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Social Media Communication and K-pop Consumption Behavior among Chinese Adolescents

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Abstract. This study examines K-pop consumption among Chinese adolescents from the perspective of social media communication. Drawing on multi-source secondary data, it examines the structural characteristics of adolescent K-pop consumption in terms of exposure channels, consumption duration, and expenditure level. Adolescents demonstrate higher levels of exposure to K-pop than other age groups but lower per capita expenditure than individuals aged 20–40. This mismatch between high involvement and low payment ability forms the practical basis for competitive consumption; The platform algorithm and fan community (fandom) quantify fan interaction as an indicator of idol commercial value, causing young people to undertake a large amount of unpaid digital labor; The exclusivity produced by closed fan circles is also most pronounced among adolescents. Accordingly, this study proposes a three-level governance framework encompassing algorithmic ethics, community restructuring, and media and financial literacy education. This study extends existing fandom research beyond adult fan communities and offers a basis for more targeted forms of protection.

Keywords: K-pop, Chinese Adolescents, Algorithmic Visibility, Fandom Economy, Competitive Consumption

1. Introduction

1.1. Research background

According to the survey of China Internet Network Information Center, in 2022, the number of minor Internet users in China will exceed 193 million, and the Internet penetration rate will reach 97.2%, which is closer to saturation than 93.7% in 2018; The proportion of underage internet users who frequently watch short videos has increased from 40.5% in 2018 to 54.1% in 2022 (Figure 1) [1]. As of June 2024, the number of Chinese internet users has reached 1.09967 trillion, with short video users accounting for 95.5% of the total internet users. Among the new Internet users, teenagers aged 10-19 accounted for 49.0%, while short videos were the first Internet applications used by 37.3% of the new Internet users [2]. Payment habits are also maturing: Tencent Music Entertainment Group's online music payment users reached 100.9 million in 2023, a year-on-year increase of 19.8%, music subscription revenue was 12.1 billion yuan, a year-on-year increase of 39.1%, and the monthly ARPPU in the fourth quarter rose to 10.7 yuan [3].

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The combination of supply expansion, channel penetration, and mature payment has enabled K-pop to reach Chinese teenagers, no longer relying on centralized broadcasting in the TV era, but through precise distribution through Weibo super talk, short-form video platforms, and algorithmic recommendations in music streaming media. The overseas Korean Wave reality survey conducted by the Korea International Cultural Exchange Promotion Institute further shows that among the respondents who first or second associate K-pop with Korea, 35.2% are teenagers, while only 16.3% are over 50 years old. From a practical point of view, the clarification of the role of social media in the process is worthwhile in the context of platform governance, the compliance management of the content industry, and minor protection.

This surge in domestic sales was 119.5% higher than in 2020, compared to the 22.7% growth of the overall content industry, which had increased from KRW 5.64 trillion to KRW 6.90 trillion during the same period. Whereas in China, the focus of digital music monetization has gone from acquiring new users to engaging them more, growing revenue from users as the key to expansion. This coming together indicates that the power to sway payment decisions of adolescents will be a major competitive edge.

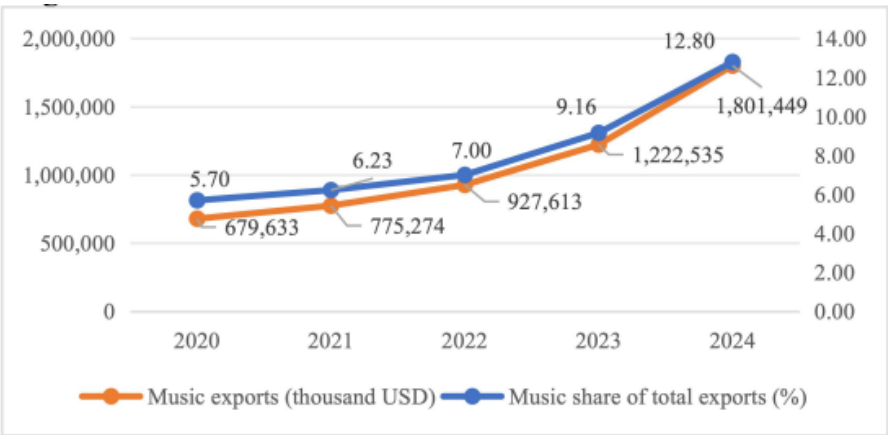


Figure 1. Exports of the Korean music industry and their share of total content exports, 2020-2024

