

The Role of Social Media in Improving College Students' Cross-Cultural Identity and Cultural Integration: A Case Study of K-pop

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Abstract. In the context of globalization, the issue of intercultural identity and cultural integration of college students has attracted much attention, which is of great significance for cultivating international talents. However, the existing research still has some problems in deepening the study on improving the intercultural ability of college students with the help of emerging media and popular culture. This article focuses on social media, using K-pop as a starting point to delve into its role in fostering cross-cultural identity and cultural integration among college students. Through surveys, interviews, and data analysis, it is found that social media transcends time and space barriers, making it convenient for college students to access K-pop culture. College students can not only appreciate the works but also gain deeper insights into Korean culture through interaction. Based on the research findings, this paper proposes: universities should recognize the value of social media in cross-cultural education and offer relevant courses to guide students in its proper use; educational departments can collaborate with platforms to create high-quality cross-cultural exchange sections; the popular cultural industry should seize opportunities to produce more content beneficial for cultural exchange. Through collaborative efforts from all parties, it aims to comprehensively enhance college students' cross-cultural competence.

Keywords: Social media; Cross-Cultural Identity; Cultural Integration; K-pop.

1. Introduction

In the context of rapid globalization and the swift development of new media technologies, the forms and pathways of cultural dissemination have undergone profound changes. Social media, as a new medium for communication, has broken the time and space constraints of traditional dissemination, becoming the core vehicle for cultural exchange. K-pop (Korean pop music), as a typical representative of Korean popular culture, has gained a large number of fans worldwide with its unique musical style, exquisite artist packaging, and robust entertainment industry system, forming extensive cultural influence. Through platforms like YouTube and TikTok, it has achieved global penetration, ranking fourth globally in music exports in 2023, topping non-English speaking countries. The internationalization strategy of K-pop (such as full English songs and collaborations with Western artists) not only promotes cultural export but also sparks some controversy, highlighting the tension between globalization and local cultural identity. This phenomenon provides a real-world case study for researching how social media influences cultural integration.

College students are the primary users of social media, whose values, aesthetic views, and cultural identity are in the process of formation and development. They are highly susceptible to external cultural influences, and their cultural consumption behaviors exhibit global characteristics. For instance, studies show that the proportion of Chinese college students engaging with K-pop through social media has significantly increased, with some universities even hosting Korean Wave clubs and cultural festival activities. At the same time, college students are at a critical stage of socialization, making their cultural identity easily influenced by the external environment. Social media serves as an important tool for shaping their cross-cultural cognition, facilitating exposure to and understanding

of Korean popular culture. The impact of this cultural dissemination phenomenon on college students' cultural identity is worth further exploration.

2. Literature Review

2.1. K-pop Communication Research

K-pop originated in the 1950s when South Korea was influenced by Western music culture and merged it with local music, giving birth to early K-pop represented by Trot, which also became a new culture (third culture) and gained popularity in small circles within South Korea. In the 1990s, as South Korea's economy rose, the entertainment industry began to emphasize K-pop, leading to its rapid development and growing influence on the global music market with its unique charm. As a crucial part of South Korea's music industry, K-pop integrates Korean language, hip-hop, electronic music, and Dance-pop. In its early stages, the musical style was characterized by intense emotion and a floating Huawei, reflecting the rebellious spirit of young people, with fast-paced rhythms that were highly rhythmic. Today, K-pop has evolved into one of the most popular cultural forces, giving rise to many K-pop idols [1].

After that, K-pop music style became diversified, integrating electronic, hip-hop, R&B and other elements, and the choreography was more professional and entertaining. However, in recent years, the spread of "Korean culture" has gradually expanded to the world, which is worth deep thinking and reference [2].

