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# Exploration of the K-Pop brand ambassador phenomenon in the food industry

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**Abstract**---This research investigates the impact of K-pop brand ambassadors on consumer behavior within the Indonesian food industry, focusing on collaborations between renowned K-pop idols and food brands like Oreo and Lemonilo. These partnerships tap into the immense popularity of K-pop, leveraging fan loyalty and cultural influence to drive consumer engagement. The study explores how these collaborations shape brand image, foster emotional connections, and stimulate purchase decisions, especially under the influence of Fear of Missing Out (FOMO). Using a qualitative approach, data from interviews with Indonesian fans reveal the psychological and social factors underlying these purchasing behaviors. This research contributes to understanding the efficacy of K-pop brand ambassadorship in modern marketing strategies, particularly in markets influenced by fan-driven consumer culture.

**Keywords**---Brand Ambassador, FoMO, K-Pop, Marketing Strategy, Purchase Decision.

**JEL Code:** M31

## 1. Introduction

Hallyu, also known as the Korean Wave, refers to the global popularity of South Korean culture, including K-pop music and K-drama. The term Hallyu was first used in the early 1990s after South Korea established diplomatic relations with China in 1992 (Hauglan, 2020). The Korean Wave's popularity has spread rapidly worldwide, driven by technological advancements and global connectivity. This

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cultural phenomenon has influenced many aspects of daily life, from fashion to food, proving that Korean culture is not just a temporary trend but a growing global influence. According to the Global Hallyu Status Report 2022 by the Korea Foundation, the number of Hallyu fans worldwide reached over 178 million (Jones, 2023). The growth of Hallyu is significantly propelled by the popularity of K-pop, which remains a major force in expanding Korean cultural influence globally (Putri, 2020). K-pop has become a global phenomenon, ranking sixth in the world music market and second in Indonesia for K-pop streaming (Tarahita, 2020).

The high enthusiasm of K-pop fans, particularly in Indonesia, is reflected in their active participation on platforms like Twitter, where Indonesia consistently ranks as the top country for K-pop tweets (Santosa, 2022). The food industry leverages this phenomenon by employing K-pop idols as brand ambassadors, as seen in collaborations like Blackpink with Oreo and NCT Dream with Lemonilo. This strategy creates an emotional connection with fans and induces FOMO (fear of missing out), driving them to purchase promoted products. K-pop's global success, exemplified by groups like BTS and Blackpink selling out international stadiums within minutes (BBC News, 2019), makes it an attractive collaboration target for companies. Fans of K-pop not only buy music and merchandise but are also likely to try Korean food, makeup, fashion, and other Korean-related products. In 2021, Indonesia had the largest number of K-pop fans online (Jones, 2022), making it a crucial market for leveraging K-pop in marketing strategies.

This research explores how FOMO, brand ambassadors, and brand image influence consumer purchasing decisions. The study aims to provide insights into how the Korean Wave can be effectively utilized in food marketing strategies and to understand the psychological and social dynamics behind consumer decisions. By examining these elements, the research seeks to contribute significantly to the understanding of the relationship between cultural phenomena, consumer behavior, and marketing strategies in the food industry.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **Brand Ambassadors**

Brand Ambassadors are individuals from popular public figures who endorse a brand. Companies often utilize Brand Ambassadors to influence or attract consumers to their products (Pratama, 2021). The effectiveness of a Brand Ambassador is significantly enhanced if the individual has a positive image as a well-known celebrity, thereby increasing the product's appeal to consumers. Essentially, Brand Ambassadors serve as a strategic method for companies to attract buyers by leveraging celebrities to promote the product's image, ultimately aiming to boost product sales.

In the context of marketing, a Brand Ambassador acts as a spokesperson representing the company for a specific period. The association of a Brand Ambassador with the brand or product they represent is a critical aspect of their role. According to Lea-Greenwood (Ajnya, n.d.), the performance of a Brand Ambassador can be measured using several indicators:

1. **Celebrity-Brand Linkage:** The relevance and connection between the celebrity and the brand they represent.
2. **Profession-Product Fit:** The suitability of the celebrity's profession with the product they endorse.
3. **Product Knowledge:** The level of knowledge the celebrity has about the product they are representing.
4. **Credibility:** The credibility of the celebrity within their field.
5. **Advertising Experience:** The previous experience the celebrity has in advertising roles.
6. **Trend Alignment:** The alignment of the celebrity with current trends and fashion developments.
7. **Public Appeal:** The ability of the celebrity to captivate and attract public attention.

