

The Cross-Industry Impact of K-pop in China

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Abstract. This study takes the South Korean girl group aespa as a case study to examine the cross-sectoral influence of K-pop in China, encompassing the entertainment industry, digital economy, cultural consumption, brand marketing, and technological development. By comparing the industrialized star-making system of South Korea with the localized practices of Chinese talent shows, the paper identifies key challenges and strategies in balancing efficiency with cultural relevance. Empirical analysis of aespa's digital album sales on Tencent Music reveals the evolving dynamics of digital music monetization and fan economy models. Further, case studies on co-branding with Chinese companies demonstrate how K-pop facilitates cross-border marketing and brand globalization. Additionally, the group's integration of virtual avatars and metaverse concepts offers insight into the application of virtual technology in interactive entertainment and digital content creation. The findings suggest that K-pop's systemic and flexible model offers a valuable reference for Chinese industries seeking to coordinate standardized production with localized innovation, and to build internationally competitive digital ecosystems.

Keywords: K-pop, cultural integration, fan economy, digital content industry, virtual idols

1. Introduction

K-pop culture is a multilayered pop culture that is based on the concept of Korean pop music (K-pop) as a combination of music production, on-stage performance, the idol industry, fashion and beauty, fan economy, and cross-media material (e.g. variety shows and online implementation of virtual technology). It is characterized by distinctive features including industrialization of content production (production of idols, contents, and their distribution across the globe), an extremely interactive fan participation model (online and offline integrated fan culture and community engagement), and strong technical-culture integration (metaverse concept and implementation of virtual idol technology) that all contribute to defining its impact upon cultural globalization because it is spread across the world.

Based on the example of the South Korean girl group aespa, this paper will discuss how K-pop culture influences different industries in China. Specifically, when comparing the formats of China and South Korea talent shows, it explores the contribution of the industrialized star making mechanism of K-pop to the entertainment industry in China and the broader area of content production. The paper is going to combine the examination of the digital sales of the album of aespa and the instances of co-branding marketing of the brands of local Chinese products to find out how

they affect the digital economy of China and strategies of brand marketing. Also, according to the notion of the metaverse virtual idol of aespa, it analyzes the impact of technological implementations of K-pop on the development of virtual technologies and digital content creation in China. Through this analysis, the paper shows how the K-pop culture can be transformed into an innovation and modernization of the entertainment industry of China, technology industry, and consumer industry through the path of technological empowerment and cultural integration. In addition to the limits of the idol industry, the strategy also takes into account the possibilities of creating cross-industry connections.

2. Background

2.1. Scale and characteristics of the Chinese K-POP market

The nature and complexity of the Chinese K-POP market have been experiencing drastic changes over the past few years. The most popular girl group, AESPA, is among the major players in this market, and even the development history of the group demonstrates a variety of changes in the K-POP market.

Based on the size of the market, China grew larger than the United States, Japan and other market players as the largest export destination of South Korea's K-pop album exports in the first quarter of 2024 where the total exports reached US\$12.96 million (estimated RMB 93 million). Chinese market orders of K-POP albums grew by US\$4.31 million to US\$17.63 million over the months of January to April 2025. In this market, aespa had a good record of ups and downs. The first full-length album released by aespa in 2024, titled Armageddon, attracted a lot of fans due to the special sound of the group, more sales of the album, and more popularity on the Chinese market [1]. However, the market was very unstable in 2023. Securities researchers' statistics indicate that during June-October 2023, the volume of albums exported to the Chinese market reduced by 95-99 percent compared to the same period in the previous year. First-week sales of the aespa new album Drama fell by 33.5 percent compared to the previous album, My World, released in May, and sales exceeded 1.13 million copies. Among them, My World was 1.02 million copies or more than half of sales and Drama could not match this number [2]. In terms of market characteristics, aespa is daring to experiment and innovatively combine its musical style. The music is explored through electronic music genre such as deep house, trance, and trap that takes down the conventional structure of K-pop girl groups to develop a new musical identity that would be accepted by young Chinese music fans who seek individuality [3]. The concept of the metaverse idea (and its members and corresponding AI avatars) and the idea of the virtual world called Wilderness were presented by aespa, which can be explained by the fact that youth are interested in exploring technologies and virtual worlds. Concerning the fan economy, the actions of aespa fans have a significant impact on the market. On the one side, the active purchase of fans prompts the purchase of albums, such as the high sales of MY WORLD, which would not have been attained without the support of fans. On the other side, some market changes also affect the behavior of fans. The limitation of group purchases to lower the price, higher pricing and international shipping costs have caused fans to rethink their habit of rushing to buy albums. At the same time, other issues such as frauds and scalpers charging exorbitant amounts during video autograph session and offline autograph session have also resulted in the fan economy being oversaturated.

