

**Your Own Mikrokosmos:  
Exploring the Identity Development of Adult Filipino K-Pop Fans, its  
Implications to Wellbeing and The Formation of Parasocial Relationships and  
Reflexive Imagination**

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**ABSTRACT**

*This study examines how Filipino adult K-Pop fans make sense of their fandom experiences in relation to identity development, cultural negotiation, wellbeing, and parasocial relationships. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the research captures the lived experiences of adults actively engaged in K-Pop fandom through semi-structured interviews. Three overarching themes emerged: (1) Identity Formation and Cultural Negotiation, (2) Wellbeing and Escapism, and (3) Parasocial Connections and Reflexive Imagination. Participants described fandom as an extension of their established Filipino identity, functioning as both an emotional refuge and a source of motivation. While some expressed aspirational admiration for Korean culture, they maintained reflexive awareness and active boundary-setting. Parasocial bonds with idols were experienced as meaningful yet consciously contained, with playful fantasies reframed as adaptive reflexive imagination rather than pathological delusions. Findings suggest that K-Pop fandom provides a psychosocial space that supports identity integration, emotional regulation, and relational meaning-making in adulthood. The study underscores the role of global popular culture in adult developmental processes, highlighting how fandom can contribute to wellbeing, agency, and social connection.*

**Keywords:** K-Pop fandom, adult identity development, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), meaning-making, cultural negotiation, wellbeing, parasocial relationships, reflexive imagination

**1. Introduction**

Identity development is a central aspect of psychological growth, particularly during young adulthood, a period characterized by exploration, self-reflection, and the construction of a

coherent sense of self. In contemporary globalized societies, identity formation is increasingly influenced by transnational cultural flows, including media and popular culture. Global media provide individuals with symbolic resources through which they interpret experiences, express values, and negotiate their identities within broader social contexts.

One prominent example of such global cultural influence is Korean popular music (K-Pop), which has achieved widespread international popularity, including in the Philippines. Filipino audiences actively engage with K-Pop through music consumption, online communities, fan merchandise, and social media interactions. Research suggests that the aesthetic presentation, performance style, and media visibility of K-Pop idols significantly contribute to their appeal among Filipino fans (Miguel & Chavez, 2023). Beyond entertainment, K-Pop fandom has become a meaningful cultural and social space where individuals form emotional attachments, develop social connections, and construct aspects of their identities.

Engagement with fandom often facilitates processes of identity exploration and self-expression. Fans may identify with particular idols or groups whose values, narratives, or aesthetics resonate with their personal experiences. In the Philippine context, scholars have argued that the popularity of K-Pop should not necessarily be viewed as a threat to local culture. Rather, it can function as a catalyst for cultural adaptation and creativity. Domingo (2021) suggests that the influence of K-Pop has contributed to the revitalization of Filipino popular music (P-Pop), illustrating the adaptability and hybrid nature of Filipino cultural identity.

Within fandom contexts, idols frequently function not only as entertainers but also as influential media figures whose reach extends to fashion, lifestyle, and consumer culture. Through social media platforms, idols maintain continuous visibility and interaction with fans, fostering a sense of intimacy and accessibility. These dynamics often lead to the development of parasocial relationships, defined as one-sided emotional bonds formed between audiences and media figures (Degen, 2023). Although parasocial relationships are commonly experienced as a normal aspect of media engagement, they may also involve varying degrees of emotional investment that shape how fans perceive and relate to idols.

The title *Your Own Mikrokosmos* draws inspiration from the BTS song *Mikrokosmos*, which conveys the idea that each individual contains a unique universe of experiences and meanings. In this study, the concept symbolizes the individualized worlds that Filipino adult K-Pop fans construct through their engagement with fandom. While fandom is often experienced collectively through fan communities, each fan interprets these experiences through the lens of personal identity, emotional needs, and social context. Fandom therefore, functions as a space where identity, wellbeing, and parasocial engagement intersect.

Scholars have increasingly examined how fandom participation intersects with identity processes. Identity is widely understood as a dynamic and multifaceted construct encompassing individuals' perceptions of themselves, including their values, roles, and social affiliations (Sigelman & Rider, 2018). Within fan communities, identity is often negotiated through both personal identification with idols and social identification with fellow fans. Research indicates that fandom participation can become an important component of fans' self-concepts. Arisandi et al. (2023), for example, found that K-Pop fans frequently integrate fandom into their daily routines and lifestyles, expressing strong emotional attachment to idols and a sense of responsibility to support them. Online platforms further facilitate identity construction, as fans curate digital personas through usernames, profile images, and shared content that signal affiliation with specific fandom communities (Ezani, 2019; Ismail & Khan, 2023).

Fandom also contributes to the development of social identity by providing a sense of belonging within communities built around shared interests. Participation in collective activities such as streaming music, discussing idols online, and sharing fan-created content reinforces identification with a particular fandom and strengthens social connections among members (Maros et al., 2022). These practices often transcend geographical boundaries, enabling fans to establish relationships with others who share similar interests and values. In some cases, fandom engagement also intersects with broader identity processes, including cultural belonging and gender expression, highlighting the role of fandom as a space for identity exploration (Kuo et al., 2020).

Beyond identity formation, fandom participation has also been linked to psychological wellbeing. Fans frequently describe their idols as sources of comfort, inspiration, and motivation. Jenol et al. (2020) found that many fans perceive their idols as role models who encourage perseverance and personal growth through their music and public messages. Engagement with fan communities and media content can also provide a form of escapism, offering temporary relief from everyday stressors and allowing individuals to experience enjoyment, relaxation, and emotional release.

