

J-POP หรือ K-POP? ความคลุมเครือของกลุ่มศิลปิน JK-POP ข้อได้เปรียบและภาวะกลืน ไม่เข้าคายไม่ออกจากตัวตนซึ่งน่าตั้งคำถาม กรณีศึกษาจากกลุ่มศิลปินวง JO1

J-POP or K-POP? The ambiguity of JK-POP groups, advantage and dilemma from questionable identity, Case study from JO1

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บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยนี้มุ่งค้นคว้าเหตุผลในการก่อตั้งกลุ่มศิลปินรูปแบบใหม่ โดยผสมผสานระหว่างวัฒนธรรม K-POP และ J-POP โดยปรับให้เข้ากับท้องถิ่น หรือ J(K)-POP ซึ่งหมายถึงกลุ่มศิลปินที่มีสมาชิกส่วนมากเป็นชาวญี่ปุ่น มีฐานหลักในประเทศญี่ปุ่น แต่ผลิตผลงานเพลงในรูปแบบคล้าย K-POP ซึ่งผลิตโดยทีมงานผลิตเพลงของเกาหลี รวมทั้งยังทำกิจกรรมในประเทศเกาหลีได้เป็นครั้งคราว โดยนำเสนอคำถามวิจัยหลักว่า: ปัจจัยใดที่ผลักดันให้บริษัทตัดสินใจเปิดตัววงดนตรีในรูปแบบดังกล่าว แม้จะมีความขัดแย้งระหว่างประเทศเกาหลีและญี่ปุ่น งานวิจัยนี้ใช้วิธีการวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพในการศึกษา โดยวิเคราะห์จากสื่อข่าวสาร ความเห็นของสาธารณชน ความเห็นของกลุ่มแฟนคลับ บทความวิชาการที่เกี่ยวข้อง และเนื้อหาที่เผยแพร่โดยกลุ่มศิลปินโดยตรง โดยมีกลุ่มศิลปินวง JO1 เป็นกรณีศึกษา ในฐานะกลุ่มศิลปินที่ใช้กลยุทธ์การผสมผสานระหว่าง J-POP และ K-POP และเป็นที่รู้จักดีทั้งในประเทศญี่ปุ่นและเกาหลีใต้ การศึกษานี้ค้นพบว่าข้อได้เปรียบหลักจากการเดบิวต์กลุ่มศิลปิน K-POP ในรูปแบบการปรับให้เข้ากับท้องถิ่นญี่ปุ่นนั้นได้แก่ โอกาสในการได้รับการยอมรับว่าเป็นศิลปินญี่ปุ่นโดยชอบธรรม ผู้ซึ่งสามารถแทรกซึมไปยังภาคส่วนต่างๆ ของวงการบันเทิงญี่ปุ่นได้หลากหลายและง่ายกว่าศิลปินเกาหลีอื่นๆ โดยส่วนใหญ่ อันนำมาสู่รายได้มหาศาลจากสถานะของตลาดเพลงญี่ปุ่นที่ใหญ่เป็นอันดับสองของโลก ในอีกแง่หนึ่ง ศิลปินกลุ่มดังกล่าวยังสามารถดำเนินกิจกรรมในต่างประเทศ โดยเฉพาะในเกาหลี และดึงดูดเหล่าแฟนทั่วโลกด้วยการใช้ประโยชน์จากโครงสร้างพื้นฐานของบริษัทคู่ค้าในเกาหลี รวมถึงการแสดงและการผลิตคุณภาพสูงอันเป็นผลจากคุณสมบัติเด่นอันแข็งแกร่งของ K-POP อย่างไรก็ตาม การมีอยู่ของศิลปินกลุ่มดังกล่าวอาจก่อให้เกิดกระแสต่อต้านจากกลุ่มผู้รับสารที่มีแนวคิดอนุรักษ์นิยมทั้งในเกาหลีและญี่ปุ่น ซึ่งแสดงออกผ่านความคิดเห็นเชิงเกลียดชัง หรือการแสดงความไม่พอใจต่อสื่อสาธารณะ ถึงกระนั้น เนื่องด้วยเหล่าแฟนคลับไอดอลส่วนใหญ่มักแยกตัวออกจากประเด็นทางด้านการเมือง รวมทั้งวงการ K-POP ที่กำลังเปิดกว้าง หลากหลาย และยอมรับศิลปินต่างชาติมากขึ้น กระแสต่อต้านจึงไม่รุนแรงในระดับที่ขัดขวางการทำกิจกรรมของวง และคาดว่าจะลดลงไปตามกาลเวลา

