Pop City

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Chapter 3

**Image Producers**

*The (Re)Production of K-Pop Idols*

This chapter examines how K-pop idols are produced, consumed, and utilized in profit generation. All three sections are constructed on the same plan: K-pop idols appeal to consumers by developing desirable images and building intimacy. They are not a simple media text; rather, they are both a human product and an agent intended to forge affective relationships with fans/audiences, turning the latter into devoted consumers of the secondary products that idols endorse. Korean municipalities likewise draw on the affective sensibility generated by idols to attract K-pop tourists to their areas (as will be discussed in chapters 4 and 5). This chapter delves into the means by which K-pop idols’ seductive power to engage the affective commitment of their fans is constructed. I argue that the idols’ alluring aura emanates primarily from their visual quality; that, in the end, is what draws fans into affective consumption of idol-associated products and places. In discussing this kind of visually oriented production and consumption, I explore a variety of topics: the cultivation of K-pop idols, the
deliberate development of idol concepts, fans’ voluntary and affective reproduction of idol images, and the profit-generation schemes that capitalize on these images.

**The Development of the Idol Industry**

The formation of the idol system and culture in Korea was strongly influenced by the Japanese model. In Japan, however, idols encompass a broader range of talent, including “highly produced and promoted singers, models, and media personalities” (Galbraith and Karlin 2012, 2), whereas in Korea the title *idol* is mainly reserved for young pop singers and performers who are strategically produced by entertainment agencies. Even though idols appear widely in television dramas, films, and various television shows, their primary point of entry into the entertainment industry is as members of bands called *idol groups*. In the Korean context, therefore, the idol system and culture are inseparable from the operation of the K-pop industry.

Idols are extremely “produced” products of entertainment companies and management agencies, called *gihoeksa* in Korean. Emulating the Japanese *jimusho* system, SM Entertainment (hereafter SME) pioneered the Korean *gihoeksa* system and started producing prepackaged K-pop bands in the mid-1990s. YG Entertainment and JYP Entertainment joined the move in that same decade, and these three major agencies have driven the organizational dynamics of the K-pop industry ever since. They developed a “concentrated and domineering musical production system” (Shin and Kim 2013, 259) by vertically integrating the in-house processes of artist selection, training, image making, song writing, management, contracting, and album production. As the market has expanded, smaller agencies such as Cube, DSP, Loen, FNC, Starship, and Pledis, among many others, have also entered it. As *gihoek* means planning or designing, the *gihoeksa* creates performers from scratch through its “in-house” production system. In addition, the *gihoeksa* controls every aspect of the idols’ public image and career, including the coordination of artistic and media content, macro- and microscheduling (i.e., deciding when to release a new album, stream a concert, or announce a television show lineup), and long-term market planning.

Idol production begins with finding a hidden talent. The way agencies often put it is to say that they “try to find a ‘gemstone’ and ‘process’ it.” Ex-
pressions such as these, used in the field, imply that the aura of idols is strategically produced through the gihoeoksa system, and individual idols’ artistic ability matters less. In earlier days, trainee recruitment was channeled mainly through connections or head-hunting. There is a famous story that Lee Sooman, the founder of SME, visited several performing arts schools to find a voice and scouted Bada, who later became a member of S.E.S. Street casting was also prevalent: staff at management companies simply went out into the streets and found attractive faces. As the industry has grown, the ways of scouting trainees have diversified to include open auditions (would-be group members visit gihoeoksa to get a test), global auditions (management companies hold international auditions at major cities across the globe), online auditions, and televised audition programs. Although the agencies went searching for trainee candidates when the industry was launched, now that K-pop is thriving, wannabes come knocking at the doors of gihoeoksa to get a much sought-after chance to audition. Since the end product of the idol-manufacturing process is someone who is to be admired for their attractiveness, musical talent is not necessarily the best quality to have for someone wanting to be selected as a trainee. In the earlier stages, gihoeoksa tried to find youngsters who could sing and dance in order to speed up production, but talent spotting has now developed in the direction of discovering beautiful faces. The emphasis on appearance is growing even greater because musical talent can be improved through long-term training.

Management agencies offer binding contracts to those young people (starting from kids in their early teens) who pass the primary screening. Under the “in-house training system,” the contracted trainees get many years of instruction in singing, dancing, acting, foreign languages, and communication techniques. Management companies usually divide their trainees into four categories (Lee 2011). The first comprises soon-to-be released groups that have a fixed team name, a finalized membership, an allotted role for each member of the team, and even a debut song. The second consists of those who have belonged to a fixed team and practiced as a team for more than two years. Management agencies officially provide room and board and a stipend to those who belong to the first two categories. The third group is made up of those who have dropped out of a team and thus are available as candidates for other teams, while those who have just passed the gihoeoksa audition and require four to five years of training comprise the last category. The hierarchical categorization of trainees points to the dropout mechanism
in the training process: if someone is not able to level up within a given period of time, he or she is forced to quit. Quite a few trainees cannot endure the intensive process and voluntarily give up in the middle of it. Even if one goes right through the whole tough process, one’s debut as an idol is never guaranteed. Only an extremely small proportion of trainees (less than 10 percent) actually debut. The abundant reserves of candidates who can step in as substitutes make the chances of success even lower and incite endless competition among trainees. As they strive to get that hard-to-win chance, intensive labor and self-exploitation are pervasive among them. Through the mechanism of infinite competition, management companies get more work out of their trainees than they have actually contracted for. A staff member at a management firm remarked, “The intensity of competition has resulted in better quality, bringing about the current high standards in K-pop.”

Uncertainty rules the K-pop industry. Only a few produced idols actually survive in the industry. Eighty-two girl groups made their debuts between 2013 and 2015, but fewer than ten achieved substantial public recognition. Even though a new group often attracts public interest, long-term popularity can never be relied on. The *gihoeksa*, therefore, is spending money to cover development costs without either any immediate return or any secured future return on their investment. It is said that the *gihoeksa* usually spends $100,000 to 200,000 to produce a group. SME invested $300,000 to launch Girls’ Generation. It is a huge investment for a product with such unpredictable earning potential. The risk factor in idol production, on the other hand, is inherent in all human capital. As Chris Bilton (1999) contends, the process of cultural production depends on human relations that remain volatile and unpredictable. The products of the idol production process do not always function as they are designed to do because they are basically human beings. For example, SME had to deal with the departure of three members of TVXQ, originally a five-boy group.

To deal with their unpredictable human capital, management companies have adopted various disciplinary measures to control trainees. One agency has come up with a ten-point “code of conduct” that trainees should observe: (1) punctuality at rehearsals, (2) no smoking, (3) a ninety-degree bow, (4) no cell phone use except during dinner, (5) no dating, (6) politeness during class, (7) no drinking, (8) no lateness or absence, (9) no food, and (10) staff members only in practice rooms. Other agencies have similar rules to discipline trainees. The strict surveillance and disciplinary control of trainees is often
covered over with the rhetoric of dreams. The tough training process is not intensive labor, but a prerequisite for trainees to pursue their dreams. Idol wannabes, therefore, voluntarily participate in forced overwork. To exploit trainees’ dreams to a maximum, the hallways and practice rooms of *gihoeksa* are filled with huge photos of already famous idols. The idea is that trainees identify themselves with these established idols and endure their current hardships in order to achieve similar success. The family metaphor is another means of controlling trainees and idols. The three major agencies use similar rhetoric, referring to themselves as the “SM Town,” “JYP Nation,” and “YG Family,” respectively. Despite their different scales, all three place emphasis on a sense of community that veils the capital–labor relations between *gihoeksa* and trainees. Under this positive fantasy of familyhood, trainees persist in exploiting themselves and their dreams. Disciplined by the family rhetoric, K-pop idols frequently express their thanks to the company chairman and staffers when they win first place on a television music show.

