

INFLUENCE OF K-POP FAN CULTURE ON INDONESIAN FANS' BEHAVIOR TOWARD THE KOREAN BASKETBALL LEAGUE

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to investigate how K-pop fan culture influences the behavior of Indonesian fans toward Korean Basketball League (KBL), with the growing spread of the Hallyu (Korean Wave) globally, Indonesia as one of the biggest markets countries for K-pop increasingly adopting Korean fan culture practices across different sectors, including sports. Through the qualitative interview with 15 Indonesian KBL fans who had been familiar with K-pop fan culture for a few years, the research reveals how the fan behaviors usually associated with K-pop such as social media engagement, merchandise culture, and fan driven project, have been adapted into Korean Basketball League fandom. Findings suggest that K-pop participatory culture significantly shapes the emotional engagement, loyalty and consumption behavior of KBL fans in Indonesia. This research highlights the convergence of entertainment and sports fandom in the digital era and provides insight into how media exposure and fan practices cross cultural and industry boundaries.

Keywords: K-pop, Korean Basketball League, Participatory Culture, Social Media, Media Convergence

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INTRODUCTION

Hallyu, commonly known as the Korean Wave has already become a big phenomenon in social media (Li, 2023). The popularity of Hallyu has spread throughout the world, largely due to the role of social media (Ruskykh, 2023). Like other Southeast Asian countries, Indonesia is also influenced by Hallyu. Even after the COVID-19 pandemic, Indonesian interest in consuming Korean Wave, or Hallyu, has continued to grow (Aritenang et al., 2024). Data from X Blog in 2021 shows that Indonesia ranked first in the volume of tweets discussing K-pop (Kim, 2021). The increasing interest of the Indonesian people in the Korean wave, culture, and lifestyle is what makes Indonesia one of the largest markets for K-pop. As a result, many local Indonesian brands attract Korean artists to collaborate with them and appoint them as brand ambassadors (Nadila & Windasari, 2022; Novelia et al., 2023). In Southeast Asia, Indonesia has shown high levels of interest in Korean cultural content, ranking first in Hallyu consumption in 2024 according to the Korean Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism. The spread of K-pop has extended beyond music into areas such as language, fashion, food, beauty, and sports (Lee, 2024)

The Korean Basketball League (KBL) has recently gained attention among Indonesian fans, many of whom originally engaged with Korean culture through K-pop. The increasing participation of Indonesian fans in Korean Basketball League fandom reflects a cultural convergence, wherein practices from K-pop fandom, including social media engagement, fan projects, and emotional attachment to public figures, are mirrored in sports fandom.

This research explores the cross-influence between K-pop fan culture and KBL fandom behavior among Indonesian fans. It investigates how the participatory and emotionally engaged culture of K-pop fandom has shaped the way Indonesian fans interact with KBL players and teams, and how social media platforms have facilitated this cultural and fandom transition.

By analyzing fan behavior through qualitative interviews, this study aims to contribute to the understanding of media convergence, participatory culture, and the globalization of Korean sports through the lens of fandom studies.

LITERATURE REVIEWS

K-pop fan culture behavior and social media

K-pop fandom is typically characterized by having a high emotional investment with the idols, practicing participatory culture, and also forming a strong community identity. This can be seen from Indonesian fans who view photocards as a symbolic tool for their idols, through the practice of collecting photocards and carrying them everywhere, this creates emotional closeness through tangible objects such as photocards (Desnika & Tambunan, 2023). Apart from that, usually K-pop fans not only act as consumers but also as active promoters and active contributors in their fandom economy, they often participate in digital projects and social media campaigns such as voting to provide support for their idols (Liu, 2022). This is what ultimately makes parasocial relationships play an important role, where fans have strong emotional ties with idols, which in the end they can develop and maintain through various kinds of online interactions such as streaming, voting, and also fan projects (Perdana, 2023). While this engagement encourages community involvement and loyalty, it can lead to impulsive and obsessive behavior (Jayanti et al., 2023). Overall, these dynamics illustrate how the behavior and form of personal identity of K-pop fandom is rooted in emotional connectivity and active participation in the digital space.

Social media platforms such as Twitter and Instagram in this era have become important spaces in this era where fans engage and collaborate in real-time. These platforms allow fans to share content, and launch support projects for their idols, not only for the idols but also as a place for fans to provide mutual support by strengthening loyalty among communities, which in the end is also useful for increasing the global visibility of their idols (Zhang, 2022; Rahyadi et al.,

2022). However, social media also sometimes becomes a place where conflicts between fans increase, commonly known as fan wars (Maros & Basek, 2022).