คำสำคัญ: J-POP; K-POP; JK-POP; การปรับให้เข้ากับท้องถิ่น; การผสมผสาน

Abstract

This research aimed to explore the reasons behind the formation of a new, hybridized, and localized version of K-POP and J-POP: JK-POP groups. This term refers to groups with mainly Japanese members, who are based in Japan but release music in a K-POP style produced by Korean production teams and occasionally conduct promotional activities in South Korea. The primary research aimed to investigate about what factors drive companies to decide to debut these hybrid groups despite ongoing conflicts between Korea and Japan. A qualitative method was used, analyzing press coverage, public opinion, fan comments, relevant academic papers, and content released by JO1, as the first well-known group in both Japan and South Korea to use this hybridization strategy, was selected as a case study. The results indicated that the advantages of debuting Japanese-localized K-POP groups include the opportunity to be recognized as legitimate Japanese artists, which allows these groups to access a broader range of the Japanese entertainment industry more easily than most K-POP groups. This facilitates significant financial success, given Japan's position as the world's second-largest music market. At the same time, such groups can also pursue more overseas activities, especially in Korea, and attract global fans by leveraging their Korean company's infrastructure and the high-quality performances and production values characteristic of K-POP. However, the existence of these groups may generate backlash or anti-sentiments from conservative Korean and Japanese audiences, as observed in hate comments or complaints directed at public media. Nevertheless, since most idol fans tend to separate themselves from political issues, and as the K-POP industry has become more open, diverse, and tolerant toward foreign performers, such backlash is not so severe as to hinder the groups' activities. It is also expected to decrease overtime.

Keywords: J-POP; K-POP; JK-POP; Localization; Hybridization

Introduction

It is widely known that Japan has been one of the biggest markets of Korean entertainment industry since the craze over Korean drama in 2004 following by present popularity of K-POP. Yet, despite Japan's strong fan base and long usage of localization strategy recruiting foreign talents to join K-POP industry since mid-2000s, there were no groups from big companies with Japanese performers until JYP entertainment debuted "Twice" the K-POP girl group with 3 Japanese members out of all 9 members in late 2015. After 2 years of debut, the group achieved a remarkable record in Japan as they succeeded to rank first on Oricon chart with 200,000 sales of its Japanese album (Soompi, 2017). and became the first K-POP girl group to hold Japanese dome tour including Tokyo Dome in 2019 (Herman, 2019).

With the rising success from localization strategy, Korean Wave started to promote this tactic more by debuting the group with local members who sing in local languages but performing

the songs and dances in K-POP style as called localized K-POP version. These kinds of groups are mostly based in local country but also do activities in Korea or release songs in Korean version. Additionally, most of them also collaborate with Japanese company to effectively compete in Japanese market. Thanks to its lucrative status as the second largest music market in the world and the strong, loyal fandom culture, Japan rose as a potential market for this strategy as many Japanese localized groups have been debuting since 2019; including JO1, Niziu, INI, &TEAM, ME:I, NEXZ, NCT Wish and IS:SUE. Unlike most Japanese artist known for being close and focus heavily only on domestic market, these JK-POP groups artists are more active on promoting oversea and aim for global market especially Korean.

JO1, one of the first groups that belong to the genre “JK-POP” referring to Japanese hybrid or Japanese localized K-POP groups, was founded from the joint ventures between Yoshimoto (Japan) and CJEM Entertainment (Korea) through the survival show called “Produce 101 Japan” which is the Japanese adaptation version from famous Korean original ones (Hirano, 2023). After 5 years since debut, in contrast to their outstanding popularity in Japan, the group still struggles to gain public interest in South Korea despite frequent Korean promotional activities. Besides, the group’ national mixed sometimes cause discrimination from both Japan and Korea or sometimes sparks controversies towards it as well.

Research Question

What are the advantages that can be gained from debuting JK-POP groups? and How are these considered as strong benefits compared to those J-POP or K-POP group without localization strategy?

Research Objectives

This research aimed to investigate how the hybrid K-POP group can benefit greater in the local region compared to those without such strategy. The other way around, the study also analyzed how the group’s hybrid identity enables it to grow in K-POP industry. The insights gained were expected to be a potential blueprint for further localized or hybrid K-POP groups.

Theoretical Framework

Developed from Oh Ingyu’s K-POP’s G-L-G (Global-Local-Global) strategy about how K-POP industry globalize its music by recruiting foreign talents yet combine with the Korean unique charm or ‘Local’ (L) elements before exporting the products to worldwide market (Oh & Park, 2013), this study proposed the framework called the updated K-POP’s G-L-G model made for the localized K-POP groups. In this study, the model was adapted to analyze not only how the Korean’s L but also the local’s L was utilized to create the group’s unique identity as a

hybrid group who can potentially profit from both K-POP and J-POP's strength. Especially in Japanese music market which is known for being close and heavily prioritizing domestic artists and audiences, the strategy to blend in with such market by implementing Japanese localization hence plays a major role in creating familiarity with Japanese audiences.

	GLOBAL	LOCAL 1 - KOREA	LOCAL 2 – TARGET COUNTRY (JAPAN)	GLOBAL
INPUT PROCEES	EUROPEAN, AMERICAN, JAPANESE COMPOSERES	COMPETING LOCAL COMPOSERS	COMPETING LOCAL COMPOSERS (JAPAN)	COMPETING non- EUROPEAN, non- AMERICAN, non- JAPANESE COMPOSERS
MANUFACTURING PROCESS	COMPETING EUROPEAN, AMERICAN, JAPANESE ENTERTAINMENT CO.'S & CHEROGRAPHERS	EDUCATION & TRAINING CHEROGRAPH MUSICAL VARIATION REFINING (K-POP'S STRONG CORE)	LOCALS' UNIQUENESS (JAPAN- BOY OR GIRL NEXT DOOR VIBES, ORDINARY DREAMERS TO PERFECT PERFORMERS, J- POP HINGUE)	COMPETING CHINESE, LATIN AMERICAN, MIDDLE EASTERN, AFRICAN, SOUTHEAST ASIAN ENTERTAINMENT CO.'S
DISTRIBUTION PROCESS	COMPETIING REGIONAL DISTRIBUTORS	COMPETING LOCAL DISTRIBUTORS	COMPETING LOCAL DISTRIBUTORS (JAPAN)	JAPANESE, EUROPEAN, AMERICAN DISTRIBUTORS

Figure 1: Oh's K-POP's G-L-G model with an additional part proposed by the author (Local 2) when applied with localized K-POP groups.

