

Special Feature

PLAVE: “Virtual Idols” as Best Representatives of K-pop’s Humanity

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Introduction: Who is PLAVE?

In March 2023, VLAST—a Korea-based “pioneering Virtual Entertainment Company”—debuted PLAVE, a five-member virtual idol group powered by real-time graphics and motion-capture technology (VLAST, n.d.). Although their avatars are rendered through a game engine, the members themselves are real human performers, each with a background in the K-pop industry. They sing, dance, compose, and engage with fans through livestreams, online fan signs, and variety-style content. In terms of practice, PLAVE functions like any other K-pop group, appearing on music shows, participating in TikTok challenges, and selling out their first solo concert at Seoul’s Olympic Hall in April 2024 (Bae et al. 2024). And yet, in public discourse—particularly outside Korea—they are often mischaracterized as “AI idols,” as if their digital appearances erase the human labor and artistry behind their performances.

This misrecognition has become a central concern for fans, known as PLLIs, who repeatedly emphasize the group’s emotional authenticity, playfulness, and self-produced content. For these fans, PLAVE’s appeal lies not in the spectacle of technology alone but in the seamless interplay between digital form and human presence. As the first group to successfully operationalize this duality within the K-pop system, PLAVE has helped redefine what it means to be an idol in an era increasingly shaped by virtuality and automation.¹ Yet despite their domestic success, PLAVE’s global recognition remains limited. In a 2024 interview, VLAST CEO Lee Sung-gu (also known as William) noted that Western audiences “are not yet ready” to understand the complexity of virtual idols, expressing hopes that recent partnerships with HYBE and YG Plus would bridge that cultural gap (Hong 2024).

The gap itself raises important questions. Why is a group like PLAVE, whose innovation rivals that of any “4th gen” K-pop act, still so often mis-framed as fully artificial? Why does the technological form—rather than the human work animating it—become the dominant narrative, especially in non-Korean contexts? Using a digital humanities approach, this paper explores these tensions through social media discourse analysis (YouTube comments and Twitter posts), arguing that PLAVE’s case reveals broader ideological patterns at work.

1 PLAVE are not the only Virtual Idols currently performing in South Korea, but this paper will only touch upon PLAVE and not the other groups such as MAVE:, AEONIT, or SKINZ.

Specifically, it examines how Western framings of virtuality and Asian innovation intersect through two entwined narratives: (1) the discourse around AI as “fake” or threatening and (2) the techno-orientalist lens through which East Asian digital culture is frequently consumed.

Opposed to a discourse which emphasizes the globality of internet as a space where race is erased, Lisa Nakamura (2002) wanted to look at a “language of race and racialism” on the online sphere. She coined the term “cybertype” to define how internet conveys and produces images that reinforces race and racism (Nakamura 2002, 6). Quoting Rey Chow, she emphasized how perceptions of authenticity are heavily related to otherness. Using the “fascination with the authentic native,” Nakamura emphasized the practice of perceiving as authentic anything that matches a predetermined conception of the other. Drawing on the work of Lisa Nakamura, I locate PLAVE’s reception within longer histories of racialized digital representation and authenticity. In the case of PLAVE, what seems to be “post-racial” or “post-national” digital performance continues to operate under a racialized gaze—one that expects Koreanness to be legible and locatable, even in avatar form.

According to Nakamura, in spaces where communication mainly happens through writing interactions, we can see “performative acts of writing and reading otherness.” However, we must keep in mind that when Nakamura wrote those words, internet was still a quite new concept, and that there were not as many platforms. It was precisely this diversification of platforms that Rukmini Pande (2018, 70) took as a starting point in *Squee for the Margins: Fandom and Race*, mentioning that “even when individuals engage in online activities that do not have anything to do with their racial, cultural, and ethnic identity, they have to continue to negotiate with that identity in some way, whether by omission or commission.” Even if PLAVE is erasing their Koreanness as “Virtual Idols,” they are still understood as a K-pop act by the Western audience and thus have to negotiate their identity through their virtual avatars.

This paper argues that the disconnect between PLAVE’s technological framing and their emotional resonance for fans is not incidental—it is symptomatic of broader cultural tendencies to separate discussions of innovation from those of affect, identity, and labor. By connecting AI discourse, techno-orientalism, and fan studies, I seek to reframe virtual idol fandom not as a niche curiosity but as a site of cultural negotiation, where fans do more than consume—they interpret, repair, and rehumanize.

