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The Relationship Between K-Pop Fandom Activities on Social Media Platform and Cultural Openness: Attitudes Toward the K-Wave as a Mediator

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the relationship between engagement in K-pop fandom activities, K-wave perceptions, and cultural openness, particularly among international K-pop fans active on social media platforms. It adopts a transnational perspective to understand its broader implications. We empirically examine whether engagement levels differences within K-pop fandom activities affect individuals' perceptions and attitudes. Through the mediating role of the K-wave's impact, our findings indicate that active engagement in fandom activities positively correlates with cultural openness, directly and indirectly. By immersing themselves in K-pop fandom communities, individuals experience heightened exposure to diverse cultural elements encapsulated in the K-wave, resulting in a more open-minded attitude toward other cultures. This suggests that the K-wave, facilitated by social media and digital platforms, not only serves as entertainment but also fosters cross-cultural understanding and appreciation. This study discourses on the role of K-wave in shaping global society. It underscores the significance of examining its impact from a transnational lens. Shedding light on the relationship between engagement in K-pop fandom activities, K-wave perceptions, and cultural openness, offers insights into the evolving dynamics of global cultural exchange. Furthermore, it provides implications for the future trajectory of K-wave as a cultural force in the global arena.

KEYWORDS

K-wave, K-pop, fandom, cultural openness, global citizenship, social media

K-wave is a significant global phenomenon. Initially, it was limited to a subculture mainly in Asia. However, it has garnered a broader international audience through K-pop, K-movies, and K-content (Shim, 2020). Notable examples of the K-wave prominence in global mainstream culture include the Billboard chart-topping achievements of K-pop artist BTS, the Academy Award-winning film 'Parasite,' and the worldwide success of the OTT series 'Squid Game.'

K-wave growth aligns with the expansion of platform media based on network technology. Through platform media, such as social media and video streaming services, the consumption of Korean content, the formation of fandoms, and the exchange of information all occur. These platforms act as catalysts that enable the K-wave to transcend geographical boundaries and simultaneously reach global audiences. The transnational dissemination of the phenomenon ‘The new K-wave,’ which began in the 2000s, has been attributed to media technologies such as social media (Byun, 2011; Yoon, 2014). Park (2012) emphasized the significant impact of online fandoms and social media on the dissemination of K-wave. Social media has transformed K-wave from a mere cultural phenomenon into a platform for community building, self-expression, and social participation, endowing it with social and political significance (Park, 2012). This implies that discussing K-wave without mentioning social media is challenging and that research should be conducted from a broader perspective.

Nevertheless, the global dissemination of cultural phenomena is not exclusive to the phenomenon known as K-wave. There have been previous instances in which culturally rooted content from a specific region has reached a broad international audience. For example, the dissemination of Western popular music through MTV and its Billboard-centered dominance (Banks, 1997; Kraidy, 2002), the global expansion of Japanese animation through fan subtitling communities, in which fans voluntarily create subtitles for media content (González, 2007; Lee, 2011), and the worldwide proliferation of Bollywood films driven by diasporic sentiments (Desai, 2006; Takhar et al., 2012) are notable examples. These cases exhibit analogous characteristics to those observed in the dissemination of K-wave to global audiences.

While these cultural phenomena also made use of digital platforms to a certain extent,

the role of digital platforms in the activities of K-wave fandom is particularly transformative. A particularly striking aspect of K-wave is how K-pop artists, such as BTS, utilize social media. In the case of K-pop artists such as BTS, they make extensive use of social media platforms, including X (formerly Twitter) and Instagram (Lee et al., 2021; McLaren & Jin, 2020). For these artists, social media serves not only as a promotional tool but also as a direct communication channel with fans, where diverse content—whether photos, videos, or text—is produced and shared (Kim & Kim, 2020). This, in turn, draws fans to social media platforms, which become the foundation for fandom activities. Consequently, social media has become a crucial media for amplifying the global reach of K-wave (Kim, 2015).

These activities are not confined to social media alone but extend across various digital platforms, including video streaming services like YouTube, OTT platforms like Netflix, and fan communication platforms such as Weverse. As discussed in Jenkins’ (2006) concept of participatory culture, digital media has become a crucial foundation for the formation and operation of fandoms. The extensive use of digital platforms has enabled the explosive growth of fandoms, which in turn has significantly contributed to the global expansion of K-wave.

Previous studies on K-wave focused on its social, economic, and policy impacts within Korea (Park, 2023; Sohn, 2009). Research on K-wave should be approached from a broader perspective because K-wave facilitates the formation of fandoms among people from various countries, creating social and political meanings. This suggests that it is essential to examine K-wave’s influence from a transnational perspective.

This study explores the impact of K-wave on cultural openness, which is one aspect of global citizenship. The concept of global citizenship has been promoted by entities such as UNESCO (2015) and Oxfam (2015). Global citizenship is an identity required by global community

members amid advancing globalization and is shaped by the ability to understand and accept different cultural backgrounds. As cultural openness is a cognitive belief for global citizens (Na & Chang, 2020), this study explores how K-wave fandom activities affect cultural openness, one of the core elements of global citizenship, across national boundaries.

