



DISSERTATION

**HOW YOU LIKE THAT? THE SUCCESS FACTORS
OF K-POP ARTISTS IN EASTERN COUNTRIES**

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IPAM LISBOA, JUNE, 2025

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Dissertation submitted to IPAM in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Marketing, supervised by Professor Doctor Natália Araújo Pacheco.

IPAM LISBOA, JUNE, 2025

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It has been a challenging yet absolutely invaluable experience undertaking this dissertation, something I could never have dreamed I might complete when I started this master's degree. I would like to offer my deepest gratitude to Professor Natália Araújo Pacheco for her ongoing support, comments, and encouragement throughout the process. Her counsel actually shaped this work. I would also like to thank IPAM Lisbon for giving me the valuable opportunity to participate in an academic exchange in South Korea. That experience led to the concept of this dissertation and gave me many academic and personal experiences that greatly contributed to my research. To all those whom I met during my foreign stay, thank you for the memories, the talks, and the knowledge that you have imparted to me. Finally, special thanks to all the respondents of the interviews; your willingness and openness to share made this research possible.

ABSTRACT

As K-Pop expands worldwide, the boom in popularity in Eastern countries raises essential questions regarding the cultural, emotional, and social elements behind success. Thus, the following research question is formulated: What are the factors behind K-Pop artists' increasing success in Eastern countries? Using a qualitative approach, ten semi-structured interviews were conducted with K-Pop fans from Eastern countries. The study focuses on four core elements; reference groups, fan communities, user-generated content, and parasocial relationships, and reveals that these factors are deeply embedded in the everyday lives of Eastern fans. Deep emotional bonds with idols, collective participation in fan-initiated activities, and collective identification based on communal values and feelings came out in interviews from the participants regarding the force behind the boom in K-Pop. When compared to research by Santos (2023) on Western fandoms, the findings reveal that while fandom processes are similar, fans from the East seem to be higher in collectivist orientation, more emotionally engaged, and with a more pervasive integration of K-Pop in their daily lives. This dissertation thus contributes a different cultural perspective, bringing new insights into fan-driven processes shaping K-Pop's popularity across different regions in the world.

Keywords: K-pop, Eastern countries, reference groups, fan communities, user-generated content, parasocial relationships, fandom

RESUMO

À medida que o K-Pop se expande globalmente, o crescimento de sua popularidade nos países orientais levanta questões essenciais sobre os elementos culturais, emocionais e sociais por trás desse sucesso. Ao investigar a seguinte questão: *Quais são os fatores por trás do crescente sucesso dos artistas de K-Pop nos países orientais?* Esta pesquisa utilizou uma abordagem qualitativa, por meio de dez entrevistas semiestruturadas com fãs de K-Pop provenientes de países orientais. O estudo foca em quatro elementos centrais; grupos de referência, comunidades de fãs, conteúdo gerado por usuários e relacionamentos parasociais, e revela que esses fatores estão profundamente integrados à vida cotidiana desses fãs. Vínculos emocionais profundos com os ídolos, participação coletiva em atividades iniciadas pelos próprios fãs e identificação com valores e sentimentos compartilhados foram aspectos recorrentes nas entrevistas, apontados como motores do fenômeno K-Pop. Em comparação com a pesquisa conduzida por Santos (2023) sobre os fandoms ocidentais, os resultados indicam que, embora os processos de fandom sejam semelhantes, os fãs orientais tendem a apresentar uma orientação mais coletivista, um envolvimento emocional mais intenso e uma integração mais constante do K-Pop em suas rotinas diárias. Esta dissertação, portanto, contribui com uma perspectiva cultural distinta, oferecendo novos entendimentos sobre os processos impulsionados pelos fãs que moldam a popularidade do K-Pop em diferentes regiões do mundo.

Palavras-chave: K-Pop, países orientais, grupos de referência, comunidades de fãs, conteúdo gerado por usuários, relacionamentos parasociais, fandom

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ABBREVIATIONS

UGC – User Generated Content

PSR – Parasocial Relationship

BIRG – Basking in Reflected Glory

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the early 1990s, South Korea has been at the heart of a cultural revolution that not only changed its own entertainment world but also that of surrounding countries. At the core of all this change is K-pop, something more than a music genre, it is a highly refined cultural export that matches catchy hooks, kinetic choreography, cutting-edge visuals, and a never-before-seen bond between idols and fans (Jin & Ryoo, 2014). K-pop has slowly evolved from a local trend to a cultural force in Asia, with a high degree of penetration in Eastern countries such as Japan, China, and Southeast Asia, where it has been aggressively integrated into their entertainment systems (Kim, 2020). Recent work by Park and Chen (2023) also confirms that K-pop has achieved cultural legitimacy across East Asia, becoming a reference point for youth identity and cross-border cultural affinity.

Scholarly studies of K-pop's worldwide impact have largely focused on its economic impact and industrial approach. Researchers have said much about how entertainment companies like SM Entertainment, YG Entertainment, and HYBE have driven innovation in the K-pop industry through not only aggressive idol training programs but also marketing practices (Jung & Lee, 2020). Research has investigated how K-pop's localization across markets, the use of multilingual content, localized subunits (i.e. NCT 127 for Korea, and WayV for China), as well as localized advertisement practices have also attributed to the success of K-pop (Oh, 2018). This is further supported by more recent research such as Wang (2023), who emphasized the role of glocalization strategies in solidifying K-pop's influence in non-Korean Asian markets. Another large body of research has described the digital media platforms, and more particularly the social media and streaming platforms, in their functions to disseminate K-pop further around the world (Kim & Kim, 2019). More contemporary analyses, such as Nguyen & Zhao (2024), also explore how emerging platforms like TikTok and Weverse are increasingly central to fan engagement and content virality in Asia. While ample attention has been given to such technological and industrial forces, literature has fallen short in explaining the agency of fans in the transmission and sustenance of K-pop in Eastern countries.

The centrality of fan culture is fundamental to the triumph of K-pop. Fandom and participatory culture scholarship describes K-pop fans as engaged in rich online and offline practices extending beyond passive consumption. They provide mass streaming events,

purchase a few units of albums to induce sales, and create online content such as fan art and memes that increase the popularity of K-pop globally (Lee, 2021). Furthermore, the phenomenon of parasocial relationships, wherein fans develop intimate emotional relationships with idols without interpersonal contact has also been characterized as one of the sources of loyalty and engagement in the K-pop marketplace (Santos, 2023). Cho & Arimoto (2024) also recently stressed that the emotional labor of fans, including their activist pursuits and work in organizing in social media, is increasingly a measurable source of cultural diffusion in East Asian contexts. However, few studies have explored systematically how these dynamics are realized in the case of Eastern nations and how they have been contributing to the sustained success of K-pop.

This dissertation attempts to fill this void by exploring the mechanisms that have been driving the success of K-pop in Eastern countries. By exploring reference groups, fan groups, user-generated content, and parasocial relations, this study hopes to set out to enhance our understanding of fan involvement and its influence on the production, consumption, and sustainability of K-pop as a cultural phenomenon. Finally, this study will indicate the grid of comparisons with Santos (2023) and their main findings assessing the explanatory limitations of K-Pop success in western countries, to investigate commonalities and differences between fandom influence and K-pops globalisation. In addition to the new comparative data we can draw from Eastern contexts, as built off the recent work of Ahn & Choudhury (2024) we can add the transnational nuance of fan practices to the topical local contexts.

Thus, the main research question of this study is: What are the factors behind K-Pop artists' increasing success in Eastern countries? To talk about this question, this dissertation aims to give a comprehensive analysis of the interplay between fan culture and industry strategies in the ongoing global spread of K-pop.

In order to investigate these objectives, this study gathered qualitative data through 10 semi-structured interviews with K-pop fans from Japan, Korea, Nepal, India, Myanmar, and Vietnam. By collecting primary data we are able to more accurately understand how their K-pop fan practices determine or influence the industry's strategic options and long-term sustainability of K-pop's popularity in these nations.

By collecting first-hand information, this study will become aware of how K-pop fan practices affect the industry's strategic decisions and sustain K-pop's long-term popularity in these countries.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter examines some of the existing research into key topics that may explain why K-pop artists have become so successful in Eastern countries. The concepts of reference groups, fan communities, parasocial relationships, and user-generated content will be discussed, as suggested by (Santos, 2023). These topics are important because they can provide insight into what the specific drivers of K-pop's rise in countries like South Korea, Japan, and China, among others, might have been. These topics are explored in the hope of exposing the cultural and social dynamics involved in the ever-increasing popularity of K-pop in these regions.

2.1 Reference Groups

When trying to account for why K-pop has become so dominant, the concept of reference groups cannot be escaped. A reference group is essentially a social group that people refer to for guidance in the development of their opinions, behavior, and sense of self (Hogg et al., 2021). They provide individuals with a sense of belonging and are a point of comparison by which people evaluate themselves. In K-pop, idols and fan groups are very important reference groups, influencing not just musical preferences, but fashion, language, and even personal values.

Shibutani (1955) described reference groups as societies that allow people to know what is valued in a culture. They serve as a "point of comparison" (Hyman, 1942; Escalas & Bettman, 2005), affecting how people interpret the world. This is especially relevant in collectivistic cultures like South Korea, Japan, and most of Southeast Asia, where people are more likely to define themselves in relation to their membership in a group (Kim & Park, 2022). More recently, Jeong and Tanaka (2023) emphasized that digital platforms have amplified the reach of these reference groups, enabling younger fans to continuously engage with idol culture in ways that extend far beyond music. Through platforms like Instagram and TikTok, K-pop idols set behavioral standards that shape how fans interact with one another and express themselves socially.

Where K-pop is concerned, fans don't just look up to their idol stars from afar rather,

they even copy their fashion sense, language usage, and even life. For example, K-pop idols in Vietnam and Indonesia inspire numerous young people to dress in fashionable attire in music videos as part of their daily outfits or using Korean slang glamorized by the idols (Al-Rawabdeh et al., 2021). This is the power of aspirational reference groups, where people admire celebrities and try to emulate their way of life (Chan & Leung, 2021).

But it's not just about looks. K-pop idols also shape social norms among fans. The majority of these artists promote values like discipline, resilience, and respect for others, which influence the way fans build their own attitudes and behaviors (Lee, 2023). This influence even carries over into what one purchases, fans are more than willing to purchase the same items their idols are supporting, demonstrating just how strong these reference groups are in influencing purchases (Park & Kim, 2022). In 2023, Lim and Zhou confirmed that fan identification with idols significantly drives consumer behavior, noting that perceived social alignment with K-pop idols has even reshaped youth spending patterns in Japan and Vietnam.

Aspirational and Non-Aspirational Groups. Park and Lessig's (1977) research highlights that people naturally gravitate toward groups that reflect the image they aspire to aspirational groups and avoid those that could harm their self-image, called non-aspirational groups. In the K-pop fandom, these aspirational groups aren't just about the idols themselves; they include fan communities where people find acceptance and a shared sense of purpose. Fans often look up to these communities because they represent positivity, creativity, and a collective spirit (Salmon, 2008).

An extreme case is how fans all over Asia rally behind their idols. Fans don't just consume the music; they produce for the idols, too. Be it streaming parties, designing fan art, or structuring mega birthday campaigns, they go all out. Just last year, BTS fans in Thailand collectively raised funds to light up Bangkok's skyline in purple to mark the anniversary of the group (Dimofte et al., 2014; Al-Rawabdeh et al., 2021). These kinds of fan-driven projects represent what aspirational groups are like, such as K-pop fandoms: admiration put into action.

Pride in Shared Success. Another reason reference groups are so influential is because of the pride and connection that the group creates. This is what researchers call the Basking in Reflected Glory, or BIRG, effect (Cialdini et al., 1976). For example, when K-pop idols achieve something such as an award or a record, fans feel that it's their

achievement too. While others say, "They won," fans say, "We won." Such a simple phrase speaks volumes about the strong level at which fans identify with their idols. Shared pride reinforces this emotional bond that joins fans to their reference groups, allowing them to support K-pop with more durability (Bernache-Assollant et al., 2007).

The Power of Belonging. Reference groups, therefore, are most effective in the East because this is tending to a vital human need: the need for belonging. In collectivist cultures, it isn't just a matter of preference to be within a group, but a way of life altogether (Hofstede, 1980; Lin, 2022). K-pop fans are into K-pop not just because they love the music, but being part of a fandom gives them a feeling of belonging. They want to belong, be a part of something bigger than oneself, and to share the fruits of victory and accolades when the team does well.

