



# Wearing Your Heart on Your Sleeve: K-pop Merchandise in Validating Identity

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## Abstract

K-pop merchandise plays a vital role in shaping fan identity, functioning beyond its commercial value. This study explores how merchandise enables identity construction and social belonging within the global K-pop fandom. This research employs qualitative discourse analysis of X (formerly Twitter) tweets and a survey of pertinent literature on fandom and material culture to delineate four principal functions of merchandise: as emblems of loyalty, instruments for active participation, rites of passage, and enablers of community connectedness. The results indicate that items like lightsticks and photocards serve as emotional and symbolic anchors, signifying personal achievements and facilitating social relationships. These objects enable fans to transition from passive consumers to active cultural participants, thereby strengthening identification through ritualized actions and shared beliefs. This study suggests that K-pop items function as hybrid objects — economically valued, emotionally significant, and culturally relevant. It provides insights into the intersection of material culture and identity formation in modern fandoms, especially within the performing arts sectors that generate and uphold idol culture.

**Keywords:** K-pop; merchandise; identity; material culture; fandom

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## INTRODUCTION

The worldwide rise of K-pop has re-configured fan culture, converting items into significant emblems of identity and belonging. The K-pop industry strategically distributes goods such as photocards and lightsticks to foster loyalty and generate revenue (Herman, 2020a); however, their cultural value transcends mere commercialism. Enthusiasts recontextualize these items as instruments for individual expression and collective ritual. Photocards serve as tangible connections to idols (Desnika &

Tambunan, 2023), whereas attending concerts and acquiring limited-edition albums demonstrate loyalty to the fandom (Biscaia et al., 2018).

This study transcends commercial analysis to examine how goods facilitate identity shifts. Fans express uniqueness through photocard exhibitions (Mellins, 2007) or openly demonstrate allegiance via themed items (Mohd Jenol et al., 2020), inverting commodified roots to affirm their membership within the K-pop imagined community (Barrière & Finkel, 2020). These actions illustrate that common symbols

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create transnational affiliation despite geographical separations.

The relationship between merchandise and identity remains inadequately explored (Cheriyah & Hadi, 2022; Hapsari, 2019; Asokan, 2021; Laffan, 2021; Maros & Abdul Basek, 2022; Mohd Jenol et al., 2020). Understanding the psychosocial dimensions of K-pop fandom necessitates recognizing how fans' emotional investment in merchandise can enhance social connectedness and a sense of belonging (Laffan, 2021; Muslimah et al., 2023; Pawening, 2023).

Previous research mostly analyzes products from economic or marketing perspectives, overlooking their function as facilitators of identity across multinational fandoms. This study aims to fill this gap by pursuing three objectives:

To theorize K-pop merchandise as ritualized boundary objects (Star & Griesemer, 1989) bridging individual identity transitions and global fandom norms.

To examine how fans repurpose merchandise as tools for emotional labor and rites of passage (de Certeau, 1984; van Gennep, 2019).

To critique the duality of merchandise as both commodified products and cultural artifacts sustaining idols' careers and fan identities.

The novelty of this research lies in its interdisciplinary synthesis of material culture, ritual theory, and imagined communities—a framework previously unapplied to K-pop merchandise.

By repositioning merchandise as *ritualized boundary objects*, this study challenges reductionist narratives of consumerism, offering instead a model for understanding how global fandoms commodify items into tools for identity-making.

This paper approaches K-pop merchandise from a performing arts perspective, emphasizing its role in supporting idols as performers and fostering a network of artistic production and fan interaction. Rather than focusing solely on its artistic design, the study highlights the merchandise's contribution to sustaining

idols' creative careers and its place within the broader cultural framework of the performing arts. This presents a novel viewpoint, contrasting with previous research on K-pop products that emphasizes economic or marketing angles (Herman, 2020a; Kartikasari & Sudrajat, 2022), diminishing items such as records or lightsticks to mere revenue sources. Synthesizing material culture and ritual theory, this study reconceptualizes products as ritualized artifacts, bridging individual action with collective identity in global fandoms. Such a contribution is critical to advancing scholarship on transnational fan cultures, material culture, and the performing arts.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Material Culture and the Role of Fan Objects

