

# The Association of Fanship in Psychosocial Outcomes among K-Pop Fans

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To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARPED/v13-i1/20550>

DOI:10.6007/IJARPED/v13-i1/20550

*Published Online:* 25 January 2024

## Abstract

Korean pop culture (K-Pop) has reached a global fan base outside of Korea. K-pop fanship is still thought to be a passing fad in society, neglecting the influence it has on its fans. Thus, the purpose of this quantitative study is to look into K-pop fanship from a psychological standpoint. Social Identity Theory and Self-Categorization Theory was applied as a theoretical framework. The study used purposive sampling to determine participants. In total, 203 K-pop fans ranging from 18 to 35 years old from Malaysia fully completed an online survey with three different instruments measuring fanship, and psychosocial outcomes (happiness and self-esteem). Descriptive analysis, T-Test, One-Way ANOVA and simple linear regression were utilized to analyze the data. Results of this study indicated that K-Pop fanship was significant predictors of happiness and self-esteem. Implications of the findings, limitations, recommendations for future studies were also presented.

**Keywords:** K-pop, Fanship, Psychosocial Outcomes, Happiness, Self-Esteem

## Introduction

K-pop, or Korean popular music, is a genre of popular music that has its roots in South Korea and is a component of that nation's culture. On top of its traditional Korean music roots, it incorporates styles and genres from around the world, including pop, hip hop, R&B, rock, jazz, gospel, reggae, electronic dance, folk, country, disco, and classical music (Laurie, 2016). Korean pop music has been gaining popularity in Asian countries for over a decade. The K-pop Wave referred to as Hallyu is known as the rise of the Korean pop music phenomenon which successfully penetrated the overall music industry all over the world (Boman, 2019).

PSY, BTS, and Blackpink are internationally recognized K-pop artists who have demonstrated the extent of K-pop culture's global popularity in recent years through the use of various digital media technologies. The origins of Korean popular music first emerged back in 1885, when Henry Appenzeller, an American missionary, began teaching American and British folk songs at a school (K-POP: A New Force in Pop Music, 2011, pp.47-48). They frequently featured Korean lyrics sung to a well-known Western melody. As the Korean Peninsula was partitioned into North and South after being freed from Japanese control in 1945, Western culture was gradually imported into South Korea between the 1940s and 1960s. After the Korean War, which lasted from 1950 to 1953, American troops stayed in

South Korea for protection. As a result, Western music gained popularity after the American Forces Korea Network radio began broadcasting in 1957. The end of the 1960s and beginning of the 1970s saw another revolution in Korean pop music. Ballad singers began to gain popularity in the 1980s after the release of an album in 1985.

Early K-pop artists adopted American popular music genres like rap, rock, and techno into their music during the 1990s (Hartong & Laurens, 2016). The exposure to American music trends aided in the establishment of entertainment companies. Talent agencies started marketing K-pop stars in the late 1990s by adopting the idol business model from J-pop (Gingold, 2019), in which talents are chosen and taught to attract a worldwide audience through formal courses or through residency programmes (Oh, 2013). Potential talents are selected through a lengthy and rigorous process that includes physical and language training as well as height selection. Regardless of whether they are male or female singers, K-pop prioritizes slim, tall, and feminine appearances with teenage or occasionally very cute facial expressions, according to sociology professor Ingyu Oh (2013). These initiatives increase the marketability of K-pop while simultaneously strengthening South Korea's soft power, which has grown to be a significant component of the official policy (Walsh, 2014).

Further with the emergence of illegal underground music clubs and punk rock bands in the 1990s, there was a reactionary movement against mainstream popular culture (K-Pop: A New Force in Pop Music, 2011, pp. 63–66). In addition to encouraging South Korean entertainers to seek out new markets, the 1997 Asian financial crisis also encouraged the national leaders to concentrate on enhancing the country's cultural influence through music (Hong, 2014).

