

*Unraveling Young Chinese Addiction With the K-pop Culture:
Cultural Identity and Representation*

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The Barcelona Conference on Arts, Media & Culture 2023
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

With the rise of the "Second Korean Wave" driven by K-pop culture, it has become ubiquitous in the lives of Asian students, particularly in China. Notably, Chinese students have exhibited a strong addiction to this pop culture phenomenon. This study aims to investigate the reasons behind young Chinese students' addiction to K-pop culture, utilizing the Uses and Gratifications Theory and Parasocial Interaction Theory. Specifically, the researchers seek to explore the underlying factors contributing to their addiction from social, media promotion, and background perspectives. Additionally, the researchers examine whether K-pop's popularity among Chinese students can be replaced by other pop cultures. A mixed methods approach is utilized, surveying at least 400 students between the ages of 12-25 from different educational institutions to obtain primary data. The sampling method employed is simple random sampling, with the use of a random internet questionnaire survey. Through this approach, the researchers aim to identify the various reasons for young Chinese students' addiction to K-pop culture. Ultimately, the results of this study are beneficial in facilitating better communication of other pop cultures and cultural studies. By these means, the conclusion reveals that young Chinese students' addiction to K-pop culture has a strong relationship with social needs and media promotion. However, it seems there is no significant relationship between the addiction level and background needs.

Keywords: K-pop Culture, Addiction, Popular Culture, Cultural Identity, Chinese Students

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Introduction

According to Oh's findings (2014), the term "Hallyu" or "Korean Wave" has become a well-known concept around the world, with Korean pop culture, being its current driving force. Korean dramas were the primary element of the first Korean Wave in the 1990s, and the second wave is characterized by the increasing popularity of K-pop culture (Oh, 2014). The popularity of K-pop can be observed in the behavior of K-pop addicts worldwide. For example, French K-pop fans gathered outside the Louvre Museum to sing and dance during a concert that sold out in less than 15 minutes (Leung, 2012). Such irrational behavior has aroused academic interest in exploring the phenomenon of K-pop culture.

Numerous studies have been conducted on K-pop culture in recent years, given that it continues to gain traction worldwide and has become a significant factor affecting nationalism, economic development, consumer behavior, and the behavior of its fans (Leung, 2012). The studies conducted by Trolan (2017) have explored how the Korean government has used the "Korean wave" to boost tourism, while Malik and Haidar (2020) have examined how K-pop fans form strong online bonds based on their shared love for their K-pop idols. Furthermore, Leung (2012) has documented the relationships between K-pop production, distribution, and consumption from a globalization perspective.

However, there is a lack of research exploring why K-pop culture has such a significant impact on Chinese people, especially the younger generation. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the reasons behind young Chinese students' addiction to K-pop culture by applying the Uses and Gratifications Theory which was introduced by Blumler and Katz and adopted by Ruggiero in his 2000 research (Ruggiero, 2000), and the Parasocial Relationships Theory which was first proposed by Horton and Wohl and further developed at a theoretical level by Giles (2002). By focusing on students with a Chinese cultural background, this study aims to provide a deeper understanding of how culture is transmitted among people with a specific cultural background through the popularity of K-pop culture. Additionally, the study aims to help addicted K-pop fans view this phenomenon more dialectically, rather than blindly following the trend. Lastly, the study aims to provide better opportunities for some regional cultures to communicate with the rest of the world.

Statement of the Problem

This study adopts an exploratory approach to comprehensively investigate the reasons for young Chinese students' addiction to K-pop culture from the perspectives of their background, social environment, and media promotion. To achieve this, researchers utilize two theoretical frameworks: Parasocial Interaction Theory and Uses and Gratification Theory. These frameworks assist researchers in elucidating the unique appeal of K-pop culture to young Chinese students and comparing it with other entertainment cultures to analyze whether its influence on this demographic is irreplaceable. Specifically, the study aims to address the following research questions and objectives:

Research Questions

1. What is the extent of K-pop culture popularity among young Chinese students?
2. Why are young Chinese students addicted to K-pop culture?
3. Is the influence of K-pop culture on young Chinese students irreplaceable?

Research Objectives

1. To determine the extent of K-pop culture popularity among young Chinese students;
2. To explore why young Chinese students are addicted to K-pop culture;
3. To figure out whether the popularity of K-pop among young Chinese students is irreplaceable.

