

The Paradox of Consumption and Creation: K-Pop Fandom in Bangladesh

By

Nashita Mahbub Apon

22103031

A thesis submitted to the Department of English and Humanities in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English

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Declaration

It is hereby declared that

1. The thesis submitted is my own original work while completing a degree at BRAC University.
2. The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where this is appropriately cited through full and accurate referencing.
3. The thesis does not contain material which has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.
4. I have acknowledged all main sources of help.

Student's Full Name & Signature:

Nashita Mahbub Apon
22103031

Approval

The thesis titled “The Paradox of Consumption and Creation: K-Pop Fandom in Bangladesh” submitted by Nashita Mahbub Apon (22103031) of Fall, 2025 has been accepted as satisfactory in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English on 9th February, 2026.

Examining Committee:

Supervisor:
(Member)

Dr. Tabassum Zaman

Assistant Professor, Department of English and Humanities
BRAC University

Departmental Head:
(Chair)

Professor Firdous Azim

Professor and Chairperson, Department of English and Humanities
BRAC University

Ethics Statement

I conducted this research by following the academic standards. All the information and images from the case studies and interviews were collected after taking the consent of the participants. Therefore, it does not violate any personal privacy or institutional policies.

Abstract

This thesis examines the paradox of consumption and creation within K-pop fandom in Bangladesh, focusing on how fans negotiate between active cultural participation and passive consumption. Using a qualitative research design, the study draws on case studies, survey responses, interviews, and media and social media materials to analyze how Bangladeshi fans interact with K-pop as a cultural, social, and economic phenomenon. The research is guided by Marxist theory and Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model to understand fandom as a site of labor, consumption, and meaning-making within a Global South context. The findings show that active K-pop fandom in Bangladesh extends beyond entertainment into performance, skill development, community formation, and selective professionalization. The cases also reveal how global K-pop texts are locally interpreted and re-encoded through performance, negotiation, and embodiment. At the same time, the thesis highlights the central role of passive consumption in sustaining the K-pop industry. Survey and interview data from participants illustrate how listening, streaming, sharing content, purchasing merchandise, and consuming Korean-themed food contribute to commodity circulation and capitalist expansion without requiring creative participation or fan identity. Overall, the study argues that K-pop fandom in Bangladesh operates across a spectrum of engagement, where both active and passive practices play structurally important roles. By situating these practices within Marxist and Hall's frameworks, the thesis demonstrates how fandom in Bangladesh enables identity formation, cultural translation, and selective mobility while remaining embedded within global capitalist and ideological structures.

Keywords: Active participation, Passive consumption, Paradox, K-pop, Fandom.

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Dedication

To my parents and my big brother. Their support and unconditional love mean the world to me.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Korean Pop music, widely referred to as K-pop, is a globalized popular music industry originating in South Korea that combines carefully produced music, synchronized choreography, visual aesthetics, and digitally driven promotion. More than a musical genre, K-pop operates as an integrated cultural system that actively cultivates fandom through performance, affect, and participation. Over the past decade, this system has extended its reach well beyond South Korea, embedding itself in diverse national contexts, including Bangladesh.

In Bangladesh, the rise of K-pop fandom has not been merely a matter of listening to songs or following idols online. It has taken concrete public, communal forms through contests, auditions, meets, and K-fest-style events. The Korean Embassy, often in partnership with institutions like Independent University, Bangladesh (IUB) and organizations such as the King Sejong Institute, has held annual or recurring auditions like the *K-Pop World Festival Bangladesh Global Audition* for K-pop enthusiasts in Bangladesh. For example, in 2025, 105 video submissions from Bangladeshi entrants were narrowed down to 15 teams who performed live at IUB; of them, *Last Min8* won first place, followed by *Knight Sisters* and *Heaven's Law* in second, and *Lumen-I* and *Lost Dynasty* in third (The Daily Star, 2025).

Earlier, the 2022 global audition held by the same organizers saw 86 video submissions, followed by live performances by 12 shortlisted teams. Among them, *Mavericks* took first prize;

Savage Girls and *RaRaLAVA* were second; *Rumaisa Islam* and *Knight Sisters* came in third (The Business Standard, 2022).

Fan-community meets are another way this participation plays out. Groups like BD K-Family, Bangladesh's first Korean culture community event organiser, have arranged periodic "K-Meets" (e.g. *Dhaka K-Meet 6.0*) in venues like Tokyo Square Shopping Mall in Dhaka. These are gatherings where fans dress in Korean-inspired styles, perform, socialize, share dance covers, speak about K-drama and K-pop, and build connections with others who share their passion (The Business, Standard, 2022).

Social media also plays a huge role: fan-pages, Instagram stories and reels of dance covers, Facebook groups sharing updates in Korean culture, K-pop idols, fashion, etc. Although precise quantified data from Bangladesh is harder to find, the presence of hundreds of event attendees (600+ at the 2025 audition), widespread video submissions (85-100+) each year, and active fan organisation implies that Bangladeshi fans are not just passive consumers but are engaging visibly through performing, interpreting, competing, and connecting with others (The Daily Star, 2025).

Alongside performative fan events, the influence of K-pop is also evident in the growth of businesses catering specifically to K-pop fan cultures. Korean beauty products, particularly skincare brands endorsed or popularised by K-pop idols have gained significant traction in Dhaka's shopping malls and online marketplaces, where they are marketed as part of an idol-inspired lifestyle that fans aspire to emulate. In a similar vein, Korean restaurants such as Koryori (in Dhaka) have become popular gathering spaces for K-pop fans seeking to experience food cultures frequently associated with idols through music videos, variety shows, and fan

content. These commercial spaces reflect both forms of engagement within K-pop fandom: passive consumption, in which fans adopt products linked to idol imagery and aesthetics, and active participation, where fans intentionally seek out shared spaces, socialize with fellow fans, and occasionally organise K-pop-themed meetups and events.

Together, these developments illustrate the paradox at the heart of this thesis: while many Bangladeshi K-pop fans appear to be highly active learning dance routines, producing cover performances, consuming idol-endorsed beauty products, dining at Korean-themed restaurants, sharing fan content online, and participating in fan-organised festivals, it remains an open question how far such practices move beyond imitation and consumption. Specifically, this thesis interrogates whether these activities constitute critical and meaningful cultural engagement or whether they are largely shaped by the logics of the global K-pop industry, circulating trends, and dominant cultural scripts. By focusing exclusively on Bangladesh, this study examines how local fans negotiate, reinterpret, and sometimes reproduce K-pop culture within their own socio-cultural context. Thereby, exploring the extent to which Bangladeshi K-pop fandom can be understood as a site of genuine cultural agency rather than merely passive consumption.

1.1 Background of k-pop industry & Rise of Fan culture

K-pop (Korean popular music) has evolved over more than three decades from its roots in the early 1990s into a global cultural phenomenon ; a process deeply intertwined with the rise of fan culture and digital media. According to *Britannica*, groups like Seo Taiji and Boys (debuting in 1992) helped pioneer modern K-pop with new styles, fusion of Western genres, and novel production, setting the foundation for later idol groups like H.O.T. and SM Entertainment in the mid-1990s (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2025). With Korean pop increasingly exported, especially

after viral moments like Psy's "Gangnam Style" in 2012, K-pop became not just a national industry but a global cultural force (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2025).

Parallel to this musical and industrial growth has been the expansion of active, digitally mediated fan culture. Fan culture, rooted in the growth of mass media, celebrity admiration, and the rise of dedicated audience communities, has gradually developed into the global and highly interactive fandoms we see today. Fans engage deeply on platforms like Facebook and Instagram through fan pages, hashtags, challenges, edits, cover dances, and fan translations. For example, in 2024 K-pop dominated Facebook engagement: the term generated over 34,195 posts and 19 million+ reactions globally, where "love" reactions comprised 66.2% of all reactions to K-pop content, underscoring both the volume and positive sentiment of fan activity (Capstone-intel Corporation, 2025). On Instagram, the song by BTS member J-Hope "Mona Lisa" had brought dance craze all over the platform (J-Hope's solo track *Mona Lisa*). Actress Dawn Zulueta danced to the song and posted the cover on Instagram; her video became viral among both the general audience and BTS ARMY for its vibrant performance and broad emotional appeal (Daily Tribune, 2025). These examples show how fans (and even idols themselves) are performing embodied imitation on Instagram. Not just listening to music, but physically engaging: learning choreography, performing challenges, sharing those performances with everyone. They illustrate how fan culture uses social media to turn passive consumption into visible, performative, and communal activity.

Therefore, this thesis argues that K-pop fandom in Bangladesh is marked by a central paradox of active engagement under constraint. On the surface, fans appear highly participatory, emulating idol fashion, producing dance covers, and joining viral challenges associated with groups such as BTS and BLACKPINK. Yet these acts of participation predominantly follow industry-scripted

templates of visibility and performance. While localized events, including the Dhaka K-Meet 6.0 and the K-Pop World Festival Bangladesh Auditions, seemingly expand the scope for reinterpretation and collective creativity, they too remain embedded within the institutional frameworks and aesthetic norms of global K-pop. Consequently, this study contends that K-pop fandom in Bangladesh cannot be understood simply as either passive consumption or cultural empowerment; rather, it operates as a negotiated cultural practice in which fans are simultaneously active participants and structurally constrained actors, navigating spaces of creativity that are continually shaped, enabled, and limited by the logics of the K-pop industry and transnational trend circuits.

1.2 Research Questions & Objectives

The primary objective of this thesis is to critically examine K-pop fandom in Bangladesh in order to understand how fans engage with Korean popular culture and how this engagement shapes their identities, creative practices, and patterns of consumption. The study aims to explore the complex relationship between active participation and passive consumption within Bangladeshi K-pop fandom through a cultural and theoretical lens.

One of the central objectives of this research is to examine the nature of K-pop fandom in Bangladesh and identify the different forms of engagement practiced by fans. These engagements are broadly categorized into active and passive forms. Passive engagement includes activities such as listening to music, watching music videos, following idols on social media, and consuming related content without direct creative involvement. In contrast, active engagement involves participatory practices such as fan art creation, dance and cover performances, fan fiction writing, event organization, and online content production. By distinguishing between

these forms, the study seeks to understand how Bangladeshi fans interact with K-pop culture at varying levels of involvement.

Another key objective is to analyze how active K-pop engagement contributes to personality development, creative expression, and skill formation among Bangladeshi fans. Active participation often requires fans to develop artistic, technical, linguistic, and organizational skills. Engagement in dance covers, digital editing, graphic design, video production, and language learning, particularly Korean. These skills can foster confidence, discipline, teamwork, and self-expression. Through these practices, fans do not merely consume cultural products but actively shape their identities and personal growth, making fandom a meaningful space for self-development.

The research also aims to investigate the role of fan communities, social media platforms, and local events in supporting and circulating creative fan practices. Online platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter play a crucial role in enabling fans to share content, collaborate, and build community connections. At the same time, local fan communities and offline events such as fan meets, dance competitions, and cultural festivals provide spaces for collective participation and visibility. Through selected case studies, this research examines how individual participants engage with fandom and how community structures influence their modes of participation, whether active or passive.

A further objective of the study is to clearly distinguish between active and passive forms of cultural consumption within K-pop fandom in the Bangladeshi context. While passive consumption reflects the traditional audience role of receiving media content, active engagement highlights fans as cultural producers who contribute labor, creativity, and meaning. By

examining this distinction, the research seeks to understand how fandom operates along a spectrum rather than as a fixed category, where fans may shift between active and passive roles over time.

To deepen the analytical framework, this research applies theoretical perspectives drawn from Karl Marx and Stuart Hall. Marxist concepts of labor, production, and commodification are used to analyze how fan labor, often unpaid, contributes to the circulation and value of K-pop culture. Stuart Hall's theories of representation, encoding, and decoding help explain how Bangladeshi fans interpret, negotiate, and re-signify K-pop texts within their own cultural context. Together, these perspectives allow for an examination of how cultural production, labor, and meaning-making operate within Bangladeshi K-pop fandom.

