Comparison of Korean vs. Non-Korean K-Pop Discourse in the Hallyu Community

UWP 001 Research Project

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Abstract

The Hallyu wave has taken the world by storm despite the linguistic barriers one must cross to understand the culture of K-Pop music. Many fans around the world are from different cultures and linguistic backgrounds, and many fans are not native-Korean speakers. And yet, fans are still able to enjoy K-Pop regardless, and this poses a question about the relationship between the Korean language and enjoyment of non-Korean speakers of Korean music. I determined that the musicality dominates over the Korean language aspects of K-Pop itself, as fans are more likely to listen to music regardless of the language because of the way music sounds. Non-Korean K-Pop terminology is more important than the Korean language when it comes to forming relationships between fans, but knowledge of the Korean language can be helpful in understanding the video content released by groups. This and future research can allow us to understand the aspects of all music that make it appeal to people who may not have knowledge of the language used in said music.

Keywords: K-Pop, Hallyu, linguistic boundaries, community discourse, media, language, cross-culture.

Introduction

Regardless of the language barrier, the Korean pop – more commonly known as K-Pop – music wave has spread all over the world, and this expansion continues strongly despite the linguistic differences between fans and their favorite idols (Crow, 2019). This phenomenon, often referred to as the Hallyu[1] wave, has taken the world by storm through media, streaming, and other mediums (Kim, 2015; Yook et al., 2014), but the majority of the content released is still primarily in Korean. Despite this, K-Pop fans – or "stans"– continue to support their favorite

groups regardless of not being a native speaker of Korean, relying on translations and subtitles to fully understand the context and lyrics in the songs and videos released by groups. A previous study has looked at the way that being a member of the K-Pop community has facilitated English learning, finding that non-English speaking fans create connections with other members of the K-Pop community by learning the structure, use, and function of particular items of memetic discourse before learning what particular words actually mean in the English language (Malik & Haidar, 2021). A question arises, however, about the importance of the lack of knowledge of the *Korean* language when interacting within the K-Pop stan community. In this study, I seek to understand the role that the Korean language plays in becoming a member of the K-Pop stan community and to determine whether there are other linguistic factors that are more important in this integration and interest in K-Pop music. I hope to approach this topic from a statistical perspective in order to contribute to the growing literature on the Hallyu wave and its influences on people from different linguistic backgrounds worldwide.

Methods

In order to conduct my research, I shared a Google Form through forms of social media. Although I initially shared the survey on an Instagram story for the K-Pop collecting community and through a post to the writing community on Tumblr, it may be that the survey was spread to further sections of the Hallyu community by sharing through mutual friends or followers. Participants were all non-native Korean speakers, although a majority were multilingual. The survey I sent out included questions that would yield both quantitative and qualitative responses. These questions focused on demographics regarding language, ratings relating to their experiences as members of the K-Pop community, and ratings about their reasons for listening to

K-Pop. Table 1 showcases the questions asked and the objectives for asking. Those surveyed were also asked to explain their answers for questions 8 and 10 to gain more insight for why they voted that particular way.

The last question of the survey asked participants to provide contact information if they were willing to participate further through asynchronous interviews over direct message, text, or email. These questions were clearer in the objectives, and allowed participants to answer with no restrictions:

1. If you do not speak Korean, why are you willing to listen to K-Pop when it is in a different language from your own?

2. How important do you believe knowing Korean is in building relationships within the Hallyu community? How important is knowing general K-Pop terminology? Do you believe one is more important than the other when becoming a member of the community?

3. How has your knowledge of K-Pop terms helped you in forming relationships with others in the K-Pop community?

With the help of Wesley Brooks at the UC Data Lab, I was able to analyze the survey results using Crosstabs in RStudio, a coding program often used in the biological sciences. The main coding package that was utilized was *ggplot2*, which allowed me to construct a scatter plot of experience versus likelihood to recommend K-Pop to other non-Korean speakers – and bar plots comparing rankings with categorical data, such as language fluency, interest in learning the Korean language, and likelihood to listen to music in other non-native languages. *Plotrix* was also utilized to produce a pie chart of participants' interest in learning Korean. The R-Code Input

is provided in the respective page of the Canvas E-portfolio. Eight of the 63 responses were not able to be interpreted in R, as the rankings were collected incorrectly in these responses.

Nine participants had agreed to further asynchronous surveys, and their responses were collected through email and Instagram and Tumblr direct messages. As three participants requested to stay anonymous, I have decided to refer to each of the three with respective numbers for simplicity (ie. Participant 1, Participant 2, Participant 3). The transcripts of their responses are provided in the respective page of the Canvas E-portfolio.

Results & Discussion

<u>Figure 1</u>: Pie chart summarizing interest in learning the Korean language among participants.