The promotion of aespa has attracted the interest of those who use the Internet and those who do not: At the 2024 Shanghai signature ceremony, the fans were extremely overjoyed and photos of the members sparked a heated discussion on social networks; the issue gained popularity online, the

music video was watched by a record number of users, and the track was played and downloaded in large volumes on local streaming platforms. One of the major indicators of the market power of K-POP artists is also popularity and interaction with fans on social media [4]. As the perception towards K-POP in China changes and the evolution of aespa continues, they will be exploring other sectors in the market and thus expand their footprint in the market and establish commercial and cultural value. Aespa returned with their latest single, Dirty Work, on June 28, 2025, which is based on the concept of metaverse and the fusion of retro disco and electronic music. The lines may be taken as the encouragement to shatter the stereotypes and stay true to oneself. Pre-sale sales exceeded 1.01 million copies in only 24 hours with China market share of almost 40 percent of total sales demonstrating their continued presence on the global stage [5].

It can be seen that AESPA dominate the China K-POP market with a certain set of characteristics. Musically speaking, they are pushing the boundaries of a conventional framework by incorporating various genres, but conceptually they belong to the technological and virtual world interests of the young generation due to the introduction of new concepts such as the metaverse and AI avatar and therefore create a distinct brand image. According to their market results, they have massive record sales and a significant share of the Chinese market. They leverage their extremely high social media engagement and online stream play rates and other events, such as autograph sessions, to connect with fans off-line, which suggests a loyal consumer base and a strong commercial footprint. Besides, they are growing at the same pace as the Chinese K-POP market restoration. By constantly organizing offline events and planning to grow into concert models, they continue to strengthen their connection with the Chinese market and demonstrate the extent to which they have infiltrated the market and what opportunities lie ahead in the market.

2.2. Resource integration and industry linkage

Aespa integrating resources into the Chinese market is founded on the multi-channel and multi-form synergy methods. They also have a high correlation with Tencent Music Entertainment Group which utilizes QQ Music as its platform of promotional efforts to access a big audience. It will also host a themed exhibition in 2025 that will sell albums and other merchandises that will be blended between online traffic and offline experience and that will promote fan loyalty under the model of music+merchandise+scene. Simultaneously, social networking platforms such as Weibo and Douyin will be used to incorporate musical content, member updates and fan interaction among other things to maximize exposure [6].

Aespa is exploring the possibilities of cross industry collaborations to expand influence in China: collaboration with games like PUBG (theme song, limited skin, emoticons), this would not only help music IP but gaming as well; involvement in the fashion industry by using magazine covers and partnerships with local fashion companies. Music+games+ fashion is beyond the boundaries of one industry, and it forms a multi-industry ecosystem and fixes its positions in China [7].

3. Case analysis

3.1. Comparison of Chinese and South Korean talent shows

Talent shows are variety programs of entertainment focusing on talent competitions and selecting winners (or group) through series of elimination. They are contest and supportive simultaneously, and the audience involvement is equally crucial in the results.

