The 4th Generation K-pop Girl Group's Style and Influences

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Abstract. Korean Pop Music's popularity has been on the rise in the recent decade. As the influence of K-pop on people of this age increases, there has been more research on the marketing and promotional strategies of different K-pop groups, to investigate their paths to success and their increasing influential abilities. This paper aims to study how the modern concepts of K-pop groups help them to engage their target audiences, and the impact it brings to the community and the world, using the case studies of the 3 most popular K-pop girl groups of today, aespa, NewJeans and IVE. Through analysing their vastly different concepts by looking deeply into their musical styles, performances and visual arts, this paper concludes on how these 3 groups manages to curate their image and bring their influences to the industry, and reflects on how K-pop can survive and further thrive in the globalised and ever-changing world of entertainment, by constantly introducing and promoting novelty in the industry.

Keywords: K-pop, Popular music, Girl groups

1 Introduction

Korean Pop Music, or "K-pop", have developed tremendously since it's beginning and have grown to become one of the most influential culture of today, especially among youths [1]. From a music form, K-pop has developed into an entire industry, where entertainment companies debut groups every 3-5 years, carefully packaging group members, discography, and the whole path for the group to rise to fame and achieve a great amount of fame, so that they can bring in significant social impact and economical value to the company. The formation and establishment of this industry have motivated many young dreamers to become trainees, hoping for a chance to debut, and cultivated many fans, inspired by the music and concepts of different groups.

Different K-pop groups take on completely different concepts and aim their influence on different target audience groups, thus resulting in them having vastly contrasting styles. From songs and lyrics, to performances, to other artistic expressions related to each group, they are not merely music-makers, but represent deep cultural and emotional connections with the listeners, which explains their significant impact in today's music and pop culture industry [2].

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Currently in the 4th generation (2018+), 3 girl groups stand out to be the most influential. aespa, NewJeans and IVE. aespa is a 4 member girl group that debuted under SM entertainment in 2020. Through their innovative use of technological elements and forward-looking musical and stylistic choices, they have made a name for themselves as the "AI girl group", attracting fans who take interest in the novel elements they bring to the K-pop music scene. NewJeans is a 5 member girl group that debuted under ADOR, which is part of HYBE, in 2022. Their gentle musical style and nostalgic fashion style speaks to many listeners and attracts fans who adore the cultural depth behind their music and enjoy the refreshing sound they bring to the predominantly loud K-pop music market. IVE is a 6 member girl group that debuted under Starship Entertainment in 2021. They are known for the elegance in their music and performances, which largely showcase the members' beauty, thus attracting fans through their aesthetic prowess. Unlike the previous 2 groups, IVE follows the traditional ways of promoting a girl group and making girl group music, that has been formulated since the past few generations, so they have also gathered a fanbase from avid K-pop fans that also follows the groups from the previous generations.

Regardless of their concepts and target audiences, all 3 groups have shown incredible amount of influence in the K-pop industry and around the world, and this can be seen from the musical trends, fashion trends and artistic trends that they have stirred, on social media platforms, or in the K-pop industry, leading other groups to follow their ideas and paths. Currently, there have been researches analysing these groups' impacts through analysing their marketing and promotion strategies, looking at their success factors, album packaging, social media advertising, discography timeline as well as world view. However, behind all of these branding elements mostly managed by the company, the music, performances and visual arts aspects are the most original elements, which form concepts that truly tie the artists to their audiences. This paper aims to use the analysis of the musical style, performances and visual arts of these 3 groups, to compare how they engage their target audiences, and highlight the different impact they bring to the K-pop community through their largely contrasting concepts.

2 Aespa: Cutting-Edge, Technology-Based Metaverse

The concept of aespa is very experimental and futuristic, and it is primarily focused on their own metaverse. SM Entertainment, which aespa is managed under, created aespa with a virtual world concept, named "Kwangya". In Kwangya, the members are represented by their virtual avatars, "ae" [3].

