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From Korea to the world: Women's role as peer-leaders in K-pop transnational online brand communities

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From Korea to the world: Women's role as peer-leaders in K-pop transnational online brand communities

Focusing on online brand communities (OBCs) centered around K-pop music consumption, this study explores the influential role of women as peer-leaders. By analyzing data from Twitter using social network analysis (SNA) and sentiment analysis techniques, we observe that (1) OBCs naturally form transnational consumer segments, (2) where peer leadership emerges organically, and (3) women often occupy these leadership positions due to their social capital and engagement in relevant conversation topics. This study contributes to demonstrating the increasing empowerment of women in a realm that has long been criticized for its portrayal of gender-related issues.

Keywords: K-pop; online brand communities, transnational segmentation, peer-leaders, women empowerment,

Introduction

This paper is rooted in the globally shared phenomenon of cultural branding exemplified by Hallyu or K-pop culture, described by Oh and Kim (2022). The growth of the market has been based on the popularity of female groups in the current offer (40.1% of YouTube likes, 45.6% of views in 2022). K-pop culture has touched millions of fans worldwide over the past two decades (Kim and Park 2020). In this postmodern context, consumer behaviour and consumption interpretation must be revised. Thus, K-pop culture has emerged as one of the strongest markers of globalized postcolonial pop culture.

The global popularity of K-pop music is likely to be due to the effective online marketing strategies of K-pop companies. However, few studies have focused on understanding the segmentation of transnational K-pop consumption. In this study, we show how intensive fan communication on major social media platforms generates spontaneous online brand communities (OBCs) that function as highly dynamic and ephemeral segments, allowing fans to have an extended consumption experience. The structure of international social media indeed facilitates the formation of spontaneous transnational OBCs among K-pop fans of various nationalities, as has been observed for other popular brands. These OBCs have characteristic forms that influence the complex processes of fan segment clustering, which are temporary and centred on customer interactions and variable themes not controlled by brands. Therefore, a finer understanding of customer behaviour is needed, given the typologies of these observed segments.

While the marketing literature acknowledges the online engagement of consumers who become fans, and sociology explores the underlying community structures and social networks, these aspects remain unexplored in the context of K-pop consumption. Similarly, few studies have examined the role of women as emerging opinion leaders in transnational exchanges within OBCs. Existing research highlights the tensions inherent in K-pop culture on this topic and points to the potential to empower women worldwide. This study aims to fill these gaps by understanding the segmentation of transnational OBCs of K-pop fans and the proactive role of women as peer-leaders in these communities.

To achieve this, our research seeks to: (1) analyse the patterns of online exchange among K-pop fans, which form distinct segments based on common

conversational topics with characteristic structures; (2) explore the transnational nature of these segments and their interconnections; (3) investigate the proactive role of women within these segments as content cocreators and opinion leaders; and (4) examine the presence of gendered discussions of interest among fans.

This study is pioneering in its interdisciplinary approach, merging fields that have rarely intersected before. In addition, it uses a novel method of data collection and analysis, taking advantage of artificial intelligence and big data available online. The study combines social network analysis (SNA), semantic analysis and sentiment analysis, which represents a new approach in the field of marketing research, especially regarding pop culture consumption. The paper is organised as follows: we review the literature on K-pop music consumption, OBCs, and the role of women in this context. We then present a set of four hypotheses, followed by the methodology used for data collection and analysis. The results and discussion sections show how the empowerment of women within K-pop OBCs can be seen as a driver of transnational adoption of this music genre.

The transnational consumption of K-pop music: from branding to paradoxes

Several dimensions can explain the success of K-pop as a transnational phenomenon. One such dimension is the impact of global online marketing strategies of K-pop companies and their brands, which has been examined in the literature.

Transnational K-pop online branding

The global adoption of social media has significantly influenced the K-pop industry by facilitating the creation of online communities. By positioning artists as distinct brands, it capitalizes on customer expectations such as content accessibility, perceived affinity, and positive social interaction, thereby enhancing the consumer experience (Salo et al., 2013). For example, YouTube has emerged as a key medium for K-pop music distribution and fan engagement (Oh and Lee 2013), despite limited community structuring capabilities.

However, research to date has focused on market differentiation and customer expectations. For example, in Asia, K-pop marketing strategies take advantage of the cultural proximity, perceived quality, and familiarity of the groups promoted (Kim and Park 2020). The success of the “Korean wave” is said to be based on adaptation to diverse cultural and geographical markets (Yoon 2018b). Dimensions such as perceived competence or warmth would influence Vietnamese consumers' attitudes towards K-pop brands (Lee, Chae and Lew, 2019). Social media engagement has been an important factor in the success of BTS, fostering emotional connections with fans (Lee, Choi and Kim, 2021). Indeed, K-pop fans actively promote their favorite artists and foster a sense of community through their online engagement.

Research in sociology, communication, and fan studies has highlighted the transnational nature of this community phenomenon underlying K-pop consumption, revealing its character as a transnational culture (e.g., Chin and Morimoto, 2013; Jin and Yoon, 2016; Lin and Rudolf, 2017; Yoon and Jin, 2017). However, marketing research has not yet explored the characteristics of the transnational segments that emerge from these online behaviours, which is the gap that this study aims to fill. We argue that K-pop online marketing is an example of transnational consumption, fostering new segmentation among a cross-border clientele on the basis of new and underexplored online behaviour criteria.

K-Pop consumption hybridity in global markets

K-pop's global popularity can be attributed to its unique fusion of Korean and Western elements (Lie, 2012; Oh, 2017), particularly appealing to younger generations by creating a sense of cultural hybridity. Existing literature examining K-pop's consumption patterns across different regions highlights the influence of peer networks, media representation, and fan attitudes, which shape its reception in diverse markets. Notably, these factors vary across countries, as evidenced by several studies.

For Asian American youth, K-pop serves as a means of acquiring an alternative identity, fostering connections among Asian communities in the United States (Ju and Lee, 2015). Brazilian fans find inspiration, hope, and emotional resonance in K-pop music (Regatieri, 2017), while Swedish fans value its novelty (Hübinette, 2018). Romanian fans, especially women, exhibit a keen interest in Korean culture and language within the realm of K-pop consumption (Marinescu and Balica, 2013). In Thailand, Twitter-based K-pop consumption and fandom activities differ based on age and gender, with younger and female fans displaying higher levels of engagement (Chansanam et al., 2021). Furthermore, studies have explored the consumption and identification patterns of Thai youth (Siriyuvasak and Hyunjoon, 2007), as well as non-Korean K-pop consumers in China and the Philippines (Ryu, Capistrano and Lin, 2020). Yoon (2018a) delves into the experiences of cultural hybridity among K-pop fans in various countries.

While the existing literature showcases diverse consumption patterns across regions and identifies multiple contributing factors to K-pop's success, a comprehensive analysis of this combined hybridity of consumption factors on a transnational scale remains absent. It allows us to better understand K-pop consumption and its role in shaping the music industry and social norms that affect the formation of transnational consumer segments.

Table 1. Studies on international K-pop consumption.