Fandom communities further contribute to wellbeing by fostering social support networks. Shared enthusiasm for idols and participation in collective fan activities often create strong interpersonal bonds among fans. In some cases, fan communities have mobilized collective action for charitable or political causes, demonstrating their capacity to function as meaningful social networks rather than merely entertainment-oriented groups (Kim & Hutt, 2021). These findings suggest that fandom engagement can play a role in shaping both emotional experiences and social relationships.

At the same time, scholars have examined the psychological dynamics of parasocial relationships

within fandom contexts. Parasocial relationships typically develop through repeated exposure to media figures and the perception of familiarity or intimacy. Within the K-Pop industry, digital platforms such as livestreams, variety content, and fan-oriented messaging provide opportunities for idols to communicate directly with fans, often reinforcing the illusion of interpersonal interaction (Utami, 2019). These forms of communication can strengthen fans' emotional attachment and create feelings of closeness despite the fundamentally one-sided nature of the relationship.

Imaginative engagement also plays an important role in fandom culture. Fans frequently participate in creative practices such as fanfiction writing, speculative storytelling, and "shipping," which involves imagining romantic relationships between idols (Haasch, 2019).

These activities allow fans to reinterpret media narratives and explore alternative possibilities within fictional or semi-fictional frameworks. Importantly, many fans acknowledge the fictional nature of these practices while still deriving emotional meaning and enjoyment from them.

However, strong emotional investment in imagined relationships may influence how fans respond to events involving idols, such as public romantic relationships or controversies (Eren, 2021).

Despite the growing global presence of K-Pop fandom, research examining the experiences of Filipino fans remains limited, particularly among adults. Much of the existing literature focuses on adolescents or relies on quantitative approaches that examine patterns of fan behavior without capturing the meanings fans attribute to their experiences. As a result, there is limited understanding of how adult fans interpret and integrate fandom into their identities, emotional lives, and social environments.

The present study addresses this gap by exploring the experiences of adult Filipino K-Pop fans through a qualitative lens. In this study, the term *delusion* is used in a non-clinical sense to reflect participants' own language when describing playful or self-aware fantasies associated with fandom engagement. These expressions are interpreted as imaginative forms of engagement rather than pathological beliefs.

By examining identity development, wellbeing, and parasocial relationships within the context of K-Pop fandom, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how adult Filipino fans construct meaning through their participation in global popular culture.

Specifically, the study seeks to address the following research questions: (1) How does engagement with K-Pop culture influence the identity development of adult Filipino fans? (2) What meanings do adult Filipino fans associate with their participation in K-Pop fandom,

particularly in relation to their wellbeing? and (3) How do Filipino K-Pop fans form and maintain parasocial relationships with their favorite K-Pop idols?

## **2. Methods**

This study employed a qualitative research design using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to examine the lived experiences of adult Filipino K-Pop fans. IPA is well suited for exploring how individuals interpret and make meaning of personal experiences, particularly within complex social and cultural contexts. Through in-depth semi-structured interviews, the study explored how engagement with K-Pop fandom relates to participants' identity development, wellbeing, parasocial relationships, and imaginative fan practices. The phenomenological perspective emphasizes individuals' subjective interpretations of their experiences and the meanings they assign to them, allowing for a nuanced understanding of how fans make sense of their involvement in K-Pop culture.

Participants were recruited using purposive and snowball sampling methods to identify individuals actively engaged in K-Pop fandom. Initial participants were contacted through social media platforms and online fan communities, after which referrals were obtained from participants' networks. A total of eleven Filipino K-Pop fans participated in the study, with one participant included in the pretest of the interview guide and ten participants included in the main data collection. Participants ranged in age from 25 to 42 years and resided in either the National Capital Region (NCR) or the Davao Region. Although the initial design focused on Metro Manila, the geographic scope was expanded through the referral process inherent in snowball sampling. Including participants from Davao allowed the study to capture perspectives from two major urban areas with active K-Pop fan communities and similar access to digital platforms where fandom engagement typically occurs.

Participants met the following criteria: Filipino citizenship, age between 25 and 42 years, proficiency in English or Filipino, residency in NCR or the Davao Region, financial independence in supporting fandom activities, and active engagement in K-Pop fandom practices. These activities included behaviors such as streaming music releases, collecting merchandise, attending concerts or fan meetings (online or offline), maintaining fan accounts, creating fan-related content, learning Korean language or culture, or traveling for fan-related events. Participants identified as fans of third- and fourth-generation K-Pop groups, defined as groups debuting between 2012–2017 and 2018 onward, respectively. To ensure confidentiality, chosen pseudonyms were created by the participants themselves, often inspired by or directly related to their favorite K-Pop idols, reflecting the personal significance and cultural connection embedded in their fan identities.

