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Chinese pop culture's development in the United States among Generation Z compared to South Korean pop culture

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South Korean pop culture (K-pop) has achieved phenomenal business and cultural success in the United States, as evidenced by numerous hit songs, large-scale concerts, and record-breaking streaming and television viewership, particularly among Generation Z (Gen Z). In contrast, Chinese pop culture (C-pop) has experienced comparatively slower growth in the same market. While existing literature highlights the technological advancements and the business models of South Korean management companies as key drivers of K-pop's success, there remains a research gap regarding the development and market performance of C-pop in the U.S. This qualitative study aimed to address that gap by conducting a comparative analysis of K-pop and C-pop in the U.S., specifically targeting Gen Z consumers. Utilizing a multiple case study methodology and a content analysis approach, this study examined the business models through numerical, textual, visual, and conceptual data derived from secondary sources. This study fills the gap in the existing literature by identifying the challenges facing C-pop in the U.S. market and proposing strategies for its growth. The findings suggest that a shift in creative direction, along with enhanced marketing strategies tailored to the U.S. market, is essential. Specifically, the study found that the American Gen Z audience prefers romance-themed and self-empowering content—whether in music or television—that establishes a personal connection and a sense of community. Therefore, it is strongly recommended that all aspects resonate with Gen Z population, a group of young individuals who experience loneliness.

KEYWORDS

C-pop, K-pop, artist management, global entertainment industry, creative direction, marketing strategy, visual presentation

Introduction

While K-pop has demonstrated significant growth in the US market and globally (Sim, 2019), driven by the “Korean Wave” and supported by both business and academic interests, C-pop has struggled to achieve similar success. The challenges for C-pop are evident in its weaker financial performance, lower popularity, limited industry reputation, and less academic research (Ma et al., 2022). Four South Korean artists and bands were on the *Billboard Artist 100*, which is dominated by Western artists, as of 6 February 2024 (Billboard, n.d.). Kim et al. (2022) pointed out that the rise of K-pop not only enhanced South Korea's critical economic value but also had positive effects on its national image and tourism appeal among global consumers. Compared to K-pop's success, C-pop appears to be significantly smaller. Limited research has been conducted on C-pop's current situation and long-term development in the US among the Gen Z audience. This research study aimed to fill the gap and compare the K-pop and C-pop business models in the US. The findings, suggestions, and recommendations

may help C-pop professionals and researchers better adjust their strategies and improve their reputation and financial performance.

Singh (2022) defined popular culture as the “culture of people” (p. 152). It “prevailed in a particular society and at a particular time” (p. 152) and was presented in various forms, including but not limited to music, film, television, and radio. This definition highlighted two crucial elements, namely audience (a specific society) and timing (a specific period), which work together to shape popular culture. Applying this definition to the research, K-pop’s current strong growth demonstrates its market acceptance by the contemporary American audience, while C-pop is still exploring its path. Mahapatra et al. (2022) identified Generation Z, or Gen Z, as individuals born between 1995 and 2010. Two defining traits of individuals from this generation are (1) technological familiarity and (2) a strong social media presence (Mahapatra et al., 2022). These characteristics are highly relevant to this study, as contemporary pop culture evolves primarily through digital platforms.

In terms of significance, this study addressed a research gap by exploring the challenges and business model of C-pop in the US market through a comparative analysis with K-pop. It pinpoints the barriers to C-pop’s appeal among Gen Z, equipping artists, managers, technology companies, and streaming platforms with data-driven strategies. By recommending strategic shifts, this research enhances C-pop’s popularity, financial performance, and overall success in the US market. Additionally, this study contributes to cultural understanding by bridging the gap between C-pop and US audience, offering a deeper perspective on the cultural dynamics of global entertainment.

Materials and methods

Hard power, soft power, and smart power

The importance and relevance of this comparison between K-pop and C-pop lie in interpreting entertainment products as a powerful form of soft power that influences a specific culture, which is closely linked to K-pop’s success and its development goals.

Nye (2017) defined power as the ability to influence others to fulfill one’s wants and needs, achieved through three primary approaches: coercion, payment, and attraction. He categorized power into two types: hard power (relying on coercion and/or payment) and soft power (rooted in attraction and encompassing elements such as a nation’s culture, values, and policies) (Nye, 2023). Wagner (2021) described these as intangible power resources. Nye (2023) further argued that the current era should mark a shift from hard power to soft power, ultimately moving toward smart power, which he defined as the strategic integration of both hard and soft power.

The framework of soft power and smart power can be applied to analyze the development and success of K-pop in the US, particularly through the strategic integration of South Korea’s national culture, values, and beliefs into various artistic forms. This approach has not only sustained but also amplified K-pop’s influence and popularity among American audiences. Elements such as language, cuisine, music, and aesthetic presentations—whether in TV shows, films, or live concerts—have served as both direct and indirect conduits of soft power. Collectively, these cultural exports have facilitated K-pop’s

expansion in the US market while fostering deeper connections with the target demographics.

Gen Z’s media consumption pattern

Gen Z has been recognized as the most diverse generation in history, with their formative years shaped by constant access to cultural diversity through the Internet and smartphone usage (Pichler et al., 2021). Psychologically, this generation demonstrates more individualistic and less socially interactive traits than its predecessors (Pichler et al., 2021). As a result, media consumption and online identity formation have become fundamental components of their daily routines (Click and Schwartz, 2018).

Click and Schwartz (2018) studied news consumption patterns across generations and found that while both Gen Z and Millennials use similar platforms, including television, social media, websites, and applications, Gen Z demonstrates a significantly higher reliance on social media for news. Notably, Gen Z is highly responsive to influencer-delivered content.

Robert-Agell et al. (2022) determined that successful engagement with Gen Z requires community-focused strategies. Their research indicates the need to develop content that respects individual expression while cultivating a shared identity. This approach, which validates personal perspectives within a collective framework, appears to be the most effective for sustaining Gen Z’s interests.

The medium is the message

Incorporating McLuhan’s (1964) theory of “the medium is the message” into the field of communication serves as a transition to highlight the importance of the relationship between the platform/medium and the content in the contemporary context, which examines the significance of selecting the right platform to promote entertainment content for both K-pop and C-pop.

McLuhan (1964) developed the fundamental theory, “the medium is the message,” emphasizing the impacts that communication tools and emerging technologies have on people in the contemporary world. Euchner (2016) further interpreted McLuhan’s theory by pointing out that “the medium usually goes beyond the content of the messages.” In a case study of the development and widespread acceptance of mobile phones, Euchner (2016) explained that this innovative medium broke the boundaries of interpersonal communication with response time accessibility and even brought enormous competition to the camera market.

Lahtinen (2020) expanded on McLuhan’s concept of hot and cold media, highlighting their differing interpretive ranges. According to this framework, a hot medium typically allows for greater interpretive freedom by the audience. While this distinction between hot and cold media remains fluid, McLuhan characterized hot media as predominantly visual forms, such as photographs and films, contrasting with less visually intensive cold media, such as books (Lahtinen, 2020). This classification retains its relevance in contemporary media environments, even decades after its introduction.

Sweetser and Becktel (2017) investigated McLuhan’s theory of “the medium is the message” within modern public relations contexts.

Their research confirmed that, while media channels continue to significantly influence audience perceptions of organizations, traditional formats such as blog posts and press releases often fail to convey adequate sincerity, with audiences perceiving these conventional media formats as lacking authenticity.

In current communication contexts, the format of the medium crucially affects audience engagement. To strengthen connections with target demographics, practitioners should prioritize media formats that demonstrate credibility and authenticity.

Streaming services and short video applications

Following McLuhan's framework, today's communication landscape is defined by the digital and interactive era, driven by the Internet and artificial intelligence (AI). Streaming services and short-video platforms have significantly enhanced the efficiency and effectiveness of communication among emerging technologies. For this study, platforms such as Netflix and TikTok have been instrumental in shaping K-pop's popularity among Gen Z consumers in the US, expanding its cultural reach.