This paper unfolds in three movements, each building on the previous one. First, it examines how fans construct authenticity in the face of PLAVE's ontological ambiguity, mobilizing affective response, interpretive labor, and shared vocabulary to stabilize the group's realness. Second, it addresses the challenges that arise from this fan-driven authentication—from the Billboard Korea controversy to the tensions between virtual abstraction and Korean cultural legibility. Finally, it argues that these dynamics, far from placing PLAVE at the margins of K-pop, make the group a diagnostic case; PLAVE reveals how K-pop's core mechanisms—sincerity, emotional legibility, fandom labor—operate in conditions where the body is no longer the anchor of belief.

Literature Review

The Anxiety of the Artificial: Techno-Orientalism and the Racialized Gaze

Public discourse around artificial intelligence remains shaped by a set of persistent misconceptions. Despite increasing exposure to generative AI, the dominant narrative continues to emphasize its “fakeness” while overlooking the indispensable role of human agency in its creation. This is especially evident in cultural contexts where virtual performances are treated as autonomous outputs rather than results of extensive labor. As Ted Chiang (2024) argues, what makes art meaningful is the complex web of human choices that brought it into being; in this view, AI does not “create” in the human sense but merely interpolates human-authored data.

This misalignment between technological mediation and perceptions of authenticity is not merely technical but deeply cultural, often operating through the framework of Techno-Orientalism. Techno-orientalism expands upon Edward Said's foundational idea of Orientalism by examining how contemporary media frames Asian societies through hyper-technological stereotypes (Roh, Huang, and Niu 2019, 3). Morley and Robins (1995) explain that this discourse emerges from Western anxieties regarding economic and technological progress in East Asia, often depicting Asian ascendancy as simultaneously fascinating and threatening. They argue that techno-orientalist discourses reduce complex human societies to “sub-human” entities characterized by emotional detachment, inscrutability, and mechanistic efficiency.

In the contemporary moment, this racialized anxiety manifests in the uneven scrutiny applied to Asian technological advancements. For instance, Western anxieties over Chinese developments like DeepSeek reveal the persistence of assumptions that position Asian innovation as inherently suspicious or authoritarian. As noted by Armangau (2025) in *Euronews* and Rundle (2025) in the *Wall Street Journal*, DeepSeek faced immediate bans in regions like Italy and New York State due to privacy concerns. Conversely, while OpenAI has faced its own ethical challenges regarding copyright and safety (Roose 2022), governmental reactions have been less severe, often framing the company as a pioneer navigating uncharted territory (Nguyen and Hekman 2022). Similarly, Crystal Abidin (2024) found that global news outlets consistently politicize Asian virtual humans, whereas intercultural outlets focus on their cultural dimensions.

Virtual influencers and idols become lightning rods for this gaze. Miyake (2023) argues that figures like the Japanese virtual influencer Imma exemplify “digital-Orientalist” discourses, wherein Western media consumption emphasizes racialized and gendered otherness through commodified representations of Japanese virtuality. Similarly, Luo and Kim (2024) analyze Ling, China’s first prominent virtual influencer, revealing how she is strategically positioned as a cultural ambassador to mobilize online nationalism, thus complicating the narrative that VIs are mere technological novelties. However, Western media often fails to read this nuance. For groups like PLAVE, this results in what Rita Rongyi Lin (2023) calls “plastic Orientalism”—an aesthetic excess that critiques traditional binaries of authenticity but is often misread by Western audiences as simple artificiality.

The Politics of Digital Embodiment: Labor, Seams, and Meta-Authenticity

Contrary to the narrative of automation, recent scholarship on VTubers (Virtual YouTubers) and virtual influencers foregrounds the intense human labor required to sustain digital performance. Rather than being “fake,” these figures rely on what D. Kim (2025) terms “meta-authenticity”—a dynamic form of authenticity co-constructed by human and technological actors. In this framework, authenticity is not verified by physical presence but by the consistency of social practice and interaction. E. Kim (2024) further

contextualizes this by noting that despite appearing novel, contemporary virtual influencers remain deeply embedded in longstanding structures of human labor, similar to historical precedents like Korea's cyber singer Adam. Scholarship on VTubers further complicates the distinction between labor and digital embodiment. Chen and Hu (2024) argue that while virtual presence conceals the performer's body, it simultaneously demands new forms of affective and gendered labor to project intentionality through a machinic interface. Similarly, Yuan (2025) explores the platformization of VTubers as a form of cultural production that commodifies celebrities while enabling counter-narratives to algorithmic standardization. Kovacic (2021) and Nozawa (2021) frame VTubers not as passive avatars but as "cybernetic idols"—techno-cultural assemblages where audiences negotiate authenticity by embracing the "seams" where digital and human intersect.

