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**Impact of K-pop Fan Engagement on Informal English
Proficiency among Pakistani Gen Z**



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Abstract

This study examines the role of K-pop fandom in enhancing informal English proficiency among Pakistani Gen Z learners. Adopting a mixed-methods approach with surveys and interviews of fans aged 14–21, the research investigates vocabulary development, conversational fluency, and confidence. Findings reveal that digitally mediated fan communities function as informal learning spaces, reducing language anxiety and fostering cross-cultural communication. The results highlight the pedagogical potential of fandom-based engagement in promoting language acquisition beyond formal classrooms.

Keyword: K-pop Fan Engagement, Informal English Proficiency, Pakistani Gen Z

Introduction

K-pop's global reach has not only impacted music and culture but also created a dynamic, multilingual space for language learning. Particularly among Pakistani Gen Z, who typically are non-native English speakers, K-pop fan communities offer informal, interactive platforms to practice English through social media, fan forums, and live chats. These online environments provide authentic, immersive exposure to conversational English, allowing users to develop vocabulary, fluency, and confidence outside formal educational settings.

English proficiency remains critical in Pakistan for academic and career success, yet formal instruction often lacks opportunities for real-world practice. Engaging with K-pop fan communities presents an alternative avenue for language acquisition. This study aims to analyze the impact of such engagement on informal English skills among Pakistani Gen Z by evaluating vocabulary growth, conversational competence, and changes in language confidence or anxiety.

Background

The Korean pop music industry, commonly referred to as K-pop, has emerged as a worldwide cultural phenomenon characterized by its highly dedicated and digitally active fan base. This global phenomenon involves not only the consumption of music and entertainment but also the formation of expansive online communities where fans engage in diverse interactive activities. These communities function as vibrant social spaces that transcend national and linguistic boundaries, fostering intercultural exchange and digital connectivity. For many young people, especially those in non-English speaking countries such as Pakistan, K-pop fan communities provide a unique multilingual environment where informal language learning occurs organically.

Pakistani Gen Z, individuals generally born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s, represent a generation growing up in an era of rapid globalization and digital communication. English plays a pivotal role in Pakistan's educational and professional sectors, widely regarded as a critical skill for upward mobility and international opportunities. However, formal English education in Pakistan often focuses on prescriptive grammar and academic language, which may not adequately prepare learners for real-world conversational fluency. The lack of immersive exposure to informal English contexts can limit learners' practical skills, such as

colloquial speech, idiomatic expressions, and conversational confidence.

With the rise of social media platforms and digital fandoms, K-pop communities offer an informal but rich linguistic ecosystem that allows Pakistani Gen Z fans to interact with a global audience primarily in English. In these fan spaces, English serves as the common lingua franca bridging speakers of diverse native languages. Fans frequently participate in activities such as live chatting, commenting on fan pages, translating lyrics, and sharing fan-created content. These interactions expose learners to authentic, colloquial English usages—slang, idiomatic expressions, stylistically varied registers—that are often inaccessible within formal classroom instruction.

Importantly, digital fan communities offer supportive peer environments that reduce the affective barriers typically associated with language learning, such as anxiety or fear of making mistakes. This lowers the so-called affective filter, encouraging learners to experiment and communicate more freely. The collaborative and culturally diverse nature of these spaces also facilitates the acquisition of intercultural competence, as fans negotiate language use across different cultures, dialects, and social norms. Through community of practice dynamics, participants not only acquire linguistic skills but also construct shared identities and social bonds centered around their fandom.

Given the increasing visibility of K-pop's influence on youth cultural practices and language use, examining how Pakistani Gen Z leverage fan engagement for informal English learning is timely and valuable. This background highlights the convergence of digital media, global pop culture, and language acquisition in a way that challenges traditional language education paradigms. The present study aims to contribute to this emerging field by investigating how sustained participation in K-pop fan communities impacts the informal English proficiency, conversational fluency, confidence, and language anxiety of Pakistani Gen Z learners.

Literature Review

The Role of K-pop Communities in Informal Language Learning

K-pop fandoms have emerged as significant digital spaces where informal second language acquisition occurs naturally through social interaction. These fan community's foster real-time, informal communication that closely simulates immersion environments. Calderón Rodríguez (2024) observes that such informal interactions enable non-native English speakers to internalize English idiomatic expressions, slang, and syntactic structures, which are often absent from traditional, formal classroom settings. Through these communities, learners adapt their language use effortlessly, reflecting a natural progression in proficiency.

The functionality of English as a lingua franca within K-pop fandoms further encourages language learning. Keith (2018) highlights that English acts as a bridging language connecting fans worldwide, allowing diverse cultural and linguistic groups to communicate effectively. The unstructured environment of fan forums, social media chats, and live discussions exposes learners to colloquial and expressive language, enriching their conversational skills beyond textbook English.