1.2. Literature review

Jin and Yoon proposed that the essence of Hallyu 2.0 is a spreadable media practice, where social media enables the dissemination of cross-border popular culture to break free from the geographical constraints of traditional distribution channels. In an earlier study of fans, youth, and consumption in the Chinese context, Fung argues that fan identity depends heavily on the visibility of consumption. Zhang and Negus focused on the production mechanism of East Asian idols and proposed the concept of data fandom, believing that the commercial value of idols is redefined by platform indicators, and fans are therefore included in the value production chain [4]. Zhai and Wang found that there is a clear hierarchical structure within the fan community, with those who possess digital skills and industry knowledge becoming organizers, while the labor of ordinary fans is neither easily noticed nor rewarded. Wang used digital ethnography to examine the political consumerism of Chinese K-pop fans, pointing out that group buying and purchasing have been constructed as a "responsibility ethics", and purchasing behavior has become a confirmation ceremony for fan identity. Yin and Xie revealed the rewriting of participatory culture by platform logic, arguing that community language and interaction rules are increasingly shaped by platform mechanisms. Zhang

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and Mao's research on Chinese online translation communities also indicates that the self-organizing production of fans is both sustainable and constantly faces external constraints [5].

1.3. Research gap

Previous studies have mostly focused on the organizational mechanisms, political implications, and identity construction of fan communities, or discussed the marketing value of K-pop from the perspective of brand endorsement effects. The quantitative description of consumption behavior is often based on adult fans or all fans as samples. Far fewer studies adopt age as a core variable to systematically compare adolescents with other age groups in terms of exposure channels, consumption duration, consumption share, and actual expenditure. There is also less discussion on how these differences can be transformed into specific consumption risks. This article attempts to fill this gap.

In short, while previous research explains why and how fans consume, it offers limited insight into the structural constraints affecting fans of different ages and the risks arising from those constraints.

1.4. Research framework

Firstly, review macro-level data on South Korean content exports and China's digital consumption environment. Secondly, select two typical cases to describe the specific path of the conversion of social media volume to consumption. Again, based on second-hand statistical data divided by age groups, identify the positive impacts and core issues brought about by this phenomenon, with a focus on explaining the formation mechanisms of three types of problems: high involvement and low payment ability mismatch, gratuitous digital labor, and circle exclusivity.

2. Case selection and analytical context

2.1. Case selection rationale

This article selects two representative communication scenarios as observation objects: one is the dissemination and consumption mobilization of the South Korean boy band BTS on Chinese social media, and the other is the daily consumption of K-pop mainly carried by streaming media platforms. These cases illustrate two mechanisms: social media-driven conversion under limited official channels, and algorithm-driven daily consumption. Since 2016, cultural exchanges between China and South Korea have fluctuated due to geographical factors, and the official exposure channels for Korean artists in China have significantly narrowed.

2.2. Social media-driven consumption conversion

In the BTS case, Wang's research documented the complete consumption chain formed by Chinese fans in the absence of local performances: some fans go to South Korea or Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan multiple times a year to participate in concerts and signing activities; Key opinion leaders within the community organize group buying, directly purchasing albums, video products, and endorsed products from Korean websites; The fan foundation uses crowdfunding to place support advertisements on city screens, bus stops, and subway stations. Within these communities, purchasing is framed as an obligation rather than a personal preference, and expenditure becomes a visible marker of fan identity.

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In daily consumption scenarios, mobile terminals constitute the main entry point. The data from the overseas Korean Wave survey can quantify this judgment: among the channels of exposure to Korean music, 88.7% are reached through online or mobile platforms, which is much higher than the 38.1% through television. Among online users, 61.7% of adolescents used Spotify, 8.1 percentage points higher than the overall figure of 53.6%.

