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Dancing Through K-Pop

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Abstract

Since the late twentieth century, Korean pop (K-pop) has significantly increased in popularity across the world. With dance choreography being such an important aspect of this music genre and the limited research examining its stylistic evolution, an exploration into how K-pop dance has developed over time calls for attention. This study aims to answer the question: How has K-pop dance movement changed and evolved over the five K-pop generations? The hypothesis proposed is that older generations would showcase lighter, flowier movements, while newer generations would include sharper, tenser, and more complex dance movements. To test this hypothesis, K-pop music videos and their corresponding dance choreography videos were sampled. Then, movements within the dance videos were then categorized using Laban Movement Analysis (LMA). Lastly, a trend analysis was conducted to illustrate the changes in dance movements over the generations. The results indicate that over time, K-pop dance movements have become more indirect, quicker, lighter, and freer. These findings provide more understanding into the cross-cultural impact of dance and the development of K-pop as a whole.

Keywords: K-Pop, Dance, Generation, LMA

1. Introduction

In the late twentieth century, Korean popular culture, including its music, television, dramas, fashion, and cuisine, began to spread across the globe (Jang & Chang, 2023). Specifically, Korean-pop (K-pop), which is a popular music genre originating from South Korea, has significantly grown in popularity. K-pop typically features groups ranging from two to twenty members and is often accompanied by dance choreography. The timeline of K-pop can be divided into generations, where a generation is an era of K-pop comprised of groups that share similar styles, dance, and music and time of debut. Since the 1990s, there have been four generations of K-pop, with the fifth generation currently in progress. The timeline of the generations is as follows: first generation: 1992-2000, second generation: 2001-2011 (Ryou, 2023), third generation: 2012-2018, fourth generation: 2019-2023, and fifth generation: 2023-present (Ryou, 2024). From the hip-hop and street style of the first generation, to the synchronized choreography of the second, the surge in Western audiences of the third, and the diversification and creative experimentation of the fourth and fifth, K-pop has evolved dramatically since its origins (Escudero, 2023).

When K-pop first began developing, the United States was notable in bringing over Western culture to the post-Korean War peninsula, introducing American songs, language, and ideals to Korean society (Hong et al., 2023). In addition, some Korean individuals were able to study in American universities, adopting Western ideas, and over time, American culture successfully integrated into Korean society (Hong et al., 2023). The effects of Western culture are not limited to just the creation of K-pop, however. Even now, “Korean pop culture imitates and gains inspiration from Western culture” (Hong et al., 2023, pg. 4).

K-pop dance also felt the effects of the Western world. Hae-Kyung Um from the School of Music at the University of Liverpool (2013) explains how the incorporation of Afro-American hip-hop dance was fundamental in setting the

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basis for K-pop dance. Peter Broadwell and Timothy Tangherlini (2021) add on by describing how K-pop dance is comprised of other Western dance styles, such as American cheer, stepping, and hip-hop. Additionally, as the K-pop industry expanded, it was not uncommon for producers and choreographers to come from outside of Korea (Broadwell & Tangherlini, 2021). This is understandable, as dance is a universal language that can communicate across cultures; thus, it is constantly evolving and influencing other dance styles (Woodard, 2020). While the formation of K-pop dance was greatly influenced by the Western world, limited research exists on how these dances have evolved over time and how Western styles continue to shape their development. This study seeks to provide a preliminary understanding of these changes and continued influences.

Specifically, this paper focuses on K-pop dance and using Laban Movement Analysis (LMA) to explore how the dance style has changed and developed over time. This paper seeks to answer the question: How have K-pop dance movements changed and evolved over the five K-pop generations? The hypothesis is that older generations will showcase lighter, flowier movements, while the dances of newer generations will include tenser, sharper, and more complex movements.

2. Materials and Methods

The methodology of this study consisted of three main steps: first, selecting a sample of K-pop music and dance choreography videos. Then, conducting LMA on the dance videos by counting the frequency of Effort Actions. LMA is a system created by dance theorist and choreographer Rudolf Laban for the observation, description, and interpretation of human movement, and it has been used in a variety of disciplines. Third, performing a trend analysis based on those frequencies. These steps allowed for the identification of changes and patterns in the evolution of K-pop dance across the five generations.

