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Idolizing Consumption

An Exploration of the K-pop Albums' Relevance in a Digital Age

A Master's Thesis for the Degree of Master of Arts (120 credits) in Visual Culture

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Abstract

This thesis looks into the rise of the K-pop album, examining how physical CDs retain relevance in a digital age. Concepts of *collectability*, *authenticity* and *the gaze* are explored in relation to these unique products. The relationship between consumer and K-pop ‘idol’ is understood through a semiotic breakdown of visual narratives within the product, in conjunction with the reimagined structure of the albums as a whole. Developments in merchandising have created a physical product that offers something entirely different from its practical usage; rather than buying just a physical CD, fans are purchasing a chance to connect with the idols on what is perceived to be a more personal level. K-pop albums are unique in that they are similarly structured across the entire genre. The formatting of K-pop albums could be an indication of the future of the CD album across other genres.

Keywords

K-pop, Album, CDs, collectability, merchandising, artist, consumer, semiotics

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Introduction

In the summer of 2008, my parents purchased cable television for the first time. Included in the package was a subscription to M-Net, the MTV of Korean pop.¹ From then on, I was hooked. I loved the bright colors, the unique fashion and sound. Despite being a long-time consumer, it was not until the end of 2018 when someone gifted me the BTS *Map of the Soul: Persona* album that I saw a physical album in person. I was immediately taken in with how beautiful the packaging was. It looked like a small hardcover book and, as an avid reader, I delighted in how perfectly it fit on my bookshelf. Even the texture was inviting, soft and smooth to the touch, not quite the cardboard of a hardback book but not the plastic of a typical jewel case album. Looking inside, I was surprised how many items were included in the package and wondered if I had been given a collector's item. As it turns out, the answer is both yes and no.

The item I received is indeed a collector's item, but not in the way that I initially thought. Almost all K-pop albums are collectors' items, because of how they are marketed. When an album is released through a Korean entertainment company it is formatted in multiple colors and with unique objects inside that are designed to be collectable. So, in that sense, there are no K-pop albums that are *not* collectable items. Playing on collectability is not unique in the music industry. Limited edition EPs, Vinyls, and album art are common merchandising tools designed to increase product value and encourage fans. However, I have never encountered such unique packaging that spread consistently across an entire genre of music. In each case, there appears to be three main thematic components essential to the marketing of physical K-pop albums: engaging with textures, inclusion of portraiture and lastly the actual CD itself. From a visual culture perspective this formula engages with consumers on a multisensory level and relies heavily on visual material to connect with audiences in a way that is different than in other genres of music.

¹ M-Net was established in 1993 and was South Korea's first cable music channel. K. Howard, 'Mapping the K-pop Past and Present: Shifting the Modes of Exchange', *Korea Observer*, vol. 45, no. 3, 2014, p.402

Aim and Research Question

As K-pop's global reach continues to grow, western curiosity and interest in the genre has expanded from an internet meme (Psy's Gangnam style)² to an entire subculture, with its own channel on YouTube and Billboard chart. The attention on Korean artists has rapidly shifted to focus on the boy and girl 'idol' groups that compose a majority of the South Korean music industry. Despite K-pop's popularity, are few resources that discuss the important role physical merchandise plays in reaching international audiences. The aim of this thesis is to explore and contextualize the objects and visual narratives presented within the physical K-pop album. I will consider how K-pop albums differ from other albums within the music industry and what the included objects and visual narratives represent to consumers. By doing so, I hope to contribute to an emerging dialogue and body of knowledge surrounding the cultural phenomenon that is "K-pop", specifically focusing on the convergence of physicality and visuality within the music genre. My primary research question consists of two parts: how do physical K-pop albums challenge traditional concepts of an 'album' to remain relevant in a digital age? Also, how is the relationship between artist and consumer visualized within these products?

Background and Relevance

To many readers it may seem surprising that I chose the music CD as a point of departure to study physical media. Released in 1982, the compact disc has a very precarious place within the music industry both as an industry standard and as an outdated technology that no longer has a defacto place in the modern household.³ Modern computers have removed the CD-drive, along with many modern cars and it is becoming more uncommon to see someone with a working CD-player in their home. With BBC news reporting CD sales have dropped at a rate of 9.6 million

²By the end of 2012 Psy's Gangnam Style became the first single video to reach one billion views on YouTube. Not only did it inspire countless memes, but it maintained its status on the top of international charts for weeks. This was likely the first introduction to Korean music for many westerners. W. Gruger, 'Psy's 'Gangnam Style' Hits 1 Billion Views on YouTube', *Billboard*, 21 December 2012, <https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/k-town/1481275/psys-gangnam-style-hits-1-billion-views-on-youtube>, (accessed 15 May 2020)

³R. Wianata, 'The Life and Times of the Late, Great, CD', *Digital Trends*, 7 February 2018, <https://www.digitaltrends.com/features/the-history-of-the-cds-rise-and-fall/>, (accessed 18 May 2020)

each year since 2008,⁴ it is not difficult to see why. In 2003, the digital market overtook the physical market in music sales for the first time, and the gap has widened from there.⁵ South Korea specifically experienced the largest shift from physical CD sales to digital sales of any other country, and was the first country to experience the physical to digital shift in market value. During this time, K-pop, which first celebrated international success around 1992 with the popular group Seo Taiji and the Boys, was just beginning to grow and expand as a genre, and an industry. As a unique blend of musical genres utilizing rap, r&b, pop and even reggae sounds, K-pop exists and grows because of platforms such as YouTube, Cable TV, Melon, Spotify and other streaming services. K-pop is a child of digital media, yet the industry continues to produce physical albums at an unprecedented rate.

As with all musicians, idol groups regularly produce music which is then sold in physical CD format as well as digitally through iTunes and other download platforms. Unlike other artists, it is not unusual for groups to produce multiple albums within a given calendar year. Sometimes, as with the case of ASTRO's *Only You* release, physical albums are produced for single track releases. *Only You* includes just one song with a radio and instrumental version. The Hanteo chart, which tracks album sales by individual buyers, still reports on the consumption of physical albums, rather than its digital counterparts which are tracked on other similar charts.⁶ If South Korea truly has, as Keith Howard states, "leap-frogged the global music industry, reducing the importance of recordings as physical objects" investing so much time and energy into the production of physical albums would be akin to pouring money down the drain.⁷ Considering that South Korea has the 6th largest music market in the world, this is hardly the case, and the physical music market after years of steady decline is growing again.⁸ In 2018, South Korea

⁴M. Savage, 'Is this the end of owning music?', *BBC News*, 3 January 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-46735093>, (accessed 17 May 2020)

⁵H. Choi, 'Value and Value Creation -Popular Music in the Digital Era: The Case of the Independent Music Industry in South Korea', PhD Thesis, University of Manchester, 2014, Available from British Library EThOS, (accessed 11 February 2020)

⁶The Hanteo Chart site does have information about digital streams, but the 'main' chart deals primarily with physical album purchases. The Gaon chart, also tracks physical sales, but tracks the number of albums sent to stores. It also has a subsequent digital tracking chart. *The Comparison of 2019 Gaon and Hanteo Annual Chart*, [website], 21 January 2020, [blog post], <https://www.allkpop.com/article/2020/01/2019-gaon-and-hanteo-annual-chart>, (accessed 20 May 2020); see also: [Guide] *How K-Pop/J-Pop Music Charts Work*, [website], 18 June 2020, <https://shineusa.net/2017/06/18/a-guide-to-charts/>, (accessed 20 May 2020)

⁷Howard, 'Mapping the K-pop Past and Present', p.392

⁸T. Herman and R. Rashid, 'For the K-Pop Industry, Merch Is As Important As the Music' *Billboard*, 16 March 2020, <https://www.billboard.com/articles/deep-dive/9331910/for-the-k-pop-industry-merch-is-as-important-as-the-music>, (accessed 11 April 2020)

experienced a 29% increase in physical merchandise revenue within their music industry, which according to David Price at the IFPI, is a natural increase simply because “People want to buy the CDs for the ability to have that CD and to listen to the music.”⁹ With online albums providing the same service, this is a simplified answer to a much more complex shift in understanding the role of physical media in the music industry.

Looking at the pressed vinyl, we can see a similar decline and resurgence in popularity yet the difference between the two are quite vast. Most obviously, vinyls are a different type of media format than CDs that have a much higher sound quality than its digital counterparts. For musical purists, vinyls provide a listening experience that surpasses the limited storage space of a digital Mp3. Despite being physical objects, CDs are in reality a kind of digital media that is scanned and processed, so the music quality it has is not much higher than what can be streamed through other platforms.¹⁰ The size of an LP also differs quite significantly from that of a CD. Whereas as Tony Bennet said, LPs are “large enough to make you feel like you were taking home your own work of art” CD packing has been accused of reducing the cover artwork to an unattractive size.¹¹

The culture surrounding fascination, or appreciation of older technologies is often referred to as an interest in ‘retromedia’.¹² Older media is deemed to be ‘retro’ because of its temporal and visual difference from modern technology. The CD is a form of retromedia in that it exists on the cusp of technological relevancy. As technology advances, the music CD begins to fall into this category, but shares few values with the vinyl record. The value of the CD is defined in other ways. Rather than viewing the CD under the limited binary of ‘old’ versus ‘new’ technology, the CD has transformed into a new kind of media whose importance as a physical object is not diminished as Howard asserts, but re-evaluated. In the context of K-pop, looking at the various components of these CD albums, we can ask ourselves if this could be the future of modern CD album design, or whether it is simply an anomaly within the music industry that is

⁹ Specifically, an 11.9% increase in album sales was seen across the South Korean music industry, which is heavily saturated by K-pop. Herman and Rashid, ‘For the K-pop Industry’, para. 8

¹⁰ There are multiple different file formats that can exist on the CD, depending on the year and who produced it. Waniata, ‘The Life and Times’, para. 6

¹¹ S. Jones, and M. Sorger, ‘Covering Music: A Brief History and Analysis of Album Cover Design’, *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, vol. 11/12, no. 1, 1999, p.70

¹² P. Magudda and S. Miniti, ‘Retromedia-in-practice: A practice theory approach for rethinking old and new media technologies’, *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, vol. 25, no. 4, 2019, p.674

produced for and caters to a unique genre. What is it that sets K-pop albums apart from their competitors and why do consumers continue to purchase CDs when the music is available through so many different streaming platforms? What is the place of the music CD in a new era of digital mediatization?

Empirical Material

I will primarily be focusing my analysis on a selection of physical albums. As mentioned earlier, in K-pop, albums by a single group are often released within a relatively short time span. It seems to be, industry standard, to release ‘mini’ albums, that is those with only 5-6 tracks on a much more regular basis leading up to a full length album which would be part of the artists’ *comeback*.¹³ For that reason, since they saturate the market, I will be looking at several ‘mini’ albums released within that past two years. Seven albums will be discussed as representative of the larger market. I will be discussing only ‘idol’ *groups* and not singular artists because they exemplify the western understanding of K-pop.¹⁴ Three albums are released by male idol groups and three by female idol groups. Albums by all-male groups are BTS *Map of the Soul: Persona* (abbr. *MOTS Persona*); ASTRO *Blue Flame*; and Monsta X *2nd Album: Take 2 We Are Here* (abbr. *Take 2 We Are Here*); while the selected albums by all-female groups are AOA *New Moon*; Dreamcatcher *Special Mini Album [Raid of Dream] Normal Edition* (abbr. *Raid of Dream*); and Red Velvet *Repackage Album Vol.2 [The Perfect Red Velvet]* (abbr. *The Perfect Red Velvet*).

I will focus my visual analysis on the all-male group BTS’s 6th mini album *Map of the Soul: Persona*, and the all-female group AOA’s 6th mini album *New Moon*. While it is rare to find K-pop ‘idol’ groups that include both male and female idols, the group KARD has reached significant success and will be included in order to provide more context for this topic. Their release of *Mini Album Vol.3 [RIDE ON THE WIND]* (abbr. *Ride on the Wind*) will be the third

¹³Generally speaking, when a K-pop group releases their first album it is referred to as their ‘debut’, every consecutive album released after their debut is then referred to as a ‘comeback’. I have found no extreme difference in packaging styles for ‘mini’ vs. full length albums. Mini albums also sometimes never lead to a full-length album and stand by themselves.

¹⁴ Idol is the common term used to refer to a Korean popular artist, while is not applicable to every Korean artist it is almost exclusively used when referring to those who perform in groups.

case study within this thesis. I will be using unboxing videos and other online platforms for reference in regard to other albums which I do not have in my personal possession. Unboxing videos on YouTube as well as what is available online and in stores will provide additional points of reference, as the albums themselves fluctuate in availability alongside the market. None of the albums that I look at are special editions (in that they are labeled as such) and all except the Red Velvet album are first press editions. Additionally, the albums that I look at were all released within the past two years (2018-2020). I have chosen to work with this material in order to gauge the state of the industry as it exists right now. A more detailed historical approach towards the evolution of album packaging within the K-pop industry is a very interesting topic, but unfortunately falls outside the scope of this thesis.

Theory and Method

Theory

There are multiple ways of interpreting physical albums. Since my focus is on these products as elements of visual culture, I will be conducting a primarily semiotic analysis. However, in order to understand these items within the greater socio-economical global context in which they are produced I will also be drawing on theories and concepts across several disciplines including feminist theory, post-colonial theory and practice theory. As my empirical material is a collection of items, I will analyze them first as representative of the genre, the packaging as a whole so to speak, and then delve deeper into more specific examples. Walter Benjamin's concepts of aura and authenticity provide a point of departure for discussing the material as it is contextualized within the framework of mass production.¹⁵ Understanding how these physical products, which are in all essence *not* limited edition, retain their collectability and value is important when digital alternatives are readily available for listening to these same albums. Reflecting upon French Sociologist Jean Baudrillard's 'system of objects', I explore how collectability and ownership of physical media adds to their value.¹⁶ Understanding the importance of physicality within this analysis is important because the items are not only

¹⁵ W. Benjamin, *The Work of Art in Mechanical Reproduction*, Prism Key Press, 2010, pp.13-17

¹⁶ J. Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, James Benedict (trans), London, Verso, 2005

recognizable for what they are, K-pop albums, but what they resemble. Visual mimicry of other media technologies, such as the paperback book and fashion magazine transform the K-pop album into a repurposed conglomeration of familiar items which begs the question: what does the modern album look like?

