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Music

The Best K-Pop Moments of 2020

Teen Vogue presents the best K-pop moments of 2020, according to dozens of journalists and writers who love Korean idol music and the artists who make it.

BY TEEN VOGUE

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The impact of Korean pop music (most commonly shorthand as K-pop) on global music trends over the past few years is undeniable. Take BTS, for example. Since their debut in 2013, the Korean septet has become the **biggest band in the world**, influencing the next generation of music-makers already.

In the midst of a global pandemic, Korean labels and artists have led the charge in creating lively, groundbreaking, immersive virtual experiences for fans. The end-of-year numbers only prove out that immense impact. According to Spotify, K-pop listening has increased by more than 2000% in the last six years, and listeners have added K-pop songs to more than 120 million Spotify playlists. (Notably, **BTS's disco-pop single "Dynamite"** sparked a 300% increase in people listening to the group for the first time on the streaming platform.) Per a **2020 Duolingo report**, Korean is the second fastest-growing language in the world, something the company

attributes at least in part to the impact of Korean entertainment, from **K-dramas** to *Parasite* and, of course, K-pop acts. On Twitter, BTS were the **most tweeted about musicians** in the United States for the fourth year in a row — with ATEEZ, NCT, and **EXO** joining them in the top 10.

Despite its ever-growing popularity, K-pop is a complex, loaded term that can be **used to otherize** as much as it can be used to celebrate. Western artists, especially white ones, get to just be regular pop music, undefined by country signifiers. Fundamentally, using the “K-pop” nomenclature is an act of separation, even when it straightforwardly refers to Korean idol music.

Fans also struggle with this. Can K-pop be considered a “genre” in the traditional sense? Is it a way of pinning household name artists in? Or is it a way of bolstering a rising tide? The “genre” question is perhaps the easiest to just come right out and deny. As any K-pop listener knows, the songs and groups vary immensely, each bringing their own flavor musically and aesthetically, each with their own influences (much like literally any other music in the world). As singer-songwriter **Tayla Parx** told *Teen Vogue* recently, K-pop has pioneered a genreless sound, or rather an all-encompassing sound. These days, to say something sounds like K-pop is about as helpful as saying a tree looks like a tree. Answers to the other questions might not be as crystal clear, but they are worth examining anyway, especially for fans processing the increasing power of Korean music through non-Korean lenses.

One thing is clear: The music coming out of Korea is more diverse and wide-reaching than ever, and the fans who love it are social media savvy, creative, and ever more powerful. To celebrate that, *Teen Vogue* asked 49 journalists and writers who covered K-pop this year to recap their favorite moments from the year – ranging from historic firsts and sartorial highlights to new music and just plain delightful memes. Below, check out their selection of the best K-pop moments of 2020.

(One of) BTS’s Historic No. 1 Hits, “Life Goes On”

As someone who grew up in the United States without ever seeing Korean culture celebrated in the media, BTS’s success has felt like a victory for Korean diaspora. When “Life Goes On” hit No. 1 on the Billboard Hot 100 — the first Korean-language song to do so — it gave us a glimmer of hope that the U.S. wasn’t as myopic as current politics may indicate. The beautiful language that my parents spoke — but that we were warned not to speak in order to fit in — was being sung by the most popular band in the world. You don’t have to understand Korean to feel the song’s warm emotions, but it adds a rich layer. — **Jae-Ha Kim**, *journalist at the Chicago Tribune*

Hwasa's Powerful "Maria" Music Video

MAMAMOO'S maknae Hwasa, who smashes Korean **beauty standards**, delivered in 2020. With "Maria," the song and music video tell a tale of self-discovery and touch on the pressures of being a Korean idol. Maria, her Catholic name, represents her experience in the industry with paparazzi, hateful comments, and gossip, and the impact that had on her mental health. Korean pop MVs always keep us on our toes with multiple, layered theories and "Maria" is no exception — Hwasa is constantly challenging standards and serving up art. — ***Bashirat Oladele, culture writer based in London***

Black Girls Take K-Pop

2020 has seen Black women spearheading tough conversations about the disproportionate violence we face in society and the K-pop world is no exception. This year, as Black Lives Matter exploded into the mainstream, Black girl-run blogs like **South Sonder** and podcasts like **Not Your Average Netizens** have pushed back against the harassment Black K-pop fans regularly endure. But in true Black Girl Magic fashion, it hasn't stopped us from having fun and starting trends. Just take a look at this creative, fan-produced **#KickItChallenge** that not only went viral, but **got noticed by NCT themselves!** We out here! — ***Sarah Raughley, columnist and YA author of The Effigies Series. Her new book, The Bones of Ruin, is slated for fall 2021.***

Sleeq's "Here I Go" on Mnet's GOOD GIRL

On Mnet's *GOOD GIRL*, a hip-hop competition show focusing on established female rappers and idol rappers in the industry, Sleeq reminded the audience that she's **a feminist first and foremost** with her second performance on the show. "Here I Go" features the rapper standing barefoot on stage and delivering a powerful, queer, and feminist anthem; it may have missed the mark with the audience and her fellow cast members, but it **clicked with a significant international audience** that decided to get into the show *because* of her. When the walls behind her pulled back to reveal rainbow flags, I knew I was going to stan. — ***Stitch, Culture writer***

A Special Day in Caratland

As **SEVENTEEN** leader S.Coups said during the opening ments, Caratland opens only once a year and this year's just happened to coincide with my own birthday, which made the occasion all the more special. Due to the pandemic, the **13-member act** was tasked to create a different kind of event for their fourth fan meeting, and to say they delivered would be an understatement. This year's Caratland – which took place on August 30 (**Virgo rights!**) – lasted for over four hours and we were fed #content from minute one, from every single angle imaginable (there were 14 camera options, after all). We got to see the very first stages for “Let Me Hear You Say” and “Together,” the latter with multiple CARATBONGs lit up to represent fans. We got breathtaking unit stages (still thinking about THE8's dance solo during “24/7”) and the traditional reverse unit stages (shout out to “Hug” Rock Vers.) on top of “Left and Right,” “Lucky” and an *aju-niced* “Snap Shoot.” Music aside, we got the SVT Newsroom segment with Jeonghan as host (and Dino later taking over to pull the group chat receipts, quite literally) as well as the highly questionable but indisputably hilarious SVT Athletics Championships, hosted by MC (**and certified Wonderful**) Seungkwan. Despite the time zones and technical difficulties, it was a time to connect with friends (hi, Anjana!) and truly forget the daily woes, which is much-needed in 2020. Games, songs, skits, and just overall good vibes... what more could you ask for? Well, VOD included, perhaps. — **Sara Delgado**, *freelance writer*, editor, and translator

That Time When the State of Georgia Felt ~Special~

Though TWICE's “Feel Special” was released in 2019, it has gone on to go viral repeatedly in 2020. At the start of the year it went viral as a **TikTok sound** with extra bass. During the United States elections in November, Twitter user **@bleorgia** (Blue and Georgia), posted **a video with “Feel Special”** that gave the electoral map the glittery fancam treatment as it zoomed into Georgia and showed things synonymous with the state, such as peaches, alligators, and politician **Stacey Abrams**. I loved the way people went straight to the **music video** and enjoyed the song after hearing it. — **Ikran Dahir**, *BuzzFeed Reporter*