Author(s)	Main Theme	Key Elements
Chansanam et al. 2021	Analysis of K-pop on Twitter in Thailand	The promotion of Korean pop culture on Twitter has a positive impact on the promotion of Korean cultural products such as TV series outside Korea
Chin and Morimoto 2013	Theoretical analysis of transcultural fandom	Transcultural approach to fandom studies, emphasizing affective affinities and challenging nation-centred analyses
Hübinette 2018	Analysis of Swedish K-Pop fans	K-Pop music allows adoption of a transnational identity, to distance oneself from the stereotypes of one's own culture and to express one's identity as cosmopolitan urban youth
Jang, Kim, and Baek 2022	Influence of K-pop fandom on the popularity of K-Drama	Analyzis of the global popularity of K-dramas and their link to K-pop fandom, confirming the influence of K-pop fandom on K-drama popularity
Jin and Yoon 2016	Social mediascape of transnational Korean pop culture	The impact of Korean pop culture (Hallyu) depends on social media, emphasizing its spreadable nature and transnational influence
Ju and Lee 2015	The Korean Wave and Asian Americans	Transnational K-pop is consumed by Asian American youth as a means of reminiscing about their pan-ethnic identity and finding comfort from social marginality

Kim and Park 2020	Korean wave segmentation and strategy for ASEAN countries.	Cultural differences between Korea and ASEAN countries can have an impact on the perception and acceptance of Korean culture in these countries
Koh and Baek 2020	Korean women's diasporic identity in Kazakhstan via K-Pop consumption.	The consumption of K-Pop by young Korean women in Kazakhstan is linked to the construction of a Korean diasporic identity and adherence to cosmopolitan values
Laffan 2021	Positive psychosocial outcomes and fandom among K-Pop fans	K-Pop fandom helps positive identification for fans, improving their self-esteem and psychosocial well-being
Lee 2013	Talking space and gender discourses in digital diaspora space for female Korean immigrants in the USA	The female Korean immigrant online community provides a space for women to discuss gender issues and cultural identity, as well as share information and support each other
Lee, Chae, and Lew 2019	Categorization and stereotype content theories applied to country of origin image	Vietnamese consumers' perceptions of Korean Wave brands are influenced by stereotypes and categorizations of South Korea and Vietnam
Lee, Choi, and Kim 2021	Success factors of the K-pop group BTS	Success factors of BTS include their music, performance, social media presence, and fandom culture
Lie 2012	K-pop international success and markers of Korean culture	The rise of K-pop as an export success highlights the lack of traditional Korean elements in the genre, making it easily marketable abroad. The "K" in K-pop is more of a brand than a representation of Korean culture
Lin and Rudolf 2017	Gender inequalities in K-Pop	The gender representation and portrayal in K-Pop reinforces traditional gender roles and stereotypes
Marinescu and Balica 2013	K-Pop impact in Romania	The popularity of K-Pop in Romania reflects the influence of global popular culture and the appeal of K-Pop's aesthetics, music, and performance
Oh 2017	How do Korean pop culture meet glocal demands	Through a process of localization and globalization, K-pop culture has successfully gained fame domestically and internationally, demonstrating the concept of glocalization
Oh and Kim (2019)	Female fans of Hallyu and communication of melancholy gender	Female fans of Hallyu express their emotions and experiences through communication, including self-expression, identification with media characters, and interpersonal relationships.
Oh and Lee 2013	Mass Media Technologies and Popular Music Genres: K-Pop and YouTube	K-pop has been marketed and consumed in different parts of the world, particularly with YouTube, illustrating the impact of social media on K-pop fandom culture
Oh and Kim 2022	Gendered Melancholia as Cultural Branding: Fandom Participation in the K-Pop Community	Gendered dynamics of K-pop fandom culture contribute to the formation of a distinct cultural identity. The melancholia is used as a branding strategy by K-pop companies. Fan participation in K-pop fandom culture has changed over time
Oh and Kim 2019	The communication of female K-pop fans	K-pop is a tool for challenging traditional gender norms, and that K-pop fans can find a supportive community in which to express their gender melancholy

Oh, Jang, and Kim 2018	The role of social networking service (SNS) providers in creating online social capital in South Korea	How SNS influence trust and online social relationships, emphasizing the importance of trust and social capital in online interactions
Regatieri 2017	Dynamics of K-Pop in Brazil	Reception and diffusion of K-Pop in Brazil is influenced by K-Pop industry's strategies and fans' practices
Ryu, Capistrano, and Lin 2020	Non-Korean Consumers' Preferences on Korean Popular Music	Factors influencing non-Korean consumers' preferences on K-Pop, comparing the US and Taiwan
Siriyuvasak and Hyunjoon 2007	Asianizing K-Pop: Production, Consumption and Identification Patterns	Production, consumption, and identification patterns of K-Pop among Thai youth is "Asianized" in the Thai context
Unger 2015	Deconstructing the Genre of K-pop Girl Group Music Videos	Explores the presentation and construction of gender and sexuality in K-Pop girl group music videos
Yoon 2018a	Global Imagination of K-pop: Music Fans' Lived Experiences	The global imagination of K-Pop among international fans and their lived experiences of cultural hybridity has shaped their fandom
Yoon 2018b	Korea Wave Marketing Performance: Cross-National Adoption	Adoption of Korean Wave marketing arguments among international consumers of K-Pop in a social media context

Social media platforms facilitate the formation of OBCs where K-pop fans can engage in self-expression, interact with fellow fans, and connect with brands. However, the existing literature has not thoroughly examined the dynamics of OBCs in the context of K-pop, which we believe is a crucial aspect for understanding its transnational market development. Consequently, the next section will delve into this topic.

The social structure of OBCs

Open-Bound Communities and Brand Identity

OBCs have become a significant resource of online marketing. They are digital spaces where non-geographically linked fans of a brand can interact, exchange resources, and build a shared brand identity (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). These communities can be found on dedicated websites or on social media platforms, enabling consumers to share their experiences and feelings related to their favourite brands without being constrained by physical boundaries or language (Algesheimer et al., 2005; Chan and Li, 2010; Fournier and Lee, 2009).

The transnational popularity of OBCs can be attributed to the unique opportunity they provide for fans to express their personal identities by participating in the co-construction of a brand identity with other international fans (Belk 2013; Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). Through this collective construction of a brand narrative, fans satisfy both personal and social goals, such as the desire for self-expression and the need for social belonging (Bagozzi and Dholakia 2002). For this purpose, OBCs require reciprocity and mutual trust between fans, which is conducive to greater engagement with the community (Chan and Li 2010; Chan et al. 2014). Community engagement

through OBCs creates additional value for the brand, leading to greater consumer satisfaction and loyalty (Brodie et al. 2013). This strengthens the relationship between the brand and fans (Akrouf and Nagy 2018), making OBCs an important site for high engagement (Chadwick et al., 2021). By distinguishing the most effective influencers, OBCs enable the identification of the most engaged members of the community, who are most likely to promote the brand and influence others to become fans (Chung and Zeng 2020). In summary, OBCs have become vital spaces for consumers to establish strong connections with brands, fostering a sense of belonging and loyalty among community members.