Material culture scholarship positions everyday objects as active participants in social life, shaping and reflecting identity (Hodder, 2012). Barrière and Finkel (2020) extend this to fandom, conceptualizing "fan objects" as emotionally charged artifacts that mediate belonging and self-expression. In K-pop, this manifests through items like photocards and lightsticks, which transcend their commercial purpose to become symbolic markers of devotion. For instance, photocards—small, collectible images bundled with albums—are not merely promotional tools but tokens of relational memory (Baym & Burnett, 2009), exchanged among fans to affirm shared identity (Merritt, 2022). Additionally, the act of purchasing and showcasing merchandise aligns with Gooch's (2008) insights on fandom performativity, further underscoring its role as a tangible representation of community and individual connection.

### Imagined Communities and Transnational Belonging

Social media sites such as X (previously Twitter) have intensified these dynamics, with more than 89 million global followers participating in discussions

regarding lightsticks, photocards, and albums (Yeon-soo, 2019). Fans ardently acquire merchandise to demonstrate loyalty, admiration, and affiliation with their preferred idols and the broader fandom community (Chandra, 2022). Examining these behaviors elucidates how commerce rituals—such as photocard exchanging or coordinated lightstick performances—embody Benedict Anderson’s (2006) concept of imagined communities, stimulating attention to the dynamics of social and cultural imagination (Calhoun, 2016). Fans use hashtags like #BTSmerch to share photos of BTS-themed merchandise, creating a visual archive of collective identity (Sutton, 2021). These digital rituals and real-time interactions during album releases exemplify the imagined communities. Objects like lightsticks or photocards become shared symbols of affiliation. Sites like X allow followers to create digital solidarity (Lynch, 2020), mobilizing around shared aims like chart voting or charity drives across borders.

While Anderson’s framework has been applied to K-pop’s digital communities (Lynch, 2020; Maros & Abdul Basek, 2022), the role of material culture in sustaining these imagined bonds remains underexplored. Through fan narratives around merchandise, this research reveals how objects like BTS’s *ARMY Bomb* lightstick or TWICE’s *Candy Bong* transform abstract belonging into tangible practice, offering fans a “script” (De Certeau, 1984) to perform their place within the K-pop imagined community. These actions, frequently regarded as commercial fanaticism, are reconceptualized as cultural resilience and identity performativity, providing new perspectives on the interaction between consumerism, artistry, and belonging.

Reconciling global fandom norms with individual identities is a dynamic unaddressed in prior studies of Anderson’s (2006) imagined communities. Lightsticks to hashtags—operate as a *boundary object* (Star & Griesemer, 1989), bridging individual identity and global fandom. In addition, studies usually regarded goods

as secondary to these community rituals, emphasizing the linguistic or musical dimensions of transnational fandom (Jung & Shim, 2013; Laffan, 2021) instead. This inaccuracy overlooks how tangible items manifest conceptualized communities. In addition, limited-edition albums accompanied by unique photocards generate shared scarcity, a phenomenon in which global fans either compete or collaborate to obtain products, further cementing their collective identity (Kartikasari & Sudrajat, 2022).

### **Ritual, Sacrifice, and Identity Transitions**

The interplay between ritual and identity in K-pop fandom is epitomized by practices that transform merchandise into tools for navigating life transitions and affirming communal belonging. The rites of passage framework (van Gennep, 1919)—comprising separation, liminality, and incorporation—provides a lens to analyze how fans use merchandise to mark milestones. For instance, graduation-themed albums featuring idols in academic regalia allow fans to symbolically align their personal growth with their idols’ careers, a phenomenon absent in Western pop fandoms (Mohd Jenol et al., 2020). Similarly, concert wristbands or limited-edition photocards act as liminal objects that signify fans’ transition from casual listeners to dedicated supporters, echoing Turner’s (1975) emphasis on ritual as a mediator of social transformation.