Netflix

As one of the most popular streaming services, Netflix has a distinct demographic age group in the United States. Stoll (2022) pointed out that a survey conducted in mid-2021 found that 75% of participants aged 18–34 years subscribed to Netflix, which shows the platform's success among the younger generations.

Netflix's official data revealed that over 60% of its audience watched Korean-titled shows in 2022 (Toh, 2023), highlighting the global popularity of the "Korean Wave." Acknowledging K-pop's success in the US and worldwide, Netflix announced an investment of \$2.5 billion in South Korea over the next 4 years to produce TV shows, movies, and reality shows (Bae and Toh, 2023). In an interview, Netflix's South Korean President, Yoon Suk Yeol, described this partnership as a significant opportunity not only for the platform but also for South Korea's content industry and creators (Bae and Toh, 2023). Park et al. (2023) echoed this sentiment, noting that Netflix has expanded the global consumption of South Korean content and promoted its diversity by influencing the creative directions and strategies adopted by South Korean TV stations. Specifically, Ju (2019) highlighted that the transnational success of K-dramas in the US stemmed from their ability to resonate emotionally with audiences, particularly through the portrayal of intimate relationships in romantic shows. Storytelling in K-dramas blends the extraordinary with the ordinary, creating a unique and engaging viewing experience (Ju, 2019).

TikTok

TikTok exemplifies Gen Z's distinctive approach to vocal expression, marking a clear difference from previous generations. Unlike Baby Boomers and Millennials, who traditionally expressed opinions through newspapers and letters (Shafie, 2021), Gen Z has pioneered new forms of digital activism. Shafie (2021) argued that Gen Z has fundamentally transformed the concept of "slacktivism" by leveraging TikTok and other platforms to create tangible real-world impact through their online advocacy.

This generational shift manifests in K-pop fan culture through the innovative practice of "fan cams." These single-shot performance videos focused on individual idols represent a fan-driven promotional strategy (Shafie, 2021). K-pop enthusiasts actively promote fan cam culture across social media, employing strategic hashtag campaigns to enhance their idols' visibility and reputation.

K-pop fans demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of digital platform dynamics through this integration of hashtag systems and TikTok's algorithmic mechanisms. Their success in amplifying K-pop's social media presence confirms that Gen Z has developed effective strategies for navigating and optimizing the contemporary digital ecosystem.

As Vitelar (2020) indicated, social media for Gen Z is about self-expression and personal branding; the content they share reflects who they are as individuals. Whether being vocal about certain social issues or promoting K-pop culture on their channels, associating it with self-identity is a critical element in attracting Gen Z audience.

Case study: K-drama *Squid Game*

Squid Game surprised the global audience with its spectacular success in viewership, reputation, and business value. This show broke Netflix's record by garnering 1.65 billion hours of viewing in 28 days, making it the number one show on the platform of all time (Spangler, 2021).

The title of this 9-episode television series is inspired from a traditional Korean children's playground game called the "squid game." The narrative centers on a financially desperate protagonist who accepts an invitation to join a clandestine competition. There, he encounters many other participants facing similar economic struggles. As the story unfolds, the contestants discover the horrific stakes of the game: elimination results in death, while the sole survivor claims a monetary prize accumulated through the fatalities of other players.

The dystopian theme intertwined with South Korean culture made this show stand out in the global market despite its dark and intense plot (Hong and Yang, 2022). According to Hong and Yang (2022), the communicator, the audience, and the content itself collectively contributed to *Squid Game*'s success, as the team proactively planned the show to be as inclusive as possible by featuring the most well-known South Korean director and actors, targeting a broader audience, and collaborating with a global production and streaming company, Netflix.

Squid Game's success was not limited to numerical reports on Netflix; it also extended to social media and cultural phenomena offline, further expanding its influence. Siregar et al. (2021) argue that such a widespread expansion of K-pop and K-drama, not only on streaming platforms (such as Netflix) but also on social media, has successfully blurred the boundaries between TV shows and real life. Siregar et al. (2021) identify three major cultural trends brought by *Squid Game* into real life: (1) the "red light, green light" game, which was one of the most popular games that appeared in the TV show, (2) dalgona candy, another game tool, and (3) *Squid Game* costume play. These trends were either originated from or inspired by the TV show, making a significant impact on social media and in real life. The growing trends were not just a phenomenon; instead, they proved the strong popularity of K-pop, which is being accepted and recognized

by a global audience. On the other hand, due to the violent content in the show, parental control was also needed to be improved.

Deeper societal reflection

The show's success stemmed significantly from its unflinching portrayal of societal issues that resonated deeply with a global audience. Chowdhury (2022) argued that the series' exploration of capitalism's dark underbelly and the crushing weight of debt elevated its narrative impact. The central premise forces debt-ridden individuals to compete for financial survival at mortal risk, highlighting the brutal realities of economic desperation. Each potential winner would inherit not just the prize money but also the psychological burden of their competitors' deaths (Chowdhury, 2022). Fundamentally, these characters risked their lives for the faint hope of financial redemption.

Chowdhury (2022) credited creator Hwang Dong-hyuk for weaving his personal experience of economic hardship into this broader societal critique. The analysis affirmed that while *Squid Game* undoubtedly succeeded as entertainment, its greater significance lies in serving as a stark commentary on contemporary struggles with financial inequality, predatory capitalism, and systemic desperation (Chowdhury, 2022).

K-pop's business model

As a pivotal case study, *Squid Game* helps summarize the K-pop business model and examines the sustainability of this fast-growing industry by converting fame and traffic into revenue through technological advancements and globalization.

Technological transformation-enabled rising

Parc and Kim (2020) argued that the ultimate essence of K-pop's initial development and global rise was promoted by the digital transformation in a systematic review conducted from the early 1990s to the present in four main categories: (1) distributors, (2) producers, (3) consumers, and (4) business contexts.

First, hardware and software development transformed K-pop consumption from analog to digital and shifted domestic distributors to international suppliers, greatly expanding the global market (Parc and Kim, 2020). During the 1980s and 1990s, copying music and compiling hit songs from different artists into pirated albums became a popular music consumption pattern in South Korea, reinforcing the piracy problem (Parc and Kim, 2020). After PC-based networks further developed in the early 1990s, digital devices, such as CD and MP3 players, gained popularity, and consumers enthusiastically shared music sources and exchanged files (Parc and Kim, 2020). From physical albums to online distribution, K-pop took another significant step in the early 2000s (Parc and Kim, 2020). Currently, major entertainment companies have adopted both offline and online music distribution methods to maximize their profits and popularity (Parc and Kim, 2020).

Second, the production mode of K-pop shifted significantly, from offline to online, domestic to international, and unilateral to bilateral, through the creation of diverse music styles, such as rap, international stage performances, and collaborations with prominent international

artists (Parc and Kim, 2020). In the early 2010s, major collaborations between K-pop groups and American artists included partnerships between the Bangtan Boys (BTS) and The Chainsmokers, Halsey, Lauv, and Nicki Minaj (Parc and Kim, 2020). These collaborations played a crucial role in facilitating BTS's expansion into the US market, leveraging the influence and reputation of established American artists to increase visibility and credibility.

Third, consumers' music consumption patterns have also been affected by the digital transformation in how they, in Parc and Kim's (2020) words, possess music to access it. This transformation began with downloading music files, physical albums, CDs, and/or MP3 players and has moved to online streaming services (Parc and Kim, 2020).

Finally, the entire business surrounding K-pop began to integrate, leading to rapidly growing partnerships outside the music field with the emergence of "chaebolization" by entertainment companies, which are using the profits to invest in other businesses (Parc and Kim, 2020), and this formed a new K-pop-centered business ecosystem.