Social capital in OBCs

Consumer engagement in OBCs is influenced by many factors, including individual, social, and informational aspects (Hook, Baxter, and Kulczynski 2018). One crucial element is the development and impact of social capital among engaged fans. Social capital, a well-established concept in sociology and management, refers to the resources individuals can access through their interpersonal relationships, such as trust, shared norms, and obligations (Coleman 1988). This concept is applicable to OBCs, where social capital plays a pivotal role (Bowden et al. 2018; Jeong, Ha and Lee 2021). In different forms of organizations, social capital facilitates innovation, knowledge sharing, mutual support, and overall improved efficiency (Tsai and Ghoshal 1998). Similarly, within OBCs, social capital influences the formation and activities of the online community and consumer behaviour in various ways. For instance, the relationship between online social networking and social capital tends to be positive, albeit influenced by factors such as the type of social capital measured and the specific social media context (Dong, Ainsworth, and Baumeister 2016).

The structure and effectiveness of social capital within OBCs play a crucial role in understanding the dynamics of the extensive discussions observed in these communities. Social capital's effectiveness is contingent upon its structure, encompassing the size and composition of an individual's network, the quality of the interpersonal relationships within it, and its cognitive dimension, which comprises shared values, norms, and beliefs among network members (Burt 2004). Research has shown that these three dimensions of social capital have a positive relationship with consumer engagement in OBCs (Bowden et al. 2018). For instance, individuals with higher levels of social capital and self-esteem are more inclined to use social media platforms to maintain existing relationships rather than form new ones (Steinfeld, Ellison, and Lampe 2008). Bridging social capital, or being a “broker”, characterized by connections to diverse networks, has been found to positively impact purchase intention for trendy products (Kim, Kang, and Lee 2020). Hofer and Aubert (2013) explored perceived bridging and bonding social capital on Twitter, revealing differences between followers and leaders, with followers perceiving more bridging social capital and leaders perceiving more bonding social capital. Additionally, the concept of social cybercapital expands the dimensions of trust, participation, and engagement, underscoring its broader implications (Oh, Jang, and Kim 2018).

In summary, individual social capital plays a crucial role in the social influence of fans and leaders of OBCs. Fans' opinions and actions are often influenced by their online peers, particularly in regard to cultural products such as K-pop music. The emotional attachment that fans have to the brand is an important factor in this relationship. Fans express their affection for the artists, share positive experiences, offer support, and give criticism when necessary. These expressions of affection and criticism

demonstrate the affective dimension of OBCs and the powerful role they play in shaping consumer behaviour (Kozinets, Patterson, and Ashman 2017).

Social dynamics of OBCs

OBCs are important channels for group communication and influence due to their capacity to allow individuals to share their thoughts and feelings with others (Kozinets, Patterson, and Ashman 2017). The social capital of OBC actors who interact with each other plays a crucial role in their leadership (Yoon 2018b). Furthermore, the structure of OBCs remains an understudied area of research in the marketing and pop culture consumption literature. However, social network analysis (SNA) can provide useful analytical tools to examine the interindividual exchanges, group dynamics, and central influencers of OBCs, since OBCs are based on online social networks (Borgatti et al. 2020; Burt 2004; Hansen et al. 2020).

Researchers have examined the dynamics of OBCs by analyzing the actions and conversations within them, as well as the strength of interindividual connections and the interest generated by discussions. These actions, such as “likes” and comments, serve as indicators of engagement, contributing to the emergence of influential users. Popular social media platforms like Twitter play a vital role in the virality of pre- and post-purchase conversations, enabling consumers to seek mixing and reciprocity in exchange within a transnational social space, fostering the formation of distinct communities based on specific conversation topics (Ahmed et al. 2022). Several archetypal forms of communities have been identified in them, ranging from *community-oriented networks* to *broadcast networks* (Ahmed et al. 2020; Chadwick et al. 2021; Himelboim et al. 2017).

The study of the social structure of OBCs, the social capital of their actors, and their impact on the international consumption of K-pop remains underexplored. It requires interdisciplinary research that combines OBC marketing, pop-culture, fan studies, and network analyses. Although the necessary concepts and methods have been established, there is a need to delve into this research area (Hung and Li 2007; Jeong, Ha, and Lee, 2021; Meek et al. 2019). This motivates our intention to further develop this research angle.

Paradoxes of K-Pop Culture between gender stereotypes and female empowerment

The impact of K-pop on individuals and society is our third research theme. The literature explores both the positive and negative effects of K-pop on identity formation, cultural consumption, and social norms. Notably, K-pop encounters cultural stereotypes concerning gender and the portrayal of women (Lee, Chae, and Lew 2019). Oh and Kim (2019) explored these paradoxical aspects by studying female fan communication. They find that K-pop provides a platform for challenging traditional gender norms, allowing fans to express their gender melancholy within a supportive community. Moreover, fans perceive this melancholy as a cultural branding that asserts their identity and support for K-pop artists (Oh and Kim 2022). Similarly, Lin and Rudolf (2017) observed that K-pop perpetuates gender inequalities, portraying female artists in a sexualised and objectified manner compared to their male counterparts. However, fans critically interpret these representations and endorse the potential for female empowerment through K-pop. Unger (2015), adopting a deconstructivist approach, further explores the tensions and contradictions between gender representations, identity construction, and

consumption practices within female K-pop groups.

In a recent research, Koh and Baek (2020) demonstrate that K-pop fan communities contribute to the formation of a Korean diasporic identity among young Korean expatriate women. Additionally, Lee (2013) highlights how these communities provide a platform for women to discuss gender issues and connect with others who share similar experiences. Engaging with K-pop fandoms has been found to foster a sense of belonging, improve self-esteem, and evoke positive emotions among fans (Laffan 2021). Moreover, Yoon (2018a) suggests that K-pop offers fans an experience of cultural hybridity through their engagement with the genre. The prominence of women and androgyny in K-pop culture challenges societal gender norms and perpetuates a transnational myth of performative gendered melancholy (Oh and Kim 2022). OBCs play a crucial role in facilitating these discussions and enabling the emergence of fan experts, who are spontaneous leaders among consumers driven by personal and interpersonal factors (Chin and Morimoto 2013).

Female leaders within K-pop fan communities play a significant role not only as consumers but also as content cocreators. These transnational OBCs co-construct a new cultural branding of K-pop, offering new social myths to their audiences (Unger 2015; Lee 2013; Lin and Rudolf 2017). K-pop encompasses a range of femininity expressions, including innocence, sexualization, androgyny, and freedom of choice. The success of female K-pop stars serves as a powerful socio-cultural symbol of transnational consumption, with powerful female stars and androgynous boys embodying values such as equality, fairness, and freedom of choice (Hübinette 2018; Oh and Kim 2019). These iconic symbols attract audiences and promote these progressive values.

To fully comprehend the dynamics of gender within fandom, it is crucial to examine the multifaceted nature of K-pop culture in OBCs. It encompasses the themes of individuality, conformity, sexualization, female empowerment, hybridity of national styles, authenticity, and music production. Notwithstanding these paradoxes, key works by Lie (2012) Oh and Kim (2019), Oh and Kim (2022) and Unger (2015) shed light on the complexities of K-pop culture, which is influenced by an emerging feminist culture embraced by fans worldwide.