K-pop's rising recognition in the twenty-first century is a component of Hallyu, also known as the Korean Wave, which refers to the spread of South Korean culture abroad (Ryoo, 2008). The growth of social media websites has been an essential instrument for the Korean music industry in expanding its audience. The South Korean government has embraced K-pop as a component of the Korean Wave and as a vehicle for projecting South Korea's soft power abroad, particularly towards international youth (Linda, 2012). The K-pop market had collapsed at the start of the twenty-first century, and any of the first-generation idol groups that had gained popularity in the middle of the 1990s had either disbanded or stopped performing together (K-Pop: A New Force in Pop Music, 2011, p. 66). However, the popularity of a new boy band upon its debut in 2003 marked the return of idol groups to Korean entertainment and the expansion of K-pop as a component of Hallyu. After the successful debuts, second-generation K-pop began to emerge. K-pop has dominated a significant share of the East Asian music market since the mid-2000s.

Also, Hallyu began to have a big impact on K-pop fans' lifestyles all over the world. For instance, the application of Korean culture can be seen more clearly nowadays among the fans in Malaysia just like how Western culture has been. In order to learn Korean, some Malaysians are even enrolling in language classes. It's amazing how well-versed most K-pop fans are in the lyrics. In addition, K-pop fashion is a significant factor in fan impact. Several Malaysians can be spotted adopting the fashion trends of their favorite K-pop idols. Besides, as an increasing number of people learn to understand and enjoy Korean cuisine, Korean eateries are proliferating throughout Malaysia. Korean noodles and "Kimchi" are gaining popularity. K-pop has undoubtedly had a fascinating cultural impact on Malaysian living. Hallyu leads social interactions in their daily lives as well. In order to join fandoms without disclosing their true identity, some fans create their own online persona. This allows the fans to form social bonds based only on shared interests (Maros & Basek, 2022). Individuals with

extraversion personality qualities are more likely to be found in a subculture like fandom. Extraverts are individuals who are friendly, talkative, and assertive. According to one study, extraversion is highly associated with self-esteem, life satisfaction, and general well-being (Kadir et al., 2011). Despite the influence on lifestyle and social relationships, all of this has surely had a large impact on the culture of consumerism toward K-pop products too. According to the findings of a study, capitalist elements such as individual factors, environmental factors, and mass media factors have an impact on the consumption habits of K-pop fans (Ayob & Abdullah, 2021).

There are fewer studies that focus on the psychological aspect of K-pop fanship. Kpop fanship is still assumed to be a random youth phase trend in society, ignoring the influences it has on its fans' lives. Undoubtedly, music is a brilliant tool for improving mental health. However, the presence of stigma towards K-pop fans can still be seen & it was mentioned in few studies (Ezani, 2019; Othman & Aini, 2021) where K-pop fans were perceived as being obsessive towards their idols. Apart from being discriminated against as obsessive, the fans from different countries or races are called "Korean Wannabe". Another stigma associated with K-pop fans is that Kpop fanboys experience more hardship than girls as a result of the stereotype known as toxic masculinity. The fact that music is gender neutral and universal appears to be forgotten by society. When fanboys support idols, particularly male idols, and show interest in the K-pop genre, they are ridiculed as homosexuals. Therefore, this study is intended to explore the insight of K-pop fanship from a psychological aspect and dispel these stereotypes and demonstrate to the community the good it has been doing.

The findings of this study would reveal what is the influence of K-pop fanship on happiness and self-esteem among the fans. This study would benefit many parties since it has a lot of advantages and would yield more insights about this topic as well. Some parties that will be benefitted are the K-pop fans themselves, the Malaysian community, parents, future researchers and the Malaysian and South Korean Government.

In a society that increasingly values online connections and global communities, this research offers a unique perspective on the power of music and fandom in shaping individuals' psychosocial well-being. This study not only explores the profound motivation that drives individuals to become fervent K-Pop fans but also investigates how their strong sense of belonging to a fandom can have far-reaching effects on their mental and emotional health. By delving into the intricate web of fan culture, it unravels the enigma of why K-Pop fans are often so dedicated, shedding light on the immense joy and fulfilment they derive from their fandom.