The "Psycho" Stage That Shook Stan Twitter to Its Core

There's something truly electrifying about a collaboration stage. When artists from different groups unite for a singular performance, they produce some of K-pop's most thrilling moments. That was especially true when AB6IX's Daehwi, [Stray Kids](#)' Hyunjin, ASTRO's Sanha, and Golden Child's Bomin beguiled viewers with a [stunning cover](#) of Red Velvet's "Psycho" during a KBS *Music Bank* special in June. This wasn't the first time the '00 liners and best friends had performed together — last year, they took on GOT7's vibrant bop ["Just Right"](#) — but "Psycho" struck a chord with K-pop stans and locals alike, going viral across social media and racking up more than 17 million views to date. But there's more to its popularity than pretty boys serving looks, harmonies, and body rolls. The concept of boy groups covering girl group songs isn't a novel idea, but what's most striking here is its sophisticated execution. From Daehwi's opening falsetto and Hyunjin captivating expressions (the blond dancer's [individual fancam](#) has 4.5 million views) to Sanha's smooth vocals and Bomin's steady charisma, they honored the sanctity of the original without sacrificing its drama and panache. And that's exactly why we can't stop replaying it. — [Crystal Bell](#), **Culture Writer**

Taemin, Taemin, Taemin

In times of uncertainty, we look towards pillars of stability. Thankfully, we have Taemin, whose unwavering quest to make religious imagery sexy will never let us down. Though he repeats motifs throughout his work, he's far from short on creativity: 2020 gave us three "Never Gonna Dance Again" singles, each [building](#) off the previous to produce one of the best trilogies K-Pop has offered. From improvising on the streets of Paris in the wistful opener ["2 Kids,"](#) to dancing with his hands tied as he marks the grand return of the ["Taemin pose"](#) in the theatrical centerpiece ["Criminal,"](#) to showcasing some of his best choreography yet in the lush grand finale ["Idea,"](#) Taemin definitively made his mark as one of the most interesting soloists in the game. — [Hannah Zwick](#), **Culture writer**

Wonho's Solo Debut — and the Ensuing Obsession from Locals

Cut and sequenced clips from Wonho's “Open Mind” MV were given the fan-edit treatment on TikTok, following the release of Wonho's solo album. The 14-second edit featured Wonho in a half-zipped top, revealing abs that swayed with his movement and the music. It went viral. The edit boasts **over 1.5 million likes** to date, eliciting hundreds of duets and locals calling him “jacked” and “mad elegant” — No Simp September challenge failed. But we know that Wonho is more than his body, and I sincerely hope this viral edit was merely an introduction to him and that people stay for his artistry, which is also mad elegant. — ***K-Ci Williams**, Culture writer*



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Jessi: A Nuna 15 Years in the Making

Jessi, known to many in the Korean entertainment industry as “**Ssen Unni**” or big sister, has had a 2020 that represented a true culmination of her 15 years as a performer. Leaving her home in New Jersey at the age of 14 to pursue a career in her ethnic homeland was a journey filled with unfair contracts, mismanagement of her career, and difficulties due to cultural differences. Now, under the label P Nation (founded by fellow Korean artist Psy, known globally for his hit “Gangnam Style”), Jessi released an EP titled *Nuna*. Part of the charm of title track “Nunu Nana” (누누난나),” outside of its self-empowering lyrics, is the performance coupled with it – earning

her a coveted **2020 Mnet Asian Music Award** (MAMA) for “Favorite Dance Performance Female.” Outside of music, Jessi has also captured the hearts of many in the entertainment sphere with the debut of “**Show!terview with Jessi**,” where she invites prominent figures such as Heechul (Super Junior), HaHa (Running Man), Tiffany (Girl’s Generation), and Yoo Jae Suk (Korea’s top presenter) for a Jessi-style interview consisting of an adorably honest approach. — **Rianne Akindele**, *Music & Culture Writer*

Reinventing the Past With Newtro

A neologism for adding a "new" spin to a "retro" style, Newtro is the foundation behind several other trends of 2020 in K-pop. See the old school hip-hop and R&B vibes in **many NCT releases**, the **disco fever** sweeping through BigHit Labels artists, the wistful city pop of **Yukika** and **Sunmi**, and the addictive '80s synths of **TWICE** and **Everglow**, just to name a few. Encompassing every aspect from sounds, to fashion, to album design, the Newtro trend provided a fresh look to the past — and reignited a blissful nostalgia for, you know, times where a pandemic wasn't raging outside. — **Tássia Assis**, *K-pop writer*

Ohmmmmmmmyyyyyyyggghghhhhhhgggggggggdhdhsjsixudbslsogbdsisgshdbxidxdbdidhdifjfir

BTS made history when they became the first Grammy-nominated Korean group, with their hit song “Dynamite,” for Best Pop Duo/Group Performance. A **video posted on BTS’ Twitter page** — captioned with a keyboard smash — showed RM, Jimin, V and Jungkook reacting to the nomination with wholesome shouts (and silent surprise, in V’s case). It was also a gratifying moment for ARMY worldwide. A Grammy nomination was long overdue, and while BTS deserved more, especially for their **top-selling, well-critiqued** album *Map of the Soul: 7*, this is a major achievement in a music industry that rarely recognizes non-English speaking artists. — **Fatima Farha**, *Audience editor at USA TODAY*

BLACKPINK Lights Up the Sky

2020 was the year of BLACKPINK’s world domination, and their intimate Netflix documentary introduced the biggest girl group in the world to millions of new fans, and for diehard BLINKs, revealed a never-before-seen side of Jisoo, Jennie, Rosé, and Lisa, delving into



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the personal sacrifices they've had to make. The film is also an important encapsulation of K-pop's global success, proving that K-pop isn't limited by language or borders but is truly a universal phenomenon. — *Stephan Lee, author of **K-Pop Confidential***

Stray Kids' Delicious "God's Menu" Choreography

It takes a special kind of band to make a burned-out viral meme from 2017 part of the year's most iconic choreography, but that's what Stray Kids did with their song "God's Menu." Salt Bae's iconic seasoning style joins other cooking-themed dance moves like sauteing, stirring pots, and chopping vegetables to create a routine that's equal parts absurd and mind-bendingly skillful. The choreography, combined with the in your face visuals of the MV and sound of the song, perfectly encapsulates the escapist joy that makes K-pop so compelling. — *Lucy Ford, Freelance entertainment reporter*

MONSTA X Making Us the Best Kind of Anxious With "Love Killa"

Some of us may already have our ult groups, but in late 2020, MONSTA X asked: got room for one more? The group returned with "Love Killa" from their third album, *Fatal Love*, in November, and Monbebes, take a moment to consider how perfect the video is. The visuals play with the crew's bad-boy reputation by paying homage to *Hitman: Agent 47*, *The Dark Knight*, *The Silence of the Lambs*, *American Psycho*, *Fight Club*, and *Drive*. In these uncertain times, the world needs more MONSTA X choreography: Nobody does body rolls like MONSTA X — that's a fact, just like the sky is blue and the sun never fails to burn hot. — *Erica Gerald Mason, Culture writer*

Korean Artists Show Support for BLM

The murder of George Floyd, a victim of police brutality, had an impact on the world that few could have foreseen. One of the surprises was the outpouring of support from the Korean music industry, who are usually silent on such matters. Many artists such as Jessi, Eric Nam, BTS, Monsta X, and members of GOT7 openly showed support for Black Lives Matter and donated large amounts of money to the movement. Meanwhile, artists such as CL and Jamie got candid about how the K-pop industry is indebted to Black culture. For Black fans, many of whom have been requiring idols to have more cultural sensitivity, it was a step in the right direction. —

Natasha Mulenga, Culture writer and host of A Soulful Storm podcast

K-pop's Yeehaw Agenda

Coming off an exciting 2019 which saw BTS' RM feature on Lil Nas X's "Old Town Road," K-pop took the momentum of the yeehaw agenda into 2020. It became a mainstay, as acts like ITZY, NCT, Oh My Girl, and TXT took on country-western concepts. Their concepts featured tropes like Wild West bandits after loot, while also incorporating futuristic aspects that were as hypnotizing as the composition of the songs. The resurgence of the yeehaw agenda transformed into an international phenomenon thanks to viral hits by Lil Nas X and Megan Thee Stallion. It became a creative movement that showed the diversity in cowboy culture through music. —

