

The Influence of K-pop Culture on the Consuming Behavior of Chinese Urban Youth and Adolescence

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Abstract: *This research paper investigates the profound impact of K-pop culture on the consuming behavior of young people in China. As the global phenomenon of K-pop continues to gain popularity, understanding its influence on consumers is imperative. To achieve this, we employed a mixed-methods approach involving surveys and close-up interviews to gauge participants' attitudes towards entertainment companies and their past purchasing experiences. The study distributed surveys to a diverse sample of Chinese youth, probing their perceptions of K-pop entertainment companies and the influence of these companies on their purchasing decisions. Subsequently, five in-depth interviews were conducted to delve deeper into individual experiences and uncover nuanced insights into consumer behavior. Our findings suggest a significant correlation between K-pop culture exposure and consumer behavior, with a particular emphasis on the role of gender. Young females, in particular, exhibited a propensity for irrational purchases influenced by their engagement with K-pop culture. These purchases often transcended traditional buying patterns and were driven by emotional connections to idols, merchandise, and fandom-related activities. This research underscores the critical role of K-pop culture in shaping the consumption patterns of Chinese youth, shedding light on the marketing strategies of entertainment companies targeting this demographic. The implications of our findings extend to businesses seeking to engage with this burgeoning consumer market, as well as scholars interested in the intersection of pop culture and consumer behavior.*

Keywords: *K-pop; Korean culture; fan culture; entertainment consumption; Chinese urban youth*

1. Introduction

The global cultural landscape has been irrevocably transformed by the meteoric rise of the Korean pop music industry, commonly referred to as K-pop. As mentioned by Fairchild(2016), the Korean wave, including K-pop, has generated a global phenomenon, influencing various aspects of pop culture and consumer behavior worldwide.^[1] K-pop's influence extends far beyond catchy tunes and captivating choreography; it encompasses meticulously crafted idol personas, strategic marketing, and a profound connection between fans and their idols.

Central to the K-pop phenomenon is the concept of the "idol factory," where aspiring talents undergo rigorous training in singing, dancing, and even personality development. This production line approach, reminiscent of the Hollywood star system of the past, results in the creation of polished, marketable idols who become the face of entertainment companies. Understanding the relationship between a celebrity's self-presentation and fans' parasocial interactions is essential for comprehending the influence of K-pop on consumer behavior.^[2]

One of the most intriguing aspects of K-pop is the management of idol-fan relationships. Unlike traditional celebrity-fan dynamics, K-pop fosters a sense of intimacy and accessibility, with idols engaging with their fans through social media, fan meetings, and fan clubs. This unique connection leads to a level of fan devotion that is unparalleled in the entertainment industry. Understanding the appeal of K-pop to both local and international fans is essential for comprehending its influence on consumer behavior.^[3]

The arrival of K-pop in China has been nothing short of a cultural revolution. Beginning in the early 2000s, K-pop made its way into Chinese markets, initially driven by the popularity of Korean dramas and variety shows. However, it was the entrancing allure of K-pop music and idols that truly captivated Chinese youth. Today, China stands as one of the largest consumers of K-pop content outside of South Korea. As Jung (2010) points out, K-pop's global expansion encompasses local adaptations and transnational connections that impact fan behavior and consumption.^[4]

To fully appreciate the intricate relationship between K-pop culture and Chinese young people's consuming behavior, we ask: what is the influence of K-pop culture on the consuming behavior of Chinese urban youth or adolescence? Why is Korean culture having such a huge impact in China? Why are young people specifically drawn to this culture? This research paper employs a mixed-methods approach. We delve into the attitudes and purchasing habits of Chinese youth, investigating the role of K-pop in shaping their consumer choices. Furthermore, we conduct in-depth interviews to unravel the personal experiences and emotional connections that drive consumer behavior among K-pop enthusiasts.

This study is situated within a broader context of globalization, cultural exchange, and the transformative power of popular culture. Specifically, it seeks to shed light on how K-pop's idol factories, fan engagement strategies, and cross-cultural influences intersect to mold the consuming behavior of Chinese youth. Ultimately, this research aims to contribute valuable insights to both scholars and businesses operating in an increasingly interconnected and K-pop-infused global marketplace.

