Pop City
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This chapter examines a case of place marketing employing the aura of K-pop idols. K-Star Road in Gangnam is a government-initiated urban district branding project featuring K-pop stars. As the biggest commercial and financial district in Seoul, Gangnam is a bastion of fortified wealth, power, and status. This case, therefore, is at the opposite extreme from the regional cities’ struggles to take advantage of inexpensive drama sponsorship to persuade the public to take notice of their areas. Instead, K-Star Road capitalizes on an already established cultural and commercial infrastructure to brand the area as a K-pop–filled place. The branding project is built around image- and lifestyle-based place-marketing spectacles, embodying the same mechanism used to produce and sell K-pop idols. The actual cultural “experience” of K-Star Road, however, is achieved only through the presence of audience-tourists and their emotional engagement with the strip. The fan-tourists perform and develop the place meanings that the place marketers give to it, but sometimes challenge, alter, and contest them, too. This chapter will offer detailed empirical data about the production and consumption
processes at work in K-Star Road. It begins with the history of Gangnam development to reveal the social, economic, and cultural meanings of the area. The next sections demonstrate that the branding of K-Star Road is a selective process designed to create particular urban images that stand in contrast to the existing realities in an effort to turn Gangnam into a global city. I argue that the K-Star Road project, on the one hand, reduces the realities of the place to fantasized images that are entirely entertainment oriented and, on the other, exploits the presence of fans and the emotional investment that they make in the area.

The “Creation” of Gangnam

The Chinese characters that make up the word Gangnam mean south of a river. The name, therefore, literally refers to the area south of the Han River in Seoul. More generally in contemporary South Korea, however, the term Gangnam is used to indicate three wealthy and privileged districts located on the south bank of the Han: Seocho, Gangnam, and Songpa. And above and beyond its merely administrative and geographic meanings, the term is deeply imbued with symbolic significance: it stands for wealth, power, prestige, and a fever for education. Gangnam is the center of business, finance, and commerce in South Korea, and the wealthiest Koreans live there.¹ The most competitive school districts, the most expensive imported car dealerships, and the outlets for the most prestigious high-end designers’ fashion brands are all concentrated in Gangnam. Until the 1960s, however, Gangnam remained an agricultural area. It was incorporated into the city of Seoul only in 1963. But within less than three decades, it had transformed into the most affluent area in South Korea, encapsulating all of the country’s vested interests. Gangnam’s rapid and radical development epitomizes South Korea’s developmental dictatorship, distorted capitalist growth, and compressed modernization.

As South Korea’s industrialization and urbanization proceeded, the concentration of population in the capital intensified. The population of Seoul increased from 1.57 million in 1955 to 2.45 million in 1960, growing by some 180,000 per year and by 900,000 in five years (Kang 2015). This explosive population growth resulted in extreme urban density in Gangbuk (north of the Han River), requiring solutions to be found in various fields, including
transportation, housing, job creation, sanitation, and public finance. Gangnam (south of the Han River) emerged as a site to which population and urban functions could be distributed from northern Seoul. The development of Gangnam, however, transcended the merely urban and functional and was involved in more complex sociopolitical contexts.

In 1966, the Park Chung Hee regime\(^2\) initiated the construction of the Hangang Bridge No. 3 (currently known as the Hannam Bridge). It constituted a critical section of the Gyeongbu Expressway connecting Seoul and Busan (the second largest city in Korea), whose construction began in 1968. Although both projects eventually contributed to the sudden urban development in the Gangnam area, neither was initially intended to promote urban development. The Hangang Bridge No. 3 was designed to alleviate the difficulties experienced by the military in crossing the river during the Korean War. The Seoul–Busan Expressway formed part of larger infrastructural plans to stimulate economic development. When funds for the highway construction project ran out, the Park regime promoted the Yeongdong Land Readjustment Project. It was this project that effectively urbanized the Gangnam area.

A land readjustment program (tojiguhoekjeongri) is a procedure to increase the overall value of a project site by combining or subdividing lots within it along rational lines and establishing public infrastructure such as roads, schools, and parks. This method enables the public authorities to secure land for public facilities without sufficient financing, because landowners provide parts of their land in return for the anticipated increase in its value. The Park regime used the land readjustment program to obtain land free of charge for the construction of the Seoul–Busan Expressway, particularly for the 7.6 km section from the end of the Hangang Bridge No. 3 to Yangjae that contains the current Gangnam area. The first Yeongdong Readjustment Project site (yeongdong 1 jigu) covered 15.62 million square meters and the second (yeongdong 2 jigu), 12.07 million square meters (Kim 2015). In total, a massive 27,690,000 square meters of land was made available for potential urban development, caused mainly by the highway construction.

Gangnam’s evolution did not remain at the level of a mere physical development project, however: land speculation began to take place for the first time in South Korea. Even under Japanese colonial rule, the propertied class had focused on profiting from the exploitation of tenant farmers rather
than seeking to make money through land transactions. Likewise, during the postliberation, post–Korean War era until the 1960s, the use value of land took precedence over its exchange value. Gangnam development, however, effectively changed the ways land was appraised and used. Hwang Sok-yong's novel (2010) *Gangnammon* (Dream of Gangnam) depicts the surprised reaction of ordinary people to the process by which Gangnam development transformed land into an exchangeable and lucrative commodity.

The bridge [the Hangang Bridge No. 3] would be finished before the opening of the Seoul–Busan Expressway. There is land where the road goes, and land makes money. That is the first principle of real estate investment. It was the period when ordinary people, including Shim Nam-soo, knew that one could earn money only through selling goods or labor. Land was merely an immobile asset that could be used for constructing a house or producing agricultural products. That was the way it was in rural areas; in Seoul, only downtown commercial buildings or fine houses in rich residential districts were worth anything. So, what did it mean that land made money? (Hwang 2010, 207)

The novel describes in vivid detail how news of the new bridge tripled the land price from 300 won (approximately 30¢) to 1,000 won ($1) within less than a month. Speculators bought land aiming to resell it quickly at a large profit. As more people participated in the speculation, the speed and frequency of the land transactions accelerated. According to the novel, in Gangnam in the mid- to late 1960s one round of land transactions raised the land value by 300 percent overnight and multiple rounds increased the value more than tenfold within a mere three months. Speed ruled the land speculation market: “One year elsewhere is equivalent to ten years here, where the speed of time is the world’s fastest” (ibid., 240). Between 1963 and 1977, the value of land in Hak-dong (an area in the Gangnam-gu administrative district) soared to 1,333 times its original level, in Apkujeong-dong to 875 times, in Shinsa-dong to 1,000 times, while in Shindang-dong and Huam-dong in Gangbuk, it increased to only 25 times what it was before (Shon 2003, 158). The skyrocketing land price in Gangnam engendered a real estate middle class that made huge fortunes merely by buying up land early and reselling it at an extraordinary profit. As *Dream of Gangnam* points out, “The weird thing is that nobody lost during the period” (Hwang 2010, 221). By boosting
the future value of adjacent land, construction of the expressway played a
critical role in creating surplus value. That is, infrastructure construction
pushed up the expected return on urban development, thereby continuously
bringing speculative capital into the real estate market.