Nnehkai Agbor, Music writer at KultScene

The Endless Joy of Virtual Fansigns

It's been a strange, long, and gruesome year, and we've all latched on to different things to feel comfort and warmth, and to make us laugh. In-person meet-and-greets weren't a possibility for most of 2020, but fans were able to interact with groups in a different way: virtual fansigns. These one-on-one chats fans had with their idols made for some incredibly hilarious and wholesome moments. Some fans dressed up in wacky clothes, sang songs off-key, and some even had lovely chats with their idols to talk about big moments in their lives. One TWICE fan told Sana and Chaeyoung she will be **moving to Korea with her girlfriend soon**, and their reactions were heartwarming. One of my favorite laugh-out-loud funny moments is when Vernon from SEVENTEEN told a fan he doesn't have any advice for her academic career because **he hasn't even graduated middle school**. For a much needed happy-cry session, I always

gravitate back to NCT's Ten giving a [message to his LGBT fans](#), where he says you should all love yourselves and to “just be you!” — *Anjana Pawa, Culture writer*

X content

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Lee Suhyun's "ALIEN"

In October, AKMU's Lee Suhyun released her first solo-single, "ALIEN," a dance-pop track that marked a different direction for the Korean vocalist. The intergalactic energy, and astronomical resonance of the song, is instantly infectious. More compelling, however, are the peculiar, yet affirming lyrics that tell a story of a girl who gains self-confidence after being told that she's an alien who is strong enough to save the world. The song itself is accompanied by a video that transitions between glittering choreographed choruses, neon-coloured action scenes, and vibrant comic-book-like animations; all of this coincides with the message of self-love and determination.

— *Ana Giggins, Editor-in-chief of [@HelloAsiaAU](#) and co-host of [@BangPopPodcast](#)*

Idols Opening Up Conversations About Mental Health

With each passing year, conversations surrounding mental health become less and less taboo — that's as true in the K-pop idol industry as it is anywhere else. While quarantine took a toll on many of us, [heightening anxiety and depression](#), idols used the hellish year of 2020 to espouse wisdom on the topic, offering empathy for listeners by sharing their own struggles — what helped them, and

the power of kindness. There are countless examples, so here's a couple: TWICE's Mina discussed her decision to **pull out of a tour**, citing "extreme anxiety and insecurity." "I contemplated whether or not I should even publicize my state," she **told *Teen Vogue***. "But I'm a human being. I have a heart. That's why I suffered. What really helped were the other members." On the boy group side of things, BTS's Suga **offered this wisdom** to *Esquire*: "Some days you're in a good state; sometimes you're not... People won't say you're a weak person if your physical condition is not that good. It should be the same for the mental condition as well. Society should be more understanding." — *Maria Sherman, Senior writer at Jezebel and author of Larger Than Life: A History of Boy Bands from NKOTB to BTS*

NCT's Massive 2020

One very exciting comeback this year was NCT's major reunion, commonly referred to as NCT 2020. The project brought together the individual units in NCT (NCT U, NCT 127, NCT Dream), plus WayV and two additional new members — bringing it to a total of 23 members (cue the memes). They released two albums, *NCT 2020 Resonance Part 1* and *NCT 2020 Resonance Part 2*, with different units participating in various songs. The group incorporated hip-hop, pop, and EDM in this project that showcased their ability to blend genres that matched well with their powerful vocals, catchy rap verses, and hard-hitting choreography. The comeback was highly anticipated, as fans have been waiting two years since their last large-scale project, and highly successful: the group was awarded the Album of the Year Daesang at the Asia Artist Awards. NCT is headed straight to the top. — *JC Jewels, Culture reporter*

Zico Welcoming 2020 With "Any Song" Dance Challenge

Before the song even made its way to the public, rapper Zico tapped popular K-pop artists like Chungha and MAMAMOO's Hwasa around this time last year to join him in doing a small dance to tease his song, "Any Song." Soon enough, the song earned itself **10 wins on South Korea's** popular music shows, and landed **the No. 1 spot** on Billboard's K-Pop Hot 100 for six consecutive weeks. The upbeat piano progression with contrasting lyrics embodies the overall 2020 mood of boredom — and it not only made an impact locally, but globally as well. With TikTok introducing new, hot dance challenges almost every other day, "Any Song" was no exception to the trend. It's safe to say "Any Song" was one of the pioneering K-pop hits to make dance challenges a thing in the scene. — *Lai Frances, Writer and host*

Kai's Intense, Multifaceted Solo Debut

After eight years, **EXO's main dancer** finally unveiled his long-awaited solo project. An R&B-based self-titled mini album with six tracks, Kai's debut was an opportunity for him to finally show the world his full vocal abilities, which weren't often showcased through his group activities in EXO and **SuperM**. Further, the artistry displayed was next level — he released a full art film to highlight the songs on the album, with dance numbers and varying aesthetics that screamed both grace and range. Then, the futuristic music video for smooth and sensual single “Mmmh” played with EXO's detailed universe, featuring Kai's “power” of teleportation, known to EXO-Ls. Both the film and music video inspired countless memes on social media, creating a full moment for Erigoms and EXO-Ls alike. Kai's solo debut was well worth the wait and shows promise for a fruitful solo career in the future. — **Ashlee Mitchell**, *Music and culture writer*

LOONA's Lightstick Conjuring Moon Prism Power, Sailor Moon Nostalgia

It took more than three and a half years for **LOONA**, who began their pre-debut rollout in 2016, to unveil their official lightstick, an essential piece of fan merchandise and an **emblem for any performing K-pop group**. Finally, in June 2020, Orbits' (LOONA's fanbase) patience was rewarded in the form of a regal wand fit for a global K-pop phenom... or a heroine straight out of a magical girl anime. The gorgeous cosmic scepter — a royal golden crown housing a crystal jewel, topped with a crescent moon—was praised even by non-fans when it was revealed on social media. It also drew nostalgia for and **immediate comparisons to Sailor Moon** and her many whimsical wands, especially her powerful Eternal Tiare rod. Naturally, **LOONA's official lightstick** pre-order sold out faster than a magical girl transformation sequence. (Don't worry, it's since been restocked.) — **Erica Russell**, *Managing Editor at PopCrush*

K-pop Idols Swearing

“Corona — *can I swear?*” asks MAMAMOO's Hwasa in Korean during a **November livestream**. “Oh, do it, do it,” says Solar excitedly as she taps her leg, egging her on. “Corona, f*ck you!” Hwasa says emphatically in English. The women gasp in delighted surprise and all erupt in joyful, mischievous giggles. Hearing a K-pop idol swear is like seeing a shooting star — a surprising, rare, and ephemeral beauty to behold. And this year, K-pop fans experienced a meteor shower of expletives from **SHINee**, **BTS**, and **Monsta X** (not explicit, but the subtext is screaming). The shock factor is delicious, but Hwasa's outburst is one of the most real moments of catharsis I've felt all year, as she felt comfortable enough to step off her idol pedestal for a moment to be a regular, grown woman, and share her frustration in the simplest, relatable way. In a time when closeness feels like a luxury, these moments when idols let their guard down have felt like being gifted a golden invitation to be even closer to them. And it feels f*cking great. — **Natalie Morin**, *Entertainment Writer at Refinery29*

Taeyong's iconic growl in SuperM's “Tiger Inside”

