

# Consuming K-Pop Photocards: Mediated Intimacy in Indonesian Fan Practices

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**Abstract.** K-Pop fans' consumptive behavior is reflected through the act of a variety of K-Pop merchandise and one of these merchandises is photocards. This article highlights photocards as a microscopic case study to explore the problematic fan practice of humanizing these photocards particularly as fans post contents related to their photocards on social media. Fans who actively collect K-Pop photocards treat them as if they are a substitute of their idols and they need to be always protected with care. Research findings show that fans treat photocards as a living human being for example by bringing these photocards while they do their activities and addressing them in their social media posts reflecting an intimate relationship between fans and the imagined presence of their idols through the photocards. By utilizing content analysis and ethnography method, data were collected through TikTok and interview session with several respondents (K-Pop photocard collectors). This research aims to observe how photocard is not only a material object that is meaningless. These photocards are humanized like a friend and become a replacement from the absence of the real form of the idols. Photocards' meaning making process is dynamic while reflecting fans' behavior in the context of K-Pop fandom in Indonesia.

**Keywords:** Fans, K-Pop, Mediated Intimacy, Merchandise, Photocard

## 1 Introduction

In April 2022, an Indonesian K-Pop fan who was the resource person in a television talk show program, namely Talk Pod NET TV, mentioned that the price of a K-Pop photocards is very high in Indonesia reaching 10.000.000 IDR. This information inflicted a lot of questions around the purpose and advantages of photocards. In several online media articles, it has been reported that photocards of K-Pop idols are sold in remarkable prices, for BTS's Jungkook photocard was sold for 10.000.000 IDS and another version of this BTS' member photocard, which was named Butterfly Lucky Even, was sold for an even higher price, 49.000.000 IDR. A photocard of Red Velvet's Seulgi from SMTOWN (the Halloween version) was sold for 9.300.000 IDR, the photocard of TWICE's Tzuyu (Superstar JYP Nation version) was sold for 4.600.000 IDR, the photocard of LOONA's Heejin was sold for 4.700.000 IDR, the photocard of BTS's Suga (the 2014 Season Greetings version) was sold for 5.000.000 IDR, and BTS's Taehyung from BTS Muster version was sold for 12.000.000 IDR [1].

The steep price of photocards could be interpreted in the context of participatory fan culture in K-Pop fandom in Indonesia. Since 2011 when K-Pop culture started to rapidly develop in Indonesia, it has gone through several phases which always reflect the fans' consumptive behavior [2]. This consumptive behavior is a form of support from fans to their idols [3]. Production and consumption activities are attached with K-Pop fans communities [4]. Usually, K-Pop fans consume products that are related to their idols, such as music albums, ticket concerts, and merchandise. Consuming these products create the feeling of satisfaction and pleasantness for the fans [5]. By collecting K-Pop stuff (merchandise) could distinguish whether they are fans or not [6] From a variety of K-Pop's merchandise consumed by Indonesian K-Pop fans, such as posters, postcards, photocards, stickers, and accessories, the consumption of photocards is chosen a case study in this article due to its problematic nature. Photocard seems to have different values among the K-Pop fans in Indonesia since in recent years, K-Pop fans have been intense in consuming and collecting photocards. Furthermore, the way these fans make use of their photocards could be seen as unique, interesting and most importantly, problematic.

A photocard is a basic photo paper that is slightly thicker than a regular photo paper and in it, we could see a photograph of a K-Pop idol. The shape of the photocard is rectangular and the size is around 8,5 cm x 5,5 cm [7]. The first few photocards released in the context of K-Pop was in 2010 by SM Entertainment for Girls Generation's (SNSD) album, "Oh". In the beginning, fans are able to get photocards from K-Pop companies if

they purchase an album. Photocard that contains the photograph of each member is put randomly in every piece of the album; therefore, there is a chance that a fan will not get the photocard from the member that they like. Afterward, the popularity of photocard increased significantly and fans started to create a system of photocard trading or selling and buying among K-Pop fans. The price of photocards varied starting from low to extremely high price as mentioned earlier in this article. There are several factors affecting the price of photocards, such as a member's popularity, high demand for a photocard due to its visuals, or limited quantity (limited edition).