Nevertheless, some audiences found the localization process from this framework complicated and unclear. In other words, the ambiguous identity as the hybrid group may trigger dissatisfaction among some audiences who are not familiar with the concept of hybridity.

Research Methodology

This qualitative study employed qualitative design as supporting evidence has been collected and analyzed from statistical collecting tools, press coverage, netizens' comments, fans' comments, the group's related released content and news. The criteria used to choose the related information is the time range, starting from 2019 when the survival show Produce

101 Japan was aired until the early period of 2025 when the group began to gain more popularity in Korea while the domestic one reached the peak. Furthermore, the study prioritized the information that clearly demonstrated to the group's success and current situation in both countries including ones that reflected Korean audience's perspective on the group as well. To collect public comments, the well-known Korean web board "The Qoo" was used as the main source of which all comments were translated from Korean to English by the author.

Some quantitative information was also used and provided to support and more clearly explain the case study group standpoint in both Korean and Japan. The trend analyzing tool called "네이버검색어트렌드", founded by Naver- the most popular search engine in Korea, was used to illustrate that JO1's Korean activities and K-POP related events had a great impact on Korean audiences to gain interest on it.

Literature Review

Since this topic is relatively new to academic fields, not much research directly mentioned or focused on this kind of hybrid group were as follows. The research on Korean soft power among young Japanese K-POP fans in 2012 found that the status of K-POP fans had a great effect on how Japanese youngsters perceived Korea. Similarly, politics issues did not affect most fans' passion for their favorite idols. Instead, fans tended to have more positive feelings toward them. Plus, the author is strongly convinced that the group's attempt to localize themselves to fit more Japanese play an important role in the perception constructing process and should be more investigated in further research (Kozhakhmetova, 2012).

In 2020, the similar research was conducted as it studied on Japanese K-POP female fans engaged with Korean discourse while also engaging or disengage with anti-Korean sentiment resulted that most participants did not perceive themselves as avid Korean wave fans. Likewise, they did not find any strong connections between rising popularity of Korean cultures and anti-Korean sentiment in Japan. Plus, age seemed to be an important factor to determine one's mindset on politics and entertainment as the young perceived less connections between media consumption and political issues (Ahn & Yoon, 2020). The study about reflection on Japan-Korea relations through the Korean Wave proposed the same argument on the distant relations between entertainment and politics. This research presented that some Japanese conservatives consider Korean Wave as a threat to Japan's prestige. In contrast, the loyalty among fans were so strong that there is a possibility for K-POP idols to become an "unofficial ambassador" who can mend Japan-Korea relationship (Baudinette, 2021).

The study on how the Korean wave reflected the Japan-Korea relations also pointed out that this trend helped propagate a positive image of Korea among Japanese fans and is pertinent to the bilateral relations. Nonetheless, the excessive influx of Korean wave can be considered as a threat for some conservative Japanese. Also, it suggested that the anti-Korean sentiment in

Japan is not a direct counterattack for Korean wave but the driving factors among some xenophobic Japanese people (Creighton, 2016).

For hybridization of K-POP, the article in 2023 about the case study on American, K-POP like groups with most western members pointed out that most K-POP fans have main criteria to judge whether each group is a K-POP group or not. These criteria include: 1. Geographical location, 2. The language of the song, 3. Korean ethnicity of members, 4. Korean language competency, and 5. The adaptation of Korean rigid training system. With these indexes, the public evaluates their satisfaction towards the groups. It was analyzed that most fans perceive K-POP as a space reserved for Korean or at least, Asian performers. To be recognized as K-POP artists, the rigorous K-POP training and proper Korean are indispensable for foreign performers (Ahn, 2023).

In Korean Music Promotion in Japan, the author defined the term “JK-POP” as the Japanese version of the original Korean song while “KJ-POP” represented the original Japanese song released by K-POP group. The first term used in this research contains the different meaning as the term referring to the Japanese localized version of K-POP group. The research findings explained that despite K-POP group’s attempt to localize via the adaptation of Japanese version, most K-POP fans found it ‘weird’ or not as good as the Korean original. Besides, they did not identify the song as the hybrid version of K-POP but K-POP itself. From this, it can be implied that the translation of the lyrics, even with Japanese manners and style of promotion, is never enough to construct the familiarity with the local audiences (Pozzi, 2022).

As suggested by the study above, the phenomenon could probably be explained by the concept of “Uchi-Soto” which urged most K-POP artists to heavily localize for Japanese market. The concept of Uchi-Soto, directly translated to inner part and outer part in English, reflected Japan’s extremely uniform society which always ostracized ones who do not conform to the norms or cannot meet the society standard to be qualified as a rightful member (Cattelain, 2014). One of the concrete examples is the term “Gaijin” (外人) which is the discriminative refer to foreigners as it can be directly translated to “The outer”. Since most K-POP idols are still considered as the non-members of the music industry, they consequently needed to adapt themselves to be more Japanese-like when promoting in Japan even though some fans are still not so satisfied with the final products.