Well-known K-pop cat boy Taeyong had his Pokémon evolution this year when he let out the feral growl that boomed through all corners of social media on SuperM's second single, “Tiger Inside.” With a raging “vroom vroom roar” he clawed unsuspecting listeners and stole the entire show. And while the phrase “He was insane for that” is overused at this point, Taeyong sitting on top of a motorcycle giving us a death glare, chains hitting his bare-ish chest as he growled is definitely the textbook definition of it. All these

months later, that's what we remember most from the music video — and that's what you call impact, folks. — *Alexis Hodyan-Gastelum, K-pop writer and co-founder of KultScene*

A.C.E. Covering BLACKPINK's "How You Like That"

There are plenty of platforms for showcasing idol choreography, but the "It's Live" channel is vocal-led, offering a full backing band to perform with, and **A.C.E** — who've produced flawless covers since their rookie days — are in their element. They refashioned BLACKPINK's rowdy revenge song into an intimate and unhurried ballad, belting through glorious ad-libs and soaking the coruscating line of "look at you, look at me" in golden R&B harmonies. Whereas BLACKPINK made this track feel like a post-breakup f*ck you, A.C.E turned it into a sweet farewell kiss with a pitying sting in its tail. — *Taylor Glasby, features journalist*

Yuta's World-Changing Navel Piercing

On March 8, Yuta of NCT 127 debuted **his navel piercing** during a performance of “**Kick It**” on **SBS's Inkigayo**. As soon as viewers spotted the new piercing, the internet went wild, and fans couldn't get enough. These piercings were especially popular among female pop stars in the 2000s but have since become rarer, and a navel piercing isn't the first time Yuta's style pushed the boundaries of gender and current trends. Often opting for longer hair that is styled **with bobby pins** and known for speaking out against the **limitations of gender roles**, this belly button moment was a gift that showcased Yuta's killer style and the space he holds as a trendsetter in the industry. March 8 also happened to be International Women's Day, so thank you, Yuta, for the very timely gift. — **Vandana Pawa**, Culture writer

BTS's Masterful “Black Swan”

BTS's “Black Swan” rollout was flawless, encompassing so much of what makes BTS, well, *BTS*. Beginning with the orchestral version (please BigHit, put it on Spotify!) and accompanying art film, BTS set up “Black Swan” as a magnum opus of sorts, a thesis statement for their feelings about making music. “If this can't resonate any longer, if this can't make my heart tremble any longer, then I'd probably die my first death,” the lyrics read, **per DoYouBangtan**. The soaring strings are largely swapped for rolling trap beats in the official version, only adding to the angst and fraught emotion embedded in the song. And just when we thought we couldn't love “Black Swan” any more — the second music video! The live versions! The Jimin contemporary dance at MOTS ON:E! The Jimin and Jungkook pas de deux at the MMAs! “Black Swan” SOTY. — *P. Claire Dodson, Entertainment editor at Teen Vogue*

The 15th Anniversary of Super Junior

November marked the 15th anniversary of SM Entertainment boy group, Super Junior, whose 2009 hit “**Sorry, Sorry**” remains a classic to this day. Despite a number of setbacks that reduced their 13-member line-up to nine, the group has never stopped moving forward, releasing album after album while members like Heechul gained footholds as popular TV personalities. Now into their thirties, the group is a rare example of longevity in an industry known for its “7-year curse.” And with their celebratory single “**The Melody**” and a 10th album on the way, it doesn’t look like they’ll be going anywhere anytime soon. — **Vivien Wu**, freelance music & culture writer

SHINee's Back!

Objectively speaking, 2020 was grueling. But a rare bright spot? The return of one of the industry's most prolific groups: SHINee. This year, the three eldest members (Onew, Key, and Minho) completed their **mandatory military service** and reunited with their *maknae* **Taemin**. Better yet: The heartfelt moment was **captured on camera** (thank you, SM videographer). Immediately following his discharge on November 15, Minho surprised Taemin, who was promoting his new single "Idea," in his greenroom at SBS *Inkigayo*. The **family reunion** that unfolded, however, was so chaotic and *so* SHINee. Let's set the scene: an exasperated Key jokingly tells Minho to leave, embarrassed by his military uniform; Minho ignores him to hug a smiling Taemin; Minho yells at Key and then wraps him in a bone-crushing embrace; and, finally, Minho tenderly melts into leader Onew's lap. You couldn't script a more perfect exchange. SHINee means so much to so many, and to see them back together for the first time in nearly two years, to watch them fall so easily back into that familiar rhythm, sparks an indescribable joy. It's a shining diamond in a year that's brought nothing but coal. Now all we need is new music. — ***Crystal Bell*, Culture Writer**

"Pporappippam," or the Embodiment of Sunmi's Purple Universe

In the selective expansion of her own musical cosmos, K-pop queen **Sunmi** released "보라빛 밤 (pporappippam)" (translated as "purple-colored night"), a magical ode to summertime nostalgia that serves as a healing antidote for this chaotic year. Featuring a music video filled with violet-toned landscapes, romantic fireworks and magnetic eye-shadow looks, the dream-like aesthetics of "pporappippam" bewitched fans around the globe. Written by Sunmi and co-produced with Korean hitmaker FRANTS (as credited by **Genius**), the '80s synth-pop gem peaked at No. 5 in both the **Gaon Digital Chart** and **Billboard's World Digital Songs**. — ***Ivana E. Morales*, journalist**

K-Pop on Your FYP

It's no question that TikTok really had a chance to shine in 2020, and it's been the new birthplace of memes and pop culture moments these past several months. Several K-pop acts have taken to the platform for a new and unique way to connect with their fans and take over the FYP. TikTok offers a rare unfiltered look at K-pop artists, and that in itself is worth highlighting — the idols who have hopped on TikTok trends, used native filters and effects, and understood the community have been especially standing out. It's hard to narrow the list down, but here are a few of my top K-pop TikTok moments from 2020. A highlight has been CLC member Sorn, one of K-pop's early TikTok adopters who has hopped on a variety of trends and also brought her CLC bandmates onto her account. The thing about TikTok is you can tell when someone is an active user themselves, and it's clear that **Sorn knows** the ins and outs: "It might be hard to believe... But I'm actually a K-pop singer," she states on her profile bio. Meanwhile, Soobin's iteration of the viral Fail challenge is one of **TXT's most viewed TikToks** at 18.8M views — and with good reason. The boys are quick to jump on trends and not shy to show off their great sense of humor. Finally, **Rain has been everywhere** in 2020, from "Gang" going viral to taking on the summer with SSAK3, so it's no surprise that he's on TikTok, too, whether he's playing with special effects or showing off a new dance. — **Kristine Kwak**, Digital marketing manager

ATEEZ's ZERO : FEVER Part 1 'Diary Film' Official Film

A beatific young woman twirling outside a 24/7 convenience store at night with headphones on, a burning basketball court at dusk. These are just a couple of the indelible cinematic visuals from ATEEZ's *ZERO : FEVER Part. 1 'Diary Film'* that live in my galaxy brain rent free. This year's short film, released in support of their EP of the same name, truly cements ATEEZ as one of the leading performance-based 4th gen groups churning out compelling dream-within-dream concept storylines. Whether as chained up goth pirate king alter-egos or more ordinary Korean *gyobok*-fitted young men, the eight makes one team truly ride the high tides, even as the hourglass sands fall. — **Rea McNamara**, Emily H. Tremain Journalism Fellow for Curators, Hyperallergic

