

Building Digital Relationship: K-pop's Strategic Engagement with Generation Z Through New Media Tools

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Abstract. This study explores how K-pop successfully builds relationships with Generation Z through the use of digital tools. Secondary qualitative data analysis and case study of aespa have been chosen in order to identify digital relationship building models that can be used as a reference for K-pop to improve brand value towards Generation Z. Context of Self-Determination Theory have selected to focus self-marketing strategies in the competitive global market. The findings reveal that social media platforms, fan-dedicated applications, algorithm-driven streaming, immersive technologies, and cross-platform collaborations play a central role in cultivating intimacy, loyalty, and identity among Gen Z audiences. However, the analysis also highlights significant challenges, including the commodification of parasocial relationships, algorithmic dependency, and ethical concerns surrounding datafication and commercialisation. The study concludes that K-pop offers a valuable model of digital engagement, but its sustainability requires balancing innovation with authenticity, inclusivity, and ethical responsibility.

Keywords: K-pop, Generation Z, digital marketing, fandom, social media.

1. Introduction

In 2020, BTS closed Michelle Obama's virtual graduation ceremony alongside global icons such as Taylor Swift and Barack Obama, which cementing their status as the defining youth influencers of a generation. Chen highlighted that social media initiatives helped K-pop albums generate \$233 million in sales, with groups like BTS breaking records with their albums [1]. This particular milestones show that digital strategies helped K-pop to align with media habits and expectations of modern consumers, for an example, Generation Z. However, Generation Z faces multiple social and personal challenges such as mental health pressures, social isolation, economic precarity, and questions of identity [2]. Therefore, this study considers the challenges faced by Generation Z and it also examines the coping mechanisms, such as digital content, fandoms, and industry strategies, provided by K-pop. The role of the digital platform evaluates as the primary facilitator of these relationships.

Research Question

- How does K-pop successfully build relationships with Gen Z using new digital tools?

This essay examines the promotional strategies employed by the K-pop market to attract Gen Z. Section 2 reviews existing literature on K-pop's online strategies. Section 3 declares the research methodology, and Section 4 presents a case study of aespa. Section 5 discusses the implications for other markets and concludes in Section 6 with results relevant to K-pop but useful for other industries seeking to attract Gen Z with digital technologies.

2. Literature review

2.1. K-pop industry overview & current status

The K-pop industry is in the broader entertainment sector, earning revenue from the sale of music, international tours, merchandise and endorsements [3]. It is dominated by the "Big 4" agencies, namely HYBE, SM Entertainment, JYP Entertainment, and YG Entertainment. Although independent labels are also on the rise, with their contribution to the diversification of genres and the threat to the long-term dominance of large companies [4]. This would mean that even though the K-pop industry remains dominated by major agencies, the emergence of the small labels represents the diversification of the trends, which are constantly reorganising the structure and future direction of K-pop.

2.2. Digital strategies in K-pop

2.2.1. Social media and fan platforms

K-pop agencies maximise fan interaction through TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram by offering dance challenges, behind-the-scenes content short-form videos [5]. Also, dedicated platforms such as HYBE's Weverse enable direct messaging, live Q&As, and exclusive content [6]. Altogether, these platforms extend the sense of closeness between K-pop idols and fans by combining accessible, mass-market reach with controlled fan spaces. However, these strategies can also create risks of over-commercialising fan participation by converting creativity into promotional labour. Consequently, direct access relies on monetised subscriptions.

2.2.2. Algorithmics, streaming, and datafication

K-pop companies optimise streaming strategies by leveraging algorithms on Spotify and Apple Music for global expansion [7]. These tactics can amplify chart dominance and enhance international exposure, but they can also increase dependency on volatile platform logics and trends beyond their control. Simultaneously, big data analytics help the agencies to profile fan preferences and personalise experiences, such as fan-voted setlists and tailored merchandise [8]. Here, datafication can strengthen fan ownership and loyalty, but it also raises ethical questions about surveillance and manipulation of consumer behaviour. Therefore, the use of algorithms by K-pop represents a potential site of digital vulnerability, despite being a driver of global expansion.

2.2.3. Immersive experiences and branding

K-pop bands leverage virtual immersion technology more heavily to bridge spatial distances and communicate with fans. For example, XR concerts, VR performances, and AI-edited avatars such as BLACKPINK's "The Show," or aespa performing AI-edited avatars synchronised with human

members in real-time virtual space [9,10]. At the same time, idols are paired with status brands such as BTS's several-year partnership with Louis Vuitton to produce a feeling of prestige, refinement, and aspirational living among worldwide fans [11]. Such actions make K-pop an aspirational commodity and cultural content, but also blur the border between advertisement and artistry and create problems concerning commercial spectacle at the expense of true musical connection.