Pie Chart of Korean Learning Interest
Maybe (34.9% - 19)
Currently learning (19% - 10)
No (1.6% - 1)
Yes (19% - 25)

Of the 63 responses collected, participants were all non-Korean speakers, although 19% of the respondents answered that they were currently learning and 44.4% expressed interest in learning (Figure 1). Most participants that were interested ('Yes', 'Maybe') or currently learning Korean were found to rank the beat and sound of music with the highest importance (Figure 3). The responses when looking at participants who listen to non-Kpop music not in their native language also showed a strong preference for music production itself as the most important factor for the reasons they listen to K-Pop (Figure 4). This ranking was, by far, the most frequent in the survey responses and had the most obvious pattern in the reason non-Korean speakers listen to K-Pop. This suggests that music listeners may prioritize instrumentation and melody over other factors like lyrics or music video production, not only in K-Pop but also music in other languages forms like Tagalog, Japanese, Chinese, or Spanish.
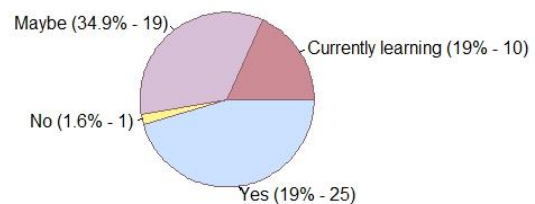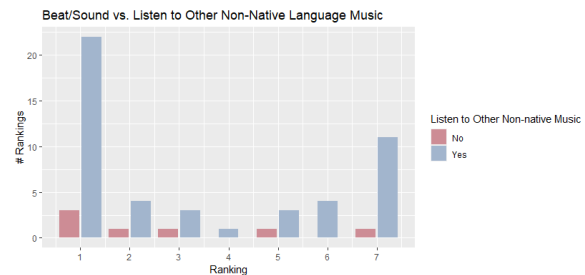
Figure 3: Comparison of interest in learning Korean to the importance of the beat or sound of K-Pop music.
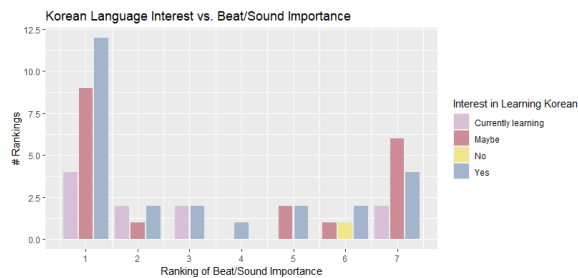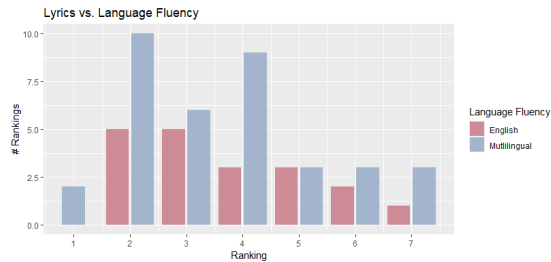

Figure 4: Comparison of frequency of participants to listen to languages not of their native one(s) to the importance of the beat or sound of K-Pop music.
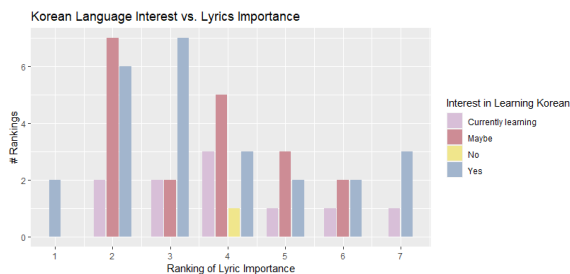

Responses from my interviewees support this claim as they describe their experiences with K-Pop music. Tumblr user @wooahaes believes that music should not be classified as good or bad simply due to the language because "music is music." Although she states that there are times in which she *is* interested in looking up the translations and appreciating the meanings behind them, she is equally as likely to listen to something as long as she is able to enjoy the energy and mood of the song. The responses of Hannah Larson and two other Tumblr users @dokiyeom and @koishua agree with @wooahae's reasoning, all three stating that they enjoy music from other languages regardless of knowing the language itself because they find interest in the construction, harmonies, instrumentation, and melodies of songs. Hannah also emphasizes that her interest in K-Pop derives from the industry's large range of genres. She explains how K-Pop is "[...] an auditory treat" through its ability to blend so many genres beyond just pop, and how it "[...] is often very musically dense, with many layers of harmony and instrumentation" (I. Torres, personal communication, 2023). With my other findings, however, I cannot conclude that

lyrics do *not* have importance in the K-Pop industry as I observed that lyrics are often ranked next highest in importance for reasons participants listen to K-Pop (Figures 5,6,7). From this, it is crucial to conduct more research to see what the possible reasons are for this observation.

Figure 5: Comparison of language fluency to the importance of K-Pop lyrics.

Lyrics vs. Language Fluency

Figure 6: Comparison of interest in learning Korean to the importance of K-Pop lyrics.

Korean Language Interest vs. Lyrics Importance

Figure 7: Comparison of frequency of participants to listen to languages not of their native one(s) to the importance of K-Pop lyrics.

