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Trust as the Key to Social Media Success in K-Pop Fandoms

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ABSTRACT

Trust (TR) significantly influences users' Behavioural Intentions (BI) on Social Media (SM), particularly in highly engaged communities like K-pop fandoms. This study focuses on a single SM platform, X (formerly known as Twitter), examining TR as a multidimensional construct encompassing platform TR, idol TR, and community TR, and exploring its role in driving K-pop fans' BI to engage in fandom activities. Using a qualitative approach, the study conducted non-participatory observations of 30 K-pop fans' X accounts over a one-month period. Observations focused on behaviors such as content sharing, engagement with verified idol accounts, and participation in collaborative campaigns. Thematic analysis identified patterns linking TR dimensions with fans' use of the platform. The findings reveal that platform TR establishes a secure foundation for engagement, as fans value X's reliability and tools for fandom-specific activities. Idol TR, fostered by verified accounts and authentic interactions, amplifies content sharing and loyalty. Community TR strengthens collaborative efforts, with fans using X to organize hashtag campaigns and coordinate streaming projects. Together, these TR dimensions significantly influence fans' BI to engage with the platform. The study contributes to technology acceptance literature by emphasizing TR's multidimensional role within the unique context of K-pop fandoms on X. Practical implications suggest enhancing platform security, promoting authenticity in idol communication, and supporting community-driven initiatives. However, the study's focus on a single platform limits its generalizability. Future research should examine multiple platforms, incorporate mixed methods, and explore TR dynamics across different fan communities and cultural contexts.

Keywords: K-pop, Social Media, Trust, Behavioural Intention, Technology Acceptance, UTAUT.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, K-pop (Korean pop music) has emerged as a global cultural phenomenon, with millions of fans across the world engaging actively with their favourite idols and music. As of January 2024, BTS was the most-followed K-pop group on X (formerly Twitter), boasting around 48.6 million followers (Statista Research Department, 2024). Another boy band from the same label, TXT, had a significant following as well, with about 14.6 million fans on the platform (Statista Research Department, 2024). Meanwhile, the global popularity of K-pop continues to soar, with the number of Hallyu (Korean Wave) fans surpassing 178 million by the end of 2022—an incredible 19-fold increase compared to 2012 (Hwang, 2023). Social Media (SM) platforms, including X, Instagram, YouTube, and dedicated K-pop fan communities, have become vital spaces for K-pop fans to interact, share content, and promote their idols (Jams, 2024; Hendarsin et al., 2024). These platforms not only allow fans to follow their idols but also to participate in various fandom activities such as streaming music videos, voting for awards, and organizing fan projects. The extent to which fans engage with these platforms is influenced by several factors, including platform usability, content quality, and social influence (Roslan et al., 2024b). However, one of

the most underexplored factors is Trust (TR)—the belief in the platform's security, the authenticity of the content, and the reliability of interactions within fan communities.

TR has long been recognized as a key factor in technology adoption and usage (Davis, 1989; Venkatesh et al., 2003). Roslan et al. (2024c) discovered that TR was used as a construct in at least 20% of the models they reviewed to examine user intentions on SM platforms. In the context of SM, TR plays a critical role in shaping users' attitudes toward these platforms and their Behavioural Intention (BI) to engage (Hossain et al., 2023; Xu, 2023). For K-pop fans, TR in SM platforms not only affects their willingness to use the platforms but also influences their participation in fandom activities such as content sharing, voting, and collaboration with other fans. Hatamleh et al. (2023) suggest that TR in SM platforms can enhance the link between how people engage on SM and the strength of their social connections. Similarly, Kim et al. (2023) highlight that fans who actively interact with each other and with their favourite celebrities on fan community platforms are likely to feel a deeper emotional bond with the community and its members. Despite its importance, the role of TR in influencing BI to use SM among K-pop fans remains largely unexplored.

