## K-pop Fans Practices: Content Consumption to Participatory Approach

### Abstract:
This article gives insight into K-pop fans' practices from the perspective of consumption patterns to a participatory approach. Digital advancement requires reshaping strategies to persuade fans to participate for idols' good image. The article examines and explores trends of participation by fans emerging due to psycho-social needs of connectedness with idols and fan communities. The study uses a systematic review method and discusses the different ways in which fans participate in the K-pop genre of fandom. The findings highlight the importance of fan communities in digital times and how they use social media to connect with other fans to participate in fandom activities. The study concludes that K-pop strategies for fans' involvement and retaining them as enthusiastic participants are exceptional. A case study of K-pop may be taken as a complete understanding of digitized fans targeting and utilizing their energies for K-pop image building.

### Key Words:
K-pop, Fan practices, Content consumption to participation, Digital fandom

### Introduction
K-pop, or Korean popular music, has gained global popularity in recent years, with millions of fans worldwide consuming and participating in the genre. The popularity of K-pop is not only limited to the music itself, but also the visual and performance aspects that accompany it, such as music videos, concerts, and fan interactions. As such, K-pop has become a cultural phenomenon that has sparked scholarly interest in the practices of its fans. The traditional view of media consumption was that of a passive audience, where the audience simply consumed media content without actively participating in its creation or dissemination. The rise of the internet and social media, however, has fundamentally changed this dynamic, as fans are now able to create and share content with

* Assistant Professor, Department of Communication & Media Studies, Fatima Jinnah Women's University, Islamabad, Pakistan.
† Assistant Professor, Riphah Institute of Media Sciences, Riphah International University, Islamabad, Pakistan.
a wider audience, often blurring the lines between producer and consumer (Khan, Won, & Pembeçoğlu, 2021; Khan & Won, 2020).

This research paper aims to explore the practices of K-pop fans in terms of their content consumption and participatory approach. The study seeks to investigate the different ways in which K-pop fans consume and participate in the genre, including listening to music, watching music videos, attending concerts, and interacting with protagonists, producers, and other fans online. The importance of fan communities and social media in shaping fan practices is also examined, as K-pop fandom is known for its active online presence and the formation of fan communities. The study particularly explores the evolution of fan practices over time such as content creation and reproduction, purchase intentions, social grouping and community, para-social relationships (Affective connections), learning the Korean language, culture learning, competitive performativity, social identities, and concepts of beauty.

Advancement in digital communication has paved the way to change the fan culture of the entertainment industry. A fan is one who has enthusiasm as an individual towards a content or personality while in fandom; communities are developed to share their ideas and enjoy experiences with members of the same community. Pre-digital fandom apparently referred to excessive passion and enthusiasm toward certain popular forms. A fan in the digital age is considered an imaginative prosumer that is a combination of producer and consumer who is not supposed to just consume media but is actively involved in processes of cultural significance (Booth, 2015). Consuming content on media as a fan results in different socio-cultural changes. These changes first occur on an individual and later on the societal level. In a detailed examination of fan culture Gooch (2008) as cited by Abd-Rahim (2019) conclude that fans have recognition for the rules of fan culture they are following. To be a fan, they adopt different types of dress codes, vocabularies, knowledge, and skill, and these elements are understood by a fan community member only.

Fandom experience is done on an individual or community level and fan studies have been shifted to the nature of identity and issues at the community level (Booth, 2010).

Technology advancements led the way to a transformation of traditional media to new media. Rapid advancements were required to bring shifts in production systems while on the other end, consumption patterns were also evolving. From broadcasting to narrowcasting targeting audiences has always been challenging.

For the last two decades, the fandom concept has also provided a different set of concepts to understand new media audiences. Practices to maintain fandom comprise stressing the fans to actively participate within their networked fan communities, providing platforms for fans' own creative transformations and negotiations for mass media texts, thinking of ways to speak back to fans, and assertion of a particular agenda about knowing what kind of popular culture is endorsed by fans (Booth, 2018).