Lyrics vs. Listen to Other Non-Native Language Music
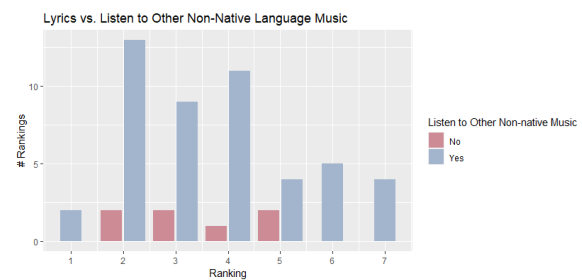
Thirty participants (47.6%) rated their likelihood to continue to listen to K-Pop after their initial experience with a 5 (very likely). When asked to rate their likelihood to recommend K-Pop to other non-Korean speakers after their initial experience, the largest number of votes (21 votes) stated that they were very likely to recommend K-Pop to other non-Korean speakers. However the second largest (14 votes) was 2. This shows that there is not a strong positive or negative relationship between recommending K-Pop to non-Koreans and initial experience, suggesting that other explanations may be the cause of this divergence in pattern. It may be that there is a difference in the likelihood for someone to recommend something to others just

because they find it interesting. More research would have to be conducted to determine if other factors like a lack of confidence that others will like K-Pop, or unwillingness to "share" K-Pop music or groups (K-Pop stans often joke about not wanting to share their favorite idols) have an influence on this. Furthermore, although there is a large degree of scattering on the plot of years of experience versus likeliness to recommend K-Pop to other non-Korean speakers (Figure 8), we still see a correlation (although weak) that shows that with more experience, participants are less likely to recommend K-Pop to other non-Korean speakers. It may be that with more years of experience, more experienced K-Pop fans are more weary or aware of the possible negative reactions that other non-Korean speakers may have to K-Pop, leading them to reduce their likelihood of making recommendations.

Figure 8: Comparison of experience (in years) to the likelihood of recommending K-Pop to other non-Korean speakers.
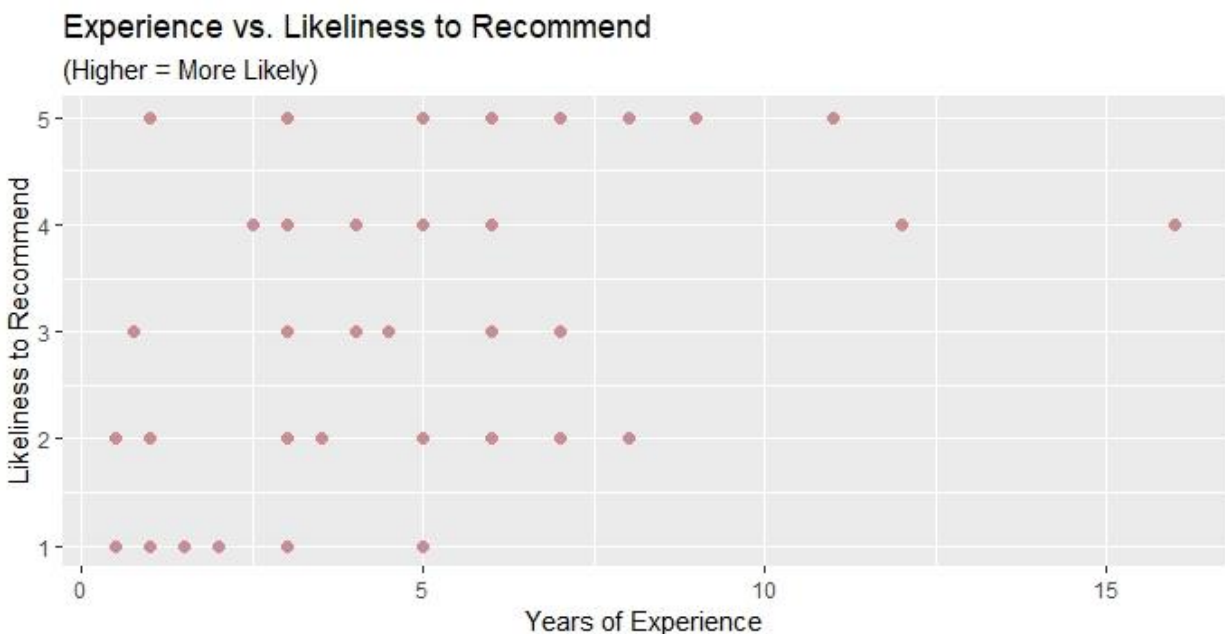
In a study from 2021, Malik and Haidar addressed how participation in the K-Pop community did not require a shared knowledge of a language. Using a basis of a previously proposed theory: schema theory, which states that learners recognize patterns in a particular discourse community without knowing it, K-Pop stans may internalize terminology the more they encounter it. Ultimately, they are able to predict how particular patterns in discourse are used based on the context and information they are provided with (Malik & Haidar, 2021). In the same way, this model can be used to explain the reason that non-Korean speakers are able to form identities within a community that *predominantly* uses the Korean language. It may be that these patterns are also observed with the formation of the K-Pop community amongst non-Korean speakers, allowing fans to express their support for their favorite groups despite the language barrier - this may be possible through the way that memes, jokes, or terminology can be internalized for a more universal understanding of the K-Pop community and the relationships within it.

