

Reinventing Traditional Media in the Platformized K-Pop Industry: CJ ENM's Strategic Adaptation Through KCON

CHAIRIN AN¹

Sookmyung Women's University, Republic of Korea

This study analyzes how CJ ENM strategically responds to structural transformations driven by globalization, digitalization, and platformization in the global K-pop industry. Employing Bilton's framework distinguishing the zone of risk and the zone of exploitation, it examines CJ ENM's strategic repositioning through idol production and the KCON fan convention. Through participant observation and interviews at KCON Japan 2024, the study reveals how CJ ENM leverages vertical integration and intellectual property control to manage market uncertainties and maximize profitability. However, tensions between corporate objectives and authentic fan engagement highlight potential limitations of top-down management in fan-centric markets. The findings contribute to a deeper theoretical understanding of traditional media conglomerates' strategic adaptations to the structural disruptions driven by digital platformization and globalization.

Keywords: K-pop, KCON, CJ ENM, fan convention, multisided market

The global popularity of K-pop has surged in recent years, significantly expanding its international market presence. For major K-pop companies, international revenues frequently match or exceed domestic earnings, as exemplified by milestones such as BLACKPINK's headlining performance at Coachella in 2023 and Seventeen's appearance at Glastonbury in 2024. The global K-pop event market is projected to continue its steady growth, making strong international fandom essential for sustaining K-pop idol careers (Allied Market Research, 2023).

As the importance of overseas markets grows, significant changes have occurred in the traditional hierarchies of the K-pop industry. The influence of domestic legacy media organizations has weakened, whereas the influence of digital platform companies has grown substantially (Park, Jo, & Kim, 2023). K-pop agencies now place greater emphasis on social marketing through global platforms (Cho, Bian, & Lee, 2023). Additionally, a few influential K-pop labels operate proprietary fan community platforms, amplifying their industry influence (Jin, 2024a). Recent scholarly attention has primarily focused on the digital platformization phenomenon within the K-pop industry, examining changes in K-

Chairin An: cran@sookmyung.ac.kr

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pop labels' global market expansion strategies. However, limited attention has been directed toward understanding how traditional domestic media conglomerates attempt to sustain their market influence in the face of these structural shifts.

In this context, this study examines how CJ ENM, a multimedia conglomerate historically dominant in domestic music content distribution, responds to structural changes in the global K-pop industry. It analyzes CJ ENM's deliberate expansion upstream into idol production through televised audition programs, thereby securing original intellectual property (IP). Additionally, the study explores how CJ ENM leverages its extensive media infrastructure, global networks, and vertically integrated corporate structure to organize large-scale offline fan conventions such as KCON, effectively engaging diverse stakeholders, including idol agencies, global fans, sponsors, and local vendors.

Through a qualitative case study of KCON Japan 2024, using participant observation and unstructured interviews with 11 event organizers, this research investigates how CJ ENM uses KCON as a multisided market platform. Specifically, this study seeks to answer the following research question: In the context of the shift toward digital platform-centric structures in the global K-pop industry, how does CJ ENM leverage offline fan conventions such as KCON to engage diverse stakeholders and reinforce its market dominance?

In examining how key industry players—including K-pop labels (idol production agencies), domestic media conglomerates, and platform companies—are experiencing positional restructuring within rapidly changing market conditions, this study draws upon Bilton's (2017) conceptual framework, distinguishing cultural industry activities between the uncertainty-intensive zone of risk and the profitable zone of exploitation. Using this approach, the study explores how the transformative impacts of digital technologies and platformization on traditional media hierarchies play out in practice, highlighting strategic responses by media conglomerates in the K-pop industry and deriving meaningful implications.

Structural Changes and Strategic Transformations in the Global K-Pop Industry

Dynamics of Idol Production in the Digital Platform-Driven Global K-Pop Market

K-pop is a globally prominent cultural phenomenon characterized by contemporary South Korean idol pop (Yoon, 2018). However, K-pop transcends being merely a musical genre, strategically targeting dedicated fandoms and cultivating distinctive fan-centered subcultures and market dynamics (Han, 2017). The term "idol" specifically refers to singers selected and rigorously trained by entertainment agencies under comprehensive management systems that oversee every aspect of their careers—from talent discovery to global marketing (Lee, 2016).

Early scholarly discussions on K-pop examined the systematic idol training processes and structured talent management approaches developed by major entertainment agencies (Messerlin & Shin, 2017; Shin & Kim, 2013). More recent studies highlight how idol agency companies navigate to achieve global expansion by using social media platforms, transnational collaborations, and localized marketing efforts (Cho, Bian, & Lee, 2023; Goh & Ngo, 2025; Ruesink, 2023). Increasing scholarly attention has also

been directed toward structural shifts driven by digital platforms, exploring how platformization fundamentally transforms the traditional hierarchical structure in the K-pop industry (Park, Jo, & Kim, 2023). Platformization, as defined by Nieborg and Poell (2018), refers to the process by which digital platform companies reshape traditional media infrastructure by dominating content production and distribution through proprietary technologies. For instance, major domestic platforms, such as Kakao, have pursued vertical integration strategies by acquiring SM Entertainment and digital music distribution platform Melon, thereby expanding their influence across content production, distribution, and platform management to a degree comparable with traditional media conglomerates (Park, Jo, & Kim, 2023).

Historically, domestic broadcasters monopolized advertising revenue and exercised gatekeeping power over idol agencies through limited distribution channels. However, as global markets and digital platforms like YouTube and TikTok gained prominence, idol agencies significantly reduced their dependency on traditional media, thereby weakening the hierarchical power of domestic broadcasters (Park, Jo, & Kim, 2023). HYBE, currently the highest-earning company in the Korean music industry, exemplifies this structural shift through its consistent growth in international revenues (Figure 1).

Bilton’s (2017) analytical framework is particularly useful for examining the shifting positions, roles, and strategic responses of key players in the K-pop industry, including K-pop labels, media companies, and platform firms. Drawing from Porter’s (1985) value chain model, which conceptualizes business processes as a series of activities that incrementally add value to products and services, Bilton categorizes cultural industries into a zone of risk—characterized by uncertain content production—and a zone of exploitation dominated by stable, profit-generating media and platforms. In the traditional K-pop industry, powerful media organizations historically occupied the zone of exploitation, while producers, artists, and smaller agencies operated within the zone of risk.