Consuming photocards is not only about buying or exchanging, but also about how fans treat their photocard collection that differentiates the consumption process in comparison with other K-Pop merchandise. The treatment and the maintenance of the photocard collections reflect how fans consider them as something that is significantly precious and important. Fans will make sure their collection are well kept, such as putting on protection plastic covers or put them in a photocard album to prevent damage. Another substantial difference is how they treat the photocard like a living creature or how fans humanize their photocards. For example, fans address the protection plastic as "shirts". For the photocard album where the fans put their photocards, they address the album as "house." So, if a fan has a photocard of Hyunjae, a member of The Boyz, they will use the term Hyunjae's shirt or Hyunjae's house. This reflects how the photocard is being humanized. Furthermore, fans usually bring their photocard when they go outside, such as hanging out in public places (mall, restaurant, and others). They would then post their activity in social media and create a narrative that fans and idols are hanging out and going out together. This article highlights how fans are humanizing their photocard by looking at the narratives they built in social media, particularly TikTok. There have been many TikTok videos narrating how fans bring their photocards while doing an activity, such as bathing and swimming with their photocards made of solid, thicker, and waterproof material. Another instance was found in several TikTok videos as well where it shows a photocard (that is already protected by its plastic) is being put in a food container (bowl) and being fed by the fan as if the photocard is able to consume the food.

By highlighting these videos as a case study in this article, we argue that fans are treating their photocard as a human substitute of their idols hence building an intimate relationship between them as fans and their idols through the act of consuming photocards. This research is expected to contribute to the discussion of fandom and fans activity particularly in the context of K-Pop consumption in Indonesia. The focus is on fans' behavior towards K-Pop photocards, and the activities done by K-Pop fans in consuming these photocards. As there has been a shift in meaning and function of photocards, the goal of this article is to fill in the gap on photocard consumerism phenomenon by K-Pop fans. As the behaviors are considered uncommon by the public, it has also become "normalized" in K-Pop fandom. Photocards, in this case study, are not passive consumer of goods (merchandise) that do not have any meanings, but it has a strong impact in the relationship of fans and idols. The analysis focusses on how consuming photocards reflects mediated intimacy in the practice of K-Pop fandom in Indonesia.

## 2 Literature review

Previous research on fandom has discussed how fan practices, such as buying merchandises that become the substitute of their idols, are reflecting the fans' desire to create an intimate relationship with their idols. Since they are not able to have direct interactions with their idols, these merchandises, including photocards, are mediating this desire to be intimate, hence the term "mediated intimacy." K-Pop photocard collection by fans reflect this desirable intimate relationship that is created between the fans and the idols through photocard. Mediated intimacy is a concept where an intimate relationship or proximity is processed through a medium from one individual to another individual [8]. Magazines and online media have been the medium for mediated intimacy. [9] stated that women online magazines were created by and for women in which there are elements in the magazines that articulate issues concerning women, such as women empowerment, sex advices, and others. Women magazines are usually created as 'best friends' to the readers because the magazine content could be a substitute of a best friend to give suggestions and solutions. Thus, it utilizes informal diction in order to draw a close feeling and sisterhood between fellow women. As these magazines incorporate related topics in the readers' everyday lives, it builds the feeling of being supported and 'not alone' because the readers (women) are all in the same circle that has similar interests.

The concept of mediated intimacy is used in this research to investigate the intimate relationship or proximity between K-Pop fans and idols. This proximity could be established through digital platforms and the contents that are uploaded by the idols, for instance YouTube contents, live streaming, and other forms that were created by K-Pop companies or agencies. This case is a form of company's marketing, such as creating the idols' personalities and the idols utilize social media to build a communication with fans [10]. Songs released by their idols could build an intimate and close relationship as well. [11] explains that ARMY feels a proximity with BTS as the band is so appreciative with the presence of their fans and they express this appreciation through their songs. Meanwhile, a relationship could be formed by consuming the merchandise and products produced by K-Pop companies. ARMY, as the fandom of a famous boy group namely BTS, frequently feels that

as a fan, there is a close relationship with the BTS members through merchandises that are consumed by the fans [12]. [13] also argues that merchandise is a key instrument in establishing a relationship between fans and their idols. Mediated intimacy has also been enhanced through social media because, for example, K-Pop merchandise consumption that are posted in the fans' social media to show their love and support toward their idol by mentioning their idol's social media account [14]. This research aims to fill the gap in the discussion of mediated intimacy through the act of consuming K-Pop merchandise, which is the photocard, as a medium to have an intimate relationship and proximity between fans and their idols.

