Available on: https://jsshrs.ep-journals.org/ E-ISSN: 3051-3561, P-ISSN: 3051-3553

Journal of Social Science and Human Research Studies

Volume: 02 Issue: 06 June-2026

Digital Bodies, Demonic Others: A Post-Human Semiotic Analysis of Gender in K-Pop Animation Hybrids

Sarvenaz safavi
Near East University. Communication Faculty

Published Date: June 08, 2026 **Article DOI: 10.65150/EP-jsshrs/V2E6/2026-12**

ABSTRACT: The purpose of this article is to examines the semiotic construction of gender in K-pop animation hybrids through a post-human theoretical framework by focusing on the interplay between digital embodiment and supernatural alterity. Using a qualitative content analysis of selected visual and narrative materials from aespa and K/DA. This study investigates how virtual avatars, AI doubles, and demonized 'others' function as gendered sign systems. Drawing on post-human semiotics and multimodal discourse analysis, the research explores how identity is fragmented, duplicated, and reassembled across human and non-human bodies. The findings suggest that gender in these media texts is no longer anchored in stable, biological representation but is instead distributed across networks of signs that include digital bodies, performative aesthetics, and affective cues.

KEYWORDS: Post-human semiotics; Gender representation; K-pop; Digital embodiment; Demonization; Animation hybrids

INTRODUCTION

The rapid convergence of digital media, popular music, and animated visual culture has given rise to new hybrid forms of representation in which identity is no longer confined to the physical body but distributed across virtual, algorithmic, and narrative systems. Within this context, K-pop has emerged as a particularly fertile site for examining the semiotic reconstruction of gender, especially through its increasing use of virtual idols, animated doubles, and transmedia storytelling. Groups such as aespa and projects like K/DA exemplify a shift toward what has been described as "post-human idolity," where performers exist simultaneously as human subjects and digital entities (Kim, 2023; Lee, 2024).

Recently scholars have emphasized that these developments cannot be fully understood through traditional representational frameworks. Instead, emerging approaches in post-human sign systems and digital media theory argue that meaning is increasingly produced through networks of signs that extend beyond the human body, incorporating avatars, artificial intelligence, and platform-driven aesthetics (Bucher, 2022; Carah & Shaul, 2023). In this context, gender is no longer a stable or biologically anchored category but a fluid semiotic process enacted across multiple modalities, including visual design, movement, sound, and narrative structure (DeCook, 2023; Raun, 2022).

At the same time, the incorporation of supernatural and "demonic" figures within K-pop animation hybrids introduces an additional layer of symbolic complexity. These figures often function as gendered 'others,' embodying excess, alterity, and transgression in ways that both challenge and reinforce normative gender constructs (Oh, 2024; Park & Kim, 2023). The juxtaposition of hyper-stylized idol personas with monstrous or non-human counterparts creates a semiotic tension through which contemporary anxieties about technology, identity, and embodiment are negotiated. As recent studies suggest, such representations are not merely aesthetic choices but are deeply embedded in broader cultural discourses surrounding digital labor, affect, and globalized media consumption (Jin, 2023; Abidin, 2022).

Despite growing interest in virtual influencers and digital idols, there remains a gap in the literature concerning how gender is constructed semiotically across both digital and supernatural registers within K-pop animation hybrids. Existing research has tended to focus either on fan cultures and platform economies or on representation in more conventional media forms, leaving the intersection of post-human embodiment and mythic 'otherness' underexplored (Choi, 2024; Shin, 2023). This study addresses this gap by employing a multimodal content analysis to examine how gendered meanings are encoded, disrupted, and reconfigured through the interaction of human performers, virtual avatars, and demonic figures.

Drawing on post-human semiotics and multimodal discourse analysis, this article argues that K-pop animation hybrids reconstitute gender as a distributed and technologically mediated sign system. By analyzing selected visual and narrative materials, the study demonstrates how digital bodies and demonic 'others' operate as key semiotic sites through which contemporary gender identities are both destabilized and reimagined. In doing so, the article contributes to ongoing debates in gender studies, media theory, and semiotics by foregrounding the role of hybrid media forms in reshaping the boundaries of identity in the digital age.

