'AESPA' AND AUTOMATION IN THE K-POP INDUSTRY

CASE SUMMARY

Ever since the success of korean boyband 'Seo-Taiji and Boys' in the 90s, the South Korean Government has been building a music empire through its investment into its k-pop industry. In order to become a k-pop "idol", individuals undergo a rigorous traineeship from a young age before being allocated into a group to debut. This process is known for being extremely quantified and profit-oriented, pushing their idols to unrealistic standards of perfection in performance, behaviour and beauty.

However, SM entertainment is increasing this standardisation with the launch of their new girlgroup "Aespa". Aespa's new defining characteristic is the integration of AI avatars for each member that appear in their music videos, and that fans can download and chat to on their own devices. SM entertainment CEO Lee Soo-man has stated that he thinks the integration of AI and robots is the future of the music industry, transcending between the real world and virtual world.

I'm addicted 끊임없이
말을 걸어주는 나의 에스파
이런 교감, 너의 존잰 날
다른 차원으로 이끌었지

I'm addicted endlessly
Talking to me, my aespa
This communion, your existence brings me
To another dimension
Lyrics from aespa's new debut single "Black Mamba"

THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY

Virtual bodies, in this case, the avatars, are seen as innovations that can exceed what is achievable naturally through the human body. In this instance, avatars are forming a metaphorical bridge between artists and their fans at any given time. This technology has allowed fans a closer relationship than was previously possible, for example, fans can now be involved in the music production process and can even create a personalised music experience. One could argue that these avatars are tools used to 'fortify and sustain the human organism' (Mumford, 1934).

Equally, it could be viewed as greater than this, as one could view the avatars as surpassing the role of the artists. Through these avatars, fans are deriving excitement, happiness and friendship in a new personalised form. Social relations have been entirely shifted, emotions that once one would only be associated with human interaction are being achieved and even enhanced through the interaction of this technology.

'By modifying one's body, either via "legitimate" technoscientific improvement or alternative physical reappropriation, the body is instituted a priori as a borderless entity, finding diverse possibilities of recreation, reconstruction, and remodelling. In such a way individuals can experience the world and its sensations in a new way, at the same time erecting their identity' (Duarte, 2014)

"The future that I envision will be defined by a world of celebrities and robots. With the global pandemic, the whole world is practicing social distancing. As people spend more time at home, their interest and needs for celebrity and entertainment are only growing higher,"

- SM entertainment CEO Lee Soo Man .

The question remains, have these avatars entirely overtake the role of the artist and will human obsolescence be achieved in the K-Pop industry? For this to be the case, technology will need to be able to achieve complete automation. This is an industry that places intense pressure on artists to produce new music, maintain fan interaction and focus on body image. These demands may not be sustainable over the long run for a single or group of persons, therefore the industry could turn to this technology to satisfy the needs of the consumer.

I에스파는 나야
둘이 될 수 없어
Monochrome to colors
이건 Evo, Evolution

I'm the aespa
There can't be two
Monochrome to colors
This is Evo, Evolution
Lyrics from aespa's new debut single "Black Mamba"

THE ROLE OF DIFFERENCE:

WHY THE USE OF AI DISPROPORTIONATELY HARMS FEMALE IDOLS

The role of difference, as outlined by Zuboff (1989) looks at how the growth of technology affects groups of people in different ways, and often unfairly. The significance of the integration of this AI technology with a female group represents how aesthetic labour is often gendered. Dean (2005) explores how female performers have to embody more aesthetic labour than their male counterparts in order to be successful in the field. Aespa's use of AI represents the subsumption of aesthetic labour by technology.

The avatars represent their most ideal and ultimately unrealistic facial features and body proportions, often appearing much skinnier than their human counterparts. By removing natural imperfections to create a technologically created 'ideal', the technology adds additional pressure on the human idols and ultimately their female fans as well. Han and Kim's (2020) study on body image among Korean kindergartners concluded that K-pop media has damaged body image among young girls, and the aespa AI's unrealistic body aesthetic will likely worsen female body image in Korea going into the future.

