EXPLORING THE NEXUS OF K-POP DANCE CHALLENGES: CHILDREN'S K-POP DREAM, INTERNET STARDOM, AND LABOR IN THE EVOLVING CULTURE INDUSTRY

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Introduction

K-pop dance challenges are a new burgeoning cultural phenomenon in short-form media culture, where K-pop idols replicate a choreographic move from their latest songs (Abidin & Lee, 2023). As the global appeal of K-pop intertwines with the proliferation of short-form media platforms like Instagram Reels, TikTok, and YouTube Shorts, these K-pop dance challenges have now been ingrained in the daily lives of young people worldwide, particularly in the Asia Pacific region.

Among these challenges, there is a notable presence of children (under 13 years old). Despite many social media platforms' age-gating policies requiring users to be at least 13 years old to create an account (eSafety Commissioner, 2023), children casually engage in the trending challenges for fun, sharing videos of themselves participating alone or with friends. Parents also join this trend by filming and posting short-form videos of their young children performing the K-pop challenges. Also, third parties, such as child influencer agencies or K-pop idol agencies, leverage these challenges as a marketing tool to promote their K-pop idol training systems, or educators incorporate them as pedagogical resources.

By interrogating the popularity of this phenomenon within the context of evolving culture industries, including influencer and K-pop industries, this study discusses how children are positioned in this emerging cultural landscape within the Asia Pacific region. I discuss pertinent issues surrounding children's agency and wellbeing, such as

children's digital labor and the subsequent commodification of childhood innocence in the industry. This study is based on a 4-year ethnographic observation of children's K-pop dance challenges in the Asia Pacific region. It draws on an extended data set comprising social media posts of K-pop dance challenges featuring children, blog entries from online mom communities discussing K-pop training programs, and field notes gathered during my traditional ethnography conducted at K-pop busking sites in Korea and Australia.

K-pop dance challenges: children's new peer culture for the K-pop dream

In tandem with glamorous images and the global popularity of K-pop idols as well as the considerable wealth amassed by successful global K-pop figures, becoming a K-pop idol has been celebrated widely in society (Lee, 2018). K-pop idols have been endorsed as "role models" for children (Kim, 2018; Lee, 2018) and as "pride" for parents and their respective countries (Chung, 2022; Ho, 2012; Kim, 2011). Consequently, both the influencer industry and traditional K-pop industry have actively adapted their business strategies to groom new idols in the contemporary social media landscape. For example, the K-pop industry now seeks out internet-famous child personalities with a substantial following and socially desirable appearances and trains them for their next K-pop idol launching (Lee et al, under review). Similarly, the influencer industries across the Asia Pacific region, mainly in Korea, Japan, and China, have introduced "K-pop academy programs" aimed at nurturing children into child influencers and debuting "child idol" groups that serve as stepping stones towards professional idol careers in the entertainment industry amidst the rise of K-pop culture (Lee et al., forthcoming).

Against this backdrop, my data show that viral K-pop dance challenges emerge as prime opportunities for aspiring child K-pop talents and their parents to showcase their idol potentials with the hope of attracting the attention of people, including K-pop agencies. Simultaneously, influencer companies utilize these challenges to promote their idol training programs. While K-pop dance challenges have become integral to children's peer culture, they also work as an apparatus where the desires of various stakeholders intersect and intertwine.
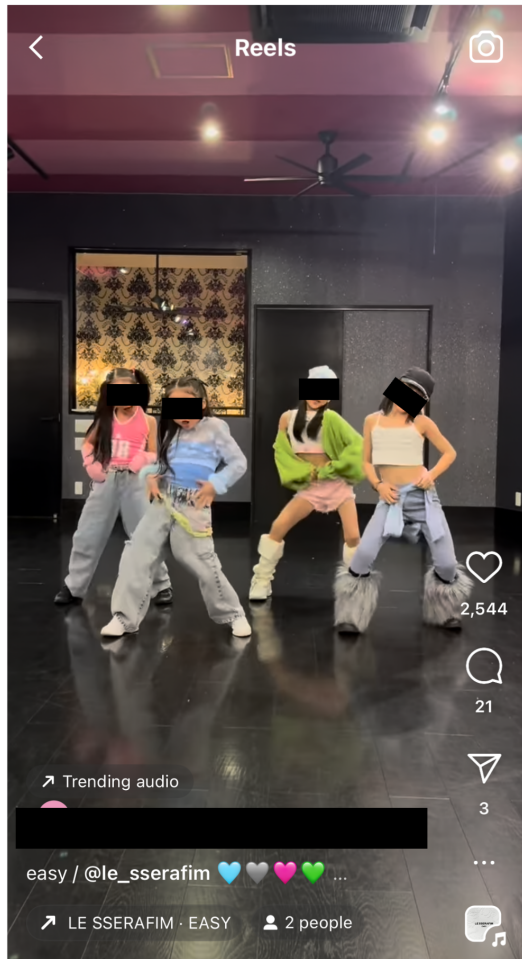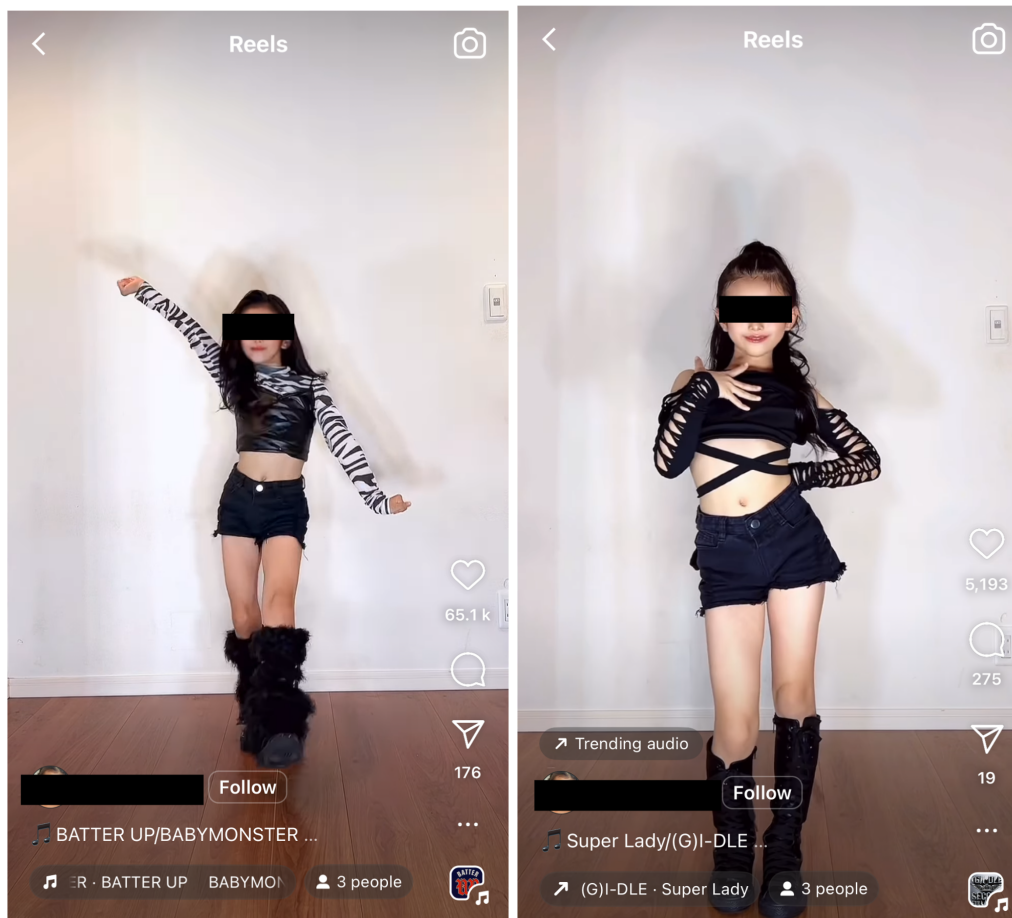
<Figure 1> Children performing a K-pop dance challenge, posted by a K-pop academy in Japan [Instagram Reels, Author's Screengrab, Instagram handle anonymized]