These indicators collectively ensure that a Brand Ambassador is not only a popular figure but also an effective promoter who can positively impact the brand's image and consumer purchase decisions. The deployment of Brand Ambassadors aims to create a strong, relatable association between the product and the consumer, thereby enhancing brand loyalty and driving sales.

### **Marketing Strategy**

Marketing management is an art and science that addresses human needs through various approaches to attract customers. It involves identifying and fulfilling human and social needs, with a succinct definition being "meeting needs profitably." According to The American Marketing Association, marketing encompasses the activities, institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that provide value to customers, clients, partners, and society at large (Keller, 2012). Marketing introduces and gains acceptance for new products that enrich people's lives, and strategic marketing is essential for improving a product's or company's market position through innovation.

A marketing strategy involves two critical components: the task environment and the broad environment. The task environment includes actors involved in all stages of production, distribution, and promotion. Companies must continuously adapt to changes through progressive marketing programs, product and service innovations, and maintaining connections with customer needs to uncover new opportunities and avoid relying solely on past successes. Effective marketing strategy management requires a balance of disciplined execution and flexibility to adjust to changing market conditions, aiming to boost sales and develop the company's offerings. Strategic marketing planning involves three main aspects:

1. **Management of the Company's Investment Portfolio:** Assessing and managing investments to align with long-term goals.
2. **Evaluation of Business Potential:** Considering market growth and the company's internal strengths.
3. **Strategy Formulation:** Developing comprehensive plans to achieve long-term business objectives.

These plans detail target markets and the company's value proposition based on market opportunity analysis. Marketing tactics derived from this planning include product features, promotions, merchandising, pricing, sales channels, and services. In connection with the abstract above, marketing strategies play a crucial role in utilizing the K-pop phenomenon to attract consumers through brand ambassadors. By integrating effective marketing strategies, companies can enhance their product positioning, leverage cultural trends, and drive consumer purchase decisions, ultimately achieving significant business growth.

### **Brand Image**

Brand Image refers to the perception that arises in consumers' minds when recalling a product from a specific brand. It represents the perception of the brand formed by the brand associations stored in consumers' memory. According to Keller (1998), brand image can be defined as the perception of a brand described by the brand associations in the minds of consumers. The strong relationship between brand associations and brand image indicates that associations formed with a brand can establish a brand image entrenched in consumer memory. Indicators of Brand Image include:

1. **Brand Attributes:** Specific characteristics or features of the brand.
2. **Brand Benefits:** The advantages or positive outcomes consumers associate with the brand.
3. **Brand Associations:** Connections or ideas consumers link with the brand.
4. **Brand Uniqueness:** The distinctive qualities that differentiate the brand from competitors.
5. **Brand Trust:** The reliability and credibility consumers attribute to the brand.
6. **Self-Image Congruence:** The alignment between the brand's image and the consumer's self-concept.

All companies aim to build a brand image with strong, favorable, and unique brand associations. Brand image is crucial as it influences consumer perceptions of quality and value, thereby affecting their purchasing decisions. Effective brand image management involves creating and maintaining a positive perception through consistent communication and marketing efforts. In relation to the abstract, the concept of brand image is pivotal in the context of using K-pop idols as brand ambassadors. A positive brand image, enhanced by strong associations with popular figures, can significantly influence consumer purchase decisions. The emotional connection and trust built through brand ambassadors can drive sales and foster brand loyalty, aligning with the overall marketing strategy and objectives. By leveraging the popularity and positive image of K-pop idols, companies can create strong brand associations and enhance their brand image. This strategy is effective in capturing the attention of consumers and establishing a lasting impression in their minds, thereby boosting the brand's market position and increasing consumer engagement.

### **Purchase Decision**

According to Loudon & Bitta (Firmansyah, 2023), consumer purchase decisions involve what to buy, how much to buy, where to buy, when to buy, and how to

execute the purchase. These decisions can be categorized into planned and unplanned purchases. Planned purchases occur when the decision to buy has been considered before the consumer enters the store, while unplanned purchases happen without prior deliberation or emerge during the shopping process. Kotler identifies two main factors influencing purchase decisions: the opinions of others and unexpected situational factors that may alter the purchase decision. Understanding consumer behavior is crucial for planning effective marketing strategies, as it allows companies to determine the optimal timing for implementing marketing programs, such as offering discounts to attract buyers. Knowledge of consumer behavior can also serve as a foundation for policymakers in making public decisions. For instance, recognizing that consumers tend to use more transportation during holiday periods, policymakers can design pricing strategies that align with demand.