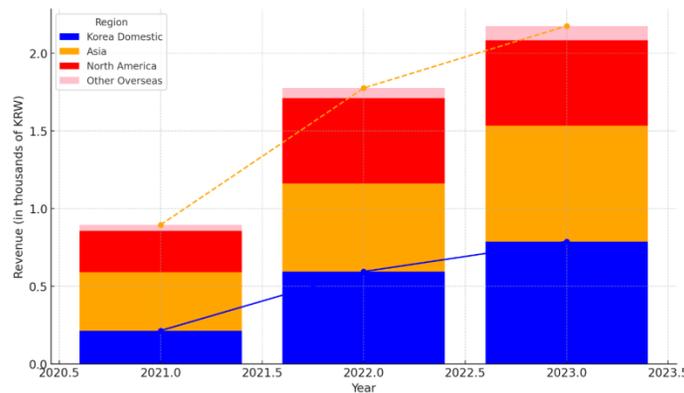


Figure 1. HYBE’s global revenue by region.

Note. Figure created by the author based on data from HYBE (2024, p. 55).

However, in response to increasing globalization, digitalization, and platformization, idol production agencies have strategically repositioned themselves toward the zone of exploitation. For example, major K-pop agencies, including HYBE and JYP Entertainment, have initiated their own idol audition programs, such as *Dream Academy* (HYBE) and *L2K* (JYP), distributing them globally through platforms like YouTube.

Previously, the production of idol audition programs was primarily led by large media companies like CJ ENM. In doing so, idol agencies not only scout and train new idols but also attempt to fully control the star-making process, positioning themselves within the zone of exploitation. Additionally, these agencies have established and managed proprietary fan community platforms, such as HYBE's Weverse, allowing direct sales of merchandise and NFTs (Jin, 2024a). Adopting such a strategy allows them to dominate album and merchandise sales, which account for a substantial share of total revenue in the K-pop market. Figure 2 presents revenue trends and forecasts for the Big 4 agencies—HYBE, SM Entertainment, YG Entertainment, and JYP Entertainment—between 2019 and 2025. It highlights a significant increase in merchandise revenue, which grew by 113.4%, rising from 277 billion KRW in 2019 to 591 billion KRW in 2022, while album sales surged by 227%, increasing from 344 billion KRW to 1.125 trillion KRW during the same period (Im, 2023).

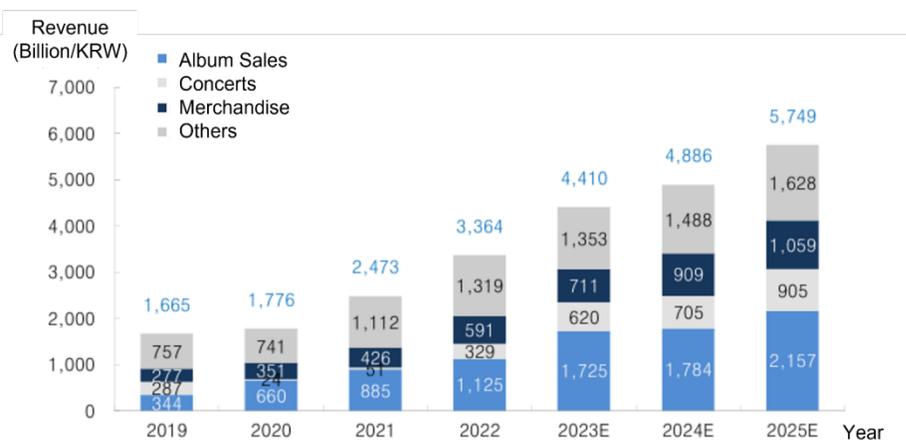


Figure 2. Revenue trends and forecasts for 4 big K-pop agencies (Im, 2023, p. 10)

The market shift toward promotion and distribution through digital platforms has also opened new opportunities for relatively smaller idol agencies. For example, ATTRAKT—a smaller agency with limited domestic influence—leveraged platforms like TikTok for the highly effective viral marketing of FIFTY FIFTY's song Cupid (Von Mentzer, Felländer-Tsai, & Udin, 2023). Consequently, the track entered the Billboard Hot 100, clearly demonstrating the transformative impact that global platforms have on K-pop's market structure (Bowenbank, 2023).

Nonetheless, the ongoing structural transformation of the K-pop industry cannot be fully explained by globalization or digital platformization alone. While the traditional media-driven hierarchy has undoubtedly begun to break down because of the increasing significance of global markets, it is also crucial to examine how traditional media companies strategically respond to these structural changes. Nevertheless, relatively little scholarly attention has been paid to how former influential gatekeepers have deliberately responded to reposition themselves within the K-pop industry. In this context, this study examines CJ ENM, a dominant media organization that has long occupied the zone of exploitation through its operation of the music-oriented cable television channel Mnet, specifically exploring how CJ ENM is reshaping power dynamics within Korea's entertainment landscape as these market shifts unfold.

CJ ENM's Strategic Entry Into Idol Production and IP Ownership

As a subsidiary of CJ Group—a diversified conglomerate involved in food, biotechnology, logistics, and media—CJ ENM has expanded its influence within Korea's entertainment industry as a multimedia conglomerate leveraging robust domestic media capabilities. Established in 1995 with its specialized music cable channel Mnet, CJ ENM quickly became one of the most influential media outlets in the domestic music industry. CJ ENM has four primary business sectors—media platforms (broadcast and OTT), film and drama production, music business, and commerce (CJ ENM, 2024b)—and within its music division, the company uses the internal integrated system known as the Music Creative System (MCS), which combines televised audition programs, artist management, and global event hosting (Interviewee C, personal communication, January 2025).

CJ ENM's strategic shift toward active idol production illustrates a deliberate move to integrate activities from the zone of risk into the more profitable zone of exploitation. Historically, idol training and talent scouting were inherently risky, requiring extensive investment without guaranteed returns. However, by launching televised idol audition programs like *Produce 101* (CJ ENM, 2016), CJ ENM effectively minimizes these uncertainties. CJ ENM outsources initial risks by collaborating with entertainment agencies and selecting trainees who have already incurred preliminary investment costs.

CJ ENM adopts different revenue-sharing structures depending on whether revenues are generated during the program's broadcast period or the final project's promotion period. For example, during the airing of *Produce 101* Season 2 (CJ ENM, 2017), revenues from music and album sales associated with the program were equally divided between CJ ENM and each trainee's original agency, with trainees receiving no additional appearance fees (Ko, 2018). After the broadcast concluded and the winning team debuted as a project group, members were able to promote only for a predetermined period because of existing contractual obligations with their original agencies. Typically, idol groups sign exclusive contracts of up to seven years with their agencies in Korea; however, CJ ENM generally signs exclusive contracts with its project groups for only one to two years. During this limited promotional period, CJ ENM seeks to maximize short-term profitability by retaining full control over IP rights and market activities. Specifically, CJ ENM secured 25% of the total profits from the project groups, including revenues from debut album sales, merchandise sales, concerts, and advertising appearances. Another 25% was allocated to the designated management agency, while the remaining 50% was distributed between the group members and their original agencies (Ko, 2018).