Realizing that previous Japanese localization attempts were not so effective, some K-POP companies decided to more actively engage more in such process by adding Japanese performers or promoting more in Japan. This study revealed that that two K-POP groups: Twice and IZ*ONE, both have more than one Japanese member which enabled the group to represent both Korean and Japanese, making it easier to attract the local Japanese. The groups also did promotional activities actively in both countries as most members are bilingual, resulting in great popularity in Japan thanks to their cultural hybridity (Boman, 2024). Yet, these two groups could

not still reach the point of being fully Japanese localized K-POP groups as both were geographically based in Korea and focused more on Korean released and activities.

In conclusion, although the previous works tried to explain the relations of K-POP and Japan-Korea relations on a public level or the localization of K-POP groups with foreign performers, they did not pay much attention to the existence of hybrid Japanese K-POP groups despite its outstanding growth during latest years. This article thus aims to fill the gap founded and present new perspective of hybrid JK-POP and its outcomes to the academic fields.

Research Findings

Listed as follow are the findings on main four topics related to the research subject:

JO1's Branding Image as a as J(K)-POP group who ultimately benefit from both markets

When applied JO1's branding strategy to a new K-POP's G-L-G framework, it can be explained that the combination of K-POP strong cores with J-POP idol's unique charm is the key strategy enabling the group to blend in with both Japanese and Korean music industry while also making the group outstanding among other J-POP or K-POP groups as the hybrid one. In more details, K-POP's advantageous elements including several performers dancing in synchronization, attractive physics, and singing-dancing coordination play an important role for the group to gain recognition from Korean public as a foreign artist whose performance achieve to meet K-POP's standard. On the other hand, J-POP idol's unique charm as an ordinary boy-next-door vibes as well as the mix of Japanese culture represented by native Japanese helped JO1 create familiarity with Japanese audiences. Additionally, the Japanese ethnicity and its Japan geographical base grants a group more opportunities to appear frequently on Japanese media such as variety shows, Japanese drama or movies, or even the popular shows that K-POP idols rarely join like Kohaku Uta Gassen- the most prestigious year end music festival.

Thanks to its hybridity, the group can be perceived by the public both as J-POP or K-POP groups, making it able to participate in more various kinds of activities in both countries which leads to a great potential to gain popularity whether in Japan, Korea or global markets through the growing interest of K-POP in international level.

The “Preserved Space” for compatriot performers in Japanese industry

As mentioned earlier in the literature review section, Japanese entertainment market is renowned for being domestically close. Owing to its status as the second biggest music market in the world, most Japanese artists chose to prioritize its reliable domestic market rather than risk investing on oversea activities. Japanese lucrative market, on the other hand, attracts many K-POP artists to do Japan exclusive promotional activities in order to gain a great fortune and big

loyal fandom. As a result, most K-POP idols abided themselves to Japanese culture by launching original Japanese songs, translating Korean songs to Japanese, or even making official Japanese debut apart from Korean ones.

Nevertheless, there are some parts of Japanese entertainment industry that K-POP idols rarely succeed to penetrate. Most of these spaces usually have high public exposure yet require long-term stay in Japan for the shooting process, for example, taking a main role in Japanese drama or movies, hosting regular shows, making constant appearance on television show, being a Japanese brand ambassador. In this study, these activities are defined as the “preserved spaces” of Japanese entertainment industry since these are usually taken part by local performers not the foreign ones. One of the most concrete examples is the chance to participate in “Kohaku Uta Gassen”, the most prestigious annual music program in Japan of which the participants are known to be acknowledged by the public as popular artists with remarkable success in Japan. Since the show only focused on domestic popularity, most of the selected artists are Japanese.

From the group’s activities in latest years, unlike most traditional K-POP groups, JO1 managed to penetrate the “preserved spaces” in Japanese industry such as participating in Kohaku Uta Gassen, a chance to host a regular Japanese variety show and taking a lead role in Japanese dramas or movies or be chosen as brand ambassador for Japanese products.

To illustrate, judging from a performer line-up for “Kohaku Uta Gassen” 2023, of all 50 artists, only 4 of them are Korean artists including Lesserafim, Straykids, Seventeen and Misamo-the subunit of three Japanese members of the K-POP group, Twice (TokyoHive, 2023). These 4 artists are the top-rank popular ones both in domestic and international markets. Likewise, there are only 4 Korean artists participating in 2024 (TokyoHive, 2024). Two of them are the old-timers (Twice and Lesserafim) while the other two are the newcomers (TXT and Illit).

It is worth noticing that all listed K-POP groups appearing in the event were invited thanks to their outstanding popularity in Japan. All of them, except for Illit as a rookie, ranked 1st in Oricon chart. Similarly, most of them were so successful that they were able to hold solo concert in Tokyo Dome, the biggest concert venue in Japan. The other common points are their backgrounds since all are from the big K-POP companies like JYP Entertainment and HYBE Label.