After going through the tough training process, some trainees have the good fortune to debut as members of newly formed idol groups. The launch of a new idol group is strategized by putting together the “best combination” of members, each of whom shows a particular talent for singing, dancing, rapping, foreign-language speaking, or looking good. Because idols are not deemed to be serious artists, the division of labor within a group is done in such a way as to make the group as a whole competitive. Simply being good-looking functions as a critical talent within a group; those with pleasant faces are called the “visual” members. A “visual” will normally take the center spot in the dance choreography or on the album cover. As the debut of a new idol group is a new product rollout, determining the composition of the group is conceived to be the same as packaging different product lines to carve out a wider niche. Beyond the mere functional logic, the rationale behind diversity in the lineup of the band lies in exploiting the broadest possible market. Each individual member develops and plays a specific personality type (character) so that the group as a whole can serve multiple audience segments. In Girls’ Generation, for example, Yuri acts as the sexy character, while Sunny does *aegyo* (a calculated cuteness). YoonA is the “visual” of the group; Jessica played the chic role, leaving Sooyoung responsible for articulate speaking and a sense of humor. Promoting a diversified attractiveness, Girls’ Generation as a whole was able to maximize its consumption potential.
One industrial standard was to form a five-member group, composed of a main vocal, a subvocal, a rapper, a dancer, and a visual member. The first- and second-generation idols such as H.O.T., TVXQ, Big Bang, SHINee, and Wonder Girls fall into this category. A recent trend among K-pop groups is having too many members: Super Junior alternates twelve or thirteen members; Girls’ Generation, Nine Muses, and TWICE have nine; although three members have withdrawn from the group, EXO is made up of twelve, including EXO-K and EXO-M; SEVENTEEN has a crew of thirteen. The practice began with Super Junior, once called a collection of left-over trainees at SME, where it was a means of disposing of the oversized and aging trainees. Yet the multimember group has been developed into a savvy industrial strategy. As fans’ tastes are diverse, the more members in a group, the wider the spectrum of preferences it can serve. The multimember groups produced by SME, such as Super Junior, Girls’ Generation, and EXO, are often labeled by fans as “assorted gift sets.” Large groups reduce the risks associated with fans’ unpredictable choice of favorites. They can also repackage themselves into smaller groups, so-called units, or even spin off a soloist, contributing to profit-diversification schemes. Super Junior has operated five subunits: Super Junior-K.R.Y, Super Junior-T, Super Junior-M, Super Junior-H, and Super Junior-D&E, each made up of different members. G-Dragon, a lead member of Big Bang, runs two subunits (GD × Taeyang and GD & T.O.P) and also performs as a soloist. Girls’ Generation’s subunit TTS and its soloist, Taeyeon, likewise have achieved substantial commercial success.

When releasing a new idol group, the gihoeksad, invests a significant amount of effort in crafting unique and marketable images for it. Concept is a word widely used in the K-pop industry. To develop its own brand, each group tries to sell its unique qualities against competition from the floods of other idol bands. While most girl groups, for instance, place themselves somewhere between innocent girls and sexy femmes fatales, 2NE1 established an exclusive image of themselves as independent and empowered women calling for female solidarity. The multinational group f(x) has experimented with unusual concepts based on its electropop style. Although f(x)’s queering concepts do not appeal to broader audience groups, the band has attracted some extremely devoted fans who admire their uniqueness.

The art of storytelling is often used to impress the concept of a newly debuted group in the public mind in a strong and rapid way. For their debut song “Mama,” members of EXO were promoted as beings from Exoplanet
who had supernatural powers such as healing, teleportation, time control, and telepathy. EXO’s twin units, EXO-K and EXO-M, who sing the same songs in Korean and Mandarin, originated from the “Tree of Life” on Exoplanet. This birth narrative has been actively reflected in the group’s lyrics, choreography, and concert themes. Similarly, under the concept of the school trilogy series, Bangtan Boys (BTS) released three albums titled “2 COOL 4 SKOOL,” “O! RUL8, 2?,” and “SKOOL LUV AFFAIR,” each presenting songs dealing with dreams, happiness, and love. With lyrics tackling issues such as school bullying, the pursuit of happiness, and the rejection of social norms, BTS’s storytelling of school lives won enormous support from teenagers.

Concepts are also used in the diachronic development of a group. Every time a K-pop group releases a new song, album, or single, it is produced and marketized along with a specific theme. The design concept rules everything from musical elements such as catch phrases and choreography to fashions, including clothes and hairstyles. A concept also functions as a site in which K-pop groups practice multiple masculinities and femininities. Girls’ Generation made its debut in 2007 with the song “Into the New World” in which the girls’ untainted purity was highlighted. The group’s megahit song “Gee” (2009) changed its members into lovely young ladies with skinny jeans, T-shirts, and long hair. In “Tell Me Your Wish (Genie)” (2009), the girls were given a navy concept and dressed in tight military jackets and hot pants. They were transformed into cheerleaders in “Oh” (2010) and medieval knights in “The Boys” (2011), while for a more recent song, “Lion Heart” (2015), they played in a 1960s retro style. While maintaining a wholesome image as “sexy yet innocent girls” (Epstein and Turnbull 2014), Girls’ Generation has performed and sold different types of femininity over time, going through a transformational journey from girlhood to sexy womanhood. Similarly, boy bands display growth through a metamorphosis in body and character from innocent boys into masculine adults. This diachronic transfiguration is a market survival strategy: there is always something fresh on offer to appeal to fans and sustain their interest.

From recruiting trainees to team composition and concept crafting, the production of K-pop music centers on the creation of images of idols. K-pop is a package that is not confined to music. With few exceptions, idols do not produce their own music and only perform music that they are given to perform and is designed to highlight the images created for them. These
images are intended to cover both synchronic distinctions that make one K-pop group stand out among many others and diachronic versatilities that enable a particular group’s image to be refreshed. Strategic image making is imperative, since the images produced for the idols are directly associated with revenues insofar as they ensure wide popular appeal. They also render idols fantasized subjects, thus obscuring the harsh labor conditions and disciplinary regulations they undergo in the industry.

**Idols and Affective Sensibilities**

As outlined in the previous section, K-pop idols are strategically produced commodities, and the process that produces them, from searching them out as trainees to devising concepts for them, is mainly concerned with their visual qualities. Nevertheless, the production process itself does not automatically lead to idols functioning as commodities in the market. Idols are human products, rather than mere media texts, that their ongoing performances constantly redefine their market competitiveness. Their ability to captivate consumers’ minds is the key to their successful operation because idols are produced and marketed as attractive people. What exactly is it, then, that makes a K-pop idol a seductive commodity? This point is critical because, as the following section will show, idols are essentially metacommodities, designed to sell other products, including celebrity merchandise and K-pop places. I argue that the felicitous interplay between K-pop idols’ iconic status and their intimacy is the resource that enables them to build up their fandom. Idols have to be objects of desire and familiar subjects at one and the same time.