The literature reviewed in this exploratory research highlights the transnational nature of K-pop consumption, the significance of OBCs as platforms for engagement, and the importance of gender issues within this context. However, several gaps remain to be addressed. Existing studies acknowledge the active role of female K-pop fans in promoting artists and fostering the community, yet empirical data on the functioning and impact of OBCs on international consumer behaviour is lacking. Moreover, little research has examined the structural aspects of K-pop OBCs and the social capital dynamics of their members. Lastly, there is a need for more comprehensive studies on the involvement of women and gender-related topics within these OBCs. Recognizing the relevance of highly active and spontaneous OBCs, it is essential for K-pop industry professionals to understand why and how engaged consumers participate in such communities. Therefore, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the dynamics of K-pop OBCs by specifically exploring the influential role of women. Building on the literature, the research question can be refined into four hypotheses:

- **Hypothesis 1:** *At the macrostructural level, peer-leaders in K-pop OBCs on Twitter emerge and lead transnational segments that are distinct from other segments, potentially influenced by brands.*

- **Hypothesis 2:** *At the meso level, the social capital characteristics of these peer-leaders contribute to their unique position within the identified segments, granting them an influence comparable to brands in the studied OBC.*
- **Hypothesis 3:** *At the microlevel, women predominantly occupy the role of peer-leaders.*
- **Hypothesis 4:** *Within the microlevel, a significant portion of the conversation topics initiated by these women leaders critically engage with gender issues.*

Intended to be exploratory, these hypotheses can be illustrated in an original model.

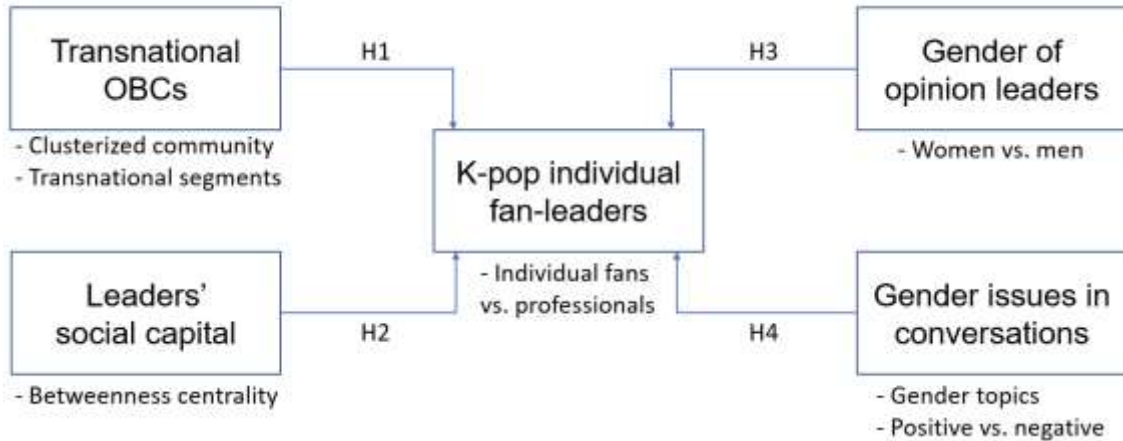


Figure 1. Theoretical conceptualization of K-pop OBC segmentation.

Methodology and Research Design

This study investigates the spontaneous formation of segments around opinion leaders in a K-pop OBC on Twitter. YouTube was excluded due to its comment filtering policy, limiting the collection of critical comments. The mixed-method case study protocol consists of several steps.

Firstly, employing a netnographic approach (Kozinets 1999), we observed various Twitter accounts, discussed with engaged fans, and collected press articles to gain familiarity with K-pop. This allowed us to witness the active online engagement related to artists, group discussions, and topics such as attitudes towards women exhibited by artists and fans. The study aims to provide insights into the structure and dynamics of these segments within the K-pop OBC.

Secondly, to compare the structuring of K-pop OBCs on different dates, we collected two Twitter datasets: *Community#1* on 2023-01-10 and *Community#2* on 2023-02-21. These dates correspond to significant announcements by K-pop brands, such as music video releases or award show results. The collected data encompassed user tweets, likes, replies, referrals, and the resulting network connections. Additionally, various aspects of users' social capital, such as followers, tweets, and likes, were considered. Data collection and analysis were conducted using the software *NodeXL* (Hansen et al. 2020), following the protocol outlined in Appendix 1.

Thirdly, in preparation for the analyses, the data was cleaned, involving tasks such as removing irrelevant data like HTML code elements or symbols, and translating tweets. Descriptive data tables were generated. Subsequently, calculations were performed to visualize and cluster the communities, revealing distinct segments based on intra-community interactions. Social network analysis (SNA) metrics (Table 2) were

then computed to identify the opinion leaders within each segment, providing a detailed characterization of their social capital.

Table 2. SNA metrics used.

SNA Metrics and Vocabulary	Description
Users	Individuals connected in a social network or a community
Links	Relationships between these users (tweets, likes, comments, mentions, replies)
Network size	Number of users connected in the community
Density	Ratio 'actual links/total possible number of links'
Betweenness centrality	How often a user lies on the shortest path between two others in the community = the brokerage index
Modularity	Level of clustering in the community, due to close interconnection between some users. Meaningful when > 0.4; high when > 0.6

In the qualitative phase that followed the quantitative analysis, we examined the profiles of the users identified as leaders within each segment of the community. This involved visualizing their accounts and considering factors such as their affiliations (company, professional, fans), nationality, and more. Additionally, we conducted a thorough examination of the most popular and shared tweets in the community, aiming to identify and classify the prevailing discussion themes (Appendix 2). Two additional analyses were performed. Firstly, a semantic analysis helped us understand the associations between commonly used words, enabling the categorization of tweets into thematic clusters (Appendix 3). Secondly, a sentiment analysis was carried out to determine the emotional tone (positive, negative, or neutral) expressed by users in their messages, thus complementing the overall protocol.

Results

First, we will present the results of *Community#1*, followed by *Community#2*, allowing for a clearer comparison.

Results for Community#1

With 28,656 users and a total of 66,761 links, *Community#1* encompasses various stakeholders, including fans, official accounts, and media. The community thrives with over 5,000 tweets, nearly as many replies and mentions, over 22,000 retweets, and more than 27,000 mentions within retweets, showcasing its high level of activity.

29.6% of the links, while smaller groups have fewer shared messages. This segmentation pattern aligns with the literature's notion of a “community network” (Himmelboim et al. 2017), emphasizing internal exchanges within segments rather than between them.

The modularity index, surpassing 0.4 (0.457), further confirms the distinctiveness of the community, primarily revolving around influential opinion leaders. Table 4 provides an overview of the main grouping themes, with *Community#1* identified as a fan community primarily discussing recent K-pop events and idol-related topics. Lastly, English predominates as the usual transnational vehicle, accounting for 60% of communications among the 42 languages used in the community. These elements show that *Community#1* demonstrates strong support for *H1*.

Table 4. *Community#1* –Five most active segments.