**Table 1. Participant Demographics**

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Civil Status</b>	<b>Range # of years being a K-Pop fan</b>	<b>Favorite K-Pop group/s</b>
RapGirlie	36 years old	Female	Single	17 years	BTS & Seventeen
yoonjinluvrrc lub	29 years old	Female	Single	15-16 years	BTS & Seventeen
Porarisu	28 years old	Female	Single	5-6 years	EXO, Seventeen, & NCT Dream
Minnie	25 years old	Female	Single	10-11 years	Seventeen
Seven Miles	27 years old	Female	Married	5-6 years	BTS
GG	32 years old	Female	Married	15-16 years	Seventeen
EAOPARK	42 years old	Female	Single	4-5 years	BTS
Hamji	30 years old	Female	Single	9-10 years	Seventeen
R	28 years old	Male	Single	1-2 years	NCT
RCS	28 years old	Male	Single	9-10 years	Seventeen

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews guided by an interview protocol designed to explore participants’ experiences within K-Pop fandom. The interview guide included open-ended questions addressing identity development, fandom engagement, wellbeing, parasocial relationships, and imaginative fan practices. The interview protocol was reviewed for clarity and sensitivity prior to data collection, and one pretest interview was conducted to refine the questions.

Participants were recruited primarily through social media and online fan communities, which function as central spaces for interaction among K-Pop fans. Prior to participation, individuals received an information sheet and informed consent form outlining the study’s purpose, procedures, confidentiality measures, and their rights as participants. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed that they could withdraw at any time without penalty.

Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or online, depending on participants' location and preferences. Each participant completed one to two interview sessions lasting approximately 90 to 150 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis. To enhance credibility, participants were given the opportunity to review summarized interpretations of their interviews and provide clarifications or feedback when necessary.

Data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. Transcripts were read multiple times to develop a holistic understanding of participants' accounts. Meaning units reflecting significant aspects of participants' experiences were identified and subsequently transformed into psychologically relevant expressions. These transformed units were then organized into emergent themes representing shared patterns across participants' narratives.

Elements of Giorgi's descriptive phenomenological approach informed the analytic process by emphasizing systematic engagement with participants' lived experiences and identifying the essential structures of the phenomenon.

To strengthen analytic rigor, reflexive self-reflection was conducted to acknowledge potential biases that could influence interpretation. Interpretations were also discussed with a content validator with expertise in qualitative research to support the credibility and consistency of the findings. Ethical procedures were implemented throughout the study. Participants provided informed consent prior to participation, and confidentiality was maintained through the use of pseudonyms and the removal of identifying information from transcripts and reports. Audio recordings and transcripts were securely stored and accessible only to the research team.

Participants were informed that they could decline to answer any question or withdraw from the study at any time. All procedures were conducted in accordance with the Philippine Association of Psychologists Code of Ethics to ensure respect for participants' rights, dignity, and confidentiality.

