

The Cross-Industry Impact of K-pop in China

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

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

1. Introduction

K-pop culture is a comprehensive pop culture phenomenon centered on Korean pop music (K-pop), integrating music creation, stage performances, the idol industry, fashion and beauty, fan economy, and cross-media content (such as variety shows and virtual technology applications). Its distinctive features include an industrialized content production system (a fully integrated chain from idol cultivation, content creation, to global distribution), a highly interactive fan engagement model (online-offline integrated fan culture and community co-creation), and the deep integration of technological and cultural elements (such as the metaverse concept and the application of virtual idol technology), all of which contribute to its global cultural influence through worldwide dissemination.

This paper takes the South Korean girl group aespa as a representative case to examine the mechanisms through which K-pop culture influences multiple industries in China. Specifically, by comparing the talent show models of China and South Korea, it analyzes the insights that K-pop's industrialized star-making system offers for the Chinese entertainment and broader content industries. Combining an analysis of aespa's digital album sales data and co-branding marketing cases with local Chinese brands, the study explores its impact on China's digital economy and brand

marketing strategies. Additionally, using aespa's "metaverse virtual idol" concept as an entry point, it investigates how K-pop's technological applications influence China's virtual technology development and digital content creation. Through this analysis, the paper reveals how K-pop culture, via a path of "technology empowerment + cultural integration," transforms Chinese industries and ultimately provides a reference for innovation and upgrading across China's entertainment, technology, and consumer sectors. This approach transcends the limitations of the idol industry alone and explores possibilities for cross-industry development.

2. Background

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

In recent years, the scale of the Chinese K-POP market has fluctuated significantly, exhibiting diverse and complex characteristics. AESPA, as an extremely influential girl group, plays a key role in this market, and its development trajectory also reflects many changes in the K-POP market.

In terms of market size, in the first quarter of 2024, China surpassed the United States, Japan, and other countries to once again become South Korea's largest export market for K-POP albums, with total exports reaching US\$12.96 million (approximately RMB 93 million). From January to April 2025, orders for K-POP albums from the Chinese market grew from US\$4.31 million to US\$17.63 million. aespa performed exceptionally well amid the ups and downs of this market. In 2024, aespa released their first full-length album, *Armageddon*, attracting a large fan base with their unique musical style, boosting album sales, and further enhancing their influence in the Chinese market [1]. However, in 2023, the market experienced fluctuations. According to statistics from securities researchers, from June to October 2023, the export volume of albums to the Chinese market decreased by 95% to 99% year-on-year. aespa's new album "Drama," released in November, saw its initial sales drop by 33.5% compared to its previous album "MY WORLD," released in May, with sales exceeding 1.13 million copies. Of these, "MY WORLD" accounted for 1.02 million copies, representing over 60% of total sales, while "Drama" fell far short of this figure [2]. In terms of market characteristics, aespa boldly blends and innovates in its musical style. Its music experiments with electronic music genres such as deep house, trance, and trap, breaking away from the traditional framework of K-POP girl groups to form a unique musical identity that appeals to young Chinese music fans seeking individuality [3]. Conceptually, aespa pioneered the introduction of the metaverse concept, with members and corresponding AI avatars, as well as the "Wilderness" virtual space, which aligns with young people's curiosity and desire to explore technology and virtual worlds. In terms of fan economy, aespa fans' consumption behavior has a significant impact on the market. On the one hand, fans' enthusiastic purchases drive album sales, such as the high sales of MY WORLD, which would not have been possible without fan support. On the other hand, some changes in the market are also affecting fan consumption. Factors such as restrictions on group purchases to lower prices, higher pricing, and international shipping costs have caused fans to reevaluate their behavior of rushing to buy albums. At the same time, issues such as fraud and scalpers charging high prices at video autograph sessions and offline autograph sessions have also caused the fan economy to become overloaded.

In market activities, aespa has garnered attention both online and offline: At the 2024 Shanghai signing event, fans were highly enthusiastic, and photos of the members sparked heated discussions on social media; online, the topic's popularity surged, music video views reached new highs, and the song achieved significant playback and collection numbers on domestic streaming platforms. Social media popularity and fan engagement are key indicators of a K-POP artist's market influence [4]. As

China's market acceptance of K-POP evolves and aespa continues to develop, they are poised to expand their activities in China, further expanding their market reach and creating both commercial and cultural value. On June 28, 2025, aespa returned with their new single “Dirty Work,” continuing the “metaverse” concept and blending retro disco with electronic elements. The lyrics convey a message of breaking stereotypes and staying true to oneself. Pre-sales exceeded 1.01 million copies within 24 hours, with the Chinese market contributing nearly 40% of sales, demonstrating their sustained global influence [5].

