

Digital Escapism: Exploring the Role of Being K-Pop Fans for Young Adult Women

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore how digital escape through K-pop serves as a coping mechanism for young adult women facing stress and personal challenges. Using content analysis and in-depth interviews with five female participants aged 20 to 25, this study focuses on individual experiences in accessing K-pop content, interacting in online communities, and developing hobbies related to K-pop, such as fan art and fan fiction. This research employs Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory as its theoretical framework, with an emphasis on the levels of love and belonging and self-esteem. The findings reveal that engagement in the K-pop world provides a safe and supportive space for participants to express themselves, build their identities, and receive emotional support online. This study highlights how popular culture and the digital context can function as significant coping mechanisms in the daily lives of young adult women. This study contributes to contemporary cultural studies and psychology by demonstrating that the K-pop world can serve as an alternative space for fulfilling the emotional and psychological needs of young adult women.

Keywords: Coping Mechanism, Digital Escapism, K-Pop

INTRODUCTION

In today's digital age, access to various forms of entertainment has become increasingly easy and instantaneous. One form of entertainment that has experienced a surge in popularity globally is K-pop (Korean pop) music. The K-pop phenomenon is not only a product of Korean culture but has also formed a global community connected through social media and digital platforms. Amid the pressures of daily life, particularly among young adult women, engagement with the K-pop world has evolved beyond mere music consumption into a form of digital escapism.

Digital escapism refers to an individual's act of escaping from reality through digital media as a form of relaxation, emotional diversion, and even the fulfillment of unmet psychological needs in the real world. Activities such as watching music videos, following entertainment content like variety shows, or engaging in fan communities have become one of the ways many individuals alleviate emotional stress. In this context, K-pop provides a safe and supportive space for young women seeking a place to channel their emotions, build their identity, and form social relationships.

Based on Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory (1943), human needs consist of several levels, starting from physiological needs to self-actualization. This study specifically focuses on the psychological needs level, namely love and belonging and self-esteem. Through the experiences of the participants interviewed, this study aims to understand how involvement in K-pop fandom can help them fulfill these needs and how this digital escape functions as a coping mechanism in dealing with academic, social, and emotional pressures.

To conduct this research, the writer selected several relevant previous studies as references. The first study related to this article is Laffan's (2021) study, "Positive Psychological Outcomes and Fanship in K-Pop Fans: A Social Identity Theory Perspective." It examines the advantages that K-pop fans experience from the standpoint of social identity theory. According to this study, belonging to a K-pop fan community can enhance emotional health and foster a sense of social connection. The focus of this study is K-Pop enthusiasts. Social identity theory, which describes how people acquire a feeling of identity and belonging through group membership, was applied by the author in this study. Because of their strong sense of camaraderie and social support, fans who felt connected to the fandom group were also better equipped to handle stress and emotional difficulties, according to the study.

The second study, written by Huang (2020) and titled "I Can Fix Him: A Mixed-Method Analysis of Psychological Effects of Parasocial Relationships in Adolescent K-Pop Fans," aimed to understand the psychological and emotional impacts of parasocial interactions on K-Pop youth in Ontario. Using a sequential explanatory mixed methods paradigm, the study first collected and analyzed quantitative data before adding qualitative data to further explore the preliminary findings. The study's key findings demonstrate that while parasocial connections can provide teenagers with emotional support and a sense of community, they can also lead to irrational expectations and emotional dependence. Despite the psychological benefits of parasocial relationships, the study concludes that adolescents should seek balance with genuine social contacts and be mindful of the boundaries of these one-way ties.

Additionally, another previous study by Lou (2024) titled "K-Pop as a Stress-Relief Mechanism: Exploring its Emotional Impact on Filipino Youth" examines the role of K-Pop as a stress-relief method, analyzing its emotional influence through themes such as escapism, social connection, and emotional catharsis. The study employed a qualitative approach, examining topics in K-Pop songs, fan community participation, and inspiration derived from celebrities' personal hardships. This study shows how relevant sentiments, inclusive fandom, and mental health advocacy in K-Pop appeal to Filipino youth.