In contrast, prior scholarship neglects this duality, reducing rituals like bulk buying to consumerism (Ortega, 2020) or overlooking their symbolic resonance (Herman, 2020). By synthesizing van Gennep’s rites of passage with de Certeau’s (1984) everyday tactics, this study reframes K-pop merchandise as ritualized boundary objects that reconcile individual identity transitions with collective fandom norms. Ultimately, this synthesis addresses the central gap in K-pop scholarship: the lack of a cohesive theoretical lens to explain how commodified objects become entangled in identity-making. It

positions merchandise as both a cultural artifact and a ritual tool, offering a model for future research on material culture in transnational fandoms.

## METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive framework grounded in netnographic principles (Kozinets, 2002) to explore how K-pop merchandise mediates identity formation and communal belonging within global fandoms. By synthesizing theories of material culture (Hodder, 2012; Barrière & Finkel, 2020) and imagined communities (Anderson, 2006), the research prioritizes thematic depth over quantitative metrics, aligning fan narratives from social media with scholarly discourses on ritual, consumerism, and transnational belonging to explore merchandise's dual role as both a commercial product and a cultural artifact integral to the performing arts.

The study's qualitative focus on narrative depth—rather than quantitative metrics—aligns with interpretive paradigms in fandom research (Hills, 2002), prioritizing fan agency in co-creating cultural meaning. The literature review synthesized peer-reviewed articles, industry reports, and fan blogs to contextualize merchandise within broader discourses of fandom, consumerism, and performing arts, identifying gaps in understanding how material objects transcend economic transactions to become tools for identity negotiation.

Social media data were sourced from X (formerly Twitter) between April 1 and November 12, 2022, a period encompassing the end of the COVID-19 pandemic and the post-pandemic resurgence of K-pop activities. Data retrieval focused on posts linked to major merchandise launches, fan events, and pandemic-era fandom practices. A keyword-based search strategy using X's Explore tab filtered posts containing terms such as *K-pop merchandise*, *lightstick*, *album*, and *memorabilia*, supplemented by group identifiers (e.g., *BTS*,

*NCT*) and thematic keywords (*identity*, *financial commitment*, and *belonging*). Boolean operators (*AND/OR*) refined results to discussions of official merchandise, excluding unofficial or irrelevant content.

Participants were identified through self-declared fandom affiliations in user profiles, verified via links to K-pop Carrd pages (*a specialized web-building platform designed for creating simple, one-page websites*) or participation in group-specific hashtags (e.g., #ARMY, #ATINY).

X is advantageous, as there can be real-time engagement and collective fandom-related activities, such as watching videos or listening to music (Kim & Hutt, 2021), participating in giveaways, and discussing budget constraints (Khelsea et al., 2021), such as the increase of tariffs (Frederica et al., 2023) and publicizing items (Rojo et al., 2022). Lee et al. (2020) suggest that these platforms' rhetoric, particularly "we," shapes social and cultural identities. This language feature is important since it reflects user belonging and collective identity, especially in fandoms where shared interests generate community.

Posts were analyzed inductively to trace how fans framed merchandise as tools for navigating personal and collective crises, with themes mapped to theories of material culture (Appadurai, 1988) and rites of passage (van Gennep, 1919). A three-stage inductive process was employed. The initial classification process involved the examination of posts for recurring themes, such as the use of merchandise as symbolic milestones, financial sacrifice, and communal rituals.

The emerging themes were cross-referenced with literature on fan performativity (de Certeau, 1984), rituals of passage (van Gennep, 1919), and material culture. For instance, van Gennep's incorporation phase was used to map discussions of graduation-themed albums, while de Certeau's "tactics of the weak" were employed to analyze bulk-buying practices. Lastly, theoretical integration was employed to contextualize the findings within the broader discourses on transna-



tional fandom and consumerism, thereby addressing the research objectives of redefining merchandise as ritualized boundary objects and critiquing its dual function as a cultural artifact and commodity.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Active Participation—An Alternative to K-Pop's Highly Competitive Voting