Fan Behavior in Sports Fandom and Cultural Convergence

Almost similar to K-pop fandom, sports fandom also shows strong emotional loyalties, ritualistic involvement, and strong community building. This is evident in the behavior of sports fans, which closely resembles that of pop culture fans, such as attending matches in person, purchasing and collecting merchandise, and engaging in online discussions (Giulianotti, 2022; Hill & Green, 2000). Sports fans also generally develop a strong sense of attachment to their favorite teams and athletes, especially when they share social or geographic identities with them (Heere & James, 2007; Lee, Kye, & Cho, 2019). Moreover, digital media has further reinforced the engagement behavior of sports fans (Vale & Fernandes, 2018), their activity on social media tends to peak during major events, such as final matches, where fans express both pride and frustration online (Gong & Wang, 2021). Additionally, the convergence between pop culture and sports fandom is also becoming increasingly apparent, as seen in the way esports and traditional sports fans display similar patterns of digital participation and emotional investment (Brow et al., 2017; Wang & Lv, 2004). Furthermore, in Asian sports such as Japanese sports shows that fans often develop strong horizontal relationships with fellow fans, which can be even more influential than their identification with the team itself. These emotional bonds within the fan community, such as camaraderie, shared rituals, and mutual support contribute to behaviors like engagement, loyalty, and positive word-of-mouth (Yoshida et al., 2025). This is especially relevant in hybrid fandoms like K-pop-influenced sports fans, where collective identity and community participation play a central role in shaping fan practices.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed qualitative research to explore how K-pop fan culture influences Indonesian fans' engagement with the Korean Basketball League (KBL). Participants were selected through purposive sampling, targeting individuals who have experience as K-pop fans and are currently active in KBL fandom. A total of fifteen participants, aged between 20 and 32 years, took part in this study.

The sample size was determined to ensure sufficient depth of data, and data saturation was achieved when no new themes emerged from the interviews. While the number may seem limited, it aligns with qualitative research standards focusing on in-depth understanding rather than generalizability. Data were collected through online interviews conducted between February and March 2025. Each interview lasted between 30 and 40 minutes and was conducted via a video conferencing platform to accommodate participants from different regions in Indonesia. Although online interviews might limit non-verbal cues compared to face-to-face interactions, this method was chosen for its flexibility, accessibility, and effectiveness in qualitative data collection (Janghorban, Roudsari, & Taghipour, 2014; Archibald, Ambagtsheer, Casey, & Lawless, 2019). Researchers also applied strategies to build rapport and ensure participant comfort during the interviews (Seitz, 2016). The interview duration was designed to balance thoroughness and participant comfort.

For data analysis, thematic analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up. Codes were developed inductively by identifying recurring concepts in participants' narratives. These codes were then grouped into broader thematic categories such as *Media Convergence in Fandom Formation*, *Fan Practices Transference in social media*, and *Digital Emotional Engagement*.

Descriptive statistics were used to summarize demographic information such as age and gender, providing a concise profile of participants. While the use of descriptive statistics is not

typical in qualitative research, it serves here to contextualize the sample characteristics for readers. To ensure trustworthiness, the study applied prolonged engagement with the data, detailed documentation of the analysis process, and methodological transparency. The researchers continuously reflected during coding and theme development to minimize personal bias and maintain analytical consistency. It is important to note that all participants in this study are female. This reflects the current demographic dominance of female fans within the Indonesian KBL fan community, especially those with a background in K-pop fandom. While this focus provides valuable insights into female-driven fan practices, it also represents a limitation. The absence of male perspectives may constrain the generalizability of the findings. Future research should include more gender-balanced samples to explore whether male fans engage differently with hybrid fan cultures.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Overview Participants

This study involved fifteen Indonesian fans who actively participated in both K-pop and Korean Basketball League (KBL) fandoms. All participants are women, aged between 20 and 32 years old. They came from various backgrounds including university students, office workers, lecturers, and former sports athletes.

Table 1 Demographic profile of interview participants

Participants	Age	Gender	Supporting Team
P1	22	Female	Anyang JKJ
P2	27	Female	Suwon KT
P3	27	Female	Suwon KT
P4	26	Female	Daegu KOGAS
P5	21	Female	Suwon KT
P6	28	Female	Seoul SK
P7	29	Female	Busan KCC
P8	27	Female	Suwon KT
P9	23	Female	Changwon LG
P10	32	Female	Suwon KT
P11	27	Female	Changwon LG
P12	29	Female	Busan KCC
P13	23	Female	Suwon KT
P14	23	Female	Seoul SK
P15	20	Female	Seoul SK