LGBTQ+ MOAs Turning Hate Into Love

TXT fans had the best response when a homophobic minority in their fandom began spouting their vitriol to invalidate queer fans. User @froghyuka conceived [#MoasAreGayParty](#) to show that MOA is a safe space for everyone. Twitter was soon flooded with all colors of the rainbow; pinks and blues and purples, shades of pride flags brought to life by the selcas of LGBTQ+ fans. Some fans came out to their family because of this tag. I can only dream of how MOA might have impacted my younger queer self, but I'm comforted knowing these are the fans leading TXT standom into the future. — [K-Ci Williams](#), Culture writer

The Adventurous *Road to Kingdom*

In April, amid the bleakness of the beginning of the pandemic, this competition show was a bright spot. Seven underrated K-pop boy groups — Golden Child, Oneus, ONF, Pentagon, [The Boyz](#), TOO, and VeriVery — faced off against each other in live performance battles. Concepts ranged from [cursed monarchs](#) and [dolls come to life](#) to elegant [classical music and K-pop](#) mashups, but the [death-defying stunts](#) and [stunning visual storytelling](#) of The Boyz swept the competition. As winners of *Road to Kingdom*, they'll compete against ATEEZ, Stray Kids, and a handful of other established groups on follow-up show *Kingdom*, which is sure to bring some much-needed levity to early 2021. — [Elizabeth de Luna](#), Culture Writer

Epik High Locks Down the Perfect Playlist Series to See Us Through 2020

When quarantine shuttered cities across the globe, Epik High delved into their discography to give fans the soundscape they needed to get lost in. With titles like “Stormy Day”, “Stay Strong” and “Feel Good”, each [YouTube playlist](#) is designed to strengthen listeners' spirits. Epik High's latest album *Sleepless in _____* explores our restless psyche with an assist from K-pop legends like IU, Crush, and Suga. He and RM [say](#) that “Fly” inspired them to pursue music, while BTS deep cut “[Hip Hop Phile](#)” pays homage to Epik High's influence. Both groups' introspective artistry has helped fans find solace this year. — [Hannah Weiss](#), Freelance writer at *Teen Vogue*

Dive Studios Bringing K-Entertainment Realness

Though only created in the summer of 2019, **Dive Studios** has left its mark on 2020 by providing honest insight into the lives, thoughts, and creative processes of those who make up the Korean entertainment industry to a greater global audience. The podcasting conglomerate is home to various shows hosted by artists like Eric Nam, Tablo (Korea's resident father figure and hip-hop pioneer), Jamie, Jae (Day 6), AleXa, **Peniel (BTOB)**, BM (**KARD**), Ashley Choi (Ladies' Code), and prominent entertainment heads like Sam and Dave (The World of Dave). The studio covers a wide range of formats, from artist interviews to life advice, and one of Dive Studios' greatest charms is how it provides a space for creatives, especially those who are not natively Korean, to share their stories in a less PR-friendly and a more transparent manner — it's clearly appreciated, as evidenced by consistent rankings on the Apple Podcast Top Charts. — ***Rianne Akindede***, Music & Culture Writer

Aespa's Debut With "BLACK MAMBA"

Love it or hate it, aespa's "BLACK MAMBA" was the epitome of a 2020 debut and may be a glimpse into the future of K-pop. Every detail of the launch, from the next-level costumes and intricate choreo (including floor work!), to the group's A.I.-inspired concept, was impossibly polished and high-budget. While many skeptics thought the release was almost too slick and seemed more like a comeback than a debut, there's no denying that SM's first girl group since Red Velvet features four impressive all-around talents to watch. Groups are rarely best known for their first single, so we're definitely looking forward to what aespa does next. — *Stephan Lee, author of K-Pop Confidential*

The Return of CL

The 2nd-gen idol has had quite a year. A selection of highlights: Lying next to Beyonce in the **first Ivy Park x Adidas commercial**, opening up a fan community on Weverse, and performing **her single “Hwa”** on the *Late Late Show*. But the standout moment from CL’s year was the release of the MV for her single “5 Star,” which depicted herself and DPR IAN in a carefree, adorable relationship that made viewers feel incredibly single. — ***Natasha Mulenga, Culture writer and host of A Soulful Storm*** podcast

Agust D's Existential "People"

There's something special about music that defines a very particular moment in your existence, and in 2020, BTS member Suga's second Agust D mixtape, *D-2*, was it. The mixtape delivers in its entirety — Agust D's signature spitfire rap and Suga's distinctive lyrical introspection intertwined with newer, softer vocals — but *D-2*'s seventh track stood out from the rest. Released in May, as it was becoming clear isolation would be the new normal, "People" offered some much-appreciated perspective: nothing, for better or worse, lasts forever. And if that's not your kind of comfort, then a clip of your fave proudly lip-syncing along and glowing like the literal sun will likely do the trick. — *Ellie Bate, Entertainment Reporter at BuzzFeed*

When BoA Dropped **202020 BoA**

Before releasing her 10th studio album *BETTER* (her 20th including Japanese and U.S. works), BoA dropped a celebratory documentary titled *202020 BoA*. In the film, she reenacts iconic moments and explores her 20-year career from her first no. 1 single on the Oricon Chart “Listen to My Heart” to one of the most underrated originals “Kiss My Lips.” Her footpath became the pavement for K-pop nowadays, but she does not linger around the past successes. “I still dream of being on stage.” As she said, she remains one of the most contemporary artists transcending time and space. Bet, she is always *BETTER*. — *Harim Choi a.k.a. Squib, Editor at **Idology***

Baekhyun's Gorgeous BoA Tribute

In a generational crossover moment that should go down in K-pop history, BoA — hailed the “Queen of K-pop” — celebrated her 20-year anniversary this year. Subsequently, SM Entertainment organized an anniversary project where various musicians inspired by the storied performer sang covers to her songs. One was million selling soloist Baekhyun, member of EXO and leader of SuperM, who sang his own soulful rendition of BoA's “Garden in the Air.” For K-pop fans and industry veterans, this moment blending talented K-pop artists from multiple generations was a treat, and one that doesn't come often. For those who have been following K-pop for a while, BoA's expansion to countries like Japan back in her prime was groundbreaking. Many newer generation idols are inspired by her, making Baekhyun's opportunity to breathe new life into one of her most iconic songs an absolute honor. — *Ashlee Mitchell, Music and culture writer*

Stray Kids's Bang Chan Acknowledging Fan Art

Though most of 2020 kept K-pop idols and their audiences apart physically, things were better than ever in digital spaces. One example was in November, when Stray Kids leader Bang Chan discussed on a livestream how much he had **enjoyed and appreciated** fan cartoonist **@anelderlymeme**, for their video rendition of a funny moment from one of his prior streams. Though maybe not the biggest moment of the year on the historic scale of things, the small virtual dialogue between K-pop artist and fan artist exemplified the sides of humanity that make the K-pop fandom experience so unique. In a year where there was little else to rely on, small moments where stars and stans “saw” and appreciated one another was a refuge for many. — **Tamar Herman, author of *BTS: Blood, Sweat, and Tears***.

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This content can also be viewed on the site it **originates** from.