Time and Emotional Investment. The influence of reference groups also grows with the greater the time and emotional investment of the fans. A number of fans invest hours every day in voting for their idols in online polls, attending concerts, or simply interacting online with other fans. Over time, this degree of involvement creates much stronger bonds to the fandom itself-and therefore to the idols themselves. To a fan, it is not a way of passing time when being a member of a reference group; it is part of their identity (McCall & Simmons, 1978, as cited in Thomas & O'Neill, 2021).

Basically, reference groups explain a lot about the resonance of K-pop in Eastern countries. These groups make fans not just interact with K-pop but feel they are part of something: whether it is pride derived from the successes of their idols, happiness derived from sharing with other people who are similarly interested, or satisfaction derived from supporting a group they truly admire, it is K-pop's reference groups that underpin its huge success (Preston, A., & Rew, L., 2021).

2.2 Fan Communities

A fan culture is a group of people with an emotional, deep-interest investment and an enthusiastic commitment to a particular cultural, such as music, film, or celebrity (Baym, 2021). In contrast to the everyday fan, fan cultures are highly interactive and organized groups of people, in which individuals engage in shared practices and form a collective identity. In Eastern cultures, where social membership is highly invested in identity, these fandoms are more significant (Duffett, 2013; Kim & Kim, 2020).

Fandoms help unite fans together through platforms such as WeChat, LINE, and KakaoTalk, which at times become close friendships. Some communities are considered to operate as extended families, rather than entertainment-based groups (Jenkins, 1995). This social structure offers psychological support, especially in times of hardship, and increases the emotional closeness of members (Kim & Kim, 2020; Zhao, 2022). As cited by Ng and Kusuma (2023), these fan networks have become increasingly therapeutic, providing identity affirmation and, as well, emotional regulation to socially or academically stressed young people. Studies indicate that engaging in fandom can positively impact mental health by facilitating social interactions and fostering a sense of shared purpose: (Lee & Park, 2023).

Along with emotional support, it is because of fan groups that K-pop is able to thrive. The devotion and strong identity of the fan groups are important in keeping and dispersing K-pop popularity across Eastern countries (Park et al., 2022). K-pop fan groups are activist-oriented compared to other fan groups: fans not only consume the content, they become a factor for success for their idols. Fans are all out in organizing mass streaming events to increase the numbers for the views on music video's; they engage in collective buyback promotions of albums for the aggregate number of sales; they even create fundraisers for charities in the name of their idols (Statista, 2023). For example, the Chinese fan base for the group EXO raised over \$500,000 dollars in 2022 for their idol's birthday celebrations, which ranged from blankets for billboards in Beijing, to, Shanghai, China (Statista, 2023; Wang, 2023). In other recent work, Tan & Huang (2024) analyzed K-pop fandoms in Eastern countries as mini-activist cells, preparing donation drives and social awareness campaigns that reiterate their common values and cultural connection. These moves display how fandoms take private passion to public power.

K-pop fandoms have been described as quasi-religious experiences in East Asian countries. Löbert (2012) explains that the fans derive identity and meaning from their affiliation with idols, promoting devotion beyond entertainment. Belonging transcends cultural and linguistic boundaries, testifying to the fact that K-pop is a lifestyle, and not just music (Obiegbu et al., 2019; Chen & Xu, 2021).

Lastly, Eastern country K-pop fan clubs are not just a fandom, but a mobilized, organized fandom that is directly responsible for the success of the industry. Their ability to mobilize mass-scale activities, create online trends, and have high levels of group

identification is a sign of the unique confluence between Eastern cultural orientation and the global character of K-pop (Li & Zhang, 2023).

2.3 User Generated Content

User-Generated Content (UGC) can be defined as the digital content made and shared not only by the media and brand organizations but also by people in the media, such as videos, artwork, reviews, posts in social media, and interactions of fans in all expanding K-Pop culture (Daugherty et al., 2008). With applications like TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, Weibo, and Bilibili, fans own up to the success of the industry and integrate it further with their passion that goes to help K-Pop triumph worldwide (Jenkins, 2006).

In the eastern parts such as Thailand, Indonesia, and Japan, UGC engages fans to directly promote K-Pop rather than going through the traditional media. Fans keep themselves busy making dance challenges, reaction videos, and lyric translations in making K-Pop accessibly fun when it comes to participating with them. For instance, on TikTok, fans are continuously gearing up in doing choreography of the well-loved songs and have created an entire trend that has gone viral having millions and millions of views (Lee, 2021).

On other hand, subtitles, remixes, and commentary add up a lot of dimensions to their experience on Chinese platforms like Weibo, Bilibili. Thus, there won't be a language bar for a new audience to immerse themselves in K-Pop (Zhang & Liu, 2020).

UGC is powerful because of its authenticity. Studies suggest that the fan-created contents hit close to home and seem more honest and believable more than corporate ads do, creating deeper engagement and stronger brand loyalty (Smith et al., 2012). Just picture how a beauty tutorial that breaks down a certain makeup look of a K-Pop idol suddenly makes the trend relatable, accessible, and easy to replicate (Park & Kim, 2022). This innate promotion speaks directly into commercial success, boosting more streaming, sales of merchandise, and concert attendees throughout eastern markets (Hwang, 2021). Li and Ryu (2023) added that UGC-driven fandoms are responsible for more than 35% of online content related to K-pop on Chinese platforms, highlighting the growing power of fan curation in shaping how idols are perceived locally.

Beyond the digital realm, UGC also fuels a participatory culture where fans actively shape the identity of their favorite groups. Flash mobs, charity projects, and birthday

celebrations for idols aren't just fun they strengthen the K-Pop community and integrate it into local traditions (Jin, 2020). A recent report by Xu and Nguyen (2024) emphasized that such events are not just fandom traditions, they're becoming cultural rituals that fuse Korean soft power with local pride, creating a new kind of hybridized cultural identity. In this way, K-Pop becomes more than just music; it becomes a shared cultural experience that fans genuinely feel part of.

Of course, not all UGC aligns with the carefully curated image that entertainment companies aim to maintain. Some corporations struggle to control the narratives shaped by fan content, while others embrace this decentralized form of promotion, recognizing that it reflects the communal values of many Eastern cultures (Cheng, 2022). Striking the right balance between corporate oversight and fan creativity remains one of the industry's biggest challenges but also one of its greatest strengths.

Ultimately, UGC has been instrumental in K-Pop's rise in Eastern countries because it transforms fans from passive listeners into active participants. Their creativity, dedication, and passion don't just promote K-Pop; they make it a deeply ingrained part of their own identities. And in doing so, they ensure that K-Pop isn't just a trend, but a movement that continues to grow and evolve (Cheng, 2022).

2.4 Parasocial Relationships

According to Horton and Wohl (1956), the meaning of parasocial relationship (PSR) theory is used in psychology and human relationships to explain the relationship that is likely to develop between individuals and media figures despite this only being a one-sided relationship. Fans have parasocial relationships, especially in the K-Pop industry. Fans reported developing a more meaningful and personal emotional relationship with idols after very frequent exposure to a particular media, and having engaged with those idols on various other media platforms (Kim & Lee, 2020). This parasocial relationship is established through identification with celebrities or artists and is dependent upon bonding affectively not knowing if someone may actually physically exist (Dibble et al. 2015). This is a reflection of the significance of PSRs in K-Pop because fans and idols develop close emotional bonds.

PSRs are a very significant aspect of K-Pop since idols are promoted as one superior to celebs they're promoted as likeable, something close to friendship. In contrast to their Western counterparts, K-Pop idols interact with fans on a regular basis through social media, live streaming, and behind-the-scenes materials to create an illusion of proximity (Choi & Lee, 2021). Social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and V-Live give idols access to share warm moments, respond to fan letters, and reveal moments of his or her life with the fans. This meeting gives the fan a sense of closeness and familiarity, and she reinforces her conviction that she "knows" the idol on a personal level (Lee & Lee, 2020).

Another significant reason why PSRs are so powerful in K-Pop culture is that idols have a highly constructed image. These artists are often seen as physically attractive, likable, and inspirational people who represent positive characteristics such as hardworking, resilient, and modest (Schiappa et al., 2007; Bond, 2018). Research suggests that people tend to create stronger parasocial relationships with those they find attractive or relatable. Research suggests that people tend to form stronger parasocial bonds with individuals they find appealing or relatable. With K-Pop, however, not only do fans value idols' appearance and talent but also their growth, struggles, and achievements, so the identification is more real (Kwak & Lee, 2017).

The K-Pop idols' vulnerability also increases these connections. Idols of course have own vulnerabilities too, i.e., their rigorous trainee days, poverty, and isolation before becoming stars. Fans who see them as artists not just more like as fellow humans themselves make them relatable to their experiences. These act as sources for inspiration and empathy (Lee & Lee, 2020). The vulnerability of idols, capped with ongoing communication with fans, generates a potent emotional bond coming from their admirers.

Apart from personal affection, PSRs also instill a sense of community among fans. K-Pop fan cultures are active, and the fans themselves participate in discussions, create and disseminate content, and execute support actions to help the idols. All this shared interaction on all fronts further solidifies their emotional bond with the idols and with the fan community itself, and the shared experience reinforces the parasocial bond (Choi & Lee, 2021).

These affective relationships are not only emotional but also have actual economic effects. Emotionally engaged fans of idols tend to purchase albums, concert tickets, and

merchandise and translate their affective investment into economic support for K-Pop companies (Kwak & Lee, 2017). This is the main explanation for the global popularity of K-Pop, as devoted fans always guarantee emotional and financial support for their idols.

Lastly, parasocial interactions underlie the incredibly widespread popularity of K-Pop among Eastern nations. Through social media engagement, the recognizability of idols, and communal activity of fandoms, parasocial relationships construct an intense emotional connection that drives fan engagement and economic feasibility of K-Pop. In the age of the digital era, where ubiquitous connectivity blurs the lines between real and perceived relationship, the power of PSRs in K-Pop grows stronger by the day, solidifying its global cultural impact. According to Arimoto and Park (2023), parasocial bonds in K-pop have deepened due to algorithmic exposure, where platforms push emotionally resonant content that reinforces fans' emotional investment. These emotionally charged interactions, though one-sided, create real psychological impacts akin to friendship or even attachment.

Table 1. Topic’s Overview

Subject	Review
Reference Groups	K-pop idols act as reference groups, particularly for young people. They are seen as role models in both aesthetic and behavioural terms (Kim & Ryoo, 2007; Shin, 2009). Identification with K-pop artists goes beyond admiration: it influences everyday practices, style of dress and personal aspirations. Lie (2012) notes that these reference figures do not only have a significance in the Korean context but become global figures for many fans, especially in Eastern European countries. More recently, Jeong and Tanaka (2023) highlight that digital platforms like TikTok and Instagram amplify this dynamic by allowing constant interaction with idol content, strengthening their influence as behavioural standards. In addition, Lim and Zhou (2023) noted that this identification alters youth consumption habits in Japan and Vietnam where idol influence directs clothing, lifestyle and purchasing choices.

<p>Fan communities</p>	<p>Fan communities play a vital role in the global dissemination of Kpop. They act as active networks of dissemination, translation and support for the artists (Jung, 2013). The communities allow fans to establish social ties based on a shared interest, forming a sense of community (Fuhr, 2016). Additionally, Korean agencies intentionally feed this dynamic by developing mythic narratives about idols that propagate a sense of community engagement (Lee & Nornes, 2015). Ng and Kusuma (2023) highlight that, for many fans, these communities have a therapeutic function, source of emotional support, and identity affirmation. Tan and Huang (2024) suggest K-pop fandoms can also undertake shared actions as a collective, for instance charitable campaigns and political mobilizing, which foster identity for the community while reflecting our common social values.</p>
<p>User Generated Content</p>	<p>User-generated content (UGC) is a key component in the global expansion of K-pop. Fans participate actively in a media ecosystem by creating subtitles, covers, reactions and fan art, allowing other audiences to access K-pop (Jung, 2013). The consumption of amateur productions has a role in cultural mediation, and helps with the internationalisation of K-pop, particularly in those areas where either language or official channels limit access (Fuhr, 2016). Li and Ryu (2023) note that UGC represents over a third of K-pop content on Chinese platforms and stress the importance of the fans as cultural curators. Xu and Nguyen (2024) note a different trajectory of localized rituals that acclimatize a Korean pop culture to identities by region or nation, most specifically around organizing, events and birthday celebrations that consist of mostly fan-generated versions of the organization.</p>
<p>Parasocial Relationships</p>	<p>Agency strategies explicitly construct likeable and "down-to-earth" public profiles to promote parasocial relationships between fans and idols (Lee & Nornes, 2015). Although these are one-sided relationships and based on fiction, fans often have real feelings of closeness and loyalty to the artists (Fuhr, 2016). For example, fans with access listen and respond to intuitively to the idols as if they are in a relationship on platforms such as VLive or Twitter (Jung, 2013). Arimoto and Park (2023) stress the growing role of algorithms in intensifying these parasocial bonds, pushing emotionally resonant content that reinforces a sense of closeness. Fans describe feelings akin to friendship or attachment, which influence both their emotional states and behavioral routines.</p>

3. METHOD

This chapter details the methods used to answer the research question: "What are some of the factors behind the growing success of K-Pop artists in Eastern countries?" A qualitative research design was selected because qualitative research is the best form of inquiry for providing a rich and an increased understanding of social phenomena through the description of the lived realities of individuals involved with the phenomenon (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018).