This profit-sharing structure allowed CJ ENM to leverage its dominant market position and substantial advertising revenue while shifting the financial risks associated with trainee development to smaller partner agencies. During the production period, CJ ENM significantly reduced production costs and mitigated risks by not providing appearance fees to trainees, instead dividing generated revenues equally. After the project team's debut, CJ ENM actively maximized profitability within the defined promotional period. Consequently, CJ ENM could rapidly monetize public interest and convert the traditionally precarious talent discovery process—originally situated within the zone of risk—into a highly profitable and tightly controlled activity situated firmly within the zone of exploitation. Recognizing the limitations posed by short-term contracts, CJ ENM recently adapted its strategy to secure sustained long-term profitability. For

example, CJ ENM exclusively used trainees from its subsidiary label WAKEONE for the recent second season of I-LAND, securing standard seven-year contracts (Ha, 2023). This shift illustrates CJ ENM's continued efforts to solidify its position within the zone of exploitation.

CJ ENM's strategic international expansion through joint ventures, such as Lapone Entertainment² also exemplifies a conscious attempt to mitigate risks traditionally associated with content creation by embedding itself deeper into more predictable, profitable market structures. This clearly aligns with Bilton's (2017) notion of businesses proactively migrating toward or integrating into the zone of exploitation to ensure competitive advantage and stable revenue streams. Thus, CJ ENM's entire idol production and IP ownership strategy can be read as a systematic attempt to convert historically risky creative activities into sustainable business models firmly anchored in the zone of exploitation.

Considering that IP ownership in the current K-pop industry ensures stable revenues, competitive advantage, greater market control, and enhanced global brand recognition (Kim & Kwon, 2022), and that K-pop fandom typically revolves around specific idol groups rather than the genre itself (Yoon, 2019), idol fandom is often cultivated from the idol training stages, which allows fans to feel actively involved in nurturing idol groups (Yu & Nam, 2018). In this context, CJ ENM's strategic pivot is toward directly generating idol-related IP within the zone of risk. By broadcasting the process through which idol trainees become debut-group members, CJ ENM fosters emotional attachment among potential fans, simultaneously reducing associated risks by leveraging its substantial domestic media influence. This approach represents a deliberate effort by CJ ENM to reposition itself in response to the declining power of traditional media.

In addition, CJ ENM has long been recognized for contributing to South Korea's cultural diplomacy through consistently hosting global K-pop events, such as the Mnet Asian Music Awards (MAMA) and KCON (Jin & Yoon, 2016). At a time when K-pop had yet to fully penetrate mainstream Western media and major award institutions (e.g., Grammy Awards, MTV Awards; Lee, 2018), MAMA has provided a crucial platform for fans and artists to showcase K-pop's expanding market presence and global influence since 1999. Moreover, the symbolic capital CJ ENM has accumulated over many years through its corporate brand, and sustained global event management has become a key advantage in today's evolving market landscape.

In 2023, CJ ENM's music division ranked third in revenue among major K-pop companies, behind only HYBE and SM Entertainment (see Figure 3), with steady revenue growth over the past five years (Kim, 2024). Combined revenues from CJ ENM's music division and the Big 4 agencies accounted for approximately 69.7% of total K-pop industry revenue (CJ ENM, 2024c; Kim, 2025), underscoring significant market concentration among a few vertically integrated corporations.

² Lapone Entertainment is a joint venture between Yoshimoto Kogyo and CJ ENM. The company produced the Japanese version of the *Produce 101* television programs, and all debuted project idol teams are affiliated with this agency.

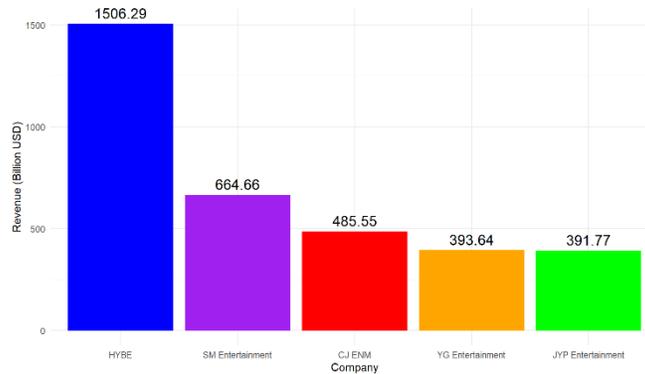


Figure 3. 2023 Revenue comparison of major K-pop entertainment companies.

Note. Data from CJ ENM (2024c) and Kim (2025).

This market concentration, despite certain unique characteristics of the K-pop industry, aligns with broader trends observed in global media markets. Hesmondhalgh (2018) argues that, contrary to expectations of decentralization stemming from digitalization and platformization, large media conglomerates consistently sustain their dominance through vertical and horizontal integration. Similarly, CJ ENM uses vertical integration—reflecting Bilton's (2017) theory—as a strategy to manage uncertainties associated with the zone of risk. Through this approach, CJ ENM positions itself within the zone of exploitation, aiming to maximize profitability and control. This practice demonstrates how traditional multimedia conglomerates may leverage digital transformations and structural market changes to maintain or expand their market presence.

Understanding KCON as a Platform in the Multisided Market

The offline fan convention KCON exemplifies how CJ ENM strategically deploys existing strengths—including established infrastructure, IP control, and extensive industry networks—to reinforce and enhance its competitive position within the evolving global K-pop market.

First launched in Los Angeles in 2012, KCON aligns with the company's vision of integrating cultural promotion with commercial profitability through systematic international event management (Ofek & Norris, 2017). Over the past decade, it has expanded rapidly into a globally recognized event series, regularly hosted in multiple countries, such as Japan, the United States, Thailand, and Saudi Arabia. This global growth not only underscores CJ ENM's ambition to solidify its market dominance but also provides an opportunity to analyze how KCON functions as a multisided market platform, connecting and mediating diverse stakeholders—fans, idol production companies, sponsors, and local vendors. This conceptual framework provides the analytical foundation for the detailed case study of KCON Japan 2024 presented in the following section.

Although the term "platform" is often narrowly associated with digital services, it broadly refers to business models that facilitate interactions among multiple user groups, including offline contexts, such as events and conventions. According to Poell, Nieborg, and Duffy (2021), platforms possess three core

attributes: connecting diverse stakeholders within a multisided market, providing infrastructure to facilitate efficient interactions, and establishing governance mechanisms for regulating stakeholder engagement. From this perspective, KCON exemplifies an offline multisided platform connecting global K-pop fans, idol management agencies, corporate sponsors, and local vendors by facilitating productive interactions beyond purely digital exchanges. Specifically, KCON provides tangible infrastructure such as concert venues and interactive fan zones, accompanied by clear governance frameworks, including curated program content, structured sponsorship frameworks, and standardized participation guidelines. Thus, this study approaches KCON as an offline, multisided market platform within CJ ENM's global expansion strategy, emphasizing its intermediary role in linking diverse industry stakeholders across the global K-pop ecosystem (see Figure 4). This conceptualization aligns closely with Kohnen, Parker, and Woo's (2023) analysis of Comic-Con as a comparable multisided platform.