This study specifically focuses on international K-pop fans that are active on social media. Considering that overseas K-pop fandoms exhibit enthusiasm for K-pop that is distinct from the culture of their place of birth or residence, examining cultural openness differences is deemed meaningful. In particular, because this study focuses on individuals' perceptual aspects, it shifts the focus from viewing K-pop fandom as a singular group to examining the individuals constituting it. The level of engagement in K-pop fandom activities and the use of social media related to fandom is applied to explore the fact that experiences as K-pop fans vary among individuals, even within the same fandom community. Consequently, to examine whether there are differences in the impact of engagement in K-pop fandom activities and social media use related to fandom on perceptions of the K-wave and cultural openness, we utilize empirical data. Through this study's findings, it will be possible to ascertain the role of K-wave in global society, which can provide implications for the future direction that K-wave should take.

K-Wave Global Fandom and Social Media

A multiplicity of media platforms has facilitated the global dissemination of the K-wave based on digital technology (Oh & Park, 2020; Yoon, 2014). In particular, social media development has fostered a global fandom for the K-wave. Social media facilitates the consumption of Korean cultural products and also promotes the acquisition of information (Li et al., 2017), the reproduction of content (Jeong, 2021), the

dismantling of barriers between artists and fans (Kwon, 2021), and direct communication among fans (An & Lee, 2022).

In this context, Henry Jenkins' fandom theory provides a useful framework for understanding this phenomenon. Jenkins (2006) examines the characteristics of fandom within the broader context of popular culture. This approach precedes the emergence of specific cultural phenomena, such as the K-wave. Jenkins underscores that the activities of fans, particularly through networked media, have given rise to the phenomenon of fandom culture, enabling global fan communities to establish themselves as significant cultural movements. Jenkins introduced the concept of "participatory culture," which highlights how new media technologies empower fans and consumers to move beyond passive content consumption to become active creators and distributors. In the context of K-wave, participatory culture manifests as fans actively engaging in content creation and global dissemination. This is particularly evident in the manner by which fans utilize digital platforms, such as social media, to reproduce and disseminate content associated with K-wave. Fans contribute to spreading the K-wave by reinterpreting content and producing secondary creations, such as fan art, fan fiction, and other forms of fan-generated content. Such activities serve to reinforce the cohesion of the fandom community and facilitate the global dissemination of K-wave.

Furthermore, Jenkins' concept of "textual poaching" is useful in understanding how K-wave fandom extends beyond the mere consumption of content. By engaging in interpretive and creative practices, fans infuse the original material with new cultural meanings. Fans 'poach' the original K-wave content by infusing it with new meanings and sharing their creations via social media. The capacity of social media to facilitate global dissemination of fan-generated content represents a significant expansion of the reach of K-wave. This illustrates how social media

platforms serve as crucial arenas for interactive consumption, allowing fans not only to express their opinions and interact with one another but also to communicate directly with artists. In the context of Jenkins' theory of "resistance culture," social media plays a pivotal role. Fans are not merely passive consumers of commercial media; rather, they are active participants in the creation of new values and discourses, the expression of their identities, and the formation of communities through collective communication. Unlike mere content creation, which focuses on reinterpretation and creative output, 'resistance culture' highlights how K-wave fandom's social and political activities transform media platforms into tools for activism, allowing fans to express their identities, advocate for social causes, and form a collective voice within global communities (Kanozia & Ganghariya, 2021; Kim & Hutt, 2021). K-wave fandom, interacting with the transnational infrastructure of digital platforms, also seeks new forms of identity based on cosmopolitanism (Cicchelli et al., 2021).

By bridging temporal and spatial distances among fans across national boundaries, Lee (2021) noted that digital networks, such as social media, facilitate the formation of fandom communities. Lee et al. (2020) posit that based on social media, K-pop fandom communities foster a sense of identity within the fandom that transcends nationality, ethnicity, and age. This is evidenced by using the collective pronoun "we," which promotes a strong sense of group cohesion. Pegoraro (2013) stated that fans could experience a rich and novel form of fandom through social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and blogs without engaging in offline activities. Additionally, Jin (2022) posited that digital platforms, such as social media, serve as a conduit for connecting fans, enabling the sharing and enhancement of cultural sentiments through the formation of fan networks. The socialization facilitated by social media experiences leads to the formation and maintenance of a collective

community called the fandom (Yoon, 2014).

According to Kim (2014), the utilization of social media in fandom expands global fandom culture and enhances social skills. Social media serves as a tool that sustains and expands the global K-wave fandom (Oh & Park, 2020). Prior studies have demonstrated that 74.9% of K-wave fans in Indonesia enjoy Korean content through social media (Putri & Reese, 2018). Social media-driven fan activities in Latin enable K-pop fans abroad to feel connected and foster bonds not only with K-pop artists but also among members of the fandom (Min et al., 2019). Prominent social media platforms in China, like Weibo, facilitate the consumption and production of Korean content, resulting in the K-wave receiving favorable reception (Li et al., 2017). These findings underscore the necessity of incorporating social media in any discussion of K-wave fandom.