Drawing from the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of cultural and social capital I will further be discussing how capital extends beyond that of the economic, and is formulated within and around these objects creating hierarchies of knowledge and communities of cultural exchange.¹⁷ I look into how exclusivity and technology are combined in ways that are both community building and isolating for K-pop consumers. The dissemination of K-pop in the west has led to K-pop becoming a subculture of interests, which focuses heavily on the physical album. As digital technology is becoming increasingly prominent, and yet 'older' technologies such as the vinyl record and the polaroid camera rejoin the ranks of popular culture, the K-pop album exists on the cusp of new and old media. While some (I believe a bit prematurely) proclaim the death of the CD, K-pop albums embrace this technology while using it to promote idol groups in other ways.¹⁸ The K-pop album does not fit into the binary of 'old' or 'new' media, but is instead hovering on the edge of retromedia. Scholars Paolo Magaudda and Sergio Minniti's proposed theory of retromedia-in-practice, in which "media materiality, their symbols and meanings, as well as the embodied activities connected to them are considered and understood together as a whole" provides an insightful perspective on how the otherwise indeterminately-placed CD in modern society is given purpose in these albums.¹⁹

Due to the saturation and also importance of figurative images within these albums, images of the idols will be analyzed within the context of the male gaze, as well as the oppositional gaze, drawing on writings from both Laura Mulvey and bell hooks.²⁰ The K-pop idol is a *racialized 'other'* within the context of western media consumption, and is commonly placed in a group institutionally divided based on a strict gender binary. The male gaze Mulvey discusses refers to how the "unconscious of patriarchal society" influences our way of seeing

¹⁷ P. Bourdieu, 'The Forms of Capital', J. G. Richardson (ed), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, New York, Greenwood Press, 1986, pp. 242

¹⁸ Savage, 'Is this the end of owning music?', para. 11

¹⁹ Magaudda and Minniti, 'Retromedia-in-practice', p.689

²⁰ L. Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', C. Penley (ed), *Feminism and Film Theory*, New York, Routledge, 1988, pp.57-68; bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, Boston, South End Press, 1992, p.115-131

visual material.²¹ Further complexifying Mulvey's concept of the gaze, bell hooks' writings on the oppositional gaze, refers to how the returned gaze of the racialized 'other' can become a site of resistance to oppressive acts of looking.²² Using these concepts I analyze how both photocards and photobooks contain curated images that project meaning to their viewers. Oftentimes, these images promote certain fantasies which affect the ways consumers perceive their idols. Analyzing the images as more than just photographs, but representations of the idols themselves, is essential to understanding the role of the idol within the context of the album specifically. As these items exist as commercial products, I will also be drawing upon Judith Williamson's notion of the currency of signs to interpret the images and to consider the images' function within an economic context.²³

While the term '*post-colonial*' itself is complex and often contested, certain post-colonial terminology provides itself useful within this analysis. Edward Said's groundbreaking work defines what exactly the 'other' is, that is who those in dominant positions of power deem degenerate, undesirable or lesser by a process of manifest and latent orientalism.²⁴ Homi Bahba expands Said's work, describing how *ambivalence* as perpetuated by the stereotype reinforces colonial ways of thinking.²⁵ The stereotype is perceived in this images by what I define as the Eurocentric gaze. Informed by Ella Shohat and Robert Stam's book 'Unthinking Eurocentrism', I define the Eurocentric gaze as the colonized look which prioritizes narratives of the white, western experience.²⁶ While these concepts will not form the core of my analysis, they are important to consider when dealing with K-pop idols. Transnational imagery contains many nuanced and complex implications depending on the cultural context in which the albums are collected/consumed. Additionally, as a westerner I do not have the tools to fully understand the complex race and gender relations within South Korea as the center of development for K-pop, nor the experiences of Asian people within the west. Since there is no room to fully explore the totality of these relationships and their visual implications within the context of this particular thesis, it presents itself as an interesting topic for further research.

²¹ Mulvey, *Feminism and Film Theory*, p.57

²² bell hooks, *Black Looks*, p.122

²³ J. Williamson, *Decoding Advertisements: Ideology and Meaning in Advertising*, Enlarged Edition, Volume 13, London, Marion Boyars Publishers, 2007

²⁴ Edward Said cited in H. Bahba, 'The Other Question', *Screen*, vol. 24, no. 6, 1983, p.24

²⁵ Bahba 'The Other Question', p.18

²⁶ E. Shohat and R. Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*, London, Routledge, 1994, p.186

Central to the semiological analysis I will be conducting is Roland Barthes formulation of *connotation*, *denotation*, and the *mythological*.²⁷ These three concepts, which break down images into coded, linguistic and non-coded messages take into consideration the complexity of images while considering the layers of meaning that may surround them through additional texts or signifiers. Structuralist theory helps separate narratives and also emphasizes cultural context, but contrasts with the fluidity of practice theory. I argue that rather than combat meaning formations developed through structuralist theory, retromedia-in-practice theory provides another nuanced level of meaning formation that is necessary to understanding these products. As collected products, they do not exist in a vacuum, but rather fulfill part of their function only in relation to and in mediation with people.

Method:

The empirical material which I discuss is part of a base of similar products. As it would be impossible to effectively discuss the nuances of all K-pop albums within the confines of this thesis, I will be using a comparative method of analysis discussing the unifying thematic elements of my chosen empirical material. As mentioned, much of this analysis is undertaken through a semiological breakdown of the albums. In addition to analyzing the albums themselves, I conducted research on the topic of K-pop to understand the economic and cultural environments which formed this type of media production. Online research, such as reading blog posts, watching unboxing videos, and frequenting K-pop forums provide secondary platforms for understanding and contextualizing the environments where this type of media is popular. Sites such as YouTube, Amino, Photocardboards.net, as well as Vlive, Weverse and Naver were platforms that I accessed for this purpose. For pricing/purchasing information I also looked at popular e-seller sites such as Amazon, eBay, Ktown4u, and Kpoptown.

I found that the purchasing of K-pop albums was difficult for a first-time buyer. This was both due to an overload and a lack of information. My experience was impacted specifically by my location in Sweden, which does not have stores such as Target that have merchandising deals with Korean sellers. Many online sellers list the full title of the album, and detail what items

²⁷ R. Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath, London, Fontana Press, 1

come with the album (i.e., poster, photocard) as well as if the purchase counts towards the local Korean music charts to support your favorite group/artist.²⁸ At the same time, the sites do not typically say how large the albums are or have much information about how many songs/what songs are on it. The Ktown4u website had the most information, with helpful unboxing videos posted on YouTube that show what to expect when the package arrives. For many first-time buyers from the west, it is likely that the package they receive in the mail may come as a bit of a surprise.

For in-store purchasing, several U.S. chains in addition to Target have worked with Korean entertainment companies to sell in their store. This is how I found BTS albums displayed with the rest of the CDs on my trip to the U.S. in the summer of 2019. Barnes and Noble, another U.S. store that sells music as well as books, had a small K-pop section across from the vinyls but separate from the other CDs. While it was my intention to do more in person fieldwork to discover the accessibility of these albums outside of Korea, the current COVID-19 pandemic has halted this research. Instead, my methods of understanding K-pop albums will be entirely formulated through the physical copies in my possession, as well as the aforementioned available online communities and established research on the subject.

Previous Research

K-pop is slowly expanding as an object of research and continues to grow and evolve as a global phenomenon, so there are continuously new ideas being added to the academic discourse. Scholar John Lie has written extensively on the history of Korean popular music, on its relationship with national identity, economics as well as the cultural implications and productions of the genre. His book, "*K-Pop: Popular Music, Cultural Amnesia, and Economic Innovation in South Korea*" provides extensive research and knowledge regarding the South Korean music industry and how the relationship between national identity and music has been shaped and altered over the years.²⁹ Meebae Lee and Heather Willoughby also take their own

²⁸ Usually the seller says something along the lines of "this purchase counts towards the Hanteo Chart" but does not say exactly why that is or what this means. Unless you already are informed about the Korean music industry, this will have little impact or meaning for the foreign buyer.

²⁹ J. Lie, *K-Pop: Popular Music, Cultural Amnesia, and Economic Innovation in South Korea*, Oakland, University of Southern California Press, 2015

historiographic approach to understanding music media with South Korea.³⁰ While providing great historical context for the emergence of K-pop, these authors pay little attention to any specific material that is being consumed by K-pop fans.

Fan culture within South Korea is explored by Bonnie Tilland, within the context of Korean consumers.³¹ Scholar Kyong Yoon looks at fan culture from a more globalized perspective, focusing on western reception of K-pop. His research, both on Canadian fan culture and cultural hybridity in relation to K-pop provide insight into the transnational fans' experience.³² Chuyun Oh and D. C. Oh's joint reflections on queer identity and cross dressing in K-pop address western assumptions of queer identities in regards to the presentations and performances by male idol groups.³³ D. C. Oh's independent research looks into how YouTube facilitates transnational fandom.³⁴ Michael Unger looks at identity and sexuality regarding female groups within the context of music videos.³⁵ Case studies within K-pop often discuss social media usage and online communities, for example Valentina Marinescu and Ecaterina Balica's observations on Romania as well as Xanat Meza and Han Woo Park's in Spanish speaking countries.³⁶ Economics and marketing research surrounding K-pop also emphasizes the prevalence of digital media. Hwanho Choi's dissertation on value and value (co)creation provides a valuable in depth approach to understanding marketing strategies for Korean music and how that disseminates through various platforms.³⁷ Researchers Keith Howard and Solee Shin also provide useful insights and research delving into the success of K-pop and the

³⁰ M. Lee, 'Entangled Modernities in the Culture of Korean Music Publishing: Challenges in Establishing a Contemporary Korean Art Music Archive', *Fontes Artis Musicae*, vol. 64, no. 3, 2017, pp.215-226; H. Willoughby, 'Under the covers: Image and imagination in Korean popular music albums', *Asian Journal of Women's Studies*, vol. 21, no. 4, 2015, pp.345-362

³¹ B. Tilland, 'MOTHER-DAUGHTER BONDING IN BETWEEN NOSTALGIA AND FUTURISM,' *Acta Koreana*, vol. 20, no. 2, 2017, pp.377-393

³² K. Yoon, 'Transnational fandom in the making: K-pop fans in Vancouver', *The International Communications Gazette*, vol. 81, no.2, 2019, pp.176-192; K. Yoon, 'Global Imagination of K-pop: Music Fans' Lived Experiences of Cultural Hybridity', *Popular Music and Society*, vol.41, no.4, 2018, pp.373-389

³³ C. OH, and D.C., OH, 'Unmasking Queerness: Blurring and Solidifying Queer Lines through K-Pop Cross-Dressing', *Journal of Popular Culture*, Vol. 50, no. 1, 2017, pp.9-29

³⁴ D.C. Oh, 'K-Pop fans react: Hybridity and the White celebrity-fan on YouTube', *International Journal of Communication* vol. 11, 2017, pp.2270-2287

³⁵ M. Unger, 'The Aporia of Presentation: Deconstructing the Genre of K-pop Girl Group Music Videos in South Korea', *Sogang University Journal of Popular Music Studies*, vol. 27, no. 1, 2015, pp.25-47

³⁶ V. Marinescu, and B. Ecaterina, 'Korean Cultural Products in Eastern Europe: A Case Study of the K-Pop Impact in Romania', *Region*, vol 2, no. 1, 2013, pp.113-35; X.V. Meza, and WH. Park, WH 'Globalization of cultural products: a webometric analysis of Kpop in Spanish-speaking countries', *Quality and Quantity*, vol. 26, no. 1, 2014 pp.1345-1360

³⁷ Choi, 'Value and Value Creation', p.11

economic and political contexts that laid the foundation for its global success.³⁸ Almost none of these authors discuss physical media more than in passing. The state of the album is treated as if it were on its way to extinction. Many of these scholars discuss the rapid change from physical to digital music media but neglect to consider what I believe is an important aspect of this digital switch. The role of physical media may not be diminishing, but instead *changing*.

When it comes to the study of albums, Steve Jones and Martin Sorger mention in their article that Kevin Edge's book, "The Art of Selling Songs, Graphics for the Music Business 1690-1990" is the first comprehensive anthology to discuss packaging.³⁹ Their analysis on album design, written in 1999, was produced on the cusp of the transition from physical CD consumption to digital streaming services and takes a rather optimistic approach to the future of albums. Jones writes, "It should be a goal of future research into the role of graphic design in music packaging to discover what elements of art theory, visual communication, art history, marketing, semiotics, and media studies can add to our understanding".⁴⁰ There is no prevailing research discussing K-pop albums, which are unique in their own right. It is my goal to add to this missing discourse from a visual culture perspective. This is important in regard to the overall understanding of K-pop as a subject because it is informed through all the other aforementioned topics. Additionally, researching the topic from a visual culture lens is relevant both to K-pop specifically and to understanding the importance of physicality within a digital age.

Disposition of the Thesis

This thesis is divided into two chapters, in which the K-pop album is explored from multiple angles. Chapter one begins with a brief history of Korean popular music which later informs the structure and development of the album. This chapter prioritizes contextualizing the album from its foundation to its global expansion. From there the chapter delves into the consumer base, that is who it is that engages with this kind of material. Specifically, how K-pop is intentionally constructed to reach a mass target audience across a variety of cultures and contexts.

³⁸ S. Shin, 'Niche, Ethnic and Global Operations: Models of Production and Circulation of East Asian Popular Music', *European Journal of East Asian Studies*, vol. 16, no. 1, 2017, pp. 5–35

³⁹ Jones and Sorger, 'Covering Music', p.69

⁴⁰ Jones and Sorger, p.97

International marketability, visuality, which is discussed in detail, and consumer conscious advertising are important devices that provide the foundation for albums to be produced on a mass scale. Essentially, how K-pop spread in the west and who are the people that purchase K-pop albums. The chapter concludes with an overview of the unique particularities that define the K-pop album, and how those attributes differ from the normative album structure. With chapter one I provide the economic and social context for the global consumption of these products and explain what makes a K-pop album so desirable to international audiences from a visual culture perspective.

In Chapter two I discuss in further detail the visual narratives produced within these albums. Taking examples from specific albums, and the thematic elements of texture, portraiture and language, I break down how meaning formations are developed. During this chapter I analyze the products from several different angles utilizing the theory previously mentioned. Semiological analysis of the albums is used to dissect the visual narratives into parts. These parts are analyzed to understand how messages can be read in various cultural contexts. I then illustrate how value is constructed utilizing Walter Benjamin's concepts of aura and authenticity, breaking down the album from each thematic point. Further, I analyze the ways in which the idol is portrayed through portraiture with specific albums. These images provide specific context for understanding how the male gaze, the oppositional gaze and the Eurocentric gaze transform the idols into a scopophilic landscape in which fantasy can replace reality. From a visual culture perspective, K-pop albums influence the artist/consumer dynamic. This thesis concludes with an analysis of the overall sociological impact of K-pop albums with their unique packaging within the larger sphere of the music industry and the place CDs have on this changing market.

Chapter 1: K-pop as A Globalized Soundscape

K-pop is, in every step of its development, a product of globalization. In order to understand the global reach and significance of the genre it is important to contextualize the historical foundation that produced what has become a very international sound. K-pop is both a westernized and a uniquely Korean production. While western music has had a long history of integration within South Korea, South Korean artists remained virtually unknown outside of their own country for many years.⁴¹ In Korea, Japanese colonial rule, as well as American occupation and missionaries, proved to have long-lasting effects on music production. During the end of Japanese colonial rule in 1945 and the emergence of U.S. military bases spurred on by the Korean War in the 1950s, American music was persistent within the South Korean soundscape⁴². Unlike their Japanese counterparts, South Koreans did not have a history of prioritizing traditional music, and instead were more heavily influenced by imported sounds. Western instruments, such as the piano and the violin were considered superior to native Korean instruments and more essential for children's education.⁴³ This is not to say that traditional South Korean music disappeared under the weight of American, Japanese or European influence, nor that these influences served as a replacement of those musical lineages. Rather, the lexicon of South Korean music has for many years become complexified through colonial occupation.

Even after the end of colonial occupation the effects were felt by extreme cultural oppression in the 1970s; Japanese music was explicitly banned and political oppression was fed through strict censorship laws.⁴⁴ In the 1980s, political revolution and the pro-democracy movement led to a series of radical changes that marked the decade as transformative in more ways than one. Despite political unrest, the size of the music industry quadrupled within South Korea during this time.⁴⁵ The industry was further developed after democratization in 1987, as people gained more freedoms and international music once again permeated the radio and television. At the time a unique mix of "trot" or folk singing (heavily influenced by Japanese

⁴¹ Lie, *K-pop: Popular Music, Cultural Amnesia*, p.29

⁴² Lie, *K-pop: Popular Music, Cultural Amnesia*, pp.30-31

⁴³ Lie, *K-pop: Popular Music, Cultural Amnesia*, p.30

⁴⁴ J. Lie, 'What Is the K in K-pop? South Korean Popular Music, the Culture Industry, and National Identity' *Korea Observer*, vol. 43, no. 3, 2012, pp. 347.