One of the examples of the industrialization of K-pop culture is one of the creations of South Korea, the so-called Create Camp 101 (2016) which included 101 trainees of 10 entertainment companies in south Korea and applied the created star-making assembly line. Their training, both in singing and dancing were grounded on the conventional K-pop standards whereby the most selective criterion was the professional capabilities. To sum up, 11 individuals were selected to form a limited team I.O.I. The cultural brand of K-pop as the sphere of the utmost professionalism is reinforced by the use of a documentary-style form of intense training and high-quality performances on stage. The vote is cast through SMS of the Korean population and it may be viewed not just as a manifestation of the fan culture of mass participation in K-pop, but also as an export of the industry standards and aesthetics through the show.

The Chinese adaptation of the K-pop concept, which is called the «Create Camp 101» (2018), features 101 Chinese trainees (some of them are also overseas Chinese) who are brought together with the purpose to make a girl group under the name of Rocket Girls 101 [8]. The contestants are diverse (both amateurs and professionals) and the format of the show is the same as the others: stage competition + elimination, although it lays emphasis on the development story. Behind the scenes in the training room and growth stories (comeback character etc.) are used to interact with the audience and stage uses Chinese culture (Hong Zhao Yuan) to suit local tastes; Voting has a link with Tencent Video and Weibo whereby fans have to view the videos and buy memberships in order to get the right to vote, and it has become customary to take part in fundraising and voting projects and the tendency is increasingly reliant on the principles of traffic logic.

The Korean edition may be viewed as an intermediate form of what is called standardized K-pop culture exports, whereas the Chinese edition takes on local values and market conditions when adapting to the market requirements. It is introduced as the way forward of the idol industry that is compatible with the Chinese setting, through the investigation of decreasing excessive industrialization and enhancing emotional connections, which demonstrates how the K-pop paradigm has been regionalized and adjusted in intercultural communication.

3.2. Localization of K-pop beauty brands in China

One of the current trends in the growing beauty industry is the combination of K-pop and beauty. Dream Beauty is one of the most successful Korean beauty brands that are part of Amore Pacific and they are actively exploring strategies to ensure that a brand is young and international. That year, Dream Beauty worked with a member of aespa named WINTER. This collaboration not only benefited off the popularity of K-pop but was also successful in attracting customers in China by targeting them with specific localisation measures.

The beauty industry in China has also experienced growth in recent years with the young people becoming the most populous group. They consider the individualized and fashionable beauty products and their tastes on how a brand should be promoted vary. Within this framework, many K-pop beauty companies attempted to enter the Chinese market, yet they face tough competition and culture adaptation problems. The cooperation of Dream Makeup and WINTER is one of the traditional cases of the localization initiatives adopted by K-pop beauty brands in China [9].

3.3. Aespa members' brand endorsement styles and influence

Each member of the aespa group has brought individuality to the advertisements of goods and services, creating a distinctive style. It had a big impact on the sale of the products. Karina is a cool and elegant human AI that spans across multiple sectors, presenting Prada as a minimalist luxury

trend and Converse as a streetwear vibe. The influence has become so significant that even luxury brands and popular goods also garnered considerable levels of focus; Winter is a combination of sweet and edgy and she is expressing the youthful energy with her promotion of Polo Ralph Lauren and New Balance. As the ambassador of Dream Makeup and Espoir, she is in line with the values of the brand due to her new appearance that leads to the rise in the sales of beauty products; Giselle is a freewheeling personality with a multi-functional persona and this shows in her creativity in her art and she applies her highly individualistic sense of fashion to contribute to the avant-garde nature of the brand, and attract people shopping for original fashion; Ningning, whose liveliness and courage personify the luxurious personality of Versace, is the ideal embodiment of the brand, and her endorsements have sparked heated debates and allowed the brand to reach a younger audience in the Chinese market.

The members use their personal characteristics as a sort of glue which enables them to integrate the K-pop impact with the brand identity in an extreme way. They are a typical example of idol endorsements which add commercial value by fan economy and mass communication where they do not only increase product visibility, but also cause emotional resonance between brand ideas and the target audience [10].