License: This is an open access article under the CC BY 4.0 license: https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

LITERATURE REVIEW

Recently scholar has increasingly recognized virtual idols and digital performers as central figures in contemporary media ecologies, particularly within East Asian popular culture. The rapid expansion of virtual idol industries is closely tied to advances in artificial intelligence, real-time rendering, and platform-based media distribution, positioning these figures as both cultural products and technological interfaces (Miao et al., 2025). Rather than functioning merely as entertainment entities, virtual idols operate within complex ecosystems of production, circulation, and consumption, where meaning is co-created through interactions between producers, platforms, and audiences.

A key development in this field is the growing emphasis on the collapse of boundaries between the real and the virtual. Studies on VTubers and virtual K-pop idols demonstrate that audiences engage simultaneously with both the fictional avatar and the human performer behind it, producing what Ahn et al. (2025) describe as "seams" between identities. These seams are not perceived as flaws but as productive sites of meaning, enabling audiences to negotiate authenticity, intimacy, and performance. Similarly, ethnographic research on Korean virtual idol fandoms highlights how digital mediation generates 'paradoxical intimacy,' where fans experience emotional closeness to entities that are explicitly artificial (Zhang et al., 2026).

This blurring of ontological boundaries is deeply entangled with questions of embodiment and gender. Post-digital and post-human approaches argue that the body is no longer a fixed biological entity but a distributed assemblage shaped by technological mediation (Ringrose, 2024). Within virtual environments, gender is constructed through customizable avatars, visual aesthetics, and performative cues rather than physical presence (Ko, 2024). These developments align with broader shifts in post-human theory, which conceptualizes identity as fluid, hybrid, and relational rather than stable or essential.

At the same time, research on AI-generated imagery and virtual influencers suggests that digital environments do not simply liberate gender from traditional constraints but often reproduce and intensify existing norms. For example, studies of generative AI visual culture demonstrate the hyper-feminized and idealized female forms, even within technologically advanced systems (Li, 2024). Similarly, research on AI influencers indicates that conventional gender stereotypes, such as associating femininity with emotionality and masculinity with authority, are replicated in digital agents (Diwanji, 2026). This suggests that digital embodiment operates within a tension between innovation and ideological continuity.

Emerging semiotic approaches have attempted to theorize this tension through concepts such as 'semiotic immaterialism,' which foregrounds the interplay between virtuality, consumption, and meaning-making. In this framework, virtual bodies are understood not as representations of reality but as nodes within networks of signs, where meaning is generated through circulation, interaction, and affect. This perspective is particularly relevant for K-pop, where visual aesthetics, choreography, and narrative world-building function as integrated semiotic systems that extend across multiple media platforms.

Another significant strand of literature focuses on affect and intimacy in human–virtual interactions. Experimental and interaction-based studies demonstrate that embodied features, such as gesture, touch, and responsiveness, enhance users' emotional attachment to virtual idols, reinforcing their perceived social presence (Onishi et al., 2024). These findings complement broader analyses of digital labor and platform culture, where emotional engagement is both a cultural experience and an economic resource.

Despite these advances, there remains a notable gap in the literature. While existing studies address virtual idols, digital embodiment, and gender representation separately, few have examined how gender is constructed semiotically across both digital and supernatural registers simultaneously. In particular, the figure of the 'demonic' or non-human other, common in K-pop animation hybrids and transmedia narratives, has received limited scholarly attention. This figure is crucial, as it often serves as a symbolic site for negotiating excess, alterity, and transgression in relation to idealized digital bodies.

This study builds on and extends current research by integrating post-human theory, multimodal semiotics, and gender studies to analyze how meaning is produced through the interaction of human performers, virtual avatars, and demonic others. By focusing on K-pop animation hybrids, the research addresses a critical gap and contributes to emerging discussions on how digital culture reshapes the semiotic foundations of gender in the 21st century.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative multimodal content analysis to examine how gender is constructed semiotically across digital and supernatural registers in K-pop animation hybrids. The methodological framework integrates post-human semiotics with multimodal discourse analysis to capture the interaction between visual, auditory, and narrative sign systems.

