

Shopping simulation: BTS army hyper-reality on the Tokopedia marketplace

Dwi Retnani Srinarwati

Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universitas PGRI Adi Buana

XII Dukuh Menanggal, Surabaya, Indonesia

Email: dwi.retnani@unipa.ac.id, Phone: +62 31 8281181

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Abstract This paper explores the phenomenon of hyperreality within the context of online shopping and fandom culture, focusing specifically on the vibrant and dedicated fanbase of the popular South Korean boy band BTS, known as the BTS Army. Drawing upon the virtual marketplace of Tokopedia as a case study, we investigate the unique and immersive shopping experiences created by the BTS Army as they engage with merchandise related to their favourite band. Qualitative content analysis with Baudrillard Theory perspectives is used to unravel the complexities of the BTS Army's consumer behaviour, purchasing patterns, and collective interactions within this simulated environment. The findings demonstrate that the Tokopedia marketplace is a hub for the BTS Army, where fans navigate a hyperreal shopping landscape infused with emotional connections, shared meanings, and transformative experiences. Through acquiring and displaying BTS-related merchandise, fans construct and reinforce their identities, cultivate a sense of belonging, and participate in a hyperreal world that blurs the boundaries between fandom and consumer culture. It provides insights for marketers, platform operators, and researchers into the dynamics of hyperreal fandom-driven markets, emphasising the significance of emotional engagement, community building, and immersive experiences for capturing the attention and loyalty of dedicated fan communities.

Keywords: buying behaviour; fandom; simulation; simulacra

INTRODUCTION

K-pop, short for Korean pop music, has experienced an explosive surge in popularity over the past decade, captivating audiences not only in Asia but also across the globe (Capistrano et al., 2022; Kim, 2013; Putra & Jusnita, 2018; Thehawijaya & Susilo, 2023). With its catchy melodies, captivating choreography, and visually stunning music videos, K-pop has emerged as a transcendent cultural phenomenon, displaying unwavering momentum in its trajectory. In this study, we will delve into the roots of K-pop, the factors contributing to its widespread acclaim, and a glimpse into the prospects for this musical genre (Cayaban et al., 2023; Park et al., 2022). The origins of K-pop trace back to South Korea in the 1990s, but it was during the 2000s that the genre truly gained

traction. Notably, one of the earliest and most triumphant K-pop groups was HOT, whose debut in 1996 swiftly propelled them to national stardom—subsequently, other groups like SES, Fin. KL and Shinhwa emerged, solidifying K-pop's prominent status within the South Korean music industry.

The late 2000s and early 2010s marked the advent of K-pop's international wave, with groups like Girls' Generation, Big Bang, and Super Junior amassing a colossal following across Asia and beyond. Integral to this global expansion was the role of social media, which facilitated the seamless sharing and discovery of K-pop content by enthusiasts worldwide (Bernhaupt, 2020). A crucial allure of K-pop lies in its emphasis on spectacle and entertainment. Renowned for their lavish music videos, intricate dance routines, and striking fashion, K-pop groups captivate fans through high-energy performances and extravagant production values.

Another factor contributing to K-pop's triumph is its appeal to younger audiences, deliberately targeting teenagers and young adults through music and aesthetics tailored to this demographic. The emphasis on exuberant energy and amusement has effectively cultivated a dedicated fan base (Ayundari & Perbawani, 2021) domestically and internationally. Notably, the K-pop industry is characterised by rigorous training programs, where aspiring idols invest years honing their singing, dancing, and acting skills. This steadfast commitment to excellence has earned K-pop a reputation for its talented performers, with fans admiring the dedication and hard work that underpin each extraordinary performance (Liu et al., 2021).

However, it is important to acknowledge that the K-pop industry has also faced criticism for its intense fixation on perfection and appearance. Many K-pop idols endure strict diet and exercise regimens and the pressure to maintain specific images. Moreover, the intensely competitive nature of the industry can lead to burnout and mental health challenges, with some idols struggling to cope with the demands imposed by their fans and management. Despite these challenges, K-pop perseveres and continues to thrive. Recent years have witnessed the emergence of solo artists and smaller groups, with figures like IU, BTS, and Blackpink achieving international acclaim. Furthermore, the rise of social media and streaming platforms has facilitated unprecedented accessibility for fans worldwide, enabling them to discover and support K-pop artists, regardless of geographical barriers.

