# Between Human and Virtual Idol: Fans Reception Analysis of Digital Alter Ego Concept

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**ABSTRACT**

The emergence of K-pop idol group Aespa has changed the landscape of K-pop fan culture since the group introduced the concept of a digital alter ego in the form of digital "ae" members. This research aims to understand how Indonesian fans construct the meanings of the digital alter ego concept carried by Aespa. This research is conducted by the reception analysis method. Informants consisted of four Aespa's fans, each with distinct experience as K-pop fans. The main findings in this research revolve around the different reading positions held by informants, as affected by the distinct framework of knowledge, relations of consumption, and technical infrastructure surrounding their cultural practices as K-pop fans. Aespa's digital alter ego could be seen in three ways: as another version of the self, a dishonest self-representation, and a polished version of the self. Through these differences, it can be concluded that fans' construction of meanings cannot be reviewed through a deterministic approach but through a socio-cultural approach instead.

Keywords: Digital Alter Ego; Reception Analysis; K-Pop Culture; Fans Studies; Media Psychology

**ABSTRAK**

Kemunculan grup idola K-pop, Aespa, telah membawa perubahan pada lanskap budaya penggemar, dengan konsep alter ego digital yang mereka usung melalui adanya anggota versi digital "ae". Riset ini bertujuan untuk mendapatkan pemahaman atas konstruksi makna yang dilakukan para penggemar terhadap konsep alter ego digital grup Aespa. Riset ini dilaksanakan dengan metode analisis resepsi. Informan penelitian terdiri dari empat penggemar Aespa, masing-masing dengan pengalaman berbeda sebagai penggemar K-pop. Temuan utama berfokus pada posisi pembacaan para informan yang dipengaruhi oleh kerangka pengetahuan, relasi konsumsi, dan infrastuktur teknis dalam praktik kultural mereka sebagai penggemar K-pop. Alter ego digital yang diusung oleh Aespa dapat dilihat melalui tiga cara: sebagai versi lain dari diri, sebagai representasi-diri yang tidak jujur, dan sebagai versi diri yang dipoles. Melalui perbedaan cara pandang ini, dapat disimpulkan bahwa pemaknaan penggemar tidak dapat ditinjau secara deterministik, melainkan harus dilihat secara sosio-kultural.

Kata Kunci: Alter Ego Digital; Analisis Resepsi; Budaya K-Pop; Budaya Penggemar; Psikologi Media

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# INTRODUCTION

South Korean popular culture, popularly known as the Korean wave, has become a trend in Indonesia, particularly in the last ten years (Muhammad, 2012; Wuryanta, 2012). Among the popular form of content is South Korean music and idols, also known as Korean pop (K-pop). Indonesian youngsters become the audiences of K-pop as they consume the products and eventually become fans. The penetration of K-pop content in Indonesia began with the first generation of K-pop idols, marked by the debut and rising of several first-generation idols, such as BoA dan Shinhwa, around 2002 (Shin & Kim, 2013). However, the emergence of Indonesian K-pop fans began during the second generation of K-pop idols in 2008; the idol groups during that time included Girls' Generation (SNSD), Big Bang, Super Junior, 2PM, and many more (Jung & Shim, 2013). Ever since, the number of K-pop fans in Indonesia only increases.

The concepts that K-pop idol groups carry from time to time have significantly shifted (Cai, 2019; Lee & Son, 2021). The first and second-generations idol groups focused on musicality and depended on television variety shows to promote their activities. Meanwhile, third-generation idol groups (which debuted since 2012, such as EXO, BTS, Red Velvet, and many more) carried more sophisticated concepts, enhanced dance choreography, and striking visuals. The ways third-generation idol groups promote their activities also vary, not only through television shows but also through self-managed channels such as Youtube shows. Currently, the newest generation of K-pop idol groups, the fourth generation, utilizes mostly their own Youtube channels to promote their concept and activities.