During the initial stage of any efforts in large-scale urban development,
the usual practice of public authorities is to introduce measures to prevent
unearned income from land speculation. The Park regime, however, was the
promoter rather than suppressor of land speculation during the 1960s and
1970s. In fact, the primary beneficiary of land speculation associated with
Gangnam development was the Park regime itself. For the second Yeong-
dong Land Readjustment Project, the Park regime and the city of Seoul an-
nounced an ambitious plan to relocate the Ministry of Commerce and its
affiliated organizations into Gangnam, and to build residential complexes to
house government officials. The actual aim of the plan, however, was to boost
real estate prices in Gangnam as a quick way of raising political funds. It is
clear from a variety of sources that the then-chief of the Urban Planning
Board in Seoul City raised $2 million in illegal political funds for the Park
regime by purchasing 821,051.24 m$^2$ of land in Gangnam at an average price of
5,100 won (around $5) per square meter between February and August 1970,
and selling them again at an average price of 16,000 won (around $16) before
May 1971 (Hwang 2010; Jun 2012). The data show that the central state
exercised the art of exploiting speed and quantity in its own land speculation.
The Park Chung Hee regime very much led the way in stimulating capital
accumulation through the new exchange value of urban space.

The regime also promoted the construction of mega apartment complexes
on the newly developed land. Each complex consisted of several multistory,
high-rise residential structures and therefore required the assembly of a large
tract of land for its construction. The land was still divided into numerous
relatively small lots owned by private individuals, however. Using its abso-
lute monopoly over the urban project, the city government introduced the
Apartment District System (apateujigu), according to which only the con-
struction of large-scale apartment complexes would be allowed on certain
designated sites. Under this system, individual landowners’ inability to carry
out separate construction activities left them with no option but to sell their
land to construction firms. Limiting individual landowners’ land use and
land disposal rights, therefore, the Apartment District System favored con-
bruction companies to an extraordinary degree and in various ways. Build-
ers enjoyed the benefits of easy acquisition of land, administrative and tax incentives from the state, and the hot-selling of the newly constructed apartment condos. Gangnam development, therefore, virtually nurtured the construction giants through a variety of preferential treatments and some of them later grew into chaebol (business conglomerates). Ji Joo-hyong describes the Apartment District System as “exceptional zoning” (Ji 2016, 321), that is, a deliberate policy of limiting individuals’ property rights and exploiting private ownership to create public infrastructure free of cost and to generate a budget for further urban development. Exceptional zoning therefore typifies the sociospatial exclusivity of Gangnam, with its preferential treatment of chaebol and the property-owning elite.

To facilitate population distribution into Gangnam, the Park regime carried out various urban strategies: the Supreme Court, Prosecutor’s Office, and Express Bus Terminal (for cross-regional buses connecting Seoul with the rest of the country) were relocated as a magnet to draw people into Gangnam; the route of the Green subway line was also altered so that it followed a circular route connecting Gangbuk and Gangnam. The most significant of these moves was the forced relocation of top-tier high schools to Gangnam: Gyeonggi High School was moved in 1976, Hwimun High School in 1977, Jungshin Girls’ High School in 1978, and Seoul High School in 1979. The relocation of elite schools continued throughout the 1980s, resulting in the establishment of the “Eighth School District.”5 Those who moved to Gangnam at that time were members of the top stratum in Korean society and included high-profile civil servants, lawyers and judicial officials, doctors, and businessmen. To ensure that their class prestige was reproduced in the subsequent generation, the Gangnam elite took an immense interest in their children’s education. Therefore, the Eighth School District and the class strategy complemented one another. The incoming upper-class families resettled in the sizable, brand-new apartment complexes.6 The new residents also included the nouveaux riches who had suddenly earned fortunes from real estate speculation. The extraordinary square footage of the apartment units in Gangnam naturally set a high price bar, making the area inaccessible to the lower middle class. Through its collective consumption of modern housing and top-quality education, the upper middle class developed a spatially based class status. And as its socioeconomic status was inscribed in a particular urban space, Gangnam, it rapidly established a spatially segregated class consciousness.
The development of Gangnam created a symbiotic relationship between the state, the construction conglomerates, and the emerging upper middle class. The Park regime tried to win legitimacy through urban modernization projects and the provision of massive housing units. The construction giants, which virtually owed their existence to Gangnam development, became a good source of political funding for the state. The upper middle class, through its territorialized class identity, effectively solidified its status as a distinct social entity. Thanks to this triangular symbiosis, Gangnam development deepened the speculative use of urban space. Gangnam became synonymous with the new meaning of urban space, whose newly created exchange value was expressed in the soaring price of real estate. Thus, the creation of Gangnam became a developmental “myth” on account of the area’s consistent growth in material and symbolic power.

The never-failing success experienced by real estate speculators during the development of Gangnam was, if anything, accentuated in the aftermath of the financial crisis of the late 1990s. The Korean financial crisis was a debt crisis: South Korean companies suffered from having to repay accumulated, but nonperforming loans (Chang 1998). The crisis led to the intervention by the International Monetary Fund, and as a result, bank interest rates soared (to more than 30 percent), the Korean currency depreciated, and the real estate market collapsed. The neoliberal, flexible economic restructuring in the aftermath of the crisis affected different social groups and classes unevenly. While the working class suffered from layoffs, wage decreases (or unpaid wages), high living costs due to rising prices, and snowballing household debt, the upper class reinvested the abundant cash income it earned from high interest rates in then-plunging real estate stock. After a decade of economic recovery, real estate buyers witnessed an extraordinary escalation in the value of landed assets. The financial crisis therefore made a significant contribution to the further consolidation of Gangnam’s power, reinforcing the myth of “invincible Gangnam.”

