

Constructing Identity Through Fandom: A Study of K-pop Fans in Pakistan

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Abstract: This paper discovers the social identity construction of K-pop (Korean popular music) fans in Pakistan, focusing on their understanding of social categorization, identification, and comparison within the local and global cultural landscape. Drawing on social identity theory and employing a qualitative research design, this study investigates how Pakistani K-pop fans construct and interpret their membership within the fandom, highlighting the unique features of this community in a local cultural context. To gain in-depth insights, 15 semi-structured interviews were conducted with both male and female fans. The study has examined fans' perceptions of boundaries between themselves and non-fans, societal interpretations, and the stereotypes that influence their K-pop experiences. It delves into the personal significance of being a K-pop fan, the impact on self-identity, and the ways fans express their affiliation to the K-pop community. The study explores how participants negotiate their K-pop fandom alongside other dimensions of their cultural and social identities, illustrating the dynamic interplay between global popular culture and local identity formation. The findings reveal the interchange between global cultural phenomena and local identity formation, shedding light on the evolving aspects of fandom culture in Pakistan. By engaging in social comparison, fans develop their connection to the global K-pop community and contrast it with local fandoms. The study contributes to the understanding of the global diffusion of K-pop and its implications for identity construction among K-pop fans. The study contributes to the understanding of the global diffusion of K-pop and its implications for identity construction among K-pop fans.

Keywords: K-pop Fandom, Social Identity Theory, Cultural Globalization, Youth Identity

Introduction

Digital technologies have led the way to introduce a new definition of fan and fandom in today's media landscape. The term fan originally derived from the Latin word *Fanaticus*, defining an individual as a temple servant or a devotee, later used for theatre audiences in the 19th century (Jenkins, 1992). However, Stever (2009), defines it as taken from the word *fanatic*, which represents a fan as mad for something. A fan is individually obsessed with content or celebrities, but fandom refers to a collective number of supporters (Lisowska 2017). The digitized world has opened up opportunities for fandom members to link with each other, work for their celebrities and idols, connect with them, and be part of global fandom. The concept of fandom communities has never been this much strong previously. This revolution in interactive internet-based media has created a remarkable difference between pre-digital fandom and digital fandom.

Fans' enthusiastic engagement in two-way communication driven fandoms has become a vital means of learning about their idols' culture, as continuous exposure to international content fosters a sense of cultural intimacy in subtle and often unnoticed way. In a study Sugihartati (2017), as cited by Kusuma et al. (2020), discovered that in the age of digital convergence, fandom is the group of globalized popular culture fans who actively participate on social media, developing it to construct their group identity. Fans try to adopt social elements of their idols, trying to converse like them, learning their language and cultural traits to keep themselves recognizable in their particular fan community. Amplifying the relation of cultural elements with fandom Schreyer (2015), has contested the claim that fandom always expands into regular content consumption, and it is essential to study some key structuring mechanisms through

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academicians to invest in exploring reasons for Hallyu attaining a very significant which culture and society may work.

In the recent era, K-pop (Korean Pop music) has gained remarkable success worldwide and truly transformed the meaning of both fan and fandom. K-pop, as referred to a popular music genre having origins in Korea, is an offshoot of the Korean popular culture, which is recognized by the term *Hallyu**. The term Hallyu not only got recognition worldwide, particularly South Asia, during era of the 1990s (Bok-Rae, 2015) but also changed the concepts associated with Korea (Lee, 2015). Global hype of Korean culture pushed several cultural creators, policy makers and media cultural scene that is non-Western (Lee, G.T, 2013). South Korea's public diplomacy strategy places significant emphasis on the Hallyu, or Korean Wave, which encompasses popular cultural exports such as K-pop, K-dramas, and Korean cuisine. According to Gull, Gul, and Ali (2020), this cultural tactic serves as a key soft power tool, allowing South Korea to improve its global image and foster stronger cultural connections with international audiences.