The rise of social media has not only required studying fandom through the lens of modernity but also led to a transition from constant consumption of content to an energetic participatory approach by fans. While discussing the return of fandom in the digital age with the rise of social media Guo (2019) has defined three distinctive “waves” of fandom studies since the 1980s. The author elaborates that the first wave consisted of focusing on the derogatory practice of fandom for a worthy cause. The second wave had a more sociological perspective and it explored how hierarchies of fans are mirrored through the expansion of the internet and new media. The focus was more on the social and cultural world. The third wave has now emerged to evaluate how fandom is part of our day-to-day lives to capture insights into modern life.

The concept of fan has travelled from "leisure and passive" to "enthusiastic participant". In the era of traditional media apparently, fan loyalty was evaluated based on consumption of media content but in the presence of new media not only participatory
culture has been developed but new elements are emerging for fans to be connected, gathering in fan conventions and above all recreation or reproducing the content of their ideal celebrities. Fandom has become a vital analytical tool in the ever-changing digital world. Fans are utilizing their technological skills, communal intelligence, individual knowledge, and skills to socially interact (Booth, 2010).

In recent times the worldwide rise of Korean popular media content known as K-pop has also played an exemplary role in shaping a new definition of "being a fan". K-pop refers to a genre of popular music with origins in Korea. Collectively, the term Hallyu is referred to a Korean popular culture phenomenon that got a trend in South Asia and China in the late 1990s (Bok-Rae, 2015). From east to west Hallyu has changed the perspective of Korea for the world (Lee, 2015). K-pop music includes hip-hop, R&B, rock, jazz, folk, disco and country, etc. (Sun, 2022). Seo Taiji and the Boys in 1992 emerged as resulting in a quantum leap. This was the first group that introduced rap and hip-hop to South Korean popular music (Lie, 2012).

The transformation of media content in Korean industry is quantitative and gradual but it can also be considered a qualitative jump. The success of K-pop is based on the development and effective strategies of the entertainment industry. Secondly, Social media rise has provided multiple options for reaching and broadening global audiences (Sun, 2022).

K-pop has involved and glued their fans with idols with multiple tactics and their strategies have been developing at a fast pace to retain their group's loyalty. The most visible strategy is the implementation of a participatory approach. K-pop fandom starts from the consumption of Korean content and leads to enthusiastic involvement and participation to make their favourite idols successful and popular. The process of involvement and participation has different intervening factors that result in individual to societal changes. Changes in social identities, purchase behaviours, speaking patterns, and bringing differences in beauty concepts make fans realize that every minor change in their attitude and behaviour matters as they are getting closer to their idols by doing what is endorsed.

In these contexts, this study is to explore and understand the practices of K-pop fans in terms of their content consumption and participatory approach. The study aims to identify the various ways in which K-pop fans engage with the genre and how their practices have evolved. Specifically, the study seeks to investigate the role of fan communities and social media in shaping fan practices, as well as how fans consume and participate in K-pop content.

**Research Method**

Through the systematic review research method, the K-pop fans' practices from content consumption to a participatory approach have been identified, evaluated, and synthesized. The research presents a comprehensive and unbiased summary of the current knowledge of K-pop fans' practices. The paper provides a detailed analysis of the various ways in which K-pop fans engage with the genre and how their practices have evolved. The paper starts by discussing the history of K-pop and its global rise in popularity. The study then delves into the different ways in which K-pop fans consume and participate in the genre, including listening to music, watching music videos, attending concerts, and interacting with other fans online. They also discuss the various online platforms and communities that K-pop fans use to connect and share their opinion and love for the genre. The findings of the study are presented in a clear and organized manner, with different themes and patterns that emerged from the literature including content creation and reproduction, purchase intentions, social grouping and community, para-social relationships (Affective connections), learning Korean language, culture learning, competitive performativity, social identities, and concepts of beauty. The systematic review of the existing literature provides a comprehensive and nuanced analysis of the topic. The
research presents a strong case for the importance of understanding fan practices to better understand pop culture's phenomenon in terms of content consumption to participation approach.

Findings and Discussion
From the systematic review of the literature, the following themes have been extracted that present an insightful discussion and findings in terms of fan practices from content consumption to participatory approach.

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Content Creation and Reproduction

K-pop marketing strategies for pushing fans to consume and recreate content have an exceptional level in the media industry and are considered the future of content and marketing. K-pop fans eagerly wait for every next update by their idols to appear on social media. Different fandoms have separate attitudinal and behavioural levels similarly K-pop fans can also be categorized based on their enthusiasm intensity.