The promotion of Gangnam, moreover, was accompanied by the simultaneous suppression of Gangbuk (north of the Han River). While Gangnam was designated a Development Promoted District (gaebal chokjin jigu) where various tax exemptions were allowed, construction activities in Gangbuk were strictly controlled. The city government banned the construction of a new department store, wholesale market, factory, and entertainment facility in Gangbuk in 1972. Districts in downtown Seoul were designated as
Redevelopment Districts (jaegaebal jigu) in 1972–1973, and the construction, reconstruction, and extension of buildings were prohibited there. The transformation of farmland and forest into land for housing was likewise forbidden in 1975. Consequently, the development of Gangnam was never a natural phenomenon; it was based on the state-controlled regulation of other areas. The intentional nurturing of Gangnam, followed by the wresting of economic power from Gangbuk, has meant that the symbolic image of Gangbuk has gradually changed from being a center of politics, commerce, and finance into a place of “backwardness” (Ahn 2010). Popular and media discourses have gradually cemented the polarized spatial identities that associate Gangnam with wealth and advancement and Gangbuk with inferiority.

The suppression of Gangbuk resulted in an extraordinary growth in the number of entertainment venues, including bars, pubs, clubs, and hotels, and other commercial facilities in Gangnam. The mushrooming of spaces dedicated to the entertainment industry caused an increase in the number of beauty salons serving upper-middle-class women during the daytime and women working in the amusement industry in the area during the evening. The agglomeration of beauty service providers, in turn, attracted related businesses such as wedding shops, photo studios, and entertainment agencies, forming the nucleus of the present-day K-pop production area. Many entertainment agencies picked the clustering of beauty shops in the area as their criterion for selecting their current locations. One entertainment agency employee remarked: “Beauty services, including hair shops and beauty clinics, are available in Gangnam. If we try to move the agency building to somewhere near the broadcasting stations, we want to make sure that there are beauty shops in the area first.” Some high-end fashion boutiques moved from Gangbuk to Gangnam and more overseas designers’ brands opened businesses there. In the wake of the concentration of consumption and entertainment spaces in the area, media and popular discourses reinforced Gangnam’s image as stylish, fashionable, and trendy. The urban areas invented by speculative capitalism have turned into a space of superficial consumerism that overtly celebrates consumption and entertainment, forming a mutually reinforcing cycle between the two.

The history of Gangnam development shows how the contemporary hegemony of Gangnam was “invented.” The developmental dictatorship produced new urban space in which speculative capital was able to move freely. The exchange value of urban space far exceeded its use value, bringing sudden
and enormous wealth only to the haves of society. Gangnam’s development engendered a new urban upper middle class that consolidated its wealth and status through the consumption of high-priced urban space, establishing a territorially identified class power. The promotion of Gangnam was likewise concomitant with the suppression of other areas, creating uneven spatial development in Seoul and the country as a whole. Gangnam’s prestige has been bolstered by a superficial consumerism that blindly glorifies conspicuous consumption, creating exclusiveness by erecting insuperable price barriers. In sum, Gangnam’s hegemony has been formed by the interactions among developmental dictatorship, speculative capital movement, spatial polarization, and materialistic, consumerist urban culture. The next section will demonstrate how a local municipality in Gangnam tries to render the place a “global place” by simply overlaying K-pop images on its already established hegemony, distorting and veiling the broader socioeconomic tensions lying behind the place hegemony.

**Gangnam’s Global Promotion Strategies**

Until 2012, Gangnam’s hegemony operated locally, that is within South Korea, but in that year Psy’s song “Gangnam Style” unexpectedly became a global phenomenon and introduced Gangnam to the world. Although Gangnam in “Gangnam Style” is used in its broader meaning as explained at the beginning of the first section of this chapter, Gangnam-gu Office (gangnam gucheong), the local administration governing Gangnam-gu, one of twenty-five official administrative districts into which Seoul is divided, has attempted to take advantage of the congruence of the two names in its place promotion.9 Gangnam-gu tried to transform the unexpected global attention into actual tourist inflow into the area. During the period from November 2012 to October 2015, the Tourism Promotion Department of Gangnam-gu Office issued more than forty self-produced press releases for circulation among the domestic and foreign media.10 The consistent marketing message throughout this period proclaimed Gangnam to be a global tourist destination. Media reports constantly described the area as the “Hallyu tourism city” or a “global tourist city,” reflecting Gangnam-gu’s aspirations to achieve the status of an international tourist hot spot, namely, the home of the Korean Wave.
Global cities are usually defined as nodes of the global economy with a heavy presence of headquarters of transnational companies, high-level professionals, and specialized service firms (Sassen 1991). They are characterized by their integration into the world economy, in which they function as base points or nodes for the global operations of transnational corporations, financial services providers, and production companies (Brenner and Keil 2006). It is necessary to ask, therefore, whether Gangnam-gu as a mere district possesses these characteristics or wields such power. The headquarters of some major firms, financial institutions, and commerce hubs are, indeed, located mostly in Gangnam. The concentration of finance and commerce in this specific geographical area, however, is the outcome of the country’s uneven development and cannot, therefore, be recognized as an asset exclusive to Gangnam. The capital city's broader financial and commercial functions cannot all be directed to and confined inside the district boundary. Gangnam-gu’s global city initiative, consequently, does not correspond to the district’s actual functional position in the global economy. It should rather be understood as an aspiration to be listed in the roster of global cities, joining in the on-going competition among rising cities to attract capital, investment, and people.

As interesting as Gangnam-gu’s pursuit of global city status while remaining a mere district municipality is the method it has adopted to realize its global ambitions. Gangnam's strategy is to attract foreign tourists. The district office officially announced a plan to inaugurate “Gangnam’s era of one million foreign tourists.” This is a strange divergence from other aspiring cities’ conventional tactics, which are based on the speculative construction of place by erecting signature buildings, initiating megaprojects, or holding hallmark events (Harvey 1989a; Kong 2007; Ashworth 2009; Gotham 2011). Although these flagship projects are also designed to attract global tourists as well as capital, they have at least some urban content because they involve building infrastructure or places. Gangnam’s strategy, on the other hand, relies on an increase in tourist numbers pure and simple without consideration of urban qualities, and rests entirely on abstract images from popular culture. Whether or not the mere attraction of vast numbers of foreign travelers could render Gangnam a global place remains questionable; a more notable point is this endeavor’s obsession with the foreign. While the imaginary existence of the foreign gaze was harnessed by the developmental state to mobilize the population to accelerate industrialization in the
developmental era, municipal governments can capitalize on the physical presence of foreign bodies to make their areas look more diverse, cosmopolitan, and global. Foreigners are not only visitors who would consume the urban amenities in Gangnam, but more important, are an essential component to make the area appear to be global. Whereas regional cities utilize the number of foreign tourists visiting their areas in the second-round place promotion (see chapter 2), Gangnam clearly believes that an influx of foreign visitors is what will advance it to global city status. Gangnam-gu Office has displayed giant promotional images at major entry points into Korea from other countries, specifically, Incheon, Kimpo, and Jeju airports and Korea Air City Terminal. Asserting “Traveling Korea starts in Gangnam,” it has tried to build a direct connection between Gangnam and the foreign. The district office also closely works with foreign (particularly Chinese) travel agencies to direct their flows into Gangnam. If global cities are characterized by the multiplicity of flows of people, goods, services, ideas, and images (Kong 2007), the narrowed emphasis on streams of tourists only, dismissing other flows of people such as professionals, servicemen, migrants, and so forth, reveals both hastiness and exclusiveness in Gangnam’s global city making.