The appeal of idols emanates from the very nature of their iconic status (Herwitz 2008; Nagaike 2012). It is in the nature of an idol to establish and sustain the iconic quality that enables him or her to exist as an object of worship. The aura of K-pop idols springs from the visual spectacle that they present to the world. Given the image-based idol production system, potential K-pop idols are basically blessed with extraordinary good looks. Such natural beauty, however, is a mere resource to be processed further. The *gihoeoksa* makes use of various production skills to develop the appearance of each idol through fashion, hairstyle, makeup, and accessories under the umbrella of a group concept. Sometimes, both idol candidates and those who have already made their debuts undergo plastic surgery to enhance their phys-
ical qualities. Some international fans claim that the perfect faces of K-pop idols are entirely due to plastic surgery. Cosmetic surgery, however, does not play a large part in creating the K-pop image because agencies search out young people who are “already pretty enough” for the stock of idol candidates. The visual qualities of the trainees that each agency has on its books testify to the fact that cosmetic surgery is not an urgent necessity. Visual perfection is achieved through strict body control rather than clinical assistance. It is common knowledge that measuring their weight is a weekly routine for trainees. In episode 9 of Mnet’s SIXTEEN, a survival reality show where 16 JYPE female trainees compete for the seven spots in a new girl group, Park Jin-young (JYP) says to one trainee: “Have I ever criticized you for your dancing or singing? What do you think is your problem?” and the trainee replies, “Taking care of myself.” JYP then says critically: “Your dance looks slow. If you gain weight, of course you’ll look like that. The first thing that I do when I get up in the morning is getting on the scale. While the other girls practice their singing, you have to lose weight.” K-pop entertainers are forced to engage in constant management of their bodies during training and even after their official debuts.

The corporate regulatory system, however, is only partial; self-management of the body is required for the perfect visual quality that bolsters the entertainers’ iconic status. It is well known that both male and female K-pop idols put enormous effort into keep their bodies in ideal condition. When Eunji in Apink was asked which member had changed most since the group’s debut on a television show, she picked herself, saying: “I have lost 15 kg since the debut. I’ve been working hard with a personal trainer and have been boxing because I thought I should improve the shape of my body.” The so-called girl group diet menus that are supposed to not exceed eight hundred calories a day have sparked lots of media and online discussion. Male idols are not free from strict self-regulation of their bodies either. In a scene from Naver StarCast, aired on August 20, 2013, and featuring EXO members, one of them, Lay, asked another, Xiumin: “Why do you try so hard to lose weight? . . . I know you work hard. So please rest, don’t be stressed, and eat something.” In reply, Xiumin confessed, “I was disappointed to see myself on TV when I put on weight.” Key, a member of SHINee, has also mentioned that he does not eat carbohydrates at all to keep fit.

Embodied in the production of the idols’ iconic status is a process of neoliberal human capital creation that valorizes individuals’ self-regulation,
self-development, and branding. K-pop idols consider their body as a developable asset and engage in its continuous improvement and management. It is vital for them to achieve a flawless outward appearance through their own bodily discipline. Beauty acts as an oppressive regime for both established idols and aspiring trainees; they are under an obligation to constantly screen and control their bodies and appearances. This very oppressive structure rewards K-pop idols with the iconic status that markedly differentiates them from their main consumers, Korean teenagers, who are likewise oppressed, but only by the strict regulations governing uniforms and hairstyles at school. What turns K-pop idols into objects of desire among ordinary teenagers is precisely their idealized quality, the contrast between their looks and those of real-life people. That is why even “girl groups” have more female fans than male. As the section on consumption will show, appreciation of the stars’ spectacular appearance is the dominant element in idol worship. The iconic aura of K-pop stars radiates from their impeccable physical qualities.

K-pop stars’ affective power, however, comes from their familiarity. The K-pop industry is highly dependent on idol fandom. Fandom wields its power over sales of music albums, the digital music chart, and publicity for idol groups. For fandom to come into being and be maintained, idols should not exist in some entirely distant and unreachable sphere. Intimacy building is required to entice audiences and eventually turn them into fans. The primary channel for K-pop idols to become familiar to their public is reality shows. Produced by and aired on cable channels, idol reality shows intensively feature one particular group and trace the members’ real lives off stage. Following from pioneering shows such as 2NE1’s 2NE1 TV (2009), 2PM’s Wild Bunny (2009), and Infinite’s You’re My Oppa (2010), more than forty idol reality programs had been broadcast by 2015. The same group may appear on several different shows (Block B, for instance, has appeared on Signal B, Match Up, and 5 Minutes before Chaos), or the same program may feature multiple groups in a series (e.g., MBC Every 1 produced six seasons of Showtime: EXO’s Showtime, Showtime: Burning the Beast, Apink’s Showtime, Sistar’s Showtime, EXID’s Showtime, and Mamamoo x GFriend Showtime).

Idol reality shows sell the “real” lives of K-pop idols. Using several observation cameras, the programs allow the audience to watch as K-pop idols go about their daily lives. For example, idol dorms where members live together are shown to the public, which also gets to see idol entertainers’ “bare faces.”
Idols are also seen in recording studios and in dance practice rooms, particularly late at night or early in the morning. Idols are also encountered in various real-life contexts in which they go shopping for groceries, cook, eat in restaurants, play in a water park, or travel overseas. Crying scenes are common in which idols reaffirm the love and friendship that exists among group members and staff. Despite the artificially created settings, reality shows become a site in which idols’ real-life personalities are revealed, rather than the entirely calculated personas that they present on stage. At a press conference during Apink’s Showtime, Apink members shared their thoughts about the reality program. Nam-joo said: “We think we’re going to put in a lot of ourselves as is. I think people will be able to feel like they’re doing things with us rather than watching a program.” Na-eun added, “Not too long ago, we filmed at a water park, and I got so excited playing there that I didn’t even notice the cameras.”

Viewers enjoy watching idols’ humane and friendly aspects. Indeed, they forge close ties with them based on their ordinary qualities, as if they were boys and girls whom they might easily come across in their own neighborhoods. Idols become special subjects, but close ones.

By disclosing idols’ real-life personalities, reality programs also provide the general audience with frequent opportunities to accumulate greater knowledge of them. According to Mark Duffett (2013), stars and fans are in an asymmetrical relationship in which the stars have power and the fans have knowledge. Fans try to balance the power relations by collecting information; as they get to know more about the stars, the distance between the two is bridged. Acquiring knowledge gives fans immense pleasure because they feel that they are getting closer to their idols. For example, Lukačs (2010a) suggests the notion of a “culture of intimate televisuality” in which Japanese viewers take pleasure in accumulating knowledge about tarento (media personalities). Once a fondness for an idol is formed, knowledge accumulation on the part of audiences/fans surpasses the passive and private arena and enters wider public circulation. Fan community members engage in collective, discursive consumption of the aspects of idols shown in the reality shows; the anonymous public “talks together” about the personality, beauty, and everyday lives of idols, taking personal pleasure from this kind of group discussion. This collaborative and discursive consumption process produces secondary content such as captured images, short movies, GIF images, and SWF images that are then further distributed on various media, particularly
online social media due to their virality and spreadability. Through fans’ active reproduction, images shown in reality shows become a resource that can be further utilized by other media, including television commercials and entertainment shows. The fans’ knowledge-gathering process serves to constitute idols’ intertextuality, endlessly cross-referenced between newspapers, magazines, online social media, and television (Galbraith and Karlin 2012). While management agencies and some advertisers capitalize on fans’ “labor of love” that spreads idol images across diverse media, fans themselves gain great pleasure from their voluntary transmedia circulation of idol images. Because fan-audiences directly participate in the process as critical agents, intertextuality creates a deeper and more affective relationship with them.

