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Creative Communities: Birthday Cafés in Seoul

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Creative Communities: Birthday Cafés in Seoul

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Visual Ethnography

Sander Hölsgens

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INTRODUCTION

'We go into another dimension,' Divicha tells me, reflecting on the birthday café experience we had just had. Such a different dimension calls for several steps of explanation, clarification, and contextualisation. Birthday cafés are a phenomenon where fans of a K-pop artist rent out a café for two or three days and decorate it with posters and pictures of the artist in celebration of said artist. Visitors of the café can buy a menu item with which they will receive goods. These goods vary from café to café. These goods that visitors receive with their drinks are not the only goods circulating these cafés. It is not an uncommon occurrence for visitors to come prepared with their own goods to give out to other visitors as well as it is not uncommon for the organisers of one café to be a visitor of another. Therefore, from this point onwards I will be making a distinction between distributors and recipients, rather than organisers and visitors. This multi-layered circulation of goods is mediated through a fascinating type of gift economy in which there are varying types of distributor-recipient relations.

To study this economy within the cafe and the type of distributor-recipient relations it facilitates, I will look at it through an economic anthropology lens. I believe this is fitting, as economic anthropology describes various economic systems, the human relations they produce and how the systems relate to one another as well as how the people within it relate to one another (Durrenberger, 1996). The economic characteristics of this school of thought enable me to clearly identify certain systems and different relations within them – between people as well as between people and products. Whereas the anthropological characteristics of this school of thought enable me to acknowledge that these systems and relations are not as clearly demarcated in practice as they will seem on paper. Economic anthropologists have also argued that the notion of property implies a relation between people rather than solely a relation between a person and their property (Gudeman, 2005: 105). It was, then, my goal to elaborate on the relations between one person and the other within the system of a café, or, more broadly, within their fandom, by taking the relation between a person and the goods that they acquire at a birthday café as a starting point. I have done this by, initially, focusing on the value of creativity, and its factors meaningfulness, novelty, and intentionality, attached to the goods circulating birthday cafés in Seoul. From this starting point I will tease out the tangled network of sociological and economic values upon which K-pop's freebie culture, and the community at large, relies.

Economic and sociological values refer to Graeber's distinction between three different interpretations of value throughout history within anthropological debates. He recognises (1) values in the sociological sense, in this case values are seen as conceptions of what is desirable or good; (2) values in the economic sense, in this case values are seen as the extent to which people want certain

goods and how much are people willing to exchange for these goods; (3) values in the linguistic sense, in this case values are seen as differences (Graeber 2001:1-2). In this project I focus on value in the sociological sense and value in the economic sense, as I explore to what extent the sociological understanding of value informs the economic sense of value and vice versa. As Hellekson (2009) argues, the K-pop fandom economy has its bases in exchange, of material as well as non-material goods, in which the role of giving, receiving, and reciprocating is crucial. Proctor reiterates this and states that the motivation within fandom to create and share goods is not monetary – value in the economic sense – rather it is the connection it creates between fans and reciprocal action of engagement and participation in the fandom – values in the sociological sense (Proctor, 2021:82). Be it as it may, the prioritisation of value in the sociological sense over value in the economic sense, does not negate the role of value in the economic sense. In the context of a birthday café, the gift that comes with a menu item is only given when *purchasing* a menu item, after all.

To centralise these theories of value, I have formulated my research question as follows: How do the values attached to goods that circulate birthday cafés in Seoul inform larger networks of values that K-pop’s freebie culture relies upon?

In order to answer this question, I will first discuss the value of creativity that the people I have spoken to attached to the goods directly. Second, I will elaborate on the various ways in which these goods – and the values attached to them – facilitate relations in the bigger context of K-pop fandom communities and map out the values playing a role in these relations as well. This will be prefaced by the theoretical framework and the methodology. In the theoretical framework I will (1) discuss value in the economic sense, in which I will focus on the formalist versus substantivist debate, (2) discuss value in the sociological sense, in which I will focus on the conceptualisation of reciprocity, and (3) discuss the value of creativity, in which I will focus on the different factors that make up creativity. In the methodology I will elaborate on the three main methods that I have used in my fieldwork as well as reflect on my epistemological considerations on subjectivity and my positionality, inspired by Upadhyaya and Savyasaachi’s concept of ‘unlearning’ (Upadhyaya, 1999:3362). In the chapter ‘Output’ I will address the inherent subjectivity of the physical output created to convey my experience in birthday cafés in Seoul, mediated by my own creative process – on which I will also elaborate in this chapter. First, however, I will take the next step in providing explanation, clarification, and contextualisation by discussing the theoretical framework through which I have approached this research.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Value in the Economic Sense

As mentioned above, Graeber's understanding of value in the economic sense is the extent to which people want certain goods and how much people are willing to exchange for these goods. One of the more influential scholars within economic anthropology on value in the economic sense is Polanyi. In his search for analytical tools with which to study pre-colonial economies, he presents the reader another dichotomy, one between the formalists and the substantivists. He described the formal meaning to be the rational nature of the 'economic', the logical choices made based on scarcity of means that are necessary to meet an end (Polanyi, 1957:243). The substantive meaning, on the other hand, he described as the interactive nature of the 'economic', one's interaction with and dependence on their environment – the natural as well as the social one (ibid.). Following this understanding, there is space for simply obtaining something because one wants it, not solely because one has a scarcity of means to an end (ibid.). In the midst of his search for analytical tools, Polanyi argued that the formal meaning of the 'economic' is only useful for a market system, whereas the substantivist approach would be meaningful for any type of economy (ibid.:247).

Applying the substantivist understanding of the 'economic' to the phenomena that are birthday cafés, is interesting for a myriad of reasons. First, Dalton, who followed in Polanyi's footsteps and became a spokesperson for the substantivist approach, agreed with most of his peers that Polanyi's substantivist understanding the 'economic' could only be applied to non-market pre-colonial economies embedded in either stateless societies, tribal kingdoms, or 'premodern sub-sets of peasantries' (Dalton, 1990:166-167). Thinking in terms of this project, Dalton's argument is an interesting one, as South Korea's economy does not fit the definition of a pre-colonial economy and it is certainly not a stateless society or any of the other societies that Dalton describes. So, following his reasoning, the substantivist approach should not be applicable within the South Korean economy. However, within the context of birthday cafés – that are embedded in South Korean economics – Polanyi's substantivist understanding of the 'economic' is closer to the economy of a birthday café than the formalist one, as the substantivist understanding of the 'economic' provides a space for gifts in addition to commodities.

Which leads me to the second reason as to why applying the substantivist understanding is meaningful. The space provided for the consideration of gifts as well as commodities within the economy of a birthday café is fitting, as the basic principle of the café is to buy a drink with which one receives a cup – the purchasing of a commodity, the drink, goes hand in hand with the reception of a gift, the cup. Furthermore, this space accounts for the visitors of the café who come in to hand out goods. I would argue that this space can be described as a 'gift economy'. Godbout and Caillé (1998)

summarised the definition of a 'gift economy' as a system of transference of goods without the expectation of immediate reciprocation. This opposes it to a system that is based on market principles (Graeber, 2005:225) – a system within which the rationality of consumption decisions is assumed, as Gudeman (2005) explains. Mauss shared this perspective in part, he too argued that commodities and gifts were opposites (Mauss, 1967). What separates a gift from a commodity in Mauss' view lies in the three moments upon which gifting depends: gift giving, gift receiving, and gift returning (Mauss, 1925). It is this 'triple obligation' that holds together the social network of a gift economy (Caillé, 2013:44-45). A commodity does not generate such networks of reciprocation, as the demand for reciprocation is immediately met when exchanging a commodity for money. In an economy in which commodities and gifts – according to Mauss' definitions – are circulated hand in hand, the distinction is person-dependent. Where one person differentiates between the drink and the goods that are given with the drink, another person categorises both the drink and the goods as commodities.

A third reason as to why birthday cafés are such an interesting place to study through the framework the substantivist understanding is the fact that the space that it leaves for gifts also opens up space to take considerations aside from scarcity into account. This is especially interesting regarding fan-made goods, as the production chain through which most of the goods travel is exceptionally short. This impacts the value that people attach to the goods as their understanding of it is less likely to be obstructed by the many different parties involved in a long line of production (Appadurai, 1986:48). The institutional distance that Appadurai mentions as one of the main obstructions is either small or non-existent, as the institution that is usually involved in the distribution of artist-related goods is the entertainment company of the artist. However, this institution is completely sidelined with the 'by the fans for the fans' principle that birthday cafés function on. They do still have an impact on the image that people have of the artist and certain concepts connected to them, so in this way they still affect people's consumption decisions, but their direct involvement within the distribution chain is non-existent. This, I would argue, is quite a unique aspect in the K-pop sphere where entertainment companies reign.

Value in the Sociological Sense

As mentioned above, this minimal institutional distance offers a space to take people's considerations aside from scarcity into account, facilitating a space to explore the influence of value in the sociological sense on value in the economic sense. In his argument that commodities and gifts are opposites, Mauss emphasises the role of reciprocation in the triple obligation on which a gift economy rests (Mauss, 1967). The obligation of reciprocation implicates another motivation than the rationale behind resources, constraint, and preferences, it implicates an expectation. An expectation borne out of a

conception of what is good, which brings us to Graeber's second understanding of value, value in the sociological sense.