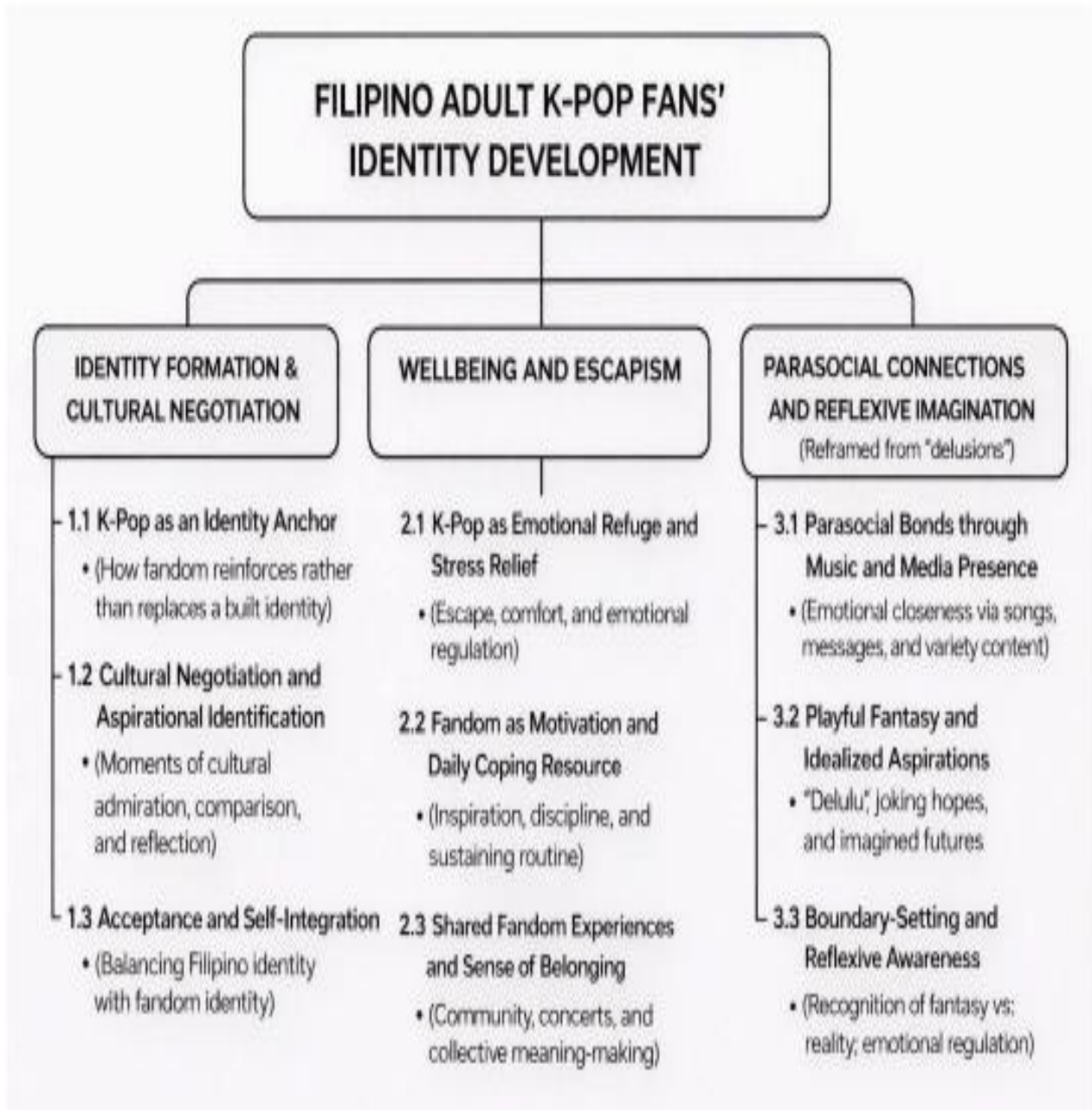
### **3. Results and Discussion**

This chapter presents the interpretative themes derived from an in-depth exploration of how Filipino adult K-Pop fans understand and make sense of their fandom experiences in relation to identity development, emotional wellbeing, and mediated relational engagement.

Guided by participants' narratives and reflections elicited through questions on identity formation, cultural negotiation, wellbeing, parasocial relationships, imaginative engagement, and coping, the analysis revealed three interconnected experiential themes: (1) *Identity Formation and Cultural Negotiation*, (2) *Wellbeing and Escapism*, and (3) *Parasocial Connections and*

*Reflexive Imagination.*

**Figure 1. Thematic Map of Filipino Adult K-Pop Fans' Identity Development**



Rather than functioning as discrete categories, these themes represent overlapping meaning-making processes through which participants interpret the role of K-Pop in their adult lives. Each theme is further articulated through interrelated subthemes that capture both shared experiential

patterns and individual variations across accounts. A thematic map is presented to visually synthesize these relationships and to serve as a conceptual guide for the interpretative discussions that follow, illustrating how participants' experiences of fandom intersect across identity, emotional regulation, and imagined relational connection.

### **Theme 1: Identity Formation and Cultural Negotiation**

**K-Pop as an Identity Anchor.** Participants' narratives consistently positioned K-Pop not as a replacement for the self, but as something layered onto an already established identity. This finding aligns with identity theory, which conceptualizes identity as an extension and clarification of the self rather than its equivalent (Serpe, 1985). Many participants described having a "built" sense of self prior to engaging with K-Pop, suggesting that fandom functioned as an anchoring force that reinforced existing values, interests, and emotional orientations.

This sense of continuity is evident in participants' own words. One participant reflected, "I feel like I'm still the same person. Not so much in terms of how I make decisions, but in terms of influence on my passions," highlighting how fandom shaped interests without disrupting core identity. Another emphasized cultural rootedness, stating, "My identity is still, my heart is still in the Philippines... I'm really just a normal Filipino girl." These accounts suggest that fandom was experienced not as a competing identity but as an affirming extension of the self.

This layered understanding was further articulated by a participant who described fandom as "*one way of learning another culture coated with us being a fandom,*" positioning K-Pop as a medium for cultural engagement and self-expression rather than identity replacement. Across narratives, participants demonstrated an interpretative process that preserved coherence and continuity while allowing for identity enrichment.

Consistent with prior research, idols were not merely entertainers but symbolic figures representing values such as discipline, perseverance, and emotional expressiveness (Arisandi et al., 2023). However, the present findings extend this understanding by showing that such influence is experienced as stabilizing rather than consuming.

This anchoring process was also reflected in participants' management of self-presentation. Four participants described maintaining alternate fandom accounts as "safe" or "private" spaces where they could freely express fangirl emotions. From an interpretative perspective, this reflects a nuanced negotiation between authenticity and social visibility, consistent with Goffman's (1959) distinction between "front stage" and "backstage" selves.

Rather than fragmenting identity, this practice illustrates how participants distributed aspects of themselves across contexts while maintaining coherence (Ezani, 2019; Ismail & Khan, 2023).

From a developmental standpoint, these accounts align with Erikson's (1968) conceptualization of identity as a lifelong process and Marcia's (1966) notion of identity achievement, wherein individuals commit to a coherent self-concept following exploration. Participants' narratives suggest that fandom represents a consciously integrated domain of meaning rather than a source of identity diffusion. At the same time, alternate fandom spaces function as controlled sites of exploration, consistent with identity moratorium, allowing for emotional expression without destabilizing the self.

Importantly, this anchoring function was situated within the developmental context of adulthood. All participants were engaged in full-time employment, with some navigating additional life roles such as marriage, parenthood, or managing Generalized Anxiety Disorder.

Despite these demands, K-Pop was described as a stabilizing and meaningful aspect of daily life, providing enjoyment, reflection, and motivation amid the challenges of "adulthood." Rather than serving as an escape from responsibility, fandom was intentionally integrated into participants' routines, reinforcing continuity across life domains.

**Cultural Negotiation and Aspirational Identification.** Building on this anchored sense of self, participants described moments of cultural reflection shaped by admiration for Korean culture. Five participants articulated thoughts such as "*I have to remind myself that I am not Korean*" or "*I wish I was Korean,*" often framed as fleeting or humorous reflections rather than sustained identity conflict. These moments can be understood through the lens of aspirational identities, defined as future-oriented self-concepts shaped through encounters with cultural others (Hoyer & Ybema, 2025).