2. Methods

I conducted a comprehensive study on how K-pop culture impacts young people's consumption behavior in China. I created a clear and concise 14-question survey covering demographics, K-pop fandom traits, purchasing habits, and attitudes toward entertainment companies and K-pop products. I distributed this survey electronically via platforms like Weibo, Xiaohongshu, WeChat, and Instagram, targeting self-identified K-pop enthusiasts aged 15 to 30, without offering incentives.

Following the survey, I conducted 10–20-minute video interviews with five participants, selected to represent diverse K-pop fandom experiences and purchasing behaviors. I analyzed survey data quantitatively using descriptive statistics and qualitatively examined open-ended survey responses and interview transcripts to identify patterns and insights related to K-pop consumption behavior.

Throughout the study, I maintained ethical standards, ensuring informed consent, anonymity, and data protection. This research combined survey data and qualitative interviews to provide a holistic understanding of how K-pop culture influences Chinese young people's consumption choices.

3. Results

3.1. Survey

3.1.1. Gender Disparity

A glaring gender disparity is evident, with 76.14% of female respondents indicating that they have purchased K-pop products, while only 41.67% of males have done so. This stark contrast signifies a pronounced preference among females for K-pop merchandise. This may be attributed to factors such as idol appeal, merchandise aesthetics, or marketing strategies tailored towards female consumers.

3.1.2. Age and Spending Patterns

Age plays a pivotal role in annual spending behavior. Respondents aged 15 to 18 exhibit an exceptionally wide range of spending, from less than 100 CNY to greater than 100,000 CNY, with a median between 2,001 CNY to 5,000 CNY. This age group not only has the highest median but also demonstrates an extraordinary dedication to K-pop fandom. Conversely, individuals aged 19 to 23 show more moderate spending, typically ranging from less than 100 CNY to 5,001 CNY to 10,000 CNY, with a median of 301 CNY to 500 CNY. These disparities reflect the generational differences in financial commitment to K-pop, with younger fans investing significantly more in their passion.

3.1.3. Reasons for Attraction to K-pop

The reasons behind respondents' attraction to K-pop are equally compelling. An overwhelming majority, 86 individuals, express a deep admiration for the idols themselves, including their appearance and personality. This intense idol-centric attraction suggests a cult of personality around K-pop stars. In contrast, a minority of 10 respondents follow the K-pop trend, representing a less emotionally-driven engagement with the culture.

3.1.4. K-pop Product Consumption

The sheer number of respondents who have purchased K-pop products is substantial, with 72.28% having made such purchases. This data underlines the industry's commercial success, driven by the sale of albums (66 respondents), official company goods (48 respondents), and membership on idol-fan

communication platforms (40 respondents). This trend showcases a substantial market for both official and fan-made merchandise within the K-pop ecosystem.

3.1.5. Perceptions on the K-pop Industry

Respondents hold strong opinions regarding the K-pop industry. A significant number, 45 respondents, strongly agree that "Idol companies sell idols' images to make huge profits." This acknowledgment of the commercialization of idols indicates an awareness of the industry's profit-oriented nature. Additionally, 50 respondents strongly agree that "Idol-related products have highly inflated prices," suggesting a perception of overpricing, which may be due to the fervent demand for these products.

3.1.6. Incentives for Purchase

The data regarding incentives for purchasing K-pop products showcases the power of aesthetics. Sixty-five respondents claim that the primary motivation for their purchases is that the products simply look nice. This aesthetic-driven consumption aligns with the K-pop industry's emphasis on visual appeal and design.

3.1.7. Resale Profit Motivation

A noteworthy pattern emerges when it comes to resale profit motivation. A significant majority, 35 respondents, report that none of their idol-related consumption is aimed at reselling for profits. This finding contradicts the assumption that fans primarily buy K-pop merchandise as an investment. Instead, the data indicates a strong emotional connection to the products rather than a profit-seeking mentality.

