

K-POP FANSHIP AND FANDOM: RELATIONSHIP WITH SELF-ESTEEM AND SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS AS PSYCHOSOCIAL BENEFITS

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Abstract

The enthusiastic and ardent fandom of Korean Pop Music is contagious and at its peak. People all around the world, despite the racial, geographical, and cultural differences, follow the various musical bands, and researchers have recently found fascinating associations between K-Pop Fanship and psychosocial benefits. This quantitative correlational study aims to be topical and intends to explore the relationship of K-Pop Fanship with self-esteem and social connectedness as psychosocial benefits. It was hypothesized that K-Pop Fanship will be positively correlated with self-esteem and social connectedness, and the level of Fanship in 12- to 20-year-old fans will be higher than in 20- to 28+-year-olds. A total of 599 individuals from various continents of the world, through volunteer sampling, participated in and completed a comprehensive online survey that measured the K-Pop Fanship, self-esteem, and social connectedness of each participant. The results indicated weak and insignificant correlations between the variables, and there was no difference found in the level of Fanship among the fans. The negative impact of unrealistic beauty standards, excessive idolization of the artists, and a globally higher ratio of female fans could provide an explanation for the findings. However, a significant positive and moderate association was found between self-esteem and social connectedness. It is plausible that K-pop Fanship served as a moderating variable in the study between the other two variables. Therefore, the interesting inferences of the study stress the need to conduct further studies, both causal and correlational, to unveil other variables that are either caused by or related to K-Pop Fanship. Limitations, suggestions, and implications are also discussed.

Keywords

K-Pop Fanship, Self-esteem, Social connectedness, Psychosocial benefits

INTRODUCTION

K-Pop is a broad subgenre of pop music with roots in South Korea and a strong emphasis on the idol side of entertainment. Musical artists and idol groups such as PSY and BTS alone attracted millions of fans across various social media platforms. The most notable contribution still falls in the hands of BTS, which stands for Bangtan Sonyeondan or Bulletproof Boy Scouts, formed in 2013 under the label of BigHit Entertainment. BTS' fame and popularity have garnered the attention of millions of people from all over the world because of the strong and influential personalities of the artists along with their innovative musical styles. Since then, more and more idol groups are coming to the surface and paving the way for K-Pop in the modern world, including EXO, Blackpink, and Seventeen, along with the rising 4th generation bands ATEEZ, TXT, etc. However, the new definition of K-Pop does not restrict itself to "pop" only; it successfully incorporates various forms of musical genres, including jazz, RnB, classical, etc. Moreover, the production of music videos and fan services, including photo books, signed albums, fan calls, and seasonal events, enables its followers to have a memorable experience, consequently causing an astronomical increment in the number of fans existing all over the world at present. K-Pop is therefore known to attract individuals worldwide to interact on a

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platform where they can share similar ideas, experiences, and interests, despite geographical differences.

The psychological perspective of K-Pop Fanship suggests that positive psychosocial outcomes are perceived to exist in association with K-Pop fanship such as possessing a strong sense of identity with fellow group members, shifts in self-esteem, social connectedness, happiness, etc. The probable reasoning behind these hypotheses is how K-Pop fanship induces a sense of self in its enthusiasts, due to which they begin to consider themselves to be a part of a huge group that follows the same ideology. Various social media platforms serve as the medium through which millions of fans come together to interact and form bonds with other followers of celebrities. As a result, they begin to develop a sense of belongingness to their fan identity and feel particularly connected to other people in the fandom. This phenomenon aligns with the concept of social connectedness, where individuals experience feelings of care, belongingness, and importance in a social circle of which they are a member. This leads to the development of a close connection with the people around them. The same concept exists as social connectedness, where individuals experience feelings of care, belongingness, and importance in a social circle they are a part of. Moreover, self-esteem can be described as the self-evaluation process. While self-esteem among K-Pop fans can be high due to an increased sense of association with their interests, it can also be considered low because of the high expectations that K-Pop fanship brings along in multiple aspects. These are fluctuating phenomena, implying that the intensity of associations between these variables is expected to differ and evolve as time goes by. Despite the growing popularity of K-Pop, there is a scarcity of research done on the psychological implications of the psychosocial behaviours that K-Pop fans exhibit. Considering this gap, this study will further examine and analyse the incidence of these connections in depth.