2.1 Musical Style

Lyricism. The earlier music of aespa focused on showcasing their world view to the fans by telling their story of Kwangya through the lyrics. One example of such lyrics can be found in their hit song, Next Level. "Never look back, don't covet things of the KWANGYA, the signal is becoming uncertain since a point of time" [4]. From their debut, "Black Mamba", until their 4th comeback, "Girls", it can be seen clearly that the

lyrics are purely revolved around their concept of Kwangya and ae, and the sole purpose it serves is to explain aespa's concept to the new fans. However, this lack of relatability and cultural purpose behind the lyrics was not very well received by K-pop listeners around the world. Thus, aespa changed the approach to their music for later releases. From "Spicy", their comeback after "Girls", until their most recent comeback, "Whiplash", the concept of Kwangya and ae has not been mentioned again. Instead, aespa focused on establishing their identity through the distinctive characteristics in their music, in particular their production styles, and this shift in focus has shown its effectiveness in aespa's rise in fame since "Spicy".

Composition. Musically, aespa has always been recognised for their experimental approach. "Next Level" was one of the pioneer examples of the use of postmodernism elements in K-pop. "Next Level" experimented with using samples and genre-switching, and achieved remarkable results with these avant-garde musical making techniques. Their use of the sample of a song from the movie "Fast and Furious: Hobbs & Shaw", successfully attracted public attention and familiarity with the music [5]. The genre-switch in "Next Level" was also ahead of its time. The success of "Next Level" prompted many other girl groups to implement using samples and genre-switching techniques into their music. In a way, aespa's futuristic approach to their music due to their unique concept has made them an important trendsetter in the K-pop market, enabling them to be leading the rest, thus fortifying their position as one of the most popular girl groups.

Production. However, the musical production style of aespa stands alone from the trends of the K-pop industry in recent years. As the K-pop girl groups shift toward a more soft toned Y2K style, aespa remains uniquely identified by their heavy instrumentals which involves multilayered usage of drums and electronic instruments. aespa carries on the girl crush style popularised by Blackpink, but makes it their own by adding a key characteristic, which is their play on rhythm. In their recent hits, "Supernova", the chorus enters just a semiquaver before the official downbeat, making the song novel, fun and groovy. Similarly, their other hits such as "Armageddon" and "Whiplash" place emphasis on the rhythm section of the instruments, using and modifying various rhythmic patterns such as the "son clave" pattern. In a world of softness, aespa remains strong with their loud songs that focus on the drums, fostering their own unique soundscape, developing their own fanbase of people who love these groovy beats that they can party and dance to.

2.2 Dance and Performance

Aespa's mediated performances always stood out in the K-pop industry, or even in the whole music industry, for their daring implementation of AI elements on stage. Particularly during their earlier performances which focused on setting their world view of KWANGYA, the "ae" avatars of the members performed together with the members. The dances of aespa are more inspired by street jazz, it is characterised by the large amount of sharp movements and focus on body isolation movements. This is a way that aespa continuously embraces their AI and technology based concept even as their songs

are more detached from their world view nowadays. The main focus of aespa performances is to create a perfect image of an AI like idol, however this has sparked controversies regarding their lack of stage presence, or doubts about their ability to sing live since they mostly lip-sync. With the recent new releases being less AI related, aespa's performances has been more rounded and well-balanced between maintaining their concept and engaging their audiences, earning them more recognition for their abilities.

2.3 Visual Arts

As shown in Figure 1, the visual arts of aespa, including outfits, staging, music videos, albums, and publicity arts, revolves around the Y3K concept. "Y3K, short for Year 3000, represents a futuristic, almost sci-fi look. Picture the fashion trend with sleek lines, metallic fabrics, and a color palette dominated by silvers, blacks, and neons" [6]. Aespa popularised the Y3K fashion trend in K-pop and in fashion, their close associations with imagining the future world has impacted the fashion and pop music industry to explore deeper into futuristic elements and representations.

Fig. 1. Aespa's Y3K outfits from their recent comeback, Whiplash (2024). Retrieved March 18, 2025, https://www.lofficielsingapore.com/culture/aespa-drops-stylish-whiplash-music-video-comeback-mini-album-k-pop

Additionally, the album designs of aespa are innovative too. For their first mini album, "Savage", there is a virtual portal that can be accessed by scanning the album with a specific application. The photocards of the members can also be scanned by the same app to obtain the photocards of the "ae" avatars. This is a frontier step that aespa has taken towards bridging virtual reality and the human world. [7]

2.4 Impact

Aespa's central concept, whether it's showcased in their music, performances, or visual art elements, have always been tied to the discussion of virtual reality, artificial intelligence, and our real life. In this digitised age, all these technology based products have become an integral part of our lives, in particular to the new generation. Youths from this new generation often turn to the Internet and technology as a method to escape their problems in the real world and fill their emotional gaps [7]. Aespa's discussion of the

relationship of AI, virtual reality and us human beings not only enables the group to better connect with their listeners, but also provides a deeper insight on how the fastly evolving technology impacts our lives. Even as aespa moves away from their original concept in their newer works, their strong emergence in the Y3K trends has remained to be impactful and acts as a futuristic vision for the industry, and for the world.