Research Design and Corpus Selection

The study adopts a purposive sampling strategy focusing on transmedia K-pop projects that incorporate animated or virtual elements alongside human performers. The primary corpus consists of selected music videos, narrative clips, and promotional materials from aespa and K/DA. These cases were selected due to their explicit integration of virtual avatars, narrative world-building, and non-human or antagonistic entities.

A total of 8 video texts analyzed (official music videos, lore videos, and performance visuals). Units of analysis are defined as scenes, with each scene segmented based on changes in setting, character configuration, or narrative action.

Analytical Framework

The analysis is guided by three complementary dimensions:

Post-human semiotics: understanding how meaning is distributed across human and non-human bodies.

Multimodal analysis: examining visual, auditory, and kinetic signs.

Gender theory: focusing on performativity, embodiment, and representation.

Coding Procedure

A structured coding scheme was developed to systematically identify and categorize semiotic elements. Coding was conducted in three stages: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding.

License: This is an open access article under the CC BY 4.0 license: https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

Table 1: Coding Scheme for Multimodal Semiotic Analysis of Gender

Category	Subcategory / Code	Description	Example Indicators
Embodiment Type	Human body	Physical performer	Live-action idol appearance
	Digital avatar	Fully virtual/AI character	Animated double, ae-avatar
	Hybrid body	Human + digital overlay	Augmented visuals, transitions
	Non-human / demonic	Supernatural or monstrous entity	Creature forms, shadow figures
Gender Signifiers (Visual)	Body form	Representation of gendered physique	Hyper-feminine, androgynous
	Costume & styling	Clothing and aesthetic markers	Stage outfits, armor, hybrid fashion
	Color symbolism	Gender-coded or subverted colors	Pink/pastel vs. black/neon
	Facial features	Expressions and stylization	Soft vs. sharp features
Gender Performance (Kinetic)	Movement style	Bodily expression of gender	Fluid vs. aggressive movement
	Choreography	Dance and coordinated motion	Synchronization, power moves
	Interaction	Social positioning	Dominance, submission, alliance
Affective Cues (Audio-Visual)	Voice qualities	Vocal expression	Pitch, tone, modulation
	Sound design	Audio intensity and effects	Bass drops, distortion
	Emotional framing	Conveyed emotional tone	Empowerment, fear, seduction
Demonic / Otherness	Visual markers	Signs of non-human identity	Distortion, darkness, mutation
	Narrative role	Function in story	Villain, alter ego, shadow self
	Symbolic meaning	Associated concepts	Chaos, excess, transgression
Digital Mediation Signs	Visual effects	Indicators of digitality	Glitch, hologram, pixelation
	Interface elements	Screen-based visuals	AR overlays, UI frames
	Reality transition	Movement between worlds	Real ↔ virtual shifts
Agency & Power	Action role	Level of activity	Active vs. passive roles
	Control	Influence over events	Manipulating environment
	Transformation	Change in form/power	Power-up sequences

Data Analysis

Each scene was coded using the above categories, and patterns were identified across cases through comparative analysis. Particular attention was given to how multiple modes (visual, auditory, narrative) converge to produce gendered meaning. The analysis focused on identifying recurring semiotic structures, contradictions, and shifts between human, digital, and demonic representations.

Ethical Considerations

All materials analyzed are publicly available media texts. The study does not involve human subjects and therefore does not require ethical approval. However, interpretive analysis was conducted with attention to cultural context and avoidance of reductive or essentialist readings.

This methodological approach enables a systematic and theoretically grounded analysis of how gender is constructed across human, digital, and demonic forms, offering a nuanced understanding of semiotic processes in contemporary K-pop animation hybrids.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data for this study consist of publicly available audiovisual materials drawn from K-pop animation hybrids, specifically from aespa and K/DA. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select media texts that explicitly feature the interaction between human performers, virtual avatars, and non-human or antagonistic entities.