4. Discussion

The concept of Aespa has transcended the boundaries of what female idol groups would usually do with the aid of a metaverse-related concept, producing an effect across various spheres of life in China that can be described as multi-dimensional, i.e., through the model of technological progress + cultural integration. Aespa has made the entertainment industry move faster in the sphere of exploring and using immersive digital technologies. The information on the sales of digital albums and the activity of fans at online and off-line events shows the presence of a healthy fan economy and a high level of market engagement.

Through its partnership with Tencent Music, gaming firms, and fashion brands, Aespa has created a synergistic music and multi-sector ecosystem that may serve as a successful solution to combine the resources and innovate within the brands. The group members within the commercial sector adopt various styles of the brand endorser that are deliberately matched to the preferences of consumers in different areas. Taken together with the fact that beauty brands associated with K-pop also act in local markets, it shows the commercial value of an idol and the necessity to culturally fit in the market globally.

The example of the Chinese-Korean girl group auditions is a case study that illustrates the structural and cultural disparity of idol industry models, such models are useful to provide valuable information about the model innovation, cultural synthesis, and monetization of domestic talent shows. This is also indicative of the gap between the consumption of entertainment options and social activities in the Chinese and Korean viewers and as such has theoretical and practical significance in the context of cross-cultural media flow and industry development.

The future is likely to bring a new opportunity to K-pop in China because the restrictions on Korean content are slowly being removed, and K-pop will face a greater possibility of performance, as well as debut groups in the Chinese market. However, there are also numerous challenges that K-POP needs to deal with because people have grown weary of consuming it due to the fan phenomenon. The Chinese also have their own emerging idol industry.

To maintain its rhythm, K-pop needs to focus on creating innovative content, enhancing the fan experience, and demonstrating cultural awareness discarding the unsustainable practices such as high reliance on fan expenditure and manipulating the data. Being sincere and wanting to offer good

content, K-pop can be sustainable in the competitive Chinese market and be relevant and responsible.

5. Conclusion

As a case study, this paper has demonstrated how K-POP has impacted various areas of Chinese life in a cross-dimensional perspective because it has been analyzed in the realm of K pop. More particularly, the difference between the two talent show formats of China and Korea highlights the dichotomy between the industrialized standardization mechanism of K-POP and localized modifications of China. The digital album data and fan economy activities of aespa provide insights into models of digital music payments, and its metaverse concept has resulted in the implementation of virtual technology in the production of content; the member endorsements and brand partnerships have indicated the effect of K-POP on transnational marketing. Thus, the research concludes that K-POP is not only a template of international innovation in various industries in China, but it can also be seen as an international industrial upgrading and development model in the country in terms of its approach to standardization and localization, as well as inter-industry cooperation.

The current work has a high reference worth to serve as a foundation of the further research in the same field, particularly in such aspects as: first of all, extending the scope of research of the impact of K-POP across cultures, liberating the research of the constraints of one idol industry, and providing an instance of the research of the synergistic effect of popular culture on different industries; second of all, providing theoretical and empirical backgrounds of innovative behavior in China as an entertainment, technology, and consumer industry, and thus facilitating them to reach resource integration and model optimization in the course of globalization.

It would be useful to examine in future studies the following directions of research as more in-depth research: first, the dynamics of the evolution of K-POP groups (including aespa) during a long time in the Chinese market, evaluating both its sustainability and tendencies in the evolution of their influence; second, deeper integration methods of K-POP and Chinese local culture and how can it impact cultural identity and values transmission; Third, competition and cooperation relations of K-POP and Chinese industries in the environment of changing policies (e.g. market reactions to the relaxation of the restriction of Korean programs); and fourth, extending the study of the application of virtual technology in the entertainment industry and the role of the technology in changing the user experience and the social interaction patterns.

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