Only one person (termed Participant 4) had responded that they had no interest in learning Korean as opposed to the 62 that were interested in learning Korean, but this same participant had also ranked the knowledge of the Korean language as important (1-2), suggesting that there may be other reasons for why they are not interested in learning Korean. For example, Participant 4 had ranked the group dynamic as the most important factor in their reasons for listening to K-Pop. Often, group dynamic is shown through variety shows or vlogs in which idols primarily speak in Korean. Those without knowledge of the Korean language therefore heavily depend on subtitles or direct translations from the English-speaking members of groups. Some media and videos that are released, however, often are not subbed - either immediately or at all - which can explain why the participant may have answered in this way. In a similar way,

Participant 3 mentioned that knowing some Korean helps fans to "understand the content of the media produced by the industry better" (I. Torres, personal communication, 2023). This suggests that, for some people, the importance of the knowledge of the Korean language may be due to the type of media they consume rather than the music itself.

Elizabeth DeJager, one interviewee most active on Tumblr, mentions that knowing the Korean language is only important when it comes to creating relationships with *Korean-speaking* fans. She rarely incorporates the Korean language into fanfiction as she tries to avoid possibly misusing the language. The Korean language, she states, is mostly important when it comes to watching the non-musical content (i.e. variety and survival shows, vlogs, etc.) that K-Pop groups release. Participant 3's responses agree, as she also emphasized that Korean language is more prevalent in taking in content as opposed to creating relationships with other fans. General K-Pop terminology, she states, is used "[...] more often between fans in the community whereas the [importance of the Korean language] deals with an individual's absorption of the content of kpop itself. Both are important but in different aspects - between fans versus between one and the media."

For Hannah Larson, knowledge of Korean language "[...adds] depth and nuance to [her] understanding and appreciation of both the groups [she stans] and Korean culture at large" but it was less important than K-Pop terminology (I. Torres, personal communication, 2023). Knowledge of the Korean language is rarely seen as a requirement for building relationships as K-Pop has become so big now that it is easy to find fans that *do* speak one's own language. Terminology like bias[1], comeback[2], killing point[3], or netizen[4] are all non-Korean terms that the interviews responded with being more important in the way that it allows fans to build connections more quickly (for example, K-Pop stans build friendships having the same ults, or

ultimate favorite group). Non-Korean K-Pop terminology allows fans to navigate their communities more quickly because they have more context about topics that fans often talk about. Non-Korean K-Pop terminology is more important than the Korean language when it comes to forming relationships between fans, but knowledge of the Korean language can be helpful in understanding the video content released by groups. This gradual integration of the K-Pop terms and their function is seemingly more essential when creating relationships within the K-Pop community, whereas fluency of the Korean language is more essential when an individual consumes media.

Is there an aspect that only K-Pop has that might influence fans to learn a completely new language? Comparisons must be made between interest in learning other languages to whether or not a participant listened to other music in a language not of their native one. This will allow us to see whether it is just K-Pop that can influence fans to learn a completely new language. I had made these comparisons and found that a majority of participants interested in learning Korean were found to frequently listen to other non-native language music (Figure 2). However, further research must also ask if participants were also interested in learning languages other than Korean. This may allow determination of whether K-Pop music is more able to influence listeners to learn Korean, or if this appeal to learning a new language can be observed in music in other languages as well. One way I could have improved my survey was to change question 9 (see Table 1) so that participants only answered with the community they were *most* involved in. It was difficult to conduct any analysis on communities versus language knowledge importance since there was such a large range of responses for each participant. If I had only gotten one community type for each participant, I would have been able to categorize participants depending on their community and could have gone into more qualitative and quantitative

analysis that could allow me to evaluate the importance of Korean versus Non-Korean terms among each community.

Conclusion

K-Pop fans often receive questions that ask about their reasons for liking K-Pop when they do not understand the language it is in. This study aimed to determine whether a particular reason dominated among the K-Pop community, and I was able to determine that the beat and sound of music was the predominant factor of K-Pop that draws listeners into the community. This, people explained, as most important due to their appeal to music in all languages due to the mood it can provide. It is less important for respondents to understand the primarily Korean lyrics due to this. Knowledge of the Korean language is less important in terms of K-Pop music itself, but more important in the other content that the K-Pop industry releases. Relationship building in the Hallyu community also utilizes more non-Korean K-Pop terminology as opposed to Korean K-Pop terminology, as they allow fans to connect on preferences of K-Pop that they share. Through this, the Hallyu culture is allowed to spread globally, suggesting that even though linguistic boundaries are in place, K-Pop can still be a vector for connection between those of different linguistic backgrounds.

Further studies can also look into specific communities within the K-Pop community to see how relationships are built depending on knowledge of Korean language vs. K-Pop stan terminology. They can also look more into how people from different linguistic backgrounds utilize fandom terminology to become part of a community. Although my single research project alone cannot determine the appeal of K-Pop culture to fans globally, it, along with future research, can be important in understanding how music culture can expand transnationally despite linguistic boundaries.

[1] *Hallyu* - "explosive popularity of Korean pop culture through Korean music, movies, food, fashion, hairstyles, cosmetics, and other products" (Yook et al., 2014).

