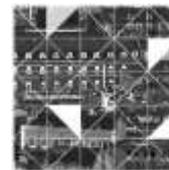


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# CIDADES, Comunidades e Territórios

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## Ultimate bias. Memorabilia, K-pop and fandom identities

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### Abstract

This article puts forward a sustained approach in the perception of the processes of construction of – individual and collective – meanings and identities in relation to the musical (sub)genre K-pop. Thus, contrary to the logic that emphasizes the loss of relevance of the CD, we tried to demonstrate that – as an object of memorabilia and musical consumption – it remains alive within the K-pop culture. In fact, not only the CD, but also other memorabilia items that emphasize the creation of visual and identity narratives, in the sense that they are seen as a means to establish, maintain and cement a relationship with the idol. Thus, in parallel to the fact that K-pop, as a musical genre, has a global character, it also highlights individual, regional and local aspects, mainly due to the variety of products that are produced, following a personalisation logic at the same time as we are facing a mass selling process. Thus, through the use of a qualitative methodology (Guerra, 2021; Pink, 2020), we intend to analyze the memorabilia items of seven Portuguese K-pop fans, in order to perceive the processes of identity creation, but also to denote the symbologies and meanings that are built around the items.

**Keywords:** identities, fandom, memorabilia, K-pop, music, visual narratives.

### 1. At first, it was just putting K and pop together

K-pop, as a musical (sub)genre, can be interpreted as being a transnational artistic production that, in turn, has as its main objective the engagement of audiences, at different levels of industrially created global imagination (Yoon,

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2018). Thinking about Appadurai's (1996) considerations, we can state that this musical genre is guided by a constellation of permanent tensions, between those that are the processes of cultural homogenisation and the processes of heterogeneity (Regev, 2013) and authenticity. Then, based on this assumption, we can say that K-pop is also assumed as a media, cultural and social phenomenon.

In fact, the growth and evolution of K-pop since the 1990s is intrinsically related to the dissemination of pop idols, an aspect that reached a different scale with the globalization of the group BTS. These *bangtang* boys epitomise the numerous processes of global mediation at the level of the South Korean recording industry, but also regarding digital and non-digital media. Dissemination is perhaps the industry's main concern, hence it is personalised, multifaceted and global, something visible in the millions of views that music videos get within hours of their release. In fact, a strategy is adopted for each country and, in this sense, for the Portuguese context – being a small country, in the scale of the projection of K-pop bands – the use of and investment in digital media is essential<sup>3</sup> (Galloway, 2020).

K-pop is much more than a musical genre demarcated by a geographical context. We ventured to say that, due to the millions of followers, the consumption of merchandising, the dissemination and consumption of other South Korean cultural contents, it can be seen as a revealing element of contemporaneity all over the world, in the sense that it increasingly emphasizes the importance of world music (Shahriari, 2018). Although this genre emerged in South Korea, it is not intended for exclusive consumption by the local population, in fact, it is a genre that is mainly produced for non-Koreans (Yoon, 2018). The construction of idols is paradigmatic. Perhaps it was due to this phenomenon that we felt the need to carry out this work, since memorabilia gravitates around a personal, aesthetic and performative identification of the self with that idol(s) and with that culture, that is, a dialectical relationship is created that attributes meaning to objects (Guerra & Quintela, 2020). In fact, the authors even state that popular music has been deeply associated with practices of preservation of memorabilia and increase of personal archives/collections, however, little academic attention has been paid to these practices and to the objects themselves (Bennett & Rogers, 2016), making it pertinent to fill this gap, starting studies that focus on these cultural expressions that, in their essence, compose modern archives: photographs, record covers, concert tickets, posters, newspapers, among others. Compared to what the authors denote for the field of fanzines and independent publications, with regard to K-pop, we identify the existence of new notions of archive, heritage and memory (Alberto & Guerra, 2019), linked to contemporaneity and that, in fact, demonstrate and reveal hybrid identities. Thus, what starts as a personal desire, quickly becomes a need to belong to a broad movement, the fandom (Choi & Roald, 2015). Groups are a majority in the face of solo artists within K-pop and, whether those emerging or those already established within the music industry, all fit an aesthetic, industrially produced and created standard. Groups such as BTS<sup>4</sup>, GOT7<sup>5</sup>, EXO<sup>6</sup>, BIG BANG<sup>7</sup>, but also women's groups such as BLACKPINK<sup>8</sup>, Red Velvet<sup>9</sup> or Girl Generation<sup>10</sup>, gravitate around the same image. They are young, physically attractive and artistically multifaceted, as they can sing, dance and act. Another very important aspect is related to the fact that the groups

<sup>3</sup> We talk about platforms like Viki Rakuten which is a kind of digital open channel, geared towards the consumption of South Korean dramas among other content and, of course, YouTube as the main means of dissemination.

<sup>4</sup> Also known as the *Bangtan* Boys, BTS are a K-pop group formed in 2013 by Big Hit Entertainment. They are the group with the largest international fans (Asia, Europe, Australia, North America and Latin America). In 2018 they occupied the number one spot in Billboard's top fifty. More information at: <https://ibighit.com/bts/>

<sup>5</sup> Male K-pop group formed by JYP Entertainment in 2014. Their debut album *Got it?* (2014) ranked second on the Gaon Album Chart and first on Billboard's World Albums Charts. More information at: <https://twitter.com/got7official>

<sup>6</sup> Group formed by S.M Entertainment in 2011 with twelve members who later gave rise to two groups, EXO-K and EXO-M. Their hit *Growl* (2013) garnered over 2 million digital sales in South Korea alone and 1 million physical copies sold, being the first K-pop group in twelve years to surpass that mark. More information at: <https://www.facebook.com/weareoneEXO/>

<sup>7</sup> South Korean male group formed by YG Entertainment. They debuted in 2006 and in 2007, their song *Lies* was at number one on the South Korean charts for a record-setting six consecutive weeks, and in the same year they won the song of the year award at the Mnet Korean Music Festival. More information at: <https://www.magazine-hd.com/apps/wp/big-bang-renovaram-contrato/>

<sup>8</sup> South Korean girl group formed by YG Entertainment in 2016. Their debut releases *Whistle* and *Boombayah* were number one on the Gaon digital chart and Billboard's World Digital Song Sales chart. They are considered the most successful female group by the Billboard Hot 100. More information at: <https://pt-pt.facebook.com/BLACKPINKOFFICIAL/>

<sup>9</sup> South Korean girl group formed by S.M. Entertainment which debuted in 2014. They are considered one of the most popular groups in the world by Time magazine and Billboard. They have already received several awards including the Golden Disc Award (2015), Best Female Group at the Mnet Asian Music Award (2017) and song of the year at the Asia Artist Awards (2019). More information at: <https://kprofiles.com/red-velvet-members-profile/>

<sup>10</sup> Also known as SNSD, they achieved stardom in 2009 with the release of *Gee*, which was named the most popular song of the 2000s in South Korea by Melon. They are one of the groups that have expanded the most into the Japanese market. More information at: <https://kprofiles.com/girls-generation-snsd-members-profile/>

are homogeneous, there are no mixed groups – or at least with the same frequency as male or female groups –, only boy bands or girl bands. To this aesthetic concern is added the musical concern, for the songs meet Americanised industrial demands. Thus, in addition to the songs being catchy, they must be conducive to the creation of custom choreography which, in turn, is rehearsed until synchronisation and perfection is achieved (Lie & Inghyu, 2014). Furthermore, for both male and female groups, utopian aesthetic imperatives persist which dictate appearances and tastes, for example to lose weight, to be beautiful, to have good physical condition, hair, skin, the use of make-up, absence of tattoos or piercings, among others. Although the fandom is homosocial, there are strong gender ideologies present in the K-pop industry (Jung, 2010). In fact, it is these paradigms that mark the K-pop netizens (citizens of the internet) and that exert a constant pressure towards the members of the groups, creating a hyper-enhanced self-consciousness about their appearance, promoting ideas of integration into specific standards of beauty. Thus, we are facing mass beauty standards, while we can frame them in a duality between progressive/conservative (Laurie, 2016).