Aespa, a K-pop girl group formed by SM Entertainment and debuted in 2020, is a fourth-generation idol group with a distinct and unique concept. Aespa consisted of four members: Karina, Winter, NingNing, and Giselle. "Aespa" stands for 'avatar', 'experience', and 'aspect', in which means 'meeting another self and experiencing the new world'. With this concept, Aespa became the first K-pop idol group that carries a duality concept: they have a human-idol version of the members and a digital-idol version of the members (the digital avatar of the human members). Unlike other K-pop idol groups' merchandising avatars (such as BTS' Tiny Tan or BT21), Aespa's alter ego acts as 'additional member' of the group. Hence, they become an inseparable part of Aespa as the core concept of the group. Hence, the alter ego of Aespa is referred to as the 'digital "ae" members' because they are counted as member of Aespa. In other words, Aespa consisted of eight members: human Karina, ae Karina, human Winter, ae Winter, human NingNing, ae NingNing, human Giselle, and ae Giselle.



**Figure 1.** Aespa human and digital "ae" members are standing side by side
(source: instagram.com/smtown)

Aespa's concept, as sophisticated and fresh as it is, might come confusing and disturbing for some fans, particularly who have been following K-pop since the first or second-generation idols. They might find it difficult to adjust to this new concept because the concept of having "ae" members is something new in the K-pop industry. Evidently, the existence of the digital "ae" members that serve

as the digital alter ego of Aespa's human members has raised controversy and debate surrounding dehumanization, stereotype, and pornography (Endriana, 2020; Herman, 2020). It has raised some concerns regarding the perpetuation of stigma against female idols, in which people only see female idols as 'dolls' objects instead of humans (Herman, 2020). Besides, there is a concern regarding whether the fans could develop a tight and strong relationship with the digital "ae" members (Endriana, 2020). Thus, this phenomenon of Aespa's digital alter ego raises a question regarding how Indonesian K-pop fans perceive the concept and construct meaning out of it.

Hence, this research is conducted to gain an understanding of how Indonesian K-pop fans define the concept of 'digital alter ego' as carried by idol group Aespa, considering the pervasiveness of K-pop in Indonesia (Langit et al., 2019; Perbawani & Nuralin, 2021). The focus of this study lies in the intersection between fan studies and digital culture; hence it becomes significant for developing the field of audience research in communication and digital media studies. Moreover, this study also enriches the media psychology aspect of communication science that engages a phenomenological rather than socio-psychological approach. Therefore, this research focuses on Indonesian K-pop fans as audiences with agency in interpreting the content they receive.

In analyzing the reception process of audiences, this study applies Stuart Hall's classic encoding/decoding theory with adaptations that are relevant to the digital media context in this issue (Hall, 2012; Shaw, 2017). According to Hall, there are three positions that readers can choose to interpret the message. The first is the dominant or preferred readings, where the information is decoded with the same meaning as it had when it was encoded. Secondly, there are the negotiated readings, which combine preferred and resistant readings. Third, the oppositional readings, in which a recipient interprets the message differently than the sender intended. Besides these reading positions, in the context of digital media, it is important to include further aspects that mold the audience's reading positions. Those aspects are the 'framework of knowledge', 'relations of production', and 'technical infrastructure' (Hall, 2012; Shaw, 2017). 'Framework of knowledge' means that the acceptance and meaning of media messages are determined by audiences' education, knowledge, beliefs, ideologies, values, and ethics (Ademolu, 2022; Fauzi et al., 2022; Hall, 2012). However, the 'relations of production' aspect in this research will be changed to the 'relations of consumption' (Briandana et al., 2021) since this research focuses on fans as audiences and consumers of K-pop content.

Related to fans' culture, three aspects of the audience's reading position play a significant role. According to Henry Jenkins, fans are active audiences that create meanings and build relationships with their idols through cultural practices (Duffett, 2013; Jenkins, 2014). Fans' knowledge framework will determine how and why fans build certain relationships and bonds with the idols they worship. The relations of production in this context refer to the social relations surrounding the fans that affect the cultural practice. Whomever anyone accesses, watches, and discusses media messages with has an impact on their own interpretation of those messages or the audience's interpretation. Lastly, in the context of digital media, the technical infrastructure of the fans becomes significant since it will affect their capability to access the digital content of their idols.