Innovative production system

In addition to technological advancements, Kim and Kwon (2022) conducted a systematic and historical review of the development of the South Korean music industry. Their longitudinal study highlighted that K-pop's global success was also built upon its innovative production system, which has emerged as one of the most important business strategies utilized by K-pop professionals (Pratamasari, 2017).

Nationwide auditions and open calls

Kim and Kwon (2022) suggested that with fewer governmental restrictions starting in the 1980s marked a blooming era for K-pop's domestic development, as traditional record companies slowly declined while some South Korean chaebols (family-owned conglomerates), such as the Samsung Group and LG Group, Inc., stepped into the field and implemented strong business approaches to cultivate teenage-oriented works; however, these companies eventually exited the market. After this period, management companies initiated a new system to expand their nationwide auditions and open calls for potential future stars as a key strategy. With technological advancements, the nationwide auditions and open calls helped attract talent and introduced new music styles and broadcasting methods, all of which elevated K-pop to a new and higher level (Kim and Kwon, 2022).

Traineeship

The traineeship system reflects a fundamental philosophy in South Korea's entertainment industry, where companies invest substantially in developing potential idols as refined "final products" (Pratamasari, 2017). This comprehensive training structure extends beyond core artistic skills such as singing and dancing to include essential social competencies such as media interaction and public engagement (Pratamasari, 2017). To safeguard their investments, companies typically require trainees to commit to extended contracts, sometimes spanning up to fifteen years, ensuring an adequate return on investment (Pratamasari, 2017).

The digital revolution has significantly transformed this system, enabling K-pop's global expansion through increased international participation (Kim and Kwon, 2022). According to Kim and Kwon (2022), technological advancements and structural adaptations have

become integral components of K-pop's innovative production framework, serving as key drivers behind its worldwide success. This evolution has facilitated the inclusion of multinational trainees and artists, further enhancing the industry's global appeal and market penetration.

Global expansion

Another key strategy behind K-pop's rapid global expansion was its emphasis on visual performance elements (Messerlin and Shin, 2017). Messerlin and Shin (2017) introduced the notion of "visibility ratio," which refers to the number calculated by dividing "the number of clicks by the number of native speakers." Research conducted on YouTube views of hit songs created by both English and South Korean artists and groups, such as Justin Bieber, Adele, Psy, and BIGBANG (a South Korean boy band), revealed that South Korean groups had, on average, a higher visibility rate of 60% than English-speaking performers. They believed that South Korean artist Psy's phenomenal "Gangnam Style" greatly contributed to this high indicator (Messerlin and Shin, 2017). Messerlin and Shin (2017) concluded that one of the key reasons for K-pop's rapid growth was its online strategies, emphasizing visual-intensive performances over vocal-focused ones. This shift extended to advertising in fields such as cosmetics, fashion, and food, enabling management companies to collaborate with major fashion brands such as LVMH Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton (Messerlin and Shin, 2017).

Beyond shifting content priorities from visual presentation to substantive artistry, Pratamasari (2017) revealed the sophisticated business-to-business strategies employed by K-pop management companies. Through a case study of SM Entertainment, the research demonstrated how strategic collaborations with international composers, choreographers, and media conglomerates such as YouTube, combined with partnerships with local music distributors, collectively contributed to the global success of the company's artists. These multifaceted alliances formed an essential component of SM Entertainment's international expansion strategy.

Outside the entertainment world

A total of 11 years ago, Kim (2012) predicted significant growth opportunities for K-pop in areas such as wholesale retail, restaurants, information services, and advertising. These predictions were later validated through both business practices and academic discussions (Messerlin and Shin, 2017).

Entering the high-end fashion world

K-pop artists have made a significant impact in luxury and fashion beyond the entertainment industry. Members of the South Korean girl group BLACKPINK, Jennie, Lisa, Rosé, and Jisoo, serve as global ambassadors for top luxury brands such as Chanel, Celine, Yves Saint Laurent (Saint Laurent), and Christian Dior SE (Dior), respectively (Kwak, 2023). Park Ji-min (Jimin), a member of BTS, helped Dior's market price reach a historical high of \$857 U.S. dollars shortly after the second day of his appointment as Dior's ambassador (Kwak, 2023). Suh, a business professor at Sookmyung Women's University in South Korea, noted that luxury companies shifted their focus to Asia during COVID-19 due to the shrinking European market. This shift led to endorsements from new South Korean brand ambassadors, who are top influencers with significant impact (Kwak, 2023). Islam and Singh (2020)

further confirmed that K-pop fans not only keep up with their idols' news but also emulate their fashion choices. Wearing the same brands as their idols signifies wealth, beauty, and social status, contributing to a "flex culture" among young Korean students.

Physical presence

Pratamasari (2017) identified community building and fan engagement as another cornerstone of K-pop's business strategy. The industry's fan-centric approach formed the foundation of its business-to-consumer model, cultivating connections through both physical and digital experiences. This comprehensive strategy encompasses various touchpoints: physical albums and merchandise, live concerts, themed establishments (including idol-branded cafes, pop-up stores, and restaurants designed for social media sharing), and online fan club platforms. By creating these multifaceted engagement opportunities, K-pop companies successfully strengthen community bonds and reinforce fan loyalty across both offline and online domains.

Identifying the gap in C-pop

Previous research has identified challenges that hinder C-pop's acceptance by a broader global audience, along with news coverage from credible sources discussing its growing influence in fashion and business. Ip (2023) posed a compelling question in his article titled "Can Chinese pop music's soft power push ever match K-pop's success?" under the "Diplomacy" category. He compared BTS, who were invited to the White House twice, with Jackson Wang, the first Chinese singer to perform solo at Coachella in April 2023. Ip (2023) noted that China's soft power has historically lagged in pop culture and entertainment compared to K-pop's global evolution. However, Jackson Wang's groundbreaking performance is significant, demonstrating that a Chinese artist can collaborate with world-leading teams and perform on a global stage, potentially shifting perceptions of C-pop among international audiences.

The previously identified problems

Despite recent successes in music and fashion, C-pop has yet to establish a strong, growing presence or produce iconic works in the U.S. Scholars and industry experts have identified several challenges hindering its growth. Xing (2021) highlighted key areas for improvement, including a lack of meaningful, high-quality music, as many creators prioritize quantity over quality; insufficient academic support and development in music education; weak copyright management that inadequately protects creators' rights; and the absence of fair, well-structured pop music competitions, which limit opportunities to discover new talents.

Fung added that China's vast population and language barriers have also hindered the creation of exportable works. While the domestic market offers significant financial rewards for Chinese-speaking artists, this has diminished the incentive to explore global markets or produce non-Chinese-speaking content (Hunter-Tilney, 2023). In March 2023, China's GDP reached 4,166.8 billion USD, compared to South Korea's 429.2 billion USD in the same period (CEIC, n.d.). This nearly 100-fold difference highlights the vast disparity in market size, explaining why Chinese artists, having achieved profitability domestically, may lack strong monetary incentives to explore international markets. While this internal ecosystem fosters cultural and economic growth within

Chinese-speaking communities, it has historically constrained the global expansion of C-pop.

Research design

Multiple case studies were selected as the research design for this qualitative study. As one of the most frequently used and acknowledged methodologies in qualitative research in social sciences, case studies effectively work to gain in-depth insights into contemporary problems (Coombs, 2022). Considering the development history of both K-pop and C-pop in the US market over several decades, exploring them through case studies for a deeper understanding could prove beneficial. Yin (2018) emphasized that the case study was not only to understand the “what” of the problem but also to always investigate the “why” and “how.” Instead of a single case study, the multiple case study methodology was purposefully chosen to strengthen the trustworthiness of this research. Yin (2018) pointed out that although multiple case studies might take longer and require more extensive resources to complete compared to a single case study, the findings were more compelling for theoretical replication. Applied to this study, the surface level of the C-pop problem’s slow growth in the US among Gen Z consumers pointed to the “what,” while understanding “why” it was happening and “how” to change the situation was the focus and goal of this research study. By answering these research questions, which served as the sub-objectives of the study, all starting with “what,” the “how” was resolved as well.