Within this framework, participants' reflections represent instances of aspirational identification that prompt self-reflection rather than identity threat. These experiences illustrate what may be described as identity stretching, wherein individuals imaginatively position themselves closer to another cultural identity without relinquishing their own. Importantly, participants demonstrated reflexive awareness, framing these thoughts as admiration for perceived values such as discipline, aesthetics, and work ethic rather than a desire for cultural replacement.

This process aligns with Berry's (1997) acculturation framework, particularly the integration strategy, wherein individuals engage with aspects of another culture while maintaining their original cultural identity. Participants selectively adopted elements such as music, language fragments, and fashion without perceiving these as incompatible with being Filipino. Rather than experiencing cultural dissonance, they described fandom as a space of curiosity, appreciation, and learning, supporting Domingo's (2021) assertion that K-Pop can facilitate cultural engagement without eroding local identity.

Recent advances in social identity research further contextualize these findings. Cognitive consistency models suggest that individuals can integrate multiple social identities in ways that are compatible and non-threatening (Roth et al., 2025). Similarly, individuals with well-integrated identities often demonstrate greater psychological adjustment and coherence (Manzi et al., 2025). In the present study, participants did not describe tension between being Filipino and being K-Pop fans; instead, these identities coexisted and, in some cases, reinforced one another. Fandom provided a sense of belonging and validation, while cultural identity remained grounded.

**Acceptance and Self-Integration.** As participants reflected on their fandom experiences over time, many described arriving at a position of acceptance and self-integration, wherein K-Pop was understood as one meaningful aspect of a multifaceted identity. One participant explained, “It doesn't have to change who you really are or your identity. It may affect somehow like your behavior or personality. But overall, it doesn't need to change your entire well-being and identity,” reflecting a settled stance in which cultural admiration and rootedness coexist.

Another participant reinforced this boundary, stating, *“To change who I am—like to be white—that’s a no for me.”*

From a developmental perspective, this subtheme represents the consolidation of earlier processes. Identity anchoring provided stability, cultural negotiation facilitated reflection, and self-integration emerged as the outcome of these meaning-making efforts. Participants demonstrated reflexivity, maintaining awareness of fandom’s role without allowing it to dominate other aspects of life.

These findings align with Iwasaki et al. (2018), who argue that meaningful leisure engagement fosters autonomy, connection, discovery, and empowerment, contributing to identity integration. Similarly, Park’s (2022) meaning-making model suggests that when culturally significant experiences align with existing belief systems, they can be assimilated into the self without distress, enhancing psychological well-being.

Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) further supports this interpretation, as fandom engagement appeared to satisfy participants’ needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Participants exercised choice in their engagement, drew inspiration from idols’ discipline, and experienced connection within fandom communities. These processes contributed to self-affirmation rather than identity disruption.

Consistent with a lifespan developmental perspective (Baltes, 1987), identity is not static but adaptive, shaped through ongoing engagement with meaningful experiences. Participants’ narratives reflect this adaptability, illustrating how fandom becomes integrated into adult identity

in ways that support continuity and growth. Additionally, these findings resonate with Sitasari's (2020) work, which suggests that celebrity admiration does not inherently undermine self-esteem. In the present study, idols functioned as constructive reference points that participants could aspire to, reflect upon, and derive comfort from without destabilizing their sense of self.

## **Theme 2: Wellbeing and Escapism**

**K-Pop as Emotional Refuge and Stress Relief.** Participants consistently described K-Pop as a reliable emotional refuge, a space they could return to when overwhelmed by daily responsibilities, interpersonal stress, or emotional exhaustion. Engagement with music, performances, and idol content was experienced as emotionally containing, offering moments of comfort, familiarity, and relief. One participant, who shared being diagnosed with Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD), reflected on rediscovering K-Pop during what she described as *"a really mentally challenging part in my life... super dark time."* For this participant, fandom engagement was not merely recreational but deeply tied to emotional survival and regulation.

Another participant articulated this experience: *"K-pop is a quick escape. It's like a daily getaway from stress."* Such narratives highlight how participants understood fandom as a "safe space," a phenomenological resource that could be accessed during moments of fatigue, loneliness, or psychological strain. Rather than requiring withdrawal from everyday responsibilities, K-Pop enabled participants to manage their internal emotional states while remaining engaged in their daily roles.

This subtheme reflects broader shifts in the understanding of adulthood, where being "grown-up" is increasingly defined by the capacity for emotional regulation, self-reliance, and managing competing demands (Wright & von Stumm, 2024). Within this context, K-Pop functioned as an accessible and self-directed means of emotional care. Participants described listening to songs after long days, watching variety content to calm themselves, or immersing in performances to momentarily disengage from stressors. These practices were not abstract but embedded in everyday routines, contributing to a sense of emotional stability and continuity.

Importantly, escapism in this context was not experienced as denial. Participants remained aware of their stressors; however, K-Pop created a temporary emotional distance that allowed them to "pause," reset, and return to reality with renewed emotional capacity. This aligns with existing literature that frames fandom participation as a source of emotional validation and belonging (Lim, 2022; Maros et al., 2022), while extending it by emphasizing how such refuge is actively constructed through intentional engagement.

**Fandom as Motivation and Daily Coping Resource.** Beyond emotional relief, participants described fandom as an active coping resource that supported motivation, discipline, and

resilience in their daily lives. As all participants were engaged in full-time work, and some were building families, K-Pop functioned not only as a retreat but also as a source of energy that enabled re-engagement with responsibilities.

