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RECEIVED 30 August 2025

REVISED 09 November 2025

ACCEPTED 19 November 2025

PUBLISHED 23 January 2026

CITATION

Lee J and Kim KCH (2026) Brand expansion for an original IP through collaboration: a case study of Disney's animated film *Wish*. *Front. Commun.* 10:1695779.
doi: 10.3389/fcomm.2025.1695779

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Brand expansion for an original IP through collaboration: a case study of Disney's animated film *Wish*

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Introduction: In this study, we explore how collaboration with K-pop idols influences brand expansion (operationalized as increases in awareness, attitudes, and behavioral intentions) for original intellectual property, focusing on Disney's animated film *Wish* (2023). As a standalone production with no ties to previous franchises or source material, *Wish* was created to commemorate Disney's 100th anniversary. Without an established fanbase, the film faced structural challenges in attracting early interest. The similarly positioned *Strange World* (2022), which lacked significant collaborations or innovative marketing, underperformed at the box office, highlighting the difficulty of promoting unfamiliar titles.

Methods: To address this challenge, *Wish* adopted a K-pop-driven strategy by featuring An Yujin of the girl group IVE in the official music video for the original song "This Wish." This collaboration increased both visibility and positive perceptions of the film. By combining Disney's global brand recognition with the cultural influence of K-pop, the campaign helped overcome barriers related to brand unfamiliarity. A survey of viewers of the "This Wish" music video assessed their perceptions of the collaboration, levels of fan activity, and extent of brand expansion. Structural equation modeling was used to examine whether fan activity mediated the relationship between collaboration and brand expansion.

Results: The results showed that K-pop collaboration positively influenced brand expansion both directly and indirectly through fan engagement. Activities such as media consumption, content creation, and social media sharing significantly contributed to audience awareness and acceptance of the original intellectual property film.

Discussion: These findings suggest that cross-industry collaborations between K-pop and film can promote fan-driven consumption and serve as effective branding strategies for original intellectual property in global markets. From a transnational cinema perspective, the partnership between K-pop idols and global media illustrates a hybrid cultural model that enhances cross-border recognition and offers strategic insights for future content marketing.

KEYWORDS

original IP, brand expansion, K-pop collaboration, K-pop idol, fan activities, fan engagement, animated film marketing, Disney

1 Introduction

The animation industry has long functioned as a major source of intellectual property (IP), and since the late 1990s, IP-based revenue models and brand expansion strategies have become increasingly sophisticated. Before the mid-1990s, however, Disney's animated films—from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) to *Pocahontas* (1995)—were primarily driven by human or animal protagonists and narrative artistry rather than by character-centric branding. Their promotional focus lay in storytelling and visual craftsmanship, not in building distinct character identities. Unlike live-action cinema, where actors come with pre-existing fandoms and emotional familiarity, animation faces the inherent challenge of having drawn figures that lack a fanbase, making it harder to elicit sustained audience affection. This difficulty becomes even greater when an animation introduces an entirely new story, new characters, or a standalone series without relying on existing IP or source material, as it lacks both narrative familiarity and pre-existing emotional attachment. Consequently, earlier animation IPs relied almost entirely on theatrical and home-video revenue streams and rarely achieved cross-media engagement beyond the film itself. Pixar's *Toy Story* (1995), as the world's first full-length 3D animated film, not only marked a technological milestone but also served as a turning point for IP franchise models that extend beyond the film itself into merchandise, games, theme parks, and mobile applications. Unlike its predecessors, *Toy Story* introduced a character-centered marketing paradigm: audiences developed emotional bonds with fully digital characters such as Woody and Buzz Lightyear, whose personalities transcended the narrative frame. Importantly, this attachment was mediated through the film's human protagonist, Andy—the young boy whose affection for his toys provided a psychological bridge for viewers. By identifying with Andy's perspective and emotional world, audiences naturally projected empathy onto his toys, transforming the digital characters into emotionally meaningful companions. This process of identification translated directly into consumer behavior, as viewers sought to reproduce Andy's world by purchasing Woody and Buzz toys. During the 1995–1996 Christmas season, the film's toy line sold out worldwide, causing what the media called “toy rage” (Garratt, 2000). This unprecedented phenomenon proved that an animated film could trigger large-scale merchandise demand and holiday sales on par with live-action blockbusters, establishing the foundation for the modern IP expansion model that unites storytelling, technology, and consumer products. Since then, animation has evolved into a core genre for character-centered brand building and long-term revenue generation through IP-based franchises.

Within this IP-driven framework, collaborations with K-pop idols have recently emerged as a prominent content marketing and localization strategy. K-pop serves as a powerful tool for expanding content reach across generations and regions, due to its robust global fandom and digital-first consumption patterns. Idol-centric fan communities actively generate and circulate secondary content through platforms such as YouTube, social media, and online forums, acting as emotionally engaged and participatory consumers. K-pop fandom not only consumes top-down content created by producers but also plays a central role in generating bottom-up content, highlighting the influence of fan activities in shaping brand image (Oh and Kim, 2022). In recent years, Disney's collaboration with K-pop has evolved into a multi-layered strategy that integrates global artists

such as BTS, SEVENTEEN, and NewJeans across various forms of content, including animated soundtracks, documentaries, live holiday specials, and performances that blend K-pop stages with Disney's cinematic universes (TenAsia, 2024). This development reflects a structured co-branding approach in which idol participation serves as a major driver of global audience expansion. Prior to the release of *Wish*, Disney implemented a localized promotional campaign titled “Guess Who?” to identify the Korean artist for a special collaboration music video. The teaser featured the silhouette of a mystery singer surrounded by symbolic “wishing bells,” encouraging fan speculation and viral engagement on social media. The event followed a series of notable collaborations with Korean vocalists—Taeyeon, who performed the Korean version of the *Frozen II* theme song; Suhyun of AKMU, who participated in the *Mulan* soundtrack; and Danielle of NewJeans, who recorded the Korean original soundtrack (OST) for *The Little Mermaid*. Positioned within this ongoing strategy, the *Wish* campaign operated as a pre-release initiative that stimulated participatory fan discourse and heightened anticipation, exemplifying Disney's adaptive use of K-pop collaboration as an audience-centered mechanism for brand expansion (TenAsia, 2023).

Since the 2020s, numerous cases in South Korea have demonstrated how K-pop idol collaborations with animated content can significantly expand audience reach. One notable example is the collaboration between Winter of the girl group aespa and the theatrical animation *Heartsping: Teenieping of Love*, in which she contributed to the official soundtrack. Originally aimed at children, the film succeeded in attracting teenage and adult viewers through this collaboration. The partnership enhanced content recognition through voluntary fan engagement and social media sharing, drawing attention from non-target demographics (Lee and Kim, 2025). Underlying this expansion is a generational familiarity effect. The Teenieping universe closely resembles the visual and narrative style of late-1990s franchises such as *Pokémon* and *Digimon*, which shaped the childhood memories of today's 20- and 30-something online users. As a result, the property functions as a playable meme object for this cohort, inviting spontaneous wordplay and viral reinterpretations that sustain adult participation beyond the original child audience (Bruce, 2024). This phenomenon suggests that fan activities can meaningfully contribute to expanding viewership and strengthening brand recognition.