As can be seen, AESPA has a massive presence in China's K-POP market, with distinct characteristics. Musically, they break traditional frameworks by blending diverse styles, and conceptually, they align with young audiences' interest in technology and the virtual world through innovative settings like “metaverse” and “AI avatars,” creating a unique brand identity. In terms of market performance, their album sales are impressive, with a significant share in the Chinese market. Online, they leverage high social media engagement and streaming play counts, while offline, they strengthen fan connections through events like autograph sessions, demonstrating a strong fan base and robust commercial appeal. Additionally, their development aligns with the resurgence of the Chinese K-POP market. By actively organizing offline events and planning to expand into concert formats, they continue to deepen their connection with the Chinese market, highlighting their deep penetration and potential growth prospects in this market.

2.2. Resource integration and industry linkage

Aespa's resource integration in the Chinese market focuses on multi-channel and multi-form synergistic efforts. It has established a deep partnership with Tencent Music Entertainment Group, using QQ Music as the core platform for promotional activities to reach a vast audience. Additionally, it will co-host an offline themed exhibition in 2025, selling albums and merchandise, integrating online traffic with offline experiences through a “music + merchandise + scene” model to strengthen fan loyalty. Simultaneously, it will leverage social media platforms such as Weibo and Douyin, integrating music content, member updates, and fan support activities to maximize exposure [6].

Aespa explores cross-industry collaborations to expand influence in China: partnering with games like "PUBG" (creating theme songs, limited skins, emojis) for mutual empowerment between music IP and gaming; venturing into fashion via magazine covers and co-branded products with local brands. "Music + games + fashion" collaborations break single-industry boundaries, forming a multi-industry ecosystem and solidifying their diverse influence in China [7].

3. Case analysis

3.1. Comparison of Chinese and South Korean talent shows

Talent shows are entertainment variety shows that focus on talent competitions and select winners (or form groups) through multiple rounds of selection. They combine competitiveness and a sense of nurturing, and audience interaction has a significant impact on the results.

South Korea's “Create Camp 101” (2016) is a typical example of the industrialization of K-pop culture: it brought together 101 trainees from 10 South Korean entertainment companies and relied on a mature star-making assembly line. From singing and dancing to stage performance, everything followed the standardized K-pop model, with “professional ability” as the core selection criterion. In the end, 11 people were selected to form the limited group I.O.I. The program reinforces K-pop's

cultural label of “extreme professionalism” through high-intensity training documentaries and high-level stage performances. Voting relies on text messages from Korean audiences, which not only reflects the fan culture logic of K-pop's “mass participation,” but also exports its industry rules and aesthetic system through the program.

China's “Create Camp 101” (2018) is a localized adaptation of the K-pop model: it brings together 101 Chinese trainees (including a few overseas Chinese) with the goal of creating a local girl group called Rocket Girls 101 [8]. The contestants are diverse (including amateurs and established artists), and the program retains the “stage competition + elimination” framework, emphasizing the “development narrative.” It uses training room behind-the-scenes footage and growth stories (such as the ‘comeback’ character) to resonate with audiences; the stage incorporates Chinese cultural elements (such as the performance of “Hong Zhao Yuan”) to align with local aesthetic preferences; Voting is tied to Tencent Video and Weibo, requiring fans to “watch videos and purchase memberships” to obtain voting rights, with fundraising and voting campaigns becoming prevalent, increasingly reliant on traffic logic.

In comparison, the Korean version serves as a medium for the “standardized export” of K-pop culture, while the Chinese version incorporates local values and market dynamics into its adaptation. By “reducing extreme industrialization” and “strengthening emotional connections,” it explores a path for the idol industry that aligns with the Chinese context, thereby demonstrating the localization and adaptation of the K-pop model in cross-cultural communication.

3.2. Localization of K-pop beauty brands in China

In the booming beauty industry, the cross-industry collaboration between K-pop and beauty has become a significant trend. As one of the leading Korean beauty brands, Dream Beauty, under the Amore Pacific Group, has been actively exploring paths toward brand youthfulness and internationalization. In 2025, Dream Beauty collaborated with aespa member WINTER. This collaboration not only leveraged the popularity of K-pop but also successfully attracted the attention of Chinese consumers through precise localization strategies.

In recent years, the Chinese beauty market has continued to expand, with young consumers becoming the main force. They pursue personalized and trendy beauty products and have unique preferences for brand marketing methods. Against this backdrop, many K-pop beauty brands have attempted to enter the Chinese market but face fierce competition and cultural adaptation challenges. The collaboration between Dream Makeup and WINTER provides a typical case study of how K-pop beauty brands can achieve localization in China [9].

