THE 'KWANGYA' PARADOX:
A STUDY ON K-POP FANDOM'S PERCEPTIONS OF AUTHENTICITY

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Introduction

Revisiting the year 2009.

K-pop debuted on the US Billboard Hot 100 through Wonder Girls' single "Nobody". (Billboard, 2009). From there, its popularity has never gone backward, and K-pop successfully enters the lexicon of global popular culture (Choi, 2014:1). This global appeal began in the 1990s, when "Hallyu," or, the "Korean Wave," alludes to the spread of South Korean popular culture (Yoon, 2022: 394). However, with popularity comes responsibility. This research examines how the global dissemination of K-pop led to the rise of two cultural inauthenticity discourses: the questioning of whether K-pop is authentic to its Korean roots and the inauthentic, continuous crafting of the idol image to fulfill the fantasy of the "Perfect Idol" (Lee, 2019:11-24), all with the goal of global commercialisation.

In 2020, KWANGYA, a virtual realm developed from the hybridity of K-pop and the metaverse, was introduced. KWANGYA explored the idea of humans' alter ego, namely the "perfect self," visualized by AI idol group ae-aespa (SMCU, 2020). Hybridity and the "perfect self," two of K-pop's present inauthenticity discourses, yet KWANGYA and AI idols were hardly accepted by the K-pop fandom, claiming the two as inauthentic due to their hybrid and highly manufactured nature. The paradox between these perspectives, emphasizes the multifaceted nature of K-pop's authenticity and its interpretation by fans. This initiated this study, which sought to determine the degree to which inauthenticity is accepted as a part of the culture's technicality. Referencing the cultural essentialism theory (Grillo, 2003), this study delves into finding the irreplaceable 'essence', or what I refer to as the "Authenticity Formula" in K-pop culture, the absence of these elements in a K-pop product would render it inauthentic in the eyes of the fandom. This qualitative grounded theory study (Glasser and Strauss, 1967) could fill a void in the ever-changing K-pop fandom

dynamic and provide insights into the social and cultural ramification of the global phenomenon of K-pop; into understanding the power of fandom in shaping a music subculture.

A Review of K-Pop

There is a prevalent misperception that "K-pop" refers to all types of South Korean popular music. According to Lee (2014:74-75), "South Korean popular music" includes a wide variety of historical Korean music genres such as *kayo, chanson, and t'ŭrot'ŭ (trot)*, which therefore, it is not appropriate to label K-pop as its overarching term. Fuhr (2016:8) contends that K-pop is a distinctive musical phenomenon in which the music itself is not the central element of the genre. The dominant discourse of K-pop, that is, the K-pop idols (Kang, 2016:134), serves as more evidence that solidifies K-pop as a distinct cultural phenomenon.

One interpretation, however, remains constant amongst multiple scholars (Leung, 2012:3, Choi, 2015:4, Oh and Lee, 2014:74-75), that K-pop is a hybrid, contemporary culture that drives on a full-scale hybridisation process (Jin,2020:43) due to its constantly evolving hybrid nature. However, the very same globalization that spawned the K-pop as we know today, has also prompted inquiries into K-pop's authenticity, as audiences start to realize its extensive history of Western influence. For instance, in 1995, Idol group *Seo Taiji and Boys* released K-pop songs in a form argued to be heavily Western-inspired: a fusion of Korean pop and the predominantly African American culture, *Hip-Hop* (Shim, 2006: 27-36). The concept of hybridity in cultural studies, often regarded as inauthentic (Pieterse, 2001:219–222), is exemplified by the ongoing discourse surrounding the perceived lack of authenticity on K-pop's in-betweenness nature. Hence, it stands to reason to study hybridity as our initial inauthentic impetus within K-pop culture.