When compared to K-POP groups invited, JO1’s popularity is not so satisfying outside Japan. Yet, being Japanese hybrid can be considered as a big privilege allowing JO1 to participate in such prestigious event despite its less popularity both in Japan (by the first appearance in 2022 since they did not have Tokyo Dome concert back then) and worldwide compared to other K-POP participants. This phenomenon may be derived from the core conception of Japanese society called Uchi-Soto (内外) or “inside and outside” which reflects highly uniformity of Japan, prioritizing preference towards Japanese people.

Uchi-Soto concept hence urged most K-POP groups to rely heavily on Japanese localization strategy to abide by the unique consumption way of Japanese people such as releasing Japanese songs, learning Japanese language or making Japanese debut separately from Korean ones. Despite some of them, especially ones from big companies' success, only few could enter such preserved spaces mentioned previously while JO1 succeeded to do so much more easily as all members are Japanese native.

Korean entertainment industry: open to foreign performers yet “K-POP’s high quality” is required.

In Korea’s case, JO1 began to actively engage in Korean music program more in recent years as the artist who represents “K-POP” elements even performed by Japanese artists. Since Korean entertainment industry is much more open and tolerant with foreigner performers, JO1 does not face much obstacle trying to make Korean media appearance. Still, it is undeniable that the big factor contributing to that is the great connection and power from CJ Entertainment who is the shareholder of JO1’s label, LAPONE Entertainment, allowing the group to appear on such media without investing too much in oversea promotion that cannot guarantee satisfying feedback whereas most Japanese artist choose to mainly rely on domestic market rather than reluctantly taking risk in international ones.

Nevertheless, to win over Korean public or even K-POP lovers’ interests, some K-POP elements are needed for the group to adapt themselves to fit the industry’s standard. In other words, JO1 on the other way round, utilize the similar Korean localization strategy with most K-POP groups using when promoting in Japan to blend in and avoid discrimination or stereotype towards Japanese idols as weak performers.

Apart from being one of the frequent participants of CJENM’s K-CON, the K-POP concert with K-POP related events touring in foreign countries, JO1 made an appearance in CJENM’s media platforms including the weekly music program M! COUNTDOWN, the dance channel Studio CHOOM, and its own Korean variety show. Although members mostly talked in Japanese throughout the show, the entire show was subbed with Korean since it aimed to promote the group to Korean audiences by portraying members’ discovering Korean countryside while experiencing Korean culture (M2, 2022).

Recently, JO1 has expanded its appearance in Korean to include programs from other entertainment companies than CJENM. One of the most notable events was when the group did the Korean promotional activities for the single “Love Seeker” in May 2024 (@official_jo1, 2024). JO1 participated in 6 music shows including “Music Bank” which is aired via KBS channel, the national broadcaster of South Korea. It can thus be referred from this that the group is becoming more accepted as K-POP or in the other way round, Korea is turning to be more

tolerant with foreign performers. JO1, in the same year, also attend the Korean music award named The Fact Music Award (TMA) and received the popularity prize (인기상) which was selected from the fans' vote from various methods (NateNews, 2024).

In 2025, the group promoted the title track for its first best album “Be Classic” in Korea after holding first solo concert in Seoul for two days. All members stayed in Korea for almost two weeks and relentlessly do Korean activities during that period to maximized profit during the stay including collaboration with Korean bakery store to launch POP-UP store and exclusive exhibition, and appearance on several Korean music shows.

In summary, JO1 at least succeed to earn constant Korean media appearance and public exposure which possibly lead to more recognition. Likewise, such events often brought about opportunities to interact with other K-POP artists which is very useful way to enhance the group's image as one belonging to K-POP industry, resulting in fans' interaction between both groups and even collaboration in the future.

Great Success in Japan but only fair recognition in Korea

To realize the localization goal, the group prioritize Japanese market by devoting their early period of début to local activities first then gradually increase Korean materials and activities over time. Still, some Japanese people question about their validity to be “J-POP” some Japanese audiences were bewildered by their first appearance on Kohaku Uta Gassen, swearing that they were watching K-POP group perform (Hirano, 2023).

Since the group debuted in 2020 during the Covid-19 pandemic, it was inevitable to focus first on the local market as the group did not have any oversea promotion except the virtual online K-POP concert in 2020. Their hard work paid off since they sold 327,130 copies of their debut single within a week after release (OriconNews, 2020). In the recent period, the group has shown impressive growth as its first solo 2-day concert was held in Tokyo Dome, the biggest concert venue in Japan with approximately 55,000 seat capacity. Furthermore, its first best album launched in April 2025 ranked first as weekly bestselling music during the last week of March 2025 in full album category (OriconNews, 2025). The title track “Be Classic” reached the first rank on Billboard Japan Hot 100 music chart, making the group 6th release to achieve such success (BillboardJapan, 2025). Owing to these constant domestic successes, JO1 can feel reassured about its main, domestic support and can seek more opportunities to promote in foreign markets.