We build upon the aforementioned discussions to empirically analyze the impact of K-pop idol collaborations on brand expansion for original IP, focusing on Walt Disney's animated film *Wish* (2023). In this article, “brand expansion” denotes consumer-level growth in awareness, favorability, and behavioral intentions, rather than product category extensions. *Wish* was released as a standalone feature commemorating Disney's 100th anniversary, lacking any prior series or original source material. As such, the film needed to attract new audiences beyond Disney's core fanbase. The earlier standalone production *Strange World* (2022), which also lacked a preexisting IP, grossed less than \$20 million during its first 5 days in North America and ultimately earned only around \$60 million globally—less than half of its production budget—ranking as one of the biggest box office failures in Disney's history. In South Korea, it attracted only about 75,000 moviegoers, further highlighting its poor performance (Box Office Mojo, 2025; Korean Film Council, 2025a). This serves as a clear example of how difficult it can be for new IP titles to achieve public recognition and market stability. In contrast, *Wish*, while still

considered a box office failure in North America with earnings of approximately \$64 million, managed to attract over 1.4 million viewers in South Korea, surpassing the one million mark (Korean Film Council, 2025b). This relative success is interpreted as the result of a K-pop collaboration strategy that leveraged the participation of An Yujin from the girl group IVE in the OST music video “This Wish” (Disney Music Korea VEVO, 2023a). The collaboration drew attention and engagement from K-pop fandoms in South Korea. It also created a structure in which organic fan-generated content helped raise awareness and contributed to brand expansion (Kang, 2023). As a result, Disney IP-related consumer activity in South Korea expanded to include merchandise sales such as character goods, food products, stationery, and clothing. Additionally, the release of *Wish* was accompanied by a Make-A-Wish campaign, showcasing a socially driven and emotionally resonant case of content-based brand expansion (The Walt Disney Company, 2023).

Accordingly, we empirically test a structural pathway using structural equation modeling (SEM): perceived K-pop idol collaboration → fan activities → brand expansion for original IP. While prior research has emphasized the awareness effects of K-pop collaborations, the mediating mechanisms through which fan activities translate collaboration into brand expansion remain underexplored. We therefore examine whether fan activities function as the mediator linking K-pop collaboration and brand expansion. The objectives are to: (1) estimate the contribution of K-pop idol collaborations to brand expansion for original IP, (2) test the mediating role of fan activities (consumption, creation, sharing) in the collaboration–expansion link, (3) assess the practical effectiveness of K-pop-based localization strategies in specific regional markets, and (4) analyze the differentiated effects of categorized fan activities on brand expansion and provide a theoretical basis for future research. Ultimately, we argue that collaboration between the animation and K-pop industries can serve as a strategic pathway to enhance the local acceptance and emotional accessibility of global brands, thereby contributing to transnational cinema scholarship by elucidating how global content interacts with regional fandoms.

2 Materials and methods

2.1 Brand expansion

2.1.1 Concept and scope of brand expansion for original IP

Brand expansion refers to a strategy that leverages existing brand assets—namely awareness, associations, and trust—and broadens them to the level of consumer cognition, attitudes, and behavioral intentions, thereby diffusing the brand into new markets, touchpoints, and media. In other words, brand expansion encompasses the process through which a brand’s presence and meaning are extended and reinforced within consumer perception.

As widely emphasized in branding research, positive brand associations and trust directly contribute to the transfer of evaluations toward new offerings (content, products, or experiences). When consumers perceive congruence and relevance with an existing brand, they tend to show greater familiarity with and acceptance of new targets. Isarabhakdee and Kotler (2018) emphasize that awareness constitutes the very first stage of the consumer–brand interaction,

serving as the foundation upon which deeper evaluations and attitudes are built.

Aaker’s (1991) brand equity model further supports this view. Aaker (1991) defines brand associations as one of the core components of brand equity, encompassing images, feelings, symbols, and experiences that consumers link to a brand. He explains that associations become powerful brand assets when they facilitate processes such as helping consumers retrieve information, differentiating and positioning the brand, providing reasons to buy, generating positive attitudes and feelings, and ultimately serving as a basis for extensions. Within this framework, brand expansion can be understood as a sequential process that begins with awareness, progresses through consumer evaluation and attitudes, and culminates in behavioral intentions (Table 1).

At this point, it is important to distinguish between brand expansion and extension, two conceptually distinct terms that are often used interchangeably in practice. Keller and Swaminathan (2022) define brand extension as the direct application of an existing brand name to a new product or a completely different category. In contrast, brand expansion is a broader concept, encompassing not only product or category extensions but also the enhancement of consumer-level awareness, attitudes, and behavioral intentions (Mailchimp, n.d.). In this sense, extension focuses on the act of execution, whereas expansion includes the resulting diffusion of brand meaning within consumer perception. Accordingly, the increase in consumer interest, attitudes, and behavioral intentions toward the original IP *Wish* is more appropriately classified as a case of brand expansion.

Ultimately, brand expansion is significant because it operates at the level of consumer perception. When consumers positively perceive and emotionally identify with a brand, expansion naturally extends into new markets and media. Furthermore, when combined with fan activities, the speed and breadth of diffusion accelerate through consumer participation, user-generated content (UGC), and word-of-mouth communication. This demonstrates that a brand functions as a cultural and emotional network embedded within consumer life (Table 2).

Brand expansion in this study is operationally defined as the enlargement of consumer cognition, attitudes, and behavioral intentions toward the original IP through K-pop idol collaboration. Specifically, it refers to how viewers of the OST music video “This Wish”—performed by An Yujin of IVE—develop heightened interest in Disney’s animated film *Wish*, perceive a positive shift in its brand image, express stronger intentions to watch the film or consume related content in the future, and show a willingness to recommend the film to others. These four dimensions, respectively, capture cognitive expansion (interest), attitudinal shift (positive image evaluation), behavioral intention (future viewing and consumption), and social diffusion (word-of-mouth). Thus, in this study, brand expansion is defined as the process by which K-pop idol collaboration-induced consumer perceptions and participatory behaviors broaden the recognition and acceptance of an original IP.