Regarding reciprocity as a sociological value, Sahlins distinguishes three types: negative, balanced, and generalised (Sahlins, 1972:169). Negative reciprocity indicates an unequal exchange in which both parties aim to gain more than they offer in return (ibid.). Balanced reciprocity denotes an expectation of a more direct exchange of goods of equal worth within a relatively short amount of time (ibid.). This kind of reciprocity is likely applied in exchanges between people who know each other well enough but are not as familiar with each other as family (ibid.). Generalised reciprocity, on the other hand, refers to no such expectation, the only expectation is that at some point something of no certain worth will be given back (ibid.). This type of reciprocity is likely applied to only the people one has their closest relationships with (ibid.).

Yan echoes the importance of the role of reciprocation within gift economies by adding that the gift giver may gain power or social standing by making a debtor of the one receiving the gift, because of the expectation of reciprocation attached to receiving a gift (Yan, 2005:251). Malinowski speaks of reciprocity in a similar way, as he states that such obligations of reciprocation hand communities 'a weapon' with which to enforce rights (Malinowski, 1926:23). However, Weiner argues that the view anthropologists have upheld on reciprocity is a Western one, a view based on the assumption that there is a natural autonomy to the idea of reciprocity (Weiner, 1992:43).

Research on the K-pop fandom in South Korea reports different views on the role of reciprocity within the fandom or between fandoms. Kang et al. (2021) present the role of reciprocity as one similar as Yan (2005) and Malinowski (1926), where fandoms use the expectation of reciprocation to get other fandoms to participate in activities that will promote an artist that they are not necessarily a fan of – for example, by voting for music awards and streaming of music videos. This perspective on reciprocation is different from Yan and Malinowski, however, in the way that the expectation of reciprocation is not a long-term 'threat' to hang over the other party's head. These ways of 'strategic collaboration' are usually made use of during a shorter period of time, during award season or during an album release (Kang et al., 2021:3). Furthermore, there is no such power imbalance that makes it impossible for one party to meet the expectation of reciprocation, Kang et al.'s study on fandom collaboration on the site DCinside shows that 89.1% of the interactions between fandoms are reciprocal (ibid.:11). Moreover, the more a member of a fandom interacts within their fandom, the more likely they are to collaborate with members from other fandoms (ibid.:13). This goes hand in hand with the community guidelines posted on the site by fandoms that state that 'building relationship' is prioritised above immediate reciprocation (ibid.:18).

Proctor (2021) offers her perspective on the role of reciprocation in the BTS fandom, ARMY, in the online space. She argues that the interpretation of reciprocation within this space is two-fold, it is both interpreted as engagement with fanfiction as well as easing the access to discovering and understanding the artist for new fans by, for example, creating videos or translating live-streams or Korean entertainment shows for free (Proctor, 2021:89). Reciprocating, in the latter understanding, is done with the purpose of giving back to the community as a whole by creating ties between the fans and the artists as well as between fans themselves and making it more accessible for people to join as they themselves once did (ibid.). The value frequently cited in this context is one of the intimacy and outlet the fandom community offers, with one interviewee even articulating their wish to organise fan-events as a way to give back as ‘an expression of love’ (ibid.:90).

Mauss (1925) explains the reason behind such notions of reciprocity to be ‘the spirit of the gift’. This idea originates from Mauss’ study of the Maori *hau*, in which he defines the ‘spirit of the gift’ as something embedded within the gift that belongs to the gift-giver (Mauss, 1925:8-9). In the context of the Maori *hau*, this makes it impossible for the one receiving the gift to not reciprocate lest they wish to be seen as dangerous and immoral (ibid.). Damon elaborates on this notion by adding that this necessity of reciprocation originates from the fact that, because something of the gift-giver is embedded within the gift, the gift cannot be fully alienated from the giver (Damon, 1980:284). Meaning that the gift will always return to the giver in some way, shape, or form (ibid.).

Although Yan opposes Mauss’ standpoint on reciprocity being the sole expression of the spirit of the gift, she does resonate with the existence of the spirit of the gift (Yan, 2005:63). She, however, argues that there is more to gift-giving than reciprocity, as reciprocity implies a balanced exchange, whereas the concept of a ‘spirit of the gift’ gives room to a less obligatory relation. Moreover, Robbins (2003) argues that the ‘spirit of the gift’ can be expressed in the symbolic recognition that comes with a gift. Caillé furthers this line of thought by adding the dimension of a public recognition of a person’s, or a community’s, identity that is involved in the exchange or circulation of gifts (Caillé, 2013:48).

Lee’s study on fandom in South Korea also acknowledges the value of the public recognition of one’s identity as a fan when it comes to the acquisition of, what he calls, ‘secondary creations’ in addition to official merchandise (Lee, 2021:53). ‘Secondary creations’ are the products made by individual fans – as opposed to the artist’s entertainment company – and it generally consists of primary materials like photos, unofficial tracks from radio broadcasts, and footage from broadcasts or it consists of secondary material like fan taken photos or videos of performances or other public appearances from the artist, fanart, DVDs, calendars, and books that compile the fan taken photos and fanart (Yang, 2014:105-106). Lee adds customised materials like ornaments, accessories, everyday items, stationary, and figures under the scope of secondary creations. Lee shares Yi’s view that fans

who collect merchandise or other products related to their favourite artists value the symbolism of the goods above the monetary value (Yi, 2001:449). The way that this symbolism is expressed is rooted in the creativity of the creator of the goods.

Creativity as a value

Im and Workman argue that creativity consists of the two factors novelty and meaningfulness (Im & Workman, 2004). March (1991) ties the factor of novelty with hedonic value and the factor of meaningfulness with utilitarian value. Hedonic value, in this context, refers to a products aesthetics, whereas utilitarian value, in this context, refers to the functionality of a product, its practical use (Chitturi, Raghunathan, & Mahajan, 2008; Dhar & Wertenbroch, 2000; Voss et al., 2003).

Im, Baht, and Lee argue that 'coolness' should be added as an intermediate factor between novelty and the hedonic value (Im, Baht & Lee, 2015). Only novel aspects of a product can be cool – whereas plenty of products can be novel without being perceived as cool – and this novelty is indicated by research participants by expressions of positive surprise (ibid.). Boden (2004) attests to the aspect of surprise as a factor of creativity. He and Weisberg add another specificity to the novelty factor, they note that there should be a distinction between inter- and intrapersonal novelty (Weisberg 2015:113). An interpersonal novelty is a novelty for the broader community, whereas an intrapersonal novelty is one for the person themselves (ibid.). This distinction clarifies that a creation that is novel to the creator, but already exists in the broader community can still be considered creative.

Where Im, Baht, Lee discuss whether a product is creative and what that means, Weisberg is more concerned with the creativity of the person creating the product – whether that be a tangible product or something intangible like knowledge. He argues that, aside from novelty, intentionality is a determining factor in whether or not a person is creative (Weisberg, 2015). With this he wishes to replace the factor of 'value' that his peers have suggested as a tool to determine creativity (ibid.:121). By replacing value with intentionality the same goal of excluding coincidental outcomes that are novel from the definition of creativity is reached, without the ramifications that, for example, Csikszentmihalyi 's argument comes with. Csikszentmihalyi (1988a, 1988b) understands the addition of value as an addition of positive evaluation by gatekeepers within the field of which the product of creativity came, only then will it become a part of the 'cycle of advancement' at which point it will become creative.

Taking these discourses on creativity as a value into account, the factors with which I will elaborate on the role of creativity and the value(s) attached to it in the context of birthday cafés, will be: meaningfulness, novelty, and intentionality. However, before I elaborate on my findings regarding

creativity as a value and, relatedly, the roles of economic and sociological value in birthday cafés in Seoul, I will clarify with what methods I came to these findings.

METHODOLOGY

I have employed several ethnographic methods, the main three of which were participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and elicitation. Considering the fact that my theoretical framework centres value, it is only appropriate to have participant observation as one of my main research methods as Malinowski is often credited with founding, or popularising, both concepts within anthropology (Harvey, 2011:219). Regarding participant observation, I have mainly used this method in order to (1) observe how to navigate the space of a birthday café, (2) observe patterns in peoples' behaviour, and (3) be able to reflect on my own experiences and positionality. The observation on how to navigate the space primarily resulted in a more tacit knowledge on the order in which I was supposed to do things – which was usually to sit first, order second, put down your acquired goods third, and finally roam around and visit the possible lucky draw. Patterns like these reveal an expression of values of visitors that they attach to the goods that is not restricted to the boundaries of language (Mukerji, 2014:358). By observing such patterns of behaviour I was able to, for example, identify peoples' tendency to display their acquired goods on the table in order to take pictures of it. The display was not necessarily limited to the goods acquired that specific café, I have observed people pulling at least six differently themed cups out of their bag and adding them to their display. I will elaborate on the sense of pride and the economic and sociological value attached to it that this indicates in my findings.

To my third purpose of employing participant observation as a research method, identifying the way people navigate a space like birthday cafés and the patterns exhibited in such a space also highlighted the reflexive properties of participant observation as Harvey discusses them (Harvey, 2011). The novelty of these observations emphasised – and helped me pay attention to – the familiarity of other aspects of birthday cafés and my own positionality within them (ibid.:220). This is crucial, as my positionality lies at the root of the application of my methods both in the field as well as regarding the creation of my physical output of this research.