The main event of a comeback or a celebrity's return is a mass-streaming and mass-voting event to raise the idol's popularity. Such activities boost the idol's music chart position, thus consequently winning awards. K-pop's voting and streaming culture is aggressive and requires time, involving rivalry between fandoms. Alternatively, supporting idols by purchasing merchandise is less stressful than highly competitive voting. A fan of the girl group Dreamcatcher, in voting for the group's title track MAISON, remarked, "... after that exhausting voting period for [M]aison, I think I'm done with voting. I'll just support the girls monetarily by buying albums and merch[andise]. Money I have; my mental health just can't take another voting period" (Viviz, 2022). Purchasing merchandise is perceived as a means of supporting idols (Syahrial & Azib, 2022), revealing their devotion and allegiance (Schroy et al., 2016), particularly for loyal fans who choose to abstain from participating in the intensely competitive and perpetually stressful activities associated with voting rituals in K-pop.

Limited edition merchandise commemorating a celebrity's comeback or new record release may contain raffle tickets or passes to fan meet-and-greets. Some fans grow obsessed with collecting photocards or passes, purchasing multiple albums to locate the photocards, only to discard them once obtained. Recent social media posts have highlighted this issue, with fans expressing dissatisfaction with the disposal of bulk-purchased TREASURE, The Second Step: Chapter 2 album, most of which were acquired to get certain photo cards. A fan regretted, "It is sad they only got the

photocards." (Dee, 2022). The reactions to these posts indicate that fans are becoming more conscious of their acts' consequences and openly acknowledging this wastefulness.

Collectively purchasing albums in quantity can impact sales, resulting in financial stability owing to overconsumption (Fany et al., 2022). Furthermore, the growing relevance of collectible photocards has changed these once-insignificant album supplements into a primary reason why fans continue to buy physical albums in today's digital age. Purchasing products encourages active engagement and support, as opposed to passive consumption. This behavior is associated with identity since it allows fans to actively assist in their idols' success. However, such rituals are exploited by the industry, which will be discussed in the next section.

### Allegiance, Distinction, and Loyalty

#### Connection to the Saviour Idol

Collecting products with visuals of the relevant idol brings them closer to their celebrity and provides comfort. This admiration and character connection can significantly impact fans' mental health, as some may struggle to find solace elsewhere (Yeo, 2020). A fan of K-pop group MAMAMOO expressed that investing in merchandise brought them a deep sense of contentment, stating, "I track my album spending, and I know for a fact that I would have been 70k richer if I did not buy K-pop merch, but I would also be 70% sadder. I buy for my mental health. MAMAMOO is the cure to my mental health" (Gem [@iheart\_wheein], direct message, 2022). The post includes a photo of an expense of 70,330.00 Philippine pesos (approximately 1,292.01 US dollars). Aside from the connection to their heroes (Ardhiyansyah et al., 2021), fans rationalize their costly goods purchases by claiming that supporting MAMAMOO has provided them with personal relief and enjoyment.

In another case, one Malaysian supporter described how a lightstick served as a signal for assistance during one of the

most severe floods in the country's history. "In my country, a lightstick saved someone trapped on a rooftop due to a flood – [a] real story in my country. Must carry [the] eribong everywhere I go now as [an] emergency light" (Rafdina, 2022).

The products and the fans' expressions provided an opportunity to market the *eribong*, or light stick, linked to the group EXO. In this context, the lightstick is a sign of hope and a savior. This opportunity facilitates the enhancement of their idol's favorable image through the narratives around the repurposing of the lightstick.

### Display of Loyalty at the Risk of Society's Negative Perception

More than an expression of love and support, spending "so much money on merchandise is an expression of loyalty" (Ortiga, 2020). As claimed by one Kep1er fan, purchasing items related to the band is the fan's way of expressing genuine love: "...buy all of their stuff[s], including albums, collecting photocards, or the first-ever K-pop lightstick, is to show [make them] love from the deepest part of my heart" (Băobăo, 2022). A stan, or K-pop stan, combines the words stalker and fan but is commonly called an enthusiastic and supportive fan. In contrast, a stalker or bad fan of K-pop is called a *sasaeng*. For example, one BTS fan described how he overcame his fear of being labeled as a stan and negatively viewed by society: "...I used to be worried if people found out I was a "K-pop stan," but now it's [like] part of my identity. [Like], there's no way [to] NOT be proud to be ARMY. [I] carry my BT21 bag EVERYWHERE, and I love spotting other ARMY wearing merch too" (Parisa, 2022).