This intersection fosters specific forms of emotional realism. Liu (2025) highlights the parasocial relationships facilitated by live interaction, while Tang, Liu, L. Liu, and Z. Liu (2025) introduce the concept of "ephemeral authenticity" to describe fleeting moments of human recognition within virtual performances. However, this labor is not without cost; Murphy and Jarrett (2024) examine the gendered politics of VTuber labor, noting that performers must navigate affective branding, harassment, and emotional exhaustion without the shield of a traditional offline identity. Thus, virtual idols are not anomalies of automation but paradigmatic figures of the current media landscape, where boundaries between human, avatar, and audience are continuously renegotiated. Yet while this body of work illuminates the affective and laboral dimensions of virtual performance, it rarely engages with the racialized frameworks outlined earlier. The question of who performs virtuality—and how that performance is read across cultural and linguistic borders—remains largely separate from discussions of meta-authenticity and platformized labor. This paper bridges these two strands by examining PLAVE as a case where techno-orientalist framings and meta-authentic fan labor visibly intersect.

PLAVE and the Gap in Virtual Idol Studies

The case of the Korean virtual idol group PLAVE crystallizes these tensions. Often mislabeled in popular discourse as an "AI-idol group," PLAVE's reality is frequently overshadowed by the spectacle of their technology. Existing

scholarship has begun to dismantle this misconception by focusing on distinct aspects of their formation.

S. Park (2023) emphasizes that PLAVE members are, in fact, singer-songwriters deeply involved in their artistic production, challenging assumptions of artificiality. Lee and Oh (2024) further analyze the technological infrastructure, noting how the Metaverse framework supports this “realness.” Shifting focus to the fandom, Kang (2024) highlights how PLAVE’s immersive storytelling and visual identity foster a strong fanbase that plays an active role in sustaining the group’s narrative.

Crucially, recent studies have begun to examine how fans interact with the technology itself. H. Park and Han (2024) and Ahn et al. (2025) illustrate how fans navigate the “seams”—moments where the virtual and real visibly intersect. For instance, Park notes that Taiwanese fans value their equal footing with Korean fans, a leveling effect made possible precisely because the virtual nature of PLAVE precludes traditional physical proximity. These findings underscore that fans do not merely accept the illusion but actively enjoy the moments where the human performers behind the virtual façade become visible.

However, a critical gap remains in literature. Existing studies tend to either foreground the technological novelty of PLAVE or focus exclusively on fan interactions, treating them as separate domains. My intervention bridges this divide. By employing the frameworks of AI discourse and techno-orientalism alongside fan studies, I argue that the technological framing of PLAVE is not incidental but actively shapes the emotional labor of the fandom. I posit that PLAVE fans engage in a form of reparative labor, navigating the “seams” of the performance not just to enjoy the content, but to reconstruct authenticity in the face of techno-orientalist erasure. This approach moves beyond the binary of real versus fake, proposing instead that virtual idol fandom is a site where cultural authenticity is critically and communally produced.

Methodology

This study adopts a multilingual topic modeling approach to examine audience discourse surrounding the Korean virtual idol group PLAVE. By focusing on user comments across a curated set of YouTube videos—including official music videos, variety show appearances, and live performances—the project seeks to

identify the dominant themes that shape how fans and viewers discuss PLAVE's technological mediation, affective authenticity, and broader cultural significance.

Conceptual Framework

Before outlining the methodology, it is worth clarifying three key terms that recur throughout this analysis.

I use “authenticity” as an umbrella term encompassing both sincerity (the perceived honesty of affective expression) and genuineness/realness (the ontological claim that the performers behind the avatars are real human beings). Following D. Kim's (2025) framework of meta-authenticity, I treat these two dimensions as mutually constitutive rather than distinct: within PLAVE's fandom, perceived sincerity in performance becomes the evidence through which fans affirm genuineness, and affirmations of genuineness in turn stabilize the interpretive frame through which sincerity is read. This dual usage reflects how fans themselves move fluidly between the two registers.