What Gangnam can offer tourists from overseas is shopping venues, medical services (focusing on beauty), and Hallyu entertainment. The new Gangnam Tourism Information Center that opened in 2013 advertises the available experiences extensively. Although the center provides general information about tourist spots, transportation, and accommodation in multiple languages, it guides its visitors toward very specific services. The division that exclusively provides information about medical services available in Gangnam takes up the majority of the first floor of the Information Center. The second floor and stairways are dedicated entirely to contemporary Korean popular culture, with exhibits consisting of photos, cardboard cutouts, and handprints of the stars and star goodies. Visitors can take photos of themselves against a replica music video background, wearing outfits worn by K-stars on stage; they can also watch digital shows with Hallyu content presented using cutting-edge technology. The particular guidance offered in the center suggests what overseas visitors should do in Gangnam. Thus, targeting an audience of “foreign tourists” not only draws a line between who is welcome and who is not but narrows down the range of desirable visitors to those who can afford the consumption-oriented experiences.
The delineation of valued visitors through an association with consumption indicates the ways the foreign can brand certain areas as global. A growing body of research has examined the politics of difference in Korea created around the ethnicity and nationality of migrant brides and workers who are mainly from China and Southeast Asia (Freeman 2011; Choo 2016). These studies demonstrate how “other Asians” suffer from severe labor exploitation, physical and social discrimination, and contested citizenship in the production and domestic arenas. When “other Asians” come to the country as tourists, however, they turn into highly valued customers, deserving special attention. The same distinction between how foreigners are treated in the production and consumption arenas applies to the perception of place. Many migrant workers reside in Garibong-dong and Daerim-dong in Seoul and Ansan City. While Garibong-dong and Ansan are known and promoted as “multicultural” areas, few people perceive them as globalized places. Present-day Myeong-dong, on the other hand, where foreign tourists visit in huge numbers (see chapter 5), is considered to be undergoing globalization. Gangnam-gu is trying to redirect them away from Myeong-dong and toward Gangnam. Conceptualizing the globalization of place associated simply with an increase in the number of foreign visitors is problematical enough, but this particular concept is exclusively based on consumerist practices. The global here is something that is essentially related to the profit-generation process.

In the production and dissemination of urban images for international consumption, Gangnam is marketed as a locus of consumption and popular culture. The very notion of itself as a space of conspicuous consumption that Gangnam has exploited to achieve its current dominant position in Korea is now projected outward to global consumers. A materialistic urban culture, operating on speculative capital and superficial consumerism, is overlaid with exciting and entertaining images representing K-pop stars. The hollow space created by developmental dictatorship, speculative capital, and high-class aspirations (in the interests of consolidating their vested rights), is now filled with cosmopolitan images of the global, the stylish, and the entertaining. And the area is seeking foreigners who will consume such images.

So, how to attract the foreign tourists of the desirable kind? Gangnam-gu promoters are trying to capitalize on the global popularity of K-pop. The district office has enlisted Hallyu stars as its public relations ambassadors: Rain and Girls’ Generation in 2012; Super Junior, SHINee, and EXO in
Marketing through ambassadors turns the stars’ global popularity to account in boosting Gangnam as a globally recognized place, linking the desirable qualities of the stars—their stylishness, trendiness, confidence, and popularity—with Gangnam (Epstein and Turnbull 2014). The opening of the Tourism Information Center was accompanied by a hand-printing ceremony involving K-pop idols such as EXO, Super Junior’s Eun-hyuk, and SISTAR Hyo-rin. Gangnam-gu Office also launched K-Star Road (discussed below) in which visitors can extend their K-pop experiences and which has held several annual festivals (e.g., the C-Festival and the Gangnam Festival) to which performances by K-pop idols are central. Yet hiring stars as the face of Gangnam-gu ironically reveals the reality of the district. Despite the spectacular images, Gangnam as a mere district does not possess intrinsically global qualities, so the global characteristics have to be hastily constructed by employing Hallyu stars who have gathered a global fan base. If the global hype surrounding K-pop wanes, the district’s global images will fade away. Image building based on K-pop is, therefore, inherently speculative and abstract, relying solely on the performativity of the cultural industry.

The speculative global ambition of image building is actually a local strategy to cement Gangnam’s hegemony. Declaring itself a “city” despite its district status, Gangnam figures as a separate entity detached from the rest of Seoul and South Korea. This separate enclave is branded as a cosmopolitan and global place to reaffirm its supremacy vis-à-vis other local areas. Thus, the self-awarding of global city status dismantles the conventional dichotomy between global domination and local resistance. Playing the global card is the area’s strategy for distinguishing itself, continuing the practice of “Othering” non-Gangnam areas. Gangnam’s tourism promotion strategies serve to fortify local supremacy by pursuing the global, visualized through the exhibition of the foreign bodies to a local audience.

As in many other cases of local promotion, Gangnam-gu’s place marketing is closely associated with the district governor’s political ambition. All press materials released by the district office prominently display then district governor’s name. Obviously, putting the elected leader’s name on the front is a very unusual practice in place marketing. The district office’s self-produced press reports, therefore, can be interpreted as being in fact targeted at local voters. As discussed in previous chapters, since the introduction of the local election system in the mid-1990s, urban space has functioned as fertile ground for elected local leaders to conduct policy extravaganzas. Even
hegemonic Gangnam, the biggest beneficiary of the country’s uneven development, is no exception. Ironically, however, the policy spectacles targeting local voters actually do not possess any substantial content concerning the local urban conditions. Since global city making is primarily focused on welcoming foreign tourists, the area’s image has to be distortedly reproduced as one of consumption and entertainment. While some capitalist venues (such as hotels, restaurants, and shops) could benefit from such spectacular and superficial images, it remains questionable how such hastily constructed images deal with local residents’ actual living conditions in general, particularly for the long-term. The localness of global city making only reveals its fragile features.