### 3 Method

The main research method is content analysis by analyzing the social media posts by fans in portraying their photocard consumption practices and digital ethnography by conducting interviews with respondents who are photocards collectors. The life that evolves and holds on to digital culture causing the ethnography approach to evolve as well, which eventually makes traditional ethnography could be applied into digital life [15]. Besides, a content analysis approach is applied to obtain the meaning, significance, or purpose from the visuals and the elements that are shown in the data. Data collecting process, which in the form of videos with photocard element like how the fans treat and liven up the photocard were collected through social media platform (TikTok) by utilizing for you page, search, and following feature, or through the accounts that are already connected with the researcher as primary data. Primary data (in video form) that contain the characteristics of K-Pop photocards (which inviting photocards to go out with fans and how fans are showing their photocards collection) were found and downloaded through 'For You Page' and 'Search' bar on TikTok. Meanwhile, secondary data were collected through the interview with respondents that are both the fans and photocard collectors. The respondents were found through filtering by utilizing polling and direct message features on Instagram. Later, both data (primary and secondary) are analyzed, categorized, and interpreted through the conceptualization of mediated intimacy.

### 4 Result and Discussion

#### 4.1 Result

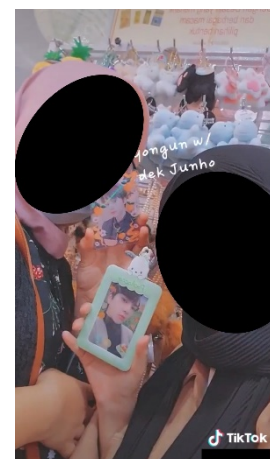
In collecting and categorizing the data, videos posted in TikTok reflect how fans consume their photocards and how these fans imagine their photocards as a substitute of the K-Pop idols they idolize. For example, in video 1 as visualized bellow in Figure 1.a, the fan shows a photocard of her idol that is protected by a card holder in a train station. The fan wrote "Yongun mau bukber~" or "Yongun is going to break his fast with friends". It signifies that the fan and her photocard is going out and do an activity with friends. Figure 1.b shows that the fan has arrived in a restaurant and there is another photocard held by someone else. It could be interpreted that the friend joining for breaking the fast together is a fellow fan who also bring a photocard. By showing the two photocards and their food in the background, the visuals reflect the two fans are eating together with their photocards. By showing the photocards in the first two still images from the video, the fan is emphashizing the significance of bringing the photocard to this social gathering. In other words, without showing herself visually in the first two images in the post, the more important figure in this TikTok video is the photocard or the idol and not her as the person who has the TikTok account.



a



b



c



**Figure 1.** Photocard’s treatment.

Figures 1.c and 1.d show the fans and the photocards, which are always front and center in each Figure, are shopping that could be seen from the backgrounds. The text in the still images from the video are “Yongun w/ Seungcheol” and “Yongun w/ Dek Junho” by showing their faces, as well as the photocards that they bring. Figure 1.e shows the fan and her photocard get into a bakery. There is a writing “Yongun w/ Om Seungwoo” along with the visual of two photocards by the two fans. In Figure 1.f, the two fans and their photocards are in a café and there is a writing, “Yongun w/ friends”. Throughout the video, the fan keeps showing her photocard as if as fans, they are accompanied by their photocards to go out while eating and shopping. It is also interesting to see how they address the idol in their photocards as “Dek Junho” to refer to Junho as a younger idol in comparison to Seungwoo with “Om” as the older idol. Moreover, in Figure 6, by saying “w/ friends,” the fan who uploaded this TikTok video emphasizes on her friendship status with her idol. There are no romantic innuendos in the written texts in the video and by using the word “friends,” the fan is reflecting a social relationship with the photocard as a substitute of their idols and not a romantic one.



