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In recent months, South Korean interpreter April Kim has become the darling of the K-pop community (and a few K-pop acts) after multiple videos – highlighting her unique ways of conveying artistes' messages to concert-goers – went viral.



It's no secret that Singapore is a hotbed for K-pop concerts. Enhypen, Ive, Shinee, FT Island, Itzy, IU. The list of K-acts who've thrilled concert-goers here in the first half of 2024 alone easily exceeds 20. And if you've been to enough concerts, you'll know that one particular voice has stood out amongst the rest – and it's not oppa or unnie.

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Meet April Kim. As a Korean-to-English interpreter, the 26-year-old usually performs her much-appreciated magic in the shadows during concerts. However, what was once solely an omniscient voice has been thrust into the spotlight, thanks to a few viral videos of Kim executing her duties with pizzazz.

Kim's unique style has garnered a legion of fans region-wide, including the idols themselves. Actress-singer IU has even praised Kim in a vlog about her Singapore concert.

CNA Lifestyle recently sat down with Kim to understand how she became one of the most recognised interpreters in Singapore.

HOW SHE BECAME AN INTERPRETER

With her candid nature and propensity for jokes, Kim was easily one of the most easygoing interviewees we've had; the entire interview was conducted as she was plopped on a sofa.

And yet, she was also one of the sharpest, possessing a unique insight into the intricacies of her job: A hybrid role of both marketer and interpreter.

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Despite having an American-tinged accent, Kim assures us she is fully Korean. Born in the Gyeonggi-do region of South Korea, Kim studied at an international school in Jeju Island for five years where she picked up her accent from her American teacher.

With a keen interest in English, Kim then furthered her studies at the Singapore Management University (SMU) where she pursued a degree in business management, with a major in marketing.

So why Singapore of all places?

“(Singaporeans) spoke fluent English and it's safe for girls,” she explains. “It has such a diverse culture. Like I love culture, history and the arts.”

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At SMU, Kim learnt how to emcee and realised it could “be a hobby or a job”.

“When I had the opportunity to interpret...I was like ‘Sure, why not?’ because I was already comfortable talking in front of people and I realised talking for people would be so much fun,” she explained.

“Interpreting is basically being a spokesperson... It's understanding what's the intention of (the original speaker). What is the question they want to ask and what is the answer they want to hear?”

Her time to shine came during an event at the Korean Association where she was asked to interpret for a few Korean speakers and VIPs. As fate would have it, one of the VIPs was someone in the entertainment industry who was impressed by Kim and proceeded to ask her to interpret for boy group Seventeen's Be The Sun concert in Singapore.

And the rest is history.

BECOMING A VIRAL SENSATION

When asked to list out her viral moments, Kim pegged her gig at Taeyeon's The Odd Of Love concert as her first brush with viral fame – not before bursting into a fit of giggles.

It's worth mentioning that Taeyeon is one of Kim's all-time favourite artists.

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After composing herself and declaring “I love you, Taeyeon”, Kim continued: “There were a few songs left (till the end of the concert) and (Singapore) was the last stop in her Asian tour. So you can imagine how happy and sad she was. She was trying to imply it with a Korean idiom that she wouldn’t really use during an overseas tour – artistes usually use simpler terms.”

According to Kim, Taeyeon then questioned if she was able to interpret it, to which Kim succeeded in conveying Taeyeon’s sentiment accurately – something which impressed Taeyeon who then said out loud: “Thank you interpreter for implying my emotions so well”.

The compliment took Kim – who, to reiterate, is a Taeyeon fangirl – by surprise.

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“I was like ‘Did she just say that to me?’ I was listening to (Taeyeon’s compliment) in Korean and the audience was wondering what she was saying. I was like ‘Hold yourself. Get yourself together. Don’t cry, don’t panic. Do your job and interpret what Taeyeon said.’”

This moment has since become a motivational tool for Kim.

“Sometimes when I’m questioning the quality of my work, I always remember her words. Taeyeon complimented my interpretation, I must be good.”

Not that the quality of her work needed much questioning.

In April this year, Kim won the hearts of K-pop fans worldwide (and another dose of viral fame) for singing and rapping out her interpretation of CNBlue leader Yonghwa’s words during the group’s concert at Singapore Indoor Stadium.



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When asked what made her decide to do so, Kim replied: "I was being playful with it because I really liked the atmosphere. It was after a wave... and it looked really beautiful. When Yonghwa asked (for another wave), the fans did it again and I thought that was so cool.

"So when Yonghwa sang 'neomu joha' to the audience [for making the wave], I thought I should definitely tell the audience how happy he was by imitating it."

Kim's quick thinking impressed Yonghwa, leading to the viral exchange.

Kim revealed that she had to ask the show director for permission to continue having fun with Yonghwa, to which the director said: "Go, go. This is perfect."



STAYING PROFESSIONAL DESPITE BEING A FANGIRL

Despite her numerous viral moments, Kim maintains her professionalism. Before each gig, she will learn about the artiste she's interpreting for to understand their history and fans – spending three to six hours a day for three days on research.

"Fans want to know what an artiste is like, not the set-up questions. I want to make sure that everything is natural when I interpret it, as if I'm a fan or as if I'm in the brain of the artiste."

While it may seem like Kim has the best job a K-pop fan could have, it doesn't mean that idols are now her besties.

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“A misconception (about my work) is that I get to take photos with the artistes. As an interpreter, I’m supposed to be professional. So the most difficult part of this job is to not be a fangirl, which I am...We’re not supposed to talk to them or make them uncomfortable.”

However, Kim revealed that a few artistes have requested to take photos and talk with her to show their appreciation directly, citing Mamamoo’s Hwasa as the most recent example.

WHAT’S NEXT FOR HER

These days, K-pop fans aren’t just hearing Kim’s voice; they’re seeing her as well. In June, Kim was the emcee for BabyMonster’s first Singapore fanmeeting – appearing onstage for a good duration of the show as she facilitated the programme and interpreted questions for the members of BabyMonster.

When asked if she thought her prior viral moments had played a part in this new job scope, Kim replied: “I feel like (those incidents) helped me get recognised as someone who has ‘personality’. Interpreters are not supposed to show too much personality, I feel...That’s the main difference between emceeing and interpreting. An interpreter is a shadow; an emcee gets the spotlight.”

She explained that the viral moments demonstrated to concert organisers that she possessed both the technical skills and personality to double up as an emcee, which led to organisers reaching out to her for this new role.

Kim’s newfound fame has been “scary” but “it also feels like a dream”.

“I’m really grateful that people recognise me and that artistes show their appreciation to me, calling my name and everything...I feel like I’m living in a K-drama. But I feel (a sense of) responsibility towards this recognition, towards this affection. It means (people) trust me that when I’m doing (my roles), it’s going to be fun...And I don’t want to disappoint them. So I’m grateful and I feel like I need to do better. So there’s a lot of pressure.”

For now, Kim has a new aim in sight.

“My goal is to actually speak Mandarin fluent enough, so that I can do interpretation in Mandarin as well.”

Source: CNA/hq