I use “affective” in the theoretical sense developed in affect studies (Massumi 2002; Ahmed 2004) rather than as a synonym for emotional. Whereas “emotional” typically refers to named, individually felt states (joy, sadness, or admiration), affective designates pre-subjective intensities and relational dynamics that circulate between bodies, texts, and platforms before—or beyond—their codification into discrete emotions. This distinction matters here because PLAVE fandom's interpretive labor operates precisely in this pre-verbal register; fans respond to a “feeling of sincerity” that is difficult to locate empirically but shapes how the group is received.

Finally, I use “negotiation” to describe the ongoing interpretive work fans perform to stabilize meaning in the face of PLAVE's ontological ambiguity—not in the sense of compromise between opposed positions but in the sense of continual sense-making across contested frames (virtual/real, Korean/global, or human/avatar). This usage follows the tradition of fan studies that understands fandom as an active site of cultural production rather than passive reception.

Data Collection

In order to collect YouTube comments, I used *Communalytic* and gathered a database of 20 PLAVE-related YouTube videos, uploaded between March 2023

and March 2025. I separated them into three categories: (1) PLAVE Music Videos, (2) PLAVE Live performances, and (3) PLAVE variety show apparitions. A point that is worth mentioning is that we are yet to have PLAVE in “regular” (i.e., TV) broadcasts. All of their variety show appearances are on YouTube (MMTG, *Zip Daesung*, PIXID, etc.).

Preprocessing and Language Detection

Comments were preprocessed using a custom Python pipeline. First, each comment was passed through a language detection function using the *langdetect* library and classified into three main categories: Korean, English, or “unknown.” This multilingual classification was crucial for ensuring that the subsequent topic modeling process did not collapse distinct discursive patterns shaped by linguistic and cultural context. Separate preprocessing steps were applied to each language subset. For English comments, hyperlinks and non-alphabetical characters were removed, and a custom stopword list (including general filler words and fandom/PLAVE-specific terms like “plave,” “noah,” “yejun,” or “love”) was applied. Korean comments were cleaned to retain only Hangeul characters and filtered using an extended stopword list combining standard Korean stopwords with additional fan-related terms. Encoding and detection failures were logged and skipped to preserve model integrity.

Topic Modeling with BERTopic

To identify patterns in comment discourse, the study employed BERTopic, a transformer-based topic modeling technique. Topic modeling, broadly, is an unsupervised machine learning method used to detect recurring themes across large text corpora without requiring predefined categories. Rather than asking the researcher to decide in advance what topics to look for, the algorithm identifies clusters of words that frequently co-occur, allowing latent thematic structures to emerge from the data itself. This makes topic modeling particularly well-suited to exploratory analysis of user-generated content, where discursive patterns may not be evident at the surface level.

Traditional topic modeling methods, such as Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA), rely on word frequency and co-occurrence within documents. BERTopic extends this approach by using transformer-based sentence embeddings; rather

than treating words as isolated tokens, it represents each comment as a dense numerical vector that captures its semantic meaning in context. Comments that express similar idea—even with different vocabulary—are placed closer together in this vector space, which allows the model to cluster them into coherent topics. Each topic is then characterized by its most distinctive keywords and a set of representative comments selected for their semantic proximity to the topic's center.

Two separate BERTopic models were trained: (1) one for English-language comments using the all-MiniLM-L6-v2 model and (2) another for Korean-language comments using the snunlp/KR-SBERT-V40K-klueNLI-augSTS model, ensuring optimal representation across linguistic registers. After embedding and clustering, BERTopic produced topic groups consisting of keywords, frequency statistics, and example comments. The analysis focused on the top 10 most frequent topics per language, excluding noise clusters (i.e., topic label -1). Within each topic, a “representative comment” was automatically selected by the model using semantic proximity to the topic centroid; these comments were then manually reviewed to ensure interpretive relevance and diversity of voice. These representative comments served as qualitative anchors for the thematic interpretation process.

Internet Ethnography and Triangulation

To complement the findings from topic modeling, I also conducted an internet ethnography of the discourse surrounding PLAVE on Twitter/X between March 2023 and March 2025. This involved collecting, annotating, and archiving screenshots of relevant fan debates, viral moments, and media narratives that circulated across Korean and English-language fan communities. Observations from Twitter included reactions to PLAVE's music releases, debates about the “AI idol” label, and responses to media coverage both in Korea and internationally.