The commonality between the two scenarios is that social media simultaneously serves three functions: content distribution, community organization, and consumer persuasion, with teenagers playing a dual role as both consumers and free promoters. The two cases differ mainly in conversion intensity: the BTS case involves concentrated, high-unit-price expenditure, whereas streaming consumption consists of frequent, low-unit-price subscription payments.

3. Mechanisms and consequences of adolescent K-pop consumption

3.1. Positive dimensions of K-pop consumption

3.1.1. Cross-cultural awareness and aesthetic literacy

The high standards of the K-pop industry in arrangement, dance choreography, and visual design objectively raise the aesthetic threshold of young people for audiovisual works. Overseas Korean Wave survey data show that 43.0% of respondents identified “good music quality” as a favorable factor, while 30.3% cited “outstanding stage performance”; both figures exceed the 26.7% who selected “attractive appearance or style”. At the same time, cross-cultural exposure has also sparked interest in Korean language learning, Korean fashion and beauty, and other related fields, expanding international perspectives and cross-cultural understanding abilities to a certain extent.

In addition, cross-linguistic content consumption has also driven actual language learning behavior: survey data shows that the primary factor inhibiting the favorability of Korean music is the unfamiliarity and difficulty of Korean lyrics, with 22.8% of respondents choosing this option and 23.3% among teenagers. Language barriers thus operate both as consumption friction and as a potential source of motivation for systematic second-language learning.

3.1.2. Digital collaboration and transferable skills

To support their idols, fans spontaneously formed data groups, translation groups, graphic design groups, and publicity groups, forming an efficient division of labor and collaboration system on social media. Zhai and Wang’s research suggests that such communities have clear mechanisms for task allocation, progress tracking, and quality review, and those who possess digital skills assume organizational functions [6]. For teenagers, participating in it means practicing project management, cross-lingual communication, and content production in real collaborative scenarios, and these abilities are transferable. Yin and Xie also observed that fan communities have developed complex expression norms and negotiation mechanisms in long-term interactions, and their level of organization has exceeded that of general interest groups [7].

The output of fan communities is aimed at an open and immediate feedback audience, and its quality standards are tested by real communication effects, rather than determined by teacher ratings. For teenagers who lack a sense of achievement in school environments, communities provide an alternative source of self-efficacy; For those with organizational skills, communities also provide early leadership practice areas.

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3.2. Structural problems in adolescent K-pop consumption

3.2.1. High involvement and constrained payment capacity

Teenagers exhibit a typical mismatch between high involvement and low payment capacity in K-pop consumption. As shown in Figure 2 and Table 1, the proportion of teenagers who first or second associate K-pop when mentioning Korea is 35.2%, which is more than twice the 16.3% of the group over the age of 50; The average monthly listening time for Korean music is 11.68 hours, and Korean content accounts for 26.55% of its total music consumption, which is higher than the overall level. However, its monthly average expenditure is only 85.97% of the overall level of $4.49, lower than the $4.90 for the 20-year-old group and the $5.01 for the 30-year-old group [8].

Table 1. Consumption of Korean music by age group, 2024

Age Group	K-Pop as First or Second Image of Korea (%)	Listening Time (hours/month)	Korean Share of All Music Consumed (%)	Spending (USD/month)	Spending Index (Overall = 100)
Overall	27.4	11.43	24.36	4.49	100.0
Teens (15-19)	35.2	11.68	26.55	3.86	86.0
20s	32.5	12.38	27.05	4.90	109.1
30s	23.3	11.83	23.65	5.01	111.6
40s	19.7	10.60	21.52	4.66	103.8
50s	16.3	7.35	14.78	3.26	72.6

Note: The Spending Index is calculated by the author as the ratio of each group's monthly spending to the overall figure.