THE RATIONALE OF THIS STUDY

K-Pop fanship is a recently found domain of research in which there is an insubstantial amount of research that stresses the need for further relationships to be brought to light for the benefit of society. Thus, this research is conducted to find unexplored relationships between K-Pop fanship and psychosocial benefits, i.e., self-esteem and social connectedness, and to contribute to providing sufficient evidence to increase the reliability of the previously found relationships between the variables, as the present study intends to complement some aspects of research conducted by Laffan (2020) by further exploring the relationship between self-esteem, social connectedness, and K-Pop fanship. The study is based on three assumptions: first, K-Pop fanship is positively correlated with self-esteem measured by the Reysen fanship scale. Second, K-Pop fanship and social connectedness (assessed by the Social Connectedness Scale-Revised (SCS-R)) would have positive associations as well. Third, K-Pop fanship is higher among fans aged 12–20 years than among those aged 20–28 years and more.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Music is a force that has a significant relationship with positive psychological outcomes (Demirbatir et al., 2013). In the 21st century, a category of music known as K-Pop is rapidly influencing people of all ages, cultures, and social identities (Agatep et al., 2014). The origin of K-Pop began when the musical sensation Seo Taiji released a song with his bandmates in 1992 that touched the roof of success. Following that, the three largest record labels' foundations were laid, i.e., SM Entertainment, JYP Entertainment, and YG Entertainment. These records were the first companies in K-Pop history to establish the idea of an idol group that is widely seen in action to this date. Musical geniuses like PSY, BTS, Blackpink, EXO, and Twice are considered to be one of the reasons for K-Pop's strong international reputation (Sung, 2013). The exact figures that highlight the total number of K-Pop admirers in the world are still unknown. As the number of K-Pop groups and idols debuting is constantly increasing, so are their fans. According to researchers, the number of K-Pop fans in the world is difficult to predict due to their widespread popularity. However, Forbes (2019) estimates the presence of around 90 million fans (ARMY) of the global sensation BTS alone. Hence, a vague idea of the overall figure representing the total number of K-Pop fans in the whole world could be in the hundreds of millions. A huge reason behind the enormous fan following of K-Pop music is the

admiration of the beauty and appearance of the artists. According to Zhao (2021), K-Pop's immense popularity is attributed to several factors, including the Asian origin of the K-Pop stars, their captivating performances, appealing personalities, and flourishing careers, which fulfil the self-esteem and aesthetic desires of K-Pop enthusiasts.

K-Pop is no longer known to be just music but rather a brand. It unites its fans and invites them to share their likings towards their favourite idols on a common platform. There are numerous ways in which K-Pop admirers depict their fandom behaviour, which significantly strengthens their positive emotions towards their desired K-Pop group/soloist. Activities such as making dance covers, fan art, video edits, writing fanfiction, etc. are personalized ways for fans to enjoy the content they are provided. Researchers support the claim and have found positive associations between K-Pop fandom and psychosocial traits such as self-esteem, happiness, the feeling of belongingness, and social connectedness (Laffan, 2020; Blas & Erestain, 2020). The feeling of belonging to a group is desired by youth, and yet K-Pop provides it perfectly by forming massive global communities of fans. The boost in self-esteem is then inevitable. Similar interests tend to provide a common ground for the fans that help them form social relationships virtually (Ezani, 2019). Moreover, Lee et al. (2021) inferred that listening to K-Pop music can be beneficial for the nourishment of the mental health and well-being of its listeners. However, some negative associations of K-Pop fandom with other aspects have also been reported by researchers. One of the commonly affected areas is the social functioning of the fans. Teenagers tend to excessively idolize artists by spending colossal amounts of money to purchase concert tickets, albums, etc., and restricting themselves to their digital screens. This ultimately results in an inhibited social life (2021).