This study seeks to address this gap by investigating the influence of TR on the BI to use SM among K-pop fans. The research aims to explore how TR in the platform, TR in the community, and TR in idol accounts influence fans' intention to use SM for K-pop-related activities. By examining this relationship, the study will contribute to a deeper understanding of the psychological and social factors that drive fan engagement in the digital age.

The primary objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To assess the impact of TR in SM platforms on K-pop fans' BI to engage in fandom activities.
2. To explore how TR in online communities and idol accounts mediates the relationship between TR in platforms and BI.
3. To provide insights into the role of TR in the broader context of technology acceptance models, specifically within the unique setting of K-pop fandoms.

By exploring these questions, this research aims to shed light on the pivotal role of TR in shaping fan behavior and to provide valuable insights for SM platforms and K-pop agencies looking to enhance fan engagement.

2.   LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 TR in Technology Acceptance Models

TR has been widely acknowledged as a crucial determinant of user behavior in the context of technology adoption. According to the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) (Davis, 1989), users' perceptions of technology's usefulness and ease of use influence their intention to adopt and use it. The Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT), an extension of TAM, integrates various factors affecting technology usage, including performance expectancy, effort expectancy, social influence, and facilitating conditions (Venkatesh et al., 2003). While these factors primarily address the practical aspects of technology, TR has emerged as an additional, important construct that influences user acceptance, especially when it comes to online platforms.

In the context of online services, TR is often defined as the willingness to rely on an entity or system to perform its intended functions with integrity, reliability, and security. Several studies

have demonstrated that TR in technology and online platforms is strongly correlated with users' BIs to use these platforms. Muhammad et al. (2023) emphasizes that consumers' willingness to share digital footprints—a specific form of user behavior—depends not only on cognitive and affective attitudes but also significantly on TR. Yuan et al. (2023) highlight that when citizens perceive government SM as trustworthy and reliable, they are more likely to engage with it and participate in digital initiatives like government-backed digital currencies. TR also positively affects users' perceptions of perceived usefulness and ease of use, both of which, according to TAM and UTAUT, directly influence BI (Venkatesh et al., 2003).

2.2 TR in SM Contexts

TR has been extensively studied in the context of SM use. In online environments, TR encompasses several dimensions: platform TR, community TR, and content TR. Platform TR refers to users' confidence in the platform's ability to protect their privacy, ensure security, and maintain reliability (Wang et al., 2024; Alamoudi et al., 2023; Yuan et al., 2022; Kao & Sapp, 2022). Community TR concerns the interactions between users within the platform, and the confidence that content shared by fellow users is authentic and genuine (You et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2024). Content TR pertains to the belief that the information shared on SM is accurate, reliable, and truthful (Han et al., 2024; Aladwani & Dwivedi, 2018, as cited in Balaji et al., 2023), including content shared by influencers, idols, or other users.

SM users engage with platforms not just for entertainment or communication, but as a space to interact with others and exchange information. Therefore, TR in SM platforms is essential for fostering continuous engagement (Huda, 2024). Users who perceive a platform as safe and transparent are more likely to share personal information (Mutambik et al., 2023; Lyngdoh et al., 2023; Abbas et al., 2023), participate in discussions (Ahmad et al., 2023), and collaborate on fandom activities (Shin & Whitaker, 2023). For K-pop fans, this translates into behaviors such as voting in polls, streaming music videos, organizing fan events, and participating in fan clubs or community-driven initiatives. On the other hand, if fans do not TR the platform, they may refrain from participating in fan activities or sharing content, which can impact their overall engagement.