K-pop music, comprised of the RDB, hip-hop, jazz, rock, and disco (Sun, 2022) during the 1980s and 1990s, started influencing teenagers as its main audience (Shin et al., 2015). K-pop genre rising with Seotaiji and the boys, leading group to introduce hip-hop music in Korea (Lie, 2012) Gangnam style being first music YouTube video that had reached a billion of views (Chang, 2019) further strengthening the success of K-music by Bangtan Sonyeondon (BTS) awarded Top social artist award 2017 and also performed marvelously during Billboard awards (Trzcinska, 2018). K-pop has over 300 music bands; however, 30-40 groups are considered top-tier by Google.

The worldwide popularity of Korean popular music did not leave Pakistan behind. K-pop emerged as a virtual community encouraged to be connected with idols, provoked to produce their discourse, and become a community for branding the idols (Kim, 2022). K-pop as quite an observable phenomenon in Pakistan, apparently strengthened its roots during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019. Zahra (2020), published an article in the Dawn newspaper of Pakistan mentioning Korean content as almost always listed as the most popular on Netflix ratings. Further, Asif (2023), defines Spotify statistics that youngsters of 18-24 years of age in Pakistan were over 50 percent more likely to listen to K-pop as compared to any other available music genre. K-pop popularity observance provoked researchers in Pakistan to check K-pop content usage by youth as Bhatti et al. (2022), also attempted to define that Youth in Pakistan is attracted to the romance and fantasies presented in Korean media content. Maqsood et al., (2022), further highlighted that K-content is not only accepted among Pakistani youth but cross-cultural romantic relationships have become normalized. Youth of Pakistan is very much determined to learn Korean language and they use this language in their routine lives and actively pursue hallyu inspired English terminologies (Sughra et al., 2022).

Fandom waves arrive and leave, but they might have impact on socio-cultural fabric of a nation or country. The researcher is mainly focused on understanding social categorization, social identification, and social comparison of K-pop fans in Pakistan. This research article is taken up to understand how K-pop fans in Pakistan have been influenced in the way they perceive themselves and how they have constructed a separate set of identity within their K-pop fandom. Fandom is a vast subject to explore about different socio-cultural issues, and it is unjustifiable to inculcate more than one linkage in single research. The researcher initially has informally observed and taken the social identity construction of K-pop fans as a primary issue to discuss through empirical research.

Despite the global prominence of K-pop as a transnational cultural force (Wonseok, 2018), scholarly attention remains limited regarding its impact on youth identity construction in culturally specific, non-Western contexts like Pakistan. While Social Identity Theory offers a valuable framework for exploring processes such as categorization, identification, and comparison, its application to Pakistani fandom contexts has been largely overlooked. The rapid diffusion of K-pop culture through digital media has introduced new forms of engagement, allowing Pakistani fans—especially youth—to interact with global fan communities while remaining anonymous in their local environments. This exposure has significantly influenced their language use, perceptions of gender roles, and everyday social behaviors (Khalid, 2024), reshaping how they see themselves and relate to their surroundings.

As part of a broader trend in global cultural consumption, Pakistani K-pop fans experience both enthusiasm and friction in negotiating their fandom identities amid social, cultural, and generational tensions (Xia, 2024; Yoon, 2022). In doing so, they form hybrid identities that merge their passion for K-pop with local cultural norms. However, limited research exists on how these fans perceive their social positions, differentiate themselves from non-fans, and engage in comparisons with other fandoms. This study, therefore, seeks to fill that gap by examining the mechanisms through which Pakistani K-pop fans construct their social identities and negotiate societal perceptions of their fandom. In doing so, it contributes to broader academic conversations on global cultural flows, youth identity formation, and the local reinterpretation of transnational fan cultures.

Accordingly, this research poses the following guiding questions: How do Pakistani K-pop fans categorize themselves and understand their position within broader social structures? In what ways does affiliation with the K-pop fandom influence their personal and cultural identities? And how do they compare themselves with both local and international fandoms, and what effect does this have on their sense of belonging and cultural worldview?