- Research Question 1: What were the differences between C-pop and K-pop’s business models in the United States with an emphasis on creative direction and marketing strategy?
- Research Question 2: What changes in the creative direction of C-pop works need to be taken to achieve bigger success and market acceptance in the U.S.?
- Research Question 3: What changes in the marketing strategy of C-pop works were needed to effectively reach more Gen Z audiences in the U.S.?

Data collection

Data were collected from secondary sources, including streaming platforms (Spotify and Netflix) and social media (Instagram and YouTube). The focus was on the top K-pop and C-pop artists’ songs, music videos (MVs), promotional materials, engagement metrics, and audience feedback. These data directly addressed Research Question 1 by analyzing the song subjects, lyrics, themes, rhythms, and music video styles (e.g., storytelling or choreography). Engagement metrics, such as comments, likes, and views, provided statistical evidence of popularity, facilitating a comparative analysis based on rankings.

Platform-based logistics allowed data to be collected for different purposes. In the general form of pictures and short videos, Instagram provided great resources to navigate audience feedback into release announcements, marketing promotions, and other campaigns. YouTube, where management companies and artists usually release long videos, could help the researcher gain engagement metrics, such as views, likes, and comments, in both numerical and textual data for interpretation. On the other hand, Spotify and Netflix, as the

mainstream music streaming and video distribution services, could reflect metrics on videos and platform-oriented inclinations in terms of creative direction and marketing strategy.

The study focused on BLACKPINK and Jackson Wang as representative cases of K-pop and C-pop, respectively, due to their significant relevance and cultural influence in the U.S. market. BLACKPINK, both as a group and through its four individual members, has made substantial inroads into the U.S. entertainment industry, spanning music, TV, and fashion. Their impact is evident through Billboard rankings, YouTube view records, fashion magazine covers, social media trends, and high-profile collaborations beyond music. Similarly, Jackson Wang stood out among C-pop artists, boasting 32.4 million Instagram followers as of March 2025, which was the highest among Chinese artists. Both BLACKPINK and Jackson Wang have performed at Coachella, a milestone that highlights their professional quality and popularity among American audiences.

Data analysis

Content analysis is a systematic and objective approach aimed at specifically describing a particular phenomenon (Elo and Kynga’s, 2008). By distilling documents in various forms into fewer content-related categories, the similar meanings of these categories explain the phenomenon (Elo and Kynga’s, 2008). Elo and Kynga’s (2008) described content analysis in a simple way as a method to “analyze documents” (p. 108). Choosing content analysis as the data analysis approach could help uncover findings regarding the differences between K-pop and C-pop in both the creative direction and marketing strategy from consumers’ perspectives, as well as potential changes that fans would like C-pop to implement in the future.

Employing the inductive content analysis approach, categories were directly derived from the data (Elo and Kynga’s, 2008). Compared to manifest content analysis, which focused on the surface meaning of the content, this research study employed latent content analysis that investigated the deeper structure of the content (Bengtsson, 2016, p. 9). Bengtsson (2016) pointed out that the key question here was, “What is intended to be said?” (p. 9). Since there was fan community jargon, emojis, and other underlying meanings within the audience and fan groups during their online engagement, the researcher decided that latent content analysis was a more suitable choice.

This qualitative study employed method and data source triangulation to ensure data saturation, utilizing a multiple case study approach through secondary sources such as social media platforms and streaming services. Method triangulation involves using multiple data collection methods to examine the same phenomenon (Carter et al., 2014). Data were collected from social media platforms (Instagram and YouTube) and streaming services (Spotify and Netflix) to provide a comprehensive understanding of the trends and challenges.

Results

Data from social media platforms (Instagram and YouTube) and streaming services (Spotify and Netflix) included numerical metrics

and textual comments to identify patterns and trends in audience engagement, preferences, and feedback. Carefully selected and reviewed, the data objectively represented the creative and marketing efforts of K-pop and C-pop, sourced from digital platforms' official annual reports and publicly available artwork pages, with screenshots included for accuracy and transparency.

Music

Creative direction

This case study took BLACKPINK, a South Korean girl group formed by YG Entertainment, as the case representing K-pop, and Jackson Wang, a Chinese singer and songwriter representing C-pop, who were the top and most popular South Korean and Chinese artists/artist groups on the US and global stage.

Lyric

The recognizable opening line and repetitive chorus that BLACKPINK planted in their songs helped the hit become viral and memorable.

As of October 18, 2024, BLACKPINK's most streamed song on Spotify was "How You Like That," with 1,072,318,099 streams, while Jackson Wang's most streamed song, "100 Ways," hit 95,704,940 streams. These two songs were released in the same year, 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Theme wise, both songs were about romantic connection; however, BLACKPINK's lyrics were much more self-centric, singing about how the girl outgrew the old relationship and darkness to embrace a new version of herself. While Jackson Wang's song expressed the longing of the lover and the deep affection, it did not contain much of the "self" notion compared to BLACKPINK's (Wang, 2020a).

Language- and lyrics-wise, "How You Like That" has Korean lyrics for all parts except the chorus, which is in English, while "100 Ways" has all English lyrics. The English chorus of "Ha, how you like that? You gon' like that, that-that-that, that, that-that-that, that" and the post-chorus of "Now, look at you now, look at me (Uh) How you like that?" is repeated throughout the whole song multiple times to reinforce the chorus and make it easier to memorize (BLACKPINK, 2020). Furthermore, BLACKPINK intentionally includes the group's famous opening intro of "BLACKPINK in your area" in many of their songs, and "How You Like That" has it too. This symbolic line enables fans to recognize BLACKPINK's watermark as soon as the song starts.

Music video

It has a different focus on the visual experience, falling into a pleasantly holistic visual experience for K-pop while telling a story and communicating emotions for C-pop.

As of October 18, 2024, BLACKPINK's most-watched MV on YouTube is their '뚜두뚜두 (DDU-DU DDU-DU)' MV, which has 2.2 billion views, while Jackson Wang's official MV has reached 93 million views (BLACKPINK, 2018, Wang, 2020b).

Both videos received massive and positive reactions from fans, as well as the general audience's feedback in the comments and view count. However, their approaches and visual delivery were different.

Stage design, color, and filters played a critical role in shaping BLACKPINK's phenomenal MV success. Regarding stage design, BLACKPINK and their team put great effort into creating an

installation that appeared in the MV as the background for the performance, aiming to provide a holistic visual experience. This included the incorporation of color and theme, from the team members' makeup and styling to the installation's color and size choices, which complemented the filters. In the MV for "DDU-DU DDU-DU," there was heavy use of bright pink and blue colors and shiny elements in the background, as well as in the clothing and makeup of the team members (BLACKPINK, 2018).

In addition, a deeper dive into the timestamp line of this MV revealed two notable peaks in the "Most replayed" section, coinciding with the group's choreography along with singing the chorus segments, as illustrated in Figure 1. The entire combination created an overall flow that attracted viewers and motivated them to watch the entire video.

Jackson Wang and his team adopted a different approach. The stage design for "100 Ways" was less colorful and simpler, focusing instead on conveying a love story that aligned with the lyrics. While the choreography was still present, the interaction between Jackson Wang and the female dancer garnered significant fan attention.

As shown in Figure 2, the MV's timestamp line appeared flatter when compared to BLACKPINK's, lacking obvious peaks, which suggests that viewers were more likely to watch the entire video to follow the storyline rather than skip to specific segments, such as choreography, as seen in BLACKPINK's case (Wang, 2020b).