Cultural Authenticity: Foreign Hybridity as a Threat to Cultural Dissemination

A popular topic that arises from this Westernization phenomenon is widely regarded as the inquiry "What is the 'K' in K-pop?" and its importance to the global acceptance of the 'hybrid genre'. Lie (2012: 339–362) argues that the "K" is distinctly naked commercialism and has very little to do with Korean Confucianism, that is, the spiritual climate in South Korea's history that is still deeply rooted in the locals' way of life (Kang, 2006:2). Language-wise, Willis (2014: 215-223) argues that the often non-semantic usage of English in K-pop is to adapt to the global market. Lee (2023:51-72) also added that K-pop was once in a phase of "conscious resistance to Korea's local elements." Jolin (2017: 54) agreed to all 3 findings, naming K-pop as a form of "Neo-Korean-ness", where they are closer to creating their own "Korean culture." From this, we may infer that the "K" in K-pop primarily represents an identity that is more about appealing to the international market.

Still, if it is not the authentic "Korean" culture, then what is authentic K-pop culture? Hsu (2021:1-89), found that the same lack of (Korean) cultural authenticity in K-pop has led to Korean K-pop fans to fear 'assimilation from an outside culture' due to the increasing number of foreign K-pop idols. This shaped the trajectory of this study, questioning why foreign idols, and not its well-known history of foreign inspirations? Perhaps, this indicates that the fandom's focus on authenticity lies heavily on their idols.

Kwangya

In comes KWANGYA, the modern-day K-pop that takes hybridisation one step further. The debut of AI idols "ae-aespa" and human idols "aespa" generated a divided reception among K-pop fans due to the hybridisation between K-pop and the metaverse, deeming this highly manufactured nature as inauthentic. KWANGYA was introduced as a virtual world where "æ"s (read: Ae) can be found. æs took the concept of the "perfect self," created through the digital information uploaded by the human members of aespa (SMCU, 2020). They are then realized as Avatars, æs, and become their AI idols. In other words, these æs are the online-presence alter ego of idol group *aespa*. This notion of the "perfect self" alter ego, however, reflects directly on the idol industry. The manufactured nature in KWANGYA that becomes the main critique of inauthenticity, ironically, is also the same expectation that human idols should fulfill, namely: the manufactured "Perfect Idol" persona.

Staged Authenticity: The Mass Production of Idols

In the world of K-pop, performers are known as "Idols" (Hsu, 2021:20). However, it is not the performance that makes these idols, idols. It is the Idol Star Training System (ISTS) (Kang, 2017:36), an in-house idol production training program that does not end with musician technicalities, but rather encompasses all aspects of idols, from their personalities to daily lives (Lee, 2016:121). According to Padget (2019:1-15), the life of an idol encompasses the following: *'youth, beauty, personality, luxury, popularity, success'*. Should the majority of fans hold this perspective on idols , then the training is successful. 'It also consists of: highly *controlled, loss of creative freedom, invasion of privacy, and extreme industry expectations*.' This is why the ISTS is required: to prepare these trainees for a life of artificial beauty and para-social kin (Hwang, 2018:190-200). With such expectations, one can hardly ever be authentic.

MacCannell proposed a theory called "Staged Authenticity" (1973: 589-603), where he argues that in tourism, the stage setting of a culture is a response to the 'touristic' demand of experiencing an authentic culture. The front region of a tourism destination is arranged to produce the impression that the back region has also been entered, and thus tourists are already experiencing the full authentic cultural experience of said destinations despite their awareness of the controlled environment. Although this theory was made upon the tourism industry, the front versus back dichotomy, I argue, is the perfect analogy that represents the "Perfect Idol" culture. Idols are staged as a response to "Perfect Idol" expectations to fulfill the 'authentic culture' experience, despite fans' existing awareness of this highly controlled management (Lee, 2019:11-24).

