

K-Pop Photocards and Their Role in Fan Culture Through Emotional Attachment and Social Identity

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Abstract. Driven by the globalization of K-pop culture, photocards have developed from album inclusions into an independent collectible category with an active secondary market where prices may exceed their original costs. While existing research has examined virtual parasocial relationships between idols and fans, less attention has been paid to the material role of fan goods in mediating emotional and social interactions. Through a literature-based analysis, this study draws on psychology, sociology, and economics to examine the cultural significance of photocards within fan practices. In particular, it explores how photocards gain emotional meanings, how trading practices support fan interaction, and how everyday engagement with photocards shapes identity expression and group belonging. The findings show that photocards can shift from commercial products to personally meaningful objects through collecting, exchange, and display practices. Trading practices may facilitate social connections and emotional communication through reciprocity and social exchange, while display practices support identity expression and participation in shared fan cultures. Yet, these practices also involve commercial pressures, as uncertainty-based marketing strategies and FOMO may contribute to consumption pressure and anxiety among some fans. Thus, this study can broaden the understanding of fan culture by examining material practices alongside digital interactions, illustrating how photocards can serve as sources of emotional support while also being shaped by commercial and social forces.

Keywords: Photocards, K-pop fan culture, Material culture, Identity expression, Community belonging

1. Introduction

The global rise of K-pop has expanded its merchandise market, turning photocards from album inclusions into a distinct category of collectibles. Meanwhile, photocards have become increasingly prominent in secondary trading markets, where their resale prices can substantially exceed their original retail value. The demographic profile of K-pop fandom further highlights the relevance of this market: the average age of K-pop fans is around 23 years, with women constituting more than half of the fan population [1]. Prior research has largely focused on digital parasocial relationships between K-pop idols and fans, while how physical fan goods shape fans' emotional experiences has received limited scholarly attention. This study therefore focuses on young female K-pop fans aged 18 to 35, who are particularly engaged in emotional feedback and identity expression through fan

practices [2, 3]. Photocard exchange is not merely an economic activity; it also facilitates emotional communication and the expression of shared identities among fans. By focusing primarily on digital interactions, existing studies have overlooked how physical objects participate in and shape fans' emotional experiences. Accordingly, this paper examines how photocards shift from commodities to objects of emotional attachment, and how their exchange shapes fan interactions. These everyday practices also shape fan identity and strengthen a sense of group belonging.

2. K-pop photocards in fan consumption and emotional attachment

2.1. Issuance methods and market circulation

Entertainment companies distribute photocards through album inclusions, fan-signing event benefits, and limited editions. Among these methods, album photocards are often randomly inserted, so fans cannot know which card they will receive before opening the album. This randomness creates an uncertain consumption experience that resembles blind-box consumption. Blind-box studies suggest that uncertainty can increase consumer expectations and affect purchasing behaviour [4, 5]. However, this evidence does not establish the same effect in the photocard market, as photocards are tied to specific idols and fan preferences rather than being valued solely for the surprise of the product itself. Photocards also vary in rarity through standard, event-specific, and limited editions, allowing scarcity to influence their perceived value and purchase intention [5].

Beyond the initial purchase, these differences in rarity shape how photocards circulate in the secondary market. Fans buy, sell, and exchange photocards via online platforms such as X, with prices influenced by rarity, idol popularity, demand, and condition. Although limited releases may resemble hunger marketing, there is insufficient evidence to conclude that entertainment companies deliberately restrict photocard supply to manipulate demand. It is therefore more appropriate to treat limited issuance as a potential scarcity-based strategy rather than an established form of hunger marketing. Through secondary trading, photocards can gain value beyond their original retail price while also taking on personal significance via fans' collecting and exchange practices.

2.2. Emotional attachment and value transformation of photocards

Fans actively assign meaning to photocards through everyday practices such as carrying, decorating, displaying, and preserving them. Although a photocard is initially a standardized printed product, repeated engagement with it can associate the object with personal memories and emotions, giving it significance beyond its material form. Besides, photocards can serve as tangible representations of the otherwise intangible relationship between idols and fans. This connection can be understood through parasocial interaction theory, which describes the relationship between fans and media figures as one-sided [6]. This dynamic is evident in the practice of some Indonesian fans who refer to their photocards as "friends" on social media, suggesting that these objects can become part of their everyday emotional practices [2].