2.1.2 Typologies of brand expansion: horizontal vs. vertical; intra-media vs. cross-media; market penetration vs. market development

In this study, brand expansion refers to the consumer-side diffusion of a standalone IP (*Wish*)—in awareness, attitudes, and

behavioral intentions—triggered by a high-salience K-pop idol collaboration (“This Wish” OST/music video), without introducing new lines or categories. The three axes (horizontal/vertical, intra-media/cross-media, penetration/development) are used solely as diffusion lenses. “Horizontal” refers to breadth across adjacent segments and touchpoints; “vertical” refers to depth within a segment through repeated exposure, richer interactions, UGC/remixes, and higher-value behaviors such as cinema attendance and related consumption. Prior evidence from idol collaborations is used conservatively as an empirical cue that within-music diversification tends to deepen existing fanbases, whereas cross-domain activities tend to open new touchpoints; our outcomes remain consumer-side brand metrics, not fandom size (Song and Kim, 2016).

Intra-media denotes consolidation within one medium; cross-media denotes conversion across media and functions. In *Wish*, the music touchpoint serves as a launchpad into the feature film and related consumption. Although Asha, Valentino, and the Star are new characters, their plush/toy goods are carried by retailers such as Toys“R”Us, indicating early merchandise conversion from music-anchored discovery to tangible IP uptake. This aligns with the view that diversified activities accumulate attachment and widen reach over time (Song and Kim, 2016). Market penetration here means deepening among reachable audiences, while market development refers to opening new segments or geographies without adding products via celebrity-led discovery, sharing, and participation. Sustained, varied activity portfolios are seen as a consumer-side accumulation mechanism that supports both penetration and development for a new IP. To avoid confusion with extension, we clarify that labels such as “horizontal/vertical” denote breadth vs. depth of audience diffusion and within- vs. across-media movement, not product or line additions.

Finally, several classic antecedents of competitive advantage are adapted as boundary conditions for expansion effectiveness in this context: scale economies in digital distribution, collaboration-asset quality control, training investments for local execution, synergy with

commemorative narratives or corporate social responsibility (CSR), and imperfectly imitable capabilities—for example, coupling K-pop fandom participation networks with Disney storytelling IP (Dev et al., 2007). The measurement link is direct: horizontal breadth maps to interest/awareness spread beyond the core; vertical depth relates to repeat exposure, participatory creation, and downstream intentions to view and recommend—all observable without altering the product set (Table 3).

2.1.3 Mechanisms linking K-pop idol collaboration, fan activities, and brand expansion

Collaborations with K-pop idols create a participatory mechanism in which consumers’ perceptions of the collaboration naturally lead to active fan engagement. When audiences encounter an OST performance by an idol such as An Yujin, they tend to perceive it as fresh, interesting, and capable of capturing their attention, while also forming more favorable impressions of the associated content. These shifts in perception lay the groundwork for heightened interest in the new IP and greater receptivity to its branding. Building on this initial perception, fan activities arise spontaneously. Consumers who find the collaboration engaging often respond with enjoyment, express their reactions through likes, comments, or saves, and repeatedly rewatch the content. Beyond these direct interactions, many participate more actively by sharing videos on social networks or producing UGC such as remixes and edits. These activities strengthen emotional connections between consumers and the brand, broaden exposure beyond the core fanbase, and contribute to a cycle of participatory diffusion that enhances awareness, favorability, behavioral intention, and word-of-mouth.

This dynamic aligns with Jenkins’s (1992) theory of participatory culture and his concept of “textual poaching,” which together recast fans as active co-creators who rewrite texts through practices such as recontextualization, timeline expansion, refocalization, moral realignment, genre shifting, crossovers, character dislocation, personalization, emotional intensification, and even eroticization.

TABLE 1 Conceptual comparison of brand expansion and brand extension.

Dimension	Brand extension	Brand expansion
Definition	Applying an existing brand name to a new product or a completely different category	Broader process of extending brand presence into consumer cognition, attitudes, and behavioral intentions
Focus	Execution of extending the brand to new categories or products	Perceptual and attitudinal diffusion of the brand within consumer minds
Example	Starbucks introducing teas or desserts under the same brand name	Increased awareness, positive attitudes, and viewing/purchasing intentions toward <i>Wish</i> through K-pop idol collaborations
Scope	Narrower, limited to product/service categories	Broader, encompassing market, media, and consumer perception
Academic reference	Keller and Swaminathan (2022)	Aaker (1991), Isarabhakdee and Kotler (2018)

TABLE 2 Operational definition of brand expansion in this study.

Dimension	Survey item	Indicator
Cognitive expansion	Q14. I became interested in <i>Wish</i> through An Yujin’s original soundtrack.	Increased consumer interest
Attitudinal shift	Q15. After watching An Yujin’s OST music video, I felt a positive change in <i>Wish</i> ’s image.	Positive brand image change
Behavioral intention	Q16. I am more likely to watch <i>Wish</i> or consume related content in the future.	Viewing/consumption intention
Social diffusion	Q17. I would like to recommend <i>Wish</i> to people around me.	Recommendation intention (word-of-mouth)

Through these strategies, participation routinely extends into production (UGC, remixes), expanding a brand's affective and cultural reach. In idol collaborations, collaboration-induced perceptions (novelty, interest, liking) flow into fan activities (rewatching; likes/ comments/saves; sharing; UGC) that circulate algorithmically and accumulate as collective intelligence, amplifying awareness and cascading into favorability and behavioral intention. Accordingly, our premise that fan activities mediate the path to brand awareness and support brand expansion is consistent with Jenkins's (1992) account of participatory textual production.

Furthermore, Zhang (2025) empirically demonstrated that the originality (i.e., creative distinctiveness) and familiarity (i.e., schema congruity) of collaboration characters significantly influence consumer preference through brand awareness as a mediator. In a survey of Chinese consumers, originality strengthened attention and memorability (a cognitive route), whereas familiarity enhanced emotional closeness and perceived risk reduction (an affective/heuristic route). Brand awareness acted as a cognitive marker that converted these attributes into downstream attitudinal and behavioral intentions. In idol-OST contexts, the co-activation of vocal/ performative originality and prior-fan familiarity channels through awareness to produce a cascade toward liking, intent, and recommendation. This mechanism parallels our focus: collaboration-induced perceptions activate fan-driven awareness pathways, effectively mapping Zhang's (2025) attribute → awareness (mediation) → preference onto our collaboration-induced perception → brand awareness path and, in turn, into broader recognition, acceptance, and brand expansion.

In addition, Oh (2023) explains that fan content creation operates within a gamification structure on digital platforms. Fans voluntarily adhere to platform rules, seek achievements such as higher view counts or subscriber growth, and receive immediate feedback through likes and comments. Short-form formats and algorithmic exposure accelerate the circulation of fan-created content, reinforcing immersion and sustaining cycles of repeated participation. This gamified environment enhances both emotional attachment to the brand and its expansion into broader consumer segments. This

dynamic aligns with our modeled path: fan activities → participatory diffusion → brand expansion (Oh, 2023).