Social marketing involves spreading ideas among consumers to change their behavior or attitudes towards a particular topic or issue. This practice emphasizes the importance of consumer insights in shaping public campaigns and marketing efforts to influence purchase decisions positively. Understanding these aspects is essential for leveraging K-pop brand ambassadors in marketing strategies, as their influence can significantly affect consumer perceptions and behaviors, driving sales and enhancing brand loyalty (Firmansyah, 2023).

### **Fear of Missing Out (FoMO)**

Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) is a widespread phenomenon, particularly among university students, affecting both physical and mental health. Social support has been identified as effective in mitigating FOMO's negative impacts (Dinh et al., 2023). The term FOMO gained popularity around 2004 with the advent of Facebook, where users could openly share their social activities (Sharma, 2021). Psychologists started using FOMO in the early 2000s to describe anxieties related to social networking sites. With the rise of social media, FOMO has come to describe the anxiety and compulsive behaviors associated with the fear of missing out on social interactions, linked to pre-existing fears of social rejection (Laurence, 2023).

Indicators of FOMO include social dissatisfaction, social anxiety, social media dependency, the need for connectivity, social comparison, and negative emotions. Social dissatisfaction and anxiety arise from perceived social exclusion, while social media dependency reflects an overreliance on social platforms. The need for connectivity and social comparison drive individuals to stay constantly updated, often leading to negative emotions and feelings of inadequacy.

Jessica A. W. and colleagues (2016) found that social media use exacerbates FOMO, impacting emotional well-being by increasing anxiety and reducing life satisfaction. Andrew K. Przybylski et al. (2013) describe FOMO as linked to basic psychological needs such as competence, autonomy, and relatedness, with social media amplifying these effects through constant social comparison. Understanding FOMO and its indicators is crucial for developing strategies to reduce its negative impacts, particularly through social support and reducing social media dependence. Brand Ambassador's strategy can trigger FOMO

through a sense of exclusivity, and the unique appeal of K-pop idols as brand ambassadors can create opportunities that only a few people have, thereby enhancing one's ego and driving consumer engagement (Dwisuardinata, Ida Bagus Nyoman and Gede Sri Darma, 2023).

#### **4. Method, Data, and Analysis**

This research adopts a qualitative approach with a case study to explore the phenomenon of K-Pop brand ambassador collaborations in the food industry. The selection of the case study method is based on the desire to understand the relationship between K-Pop brand ambassadors and the success of marketing strategies, consumer perceptions of brands, and the long-term impact of these collaborations on brand image and consumer loyalty. The research location is chosen in several regions of Indonesia relevant to the exclusive collaborations between Blackpink and Oreo as well as Lemonilo and NCT Dream. Data collection methods include interviews, observations, and document collection from various sources such as articles, journals, books, news, and social media. The determination of research informants uses purposive sampling techniques with considerations of criteria relevant to the research problem, including consumers of these collaborative products. Research instruments used include cameras, mobile phones, laptops, and the researcher themselves as part of the tools used. In qualitative data analysis, the content analysis method is used with three stages of analysis processes: capturing phenomena, processing data categorization, and verifying data authenticity through source triangulation. These steps aim to understand the process of social phenomena, explore the meanings in the information collected, and ensure data validity by comparing information from various sources and methods. Thus, this research provides an in-depth understanding of K-Pop brand ambassador collaborations in the food industry and their contributions to marketing strategies, consumer perceptions, and brand image in the context of Indonesia.

#### **5. Result and Discussion**

##### **Emotional Connection and Brand Loyalty**

The findings from this study emphasize the power of emotional connection fostered by K-pop brand ambassadors in creating strong brand loyalty. When fans purchase a product endorsed by idols like Blackpink or NCT Dream, they are not merely acquiring a product but are partaking in a form of symbolic support for their favorite idols. This emotional connection is profound, as the fans feel that the act of purchasing and using these products brings them closer to their idols, turning these purchases into meaningful gestures of devotion.

Participants in the study revealed that their initial attraction to products such as Lemonilo's noodles was significantly influenced by the endorsement of NCT Dream. For example, one participant, Ayu, described her excitement when she discovered that Lemonilo was collaborating with NCT Dream. Although she had not previously been inclined to purchase health food products, the endorsement by NCT Dream changed her perspective, prompting her to make a purchase. She described the product as a "symbolic connection" with her idols, one that allowed

her to participate in their success and support them in a tangible way. The symbolic value attributed to these products, therefore, goes beyond conventional brand loyalty, evolving into a personal commitment to the brand as long as it maintains its connection with the idols.