Warhurst and Nickson (2009) take this gendered aesthetic work further and discuss the transformation of aesthetics work as sexualised work in interactive service industries like music. There are concerns surrounding the sexualisation of aespa's avatars after they have been downloaded by fans. The k-pop industry also has a dark history with "deepfake" pornography - where AI is used to superimpose female idol's faces onto pornographic content (Chen, 2019). There is concern that the modelling of the avatars off of real women will allow them to be easily used in deepfake pornography, further adding to the objectification of female k-pop idols.

Many have noted that the AE Avatar technology makes the idols look more white than their human counterparts, and this is due to the technology being based on european features and beauty standards.

I'm ejected
선함 만으론
너의 거대함을 이기지 못해
I'm exhausted
너의 존잰 모든
탐욕들을 먹고 자라 났지

I'm ejected
Good is not enough
To break your greatness
I'm exhausted
Your existence has grown
Swallowing all of the greed
Lyrics from aespa's new debut single "Black Mamba"

THE VIRTUALISATION OF CELEBRITIES

Virtualization is commonly understood as creating a representation of a physical entity, either based on software or virtual. In this case, creators of aespa virtualize their appearance, to better fit the "beauty standard" supposed of singers, therefore making them stand out. This virtualization of the artists transforms their labour into "virtual work" (Cherry, 2011). However, this virtualization ultimately "hides" the workers, dividing the artists (from their fans point of view) between the avatar performing the work and the singer producing the song.

The avatars transcend the natural form of the body of the aespa members into the digital world. However, through this transcendence, the job of the singers is degraded, as part of the singers job is also reaching out to the fans, and adding their own personal stories. The degradation of labour occurs in which workers are no longer owners of their work, and thus alienated from and not credited for their contributions (Braverman, 1979). As Braverman describes, in a capitalist form of production, the pursuit for profit and innovation alienates the worker, as their intentions fail to align. The virtualisation of aespa changes the way in which artists perform and audiences consume music.

> "THIS GROUP IS WHAT I'VE DREAMED OF AS IT PROJECTS A FUTURE WORLD CENTERED ON CELEBRITIES AND AVATARS, TRANSCENDING BOUNDARIES BETWEEN THE REAL AND VIRTUAL WORLDS,"
> - SM ENTERTAINMENT CEO LEE SOO MAN .

This process focuses upon reaching perfection, becoming transhuman and achieving tasks which humans are not physically capable of. The benefit of avatars is that they can be modified at a whim, and therefore be constantly altered. Moreover, through the integration of this technology, fans are now able to engage in social interactions with their idols, in a personable manner. However these social interactions lack the requirements of a relationship: consensuality. The avatar is programmed to interact with fans regardless of the nature of conversation, blurring the line between virtual life and reality.

AXIOLOGY OF HUMAN LIFE

In favour of Danaher's (2019) proposition #3, Integrating ourselves with technology, Donna Harraway explored the idea of how **cybernetics** and **digitisation** has changed what it means to be male/female – or any 'kind' of human. In her 1985 Cyborg Manifesto, she said that "By the late twentieth century, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorised and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism—in short, cyborgs." She examined the way technology and information link people around the world to a society driven by prescience, exploitation and solidarity. In hindsight, we must therefore acknowledge that the prospect of technology rendering human behaviour obsolete has already begun, and has been ongoing for many years.

Furthermore, I ask you to humour the worst-case-scenario - total subsumption of Avatar technology that inspires an active technological utopia. Think SIMS - a series of life simulation video games where routines and relationships are predictable, consistent and perpetual. Well, such society is far closer than you think. Terminus AI City Operating System   (TACOS) in Chongqing, for example, is an upcoming sustainable Chinese city which is destined to be entirely operated by an artificial intelligence system. This community aims to achieve perfect harmony, in which human-humans and AI humans live together **as one**. This example stimulates Danaher's 4th proposition - building a virtual utopia, where we submit our human selves to a virtual realm, built upon technological infrastructure. Would such society not exemplify the imminence of human obsolescence in the workplace?