The Mechanism of Profit Generation

As shown in the above discussions, both the production and operation of K-pop idols have a great deal to do with the construction of desirable images for them. K-pop is all about achieving that “right look” that is prized by the audience. Behind this image-focused production process are profit-generation channels that are not necessarily associated with music. The recent development of the Korean popular music industry reveals a fundamental shift in the way profits are made. Until the 1990s, sales of music—on LP, cassette tape, or CD—were a primary source of revenue for production houses. The first decade of the twenty-first century, however, witnessed a drastic decline in CD sales. Between 2000 and 2005, South Korea lost a whopping two-thirds of its album sales, while the global market shrunk by a more modest 18 percent.23 The decline of the physical record market ushered in a digital crossover. As early as 2006, South Korea became the first major music market to become more than 50 percent digital (the 2012 global rate was just 38 percent).24 As of 2012, total revenues from digital sales had reached $670 million out of a total of $750 million. The soaring digital music market re-organized the profit-distribution system in a manner unfavorable to production houses, despite the fact that the size of the pop music market had expanded over time. While more than half of the profits now go to the distribution platforms and wireless carriers, record labels and entertainment companies, which actually produce the music, earn lower profit margins.25 A chief director of KMP Holdings (KMP is an abbreviation for Korean
Music Power), a music distribution company established as a joint venture among seven entertainment companies, including the major three, remarked, “Few production houses, except the major three, can expect actual profits from the sale of music.” Yet the situation is not bright even for the big three. For example, SME recorded a total of $287 million of sales revenue in 2014. Yet revenues from digital music and CD sales remained at $45.5 million, less than one-sixth of the total, at a time when physical CD does not function beyond an idol merchandise. These figures reveal that the traditional exchange system organized around physical and digital music no longer functions as effectively as it once did. Against the backdrop of the crash in the music market, the profit-generation schemes within the K-pop industry have fundamentally changed. Music is only one dimension of idols’ popularity and is responsible for only part of the revenue they generate. The principal sources of revenue for giheoksa are endorsement deals and performances at events, both of which depend on the attractiveness of idols’ images.

Signing endorsement deals is the ultimate way of making money in the entertainment industry. Corporate or product sponsorship brings pure profit at no cost, because it utilizes established (idol) images. The Korean advertising industry is well known for its heavy reliance on celebrities. Of the 2000 commercial advertisements released in Korea in 2010, for example, 65 percent featured them. By comparison, the same figure for the United States, the United Kingdom, and France was less than 10 percent. Bruce Haines, a Briton who currently heads the largest advertising agency in South Korea, Cheil Communication, revealed that the biggest difference between U.K. and Korean advertising lies in the fact that Korean advertisers are hugely dependent on celebrity endorsement. As Carruth (2009) puts it: “Of course, it’s not uncommon in the west for stars to endorse a product, but generally the ad has a core idea and makes use of the celebrity endorsement to enhance the original concept. Not so in Korea. In its crudest form, Korean advertising degenerates to beautiful people holding a bottle.” Recently, K-pop idols have risen to be a valued currency in the advertising market given their favorable images and the size of their fandom. Commercials capitalize on particular idol images built on their appearances on various media. Miss A’s Suzy was once called the “$10 million girl” due to the twenty-two endorsement deals she signed during the period from February 2012 to April 2013 alone. The number of modeling contracts she landed increased even further thereafter. Although Miss A did not set about vigorously releasing new songs, Suzy’s
successful movie debut in the film *Architecture 101* (*Geonchukhak Gaeron* 2012) earned her the nickname “the nation’s first love.” Thanks to her pure image combined with her extraordinary physical appearance, she became the most sought-after female celebrity in the advertising industry. In August 2014, Hyeri from Girls’ Day appeared in *Real Men* (*Jinjja Sanai*), a variety show about celebrities’ experiences in the military. After only a four-day experience in the military on the show, a brief clip in which Hyeri showed aegyo (carefully crafted cuteness of expression) went viral. Thanks to her cute but energetic image, Hyeri landed seventeen endorsement deals. Cheerful images from her performance in the television series *Reply 1988* (*Eungdaphara Ilgupalpal* 2015) brought more deals for product sponsorship. Once a favorable image has been created, its commercial value is heightened through its constant circulation via different media. Thus, the most urgent task for idol producers is to get an opportunity for their idol to appear on television shows where remarkable images can be built. Releasing an album is simply a means of generating publicity and obtaining an entry into other media.29

Idols have risen to become a desirable commercial model because of their sizable fandoms as well, which have been growing even greater with the globalization of K-pop. Fans—those who forge affective relations with idols—consume the products that their idols endorse in affective ways, that is, as a means of being connected with them. Product reviews, therefore, are likely to be favorable and fans’ collective supportive comments, when circulated online, can bring a rapid promotional effect. Advertisers frequently hold fan meetings at which only those who buy promotional products are allowed to meet idols in the flesh, in the same way that a giheoksa runs fan-signing events for which attendees are picked by lottery, with each album purchased entitling the purchaser to one ticket in the lottery. Marketing with K-pop stars is a direct commercialization of fans’ desire to get closer to their idols. EXO starred in multiple commercials and publicity campaigns across Asia thanks solely to the incredible size of its global fandom. Maintaining its long-term top position against competition from floods of other girl groups, members of Girls’ Generation appeared in 18 commercials in 2008, 17 in 2009, 18 in 2010, and 18 in 2011, endorsing a wide variety of products from cell phones and theme parks to roast chicken.

Event performances contribute substantially to the revenue streams for idol producers as well. The performances in question, called haengsa in Korean, are occasions during which singers and entertainers perform live at a
concert organized by sponsors. Haengsa include local festivals, college festivals, and corporate events. As local events, haengsa are not publicly broadcast and the size of the audience depends on the sponsor. An event performance appears similar to a concert inasmuch as the audience watches a show, yet its exchange value system is much more like that of a commercial advertisement. While the audience buys tickets to attend a concert, haengsa are open to the public free of charge. Companies and local governments put on such events and pay for them for much the same reasons that they pay for commercials featuring the groups. Idol group images and brands are bought to sell other tangible and intangible commodities, such as corporate or city images. Popular music once had a first-order commodity relationship with consumers. Now, the primary mechanism for generating profits operates via idols’ images that are sold to advertisers. The selling of cultural text (music) through idols has now turned into a process in which the idols themselves become a commodity to be sold to sponsors, thus forming a second-order commodity relationship.

It is not only advertisers who capitalize on idol images, however. Entertainment agencies are the foremost exploiters of crafted idol images for their profit-diversification schemes. Idol merchandise consists of commodities that directly commercialize idol images. Originating from the Japanese “goods culture” (“goods”/gutjeu is a term taken from English to refer to commodities), celebrity merchandise covers literally all products related to stars (particularly idol groups) from photos, accessories, clothing, and stationery products to home goods and snacks. As they serve as a unique means of identifying oneself as a fan, star goods have gained greater significance in the recent history of K-pop. The first-generation celebrity merchandise in the 1990s was mainly limited to star photos of different sizes, usually bundled with a music album (cassette tape or CD), different colored balloons and raincoats (each color representing a particular idol group), star name badges, and star T-shirts and hats. The fan clubs of second-generation idol groups in the early 2000s voluntarily produced and circulated various types of star merchandise among fan club members such as stationery, sticker photos, and wristbands with group names on them. Recognizing the market potential, since around 2005 entertainment agencies have aggressively produced celebrity merchandise as a means of widening the channels to profit. As K-pop fandom has grown, the goods market has also thrived. Since fandom is about desiring the same lifestyle as idols, celebrity goods now go beyond cheering
tools (such as balloons and light sticks) and have diversified into everyday
products such as sticker books, accessories, cell phone cases, art toys, candles,
necklaces, cushions, pillows, cups, pouches, and eco-bags. Each product is
designed with an idol image or idol group logo, only having affective values to
assert fandom with significantly less use values.