In summary, these extreme data points highlight the intense and emotionally charged nature of K-pop fandom, particularly among female fans and those in the 15 to 18 age group. The data also underscores the industry's success in marketing and merchandising, while simultaneously dispelling the notion that fans are primarily motivated by resale profits. Understanding these extremes provides valuable insights into the complex dynamics of K-pop consumption among young Chinese individuals.

3.2. Interview

This section conducts a comprehensive analysis of interviews with five individuals, identified as Lucy, Emma, Jessica, Chloe, and Anne, to explore the behaviors and motivations of K-pop fans. These interviews offer intricate insights into the diverse experiences and perspectives within the K-pop fandom, enabling a nuanced understanding of the factors influencing fan behavior. While distinct differences emerge among these interviewees, it is through their shared similarities that we unveil valuable insights that can be generalized to a broader spectrum of K-pop enthusiasts.

3.2.1. Shared Similarities among Interviewees

3.2.1.1. Introduction to K-pop

One common thread that unites all interviewees is their initial exposure to K-pop through social connections, media exposure, or talent shows featuring K-pop idols. Chloe Emma, and Jessica all mentioned seeing the K-pop girl group BLACKPINK as their first contact with this industry. This underscores the significant role of peer influence and media dissemination in fostering an interest in K-pop, a phenomenon that resonates with many fans.

3.2.1.2. Social Impact

The impact of K-pop on the social lives of all interviewees is remarkable. It has fostered the expansion of their social networks, kindling connections with fellow fans and leading to engaging discussions centered around K-pop. This sense of community within the K-pop fandom, shared by all interviewees, reflects a broader trend among fans.

3.2.1.3. Consumer Behavior

Collectively, the interviewees have engaged in consumer behavior associated with K-pop, including the purchase of albums and merchandise. This collective willingness to invest in K-pop-related products underscores the tangible and monetary methods through which fans express their unwavering support for their beloved idols. Their consumer behavior reflects a commonality among K-pop enthusiasts who actively participate in the fandom.

3.2.1.4. Budget Consideration

Universally, the interviewees exhibit a degree of financial acumen concerning their K-pop spending. They manifest an acute awareness of their fiscal constraints, with some actively taking steps to save or supplement their income to fund their K-pop interests. This shared sense of budget consideration is

emblematic of a broader financial mindfulness prevalent within the K-pop fan community.

3.2.1.5. Reflection on Spending

A shared trait among the interviewees is their capacity for introspection when it comes to their spending behavior. They candidly acknowledge instances of impulsive purchases and the necessity for fiscal responsibility. This introspective quality is indicative of an evolving comprehension of the financial intricacies intertwined with their fandom. It is through this self-awareness that we observe a common thread among fans who actively reflect upon their spending habits.

3.2.2. Differences among Interviewees and Generalization

While these shared similarities form a significant part of the K-pop fan experience, the interviewees also present noteworthy differences:

3.2.2.1. Age and Life Stage

Age plays a pivotal role in shaping the interviewees' financial autonomy, spending habits, and financial responsibilities. This diversity of life stages among interviewees highlights the impact of age on income accessibility and expenditure patterns. These differences are emblematic of the varied demographics within the broader K-pop fan community.

3.2.2.2. Parental Support and Influence

Disparities in the level of parental support and influence within the K-pop fandom are evident. While some interviewees benefit from parental support that does not contest their K-pop interests, others do not emphasize strong parental involvement. This range of parental dynamics reflects the heterogeneity in familial attitudes towards K-pop.

3.2.2.3. Social Behavior and Anxiety

Emma and Anne expound upon changes in their social conduct and a reduction in social anxiety attributable to their immersion in K-pop fandom. In contrast, others do not explicitly reference such transformative effects. These differences underscore the varying social repercussions of K-pop engagement on fans, a spectrum reflected in the wider fan community.