K-Pop Tourism

The growth in numbers of Gangnam’s global tourism promotion is not entirely policy driven. There is genuine tourism demand from the global K-pop fans. From the middle of the first decade of the new century, die-hard K-pop fans from Japan, China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, the Philippines, Malaysia, Thailand, and other Asian countries have traveled to Seoul specifically to attend concerts by top K-pop stars. The numbers have soared and the diversity of international fans has expanded beyond Asia to cover North America, South America, and Europe. Large numbers of fans visit Korea, as individuals or in small groups, to attend live music shows hosted by broadcasting networks or K-pop groups’ own concerts. The Incheon K-Pop Concert in 2012, for example, attracted 66,000 overseas fans from 65 countries, generating an economic impact equivalent of $9 million in income to the area; the Changwon K-Pop Concert in 2012 drew in around 50,000 foreign fans (Korea Tourism Organization 2012).

Korean popular music has become an essential component of South Korean tourism revenue, and the government has promoted Hallyu tourism aggressively to monetize the international impact and influence of the Korean entertainment industry. In 2011, the Korea Tourism Organization (KTO), a state corporation affiliated with the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, paid SM Entertainment approximately $264,000 to stage a concert in France to promote K-pop and travel to Korea. Hallyu stars, including Girls’ Generation (2010–2012), Psy (2013–2014), and Jun Ji-hyun
Chapter 4

(2014–2015), were employed as Honorary Ambassadors for the “Visit Korea” campaign. In 2012, the KTO also launched an Internet campaign, the “Touch Korea Tour,” via the Buzz Korea website (www.ibuzzkorea.com/eng), a website dedicated to Korean tourism marketing. The campaign offered the chance for fifteen lucky fans to win an all-expenses-paid trip to Korea, during which they would meet the goodwill ambassadors (the girl band Miss A, and the boy band 2PM) and embark on a “mission” together. There were a million foreign entrants from every corner of the globe (Browne 2013).

Individual actors have also joined the campaign. To celebrate the launch of MTV Korea in 2013, the network sponsored a “Fly to the Stars Contest” in which contestants had to “like” the MTV Korea Facebook page and upload a video explaining why they deserved to meet their idols. The winner would then receive a free trip to Korea to meet his or her favorite star (Browne 2013). Television stations that hold weekly live music shows to which fans are invited as audience members usually reserve seats for foreigners; the official website for Korea Tourism (www.visitkorea.or.kr) explains how to apply to attend K-pop music shows. Branching out its business interests into tourism, in 2012 SM Entertainment took over Happy Hawaii, a travel agency specializing in Hawaii, and renamed it SMTown Travel in a bid to build up more physical outlets for foreign K-pop fans. In the same year, SM also acquired BT&I, one of the largest travel agencies in Korea in an effort to associate its cultural production with tourism. The company CEO stated, “We’re looking to expand K-Pop’s business model to include dining, fashion, accommodation and exhibitions by building on BT&I’s original tourism, leisure and travel business” (Cha 2012).

Endeavors by the government and industry to make K-Pop more tourist-friendly are not entirely supply driven. There are bigger potential demands for K-pop tourism to Korea. Global fans of Korean entertainment continue to express their aspirations to visit Korea both online and off-line:

It’s the gateway drug. The more you get into the music, the more you want to know about the language, the history, the culture, the food.16

I was only in high school when I first got into the K-Pop craze. . . . My ultimate dream was to go Korea and actually meet my idols, see them performing on stage or even just bump into them in the streets. Back then, it seemed like it was impossible, but I know that as I get older, I’ll be able to fulfill my dream because I’ll eventually have work to earn my own money.17
I saved up money for many years, then I fell for K-Pop, and started spending. Right now I have to plan every concert/Seoul trip in advance. . . . I am very happy with my life as it is now. I love K-pop, and I love to travel.18

It’s no doubt every international fan’s dream to visit the entertainment companies of their favorite artists, take a proof-shot signifying “I’ve been here” and roam the area in hope to spot some K-Pop stars. This is totally understandable considering how many of us have been behind our laptops, getting emotional and being all jealous when we read up about the many fan accounts of our oppas [literally, “older brothers,” but meaning male idols] and unnie[s] [literally, “older sisters,” but meaning female stars] being nice and sweet whenever they meet fans on the streets.19

I have direct personal evidence of both the immediate and latent tourist demand for opportunities to visit Korea; two students in my Globalizing East Asian Popular Culture class went to Korea to visit SM Artium during the spring break in 2015, much to the envy of their classmates.

For international fans of K-pop, Korea is a place where, so they fantasize, K-pop experiences are likely to be deeper and more direct. Traveling to Korea, therefore, is an overwhelmingly pop culture–focused journey to attend concerts and television shows, to go on pilgrimage tours to entertainment agency buildings and restaurants operated by K-pop stars (or their families), and to shop for K-pop merchandise (idol goodies). Tour itineraries and activities are flexible and individually tailored, far different from the conventional guided tours that follow fixed routes around historic and heritage sites. As K-pop fan-tourists are keen to explore any place associated with their K-pop idol(s) and search out embodied experiences and entertainment, their behaviors are similar to those of the drama-inspired tourists or celebrity fans described in chapter 2. I frame K-pop fan-tourists’ experiences in terms of three types of “pleasure”: the pleasure of expectation, the pleasure of connection, and the pleasure of knowledge accumulation.

First, for international fans, Korea is a dream place where the chances of meeting their beloved idols in person are much higher than elsewhere. Pleasurable expectation acts like a magnet to draw more fan-tourists to Korea. The area where entertainment agencies are mainly located is a common destination for fan-tourists aspiring to encounter a star. During both my fieldwork periods in Gangnam in 2011 and 2014, I saw significant numbers of overseas fans gathered, full of expectation, mainly around SME, JYPE,
and Cube Entertainment. The fan-tourists were not engaging in typical tourist activities such as sightseeing. Rather, they were waiting around, probably in hopes of spotting their idols. A small donut shop located just in front of the JYPE building was enjoying a boom in sales serving the waiting fans. The Cube Studio, a café run by Cube Entertainment that sells coffee, desserts, and star goodies, looked to be thriving thanks to those fan customers, too. Every time a car stopped outside, all heads swiveled in hopes of spotting one of the label’s stars on their way to the dance rehearsal rooms or voice-training studios upstairs. One of my teenage Japanese informants said: “I’m a fan of Taecyeon in 2PM. I hope to visit the restaurants and shops frequented by him. I also want to loiter around the JYP Entertainment building. If I’m lucky enough, I might be able to spot him or other members.”