Furthermore, the research illuminates the contribution of these passionate fans to the broader cultural landscape. As K-Pop continues its global ascendancy, understanding the psychosocial dynamics of fandom becomes increasingly relevant. This study is poised to uncover valuable insights that can not only benefit the fans themselves but also inform the entertainment industry, academia, and society at large about the transformative power of music and fandom on individuals' lives.

### **Literature Review**

There are two theories that can be used to explain fan behavior and cognition, the Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Self Categorization Theory (Reysen & Branscombe, 2010). It appears that K-pop followers have a social identity based on their compassion to the genre. As a matter of fact, the psychological fanship depth of the K-pop fan identity is still mostly unknown and is a crucial part of the fan social identity conception put forward by Reysen and

Branscombe in 2010 (Laffan, 2020). The K-pop fan identity may be examined within the framework of an empirically supported psychological construct, which is highlighted by the way that group memberships and affiliations affect one's self-concept.

According to Henri Tajfel and John Turner-developed Social Identity Theory (SIT) in 1979, individuals will construct their self-concept or define their identities when they are surrounded with specific social groups. According to Tajfel (1987), a social identity is "that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership" (p. 63). According to this concept, individuals will display proper behavior following the norms owned by their specific organization. For example, if the organization has a research culture that encourages academic excellence, the individual will be involved in research as well. This individual's self-esteem is also linked to organizational membership, and he will compare his organization to others (Nor et al., 2017). Moreover, the self-categorization theory by Turner and his colleagues in 1987 explains that individuals tend to characterize few identities in different settings when they are alone or ingroup entities (Levine & Hogg, 2010). And, through the process of self-categorization, people form their own social identity. As a result of self-categorization, individuals also report several beneficial psychosocial outcomes, including a positive perception of fellow group members and changes in self-esteem and self-enhancement (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

SIT might provide some useful insights regarding how the social identity of K-pop fans has evolved. From this vantage point, K-pop fans might think about their social and personal selves in relation to their K-pop fandom. K-pop enthusiasts have been known to organize themselves into different online fan organizations by starting, joining, and managing them (Kim & Kim, 2017). Yet, there hasn't been a lot of work done to investigate the psychosocial scope of K-pop fans' self-categorization behaviors. In contrast to the assumptions of the theory, qualitative research on K-pop fan identity has shown the existence of a pathological fan type termed Sasaengpaen (Williams & Ho, 2014). Sasaengpaens have been known to display stalker like behavior and an extreme level of fanship. But this kind of fan is not typical of K-pop fans in general (Williams, 2016).

The study conducted by Reysen and Branscombe in 2010 was intended to examine the similarities and differences between sports fans and non-sports fans with fanship and fandom on entitativity, and collective happiness. The findings of the study produced a positive correlation between fanship and collective happiness among sports fans (Reysen & Branscombe, 2010). Another study has been conducted to find the differences in happiness between otaku and non-otaku college students (Jang & Park, 2021). Otaku is a Japanese term for those who have an intense interest towards something, especially in anime, manga and video games. The study results proposed that otaku students had a significantly higher happiness score compared to non otaku students. Laffan (2020) investigated the relationship between K-pop fanship and psychosocial outcomes which included happiness and self-esteem too, along with another domain among K-pop fans. The findings of this study in the end demonstrated K-Pop fanship as a significant predictor of increased happiness, self-esteem, and social connectedness. The attitude of fans has been demonstrated in another study to play a mediating function in the relationship between psychological well-being and self-esteem (Ismi & Badayai, 2023).

## **Methodology**

### ***Research Method and Design***

This study used a quantitative approach to study the association of fanship on psychosocial outcomes (happiness and self-esteem) among K-pop fans. Research design that was used in this study is regression analysis. Regression design was used to solve the research questions included in this study. Since the objective of simple linear regression is to predict the value of an output variable based on the value of a predictor variable, it is suitable for these research questions. Moreover, it simplifies the calculation technique and, more significantly, these linear equations have a simple interpretation.