Many participants described internalizing the narratives and work ethics associated with idols, translating these into personal goals and routines. One participant reflected, *"They work hard, and plus luck, they reach success... That's relatable to me. I'll work hard, and if luck strikes, then I'll make it,"* illustrating how idols' stories were interpreted as personally meaningful and applicable. Another participant shared, *"It keeps me motivated to work hard so I can afford more concerts... and for travel."* These accounts suggest that fandom reinforced participants' sense of agency, encouraging effort and forward-thinking rather than passivity.

In this subtheme, escapism functioned as a bridge back to reality. Participants intentionally engaged with K-Pop content to uplift their mood, restore motivation, and sustain productivity. This resonates with studies describing K-Pop as a "happy pill," wherein engagement generates joy, intrinsic satisfaction, and emotional renewal (Atanacio-Blas & Erastain, 2020; Utami, 2019; Lopina et al., 2022). Importantly, participants framed these experiences as self-directed and meaningful, rather than compulsive or dependent, highlighting their agency in using fandom as a coping tool.

From the perspective of Sikolohiyang Pilipino, these narratives foreground the role of *loob* (inner self) and *damdamin* (emotional experience) in coping processes. Engagement with K-Pop allowed participants to attend to their emotional states in ways that felt safe and culturally resonant. Music, lyrics, and idol narratives served as symbolic mediums through which *damdamin* could be processed and soothed, without requiring explicit verbalization. In this sense, fandom functioned as a culturally consonant form of emotional care, enabling participants to nurture their *loob* through resonance and affective connection rather than formal support systems.

**Shared Fandom Experiences and Sense of Belonging.** Participants' accounts further revealed that wellbeing was not only shaped by individual engagement but also significantly enhanced through shared fandom experiences. Many described the emotional value of interacting with fellow fans, whether through concerts, online communities, or informal gatherings. These shared spaces were experienced as validating, accepting, and emotionally safe.

One participant described meeting with her *"core group of army friends... get together just for moral support and to talk about it and to openly cry without being judged by other people,"* while another noted, *"you feel like you belong. You don't know everyone, but when I get to a concert, you know everyone."* Additionally, participants explicitly described fandom spaces as a

“safe space” and “cathartic,” emphasizing the emotional openness and acceptance they experienced within these communities.

These narratives highlight how escapism operates not only as an individual process but also as a relational one. Within fandom spaces, participants encountered shared emotional language, mutual recognition, and collective validation, all of which contributed to a sustained sense of belonging. This aligns with prior research emphasizing fandom as a source of affiliation and community (Lim, 2022; Maros et al., 2022), as well as findings that K-Pop fandom can provide representation and affirmation (Kuo et al., 2020). In the Philippine context, Benitez (2022) further notes that fandom spaces can foster inclusivity and accommodate diverse identities.

From a Sikolohiyang Pilipino perspective, these shared experiences resonate with *kapwa* (shared inner self) and *pakikipagkapwa* (relational engagement), which are central to Filipino personhood. Although idols remain physically distant, participants described experiencing emotional closeness through messages of encouragement, vulnerability, and perseverance. These mediated interactions were not perceived as illusory but as symbolic forms of connection grounded in shared humanity.

This relational dynamic was further deepened through interactions with fellow fans, where emotional experiences were collectively acknowledged and validated. Over time, individuals initially perceived as *ibang tao* (outsiders) became *hindi ibang tao* (one of us), reflecting a transition toward *pakikipagpalagayang-loob* (mutual trust and inner comfort). In this way, fandom functioned as a social and emotional space where participants could experience belonging, recognition, and shared meaning.

### **Theme 3: Parasocial Connections and Reflexive Imagination**

**Parasocial Bonds Through Music and Media Presence.** Participants described parasocial bonds as gradually emerging through repeated exposure to idols’ music, messages, and mediated appearances. These connections were not experienced as sudden infatuations but as cumulative feelings of familiarity, comfort, and emotional reassurance. Music, in particular, was described as deeply personal, with lyrics often interpreted as speaking directly to participants’ emotional states. One participant reflected, “*I feel like that’s where you really see how a single song can give so much meaning and significance in your life, and have such an impact on your perspective.*” Another emphasized the role of media engagement, stating, “*If I don’t watch their content, I don’t think I’d feel connected to them. You need to watch their content to feel that sense of connection.*”

These accounts illustrate how parasocial bonds are cultivated through sustained and multimodal engagement. Variety shows, livestreams, and social media content contributed to the perception

of idols as relatable individuals rather than distant celebrities. Participants described idols as emotionally present figures who offered encouragement, motivation, and reassurance, particularly during periods of stress or uncertainty.

Consistent with prior research, idols' perceived authenticity and narrative consistency enable fans to internalize messages as personally meaningful (Evangelista, 2019; Asrita, 2023; Wise, 2022; Utami, 2019). In the present study, this internalization was experienced as supportive rather than consuming, with idols functioning as symbolic sources of strength woven into participants' emotional lives. Among adult participants, these bonds were often framed in non-romantic and caregiving terms, aligning with findings that describe idols as "someone who gives advice," "someone who comforts," or "someone who motivates me to keep going" (Loh & Gilmour, 2022).

Importantly, participants emphasized that these relationships remained consciously one-sided. Emotional closeness did not translate into expectations of reciprocity, nor did it interfere with real-world relationships. Instead, parasocial bonds functioned as an additional layer of emotional support, reinforcing rather than replacing participants' existing social connections.