Segments, Community#1	Top Word Pairs in Tweets	Theme
G2-Citizens	kpop.ctzen ctzen.ssp #ssp,#airdrop 300.ssp kpop_ctzen.google ssp.follow follow,kpop_ctzen last.24 24.hours 수,11am 클릭,beautiful	Kpop Citizen magazine fan community, promotion, event and projects announcements, etc. (English language)
G3-MonstaX	방법,#mubeat #beautifuliar,#뮤직뱅크 마감,230111 팬투표,클릭 뮤빗,pop 사전투표,안내	Monsta X band Fan community, song and TV shows announcement, clip sharing, etc. (Korean, English)
G4-Indonesia	cowo,kpop cowo,fiksi cewe,yang kpop,kalo ga,cowo backingannya,pasti pasti,cowo yang,keliatan keliatan,mentalnya kalo,ga	Indonesian fan community, ironic comments on romantic relationships and fan adoration for boys from kpop bands, etc. (mostly Indonesian)
G5-Happenings	kpop,happenings_,kpop kpop,girl idol,doesn doll,fuck girl,idol mean,doll doesn,mean kpop,boy kpop,industry free,attendees	Kpop general fan community, comments on bands, artists, criticisms on sexist attitudes, sometimes makes fun of artists' behavior in their live shows (English)
G6-Ateez	kbs,kpop 출처,kbs 문빈,산하 moonbin,sanha 230106,출처 choreography,musicbank musicbank,kbs tower,cam chup'moonbin cam,4k	Ateez band fan community, shared dance practices, news, announcements, news and comments on other international artists (Korean, English)

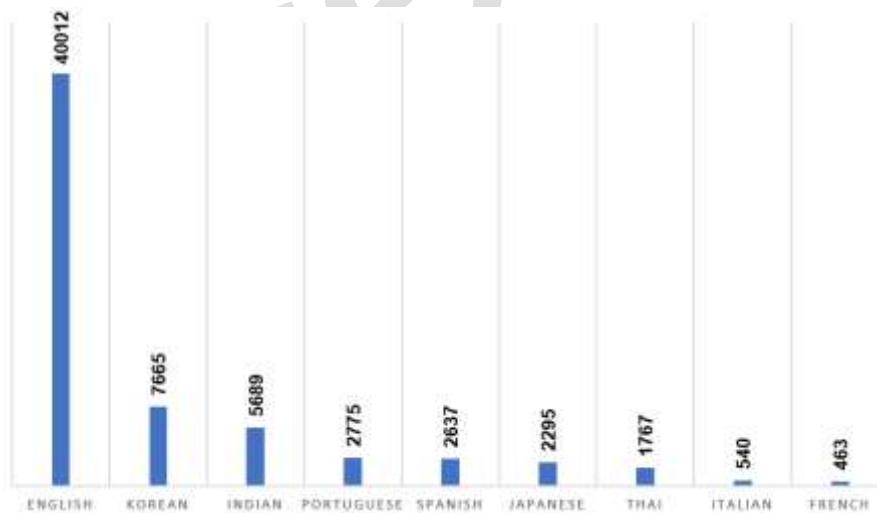


Figure 3. *Community#1* – The main languages used.

Opinion leaders within each conversational segment are identified using a crucial metric for measuring social capital, *betweenness centrality*, which assesses their ability to connect with others. In *Community#1*, it is evident that individual fans hold a

significant influence, comprising half of the most influential opinion leaders. The remaining leaders consist of a K-pop group's official account and four specialized media outlets. Notably, the first influencer, a female YouTuber, exhibits over double the betweenness centrality of the leading professional account and more than four times that of the top K-pop company. This observation confirms the support for *H2* in *Community#1*, as the importance of opinion leaders is evident in facilitating communication and information flow.

Table 5. *Community#1* – Top 10 users, ranked by Betweenness centrality.

Top 10 Users, Community#1	Betweenness	Rank	Followers	Number tweets	Segment	User Type
1 kpophappenings_	96,196,510.4	1	264 k	8.9 k	5	Individual Youtube channel owner, girl
2 adorkablehyuk	51,750,254.2	2	927	64.9 k	7	Individual fan, girl (Indonesia)
3 officialmonstax	46,648,326.8	3	5.1 M	20.6 k	3	Boys Band Monsta X, Official account
4 serietv46	42,339,931.7	4	169.1 k	51.9 k	3	Broadcast channel on kpop statistiques
5 gqkorea	33,724,889.6	5	148.9 k	2.7 k	13	Korean fashion magazine official page
6 bibliophilabe1	33,361,785.5	6	650	35.7 k	10	Individual fan, boy
7 1990cme	27,112,566.0	7	17.6 k	4.77 k	4	Individual fan, boy (Indonesia)
8 kpop_herald	26,738,657.8	8	434.4 k	32.6 k	11	Korean online magazine on kpop
9 koreaboo	23,865,036.2	9	2.4 M	144.9 k	22	Kpop media company
10 biinkshit	23,071,275.9	10	16.1 k	39.1 k	8	Individual account, girl, on women in pop culture

Among the top ten opinion leaders, five are fans, with the two most influential and the tenth being women, supporting *H3*. These female peer-leaders, despite having fewer followers than certain official accounts or companies, hold significant centrality in the community ($Betweenness_1=96.2M$, $Betweenness_2= 51.7M$, $Betweenness_{Mean}=70.2K$), demonstrating their essential role. Additionally, women outnumber men in the user population, with 2812 identifying as “she/her” compared to only 261 “he/him”. Thus, the data from *Community#1* confirm *H3*.

The mixed analysis of community conversations for *H4* reveals interesting findings. Positive discussions primarily revolve around fans expressing support for their idols' professional achievements, aesthetics, and overall success. They relate to performances, idol support, and entertainment expectations. Conversely, negative conversations involve criticism of sexist attitudes towards female artists, ironic remarks about the behavior of artists and fans, and discussions on romantic relationships and passionate attitudes of female fans towards male artists. Although critical conversations are not as numerous, they highlight gender-related issues within the community. Additionally, word pair co-occurrence and sentiment analysis provide further insights into the prevailing topics and emotional tones within these conversations.

The sentiment analysis reveals that positivity dominates in terms of both word count and proportion, but its intensity varies significantly across clusters and conversation topics. The *G5-Happenings* segment exhibits the highest positivity (5.94%), but it also contains the most negative expressions (4.7%), particularly concerning artists' sexist attitudes and behavior.

This segment is led by the most influential woman in the community, actively engaging in discussions with highly rated emotional expressions. In contrast, other segments have minimal negative connotations and focus more on information consumption. Consequently, *H4* is only partially supported as positive sentiments prevail overall, but critical discussions regarding gender-related issues are concentrated within specific segments.

Table 6. *Community#1* – Sentiment analysis, segments G2-G6.

Segments, Community#1	Users	Links	Positive Sentiment List	(%)	Negative Sentiment List	(%)	Δ (%)
G2-Citizens	1,894	5,768	947	2.76	85	0.25	91.0%
G3-MonstaX	1,141	3,436	804	2.30	381	1.09	52.6%
G4-Indonesia	1,103	2,432	387	1.96	84	0.43	78.3%
G5-Happenings	1,034	2,222	1,184	5.94	937	4.70	20.9%
G6-Ateez	1,004	2,840	607	2.30	251	0.95	58.6%

Results for Community#2

We then conducted the same successive analyses for *Community#2*. In this second community, consisting of 12,634 users connected by 28,112 links, there is a heightened focus on female K-pop groups that have excelled in sales, online views, and fanbase size in 2022.