The findings of this study revealed that K-Pop promotes resilience, belonging, and healing among its fans. However, the study did identify issues such as excessive idol worship, financial pressure, and unrealistic beauty standards. To maximize the positive influence of K-Pop, supporters must maintain a balance in their fandom behaviors. This linked study influences the analysis of "Digital Escapism: Exploring the Role of Being a K-Pop Fan as a Coping Mechanism for Young Adult Women." Previous studies have investigated the influence of K-pop on the lives of fans, focusing on psychological impacts, coping mechanisms, and social relationships. While previous studies have focused on the emotional and entertainment aspects of K-pop, they have not delved deeply into how digital escapism through fandom develops into more complex coping techniques. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by presenting an overview of how K-pop is utilized by young adult women as a form of digital escape and how K-pop contributes to the emotional well-being of young adult women. This study is expected to expand the scope of contemporary cultural and psychological research.

METHOD

The research method used is data Collection and data Analysis, the author is looking for young adult women who use K-Pop as their digital escape when life in real life is not okay. This method will help researchers to be able to understand how people interpret their experiences. Content analysis does not influence statistical analysis to support interpretations but rather lead researchers to make rhetorical statements or arguments that make sense to support their research. (Moleong, 2019) suggests that qualitative approach is a research procedure that produces descriptive written and spoken words from people and observed behavior. According to Kriyantono (2020), the types of qualitative descriptive research aim to make descriptions systematically factual and accurate, about the facts and properties of certain objects. In addition, qualitative research with a descriptive type aims to reveal the problem situation in a more in-depth, broad and comprehensive manner. This is in accordance with the purpose of this study, which is to see how young adult women deal with the life pressures they have and how K-pop content can have a positive influence on them.

DATA COLLECTION

The data collection technique used in this study was in-depth interviews, which allowed researchers to gain a detailed understanding of the participants' experiences and perspectives. First, the author selected young adult women aged 20 to 25 because this age is a transitional period from adolescence to adulthood, marked by various pressures such as academic and career demands, identity formation, and financial independence. This phase makes young adult women a vulnerable group prone to stress and emotional instability. The author observed several participants who are active in K-pop and on social media, then conducted in-depth interviews both offline and online, exploring topics such as how they first became interested in K-pop, how they support their idols, whether they feel more comfortable in the digital world, the positive and negative impacts, and finally, the significant changes they have experienced. All interviews were recorded and documented with the participants' consent, and verbatim transcriptions were created for analysis. The transcriptions were conducted by the author to ensure accuracy in understanding the data.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data analysis was conducted on data obtained from in-depth interviews with five young adult female participants who are active in K-pop. First, all recorded interviews were transcribed by the team and then re-verified to ensure accuracy. Each transcript was examined to identify statements relevant to the research objectives and questions. Then, the author read through all the transcripts repeatedly to find important sections containing information that could be used as key points in the research. Some sentences from the participants that were relevant to the research were identified and grouped into themes that aligned with the theory used in the research.

Table 1. Participant

Participants	Initial Identity
Participant 1	AV
Participant 2	HL
Participant 3	SN
Participant 4	NP
Participant 5	DP

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

To analyze how digital escapism takes place in the lives of young adult women who use K-Pop as an escape, this study examines analysis data collected through interviews and explores social media interactions between interviewees and K-Pop idols in the digital world. The analysis is organized based on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, which illustrates how the role of K-Pop idols on social media fulfills the psychological and emotional needs of their fans. This chapter consists of finding and discussion of the study. Data were collected through interviews with five young adult female informants, aged 20-25, who identify as active K-Pop fans. The findings of this research are presented based on research questions. The data show as an excerpt in some of the participants's answers. The data is utterances used as the data to answer the problem of the study. The data has been taken from May 2025. The researcher did 5 interviews with the participant.