Taken together, these perspectives illustrate that K-pop idol collaboration triggers participatory mechanisms of fandom—rooted in consumer perception, creative engagement, and gamified circulation—which reinforce awareness, strengthen emotional bonds, and ultimately drive brand expansion. The expansion observed in this study should thus be understood as a process in which collaboration-induced perceptions activate fan participation, and fan activities mediate the transition from initial recognition to broader acceptance and recommendation for original IP (Table 4).

2.1.4 Case evidence: *Winter–Heartspring: Teenieping of Love* and *An Yujin–Wish*

In the animation industry, brand expansion materializes through franchise building, IP enlargement, and cross-media or cross-industry collaborations. *Wish* is a standalone release without a preceding series or source text; Disney therefore combined corporate brand salience and centennial symbolism with a K-pop idol collaboration as a localization tactic to convert global awareness into local consumer engagement. In South Korea, featuring IVE's An Yujin on the original song "This Wish" and producing an official music video positioned music as the first touchpoint from which interest could cascade into the film and related consumption. Viewed through the expansion lenses established earlier, this collaboration broadened horizontal reach by attracting the adjacent public and deepened vertical engagement via repeated exposure, interactions, and selective user-generated remixes, thereby elevating awareness, attitudes, and downstream intentions without introducing a new product line. Executonal conditions such as asset quality control, local execution training, scale economies in digital distribution, and synergy with commemorative narratives or CSR help explain why a music-anchored touchpoint can efficiently convert attention into theatrical consideration and related behaviors in a given locality.

A complementary South Korean case clarifies how collaboration can operate even when the property is not new in absolute terms. *Heartspring: Teenieping of Love* belongs to the ongoing *Catch! Teenieping*

TABLE 3 Contrast of typology labels in this study: expansion vs. classic extension.

Axis	Meaning in this study (brand expansion; audience diffusion)	Typical signals in this study	Meaning in classic brand extension (product/line)
Horizontal vs. vertical	Horizontal: breadth across adjacent segments/ touchpoints Vertical: depth within a segment	Horizontal: awareness/interest spread to non-fans/light users Vertical: rewatching, UGC/remix, cinema attendance, related consumption	Horizontal: peer variants within the same category Vertical: up/down quality–price tiers
Intra-media vs. cross-media	Intra-media: consolidation within one medium (music video → streams/clips/playlists) Cross-media: conversion across media/functions (music → film → merch/CSR/events)	Within-platform metric growth; conversion from music to film and IP consumption, including early plush/toy sales for Asha/Valentino/Star at retailers such as Toys"R"Us	Communication architecture that supports a new line across channels
Penetration vs. development	Penetration: deepening adoption among reachable audiences Development: opening new segments/geographies without adding products	Penetration: stronger intentions among Disney loyal/K-pop fans Development: first-time discovery via collaboration-led sharing	Penetration: sell a new line in current markets Development: sell a new line in new markets

UGC, user-generated content, CSR, corporate social responsibility, IP, intellectual property.

series and was originally aimed at children; however, for teenagers and adults, the property effectively functioned as original IP. The collaboration with Winter of aespa reframed discovery around a music/performance entry point and, empirically, expanded the audience to include teenagers and adults while increasing related consumption. Reported indicators include the film surpassing 1.23 million admissions in 2024, a 483% increase in average streaming for the OST album relative to the opening-day baseline, and Winter's "The First Moment" logging about 177,591 unique listeners and 1,779,123 total plays compared to 60,770 listeners and 716,464 plays for the original version—approximately 2.9 times more unique listeners and 2.5 times more plays. Social video metrics likewise captured an influx of adult viewers, with a dance-challenge clip garnering around 1.8 million views on YouTube and roughly three million combined across social media, while external preference snapshots show aespa's strongest traction in the 20s and 30s cohorts, aligning with the observed shift in reach. Marketing execution further fused the idol with the character through look-and-feel matching to facilitate the transfer of emotions from the performer to the animation's world, transitioning from OST/music video discovery to theatrical consideration. Taken together, these observations indicate brand expansion in the precise sense used here: the collaboration opened previously unaddressed adult segments and heightened downstream behaviors among newly reached audiences without adding products, even though the franchise itself was already familiar to children (Lee and Kim, 2025).

2.1.5 Implications for theory and practice, and hypothesis development

In theoretical terms, we view a K-pop idol-OST collaboration as a simple yet powerful way to localize a global, standalone animation IP and accelerate consumer-side brand expansion. Prior film research shows that an idol's participation can enhance viewing intention through a path that aligns with fan activity; we adopt that idea as a participation-based diffusion mechanism in which a music touchpoint (the OST/music video) raises awareness, builds positive feelings, and leads to behavioral intentions—without creating any new product lines or categories. From a transnational cinema perspective, collaboration is more than mere delivery; it is a space where a global IP melds with local tastes and emotions. This lens helps explain why choosing a

locally prominent singer and crafting the OST/music video in a familiar local tone can reduce the symbolic distance of a new IP and lower entry barriers. Cultural proximity adds an additional layer: when people hear a familiar voice and style, they understand and accept the offer more quickly and are more willing to act—so expansion occurs solely on the consumer side (Isarabhakdee and Kotler, 2018). In short, the collaboration is not a substitute for product-line decisions; it is a high-attention discovery node that supports growth within one medium (music video → streams/clips) and movement across media (music → theater and related behaviors), which are precisely the outcomes we consider as expansion.

For practice, the steps are straightforward. First, design the music touchpoint to reach beyond the usual target: cast a locally relevant idol, match translation and tone to local norms, and release in the short-form and streaming spaces where that audience already spends time. Second, split execution by audience type: for non-fans, maximize exposure with high-reach edits, challenges, and portable clips; for reachable audiences, deepen participation with behind-the-scenes content, duet/remix options, and memorable musical hooks (Disney Music Korea VEVO, 2023b). Third, plan the handoff from the OST/music video to film consideration and related behaviors with tight timing—coordinated music video drops, reminders, and clear calls to action that facilitate the transition. Fourth, measure what matters using key performance indicators that map to our constructs: for collaboration perception, track freshness/liking and attention; for participation, track rewatching, likes/comments/saves, and sharing/UGC; for expansion, track interest, image shift, viewing/consumption intention, and recommendation intention. Finally, treat platform algorithms and format norms as levers you can pull, not background noise, because they shape how quickly attention converts into the expansion results we measure. Taken together, a culturally relevant, music-first collaboration localizes a global IP and delivers brand expansion in the strict sense used here.

2.2 Methods

We employed a cross-sectional online survey and SEM to test a simple mediation model in the context of Disney's *Wish* (2023). The

TABLE 4 Alignment of survey items with mechanisms of brand expansion.