[2] *bias* - favorite member in a group

[3] *comeback* - equivalent of saying a group is releasing a new album or song; contrasts with the Western definition of a comeback which describes a musical artist returning back to the music industry after a really long time

[4] *killing point* - most memorable part of a song or choreography

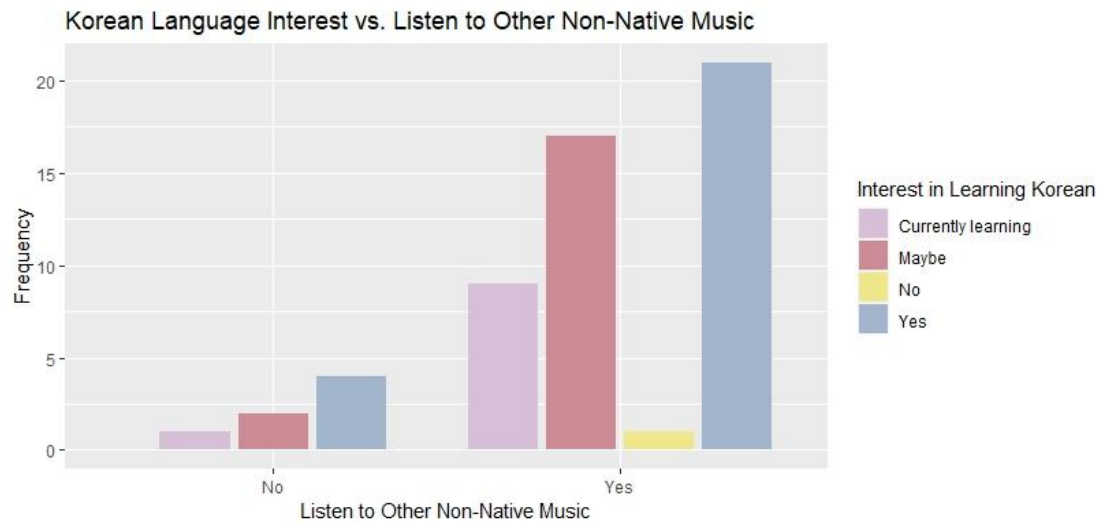[5] *netizen* - general term for fans online, or an international online fan (K-netizens are Korean fans online

[2], [3], [5] (*Kpop Vocabulary*, 2017)
[4] (*10 K-Pop Terms You Need to Know*, 2020)

Figures

Figure 1: Pie chart summarizing interest in learning the Korean language among participants.

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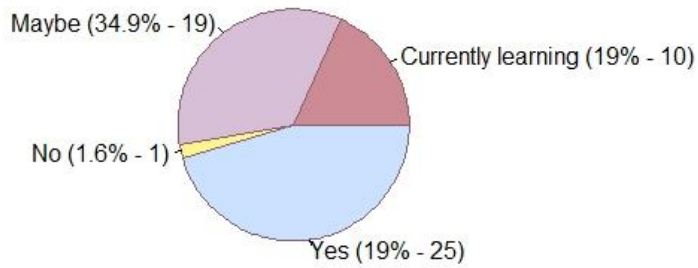
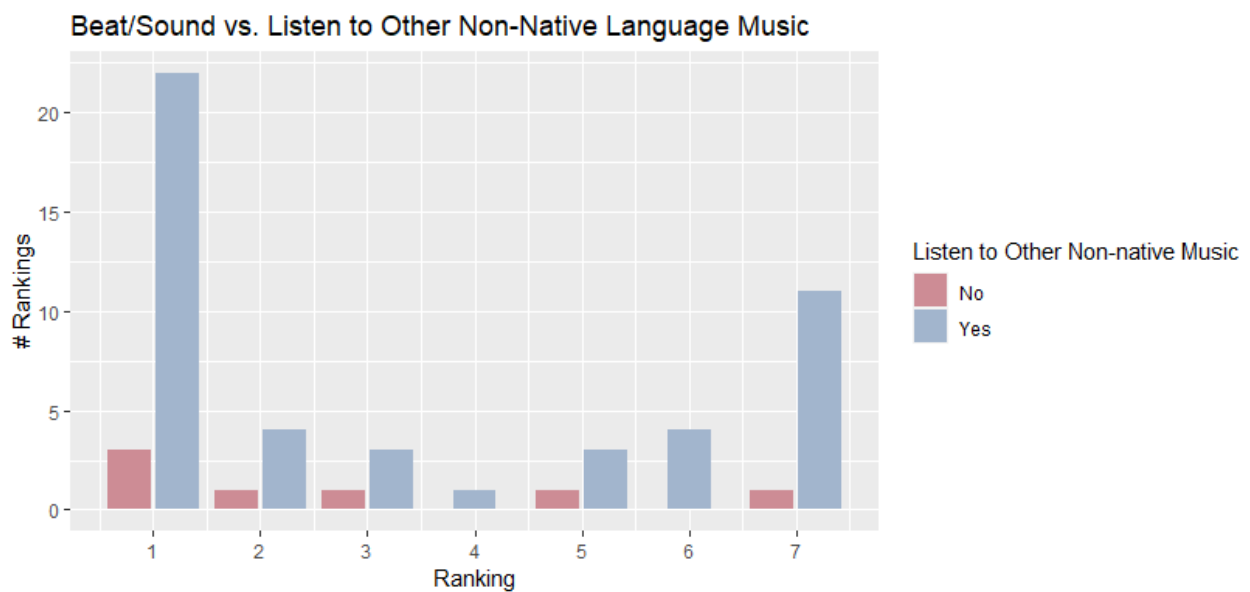**Figure 2**: Comparison of interest in learning Korean to the frequency of participants to listen to languages not of their native one(s).