This phenomenon aligns with theories of emotional branding, which suggest that products associated with beloved public figures or idols can transcend their functional value, becoming part of a consumer's identity. The study's findings align with the concept of "brand love," where fans demonstrate a long-lasting loyalty based on emotional bonds. Fans such as Ayu are likely to recommend these products to others within their social circles, further enhancing brand loyalty. This loyalty is not only confined to the product itself but extends to other brand offerings, as the positive experience with an endorsed product often encourages fans to explore more from the same brand. Emotional branding through idols thus builds a consumer base that feels personally connected to the brand, reducing the likelihood of brand switching and enhancing consumer retention.

### **Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) and Purchase Decisions**

Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) emerged as a powerful psychological driver influencing fans' purchasing behavior. The presence of FOMO is intensified in K-pop communities, where limited-edition products or exclusive collaborations are highly sought after and quickly shared on social media. This phenomenon creates a sense of urgency among fans, who fear being left out of a trend or missing out on a rare opportunity to connect with their idols. The limited availability of products like Oreo x Blackpink or Lemonilo x NCT Dream heightens this fear, compelling fans to act quickly to secure these items before they are sold out.

Several participants expressed how FOMO drove their decision-making process. For instance, Ghea from Bandung described the pressure she felt when she saw her friends posting exclusive Blackpink photo cards included with Oreo purchases on social media. She shared that the posts made her feel "left behind" and heightened her sense of urgency to buy the product. In Ghea's words, "Seeing my friends have it first made me feel like I was missing something essential." This statement encapsulates the social and psychological pressures that FOMO creates, turning a typical consumer product into a perceived necessity within the fan community.

Social media serves as the primary catalyst for FOMO, as fans are constantly exposed to posts from other fans showing off their recent purchases. Platforms like Instagram and Twitter act as amplifiers, where fans publicly share unboxing moments or showcase the exclusive items included with their purchases, such as photo cards or special packaging. As these images and videos circulate, fans who have not yet purchased the items feel an increasing pressure to do so, fearing that they might lose the opportunity to own a piece of the "experience." The strong influence of FOMO ensures a rapid surge in sales, as fans are driven by the compulsion to be part of the collective experience shared by their community.

FOMO as a marketing strategy, especially when applied to limited-edition or exclusive products, proves to be a highly effective tactic in motivating impulse purchases. This study highlights that FOMO does not merely drive one-time purchases; it fosters an ongoing demand as fans continuously seek out new limited-edition products associated with their idols. This perpetual cycle of urgency and exclusivity keeps fans engaged with the brand, as they anticipate future releases and feel compelled to act quickly whenever a new product is launched. Thus, FOMO sustains a dynamic where fans feel both excitement and pressure, a combination that propels them toward consistent engagement with the brand.

### **Brand Image Enhancement through Celebrity Endorsement**

K-pop idols' endorsements have been shown to significantly impact brand image, positioning products as desirable and trendy lifestyle choices rather than mere consumables. When a widely admired idol such as a member of Blackpink endorses a product like Oreo, it imbues the product with aspirational qualities associated with youth, modernity, and vibrancy. Fans perceive these brands as an extension of the idols' image, making them more attractive and relevant within their lifestyle choices.

For instance, Blackpink's partnership with Oreo redefined the brand for young consumers, making it appear more aligned with the high-energy and stylish image of the group. One participant, Diah, noted that she typically viewed Oreo as a simple snack, but after the collaboration with Blackpink, she started seeing it as a trendy product that reflects her interests in K-pop culture. This shift in perception illustrates how celebrity endorsements can effectively alter brand identity, positioning a familiar product in an entirely new light for its audience.

NCT Dream's collaboration with Lemonilo further emphasizes this impact on brand image, as fans like Yuna reported seeing Lemonilo not just as a health food but as a product that embodies a cool and youthful appeal. Fans attributed qualities of the idols, such as vitality and enthusiasm, to Lemonilo, making it an appealing choice even for those who might not ordinarily be interested in health foods. By linking the product to the positive attributes of NCT Dream, Lemonilo successfully positioned itself as more than just a health-conscious option, but as a lifestyle brand that resonates with the ideals of a young, energetic audience.