Crucially, I adopt an interpretive approach that prioritizes fan-fan and fan-nonfan interaction as the primary unit of analysis. Rather than treating social media comments as fixed texts or cultural artifacts, I consider them as situated social interactions, following Younghan Cho's (2020) framework for reading bulletin board discourse as dialogic engagement rather than static representation. This orientation also informed my decision to exclude PLAVE's official livestream content from the dataset; while valuable, such material lacks the

interactive structure necessary to observe discursive negotiation among different publics.

These ethnographic insights serve two purposes: first, they provide cultural and temporal context for the themes surfaced in the topic models; and second, they highlight how fans actively negotiate and contest narratives around virtuality, authenticity, and identity in real time. Relevant Twitter discourse is presented in parallel with YouTube-based topics to draw connections between platformed meaning-making, thereby allowing for a multi-modal, multi-lingual understanding of PLAVE's reception.

While topic modeling offers a scalable way to map conversation patterns, this project emphasizes the interpretive layer of fan discourse. Particular attention was paid to the concept of “seams”—moments when the tension between the virtual and the real becomes visible to the viewer. These were especially salient in comments that resisted the classification of PLAVE as “AI idols” or that emphasized their emotional expressivity, vocal talent, and production work. Using these seams as entry points, the analysis integrates computational modeling with digital ethnography and close reading, allowing for a critical exploration of how fans negotiate questions of authenticity, affect, and technological embodiment across linguistic and platformed communities.

The Dislocated Gaze: Perceptual Drift Across Screens

One of the clearest patterns across the topic modeling data is the uncertainty around PLAVE's perceptual framing—not just whether they are “real,” but how viewers are supposed to see and make sense of them. March (2023), in their analysis of the Vocaloid Hatsune Miku's collaboration with an American artist highlights a sense of skepticism in the mainstream reception of the phenomenon. However, for the case of PLAVE, this confusion is not specific to one linguistic group. Rather, it reveals a broader semiotic disruption across audiences and formats.

Killing Voice is a long-running YouTube series produced by Dingo Music, a Korean media company known for crafting intimate, stripped-down musical content. In this series, artists perform live medleys of their most popular songs against a minimalist, often monochromatic backdrop. The concept prioritizes vocal performance over spectacle—hence the name—and often includes casual

commentary, anecdotes about the songs, or playful fanservice in between tracks. PLAVE appeared on *Killing Voice* on February 18, 2024, marking a pivotal moment in their career. As of January 2026, the video has surpassed 4.8 million views, making it one of their most-watched live performance videos. The group’s inclusion in the series placed them alongside established, “real-body” idols, subtly challenging conventional norms of what constitutes a legitimate vocal act in K-pop.

A particularly significant moment during their performance is their live rendition of “Virtual Idol,” a self-aware track where the group directly addresses the public suspicion surrounding their virtuality. The lyrics playfully and boldly reclaim the term, as the group sings:

“You’ll end up asking what my name is and become a fan” (Genius n.d.). This line doesn’t just entertain—it speaks to a real and recurring pattern among viewers. This arc of doubt, discovery, and then devotion reflects a phenomenon often described in fan discourse as *iptteok*, the moment one “falls” for an idol. PLAVE doesn’t just acknowledge this process in “Virtual Idol,” but they actively perform it.

In *Killing Voice* (English), the most prominent topic (Table 1) centers around PLAVE’s ontological status. The presence of the term “ai” within the top keywords, alongside “virtual,” “real,” and “motion capture,” underscores that for many viewers, PLAVE’s lack of bodily proof causes not rejection but visual drift; audiences struggle to anchor what they are seeing to a familiar model of performance. Rather than dismissing the group, commenters work to reconcile what they see with what they know, often asking technical questions about the studio setup or defending PLAVE’s realness against hostile framing.

This confusion is not confined to global audiences. In *Small Girl Live* (Korean, Topic 9), top keywords include *jeon’gwangpan* (LED screen), studio, motion capture, *wongyeok* (remote), and camera—suggesting that Korean commenters are also attempting to map the technical scaffolding of PLAVE’s virtuality.

Table 1. Killing Voice (English), Topic 0: Ontological Negotiation (4.10% of comments, n=141)

Top Keywords	virtual, real, idols, motion, capture, idol, people, ai, suits, use
Representative Comments	“They are PLAVE. Virtual idol. Not ‘this thing.’”
	“They film/livestream everything on their own motion capture studio, so yes.”
	“I want to know if the people place is in front of. [sic] Can they actually see the real them?”