Idol merchandise stands at the summit of the idol industry. “It is the tail
that wags the dog” (as in the Korean proverb, baeboda baekkop jangsaga
heunghaetda), an appropriate metaphor to refer to a situation in which more
revenues come from idol goods than from musical content. Major manage-
ment companies have opened online and off-line retail outlets to sell idol
goods. YG Entertainment has launched the online shop YGeshop to sell
products themed with YG artists. In January 2013, SME opened a “pop-up
store” inside a Lotte Department Store to sell new SM artist merchandise. A
pop-up store is a short-term sales space, and this one was originally supposed
to operate for just one month. As the sales revenue reached around $600,000
within twelve days, however, Lotte offered more space, and now the SM
Town pop-up store is one of the department store’s most profitable shops, re-
cording a billion dollars’ worth of sales every month. SM Entertainment has
added more diverse product options, including flip-flops, travel packs, oil-
absorbing blotting paper, nail stickers, and Blue Marble board games.
Despite their relatively high price (e.g., EXO earphones cost more than $1,200
and an EXO rabbit toy sells for $560), fans’ desire to wear and use items as-
associated with their favorite stars all day long keeps them buying, however
expensive the goods. One particular feature at the SM pop-up store is a “lucky
bag” containing a variety of anonymous wrapped-up goods. Although no one
knew what products were inside, more than one hundred lucky bags were
sold on the day the shop opened. The company also carried out one-off mar-
keting exercises; for example, rather than offering tickets for the EXO con-
cert in 2015 at conventional online booking sites, issuing tickets to those who
spent over a particular amount on goods at the SM Town pop-up store, with
the amount spent determining where the seat was as well. Since 2013, 1,500 to
2,500 people have visited the pop-up store daily, and around 50 percent of
these visitors have been Chinese and Japanese tourists. K-pop retail outlets
have become a must-go destination for international K-pop fans. To cater to
their growing numbers, SM Entertainment has opened further pop-up stores
at Incheon International Airport and Dongdaemum Design Plaza. YG
Entertainment has also launched an off-line pop-up at a Lotte Department
Store and Cube Entertainment is now operating the ground floor of its agency building as a souvenir shop.

Amazed by the profitability of K-pop spin-off products, SME has also marketized the act of “performing K-pop” by opening a karaoke place named EverySing. In addition to providing spaces to sing and dance to SM artists’ songs, EverySing also features a comprehensive gift shop selling the SM-branded merchandise. Visitors can also try on costumes worn by SM idols in music videos and take photos in sticker photo booths. The agency had a media promotion day when lots of SM artists were employed to promote the place: Yoona from Girls’ Generation exclaimed, “We wish you could see how we play there, relaxed and goofing off between various broadcast schedules.” The quotation from the interview lures devoted fans to the karaoke place by suggesting that they might encounter SM idols there, or at least be able to take part in the same leisure activities as they do.

Combining the concepts of buying, performing, and experiencing K-pop, SME recently opened an entertainment complex, filled with a range of content based on SM stars. The SM TOWN Atrium is a multicultural complex where fans and tourists are able to undergo the ultimate SM experience. It has six floors: The first floor is a welcome zone that leads to the second floor, where SUM, a merchandise shop, offers visitors souvenirs and fashion items featuring SM artists. Given both the shop’s name (SUM) and the high price of its products, fans joke that they need to bring a huge sum of money to buy anything there. Obviously targeting foreign tourists, SUM also offers gift products designed to reflect traditional Korean culture. The third floor is devoted to a studio where visitors are able to record their own music videos with the help of SM employees. The recording booths and photo studios replicate those that SM artists actually use. The studio is available on a reservation basis only, and there are always long waiting lists. Adorned with stills and albums autographed by SM artists, the fourth floor is the LIVErary Café, which offers tea, coffee, desserts, and music. Items on sale include sparkling water with a photo of Taeyeon (or another SM artist) on the wrapper, ice creams themed for every group, and cupcakes with hat-shaped icing and lettering on the hat that spells out the names of SM groups such as EXO, Girls’ Generation, SHINee, and Super Junior. The fifth and sixth floors are a theater showing hologram performances and musicals. Combining cultural content with cutting-edge technology, the hologram performances project three-dimensional images of singers onto the stage so that spectators feel they
are watching an actual concert. In sum, no idols are actually present in person at SM Artium, but their images are inscribed everywhere on cups, cupcakes, and so forth, or appear in virtual shows.

Following SM TOWN Artium’s lead, multicultural spaces exploiting K-pop content are now spreading quickly. YG Entertainment has opened Klive in the Dongdaemun area. It too consists of a hologram concert hall, photo zone, exhibition hall, gift shop, and café. Klive also has digital attractions in which audience members can participate: the augmented reality (AR) elevator makes riders feel as though they are standing next to K-pop stars; a “secret window” allows visitors to watch not-yet-released videos through special 3D glasses; at the six-meter-tall Giant Tower, people can view photo albums of their favorite stars; in the Start Photo Box, people can pose for pictures with 3D images of YG artists and print the images. SM Entertainment has launched similar entertainment complexes in Osaka, Japan, and has been promoting one in China; YG Entertainment has also announced plans to open more in Myeong-dong, Jeju, Japan, and China. Integrating technology and cultural content, these hologram performance halls and multicultural spaces invite K-pop fans from across the globe into a world of fantasy. Fantasy images of K-pop stars appear in front of their eyes as if their desire to encounter their idols can be satisfied in reality.

How large, then, is the number of fascinated fans willing to spend $18 on an EXO ice cream and $1,200 on EXO earphones? Although the ever-growing idol-focused retail shops demonstrate their profitability, I personally doubted the feasibility of such fantasy-driven places and products. My hands-on visit to the place in June 2016, however, broke down my preconceptions. The place was packed with fans and visitors, and I barely managed to make my way among the crowds, who do spend money in the multicultural space. Despite the expensive prices for what are intrinsically souvenirs, international fans describe the merchandise as “treasures.” The music video–shooting experience is run exclusively on a reservation basis and costs $300 per person, but it was fully booked up. I particularly wondered why fans spend money on desserts that cost around $15 to $20, yet provide only brief satisfaction, as opposed to the kind of celebrity merchandise through which fans collect and accumulate memories. One fan eating an EXO ice cream priced at $18 remarked: “Fans have eighteen dollars in their hearts. They do and I do.” EXO cupcakes, $8 each, were sold out. “It is a place where fans can gather together to enjoy macaroons and other desserts, with
each flavor corresponding to a specific SM group. It is fun to indulge that fangirl every once in a while with a few extra hundred calories dedicated to the group you love.” The data suggest fans’ affective consumption of idol images and idol spin-off products. Idols have the affective power to captivate their fans to the extent that they consume intangible images inscribed in multiple products that are translated into tangible material profits.