### ***Sample***

The target population of this study were Malaysian K-pop fans. Participants in this study were required to meet the eligibility requirements, which include being between the ages of 18 and 35 and having listened to K-pop for at least a year. Purposive sampling approach was used to determine participants for this study. The Cochran Formula was used to determine the required sample size which was 384. However, only 203 responses were collected. The setting of this study was based in Malaysia only.

### ***Instrumentation***

#### **a. K-pop based demographic questionnaire**

Participants were queried about their demographic details regarding age, gender, nationality, favorite K-pop artist or band, how long they have been fans of that artist or band, and how frequently they listen to K-pop music.

#### **b. Fanship Scale**

The Fanship Scale was used to assess K-pop fanship (Reysen & Branscombe, 2010). The Fanship Scale is an 11-item, unidimensional self-report instrument that measures psychological fanship and was created to accommodate all types of fan interest. Using a likert scale that ranges from one to nine, each item is self-reported. The Fanship Scale's scoring process entails adding up the item scores, with one item being scored in reverse, and interpreting the total result as the fanship level. Greater scores are correlated with higher fanship levels. Sample questions of this questionnaire are "I am emotionally connected to my interest" and "My interest is part of me". This Fanship scale adapted for K-pop fanship is highly reliable (11-items,  $\alpha = 0.88$ ).

#### **c. Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS)**

A 4-item scale of global subjective happiness is called the SHS. The Subjective Happiness Scale was developed by Sonya Lyubomirsky and Heidi Lepper. Two items ask respondents to rate themselves both in absolute terms and relative to peers. The other two items provide brief descriptions of happy and unhappy people and ask respondents to what extent each categorization describes them. A range of 1 to 7 is produced by averaging responses to the four items. A higher score means that the person is happier. "In general, I consider myself not a very happy person (1) or a really happy person (7)" is one of the example items.

#### **d. Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale**

Rosenberg developed the Rosenberg SES in 1965. The scale is assessed by adding the totals of the 10 items' scores on a four-point Likert scale, with half of the items' scores being given

in reverse. An example question is “At times I think I am no good at all”. Higher total scores indicate higher levels of self-esteem. The SES is satisfactorily reliable according to McDonald’s Omega reliability computation (10-items,  $\alpha = 0.79$ ).

### **Data Analysis**

The SPSS statistical analysis software was used in this study. Data cleansing was done first to find any potential inaccuracies or errors in the database's data. This is accomplished by eliminating erroneous, incomplete, and improperly formatted data (Warudkar, 2022). The data was then validated and evaluated for reliability. The data was next subjected to a normality test to confirm that it is distributed normally. As the data was trustworthy, legitimate, and normal, the research was continued with the data analysis.

Simple linear regression analysis was utilized to examine the relationship between two continuous variables. Since the focus is to find out if psychosocial outcomes can be predicted by K-pop fanship, simple regression analysis was used to determine how much these as a whole affect psychosocial outcomes.

### **Findings**

#### **Descriptive Analysis**

Means, Standard deviation, Minimum and Maximum of three variables are shown in Table 1, including age, gender and the frequency of the fans listening to K-pop music. A total of 203 K-pop fans have participated in this research. A majority of the fans were female (66%) and 34% were male. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 35 divided into three groups, with a mean age group of 1.4, standard deviation of 0.69, and lastly, a minimum age of 18 years old and a maximum age of 26 years old. According to the data collected, 51 (25.1%) out of 203 fans listen to K-pop music excessively. Then, another 43.3% listen to this genre frequently and 31.5% of them listen to it occasionally.

Table 1

*Means, Standard deviation, Minimum and Maximum for K-pop Fan’s characteristics (n=203)*

<b>Variable</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Age (Years)</b>		
<b>18 – 23</b>	<b>144</b>	<b>70.9</b>
<b>24 – 29</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>17.7</b>
<b>30 – 35</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>11.3</b>
<b>Mean</b>	<b>1.40</b>	
<b>Sd.</b>	<b>0.69</b>	
<b>Min.</b>	<b>18</b>	
<b>Max.</b>	<b>35</b>	
<b>Gender</b>		
<b>Male</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>34</b>



