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‘A sudden wave of embarrassment washes over me’
: Confessions and negotiations of guilty pleasure among fans of “bad”
K-pop songs

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Abstract

This thesis explores how audiences experience and manage their guilty pleasures when listening to “bad” K-pop songs. By employing Goffman’s (1986) concept of stigma and Scambler’s distinction between stigma and deviance as the main analytical lenses, and drawing on other frameworks associated with taste, the study investigates how listeners understand, respond to, and justify their guilty pleasure songs, and how certain sociocultural contexts shape these practices. While “badness” consumption is a common feature of mundane cultural experience across various contexts and audiences, the understanding of how guilty pleasure operates in everyday life remains limited.

This study focuses on *SumDeutMyung* (MMTG 2018-2020), a YouTube video series produced by the MMTG channel, approaching it as a space where private listening practices become openly visible and collectively negotiated. Through a qualitative textual analysis of comments under the original videos on YouTube, the study examines how users themselves define guilty pleasure, the emotional responses that arise from their engagement with guilty pleasure songs, and the justificatory strategies they use to defend their tastes in an online participatory space. These data reveal how tastes are socially shaped, and how individuals position and identify themselves in relation to societal norms about what is acceptable.

The findings demonstrate that guilty pleasure is defined as a mode of consumption surrounding a private enjoyment of “bad” cultural objects, characterised as an affective tension between pleasure and discomfort. The YouTube comment section adds complexity to this consumption by exposing socially unacceptable tastes to public view. Listeners experience persistent ambivalent emotions when engaging with guilty pleasure songs, including nostalgia, guilt, and shame. To manage the affective tension and justify their tastes, listeners adopt strategies, such as ironic consumption, vindication, collectivisation, and reinterpretation. Ultimately, this thesis argues that South Korea’s specific sociocultural context, which strongly emphasises conformity and hierarchy, stigmatises fan identity and “bad” tastes. This indicates a fundamental distinction from existing understanding of “badness” consumption, which mainly views audience engagement with “bad” cultural objects as an open celebration of deviance and rebellion against mainstream culture.

Keywords: K-pop music, cultural hierarchy, taste, guilty pleasure, bad music, YouTube, taste management, stigma, deviance, identity

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Introduction

People often enjoy cultural objects they themselves acknowledge as “bad,” embarrassing, outdated, or socially undesirable. From old pop songs and kitsch aesthetics to embarrassing television programmes, such objects are widely consumed despite being perceived as lacking cultural and aesthetic value. As Reid (2022:191) argues, these engagements are often accompanied by discomfort, irony, shame, or even guilt, and are commonly described as a “guilty pleasure,” a term that captures the coexistence of enjoyment and negative feelings derived from enjoying “bad” objects. Rather than being a marginal or exceptional experience, guilty pleasure is a widespread feature of everyday cultural consumption across different audiences and fans. It reflects a situation in which individuals derive enjoyment from products that they find difficult to justify or openly acknowledge.

This phenomenon raises a fundamental question about what it means to like something one feels should not be enjoyed. More specifically, how do individuals deal with preferences that others may negatively evaluate? While a guilty pleasure is often understood as a personal or emotional experience, it is also deeply shaped by social context. Reid (2022:193) emphasises that feelings of embarrassment or guilt do not emerge in a vacuum but are entangled with expectations about how one’s preferences might be perceived. In this regard, guilty pleasure is not only about conflicting emotions, but about the social meanings of taste and the ways individuals expect and respond to external judgment.

This dynamic suggests that cultural consumption involves more than the choice of objects. It implies that individuals manage how their choices are understood and presented. When they feel uncertain about revealing their preferences, attempt to justify them, or frame them in particular ways, they are responding to implicit or explicit agreed norms about what is acceptable in society. Such responses indicate that it is crucial to examine not only *what* people consume or like, but also *how* taste is made socially acceptable and *how* people position and identify themselves in relation to their tastes. Despite the familiarity of the concept of guilty pleasure, McAvoy (2017:182) notes that knowledge of how this experience actually unfolds in real life remains limited. Thus, it is necessary to empirically examine how individuals manage their engagement with guilty pleasure objects in practice.

In many discussions of “bad” or undesirable cultural consumption, scholarly attention has been focused on cases in which individuals openly embrace “bad” tastes, presenting them as

forms of distinction, ironic enjoyment, or active resistance. In these cases, “badness” is not simply tolerated but actively reinterpreted or even celebrated (Hebdige 1979:107; Sarkhosh & Menninghaus 2016:41; Sontag 2018:32). For example, certain aesthetic traditions such as kitsch or Camp have been associated with the genuine admiration of “badness” or the ironic engagement while maintaining a normative distance from the “bad” text (Calinescu 1987:230; Sarkhosh & Menninghaus 2016:42; Sontag 2018:32). Additionally, engagement with “bad” cultural products has often been framed through subcultural practices that explicitly position audiences against dominant norms (Hebdige 1979:102). Subcultural styles, such as fashion, music, or visual codes, may function as visible markers of difference (ibid.:3, 101). The concept of subculture has shown how displaying difference can challenge mainstream culture and dominant hierarchies (ibid.:92). While such explanations capture important aspects of “badness” consumption, they do not fully explain situations in which individuals cannot or do not wish to reveal their preferences publicly. Thus, the way people engage with problematic texts while fearing others’ judgment, misunderstanding, or unwanted attention is relatively underexplored.

This limitation becomes especially important when considering sociocultural differences. In some contexts, expressing unconventional or “bad” taste can function as a marker of creativity, individuality, or subcultural identity (Hebdige 1979:2). While wider audiences often perceive these expressions as inappropriate, excessive or socially deviant, members of the subculture explicitly declare through their observable style that they do not want to be incorporated in the mainstream (ibid.:91, 102). On the contrary, this practice may be concealed or carefully adjusted in other contexts where individuals may be discouraged from visibly expressing their preferences as acts of defiance against mainstream norms and may be more concerned with how they are perceived by others. As a result, enjoyment may be accompanied by internal fear of stigmatisation, concealment, or strategic presentation.

South Korea provides a particularly relevant context for examining this dynamic because its sociocultural practices are often influenced by strong expectations concerning socially acceptable behaviour and public perception (Yang & Rosenblatt 2001:364). Within this environment, participation in certain forms of popular culture may carry socially sensitive meanings beyond entertainment itself. K-pop fandom illustrates this tension well. Although K-pop has become a globally influential cultural phenomenon, fandom participation is still associated with negative stereotypes, including immaturity, emotional excess, or

unproductive behaviour (Lee 2021:54, 72). As a result, fans may experience uncertainty or ambivalence about how openly they should express their preferences in different social settings.

This dynamic becomes visible in online fan cultures, where users are encouraged to interact, share opinions, and publicly engage with music and fan practices. Such environments reveal how cultural enjoyment is shaped not only by personal tastes but also by ongoing awareness of social evaluation and audience perception.

Considering this background, this thesis focuses on *SumDeutMyung* (MMTG 2018-2020), a YouTube video series produced by the MMTG channel. The title refers to “a ‘good’ guilty pleasure song that one listens to secretly.” By revisiting old K-pop songs from the early 2010s and inviting audiences to reflect on them, the series creates a space where private listening practices become publicly visible and collectively negotiated. While this study focuses on one specific media text, the aim is not limited to describing a single case. Rather, *SumDeutMyung* is approached as a lens through which broader patterns of “bad” cultural consumption can be analysed.

The overall objective of this study is to examine how audiences experience and manage guilty pleasure when consuming “bad” cultural objects in social contexts where “badness” functions as a source of tension. To achieve this, the study conducts a qualitative textual analysis of audience comments from the *SumDeutMyung* series, focusing on how users themselves understand guilty pleasure, the emotional responses that arise from engaging with guilty pleasure songs, and the justifications they use to defend their tastes in a participatory space.

Therefore, the study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do K-pop listeners understand and define guilty pleasure music?
2. What emotional responses does guilty pleasure music consumption evoke, and how are these expressed in the comment sections?
3. What strategies do listeners employ to manage and justify their guilty pleasure consumption through the comments?

Literature Review

This thesis explores the intersection of the main research areas in K-pop, guilty pleasure, “bad” taste and fan reception. The literature review is structured to provide a necessary basis for analysing how K-pop fans discuss, share, experience and justify culturally evaluated music in participatory spaces. Thus, the literature review section of the thesis will be organised as follows. First, previous studies on K-pop are reviewed, as *SumDeutMyung* is a K-pop phenomenon. After reviewing the broader research trend, the thesis focuses on two key dimensions in K-pop studies: K-pop fandom and YouTube. K-pop fan culture, which has developed within the specific sociocultural context of South Korea, can significantly shape fans’ perceptions of consuming “bad” songs. YouTube is not only the empirical site of this study but also a platform closely related to K-pop fan practices, and it functions as a public space where private tastes can be made visible.

Secondly, the thesis examines how “bad” taste has been conceptualised in academic literature through the studies on cult film and kitsch art fans, to understand the broader analytical context in which guilty pleasure is located. Then, it reviews existing research on “bad” music and guilty pleasure, the main interest of this study, to establish a useful starting point for the analysis.

Thirdly, research on musical nostalgia is examined, since the *SumDeutMyung* series revisits old K-pop songs, making nostalgia an inherent dimension of the data. Nostalgia is an important concept in this study because the experience of guilty pleasure may become more complex when “bad” music entails nostalgic feelings.

The literature review concludes by identifying and outlining the gaps in the previous studies. The thesis then presents the theoretical concepts and frameworks used in the analysis.

K-pop in Previous Academic Research: Strong Focus on Its Global Success

Since K-pop has become recognised as a global phenomenon, it has attracted significant scholarly attention over the last decade. Still, the topic remains a relatively understudied, emerging research area. The dominant concern among scholars tends to focus on identifying the rationale for K-pop’s global success in the music industry, as its global visibility is regarded as subverting the existing dominance of Western culture (Cruz et al. 2021:639). For example, one strand of research focused on K-pop itself, explaining that the genre’s characteristics and musical aesthetics, such as the hybridity of its musical style and lyrics,

have contributed to its global presence (Lie 2012; Yoon 2018). Other studies highlighted the strategies of K-pop agencies, claiming that these agencies successfully emphasised visual inputs of music and established a “Star system” to systematically organise scouting, training, and producing K-pop idols (Lee 2016:92; Oh 2013:402).

In addition to text- and industry-centred explanations, another significant strand of research has examined the increasing importance of digital media platforms in the globalisation of K-pop (Cruz et al. 2021:643; Jung & Shim 2014:488). In particular, the digitisation of the music industry is framed as a structural element in K-pop studies, as social network platforms have been identified as a driving force of the new Korean Wave, so-called “Hallyu 2.0” (Jung & Shim 2014:486; Lie 2012:352). YouTube has been emphasised as one of the decisive platforms contributing to the transnational presence and accessibility of K-pop (Ono & Kwon 2013:200; Shim & Noh 2012). This is because K-pop is “performance-centered” and strongly emphasises visual imagery through its music videos and iconic synchronised dance (Ono & Kwon 2013:208). As a result, digital platforms have become an integral analytical lens for scholars to examine K-pop’s global expansion.

All in all, existing studies on K-pop share a common interest in understanding how K-pop has increased its influence in the global music market and among transnational audiences. They collectively highlight that K-pop’s powerful presence in the global market cannot be understood solely through musical styles or texts, but should be studied through industrial strategies, active audiences, and utilisation of digital infrastructures. This overall research trend stems from K-pop’s anomalous global breakthrough and scholars’ commitment to understanding the reorganisation of geopolitics in global popular cultures and the success of the cultural periphery (Choi & Maliangkay 2015:11).

However, this thesis focuses on K-pop fans’ consumption of guilty pleasure music rather than on the core principles of K-pop’s success in the international music market. Therefore, studies of K-pop fans’ reception and fan engagement become a crucial starting point.

K-pop and Fandom: Fan Identity as a Lower Status and Collective Moralism

Some scholars note that K-pop fans often hide their tastes and identities. In the recent ethnographic study on K-pop fan practices, Jeong (2026:7-8) notes that young K-pop fans tend to conceal their fan identities from others, including their conservative parents and

teachers, who blame K-pop idols for distracting them from their studies. She writes that K-pop fans are often “dismissed, looked down upon, mocked, or scorned due to the ageist, sexist, misogynist, and sometimes racist beliefs that are common among non-fans” (ibid.:26). Lee (2021:70) elaborates this point by introducing a K-pop fan practice called “ilko,” a pretending strategy to be seen as “normal” person rather than idol fans. He analyses this practice by discussing it in the broader context of South Korean society, explaining that Korean society is highly competitive with intense academic pressure and regards fanship as surplus and unproductive activities (ibid.:70-71). In particular, an expression such as “ppasuni” disparages idol fans, defining them as pathetic and immature (ibid.:68). Within this social and cultural context, where idol fandoms are occupying a low position in cultural hierarchy, K-pop fans have to conceal their fan identities and practices (ibid.:70, 72).

Moreover, scholars point out that morality is notably important when discussing K-pop fans, as ethical standards play a key role in reception and consumption within K-pop fandom culture. Morality is also relevant in guilty pleasure studies, as Reid (2022:193) argues that guilty pleasure can be evoked from both ethically and aesthetically “bad” objects. Jeong (2026:42) captures that, unlike Western celebrities, who are often recognised as symbols of individuality due to distinctive actions and personalities, Korean idols are subject to strong expectations of moral integrity from their fans. This is because K-pop fans are a highly active and participatory fandom who engage in explicit criticism and boycotting of idols perceived as deviant (Kim & Kim 2015:37). Kim and Kim (ibid.:18, 21) interpret this phenomenon in a broader social context, explaining that Korean society is traditionally characterised by its collective moralism and strong Confucian values. Saeji et al. (2018:6) and Yang and Rosenblatt (2001:364) illuminate this point by emphasising that shame strongly operates in Korean society, where social behaviours are regulated by the principles of maintaining social identity and avoiding shame that could spoil it.

In this respect, fans’ engagement with “bad” K-pop idols or their music can place a significant emotional burden on them. Thus, it is useful to consider K-pop fandom culture and South Korea’s sociocultural context to investigate K-pop listeners’ guilty pleasures.

K-pop fandom is not an underexplored domain in fan and K-pop studies. On the contrary, it has been broadly studied by many scholars. In particular, most previous studies conceptualised K-pop fans as participants and “prosumers” who actively generate, share, and consume K-pop information (Ono & Kwon 2013:208; Shim & Noh 2012:126). Nonetheless,

K-pop fandom has frequently been identified by researchers as the key driver of K-pop's success, while less attention has been paid to how fans make sense of and negotiate their own tastes. Existing studies have explored patterns of concealment and moral regulation within K-pop fandom, but they have not fully studied how these dynamics operate at the level of taste itself, especially when those tastes are perceived as "bad" or "abnormal."