I would consider myself relatively familiar with many aspects of the K-pop fandom and their norms and values, as I have been a part of multiple fandoms within K-pop for the past six years. This has helped me build rapport with my interlocutors quickly, as I, for example, did not have to be explained what certain terms meant and it enabled me to join conversations on certain topics that are only familiar in the fandom more easily. However, this familiarity with the community also came with the risk of letting preconceived notions influence my research too much. To navigate this, I was inspired by Upadhyā's endorsement of Savyasaachi's argument on the aim of fieldwork being 'unlearning' (Upadhyā, 1999: 3362) regarding my methods in the field as well as Wright and Schneider's view on subjectivity regarding my methods used in creating the physical output (Wright & Schneider, 2013). Upadhyā and Savyasaachi argue for a dialogical method in an effort to unlearn one's ways of thinking,

socially acquired habits and beliefs in order to, in turn, create an inquisitive mindset that is not as result-oriented and dependent on exploitative ways of gathering information (Upadhy, 1999: 3362). I have interpreted this as a request not to throw away the preconceived knowledge that one as a researcher already possesses – Upadhy strongly argues against anthropology’s historical ‘obsession’ with objectivity (ibid.) – but to acknowledge it and question it. Wright and Schneider similarly argue against the legitimacy of objectivity as a goal in anthropological research. Although I had this in the back of my mind when researching, it took centre stage during the creation process of my physical output, so I will further expand upon this argument in the chapter ‘output’.

Regarding the second method employed during my fieldwork, it offered me a framework through which to interpret the tacit knowledge gained through participant observation. Semi-structured interviews are a good opportunity to directly ask peoples’ opinions, views, and values that inspire their actions and decisions (Holy & Stuchlik, 1983). Cohen and Rapport add to this argument by stating that it is necessary to listen to peoples’ answers to direct questions to uncover what they are conscious of (Cohen & Rapport, 1995:11-12). By answering direct questions, Steicy mentioned a sense of pride in having a physical good that proves that she was at an event supporting an artist. This conscious use of goods gave me a framework through which to interpret the displays made by café visitors, the subsequent photoshoot of said displays, and the online posts of these photos. My main interlocuters, that I have all interviewed, are Divicha, Heejung, Karolina, Kelsi, Phina, Steicy, and Yris (pseudonym).

The third method I employed was brought about by the dialogical properties of semi-structured interviews. By asking direct questions, while being open to a divergence from the prepared line of question, it opens up a possibility for people to bring up things that are significant to them and that would steer the discussion in a direction that highlights these things (Harvey, 2011: 221). This happened during multiple interviews in which an interlocuter took their phone out of their pocket to show me pictures of cafés that they had previously visited or goods they had either received or made themselves. One example, is the instance in which I commented on a drawing Steicy had in her phone case. It turned out to be fanart of one of her favourite artists that she had made herself. She immediately offered to show me more fanart that she had made and picked up her phone to scroll through what would have been at least thirty drawings and designs. Amazed by all this incredibly drawn art, I asked about the inspiration behind the drawings, which led to an entire conversation on aesthetics, effort, and reflections on the influence that being an artist herself has on the value she attaches to the goods circulating birthday cafés. Exactly these topics – and several more – are what I will be discussing in my findings.

FINDINGS

'I look at what the gifts for, like... the art direction is for the cafés, and, like, if there are many- and I know that I'm not going to be able to do them all, or that I don't want to do them all because I don't want to spend so much money. I just choose the ones that I like the best. Like, for example, the Hobi café that we did. I really wanted to go the one in Myeongdong because I really liked the art direction. Whereas, there was one in Hapjeong that I liked a little less, so it was okay to skip that,' Yris tells me. We are situated in a café near Sinchon station, talking over a cup of coffee. Actually, a cup of tea for Yris, as she has just come down with a relentless cold, making it impossible for her to speak for more than ten minutes without a sip of heavily honeyed tea. Still, she has taken the extra effort to meet up with me for this interview for which I feel immensely grateful. I am hesitant to ask her too much, as I do not want her to overexert herself while she is sick, but with the question 'what do you with the stuff afterwards?' she enthusiastically takes out her laptop.

'Some of them I actually, like, stick- when it's stickers, I stick them on my reader, my kindle, or on my computer or, like, stuff like that.' Frowning down at her laptop, she notes: 'Strange that I don't have any on this....' 'Yeah none of those are,' she trails off. Before I can ask her what she is referring to, she perks up and point at a sticker in the corner of her laptop cover. 'It's Suga! And this and this were freebies from buying some fan-made merch. And those were also freebies!' Oh, this is a sticker from a birthday- like not a birthday event- from a ship event, it was also MinChan but it was not- like it was in between their two birthdays. It was like, they are the moon and the sun, they need each other. It was so adorable. And so that's why it looks lowkey, you wouldn't know- when you look at it, you wouldn't know... but it is a shipping.' She once again trails off as her sticker tour comes to an end. Not wanting her to stop sharing her enthusiasm I respond: 'That's so cute!' And I find myself wholeheartedly meaning it.

'Aside from that, a lot of like the... like posters, or like, small banners, I would put them on my wall, just like posters. Photocards I just keep them all together and look at them occasionally. And then... what else... like stuff like this,' she pulls her keys out of her bag, ruffles through the keyrings for a few seconds, and presents me with a specific keyring in the shape of a small content-looking bread smiley. 'It's also, like, an I.N. birthday thing. And yeah, I use it like this, I just use them like normal merch.' She takes a sip of her tea.

'I'm curious, is there a difference for you, then, between fan-made merch like this and official company-made merch?' I ask.

'There is- I don't know how to explain- for me, like, this kind- the official merch is something that anyone would recognise immediately, whereas fan-made merch... more often than not, it's like,

you have to know. You know what I mean? You know when you do the iceberg thing. It's like the official merch is the surface level and the birthday events or freebies and stuff, they are, like, deeper in the fandom. Like, the deeper you go, the more obscure it would be with memes and stuff. So, I would say that... yeah... official merch is like the tip of the iceberg and the rest is more of an insider thing.'

With this interview segment Yris has blessed me with a vignette that touches upon all the aspects I would like to discuss regarding birthday cafés and their goods. First, I will elaborate on the value of creativity attached to the goods. It was quite the popular value to mention amongst the people I have spoken to. Second, I will flesh out the network of values within the economy of a birthday café that these goods and the values attached to them facilitate. Within this section I will follow Yris' lead and discuss the way the goods travel through freebie culture in the cafés – and at times outside of them – first. Then, I will address the fandom community context in which this freebie culture with its network of values exists, the 'insider thing' as Yris dubs it.

Creativity as a Value

Meaningfulness

Yris was not alone in her practical use of the goods acquired at birthday cafés. With practical use I am referring to the way she uses it to decorate her laptop, kindle, bedroom walls, and keys. When asked if she is not scared to damage the goods by using them like this, she responds with: 'I will care less that [the fan-made goods] would get lived [as opposed to the official merch], you know. But I think they are just as precious, because they have the fandom life quality to them. Which is why I like them to live.'

Steicy echoes this sentiment as she mentions using her cups to drink out of, instead of only displaying them. 'It is always useful to have a glass.' Concurrently, she shares that there are many goods that have little to no use for her.

'You can't just display everything, because it is just too much. [...] But you can't refrain yourself to do it, I don't know how to explain that. Maybe, also typical from fan behaviour. [...] It's kind of collection feeling that's very satisfying even though it will not be useful to- if you have too much things. [...] And you just store it somewhere, but you are still so happy with your collection... it's so weird to explain.'

Kelsi shares her perspective on why people are happy with their collection of these goods even if they may not have a direct utility. She is on the producer-side of the gift economy inside birthday cafés – and at several other K-pop events, like fan-signs, concerts, and broadcasts. While unpacking

boxes of goods, she explains to me her view on the value of the photocards that she has made to hand out at past events.

‘They’re not that expensive to produce, require creativity, and people often keep it. I wouldn’t say there is a value, as in a price, to the photocards that I make, but people like to have a cute little photocard they can put in their holder on their backpack. So, it doesn’t have a direct utility, but it has a utility in that K-pop fans want stuff that they can have around them of their favourite artist.’

Heejung, however, does not share this view. She strictly views the goods that she had gotten as ‘beautiful trash’, acknowledging that she had felt joy in the moment of receiving the goods and the effort put into them, but simultaneously reflecting on the fact that, looking at them ten years later, they have the same value as trash to her. The connection to trash is specifically drawn, because of the environmental issues within the K-pop industry at large. In order to enter the raffle for a ticket to a fan-sign, for example, fans are encouraged to buy as many albums as possible, as one album bought equals one ticket into the raffle. So, the more albums bought, the more chance one has to win an entry to a fan-sign. ‘My first fan-sign event it was BTS, I bought 7 albums. Now they have to buy like a thousand, not even kidding... for one member,’ Heejung reports. This results in people throwing albums away after having won the entry ticket, as they do not have use for them anymore. Heejung herself has bought up to fifty album for a fan-sign event, but ‘looking at it now I’m like “What do I do with this?” I’m very into environmental issues and in that perspective as well, producing and buying and just discarding so many albums is such a waste.’