2.3. Success metrics

Global K-pop popularity is regulated and monitored by commercial, cultural, and symbolic signs. For example, global music chart-leading by groups such as BTS and BLACKPINK being ranked consistently at the top of Billboard Hot 100 and Spotify Global Charts as a sign of worldwide consumption [12,13]. With quantitative dominance, fanbase expansion in larger markets from North America to Southeast Asia shows the expansive popularity of internet versions of K-pop. Idol celebrity tours to global centres, like the speech by BTS at the United Nations, show the soft power and cultural diplomacy function of K-pop for Korea [14]. But achievement charts and progress shown on them can discredit downplaying achievement by focusing on the quantitative outcome instead of qualitative matters such as fan health, endurance in culture, and ethical conduct.

2.4. Gen Z's consumption habits & K-pop appeal and consumer trends

Being digital natives, Generation Z are hugely drawn to short-form video content, particularly on platforms such as TikTok, where visually rich vignettes and dance challenge virals are central first points of contact for up-and-coming artists and music [15]. Generation Z do not demand passive viewing like the preceding generations but rather requires co-creation and interactivity, and thus user-generated content and direct interaction with idols are principal elements of their consumption culture. In response to these, K-pop companies provide different elements to engage fans, such as behind-the-scenes content, promote social value, and create global fan interactions. The parasocial relationship between Generation Z and K-pop idols is based on the interaction of social, psychological and technological factors, which is aligned with the digital literacy of Generation Z. Structured fan communities like ARMY and BLINK are online social communities in which youth obtain legitimization, identity, and meaning [16]. Streaming in real-time, fan editing, and crowdfunding make the fans stakeholders, rather than customers. This legitimates affective identification and loyalty. Lastly, K-pop is attractive because it provides entertainment with identity-making tools and community-based production in a fractured digital society.

3. Methodology

The qualitative method using secondary data sources has been employed in the study. This strategy makes it possible to deeply consider consumer culture, cultural meanings, and interpretative models in connection with quantitative data, and for this reason, it is suitable for cultural research, identity, and consumer culture studies [17]. This design is suitable because it makes it possible for us to research Gen Z and K-pop fandoms' consumer practices, identity-related behaviours, and cultural meanings that are constitutive. This study conducted a case study analysis to examine the way K-pop group aespa uses digital resources to engage with Generation Z. The analysis synthesised insights from these sources to provide an integrated understanding of K-pop's marketing practices. As the study relied exclusively on publicly available literature, no ethical approval was required.

4. Case study

4.1. Introduction of aespa

Aespa (stylised as æspa) is a fourth-generation Korean girl group launched by SM Entertainment on November 17, 2020, consisting of four human members, namely Karina, Giselle, Winter, and Ningning, along with four AI members (æ) that exist in a shared metaverse storyline [18]. Since their debut, aespa has been recognised for their blend of music, technology, and narrative, which earned international acclaim for impactful performances and visually dynamic productions [19]. This case study examines aespa's digital marketing practices and their resonance with Generation Z.

This case study chose aespa as the representative girl group because: aespa, an actively constructed virtual and real symbiosis system, perfectly reflects the current living state of Generation Z in real and digital space, and provides a ready-made structural framework for the study of "digital relationship construction".

Aespa is chosen for its significance on cyber-inspired aesthetic, strong interactive AI blended technology and most importantly it perfectly aligns with cultural text of Generation Z. Moreover, similar to traditional idol group integrates AI skill of human that helps to improve the fan engagement. In addition, the aespa vision system deeply integrates cyberpunk, electronic wasteland, and mecha elements, which is highly consistent with the cultural orientation of Generation Z for science fiction themes and gamified aesthetic preferences. Compared with the aesthetic fatigue of the traditional Hallyu stage, aespa's style differences form a strong generational appeal. Aespa's successful model - "core worldview, all-media narrative, technology-enabled interaction" - provides a model for subsequent idol groups. By analyzing aespa, a set of "digital relationship building models" can be extracted that can be used as a reference for other brands or artists.

4.2. Marketing strategies

4.2.1. Social media and user generated content

On May 14, 2024, aespa's official Bilibili channel preview-released their debut full album Armageddon's title track "Supernova" in the style of a secondary creation challenge where the fans posted edits, covers, and artworks [20]. By converting marketing expense into creative fan interaction, aespa was able to effectively harness the participatory enthusiasm of Gen Z. This is consistent with Self-Determination Theory that users favour content more when they create it themselves [21]. Yet, too much dependence on User-Generated Content weakens brand identity through the absence of implicit quality control.

4.2.2. Virtual members and metaverse narratives

Aespa's competitive strength lies in presenting four virtual members, "æ" (avatars), and creating a different world context besides the actual members. For example, in the "Black Mamba" MV, virtual and real members both appeared together and completed smooth docking with CGI technology and motion capture technology [22]. Such cross-dimensional interaction promotes the future-oriented language of the collective that is appealing to Generation Z's hyper-realistic experience [23]. Such mixed reality content can help users' immersion and engagement further.