<b>Female</b>	<b>134</b>	<b>66</b>
<b>Frequency of Listening to K-Pop Music</b>		
<b>Very rarely</b>	<b>0</b>	
<b>Rarely</b>	<b>0</b>	
<b>Occasionally</b>	<b>64</b>	<b>31.5</b>
<b>Frequently</b>	<b>88</b>	<b>43.3</b>
<b>Very frequently</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>25.1</b>

**Note:** Sd. = Standard deviation, Min.= Minimum, Max. = Maximum.

### Results

Simple linear regression was carried out to examine if K-pop fanship predicts happiness. The model was statistically significant ( $F(1,201) = 178.93, p < 0.001$ ). The adjusted  $R^2$  indicated that 46.8% of the variance in happiness can be explained by the variance in fanship. Fanship significantly predicted happiness among K-pop fans. Thus, the alternative hypothesis is accepted. The regression equation for this model was: Happiness =  $9.56 + (0.13 \times \text{Fanship})$ .

Table 2

*Simple Regression Analysis for Happiness.*

<b>Variable</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>SEB</b>	<b><math>\beta</math></b>	<b>p</b>
Fanship	0.125	0.009	0.686*	0.000
(Constant)	9.557	0.671		0.000

**Note:** \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

Simple linear regression was carried out to examine if K-pop fanship predicts self-esteem. The model was statistically significant ( $F(1,201) = 231.43, p < 0.001$ ). The adjusted  $R^2$  indicated that 53.3% of the variance in self-esteem can be explained by the variance in fanship. Fanship significantly predicted self-esteem among K-pop fans. Thus, the alternative hypothesis is accepted. The regression equation for this model was: Self-esteem =  $29.59 + (-0.08 \times \text{Fanship})$ .

Table 3

*Simple Regression Analysis for Self-Esteem.*

<b>Variable</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>SEB</b>	<b><math>\beta</math></b>	<b>p</b>
Fanship	-0.076	0.005	0.732*	0.000
(Constant)	29.587	0.357		0.000

**Note:** \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

## Discussion and Conclusion

### a. Fanship as A Predictor of Happiness

This study aims to examine if K-pop fanship predicts happiness. The hypothesis stating that K-pop fanship predicts happiness is accepted. Results found that indeed fanship is a predictor of happiness among K-pop fans. The result of this study is in line with past studies (Reysen & Branscombe, 2010; Jang & Park, 2021).

The findings of this study may be explained by the fact that K-pop provides its worldwide fans with a pleasant and motivating hobby to be passionate about. Individuals gather and discuss how much they love Korean pop and media instead of engaging in negative behaviors. Being a fan of something enables individuals to meet and connect with others who share their passions in addition to focusing on what they love. Being a member of a social group, anticipating updates each day, and taking part in enjoyable activities can all contribute to an individual's happiness over time. Psychology has long recognized the significance of social relationships and affiliations for wellbeing. Being a fan or being a part of a fandom can provide some people with a safe place to feel, cry, laugh, or display indications of affection in a society where people frequently feel they must suppress their inner emotions. Some people who are fans of anything also get to experience the sense of achievement, even though it was done by someone or some group they admire rather than themselves.

### b. Fanship as A Predictor of Self-Esteem

This study aims to examine if K-pop fanship predicts self-esteem. The hypothesis stating that K-pop fanship predicts self-esteem is accepted. Results found that indeed fanship is a predictor of self-esteem among K-pop fans. Thus, fanship can boost self-esteem.

Previous studies have shown that being associated with successful organizations such as K-pop bands or football clubs can raise an individual's self-esteem and self-appraisal. Feeling connected socially can have a positive effect on self-esteem and wellbeing. O'Donovan (2016) found that participating in fandom activities tended to lead to the development of the individual's skills and the boosting of their confidence, subsequently leading to a higher self-esteem.

According to another study, fanship can help one feel more confident (Frederika, 2015). The desire for individuals to feel competent and worthwhile drives them to engage in the behavior of comparing themselves to others. When individuals believe they have a positive image in comparison to their idols or the members of their favorite band, they are more likely to follow them in order to increase their self-esteem. When choosing their own favorite idols, people tend to have this trait.