Korean Language Interest vs. Listen to Other Non-Native Music

Interest in Learning Korean

Currently learning
Maybe
No
Yes

Figure 3: Comparison of interest in learning Korean to the importance of the beat or sound of K-Pop music.
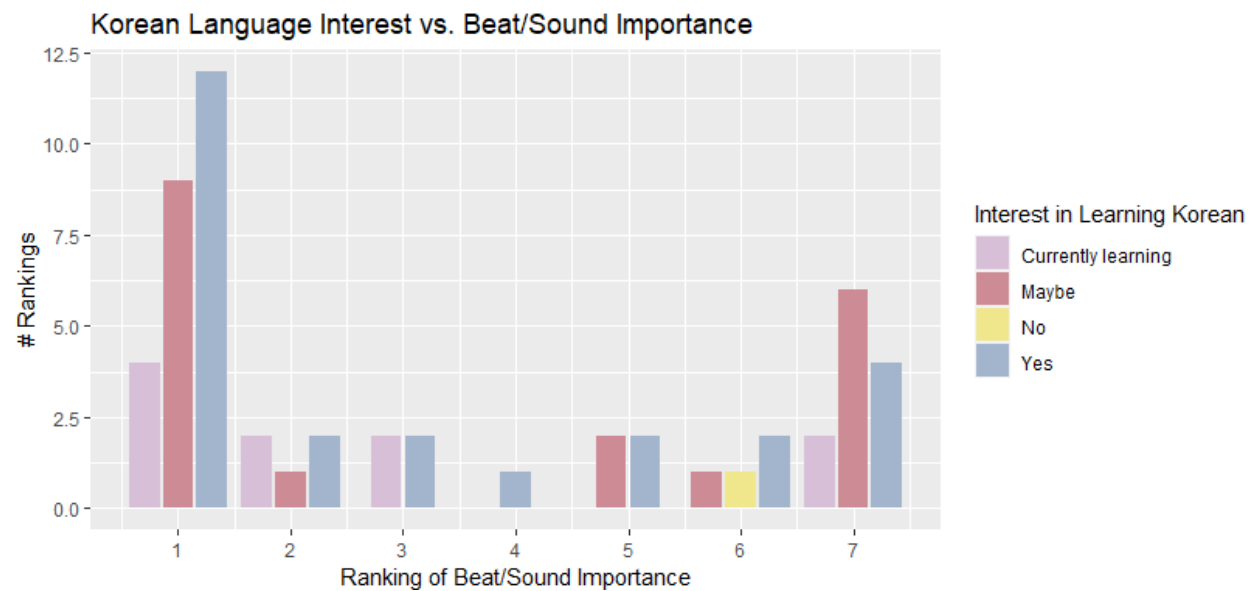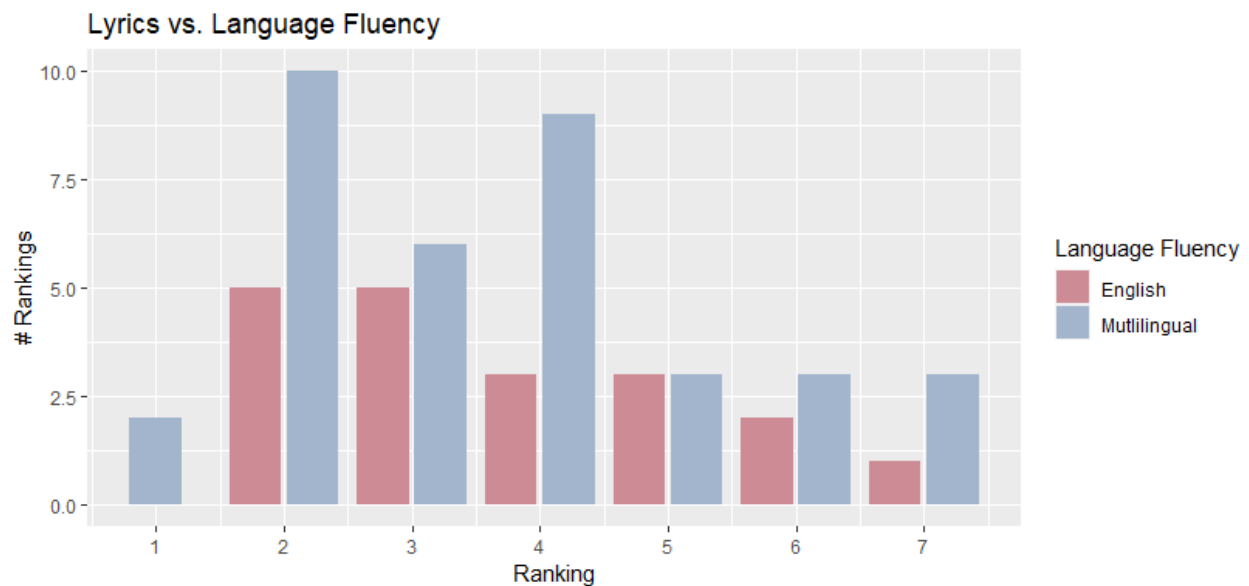