Construct (path)	Mechanism explanation	Corresponding survey dimensions
K-pop idol collaboration → consumer perception	Idol participation in the original soundtrack (e.g., An Yuji's "This Wish") creates freshness, interest, and favorable impressions, positioning collaboration as more than simple exposure.	Q6. Freshness and interest Q7. Sufficient attention capture Q8. Increased favorability toward <i>Wish</i> Q9. Positive perception of K-pop idol participation in Disney original soundtracks
Consumer perception → fan activities	Positive perception leads to active engagement: enjoyment, emotional resonance, and spontaneous interaction with the content.	Q10. Enjoyment while watching the OST music video
Fan activities (participatory culture)	Fans express engagement through platform interactions and circulation: liking, commenting, saving, repeated viewing, sharing, user-generated content/remixes. These behaviors strengthen emotional connection and extend reach.	Q11. Likes, comments, saves Q12. Repeated viewing Q13. Sharing or recommending via social networking services
Fan activities → brand expansion	Emotional and participatory engagement amplifies awareness, interest, attitudes, and behavioral intentions, accelerating diffusion into broader consumer segments.	Captured indirectly through sequential elevation: familiarity → favorability → intention → recommendation

model specifies perceived K-pop idol collaboration as the independent variable, fan activities as the mediator, and brand expansion for original IP as the dependent variable. Eligible respondents were adults (18+) in South Korea who had watched the “This Wish” OST music video; exposure was verified by a screening item prior to the main questionnaire. Each construct was measured with four items on a 5-point Likert scale. Following a two-step approach, we first validated the measurement model via confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), assessing reliability (Cronbach’s α , composite reliability) and validity (convergent validity via average variance extracted (AVE); discriminant validity via the Fornell–Larcker criterion). We then estimated the structural model and tested mediation using bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals. Multi-group SEM by fan status (fan vs. non-fan) was conducted to explore group differences. Analyses were performed in SPSS 25.0 and AMOS 25.0 with a significance threshold of $p < 0.05$.

2.2.1 Research questions and hypotheses

We aim to empirically analyze the impact of collaborations between K-pop idols and global animated films on brand expansion for original IP. Specifically, we seek to verify whether fan activities mediate this relationship by applying an SEM approach. In this context, brand expansion refers to consumer-level growth in awareness, attitudes, and behavioral intentions rather than movement into new product categories (Aaker, 1991; Isarabhakdee and Kotler, 2018). Previous studies have shown that entertainment collaborations can transfer associative meanings, increase familiarity, and strengthen brand perceptions (Dev et al., 2007). Accordingly, the following research questions are proposed:

RQ1. Does collaboration with K-pop idols have a direct effect on brand expansion for original IP?

RQ2. Do fan activities mediate the relationship between K-pop idol collaboration and brand expansion for original IP?

Based on the above research questions, the following hypotheses are formulated:

H1. Collaboration with K-pop idols has a positive effect on brand expansion for original IP.

H2. Collaboration with K-pop idols positively influences fan activities.

H3. Fan activities positively affect brand expansion for original IP.

H4. Fan activities mediate the relationship between K-pop idol collaboration and brand expansion for original IP.

Based on these hypotheses, we propose a simple mediation model in which K-pop collaboration is treated as the independent variable, brand expansion for original IP as the dependent variable, and fan activities as the mediating variable (Figure 1).

Wish is a completely standalone production, unconnected to any existing Disney animated series. Rather than relying on an established fanbase or prior brand recognition, it engages audiences with an entirely new brand strategy. Because of this characteristic, *Wish* faces

inherent limitations in generating broad public awareness beyond Disney’s existing loyal customer base. Therefore, if *Wish* were to be considered as the independent variable, its direct connection to the dependent variable of brand expansion would be limited—making it inconsistent with our aims. Instead, the OST music video produced in collaboration with a K-pop idol plays a central role in driving brand expansion. The video for “This Wish,” featuring An Yujin of IVE, serves as a critical intermediary, allowing the original IP *Wish* to extend its reach beyond Disney’s traditional fanbase by drawing active participation from the K-pop fandom. In this study, brand expansion refers not to the Disney brand as a whole but specifically to the growth of interest in and consumption of the *Wish* film. We analyze the process by which *Wish*, as an independent piece of content, reaches a wider audience through K-pop collaboration, raises awareness of the film, and ultimately drives consumption. In other words, as the collaborative content serves as the key factor behind *Wish*’s brand expansion, K-pop collaboration is set as the independent variable.

2.2.2 Variable definition and measurement

The key variables were defined based on prior research, and all items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). The conceptual definitions and measurement approaches for each variable are as follows (Table 5).

2.2.3 Data collection and analysis procedures

Data were collected through an online survey. The sample was limited to respondents in South Korea who had watched the OST music video for Disney’s animated film *Wish* featuring An Yujin of IVE. A screening question verified viewing experience, and the main questionnaire was administered only to those who consented to the study’s purpose. Eligible participants were adults aged 18 or older, including general consumers and K-pop fans. A minimum sample of 100 was secured to meet the recommended threshold for SEM.

Following the logic of probability sampling, a sample of approximately 100 cases is generally sufficient to estimate population tendencies with reasonable accuracy (Babbie, 2012). Once the acceptable level of sampling error is determined, this sample size provides stable estimates at a 95% confidence interval with about $\pm 10\%$ precision. Furthermore, the validity of survey estimates depends more on random selection than on sheer sample size; a simple random sample of $n = 100$ serves as a standard unit of scientific survey design, and in repeated sampling, roughly 95% of estimates fall within the bounds of error (Scheaffer et al., 2011). Together, these theoretical and statistical principles justify our use of a 100-participant sample as methodologically and inferentially adequate.

The questionnaire comprised four sections: (1) perceptions of the K-pop collaboration, (2) fan activities, (3) brand expansion of *Wish*, and (4) demographics. All items used a 5-point Likert scale.

The collected data were analyzed using SPSS 25.0 and AMOS 25.0. First, frequency analyses were conducted to describe respondents’ general characteristics. To assess the validity and reliability of the measurement instruments, CFA and reliability analyses were performed, and discriminant validity was examined via inter-construct correlation analysis. Finally, SEM was used to test the structural model and hypotheses; mediation was assessed with

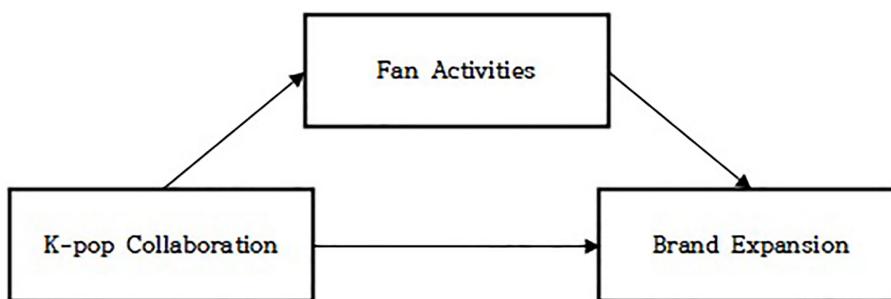


FIGURE 1
Research model.