### *Implication*

The yielded results highlight that fanship predicts psychosocial outcomes, depending on the domains. K-pop has been constantly tied up to its negative effects on individuals and the cons of it. Some people are worried about the enormous growth of K-pop and how it plays a vital role in everyone's life. While it might be true that excessive obsession towards K-pop leads to negative effects of psychosocial outcomes, it is not the sole reason for it.

This study would increase the awareness among the Malaysian community on addressing K-pop as the rising phenomenon and how it influences psychosocial outcomes. Adding into it, this study would provide a vision to parents too. Parents can learn how K-pop has been influencing their children's psychosocial outcomes on a daily basis. Particularly if the children are still students or in the age range of 18 to 22 years old, parents can take action to



support their interests so that they achieve the most positive outcomes, and they can also assist them in overcoming any unwanted influences.

Moreover, this study will provide information for the future researchers that intend to study about this topic or any relatable topics that involves fanship and psychosocial outcomes among fans of anything. This information will encourage them to further study the variables and their relationships. It will inspire them to study other factors that may be related to the variables in this study. Not only that, but the findings would be useful to the advancement of Psychology in Malaysia, especially in the field of Social Psychology, as this will contribute to the limited local research on K-pop fanship and psychosocial outcomes.

This study also would be helpful to develop the relationship between the Malaysian and South Korean Government. The findings on positive psychosocial outcomes among fans in Malaysia would encourage Malaysia to host more K-pop based events and this will eventually benefit the economy of both governments which can lead to gain trust between each other.

This study has added more evidence into existing literature related to K-pop. If promoting the hobby of watching K-pop is considered as one of the solutions to good psychosocial outcomes, then this aspect must be looked into deeply to acknowledge the extent of its effects. Interventions should be specifically designed for each individual to cater to their needs and circumstances.

### **Limitation**

Limitation in studies will certainly be present no matter how perfectly a research is designed, same goes for this study too. The first limitation of this study is that the samples are only taken from Malaysia. Hence, the results of this study cannot be generalized to other fans that reside in any other part of the world. Secondly, the main focus of this study is on K-pop fans that are in the age category of 18 to 35 years old. Hence, results obtained are not suitable to be generalized to populations that belong to different age groups. Adding on, there are no moderating or mediating variables involved in this study. Not only that, demographic variables such as academic intelligence, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation and physical or mental health problems are also not inquired in this study. Thus, future research can focus on these variables too.

Another limitation of this study is that the data was collected by using a self-report questionnaire on an online basis. The downside of this method includes participant bias in which participants might not remember certain events, exaggerate their feelings or just do not want to reveal the truthful information as they are worried that they would be judged by others. Finally, the desired sample size was 384 in total, but only 203 responses were collected. Thus, future study can attempt to elicit more responses in order to produce broader and different outcomes.

### **Recommendation**

This issue about the association of fanship with psychosocial outcomes is an intriguing one which should be explored in further research. First and foremost, future studies must consider using more diverse samples that represent a wider population. In this current study, the focus is only on K-pop fans as a sample, but it does not reflect other age groups or socioeconomic backgrounds. Secondly, the setting of the research can be wider rather than restricting it to Malaysia to find out how one's lifestyle affects these variables. This is due to the fact that individuals living in different countries will have different patterns of fanship, and chances of them influencing psychosocial outcomes. Further research on this can help researchers gain

an in-depth understanding of the relationship. Adding on, this research only has a total sample number of 203. Future research should recruit a much bigger number of participants to generalize the results to a larger population.

Moreover, the context of study relating to fanship may delve into other aspects such as problematic fanaticism which is shown through acts of spending an unusual amount of money on merchandise or engaging in an invasion of privacy of idols. Moderating and mediating variables ought to be assessed as well to learn more about their connection between the variables.

## Conclusion

In this study, the major aim was to assess if there is any sort of association in fanship with psychosocial outcomes. This research utilized three instruments namely Fanship Scale, Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS), and Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale intending to measure the independent variable and dependent variable accordingly. The findings of this current study proved that there are associations between the variables.

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