This mismatch has clear behavioral consequences. Teenagers' emotional investment approaches that of adults, yet their disposable income remains constrained. Therefore, when the community converts expenditure into identity identification, the gap can only be filled by compressing other expenses or relying on consumer credit. Algorithmic recommendations further amplify this pressure: the high interaction rate of high-priced consumers' posting content leads to more distribution, repeatedly reinforcing the circle norms of 'no buy, no love'. The mechanism of fan identity dependence on consumer visibility pointed out by Fung has evolved into a structural consumer anxiety among teenagers due to the constraints of payment ability [9].

The structure of access channels further clarifies how this pressure is transmitted. As shown in Table 2, 88.7% of people who come into contact with Korean music through online or mobile platforms, while television accounts for only 38.1% and radio accounts for 12.6%; Among online platforms, 61.7% of adolescents used Spotify, 8.1 percentage points above the overall rate [10]. Adolescents' use of Weverse, a dedicated fan community platform, stood at 6.4%, compared with 5.1% overall. This means that adolescents' contact behavior is highly concentrated in an environment regulated by both algorithms and community mechanisms, both of which are ranked based on interaction and consumption. In contrast, one-way channels such as television and radio, although also disseminating content, do not have the function of making individual consumption behavior public and comparable.

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Table 2. Channels and platforms used to access Korean music, 2024

Channel or Platform	Overall (%)	Teens 15-19 (%)	Difference (pp)
Online or mobile platform	88.7	88.1	-0.6
Television	38.1	34.5	-3.6
CD, DVD, Blu-ray, or videotape	16.1	15.8	-0.3
Radio	12.6	11.5	-1.1
YouTube	71.6	72.0	0.4
Spotify	53.6	61.7	8.1
YouTube Music	42.2	42.6	0.4
Weverse	5.1	6.4	1.3

Note: The first four rows are channels of exposure; the remaining rows are online platforms used by respondents who access Korean music online. Differences are calculated by the author.

3.2.2. Algorithmic exploitation and unpaid digital labor

Social media quantifies interactive behaviors such as likes, shares, comments, and votes as indicators of the commercial value of idols, and Zhang and Negus refer to the resulting fan base as data fans. Under this mechanism, teenagers are required to devote a large amount of their spare time to completing tasks such as ranking, controlling evaluations, and reporting in order to maintain the popularity of their idols. Zhai and Wang's empirical analysis shows that the hierarchical structure within a community gives organizers prestige and discourse power, while the labor of ordinary members lacks visibility and does not generate any form of compensation [6]. Considering the high Internet penetration rate among minors in China and the advantages of short video platforms, the time value of this kind of labor is significant in total, while it can be hidden and only be discovered when children's academic performance drops or when their sleep pattern is disordered [2, 11].

There are three reasons for the concealment of this mechanism. First, the tasks are decomposed into a high frequency of micro behaviors, which are performed in the short term, and have extremely low single inputs, but which add up to a substantial amount. Secondly, work is not treated as work but as emotion, and teenagers label it as leisure and don't have to deal with the traditional definitions of time use. Thirdly, the hierarchical structure of the community makes the peer pressure for assessment greater than the institutional pressure, and the social cost of evading the assessment greater than the time cost of doing work. Yin and Xie suggest that platform logic changes the norms of community, through the regulation of content dissemination, based on data from interactions, thereby generating institutional incentives for fan mobilizing [7]. The result is that teenagers continue to produce tangible attention for commercial entities without employment relationships, remuneration, or clear working hours.

3.2.3. Fan circle exclusivity and adolescent identity formation

The exclusivity of the circle is the most strongly felt negative factor among teenagers. Figure 2 shows that among the factors that suppress the favorability of Korean music, the proportion of teenagers who choose "closed and exclusive fan culture" is 17.8%, the 20-year-old group is 18.2%, and the group over 50 years old is only 12.6%; Among adolescents, 15.8% chose 'poor response

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from those around them', which is also higher than other age groups [8]. These two indicators together outline a situation where teenagers are both the main bearers of social exclusivity and potential producers.

