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Research on the Consumption Behavior of Young People in the Korean Wave Cultural Industry—A Case Study of Generation Z

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Abstract

The dissemination and popularity of the Korean Wave (Hallyu) culture in mainland China has spanned nearly three decades. As a widely influential pop culture phenomenon, it has long been recognized by the public. Through its highly appealing content, the Korean Wave has gradually permeated the daily lives of young people, significantly influencing their consumption behaviors. This paper focuses on Generation Z as the research subject, examining their consumption behaviors related to Korean Wave culture. Through an investigation into the consumption behaviors of Generation Z youth, this study finds a strong correlation between their consumption patterns and those of Korean Wave culture consumers. For instance, they share preferences for self-pleasure consumption, value-driven consumption, and social consumption. Moreover, as the Korean Wave enters the Chinese market, its cultural industry further stimulates the consumption enthusiasm of Generation Z youth, particularly in areas such as Korean dramas, webtoons, variety shows, and beauty and cosmetics.

Keywords: Korean Wave cultural industry; young people; consumption behavior.

Since the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and South Korea in 1992, the economic and cultural ties between the two nations have grown increasingly close. Leveraging its strong cultural export capabilities, South Korea has secured a significant share of the Chinese market. The Korean Wave (Hallyu) has permeated China through various sectors such as TV dramas, modern music and dance, variety shows, online games, food and beverages, cosmetics, and plastic surgery, exerting a profound influence on the development of China's cultural industry. Additionally, Korean Wave culture has impacted the lifestyle, values, and consumption patterns of China's Generation Z youth [1]. In recent years, with rapid technological advancements, widespread internet penetration, and the rise of social media platforms like TikTok, South Korea has further utilized its exceptional marketing strategies to position Hallyu as synonymous with fashion, avant-garde trends, and romance. For instance, the 2022 drama *The Glory*, starring Song Hye-kyo, sparked significant buzz in the Chinese market, with the fashion

style of the character Park Yeon-jin quickly gaining popularity. Many young fashion enthusiasts rushed to purchase similar clothing and accessories, demonstrating the notable influence of the Korean Wave on the consumption behavior of China's Generation Z.

1. Theoretical and Practical Contributions of Research on Korean Wave Culture

Consumption, as a crucial component and the final stage in the social reproduction process [2], plays a pivotal role in economic circulation. Generation Z, being the main force in current market consumption, has consumption preferences that not only directly impact the profitability of market participants but also profoundly influence the development trends of a nation's consumer market at a macro level. As the demographic most receptive to new trends and highly active in online spaces, young people exhibit strong interest and acceptance of emerging cultures, industries, and products. Korean Wave culture has precisely captured these characteristics, primarily targeting consumers aged 30 and below. Through highly tailored marketing strategies, it has significantly influenced the consumption behaviors of contemporary youth.

However, this influence is not entirely positive. The rise of the Korean Wave cultural industry has also brought about a series of issues, most notably the phenomenon of impulsive consumption among young people. Taking college students—a representative segment of Generation Z—as an example, research data indicates that 21% of them allocate a larger portion of their disposable income to Korean Wave-related purchases. When purchasing similar products, over 50% of college students prioritize Korean brands, while nearly 20% buy Korean products solely based on personal preference, disregarding cost-effectiveness. This phenomenon, prevalent even among highly educated and representative groups like university students, reflects an irrational consumption tendency. The impulsiveness of such consumption behaviors may not only negatively impact personal finances but could also, from a broader sociocultural perspective, lead to a weakening of cultural identity.

Therefore, this paper will focus on an in-depth study of Generation Z's consumption behaviors related to the Korean Wave cultural industry, analyzing the underlying psychological motivations, social influences, and cultural factors. Additionally, it will explore ways to regulate the consumption behaviors of today's Generation Z youth, proposing practical recommendations to ensure more rational and healthy consumption habits. This approach aims to promote individual development while supporting the sustainable growth of the socioeconomic landscape.