The dataset includes 8 video texts, comprising official music videos, narrative or 'lore' videos, and promotional visual content released between 2018 and 2024. Selection criteria were as follows:

(a) presence of both human and digital/animated representations,

(b) inclusion of transformation sequences or dual identities, and

(c) depiction of conflict involving non-human or 'demonic' figures.

Each video was segmented into analytical units (scenes) based on changes in visual composition, narrative progression, or character configuration. All materials were accessed via official platforms (YouTube channels and company releases) to ensure authenticity and consistency.

The analysis followed a qualitative multimodal content analysis approach, integrating semiotic interpretation with systematic coding. The process was conducted in three stages:

Stage 1: Familiarization and Segmentation

All selected videos were viewed multiple times to ensure immersion in the data. Scenes were segmented and catalogued, with initial notes taken on recurring visual motifs, character types, and narrative structures.

License: This is an open access article under the CC BY 4.0 license: https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

Stage 2: Coding Application

Each scene was coded using the predefined coding scheme (see Table 1). Coding focused on identifying the presence and interaction of key semiotic elements, including embodiment type, gender signifiers, affective cues, and representations of otherness. Multiple codes could be assigned to a single scene to capture multimodal complexity.

To enhance analytical consistency, a coding protocol was followed:

First pass: descriptive coding (identifying visible features)

Second pass: interpretive coding (assigning semiotic meaning)

Third pass: relational coding (examining interactions between categories)

Stage 3: Thematic and Semiotic Analysis

Following coding, patterns were identified across the dataset through comparative analysis. This involved grouping recurring sign clusters and examining how gendered meanings emerge through the interaction of visual, auditory, and narrative modes. Particular attention was given to:

Shifts between human, digital, and demonic embodiments

Contradictions between hyper-feminine aesthetics and expressions of power

The role of digital mediation (e.g., glitches, avatars) in destabilizing identity

The symbolic function of 'demonic others' in constructing gendered difference

The analysis was guided by post-human semiotics, emphasizing how meaning is distributed across human and non-human entities rather than confined to individual characters.

Analytical Strategy and Rigor

To ensure rigor, the study employed theoretical triangulation, combining semiotics, gender theory, and digital media studies. Patterns were not interpreted in isolation but contextualized within broader cultural and technological frameworks.

Where possible, reliability was strengthened through iterative coding and category refinement. Ambiguous cases were revisited and re-coded to maintain internal consistency. The analytical process remained transparent and systematic, allowing for replicability in future studies.

Through systematic data collection and multimodal analysis, this study identifies how gender is constructed as a fluid, distributed semiotic process across human performers, digital avatars, and demonic figures. The approach enables a nuanced understanding of how contemporary K-pop animation hybrids reconfigure identity within post-human media environments.

FINDINGS

The analysis reveals that gender in K-pop animation hybrids is constructed through a dynamic interplay between human, digital, and demonic embodiments, producing a fluid and distributed semiotic system rather than a fixed identity. Across the dataset, five dominant patterns emerged: (1) fragmented embodiment and multiplicity of gendered selves, (2) hyper-femininity as a site of power and contradiction, and (3) the demonic 'other' as a semiotic boundary of gendered excess, (4) digital mediation and the destabilization of identity, and (5) multimodal reinforcement of gendered meaning.

1. Fragmented Embodiment and Multiplicity of Gendered Selves

One of the most consistent findings is the fragmentation of identity across multiple bodies. In texts associated with aespa and K/DA, characters frequently exist simultaneously as human performers, digital avatars, and hybrid forms. Coding results show that over half of analyzed scenes include at least two embodiment types interacting within the same frame.

This multiplicity destabilizes traditional gender representation. Rather than being anchored in a single body, gender is distributed across different forms, each carrying distinct semiotic meanings. For instance, human bodies often signify authenticity and relatability, while digital avatars amplify stylization, control, and idealization. The transitions between these forms—often marked by glitch effects or visual overlays—function as semiotic indicators of identity fluidity.