Table 7. *Community#2* – Graph metrics.

Graph Metrics.	Value
Graph Type	Directed
Users	12,634
Links	28,112
Retweet	15,278
MentionsInRetweet	8,159
Tweet	2,173
Replies to	617
Mentions	1,885
Self-Loops	2,214
Modularity	0.621

The main segments, *G1* to *G16*, encompass 92.6% of the users and 88% of the links (Figure 4). Unlike *Community#1*, *Community#2* exhibits a distinct structure with *G1* and *G2* being divided into smaller subconversations, forming bean-shaped groups. This structure is typical of “broadcast” segments, where fans consume information rather than actively engage in discussions. Interestingly, in *Community#2*, the largest segment is not the “isolates” segment, *G4*.

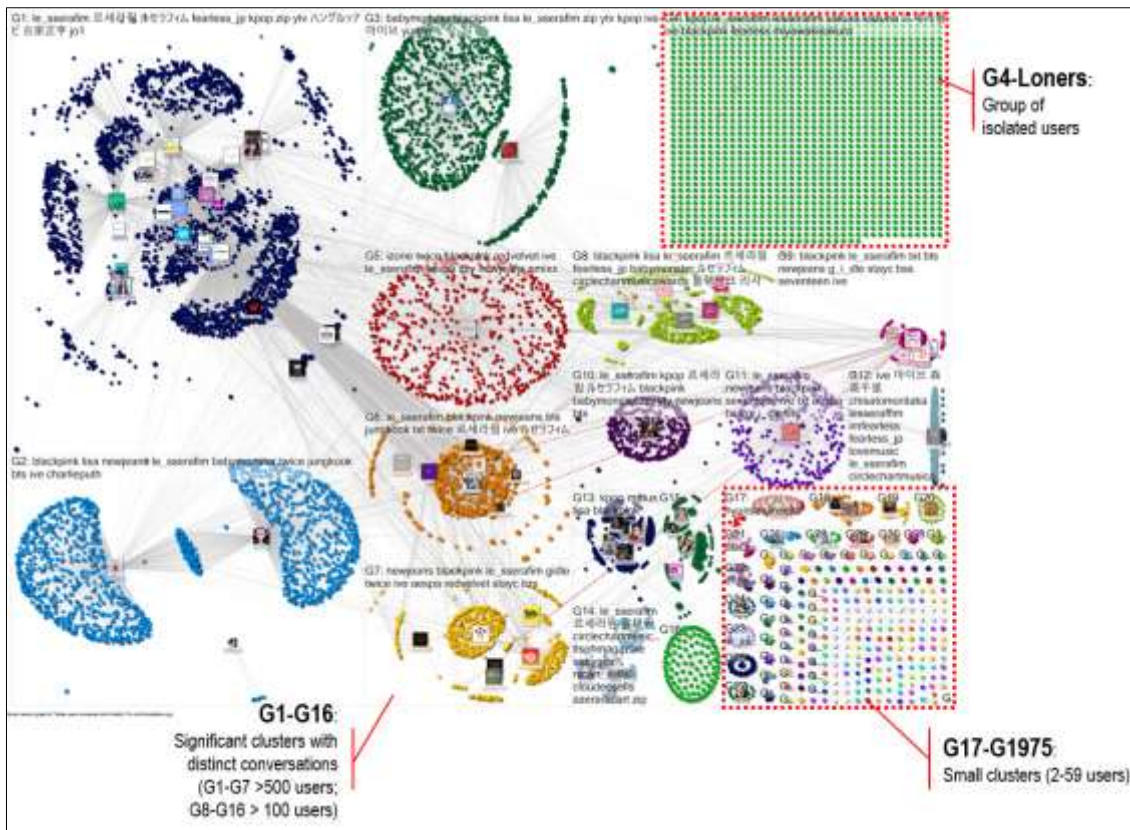


Figure 4. Community#2 – Twitter data, retrieved 2023-02-21.

The segmentation analysis of *Community#2* is highly valid, supported by a high modularity index of 0.621. The segments predominantly consist of fan groups discussing female K-pop stars, sharing extensive information. These segments exhibit significant international participation, evident from exchanges in 28 different languages, with English remaining the dominant language (69%). Hence, the findings support *H1* for *Community#2*.

Table 8. Community#2 –Five most active segments.

Segments, Community#2	Top Word Pairs in Tweets	Theme
G1-Sserafim	#le_sserafim, #르세라핌 girl, group pop, girl #르세라핌, #fearless_jp #fearless_jp, #르세라핌 debut, 1st japanese, debut 1st, single billboard, japan を直撃, 世界各国から注目を集める彼女たちの私生	Le Sserafim band fan community, promotion, activities, events, clips, and other information shared about several girls bands. Significant micro-groups in the cluster, with strong interlinks, several leaders (Korean, Japanese, English)
G2-Lisa	mentioned sserafim #blackpink lisa #lisa yunjin tv kazuha meet 2018	Very international k-pop fan community: Express their passion and support for their favorite artists, specific performances, look, charity actions, etc. Polarized on 2 leaders, with their own subgroup and 1 in common (Thai, Japanese, English, Russian, Italian)
G3-Thai	นาง choice37 blvsh ไรท์นาง และ sserafim fearless shut down bts	K-pop Fan community, support for artists and bands, similar to G2, smaller. 2 subgroups following one main leader (Thai, English)
G5-News	kids, 27m highest, peak 53m, stray aespa, 44m generation, groups spotify, newjeans newjeans, 21 10, aespa groups, highest 85m, txt	'Broadcast' type cluster, led by a specialized account, data sharing about market stats (streaming, etc.) (English)
G6-Info	south, korea youtube, music #9, ive_twt music, south 02, 16 artists, week's week's, youtube ive_twt, #10 newjeans_twt, #2 _iuofficial, #5	Mix of 'broadcast' and 'community' type cluster, sharing a lot of data and events information about artists, strong links with G1, G7, G9 (English)

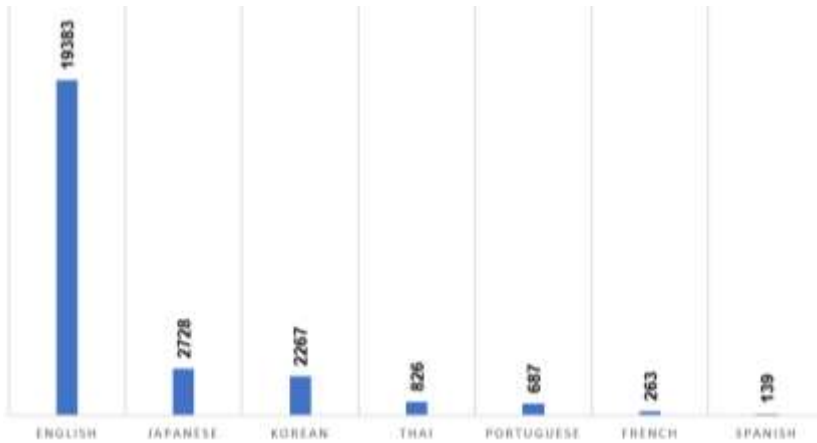


Figure 5. *Community#2* – The main languages used.