2. Korean Wave Culture and the Z-Generation Youth

2.1 The concept of Korean Wave Culture

The term "Korean Wave" first appeared in Go, originally meaning "Korean Wave", abbreviated as "Korean Wave". Later, "Korean Wave" evolved to mean "the trend of Korea". In layman's terms, the so-called "Korean Wave" refers to the phenomenon where South Korea's mass

cultural products are accepted by certain social strata in East Asian regions such as China and Japan and become a popular trend. Korean culture, on the other hand, refers to a cultural phenomenon that originated in South Korea and is widely popular around the world. The Korean Wave culture can be divided into broad and narrow senses. In a broad sense, Korean Wave culture refers to various aspects of South Korea such as clothing, food, and fashion. It not only covers South Korea's entertainment industry but also includes its daily lifestyle and cultural traditions. In a narrow sense, the Korean Wave culture refers to the entertainment industry in South Korea, including popular cultural products such as TV dramas, movies, K-pop and variety shows.

2.2 Characteristics of Korean Wave Culture

The culture of any country is not only an important part of its history, but also its formation and development are inevitably marked by the historical process of that country [4]. Because South Korea is geographically close to China, South Korean culture has been influenced by Chinese culture to a certain extent. During the five-thousand-year history of China, for a long time since the establishment of South Korea, China and South Korea have had very close exchanges in the political, economic and cultural fields. South Korea actively introduced the original Eastern culture of China and formed a unique Korean Wave culture through its own integration and development. Later, with the rise of Western culture, South Korea vigorously introduced advanced Western culture. After years of development, it has formed the unique Korean Wave culture based on Confucianism, which combines the characteristics of both Eastern and Western cultures today.

One of the major characteristics of the Korean Wave culture is the integration of Eastern and Western cultures. For instance, the thematic ideas of Korean dramas not only incorporate the wit and humor of Western culture but also embody the mainstream values such as punishing evil and promoting good, as well as the brilliance of humanity, which are highly regarded in Eastern culture. Take the recently highly-discussed drama "Meet You After All the Bitterness" in China as an example. The entire drama is free from extravagance and dissipation. It does not focus on some successful upper-class people but centers around a group of ordinary people who make a living by the sea. The scene of the islanders silently helping the female protagonist's family, who have lost their son and are in financial hardship, perfectly aligns with the main theme of the inherent goodness of human nature in China. The loyalty to love, responsibility towards family and respect for elders shown in the drama also conform to the cultural background that the domestic public has long formed, and will not feel alienated or disconnected from Korean dramas. Therefore, this drama caused a huge response in China as soon as it was released, and it can be seen from this that the Korean Wave culture is also highly in line with the demands of the domestic market.

2.3 The Concepts and Characteristics of Generation Z Young People

Nowadays, Generation Z young people refer to those born between 1995 and 2009. As

Generation Z young people grew up in the social background of the rapid development of the Internet and the rapid popularization of social networks, this enables this group of young people to keep up with the trend of The Times better and be more easily influenced by different cultures. Therefore, compared with other groups, young people of Generation Z have a higher acceptance of k-pop, Korean dramas, Korean variety shows and other Korean wave cultures, and their consumption behaviors are also more likely to be influenced by them.

Compared with other consumers, young people of Generation Z pay more attention to unique consumption experiences. They are more inclined to self-pleasing consumption, value consumption and social consumption. They are willing to consume for the sake of becoming more beautiful and handsome, to pay for culture and to consume for social purposes. This is also highly consistent with the consumption concept advocated and promoted by the Korean Wave culture. Consumers of the Korean Wave culture are more willing to pay for the culture and are very willing to consume for their favorite stars, idols, Korean dramas, etc., in order to become as charming in appearance as their favorite stars. Overall, there is a strong similarity in consumption preferences and characteristics between the young people of Generation Z and the consumers of the Korean Wave culture. Both of them like to pay for their own feelings, enjoy self-pleasing consumption and focus on the current consumption experience. Therefore, the young people of Generation Z can easily become consumers of the Korean Wave culture under the influence of the Korean Wave culture industry. Taking the young people of Generation Z as an example to study the consumption behavior of young people towards the Korean Wave culture industry is also highly representative, targeted and of great practical significance.