3.3. Aespa members' brand endorsement styles and influence

The members of aespa have established a distinctive style in brand endorsements through their unique characteristics, and have had a significant impact on product sales. Karina, with her cool and sophisticated “human AI” aura, spans multiple fields, infusing Prada with a minimalist luxury style and Converse with a trendy vibe. Her powerful presence has driven both high-end brands and mass-market products to achieve high levels of attention; Winter combines sweetness with edginess, conveying youthful vitality in her endorsements for Polo Ralph Lauren and New Balance. As the spokesperson for Dream Makeup and Espoir, she aligns with the brands' concepts through her fresh image, driving up sales of beauty products; Giselle's free-spirited and versatile personality resonates with Loewe's artistic creativity, using her strong personal style to reinforce the brand's avant-garde attitude, attracting consumers seeking unique fashion; Ningning, with her vibrant and confident

Eastern beauty, perfectly embodies Versace's luxurious personality, with her endorsement looks sparking heated discussions and aiding the brand's penetration into the Chinese market's younger demographic.

Members use their unique characteristics as a bond to deeply integrate K-pop influence with brand identity. Through fan economy and mass communication, they not only increase product exposure but also promote emotional resonance between brand concepts and target audiences, becoming a typical example of idol endorsements empowering commercial value [10].

4. Discussion

Aespa has broken through the conventional boundaries of female idol groups by leveraging a metaverse-based concept, generating a multi-dimensional impact on various sectors in China through a model of “technology-driven development + cultural integration.” In the entertainment industry, aespa's virtual idol concept has accelerated the exploration and application of immersive digital technologies. Data from digital album sales and the performance of both online and offline fan events demonstrate a thriving fan economy and strong market engagement.

In terms of cross-industry collaboration, aespa's partnerships with Tencent Music, gaming platforms, and fashion brands have built a synergistic “music + multi-sector” ecosystem, offering a practical model for resource integration and cross-brand innovation. In the commercial sector, the group's members each adopt differentiated brand endorsement styles, which are strategically aligned with local consumer preferences. This, along with the localized operations of K-pop-affiliated beauty brands, highlights both the commercial value of idol influence and the necessity of cultural adaptation in international markets.

The case analysis of Chinese–Korean girl group auditions reveals the structural and cultural differences in idol industry models, offering valuable insights into model innovation, cultural integration, and monetization strategies for domestic talent shows. It also reflects differing entertainment consumption preferences and social values between Chinese and Korean audiences, thus bearing both theoretical and practical significance for understanding cross-cultural media flows and industry development.

Looking ahead, as China gradually relaxes restrictions on Korean content, K-pop is likely to face new opportunities, such as expanded performance activities and group debuts in the Chinese market. However, K-POP also faces numerous challenges, as fans have grown weary of “fan-driven consumption.” China's domestic idol industry is also continuously developing.

To maintain its momentum, K-pop must prioritize content innovation, enhance fan experiences, and demonstrate cultural respect, while moving away from unsustainable practices such as over-reliance on fan spending and data manipulation. With a sincere attitude and a commitment to high-quality content, K-pop has the potential to achieve sustainable development in China's competitive market and continue to expand its influence in meaningful and responsible ways.

5. Conclusion

The findings of this study are as follows: Through an analysis of aespa as a case study, it was found that K-POP has exerted cross-dimensional influences on multiple sectors in China, including the entertainment industry, digital economy, brand marketing, and virtual technology R&D, through the path of “technology empowerment + cultural integration.” Specifically, the comparison of Chinese and Korean talent show models highlights the differences between K-POP's standardized industrialized star-making system and China's localized adjustments; aespa's digital album data and

fan economy operations provide insights into digital music payment models; its metaverse concept has driven the application of virtual technology in content creation; and member endorsements and brand collaborations demonstrate K-POP's inspiration for cross-border marketing. Thus, the research concludes that K-POP not only provides an international innovation model for China's various industries but also offers a universally applicable reference framework for China's industrial upgrading and development through its practices in balancing standardization and localization, as well as cross-industry collaboration.

This study offers valuable reference significance for future research in related fields, primarily influencing: first, expanding the scope of research on K-POP's cross-cultural influence, breaking free from the limitations of a single idol industry, and providing case support for analyzing the synergistic effects of popular culture on multiple industries; second, providing theoretical and empirical basis for innovative practices in China's entertainment, technology, and consumer industries, aiding them in achieving resource integration and model optimization under globalization.

Future research should focus on the following directions for in-depth exploration: first, long-term tracking of the development dynamics of K-POP groups (such as aespa) in the Chinese market, analyzing the sustainability and trends of their influence; second, exploring deeper integration pathways between K-POP and Chinese local culture, and its potential impact on cultural identity and value dissemination; Third, examining the competitive and collaborative relationships between K-POP and China's domestic industries in light of policy environment changes (such as market adjustments following the relaxation of the "ban on Korean content"); and fourth, further exploring the application scenarios of virtual technology in the entertainment industry and its role in reshaping user experience and social interaction patterns.

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