Among the top ten influencers (*H2*), five are fans (ranked 2 to 4, 6, and 10). These peer-leaders exhibit high betweenness centrality scores (from 7.18M to 22.8M). The official account of the group *Le Sserafim* surpasses them all with 30.7M. Additionally, two Japanese TV channels and two media outlets providing K-pop market statistics also emerge as significant influencers. The individual peer-leaders demonstrate considerable influence, providing support for *H2* in *Community#2*.

Table 9. *Community#2* – Top 10 users, ranked by Betweenness centrality.

Top 10 Users, Community#2	Betweenness	Rank	Followers	Number tweets	Segment	User Type
1 le_sserafim	30,702,066.7	1	1.1 M	809	1	Girls Band Le Sserafim, Official account
2 bmwnl1	22,841,162.7	2	18.4 k	8.6 k	3	Thai individual fan, girl
3 bp_awards	19,309,824.7	3	3.5 k	509	2	Individual fan, english language only
4 bbu_blackpink	18,607,822.2	4	534.7 k	63.1 k	2	Singapour individual fan, girl
5 sumatanent	13,914,103.7	5	23.9 k	5 k	1	Japanese TV channel
6 txt_news	13,143,449.0	6	72.6 k	75.8 k	5	Individual fan
7 nhk_etele	9,276,718.0	7	112.6 k	18.4 k	1	Japanese TV channel
8 serietv46	7,835,583.0	8	169.2 k	52 k	9	Broadcast channel on kpop statistics
9 kpopggsuperior	7,494,921.1	9	95.3 k	46.2 k	7	Kpop Girl Group korean charts
10 gmerana_	7,183,196.8	10	2.4 k	71.4 k	10	Japanese individual fan, girl

Concerning the gender of the peer-leaders (*H3*), three out of the five fans are women, while the gender of the remaining two could not be determined. One fan focuses on sharing content about the female band *Blackpink*, while the other is an Indian fan dedicated to the male band *TXT*. Despite the unknown gender of a few leaders, this distribution supports hypothesis *H3* for *Community#2*.

For *Community#2*, the common words are closely tied to the major segments (*G1* to *G6*) due to high modularity, indicating concentrated conversations. The community's focus is primarily on female artists, but the discussions revolve around supporting and idolizing them rather than engaging in opinionated exchanges. Negative comments are scarce, as evident from the positive/negative proportion in the sentiment analysis for each segment (Table 10). Most segments exhibit a supportive nature, expressing a desire for various types of information, be it professional or personal, about their favourite stars.

G2-Lisa stands out as the most positive segment, while all segments maintain a predominantly positive sentiment, except for *G5-News*, which has a balanced sentiment (1.81%). Although *G2-Lisa* and *G5-News* show higher levels of negativity, the criticism mainly revolves around consumer frustrations, such as not having timely access to

certain information or feeling disappointed by rankings or sales figures. The opinion leaders themselves primarily disseminate positively-oriented information. Hence, hypothesis *H4* is not supported for *Community#2*.

Table 10. *Community#2* – Sentiment analysis, segments G1-G6.

Segments, Community#2	Users	Links	Positive Sentiment List	(%)	Negative Sentiment List	(%)	Δ(%)
G1-Sserafim	3,045	8,572	5,152	3.19	611	0.38	88.1%
G2-Lisa	1,719	1,884	3,778	5.00	919	1.22	75.7%
G3-Thai	1,380	1,413	2,982	4.82	261	0.42	91.2%
G5-News	644	948	949	1.81	948	1.81	0.1%
G6-Info	621	5,933	554	1.56	163	0.46	70.6%

Discussion

Our study shows that transnational online channels drive the consumption of K-pop, creating active consumer segments in dedicated communities led by predominantly female peer-leaders. This phenomenon empowers women and fosters discussions on gender issues, which hold significant relevance in the realm of K-pop and popular culture at large. In our study of two OBC cases, hypotheses *H1* to *H3* were supported, while *H4* received partial support only. Our findings confirm the transnational nature of these temporary online segments, where consumers from different countries engage in multilingual discussions. However, these consumers do not communicate uniformly. Instead, they voluntarily form coherent thematic conversations centred around their favourite artist-brands on Twitter, creating distinct segments. These “community” networks foster open and emotionally driven exchanges, led by active individuals, particularly women, who play a crucial role in shaping these segments (Chadwick et al. 2021; Muniz and O'Guinn 2001).

Table 11. Hypothesis validation.

Hypothesis	Result	Supported/ not supported
H1: (macro) Peer-leaders emerge and lead transnational K-pop OBCs	Community#1	
	- Modularity: 0.457	Supported
	- Significant segments G2 to G16	
	- 42 languages, English 60%	
	Community#2	
	- Modularity: 0.601	Supported
- Significant segments G1 to G16		
- 28 languages, English 69%		
H2: (meso) The influence of peer-leaders depends on their social capital characteristics	Community#1	
	- 5 individuals out of 10 leaders (50%)	Supported
	- Betweenness: 7.18 to 22.8 M.	
	Community#2	
- 5 individuals out of 10 leaders (50%)	Supported	

- *Betweenness: 23.07 to 96.19 M.*

H3: (micro) Peer-leaders are predominantly women	<p>Community#1</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 3 women / 5 individual leaders (60%): Top users 1, 2 and 10 <p>Community#2</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 3 women / 5 individual leaders (60%): Top users 2, 4 and 10 - 2 others undetermined 	Supported
H4: (micro) Conversation topics are significantly about gender issues	<p>Community#1</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - G4: ironic comments on women/men relationships - G5: criticisms on sexist attitudes <p>Community#2</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - No significant conversations 	Partially supported
		Not supported

It is noted that segments shape behavior: “community” segments foster emotional discussions, while “broadcast” segments serve as information-sharing spaces for continuously engaged fans. This augments consumption, influencing self-perception and interindividual actions (Belk 2013). In the current “phygital” (physical and digital) social world, consumer experiences and practices extend through sharing individual experiences within OBCs. This fosters a postmodern co-construction of self, empowering, proactive, and influential roles for everyone.

The transnational character of the exchanges is evident in both the topic and emotional tone of the conversations. Different segments adopt distinct tones, reflecting their interests and preferences. Some segments maintain a positive and light-hearted tone, seeking updates and entertainment related to their favourite stars. Others engage in discussions with a point of view and expertise, touching on more serious subjects. Critiques and controversies are also shared, such as debates about the perceived sexualization of a K-pop artist during her solo career, despite her company previously promoting that image when she was part of a group. Fans also engage in ironic commentary on an androgynous-looking artist's sapphic dance or challenge assumptions about the romantic relationships of famous single women in the K-pop world. These conversations showcase the diverse range of topics and perspectives within the OBCs.

K-pop artists serve as cultural ambassadors, representing Korean brands with fan communities worldwide (Lee, Chae, and Lew 2019; Lee, Choi, and Kim 2019). Their popularity reflects the global appeal of consumer preferences and the perpetuation or subversion of gender stereotypes. Fans engage with these artists on both emotional and cognitive levels, responding to the broader global context and the artists' cultural significance.