**Figure 2.** Photocard’s treatment

Other data show that fans are not only pretending that the photocards are able to accompany them in doing all kinds of activities, but they also pretend that their photocard is able to do “human” activities, such as consuming food. In Figure 2.a and Figure 2.b, the visual shows that a bowl of Indonesian dessert drink, namely *cendol*. The photocard is in the bowl of *cendol* and the spoon is positioned as if the fan is feeding the photocard with *cendol*. Through this video, the fan is imagining that the photocard in the video is a living person that could eat or drink something. There is also a text in the video: “*menyuapi Sunoo cendol*” or “feeding *cendol* to Sunoo.” There are also emoticons with love icons reflecting that feeding her idols with *cendol* is an act of affection.

## 4.2 Discussion

Research findings show that TikTok videos of fans bringing their photocards to do activities with them and pretending or imagining that these photocards are able to reciprocate, for example feeding food or accompanying them to the shopping mall reflect a form of mediated intimacy. It is built through fans doing interactions with these photocards or even humanizing them. “Intimacy” is related to positive values of a relationship that is interpreted as close relationships and tightness between one individual and another individual, such as with their family, best friends, or partner [16]. The meaning of intimacy in this case study should be evaluated since it does not only show the symbol of romantic relationship, love, or even sexual but it reflects an imagined and mediated relationship between fans and their idols.

Since K-Pop fans are not able to have an immediate relationship with their idols, purchasing a merchandise in this case consuming photocards as a part of their fan practice, reflects an intimacy that is mediated. [8] argued that mediated intimacy is a concept where intimate relationship is built through a medium. Previous research on mediated intimacy focuses on social media as the medium to create intimacy [16]. The argument revolves around how this medium becomes a space in which one individual and another individual could express and tie their relationship even if there are no direct meetings. K-Pop fans could create this mediated intimacy through digital platforms such as social media, YouTube, live streaming, variety/reality shows on television, and other medium. By watching contents that show idols’ activities off stage, fans could connect to their idols in a personal level particularly as most of these contents are providing glimpse of the idols’ everyday lives. For example, when K-Pop idols do a live streaming that could be watched by fans from all over the world, the purpose is mostly to establish relationship and create interaction [10].

In this case study, as described in the Result section, the way fans consume photocards is tied to the mediated intimacy concept. The photocard has become a medium to establish relationship with their idols. Fans are using their photocards while pretending that these objects could do things that are normally done by humans, for instance, taking the photocard to go to the shopping mall to hang out, introducing “it” to their friends, breaking the fast together with friends, and eating or drinking. In Figure 7 and 8, the act of feeding *cendol* to the photocard could be interpreted as an intimate act as feeding food is usually done to a significant other with a romantic nuance. The fan is shown to be feeding a spoon of *cendol* for several times into the mouth part of the photocard. It seems like the photocard owner wants to show that the photocard could eat or drink and digest food like humans. Afterwards, this feeding activity could be interpreted as an interaction between the fan and the idol to have a close or even intimate relationship.

Data collected through interview also reflect how photocard owners are creating an intimacy that is mediated. Respondent P said that even though a photocard is just a basic photo paper, but its presence feels “real.” It is claimed that photocards are considered as “real” form of her idol. Respondent P has a similar tendency as the other fans, which is to bring her photocard when she goes outside. In our interview, she stated that she agrees that photocard could represent the presence of the idols in fans’ lives: “...indirectly, it is maybe a yes, from a photo (photo paper) but we could say that it indeed feels like an idol” (Respondent P, (30<sup>th</sup> of November, 2022)). Another respondent, Respondent T, shared that the way she treats her photocards as friends might seem strange, but she also feels that her idol is present in her surroundings through these photocards. “...yes! It sounds a little weird. Sometimes when I open the binder (collection book), I suddenly share my feelings, so it feels like as if they are around me hehehe” (Respondent T, (29<sup>th</sup> of November, 2022)). Meanwhile, Respondent K explains that she considers a photocard is just a basic photo paper in its literal meaning. It could not replace, represent, or fill the emptiness of an idol’s real form in her life. “...no, I cannot. Because I just feel that it is for my solace so I would not get bored. It is for ‘spoiling the eye’ purpose.” (Respondent K, (23<sup>rd</sup> of February, 2023)). However, she still constantly brings her photocard when she goes outside just like the other fans do when they go outside.