A study by Sun (2020) established and categorized K-pop fan labour into three main forms specialized labour, managerial labour, and unskilled labour. Fan's creativity, knowledge and skills are related to specialized labour. As a result of specialized labour products such as images, videos, and idol performances are released online or offline by fans. In managerial labour, fans promote their idols by organizing events and assisting fan members. Celebrating idols' birthdays and anniversaries in local cafes is one of the examples. Unskilled labour involves watching videos frequently and voting for idols through different polls.

What gives success to K-pop is the category of specialized labourers who have the capacity for valuable actions to recreate and reproduce content. Data presented by Jenol and Pazil (2020) established that now fans are active producers and content creators which denies the concept of fans as a passive entity.

The digital revolution and blurring lines between producers and consumers have created a symbiotic relationship between media corporations and their fans. This gives rise to new ventures of cultural production (Pearson, 2010). Producers need a complete understanding of the operational working of fan groups and knowledge about what they value. This will enable producers to ensure enjoyable fan experiences and bring loyalty to their media text (McCudden, 2011).

Purchase Intentions

Intention to purchase is a behavioural tendency that might result in purchasing a particular product (Hui & Zhou, 2002). Purchase of goods recommended by fans' idols or products comprised of their pictures, signatures, or videos may be considered as showing loyalty to the idol. A range of products like souvenirs, mugs, and keychains are purchased to have a collection of their idol's pictures. Most of such products do not require customers but they are kept as a collection. In research related to purchasing behaviours of K-pop idol goods, Kim et al.
(2018) conclude that fans work hard more if they identify their favourite idols, the more their income is the more they invest in the purchase of idols-related goods. Regarding post-buying behaviours, authors reveal that fans are more inclined to store the products rather than use them.

Soft power strategies are the source of bringing up a country’s image in the eyes of fans. Celebrities with a large fan following are utilized for image building of a nation that eventually helps in economic progress. According to Sun and Jun (2022), attitude towards a country has a positive impact on purchase intentions for a country’s products. Therefore, the favourable attitudes of Chinese fans led to a strong willingness to buy Korean products too.

Motivations to purchase products on endorsement by idols may vary for different fans depending on their economic class level and independence to spend money. Online membership fees, tickets to attend concerts, or buying DVDs are some of the purchase examples that are influenced by their idol worship and emotional attachment. Fans gain satisfaction and comfort by collecting merchandise of their idols supported by them.

Social Grouping and Community
A human prefers to live in communities and groups to fill biological and sociological needs. Groups are formed according to the hierarchy level of needs of individuals. Having similar interests in content and development and of desire to share ideas on that interest helps to form fan’s social groups and communities. People need platforms to confirm their internal social identities by comparing them with the masses. Becoming a member of a fan community is a free choice but different pressures (like peer pressure) and behavioural tendencies result in being forced to be part of a fan community. From traditional non-digital groups to digital and social media groups development dynamics of fan engagement have changed.

MAROS and BASEK (2022) evaluated K-pop fans’ participation through social media and found that K-pop fans tend to use social media networks as a platform for their activities. In recent years fans have developed online communities for connections which are called fandoms.

The outcome of becoming part of an 'in group' is apparently to show loyalty towards their idols and participate in their success journey. Fans abide by unwritten laws and rules of that group for cooperation. Kang et al. (2022) defined K-pop fans as active collaborators with each other and elaborated that the motivation behind these collaborations is to promote mutual help. This help is considered effective for the success of K-pop music bands.

There are multiple choices of online communities for K-pop fans. These communities offer news, chats, updates, and activities for the interest of their fans. Geographically separated, individuals face difficulty to know about people who may be closer based on their shared interests. This is where such online platforms help to discover fellow fans and develop strong bonds with them. Malik and Haidar (2020) explored a Twitter-based online K-pop fan community and found that the members of K-Pop Stan Twitter have formed interpersonal bonds with each other, they communicate with each other on a regular basis and have created a close-knit online community where fans share and contribute to their capacities.

Social media fan networking has defined fandom to its core from a transcultural perspective. Border crossing fandoms due to social media availability ignite interest in fan objects. Analyzing the Transcultural fandom of the Korean Wave in Latin America Min et al. (2019) described that the social-cultural intimacy of K-pop fans in Chile and Latin America is specific to social media. K-pop creates affinity spaces through different social media networks.

