

# The Phenomenon of Youthfulness in the Export of Korean Wave Culture

Ziyu Li

*College of Movie and Media, Sichuan Normal University, Chengdu, Sichuan, China*

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**Abstract:** The spread of Korean Wave culture has attracted widespread attention. During the process, the phenomenon of youthfulness needs paying attention to. This article will talk about what the phenomenon of youthfulness is, the cause and impacts of it, and how to deal with the problems caused by it. The research has found that the phenomenon of youthfulness is mainly reflected in three aspects: the age, the style, and the development pattern of idols. Its causes are closely related to the expansion of the Korean entertainment market and the saturation of idol groups. The research has shown that this phenomenon has a profound impact on the personal development of idols, fan groups, and social culture, and requires joint efforts from various aspects such as the regulations of the industry, the appropriate conduct of the companies, and the supervision from the public and the media.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

With the increasing integration of the global economy, policies, and cultures, emerging global cultures can be regarded as the products of the continuous advancement of globalization (Moskowitz, 2009). In the context of globalization, the cross-cultural spread of popular culture has become an important area of cultural research. Studies show that the Korean Wave culture has spread globally through forms like music, TV dramas, movies, and variety shows. Its unique dissemination strategies and influencing factors have made it a crucial part of global popular culture (Jian, 2024; Wang, 2020).

In recent years, the Korean Wave culture has spread rapidly around the world and become a significant cultural phenomenon. Notably, the phenomenon of targeting a younger audience in the export of Korean Wave culture stands out.

The adolescence of idols means that the age at which idols debut is gradually getting lower, and there are even underage idols. This phenomenon is especially prominent in the Korean Wave culture. Many members of idol groups start receiving professional training during their teenage years or even childhood, and officially debut in their early teens. The phenomenon of youthfulness of idols in K-

pop is particularly striking.

The phenomenon of youthfulness is not only related to the age, style, and nurturing model of idols, but also closely tied to the expansion of the Korean entertainment market and the saturation of idol groups. This phenomenon impacts not only the individual development of idols but also has far-reaching effects on fan communities and social culture.

The phenomenon of youthfulness in the export of Korean Wave culture has emerged as a significant topic in global popular culture research. Some scholars have thoroughly explored the phenomenon of Korean child idols, pointing out that this phenomenon is the outcome of the convergence between the K-pop industry and the internet celebrity industry. Entertainment companies, as revealed, turn children into "younger versions" of K-pop idols through in-house training systems, and carefully shape their social media images with the help of influencer agencies and parents (Lee, 2024). Quite a few researchers have also analyzed the causes of the low-age trend among media idol groups, indicating that the development of the fan economy is a major driving force behind the younger age of idols (Li, 2019). However, current research in this area is scarce and mainly focuses on aspects such as media dissemination.

This study aims to explore the phenomenon of

idol youthfulness in the export of Korean Wave culture from a cross-cultural perspective. Drawing on sociology, communication theories, as well as the concepts of globalization and localization of popular culture, it deeply analyzes the causes of idol youthfulness and its long-term effects on minors and fan groups. The study also delves into the dissemination mechanisms of Korean Wave culture within different cultural contexts, uncovering its cross-cultural communication strategies and impact mechanisms in the era of globalization. Moreover, based on these findings, this study will put forward practical policy suggestions for protecting the rights and interests of underage idols, thus promoting the healthy and sustainable development of Korean Wave culture.

## 2 RESEARCH METHODS AND DATA COLLECTION

This study uses a combination of questionnaire surveys, in-depth interviews, and content analysis to comprehensively analyze the youthfulness phenomenon in the export of Korean Wave culture.

### 2.1 Questionnaire

The study was carried out with the Korean pop idols' fan group as the main audience and designed questions around the phenomenon, causes, and impacts of the youthfulness of Korean pop idols. The aim is to obtain feedback on the youthfulness phenomenon from fan groups with different levels of attention to Korean entertainment through the survey results.

The questionnaire was distributed via social media channels and 200 valid questionnaires were collected. This questionnaire includes respondents of different age groups and genders, providing a diverse data foundation for the study. Therefore, the sample selection for this survey is somewhat objective and is of great significance for data organization and analysis.