Moreover, social media enables the K-wave fandom to transcend the role of mere passive content consumers and become active agents of action. A noteworthy illustration is the social movement activities of BTS's fandom, "ARMY" (Kim & Hutt, 2021). The K-wave fandom, connected through social media, has participated in various activities for social causes, including donating during the COVID-19 pandemic (Kanozia & Ganghariya, 2021), fundraising for campaigns such as Black Lives Matter (H. S. Park et al., 2021) and advocating for climate justice through digital movements (Leksmono & Maharani, 2022). This enables the K-wave fandom to generate political and social implications, thereby enriching the identity of the fandom and enhancing its presence in the global society.

Considering these discussions, exploring fandom based on social media should continue to be a critical theme in K-wave studies. In particular, research focusing on fandom activities as active rather than passive content consumers should be pursued more vigorously.

Fandom Activities as an Individual Fan

Previous research on fandom has predominantly adopted an alternative community perspective (Lee & Ji, 2015). These studies have explored fandom as a collective group, investigating the characteristics, activities, and various social and cultural impacts of fandom. Nevertheless, although there has been a focus on perceiving fandom as a collective entity, there is a lack of discussion regarding the distinctions within fandoms (Kim & Kim, 2015; Lee & Ji, 2015). Platform media, such as social media and online streaming services, primarily constitute the contemporary K-pop fandom. This implies that media's media personalization characteristic allows fandom activities to occur at various levels depending on individual preferences and environments (An & Lee, 2022). Even within the same fandom community, the scope of fan activities can vary for each individual. For instance, in the case of X (formerly Twitter), a prominent social media platform for K-pop fandom (Kim, 2017), individuals form their communities centered around people with whom they resonate well, primarily using the following function, and engage in fan activities within those communities (An & Lee, 2022). Moreover, the multifunctional features of X (formerly Twitter), including tweeting, retweeting, quoting, sending direct messages, and setting post visibility levels, enable a diverse range of fan activities. Moreover, on unrestricted social media platforms with no limitations on posting topics, various types of fan-made content have emerged, including texts, drawings, photos, videos, and merchandise based on media content or media figures (Lee & Ji, 2015). In this process, fans may also assume the roles of content producers, consumers, or both. Additionally, this suggests that even within the same fandom, the level of fan activity can vary considerably.

Previous studies have investigated the potential variations in fan activity categories within K-pop

fandoms. Li et al. (2017) examined the activities of Chinese Weibo users who are K-pop fans. The researchers distinguished between passive and active users. According to their findings, active users were more likely to embrace the K-wave than passive users. Song and Jang (2013) investigated variations in participation levels in YouTube usage among K-pop fandoms in Hong Kong. Moreover, Lee and Ji (2015) examined hierarchies' existence within a fandom, focusing on fan-made content producers within the fandom. An and Lee (2022) revealed the presence of differentiated fan activities within X (formerly Twitter) fandom, categorizing them into three distinct types: relationship-oriented, consumption-oriented, and information seeking. These studies collectively substantiate the diverse types of individual fans within the broader context of fandom, underscoring the significance of investigating this phenomenon for a comprehensive understanding of the community.

Cultural Openness in the Context of K-Wave Fandom

Globalization is increasingly blurring the lines between countries and cultures in the modern world. In this context, understanding and respecting diverse cultural backgrounds has become essential for fostering international interaction. A key factor in this process is cultural openness. Cultural openness refers to an individual's propensity to actively seek out, interact with, and appreciate knowledge and experiences from distinct cultures (Saef et al., 2019). It is defined in previous studies as a willingness to engage with other cultures and traditions (Sabah et al., 2014; Sharma et al., 1994).

Cultural openness is influenced not only by demographic factors, but also by experiences with diversity, including experiences with foreign cultures and experiences through the media (An et al., 2012; Hong, 2014). Similarly, openness to diversity, a concept closely related

to cultural openness, is shaped by social contexts and cultural experiences. Previous research has shown that students' cultural openness is significantly influenced by college environments that encourage collaborative learning (Loes et al., 2018) and peer interaction (Longerbeam, 2010; Pascarella et al., 1996; Whitt et al., 2001). Openness to diversity has been evaluated based on students' receptiveness to cultural and racial diversity and their willingness to engage with different perspectives, values, and ideas (Loes et al., 2018). For instance, exposure to collaborative learning increases interactions with people from diverse backgrounds, positively impacting openness to diversity (Loes et al., 2018). Additionally, peer interaction fosters sustained openness to diversity over time, aligning with the contact hypothesis, which emphasizes the importance of environments that promote mutual respect and acceptance of differences (Longerbeam, 2010).

Previous studies have demonstrated that cultural openness is associated with a reduction in stereotyping and discriminatory behaviors, while also fostering a greater inclination to engage in intercultural interactions (Hong, 2014). Moreover, cultural openness has been found to impact consumers' intentions to purchase foreign products (Gammoh et al., 2020). Porter et al. (2017) observed that cultural openness exerts a beneficial influence on the relationship between the nationality similarity of business partners and partner preference. Furthermore, it shapes how individuals perceive and evaluate social information when making social judgments. In this regard, cultural openness serves to suppress negative cognitive processes that may arise from differences, instead fostering curiosity, inclusion, and positive engagement with diversity. This reinforces the notion that cultural openness is an essential factor in the transnational age, driven by global networks that connect people around the world.