Literature Review

Fandom and fan culture have become central to understanding contemporary media engagement. Matt Hills (2002), observes, the term “fan” typically induces the image of someone intensely devoted to a particular celebrity, TV show, music band, or film—someone who can effortlessly recall extensive details and quote his favourite lines. This devotion reflects more than casual interest; this behaviour forms the foundation of a communal identity. Fans collectively are often viewed as the most visible and recognizable segment of media audiences, characterized by their deep emotional investment in the content and specialized knowledge of their chosen media, idols or celebrities (Lewis, 2002). Fandom, therefore extends beyond individual enthusiasm to become a shared subculture where members connect over common interests and values (Kington, 2015). Fandom is something that brings individual fans under the umbrella of their shared interests, where they can speak their heart out. This represents a space where mass-produced entertainment content is reinterpreted and converted into something meaningful and culturally rich by a self-selecting community (Kustritz, 2018). The procedure of reinterpretation and identity-building lies at the heart of fan culture, revealing how fandom helps not only as entertainment but also as a mode of cultural participation and belongingness. Fandom brings people closer and help them build a different identity when they discuss and share their ideas with fellow fans.

In today’s media-driven society, individuals often develop deep emotional attachments to celebrities, idols or fictional characters, leading to the emergence of fan cultures that significantly shape personal and social identity (George, 2024). Within these cultures sometimes attributed as sub-cultures, shared admiration and emotional investment substitute a sense of belonging, influencing how fans see themselves and their self-worth in their fandom community. Fandoms may provide them a platform where the skills of fans might be utilised and cherished by other fans. Fandoms function as dynamic systems shaped by the communications among fans, where identity is not just about similarity with other fans but also about how individuals categorize themselves and others within or outside the group (Wang, 2014). Social Identity Theory supports this by exploring how individuals develop loyalty toward their in-groups while distinguishing themselves from outsiders: out groups (Perse & Rubin, 1989). The concept of in-group and out-group may be perfectly studied within a context of fandom of a genre. Fan communities thus strengthen both self-identity and group identity through common interests and collective ideas and experiences, particularly when people are increasingly constructing their identities independently (Livingstone, 1998). These shared affiliations and common interests contribute to a fan’s sense of identity, highlighting how fandom is not only about media consumption but also about social categorization, belonging, and identity formation (Song & Tang, 2022).

Initially emerging in the late 1990s, the term “Korean Wave” or *Hallyu* gained fame as Korean popular culture—especially music and television dramas—began to attract noteworthy attention from international audiences, particularly in East and Southeast Asia (Sun, 2022). The global upsurge of K-pop is an outstanding example to learn how cultural products can transcend cultural, geographical and linguistic boundaries through strategic export and hybridization. Vital to this transnational appeal is K-

pop's musical foundation, which has been deeply influenced by American and European dance music since the early 1990s (Oh & Jang, 2022). According to Messerlin and Shin (2017), K-pop's development from a regional phenomenon into a global popularity has seen it captivating audiences not only across Asia but also in the Europe, United States, Middle East and Latin America. More recently, scholars like Chen (2023), have painted K-pop as a successful model of export-oriented cultural production, demonstrating how a nation can influence popular music to gain soft power and visibility within the global cultural fabric. The convergence of strategic marketing, localized fan engagement, and globalized production styles, has turned K-pop into a booming cultural force beyond its national origins.

The worldwide propagation of South Korean popular culture, known as Hallyu, has significantly influenced youth culture in various countries, including Pakistan. Fuelled by the widespread popularity of Korean dramas, K-pop music, and other cultural elements, this phenomenon has formed how young audiences perceive and engage with global culture and audiences in the digital age. The COVID-19 pandemic further enhanced this trend, as increased consumption of Korean content during lockdowns deepened Pakistani adolescents' understanding of and appreciation for Korean traditions and media (Bhatti et al., 2022). This cultural revelation has led to noticeable transformations in their everyday behaviours of Pakistani fans, influencing aspects such as perceptions of gender roles, language, and their social conduct (Shahzad et al. 2024).

Within the K-pop fan community, individuals often adopt the norms and characteristics of their fandom groups, using these identities as a form of escapism and a means of emotional attachment and relief. Psychologically, individuals find it difficult to live in isolation so they tend to become a part of a group. These groups or communities like K-pop fandom community provides a space for social connection and personal well-being, with peer fan groups, media, and family members playing an important role in guiding new fans into the K-pop realm (Maros & Basek, 2022). Expressions of fandom are often competitively performative, with fans showcasing and showing off their dedication through participation in fan-organized events, cover dance performances, and volunteering at concerts—activities that not only display devotion and loyalty but also reinforce a collective fan identity (Putri & Fazli, 2024). Collectively, these cultural and media dynamics illustrate the powerful role of Hallyu in shaping youth identities and fostering transnational cultural engagement globally and locally.