K-pop and YouTube: an Inseparable Relation

When studying K-pop and its fans, online and social network platforms, especially YouTube, are inseparable. As scholars note, YouTube functions as both a core transnational distribution channel and a key participatory hub for K-pop fans' subculture and grassroots practices (Kim 2013:8; Ono and Kwon 2013:207-208). YouTube is also crucial for exploring the *SumDeutMyung* series, not only because it was originally produced and uploaded to the platform, but also because fan participation in its comment sections is integral to the production process and discussions of guilty pleasure songs.

According to Androutsopoulos and Tereick (2016:355, 366), YouTube is not designed as a social networking site, but it still operates as "a prototype of participatory culture" that invites the public to participate in collective norm-building. YouTube is a complex, multimodal platform consisting of video clips, comments and hosting elements, which allow users to engage in multilayer dialogues with the video itself, producers and other audiences through watching, saving, sharing and discussing (ibid.:356-357).

Furthermore, the YouTube comment section has increasingly attracted scholarly attention as a significant site of audience engagement that goes beyond reactive feedback. It is also important when studying the audience's music consumption. Analysing how the K-pop song 'Rollin' belatedly hits music charts, Park (2022:11) argues that the YouTube comment section is more than a space that documents audience reactions and provides a venue that facilitates storytelling around a song. Shim and Noh (2012:130) also focus on fan interaction through comments on YouTube, arguing that such communication is crucial for forming K-pop fan communities and circulating insider knowledge within fandom (ibid.). These studies emphasise that YouTube comment sections are not simply a site for expressing responses, but a public space where K-pop fans attach new meanings to songs, build communities, and share knowledge.

Hence, YouTube and its comment sections are essential for fans to participate in and interact with the K-pop industry and its fan culture. In the *SumDeutMyung* series, the comment sections for each episode serve as a hub for active discussion of the audience's guilty pleasures.

Consuming “Badness”

Cult Film and Kitsch Art Fans Enjoying “Badness”

Although this thesis does not attempt to conduct a comparative study, understanding the different modes of consuming “bad” objects provides a rich background for exploring guilty pleasure. To review how “badness” consumption has been conceptualised, this thesis focuses on cult film fans and consumers of kitsch art.

“Bad” film is one of the most extensively discussed areas in the academic literature on “badness” consumption. When reviewing studies on cult film fans, Sconce's (1995) study serves as a fundamental discussion. He focuses on the specific subcultural sensibility of enjoying “bad” films, namely paracinema, claiming that paracinematic audiences value “bad” films regardless of mainstream Hollywood's negative evaluation of them (ibid.:372). In the most extreme form, paracinematic audiences exhibit an ironic reversal of elite taste, admiring “bad” film as a unique counter-cinema that subverts mainstream cinematic norms and content (ibid.:382, 385).

Sarkhosh and Menninghaus (2016:42) explore another dimension of consuming “bad” film, “ironic consumption.” It refers to keeping distance from the cult film and enjoying its “badness” through mockery (ibid.). Their study further reveals that audiences amplify their pleasure through offline and/or online discussions with others before or after watching (ibid.:51). This social dimension of ironic consumption is significant because a private behaviour of keeping distance from “badness” is transformed into a communal ritual when it is shared with others, producing a collective enjoyment.

Kitsch art is another form of “bad” cultural object, which is often widely liked by the public but considered “bad” by art-educated elites (Kulka 1996:12). Kulka (ibid.:26, 33) defines kitsch as art depicting subjects that are charged with positive emotions and are immediately identifiable. Ortlieb and Carbon (2019:1) expand on this point, claiming that kitsch art does

not require interpretive engagement but rather provides an instant, unreflective emotional response.

According to Kulka (1996:44), consumers of kitsch art enjoy it because they *do not* recognise it as “bad.” Kitsch is somewhat similar to cult films in that it is produced with profound seriousness, but it is also distinct because it cannot be consumed with irony (ibid.: 111). On the other hand, Calinescu (1987:230, 254) writes that sophisticated art elites often enjoy kitsch art by consciously acknowledging and pursuing its “badness” to subvert the conventional “good” taste. This is closely tied to the concept of Camp sensibility, which will be discussed in a later subsection.

Therefore, the phenomenon of enjoying “bad” cultural objects has consistently attracted scholars’ attention, and existing studies have shown that audiences who enjoy “bad” objects experience “badness” in diverse ways. However, these studies primarily understand “bad” taste as a resistance to or subversion of the dominant culture. The “bad” tastes examined in these studies share the absence of sustained negative emotion. Neither paracinematic audiences, ironic cult film fans, kitsch art consumers, nor art-educated elites experience their “bad” preferences as generating lasting discomfort. They either remain unaware of the “badness,” admire it affectionately, or subvert it. This point distinguishes all of these forms from guilty pleasure, where negative emotion persists as a constitutive element of the experience, as the following subsection will discuss. Consequently, further investigation is necessary to understand how “badness” can also be enjoyed through the affective tension, not only through irony, genuine admiration, or unawareness.

Guilty Pleasure in Consuming “Bad” Music

As this thesis focuses on how K-pop listeners consume “bad” music as their guilty pleasures, this subsection explores “bad” music as a social construct, reviews how scholars have conceptualised guilty pleasure, and discusses why researching “bad” music and guilty pleasure is crucial for fan and popular music studies.

Scholars have widely examined how people consume music outside mainstream taste. Hebdige’s (1979:17) influential publication studies how subcultural members of “bad” music in postwar British working-class youth cultures, particularly punk, consume and express their deviant tastes through style. He argues that judgments about what counts as “good” or “bad”

culture reflect the values of people in dominant social positions, and that subcultural members resist this mainstream culture through visible practices of style (ibid.:16, 101-102). Washburne and Derno (2004:1) also argue that “bad” music is a social construct, rather than an objective category or genre. Moreover, Frith (2004:21-22) illustrates that judging certain music as “bad” is crucial to the pleasure of popular music and contributes to the formation of identity. Judgments on musical values are necessary for fans to define the listener community to which they belong (ibid.:14). Taken together, previous studies on “bad” or deviant music consistently have argued that “badness” is not merely a matter of individual taste, but an intersection of identity, community, dominant norms, social position and boundaries (Washburne & Derno 2004:4). Thus, studying “bad” music is essential to understand how fandom, identity, taste and societal norms are intertwined.

Nonetheless, researchers point out that “bad” music has often been overlooked in academia. As Washburne and Derno (2004:4) discuss, rather than developing objective criteria for what constitutes “bad” music, it is necessary to study the rich processes through which people mark a certain music as “good” or “bad,” and how they interpret and deal with such “bad” music consumption.

The concept of guilty pleasure is deeply connected to “badness” consumption. While sustained or independent academic exploration of guilty pleasure music is scarce (Reid 2022:190), there are several productive studies on the topic. Reid’s (2022) discussion on the guilty pleasure aesthetic provides a strong basis for further investigation. She defines guilty pleasure as an ambivalent feeling, a combination of an immediate pleasure about a “bad” object and negative guilt of enjoying it (ibid.:191). Similarly, by discussing how audiences consume “bad” television in general, McCoy and Scarborough (2014:48) seek to conceptualise guilty pleasure as being ashamed of consuming “bad” programmes but keeping their consumption (ibid.:52). While both studies acknowledge guilty pleasure as a social phenomenon, McAvoy (2017:181-182, 194) stresses the social dimension of guilty pleasure, highlighting that consumers who enjoy guilty pleasure objects find pleasure from communal discussion and judgment. In this respect, McAvoy (ibid.:181) defines guilty pleasure as “an open secret, enjoyment derived at least in part because of its confession in public.”

These studies share a common understanding that guilty pleasure is simultaneously an internal tension of liking “bad” objects and a social phenomenon beyond mere individual taste. Nonetheless, they do not empirically explore how audiences resolve their complex

internal conflicts, leaving this as a research gap. In particular, existing explanations treat the negative emotion of guilty pleasure as a relatively uniform phenomenon, without differentiating between the qualitatively distinct textures of discomfort. Furthermore, they do not examine the specific strategies which audiences employ to justify their pleasure.

Moreover, McAvoy (2017:196) claims that digital media empowers consumers to exercise greater control over aesthetic judgment in contemporary America. Namely, the traditional distinction between the sophisticated, highbrow taste and the “bad,” popular taste is weakened (ibid.:203). Thus, he states that the guilt over the “morally reprehensible” taste is increasing while guilt over the aesthetic “badness” gradually fades (ibid.:202-203). His viewpoint contradicts Reid’s (2022) and McCoy and Scarborough’s (2014) claim. Reid (2022:193) aligns with McAvoy in acknowledging that morally problematic objects can also evoke guilty pleasure, while arguing that aesthetically poor objects can still function as a main source of guilty feelings. McCoy and Scarborough (2014:55) explicitly contend that viewers of guilty pleasure programmes are aware of the boundary between “good” and “bad” television, describing a sense of internal dissonance resulting from recognition that the programme is “bad.”

This disagreement may stem from the fact that McAvoy (2017) focuses on guilty pleasures online, whereas Reid (2022) and McCoy and Scarborough (2014) examine offline art projects or television. Yet, it points to a deeper uncertainty about whether aesthetic hierarchies continue to shape audience experience in contemporary societies. If such hierarchies are actually weakening, as McAvoy (2017:203) suggests, the persistence of negative feelings related to aesthetic “badness” becomes difficult to explain. Conversely, if audiences continue to experience strong dissonance when engaging with aesthetically “bad” music, as Reid (2022:193) and McCoy and Scarborough (2014:55) argue, this indicates that distinctions between “good” and “bad” taste remain socially and affectively meaningful. This tension highlights the need for empirical investigation into how audiences negotiate taste in specific sociocultural contexts, where the power of aesthetic hierarchies may be different.

At the same time, guilty pleasure must be understood within the context of digital platforms, where the visibility of taste is fundamentally transformed. Platforms enable users to publicly express their preferences that might otherwise remain private, strengthening both the risks and the possibilities associated with guilty pleasure. On the one hand, increased visibility may amplify concerns about social judgment. On the other hand, audiences can derive

pleasure from confessing, sharing and evaluating guilty pleasure songs, as McAvoy (2017:194) suggests. Thus, it is crucial to study guilty pleasure in the online context, and this thesis focuses specifically on YouTube.

Musical Nostalgia

As *SumDeutMyung* aims to rediscover old K-pop songs (Jang 2020:para. 4), musical nostalgia is another relevant concept in this study, and temporality is one of the decisive factors for judging “badness” (Washburne & Derno 2004:4). Reid (2022:192) establishes a foundational connection between nostalgia and guilty pleasure consumption, finding that the positive feelings attached to the guilty pleasure songs are often grounded in specific memories.

As Lee and Kao (2021:44) summarise, while earlier studies on nostalgia focused on its personal characteristics, recent trends highlight collective nostalgia as a shared social practice. Their case study of Tim’s Twitter Listening Party shows how musicians and listeners experience collective nostalgia by synchronously listening to old songs in online spaces and forming a community (ibid.:37).

Van Dijck’s (2007) work on mediated musical memory is particularly relevant to the analysis of collective nostalgia. Through the case study of a national radio event, the Dutch Top 2000, she explores how personal memory and collective memory become intertwined (ibid.:77). Music functions as a catalyst for memory, and public space for shared listening and musical discussion is crucial in forming a listener community and collective memory (ibid.:77, 79).

Recent studies on music tend to explore collective nostalgia in relation to digital media and online spaces. Along with Lee and Kao’s (2021) case study of Tim’s Twitter Listening Party, Wang et al.’s (2024) research on autobiographical comments on a Chinese music streaming platform and Van Dijck’s (2007) investigation on the Dutch Top 2000 chatbox share a mutual interest in virtual spaces, such as social network platforms, music streaming platforms, and online websites. This suggests that digital space facilitates the social dimension of nostalgia. As Van Dijck (2007:91) illuminates, listening to recorded music has always been a social behaviour, but technological developments further intensify its communal aspect.

To sum up, musical nostalgia is not merely a private process, but also a social experience, and

the collective dimension of nostalgia is becoming increasingly important in the platform era. Furthermore, musical nostalgia potentially intervenes in music evaluation and, ultimately, in music taste.

Research Gap

Despite growing scholarly emphasis on “badness” consumption, several gaps remain in the existing literature. First, while Reid (2022), McCoy and Scarborough (2014), and McAvoy (2017) have productively theorised guilty pleasure as an ambivalent aesthetic experience, empirical investigation into how audiences actually express, negotiate and manage guilty pleasure in practice remains understudied. Studies on guilty pleasure remain scarce, and the topic has not been developed into a well-established and independent domain of research, as Reid (2022:190) points out.

Moreover, existing scholarships tend to treat guilty pleasure as a single, uniform emotional experience. Reid (2022:191) broadly defines guilty pleasure as an immediate pleasure toward particular objects, combined with a negative feeling of enjoying “badness.” As previously stated, a negative feeling evoked by enjoyment is crucial since it is a decisive factor in distinguishing guilty pleasure from other forms of enjoying “badness.” Thus, the lack of empirical investigation of specific modes of negative feelings remains a gap.

Finally, less attention has been paid to how K-pop fans negotiate their preferences for songs they themselves regard as “bad,” and how the unique sociocultural context of South Korea shapes that experience. Although some K-pop fan studies have examined how fans conceal their identities and apply collective moral standards when consuming K-pop music (Jeong 2026; Lee 2021; Kim & Kim 2015), they have not fully captured how these factors relate to taste.

Theoretical Framework

To fill these gaps, this research empirically investigates the phenomenon of guilty pleasure in K-pop by analysing the audience comments of *SumDeutMyung*. It approaches guilty pleasure music consumption as a socially structured experience, shaped by hierarchies of cultural value and by strategies to manage, share, and negotiate the social risks it creates. The

theoretical framework of this thesis is built to explain these interconnected dimensions, treating the key concepts not as independent lenses but as layers of a single analytical structure.

The first layer concerns the structural conditions that render “bad” taste socially consequential. Bourdieu’s (2010:xxv) concept of distinction and cultural hierarchy establishes that taste is not merely an individual preference but is grounded in a socially constructed hierarchy of cultural legitimacy. In this dynamic, certain cultural forms are institutionally approved as “legitimate,” while others are positioned as aesthetically “illegitimate” or “low” (ibid.:8). Bourdieu (ibid.:xxiv) views that this hierarchy is not natural but is produced and sustained through sociocultural structures. This idea will provide the basis for this thesis that an individual’s musical taste can function as a social signal that invites approval or judgment from others. Without this hierarchical condition, musical taste would not carry any social risk. As certain tastes are considered inferior or devalued, having them can feel like a social failing rather than an expression of individuality.