While cultural openness is a critical concept

in understanding intercultural interactions, it is important to distinguish it from other related terms, including cultural tolerance, cosmopolitanism, and global citizenship. Cultural tolerance, for instance, is frequently associated with the acceptance and appreciation of differences. According to UNESCO (1997), tolerance entails comprehensive acceptance, respect, and affirmation of diversity across a range of domains, such as religion, ethnicity, opinions, and modes of living (Madanipour, 2016). In contrast, cultural openness goes beyond mere acceptance, involving an active engagement with and value placed on cultural differences.

Similarly, cosmopolitanism is a broader concept than cultural openness. It is defined as an orientation toward a larger community that extends beyond one's immediate location (Cho & Kim, 2020; Pichler, 2009). While cultural openness is concerned with the individual's willingness to engage with different cultures, cosmopolitanism is a broader concept that encompasses a worldview seeking to transcend local boundaries in favor of global unity.

Finally, global citizenship differs from cultural openness by emphasizing not only cognitive understanding but also the practice of values and attitudes aligned with a global citizen identity. Morais and Ogden (2011) posit that global citizenship is constituted by three core dimensions: responsibility, competence, and participation. These dimensions extend beyond the cultural context to encompass civic engagement, political expression, and involvement in global activism. In contrast to cultural openness, which is primarily concerned with cultural exchange and understanding, global citizenship entails a more comprehensive dedication to global societal practices.

With the rise of the K-wave, what once originated as a cultural phenomenon in South Korea has now evolved into a shared interest and preference that transcends national and ethnic boundaries. Fan activities related to K-wave are no longer confined

to a single country or cultural context but have embraced transnational values, with fandom actions reflecting this global mindset. This is particularly evident in the BTS fan community in Surabaya, where fans are motivated to get more involved in numerous social movements by BTS's charity works like the Love Yourself campaign (Kusuma et al., 2020). Despite its global reach, the essence of K-wave remains deeply rooted in a foreign culture that may appear unfamiliar or distinct to international fans. As a result, global K-wave fans are continually exposed to different cultural values and practices, positioning them to naturally engage with and accept such differences. Given that K-wave content frequently introduces fans to a culture that is distinct from their own, their continued exposure and active participation may foster a broader openness to diverse global cultures. This exposure, therefore, may foster not only openness towards Korean culture but also a broader cultural openness to diverse global cultures.

This growing openness is further facilitated by the rapid advancement of digital media technologies. As cultural boundaries are increasingly breaking down, the public can access a wider range of cultural content more easily. In particular, K-pop content is disseminated through global media platforms such as Facebook, X, and YouTube, where fans can freely share and watch content from other cultures (Ahn et al., 2013; Ono & Kwon, 2013). Consequently, the frequency of international fans being exposed to Korean culture through these mediums is increasing (Ahn et al., 2013; Han, 2017), which could potentially influence their cultural openness.

The rapid spread of K-wave, especially K-pop, has significantly boosted global fandom growth, highlighting the pivotal role of these digital spaces. The widespread distribution of K-pop content online has consolidated the fandom within Korea and expanded the fandom globally. Fans from various nationalities exchange content

and build cultural bonds online (Jang & Song, 2017), suggesting that Korean culture is naturally integrated into their lives. K-wave serves as more than just entertainment; it can influence individuals' cultural openness by encouraging a broader acceptance and understanding of different cultural expressions.

Active participation in fandom activities enhances cultural openness. Jang and Song (2017) discovered that engaging in K-pop fandom activities in the Philippines, such as attending K-pop events and participating in fan-driven social media campaigns, significantly enhances familiarity with K-wave and Korean culture. Similarly, Min et al. (2019) revealed that Latin American K-pop fans acknowledge K-pop as a core aspect of Korean culture and have developed a cultural affinity for it despite the geographical, cultural, and linguistic barriers. The implication is that active participation in fandom activities provides direct exposure to the cultural elements of K-pop and fosters deeper understanding and acceptance among fans. This can help overcome cultural and linguistic barriers, leading to increased cultural openness. In other words, such engagement not only strengthens cultural ties among fans worldwide but also serves as an important channel for cultural exchange, potentially increasing cultural openness.

Consequently, this fandom engagement builds bridges between individuals and the broader world. As fans actively share, discuss, and explore other countries' cultures, they are likely to develop a more inclusive and expansive perspective. This process is expected to result in a willingness to accept and recognize the diversity of cultures worldwide. Considering the preceding discussions on the role of K-wave fandom activities in fostering cultural openness, the following hypothesis and research question are proposed.

K-Wave Impact

Exposure to other cultures often impacts one's

attitudes. This phenomenon is known as the “K-wave impact,” which refers to the influence that Korean culture, including K-wave, has on individuals who encounter Korean culture through various media (S. Y. Park et al., 2021). The K-wave influence encompasses individual’s attitudes and behaviors toward Korean culture after exposure to music, dramas, food, fashion, language, and more (Kim et al., 2022; Moon & Park, 2012). Because K-pop fandom activity encompasses all these domains, the fandom activities of international fans will likely influence their attitudes toward Korean culture.

