Popularity of Korean Pop Music among Young Adults in Bangladesh

Nigar Sultana[a] and Md. Mahdi-Al-Muhtasim Nibir[a]
[a] Mass Communication and Journalism Discipline, Khulna University, Bangladesh

Abstract

K-pop, a South Korean popular culture, has gained global popularity due to its catchy music, choreography, and visuals. In Bangladesh, the youth are increasingly interested in K-pop, engaging on social media, and organizing events to celebrate the culture. This study investigates the factors contributing to K-pop's popularity in Bangladesh, its impact on cultural practices and consumption behaviors, and the effects of online and offline platforms on fan behavior and merchandise purchases. Findings from the authors' interviews with young adults suggest that K-pop's popularity in Bangladesh is attributed to its exceptional production, relatable lyrics, intricate choreography, and multifaceted personalities of K-pop stars. Young fans' identification with idols, performances, vocals, fashion, and outward appearances has also contributed to this genre's enduring popularity. K-pop also shapes a cross-cultural sense of self among fans through online fan networks. This research sheds light on the factors that contribute to K-pop's popularity among Bangladesh's youth and explores the unique characteristics of K-pop, the significance of online fan networks, and South Korea's cultural strategy. This research suggests that these insights can be used to enhance cultural dissemination efforts and support the expansion of the Bangladeshi entertainment industry.

Keywords: K-pop, Popular culture, Fandom, Youth, Bangladesh.

Introduction

South Korea's cultural strategy has helped it build its identity in opposition to cultural globalization by ending the ban on foreign cultural objects, which contributed to the growth of cultural globalization (Do, 2012). The backing of the Korean government has been crucial to the development of Korean culture, particularly popular culture. Kim was quoted in Ju and Lee (2015) as saying that the popularity of Hallyu has helped fans building a cross-cultural sense of self through their participation in online fan networks and the things they do.

The influence of South Korean popular culture has led to the emergence of the 'Hallyu'[1], also known as the Korean Wave, as a significant global phenomenon (Ravina, 2009). This cultural phenomenon incorporates various aspects of Korean culture, including television dramas, skincare products, cuisine, and K-pop, which refers to Korean pop music, as its core element. The global influence of K-pop was first sparked with the release of PSY's 'Gangnam Style' in 2012. However, the origins of K-pop can be traced back to the early 1990s in South Korea (Oak, 2013). A major turning point was reached in 2021 when the South Korean boy band BTS achieved chart-topping success, proving the broad appeal of K-pop (Savage, 2022). At the core of K-pop are 'Idols', who are widely recognized for their incorporation of both Western and Eastern elements, as well as their fascinating choreography and wardrobe (Oak, 2013).

In Bangladesh, there is a notable reflection of this cultural transformation, as the youth are actively adopting K-pop and Korean culture, employing various social media platforms as a means to magnify and amplify this phenomenon. Numerous active fan clubs on well-known social media sites like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Reddit serve as evidence of this devotion. The increasing occurrence of events like K-Meet 6.0[2] in Dhaka underscores the growing cultural exchange between Bangladesh and South Korea (Zamal, 2022). The phenomenon known as the 'Korean Wave' signifies the rise of South Korea as a prominent cultural exporter, embracing a wide range of genres such as music and diverse local materials (Fuhr, 2016). The rise of Korean popular music extends beyond its musical compositions, indicating a range of diverse appeals (Fuhr, 2016). This study aims to comprehensively explore the resonance of K-pop among young Bangladeshis in the context of its evolving global phenomenon and increasing influence on diverse societies.

Research Objectives

This study explores the reasons behind the growing popularity of Korean pop music (K-pop) among Bangladeshi youth. It examines the unique social and cultural factors that make K-pop so appealing in Bangladesh. The research has two objectives:

1. The primary objective is to identify the factors that contribute to Korean pop music's appeal to young people in Bangladesh, with a particular emphasis on the unique sociocultural dynamics that underlie its appeal.
2. The secondary objective is to determine the level of cultural integration and fan behavior expressions in Bangladesh.

Through these objectives, this study aims to contribute valuable insights into the multifaceted appeal of K-pop by illuminating the factors that shape its popularity and examining the ways in which it integrates with local culture and inspires a variety of fan expressions of enthusiasm.