At the meso level, we observe that opinion leaders play a crucial role in shaping the dynamics of the K-pop community, with half of them being influential peer-leaders, particularly women (Akrouf and Nagy 2018), and the other half being official accounts. These female influencers, hailing from various countries and platforms like YouTube, blogs, and Twitter, contribute to the diversity and empowerment within the K-pop

fandom. They possess social capital that allows them to occupy central positions in their respective segments, serving as catalysts for important discussions and embodying the brand-consumer relationship (Hsieh and Wei 2017). In South Korea, social media users' social capital has been proven to be vital for fostering social connections and constructing consumer identities (Oh, Jang, and Kim 2018). Over the past two decades, the K-pop wave has thrived due to the unwavering dedication of fans in utilizing online platforms to expand its global reach.

Nevertheless, while Twitter is often associated with open criticism and the potential for harsh content, we anticipated more critical and in-depth engagement within the K-pop conversations. There are several significant topics in the K-pop universe that invite critical discussion, such as recent artist suicides, plagiarism allegations, sexual harassment accusations, work conditions, and the objectification of young women. It is perhaps a question of temporality: the reactive nature of microblogging platforms like Twitter limits the longevity of these discussions, as fans swiftly move on to new topics.

To gain a comprehensive understanding of fan behavior and achieve a more nuanced segmentation, adopting an omnichannel approach that encompasses various platforms where fan communities converge becomes necessary. While discussions around dominant gender norms are present (Oh and Kim 2022), one would expect them to occupy a more prominent space. Fans predominantly focus on consuming the cultural product, embracing the associated stereotypes and aesthetic ideals. Female fans aspire to identify with their idols while acknowledging the perceived distance that almost elevates their idols to a sacred status in certain comments. The transnational nature of this fan attitude has contributed to its success in numerous countries. Nonetheless, amidst this fan culture, some women are emerging as influential voices, challenging stereotypes, and leading conversations on more critical topics with notable success.

Theoretical implications

Through this study, we make several conceptual contributions. Firstly, we demonstrate the applicability of archetypal structures (Himmelbaum et al. 2017) in understanding the nature and structure of a multilevel OBC. While previous studies have categorized social networks in this manner, to our knowledge, this approach has not yet been applied to segments within an OBC, which are integral components of such networks. These archetypal structures aid researchers in identifying the dynamics of a socially connected network that extends into the phygital world (Kozinets, Patterson, and Ashman 2017), transcending geographical boundaries and embracing a transnational scope. Furthermore, they provide a visual representation of how connections are established among consumers.

Another significant contribution of this study is the recognition of OBCs as dynamic and ever-evolving segments (Chadwick et al. 2021). These segments undergo constant change, influenced by the ephemeral yet impactful nature of the online relationship. Emotions play a crucial role in driving the dissemination of information within these communities. It can lead consumers to discover and develop an affinity for an artist, thanks to endorsements from influential individuals, peer-leaders within their online community, even if they don't really know each other. Conversely, it can also result in criticism or outright rejection of an artist or K-pop company based on their stance, or lack thereof, on societal issues or behaviours that are reported by the media and discussed within online networks.

Mostly, this study sheds light on the growing influence of women as peer-leaders in domains that have traditionally marginalized them to passive consumers of

products primarily created by men. The transnational impact of the K-pop phenomenon, driven by a predominantly feminized production since 2022, is challenging the established norms of the genre. This global audience is witnessing the emergence of young women taking on a more proactive role, asserting their opinions and preferences in shaping the direction of their consumption and cultural preferences.

Our study presents a unique methodology that transcends national boundaries, capturing the transnational nature of consumer behavior and K-pop engagement through social media platforms. By employing a comprehensive management protocol, we collected a substantial dataset directly from consumers, enabling us to analyse their segmentation based on topics of interest and emotional expression. This research contributes to the exploration of online community dynamics and the viral nature of information dissemination utilizing SNA techniques. Despite its potential, marketing research has yet to fully embrace these opportunities to understand the leader's positions and trends within evolving OBCs, and our study aims to fill this gap by demonstrating the value of analyzing data from dynamic communities.

Managerial implications

Brand managers hold a competitive edge by comprehending and engaging with OBCs, tapping into the motivations and actions of customer-fans and leveraging them as brand advocates. Although ever-evolving, these spontaneous OBCs form the foundation of brands' sociotechnical environment, allowing for the construction of more stable segments based on the observed online behaviour. It is crucial for brand managers to acknowledge that influencers emerge organically and become respected peer-leaders, rather than being orchestrated by professionals. This paradigm shift emphasizes the necessity of collaborative customer/fan management within dynamic OBCs, where members derive value from their co-creation endeavors.

It is also noted that companies need to actively incorporate women's and gender issues into their actions and communication strategies. In the realm of K-pop music, these issues are particularly relevant, as they challenge prevailing stereotypes in contemporary societies. Young stars and their devoted fan base critique and ridicule these stereotypes, promoting a global vision of more ethical and liberated lifestyles (Oh and Kim 2022). In this context, individual peer-leaders wield significant influence over diverse customer segments, and the co-creative processes they engage in play a crucial role in fostering an inclusive and participatory consumer experience sought by customers.

Limitations and future research

To enhance the scope of our study, future research should address several limitations. Firstly, expanding the dataset longitudinally by collecting interactions on various social media platforms can provide more extensive data. With APIs now available to researchers, platforms like Twitter, YouTube or Reddit offer opportunities to surpass the limitations imposed by standard data capture permissions. Additionally, comparing multiple social media platforms in capturing fan attitudes can offer a more comprehensive understanding of segmentation based on online behaviour. Thus, a multichannel approach is warranted for both researchers and marketers. Furthermore, incorporating specialized social networks established by K-pop production companies, which have effectively attracted large fan bases, would be valuable.

Finally, delving deeper into the topic of gender and the role of women in media warrants further investigation, leveraging mixed methods such as content analysis and semantic analysis on textual data. Further research is essential, particularly in a longitudinal manner, as this exploratory study based on consumers' online behaviour provides unique empirical data that has not been previously examined in this manner.

Conclusion

Unlocking the potential of online communities in K-pop fandom has proven to be a valuable avenue for understanding consumer behaviour and preferences. The transnational nature of these communities, driven by individual leaders and emotional engagement, highlights the need for nuanced segmentation strategies. Beyond mere consumption, fans seek an extended experience where shared passions transcend geographical boundaries and traditional demographics. It is crucial for researchers and brand managers to recognize the power of spontaneous, user-driven communities alongside managed ones, as they provide valuable insights into current expectations.

Through social listening, influencer identification, and collaborative customer engagement analysis, this research unveils the dynamics of social media presence. Longitudinal studies are encouraged to further explore this ever-evolving landscape and capture the intricate nuances of these virtual communities. By embracing the complexity and diversity of these online spaces, brands can effectively engage with customer-fans, fostering meaningful connections and co-creating experiences that resonate with their global audience. The study at hand presents a stepping stone towards a deeper understanding of online community management and its implications for K-pop businesses in the digital age.

Disclosure Statement

The author(s) did not report any potential conflict of interest.

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To come in the final version

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