However, there is a hidden face of this entertainment industry. This industry does not follow the same procedures as the American industry, for example. Most of the time, artists are not discovered singing on platforms like YouTube, on the contrary. The idols are subject to systematic and hard training, often enrolled in academies (Han, 2015) by their parents and live the life of a trainee from an early age. Being a trainee means living, rehearsing and performing in a group. They all have regular dance classes as well as singing lessons, and some learn rap to set themselves apart from the rest. From an early age, they create YouTube channels to post videos that meet a marketing strategy that encourages the creation of a fandom. They must also maintain their physical fitness, while also excelling in facial expressions while performing (Yoon, 2018). When we are faced with young idols like those who make up the aforementioned bands, we enter another level of rigidity and discipline, just take as an example the prohibition made by labels in terms of love relationships. Many do it in secret and if they are discovered they can even be expelled from the label. The aim is to make fans imagine that their idol could be their love partner.

Thus, this attraction that is created around K-pop and its idols leads us to other issues, namely to the physical field. This article does not intend to approach K-pop from the point of view of industry, dissemination, nor performance. The focus will be on the audiences. Even more specifically, we intend to analyse the collection of memorabilia, since the number of groups in social networks of sale/exchange of merchandising has increased exponentially, especially in Portugal. These labels, such as Big Hit or YG, can be seen as gatekeepers that systematically explore and maintain an international strategy of exporting an imaginary and a high-quality model, but at relatively low prices (Sun, 2020). It is the industry of customisation and embodiment, but also the industry of global imaginaries. This is where the innovative nature of this article lies. Until now there has not been a focus on the material issue of K-pop, on memorabilia, not having also been made an investment in the approach of this dimension and its interface with the transnational experience that K-pop allows, much less in Portugal. In this way, throughout this article we will approach the question of consumptions, but also the connection of these with the emergence of a fan identity, materialized in the objects from the other side of the world. In parallel, images of memorabilia of the Portuguese fandom will be presented, following a qualitative methodology, based on content analysis of items related to the universe of K-pop (Pink, 2020), referring to seven young K-pop fans, aged between 20 and 28 years, following and adopting the methodological procedures proposed by Sarah Pink, at the level of sensory ethnographies. It should also be noted that all the photographs presented in this article were provided by the girls contacted. For this purpose, contact was established through social networks and based on their participation in a closed group of sale/exchange of K-pop merchandising. The first ten publications in the group were contacted, seven of which answered.

## **2. *Haru haru*. One day after another in the K-pop industry**

South Korea is undoubtedly one of the main countries responsible for the distribution of global popular music, hence it is important to look at the impacts of such distribution in countries like Portugal and in the most different spheres because, even though it is a small country, fandom has grown substantially. However, the South Korean music industry has not always been directed towards the world. On the contrary. South Korean popular music

included ballads and foreign content that was imported from Japan or the American colonies during the period of military invasions (Oh & Lee, 2014). In the early days of the industry, the *kayo* (pop music) music genre was associated with a set of deeply stigmatising stereotypes, in the sense that lovers of the genre were seen as gangsters. In fact, this stigmatisation has only changed more recently, as aesthetic choices such as tattoos were frowned upon, as was the case with the artist Jay Park<sup>11</sup>, for example. As Oh and Lee (2014) enunciate, it was in the 1990s that the first male K-pop group emerged, *Sobangcha*<sup>12</sup> and then the group *Seo Taiji and the Boys*<sup>13</sup>. These two groups have largely contributed to overcoming these negative representations associated with pop music, and with them came changes on the part of the public, with singers now being seen as sophisticated and professional stars who use their creativity for the benefit of the public and the industry. Indeed, “while Seo Taiji and the Boys are not responsible for the development of K-pop as a genre, their success proved that a fusion of western music and Korean sounds resonated with a youth that was trying to find its own place in an increasingly globalized world.” (Oliver, 2020, p. 21). Other authors such as Kim (2011) explain the popularisation of the phenomenon in China in the mid-1990s, with groups such as *H.O.T*<sup>14</sup> or solo artists such as *BoA*<sup>15</sup>.

Based on the contributions of Oliver (2020), K-pop can be understood as a product of globalization and, as such, it can be seen as a cultural product that is made to please the masses, always maintaining its local character and specificities (Regev, 2013). Based on this premise, this musical genre can be understood as a mix between what is contemporary pop, hip-hop and also – and an element that demarcates the transnational character – we have present quite often, infusions of the English language. In this sense, Oh D.C (2017) states that K-pop is a hybrid format marked by *mugukjeok* qualities, i.e., qualities that make up for the absence of a nationalistic character, an aspect that largely contributes to its expansion and commercialisation. Another emerging issue concerning K-pop and its consumption is related to the fact that this music genre is future and youth culture oriented (Baker et al, 2016), as attested by the type of performances that are performed, especially by male K-pop groups, where sensuality (Laurie, 2016), but also romance and shyness prevail. In what concerns female groups, the captivation of the audience goes through beauty and shyness, or rather, the captivation is based on a cuteness logic (Han, 2016; Kim, 2011) and on the advent of feminist and empowerment discourses and rhetoric (McRobbie, 2009; Gill, 2016). Something that exacerbates these characteristics is fashion, namely different coloured hair, hairstyles, accessories and clothes, which are part of the K-pop lexicon and, as such, are imperative elements in the groups' visual communication strategies and a constant in memorabilia items. Thus, these elements combined, make K-pop distance itself from the American legacy (Urbano et al, 2020), being the same strongly linked to the creative industry, in the way Flew (2017) tells us, in the sense that they are the driving force behind the creativity of the groups, while these industries are the main causes of the intense relationships between fandom and idols (Sun, 2020).

At the same time, the interactions with fans are essential for the maintenance of the industry, as well as for the genre to be successful, as is the appanage of the history of cultural theory (Duffett, 2015), whose practices and activities of fans are considered essential for the industry to work. In this way, there are several vlogs, privileged appearances in talk shows and social networks (although many of them are managed by managers), contributing to the loyalty of fans, recognizing and classifying them as admirers, as *connoisseurs* of a particular theme/artist, collectors and, ultimately, they are placed in a relentless identity search that aims to identify with a particular style (Duffett, 2015, 2013). So, unlike those that are the American idols (Urbano et. al, 2020), for example, where a

<sup>11</sup> He is a South Korean and American b-boy, dancer, rapper, producer, CEO, model and actor. He is a former member of the group 2PM. In 2013 he founded his record label, AOMG and in 2017 HIGHR MUSIC, a global hip-hop label. The artist was marked by the 2009 controversy where on his Myspace account he expressed displeasure with his life as a trainee, causing internet users to call for his 'expulsion' from the country, suicide petitions were even made which had around 3000 signatures. His lifestyle, music videos and songs also caused a lot of controversy for their sexual nature.