K-wave impact can be viewed as a form of attitude, indicating that the cognitive and emotional responses experienced by individuals exposed to Korean cultural content, which includes either positive, negative or neutral responses. K-wave impact is more than just the consumption of cultural content, it changes the cognitive and emotional elements of an individual and contributes to the development and strengthening of their perception of Korea. Shrum (2009) emphasized that media consumption increases the accessibility of certain concepts, which in turn activates other concepts related to them. Consistent portrayals of the media activate related concepts within an individual’s cognitive structure, and this process suggests that influences the way media consumption processes information and forms attitudes. Thus, repeated exposure to K-wave contents can lead individuals to develop multifaceted and complex attitudes toward Korean culture. The degree to which an individual is affected by the K-wave phenomenon can be described as the degree to which K-wave phenomenon influences an individual’s attitudes toward Korean culture, as it can trigger a variety of reactions, such as antipathy or indifference, rather than just positive attitudes.

Although there is limited research on the influence of fandom activities on K-wave impact, some studies have examined the relationship between K-pop consumption and

attitudes toward Korean culture. Zhang et al. (2020) discovered that international fans who consume K-pop tend to have positive attitudes toward Korean culture and mediate between the frequency of K-pop consumption and the intentions to purchase Korean products. This suggests that even passive activities, such as listening to songs via online platforms, can positively affect attitudes. More active fandom activities (An & Lee, 2022), such as actively participating in fan events, sending messages to K-pop artists, posting on fan communities, or purchasing artists’ merchandise, provide more opportunities for exposure to Korean culture than passive activities. This is anticipated to stimulate curiosity about Korean culture and potentially have a higher impact on attitudes.

A positive preference for K-wave positively influences consumer attitudes such as cultural awareness (S. Y. Park et al., 2021). Positive attitudes toward Korean culture leads to a more profound immersion in Korean culture or an open acceptance of other cultures. According to Newton and Ferenczi (2024), fans exposed to Korean culture through music and interaction with K-pop artists, particularly ARMY, fans of the global K-pop artist BTS, can form transcultural identities through remote acculturation. Therefore, it can be predicted that the formation of transcultural identities is a direct result of the K-wave impact, which will impact fans’ perception and comprehension of Korean culture and their ability to embrace and comprehend diverse cultural backgrounds. Thus, active fandom engagement is predicted to positively affect attitudes through the mediating role of K-wave impact, ultimately enhancing an individual’s cultural openness.

Furthermore, contact theory states that attitudes toward each other improve when people from different groups have certain conditions, such as equal status, common goals, intergroup cooperation, and support of authorities, law, or custom (Allport, 1954). K-pop fandom activities

are characterized by indirect contact through the media, which forms an image of Korea through various media contents featuring K-pop artists. This indirect contact falls under the parasocial contact hypothesis, which argues that parasocial contact - interactions with characters in media - can serve as a form of intergroup contact (Schiappa et al., 2005).

The parasocial contact hypothesis argues that when ingroup members encounter outgroup members through the media, they may develop a sense of kinship with them and, as a result, their attitudes toward them may change positively. For example, Bond (2021) found that heterosexual participants who watched a TV series about homosexuality for 10 weeks formed a parasocial relationship with a gay character, resulting in a decrease in prejudice against gay people. Another study found that students exposed to a TV show with episodes featuring LGBT people had improved attitudes toward LGBT people compared to before watching the show (Schiappa et al., 2005). These findings may be similarly applicable to K-pop fandom activities. Fans experience quasi-social interactions with K-pop artists through the media, and as a result, they develop an affinity for Korean culture and people. This process may not only change their perceptions of Korea but may also contribute to greater acceptance of other cultural diversity. Thus, active fandom engagement is predicted to positively affect attitudes through the mediating role of K-wave impact, ultimately enhancing an individual's cultural openness.

Based on these discussions, the following hypothesis and research questions have been established.

- H1. Active engagement in fandom activities positively affects cultural openness.
- H2. Active engagement in fandom activities positively affects K-wave impact.
- H3. K-wave impact positively affects cultural openness.

H4. K-wave impact mediates the impact of active engagement in fandom activities on cultural openness.

RQ1. How does social media use related to fandom impact cultural openness?

RQ2. How does social media use related to fandom impact K-wave impact?

RQ3. Can K-wave impact mediate the relationship between social media use related to fandom and cultural openness?

METHOD

Data Collection

As K-pop continues to expand its global influence, China has emerged as one of the largest overseas markets for the genre. To investigate the engagement effect in K-pop fandom activities on the cultural openness of global fandoms, we conducted an online survey via Weibo, China's largest social media platform. Weibo is one of China's most active platforms for fandom engagement, with over 600 million active users. It offers various features, including real-time trends, built-in communities, and group chatting functionalities (Li et al., 2017).

We uploaded a post containing the questionnaire link on Weibo on February 5, 2024. In the post, we outlined our academic study targeting K-pop fans. We pledged to randomly select 30 respondents who completed the survey to receive a \$2 incentive. As of February 9, we have received 331 valid responses.