The other two variables used in the study are self-esteem and social connectedness. A positive association has been found to exist between the two variables (Lee and Robbins, 1998). These are termed psychosocial benefits due to their positive influences. Preston and Rew (2021) identified a positive correlation between social connectedness, self-esteem, and enhanced psychological well-being. High self-esteem and social connectedness help lower youngsters' psychological distress (Dang, 2014). Over the years, researchers have been emphasizing the importance of participating in social communities as a protective factor against psychological stressors. The variables together tend to also lower the social anxiety of individuals (Fatima et al., 2019). However, this study explores the relationship between K-Pop fandom and self-esteem and social connectedness.

RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

H₁: K-Pop fandom among the fans will be positively associated with self-esteem.

H₂: K-Pop fandom among the fans will be positively associated with social connectedness.

H₃: K-Pop fandom will be higher among individuals aged 12–20 years as compared to those who fall under the age bracket of 20–28+ years.

METHOD

This study aims to explore the relationship between the rising association with K-Pop and fans' degree of self-esteem and social connectedness.

SAMPLE

Five hundred ninety-nine K-Pop admirers from all over the world (females $n = 532$, males $n = 6$, non-binary $n = 27$, genderfluid $n = 22$, trans-males $n = 4$, and others $n = 8$) participated in the study through volunteer sampling. Most of the participants were citizens of Asia ($n = 221$), America ($n = 181$), and Europe ($n = 168$) among other continents, under the categorized age range of 12–20 and 20–28+ years with ages 16–20 years being the majority ($n = 300$). A huge number of participants ($n = 454$) reported ATEEZ Boys Band to be their favourite K-Pop music band amongst others, while the average duration of fandom reported was 1–3 years.

INSTRUMENTS

Three main scales were used in the study to evaluate K-Pop fanship, self-esteem, and social connectedness:

Reysen Fanship Scale. This scale was developed by Reysen and Branscombe (2010). It is an 11-item self-report scale (1 reverse scoring item) measuring psychological Fanship. Sample items on the Fanship Scale consist of questions such as “I would devote all my time to my interest (my favourite/most-listened-to K-Pop idol) if I could” and related items that are self-assessed on a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 9, where 1 represents “Strongly Disagree” and 9 depicts “Strongly Agree”. The scoring of this scale includes summing up the individual scores to determine the overall level of Fanship. The higher the scores, the higher the level of Fanship demonstrated. According to Laffan (2020), the scale is highly reliable, as the McDonald’s Omega reliability computation revealed (11 items = 0.88).

Rosenberg self-esteem scale. A self-report questionnaire that assesses an individual's attitudes towards themselves. The scale was developed by Rosenberg in 1965 and consists of 10 items, with 5 items being reverse-scored. The questions are designed to measure both positive and negative attitudes towards oneself, with examples such as “I take pride as a positive attitude towards myself”, or “On the whole, I am satisfied with myself”, and related questions that are assessed on a continuum of 1–4, where 1 represents strong disagreement and 4 illustrates strong agreement, as the assessment consists of a four-point Likert scale. Higher scores indicate high self-esteem, and lower scores depict an individual’s low self-esteem. The scale's reliability is acceptable, with a McDonald's Omega reliability calculation of 0.79 for the 10 items. (10 items, $\omega = 0.79$).