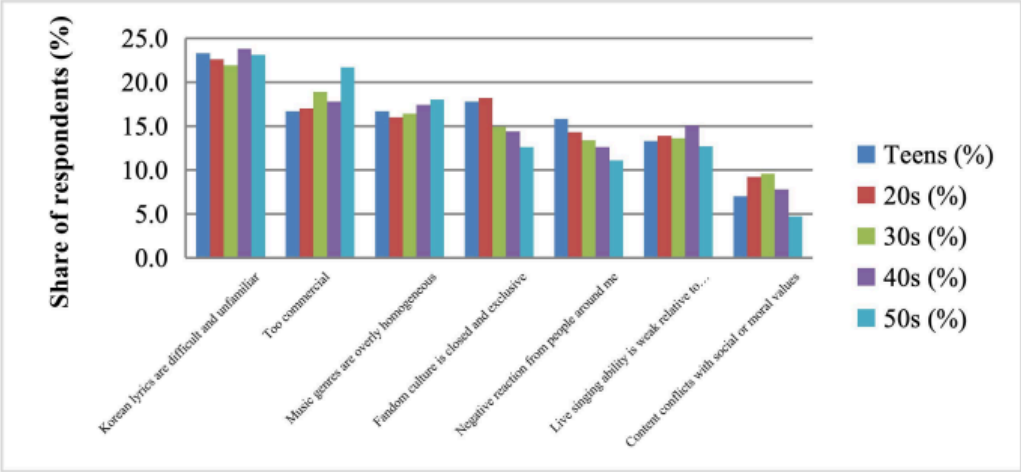


Figure 2. Factors inhibiting favourability toward Korean music by age group, 2024

Note: Multiple response items, first and second choices combined; base is respondents who consumed Korean music.

The direct manifestation of exclusivity is community conflict. When fans see their idols as an extension of themselves, criticism of their idols can easily be recognized as a denial of themselves, triggering defensive attacks. Wang's research documented the strategy of some communities using identification of other individuals to transfer pressure during controversial events [12]. Although this attribution method can alleviate conflicts in the short term, it spreads opposition to more groups. For adolescents who are in a critical period of identity formation, long-term immersion in highly confrontational discourse environments may weaken their ability to accept different viewpoints and weaken their value judgments of local culture while excessively identifying with foreign cultural symbols.

It is worth noting that the situation of adolescents in such conflicts has a dual nature. On the one hand, their identity is not yet stable, making it easier for them to internalize group positions into personal positions, resulting in higher emotional involvement in conflicts. On the other hand, it is often at the bottom level of the community hierarchy, lacking the power to define issues and resolve conflicts, and often can only execute action plans set by organizers [6]. On a longer time scale, if adolescents learn to handle differences through confrontation rather than negotiation during this stage, their social cognitive patterns may be influenced for a long time, and this outcome goes far beyond the scope of consumer behavior itself.

4. Governance strategies

4.1. Platform governance: age-sensitive algorithmic ethics

To address competitive consumption, platforms should establish age-sensitive recommendation models. Specifically, in the information flow of accounts identified as minors, it is necessary to forcibly remove content centered on consumption amount ranking, posting screenshots, and progress of assistance fundraising, in order to cut off the transmission path of peer pressure. Secondly, a consumption prompt and cooling mechanism can be established: when the system detects that

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underage users frequently browse high premium merchandise or repeatedly purchase the same album in a short period of time, a rational consumption prompt will be forced to pop up, and a cooling period for placing orders will be set. Again, the algorithm weights should be adjusted to include music appreciation, music theory popularization, and aesthetic education content in the recommendation pool, diluting the concentration of pure consumption information. Considering that short video users account for 95.5% of the total internet users, the responsibility of short video platforms in such mechanisms is particularly crucial [2].

The feasibility of this strategy is based on two practical conditions. Firstly, the platform has mature age recognition and duration management technology capabilities. The implementation experience of restricting the game duration for minors shows that the relevant mechanisms do not constitute obstacles at the engineering level. 61.5% of underage netizens believe that the management method of limiting game duration has indeed reduced their own or their classmates' game time. Secondly, such interventions target specific types of content rather than the total amount of content, and do not involve restrictions on normal cultural consumption, so the commercial cost is controllable. Mechanism design should avoid relying solely on blocking; instead, prompts and explanations should help adolescents understand the rationale for restrictions.