⁴⁵ Choi, 'Value and Value Creation', p.162

music) and western rock were extremely popular.⁴⁶ In the 1990s, South Korea's strong investment into online infrastructures meant that people had unprecedented access to global networks. In 1992, the most influential group to hit South Korea, Seo Taiji and the Boys, entered the music scene.⁴⁷ Their new sound mixed genres of rap, rock, R&B with interesting dance moves and lyrics political and social commentary, and it was wildly successful. They reached international acclaim throughout Asia, spearheading a new culture of future-oriented youth that were no longer bound by political oppression, and had the freedom to explore the world in new and exciting ways.⁴⁸ While Seo Taiji and the Boys are not responsible for the development of K-pop as a genre, their success proved that a fusion of western music and Korean sounds resonated with a youth that was trying to find its own place in an increasingly globalized world. Lee Soo-Man, founder of SM Entertainment was inspired by the R&B and Hip-Hop sounds in American music, as well as music videos on MTV, and wanted to incorporate that within his company's production.⁴⁹ He developed an idol training system that focused heavily on coordinating visuals, and infused some of the hip-hop sounds that made Seo Taiji so famous, essentially creating the idol as we know it today. The success of K-pop has become so great that South Korea's own government allots a budget for investing in the industry, citing it as a cultural investment.⁵⁰ Furthermore, K-pop is an industry birthed through technological innovation. It exists and grows because of online infrastructures and transnational exchange of information. How then, did an industry supported so heavily by online networks manage to reverse declining album sales in a country that also experienced the largest shift from physical to digital media in the world?

Transnationality and Consumerism

Something to keep in mind when looking at K-pop is that it is intentionally designed to appeal to mass global audiences. I have been using the terms 'genre' and 'industry' interchangeably up to

⁴⁶ Lie, 'What is the K in K-pop?', p.348.

⁴⁷ Lie, *K-Pop: Popular Music, Cultural Amnesia*, p.57

⁴⁸ Shin, 'Niche, Ethnic and Global Operations', p.28

⁴⁹ Shin, 'Niche, Ethnic and Global Operations', p.28

⁵⁰ I. Oh, and H. Lee., 'K-pop in Korea: How the Pop Music Industry is Changing a Post-Developmental Society' *Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review E-Journal*, No. 9, 2013, p.116, <http://cross-currents.berkeley.edu/e-journal/issue-9>, (accessed 11 February 2020)

this point because it is effectively both. As a genre, it is a unique blend of contemporary pop with Hip Hop elements infused with the Korean language and with its own visualities. As D.C. Oh points out,

“K-pop is a hybrid form that mixes western popular music and images with indigenous taste, creating texts that have *mugukjeok* qualities meant for global distribution. *Mugukjeok* literally means “nationlessness,” Jung’s (2011) conceptualization of *mugukjeok* refers to the ways in which Korean texts retain their Koreanness but with enough transnationally recognizable elements to facilitate global reception. Its hybrid nature allows it to be relatable but with Korean cultural specificity”.⁵¹

As an industry, K-pop is primarily recognized as idol groups externally put together and trained by a prevailing entertainment company. The K-pop industry’s main marketing strategy is to present a product (this could be the albums or extend to the idol groups themselves) that reaches the largest international target audience possible. While this may seem like a difficult task, K-pop’s reach is indeed impressive. Fans of the genre are widespread, from the Americas to Europe, all across Asia and the Middle East.⁵²

I have already discussed K-pop as a future-oriented and appealing to youth culture. This is visualized in a number of ways, both on the idols’ bodies and through their actions. Fashion is a huge part of the K-pop visual lexicon. Idols consistently wear high fashion runway looks and aspire to dress in ways that are fashion forward and visually interesting. Additionally, idols interact with fans on multiple platforms, performing in concerts, uploading vlogs on various sites such as Weverse and VLive, appearing on numerous talk shows and variety shows, as well as posting continuously on Twitter and Instagram. Idol groups consistently pay attention to burgeoning technologies and reach out to users across different platforms that target varied audiences. Even now, as Tik Tok grows in popularity, K-pop groups are taking advantage of this new video-sharing platform and beginning to open official verified accounts for their fans to watch. There is no shortage of material for fans to consume, and a variety of ways in which fans can interact with the music besides simply listening. Engaging dance choreographies, another key component of the K-pop genre, makes the music interesting not only from an auditory level,

⁵¹ Oh, D.C. ‘K-pop Fans React’, p.2275

⁵² Lie, J., ‘The Globalization of K-pop: Local and Transnational Articulations of South Korean Popular Music’ *Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review* E-Journal No. 9, 2013, p.40-43 <http://cross-currents.berkeley.edu/e-journal/issue-9>, (accessed 20 May 2020).

but from a visual and physical level as fans can engage with the material on a performative level. Learning the dance and engaging with the music becomes a source of enjoyment even if they do not understand the lyrics.⁵³ Dance routines range from easy to increasingly complex, which appeal to people at various levels of dance proficiency.

What has been difficult to ascertain is the ratio of male to female consumers of K-pop. Considering the history of ‘boy bands’ in the US draws to mind seas of young women screaming for the Beatles, One Direction and Backstreet Boys it is easy to assume that most K-pop fans are women. Even girl groups such as TLC and the Spice Girls being to mind ‘girl power’ and female fandom. However, these are just stereotypes. For female K-pop groups, there tends to be a considerable number of male fans, deemed ‘fanboys’.⁵⁴ There are plenty of self-declared western K-pop ‘fanboys’ making reaction videos and posting content on the internet in support of their favorite groups, regardless of the groups gender.⁵⁵ Despite this, there is no real way of defining the numbers. Thus, while K-pop appeals to both genders, the extent to which each gender is represented is unclear.

While teenage and youth culture make up a large portion of K-pop consumers, it is a common misconception they are the only demographic that listens to the genre. As Bonnie Tilland explains in her respective article, it is increasingly common for parents and older generations to develop an interest in K-pop.⁵⁶ As John Lie points out:

“K-pop exemplifies middle-class, urban and suburban values that seek to be acceptable at once to college-aspiring youths and their parents: a world that suggests nothing of inner-city poverty and violence, corporal or sexual radicalism, or social deviance and cultural alienation. K-pop in this sense satisfied the emergent regional taste and sensibility, though it would be remiss to stress the region as its appeal could easily extend beyond it. The oft-repeated claims about K-pop singers’ politeness — their clean-cut features as well as their genteel demeanors — is something of a nearly universal appeal, whether to Muslim Indonesians or Catholic Peruvians”.⁵⁷

⁵³ The importance of choreography is one of the key differentiating factors between K-pop and J-pop. Lie, ‘What is the K in K-pop?’, p.349, p.353

⁵⁴ For a brief history of the term ‘fanboy’, see: H. McCracken, ‘Fanboy!’, *Technologizer*, [website], 2010, <https://www.technologizer.com/2010/05/17/fanboy/>, (accessed 17 May 2020)

⁵⁵ YouTubers such as BrisxLife and Form of Therapy are some examples. See: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCFdAdgyV43x3OolPd8RQUig> and <https://www.youtube.com/user/FOTmedia>

⁵⁶ Tilland, ‘MOTHER DAUGHTER BONDING’, p.378

⁵⁷ Lie, ‘What is the K in K-pop?’, p.355

Some groups have made brief political commentary on the state of global affairs, for the most part idol groups stick to their core tasks: performing, advertising and promoting their group's music. Idol groups refrain from controversy, largely supported by the extensive (and often criticized) contracts they sign.⁵⁸ As Lie points out, idols are often expected to act or behave in a certain way that appeals to the nature of *mugukjeok*. The purpose of this seems to be to avoid challenging the status quo, to not rock the boat too much and to respect others in a way that communicates a sense of humility about their achievements. For fans, they come across as "approachable and modest figures in contrast to their western counterparts".⁵⁹

To become an idol, applicants go through an audition process to be accepted as trainees. As trainees they will spend years learning various languages, social media skills, dance, voice lessons, and other desirable skills. If the trainee fits a certain concept for an upcoming idol group, they will be selected and then practice extensively until that idol group's debut.⁶⁰ Only a very small percentage of trainees make it to an idol group, and sign to contracts ranging from 5 to 13 years.⁶¹ In some of these contracts, idols are not permitted to date, have limited contact with friends and are not allowed to have their own social media accounts.⁶² Dating scandals reported in tabloids can have a great negative impact on a group's success. If an idol is found to be so much as kissing someone, it ruins the illusion of their availability, which is an important sales point. Harsh penalties surrounding drug use in Korea prevent most idols from discussing or engaging in drug use. They appear to be well spoken, attractive, sexy (but not vulgar), talented individuals who are devoted to their fans. Just as these attributes are sustained by all other forms of media, K-pop albums are produced to maintain this wholesome image, this idea of *mugukjeok*, availability and appeal to mass global audiences.

⁵⁸ BBC news has reported on the harsh contracts of K-pop idols which sometimes threaten severe financial repercussions if they are broken, as well as Al Jazeera reported on the extreme contract of Joy from RaNia. E. Chong, "I could have been a K-pop idol - but I'm glad I quit", *BBC News*, 13 February 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/stories-51476159>, (accessed 15 May 2020) ; Howard 'Mapping the K-pop Past and Present', p.406

⁵⁹ Yoon, 'Global Imagination of K-pop', p.383

⁶⁰ This is a revised version of the assembly-style production that was originally developed in Japan and transformed by SM entertainment in the 1990s. It has become the standard for large entertainment companies in Korea to scout and train artists this way. Shin, 'Niche, Ethnic and Global Operations', p.28

⁶¹ Since contracts are not public knowledge, most of what we know comes from court cases and idols who have opened up about their personal experience.

⁶² Howard 'Mapping the K-pop Past and Present', p.405-6

Album Production

Previous research, as I've mentioned, discusses the shift from physical to digital media in quite absolutist terms. People are streaming and purchasing more online, and the lifespan of the CD is being cut short. However, recent statistics show that this is not entirely true, especially since there is no modern technology which replaces the function of a CD as a physical object for commercial exchange.⁶³ Part of the success of K-pop albums comes from restructuring marketing techniques, and by engaging with fans to see what they like or dislike. As Choi points out in his thesis, the Korean music industry has moved from an exchange perspective to a relationship perspective with an emphasis on value (co)creation.⁶⁴ Under the exchange perspective, companies produce a number of products in which the consumer is expected to make an independent decision and be persuaded to make a purchase. Under the relationship perspective production is completed with input from the consumers (usually informed through social media), in which consumers and companies inform each other to create desirable products.⁶⁵ Most obviously this is manifested in the variety of albums produced by idol groups.

Creating a single product that appeals to everyone is impossible. To compensate for that, K-pop albums are produced in a number of varieties that can appeal to different markets. Variations come in four separate categories: an album with different packaging and exclusive



Figure 1: Top Row: All four versions of BTS *MOTS:Persona*, Bottom Row: Both versions of ASTRO *Blue Flame*

⁶³ Some K-pop albums have been released on a “Kihno kit” which is a physical media with no actual data embedded in it. Instead, it contains a download link to play the album from the Kihno app, which is relatively new, and has only been formatted for K-pop albums as of right now. For more information see: *About Kihno*, [website], 2019, http://kihno.com/about/kihno_new.jsp, (accessed 15 May 2020)

⁶⁴ Choi, ‘Value and Value Creation’, p.35

⁶⁵ Choi, p.31

content (but the same CD), the same album produced in a different language, a re-release of an album with additional songs, and a separate album sung in a different language than Korean. Here we can look at a few examples. Both ASTRO's album *Blue Flame* and BTS's album *MOTS: Persona* come in multiple versions, with differences in packaging (see Figure 1). This type of repackaging appeals to collectors and fans because they can enjoy multiple versions with varying extra content. These additional photocards, photobooks and so on will be discussed in further detail later in the thesis. The second option occurs most often when popular album tracks are translated and re-recorded in Japanese. Many different K-pop groups have been known to do this, as the domestic Japanese market is significantly larger than the Korean market.⁶⁶ Due to extreme copyright restrictions and an emphasis on domestic markets, Japanese consumers invest more heavily in physical CDs than any other country within the global market.⁶⁷ Profits of selling a Japanese album, because purchasing physical albums is more of the normative culture there, outweighs the cost of production. Entertainment companies are aware that Japanese consumers value physical CDs, and therefore put more effort into distributing CDs that will appeal to that target audience. However, considering this thesis looks at albums from a western perspective, I will not be discussing the Japanese versions because they are uncommon within the western markets.

Other types of variations include re-releases. An example of this being Red Velvet's *The Perfect Red Velvet*. This album is classified as a re-package, because it is a re-release of their previous album, *Perfect Velvet* with three new songs. One of those songs, "Bad Boy" was released as a single with its own music video. *The Perfect Red Velvet* was promoted as a normal album release, while the group was simultaneously releasing a Japanese album (of a different name) and a summer mini album. While *The Perfect Red Velvet* is not technically a 'mini album', for the purposes of this thesis it functions as such, because it only contains three original tracks. Additionally, a different version on iTunes was available for purchase containing five songs, three of which were the new tracks alongside popular tracks from the previous album. Strictly speaking, releasing the EP on iTunes would have been sufficient if indeed the value of a CD has been diminished due to online services. SM Entertainment, the company behind Red Velvet recognized that there are many fans who still wish to have a physical copy. Repackaging

⁶⁶ Shin, 'Niche, Ethnic and Global Operations', p.22

⁶⁷ Shin, p.21

the album with the older tracks allowed SM Entertainment to provide fans with new material while still capitalizing on previously released material.

Lastly, a group can produce entirely *new* tracks in a different language. Groups such as Monsta X and WayV have done this with English, as well as Chinese. Specifically, Monsta X has released an album entirely in English as a sort of ‘American Debut’ within the US market.⁶⁸ In this case, Monsta X’s Korean entertainment company Starship worked with the Sony Entertainment subsidiary group Epic Records to produce something for an American audience. International partnerships, which may involve hiring local choreographers, signing with foreign companies and even the scouting foreign idols, is common within the industry.⁶⁹ Breaking into the American music scene poses its own difficulties, as K-pop is racialized within the west. Idol groups can never truly escape the “K-pop” label and exist simply as artists.⁷⁰ From a marketing perspective these albums are an answer to international fans wishing for more content. They are an attempt to appeal to fans who may feel hesitant towards K-pop due to the language barrier. Albums that are produced in English may appeal to a wider range of international fans, thus introducing them to the culture of K-pop including the elaborate album design and content within.

Album Design

When I refer to the design of K-pop albums as elaborate, I do not mean that the actual packaging comes in a complex structure with numerous folds and intricate embellishments (though it absolutely can). Rather I am referring to how the content of a K-pop album is curated in an interactive and highly sensorial way. Willoughby points out that album packaging serves several purposes; it protects the contents within,



Figure 2: K-pop albums lined up, spines facing outward.

⁶⁸ The album, *All About Luv* was released by Epic Records on 14 February 2020.