2.1 Methodology Choice

LMA was selected based on a study conducted by researchers Loken-Kim and Crump, who used LMA to observe the differences between two generations of traditional Korean dance (1993). Additionally, LMA has been used for a diverse range of purposes. It has been employed to analyze a variety of dance styles, such as traditional folkloric (Aristidou et al., 2015) and jazz (Heiland & Megill, 2018), as well as in areas outside of dance, such as analyzing the body movements of musicians (Broughton & Stevens, 2012) and hospital patients (Foroud & Whishaw, 2006). Given both its prior use in Korean dance research and its broad application, using LMA was well-suited for identifying generational differences in K-pop, a dance style that incorporates multiple genres.

A trend analysis was utilized based on a study done by researcher Ning, who used data from the years 2000-2020 to analyze the development direction and impact of ethnic Chinese folk dances (Ning, 2023). Similarly, this study analyzed the development of a dance style across a time frame of over thirty years, making a trend analysis an appropriate method for this study. Excel Spreadsheets was used to review the data and create the graphs needed for the trend analysis.

2.2 Sampling

Six of the most-viewed music videos from each generation were selected as the sample. YouTube served as the database, as many K-pop producers release their content there due to its free music distribution and ability in popularizing new music genres like K-pop (Oh & Lee, 2013). Searches for K-pop music videos were filtered by view count, with the most viewed videos at the top and descending in decreasing view count. View count was used as a criterion because these groups best represent the trends and ideals of their generation. For instance, “Gangnam Style” by PSY (third generation) is immensely popular, with over five billion views on YouTube (officialpsy, 2013). Ryan Shin explains that a significant reason why “Gangnam Style” became so popular was due to the multiple different cultures it embodied (Shin, 2016). The third generation was marked with a surge in popularity of K-pop in the Western world, with groups like BTS and BLACKPINK becoming worldwide hits. “Gangnam Style” reflected this upsurge in popularity, as it showcases the fusion of Western and Korean influences and played a critical role in spreading Korean

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pop culture (Shin, 2016). Additionally, selecting videos based on view count was an easier way to locate videos specific to each generation, and those music videos tended to yield the clearest and best video quality. Generations were classified based on the group's debut year, which is the most commonly accepted method for determining K-pop generations.

The analysis began with the topmost video from the YouTube music video results and proceeded down from there. For each music video, the K-pop group's name, song title, group gender, and generation were recorded. The generation of each K-pop group was determined using articles published by Hae-jeen Ryou (2023 & 2024), which outline the dates of each K-pop generation, alongside a KProfiles list of debut dates for K-pop groups. KProfiles is a website that has partnered with entertainment companies, such as *Warner Music Korea,* to create a comprehensive list of the debut dates of nearly every K-pop group (Jessica, 2019). Using the K-pop group's name from the YouTube music video, the group's debut date was obtained from KProfiles, and the corresponding generation was identified based on Ryou's articles. For instance, the topmost music video in view count is "Ddu-Du Ddu-Du" by BLACKPINK, amassing around 2.2 billion views (BLACKPINK, 2019). According to the KProfiles list, BLACKPINK debuted on August 8, 2016, and according to Ryou's article, the third generation lasted from 2012-2018, indicating that BLACKPINK is a third generation group.

Regarding sample size, three male and three female groups were selected for each generation, totaling to six music videos for each generation and thirty music videos in total. Once the three most-viewed male and female groups for a generation were identified, additional videos from that generation were excluded from the dataset. Music videos belonging to that generation beyond the selected groups were disregarded and not included in the data collection. Videos of K-pop soloists were also not included, as this study focuses on K-pop groups, not individual idols. Other exclusion criteria included live performances, concerts, or other videos unrelated to official K-pop music releases.

The corresponding dance choreography videos were then identified, as up to this point, only music videos had been collected. YouTube was used to locate the dance choreography videos. For example, for "Ddu-Du Ddu-Du," the search, "Ddu-Du Ddu-Du by BLACKPINK dance choreography" was used to find the dance choreography video. In choosing which dance choreography videos to analyze, official videos published by the K-pop group or their managing company and performed by the group members were prioritized. However, if no official dance choreography video was available, such as with first generation groups, dance covers were used instead. A dance cover is a performance of the original dance choreography by non-members with minimal changes made to the dance. Thus, six music videos were selected for each K-pop generation, comprising three male groups and three female groups, resulting in a total of thirty dance choreography videos, each approximately three to four minutes in length. It was with these dance choreography videos that LMA as conducted on.