Since this research explores the issue of K-pop idols' digital alter egos, some concepts related to digital alter egos are also applied in this study. Digital alter ego refers to an individual's digital persona, consisting of virtual data, and is represented as a digital media avatar through social media presence and profiles (Bolea, 2016; Todd Herman, 2019). Hence, the digital alter ego served as individuals' polished and perfected version. Sarah Young identified and depicted the characteristics of a digital alter ego as (1) super intelligence, (2) invisible and intangible, (3) transcending space and time, (4) shape-shifting and multi-powered personalities, and (5) super strength (Young, 2020). The pervasiveness of social media platforms has urged users to create more than just one digital alter ego in the virtual space. In other words, the self-identity in the digital era has become fragmented into several alter egos (Prajarto & Purwaningtyas, 2022; Susanti & Hantoro, 2022)

The recent phenomenon regarding K-pop fans is closely related to digital alter ego. For example, the phenomenon of role-playing accounts on Twitter, where fans create an account with the identity of their favorite idol (Hapsari, 2019; Syawbriyanti, 2021). In fan culture, being a prosumer (producer and consumer of content) is expected as fans would recreate a world of their own based on real-life idols (Sugihartati, 2020). However, when it comes to the concept brought by the idol group purposely, the way fans define the digital alter ego concept might be different from what they used to perceive it. Hence, the novelty of this study lies in the audience's interpretive meanings towards the idol's digital alter ego concept; in this case, it follows the duality of Aespa's human and virtual version of the idol.

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## METHODS

This research is conducted by reception analysis method with a qualitative approach. Reception analysis is the most appropriate method to answer the research question since it enables researchers to discover and analyze audiences' construction of meaning towards certain media content (Briandana et al., 2021; Hall, 2012; Shaw, 2017). Informants in this research consisted of four fans of Aespa who were chosen purposively, with details as below:

**Table 1.** List of informants (source: research data)

| Informants | Start being K-pop Fans |
|---|---|
| NN | Since $3^{rd}$ generation idols (2012) |
| TN | Since $4^{th}$ generation idols (2018) |
| J | Since $2^{nd}$ generation idols (2008) |
| E | Since $2^{nd}$ generation idols (2009) |

To protect informants' personal information, their names were written in initials. Researchers deliberately chose informants with different backgrounds regarding their involvement as K-pop fans. The reason is to gain a diverse perspective towards the digital alter ego concept of Aespa, since Aespa's concept is a relatively new thing among K-pop fans. Informants following K-pop since the second or third generation might convey different approaches to newer K-pop fans.

Data collection techniques were conducted by in-depth interview with each informant and observation. Observation was conducted through participatory mode, where researchers and informants watched the content together. As for the content being received by the informants is the first episode of SM Cultural Universe Aespa titled "Black Mamba". The preferred reading that is offered by this video tends to construct that the digital "ae" members were made of digital information and took on a form of their own. The intended meaning of Aespa's video is to make audience believe that "ae" is formed from data uploaded by users to the internet. Hence, the encoded message can be summarized as: digital "ae" members are made of data from humans, but they exist and have a life of their own.

**Table 2.** List of highlight scenes in the received contents

| Scene Code | Scene | Description |
|---|---|---|
| #1 |  | In this scene, a professor explains about "ae", that "ae" is made of digital information and takes on a form of its own |
| #2 |  | In this scene, the professor explains in a classroom that "ae" comes from data uploaded by users daily, therefore "ae" is us and not us simultaneously. |

| #3 |  | In this scene, professor's explanation (that "ae" is formed from data uploaded by users to the internet) is visualized by Aespa human and digital "ae" members. |
| --- | --- | --- |
| #4 |  | In this scene, a student asks: what if someone alters the data that is uploaded to the internet, can "ae" still be called 'self-reflection'? |

Furthermore, the data analysis technique was carried out by applying Stuart Hall's main concept in reception studies, which categorizes audience reading position into three: dominant/hegemonic, negotiated, and oppositional reading position (Hall, 2012; Shaw, 2017). Furthermore, each informant's reading position is analyzed through three main factors: framework of knowledge, relations of consumption, and technical infrastructure (Hall, 2012; Shaw, 2017). Qualitative research applies to this research, where data saturation is indicated by no longer obtaining new data or information.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Defining Aespa's Digital Alter Ego

The pervasiveness of the internet and social media platforms in daily life has brought understanding towards digital alter ego. Digital alter ego could be defined as the digital version of a human, embodied through their internet presence as the self-(re)presentation (Young, 2018). In terms of idols or celebrities, in the era of social media, their self-presentation on social media platforms (such as Instagram and Twitter) could create a new level of parasocial relationship through the interactivity provided by the social media platform (Ackerman, 2021). Fans can follow the social media accounts of their idols (the credible account usually marked as certified account) and keep up with the idol's daily activities through their daily updates on social media. The emergence of Aespa, however, has changed the dynamics since digital alter ego became the group's concept as they created a particular avatar as the digital alter ego.