The growth of the internet and new media has significantly reshaped the landscape of identity formation, providing individuals with digital spaces to express, explore, and construct their identities. Manago (2015), stresses that identity construction in online environments is deeply interconnected or influenced with offline realities, as shared interests among users create social networks that reinforce both virtual and real-world personas. Jenol and Pazil (2020), claim that the borderless nature of the internet allows K-pop to function as a source of psychological shelter for fans, enabling them to develop distinct identities within virtual communities. The Internet provides the fans not only an opportunity to perform their skills for a fandom but also to remain anonymous also if they want to. These communities often blur the lines between the digital and physical self, nurturing a sense of belonging and emotional well-being. Within this context, the emergence of transnational pop culture genres like K-pop exemplifies how digital platforms serve not only as paths for cultural exchange but also as mechanisms for personal and collective level escapism. Despite the growing body of literature on K-pop—highlighted by scholars such as Chua (2004), and Shim (2006), there remains a notable gap in research addressing the existing experiences of fans, especially about how mass-mediated representations of deviance and identity influence their self-construction. Mostly fandom waves are studied in the context of their popularity but neglected in their social and cultural contexts. Williams (2016), highlights this oversight, supporting deeper exploration into the ways fans negotiate identity within the symbolic frameworks presented by K-pop fandom. Together, these studies highlight the evolving relationship between digital culture, media consumption, and identity negotiation in the contemporary era.

Theoretical Framework

Social Identity Theory (SIT) offers a compelling theoretical framework for examining the social identity construction among K-pop fans in Pakistan. At its core, this theory posits that an individual's self-concept

is shaped by his perceived membership in defined social groups, which carries emotional and evaluative significance for them (Tajfel, 1978). This sense of belonging not only appraises how individuals define themselves but also influences their behavior and perceptions of others (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995). As Hogg and Abrams (1988), explain that social identity involves a person's awareness of belonging to a specific social category, which becomes a reference point for rendering social experiences. The SIT emphasizes the impulsive nature of the self, enabling individuals to adopt and internalize different social classifications based on their group affiliations. In the context of K-pop fandom in Pakistan, these processes are particularly manifested as fans engage in self-categorization, adopt group norms, and develop a collective identity centred around shared cultural and social practices. Hornsey (2008), emphasizes the broader impact of the social identity approach, highlighting its relevance in understanding group-mediated perspectives. Given the strong sense of community, symbolic participation, and identity performance observed in K-pop fan culture, SIT provides a vigorous lens and a strong framework through to analyse how Pakistani fans negotiate their belonging, define themselves in comparison to others, and construct hybrid cultural identities in a globalized media environment.

Methodology

The research study is comprised of qualitative data focusing on finding the answers to hows and whys of a phenomenon. Kaplan & Maxwell (1994), elaborated that if textual data are quantified, the perspectives of respondents and their social context is usually lost. Qualitative research sequence is based on three intertwined cycles, including the design cycle, the data collection cycle, and the data analysis cycle (Hennink, 2020). This nature of research allows for diverse methods to recruit respondents, gather data, and apply various approaches of instrumentation (Ponto, 2015). This particular study has employed a survey research method, and in-depth interviews have been taken as research instrumentation. In this study, a grounded theory approach is employed, and semi-structured in-depth interviews are conducted. In-depth interviews are selected as an instrument for personal and close meetings between the researcher and the participant, in which open-ended, direct, and verbal questions are formulated to get detailed descriptions and stories of respondents (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006).