Marketing strategy

K-pop's heavy emphasis on collaboration with Western artists, streaming platforms, and its fandom's power through user-generated content (UGC) has become a powerful tool for promoting continuous success.

In YouTube's official Culture and Trends Report, the All-Time Most Subscribed Official Artist Channel as of 5/13/2024 revealed that BLACKPINK and BTS (Bangtan Boys, a K-pop boy group) are ranked as the top two, with 93.7 million and 78 million subscribers, respectively. For comparative reference, Taylor Swift was ranked fifth on the list with 58.9 million subscribers. Moreover, in the All-Time Top 24-h Music Debuts ranking as of 5/13/2024, BTS and BLACKPINK almost claimed 9 out of the 10 videos on the list.

Fandom

The K-pop fandom shined with power here. The YouTube *Culture and Trends Report 2022* made a bold and straightforward statement that "fandom is central to K-pop" based on its annual reflection. Because of UGC, fans were able to see different perspectives of their idols, which made it a true "pop culture" phenomenon (YouTube Culture and Trends Team, 2022, n.d.). As the top comments under the videos on the lists indicated, K-pop fans perceived reaching high views of their favorite artists as a significant goal for themselves as fans. "It's 2024, and let us make it into 1B (writer's note: 1 billion views)." "We are here to unite to go for 600 M views. We are ARMY (writer's note: BTS fan group's nickname)." Compared to K-pop's fans, who often focus on boosting views, C-pop fans appear to pay more attention to the MV content itself. This distinction is evident in the top comments on Jackson Wang's recent MV *Feeling Lucky*, featuring female artist BIBI. Fans and viewers were more interested in the storyline and character interactions than in streaming performance. Comments such as "A good story speaks louder than a high-budget MV," and "I need a longer episode of this series," reflect a preference for narrative depth and emotional engagement over production scale or view metrics.



FIGURE 1

Screenshot of BLACKPINK's music video '뚜두뚜두 (DDU-DU DDU-DU)' on YouTube. The first "Most replayed" peak appeared in the group's choreography with the chorus.



FIGURE 2

Screenshot of Jackson Wang's music video "100 ways" on YouTube. A flatter timestamp line appeared in Jackson Wang's "100 ways" MV.

Collaboration

Collaboration with Western artists was another marketing strategy that K-pop employed to expand its influence on the U.S. and global stage. BLACKPINK had multiple big hit singles with Cardi B, Dua Lipa, Lady Gaga, and Selena Gomez, respectively, while BTS

released singles featuring Halsey, Charlie Puth, and Snoop Dogg. All of these Western artists were well-known in the U.S. and had massive fan bases across different music genres. Spotify even created an official K-pop collaboration playlist named "K-pop Kollabs (Spotify, n.d.)." In comparison to K-pop's collaborative efforts, C-pop appeared quieter.

Although there have been notable collaborations with Asian artists, particularly through the label 88rising, C-pop has not achieved K-pop’s level of engagement with Western markets.

TV shows

Creative direction

In addition to the enduring popularity of light romance, the genres of sci-fi and costume drama appear to be gaining traction in the United States.

K-drama

Some common themes and plots can be identified in popular K-dramas. As shown in Figure 3, the screenshot of Netflix Tudum’s most recent record revealed that two K-dramas were on “Netflix’s Most Popular TV (Non-English)”: #1 *Squid Game: Season 1* with 265.2 million views and #9 *All of Us Are Dead: Season 1* with 55.5 million views as of June 30, 2024. It is worth mentioning that *Squid Game: Season 1*’s hours viewed are ahead of the second place by a wide margin, at 3.1 times. Both K-dramas explore the dark side of the society and community in which the characters live. The main plot twists and conflicts in these two K-dramas revolve around imbalanced power dynamics and people fighting for their loved ones and themselves. On the other hand, love-themed and romance-centric dramas have been trending subjects for both K-drama and C-drama.

As people search these terms on Netflix, the majority of the search results feature contemporary love stories set in urban environments.

C-drama

3 Body Problem: Season 1, a trending television series, maintained its position in Netflix’s Top 10 TV shows in the United States for 5 consecutive weeks, from March 18 to April 21, 2024. Although this series is not a Chinese drama, it is a full Netflix production based on the award-winning trilogy by Chinese author Liu Cixin. Unlike the themes and subjects discussed previously, *3 Body Problem* presents a science fiction narrative centered on an alien invasion. Prior to Netflix’s adaptation, a successful television series produced entirely by a Chinese team was released in 2023 and received a positive reception in China. Rather than introducing this existing show to U.S. and Western audiences, Netflix acquired the rights to the original material and created its own version of *3 Body Problem*. This adaptation retained the main storyline but shifted the setting from China to multiple global locations and featured a predominantly Western cast.

The controversy surrounding these two television adaptations, both based on the same literary source, sparked intense online debates regarding which rendition better captured Liu’s original intent. The official trailer for *3 Body Problem*, posted by Netflix on YouTube, garnered 14 million views and nearly 10,000 comments since its initial release on January 9, 2024. Several top comments, which received thousands of likes, highlighted the significance of Liu’s original work and expressed hope for a successful adaptation by Netflix. For



FIGURE 3
Most TV Popular Lists (Non-English) as of June 30, 2024 (Netflix Tudum, 2024a, 2024b). Squid Game: Season 1 was ranked #1, and All of Us Are Dead: Season 1 was ranked #9.

instance, one commenter noted that the trilogy represents a remarkable achievement in the sci-fi genre, unparalleled by other works. Another comment emphasized that the simultaneous airing of *3 Body Problem* and *Dune* provided science fiction fans a year of enjoyment and celebration. Amid the positive feedback and high expectations for *3 Body Problem*, it was interesting to analyze Netflix's strategic decisions and the market's response to a Chinese-based narrative reinterpreted through a Western lens.

Apart from sci-fi stories, *the Chinese TV Drama's Overseas Influence Study 2021–2023* (Si, 2023), conducted by the Research Center for Audiovisual Communication at Tsinghua University, revealed that the most popular genres that international viewers liked are thrillers, dramas, romance, and costume dramas. To take “*The Untamed*,” a remarkably popular novel-adapted Chinese TV show from 2019, as an example, it is now available to stream on Netflix, WeTV (Tencent Video), and its YouTube channels, with hundreds of millions of views. “*The Untamed*,” streaming on Netflix, ripped my heart out and fed it to me. I cannot get enough,” culture reporter Romano (2020) described their passion for this costume drama in the headline of this article. Romano (2020) shared that the biggest attraction of “*The Untamed*” to them was that the plot twists and the intense emotions between the two main characters all aligned with the story's background of the historical costume setting, in addition to its “beautiful costumes, the lavish production design, and the sword fights.”

Marketing strategy

The distribution channels, online promotion, and offline experiences distinguish K-drama and C-drama as two distinct avenues in the U.S. market.

K-drama

The recent phenomenal success of K-dramas on the Western and global stages, such as *Squid Game: Season 1* and *All of Us Are Dead: Season 1*, is closely associated with Netflix's strategic planning in both online and offline formats. K-drama is officially considered a genre, just like Action, Crime, and Comedy. There is a K-drama genre on Netflix under TV Shows that allows the audience to choose from. Tudum, Netflix's official companion website, listed *Squid Game* as one of the “drama series sure to hook you immediately” (Picurro, 2024). The world's biggest streaming service's push on K-drama reflects the business values it sees in the field, and it also contemplates K-drama's marketing strategy.

Additionally, offline campaigns and events enhanced viewer engagement by providing an immersive experience. Netflix hosted “*Squid Game: The Trials*” in Los Angeles in December 2023, replicating the setup from the TV show and inviting viewers to join and compete in the same challenge games featured in the series. Among the numerous five-star reviews of the event, Netflix selected a few comments to highlight on their official event webpage; one of them stated: “I loved it! So much fun to play the games with immersive sets and fun twists. There was also a Korean food stall, a VIP section, and tons of merchandise that you could purchase.” In addition to “*Squid Game: The Trials*,” the *Squid Game* marketing team had previously organized another immersive event at a major local shopping mall in Los Angeles, as shown in Figure 4.