So, the utility, or meaningfulness, of fan-made goods plays a crucial role in the value attached to the goods. This is apparent from the way Heejung likens the value of her goods to the value of trash – which is implied to be non-valuable or even have negative value in the context of the environmental issues in the K-pop industry at large – with the reasoning that the goods have no use. The overall value of the goods decreases as the utility of the goods decreases. However, it is also apparent that it is not the only determining value, as Steicy still attaches value to the goods she cannot use to drink out of or to decorate with, even if she struggles putting into words why exactly.

Novelty

Im, Baht, and Lee (2015) argue that there is a specific kind of novelty, which they define as coolness. Although I believe coolness may not be an appropriate term to describe expressions of value within the context of this research – as most of the people I have spoken to are self-conscious about being a part of the K-pop fandom and have not once described goods as ‘cool’ – I do believe the reaction of surprise that Im, Baht, and Lee indicate coolness with is an accurate description of the reaction to

goods in birthday cafés. The more fitting term to describe this surprise in this context, would be uniqueness.

For example, when asked if she preferred goods made by fans or official goods made by the entertainment company, Heejung responded with the unpopular opinion – among the people that I have spoken with – that she preferred the official goods made by the company. The main factor behind her reasoning was the uniqueness of official goods. In the case of fan-made goods, fans are not in possession of original photos, they are forced to choose from a pool of pictures on the internet that have been posted somewhere before – with the exception of fan-sites who take their own pictures of artists. This makes the photos on fan-made goods often less unique, as the pictures on them can be found anywhere. The pictures of official photocards do not get posted on social media, ‘because if they do everyone can just print it out and make a same photocard, right?’ So,’ Heejung concludes, ‘it has more value.’

Steicy is among the majority, among the people I have spoken to, who prefer fan-made goods rather than company made goods. Her reasoning for it, however, is similar to Heejung. ‘My favourite goods are always the ones that are designed by collab artists, because they are the most unexpected.’ The difference between Heejung and Steicy is the kind of goods that they have in mind. Where Heejung is discussing the value of goods that are decorated with a picture of the idol, Steicy is discussing the value of goods decorated with drawings or designs in mind. She states that a picture does not offer any uniqueness, as she already knows what the artist looks like.

‘When you have collaboration with an artist you know, that it is something very different that you can get: a unique vision of the idol. So, for me, that’s what I prefer, because I know that I cannot have something like this somewhere else. [...] As an artist, I like to be surprised by the unexpected and to enter in others’ minds about the band I like and to see other perspectives, so that’s why I prefer fan-made in a way.’

Although both Heejung and Steicy have different preferences regarding official goods or fan-made goods, both their reasoning was dependent on the factor of surprise and experience of uniqueness. However, there are also instances in which a good may not be experienced as unique by the person receiving them, but they are still considered novel. The two examples of Heejung and Steicy’s argument both describe novelty on an interpersonal level, a novelty for the broader community – or at least for them as the receiving party. As mentioned earlier, intrapersonal novelty is one for the person themselves (Weisberg 2015:113). Intrapersonal novelty plays a role for fan-artists when working on their own art and expression. When sparring ideas on how Yris would one day like to design the goods of a birthday café if she were to organise one, she took her personal preference of drawing webtoon or chibi style as a starting point. From this she quickly developed the concept of

a cohesive series of drawings where each member of a group, for example Stray Kids, would be drawn with a dragon around them, as it is the year of the dragon. To her this is an entirely new idea. Yet, there only has to be one other person who thinks of this and it may not be deemed a novel idea anymore by a third party receiving the goods. This would take away from the experience of surprise and consequently the experience of uniqueness for the receiving party. For the distributing party, the artist in this case, it would also not be a surprise, as they are the ones designing it, also robbing the good of its unique status. However it would still allow the goods to keep their novel status, as it is a new idea to the artist, thus making it an intrapersonal novelty. So, uniqueness often plays a role in ascribing novelty to goods, it is not necessary for goods to be considered unique for them to be considered novel.

Intentionality

The reason Weisberg argued for the distinction between interpersonal and intrapersonal novelty has its roots in the emphasis that Weisberg puts on the creator being considered creative rather than the good being considered creative. He points out that the values with which goods are being considered creative throughout history are subject to change. This is illustrated by the earlier mentioned reflection of Heejung, in which she states that at the time she visited the cafes she genuinely enjoyed it. However, looking back on it, she looks at the goods she had collected and thinks 'hm.. beautiful trash'. Focusing on the creator, instead of the goods, Weisberg also argues for intentionality to be added as a factor of creativity, as it eliminates coincidental productions from being classified as creative.

This addition of intention to the definition of creativity aligns with various views and opinions expressed by the people I have spoken to. Aside from the obvious intention to create goods in order to attract people to come to the cafe, multiple interviewees have explained their creative thought process behind multiple products that was grounded in the artist's lore, concept, or songs. All these decisions were made with intention behind them. Kelsi, the organiser of a Mingi birthday café, a Hongjoong birthday café, and the future organiser of a Yunho birthday café, opines that there is a quality to a product if you ask a fan to make it.

'Others could do amazing things, but I do think there is a level of- when someone is familiar with inside jokes, the personalities of the boys, the source materials of music etc. the quality that you get from it – not necessarily technically – but getting people in the community... you get that [quality] back. Like, Taco does not make technically spectacular art, but she is so popular because she does such a good job at capturing the personality and the inside jokes of 'someone did this silly thing'. One that she did recently, Hongjoong was talking about his Aniteez and said he was a really good eater and it doesn't go into height but his tail, and so

she did this really cute cartoon about it. It matters that they have the understanding of the community to me.'

For Steicy, a fan-artist herself, a well-designed fan-made good speaks to her, as she likes to see different ways in which artists see and express the story lore of their favourite artists. As for Karolina, who is also a fan-artist herself, it depends on how prepared she is for the event, how much time she has left, and if there are unfinished designs or drawings that she can alter to fit her idea of the concept of the event. For a Key concert that she attended, she started a project from scratch in which she found joy in putting details in the drawings that referred to the lyrics of a song from Key.

Yris, who, as mentioned before is also a fan-artist and who created designs for Kelsi's Hongjoong birthday café event, it is also crucial to be intentional with design decisions. She explains the process behind one of her designs for the Hongjoong birthday café event.

'So, you know how in the music video there is, like, behind Hongjoong there is written 'the goat' in neon lights? I redid that in illustrator, so that she could use it on the back of her photocards. [...] And she told me 'this is the mood of the whole thing', so that was 'this my, this Hongjoong', so I did just a chibi of that. But the back and forth that we had – since it was in chibi form, he had very small arms, so he couldn't fully hug the goat, because his arms were too short – like, is it okay if he has like one hand on top and one hand here? Because at first, I was like 'the goat is too big or you would have to make the goat so small that it would be too small. So at first – I don't remember what was the first pose, but he touched less than he does in the final drawing. [...] And I did also the – you know how in their choreography they do this pose?'

The pose Yris is referring to is one in the choreography of Ateez's song 'Bouncy', where they make a motion as if they are zipping their lips shut.

Lastly, when designing her own art for her cafés, Kelsi prefers to match the theme of the comebacks. For her upcoming Yunho birthday café event she explained that she is specifically basing the concept on the diary versions of the most recent comeback. She opens a box to show me:

'They're all necklace pendants. I don't know how familiar you are with history, but in the regency period people would have their secret lover in a secret locker. And since the diary version of the album is kind of 'Pride and Prejudice' vibes, I thought it was fitting. I spent my Christmas break figuring out how to make these. I have these for the lucky draws and an acrylic photocard holder. So, I have that and then I have these little acrylic pendants that I have made into earrings, I have put them a necklace. So, I'll let people decide what they want to do with them. I also have some mirrors that are getting delivered. Now, I'm most excited for the mirrors,

because one of my friends went to a fansign and asked Yunho 'what would you like for fans to get as a birthday gift'. And there were options, one of them was a mirror so fans can see how pretty they are and that's the one Yunho chose. And I'm not surprised he picked that, it was really cute. And that's one of the things that is really fun to me, that fosters connection. So, I'm going to have, like, in a star 'Yunho's choice' on the lucky draw table or something.'

So, intention as well as novelty, which often includes the value of uniqueness expressed in surprise, and meaningfulness or usefulness are all crucial values attached to the goods in birthday cafés. Thus, creativity is the main value referred to by the people I have spoken to, as these factors make up the value of creativity.

Freebie Culture

As soon as Yris and I sat down at the café in which we were to do the interview, she reached into her pocket and pulled out a card.

'Here. I was at Phina's place yesterday and she had this Han photocard and she knew we were meeting up today. So, when she got that out we thought about you and so here you go.'

...

'I should throw them away,' Heejung concludes. She had just been telling me about her difficulty moving accommodations with all the albums she had bought for a CIX fan-sign.

'Do you still have them?' I asked. I was surprised, as she had just stated that she had not been into K-pop for a while.

'Yeah... some.'

'Which one?'

'CIX?'

'Yeah.'

'I think it's Jungle album- or the before one.' Heejung looks it up quickly. 'Jungle album, yeah. Do you... do you know this song?'

'I love Jungle!'

'What, really?!' The surprise is evident in her tone. Immediately she lights up and says: 'I can give it to you? Give them to you, seriously.'

I am stunned for a few seconds, as I did not expect the conversation to go in this direction. In the back of my mind alarm bells go off that sound a lot like 'careful of your luggage weight!', but in the face of Heejung's enthusiasm I can hardly say no.

...