Literature Review

This analysis of K-pop's popularity in Bangladesh reveals a multidimensional appeal that extends beyond catchy music and dance routines. After reviewing the literature, three key thematic clusters emerged: Cultural Identity and Diasporic Connections, Cultural Proximity and Influence, and Diverse Motivations and Effects on Audiences.

Cultural Identity and Diasporic Connections

Multiple studies have highlighted K-pop's role in redefining cultural identity and nurturing connections between diverse diaspora communities. Yoon (2018) showed how young Korean Canadians use K-pop to reshape their ethnicity and achieve self-assurance. According to the study, K-pop empowers diasporic Korean Canadians, enabling them to redefine their identity through this cultural medium (Yoon, 2018). In a similar vein, Ju and Lee (2022) examined how cross-border Korean media consumption influences the cultural practices of young Asian Americans, thereby obscuring the distinction between their American and Asian identities. Collectively, these studies demonstrate the transcultural effectiveness of K-pop in nurturing connections and self-empowerment among diasporic communities.

Cultural Proximity and Influence

The concept of cultural proximity plays a critical role in the global popularity of K-pop. Kanozia and Ganghariya (2021) highlighted the impact of cultural proximity on the growing popularity of Korean media in Northeast India. Messerlin and Shin (2017) expanded on this theme by highlighting how internet technologies, niche strategies, and small businesses that capitalize on global networking drive Hallyu's success. The concept of cultural hybridization helps to explain the pervasive popularity of Korean media in India (Kanozia & Ganghariya, 2021). Collectively, these studies highlight how cultural proximity and strategic distribution contribute to K-pop's international popularity.

Diverse Motivations and Effects on Audiences

Do (2012), in his research, analyzed the role that the Internet plays in bringing K-pop news to audiences comprised mainly of teenagers and young adults. Cho (2017) asserted that the motivations of fans can range from

virtual connections and cultural appreciation to the depth of these connections in actual interactions. Ding and Zhuang (2021) examined the motivations behind online star-chasing[3] behavior, identifying factors such as personal skill development, appreciation for diverse artistic expressions, feelings of empowerment, stress reduction, and a sense of community. Study by Lin *et al.* (2021) examined the influence of K-pop music videos on young people's body image and found that factors like race, gender, and location did not significantly impact how viewers perceived their own bodies.

While K-pop's global popularity is well-documented, a deeper understanding of its appeal among specific demographics remains elusive. Existing research often focus on broad themes like cultural identity or diasporic connections. Present study addresses this gap by investigating K-pop's popularity among young adults in Bangladesh.

There is a critical need to explore how K-pop integrates with Bangladeshi culture. Currently, little is known about the extent of cultural assimilation, how Bangladeshi fans express their enthusiasm, and their unique media consumption patterns.

By filling these research gaps, this study aims to provide a more comprehensive picture of K-pop's popularity in Bangladesh. It may shed light on the specific factors that resonate with young Bangladeshi fans, how K-pop interacts with local culture, and the unique ways Bangladeshi fans engage with this genre.

Methods
Study Design and Approach
We employed a qualitative research approach to acquire comprehensive insights into the K-pop consumption patterns of young people in Bangladesh. This method allowed us to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. With a focus on the distinctive sociocultural dynamics that contribute to its appeal and determine the level of cultural assimilation and fan behavior in the Bangladeshi context, our goal is to understand the factors underlying the popularity of K-pop. We conducted in-depth interviews, and a semi-structured interview guide was utilized in this process.

Sampling and Participants
The interviewees were selected through purposive sampling and recruited through online advertisements in particular K-pop fandom Facebook groups. According to the inclusion criteria decided before selecting the participants, they had to meet the following requirements: (i) be a citizen

and resident of Bangladesh; (ii) be between the ages of 18 and 26; (iii) have been involved in a Facebook fan group for a minimum of one year; and (iv) actively engage in the consumption of K-pop.

The age range of 18 to 26 is used in this study to identify young adults because it serves as an arbitrary marker for the boundaries of the developmental process and the social transitions that characterize young adulthood (National Research Council et al., 2015). After conducting in-depth interviews with 18 participants, data saturation was achieved which indicates that the sample size was sufficient for the study. Table 1 presents the profile of our selected respondents in terms of their age, sex, and education level.