Young adult women are very vulnerable to stress due to several factors, including academics, work, and others. The author wanted to find out the reasons behind these young adult women choosing K-pop as an escape when they are tired of the real world. The results of the interviews revealed that some of them learned about K-pop by accident and from other people. One of the participants AV said *"I first became interested in K-pop when I was exhausted and needed some entertainment. While scrolling through TikTok, I came across some amusing K-pop content, which piqued my curiosity. I noticed the attractive members and initially became interested in Seventeen. Their content is entertaining. The name of the content is "Going Seventeen" on YouTube"*. AV described her initial encounter with K-pop as stemming from a need for entertainment. The above statement highlights a common entry point into digital escapism through humor-based K-pop content. The participant did not initially seek out K-pop intentionally but rather came across it while seeking a diversion from her daily stress. The appeal of a variety show called "Going Seventeen" from a content variation of the boy group Seventeen made the interviewee interested in exploring more about the boy group. From the perspective of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory, this theory reflects an attempt to fulfill the psychological needs of emotional institutionalization and a sense of social belonging. The participant's curiosity was triggered by the members' humorous and entertaining interactions, viewing this content could set the interviewee's mood and this shows that going seventeen is not only entertainment but also a coping strategy for adult women.

DP experienced something similar. DP recounted how he first learned about K-Pop DP said *"The first time i became interested in K-Pop was the last year of junior high school, which at that time, as a last year student was quite stressful because of exam activities, and academic pressure that made me stressed and my only distraction was watching YouTube, then i accidentally watch a trending video, namely BlackPink' MV "As It's Your Last" and I was immediately interested because the song was good and the visuals of the members were so pretty, and from there I started following them. So what started out as a way to relieve stress become my own comfort zone, it feels like I have my own little world that allows me to escape the pressure of academic things for a while"* DP, one of the participants, revealed that her introduction to K-Pop began in the last year of junior high school, during school exams where she was stressed due to academic pressure she chose to look for entertainment on YouTube and found a trending music video that belonged to BlackPink. The statement from the informant illustrates where K-Pop becomes a coping mechanism from the beginning of consumption as a distraction or momentary entertainment to finally develop into a "comfort zone" or "small world" for the participant.

SOCIAL MEDIA SUPPORT AND ACTIVITY LEVEL

Social media is the platform most frequently used by K-pop fans to find out the latest information about their idols, and through digital media, K-pop fans can interact in real time without being limited by distance and time (Zainuddin, F. N., & Yunus, M. M. 2022). One participant also mentioned surfing social media is DP *"I watch K-pop related content almost everyday even if it's just 15 - 20 minutes before bed and during my free time. Starting from variety shows, behind the scenes, and fancam performance because those contents make me feel closer and more familiar with the idols that I like. I also like watching reaction videos and funny videos because watching those videos makes me feel healing from all my daily tired activities. And somehow even though I've watched it everytime I never get bored because every time there's a comeback or new content it always feels fresh and makes me excited. So it's not just for entertainment but it's also part of my routine and a way for me to give myself time. I support them via Instagram or tiktok and also I always update on my story if they just released new song or MV"* DP explained that although she only spends 15 to 20 minutes per day viewing kpop content this activity is consistently done every day in her spare time and this shows that the consumption of kpop content has become a digital escape mechanism that is integrated into her daily life.

In addition, the statement that he is never bored because of the new content and enthusiasm for the latest releases also shows that k-pop provides positive emotions because it can be a source of encouragement and reinforcement of positive emotions obtained. The interviewee also actively supports his idol through social media Instagram and Tik Tok and he is diligent in sharing the latest story updates from his idol. These activities fulfill the need for self-esteem, namely feelings of pride due to active participation and self-expression in the digital space.