Outside of the TV shows themselves, the official companion website, Tudum, provided the platform and the team with a place to

represent the creators' voices and elaborate on the ideas and fun stories behind the scenes, including exclusive interviews. For instance, there was an article sharing that the candy made by the honeycomb candy maker was present during the shoot, and the set smelled like candy, which served as an important prop in the show (Bentley, 2022).

C-drama

Unlike Netflix's full production of K-dramas and further promotion, C-drama has its own platforms and external strategies.

Distribution-wise, C-drama followed a combination strategy involving its own developed platform, going overseas, and selling IP to international streaming services. Tencent Video (We TV), iQIYI, Mango TV, and YOUKU are the mainstream Chinese streaming services that are developing their international presence with high-quality Chinese TV dramas and other long-form videos (Si, 2023). Externally, Chinese dramas have collaborated with Netflix and Disney+ to leverage their platform impacts and further promote their works (Si, 2023).

Using *The Untamed* as an example, its international distribution relies on WeTV (Tencent Video, 2019) and Netflix. In addition to Netflix and WeTV, the platform itself, WeTV, has also uploaded all 50 episodes to its official YouTube channel; the playlist has generated over 41.6 million views as of May 15, 2024. Besides the distribution through major channels, Tencent Video's subsidiary YouTube channel, Tencent Video Costume, has also released all 50 episodes of *The Untamed*, which have received more than 3.9 million views as of May 18, 2024 (Tencent Video—COSTUME, 2021). This indicates another strategic

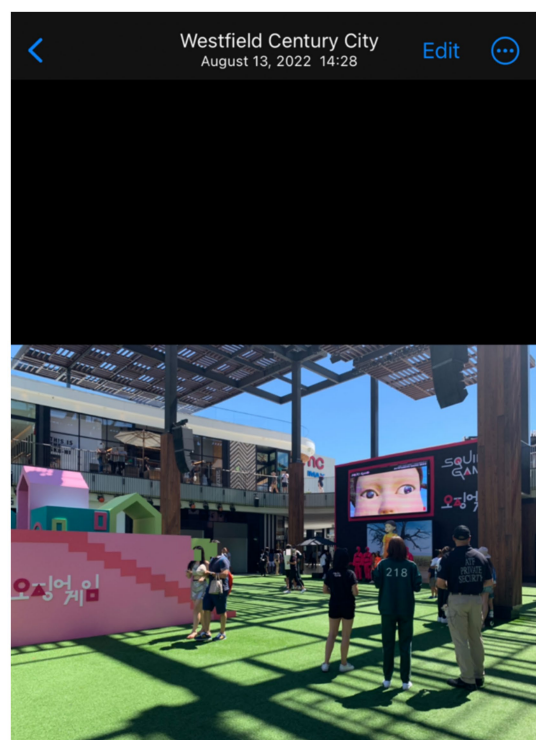


FIGURE 4
Squid Game's offline event at Westfield Century City, Los Angeles, CA. Photo taken by the researcher in August 2022.

TABLE 1 Differences between K-pop and C-pop in creative direction, marketing strategy, and business models.

	K-pop		C-pop	
Music	CD	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Me-centric lyrics• Repetitive chorus in English• Recognizable and memoizable opening line• A holistic visual experience that combines makeup, clothing, stage design, and choreography	CD	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Romance-centric lyrics• Choreography is there but not the biggest focus• Focusing on telling a story through the lyrics and the MV built upon actors' interaction
	MS	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Fans' push on accumulating plays and views• Fans generated content• Collaboration with famous Western artists	MS	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Less collaboration with Western artists• More focus on collaboration with Asian artists
TV drama	CD	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A dark theme about societal power imbalance• Light romance theme in the urban setting	CD	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sci-fi-themed story adaptation• Light romance theme
	MS	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Streaming platform's online push• Offline experience• Companion website's assistance	MS	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Distribution on Chinese streaming service's international platforms• Distribution via collaboration with major Western streaming services• Distribution on YouTube via different channels
Video games	CD	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• /	CD	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Adaptation from well-known stories• Action-themed• Role-playing games
	MS	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• /	MS	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Availability on different platforms• Fans generated content
Business model main features		<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A mature production system, spanning talent training to development• A strong focus on international expansion• An emphasis on collaborations with Western artists and streaming services		<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A developing entertainment ecosystem• Active domestic growth is driven by market size and profitability• Expanding international efforts through diverse strategies.• Emphasis on building independent platforms and channels

marketing approach to expand the show’s influence and popularity by separating the channels while simultaneously attracting more traffic.

Chinese video games

While it might not be the first thought to arise when discussing pop culture, the field of video games has propelled Chinese creative digital works onto the global stage in a very dominant position with the phenomenal success of *Black Myth: Wukong*.

Initially released on August 19, 2024, *Black Myth: Wukong* is now available on major platforms, including the PlayStation 5, Windows, and Xbox Series X/S. This action role-playing video game is an adaptation of the well-known Chinese novel *Journey to the West*, featuring the protagonist Sun Wukong (the Monkey King) in a structure of six chapters, developed by Game Science, a Chinese video game development and publishing company (Clement, 2024). Upon its release, this game has so far gained 18 million units in sales worldwide as of September 2024 and has reached the record as one of the fastest-selling video games in history (Clement, 2024). Clement (2024) made a bold statement that “China’s gaming industry is starting to take off internationally” following the success of *Black Myth: Wukong*. He pointed out that the reasons behind this success were strongly based on the materials of the adaptation, which have been previously transformed into various forms of pop culture, including TV shows, movies, and cartoons, and are well-known to Western and global audiences.

In addition, the role of gaming influencers and fans, who contributed user-generated content through reviews and support videos, has further solidified and expanded the success of *Black Myth:*

Wukong. This engagement from the gaming community has helped sustain the game’s momentum and visibility on a global scale.

Searching for “Black Myth: Wukong” on YouTube revealed a wide range of videos. Among the top results, roughly half of the titles are in Chinese, while the other half are in English. Aside from player reviews, many videos feature “game walkthroughs” that narrate the game’s plot. One top result, an 18-h video, has garnered 5 million views and over 3,000 comments as of October 2024 (MKIceAndFire, 2024). The top comments, which have received thousands or hundreds of likes, are overwhelmingly positive. One commenter named *Black Myth: Wukong* the “Game of the Year,” while another praised its faithful adaptation of the original story of *Journey to the West*, emphasizing how it reconnected them with their childhood memories (see Table 1).

Changes needed in creative direction

The findings from Spotify’s *Culture Next 2024* report and Netflix’s latest Engagement Report (Spotify Ads, 2024) contributed to answering Research Question 2, which focused on C-pop’s changes in the creative direction needed for greater success in the U.S. among the Gen Z group from three aspects: (1) a greater diversification in artwork themes, (2) creating works that could build stronger personal connections with the audience, and (3) thinking outside the box.

Greater diversification in artwork themes and forms

The findings revealed significant diversification across both thematic content and artistic formats in contemporary media. Recent

data from Netflix's (2024a, 2024b) engagement report demonstrates this trend, showing strong audience demand for varied genres, including action-adventure, documentaries, animated features, and enduringly popular romance content. Specifically, Korean productions dominated the non-English category with three standout performances: *Queen of Tears* (29 million views) and *My Demon* (18 million views) in the romance genre, alongside the thriller *Parasyte: The Grey* (25 million views). As Kim (2024) explained, while international streaming platforms have enabled broader distribution for traditionally restricted content like horror, thrillers, and mature-themed productions—genres often limited on conventional Korean networks—romance narratives continue to maintain their position as the predominant and most mainstream thematic choice in K-dramas.