Finally, this research aims to contribute to the limited academic literature on K-pop fandom in Bangladesh by providing context-specific insights. While existing studies on K-pop fandom largely focus on East Asia or Western contexts, this thesis highlights the experiences of Bangladeshi fans and their unique socio-cultural positioning. By addressing patterns of engagement, identity formation, community dynamics, and theoretical implications, the study fills a significant gap in fandom and cultural studies scholarship.

Research Questions: Guided by these objectives, the research is structured around three core questions. Firstly, what are the different forms of K-pop fandom engagement in Bangladesh, and how do fans participate in both active and passive ways? Secondly, how does active participation in K-pop fandom through creative practices, skill development, and community involvement shape the identities and personal development of Bangladeshi fans? Thirdly, what roles do fan communities, social media platforms, local events, and industry frameworks play in shaping the

balance between active engagement and passive consumption among Bangladeshi K-pop fans?

Together, these questions encapsulate the central aims of the study and provide a focused framework for analysis.

Therefore, by addressing the objectives and research questions outlined in this chapter, this study develops a deeper and more context-sensitive understanding of K-pop fandom in Bangladesh.

Examining both active and passive forms of engagement allows the research to move beyond viewing fans as mere consumers and instead recognize them as participants who create meaning, skills, and cultural value. Analyzing creative practices, personality development, and community involvement helps reveal how fandom functions as a space for identity formation and self-expression among Bangladeshi fans. Furthermore, investigating the role of fan communities, social media platforms, local events, and industry structures highlights how global K-pop culture is locally interpreted and negotiated. Together, these insights contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how K-pop fandom operates within Bangladesh's specific social and cultural context.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

2.1 K-pop as a Global Cultural Phenomenon

The existing literature indicates that K-pop's global prominence is the result of decades of strategic cultural production, positioning it as the initial driving force of the broader Korean Wave (Hallyu). Emerging in the early 1990s, K-pop began as a domestic music industry but gradually transformed into a global cultural phenomenon through the combined influence of the idol system, government support, and digital technologies (Jin 2016; Lie 2015). Scholars such as Howard (2017) highlight K-pop's hybridity, its blending of Western musical elements with distinctly Korean performance aesthetics as central to its international appeal. The viral success of Psy's Gangnam Style in 2012 demonstrated K-pop's ability to capture worldwide attention, and groups like BTS and Blackpink have since consolidated its status as a transnational cultural powerhouse (Oh & Park 2020). K-pop's global diffusion laid the foundation for the wider Korean Wave, which now includes television dramas, beauty products, fashion, and cuisine, creating multiple avenues for transnational cultural exchange (Jung 2011; Kim 2017). Many idols themselves expand into acting and other entertainment sectors: for example, IU began as a singer before becoming a celebrated actress in dramas like Moon Lovers: Scarlet Heart Ryeo; Suzy of Miss A transitioned from K-pop to acting in *While You Were Sleeping*; and V (Kim Taehyung) of BTS is increasingly involved in variety shows, endorsements, and acting projects. Through these trajectories, K-pop not only sparks initial fan engagement but also acts as the gateway through which fans enter the broader K-industry, a process evident in countries like

Bangladesh, where K-pop fandom often extends to Korean dramas, fashion trends, and lifestyle practices.

2.2 Fan Culture: From Consumption to Participation

Fan studies provide a lens to understand how audiences interact with cultural products.

Foundational work (Fiske 1992; Jenkins 1992) challenged the notion of audiences as passive, portraying fans as active creators of meaning. Within the K-pop sphere, this has taken shape through activities such as cover dances, fanfiction, fan-subtitling, social media activism, and circulation of merchandise (Choi & Maliangkay 2015; Lee 2019). The rise of digital platforms has further amplified these practices, enabling instant interaction, global networking, and innovative recirculation of idol content (Oh & Lee 2014).

Yet, some scholars caution against an overly celebratory view of fan practices. Jung (2011) and Elfving-Hwang (2018) suggest that reproducing idol choreography, emulating fashion trends, or embracing K-beauty can reinforce commercial structures and ideological frameworks embedded within the K-pop industry. Thus, debates in fan studies often center on the tension between creativity and consumption, or individual agency and industrial influence.

2.3 K-pop Fandom in Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, academic work on K-pop fandom remains scarce but is gradually expanding. Sultana and Nibir (2024) show that young fans are attracted to K-pop's aesthetics, stage performances, and high production values, often expressed through digital platforms and consumer habits. Similarly, Arif (2024) demonstrates how participation in fandom shapes identity and provides youth with a sense of belonging to a global community.

Beyond online spaces, fandom in Bangladesh also materializes in embodied practices such as the K-pop World Festival auditions, Dhaka K-Meets, and cover dance competitions. The growing popularity of K-beauty and Korean cuisine in Dhaka further illustrates how fandom intersects with lifestyle consumption. However, little critical research examines whether such practices in Bangladesh represent creative reinterpretation or largely reflect passive adoption of global fandom scripts.

2.4 Agency and Consumption

Fan studies frequently grapple with the paradox between creative agency and consumerist participation. Jenkins (1992) portrayed fans as “textual poachers,” actively reworking cultural texts. Later scholarship, however, underscores how fan labor - streaming, subtitling, or content-sharing often supports industry logics and generates corporate value without direct compensation (Andrejevic 2008; Lee 2019). In the context of K-pop, Jung (2011) and Elfving-Hwang (2018) argue that fan practices that appear participatory may in fact reinforce capitalist aesthetics and industry hierarchies. This perspective is especially relevant for Bangladesh. Fan behaviors such as performing dance covers, adopting idol fashion, or purchasing K-beauty can simultaneously signal identity expression and compliance with global consumerist circuits. The critical question becomes: at what point does imitation give way to genuine cultural agency?

2.5 Psychological Dimensions of K-pop Fandom

Beyond cultural and economic dimensions, K-pop fandom also carries important psychological implications, which are central to understanding fan engagement in Bangladesh. Fandom is not simply a matter of media consumption or participation in creative practices; it functions as an emotionally charged space where fans cultivate attachments, negotiate identities, and experience a sense of belonging. In Bangladesh, anecdotal and observational evidence suggests that fans, often adolescents and young adults, derive confidence, self-expression, and social connection from participating in K-pop communities, both online and offline.

A useful framework for understanding these processes is parasocial interaction theory (Horton & Wohl, 1956), which explains how fans form one-sided emotional bonds with media figures. In the K-pop context, idols intentionally cultivate closeness through reality shows, livestreams, social media interactions, and personalized fan content, which enhances fans' sense of personal connection (Tukachinsky & Stever, 2019). For Bangladeshi fans, these parasocial ties can serve as a source of comfort and motivation, particularly in contexts where opportunities for creative expression or community belonging are limited. However, these relationships are double-edged: while they support emotional attachment and identity formation, they may also create unrealistic expectations, dependency, or stress when idols face controversies or when fans feel pressured to maintain high levels of participation (Elfving-Hwang, 2018).

K-pop fandom also intersects with identity construction and group belonging, as explained by social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Fan communities in Bangladesh, ranging from informal online groups to organized events such as Dhaka K-Meet provide collective spaces where fans collaborate, create content, and celebrate shared interests. Participation in these

communities can enhance self-esteem, reduce social isolation, and foster creative output, such as fan-subtitling, cover performances, or choreography (Choi & Maliangkay, 2015). Yet, even these seemingly creative practices are embedded within broader global fandom patterns; they often mirror formats, challenges, and aesthetics dictated by the international K-pop industry. As such, while Bangladeshi fans exercise agency in adapting and localizing K-pop, this agency exists alongside structural constraints imposed by globalized fandom norms.

The affective dimension of fandom is also closely tied to coping and emotional regulation. For many Bangladeshi fans, K-pop provides an outlet for stress relief, inspiration, and emotional expression. Idols' dedication and artistry serve as aspirational models, motivating fans to persist in personal or academic challenges. Yet, the emotional investment demanded by fandom can create tensions, including financial strain from merchandise consumption, social stigma, or the pressure to participate in fan activities to maintain recognition within the community (Oh & Lee, 2014; Elfving-Hwang, 2018).

Collectively, these observations highlight a paradox at the heart of Bangladeshi K-pop fandom. Fans are actively engaged producing content, participating in events, and cultivating personal and collective identities. Yet much of this engagement operates within structures shaped by the global K-pop industry. The same practices that foster creativity, belonging, and self-expression can simultaneously reinforce commercial imperatives and standardized fandom norms. While scholarship on K-pop fandom globally has examined such dynamics, studies in Bangladesh remain limited, often focusing narrowly on attraction factors or identity formation (Sultana & Nibir, 2024; Arif). This thesis addresses this gap by analyzing how Bangladeshi fans negotiate the tension between passive imitation and critical cultural agency across both digital and physical

spaces, providing insight into the ways local fans reinterpret, adapt, and sometimes reproduce transnational K-pop fandom patterns.

2.6 Research Gap

Although the global rise of K-pop has attracted significant attention from scholars around the world, there are still important areas that remain underexplored, especially in the context of Bangladesh. Most existing studies on K-pop mainly focus on countries with long-standing fandom cultures such as South Korea, Japan, China, and Western nations like the United States and parts of Europe. But there is a significant lack of studies explaining how K-pop fandom operates in Bangladesh. This is a major gap because the cultural, social, and economic context of Bangladesh is very different from those regions where K-pop research has traditionally been centered.

One key limitation in the current literature is the lack of attention to local fan practices and identities in Bangladesh. While some studies discuss how international fans engage with K-pop, for example through online platforms, concerts, and merchandise; there is little research that explains how Bangladeshi fans interpret, adapt, or reshape K-pop culture within their own cultural and social environment. How do local values, norms, and digital practices influence the way fans consume and create K-pop content in Bangladesh? Existing research does not answer this clearly.

Additionally, many studies focus heavily on active fans, for example, those deeply involved in fan clubs, social media campaigns, and organized events. However, passive consumers, people who engage with K-pop in less visible ways (e.g., listening occasionally, buying merchandise for friends, enjoying related food and cultural products without participating in fandom

communities), are rarely discussed. This represents a significant gap in understanding the full spectrum of K-pop consumption and participation in Bangladesh. Without this perspective, research tends to assume that all K-pop consumers are active fans, which oversimplifies the reality of how people engage with K-pop.

Another important gap lies in how economic and cultural forces shape both consumption and creative participation among Bangladeshi fans. Most research focuses on either consumption (listening, streaming, purchasing) or creative participation (fan art, translations, fan fiction, fan events). Few studies address the contradiction or paradox between these two modes: how fans can be deeply involved emotionally and socially, yet also influenced by global capitalist structures that turn cultural products into commercial commodities. In Bangladesh, where digital access, economic opportunities, and cultural industries differ from the global West or East Asia, this contradiction may look very different but we lack studies that reveal how.

Finally, existing literature does not sufficiently explore the broader social and cultural impact of K-pop on Bangladeshi youth. For example, how it may influence identity, gender expression, creative aspirations, or even local music and fashion trends. Do K-pop fandoms encourage cultural exchange or create new forms of cultural tension? These questions remain largely unanswered for the Bangladeshi context. Addressing these gaps will not only enrich our understanding of K-pop's global influence but also highlight the unique ways in which Bangladeshi audiences engage with, reinterpret, and produce cultural meaning around K-pop.

2.7 Theoretical Framework

This research employs Marxist cultural theory alongside Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding framework to critically examine K-pop fandom in Bangladesh, treating fandom as a contested

cultural space where creative agency and structural constraints coexist rather than simply passive consumption or creativity.

Marx's Theory of Commodity Fetishism in *Capital*

Karl Marx's concept of commodity fetishism describes how, in capitalist societies, social relations between people appear as relations between things (commodities) in a way that obscures the labor and social processes that produced them (Marx, 1887). This occurs because market exchange conceals the labor relations embedded in commodities. As Marx writes:

“A commodity ... appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing ... its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing ...”

(Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume I*, Chapter 1, Section 4, p. 46).