Globally, K-pop has leveraged the internet for dissemination, with online music platforms making it convenient for global audiences to listen. Korean entertainment companies organize world tours for their groups to boost international recognition, while dramas and variety shows also collaborate with K-pop to comprehensively promote Korean culture. In China, K-pop initially gained popularity through TV programs and dramas introduced by local channels. With the spread of the internet, the mode of dissemination has evolved, with video websites introducing a large number of Korean music videos and variety shows. Fans translate works through subtitle groups and share them on forums and Tieba, forming niche communities. The rise of social media has accelerated the spread of K-pop, with platforms like Weibo and TikTok becoming hubs for fan interaction and dissemination. Fans post recommendations and engage in topic discussions, achieving exponential growth in their influence. Offline events such as Korean pop meet-and-greets and entertainment expos continue to increase, providing fans with opportunities for closer engagement and solidifying K-pop's fan base in China.

In recent years, changes in the political and cultural context have made K-pop consumption in China more complex. Chinese K-pop fans face numerous challenges while pursuing stars across borders: on one hand, anti-Korean movements have emerged in China's cyberspace, leading to the stigmatization of Chinese K-pop fans by nationalism, and cultural disputes between the two countries hinder fan activities. On the other hand, Chinese idol groups that mimic K-pop styles are rapidly developing, providing Chinese youth with more cultural closeness and political safety in their idol culture obsession. However, unexpectedly, these challenges faced by K-pop in China have not reduced its fan base in the country [3].

2.2. Research on Cultural Identity of College Students

In the theory of college students' cultural identity, social identity theory suggests that college students gain identity through belonging to specific cultural groups, such as joining anime clubs to strengthen their recognition of anime culture. Cultural adaptation theory points out that in a multicultural environment, college students adapt through assimilation and integration models, which influence their recognition of different cultures. John W. Berry's theory of cultural adaptation posits that factors influencing college students' cultural identity mainly include three aspects: family, where the family cultural atmosphere is the foundation of cultural identity; families that value the inheritance of traditional culture have children with stronger recognition of local culture. At the same time, school

education is also crucial; through courses and activities, students can broaden their horizons, enhancing their cultural inclusiveness and identity; in the social and cultural environment, the diverse cultures spread by mass media and the internet impact college students' cognition, affecting their cultural identity.

College students are a vibrant and energetic group, full of curiosity about new things, easily attracted by fresh cultures and trendy products. K-pop can meet the diverse needs of college students. This research analyzes from multiple angles: in terms of entertainment, it integrates various musical styles with dynamic rhythms and impressive stage performances, allowing college students to relax and enjoy a feast for the eyes and ears after class. On the social front, K-pop has a large fan base, enabling college students to connect with like-minded individuals through online forums and offline support activities, sharing their star-chasing experiences and expanding their social circles. In terms of self-expression, college students emulate K-pop idols' fashion and dance styles, sharing them on social media platforms to showcase their understanding of trends.

From the perspective of musical characteristics, K-pop melodies are catchy and styles are diverse, blending elements such as electronic and hip-hop, constantly innovating to cater to college students' desire for novelty. In terms of idol appeal, K-pop artists have outstanding images and multifaceted talents. The inspiring stories and growth journeys showcased on social media easily resonate with college students, making them popular figures. Fan culture fosters a strong sense of belonging; fans help each other, create creative support, and produce fan works, attracting college students to integrate and find value and recognition within the community [4].

2.3. Social Media and Intercultural Identity

Since the formal establishment of diplomatic relations between China and South Korea in 1992, exchanges between the two countries have been close. K-pop is one of the main contents of South Korea's cultural exports to China. After entering China, K-pop quickly swept through the country, gaining a large number of fans domestically. These K-pop enthusiasts actively engage in cross-border and intercultural participation practices [5].

Research shows that social media has broken geographical barriers, providing college students with convenient access to diverse cultures. By following K-pop stars, joining fan communities, and participating in topic discussions, college students can gain a deeper understanding of Korean culture, including language, music, dance, cuisine, and fashion, thereby enhancing their knowledge and appreciation of Korean culture.

Social media provides a platform for college students to communicate with like-minded people. In the process of sharing K-pop information, discussing idol dynamics, and participating in support activities, college students can find a sense of belonging and identity, thus strengthening their identification with K-pop culture.