The way informants in this research perceive Aespa's digital alter ego is influenced by three aspects, derived from Hall's encoding/decoding theory (Shaw, 2017): (1) informants' framework of knowledge related to K-pop and digital alter ego (2) informants' social relations of consumption, and (3) informants' technical infrastructure. First, the informants' framework of knowledge related to K-pop and digital alter ego has affected the way they perceive Aespa's digital alter ego. Informant NN and TN believe that Aespa digital "ae" members are the other version of the human members. In other words, these two informants perceive the digital "ae" members of Aespa with the same meaning as presented in the video content. They stated that Aespa's digital "ae" members were built from the real nature and character of Aespa's human members.

However, informants NN and TN also admitted that the digital "ae" members could be a polished version of the human members to look more admirable and more perfect. Nevertheless, they argued that even though the digital "ae" version is polished and upgraded, it does not mean it is unreal or better than the human version. NN and TN, which have been following K-pop since third and fourth-generation idols, respectively, admitted that they do understand that the digital "ae" members might serve as a marketing gimmick of Aespa. Still, they also argue that it is not a bad thing. They compare it to the practice of having a second account in social media platform; they argue that a

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second account might be more authentic than the first one, as has also been discussed in previous research (Sokowati & Manda, 2022). At this level, informants' prior knowledge regarding digital alter ego plays a significant role in the way they perceive Aespa's digital "ae" members.

On the other side, informant J argued that Aespa's digital "ae" is the dishonest representation of the human members. He considered it as only a marketing tool for gaining commercial benefits and for informant J this practice only shows the banality of the digital "ae". Apparently, his experiences as K-pop fan since the second-generation idol plays a significant role in shaping his perspective. He stated that this concept of digital alter ego carried by Aespa is confusing and useless. He admitted that K-pop is enjoyable because of its music and performance. Hence he thinks that this gimmick is degrading Aespa's quality as an idol, because he wanted to see Aespa for their talents (just like idols from second-generation), not for the gimmick. In line with informant J, informant E also believes that Aespa's digital "ae" is unreal, while only the human members are genuine. Even though he considered himself loyal K-pop fans and claimed that he rarely criticizes idols, he tends to see the digital "ae" members as superficial gimmicks.

The second aspect influencing how informants perceive Aespa's digital alter ego is the social relations of K-pop consumption. Informant NN, who has been a fan of K-pop since third-generation idols, admitted that she had faced some stereotypes regarding being a K-pop fan. In the traditional view, fans are commonly seen as pathological, which is used to marginalize the fans as irrational beings (Andini & Akhni, 2021; Lundy et al., 2020; Nugroho, 2014). This kind of stereotype is experienced by informants NN, TN, J, and E. However, the four informants' different perspective on seeing Aespa's digital alter ego shows that the cultural practice of K-pop fans has been breaking the stereotype. Their consumption practice of K-pop content is commonly seen as not productive by people around them. However, informants in this research show that they do not ultimately accept and like all content their idols give them. Even though all four are self-proclaimed Aespa fans, not all necessarily worship Aespa's digital alter ego concept.

The stereotype surrounding K-pop fans is one of the reasons why the bond and group cohesiveness among fellow K-pop fans are thick and strong (Lee et al., 2020). All four informants in this research build peers or join a community related to K-pop to have passionate K-pop discussions while not being judged as irrational. In this research, their K-pop peers are found to affect their perspective towards Aespa's digital alter ego. Informant NN and TN are surrounded by peers who enjoy Aespa's digital "ae" performance and tend not to criticize it. Unlike them, informant J is involved in peers who are more skeptical about Aespa's digital "ae". However, the K-pop peers around informant E is quite different; his peers tend to be divided between people who accept Aespa's digital "ae" openly and people who strongly dislike the digital alter ego concept of Aespa. Torn between these two clashing perspectives, informant E tends to take the middle road by watching Aespa's digital "ae" but not necessarily believing that the avatars are the same as the human idols.