4.2.3. Virtual reality concerts

Real Live, a subsidiary of SM, and AmazeVR joined hands on 21st September 2023 to display aespa's VR concert at Mega Box Seoul [24]. Virtual reality technology not only enhances the experience of performances but also offers more room for interaction, enabling fans to feel connected with aespa's performance and music on an individual level. Incorporation of such technology reveals much about Gen Z's desire for immersive and interactive content.

4.2.4. Cross-platform collaborations

Aespa collaborated with PUBG in July 2025, including their metaverse storytelling within the game universe directly through interactive stages and special virtual skins. The collaboration exposed both gaming enthusiasts and K-pop enthusiasts to the union, significantly increasing downloads while proving that Gen Z was interested in scarcity-driven digital experiences such as PUBG: Battlegrounds and aespa 2025 [25]. Based on the attention economy [26], instant and short game activities like logging in every day to receive pieces accumulate users' habits of instant reward, which adjusts to music promotion's extended cycles in the classical sense. However, some individuals criticised this step due to the invasion of gaming and the increasing commercialisation of artists.

4.3. Summary

To sum up, aespa's digital strategy in attracting Generation Z reflects a high degree of forward-looking and innovative: it deeply integrates metaverse narratives, immersive technology and social media interaction to build a fan ecosystem that integrates virtual and real and has a strong sense of engagement. With the help of UGC challenges, VR concerts and other forms, the user's immersive experience and emotional connection are strengthened, and the brand stickiness and communication breadth are effectively enhanced. These strategies demonstrate Gen Z's need for personalization, interactivity, and instant feedback.

However, there are some problems with this strategy. Firstly, over-reliance on user-generated content, while fueling fan engagement, can also lead to fragmented brand image, weakening the authority of the official narrative. Secondly, although the application of metaverse and virtual reality technology is innovative, high production costs may limit its large-scale promotion, and some fans express disgust with overly commercial cross-border cooperation (such as game linkage), believing that it weakens the purity of art.

Aespa's future optimization can be carried out around three key points: first, strengthen the synergy mechanism between UGC and official content, and maintain brand consistency while stimulating user creativity through theme guidance, quality screening and reward mechanisms; second, deepen the inclusiveness of technology applications, such as developing lightweight AR/VR experiences or low-threshold interactive functions to reduce fan participation costs and expand coverage; The third is to pay attention to the artistic integration of commercial cooperation, choose cross-border projects that are highly compatible with the brand tone, and avoid aesthetic fatigue caused by excessive commercialization. Ultimately, aespa needs to find a balance between technological innovation and humanistic care, consolidating its pioneering position as a "metaverse icon" in a sustainable way, while deepening its emotional resonance with Gen Z fans.

5. Discussion

The aespa literature review and case study show that K-pop is a quintessential example of how to connect with Generation Z through online platforms. By combining experiential content, immersion, and collaboration between devices, K-pop shows how brands can be embedded in the daily life of young consumers. This is relevant to marketing since it means corporations across sectors can utilise social media to create loyalty and a culture of some sort [5,6].

K-pop also accentuates co-creation and collaboration. Fan art, real-time chat, and voting campaign activities not only strengthen emotional connections but also set consumers at the centre of the brand story [27]. This would mean that giving consumers creative outlets and control can yield genuine, lasting loyalty for businesses. Likewise, new technologies such as virtual concerts and gamified partnerships demonstrate how brands can circumvent physical boundaries, reach more individuals, and create experiences that truly resonate with Gen Z's digital identity [9,10]. In contrast with Self-Determination Theory, it can be argued that, more dependency on the user generated content may disrupt the brand identity in the competitive market [21]. It can be important for K-pop to focus on Omni-channel in order to market the brand and content.

However, there are exceptions. In one, for example, parasocial relationships establish closeness but commercialise personal relationships and foster dependency [28]. Moreover, excessive commercial brand-ification and algorithmicization can alienate viewers if they feel exploited [29]. These dangers mean that while online engagement can fuel growth, careful management is required to build trust and cultural respect.

6. Conclusion

The above evidence evidently indicates that strategies like participatory social media promotion, online experience-based interaction, fan-based strategies, and data customisation are critical in building belonging, identity, and loyalty among young fandom. K-pop entertainment companies, following the principles of authenticity, inclusivity, and interactivity of Gen Z, have transformed passive fandom into a participatory, collective culture.

The study also acknowledges some gaps and limitation. In this particular study, Case of aespa have been chosen, however, the case not fully reflects the entire K-pop group in the global market. Also ethical aspects regarding the fan data, much algorithm dependency those key challenges have not been clear from this case study. Moreover, future research can focus on investigation of the cross-industry K-pop cultural and ethical use of AI and technology in entertainment industry.

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