Moreover, the phenomenon of "trans-scripting," where multilingual fans frequently intersperse English with elements of their native languages, adds another dimension to language development. Song and Feng (2022) argue that this practice not only enhances fans' language skills but also boosts their intercultural competence by navigating multiple linguistic codes simultaneously. Such interplay between

languages contributes to flexible and creative linguistic usage that supports deeper learning.

Exposure to English through Fan Activities

K-pop fans' participation in activities such as watching fan-subbed videos, posting comments, and engaging in live chats provides continuous informal exposure to English. This exposure is crucial for learners to develop both receptive and productive skills. Kim (2022) found that the act of decoding English-language subtitles, lyrics, and fan-generated content requires complex linguistic engagement, thereby fostering improved comprehension and vocabulary retention.

Hernández-López (2024) emphasizes that informal engagement with English through fan-served subbed content bridges gaps left by formal instruction. Fans experience English in contexts that are meaningful and enjoyable, thus enhancing motivation and reducing affective barriers often found in conventional learning environments. This form of situated learning allows for the acquisition of language in socially relevant, authentic settings.

Impact on Written and Spoken English Proficiency

One notable outcome within the literature is the positive impact of K-pop fan engagement on learners' written English skills. Lee (2018) found that regular participation in online forums, commentary, and social media discussions constitutes deliberate practice in writing. These activities enhance participants' command of syntax, vocabulary, and discourse strategies in informal English registers.

In addition to writing, speaking proficiency and confidence are also indirectly influenced by fan community interactions. Malik and Haidar (2021) note that the supportive nature of online fan spaces reduces language anxiety, creating a safe environment for linguistic experimentation. This reduction in affective filter allows participants to transfer their confidence gained from digital communication to real-life spoken English scenarios.

Cultural Exchange and Linguistic Diversity

The multicultural and multilingual nature of K-pop fandoms contributes to the learners' understanding of English as a dynamic and adaptable language used across diverse sociocultural contexts. Calderón Rodríguez (2024) stresses that the cultural exchanges fostered within these communities enhance learners' pragmatic and sociolinguistic awareness. Participants adapt their English usage to accommodate various accents, dialects, and cultural references, thus expanding their communicative competence.

Furthermore, Valerio-Ramos (2023) discusses how communities of practice within fandoms facilitate both linguistic and cultural learning. Collaborative tasks such as lyric translations, meme creation, and fan discussions enable participants to internalize social norms of language use while also negotiating cultural identities through language.

Sociocultural Theoretical Underpinnings

The foundation of many studies about language development in fan communities draws on Sociocultural Theory. Vygotsky's (1978) emphasis on social interaction as central to learning is evident in fan-based English acquisition. Hernández-López

(2024) describes K-pop communities as Zones of Proximal Development where peer collaboration scaffolds emerging language skills, allowing learners to achieve higher proficiency with community support.

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) Theory, particularly Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1985), underpins the idea that exposure to comprehensible, slightly challenging English input within a low-anxiety environment promotes acquisition. Malik and Haidar (2021) highlight the importance of affective filters, underscoring that fan communities create emotionally supportive spaces that bolster language confidence and reduce anxiety.

Lave and Wenger's (1991) Community of Practice (CoP) theory also informs these studies, illustrating how shared activities within fan communities provide authentic contexts for practice, identity negotiation, and linguistic adaptation (Valerio-Ramos, 2023). Such communities do not only teach language; they transform participants' cultural and social identities.

Learners' Vocabulary Acquisition

Emerging research consistently shows that K-pop fans acquire a wide range of informal vocabulary, including slang, idiomatic expressions, and culture-specific phrases. Terms like "stan" and "spill the tea" have permeated fans' everyday English vocabulary, reflecting their integration into informal language repertoires (Valerio-Ramos, 2023). This vocabulary acquisition is often spontaneous and learner-driven, facilitated by repeated exposure and social reinforcement within fan interactions.

Improvement in Writing Fluency

Regular online writing—through comments, posts, and fan fiction—provides fans with crucial opportunities to practice and refine their English writing skills. Lee (2018) argues that informal writing practice in these digital communities helps learners develop fluency and stylistic flexibility, particularly in social, playful, and expressive modes of writing.

Reduction in Language Anxiety

A significant psychological benefit reported in the literature is a reduction in language anxiety. Malik and Haidar (2021) note that social media platforms dedicated to fandoms tend to be judgment-free zones where learners feel comfortable experimenting with language. This lowered anxiety enables learners to take risks linguistically, an essential component of language development.