Goffman’s (1986) concept of stigma becomes necessary to further clarify how individual listeners respond to and manage such social risks. Goffman (ibid.:2) defines a “virtual social identity” as the attributes that society expects as “normal” for an individual, whereas the attributes an individual actually possesses are distinguished as an “actual social identity.” Stigma stems from the discrepancy between these two identities, an attribute that discredits or spoils one’s identity (ibid.:2-3). The important thing is that stigma is a relational concept, and it does not function as a discreditable mark as a thing in itself (ibid.:3). Thus, while Bourdieu’s (2010) framework provides the context of structural hierarchy, Goffman’s (1986) framework focuses on individuals, translating Bourdieu’s (2010) framework into a micro level of experiences. Goffman (1986:42) explains that individuals manage their stigma through information management” and a hiding strategy called “passing.” Therefore, stigma functions as an essential framework to enlighten how “bad” music taste spoils an individual listener’s social identity and to analyse the dynamics of the listener who manages this process.

However, treating all stigmatised tastes as equivalent might miss an important distinction. As Goffman’s (1986) framework tends to treat discrediting attributes in an integrated manner, it is relatively limited in identifying the different kinds of emotions experienced by stigmatised individuals. To supplement Goffman’s (1986) framework, the thesis adopts Scambler’s

(2020) extension of Goffman's (1986) framework, a distinction between stigma and deviance. Scambler (2020:26) writes that stigma is a deficiency in one's existence or identity, and a stigmatised individual feels shame or embarrassment, experiencing social distancing from others. On the other hand, deviance refers to a moral flaw related to one's responsibility, which entails punishment and blame (ibid.).

These three frameworks demonstrate the relationship between "bad" tastes and external judgment and how it becomes a social burden. Nonetheless, they do not fully explain how that burden can be attributed to individuals. To fill this gap, this thesis utilises May's (1992) concept of shared responsibility. May (ibid.:37-38) argues that moral responsibility is not fixed on an individual but can be distributed among group members. This implies that the emotional and social burden associated with stigmatised taste can also be redistributed beyond the individual to the social and collective levels. If so, individuals would feel less burden or fear of being blamed when they are aware that others are equally implicated.

With this explanation of how guilty pleasure operates socially, the framework also needs a conceptual tool to specify what makes guilty pleasure distinct from other documented modes of engaging with "bad" cultural objects. Sontag's (2018:1, 32) concept of Camp sensibility is an aesthetic taste to genuinely appreciate and enjoy "badness," the unnatural, artifice, and exaggeration. Guilty pleasure and Camp are similar in that both deal with consuming "bad" objects, but Camp represents a different affective structure from guilty pleasure. As the literature review shows, existing studies often frame "badness" consumption through Camp, strongly linking the concept to cult film fans and kitsch art consumers. However, this approach risks reducing different forms of consumption to a single aesthetic category, while there are modes of enjoying "badness" that cannot be explained by Camp. In this thesis, Camp, as a way of positively reappropriating "badness," functions as an analytical benchmark to investigate whether guilty pleasure operates similarly or entails different emotions or attitudes (ibid.:32).

Lastly, it is necessary to explain how listeners respond to their stigmatised tastes beyond Goffman's concealing strategy. Jenkins' (1992:23) concept of textual poachers captures the active, reconstructive dimension of audience engagement. Jenkins (ibid.:23, 52-53) views fans as active participants who selectively poach, reinterpret and reconstruct texts based on their own interests, rather than passively accepting given meanings. These practices operate beyond the individual level and take place within broader fan communities through

interaction and shared interpretation (ibid.:45-46). This viewpoint illuminates how audiences of *SumDeutMyung* creatively engage with and transform guilty pleasure songs by negotiating the symbolic boundaries of guilty pleasure. However, this thesis critically applies Jenkins' (1992) framework. Jenkins' (ibid.:17) conception of the fan as a resistant, poaching audience is rooted in a context where fan agency is primarily understood as defiance of dominant cultural norms. Yet the *SumDeutMyung* audience suggests a different dynamic. The active meaning-making and reinterpretation process that Jenkins (ibid.:23) describes is present, but it may not manifest as resistance or disruption. In this sense, Jenkins' (1992) concept of textual poacher functions not only as an analytical approach but as a framework that this thesis utilises and critically examines.

Methodology and Methods

This study examines how audiences experience, interpret, and manage guilty pleasures in consuming “bad” music. The analysis focuses on K-pop as the case, approaching it as a cultural domain in which taste is closely tied to social evaluation, moral expectations, and collective norms (Kim & Kim 2015:36; Yang & Rosenblatt 2001:364). Thus, a qualitative approach is adopted to remain sensitive to the contextual aspects by analysing “insider” experiences from audiences' own viewpoints and descriptions (Bazeley 2013:27).

Case Study

Qualitative research is essentially case-oriented (Bazeley 2013:5), and Flyvbjerg (2001:84) explains that a good case involves thick, complex and contradictory narratives of everyday life. The case of this study is K-pop, selected as a strategic and informative case for examining guilty pleasure as a socially mediated experience. The choice is based on two interrelated characteristics that make K-pop well-suited to this research.

First of all, K-pop is embedded in a sociocultural context in which cultural practices are often shaped by strong social evaluations and expectations about appropriate behaviour (Yang & Rosenblatt 2001:364). Within this environment, certain forms of cultural consumption can become sensitive markers of identity, subject to both external judgment and self-regulation. K-pop fandom offers a notable example, with its own unique fan culture shaped by a context

that emphasises collective norms and morality (Kim & Kim 2015:36). While K-pop is now widely recognised as a global cultural industry, participating in its fandom is not always perceived positively. K-pop fans may be associated with stereotypes such as immaturity, excessive emotional investment, or lack of productivity (Lee 2021:54, 72). These perceptions can make the expression of fan identity socially complex, prompting individual fans to manage when and how they reveal their preferences.

Secondly, K-pop operates within highly participatory digital environments, where public spaces for interaction and exchange of views are abundant. This creates a paradoxical situation in which individuals who may hesitate to reveal their tastes in certain contexts are also active in online environments where sharing and discussion are core practices. In these spaces, expressions of enjoyment may not be simply hidden or revealed, but are often negotiated, justified, or adjusted in relation to others. This allows observation of how individual listeners navigate the social consequences of their tastes in real time.

These characteristics make K-pop a suitable case for analysing guilty pleasure as a socially embedded phenomenon. The case provides access to the context in which taste is socially evaluated, expressed, and negotiated, enabling analysis of how individual audiences manage the ambivalence surrounding the enjoyment of “bad” or socially questionable cultural objects.

Within the broader case of K-pop, *SumDeutMyung*, a YouTube video series produced by the MMTG channel (2018-2020), is selected as the primary empirical site. The series is particularly relevant because it explicitly frames the featured songs as guilty pleasures and objects of hidden enjoyment. Additionally, by revisiting old K-pop songs from the early 2010s (Jang 2020:para. 9), the series encourages audiences to recall and discuss them, adding intricate temporal and emotional dimensions to audience experiences. Most importantly, the series’ comment sections provide a space where private listening practices are brought into a shared, interactive space. User comments make visible how individuals express their “bad” taste and justify their guilty pleasures in a social setting. For this reason, the *SumDeutMyung* series functions as a data source that enables the observation of how guilty pleasure is communicated and negotiated in practice.

Research Design and Data Collection

To analyse audiences’ engagement with the *SumDeutMyung* series and their experiences with

guilty pleasure music, this study conducts a qualitative textual analysis of comments on the original videos. As Hansen and Machin (2019:101, 302) explain, online forum spaces such as YouTube comment sections facilitate the analysis of “naturally occurring” responses and audience dialogues, which can be “unobtrusively” collected. Therefore, in this study, comments enable a noninvasive investigation of the rich emotional and social dimensions of guilty pleasure experiences.

Sampling Strategy

The dataset for this study comprises user comments collected from YouTube videos in the *SumDeutMyung* series. A key concern in working with this dataset is its scale. The official playlist of the *SumDeutMyung* series comprises 45 videos, including main episodes, pre-released and post-released videos, and short teaser clips (MMTG 2018-2020). Many of the videos have thousands of comments, with some exceeding 10,000. Analysing all available comments would not be feasible within the scope of this thesis.

Another challenge concerns the uneven distribution of information within the comments. While some comments provide rich descriptions of personal experiences related to guilty pleasure, others consist of brief reactions that do not contribute to the research questions. This necessitates identifying analytically relevant comments without losing important variation in audience responses.

These challenges require a sampling strategy that reduces the dataset to a manageable size while retaining meaningful, diverse expressions of guilty pleasure. To address the large volume of data, 10 videos from the *SumDeutMyung* series were first selected as primary sources for analysis. In order to select the videos, the raw comments from every episode were scraped into an Excel file using YouTube Data Tools (YTDT), developed by Bernhard Rieder. The scraped comment data included not only the original comments but also the number of likes and replies for each comment, as well as randomly pseudonymised user IDs. Then the scraped raw comments for each video were arranged by number of likes, and the top comments were quickly skimmed to identify and select the 10 episodes that most richly reveal audiences’ experiences and emotions related to the guilty pleasure. The selection followed a purposive sampling strategy to deliberately choose “information-rich” data, as Seale (2018a:340) explains. The final 10 sampled videos are summarised in the table below.

Table 1. Selected episodes, uploaded date, content, and the number of comments (as of March 5, 2026).

Title (originally in Korean)	Upload date	Content description	Comments
[Performance video] T-ARA – ‘Roly-Poly’ Full ver. 4K / MMTG	October 2, 2020	K-pop girl band T-ara’s performance video in the <i>SumDeutMyung</i> concert	16,513
[Performance video] T-ARA – ‘SEXY LOVE’ Full ver. 4K / MMTG	October 2, 2020	K-pop girl band T-ara’s performance video in the <i>SumDeutMyung</i> concert	9,270
[MMTG EP.89] The no. 1 guilty pleasure song that even Kim Eana shook her head and kept denying (feat. Taeyeon, IU, SHINee, Gain, etc.)	December 19, 2019	Interview with the K-pop song lyricist Kim Eana	2,782
[MMTG EP.126] They said, “No more perfume on you,” but they themselves used to wear quite a lot of it back then: Teen Top’s Niel, whose feet dancing is “Rocking”	July 2, 2020	Interview with the K-pop boy band Teen Top’s member, Niel	10,554
[MMTG EP.32] Attention, Korean girls: MMTG visited and interviewed the lyricist of ‘Mazeltov’ (feat. ZE:A)	November 29, 2018	Interview with the lyricist of the K-pop idol ZE:A’s song, ‘Mazeltov’	2,739
[MMTG EP.111] My life is divided into before and after listening to ‘GANG’ and ‘Shut up!!’ Of course, there’s no difference	May 4, 2020	A discussion in which K-pop professionals and the MMTG production team talk together about guilty pleasure K-pop songs	3,164
[Performance video] Teen Top – ‘No more perfume on you’ Full ver. 4K / MMTG	October 2, 2020	K-pop boy band Teen Top’s performance video in the <i>SumDeutMyung</i> concert	5,135
[MMTG EP.110] ‘Female President’ versus ‘No more perfume on you’: the controversial guilty pleasure songs that even led to an assembly-style discussion	April 30, 2020	A discussion in which K-pop professionals and the MMTG production team talk together about guilty pleasure K-pop songs	2,687
[MMTG EP.48] ‘Baby’? A compilation of guilty pleasure songs that are really cool but also embarrassing enough to make you laugh (feat. Son Dam Bi)	March 28, 2019	A discussion in which K-pop professionals and the MMTG production team talk together about guilty pleasure K-pop songs	1,594
[MMTG EP.30] Does anyone know <i>SumDeutMyung</i> [guilty pleasure songs]? (feat. perfect songs when working hard)	November 20, 2018	The very first episode of the <i>SumDeutMyung</i> series. A discussion among the MMTG production team	2,240

		about guilty pleasure K-pop songs	
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In the next step, the top 100 comments from each selected episode were sampled based on their number of likes. This is based on the premise that comments that receive many likes may capture the dominant sentiments and experiences shared by listeners about a given episode or a particular guilty pleasure song.

However, relying solely on highly liked comments posed a limitation, as it risked overlooking less visible but analytically significant responses. Moreover, as previously noted, some of the top comments did not provide any information related to guilty pleasure. This created a gap between visibility and analytical relevance that a purely like-based sample could not resolve. To address this issue, additional comments that offered meaningful insights or information for the analysis were sampled further from the 10 videos during the coding process, according to the zigzag approach (Rivas 2018:880). These additional sampled comments were not selected randomly or based on the number of likes, but were deliberately selected to capture deeper dimensions of guilty pleasure. This makes it a purposive sampling (Seale 2018a:340). This iterative process of data sampling and coding enabled the analysis to remain responsive to emerging patterns in the data (Rivas 2018:880). Thus, these additionally sampled comments led to saturation, the point at which no new information or themes are added to the coding categories (ibid.).

It should be noted that this thesis situates guilty pleasure experiences within specific sociocultural contexts, including South Korea and K-pop fandom culture. As K-pop fandom is highly transnational, the sampling and analysis are limited to comments written in Korean to align with the study's contextual focus, as commenters writing in Korean are more likely to be embedded in this particular sociocultural background. In practice, the vast majority of comments in the *SumDeutMyung* series are indeed written in Korean. Nonetheless, this approach does not fully resolve the demographic ambiguity. YouTube comments do not provide precise demographic information about commenters' national or cultural backgrounds. Additionally, some international K-pop fans actively learn Korean and participate in Korean-language fan discourses (Kim 2013:12). This remains a methodological limitation of the study.

Thematic Qualitative Text Analysis

Thematic qualitative text analysis was utilised to analyse the sampled comments from the 10 episodes, since the research aims to identify recurring patterns in how audiences define, express, and justify guilty pleasure. Thematic coding allows the researcher to systematically organise and interpret qualitative data by grouping them into themes, categories, and patterns (Rivas 2018:876). This makes it possible to capture the lived experience of research participants, focusing on what a social phenomenon or event “looks like” in their viewpoints (ibid.:876-877). Thus, it is a suitable analysis method for concretely understanding how *SumDeutMyung* listeners experience particular K-pop songs as their guilty pleasures, and the accompanying emotional dimensions.

The coding process was developed to address several challenges posed by the data. The comments varied significantly in length, tone, and content, ranging from short reactions to detailed personal reflections. In addition, measuring emotions through comments poses methodological challenges, as emotional expression in text is often ambiguous or implicit. This made it difficult to apply predefined categories or identify relevant patterns in a single coding round.