Although fans’ expectations seem overoptimistic, it is this kind of anticipation that excites fans and keeps them engaging in fan activities. Mark Duffett (2013) explains, “the primary pleasures of fandom stem from their aim of encountering the performer” (16, emphasis added). The pleasure of expectation is a significant element in idol worship, so it is also a critical component of K-pop tourism. Anticipation is often accompanied by disappointment: “Fans hang out here, Dunkin Donuts just in front of JYP, to wait for their favorite idols, ’cause it’s just in front of JYP, you can easily see idols or their cars coming and going. But NO idols were spotted T_T [a crying emoticon].”

“We didn’t see any stars and weren’t able to get inside any of the companies, so that was a little disappointing, but it was still cool actually being able to be where the companies were.” Yet it is a different sort of disappointment from that felt by group tourists while touring the drama sets. Rather than shattering their fantasies, a disappointing experience fuels even more powerful ambitions among keen K-pop fans to pursue other chances to meet the stars. Fan-tourists, therefore, tend to be extremely mobile and to explore multiple venues.

Second, the pleasure of connection is generated at the moment of an encounter with a star. K-pop concerts provide fans with the opportunity for actual physical copresence with their idols. For fans from overseas, concerts are events in which the consumption of K-pop moves from the virtual, mostly via online videos, to the physical and corporeal. International fans describe how they feel at the critical moment when they finally see the idols in person: “It feels like a dream. When the idols are on stage, they look so surreal. It is like watching a video clip but they ARE ACTUALLY THERE”;
“When the artists come on stage, your heart stops. ‘Are they real?’ Then they start moving, so you know they’re real. They might as well be unicorns because you’re not sure they’re real but they look magical, regardless.”

The idols’ physical presence assures fans that it is not a fantasy; these are real human beings in whom they have invested emotional and material resources. Once they have felt the thrills, overseas fans say, they want more of the same and cannot stop actually visiting Korea or wishing to go there again. That is why tourists driven by K-pop music are loyal and frequent visitors, as evidenced by the following excerpts from my personal interviews with diverse generations. A Chinese teenager remarked: “This is the thirteenth time I have visited Korea. Four of them were to attend EXO and SM Town concerts.” And a Japanese female in her sixties stated: “I have traveled to Korea more than twenty times with my daughter. Many of them were to attend concerts given by Rain. Standing in a concert hall is totally different from watching a drama. It gives me energy and makes me younger.” Compared with drama tourism, in which one-off visitors comprise the majority, K-pop tourism is geared toward repeated visits. Although the same groups and singers perform, every single concert is a composition with different content and a different plot. In addition, K-pop groups often “come back” with a new album/single and a different concept, different outfits and hairstyles, and different dances. Enthusiastic fans keep “coming back,” too, so long as their interest is maintained.

In the mecca of K-pop, international fans not only connect with stars but also with other K-pop fans (Kim, Mayasari, Oh 2013). A Singaporean fan, who had already made her name as a leading K-pop fan online, conveyed the excitement of meeting other international K-pop fans: “When I was hanging around the SM Entertainment building, I came across a couple of Japanese fans. I talked to them with the little Japanese I know and a bit of hand gestures and we soon realized that we are all EXO-Ls [fans of EXO]. We’re so excited, giggling and jumping in excitement. Of course, one of the most important questions that you need to ask when meeting a Kop fan is ‘WHO’S YOUR BIAS? [‘bias’ means favorite group or member]’. . . We chit-chatted for a bit and said our goodbyes. It was an awesome experience meeting international fans.”

If Korean pop music functions to bond global fans, Seoul is a place where you can meet the members of this virtual and imagined community in person. Despite language barriers, physical encounters among global K-pop fans provide a sense of sharing and community.
Concert venues in Korea are places not only to meet other global fans but to experience the practices of Korean fandom. International fans explain that there are differences in seeing a K-pop concert live in the capital of K-pop, where they can experience entirely new fan culture presented by domestic fans. Korean fans proclaim which idol group they are cheering for by displaying that group’s unique color and regalia. Trinkets, glow sticks, and poster paper are also used as fan signs. For international fans, simply watching the scene or participating in the group activity is a special experience. Having the opportunity to be in the crowd and yell along with the fan chants is so thrilling for them. Bags of rice from all over the world are usually piled up in front of concert venues; fans express their support for their favorite groups by presenting rice bags that will be donated after the show in the name of their group. Fans say the various countries represented in the rice donations are like a mini United Nations. While waiting for the concert to begin, fans will take pictures of themselves next to cardboard cutouts of their favorite stars. International fans can also witness how passionate fans chase their idols’ cars the moment after a concert ends. Fan-informants have told me: “K-Pop concerts have a magical aura that you can only get by seeing them in the motherland of K-pop. You may have to wait a long time, but the memories, fan chants, singing, and screams stay with you for a long time. It is definitely worthwhile; the excitement before, during, and after the experience stays constant throughout.”

Third, visiting Korea offers global fans the pleasure of knowledge accumulation. Concerts and fan meetings are precious opportunities for fans to have face-to-face encounters, enabling them to expand their knowledge of celebrities into new areas. Knowledge accumulation by international K-pop fans, however, is not confined to learning about stars. They get to know about K-pop-associated places, the idol-branded products, and South Korea in general. Experienced K-pop tourists offer comprehensive advice on where to go, where entertainment companies are located and how to reach them, where to eat, how to get into music shows being filmed for broadcasting, how to obtain concert tickets and access concert venues, and where to buy idol goodies. Online postings pass on visual information, including transportation maps, corner-to-corner photos, and landmark displays. There are even those who have filmed their journeys in Korea and added detailed verbal explanations before uploading their material to YouTube. By distributing the information they have collected to other supporters, pioneer fan-tourists can
achieve a higher status within fan communities. The pioneers who first experienced K-pop in the mecca of K-pop also relate how they felt to be in Seoul. “Two of my bias [favorite] group’s name in one post—I was screaming! Props to the designer . . . exercising our Sherlock eyes on this little designs [sic] just to find our favorite group’s name. Lovin’ the concept. NOW ENTERING MY HEAVEN.” Sharing affective experiences stimulates other fan-viewers to emotionally engage with the online post, provoking in them the pleasures of expectation. These sorts of personal, detailed, and affective accounts of their experiences of concerts and K-pop–associated places function as the most effective tools to advertise the places and actually attract more fans. As the next section will elaborate, place marketers both intend to or happen to utilize such fans’ “labor of love” as skilled free labor to promote place well beyond the original advertisement target boundary.