Moreover, this emotional significance also shapes fans' evaluation of photocards, as perceived value affects consumer purchase decisions through emotional, social, and symbolic dimensions [7]. For photocard collectors, emotional value may come from connections with preferred idols, social value from fan community recognition, and symbolic value from fan identity. These dimensions help explain why some photocards can command prices far above their production costs. Similarly, Bowlby's attachment theory has been extended to consumer research to examine emotional bonds between people and objects [8]. In relation to photocards, this perspective may help explain fans'

lasting emotional bonds with particular cards, but this remains a theoretical extension rather than evidence that photocards fulfill the same psychological roles as interpersonal attachment figures.

Through these practices, photocards can therefore shift from standardized merchandise to objects associated with personal memories, emotional connections, and fan identity. As these cards enter secondary trading, these meanings remain attached to them, providing a basis for examining how photocard exchange facilitates social interaction and emotional communication among fans.

3. The photocard exchange and the formation of fan social relations

3.1. The formation and operation of idol photocard exchange practices

The randomized distribution is one factor encouraging photocard exchange, as fans may receive duplicate cards while lacking desired ones. In response to this mismatch, photocard exchanges can take different forms. Ordinary market transactions involve buying and selling cards, with prices shaped mainly by rarity, idol popularity, and demand. By contrast, direct swaps involve exchanging unwanted or duplicate cards for desired ones, with reciprocity and perceived equivalence playing a central role. Beyond these exchanges, gift-embedded exchanges may include handwritten letters, decorated packaging, or small gifts, making them more personal than simple transactions.

These differences become clearer when photocard exchange is viewed through gift economy and social exchange theory. From a gift economy perspective, exchanges that include personal messages or additional gifts extend beyond the transfer of commodities and can create social ties among fans [9]. Mauss identifies giving, receiving, and reciprocating as key obligations in gift exchange [9]. In this sense, gift-embedded exchanges may strengthen social ties through reciprocity. This relational dimension can also be understood via social exchange theory, which suggests that fans invest time and effort in exchange practices in return for social interaction, recognition, or emotional rewards [10]. Such reciprocal interactions can help maintain relationships among fans. This is also reflected in Desnika and Tambunan's finding that photocard exchange can connect fan communities across geographical boundaries [2]. Therefore, ordinary transactions remain primarily market-based, while direct swaps rely on reciprocity, while gift-embedded exchanges are more interpersonal.

3.2. Emotional connections and relationship maintenance in photocard exchanges

Through photocard exchange, fans with shared interests can interact with one another beyond the context of individual consumption [2, 3]. More specifically, Desnika and Tambunan indicate that photocard trading places fans within broader networks of social relationships [3]. At the individual level, a transaction may begin as a brief interaction between strangers, but repeated exchanges can create opportunities for continued contact and relationship maintenance. Moreover, exchanges may include gifts, handwritten notes, or other friendly gestures, which add a personal dimension to an otherwise transactional interaction [9]. In turn, these practices can make subsequent exchanges more personal and relational, rather than simple transfers of photocards.

As interaction continues, fans may maintain contact through social media platforms such as X or Instagram and develop more sustained social connections. However, repeated trading does not necessarily lead to friendship. Instead, it may provide a low-intensity form of social contact through which trust, familiarity, and mutual recognition can gradually be maintained. At a broader level, the accumulation of these individual interactions connects fans beyond isolated transactions and may contribute to a shared sense of community and belonging. Thus, photocard exchange serves both to obtain desired cards and to maintain social ties within the fan community.

4. Photocard practices and the construction of fan identity and group belonging

4.1. Photocard display and fan identity expression

Fans display photocards on social media, making private collecting a form of public self-expression. In this practice, photocards can reflect fans' preferences, emotional attachment, and involvement in K-pop. This use of possessions as a form of identity expression is consistent with Belk's argument that possessions can become part of the extended self, allowing individuals to express aspects of their identity through the objects they own [11]. From this perspective, a photocard collection can reflect a fan's preferences and fandom experiences. By sharing the collection online, fans make these aspects of their identity visible to others.

This public display also provides opportunities for social recognition. In Goffman's framework, self-presentation involves selectively presenting oneself to others in social settings [12]. Similarly, fans may choose particular photocards, arrangements, or decorations to communicate their interests and personal style. Bourdieu's theory of taste further suggests that aesthetic preferences can reflect cultural knowledge and distinguish individuals within a social group [13]. For photocard fans, the way collections are selected and displayed may therefore communicate both personal taste and familiarity with the fandom. In this sense, display is not necessarily about demonstrating wealth or status; instead, it allows fans to express their identities and gain recognition from others who share similar interests.