<sup>12</sup> They made their debut in 1987. It was with the release of their hit *Please send this message to her* that many young girls were exposed for the first time to young women of that style, with its deep pop sound and complex choreography. For more information visit: <https://www.allkpop.com/article/2016/05/way-back-wednesday-sobangcha-the-first-k-pop-boy-group>

<sup>13</sup> They were a South Korean music group (1992-1996), credited as being responsible for changing the South Korean music industry. In 1996 Billboard reported that their albums had sold over 1 million copies, unheard of for the time. For more information visit: <https://revistakoreain.com.br/2016/09/kpop-uma-historia-seotaiji-and-boys/>

<sup>14</sup> South Korean male group from the mid-1990s. They were the first K-pop group to have an album become a 'million' seller. Their popularity led to the creation of female groups in Korea. For more information visit: <https://kprofiles.com/h-o-t-members-profile/>

<sup>15</sup> She is a South Korean singer, producer and actress, commonly known as the 'Queen of K-pop'. Since her debut in 2000, she has released twenty albums. More information at: <https://kprofiles.com/boa-profile/>

difference is marked between the artist and the audience, K-pop idols find their strength here. As Oliver (2020) points out, there are several ways for fans to interact with their idols, be it through involvement in the choreographies, learning the lyrics and, of course, acquiring memorabilia such as CDs, photocards, calendars, lightsticks or other differentiated products such as keyrings, calendars (see Figure 1), posters (see Figure 2) or soft toys. Concomitantly, we must alert to the fact that we are not talking exclusively about fangirls, as is usual for American boy bands because, in the case of K-pop, there is a considerable number of fanboys who make reactions to the music videos on their YouTube channels<sup>16</sup>.

**Figure 1. Calendar of the Day 6<sup>17</sup>, from Joana Gonçalves<sup>18</sup>**



Source: provided by herself.

**Figure 2. Poster of K-pop idol Baekhyun, from the album Delight, the Chemistry version, from Beatriz Faria<sup>19</sup>**



Source: provided by herself.

<sup>16</sup> As is the case of the JREKML channel, for example. Link available here: <https://www.youtube.com/c/JREKML1/featured>

<sup>17</sup> South Korean rock band formed by JYP Entertainment, whose debut came in 2016. More information at: <https://kprofiles.com/day6-members-profile/>

<sup>18</sup> Joana Gonçalves, 24 years old, shopkeeper and K-pop fan since 2012.

<sup>19</sup> Beatriz Faria, 21 years old, shopkeeper and K-pop fan since 2016.

When we spoke earlier that K-pop is oriented towards youth cultures, it is important to highlight the fact that more recently there are a considerable number of older fans, i.e., mothers and fathers who follow the tastes of their children and eventually end up surrendering to the K-pop industry (Lie, 2012). As Yoon (2018) states in his work *Global Imagination of K-pop*, idols must stay true to the image of an accessible star, largely contrasting with Western idols. Thus, the previously stated characteristics, such as beauty, talent and attractiveness, are attributes supported by an investment in the aesthetics of K-pop albums (among others), appealing to the masses (Oliver, 2020). Although numerous studies consider that the purchase of CDs is obsolete, for K-pop the exact opposite is true. The CD remains as a strong attractive and collectible symbol, and cannot be replaced, because its commercial exchange value would no longer be in question (Choi, 2014). In parallel, the CD and other collectibles, as physical objects, can also be understood as a strong symbolism of nostalgic feelings, as well as of fundamental imaginaries for, in the medium and long term, us to understand the ways in which the production and experience of South Korean pop music has been established with the fans (Guerra & Alberto, 2021). Furthermore, part of the success of K-pop albums is related to a strong investment in restructuring marketing techniques and engagement with fans, i.e., products are designed and created after listening to fans' tastes. As Patryk Galuszka (2014) highlights, the relationship between fans and producers has been widely studied for these reasons, i.e., the fact that there is a dual and ambivalent relationship, but also one of interdependence; however, few studies have looked at the products that are born from this troubled relationship, nor have they detailed the symbologies for fans. Once again Choi (2014) offers us important inputs, in the sense that she states that the Korean music industry has moved from an exchange perspective to a relationship perspective, with an emphasis on the (co)creation of value. Thinking about the memorabilia previously enunciated, there is in parallel a strong investment in the creation of varied, highly collectible products (Alberto & Guerra, 2019).

K-pop albums are produced in a varied way, however, four categories seem to emerge: i) the production of the same album, but with different packaging and with exclusive contents; ii) a re-release of an album with additional songs; iii) a separate album in another language, such as English, thus meeting the genre's claim as being a universal sound, fitting within a universal pop logic (Urbano et al, 2020; Regev, 2013); iv) finally, the re-releases. Some examples of these categories can be given, for example the BTS album *MOTS: Persona* was made in several versions, with each package having a variation in colour, i.e., it was made in four shades of pink. Or also the albums of Monsta X<sup>20</sup> and of WayV<sup>21</sup>, which were released with English-only tracks, in order to promote their American debut. These types of productions are highly appealing to collectors and fans, mainly because they can enjoy multiple versions and variable contents. Furthermore, photocards are also made, following the logic of postcards but with the image of the idols, as well as photo albums, among others. Both the albums and the other mentioned products are elaborated from the point of view of their design, not only from the outside, but also from the inside and the way the contents are presented, since these products are designed to be consumed in an interactive and highly sensorial way. In fact, K-pop fans even enunciate that,

For me k-pop is not just a listening experience. I don't think it's funny to walk up to someone and say "listen to that song". If it's k-pop it has to be "watch that video". K-pop is not just a listening thing. It's not just about the music: it's a general experience. You must see the video, the dance, the music. (Arthur, "O K-pop não é coisa de miúdos", In *Público*, 2018).

And also on the question of aesthetics and monetary accessibility,

They are expensive because they come from abroad, but not only that. For example, on a *One Direction* CD, you have the CD and the plastic cover with the leaflet. In k-pop they invest in photo shoots, in the CD itself. The last one I bought was from G-Dragon, it's called *One of a Kind*. It's the size of a bible. There are two versions, bronze and gold, with different photos. They have photocards, posters. The cover itself is padded. (Sara, "O K-pop não é coisa de miúdos", In *Público*, 2018).

<sup>20</sup> South Korean male group formed by Starship entertainment and since their debut in 2015 have won numerous awards and most recently their single *Beautiful* has earned them a chart spot on Billboard's Digital World Songs. More information can be found at: <https://kprofiles.com/monsta-x-members-profile/>

<sup>21</sup> The group was first announced in 2018 and is the fourth sub-unit of the NCT group, managed by SM Entertainment - Label V. Despite their recent debut, the group already counts as a regular presence on the Billboard charts.