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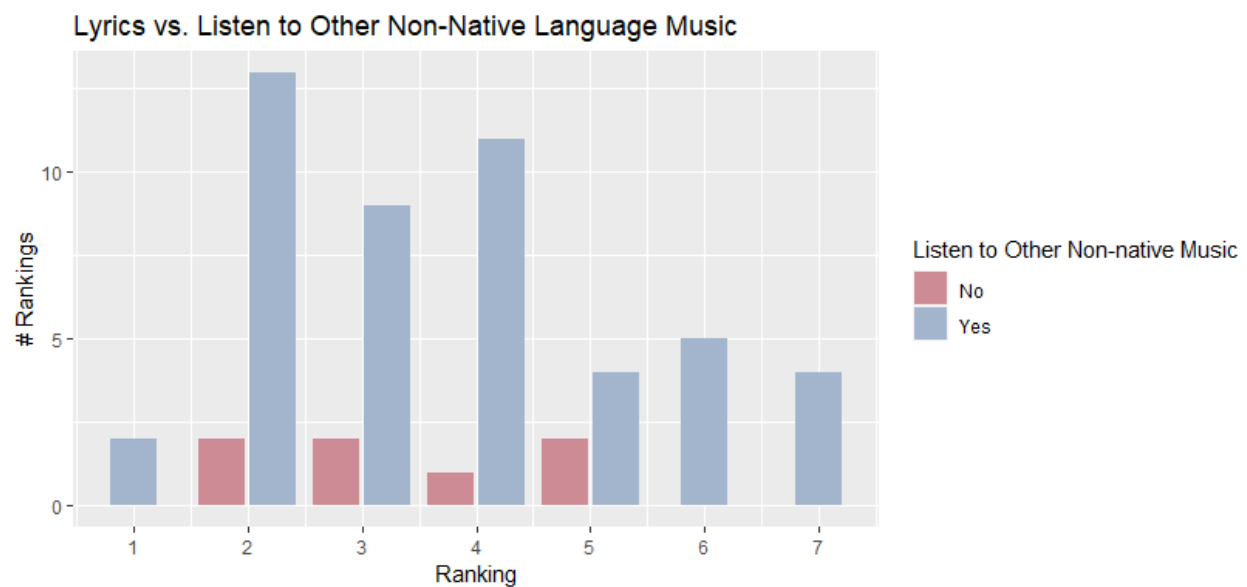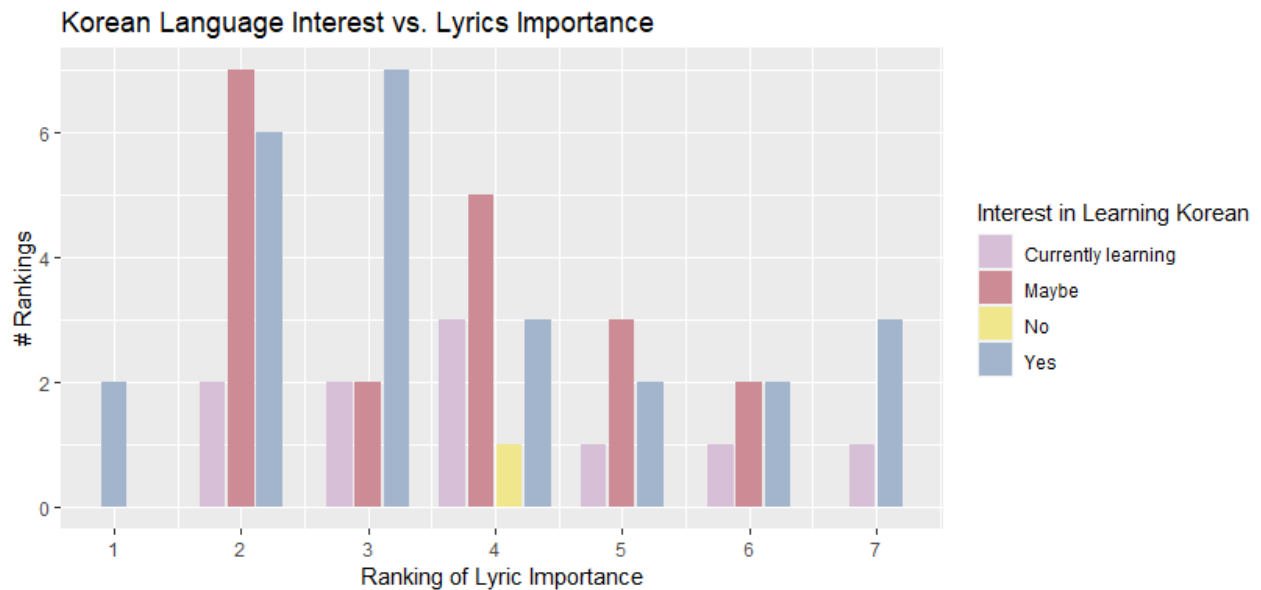
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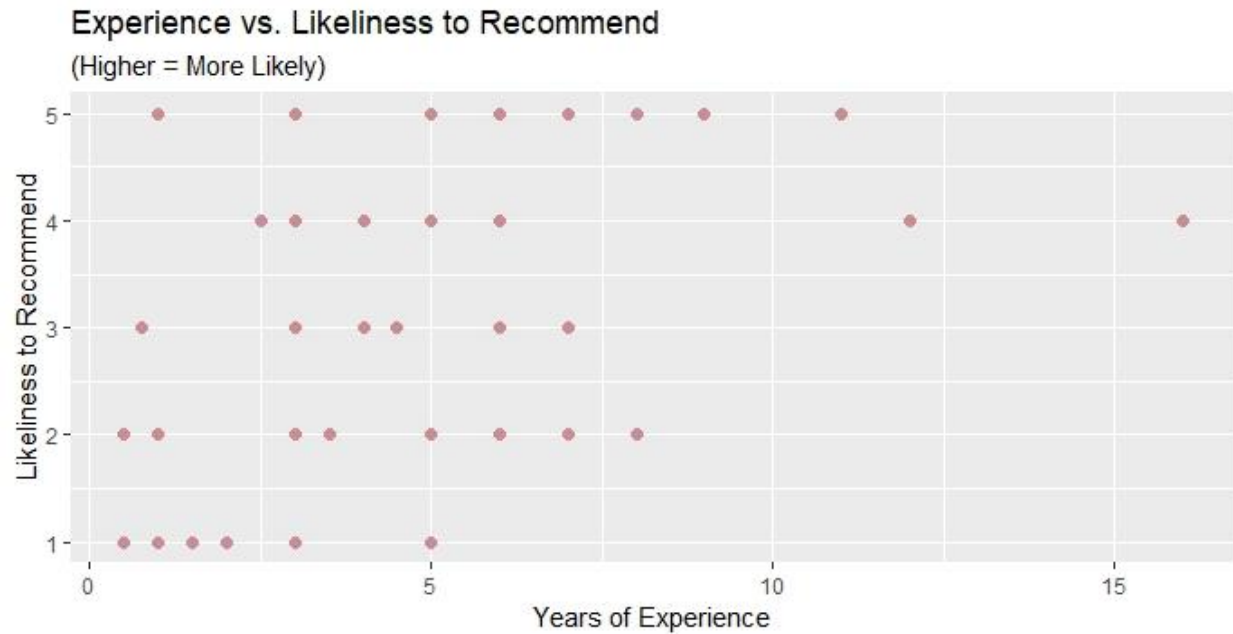