K-pop dance challenges as a new iteration of child pageant programs

K-pop dance challenges also serve as a new iteration of child pageant shows. When the genre has been repurposed as a platform for online auditions for K-pop aspirants, every visual aspect of the K-pop dance challenges is meticulously curated to captivate the eyeballs of potential audiences, including recruiters from K-pop companies, and to achieve viral internet stardom, competing among the plethora of similar challenges constantly being posted online. Consequently, many child participants are presented almost as the original idols of the dance challenges, by emulating the visual styles of the original K-pop idols, such as clothes, makeup, and facial expressions, and even exuding a star aura by creating 'hip' vibes between dance movements. This kind of presentation and performance of children as K-pop idols is submitted to adult audiences' gaze, who are assembled by social media platforms' algorithms. Consequently, the challenges

transform into online K-pop auditions, similar to child pageant shows where visualities of children are assessed against the criteria of 'idol materials' and 'idol standards'.

Many people have criticized child pageant programs for child commodification. In these contests, children are "made to look physically mature and sexually inviting through their costumes, makeup, and performances" and their bodily features are constantly assessed by adults against the adult beauty standards (Tamer, 2011: 84). However, in the case of K-pop dance challenges, the issue of child exploitation is often disregarded as it has become a significant part of children's peer culture. Rather, the playful, enjoyable, fun nature of the K-pop dance challenges tends to be emphasized, with upbeat K-pop sounds and cheerful choreographic movements, overshadowing the significant work children unconsciously invest in them.

<Figure 2> An 8 year-old child in Japan performing K-pop dance challenge wearing full makeup and clothing similar to that of the K-pop girl group [Instagram Reels, Author's screengrab, Instagram handle anonymized]

Child labor of cute in K-pop dance challenges

In K-pop dance challenges, the performance and presentation of desirability are crucial to go viral. Yet, it requires delicate and carefully-calculated work. It should be

entertaining enough to draw people's attention and should be sophisticated enough potentially to be recruited by K-pop agencies. Thus, the performance and presentation should be made in a balanced way. Here, children must possess several key attributes: (1) an idol appearance, which includes a slender physique and socially-desirable beauty features, such as big eyes and small oval-shaped faces, along with chic fashion sense; (2) K-pop knowledge, including familiarity with the most popular K-pop artists, songs, and dance moves; (3) a blend of immature maturity, which can highlight their childhood innocence, including approachable and soft personalities, yet showing noticeable prodigious skills in K-pop.

These elements form the foundation for cultivating a sense of cuteness in children, which is key to their progression in developing their professional idol careers in the industry. The presentation and performance of cuteness aims to build their personas less fake and staged but more authentic as innocent but flawless children who just aspire to K-pop idols with great skills. Yet, the production of cute requires children to engage in meticulous, tacit, ongoing, and often unconscious emotional labor to entertain predominantly adult audiences. Despite the laborious work of cute, the myth of success as an idol continues to disregard this labor as mere "experience" that supposedly "contribute to increasing an individual's human capital" (Luckas, 2015 :504), even though the labor is never compensated. Crucially, the virality-centered algorithms of social media platforms underpinned in K-pop dance challenges further normalizes children's seamless labor of cute, with the myth of instant internet virality, hyper-visibility, and stardom.

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