LIFE BEFORE AND AFTER BEING K-POP FANS

K-pop has become a part of the lives of some participants, especially for SN and NP participants. K-pop has changed their lives. SN one of the participants stated that *"After getting into K-pop, I think I became more interested in something and life became less boring"* From this excerpt, it is evident that the K-pop world does not merely serve as entertainment but also sparks new interests and enhances the quality of daily life experiences. Given that SN is an introvert and previously felt her life was uninteresting, they had no particular interests. However, after discovering K-pop, she found many things that piqued their interest. This change shows that digital escapism, which began as a response to boredom or stress, gradually transformed into a space that supports identity formation and enriches the psychological life of the interviewee. She feels her life is more colorful and meaningful, meaning that digital exploration in the K-pop world not only helps her escape from stress but also serves as a medium for self-actualization and the development of interests within a social context.

In the phenomenon of the K-pop world, Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality is highly relevant. Baudrillard (1981) states that *"the real is no longer real—it is hyperreal,"* meaning a condition in which digital representations do not merely reflect reality but replace reality itself. In the case of the participants in this study, their involvement in the fandom does not occur through direct interaction with idols but through intensively constructed media content. Nevertheless, they still experience genuine and deep emotional connections. These connections are built through social media, TikTok reels, variety shows, and other digital activities that serve as sources of comfort, inspiration, and even identity for the participants. Thus, the K-pop

world can be seen as a form of hyperreality, where digital escape is not merely a means of distancing oneself from reality but also a way of creating a new reality that fans perceive as more authentic.

Also NP said *“If i don't know KPop i will not have friend until now, so I am grateful to know kpop and knop many wonderful people, if for a significant change it might be felt after i started developing my hobbies, so i starting to take kpop as a hobby and a way as a medium for me to develop my hobbies which is drawing and writing to make friends, so if i don't like KPop maybe it never existed in my life. So of course my life makes us happier because it got me hobbies”*. Since the participant has hobbies like drawing and writing, she began to express herself creatively and develop talents she had not previously explored. However, after discovering K-pop, she started to develop her hobbies further. She converted her digital escape into a tool for expressing her hobbies, such as drawing and writing, transforming it into a creative and productive process, which ultimately boosted her self-esteem, confidence, and personal achievements.

In this regard, this study shows that K-pop serves as a digital escape for young adult women to fulfill their needs to entertain their daily reality. 2 out of 5 participants stated that their love for K-pop began with a need for entertainment and developed into a means of self-development. For example, AV one of the participants said *“I first became interested in K-pop when I was exhausted and needed some entertainment. While scrolling through TikTok, I came across some amusing K-pop content, which piqued my curiosity...”*

AV was interested in K-pop because of the funny and interesting content of “Going Seventeen”. It showed how her consumption of social media became a starting point for escaping the pressures of her real life.

Also, DP said *“The first time I became interested in K-Pop was in the last year of junior high school, which at that time, as a last year student, was quite stressful because of exam activities, and academic pressure that made me stressed and my only distraction was watching YouTube...”*

According to DP's confession, when she was stressed out with her studies, digital media served as entertainment, and K-pop content from Blackpink distracted her from the burdens she was facing. When facing academic pressure, DP felt stressed, which disrupted her emotional balance. According to Maslow's theory, safety not only encompasses physical security but also emotional and psychological stability. Her escape to YouTube was an effort to find a safe digital space to reduce tension and temporarily avoid the burdens of reality.

In addition, participants also use their free time to access K-pop content as a form of entertainment. AV stated that whenever he has free time, she always watches K-pop content. Meanwhile, NP has a routine activity where approximately 88% of her social media activity is conducted in a K-pop fan group on Twitter. In contrast, DP is not very active on Twitter, but she always sets aside 15 - 20 minutes each day to watch K-pop content. These participants' habits reflect the fulfillment of emotional safety needs through digital spaces, and their activities indicate that their involvement in the K-pop world has become part of their daily routine. When free time before bed indicates that this activity is not just ordinary entertainment but also serves as an emotional habit that helps end the day with a sense of calm and enjoyment aligned with the digital concept where individuals use digital media to distract themselves from stress.

