

Authenticity, Ownership, and Techno-Orientalism: Reconfiguring K-pop through AI Virtual Idols

Aiko Kato

Pomona College Media Studies Department

In recent years, the emergence of K-pop idols utilizing artificial intelligence (AI) and virtual technologies has rapidly attracted significant attention. From aespa's virtual character naevis, which plays a central role in the group's fictional universe, to fully virtual girl groups like MAVE; hybrid formations such as Superkind that combines virtual members with real human performers, and PLAVE, which uses motion-capture technology to project real-time performances by human actors — these technology-driven idols fundamentally disrupt the traditional framework of the "human idol." The integration of AI and virtual technologies into K-pop destabilizes traditional notions of authenticity and emotional intimacy, while also expanding corporate ownership and control over idols' identities and emotional expressions. At the same time, the emergence of AI-powered idols both reinforces and complicates techno-Orientalist constructions of Asia within global pop culture.

The first critical issue raised by the emergence of AI idols in the K-pop industry is the question of authenticity and intimacy. To examine this, it is essential to understand the processes through which K-pop idols are produced and the labor conditions under which they operate. In response to the question "What makes K-pop K-pop?", Jennie, a member of the globally recognized girl group BLACKPINK, answered in their Netflix documentary that it was "the time spent as a trainee." Prior to debut, K-pop idols undergo rigorous training in singing, dancing, rapping, acting, language, and fashion. This process can last from months to over a decade, with trainees living communally under strict surveillance and facing limits on personal relationships and social media. Monthly evaluations determine who debuts, and many in smaller agencies carry debt from training and promotional costs.

Even after debut, the pressure continues. During promotional periods, referred to as "comeback," idols face packed schedules with music shows, signing events, and filming, often with severe sleep deprivation. Such conditions lead to frequent cases of burnout, eating disorders, anxiety, and mental health struggles. While recent years have seen improvements in working conditions and mental health care, the industry still promotes an ethos of "suffering as virtue." The narrative of struggling through these harsh conditions and eventually achieving success, such as upgrading from cramped dormitories filled with bunk beds to headlining large-scale concerts,

reaching million-seller status, and upgrading to more spacious and luxurious accommodations, forms a core component of what connects idols to their fans emotionally. It is through witnessing and empathizing with these journeys of hardship and growth that fans establish a deep, affective bond with their idols. This affective resonance and shared emotional investment constitute the core of authenticity in K-pop and are central to the meaning of the idol itself.

In contrast, AI idols possess no such experiential narrative. Without enduring the exhaustion of training, the anxieties of debut, or the hardships of real-world performance, AI idols enter the industry as fully "complete" entities. While this allows them to bypass the psychological and physical burdens faced by human idols, it also strips them of the emotional depth that constitutes "human-ness." K-pop idols are not only musical performers but affective laborers who engage with fans 24/7 across various channels, such as fan signings, social media, media appearances, rendering emotion itself a constant performance. This affective labor is not merely a service but an essential component of relationship-building between idols and fans. AI idols, immune to fatigue and psychological strain, cannot embody this form of "emotional fluctuation" or existential doubt. Although AI idols may be given backstories and emotional expressions, these are ultimately scripted and algorithmically generated performances. Kang et al. (3) argued that "in a parasocial relationship — a one-sided relationship between audiences and media figures — the audience expects media figures to be authentic." While K-pop human idols increasingly attempt to foster intimacy through social media and fan platforms, creating the illusion of two-sided interaction for fans, AI idols, whose responses are pre-scripted and algorithmically generated, cannot genuinely participate in such exchanges. Consequently, as noted by Francistyová (163), interaction with AI idols is being reconceptualized as "one-and-a-half-sided," regardless of the extent to which they simulate human-like engagement.

Thus, although AI idols are often presented as ideal solutions to the industry's labor problems due to their scandal-free image, tirelessness, and complete controllability, they also risk undermining the core values of authenticity and intimacy that have defined the cultural and emotional significance of K-pop. When affective labor is entirely eliminated, one must ask: can such an entity still be called an "idol?" AI idols compel us to fundamentally reconsider the notion of what it means to be an idol and, more importantly, remind us of the extent to which "being human" has shaped the affective appeal and cultural meaning of K-pop.