⁶⁹ Shin, ‘Niche, Ethnic and Global Operations’, p.32

⁷⁰ Many fans felt the group BTS were racially profiled by receiving the “K-pop” video of the year award from MTV, as opposed to winning the overall award. It was the first time MTV announced the K-pop video of the year award. J. Kim, ‘BTS Wins First VMA in Controversial K-pop Category’, *Variety*, 26 August 2019, <https://variety.com/2019/music/news/bts-vmaw-kpop-category-mtv-1203314934/>, (accessed 20 May 2020)

complements the music in some way, acts as advertisement and is a commodity separate from that of the CD.⁷¹ Under that logic, the album designs by definition add value to the CD and become an important marketing tool. I argue that K-pop albums, in addition to the previous definition provide a venue for fans to cultivate a connection with their idols. From a marketing perspective, albums have a consistent thematic packaging style that is attractive to consumers. The textures and visual material, including portraiture, provides a sensorial experience that is an important frame for the music. For many western consumers this attention to detail is surprising, because it is not the industry standard for any western companies or genres. In an interview with *Billboard* magazine Bernie Cho, head of a music export agency in Korea is quoted as saying “When you usually buy a CD, it’s assumed you’re buying a plastic disc that happens to have a booklet, in Korea, with a lot of the big releases it’s almost the other way around: You are buying an elaborate book that just happens to have a CD”.⁷² Most Americans and Europeans are accustomed to a simple plastic jewel case cover with a small lyric booklet.

The size of K-pop albums is worth taking note of, as it is a visual signifier that identifies the objects as different from other genres. In Figure 2 all of the physical albums that make up my more empirical material are lined up next to each other (see Figure 2). Here you can see that only one of the seven albums come in a traditional jewel case package. The rest are around that same size as a generic paperback novel, with a hard cover and a pocket or foam form for the CD to sit in.⁷³ In general, K-pop albums tend to diverge from the typical jewel-case, and take various

⁷¹ I. Inglis, cited in Willoughby, ‘Under the Covers’, p.346

⁷² Herman and Rashid, ‘For the K-pop Industry’, para 20.

⁷³ While initially it may appear as a bit of a given, all of the albums I am referring to include a physical CD. All albums have to be released in CD format to be considered for the Hanteo Chart, with one exception. In 2017, world famous rapper and singer G-Dragon from the group BigBang released a solo album in USB format inside of a traditional jewel case. The USB actually did not contain any songs on it, but instead contained a serial number which was to be imputed on the YG Entertainment main site in order to download the songs on the album. This was unprecedented in the K-pop industry and was not initially accepted by the Hanteo Chart. After much debate, and due to its popularity, the album was eventually recognized by the charts. D. Deahl, ‘Korea won’t count K-pop rapper G-Dragon’s USB release as an album’, *The Verge*, 21 June 2017, <https://www.theverge.com/2017/6/21/15845770/korea-k-pop-g-dragon-usb-album-kwon-ji-yong>, (accessed 17 May 2020)



Figure 3: AOA *New Moon* (left) and ASTRO *Blue Flame* (right) cover with texture detail.

shapes and sizes depending on the content within. On a shelf the albums appear quite dynamic, they all vary slightly but they still have three themes in common. All of the albums emphasize texture, include portraiture of the idols as well serve their function as jackets for the CD. As Cho mentioned, they are in many ways, elaborate books as well as protective cases for the CDs. Many K-pop albums utilize textures that are uncommon for the average music CD, such as fabrics (ASTRO *Blue Flame* and AOA *New Moon*, see Figure 3), varying levels of hard cardboard (Dreamcatcher *Raid of Dream*, KARD *Ride on the Wind*, and Monsta X *Take 2 We Are Here*, see Figure 4) or plastic (Red Velvet *The Perfect Red Velvet*, see Figure 5). Some of the



Figure 4: Monsta X *Take 2 We Are Here* (upper left), KARD *Ride on the Wind* (lower left) and Dreamcatcher *Raid of Dream* (right) cover art and detail images.



Figure 5: Red Velvet *The Perfect Red Velvet* cover (upper left), photobook, jewel case and outer sleeve detail

albums have a slightly rubberized coating that makes the jacket soft to the touch (BTS *MOTS Persona*). Additionally, there are multiple separate items within the album that are designed to be interacted with. This includes photocards, a photobook, and various other ‘extras’ like postcards, bookmarks or posters. These items allow consumers to interact with the material on multiple levels, and each have their own tangible differences.

Photobooks, a staple of the K-pop album, usually have photos printed on high quality

paper, which changes to a different texture or quality of paper when reaching the lyric portion of the book. Lyrics books can sometimes come as separate booklets, but often are included within the contents of the photobook. Lyrics within the photobook differentiate them from other independently sold photobooks, which have their own market.

Portraiture discussed here refers to the importance of including high quality images of the idols themselves. There seems to be a preference for staged, professional photoshoots of the idols rather than concert photos or performance visuals. In every case referenced here, photographs of idols, both close-up shots of their faces and full body photos make up a large portion of the albums’ content. Even the smaller, jewel case Red Velvet CD came with a corresponding photocard of one of the members of the group along with a small photo book with high quality images of the group. Photocards, as opposed to the photobooks, are wallet sized images that usually have a single member on them, and range between being a professional photoshoot image to a ‘selfie’ style photo. Their size makes them easy to carry around, and store. It has become a trend for K-pop lovers to put their ‘bias’ or favorite member’s photocard in their clear phone case for a custom look that they can switch out easily. These products are not exclusive to K-pop albums and can come in other idol merchandise. For example, colored contacts promoted by BTS come with their own photocard. Even non-K-pop idols can have their own photocards for sale, or as an additional bonus when purchasing their merchandise. Popular South Korean

YouTuber Itsjinakim includes photocards with every purchase of her clothing merchandise.⁷⁴ While she does not deal explicitly with K-pop content on her channel, it is likely that this trend is inspired by photocards in the K-pop community. As a South Korean, she does interact with K-pop content on her channel and is well aware of the global popularity of K-pop music. Taylor Swift's 2019 album *Lover* had a deluxe version that came in four separate varieties and is often compared a K-pop album, with its own photobook and pictures.⁷⁵ This illustrates that it is possible the inclusion of photocards of popular celebrity figures may spread across industries and genres.

What ends up tying these elements together as components of an album is the CD. A K-pop album needs to include a CD with officially released tracks as well as some kind of information crediting those who were involved with the production. Often this takes place in the form of a lyric booklet within the photobook, with occasional additional information such as notes about the music included. Without including the CD, the album would simply be an intricately packaged collection of photographs. The CD, regardless of whether or not the user ever uses it to listen to the music on it, fulfills a multisensory experience where the consumer feels, sees and hears in relation to the object and its various components. CDs have a unique place in technology because they are the most modern, popularized *physical* format of music consumption, yet they are at the same time considered somewhat outdated because of the digital turn towards music streaming services. For this reason, looking at a CD one can easily recognize what it is, what it is for and how to use it, unlike per say the floppy disk that mainly lives on as the save button icon in various data programs. Seeing a CD, we can immediately recognize it as a medium for auditory experience, understanding that if we wanted to we *could* access that information at any time.⁷⁶ Within a given album, consumers can expect to receive certain components, such as the CD, photobook and photocard, while still retaining the excitement of the unknown since it is never certain which member's photocard you will get, or what all the pictures in the photobook will look like. Thus, the components usually found in the K-pop album

⁷⁴ itsjinakim, 'Sneak peek of my photo cards for my patrons & @shopjinakim pre-order customers 💖', [website], 21 February 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B81FoaMnqL4/> (accessed 21 May 2020)

⁷⁵ UNBOXING: *Lover Deluxe Albums -Taylor Swift*, [online video], 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Y4sX4EMF54>, (accessed 22 May 2020)

⁷⁶ While the floppy disc is only readable through a floppy disc drive, CDs retain some technological relevance in that they can be played by devices such as DVD players and gaming consoles even if it is not that device's intended function.

give the consumer a sense of familiarity when making purchases, without becoming too predictable.

Chapter One Summary

There is nothing particularly “Korean” about K-pop, at least nothing that can be pinpointed in exact terminology.⁷⁷ The genre is truly an amalgamation of global music trends born through South Korea’s own complicated cultural and political history. Despite this, or perhaps because of this, K-pop retains its own sense of Korean-ness by mixing and interacting with various other genres to establish a recognizable image and mediated sound reflective of its own complicated music history. As it is embraced by the current government of South Korea, many people see K-pop as representative of Korea. For some westerners it may be their only insight into Korean culture. Understanding K-pop as a globalized soundscape helps to contextualize exactly how the music has reached its current level of international attention.

Album variations visualize the export-focused marketing strategies employed by Korean entertainment companies, informed by the value (co)creation model. Utilizing social media to the fullest, idols are able to interact with their fans across multiple platforms and advertise their group at the same time. Social media use allows the entertainment companies to gauge the differences between certain markets and make slight alterations to their products in order to cater to these differences and maximize profits. Detailed contracts and years of training ensures that the idols retain a wholesome image, and appeal across a wide range of audiences. The image of the idol becomes one that is desirable from multiple perspectives, from their looks to their talent and their respectable demeanor. The idol then becomes a central part of the album design process, with a large portion of the design focusing on portraiture.

Other aspects, such as textiles and the music-related content (lyrics, the CD) encourage a multi-sensory experience of the CD album for the consumers. Buyers are not only are given numerous variations to choose from within a single album release, but they are also encouraged to interact with the contents within. Photobooks allow consumers to visually explore the figures of the idols with clear professionally styled photographs, while photocards encourage collecting

⁷⁷ Yoon, ‘Global Imagination of K-pop’, p.377

and trading. Other objects within the album vary enough that consumers are consistently surprised, encouraging repeat purchases. Lastly, it is the CD which ties all of these elements together. All of the extra perks within the album renew interest in the physical CD, and with each album release encourage consumers to consider the album as an exploration of the artists themselves. Challenging traditional conceptions of what constitutes an 'album' through size, texture and imagery, physical K-pop releases have been able to remain relevant in an age otherwise dominated by digital downloads.

Chapter 2: Relationship Building and Meaning Formations

So how exactly do these objects affect the consumer-artist dynamic? What does it mean to say albums provide a venue for fans to cultivate a connection with their idols? With semiotic analysis, meaning formations can be broken down to illustrate how visual narratives manifest in the thematic elements within the K-pop album that construct a relationship with the fans. As Walter Benjamin notes, when photography “freed the hand” so many years ago, it forever altered the way we perceive images.⁷⁸ Signs, according to Roland Barthes are what we use to read images, and those signs are then translated into linguistic messages (informed through text), coded iconic (perceived) and non-coded iconic (literal) messages.⁷⁹ Within advertising, he notes, signs should be obvious, meaning that consumers should be able to immediately recognize and understand what the signs are and what they represent.⁸⁰ I will be referring to coded messages as connotated images, and non-coded as denoted messages. Because the albums are global commodities these signs, and by extension messages, are being consumed by people from various cultures and communities. They will be reading these images in different contexts. According to Barthes, when context is removed from an image, and the original meaning of that image disappears, a mythology is formed which is composed of new meanings for the image. The mythical in Barthes terminology is discontinuous, produced by a phraseology that is fragmented.⁸¹ These fragments are revealed within the K-pop album when the visual narratives are deconstructed through multiple lenses, and multiple frameworks.

Looking at the K-pop album from various angles, its authenticity, its image production and its practice reveals not only the connotated messages produced but also how these messages establish the mythical. In Willoughby’s previous definition of an album, cover artwork is essential for drawing in new listeners, and is used as a visual advertising tool. In the case of the K-pop album, cover artwork remains minimalist, instead relying on the album’s unique shape and internal contents to encourage further purchases. Rather than rely on cover art to advertise for the music, visual signs *within* the album create a mythological narrative representing a

⁷⁸ Benjamin, *The Works of Art*, p. 10

⁷⁹ Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, p.36

⁸⁰ Barthes, p.33

⁸¹ Barthes, p.165.

relationship with the idols. Albums become less about the music, which they are reliant upon, and more about establishing a bridge between idol and consumer.

Authenticity and Newness

Interacting with these products is a truly sensorial experience, which is emphasized through both the tactile nature of the packaging and the feeling of newness when the album is removed from its shrink wrap. Removing this outer layering implies a sense of novelty, that this product is individualized, one of its kind and therefore special. The object's tangibility implies a kind of permanence that is not visual in its digital counterparts. Value that is placed in physicality can be explained further by Walter Benjamin's theory of the aura. According to Benjamin, a singular item contains an aura, an essence of itself that through the process of reproduction is divided into smaller and smaller fragments.⁸² Through the loss of the aura there is also the loss of authenticity, as the origin of the product is that which is the most authentic. In the case of the K-pop album, which can exist in multiple forms, the aura is affected differently as a result of these variations. In order to break this down further, I will refer back to the three main thematic design elements discussed in the previous chapter: textiles, portraiture and music.

I have already mentioned that textiles and other materials are a significant part of the K-pop album design. These marketing choices also impact the authenticity of the object. Linen textiles, such as the type of texture featured on both the AOA and ASTRO album are not typical materials used within music packaging, making them more difficult to reproduce and thus decreasing the risk of 'false' or counterfeit copies. While according to Benjamin it is difficult (some might say impossible) to trace the origin of an object's aura, as historically technology has been reinventing itself for centuries, from a collector's perspective this makes first edition copies of these items' originals. These originals, because they are wrapped in a unique texture and are more difficult to reproduce, hold a sense of authenticity separate from that of typical jewel-case packaging. For other types of packaging, like the rubberized cover on the BTS album or the embossed Monsta X album, the same kind of logic applies. Small details such as thickness, height and page texture vary slightly with each group's individual releases. This ensures enough

⁸² Benjamin, *The Works of Art*, p.17

diversity within the packaging to both convince consumers that the items they receive are unique (therefore more authentic) and still provide a sense of familiarity through a connection to basic technology which they often visually mimic: the book.

As the consumer handles these objects the authenticity and aura of the object are of significance for two primary reasons. Firstly, from an economic standpoint the more authentic the item is the more monetary value it has. An authentic Van Gogh, for example, will always sell for more than a reproduction. Secondly the stronger the object's aura, the closer the individual is to the object's origin through association. Rather than feeling as though they are receiving a mass-produced item from a nameless production site, the individualization of these albums makes consumers feel as though they are getting something exclusive. The item's familiar shape, that of a book, ensures that only people who are interested in this type of music will be able to recognize it for what it actually is: a music album. Individual albums hold the *connotation* of being special. More than just an album, it is a ticket into an exclusive community. Consumers can then share that privileged experience with people who share the same interests.



Figure 6: Clear and round photocards found in different albums.

The same kind of community structure is encouraged through the inclusion of photocards within each album. Each photocard, usually of a singular member of the group, is randomized, meaning there is no guarantee that you will get a specific member from whatever version of the album you purchase. This encourages both extra spending, and interaction between fans for trading.

One particular online forum exists for the singular purpose of cataloging and tracking photocards.⁸³ Each time a new album is released, users compile images of each available photocard, usually discovered through purchasing multiple copies, and upload the images for collectors to use as a referencing guide for what they have or want.