Semi-structured interviews were the chosen method for data collection because it provides a level of flexibility to discussion regarding the key themes yet holds the potential for consistency across interviews. Interviews were conducted with K-Pop fans in Eastern countries such as Vietnam, Myanmar, Japan, South Korea and India. Semi-structured interviews were the best method of data collection to give the opportunity for the respondent to develop their personal experiences and stories yet also stay closely aligned with the purpose of the research study (Legard et al., 2013).

A unique opportunity with this research was the ability to conduct face-to-face interviews with fans as the principal investigator completed a study abroad semester in South Korea. The experience in South Korea provided a deeper and contextual understanding of the cultural connection fans have with K-Pop.

Overall, 10 K-Pop fans were interviewed, all female, between the ages of 18 and 30, residing in Eastern countries. This demographic reflects the dominant composition of K-Pop fandoms in these regions. Participants were selected based on three criteria: (1) being from an Eastern cultural background, (2) growing up in that cultural context, and (3) being actively involved in K-Pop fan communities. Participant demographic information is presented in Appendix 1.

The full transcriptions of the interviews are accessible via the following Google Drive link for verification purposes:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1CpSswLbq1KBsDOoQj0S-wp8jSSvAN9i43WIBNVudZC8/edit?usp=sharing>

Participants were primarily identified during the author's time in South Korea, and further participants were recruited through snowball sampling: initial interviewees

recommended additional contacts within their local fandom networks. This method proved valuable for reaching engaged fans in different countries.

For in-person interviews, a portable voice recorder was used, and online interviews were completed via Zoom. Transcriptions were conducted using the Word Dictate tool, which effortlessly and accurately transcribed the audio recording to text.

The interview questions were provided to participants in advance, highlighting the themes from the literature review; reference groups, parasocial relationships, fan groups, user-generated content. Questions were intentionally phrased in an informal manner to afford an open, free-flowing discussion and were guided by additional questions posed when additional explanation or elaboration was warranted.

The interview guide is repeated in Table 2 below. It will be noted that while a guide was used, the intent was to facilitate the same observation based on Santos' (2023) review; maintain consistency across interviews while allowing for the participant to demonstrate familiarity with or bias towards the thematic areas or structures, while compared to other participants, mirror dismissibility of the same.

The data was analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis provided the ability to identify and recognize commonalities in themes across interviews, and allowed for manual coding of data, by grouping data identifiers in categories to identify central themes to the study's a priori intent. Through this analysis, both the a priori themes (from the literature gap) and new learned evidenced themes were expectedly assigned.

The group results were summarized in tables, displayed in Appendices 3-7 and each corresponding to 1 of the specified thematic area discussed. This will affirm clarity in comparisons across participants but also the ability to refer back to any response, including subcategories, for in-depth discussion of subjective emergent meaning and interpretations in the results and discussion chapters.

Table 2. Interview Guide

Subject	Questions
Interviewee Profile	<p>Can you tell me a bit about yourself?</p> <p>What is your name? How old are you?</p> <p>What are your hobbies?</p> <p>What type of music do you usually listen to?</p> <p>Are you involved in any music-related activities, such as playing an instrument, singing or dancing?</p> <p>How did you first discover K-pop?</p> <p>What attracted you to this kind of music?</p> <p>What do you like the most about K-Pop?</p> <p>What are some of your favorite groups?</p>
Overview of K-Pop's Success in Eastern countries	<p>What do you think are the key factors that have contributed to the popularity of K-pop in Eastern countries?</p> <p>How do you think cultural values in Eastern countries shape the way K-pop is consumed and appreciated?</p> <p>What role do you think fan involvement and participation play in K-pop's success in these regions?</p> <p>How do you think the relationship between fans and artists differs in Eastern countries compared to the West?</p>
Reference Groups	<p>How have K-pop artists inspired or motivated you to pursue new interests?</p> <p>Has your interest in K-pop influenced your relationships with other people?</p> <p>Do you think your interest in K-pop has impacted your family relationships?</p> <p>Have you ever met new people through K-pop fandom?</p>
Parasocial Relationships	<p>Can you describe the emotional connection you feel with your favorite K-pop artist?</p> <p>Why do you think that connection exists?</p> <p>How does that make you feel as a fan?</p>

	<p>Have K-pop artists ever inspired or motivated you in your personal life? If yes, how?</p> <p>Do you think social media interactions and other digital tools reinforce your connection with K-pop idols?</p> <p>If these online interactions ceased to exist, do you think your connection with K-pop would change? Why or why not?</p>
Fan communities	<p>How important is it to belong to a K-pop fan community?</p> <p>What role does the fan community play in your experience as a K pop fan?</p> <p>Have you formed strong friendships through K-pop fandom?</p> <p>How does engaging in a fan community influence your enjoyment of K-pop?</p>
User Generated Content	<p>What kind of fan content do you frequently see?</p> <p>Have you created any similar content yourself?</p> <p>Have you actively promoted your favorite K-pop artists or their projects online? If yes, how?</p> <p>How do you think user-generated content affects people unfamiliar with K-pop?</p> <p>Do you think UGC plays a major role in K-pop's global success? Why or why not?</p>
Additional Information	<p>Do you have anything you would like to add about your experience as a K-pop fan?</p> <p>If you could describe K-pop in one word or phrase, what would it be and why?</p>

4. FINDINGS

4.1 Overview of K-Pop's Success in Eastern Countries

In addressing the general questions regarding K-Pop's popularity, the interviewees had overwhelmingly positive perspectives on its increasing rise in prominence with Eastern countries. Most interviewees underlined the point that K-Pop's disciplined training process and production value makes it appealing to so many. Several interviewees commented that K-Pop idols are not simply singers but are artists who are also comparable dancers and entertainers, therefore making their performances more enjoyable and interactive. According to one interviewee, "K-Pop is not just about the music; it's about the full experience; performance, visuals, and emotion."

When asked what sets K-Pop apart, most participants mentioned the highly choreographed shows and the fact that each comeback is highly planned, with visuals, a new genre of music and marketing content. Rather than most other music industries, K-Pop groups have detailed storylines in their music videos that create an experience that feels much more immersive and engaging. This permanent throughline in the groups' artistry forms a sense of attachment to the fans who look forward to the "next episode" of the group's music and experience. As one fan from Myanmar explained, "Each music video feels like a piece of a bigger story, and I love uncovering the hidden messages."

A notable factor common in the responses was the importance of fan engagement. Many participants mentioned the idol-fan relationship model in Eastern childhood cultures is based on admiration and respect. Fans care deeply and realize an emotional and personal investment in idol figures as they, likewise, have an investment in the physical music and the people creating it. More to the point, fans are attached not only to the artists themselves, but also to the material objects produced by these artists, which they see as an extension of their emotional bond with them. Aside from the music, fans become invested in the personalities, humility, and failure of their idols. The organized fan engagement in K-Pop context through fan meetings, social media engagement, and live-streaming provide more robust support for a fan-idol connection or relationship. Certain interviewees elaborated that there is more to be a fan than to listen to music; to be a fan in K-Pop culture involves an active engagement to support a fan's idol through streaming, promoting, or voting. "Being a fan means feeling like my favorite idol is everything to me," expressed one interviewee.

When inquired about the tremendous appeal of K-Pop in Eastern countries, many cited its melding of Western influences in music with strong cultural values from Asia. K-Pop idols represent a disciplined image that aligns with a cultural emphasis on hard work, perseverance, and respect for hierarchy across many Eastern countries. Additionally, the sheer effort that goes into every K-Pop group's creation, from practice to performance, reflects an ethos of collective effort that resonates with other East Asian nations. "I respect how much effort idols put into their work. They train for years to be the best, and it inspires me to work hard too," mentioned a fan from Vietnam.

Another key point was the difference in promotion strategies compared to other types of music. Interviewees reported that K-Pop artists go through rigorous promoting cycles, in which they perform regularly on music shows, do challenges on social media platforms, and provide fan interaction on various platforms with personalized, on-brand content; this provides interaction with fans and always keeps idols visually present and recognizable, allowing them to build and maintain popularity over time. "They are everywhere; music shows, social media, even reality shows! It keeps us connected to them all the time," shared an Indian K-Pop fan.

When discussing the ways in which K-Pop diverges from Western music, the majority of interviewees pointed out that while Western artists may heavily skew toward music and showcasing themselves as individuals, K-Pop blends their music with visuals, choreography, and elaborate storytelling, creating intrigue into their branding. Also, a few mentioned that Western music can be provocative and "out there," while K-Pop balances, in their minds, modern things and cultural conservatism, making more of the audience in the East more accepting compared to Western countries. "Western artists are too revealing sometimes. K-Pop idols keep things stylish but respectful," commented one interviewee from Myanmar.

When asked about how they became K-Pop fans, the interviewees mostly stated that they were drawn to it by social media or by friends who recommended it. In addition, many noted that the visuals were spectacular to watch and that the performances were clean and crisp. Some interviewees also mentioned that they enjoy how K-Pop fashion and aesthetics influence their personal style, reinforcing the idea that K-Pop is more than just music, it is a cultural phenomenon. "I love how K-Pop influences fashion. Their style is unique and inspiring," stated a Vietnamese fan.

In the end, the results indicate that K-Pop's appeal in Eastern nations is multifaceted: high caliber of entertainment, robust fan engagement, idol discipline, and marketing strategies. Fan engagement also contributes to K-Pop's relevance in their lives, providing not only consumption, but also engagement in fan culture, development of community, and feeling of belongingness while living vicariously through idols.

4.2 Reference Groups

There is no denying that, beyond reasonable doubt, reference groups have played a major role in influencing K-Pop fandom in Eastern countries when it comes to fandom interest and participation. Family, friends, and peer communities often act as opinion leaders whose reaction, either positive or skeptical, plays an important role in certain people's engagement with K-Pop. In fact, some interviewees admitted their family was not always supportive of their enthusiasm. One participant from Myanmar candidly explained, "It depends on the family. Mine doesn't always understand my love for K-Pop." Yet this lack of familial support rarely discouraged fans from remaining engaged. Quite the opposite, many were confident in their choices and frequently used this zeal as a foundation to establish new social connections. As one fan from Nepal shared, "My friends were surprised at first, but now we watch comeback stages together."

It is worth noting that this influence is not unidirectional. Though many were introduced to K-Pop through friends, or online communities, others became the influencers in their own social circles. One Indian fan explained proudly, "Even my non-K-Pop friends have started listening because of me." This dynamic illustrates how K-Pop acts as both an entry point for socialization and a medium for fans to connect more deeply with those around them. The genre becomes more than entertainment, it becomes a social bridge.

The sense of belonging to a larger fan group or community was repeatedly highlighted. Whether through online forums, comment sections, or local events, fans find others who share their level of devotion and emotional investment. One respondent emphasized that "being a fan means having friends who truly understand me," emphasizing how reference groups give a sense of affirmation and emotional support. Another individual

echoed this by stating fan communities helped her figure out new parts of herself, especially in confidence and self-expression.

Competitions between fandoms were also noted, particularly online. Some fans described this more as a friendly rivalry that drives them to vote more for their idols or stream their music with more zeal. But some fans acknowledged this friendly rivalry can sometimes have its tension. Still, the majority of participants related positivity and potential that consumed the fandom world. Often, the connection between supporters and shared happiness was greater than negative encounters, something that is difficult to replicate outside fandom places and spaces.

More than just connecting with peers, many fans view K-Pop idols themselves as part of their aspirational reference group. These idols serve as role models whose work ethic and discipline resonate with fans' cultural values. As one participant explained, "They've inspired me to become a better dancer myself." Another shared that she admired CL from 2NE1 for her "appearance and attitude," which pushed her to be more confident and expressive. These role models offer more than aesthetic appeal, they represent attainable growth, motivating fans to pursue personal goals with greater determination.