The third aspect that influences the way informants perceive Aespa's digital alter ego is the informants' technical infrastructure. At this level, all four informants have a similar level of technical infrastructure. They are equipped with the internet, smartphones, and computers to be able to access the same content from the idols. However, what makes the difference among these four informants are their digital literacy. Informant NN and J were not only consumers of K-pop contents, but also producers of severalfan productionsn, such as fanfiction and 'alternate universe' (AU). However, they both show different tendencies in seeing Aespa. Informant NN tends to accept the digital alter ego as a part of Aespa. On the other hand, informant J tends to see the digital alter ego for entertainment purposes only. Meanwhile, informant TN was actively searching for additional information regarding Aespa. Thus, she concludes that the group's digital alter ego serves as the other personas of the members. As for informant E, his experience in using social media has made him tolerate the digital "ae" as the polished version of the human members, even though he argued that it is unrealistic.

Based on the discussions above, the informants' reading position can be summarized as below:

**Table 3.** Informants' reading position (source: research data)

| Informants | Reading Position |
|---|---|
| NN | dominant-hegemonic |
| TN | dominant-hegemonic |
| J | oppositional |
| E | negotiated |

Informant NN and TN, who are in the dominant-hegemonic reading position, tend to define the digital alter ego as 'another version of us'; it is still us, but just presented with several differences and similarities. On the other hand, informant J, who is in oppositional reading, tends to define the digital alter ego as dishonest self-representations; the digital alter ego is considered a manufactured self. Meanwhile, informant E, who is in negotiated reading position, tends to define the digital alter ego as the 'polished version of the self', as it is part of the self but also unreal at the same time.

## Dualism: Between Real and Virtual Idol

Based on discussions in the previous part, it can be seen that informants in this research interpret the concept of digital alter ego promoted by the girl group Aespa in various ways. The interpretation of the digital alter ego concept then brings the discussion to a further level regarding the concept of Aespa as idols in the mind of their fans. As a group that carries a duality of characters, namely themselves in human form and themselves in digital "ae" form, this has sparked a debate about which persona fans believe in more: the human members of the digital "ae" members.

Aespa's digital "ae" members were formed from data uploaded by Aespa's human members, thus creating an alter ego dualism in digital form. The duality of the digital alter ego is explicitly presented by SM Entertainment (the agency that organizes Aespa) through the first episode of SMCU's Aespa video content and the interview video between Karina's human version and Karina's "ae" version. At this level, even though SM Entertainment and Aespa give freedom to the audiences to give their meanings of the digital alter ego, they also tend to direct the audiences to believe that Aespa has eight members: four human members and four digital "ae" members.

The differences in form between humans and digital entities are the main point of whether the digital "ae" members can represent actual figures or humans or vice versa, whether the humans represent the digital entities. Related to the relationship between idols and fans, knowing which celebrity's persona is more dominant in thefans' mind is an important aspect for reviewing the transforming fans culture in this digital era (Kusuma et al., 2020). This leads to the next discussion regarding which version of Aespa is trusted more by informants.

Generally, informants are divided into two perspectives as below:

**Table 4.** Informants' trust towards human idol and digital "ae" idol (source: research data)

| Informant | Trust towards Human Idol vs Digital "ae" Idol |
|---|---|
| NN<br>E | Digital "ae" members are more trusted because they are formed from real-world human members' data. |
| TN<br>J | Human members in the real world are more trusted because they are real human beings. |

Two aspects influence the different perspectivess of the informants in this study. The first aspect is the daily experience of the informants with the digital alter ego dualism that they got through managing their social media accounts. All four informants are social media users familiar with the alter ego concept through the use of more than one account on social media platforms (Purwaningtyas & Alicya, 2020). When managing two different accounts on the same platform, users will divide hemselves and set which persona they want to show or hide in each account (Kang & Wei, 2020; Purwaningtyas & Alicya, 2020). In this research, informants referred to their main account as 'first account' and their supplement account as 'second account'. Informants refer to the main/first account as the account that is using their real name. Meanwhile, the supplement/second account is referenced as the account that is not using their real name.