An online database with these images poses its own problems in terms of aura and authenticity for photocard collectors. While having a reference guide to catalog the available photocard options is useful from a logistical standpoint, uploads of these images allow for their inevitable reproduction. Not only are they multiplied in a digital format, stripping them of their physicality, but they can then be (and often are) printed at home for wannabe collectors that cannot afford to purchase them independently. The aura, in this instance, is diminished from the object first through its digital rendering, and then once again as it is reprinted from that digital rendering. Specially printed photocards, which can be clear like in the Monsta X and Dreamcatcher albums or have an unusual shape such as the circular one in the AOA album are trickier to reproduce (see Figure 6). Including unique cards in the albums prevent these kinds of at-home printed copies from being mistaken for the original versions.⁸⁴

Photobooks function similarly to photocards in terms of providing a visual connection between consumer and idol but have a higher value in terms of authenticity. This is because of the size of the photocards, versus the size of the photobooks. While photocards come in small, easily replicated wallet sizes, the included photobooks are bound with multiple pages of photo paper. Some of the photos are even split across the binding which makes them difficult to scan and copy. Additionally, not all of the photobooks are uniform within a particular album. Different versions of the same album often have different photographs. They contain the same number of images, and each member is still featured in the same way, but the concepts of the photos have changed. Take for example ASTRO's *Blue Flame* which contains two variants: the book version and the story version. The tan version of the album, known as the book version, contains photos within a tan or sepia toned color pallet and a visual narrative emphasizing reading and novels. The members are often seen holding books, posing by books, or surrounding by books. In contrast, the story version is blue in color and the photos inside have more of an

⁸³The forum is, aptly named, 'Photocard Forum'. *Photocard Forum*, [website], 2015, <https://photocard.boards.net/>, (accessed 11 February 2020)

⁸⁴ These cards also have their own glossy coating, which cannot be replicated on a home printer.

elegant theme. The members pose with floral accessories and instead of bookcases there is a large chandelier in the background. AOA's *New Moon* does not contain multiple versions, instead the album has multiple photo concepts or themes within the singular photobook. In every case the photobooks provide consumers with special access to images that might not be available digitally. Photos which are reposted online as part of intermedial marketing strategies do not retain the same kind of authentic aura because they lack the physicality of a tactile object. Additionally, they are removed from their original context. Instead of belonging to a collection of items within a larger album, they are detached from the whole and singled out. Since the value of an item increases when it has all its original parts, when those parts are removed they subsequently lose value.⁸⁵ Images within an album are most authentic when they are together with the rest of the album.

Do we then look at something like the CD, packaged carefully within these albums as a device of authenticity? Where does the music itself fit into this narrative? As mentioned earlier, we live in an age of digital streaming. Just the other day I was looking through my things trying to figure out if I even have a device that can play one of these physical CDs. I no longer have a CD-player, my laptop does not have a disc reader and I cannot remember the last time I saw a boom box. For someone who has grown up with CDs being the norm, this was a shocking revelation. My DVD player was the only thing that could play the CDs I purchased, which means that I would have to play the music from my television, taking portability completely out of the equation. Despite this, I found myself happy to have a physical manifestation of the music that has appealed to me. The authenticity of the object lies not in its function, as a tool to listen to music, but in its representation of the music in a tangible form. Here, a new meaning of the authentic begins to unfold. If we were to follow Benjamin's traditional understanding of aura and authenticity then we could look at the CD and try to trace its physical origins. From one perspective the closest thing would be to hear the idols actually performing the songs themselves, but even that would be divisive because the instruments are not recorded simultaneously with the vocals. Elements like backing tracks, sound effects and mastering techniques within sound design alter the recording from its inception to its completion into something entirely irreproducible in person. There will never be a performance that mimics with

⁸⁵ Benjamin, *The Works of Art*, p.13

exact precision what is recorded on the CD.⁸⁶ As that same recording is then replicated over and over to create the mass-produced item sold in stores, it is difficult to say that there truly is an ‘original’. Rather, the ‘original’ is an illusion - a result of several complex processes leading to the development of the CD within the packaged album. The CD within the packaged album, as it is transferred into this new context becomes its own ‘original’ within the first press copies.

Up until this point I have taken a rather literal approach to the concepts of aura and authenticity as Benjamin has described them. However, the terms that Benjamin discusses do not encompass the overall complexity of the kind of product being analyzed here. Benjamin, when highlighting aura and authenticity, was discussing primarily art and film, and how their mediums and mass production of such mediums relate to their reception and value. While I argue that these albums can absolutely be seen as art in their own right, the curated photos and sensuality of the objects are of special craftsmanship, they are produced for commercial purposes to be consumed by a specific audience. When the object is packaged initially from its warehouse and then sent to the consumer’s house, a transaction of ownership is taking place. The album is no longer part of a collective, mass produced lineup. Instead the album becomes a personalized item within an *individual’s* realm of belongings. For some, this may simply be an item for personal enjoyment and have no specific attachment to a broader collection of albums. For others, this item would take a specific place as an authentic item within a contextual library of other similar products. If the former, someone who simply purchased an album with no intention of buying more decides later on to establish their own collection, that particular album then gains greater significance in terms of emotional and logistical value as the ‘first’ in a growing collective. That singular item becomes the authentic original in more than one way, as the original of its own individual group’s first press album, and as the original in the personal collection of a devoted collector. Aura, as it can be related in this scenario of personal ownership, may be strongest within the first album of a collector’s purchase, or even perhaps the first purchase of a particular group’s album. Personal attachment, or significance more appropriately, is in this context what determines the strength of the item’s aura.

⁸⁶ Unless of course the artist is then lip synching to a play-back of the CD, but then you still have the auditory dimensions of the environment to consider. Either the sounds of fans if the performance is live or the mastering techniques used by the television station broadcasting the performance.

Ownership, or possession as French sociologist Jean Baudrillard defines it, is a key function of an object's purpose.⁸⁷ Another is for the object to be put to use. The CD within the context of the album is no longer consumed solely for its function, but also finds value as a possession. When an object is possessed, it is “*abstracted from its function and thus brought into relationship with the subject*”.⁸⁸ In what form that relationship manifests itself depends on the level of passion the possessor has for the object. According to Baudrillard, when an object is abstracted entirely from the function of use, it becomes strictly subjective and thus part of a collection.⁸⁹ Inherent in this process is a sense of intimacy with the object, where the possessor feels an attachment beyond simply owning it. The concept of ownership allows the item to become ‘personal’. The ability to hold said item, and physically interact with it contributes to the item's singularity while its existence as part of a series (that is, other K-pop albums in whatever context) subtly encourages the possessor to continue adding to their collection.

Physical objects procure a sense of ‘reality’ perpetuated through touch versus the visual, as the visual can oftentimes be easily manipulated, or illusioned. We do not always believe what we see, and often use touch as a way of determining reality even if this, too, can be easily manipulated. Consider the other components that come with each album, and how they might relate to this concept of authenticity. The 2018 KARD album *Ride on the Wind* includes a fake concert ticket complete with a date and time. Despite knowing the tickets are fake, they appear ‘real’ because we can hold them, in some cases they could feel more real than an online ticket for concert we actually attended. Memorabilia such as this encourages a fantasy in which a physical keepsake has been provided for. The line between lived experience and desired experience becomes blurred, opening the door to a fetishization of these idols that exits the virtual world and enters your personal home. A closer look at the photobooks and photocards within reveals the extent to which consumers are visually seduced into cultivating an imaginary dialogue with these artists.

⁸⁷ J. Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, London, Verso, 2005, p.92

⁸⁸ Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, p.91

⁸⁹ Baudrillard, p.92

The Gaze and the Idol

Idols' are in some ways both a blank canvas and a creatively orchestrated image. At the same time, they are people with their own hopes, desires and personalities. The extent to which these individuals reveal their own personalities is completely dependent on the company they signed with, the freedoms they allow their idol as well as the idol's own willingness to play the part of the 'concept' they were given. What goes on behind the scenes is unknown to fans, but the content involving these artists is so abundant that fans feel as though they know the idols in a personal way. From television shows, to commercials, to 'behind the scenes' footage it is hard to believe that someone could be playing a part for so much of their lives. And, indeed, they may not be. It is important to keep in mind that most of the idols' lives are heavily edited for public consumption. This is especially true for how the idols are presented within K-pop albums; each pose, angle and framing are intentional. The denoted message of photobooks is that they are a collection of images of the artists designed to accompany an album. As Barthes points out, edited material, or material that has been influenced through human intervention "effectively belong to the plane of connotation".⁹⁰ This is especially true for the album photobooks, as they are carefully curated to have a certain type of concept or appeal. Images within the albums are therefore full of coded iconic messages, which are contextualized by the consumer. Taking a closer look at how idols are represented within the photobooks and photocards can reveal the saturated layers of meaning within.

The primary interaction consumers have with the artists within the album comes from the portraiture. How they are posed, what kinds of photographs are included and how they are edited all impact the perception of the idols. As such, portraiture is key to cultivating the relationship between artist and consumer. I will be discussing the photos found in the photobooks of the seven albums that constitute the empirical material for this study, with a focus on BTS *MOTS Persona*, AOA *New Moon* and KARD *Ride on the Wind*. The analyses of these albums aim to tease out some of the overarching trends relating to the K-pop genre. All the photobooks are constructed with a certain number of photographs of each member, combined with group photographs. While there are always exceptions, looking at these albums, all from different entertainment companies and with different concepts can provide a general analysis of the ways

⁹⁰ Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, p.44

idols are presented to global audiences, and give some idea of what the codes represent from a western perspective.

BTS, *MOTS: Persona*



Figure 7: Group photo of all seven BTS members in *MOTS: Persona* ver.1

This particular album comes in four different variations, each with their own thematic styling. Aside from a very slight color change, the cover of each album is the same. Each is a shade of pink, with a line drawing of a heart on the front. Inside the

package however, the

portraits within the photobooks are different, though they all share similar qualities. In each of the versions, the color saturation and palette focus on bright pinks and blues. For version one, photos are laid out like film strips, with a collage of the members broken up by individual photographs. In the group photo, we are placed in the camera's perspective (see Figure 7). The members pose in front of the lens as if taking a snapshot, making silly faces and interacting with the camera. As we make direct eye contact with the members, we are let into their world of fun. Looking at the individual group members photos, we remain the camera lens, as they pose and interact with props for our entertainment (See Figure 8). Towards the side of the film strip, we can see a blurred hand or finger blocking part of the lens. These images resemble selfie style photos, as if they are using the front camera rather than the back camera. This is more identifiable in V's individual photo set as his prop is a selfie stick with his selfie still lit up on the screen (see Figure 9).



Figure 8: Photo collage of BTS member's individual photosets in *MOTS: Persona ver. 1*



Figure 9: BTS member V individual photoset from *MOTS: Persona ver. 1*

A sense of intimacy is portrayed within these images, as they mimic the viewpoint of being on a one on one video call. Possibly, the viewer could imagine themselves as a participant in these images, on the other side of that video call. As selfie style photographs, they also carry the connotation of being more personal, as they are taken by the idols themselves, and not in a

professional studio by a photographer even though they have been edited and placed in a specific layout to look that way.

Intimacy becomes another common theme looking at the photographs in version two. Film strip style photographs still provide a snapshot into the idol's personal lives, but the perspective of the viewer has changed. Instead of looking at the idols as a participant, viewers are seeing the idols from their bathroom mirror (see Figure 10). The frame, towel and shower curtain are all signs that signify the location as the bathroom. Combined with their actions, fixing their hair, and adjusting their shirts the connotation is that the viewer is the mirror and the idols are unaware that we are looking at them. Their gaze is returned, they are looking at the camera lens, but the implications of the location, the bathroom which is a private space, and perspective the viewer has on the other side of the mirror connotes that the idols are oblivious of our look. We are spying on them; they have become an object simply for our aesthetic pleasure. The viewer shares a sense of intimacy in which they are free to look into a personal, private, and very human routine of getting ready in the bathroom. They are removed from status of 'celebrity' and become relatable.



Figure 10: BTS member J-Hope individual photoset in *MOTS: Persona ver.2*



Figure 11: BTS member Suga individual photoset from *MOTS: Persona* ver. 3

Version three offers another change of location, but this time to an unknown room. The clothes that the idols are wearing appear to be pajamas, which gives the impression that it is nighttime, and they are headed to their bedroom for rest (see Figure 11). Later photographs of the idols

posing beside a wardrobe contribute to the

connotation of both a bedroom and that it is nighttime. The association between the wardrobe and what they are wearing creates this implication. All of the idols continue to make eye contact with the camera, signaling that they are aware of being looked at and that this act of looking is welcomed. While the idea of this being their bedroom is easily assumed, the absence of a bed makes the invitation of their gaze non-sexual.

Images within the fourth and final version, have a more sexual connotation. In the individual photographs this is visualized through the idols' interactions with fruit (see Figure 12). In each image the fruit is brought up in a way to draw attention to the idol's mouth and hands. Direct eye contact with the camera acknowledges the



Figure 12: BTS member Jimin poses for a photo in *MOTS: Persona* ver. 4

viewer, fruit posed in an enigmatic coded message connotating the act of consumption. Drawing attention to their mouths and hands, the idols are sexualized without being revealing or graphic. Fruit touches their lips in a soft way, a gentle kiss, while their eyes suggest they know they are being watched. Viewers are led to fantasize through a slow seduction of eyes, hands and mouths. This kind of sexual intimacy concludes the illusion so carefully narrated throughout the albums. Even independently, each album presents an exploration of intimacy with the idol's bodies. Not explicitly, but through a phraseology, a series of images with carefully curated messages, a mythological fantasy is formulated of a personal relationship with the idols.

If we compare these images to those found within other all-male groups, posing with objects near or directed towards the mouth is a common theme. We can see this in both versions of ASTRO *Blue Flame*, as well as in Monsta X's *Take 2 We are Here* album (see Figure 13). Direct eye contact is important, because the returned gaze provides the invitation to look. However, there are also many cases where eye contact is



Figure 13: Top Row: ASTRO *Blue Flame* portraits, alternating Book and Story version; Bottom Row: Selected photographs from Monsta X *Take 2 We Are Here*

avoided. The succession of these images, alternating between returned and avoidant gaze turns the idol into a participant of the gaze. They pose, knowing they are to be looked at, but allowing you to objectify them. While this can be read as an oppressive act of fetishization, bell hooks notes that the oppositional gaze of the other also creates agency for change.⁹¹ Sexualizing the Asian male body holds very different connotations than the female body because of the west's history of racially stereotyping Asian men to be undesirable.⁹² Because Asian men are often de-

⁹¹bell hooks, *Black Looks*, p.116

⁹² The U.S. specifically began to desexualize Asian men as a response to Chinese immigration. Chinese men were perceived as a threat to white American job security, as well as stealing white American women. A recent study revealed that Asian-American men still struggle with their identity due to racist stereotypes about Asian men. A.

sexualized in western cultures, these albums provide additional representation for the Korean ‘other’, challenging traditional concepts of beauty and seducing the audience to look.

Clothing also plays an important role in the staging of these images. The idols’ clothing is not only coordinated to match the setting but is always high fashion. For the ‘sexier’ concepts, rather than show the idols shirtless, or showcasing more sexually charged body parts, the clothing is showcases more delicate parts of the body.⁹³ The lower back, sheer fabric highlighting the shoulders with lace, and the collarbone are all parts of the body that may appear to be framed in a ‘feminine’ way from a western perspective (see Figure 13). Combined with makeup, which is still considered taboo for straight men in western culture, K-pop idols do not visually represent traditional ideologies of masculinity.⁹⁴ In South Korea, the concept of ‘flower boys’, or more feminine looking idols is quite popular.⁹⁵ However, this does not mean that femininity is acceptable for men. There is still a strong patriarchal structure that does not in large accept queer identities, as well as a history of cross-dressing and performance that contextualizes this aesthetic under heteronormative values.⁹⁶ Because idols are performers by trade, they are able to dress and wear makeup because the underlying societal expectation is that they are heterosexual by default. For a western observer, however, scholar D.C. Oh points out that without this context K-pop idols presenting androgyny through performance, and I argue through imagery as well, challenge traditional concepts of masculinity and can read as representative of queer identities.⁹⁷ For queer fans, not only does this allow for representation of a different kind of masculinity, sexuality becomes ambiguous. The flux between masculine and feminine presentations allows them to participate in a mythical relationship with the idols as well.