2.3 Laban Movement Analysis

As mentioned previously, the specific movement analysis tool utilized was LMA. In LMA, body motions, or Efforts, can be broken down into the four Effort Factors of Space (the body's awareness of its surroundings and its direction), Weight (the body's heaviness and relationship to gravity), Time (the speed of movements), and Flow (the continuity and persistence of movements) (Aristidou et al., 2015). Furthermore, each Factor has two extremes, or polarities. For instance, the polarities of a movement's Weight are Heavy and Light; the polarities of Time are Sudden and Sustained. Table 1 organizes the four Factors and their polarities. Once again, Effort Factors are the four different categories of body movement (Efforts), and they each have two polar qualities.

Table 1. Effort Factors and Their Polarities.

Space	Weight	Time	Flow
Direct (specific, precise direction)	Strong/Heavy (substantial, solid)	Sudden (quick, unexpected, brief)	Bound (controlled, restrained)
Indirect (flexible, ambiguous direction)	Light (airy, delicate)	Sustained (slow, lengthy, stretching)	Free (unrestricted, fluid)

Note. Table created from a research paper detailing the Effort Factors and their polarities. Data from Aristidou et al., (2015).

Furthermore, the Effort Factors of Space, Weight, Time, and Flow, including their polarities, can be arranged into eight different combinations called Effort Actions. For instance, if a movement has a Direct Space, Heavy Weight,

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Table 2. Effort Actions and Their Effort Factors.

Effort Action	Space	Weight	Time	Flow
Punch	Direct	Heavy	Sudden	Bound
Slash	Indirect	Heavy	Sudden	Free
Dab	Direct	Light	Sudden	Bound
Flick	Indirect	Light	Sudden	Free
Press	Direct	Heavy	Sustained	Bound
Glide	Direct	Light	Sustained	Free
Float	Indirect	Light	Sustained	Free
Wring	Indirect	Heavy	Sustained	Bound

Note. Table created from a video by Andrew Pearson showing the different Effort Actions and their Effort Factors (Pearson, 2020).

Sudden Time, and Bound Flow, that combination would be the Effort Action of Punch. Along with punch, there are seven other Effort Actions: Press, Slash, Wring, Dab, Glide, Flick, and Float (Pearson, 2020). The eight different Effort Actions and their corresponding Effort Factors are displayed in Table 2. Once again, Effort Actions are the different combinations of the four Effort Factors, and it was with these Effort Actions that dance movements were categorized.

2.4 Collecting Dance Movement Data

When observing the dance videos, movement data was obtained from a backup dancer visible in the frame—whether it was one of the group members or an extra—as the person in the center is usually singing, resulting in a modified, simpler choreography for that member. Thus, with each selected dance video, the distinct movements of the backup dancer were categorized into one of the eight Effort Actions. A distinct movement is a dance pose/movement with noticeable differences from the previous one. Generally, if the movement was able to be detected at normal playback speed, it would be considered a distinct movement. If the dancers moved too quickly, the video's playback speed was slowed for analysis; however, after watching a movement slowed down, the video was replayed at normal speed to ensure a consistent analysis. If there were vocal-centered parts in the video where all members were singing and performing minimal choreography, movement data was not collected from that section. Additionally, Movement data was not collected during camera-angle transitions, as movements were often blurred and difficult to distinguish. Once all the data had been collected, the occurrences of each Effort Action within a generation were used to conduct a trend analysis, illustrating generational patterns across the Effort Factors of Space, Weight, Time, and Flow.

3. Results

For an initial overview of the data, a column chart was used to display the distribution of the eight Effort Actions for each generation. The distribution of Effort Actions can be seen in Figure 1, with each color corresponding to an Effort Action. Generation numbers are abbreviated; for example, "Generation 1" has been shortened to "G1."