In Marx's explanation, use-value refers to the utility of a product (e.g., a K-pop album satisfies entertainment desires), while exchange-value is the quantitative worth expressed through market exchange (e.g., price in currency). Commodity fetishism arises when exchange-value appears a natural characteristic of the commodity itself rather than a reflection of socially necessary labor embedded in its production. A K-pop merchandise item thus seems valuable in and of itself, obscuring the many layers of labor such as production, marketing, distribution, fan-driven streaming campaigns that contribute to its market value.

In the Bangladeshi context, fans' engagement in activities like purchasing albums, participating in streaming events, voting in worldwide polls, and creating subtitles or translations functions as affective and cultural labor that supports the global circulation of K-pop products but often remains unpaid and unrecognized. The emotional investment and labor invested by fans thus become part of the social relations of production, even as those relationships are obscured by the

apparent “magic” of the commodity form. This is precisely the “mystification” Marx describes, where social relations appear as independent, market-driven forces (Marx, 1887).

Stuart Hall’s Encoding/Decoding Model

Stuart Hall’s encoding/decoding model (1980) rethinks how communication works in mass media. Instead of seeing audiences as passive receivers of messages, Hall argues that meaning is constructed through interaction between media producers and audiences. Media messages are encoded with preferred meanings by producers, but these meanings are not guaranteed to be understood or accepted in the same way by everyone.

Producers encode messages based on dominant ideologies, institutional goals, and assumptions about the audience. However, audiences decode these messages differently depending on factors such as class, culture, education, gender, and personal experience. Because of this, meaning is never fixed or universal.

Hall identifies three main decoding positions: dominant-hegemonic, negotiated, and oppositional.

Dominant-Hegemonic Reading

A dominant-hegemonic reading occurs when audiences decode a media message in the exact way it was intended by its producers and fully accept the dominant ideology embedded within it. In this position, the message appears natural, logical, and common-sense, rather than constructed or ideological. Because the encoded meaning aligns with dominant social values, audiences do not feel the need to question or resist it.

For example, a television advertisement presents luxury housing as a symbol of success, stability, and a “better life.” The advertisement shows spacious interiors, happy families, and peaceful surroundings, suggesting that owning such a home represents personal achievement and social progress. Viewers who adopt a dominant-hegemonic reading accept this message as truthful and desirable. They come to believe that owning property is a natural life goal and that financial success should be measured through material ownership.

In this process, the social and economic conditions that make such housing inaccessible to many people such as income inequality, rising land prices, or debt are not questioned. The advertisement does not appear to be promoting an ideology; instead, it appears to reflect reality. By accepting the message in this way, audiences help reproduce dominant capitalist values, where success, security, and happiness are closely tied to consumption and ownership.

Negotiated Reading

A negotiated reading occurs when audiences understand and largely accept the dominant meaning of a media message, but reinterpret certain aspects based on their own experiences, social positions, or practical realities. In this position, the audience agrees with the general message but does not apply it completely or uncritically.

For instance, a public campaign promotes the idea that working long hours demonstrates responsibility and commitment to one’s career. The campaign shows successful professionals who sacrifice leisure time in order to advance. A negotiated viewer may accept the idea that effort and dedication are important for career growth, but also recognize the negative effects of overwork on health and personal relationships. As a result, they agree with the value of hard work but reject the idea that constant exhaustion should be normal or desirable.

This viewer does not challenge the broader ideology of productivity or success through labor. Instead, they adapt it to their own life by setting limits or making compromises. Negotiated readings therefore allow individuals to manage dominant expectations without openly resisting the system that produces them. The dominant ideology remains intact, but it is adjusted to fit everyday realities.

Oppositional Reading

An oppositional reading takes place when audiences fully understand the intended meaning of a media message but consciously reject it and reinterpret the message in a way that challenges the dominant ideology. This position requires critical awareness of how power, ideology, and economic interests shape media representations.

For example, a news report presents large corporate profits as evidence of a strong and successful economy. The report frames profit growth as beneficial for society as a whole and emphasizes investor confidence and market expansion. An oppositional viewer understands this intended message but interprets it differently. Instead of seeing profit as a sign of collective progress, they view it as evidence of unequal wealth distribution and the exploitation of workers.

This viewer questions whose labor created those profits and who actually benefits from economic growth. Rather than accepting the message as neutral or positive, they recognize it as serving corporate and elite interests. Through this oppositional reading, the media message is exposed as ideological rather than objective. While such readings challenge dominant meanings, Hall notes that they are less common because dominant ideologies are constantly reinforced through media, education, and everyday social practices.

2.8 Applying Marx and Hall to K-pop Fandom in Bangladesh

Applying Karl Marx's theory of commodity fetishism alongside Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model allows Bangladeshi K-pop fandom to be understood as a complex cultural field where global capitalist structures and local meaning-making processes intersect. From a Marxist perspective, K-pop fandom operates within systems of cultural capitalism in which commodities such as albums, merchandise, idol images, performances, and even themed lifestyle experiences acquire value that appears intrinsic, while the labor and social relations behind them remain obscured. In Bangladesh, this process is visible across both active and passive forms of fandom. As later chapters demonstrate, fans' streaming practices, merchandise purchases, event participation, and lifestyle consumption contribute to the circulation and profitability of K-pop without fans holding ownership or control over the cultural products they help sustain. For example, the passive consumers such as Participants D, E, and F do not identify as producers or creative agents, yet their everyday actions of streaming, dining at Korean restaurants like Koryori, or buying merchandise as gifts function as unpaid affective labor that strengthens K-pop's commercial power (Chapter 5). Here, commodity fetishism is evident: K-pop products appear magical, desirable, and emotionally meaningful, while the labor of idols, trainees, service workers, and fans themselves remains invisible.

At the same time, Marx's framework also helps explain the position of active fans examined in Chapter 4. Figures such as Arif Chowdhury, Muhsinuzzaman Mahim, and Shefa Tabassum engage in sustained creative and bodily labor through dance, music, rehearsal, and public performance. Although these activities appear expressive and empowering, they still operate within capitalist cultural systems that benefit from fan productivity without guaranteeing long-term economic security. Mahim's performances at K-fests and national competitions and Shefa's

international success at the Changwon K-Pop World Festival illustrate how fan labor can generate symbolic and occasional material value, yet remains structurally precarious and institutionally controlled. In Marxist terms, these fans move from pure consumption toward production, but they do not escape the commodity system; rather, their labor enhances the cultural and symbolic value of K-pop as a global brand.

Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model complements this analysis by shifting attention from economic structures to meaning-making practices. Hall's framework emphasizes that media texts are encoded with preferred meanings by producers but decoded differently by audiences depending on their social and cultural contexts. In the Bangladeshi K-pop fandom, dominant-hegemonic readings are especially visible among passive consumers. As shown in Chapter 5, participants who consume K-pop music, fashion, and food without engaging creatively tend to accept the industry's encoded meanings of beauty, success, emotional comfort, and aspirational lifestyle without reinterpretation. K-pop is enjoyed as entertainment or trend, reinforcing its ideological and commercial messages rather than questioning them.

However, the case studies in Chapter 4 demonstrate that not all fandom engagement aligns with dominant readings. Active fans frequently engage in negotiated decoding. When Bangladeshi dancers perform K-pop choreography at local events, adapt performances for Bangladeshi stages, or combine K-pop aesthetics with local cultural elements, they accept the core meanings encoded by the industry such as discipline, excellence, and aesthetic polish, while rearticulating them through local bodies, spaces, and audiences. Arif Chowdhury's dance covers, Mahim's orchestral reinterpretation of BTS's "Black Swan," and Shefa Tabassum's performance of "Gashina" on international platforms all exemplify negotiated readings, where global cultural

texts are neither rejected nor passively copied but re-encoded through localized performance and identity.

Nevertheless, Hall's model also clarifies the limits of this agency. Even negotiated or creative readings remain bounded by the global visibility and legitimacy of K-pop itself. These performances gain recognition precisely because they remain identifiable as K-pop. As later chapters show, Bangladeshi fans' creative agency depends on conforming to industry-recognized aesthetics and standards, whether in competitions, festivals, or social media platforms. Thus, while fans actively produce meaning and cultural value, their interpretive freedom does not fully disrupt the dominant ideological framework of the K-pop industry.

Together, Marx's concept of commodity fetishism and Hall's encoding/decoding model reveal Bangladeshi K-pop fandom as a contested cultural space rather than a simple divide between active creativity and passive consumption. Fans simultaneously sustain global capitalist systems through consumption and labor, while also interpreting, negotiating, and localizing K-pop meanings within their own social realities. The empirical findings presented in Chapters 4 and 5 demonstrate that fandom in Bangladesh exists on a spectrum, where passive consumers stabilize K-pop's commercial power and active fans negotiate identity, skill development, and recognition, all within the constraints of transnational cultural capitalism. This integrated theoretical approach allows the thesis to move beyond binary classifications and instead understand K-pop fandom in Bangladesh as a dynamic process of participation, labor, and meaning-making shaped by both global structures and local practices.

Chapter 3

Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore the experiences, perspectives, and meaning-making processes of Bangladeshi K-pop fans. A qualitative approach is particularly appropriate for this research because the primary objective is to understand *why* and *how* fans engage with K-pop, rather than to quantify the extent or frequency of their behaviors. As Patton (2002) argues, qualitative research enables the researcher to make firsthand observations of activities and interactions, often through direct or personal engagement, allowing for a deeper understanding of social phenomena (p. 4). In line with this perspective, the present study prioritizes rich, descriptive data that capture fans' lived experiences within the K-pop fandom in Bangladesh.

The focus of inquiry centers on identity formation, emotional engagement, and creative participation within K-pop fandom. The research seeks to understand how fans construct meaning through their engagement with K-pop and how this engagement shapes their sense of self, social belonging, and emotional expression. Particular attention is given to the paradoxical nature of fandom, where participants simultaneously navigate between active creation such as producing fanart, dance covers, or organizing events and passive consumption, including listening to music and following idol content. Rather than emphasizing statistical measurement, this qualitative approach foregrounds meaning-making processes and aims to uncover the cultural and personal significance of K-pop in the everyday lives of young Bangladeshi fans.

3.2 Data Collection Process and Participants

The study involved a total of 38 participants, all selected based on their shared interest in K-pop. Of these, 34 participants were recruited through a Google Form survey, while the remaining 4 participants took part in in-depth interviews. Together, these participants provided a diverse yet focused sample that reflects the contemporary K-pop fandom landscape in Bangladesh. The majority of participants were female, with a smaller number of male participants included to ensure broader representation. Most participants were young adults in their early twenties, while two participants were in their late twenties or early thirties, allowing the study to capture experiences across a slightly wider age range.

In terms of educational and professional background, the majority of participants were undergraduate students from prestigious universities in Bangladesh, including the University of Dhaka, BRAC University, East West University, and North South University. In addition to students, a few participants were job holders, such as a teacher from Southpoint School and College in Chattogram and an AI expert working at a well-known company in Bangladesh, Augmedix. This diversity helped situate K-pop fandom across both academic and professional contexts.

The study also incorporated case studies of several public figures, including Arif Chowdhary, Shefa Tabassum, and Muhsinuzzaman Mahim. All information and data used in these case studies were collected with the explicit approval and consent of the participants. To ensure ethical research practice and protect participant privacy, other contributors were anonymized and referred to as Participant A, B, C, D, E and F.

Data collection was carried out through multiple qualitative methods to ensure depth and triangulation. A Google Form survey was first distributed to collect initial responses, and 34 participants responded through this method. The survey included questions related to participants' fandom experiences, social media engagement, creative activities, and personal motivations for engaging with K-pop. In addition to the survey, in-depth interviews were conducted with selected participants to gather more nuanced insights into fan experiences and identity formation. These interviews were recorded using a mobile phone, with prior consent obtained from all interviewees.

To supplement the primary data, social media analysis was also conducted. Public posts, photographs, and social media accounts of participants were examined to better understand their modes of engagement, creative output, and online self-presentation within K-pop fandom. Permission was obtained from participants before using any social media content, and all materials were used solely for academic research purposes.