Experiences of K-Star Road

In September 2013, Gangnam-gu Office announced its plan to create a tourist attraction by designating the 1.08 km stretch of road between the Galleria Department Store and SM Entertainment and Cube Entertainment in Apgujeong-dong as “K-Star Road.” The plan outlined how the street would be redesigned as an urban trekking route, along which tourists would be able to visit places telling the stories of Hallyu. The project was carried out in two different phases. In the first phase (2013–2014), the district office placed the “K Bird,” a symbol of K-Star Road, on lampposts, trees lining the street, and pedestrian crossings. The K Birds draw attention to forty-eight “Storyshops,” stores and businesses in the neighborhood frequented by Hallyu stars; for example, a barbeque house that members of KARA often visit, a curry place frequented by members of SHINee, a café run by So Ji-sub (an actor and Hallyu star), and shops featured in popular television dramas such as *Secret Garden* and *IRIS*. Retelling stories about various Korean pop stars, the designated shops aim to let K-pop fans have similar experiences to those their beloved stars had at those places. The district office also produced and distributed guidebooks and maps introducing the forty-eight Storyshops to foreign tourists and established photo zones in which fan-tourists could have their photos taken with life-size cardboard cutouts of their beloved idols. The second part of the project (2014–2015) included setting up three-meter-tall
art toys, or so-called GangnamDols—a word coined by combining “Gangnam-gu” and “K-pop idols” (see figure 4.1). The GangnamDol kiosks were named for the ten popular K-pop groups the district office worked with: Miss A, 2PM, 4minute, Super Junior, SHINee, FT Island, TVXQ, EXO, CNBLUE, and Girls’ Generation.

K-Star Road is one part of the “K-ROAD” urban branding project that Gangnam-gu Office is promoting. Urban branding originates in product branding, a marketing strategy to select some attributes of a product as its core values to facilitate the process by which consumers come to confidently recognize and appreciate those attributes (De Chernatony and Riley 1998). City branding is a development of this technique that is used to publicize a city’s competitive advantages. Cities do not have single, unique identities. Where there are a number of coexisting urban identities that often compete against each other, city branding is an inherently selective process that distills various representations of an urban area and guides recipients to “see the city” in a particular way (Selby 2004). Urban branding is a deliberate intervention privileging certain representations of a city and embedded in certain norms and values (Jensen 2007). As Miriam Greenberg (2000, 229) defines it, the branding of the city is “the simultaneous marketing and production of a monolithic, consumer-oriented version of the urban imaginary.”

Figure 4.1. GangnamDol on K-Star Road. Photo by author.
The K-Star Road project guides its audience, especially foreign tourists, to see Gangnam exclusively as the place of entertainment. As a result of this restrictive urban image making, the material reality of Gangnam—the hegemonic place created by uneven economic development, the spectacular place built on speculative capital and superficial consumerism, the place that is driving the real estate bubble that is seriously affecting the lower classes—is erased. The friendly, chic, and stylish K-pop idol images obscure Gangnam’s contentious history and controversial hegemony. Since urban branding operates as a “specific discursive formation and practice” (Mayes 2008, 126), local media coverage, mainly controlled by press releases from Gangnam-gu Office, reinforces this exclusive way of perceiving Gangnam.

Gangnam’s image branding is not only contested, however; it also has no content. Obviously, the K-Star Road project puts K-pop idols in the forefront of place marketing. Idol-based place marketing is possible there due to the agglomeration of entertainment agencies in the area: there were 806 in total as of May 2017. As discussed previously, the deliberate promotion of Gangnam and suppression of Gangbuk caused entertainment companies to concentrate there. For easy access to their workplaces, many celebrities actually live nearby. Gangnam, therefore, is where K-pop stars work, rest, and live their lives, which makes it a fantasy land for fans, where the chances of seeing idols are much higher than elsewhere. Yet the pilgrimage tours to Gangnam began even before the Gangnam Style boom and the K-Star Road project. These facts are also highlighted by a district official’s promotional statement:

The place is most-frequented by avid K-pop fans worldwide who visit Korea in hopes of seeing their idols in person. We hope this street becomes a landmark tourist attraction, especially with growing demands from K-pop fans who visit Korea for their concerts. We hope this street helps them have a unique cultural experience in a country of their beloved stars. Visitors to the street may want to really see Hallyu stars. So we’ll hold autograph events regularly. The Korean entertainment industry is gaining worldwide recognition for its talented performers. The district will help support them by organizing events more frequently where they can interact with fans. We plan to further develop cultural content that can accommodate K-pop fan visitors to help them spend a memorable time while staying here.

What Gangnam-gu Office is doing is merely capitalizing on both the already established cultural infrastructure in the area and the global fans’ aspiration
to meet K-pop stars. By giving a name, “K-Star Road,” to the ambiguous geographical space where K-pop fans frequently hang out, the local government has made the growing phenomenon tangible and the exclusive property of that particular area.

Despite the power of its name, however, K-Star Road does not necessarily provide entertainment content to visitors, that is to say that fans cannot always see their idols or idol performances there. The mere physical clustering of management companies does not guarantee that any visitors actually experience K-pop; instead, fans sometimes experience the limited pleasure of expectation only. The idol-featuring art toys and bird symbols merely offer pseudo-idol experiences to K-pop fans. To supplement this vague and uncertain notion of “experience,” the district office announced that it would organize more events such as Hallyu concerts and star–fan meetings (though not on a regular basis). Yet to what extent sporadic events of this kind will offer visitors sufficient and satisfactory K-pop experiences remains uncertain. The municipality does not engage in actual K-pop production at all; the actual cultural producers are the stars and entertainment agencies. Gangnam-gu is building its district image by simply appropriating the output of the cultural suppliers congregated within it. Thus, the idol-led place promotion is revealed as being image based rather than actually developing the cultural content of the area, in the same ways that K-pop idols are sold on the basis of their images rather than their actual cultural assets and talent. What the local government intends is a “celebrity transference” to the place, forging fictitious, rather than actual, links between K-pop idols and K-Star Road.

If the K-Star Road branding project does not provide any actual entertainment content, then what is the mechanism that will create and sustain the place’s brand? What renders K-Star Road a truly Hallyu-filled place is fan-tourists’ emotional investment in it. Seasoned fans share and disseminate the pleasure they got from expectation, connection, and knowledge accumulation about K-pop–related places among the fan communities. To give one example: “I really miss this place so much! I regretted that I didn’t wait for a longer time in front of my idol’s entertainment company. . . . I really wish to see him in real lifeeeeeeeeeee. . . . We headed to K-Star Road which located [sic] at Apgujeong Rodeo Station. I was sooooooooo excited because I would be going to visit the place that my idol usually works! Inhaling the same air with him, walking through the places that he stepped before.”