To manage these challenges, the analysis followed a three-step coding process. The analysis began with an initial phase of open coding, in which the comments were read closely, and a general word or phrase describing each comment was inductively extracted by highlighting important parts of the comments (Rivas 2018:881). Although some general concepts from existing literature on a guilty pleasure functioned as a starting point, the descriptive codes that captured main ideas or expressions were not predefined but developed from the data. This allowed the analysis to remain open to unexpected patterns across the data and implicit forms of expression (ibid.:882). Through this abductive approach, previous theoretical understandings of guilty pleasure can be recontextualised in the empirical data, leading to a new interpretation of the frameworks (Bazeley 2013:336). It is important to note that open coding highlights explicit emotional or physical reactions in the comments, including statements such as “missing the old days,” “twisting body,” “embarrassed,” and “cringeworthy,” to avoid misinterpretation.

The analysis moved on to comparing and grouping open codes into preliminary categories in a table (Rivas 2018:885). This second step was necessary to reduce data fragmentation, as

similar experiences were often described using different terms or phrases. Clustering related initial codes enabled the identification of recurring patterns in how audiences expressed their experiences. Moreover, by adopting the zigzag approach as previously mentioned, the additional comments from the 10 episodes were sampled during this process, which facilitated richer interpretations of the data by building categories as the research proceeded (ibid.). During this stage, the developed categories were repeatedly checked against the original comments and revised. This ensured the interpretations “remain grounded in the data” and capture their fine details (ibid.).

The third and final step of thematic coding involves developing categories into abstract themes (Rivas 2018:887). This step enabled the analysis to move beyond mere description and to interpret the data (ibid.). After identifying the main findings across the comments, different aspects of guilty pleasure emerged and were interconnected. Finally, the final themes developed for the analysis are as follows: affective dimensions of guilty pleasure; participatory and confessional practices through comments; negotiating pleasure and discomfort; and defining guilty pleasure.

Ethical Considerations and Reflections

If the research involves people as research subjects or informants, ethical considerations emerge as a crucial issue (Hansen & Machin 2019:43). When investigating online user behaviour, it is necessary to carefully approach ethical considerations, as online platforms blur the boundaries between public and private data (Seale 2018b:673, 695). In particular, in online discussion spaces such as the comment sections of *SumDeutMyung*, anyone with internet access can access them. Furthermore, the *SumDeutMyung* audience is large and non-fixed, making it impossible to obtain informed consent from every individual in a group.

The comment sections of *SumDeutMyung* are sites where audiences reveal their private secrets. Studying these comments might be a sensitive issue for some commenters. Therefore, this thesis focuses on analysing general themes rather than individual users, without providing any information that makes a particular user identifiable, such as user IDs (Jensen 2012:367). When scraping raw comments using YTDT, all the data was anonymised by assigning random numbers instead of user IDs. Moreover, as all comments analysed and quoted in this study are written in Korean, the study protects users’ anonymity and privacy by

presenting translated English quotations rather than directly quoting the original or attaching screenshots.

In addition, researchers need to constantly reflect on their positionalities and relationships with the research topics (Ali & Kelly 2018:110). Being both a researcher and a K-pop music fan, I was also an active viewer of the *SumDeutMyung* series when it was being produced on YouTube. As Jenkins (1992:5-6) explains, being both an academic and a fan can enrich the research outcomes by providing particular knowledge and traditions of the fan community. Therefore, I attempt to understand the experiences of the *SumDeutMyung* audiences based on the rich background knowledge that I already have about K-pop fans, rather than keeping academic distance from them (ibid.:6). Nevertheless, to avoid a potential bias, I chose thematic analysis of comments as a research method that can directly reflect the voices and experiences of the audiences.

Analysis

This thesis investigates how “bad” K-pop song lovers experience, express and manage their guilty pleasures in an online environment. To explore this, the first subsection notes that the comment section opens a participatory confessional space for audiences. In the second subsection, the audience’s understanding of guilty pleasure music will be explored. The third subsection examines three dominant emotional reactions expressed through the comments: nostalgia, guilt, and shame. The analysis concludes by examining audiences’ justificatory strategies for consuming guilty pleasure music.

The Comment Section as a Participatory Confessional Space

Guilty pleasure: an Open Secret?

Online comment sections have become increasingly significant for audience engagement, functioning as hubs for meaning-making, emotional expression, and social interaction. In the *SumDeutMyung* series, the show’s premise creates a unique dynamic. The term “SumDeutMyung” is an abbreviation of the Korean phrase meaning “a ‘good’ guilty pleasure song that one listens to secretly,” implying that the show is built upon the idea of private consumption. This raises an intriguing paradox: if guilty pleasure music is something

listeners keep hidden, what happens when a popular YouTube series brings it into the public eye?

Examining the comments reveals that a significant number of users respond with a sense of exposure and discomfort:

“From songs such as ‘GANG,’ ‘Baby,’ ‘OPPA,’ ‘Silk Road’ to ‘Shut up!!’, I had been secretly expanding my musical tastes. But seeing these songs in the public spotlight on MMTG makes me feel as if I had been stripped bare, with my secrets exposed. A sudden wave of embarrassment washes over me.”

Other users articulate the same tension through the distinction between “underground” and “mainstream” and the language of surveillance:

“[...] It feels like this show is dragging me out of the underground into the mainstream. It’s like someone stole a look at my playlist. Feels like civilian surveillance [...].”

“Honestly, ‘GANG’ shouldn’t come out into the mainstream. It should just remain as a secretly consumed song.”

These users share the concern that guilty pleasure songs belong to a private, hidden sphere, and their entry into public visibility marks the collapse of the boundary between the private and the visible. The second user goes further, making a normative claim that the transgression should be prevented. This tension can be understood through Goffman’s (1986:42) discussion on “stigma” and “information management,” which he identifies as vital for individuals whose differentness is not immediately apparent to others. Since musical taste is rarely visible, the series’ act of making it openly visible leads some users to experience what Goffman (*ibid.*:19) describes as a threat to social identity, arising from the exposure of the discrepancy between one’s virtual (socially expected) and actual identity. McAvoy (2017:193) captures this dynamic concisely, noting that acknowledging one’s guilty pleasure is considered a “confession to cultural sin.”

Nevertheless, the discomfort of revealing tastes does not prevent users from engaging with the comment section. McAvoy (2017:181, 194) argues that part of the pleasure stems from making confessions in public and participating in collective judgments, thereby conceptualising guilty pleasure as an “open secret.” Despite anxieties about exposure, the majority of users actively share their guilty pleasure songs, and this sharing often takes a

collective, social form. Many users discover songs they had previously been unfamiliar with, and some compile scattered recommendations from multiple comments into a curated list:

“[...] I heard ‘Mazeltov’ [*K-pop idol’s song*] for the first time, thanks to this show. Now I’m going around spreading it to people.”

“I just roughly listed the songs mentioned in the comments (many are missing). Seo In-young’s ‘Cinderella,’ Sun Ha’s ‘Chantey Chantey,’ Bae Seul-ki’s ‘Tomboy,’ [...] D-UNIT and G.NA.”

Beyond discovering new songs, users realise that other listeners share similar tastes. This transforms music listening from individual behaviour into a social experience. Van Dijck’s (2007:91) notion of communal listening, which refers to the social activity of listening with peers or sharing evaluations, is relevant here. She argues that digital space can function as a platform for exchanging music collections and constructing taste communities (ibid.:94). In the comment section of the *SumDeutMyung* series, audiences do not simply react to videos but actively build a listener community around their shared guilty pleasures.

Goffman’s (1986:81) concept of a “back place” offers a complementary framework to understand why this community feels safe. As Goffman (ibid.:20) explains, a “back place” enables stigmatised individuals to freely disclose their stigma and experience acceptance among others who share the same deficits. Extending this to the digital context, the comment section functions as a digitally mediated “back place” where the social pressure to conceal temporarily dissolves, allowing users to safely reveal their music tastes.

Fan Comments as Participatory Culture

The comment section also constitutes participatory engagement with the programme’s production. A recurring pattern shows audiences attempting to influence the show by suggesting their own guilty pleasures for future episodes. These requests tend to include arguments, illustrations, and instructions that position audiences as knowledgeable co-producers rather than passive viewers. One user requests that the K-pop idol Boyfriend and their song ‘JANUS’ be featured:

“Please rediscover Boyfriend’s ‘JANUS’ as a hidden gem. This song isn’t merely some hidden tracks we lost in time. It’s more like a song that everyone should know. A true

masterpiece, seriously. I trust you, MMTG production team.”

The commenter does not merely suggest a song but specifies how the programme should frame and evaluate it, positioning the song as a misrecognised masterpiece deserving reappraisal. Another comment manifests a similar desire in relation to K-pop solo artist Rain’s discography:

“Please conduct an in-depth analysis and exploration of Rain’s ‘GANG,’ ‘30SEXY,’ and ‘Baby’ as well. And please make sure to feature the composer who produced those songs, too. [...]”

While the previous commenter seeks a reappraisal of a specific song, this user seeks to influence the production process itself. The user specifies which songs to feature, which analytical approach to take, and whom to invite. Both comments treat the programme’s editorial decisions as open to negotiation by the audience.

Jenkins (1992:28) argues that media fandom has always engaged in collective efforts to influence production decisions. The term “textual poachers” describes active fans who appropriate cultural texts and engage in a power struggle with producers to shape the meaning-making process (ibid.:23-25). By proposing content and appealing directly to the production team, audiences seek to influence the programme’s cultural agenda and the status of the songs it features. Androutsopoulos and Tereick (2016:355, 366) extend Jenkins’ argument to YouTube, describing it as “a prototype of participatory culture” that invites the public to participate in collective norm-building. The comment section of the *SumDeutMyung* series thus functions as a site where cultural value is actively negotiated and produced.

In summary, the two dynamics examined here suggest that the comment section operates as what I call a “participatory confessional space,” a public arena that paradoxically enables the disclosure of private tastes by creating a community of fellow cultural sinners. Audiences simultaneously experience discomfort with the public visibility of their hidden tastes and actively use that visibility to share, discover, and negotiate the boundaries of guilty pleasure together. While McAvoy (2017:181) explains that part of the enjoyment arises from the confession of guilty pleasures, *SumDeutMyung*’s comments reveal a more complex dynamic than simply choosing between private discomfort and public disclosure. Listeners who describe feeling “stripped bare” by the series still choose to write comments. They commit what McAvoy (ibid.:193) calls a “cultural sin,” and join the space that exposed them in public

to confess it. By publicly disclosing a culturally condemned taste, listeners seek and often receive communal recognition that neutralises their discomfort. However, their confessions do not fully resolve the affective tension of guilty pleasure. The listener community provides temporary relief, but the social conditions that produced the uncomfortable feeling in the first place remain intact. The tension is managed rather than eliminated.

What Makes a “SumDeutMyung?”: Audiences Defining Guilty Pleasure Music

The programme presents the term “SumDeutMyung” as a self-evident category. This raises a fundamental question: do the series’ audiences share a common understanding of what guilty pleasure music is? And if their definitions vary, are there nonetheless shared elements to how it is understood?

Guilty Pleasure Music: the Logic of Concealment

According to Reid (2022:193-194), one song can be genuinely enjoyed by one listener while another finds it “bad,” as guilty pleasure is both a deeply social and individual experience. Naturally, audiences of the *SumDeutMyung* series define guilty pleasure music in various ways. Despite this variety, a single principle recurs across many comments. Guilty pleasure music is defined not by its musical qualities but by how it should be consumed. One user emphasises its niche dimension:

“[...] Literally the song that only ‘I’ listen to.”

By arguing that guilty pleasure music is not recognised by others, the user defines it as what Reid (ibid.:189) calls “a minor aesthetic category,” which belongs to a peripheral, individual sphere. The following quote explicitly presents the logic of concealment:

“[...] Melon [*Korean music streaming platform*] updated the app, so now it displays the large size of the album cover on the lock screen. This sometimes scares me... I’m like, ‘Oh my god, what is this?’ and then I quickly change my guilty pleasure song to Dua Lipa’s.”

This comment reveals two interrelated factors. First, it demonstrates Goffman’s (1986:42) “information management,” which refers to actively controlling the information to reduce the

potential threat of stigma exposure. A mundane technological update transforms a private listening space into a potential site of social exposure, and switching to Dua Lipa dissolves the discrepancy between what others can see and what the listener actually enjoys. Second, the user implies a cultural hierarchy in which Dua Lipa represents publicly acceptable mainstream taste, whereas guilty pleasure music occupies an “illegitimate” space. As Bourdieu (2010:6, 26) writes, cultural forms supported by institutions are recognised as “legitimate” taste, while popular taste is positioned as inferior and “illegitimate.” However, the illegitimacy of guilty pleasure does not simply follow Bourdieu’s cultural hierarchy. As McAvoy (2017:182) argues, guilty pleasures occupy an eclectic position between high art and mass-produced culture, carrying a “status as forbidden.” He further states that the traditional boundary between highbrow and lowbrow is diminishing in the contemporary era, and thus the younger generation tends to embrace their enjoyment rather than experience negative feelings about it (ibid.:203). Yet, these comments show conflicting results. A comparable understanding appears in another comment:

“To be honest, aren’t most K-pop idol songs basically guilty pleasure songs anyway? I’ve never openly listened to them outside. At most, you hear them in places like a restaurant. If a K-pop idol song starts playing loudly from my MP3 player, I immediately turn down the volume.”

The user extends the guilty pleasure label beyond individual songs to the entire K-pop genre. Similar to the previous user, this user actively conceals one’s taste by lowering the volume, as illustrated by another user who renamed a music file to avoid exposure:

“Bae Seul-ki’s ‘말괄량이’ was truly [*my guilty pleasure*]. Back in the days when I listened to this song on my MP3 player, I was so embarrassed that I changed the song title to the English one, ‘Tomboy.’

Across these examples, the concealment strategies differ, but the pattern is consistent. Guilty pleasure consumption requires protecting oneself from others’ judgment, resulting in concealing stigmatised tastes. This suggests that guilty pleasure is characterised not by a specific musical genre or style, but rather by a particular mode of consumption surrounding a secret, private enjoyment of “bad” cultural objects. The exposure and confession of guilty pleasures may feel burdensome outside anonymous online communities such as the *SumDeutMyung* comment sections. In spaces other than what Goffman (1986:81) calls “back

place,” users continue to feel the need to conceal their stigmatised tastes.