Para-Social Relationships (Affective Connections)
Parasocial relationships are considered one-sided relationships from a fan for their
idealized celebrity or idol. The idols may sense their collective popularity by their fan groups but are unable to know the level of intimacy of individual fans. They have a behavioural tendency to invest time, money, and energy to maintain this relationship. According to Hills (2015) as cited by (McLaren, 2017) fan’s emotional attachment to their idols works like a ‘glue’ to maintain fan communities. In such communities, para-social relationships are like social currency to maintain exchanges and group affiliations.

A para-social relationship psychologically is having a resemblance to real-world interpersonal relations. Para-social relationships may start from the consumption of favourite idol content and prolong after the development of enthusiastic liking. The process of para-social relationship development is considered both conscious and unconscious activity. Souders (2022) in a qualitative content analysis of We Verse, YouTube, and V Live comments concluded that many posts show fans longing for real-world relationships with their idols. Such relationships range from friendship to intimacy. The research also concluded that such interactions are developed better due to the availability of social media networks.

Despite hard work in music production K-pop celebrities get time to acknowledge their fans for support. Take the example of BTS (Bangtan Sonyeondan, a popular Korean music group that broke the record for highest viewership for a YouTube premiere) fans who are titled as ‘Army’ have a group identity based on this notion. A specific title may help to develop more strong affiliation and bonding with idols. Elfving-Hwang (2018) describes the position occupied by a celebrity in the modern Korean mediascape. According to the author of the book celebrity is an entity of both consumption and para-social interaction. This results in imagining the celebrity as a ‘Para-social Kin.’

K-pop idols and fan relationships are interesting and innovative to study. K-pop idols send messages in fan chat rooms to create a direct communication feeling among fan members as Reynolds (2022) explores the relationship of media consumers from the perspective of social media. The study highlights that through social media audiences are directly addressed by celebrities or influencers. They share content with consumers that provoke the audience to follow influencers and develop para-social relationships with them.

### Learning the Korean language

To be a K-pop fan learning the Korean language is not a requirement. Starting learning from a single word is taken as a small victory and each step of enhancement brings satisfaction for learners. Touhami and Al-Haq (2017) have studied the influence of language on K-pop international fans and their intention to learn the Korean language. Researchers revealed that fans start speaking Korean words in their daily lives, and use English words with adapted Hallyu meanings and it leads to the practice of saving phone contacts with perfect Korean terms of kinship. They start sharing linguistically odd jokes that are shared by their idols, use proverbs, and with the passage of time they start adopting English sounds with different pronunciations.

K-pop songs are presented with English and Chinese subtitles to make them understandable to an extent by content consumers. If the content is presented with supporting translations, it instantly provokes one to see a word in different languages. This ultimately urges fans to learn the Korean language. Kim (2022) conducted research to consider transnational multimodal practices of students in America who use webtoon apps that display Korean webcomics. The research concluded that young adults do not read webtoons with the intention to get pleasure instead their goal is to improve their Korean language skills and to know about Korean culture. K-pop is a cultural item developed through cultural and linguistic perspectives (Yoon, 2018).

Efforts to learn the Korean language to understand songs and participate with the fan community using the Korean language might not be an ordinary activity and easy to get on
stage. If a fan watches content having translations in Korean and English languages it may be considered an unconscious activity by a fan while using different apps for regular learning is a deliberate effort. Aisyah (2017) has researched related to Korean-English language translational action of K-Pop in terms of social media content taking a case study of BTS (Bangtan Sonyeondan’s) Twitter account. The author elaborates that in social media presence, users belong to different cultural and linguistic backgrounds and translation output might be different from the source of the text. The findings of the research highlighted the cognitive process to learn a foreign language as fan followers try to find alternative ways to get translated text from different Twitter accounts.

A previous study conducted by Sughra et al. (2022) focusing on the linguistic influence of the Korean wave concluded that K-media provokes fans to use linguistic gestures. 62% of the selected sample agreed with this notion. 58.3% had experienced a shift in ways of their communication. Another interesting finding indicated that 66% of the sample agreed that they use the Korean language unconsciously in their private thoughts.

Continuous exposure to a particular language might have long-term effects on thought processes, gestures, and communication patterns. The process of settlement of foreign language seems to have unconscious effort but this settlement brings multiple cultural traits also.