3. The Impact of the Korean Wave Cultural Industry on Consumer Behavior

The Korean Wave culture is characterized by distinct fashion and avant-garde features. The "Korean Wave" emerged against the backdrop of the integration of cultural policies, creative industries, and digital technologies. The turmoil of the economic crisis in South Korea in the second half of the 20th century enabled it to learn to adapt quickly to the constantly changing environment, break traditions, integrate various cultures and formulate its own plans. In the current era of rapid popularization and development of the Internet, South Korea's cultural industry has made significant contributions to enhancing the country's image abroad and has provided it with huge economic potential and export value. The popularity of various Korean dramas and variety shows, as well as the endorsements of various celebrities and Internet influencers, have enabled South Korea's cosmetics, clothing, food, and even medical aesthetics to occupy a considerable market share in China. It has greatly stimulated the consumption of such projects among domestic young people.

3.1 Drive the transformation of consumption concepts

With its forward-thinking, sharp vision and successful marketing, South Korea has made the

Korean Wave a synonym for avant-garde and trendy. Influenced by traditional culture, the consumption concepts of the Chinese people in the past were relatively conservative. Most people were more inclined to consume for some necessities, paying more attention to the cost performance and practicality of goods. Moreover, before the Korean Wave culture entered the Chinese market, most Chinese people did not like to purchase too many products with similar functions. However, after the Korean Wave cultural industry gradually exerted an influence in China, influenced by the star effect, the Internet celebrity effect and various Korean dramas, the consumption concepts of Chinese people have also gradually changed. In an era of abundant material resources, the consumption of young people is shifting from functional satisfaction to emotional resonance [5]. People are now more willing to pay for their feelings. They even buy the same product just because of a favorite celebrity's endorsement or a product they have used. They are constantly updating their items. In terms of cosmetics, in the past, people might not buy a new lipstick until they had used up one. But in recent years, under the influence of Korean Wave culture, people have started to constantly update their lipsticks, thinking that lipsticks will become outdated. A large number of people even buy new styles as soon as they come out. It is evident that the Korean Wave cultural industry has, to a large extent, stimulated the consumption willingness of Chinese people, especially the young people of Generation Z, and transformed their consumption concepts.

3.2 Diversification of consumption behavior

Korean Wave culture has promoted the diversification of consumption behaviors. For instance, many Korean stars nowadays conduct online autograph sessions, and many young people of Generation Z in China can interact and communicate with their favorite stars online and pay for it. For instance, the current rise of the fan economy, such as fans spending millions on chartered flights to celebrate and support their idols' birthdays. For instance, with the development of the Internet economy and the rise of live-streaming sales, many South Korean Internet celebrities have also flooded into the Chinese consumer market. They have opened their own accounts on Chinese platforms like Douyin and taken on advertising to sell products. Even some South Korean brands have collaborated with Chinese Internet celebrities, who sell South Korean products. Chinese netizens can now purchase their favorite items online.

3.3 It has promoted the consumption of fashion and beauty among young people of Generation Z

The Korean Wave culture has a significant influence on the clothing and beauty consumption of today's Generation Z young people. The fashion and beauty care concepts displayed in Korean dramas and variety shows have attracted young people to imitate and purchase related products. For instance, the "evil girl outfit" of Yeon-jin in the hit Korean drama "Dark Glory" two years ago was emulated by many young people in China. For a time, a lot of "Yeon-jin's same style of clothes" and "Yeon-jin's same style of jewelry" emerged in China. For instance, the "rich girl outfits" and "rich girl makeup" of the actresses in "The Heirs" have also sparked a craze among

young people in China. Even a large number of young people in China have flocked to South Korea for the same cosmetic treatments or beauty treatments because they like the facial features, figures and skin conditions of South Korean stars. For instance, the water light skin that was recently popularized by South Korean stars has also been favored by many young people of Generation Z in China, who are eager to go to South Korean beauty salons for water light treatments.