4.2. Photocard culture and fan group belonging

According to participatory culture, it is a cultural form in which the public actively produces and circulates content, sharing and co-creating value rather than acting solely as consumers [14]. In photocard communities, fans share collecting experiences, exchange information, and create content on social media. Such practices may begin as individual forms of expression, such as decorating photocard packaging with ribbons. As these practices are shared and adopted by other fans, they may become established within the community. In turn, photocards can acquire shared cultural meanings through these practices. This process can be understood through Appadurai's concept of singularization, which explains how objects move beyond their commodity status and take on specific meanings in social contexts [15]. Accordingly, photocards can function as material markers of shared experiences and interests, helping fans recognize others who participate in the same fan culture.

Alongside these material objects, specialized terms such as Pre-Order Benefit also function as cultural codes within photocard communities [2]. Through familiarity with these terms, fans can recognize others with shared interests and distinguish insiders from outsiders within the fandom. This process of group recognition can be further understood through social identity theory, which explains how individuals define themselves through group membership and identify with people they perceive as belonging to the same group [16]. For K-pop fans, identifying as a particular idol's fan and participating in shared practices can therefore strengthen a sense of group belonging. This sense of belonging can also extend beyond photocard exchange to activities such as birthday café events and other fan support activities [2, 3]. Taken together, shared objects, practices, and cultural terms help fans recognize one another and participate in a shared fan culture.

5. The effects of photocard culture on fan experience and behavior

5.1. The positive side: emotional support, community belonging and self-achievement

During stressful periods, photocards may provide emotional comfort and a sense of continuity in fans' everyday lives [8]. Similarly, collecting and organizing photocards can give fans a sense of control through a structured and personally meaningful activity, especially during uncertain periods. In photocard communities, fans can build social connections and receive mutual support, which may reduce loneliness and strengthen their sense of belonging. At the same time, engaging with photocard culture can allow young female fans aged 18 to 35 to explore their aesthetic preferences, values, and social identities. Through participatory practices, fans may also develop skills in areas such as writing, photography, communication, and content creation, some of which can be applied beyond fandom contexts [15]. In this sense, photocard culture can provide not only emotional and social support but also opportunities for personal development and self-achievement.

5.2. The negative side: overconsumption, anxiety and identity constraints

By randomizing photocard distribution, retailers create an uncertain purchasing experience similar to blind-box consumption. Existing studies of blind-box products indicate that such uncertainty may influence purchasing behaviour [4]. However, this does not mean that all repeated or excessive purchases are the same. Repeat purchasing refers to buying multiple albums or products to obtain a desired photocard, which may result from random inclusion. In contrast, impulse buying involves unplanned purchases triggered by immediate emotional responses. In this case, frequent exposure to rare or desirable cards on social media may increase FOMO, defined as a persistent concern that others are experiencing rewarding activities without oneself [17]. Indeed, research has found that FOMO is a strong predictor of impulse buying, particularly among young women [18]. Unlike these purchase patterns, compulsive buying involves repeated and excessive purchasing that is difficult to control and may be associated with psychological or social pressures. In photocard communities, concerns about maintaining one's position within the fan community may influence this behaviour.

Thus, these three patterns describe different forms of consumption rather than a single process: repeat purchasing involves obtaining desired cards, impulse buying involves unplanned purchases, and compulsive buying involves difficulty controlling consumption. While randomized distribution may encourage repeat purchases, and FOMO may contribute to impulse buying, these mechanisms should not be treated as equivalent to compulsive buying. Therefore, photocard culture can provide support and belonging while also generating consumption pressure and anxiety.

6. Conclusion

This paper explores how K-pop photocards develop from commercial products into material objects carrying emotional, social, and cultural meanings. Through the analysis of photocard circulation, exchange practices, display behaviours, and community participation, this study demonstrates that photocards can provide a tangible connection between fans and idols, while everyday collecting practices transform standardized products into objects with personal meaning. Photocard exchanges further demonstrate that these objects are not only traded for economic purposes but also facilitate social interaction, emotional communication, and community connection through practices such as reciprocal exchange and gift-giving. In addition, photocard display and related fan practices allow individuals to express personal identity, recognize shared interests, and participate in a collective fan

culture. This study extends existing discussions of fan culture from digital interactions to the material dimension of fandom, showing how photocards can provide emotional support while also creating consumption pressures. However, this study has several limitations. It focuses primarily on young female fans aged 18 to 35, and therefore may not fully represent the experiences of other groups, like male fans or younger fans. Furthermore, the findings are based on the K-pop context, while other fan cultures, such as animation or gaming communities, may involve different forms of collecting, exchange, and identity practices. Future research could examine diverse fan groups and compare different cultural contexts to further understand how material objects shape emotional connections and community formation.

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