Furthermore, reference groups in K-Pop fandoms are not solely specific social groups within one's immediate social environment; they also include fellow fans one may hook up with in digital spaces. As some participants mentioned, they didn't just respect and love the artists, but also the fans who enjoyed spending their time and creativity spreading, promoting idols, etc., online. In many cases, this also influenced admiration, inspiring fans to do themselves, support each other, and be involved in the fandom.

In conclusion, already being such a big part of fandoms and IDOL culture, it became major patterns of being because reference groups are not only the gateway into K-Pop, but are the glue that holds that fandoms, and meaning together. It is clear that reference groups were a strong motivator for initial interest or involvement in K-Pop, and provided everything from emotional depth in the K-Pop to the social spaces that fans continued to build over time as they welcomed K-Pop into their lives. For some, K-Pop was integrated as a difference in those patterns of personal agency or identity, made possible by the collective influence of connections both proximal and distal.

4.3 Fan Communities

Fan communities have an important place in the K-Pop fan experience, providing a context for fans to share their love for K-Pop and feel a sense of belonging. A number of interviewees characterized their fandom as a “second family”, or a place “where I could be myself without fear of being judged.” What we love most is that we can all talk about music releases, share theories on what the band means and celebrate an artist’s success together. “When a comeback announcement happens, we all collectively experience the hype and the excitement, we can all feel the connection of the shared experience,” shared one of the fans.

For many, the community acts as a daily source of emotional comfort and motivation. One fan from Myanmar described how she regularly checks fan forums after school because “it helps me feel less alone and more connected to something bigger.” A person from India stated that she started a group chat in order to keep up with BTS news, and over time, the chat became an active friendship with members discussing personal aspects other than music. These examples indicate how fan engagement can go beyond what they came together for and be more like a safe emotional space or support system.

For some, being involved in a fan community is not essential, but they recognise that it allows them to keep up to date with their favourite artists and to access exclusive content through online discussions and events organised by the community. A fan from Nepal noted that although she doesn’t post often, she likes to “read fan translations and analysis on Twitter,” which help her appreciate the depth behind concept albums and visuals. Even passive participation seems to have an impact.

The impact of fan communities does not stop at engagement with the music; it also influences the way in which individuals perceive and express themselves. Several interviewees mentioned that their self-confidence had grown as a result of interacting with other fans. “Seeing other people express their passion freely has encouraged me to take more responsibility for what I love”, shared one fan. What's more, the influence of the fandom is also reflected in some people's appearance and personal style: “I've adopted looks inspired by my idols and other fans that I find inspiring.” Another person added: “You can almost tell that someone likes K-Pop just by looking at their style of dress.”

Some fans explained that adopting these styles is not merely aesthetic, but a way to visually identify with their community. “When I dye my hair or wear K-fashion, I feel more

connected to my fandom,” said one. The bodily expression of fandom thus becomes a functioning aspect of our shared cultural identity.

Nevertheless, while we afford our fandom communities a generally positive and homogenous perception, some of my interviewees noted tensions between fans of different groups, most particularly around voting or awards ceremonies. “Sometimes the competition can become toxic, but at the same time it motivates us to show even more support for our artists”, admitted one fan. Others pointed out that this rivalry, while intense, often fosters greater creativity and mobilization. “We organize voting parties or donation projects, which brings us closer,” explained one respondent.

Despite the competition, the advantage of being involved with a community prevails, according to most of the interviewees, as being part of the fandom provides them with ways to meet others with shared interests and subsequently actively participate in the K-Pop culture. One fan explained, “It’s about more than just music, it’s about belonging to something that is alive, changing, and where all the people care like I do.” The testimonies supported the notion that fandoms are more than a network of fans, but rather a true extension of an identity and lifestyle for the participants.

4.4 User Generated Content

User-generated content (UGC) is important to the experience of K-Pop fans in countries in the East because it allows fans to directly participate in the relationship with artists as well as the global spread of the genre. The interview participants identified that developing and viewing fan content (e.g. reaction videos, dance covers, edits, translations, songs) increased their sense of belonging and connectedness to K-Pop. Fans indicated that TikTok, YouTube, Weibo, Bilibili, and other social media platforms were useful ways of expressing their fandom creatively and that they enjoyed sharing their admiration of K-Pop as fans. “It’s not just about watching; it’s about contributing,” explained one fan, who enjoys creating dance challenges on TikTok. Another fan shared, “Seeing others put so much effort into edits and covers inspires me to be just as passionate.”

Some participants explained how creating content helped them overcome shyness or develop new skills. One fan from India said, “I made short reaction videos for fun, but now I learned basic editing and I now assist my classmates with a video project.” Other fans

remarked the pleasure of being seen and acknowledged by the fandom: “Once a super popular fan account reposted my edit and I felt so honored. It felt like I was really part of something,” said a fan from Myanmar. These examples illustrate how UGC serves as both a creative outlet and a pathway to social validation.

Many fans pointed out amusingly that UGC is especially impactful because it is authentic and original, compared to entertainment companies’ official content. One interviewee stated it perfectly, “When fans create content, it feels more real because it comes from a place of love and passion, not marketing.” Several respondents agreed that official content, while polished, sometimes feels distant or scripted. In contrast, UGC “feels like it’s from real people with real emotions,” one fan observed.

Many fans are mindful that this type of content can serve as promotion for K-Pop, sometimes without even realizing. “I posted a reaction video, and people who never listened to K-Pop before suddenly got interested.” For example, one mentioned that UGC is their way to introduce K-Pop to new fans. A fan from Nepal recounted, “My cousin didn’t know BTS at all, but after watching a dance cover I did, she downloaded their whole album.” UGC thus becomes an organic and grassroots promotional tool.

UGC promotes a participatory culture that deepens the fandom’s perception of community. As an example, this level of involvement by fans has also been noted across Eastern nations, whereby fans engage in their idols through flash mobs, fan projects, and other charitable endeavors. Moreover, one fan reported, “we lighten the mood when celebrating birthdays of our favorite idols or anniversaries of favourite idols via making charitable donations and any events. It’s our way of showing love and support.”

Another fan shared how she once took part in a school campaign to collect sanitary products for women in need, as part of a fan initiative inspired by a girl group known for feminist messages. “It was fandom-powered and made me feel proud,” she said. These responses emphasize the nature of UGC as it moves fluidly across digital boundaries and exists (and develops) as part of the fabric of a local practice, strengthening the relationship between fans and the K-Pop medium.

Yet, fans also noted the disadvantages of UGC content, especially control over narrative. Some interviewees mentioned that although UGC was liberating, it also “deformed” the pre-established, constructed identity of K-Pop idols. “Sometimes fan content can spread misinformation or exaggerate things, which can be harmful,” one fan remarked.

Others worried about “fan wars” emerging due to controversial or misunderstood edits. Still, the majority of interviewees highlighted that they value the opportunity to create and exchange content, as they see it as a significant motivating factor for K-Pop's success in Eastern countries.

4.5 Parasocial Relationships

Parasocial relationships (PSR) represent a key aspect of the K-Pop fan experience and signify the psychological relationship that fans establish and maintain with idols, even if the relationship is unidirectional in nature. The interviews conducted across Eastern countries revealed how fans perceive these connections as emotionally deep and personally meaningful. A fan from Nepal said, “Even though they don’t know me I feel like they care. During times I feel sad or anxious, watching their livestreams or watching some of their content brings me joy and comfort.” The theme of emotional support, particularly during times of struggle, was one that was voiced by nearly all of the interviewees.

Digital platforms of V-Live, Instagram and Weibo are also central to these relationships. Fans described how with idols being on these platforms regularly, and so many people following them, give the appearance that they could be somewhat close and there is a continuity. A fan from Myanmar said “It feels like I know them as a person. They are not just celebrities to me, but a person I respected and looked up to.” The immediacy and frequency of communication by idols creates a perception of immediacy regarding idols. Fans often feel like they are a part of the idols' lives.

Furthermore, many interviewees stressed how important it is for idols to share their difficult life circumstances and struggles with fans. One Indian fan shared their thoughts, saying, “Seeing their difficulties makes me respect them even more, I feel like we are on that journey together.” This type of honesty is often pointed to as resulting in a deeper emotional connection between idols and fans. Fans expressed that at those moments of genuineness idols appeared more relatable, human, and admirable far beyond their faceless image.

One participant remarked, “Their openness about their fears and dreams makes me respect them even more,” and it was evident that these flaws and personal stories do not destroy idols' impressions, but build fans' admiration. For many fans, these fans are

maintaining relationships established by not just their admiration for idols' looks and talent, but related to perceived shared personal experiences.

PSRs are also influential to conduct. Numerous fans articulated a strong sense of duty that obligates them to reciprocate and support their beloved idols through voting, streaming, buying merch, and defending them online. "They do so much hard work for us, I want to keep giving back by supporting them in every way I can," said one fan. The sense of reciprocity they feel contributes to a cult-like collective sense of purpose within a fandom, which unites individuals in a common mission when they commit loyalty to their idols.

The importance of digital interaction is relevant to these fans agreeing that none of these relationships would feel as strong without it. "If they didn't share such a big part of their life, I wouldn't really feel as close to them," a fan stated while commenting on how important it is to have continual access and their everyday lives online. Digital environments were commonly referred to as bridges that make idols feel "closer than friends" even though there is geographical and cultural distance.

In conclusion, the interviews indicate that PSRs are foundational in shaping the emotional landscape of K-Pop fandom. These relationships echo in fans' emotions and connect to their behaviours and even their financial commitments. These memberships transcend geographical and cultural backgrounds and elevate idols from distant public figures to loved ones. The emotional connection is a continuously important theme that binds fans to the K-Pop genre across the eastern countries interviewed.

4.6 Final Thoughts

When asked for their final thoughts, many of the interviewees stressed the considerable extent to which K-Pop has been more than entertainment in their lives, but a conspicuous presence and source of comfort, confidence and belonging.

Cherry, who is from Myanmar, conveyed the affective nature of this experience when she mentioned: "I love BTS not just because they are a successful group, but because they were honest, humble, and dedicated. I admire their discipline, and they live simple lives. Every time I hear them talk, I have to stop and think about it and then I feel so motivated. ... Through their music and message, they have helped me to love myself and accept me for me." Cherry's remarks are indicative of how K-Pop transcends music; it

serves as a vehicle for both personal transformation, but simultaneously allows fans to see their own walls to be broken and opportunities to be realized.

Furthermore, Yin Min, also from Myanmar, illustrated how K-Pop provides her with a sense of identity and a sense of being understood: “Even if I feel like no one understands me, I feel like they do. They give me love.” This feeling illustrated for her that idols provide emotional knowledge and support, rather than merely performance.

In reference to a question about the meaning of K-Pop, Yujin Shrestha of Nepal talked about the untranslatable and borderless language of K-Pop stating, “Even if I don’t understand Korean. I feel all the feelings of the songs. Like, the feeling is the same.” This statement demonstrates that songs do not only refer to the lyrics, they refer to lived emotions and lived experiences.

Manisha of India commented about K-Pop being part of her day-to-day life and mental well-being, “It’s like therapy.” Their songs, their words, and their smiles help me get through my rough days.” Her comments detail the notion that K-Pop has basically become emotional shelter for many of its fans while they traverse through uncertainty in their lives.

Trinh of Vietnam spoke about the sense of community and described how “Being a fan of Seventeen has truly connected me to other individuals who have that love and it definitely makes it more intense in terms of supporting the group. It is all of this community even though I think it makes a difference if I can interact, and even though I can interact mostly with that engagement online, I think that just listening to the music and lyrics is enough to have an emotional attachment.” He thinks about imagining K-Pop as a mix of the personal and collective experience, where listening is used to connect “belonging”.

Sanya, a fan from India, offered a much more internally focused perspective, and said “Um, I don’t have anything to add to this, it’s just that I think it very different for everyone is it not? My experience is different. If you interview another fan, they might like a different group and have different opinions to me. Some people find K-Pop after watching K-dramas before being adventurous. For me, what I’ve experienced is what I have shared with you and it is really something special. I’m really happy that I found this group, it makes me more happy in life.” Her testimony articulates that there are no set ways to discover K-Pop, all the journeys are unique, personal, and determined by individual circumstances and tastes.

Together, these voices show that K-Pop is much more than the performance or merchandise purchase. For fans in the Eastern world, it represents a realm for self-selection, coping with emotional distress, and a connection to community. From songs about surviving or idols who are shamelessly themselves, K-Pop represents strength and is something many fans carry with them outside of the screen.