3.4 Impact the domestic consumer market

With the entry of Korean dramas and variety shows into the domestic market in recent years and the huge popularity of various Korean groups such as black pink in China, a large number of young people of Generation Z in China, the main consumer group, have been attracted to travel and take photos at the same locations as Korean TV dramas or movies, or to eat the same snacks, buy the same clothes and have the same beauty treatments. Especially after Jeju Island became visa-free, a large number of Chinese people flocked there for tourism and check-ins. This indicates that the South Korean cultural industry has largely occupied the Chinese consumer group and is competing with many domestic industries in China, which has led to a reduction in the profits of various industries including tourism, beauty, cosmetics and clothing. Therefore, objectively speaking, South Korea's cultural industry has, to a certain extent, impacted the domestic consumer market.

4. The Development of the Korean Wave Cultural Industry in China

4.1 The current Development status of the Korean Wave cultural Industry in the Chinese market

Since Korean dramas entered China in the 1990s, they have rapidly exerted a huge influence in China. This is mainly the result of the South Korean government's vigorous promotion of the cultural export strategy in recent decades [6]. The development of Korean Wave culture in China shows a certain degree of complexity. It is obvious that China has a huge consumer base and a broader market compared to South Korea. Moreover, the Chinese consumer group has extremely strong purchasing power. Therefore, Korean Wave culture is bound to have broad development space and bright prospects in China. Although the Korean Wave culture currently has a large number of fans and a relatively solid market foundation in China, coupled with the development of the Internet nowadays, the dissemination scope of the Korean Wave culture has become even wider. However, due to the large number of domestic cultural industries in China, various entertainment companies, boy bands and girl groups have gone public one after another. Coupled with the relevant policies for protecting local industries in China, the development of the Korean Wave cultural industry in China is bound to encounter certain resistance.

4.2 The market continues to expand and the audience group further

increases

Since the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and South Korea in 1992, South Korea, which adheres to the concept of "building the country through culture", has been actively exporting Korean culture to the domestic market. All along, China has been one of the important audience markets for Korean Wave culture. According to The statistics of The Korea Foundation in 2022, China has become the country with the largest fan base of the Korean Wave. The audience of Korean Wave culture in China is mainly young people. The click rates and attention paid to its TV dramas, movies, music, variety shows, etc. in China have always been relatively high. TV series like "The Heirs" and "You Who Came from the Stars", which are very popular among the Z-generation young people in China, still have a high level of discussion and demand rate in recent years. In terms of the domestic music market in South Korea, in 2023, China became the third-largest market for South Korean music album exports, only after Japan and the United States. Especially in recent years, South Korean girl groups have entered the Chinese market. Representative ones include BLACK PINK and ive. These two girl groups have attracted a large number of young fans in China and further expanded their market in China through holding concerts in China and participating in activities in China. This also indicates that the Korean Wave culture still has strong market appeal in China, and both the market size and the consumer group are constantly expanding.

4.3 The multi-field infiltration of Korean Wave culture has accelerated the process of digital dissemination

The dissemination scope of the Korean Wave cultural industry in China is quite extensive, covering multiple fields such as music, film and television, variety shows, fashion, beauty, and tourism. For example, Korean pop music (K-POP) has attracted a large number of Chinese fans with its dynamic melodies, touching styles and passionate and unrestrained dance styles. As for Korean dramas, "Fated to Love You" and "Dae Jang Geum" have sparked widespread attention and discussion after their broadcast in China. Particularly, "Dae Jang Geum" has aroused the interest of a large number of domestic viewers in the numerous Korean delicacies presented in the show after its broadcast, and has also stimulated a large number of people to travel to South Korea to experience the local food culture. The Internet can break the constraints of time and space. With the development of the Internet and social media, the dissemination of Korean Wave culture in China through digital platforms has become more convenient and the scope of dissemination has also become wider. Through online video platforms, social media and live streaming, Korean Wave artists and their works can quickly interact with Chinese fans. By means of online autograph sessions for artists and modifying the plot of Korean dramas based on online users' votes while they are broadcast, the sense of participation of domestic Z-generation young people has been enhanced, and their interest in Korean Wave culture has been further stimulated.