Table 2. Small Girl Live (Korean), Topic 9: Mapping Technical Scaffolding (1.84% of comments, n=31)

Top Keywords	전광판 LED screen, 광학식 optical, 스튜디오 studio, 모션캡처 motion capture, 원격 remote, 카메라 camera, 한국 Korea
Representative Comments	어차피 콘서트나 팬미팅, 음방 안 가는 방구석 팬들은 버추얼이나 연예인들 다 똑같은ㅋㅋㅋㅋ 근데 본업을 잘한다? 안 좋아할 이유가 없잖아 For couch fans who don't attend concerts, fan meetings, or music shows, virtual or real celebrities are all the same lol. But if they do their job well? There's no reason not to like them.² 컴퓨터그래픽이에요요? Is it computer graphics? 아니요 광학식 모션캡처 기술장비를 착용한 버추얼 아이들입니다. 실제 사람들을 저렇게 보이게 하는 기술이에요 ☺ No, they're virtual idols wearing optical motion-capture equipment. It's the technology that makes real people look like that ☺.

Small Girl Live is a special performance staged at the 2024 Mnet Asian Music Awards (MAMA), where rapper Lee Young Ji collaborated with PLAVE on her track “Small Girl.” During the performance, Lee appeared live on stage while PLAVE, portrayed through motion-captured avatars, joined her via a large LED screen. The act became widely discussed not just for its music, but for how it foregrounded the tension between physical and virtual presence within a shared performance space. Fans are trying to recalibrate the semiotic frame. PLAVE’s presence constitutes an “aesthetic mismatch”—an unresolved tension between sonic realism and visual abstraction. It is this perceptual mismatch, not disbelief per se, that drives fan engagement into explanatory and emotional terrain.

“Are they AI?” “No, they’re Real People.”

Despite the visual ambiguity, fans repeatedly turn to relational cues—particularly voice and emotional affect—to orient themselves. These cues become the new coordinates of authenticity in the absence of physical presence. In *Killing Voice* (English, Topics 4, 5, and 7), clusters like *singing*, *proud*, *work*, *talented*, *deserve*, *voices*, and *amaze* emphasize effort and emotion over certainty.

As these comments illustrate, even amid doubts (Topic 0), the group’s affective performance recalibrates audience expectations. This is a practical example of D. Kim’s (2025) concept of meta-authenticity—a mode of fandom

² This translation and following ones, unless mentioned, are by the author.

that authenticates mediated idols through interaction, not physicality. Here, ontology is retrospectively rewritten by emotional resonance. Similarly, *YooIn Radio 2* (English, Topic 0) contains terms like *genuine, feel, thank, and sincerity*, with representative comments describing the experience as “genuine” or “authentic” even while referencing PLAVE as AI. Sincerity becomes the bridge between uncertainty and belief. Importantly, fan behavior isn’t limited to affective alignment. It also includes defensive and explanatory labor.

In *Small Girl Live* (Korean, Table 4), a significant cluster emerges around meta-discourse on hostile commenters (*akppeul*) and the defensive labor required to counter them. Fans are not simply enjoying the performance—they are simultaneously correcting misinterpretations, calling out bad-faith critics and reorienting public narratives about PLAVE’s legitimacy.

This pattern is not unique to *Small Girl Live*. In the *Killing Voice* Korean corpus, the same kind of defensive meta-discourse appears at a far larger scale; it constitutes the single most frequent topic of the entire corpus, with 1,162

Table 3. Killing Voice (English), Topics 4, 5, and 7: Affective Re-evaluation (6.41% of comments, n=220)

Topic	Top Keywords	Representative Comment
Topic 4: Labor & Sincerity	singing, hard, proud, sing, work, music, talent, songs, colors, long	“I really like how PLAVE’s love for music is clear every time they sing...their songs might be cheesy sometimes, but they put so much effort, passion, care, and emotion that it’s impossible to not support them!”
Topic 5: Earned Recognition	talented, talent, deserve, recognition, talents, blah, boys, bunch, crazy, showcase	“pleasee...they such bunch of talented person & bunch of crazy when they doing variety content...u gonna fall for them”
Topic 7: Vocal Presence	voices, voice, amaze, siren, fail, singer, sirens, goooooood, intoxicated, slightly	“how ㅋㅋㅋ their voice is exactly the same as in the recording”

Table 4. Small Girl Live (Korean), Topic 1: Defensive Meta-discourse (5.94% of comments, n=100)