Table 3. Finding’s Overview

Subject	Review
Interviewee Profile	Most of the participants are young, aged between 18 and 25, with a strong interest in music, dancing and Asian pop culture. Some of them are involved with music and are in musical related activities, either by actively contributing to singing or dancing, or creating artwork for anything music related. The way they found K-Pop varied for many of them (friends, social networks, Korean drama, etc.). What they are drawn to in this music genre often has to do with a combination of visual aspect, production quality and emotional attachment. They have multiple favorite music groups, such as BTS, Black Pink, Twice, EXO, and Stray Kids, influenced by the values promoted by, the idol's artistic talents and personalities of the idols.
Overview of K-Pop’s Success in Eastern countries	The interviewees see the success of K-Pop in their countries as being justified by a combination of artistic and structural elements. The professionalism and multi-dimensional talent of the idols (singing, dancing, visuals), as well as the refined aesthetic of the clips and performances, all contribute to seducing the public. Through the intense labor, the artist’s credibility is established with fans because of the rigorous training process that artists must go through, and then the accessibility of their works of art through social media and streaming promotes engagement with those artist's works in East Asian contents.
Reference Groups	Reference groups play an ambivalent role in fans' experience. Negative judgements by society or those around them do not seem to alter their commitment, but rather strengthen their attachment. On the other hand, positive interactions or the discovery of the genre through friends or family can have a significant influence on the development of their interest. The

	social environment therefore acts as a catalyst or moderator of their passion, depending on the case.
Parasocial Relationships	Fans feel a deep emotional connection to their idols, who are viewed as an accessible, caring, and inspiring presence in people's lives. The one-sided relationship is further exacerbated by idols' efforts to be constantly present in their fans' lives, through various forms of communication such as snapshots on social media, performances, or documentary features. Fans often connect with idols on an individual level through their personal challenges or successes, which can increase feelings of empathy and connection. These relationships can serve as both stabilising and motivating forces in their day-to-day lives.
Fan communities	Fan communities are considered a very important medium for communicating, exchanging, and providing support. They allow enthusiasts to escape feelings of isolation in their passion, and provide a sense of community. They become an extension of their social life very quickly, almost as a virtual family. Participation in these groups encourages the exchange of content, the coordination of actions in support of idols, and the development of links between fans.
User Generated Content	Fan-generated content plays an important role in fan engagement. Posting, sharing or creating videos, fan art or comments on social networks is seen as an active way of supporting their favourite artists. UGC is also a powerful lever for attracting new fans and boosting bands' visibility. It is also a vehicle for personal expression, where fans can showcase their creativity while strengthening their bond with the community.
Additional Information	In their final reflections, fans express that their attachment to K-Pop is deeply personal, evolving and unique. Although they are similar in some aspects, every fan's relationship with the music is unique, influenced by their own findings, tastes and broader, social context. For many, the experience provides pleasure, inspiration and fulfillment, and it becomes more than a musical genre to form an important part of their identity.

5. DISCUSSION

In this chapter, the results from the interviews are compared with the previous literature on the respective issues in order to highlight the points of convergence, divergence, and the new knowledge added by this thesis. The findings also are compared with the research of Santos (2023) on the success factors of K-pop artists in Western countries, in order to identify the similarities and dissimilarities between the contexts of the East and the West.

5.1 Overview of K-Pop's Success in Eastern Countries

The study indicated considerable interest in K-Pop in the Eastern countries due to intertwined factors: artistic potentiality, emotional involvement, and cultural connection. The participants voiced continuously that K-Pop is more than just music; idols are viewed as multilayer artists who sing and dance but also perform implications of complex live performances, and K-Pop includes visual story-telling. This is aligned with earlier studies of the multiplexity of K-Pop (Kim & Ryoo, 2007; Shin, 2009) and corroborates Santos' (2023) finding on the significance of performance complexity to the global popularity of K-Pop.

A related finding of importance from the interviews was fans' preoccupation with narrative coherence between comebacks, albums, and music videos. Fans are typically drawn to storylines, which tend to be symbolic and multilayered, bringing fans to a place of analytical practice and to a deeper emotional commitment. One fan described the process well, "it feels like each comeback is the next chapter of a story." This theme supports Lie's (2022) argument that K-Pop idols act as global reference figures and also relates to Jeong and Tanaka's (2023) analysis of the way identities are formed through digital fandoms in East Asia. While Santos (2023) argued that visual storytelling is conducive to engagement in the West, the current study shows that in concurrently Eastern countries, they are not only appealing, but also act as a method for emotional loyalty or introspection.

Another strong theme was the active forms of fandom. Fans in Eastern countries emphasized that they are participatory fans in the sense that they are streaming, posting, promoting, and emotionally supporting their idols. This supports the notion of fandom as an active not passive act, elaborating Lee and Nornes' (2015) considerations of parasocial

relationships. Furthermore, Arimoto and Park (2023) explain how algorithmic intimacy or closeness creates a sense of closeness and which was echoed through how Eastern fans felt "seen" or "recognized" by their idols on social media. While, Santos (2023) illustrated parasocial dynamics as tools of visibility predominantly in Western markets; this study showed how, in the East, parasocial dynamics are embedded in the emotional ties that are specific to cultural values such as diligence and humility.

The third area of interest and focus for K-Pop fandom is social media and collective fan practice. Much of the discussion that interviewees described in regard to acts of engagement from a social aspect included participating in activities involving translation, engaging in fan-centric activities, and participating in deaf-gathered streaming campaign actions with other fans, thus helping to illustrate how the social impacts of these activities still constitute a part of the K-Pop fandom experience. All these activities provide a sense of agency and togetherness. This aspect of K-Pop fandom parallels Jung (2013), Fuhr (2016), and most recently, Li and Ryu (2023), who have considered the importance of fan produced media and artifacts in sustaining and enhancing K-Pop's growing easily accessible transnational presence especially in Chinese-speaking sites. Tan and Huang (2024) too conceptualize fandom as a mobilization and activist process, a process which some of the interview participants hinted at when they alluded to collective online actions that supported or defended idols.

Cultural resonance also became another significant bandwagon success factor. Many fans highlighted the way K-Pop combines global pop aesthetics with distinctly Asian cultural values, such as respect for elders, collectivism, and emotional resilience. These findings extend the arguments of Kim and Ryoo (2007) by adding contemporary empirical backing from fans in Southeast and South Asia. Lim and Zhou (2023) argue that youth consumer culture in East Asia is particularly drawn to idols who embody aspirational but culturally grounded images, a pattern strongly reflected in interviewees' admiration for idols' work ethic and humility.

At last, fans expressed satisfaction with the interactions that result from the continuous promotional cycles found throughout music shows, variety shows, and social media challenges that develop an ongoing investment in emotional responses and connectedness with idols. This is consistent with Jung's (2013) thesis that constant generation of content acts as one of the building blocks of the K-Pop marketing strategy. At

the same time, although Santos (2023) stresses visibility and reach as desirable characteristics of Western fan practices, it may be that the findings presented here could suggest that in the eastern context these cycles act as a form of emotional maintenance for long-term emotional connection, and that the remaining apparent divergent case of emotional challenge-immediacy may reflect culture-based expectations around relational continuity and loyalty in Eastern societies.

In sum, although Santos (2023) demonstrated how the success of K-Pop in places like the West hinged on visibility, performative hybridity, and accessibility, this dissertation ultimately finds that in Eastern locations, emotional depth, cultural attention, and participatory fandom underpin K-Pop's sustained prominence. K-Pop is not just a music genre in places like the East, K-Pop is a community-building, emotionally-inhabiting, and culturally-significant process.

5.2 Reference Groups

The analysis of interviews verifies the significance of reference groups in building the K-pop fan experience in Eastern countries. Like Shibutani (1955) and Hogg et al. (2021), the fans tended to explain that idols and fellow fans are strong points of similarity and comparison, which offer both a sense of belonging and aspirational identity. Instead of simply idolizing the idols, the fans will embody and mimic the idols' behaviors, styles, and norms. This goes hand-in-hand with Al-Rawabdeh et al. (2021) expounding on the lifestyle habits K-pop fans adopt in Southeast Asia such as fashion, grooming habits, and languages.

This is echoed in newer studies. For example, Lim and Zhou (2023) discuss how East Asian youth mimic the consumption and self-presentation of idols while Jeong and Tanaka (2023) explain how social comparison within online fandom develops self-concept and personal aspiration. Respondents supported these findings, with Yujin of Nepal reporting that BTS encouraged her to work more diligently and practice self-care, and Cherry of Myanmar reporting that the group's philosophy encouraged her to study Korean culture and put self-betterment first.

In this regard, K-pop fandoms appear to be robust aspirational reference groups (Chan & Leung, 2021; Park & Lessig, 1977; Salmon, 2008). Interview participants reported

they had been able to develop new habits or new hobbies based on fandoms like learning Korean, new wellness routines, or a boost in confidence. Such experiences involve identification with exemplary characters who represent self-enabling actions (Santos, 2023).

When comparing Western cultures (Santos, 2023) in which emotional identification was paramount, the experience of the Eastern fan seems more focused on collective identity and shared values. This is due to the fact that the majority of Eastern countries have a collectivist cultural pattern, in which group belonging is an integral part of personal identity (Kim & Park, 2022; Hofstede, 1980). Through interviews, it was established that the fans tend to identify with feelings of belonging when their idols are winners, finding achievement in terms of a collectivity (such as “we won” rather than “they won”). This is because of the Basking in Reflected Glory (BIRG) effect (Cialdini et al., 1976), and was also found in the research of Santos' (2023), but in Eastern contexts this collective self appears even more emotionally entrenched.

For example, some of the Indian and Nepali participants described how they could recognize other supporters based on visual appearances, including style according to idols. This is corroborated by Groene and Hettinger's (2016) identification that reference group members internalize external signs, including clothing, accessories, activities, which are indicators of membership in the group. Xu and Nguyen (2024) explain how these behaviors are even ritualistic in character, thus making fandom a local tradition in certain Eastern societies.

Also, the level of time and emotional investment by supporters appears to be in direct proportion to the level of influence. This fits with the model proposed by McCall and Simmons (1978, as referenced in Thomas & O'Neill, 2021), that suggests extended interaction in a group solidifies identification and influence. Fans like Manisha from India emphasized that her K-pop community was not just a social outlet, but a source of emotional support and information. These deeper emotional attachments may be further understood through the lens of algorithmic intimacy and parasocial closeness in digital spaces (Arimoto & Park, 2023), reinforcing the idea that proximity, even virtual, intensifies the fan experience.

In terms of idol endorsements, the findings present a more nuanced picture. Fans were happy when idols received brand endorsements, but this did not directly lead to the

behavior of purchasing. Consistent with findings in Santos (2023), price and availability considerations also tended to be more determining. Dimofte et al. (2014), who argued that affective attachment to endorsers need not always prevail against practical constraint, concur with this finding. In others, the fans felt a more intimate connection to the idols because they knew the boundaries of availability of some branded commodities, something that made their connection stronger rather than weaker.

In sum, these findings reaffirm the central role of reference groups in shaping fandom behaviours and identity formation within K-pop communities. Like in Santos' (2023) study, K-pop idols and fan groups serve as aspirational models. However, in Eastern countries, the collectivist culture appears to intensify the emotional depth and communal significance of these connections. As suggested by Ng and Kusuma (2023), online fandom in Southeast Asia functions as a form of digital kinship, offering not just entertainment but emotional grounding, collective pride, and a sense of belonging.

5.3 Fan Communities

The findings from the interviews suggest that K-pop fandom communities in Eastern countries act as environments that are emotionally accommodating, socially cohesive, and highly organized. Participants consistently described fandom in ways that suggested it was much more than a common interest in music; participants framed fandom as an important emotional support system, and a part of shared identity. This illustrates the ideas of Baym (2021) and Jenkins (1995), where both authors outline fan cultures as spaces which allow collective identity to emerge based on emotional connection and partaking. Similar to the interviews of Kim and Kim (2020), some of the fans described aspects of acceptance, validation, and emotional support based on their fandoms, especially through the difficult times in their life. This also supports the findings of Santos (2023) who found that Westerners also see value in the emotional security and understanding fandoms give them.

In collectivist contexts and places such as South and Southeast Asia, these fans' existence seems to be translated into communal support. Fans on WeChat, KakaoTalk, and Instagram group chats deemed these online friendships long-lasting, with some even placing these online communities under the designation of a "second family." This resonates with the findings of Ng and Kusuma (2023), who explained their characterization

of placing these types of digital interactions in Southeast Asia as a form of "digital kinship." As one participant indicated, "We don't talk only idols, we talk about life, exams, family. It's a real bond".