Informants TN and J, who stated that they trust more in Aespa's human members more, are the informants who considered that both the first and second accounts only represented some parts of a person's personality, not the entirety of a person's character. From that reasoning, they concluded that even though the digital "ae" version of the members obtained the data from human members, they were only an avatar that could not describe the entire persona of a human. Moreover, informant TN stated that the digital "ae" members could be fabricated to present a more perfect self than the human version.

On the other side, informants NN and E believe that their first and second accounts are part of themselves. Even though there is a selection of information, they stated that there is no real or false

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information regarding themselves; all of it is theirs. This understanding has made them trust the digital "ae" members more than the human ones. Informant E argued that digital data would tend to be stable and unchanging, while human might change according to mood. Therefore, they trust digital "ae" members more, for there is a higher chance that the "ae" will not disappoint them in the future, in terms of possible celebrity scandals that might occur.

The second aspect that influences the different perspectives of informants is the difference in their previous reading position regarding Aespa's digital alter ego concept. Informant NN and E are in dominant-hegemonic and negotiated position, respectively. Meanwhile, informants TN and J are in dominant-hegemonic and opposition position, respectively. Even though informants NN and TN shared the same reading position, they had different perspectives on trusting human and virtual idols. Thus, how does the reading position influence their view on the dualism of human idol and virtual idol?

Through her dominant-hegemonic reading position, Informant NN assumed that whether the digital "ae" or the human members, Aespa is still Aespa. At this level, it can be seen that Aespa, at some point to some extent, has successfully managed to build an image that the digital "ae" members are not mere images or persona, but a form of their true selves. On the other side, informant TN, based on the dominant-hegemonic reading position, assumed that the digital "ae" members are only representations that could represent only some parts of the self. Hence it is loaded with selected content modified to show perfection. These findings indicate that even though they depart from the same reading position, informants -as fans- can construct different perspectives in the practice of worshiping idols. This is retrospective to the contemporary view in fans studies that notes fans as cultural practice instead of pathology (Benecchi et al., 2022; Stever, 2021). At this level, fans can create their meanings as they have distinct experiences in being a fan (Duffett, 2020).

Related to the informants' status as self-proclaimed Aespa fans who invested their resources in their idols, it can be seen that their status as fans did not become the barrier for informants to be able to critically view the alter ego dualism. Informant TN and J, for example, like Aespa's content while simultaneously perceiving the digital "ae" members as unreal images only created to entertain the fans. At this level, fans no longer seen as pathological, but rather active audiences who have their rationalization in consuming texts related to their idols (Benecchi et al., 2022; Lundy et al., 2020). Hence, they can joyfully consume the idol content without being trapped in the illusion made by the media. Therefore, the dualism that appears in the concept of Aespa is still interpreted by fans rationally.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, whether K-pop idol's digital alter ego concept could be more or less trusted by fans depends on fans' personal experiences of being a K-pop fan, as well as their experiences with digital alter ego through multiple social media accounts. There are two research implications for studying fan culture, particularly K-pop fan culture. First, how long or the duration of someone being a K-pop fan will influence the way they perceive a new concept in the industry, particularly ones that are related to digitalization since they have comparisons with the older generation of idols who did not rely on the digital aspects to promote their works of art. As discussed in this research, the K-pop fan framework of knowledge is heavily affected by the distinct generation of idols who started becoming fans of K-pop.

The second implication is the understanding that nowadays, K-pop fans can no longer be seen only from a pathological perspective. Instead, K-pop fans in this study have shown that being fans is a cultural practice that -at some point to some extent- enables them to make sense of their everyday life; this is against the stereotype of K-pop fans in Indonesia, which is infamous for being irrational and illogical. In the field of media psychology, particularly digital media, this study implicates the understanding that the way users/fans utilize digital media and how it affects their daily life as fans could not be seen through the deterministic frame of socio-psychological tradition only. Instead, the socio-cultural or phenomenological tradition is more suitable to dismantle how digital media would affect users' behavior and perspective as fans.

This research is limited by the specific focus on the audience's interpretation of Aespa's digital alter ego concept. Whereas, this focus has not covered further controversies surrounding Aespa's digital alter ego concepts, such as the issue of female idols' stereotypes and pornography. Hence,

future research could explore further in regard to those issues. Moreover, the usage of avatar or metaverse in the concept of Aespa is also open for future research in terms of celebrity marketing in the digital era, as well as the shifting in idols-fans relationships that might be caused by the metaverse.

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