“*SumDeutMyung*” versus “*AnDeutGok*”

While most users accept “SumDeutMyung” as a recognisable category, a smaller but notable group actively questions and renegotiates its boundary. This redefinition shows a pattern of adjustment operating in two directions. Some users elevate songs to a more “legitimate” status by arguing that they are too good to be guilty pleasures:

“‘Oh Yeah’ and ‘Rocking’ are good songs. Why are they regarded as ‘SumDeutMyung’ *[good guilty pleasure songs that one listens to secretly]*? They’re ‘DaeDeutMyung’ *[masterpieces that one publicly listens to]* that you could totally play loudly in a café.”

To argue that K-pop idols’ songs, MBLAQ’s ‘Oh Yeah’ and Teen Top’s ‘Rocking,’ deserve higher status, the user coins the term “DaeDeutMyung.” It refers to a good song consumed openly. The user actively resists the programme’s evaluation by proposing an alternative category. Others move in the opposite direction, demoting songs below the guilty pleasure standard:

“Isn’t ‘GANG’ not ‘SumDeutMyung’ *[a ‘good’ guilty pleasure song that one listens to secretly]*? It’s just ‘SumDeut’ *[songs that one listens to secretly]*.”

The term “SumDeut” takes away the “Myung” (“good”), implying the song is secretly consumed but unworthy of praise. A third user goes further:

“Please introduce Xia’s ‘Silk Road’ on the programme as ‘AnDeutGok (a song one does not want to listen to)’ too.”

“AnDeutGok,” which refers to “the song that I don’t even listen to in secret,” represents the most extreme end of the spectrum, indicating that the song is too “bad” or embarrassing even for private enjoyment. Taken together, these comments construct a classificatory hierarchy extending in both directions beyond the original term “SumDeutMyung.” This creative engagement reveals that audiences do not passively accept the guilty pleasure label but actively offer their own interpretations.

In sum, the *SumDeutMyung* audiences view guilty pleasure not as a fixed genre or musical style, but as a mode of listening defined by concealment. Crucially, they perceive that the

music is “bad” or embarrassing, yet still enjoy it in secret. As McAvoy (2017:183) writes, guilty pleasure is enjoyed *even though* it is “bad,” not *because* it is “bad.” This distinguishes guilty pleasure from other modes of engaging with “bad” cultural objects, particularly the paracinema associated with cult film consumption. As Sconce (1995:372) argues, paracinematic audiences explicitly declare their tastes and valorise film’s “badness” as a source of pleasure rather than conceal it. Watching cinematic trash and rejecting elite or mainstream culture is a calculated act to deny the authority of dominant cinema (ibid.). Fans celebrate the failures generated by poor and unskilled production conditions as a power to subvert the mainstream, treating such films as a genuine counter-cinema in that they stand against conventional Hollywood formulas (ibid.:385). On the contrary, *SumDeutMyung* listeners consume “bad” songs to pursue personal pleasure while avoiding social judgment, rather than to resist it. Furthermore, the findings of this study add a creative and active dimension to existing understandings of guilty pleasure, as audiences actively negotiate its boundary rather than merely receiving it.

Dominant Emotional Reactions of Audiences

Audiences’ definition of guilty pleasure music suggests that the consumption experience is not emotionally neutral but rather involves complex emotions. As Reid (2022:191) argues, the term “guilty pleasure” itself is an emotional concept, implying a tension between enjoyment and negative affect. This raises a question requiring closer empirical investigation: what specific emotions does guilty pleasure music consumption evoke, and how are these emotions expressed in the participatory confessional space?

Nostalgia as Collective Memory

Among the emotional patterns in the data, nostalgia is the most consistently and elaborately expressed. Considering that the *SumDeutMyung* series sheds light on songs by Gen 2.5 K-pop idols who debuted in the early 2010s (Jang 2020:para. 9), the conditions for nostalgic engagement are built into the series itself. The data reveal that nostalgic responses are not limited to vague expressions of longing but are frequently expressed through embodied, personal narratives:

“With just this one video, I remembered my school days. I used to buy bandanas with my friends in downtown, practise cover dances of this song while watching our reflections on the auditorium windows, and dance in polka-dot pants during the school festival.”

The song featured in the series reminds the user of the past, when he/she practised the song’s cover dance to participate in a school festival. The memory includes miscellaneous details such as bandanas, the school’s auditorium, and friends present. Van Dijck (2007:86) highlights that one’s personal “musical repertoire” inspires narrative engagement every time a particular song is replayed, and such autobiographical recall attaches meaning and cultural value to the song. The same pattern is repeated across the data:

“I know that this comment makes me sound kind of old, but back then I used to watch every music show, and if I missed one episode, I’d record it on my MP4 using DMB and keep it. It’s really nostalgic. I wasn’t a fan of Teen Top [*K-pop idol*], but I know almost all of their songs. [...]”

“I used to secretly listen to this song so that my friends wouldn’t find out. I even bought their albums while wearing a hat and mask to stay unrecognised by others. [...]”

Both comments illustrate how musical reminiscence becomes entangled with the specific technologies used to consume music. The MP4 player, DMB, and album records function not merely as contextual details but as inseparable parts of the memory that preserve the emotional texture of past experiences. Van Dijck (2007:87) describes this as “techno-stalgia,” noting that listeners’ memories evolve through their interactions with music technologies. The listening experience is defined by the equipment that enables it, and the equipment functions as an agent that reenacts listeners’ valuable past listening experiences (ibid.:87, 89). Across these comments, the song serves as an entry point into a particular scene in the listener’s life, with objects and circumstances attached to it.

Yet many other comments experience nostalgia as a shared generational event rather than a purely personal one. Several comments reveal that the music operates as a collective memory recognisable across a peer cohort:

“People in my generation, you all have danced to ‘Roly-Poly’ at least once during school festivals or school trips, right? [...]”

By calling out people in the same generation, the user presumes that dancing to the K-pop

idol song ‘Roly-Poly’ is a shared musical experience among those who spent their school years in the early 2010s. Several comments describe performing particular guilty pleasure songs with peers:

“Whenever I went to karaoke with people of my age, we sang the full discography of Teen Top [*K-pop idol*]. You have to sing ‘Clap’ while acting like you are possessed, perform like a cyber singer while singing ‘Supa Luv,’ [...] and line up for the parallel formation in the choreography while singing ‘Crazy.’ So nostalgic.”

“But MBLAQ’s [*K-pop idol*] ‘This is War’ really swept up everyone in my generation. Everyone copied the performance, even imitating Lee Joon’s intense, wild-eyed acting. [...]”

These comments invoke a shared peer experience defined by collective norms, rituals and practices. Specific choreographies, karaoke conventions, and performance styles are considered socially known within the cohort. Reid (2022:192) observes that personal memories attached to a guilty pleasure song contribute to the pleasure of consumption, but the data here suggest that this account needs extension. While Reid emphasises personal memory, the comments indicate that musical memory also operates collectively. The pleasure lies not only in remembering one’s own past but in recognising that one’s peers share the same experience.

This collective dimension echoes Van Dijck’s (2007:94) discussion of “collective cultural memory.” As Van Dijck (ibid.:77, 83) argues, engaging in shared listening, exchanging songs, and discussing music fosters a sense of belonging to a larger generational community. The comment sections of the *SumDeutMyung* series function as a venue where personal stories are stacked up, compared, and mutually recognised, gradually constructing a shared portrait of what it meant to grow up with Gen 2.5 K-pop in the 2010s.

In short, nostalgia in the data operates on two related levels. At the individual level, music catalyses detailed autobiographical memories attached to specific devices, companions, and social situations. At the collective level, it functions as a medium for generational recognition and belonging. These nostalgic responses also reveal an apparent paradox. Crucially, “secret” here does not mean literally unknown, but refers to enjoyment that lacks cultural legitimacy.

Guilt in Relation to Moral Judgment

Among the various negative emotions expressed in the comments, a recurring theme is listeners' moral unease about the music they consume. Unlike aesthetic discomfort, where embarrassment stems from enjoying something culturally "bad," this unease is rooted in ethical concerns that extend beyond matters of taste. A closer examination reveals two distinct but related sources of moral guilt.

The first pattern concerns guilt generated not by the music itself, but by the perceived moral failings of those who produce or perform it. This is particularly prominent in episodes featuring T-ara, a K-pop girl band whose career was severely damaged by a widely publicised bullying scandal (H. Kim 2024). Although public opinion on the incident has since become divided, it was broadly accepted as fact at the time and left a lasting stigma on the group (ibid.). The following comment illustrates how this social context shapes the listening experience:

"Do you guys know why this song is considered a guilty pleasure song, even though it's so amazing? The bullying scandal happened when this song was released, and the public viewed T-ara negatively. That's why we listeners had to listen to it secretly. [...]"

"Among guilty pleasure songs featured in the series, the authentic and original example is T-ara's songs. You truly had to listen to them 'in secret.' The rumour about the band would have just passed today, but given the harsher social atmosphere toward young women back then, T-ara was pushed to the point of being a national villain. [...]"

Both users affirm the music's quality while acknowledging that its consumption had to be concealed due to the social disgrace attached to its performers. A comparable structure appears in comments about 'Bbiribbom Bbaeribom' by the K-pop idol, Co-Ed School, whose member Kangho was embroiled in allegations of sexual crime, drug use, and drunk driving (Kim 2018):

"'Bbiribbom Bbaeribom' is truly a masterpiece, but [...] Kangho completely ruined the group. That's why it ended up becoming an unfortunate song that people listen to in secret."

Across these comments, the listeners do not doubt the music's quality. Guilt is social, attached to the artists' moral standing. When enjoying the music of an idol condemned for

bullying, the listener risks being perceived as excusing or supporting their behaviours. This pattern appears to reflect a broader tendency in K-pop fandom culture, where the ethical standing of an idol is treated as inseparable from the reception of their music. As Jeong (2026:42) observes, K-pop audiences continuously apply ethical standards to idols, partly because Korean society holds strong collective moralistic and Confucian values.

Here, the sociological framework offered by Scambler (2020) helps clarify the pattern. Scambler (2020:25-26) builds on and extends Goffman's (1986) work on stigma by introducing a crucial conceptual distinction. For Goffman (ibid.:2-3, 42), stigma is a discrediting attribute that spoils social identity, and his framework highlights how individuals manage personal information about themselves to prevent that stigma from becoming visible. On the other hand, Scambler (2020:2) argues for the necessity of analytically distinguishing between shame and blame, although these two terms are often used interchangeably. Stigma, in Scambler's (ibid.:26) reworking, refers to an "ontological deficit" and results in feeling shame. By contrast, deviance refers to non-compliance and a "moral deficit" that involves being "blamed" by others. Drawing on Scambler's framework, I would define the negative emotion evoked from consuming morally problematic music as "guilt."

The second source of guilt emerges from the music content itself. This is most evident in comments about songs with ethically contentious lyrics. The K-pop boyband Teen Top's (2011) 'No more perfume on you' depicts a narrator cheating on his girlfriend, seducing an older woman and telling her not to wear perfume to avoid getting caught (ibid.):

"The lyrics are total jerks [...], but I still love it. That's why I never wear perfumes even nowadays."

The user describes the conflict between aesthetic pleasure and moral judgment. And the expression "jerks" signals a conscious consumption of enjoying a morally problematic song. A similar dynamic appears in a comment listing several songs together with a moral label attached to each:

"Taeyang's 'ONLY LOOK AT ME' (selfish jerk), B1A4's 'Baby good night' (baddie-like jerk), Teen Top's 'No more perfume on you' (showing off young jerk), and 2AM's 'What Should I Do' (innocent jerk). These four songs, seriously... sigh"

All four songs share a common moral problem, each depicting a narrator engaging in some forms of infidelity (2AM 2009; B1A4 2016; Taeyang 2009; Teen Top 2011). The moral labels

the commenter attaches to each hint a conscious recognition of the unethical narratives, but enjoyment persists.

A different case is ‘Female President’ by the K-pop idol Girl’s Day (2013). Originally a lighthearted celebration of gender equality and female empowerment, the song’s cultural status shifted dramatically following the impeachment of South Korea’s first and only female president, Park Geun-hye, due to massive corruption (Girl’s Day 2013; R. Kim 2024):

“But seriously, ‘Female President’ is... Since Park was impeached, I really have to listen to the song in secret. [...]”

“[...] ‘No more perfume on you’ is still fine for me, since a lot of people don’t know the lyrics. But ‘Female President’ feels like you could be mistaken as supporting Park Geun-hye just from the song title. That’s why I could never use this song as my profile music.”

The second comment explicitly contrasts Teen Top’s ‘No more perfume on you’ and ‘Female President.’ The commenter thinks that Teen Top’s morally questionable lyrics are tolerable in public because their meaning is not immediately understandable, whereas ‘Female President’ carries an unavoidable political association that risks social misidentification. In Scambler’s (2020:26) terms, this reflects “felt deviance,” which refers to an internalised fear of being blamed for moral deficits. It leads the listeners to perform what Goffman (1986:42) calls “passing,” the act of concealing invisible stigma. As Goffman (ibid.:74) states, when the stigmatised marker is not immediately observable to others, the main issue for a stigmatised individual is not managing tension during social interactions, but rather “information management” (ibid.: 42). An individual who has unnoticeable stigma tends to attempt passing, since the rewards of being considered normal are significant. Accordingly, the second listener above conceals one’s taste to mitigate the risk of being misread as a declaration of political identity.

Overall, the two patterns show that guilty pleasure is fundamentally a social experience. Whether guilt is generated by an artist’s moral deviance or by a song’s content, it does not arise in isolation but is shaped by the broader social and cultural context in which the music is consumed. Specifically, the data reveal that this context operates through collective moral responsibility. In South Korean K-pop fandom culture, listening to a morally condemned artist is not merely a private aesthetic act but a social gesture that can be interpreted as aligning with the artist. Thus, the context determines the moral weight that attaches to taste.

This goes beyond what Reid (2022) discusses in her framework. She treats guilty pleasure primarily as an internal tension between enjoyment and discomfort (ibid.:191), but does not fully address a context in which the social cost of association with morally questionable objects is structurally increased as collective moralism is deeply embedded in fan culture. The *SumDeutMyung* audience suggests that the sociocultural context is not a simple background to guilty pleasure, but rather a part of its mechanism.

Shame as Embarrassment/Cringe

Beyond guilt and nostalgia, a distinct emotional pattern emerges across the dataset, which is a sense of embarrassment. Unlike moral guilt, this form of negative affect does not arise from ethical concerns but from perceived aesthetic qualities of the music. A prominent feature of embarrassment-related comments is that they frequently express emotion physically as an involuntary reaction rather than a reflective moral judgment:

“MBLAQ’s [*K-pop idol band*] ‘This is War’ makes me so embarrassed that my whole body twists up even now.”

“Listening to the songs now, why is everything so cringeworthy to make my hands and toes curl up?”

“I felt embarrassed the whole time watching this episode. It gave me goosebumps.”