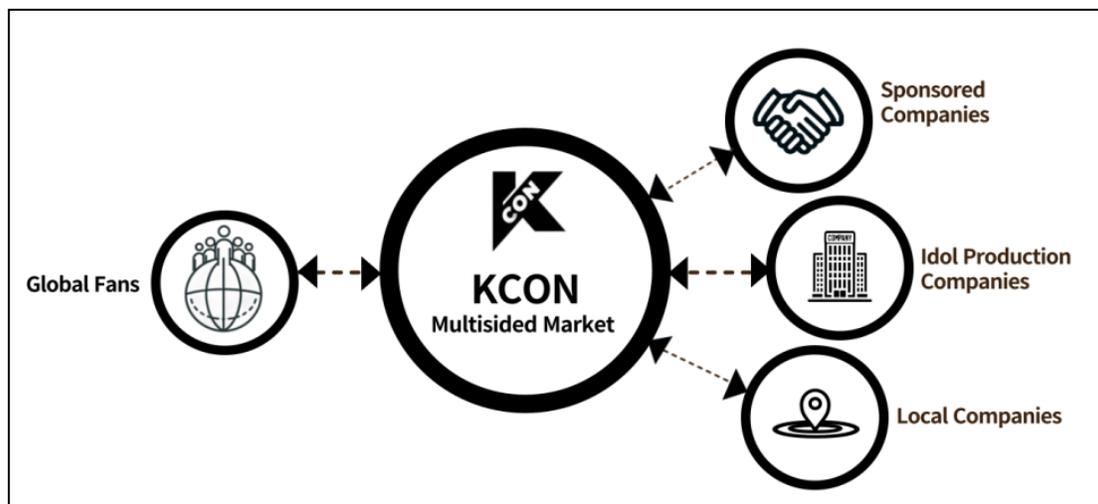


Figure 4. The multisided market of KCON.

Global Fans

The International Federation of the Phonographic Industry's (IFPI, 2024) report identifies K-pop's "superfans" as key drivers of physical album sales and revenue growth, particularly in Asia (p. 31). In South Korea, this group is referred to as "core fandom" and is regarded as the primary revenue source for idol agencies (Lee, 2015). These superfans engage in various coordinated activities, such as streaming campaigns and bulk-buying albums, and their influence extends beyond direct financial contributions. Their engagement creates a strong sense of community and identity within fandoms, as seen with BTS's ARMY, who actively collaborate, advocate for their idols, and even protest against agency mismanagement when necessary (Abd-Rahim, 2019; Cheriya & Hadi, 2022; Im, 2023). Through platforms such as Twitter and Weverse, international fans collaborate closely with domestic fan groups, extending the global influence and effectiveness of these coordinated fan actions (Jin, 2024a).

According to interviews conducted with KCON organizers, KCON's primary competitors are overseas K-pop events structured mainly as concerts, such as international music festivals and special overseas episodes produced by Korean broadcasters (Interviewee B, personal communication, May 2024; Interviewee E, personal communication, January 2025). These events primarily aim to generate revenue from ticket sales. In contrast, KCON generates additional revenue streams through booth sales and sponsorships, in addition to admission fees, similar to typical fan conventions (Woo, Johnson, Beaty, & Campbell, 2020). KCON also differentiates itself by integrating fan conventions with live concerts and offering extensive cultural exhibitions focused broadly on Korean culture. The multiday structure of KCON provides global fans—who predominantly engage online—with unique opportunities for prolonged, direct interactions with idols and immersive cultural activities. The event expands beyond traditional concerts by promoting active participation and immersive on-site experiences. These offline interactions significantly reinforce fans' emotional investments, deepen their sense of community identity, and solidify long-term loyalty.

Furthermore, KCON complements online activities facilitated by digital platforms, such as YouTube and TVING (CJ ENM's OTT service), by creating a crucial space where domestic and international fans can meet, collaborate, and amplify their collective impact. Consequently, KCON serves not merely as a promotional platform but also as an essential site where global fan communities converge, strengthening their integral role in the ongoing global expansion of K-pop.

Idol Production Companies

For idol production companies, KCON serves as a significant platform for showcasing talent to international audiences. Many idol production companies, particularly smaller agencies, face substantial barriers in independently organizing large-scale global promotional events or collecting adequate international market data. KCON addresses these challenges by providing a structured platform that allows agencies to showcase their artists and assess their potential for international success through direct audience interactions. While smaller agencies primarily use KCON to gain essential visibility and immediate market feedback, larger entertainment companies leverage KCON stages to introduce rookie groups and enhance their global reputations. Over more than a decade, KCON has firmly established itself as a premier international K-pop event. For instance, SM Entertainment's AESPA and HYBE's NewJeans participated in KCON shortly after their debuts, boosting their international visibility (see Appendix B).

KCON's structured environment for fan engagement and market validation lowers entry barriers for agencies of varying sizes seeking global market expansion. By facilitating meaningful connections between global fans and artists, KCON not only strengthens commercial relationships but also reinforces its role as a critical mediator, balancing the interests of fans and production companies within the global K-pop ecosystem.

Sponsors and Local Vendors

KCON actively facilitates the participation of various external sponsors and local businesses related to Korean culture, using diverse content that encompasses not only K-pop but also broader elements of K-culture. Recent industry analyses indicate that global K-pop fans not only consume music content but also

actively engage with diverse Korean cultural products, including beauty, fashion, food, and entertainment (Gammon, 2024; Jin, 2024b). KCON capitalizes on these broader consumer interests by curating immersive Korean cultural experiences beyond music, providing a structured commercial space for sponsors and local vendors to interact with highly engaged global fans. For sponsors, KCON serves as an effective entry point, reducing the risks associated with international market penetration by directly targeting an audience with proven cultural affinity and consumption patterns. Local vendors, particularly Korean restaurants and small businesses, also benefit significantly by increasing their visibility among culturally aligned global audiences.

Ultimately, CJ ENM leverages KCON's multisided platform structure to mediate interactions among fans, idol production companies, and sponsors, converting cultural engagement into substantial commercial value. By systematically orchestrating and monetizing stakeholder interactions, KCON not only reinforces CJ ENM's dominant market position but also actively shapes the global K-pop industry's evolving dynamics. This strategic use of the multisided platform structure is explored in greater depth in the subsequent case study of KCON Japan 2024, highlighting specific operational practices and stakeholder interactions within a localized context.