TABLE 5 Variables and measurement.

Variable type	Variable	Conceptual definition	Measurement
Independent	K-pop collaboration	Perceived creativity, interest, and positivity of the collaboration between a K-pop idol and the content	5-point Likert scale (4 items)
Mediator	Fan activities	Active behaviors such as viewing the original soundtrack music videos, sharing content, creating secondary content, and participating in communities	5-point Likert scale (4 items)
Dependent	Brand expansion	Degree of interest in the original intellectual property <i>Wish</i> , intention to recommend, and intention for future consumption	5-point Likert scale (4 items)

bootstrapping, and moderation by fan status was evaluated through multi-group analysis.

3 Results

3.1 Demographic characteristics of respondents

A frequency analysis of respondents' demographics (Table 6) showed the following: Forty-nine (49.0%) were men, and 51 (51.0%) were women. Regarding age, 14 (14.0%) were in their 20s, 27 (27.0%) were in their 30s, 34 (34.0%) were in their 40s, and 25 (25.0%) were aged 50 and above. In terms of occupation, 83 (83.0%) were office workers, 10 (10.0%) were self-employed/freelancers, and three (3.0%) were students. Regarding interest in K-pop, 37 (37.0%) strongly agreed, 25 (25.0%) agreed, 24 (24.0%) were neutral, 12 (12.0%) disagreed, and two (2.0%) strongly disagreed. In terms of fandom for An Yujin, 50 (50.0%) were fans, and 50 (50.0%) were non-fans.

3.2 Validity and reliability assessment

The CFA results for the measurement model are shown in Table 7. Model fit indices indicated an overall acceptable fit: $\chi^2 = 59.184$ ($df = 49, p = 0.151$), $\chi^2/df = 1.208$, root mean square residual = 0.031, goodness-of-fit index = 0.911, adjusted goodness-of-fit index = 0.859, normed fit index = 0.927, Tucker-Lewis index = 0.982, incremental fit index = 0.987, comparative fit index = 0.986, root mean square error of approximation = 0.046. Composite reliability ranged from 0.904 to 0.922, and AVE ranged from 0.701 to 0.750. All standardized factor

loadings exceeded 0.50 and were significant, supporting convergent validity. Finally, reliability coefficients ranged from 0.822 to 0.905, exceeding the 0.60 benchmark and indicating satisfactory internal consistency.

To assess discriminant validity, we reported the inter-construct correlations among the three latent variables and the square roots of their AVEs (Table 8). Following the Fornell-Larcker criterion, discriminant validity is established when each construct's AVE exceeds the squared inter-construct correlations. The highest squared correlation—between fan activities and brand expansion—was 0.551, while the lowest AVE—for K-pop collaboration perception—was 0.701. As $0.701 > 0.551$, the constructs met the requirement for discriminant validity.

3.3 Testing the structural model and hypotheses

The results for model fit and hypothesis testing are shown in Table 9. The structural model met conventional fit thresholds— $\chi^2 = 67.277$ ($df = 50, p = 0.052$), $\chi^2/df = 1.346$, root mean square residual = 0.032, goodness-of-fit index = 0.893, normed fit index = 0.917, Tucker-Lewis index = 0.969, incremental fit index = 0.977, comparative fit index = 0.977, root mean square error of approximation = 0.059—indicating an overall acceptable fit.

Given the acceptable model fit, we tested the hypotheses (Figure 2). H1 posited that perceptions of K-pop collaboration positively influence brand expansion. The analysis supported H1: K-pop collaboration perception had a significant positive effect on brand expansion ($\beta = 0.227, p < 0.05$). H2 proposed that K-pop collaboration perception positively influences fan activities. This was also supported: K-pop collaboration perception significantly and

TABLE 6 Respondents' demographic characteristics.

Classification		Frequency (n)		%
Gender	Man	49		49.0
	Woman	51		51.0
Age	20s	14		14.0
	30s	27		27.0
	40s	34		34.0
	Over 50	25		25.0
Job	Student	3		3.0
	Office worker	83		83.0
	Self-employed/freelancer,	10		10.0
	etc.	4		4.0
K-pop interest	Strongly disagree	2		2.0
	Disagree	12		12.0
	Neutral	24		24.0
	Agree	25		25.0
	Strongly agree	37		37.0
Fan status	Fan	50		50.0
	Not a fan	50		50.0
Total		100		100.0

TABLE 7 Confirmatory factor analysis and reliability for the measurement model.

Classification		Estimate	SE	t-value	C.R.	AVE	Cronbach's α
K-pop collaboration	→	KC1	0.739	–	0.904	0.701	0.822
	→	KC2	0.758	0.210			
	→	KC3	0.778	0.215			
	→	KC4	0.683	0.178			
Fan activities	→	FA1	0.819	–	0.922	0.747	0.905
	→	FA2	0.895	0.151			
	→	FA3	0.836	0.118			
	→	FA4	0.889	0.118			
Brand expansion	→	BE1	0.800	–	0.922	0.750	0.874
	→	BE2	0.683	0.129			
	→	BE3	0.864	0.141			
	→	BE4	0.837	0.128			

Fit statistics: $\chi^2 = 59.184$ (df = 49, $p = 0.151$), $\chi^2/df = 1.208$, RMR = 0.031, GFI = 0.911, AGFI = 0.859, NFI = 0.927, TLI = 0.982, IFI = 0.987, CFI = 0.986, RMSEA = 0.046. *** $p < 0.001$.

positively affected fan activities ($\beta = 0.604$, $p < 0.001$). H3 stated that fan activities positively influence brand expansion. The results supported H3 as well: fan activities had a significant positive effect on brand expansion ($\beta = 0.674$, $p < 0.001$).

Hypothesis 4 posited that fan activities mediate the relationship between perceptions of K-pop collaboration and brand expansion, with the indirect effect estimated via bootstrapping. As shown in Table 10, the indirect effect of perceptions of K-pop collaboration on brand expansion through fan activities was 0.407 (confidence interval: 0.318, 0.663). The 95% confidence interval obtained via the bootstrapping procedure

did not include zero, indicating that the indirect effect of fan activities in the relationship between K-pop collaboration perceptions and brand expansion is statistically significant; therefore, Hypothesis 4 was supported.

3.4 Test of moderation by fan status

The results of the multi-group analysis conducted to examine whether fan status moderates the structural relationships between perceptions of K-pop collaboration, fan activities, and brand

expansion are shown in Table 11. For the moderation test, constrained and unconstrained models were specified. Moderation is supported when the unconstrained model is superior to the constrained model, which is determined by the difference in χ^2 values relative to the degrees of freedom; if the χ^2 difference exceeds the critical value for the given degrees of freedom, a moderating effect can be inferred and interpreted as significant.