**Playful Fantasy and Idealized Aspirations.** Alongside these emotionally meaningful connections, participants described engaging in playful fantasy, often humorously referring to themselves as "delulu." One participant noted that engaging in such fantasies felt natural and enjoyable, particularly when interacting with fanfiction and alternate universe (AU) narratives, explaining, "*You really become delusional because you're the main character.*"

In the context of this study, however, these "delusions" are more accurately understood as *reflexive imagination*. Participants consistently framed these scenarios as lighthearted and self-aware, as reflected in statements such as, "*Of course it's delulu, but it's fun to imagine.*"

Rather than indicating belief or expectation, these fantasies functioned as shared cultural practices within fandom, embedded in humor, creativity, and collective understanding.

This interpretation is supported by prior research indicating that fans may engage in romantic or aspirational imaginings involving idols (Atanacio-Blas & Erastain, 2020). However, the present findings highlight the reflexive dimension of these engagements. Participants frequently qualified their statements, laughed at themselves, or used fandom-specific language to signal awareness of the fictional nature of their imaginings. This reflexivity suggests that fantasy was not passively absorbed but actively constructed and managed.

Participants also demonstrated autonomy in their engagement with these fantasies. They described choosing when and how to indulge in imaginative scenarios, which were experienced

as temporary and easily set aside. This capacity to shift between imaginative engagement and everyday reality reflects a form of reflective agency, wherein participants maintain control over the emotional boundaries of their fandom experiences.

These imaginative practices are further contextualized by media structures that invite emotional projection. Khedun-Burgoine (2022) notes that idols are often constructed through narratives that address fans directly, creating relational spaces that encourage identification and imaginative engagement. Participants in the present study recognized this dynamic and engaged with it knowingly, allowing themselves to participate in the fantasy while remaining aware of its performative nature.

Similarly, research suggests that idols' consistent displays of care and attentiveness may evoke romantic or aspirational interpretations (Asrita, 2023). Participants echoed this understanding but reframed these qualities as aspirational standards rather than literal expectations. Traits such as kindness, discipline, and emotional expressiveness were used as symbolic benchmarks when reflecting on future partners, rather than as criteria for real-world comparison.

Haasch (2019) further observes that fans often maintain boundaries within creative spaces, using phrases like "Let me believe" as invitations to imaginative play rather than assertions of belief. Participants in this study demonstrated a similar stance, engaging in fantasy as a controlled, meaningful, and culturally shared form of expression.

**Boundary-Setting and Reflexive Awareness.** While participants engaged in imaginative and aspirational fantasies, their accounts were equally characterized by deliberate boundary-setting and reflexive awareness. Reflexive awareness refers to a higher-order process of self-monitoring through which participants actively recognized and maintained the limits of their parasocial engagement. This allowed them to enjoy emotional closeness and imaginative engagement without conflating fantasy with reality or developing unrealistic expectations.

Participants articulated this awareness explicitly. One participant reflected on the importance of boundaries, stating, "*That wouldn't work in real life,*" while another emphasized respect for idols' autonomy: "*I don't want to do things they don't want. And I think what also helps is that their way of treating fans is like family and friends.*" These statements illustrate how participants actively regulated their engagement, ensuring that admiration remained grounded in respect and realism.

Participants also distanced themselves from extreme fan behaviors. Some described such behaviors as "*Crazy... that's not being a fan... there's a mental disorder there because they've been called out so many times*" or dismissed them with "*touch some grass.*" Others emphasized a more reflective approach to fandom, noting that appreciation should center on "*something as a*

*craft, as a culture, as an art,”* and that *“If you’re grounded enough, I guess maturity also plays a big part.”* These accounts reinforce the role of maturity and self-awareness in shaping adaptive fandom engagement.

Consistent with prior studies, fans may experience emotional reactions to idols while maintaining awareness of the imagined nature of these feelings (Asrita, 2023; Utami, 2019).

Participants in the present study demonstrated this dual awareness, oscillating between emotional engagement and reflective distancing. This capacity prevented parasocial relationships from escalating into dependency or entitlement.

While some research has suggested that immersive fandom engagement may lead to mood fluctuations or disappointment (Atanacio-Blas & Erastain, 2020), such outcomes were not evident in the present study. Instead, participants’ experiences reflected a developmentally adaptive form of engagement that did not interfere with daily functioning, work responsibilities, or interpersonal relationships.

Participants also expressed realistic attitudes toward idols’ personal lives. In contrast to findings suggesting that fans may struggle with idols’ real-life relationships (Eren, 2021), participants in this study demonstrated acceptance and emotional maturity, consistent with research indicating that fans maintain awareness of their role as audiences (Cahyani & Purnamasari, 2019).

Moreover, participants challenged deficit-based portrayals of K-Pop fandom. Echoing findings that many fans disengage from fan wars (Maros et al., 2022), participants rejected toxic behaviors and emphasized respectful engagement. Their accounts also counter stereotypes of “Koreaboo” fans as culturally disengaged (Rosenau, 2022), instead demonstrating selective cultural integration grounded in Filipino identity.