Table 1. Profile of the participants

No.	Name*	Age	Sex	Division	Educational Level
1	Jhuma	18	F	Khulna	H.S.C
2	Mumu	22	F	Khulna	Bachelor
3	Brishty	22	F	Dhaka	Bachelor
4	Shourav	21	M	Barishal	Bachelor
5	Shworna	20	F	Mymensingh	Bachelor
6	Jannat	19	F	Sylhet	Bachelor
7	Tasnim	19	F	Dhaka	HSC
8	Raya	21	F	Chattogram	Bachelor
9	Rasik	23	M	Chattogram	Bachelor
10	Shamima	18	F	Rajshahi	HSC
11	Rekha	22	F	Chattogram	Bachelor
12	Fariha	23	F	Rangpur	Bachelor
13	Twaha	20	M	Sylhet	Bachelor
14	Neha	21	F	Rangpur	Bachelor
15	Sachi	21	M	Rajshahi	Bachelor
16	Jeba	24	F	Barishal	Bachelor
17	Jyoti	18	F	Khulna	HSC
18	Sadi	22	M	Barishal	Bachelor

* All the identities in this table are pseudonyms.

Procedure

The in-depth interviews were conducted using the 'Zoom' video conferencing tool, and all the information was recorded with the participants' prior consent before being verbatim and in full length transcribed to capture every word (including repetitions and pauses) that was said. During the interviews, notes and reflections were also taken to ensure the transcription was accurate. The interviews were conducted in Bengali at first, but the researchers made every effort to translate them into English without diluting their original content.

Data analysis technique

The information obtained from the in-depth interviews was interpreted using thematic content analysis. Identification of themes or patterns is a key component of thematic analysis, a methodical approach to the analysis of qualitative data (Lapadat, 2010). Based on the participants' actual experiences, it allowed us to pinpoint the similarities and differences. During data collection, we used appropriate codes and then categorized those into themes. Data analysis revealed four major themes - Fans' Motivation to Consume K-pop, Perception of the popularity of K-pop, Adoption of Korean culture, and Fan behavior and purchase style.

Results

Fans' Motivation to Consume K-pop

Participants of the study had a clear understanding of K-pop, defining it as South Korean popular music encompassing music groups, solo artists, and various forms of visual media like movies, dramas, and series. Interestingly, a significant portion of the interviewees viewed K-pop as more than just catchy music. They saw it as an avant-garde musical genre that challenges established norms and ideas. A participant, Shourav (21), exemplifies this perspective: "K-Pop basically refers to Korean music. To me, K-pop is an attempt to break conventional ideas through music."

The reasons for becoming K-pop fans varied among the participants. Some highlighted the versatility of the artists, appreciating their ability to excel in singing, dancing, rapping, and even acting. This well-roundedness was a major draw for fans, who expressed their admiration for the artists' diverse skill sets.

For others, a strong emotional connection with the artists played a key role. They were drawn to the captivating entertainment value, relatable lyrics, and intricate choreography that K-pop offers. Another participant, Mumu (22) captured this sentiment, stating: "It seems like a complete package. Because, for me, the reason behind supporting K-pop is that they always connect with the audience so much that the audience is always busy with something."

The study interviewed participants about their initial exposure to K-pop. Most of them were exposed to K-pop primarily through interpersonal connections and using social media platforms like YouTube, Facebook, and TikTok. The most popular K-pop group among the respondents was 'BTS', followed by 'BLACKPINK' and 'BIG BANG'. Other notable K-pop groups and artists included Super Junior, ITZY, Kim Woo-sang, Jeenie Kim, Lalisa Manobal, V, RM, and Jungkook. The emotional content of the lyrics was the primary factor in the participants' admiration for their preferred artists.

Most of the participants emphasized the importance of relatable lyrics as a key determinant of the artists' appeal. As a participant, Jhuma (18), explained:

> BTS, Stray Kids, and Big Bang are my favorites because their lyrics are very good. I love Stray Kids because they write their own lyrics and music. No external producer or lyricist is involved. The reason for liking Big Bang is that their leader used to write the songs himself and, in the songs, he highlighted his childhood and teenage troubles.