Most participants were female ($n = 310$), with an average age of 20.35 years ($SD = 3.85$). Additionally, 29.3% reported being fans of K-pop artists for 1.5 to 3 years ($n = 97$). Table 1 provides further socio-demographic details.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics

Variables		n	%
Gender	Male	21	6.34
	Female	310	93.66
Age	Under 20	162	48.94
	20~24	120	36.25
	25~29	41	12.39
	30~34	8	2.42
Length of time as fans of K-pop artists	Within half a year	9	2.72
	Within 6 months to 1.5 years	73	22.05
	Within 1.5 to 3 years	97	29.30
	Within 3 to 5 years	69	20.85
	More than 5 years	83	25.08

Measures

Engagement in K-pop fandom activities refers to the behaviors individuals exhibit as fans of specific K-pop artists, as measured by a set of 13 items proposed by An and Lee (2022). These items inquire about fan activities related to consumption, information seeking, and relationship maintenance. However, we adapted them in the context of our study to focus on global fandom activities related to K-pop artists. Examples include “asking friends or others to purchase merchandise related to the K-pop artists” ($M = 3.23, SD = 1.28$), “purchasing products endorsed or featured in advertisements by favorite K-pop artists” ($M = 3.17, SD = 1.24$), and “seeking out posts related to favorite K-pop artists (such as photos, videos, and articles)” ($M = 4.37, SD = .97$). Respondents rated their engagement on a five-point Likert scale (1 = *Never*, 5 = *Always*). Higher mean scores indicate greater engagement in fandom activities ($M = 3.24, SD = .79$, Cronbach’s $\alpha = .88$). Table 2 lists the remaining items.

Social media use related to fandom is measured by asking respondents about the frequency of

their social media activities related to their favorite K-pop stars and fandom. Respondents were asked about the frequency of seven types of behaviors, such as reading comments ($M = 5.79, SD = .69$), liking posts, and participating in polls ($M = 5.06, SD = 1.40$). The items were adapted from Escobar-Viera et al. (2018) on passive and active social media use and were measured using a six-point Likert scale (1 = *Never*, 6 = *Several times a day*). Higher scores indicate more frequent and active related fandom activities through social media.

We utilized four items adapted from Lee and Robb (2022) for cultural openness. These items include statements such as “It is interesting to deal with people from other cultures” ($M = 5.88, SD = 1.10$) and “It is interesting to learn about people from other cultures.” ($M = 5.98, SD = 1.09$). Respondents rated their agreement on a seven-point Likert scale. Overall, the scale demonstrated high internal consistency ($M = 5.85, SD = 1.02$, Cronbach’s $\alpha = .92$).

K-wave impact describes the extent to which an individual is influenced not only by K-pop but also by various genres of the K-wave phenomenon, including Korean dramas, movies, and other Korean content. This study adapted

Table 2. *Measurements of Engagement in K-pop Fandom Activities*

No.	Item	Mean	SD
1	Meet friends who like the same K-pop artist separately from fandom activities.	2.03	1.23
2	Attend concerts or fan meetings with friends who like the same K-pop artist.	1.86	1.21
3	Meet offline with friends who are fans to watch online performances or year-end stages.	2.16	1.34
4	Watch online performances or year-end stages with friends while chatting (mentioning, DM, etc.).	3.34	1.45
5	Ask friends to purchase goods on your behalf.	3.23	1.28
6	Send messages to favorite K-pop artists through applications (including replies).	3.37	1.39
7	Consume goods such as clothing, accessories, food, movies, or dramas related to favorite K-pop artists.	3.21	1.24
8	Purchase products advertised by favorite K-pop artists.	3.17	1.24
9	Purchase unofficial goods.	3.23	1.31
10	Follow related SNS accounts.	4.48	0.87
11	React to posts left by favorite K-pop artists (e.g., mentions, retweets, likes).	4.31	1.03
12	Join fan cafes or fan communities that require separate memberships.	3.43	1.47
13	Search for informational posts (photos, videos, articles, etc.) related to favorite idols.	4.37	0.97

Table 3. *Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for Main Variables*

Variable	1	2	3	4	M	SD	Cronbach's alpha
1. Engagement in K-pop fandom activities	-				3.24	0.79	.87
2. Social media use related to fandom	.59 ^{***}	-			5.04	0.86	.84
3. K-wave impact	.24 ^{***}	.28 ^{***}	-		2.91	0.61	.82
4. Cultural openness	.37 ^{***}	.16 ^{**}	.22 ^{***}	-	5.85	1.02	.92

^{***} $p < .001$.

the items proposed by S. Y. Park et al. (2021) to measure the impact of K-wave on global fans, resulting in a scale comprising six items ($M = 2.91$, $SD = .61$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .82$) using a four-point Likert scale (1 = *Strongly disagree*, 4 = *Strongly agree*). Examples of these items include "K-wave has influenced my image of Korea" ($M = 2.88$, $SD = .79$) and "I want to learn Korean to understand better Korean TV shows, movies, and K-pop" ($M = 3.21$, $SD = .83$).