Some scholars point out that social media may also trigger college students' reflection and criticism of their own culture. While engaging with K-pop culture, college students will unconsciously compare it with their own culture, thus viewing the strengths and weaknesses of their own culture more objectively, promoting the formation of cultural reflection and critical awareness.

2.4. Social Media and Cultural Integration

Social media promotes the spread and communication of culture: K-pop culture is rapidly spreading to all parts of the world through social media platforms, attracting fans from different cultural backgrounds. College students share K-pop music, dance videos, variety shows and other content through social media, promoting the exchange and integration of Korean culture with other cultures.

Social media drives cultural innovation and development: Social media provides a platform for fans from different cultural backgrounds to interact and communicate. In this process, various cultures collide and merge, giving rise to new cultural forms. For example, some college students combine K-

pop elements with Chinese traditional culture, creating K-pop works that have distinct Chinese characteristics, thus promoting the innovation and development of K-pop culture.

Social media exacerbates cultural conflicts and contradictions: Some scholars also believe that social media may exacerbate conflicts and contradictions between different cultures. For example, some K-pop fans make inappropriate remarks on social media, which arouses the aversion of other cultural groups, leading to cultural conflicts and contradictions.

3. Impact

With the rapid development of social media, cross-cultural communication has penetrated the daily life of college students with unprecedented breadth and depth. This section discusses the positive and negative effects of cross-cultural communication in the era of social media based on the influence of K-pop on college students' cultural identity.

3.1. Positive Impact

Research shows that social media has broken geographical barriers, providing college students with convenient access to diverse cultures. By following K-pop stars, joining fan communities, and participating in topic discussions, college students can gain a deep understanding of Korean culture, including language, music, dance, cuisine, and fashion, thereby enhancing their knowledge and appreciation of Korean culture. K-pop culture spreads rapidly around the world through social media platforms, attracting fans from various cultural backgrounds. College students share K-pop music, dance videos, variety show content, and other materials via social media, promoting the exchange and integration of Korean culture with others. Social media provides a platform for college students to connect with like-minded individuals, fostering a sense of belonging and identity as they share K-pop news, discuss idol updates, and participate in support activities. The interactive nature of social media allows users to leave comments, likes, and shares below videos, creating an open and inclusive space for communication [6].

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Some scholars point out that social media can also trigger college students' reflection and critique of their own culture. While engaging with K-pop culture, college students will unconsciously compare it with their own culture, leading to a more objective view of its strengths and weaknesses, thus fostering cultural reflection and critical awareness. For example, Korean Wave fan communities have formed extensive social networks on social media, where college students can meet like-minded friends, expand their social circles, and enrich their social lives. This cross-cultural exchange and learning not only broadens the cultural horizons of college students, enabling them to view the world from a more inclusive and diverse perspective, but also enhances their understanding and respect for different cultures.

3.2. Negative Effects

Based on the age and psychological characteristics of college students, cultural communication in social media will also have a certain negative impact on the cognition and behavior of teenagers.

First and foremost, social media can easily lead to internet addiction among teenagers, thereby affecting their studies. For a college student, the primary task upon entering university is to enhance their abilities through learning relevant knowledge and professional skills, to develop into a useful person for themselves and society after graduation, or to expand social platforms to accumulate more resources, so that they can develop better in the future. However, excessive immersion in popular

culture will consume a significant amount of time, reducing the time available for personal development. Moreover, entertainment itself is a form of leisure, which can more easily foster laziness, which is very detrimental to the development of college students.

Second, popular culture tends to superficialize the thoughts of young people. K-pop culture, with its unique packaging, fashionable styling, and stage performance style, has reshaped the aesthetic standards of some college students. Under the influence of K-pop idols, fair skin, delicate features, and slim figures have become the ideal looks many college students strive for. However, it is clear that this aesthetic standard focuses solely on the refinement and splendor of appearance, causing them to overlook deeper explorations of beauty itself. Furthermore, they see only the surface glamour but fail to recognize the effort required to achieve success. These value shifts create an absurd cultural landscape, leading students to exhibit extreme behaviors.