Theoretical Framework

According to Reyes (2005), a theoretical framework provides the researcher with the necessary information, problems, and data to concentrate on. This study is focused on the Parasocial Interaction Theory by Horton and Wohl and the Uses and Gratification Theory by Katz and Blumler, which serve as the foundation for this investigation and support three independent variables in this study.

The Parasocial Interaction Theory explains the potentially one-sided interactions between media consumers and the media itself. It refers to the establishment of parasocial relationships between media users through social media platforms and the characters they encounter through the media. This theory assumes that media users establish parasocial relationships with the people they encounter through media after Parasocial interaction (Giles, 2002). The theory suggests that Chinese adolescent students, as media users, develop parasocial attachments to K-pop artists as media communication figures and then become addicted to K-pop culture (Stever, 2017). Furthermore, the more attractive the performers are and the stronger their ability to make the audience empathize with them, the more intense the audience's parasocial experience will be, leading to an increased need for prosocial relationships and greater addiction to the pleasure of the prosocial experience (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011).

The Uses and Gratification Theory by Katz and Blumler mainly focuses on communication on social media and the psychological needs of the audiences. It claims that a group of people will use a specific social media to meet their psychological needs, which include escapism, knowledge, social companionship, etc. The theory also indicates that different media compete with other media to satisfy the audience (Ruggiero, 2000). Since the research topic is to unravel young Chinese students' addiction to K-pop culture, the demands of the students should be focused on. By applying the theory of uses and gratifications, the research can better conclude whether the addiction to K-pop culture is related to the way of media promotion.

Conceptual Framework

This study adopts the Conceptual Map Model proposed by Hwang (2003), as shown in Figure 1. The framework is designed to assist researchers in interpreting significant findings and understanding the impact factors of addiction to K-pop culture within the Chinese cultural context. The impact factors identified in this study include background needs, social needs, and media promotion. Through statistical analysis, the study aims to demonstrate how these factors contribute to addiction to K-pop culture and whether the influence of K-pop culture on young Chinese students can be replaced by other pop cultures. Besides, the study provides insights into cultural communication and offers guidelines for other pop culture's seeking to gain popularity among young Chinese students.

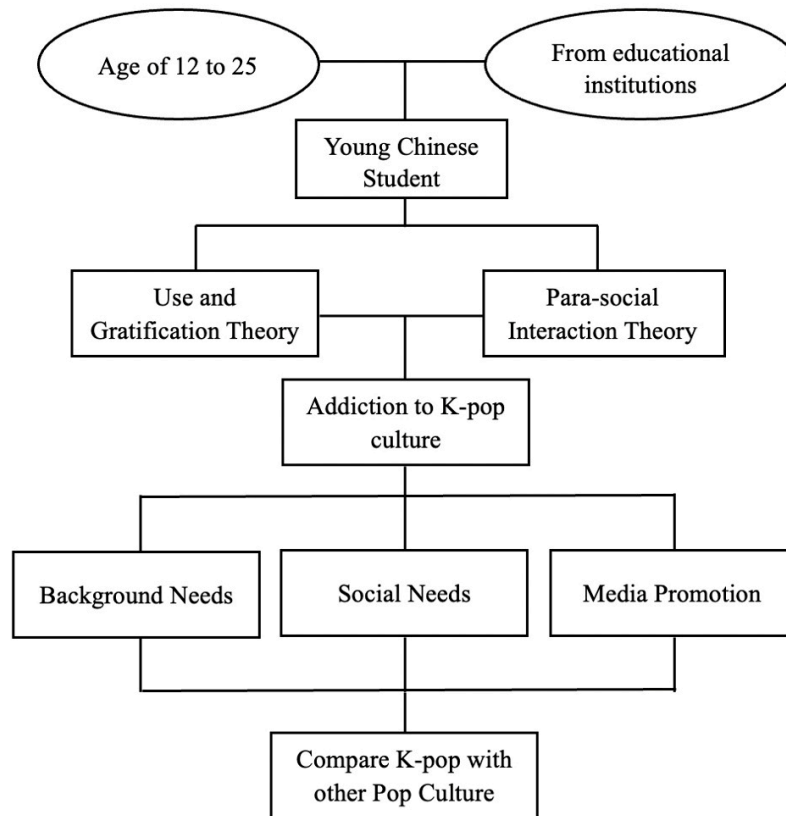


Figure 1 Schematic diagram of the conceptual framework of the study

Research Methods

In this study, the focus is on unraveling the addiction of young Chinese students to K-pop culture and evaluating whether the influence of K-pop culture on them is irreplaceable. To address these research questions, a mixed methods approach is adopted, using both qualitative and quantitative research methods (Ivankova & Creswell, 2009). The qualitative aspect of the study involves collecting nominal and ordinal data from the literature (Bailey, 2014), while the quantitative aspect uses numeric data and statistical analysis with software such as SPSS and Jamovi.