### **Emergent Metaphor**

To further illuminate how these themes interconnect and to provide a cohesive representation of the participants’ lived experiences, a conceptual symbol was developed to visually synthesize the findings. Given the cultural and emotional significance of concert lightsticks within K-Pop fandoms, the lightstick serves as an ideal metaphor for understanding how Filipino adult fans articulate, negotiate, and embody their identities through fandom involvement. This symbol not only captures the multidimensional nature of identity development, wellbeing, cultural negotiation, and parasocial attachment but also reflects the emotional resonance and personal meaning participants associate with K-Pop.

Figure 2. Lightstick Representation of Adult K-Pop Fandom Themes



*Note.* The lightstick serves as a conceptual representation of how Filipino adult K-Pop fans

integrate identity, wellbeing, cultural negotiation, and parasocial engagement within their lived experiences. The handle represents the participants' core, pre-existing identity, emphasizing stability and continuity rooted in a Filipino sense of self. The illuminated globe signifies fandom as an extension of identity, reflecting processes of self-expression, meaning-making, and identity enrichment. The upward tilt of the lightstick illustrates moments of cultural aspiration and negotiation, where participants momentarily orient toward Korean cultural ideals while maintaining cultural groundedness. The glow emitted from the globe represents emotional wellbeing, highlighting fandom as a source of comfort, regulation, and psychological support.

Radiating lines extending from the globe depict parasocial connections, symbolizing emotionally meaningful yet one-sided relationships with idols that remain bounded by reflexive awareness.

Surrounding sparkles represent reflexive imagination, including playful and self-aware fantasies that function as creative extensions of identity rather than distortions of reality. Taken together,

the components illustrate fandom as a dynamic yet grounded process in which global cultural engagement, emotional resilience, and imaginative involvement are integrated into a coherent and developmentally adaptive sense of self.

#### **4. Conclusion**

This study advances understanding of adult identity development by demonstrating that identity remains an ongoing, dynamic process shaped by cultural engagement, rather than a fixed outcome of adolescence. Among Filipino adult K-Pop fans, identity was experienced as both grounded and evolving, with fandom functioning as a meaningful extension of the self rather than a source of disruption. Engagement with K-Pop provided a context for self-expression, reflection, and meaning-making, illustrating how personal interests and global cultural participation contribute to identity construction in adulthood.

From a cultural perspective, the findings highlight how individuals actively negotiate global influences while maintaining local rootedness. Participants' reflections revealed moments of cultural aspiration alongside a sustained commitment to Filipino identity, suggesting that engagement with K-Pop facilitates selective integration rather than cultural displacement. This underscores the role of globalization and media in shaping contemporary identity processes, where individuals construct hybrid yet coherent selves.

Socially, fandom emerged as a significant site of belonging and connection. Participants experienced validation, shared identity, and emotional support through both community engagement and parasocial relationships with idols. These findings reinforce the relevance of social identity processes within digital and fandom spaces, while also demonstrating that parasocial interactions can serve meaningful relational and emotional functions when engaged with reflexive awareness.

Importantly, the study also positions fandom within a positive psychological framework. Rather than reflecting maladaptive escapism, K-Pop engagement functioned as a source of comfort, motivation, and emotional regulation. Participants described fandom as a reliable coping resource that supported wellbeing amid the demands of adult life, highlighting its role in fostering resilience and psychological nourishment.

These insights carry practical implications across disciplines. For mental health practitioners, recognizing fandom as a legitimate source of meaning may support more culturally sensitive and strengths-based approaches to therapy. For educators and psychologists, the findings emphasize the importance of integrating discussions of media engagement into understandings of adult development. At the same time, the results encourage fans to maintain reflective awareness and boundaries, and call attention to the responsibility of media producers in shaping emotionally

impactful content.

Overall, this study positions K-Pop fandom as a culturally embedded and psychologically adaptive space in which Filipino adults sustain identity continuity, navigate global influences, and cultivate emotional wellbeing, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of media engagement in contemporary adulthood.

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings and identifying directions for future research. First, the use of a small, purposive sample of ten Filipino adult participants limits the generalizability of the results. While Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis prioritizes depth over representativeness, the experiences captured may not reflect the diversity of K-Pop fandom across varying socioeconomic backgrounds, geographic contexts, and levels of engagement. Future studies would benefit from larger and more diverse samples to enable broader comparisons and enhance transferability.

Second, the findings rely on self-reported narratives, which may be shaped by selective recall, social desirability, or participants' tendency to frame experiences in socially acceptable or humorous ways. This was particularly evident in discussions of parasocial relationships and "delulu" thoughts, which were often presented as jokes. While this reflects reflexive awareness, it may have constrained deeper exploration of more vulnerable or potentially distressing aspects of fandom. Incorporating mixed-methods approaches, including quantitative measures of wellbeing, social connectedness, and media engagement, could provide a more comprehensive understanding of these experiences.

Third, the cross-sectional design captures participants' perspectives at a single point in time, despite identity development, wellbeing, and cultural negotiation being inherently dynamic processes. Longitudinal research is recommended to examine how fandom involvement evolves across life stages and in response to personal or societal changes, as well as how parasocial relationships shift in meaning and intensity over time.

Finally, the focus on Filipino adult fans excludes perspectives from other age groups and cultural contexts. Future research could explore adolescent and older populations, as well as conduct cross-cultural comparisons, to better understand how fandom is shaped by developmental and sociocultural factors. Additionally, examining the role of family dynamics and social networks may further illuminate how fandom intersects with broader relational and cultural systems. Collectively, these directions can deepen understanding of identity and wellbeing within media-driven cultural spaces.

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