Kung, ‘The desexualization of the Asian American male’, *CNN Style*, 3 March 2020,

<https://edition.cnn.com/style/article/andrew-kung-asian-american-men/index.html>, (accessed 18 May 2020); K. Liao, K. Y.-H., Shen, F. C., Cox, A. R., et. al. ‘Asian American Men’s Body Image Concerns: A Focus Group Study’ *Psychology of Men & Masculinities*, advance online publication, 2019, doi:10.1037/men0000234

⁹³ This is changing as certain groups targeted for more western audiences have begun to reveal more and more skin.

⁹⁴ I would like to point out that makeup has been used in performance by men for many years, but the use of more feminine ‘beauty’ style makeup on male K-pop idols is still unusual to see on straight men. As a whole, makeup for straight men is still considered taboo in western culture. M. Hall, B. Gough, and S. Seymour-Smith “‘I’m METRO, NOT Gay!’: A Discursive Analysis of Men’s Accounts of Makeup Use on YouTube.’ *Journal of Men’s Studies* 20, no. 3, 2012, p.222

⁹⁵ Oh and Oh, ‘Unmasking Queerness’, p.9

⁹⁶ Oh and Oh, p.10.

⁹⁷ Oh and Oh, p.22

AOA *New Moon*

For all-female groups, the gaze provides a different kind of connotation. When Laura Mulvey first coined the term the *male gaze* she was referring to female bodies within the cinema, but the term is easily extended to the photograph. After all, quoting Barthes, Mulvey explains that the image allows for a continuous gaze, we can look at it for as long as we desire and it therefore has its own meaning.⁹⁸ In western culture, as opposed to men who are desexualized, Asian women are often fetishized.⁹⁹ Looking at AOA's album *New Moon*, we can see how the male gaze impacts the connotations within the image.



Figure 14: Photo-collage of all five members of AOA in *New Moon*

Comparing the image structure of this album to that of the all-male groups' albums there are many similarities. Group photos combined with individual member photos introduce the viewer to the idols. In this album, there are no separate variations, instead the images are divided in the book to present two different photo concepts. One more edgy and one more retro as visualized by their clothing. There are continuous moon symbols to remind us of the album's title. For

⁹⁸ R. Sassatelli, 'Interview with Laura Mulvey Gender, Gaze and Technology in Film Culture', *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 28, no. 5, 2011, pp.137

⁹⁹ Zhou, Yanyan, and Bryant Paul. "Lotus Blossom or Dragon Lady: A Content Analysis of 'Asian Women' Online Pornography." *Sexuality & Culture*, vol. 20, no. 4, 2016, pp.1083

female idols, the oppositional gaze is essential for retaining autonomy of their bodies. As Mulvey writes, the world is ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between the active (male) and passive (female) roles.¹⁰⁰ In order for idols to take an active role, they have to engage with the viewer. In the all-female photobooks, when the returned gaze is alternatively given and taken away, they appear passive, whereas when the male idols do the same they appear active in their consent. The oppositional gaze has the potential to challenge prevailing patriarchal norms, but the extreme binary structure of the groups being all-male or all-female already visually signifies the group's difference as related to their gender. Social constructs relating to gender identity are further perpetuated by how the members of AOA are posed within their photobook.

As exemplified in Figure 14, these women do not need to engage with props to visualize their sexuality. Instead their postures and poses provide a sensual invitation that engages with the viewer on a more subtle level. For each of the five members, there is a photo spread featuring the idols either laying down or leaning back. In these photos, as well as others, the viewer takes a dominant position over the idols, either looking down at them or observing them from their place of comfort. The viewer, through the male gaze takes the active role of looking while the idols have no choice to accept.

In contrast to their submissive posture, the idols' faces radiate confidence. They appear effortlessly sexy, both comfortable and desirable without wearing revealing clothing or making suggestive poses. For Korean artists, showing off legs rather than cleavage or their butts becomes the socially acceptable way to sexualize their bodies.¹⁰¹ Consistently, many outfits shown in the albums draw attention to the legs such as the trench coats in Dreamcatcher's *Raid of Dream* album and fishnet stockings in Red Velvet's *The Perfect Red Velvet* (see Figure 15). Because legs are not controversial as cleavage, (though they are still sexualized) it becomes socially acceptable for young women to desire and emulate these artists. For young men, they get to enjoy this act of looking which reinforces the patriarchal narrative of male dominance over female bodies.

¹⁰⁰ Mulvey, *Feminism and Film Theory*, p.62

¹⁰¹ Unger, 'The Aporia of Presentation', p.34



Figure 15: Dreamcatcher group photo from *Raid of Dream* (left); Red Velvet member Yeri photo from *The Perfect Red Velvet* (upper right); Red Velvet member Seulgi photo from *The Perfect Red Velvet* (lower right).



Figure 16: AOA members Yuna (left) and Jimin (right) styled for their 'retro' concept in *New Moon*

In the retro photos, the major change is simply a difference in clothing and hairstyle (see Figure 16). The women do not use props because it is already known that they are the subject of looking. These images are the starkest example of how the role of the idol becomes not that of a

musician, but that of a model. Taken out of context it could appear that they are modeling for a clothing company, but within the context of the album it is understood that they are modeling themselves, and their identities. Each individual member is a part of their brand as an idol group, and therefore are posing for the audience, inviting the look and silently persuading the viewer to get to know them on a corporeal level, separate from their music. Whether that is simply taking pleasure in viewing their bodies or learning more about them on a personal level is a choice the viewer is left to make.

While none of the all-female albums I have mentioned thus far focus on a ‘cute’ aesthetic, it is important to note that images of the female idol never leave the realm of hyper feminization.¹⁰² They are always, whether it be through their hair, makeup or clothing presented in traditionally feminine ways. Even in the Dreamcatcher album, which has a concept of authority and strength, they remain feminine in their styling of hair and makeup when they wear more masculine clothing such as a dress-shirt and tie in Figure 15. For female idols, the concept of ‘cuteness’, often referred to as *aeygo*, perpetuates a patriarchal ideology which fetishizes and infantilizes femininity.¹⁰³ Whereas connotations of androgyny and queer identity can be read from the male idol’s album photos, the same cannot be said for the female idols.

Female idols are fixated within in the impossible stereotype of extreme sensuality and simultaneous innocence cast upon them by the Eurocentric gaze.¹⁰⁴ When Edward Said discusses the concept of orientalism, he refers to the way colonizers use their power to create a narrative of ‘otherness’ which labels the colonized as degenerate, or undesirable in their difference.¹⁰⁵ Homi Bahba, with a point of departure from Said’s work, discusses how the stereotype is essential to the construction of racism through *ambivalence*.¹⁰⁶ Bahba explains that “[b]y acceding to the wildest fantasies (in the popular sense) of the colonizer, the stereotyped other reveals something of the ‘fantasy’ (as desire, defense) of that position of mastery”.¹⁰⁷ The colonizer in this instance, refers both to the Eurocentric gaze, which historically perceives Asian identity as the ‘other’, but

¹⁰² The album *Bloom* by Iz*One which I will mention later in this thesis is a good example of a ‘cute’ aesthetic, as the photos are much brighter in color and more playful in nature.

¹⁰³ Yoon, ‘Global Imagination of K-pop’, p.384

¹⁰⁴ Asian women are often reduced to the stereotypes of ‘Lotus Blossom’, referring to youthful innocence, or ‘Dragon Lady’, who are ‘sexually submissive but also devious.’ - Zhou and Paul, ‘Lotus Blossom or Dragon Lady’, p.1088.

¹⁰⁵ Edward Said cited in H. Bahba, ‘The Other Question’, *Screen*, vol. 24, no. 6, 1983, p.24

¹⁰⁶ Bahba. “The Other Question”. p.34

¹⁰⁷ Bahba, p.34

also the male gaze which stereotypes the female body under the label of passivity Mulvey discusses. The images accede to the ‘fantasy’ of the Eurocentric and the male gaze by adhering to the stereotype that Asian women are both innocent and sexy, as well as passive and willing to be subjected to the act of looking.¹⁰⁸ Their subtle sexuality combined with their confident expressions reinforces the patriarchal ideology that women exist to fulfil male desires, within the context of Asian stereotypes of sensual duality. Again, they are sexy (but not vulgar) and they are also confident (but not assertive).

KARD *Ride on the Wind*

Considering idol groups are usually gender segregated it is interesting to look at the group KARD, as it is composed of two male and two female members. In their mini album *Ride on the Wind*, there are two things that stuck out as different compared to the albums from the other idol groups. Firstly, the compositions of the photos are much more fragmented, the members are not divided succinctly into neat individual photo segments. Secondly, there is a specific structure in how male and female members are posed in group photographs. For this album, photos were taken under the concepts of “wind, water and light”.¹⁰⁹

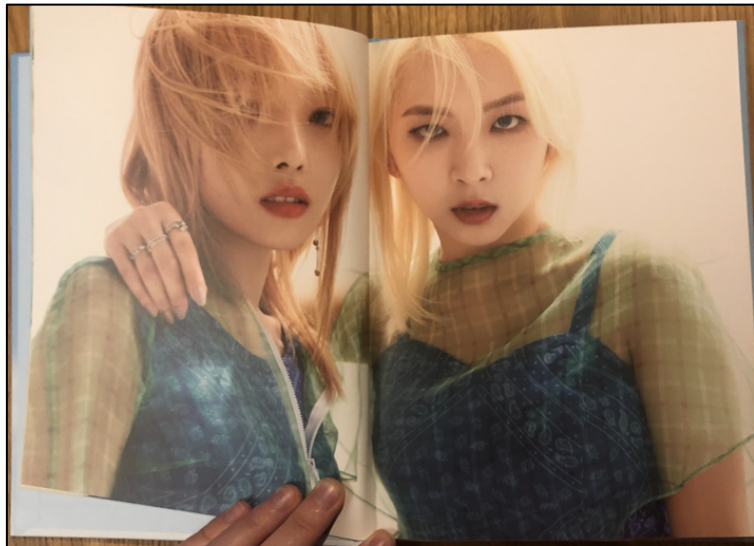


Figure 17: KARD Group members Jiwoo and Somin pose for the 'wind' concept in *Ride on the Wind*

¹⁰⁸ Zhou and Paul, ‘Lotus Blossom or Dragon Lady’, p.1088

¹⁰⁹ [Ktown4u Unboxing] KARD unboxing their 3rd mini [RIDE ON THE WIND] themselves! 카드가 직접하는 언박싱!, [online video], 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MxwU-H7IQq4>,n(accessed 17 May 2020).

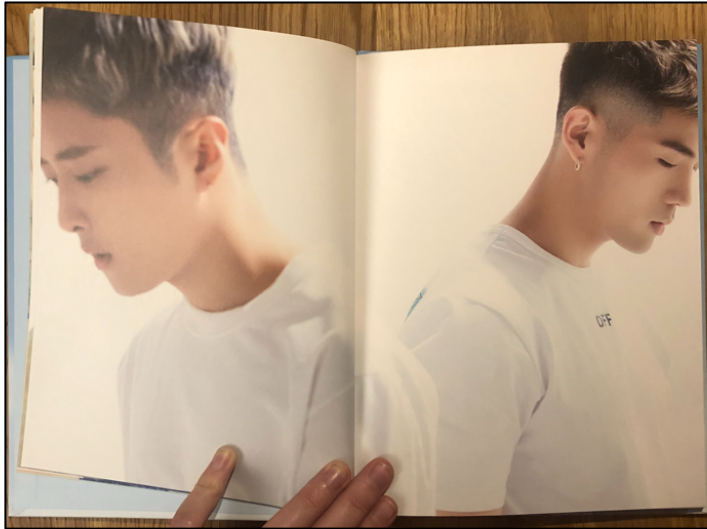


Figure 18: KARD members J. Seph and BM pose for the 'wind' concept in *Ride on the Wind*

Where in the other albums the oppositional gaze was an essential part of the portrait, many of the images within this album feature the artist's profile. Framing, as we can see in Figures 17 and 18 is often focused on the idols' faces, or from the waist up. Few of the photographs depict full body images of the idols, instead prioritizing the face. For the wind concept, the two female members Jiwoo and Somin are paired together,

wearing similar outfits (see Figure 17). Their similar hairstyles and clothing give the connotation that they are sisters, or even twins. Jiwoo casually lays her arm across Somin's shoulder in a familiar gesture suggesting they have a closeness. BM and J. Seph, the male members, are also wearing almost the same outfit within this concept and could be considered brothers. However, in their photographs they are not touching (see Figure 18). In this scenario, touching becomes categorized as feminine, already visually dividing the group by their gender.

In the second concept, water, extreme close ups of the members face, and profile divide them once again by gender, first the women and then the men, followed by group photos of them together. These photos are much more sensual, as the water droplets could also be sweat. Their nearness combined with the sheer effects of their clothing could be read as heat and physical exertion. In the group photos, the female members stand in



Figure 19: KARD group members pose for the 'water' concept in *Ride on the Wind*

between the male members, bracketed by their larger bodies (see Figure 19). The women are at the center of the image, and the men keep them placed at the center, drawing the eye towards them. As a viewer the male gaze pushes us to perceive the women as objects of our attention, while we question what their relationship is with the other members. Water mimicking sweat droplets, the members proximity to one another within the frame implies closeness, but as before, the women separate the men from touching one another.

In the last photo compilation for the light concept, as with the others, there seems to be an equal representation of photographs for each member. The last photograph in the album is a group photograph, the only one in which the male members are placed in the center of the image (see Figure 20). Although BM and J.Seph are touching in this image, they are not directly interacting with one another. Instead of drawing our attention to their physical connection with one another, they retain their aloof masculinity through the actions of the female members. Jiwoo rests her chin on J. Seph's shoulder while Somin places a reassuring hand on BM's shoulder. Their intimacy is only acceptable through the reassurance of their female counterparts.

From these images a distinct patriarchal structure is visualized, something that existed much more subtly within the other album's photographs. Because the relationships between the idols male and female members is more ambiguous, these images do not entice the audience through a sexual fantasy of a relationship, but rather through the enigma of mystery. The viewer is presented with the thrill of uncertainty, where they can choose to interpret the images as a relationship between the members or as individuals posing for the viewers own personal enjoyment. Fragmenting parts of the idols face and dividing the members throughout three



Figure 20: KARD members pose for the final photograph in *Ride on the Wind*, styled for the 'light' concept.

separate concepts gives this sense of mystery. The viewer is left unclear of the idols' relationship with one another prompting them to seek out more information.¹¹⁰

AR Photocards

Photocards, as I have mentioned before, are not exclusive to K-pop albums but are an important component of the album. Albums are expected to contain certain extra items that are an important part of the collecting culture. Such items include the fake concert ticket in the KARD album, postcards and a fake film strip in the BTS album, and a bookmark in the ASTRO album. With new technology, some companies are taking the photocard to the next level, producing AR (Augmented Reality) photocards. Using an app, fans can scan the image on the photocard which digitally transforms the static photograph into a moving image. These AR cards are filmed so that the idol appears to interact with the viewer directly, almost as though they were in a one on one personal video call. VR technology is becoming more common, saturated into daily life but so far the only other industry to incorporate AR technology to any notable extent has been the video game industry.¹¹¹ Since gaming primarily deals with virtual (albeit sometimes lifelike or very realistic) characters rather than actual people, the visual implications are quite different.