Top Keywords	댓글 comments, 욕하는 criticizing, 본인 oneself, 인생 life, 사람들 people, 노친네heri격기 breaking old people’s backs (slang), 말귀 making sense
Representative Comments	이해하지 않아도 된다. 하지만 제대로 알아보지도 않았으면 비난할 자격이 없다 You don’t have to understand. But if you haven’t even properly looked into it, you don’t have the right to criticize. 악플러들 바보같다 싫다고 댓글 남기면 알고리즘이 자꾸 추천한다고ㅋㅋㅋㅋ Haters are so dumb—if you leave the comments such as “I hate this,” the algorithm keeps recommending it lol. 막상 다른 케이팝 팬들은 플레이브한테 악감정이고 뭐고 없음ㅋㅋㅋ [...] 플리를 분탕질하는 애들은 그냥 무시하세요 Actually, other K-pop fans don’t have any hard feelings toward PLAVE lol [...] Just ignore the people trolling PLLIs.

Table 5. Killing Voice (Korean), Topic 0: Defensive Labor at Scale (5.20% of comments, n=1,162)

Top Keywords	악플 hate comments, 굳이 going out of one's way, 댓글 comments, 달지 leaving (a comment), 아이돌 idol, 답글 reply
Representative Comments	님 가치 떨어뜨리는 나쁜 말하지 마세요 Don't say bad things that bring down your own value. @user 참 정성이다 ㅋㅋ 굳이 굳이 플레이브 영상 찾아 와서 댓글 달고 다니네 할 짓이 그리 없노 ㅋ ㅋ @user, you're really dedicated lol—going all the way out to search for PLAVE videos just to leave hate comments. Do you have nothing better to do? lol. 강 팬들주접이라고 생각하면됨 ㅋ ㅋ Just think of it as fans being over-the-top lol.

comments or 5.20% of all Korean-language comments (Table 5). No other thematic cluster—including topics about vocal performance, motion-capture technology, or aesthetic details—comes close. The sheer volume reveals that defensive labor is not a marginal fan activity but a structural one; for a significant portion of Korean commenters, engaging with PLAVE means engaging with—and often pushing back against—skepticism directed at the group.

This defensive labor was put to a critical test in April 2025, when *Billboard Korea* announced a special “PLAVE Edition” magazine. The controversy erupted immediately upon the release of the cover art, as fans spotted the tell-tale signs of generative AI—inconsistent textures, “fish-eye” distortions, and illogical lighting—used in the members’ costumes and backgrounds.

Crucially, fans quickly identified the collaborator for the project: Kunstkammerai, a creator reputed for using Midjourney to produce “prompt-based” digital art. The choice of this specific artist by *Billboard Korea* was perceived not just as an aesthetic lapse, but as an ontological betrayal. Kunstkammerai’s public portfolio, which emphasizes “co-creation” with algorithms rather than human-centric design, stands in direct opposition to the “meta-authenticity” PLAVE fans cultivate. For the fandom, the AI label is not merely a technical descriptor but a moral accusation implying laziness and a lack of human agency. By hiring a reputed AI-generator to style PLAVE, *Billboard Korea* inadvertently validated the very techno-orientalist gaze that fans fight against—flattening the complex human labor of the idols into a cheap, automated spectacle compatible with algorithmic “prompting.”

The backlash was swift. Fans, who had spent years meticulously distinguishing PLAVE’s motion-capture technology from “generative AI,” launched a boycott that forced *Billboard Korea* to issue an apology. The publication admitted that while the members’ poses were captured on site (“shot

on site”), AI generation had indeed been used for the styling and background elements. This incident serves as a potent ethnographic data point: it proves that PLAVE fans are not indiscriminate consumers of virtuality. They strictly police the boundary between “virtual tools” (which enable human performance) and “generative AI” (which replaces it). The fandom’s rejection of *Kunstammerai* demonstrated that their loyalty is contingent on the visibility of human labor; they accept the avatar only so long as it remains a vessel for human effort, rejecting it the moment it slips into automation. Here, coherence takes the form of fandom-as-interpreter: explaining motion capture, mythologizing backstories, and absorbing technological inconsistencies as part of a shared world. The fandom itself becomes the site where belief is constructed and maintained—through explanations, memes, and affective sharing.