Social connectedness scale-revised (SCS-R). This scale was developed by Lee et al. (2012) and is a 20-item self-reporting questionnaire (10 reverse score items) that assesses the feelings of belongingness in an individual concerning their social interests. It has negative and positive questions about oneself, such as “I feel disconnected from the world around me”, or “I feel comfortable in the presence of strangers”, and is related, consisting of a six-point Likert scale ranging from 1 to 6, where 1 represents being strongly disagreed and 6 represents strongly agree. The SCS-R is a reliable scale according to McDonald’s Omega reliability computation (20 items, $\omega = 0.72$).⁴

PROCEDURE

An online survey form was developed on Google Forms, where participants were made aware of their consensual rights to participate in the study following the demographic questions: Fanship, self-esteem, and social connectedness. After the online survey was created, online K-Pop fan pages on social media platforms like Instagram and Twitter were approached to distribute the form among the individuals who wished to voluntarily participate in the study. The data collection took place for a week, and after its successful completion, the data were statistically analysed through SPSS (Statistical Software for Social Sciences version 26).

RESULTS

The data that have been examined consisted of 599 respondents who were fans of K-Pop music. The results of the study were found to be contrary to the research hypothesis, as K-Pop Fanship and social connectedness were not correlated, whereas K-Pop Fanship and self-esteem displayed a weak and negative correlation. However, the third hypothesis was accepted as a positive and strong correlation was found to exist between K-Pop fans’ self-esteem and social connectedness.

Variable		<i>n</i>	%
Gender	Male	6	1.0
	Female	536	89.5
	Other (Non-Binary, Genderfluid)	57	9.5
Age (years)	12–20	447	74.6

⁴ Permission to access the scale was provided by the test developer, Richard Lee, on 9 March 2022.

	20–28+	152	25.4
Location	Asia	221	36.9
	America	181	30.2
	Africa	12	2.0
	Australia	9	1.5
	Europe	168	28.0
	Pacific Islands	8	1.3
Duration of Fanship	6 months or less	21	3.5
	6 months–1 year	78	13.0
	1–3 years	233	38.9
	3–6 years	167	27.9
	6 years or more	100	16.7

Figure 1: This table displays the demographic information of the participants. There was a higher ratio of females, 12–20-year-olds, and residents of Asia. Moreover, most of the respondents had been following K-Pop for 1–3 years.

	K-Pop Fanship	Self-Esteem	Social Connectedness
K-Pop Fanship	-	-0.101*	-0.062
Self-Esteem	-	-	0.549**
Social Connectedness	-	-	-

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

Figure 2: This table shows that K-Pop fanship is negatively associated with self-esteem and social connectedness, with each displaying either a weak or no correlation, respectively. However, self-esteem is significantly and positively associated with social connectedness among fans.

	12–20 ($n = 447$)		20–28+ ($n = 152$)		t	p	LL	UL
	M	SD	M	SD				
KPF	74.43	12.16	74.03	14.04	0.311	0.756	-2.11	2.911

KPF: K-Pop fanship.

Figure 3: The table displays an insignificant difference between the level of fanship of the two age groups on the K-Pop Fanship scale. Thus, further inferences cannot be drawn. This is an independent t-test to find the mean differences in Fanship between the two age groups ($n = 599$).

DISCUSSION

The study demonstrated the existence of weak and negative relationships between the variables, i.e., K-Pop fanship and self-esteem and K-Pop fanship and social connectedness (see Table 1). The results of the research nullified hypotheses 1 and 2 as positive associations were not found between the variables. Moreover, the mean difference between the age groups of K-Pop fans was also found to be insignificant (see Table 2), rejecting the third hypothesis. It was expected that the increased K-Pop fanship would give rise to healthy psychosocial functioning, i.e., increased self-esteem and social connectedness, but the results indicated otherwise. According to research conducted in the past, K-Pop admiration has negatively influenced its followers by portraying unrealistic beauty standards and sexism through the artists (Lin & Rudolf, 2017; Epstein & Joo, 2012). This could be a potential reason for the negative relationship between the variables, as self-esteem can decline due to excessive self-comparisons with fantasies (Ruggiero et al., 2011). The looks of the Korean performers are given much attention, and hence, they are displayed as the epitomes of perfection, which distorts the self-image of viewers as they start evaluating themselves as per the standards of the artists. As a result, it seems to lower the will to socialize because decreased self-esteem is associated with a person's social interaction abilities and skills. Moreover, Utami (2019) inferred that idolizing K-Pop singers can influence teenagers to form detrimental perceptions about their body image, which indicates that

admiration of K-Pop artists does not always induce positive psychosocial outcomes. All these factors could be the key reasons behind the weak correlations between the variables.