While music is central, participants identified several other factors that fuel their K-pop fandom. These include intricate narratives in music videos, the impressive skill showcased in synchronized dance routines, the high-energy and captivating performances at concerts, and the overall entertainment value that goes beyond music. This 'complete package' approach, encompassing storytelling, choreography, liveliness, and diverse contents, keeps fans engaged and fosters a strong connection with the artists. Tasnim (19) explained:

> I like the songs of BTS and Black Pink very much. I love the way they dress and the color patterns they use. I love the way they tell stories through their songs. It is great to see not just the song but also the choreography they do to showcase the song and everything they do themselves. In other words, the multitalented thing is in them.

The popularity of K-pop is on the rise as young people embrace the Korean Wave or Hallyu phenomenon. Participants discussed the various elements contributing to K-pop's rise, including the variety of music and subject matter presented by different bands and performers, the engaging qualities of K-pop musicians and bands, and their focus on establishing connections with the audience and cultivating a human-centered approach. The participants emphasized the importance of diversity within a single group or band. As one participant, Fariha (23) states:

> They work more diversely. Their theatrical plots vary. K-pop bands and singers do not just produce one type of song. Each of their songs has a different theme, melody, lyrics, and audience message. Their music is audience-focused. After a fast rise, they do not misbehave with followers. They are humble. They study their audience.

Perception of the popularity of K-pop

This study categorized engagement with K-pop into three levels: high, moderate, and low. High-level engagement involves regularly monitoring K-pop musicians' professional and personal updates, middle-level engagement focuses on music-related updates with occasional personal content, and low-level engagement involves consumption of K-pop content without actively following stars. The depth of K-pop fandom varied amongst the participants. Half of the participants (nine) fell into a 'moderate' category, actively consuming K-pop contents but not necessarily attending every event or participating in all fan activities. The remaining participants displayed a more polarized level of engagement. Five individuals were highly dedicated fans, likely attending concerts, joining online communities, and staying deeply invested in the lives and careers of their favorite artists. On the other hand, four participants exhibited a more casual level of engagement, perhaps enjoying K-pop music, but not actively following the broader fan culture.

The rise in popularity of K-pop can be attributed to various factors according to the interviewees. Social media and the large fan base of K-pop were identified as key influencers. The precise timing required for music production and K-pop's ability to stay contemporary were also acknowledged. The interviewees consistently emphasized the high production value of K-pop as a critical factor in its appeal. This concept extends beyond the quality of music production and encompasses the entire K-pop experience. Music videos often feature intricate storylines, elaborate sets and costumes, and perfectly synchronized dance routines executed by impeccably dressed performers. This emphasis on visual aesthetics creates a captivating sensory experience that draws viewers in and fosters continued engagement. Rasik (23), an interviewee, said:

> In my opinion, K-pop has risen to the top of the international music industry, thanks, in large part, to its distinctive combination of catchy tunes, exquisite choreography, and high production values. This has helped catapult the genre to the forefront.

The preferences of the participants were found to be consistent with the explanations provided for the popularity of K-pop. The participants were captivated by the bands or musicians' ability to multitask, as each member flawlessly merged their contributions, resulting in a fascinating ensemble that had the spectators' complete attention. Twaha (20) described his favorite aspect of K-pop: They are incredibly effective in engaging listeners.

In addition to performing unique music, the groups also perform choreography created specifically for the audiences.

The majority of participants responded negatively when asked if K-pop is enjoyed by people of every age or social class. A total of eleven participants believed that the Generation-Z enjoy K-pop the most, while the rest thought it is enjoyable for all ages. All respondents agreed that K-pop content focuses on the present era and generation. A participant, Shourav (21) describes:

> Actually, I do not think it has reached all classes of people. But they have captured a generation very well. In fact, not all classes can be reached. One or two people can enjoy their songs, but they cannot be compared with the entire generation.

According to the participants, K-pop differs from other types of music or genres in a number of ways. They stated that K-pop is unique by its lyrics, melody, dance, perseverance, and fan base. The majority of respondents cited their choreographed routines as the most distinctive aspect that sets K-pop apart from other genres. Jhuma (18) shared her view of this exceptional aspect:

> Sometimes we cannot sing the lyrics, but we can move our lips along with the lyrics as if we knew the music. Furthermore, in our country, various dance groups are now covering the dances of BTS or BLACKPINK. So, I would say they are more popular for music, melody, and dance types than lyrics.