BTS Going Viral in India and Abroad After “Boy With Luv” Dance Practice Was Mashed-Up with “Chunari Chunari”

The pop world was quite reliable when it came to releasing music we all found comfort in during the past year. The pandemic gave rise to extreme interest in Korean content in India, including music and drama, and Grammy-nominated pop sensation BTS made their way to the hearts of locals when their dance practice video of 2019 track “Boy With Luv” went viral in June. While India was clearly aware of the stardom of the band due to their music and philanthropy, it was this video that garnered the attention of the locals, so much so that it even reached family group chats on WhatsApp. The video synced perfectly with peppy dance number “**Chunari Chunari**,” a track from the 1999 Bollywood film *Biwi No. 1*. While it’s quite popular to mash-up K-pop videos with Indian music, those who grew up in the ‘90s were mesmerized by the edit, made by creators at FilmForFare. Not only did the video garner staggering views on Instagram and Twitter, the reach of it was such that big publications covered it, and it even reached Indian celebrities including

popular singer [Armaan Malik](#) and filmmaker [Anurag Kashyap](#). The rise of BTS in India has been immense, and this was only a glimpse of it. — [Monica Yadav](#), Entertainment Journalist, *Bollywood Hungama*

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Senegalese Model Fatou Samba Debuts in Blackswan

DR Music's Blackswan is no stranger to non-Asian members. During their days as Rania, they hired African-American singer Alex Reid. But when fans noticed that Alex [wasn't treated equally to her Korean bandmates](#), it became clear that Black representation in K-pop still had a long way to go. Enter Senegalese model Fatou Samba. Her unveiling as a Blackswan member had K-pop twitter *shook*. For fans all too aware of [Black culture's deep-rooted influence on K-pop](#), to have Fatou fully incorporated in Blackswan's debut from the video to the performances means a lot. Hey, Black Lives Matter in K-pop, too. — [Sarah Raughley](#), *columnist and YA author of The Effigies Series*. Her new book, *The Bones of Ruin*, is slated for fall 2021.

Yukika Baring Her Shimmering City Pop Seoul on Retro Debut Album

City pop — the smooth, synthy sound of [Japan's glitzy bubble era](#) — has gone viral in recent years, thanks largely in part to YouTube's surprise hit-producing algorithm (and one particularly enduring [Mariya Takeuchi single](#)); its sample-friendly appeal within electronic sub-genres such as [vaporwave](#); and the cyclical nature and increased globalization of musical trends. In early 2019, Japanese K-pop artist Yukika experienced her own minor viral city pop hit with “[Neon](#),” her nostalgic take on the genre complete with matching '80s

Japanese pop idol aesthetic. Her polished debut album, *Seoul Lady* (released July 21), **builds upon that dreamy throwback sound** so authentically that much of it sounds like it could have been plucked straight from a Shibuya vinyl record shop circa 1985, making it an unexpected breath of fresh air among 2020's K-pop offerings. But the neon-drenched album isn't solely an ode to city pop: Yukika also dips into new jack swing ("Yesterday"), future bass ("pit-a-pet"), and neo-soul ("A Day for Love"), proving her versatility. — **Erica Russell**, Managing Editor at PopCrush

A Voting Drive for American Idols

The push for civic engagement in 2020 was prominent globally. The United States presidential election in November was on the forefront of the minds of many U.S. fans — and the community did their part in encouraging idols with American citizenship to do their part as well. Some idols were much **more vocal than others** about the necessity of voting, but the online movement encouraging idols in Korea to register to vote and submit their absentee ballots on time stayed strong, and also led to hilarious **video edits** showcasing the potential for idols to be civically engaged in their hometowns. I actually tried it myself, and I must say doing the choreography to NCT 127's "Kick It" at my polling location really elevated my overall voting experience. — **Vandana Pawa**, Culture writer

BTS Member V's Fan-Created *Simpsons* Portrait on Weverse

It began last fall with a seemingly innocuous Weverse post. "Can [someone] draw me as a Simpson?" **asked** Kim Taehyung, BTS's vocalist, visual, and self-appointed Weverse fan engagement ambassador. "I want to frame it." What V asks, V gets. In May, he **uploaded** a photo of himself lounging in a DOSSY Elephant pajama set on a leather couch, looking above at, yes, the requested *Simpsons*-style fanart. Immediately, ARMY flooded Weverse and other socials with photoshop manipulated memes, demonstrating the unique call and response interplay BTS has with its horizontally-organized fandom. In a way, the incident foreshadowed the visual direction Taehyung employed for *BE*'s concept photography, from its balanced symmetry to nuanced understanding of all of our site-specific "Fly to my Room"-esque localities. ARMY may paint Taehyung, but Taehyung will always be the framer. — **Rea McNamara**, **Emily H. Tremaine** Journalism Fellow for Curators, Hyperallergic

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This content can also be viewed on the site it [originates](#) from.

Taeyeon's New Album Is the Light to Guide Us Through This Winter

Taeyeon's new mini-album *What Do I Call You* is a gorgeous blend of whimsical melodies and wistful lyricism. Taylor Swift may be setting up her songwriting camp deep in the folkorian woods, but Taeyeon has created her own tiny universe within these six songs. "To the Moon" transforms our collective cabin fever into a fairy-tale flight of fantasy, while "Galaxy" uses cosmic metaphors to detail the simple peace of time spent with oneself. The album feels like a notebook the singer has scribbled her thoughts in over the past year. With its chill soundscape and Taeyeon's airy vocals, *What Do I Call You* is the perfect soundtrack to close 2020. The album examines loneliness, desire and regret through a soft filter, sharing a touch of warmth to carry us through this winter. — **Hannah Weiss**, *Freelance writer at Teen Vogue*

IZ*ONE Bringing a Dance Break for the Ages

There are few things that I enjoy better than a good dance break. This year has seen its fair share of them, but not many quite as satisfying as IZ*ONE in "Secret Story of the Swan," the lead single of their summer comeback *Oneiric Diary*. The dance break is powerful and sharp and everything there is to love in K-Pop choreos, making perfect use of IZ*ONE's 12 members and highlighting the

skill of the group's main dancer Chaeyeon. It has definitely earned all of the viral glory it has enjoyed since it premiered. — ***Benedetta Geddo**, Entertainment Writer*

MAMAMOO's OT4 Comeback

Despite each member releasing solo music throughout 2020, fans were delighted to see the return of OT4. MAMAMOO have never been afraid to be fierce and sensual, so it came as no surprise that the vocal powerhouses wowed fans with their carefree, retro-inspired song “Dingga” and lead single “Aya”, which felt like the 2020 upgrade of “Egostistic.” Did anyone else enjoy seeing MAMAMOO do the “Zanku” during the dance break in “Aya?” I know I did. — ***Natasha Mulenga**, Culture writer and host of **A Soulful Storm** podcast*

When Omega Sapien Shrieked 'I GO!' in 'Ah! Ego'

While K-pop extended its border externally, new movements rose in Korea: Neo K-pop and Alternative K-pop. Both seek to combine different kinds of music hyperactively, referring to the hybrid methodology of K-pop. SUMIN, who participated in many K-pop songs such as BTS's "Lie" and Red Velvet's "Look," declared "Neo K-pop" in the 2019 release "OO DA DA," and now Omega Sapien of the crew Balming Tiger introduces himself as "Alternative K-pop." He jumbled various genres from hip-hop to footwork and gabber in the debut EP *Garlic*, and the chaotic shriek of "Ah! Ego" is on the apex. If you are down to delve into this new current, check the list <+82-NEO-POP>. — *Harim Choi a.k.a. Squib, Editor at Idology*

Jimin's Standout Performance of "Filter" at Map of the Soul: One

Words can't do justice to describe how hypnotic Jimin's performance was on both nights of the virtual concert. From the moment Jimin started wearing clothing from the mannequin, right to when he gets lifted by the dancers at "*I can be your genie*." The entire performance was enchanting. As Jimin dances in and out of vision by disappearing behind the dancers, you're left entirely unprepared for THE suit change. Clothes are thrown into the air and then boom, a wild sexier Jimin appears in a brand new suit. — *Ikran Dahir, BuzzFeed Reporter*