Case Study: KCON JAPAN 2024

This case study explores how CJ ENM uses KCON as a multisided platform to reinforce market dominance in the context of shifting industry dynamics. Fieldwork was conducted at KCON Japan 2024 (May 9–11, Chiba, Japan), using participant observation of performances, workshops, and vendor activities (see Figure 5). Additional insights were gathered from 11 unstructured interviews with key organizers and staff from KCON's Convention Planning, Performance Production, Digital Solutions, and Marketing teams, conducted both on-site and through follow-up interviews (see Appendix A for a detailed interview list).



Figure 5. KCON JAPAN 2024 convention site map (KCON JAPAN, n.d.).

Global Fans

Catering to Diverse Fandoms

KCON carefully selects event locations to align with local audience preferences, relying on data-driven approaches to identify regions with strong existing fan engagement rather than developing new markets from scratch. Metrics such as album sales, online fan activity, and concert attendance are analyzed

to inform the selection of host cities. Data collected from the MAMA online voting system also plays a pivotal role in these decisions. As Interviewee A explained, KCON considers past K-pop concert activity, Mnet Plus membership data, and regional MAMA voting trends when selecting new locations (Interviewee A, personal communication, May 2024).

Ticketing practices also reflect regional norms, highlighting KCON's adaptability accumulated through extensive local experience. In Japan, where lottery-based ticketing is the norm, KCON adheres to this custom by pricing all seats equally and assigning them randomly (Interviewee A, personal communication, May 2024). This contrasts with markets like the United States and Europe, where ticket prices vary based on seat location.

Beyond general admission, KCON offers specialized Meet and Greet (M&G) tickets,³ providing fans with direct interactions with their favorite idols—an opportunity unavailable at standard concert-type K-pop events. A special "Hi-Touch" event gives M&G Premium ticket holders the chance for brief personal interaction with their chosen artist (see Figure 6). Fans must select their preferred artist at the time of purchase to participate in that artist's Hi-Touch session. Considering that most other global K-pop events organized by international festivals or broadcasting companies primarily focus on concert performances rather than providing dedicated spaces for fan conventions, KCON uniquely offers K-pop fans opportunities for closer and more interactive experiences with idol stars. At KCON Japan 2024, more than 30 idol groups took part in M&G events alongside smaller showcase performances.



Figure 6. M&G (Hi-Touch) event at KCON JAPAN 2024 (KCON Japan Official, 2024).

Blending On-Site and Digital Experiences

KCON integrates physical and digital platforms to enhance its accessibility and engagement for both local and international fans. While M&G tickets and interactive showcases offer attendees direct, on-site interactions with idol singers, CJ ENM leverages digital platforms to extend its reach. All artist events are livestreamed on KCON's official YouTube channel, enabling fans worldwide to participate virtually.

³ For example, at KCON JAPAN 2024, the 3 Day Plus Ticket, which allows access to all three days of events, was priced at ¥36,900 (approximately \$240 USD), while the M&G Premium Ticket, which includes access to the HI-Touch event, was priced at ¥8,900 (approximately \$58 USD).

Furthermore, concerts are available for livestreaming and on-demand viewing through TVING, aligning with the company's broader strategy to expand its international subscriber base.

The introduction of the PlusCON mobile app at KCON Japan 2024 aimed to enhance fan experiences by providing convenient and personalized on-site services (see Figure 7). According to Interviewee E, although the app's initial usage rate was lower than expected, there are plans to improve its functionality for future events, developing it into a community platform for K-pop fans. This aligns with the broader goal of expanding digital engagement.

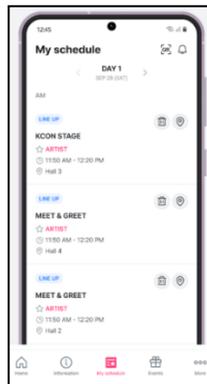


Figure 7. Personalized KCON schedule for fans on the PlusCON application (PlusCON, n.d.).

Managing Crowds and Regulating Behavior

KCON is recognized for its efficient crowd management and use of digital solutions, as demonstrated at KCON Japan 2024, where CJ ENM reduced wait times while maintaining an engaging atmosphere. The Naver Line⁴ mobile queuing reduced disruptions by allowing attendees to preregister, effectively minimizing waiting times. Fans were assigned queue numbers via the app and called in manageable groups to participate in high-demand activities. For fans who faced unavoidable delays, the "Jelly Staff" (see Figure 8) maintained the venue's festive atmosphere by distributing temporary tattoos, providing tips on event navigation, and engaging attendees with interactive activities. This approach helped maintain a smooth experience, even during waiting periods.

⁴ Naver Line, a popular mobile messaging app by South Korean Internet giant Naver, offers real-time translation that enables smooth communication between Japanese and Korean users, making it ideal for KCON's operational coordination with local Japanese staff.



Figure 8. Jelly staffs at KCON JAPAN 2024. Photographs taken by the author, May 2024.

Meanwhile, KCON enforces strict regulations to protect artists' IP and ensure fan safety. Interviewees E and K both emphasized that significant efforts are made to prevent the activities of K-pop fans who profit from unauthorized photo and video recordings from disrupting the event's order. Photography with personal devices is generally permitted in convention spaces, but professional cameras and videography equipment are prohibited in concert venues. Bag searches reinforce these policies. Regional cultural norms also influence regulations; for example, strictly prohibiting photography during performances in Japan while allowing more flexibility in the United States (Interviewee A, personal communication, May 2024). Because few fans attend KCON in multiple countries, regional rules are set contextually through communication with local coordinators and partners to gather relevant information (Interviewee B, personal communication, May 2024).

Fostering a Collective Identity: KCONers

Although typical K-pop fandoms primarily organize around specific idol groups rather than the broader K-pop genre (Yoon, 2019), KCON intentionally fosters a collective identity among attendees by branding them as "KCONers." At KCON, attendees receive personalized KCONer ID cards that allow them to customize their cards with photos of favorite artists, helping them maintain their existing fan identities while simultaneously reinforcing a shared identity as KCON participants (see Figure 9). Additionally, whereas individual fandoms traditionally use distinct official lightsticks symbolizing their respective groups, KCON intentionally promotes a unified, KCON-branded lightstick for collective use during concerts. Through such mechanisms, KCON attempts to construct a shared identity that encompasses diverse fandoms, fostering a unified cultural experience while simultaneously minimizing potential conflicts or divisions arising from individual fandom loyalties.

This approach aligns closely with CJ ENM's broader corporate strategy to market "K-culture" as a cohesive global brand. Ritualistic practices, such as all performing artists collectively chanting "Let's KCON!," further demonstrate CJ ENM's deliberate efforts to embed the KCON brand deeply within the global K-pop experience. This tightly controlled branding suggests CJ ENM's intention to consolidate its influence over global K-pop distribution and marketing channels.