Looking ahead, it is evident that K-pop will continue to exert a profound influence in the music industry, owing to its distinct amalgamation of captivating melodies, mesmerising choreography, and visually arresting aesthetics, which have established a unique and inimitable niche. As the industry continues to adapt and evolve in response to changing trends, we can anticipate even more exhilarating developments from the world of K-pop in the forthcoming years.

Indonesia boasts one of the most prominent K-pop fandoms globally (Thehawijaya & Susilo, 2023). The fervour for K-pop took root in the early 2000s with the emergence of first-generation K-pop idols, such as TVXQ and Super Junior, who rapidly garnered popularity. Since then, K-pop has commanded a prominent presence in the Indonesian music landscape, while the fandom has experienced exponential growth. Notably, a crucial driver behind the popularity of K-pop in Indonesia is the compelling influence of Korean dramas and variety shows in the country. Through these shows, Indonesians have been exposed to Korean culture, kindling a fervent following for the K-pop genre.

Renowned for their ardent support, the Indonesian K-pop fandom actively organises various events, including fan meetings, concerts, and charitable endeavours in the name of their beloved idols. Fans also contribute significantly to the success of their favourite groups by streaming their music, voting for them on diverse music shows, and enthusiastically purchasing their albums and merchandise. As a result, Indonesia has emerged as a pivotal market for K-pop, attracting the attention of various Korean entertainment companies who recognise the country's immense potential (Prawesthi, 2020). K-pop groups often include Indonesia in their tours, with some even holding exclusive concerts in the country. The Indonesian fans' warmth and hospitality have left an indelible impact on K-pop idols, who have openly expressed their gratitude and affection for their Indonesian supporters. Notably, the Indonesian K-pop fandom is characterised by its diverse composition, with fans of varying ages, backgrounds, and religions united in their shared support for their cherished idols. K-pop serves as a unifying force, transcending boundaries and bringing together individuals from diverse walks of life. This vibrant and passionate community of Indonesian K-pop enthusiasts has played an instrumental role in propelling K-pop to global acclaim, with their unwavering devotion serving as a crucial pillar in the industry's continuous growth.

On the other hand, Simulation theory represents a philosophical and scientific concept positing that our reality is merely a computer-simulated construct (Susilo & Hui Chen, 2023), akin to a video game. While this theory has been extant for decades, it has witnessed a surge in popularity, particularly in entertainment. Notably, the K-pop group BTS is no exception to this phenomenon. The ethos of simulation theory finds profound resonance within BTS's music and image. A notable instance is their 2018 album "Love Yourself: Tear," which delves into the theme of a simulated reality. The album's lead single, "Fake Love," contemplates the notion of a deceptive reality, conveyed through poignant lyrics such as "For you, I could pretend like I was happy when I was sad." The corresponding music video depicts BTS members traversing a labyrinthine set, symbolising their entanglement within a simulated world.

BTS, the renowned K-pop group, has actively explored the intriguing concept of simulation theory through their live performances.

A striking example was witnessed during their 2019 Love Yourself: Speak Yourself tour, where a colossal LED screen served as the backdrop for their stage. This screen showcased captivating imagery of computer code and digital landscapes, effectively reinforcing the notion of a simulated reality (Hasna, 2021). Notably, BTS's music videos have also frequently incorporated references to technology and the digital realm. For instance, their music video for "Not Today" depicted the members adorned in futuristic attire, gracefully dancing against a cityscape backdrop. The video also featured enigmatic shots of a luminous orb, possibly symbolising the control centre of a computer simulation (Hasna, 2021).

The group's captivation with simulation theory can be attributed to their quest to question the essence of reality and the profound impact of technology on our existence. In an interview with Rolling Stone, BTS member Suga expressed, "We have seen a lot of technology, and it made us wonder what reality truly is." He further elucidated, "We are living in an era where the lines between the real and fake are blurred." This fascination with simulation theory extends beyond BTS's musical and performance ventures and their merchandise. The "Love Yourself: Answer" album presented fans with a virtual reality experience called "BTS World," offering an opportunity to interact with virtual representations of BTS members. This innovative experience blurs the boundaries between reality and simulation, prompting contemplation on the potential future where complete immersion in a simulated world might become attainable (Baudrillard, 1994; Triary Hardy & Susilo, 2022).