Commercializing (In)Authenticity: Less about Music & Discussions on Methodology

In his study of the social structure of stardom, Marshall argues that to become a commercialized commodity, popular music stardom should emphasize the artistic qualities over the economic ones (2012:578–596). Dyer (1991: 137) further added that authenticity is a necessity in stardom, shaped by 'a rhetoric of sincerity or authenticity,' two qualities highly valued in stars as they guarantee genuineness and integrity (2004:9–10). This is opposite to the profit-driven K-pop culture that exploits the artistic value owned by each idol (Kang, 2016:136-141). The more vividly the "idol persona" is embedded in fans' minds, the higher the profit will be. Such findings exemplify the degree to which the K-pop idol industry is distant from the established definition of 3 different authenticity theories—further intensifying the curiosity to find the fandom's own theory of

authenticity in K-pop. The discourse on authenticity in K-pop, as explored by Hsu (2021: 1-83) and Kang (2016: 136-141), mostly centered around Korean cultural elements and predates the era of AI idols. This study aims to address the existing void by investigating what truly embodies the core of K-pop culture. This will be achieved by incorporating the KWANGYA concept of "perfect self" and AI advancements into the analysis—all done through the lens of the K-pop fandom.

Therefore, I proposed the research question:

"What are the cultural 'essences' in K-pop that authenticate the inauthentic nature in the manufactured K-pop idol culture?"

Marwick and Boyd (2011:119) argued that in studying authenticity, one should distinguish between the study of authenticity as an object, and of how it is perceived. This study is not interested in the absolute sense of K-pop's authenticity, but rather in what the fandom deemed as 'authentic'. Therefore, despite its critiques for supporting negative social categorization, a reliance on the theory of cultural essentialism will be used in this study. This qualitative grounded theory study (Glasser and Strauss, 1967:2) collects empirical data to generate analytical ideas and form a new formula that elucidates authentic K-pop. A mixed-method research approach (Bowers et al, 2013 :2157-58) will be employed in conjunction with "Method Triangulation," a convergence of qualitative empirical data gathering methods (Patton, 1999: 1192-93). This approach aims to achieve a tested consistency of findings and reduce the vulnerability of errors due to the social complexity of studying a large population. This research approach was shaped through the lens of my own biography; an influence of my 11-year immersive experience being a part of the K-pop fandom. The "field notes" I recorded originated back to my teenage days, hence, making the design of this study ethnographic-inspired.

Interviews were strategically conducted first to collect rich first-hand data that helps narrow down the direction of the triangulation strategy. 6 credible participants from 3 different continents were selected from online forums, making the scope of this research international. To improve the quality of responses, each interview was conducted in each participant's most comfortable language. This was later translated, transcribed, and coded. Secondly, questionnaires – partially inspired by the interviews – were used as a way to evaluate interviewee reliability in a broader study sample of 81 participants (Rubenfeld, 2014), and partly based on my K-pop knowledge. Questionnaires were distributed through online spaces namely: Instagram, Reddit, and Quora. Lastly, textual analysis is implemented with the sole aim of finding supporting case studies. An analysis of X threads, Reddit, and YouTube was done following the responses obtained from previous methods. This approach illuminates the real-life case study of the ongoing discourse, gathering information and examining texts as they appear on different mediums (Smith, 2017:1-3). This method also enables the research to reach a wider global audience.

Findings - "The Paradox"

Fans have expressed disapproval towards the concept of AI idols and KWANGYA, contending that they lack authenticity within the cultural context. 98.8% of the questionnaire participants also agreed to this notion. However, when asked to justify their unacceptance towards AI idols and KWANGYA, a paradoxical response was found. The very same element that renders an AI idol inauthentic and not accepted by the fandom is also the exact factor that distinguishes a good human idol (see Table 1).