This alignment with idol values also enhances the perceived authenticity of the brand, as fans feel that the brand has made an intentional choice to partner with idols who reflect values important to them. Such associations provide these brands with a distinct advantage, as fans are more inclined to trust and stay loyal to brands that align with their cultural preferences and values. Through this brand image enhancement, Oreo and Lemonilo not only increase their appeal but also cultivate a unique identity within the competitive consumer landscape.

### **Social Media Amplification**

Social media serves as a powerful amplification tool in the relationship between K-pop brand ambassadors and consumer behavior. Platforms such as Instagram,



Twitter, and TikTok facilitate fan interactions with brands, allowing fans to showcase their purchases and celebrate their experiences with products endorsed by their idols. This sharing generates a ripple effect across social networks, as fans influence each other's purchase decisions by sharing their personal enjoyment and emotional satisfaction derived from owning idol-endorsed products.

One significant aspect of social media's role in this amplification is the way it fosters a community of shared experiences. Fans post about their purchases, upload unboxing videos, and display any exclusive items included with these products, such as photo cards of Blackpink or NCT Dream. This user-generated content not only promotes the product organically but also reinforces FOMO among fans who have not yet purchased it. Seeing other fans enjoy the product heightens the emotional appeal, creating an environment where fans feel they must join in to fully experience their idol's influence in their lives.

Furthermore, brands benefit from this free publicity as fans tag official accounts and use branded hashtags, creating a vibrant digital ecosystem around the product. The content generated by fans is authentic, as it reflects genuine excitement and satisfaction, making it more persuasive than traditional advertisements. Fans who post their experiences create a narrative around the product, making it more than just a purchase; it becomes a shared journey of celebrating their idols. This collective sharing and interaction transform the fan community into an extended marketing platform, where each fan contributes to brand promotion within their network.

Additionally, brands often engage with this user-generated content by resharing fan posts or hosting contests that encourage more interactions. This engagement fosters a reciprocal relationship between the brand and the fans, enhancing loyalty as fans feel acknowledged and valued. The interactive nature of social media thus not only amplifies the brand's reach but also strengthens the emotional connection fans have with both the brand and their idols. As a result, social media is not merely a promotional tool but a core part of the fan engagement strategy, enabling brands to cultivate long-term loyalty within a highly passionate and connected community.

## **5. Conclusion and Suggestion**

This study demonstrates the powerful influence of K-pop brand ambassadors on consumer behavior within the Indonesian food industry. By leveraging the emotional connections fans have with idols like Blackpink and NCT Dream, brands such as Oreo and Lemonilo successfully cultivate brand loyalty, influence purchase decisions through FOMO, enhance brand image, and amplify reach through social media engagement. The emotional connection established through celebrity endorsement transforms products into meaningful symbols of fandom, elevating them from everyday consumables to items with personal significance. This bond fosters a deeper sense of loyalty, as fans view these purchases as expressions of support for their idols, making them more inclined to repurchase and recommend these products. The study highlights that FOMO also plays a crucial role, especially in the context of limited-edition products. The urgency

created by FOMO is further amplified by social media, where fans witness and contribute to a collective narrative of ownership and pride, enhancing the pressure to participate and purchase quickly.

Additionally, celebrity endorsement by popular idols reshapes brand image, infusing it with qualities associated with youth, trendiness, and aspirational values. Fans perceive products endorsed by K-pop idols as more than just items to consume; they see them as lifestyle choices that reflect their interests and identity. Social media serves as a vital amplification tool, allowing fans to share their experiences and build a sense of community around these products. Through user-generated content, brands benefit from organic promotion, which further strengthens emotional connections and sustains engagement over time. In summary, the combination of emotional branding, FOMO, strategic celebrity endorsement, and social media amplification forms a cohesive approach that enhances brand perception, drives consumer action, and builds long-lasting loyalty among K-pop fans. These findings underscore the effectiveness of using culturally resonant brand ambassadors and the significant role of psychological drivers in shaping consumer behavior.

#### Suggestion:

To maximize the impact of K-pop brand ambassadorship, brands should focus on creating authentic emotional connections through carefully chosen idols that resonate with fans' values, harness FOMO by offering limited-edition products, and use social media to amplify fan engagement and community building. Limited releases and exclusive items drive urgency, while social media platforms allow fans to share experiences and strengthen communal bonds around the brand. Brands can further maintain engagement by periodically re-engaging ambassadors and offering complementary products, ensuring fans transition from one-time buyers to long-term loyal customers.

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