Simulation theory has become a central theme embraced by BTS, intricately woven into their music, performances, and merchandise, reflecting their profound curiosity regarding the concept of simulated reality and the ever-evolving role of technology in our lives (Kłosiński, 2022; Taghiyari et al., 2022). By delving into this thought-provoking realm, BTS enriches their artistic expression while encouraging their fans to critically contemplate the world around them (Hidayat, 2012).

Simulation theory, also known as the simulation hypothesis or the simulation argument, posits that our reality is, in essence, a computer-generated simulation crafted by an exceptionally advanced civilisation. Although its origins can be traced back to ancient philosophies like Hinduism's concept of Maya and Plato's allegory of the cave, the contemporary popularity of simulation theory was bolstered in the 21st century through the works of philosopher Nick Bostrom and entrepreneur Elon Musk. This intriguing hypothesis opens the door to philosophical and scientific inquiries about the nature of our existence and the possibility of alternate realities shaped by advanced technological prowess.

In the 20th century, the concept of simulated realities found its roots in the creative works of science fiction authors, exemplified by Philip K. Dick's novel "Ubik" and the iconic "Matrix" film franchise.

However, it was not until 2003 that philosopher Nick Bostrom presented his argument, elevating the idea to academic prominence. Bostrom's proposal, known as the simulation hypothesis, posits that the probability of our existence in a simulated reality crafted by an advanced civilisation is higher than the likelihood of us inhabiting a base reality. He contends that if such an advanced civilisation exists, it would possess the capability and incentive to create a simulation akin to our reality. This hypothesis has since captured the attention of philosophers, scientists, and the general public alike, with technology entrepreneur Elon Musk notably endorsing the idea, suggesting a minute likelihood of living in a base reality, "one in billions." Nevertheless, the simulation theory continues to stir controversy, as many critics contend it lacks substantial empirical evidence to support its claims.

The success of digital purchasing on Tokopedia can be attributed to the platform's ability to provide an extensive array of products, coupled with a user-friendly interface, diverse payment options, efficient and dependable delivery services, and a robust customer service team (Thehawijaya & Susilo, 2023). Emphasising customer satisfaction and adaptability to user needs, Tokopedia has emerged as one of Indonesia's most thriving e-commerce sites. As the e-commerce industry in Indonesia continues to burgeon, it is foreseeable that Tokopedia will remain a prominent player in the market.

With the K-pop industry garnering an immense global following, including a substantial fan base in Indonesia, the demand for purchasing merchandise related to favourite K-pop groups has surged. In this context, Tokopedia, one of Indonesia's largest e-commerce platforms, has become a preferred destination for K-pop enthusiasts seeking to acquire their cherished merchandise. This research explores why the K-pop community's inclined to purchase from Tokopedia (Algiffary et al., 2020).

Tokopedia, as an e-commerce platform, caters to the diverse and enthusiastic K-pop fanbase by offering an extensive range of merchandise choices (Mastan & Christianto, 2021). This assortment encompasses albums, posters, light sticks, clothing, and accessories, among other items. The platform's strategic collaborations with multiple sellers enable fans to access a wide array of K-pop merchandise conveniently, eliminating the need to navigate various online shops or physical stores.

In addition to its product diversity, Tokopedia maintains a competitive pricing structure for K-pop merchandise, permitting sellers to set varying prices for their products. This pricing flexibility empowers fans to choose sellers offering the best deals for their desired items. Furthermore, Tokopedia implements promotional campaigns and discounts, further incentivising K-pop enthusiasts to purchase through the platform.

Tokopedia prioritises user convenience through its user-friendly interface, facilitating fans' seamless navigation to find their desired K-

pop merchandise (Mastan & Christianto, 2021). The platform's efficient search function allows fans to explore products using specific keywords or filters, such as price range or artist, streamlining the shopping experience. Additionally, Tokopedia offers a chat feature that fosters direct communication between fans and sellers, enabling inquiries and clarifications before purchasing.

The platform strongly emphasises secure and diverse payment options, catering to users' preferences and ensuring their financial safety. Tokopedia offers various payment methods, including bank transfers, credit/debit cards, and e-wallets, granting fans the flexibility to select the most convenient and secure mode of payment. Implementing a robust and secure payment system reinforces the trust between Tokopedia and its customers, including the K-pop community.