2.3 K-pop and SM Usage

The rapid rise of K-pop has been fueled by the global reach of SM. Platforms like YouTube, X, Instagram, and TikTok have enabled K-pop idols to engage directly with fans, fostering a sense of closeness and community. Studies show that K-pop fans are highly active on SM, not only consuming content but also contributing to it through sharing, remixing, and promoting content (Sagolsem, 2023; Trinh, 2023; Mohd Jenol & Ahmad Pazil, 2022). Fanbases like BTS's "ARMY" and BLACKPINK's "BLINKS" are well-known for their organized efforts on SM to trend hashtags, promote albums, and hit streaming milestones through coordinated campaigns. For example, ARMY successfully launched an online campaign under the hashtag #MatchAMillion, raising funds to match a donation in just 25 hours (Bhandari, 2020). Similarly, some BLINKS organized an ad campaign to voice their frustrations over the lack of releases and promotions for BLACKPINK, urging YG Entertainment to honor its commitments to the group and their fans (Herman, 2019).

TR plays a fundamental role in these behaviors. When fans TR the platform, they are more likely to engage in these collective activities (Roslan et al., 2024b), knowing that their efforts will be met with rewards (e.g., increased visibility for their idols or recognition for their fanbase). Conversely, skepticism about platform transparency or security can reduce fan participation, limiting the potential reach of these SM-driven campaigns.

2.4 The Impact of TR on BI in SM Use

The link between TR and BI has been explored in various studies on SM adoption. Research has shown that TR in SM platforms significantly affects users' BI to use the platform (Jing et al., 2023; Muhammad et al., 2022; Hanaysha, 2022), with TR in content (Freeman et al., 2023; Heim et al., 2023) and community (Zhang & Jahng, 2024) moderating this relationship. Furthermore, TR enhances users' perceived usefulness (Yu et al., 2023; Liu & Tao, 2022). For the context of the study, the platform allows fans to interact with idols or access exclusive content. TR also enhances users' social influence (Kilani et al., 2023; Amnas et al., 2023). For the context of the study, seeing other fans using the platform and participating in fan-driven campaigns.

2.5 Research Gap and Rationale

Although K-pop's popularity continues to soar and fans are highly active on SM, there is still a significant gap in understanding what drives their engagement on these platforms. This is especially evident when considering the connection between fans' intentions to use SM and the role of TR within K-pop fandoms. While TR is widely recognized as a key factor in adopting new technology, there is a need for deeper research to explore how it influences K-pop fans' SM behavior and interaction.

For instance, the V Live app enables K-pop idol groups from various entertainment companies to connect with their fans through live streaming. This platform allows fans to interact in real-time, sharing comments and reactions during broadcasts. According to Kim et al. (2021), despite being around for nearly five years and steadily growing in both user base and revenue, research on V Live remains limited. Most existing studies focus on other live-streaming platforms like Periscope, Twitch, and Afreeca TV, leaving a gap in understanding V Live from the user's perspective.

To address this gap, this study will focus on understanding SM use from the perspective of individual users, specifically exploring how TR impacts K-pop fans' intentions to engage with these platforms. By exploring how fans perceive TR in SM—whether in the platform's functionality, the idols' authenticity, or the overall community experience—this study provides insights into the role TR plays in driving user satisfaction and continued engagement. Understanding these dynamics can help platform developers and entertainment companies build stronger TR mechanisms, such as ensuring reliable features, promoting transparency, and enhancing idol-fan connections, ultimately fostering deeper loyalty and interaction on not only V Live, but on SM generally.

3.   METHOD

3.1 Research Design

This study takes a qualitative approach, using observation to explore how TR shapes K-pop fans' intentions to use SM. Observational research involves watching and analyzing participants' behavior in their natural, everyday environments. For this study, the researcher will closely observe K-pop fans' SM activities to gain insights into their usage habits, preferred content, and interactions within online communities. This method helps capture real-world behaviors and patterns to better understand the role of social influence in their engagement with SM platforms.

3.2 Participants

The participants in this study are K-pop fans who actively engage in K-pop-related activities on SM. They will be selected using purposive sampling, targeting individuals who identify as K-pop

fans and frequently use platforms like X. The aim is to include a diverse group of participants, considering factors such as how long they have been active on SM, their follower count, and their level of involvement in the K-pop fandom.

