

A Study on the Path Mechanism of K-Pop Pop-Up Stores in O2O Integrated Marketing

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Abstract. Against the backdrop of global cultural industry integration and deep digital technology penetration, K-pop has emerged as a highly influential cultural phenomenon through its distinctive musical style, idol economy model, and global expansion strategy. Pop-up stores, as a retail format combining limited-time offerings, thematic experiences, and high interactivity, have gradually become a crucial bridge connecting K-pop's online fan communities. This study focuses on K-pop pop-up stores, aiming to explore how they achieve the transformation mechanism from offline experiences to online dissemination through an “Immersion-to-Spread” pathway. Findings reveal that pop-up stores effectively stimulate voluntary social sharing through scarcity-inducing limited-time designs, emotionally resonant interactive experiences, and share-worthy spatial layouts. This dual-track approach simultaneously boosts sales conversion and elevates brand value. Addressing current challenges faced by K-pop pop-ups—such as disconnects between online promotion and offline experiences, excessive technical barriers, short-term traffic failing to convert into long-term user assets, and inadequate cultural localization—this study proposes systematic solutions. For example, establishing a “online promotion - offline execution” verification mechanism with on-site rapid response teams to ensure consistent experiences. Second, implementing technology-inclusive design by offering diverse interactive options to accommodate fans with varying technical proficiency. Third, integrate long-term operations into the initial pop-up store design through official communities and membership systems to retain users. This study not only enriches theoretical research on O2O integrated marketing and fan economy but also offers new perspectives on understanding the commercialization pathways of the K-pop industry.

Keywords: K-pop pop-up stores, O2O integrated marketing, immersive experiences, social dissemination, uniqueness demands

1. Introduction

As K-pop's global influence continues to expand, fan culture has gradually extended from online communities to offline physical spaces. Pop-up stores, as a limited-time, themed, and highly interactive retail format, have become crucial venues connecting idols with fans [1]. Beyond

merchandise sales, these stores stimulate emotional resonance and sharing behavior among fans through immersive scenography, interactive experiences, and social media integration, thereby driving brand dissemination and commercial conversion [2]. In recent years, companies like HYBE and SM Entertainment have launched themed pop-up stores in major global cities, such as BTS POP-UP SPACE OF BTS and BLACKPINK THE STORE. These examples vividly demonstrate the pivotal role of pop-up stores within the K-pop fan economy [3].

As vital carriers of offline experiences, K-pop pop-up stores reinforce the symbolic relationship between fans and idols through spatial narratives and emotional connections. Fans consume not only merchandise but also a sense of identity and cultural belonging within these spaces [4]. This experience is often amplified through secondary dissemination on social media, creating a closed-loop interaction between online and offline channels. Existing research indicates that the temporary and unique nature of pop-up stores significantly enhances perceived brand value, particularly triggering electronic word-of-mouth among groups with high Need for Uniqueness (NFU) [5].

However, existing research predominantly focuses on the marketing effectiveness of pop-up stores or descriptions of fan behavior, lacking systematic analysis of their “offline immersion-online dissemination” conversion pathway. Particularly within the context of O2O integrated marketing, how pop-up stores can stimulate fans' autonomous dissemination behavior through experiential design to maximize brand value remains an area requiring in-depth exploration [6]. This paper addresses these gaps by systematically analyzing the “immersion-dissemination” pathway mechanism of K-pop pop-up stores. Grounded in consumer experience value theory and uniqueness need theory, it draws on K-pop pop-up store case studies to provide practical insights for relevant enterprises and brands.

The research question addressed is: How do K-pop pop-up stores achieve dual conversion of sales and brand influence through the immersion-dissemination pathway? Specifically, this study analyzes three dimensions—immersion experience construction, offline conversion mechanisms, and online dissemination strategies—combining practical cases with theoretical frameworks to reveal underlying mechanisms and implementation outcomes. This research aims to provide theoretical support and practical guidance for the commercial development of the K-pop industry.

2. Theoretical foundation

As an experiential retail format, the success of pop-up stores hinges on a profound understanding of consumer psychology and behavior. This study primarily draws upon Consumer Experience Value Theory and the Theory of Uniqueness Needs to construct an analytical framework.

Holbrook's Consumer Experience Value Theory categorizes consumption value into self-directed, other-directed, and composite-directed dimensions [7]. Within K-pop pop-up store contexts, self-directed value manifests as fans deriving aesthetic enjoyment and emotional fulfillment through immersive experiences; other-directed value reflects community belonging and identity symbolism; composite-directed value integrates personal pleasure with social recognition, collectively motivating fans to engage in sharing behaviors [8-10]. For instance, at BTS pop-up stores, fans purchasing limited-edition merchandise and participating in Virtual Reality (VR) interactions not only satisfy personal collecting desires but also reinforce their identity as ARMY (BTS fans) [11].

Uniqueness Need Theory explains why fans, while enjoying unique experiences, still choose to share them on social media. Research indicates that individuals with high NFU (Need for Uniqueness) prefer showcasing unique experiences to distant audiences via electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) rather than sharing with close friends, to avoid diminishing their uniqueness [12]. This mechanism is particularly evident in K-pop pop-up stores, where fans post check-in content on

platforms like Instagram and Twitter. This practice simultaneously showcases their “up-close” experiences with idols while maintaining their unique status within the fan community [13].