Cross-Cultural Adaptability

Interactions with international fans foster learners' adaptability in negotiating diverse accents, dialects, and cultural references embedded in English usage. Calderón Rodríguez (2024) and Valerio-Ramos (2023) emphasize that this exposure cultivates linguistic versatility, which is crucial in globalized digital communication.

Linguistic Innovation within Fan Communities

The innovative morphological and syntactic phenomena emerging within fandom language practices in the form of blending, affixation, and semantic shifts frequently occur as fans creatively manipulate English to express identity and solidarity (Keith, 2018). These linguistic modifications challenge traditional language norms, which

may as well become a threat and lead to the eradication of minor languages or dialects (Zaman, Jabeen, & Ali, 2025), and also demonstrate the dynamic evolution of English within digital cultures.

Challenges and Limitations of Informal Learning

While overwhelmingly positive, some studies report challenges related to informal learning environments. Participants often struggle with complex or fast-paced idiomatic language during live chats and may require additional scaffolding to fully comprehend nuanced expressions (Hernández-López, 2024). These limitations suggest a complementary role for formal instruction alongside informal engagement.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a robust mixed-methods research design that strategically integrates both quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of how engagement with K-pop fan communities influences informal English language proficiency among Pakistani Gen Z individuals. Quantitatively, the study utilizes structured surveys to capture broad trends regarding participants' frequency of interaction with K-pop content, their self-perceived proficiency in informal English areas such as slang and conversational expressions, their confidence levels in casual English communication, and their experiences with language anxiety. Qualitatively, the research incorporates in-depth semi-structured interviews that delve into the lived experiences of a subset of participants, offering rich, contextual insights into language learning processes, emotional responses, and social dynamics within these fan communities. The combination of these methods allows for triangulation, thereby reinforcing the validity and depth of the findings through cross-verification from diverse data sources.

Participants and Sampling

The target population for this study comprises Pakistani members of Generation Z, specifically individuals aged between 14 and 21 years, who engage actively in K-pop fan communities on prominent social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube. A sample of 50 participants was recruited to answer the survey, ensuring a moderately sized quantitative data set capable of yielding statistically significant trends. Furthermore, to complement the numerical data and provide nuanced exploration, 10 participants were purposefully selected from the survey respondents for in-depth qualitative interviews. The snowball sampling technique was employed for participant recruitment, which leveraged existing networks and community ties within K-pop fan groups on social media. This approach was particularly effective due to the tight-knit and digitally connected nature of these fandoms, enabling access to individuals who are genuinely invested in K-pop culture and thus likely to provide meaningful data relevant to the research objectives. The balanced inclusion of both female and male participants in the sample ensured gender diversity, which contributes to the representativeness of the findings.

Data Collection

Data collection was carried out using two complementary instruments adapted for the research aims. The quantitative survey was a carefully structured online questionnaire

that combined Likert-scale items with multiple-choice questions to quantify participants' engagement levels, self-assessed informal English skills, confidence in language use, and anxiety related to language practice. Administered via Google Forms, the survey provided the flexibility for participants to complete it conveniently in their own time while facilitating efficient aggregation and analysis of data. The qualitative component consisted of semi-structured interviews conducted via virtual platforms such as Zoom or WhatsApp, chosen for their accessibility and participant preference. These interviews were designed to probe beyond surface-level responses, encouraging participants to describe their personal journeys of learning English informally within the K-pop fandom, detailed perceptions of the fan community's role in language skill development, emotional factors influencing language use, and changes in their language anxiety and confidence over time. The use of video/audio calls allowed for natural conversational dynamics while maintaining participant comfort and engagement.

Data Analysis

The quantitative data underwent descriptive statistical analysis using relevant software to compute measures such as mean scores, standard deviations, and frequency distributions that helped to identify overall trends and central tendencies in language acquisition, confidence, and anxiety among the participants. Such analysis enabled the researcher to quantify the extent to which informal English skills had been acquired through fandom interaction, and how language anxiety was modulated within this context. For the qualitative data, thematic analysis was employed systematically, involving iterative coding of interview transcripts to identify recurrent themes and patterns pertinent to vocabulary acquisition, writing fluency development, reductions in language anxiety, and cultural adaptability. This rigorous interpretive process allowed for the extraction of meaningful qualitative insights that contextualized and enriched the quantitative findings. Selected interview quotes provided vivid illustrations of participants' experiences, helping to portray a holistic picture of informal language learning in digital fan spaces.