A useful comparison here is the difference in reception between the fully virtual girl group MAVE: and the hybrid group PLAVE. While MAVE: attracted attention at debut for its novelty, its subsequent releases struggled to maintain strong fan engagement, possibly due to the absence of visible emotional growth or

real-time interaction. By contrast, PLAVE, despite presenting itself through animated avatars, has gained significant popularity, including hosting fan meetings. This success is largely attributed to the fact that each PLAVE member is backed by a real human. Personal details such as blood types are shared with fans, and their live performances and emotional expressions foster a sense of authenticity, relatability, and emotional connection. This contrast between MAVE: and PLAVE suggests that authenticity and emotional intimacy, even when mediated through virtual avatars, remain essential for cultivating lasting fandom in K-pop.

The second issue that AI idols pose to the concept of the K-pop idol is the question of ownership and control. AI idols are engineered to surpass the limitations of human labor, designed to function as perfect and efficient entities. At the same time, however, this gives rise to a new question: "Who exactly owns such beings?" While traditional K-pop idols have long been subjected to control through contractual obligations with entertainment agencies, AI idols extend this system of control beyond physical bodies and vocal expression. Their personalities, utterances, and even emotional displays are entirely designed and regulated by corporate actors. Devoid of rights or autonomy, these AI idols exist not as human artists, but as intellectual property (IP), functioning as legal and cultural commodities optimized as brand assets and lacking individual subjectivity.

This form of corporate-driven idol construction is particularly evident in SM Entertainment's girl group aespa. In addition to its four real-life members, aespa features virtual counterparts known as "ae," as well as a digital guide figure named naevis, who plays a central role in the group's fictional universe. She appears in multiple music videos, including "Next Level" and "Savage," performs in the track "Welcome To MY World," made a solo debut, and appears holographically during aespa's world tour. She also participates in brand collaborations, gaming, webtoons, and even dance challenges with human idols.

Despite this extensive media push, naevis has failed to generate strong emotional investment from fans. On social media, her concert segments are often referred to as "bathroom break time that hurts no one," and audiences are seen leaving their seats or checking phones during her appearances. This response suggests that fans do not view her as an idol to connect with emotionally, but rather as a manufactured presence. Her failure to generate fan intimacy highlights the limitations of fully virtual idols under full corporate control.

Characters like naevis function less as agents of fan intimacy and more as tools for corporate world-building and brand differentiation. Her body, voice, personality, and emotional expression are fully curated by the company, allowing for total managerial control and eliminating spontaneity or emotional variability, and as an IP-protected digital asset, she can be endlessly reproduced and monetized. In this way, the

idol is redefined from a human figure of emotional labor into a programmable, emotion-performing commodity, exemplifying the limits of emotional engagement when idols are entirely constructed by corporate design.

Another notable approach to this corporate model appears in HYBE's AI artist project, MIDNATT. The initiative reconfigures the voice of Lee Hyun, a former member of the groups 8eight and HOMME, using technology developed by Supertone, an AI audio company acquired by HYBE. This technology enables the generation of multilingual and multi-tonal performances. In the 2023 debut single "Masquerade," MIDNATT performs in six languages, including Korean, English, Japanese, Chinese, Spanish, and Vietnamese, by synthesizing Lee Hyun's voice to produce native-like pronunciation. At one point, the AI even modulates his voice into a female tone, illustrating the potential of AI to extend vocal expression through augmentation rather than full automation.

Although Lee Hyun has emphasized that the project originated from a personal desire to connect with global audiences, rather than from technological ambition alone, some long-time fans have expressed concern that his once-distinctive voice has been reduced to a commercialized product. Despite its personal origin, MIDNATT is ultimately perceived as an AI-mediated construct shaped by corporate design and intellectual property strategy.

In this way, the rise of AI idols calls into question the very foundation of what it means to be an idol. Are idols corporate-owned assets? Are they sustained by fan empathy and emotional investment? Or are they strategic products composed of code and image? Once an idol becomes a fully managed and infinitely replicable commodity, can it still be called an "idol?" The emergence of AI idols reveals how identity, expression, and relational intimacy are increasingly susceptible to commodification and corporate control in the digital entertainment landscape.