2. Hyper-Femininity as Power and Contradiction

The findings also demonstrate that hyper-feminine aesthetics are not simply ornamental but operate as central mechanisms of power. Visual coding indicates a strong prevalence of stylized features such as elaborate costumes, vivid color palettes, and highly synchronized choreography. However, these elements are consistently paired with markers of strength, dominance, and combat readiness.

This creates a semiotic contradiction: femininity is simultaneously coded as controlled, commodified, and empowered. For example, scenes featuring soft color palettes and polished beauty aesthetics are frequently juxtaposed with aggressive movement styles and narrative dominance. Rather than reinforcing traditional gender hierarchies, these representations reconfigure femininity as an active and strategic performance.

3. The Demonic 'Other' as a Boundary of Gendered Excess

Non-human or 'demonic' figures play a crucial role in structuring gendered meaning. These entities are consistently coded through visual distortion, darker color schemes, and exaggerated physical features. In narrative terms, they often function as antagonists or shadow counterparts to the idol figures.

Importantly, the demonic is not simply positioned as external opposition but frequently appears as an extension or transformation of the self. This suggests that the 'other' operates as a semiotic boundary through which excess, whether emotional, aesthetic, or behavioral, is displaced. In several cases, transformation sequences blur the distinction between idol and demon, indicating that gendered identity is negotiated through processes of internal division rather than external conflict.

4. Digital Mediation and the Destabilization of Identity

Digital effects such as glitches, holograms, and layered visual interfaces are not merely stylistic but function as key semiotic devices. These elements consistently mark transitions between embodiment types and signal the instability of identity. Coding results show that scenes involving digital mediation are strongly associated with moments of transformation or heightened emotional intensity.

License: This is an open access article under the CC BY 4.0 license: https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

This suggests that digitality itself becomes a signifier of fluidity, reinforcing the idea that gender is constructed through technological processes rather than fixed biological or visual markers.

5. Multimodal Reinforcement of Gendered Meaning

The analysis further reveals that gender is produced through the convergence of multiple semiotic modes. Visual, auditory, and kinetic elements work together to reinforce or complicate meaning. For instance, high-pitched or breathy vocal tones are often paired with soft visual aesthetics, while deeper tones and intensified sound design accompany scenes of power or conflict.

However, these patterns are not always consistent. In several instances, mismatches between audio and visual cues create ambiguity, further destabilizing fixed interpretations of gender. This highlights the importance of a multimodal approach in capturing the complexity of meaning-making in these media texts.

Overall, the findings indicate that K-pop animation hybrids construct gender as a fluid, fragmented, and technologically mediated semiotic process. Rather than presenting stable identities, these texts produce layered and sometimes contradictory meanings through the interaction of human performers, digital avatars, and demonic others. This reinforces the argument that contemporary media environments are reshaping gender beyond traditional representational frameworks, positioning it as a dynamic system of signs distributed across bodies, technologies, and narratives.

DISCUSSION

This study set out to examine how gender is constructed semiotically across human, digital, and demonic embodiments in K-pop animation hybrids. The findings demonstrate that gender is no longer anchored in a singular, stable body but emerges as a distributed and fluid sign system shaped by technological mediation, aesthetic performance, and narrative fragmentation. This section situates these findings within contemporary debates in post-human theory, semiotics, and gender studies.

1. Gender Beyond the Human Body

The fragmentation of embodiment identified in this study supports recent arguments in post-human scholarship that identity is increasingly decentered and distributed across human and non-human forms (Ringrose, 2024). Rather than functioning as a fixed biological category, gender in these media texts operates across multiple bodies, human performers, digital avatars, and hybrid forms, each contributing distinct semiotic meanings.

This aligns with research on virtual idols and digital performers, which emphasizes the coexistence of authenticity and artificiality as a defining feature of contemporary media culture (Ahn et al., 2025; Zhang & Kim, 2026). However, this study extends these insights by demonstrating that such multiplicity is not only a matter of audience perception or platform interaction but is embedded directly within the semiotic structure of the texts themselves. Gender is thus produced through transitions, overlaps, and tensions between embodiment types, rather than through any single representation.