In Figure 1, the proportions of each Effort Action in a generation and the changes in these proportions over time are graphed. For example, it is seen that the proportion of the Dab and Flick Effort Actions mainly grew across the generations. Additionally, the total number of Effort Actions increased over the generations, indicating that there has been a general rise in the number of movements in dance choreographies over time. This could be due to movements becoming more complex and quicker despite the dance videos remaining around the same length, as later findings will suggest. Although the changes in the total number of dance movements were not considered in the original hypothesis, this finding is worth mentioning, as it demonstrates how K-pop dance movements have changed over the generations.

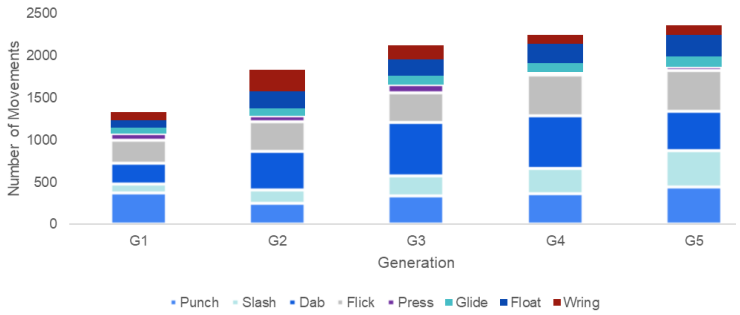

Figure 1. Distribution graph of Effort Actions by generation. Each color represents an Effort Action.

For a more extensive view of the data, the frequencies of each Effort Action and their corresponding Effort Factors were used to create four graphs depicting trends in Space, Weight, Time, and Flow across generations. For instance,

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the Effort Actions of Punch, Dab, Press, and Glide all have an Effort Factor of Direct Space, while the Effort Actions of Slash, Flick, Float, and Wring all have an Effort Factor of Indirect Space. Thus, The occurrences of Punch, Dab, Press, and Glide were combined, as were the occurrences of Slash, Flick, Float, and Wring, to create a graph that depicted Direct and Indirect Space over the five generations. This process was repeated with different Effort Actions to illustrate the trends of Weight, Time, and Flow.

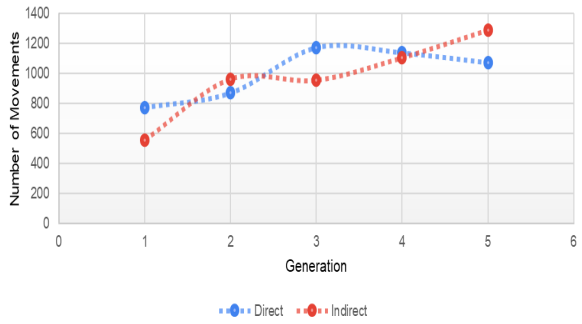

Figure 2. The trend of direct and indirect Space over the five generations.

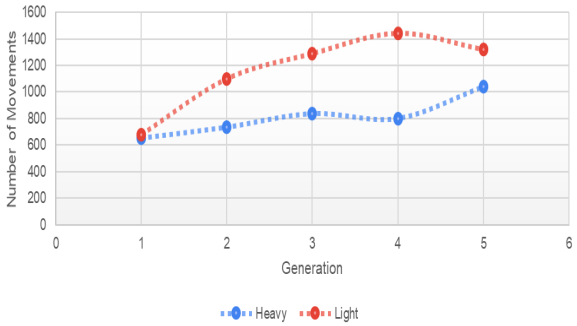

Figure 3. The trend of heavy and light Weight over the five generations.

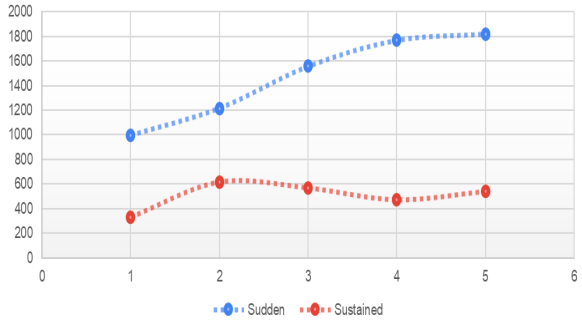

Figure 4. The trend of sudden and sustained Time over the five generations.