3.2.2.4. Income Sources

Emma stands out as the only interviewee who actively seeks part-time employment to finance her K-pop interests, whereas the others predominantly rely on allowances or familial financial backing. These divergent income sources highlight the different levels of financial autonomy within the fandom and can be generalized to illustrate the multifaceted financial backgrounds of K-pop enthusiasts.

3.2.2.5. Emotional Impact of Spending

Emma and Jessica divulge more tempered emotional reactions to significant K-pop-related purchases, while Anne interprets her spending as a form of investment. These disparate emotional responses epitomize the intricate emotional dynamics that underpin fan spending. It is through this spectrum of emotions that we recognize a commonality in the depth of emotional connection fans form with their idols.

3.2.2.6. Resale Value Consideration

Anne singularly exhibits a penchant for considering the resale value of K-pop merchandise as a determinant in her purchasing decisions. This idiosyncratic approach underscores the heterogeneity in fan behavior, but it also points to the broader trend of fans exploring merchandise as potential investments.

3.2.2.7. Selective Purchasing

Anne emphasizes the importance of selectively procuring items in pristine condition and at reasonable price points, signaling a more discerning approach to spending when juxtaposed with the others. Her discernment, while unique, mirrors a broader trend among fans who carefully evaluate merchandise quality.

In summation, while the interviewees exhibit a rich tapestry of similarities and differences, it is through their shared traits that we uncover valuable insights that can be generalized to a wider group of K-pop enthusiasts. These shared aspects encompass the influence of peer exposure, the sense of community, consumer behavior, budget consideration, and introspection on spending. The differences, on the other hand, offer a glimpse into the diverse demographics and financial backgrounds within the K-pop fan community. Together, these findings paint a comprehensive picture of the multifaceted and dynamic world of K-pop fandom.

4. Discussion

4.1. Industry Chain

The K-pop industry has achieved remarkable profitability through a multifaceted approach. It begins with talent development and training, where aspiring idols undergo rigorous preparation, honing their singing, dancing, and performance skills. Group formation is a crucial strategy, as K-pop groups usually consist of several members, each contributing a unique appeal to target a broad demographic range. Agencies also prioritize global expansion, aiming to captivate international audiences by promoting artists worldwide and releasing English versions of songs.^[5] Maintaining a strong online presence through social media and fan engagement is paramount, as idols interact with fans through platforms like Twitter and Instagram and offer exclusive merchandise to foster loyalty. Digital sales and streaming play a vital role in chart rankings and revenue generation. Concerts and tours offer both substantial income and opportunities for merchandise sales. Additionally, product endorsements, television appearances, and strategic partnerships contribute significantly to revenue. K-pop agencies also diversify into various entertainment ventures and manage licensing and copyrights effectively. Scarcity marketing and continuous content creation keep fans engaged and invested, ensuring the industry's enduring profitability and global success.

K-pop went viral in China because it met the urgent emotional needs of the new generation. The idols serve as vital sources of mental support and emotional relief for Chinese urban youth, offering a unique platform for the expression and projection of emotions amid the pressures and realities of their lives.

One of the key roles of K-pop idols is their ability to provide emotional refuge for their fans. In the hustle and bustle of urban life in China, many young people often face overwhelming stress from academic, career, and societal expectations. K-pop offers a welcomed escape from these pressures. Idols' music, lyrics, and performances create a safe space where listeners can immerse themselves in the emotions conveyed by the songs.^[6] Whether it's the joy of an upbeat track or the solace of a heartfelt ballad, K-pop allows fans to temporarily set aside their worries and find solace in the melodies and lyrics that resonate with their feelings.

Moreover, K-pop idols themselves often share their personal struggles, challenges, and vulnerabilities through their music and public personas. This openness and authenticity make them relatable figures for their fans. When idols share their stories of overcoming obstacles and their emotional journeys, it encourages young people to confront their own struggles and emotions. This relatability fosters a sense of empathy and connection, reassuring fans that they are not alone in their experiences.^[7]

The emotional projection facilitated by K-pop extends to fan interactions as well. Many idols engage actively with their fan base, sharing personal anecdotes, offering words of encouragement, and even addressing fan letters and messages. These interactions create a sense of intimacy and emotional connection between idols and their fans. Fans often find solace in knowing that their idols genuinely care about their well-being, and this emotional support can have a profound impact on their mental health.^[8]

Furthermore, K-pop provides a creative outlet for fans to express their emotions. Many fans create fan art, fan fiction, and fan videos inspired by their favorite idols and songs. These creative endeavors allow fans to channel their feelings into something constructive and artistic, providing an effective means of emotional release and self-expression.