Lastly, Tokopedia's commitment to reliable and efficient delivery services further bolsters the trust between the platform and the K-pop community. The platform's partnerships with multiple logistics companies ensure prompt and secure deliveries to fans. Additionally, Tokopedia provides order tracking functionality, offering fans real-time delivery updates and enhancing customer experience and satisfaction. This level of service excellence has culminated in increased sales and revenue for Tokopedia, solidifying its position as a preferred platform for the K-pop community.

The K-pop community shows a strong preference for purchasing K-pop merchandise on the Tokopedia platform owing to several key factors, such as the platform's ability to offer a wide range of K-pop merchandise, competitive prices, a user-friendly interface, a variety of payment options, fast and reliable delivery, and a secure payment system. As the popularity of K-pop continues to grow in Indonesia, it is likely that Tokopedia will continue to be a popular destination for K-pop fans to purchase merchandise (Indah & Rachman, 2020). The platform's focus on customer satisfaction and its ability to adapt to the needs of its users has made it one of the most successful e-commerce sites in Indonesia (Wijaya et al., 2021).

METHODOLOGY

The research method employed in this study is centred around Jean Baudrillard's concept of simulation, which offers a lens to explore the implementation of hyperreality within marketplaces like Tokopedia (Antony & Tramboo, 2020). As a distinguished French philosopher and cultural critic, Baudrillard delved into simulation and its profound impact on society, postulating that we inhabit a world where hyperreality supersedes reality. Hyperreality refers to a state in which simulations of reality become more authentic than actual reality (Baudrillard, 2020). An illustrative example of hyperreality can be observed in Disneyland, the quintessential American theme park, which meticulously curates an immersive fantasy experience for visitors. Disneyland's simulation presents a world founded on the ideals and values of Disney, ultimately

overshadowing the actual reality outside its boundaries (Antony & Trambo, 2020)

Baudrillard contends that visitors to Disneyland willingly embrace the fantasy world presented to them as real, blurring the lines between reality and simulation. This shift makes the simulation the dominant reality, relegating the outside world to a lesser importance. Disneyland embodies what Baudrillard terms a "hyperreal" world, where the distinction between reality and simulation becomes obscured. This phenomenon is not confined to the theme park; it echoes in society, where simulation is dominant in shaping our perceptions and experiences.

As an emblematic symbol of simulation's influence, Disneyland exemplifies the power of constructed spaces in shaping our worldview. By presenting visitors with a meticulously designed reality based on Disney's values and ideas, the park subtly encourages conformity to a specific set of beliefs and principles. The simulation principles extend beyond the physical confines of Disneyland, permeating the world of Disney films and merchandise. These media products are not mere commodities but simulations of a distinct worldview catering to children and adults alike. The carefully constructed fantasy world in Disney films and merchandise effectively becomes more real than reality, firmly establishing its significance in our cultural landscape.

Baudrillard's concept of simulation serves as a compelling framework to scrutinise the world of Disney, especially the realm of Disneyland, where hyperreality blurs the boundaries between reality and simulation. This carefully constructed simulation wields a subtle form of social control, influencing visitors to align with specific values and ideologies. Furthermore, the world of Disney, as depicted in films and merchandise, represents an intricately crafted simulation of reality, significantly impacting our broader cultural milieu.

The analysis technique chosen for this study revolves around utilising the Tokopedia application, serving as a tool to present materials for analysis similar to Baudrillard's examination of Disneyland (Hikmawan & Azwar, 2020). The effectiveness of Baudrillard's analysis of consumerism simulation is showcased with the assistance of modern smartphone applications, such as Tokopedia, which simplifies the process (Hikmawan & Azwar, 2020). The analysis will focus on BTS-related keywords, integral to understanding the purchasing decisions between Tokopedia Marketplace and BTS fandom users.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

In the provided analysis, two figures, denoted Figure 1 and Figure 2, showcase the prices of similar products but from different brands. Figure 1 features a BTS-related product, while Figure 2 displays a general stuffed pillow. The comparison reveals a noticeable price disparity, with Figure 1 priced at IDR 34,000 and the general pillow in Figure 2 priced at IDR 29,000, resulting in a difference of IDR 5,000. This discrepancy

is evidence of hyperreality, a phenomenon driven by the public's idolisation of BTS, wherein the perceived value of products associated with the idol group surpasses that of regular products from unfamiliar brands (Rahayu, 2021).