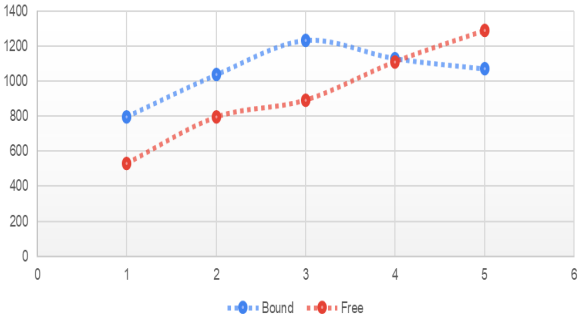

Figure 5. The trend of bound and free Flow over the five generations.

For the trend of Space as seen in Figure 2, there has been a general increase in the utilization of both Direct and Indirect movements, with Indirect increasing more than Direct. The greater increase in Indirect Space suggests that movements' directions have become more varied. Rather than movements in two-dimensional space (e.g., up-down, side-side, front-back), three-dimensional movement becomes more prevalent, such as dancers reaching across the body and exploring different levels of elevation (e.g., transitioning to the floor). For instance, "I'm Your Girl" by S.E.S. (first generation) had many movements where the dancers stood and pointed to the front and sides, while "Drunk-Dazed" by Enhypen (fourth generation) had a section where the dancers were rotating on the floor. This demonstrates a growth in the complexity of K-pop movements, as they have become less restricted in their directions, supporting the part in the original hypothesis that predicted movements becoming more complex over time.

In Figure 3 depicting the Trend of Weight, there has been a general increase in both Heavy and Light Weight, with a greater growth in Light Weight compared to Heavy. The greater growth in Light Weight indicates that over the generations, movements have become less sharp and less tense. However, the Lighter Weight suggests that movements have also become more complex. When observing the dance choreography videos, newer generations tended to incorporate numerous clear-cut, precise movements that required little force or power to achieve seamless synchronization. For instance, finishing a turn on the same foot does not require a lot of Heavy Weight, but it is used to ensure that the choreography is neat. Additionally, newer generations included intricate and light movements to make movements appear more nuanced and complicated. In "Like That" by Babymonster (fifth generation), dancers performed complex handwork that made movements appear more stylish, but it did not require much power from the dancers. These kinds of movements are commonly associated with the Dab Effort Action, which, according to Figure

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1, has increased in quantity over time. The growth in Lighter movements disproves the part in the original hypothesis predicting that newer generations would include tenser, sharper movements while further supporting the prediction of movements becoming more complex.

Observing the trend of Time in Figure 4, Sudden movements rose significantly more compared to Sustained movements. Even though the lengths of the dance choreographies did not vary much across generations (all were around three to four minutes long), movements have become faster. This could be due to dancers' footwork becoming more complicated and the increase in smaller, more precise movements that enhance a choreography's detail, as mentioned previously. For example, in "Boy With Luv" by BTS (third generation), there are several parts where the dancers are performing quick and involved footwork. The faster tempos further add to the complexity of the dances of newer generations, as dancers are now performing more dance movements within a choreography in around the same time as before. The quicker speeds support the part of the original hypothesis predicting that new generations would have more complexity in their movements compared to older generations.

For the trend of Flow in Figure 5, Bound and Free flowing movements increased for the first three generations but later diverged, with Bound movements decreasing and Free movements continuing to grow, indicating that over time, movements have become less restricted. Rather than having movements that come to a stop, such as placing hands on shoulders or pointing to the front, movements have increased in continuity and fluidity (e.g., revolving arms around the head). For instance, "BADVILLAIN" by BadVillain (fifth generation) had many movements where the dancers circled their arms around their heads and glided their hands across their chest. These kinds of movement are typically associated with the Float and Flick Effort Actions, which, according to Figure 1, have both increased over time. The increase in Freer movements disproves the part of the hypothesis predicting that older generations would showcase flowier movements.

4. Discussion

After analyzing the data, a few major trends emerged. Overall, there has been an increase in the total number of movements in dance choreography; additionally, there has been a greater increase in the use of indirect Space, lighter Weight, sudden Time, and free Flow.