Human Idols	AI Idols
What makes a good Idol?	Can you like an AI idol as much as a human idol?
Participant #61: "Able to <u>create a persona without risking their personal image</u> or branding."	Participant #33 "No. They are programmed. <u>Their personalities and traits are not of their own</u>".
Interviewee D: "I like Jungkook because I think <u>he is near that perfection level</u>."	Participant #25 "No,<u> they might seem to perfect</u>."
Participant #31 "If an idol <u>shows that they want to keep learning.</u>"	Participant #3 "No. Its not authentic, <u>its learned</u>."
Participant #20 "A <u>K-pop group should be able to blend and no one stood out</u>…"	Participant #55 "No, <u>no individuality</u> in my opinion."
Participant #13 "<u>Other aspects I'm fine with being heavily controlled</u>,…."	Participant #4 "Probably not.<u> If something is completely generated, I wouldn't like it as much.</u>"
Participant #43 "<u>Their unique approach</u> to music & entertainment."	Participant #28 "No. I'm too realist, <u>they'd be too unique</u>"
Participant #6 "Even if <u>idols aren't showing their authentic personalities and it is a show</u>, they should be honest."	Participant #80 "No, they <u>don't have a real personality</u>"

Table 1: Human vs. AI Idols

The only different reasoning mentioned by participants is how AI idols lack the "human" touch. This includes the acts of human interaction and emotions, which are intrapersonal skills that, according to Lindquist (2021:41), machines will never possess. Still, this does not explain how amongst the 81 responses, when asked the same justification of what makes a good K-pop idol, the term "genuine" and its synonyms with comparable meaning, such as "Original" and "Real", were mentioned a total of 42 times, a little more than half of the participants. Responses include:

Participant:

#6:	"True to themselves."
#43:	"Create their own stance."
#57:	"Real personality. I cringe when an idol is trying too hard to look cute.
#59:	"Real and not fake. Someone not going to get busted for bad behavior."
#66:	"Humane, Sincere, and Breaking the Mainstream"

This paradoxical position confirms that the authenticity in K-pop does not conform to just humans or AI, and there are underlying elements that lead to the inauthenticity discourse surrounding AI idols and KWANGYA. Therefore, the subsequent course of action is to identify the specific element, or in our case, the "K-pop essence," that gives rise to a fanbase culture that tolerates this lack of authenticity due to their own definition of "authenticity". These elements, I would like to call them: The Authenticity Formula.

The Authenticity Formula

It is acknowledged that numerous experts, including Jolin (2017:1-54) and Van der Ploeg (2016:3), reached a consensus that the 'K' in K-pop has limited connection to Korean traditional culture. It is also notable that Lie's argument directly relates to the lack of Korean Confucianism (2012: 339-362) in K-pop culture. However, after examining my collected data, a gap in the current academic research on identifying the "K" was identified. The approach that the existing studies took was to delve into the ancient historical ideology of Confucianism in Korea. Here, I will present a different viewpoint on Korean Confucianism in K-pop, focusing on the Confucian social conduct that is still deeply ingrained in South Korea's way of life today (Kang, 2006: 1). According to Confucian teaching, there are four constant virtues that still play a role in modern South Korean nationalism, namely: Ren, Yi, Li, and Xin (Śleziak, 2013: 26- 47).

Ren and Yi: The Human Cultivation

From her brief experience as a K-pop idol trainee, interviewee E can speak to its hardship. However, it is not the music nor the media classes that remain with her to this day. Instead, E claims:
"..But I think a huge part of me that has changed is self-discipline. I learned humility; that experience humbled me. I keep thinking that whatever I have right now, I can do better, so I always have to strive for the better." (E, research interview, March 9, 2024)

This concise reply from E effectively exemplified the virtues of Ren and Yi in Confucianism. Ren holds that all individuals are teachable and improvable (Pohl, 1999: 85) and therefore should enter a stage of self-cultivation to achieve self-discipline. Yi, on the other hand, holds the challenging demand of remaining humble after achieving the self-cultivation, Ren doctrine (The Analects, 16:10). In the realm of K-pop, the ISTS represents the phase of self-cultivation. It provided trainees with the opportunity to cultivate essential mental attributes, like tenacity and humility to enter stardom; attributes that fulfill the Yi virtues. Other participants also mentioned these attributes as owned by successful idols.