Figure 1. BTS Stuffed Pillow on Tokopedia
Source: Author Collected Data (2023)



Figure 2. Regular Stuffed Pillow on Tokopedia
Source: Author Collected Data (2023)

Moving on to Figure 3 and Figure 4, these images represent constructed features and numbers strategically designed to evoke a desire to purchase goods. For instance, Figure 3 presents a "Discount" feature intended to create the perception of an actual discount on a fresh product. Similarly, Figure 4 showcases a "Delivery Cost" offer, promoting zero delivery cost for orders at least IDR 50,000. However, it is crucial to recognise that these seemingly advantageous incentives may not translate to significant savings for consumers. For instance, in the case of the "Discount," the price reduction may not be as substantial as perceived. At the same time, the "Zero Delivery Cost" may encourage consumers to make higher-value purchases to avail themselves of the apparent benefit (Zayusman & Septrizola, 2019). This strategic

approach aims to fuel consumerism and encourage increased consumption in Indonesia.

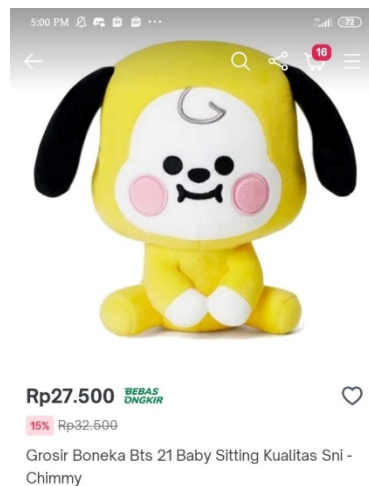


Figure 3. Discount
Source: Author Collected Data (2023)



Figure 4. Delivery Cost
Source: Author Collected Data (2023)

Hyperreality Construction Around BTS Merchandise

As conceptualised by Jean Baudrillard, hyperreality construction entails the proliferation of simulated realities that have become so pervasive in modern society that they supersede genuine experiences of reality (Michalski, 2020). Baudrillard introduced this idea in his influential work "Simulacra and Simulation," wherein he contends that the line between reality and simulation has blurred to indistinguishability. This phenomenon unfolds through a series of stages, starting with representing reality through images and symbols, a process he terms the "sign economy." In this stage, symbols and signs are crafted to stand for reality, serving as channels of communication and exchange.

The subsequent stage is the mass production of these signs, leading to what Baudrillard labels the "seriality" of images (Houston, 2004). Here, signs proliferate, becoming detached from their original referents, existing solely as replicas of replicas. Finally, the third stage involves the simulation of reality through these signs, termed the "simulacrum." In this phase, signs and symbols assume dominance in communication and exchange, overshadowing the authentic experience of reality.

Various factors drive the construction of hyperreality, including advancements in technology, the influence of media, and consumer culture (Mohammadi Vakil, 2023; Mohammed et al., 2022; YILMAZ, 2023). Technological progress enables the creation of increasingly lifelike simulations, such as video games and virtual reality experiences. The media plays a pivotal role in disseminating these simulations, perpetuating a feedback loop wherein simulations become more widespread and convincing. Consumer culture also contributes significantly to hyperreality construction, as it revolves around producing and consuming signs and symbols, generating desire and imbuing meaning (YILMAZ, 2023). Consequently, simulated experiences and products, such as theme parks and brand identities, proliferate as substitutes for authentic experiences and products.

In conclusion, hyperreality construction is a multifaceted and intricate phenomenon with profound implications for comprehending reality, identity, and power dynamics (Yasmeen, 2000). Understanding the underlying processes of hyperreality construction can empower us to navigate the intricate landscape of contemporary society more adeptly, striving to foster a more meaningful and genuine experience of the world.

How does it work? The hyperreality works by creating the perception listed: a) Digital purchasing is cheaper. b) Digital purchasing is easier. c) Digital purchasing has more discounts than offline shops. d) Digital purchasing has more rewards than offline purchasing. e) Digital cashback is rewarded currencies that offline shops do not have.