In order to understand this phenomenon better, I will look into two specific photocard sets. One from the all-female group IZ*One and another by all-male group X1.¹¹² In the first image, Chaeyeon from IZ*One pointedly looks at the camera. The image is cropped just above the knees, her finger placed thoughtfully on her chin in a coy manner. Hip cocked to the side, her whole body, rather than just her face as per the typical photocard image is the focus of the photograph clad in a silk green dress. When the app is turned on, and the phone camera is pointed at the image, she comes to life, waving her arms in a graceful motion. Her head turns to the side with a brilliant smile. She does a spin, ending with her hand on the wall behind her gazing directly back into the camera. Holding up a peace sign, and then blowing a kiss to her

¹¹⁰ This is apparently a successful strategy because one of the first search results when I googled "who is Kard" was the question "Are any KARD members dating?" (accessed 25 April 2020)

¹¹¹ *AR Cards, see your games in the real world*, [website]2019, <https://www.nintendo.com/3ds/ar-cards/>, (accessed 20 May 2020).

¹¹² The IZ*One album is titled *Bloom*IZ*, and this particular photocard is from the 'I Am' version. The X1 Photocard is from their debut album *Emergency: Quantum Leap*. The group X1 has since disbanded after a short debut in 2019.

audience she signals the end of the short performance by waving goodbye. As she waves, she continues making intermittent heart shapes with her hands and fingers¹¹³.

Upon first seeing this, it feels like magic. The camera is capturing the image as it lays in the palm of your hand, trapped in a small box you can hold. It appears incredibly personal. Maintaining eye contact, waving and blowing kisses the idol appears to send them directly to the viewer. Especially since the image is most likely being received on a cell phone (through the app) it feels personal. People use their phones in almost every aspect of their lives from entertainment and videos, to work, and specially to connect with loved ones. It is easy to imagine that the video of Chaeyeon is being sent personally *by* her, and that she has a place among those in your contact list. Other videos from the same photoset show the members performing their own version of the same kind of gestures. They pose from various angles, both selfie style and not, giving the artists a sense of individualization. They interact with the audience in different ways, emphasizing their individual personalities and taking a point to interact directly with the camera.

The AR photos of X1 are slightly dissimilar, but function in the same way.¹¹⁴ All the members are performing the same actions, jumping in a field and waving a sparkler, but doing them in singular ways. Each member performs his task with rapt attention to the camera, almost as if asking for verification that he did a good job. Because it is difficult to totally remove the background of the photocard from wherever you are watching through the app, the images remain framed by the external background. They resemble the moving portraits in fantasy films such as Harry Potter, stepping away from the camera and walking through the depth of the image. They particularly resemble the chocolate frog trading cards Ron shows Harry in the first film.¹¹⁵ In the same way Ron brags about his own collection, and Harry awes at his disappearing Albus Dumbledore card, viewers are encouraged to connect with the idols on a multisensory level. This is different from that of a video posted on snapchat, or Instagram because you can literally hold it in your hand. The entire album encourages a tactile exploration of visual

¹¹³ [TUTORIAL] IZ*ONE - Bloom*IZ AR Photocard: How to use Moing AR Photo Card?, [online video], 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s3hD6ZBprXU>, (accessed 17 May 2020)

¹¹⁴ X1 AR Photocard Quantum Leab & H/ 3¹ Ver., [online video], 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=763iRWtGr38>, (accessed 17 May 2020)

¹¹⁵ Time stamp 02:41-3:22 - Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone Train Scene, [online video], 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rn5nAx-EWpA>, (accessed 23 May 2020)

modalities, enhancing the owners experience and transforming their perception of what an album looks, sounds, and feels like.

The Idol and Advertisement

The transition that we are seeing within the K-pop album is a movement from selling the album as an object to selling an experience, even if it is only a fantasy. The experience is hidden within the album, only to be revealed once the contents are purchased. This kind of advertising is what Judith Williamson describes in her book *Decoding Advertisements*, a totem.¹¹⁶ As a totem, the advertisement assumes the consumer already has a connection with the item being sold, and purchasing that item makes the consumer part of an exclusive group of people different from the average buyer.¹¹⁷ Minimal cover art, and lack of outer text on the album assume that buyers already have prior knowledge of what they are buying, once the album is bought it signifies belonging to a group's fan community.

Within the album idols have become an embodied advertisement, visualized through photobooks, photocards and other included media. They act, in Williamson's terms, as a *generator* for a particular signified, or connotated meaning.¹¹⁸ None of their photos have anything to do with music, instead they are selling a version of themselves that can be shared. Take BTS' *MOTS Persona* for example, in their photobook images they act as a product which *generate* connotations of intimacy with the members. We laugh with them, we get ready with them, we relate to them and we may desire them. Their portraits sell the idea that the buyer is getting to know the idols on a more personal level; that listening to their music, being a fan, *generates* these experiences. Each member has their own section of photographs to highlight parts of themselves, physically or symbolically. Becoming more familiar with the idols opens doors to accessing new information about the group and encourages fans to listen to their music, as they may feel a personal attachment with the members.

¹¹⁶ Williamson, *Decoding Advertisements*, pp.47-48

¹¹⁷ Williamson, p.47

¹¹⁸ Williamson, p.36

The idols are used to personalize the experience, making it less about an untouchable group of celebrities and more about the lives of separate individuals. Consumers become part of an exclusive group of people that learn who these people are beyond their group, becoming more than just about the music. Posed images of the idols serve a secondary purpose of making sure they look available for their audience. Since it remains important for idols to remain single in order to present themselves as available to their fans, it is imperative they are not photographed with anyone other than their group members. Idols become a totem for desire, where their image advertises their desirability and their availability. While I have already mentioned the importance of visuals in K-pop as an industry, this ideal of exclusivity is further developed through linguistic messages, or how language shapes how the images are perceived.

According to Barthes, language is used in a way that directs us towards certain connotations related to the image.¹¹⁹ For Barthes, text is rather parasitic, attaching to the image and thus informing our understanding and amplifying back and forth with the visual signifiers. If language is however loading the text with a particular culture, what culture is being loaded when the text is composed of multiple alphabets? I would argue that the use of texts within the K-pop album is done in such a way that the visuals, rather than the text become the dominant signifiers. The text only informs those who already belong to and understand the textual lexicon of K-pop albums.

Let's take the album covers for example. It was previously understood that the role of the album was to advertise for the artists. Looking at cover designs, one could gauge in general what kind of music it was or be intrigued by the cover art. The interesting size and shape of K-pop albums combined with their minimal cover design make it difficult for non-K-pop consumers to know what they are. The titles of the albums are listed sometimes in very small text, and unless you are already familiar with the group you may not understand what it is. For several of the albums, a track list is not easily found, so the unique size and shape of the item would be the only clue that it is an album, and even then the user would have to be familiar with the nature of K-pop albums as a whole. Essentially, one would have to already be familiar with some K-pop in order to understand the item. Albums then are not designed to reach out to new consumers in their packaging. This is instead accomplished through other forms of digital or media-based advertising.

¹¹⁹ Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, p.25

Other ways the text is used in the album is to provide information about the members. In most cases, this refers to simply putting the idol's name next to a series of their photographs. Almost no sentence structure is utilized, instead we understand that these are referring to the members names because it is listed in this way. The words are understood as a signifier for the visuals within the image, even if the names are unfamiliar to a western audience. This removes language barriers while still ensuring the marketable information is available to look into. The idols' names are important because they are the main advertising source for the music. Knowing the members' names gives consumers opportunities to invest more time and energy into understanding the group, encouraging more future purchases.

The cover text has not been in Hangul, the Korean alphabet, in any of the albums discussed in this thesis. All albums are printed with the English titles on them, and special albums are also produced with Japanese letters. Not many albums are produced exclusively with Korean text, which shows the extent that marketing focuses outside of the domestic economy. Instead it is the lyrics which are written in Hangul, as well as individual credits. Additionally, individual photocards often have the member's signature printed on the back, alongside a personal message. These messages are rarely translated from Korean, so one would already need to have a previous knowledge of the idol group's members in order to understand who was featured on the card. Linguistic messages are in this way signified through different planes of language, Korean, the Roman alphabet, and the pre-established lexicon of knowledge within the K-pop community. Willoughby asserts that the "album cover art helps to mold and reiterate one's sense not only of personal identity but also of communal identity and culture as a whole".¹²⁰ I argue, that in the role of the modern K-pop album, it is the contents of the album that do these things. Through interacting with the album, the viewer experiences their own mythological connection to the artists, dependent on their individual ethnic and sociological backgrounds. In turn, the album acts as a medium for social exchange among others.

¹²⁰ Willoughby, 'Under the covers', p.347

Communities and Social Currency

Choi mentions in their dissertation, “the value of music in the digital age cannot be fully explained by the economic standard”, instead we must look at what role the CD plays both economically and culturally.¹²¹ We know that the CD no longer has its foothold as the primary mode of listening for consumers, so the K-pop album has not only become a device for listening but a device for communicating and interacting within a particular subculture of people. Bourdieu’s notion that “capital extends beyond the economic” provides a useful lens for understanding how this transpires.¹²²

Essentially, Bourdieu holds that capital is accumulated in three forms: *cultural*, *economic* and *social*.¹²³ When K-pop fans engage in discourse within the community, that is when they interact with other people familiar with the genre, they are making use of a cultural commodity as a form of *cultural capital*. Cultural capital manifests itself in three different ways, embodied, objectified and institutionalized.¹²⁴ In regard to the K-pop album, these three manifestations of cultural capital take the form of K-pop knowledge, the physical albums themselves and community platforms in which this information is shared. For embodied cultural capital to accrue there needs to be time spent learning the material.¹²⁵ This is the knowledge that assists the individual when purchasing an album. Time spent learning the members names, learning their songs, understanding the vocabulary, what it means to have a ‘bias’, what it means to debut, to have a comeback. The more embodied cultural capital a person has the more prepared they will be to make an album purchase. While anyone can at any point purchase an album, embodied cultural capital implies knowledgeable premeditated intention to make purchases. Those with embodied cultural capital make informed purchasing decisions and have a greater understanding of all of the materials within a given album.

When I first received the *MOTS Persona* album I had a certain level of embodied capital in regard to the group themselves. I knew who they were and what they looked like, but I had next to no knowledge of what the items in the album were for. To me, the photocard seemed to

¹²¹ Choi, ‘Value and Value Creation’, p.321

¹²² Bourdieu, ‘The Forms of Capital’, p.242

¹²³ Bourdieu, ‘The Forms of Capital’, p.243

¹²⁴ Bourdieu, ‘The Forms of Capital’, p.243

¹²⁵ Bourdieu, ‘The Forms of Capital’, p.244

be a frivolous wallet sized picture, and the photobook a unique perk that came with that particular album. Now, after many months of research I understand the significance of the photobook as an essential part of the K-pop album design and production process. Photocards are collectable and desired portraits that have value not only in their inclusion within the album, as an album would not seem complete without them, but as signifiers of meaning within a unique subculture indicating artist preference. Some collectors choose to only collect photocards of their ‘bias’ or, favorite member of a group and engage in trading or selling in order to gain all the desired cards. With embodied knowledge, one can not only make these distinctions, but recognize when other fans share their appreciation for their bias.

A common way of using the photocards, aside from collecting or trading is to place a photocard under a clear phone case. As I previously mentioned, fans often do this with their own bias, choosing to outwardly express their appreciation for a certain member of an idol group for others to see. I did this once with the photocard I received from the *MOTS Persona* album and was surprised to note how many people commented on it. Most people were unaware of who it was, and I was asked on multiple occasions if it was a picture of my boyfriend. On one occasion a classmate saw the image and recognized who was in the photograph. We had never before spoken about music, and it was a moment of connection for us both. She explained to me that he was her favorite member of the group and we discussed some of their songs. This conversation was only possible because she also had enough embodied cultural capital to recognize who it was displayed under my phone case. While neither of us are K-pop album collectors, it is easy to imagine the conversation could have continued further had we been collectors. As it stands, we now had a topic of conversation and a mutual interest previously unknown to us.

As the above example illustrates, embodied cultural capital within the K-pop album context is directly related to objectified cultural capital. Defined most simply as items which are physical objects, objectified capital are cultural goods that have both symbolic and literal value.¹²⁶ The photocard had, within that context, become both a symbolic instrument representative of our similar music tastes as well as a collector’s item. For those without knowledge of the subject, a single photocard, slipped neatly into a phone case signified to others that I had a personal relationship with the person in the photo. Since it has been common for

¹²⁶ Bourdieu, ‘The Forms of Capital’, p.248

people to place pictures of loved ones in their wallet, the shape and size of a wallet-sized photograph signified to others that I must know this person. As photocards are not common among western celebrities, the average person may not initially assume that the person in the photograph is a celebrity, and instead misread the situation. For those who desire such a relationship, it becomes easy to engage in a fantasy in which the idol on the photocard does have a personal connection with them.

When it comes to albums as a whole, the more albums you own, the more of a ‘real’ fan you are, and you gain respect and capital from those interactions. From a class perspective, it reveals how much you can afford to spend on these interests. An abundance of objectified capital can also allude to a greater embodied capital. Regardless of whether or not an individual actually *has* a large amount of embodied capital, the presence of these objects (as an expression of objectified capital) implies a sense of knowledge. If one were to have a great collection of British literature, it would be natural to assume that the owner has some knowledge of British authors. Likewise, if an individual has a large collection of K-pop albums the implication would be that the owner has an impressive knowledge of K-pop and K-pop artists. This is amplified once these collections are shared through media where fans can upload and share their personal collection of K-pop albums and merchandise. This leads to the third subcategory of cultural capital, which is institutionalized capital.

Institutional capital refers to some kind of institutional recognition which is subjective to whatever is being discussed.¹²⁷ Online platforms, especially forums such as Amino and the Photocard forum have admins in charge of editing and monitoring content. On Snapchat, there is a continually running public story titled “K-pop Crazy” in which posts can be added on a regular basis. Vlive and Weverse are two examples of online platforms dedicated entirely to K-pop communities. Digital platforms such as these are institutions in which there is a defined authority structure. Amino and Vlive not only have admins that run the site (the former being run by the fans and the latter being run by the companies), but they have fan levels which, posted next to their username indicate how active they are in the community. The more engagement you have with the site, the higher your fan level number is. This number is then directly associated with your engagement with K-pop material and gives the user higher institutionalized capital. Being featured in multiple posts on the K-pop crazy snapchat implies a certain dedication to the artists.

¹²⁷ Bourdieu, ‘The Forms of Capital’, p.248

Publicly sharing K-pop album collections is a popular trend across all of these platforms. Those who have vast K-pop knowledge (possess embodied capital) or own a lot of merchandise (objectified capital), will generally have more to contribute to these communities, and will therefore be in a better position to gain a higher fan level number (institutionalized capital). On certain occasions, idols even interact with fans across online platforms, through their twitter, Weverse or Instagram accounts. Having a higher fan level could contribute to your post having greater traction and be recognized by the idols themselves. When this happens, idols who are the ultimate authority source within these spaces give capital to those specific users, encouraging others to keep posting for their chance to be seen by their favorite idols. Admins, popular users (that is, those with the most likes/comments/shares) as well as fan site owners all hold institutional capital within these regulated spaces.