Onewe's Dongmyeong Putting All Your Makeup Routines to Shame

In an industry where masculinity is constantly **being redefined**, Onewe's Dongmyeong deserves a moment in the spotlight for reminding us that makeup — no matter your gender — can make anyone feel a little more fabulous. The lead singer and keyboard player of the five-piece band went viral earlier this year for effortlessly **applying his own makeup** in a vlog posted on the group's YouTube channel. Of course, male idols wearing makeup is nothing groundbreaking, but knowing which shade of foundation to use and how to get that perfect winged eyeliner look definitely had K-Pop fans wondering **who this talented beauty guru is**. — *Chyenne Tatum, Music/entertainment writer at EnVi Magazine*

The Power of #SMBlackout

Cultural appropriation and misappropriation within K-pop has been pervasive since the genre's inception, despite fans' persistent efforts to make the industry aware of it. When the murder of **George Floyd** sparked international outrage and action to dismantle systems of inequality, K-pop fans waited for the agencies behind their favorite groups to step up in support of Black lives. Most didn't. Fans of SM Entertainment, which pioneered K-pop as we know it today using hip-hop and R&B as a blueprint, decided to hit the company where it would hurt most: its bottom line. Davonna, 27, De'Andra, 23, and Ellie, 19, created **#SMBlackout** to make it known that "Black fans will no longer monetarily invest" in SM and its artists "as long as they stay silent on Black Lives Matter and other issues that plague the Black community." The hashtag was one of the first in K-pop to encourage fans to speak with their spending and opened the door to future forms of fan-driven activism. — **Elizabeth de Luna, Culture Writer**

Solar's Bald Moment in Her "Spit It Out" Music Video

When MAMAMOO's leader Solar announced her solo debut, no one knew just what we were in for. Released in April, "Spit It Out" is *fierce*. Delivering the catchy, Latin pop-inflected track in glossy latex gloves and neon acrylic nails, Solar is in complete control and having so much fun in her music video. But then, suddenly, she appears draped in a translucent cloth, bald. It's a startlingly vulnerable moment, but that's something fans have come to expect from Solar. She's turned to **YouTube** to connect to fans with vlogs, challenges, and most recently, quickfire covers of Christmas classics that blow the originals out of the water. — **Katie Goh, Culture Writer**

Megan Thee Stallion x Idol Edits

If you're a fan of Megan Thee Stallion *and* the Korean idols who've put out great music this year like I am, chances are that a big bright spot in your year has been the fan-made idol x Megan Thee Stallion edits that put idols' excellent moves against Megan's 2020 hits "WAP," "Savage," and "Body." Funny and **spicy**, these **short videos** show the creativity of idol fans and put two different pop culture powerhouses together in a ridiculously entertaining combination. — *Stitch, Culture writer*

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This content can also be viewed on the site it **originates** from.

BTS's Relaxing Journey, *In the Soop*

During the pandemic, BTS took us into their lives. Their label BigHit Entertainment is committed to "music and artists for healing," and the septet definitely lived up to that mission! Reality show *In the Soop* provided ARMYs with slow-paced content, portraying the members relaxing in a **lakeside Airbnb**. This year wasn't the smoothest, but the show gave fans the opportunity to unwind and slow down with BTS, see more of their vulnerability, and learn more about the members. It was by far a best moment of 2020, reminding us to reflect on the little things we can control. — *Bashirat Oladele, culture writer based in London*

The Triumphant Debut of the Refund Sisters

What happens when four icons of K-pop girl power are united in one group? They become the *Refund Sisters*, **so named** because these fierce gals could get a refund from even the most reluctant of shopkeepers. The multigenerational group, consisting of Uhm Jung-hwa, Lee Hyori, Jessi, and Hwasa, was an instant hit with "Don't Touch Me," which even **ousted BTS's "Dynamite" from the top of the Gaon**

chart (albeit briefly). The track, and its music video, are packed with attitude and confront stereotypes about how women should age. More of this energy in 2021 please! — *Claire H. Evans, Culture writer*

Cats Vibing to K-Pop

In October of this year, a Twitter account called [@catvibingtokpop](#) was created. It is exactly what it claims to be. It's a cat straight vibing to K-pop songs, and it's delightful. Born from a viral TikTok meme from April, a green screen version of a cat bobbing its head rhythmically has been making the rounds all over Twitter. Unlike memes that are sometimes built of layers upon layers of context, this is a very simple joy. Because really, at the end of the day, aren't we all just cats vibing to K-pop? — *Lucy Ford, Freelance entertainment reporter*

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Jungkook's Hair Transformations

Jungkook's hair always creates A Moment, but never more so than in 2020. After a brief attempt at growing it in [late 2019](#), Jungkook has spent this year carefully curating his locks, creating several meltdown-inducing looks on the way to his ideal length. Highlights include [The Curls](#), [The Bun](#), [The Pony](#), [The Slicked-Back](#), and, most importantly of all, [The Exposed Undercut](#). With his hair seeming to play an important part in his self expression, 2020 Jungkook has made all kinds of statements about who he is and how he wants to

be seen, as he leaves **The Coconut** of his teen years far, far behind. — *Jenna Guillaume, entertainment journalist and author of **What I Like About Me***

BLACKPINK's Supreme, Collaborative Year

With three huge collaborations and the release of their debut full album, 2020 was a year of **BLACKPINK** reaching new heights and displaying versatility. They kicked it off with “Sour Candy,” a lively electropop collaboration on Lady Gaga’s *Chromatica* that immediately got people dancing. From one pop star to the next, BLACKPINK’s catchy and sweet “Ice Cream” featuring Selena Gomez, was an even bigger hit. Lastly, “**Bet You Wanna**” featuring Cardi B was the group’s first feature with a rapper, but it was just as captivating thanks to their vocal prowess and Cardi’s powerful delivery. — *Maddy Myer, Entertainment writer*

ITZY, “WANNABE”

ITZY’s music is all about being yourself, and this year they gave us the anthemic “WANNABE” to prove it. From Ryujin’s **iconic shoulder shimmy** to the powerful kiss off, “It’s none of your business / I do my own business,” “WANNABE” is a crash course in Confidence 101. The music video shows Yeji, Lia, Ryujin, Chaeryeong, and Yuna cutting their hair, making a mess, dancing barefoot with abandon (on a catwalk, no less), and generally following their own paths. It’s a reminder that, yeah, “there’s no need to be something [else]” because “I’m the best when I’m myself... I just wanna be me!” — *Elizabeth de Luna, Culture Writer*

Ong Seong Wu's Versatile Solo Debut

After gaining popularity on the competition show *Produce 101* and debuting in its K-Pop group Wanna One, 25-year-old triple threat Ong Seong Wu took center stage with the release of his first solo mini-album, *Layers*, on March 25. A collection of his experiences learning and growing throughout his early twenties, each of the album's tracks was written and composed by Seong Wu and reveals another layer of his personality. From finding the courage to start anew on “Gravity” to dropping Harry Potter references on “Guess Who,” *Layers* proved that Ong Seong Wu is a versatile artist and storyteller in his own right. — *Emlyn Travis, Writer*

K-Pop's Influence in Gaming with K/DA and More

In addition to K-pop, South Korea's Hallyu wave has spread to dominance in esports and gaming. If you're familiar with both industries, then you were well fed with the various collaborations of K-pop acts dipping their feet into the world of gaming. While BTS revived MapleStory and BLACKPINK played PUBG, the ultimate crossover this year was arguably (G)I-DLE and TWICE's involvement with *League of Legends*' virtual girl group, K/DA. Debuting in 2018 with "POP/STARS", *LoL*'s virtual quartet (Ahri, Akali, Evelynn and Kai'Sa, based on the games' themes) was initially voiced by Madison Beer, (G)I-DLE's Soyeon and Miyeon and Jaira Burns. This year, TWICE's Nayeon, Sana, Jihyo and Chaeyoung become the newest additions on EP, *All Out*, for the track "I'll Show You" with Bekuh Boom and Annika Wells. Three of the five tracks consist of features from (G)I-DLE ("The Baddest", "More") and TWICE. — **Lai Frances**, *Writer and host*