3 NewJeans: Nostalgia and the Reminiscence of Youth

The concept of NewJeans aims to connect to their listeners by connecting with their cultural capital, using their artistry not only just as K-pop artists, but truly making every piece of their work a piece of art that contains a deeper meaning. [8]

3.1 Musical Style

Composition. NewJeans and aespa are almost polar opposites. Unlike aespa's heavy hitting sounds, NewJeans approaches their music in a very light manner. In fact, there's rarely high notes to be found in NewJeans' music, unlike K-pop music from the older generations that has to contain such parts to show off the member's talents. The blurring and reduced focus on showcasing vocal abilities shines the spotlight on the vocal colour and quality in their songs, sometimes even achieving a geno-song like quality, such example can be seen at the opening of "Ditto", where the geno-song humming of a short melody perfectly set up the ambience for the song. NewJeans makes their sound in a light and approachable way, this can be attributed to one of NewJeans' core concepts, that is to act as "companions" to their fans. Thus, NewJeans' music does not leave a dark-inked footprint in the listeners ears, but rather constantly tickles the most sensitive part in the listeners hearts, triggering something that resonates longer. In a way, NewJeans is defying the norms of the usual K-pop songs formulas, and has set a new trend of soft, almost dreamcore sound in the K-pop industry, which future groups like ILLIT and Hearts2Hearts have followed.

Lyricism. NewJeans' lyrics quite often call out to their fans, and invite their fans to be part of their music. Their song "ETA"'s lyrics, "The day you couldn't come to my birthday party, The day Hyejin got in so much trouble, The day Jiwon broke up with his girlfriend, The day without you he was always, The day he showed up dressed to the nines." represents a casual conversation between friends, fostering a sense of interaction between the fans and the idols. [8,9] Aside from the core idea of companionship, NewJeans also connect to the fans by singing about everyday events. Combined with the soft nature of their sound, this makes their songs really closely relatable and strongly linked to their fans.

Production. NewJeans frequently uses musical styles from the 20th century in their instrumentations, such as the usage of Jersey Club style in "Attention", and the usage of UK Garage style in "Super Shy" and "Supernatural". A common musical characteristic in NewJeans' music is the fast and upbeat drum patterns, but the upbeat feeling in the drum patterns sometimes is paired with a slightly moody melody instead. While NewJeans also frequently uses sampling, they tend to smash up the samples and remix

it with different drumming patterns, creating their own unique sound that combines K-pop characteristics and elements from older styles.

3.2 Dance and Performance

NewJeans started the transition of K-pop girl group dances from jazz-based, to hip hop-based. Traditional K-pop girl group dances are based off street-jazz, to showcase the feminine side of the idols. However, NewJeans wanted to establish a more lively and youthful vibe for their performances, therefore their dances are heavily hip hop inspired, with fluidity and groove being the definitive characteristics. They also abandoned the tradition of focusing on the cleanliness of the moves as a group and instead added many improv and playful moments to the choreography, as if it was just friends having fun. Overall, NewJeans' performances radiate liveliness and youth. They did not confine themselves to the traditional structures of K-pop, and instead broke free of their idol frame and embraced their passion with a free spirit. This carefree aura given off by the group is one of the key reasons why NewJeans became one of the most popular girl groups of today, and a significant icon to the youths of South Korea, and the whole world.

3.3 Visual Arts

NewJeans promoted the resurgence of Y2K trends around the world. Unlike aespa, who takes a look at the future, NewJeans brings back the memories from the past. "Y2K fashion is a celebration of the daring, futuristic, and sometimes quirky style that defined the early 2000s. Inspired by the promise of a new millennium, it's packed with metallics, playful accessories, and techy details that feel forward-thinking but with a retro charm. Y2K style reflects the spirit of the era, embracing a bold, carefree attitude" [10]. As shown in Figure 2, through the extensive use of Y2K and retro elements in outfits and music videos, NewJeans blends the past and the present, achieving a youthful and colourful image that feels closely bonded with the audience, making them more "alive" [11].