However, their situation is quite different in South Korea with much less popularity and public recognition. This could be assumed as the consequences of their lack of Korean promotional activities in the first period after debut. JO1 began performing in South Korea for the first time after about one year of debut in February 2021 on the music show “M! Countdown” owned by CJENM, the one invests in their Joint-Venture. For their early

appearances in Korean media and festivals, JO1 sang their songs in original Japanese with Korean subtitles (Mnet_K-POP, 2021). In early 2022, they started singing in Korean for Korea-based activities, followed by launching Korean variety shows, participation in K-POP music festivals, doing TikTok challenges with other K-POP idols and so on. The group's attempt to become more Korean was shown through these adaptations and activities.

Judging from the fact that JO1's songs never entered any Korean music chart or won any music shows, and from YouTube artist's statistics for past one year, no cities in Korea are in the list of top 15 cities of most JO1's listeners (YouTubeMusic, 2025). It can be assumed that this group is not so popular in Korea. Nonetheless, according to YouTube music artist statistics in South Korea for past one year, the number of JO1 listener is relatively higher than those traditional J-POP boy groups without localization strategy. The data was summarized as shown in the graph below.

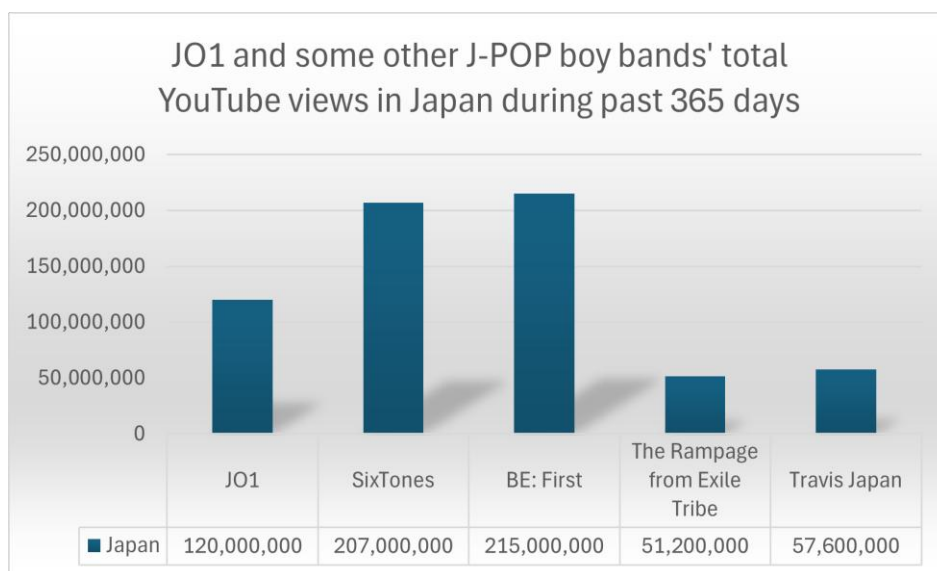


Figure 1: The graph illustrates JO1 and some other J-POP boy bands' total views on YouTube in Japan during past 365 days. (The data was collected from April 23, 2024 to April 23, 2025, and retrieved by the author on April 27, 2025) Source: YouTube Music Charts

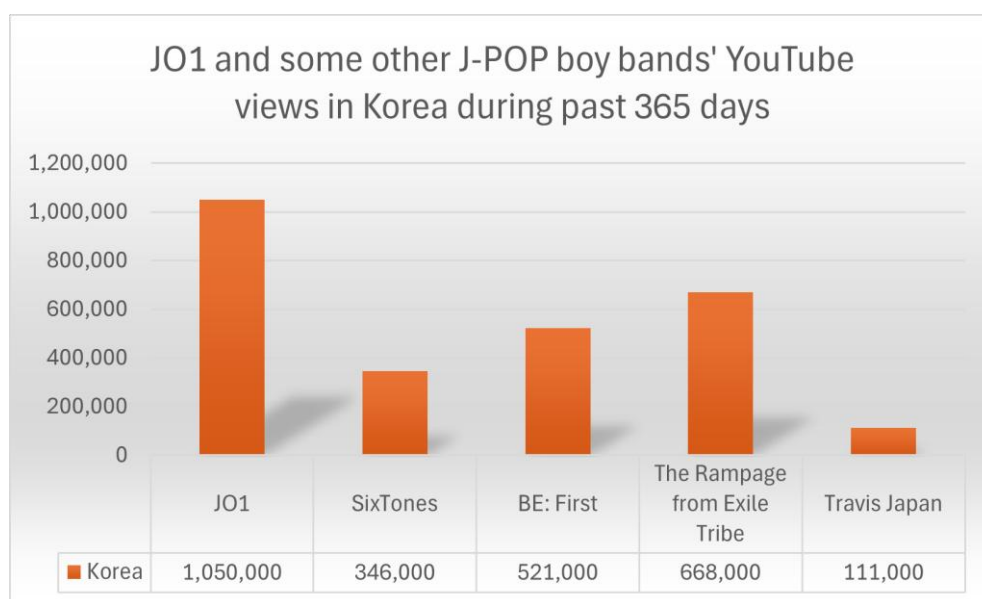


Figure 2: The graph illustrates JO1 and some other J-POP boy bands' total views on YouTube in South Korea during past 365 days. (The data was collected from April 22, 2024 to April 22, 2025, and retrieved by the author on April 27, 2025) Source: YouTube Music Charts

The figure 1 and the figure 2 compare the total YouTube views for some popular J-POP groups during past 365 days by the time this research was written in Korea and Japan. Even though the total views of JO1 in Japan is not so high compared to others, the situation is completely different in Korea where JO1 gained apparently more views and interests.