Figure 9. Personalized KCONer ID cards (KCON Japan Official, 2024).

However, participant observations indicated that many attendees primarily engaged with events and performances related to their favored artists, spending the remaining time visiting sponsor booths or dining areas while awaiting concerts. Consequently, the collective term “KCONer” appeared to have limited practical resonance among attendees. Indeed, CJ ENM’s multilayered promotional strategy at KCON appeared to reveal notable tensions. Whereas individual idol agencies typically prioritize targeted promotion of specific idol groups, CJ ENM’s objectives at KCON are more complex, encompassing not only artist promotion but also the broader reinforcement of its corporate identity, subsidiary brands, and commercial partners. Such efforts to cultivate a unified yet commercially standardized identity reflect the inherent tensions highlighted in Scott’s (2019) discussion of the convergence culture industry. Although this study does not intend to criticize the commercial use of fandom, recognizing these tensions could be meaningful in proposing alternatives for KCON’s sustainable growth, especially considering its dependence on the K-pop fandom market. According to Scott, media corporations ostensibly celebrate voluntary fan engagement but primarily standardize and monetize fan practices to align with corporate objectives. The absence of fan-organized spaces or grassroots contributions at KCON further highlights this tension. Given the significant role of voluntary fan-generated content and activities in the globalization of K-pop, KCON, positioning itself explicitly as a fan convention, appears to require a revised approach to effectively address these issues.

Artist Production Companies

Mediating External Agencies to the Global K-Pop Market

For idol production companies, KCON serves as a critical platform for showcasing talent to international audiences. By featuring both renowned stars and emerging idol groups, KCON functions as a testing ground, providing companies with direct fan feedback and immediate exposure to international markets. KCON deliberately facilitates external production companies’ efforts to navigate market uncertainties and expand internationally. Interviewee A clearly explained this approach:

We lock in headliner artists early since they drive ticket sales. Meanwhile, rookie idol agencies often reach out to us first. With KCON’s schedule announced yearly around late December or early January, many agencies show interest in securing a spot.

Notably, global sensations like BTS performed at KCON in 2014, 2016, and 2017 before solidifying their prominence in the global market (see Appendix B). Such appearances facilitated critical connections with international promoters, highlighting KCON’s role as a stepping stone for idols seeking global recognition.

In addition to performances, KCON also provides a market platform, enabling agencies to sell merchandise and albums. Booth spaces are sold directly to agencies, significantly contributing to CJ ENM's revenue. These booths frequently feature appearances by idols, creating memorable fan experiences and enhancing overall engagement at the event. At KCON Japan 2024, 26 agency-operated artist booths highlighted this dynamic, reinforcing the commercial potential of on-site interactions between idols and fans.

Smaller agencies, however, often face logistical and financial barriers when managing booths at large-scale international events. To address these limitations, KCON Japan 2024 introduced the "Artists' Locker" initiative, allowing smaller agencies to outsource booth design and operation directly to KCON organizers (see Figure 10). According to Interviewee A, the initiative was based on prior participant feedback, recognizing that booth design posed a major hurdle for smaller agencies. For KCON Japan 2024, organizers managed the entire process, with agencies simply providing their merchandise (Interviewee A, personal communication, May 2024).



Figure 10. Artists' locker booth (above) and sponsors' booth (below) (KCON Japan Official, 2024).

This initiative highlights KCON's adaptability in accommodating diverse stakeholders and supporting smaller idol production companies, enabling their participation despite resource constraints. By lowering barriers to participation, the initiative encourages diverse agency involvement, allowing CJ ENM to differentiate KCON's content in the face of increasing global competition. Interviewee B elaborated on this approach:

As K-pop's influence grows, more top idols are playing major festivals like Coachella and Summer Sonic, making it tougher for us. With more overseas K-pop concerts and TV music programs hosting them abroad, we're focusing on creating experiences fans can only get at KCON. (Interviewee B)

Leveraging In-House Talent at KCON: Strategic Advantages of Vertical Integration

CJ ENM not only serves as an intermediary for external production companies but also actively promotes its own artists who debuted through Mnet's audition programs. Through KCON, these artists are introduced directly into local markets, effectively testing their commercial potential in key countries. As previously discussed, groups debuted by CJ ENM typically operate as project teams, allowing immediate commercial activities but within relatively short contractual periods. Consequently, CJ ENM faces pressure to maximize revenue opportunities rapidly within these limited timeframes.

The data presented in Table 1 and Figure 10 illustrate a notable increase in the proportion of KCON performers debuting from CJ ENM-produced programs, particularly after 2017. This demonstrates the market trend in which idols debuting through *Produce 101* (CJ ENM, 2016) paved the way for a surge in idols debuting via similar audition programs. By 2024, 31.16% of KCON's lineup consisted of artists who had debuted through CJ ENM's audition shows, marking a significant rise from 3.7% in 2016. This trend underscores CJ ENM's ability to leverage its internal resources to dominate the K-pop market.

Of the 28 artists performing at KCON Japan 2024, nine debuted through Mnet's audition programs. Among these, JO1, ME:I, and INI are Japanese groups formed through the local version of *Produce 101* (Lapone Entertainment, 2019, 2021, 2023; see Table 2). These artists are represented by Lapone Entertainment, giving them a competitive advantage in being selected for KCON.

Since we have a dedicated department within CJ ENM that manages Lapone-related matters, information sharing and coordination with Lapone-affiliated artists are much smoother compared to other agencies. If securing Lapone artists becomes critical for ticket sales, we can internally decide to prioritize their inclusion. (Interviewee I)

Table 1. Number of KCON Cast Members Who Debuted From CJ ENM-Produced Television Audition Programs.

Year	Number of Artists Who Debuted From Mnet Audition Program	Number of Total Artists (All KCON Concerts)	Ratio (%)
2012	0	6	0
2013	0	8	0
2014	1	8	12.5
2015	1	28	3.57
2016	2	54	3.70
2017	3	63	4.76
2018	11	65	16.92
2019	14	75	18.66
2022	10	51	19.60
2023	16	88	18.18
2024	24	77	31.16

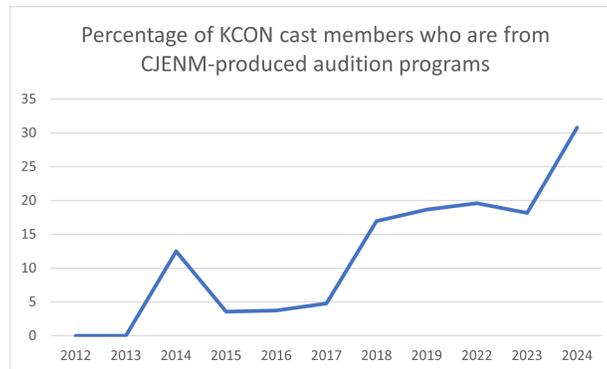


Figure 10. Percentage of KCON cast members who are from CJ ENM-produced audition programs.