At the trail end of a four hour interview turned conversation Kelsi turns to me and asks: 'Who is your bias?'

'Hongjoong,' I answer. We had just been talking about a Hongjoong birthday café that she had organised in November and I realise that perhaps my enthusiasm about it had been telling. Kelsi stops unpacking the goods she had been showing me to turn to another box.

'I have some goods leftover from the café, I'll give them to you!'

These instances, to me, are prime examples of freebie culture, as I have interpreted freebie culture in the way Godbout & Caille interpret the concept of gift economy. According to this interpretation freebies, or gifts, are goods given with no expectation of immediate reciprocation. In the cases I describe above the interactions fit this description. However, regarding the goods that one receives when buying a drink it is dependent on the perception of what the reciprocation consists of. Where Mauss clearly distinguishes between commodity and gift, according to the triple obligation principle upon which the social network of gift economy relies – gift giving, gift receiving, and gift returning – people in birthday cafés do not. This is due to the fact that the drinks, the commodities, are directly tied to the goods received and, therefore, intricately intertwined with the social network of the gift economy. Thus, there are several classifications regarding the goods received with the drinks. First, one can interpret it as a freebie, or gift, from the point of view of the organiser as they do not get the money in return, so reciprocation is not an expectation. Second, one can classify it as a non-gift from the point of view of the recipient, as they are expected to spend money in return for the goods, so the expectation of immediate reciprocation most definitely plays a role. Third, one can interpret it as something similar to a freebie, as the prices of the drinks do not go up, so the drink is classified as a non-gift, but the goods given with them are classified as gifts, as the expectation of immediate reciprocation is only applied to the drinks, not the goods given with them.

Divicha leans towards the first interpretation, as she uses the word 'freebie' to describe the goods gotten with the drink at birthday cafés. After being asked what the difference between birthday cafés in Seoul as opposed to birthday cafés in Paris are like, she answered with: 'The freebies. Because in France we have, like, a photocard, just one, and sometimes the cup-sleeve. [...] But right now, just for I.N's birthday, I have a bag.' Later she also describes the rose we had gotten with our drink at a Bangchan and Leeknow café event as a freebie.

Karolina implies that she adheres to the third interpretation, as she separates the menu item from the 'freebies' she got with them during a Leeknow birthday café. 'It was very cute, I loved the macarons and the freebies are also really cute.'

Yris leans toward the second interpretation, where the goods received with the drink or menu item are not classified as freebies. When deliberating on whether or not a birthday café event in France would work she says: 'I feel like in France they want freebies, but not spend on that. [...] If it's a freebie they're going to be happy. If they have to pay for it- like, why would I pay for this, it's not official.' In these cases the economic value of money plays an apparent role, which is telling of the way one interprets freebie culture or the category of 'freebies', as the immediate reciprocation in this context takes shape in money. So, when asked about freebie culture explicitly, Phina, Karolina, Steicy, and Kelsi all mention different values other than monetary ones.

Steicy describes being on the receiving end of freebie culture.

'[The people distributing freebies] want to enjoy the moment and share with random people. You also see it at concerts where artists share their art for free. Some leave the box at the venue and people can just take how many they want. Or at an event at a cinema people share or trade photocards. People take pictures together with banners and post it to cheer on the artist 'we are proud to be of your fandom' 'you want to make it last, so after the moment we just hang out with random people ... to remember the show together, to continue daydreaming about what happened' tomorrow it's like an illusion.'

So, for Steicy the value of these fan-made goods lies in having a physical reminder of the feeling she experienced and shared with others during the event.

Phina and Karolina both make freebies with the intent to make other people happy and share joy. Karolina states that 'making freebies is just to share my admiration for the group. I got it from the SHINee fandom. What I noticed when I went to SHINee events, fans make so many freebies. I really admired it and you can see the smile on peoples' faces when they receive it. And so I really thought I also wanted to do that, I thought it was a nice thing to do, and just to share the excitement before the concert, just spread good vibes. Sometimes I do end up meeting people and making friends, but mostly it's just to spread good vibes.'

While Kelsi echoes this sentiment, she is the only one, among the people I have spoken to, to bring up the value of money. However, she does not bring it up in the context of reciprocation within the interaction between her, as a distributor, and the recipient.

'Any time I've done café events or made freebies. I do things like attend broadcasts. I got into four or five for Ateez during Bouncy and I go to popups. And everywhere I bring the freebies, the cards. It's really fun to make those things and people remember me, enjoy them and have people say they look for me and collect my cards. It's fun and really nice! Any time I make the photocards it's, like, 40.000W every time I make freebies and that's multiple times a year. So,

for all of their birthdays and their comebacks I make them. And that's also a commitment and the boys are never gonna know that I did that. But Atiny appreciate it and it's been a nice way of building credibility in the Atiny community specifically and I'm working on the same thing with Xikers. It's a nice way of showing appreciation and making people feel valued. If Atiny don't feel like that the community that they're in, if they don't feel like its welcoming people do leave. People leave fandoms even if they like the artist. They'll lessen the activity they do if it's not a welcoming space. It's nice to be nice and welcoming and make people feel excited to take part in things. For example, especially San stans are so excited. And it's really nice to be able to make somebody's day by doing something like that. It's nice to build community. And people are always so happy when they get the surprise.'

So, economic and sociological values are most intimately intertwined in the direct interaction between distributor and recipient. Herein, the economic value tied to the expectation of immediate reciprocation that distinguishes commodities from gifts is dependent on personal perspectives. Where Yris categorises the goods with the drink as commodities, Divicha and Karolina view the goods received with the drink as gifts – from the perspective of the distributor and the recipient, respectively. Economic value also plays a less direct role in the consideration of sociological values in Kelsi's case. Here, the economic value of immediate monetary reciprocation is not considered in the context of the interaction between the distributor and the recipient, rather it is considered in the step that comes before that interaction: the production of the gifts. The sociological values that Steicy, Phina, and Karolina mention – of spreading joy and having a physical reminder of that joy – that freebie culture basks in, at its very basis, are dependent on the economic value tied to the initial production of the freebies.

Community

With her explanation of the value of freebies and the role they play within a community, Kelsi aptly illustrates Kang et al. (2021) and Proctor's (2021) arguments. Kang et al. gives the example of community guidelines posted on a site that facilitates fandom interaction that state that 'building relationship' is a higher priority than immediate reciprocation (Kang et al., 2021:3). Proctor reiterates this by arguing that the motivation behind sharing goods is the expectation of reciprocation in the shape of connection between fans and, in turn, their engagement with and participation in the fandom community – rather than immediate monetary reciprocation (Proctor, 2021:82).

There is a specific kind of reciprocity that plays a role in this network of freebie culture and that is generalised reciprocity. This kind of reciprocity refers solely to the expectation is that at some point something of no certain worth will be given back – as opposed to balanced reciprocation, in

which case a more direct exchange of goods of equal worth is expected (Sahlins, 1972:169). Generalised reciprocity is likely applied to only the people one has their closest relationships with (ibid.). Yet, people who take part in freebie culture in this context practice this general reciprocity, even though they would, conventionally, not be categorised as people with close relationships – certainly not a person’s closest relationship. However, there is this inherent feeling of trust between people within the same fandom that echoes this sentiment of a close relationship in Sahlin’s sense. Enough for people to shape an entire economy around the principle of generalised reciprocity. This sense of trust is apparent in Steicy’s statement: ‘sometimes we just rely on- okay, if this person is an Atiny, by example, fan of Ateez, I can trust her. Sometimes we can have people who cross the world and trust in so much, because we are liking the same K-pop group.’ It is also illustrated by the countless times people I have spoken to have referred to a K-pop fandom community as ‘family’. Kelsi’s rationale as to how these bonds are forged is through the parasocial relationships that entertainment companies promote between fans and artist.

‘It’s kind of like we make friend by being their parasocial friends, but we make friends with each other because there’s goals that we work towards together. Whether it’s, like, streaming goals, planning for concerts, attendance things. There’s this genuine sense of community in K-pop that is unique, not completely, but on some level. And one of the ways it happened in Korea is in the event cafés. Those are ways of strengthening the community.’

Such type of reciprocity would be classified under sociological values, as immediate monetary reciprocation is not expected in the interaction between the distributor and the recipient. Furthermore, sociological values are defined as conceptions of what is desirable or good and Kelsi argues that people leaving the community is not desirable or good. One of the reasons behind this *would* be classified as economic value.

People ‘lessening their activity’, as Kelsi states, results in less people to work towards the streaming goals and attendance goals mentioned above as well as less people buying albums to listen to the music, collect photocards, or get a chance to attend fan-signs. This, in turn, results in less direct monetary support for the artist as well as less indirect monetary support, as entertainment companies are less likely to invest in groups that have smaller active fandoms. This value of monetary support to the K-pop artist is also the most common reason cited, by the people I have spoken to, to buy official company-made merchandise. Steicy, for example, states:

‘You know that when you purchase an official product it’s an official way to support your artist, because the money will directly go in their pocket- the company pocket, but sometimes some of it is given to the artist. It is a way I want to support them, so that’s also why you buy the

album even if you can find everything on the internet. [...] You know that if you want them to have a trophy to win all the awards- different awards, at each comeback, that you need to buy the album. [...] So, yes, that's why for some people, maybe, official product is more meaningful, because of this idea of support.'