Sampling techniques are required to select participants systematically from a pre-defined set of populations as per the purposes of the research study (Sharma, 2017). As this study requires a specific sample of K-pop fandom members non-probability sampling technique is comparatively more appropriate for this research study. The research proposes data collection from a very specific sample of K-pop fans, so purposive sampling is employed as this sampling requires some decision and idea of the researcher to reach a 'representative' sample (Vehovar et al., 2016). Following purposive sampling strategy initially identified K-pop fans in Pakistan who were actively involved in fandom activities rather than being passive consumers of Korean pop culture. These participants were selected based on their sustained engagement with K-pop music, idols, and fan communities—especially those who manage or promote fan pages, participate in fan-driven events, or connect with global fandom networks via digital platforms. To further reach deeply embedded fans, snowball sampling was used, whereby existing participants referred other enthusiastic and participatory fans. This approach enabled the researcher to access a rich network of informants who might not be immediately visible in mainstream social or academic circles but play a crucial role in sustaining and amplifying K-pop fandom in Pakistan. These fans contributed valuable insights into how identity is constructed and performed through transnational fan culture. Researcher has approached 15 young K-pop fans comprising both males and females in almost equal division from the age group of 15–24 as defined 'young' by World Health Organization. The geographic locations of the K-pop fans were diverse covering maximum diverse area of the country to make it more representative. It was observed that female fans were more sociable and were willing to participate in the study; however, it was quite challenging to persuade fan boys to contribute through interviews. Most of the fanboys declined the request initially, seemingly due to social and cultural constraints in Pakistan. However, all the willing K-pop fans fully collaborated not only during the interviews but later they shared images and videos of their social identity development phases they have experienced. Online Interview sessions were conducted, and each interview was approximately 40–50 minutes long, as 15 open-ended questions were formed for three

research questions. All the interview sessions were audio recorded to address their privacy concerns. Interviews followed multiple follow-up questions to get clarity, examples, and further elaboration by the respondents. The thematic analysis method was selected as it permits the researcher to include a flexible approach for analyzing data.

Table 1
Sample of K-pop Fans in Pakistan

S.No.	Initials	Gender	Age	Education	City
1	A.A.	Female	21	Undergraduate	Islamabad
2	M.Z.	Female	19	Undergraduate	Rawalpindi
3	R.A.	Female	21	Intermediate	Islamabad
4	B.A.	Female	28	Undergraduate	Rawalpindi
5	A.R.	Female	27	Undergraduate	Karachi (Malir)
6	A.K.	Female	26	Masters	Multan
7	I.N.	Female	24	Intermediate	Gujrat
8	T.Z.	Female	23	Undergraduate	Abbottabad
9	S.H.	Male	Not Provided	Not Provided	Karachi
10	S.A.	Male	24	Undergraduate	Lahore
11	M.A.	Male	21	Undergraduate	Lahore/Korea
12	A.A.	Male	26	Masters	Islamabad
13	K.R.	Male	22	Undergraduate	Okara
14	T.A.	Male	20	Not Provided	Islamabad
15	H.H.	Male	28	Masters	Gilgit

Results and Discussion

Identity construction is a multifaceted phenomenon that can be examined from various perspectives. Framed within a socio-cultural perspective and grounded in Social Identity Theory, this study organizes the data from the in-depth interviews into three major thematic categories: social categorization, social identification, and social comparison. These themes collectively offer insight into how Pakistani K-pop fans construct and negotiate their social identities within local and transnational contexts.

Social identity has been considered an old theory that emerged before the internet era and is not based on defining online social identity construction however it provides a strong foundation to study identity construction of fans and its representation through online mediums. It may also be assumed that internet is a platform for audiences to present their identities in a separate way as compare to reality. K-pop fandom is a very unique phenomenon to study under social identity construction as K-pop community presents itself and their loyalties towards their idols through cyber spaces. Chang (2014), describes cyberspace as a backstage for fans who cannot realize their “stage” reality. This enables them to unify the “real myself” and “ideal myself” to construct their social identity.

It was interesting to study K-pop fans in a country like Pakistan, where religious and cultural norms are deeply rooted; however, hybrid cultures, global connectivity, online fandoms emergence etc are unavoidable aspects of influence on global and local audiences and their different identities emergence. Saliha & Nayab (2024), in a research study elaborate the concept of alternative identities and lifestyles of youngsters who use social media platforms like TikTok or Instagram, follow global trends, and adapt subcultures. The researcher has divided the data taken from K-pop fans into three major themes named social categorization, social identification, and social comparison in connection with social identity theory to get insight into these major areas and their identity construction in these domains collectively.