The photo albums, one of the main elements of K-pop products, usually have photos printed on high quality paper. The same goes for the lyric books, which can be bought only as separate booklets from the other products, or they can be included in the content of the photo book or the albums. At the album level, the idols' photos are staged and concert photos are not used. Photocards, being small-sized photographs, are only of their faces, which can range from selfie-style to professional-style (Oliver, 2020). These can be easily exchanged and collected. So, we are left to ask how these objects, when collected, contribute to the creation of a fandom, as well as to the creation of an identity that is based on the premise of 'K-pop fan'. Let's take as an example a sample of the photocard collection of Iolanda, a K-pop fan since 2015, whose collection focuses on her bias, the artist Tael from the group NCT<sup>22</sup>,

**Figure 3. Photocards collection of the artist Tael, from the NCT group, from Iolanda Dias<sup>23</sup>**



Source: provided by herself.

As Alexandra Borges, 25 years old and a K-pop fan for 11 years tells us during an informal chat at Instagram,

(...) belonging to a fandom creates a certain different identity of ourselves, and the sense that we participate in something and that we belong somewhere, and a lot of friendship and learning comes out of that. Through that learning, certain facts about yourself change and create that different identity. But I think not only identity, but also the way you see the world and other people. Sometimes I think it's more than a fandom, but a family, because through those people you can be yourself and show your feeling for the group the way you want without anyone criticising you. For me it is a 'safe place' where I can be myself without having to worry about other people around me who don't accept this side of me. (Alexandra Borges, 25 years old, Porto, unemployed, K-pop fan since 2011).

### **3. Hallyu. The Portuguese fandom and the Korean cultural wave**

Pop culture, as a result of a capitalist system, is one of the main causes for the fact that it is possible for individuals to choose an identity (Kratz & Reimer, 1998), causing a variety of subcultures to emerge (Guerra & Quintela, 2018), which are enhanced by the dissemination of cultural content through the internet (Manago, 2015; Choi, 2015; Jin, 2016). In fact, it is enough to take Alexandra's speech, presented earlier, as a reference. Nowadays,

<sup>22</sup> Male K-pop group formed by S.M. Entertainment in 2016. Their name is an abbreviation of Neo Culture Technology, a term coined by the founder of S.M. Entertainment and describing the concept of a group with an unlimited number of members, divided into various sub-units around the world. NCT are a sub-unit of the previously mentioned C-pop (Chinese Pop) group WayV. More information can be found at: <https://kprofiles.com/nct-members-profile/>

<sup>23</sup> Iolanda Dias, 20, university student and K-pop fan since 2015.

being a fan is an identity. Or rather, it is even something valued, demonstrating a marked sense of taste. To build this fan identity, there are sets of codes that are followed, not only for the field of K-pop fans, but in a generalized way. If for some musical genres this identity construction is based on lifestyles (Mazur, 2018), for K-pop we can gauge that the same process is based on aesthetic elements, such as clothing, use of vocabulary that is only understood within a restricted group of individuals, by the type of music and, of course, by the most adored idols (Gooch, 2008).

Moreover, at this point we can introduce the considerations of Jenkins (1992) about fan culture very directed to mass culture. However, we consider relevant to adopt Duffett's perspective (2013), in the sense that we leave aside the negative connotations attributed to fan culture by theorists like Adorno and other sociologists, anthropologists and psychologists, in the sense that fans were often seen as primary representatives of the masses, as alienated consumers and as distant from the processes of cultural production. Also some studies mentioned that being a fan depended on a certain social inadequacy or individual loss, that is, on an absence of dreams or aspirations, only with a focus on the illusions created around idols to compensate for these failures.

The demonstration of identity as a fan can arise as an attempt to build new friendships, but also as an interest in maintaining relationships with those who share a similar taste, hence perhaps the strong growth of K-pop groups on Facebook can be justified (Löbert, 2014). All of them are closed groups, where someone's acceptance in it, depends on a set of answers facing the genre and the industry, such as 'What are your 5 favourite K-pop groups' or 'Who is your bias', but also 'Do you collect K-pop merchandising' and also, 'Do you want to buy, sell or trade K-pop merchandising?'<sup>24</sup>. Thus, in the search for the similar (Chadborn et. al, 2017), collectibles and memorabilia are an essential element to express statements of belonging to a collective as well as a personal identity (Jacobsen & Kristiansen, 2016; Rahim, 2019; Lacasa et al, 2017). As Jenol (2020), Kratz and Reimer (1998) point out, the purchase of these hitherto stated products is nothing more than ways for fans to communicate with each other, but also to make known to which fan group they belong. Jenkins (2004) talks about a social identity which is assumed as a continuation of the personal identity. Now, what does this social identity refer to? It refers to an involvement between that which is the similarity with the other and, simultaneously, denotes the difference. As Duffett (2013) states, fandom is rooted in multiple involvements that are often reinforced by social participation, in this case of K-pop, in somewhat restricted groups and, in this sense, fans are active and not passive as previously thought.

Collecting these items, like almost any other kind of collection, denotes to some extent, a distinct difference between the one who is a fan and the one who is not. Moreover, the objects themselves confer a support to K-pop fans regardless of the individual's social environment (Jenol, 2020), as identities are not restricted to family background, gender, social class or country of origin, they have rather become something of a broad origin (Giddens, 1991). Within this field, language plays an essential role, also since it promotes an identity based on social relationship, that is, it allows interaction with virtual reality(s) (Locke, 2000). Let us see then that the re-appropriation that is made of the Korean vocabulary by the fans, means multiple spheres of identity performance, causing the creation of a kind of *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1984) that meets a specific type of cultural capital, skills and dispositions that materialize in ways of life. In fact, there is an appetite to learn the language in non-Korean fans, whether from song lyrics, TV shows or digital content, something that may be due to the need to accentuate a place of belonging to a fandom. As Soompi (2018) refers – and going along with social identity (Jenol, 2020) and the creation of a *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1984) – dedicated fans will certainly learn to read, speak and write in the language of their idols in order to emphasise closeness to them, as we talked about earlier. It is through the language and the linguistic codes adopted among groups of fans that feelings of belonging to a group emerge and that, consequently, materialize in obtaining memorabilia (Riedel, 2020; Almeida, 2017). Also, the internet assumes a prominent place in this sense, especially because it encourages and allows communication, contributing to the creation of a kind of big brother highly informed about idols, sometimes leading to extremism in fandom (Duffett, 2013; Vieira & Brito, 2016).

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<sup>24</sup> These are some of the questions that the authors of this article had to answer to gain access to the groups and consequently to contact the fans.

Based on this premise, we can gauge that the importance of memorabilia is cemented in the importance of consuming ‘someone’ and everything that ‘someone’ represents (Alberto & Guerra, 2019). Consuming the bias<sup>25</sup>. Bearing in mind the thought of Todd (2012), it is impossible to have a consumption of something without a deep knowledge about it, however, there is at the outset a greater or lesser possibility of certain fans to participate in the culture, meeting what Bourdieu (1984) states about hierarchy and capital. The K-pop fans consumptions can be seen as products of a hierarchical social system that is institutionalized, through which each fan will create and acquire cultural capital, but that also allows the fan itself to demonstrate certain social and economic capital, establishing itself within a *status quo*, associating itself to the logics of sharing memories and processes of construction of a collective consciousness (Lévy, 2000).