The profit-generation schemes demonstrate how cultivated idol images sell other products. The visually highlighted idol images are a metacommodity to sell other products, including music, celebrity merchandise, and K-pop places as pseudoavatars of K-pop idols. Once images are cultivated, they can be endlessly reproduced in products, virtual shows, and experimental tours. The bigger argument of this book is that Korean municipalities also buy such strategically produced idol images in their place-promotion efforts to attract idol fans as tourists. As the next two chapters will show, the fan-tourists consume the idol image–attached places in the same affective ways as they spend money on the idol-featured cupcakes. For fan-tourists, affective consumption is not about money but about invaluable experiences. For place marketers, affective consumption is all about material profits and another route to raise publicity at the same time.

Yet there is a critical problem with the seemingly eternal idol images: youth does not last forever. The commercial potential of K-pop idols is built on their youth. Not just teenagers but those who miss their younger days admire the young idols’ beautiful bodies. The bright energy emanated from the idols’ youth is the source of their ability to forge intimate relations with fans. Traditionally, within the Confucian hierarchy, youth was not a privileged value in Korea. In rice-farming culture, youth represented labor resources. This convention continued during the Japanese colonial period, during which young Koreans were forcibly mobilized as military and sexual labor. Likewise, during the economic development process, youth meant cheap and easily replicable labor power at best; individual self-sacrifice in the form of submission to labor exploitation was taken for granted for the sake of national development. One of the few groups of young people to be celebrated was the college students who demonstrated against the military dictatorship and were praised as warriors advancing democracy during the 1980s. Since the Asian financial crisis in the late 1990s, the younger generation has lacked the abundant job opportunities that the previous generation enjoyed during the era of economic growth. Rather, young people are forced
to constantly develop themselves in order to be sold as valuable human capital in the current neoliberal economy. The globalization of K-pop and nationalist praise of the phenomenon have made young women and men in their late teens and early twenties welcome and wanted in popular imagination, albeit in regulated and commodified ways, for the first time in the country’s history.

Because the aging of idols is unavoidable, the crafting and commodification of idol images that basically utilize their youth is limited. While the restricted commercial availability of idols causes the intensified and accelerated commodification to extract maximum profits during the limited time, it has also opened up active collaboration between drama and K-pop producers. As mentioned in chapter 1, Korean drama producers increasingly hire well-established idols as a means to further exports. Appearing in television dramas provides idols not only greater chances to sign endorsement deals, as occurred in the cases of Suzy and Haeri, but more important, offers them stable transitions from singers to actors. Because acting is not necessarily premised on youth, K-pop idols strive to be an actor as their final destination in the entertainment industry. The K-pop music production houses have also expanded their business into the production of television dramas and films, employing their own idols as actors. JYP Entertainment coproduced the drama Dream High with KeyEast Entertainment. SM Entertainment produced several television dramas, such as Heading to the Ground (Maenttange Heding 2009), Paradise Ranch, and Prime Minister and I (Chongriwa Na 2013), although none of them turned out be successful.

The Formation of International Fandom

K-pop producers’ recent profit-diversification schemes are designed to meet demand from global K-pop fans. The formation of international fandom has opened substantial new markets for the Korean idol industry, which had fully saturated the small domestic market. The globalization of K-pop, however, did not come about entirely accidentally; planning and preparation for overseas expansion, mainly on the part of the major agencies, had been going on for over a decade. SM Entertainment has been at the forefront of this endeavor; its distinctive departure from its own Japanese models of idol production lies in exports. The member composition of each idol group reflects
these outward-looking intentions: even the first-generation idol groups in the late 1990s had at least one member who was fluent in English, such as Tony in H.O.T or Eugene in S.E.S. Lee Soo-man, a founder of SME, talked about the three steps in SM’s globalization process: exporting cultural products, international collaborations, and globalization. Lee stated: “The first level of Hallyu is the exportation of cultural products, which is exemplified by BoA and TVXQ’s advancement into Japan. The collaboration between KangTa and Taiwanese singer Vanness Wu is an example of the second level.”

Exports are conducted through indigenization, or localization, a process in which idols brush up on the language of the local market in which they will be sold. In the first case of localization, BoA set about launching herself in the Japanese market by strategically creating a nationless image: she perfected her Japanese and did not mention her nationality. Coproduction with a Japanese entertainment firm, AVEX, also helped in branding BoA as a hybrid commodity. Building on BoA’s success, more SME artists, including TVXQ, Girls’ Generation, SHINee, and Super Junior, were able to break into the Japanese market.

The final step in localization is completed through the direct training of local talent. Agencies scout young talents from various national backgrounds, educate them in Korea, and launch a group for the local markets by combining them with Korean members. EXO-K and EXO-M were twin groups that performed the same songs in Korean and Mandarin. Although it finally broke up after Chinese members took SME to court to be removed from the group, EXO-M originally consisted of two Koreans and four Chinese who were trained in Korea. The members of SME’s f(x) include one Chinese and one Taiwanese American, and JYPE’s TWICE is made up of three Japanese and one Taiwanese. Chung Wook, a chairperson of JYPE, has also suggested similar strategies for globalization: “The final goal is to export our system and product content using the local talents in local language. We try to establish a platform in which the local capital can cooperate with our system.”

Entertainment agencies’ export and indigenization strategies have nurtured a sizable K-pop fandom in the East and Southeast Asian market. Besides producers’ efforts, however, a variety of factors have contributed to the expansion of international K-pop fandom beyond East Asia, including to North America, South America, and Europe. Most credit should go to international K-pop fans themselves, that is, those who are not Korean nationals but identify themselves as fans of an individual K-pop group or
solo artist. Domestic idol fans are often recognized through official fan clubs sponsored by their idol’s music label. These fan clubs have official names, such as SONE for Girls’ Generation and VIP for Big Bang. Their members receive special benefits such as priority concert tickets and invitations to fan meetings. Because membership is granted on the basis of an official Korean resident registration number, however, international fans cannot join. Nevertheless, overseas fans can and do organize themselves informally into fan communities through social networking platforms and fan-managed websites, and actively participate in fan culture. Devoted fans have set up numerous English-language Facebook pages, Twitter accounts, YouTube channels, Tumblr accounts, blogs, and online forums solely dedicated to K-pop, K-pop groups, and individual idols. Well-known North American–based websites include www.allkpop.com, www.khype.com, www.dkpopnews.net, and www.soompi.com. A site called www.popgasa.com provides K-pop lyrics translated into English. In Southeast Asia, K-pop Kingdom (www.K-popkingdom.com) is one of the websites for those who are interested in Korean music. ViKi (www.viki.com)—a name coined by combing “video” or “visual” and “wiki”—is another site on which fans can upload, watch, and download K-pop movie clips. These sites provide up-to-date information about K-pop, English translations of Korean entertainment news, and concert information. K-pop fan sites are mostly operated in a system in which small numbers of pioneer fans carry out a free service—providing information about K-pop—for a larger community, attracting more and more participants until the size of the community becomes large enough for members and visitors to become engaged in collective discussions about K-pop news and gossip. Playing a critical role in spreading K-pop worldwide, global fans have “reproduced” it. Their role is not limited to being consumers but has now extended such that they are “marketers, mediators, translators, and localizers of the globalizing culture” (Otmazgin and Lyan 2013, 70), serving as both cultural practitioners and market catalysts.