The collected data aims to analyze the popularity of K-pop culture among young Chinese students, identify the reasons for their addiction to K-pop culture, and evaluate whether the influence of K-pop culture on young Chinese students is irreplaceable. To ensure the effectiveness of the research design, random sampling is used to target Chinese students aged 12 to 25 (Bhardwaj, 2019). An online survey questionnaire is used to maintain the confidentiality and anonymity of respondents.

Since the research questions are focused on 'how', 'why', and 'whether', questionnaires and interviews are the most appropriate methods for collecting and displaying the data and analyzing the relationship between different variables. Finally, the data is collected, displayed, and analyzed at an objective level to ensure that the result is reliable. Overall, this research design significantly helps in providing evidence to answer the research problem as accurately, clearly, and unequivocally as possible (Ivankova & Creswell, 2009).

Research Sample

The target population of this study comprises Chinese students aged between 12 and 25 years. The research aims to collect a minimum of 400 questionnaires from this population and analyze the data collected. The researchers use a basic random online questionnaire poll to sample the population. The questionnaire sample is selected based on certain criteria, including that the participants should be students in educational institutions and their ages should fall within the 12-25-year range.

Research Instrument

The researchers utilize a self-made questionnaire as the primary research instrument, supplemented by face-to-face interviews. The online survey questionnaire includes a series of questions related to the K-pop social circle, K-pop group conception, and the promotion of K-pop culture, among other topics. The questionnaire is divided into four parts: the first part collects basic information about the respondents, the second part investigates the popularity of K-pop, the third part explores the reasons for addiction to K-pop, and the fourth and final parts assess whether K-pop could be replaced by other pop cultures. The questionnaire includes single-choice, multiple-choice, and scale selection choices to collect participants' attitudes and thoughts on these topics. The researchers aim to collect as much data as possible to obtain a comprehensive understanding of young Chinese students' addiction to K-pop culture.

Data Analysis

This study aims to unravel the addiction of young Chinese students to K-pop culture. The primary data collected is analyzed objectively to meet the three objectives of the study by using SPSS and Jamovi. All qualitative data is analyzed using descriptive analysis and thematic analysis to explore the extent of the popularity of K-pop culture among young Chinese students (Objective 1), figure out the reasons for the addiction to K-pop culture (Objective 2), and examine whether the influence of K-pop culture on young Chinese students is irreplaceable (Objective 3).

Establishing Quality

Collecting and analyzing data related to the research problems is essential to meet the research objectives. The data collection method adopted by the research is a random questionnaire survey, which can eliminate chance, remove any bias, and ensure the representativeness of the population. Additionally, the designed questions do not contain any guiding questions, and the researchers have structured the problem from the superficial to the deep to ensure the research has value.

Ethical Consideration

The researchers aim to guarantee ethical considerations and protect the confidentiality of the participants throughout the study. The respondents are treated with respect and kindness, and their personal information is kept confidential. The researchers inform the respondents about the purpose of the study, and their data is used solely for this research. The researchers promise not to use the data for any other purposes or share the data with any third parties. To ensure anonymity, the respondents are identified by a code number instead of their names.

Innovation and Significance of Study

The innovative aspect of this study is the utilization of network information dissemination and acquisition chains to create the questionnaire. Specifically, the questionnaire collects the participants' views on K-pop culture through the online K-pop network community. This approach is aligned with Blumler and Katz's Uses and Gratification Theory (Ruggiero, 2000), which suggests that individuals actively seek out and use media to satisfy their needs and desires. The strict limitations on entertainment activities for Chinese teenagers in the educational system have led to the development of the Internet as a platform for Korean entertainment culture to enter the social media of Chinese young students, resulting in its gradual popularity.