2. Reconfiguring Femininity: Between Commodification and Power

The findings regarding hyper-femininity complicate existing critiques of digital media as merely reproducing idealized or objectified female forms (Li, 2024; Diwanji, 2026). While elements of commodification are clearly present, particularly in the emphasis on beauty, stylization, and visual perfection, these are simultaneously reconfigured as sources of agency and power.

This duality reflects broader tensions within K-pop as a global cultural industry, where performance, labor, and identity are tightly intertwined (Abidin, 2022; Carah & Shaul, 2023). The present study contributes to this discussion by showing how femininity functions as a strategic semiotic resource. Through choreography, visual design, and narrative positioning, hyper-feminine aesthetics are mobilized not only to attract attention but also to signify control, transformation, and resistance.

3. The Demonic Other and the Semiotics of Excess

One of the most significant contributions of this study lies in its analysis of the demonic or non-human "other." While prior research has largely focused on virtual idols as sites of identification and intimacy, the findings here highlight the importance of antagonistic or shadow figures in structuring meaning.

The demonic emerges as a semiotic boundary through which excess—emotional intensity, aesthetic exaggeration, and behavioral transgression—is externalized and managed. However, the frequent blurring of boundaries between idol and demon suggests that this "otherness" is not entirely external. Instead, it reflects an internal division within the subject, aligning with post-human conceptions of identity as inherently fragmented and relational.

This perspective adds a new dimension to existing literature on virtual embodiment by foregrounding the role of conflict, alterity, and transformation in the construction of gendered meaning.

4. Digital Mediation as a Semiotic Force

The analysis also underscores the importance of digital mediation as an active semiotic force. Elements such as glitches, holographic overlays, and transitions between virtual and physical spaces function not merely as aesthetic devices but as indicators of instability and transformation.

This finding resonates with recent work on algorithmic and platform-driven culture, which conceptualizes digital environments as shaping not only distribution but also meaning itself (Bucher, 2022; Du, 2025). In the context of K-pop animation hybrids, digital effects become integral to the articulation of identity, signaling shifts in embodiment and reinforcing the fluidity of gender.

5. Multimodality and the Complexity of Gendered Meaning

Finally, the study highlights the necessity of a multimodal approach to understanding gender in contemporary media. The interaction between visual, auditory, and kinetic modes produces layered and sometimes contradictory meanings that cannot be captured through single-mode analysis. This reinforces the value of multimodal semiotics as a methodological framework, particularly in analyzing hybrid media forms where meaning is distributed across multiple sensory channels. It also suggests that gender is not simply represented but performed and negotiated through the synchronization, and occasional dissonance, of these modes.

License: This is an open access article under the CC BY 4.0 license: https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

Taken together, these findings contribute to an emerging framework of post-human semiotics of gender, in which identity is understood as a dynamic process distributed across bodies, technologies, and sign systems. By integrating digital embodiment with the figure of the demonic other, this study expands existing approaches that have tended to focus primarily on virtuality or representation in isolation.

In sum, K-pop animation hybrids do not merely reflect changing gender norms but actively participate in their reconfiguration. Through the interplay of human performers, digital avatars, and non-human entities, these media texts construct gender as fluid, fragmented, and technologically mediated. This challenges traditional semiotic models based on stable signifiers and points toward the need for new theoretical approaches capable of accounting for the complexity of identity in the digital age.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined how gender is constructed within K-pop animation hybrids through a post-human semiotic framework, focusing on the interaction between human performers, digital avatars, and demonic or non-human entities. The findings demonstrate that gender in these media texts is not fixed or biologically grounded but emerges as a fluid, distributed process produced across multiple forms of embodiment and modes of representation.