3.3 Data Collection

Data for this study will primarily be collected by observing participants' SM accounts and activities over a specific period. The researcher will closely monitor and record the content shared by participants, such as text posts, photos, videos, comments, likes, and shares related to K-pop. These observations will be conducted passively, without any direct interaction with the participants, allowing the researcher to capture their natural behaviors and interactions within the online space. This method ensures that the data reflects authentic engagement in the digital environment.

3.4 Data Analysis

Data analysis in this study will involve qualitative content analysis to identify themes, patterns, and trends in the SM activities of K-pop fans. The researcher will carefully review the observed content to recognize patterns in the types of posts shared, the frequency of posts, engagement metrics (such as likes and comments), and interactions with other users or fan communities. The data will be organized through thematic coding, allowing the researcher to categorize and highlight common themes as well as differences across the participants. This approach helps to uncover meaningful insights from the data.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Overview of the Observed Pattern

Analysis of the 30 observed SM accounts revealed several recurring patterns demonstrating the influence of TR on fans' BI to engage with SM platforms.

4.1.1 TR in Platform: Security and Reliability as Key Drivers

Platforms like X stand out because they offer features that align with fans' needs, such as verified accounts, secure login systems, and robust privacy measures. These elements foster TR by ensuring that fans' personal data and content are protected, which is particularly important given the emotional and time investment fans put into these platforms.

Figure 1. Voting channel at MAMA awards.　　**Figure 2.** Voting guides and tutorials

The MAMA Awards is a prominent annual music awards ceremony organized by the entertainment company CJ ENM (Yonhap, 2024). Fans' TR in these platforms is also reinforced by endorsements from K-pop agencies. For example, during music awards seasons or comeback promotions, agencies frequently recommend specific voting systems or streaming platforms as shown in Figure 1. These platforms are portrayed as official and secure channels where fans' efforts will directly contribute to their idols' success. This endorsement acts as a form of validation, encouraging fans to engage without fear of fraud, misinformation, or wasted efforts.

TR in the platform's authenticity plays a vital role in encouraging active engagement. When fans believe that a platform is secure and reliable, they are more likely to participate in activities like streaming songs, voting in polls, or promoting idols' achievements. For instance, fans often promote secure voting platforms through their SM posts, providing tutorials and guidance to others, which builds collective confidence in the process as shown in Figure 2.

Moreover, platforms with high TR levels are seen as essential hubs for fandom activity, enabling fans to organize large-scale campaigns, share updates, and connect with other members globally. This TR not only facilitates engagement but also creates a sense of assurance that their efforts will contribute meaningfully to their idols' success. By focusing on platforms with perceived security and reliability, fans ensure that their time and energy are directed toward trustworthy and impactful endeavours.

4.1.2 TR in Idols' Accounts: Verified Accounts as Anchors of Authenticity

Platforms like X provide verification badges for authentic accounts, distinguishing them from impersonators or unofficial sources. This verification signals to fans that the content shared is legitimate and directly from their idols or their management teams.

Fans consistently engage with and share posts from these verified accounts, such as posts from SM, or content from apps like Weverse or Bubble. These accounts serve as a bridge between idols and their fans, offering exclusive updates, personal messages, behind-the-scenes content, and official announcements. The TR established through verified accounts ensures that fans feel confident they are receiving accurate and timely information about their idols' activities, releases, and schedules.

The authenticity of idols' accounts fosters a sense of connection and TR that extends beyond the platform. Fans often share content from these accounts, amplifying its reach within the fandom and ensuring that accurate information circulates widely. For example, a post from a verified account announcing a new album release is quickly disseminated across SM by fans eager to promote their idols. Figure 3 shows an X user reposts and leaves some quotes to a post posted by idol official accounts.

Figure 3. Fan reposts

Figure 4. Idol and fan interaction.