Fig. 2. NewJeans' Y2K style outfits in "Hype Boy" (2022). Retrieved March 18 2025, https://thebiaslist.com/2022/07/22/song-review-newjeans-hype-boy/

3.4 Impact

Overall, all of NewJeans' concepts, whether it's how they make their music, their performances, or their stylistic choices, is all tied down to one word, "nostalgia", which

also directly contributed to their immense and instant success [12]. NewJeans always aims to tell a story through their songs and music videos, and these stories are closely linked to a specific community's collective cultural capital and habitus. In "Hype Boy" and "Attention", their debut songs, it was about American High Schools in the 90s, in "Ditto" and "OMG" (shown in Figure 3), their first comeback, it was about growing up in East Asia; "Super Shy" was set on European streets while "Cool With You" is about the greek mythological story of Cupid and Psyche. Every NewJeans' MV contains a deeper meaning behind it that is up to the free interpretation of the audience, based on their own cultural capital and habitus, it can be about love, it can be about growth, but in the end, everyone's interpretation is linked together to two things, youth and memories.

Fig. 3. Nostalgic vibes in "Ditto" (2022) by NewJeans, retrieved March 18 2025, https://kpopping.com/kpics/NewJeans-Ditto-Concept-Teasers

From Y2K trends to nostalgic messages in MVs, NewJeans connects to the past via shared cultural backgrounds, but also helps their listeners and fans to connect to their own past and the deepest part in their hearts. This communication between the idols and the fans through music and performance is what made NewJeans a true ray of light for many youths of today, and their impact will continue to influence more around the world.

4 IVE: Elegance and Tradition

Compared to aespa and NewJeans, IVE is a much more traditional group, mostly following the traditions set for K-pop girl groups based on the past generations. IVE's works, although does not have a particular concept or area of focus as compared to the previous two mentioned, mostly has an elegant vibe to it that can be seen as their key characteristic.

4.1 Musical Style

Composition. IVE's music is quite traditionally like a K-pop girl group's music by following the trends set by older K-pop generations, nothing quite ground-breaking and distinctive, but it is still well-received both in South Korea and globally. One thing worth mentioning is that IVE also uses sampling like the other two groups mentioned. However, IVE uses it in another different way. IVE usually incorporates their samples

into the melody of the music and expands their song based on the sample. In one of their hit songs "After Like", IVE sampled "I Will Survive" by Gloria Gaynor in the post chorus. Their chorus flowed well into this sampled post chorus, amazing many listeners when this song was released. In their song "Off The Record", they sampled "Memories" from Cats as the intro, and also sampled "Lovefool" by the Cardigans in the bridge, with slightly modified melody. In their most recent comeback, "Attitude", they also sampled "Centuries" by Fall Out Boy in the post chorus, and all these samples were generally applauded by the listeners for how well it fits the songs. IVE usually samples these classical or pop music in the 20th century, and then making it their own by adding twists to the melody, instrumentation or rhythm and fitting it into their songs, thus giving their songs a touch of time and elegance, much like a palimpsest. These sampled melodies also add familiarity to IVE's songs, making it easier for their songs to be addictive and ear-catching.

Lyricism. IVE's lyrics are not particularly meaningful, akin to the lyrics of the 3rd generation. One specific characteristic of IVE's lyrics is the idea of self-love and response to the haters. IVE has always been put under the centre of attention due to their member, Wonyoung, being one of the most popular idols of the 4th generation. IVE often addresses the hate revolving around them with their lyrics, such as the lyrics from "Attitude", " I'm that, I'm that girl I'm that, what? I'm that attitude. I choose my own mood, I'm that attitude. Even if I stumble, luck is always on my side, I'm that, I'm that girl I'm that, ooh, I'm that attitude." [13] IVE members have taken part in writing the lyrics to some of their songs. Member Wonyoung expresses that she hopes to spread the message of keeping a pleasant mindset in an unchangeable bad situation. [14] IVE spreads powerful self empowerment messages to their fans, making them a new icon for confidence for many K-pop listeners.

Production. IVE's instrumentals, again, are pretty much traditional and not experimental. However, this traditional approach to their music helped them to garner high affinity for their music from the public listeners. Unlike aespa and NewJeans, where their distinctive sounds might not be liked by non-fans, IVE's songs are not revolutionary, but definitely do not lack interest. The perfect harmony, sampling of famous songs and occasional presence of special instruments such as violin in "Off The Record" gave IVE's music distinctive elegant vibes, which the public has shown preference over innovative sounds. This traditional approach has also made IVE stronger in the South Korea market as compared to aespa and NewJeans, who's more famous internationally.