At this point, we entered the focus of our article, namely the meanings (Silva & Guerra, 2015; Guerra, 2019a). If we think of theoretical currents such as Symbolic Interactionism, we will see that individuals’ behaviours are determined by a set of external micro-scale forces and that it is within this localized social context that they construct and share meanings. This leads us to the concept of the self as Mead (1934) presents it and as Blumer (1969) later works, presenting the three premises of social interaction, namely, i) we act according to the meanings attributed; ii) meanings derive from social action and iii) meanings are managed or changed according to interpretative processes. So, what we intend to envisage is related to the analysis of the construction of meanings by seven Portuguese K-pop fans. More, we intend to understand in what sense memorabilia can contribute to a sense of belonging, as this form of collecting is framed – often – by the belonging to the fandom and, of course, denotes the passion for the genre and the idols, since the objects are preserved in a careful way, as well as follow an expository logic in the rooms of each fan, becoming the same in the new museums (Alberto & Guerra, 2019). As Hellekson (2009) and Turk (2014) describe, the economy of these items gives them satisfaction and makes them feel valued within the community, contributes to their well-being and promotes personal growth and development (Ryff, 1989), while solidifying the K-pop fan identity (Duffett, 2014). In short, we aim to contribute to the advancement of sociology on this theme in Portugal, since we intend to move away from the unilateral vision of the impacts of icons on culture and individuals (Stever, 2009), but to understand how the fans have a connection with the cultural industry and with those same icons, where memorabilia is the fundamental aspect and the main link of connection of these two axes.

#### **4. *Catch Me If You Can: the possible construction of meanings***

Continuing the same logic of thought of the previous section, we questioned in what sense the objects cultivate a connection between fans and idols, since these same relations are built from a visual base (Guerra & Alberto, 2021). Now, this visual basis meets the thematic elements that are associated with the K-pop fandom, which we will illustrate further on through the photographs provided by the contacted fans. However, what we can ascertain is that, as Barthes (2005) states, deconstruction processes of K-pop visual materials can (and should) be done, that is, if we remove the context from the idols’ images, the original meaning of the image also disappears. This is where the contributions of sociology are centred, in the processes of deconstruction and eventual decolonisation of a sociology of popular culture. In other words, if we remove the fans from the equation of consumption, the memorabilia items, especially the more specific ones referring to bias, lose their meaning as well as the narrative constructed by the South Korean K-pop industry, since all marketing is done thinking about the fans. If we remove the context and the image from a K-pop album, independently of the group, the visual narratives associated to it lose meaning and it’s these meanings that interest us, as well as the feelings of belonging that are lost and what was a culture created for the world, besides being ruled by a nationalist absence, it would become null and non-existent.

All the items given to us by fans, from albums, photocards, soft toys, lightsticks and others, can be analysed from various angles and from different perspectives. On the one hand, there is the question of authenticity and originality. Let’s see that the album covers themselves are contradictory when compared to the Anglo-American industry, where they are worked on from an artistic point of view. In K-pop, covers tend to be minimalist, but the

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<sup>25</sup> This term refers to the favourite member of each group, and the expression ‘he/she is my bias’ is often used.

investment and creative work is inside the album and in the other items that accompany it. This ends up being an extremely attractive factor for fans, more specifically the fact that these are not conventional albums, like so many others in which only the cover differentiates them. This is how the individual symbolic value and collective value is created for a certain product within each fandom and, of course, the interaction with the materials becomes an extremely pleasant and sensorial experience, emphasized by the tactile nature of the objects themselves. We thus take into account the construction of an aura as Walter Benjamin (1994) referred which, in parallel, is maintained through the authenticity of the products. Thus, we mean that it is also through the aura of the objects that fans' relationships with the objects are cemented, as well as the need to keep consuming them is maintained, especially by the strong relationship that is created with the source of origin and the image of the product. The aura of these objects conveys a feeling of individualization, as opposed to the idea that they are receiving/buying a mass product (Oliver, 2020). In fact, the very format of the albums comes to ensure the idea that only K-pop fans would be able to recognize and, consequently, acquire them. Thus, this idea also comes to emphasize the special character that fans possess for the promotion of the genre. Here are some examples:

**Figure 4. Albums of the Day 6 group, from the collection of Joana Gonçalves**



Source: provided by herself.

**Figure 5. K-pop album collection, from Érica Oliveira<sup>26</sup>**



Source: provided by herself.

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<sup>26</sup> Érica Oliveira, 24, university student and K-pop fan since 2016.

**Figure 6. The inside of an album of K-pop group EXO and their photo albums, from Érica Oliveira**



Source: provided by herself.

**Figure 7. Other examples of K-pop albums, from Érica Oliveira**

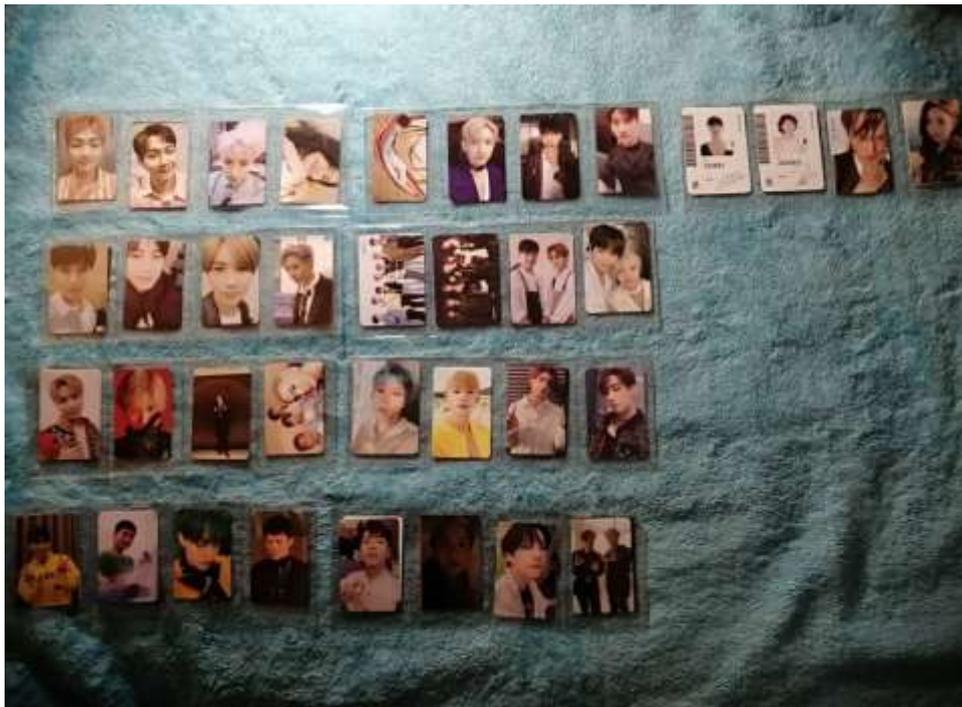


Source: provided by herself.