This TR also encourages fans to interact with the content, such as liking, commenting, or participating in live interactions like Q&A sessions. Fans feel reassured that their engagement—whether a comment or a shared post—is being seen or acknowledged by the idols or their teams. As shown in Figure 4, an idol interacts with their fans by replying to the fans' post. This sense of direct connection strengthens the bond between idols and fans, motivating fans to remain active and engaged within the fandom ecosystem.

Verified accounts also contribute to building TR in the platforms hosting them. When fans see their idols actively using a platform and sharing authentic content, it reassures them about the platform's legitimacy and reliability. This TR can influence fans' decisions to join and actively use these platforms, further integrating SM into their daily fandom activities.

4.1.3 TR in Fan Communities: The Foundation of Collaboration

Fan communities within K-pop are known for their highly organized and collaborative nature. Observations reveal that TR among community members plays a vital role in enabling these collective efforts. Fans depend on one another to coordinate complex activities such as organizing

hashtag trends, sharing campaign strategies, and participating in impactful group projects like charity drives or donation campaigns (Yang et al., 2024a). This TR is not only crucial for achieving shared goals but also for fostering a sense of belonging and unity within the fandom.

One of the most visible manifestations of TR in fan communities is the ability to successfully organize and execute hashtag trends on SM. Fans rely on each other to disseminate instructions, promote participation, and ensure consistency across different time zones and regions. For example, during an idol's album release or birthday, fans TR that their collective efforts will make the hashtag trend globally, amplifying the idol's visibility and success.

TR among community members is also evident in the sharing of detailed and accurate campaign instructions. These could include guidelines for streaming idols' music videos, voting in award shows, or raising funds for projects. Fans TR the individuals or groups disseminating these instructions to provide accurate information and ensure that their collective efforts are effectively directed. This TR often extends to fan leaders or organizers who are seen as reliable and knowledgeable within the community.

Group projects like charity drives or large-scale fan events further demonstrate the importance of TR. These initiatives often involve financial contributions, time, and effort, requiring fans to TR that their donations or participation will be used appropriately and transparently. For instance as shown in Figure 5, fundraising drives in an idol's name rely on members' confidence that their contributions will reach the intended cause and reflect positively on the idol and the fandom.

A key factor in building TR within fan communities is the peer-to-peer support system. Fans often help each other with queries, technical issues (e.g., how to stream or vote), and emotional support during significant fandom events. This mutual assistance reinforces the perception of a reliable and supportive community.

Fan community leaders or prominent organizers play a crucial role in sustaining TR. Their ability to coordinate activities, communicate effectively, and ensure transparency in projects enhances the overall trustworthiness of the community. Fans often look to these leaders as credible sources of information and direction. Figure 6 shows fan community leaders update their progress on their fan project for the concerts. Fans normally do a fan project during concerts collectively just to make their idol's visits more memorable.

Figure 5. Charity on behalf of idols.