The post conveyed that the fan's apprehension has become pride in being part of ARMY (BTS's fan, an acronym for Adorable Representative M.C. for Youth). An item serves as a symbol of connection with other ARMYs who own similar objects. (The BT21 merchandise consists of animated characters representing BTS

members in collaboration with Line Friends Corporation.). Seeing others donning fandom-specific attire or clothing elicits a feeling of acknowledgment and a sense of inclusion and camaraderie. (Chadborn et al., 2017; Merai & Nimkar, 2020) Booth (2010) posits that whatever our interests may be, we derive a portion of our identity from our admiration of that fandom (p. 20). More significantly, the fan's awareness and acceptance of society's unfavourable preconceptions about obsessive fans, as well as the realities of fandom. Such demonstrations of loyalty include "sacrifices that fans are willing to pay" (Ortiga, 2020). The circumstance directly addresses an additional stratum of identity formation within a group between the casual and the loyal (Baasir, 2018). In this case, the cost or price of the product is not the primary concern; rather, it affects one's reputation and perception of being a devotee as a result of societal assessment. This recognition signifies their authentic affinity for the group rather than a temporary interest usually associated with casual fans.

Merchandise enables fans to differentiate themselves from other organizations and exhibit their loyalty, particularly in the face of external criticism. It provides a clear sense of identity and belonging, as consumers or fans are intentionally categorized as either casual or loyal. This emphasizes forming an individual's identity within a certain social group by showcasing one's fan identity to other fans, rather than to those outside the fandom.

Fans perceive bulk-buying or photocard collecting as sacred tributes to support idols. Regarded as necessary sacrifices, this reframes financial expenditure as devotional care work (Sun, 2020). This involved publicly displaying items despite negative perceptions.

This aligns with de Certeau's (1984) notion of "tactics of the weak," where fans subvert commercial intent by imbuing purchases with personal meaning, such as using photocards as talismans for emotional support (Muslimah et al., 2023) or justifying their actions for purchasing amidst

financial strain and society's negative judgment.

However, industry strategies often exploit these rituals. Valge and Hinsberg (2019) critique K-pop's "manufactured intimacy," where labels market merchandise as exclusive tokens of loyalty (e.g., fan meeting raffle tickets bundled with albums). Yet fans reclaim agency by repurposing these items—for instance, trading duplicate photocards to build social networks or curating displays of merchandise as "shrines" to idols (Merritt, 2022). Such acts illustrate Hodder's (2012) entanglement theory, where objects become enmeshed in fans' daily lives as mediators of identity and resilience.

This redefines consumerism in K-pop scholarship, positioning fans as *active co-creators* of cultural value who subvert industry commodification through tactics like curating shrines or repurposing lightsticks as emergency tools. These are illustrated in the following section.

### **Belonging**

#### ***Cherished Mementos Associated with Life's Milestones and Rites of Passage***

The transition into adulthood marks a significant period for young K-pop fans, and merchandise often plays a vital role in this rite of passage. For instance, graduation-themed merchandise featuring idols in caps and gowns allows fans to celebrate this milestone within the context of their fandom. Acquiring and displaying such items can be seen as a symbolic act, signifying their personal growth and deepening commitment to the fandom. This emotional investment can catalyze increased engagement, potentially propelling fans from casual listeners to loyal fans as they seek deeper connections and experiences within the K-pop community.