The sampling method employed in this study was snowball sampling. Initial participants were recruited through the Google Form survey and were asked to forward the survey to friends and peers who shared similar interests in K-pop. This method proved effective in reaching participants who might not have been accessible through random sampling. It also facilitated the identification of popular K-pop-related social media pages and community events within Bangladesh, thereby enriching the contextual understanding of the fandom.

The data collection process further enabled the researcher to identify cases in which fans transformed their passion for K-pop into career-building opportunities, such as content creation, event management, or professional social media engagement. These instances became central to

several case studies included in the research. All experiences, achievements, and narratives drawn from these case studies were incorporated only after obtaining the informed approval of the participants involved.

3.3 Data Analysis

Data analysis began with an initial coding process, during which all collected data were carefully read and annotated. Key words, phrases, and significant instances reflecting fans' experiences, motivations, and creative practices were identified. The coding process captured both concrete activities such as creating fanart, producing dance covers, or attending K-pop events and subjective experiences, including identity formation, emotional attachment to idols, and recognition within fan communities.

Following initial coding, the codes were grouped into broader thematic clusters that reflected recurring patterns in fan engagement. These thematic clusters included creative participation, encompassing activities such as dance covers, fanart production, merchandise creation, and event organization; identity and social recognition, which examined how fandom contributes to personal growth, social validation, and a sense of community belonging; consumption practices, such as passive listening, following idol-related content, and attending online events; and cultural adaptation and localization, which explored how fans interpret, negotiate, and transform global K-pop culture into locally meaningful expressions. Most of these thematic clusters were analyzed using a combination of case studies and primary data obtained from surveys, interviews, and social media analysis.

The final stage of analysis moved beyond descriptive accounts to interpret how and why participants engaged in these practices. Drawing on relevant theoretical frameworks, the study

examined the underlying motivations, power relations, and cultural meanings embedded in fandom activities. This interpretive process allowed the researcher to distinguish between active production, understood as creative labor, and passive consumption, thereby highlighting the paradoxical nature of fandom. By integrating thematic coding with the perspectives of Marx and Hall, the analysis demonstrated that K-pop fandom exists at the intersection of creativity, personal identity, and consumption. Practices such as creative engagement, identity development, and cultural reinterpretation were thus understood not merely as individual hobbies, but as socially and culturally significant actions that reflect broader processes of labor, meaning-making, and the localization of global culture within the Bangladeshi context.

Chapter 4

Active Engagers of K-pop in Bangladesh: Creative Practice, Identity and Meaningful Participation

4.1 Patterns of Active Engagement in Bangladesh

The survey responses reveal that active engagers of K-pop in Bangladesh participate in a wide constellation of creative practices that extend far beyond passive listening or casual fandom. These individuals engage with K-pop as a source of embodied practice, meaningful consumption, and skill development. For many, K-pop serves as a framework for creative expression, enabling them to reinterpret global cultural forms in ways that resonate personally and socially. In the dataset, respondents such as Arif Chowdhury, Participant A, Participant B and others articulate how their interaction with K-pop content became productive rather than merely receptive. A recurring theme in multiple responses is that “K-pop helped them develop dance skills, boost confidence, and participate in community events,” which they identify as formative in their personal trajectories. This suggests that active engagement with K-pop in Bangladesh encompasses both performative and creative labor, where meaning is co-produced through practice, social interaction, and ongoing cultural exchange.

Responding to the survey, Participant A, an active member of “Knight Sisters” under the Kpop dance group Renessus in Bangladesh, explicitly states, “I learned dancing from K-pop choreographs and now I perform in events,” highlighting how the respondent’s own sense of identity as a dancer is grounded in K-pop practice. In a similar vein, Participant B, an entrepreneur and student from East West University, described that she not only learned dance

moves from K-pop songs but also began creating handmade fan merchandise that she shared and sold within local fan groups. These responses underscore that K-pop engagement becomes a site of active skill cultivation, where participants leverage global popular culture to develop locally meaningful competencies.

4.2 Creative Practices as Active Cultural Labor

The creative practices of active K-pop fans in Bangladesh illustrate how fandom functions as a form of cultural labor rather than simple entertainment consumption. The case of Arif Chowdhury demonstrates this clearly. His engagement with K-pop extends beyond listening or watching performances to learning and publicly performing complex choreographies by groups such as EXO, Stray Kids, ATEEZ, and SHINee. Participation in events like K-meets, K-fests, and the K-pop World Festival Bangladesh requires sustained physical training, coordination with peers, and repeated rehearsal. From a Marxist perspective, these practices can be understood as productive labor, even though they are unpaid. Arif's time, effort, and emotional investment generate cultural value that circulates within the K-pop fandom ecosystem.

The widely shared "EXO Monster dance cover by Arif Chowdhury" posted on the Renessus21 Facebook page illustrates how this labor becomes visible and socially meaningful. The use of hashtags such as #exoL and #exomonster embeds his performance within global K-pop commodity culture. Here, commodity fetishism becomes evident: the choreography, idol image, and performance style appear as objects of admiration detached from the labor systems behind them, while fan labor itself is normalized as passion rather than work. Arif's creative output contributes to sustaining the popularity and symbolic value of K-pop while remaining outside formal economic recognition.



Figure 1: EXO Monster dance cover by Arif Chowdhury (Facebook post on Renessus's official page)

At the same time, Hall's encoding/decoding model helps explain how Arif's practice is not mere imitation. K-pop choreography is encoded by the industry with meanings of perfection, discipline, and synchronized excellence. Arif's performance represents a negotiated decoding, where he accepts the aesthetic structure of the choreography but rearticulates it through his own body, local stage, and community audience. The performance is not consumed privately but reproduced as localized cultural expression. That is what makes his labour and consumption of K-pop culture a negotiated decoding.

This negotiation becomes visible in the way Arif simultaneously preserves and transforms the encoded meanings of K-pop performance. While he follows the original choreography closely; thereby, accepting the dominant aesthetic values set by the K-pop industry, his performance is situated within a Bangladeshi socio-cultural space that fundamentally alters how those meanings function. The choreography, originally designed for polished idol stages, professional lighting,

and global media circulation, is re-embedded in local performance venues, community-run events, and fan-organized platforms. Through this shift, the meaning of “perfection” becomes less about industrial spectacle and more about embodied effort, peer recognition, and communal validation. His body, shaped by local training conditions rather than the idol system, becomes a site where global pop aesthetics are negotiated rather than passively reproduced.

Moreover, Arif’s practice involves selective adaptation rather than total acceptance of the industry’s encoded message. He adopts the discipline and technical rigor of K-pop choreography, but the purpose of the performance changes. Instead of functioning primarily as a commercial product designed to generate profit or brand value, his performance operates as a form of cultural participation and social labor within a fan community. The circulation of his dance covers through community pages such as Renessus21 transforms the choreography into a shared cultural resource rather than a proprietary industry asset. In this sense, Arif does not reject the dominant meaning of K-pop, but he does not consume it in its original commercial form either; he reworks it to fit local conditions, aspirations, and forms of recognition.

This practice illustrates fandom as a site of labor, consumption, and meaning-making within a Global South context. Arif consumes K-pop as a global cultural commodity, learning choreography and engaging with idol aesthetics, yet he also performs significant unpaid labor through rehearsal, physical discipline, and public performance. This labor generates cultural value within the Bangladeshi fan community while simultaneously contributing to the global visibility and circulation of K-pop. At the same time, Arif actively produces meaning by translating a globally encoded performance into a locally legible expression of skill, identity, and belonging. His negotiated decoding thus emerges from the tension between structural constraint

and creative agency, where global cultural texts are neither passively accepted nor radically opposed, but reshaped through localized labor and interpretation.

4.3 Community Platforms as Sites of Meaning-Making and Validation

Community platforms such as Renessus BD and Renessus21 play a crucial role in transforming individual creative labor into collective cultural production. These platforms do more than host content; they actively validate and circulate fan labor, reinforcing its value within the fandom. When Arif's dance cover appears on Renessus21 rather than a private account, it signals recognition by the community and positions his work as part of a shared cultural archive.

From a Marxist standpoint, these platforms help sustain the circulation of cultural commodities without monetary exchange. Fan performances, though unpaid, increase visibility, engagement, and symbolic capital for K-pop as a global product. The labor of posting, sharing, commenting, and reacting becomes part of the wider production process, even though it is framed as voluntary participation.

Hall's theory further reveals how these platforms encourage shared decoding practices. Posts such as the "Mantra Jennie dance class cover" by Knight Sisters at K-Fest or the Stray Kids "Do It" cover by Plato Biswas show how fans collectively negotiate K-pop meanings. While the industry encodes idol performances with polished, commercial aesthetics, community platforms allow fans to reinterpret these meanings through group choreography, peer learning, and localized performance spaces. The repeated circulation of such content normalizes active engagement as a legitimate way of "being a fan," shifting fandom from consumption to participation.



Figure 2: Mantra Jennie dance class cover at K-fest & *Stray Kids* “Do It” dance cover by Plato Biswas (Renessus Facebook page)

4.4 Public Performance and Interaction with Wider Audiences

Live performances at venues such as St. Francis Xavier’s Girls High School and College and Chef’s Table Courtside demonstrate how K-pop fandom moves beyond insular fan spaces into broader public life.



Figure 3: K-pop inspired events at St. Francis Xavier's Girls High School and College and Chef's Table Courtside
(Renessus Facebook page)

These events enable fans to present their creative work to audiences who may not identify as K-pop fans, contributing to the local spread of K-pop culture.

Analytically, these performances reveal how fans decode K-pop in ways that are both global and local. When performers adapt Bangla or Hindi songs using K-pop-inspired choreography, formations, and styling, they engage in a negotiated decoding process. The dominant encoded meaning of K-pop as a distinctly Korean cultural product is partially reworked to fit local linguistic and cultural contexts. This shows that fandom is not about cultural replacement but cultural translation.

From a Marxist lens, these performances still operate within the logic of commodity culture. The aesthetic frameworks of K-pop fashion, movement, visual presentation remain central, reinforcing its global dominance. However, the fans' ability to repurpose these aesthetics for

local expression demonstrates agency within constraint, where global cultural forms are re-used to articulate local identities.

4.5 Creative Diversification, Identity Formation, and Active Consumption

The mentioned cases further demonstrate how active K-pop engagement reshapes identity and everyday life. Participant A's statement that she became a dancer because of K-pop highlights how fandom enables embodied self-transformation. Her participation in K-fests and K-meets as a performer reflects how confidence, discipline, and public presence are cultivated through fandom. This aligns with Hall's idea that audiences actively use media texts to construct identity, rather than simply consuming them.

Participant B's engagement with handmade fan merchandise shows how fandom can move into semi-economic creative labor. Inspired by idol work ethics, she transformed her hobby into a small-scale entrepreneurial practice. While this reflects personal empowerment, a Marxist analysis reveals that such creativity still operates within capitalist frameworks, where fan labor fills market niches without institutional support or protection. Her work adds value to K-pop's cultural economy while remaining informal and precarious.

Other respondents' use of social media platforms to share dance covers and fan edits further supports this analysis. Regular posting, peer feedback, and public recognition reinforce identity through visibility. As Participant C (a student from BRAC University) noted that, K-pop influenced her interest in Korean language, beauty, and culture, shaping her lifestyle during adolescence and early adulthood. Influenced by the Korean culture, she even learned the language and tried the Korean beauty products. This demonstrates how active engagement extends into psychological development and everyday practices.

Psychologically, Participant C's engagement reflects the processes discussed in the literature on parasocial interaction and identity formation. Through repeated exposure to idols, performances, and fan communities, K-pop becomes more than entertainment; it operates as an affective environment where aspirations, emotional attachments, and self-concepts are cultivated.

Learning the Korean language is not merely a hobby but an outcome of sustained emotional investment and identification with the cultural world associated with idols. As discussed in Chapter 2, parasocial bonds encourage fans to internalize idols as reference figures, which can motivate long-term cognitive and behavioral commitments. In Participant C's case, this attachment translates into linguistic learning, demonstrating how emotional connection drives skill acquisition and intellectual effort.