Interview data reflects the same findings with the TikTok video analysis even though findings show a dynamic way of how these fans utilize their photocards as a significant tool to build a relationship or intimacy with their K-Pop idols. Fans make the photocards look like a living element in their TikTok posts, either as a friend or even partner. This signifies that there is a close or intimate relationship that has been tied with the idols from the fans. In relation to these findings, we would like to refer to intimacy values as explained by [17] because it reflects a sense of togetherness and sharing activities. This matter is also a representation of idols’ real form to fill their absence in fans’ lives and constructing proximity. Fans are imagining that the photocard is a living person that devotedly accompanies the fan and participates in all the activities that are carried out by the fan, just like a friend or a partner.

According to [13], merchandise is such an instrument to create a relationship between the fans and the idols. Fans could pour their love and support by consuming K-Pop merchandises [14]. With the love that is highly massive towards the idols, in this phenomenon, they utilize photocards as the medium to pour their love and support. Respondents that we interviewed disclosed that the presence of photocards helps them to channel their

love, affection, and support to their idols. According to Respondent T, she understands that the photocards help her to channel her love towards her idol although she needs to spend a lot of money.

*“...hehehe i feel like from purchasing photocards of the idol that I love, that means I like or love them that much to the point where I willingly spend my money for a sheet of paper. There are actually a lot of things to express the love to the idol without spending money hehe but for me, this is the way.”* (Respondent T, 29<sup>th</sup> of November, 2022)

Respondent T explains that she knows that she is spending money for “a sheet of paper” but she stated that this is the way she could express her love towards her idol. The same thing could be found in Respondent P’s responses: *“...I agree (in giving the love, support, and affection to the idols), there is like a support towards them because we support their effort through the photocard purchase”* (Respondent P, 30<sup>th</sup> of November, 2022). Respondent K also agreed that the photocard consumerism could be the medium to channel the love and support to the idols. She also said, (from the photocard) it could be seen that she likes the idol. *“...yes. Because I collect the member that I like so it seems that I like that member, like focusing more on that member.”* (Respondent K, 23<sup>rd</sup> of February, 2023).

A photocard is not a real living creature, such as humans or idols in real form, but the presence of a photocard has a similar pattern to create a close relationship or intimacy between the fans and the idols. As argued by [8] mediated intimacy could be created through a vlog that is made by a beauty vlogger. These vlogs give an impression, image, and feeling of ‘sisterhood’ or ‘big sister’ to the audiences. Beauty vlogger creates and gives something that leaves an impression and feeling towards the audiences and this creates mediated intimacy. Photocards are created and given to the fans through album purchase or by purchasing the merchandise itself. K-Pop companies and idols are offering a form of pleasure in K-Pop fans’ practices. Fans are not being passive. They construct the meaning and how a photocard give extra pleasantness by constructing this mediated intimacy by imagining the photocards as humans, friends, or even partners that have proximity and intimacy with them. At the end, a photocard is not just a material object that is meaningless but it has a role to channel a certain feeling, love, relationship, support, and proximity between the fans and the idols. An intimate relationship that is heavily mediated, such as by the photocard, is being established by several actors involved in this fans’ practice, namely K-Pop companies, the idols themselves, and the fans. [13] stated that the fans always share a “story” about a merchandise to their community because they are the people that will appreciate the value of the object.

## 5 Conclusion

In conclusion, as fans of K-Pop in Indonesia consume photocards that have immersed in their everyday lives, fans are creating an intimate relationship with their idols, which is mediated by photocards as an imagined presence of these idols. However, unlike physical intimacy in which there is a reciprocal effect, mediated intimacy in the consumption of photocards is one-sided. The affection and intimate behavior from the fans toward their photocards are not reciprocated and this is re-evaluating the notion of intimacy since intimacy usually requires the two sides to give feedbacks to one another. It could be concluded that this research findings reveal how photocards are similar to other merchandises as argued by previous scholars. Photocards and other merchandise are used by fans to build relationships either an imagined intimate relationship or merely to build shared narratives with other fans.

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