"I think if an idol can stay humble and respect their fans, not as a money-maker after success, they are a good idol doing it for their passion." (B, research interview, April 10, 2024)

"(A good idol) shows that they want to keep learning and improving." (Respondent #74, questionnaire, March 25, 2024)

Witnessing someone's commitment to attain greater skills while remaining humble is a praiseworthy quality on its own that contradicts the innate human instinct, and the appreciation and, to an extent, expectations the K-pop fans showed towards this idol quality exemplifies the role of Ren and Yi virtues in the K-pop industry.

Xin: Team Dynamics and Faithfulness

Xin, the ethics of trust in Confucianism (Wee, 2011: 516), according to the responses, is also a demanded quality an idol should possess. E further shares her trainee life experiences:
"Teamwork was also a huge part of training. I could get paired up with a stranger, but we have to trust each other and give the best performance to stay. I think by now everyone could determine which K-pop groups are close and which aren't. I think it affects your performance on stage." (E, research interview, March 9, 2024).

E's statement on fans' ability to determine the relationship between group members was supported by the online discussions on forums (Appendix 5). Moreover, as shown in Fig 4, respondents agreed that teamwork is a requirement in K-pop, naturally due to the concept of idols debuting as a group. An example of this response includes:

"A group that feels like family is almost like a guarantee of a good K-pop act. The chemistry between members just cannot be faked." (Respondent #65, questionnaire, March, 25, 2024)

These findings have shown that fulfilling the virtue of Xin will bring an idol one step closer to being recognised as a "good K-pop act."

Li: Manners

Several researchers, such as Tamai (2022:33) and Stowell (2003 :111-112) argued that out of all virtues, polite manners are the adopted Confucian belief that is most prominent in South Korean society today. From the etiquette of bowing to the language honorifics system, the virtue of Li signifies "Respect" as an ideal ethic (Yuan, 2022: 119-133). Therefore, it makes sense that good manners are the most expected attribute that fans expect an idol to possess, reaching a total of 30 mentions. Participants expressed:

"With their great talent, good attitude is just as important." (Participant #69, Questionnaire, March 25, 2024)

"Idols should also be polite and care for their fans." (Participant #46, Questionnaire, March 24, 2024)

"My favorite idol is ***. I think she is a really talented performer, and I really like how polite she is." (C, Interview, March 7, 2024)

This concludes that the significance of good etiquette in an idol's personality, adopted from the Li virtue, is another Confucian teaching that is demanded by the fandom towards their idols.

The Blood, Sweat, and Tears of K-pop.

Our previous findings indicate that Confucianism is indeed present in K-pop, contrary to Lie's findings (2012: 339–362). The quiet prevalence of Confucianism that has been passed down across generations in South Korean culture, has resulted in fans inadvertently anticipating that idols embody all four Confucian virtues. This finding and Confucianism perspective explain why the "perfection" of a human and AI idol is incomparable. K-pop fandom valued the blood, sweat, and tears put into the efforts of an idol in reaching the "perfection" standard that the culture has— something that AI idols failed to simulate, hence, becoming inauthentic in the eyes of the fandom. The study also indicated that 77.8% of respondents would see AI Idol more favorably if they knew there was a human behind it out of respect for their work. This work signifies how hard work and ISTS become an 'essence' in K-pop: the "self-cultivation" process towards perfection. This is not merely a matter of a "human touch," but rather stems from the deeply ingrained societal beliefs in South Korea that prioritize the authenticity of an individual's effort and perseverance.

Idols: Singer, Dancer, Fantasy-Maker

"Not All Idols Can Sing, and that is Okay"

@dailynaver tweeted on X: "Should all idols be expected to have talents to sing 'live' as singers?" (@dailynaver, X, 2023).