Moreover, ephemerality—a core characteristic of pop-up stores—significantly enhances perceived brand value and fan engagement enthusiasm [14]. Limited availability not only creates scarcity but also sparks urgency and participation motivation among fans, further driving their dissemination behavior [15]. Research indicates that emphasizing the temporary nature of pop-up stores amplifies the positive impact of brand experiences on word-of-mouth communication [16].

Within the K-pop context, the characteristics of fan culture further amplify these mechanisms. K-pop fans typically exhibit high levels of engagement and productivity, actively participating not only in content consumption but also in content creation and dissemination [17]. Pop-up stores effectively leverage these traits by designing interactive experiences and fan engagement activities, fostering communication and interaction between fans, idols, and fellow fans [18]. For instance, SM Entertainment's NCT 127 pop-up stores in Seoul featured interactive installations like a member handprint wall and recreated music video backdrops, encouraging fans to take photos and share them—thus achieving a natural transition from offline experiences to online dissemination [19].

In summary, consumer experience value and uniqueness demand theory provides a robust theoretical foundation for understanding the immersion-dissemination pathway of K-pop pop-up stores. Subsequent analysis will be built upon this framework. These theoretical frameworks not only help explain the psychological motivations behind fan behavior but also offer theoretical guidance for the experiential design and dissemination strategies of pop-up stores.

3. Analysis of the immersion-communication path mechanism in K-pop pop-up stores

Through systematic O2O integration design, K-pop pop-up stores establish a complete “immersion-communication-conversion” closed-loop mechanism. This mechanism begins with offline immersive experiences, leveraging emotional and interactive connections to enhance fan engagement. It then directs participants to online social platforms for secondary dissemination and user retention, ultimately achieving brand value enhancement and commercial conversion objectives [10].

3.1. Immersive experience mechanism: multi-dimensional scenario construction of space, emotion, and interaction

The core competitiveness of K-pop pop-up stores stems from their immersive experiences, which rely on multi-dimensional, highly interactive scenario construction. First, spatial design emphasizes thematic and narrative elements. Take HYBE's 2023 BTS POP-UP SPACE OF BTS in Seoul as an example. This space employs elements like member-representative colors, lyric walls, and recreated music video scenes to construct a story-driven environment. Combined with lighting, sound effects, and strategic traffic flow, it heightens fans' emotional immersion, creating a powerful sense of “being inside the idol's world” [3]. Such designs not only satisfy fans' pursuit of aesthetic value (self-directed value), but also reinforce community belonging and identity recognition (other-directed value) through shared symbolic systems [8,9].

Second, the integration of technology significantly elevates interaction quality and experiential uniqueness. SM Entertainment's 2022 aespa pop-up event incorporated AR technology to blend virtual members with real-world settings, creating a mixed reality experience. Fans could take photos with virtual idols via a dedicated app. Such innovative interactions not only heightened enjoyment and memorability but also spurred spontaneous sharing due to their technological novelty

and scarcity [19]. This approach embodies the “Culture Technology” strategy consistently advocated by the K-pop industry—achieving a three-dimensional integration of content, technology, and consumption [16].

3.2. Offline-to-online conversion mechanism: O2O strategy facilitates behavioral continuity and traffic migration

Offline experiences not only deliver immediate engagement but also serve as critical entry points, guiding users into the brand's digital ecosystem. Pop-up stores achieve this transition through systematic O2O strategies. For instance, fans can scan QR codes on-site to participate in AR interactions and unlock hidden digital content (such as unreleased footage). After purchasing merchandise, they can link their Weverse or official membership accounts to synchronize points, redeem digital merchandise, or access membership privileges [11]. Such designs enhance the immediate experience while simultaneously linking offline actions with online identities through data integration, laying the groundwork for subsequent targeted user engagement [10].

Interactive programs also emphasize cross-scenario coordination. YG Entertainment's BLACKPINK pop-up store featured a “scan-to-collect cards” campaign, requiring fans to scan offline QR codes and share online to collect virtual cards redeemable for rewards. This mechanism cleverly leverages fans' collecting psychology and social motivation, facilitating the natural migration of offline traffic to online communities [15]. Even traditional interactions like autograph walls and message boards underwent digital transformation—fan comments appeared in real-time on official social media topic pages, enhancing event continuity and participation engagement [18].

3.3. Online retention and repurchase mechanisms: community-driven operations and extended value

The ephemeral nature of pop-up stores dictates their brief offline existence, making online operations crucial for sustaining momentum and unlocking long-term user value. Brands effectively transition offline-gathered fans into online private domains through community management. Post-event, official channels like Weverse, LINE groups, or member apps continuously push exclusive behind-the-scenes footage, member thank-you videos, and limited-edition pre-sale updates to sustain fan loyalty and engagement [10]. SM Entertainment frequently grants exclusive discounts and access to online-only merchandise to members who attend events, effectively driving repeat purchases and secondary conversions [16].