This idea of support is highlighted in Proctor's (2021) view on reciprocity as well. She states that one of the ways in which fans give back to the community is by easing access into the fandom. This makes the artist more accessible and is, thus, a part of the promotion of the artist to potential new fans. Fan-organised events like birthday cafés similarly contribute to a bigger and more active fandom, resulting in an increase of the economic value of the artist and their related goods.

This, then, culminates in a sense of pride regarding one's support of a K-pop artist, which is illustrated by Steicy's continuation of the interview segment above: 'Sometimes [one prefers official merchandise] to have an official souvenir of the event that can prove 'I went there!', [...] it is proof that I was there and that I did my job as a fan. So, it is also pride.' This is in line with Robbins (2003) argument on the 'spirit of the gift', in which he states that the 'spirit of the gift' can be expressed in the symbolic recognition that comes with a gift, and Caillé's addition of *public* recognition (Caillé, 2013:48).

However, this symbolic recognition is not solely a quality of company-made goods, fan-made goods are also infused with symbolism that other people from the community can recognise, depending on how deep into the fandom you are, or how much of the iceberg you have discovered, following Yris' iceberg metaphor. According to Yris' statement, one can also take pride in being an 'insider', in undeniably being a part of a community and signalling this through fan-made goods that refer to inside jokes or more niche events within the fandom community. Visibly being a part of a fandom community indicates one's activity in the fandom – like attending birthday cafés – as much as official company-made goods signals activity – like attending broadcasts. So, both displaying official company merch and fan-made goods can be seen as support and therefore valued.

The difference between company-made merch and fan-made merch, however, is the emphasis on intentionality and uniqueness, and therefore creativity, that is valued. Karolina, for example, opines:

'At the end of the day it's huge corporation making these goods and I feel like, especially these days, they make so many- like so much merchandise. Sometimes it's all the same, let's be honest. Like, especially when it comes to [...] clothing, for example, when they make, like, hoodies or t-shirts, they just add Stray Kids logo and that's it. [...] At the end of the day, sometimes not that much effort is put into it.'

Both the intentionality and the uniqueness are not taken into account regarding the production of these company-made goods, whereas these are crucial values when it comes to fan-made goods, as illustrated in the paragraph 'creativity as a value'.

To conclude, it is noteworthy that the gift economy that is K-pop's freebie culture is based on generalised reciprocity, which, in turn, is based on trust. Said trust is built on mutual experiences of, according to Kelsi, working towards streaming goals, attending broadcasts, and attending concerts. These experiences stem from, according to Steicy, a sense of reciprocity towards the artist. This sociological value of reciprocity is borne out of the economic value attached to the resources – monetary or not – that the artist will be provided with, based on the activity of the fandom. This chain of sociological and economic values, then, culminates in a wish for public recognition, indicating the importance put upon these values for the product symbolising them to be shown off. These products – whether they are company-made or fan-made – showing off these values are, thus, a crucial part of K-pop communities and, to circle back to 'creativity as a value', these goods are judged on their creativity or the creativity of the producer. Therefore, I would argue that understanding the value attached to the creativity of goods in birthday cafés is essential to understanding the K-pop community at large, as it also offers insight into the value attached to goods outside of the birthday cafés, and ultimately gives insight into the way the (gift) economies, on which K-pop communities are built, are held together.

OUTPUT

There is an increasing amount of multimodal experiments within anthropology, due to the critique on representation in anthropological discourse (Orrantia, 2013:38). Wright reflects on several views on representation and what it means to document, he argues that anthropologists oftentimes fail to take implications of representation into account (Luvera, 2013:48). This is rooted in the truth-value that has historically been ascribed to photography and observational ethnographic film (Mjaaland, 2013:53). In order to circumvent this to a certain extent I have decided to create a multimodal output in which I lean into the subjectivity of documenting. This multimodal output is formatted in a K-pop album, like Stray Kids' latest album '樂-STAR', for example, which includes: a photobook, a cd, photocards, a panorama mini poster, a folded poster, and stickers.



Image 1: Stray Kids 樂-STAR Album Inclusions pt. 1 (@Stray_Kids, 2023)



Image 2: Stray Kids 樂-STAR Album Inclusions pt. 2 (@Stray_Kids, 2023)

Not only do I wish to approach my interlocuters in this way, by presenting them with something in a format they are very familiar with, but it is also a way for me to pull the audience even more into the life world of the K-pop fandom and my interlocuters. Furthermore, this format as well as the intention to lean into subjectivity allows me to explore my own creativity and its place in the context of birthday cafés and research in general. So, in this chapter I will be discussing the meaningfulness and intentionality of this output – as the only statement I can make regarding novelty at this moment, in which I have yet to distribute this ‘good’, is that it is an intrapersonal novelty. Meaningfulness will be discussed in the sense that Kelsi discusses it, in an indirect sense. I will emphasise the utility of the format of this output in an epistemological context. Additionally, in the

paragraph on intentionality I will specify instances in which values in which this physical output showcases the values fleshed out the chapter 'Findings'.

Meaningfulness

Reflecting on the film Yanqui Walker and the Optical Revolution, Ramey points out her mistrust regarding the tendency found in realist documentary to trust vision to be the primary sense to observe reality (Ramey, 2013:73). She centralises this topic in her film by gradually introducing the viewer to the subjectivity of the film, making it more and more obvious (ibid.). I do not introduce the subjectivity of this project and its output gradually, I do it immediately and abruptly, but with a similar idea in mind. This research and certainly its documentation is subjective, due to the fact that it is documented and consequently curated by me, and I wish to point this out clearly in my output.

In the video I have done so by, for example, adding text on screen. First, the viewer is subjected to my point of view by my emphasis on movement that I find relevant, by adding, for example, '(dance)' on screen. Second, the viewer is further subjected to it by the addition of '(shocked)' on the screen. In this instance I am directly ascribing an emotion to the person on screen adding another layer of my own interpretation. This, to me, cements the subjectivity in this piece like no other element. Ramey states that her aim with the film Yanqui Walker and the Optical Revolution, to reflect on subjectivity, goes hand in hand with the invitation for the viewers to form their own interpretation of it (ibid.). This is something that I pay more attention to in the photobook.

Thera Mjaaland touches upon this involvement of the viewers as well. She argues that the strength of photographs is not what can be observed directly, its strength rather lies in what is absent, the connections that can be made with one imagination (Mjaaland, 2013:56). By emphasising the fact that photographs are fragments of the photographers point of view the photographer can involve the viewer in filling in their own narrative (ibid.:57). In the first photo series, introducing birthday cafés, I am similarly hoping to appeal to the imagination of the audience on what birthday cafes could look like. By presenting multiple images of the same element – the lines outside the cafés, the buildings in which the cafés are located, the 'empty' spaces of the cafés, the cup stacks, images on the wall, displays in the café – I show a variety of my interpretation of the same element displayed in, or surrounding, different cafés. The final four pages pertain to my personal favourite cafe, where I have arranged multiple elements of a singular cafe on one page, to conclude with a more holistic view of a birthday cafe. Still, I have purposefully not mapped out an entire space - even the 'empty' space photos are from one point of view – as I would like to invite the audience to fill in spaces for themselves, to let their own creativity flow into their imaginations.

Intentionality

Regarding the photobook's cover, I intend to introduce all elements included in the physical output – some more directly than others. The poster on the cover corresponds to the poster in the video, the font of the notebook and the lyrics booklet, and the graphics throughout the second photo series in the photobook as well as the graphics on the back of the photocards. The CD is referred to a little less directly. The poster is positioned in such a way that the spine of the photobook spells out AU, which, at least in K-pop context, refers to Alternate Universe. This is a reference to the introduction of the CD in which Divicha mentions that walking into a birthday café feels like walking into another dimension, or an alternate universe. In the photobook itself I have arranged two photo series. The first introduces the viewer to birthday cafés. In this photo series I have taken more direct inspiration from K-pop albums that I own – as can be seen in appendix 1 – in order to establish the concept of a K-pop album photobook. Throughout the second photo series I have taken more creative liberty, as I prioritised the way goods are displayed in cafés, rather than the way the layout of the photobook in a K-pop album is generally arranged. With this photo series I intend to emphasise the tacit knowledge of this pattern gained through participant observation, later interpreted as an expression of pride through the framework offered by the explanation of interlocutors in interviews. Allowing myself more freedom with the layout of these pages is also signalled by the graphics I have added. These graphics stay consistent throughout my physical output to honour the idea of a 'concept' that is chosen for every new album that a K-pop artist brings out. So, by adding the graphics I signal that it is my 'concept' once again.

Regarding the video, I have included phone footage with the intent to illustrate the presence of birthday cafés online as well as offline and how they inform each other. Not only does the advertisement of the birthday cafés online influence the offline space in regards to the amount of visitors, but the discourse that follows visitors posts about the offline space also influences this offline space in regards to the experience of the café. This can be seen in the moment Heejung discovers the length of the queue online before we could experience it offline. Seeing this online, before experiencing it offline, built suspense for the offline situation which affected how I experienced it. I intend to convey my experience as accurately as possible by including this online component. Furthermore, the goods, on which this research is based, are arranged and photographed in part in order for people to post them online. So, the online space is crucial to include in an illustration of a birthday café experience.