The phenomenon of young Chinese students' addiction to K-pop culture makes this research significant to communication studies, psychology, and other related fields within social sciences. The study's findings contribute to the communication system, facilitating better communication between other pop cultures and the world by adopting this innovative approach.

Conclusion

Main Findings

Through correlation studies, we got statistically significant results. Pearson's correlation coefficient between addiction level and the environment is 0.174. For the social needs of the students, the R-value is 0.432. For the degree of media promotion, the R-value is 0.581. We can also see the result from the 3 scatter plots. It can be concluded that young Chinese students' addiction to K-pop culture has a strong relationship with social needs and media promotion. However, it seems there is no significant relationship between the addiction level and background needs.

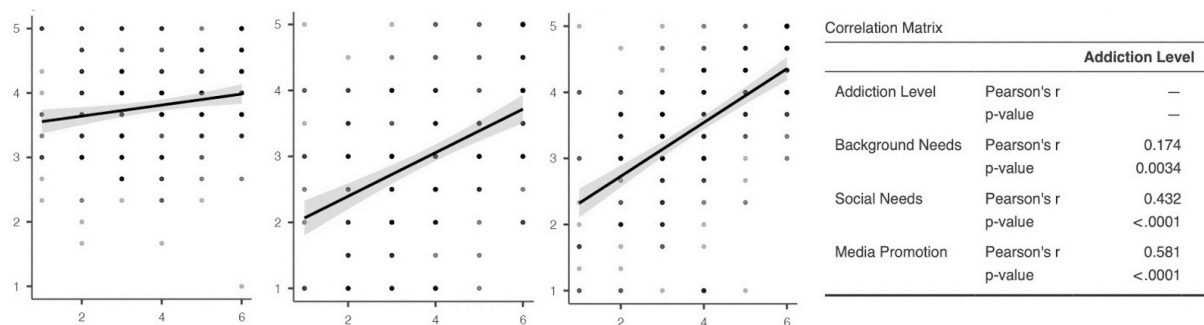


Figure Two: Pearson's correlation coefficient between addiction level and the background needs, social needs, and media promotion (from left to right)

When it comes to the last two questions, we also find that:

Regarding the respondents' opinion on the popularity of K-pop among young Chinese students, the mean value is 3.071 and can be interpreted as "Neutral". Besides, the last question "Is the influence of K-pop culture on young Chinese students irreplaceable", there are several items, and the item "Do you think the production system of K-pop is more perfect than which in China?" has the highest mean value, which is 3.739 and can be interpreted as

“Agree”. However, in general, the student’s attitude towards the irreplaceability of K-pop culture is “Neutral”.

Limitations

1. Limitations of the conceptual map model. Although the conceptual map model provides a useful framework for analyzing addiction to K-pop culture, it may not account for all factors that contribute to addiction.
2. Difficulty in measuring addiction. Measuring addiction is a complex process, and there is no universally accepted definition or measurement tool. Therefore, researchers may encounter difficulties in accurately measuring addiction to K-pop culture.
3. Generalizability of findings. The findings of the study may not be generalizable to other cultures or populations due to differences in cultural values, media exposure, and other factors. Therefore, caution should be exercised when applying the study's findings to other contexts.
4. Some Chinese students' resistance and stereotypes of Korean culture. Due to the tense political relationships between China and South Korea (Sakaki and Wacker, 2017) and the recent unfriendly attitude of the South Korean government toward Chinese tourists (Kwon, 2023), Chinese students may hold a resistant attitude toward South Korea and its culture. Hence, the Chinese students might participate in our questionnaire as well as the interview with their prejudices or stereotypes of K-pop culture.
5. The sample size used in this study is still limited. By way of difficulties, although this study includes at least 400 young Chinese students, based on such a sample size, the research sample cannot represent all young Chinese students; In addition, since the researchers are college students. Therefore, college students may be the majority of teenagers participating in this research, which is also difficult to represent all age groups from 12 to 25 years old, and the number of people in all age groups may not be average.

Further Study

Given current research limitations, there is no international measure of addiction to culture or some invisible trends, the study provides a foundation and a lens of how to make a standard measurement of an individual’s “addiction” to a particular culture for further study.

Acknowledgments

I am deeply thankful to Rosalie Palaroan, for her invaluable guidance, support, and expertise throughout this endeavor. Her mentorship has been instrumental in shaping the direction of this research.

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