The high level of TR among community members significantly enhances their ability to achieve collective goals. Whether it's trending hashtags, surpassing streaming milestones, or raising funds for charitable causes, the seamless collaboration enabled by TR ensures that these efforts are successful. Moreover, this TR strengthens the fandom's cohesion, making fans more likely to engage in future activities and invest further in the community.
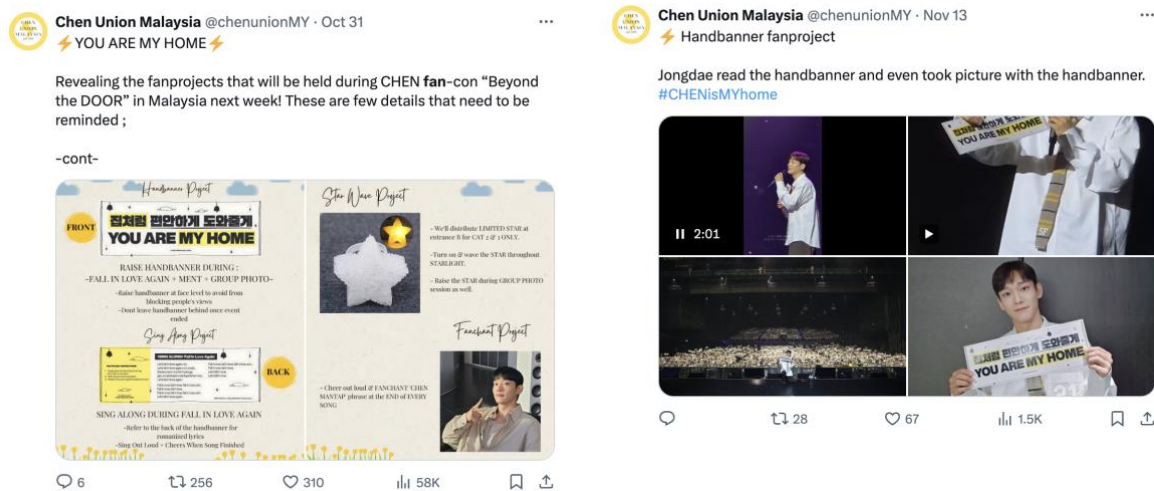
(a) Notice before concert,   (b) Notice project success.

Figure 6. Fan project.

4.2 Emergent Themes

4.2.1   Platform TR as an Enabler of BI

TR in SM platforms plays a pivotal role in driving fans' BI to use these platforms for fandom activities. Fans naturally gravitate toward platforms that prioritize privacy and security, perceiving them as safe spaces for their engagement (Zhou & Xiong, 2024). Platforms like X, known for their robust security features and verified account mechanisms, are particularly favoured.

Fans frequently discuss platform reliability in online forums and group chats, often exchanging recommendations for specific apps designed for fandom-related activities like voting in music awards or streaming their idols' songs. This shared emphasis on security and authenticity reinforces fans' confidence in these platforms (Xu et al., 2024), making them more likely to invest time and effort in using them. For example, during voting campaigns for award shows, fans explicitly highlight the importance of using "official" or "secure" apps to ensure their votes are counted accurately (Ng et al., 2024).

4.2.2   Authenticity in Idol and Community Interactions

The authenticity of interactions with idols and within fan communities is another significant driver of TR. Verified accounts of idols on platforms provide fans with a sense of direct connection and authenticity, ensuring that the information they receive is accurate and trustworthy. Features like live chats or personalized responses from idols—whether through comments, mentions, or fan-exclusive content—further enhance this TR, fostering a sense of closeness and engagement (Yang et al., 2024b; Jie et al., 2022).

Within fan communities, TR is built on shared norms of authenticity and mutual respect. Fans appreciate communities that emphasize collaborative and respectful behaviour (Yoon & Labarta Garcia, 2024), such as avoiding misinformation and focusing on shared goals. This creates an environment where fans feel supported and valued, encouraging deeper involvement in fandom activities.

4.2.3   TR-Driven Participation in Fandom Activities

TR in platforms and communities strongly motivates fans to participate in extensive and often resource-intensive fandom campaigns. Activities such as voting marathons for award shows, streaming projects to increase view counts, and organizing charity initiatives require significant investments of time, effort, and sometimes money. Fans are willing to make these commitments when they TR the platforms they use and the communities they engage with.

For example, voting marathons often involve fans staying up late or working in shifts to ensure continuous participation. Such coordinated efforts rely on TR in the community's organizers and the platform's reliability to accurately reflect their contributions. Similarly, charity projects conducted under an idol's name (Yang et al., 2024a) require TR in the transparency and accountability of the organizers to ensure that donations are used appropriately and reach their intended beneficiaries.

5.   DISCUSSIONS

This research has successfully met its stated objectives through an in-depth qualitative exploration of TR and its influence on K-pop fans' BIs to use SM.