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Figure 7: Comparison of interest in learning Korean to the importance of K-Pop lyrics.

Figure 8: Comparison of experience (in years) to the likelihood of recommending K-Pop to other non-Korean speakers.

Tables

	Question	Objective
Table 1		
	Question	**Objective**
1	What language(s) do you speak?	To gain an understanding of the participants' linguistic background.
2	Do you have an interest in learning Korean in the future?	To see whether the knowledge of Korean was important enough that people would want to learn it.
3	How long have you been listening to K-Pop?	To gauge how much experience participants have had with K-Pop
4	Besides K-Pop, do you listen to music in other languages not of your own? What else?	To possibly understand whether it is just K-Pop that undergoes this 'wave' despite the language barrier.
5	What was your first impression of listening to K-Pop?	To understand whether participant opinions on K-Pop changed the more they listened to it - did the language barrier become less important?
6	On a scale of 1-5, how likely were you willing to continue to listen to K-Pop after your initial experience?	To understand whether participant opinions on K-Pop changed the more they listened to it - did the language barrier become less important?
7	On a scale of 1-5, how likely were you to recommend K-Pop to other non-Korean speakers?	To understand if their first experience with K-Pop was positive enough to recommend to other people that might not understand the lyrics.
8	From 1 (most important) to 7 (least important), please rank the importance of the following reasons for why you listen to K-Pop. ● Beat / Sound of music ● Lyrics / Meaning behind lyrics ● Video production	To try to understand why participants choose to listen to K-Pop despite the language barrier.

	● Group dynamic ● Interest in industry culture / trainee life ● Fashion ● Design / Art Style / Aesthetic	
9	What communities within the K-Pop community are you part of? The participants were given the following choices and were able to select more than one: ● Collecting ● Deco/journaling ● Fanart ● Writing/authors ● Dance/song covers ● Other:____	To gauge the types of communities that participants are part of within the K-Pop community, possibly finding a divergence in the importance of the knowledge of Korean.
10	From 1 (most important) to 5 (least important), please rank the importance of knowing/utilizing the following aspects in being a member of the K-Pop community. ● Fandom/anti-fandom names ● Familial terms (i.e. hyung, unnie, maknae, ajussi) ● Stan terms (i.e. delulu, feral, oomf, moots, tw) ● Non-Korean terminology used in K-Pop (i.e. bias/wrecker, comeback, j-line, killing part, sub-unit, pc, center, visual) ● Korean terminology used in K-Pop (i.e. aegyo, daesang, hwaiting)	To gauge whether participants find jargon used in the K-Pop community in particular ways more important or having actual knowledge of Korean terms.

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