Table 2
Thematic Representation of K-pop Fan Identity Construction Through the Lens of Social Identity Theory

S.No.	Theme	Brief Description	Associated Concept in Social Identity Theory (SIT)
1	Social Categorization	Refers to how fans distinguish themselves from others by categorizing people into in-groups (K-pop fans) and out-groups (non-fans). This mental grouping helps them define and structure their social world.	This relates to categorization , a fundamental process in SIT where individuals classify themselves and others into social groups.
2	Social Identification	Describes how fans adopt and internalize their group membership (as K-pop fans), aligning their behavior, language, and emotions with their idols and fellow fans.	Corresponds to identification , where individuals derive a sense of pride and self-esteem from belonging to a particular group.
3	Social Comparison	Highlights how fans evaluate their in-group (K-pop fandom) in relation to out-groups to maintain a positive self-concept, often emphasizing uniqueness, superiority, or emotional fulfillment.	Tied to comparison , where individuals enhance self-worth by favorably comparing their group to others.

Social Categorization

The construction of social identity is a multifaceted process influenced by various social, technological, and cultural factors. The digital flexibility offers the fans, the opportunity to express an idealized version of themselves that may differ from their offline persona (Jeewa & Wade, 2015). K-pop fandom is one such domain where identity performance becomes dominant, as fans navigate between their real-life characters and online fan identities. Understanding how K-pop fans perceive themselves within these offline and online realities offers valuable insight into contemporary social identity construction.

Social identity theory by Hogg (2006), especially the concepts of in-groups and out-groups, provides a useful theoretical framework to analyze fandom dynamics. According to Hogg, individuals internalize the norms of their in-groups, shaping their perceptions and behaviours accordingly. In this research, participants described notable shifts in their personalities and behaviours when participating in K-pop fandom-based practices, distinguishing these roles from their everyday social and cultural responsibilities. Participant 7 (LN, Female, age 24, Islamabad) highlighted this transition by saying: "My fandom is different from my other religious and cultural activities. There is no collaboration between the roles I perform. I switch on and off my roles multiple times." This statement reflects the psychological compartmentalization fans perform to balance their dual identities. Likewise, Participant 11 (MA, Male, Age 21, Lahore) elaborated on the conscious management of these shifts: "I manage my identity shifts as I don't discuss my K-pop fandom when I am with my immediate family and friends who are not in fandom. I am categorized differently as a K-pop fan in my fan community." These insights propose that fans not only navigate different social domains but also exercise agency in determining how, when, and with whom they express their fandom identity. This aligns with Chen's (2013), opinion that the internet assigns symbolic labels to users in backstage roles—labels that instantaneously affirm individuality and community membership. These digital labels help distinguish fans from general audiences and enable them to establish identities that are validated within their online communities.

Community norms and shared characteristics further shape identity construction. Turner et al. (1987), clarify that social categorization is not simply about labelling others but serves as a cognitive mechanism that structures behaviors, attitudes, and perceptions. Within the K-pop fan community, participants reported accepting specific behaviours and practices such as charity work, use of fan speak (a specialized language of fans), collecting merchandise, following Korean-inspired cuisine and fashion, creating fan art, and using inside jokes. These elements serve as social indications that affirm one's membership in the fan group and reinforce a collective identity. Participant 7(IN, Female, Age 24, Gujrat) remarked: "I will instantly recognize a K-pop fan due to our common characteristics. Habits and behavior of a BTS fan are shared.

Their idols would be reflected in their personality like following their fashion trends, oversized clothing, piercing, accessories, and their hairstyles, obviously." These markers of fandom identity foster a strong sense of belonging to community, which, according to Hogg (2006), also strengthens perceived similarities within groups and distinctions between them, leading to both stereotypical thinking and solidarity. Most of the research Participants stressed that their interactions within the K-pop fan community are markedly different from their conversations with non-fans. The fan community is often perceived as a safe and supportive space. Some even described it as a "mini religion," highlighting the symbolic significance and emotional intensity of the group. Participant 6 (AK, Female, 26, Multan) shared: *"I will openly have discussions with K-pop fans as I know I will not be judged by them,"* while Participant 7 (IN, Female, Age 24, Gujrat) added: *"K-pop fandom taught us not to say anything to haters."*

However, fans also reported experiencing stereotyping and marginalization and from mainstream society. In Pakistan, where religious and cultural norms are widely practiced and respected, many K-pop fans prefer to conceal their fandom activities to avoid judgment by society. When asked about the labels they encounter, participants identified several derogatory terms and stereotypes, particularly targeting male fans. These included assumptions of homosexuality (with "fanboys" being labeled as gay), as well as terms such as "star freak," "wanna-be," "burger kid," "transgender," "crazy," "vagabond," and "obsessed." These stereotypes reflect the cultural tension between conservative societal norms and the expressive culture of K-pop fandom.