Institutionalized capital can even extend beyond the digital, such the chance to get a ticket for fan signings and to be a guest on a show in which the idols are appearing. Often within an album there will be a code that gives the buyer a lottery number for a chance to attend a fan signing.¹²⁸ When an idol group is scheduled to appear on a certain TV show sometimes fans will have to show proof of purchase of certain items in order to get a ticket to be in the audience. Album purchases are almost always included on the list of required purchases for these shows. Owning albums, then, relates not only to objectified capital, but also to institutionalized capital, since they have the potential to grant the owner certain experiences within the K-pop community unavailable to others. Requiring fans to make specific purchases in order to see the artists in person is part of an institutional system that rewards those who have accrued cultural capital in various ways.

From the artists' perspective, these methods of accruing cultural capital are beneficial both from an economic standpoint and from a marketing perspective. For consumers, the acts of buying and owning albums becomes more than an economic investment. Not only are they supporting their favorite artists, but they are continuously gaining access and increasing capital. The more capital they have the closer their relationship with the idols appears, as they gain opportunities to speak and interact with the artists. The overarching network of fans, both within

¹²⁸ I am uncertain whether or not the owner would then have to purchase an additional fan meet ticket, but I would assume this would be the case. During a fan signing, it is a meet and greet style interaction with each individual member of the idol group in which the fan gets to speak with the idol (separated by a table like at a book signing) and gets their album signed.

and outside of these institutionalized spaces create social capital amongst one another through a series of exchanges. Social capital, as Bourdieu describes it, constitutes membership of a group backed by its own credential system.¹²⁹ Owning an album gives the consumer the credentials to belong to both the subculture of K-pop consumers and the specific subculture of fans which support a specific idol group.

Drawing from Barthes once more, the linguistic message is what clearly defines these sorts of subcultures. Fans of particular groups often have their own nomenclature. These include ARMY for fans of BTS, Aroha for fans of ASTRO, and ReVeluv for fans of Red Velvet.¹³⁰ Western artists see this with their own fan clubs, perhaps most commonly known is that of Lady Gaga's fans as 'Little Monsters', yet the social structure around these names are a bit different. While Lady Gaga's fans proclaim themselves as 'Little Monsters' idol groups typically decide what name their fans will have before debut. By the time that they perform for the first time their fans are already associated with a particular identity. K-pop artists almost exclusively refer to their fans by the fan-name and rarely ever refer to them as anything else. Owning an album visually signifies an individual as a member of this social network in which they can feel both a sense of belonging and also feel connected to their favorite artists. They are not 'just' a fan, but have a position within this special network, which by association comes with its own both social and institutionalized cultural capital.

A sense of belonging is particularly important for Western consumers because of the social stigma of K-pop fans. Many western fans (especially white fans) feel uncomfortable sharing their appreciation for K-pop with non-K-pop fans fearing that they would be misunderstood as fetishizing Asian culture.¹³¹ Other fans worry about racist stereotyping or reactions from peers or family members, and feel they have to be secretive about their music tastes.¹³² These types of fears stem from (mostly) online activities of overzealous (often white) fans referred to as 'Koreaboos' who are obsessive in their consumption of Korean pop culture.¹³³ Koreaboos, in their problematic fetishization of Korean culture have created a negative

¹²⁹ Bourdieu, 'The Forms of Capital', p.248-249

¹³⁰ *Kpop Official Fan Club Names and Fan Colors*, [website], 2020, <https://kprofiles.com/kpop-official-fanclub-names-fan-colors/>, (accessed 20 May 2020)

¹³¹ Yoon, 'Transnational Fandom in the making', p.184

¹³² Yoon, 'Transnational Fandom in the making', p.184.

¹³³ Yoon, 'Transnational Fandom in the making' p.184-185

stereotype of the international K-pop fan, making it difficult for some to openly express their love of the genre. Institutional spaces where transnational fans can share their love of K-pop with one another become necessary spaces for community bonding, especially for international fans. How fans interact with one another in these spaces is relational to the practices which encourage album purchasing and sharing.

Also partly derived from Bourdieu’s concept of habitus, which focuses on the strategies of practice, retromedia-in-practice theory evolves our understanding of how these social groups interact with the CD.¹³⁴ All of these things circulate within a particular subculture, and the ways in which these three types of capital move between one another creates meaning. As the CD becomes less and less profitable from an economic standpoint, the practices around the CD create value of a different kind. Utilizing Magudda’s circuit of practice model and applying it to Magguda and Miniti’s Retromedia-in-practice theory, transitions in cultural interests surrounding the CD are visualized.¹³⁵ In this adapted version of the circuit of practice model (see Figure 21)

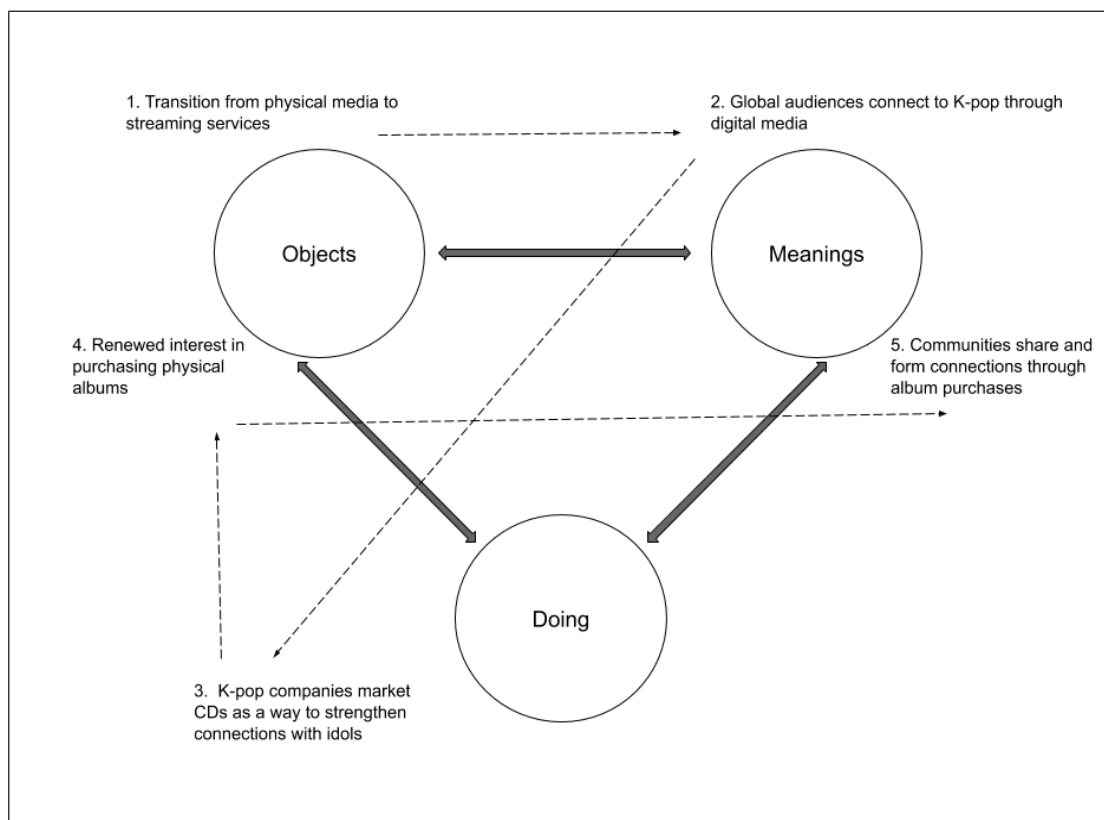


Figure 21: Circuit of Practice as it pertains to K-pop albums

¹³⁴ Magguda and Miniti, ‘Retromedia-in-Practice’, p.677

¹³⁵ Magguda and Miniti, p.680

we can see how the perception of the CD is changed within the context of the K-pop album, and how perception is transformed by materiality.

The circuit of practice starts with the marketing shift in the music industry spurred by the rise of the internet. As South Korea transitioned from a physical to digital market, knowledge of K-pop disseminated across the globe. In order to sell physical CDs which are still industry standard but rapidly declining in terms of public sales, entertainment companies needed to reimagine the music album. Rather than selling the CDs for their designed purpose, companies instead focused on developing albums as a way for fans to gain knowledge and connect with the idols. This is illustrated by the album design, which rewards purchasing by shrink wrapping the product and by the photocards, book, and other extra goods within. Other rewards include the chance to meet the artists through fan signs or seeing them perform on a television show. Having these rewards promotes interest in the albums and encourages purchasing physical albums for more than just their value as a medium for listening to music. Once the albums are bought, consumers can use them as expressions of cultural capital within social networks surrounding the K-pop fanbase. They are able to connect with others who have the same interests via their album purchases and support of the artists, as well as form connections with the artists through the material within the albums. The practices surrounding the K-pop album have shifted from a focus on music as the connection between consumers to the idols themselves as the primary ‘good’ that the albums sell. Social networks value K-pop CDs not simply for the music that they represent, although this is surely one aspect, but for the collectability and exclusive images they provide of their favorite artists, and the cultural and social capital owning such products can provide.

Chapter 2 Summary

After a semiotic analysis of the contents of K-pop albums, certain visual narratives are revealed that are designed to strengthen the consumer-artist relationship. Firstly, the act of collecting is encouraged through developing a sense of individuality with each album. This is done by creating multiple album variations revolving around a single release or comeback, as well as focusing on the interactive experiences of opening and engaging with the object’s contents. The

album thus gains value more as an object of possession than for its function as an auditory medium for listening to music. K-pop albums gain authenticity through the collection process, as well as in virtue of their ability to connect with the viewer via carefully curated images and objects.

Secondly, photobooks especially give insight into the connotated messages within K-pop albums, as they often make up the bulk of the product. Filled with portraits of the idols, these photobooks are a window through which the buyer can observe the artists to their heart's content. Posed and dressed to be inviting without being overtly sexual, idols encourage the viewer to look at them while signaling their availability. From a western perspective, the overtly binary structure of the idol-groups, combined with a patriarchal social structure, changes the connotations behind the images of each group. From one perspective, the popularity of K-pop stars contrasts with a history of desexualizing Asian men and simultaneously challenges traditional ideas of masculinity. Effeminate qualities, such as laced clothing and use of beauty makeup also invite a queer reading of the idols that suggests greater queer representation in media and popular culture. Conversely, from another perspective, western society has a problematic history of fetishizing Asian women and these images provide another avenue to do so. While the portraits can be read as empowering for the women, as they are engaging with the camera, the male gaze within the prevailing patriarchal structure in the west projects a connotation of passivity on the women. Women are to be the objects of looking, and men are ultimately in control of the look. This is further illustrated in the photographs of the mixed gender group, where the female members are repeatedly framed by their male counterparts.

The photographs within the photobooks are portraits, but they are also advertisements. Idols, through these images advertise themselves as products that the consumer can enjoy as a complement to the CD. By selling their image, they invite the consumer to engage in fantasies in which the idols are the focus. The buyer is drawn into their world, getting to know their names and their faces up close and (seemingly) personal. Via the album, consumers are invited into an ostensibly exclusive club with its own title (the group's fan-name) and gain access to privileged materials and opportunities connected with the people whose images they are becoming acquainted with. This material and the CD as an object become a form of cultural capital that are valuable in certain social communities.

These communities also give consumers opportunities to interact with each other and bond over the K-pop albums. As more people are exposed to K-pop through the internet, western audiences are becoming more and more interested in the genre. Purchasing an album gives the owner cultural capital they can use to obtain a position in the communal spaces. This may encourage others to make similar purchases. The unique packaging of albums also encourages buyers to share the item with non-K-pop fans who may find interest in the album's novelty. Buyers then continue to purchase the albums for their interesting design and collectability rather than for the music itself, transforming the function of the CD from its use to its abjected symbolic value of collectability. The relationship between consumer and artist is visualized by two different methods. Firstly, through the objects within the album that connects the image of the idol to the buyer in various forms. Secondly, the consumer-artist relationship takes form in the circuit of practice, where consumers can use the albums to connect, share their appreciation and support their favorite artists across multiple social platforms.

Conclusion and Further Perspectives

Whether we understand the CD as a form of retromedia or not, the place of the CD in the current music industry is changing. As CD sales have dropped rapidly over the past several years, the K-pop industry is the first to see those numbers start to climb back up. The growth of K-pop, from its complicated cultural background and expansion through digital media has exceeded expectations to become an incredibly profitable industry. Part of the success of K-pop is derived from the non-contentious and carefully crafted image of the idols, which appeals to a wide audience. The same care and attention to detail is placed on the album design and production process. The value of the CD has, through a process of re-imagining the CD album, changed from a simple medium for listening to music, into a complex interactive fan experience.

From opening the package to collecting and trading photocards, the K-pop album has transformed into an item that has symbolic value more than functional value. The purpose of the CD is no longer to convey music - streaming services and online platforms do that well enough. Instead, the album aims to sell an idea. It advertises both an imagined relationship between consumer and idol and provides the owner social capital in a variety of K-pop communities. Practices surrounding the K-pop album recontextualize the CD as an object separated from its use, while retaining its value in relation to its potential use. People buy the albums because of its additional contents, but it is the entire package that is so desirable. Fans could purchase single posters, photos, biographies, and photocards of their favorite idols, but the album ties all these components together. Seemingly getting to know the artists via the album creates a multi-sensory experience that allows consumers to develop a deeper connection with the idols. As consumers interact with the components of an album, they become a part of its world. Whether as a fan, collector, or simply out of curiosity, purchasing a K-pop album gives the owner access to a carefully crafted visual lexicon of codes and signs that translate into meaning both symbolically and in the physical world.

We are currently seeing a revival of the CD through these albums. However, it is still too early to tell how this will play out in the long-term. What we are seeing is a re-imagining of the traditional album structure, straying away from the standard simple jewel case and information-

booklet combo. This could potentially be a template for the future of album design and merchandising, as we see in the deluxe release of Taylor Swift's album *Lover*. As digital streaming continues to dominate the music market, repurposing the physical CD is imperative if the media is to survive. Audiences need a reason to buy physical music, perhaps in addition to buying a subscription to a streaming service. For vinyls, this could be the higher sound quality or the 'retro' look and style. The CD too, becomes 'retro' in its function, but packaging albums with CDs in the K-pop style offers an experience that connects to consumers in a different, seemingly more intimate way. If this style, characterized by textiles, portraiture and collectability, can be standardized across the K-pop genre, it could perhaps also be adopted and repurposed by other genres.

Time will tell what the future of album packaging looks like, but I believe that physical media will continue to have value even as technology advances further. In order to better understand the complexities of the current technological shift, further research into the resurgence of the CD from an economic standpoint is warranted. How the popularity of K-pop affects queer and racialized bodies in the west is also a topic which needs more attention in K-pop scholarship. From a visual culture perspective, K-pop's emphasis on visuals and successful international marketing techniques provide a plethora of topics for future research regarding globalization, fashion and technological innovation.

Appendices A: Album List

Primary Album List

AOA New Moon

ASTRO Blue Flame

BTS Map of the Soul Persona

Dreamcatcher Special Mini Album [Raid of Dream] Normal Edition

KARD Mini Album Vol.3 [RIDE ON THE WIND]

Monsta X 2nd Album: Take 2 We Are Here

Red Velvet Repackage Album Vol.2 [The Perfect Red Velvet].

Additional Albums Mentioned

G-Dragon Kwon Ji-Yong

*IZ*One Bloom*IZ, ['I Am' version]*

Monsta X All About Luv

Taylor Swift Lover, Deluxe Edition

X1 Emergency: Quantum Leap

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