

Investigating the role of institutional, social, and family contexts in adolescents' inclination towards K-pop music (Case study of teenage girls in Tehran, 2014–2015)

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Received: 29 November 2025, Accepted: 14 July 2026

Doi: 10.22034/rcc.2026.2078420.1269

Extended Abstract

Purpose

The global expansion of Korean pop music (K-pop) has transformed it into a major cultural force that influences youth identity, belonging, and lifestyle practices. While extensive scholarship has examined K-pop's diffusion in East Asia, North America, and Europe, limited attention has been paid to how this phenomenon evolves in societies characterized by institutional constraints, cultural conservatism, and restricted recognition of global youth cultures. This study aims to explore how adolescent girls in Tehran acquire, negotiate, and sustain their interest in K-pop, and how this engagement reflects deeper structural tensions in Iranian youth cultural consumption. By analyzing the institutional, familial, and peer-based factors shaping their orientation, the study investigates how global cultural flows are localized through social interaction and mediated by institutional environments.

Design / Methodology / Approach

This study employs a qualitative research design based on Strauss and Corbin's systematic grounded theory approach. Seventeen female high school students in Tehran, aged 15–17, were recruited through purposive sampling, ensuring variation in school type, socioeconomic background, and levels of K-pop fan engagement. Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews exploring five domains: school cultural atmosphere, peer interactions, family dynamics, digital practices, and meaning-making processes surrounding K-pop. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using open, axial, and selective coding to develop conceptual categories. Constant comparative analysis and memo-writing supported theoretical integration. Lincoln and Guba's trustworthiness criteria—including credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability—were used to ensure methodological rigor and enhance analytical robustness.

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This approach allowed context-specific categories to emerge inductively from participants' lived experiences within the Iranian cultural and institutional setting.

Findings

The analysis revealed two overarching contextual categories that structure adolescents' orientation toward K-pop:

- Institutional and social environment
- Social control and family support

Together, they show that adolescents' engagement with K-pop is a socially embedded and institutionally mediated phenomenon rather than an isolated personal choice.

1. Institutional and Social Environment

Schools in Tehran serve as formal spaces of cultural socialization but often overlook, marginalize, or restrict youth engagement with global popular culture. Participants consistently described school environments that prioritize national or traditional cultural forms while framing global youth cultures—such as K-pop—as frivolous, inappropriate, or culturally undesirable. This institutional conservatism creates a symbolic disconnect: adolescents internalize that their global cultural interests cannot be openly expressed in formal educational settings.

Consequently, K-pop engagement shifts into informal arenas—private conversations, after-school socialization, and, most significantly, digital spaces. However, paradoxically, the school still becomes the *primary site of cultural reinforcement* through peer interactions. Peer groups serve as the central mechanism for exposure to K-pop, introduction to new content, sharing emotional responses, and building micro-communities of fandom. The processes identified include:

- Encouragement and peer-driven discovery
- Friendly competition (e.g., staying updated, collecting merchandise)
- Imitation and symbolic participation (styling, dance practice)
- Formation of intimate fan-based friendship networks
- Continuous digital interaction and content sharing

These mechanisms strongly align with social capital theory as articulated by Bourdieu and Coleman: peer networks provide cultural legitimacy, emotional support, and informational resources that intensify and sustain adolescents' engagement with K-pop.

2. Social Control and Family Support

The family emerges as a critical domain of tension, negotiation, and emotional meaning-making. Two contrasting parental strategies were identified:

A. Supportive and dialogic approaches

These families exhibited moderated supervision, emotional validation, curiosity about adolescents' interests, and occasional participation in K-pop-related activities. Supportive strategies—such as asking questions rather than prohibiting behaviors, watching performances together, or purchasing albums—enhanced trust, reduced generational conflict, and facilitated balanced cultural engagement. Adolescents described feeling understood, respected, and trusted, which fostered responsible consumption and moderated enthusiasm.

B. Restrictive and prohibitive approaches

In contrast, restrictive strategies included banning access to phones or the internet, condemning foreign cultural content, or emphasizing traditional cultural norms. These approaches frequently produced unintended outcomes:

- Covert listening and secret digital practices
- Symbolic resistance
- Increased emotional attachment to K-pop
- Stronger identification with peer communities over family authority

Adolescents experiencing strict control described K-pop as a symbolic space of autonomy and emotional refuge. These findings resonate with Hirschi's social control theory: when communication weakens and trust erodes, restrictive strategies intensify resistance rather than compliance.

Research Limitations / Implications

The study is based on a small qualitative sample from Tehran and may not represent diverse regional or socioeconomic contexts across Iran. Additionally, participants were self-identified K-pop fans, which may limit the scope of variation in cultural orientations. Future research could benefit from:

- Comparative studies across different Iranian cities or regions
- Quantitative validation of the grounded theory model
- Examination of boys' engagement with K-pop and gender differences
- Longitudinal studies exploring changes in global cultural consumption

Practical Implications

For educational institutions, the findings highlight the need to acknowledge diverse youth cultural orientations rather than dismissing them. Schools can benefit from:

- Creating culturally inclusive extracurricular programs
- Encouraging dialogue about global media
- Offering structured spaces where students can safely express their interests

For families, adopting dialogic and empathetic approaches can reduce secrecy, conflict, and symbolic resistance. Parents who balance supervision with understanding support healthier identity formation.

For cultural policymakers, the study underscores the need to shift from restrictive policies toward constructive engagement with global cultural flows that are already embedded in adolescents' lives.

Social Implications

The study illustrates broader societal transformations in Iran related to globalization, youth identity, digital media, and generational tensions. K-pop orientation serves as a lens through which to observe:

- Shifting cultural boundaries
- Emerging digital literacy and global connectivity
- Youth negotiations of autonomy and self-expression
- The widening gap between institutional norms and lived cultural experiences
- Policy strategies that promote open communication, cultural pluralism, and youth-centric approaches can help mitigate intergenerational misunderstandings and support healthier cultural development.

Originality / Value

This study offers one of the few grounded-theory analyses of K-pop engagement in Iran and provides a context-sensitive model for understanding how global cultural forms are negotiated within constrained institutional environments. Its value lies in:

- Revealing how institutional conservatism interacts with peer social capital

- Showing how family control strategies shape emotional meaning-making
- Demonstrating how global cultural flows become embedded in local identity processes
- Extending theoretical discussions of youth globalization to the Iranian context

By synthesizing social capital theory, social control theory, and critical cultural perspectives, the study contributes a nuanced, empirically grounded explanation of how Iranian adolescents navigate globalization in everyday life.

Keywords: K-pop, institutional and social context, family context, Tehran adolescents, global culture, cultural orientation