A MACAT ANALYSIS
DONNA HARAWAY'S
A CYBORG MANIFESTO

John Danaher

AUTOMATION AND
UTOPIA
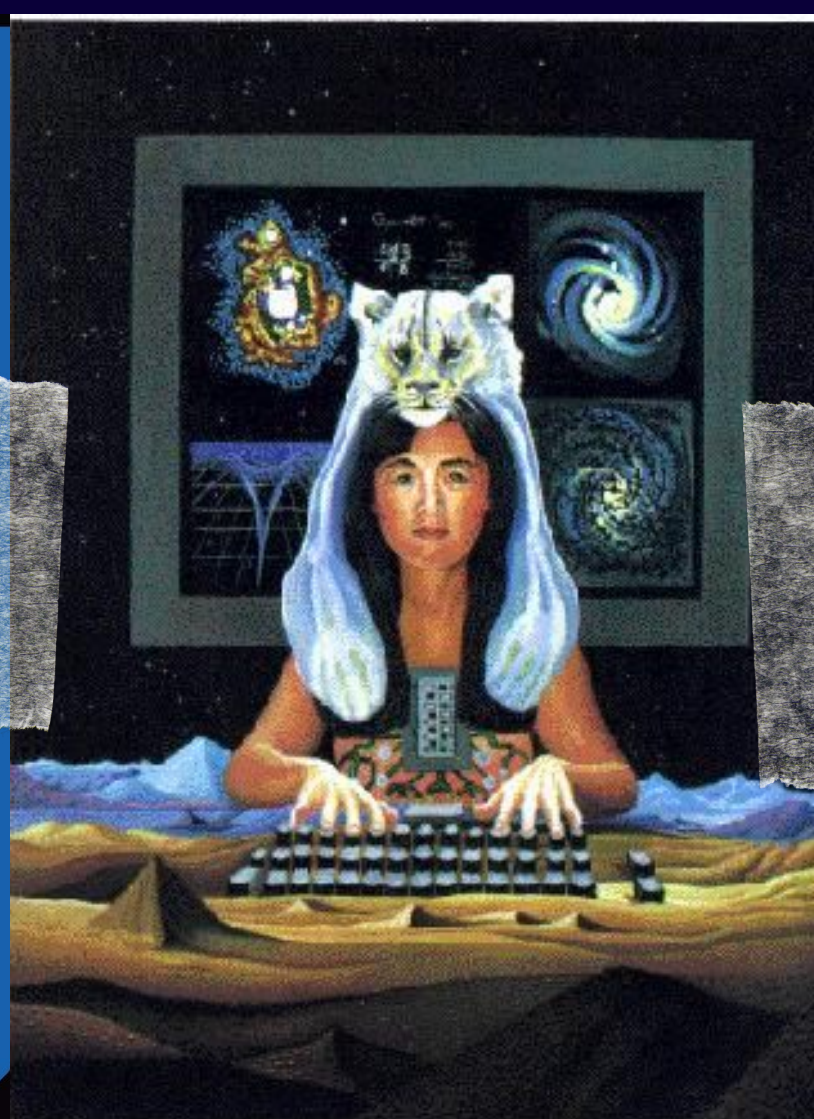
AESPA FUTURE?

Human obsolescence in the music industry is still very much in the distance. The ecstasy that was once felt from **live** music in a pre-COVID world can **never** be forgotten - artists will remain loved, idolised, venerated by their fans for years to come.

The subsumption of products such as Avatar-like performers requires patience, sensitivity and major culture/system change. BUT, the kinetic nature of the music industry inspires **innovation**, stimulates **uniqueness** and rewards **ambition - t**he perfect environment for a dogma waiting to be challenged.

거울 속의 나는 네가 아닐까?
일그러져버린 환영인 걸까?
다시 너와 연결될 수 있다면
너를 만나고 싶어 이
제모든 걸 삼켜버릴

Is me in the mirror you?
Is it just a distorted vision?
If I could connect with you again
I want to meet you now
It will swallow everything
Lyrics from aespa's new debut single "Black Mamba"

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GROUP 5

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