# How a K-pop fandom transformed a shy woman’s self-confidence and sense of belonging



In 2018, a casual conversation at a birthday lunch introduced a young woman to a world she never knew existed—a world of vibrant K-pop music and its enthusiastic fandom. As her friend played songs by the South Korean boyband SHINee, she found herself captivated by the music's energy, which evoked memories of the pop culture she cherished in her youth. This moment of discovery marked the beginning of a profound and transformative journey, not just into a new genre of music, but into a community that would help redefine her identity and self-acceptance.

Going beyond mere fandom, her excitement propelled her and her twin sister into the K-pop event scene, where they attended a celebration at a café in Soho, London, for the birthdays of the boyband GOT7. It was here that she made an unexpected discovery—this gathering attracted a diverse crowd, including other Black girls who shared similar passions. What she had anticipated might be an isolating experience, fraught with judgment, quickly transformed into an affirmation of community; among friends sporting bright makeup and expressive outfits, she felt seen. K-pop culture became a realm of escapism where her previous worries about social perception faded away.

Over time, her infatuation with K-pop unleashed a new chapter of her life. She expanded her musical repertoire, diving into the works of boybands like BTS and MONSTA X, as well as girl groups like Mamamoo and Dreamcatcher. This newfound passion spilled into her professional life as well, enhancing her career as a journalist. She conducted interviews with idols and reviewed concerts, thereby deepening her connection with the music and its circle of fans. This dynamic engagement was echoed in broader studies indicating that stronger ties to K-pop fandom can lead to enhanced happiness, elevated self-esteem, and a sense of belonging—an insight supported by research on the positive psychosocial outcomes associated with K-pop fandom.

The unconditional acceptance she found within this vibrant community played a vital role in reshaping her self-image. No longer did she feel the need to mask herself with dark clothing or diminish her presence. She embraced her individuality, sporting flashy colours and vibrant styles, ultimately accumulating a wardrobe reflective of her newfound confidence. The bonds formed over shared interests transcended beyond music; friendships deepened through shared experiences, such as Korean barbecues and K-pop exhibitions. Such connections were not merely about the fandom but transcended into life’s challenges—relationships formed were pillars that offered support during significant life events, from career pivots to dealing with personal losses.

Reflecting upon her journey, she realised that her love for K-pop extended beyond the artists and their music. At a recent concert featuring ATEEZ, she rediscovered the joy that drew her into this world, reaffirming the warmth and camaraderie it fosters. The lessons learned through this journey of self-exploration align with the messages espoused by K-pop megastars like BTS, who often encourage self-love and acceptance.

As she now navigates her 30s, she aspires to embody the same carefree spirit of the friends she met at that first K-pop café event. A central revelation, one that resonates not only within the K-pop fan community but also in broader pop culture contexts, is that people’s perceptions are not as rigid or judgmental as they may seem. This newfound perspective offers freedom to celebrate one’s individuality without the weight of external expectations. Ultimately, the K-pop experience becomes a canvas—one painted with strokes of belonging, empowerment, and unyielding self-love.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2025/may/28/a-moment-that-changed-me-i-was-shy-and-cared-too-much-what-people-thought-of-me-then-a-group-of-k-pop-fans-came-into-my-life), [[2]](https://time.com/6122609/bts-army-photos/)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2025/may/28/a-moment-that-changed-me-i-was-shy-and-cared-too-much-what-people-thought-of-me-then-a-group-of-k-pop-fans-came-into-my-life), [[4]](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32985364/), [[6]](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/mind-matters/202407/the-healing-power-of-pop-culture-communities)
* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2025/may/28/a-moment-that-changed-me-i-was-shy-and-cared-too-much-what-people-thought-of-me-then-a-group-of-k-pop-fans-came-into-my-life), [[3]](https://time.com/4833807/rap-monster-bts-interview/), [[5]](https://time.com/5681494/bts-bang-si-hyuk-interview/), [[7]](https://koreascience.or.kr/article/JAKO202209834561537.page)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2025/may/28/a-moment-that-changed-me-i-was-shy-and-cared-too-much-what-people-thought-of-me-then-a-group-of-k-pop-fans-came-into-my-life), [[2]](https://time.com/6122609/bts-army-photos/), [[6]](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/mind-matters/202407/the-healing-power-of-pop-culture-communities)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2025/may/28/a-moment-that-changed-me-i-was-shy-and-cared-too-much-what-people-thought-of-me-then-a-group-of-k-pop-fans-came-into-my-life), [[2]](https://time.com/6122609/bts-army-photos/), [[4]](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32985364/)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2025/may/28/a-moment-that-changed-me-i-was-shy-and-cared-too-much-what-people-thought-of-me-then-a-group-of-k-pop-fans-came-into-my-life> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://time.com/6122609/bts-army-photos/> - An article from Time magazine featuring portraits of BTS fans, known as the ARMY, highlighting the diversity and personal experiences of fans from various backgrounds. The piece showcases how BTS's music and messages have positively impacted fans, with some rediscovering hobbies and others finding inspiration and comfort in the band's work. The ARMY's global reach and varied demographics demonstrate the universal appeal of BTS and the profound connection between the group and its fans.
3. <https://time.com/4833807/rap-monster-bts-interview/> - An interview with Rap Monster (Kim Nam-joon) of BTS, discussing the band's rise to fame, their genuine engagement with fans, and the themes of self-esteem and depression explored in their music. The article highlights BTS's dedication to their craft and their close bond as brothers, emphasizing the group's sincerity and consistency in connecting with their global fanbase.
4. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32985364/> - A study published on PubMed examining the positive psychosocial outcomes associated with K-pop fandom. The research found that higher levels of K-pop fanship were significantly linked to increased happiness, self-esteem, and social connectedness. The study applied social identity theory to understand how self-categorization within the K-pop fandom contributes to these positive outcomes, highlighting the psychological benefits of being part of a fan community.
5. <https://time.com/5681494/bts-bang-si-hyuk-interview/> - An interview with Bang Si-hyuk, founder and co-CEO of Big Hit Entertainment, discussing his journey in creating BTS and the band's success. The article emphasizes the importance of sincerity, consistency, and genuine connection with fans, highlighting BTS's direct interactions and social media presence as key factors in their global appeal and influence.
6. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/mind-matters/202407/the-healing-power-of-pop-culture-communities> - An article from Psychology Today exploring the therapeutic benefits of fandoms, particularly in the context of pop culture communities. The piece discusses how participating in fandoms can provide a sense of belonging and community, combat feelings of loneliness and alienation, and promote mental resilience and emotional well-being. It highlights the supportive environment that fandoms offer, especially for individuals from marginalized or isolated backgrounds.
7. <https://koreascience.or.kr/article/JAKO202209834561537.page> - A study published in The Journal of the Korea Contents Association examining the generational shifts in K-pop idol fandom and social media use. The research found that third-generation fandoms, which primarily use social network services, exhibit greater intimacy, attachment, similarity, loyalty, and identity compared to first and second-generation fandoms that rely on online communities. The study highlights the evolving nature of fan culture and the impact of digital platforms on fan engagement.