In addition, participants also mentioned the content they always watch. AV said she likes to watch variety shows featuring her idol, “Going Seventeen.” HL tends to prefer interview

content featuring her idol, Stray Kids. SN always streams music videos or stage performances to support her idol, and DP prefers funny reaction videos for entertainment. Their activities are a concrete manifestation of digital escapism, functioning as an emotional coping mechanism, particularly for young adult women, by selecting specific content tailored to their individual emotional needs. Participants utilize digital spaces to create a sense of comfort.

From the interview findings, participants revealed how interacting with K-pop content and the K-pop community serves as a form of digital escape for many, providing emotional comfort and relief from stress. This aligns with the “Safety needs” and “Love and Belonging” in Maslow's framework, where participants find emotional security when feeling lonely or unwell. Participants also use digital spaces to express themselves and form their identities. Through these digital activities, they can gain self-confidence, feel valued in a social environment, and explore aspects of themselves that are difficult to express in the real world.

Stress is considered one of the most impactful psychological phenomena due to its consequences for mental and physical health. In psychology, stress is defined as the result of the relationship between an individual and their environment, which is evaluated by the subject as a threat or exceeding their resources and threatening their well-being. Women, especially during the transition to adulthood, face life transitions and changes in education, relationships, residence, and employment. Certain common events during early adulthood, such as entering college, starting a job, moving, and making new friends, place young adult women in a state of adjustment as they seek to define their identity. K-pop is one way for young adult women to forget everything that stresses them out, NP one of the participants shared how her positive involvement with K-pop changed her life. NP explained that after becoming an active K-pop fan, she began channeling her creativity into the arts by creating fan art and writing fanfiction.

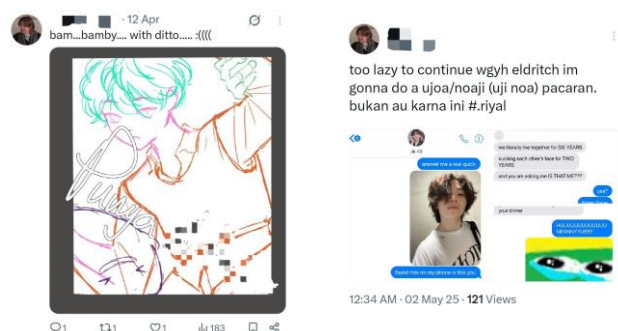


Figure 1. Twitter NP's Participant and Twitter NP's Participant

The images above are works from NP's participation, namely fan art (illustrations or drawings of idol characters) and fan fiction (fictional stories based on their idols). NP is active in several fan activities, and since she is a fan of the boy group Seventeen, she often creates drawings or writes stories inspired by the members of Seventeen. NP's activities are not only a means of calming herself down, but also a productive hobby for her. These creative activities reflect Maslow's hierarchy of needs at the level of self-esteem. In addition, the creative process that NP undergoes gives her satisfaction in building her identity, which strengthens her belief that she can create something meaningful for other fans.

Another participant, DP, revealed that she was introduced to the world of K-pop while still in junior high school. At that time, she was experiencing academic pressure ahead of her graduation exams, and this burden triggered stress that led him to seek forms of entertainment as a distraction. She discovered K-pop content featuring Blackpink on YouTube, which piqued

her interest in the music's visuals and the idols' personalities. This interest then evolved into active engagement on social media, where she found ways to channel her emotions and manage the stress she was experiencing. DP explained that one form of digital escape that helped her was through social media activities, specifically Instagram. She regularly posted stories about his favorite idols and commented on their posts. SHE described this as an emotional ritual that gave her a sense of connection and closeness to the idols she admired.



Figure 2. Instagram DP's participant

In the context of Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory, DP's experience can be linked to the fulfillment of two important levels, namely love and belonging and self-esteem. When her posts or comments receive responses or interactions from fellow fans, she also feels validated, which strengthens his self-confidence. Thus, DP's digital escape is not only entertaining but also serves as a coping strategy in dealing with academic and emotional pressures during her teenage years until now.