Results and Discussion

The results from the analysis reveal compelling evidence that active involvement in K-pop fan communities strongly correlates with enhanced informal English language proficiency among Pakistani Gen Z participants. Participants demonstrated a notably high degree of confidence when using informal English, especially in employing slang and idiomatic expressions that are commonly encountered in fan interactions. The average confidence score of 4.25 out of 5 ($SD = 0.87$) indicates robust self-assurance in navigating casual conversational English shaped by digital fandom culture. This high confidence level points to the enabling role of fan communities, which provide repeated and meaningful exposure to informal English in a context that encourages experimentation without fear of severe judgment or criticism.

The majority of respondents disclosed learning a variety of new expressions and colloquial phrases through their fan activities, as reflected by a mean acquisition score of 4.35 ($SD = 0.78$). Phrases such as "spill the tea," referring to gossip or inside information, and "stan," denoting an enthusiastic fan, have become part of their everyday informal English vocabulary. This implies not only lexical expansion but also deeper cultural literacy gained through sustained fan engagement. Supporting

this, 80% of participants reported experiencing a significant reduction in language anxiety, with a mean score of 4.20 and a standard deviation of 0.80. Such reduction in affective barriers is critical, as it fosters a more relaxed attitude toward English communication, promoting more frequent and confident use of the language in various informal settings.

An additional important finding relates to improvements in participants' written English abilities. The mean score of 4.10 (SD = 0.85) reflects enhanced writing skills, largely attributed to the practice of commenting, posting, and participating in online fan discussions. This regular, semi-public writing practice appears to boost not only fluency but also comfort in using informal registers of English, which are vital for authentic communication in digital spaces. The findings also emphasize a broader cultural and linguistic adaptability among participants; 90% indicated that they consciously adjusted their English to accommodate diverse international audiences, suggesting heightened intercultural competence. Eighty percent reported an improved understanding of different English accents and dialectical variations, underscoring the role of K-pop communities as platforms for global linguistic exchange and cultural learning.

The qualitative interviews validated and enriched these quantitative results. All ten interviewees highlighted vocabulary acquisition as the most conspicuous benefit of their fan involvement. Several participants expressed how learning new slang and idioms became easier and more enjoyable within these fan spaces, thanks to the supportive and interactive community culture. Seven participants reported marked improvements in their ability to write fluently and expressively in informal English, crediting the regularity of online writing activities. Additionally, eight participants emphasized the considerable reduction in language anxiety due to the non-judgmental environment of K-pop fandoms. Participants explained that this atmosphere allowed them to experiment with English freely, thus accelerating their linguistic confidence. Furthermore, cross-cultural interactions with fans from various countries expanded participants' abilities to adjust language use according to different cultural and linguistic contexts, fostering versatility.

Many interviewees linked these gains to broader personal aspirations, such as performing better academically and preparing for future career opportunities. For instance, one participant reported gaining the confidence to actively participate in college group discussions after their experience in fan communities, marking a significant shift from earlier reticence. Another participant viewed the improvement in informal English proficiency as stepping stones toward working abroad, demonstrating the practical utility and motivational significance of language learning through fandom engagement. These findings collectively highlight that K-pop fan communities not only serve as spaces for amusement but also as potent sites of informal language acquisition, cultural exchange, and identity development for Pakistani youth.

Implications

English Language Teaching (ELT) can benefit from incorporating fan culture content and activities into curricula, enhancing student engagement and offering more practical, relatable learning experiences. Creating low-pressure classroom environments modeled after fan spaces can help reduce language anxiety, enabling learners to experiment with language more freely. Teaching should also emphasize

cross-cultural communication skills to prepare learners for diverse linguistic contexts. Additionally, hybrid learning models that blend formal instruction with informal community participation can maximize language acquisition outcomes by bridging traditional and digital learning spaces.

Limitations

The study's findings may have limited generalizability beyond the specific group of Pakistani Gen Z K-pop fans, as their unique engagement patterns may not represent all language learners. Moreover, reliance on self-reported data for language proficiency and confidence introduces potential biases, as participants might overestimate or underestimate their skills. These limitations suggest caution in extrapolating results to broader populations without further corroborative studies.

Ethical Considerations

In conducting this study, informed consent was obtained from all participants to ensure they participated voluntarily and with full awareness of the research aims. Participants' anonymity and confidentiality were rigorously maintained to protect their privacy. Additionally, participants were granted the right to withdraw from the study at any time without facing any consequences, safeguarding their autonomy throughout the research process.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that K-pop fan communities function as effective informal learning environments where Pakistani Gen Z learners acquire vocabulary, improve fluency, boost confidence, and develop cultural adaptability in English. The combination of social interaction, emotional safety, and collaborative practices within these digital fan spaces plays a crucial role in facilitating language development. These findings underscore the transformative potential of digital fandoms as valuable sites for second-language acquisition beyond the constraints of traditional classroom settings.

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