Second, streaming services have increasingly adopted flexible format strategies, with Netflix's (2024a, 2024b) data showing that the top shows average just 6.6 h of runtime. This shift toward shorter or segmented content reflects a creative evolution in storytelling techniques and a deliberate market positioning strategy.

Creating works and building stronger personal connections with the Gen Z audience

Building stronger personal connections was heavily emphasized in attracting the American Gen Z audience. First, Spotify's *Culture Next 2024* report pointed out that loneliness was a prevalent issue in the Gen Z community, as 67% of them agreed that people are lonelier than they were 10 years ago. Gen Z seeks genuine personal connections both online and in real life, and music, podcasts, and other types of digital works can serve as a medium to share and connect, given their shareable nature. A similar conclusion was also drawn from the YouTube Culture and Trends Team (2024), which revealed that 65% of Gen Z felt more connected with content that was more relevant to them rather than merely trending content.

One highlighted trend among American Gen Z is the concept of "romanticizing your life" and point of view (POV). Both refer to picturing oneself as the main character of a movie and immersing oneself in the setting through surrounding elements, such as music, lighting, aromas, drinks, and more. The playlists and artworks that relate to these themes resonate deeply with Gen Z's focus on "hyper-niche moments," which relate to formative personal experiences such as a first kiss, a first date, or a first breakup, as noted in Spotify's report. Moreover, Gen Z shows a strong interest in the playlist terms "sleepover," "graduation," "puppy love," and "adulthood" (Culture Next 2024).

Thinking outside the box

By expanding beyond traditional definitions of pop culture, which typically center around music, television, and film, emerging digital formats such as video games and podcasts present undeniable potential to impact Gen Z audiences in the U.S.

Black Myth: Wukong, as a successful example of C-pop entering the U.S. market, points out a path to the breaking point for the entire video game industry. Findings reveal multiple factors that fostered the phenomenal success. As one of the top comments, with approximately 600 likes in the same YouTube review video, states, there are three main reasons that he/she loves this game: (1) its spectacular

storytelling, (2) it is close to real-life character building that makes the commenter feel related to his/her friends, and (3) the exceptional graphic design that targets every detail. Additionally, another comment with about 100 likes shared that he/she admired the fact that the development team must have read the original *Journey to the West* mythology thoroughly to create this game. Clement (2024) agrees with the comment, believing that the game's story source material, rooted in deep cultural relevance, is a key determinant of success. By linking back to its very cultural nature and integrating with contemporary pop culture forms, C-pop found its own breakthrough here.

Changes needed in marketing strategy

The findings contributed to answering Research Question 3, which focused on the changes in C-pop's marketing strategy needed for greater success in the U.S. among the Gen Z group from four aspects: (1) creating playlists that resonate with the Gen Z audience, (2) organizing offline events to foster deeper engagement, (3) enhancing user stickiness, and (4) building a strong and dedicated fandom. These strategies indicate a more tailored and interactive approach to marketing C-pop among Gen Z in the U.S.

Creating playlists that resonate with the Gen Z audience

Circling back to the importance and heavy impacts of playlists on the changes that C-pop needed to make in its creative direction, this concept could also be applied to marketing strategies. To appeal to the American Gen Z audience, creating playlists that focus on "formative firsts," referring to the special moments and emotions that resonate deeply with this demographic, could expand the reach and impact of C-pop in the U.S. In addition, 90% of the Gen Z audience agreed that a good playlist could hold a successful party (Culture Next 2024). These possible playlists could include Chinese and English songs, such as those about first love, heartbreak, or personal growth. Furthermore, collaborating with playlist curators or music influencers to integrate more C-pop songs into popular playlists that have already built a strong Gen Z following could boost C-pop's visibility and marketing power.

Organizing offline events fosters deeper engagement

Offline events can strengthen the connection and loyalty with the American Gen Z audience. Spotify's *Culture Next 2024* report (Spotify Ads, 2024) acknowledged the significance of offline events, including but not limited to concerts, live shows, and listening parties. Statistics revealed that 74% of Gen Z's audience attended a concert or live music show in 2023, and approximately 50% of them participated in an in-person listening party for a new album or song (Culture Next 2024, 2024). Spotify's *Culture Next* report (Spotify Ads, 2024) also pointed out that there was a lesson for brands to learn, as they discovered that 49% of the Gen Z group was inclined to support brands that sponsored live music events and concerts.

Deepening user stickiness

Netflix (2024a, 2024b) valued users' watch time, or engagement, as the most important indicator of member happiness. According to the streaming service's rationale, the more shows people watch, the

longer they remain on the platform, which could increase the likelihood of recommending Netflix to others (Netflix Engagement Report, 2024).

Focusing on building a strong and dedicated fandom

Fandom played an instrumental role in shaping and developing K-pop's growth and success in the U.S. (YouTube Culture and Trends Team, 2022). Not only did UGC contribute to expanding artists' and artworks' reach from multiple angles, but the strong and focused support in accumulating song and music video streams and views also demonstrated the power of the dedicated fandom in promoting their beloved artists' visibility on mainstream rankings and charts.

Discussion

Findings from social media platforms and streaming services highlighted the differences between K-pop and C-pop's business models, particularly regarding creative direction and marketing strategies. The study identified key qualities and priorities that American Gen Z consumers value when engaging with pop culture and entertainment content by analyzing what fans and audiences liked, disliked, praised, or criticized.

What American Gen Z consumers search for in the pop culture's creative direction

American Gen Z's preferred creative direction, based on the findings regarding the differences between K-pop and C-pop's current developments, reveals two instrumental elements: (1) the theme and (2) the visual presentation.

First, the analysis revealed that American Gen Z consumers demonstrated a consistent preference for romantic content across music, television, and film media. Unlike more draining genres, romance narratives provide accessible enjoyment through their soothing and uplifting storylines. This demographic also embraced darker thematic works that critically examine societal power structures and inequality. These consumers particularly valued narratives that facilitated meaningful connections between fictional plots and real-world applications. In addition, the emerging interest in science fiction content indicates significant growth potential for this genre.

Second, the visual presentation was not only highlighted but also evolved into a determining creative element to attract American Gen Z consumers. The final project's visual presentation was pervasive, from the artist's makeup and outfits to choreography, music videos, stage design, the artist's own logo, album covers, and social media posts, along with a symbolic color or color combination that could remind fans and audiences of a particular artist in the first place. The American Gen Z audience expected substantive visual narratives that demonstrated thoughtful and conceptual development effectively. Successful implementations required artists and management teams to create cohesive visual ecosystems that authentically communicated the artistic vision while inviting critical interpretation.

What American Gen Z consumers care about in the pop culture's marketing strategy

Fandom and collaboration were the essence of the marketing strategy valued by American Gen Z consumers.

First, the cultivation of an organic and supportive fandom was pivotal not only for the growth of specific artists or works but also for the broader development of pop culture. In a business context, fandom originated from the voluntary actions of fans, providing support beyond the scope of the business itself and creating a community for fans to gather, share, and connect. Fandom activities ranged from online groups, forums, and discussion boards to offline gatherings and events. The findings underscored the importance of nurturing a supportive fandom, as it contributed not only to actual sales and profits but also to encouraging UGC, which further enhanced and enriched the artists and their works.

Second, international and cross-genre collaborations among artists, as well as partnerships with streaming services and production companies, are considered crucial. The findings indicate that creative and engaging collaborations, such as those involving social media posts, songs, photoshoots, TV shows, or films, are highly appealing to American Gen Z consumers, prompting them to share these works with their friends and fan circles. These collaborations extend beyond entertainment to include fields such as culinary arts, fashion, beauty and skincare, well-being, tourism, and other innovative industries. Such partnerships not only drive financial gains but also amplify the influence of artists and their works across diverse domains. Collaborations with streaming services and production companies further maximize exposure and resource allocation, providing significant support to artists.