Participants' socio-demographic characteristics, including gender, age, and length of time being fans of K-pop artists, were utilized as control variables.

RESULTS

To explore the impact of engagement in fandom activities and social media use related on fandom

Table 4. Summary of Regression Analysis Results for Relationship Between Engagement, K-Wave Impact, and Cultural Openness

Direct effects					
	Estimate	SE	95% Confidence interval		p
			LL	UL	
Engagement → Cultural openness	0.25	0.08	0.10	0.40	.001
Engagement → K-wave Impact	0.26	0.04	0.18	0.34	< .001
K-wave cultural openness	0.26	0.10	0.07	0.45	.008
Social media use → Cultural openness	0.15	0.07	0.01	0.28	.03
Social media use → K-wave impact	0.18	0.04	0.10	0.25	< .001
K-wave → Cultural openness	0.32	0.09	0.13	0.50	.001
Indirect effect					
	Estimate	SE	95% Confidence interval		
			LL	UL	
Engagement → K-wave impact → Cultural openness	0.07	0.03	0.02	0.13	
Social media use → K-wave Impact → Cultural openness	0.06	0.02	0.02	0.11	

Note. LL = lower limit; UL = upper limit.

on cultural openness and whether K-wave impact mediates this relationship, we utilized Hayes’s (2017) PROCESS macro within the R program. Our study involved bootstrapping 15,000 distinct samples to generate 95% confidence intervals in the analysis.

This study employed a mediation model with engagement in K-pop fandom activities and social media use related to fandom as independent variables, cultural openness as the dependent variable, and K-wave impact as the mediator while controlling for participants’ socio-demographic characteristics and length of time being fans of K-pop artists. All measured variables were analyzed as single-dimensional constructs. The results were as follows (see Table 4). Firstly, engagement in K-pop fandom activities significantly positively affected cultural openness ($b = .32, SE = .07, 95\% CI [.178, .444], p < .001$), without considering the mediating effect. This suggests that the increased

engagement in fandom-related behaviors among K-pop global fans correlates with a heightened willingness to embrace cultures different from their own. Thus, confirming H1 which posited that active engagement in K-pop fandom activities positively affects cultural openness.

Moreover, it was found that engagement in K-pop fandom activities positively affect K-wave impact ($b = .26, SE = .04, 95\% CI [.182, .344], p < .001$). Subsequently, K-wave impact significantly influences cultural openness ($b = .26, SE = .10, 95\% CI [.067, .447], p < .01$). This indicates that active engagement in K-pop fandom activities results in increased K-wave impact, amplifying openness to other cultures, confirming both H2 and H3.

Engagement in K-pop fandom activities had a significant direct and indirect effect on cultural openness. Specifically, K-wave impact mediates the relationship between engagement in K-pop

fandom activities and cultural openness ($b = .07$, 95% CI [.016, .127]). This suggests that active engagement in fandom-related activities enhances K-wave impact, fostering greater openness to other cultures. Thus, engagement in K-pop fandom activities positively affects cultural openness through K-wave impact, confirming H4.

Similarly, when social media use related to fandom was treated as an independent variable, the same positive and significant pattern was observed. Without considering mediating effect of K-wave impact, social media use related to fandom has a positive effect on cultural openness ($b = .25$, $SE = .08$, 95% CI [.103, .404], $p = .001$). This indicates that active social media use leads to a greater openness towards foreign cultures. When K-wave impact is introduced, social media use positively influences K-wave impact ($b = .18$, $SE = .04$, 95% CI [.097, .254], $p < .001$), and K-wave impact, in turn, positively affects cultural openness ($b = .32$, $SE = .09$, 95% CI [.131, .503], $p = .001$). K-wave impact plays an effective mediating role in this relationship ($b = .06$, 95% CI [.019, .105]). In response to research question 1-3, the higher the frequency of social media activities related to favorite artists and fandom, the more open individuals are toward foreign cultures. This openness towards cultures due to active social media use is mediated by the increased impact of the K-wave.

DISCUSSION

Given the expanding global influence of K-content, such as K-pop and K-dramas, this study explores the broader impact of the K-wave on global fans beyond mere entertainment. Our study specifically investigates the relationship between K-pop fans' engagement in fandom activities, social media use related to fandom, the K-wave impact on their perceptions, and their openness to other cultures. To achieve this objective, a study was conducted on Chinese

K-pop fans who engage with their fandom through Weibo, the country's leading social media platform. Our findings suggest that active engagement in fandom activities and social media use related to fandom positively influence cultural openness, both directly and indirectly, with K-wave impact serving as a mediator. Through active engagement in fandom activities and social media use related to fandom, individuals experience heightened exposure to the K-wave, enhancing their openness to other cultures. Thus, our study confirmed that active engagement in K-pop fandom activities and active social media use related to fandom contribute to a more open-minded attitude toward other cultures, which is facilitated by the impact of K-wave.