Moreover, the interviews indicated that K-pop fan communities in Eastern countries are much more participatory. Although this was not the intention of the interview questions, the data suggests that fans do not only consume; they also act on behalf of; they do not simply consume, they also spread and promote K-pop. In other examples of action that fans participated in together, we saw organized streaming, buying albums together (in essence crowdfunding to buy albums), translation projects for websites and fan collectors, and charity events to imply a sense of collectivism. Tan and Huang (2024) would assert that K-pop fandoms in Asia frequently engage in cultural activism, and collective mobilization. Santos's (2023) analysis of Western fans provided some ideas that Western fans also add to the continued promotion of their idols through streaming and social media advocacy efforts, although the formalized structure and habitual nature of fans calling for any action within Eastern countries is much more formalized than individual promotion in Western consumer culture. In Eastern countries, fans tended to frame participatory actions to promote Korean idols as a duty of the fandom, rather than simply a passionate endorsement of an idol or K-pop more broadly.

The personal impact of fandom was another recurrent theme. Several interviewees noted that the communities helped them develop their confidence, emotional resilience, and self-esteem. This development and empowerment supports Groene and Hettinger's (2016) work on empowerment and development and aligns with Lee and Park (2023), who suggested fan engagement produced well-being and self-actualization. One fan mentioned she felt more confident to express herself in general and less frightened by judgement after participating in fan spaces, which she attributed to interactions with other fans. This is also consistent with Santos' (2023) study, where Western fans described fan spaces as sites for personal development and identity development.

In terms of consumer behaviours, the participants talked about their involvement in a fan community as being linked to the how and why of their music purchase, merchandise purchase, or content engagement in terms of their consumption. For many, participating in voting, streaming, or purchasing was part of their enjoyment and loyalty rather than an expectation or obligation. This aligns with Cova and Dall'Aglio (2009) and Schau

et al. (2009)'s discussions of "working consumers" and "brand enthusiasts," and is reflected in Li and Ryu (2023) and their discussion of Chinese K-pop fandoms. Similar behaviours were reported in Santos (2023); however, once again, in this study, that behaviour looks much more woven into a community relationship reinforced by collectivist cultural norms around shared responsibility and collective pride.

One particularly compelling similarity to Santos' (2023) study was the way in which the fan spoke about serve expressions of fandom often via fashion and accessories, or speech, as identity markers. Participants explicitly indicated that it was often clear who the fans were, publicly, based on how they dressed and acted. This shared symbolic language is what reinforces in-group recognition and belonging and highlights Groene and Hettinger's (2016) idea of the performative characteristics of fan identity.

While participants did not necessarily consider their experiences as "religious", many participants embodied an emotionally-engaged experience with a passionate devotion similar to Löbert's (2012) conjecture regarding fandom as a quasi-religious experience. Both fandoms create emotionally-safe spaces, create frameworks for values and identity and allow for understanding of purpose in life that endures. This idea was noted in Santos' (2023) work, however in this research the Eastern fans connected their fandom to their commitment more often through communal and culturally-situated concepts of fandom, sometimes couched with local traditions, or as a social relatedness as part of collective rituals. Likewise, Xu and Nguyen (2024) noted that fans shared a passionate devotion to the same fandom.

The data suggested that K-pop fan communities in Eastern countries can be categorized as socially meaningful and emotionally meaningful in a way that emphasizes action. While there are similarities with the Western fan communities discussed in Santos (2023) with regards to emotional support, personal growth and promotion of fans' works, there does seem to be structural organization and collective values in Eastern fandoms. The variance in emphasis and structure will be intriguing avenues for future comparative studies.

5.4 User Generated Content

As indicated by the interviews, UGC has considerable value in constructing the cultural and emotional dimensions of K-pop fandoms in Eastern countries. As similar to previous work by Daugherty et al. (2008) and Jenkins (2006), it is noteworthy that UGC is shown to be both a mode of expression and also a key process of a fanbase's ability to grow, connect, and exist. In this context, the results reflect Santos (2023) who also showed that fans in the Western context aesthetically produce UGC for the purpose of promoting their favorite artists. However, in the case of the East, this production may convey a deeper connection around collective identity and emotional liability than in the West.

Researchers in this study cited UGC (user-generated content) as a way to share their love for an idol while adding new audiences to their own share, of course. This similarly aligns to the notion of "working consumers" or "brand enthusiasts" (Cova & Dallı, 2009; Schau et al., 2009) which have further developed developmentally and theoretically in Li and Ryu's (2023) study about Chinese fandoms. Li and Ryu (2023) further included that while fan-made media has a big impact on idol culture creation, it can diffuse the intentions of the official brand strategy processes, such as brand recall (Lee et al., 2022). Santos (2023) has also noted that in Western contexts, fans create, disseminate, share, and exchange idol-related material on platforms like Twitter and YouTube, which have been an involvement channel that is beneficial in terms of visibility, although it can deviate from the way in which idols are intended to be marketed and promoted by official institutions. However, Eastern fandom relies on the institutions and planning for path overlays from the academy, to build and coordinate their dance covers, reaction videos or translated media, and then layer their work is a cultural effort, rather than a burst of media.

A major theme that came out in the interviews was authenticity in UGC. Interviewees often described content made by fans as more "real," "relatable," or "emotionally sincere" as opposed to intent-to-distribute promotional material from entertainment companies. This aligns to some degree with Smith et al. (2012) who discovered in their study that an audience would respond with a more favorable attitude to user content compared to user generated content if the user generated content had an emotional connection. There is also raw authenticity distinction in Santos' (2023) study, but in regard to the work I am doing here authenticity has a broader communal function. The authentic fan content in Eastern territories was often not only a preferred means of content

generation for the creators and the audience, but it also becomes an informal way to onboard new fans and has a place in existing interactive digital and non-digital rituals like Travis and Nguyen (2024) suggest for contemporaneous localization fandom through tradition.

Additionally, UGC contributes to the formation of a participatory culture, where content creation reinforces not only personal expression but also group solidarity and cultural mobilization. As argued by Jin (2020) and recently by Tan and Huang (2024), K-pop fandoms often use UGC as a tool for activism and collective identity. This was observed as well in the findings of Santos (2023), but more as a means of individual advocacy or fan creativity. In contrast, this study suggests that Eastern fans are more likely to engage in organized offline events, such as flash mobs, charity drives, or birthday projects, as direct extensions of their online fandom activity, turning digital enthusiasm into civic expression.

At the same time, the interviews also signal inconsistencies in UGC practices. Several interviewees brought up misinformation, distorted representations, and at times, fan wars with viral content in a manner that lends support to Cheng's (2022) claim that UGC is disruptive, or otherwise incompatible with the accountable idol narratives of entertainment companies. While Santos (2023) also mentioned fan wars potential regarding content ownership and credit, the Eastern fans in this study seemed to be conscious of balancing creative freedom and idol-focused representation, in light of heightened emotional identification.

In addition, the findings suggest that user generated content (UGC) is not simply performative, but a method of fostering emotional and economic sustainability. The interviewees framed content creation as a labour of love, rather than as an obligation, which reinforced the idea that engagement with the idol was seen as part of their identity. This did produce slight differences from the Western fans studied in Santos' (2023) study, where passion was also a primary characteristic of the participants, yet in some cases where acts of promotion were described more as personal acts rather than as collective responsibilities. In Eastern contexts, the collectivist values of loyalty and service seem to illustrate that content creation is part of contributing to the highly impactful idol ecosystem, as suggested by Arimoto and Park's (2023) explorations regarding algorithmic intimacy and digital devotion.

In summary, UGC in Eastern K-pop fandoms is a creative, convivial, and cultural space for imaginative expressions. In contrast to Western fans in Santos (2023), Eastern fans seem more committed to using UGC to express ownership as a cooperative act which integrates digital literacies with collaborative responsibilities. The fans are co-constructing K-pop's cultural footprint, rather than a singular expression of admiration, which localizes K-pop's value, emotional meaning, and significance through their shared content, values, and rituals.

5.5 Parasocial Relationships

The data obtained from the interviews suggest that parasocial relations have become embedded and a normal aspect of the K-pop fan culture in Eastern countries. Returning to Horton and Wohl's (1956) original handling, observe that PSR relationships are not infatuation; when interviewees elaborated on these relationships, they indicated that emotional investment rose because, as repeated monitoring of the idol's life (e.g., increased live coverage creating immediacy, day-time variety shows, social media postings/videos) took place, emotional connection rose, mounting against passive, limited-investment viewing. It is consistent with the work by Dibble et al. (2015), and Tukachinsky et al. (2020), albeit in the Eastern context this again suggests that PSR relationship descriptions denote more of an embedding in the everyday.

As mentioned by Santos (2023), fans often express commitment to artists whom they have developed HS, and tend to prioritize these artists on some level in daily life (at a minimum to check for updates or watch their performance again). However, interviewees in this study emphasized the emotional consonance they shared with idols: this person being attached to idols was a comfort later on in life, with some recollecting these idols acted as companions during difficult situations. Also included in Santos' study were Western fans who used idols in similarly emotional ways, but, the Eastern interviewees certainly more often connected their attachment to idols with cultural values, or considerations, such as resiliency, humility, and reciprocity, indicating a minutely different emotional history nurtured from cultural norms (Lim & Zhou, 2023; Ng & Kusuma, 2023).

One important theme discussed was how the idols conveyed vulnerability, whether through documentaries, behind-the-scenes material, and livestream content, which became a basis for emotional connection. The interviewees articulated that they felt more connected

when the idols mentioned openly how they had gone through adversity during training, or their insecurities. These stories of hardship and adversity made interviewees feel acknowledged and understood, and these prior studies by Lee and Lee (2020) and Kwak & Lee (2017) suggest that this effect was important to shape longevity of parasocial relationships. Some interviewees from Myanmar and Nepal explained how seeing their idols overcome adversity inspired them to persist in their own lives, reinforcing the idea that vulnerability fosters intimacy.

The emotional impact of PSRs was also expressed in how interviewees described finding comfort and encouragement from idols during hard times. Even while knowing the chance that those idols would never know them personally, the fandom felt real. This is parallel to the argument made by Derrick et al (2008) that the psychological effects of PSR can still be felt when the fans recognize this as unidirectional. Members would forever mention that if only they can glimpse an idol's smile or get a couple of words of encouragement can grant them even better stability and hope in their life.

It was definite that the role of technology in maintaining those ties was being agreed upon globally. For instance, V-Live, Instagram, and Weibo were seen as links to a lifeline of updates from the idols, allowing fans to feel regarding their idols continuously. While Tukachinsky et al. (2020) proposed that decreased interaction does not always diminish PSRs, the interviewees in this study often stated the opposite: regular contact through digital channels was essential to maintain emotional closeness. This is supported by recent work from Arimoto and Park (2023), who argue that algorithmic intimacy intensifies parasocial closeness in contemporary East Asian fandoms.

Another noteworthy pattern was how fans connected with idols in terms of identifying with them or reacting to differences. Some participants said they saw themselves in the idols, whether due to shyness, ambition, or family values, and that resemblance created an intense mirror-like intimacy. Others said they respected things they lacked and that those differences provoked development. This dual mechanism of identification and aspiration was consistent with Yuan and Lou's (2020) findings, and helped us further elaborate on how PSRs tend to operate psychologically.

In addition to emotional proximity, the interviews surprised us with an affirmation that PSRs can regulate behaviour. Many of our interview participants recounted the feeling of obligation to support their idols, voting in music show rankings, defending them as a

group online, helping to choreograph streaming campaigns, etc. This behavioural response is consistent with Choi and Lee's (2021) assertion that PSRs often lead to community-like action and are usually indistinct from being an expression of a communal sentiment. Likewise, Tan and Huang (2024) noted that this community-like energy could also be mobilized in ways that get fans involved in further actions and genuine mobilizations, especially in the context of Asian fandoms.

When compared to Santos (2023), this study suggests that while the emotional structure of PSRs may be similar across cultures, the meaning assigned to those relationships appears different. In Santos' work, Western fans described PSRs mostly in terms of admiration and emotional connection. In contrast, the participants in this study indicated they made many linkages to broader cultural values like duty, perseverance and pride in their parasocial relationships. This relates to Ng and Kusuma's (2023) theory of a Southeast Asian digital kinship, where individuals' affective closeness to public figures serves not only to fulfil individual needs but euphemistically expresses collective social functions.