K-pop idols play a crucial role in offering mental support and emotional relief to Chinese urban youth. Through their music, personal stories, and interactions with fans, they create a safe haven for young people to escape from the pressures of urban life, find solace in shared emotions, and channel their feelings into creative expressions. In doing so, K-pop idols serve as pillars of emotional support and understanding in the lives of their devoted fans.

4.2. Common Patterns

4.2.1. High Spending on K-pop Merchandise and Concerts

Chinese K-pop fans invest a substantial portion of their income in K-pop merchandise, albums, and concert tickets. The K-pop commercial ecosystem employs strategies like upgrading, series collection, and idol pairing to enhance fan engagement and generate revenue. These strategies create competition among fans, driving album sales and fan loyalty. Upgrading encourages fans to buy multiple versions of albums or merchandise, leading to competition in completing collections and increasing industry profits. Series collection connects items through narratives, fostering anticipation and fan competition. Idol pairing fuels friendly rivalries and debates among fans. While these commercial tactics boost fan engagement, they also result in financial competition as fans invest in collections. Online engagement

competition arises as fans create impressive content for recognition. Scarce and exclusive merchandise drives up prices in the secondary market.^[9] This competitive dynamic shapes China's vibrant K-pop fandom culture and contributes to the industry's financial growth.

4.2.2. Collection Culture, Resale Market and Investment Mentality

K-pop fans treat their purchases as potential investments, influenced by peer culture, Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), and online trading. Owning rare K-pop items boosts social status within fan communities. FOMO drives purchases due to limited releases. Online marketplaces reinforce the investment mindset as fans buy, sell, and trade collectibles. K-pop agencies use scarcity to increase item value. However, emotional attachment remains important. Fans value their collections as expressions of love for idols. Informed consumerism is key, with fans researching market trends and item releases. K-pop merchandise is more than memorabilia; it's seen as assets with financial value in the digital age.

4.2.3. Social and Economic Impacts

K-pop has influence on social behavior, such as increased self-confidence and improved social skills, is evident in the interviews. This social transformation is beneficial for personal development and fosters positive interactions among fans. The global fan community formed around K-pop idols promotes cultural exchange and international friendships. It creates a sense of unity and shared identity among fans worldwide. The emotional connection fans have with K-pop idols contributes to their sense of self-worth and belonging, positively impacting their mental and emotional well-being. The willingness of young Chinese fans to spend on K-pop merchandise and concert tickets is a significant economic driver for the K-pop industry. This consumer behavior results in substantial revenue generation for the industry. The resale market for K-pop merchandise represents a unique economic aspect where fans view their purchases as potential investments. This resale market benefits both individual fans and resellers. While K-pop culture brings about positive social transformations, such as increased self-confidence and global connections, it also raises concerns about financial responsibility. Some fans may prioritize their fandom over other financial obligations, leading to financial challenges.

5. Conclusion

K-pop culture exerts a multifaceted influence on the consuming behavior of young Chinese people. It drives economic growth within the K-pop industry, with fans willing to spend generously on merchandise and concerts. Simultaneously, it leads to personal growth and enhanced social skills among fans, fosters a global fan community, and provides a sense of identity and belonging. However, it also poses challenges related to responsible financial management. This dual impact, viewed through economic and social lenses, underscores the complexity of K-pop culture's influence on young Chinese consumers. It reflects a dynamic interplay between economic consumption patterns and the social and emotional transformations experienced by fans. Understanding this balance is crucial for comprehending the holistic impact of K-pop culture on the lives of young Chinese consumers.

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