Indeed, idol groups such as JO1 and INI enjoy considerable popularity in the Japanese music market, demonstrating strong ticket-selling power at local events. For example, JO1 and INI ranked third and ninth, respectively, in Billboard Japan's year-end top singles sales ranking, highlighting their commercial strength and local appeal (Japan Billboard, 2024). This collaborative approach allows CJ ENM to mitigate the risks associated with overseas market entry by leveraging its globally integrated vertical system. By continuously securing idol IP both domestically and internationally, CJ ENM aims to maximize revenue through global K-pop events like KCON.

Thus, KCON's dual strategy—supporting external production companies while intentionally promoting CJ ENM's vertically integrated idol groups—reinforces its market position by effectively balancing immediate commercial interests with long-term global market expansion.

Table 2. K-Pop Artists at KCON Japan 2024 Who Debuted Through CJ ENM-Produced Audition Programs.

Number	Group/Artist	Program Title	Broadcast Channel
1	&Team	I-LAND (CJ ENM & HYBE, 2020)	Mnet
2	B.D.U	Build Up: Vocal Boy Group Survival (CJ ENM, 2024d):	Mnet
3	INI	Produce 101 Japan Season 2 (Lapone Entertainment, 2021)	TBS
4	JO1	Produce 101 Japan Season 1 (Lapone Entertainment, 2019)	TBS
5	Kep1er	Girls Planet 999 (CJ ENM, 2021)	Mnet
6	ME:I	Produce 101 Japan The Girls (Lapone Entertainment, 2023)	TBS
7	Tempest	I-LAND (CJ ENM & HYBE, 2020), Produce 101 (CJ ENM, 2016, etc.)	Mnet
8	YENA	Produce 48 (CJ ENM, 2018)	Mnet
9	ZEROBASEONE	Boys Planet (CJ ENM, 2023)	Mnet

Note. TBS (Tokyo Broadcasting System) is a major television network based in Japan.

Sponsors and Local Vendors: Leveraging Global Interest in K-Culture Through KCON

Sponsor booths at KCON Japan 2024 featured a diverse range of industries, reflecting global K-pop fans' broad interest in Korean cultural products beyond music, including beauty, food, electronics, and lifestyle. The event featured nine corporate booths, including subsidiaries of CJ Group (CJ Olive Young, CJ Cheil Jedang), clearly demonstrating CJ ENM's strategic use of its vertically integrated corporate structure and cross-industry promotional capabilities (see Table 3). As Interviewee G explained, sponsors actively incorporate popular idol artists into booth activities, aiming to capitalize on attendees' strong affinity toward their favorite stars:

Sponsors prioritize integrating artists into their booth programs, such as artist visits or product demonstrations. To facilitate this, our 360 Solutions Team coordinates closely with the production team, aligning sponsors' promotional goals with KCON's operational guidelines and artist management plans.

The inclusion of artists in sponsor activities effectively reduces sponsors' uncertainties about market acceptance by directly validating fan engagement. By managing sponsor involvement, CJ ENM not only generates revenue through booth rentals and sponsorship fees but also strengthens its market position by enhancing sponsor loyalty and brand associations within the broader K-culture ecosystem (see Figure 11).

Local vendors similarly benefit from participating in KCON by directly interacting with culturally interested global audiences. These interactions offer local businesses immediate insights into international consumer preferences, thereby reducing market entry uncertainties. The strategic selection of event locations reflects CJ ENM's focus on profitability and operational efficiency. For example, securing ZOZO Marine Stadium presented logistical challenges due to limited setup time after a baseball game. However, its accessibility and surrounding amenities ultimately outweighed those difficulties. As Interviewee H noted, while the dome-shaped venue allowed for faster setup and breakdown, increasingly strict labor regulations in Japan—similar to those in the United States—have made nighttime work more difficult (Interviewee H, personal communication, January 2025).

Table 3. Sponsors' Booth List at KCON JAPAN 2024.

Number	Corporate	Category
1	CJ Olive Young*	Beauty
2	CJ Cheil Jedang*	Food
3	Samsung Electronics	Electronic
4	Nongshim Japan	Food
5	Cosmax	Beauty
6	Sony Creative	Cultural Content
7	C.lay Co	Beauty
8	INTO YOU	Beauty
9	K-TOWN	Korea Tourism

Note. The * indicates a subsidiary of CJ Group (CJ ENM, 2024a).

Through extensive experience with overseas events, KCON's operational teams regularly face challenges stemming from varying local environments, regulations, institutional norms, and cultures. Communication with local partners is essential—not only for performance setup but also for maintaining convention spaces where fans spend extended time. As KCON's unique selling point is intimate fan-idol interaction throughout the day, its positioning as a fan-centered convention continues to provide strong market differentiation.



Figure 11. K-Food lounge at KCON JAPAN 2024 (KCON JAPAN Official, 2024).

Through the deliberate coordination of sponsors and local vendors, CJ ENM aims to maximize commercial value at KCON by targeting culturally engaged global audiences, thereby reducing market entry risks and reinforcing its global industry leadership.

Discussion and Conclusion

Through an in-depth examination of KCON Japan 2024, this study analyzed how CJ ENM strategically responds to structural transformations within the global K-pop industry. Findings suggest that CJ ENM uses KCON's multisided market platform structure to mediate interactions among various stakeholders—including global fans, idol production companies, sponsors, and local vendors—to enhance profitability, market reach, and brand influence within the globalized K-pop market.

CJ ENM's vertical integration practices at KCON involve shifting high-risk activities (zone of risk) into more controlled and profitable domains (zone of exploitation) within its broader business ecosystem (Bilton, 2017). By directly managing idol groups formed through televised audition programs and positioning them on KCON's global stages, CJ ENM reduces the financial risks associated with artist debuts and market entry, enabling sustained revenue generation through IP ownership and controlled artist promotion.

This case study highlights the complex dynamics of platformization and globalization shaping the contemporary K-pop market. Although digital platforms decentralize traditional media influence, CJ ENM's use of KCON illustrates how multimedia conglomerates leverage offline platforms to maintain their

intermediary role within industry value chains. Through structured, multisided interactions, CJ ENM aims to effectively monetize fan engagement to generate commercial value.