While international fans are the main agents in the global dissemination of K-pop, social media function as the platform on which visual and discursive consumption of K-pop is carried out. Defined as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content” (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010, 61), social media have facilitated the distribution of K-pop content in transformative and powerful ways. What is
notable is that the functions of social media have engendered the particular ways K-pop is consumed. The discussion that follows examines fans’ activities on YouTube and Tumblr, the two most critical platforms in the penetration of K-pop, and will demonstrate that the very functionality of those social media sites has configured the visual, discursive, and affective consumption of K-pop among domestic and international fans.

By providing free access to the audio and video forms of K-pop content and serving as a base for the social distribution of fan culture, YouTube has played the key role in K-pop’s international success. While music labels in other countries tend to remove video content from YouTube (except Vevo) because of copyright issues, Korean agencies have actually utilized the free platform as a promotional tool to reach a worldwide audience, particularly outside of Asia. The year 2008 ushered in a new period in K-pop history on YouTube. In 2008, JYPE and YGE joined YouTube and started to upload idol music videos; MNET became the first broadcaster to start posting live performances on the platform; and Eat Your Kimchi uploaded their first “How to Dance K-Pop Style” video, setting the stage for the many K-pop vloggers who followed. SME joined YouTube in 2009 and KBS became the first terrestrial station to publicly display K-pop performance clips on YouTube in 2010. The momentum has even accelerated since 2012 when Psy’s “Gangnam Style” hit one billion views.

The video-based platform has turned out to be an ideal fit for the visual focus of K-pop. The reasons people do not just listen to K-pop but watch it lie in its music video–based promotion. Because it presents each song’s general concept, stage costumes, and sophisticated dance routines, music video is a main format for launching artists and advertising new songs. Korean entertainment agencies release idol groups’ music videos, performance clips, and other media materials on YouTube with free access. Because the primary access channel to K-pop is graphically oriented, the consumption of K-pop among international fans is also visual. But YouTube allows its users to comment on each video, so reception can also be verbalized. Fans really discuss K-pop idols and their performances, and some fans conduct textual analysis of the performances frame by frame. International fans particularly appreciate K-pop’s choreography, which flawlessly coordinates catchy tunes with synchronized dance routines acted out by multiple members of a group. As one blogger has remarked: “Their emotion was stunning and their performance was chilling. As for dancing, much K-pop choreography is
jaw dropping. Sometimes the dance moves they perform might not even be
difficult, but what is amazing about them is how in sync they are with the rest
of the group. They can convey the message of their songs through their dance
and their facial expressions when they sing." The series of comments form a
dialogue among fans, producing collaborative discussion of K-pop content.
The collective and discursive consumption of K-pop generates additional
pleasures—particularly the pleasure of sharing the same interests with fellow
fans—in addition to enjoyment of the original content. YouTube, therefore,
enables sequences of visual and discursive consumption of K-pop.

The visual consumption of K-pop instigates visually oriented fan activities such as producing response videos, dance covers, and parody videos. Video tagging and annotation tools of YouTube also help global K-pop fans upload, share, and tag videos for each other, not only consuming the original content but also spreading it and enhancing fan communication (Chaney 2014). Fans also create and post “moments” videos in which multiple photos of particular idols (who are not necessarily in the same group) are organized with background music, creating the same kind of delicate ambiance as if they were a real couple. YouTube’s “related videos” suggestions, powered by the Google search engine, cause fan-generated movie clips to appear together with original K-pop content, so that users can see a list of videos associated with particular groups. The usual pattern for most international fans is to become K-pop–addicted only after stumbling on a K-pop video online, which catches their attention sufficiently to encourage them to find out more about the idols or music scenes involved. The “related videos” function also lists the entertainment and reality shows in which idols appear, allowing fans who search for them to encounter and study diachronic information about K-pop groups. As this quotation from an interview suggests, those who simply fall for an idol can find themselves being thrown into the sea of K-pop: “K-pop groups have their own histories. When I accidently got into Super Junior in 2013, I searched more about the group online that went back to their debut year, 2005. When I realized that there are abundant music videos, shows, and concert scenes that have accumulated over the years, I felt like I found an inexhaustible well of fun.” In this way, the nature of the content and the functionality of the distribution medium work together synergistically.

Management agencies use YouTube as a main channel to both listen to
global fans’ voices and utilize them as free, but loyal labor (Jin 2015). YG Ent-
tertainment recruited fans to visit the Big Bang page (www.youtube.com
K-pop producers draw on fans’ willing and excited participation in raising publicity and generating revenues. These practices bring about a convergence between cultural producers, consumers, and distributors, that is, a convergence between the ways producers create new revenue opportunities and fans negotiate their right to participate through new media tools (Jenkins 2006).

Known as the hub of K-pop, Tumblr is an essential social networking platform that sustains thousands of international K-pop fan communities. Originally created as a blogging site, Tumblr is now a microblogging site that allows users to post multimedia content including images, links, quotes, audios, videos, and GIFs. Being very visually focused, Tumblr forms a synergetic fit with the visual consumption of K-pop not only by increasing the number of views of K-pop music videos and performance shows but also by driving the transregional movement of idol images. Tumblr-users post the digital versions of idol images in physical print: for example, those published in magazines and brochures exclusively produced in particular countries. Fan-generated images such as “airport photos” are transferred to Tumblr sites; fan communities on Tumblr also post all social media updates about K-pop idols, including those from East Asia–based platforms, such as China’s Weibo and Korea’s Me2day. The visually specialized operation of Tumblr, therefore, drives the rapid and distant distribution of K-pop stars’ images across the globe. At the same time, globally connected through Tumblr, K-pop fans build a strong affinity with one another cross-regionally by sharing and exchanging idol images. Tumblr’s functionality also contributes to the quick reproduction of K-pop idol images. Much of Tumblr’s content can be accessed from Dashboard, where posts from the Tumblr blogs one follows appear. Content can be reblogged with a single click on a button on the dashboard without even having to leave Dashboard (i.e., without visiting the original blog site). This extremely user-friendly and interactive platform allows speedy dissemination of content, facilitating the ability of certain content to quickly go viral (DeSouza 2013). Users can, therefore, produce high volumes of posts through regular reproduction of the original content.
Building on its graphic-based feature, Tumblr’s tagging function facilitates the affective consumption of K-pop. All posts can be tagged with subject or content identifiers. Because users can follow tags and see real-time updates from any Tumblr sites that post about the tags, the tagging function makes it easy for K-pop fans to look through all the posts related to their interests. K-pop devotees are extremely fond of using the tagging function to practice OTP (original true pairing), which indicates their favorite pairings among K-pop idols. Fans pair up idols regardless of gender and group, mostly based on their interactions with each other, and post crossover moments featuring the imagined couples (similar to the “moments” videos on YouTube). OTP can be understood as a visualized form of fan fiction. Posting the photos showing the fan-generated couple together, fans develop a fictional romantic relationship between them. Fans also talk about the endless possibilities of OTPs, fascinated by the tensions and chemistry between the paired-up stars. This imaginary relationship is what keeps those who support that particular OTP hard at work, passionate, and inspired. OTP practices exemplify the process by which entertainment-driven fans’ visual and discursive consumption of K-pop idols leads to the affective reproduction of them. Fans are attached to K-pop idols in diverse and creative ways, and the very functionality of social media keeps such enjoyable practices possible and sustained.