Merchandise as a tangible marker of transformation. Teenagers cherish merchandise as a memento of significant events, particularly during the rite of passage to adulthood. A fan expressed, "I've been staring at this frame, getting flashbacks of everything, like literally every-

hing. First, on June 1, 2022, my mom allowed me to go to the concert, then I waited for months, then September 25 [came], and I got my tickets after waiting for 6 hours, and now the con[cert] is over" (Fai, 2022). The post was accompanied by a photo displaying a collection of concert memorabilia encapsulating the fan's experience at TXT's concert, <ACT: LOVE SICK> IN MANILA. They are comprised of official and non-official merchandise, including a light stick, a framed Polaroid, and ticket stubs. It included attendee bracelets or wristbands, a typical gift exchange among K-pop concert attendees. The combination of products and exchange experiences provided an opportunity to meet other fans while also sharing the excitement and mutual feelings associated with gift exchanges and attending concerts. In this sense, merchandise is more than advertisement for artists or collectibles for fans to flaunt (Merritt, 2022). Buying and showing off things can be seen as a symbolic act for young fans, showing that they are becoming more mature in their fandom and more committed to it.

Merchandise as a catalyst for increased engagement. Fans may cultivate a personal bond and sentimental significance for the goods, making it challenging to part: "...there was a time also that I really want[ed] to leave K-pop and sell all my merch due to financial prob[lems]; I was crying then. I was telling myself that I can no longer keep up with my main. Merch is giving me so much happiness, and it's tough to leave the group that's giving me so much joy" (Jm, 2022). K-pop fandom strongly correlates with heightened happiness, self-esteem, and social connectedness (Laffan, 2021). However, fans abandon a fandom or experience a preference shift due to the fan community, the admirers or the idols themselves (He & Sun, 2022). As it may be a traumatic experience, fans seek out spaces, such as online platforms, that facilitate, normalise and empower their expressions of grief for their idol or

celebrity (Jones et al., 2022). In response to the tweet, a fellow fan comforts, "... no joke. It's hard to leave K-pop. There was a time when I was [really] thinking of leaving, but I couldn't do it. It's a tough decision, and I know a lot of K-pop fans go through this. Sending hugs to everyone who experienced this" (Huda, 2022). Support and acceptance from like-minded individuals alleviate feelings of isolation and loss that mainstream society does not accept openly (Jones et al., 2022). Therefore, the emotional weight of these rite-of-passage items might motivate fans to engage more deeply with the fandom.

Merchandise is a bridge between fandom and personal growth. Goods are strategically catered to younger fans as a concrete symbol of transformation. Targeting marketing efforts towards persons or populations aged 15 to 20 years is deliberate, as this cohort possesses ample time to engage with music (Le, 2018). The acquisition of these specific merchandise items can coincide with other significant life events for young fans, further solidifying the connection between fandom and personal growth. Fans might reflect on these items later in life, viewing them as nostalgic reminders of their journey as fans and their personal development alongside their idols. Fans' use of graduation-themed albums to mark personal milestones mirrors van Gennep's (2019) incorporation phase, where merchandise legitimizes their new identity as 'adult' fans. Facilitating a unique identity and sense of belonging for adolescents fosters long-term loyalty. Consequently, the object exemplifies the fandom experience by highlighting both its good and negative dimensions, ultimately portraying the fan fanbase as the definitive physical or tangible link.

The pandemic and post-pandemic saw 69.7% comprising mature fans aged 18 and older in the 2022 BTS census survey (BTS Army Census, 2022; Grover et al., 2022). Aside from seeing a substantial increase in the sales of K-

pop albums and merchandise during this period (Maulidia et al., 2023). The pandemic functioned as a macro-level rite of passage, with fans using merchandise to navigate this transition. Rites of passage can be context-driven, where adulthood itself involves recurring transitions (e.g., career changes, parenthood), which merchandise can mediate, especially during crises. For adults lacking traditional milestones (e.g., graduations), they turned to fandom to mark growth and resilience, where merchandise is used to reaffirm identity during crisis, fostering loyalty through shared trauma and growth. The findings reveal items are not mere purchases but *symbolic milestones* for fans. Participants framed acquiring a first lightstick as "joining adulthood" within the fandom (Participant Fai, 2022), aligning personal growth with idol careers. This ritualized use of merchandise extends van Gennep's (2019) framework into transnational fandom contexts, demonstrating how commodified objects become tools for *self-actualization* rather than passive consumption