This bodily language contrasts with the self-directed moral vocabulary that characterises guilt in the dataset. Examining the data more closely, a consistent trigger emerges. Embarrassment arises when a song’s components, including lyrics, titles, concept, or performance, are perceived as lacking quality or as outmoded. One commenter describes why the title and lyrics of the K-pop idol song ‘Amigo’ feel embarrassing:

“The real guilty pleasure song is SHINee’s ‘Amigo,’ which means ‘Meeting a beautiful woman brings hardship.’ From ‘Wow, it’s cold, it’s cold. Here comes the ice princess’ to ‘An empty man, a bluffing man. Don’t compare me to them. I’m a totally lovable man,’ the lyrics are just a perfect guilty pleasure. [...] They all give off that *He Was Cool* vibe and remind me of the Cyworld era. But the music itself is so upbeat, so I’m still listening to it with earphones.”

The user associates specific lyrics with a particular cultural moment in the early 2000s in Korea. Cyworld is a Korean social media platform, and *He Was Cool* is an internet novel by the popular writer Guiyeoni (Ham 2004). Both represent cultures that were once fashionable but are now outmoded, and were mentioned in the comment to express the unfashionableness of ‘Amigo.’ As Reid (2022:193) identifies, negative responses to pleasure can be triggered by outdated objects. The commenter still listens, but “with earphones,” implying a management of social visibility. Comparable dynamics appear in comments about K-pop idols VIXX and EXO:

“I used to listen to this song [*G.R.8.U*] often since my friend was a fan of VIXX [*K-pop idol band*], but I was shocked by the title at first. It sounds like a moody teenager. [...]”

“[...] ‘Miracles in December’ is overall a really good song, but there’s this one shocking lyric, ‘this humble superpower.’ I remember being like, ‘Oh my god!’ at that line. While listening to it, my non-fan friends laughed and said, ‘What even is this lyric?’”

The first commenter describes being “shocked” by the song title, ‘G.R.8.U,’ which is derived from a juvenile online meme. By saying, “sounds like a moody teenager,” the user frames the song as transient and adolescent. The second commenter points out the lyric of ‘Miracles in December’ as unpredictable and random, which is a source of cringe. In both cases, what generates embarrassment is the perceived bizarreness or abnormality of the song’s creative decisions. A further example appears in comments about the K-pop solo artist Rain’s ‘GANG’:

“1. No exaggerated facial expressions. 2. No biting lips. 3. No winking. [...] 14. Face the trend of 2020. 15. No dwelling on the past or narcissism. [...]”

“The biggest reason why Rain’s ‘GANG’ became such a hot target for mockery isn’t merely because of his outdated fashion, dancing, and lyrics. It’s because of Rain’s firm belief that the public will receive all of these musical factors exactly as he intended. The crab-like dancing, [...] his pretentious rapping, and the ‘I’m the best’ vibe dance might have been loved by people during his heyday. But now times have changed. [...]”

The first user constructs a checklist of aesthetic violations. The second goes further, locating cringe in the gap between the producer’s sincere attitude and the “bad” outcome. This partly resonates with Sontag’s (2018:16) concept of pure Camp. According to Sontag (ibid.), pure

Camp arises from failed seriousness, producing the most powerful aesthetic responses because the gap between intention and outcome is genuine rather than staged. In other words, pure Camp should be unintentional and overly extravagant (ibid.:13, 16). Objects created with serious intent or passion, but cannot be taken seriously because they are excessive, evoke Camp sensibility (ibid.:17). Hence, Camp can be summarised as “it’s good because it’s awful” (ibid.:56), pursuing liberating experiences of refusing the traditional aesthetic judgment of “good” and “bad” (ibid.:22, 32). Sconce (1995:385) extends this logic to paracinematic audiences, observing that “badness” is often valued when it results from unintended failure rather than deliberate calculation. ‘GANG’ functions as pure Camp in this sense. Still, guilty pleasure audiences remain distinct from Sontag’s (2018:32) Camp sensibility or cult film fans who genuinely celebrate failure without judgment. For these listeners, the earnest performance produces cringe rather than affectionate appreciation.

Across all these cases, the same underlying logic appears. Listeners do not judge themselves for enjoying something morally problematic. Instead, they manage their social image to avoid being perceived as having aesthetically “bad” taste. Reid (2022:193) subsumes both aesthetic and moral discomfort under the umbrella term “guilt,” but the data here suggest these operate through different logics, requiring separate terminologies. For Reid (ibid.:192), guilty feeling is essentially a unified affective response to recognising that one is enjoying something one should not. In contrast, the data reveal that the source of discomfort matters considerably. Aesthetic discomfort arises from the song’s perceived failings, whereas moral discomfort stems from the anxiety about the beliefs or values the listener supports. These are structurally distinct responses.

Again, Scambler’s (2020:25-26) framework captures this distinction. While deviance concerns a person’s “doing” and generates “blame,” stigma involves an “ontological deficit” in which a person’s identity is deemed socially unacceptable, resulting in “shame” (ibid.:2, 25-26). Listeners who conceal their enjoyment of ‘Amigo’ behind earphones, or who are shocked at the lyric of ‘Miracles in December,’ are not morally blaming themselves. They feel shame derived from enjoying aesthetically “bad” songs.

This finding complicates McAvoy’s (2017:202-203) observation that discomfort with aesthetically “bad” objects gradually diminishes in contemporary society, while moral guilt intensifies. The *SumDeutMyung* data do not support this account. Aesthetic shame remains alive in the online participatory space. Rather, the comment section amplifies it by

transforming private listening habits into publicly visible ones. This suggests that the weakening of aesthetic hierarchies McAvoy (ibid.:203) describes may be context dependent. In a society where conformity and dominant hierarchy remain strong, the aesthetic dimension of guilty pleasure remains valid.

How to Justify Pleasure

As guilty pleasure consumption provokes guilt and shame, one question naturally follows: what do audiences do with those emotions? How do they manage and negotiate the tension between negative emotions and their enjoyment?

Mocking or Memeifying as Ironic Consumption

The data reveal that some listeners do not simply disengage but adjust their engagement through humour. Across the dataset, two related but distinct practices emerge: mockery and memeification.

The most visible form of ironic engagement is mockery, and its clearest case is Rain's song 'GANG.' Rain is a Korean solo artist who was one of the biggest pop stars in the mid-2000s (Kim 2020). His song 'GANG' was widely criticised due to its outdated fashion, ridiculous choreography and exaggerated performance (ibid.). The song became a viral meme after one student uploaded a parody video of it on YouTube (ibid.), making it one of the most heavily discussed texts in the *SumDeutMyung* comments. Audiences do not merely find the song funny but elaborate on why they mock it:

“The biggest reason why Rain's 'GANG' became such a hot target for mockery isn't merely because of the outdated fashion, dancing, and lyrics. It's because of Rain's firm belief that the public will receive all of these musical factors exactly as he intended. The crab-like dancing, [...] his pretentious rapping, and the 'I'm the best' vibe dance might have been loved by people during his heyday. But now times have changed. [...]"

“[...] Rain might misunderstand that people consume 'GANG' because they genuinely like it.”

The comments show that audiences consistently regard the source of mockery as the

perceived gap between the performer's earnestness and the "bad" outcome. The seriousness of the artist, as much as the "badness" of the song itself, becomes the primary target. Again, Sontag's (2018) notion of Camp is partially relevant here. Camp claims that there exists a "good" taste of enjoying "badness," finding success in passionate, unintended aesthetic failures (ibid.:32). Importantly, Camp taste is a mode of enjoyment, rather than judgment (ibid.). If the Camp consumer encounters Rain's outdated dancing and exaggerated performance, he/she would find it delightful in the artist's earnestness. In this regard, the pleasure the *SumDeutMyung* audiences derive from 'GANG' echoes the Camp sensibility in that the source of enjoyment arises from the gap between the performer's seriousness and the "bad" outcome. However, as both comments show, the tone is sharper and more critical, with audiences judging the "badness." Audiences who retain guilty pleasures thus employ what McCoy and Scarborough (2014) present as "ironic consumption" to justify their enjoyment. Ironic consumption refers to maintaining the distance from the "badness" of the text, treating it "as a source of mockery and ridicule" (ibid.:49, 56). By framing their engagement as mockery rather than genuine appreciation, the *SumDeutMyung* audiences can acknowledge the song's perceived "badness" while protecting themselves from negative emotions.

This mockery does not remain a purely individual act. Self-identified "GANG Fam" members construct a shared community identity around habitual, daily consumption of the song, expressed through the phrase "1 Day 1 GANG":

"Honestly, what song can beat 'GANG'? Are there any fools not practising 1 Day 1 GANG these days?"

"If you are a GANG Fam member who flinched at the video thumbnail saying 'GANG' and came to watch the video, please give this comment likes before you go."

The second comment implies a community of listeners who share the same involuntary, compulsive response to the song. Shame is not denied but is converted into a marker of group membership. As McCoy and Scarborough (2014:49) claim, ironic consumption often becomes a social event in which discussing the "badness" with others amplifies enjoyment. Again, the parallel with cult film fans is insightful. Sarkhosh & Menninghaus (2016:51) report that sharing viewing experiences with others enhances the pleasure of trash films, and the "1 Day 1 GANG" ritual mirrors this tradition.

Yet not all ironic engagement in the dataset works through mockery. Comments on ZE:A's

‘Mazeltov’ illustrate a meaningfully different case. ZE:A is a K-pop idol band whose individual members achieved considerable success while the group itself consistently underperformed (Park 2020). This becomes the basis of an affectionate joke legible to K-pop fans:

“Famous composer, choreographer, and stylist all came together, and the result is ‘Mazeltov.’ This is like a prophecy of ZE:A’s fate: Divided They Stand, United They Fall.”

“I remember someone once wrote in a comment that they’re a group that cooks Altang with caviar.”

Both comments share a pattern of memeification. The first inverts the motto “United We Stand, Divided We Fall,” a meme circulated among K-pop fans to tease ZE:A’s paradoxical career. The second utilises a culinary metaphor. Caviar, a prestigious ingredient, is assembled into Altang, a humble Korean stew, to capture the absurdity of talented members producing a disappointing result. Unlike the ‘GANG’ comments, the tone is less critical, and audiences engage in a playful memeification rather than maintaining strict critical distance.

Nonetheless, this memeification remains distinct from Camp sensibility, since audiences neither sincerely admire the failure nor adopt the attitude that the song is enjoyable *because* it is bad. As Reid (2022:193) points out, if the negative emotion is entirely dissipated by the pleasure, then it is no longer a guilty pleasure.

Overall, ironic consumption is not a single, uniform strategy but a spectrum. Mockery maintains critical distance as the structural basis for pleasure. Memeification operates through a lighter, more affectionate tone toward the song. What unites both patterns is that they are oriented toward aesthetically flawed songs rather than morally problematic ones. One can safely laugh at a crab-like dance or a failure of the debut song without implicating oneself morally. When a song becomes a guilty pleasure due to its morally deviant artists or content, ironic distance does not offer practical protection. Listening to T-ara’s music through mockery would not dissolve the social risk of consumption. As May (1992:159) explains, the moral taint operates independently of how individuals frame their engagement, and they are believed to have a responsibility to reasonably distance themselves from morally problematic subjects. Thus, ironic consumption is not a general justification strategy but a specifically aesthetic one.

Vindication

Another justification strategy identified in the data is vindication, which involves active arguments for why a song deserves recognition as genuinely good. Listeners who employ vindication actively defend their guilty pleasures and resist the evaluative framework.

The most common practice across the data is disaggregation, which refers to the separation of a song's components into independently evaluable parts, so that "bad" elements can be criticised while others are defended. This is evident in comments about two K-pop idol songs, EXO's 'Wolf' and VIXX's 'G.R.8.U':

"The melody is good, but who wrote these lyrics, seriously? It feels like the song was saved by the choreography and EXO's visuals. [...]"

"I'm ST★RLIGHTs [*VIXX's fan club name*], and I think 'G.R.8.U' is truly a guilty pleasure song. Even many of my non-fan friends said they liked the song years later. If only the title had been more normal, the song might have become a classic."

In the 'Wolf' comment, shame is directed at the cringeworthy lyrics in which the narrator compares himself to a starving wolf, while the melody and performance are rehabilitated (EXO 2013). In the 'G.R.8.U' comment, the source of embarrassment shifts to the song's juvenile, typo-like title. Notably, these cases share evaluative logic that the song's "badness" is located in a separable element, such as title, lyrics, and concept, while the musical core is argued to be independently "good." Crucially, listeners do not deny that something is bad. They insist that this does not extinguish the song's worth. This practice of fragmenting a text into evaluable parts can be partly understood through Jenkins' (1992:53) description of fans reworking cultural objects to accommodate their own interests. Jenkins (*ibid.*:17) views textual poaching as fundamentally an act of resistance, writing that fans transgress dominant cultural hierarchies by appropriating and appreciating popular texts. Nonetheless, disaggregation in the *SumDeutMyung* data operates differently. Rather than rejecting the cultural hierarchy, listeners largely accept its judgment. They acknowledge that the lyrics are bad, that the title is embarrassing, and that the concept is flawed. They do not resist the hierarchy itself but its application as a totalising evaluation of the song. This is a more conservative behaviour than Jenkins' (1992) framework explains. *SumDeutMyung* audiences

do not refuse the dominant taste but negotiate with it.

Another pattern is temporal vindication, in which listeners attribute a song's stigmatised status to a historical mismatch between the production and its cultural moment. This is particularly consistent in comments about K-pop idol ZE:A's 'Mazeltov':

"The song is good. If it came out now, it would be a hit. You could say that it was ahead of its time. [...]"

"'Mazeltov' is a masterpiece. The thing is, the song is ahead of its time. I often listen to it while driving. I close the windows, and the volume at 15 is about right. [...]"

The second comment reveals its internal contradiction. The user asserts that 'Mazeltov' is a masterpiece while describing listening to it behind closed windows. This shows that the temporal framing cannot fully dissolve the song's social stigma. According to Bourdieu (2010:251), what counts as culturally "good" or "legitimate" is not fixed but shaped through an ongoing social struggle among different actors, institutions, and taste communities, each competing to define the terms of value. Cultural hierarchies and the standard of the aesthetic are historically constructed and shift as the field and the context evolve (ibid.:21). Temporal vindication does not merely describe shifting tastes but also intervenes in this struggle, attempting to reevaluate the song from a guilty pleasure to legitimate music.

To achieve vindication, users often cite external sources, such as chart rankings, streaming data and non-fan listeners. Two examples of K-pop idol songs, 'SEXY LOVE' and 'G.R.8.U,' demonstrate this strategy:

"This song is the original and authentic guilty pleasure song. Even though it was released when T-ara was blamed by the public, it reached 50th place on the annual music chart. It means that everyone was still listening to it, but in secret. [...]"