The data illustrate that K-pop fans vigorously construct and negotiate their identities through performances influenced by online social platforms, fandom community norms, and societal expectations. K-pop fans socially categorize them differently when they are with fellow fans or involved in fandom activities. While the fandom provides its fans a space for empowerment and emotional belonging, it also exposes fans to cultural judgments and stereotypes. This duality highlights the complicated ways in which a separate identity is constructed, compartmentalized, and performed in contemporary digital culture.

Social Identification

Jeewa and Wade (2015), claim that the Internet enables fans to visualize themselves in desired roles through the immersive possibilities of virtual reality. This view resonates strongly within the K-pop fandom, where fans often construct alternative identities as part of their engagement. Many K-pop fans perceive themselves differently within the fandom space, actively reshaping their self-presentation to align with the fan community and the idols they admire. They want to be accepted and recognised by their idols and fans of the fandom community. They urge to be as similar to their idols as they can be that ultimately brings appreciation from fellow fans. This identity construction is evident in the adoption of modified social media names by Pakistani fans—such as Seok-ha, Sam, Saim, and Kin—derived from their original Islamic names, symbolizing a deliberate rebranding of self within K-pop fan culture. Furthermore, these fans frequently use profile pictures (DPs) of their favourite idols instead of their own, both as an expression of faithfulness and as a strategy to conceal their real identities from their offline social circles as respondent 11 (MA, Male, Age 21, Lahore) elaborated, *"Nobody around me knows that I am a K-pop fan and they don't even know I have a social media platform where I perform as a dancer and share my skills"*. Another participant narrated, *"I have a different identity as a K-pop fan separated from my real life identity... I am known as Seok-ha or Sam in my fandom community"* (Participant 2, MZ, Female, Age 19, Rawalpindi). These narratives emphasize how K-pop fans are having dual identity and performing differently for these identities. Data shows that fans have developed a parallel sense of self separate from their everyday realities.

The transformative influence of K-pop fandom on individual identity development was a recurring theme among participants of the study. Many fans credited their involvement in the K-pop community as a catalyst for personal growth, enhanced self-confidence, and the discovery of new talents and interests. Participant 4 (BA, Female Age 28, Rawalpindi) highlighted a significant shift in personality: *"I have changed a lot. I used to be extremely introverted, but now I see myself as more extroverted,"* suggesting that active involvement in fandom activities—often centred on communication, collaboration, and public expression—can contribute to emotional openness and social confidence. Participant 10 (SA, Male, Age 24,

Lahore) shared, “K-pop made me confident over the years. The K-pop community accepted me for things I was never welcomed for elsewhere,” emphasizing the inclusive nature of the fandom and its role in fostering a sense of belonging. Engagement of fans in the fandom appeared to inspire creative pursuits, as illustrated by Participant 6: “I started sketching and singing after getting involved in K-pop. K-pop made me fall in love with dancing, and I started learning it.” Choi & Maliangkay (2015), also supported this notion that K-pop fans often construct their identities around their devotion to idols, finding self-definition and a sense of community through shared rituals, norms, language, and cultural practices associated with their fandom. These narratives underscore the role of fandom not only as a site of entertainment but also as a developmental and creative space that nurtures skill-building and self-expression. The inclusive environment of K-pop world appeared to serve as a space where fans could express aspects of their identity that may be suppressed or judged in their offline environments.

Additionally, Participant 12 (AA, Male, Age 26, Islamabad) emphasized the deeper moral and interpersonal lessons learned through fandom: “I learned a lot from my idols and the fan community. That is why I proudly own my K-pop identity. My friends in the fandom even call me by a different name. I learned how to accept things that may not align with my personal preferences.” This reflection highlights how fandoms may serve as informal educational platforms, where values such as empathy, tolerance, and identity fluidity are strengthened. The use of alternate names in K-pop fandom, as mentioned, also illustrates how fans symbolically mark their transformation and sense of belonging within a unique sub-culture. These insights disclose how the K-pop fandom purposes as a meaningful site for identity exploration, creative development and emotional empowerment. Far beyond passive consumption, fandom engagement becomes a transformative experience that shapes how individuals see themselves and interact with the world around them.