I have discussed the formation and growth of the international K-pop fandom that has been intertwined with the development of social media. International fans are gaining more weight recently not only because they have now begun to feed the K-pop industry itself but also because they are potential tourists to Korea, that is, the place consumers that Korean municipalities are waiting for. The next two chapters will show the tactics of Korean municipalities to entice global K-pop fans and utilize their affective attachment in promoting the K-pop–featured places.

The Visual Reproduction of K-Pop Idols

The previous sections have demonstrated how the production of K-pop idols focuses on cultivating idealized images and how profit-generation schemes exploit such images. Mainly focusing on international fans, I have shown that consumption practices also engage primarily with the visual aspects of
K-pop music and idols. Here, let me extend the scope to include domestic K-pop fandom and analyze how their consumption practices “reproduce” K-pop idol images. I use the terms *reproduce* and *reproduction* because fans generate idol images on their own, in a way that surpasses the ability of producers to control them. The reproduction of K-pop therefore extends the visual and affective consumption of idols; because of their appreciation of idols’ visual aspects, fans want to generate the best-quality idol images through their own admiring gaze.

Korean fans aggressively promote songs by buying or streaming music, religiously attending live music shows and event performances, and sending gifts to stars. Fan activities are not limited to cultural consumption. Social engagement in the name of K-pop idols is an already established phenomenon. Fans conduct philanthropic activities such as donating rice, building schools and libraries in developing countries, or planting forests in the name of the idols they admire. The most essential part of fan activity, however, is the visual consumption of idols; fans collect idol photos, repeat-watch idols’ performances and create GIF or SWF images from video clips, or produce photo books and DVDs of the beloved idols by themselves. K-pop fans literally celebrate the visual appearance of idols so that “fucking pretty” and “fucking handsome” are the most frequently used words in the appreciation of idol photos and performances. Music is a supporting element to the visual qualities of idols on the consumption side as well. Of course, fans talk extensively about idols’ voices and their strong and weak points vocally; they also admire their idols’ mesmerizing dance performances. Nevertheless, the visual appreciation of idols is the dominant element in K-pop consumption.

Visual consumption leads to the visual reproduction of idol images and *fansite photographers* are one of the agencies for this. Fansite photographers take photos of a particular idol or an entire group of performers in public spaces such as in airports or at concerts, or during filming. They are often called “cannon goddesses” (*daepo yeosin*) because they use professional-grade, cannon-size cameras and lenses. With superfunctional DSLR (digital single-lens reflex) cameras and superzoom telephoto lenses, the cannon goddesses take close-up photos of idols that make them look as if they were standing right in front of the viewers. These already high-quality photos undergo retouching to further enhance their quality. By taking pictures of the LCD screens of these cameras, camera fans also post low-quality “previews” of idol photos on online fansites (mostly on Twitter) to entice other fans to buy the
originals. Personalized logos to identify the copyright holder are added to one corner of the photos. The original copies are produced as photo-books or DVDs that will be sold, like idol merchandise, to other fans.

Idol photos taken by cannon goddesses are fundamentally different from those taken by journalists or commercial photographers. As the currency of fandom is love and affection, fan-produced photos embody their affective gaze. Taking account of idols’ features and figures, fans capture the best angles and shots—the stars’ most shining moments. Shinee World (or Shawaol), the fan club of SHINee, is famous for the fantastic quality of the photos produced by fans.49 A typical comment on a photo taken by Shinee World reads: “You can only capture the true beauty of something if you’re truly in love with the subject. I think this is where being a fan shines.”50 Fans’ production and distribution of idol photos represents the visual and affective reproduction of K-pop. Both fan producers (photographer fans) and fan consumers (fandom in general) of idol photos enjoy the pleasures of the affective rather than commercial reproduction of idols. Despite the possibility of stars’ portrait rights being violated, entertainment agencies usually tolerate fan-generated photos because of their favorable function: to expand and consolidate fandom. Exquisitely visualizing idols’ lives, fan-generated photos serve to sustain fandom both domestically and internationally, and attract more fans. For international fans, the fansite photographs are channels through which they can access the everyday lives of Korean idols. Needless to say, the photos taken by cannon goddesses are circulated on Tumblr, Twitter, YouTube, and other online venues for international fans.

Fan-generated idol images go beyond private and virtual circulation and become part of everyday media and urban landscapes in the form of idol advertisements, a part of celebrity advertisement that is planned, sponsored, and practiced by fan clubs to celebrate stars’ birthdays, promote new albums and dramas, or publicize the anniversary of a group’s debut. Advertising channels are varied and include newspapers, magazines, subway ad panels, and outdoor billboards. Because of their high visibility, appeal to the anonymous public, and relatively inexpensive cost, outdoor advertisements on subway trains, subway screen doors, buses, and billboards (see figure 3.1) are preferred by idol fans. For bus ads, an entire bus is wrapped in idol images. The result (called a bus wrap) has an enormous publicity effect due to buses’ extreme mobility and ability to travel through the broader geographies of Seoul. On the electronic signage of building billboards, a fan-produced movie
Figure 3.1. Idol advertisement at subway platform. Photo by author.
featuring a particular idol is run in areas with a high volume of pedestrian traffic such as Myeong-dong, Gangnam, and Yeouido, capturing the public’s gaze.

As K-pop fandom has grown, transcending gender, age group, and nationality, idol fan clubs have become a new source of demand in the Korean advertising market. Surprisingly, international fans (mostly Chinese, but expanding to include other nationalities) increasingly advertise K-pop idols in Korea. JungSooJungBar, a Chinese fan club for Krystal in f(x), produced dynamic advertisements in Korea to celebrate her twenty-third birthday in 2015. According to reports, more than 80 megasized digital screens at the Gangnam, Hongdae, and Sinchon subway stations showed images of Krystal 257 times a day during one month. Given that the ads cost many thousand of dollars for a single day, we can imagine the amount of money fans used for the advertisement that continued for a month.\(^5\) If idol merchandise satisfies fans’ personal desires to be with the idols they admire, advertising an idol on a voluntary basis publicly asserts their affection and loyalty.

Domestic and international fans’ love and support for K-pop idols are diversifying Korean urban landscapes. The influence exerted by international K-pop fandom, however, is not limited to cultural consumption and the transformation of streetscapes. As international fans wish to visit Korea and experience idol-associated products and places in the capital of K-pop, they have the potential to change urban economies. K-pop tourism is a growing phenomenon, and in anticipation of it or in response to it, Korean municipalities have launched place marketing featuring K-pop sites, as I will show in the next two chapters.

This chapter has established that the process of production, consumption, reproduction, and profit generation involving K-pop idols is entirely visually oriented. Fans’ appreciation of the visual quality of idols is directly related to their affective consumption of idol-associated products and places. Idols manifest the neoliberal enforcement of the refined body and the commodification of youth. Behind the celebration of K-pop idols lies the incessant bodily development and affective labor that commercialize their youth. As most K-pop idols’ popularity is built on their youth, the industry has contrived to maximize the profits from the time-limited marketability of idols by proliferating the business arenas that capitalize on their visual images. One of the business strategies that has been devised for this purpose is the creation of
K-pop places by creating associations between abstract pop music and physical sites. The spatialization of K-pop music and idols, along with the industry’s globalization, has opened a window that enables Korean cities to utilize idol images to attract global fan-tourists. The next two chapters will show that the branding of Korean cities via K-pop idols likewise involves the image-oriented and affective nature of K-pop music.