Third, K-pop culture has given rise to a series of related consumer markets, with college students becoming a significant force in these markets. The alienation of consumption behavior highlights the crisis of cultural identity. The convenience of social media makes such consumption more accessible; fans can easily obtain information about their idols' merchandise and make purchases through online platforms. Bilibili's 2023 "Star Chasing Consumption Report" revealed that college students spend an average of 1,376 yuan per month on idol-related items, equivalent to 58% of their disposable income. Moreover, the consumption driven by K-pop culture in areas such as fashion, beauty, and dining is also on the rise among college students. They express their love and recognition of K-pop culture through consumption. This fervent consumerism is essentially a manifestation of the materialization of cultural identity—youths attempting to confirm their virtual cultural belonging through material possession.

Fourth, the conflict between popular culture and traditional culture. Professor Li Liangrong, a famous scholar, pointed out that "post-90s" and "post-00s" grew up surrounded by the Internet or were born in the Internet era. They are the original inhabitants of the Internet and also the main force on the current Internet [7].

Young people influenced by Korean entertainment culture will experience a clash and gap with traditional values in their personal beliefs and behavior. This is a cultural shock and a manifestation of the conflict between modern and traditional cultures. Traditional culture emphasizes collectivism, hierarchy, and respect for elders. East Asian traditional culture tends to be more reserved and conservative, making interactions between elders and young people more serious. However, the entertainment spirit in popular culture tends to undermine this seriousness. Traditional culture is also more subtle in self-expression; people do not directly express their likes and dislikes or evaluations. In contrast, pop songs convey love, hate, praise, and criticism directly. Therefore, compared to the conservative aspects of traditional culture, modern popular culture, influenced by individualism and equality, places greater emphasis on self-actualization, personal expression, and even the expression of personal desires. Overall, traditional values formed during agrarian society have significantly diminished influence on young people in the context of modernity. The younger generation naturally adopts a more contemporary lifestyle. Popular culture plays a crucial role in facilitating this generational shift. Indeed, changes in the behavior and mindset of young people are a natural outcome of the times. It is not a bad thing, but it will bring some specific conflicts at more specific micro-social levels, family member relationship levels, and the interaction between the older generation and the young people. This kind of conflict is a common social phenomenon. From this perspective, the acceptance of popular culture by young people does have negative effects.

4. Implications and Recommendations

4.1. Strategies for Social Media Platforms to Play a Role in Communication

In the process of college students achieving cross-cultural identity and promoting cultural integration, social media platforms play an extremely crucial role, serving as a vital link for the dissemination of

diverse cultures. Nowadays, most social media platforms primarily push content based on users' past browsing records and interests. While this approach can cater to individual preferences to some extent, it also easily traps users in "information cocoons." For example, in the case of K-pop dissemination, if a college student frequently watches K-pop videos, the platform may frequently recommend similar content, significantly reducing their opportunities to encounter unique cultural styles from other countries [8].

To reverse this situation, social media platforms should be encouraged to build a diverse content recommendation system. When users start browsing K-pop videos, the platform can skillfully intersperse J-pop music, popular Western films and TV shows, traditional Chinese art performances, and other content. According to research published by the Pew Research Center, scientifically sound algorithmic recommendations increase users' exposure to multicultural content by over 30%, effectively expanding the boundaries of cultural exchange in both breadth and depth [9,10].

In addition, social media platforms can actively cooperate with universities and cultural institutions to jointly hold various online cross-cultural exchange activities.

4.2. Methods for College Students to Accept Cross-Cultural and Cultural Integration

When college students are exposed to cross-cultural content, they should be open-minded and inclusive. When they come into contact with foreign cultures such as K-pop, they should not set boundaries in advance, treat cultural differences with respect, and avoid rejection due to different cultural backgrounds.