## Self-Affirmation

### A Trustworthy Bond

More than a symbol to represent fandoms, illuminated lightsticks are fan identifiers within the audience, while switching them off signifies a black ocean of darkness, communicating a disagreement or boycott. Others have noted such fans' performativity, highlighting the lightstick's significance in assessing the artist's reputation. On August 20, 2022, SMTOWN LIVE 2022: SMCU EXPRESS featured a collaborative concert of artists under SM Entertainment. A single SuJuBong (referring to Super Junior's official blue-colored lightstick) was outnumbered by a sea of green lightsticks, representing the pop group NCT. Even so, the fan's singular presence was sufficient to attract the attention of Donghae of Super Junior. As a testament to their idol's commitment to reciprocate and value fans, a fan described, "See that solo sujubong? That's how important that



lightstick is, cos when Suju [abbr. for Super Junior] said they'd perform even if there's only one elf in the crowd, they meant it." (Jes, 2022).

The mutual trust between the idol and the fan establishes a unique connection, reassuring fans and boosting the idol's persona.

### **Idol's Positive Image Construction through Merchandise and Fan's Narrative**

Combined with fan narratives, the user experience of merchandise helps construct a positive image of idols as kind, generous, and unlike the perceived "patriarchal, sexist, and unstylish stereotypes of Korean men" (Tai, 2020). This, in turn, facilitates the creation of the idol's positive public representation. Such an image, alongside supportive fan posts or tweets, can enhance fan loyalty, as fans or customers are influenced by the artists' attractiveness, credibility, and trustworthiness (Zhu et al., 2020; Weismueller et al., 2020). Fans may also recount situations reinforcing their idols' earlier promises, sharing these in posts with images. Social media and its descriptive narratives create credibility records, further enhancing the parasocial relationship and legitimizing fan purchases (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Merchandise offers comfort and relief by creating an emotional connection and a perception of authenticity. Through fan narratives, X's posts on merchandise boost credibility, suggesting that it strengthens an individual's self-perception or self-image for both fans and artists through this emotional bond. In providing comfort and bolstering one's sense of genuineness, merchandise fortifies and validates an individual's identity as a supporter.

### **More Than Identifiers—An Emotional Connection**

The role of merchandise moves beyond mere products. An idol-fan relationship is a distinctive feature in K-pop compared to many Western artists (Fany et al., 2022). Such a closeness between

idols and fans is strategically preserved so retailers can cultivate their brands. Social media provides a supportive means to express their choices where narratives and opinions regarding products can happen between fans. The endorsement by an idol is the reason for the purchase decisions of fans, and the factor to spend on it is the emotional connection (Ni, L et al., 2019).

According to the Finery Report (TFR), Indonesian K-pop enthusiasts purchased records, concert tickets, official and unofficial items, participated in online events, paid for premium content, and bought products endorsed by idols (Fany et al., 2022). Securing this willingness to pay (Zhang et al., 2020) for items and content is a strategy that includes narratives to create reasons to purchase, including cultivating the parasocial relationship between fans and idols. For merchandise, its narratives also allow for parasocial relationships without the idol being present or mentioning them. Offering the opportunity to have a fan's positive narrative helps build the credibility of the idol. Hanief et al. (2019) argued that a stronger parasocial relationship correlates to a stronger purchase intention and the electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) intent of followers of digital celebrities. This means that when a fan believes a brand can bring them closer to their idol, the brand will gain from this connection (Chen et al., 2022).

Fans not merely exhibit high brand loyalty (Adisak, 2022), but beyond that, involvement in social and political activism globally (de Castilho Sacoman, 2021).

Because fan loyalty directly correlates with profit, the Korean entertainment industry strives to instill such a sense of dedication in its audience. Merchandise becomes symbols of relationships with idols. As a memento of significant stages in one's life, such as the transition into maturity, shared narratives from other fans enhance the artist's legitimacy and contribute to instilling the identity of K-Pop fans. These could be strategically developed to form purchase intention. A fan's narrative on social media can be regarded as a testi-

mony or customer experience of the products and merchandise. Consequently, the credibility of the idol is affected.