4.2. Industry adjustment: from data labor to value creation

The brokerage company and the platform jointly reconstruct the fan incentive mechanism and transform data into public welfare. Feasible paths include: initiating educational, environmental, or community service projects in the name of idols, redirecting funds and time originally intended for repeat purchases towards verifiable social contributions, and awarding virtual honor labels based on this; At the same time, platforms should reduce the weight of pure interaction in content distribution and ranking, and instead include indicators such as content originality and community mutual aid quality. The hierarchical structure issue pointed out by Zhai and Wang suggests that the adjustment of incentive mechanisms should also focus on the distribution of benefits between organizers and ordinary members, in order to avoid one-way concentration of labor results [6]. This can guide emotional energy towards social value creation, fundamentally weakening the extreme consumerism orientation of losing followers without buying.

From an industry perspective, this shift need not be understood as a net cost. The peak sales caused by repeat purchases are often concentrated in the early stages of issuance, and their contribution to long-term user value is limited. In contrast, participation through public welfare or co-creation can extend the lifespan of fans and reduce the probability of public opinion crises caused by extreme consumption. Industry data also supports this judgment: music subscription revenue has become the main source of growth for online music businesses, with a growth rate of 39.1%, indicating that stable, low-threshold continuous payments are more sustainable than concentrated high spending [3]. Redirecting incentives toward stable participation is consistent with the evolving income structure of the online music industry.

4.3. Educational intervention: integrated media and financial literacy

It is recommended to promote media literacy and financial literacy education simultaneously at both home and school levels. Schools can incorporate media literacy into compulsory or school-based courses, focusing on deconstructing the commercial logic of emotional manipulation language, guiding students to identify marketing designs such as time limits, limitations, and scarcity, and cultivating equal awareness of different cultures through cross-cultural comparison courses,

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avoiding one-way looking up or simplistic belittling. In terms of families, contract-based management can be implemented to jointly agree on the amount and settlement period of star chasing expenses with children, and present the opportunity cost of star chasing expenses in the form of a family ledger. In view of 77.4% of young netizens in 2022 believing that the Internet has a positive impact on learning, education intervention should not be aimed at isolation, but should be guided by improving critical thinking and self-management ability, so that teenagers can act based on rational judgment rather than emotional impulse when facing consumption induction [11].

In terms of specific implementation, three key points are worth noting. Firstly, the course content should be based on real cases, including the flow of funds for fundraising, the premium formation mechanism in the secondary market, and the conformity design in community discourse. Secondly, family communication should avoid being based on negating interests themselves; it is easy to turn the problem into a hidden state and weaken the effectiveness of guardianship. A more feasible approach is to acknowledge the legitimacy of interests while setting common rules for expenditure and time. Thirdly, it is necessary to establish channels for information exchange between schools and families, as the correlation between consumer behavior and academic performance is often visible at both ends. The combination of the three aims is not to reduce the cultural participation of teenagers, but to enhance their autonomy and control in participation.

5. Conclusion

Using multi-source data, this study finds that Chinese adolescents show high K-pop involvement but limited spending, fueling competitive consumption, unpaid digital labor, and identity risks. It proposes a three-level governance framework addressing algorithmic ethics, community restructuring, and literacy education. This study offers practical guidance for platforms, the content industry, and educational institutions, while its framework also informs governance of youth-oriented cultural products beyond K-pop, including domestic idol and gaming industries.

This study also has limitations. Firstly, the research mainly relies on second-hand data and lacks first-hand surveys targeting Chinese adolescents. The cited cross-border surveys are based on individuals aged 15 and above who have experience with the Korean Wave, making it difficult to fully represent the overall situation of the Chinese adolescent population. Secondly, the data is a cross-sectional structure and cannot directly establish a causal relationship between consumer behavior and psychological mechanisms. Future research can obtain first-hand data through questionnaire surveys and in-depth interviews, and use tracking designs to examine the dynamic changes in consumer behavior with age and community participation, in order to test and revise the conclusions of this article.

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