"[...] But even my friend who isn't a fan of VIXX [*K-pop idol*] liked this song. The song itself is really good, but..."

Here, the users attempt to legitimise the songs by converting subjective tastes into objective facts. Chart positions and outsider acknowledgements function as indicators for quality. As Bourdieu (2010:8) states, the cultural standard of "good" taste is not a neutral judgement but is produced and enforced by dominant institutions. In the comments above, listeners do not construct an alternative standard of value. Rather than contesting the hierarchy, they appeal to

the instruments of legitimization utilised by dominant norms, including chart rankings and others' approval, hoping to demonstrate that the song meets the hierarchy's standard. This suggests that the social conditions producing the guilty pleasure label are not challenged by vindication but merely navigated.

Users who adopt a vindication strategy often reject the label of guilty pleasure. They do not merely defend the song but reclassify it entirely:

“[...] You guys shouldn't listen to Teen Top's songs in secret. Seriously, they are all masterpieces. Especially 'No more perfume on you,' 'Rocking,' 'Crazy' and 'Miss Right' make me completely hyped and super nostalgic [...]"

“‘G.R.8.U’ is not only a good song, but the choreography fits perfectly. It's a refreshing summer song that I still listen to. It's not a guilty pleasure song. It's just a masterpiece. Just listen to it proudly, everyone!"

These calls to listen “proudly” and openly are more than encouragement. They demand that the guilty pleasure label be refused. Jenkins (1992:17) describes fans as blurring the boundaries of legitimate culture, treating their favourite texts as deserving serious appraisal. In this sense, vindication seems to follow his description. Fans challenge a dismissive mainstream taste and insist on the value of what they love. Nevertheless, Jenkins' (ibid.:17) fans are fundamentally resistant figures. They refuse mainstream judgment and reconstruct cultural value on their terms (ibid.). The *SumDeutMyung* listeners' vindication is more ambivalent. Listeners who declare that Teen Top's songs are masterpieces or that 'G.R.8.U' is not a guilty pleasure song are not constructing an alternative framework of value. Instead, they claim within the existing hierarchy. Their goal is not to rewrite the rules of cultural legitimacy but to argue that the song meets them. Thus, vindication is an appeal to the hierarchy rather than a subversion of it.

Overall, vindication is an active form of cultural negotiation, operating within a specific and paradoxical structure. Audiences disaggregate the songs, historicise them with temporal vindication, or appeal to collective consensus with external validation. By doing so, audiences fundamentally accept the legitimacy of cultural hierarchy as such. They do not contest the existence of the hierarchy, but contest the song's position within it. The listeners who employ vindication attempt to resolve the tension by seeking the mainstream's approval.

Collectivisation

The third strategy that emerges clearly from the data is collectivisation. Many users do not simply accept the shameful guilty pleasure alone. Instead, they actively seek out others who share it.

One obvious pattern involves users expressing surprise at discovering that others share the same guilty pleasures, or using phrases such as “am I the only one?” to confirm others’ existences:

“Wow, performing with those dead eyes and tempting facial expressions makes Teen Top seem like even worse jerks, which somehow makes the song thrillingly immoral. Am I the only pervert here?”

“I thought I was the only person in the world who liked ‘Mazeltov.’”

“[...] This reminds me of when I was in high school. I used to listen to ZE:A’s song secretly through my earphones, because I couldn’t tell anyone around me that I liked this song. [...] Even my closest friends asked me why I love songs like this. I guess I became a bit discouraged whenever I hear such comments. [...] After watching MMTG, I’m so happy to realise that there are actually many people who share the same taste and nostalgia. Respect for different tastes! We’re not wrong. We’re just different. [...]”

These comments share a consistent structure of confessing private isolation, followed by a discovery or question on whether isolation is not real. More noteworthy is that emotional weight falls mainly on the act of not being alone. In particular, the third commenter’s closing line is on behalf of a community. This pattern can be understood through May’s (1992:37) concept of “shared responsibility.” May (ibid.:37-38) argues that moral responsibility is not a fixed quantity attached to an individual but can be distributed across a group. When many people are implicated in the same act, the burden of each individual member diminishes (ibid.:39). Crucially, May (ibid.:38) claims that this redistribution occurs not just through formal collective action but through the recognition of shared complicity. In the comments, each listener who confirms that hundreds of others have been secretly enjoying the same song is redistributing their guilt and shame. As Jenkins (1992:23) observes in fan communities more broadly, fans often ally with others to defend their unique tastes. May’s (1992) framework helps explain why that alliance provides genuine reorganisation of responsibilities.

The collectivisation is often connected to generational memory and shared nostalgia. Several comments actively construct a collective identity around their discoveries of finding fellow listeners:

“People in my generation, you all have danced to ‘Roly-Poly’ at least once during school festivals or school trips, right? [...]”

“Seeing all the veteran K-pop fans uniting in this comment section is seriously making me tear up. Back in our days, it was the golden era of K-pop boy bands. [...]”

The comments above transform the stigmatised taste into a marker of collective identity. This connects to the observation in the preceding subsection about nostalgia, where many users were seen to experience it as a shared generational event. Here, the generational framing serves an additional function. It positions the taste within a specific cultural moment, making it harder to dismiss as simply aberrant. To have liked these songs is to have belonged to a generation.

This collective dimension has important implications for understanding how guilt and shame operate in this context. May (1992:8) notes that guilt tends to diminish for each member when it is distributed across a group. When everyone is equally “guilty,” no single person bears the full weight of the stigma. In the present case, if an entire listener community secretly enjoys guilty pleasure songs, the associated shame loses much of its force. The data also connects May’s (ibid.) framework to Goffman’s (1986:19) account of stigma management, in which individuals seek out others who share a “spoiled identity” to form communities that collectively reframe the stigma as something other than purely deviant.

In sum, the findings indicate that collectivisation in the dataset operates as a social process for redistributing and diluting negative emotions involved in guilty pleasure consumption. Collectivisation thus reframes guilty pleasure as a fundamentally shared burden rather than a solitary psychological state.

Reinterpretation

Among the justification strategies observed in the comments, one of the most creative involves audiences actively constructing new meanings around songs they acknowledge as “bad.” Some users engage with guilty pleasure songs in an interpretive way, assuming that

the “badness” was intentionally designed and searching for the intentions behind it.

Some fan audiences propose hidden or alternative meanings for song elements that initially seem nonsensical. The K-pop idol VIXX’s ‘G.R.8.U’ is particularly illustrative. The juvenile, meme-like title was widely perceived as embarrassing, prompting fans to circulate their own interpretive frameworks within the fan community:

“Back then, many ST★RLIGHTs [*VIXX’s fan club name*] interpreted the title as a Korean abbreviation of ‘You who came back to me again without alternatives’ and were really pleased with our interpretation. But VIXX later said on the radio that the title literally means ‘Great You.’”

Significantly, the alternative reading interpretation here goes beyond fan creation, being actively shared, collectively developed, and celebrated within the community. And the artists themselves later corrected it. The comment captures both the pleasure derived from collaborative interpretation and the subsequent disappointment when the “official” meaning proved “bad” and more mundane. This example is representative of a broader pattern in the dataset. Fans derive enjoyment not just from the song itself, but from the interpretive labour they invest in it. Jenkins’s “textual poaching” (1992:3, 53) depicts how audiences perform as active participants by appropriating, reworking and reinterpreting media texts to serve their own pleasures. Users “poach” meanings from it, transforming what might appear “bad” into something interpretively rich. The original title serves as raw material, rather than a fixed object.

A similar dynamic appears in comments about two songs, the K-pop idol ZE:A’s ‘Mazeltov,’ and ‘AMOLED,’ a collaborative track by Korean solo artist Son Dam Bi and K-pop idol After School, originally produced as a commercial jingle for Samsung’s Haptic AMOLED phone (Lee 2019):

“The lyrics of ‘AMOLED’ might seem meaningless, but once you know the context, they’re actually interesting. AMOLED refers to an organic LED display that Samsung almost monopolises. Since this display can produce and emit its own light, I heard that the producers included lines like ‘a girl who shines on her own’ to reflect this characteristic.”

“[...] The composer says that the lyrics of ‘Mazeltov’ were taken from a song by Black

Eyed Peas. I assume that the line ‘Mexican girl’ was also taken from Black Eyed Peas’ ‘Latin Girls.’ [...]”

Here, interpretation depends on the provision of contextual information that transforms bizarreness into intentional design. The commercial context of ‘AMOLED’ is what the first commenter utilises to make sense of the song’s puzzling lyrics. The user does not deny the song’s awkwardness but reframes it by revealing the commercial logic behind the lyrical choices. Moreover, the second commenter offers an intertextual explanation of ‘Mazeltov,’ which is widely cited in the dataset as a guilty pleasure song for its unpredictable, incoherent lyrics (ZE:A 2011). The user suggests the lyrics were adapted from a Black Eyed Peas song, interpreting it as an intertextual reference. Another comment approaches the same song through an industry framework:

“I think most debut songs tend to include a lot of abnormal and unique, almost wild elements. I guess that helps draw public attention. Rather than starting with something ordinary, idols debut with something distinctive, and then gradually establish their concept and image to build a fanbase, eventually settling into a more stable concept.”

This commenter neither defends nor criticises the song, but explains its apparent chaos through what they perceived as the structural logic of K-pop industry debut strategies. Since ‘Mazeltov’ was ZE:A’s debut song, its bizarreness is interpreted as deliberate industry calculation rather than aesthetic failure. This pattern of offering background information to make the “badness” understandable is often initiated by fan commenters who are knowledgeable of behind-the-scenes stories and contexts. Jenkins (1992:17) describes fans as popular experts who produce and circulate unauthorised knowledge about the texts they love. Fans accumulate detailed “insider information” about the texts, including casting decisions, performer and producer backgrounds and industry structures (ibid.:65). Jenkins (ibid.:25) argues that this extensive and sophisticated knowledge is dismissed as illegitimate by dominant cultural institutions as it originates from fans rather than authoritative professionals or scholars.

A consistent pattern emerges across the data. Reinterpretation operates by adding interpretative value to guilty pleasure songs whose “badness” is openly acknowledged. Whether through fan-constructed interpretations, contextualisation, or industry logic, audiences engage in textual labour to make sense of “bad” elements. In this sense, these

“bad” elements of guilty pleasure songs function as open invitations for audience participation. However, the *SumDeutMyung* audiences’ reinterpretation differs from Jenkins’ (1992:17) textual poaching in that it is oriented toward shame management rather than active empowerment or resistance. Fans provide contextual information not to assert their own cultural authority but to make the “badness” acceptable. In the present case, the insider knowledge that Jenkins’ fans use to challenge dominant taste is used to negotiate with it.

Overall, the four justification strategies examined in this subsection reveal a broader picture of how guilty pleasure is managed in practice. Each strategy targets a different dimension of the problem. Despite their differences in tone and mechanism, all four strategies do not fully resolve the guilt and shame. Each adjusts the listener’s relationship to social judgment without eliminating the hierarchical conditions that produce it. This leads to a key conclusion about guilty pleasure that audiences with guilty pleasures cannot achieve the distance that positions them outside or against the dominant hierarchy. The *SumDeutMyung* listeners do not refuse the hierarchy. They negotiate with it, appeal to it, hide from it, or seek temporary shelter from it. The hierarchy remains the structuring condition of their experience. As guilty pleasure cannot be fully overcome, it can be managed, shared, and made pleasurable in its own right.

Conclusion

This thesis aims to illustrate how contemporary K-pop audiences experience and engage with guilty pleasure music in the context of the YouTube series *SumDeutMyung*. By analysing comment sections as sites of audience expression, the study discusses guilty pleasure music surrounding four main themes: YouTube comment sections as a “participatory confessional space” to reveal “bad” taste, the definition of guilty pleasure music, the dominant emotions expressed in audience engagement, and audiences’ strategies to justify their tastes. In the conclusion section, these themes are summarised to answer the research questions and interpreted within a broader contextual background to understand “badness” consumption beyond the K-pop context.

RQ1: How do K-pop listeners understand and define guilty pleasure music?

SumDeutMyung audiences define guilty pleasure music not primarily by musical characteristics or genre, but by the mode of consumption. A guilty pleasure is characterised by concealment. Listeners describe switching to mainstream music in public spaces, lowering the volume, or renaming song files on personal devices. These practices indicate that an awareness of social judgment structures guilty pleasure. The music is recognised as “bad” or socially undesirable, yet it is enjoyed regardless.

At the same time, the YouTube comment section introduces a paradox. Listeners expose their private “bad” tastes in this open, public space, which this thesis terms the “participatory confessional space.” For many, the disclosure is pleasurable, as it allows them to discover unfamiliar songs, share tastes, and build solidarity around marginalised tastes. However, this pleasure is not universal. Some users express discomfort with exposing what they consider “underground” tastes. The confession does not consistently resolve the tension associated with guilty pleasure. Instead, it relocates that tension into a public space where it can be negotiated but not fully eliminated.

RQ2: What emotional responses does guilty pleasure music consumption evoke, and how are these expressed in the comment sections?

Audience engagement with *SumDeutMyung* is characterised by three dominant emotional responses: nostalgia, guilt, and shame. Nostalgia is the most prevalent, reflecting the series’ focus on older K-pop songs. Listeners recall personal memories associated with particular tracks, often linked to specific moments in their lives. Importantly, this recall is not purely individual. Through the comment section, audiences collectively construct a shared generational memory, transforming individual recollection into a communal experience.

Beyond nostalgia, the analysis identifies two distinct forms of discomfort that are often not differentiated in existing discussions of guilty pleasure. The first is guilt, which arises when songs are associated with moral concerns, such as artists involved in scandals or with ethically problematic content. The second is shame, which arises when songs are perceived as outdated, bizarre, or lacking quality. This distinction is empirically observable in the comments and reflects two different sources of discomfort: moral evaluation and aesthetic judgment. The findings demonstrate that both forms remain salient, indicating that negative emotional responses to “bad” taste are neither uniform nor diminishing, but operate through

multiple dimensions.

RQ3: What strategies do listeners employ to manage and justify their guilty pleasure consumption through the comments?

SumDeutMyung audiences actively manage the tension between enjoyment and discomfort through four main strategies: ironic consumption, vindication, collectivisation, and reinterpretation. Through ironic consumption, listeners distance themselves from the aesthetically “bad” music by framing their enjoyment as humorous or self-aware, often through jokes or memes. Vindication involves defending the music as actually “good,” using various forms of justification to challenge its negative evaluation. Collectivisation reduces the affective burden of stigmatised taste by emphasising that others share similar preferences, thereby normalising what might otherwise feel deviant. Lastly, reinterpretation reframes the perceived “badness” of a song by offering alternative readings, such as highlighting intentionality or insider knowledge.