Proactive in-depth exploration is equally crucial. It should not be confined to superficial entertainment appreciation but can leverage the vast amount of information provided by social media to delve into deeper aspects such as the development of the K-pop industry and the embodiment of Korean cultural values. For example, analyzing the team collaboration and spirit of perseverance embedded in K-pop idol group culture, and conducting comparative reflections on the relationship between K-pop idol group culture and national culture.

At the same time, it is important to cultivate a habit of rational and critical thinking. When dealing with cross-cultural content, one should discard the inferior elements and absorb the essence. For instance, during the spread of K-pop, there may be consumerist values and other negative ideologies mixed in. College students should use their rationality to discern these issues, absorb positive cultural nutrients, and reject negative ideas. This will achieve high-quality cultural integration, allowing cross-cultural content to truly contribute to personal growth and cultural fusion.

4.3. Suggestions on Education to Promote Intercultural Identity and Cultural Integration among College Students

Universities can offer courses related to intercultural communication, skillfully integrating popular culture cases such as K-pop into the curriculum. Through classroom discussions, group collaborative assignments, and case studies, students are encouraged to explore the cultural phenomena underlying popular culture. For example, organizing a special seminar on "The Cultural Impact and Integration of K-pop in Global Communication" can inspire students to delve deeply into various dimensions, including culture, economy, and society, thereby enhancing their cross-cultural perception and analytical skills [11].

Universities should organize a variety of intercultural practical activities, implement international cultural festivals, and advocate and encourage students to showcase the charm of cultures from different countries. At the same time, they should genuinely expand the scope of international exchange programs, leading students to participate in overseas study tours, exchange programs, and other projects, allowing them to experience diverse cultural atmospheres firsthand. Through these practical experiences, students can enhance their intercultural recognition and integration skills. According to relevant surveys, students who participate in international exchange programs have

improved their intercultural adaptability, significantly strengthened their awareness of cultural integration, and gradually enhanced their ability to adapt culturally.

The education department should give full play to the policy guidance efficiency, formulate a set of policies and regulations advocating multicultural education, promote schools to integrate cross-cultural education into the teaching system, open up special research funds, support schools to carry out educational research related to popular culture, provide solid theoretical support for educational practice, and give more scientific nature to educational practice.

In addition, the education sector should take the lead in establishing a cross-cultural educational resource sharing platform to integrate high-quality educational resources from both domestic and international sources, including teaching cases, academic papers, and cultural materials. The platform can also invite renowned scholars to record open courses on cross-cultural education, sharing cutting-edge academic achievements to provide diverse teaching materials for schools and teachers. This will promote the widespread adoption and deeper development of cross-cultural education in universities, benefiting more college students.

5. Conclusion

K-pop music is diverse, blending various elements and incorporating multiple art forms in stage performances. Through social media, college students can be exposed to the unique charm of Korean pop culture, broadening their understanding of different musical styles, dance forms, and fashion trends. They learn about the spirit of teamwork and perseverance emphasized in Korean culture, enriching their comprehension of foreign cultural connotations and enhancing awareness of cross-cultural communication. However, some college students become overly immersed in K-pop, dedicating a significant amount of time and energy to learning about Korean culture while reducing their attention to traditional Chinese culture, such as Peking Opera, classical poetry, and folk customs. This results in insufficient knowledge of local culture and even a lack of clear recognition of the unique value and advantages of traditional Chinese culture, leading to cultural cognitive biases.

In summary, social media plays a significant role in enhancing college students' intercultural identity and cultural integration. Through social media, college students can conveniently access and understand diverse cultures, reinforcing their cultural identity and sense of belonging, while fostering cultural reflection and critical awareness. At the same time, social media provides a platform for communication and integration between different cultures, promoting cultural innovation and development. However, social media may also exacerbate cultural conflicts and contradictions, which require attention. Looking ahead, future research could delve deeper into the details of how social media facilitates communication, exploring how to leverage this powerful tool more effectively to promote multicultural exchange and foster positive cultural identity.

Authors Contribution

All the authors contributed equally and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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