This process also illustrates fandom as a site of labor. Learning a new language requires sustained mental discipline, time investment, memory work, and repeated practice. Although this labor is self-directed and unpaid, it produces tangible personal outcomes, including enhanced language proficiency, improved cognitive flexibility, and expanded cultural literacy. Her engagement thus moves beyond passive consumption of K-pop content into active self-development, where fandom becomes a training ground for transferable skills. At the same time, this labor remains intertwined with consumption: her interest in Korean beauty products and cultural practices reflects how learning and lifestyle adoption coexist with market participation. Consumption here is not accidental but meaningful, functioning as a way to materially inhabit the cultural identity she is constructing.

Meaning-making is central to this process. Participant C does not consume Korean language or beauty culture as isolated products; instead, she integrates them into a broader narrative of self-growth and identity during adolescence and early adulthood. Through fandom, Korean language

learning becomes meaningful as a symbol of dedication, belonging, and cultural competence rather than simply an academic exercise. Social media visibility further reinforces this meaning. Sharing content, receiving feedback, and being recognized by peers validate her efforts and stabilize her identity within the fandom community, aligning with social identity theory discussed in the literature review.

Within a Global South context, this case also highlights how global cultural flows shape psychological development and everyday practices. Access to K-pop through digital platforms enables fans like Participant C to engage in forms of self-improvement and cultural learning that may not be institutionally structured or formally recognized. Her linguistic and aesthetic practices demonstrate how global popular culture can function as an informal educational space, where consumption motivates labor and labor produces meaning. However, as with other cases in this thesis, this agency exists alongside structural constraints: her learning and consumption simultaneously contribute to the circulation and expansion of K-pop's global cultural economy. Thus, Participant C's experience exemplifies how psychological development, labor, and consumption are deeply entangled within fandom, reinforcing the thesis's argument that K-pop fandom in Bangladesh operates as a complex site of labor, consumption, and meaning-making rather than a simple form of entertainment.

Across these cases, active consumption emerges as a process of meaning-making rather than passive absorption. Fans decode K-pop texts in ways that align with their aspirations, adapt them to local contexts, and use them to build skills, confidence, and community belonging. Yet, this agency exists alongside structural constraints, where fan labor continues to fuel global cultural industries.

4.6 From Fandom to Enterprise: Success Stories of the K-Community in Bangladesh

Building on the previous discussion on active engagers, this sector examines what happens when such active engagement enters economic, professional, and institutional spaces. By analyzing specific success stories within the Bangladeshi K-community, it explores how fandom can transform into public recognition, performance careers, and entrepreneurial pathways, while remaining shaped by broader structures of cultural production.

Muhsinuzzaman Mahim (Beast Boi): Performance, Labor, and Personal Transformation

Muhsinuzzaman Mahim, widely known in the Bangladeshi K-pop community as “Beast Boi,” provides a compelling example of how sustained K-pop engagement can generate both public recognition and personal growth. Mahim participated actively in the local K-pop scene as a singer and dancer, performing at multiple community events and national competitions. His success at the 2019 K-Fest (Bangladesh Global Audition), where he won first prize and received a cash award of 30,000 BDT marks a crucial moment where fan activity crossed into institutionally recognized cultural labor.



Figure 4: Mahim’s achievement at Bangladesh Global Audition

From a Marxist perspective, Mahim's performances illustrate how fandom can function as productive labor rather than leisure alone. His preparation for competitions required disciplined rehearsal, vocal training, emotional investment, and bodily endurance. These efforts produced exchange value in the form of prize money, certificates, and symbolic recognition. Unlike passive consumption, Mahim's labor actively reproduced K-pop culture in a localized form, demonstrating that fans can become co-producers of cultural value, even when operating outside formal employment structures.

However, Marxist analysis also reveals the precarious nature of this labor. Although Mahim gained recognition, his work remained largely unpaid or short-term, reflecting how fan labor often exists at the margins of capitalist cultural economies. His success did not translate into long-term financial security, highlighting the structural limits within which creative fandom operates.

Mahim's achievements continued at the Korean Festival 2020 organized by Independent University, Bangladesh, where he won first place in the music competition and received a certificate and crest. These repeated institutional recognitions demonstrate how fan labor becomes visible and valued only when it aligns with formal evaluative frameworks such as competitions, festivals, and judging panels.



Figure 5: Mahim's (Beast Boi) certificate and crest

Mahim's visibility extended further through mainstream media coverage. He was featured in *Prothom Alo*'s youth and culture section, under the tagline “করিও সুর-তালে বাংলাদেশি তরুণেরা,” (the entrenchment of Korean music within Bangladeshi youth culture) with other K-pop enthusiasts. This feature situates the fandom within a broader narrative of Bangladeshi youth cultural creativity. This media recognition is significant because it shows how fan practices, once considered marginal or niche, enter national cultural discourse, reinforcing fandom as a legitimate cultural activity rather than a private hobby.



Figure 6: Prothom Alo feature on K-community

Through Hall's encoding/decoding framework, Mahim's performances can be understood as acts of negotiated meaning-making. K-pop songs are encoded by the Korean entertainment industry with specific aesthetics, emotions, and narratives. Mahim's orchestral performance of "Black Swan" by BTS at *Korean Wave 2020* demonstrates how these encoded meanings are reinterpreted. By altering the musical arrangement and performing it live for a Bangladeshi audience, he re-encoded the song within a local cultural context. This was neither a rejection of K-pop nor a direct imitation, but a negotiated decoding that balanced fidelity to the original with personal and communal expression.



Figure 7: Mahim’s performance at K-gathering on Black Swan by BTS (His public Facebook post)

Mahim’s reflection on his “fanboy years” further highlights fandom’s role in identity formation. Coming from a conservative family background, his involvement in K-pop events enabled him to become more social, confident, and communicative. In his words,

“My K-pop Fanboy days kinda defined an era for me. My 17–21 years old time was spent mostly communicating with various people, making connections via fan activities or performances etc. It played a vast role into making me more social, and also step into the real world, coming from a conservative family. So it did contribute a lot for my personal development, even though I am not a part of this culture anymore.” (Appendix C).

This indicates that fandom operated as a social training ground, providing skills, building confidence and networks that extended beyond cultural participation. Even though Mahim later disengaged from K-pop, his experience shows that fandom can function as a formative life stage, shaping personal development even after active participation ends.

Furthermore, when viewed through Marxist theory and Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding framework together, Mahim's case reveals a central paradox of contemporary fandom: even highly active, creative participation remains structurally grounded within global capitalist systems of cultural production. While Mahim clearly moves beyond passive consumption through performance, training, and public visibility, his labor does not escape the economic and ideological framework of the K-pop industry. Instead, it operates within it, often reinforcing the very system it appears to localize or personalize.

From a Marxist perspective, Mahim's activities represent active cultural labor rather than simple consumption. His singing, dancing, rehearsal discipline, and public performances generate cultural value, visibility, and symbolic capital. In moments such as winning competitions or receiving media coverage, this labor is temporarily recognized and rewarded. However, this recognition remains limited, episodic, and institutionally controlled. Despite his skill and dedication, Mahim does not gain ownership over the cultural product he reproduces, nor does he gain sustained economic security. His labor circulates value (attention, legitimacy, and cultural prestige) for K-pop as a global industry, while his own gains remain symbolic and short-term. This reflects Marx's idea that even productive labor can be exploited when it operates outside ownership and control.

At the same time, Mahim's work also demonstrates negotiated meaning-making through Hall's model. His performances do not simply copy K-pop in a mechanical way. By adapting songs, rearranging music, and performing for Bangladeshi audiences, he re-encodes global cultural texts within a local context. This gives the appearance of cultural agency and creative freedom. However, this negotiation has limits. The core meanings of K-pop for instance, aesthetics, emotional narratives, and prestige remain intact. Mahim's performances gain value precisely

because they are recognizable as K-pop. Thus, even while he actively reshapes form and presentation, the ideological framework of the original product remains dominant.

This creates a paradoxical position: Mahim is an active participant, yet he is not fully autonomous. He produces culture, but within boundaries set by global capitalist and cultural systems. His creativity depends on the visibility, legitimacy, and symbolic power of K-pop as a global brand. In this sense, active fandom does not fully oppose passive consumption; rather, it exists on a continuum with it. While Mahim produces new performances, he simultaneously contributes to the circulation and reinforcement of K-pop's global value.

This paradox directly supports the central argument of this thesis: the distinction between active and passive consumption is not absolute. Active fans like Mahim challenge the idea of fans as merely consumers, yet their labor remains embedded within commercial and ideological structures that benefit global cultural industries. Even as fandom enables personal growth, skill development, and social mobility, it continues to function as part of cultural capitalism. Mahim's journey thus illustrates how fandom can be both empowering and limiting; offering agency, recognition, and transformation, while remaining structurally dependent on the very system it helps sustain.

Shefa Tabassum: International Recognition and the Professionalization of Fan Labor

While Mahim's case illustrates national-level recognition, Shefa Tabassum represents a more transnational trajectory of K-pop fandom in Bangladesh. Shefa gained international recognition by representing Bangladesh at the 2018 Changwon K-Pop World Festival in South Korea, where she won the Best Solo Performance Award. Her journey began at the Bangladesh preliminary

round held at Shilpakala Academy, where she performed “*Gashina*” by Sunmi and earned the opportunity to compete internationally.



Figure 8: “*Gashina*” performance by Shefa Tabssum at K-Pop World Festival (Screenshot from YouTube)



Figure 9: Award winning moment (Screenshot from YouTube)

From a Marxist standpoint, Shefa’s case demonstrates how fandom can shift from informal participation to professionalized cultural labor when it meets global institutional standards of performance, discipline, and evaluation. Her success was not accidental or purely based on passion; rather, it was the result of sustained bodily discipline, intensive choreographic training, and consistent performance practice over time. These forms of labor required physical endurance, emotional regulation, time investment, and self-management characteristics commonly associated with professional cultural work rather than leisure or hobby activity.

Through this labor, Shefa generated significant symbolic capital, including international recognition, certificates, awards, and media visibility. While these rewards may not always carry

immediate monetary compensation, they possess clear exchange-value within the cultural economy. For instance, her accumulated recognition enabled her to secure further institutional roles, such as her position as Master of Ceremony at the K-Pop World Festival Bangladesh auditions in 2021. In this way, symbolic achievements were converted into professional opportunities, demonstrating how non-monetary rewards can circulate as value within cultural markets.



Figure 10: Shefa's role as MC in KWF'21 BD audition (Featured by Daily Star)

At the same time, these awards and certificates also carry use-value for Shefa herself. They function as proof of skill, credibility, and legitimacy, strengthening her personal and professional identity. They can be used in portfolios, auditions, and public profiles to establish authority and expertise. Thus, her achievements operate on two levels: personally empowering for the performer, and economically meaningful within the broader cultural system.

Similarly, commodity fetishism is also evident in how these achievements are socially perceived. Awards, certificates, and titles often appear as natural indicators of talent and success, obscuring

the extensive labor, discipline, and unequal conditions that produced them. The focus shifts from the process of labor to the object - the certificate, the title, the media feature, which seems to possess value on its own. In this way, the social relations behind Shefa's success, including institutional gatekeeping, global hierarchies, and competitive selection processes, become less visible.

Marxist analysis further exposes the unequal structure of global cultural production that frames Shefa's success. As a performer from the Global South, her visibility depended on achieving exceptional performance within an international framework largely governed by institutions based in East Asia. Access to recognition was conditional, selective, and competitive. While her success demonstrates that global cultural systems can be navigated through skill, discipline, and strategic participation, it does not dismantle the structural inequalities embedded within those systems.

On the other hand, rather than eliminating global hierarchies, Shefa's case illustrates how limited access is negotiated under unequal conditions. Her achievements highlight both the possibilities and constraints of professionalized fan labor: fandom can become a pathway to recognition and opportunity, yet it remains dependent on global capitalist structures that control standards, visibility, and value. This reinforces the broader argument of the thesis, that even highly active and professionalized fandom operates within, rather than outside, global systems of cultural capitalism.