The third key issue raised by the emergence of AI idols in the context of K-pop lies in the reconstruction and simultaneous reinforcement of the visual and narrative trope of the "Futuristic East." This phenomenon can be examined through the theoretical lens of techno-Orientalism, which refers to a Western-centric discourse that frames Asia as a cyborgian or mechanized entity, emphasizing discipline, diligence, and functionality over individual creativity or interiority. This framing reinforces white hegemony by dehumanizing Asian individuals as mechanistic others.

This framework of techno-Orientalism is not merely abstract but takes concrete form in the elaborate world-building strategies that surround AI idols. Conceptual universes such as SM Entertainment's KWANGYA, MAVE: 's IDYPIA, and Superkind's NUKE/PRID reimagine K-pop not merely as a music genre,

but as a non-human, futuristic space. These virtual worlds extend across music videos, webtoons, games, VR concerts, NFTs, and other transmedia platforms, offering multiple entry points into the fandom and positioning AI idols as meticulously engineered symbols of the so-called "Future East." While such expansive storytelling strategies enhance engagement, they also risk reinforcing techno-Orientalist stereotypes by presenting Asians as depersonalized, consumable artificial beings.

At the same time, however, AI idols are not purely robotic. Many are designed to mimic human emotions, backstories, and personalities to appeal to fans. Their emotional performances, while carefully scripted, are designed to emulate the affective dynamics that have been central to K-pop's global success. As a result, AI idols occupy an ambivalent position: they reproduce the "cyborg-like Asian figure" imagined in techno-Orientalism, yet simultaneously strive to disrupt it by inviting emotional intimacy.

Positioned at the intersection of technology, narrative, visual aesthetics, and corporate strategy, AI idols are central to K-pop's transformation from a musical genre into an integrated digital worldview. Yet in doing so, they risk reducing the authenticity and intimacy cultivated by human idols to something overly scripted and artificial. Their emergence compels us to reconsider how cultural representation, affective labor, and technological aesthetics converge in global pop culture.

Centered around the West, prejudice and discrimination against non-white individuals remain deeply rooted. Within that context, Asians have long been symbolized in popular culture as robots silently carrying out tasks, or as emotionless cyborgs. Precisely because of this, speaking of AI and Asians together entails the risk of reinforcing such preconceptions and discriminatory imagery, and even in the best-case scenario, carries the danger of reproducing techno-Orientalist discourses that have already been subject to critical examination. Under such circumstances, the phenomenon of AI idols goes beyond the realm of entertainment content that utilizes new technologies, and is involved in the reconfiguration of cultural representation. In the present era of hyper-mediatization, South Korea, through transmedia storytelling involving AI idols, is constructing an international image as a technologically advanced nation. As asserted by Amaliyah et al. (874), "integrating artificial intelligence (AI) into K-pop can be a significant catalyst for advancing AI as a pivotal component of South Korea's future cultural diplomacy." However, by linking entertainment to national soft power strategies, Korea is simultaneously being re-othered under global scrutiny as a symbol of the "Futuristic East" shaped by AI technology. Consequently, the country occupies a dual cultural position as both a producer of advanced innovation and an object of commodification.

This paper has examined how the emergence of AI and virtual idols destabilizes the traditional concept of the K-pop idol through three core dimensions: authenticity and emotional intimacy, ownership and control, and the reimagining of Asia through techno-Orientalist narratives. AI idols turn human-centered affective labor into pre-scripted, commodified emotion, shifting the foundation of fan-idol relationships. They also expose how entertainment companies now control not only idols' appearances and voices, but also their personalities and emotional expressions, rendering idols into products designed for perfect management and monetization. Furthermore, their existence as highly engineered, emotion-performing figures feeds into Western techno-Orientalist fantasies, while simultaneously complicating them through efforts to appear emotionally relatable.

Through these dynamics, AI idols are not merely additions to the K-pop industry — they are actively reconfiguring K-pop by redefining the very meaning of "humanness," the ways emotional connections with fans are formed, and even the structure through which Korean culture is consumed on a global scale. Their existence thus raises pressing questions: What is real? To what extent can a connection be considered genuine? Are AI idols the next frontier in entertainment, or are they a warning sign marking the moment when authenticity may no longer be possible? The answer depends on what kinds of relationships we choose to value, and what kinds of stories we allow ourselves to believe.

Works Cited

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