The concept of hyperreality serves as the underlying premise to influence buyers' purchasing behaviour in online shops. Specifically, buyers continue to hold constructed perceptions surrounding BTS goods, as outlined (Shyfa Mourizka Nadia, 2021): a) I only need the product of my idol (Nurhablisyah & Susanti, 2020) b) The product of my idol is better. c) The price of my idol goods is reasonable due to licensing.

In the context of BTS goods buyers, their purchasing behaviour deviates from the traditional perception of digital purchasing, which typically prioritises real discounts and lower prices. Instead, these buyers tend to make impulsive purchases driven by their desire to connect with their idols. The hyperreality surrounding BTS goods plays a significant role in influencing their perception of value. While a generally stuffed pillow may not hold much value for the average buyer, once it becomes associated with BTS through branding, it gains sentimental importance for fans, perceived as a means of getting closer to their beloved idol.

Turning our attention to Tokopedia, an Indonesian technology company that has grown into one of the country's largest e-commerce sites since its establishment in 2009 by William Tanuwijaya and Leontinus Alpha Edison. Tokopedia offers an extensive range of products through its online marketplace, encompassing electronics, fashion, beauty products, home appliances, and groceries. The platform also

facilitates service offerings, including flight tickets, train bookings, and hotel reservations. The platform's success can be attributed to its dedication to customer satisfaction, evident in its diverse product offerings catering to varied needs, thus sparing customers from navigating multiple online shops or physical stores (Fataron, 2020).

Tokopedia boasts a user-friendly interface that enhances the overall shopping experience for customers. With an efficient search function, customers can swiftly locate their desired products by employing specific keywords or filters, such as price range or brand. Additionally, the platform facilitates direct communication between customers and sellers through a chat feature, empowering customers to seek clarifications and make well-informed purchase decisions.

In terms of payment options, Tokopedia endeavours to accommodate diverse preferences. Customers can select from various payment methods, including bank transfer, credit/debit cards, e-wallets, and even cash on delivery, ensuring convenience and security. The platform's robust and secure payment system has bolstered customer trust, consequently bolstering sales and revenue.

Furthermore, Tokopedia is lauded for its commitment to efficient and reliable delivery services. Through partnerships with multiple logistics companies, the platform ensures timely and smooth deliveries to customers. Additionally, customers can track their orders, staying informed about the status of their deliveries, thereby reinforcing trust and encouraging repeat purchases.

Finally, Tokopedia's strong customer service team is dedicated to promptly addressing customer concerns. With a comprehensive help centre offering solutions to frequently asked questions and channels for reporting issues, customers can expect swift and practical assistance. Moreover, a customer service hotline facilitates quick and efficient problem resolution, culminating in a positive and satisfactory customer experience (Sasmita et al., 2021).

CONCLUSION

This research suggests that idol and franchise merchandise utilise the concept of "spiritual enthusiasm" as a marketing strategy to captivate the market. This phenomenon demonstrates the potent influence of spiritual fervour on consumer behaviour, similar to how individuals may feel compelled to purchase revered religious texts like the Holy Bible or the Holy Qur'an due to their veneration (Davymuka & Fedulova, 2020). In the case of BTS fans, their desire to establish a close connection with their idol, despite the unlikelihood of meeting them in person, resembles a long-distance relationship or the yearning for a divine presence. This emotional need and perception drive their impulsive purchases of non-essential items such as merchandise, transcending the utilitarian value of necessities like food, clothing, shelter, or money.

Tokopedia's implementation of features like discounts and zero delivery costs further fuels the impulsive buying tendencies of BTS goods

buyers. This could yield both positive and negative consequences. On the positive side, increased partnerships in education and business within Indonesia can spur economic growth and mitigate the risk of economic downturns through heightened consumer activity (Maclaran, 2020). However, on the negative side, excessive consumerism driven solely by pop culture trends could erode traditional Indonesian ideological values over time (Maclaran, 2020).

As an academic recommendation, the author suggests conducting more comprehensive research, delving into the community involved in selling these goods and exploring the associated policies and institutions supporting this selling system. This would offer a deeper understanding of the ecosystem surrounding idol and franchise merchandise sales. On a practical level, the author proposes expanding the distribution channels for these goods beyond online shops to include offline retail outlets. This diversification would contribute to the growth and enrichment of the K-pop cultural market.

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