Using Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model, Shefa's performances can be understood as acts of transnational re-encoding, where globally produced cultural texts are actively reinterpreted through local embodiment. In Hall's framework, cultural texts such as K-pop songs are not

neutral; they are encoded by producers with preferred meanings shaped by specific social, cultural, and industrial contexts. The K-pop song “*Gashina*” is originally encoded with meanings of gendered confidence, stylized femininity, controlled sensuality, and polished pop-industrial aesthetics, all carefully designed within the Korean entertainment system.

When Shefa performs the choreography of “*Gashina*” on international stages, she does not simply reproduce these encoded meanings unchanged. Instead, she decodes the song through her own social and cultural positioning as a Bangladeshi dancer and then re-encodes it through performance. This process reflects a negotiated reading. She accepts the core aesthetic and emotional meanings of the song for instance the confidence, strength, and feminine expression. But adapts how those meanings are embodied, presented, and read. Here, nationality also plays a vital role. People are seeing a K-pop performance on an international stage. But the performance is delivered by a Bangladeshi. Thus, her performance remains recognizable as K-pop, yet it is no longer tied exclusively to Korean identity.

This negotiated decoding challenges the assumption that K-pop authenticity belongs only to Korean bodies or national contexts. Without rejecting the original meaning of the song, Shefa expands it. Her body becomes a site where global pop meanings are translated rather than copied. In Hall’s terms, she works within the dominant framework of K-pop while subtly shifting its boundaries, showing that meaning is not fixed at the point of production but continues to evolve through performance and reception.

Shefa’s continued visibility on Instagram (@shefa.righthere), where she identifies herself as “Best Solo Performance Winner Changwon KWF’18,” further demonstrates this process of negotiated meaning-making. Institutional recognition from an international K-pop platform is

originally encoded as an official marker of excellence within a specific evaluative system. By incorporating this title into her personal digital identity, Shefa re-encodes the institutional meaning into a personalized narrative of achievement that is accessible and understandable to diverse audiences.

Through a Hallian lens, this act does not oppose the dominant meaning of the award, nor does it passively accept it. Instead, it negotiates it. The title is transformed from a formal institutional label into part of an ongoing self-representation strategy. For global audiences, it signals legitimacy and skill; for local audiences, it signifies international recognition and success. In both cases, meaning is actively managed rather than simply received.

Moreover, Shefa's performances and online self-presentation illustrate how negotiated readings operate across borders. They show how global pop culture texts retain their dominant meanings while acquiring new layers through local embodiment, reinterpretation, and circulation. Hall's encoding/decoding model thus helps explain how Shefa functions not as a passive receiver of K-pop culture, but as an active meaning-maker working within, yet subtly reshaping, transnational cultural flows.

Lastly, Shefa's experience illustrates a clear paradox of active fandom: she is simultaneously a highly visible cultural producer and a participant constrained by global commercial structures. On one hand, she actively engages in K-pop culture through disciplined practice, precise choreography, and repeated public performances. Winning the Best Solo Performance award at the Changwon K-Pop World Festival 2018 and serving as Master of Ceremony for the KWF Bangladesh auditions in 2021 are concrete examples of how her labor translates into recognition, visibility, and professional opportunities. Her sustained preparation, performance consistency,

and ability to adapt songs like “*Gashina*” for international stages demonstrate that fan labor can extend far beyond personal enjoyment, producing measurable cultural and symbolic value.

But at the same time, Shefa’s labor remains bound by structural limits. Her visibility and recognition depend on institutions largely controlled outside Bangladesh, which set strict evaluative standards and aesthetic norms. While her performances re-encode K-pop meanings for local and transnational audiences, her creative agency is exercised within the frameworks already established by the global K-pop industry. The awards, certificates, and media features she receives, though valuable, are conditional. They only exist because she successfully navigates an international system that determines what counts as skill, talent, or excellence.

This tension creates a paradoxical engagement. Shefa is clearly an active participant, producing cultural labor, shaping performances, and negotiating meaning across borders. Yet her activity is inseparable from the global structures that frame and limit its value. Her creativity and recognition are enabled and legitimized by a commercial and institutional system over which she has little control. In other words, she simultaneously embodies autonomy and dependence: she exercises agency through performance while remaining anchored to the hierarchies, expectations, and commercial logics of global K-pop.

Shefa’s journey thus reflects the central paradox of active fandom: fan labor can be both productive and empowering, locally transformative yet globally constrained, allowing for personal visibility and professional opportunity while remaining deeply embedded within structures of international cultural production. Her engagement is neither fully independent nor fully passive; it exists in the tension between creative agency and systemic dependence, highlighting the complex realities of fandom in a globalized cultural economy.

To summarize, this chapter examined how K-pop fandom in Bangladesh moves beyond personal enjoyment and becomes a space for performance, labor, recognition, and opportunity. Through the success stories of figures such as Muhsinuzzaman Mahim (Beast Boi) and Shefa Tabassum, as well as examples from dance crews, competitions, festivals, and media exposure, the chapter showed that fandom functions as an active cultural practice, not a passive one.

Across different sectors such as dance, music, competitions, event hosting, social media presence, and international festivals, Bangladeshi K-pop fans invest significant time, skill, emotional energy, and discipline. These activities reflect a form of cultural labor. Fans rehearse for months, organize teams, translate lyrics, maintain online profiles, and perform on public stages. While much of this labor is unpaid or informally rewarded, it produces both symbolic value (certificates, titles, recognition, confidence) and, in some cases, material benefits (prize money, professional roles, and invitations).

From a structural point of view, these fan practices remain connected to global capitalist systems. K-pop content, idols, and competitions are created and controlled by powerful entertainment industries, and Bangladeshi fans participate within rules set by these global institutions. This is visible in international competitions such as the K-Pop World Festival, where only a few exceptional performers from the Global South gain visibility. As seen in Shefa Tabassum's case, success often depends on meeting global standards of performance, discipline, and aesthetics. This shows that fandom operates within unequal global cultural hierarchies, even when it offers opportunities.

At the same time, this chapter demonstrates that Bangladeshi fans are not simply controlled by the industry. Using negotiated practices, they reinterpret K-pop in ways that fit their own social

and cultural contexts. Mahim's orchestral version of "*Black Swan*", Shefa's embodied performance of "*Gashina*", and the localized choreography of Bangladeshi dance crews all show how global K-pop texts are adapted, reshaped, and re-encoded. These practices create space for creativity, self-expression, and community-building, while still engaging with global popular culture.

Media coverage, such as features in *Prothom Alo*, and visibility on social media platforms further indicate how fandom can become a recognized public identity. For many participants, K-pop fandom acts as a training ground where they develop communication skills, confidence, teamwork, and leadership skills that often extend beyond fandom itself. Even when fans later move away from K-pop, the impact of their participation remains meaningful in their personal and social lives.

Overall, this chapter concludes that K-pop fandom in Bangladesh is best understood as a contested cultural space. It is neither fully empowering nor entirely exploitative. Instead, it exists at the intersection of global capitalism, local creativity, fan labor, and identity formation. By examining success stories across multiple sectors, this chapter shows that Bangladeshi K-pop fans actively negotiate global cultural forces to create opportunities, meaning, and visibility within their own social realities.

Chapter 5

Passive Consumers of K-pop in Bangladesh: Silent Supporters of Commercial Power

5.1 Passive Consumption Practices in Bangladeshi K-pop Fandom

Passive consumption represents one of the most widespread, yet frequently overlooked, forms of engagement within Bangladeshi K-pop fandom. While active fans often receive academic attention for their visible creativity such as dance covers, fan art, translations, or event organization, passive consumers quietly sustain the industry through everyday acts of consumption. These acts include listening to music, watching music videos, streaming content, sharing posts online, purchasing merchandise, visiting Korean restaurants, and imitating idol fashion or lifestyle choices. Although these practices may appear simple or casual, they play a crucial structural role in maintaining K-pop's economic and cultural power in Bangladesh.

The cases of participants D, E, and F clearly demonstrate how passive consumption operates across different social positions and levels of emotional attachment. Participant D, a student from BRAC University, engages with K-pop mainly by listening to songs, watching music videos, occasionally covering songs or choreography for personal enjoyment, and eating at Korean restaurants. Importantly, she explicitly states “None” under creative or active engagement. This self-identification is analytically significant because it shows a conscious boundary between enjoyment and production. Her engagement remains private and consumption-oriented rather than public or productive.

From a Marxist perspective, Participant D's practices contribute directly to commodity circulation rather than cultural production. Every streamed song, viewed music video, or purchased meal adds to the economic value of K-pop-related industries. Even though she does not create fan content or organize activities, her consumption still generates profit and visibility. Algorithms on platforms like YouTube and Spotify depend heavily on repeated views and streams; thus, passive consumers like Participant D help push K-pop content higher in rankings, attracting advertisers and expanding global reach. In this way, her labor is indirect and unpaid, yet economically meaningful.

Furthermore, commodity fetishism is clearly visible here. The music videos, idols, and even Korean food appear as attractive, self-contained objects of pleasure. The complex labor behind them for instance, trainees' years of training, factory-style idol management, low-paid restaurant workers, global supply chains producing merchandise remains hidden. Participant D enjoys the finished cultural product without encountering the social relations of labor that make it possible. As Marx explains, commodities appear to have value in themselves, while the human work behind them becomes invisible.

This invisibility is precisely what situates Participant D's engagement within passive consumption. Her interaction with K-pop remains at the level of enjoyment and use-value, where pleasure, relaxation, and aesthetic satisfaction are foregrounded, while the conditions of production are neither questioned nor made visible. Although her streaming, viewing, and dining practices contribute economically to the K-pop industry, this contribution is experienced as leisure rather than labor. The labor embedded in her actions—such as generating views, increasing algorithmic visibility, or sustaining themed commercial spaces—is obscured by the framing of these activities as personal enjoyment. As a result, consumption is naturalized,

appearing apolitical and effortless, even though it plays a crucial role in sustaining global cultural capitalism.

Moreover, through Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding framework, Participant D's engagement can be understood as a dominant-hegemonic reading. The meanings encoded by the K-pop industry for instance, entertainment, beauty, emotional comfort, and aesthetic pleasure are accepted without resistance or reinterpretation. K-pop is consumed exactly as it is offered: something enjoyable, relaxing, and personally meaningful, but not something to be questioned, reshaped, or politicized.

What makes this reading dominant-hegemonic is not simply acceptance, but the absence of negotiation or critical distance. Participant D decodes K-pop texts in alignment with the industry's preferred meanings, treating idols, music videos, and associated lifestyle products as naturally pleasurable and emotionally rewarding. The representations of beauty, success, and happiness presented in K-pop are taken at face value, reinforcing their ideological power. There is no attempt to reinterpret these meanings within a local or critical framework, nor to transform them through creative or communal production. Instead, the encoded message circulates intact, reproducing itself through repeated acts of consumption.

This mode of engagement also stabilizes meaning rather than producing new ones. Meaning-making here functions through repetition rather than reinterpretation. By consuming K-pop content as it is presented, Participant D helps normalize its values and aesthetics within everyday life, contributing to their hegemonic status. Her enjoyment confirms the industry's narrative that K-pop is universally appealing, emotionally soothing, and culturally desirable. In Hall's terms,

this reinforces the dominance of the encoded meaning by making it appear common-sense rather than constructed.

Within the framework of fandom as a site of labor, consumption, and meaning-making, Participant D's case illustrates how passive fandom operates structurally. While she does not engage in visible creative labor, her consumption still performs an essential function within the cultural economy. Her streams, views, purchases, and dining choices generate value and visibility, yet this labor is experienced as private leisure rather than social contribution. Meaning is not actively produced or contested; it is received, affirmed, and circulated. Thus, her engagement exemplifies passive consumption in its clearest form: economically productive, ideologically stabilizing, and affectively satisfying, while remaining detached from critical reflection or transformative cultural agency

Furthermore, a similar pattern is evident in Participant E's responses. Participant E, a student from Popular Medical College, encountered K-pop through family and social gatherings rather than personal exploration. She explains, "I first came across K-pop when one of my cousins played it at her birthday party... I began dressing like them and trying the foods they eat." (Appendix B). This statement highlights how K-pop enters everyday life through social interaction rather than ideological commitment. Birthdays, family events, and casual gatherings become key sites where K-pop circulates naturally. Her engagement includes dressing like idols, trying Korean food, reposting content on social media, and purchasing merchandise. These practices demonstrate how passive consumption extends beyond media and becomes part of lifestyle imitation. Idol fashion choices are treated as desirable standards, encouraging consumers to buy similar clothes, accessories, or cosmetics. Food consumption works in the

same way; Korean dishes become symbols of modernity, trendiness, and global belonging rather than simply meals.