Contrary to this study, researchers have found that K-Pop fanship induces a feeling of belonging within the fan group (Blas & Erestain, 2020). The immense sense of belongingness and the experience of ecstasy in these fans, when exposed to the K-POP media, result in positive psychosocial outcomes. Group solidarity enhances positive emotions and contributes to benefiting individuals (Turner et al., 1979). The minimal literature related to K-Pop fanship suggests that it induces positive feelings in admirers (Laffan, 2020), but some researchers have found negative correlations between K-Pop fanship and psychosocial outcomes, which further stresses the need to research the novel topic to gather sufficient literature for increasing the external validity of the findings altogether.

The statistical analysis rejected the third hypothesis as there was an insignificant difference in the level of K-Pop fanship in the two separate age groups, i.e., 12–20 and 20–28+ years. Although the statistics available through a recent survey (Tizzard, 2021) conclude the average age of K-Pop fans is under 18 years, no such findings were revealed in this study. Apart from the age factor, most of the participants in the study were females, despite collecting responses globally, who stated ATEEZ, a boy band, to be their favourite K-Pop band. Generally, K-Pop admirers are mostly females (Tizzard, 2021) because of the alluring common factor of soft masculinity depicted by K-Pop boy bands. Thus, the high female ratio is justified by the majority of the respondents reporting following boy bands.

The study found some unexpected associations between self-esteem and social connectedness, as a significantly positive and strong relationship was found between the variables. Without the association of K-Pop fanship, social connectedness itself has been previously associated with happiness and other psychosocial benefits (Tian et al., 2021; O'Rourke, 2009; Kim & Kim, 2017). It is possible that K-Pop fanship served as a mediating variable between self-esteem and social connectedness, but as it was not the main study variable in this study, it can be certainly concluded. Therefore, these fascinating findings provide an avenue for future researchers to conduct studies that study the mediating aspect of K-Pop fanship between psychosocial benefits, including but not limited to self-esteem and social connectedness.

LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Past research has found self-esteem and social connectedness to be positively associated with K-Pop fanship (Laffan, 2020), whereas in this research, no association was found between the variables. Most of the participants in the study were females and fell under the age bracket of 16–20 years, which affected the external validity of the research and could be a reason for accepting the null hypothesis. Thus, it is suggested to conduct further research with an approximately equal ratio of all genders and ages to increase the external validity and predictive power of the findings. Furthermore, K-pop fanship should be studied as a mediating variable between any two psychosocial outcomes, such as happiness and self-esteem, to yield beneficial findings for the general population.

IMPLICATIONS

There are potential implications of the findings of the study in the domain of social psychology as it studies the multiple factors impacting fan groups. The results of this study can be used to predict the insignificant association of psychosocial benefits with the global fanship of K-Pop. This will further enlighten the fans on how to manage their time and energy to divert it to something mentally nourishing. Moreover, personality psychologists can also benefit from the study, as the positive relationship between social connectedness and self-esteem can provide a direction for studying factors impacting personality.

CONCLUSION

The current study sheds light on the associations of K-Pop fans with psychosocial constructs. Although the findings did not yield the expected results, the results are valuable to conclude that K-Pop fanship is not associated with social connectedness and self-esteem, but the insubstantial

literature asserts that conducting further research will strengthen the validity of the findings. Considering the growing fandom of K-Pop worldwide, the associations or causal relationships of K-Pop fandom can help benefit society.

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