Adoption of K-pop Fan Culture in Indonesian KBL Fandom

The findings of this research reveal that Indonesian fans' engagement with the Korean Basketball League (KBL) is deeply influenced by their previous experience as K-pop fans for a few years. Participants had been active in K-pop fans communities for a period of five to ten years, suggesting that their fandom behaviors had been well-formed over time. They describe practices that are usually familiar with K-pop culture such as collecting photocards, writing online fan fictions or Alternate Universe (AU), organizing fan events, and coordinating support projects naturally adapted into their engagement with Korean Basketball Players and Korean Basketball Team. Several participants were introduced to the Korean Basketball League not through sports contents or media, but rather through Korean variety shows and reality shows programs featuring basketball players, such as *I Live Alone*, *Boss in the Mirror*, *Singles' Inferno*, and *Let's play Soccer*. participant shared, "*I watched Let's Play Soccer, I saw basketball players like Hur Jae and Heo Ung and became curious about the KBL.*" (P7, aged

29) and another participant, *"I watch a lot of Korean variety shows, and one of them is I Live Alone. There was an episode featuring Heo Hoon, and that got me curious about the Korean Basketball League (KBL)."* (P4, aged 26). From the participant demographics as well as this response, it is shown that Suwon KT Sonicboom is one of the most supported KBL teams in Indonesia. This is largely due to one of their most popular and top players, Heo Hoon, who is well-known in South Korea as the son of Hur Jae, a legendary South Korean basketball player. Heo Hoon is the second son of Hur Jae, and his older brother Hep Ung is also a basketball player for the Busan KCC team. The Heo brothers frequently appear on variety shows, commercials, and in magazines, which has contributed to their growing fanbase in Indonesia. This shows that the significant roles of media convergence, where entertainment content serves as a bridge for fans to transition into new cultural areas (Jenkins, 2006) Instead of perceiving Korean Basketball League purely as a professional sports league, Indonesian Korean Basketball League fans approach it through the hybrid lens that merge elements of Idol culture with sports.

Many Participants also described engaging in collective activities that closely mirrored K-pop fandom practices such as birthday project, gift support for the players. This project is generally associated with fundraising initiatives, such as donations to environmental causes and the conservation of endangered wildlife. For instance, one participant shared: *"I once created an advertisement for my favorite player Ha Yungi on Instagram ads and also donated for tree planting."* (P13, aged 23) another participant also shared their experience, *"I have participated in several fan projects. For Heo Hoon's birthday, Indonesian fans symbolically adopted a baby orangutan in Heo Hoon's name."* (P8, aged 27). These practices have become highly common among K-pop fandoms. In one instance, P4 reportedly celebrated a player's birthday by providing support in the form of food items (coffee and fruit) for the team with which the player is affiliated. Although separated by geographical distance, Indonesian fans remain committed to demonstrating their support for their favorite players.

Furthermore, participants reported engaging in practices rooted in K-pop fan culture, particularly the acquisition of merchandise as a means of expressing their loyalty and identity as fans. They described collecting various items, including trading cards (photocards), team jerseys, keyrings, lightsticks (with popular KBL players such as Heo Hoon from Suwon KT Sonicboom even having personalized lightsticks), and mascot dolls representing either players or teams.

For the participants, these items functioned not merely as collectible items but also as material embodiments of their emotional attachment with the players, symbolizing a deeper affective investment beyond mere fandom.

Role of social media in mediating Fan behavior

Social media has played an important role in shaping how Indonesian fans engage with the Korean Basketball League (KBL). Platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, and TikTok have become a central base for fans to consume content and community discussions. For many participants, social media served not just as sources of information about matches, but also as a space to build emotional connections and collective identities with fellow KBL fans.

One of the participants described Indonesian KBL fans' activities on social media, *"The Indonesian KBL fan community is more active on Twitter (X), but it's also quite active on Instagram now. Before Byun Jun-Hyeong went into military service, I often edited videos of him, consumed content from Korean fans, and sometimes sent DMs on Instagram to congratulate or wish players a speedy recovery."* (P1, aged 22). Through social media posts, translation content, fan fictions, and fan projects, fans are able to extend their interactions beyond traditional passive audiences into active participation. Participants highlighted that social media enabled them to feel closer to the players, despite the physical distance between

Indonesia and South Korea. They often commented on players' Instagram posts and DMs, shared translation content, helped foster a sense of proximity and emotional attachment aligning with the concept of parasocial relationships (Blight et al., 2017).) In addition, social media plays a big role as a platform for the creation and distribution of fan fictions, mainly alternate universes (AU). Fans used X (formerly Twitter threads) to write and share their fictional stories where KBL players are reimagined in different roles and everyday scenarios. For instance, one participant shared her opinion about AU, *“even though it’s not as massive as K-pop AU, there’s a lot of KBL fans that enjoy writing and also reading fiction about KBL players.”* (P5, aged 21). Other than P5, all participants reported that they actively consume KBL fan fiction and also often share their own fiction on X (formerly Twitter). This reflects participatory culture, where fans produce media not because of commercialism or a desire to be included in the professional industry, but because they simply love it (Jenkins, 2012; Baghdadi, 2019).