Alongside albums, photocards are also extremely relevant, and are perhaps the most collectible items. Moreover, this is a way to strengthen, as well as to provide continuity, to the sense of community and belonging among K-pop fans (Galloway, 2020). Why is this? Well, when a fan buys a K-pop album, there is an element of surprise as to which photocard will be included, and it may not correspond to the preferred member. Thus, the processes of

exchange, sale and purchase of these items are encouraged, with the aim of collecting the ultimate bias<sup>27</sup>. Moreover, the preservation of the photocards is also a process that cements the affective relationship that is created between the group and the fan, since there is a preservationist feeling (Heinich, 2010) towards them. For example, they are placed in protective covers and are organised according to certain logics. Even in the sent photographs one can see care and concern regarding the way the items are presented, as they are aligned and within skins. In this way, we can consider that these items are a form of material heritage, although they are not yet recognised as such. An example of this care is the collection of Jéssica Barros, a K-pop fan for eight years. In conversation, she mentioned having in her possession 85 photocards and about 66 albums.

**Figure 8. Sample of the photocards collection, from Jéssica Barros<sup>28</sup>**



Note: Referring to groups such as EXO, TVXQ<sup>29</sup>, BTOB<sup>30</sup>, MonstaX, SuperM<sup>31</sup>, SHINee<sup>32</sup> and NCT.

Source: provided by herself.

Beatrice also follows the same pattern, an assumed fan of MonstaX and EXO. Her ultimate bias, as she tells us, are the artists Hyungwon from the group MonstaX and Baekhyun from the group EXO and it is around these idols that she has built her collection.

<sup>27</sup> It is an expression used within the K-pop fandom that refers to each group's favourite member.

<sup>28</sup> Jessica Barros, 27 years old, a graduate and K-pop fan since 2013.

<sup>29</sup> A South Korean male group formed by S.M. Entertainment in 2003. In Korea they are also known as DBSK. The group is known for being one of the first to become successful outside Korea, mainly in Japan and China. More information can be found at: <https://kprofiles.com/tvxq-members-profile/>

<sup>30</sup> An acronym for Born To Beat, they are a male group formed by Cube Entertainment in 2012 and have since received several awards including Singer of The Year at the KBS Music Festival in 2015. More information can be found at: <https://kprofiles.com/btob-members-profile/>

<sup>31</sup> It is a South Korean sub-group formed by S.M. Entertainment. The members are also part of other groups such as SHINee, EXO, NCT 127 and WayV. In 2019, with the release of their 4th EP they entered at number one on the Billboard 200. More information can be found at: <https://kprofiles.com/superm-profile-facts/>

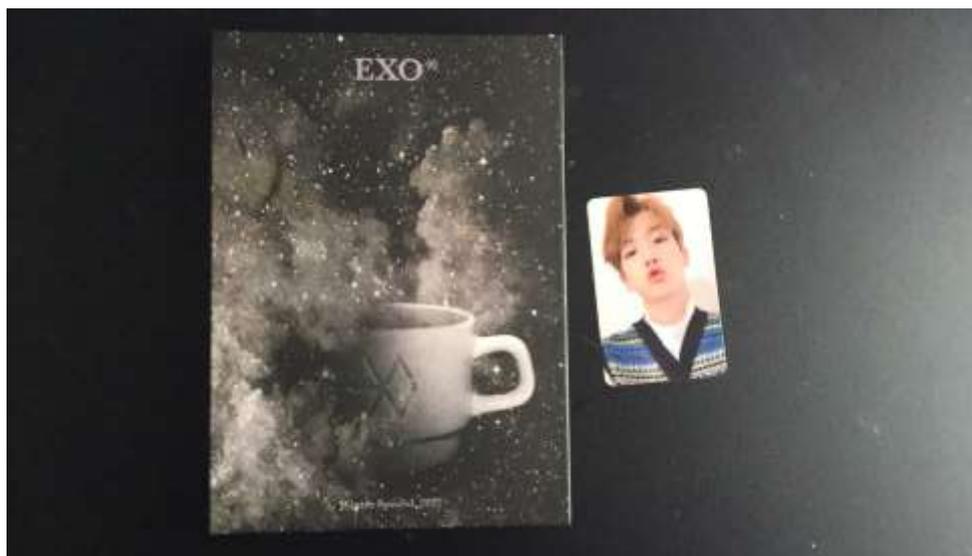
<sup>32</sup> Male group formed by S.M. Entertainment in 2008. The group's popularity in South Korea earned them the title "Princes of K-pop". S.M. Entertainment's goal was to make the group a reference and a trend in the world of music, fashion and dance. More information can be found at: <https://kprofiles.com/shinee-members-profile/>

**Figure 9. Photocard of Baekhyun from the album *Delight* and photocard of Hyungwon from 4<sup>th</sup> Fanclub *Monbebe***



Source: provided by herself.

**Figure 10. EXO's album and photocard from Baekhyun**



Source: provided by herself.

Still regarding the photocards, this preservation logic is also associated to the albums, as well as to other items, such as soft toys, lightsticks and, of course, to other items related to Meet & Greet. This way, the photocards become themselves carriers of meanings within a unique subculture, which aims at indicating a preference for one or more artists, as is the case of Beatriz. The same applies to lightsticks or special items, such as concert bracelets or banners, these rarer in the Portuguese context as K-pop concerts do not take place on a regular basis because this country is considered too small to host the bands' giant artistic productions. One example is the collection of Andreia Caetano, 28 years old and a K-pop fan since 2016, which includes souvenirs from two concerts in Lisbon and one in Madrid.

**Figure 11. Banners, meet&greet photos, concert photos and lightsticks**

Note: Souvenirs of the groups ATEEZ<sup>33</sup>, VAV<sup>34</sup>, ACE<sup>35</sup>, 24K<sup>36</sup>, PENTAGON<sup>37</sup> and BLOCKB<sup>38</sup>

Source: provided by herself.

**Figure 12. Souvenirs from the two concerts of the 24K group in Lisbon (2017 and 2018)**

Source: provided by herself.

<sup>33</sup> Male group formed by KQ Entertainment and had their debut in 2018. More information at: <https://kprofiles.com/ateez-members-profile/>

<sup>34</sup> Acronym for Very Awesome Voice, the group was formed by AQ Entertainment and had their debut in 2015. More information at: <https://pt-facebook.com/VAVofficial>

<sup>35</sup> An acronym for Adventure Calling Emotions, they are a South Korean group co-managed by Swing Entertainment and made their debut in 2017. More information at: <https://kprofiles.com/ace-kpop-boy-group-members-profile/>

<sup>36</sup> Male group formed by Choeun Entertainment and who had their debut in 2012. More information at: <https://kprofiles.com/24k-members-profile/>

<sup>37</sup> Male group, also known as PTG, formed by Cube Entertainment in 2016. More information at: <https://kprofiles.com/pentagon-members-profile/>

<sup>38</sup> A male group under-managed by Seven Seasons who made their debut in 2011. They are known for being able to work with a variety of musical genres. More information at: <https://kprofiles.com/block-b-members-profile/>