The constrained model produced $\chi^2(103) = 141.317$, whereas the unconstrained model produced $\chi^2(100) = 117.934$. Comparing the two, the unconstrained model has a χ^2 that is smaller by 23.383 ($p < 0.001$) and degrees of freedom that are smaller by 3. In other words, because the reduction in χ^2 sufficiently compensates for the loss of degrees of freedom, the unconstrained model is considered superior to the constrained model, indicating that the moderating effect of fan status is significant.

To identify which paths showed significant differences in the χ^2 difference test across groups, we imposed a single equality constraint on each path in turn and conducted multi-group analyses comparing the unconstrained and constrained models by fan status. As each path constraint fixes one parameter, the degrees of freedom differ by 1; therefore, at the 0.05 significance level, a χ^2 difference of 3.84 or greater ($\chi^2 = 3.84$, $df = 1$) indicates a significant difference.

As shown in Table 12, the effect of K-pop collaboration perception on brand expansion differed significantly by fan status ($\Delta\chi^2(1) = 20.577$, $p < 0.001$): it was significant for non-fans ($\beta = 0.947$, $p < 0.001$) but not for fans ($\beta = -0.024$, $p > 0.05$). The effect of fan activities on brand expansion also differed significantly ($\Delta\chi^2(1) = 15.077$, $p < 0.001$): it was significant for fans ($\beta = 0.963$, $p < 0.001$) but not for non-fans ($\beta = -0.061$, $p > 0.05$). Finally, the path from K-pop collaboration perception to fan activities did not differ significantly by fan status ($\Delta\chi^2(1) = 0.001$, $p > 0.05$).

TABLE 8 Correlation matrix and discriminant validity test results.

No	Factor	M \pm SD	1	2	3
1	K-pop collaboration	4.01 ± 0.588	0.701^a		
2	Fan activities	3.43 ± 0.881	0.534***	0.747	
3	Brand expansion	3.74 ± 0.668	0.534***	0.742***	0.750

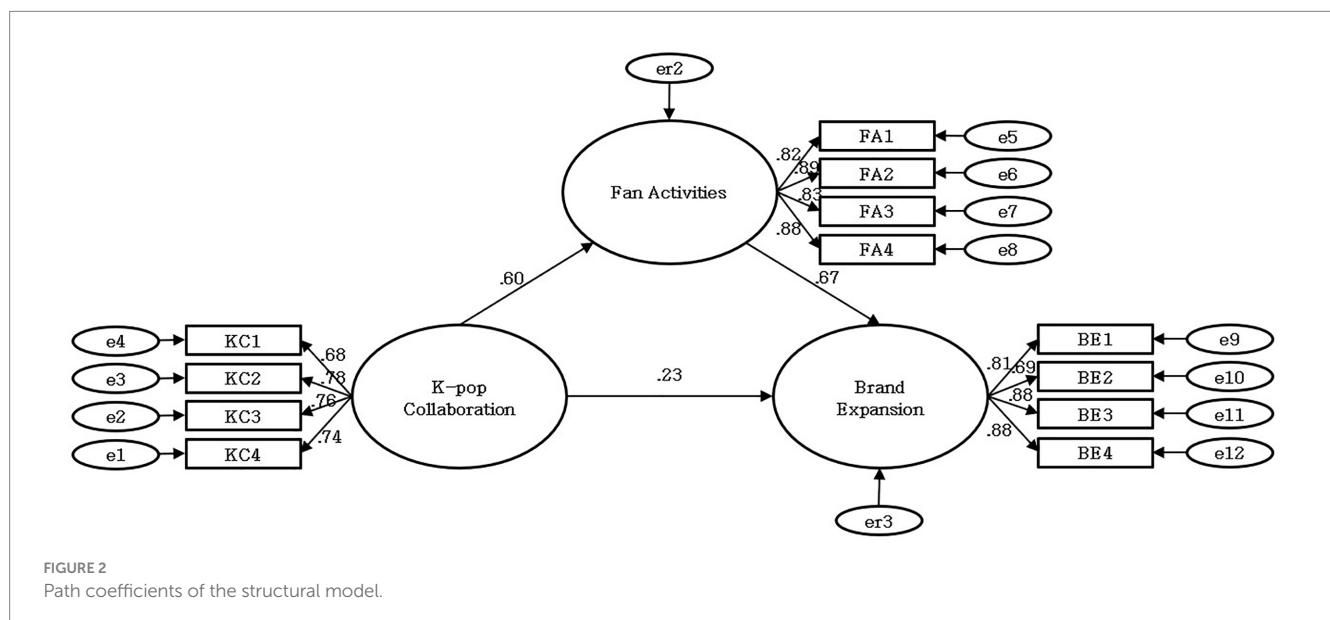
^aAverage variance extracted. The bold diagonal values (1-1, 2-2, 3-3) represent the AVE values.

*** $p < 0.001$.

TABLE 9 Testing the structural model and hypotheses.

Route	Estimate	SE	C.R.	p	Hypothesis	
H1	K-pop collaboration \rightarrow brand expansion	0.227	0.140	2.187*	0.029	Accepted
H2	K-pop collaboration \rightarrow fan activities	0.604	0.204	5.069***	0.000	Accepted
H3	Fan activities \rightarrow brand expansion	0.674	0.092	5.775***	0.000	Accepted

Fit statistics: $\chi^2 = 67.277$ ($df = 50$, $p = 0.052$), $\chi^2/df = 1.346$, root mean square residual = 0.032, goodness-of-fit index = 0.893, normed fit index = 0.917, Tucker-Lewis index = 0.969, incremental fit index = 0.977, comparative fit index = 0.977, root mean square error of approximation = 0.059. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.001$. SE, standard error; C.R., critical ratio.



4 Discussion

We used Disney's animated film *Wish* as a case to empirically identify how collaboration with a K-pop idol drives brand expansion—defined here not as movement into new product categories but as consumer-level growth in awareness, attitudes, and behavioral intentions. The analytic sample comprised adult respondents in South Korea who had viewed the OST music video “This Wish” featuring An Yujin of IVE, and the path of collaboration from perception → fan activities → brand expansion was estimated via SEM. The mediating construct, fan activities, encompassed repeated viewing, UGC/remix creation, and participatory behaviors such as commenting and sharing.

Empirically, perceived K-pop collaboration exerted a positive direct effect on brand expansion. It also significantly increased fan activities, which in turn strongly promoted brand expansion. The indirect effect verified by bootstrapping was statistically significant as well. These results indicate that collaboration does more than raise salience; it activates a participatory diffusion mechanism in which fan activities mediate the progression from interest and favorability to viewing/consumption and recommendation intentions. In particular, the music-anchored touchpoint of the OST music video served as a launchpad for cross-media movement into the feature film and related products/content, effectively broadening market uptake for a new IP.