In sum, the interviews suggest that PSRs are not fixed in the Eastern context, but develop over time, constantly adapting through daily rituals involving what could be considered emotional reciprocity, despite the interactions being imagined rather than physical, and digital closeness. The PSRs discussed above serve as personal forms of coping mechanism, but they also serve as units of community whereby individuals strengthen their group identity, emotional resilience, and transnational purposes.

Table 4. Comparative Overview: Eastern vs. Western Perspectives

Subjects	Results from Current Investigation – Eastern Perspective	Results from Santos (2023) – Western Perspective
Reference Groups	Idols and fan communities are viewed as collective and aspirational reference groups; collectivism and emotional pride in success with influence.	Reference groups are aspirational as well, but more personally experienced; less collective identity.
Fan Communities	Fan groups as affective "second families," highly structured, and engaged (e.g., charity, live streaming).	Communities are emotionally supportive and form close-knit ties, but activism appears to be less planned and more individual.
User Generated Content	UGC as a tool of collective identity, emotional authenticity, and word-of-mouth communication; deeply rooted in local culture and group rituals.	UGC used for artist promotion and connection, but less so as shared responsibility or local cultural ritual.
Parasocial Relationships	PSRs that are emotionally intense, morally grounded, and deeply rooted in day-to-day life; emphasize empathy, duty, and collectivist loyalty.	PSRs are emotionally significant, used for comfort and inspiration, but less engaged in communal cultural schemas.

6. CONCLUSION

As K-Pop continues its cultural impact worldwide, its growing visibility in Asian countries challenges us to find out more in-depth what is behind this success, not just from a market perspective, but from the everyday lives of the fans. While many studies have endeavored to establish the causes for the success of K-Pop all over the world, few have dared to challenge how fans in the East engage the genre daily, emotionally, and communally. This dissertation attempted to chart that space by posing the question: What are the factors behind K-Pop artists' increasing success in Eastern countries? In order to address this question, 10 semi-structured interviews were held with K-Pop fans from Eastern countries.

The current research reveals that being a K-Pop fan is more than simply being a fan of the music, it involves identity, friendship, and development. Furthermore, this research project also illustrates how fan practices are transported from one space and culture to another by comparing with Santos (2023), that examined K-Pop fans in the West.

The findings suggest that four important factors: reference groups, fan communities, user-generated content, and parasocial relationships, are at the core of the K-Pop experience in Eastern countries. Idols and fan groups were not only foci of admiration but aspirational reference groups that inspire self-discipline, ambition, and social identification. By doing so, not only did fans idolize their idols, they identified with them. While similar trends were identified in Western contexts, Eastern respondents seemed to express a stronger sense of shared identity, often based on cultural expectations of belonging, respect, and persevering beneficence.

I discovered that fan culture is full of emotional and organized richness, with communities often described as second families or havens for fans to be themselves, with support from others. The fandom practices (ex: charitable work, meet-ups, fan-driven promotional events) also have further structures in offline life. Santos (2023) did find fan agency and solidarity within the West, but collective emotional interdependence and coordination appeared to be more deeply embedded in Eastern fans' daily lives.

The UGC culture helped to reinforce this sense of collectiveness. For the majority of Eastern respondents, content production was not so much a way of interacting as a way

of giving back to their idols and establishing relationships with the community. These expressions of creativity like dance covers, translations, or fan art contained cultural pride and emotional authenticity. While Western fans also engage with UGC (Santos, 2023) considerably, Eastern fans drew on inspiration from their desired idols in cultural practices through inputs seen more like a social responsibility than a form of expression.

Consistent with parasocial relationships, the qualitative data suggested that these are significant aspects of the K-Pop experience. Interviewees used rich, personalized language to talk about their relationships with idols using terms like friends, role models, sources of comfort when times are tough, etc. There were also indications that social media platforms (e.g., YouTube, Instagram, Weibo) helped support the creation of these affective ties. In Santos' (2023) study, Western-based fans, talked about emotional attachment and relationships to idols. While the Eastern-based fans, expressed their relationships with idols more holistically in terms of values of loyalty, humility and emotional reciprocity.

When combining both studies, the differences do not indicate that fans behaved differently but rather the method and meaning of these behaviours. The mechanisms aspiration, community, creativity, emotional bonding, exist across both East and West. But in Eastern contexts, these mechanisms operate within a more collectivist cultural framework, where the self is experienced in close relationship with others, and where fandom becomes a shared emotional and social project. While this study does not claim to measure the intensity of these experiences, the narratives suggest that Eastern fans may integrate K-Pop more deeply into their identities and social relationships than what was observed in Western contexts.

The current study contributes to our theoretical understandings by illustrating that K-Pop fandom in Eastern countries takes the form of collectivist identity making, whereby fan practices function not only as an expression of admiration, but culturally embedded rituals of belonging that push against more individualistic, Western-centred models of fandom. Additionally, the research builds theorisation around parasocial interaction, identity-making, and cultural consumption in more relational and communitarian forms, instead of individualist ones. Also, it adds layers of depth to transnational fan studies by demonstrating how like behaviours (e.g. UGC or idol admiration) can be culturally reframed, relative to local values, which contribute to cross-cultural theory in media and fan studies.

The present research also offers managerial implications in two significant ways. First, when entertainment companies and artists are engaged in an eastern market, they should be aware of the emotional and relational aspects of fandom. Creating fandom communities, giving weight to fan-generated content, and actively encouraging parasocial relationships that resonate culturally are probably just as important as producing high-quality music or videos. Second, artists might want to participate in community-driven projects, but also signal a reciprocal concern for fans' emotional investments. Finally, creating platforms or campaigns that emphasize collective, fan-led expressions rather than individual or fan-to-artist interactions may foster loyalty long-term.

In the end, what this dissertation shows is that K-Pop is not merely a style of music, but form of belonging. In East Asian countries, fans are not just passive listeners, but co-creators, caretakers, and emotional investors in a very large cultural story. And it is perhaps just this very involvement, predicated on care, commitment, and belonging, which makes K-Pop more than music. It becomes a part of people's lives, and in the process, it goes on further, speaks louder, and lasts longer.

6.1 Limitations and Futures Research

Similar to in any qualitative investigation, this research has its limits. To begin with, while the study discussed four important dimensions to account for the popularity of K-Pop in Eastern countries, that is, reference groups, fan culture, user-generated content, and parasocial relations, it failed to examine other probable influencing aspects, such as economic factors, national media policy, or cultural diplomacy. Such macro elements also might have impacts on fan actions and must be explored more in-depth in later studies. Scholars could carry this project forward by embedding political and economic situations into analyzing K-Pop dances and succeeding where they move to different cultural milieus.

Second, this research limited itself to K-Pop fandom alone and did not make any comparison of the same with other music fan cultures such as J-Pop, Mandopop, or Western pop. An understanding of how K-Pop stands apart from, or is alike, other fandoms could enhance our comprehension of its popularity. Comparative research on fan cultures by future scholars could be useful in exploring both the convergence and divergence of emotional identification, collective activity, and cultural values.

A further limitation is the qualitative nature and scope of the research. While the ten semi-structured interviews gave rich and in-depth information, the relatively low number of participants and the focus on specific areas, primarily Southeast and South Asia, mean that the findings cannot be representative of the entire picture of K-Pop fandom across the broader Eastern world. Subsequent research could take a mixed-methods approach with in-depth interviews combined with more comprehensive quantitative questionnaires to research trends in other previously un-researched areas such as Central Asia or the Middle East, where K-Pop fan culture is increasingly picking up speed.

Time constraints also meant that some of the emerging themes were not explored as thoroughly as might have been desirable. For example, several interviewees informally stated that viewing K-Pop initially exposed them to an interest in the Korean language, traditions, and lifestyles. This is an intriguing observation which suggests that K-pop is able to act as a cultural bridge, which makes the fans more engaged with Korean society. Subsequent research can investigate this interest in culture and whether K-pop has an influence on longer-term cultural acquisition, identity formation, or even mobility plans overseas.

Another area to explore further is the importance of narrative and storytelling in the world of K-Pop. Several of the interviewees talked about being drawn in not just by music but by the complex narratives in music videos, concept teasers, and comeback themes. These narratives might be important to sustaining fan dedication and affective investment. Future research might try to explore how visual and narrative approaches impact emotional attachment and community formation in fandoms.

Finally, the rapidly evolving technology landscape presents new avenues of inquiry for fandom studies. As of 2025, technologies such as AI-generated fan works, virtual concerts featuring idols, and metaverse sites begin to redefine fan interaction with artists and between fans. Future research should examine how such technologies influence parasocial relationships, content production, and collective identity within the K-Pop fandom, possibly changing what it means to be a fan in the first place.

In short, while this dissertation offers meaningful insights into the emotional, social, and cultural mechanisms behind K-Pop's popularity in Eastern countries, it also highlights the need for continued exploration. As K-Pop evolves in response to shifting fan cultures, technologies, and global dynamics, future research will be essential to understanding not

only where the genre is headed, but also how it continues to touch the lives of fans across borders.

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APPENDIX

Appendix 1. Interviewees' Profiles

N° OF INTERVIEWS	INTERVIEWEES	RESIDENCE (COUNTRY)	GENDER	AGE
E1	Sanya	India	Female	25
E2	Manisha	India	Female	21
E3	Trinh	Vietnam	Female	21
E4	Yujin	Nepal	Female	19
E5	Cherry	Myanmar	Female	20
E6	Yin Min	Myanmar	Female	24
E7	Theint	Myanmar	Female	25
E8	Haruka	Japan	Female	20
E9	Daichi	Japan	Female	22
E10	Kim	South Korea	Female	21

Appendix 2. Interview Content – Categories

CATEGORY	SUBCATEGORY	CATEGORY DESCRIPTION	CODE
Overview of K-Pop's Success in Eastern countries	Thoughts on K-Pop's success aspects Favorite Success Factors Differences and Similarities between K-Pop and Western artists Becoming a fan Identifying traits	Opinions regarding K Pop and their interest for the genre	OV

Reference Groups	Inspiration from artists Peer's impact Family's Impact Friends' impact Fan dynamic Inspiration from fans Product endorsements	Impact of outside entities on the interest in K-Pop	RG
Parasocial Relationships	Connection with artists Similarities between fan and artist Impact of K-Pop on fans' lives Connection without interactivity Fan responsibilities Give and take dynamic	Impact of the connection with K-Pop artists on the interest in K-Pop	PSR
Fan Communities	Impact on fan experience Importance of fandom Other fans' impact on identity	Impact that being integrated in a fan community has on being a fan of K-Pop	FC
User Generated Content	Content creation Online Promotion Exposure to non-fans Connection without UGC	Content Creation techniques and how that impacts fans and non-fans of K-Pop	UGC
Additional Information	Any additional information regarding K-Pop	General perception regarding K-Pop	AI

**Appendix 3. Table of Content - Overview of K-Pop's Success in Eastern Countries
(Interviews)**

Interviewee	Factors for Success in Eastern Countries	Cultural Resonance (Eastern Values)	Fan Participation
Sanya	"K-pop focused on fan-idol interaction through fan meetings, vlogs, and direct messages. That people-to-people connection is key."	"People are able to relate more... it targets the audience directly, and that personal bond is stronger."	"The agencies make sure idols and fans interact... fans check content, buy merch, and stay updated through Weverse."
Manisha	"Blending catchy music with visuals that feel larger than life. Idol training creates stars who feel aspirational yet relatable."	"Cultural emphasis on discipline and collectivism... aligns with K-pop's polished group dynamic."	"Fans organize streaming events and act as ambassadors for their faves."
Trinh	"K-pop is more of a band-oriented culture, while in the West, solo artists are more common."	"We appreciate the group dynamic more. That's a big reason why K-pop connects here."	"Fans organize charity and promotional events. It's a culture of contribution and bonding."
Yujin	"Addictive music, stunning visuals, and the way idols can be so relatable. Platforms like YouTube and TikTok make it easy to discover K-pop."	"Teamwork and discipline of K-pop groups resonate with values like hard work and community that are big in Eastern cultures."	"We stream music videos, vote for awards, and spread the word on social media."
Cherry	"K-Pop resonates culturally through relatable themes, catchy music, and strong visuals, while emphasizing respect and collectivism."	"Cultural relatability matters more in the East."	"K-Pop fans connect globally but are especially active in collectivist cultures where mutual support is key."
Yin Min	"K-Pop is visually impressive and highly polished. It highlights diverse concepts that attract a wide audience."	"Eastern culture emphasizes discipline, hard work, and respect, values that are reflected in K-Pop idols."	"Fans actively support artists by voting for them, buying albums, and promoting their music online."