4.4 Issues regarding the Development of Korean Wave Culture in

China

It is undeniable that the wide spread of Korean Wave culture in the Chinese market has greatly enriched the spiritual life of contemporary Z-generation young people. However, culture is inevitably accompanied by conflicts and integrations in the process of dissemination. The development of Korean culture itself has its shortcomings and flaws. In recent years, with the popularity of various online dramas, especially the recent popularity of various online short dramas that are thrilling, and the current fast-paced environment where people's patience for plot development is limited, in order to meet the needs of young people today, the creation of Korean film and television works has inevitably gradually become vulgar. Nowadays, many production companies, when preparing works, tend to first consider what the current young people need and want to see, rather than thinking about what the current young people should see and what is beneficial to the formation of their values and physical and mental health. It is precisely for this reason that in the popular Korean dramas in recent years, most of the plots we see are those featuring chaebols, handsome men and beautiful women, social violence, and school bullying. While they have achieved a large number of on-demand views, they have more or less had adverse effects on the values of young people, and such effects are bound to be long-lasting. Furthermore, since China's "ban on Korean dramas" was introduced in 2016, a large number of Korean artists and dramas have been boycotted. Especially a few years later, the pandemic also had a certain impact on South Korea's cultural industry. In recent years, it has not been able to produce many popular works or globally popular artists. Therefore, Although the domestic resistance to the South Korean cultural industry has decreased in recent years, with the gradual rise of the domestic cultural industry and the shortcomings of the South Korean cultural industry itself, the dissemination of the South Korean cultural industry in China has been less than satisfactory.

4.5 The Negative Impact of Korean Wave Culture on the Consumption behavior of Generation Z Young People

As mentioned earlier, at present, in order to meet the aesthetic demands of the Z-generation young people under today's high-pressure and fast-paced life conditions, the South Korean cultural industry has ignored the educational and warning role that the cultural industry itself should have, which is to inspire goodness and make people think deeply, when producing many works. Instead, it merely focuses on short-term benefits and economic interests. This has led to the production of many works in South Korea nowadays, such as overbearing CEOs falling in love with Cinderella from the slums, school bullying, or those that fully display the luxurious life of the upper class. Many young viewers can only satisfy their temporary spiritual pleasure. After that, they may be adversely affected by the plot, such as stimulating the vanity and competitive mentality of some people, intensifying the dissatisfaction of young people with their current living conditions, and triggering the lament of some young people about the injustice of fate. The consumption concepts of some characters in Korean dramas can also subtly influence young people in China. It is highly likely to stimulate some people to consume ahead of their

time, purchase luxury goods that do not match their current consumption level, and buy items that are not practical for them to show that they are sociable or to satisfy their temporary vanity. In this regard, The cultural industry in South Korea also has a negative impact on the consumption behavior of contemporary young people.

5. How to regulate the influence of the Korean Wave cultural industry on the consumption behavior of contemporary young people

5.1 Chinese native

The dissemination of Korean Wave culture in China is also largely influenced by relevant local policies, especially to regulate the consumption behavior of young people nowadays, help them cultivate correct values, and for the purpose of protecting local industries and maintaining the domestic consumer market. China has an inescapable responsibility to regulate the influence of Korean Wave culture on the consumption behavior of contemporary young people.

5.1.1 Formulate restrictive policies for the dissemination of the Korean Wave cultural industry in the domestic market

As for Korean dramas, one of the major characteristics of Korean TV series and films is their boldness in shooting, which is undoubtedly a great merit. They dare to reveal the unknown dark side of social life and satirize it to make people think deeply. However, a major drawback that follows is that many plots that are rather bloody and violent for young people or overly depict the flashy lifestyles of certain social classes have also been incorporated into film and television works. Once these works enter the Chinese market, they are very likely to have an adverse impact on the psychology and values of young people today. It is also very likely to mislead the way of thinking, life concepts and consumption behaviors of young people. Therefore, the state should formulate relevant policies to prevent or selectively allow some overly sensitive topics to enter the Chinese market, so as to ensure that young people have correct consumption behaviors and to a certain extent protect the domestic cultural industry market in China.