Jin's "Abyss"

Two hours before his birthday, BTS's Jin surprised ARMY by gifting his fans with a **brand-new solo song**. Implementing the **rich metaphor of a deep sea**, "Abyss" explores themes of isolation. Accompanying "Abyss," Jin delivered a note where he divulged that he was grappling with burnout and experiencing anxiety as a result of feeling undeserving of BTS's groundbreaking success. He worked on this song as a way of understanding his emotions, while also expressing his sad feelings through music. Fans immediately took to Twitter to recognize Jin's honesty and vulnerability, and, in turn, shared their own relationship with their mental health. — **Ana Giggins**, *Editor-in-chief of @HelloAsiaAU and co-host of @BangPopPodcast*

TXT's Best Song Yet: "Ghosting"

What can a K-pop boy band of mostly teenage talents accomplish in the year after a debut? A hell of a lot. BigHit Entertainment's TOMORROW X TOGETHER (TXT for the breathless), frequently dubbed BTS's "younger brother" group, is a quintet of eclectic experimentalists, unafraid to traverse unexpected genre lines — as long as each song maintains a sweet reverence for earnestness, the superpower of adolescence. In 2020, that inspired two kinetic EPs, the critically-exalted *The Dream Chapter: Eternity* and the group's highest-charting release to date, *Minisode1: Blue Hour*. The latter opens with "Ghosting," a hazy, synth-heavy indie rock ode to love lost that also happens to be well-studied shoegaze—and, in this writer's opinion, their best song to date—proof that there isn't any sound they won't attempt, and master. Who knew TXT would breathe new life into K-pop by modernizing a subgenre founded in the UK in the 1980s? Now that's inventive! — *Maria Sherman, Senior writer at Jezebel and author of Larger Than Life: A History of Boy Bands from NKOTB to BTS*

Red Velvet's Irene and Seulgi, "Monster"

Red Velvet members Irene and Seulgi released the ferocious, intensely fun “Monster” back in July, and I'm still thinking about the music video. The duo's choreo is off the charts as they prowl around amid a group of undulating back-up dancers, and their eyeliner is a character in its own right. The video has range: part childhood doll-destruction, part sapphic disco, and part spy plot to ruin your life.

—*P. Claire Dodson, Entertainment editor at [Teen Vogue](#)*

A Watermelon Suga High

One of the cutest moments in K-pop this year was BTS’s adorable shoutout to Harry Styles’s major hit “Watermelon Sugar.” During the “Dynamite” promotions at the end of the summer, the group was asked about a song that had been stuck in their head. Some of the members started gleefully singing Harry’s summer song, while pointing to and clapping at Suga, who just grinned and did the sweetest dad-style dance moves as they sang “Watermelon Suga High.” It definitely felt like an inside joke they’d made several times amongst each other. — **Aamina Khan**, Style News Writer/Contributor

DeepStudio Entertainment’s YOURS Project Learns About Cultural Appropriation

From idols **dropping the n-word in a cover** to **cultural appropriation** in the quest to be authentic to hip-hop (or just fooling around for their fans), 2020 has been... messy. However, DeepStudio Entertainment has tried to get ahead of the curve by making education about cultural appropriation (with a heavy feature on anti-Blackness) part of the learning process as they prepare their trainees for debut in their YOURS project. In **a nine-minute video**, 19-year-old Jia used **comic artist Yerong’s work** to explain why they don’t want to become part of the problem. It’s a brief look at something that will hopefully have long lasting impacts on their career as idols. — **Stitch**, Culture writer

Lisa’s Viral Legs

BLACKPINK’s Lisa took the internet by storm when she uploaded a dance performance of QUIN and 6lack’s “Mushroom Chocolate.” The sultry cover included a moment that showed the dancer and rapper’s long legs. From there, her legs became the “Did it work?” meme. Twitter user **@dilfsarek** posted screenshots of *Star Trek* character Spock’s torso next to a screenshot of Lisa’s legs, sparking the viral meme. As more users hopped on the trend, the most unexpected participation came from **Dolly Parton** — and Lisa herself even joked about her viral legs during the first episode of **BLACKPINK’s reality show 24/365!** — **Nnehkai Agbor**, Music writer at KultScene

X content

This content can also be viewed on the site it [originates](#) from.

Chaeyoung's "Risky risky wiggy 위기 / This is an emergency"

Few lines have such a strong impact as Chaeyoung's "Risky risky wiggy 위기 / This is an emergency" on TWICE's "I Can't Stop Me." Released in late October, the song and its accompanying music video immediately captivated listeners with its striking visuals, shoulder-shimmy choreo, and catchy melody – not to mention [the sartorial and beauty choices](#) (lest we forget red-haired Jihyo). However, it was Chaeyoung's punchy one-liner that completely took over stan Twitter, serving as inspiration for countless memes – together with its [English version counterpart](#) – and even more profile names. Add to that the fact that it is nearly impossible to get it out of your head, and you have the definition of a "cultural reset," in keeping with internet lingo. Viral lines aside, "I Can't Stop Me" is perhaps TWICE's strongest release to date and further solidified [a year of great music](#) for the nonet. — *Sara Delgado, freelance writer, editor, and translator*

The Genius Artistry of CONNECT, BTS

While I believe any time Kim Seokjin exposes his forehead is a cultural reset, the global [CONNECT, BTS](#) art installation project, in which BTS partnered with 22 artists from five cities around the world, helped upend a multitude of entrenched, wrongheaded ideas about culture. First, that "pop music" has no place in "real art." Second, that young pop music fans won't be interested in deep exploration of topics like ecology, cosmology, and the self. And third, that BTS themselves are somehow manufactured automatons and philistines when it comes to music, language, and artistry. All wrong! Ultimately, each art project curated as part of CONNECT,

BTS, in partnership between BTS and leading art historians and artists from Buenos Aires to Seoul, reminded us that great transformative art and great transformative ideas, while deeply rooted in tradition and culture, can always reach beyond our arbitrary borders. — *Amy S. Choi, Editorial Director, [The Mash-Up Americans](#)*

K-pop's Pioneering Virtual Live Music Experiences

After a string of concert cancellations, music industries across the world started searching for alternate ways to keep the proverbial show going on amid a pandemic. K-pop set the benchmark when it came to taking the concert experience online. Not only was it one of the first industries to jump on the virtual bandwagon, but K-pop companies also used technology in inventive ways to give fans a phantasmagorical experience. Industry titan SM Entertainment started [the Beyond Live series](#), a paid virtual concert experience that went "beyond technology, beyond imagination, beyond future." SM banked on AR tech and 3D computer graphics to augment virtual performances (was this a preface for the SM Culture Universe? Methinks so.) Elsewhere, BTS's *[Bang Bang Con: The Live](#)* hosted a record-breaking [concurrent 756,000 viewers](#), making it into the Guinness Book of World Records (they would later follow it with the massive *Map of the Soul ON:E*). It wasn't just isolated company concerts that went above and beyond to create an immersive concert experience. After the on-ground event was cancelled, KCON — one of America's largest festivals celebrating Korean culture and media — launched KCON:TACT, with performances that employed extended reality tech and volumetric display, which turned the entire performance arena into a themed accessory for acts. So, while Everglow performed their hit "LA DI DA" in a virtual warehouse, technology turned the same stage into a vast automated jungle for KARD. Whether this becomes a permanent part of the K-pop experience is yet to be seen — we were just thankful to be able to see our faves! — *Tanu I. Raj, Culture writer*

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