Adoption of Korean culture

The most adopted Korean manner for the youth is 'Finger hearts', a small heart shape formed by joining the thumb and index finger. The 'victory' sign, which involves making a hand gesture with two fingers, was another gesture that was widely used by the participants. A respondent, Brishty (22) said:

> I find their gestures very adorable. I can mention finger heart, or making heart shape with the mouth. These are very cute to me. Even though these are not common in our country yet, these are becoming very popular among some people.

The respondents heavily focused on the K-pop celebrities' respect for elders, politeness, and humility. Some of them stated their aspiration to be like their favorite K-pop stars. Shamima (18) expressed her views as following: "I love

how they (K-pop singers) respect elders. Even though our cultures are similar, I think they show different level of respect for their elders. I want to practice this virtue in my life."

Out of the 18 respondents, 12 individuals acknowledged incorporating a selection of Korean terms or phrases into their daily routine. The individuals thought those words to be humorous or endearing and chose to utilize them as a means of self-expression. An interviewee, Twaha (20), stated: "I say 'Annyeonghaseyo' instead of hello now. Also, I say 'Babo' whenever someone does something stupid."

The responses from all participants were largely consistent about the similarities between Bangladeshi and Korean cultures. According to their responses, there are few shared elements between these two cultures, with the exception of fundamental Asian cultural values that are universally present across various Asian nations. Sachi (21), a respondent, stated: "I think the basic Asian culture is similar. Except that, I do not find any other thing that resembles that much."

Fan behavior and purchase style

Fans of the K-pop industry stay connected to the community through social media groups and receive updates through their newsfeed. They also receive notifications when new content is released on various media platforms. Dedicated software platforms like 'Weverse' and 'V-live' are used by bands and musicians to share their latest updates and content. Out of the participants, six individuals have used 'Weverse' and five individuals have used 'V-live'. A participant, Shworna (20), said:

> Previously, I would frequently look for new content on 'Weverse' and 'V Live' in addition to pursuing digital editions of newspapers, I also stay informed about current events by following newsfeeds on Google and Facebook, watching videos on YouTube, and reading other online resources.

Online debates about K-pop are frequently seen on social media and discussion forums. These debates become intense when individuals express their personal beliefs. Out of the respondents, only four said they actively engage in these debates to discourage spreading hatred. The majority of participants prefer to remain silent in such situations. A participant, Jyoti (18), stated:

> I actually feel bad when people make bad comments about BTS. Those who actually make bad comments do not really understand. I think it is

really admirable how hard K-Pop works behind the scenes. When I see bad comments, I respond to them immediately.

In contrast, only three participants indicated that they prefer to overlook unpleasant comments when confronted with them in real-life situations. The majority of the respondents indicated their intention to respond to the unfavorable commenter in a kind and considerate manner. Respondent Sadi (22) stated: "Everyone's preference may not be the same. However, if someone says something wrong, I try to explain it to him. Also, I keep in mind that not everyone's preferences may be the same."

The study reveals that motivation to purchase K-pop-related goods varies among individuals. Some buy products from Korean companies to support K-pop stars, while others display their fandom affiliation. Some also find Korean goods as 'Cute' and 'Adorable', indicating a diverse range of responses to the factors influencing this behavior. Raya (21) described her buying reasons as: "Basically, I buy to support them. I have not bought much for myself, but people often do. Whether the support reaches them or not is not really my concern. It is just for peace of mind."

Participants' lifetime spending on K-pop merchandise varied considerably. Some reported spending between 1,000 and 3,000 BDT, while others spent as much as 7,000 BDT. Notably, two participants revealed lifetime expenditures of 15,000 and 20,000 BDT, respectively, highlighting the range of investment fans make in K-pop merchandise.

It is inevitable that other cultures may be influenced by Korean pop music as a result of its widespread dissemination and popularity. K-pop is becoming a worldwide phenomenon among young adults because of its distinctive combination of hypnotizing melodies, smooth performance art, and visual effects, as well as an enormous number of attractive South Korean artists who spend a lifetime in arduous studio systems practicing to sing and dance to synchronized perfection.