What truly advertises K-Star Road to an international audience, therefore,
is not the district office’s outpouring of media promotions, but fan-tourists’ emotionally charged accounts of their own experiences of the place. The key to successful branding is to establish a relationship between brand and consumer; thus, there should be a close fit between the consumer’s own physical and psychological needs and the brand’s functional attributes and symbolic values (Hankinson and Cowking 1993). Likewise, city branding strategies aim to forge emotional links between a commodified urban space and consumers. Thanks to the affective nature of popular culture, K-Star Road allows visitors to develop emotional connections with a celebrity-associated space. K-pop fans, particularly international fans, equate K-Star Road with K-pop idols; the urban space turns into an emotion-laden place brimming with expectation and yearning to meet the idols they admire in person. The above quotation demonstrates once again how passionate appreciation of K-pop idols is extended into affective consumption of place. The aim of the K-Star Road branding project, therefore, is to exploit the emotional resources that international K-pop fans invest in developing empathetic bonds with the place.

To complete the K-pop–focused urban branding project through its urban users’ voluntary participation, the district office has come up with the idea of “storytelling.” A notable feature of K-Star Road is its promotion of “Storyshops”—cafés, restaurants, and boutiques frequented by Hallyu stars. These star-associated businesses are scattered nuggets of K-pop acting as hidden magnets to draw in significant numbers of (foreign) tourists. Both domestic and international fan communities have shared enormous amounts of informal information about restaurants, cafés, and shops operated by K-pop idols and their families. Blogs and social media pages introduce the idol-run shops and include directions to them, menus, and even pointers about time slots that offer the best chances to spot the stars. Reviews of these shops display dazzling photos of their interiors and the dishes on offer, and describe in detail how celebrity families behave toward fans. For example: “Kamong Café is owned by the sister of one of the EXO members, Kai. K-pop fans, most especially EXO-Ls, have flooded this recently opened café because it’s connected with one of the members of EXO. Her older sister has been gaining a lot of popularity these days by how she takes orders personally from her customers and fans would ask anything-under-the-sun questions about Kai and EXO.”

What Ganganm-gu Office has done is to publicly identify and brand those shops that are located within the district’s boundary near K-Star Road. But
neither the place marketers nor the designated shops themselves spread stories about Storyshops. The job of storytelling falls on consumers who visit K-Star Road, that is, mostly K-pop fans. Fans may spot their favorite idols on K-Star Road and circulate the story to online fan communities. Fans’ accounts of their own experiences when visiting shops run by K-pop stars are always exciting for them and are likely to make fan communities jealous. Storytelling, therefore, requires consumers’ proactive participation, in the form of a significant level of willingness to create stories. As in the drama-associated places, therefore, the essential advertiser of the place is devoted consumers. While regional municipalities show their particular interests in the number (itself) of tourists in boosting publicity, Gangnam devised an extra mechanism, via Storyshops, to encourage fan-tourists to voluntarily deliver their own stories about the place.

K-Star Road obviously aims to harness the global popularity of K-pop idols. Yet apart from the entertainment agencies, there are no local places that are directly associated with the stars. Idols are “made” in the transmedia circulation and by fans’ discursive consumption. They are an intertextual commodity and thus not inherently associated with physical places. Stars are placeless; indeed, they are extremely mobile in visiting any places where there are demands for idols. Yet the K-Star Road project is an attempt to connect that place with stars. The Storyshops are those of a few places that could have, at least, some relations to celebrities by highlighting stars’ memories. The shallow and fragmented star memories the Storyshops are trying to evoke serve to expose the project’s lack of real content.

What, then, has been the outcome of the K-Star Road project? Because the project is relatively recent and still ongoing, it is too early to evaluate its success or failure. The number of foreign tourists visiting Gangnam has been continuously increasing since 2011. Yet it is hard to tell what exactly attracts them in the context of the overall increase in inbound tourism to Korea; Gangnam’s medical services, K-pop production, shopping centers, and other attractions all function as magnets. Thus, the particular impact of K-Star Road on foreign tourist numbers remains uncertain. Despite the ambiguous consequences of the policy, the branding project is not likely to wither in the near future. Capitalizing on the established cluster of entertainment agencies, the K-Star Road project is inherently different from the one-off sponsorship of drama production by regional cities. Since the area already has a settled cultural infrastructure, the branding power of K-Star Road is likely
to be sustained for as long as the global popularity of K-pop lasts. Nevertheless, the K-pop–mediated branding practices are also speculative, because they entirely depend on K-pop’s global popularity, whose duration is uncertain. Despite the rich infrastructure, the policy’s short-term focus dovetails with the district governor’s limited tenure, revealing the local nature of the policy extravaganza once again. Riding on the (probably temporary) K-pop craze, relying on preexisting cultural assets, and taking advantage of K-pop fans’ emotional engagement, the K-Star Road branding project looks to be less expensive and more stable and sustainable than drama sponsorship.

It is difficult to think of Apgujeongro, where K-Star Road is located, as a “street.” In reality, it is simply a road where car traffic is heavy and fast moving. Interactions between the road and nearby buildings are scant. Few people actually walk along the sidewalk, since upper-class customers mostly use cars to enter shops. Apgujeongro is densely dotted with designer brand shops, representing the superficial “lookism” nurtured by South Korea’s compressed modernity. At the same time, these luxury shops embody the country’s stratification, since they form an alienated and inaccessible enclave. The dazzling facades of the luxury shops, adorned with glittering glass and metal screens, offer in microcosm an image of the area’s cold and impassive material urban evolution. Now, the hollow space has been decorated with K-pop images. The place marketers have chosen and promoted one particular fantasized and entertainment-led urban image, erasing the underlying material and spatial tensions the areas has. Moreover, what sustains and further develops the fantasized K-pop imagery of the place is not the place marketers’ investment, but the emotional resources of consumers. The free labor of fan tourists who write personal accounts of this urban space is the mechanism used to advertise it and create brand value for it. The activities created for consumers’ own pleasure are exploited as a means of generating surplus value from the commodified urban space. The superficial nature of this case of place branding is particularly well illustrated by its audience-led storytelling: the spectacle itself that audience has come to see has no substance, no content, and no investment. This is the naked reality of Gangnam. Gangnam’s traditions have to be “engineered” by K-pop fans’ proactive storytelling.