While the exact causes of these trends cannot be definitively determined, a plausible explanation is the cross-cultural impact of dance. As mentioned previously, Western dance styles, such as hip-hop, significantly influenced the origins of K-pop, and Western culture continues to impact K-pop today. Given the continued influence of the Western world and dance's ability to communicate across cultures, it can be assumed that Western dance continues to shape K-pop choreography today. For instance, modern dance, which emphasizes the freedom of expression and finding new, unique ways of moving, began gaining popularity in the Western world in the twentieth century (Thompson & Shott, 2015). This type of dance style rejects rigid, defined body structures and instead includes improvisation, floorwork, and release techniques designed to release tension and focus on body freedom (Kwan, 2017). Thus, from an LMA perspective, modern dance exhibits high numbers of movements that have a Light Weight, Free Flow, and Indirect Direction. Because dance is a universal language of communication and culture, as modern dance gained popularity in the Western world, aspects of it may have transferred to K-pop dance, resulting in the corresponding increases in Indirect, Lighter, and Free-flowing movements in K-pop dance. However, the rise of Sudden Time in K-pop dance may not be caused by the influence of modern dance, as the speed of movements is not a defining characteristic of modern dance.

5. Conclusion

These results reveal how the total number of movements in choreography has grown. There has also been a greater increase in indirect Space, lighter Weight, sudden Time, and free Flow. The increases in indirect Direction, light Weight, and sudden Time indicates that K-pop movements have grown in complexity. However, the greater growth in lighter Weight also suggests that movements have not become sharper or tenser. Lastly, the increase in free Flow

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indicates that movements have not become less flowy over time. These changes in dance movements support parts of the original hypothesis, while other aspects were disproved.

This research contributes to the body of knowledge by providing a novel understanding of how K-pop dance has evolved across five generations, a topic that has not been extensively studied. Through these findings, there is a clearer indication of the possible continued influence of Western culture on K-pop as well as the broader cross-cultural influence of dance. The trends found in this study may be indicative of how other dance styles, mainly those of the Western world, have influenced the development of K-pop choreography. This also offers more insight into how K-pop and how the industry responds to the Western world. The changes found within K-pop dance could demonstrate that the K-pop industry may be incorporating more Western dance styles to increase popularity among Western audiences. In other words, to increase marketability and appeal, the K-pop industry has to accommodate the changing ideals of Western culture. These findings may support that notion, bringing more insight to how K-pop reacts to the changes in Western culture and how K-pop industries should go forth with their dance choreographies to increase popularity.

5.1 Limitations and Future Research

There were a few potential sources of error during data collection and analysis. For one, the researcher is not a certified LMA expert, which may have led to inaccurate interpretations of the dancers' movements. Although extensive prior research on LMA was conducted to mitigate inexperience, the accuracy of the results may have still been affected. Additionally, personal bias may have influenced results, as the interpretation of dance movements is subjective. Coupled with the fact that a single researcher conducted all the observations, this subjectivity may have also contributed to the results not being entirely accurate. To minimize these errors, complex and confusing sections of the recordings were repeatedly played to achieve the most consistent and accurate analysis possible; however, without the involvement of research assistants to provide additional perspectives and reduce subjectivity, there may still be flaws in the evaluation of dance videos.

Another potential limitation could have come from having to use a dance cover rather than the actual choreography video for the song *Candy* by H.O.T., a first generation group. There was no official dance choreography video for this song published on YouTube, possibly due to the music video being released so long ago and dance choreography videos not being as popular back then. Thus, a dance cover was used instead, which may have led to an incorrect analysis of the dance, as the members themselves were not performing the dance choreography. The dancers in the cover may have deviated slightly from the actual execution of the movements, reducing the accuracy of the data gathered for the first generation.

Regarding future research, these findings may provide an example of how different dance styles are able to influence one another. There must be a reason for these trends in K-pop dance, and if future researchers can apply the same methodology to find similar trends in modern dance from the twentieth century to the present, such findings would provide compelling evidence of how K-pop has been, and continues to be, shaped by Western dance. This would also bring more insight into how K-pop as a whole functions in response to the Western world. Furthermore, future researchers are not limited to only K-pop; other dance styles, such as cheer, traditional folkloric, and jazz, can all be analyzed to determine how those styles have changed and evolved over time.

This paper also raises questions of how future K-pop generations will look like. Will the dances of the sixth generation continue to follow the trends discovered within this research? What about the seventh? The eighth? These are all possible questions future researchers can explore.

Ultimately, K-pop dance is part of a much bigger, extensive culture that has reached the entire world. A comprehensive understanding of the dance's complexities and changes since its creation is important in appreciating its cultural significance.

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