This study's implications are as follows. First, the relationship between K-pop fandom activities and cultural openness is confirmed, thereby demonstrating that the K-wave can impact social and cultural aspects globally, extending beyond the boundaries of Korea. The cultural openness examined can be considered a more global awareness, not limited to a specific country or culture. This implies that exposure to diverse cultures through the K-wave has fostered greater openness to other cultures. These findings demonstrate that the K-wave is a significant cultural force that contributes not only to the success of the entertainment industry but also to global cultural openness and global citizenship. This indicates that the K-wave can foster an understanding and respect for global cultural diversity. In the contemporary era, as the boundaries between nations and ethnicities are becoming increasingly indistinct, the awareness of being equal citizens within a single global community is becoming increasingly significant (Park & Park, 2016). Furthermore, the concept of "cosmopolitanism," which denotes an orientation towards larger communities beyond one's immediate location (Pichler, 2009), is being emphasized (Cho & Kim, 2020). Transnationalism emerged in the wake

of globalization and was regarded as a dominant ideology that shaped the global landscape. Concurrently, issues such as terrorism, infection, refugee, and the climate crisis have emerged as major agendas that require shared awareness and solutions beyond national boundaries (Yoon, 2020). The transboundary orientation, “global citizenship” or “cosmopolitanism,” is gaining attention in this context. This study is significant because it empirically confirmed that the K-wave can strengthen such orientations among the world’s population. It demonstrated that the K-wave plays a positive role on a global scale and derived new implications of the K-wave.

Secondly, this study was conducted on Chinese Weibo users, indicating that digital platforms such as social media can promote cultural openness. Social media serves as the infrastructure for fandom activities for overseas fans, offering a space for engagement in various fandom activities. These findings indicate that platform media, including social media, is crucial for the continued growth of the K-wave. Social media’s hyper-time, hyper-space, and hyper-connected nature affords K-wave fans an identity that transcends mere content consumers. This affects their perception of K-wave and the entire world. To emphasize the new implications of K-wave presented in this study, the active utilization of digital platforms, including social media, is essential. Based on this study’s results, practical implications can be provided for developing digital media and global communication policies concerning the K-wave.

Lastly, this study has demonstrated that active fan activities positively influence perceptions of the K-wave. This highlights the significance of creating an environment that supports diverse and active fan activities for the sustainability of the K-wave. This indicates that it is paramount to facilitate content reproduction and distribution when devising K-wave strategies. Moreover, this study’s practical implications suggest that it is necessary to devise various strategies to enable the formation of K-wave fandoms and the

reproduction and distribution of content through relationships and exchanges within them.

This study has several limitations. Initially, the research was conducted through an online survey targeting Chinese K-pop fans. This makes it difficult to generalize the phenomenon of K-pop fandom in China as a universal model. Variations may occur between countries; thus, rather than understanding all global K-pop fans as a homogeneous group, future studies should employ a detailed and nuanced approach to explore the complex factors of K-pop fandom worldwide. In particular, sample designs that take into account differences in fandom across countries and cultural contexts are important, and this requires methods to collect a more representative sample rather than a non-probability sampling. Furthermore, because online survey relies on voluntary participation, future research should adopt sampling schemes and different methodologies that better reflect the characteristics of the population to improve generalizability. Second, this study did not measure perceived cultural proximity; therefore, participants did not assess how close or similar they felt their culture was to the Korean culture. This limitation can be mentioned because the level of cultural proximity may affect the results, and it is necessary to control for the level of cultural proximity to generalize the study to global fandom. To control for these variables, future research should measure various factors, such as cultural proximity and familiarity. Third, participants were asked to self-report their perceptions of fandom engagement, K-wave impact, and cultural openness. Self-reporting is limited because it relies on participants’ subjective evaluations, which may not align with their attitudes or behaviors. Therefore, discrepancies may exist between participants’ perceptions and actual behaviors, which may affect the accuracy of the study’s findings. To increase the reliability and validity of the findings, future studies can overcome this limitation by adopting more

objective and accurate measurement methods. For example, incorporating methods such as behavioral observation, longitudinal tracking, or third-party data (e.g., social media activity logs) can help overcome the limitations of self-reporting. We also expect that using a mixed-methods approach that combines self-reporting with in-depth interviews, focus groups, etc. will provide a more comprehensive understanding. Fourth, this study is limited by the fact that it only focused on Weibo users and did not measure the frequency of Weibo use. Therefore, future studies should consider variables such as frequency of Weibo use to analyze the specific impact of social media use on cultural openness. Further research will contribute to a clearer understanding of the impact of social media use on cultural openness. Lastly, the study was primarily based on participants in their 20s. This somewhat limited age range makes it difficult to generalize the findings. Given the wide range of age groups that enjoy K-pop artists, future research should consider researching the entire age range, from teens to 60s, or exploring how perceptions vary with age.

Our study examined the relationships among K-pop fans' engagement in fandom activities, social media use related to fandom, the impact of the K-wave on their perceptions, and their openness to other cultures. By analyzing engagement in fan activities as a unified construct, we demonstrated its significant influence on both the perceived impact of the K-wave and cultural openness. However, previous research (An & Lee, 2022) has categorized engagement in fan activities into three distinct types based on the nature of the activities. Future studies could build on this foundation by exploring the nuanced differences among these three types of activities, providing deeper insights into how specific forms of fan engagement may uniquely shape fans' thoughts, attitudes, and perceptions.

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