In the same manner, the search trends tend to rise significantly when the group participates in Korean or K-POP activities proving that at least these can help improve Korean people's interest rate for the group as portrayed in the graph and table below.

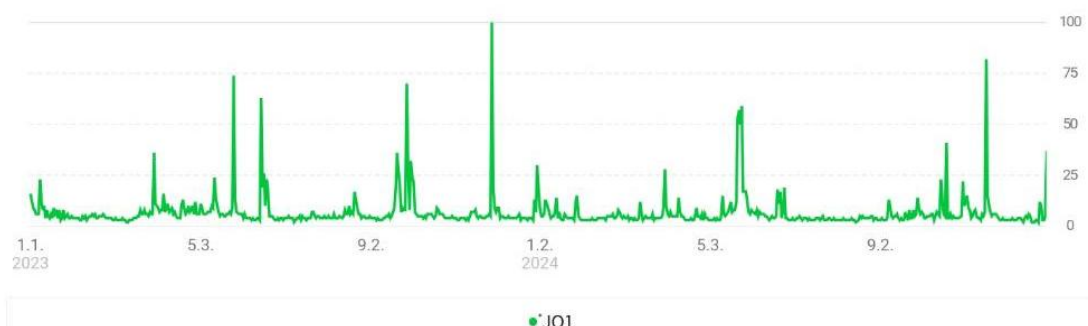


Figure 3: The graph generated by 네이버검색어트렌드 on the keyword "JO1" searching trend on Naver platform during the year 2023 and 2024 Source: 네이버검색어트렌드, Naver

Table 1: JO1’s search trend rate in South Korea according to 네이버검색어트렌드 during some weeks with Korean or K-POP related activities in 2023 and 2024

Date	JO1’s activities (including K-POP related, Korean activities)	Searching Trend rate on Naver*
March 30, 2023	Appearance on M! Countdown, performing the song “Tiger” in Korean version	36
May 27, 2023	Appearance at Dream Concert in Busan	74
June 15, 2023	The cover performance of the Song “Boy with love” (original by BTS) at K-Con Japan was on aired and published officially	63
September 28, 2023	The cover performance of the Song “Super” (original by Seventeen) at K-Con LA was on aired and published officially	70
November 28, 2023	Appearance at 2023 MAMA Awards	100
May 24, 2024	First appearance on Korean music show, Music Bank	57
May 26, 2024	Appearance on Korean music show, Show Champion	59
October 20, 2024	The performance of the song “Where do we go” Korean version at Inkigayo Live in Tokyo was on aired	41
November 17, 2024	Appearance on Korean Grand Music Awards, receiving best foreign K-POP artist awards	82
*The number shown in the table was retrieved on April 27, 2025		

Note: The number index shown was not absolute but relative values since the tools did not provide the exact, absolute values of the total search times. The values range from 1 to 100 depending on the search volume during each period. The number 100 represents the maximum search while the number 0 indicates that there is not enough search volume at that time to be represented. Due to changing search volume, it should be noted that the results can be fluctuated overtime but not so dramatically. Consequently, the index number should be used only to show how certain events can have great impact on public interest about the group, not to precisely measure or convert it into exact values.

Furthermore, it should be noted that JO1’s recognition and popularity level in Korea seems to crease significantly after the group started actively promoting more in Korea along with adapting more to K-POP cultures around the end of 2022. The clearest evidence of its growth is the first solo concert in South Korea held on 29 and 30 March 2025 (스포츠경향, 2025). Even though the venue is relatively small with only approximately 1,400 seat capacity, this event should be considered as a promising sign to thrive even further in Korean market with continuous attempts to be widely acknowledged as a Japanese localized yet skillful K-POP artist.

Inevitable backlash, Discrimination from Korean audiences as “Non-K-POP”

Although CJENM oversees JO1 production process as most of the team is from Korea, some Korean people still criticize the group for not being a valid K-POP group as it is reflected

by the Korean press headline mentioning the group. The terms like “일본”, “日”, “프듀 재팬” (Short for ‘Produce 101 Japan’) often appears to indicate their native or ethnicity (Koreasisailbo, 2020) (ETNNews, 2024) (StarNewsKorea, 2024) (스포츠경향, 2023). Some Korean netizens also refer to the group as “CJ 의왜동아들” which is translated as “The only son of CJ” in a sarcastic manner based on its status under CJ Entertainment (Anonymous_User, 2021).

Some Korean audiences, especially during their competition time in the survival show and early period of debuting, strongly blamed them for poor performances, complaint about their appearance, and accused them of plagiarizing other K-POP groups. Some opinions written in Korean in the comment section even showed such a sense of discrimination towards Japanese people that one Korean Youtuber make a funny video about Korean’s comment compilation for the group’s pre debut performance for the song “Love Me Right” (Original by EXO), the total view has surpassed 7 million views now. Listed below are some concrete examples from the video (레전드맷, 2020).