However, the analysis also identifies tensions between corporate objectives and fan-driven engagement. While CJ ENM promotes corporate identity and integrated branding, participant observations indicated that fans predominantly value idol-specific interactions. This tension points to the potential limitations of top-down management in fan-centric cultural markets. As Scott (2019) argues, corporate control over fandom experiences may undermine the authenticity central to fan cultures. As competition among international K-pop events intensifies, KCON may need to better emphasize its distinctiveness as a fan convention by supporting fan autonomy and grassroots creativity.

While most recent studies on K-pop industry strategies have predominantly focused on idol agencies responding to digital platformization, this study highlights how traditional media conglomerates like CJ ENM—whose distribution control has weakened in the digital platform era—seek to retain market dominance in the global K-pop industry. Facing technological disruption and shifting hierarchies, CJ ENM leverages its broadcasting rights, ties with smaller domestic agencies, and symbolic capital from global events such as MAMA and KCON to maintain a strong industry position, as reflected in its revenue leadership within Korea's music industry.

Nevertheless, this study has limitations. Its qualitative approach—centered on a single event—may limit the generalizability of the findings. The exclusive focus on the Japanese context may also overlook geographic variations in stakeholder dynamics. Future research could benefit from comparative analyses across multiple global locations or with conventions like Disney's D23 Expo or Comic-Con to further examine how media conglomerates manage online-offline platforms and fan engagement.

Ultimately, this study contributes to a broader theoretical understanding of how traditional media conglomerates strategically adapt to rapid industrial changes driven by globalization and digital platformization. Specifically, it advances existing theories on platformization and cultural industries by illustrating how these conglomerates leverage historically accumulated resources—such as established media infrastructures, vertically integrated production systems, and extensive global networks—to sustain market dominance and profitability. By analyzing the interplay between digital disruption and the persistent relevance of offline multisided platforms and vertically integrated systems, this study enriches scholarly discussions on the resilience and adaptability of legacy media organizations within dynamically evolving cultural markets. The case of CJ ENM and KCON demonstrates the ongoing relevance of offline multisided platforms, even in an era increasingly defined by digital interactions. It highlights the continued importance of physical spaces where diverse stakeholders converge to create commercial, cultural, and symbolic value. Thus, future research should further explore how traditional media conglomerates leverage their historically accumulated infrastructure and global networks within hybrid (online-offline) platform ecosystems, potentially revealing new pathways for sustainable growth and competitive advantage amid intensifying global competition and technological disruption.

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Appendices

Appendix A. Interviewee List.

Number	Interviewee	Date	Interview Type	Location
1	A	2024.05.09-11	In Person	KCON JAPAN On-Site
2	B	2024.05.09-11	In Person	KCON JAPAN On-Site
3	C	2025.01.17	Online	Zoom
4	D	2025.01.17	Online	Zoom
5	E	2025.01.17	Online	Zoom
6	F	2025.01.22	In Person	A Café (Seoul, Korea)
7	G	2025.01.22	In Person	A Café (Seoul, Korea)
8	H	2025.01.22	Online	Zoom
9	I	2025.01.24	Online	Zoom
10	J	2025.01.31	Online	E-mail
11	K	2025.02.03	Online	E-mail

Note. To ensure confidentiality, the specific teams of each interviewee were not disclosed. For e-mail interviews, the questions were sent on January 20, 2025, and the dates listed in the table indicate when responses were received.

Appendix B. KCON History.

Year	Country	Number of Participants (Unit: Thousands)	Participated Artists (concert performing)	
			Number of Teams	Example of Notable Idol Artists
2012	USA	10	6	EXO-M
2013	USA	20	8	EXO, G-DRAGON
2014	USA	43	8	G-DRAGON, BTS
2015	Japan	15	15	GOT7, INFINITE, JUN.K
	USA	58	9	GOT7, SUPER JUNIOR, RED VELVET
	USA	17	4	AOA, SNSD
2016	UAE	8	7	BTS, TAEYEON
	Japan	33	19	AOA, ZICO, TWICE
	France	13.5	6	BTS, SHINEE, I.O.I.*
	USA(NY)	42	10	SEVENTEEN, BTS
2017	USA(LA)	76	12	BTS, I.O.I.*, SHINEE,
	Mexico	33	8	BTS, NCT 127, MONSTA X
	Japan	48.5	24	ASTRO, SEVENTEEN, BOYS24*
	USA(NY)	43	9	NCT 127, TWICE
	USA(LA)	85	12	SEVENTEEN, WANNA ONE*
	Australia	21	10	EXO, WANNA ONE *

2018	Japan	68	28	PROMISE9*, SEVENTEEN, STRAY KIDS, IN2IT*
	USA(NY)	53	10	STRAY KIDS, PROMISE 9*, NCT 127, WANNA ONE*
	USA(LA)	94	13	IN2IT*, WANNA ONE*. PROMISE9*
	Thailand	42	14	WANNA ONE*, PROMISE 9*
2019	Japan	88	29	HASUNGWOON*, IZONE*, PROMISE 9*, IZ*ONE*
	USA(NY)	55	11	IZ*ONE*, TOMORROW BY TOGETHER, PROMISE 9*, SEVENTEEN
	USA(LA)	103	14	IZ*ONE, PROMISE9* SEVENTEEN, STRAY KIDS
	Thailand	45	21	X1*, IZ*ONE*, STRAY KIDS
2022	USA	90	16	ENHYPEN*, INI*, KEP1ER*, STRAY KIDS, NCT DREAM, TO1*
	Saudi Arabia	20	112	NEWJEANS, T01*
	Japan	65	23	INI*, TO1*, IVE, JO1*, NEWJEANS, KEP1ER*
2023	Japan	123	23	INI*, YENA*, DXTEEN*, JO1*, ENHYPEN*, KEP1ER*, ZEROBASEONE*
	USA	140	23	IVE, INI*, KEP1ER*, ZEROBASEONE*, JO1*, STRAY KIDS
	Thailand	24	16	JO1*, MBITIOUS*, KEP1ER*, INI*, TO1*
	Saudi Arabia	23	26	NEWJEANS, TO1*. SUPER JUNIOR-D&E. EL7Z UP*
2024	China	45	15	AESPA, YENA*, JO1*, ZEROBASEONE*
	Japan	140	28	ZEROBASEONE*. KEP1ER*, INI*, JO1*, ME:I*, YENA*, &TEAM*
	USA	125	18	JO YURI*, INI*, KEP1ER*, ENHYPEN*, ME:I*, ZEROBASEONE*, I-LAND2 DEBUT TEAM*
	Germany	3	16	JO1*, RIIIZE, KEP1ER*

Note. Concerts held online during the COVID-19 pandemic (KCON:TACT) and the 2022 KCON Premieres are not included in this list as they were not official KCON. The * mark after the artist's name indicates that the artist is from an idol audition program produced by CJ ENM (CJ ENM, n.d.; CJ ENM America, n.d.; CJ ENM Internal Resources).