Culture Learning

While considering different aspects of persuasion and influence K-pop music industry is also trying to be struck audiences with the beautiful, mesmerizing, and colourful side of Korea. Hallyu is the term used to represent Korean culture as a whole. A combination of traditional and modern Korean culture is presented in Korean media content. Culture is diffused through multiple platforms and strategies and one of the important elements to spread a country’s culture is people-to-people connection. The K-pop industry also emphasized strong communication strategies among fans and celebrities to develop a positive image of Korean culture among the masses.

Jang and Song (2017) have studied the influence of K-pop on increasing cultural content and evaluated K-pop participatory efforts for enhancing cultural contacts among local areas and Korea. Concluding interviews with fan’s club administrator’s researcher defined that person-to-person connections among the local public result in a motivation for participating in Korean culture and K-pop. These connections also bring favorability to Korea as a country.

Among the most popular works for contributing to spreading Korean culture seem to be entertainment-based genres. A dedicated and loyal fan is naturally interested to know the whereabouts of his idol and while having a look at his idol's affiliations cultural elements intervene to be learned silently. To some extent, an adaptation of different cultures is an outcome of social media usage by K-pop fans as it provides an opportunity to reach globalized audiences having different cultural traits to share.

Taking the case of Korean artist Psy’s viral video Gangnam Style, Xu (2017) studied the early stage of cultural diffusion based on social media. The researcher studied the characteristics of YouTube users including semantics and sentiments expressed in comments of users. Young and males were more in number and had domination over the early stages of diffusion. It was concluded through semantic analysis that the majority of commenters had an interest in the national cultural origin of the video.

Competitive Performativity

Digitalization had an impact on the promotional and participatory role of K-pop fandom. A number of researches are ongoing to study practices and beliefs of competitive performativity. The phenomenon of competitive performativity among K-pop members is bringing up loyalty for fans' idols
and they need to retain their good fan identity as well.

While discussing Competitive performativity in Korean Pop fandom Tinaliga (2018) found in a research study that avenues of competition are beneficial to serve their idol groups and make them successful in the best possible way. These acts of competition result in the enhancement of the fandom's good image. The researcher argues that fans have a feeling of accountability and they have a say in the success of their idols and this quantifiable measure is the reason for the sustainability of the K-pop industry.

Competitive performativity is beneficial for an idol's success and support from fans in different capacities ensures an increase in the popularity of K-pop groups. However, there are some dark sides too. Fans not only support, like, or admire their idols but create hatred against opponent fan groups. Having access to digital platforms it is easier for them to create rivalry and enhance hate speech. SAVIRA et al. (2021) have studied competitive performativity leading to toxicity among fans. Researchers have used the term “Fan war” as fans defend their idols and denounce other idols. The study was conducted on Indonesian K-pop teenage fans using Twitter. The research concluded that three triggers are the reason for the competitive performativity of K-pop fans including competition, ignited emotion, and fake fans & solo stand fans.

Social Identities

Understanding the concept of self for an individual is of vital importance to know about particular abilities, perceptions, and characteristics. It makes us understand ‘who’ we are. Self-actualization is a source to know about one’s identity. When it comes to social identity it is taken as how we see ourselves in the presence of any social group or community.

Social identity is not a fixed phenomenon it depends on the setting of the specific intergroup in which we find ourselves (McNamara, 1997). Socially human beings consider different traits while communicating as race, gender, religion, or national origin.

K-pop fan identity can be evaluated based on their speaking patterns, dressing, sense of belonging, and socialization aspects among the K-pop community. Chin and Morimoto (2013) as cited by McLaren and Dal Yong (2020) define that transcultural fan identities permit the interrogation of contexts and identities that are developed beyond the category of the nation. It acknowledges and accepts subjective experiences and the construction of a fan's emotional investment in popular culture.

In an era of digitalization concept of digitalized identity has to be understood separately. Real-time identity and social media identity may differ for fan communities. There might be a difference between the actual self and self-presentation to others. Purwaningtyas and Oktara (2023) found that fans or role players of K-pop create an account by using the name and identity of their favourite idol and use it to have conversations with other fans or role-players. This phenomenon is interesting to understand and raises a question concerning the social identity of fans who are using the veil of their idols.