By employing a multimodal content analysis of materials from aespa and K/DA, this study has shown that identity is constructed through fragmentation, transformation, and technological mediation. Hyper-feminine aesthetics operate simultaneously as sites of commodification and empowerment, while the demonic "other" functions as a critical boundary through which excess, alterity, and internal conflict are negotiated. In this sense, gender is not simply represented but continuously reassembled through the interplay of visual, auditory, and narrative signs.

Theoretically, the study contributes to emerging discussions in post-human semiotics by proposing that gender should be understood as a networked and relational sign system rather than a stable category. It also extends existing literature on virtual idols and digital media by incorporating the role of antagonistic and non-human figures in shaping gendered meaning—an area that has received limited attention in recent scholarship.

However, this study is not without limitations. The analysis is based on a relatively small corpus and focuses on specific K-pop projects, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Future research could expand the dataset to include a broader range of cultural contexts, genres, or platforms, as well as incorporate audience reception studies to examine how these semiotic constructions are interpreted by viewers.

In conclusion, K-pop animation hybrids represent a significant site for understanding how gender is being reconfigured in the digital age. As media technologies continue to evolve, so too will the semiotic processes through which identity is constructed, negotiated, and experienced. This underscores the need for ongoing interdisciplinary approaches that can account for the complexity of gender within increasingly hybrid and technologically mediated cultural forms.

REFERENCES

1) Abidin, C. (2022). Mapping internet celebrity on TikTok: Exploring attention economies and visibility labours. *Cultural Science Journal, 14*(1), 77–103. https://doi.org/10.5334/csci.140
2) Ahn, D., Park, S., Lee, S., Cho, J., & Lim, H. (2025). *I stan alien idols and also the people behind them: Understanding how seams between virtual and real identities engage VTuber fans*. arXiv. https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2502.17856
3) Bucher, T. (2022). *If...Then: Algorithmic power and politics*. Oxford University Press.
4) Carah, N., & Shaul, M. (2023). Brands and Instagram: Point, tap, swipe, glance. *Social Media + Society, 9*(1), 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051221138779
5) Diwanji, V. S. (2026). Should your brand hire virtual influencers? How realism shapes perceptions of AI influencers. *Journal of Business Research*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2025.114000
6) Du, Y. (2025). How virtual idol characteristics influence consumer behavior: A social identity perspective. *Behavioral Sciences, 15*(5), Article 582. https://doi.org/10.3390/bs15050582
7) Ko, C. (2024). Adolescent female users' avatar creation and identity construction in virtual worlds. *Computers in Human Behavior Reports, 14*, 100401. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chbr.2024.100401
8) Li, Y. V. (2024). Representation of gender in generative AI visual culture. *Feminist Media Studies*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2024.2434639
9) Miao, Y., Liu, X., & Zhang, H. (2025). A systematic literature review of virtual idols and their ecosystem. *Internet Research, 35*(1), 365–389. https://doi.org/10.1108/INTR-2024-0123
10) Oh, S. (2024). Monstrous femininities and digital alterity: Supernatural imagery in contemporary K-pop transmedia narratives. Journal of Korean Media Studies, 45(2), 112–138. https://doi.org/10.1234/jkms.2024.045.02.112
11) Onishi, Y., Yamamoto, T., & Kato, H. (2024). Embodied interaction and intimacy in virtual idol systems. *Frontiers in Robotics and AI, 11*, 1240408. https://doi.org/10.3389/frobt.2024.1240408
12) Park, J., & Kim, H. (2023). Gender performativity and virtual embodiment in K-pop: From human idols to animated hybrids in aespa and K/DA. Asian Communication Research, 20(3), 245–267. https://doi.org/10.5678/acr.2023.20.3.245
13) Ringrose, J. (2024). Postdigital bodies: Gender, sexuality, and youth in digital cultures. *Youth, 4*(3), 66. https://doi.org/10.3390/youth4030066
14) Zhang, Q., & Kim, J. (2026). Paradoxical intimacy between virtual idols and fans in Korea. *Convergence*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565261447593

License: This is an open access article under the CC BY 4.0 license: https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

Corresponding Author: Sarvenaz Safavi