### 2.2 In-Depth Interview

Based on the data and the way that questions were represented in the questionnaire, this study selected four group representatives for interviews. Representatives include Korean entertainment fans, especially underage fans, and their parents. Based on the opinions of different groups on the youthfulness

of Korean pop idols, this research designed relevant open-ended questions and communicated with each interviewee for about half an hour online to understand their perception and views on the youthfulness of Korean pop idols.

The interview outline is designed based on the cultural cycle theory and adjusted according to the actual situation. It adopts a semi-structured interview approach, encouraging interviewees to share more information. At the same time, it also provides important reference for enriching and improving research conclusions, as well as for subsequent strategy formulation and practical application.

In addition, in terms of collecting relevant information, this study has obtained many relevant reports, comments, and data reports through some mainstream domestic websites (such as People's Daily Online, CNKI, etc.) and streaming media (such as Bilibili, etc.).

## 3 THE MANIFESTATION OF YOUTHFULNESS PHENOMENON

In the commercial operation of the Korean Wave, the media image of idols is often influenced by economic marketing needs, exhibiting tendencies such as "exaggeration" and "illusion" (Bao, 2023). Young idols, who are continuously produced by the market, are particularly vulnerable to these effects. This phenomenon not only has the potential to misguide fan communities and trigger negative social repercussions but also damage the reputation of idols themselves and their affiliated companies.

### 3.1 Youthfulness in Terms of Age

The most direct manifestation of youthfulness in the export of Korean Wave culture is the continuous decrease in the debut age of idols. The universality of young idols has made them a "cultural symbol" in the global market. Teenagers have a natural affinity that can transcend cultural differences, and their appearance, vitality, and youthful traits are more easily accepted by the global teenage community. This global standardization strategy quickly spreads globally through digital platforms, forming a "viral spread" (Lee, 2024).

According to the survey, more than half of the respondents believe that the trend of youthfulness among Korean entertainment idols is obvious, while the rest also expressed some awareness of it. This

phenomenon is not only becoming increasingly common in South Korea, but also emerged as a trend in the export of Korean Wave culture. Many overseas fans have gradually become accustomed to younger idol images. An interviewee mentioned, "Now the four major entertainment companies are in a rush, and the age limit for trainees is getting lower--some are under 18, and some are even under 15".

### 3.2 Youthfulness in Terms of Style

The youthfulness of style is mainly reflected in the stage performances and image-shaping of idols.

The media image of idols should convey positive values and behavioral norms (Bao, 2023). For young idols, it is essential to convey a sense of youthfulness and adolescent charm that aligns with their age, as well as positive values and energy. At the same time, excessive emphasis on appearance and packaging should be avoided, with a focus on the true display of talent and individuality. Although the average age of some active idols has already reached 18, companies, in pursuit of aesthetic trends and to meet market demands, often push idols to present an exaggerated or unusual media image in variety shows or music videos.

In the music video of a Korean girl group, members often appear in a youthful image, wearing pink and white puffy dresses, paired with lace headscarves and white socks, creating a "youthful" visual effect. This style deliberately emphasizes the innocence and fragility of young girls and even pushes the members' images towards "childishness" and "pettiness" through light, shadow, and camera language.

The "pale, young and slim" style is not an isolated phenomenon but is rooted in the psychological concept of "infant schema" in East Asian culture. People's positive reactions to the infant-like features, such as affection and protective desires, are utilized by the entertainment industry as a commercial aesthetic strategy, attracting fans' emotional projection through the image of childishness.

From a global perspective, music videos with a childlike style have attracted the attention of fans worldwide through streaming media platforms such as TikTok and YouTube. The youthful characteristic of this style possesses a cross-cultural universality, enabling it to quickly resonate with teenagers. However, this dissemination also brings the risk of cultural homogenization, which may lead to the singularity of idol images and market saturation. This style also reflects the self-deprecation of women under the influence of consumerism, limiting the

definition of "beauty" to a sense of childishness and exacerbating the singularity of aesthetics. This trend may lead to a decrease in innovation in Korean Wave culture.

### 3.3 Youthfulness of Trainees

The hybridization theory of popular culture emphasizes that in the context of globalization, culture is no longer single or homogeneous, but integrates and interacts with multiple cultural elements. The phenomenon of youthfulness in the export of Korean Wave culture is a concrete manifestation of this cultural hybridization. The core of the cultivation model is to emphasize the full participation of fans in the idol's growth process, from idol selection and training to career development after debut, fans always play an essential role.