Firstly, the study assesses the impact of TR in SM platforms by examining fans' reliance on secure and reliable platforms to engage in fandom activities. The findings demonstrate that fans prioritize platforms with robust privacy, verified content, and functionality that supports fandom-specific actions such as voting, streaming, and coordinating campaigns. This highlights the critical role of platform TR in enabling fans' active participation in K-pop fandom activities, thus addressing the first objective.

Secondly, the research explores how TR in online communities and idol accounts mediates the relationship between platform TR and BI. The results reveal that while platform TR establishes a foundation for engagement, TR in idols (through verified accounts and authentic interactions) and fan communities (through supportive collaboration and mutual respect) amplifies fans' willingness to invest time and resources in fandom-related efforts. TR in idols ensures the authenticity of shared content, while TR in communities facilitates collective action. This interconnected dynamic illustrates how community and idol TR bridge the gap between platform TR and sustained BI, thereby achieving the second objective.

Lastly, the study provides insights into the role of TR within the broader context of technology acceptance models, particularly in the unique setting of K-pop fandoms. By emphasizing the multidimensional nature of TR—spanning platforms, idols, and communities—this research extends the traditional understanding of TR in technology acceptance. It highlights that TR is not just a factor influencing engagement but a multifaceted construct that drives the interplay between various entities within fandom ecosystems. These findings contribute a fresh perspective to existing technology acceptance literature, addressing the third objective and offering a basis for further exploration in similar or related contexts.

By identifying the specific ways TR influences K-pop fans' BIs and contextualizing these findings within existing theoretical frameworks, this study comprehensively achieves its stated objectives and advances both practical and academic understanding of TR in digital fandom spaces.

6. CONCLUSION

As recommended by Roslan et al. (2024a) to focus on K-pop fans' behaviour, this study explores the role of TR in shaping BI to use SM among K-pop fans, emphasizing its multidimensional nature involving platform TR, idol TR, and community TR. The findings reveal that TR significantly influences fan engagement behaviors, such as content sharing, campaign participation, and collaborative projects. Fans are drawn to platforms they perceive as secure and reliable, idol interactions they view as authentic, and communities that foster supportive and respectful norms. These dimensions of TR collectively drive sustained SM use among K-pop fans, underscoring its critical role in fostering vibrant online fandoms.

The research contributes to the literature by extending the understanding of TR in the context of technology acceptance and SM engagement. Unlike traditional models that often focus solely on platform TR, this study highlights the interplay of platform, idol, and community TR in a highly engaged fandom setting. It offers a nuanced perspective on TR's influence in digital communities, providing a framework for examining similar dynamics in other cultural or entertainment contexts.

For K-pop agencies, the findings suggest actionable strategies to enhance fan engagement. Encouraging idols to maintain active and transparent communication through verified SM accounts builds TR and deepens fan loyalty. Partnering with SM platforms to ensure secure and trustworthy environments for fan activities, such as voting or streaming, can enhance fan

satisfaction. Additionally, recognizing and supporting fan-led initiatives like charity campaigns or streaming projects can further strengthen TR and loyalty within fandom communities.

Despite its contributions, the study has limitations. The purposive sampling approach focused on publicly visible SM activity, potentially excluding less active or private fans. The reliance on observation provided valuable insights but did not capture fans' internal motivations or perceptions. Furthermore, the findings are specific to K-pop fandoms and may not generalize to other fan communities or cultural contexts. Future research could address these limitations by employing mixed methods, such as combining observation with surveys or interviews, to gain deeper insights into fan motivations and perceptions. Expanding the scope to include diverse fan communities and regions could also validate the findings across different contexts. Longitudinal studies could explore the evolution of TR over time, while platform-specific analyses could identify targeted strategies for fostering TR.

In conclusion, this research highlights the critical role of TR in driving SM engagement among K-pop fans, offering valuable insights for academics, SM providers, and entertainment agencies. By understanding and leveraging TR's multidimensional nature, stakeholders can foster stronger, more vibrant online communities that support sustained engagement and fan loyalty.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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