Psychologically, this pattern of engagement establishes a sense of belonging through conformity rather than creative identification. By adopting visible and socially recognizable markers of K-pop culture (fashion styles, food preferences, and online reposting), Participant E aligns herself with a shared cultural trend that signals inclusion within a broader peer and family network. Rather than forming attachment through deep emotional bonds with specific idols or creative participation, her connection to K-pop is mediated through social approval and normalization. Following trends becomes a way of reducing social distance, avoiding exclusion, and affirming group membership. In this sense, K-pop functions as a social language: dressing like idols or consuming Korean food communicates familiarity and cultural awareness, allowing Participant E to feel connected without the risks or commitments associated with active fandom.

This form of belonging is psychologically stabilizing because it requires minimal cognitive or emotional investment. Participant E does not need to interpret, negotiate, or critically engage with K-pop texts; instead, she participates by mirroring widely accepted behaviors. Such participation offers reassurance through sameness, where being “up-to-date” with trends becomes more important than producing individual meaning. This aligns with the literature on social identity formation, where group belonging can be achieved through visible markers rather than deep ideological alignment. In this case, K-pop provides a ready-made cultural framework that allows Participant E to situate herself within a global trend while remaining socially embedded in her immediate environment.

From a Marxist standpoint, Participant E's actions represent reproductive consumption. She does not produce new cultural meaning or challenge existing narratives. Instead, she repeats and reinforces already established meanings by buying, sharing, and imitating. Her reposting behavior on social media amplifies existing promotional content rather than transforming it. This circulation helps maintain demand and visibility, allowing the K-pop industry to grow without needing additional creative labor from her. Commodity fetishism operates strongly in her case. Merchandise, clothing styles, and food items appear as gateways to the K-pop world. The act of wearing idol-inspired fashion and trying the Korean food creates the feeling of closeness to the celebrities. However, the exploitative labor systems behind idol production, fashion manufacturing, and food service remain unseen. Social relations between workers, producers, and consumers are replaced by emotional attachment to objects.

Using Stuart Hall's framework, Participant E's engagement again aligns with dominant decoding. The encoded meanings of idol lifestyle, beauty standards, and success are accepted as aspirational norms. Psychologically, this acceptance is reinforced by the social rewards of conformity and recognition rather than by critical reflection. Instead of adapting these meanings to local realities or questioning their relevance, she adopts them directly, reinforcing K-pop's ideological power. Meaning, in this case, is not actively constructed but socially absorbed, confirming passive consumption as a mode of engagement that sustains both cultural hegemony and emotional belonging without challenging the structures that produce them. This acceptance of a foreign culture without any creative labor makes the practices seem like a social norm and beneficial to all (in participant E's case, recognition in her social surrounding) rather than a tool for maintaining dominant power.

Lastly, another case of Participant F, an AI expert working at Augmadix in Dhaka, offers a particularly revealing point of view. He first encountered K-pop through his sister, who introduced him to BTS's "Spring Day." Despite clearly stating that he does not consider himself a K-pop fan, he still purchases K-pop merchandise as gifts for his sister and friends who are K-pop fans and eats at Korean restaurants such as Koryori (Appendix A). This shows that emotional fandom identity is not necessary for capitalist cultural systems to function.

What makes Participant F's case especially significant is that his engagement demonstrates how K-pop's cultural dominance extends beyond fan communities into everyday social practices. His actions are motivated not by affective attachment but by social utility. K-pop functions for him as a culturally recognized symbol; something that is widely legible, appropriate, and meaningful within contemporary social interactions. By choosing K-pop merchandise as gifts, he implicitly acknowledges its cultural value and relevance, reinforcing its status as a normative and desirable cultural form. In this way, K-pop operates as a shared cultural language that does not require personal belief or identification to be effective.

From a Marxist perspective, Participant F demonstrates indirect consumption. Even without personal interest or identification, his actions still support commodity circulation. Buying merchandise as gifts and dining at themed restaurants injects money into K-pop-related industries. This highlights how cultural capitalism operates beyond fandom boundaries. K-pop becomes socially useful as a gift, a trend, or a shared reference point, regardless of individual taste.

This form of indirect consumption is particularly important because it shows how dominant culture reproduces itself through routine, pragmatic decisions rather than enthusiastic

participation. Participant F's consumption is embedded in everyday life and social obligation, making it appear natural and unremarkable. As a result, K-pop's economic and cultural power is reinforced through actions that are not perceived as fandom labor. His participation demonstrates how capitalist cultural systems rely not only on devoted fans but also on peripheral actors whose seemingly neutral choices nonetheless sustain demand, visibility, and legitimacy.

Commodity fetishism is again present here. K-pop merchandise functions as a socially valuable object, symbolizing thoughtfulness, trend awareness, and cultural relevance. The social relationship between giver and receiver is mediated through the commodity, while the labor behind the product remains invisible. The object itself appears to carry meaning and value as gifts. Moreover, fetishism here is intensified by distance. Because he is not emotionally invested, the commodity's meaning appears even more autonomous, detached from production processes and human labor. The gift object seems to naturally "fit" the occasion, as if its value were inherent rather than constructed. This reinforces the illusion that cultural commodities circulate independently of labor relations, masking the exploitative systems behind idol production, manufacturing, and service work.

Through Hall's model, this can be described as functional decoding. The meanings of K-pop as popular, relevant, and socially acceptable are recognized and accepted, even without emotional attachment. This confirms that passive consumption operates structurally, embedding K-pop into everyday life beyond fan communities. Crucially, this functional decoding still aligns with dominant-hegemonic meanings. Participant F does not reinterpret or challenge K-pop's cultural positioning; instead, he reproduces it through practical acknowledgment. By treating K-pop as an appropriate and valuable cultural reference, he helps normalize its presence within social rituals such as gift-giving and dining. His behavior illustrates how dominance is maintained not only

through belief or enthusiasm, but through widespread, uncritical acceptance. Even from outside the fandom, Participant F contributes to the reproduction of K-pop's ideological and economic dominance, demonstrating how passive consumption sustains global cultural power across both fans and non-fans alike.

5.2 Economic Impact of Passive Consumption: The Case of Koryori

Although Koryori, a Korean restaurant in Dhaka, was founded by a K-pop fan, within this chapter it is best understood as a site of passive consumption rather than active fandom production. Most customers coming to eat and socialize at the restaurant do not create content, perform fandom labor, or organize events. Instead, they participate as consumers by purchasing food, attending themed dining experiences, and enjoying the atmosphere.



Figure 11: Koryori's official Facebook Page

From a Marxist perspective, Koryori operates primarily as a capitalist enterprise. Its core commodities are food, service, and dining experience. K-pop functions as symbolic surplus value rather than the main product. Events such as “BTS Week at Koryori,” where BTS songs and

videos play continuously, create a themed environment that customers can consume without effort or participation.



Figure 12: “BTS week” at Koryori (Facebook Post)

Moreover, commodity fetishism is particularly visible in this space. Dishes like beef kimbab, tteokbokki, or Korean corndogs are not consumed only for taste or hunger. They are valued for what they represent: closeness to Korean culture, participation in global trends, and symbolic proximity to idols. Customers feel connected to K-pop through consumption, while the labor of chefs, servers, and supply chains remains hidden.

Social relations among people (workers, producers, and consumers) are replaced by relations between consumers and commodities. The restaurant atmosphere creates the illusion of cultural intimacy, masking the economic relations that sustain it. Customers enjoy the experience as a complete package, without questioning how it is produced. In this process, the real social relationships between people such as the labor of cooks, servers, suppliers, cleaners, and even global workers connected to Korean food imports are pushed into the background. Instead of seeing these human efforts, customers mainly interact with commodities: the food, the décor, the

music, and the K-pop-themed atmosphere. What matters most is not who made the food or under what conditions, but how the food *feels* and what it represents.

The restaurant atmosphere plays a key role in this transformation. Through K-pop music, idol visuals, themed events like “BTS Week,” and Korean aesthetics, Koryori creates an illusion of cultural closeness and emotional intimacy with Korean culture and K-pop idols. Customers feel as if they are participating in the K-pop world simply by sitting there and eating. This feeling hides the economic system that makes the experience possible, including wage labor, business profit, and commercial branding.

As a result, consumption feels natural and pleasurable rather than economic or political. Customers experience the restaurant as a ready-made cultural package, including food, music, mood, and identity combined, without needing to think about how it is produced, who benefits financially, or whose labor supports it. In Marxist terms, the commodity appears to have value and meaning on its own, while the human relationships and labor behind it become invisible. This is how commodity fetishism operates: social relations between people are replaced by seemingly magical relations between consumers and things.

Through Stuart Hall’s encoding/decoding model, Koryori can be understood as a space where meanings are mostly read in a dominant-hegemonic way, with only “minimal” negotiation. The producers of the restaurant encode specific meanings into the space: K-pop is presented as fun, trendy, modern, and socially welcoming culture. These meanings are carefully built through music selection, themed events like “BTS Week,” visual references to idols (decorating the restaurant wall with posters of K-pop idols) and the overall dining atmosphere.

Some elements are slightly localized to fit the Bangladeshi context, such as affordable pricing, familiar service styles, and an accessible urban location at Uttara, Dhaka. This localization represents limited negotiation, where global K-pop culture is adjusted just enough to feel comfortable and relatable for local consumers. However, this adjustment does not challenge the core message of K-pop as desirable, fashionable, and commercially attractive.

Most customers decode the experience exactly as it is intended. They enjoy the food, music, and environment without questioning why K-pop is framed this way or whose interests this framing serves. Rather than reinterpreting K-pop's meanings or using the space to express alternative identities or critiques, customers accept the experience as a complete package. In doing so, they reinforce K-pop's commercial value and popularity, helping to strengthen its market power instead of reshaping or resisting (oppositional reading) its underlying ideology. Thus, this fosters the theory of dominant-hegemony with a limited negotiation made only by the owners of the restaurant to make the consumption more natural and localized.

5.3 Socio-Cultural Impact of Passive Consumption

Although passive consumers do not create cultural texts, their actions significantly shape K-pop's visibility and normalization in Bangladesh. Practices such as wearing idol-inspired fashion, eating Korean food, and sharing posts online integrate K-pop into everyday social spaces. Birthdays, universities, restaurants, and social media timelines become sites where K-pop feels ordinary and familiar.

From a Marxist perspective, this normalization strengthens cultural capitalism. Passive consumers expand markets and stabilize demand, transforming K-pop from a niche interest into a mainstream lifestyle reference. Their actions sustain power structures without challenging them.

Using Hall's theory, this process can be seen as the stabilization of meaning. Dominant readings circulate widely, making encoded values such as beauty standards, success narratives, and lifestyle aspirations appear natural and desirable. Passive consumers help fix these meanings rather than questioning or localizing them.

Participant F's case again highlights how K-pop becomes socially unavoidable. Even non-fans participate in its circulation, confirming its hegemonic presence in everyday life.

In conclusion, this chapter demonstrates that passive consumption is not weak or insignificant. It is structurally essential to the survival and expansion of K-pop in Bangladesh. Through streaming, sharing, purchasing, dining, and lifestyle imitation, passive consumers quietly sustain the economic and ideological power of the K-pop industry.