Another intentional decision made is the poster as a title screen as well as the drawing sound and visual effect to introduce the title screen. This signals that this is a product of my creativity, emphasising the subjectivity of my experience. The subtitles are formatted the way they are in

reference to the standard subtitles in a YouTube video, as this is how I watch the ‘behind the scenes’ videos or ‘vlogs’ that K-pop artists that I follow post – again, emphasising my own experience and its subjectivity. The sound effects and the way that the text in screen is formatted is inspired by these videos as well – this can be seen in appendix 2. Furthermore, the values expressed by Heejung are highlighted in several scenes. A few examples of this are the scene in which she states ‘and it is useful as well’ when referring to the cup we were about to decorate, signalling the value of meaningfulness. The value of community and the phenomenon of forging friendships with other fans through a parasocial friendship with the artist that Kelsi mentions, is illustrated in the scene in which Heejung tells me about her reconnection with a friend and the undeniable trust of letting someone, who she has not spoken to in ten years, stay in her house. The economic value of money also comes up as me and Heejung discuss the price of the photobooth and how many times we want to spend money on it.

Regarding the booklet with fieldwork notes, I was inspired by the notebooks included in BTS’ albums during their ‘Love Yourself’ album series as well as Steicy’s anecdote about the diary versions of Ateez albums. The notebooks in BTS’ ‘Love Yourself’ albums centred around developing the lore and the concept that this series was based on. Ateez had a similar purpose with the diary versions of their albums. According to Steicy:

‘KQ entertainment, the company of Ateez, for their second era – it was Fever era – they set up a contest of fanfictions for the story-lore of the group. After the Treasure era, we have an alternate universe, but not a real story [...], so it was very messy. And they asked to the fandom ‘okay, we are opening a fanfiction contest. Write your story in English or in Korean, send it to the group, and we will choose the best one that we will make the band members read and they’re going to choose the story they want to use for their story-lore. So, that’s why starting from Fever era [...] that there are stories written in the booklets of diary versions [of the album]. [...] D, diary version, that is the album where you have a little booklet with a little story that you can read, kind of as a log of each member.’

With this notebook I intend to illustrate a few of the more evocative examples of entire networks of values instead of focusing on them one by one.

The intentional choices made in the process of creating the CD are several as well. The content titles refer to either the main topic or the conclusion of the track as well as other aspects of the output – for example, ‘hm... beautiful trash’ and ‘freebie culture’ directly refer to the notebook. The formatting of some of the titles is inspired by K-pop album titles. For example, the use of the number two in ‘2 COLLECT’ is inspired by the format of the title of BTS’ album ‘O!RUL82’. The title ‘UNIQ’ refers to the main topic of the track, the value of uniqueness, as well as a K-pop group called ‘UNIQ’. Another deliberate choice was made regarding the order of the topics discussed, I intend to present a logical

sequence of perspectives and topics – from a general description of a birthday café experience, to company-made versus fan-made goods, to fan-made goods decorated with pictures versus designs and drawings, to the larger context of freebie culture in which these goods circulate. Additionally, I have curated these tracks to present several different values expressed by interlocutors. In the track ‘hm... beautiful trash’ Heejung recognises the intentional choice behind the credit card number and the chick face. In the tracks ‘2 COLLECT’ and ‘UNIQ’ the values of uniqueness and, thus, novelty take centre stage. Finally, in the track ‘Freebie Culture’, the value attached to community building and the bigger network in which freebies circulate is centralised.

CONCLUSION

In this research I have studied the value that people attach to goods in birthday cafés in Seoul. I have done this by employing participant observation, offering me tacit knowledge, semi-structured interviews, offering me a framework through which to interpret this tacit knowledge, all while keeping in mind to ‘unlearn’ preconceived notions, not by dismissing them without a second thought, but by acknowledging them and questioning them.

This has resulted in a deep understanding of creativity as a value, consisting of the factors meaningfulness, novelty, and intentionality, that is often attached to goods in birthday cafés in Seoul. Meaningfulness is mentioned in an indirect sense in Kelsi’s case, in which she mentions that the utility of a good sometimes lies in the fulfilment of a fan’s wish to have something referring to their favourite artist around them. It is also mentioned in a more direct sense in Steicy’s case, in which she weighs the value of a cup as opposed to posters according to their utility. It is apparent that meaningfulness, thus, plays a role in determining the value of goods, but it is also evident that it is not the only factor, as Steicy mentions that she values the gifts that are less useful as well. Novelty, and the factor of uniqueness tied to it, is the main factor behind most of my interlocuters’ preference for fan-made goods, as Steicy explains that a fan-made goods decorated with designs or drawings express a unique point of view from the artist, increasing the value of the good for her. Kelsi, among others, gives insight into how this uniqueness is established by explaining the intentional choices made when making goods for birthday cafés – and outside of them.

Establishing the factors that make up creativity gives insight into the network of values that tie together a gift economy like K-pop’s freebie culture. This is apparent in the way that the goods, that are evaluated by their creative properties or the creativity of the producer, are used for public recognition – whether that public is the K-pop community at large or a small community of ‘insiders’, as Yris mentions, that are in on a niche joke or reference. This wish for public recognition is borne out of a sense of pride at having supported the artist. Displaying goods signals that one has ‘done their job as a fan’. The sociological value of this sense of reciprocation towards the community as well as the artist has its roots in the economic value that is attached to the artists’ resources that they are provided with – monetary or otherwise – based on the activity of the fandom. So, the value of creativity offers a starting point from which to analyse values attached to goods circulating outside of the birthday cafés in Seoul, and, finally, tease out the networks of values in freebie culture, or gift economies, on which K-pop communities are built.

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Stray_Kids

2023 Stray Kids(스트레이 키즈) "樂-STAR" DETAILED ALBUM PREVIEW ★ ROCK VER. / ROLL VER. ★
[image]. Twitter: https://twitter.com/Stray_Kids/status/1719519702056357972.

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Appendix 1: Intentional choices, Photobook

Layering the image with an identical one and slightly rotating it, creating a layered effect, like:

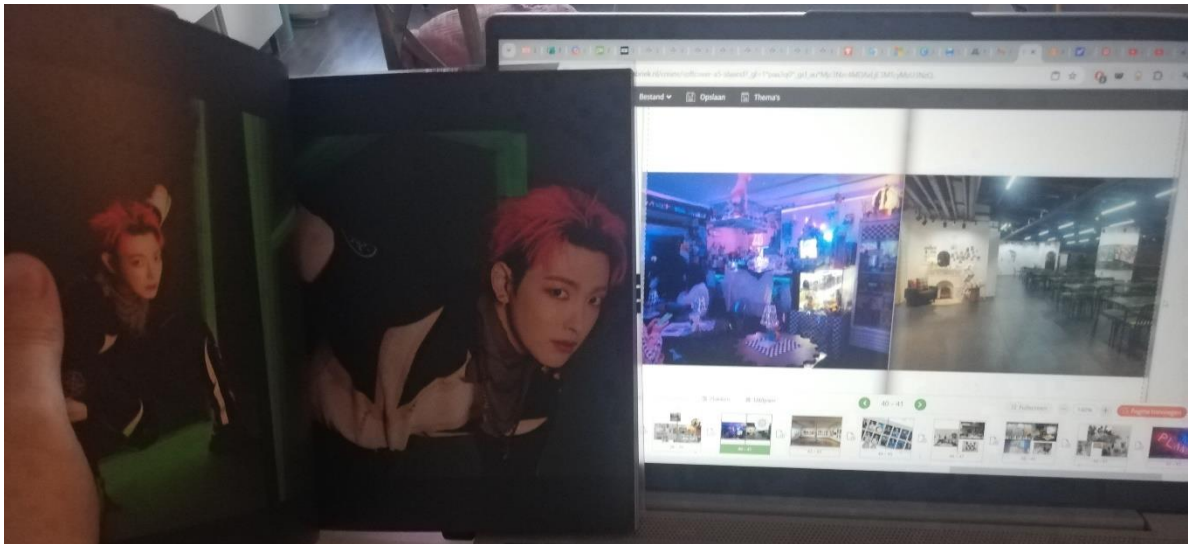


Stray Kids album '樂-STAR'

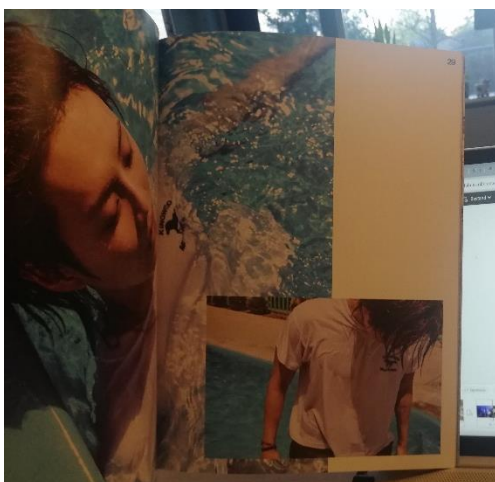


My image of photobook

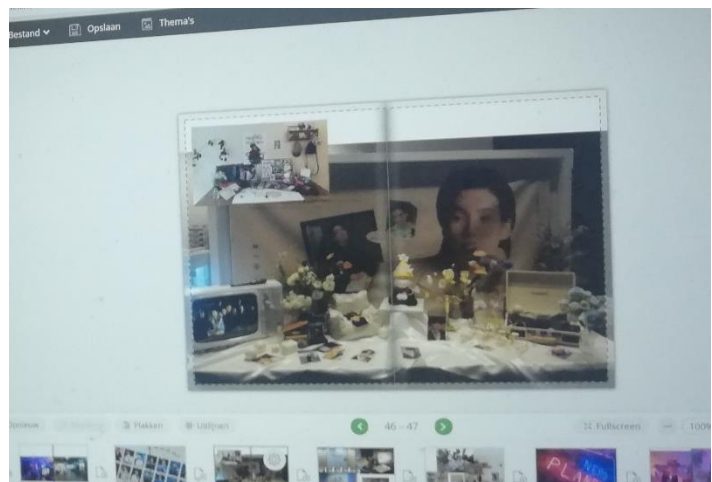
Direct format inspiration, like:



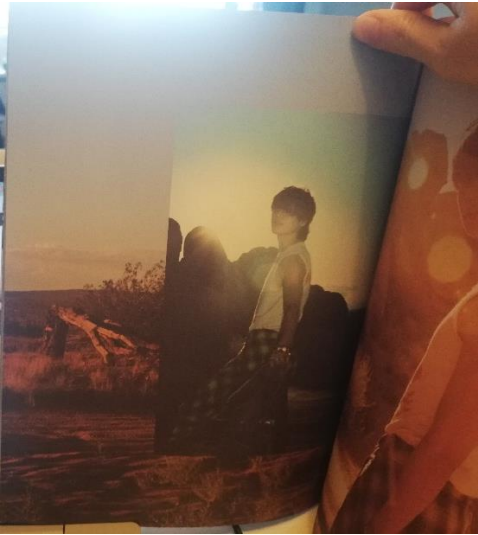
My image of photobook featuring Ateez's album 'The World Ep.2 Outlaw'



Taemin's album 'Guilty'



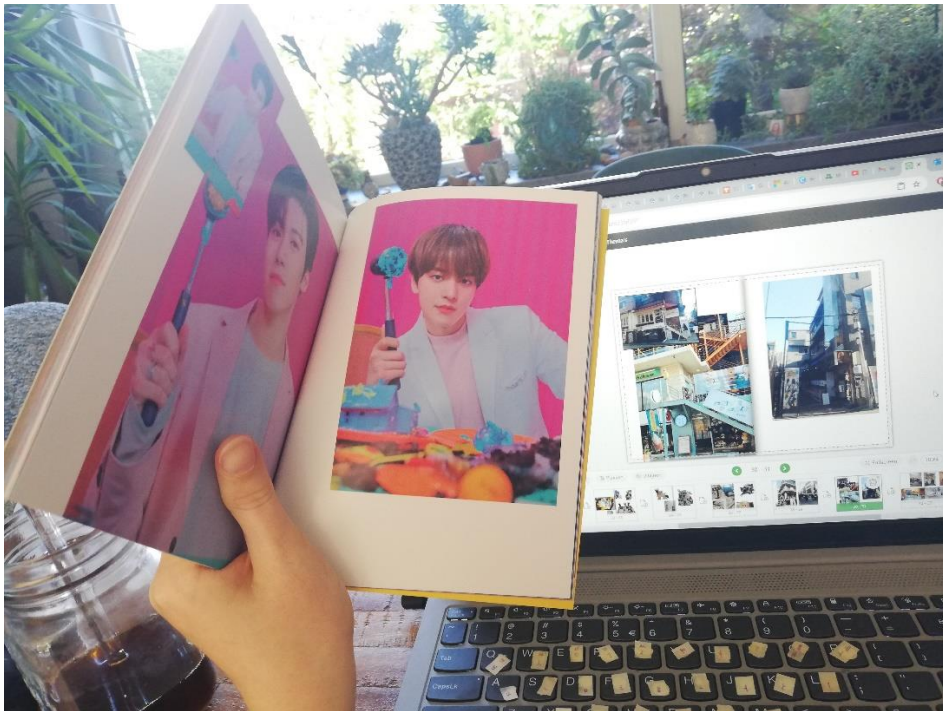
My image of photobook



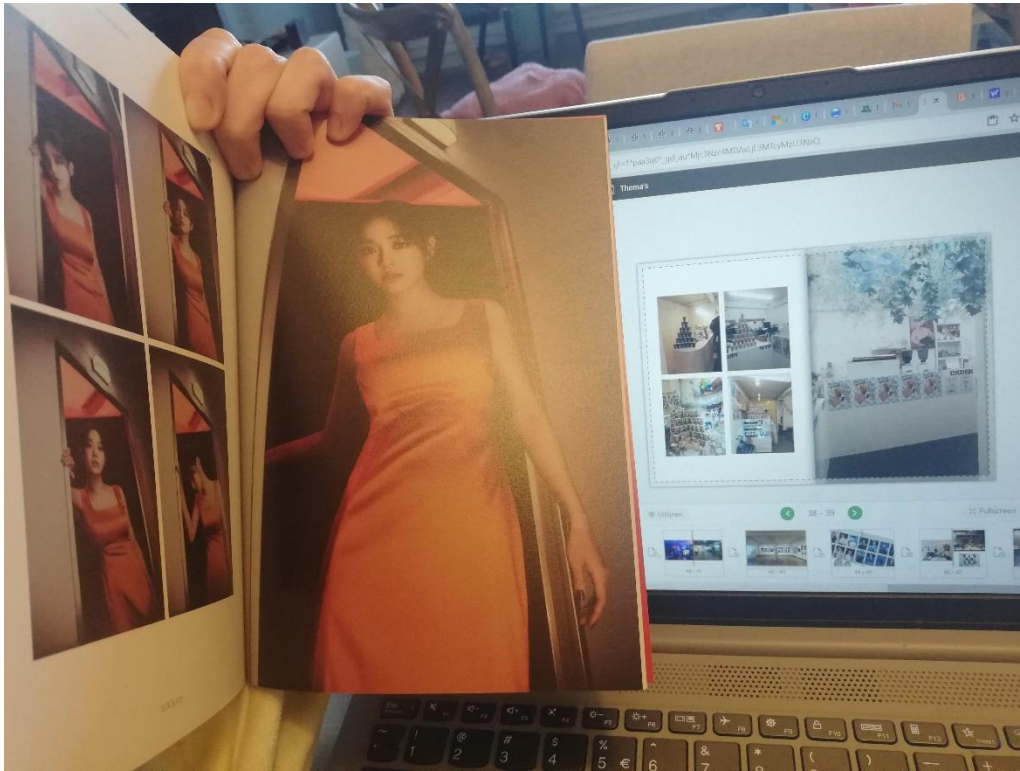
Taemin's album 'Guilty'



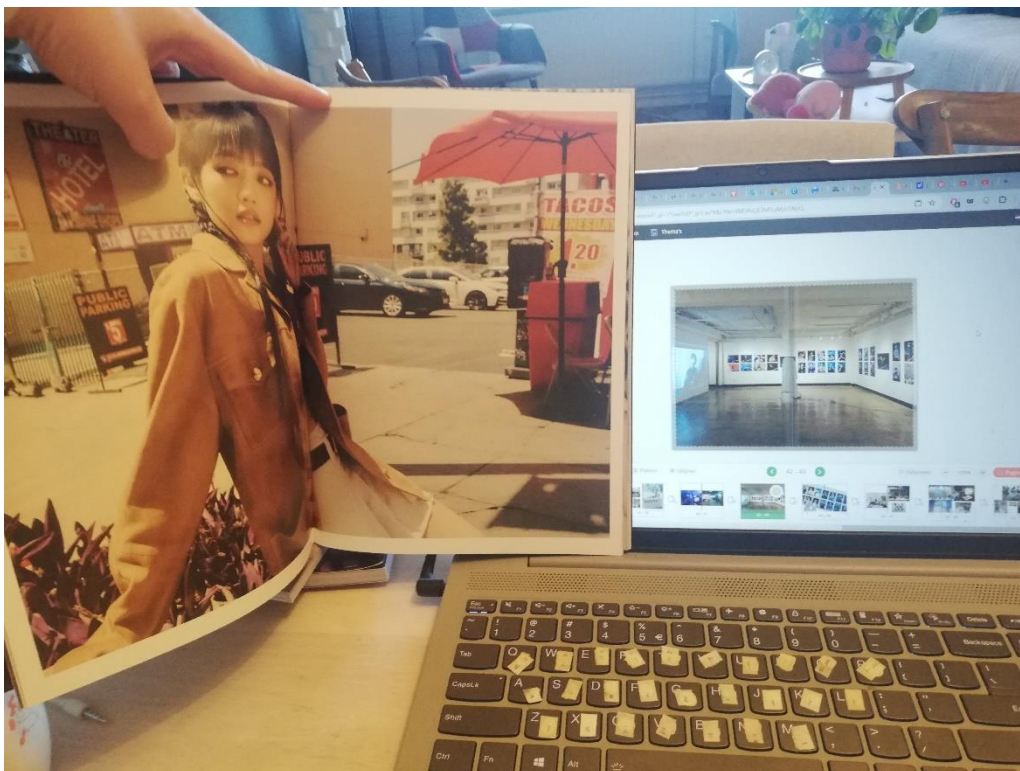
My image of photobook



My image of photobook featuring Oneus' album 'DEVIL'



My image of photobook featuring Kim Sejeong's album 'Door'



My image of photobook featuring (G)I-dle's album 'Queencard'

Appendix 2: Intentional choices, Video