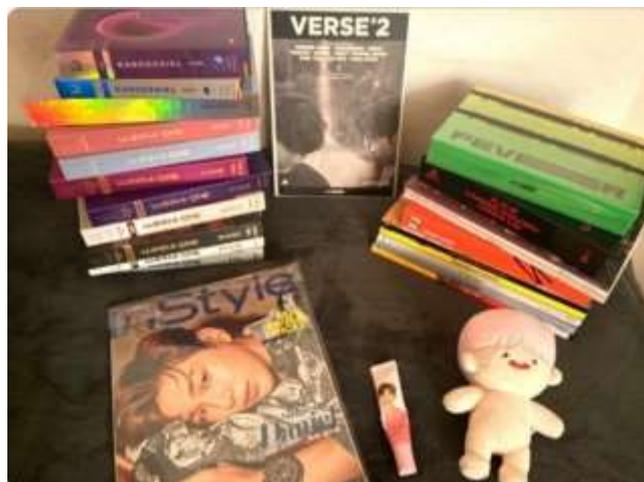
Based on this assumption, we returned to Bourdieu's contributions (1984) when he enunciates the different types of economic, cultural and social capital. Let us see that the interaction of the authors with these fans, as well as the explanation of each of the photographs provided, denotes a strong cultural capital. Thus, as Oliver (2020) enunciates, this cultural capital manifests itself according to the form of knowledge about K-pop. On the one hand, by the investment made in memorising and/or knowing the names of the albums and whether they are special editions, but also by the time invested in knowing the names of the members and specific characteristics, such as height or weight. Furthermore, knowing the names of the songs, the lyrics and which album they belong to also requires a strong investment, because a true fan knows how to differentiate between a debut and a comeback, something quite common in K-pop. This differentiation is one more marketing strategy that aims to capture the attention of fans (Sun, 2020), reminding us to what was assessed at the beginning of the article, about the fact that there is a need to attend all the live performances, thus meeting this differentiation. So, this knowledge about K-pop, recognized as the *aegis* of the cultural capital, manifests itself in the intention to buy and consume more items of this genre, appearing as a reinforcement to their personal and collective identity (Jenkins, 1992). Thus, also as a form of recognition and appreciation of the individual and the items acquired, the need to exhibit them arises. Not only the albums, but all the items related to the bias.

**Figure 13. Collection of photocards and a binder with other photocards (exposed ones are the most cherished)**



Source: provided by herself.

**Figure 14. Collection of albums and other items**



Source: provided by herself.

With the image above (Figure 14) we have presented the variety of products that can be collected within the K-pop genre. Thus, in the two photographs, according to Alexandra Borges, a 25-year-old young woman and K-pop fan since 2011, all the items that she esteems the most are present, such as the albums of the groups GOT7, A.C.E, ATEEZ, Stray Kids<sup>39</sup> and by the artist Kang Daniel. Again, on the importance of the proximity to the idol (Oliver, 2020), we have (see Figure 16) a set of items that meet this idea, and the magazines are also of important relevance<sup>40</sup>, as 'inStyle', the first in which the artist Kang Daniel featured on the cover, as well as a K-pop Doll of the same artist, and also a lipstick of the innisfree line<sup>41</sup> in which the WANNA ONE group<sup>42</sup> was the face of the brand. Each member had a different colour lipstick, Alexandra acquired the one of her bias, Kang Daniel. Otherwise, the representations that are constructed around the items, lead us to others, such as authenticity, beauty, monumentality and meaning, which are essential characteristics identified by Natalie Heinich (2017) towards heritage value and which, in turn, can also be identified in memorabilia items.

Thus, we consider that we are facing what Stuart Hall (2005) states about the postmodern subject, since we are facing cultural identities (Williams, 2006) that allow the integration of the individual in a movement that goes beyond the musical taste, but that aims, indeed, at the integration of the individual in an active culture, promoting socialization and the dissemination of ideas with other individuals who share the same taste. This post-modern identity serves as a basis for our understanding of the ways in which South Korean culture is consumed, especially in terms of memorabilia, almost as if it were a way of recognizing it as their native culture. We are thus in hybrid identity processes that emphasize the relationship with the consumed products and that, in turn, contribute to its dissemination. In this way, the fans see themselves as a fundamental element for the dissemination of the genre.

**Figure 15. EXO member Lay's soft toy and extras and Andreia Caetano's ultimate bias**



Source: provided by herself.

<sup>39</sup> Also known as SKZ, they are a male group formed by JYP Entertainment and had their debut in 2018. Their fandom is known to be titled 'Stay'. More information at: <https://www.instagram.com/realstraykids/>

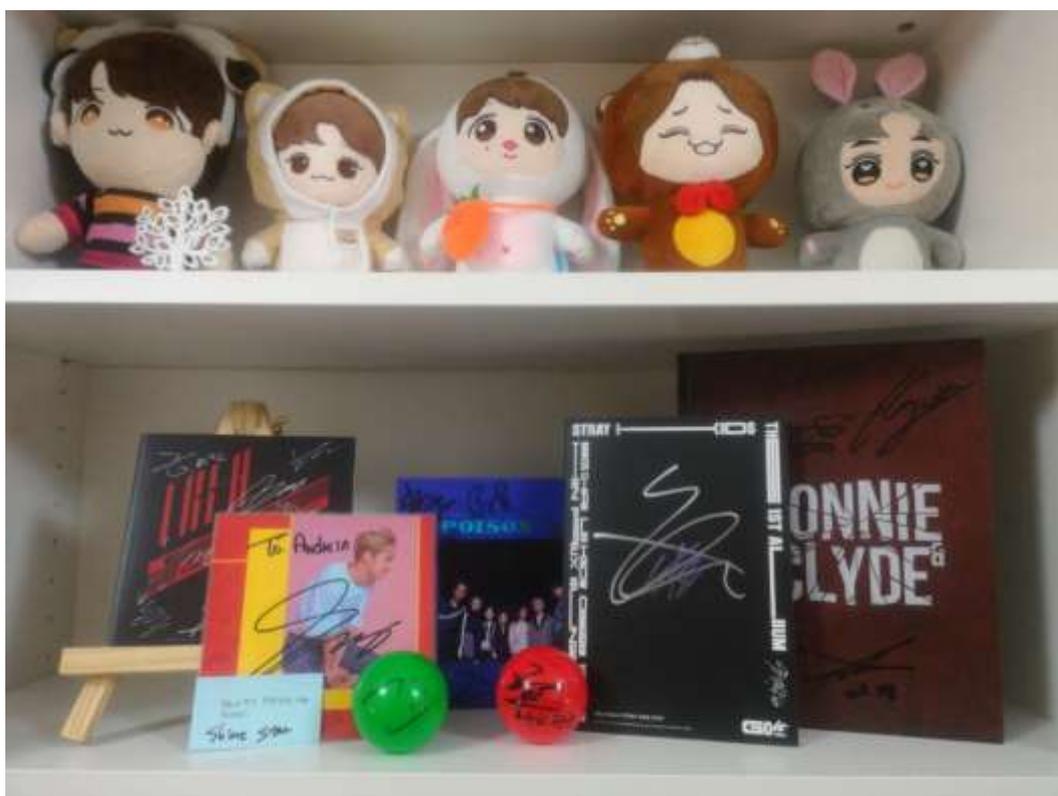
<sup>40</sup> Somewhat similar to western practice, such as collections from *Bravo* magazine or *Blitz*.