From a Marxist perspective, passive consumers function as unpaid supporters of cultural capitalism, maintaining commodity circulation and fetishism. Through Stuart Hall's framework, their engagement largely reflects dominant-hegemonic decoding. The case of Koryori further shows how fandom-inspired spaces can operate primarily as sites of consumption. Together, these examples confirm that passive consumption plays a decisive role in embedding K-pop within Bangladeshi social, cultural, and economic life.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

This thesis set out to examine the paradox of consumption and creation within K-pop fandom in Bangladesh, with a specific focus on how fans negotiate between active participation and passive consumption in their everyday engagement with Korean popular culture. Drawing on qualitative data collected through surveys, interviews, case studies, and social media analysis, and grounded in Marxist cultural theory and Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding framework, the study has demonstrated that K-pop fandom in Bangladesh cannot be understood through a simple binary of active versus passive engagement. Rather, it operates as a complex, negotiated cultural practice shaped by global industry structures, local socio-cultural contexts, and individual aspirations.

Across the previous chapters, the research showed that Bangladeshi K-pop fans are deeply involved in creative and participatory practices. Chapter 4 illustrated how active engagers transform K-pop from a mediated cultural product into embodied and localized practices through dance covers, live performances, fan art, digital edits, and community participation. Case studies such as Arif Chowdhury and members of groups like Knight Sisters revealed that K-pop engagement often leads to tangible skill development, confidence building, and identity formation. These fans do not merely consume K-pop content; they reproduce, reinterpret, and circulate it within local contexts, turning fandom into a site of meaning-making and personal growth.

The chapter further extended this discussion by examining how fandom can move beyond creative participation into economic and professional domains. The success stories of

Muhsinuzzaman Mahim (Beast Boi) and Shefa Tabassum demonstrated that sustained engagement with K-pop can result in public recognition, competition wins, media visibility, and even international exposure. These cases highlight how fan labor, although often unpaid or underpaid, can generate symbolic and material value, aligning with Marxist ideas of cultural and affective labor. At the same time, these examples also expose the structural limits of fandom-based opportunities, as such successes remain exceptional rather than guaranteed outcomes for all fans.

In contrast, Chapter 5 (passive engagement, as discussed earlier in the thesis) revealed that a significant portion of Bangladeshi K-pop consumers engage with the culture primarily through listening, streaming, following idols on social media, purchasing idol-endorsed products, and visiting Korean-themed restaurants or cafés. While these practices appear less visible than dance covers or performances, they nonetheless play a crucial role in sustaining the global K-pop industry and its capitalist circuits. From a Marxist perspective, these forms of consumption contribute to commodity fetishism, where emotional attachment to idols and aesthetics often obscures the labor and profit structures behind cultural production.

By applying Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model throughout the analysis, this thesis has shown that Bangladeshi fans do not uniformly accept the dominant meanings encoded by the K-pop industry. Instead, their interpretations range from dominant-hegemonic readings (such as closely imitating idol fashion or choreography) to negotiated readings, where fans adapt K-pop aesthetics to local stages, languages, and social realities. Events like K-meets, K-fests, and the K-pop World Festival Bangladesh auditions function as important spaces where global cultural texts are locally re-encoded, producing new meanings that reflect Bangladeshi youth identities and aspirations.

Taken together, the findings confirm the central argument of this thesis: K-pop fandom in Bangladesh is characterized by a paradoxical coexistence of creativity and consumption. Fans are simultaneously active cultural producers and participants in global capitalist systems. Their engagement offers emotional fulfillment, community belonging, and opportunities for skill development, while also reinforcing industry-driven norms, trends, and consumption patterns. This negotiated position underscores the need to move beyond simplistic assumptions about fandom as either empowering or exploitative, and instead recognize it as a contested cultural space shaped by both agency and constraint.

6.1 Implications of the Research

The findings of this research have several important academic, cultural, and social implications. First, this study contributes to the limited body of scholarly literature on K-pop fandom in Bangladesh by offering context-specific insights into how global popular culture is received, adapted, and practiced in other countries like Japan, Korea and so on. By foregrounding Bangladeshi fans' voices and experiences, the research challenges the dominance of Western and East Asian-centric perspectives in K-pop studies.

Second, the study extends fan studies by demonstrating that fandom should be understood as a spectrum of engagement rather than a fixed category. The distinction between active and passive fans in this thesis shows that even seemingly passive consumption plays a vital role in sustaining cultural industries, while active participation often remains embedded within pre-existing industry frameworks. This nuanced understanding can help future researchers avoid overly celebratory or dismissive interpretations of fan culture.

Third, the research has implications for understanding youth culture and identity formation in Bangladesh. The data shows that K-pop fandom provides young people with alternative spaces for self-expression, confidence building, skill acquisition, and community formation, especially in a context where creative opportunities may be limited. Dance groups, fan communities, and events offer platforms for youth to experiment with identity, gender expression, performance, and collaboration in ways that may not be available through formal institutions.

Finally, this study has practical implications for cultural organizers, educators, and policymakers. Recognizing K-pop fandom as a meaningful site of creative labor and youth engagement can open up possibilities for supporting cultural events, workshops, and collaborations that channel fan enthusiasm into broader creative industries. At the same time, awareness of the exploitative dimensions of fan labor can encourage more ethical and inclusive approaches to organizing fan-based events and competitions.

6.2 Limitations of the Study and Scope for Future Research

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that must be acknowledged. One major limitation is the scope of data and sample size. While the qualitative approach allowed for in-depth analysis, the study relied on a relatively small number of participants, primarily university students and young adults already connected to K-pop communities. As a result, the findings cannot be generalized to all K-pop consumers in Bangladesh, particularly older audiences or those outside urban centers.

Another limitation lies in the breadth of the research focus. This thesis examined K-pop fandom as a broad cultural phenomenon, which meant that certain sectors within the fandom ecosystem could not be explored in depth. For example, K-pop-related events in Bangladesh such as K-

meets, K-fests, and large-scale auditions deserve focused, standalone research. Future studies could examine how these events are organized, funded, advertised, and managed, as well as how power, visibility, and hierarchy operate within these spaces. A dedicated paper on K-pop events in Bangladesh could provide valuable insight into the institutional and logistical dimensions of fandom that this study could only touch upon.

Additionally, while this research addressed both active and passive engagement, it did not conduct a detailed comparative analysis between different regions, socio-economic classes, or age groups within Bangladesh. Future research could expand the participant pool to include a larger and more diverse sample, incorporating fans from different cities, educational backgrounds, and income levels to better understand how access and resources shape fandom practices.

It is also important to note that although K-pop is often considered a niche cultural interest in Bangladesh, the findings of this study suggest otherwise. The growing number of participants in auditions, the popularity of K-events, the visibility of fan communities, and the influence of K-pop on fashion, beauty, food, and lifestyle indicate that K-pop's impact on Bangladeshi youth culture is no longer marginal. Therefore, future research should treat K-pop fandom as a significant cultural force rather than a subcultural curiosity, employing larger-scale interviews, surveys, and longitudinal studies to track its evolving influence.

In conclusion, while this thesis provides a foundational analysis of the paradox of consumption and creation within Bangladeshi K-pop fandom, it also opens up multiple avenues for further investigation. Expanding the scope to include event-focused studies, larger participant groups, and comparative approaches will deepen our understanding of how global popular cultures are

localized and lived in Bangladesh. Such future research will be essential for capturing the full complexity and significance of K-pop fandom as an enduring and influential cultural phenomenon.

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Appendix

A.

1. Can you introduce yourself a bit please?

Ans: Ah, sure. My name is “X”. I work at Augmedix as an AI expert in Dhaka.

2. So, are you part of any K-pop fandom?

Ans: No, not really. I don’t really consider myself a fan. But I did listen to some of the songs. In today’s age it’s hard not to when K-pop is getting so popular worldwide.

3. How did you come across the concept of K-pop?

Ans: Ah! One day, my sister made me listen to a K-pop song. It was I think “Spring Day” by BTS. So yeah, after that I sort of started listening to K-pop when my sister played it at home. And I have friends who are huge K-pop fans including my sister who is a die-heart fan of BTS, consider herself as “Army.”

4. So, do you think, without being a K-pop fan you still contribute in making K-pop known in Bangladesh?

Ans: Well, I do buy gifts like posters of K-pop idols, pictures etc. for my sister and the friends I mentioned. And I love Korean cuisine and beverages. Bibimbap, Korean bbq, Buldak instant Ramen, and Soju (Jinro) is my favourite! I go to eat quite frequently at Koryori, the Korean restaurant in Uttara. So Yeah...

5. Alright, last question. Did you attend any K-events in Dhaka? With your sister or friends maybe?

Ans: Ah, no. Not really.

B.

1. Can you introduce yourself a bit please?

Ans: I am “Y” I study at Popular Medical college in Dhaka.

2. Have you listened to any K-pop songs?

Ans: Yes, definitely.

3. How did you first become interested in K-pop?

Ans: I first came across K-pop when one of my cousins played it at her birthday party and it got my interest instantly.

4. If you are part of any fandom, what initially drew you to them?

Ans: In 2012, EXO was extremely popular internationally, though not so much in our country. I wanted to connect with my friends, so I became a fan. Later, around 2018–2019, BLACKPINK rose to fame among girl groups, and I began listening to their songs. I was especially drawn to their dance performances.

5. In what ways has fandom shaped your personality/style/interest?

Ans: I began dressing like them and trying the foods they eat.

6. What kind of creative projects do you create for your fandom?

Ans: I’m not very involved in creative projects.

7. Do you feel that your fan activities contribute more to your personal development or more to the commercial success of the K-pop industry?

Ans: Yes, I think my fan activities contribute more to the commercial success of the K-pop industry. I was drawn to K-pop partly because of its popularity and trending status, which encouraged me to stream songs, buy albums, and follow idols on social media.

C.

1. How did you first become interested in K-pop?

Ans: A Friend suggested to listen to EXO and BTS and went down the rabbithole

2. Which K-pop groups/artists do you follow?

Ans: DEAN, PENOMECO, RM, pakaowlla

3. Did you attend any local K-fan events in Bangladesh?

Ans: Ah yes, K-fest, K-meet, K-fan gatherings.

4. What initially drew you to K-pop and the fandom?

Ans: A community of like-minded music taste and the discussions surrounding it felt refreshing as a rookie fanboy.

5. What kind of creative projects do you create for your fandom?

Ans: Once I made an Original Rap Song for BTS' 4th year Anniversary. Other than that, dance/song covers. I also won first prize and received a cash award Bangladesh Global audition, K-Fest 2019. And was featured in Prothom Alo newspaper in their entertainment section.

6. Do you feel that your fan activities contribute more to your personal development or more to the commercial success of the K-pop industry?

Ans: My Kpop Fanboy days kinda defined an era for me. My 17-21 years old time was spent mostly communicating with various people, making connections via. fan activities, or performances etc. It played a vast role into making me more social, and also step into the real world, coming from a conservative family. So it did contribute a lot for my personal development, even though I am not a part of this culture anymore.

D.

1. Are you part of any fandom?

Ans: Yes. I follow BTS, EXO, TWICE, Enhypen, Chunga, Taemin etc. You can call me a multi-fan actually.

2. How did you first become interested in K-pop?

Ans: There was a TV channel that I stumbled into. In one of their shows, the kpop groups used to perform on stage. I loved watching them and became interested.

3. Which fandom activities do you participate in?

Ans: Like listening to K-pop songs or watching mv. Creating edits or fanart. Covering K-pop songs and dance choreography. I also got interested in Korean cuisine eventually.

4. What ways has fandom shaped your personality/style/interest?

Ans: Kpop Idols are usually very hardworking and multitalented. Their dedication towards their crafts and their constant hard work has inspired me a lot throughout my life.

I've learnt to go after my passions and work hard for them. My fashion sense and makeup preferences are also greatly inherited from Kpop. Listening to Kpop has also made me willing to appreciate the culture of different countries more and I've become open to multiple cultures after that.

5. Do you feel that your fan activities contribute more to your personal development or more to the commercial success of the K-pop industry?

Ans: I think both. My fan activities are the results of the creative inspiration Kpop ignites in me. The personal development Kpop has caused in me is totally worth my time and money. I want to give back to the Kpop artists I follow too to show my appreciation. So I think it's a Win-Win.