Social Comparison

The third component of Social Identity Theory, *social comparison*, highlights how individuals assess their group in relation to other groups, often to affirm their group’s value and enhance their self-esteem (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In the case of Pakistani K-pop fans, comparisons with global K-pop fan communities reveal both admiration and a sense of exclusion. Participant 4 (BA, Female, Age 28, Rawalpindi) reflected, “We take inspiration from those who are global fans. The difference is their community meetups are at a large scale.” The aspiration to replicate large-scale dance events, as mentioned by Participant 7 (IN, Female, Age 24, Gujrat) “We want more dance events in Pakistan as held worldwide”—describes that social comparison not only affects self-perception within the fandom but also stimulates collective action aimed at elevating their local community to global standards. This highlights the perceived disparity between local and international fandom experiences, where Pakistani fans view global fan cultures, such as those in Korea, the U.S., or Southeast Asia, as more organized and socially accepted. These comparisons reinforce feelings of marginalization and fuel a demand for similar recognition and visibility of their fanship within Pakistan. This comparative dynamic also strengthens in-group cohesion among Pakistani K-pop fans. Participant 11 (MA, Male, Age 21, Lahore) remarked, “In Pakistan, K-pop fans basically worship idols for their looks. In Pakistan, it is not culturally accepted as in other countries so we need to hide our identity.” This statement echoes a perceived cultural disconnect, motivating fans to distinguish themselves from the broader societal norms and align more closely with the global K-pop community. International K-pop fans engage themselves in social comparisons that uplift their fan identity above local cultural norms, using their affiliation with Korean pop culture to signal cultural capital (Jung & Shim, 2014). The need for concealment reinforces the in-group’s boundary, further hardening the fan identity in opposition to core cultural expectations. Despite these challenges and hindrances, participants express a strong sense of global belonging. Participant 6 (AK, Female, Age 26, Multan) shared, “Enthusiasm makes us connected globally. I have friends from different parts of the world and K-pop connected us,” while other participants described and shared the unifying goal of bringing K-pop idols to perform in Pakistan. These narratives direct that social comparison not only creates a sense of inferiority to some extent but also serves as a motivating strength that fosters the local fan identity through aspirational alignment with the international K-pop community.

Conclusion

The investigation of Pakistani K-pop fans through the lens of Social Identity Theory discloses a complex interplay of identity negotiation, community belonging, and global aspiration. Fans construct distinct identities within the K-pop fandom, often adopting new names, altering their online profiles and personas, and engaging in behaviours that reflect their loyalty to idols and alignment with fan norms and values. These performances and fandom practices of the fans are consciously separated from their offline lives due to prevailing cultural and religious sensitivities in Pakistan, leading to a compartmentalized sense of self. Through social categorization and in-group identification, K-pop fans find emotional security, moral guidance and creative expression, and within their fan communities, which often function as alternative support systems or as described by fans “mini-religions.” The role of social comparison further deepens this identity work, as Pakistani fans contrast their experiences with global fandoms also, highlighting disparities in acceptance, event opportunities, and community acceptance scale. However, rather than discouraging participation, these comparisons fuel ambitions to elevate the local fandom to international standards and strengthen internal cohesion. Ultimately, the K-pop fandom in Pakistan is not just a subculture but a transformative space where individuals reshape and reconstruct their identities, find belonging, and engage with a global hybrid cultural movement. This duality underscores the resilience and adaptableness of youth identities in a globalized yet locally restricted digital age.

Ethical Statement

This study was approved by the Institutional Ethics Committee of Riphah Institute of Media Sciences, and all research procedures adhered to established ethical guidelines. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their involvement, including parental consent where necessary. Participants were clearly informed about the academic purpose of the research, and all data were collected exclusively for scholarly use. To acknowledge their time and cooperation, participants received appropriate compensation. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured throughout the study.

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