The key: personal connection

When addressing creative direction or marketing strategy, the key element emphasized by the findings was the "personal connection." All creative direction and marketing strategies originated from this element, and it was expected to be consistently reflected and elaborated upon throughout both the creative direction and the marketing strategy.

The phrase "personal connection" appears multiple times in the textual data from official reports and comments, leading to the thesis statement and a central idea of the fundamental characteristics and core beliefs expressed through artists' creative and marketing endeavors. A personal connection is built upon the construction of a holistic fan experience, engagement, and emotional bond through artistic exploration and expression. When this authenticity permeates all aspects of fan engagement, from musical output to visual presentation to interpersonal interactions, it cultivates deeper, more meaningful relationships with the audience.

Creative direction

To achieve greater success and market acceptance among Gen Z consumers in the U.S., C-pop should focus on creating authentic works that foster stronger personal connections. This process involves delivering stories that deeply resonate with the target audience. A guiding question could be: *What emotions and feelings resonate with American Gen Z fans in relation to the artist and their work?* Exploring a more diverse range of themes, formats, and genres is encouraged,

such as urban romance, costume dramas, self-empowerment narratives featuring character growth or self-affirming lyrics, sci-fi stories with advanced production design, and even collaborations with other media such as video games.

In summary, C-pop should innovate and enhance its visual presentation aspects, such as makeup, outfits, choreography, stage design, social media content, packaging, and merchandise design, to establish a more compelling and cohesive artistic identity.

Marketing strategy

A targeted strategy specifically designed for the U.S. is highly recommended to effectively reach more Gen Z audiences, which includes thorough market research and an audience analysis of the cultural and social backgrounds.

Artist teams and management companies should prioritize the continuous monitoring of American Gen Z preferences through comprehensive environmental scanning. This involves tracking evolving trends, discussion topics, and cultural sentiments by posing key questions: *What resonates with this demographic? How do they perceive current sociocultural issues?* For instance, seasonal themes such as “romanticizing your life” have shown particular appeal, where autumn-themed campaigns incorporating pumpkin spice flavors, UGG boots, and other seasonal elements can effectively align with Gen Z consumption patterns when timed appropriately. Second, while showcasing artists’ work is essential, portraying their personalities as relatable individuals is equally important for building genuine connections with fans. This can be achieved through increased online interactions, such as behind-the-scenes content, or offline events such as fan meetings, live performances, or intimate pre-release listening parties. These efforts not only strengthen fan engagement but also foster a supportive fandom, encouraging UGC through meaningful interactions. Finally, forging official partnerships with major American digital platforms, including music services (Spotify), streaming providers (Netflix, Hulu, Amazon), and gaming platforms (Steam), can dramatically improve content visibility and audience reach.

While examining K-pop’s success in the U.S. as a benchmark for targeting Gen Z consumers is valuable, it is important to note that C-pop should not simply replicate this model. Instead, C-pop should cultivate its own unique identity and strategies to stand out on the global stage.

Theoretical implications

The findings provide theoretical implications, particularly regarding the contemporary audience and the analysis of consumer behavior related to Nye’s soft power concept, Gen Z’s media consumption patterns, and Marshall McLuhan’s theory of “the medium is the message”.

First, Nye’s concept of soft power is clearly reflected in K-pop’s success in the U.S. and globally. Korean slang, foods, and beverages, such as kimchi and soju, along with urban and suburban landscapes, prominently feature in K-pop music, TV, and film. These elements serve as a form of soft power, gradually immersing audiences in South Korean culture and fostering its acceptance worldwide. C-pop’s struggles highlight the need to strengthen its soft power by identifying and emphasizing the essence of Chinese culture itself.

Second, the findings align with prior research on Gen Z’s media consumption patterns, which prioritize individuality and the pursuit

of an online community centered around a well-acknowledged theme. Heavily influenced by the internet and smartphones during their upbringing, Gen Z values their individuality (Pichler et al., 2021) and online self-identity (Click and Schwartz, 2018). The pop culture that gathers fans helps to form a community outside of daily social circles and contributes to a sense of belonging for the young generation.

Finally, Lahtinen (2020) expanded on McLuhan’s theory of “the medium is the message” by distinguishing between hot and cold media. Hot media are visually oriented, while cold media are more text-focused. In the context of this study, C-pop’s presentation incorporates both hot and cold media. Music videos, concerts, TV shows, and movies serve as strong hot media, delivering intense visual messages. Meanwhile, cold media such as lyrics, slogans, titles, and dialogue play a crucial role in conveying the artists’ concepts and central ideas. This suggests that a strategic combination of both hot and cold media could enhance C-pop’s growth in the U.S., particularly when targeting Gen Z consumers in future initiatives.

Limitations

This study has several limitations that may have impacted its findings and conclusions. First, the lack of existing literature on the topic limited the theoretical foundation for the research. Second, the reliance on secondary data and a narrow case selection (e.g., BLACKPINK and Jackson Wang, limited to music and TV shows) may not fully capture the diversity of the K-pop and C-pop ecosystems. Finally, the self-reported data from public sources, such as YouTube comments, were difficult to verify independently (Brutus et al., 2013). While the objective numerical data from streaming services and social media platforms were cross-referenced with insights from the comments, potential biases in interpretation remain. To reduce interpretation bias, multiple rephrased quotes from the original comments were included.

Recommendations

#1 for practitioners: following and understanding streaming services’ official reports

Practitioners in the entertainment industry targeting American Gen Z consumers are strongly encouraged to closely monitor and thoroughly understand streaming services’ reports on user and engagement metrics. Key public data for this study were collected from YouTube, Netflix, and Spotify’s official reports on user habits and preferences, offering valuable insights to inform adjustments in creative direction and marketing strategies. By leveraging these reports, future data-driven creative and marketing campaigns can be developed more effectively.

#2 for policymakers: strengthening protections for artist rights

Cultural policymakers at all levels, local, national, and international, are recommended to implement comprehensive measures to safeguard artists’ rights. First and foremost, this requires establishing systematic legal frameworks to protect intellectual property and creative works. Governments and cultural institutions should develop accessible legal support systems, including subsidized consultation services and educational programs, to help artists

navigate contractual and copyright matters. Equally important is the need to regulate contractual practices by setting reasonable limits on contract durations and terms to prevent exploitation that could hinder artists' professional growth or personal well-being. These coordinated efforts would create more equitable working conditions in the creative industries while supporting sustainable artistic development.

#3 for future research: considering C-pop's next five years in the United States

This qualitative study examined the differences in business models between K-pop and C-pop in the U.S., focusing on Gen Z consumers and historical trends up to 2024. Future research is recommended to explore C-pop's anticipated development over the next five years within the same market and target demographic, emphasizing changes in consumer behavior resulting from implemented findings. Such research could validate how these changes influence strategic shifts or identify further necessary directions. Qualitative or mixed-method designs, supplemented by numerical performance data, are suggested to provide comprehensive insights.

#4 for future research: gaining deeper insights into Gen Z

Beyond business, researchers are encouraged to explore the social, cultural, and psychological factors influencing American Gen Z's strong engagement with K-pop and other pop cultures as a means of seeking community. Future studies targeting this demographic should adopt qualitative methodologies to uncover the deeper psychological motivations fueling their passion for K-pop.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

Ethical approval was not required for the study involving human data in accordance with the local legislation and institutional

requirements. Written informed consent was not required, for either participation in the study or for the publication of potentially/indirectly identifying information, in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The social media data was accessed and analyzed in accordance with the platform's terms of use and all relevant institutional/national regulations.

Author contributions

ZL: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Software, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Generative AI statement

The author(s) declare that no Gen AI was used in the creation of this manuscript.

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