The majority of the responses claimed that singing is the basic requirement an idol should possess, stating:

"Of course yes, What's the training for then if they can't sing live?" (@Karramel–,X, 2023)

"Yes?? What are idols trained for?? Just to sit there being pretty like dolls???" (ateezforlife–, X, 2023)

In contrary to these comments, however, a prominent finding that emerged from this post is the acknowledgement of a portion of the fandom that accepts its idols' lack of vocal proficiency, which, as noted by Hsu (2021:20) and Kang (2016:353), constitutes the basic job requirement of an idol.

Interviewee A is on this side of the fandom, drawing upon girl group Le Sserafim's case, who got criticized over their live performance.

"I read about the hate Le Sserafim got, especially Sakura (Le Sserafim's member), but I think the hate this poor woman got is way too much. Logically, she won't survive in the idol industry that long (10 years) if singing is really that important." (A, Research Interview, March 5, 2024)

I continued by asking what makes her think Sakura could stay relevant for so long. She claimed:

"Well, she's really pretty, she interacts with fans very well, and she's got a hilarious personality. I think she's one of the best at <u>selling the fantasy</u>. (A, Research Interview, March 5, 2024). Additionally, interviewee B mentioned "fantasizing about her favorite idol due to him fulfilling her 'dream man' criteria" as a reason on why she really liked this idol (B, Research Interview, April 10, 2024). The one common term found in these two responses is: Fantasy. The fantasy of the perfect human on screen that actually exists in real life.

Fandom: The Consumer and the Catalyst to Fantasy

The remarks given by A and B convey the notion that these idols serve as a source of fantasy due to their personas, which coincide with fans' portrayals of an "ideal" human. This celebrity fantasizing phenomenon, according to studies done by Spitzberg and William (2008:287-312) and Maltby et al (2006: 273-283), is a common phenomenon that could happen to any fandom due to the human nature of sense of fulfillment. This means, fantasizing about idols extends beyond just K-pop culture, and could be found in other fandoms.

What is not common, however, is how K-pop's culture allows fans to prioritize their idol "fantasy material" over their musical talents (Iwicka, 2018:125-147). As we continued the interview, I asked B, who also happens to be a fan of Taylor Swift, about her perception of fantasizing about celebrities outside of K-pop. She responded:

"I think idols are marketed that way by their companies. I can't think of any Western artists who sell their 'good morning' voice as an alarm." (B, Research Interview, April 10, 2024).

F's interview response, in which she claimed to spend £20 on a monthly subscription to the idol-fan communication platform, *Bubble*, furthered B's claim. This confirmed Choi's (2019:64-65) theory, that the "idol-persona" was created for commercialization purposes. The fabricated persona of an idol fosters the para-social bond between the idols and the fans, creating the illusion of intimacy, and K-pop agencies further promote this notion by creating the idea that fans could continue building this intimacy through consumerist behavior. As fantasizing becomes a part of the culture, naturally, fantasy-material contents are demanded. This is where the market for fan-made fantasy content opens, making fans the "*Prosumers*" of this phenomenon, a portmanteau of "producer" and "consumer"(Toffler, 2018). Fantasizing idols has become a trend, and "*Boyfriend/Girlfriend*" contents are a whole subsection on social media. The popularity of these contents indicates that a huge part of the fandom does fantasize about their idols. These contents may seem innocent, yet this phenomenon has reached the point of sexualising idols.

The idol persona, 'created' by the K-pop agencies and 'adjusted' by the fans, led to an even more manufactured persona and an even higher expectations. This condition furthers an idol's authenticity, verging them to their alter-ego. K-pop has become a space that only accepts a human alter-ego; just like KWANGYA. But the question remains: why does the same fandom culture that accepts the manufactured alter-ego reject the idea of an AI, a digital alter-ego? To what extent is this inauthentic alter-ego self seen as an expected part of the culture and not a disruption that is no longer accepted?