Also, participant HL explained that one of the activities they did as fan girls was engaging on Twitter. They felt that Twitter was the most lively and active platform for discussing K-pop, especially because of the existence of various freedom accounts that regularly shared photos and support campaigns for idols. According to HL, the atmosphere within the community is very enjoyable and supportive, making her feel comfortable and accepted as part of the group. Surfing on Twitter has become a daily routine that serves not only as entertainment but also as an escape from the routine and pressure she experiences. One of her forms of involvement is actively retweeting content related to her idols. She mentions that besides simply liking the content, she also feels it is a small yet meaningful contribution, especially in helping to boost hashtags or trends related to her idol on Twitter.

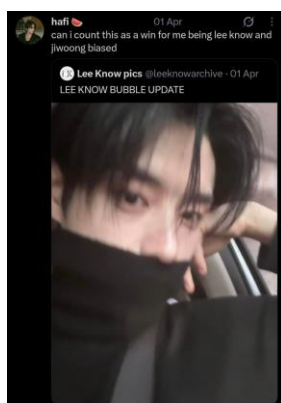


Figure 3. Twitter HL's Participant

This not only demonstrates active engagement in social media but also serves as a form of self-expression and social participation that strengthens a sense of belonging. This phenomenon is directly linked to the third level of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which is love and belonging. The K-pop world provides participants with emotional support, a space to be part of something larger than themselves, and friends. However, this form of digital escape is not merely passive; participants do not just consume content but also create and share their own work. These activities indicate that the K-pop world is not merely entertainment but can also serve as a productive means to strengthen personal identity and social connections.

CONCLUSION

This study was analyzed using Maslow's hierarchy of needs framework, focusing on two basic levels of needs in Maslow's theory, namely love and belonging and self-esteem. This focus was chosen to align with the psychosocial context that was the center of attention in this study. The third level, love and belonging needs, reflects the human need to form meaningful social relationships, feel accepted, and be part of a group. Participants reported experiencing communication that provided emotional support and a sense of belonging. The fourth level, the need for self-esteem and personal achievement was also fulfilled through fangirl activities. Participants demonstrated how they built self-confidence and gained validation through social media. Positive responses from the community, such as comments, likes, or reposts, encouraged them to continue expressing themselves and feel socially valued.

In addition, from the results of the interviews, the author obtained evidence that digital escapism practiced by adult women is not only a means of escaping briefly into the digital world, but also a platform for discovering hobbies and useful activities. In his theory, Abraham Maslow states, "A Musician Must make Music, an artist must paint, a poet must write" which consistently asserts that a musician must make music, a painter must paint, and a poet must write. He does not merely describe actions but also the existential need of humans to express their deepest identity. By creating content and actively participating in online communities, participants NP find a place where her creativity is valued. Maslow's words form a powerful philosophical statement about humanity's deepest need to self-esteem to become the best version of oneself by pursuing what truly calls to one's soul.

The concept of digital escapism is key to understanding the dynamics of participants' engagement with the K-pop fandom. In much literature, escapism is often viewed negatively as a form of avoidance from reality or denial of real issues. However, the findings of this study show that the digital escapism practiced by participants is beneficial and has a positive effect on them. They not only consume digital content but also create, network, and transform, demonstrating the positive aspects of digital escape as a strategy for emotional and social survival amid the pressures of modern life. This study also adds a new perspective to the discussion on digital escapism by highlighting how digital escape can serve as a pathway to self-development, social connections, and improved mental health. From the results of the interviews with participants and discussion it can be concluded that K-pop functions as more than just an escape room, K-pop gives hope direction and connection, K-pop helps the participants to cope when they are depressed when they want to find entertainment. All the findings show that digital excavation through K-pop is a form of coping mechanism and not only helps individuals survive but also grow. The activity that started from a sense of fatigue and stress turned into an experience of equality by giving hope and direction to fans. Finally,

this study confirms that young adult women's involvement in the world of K-pop is a real form of individuals' efforts to fulfill their psychological needs.

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