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REAL BUT FAKE, REAL BECAUSE FAKE: TECHNOLOGICALLY AUGMENTED K-POP IDOLS AND META-AUTHENTICITY

Do Own (Donna) Kim
University of Illinois at Chicago

Introduction

“Hi, H. I.,” greets the two heavily filtered faces of JHo and Tan, the duo from the K-pop idol group “Mad Monster”. Six billion global fans, song collaboration with three famous Justins—Timberlake, Bieber, and Trudeau, and the first NFT album in Korea that has been traded for around \$4,500 are some of the unconfirmed achievements that adorn the group’s supposed fame. According to the self-claimed fans in YouTube comments, Mad Monster is the most authentic K-pop idol group there is despite their “natural” autotune singing voice, highly curated “genuine” fan interactions—such as their “cool” signature move to spell out all (but only if it is easy) English words like “Hi, H. I.,” and their “born beautiful” heavily filtered faces that occasionally morph back into the original whenever the members “mistakenly” disturb the AR filter sync. These fans, both Korean and international, profusely deny—and even claim to sue against those who propagate—the so-called conspiracy that Mad Monster is somehow related to the “unattractive”, “old” (by K-pop idol standards), and “untalented” comedic duo Lee Chang Ho and Kwak Bum. While according to their own lore, Mad Monster has been famous all along with its six billion global fans, most Korean public got to know them through their V-logs and music videos on the YouTube channel “Bbangsongguk” or through TV music shows on Korea’s major broadcasting stations after they became Internet famous.

Through the case of Mad Monster, I explore the participatory culture in the supposedly revolutionary proliferation of “humanlike, realistic” digital technologies by drawing on the concept of *meta-authenticity* (Kim, 2022), loosely defined as the desire or achievement of authenticity in practices of inauthenticity. Increasing social integration of artificial agents and augmentative tools, such as ChatGPT and DALL·E, have been approached as groundbreaking, including in ways that suppose liberation from bodies, places, institutions, and even “being human” (Brantner & Saurwein, 2021; Hong, 2021). While the “cyborg” (Haraway, 1991) technological shift has shaken traditional ontological binaries—e.g., the hierarchical separation between humans and non- or lesser-than-

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humans (Braidotti, 2013; Chasin, 1995), the grounds that enabled their historical perpetuation remain yet to be broken: systematic power relations persist, at times unchecked under the flashy banner of technological novelty. However revolutionary in technical terms, technological developments do not equate social, cultural revolutions.

Case: Mad Monster

Therefore, I focus on the implications of these “revolutionary” artificial cyborgs for human practices and cultures, not to re-establish the human-nonhuman binary but to illuminate the persisting human presence and involvement—yet physical, place-bound, sociotechnical, and meaningful. This article investigates how Mad Monster’s authenticity is achieved through collective practices around their blatantly “inauthentic” technological augmentations like extreme facial and voice filters—not despite them—by qualitatively studying their transmedia content (e.g., Bbongsoonguk, 2021) and fans’ digital participation. In the conventional sense, Mad Monster does not exist “in real life” as technologically augmented “fake” figures. However, they do exist; they are animated through the comedians’ bodily performances, through their fans’ voluntary co-construction of their personas via star-fan and fan-fan interactions, through existing K-pop industry practices and Internet cultures that create tropes and allow for their play on them, and through commercial parties that unironically capitalize on Mad Monster and fans’ slights on how over-the-top technological augmentation and presentation derives from inauthentic capitalist interests. The “joke” and the pull of Mad Monster is that while their technological augmentation stamps them as “inauthentic” and “not human”, all else points towards authenticity—they are otherwise no different from “human” idols. If anything, their “inauthentic” artificiality added to their relative realness over “real” idols. Those who were not able to identify their technological enhancements and believed them to have the bodies represented on videos showed genuine confusion at their appeal and popularity, particularly due to all participating parties’ contribution to their fabricated history-in-making. The Mad Monster universe was co-managed: by the comedy duo, their fans, existing institutions, and commercial interests—the locus of their authenticity was in collaborative performances.

To be more specific, in the simplest, producer-focused sense, Mad Monster can be described as a series of parodic comedic sketches of the domestic and international K-pop industry and their fandom cultures by two Korean comedians Lee Chang Ho and Kwak Bum. However, the level of detailed transmedia presentation, the necessity of make-believe participation of the fans, and legacy media and commercial parties’ yield to their playfulness (e.g., broadcasts adopting blatant face filter edits specifically for them) hints at how the notion and forms of producer- or product-focused authenticity have shifted in the contemporary digital media ecology (Jenkins, 2013). In particular, the public’s welcome acceptance of the parodic easter eggs on K-pop cultures and Mad Monster’s collaboration with AR filter camera app Snow—(in)famous in Korean popular discourse for its capacity for natural to “unreal” beautification—highlights how their authenticity is co-constructed from both existing expectations around authentic performances for humans and their presumed inauthentic state (Kim, 2022; cf., Banet-Weiser, 2021). Moreover, their success was amid the hopeless lamentation around the suspected end of Korea’s comedy industry, marked by the unexpected discontinuance of Korea’s most esteemed legacy media comedy show *Gag Concert* (1999-2020; akin

to *SNL*). Mad Monster's fans warmly welcomed the now freelancing comedians by saying that YouTube and social media-based participatory formats make their comedic acts more "authentic" than what was available through legacy media.

Key Implications and Conclusion

On one hand, Mad Monster is a case of contemporary meta-authenticity that demands a shift of focus from the state of technological sophistication to collaborative performances around it; how "humanlike" or technologically augmented cyborgs are involved in social spheres matters more than what they are. This encourages the embracement of engagements with technological social actors, or at the least their relational effects. On the other, their success as "fake but/thus real" AR-filtered, autotuned celebrities warns us. It reminds us of how diverse humans' crucial contributions can be easily hidden in cyborg phenomena that stress their technological components, and how accountability can be diverted. Unlike "human" idols who face strict public policing, they can claim their "inauthentic" technological origin—i.e., "not real anyways"—in instances of scandalous events, or simply disappear. While some of Mad Monster's key contributors, the two comedians, are easily identifiable, the process of demanding responsibility can be more complex with other "humanlike" or augmented cyborgs, such as AI agents like ChatGPT, that further obscure human involvement (e.g., Eubanks, 2018; Kang, 2023; Smits & Wevers, 2021). Lastly, they may no longer (not) simply be a tongue-in-cheek novelty or a "cool" experiment when they replicate, not subvert, dominant structures. This returns to the first point; a state-focused lens may diminish how their role and discursive practices can further normalize existing power relations, not simply by affirming them through replication but by making less conspicuous their contributions to value production and exploitative patterns. The revolutionary potential of cyborgs rests not in technical achievements but in the collaborations of the actors involved: questioning, shaking, and breaking the ground (Jenkins et al., 2020).

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