Multi-group analysis further revealed different operating pathways for fans versus non-fans of An Yujin. In the non-fan group, the direct effect of collaboration perception on brand expansion was significantly larger (significant for non-fans; non-significant for fans), suggesting that mere exposure to the

collaboration quickly generates awareness and interest among new audiences. In the fan group, the effect of fan activities on brand expansion was markedly stronger (significant for fans; non-significant for non-fans), indicating that activating participatory behaviors is the primary driver of expanded attitudes and behavioral intentions among the core fanbase. This dual-path pattern reveals that non-fans predominantly follow an exposure-based mechanism—where visibility and accessibility of the collaboration enhance awareness and liking—while fans follow a participation-based mechanism, in which engagement behaviors such as remixing, challenges, and sharing incentives mediate learning-oriented and immersive attitudes that sustain long-term brand expansion. Practically, this implies a dual approach: increase access and visibility of the collaboration to strengthen the direct “awareness-liking-interest” route for non-fans, and design participation mechanisms (remixes, challenges, sharing incentives) to maximize the fan-activity mediation route for fans.

Contextually, whereas *Strange World* (2022) underperformed in both North America and South Korea, *Wish* (2023)—although classified as a global box-office miss—surpassed one million admissions in South Korea and was accompanied by IP consumption (character goods, food items, stationery, apparel) and Make-A-Wish-linked CSR activities. This aligns with the study's pathway, showing how K-pop collaboration can progress from igniting attention → amplifying fan activity → cross-media diffusion and commercial channel linkage, thereby substantively supporting brand expansion for a new IP.

Theoretically, the data confirm all hypothesized paths and empirically substantiate the proposed mediation mechanism: collaboration perception significantly enhances fan activities, which in turn transform cognitive attention into attitudinal and

TABLE 10 Direct, indirect, and total effects (bootstrapping).

Route	Direct	Indirect	Total	BC 95% CI	
				Lower	Upper
K-pop collaboration → fan activities → Brand expansion	0.227	0.407	0.634	0.318	0.663

BC, bias corrected; CI, confidence interval.

TABLE 11 Results of the χ^2 difference test for the measurement model by fan status.

Model	χ^2	df	$\Delta\chi^2$	Δdf	p
Unconstrained	117.934	100			
Constrained	141.317	103	23.383***	3	0.000

*** $p < 0.001$.

TABLE 12 Results of the multi-group analysis by fan status.

Route	Fan (n = 50)		Not a fan (n = 50)		$\Delta\chi^2$ (df = 1)	Hypothesis
	Estimate	C.R.	Estimate	C.R.		
K-pop collaboration → brand expansion	−0.024	−0.267	0.947	4.292***	20.577***	Accepted
K-pop collaboration → fan activities	0.511	3.183**	0.689	4.013***	0.001	Rejected
Fan activities → brand expansion	0.963	6.403***	−0.061	−0.361	15.077***	Accepted

*** $p < 0.001$. C.R., critical ratio.

behavioral expansion. These results consolidate the fan–non-fan mechanism model, showing that collaboration perception directly drives brand expansion for non-fans (exposure-based), whereas for fans, the collaboration stimulates participatory learning processes that mediate expansion (participation-based). This finding explains how the observed statistical relationships materialize—namely, through the fan community's participatory agency that translates exposure into sustained engagement. The model thus moves beyond numerical validation to demonstrate that K-pop collaboration operates as a cultural accelerator of audience involvement. By combining emotional resonance, fandom creativity, and cross-platform circulation, fan activities function as the connective tissue converting symbolic recognition into tangible brand outcomes. This interpretation enriches the meaning of the data and situates the statistical evidence within a broader cultural–behavioral framework.

From a theoretical standpoint, these results extend diffusion and brand expansion theories by illustrating that participation-based mechanisms mediate the relationship between exposure and consumption in entertainment IPs. The data-driven validation strengthens prior conceptual claims (Jenkins, 1992; Zhang, 2025) that participatory fandom transforms the audience from passive recipients to co-producers of value. In the context of transnational cinema, the results also reveal that coupling global IP with localized fandoms creates a cultural strategy that enhances local receptivity and emotional accessibility, offering empirical grounding for cross-cultural branding theory.

From a managerial perspective, the study's quantitative evidence provides actionable guidance. The significant mediation effect suggests that marketers should treat fan activity not merely as a byproduct of popularity but as a measurable pathway linking collaborative exposure to downstream outcomes such as film viewing, merchandise purchase, and recommendations. Strategically, the fan–non-fan mechanism emphasizes that visibility and accessibility must be prioritized for non-fans, while participatory incentives and remix-based engagement should be focused on fans to foster deeper learning and emotional continuity. Designing integrative flows connecting music → film → goods → offline events → CSR campaigns can optimize this conversion chain and reinforce both economic and social brand capital. The findings thereby bridge quantitative verification with strategic application, turning the statistical data into a concrete blueprint for cross-media IP growth.

This study has limitations: it centers on a single collaboration case (*Wish* × *An Yu Jin*), relies on a South Korean viewer sample, and uses cross-sectional, self-reported data, which constrains generalizability and raises the possibility of common method bias. Future research should employ multi-region comparative samples, longitudinal or experimental designs, and objective behavioral indicators (e.g., ticketing, streaming, purchase data), and compare collaboration types (vocal, performance, live event, UGC-linked), platform contexts (short-form, live, fan communities), and the moderating role of algorithmic exposure.

In sum, collaboration between K-pop idols and global animation significantly increases brand expansion for new IP—manifested as broader awareness, more favorable attitudes, and stronger behavioral intentions—through the mediation of fan activities. By systematically linking the statistical results to theoretical explanations, this study demonstrates that K-pop collaboration functions as both a quantitative and conceptual mechanism of participatory diffusion. In a digital media

environment, such collaboration provides a powerful, empirically verified pathway for market acceptance and cross-media expansion, with differentiated engagement strategies for fans and non-fans maximizing overall impact.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/[Supplementary material](#), further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

Ethical approval was not required for the study involving humans in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent to participate in this study was not required from the participants or the participants' legal guardians/next of kin in accordance with the national legislation and the institutional requirements.

Author contributions

JL: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. KK: Funding acquisition, Supervision, Writing – review & editing.

Funding

The author(s) declare that no financial support was received for the research and/or publication of this article.

Acknowledgments

This article is based on the paper presented at The Society of Korean Language and Culture Autumn Conference 2025, Hanyang University, Seoul, on 1 November 2025 (oral presentation). The manuscript is a revision and expansion of the original presentation.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Supplementary material

The Supplementary material for this article can be found online at: <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fcomm.2025.1695779/full#supplementary-material>

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