<sup>41</sup> A South Korean brand of beauty products.

<sup>42</sup> Male group formed by CJ E&M through Mnet's Produce 101 program. They had their official debut in 2017 and made their last performance in 2018. More information at: <https://kprofiles.com/wanna-one-members-profile/>

Also in the following figure (see Figure 16), Andreia reinforces the previous idea, as she provided us with a detailed description of each of the items. Thus, we ask the reader to read the image from left to right, since we will provide the legend as she indicated. We decided to do so since we have denoted a strong sense of pride in the items, as Andreia goes to concerts and has participated in meet&greet. In parallel, it is also important to demonstrate her knowledge as a fan, her cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984; Oliver, 2020). Another curiosity, being in front of albums signed by her idols, we asked her about the prices, an issue already stated here in the article, and Andreia stated that these would be the most expensive ones she acquired, in fact she even pointed out that the most expensive one is NAMANANA of the artist Lay – her bias – and that it cost 55 euros. So, from this example we can reinforce what was said before, that it is a strong cultural and economic capital, in the sense that, regardless of the price, the focus is on establishing a relationship with the idol, acquiring all the products related to it.

**Figure 16. Signed albums, from Andreia Caetano**



Note: Ateez ep2 signed by all members; Ateez Illusion version signed by Seonghwa and with an answer to a question; VAV Poison signed by all members; Stray Kids GO signed by Hyunjin; 24K Bonnie & Clyde signed by all members; Green ball signed by Ziu (VAV in concert) and red ball signed by Hongseob (24K in concert)

Source: provided by herself.

There are also some examples of lightsticks used in concerts, which are considered an important part of the memorabilia, mainly because they accentuate the presence of fans in the shows, as well as their support to the artists. It is important to note that in these three images we observe the customization of products, since the lightstick of the EXO group of Erica's collection (see Figure 18) and the one of Jessica's collection (see Figure 19), although both have flowers inside and have the same format, their colours are different, as well as the positioning of the name of the group.

**Figure 17. Lightband of the Day 6 group, from Joana Gonçalves**



Source: provided by herself.

**Figure 18. EXO's lightsticks collection, from Érica Oliveira**



Source: provided by herself.

**Figure 19. Lightsicks by SHINee and EXO, from Jessica Barros**



Source: provided by herself.

Thus, it is also important to highlight that the purchase of these items denotes a strong nostalgic feeling, as well as a strong sense of belonging. Moreover, K-pop – within popular music – has become a cultural heritage, in which the memorabilia associated with this genre reveals nostalgic properties (Guerra, 2010) deeply connected to the idols. On the one hand, and meeting what was previously said about the knowledge obtained and demonstrated about the world of K-pop associated with the possibility of making it known, it may cause feelings of fulfilment, as well as give them a sense of belonging since, especially in the Portuguese context, a strong stereotyping towards K-pop fans still remains. These stereotypes (Duffett, 2013) are built from the idea that K-pop fans are introverted, shy and with weak socialization skills, a bit like the stereotypes that exist about fans of manga or comic books.

In a systematic way, we can assess that global audiences connect with K-pop through digital media, thus having implicit a connection between the meaning and the object that, consequently, ends up being shared as a form of communication, through the purchase of albums and other products. These relationships created with the objects exalt multiple reflective elements on consumptions, but also on collective memories (Halbwachs, 1992; Alberto & Guerra, 2019), something as much, or even more, evident because there are numerous fans who have the same bias, or who share the same K-pop items, thus giving rise – and materialising – in distinct types of sociabilities and ways of life (Guerra, 2018; 2019b). The items presented above, as well as the care mentioned regarding the presentation of the items in the rooms, combined with a preservationist logic (Heinich, 2010), point us to the idea of museification (Duarte, 2014) of private spaces. Well, these processes and the collecting practices around K-pop items should thus be taken into account in a sociological approach such as the one we propose here, especially because it refers us to different forms of cultural heritage (Roberts & Cohen, 2014), different symbologies and, of course, enunciates the importance of the materiality of popular culture, namely of South Korean popular culture.

Through the photographs we received, as well as through the informal conversations established by social networks such as Facebook and Instagram, we were able to denote the notion of ‘patrimonial emotion’ (Fabre, 2013), since a set of emotions and feelings is constructed in relation to the idol and the groups, but also in relation to their

objects that, in essence, constitute and compose a common heritage that is lived according to a reality of meanings (Godelier, 2008).

### 5. *MoneyMakerz*. Debut or comeback of the Portuguese fandom?

With the elaboration of this article, it became possible to assess that K-pop, besides being a musical genre that is considered as a product of a systematic globalization process (Oliver, 2020), can also be considered as a new way of perceiving the importance of the local context. Thus, parallel to the fact that it is a product that aims at mass appeal, it simultaneously manages to adapt itself to each regional and local specificity, something even more visible with the visibility of each group per country. We can see that, in the collections that were presented, almost always the same groups appeared, such as EXO, Day 6 or StayKids.

In this article, we got a glimpse of a strong wave of memorabilia collection within the Portuguese fandom, an aspect that has been accentuating gradually, also considering the changes within youth cultures. Digital networks are also a factor to be taken into consideration, in the sense that they provide interaction based on the images and productions of idols. Moreover, as Duffett (2015) states, the new environments created about and from the social networks, bring the fandom closer and play key roles at the levels of artistic productions and consumption, since the products are made thinking about the fans (Sun, 2020). Thus, the performances, the appearances, the use of social networks, the songs, the video clips and merchandising – among others – when associated with this musical genre, always assume vast and distinct proportions and materializations, turning it into an even more profitable genre, cementing itself continuously in the young fans' imaginaries. Another point that this article has highlighted is that fan culture in contemporaneity, at least as far as K-pop is concerned, is not limited to the online universe, materializing in physical and collectible objects, as in the 1980s and 1990s, thus having a duality between contemporary and traditional, exalting a kind of nostalgia (Alberto & Guerra, 2019).

Being a fan is not restricted to the end of a concert or a performance; in fact, it extends to several dimensions of individual and collective social life. If it seemed that the fan identity no longer had the same strength as in the 1980s, 1990s and even in the early 2000s, due to the immensity of mass-produced cultural products, with K-pop it seems to be the opposite. An example of this is the importance given to CDs – something that in American and Western culture is not really the case – without neglecting the importance of digital platforms and *vice versa*. Thus, we are left to think and reflect on the importance of objects and memorabilia associated with K-pop, mainly from the point of view of the creation of an identity, but mainly from the attribution, sharing and construction of meanings *vis-à-vis* these items (Guerra, 2019a; Blumer, 1969). Rather than being something temporary, a fever for idols similar to what happened with other western boy and girl bands, the appreciation and demonstration of taste for the groups and the musical genre, even contributed to the permanent creation of a sense of belonging (Ryff, 1989).

In short, with the writing of this article we intended to counter recent studies focusing on the impacts of icons on culture and individuals (Stever, 2009), but also to move away from an economic and commercial view of K-pop merchandising items. So, we consider that it will be important to resume and deepen this issue in future researches, extending the age groups, and also widening the geographic scope, in order to foresee similarities and differences regarding this type of consumption, according to the country of origin of each fan.

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