Discussion

This study delves into the factors driving K-pop's popularity among Bangladeshi youths and explores their engagement with Korean pop culture. While K-pop's global phenomenon has been documented according to previous studies, this research sheds light on its specific influence within the Bangladeshi context.

Similar to trends observed elsewhere, the high production value of K-pop - catchy music, intricate choreography, and visually stunning music videos - emerged as a major draw for Bangladeshi young participants. This resonates with the idea of fans connecting with the multifaceted talents of idols. Interestingly, some participants even expressed a sense of self-love

resonating from K-pop's messages, hinting at a potential connection to identity exploration.

The study reveals a cultural exchange where K-pop's influence extends beyond music, shaping some young people's daily interactions. This differs from findings focused on Asian Americans negotiating cultural identities. This highlights K-pop's potential to shape social practices in diverse contexts. However, unlike studies suggesting cultural proximity as a factor, Bangladeshi youth's engagement seemed less focused on broader Korean culture adoption. This suggests a nuanced interplay between cultural elements within K-pop's appeal.

The study aligns with the idea of fans who appreciate idols' connection with audiences. The desire for this connection was evident in participants who valued diverse content and the multi-talented aspects of K-pop stars. Furthermore, purchasing K-pop merchandise emerged as a way for fans to express their fandom, mirroring behaviors observed in other studies. While economic factors have been linked to K-pop's global reach, only one participant mentioned a possible connection to South Korea's political economy, suggesting this might not be a major driver in Bangladesh.

This study contributes to understand K-pop's multifaceted appeal and the evolving nature of K-pop fandom in Bangladesh. Future studies could explore the role of social media platforms in shaping these dynamics and delve deeper into the potential influence of K-pop on self-perception among Bangladeshi youth.

Conclusion

This study is helpful to gain a better understanding of the fundamental aspects that contribute to popularity, cultural hybridization, and the behaviors of fans. This comprehension can be put to use in subsequent efforts to improve the country's cultural dissemination across the world. The music industry in Bangladesh is not quite in the same condition of disrepair as it was in past years, but it is nonetheless struggling. The findings of this study have the potential to assist the entertainment sector in expanding its reach to young people in modern society. On the other hand, the factors that have been identified as being responsible for the worldwide popularity of K-pop can be implemented in order to achieve greater audience support and engagement. The dissemination of music and culture on a national as well as a global scale can unquestionably be aided by working toward the establishment of some of the approaches acquired, which can surely help in the process.

Strengths, Limitations, and Recommendations

This study analyzes the diverse ways in which Bangladeshi youth engage with K-pop, and enriches the understanding of fan communities, cultural elements, and the transformative power of virtual relationships within the K-pop fandom. It also elucidates how consumer behavior, such as purchasing K-pop merchandise, serves as a form of expression and support for the fandom.

The study does not explicate consumers' usage and habits which is one of the limitations of this study. This kind of study may demands Key Informant Interviews (KII) to appropriately analyze cultural factors. While the study does not directly address the impact of K-pop videos on body image, it opens up avenues for future research to explore the nuanced relationship between media consumption, self-perception, and cultural influences among youth audiences in Bangladesh.

This study also sets the stage for further investigations into the evolving dynamics of fandom and cultural consumption in a digital age. As the Korean Wave is incorporating more international music and culture, further researches can focus on cultural policies that emulate or discourage cultural imperialism and the economic implications of Hallyu. Further studies on Korean films and TV shows and their structural importance in modern times is suggested.

Notes

1. Hallyu, also known as the Korean Wave, refers to the global rise of South Korean culture, encompassing music, dramas, movies, and more.
2. K-Meet 6.0 refers to a cultural event held in Dhaka that promotes interaction and exchange between Bangladeshi and South Korean cultures.
3. Star-chasing refers to the active following and engagement with celebrities, particularly through online platforms. Star-chasers engage in activities like joining fan clubs, attending events, consuming contents related to their favorite celebrities, and interacting with other fans on social media.

Acknowledgment

Ethics statement

This study was carried out following ethical standards and research principles. The research adhered to ethical guidelines by obtaining informed consent from participants and ensuring the confidentiality and anonymity of their identities

throughout the research process. Data collection, analysis, and reporting for the study were conducted with the utmost ethical integrity.

Conflict of interests
The authors declare no conflict of interests that could have influenced the research process or the findings of the study.

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