This is also in line with Danah Boyd's (2014) concept of networked publics, where social media platforms such as Twitter and Instagram function as social spaces designed to allow users to develop their identities, express themselves, and interact publicly with mutual friends. The experiences shared by the fans in this study, such as supporting athletes through social media, spreading fan edit content, and participating in fan projects, demonstrate that networked publics serve as spaces where emotional and cultural engagement takes place, particularly among teenagers and young adults in the digital landscape.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

This research shows that K-pop fan culture has a strong and transformative influence on the behavior of Korean Basketball League (KBL) fans. This is a result of their long-term involvement in K-pop fandom. The participants demonstrated behaviors commonly found among K-pop fans, such as collecting photocards, organizing fan events, creating and reading fan fiction, and expressing their loyalty through purchasing and collecting team and player merchandise. These items often adopt elements of K-pop culture, such as player character plush dolls, slogans, and lightsticks. Their digital interactions with KBL player content and activity on social media further reinforce this influence.

This reflects Jenkins' Media Convergence Theory (2006), which emphasizes the movement of cultural practices across different media platforms. It is this convergence that blurs the boundaries between entertainment, sports, and digital fan communities. KBL fans no longer view the league purely as a professional basketball competition. Instead, they engage with it in ways similar to how K-pop fans relate to idols, perceiving players as idol-like figures and teams as idol groups, thereby fostering deep emotional attachments. This phenomenon has been shown to drive parasocial relationship behaviors, which can influence fans' impulsive support for KBL players or teams through actions such as purchasing merchandise, providing food support, or even traveling to South Korea to attend live matches (Safari & Saraskanrood, 2025). Social media is one of the primary drivers of this cultural shift. This behavior illustrates that fandom has become increasingly participatory and emotionally driven, mediated through digital platforms, as explained by Jenkins in his theory of participatory culture. Jenkins argues that fans participate not for profit or employment, but because they enjoy what they do. They produce, distribute, and personalize content to strengthen the loyalty and cohesion of their fan communities.

However, this research also recognizes that fan engagement is a complex phenomenon with multiple dimensions, including the potential to both create and destroy value within sports fandom (Huettermann, Uhrich, & Koenigstorfer, 2019). In this context, Indonesian KBL fans generate value through community-building, such as online support, content creation, and forming fan communities, which contribute to expanding KBL's international appeal.

Nevertheless, as in many other fandoms, excessive emotional investment can lead to conflict or exclusivity within the fan community. Therefore, understanding fan engagement requires acknowledging both its potential to strengthen and to harm the broader sports fandom ecosystem.

Based on the findings, sports organizations, particularly those seeking to expand internationally, can implement specific strategies to engage hybrid fan communities shaped by K-pop culture or other pop fan culture. First, leveraging social media that humanizes athletes (e.g., through behind-the-scenes or lifestyle content) can strengthen parasocial bonds. Second, teams and leagues should encourage and acknowledge fan-led initiatives like birthday projects, debut anniversaries, or charity donations, which promote emotional investment. Third, expanding access through international broadcasting platforms, without geo-blocking, can significantly enhance visibility and engagement from global audiences. Providing seamless, real-time access to games and related content enables international fans to follow their favorite teams and players more actively. In addition, ensuring that video content on platforms like YouTube and Instagram includes English subtitles can greatly improve accessibility and comprehension for non-Korean-speaking fans.

In conclusion, this research shows that Indonesian fans of the Korean Basketball League are not just passive sports spectators, but active cultural participants whose behavior is shaped by their experiences as K-pop fans over the years. They succeeded in combining the world of entertainment and the world of sports through adapting participatory digital practices and increasing KBL's global visibility. However, this research has limitations, namely that the sample consists only of female participants, which may not fully reflect the diversity of KBL fans in Indonesia. Including male fans in future research can certainly provide more balanced insights. In addition, the use of qualitative interviews with only fifteen participants can limit the generalization of the findings, as there is no large fanbase in the community, resulting in Indonesian KBL fans often being divided into fans of individual players and individual fans of the teams they support. This research also focuses only on Indonesian fans, and comparative research with other countries, including Korean fans and fans from other Southeast Asian countries such as Thailand, the Philippines, and Malaysia, will offer a deeper understanding of cross-cultural fandom behavior. It is hoped that future research can explore how sports organizations respond to these hybrid fandom dynamics and can utilize them for fan engagement strategies, particularly with international fans.

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