5.1.2 Relevant government departments should strengthen the education of young people

The formation of a person's correct values cannot be separated from correct guidance, especially for young people who are at a crucial stage in the formation of their values. Therefore, relevant government departments should actively take measures to ensure that young people influenced by the Korean Wave have correct consumption concepts and behaviors. In this era of highly developed Internet and when social media dominates the entertainment life of the majority of people, relevant government departments can utilize social media to warn young people not to be influenced by certain incorrect consumption concepts in the Korean Wave culture by means of

shooting short videos and other methods that are popular among contemporary young people, and to adhere to their correct consumption views.

5.2 South Korean Cultural Industry

Strengthen the standardized development of its own cultural industry. As the source of the Korean Wave that is popular in China, in order to develop and make profits in the Chinese market for a long time, the Korean cultural industry must make corresponding adjustments according to the mainstream values in the country, reduce the release of various flashy and incoherent works, and also strengthen the education and guidance of artists who have hated the local area. Prevent the occurrence of behaviors such as making remarks that insult China, racist remarks, and guiding young people to consume. For instance, the incident that caused a stir some time ago where a member of a South Korean girl group who once worked in China participated in the Crazy Horse Show in a high-profile manner, the artist's statement "You weren't invited" became very popular among young people in China. Of course, most people just played with a joke, but there must also be some young people who, influenced by the artist's star status, developed some inappropriate ideas. Therefore, the cultural industry in South Korea should strengthen the management of professional norms to prevent similar incidents from happening again. Meanwhile, if we want to spread traditional Chinese culture to the world, we should develop a variety of cultural products and services in a targeted manner based on market demands to meet the diverse cultural needs of people around the world [7].

5.3 Young People of Generation Z Themselves

As the saying goes, "One must be strong oneself to forge iron." All kinds of external guidance, regulations and education are additional conditions. Under the influence of the Korean Wave cultural industry, the key to maintaining correct consumption behavior still lies in the young people themselves. Contemporary young people should have the ability to distinguish right from wrong, resolutely put an end to certain behaviors in the Korean Wave culture that lead to advanced consumption, consumption that does not conform to their own living standards, and impractical consumption. They should adhere to their own consumption bottom line and not engage in meaningless consumption, not just to cater to the mass consumption. Correctly view the positive and inappropriate aspects of the Korean Wave culture, avoid being a puppet of the cultural industry, truly make use of all kinds of Korean Wave culture for oneself, absorb the aspects of Korean Wave culture that suit oneself, and make consumption that suits oneself.

6. Conclusion

As can be seen from the previous content, with the spread and development of the Korean Wave culture in the Chinese market since the 1980s, in recent years, the Korean Wave culture has had a significant impact on the consumption behavior of young people of Generation Z. Of course, through the analysis above, it can be known that this influence can be divided into two aspects: positive and negative. In terms of its positive impact, it has driven the young people of

Generation Z to change their consumption concepts, be more willing to pay for their emotions, and pursue more trendy and fashionable things. It has also attracted more funds to flow into the market, accelerating the capital circulation in both domestic and international markets. On the negative side, the Korean Wave culture may distort the consumption view of Generation Z young people, who blindly pursue fashion and avant-garde, as well as the same items as celebrities, and engage in consumption that does not conform to the current living standards. Therefore, whether it is the Chinese market itself, the Korean Wave cultural industry or the young people of Generation Z, they should all establish correct values and consumption views. The government should provide guidance, the market should impose constraints, the cultural industry should enhance self-discipline, and young people should improve their ability to distinguish. All departments and fields should work in coordination to jointly ensure that the Korean Wave cultural industry can play a positive role in guiding the consumption behavior of the young people of Generation Z.

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