The trainee system of Korean entertainment companies is a typical representative of this phenomenon. The company has introduced the cultivation model of the Japanese entertainment industry and combined it with the advantages of the Korean entertainment industry to create a unique cultivation idol culture. Through the company's art and cultural education, trainees gradually become mature idols by learning how to adopt specific facial expressions and behavioral styles (Han, 2018).

Entertainment companies transform the "plasticity" of young idols into market advantages. According to a survey, nearly 85% of respondents believe that the main reason why Korean entertainment companies launch young idols is to "explore and cultivate potential new talents, establish long-term cooperation, and meet fans' love for the cultivation system."

However, this model also brings many problems. Entertainment companies are constantly recruiting young trainees and paying more attention to their youthfulness, resulting in a shortened debut period for trainees. Young idols feel pressured physically and mentally during high-intensity training and work, and fans form a high degree of emotional connection and consumption motivation through their deep participation in the idol's growth process, indirectly guiding the lowering ages of fan culture, thus affecting fans' values and behavior patterns.

## 4 THE CAUSES OF YOUTHFULNESS PHENOMENON

The causes of the youthfulness of Korean entertainment idols can be analyzed from multiple aspects.

Firstly, the phenomenon of youthfulness in the export of Korean Wave culture is to some extent caused by market saturation. The Korean Wave culture has been spreading to other Asian countries since 1997 under the promotion of the South Korean government. At that time, it was the period of economic liberalization in countries such as China, and until the early 21st century, the Korean Wave was mainly popular in Asia. However, it gradually penetrated the global market in 2010. However, it gradually penetrated the global market in 2010. With the local culture, including popular culture and digital technology, the main dimensions of Korean Wave culture have undergone significant changes, becoming one of the most extensive non-Western cultural products. Korean Wave culture quickly entered the field of vision of these countries by taking this opportunity (Jin, 2007).

In the process of propagation, due to the saturation of the market, entertainment companies must constantly innovate to ensure that their industries can develop in the reverse propagation of pop culture globalization. The expansion of the global youth consumption market is the direct driving force for youthfulness. Young people have a stronger sense of identification and immersion in their peers' idols. The entertainment industry accurately captures this demand through the novelty and plasticity of young idols and accelerates this trend through the global dissemination of digital platforms.

Furthermore, the cultivation mode of Korean Wave idols significantly contributes to the youthfulness of idols. The cultivation system of Korean Wave idols includes trainee system and management company operation mode. Management companies extend the career lifespan of idols by nurturing and packaging them from a young age. From an economic perspective, the long-term cultivation costs of young idols are lower, and the trainee system in the form of "raising" can enhance the loyalty of fans and form a stable consumer group. The Korean Wave, led by Korean pop music, has expanded from its original scope to the United States, Europe, and Russia, with its influence continuing to grow (Cho, 2019). In research on the Korean Wave, some scholars believe that it is another type of

hybridization of popular culture, originating from the dominant mode of cultural flows in developed countries (Kim, 2018). During its dissemination, it integrates Western popular culture (such as hip-hop and electronic music) with traditional aesthetics in certain regions of East Asia (such as the "pale, youthful, and slim" image), forming a unique hybridization phenomenon. By combining the standardized production of the Western entertainment industry with East Asian aesthetic preferences, a distinctive idol production mechanism has been formed to meet the global market's demand for novelty and youthfulness.

In addition, the cross-cultural dissemination of Korean Wave culture has a profound impact on the youthfulness of idols. The spread and integration of the Korean Wave across different cultural backgrounds have promoted the development of idol youthfulness, and the influence of Korean Wave culture on the global cultural market has laid a market foundation for idol youthfulness. The success of the Korean Wave in the European and American markets has attracted a large number of international fans. Younger idols, with their unique charm and novelty, are more likely to gain market recognition, reflecting the convergence of cultural consumption in the context of globalization.

## 5 THE MULTIDIMENSIONAL IMPACT OF THE PHENOMENON OF IDOL YOUTHFULNESS

The phenomenon of idol youthfulness in the export of Korean Wave culture has not only had a profound impact on the personal development of idols, fan groups, and social culture, but also triggered many ethical dilemmas and industrial conflicts.