4.2 Dance and Performance

IVE prioritise elegance and beauty over almost everything, so their dances are mostly filled with simple movements, and rather places emphasis on showcasing the looks of the members. The excessive use of hand movements in their choreographies have allowed them to have trending hand dances on TikTok such as the cat move from "Baddie" or the eye move from "Eleven". However, their lack of ability to perform stronger dances and frequent flaws in their live singing have made many criticise them for their lack of basic idol skills. The choice of performance effects over showcasing raw idol

skills has remained a problem to be fiercely debated over in the K-pop community today.

4.3 Visual Arts

IVE's visual arts largely use royal and mystical elements to signify their elegant concept. Terms such as "Princess Visuals" have been used to describe IVE members frequently, and their elegant dressing styles, as shown in Figure 4, have been followed by many youths in South Korea and in the world. Due to the strong presence of royal and ancient Greek elements in their earlier comebacks, "Eleven" and "Love Dive", there has been speculation on the group's concept's relation to Greek mythology. However, as shown in Figure 5, recent comebacks such as "I Am" and "Rebel Heart" have been more adhering to a modern elegant style.

Fig. 4. IVE during "Eleven" (2021), retrieved March 18 2025, https://kpopreviewed.com/2021/12/05/eleven-ive/

Fig. 5. IVE during "I Am" (2023), retrieved March 18 2025, https://kpopevaluated.com/2023/06/09/song-review-i-am-by-ive/

4.4 Impact

IVE has set many trends on self-love and self acknowledgement around the world. One example is the "Lucky Vicky" mindset from the member Wonyoung. " Lucky Vicky originated from Wonyoung's incident at a bakery, "I was disappointed that bread was sold out at a bakery in Spain during the tour, and soon after, freshly baked bread came

out. "At that moment, I started jokingly saying, 'You're a lucky Vicky." It blew up in the internet after she shared this incident in an interview and many sees it as a form of self encouragement and positivity. To this, Wonyoung commented "It's really meaningful if people see my story and feel small happiness and change positively." [15] IVE has also set many makeup and beauty trends around the world due to their fame for the elegance and beauty embodied in their concept.. The famous luxury brand, MIU MIU, has seen constant increase in sales after naming Wonyoung from IVE as an ambassador. [16] Despite sticking to the traditional way of K-pop groups, IVE has also seen significant success due to their attractive concept and music, as well as the presence of an "IT girl" personality in their group, and they will continue to set beauty and self-care trends, empowering their fans around the world for self-improvement.

5 Conclusion

With completely different concepts, the 3 groups have each found their ways to connect with a group of fans that truly loves their music and their performances, and they have all spread their influences in many positive ways to the K-pop community and beyond, thus making them not just parts of this big industry, but each becoming their own kind of art. Whether it is the close engagement with the technological advances today with aespa, or the look back on collective memories and growth with NewJeans, or the more common and formulated approach with IVE, all 3 of them have indeed succeeded to build their concepts and expand on them, ultimately forming a clear and meaningful worldview of their own. The messages that they spread to their fans and to the community has also connected and inspired many people. Their paths to success will continue to influence more K-pop groups to follow their footsteps and keep bringing new colour and new meanings to the world of K-pop.

Moving forward, as K-pop grows in popularity exponentially around the world, entering more markets, and reaching out to more audiences, the industry needs to look for new ways to differentiate itself from when it was still developing, or in other worlds, it needs to become more globalised. With the quick advancements of technology and interconnectedness between people of the world, K-pop is slowly renovating itself so that it can embrace the ever-changing currents of today's society, particularly the entertainment industry, and hopefully continue growing its influence and popularity until it reaches a greater height of worldwide recognition.

Led by these 3 girl groups, groups of the 4th generation have been exploring various ways to achieve a novel branding of their own, so that they can withstand the fast-paced regeneration and renovation of the K-pop industry. Although not all groups have ended up achieving success, the audiences, including the fans and the general public, have significantly increased their reception and appreciation towards the novelty that new groups bring into the industry. With this upward trend of accepting, embracing and moving forth together with the global currents of change, one day K-pop will be able to become a fully developed art form that brings communities together and inspires everyone.

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