The Lack of Self

Throughout my interview, one question received a unanimous answer. I asked, "What makes you perceive AI idols differently from real idols?". All replies speak to the emotional distance between real fans and the KWANGYA universe.

"I can't feel a connection with AI idols. They could be performing the most emotional song, and I would feel nothing." (D, Research Interview, April 15, 2024)

80% of questionnaire respondents recited this emotional connection obstacle. Anderson (2021:41–43) blamed the lack of a virtual entity's 'logocentric core' for this impediment. She claims from her study of Japanese virtual idol Hatsune Miku that these AIs have no past, such as childhood memories, and therefore cannot portray the deep emotional connection that human musicians can. I, however, would argue that, if the lack of emotion is the sole reason why fans cannot accept digital entities, then how is Japanese *anime* any different? How did they popularize the discussion of para-social relationships with fictional characters (Gannon, 2018), when they too are digital characters in an imagined realm?

E and B stated:

"AI idols are non-imaginable. There's just no settings to AI idols" (E, Research Interview, March 10, 2024)

"AI idols are just performers. There's not much for fans to explore because their only purpose was to 'work' as idols." (B, Research Interview, April 10, 2024)

Bowman et al (2007:36-4 3) argue that the goal of immersive virtual environments (VEs), like KWANGYA, was to let the user experience a computer-generated world as if it were real. From these responses, we could gather that there is a gap—in a way, a lack of context—in the imagined realm of KWANGYA universe that limits the immersion experience of the audience and leads to an unsatisfactory experience of escapism, which Hirschman links to fantasy fulfillment in humans (1983:63-76). This was further supported by E, who claims the only AI group she could get into is aespa, due to the "clear context" of the trilogy concept. Fans' fantasies about the "idol persona" reveal how said persona is needed for escapism. Although KWANGYA is fictional, this reciprocal relationship of one's true self and one's alter ego is argued by Sarte in his theory of alter-ego (1948: 181-199), where an alter-ego is just a modification of the mundane "I", that still lives in oneself, one body. Therefore, an inauthentic aspect of KWANGYA and AI idols is their inability to simulate the same escapism and immersion experience that human idols can offer through the fantasizing fandom habit in K-pop culture. This condition of the missing "self" in AI idols, is what I call the "Lack of Self."

This finding also shows how the drive towards the "Idol persona" inauthenticity discussion in K-pop, is also the very same thing that creates an authentic part of the K-pop experience: fantasizing. Hence, fantasy and its escapism are an 'essence' that cannot be absent in K-pop culture.

Conclusion

The formation of this study was inspired by a paradoxical situation in fans' acceptance and expectations between human idols and KWANGYA's digital entities that drew an invisible line of (in)authenticity in the culture. This research traces that line, and finds the irreplaceable measures

that make the inauthentic nature of K-pop authentic to the fans and that, if absent, are viewed as inauthentic. Through the triangulation of methods, this grounded theory study clarifies that there are 'essences' of authenticity in K-pop beyond its manufactured reasonings. Two emerging cultural 'essences' were found. First, the 'ideal idol', fits into the four virtues of Confucianism, which highlighted the importance of self-cultivation that AI cannot replicate. Second, the "lack of self" prevented AI from replicating the escapism and immersion of fantasizing about human K-pop idols. Nonetheless, there are chances of methodological errors, such as translation and response performativity. Measures had been taken to minimize errors as much as possible. Moving forward, there are possibilities to discuss the differences on authenticity perception between Girl Group and Boy Group fandoms, given that Confucianism is a male-dominated tradition (Craddock, 2022: 2).

This study elevates the definition of 'foreign' by incorporating the newly established AI idols, and the future of AI authenticity perception goes back to the fandom and the industry. One thing is for sure: As long as AI still aims to replicate the products of the world's best creatives, the discourse of AI inauthenticity will continue. After all, as Little (2019) once stated, accurate re-creations are inauthentic, therefore making the original idols, human: authentic—no matter how manufactured.

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