Williams (2016) believes that the Music fan ‘self’ is continuously developing having complex social processes exist including representation on mass media to interpersonal and intrapersonal conversations. K-pop fans have a shared identity sense and a specific popular youth culture status. However, they have experienced negative media portrayals and this behaviour of deviant fans has stigmatized the social identity of K-pop fans.

Concepts of Beauty

The term aegyo is used to define a ‘cute’ style in K-pop society (Streng, 2018). K-pop has successfully defined new concepts of beauty for its fan groups. Fans enjoy the incomparable aesthetics of K-pop idols. Beauty has always been a source to develop attraction of fans. From admiration of idols to step in desire of becoming like an idol is undoubtedly obvious. A lot of investment is done to enhance the
overall package of attraction with beauty standards. According to Yoon (2018) cute images of K-pop idols are designed by Korean entertainment agencies through different marketing platforms like TV variety shows and stage performances.

According to Stephen Epstein with James Turnbull as cited by Lee (2016) ‘Korean popular music is driven by the visual’. The researcher elaborates that K-pop idols’ “looks” are managed by entertainment companies and then commodified along with music and dance. It is promoted as a package for the international audience.

Most of the Korean boys' and girls' music groups demonstrate ideal body images, and unrealistic social aspirations to achieve (Laurie, 2016). To be like an idol and follow a set beauty standard a fan does physical efforts from hair styling to dressing and body fitness. A perfect body figure displayed in music videos may bring complexity among content consumers.

Siswanti (2014) in research to understand the phenomenon of the body in consumer culture selected K-pop popular songs for analysis. The study discovered that songs have embodied the body concept in the consumer culture. As the body is considered a vehicle of interest so the body must have full energy with a young and beautiful look. It must present fitness and fun as well.

Tresna et al. (2021) In an analysis to determine the relationship between celebrity idealization and body image among female adolescents having K-pop girls as their idols researcher describes that K-pop girl groups have set ideal body standards. A perfect nose, white skin colour, and slim smart body are some of the traits for fans to adore and create a desire to become like their idols.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, the practices of K-pop fans in terms of their content consumption and participatory approach are complex and multifaceted. This study, however, explored the various ways in which K-pop fans engage with the genre, from listening to music and watching music videos to participating in fan communities online. The role of fan communities and social media in shaping fan practices has also been highlighted, as has the evolution of fan practices over time. Conceptualizing the phenomena with a growing body of existing literature, the fan content consumption to participatory approach has been used to explain the active and participatory nature of K-pop fandom, emphasizing the importance of fans in shaping the practices and culture of the genre. The study recognizes that fans are not just passive consumers of content, however, are also active contributors to the creation and dissemination of that content.

The study further concludes from reviewing the literature about K-pop content consumption leading to a participatory approach by K-pop fans, the K-pop industry has developed new and unique strategies to hold their fans loyal. Korean content appearance since the 1990s till date has seen different reasons for popularity. K-pop has utilized OTT (Over the top) platforms for reaching millions of fans. The digital media boom changed the concept of fans and has allowed providing platforms for the active participation of fans in different capacities. Shifts from fandoms to digital fandoms have drawn a new picture of the fan world and its community. A digitized fan has different psycho-social needs to be connected to his idols. What makes him a fan is dependent upon his performance in participation at online fan community platforms. A fan has travelled a journey from consumer to prosumer to show enthusiasm for their idols. K-pop fans have developed bonding not only with idols but with their fan communities and interest groups too. A K-pop fan possesses an interest in learning the Korean language, knowing Korean culture, recreating K-pop content, buying K-pop idols-related products, getting an identity being a K-pop fan, and following standards of beauty defined by their idols. These are some of the consuming and participating practices of K-pop fans however the motivations behind such practices may vary for fans depending on their
psychological, social, cultural, and economic status.

Overall, this research contributes to the growing body of literature on fan practices and fandom and highlights the importance of understanding fan practices to better understand the cultural significance of popular culture. K-pop fandom is a dynamic and active community, and this research paper provides a nuanced exploration of the practices of its fans, highlighting their engagement with the genre and the role they play in shaping its culture and practices.

K-pop may be taken as a successful case study with impressive strategies to get connected to the targeted audiences and utilize their enthusiastic energies for image building of Korean idols, products, and above all country.
Reference