Theint	"Cultural appeal, strong visuals and storytelling, emotional connection, and fan culture."	"Eastern fans appreciate the idol training system, deep storytelling, and cultural familiarity."	"Fans are highly engaged in streaming, voting, and social media promotions, which boost K-Pop's visibility."
Haruka	"Discipline and aesthetics. Eastern audiences respect effort and emotional storytelling, and K-pop reflects both."	"We value harmony, hard work, and subtle emotional expression. K-pop resonates because idols embody those values."	"Fans don't just consume, they promote, organize events, and share everything. It feels like teamwork."
Daichi	"Visuals, hard work, and the emotional sincerity of the idols. In our cultures, that's highly valued."	"In Japan, modesty and perseverance matter. We relate to idols' stories of struggle and growth."	"Fans become co-creators and promoters. The artists give us energy, and we give it back."
Kim	"Its ability to adapt culturally, its emotional connection, and its mix of tradition and modernity."	"There's a respect for emotional storytelling and loyalty, which K-pop channels very well."	"We feel responsible. Like it's our duty to support, promote, and protect what we love."

Appendix 4. Table of Content - Reference Groups (Interviews)

Interviewee	New Interests or Motivations	Impact on Relationships with Others	Family Influence	Meeting New People
Sanya	"I changed my wardrobe, started learning Korean, and tried dancing because of BTS."	"Friends who like the same group... you kind of connect more... you start gushing over the idols."	"My mom became a fan too... she's very up to date with the fandom!"	"The fan community is worldwide... people meet at concerts and interact on Instagram."
Manisha	"BTS's messages about self-worth inspired me to push through challenges... I started learning Korean seriously."	"I've bonded with a few classmates over K-pop."	"Now that I'm in Korea, they're more curious and ask about BTS concerts or K-pop culture."	"Yes, I have friends in India, we still talk... I've had moments of connection with ARMYs on campus."
Trinh	"I started learning Korean because of K-pop."	"I met a Seventeen fan at my hotel in Bali... we started"	"My dad thinks it's a waste of money. My mom is"	"I meet other fans through social media and have"

		talking about the group."	supportive and tells me to be safe at concerts."	gone to concerts together."
Yujin	"BTS inspired me to work harder in school and chase my dreams."	"It's helped me connect with my cousins who love K-pop too."	"My parents are supportive... My younger sister started liking TXT because of me."	"Yes! I've met tons of people through Instagram and at fan events like BTS concert screenings."
Cherry	"BTS has inspired me to explore Korean culture, learn bits of the language, and focus on self-improvement."	"It has helped me connect with like-minded fans."	"It's sparked conversations about cultural diversity, music, and self-expression."	"Yes, I've made so many online friends through K-pop."
Yin Min	"They motivate me to learn more about dance and music."	"Yes, I have made friends who share the same passion."	"Mine doesn't always understand my love for K-Pop."	"Yes, I have met friends through online discussions and K-Pop events."
Theint	"Their hard work and dedication inspire me to improve my own skills and stay motivated."	"Yes, I have made new friends through shared interests in K-Pop."	"At first, my family didn't understand my interest, but now they see how much joy it brings me."	"Yes, I have connected with fellow fans online and in fan communities."
Haruka	"I started learning Korean and got into dancing. I also began journaling, inspired by idols talking about mental health."	"Yes! I became closer with friends who were also fans."	"My younger sister became a fan too."	"Yes, many! Especially online, some are now real friends I meet regularly."
Daichi	"They made me take dance seriously. I now choreograph pieces and hope to teach someday."	"Yes, I made a lot of friends through dance cover events."	"They were skeptical at first, but they saw my passion and came to support me."	"Definitely. We bond quickly because we share the same admiration for talent and aesthetics."
Kim	"I got into writing and academic	"Definitely. Some of my closest friends came	"Yes, positively. My mom started listening to IU after	"Yes, even international friends

	analysis thanks to BTS and how they talk about mental health and art."	through fandom platforms."	I showed her some lyrics."	I met on fan forums and Twitter."
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Appendix 5. Table of Content - Parasocial Relationships (Interviews)

Interviewee	Emotional Connection	Reason for Connection	Personal Impact	Role of Social Media / Digital Tools
Sanya	"I personally have related more with a lot of members... their music helped me in a time when I was not in a very good place."	"They are very kind and innocent persons... I have seen their journey from 2013 to present."	"It was because of them that I started exploring South Korea... and I actually got an opportunity to be here."	"They do live streams... post images and write blogs on Weverse. It's more of a personalized connection."
Manisha	"BTS's music... has been there for me during lonely or stressful times."	"Their vulnerability about struggles like burnout or self-doubt makes them feel human."	"When I'm overwhelmed with studies, BTS's music feels like a reminder to keep going."	"Even if I'm not as active, seeing their posts or fan translations still strengthens that bond."
Trinh	"I feel like they're really close to their fans."	"They share their personal lives with us."	"During my university entrance exams, their lyrics helped me stay positive and motivated."	"Even without direct online interaction, the music still brings me close to them."
Yujin	"I feel super close to BTS, especially Jungkook... it's like he's talking to me."	"They share so much of their lives, through music, interviews, and social media."	"When I'm down, listening to BTS or watching Lisa makes me feel like I can keep going."	"Watching their lives, Weverse posts, or TikToks makes me feel so close to them."
Cherry	"I feel deeply connected to BTS because their music, values, and actions resonate with my own experiences."	"They share genuine stories of struggle, self-love, and hope, which feel personal and relatable."	"They helped me during tough times by encouraging self-love, resilience, and hope."	"Even if I don't usually use online platforms, their music and values are timeless and meaningful."

Yin Min	"I see them almost like my friends or even my imaginary boyfriends."	"Because I see them in a romantic way, and their presence comforts me."	"It makes me happy and gives me a sense of closeness with them."	"They allow fans to feel closer to the artists and to have the impression of sharing moments with them."
Theint	"I feel inspired and comforted by their music and hard work."	"Their dedication and passion resonate with me."	"It makes me feel motivated and proud to support them."	"Constant updates and interactions help maintain the connection."
Haruka	"With Jimin from BTS, I feel like I know him. His kindness and honesty make me feel less alone."	"Because he shares his vulnerable side, it feels genuine and relatable."	"Comforted. I feel like I have someone cheering for me even if we've never met."	"Even a simple post or live makes me feel close to them."
Daichi	"I look up to Taemin from SHINee. His evolution inspires me as a dancer and as a person."	"He's vulnerable on stage but powerful too. I relate to that duality."	"Proud and encouraged. It's like we're on parallel journeys in different fields."	"Even short clips of behind-the-scenes make them feel human and approachable."
Kim	"I feel like BTS members, especially Namjoon, speak directly to my struggles as a young adult."	"They show their true selves. They're not perfect, and that makes them human."	"It helps me feel seen. It's not just admiration, it's identification."	"It creates a sense of continuity, like I'm part of their journey."

Appendix 6. Table of Content - Fan Communities (Interviews)

Interviewee	Importance of Fan Community	Role Played by the Community	Strong Friendships Formed	Influence on Enjoyment
Sanya	"The fan community is worldwide... people meet in concerts and	"ARMYs do donations, volunteer work, and form global connections in BTS's name."	"Yes, friends who like the same group... you kind of connect more and share content."	"It gives fans a sense of belonging and interaction that strengthens the bond with the artists."

	interact on Instagram."			
Manisha	"It used to be really important... Now, it's less critical because my studies take priority."	"The community was my source for news, memes, and excitement over BTS releases."	"Yes, I have friends in India, we still talk... I've had moments of connection with ARMYs on campus."	"Now that I'm busier, I enjoy K-pop more privately, but the community's energy still inspires me."
Trinh	"It's important to me because it brings fans together."	"It makes supporting them even stronger."	"I meet other fans through social media and have gone to concerts together."	"It helps me feel more connected to the group and to other fans."
Yujin	"It's super important! Being in a fan community makes K-pop so much more fun."	"People plan streaming parties, discuss theories, and cheer each other up."	"Yes! Some of my closest friends now are from online fan groups."	"Sharing reactions... makes every moment more meaningful."
Cherry	"It's very important because it provides a support network, a place to share passion, and a feeling of belonging."	"It enhances the experience by creating a sense of community, shared excitement, and collaboration."	"Yes, some of my closest friends are fans I met online."	"The fandom has inspired me to take part in meaningful projects and feel part of something larger."
Yin Min	"It's important because it allows you to share your passion with other people."	"It allows me to discuss comebacks, performances, and the artists I love with other fans."	"Yes, I have met friends who share my interest in K-Pop."	"It makes the experience more immersive and helps me discover aspects I wouldn't have noticed on my own."
Theint	"It's not essential, but it makes the experience more enjoyable."	"It helps in staying updated and sharing excitement with others."	"Yes, I have met many amazing people through fandoms."	"It makes everything more exciting and interactive."
Haruka	"Very important. It makes the whole experience more meaningful."	"It's where I get updates, share theories, and feel validated as a fan."	"Absolutely. Some of my best friends are people I met through fandom."	"Comebacks become group events, not just personal moments."

Daichi	"It's like having a global family."	"They amplify everything, from joy during comebacks to support when idols face hardships."	"Yes, and some of them feel stronger than school friendships."	"It multiplies the energy. I can't imagine enjoying K-pop alone anymore."
Kim	"Very. It makes fandom more powerful and purposeful."	"They amplify emotions and create platforms for action, whether for voting or for charity."	"Yes, and we've even done research projects together about fandom culture."	"It multiplies the meaning. I'm not just a fan, I'm part of a cultural movement."

Appendix 7. Table of Content – User Generated Content (Interviews)

Interviewee	Types of Fan Content Seen	Content Created Personally	Online Promotion	Impact on Non-Fans / Global Success
Sanya	"Fan-made videos, reels, Weverse blog posts, and lots of BTS merchandise content."	"No direct content creation, but I follow and consume a lot from fan platforms."	"Yes, I engage on Weverse and Instagram and keep up with posts and videos."	"Companies tend to exploit fan sentiment, but fan content creates massive engagement and visibility online."
Manisha	"Fan art, lyric translations, video edits, throwback compilations... dance covers and reaction videos."	"Not a single time... I might share a tweet or story hyping a BTS comeback."	"Yes, I'd share BTS music videos, vote for awards, and join streaming parties."	"Translations and edits make K-pop accessible to non-Korean speakers... fan content spreads organically."
Trinh	"I know fans who design and sell t-shirts with Seventeen symbols..."	"I had a fan account where I shared my thoughts and content about Seventeen."	"Yes, I've shared content with non-fans, and some of them have become fans too."	"It promotes the group and helps others discover them through creative initiatives."

	proceeds go to charity."			
Yujin	"Fan edits, dance covers, reaction videos, POV's, and fan art... funny memes."	"Yeah, I've made a few dance cover videos... I've also posted some BTS photo edits."	"Yes, I share teasers, MVs, voting links, and join streaming parties."	"Fan content spreads K-pop like wildfire... It's free promotion."
Cherry	"Posts about BTS's achievements, inspirational quotes from their lyrics."	"Yes, I share posts and edits on Instagram."	"Yes, I've shared BTS's music videos, interviews, and charity campaigns."	"Exposure to fan content might spark curiosity or interest in BTS."
Yin Min	"Funny videos, edits, and dance performances."	"Yes, I like sharing content to show my interest in my favorite groups."	"Yes, by sharing their videos and talking about them on social media."	"It catches their attention and can encourage them to get into it."
Theint	"Fan edits, reaction videos, dance covers, and analysis of K-Pop music."	"Sometimes, I share updates and personal thoughts on social media."	"Yes, by sharing updates, streaming music, and participating in voting events."	"It introduces them to the genre and makes them curious to explore more."
Haruka	"Dance covers, reaction videos, photo edits, memes, and lyric translations."	"Yes, I do fan art and sometimes post short reaction videos."	"Yes! Especially during comebacks, I share videos, streaming goals, and birthday projects."	"It makes it accessible. People see a dance or fan edit and get curious."
Daichi	"Dance covers, reaction videos, memes, and aesthetic Instagram edits."	"Yes, I post our dance team's covers and behind-the-scenes clips."	"Yes, especially during voting seasons. It feels like a mission."	"Fans are not just supporters; they are content creators and recruiters."
Kim	"Analytical threads, fan cams, visual art, and deep-dive YouTube videos."	"Yes, I write posts analyzing lyrics and concepts from a feminist perspective."	"Yes, especially during streaming campaigns and social justice projects."	"It gives depth and context, it shows that fandom isn't shallow, it's critical and engaged."