Encouraging user-generated content (UGC) is a core strategy for expanding reach and strengthening community bonds. Brands establish official hashtags (e.g. BTS_POPUP) to collect fans' check-in videos and exhibition experiences, rewarding outstanding submissions with points, merchandise, or tickets to online performances [12]. This approach significantly boosts brand exposure while deepening fans' emotional attachment by granting them the role of “co-creators” [17]. Take HYBE's pop-up event for LE SSERAFIM as an example. After the event concluded, offline participants received a “Offline Check-in Achievement” digital badge on their Weverse accounts along with exclusive discounts for the online store. This approach sustained fans' sense of accomplishment and exclusivity while effectively boosting online community engagement and subsequent spending, achieving efficient conversion of offline traffic into long-term online value [17].

4. Challenges and recommendations

Despite K-pop pop-up stores demonstrating strong performance in O2O integrated marketing, they still face multiple systemic challenges during implementation. These challenges span technical, cultural, operational, and user experience dimensions [6].

4.1. Challenges

Discrepancies between online promotions and actual offline experiences are a primary cause of fan disappointment. When meticulously produced promotional videos and images diverge significantly from the actual on-site experience, it not only erodes fan trust but also triggers negative word-of-mouth, causing long-term damage to brand image [6]. For instance, if the flashy AR interactive installations teased in online previews fail to function due to technical glitches, or if limited-edition merchandise sells out prematurely without timely restocking, it directly undermines the immersion and scarcity effect [15].

Pop-up stores commonly employ high-tech interactive methods like AR photo booths, QR code unlocking, and VR experiences to enhance immersion. However, this inadvertently creates participation barriers for groups with weaker technical adaptability (such as older fans or those who rarely use smart devices). Technical complexity may prevent them from fully engaging with core experiences, thereby excluding them from community interactions—a contradiction to the highly inclusive nature of K-pop fandom culture.

The essence of pop-up stores lies in their “limited-time” nature, where this transience spurs urgent consumption by creating scarcity [14]. Yet nurturing brand-fan relationships is a long-term endeavor. After pop-up events conclude, operators face a major challenge: how to convert users attracted by short-term hype into long-term brand assets, preventing the phenomenon of “once the crowd leaves, the tea goes cold” [10]. Without follow-up strategies, substantial user traffic will rapidly dissipate post-event.

Though K-pop is a global phenomenon, subtle differences exist across regions in fan consumption habits, aesthetic preferences, social media usage patterns, and even expectations for idol interactions [14]. In global pop-up tours, simply replicating successful models from Korea or other regions without localization may fail to resonate deeply with local fans. For instance, interactive formats highly effective in North America might receive lukewarm responses in Southeast Asia or China due to cultural differences.

4.2. Recommendations

Addressing these challenges, this paper proposes the following systematic recommendations. **Ensuring Experience Consistency and Managing Fan Expectations.** During the planning phase, establish a rigorous “online promotion-offline execution” verification mechanism. Use preview videos, on-site photos, and detailed instructions to set reasonable fan expectations. Simultaneously, deploy an on-site rapid response team to promptly address technical glitches and merchandise restocking issues, maximizing the smoothness of the experience flow [6].

Implementing Technology-Inclusive Design and Offer Diverse Interaction Options. Provide alternative interaction solutions for fans with varying levels of technological proficiency. For instance, alongside AR photo zones, retain traditional physical backdrop photo spots; beyond QR code interactions, offer manual registration with staff assistance. This ensures all fans can participate in ways that suit them, fostering a sense of belonging [19].

Establishing Long-Term Operational Mechanisms to Capture User Value. Incorporate sustainable operational plans from the initial design phase of pop-up stores. Seamlessly redirect offline users to official online communities, membership apps, or social media accounts via QR code interactions [10]. After the pop-up concludes, continuously nurtures the fan community by regularly pushing exclusive digital content, hosting online-only events, and opening repurchase channels for limited-edition products. This transforms the “traffic” generated by short-term events into the brand's long-term “retention” [11].

5. Conclusion

This paper systematically analyzes the immersion-to-dissemination pathway mechanism of K-pop pop-up stores by integrating consumer experiential value and uniqueness demand theories with multiple case studies. Findings indicate that through immersive scenario design, O2O interaction strategies, and community operations, pop-up stores successfully guide fans from offline experiences to online dissemination, thereby achieving dual enhancement of brand value and commercial conversion. This is manifested in aspects such as aesthetic value and participatory engagement stimulating sharing behavior, temporary elevation of perceived value, and higher NFU fans exhibiting greater propensity for eWOM dissemination. Furthermore, this paper identifies ongoing challenges in technical adaptation, cultural localization, and long-term operations for current pop-up stores. It recommends brands enhance overall marketing efficacy through technology-inclusive design, cultural adaptation, and sustained community management.

Future research could explore audience differences and communication effects of K-pop pop-up stores across diverse cultural contexts, or employ big data analysis to quantify the specific impact of immersive experiences on sales conversion, thereby enriching both theoretical research and practical applications.

Authors contribution

All the authors contributed equally and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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