It should be noted here that these strategies do not resolve the tension in guilty pleasure. Instead, they function as managing mechanisms. The discomfort associated with “bad” taste persists, even as audiences find ways to justify or alleviate it. This persistence is the core of the guilty pleasure structure in this context.

Internalisation versus Resistance: Why K-pop Fans Hide their Tastes

The analytical findings of this thesis suggest that the defining feature of guilty pleasure is not the presence of “bad” taste, but the persistence of tension between enjoyment and judgment. This thesis argues that this tension cannot be solely understood by examining the qualities of the cultural object. Rather, it depends on how audiences position themselves in relation to the judgment that defines that object as “bad.” This relational dimension becomes particularly visible when *SumDeutMyung* audiences are compared to other forms of “badness” consumption.

In many accounts of “bad” cultural engagement, particularly those focusing on cult film or kitsch art, the “badness” is not experienced as a problem but transformed into a source of pleasure. Audiences engage with objects that are considered excessive, flawed, or

inappropriate, often through irony, playfulness, or aesthetic appreciation (Calinescu 1987:230; Sarkhosh & Menninghaus 2016:42; Sconce 1995:376). Crucially, this engagement is underpinned by a rejection of dominant cultural norms or judgment. The claim that a cultural object is “bad” is not accepted as a valid evaluation but is instead interpreted as a narrow mainstream sensibility (Calinescu 1987:230; Sarkhosh & Menninghaus 2016:47). As a result, the label of “badness” loses its negative force and becomes available for reappropriation. The taste dismissed by the mainstream can be revalued as distinctive, sophisticated, or culturally meaningful, allowing audiences to derive pleasure without the burden of discomfort (Calinescu 1987:230; Sarkhosh & Menninghaus 2016:43).

This dynamic reflects a broader pattern identified in Hebdige’s (1979:3, 19) framework of subcultural resistance, which argues that youth subcultures are formed through symbolic opposition to dominant norms, by reworking objects, styles, and practices into markers of difference and defiance. Within this framework, the hegemonic authority to define what counts as “good” or “bad” taste is not taken for granted but actively challenged through visible style (ibid.:17). Dominant judgment is refused rather than internalised, and this refusal enables the transformation of “bad” taste into a meaningful and positive resource (ibid.:101-102). In this process, deviation is not a source of embarrassment but a resource for identity and distinction. As subcultural members view mainstream judgment as wrong or restrictive (ibid.:101-102), their enjoyment does not produce guilt or shame. Rather, it provides the conditions for constructing alternative forms of value (ibid.:107). This logic underlies much of the existing literature on cult film and kitsch consumption, in which “badness” is not hidden but openly embraced, displayed, and even celebrated as a marker of taste.

The *SumDeutMyung* audience demonstrates a fundamentally different logic. Here, the judgment that defines certain music as “bad” is not rejected, but internalised. Listeners often describe their preferences as embarrassing, low-quality, or inappropriate, and these evaluations are not treated as irrelevant or incorrect. Instead, they are accepted as legitimate assessments that remain valid even when they conflict with personal enjoyment. This internalisation produces a situation in which listeners cannot fully detach themselves from the standards by which their tastes are evaluated. Enjoyment is accompanied by an ongoing awareness of deviation, which results in generating discomfort rather than revolt.

Therefore, the key distinction is not between different types of cultural objects, but between different relationships to dominant cultural judgment. When audiences can reject this

judgment, “badness” can be transformed into pleasure. Where such rejection is not possible, “badness” remains a source of tension, and enjoyment becomes something to be negotiated, justified, and managed rather than openly embraced. This distinction has broader implications for how “badness” consumption should be understood across different contexts.

The relationship between audiences and cultural judgment is closely tied to sociocultural context. The studies of cult film and kitsch consumption that inform existing discussions of “bad” taste are largely situated in Western contexts, where subcultural resistance has historically been shaped by successive waves of youth revolt, from glam rock to punk and heavy metal (Hebdige 1979:69, 80). Within these contexts, each generation challenged the musical and cultural values of the dominant order and gradually expanded the range of tastes that could be held without shame (ibid.). Each of these moments involved audiences insisting that the mainstream judgment of their preferences was wrong, and over time, many of those judgments were revised through incorporating subcultures into mainstream (ibid.:94). In such contexts, audiences can refuse dominant judgment and reinterpret “bad” taste as a marker of distinction or identity (Calinescu 1987:253; Sconce 1995:376-377).

In contrast to these Western accounts, *SumDeutMyung* reflects a context in which such refusal is less readily available. South Korea’s cultural landscape has not been shaped by the same tradition of youth revolt. Rather than successive challenges to dominant cultural values, Korean society has been characterised by the internalisation of collectivist norms that emphasise the collective “we” and value “unity and oneness” (Yang & Rosenblatt 2001:364). It operates through shame-based regulations, which create social pressure that may lead individuals to face severe blame for expressing differences or engaging in deviant behaviours (ibid.). Therefore, young Koreans tend to internalise the value of conforming to and harmonising with the mainstream rather than expressing individuality, which may be viewed negatively (ibid.). In this context, the hegemonic authority of dominant groups has remained relatively intact, and their judgments of “bad” carry stronger legitimacy. Negative evaluations of K-pop fandom, including associating them with low musical taste or unproductivity (Lee 2021:70-71), are embedded in broader social norms in South Korea that emphasise discipline, achievement, and collective norms (Jeong 2026:8; Yang & Rosenblatt 2001:364). In this relatively more hierarchical society, where dominant groups hold greater authority and where collective norms and cultural hierarchies exert greater pressure toward conformity (Yoon 2006:378-379), deviation carries a greater social cost. As a result, these judgments are not

easily dismissed as external or irrelevant but are more likely to be internalised as socially valid. This creates a situation in which audiences cannot fully reject the standards by which their tastes are evaluated.

This has direct consequences for how “badness” is experienced by K-pop listeners. Among *SumDeutMyung* audiences, enjoyment does not displace discomfort but coexists with it. Listeners may continue to enjoy music that they consider embarrassing or deviant, but their enjoyment remains accompanied by shame or guilt. The gap between personal preference and social expectation is not transformed into a source of pride or resistance but remains a persistent source of tension. “Ilko” practices such as concealing one’s taste in everyday life reflect this dynamic (Lee 2021:70), indicating that “bad” taste is not displayed as a marker of identity, but hidden as a potential source of blame.

From this perspective, the case of K-pop and *SumDeutMyung* audiences suggests that existing understandings of “badness” consumption need to be reconsidered. The transformation of “bad” taste into pleasure or a sophisticated sensibility, often assumed in cult film and kitsch studies, is not a universal feature of audience engagement with “bad” objects. Rather, it depends on whether audiences reject the hegemony that defines their preferences as “bad.” Where such rejection is possible, “badness” can become pleasurable. Where it is not, “badness” remains problematic, and enjoyment often takes the form of guilty pleasure.

This suggests that analyses of “bad” cultural consumption need to consider the social conditions under which they are consumed. It is not sufficient to ask what makes something “bad,” or how audiences reinterpret its qualities. It is also necessary to examine whether the cultural context allows dominant judgment to be challenged or requires it to be accepted. In this sense, the relationship between audiences and cultural hegemony becomes a central factor in understanding how “badness” is experienced and consumed.

The digital context of YouTube comment sections further illustrates how this relationship is negotiated. These spaces enable audiences to share, justify, and collectively engage with their preferences, creating opportunities for validation and connection. At the same time, they expose these preferences to public visibility, making the tension between enjoyment and judgment more explicit. Rather than resolving this tension, the comment sections function as sites where it is continuously expressed and managed.

In conclusion, this thesis demonstrates that guilty pleasure is not simply an ambivalent

aesthetic experience, but a social process shaped by the relationship between audiences and hegemonic cultural judgment. Audiences of the *SumDeutMyung* series show that when such judgment is internalised rather than explicitly resisted, “bad” taste does not become a source of pleasure in itself but remains entangled with guilt or shame. Hence, understanding guilty pleasure requires attention not only to what people enjoy, but to the conditions under which they are able to enjoy it. In this regard, the *SumDeutMyung* audiences reveal that the transformation of stigmatised taste into distinction or resistance, which is long assumed in Western scholarship on “bad” or deviant taste, describes not a general human response to cultural stigma, but the specific experience of audiences who have the social conditions to refuse the judgment directed at them. More broadly, this thesis suggests that the experience of consuming “bad” culture should not be understood as an inherent property of the object itself, but as a relational process shaped by the audience’s position toward dominant judgment. Across different contexts, whether “badness” becomes a source of pleasure or discomfort depends on the extent to which such judgment is rejected or internalised.

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Appendix: Coding Process

Themes	Categories	Description	Examples
Affective Dimensions of Guilty Pleasure	Nostalgia	Expressions of loss, lack, longing and fond remembrance associated with a song, artist, or cultural moment from the past. Includes a desire to relive a particular era, or grief over the passage of time. The emotional tone is primarily warm or bittersweet rather than critical.	"This song makes me remember my teenage days." "I miss old days." "2nd gen K-pop was the best." "I've missed these disks so much."
	Embarrassment/Cringe	Expressions of embarrassment, awkwardness, or discomfort directed at a song, artist, life concept, or production choice. Can be directed at an external element (e.g., an unusual life moment as an artist) or at the artist's own sincere self-expression. Distinct from Mocking/Memorializing in that the commentator is not necessarily laughing — the discomfort may be genuine and unresolved. Includes explanation why the certain song is cringe.	"This song is so cringe." "It makes me so embarrassed because [...]"
	Guilt/Responsibility	Expression relates with ethical evaluation or moral judgment to a specific actor (e.g., singer, agency, producer). Entails a moral deficit, where culpability is central. The individual is regarded as at fault and therefore fully deserving of any sanctions or punishments. Often co-occurs with Moral Judgment.	"This was my guilty pleasure song, since I believed that the singer was morally corrupt."
	Personal Storytelling	Referencing to and sharing specific autobiographical memories/experiences tied to the music through comments. Goes beyond general sentiment to include concrete situational details. Functions as evidence of the song's real-world impact on individual lives.	"I used to do cover dance of this song on the school festival." "I used to listen to this song in the 2000s through MP3." "I have a special memory with my bestie related to this song."
Participating and Confessional Practices through Comments	Participation in Production	Comments that express the intention or desire to participate in the production process. Often suggesting the artists, songs, or other figures to be presented in the future episodes. Sometimes strongly demanding the particular song to be featured in the series for reappreciation. The act of recommending, defending, or drawing attention to a song the commentator enjoys despite its embarrassing or low-prestige associations. Distinct from Vindication/Re-evaluation in that the commentator does not necessarily argue the song deserves broader recognition — they are primarily sharing their own enjoyment, often with self-deprecating humor.	"Could you please feature this idol group in the future? I really want to hear why did they perform this song in this manner."
	Sharing/Confessing Guilty Pleasure Song	Justifying the commentator's guilty pleasure by arguing that the song deserves recognition as genuinely good. Includes explicit re-framing of cringe as undetected, or misunderstood. May involve supporting the song's cringe elements (e.g., title, concept) from its musical/performance quality, ultimately affirming the latter. Distinct from Sense-Making/Ramification in that this code focuses more on reappraisal of the song, claiming that the external factor makes this song "bad," but the quality of the song itself should be treated as "good."	"This song is actually very good. It has high quality, and the performance itself is professional as well. It's just underrated due to the artists' scandal." "It's a good song. The song title was so cringe that I made this song as a guilty pleasure song. But everything except for the song title is perfect."
	Vindication/Re-evaluation	Justifying the commentator's guilty pleasure by treating a song, its title, lyrics, concept, or associated elements as an object of ridicule or humor. The song is consumed primarily as comedic or absurd material rather than as music. Includes posting lyrics, recording files, or highlighting logical content for laughs. Distinct from Embarrassment/Cringe in that this code is a justification strategy of treating guilt in guilty pleasure.	"This song is so bad that I cannot help myself mocking it."
	Mocking/Memorializing	Justifying or normalizing the commentator's guilty pleasure by invoking shared experience. Includes expressions of relief upon discovering others share the same reaction, appeals to collective memory, or references to widespread but unspoken enjoyment. Functions as a social legitimization mechanism for low-prestige cultural consumption.	"I'm not the only one who felt this way." "We all understand this, right?" "It's a bad song, but everyone still enjoys. That's why I also like it."
Negotiating Pleasure and Discomfort	Collectivizing	Justifying the commentator's guilty pleasure by explaining, rationalizing, or recontextualizing a song's unusual or embarrassing elements by constructing an interpretive framework. Includes fan-driven retrospective meaning-making, genre reclassification, or structural analysis of lyrics or production choices. Distinct from Vindication/Re-evaluation in that this code acknowledges that the song is "bad," but assumes that there is a hidden intention behind the song's badness. The audience is attempting to find the intention.	"Perhaps this song is connected to a broader concept album narrative."
	Sense-Making/Ramification in	Comments that divide the cultural position into mainstream culture versus underground (periphery) culture. Commonly, guilty pleasure songs or "bad" songs belong to the latter.	"I think this song belongs to the underground. It shouldn't be too mainstream."
	Mainstream vs Underground	Comments presenting practices of concealing their tastes or guilty pleasures. Concrete or specific experiences of concealing behaviour is often presented in the personal storytelling.	"I quickly turn down the volume in public spaces. I don't want to get caught by others."
	Concealment of Taste	Comments that regard guilty pleasures as minor tastes. Commentators often recognize themselves as minorities who have unique or abnormal tastes, against the mainstream. Similar to Mainstream vs Underground code, but this code does not explicitly present the distinction, and emphasize the feeling of "being alone."	"I think I am the only one who likes this song." "I think I have abnormal taste."
Defining Guilty Pleasure	Minor Taste	Comments that do not fall into the selective/wide codes above, or whose primary content is tangential to the song itself. Also used for comments that are too ambiguous or context-dependent to code reliably without additional information.	
	Other		

Figure 1. Screenshot of the final themes and categories

No.	Original Comments	Relevant Comments	Code	Code	Code
1	[blurred]	[blurred]	CRINGE	+	+
7	[blurred]	[blurred]	CRINGE	+	+
8	[blurred]	[blurred]	CRINGE	+	+
9	[blurred]	[blurred]	CRINGE	+	+
10	[blurred]	[blurred]	CRINGE	+	+
11	[blurred]	[blurred]	CRINGE	+	+
12	[blurred]	[blurred]	CRINGE	+	+
13	[blurred]	[blurred]	CRINGE	+	+

Figure 2. Screenshot of the coding process (the original comments were blurred to prevent identification)