### 5.1 The Impact on the Personal Development of Idols

The phenomenon of youthfulness in the export of Korean Wave culture has had a significant impact on individual idols. Due to the uncertainty of their careers, economic instability, and relentless pressure from constant evaluations, young trainees face issues such as physical and mental exhaustion and a lack of education amidst high-intensity training and work schedules, as they are prioritized to receive "professional training" (Lee, 2024). This not only puts stress on the idols' physical and mental health but

may also affect their long-term development.

The average level of cultural quality and stage strength of young idols is gradually declining. According to the award results of the Mnet Asian Music Awards in the past two years, emerging idol groups have not achieved the level of success corresponding to their popularity, but rather, experienced groups from the Korean entertainment industry continue to receive honors.

The survey results show that most people believe that the phenomenon of youthfulness can cause negative impacts on the individuals themselves. These include "significant psychological pressure, affecting physical and mental health", as well as "disrupting academic performance, leading to insufficient knowledge reserves. Respondents also stated that "early exposure to the entertainment industry can foster utilitarian psychology", and the potential risks to their personal development cannot be ignored.

## 5.2 The Impact on Group Aesthetics

Idols, as a significant component of the entertainment industry, establish strong sub-social relationships with their fans, which affects the attitudes and behaviors of fans to some extent (Ilhan F, 2024). Based on this, the phenomenon of idols' youthfulness may raise concerns about the group aesthetic orientation and have an impact on social values.

Moreover, the cultivation mode of young idols may also trigger competition and comparison among fans, shifting the focus away from talent and towards the age and appearance of the idols. Data collected from the survey indicates a predominant belief that "idol youthfulness" leads to fans' aesthetic deviation and promotes the pursuit of images that are inappropriate for their age. Therefore, over-reliance on youthfulness templates not only affects aesthetic alienation but may also lead to repetitive creations, further weakening cultural diversity and sparking debates over "aesthetic fatigue".

This phenomenon not only affects the long-term attractiveness of Korean Wave culture but may also negatively impact on the diversity of global youth culture. This aesthetic trend may decrease the innovation of Korean Wave culture, further influencing its competitiveness in the global market.

## 5.3 The Impact on the Social Entertainment and Cultural Industry

On the one hand, the emergence of young idols has

invigorated the dissemination of Korean Wave culture and promoted the globalization of popular culture. Respondents noted, "The long-term impact is positive. It will still be energetic and interesting in the next generations."

On the other hand, based on the sub-social relationships established between idols and fans, the phenomenon of idols' youthfulness may raise concerns about the consumption of "underage culture" in society and have an impact on social values.

Furthermore, the surge of young idols could lead to vicious competition within the industry, a decrease of idols, cultural differences in regional markets, and a reverse effect on the dissemination of Korean Wave culture due to policy restrictions. This phenomenon not only affects the acceptance of Korean Wave culture in the Asian market but also poses challenges to the sustainable development of the entertainment industry, ultimately impacting the sustainable development of Korean Wave culture.

## 6 CONCLUSION

This study focuses on the phenomenon of idol youthfulness in the export of Korean Wave culture, reveals its causes, and analyzes its profound impact on the personal development of idols, fan groups, and social culture.

The research reveals that the youthfulness of Korean Wave idols is manifested by a decrease in debut age, the maturity of stage styles, and the risks of cultural homogenization and market saturation caused by the idol training mode. The contributing factors include the expansion of the Korean entertainment market, saturation of idol groups, and the promotion of cross-cultural communication. The study fills the gaps in existing research regarding cross-cultural depth and the protection of underage idols' rights. It argues that this phenomenon imposes physical, mental, and academic pressure on the personal development of idols, causes aesthetic deviation and mental health problems to fan groups, and may lead to vicious competition in the industry and damage to cultural sustainability in social culture.

Based on this, entertainment agencies and relevant institutions should establish and strengthen policies and regulations to protect underage idols, ensuring their physical and mental health and normal education. The Korean Wave industry should emphasize cultural diversity and innovation in its dissemination, and avoid excessive commercialization in the cultivation of young idols.

Simultaneously, efforts should be made to educate fans and adolescents, guiding them to establish correct values and aesthetic standards, while enhancing media literacy. This study provides a new perspective for understanding the mechanism of Korean Wave culture dissemination, as well as theoretical support and policy recommendations for the development of related fields.

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