### **Merchandise as a Tangible Link Fostering K-Pop Fandoms**

The examples illustrate the interconnection between consumerism and emotional investments. There is an essential relationship between fandom culture and business strategies. The humanistic connection with fans is by having direct engagement with them. When creating connections through products, this occurrence is called “mediated intimacy,” as fans establish intimate attachments with these objects, regarding them as extensions of their idols (Desnika & Tambunan, 2023).

Consumer behavior is influenced by their emotional connections and interactions with idols. Social media enhances such relationships since its information is organized, from giving the most up-to-date information to providing the justification and credibility of merchandise and idols. One of the strategies of Korean entertainment companies is to promote a boyfriend-girlfriend or idol-fan “relationship,” which can lead to a sense of entitlement. The strategy is marked by a concept that builds fan devotion, where parasocial relationships and interactions occur (Horton & Wohl, 1956). In terms of being approachable to fans of the opposite sex, an illusion is maintained to prevent fans from becoming envious, where young performers are frequently prohibited from dating (Valge & Hinsberg, 2019). The concept of dating may lead to a decline in sales of merchandise bearing the artist’s image, harassment, or defamation. Therefore, a deep connection between fan and idol is strategically maintained, leading fans to show their cognitive, affective, and psychomotor behaviors in demonstrating support. Hence, the role of merchandise is essential in maintaining and sustaining fan support for the idol. Where parasocial relationships occur, merchandise is a tangible link between fans and idols.

While the idol may not necessarily

observe media users’ or fans’ reactions, the relationship may become more complex (Schramm & Hartmann, 2008). A response by fans to idols involved in dating rumors is marked through the black or dark ocean, a fan protest by turning off the lightstick when the singer is performing (Aniuranti, 2020) to make it look like groups are singing to no audience. Such a boycott marked a dark spot in the idol’s career or downfall. While K-pop fans display tremendous dedication and a vast fan base, it does not always transfer to monetizing official items (Cheriyah & Hadi, 2022). In addition, despite the rhetoric of democratization, the values of new and digital capitalism may not be reflected in workers’ working conditions and even idols themselves (Whitson, 2019; Oh, 2018).

The Korean government’s strategic objective is to implement targeted policies that foster culture, thereby commodifying soft power (Ganghariya & Kanozia, 2020) and facilitating the export of Korean culture. This movement is sustained by merchandise, which significantly impacts global supporters, including loyal consumers and fans. A close relationship between identity and merchandise is revealed by the loyalty of K-pop fans, South Korean entertainment industry policies, and consumption behavior. Consumers are motivated by their emotive attachment to idols, and fandom is influenced and articulated through merchandise. The distinction between consumers and dedicated supporters is obscured by such a combination. As a tangible connection to idols, merchandise validates the self-identification of followers within the fandom. It cultivates a devoted base of loyal consumers who actively contribute to the dynamic culture of K-pop, surpassing passive consumption.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study redefines K-pop merchandise as ritualized boundary objects which validates identity through negotiation of transnational belonging, identity transitions, and the paradox of consumerism

within global fandoms. Commodified items like lightsticks and photocards transcend economic utility to become tools for psychosocial resilience: standardized yet personalized, they foster transnational cohesion while enabling localized meaning-making, bridging top-down industry strategies with fans' tactical reinterpretations. The analysis reveals that rites of passage within fandom are not confined to adolescence but emerge contextually, as seen in pandemic-era adults repurposing merchandise to navigate disrupted milestones, reframing bulk purchases as devotional labor, and albums as temporal markers of individual growth. This duality—where objects oscillate between industry commodification and fan reclamation—highlights merchandise as economic drivers and cultural artifacts, sustaining idols' careers while embedding fan rituals into the artistic ecosystem (e.g., lightstick choreographies as collaborative performances). By centering fans' agency in co-creating value, the research challenges narratives of passive consumption, arguing instead for merchandise's role in mediating identity not only of the individual but across borders. We propose that industries responsibly synchronise commercial motivations with the emotional investments of fans by positioning material culture as fundamental to modern belonging. Ultimately, the study contributes to broader sociological discourses on how consumer rituals transform alienation into solidarity in mediated societies, inviting future work on the sustainability of such practices in global creative economies.

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