- I have a hope to redream my once abolished dream to become a singer now! (00.32)
- 0.27 When EXO did this part, I could not help but thinking they were so cool...but when I saw this, they were dancing like a wooden doll. (00.39)
- The more I watched Produce 101 Chinese and Japanese version, I realized why only K-POP is the only one from East Asia to gain popularity from all around the world. (00.43)
- I wonder why I kept seeing the Korean comments saying it is “Ra Mi Ran*” not “Love Me Right” so I listened to it. Now I cannot stop hearing it as anything but Ra Mi Ran. (Laughing) Ra Mi Ran!!! (1.11)

*Note: Ra Mi Ran is a famous Korean actress. The comment mocked members’ poor pronunciation.

- Which part of this did the audiences like and scream.... (1.38)
- No but LOL it was so funny and tiring. The more I watch the second half part, their voices kept getting wilting. (3.24)
- What is this? Why they keep spoil the original song? (3.30)

Other than this video, other discrimination comments can also be found on free web board like “The Qoo” or “Naver board” on the article about Produce 101 Japan and the group itself. Since most of the comments are written by anonymous users, the order of comments was shown instead. In case it is not anonymous, the only first few digits of the name were shown to keep anonymity of the users.

- Is this J-POP or K-POP? I’m so annoyed (Number1_Commenter (Anonymous), 2024).
- Why do they appear on Music Bank? I don’t really understand, aren’t they a localized group? (Number12_Commenter (Anonymous), 2024).

- Please stop pushing the localized group to appear on Korean music show... There are not enough seats in the first place (for Korean artists) even though they do not appear... (Number23_Commenter (Anonymous), 2024).
- Junki is really...LOL I have never seen a Japanese man who look like a Korean like this before (Number6_Commenter_(Anonymous), 2023).
- Is he Japanese? How about getting rid of moles and doing Korean activities? He is handsome... (Number16_Commenter_(Anonymous), 2020).
- Huh...I have been hating them but for this time, the group's debut song is all copying NCT, TXT, BTS so I hate them even more now (You***, 2019).
- They are not talented anyway, no need to worry LOL (๖****, 2019).
- According to my standard, there is no handsome one (Number23_Commenter_(Anonymous), 2019).
- The hybrid group? I fucking hate it... (Number28_Commenter_(Anonymous), 2019).
- He lacks vocabulary skills just like a Korean baby LOL ((Anonymous), 2019).

From these selected comments, it can be inferred that these users have inferior perceptions towards Japanese people, especially J-POP idols as non-talented ones whose visuals are not-so-good with lame styling according to Korean beauty standards. Besides, some of Korean netizens hold a fixed view that the Korean music show should be preserved only for authentic Korean artists while these hybrid groups become a threat for K-POP snatching a chance to perform on Television program. Some comments as well hinted that Japanese people are usually not so good-looking as Korean people and should go to Korea to improve their visuals.

Conclusion

Investigation of JO1's strategy also provided new aspects Oh's existing framework on G-L-G strategy of K-POP music as localized K-POP group could add more of each local's culture and mix them with Korean ones, making the L elements even more interesting and unique. In JO1's case, it was found that the group not only fully adopt all three strong cores of K-POP; physics, number, and singing-dancing coordination but also combine them with Japanese idols' distinctive charms and Japanese cultures. Owing to this, the group hence is able create its own unique color making it stand out whether among J-POP or K-POP idols and benefit from both markets effectively. Even though the popularity level in Japan is much higher based on the group's potential to hold solo concert in Tokyo Dome and remarkable latest album sales, the group's situation in Korea shall be considered promising as the group is gaining more popularity and attention from the public in the degree that is enough to hold solo concert in Korea.

Nonetheless, it can be inferred from the hate comments that even though some Koreans dislike or have negative views towards JO1, this phenomenon seems to have no relevance to

the Korea-Japan international relations as they never referred to any political conflicts when commenting about the group even during when the relations were bad. Due to the lack of the trend interest in Korea for most of the times (except for when they have Korean activities), it is hard to accumulate data on whether the bilateral conflicts affected JO1's recognition among Korean people. Still, from the information in this article, it is supposed to be the same with the Korean Wave in Japan of which its trends remain almost unaffected from the two countries' conflict as the fans tend to distant political issues from their own passion for Korean performers.

Discussion

From the study's findings, it is suggested that the K-POP's G-L-G model is considerably effective nowadays. Yet, it is undeniable that the present stage of K-POP is turning more into becoming World-POP or music genre listened by people all around the world. Likewise, despite the impressive growth of K-POP during the past few years, some non-fans audiences may find the over influx of Hallyu trends overwhelming and that sentiment may trigger the anti-sentiments toward Korean wave which can be harmful to the industry in the long term.

To sustainably maintain K-POP industry, the localization or blending K-POP with local strategy is essential to alleviate the backlash and at the same time, such strategy can help expand the range of target audiences from K-POP listeners to local music listeners as well. The blueprint of new localized version of K-POP's G-L-G's strategy found from researching on JO1's study case is expected to be practical to be adapted into further localized K-POP projects with any other countries.

Since this study only focused on JO1's case, which is the Japanese Korean hybrid group, it should be noted that each target country's attributes of "L" or the local uniqueness varies. It is preferable that the further studies focus on the localized K-POP groups of each country including its "L" elements and how it blends with original Korean ones. These further studies should take a major role in supporting the sustainability of K-POP or proposing new findings on developing new form of localized K-POP projects.

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