This brings us to the role of glitch—a phenomenon that complicates, rather than negates, authenticity. Berryman et al. (2025, 20), writing on virtual influencers, describes glitch as a moment of “technological vulnerability,” where the illusion of smoothness is broken and the presence of technical scaffolding becomes visible. For PLAVE, this vulnerability has become a ritualized site of meaning. As H. Park and Han (2024, 18) write “what is interesting is the fans’ interaction with the intentional exposure of these seams. PLAVE’s fans even compile and share instances of technical glitches for enjoyment.” A widely circulated example is the *PLAVE Glitching for 10 Minutes* fan edit on YouTube (Bonggu’s Rice 2024), where repeated render delays and animation bugs are turned into affectionate content. Rather than breaking immersion, these glitches offer fans evidence of labor—proof that a real-time system, and by extension real people, are at work. H. Park and Han (2024) further explain that when live broadcasts break down, fans reference the developers with nicknames like *Ttuks*, humorously personifying them as glitch-rescuing characters. These developers, normally hidden backstage, become part of the fandom’s worldbuilding (Park and Han 2024, 18). This shows that technical fragility doesn’t undermine authenticity—it enhances it. Glitches are not errors to be hidden; they are windows into presence, and fans have learned to read them as such.

This interpretive fluency is also linguistic. PLAVE’s fandom has developed a unique in-group lexicon—terms like *PLLI* (fans), *Asterum* (PLAVE’s first single album title meaning the in-between space where PLAVE members meet their fans), and other linguistic rituals perform the same function as concert chants or lightsticks in traditional fandom; they signal belonging, but they also produce

legibility. The more fans share terms, the more they stabilize PLAVE's ontology, not as physical beings, but as emotionally coherent performers. Together, affective response, glitch circulation, and shared vocabulary illustrate that fans are not passively consuming PLAVE's content. They are actively constructing their reality. Having examined how fans construct PLAVE's authenticity through affective labor and interpretive negotiation, I now turn to the challenges this framework faces, both internal to the fandom and in relation to broader structures of K-pop visibility.

“Too Korean, or Not Enough?”: PLAVE as a Representative of K-pop's Current Challenges

Beyond the affective and interpretive dynamics examined so far, one striking fact stands out in the dataset; in contrast to typical K-pop YouTube videos—which often see a majority of comments in English or other international languages—the PLAVE corpus is overwhelmingly in Korean. Out of approximately 154,000 comments, about 74% were in Korean, 13% in English, and 1% in Indonesian. This pattern holds even for content that tends to attract international engagement, such as music videos and *Killing Voice*. This unusual linguistic breakdown invites reflection. Rather than being a clear indicator of a Korean-only fanbase, it reflects how language in PLAVE's world functions not merely as communication but as cultural anchoring. PLAVE's performances are rich in Korean-specific wordplay, culturally coded humor, and variety show logic—elements that rely heavily on contextual fluency. The group's fictional setting, *Caelum*, and their fans on *Terra*, do not erase their Koreanness—they obscure, blur, and abstract it.

As Rukmini Pande (2018) reminds us, even in seemingly “neutral” or “identity-less” digital spaces, race, language, and cultural literacy are always at play. In PLAVE's case, the members are never shown unmasked; their racialized or national identities are hidden behind *manhwa*-style³ avatars. And yet, they speak Korean, engage with Korean platforms, and perform in Korean music shows. This results in what we might call a performative Koreanness—an

3 *Manhwa* refers to Korean comics and print cartoons.

identity constructed through interaction, genre competence, and linguistic dexterity.

Although PLAVE initially appears unconventional—animated, anonymous, and visually distinct from standard K-pop idols—they arguably represent the clearest expression of K-pop’s current contradictions. The group, which debuted outside of Korea’s traditional entertainment companies, has cultivated a localized and tightly committed core fandom, particularly across Korean, Indonesian, and Thai fan communities. These fans exhibit remarkable fluency in PLAVE’s fictional lore, technical infrastructure, and platform-specific behaviors, from motion capture to live-rendering latency. A Taiwanese fan interviewed in S. Park (2023, 127) noted that one of the reasons they were drawn to PLAVE was because “no one gets to see them in real life. It puts us all on the same level as Korean fans.” This flattening of access, enabled by the avatars, destabilizes the traditional axis of global-local fandom. There is no “foreign” or “domestic” fan in *Asterum*. Everyone is just a PLLI, logging in from *Terra*.

This structure, however, creates both affordances and constraints. PLAVE’s fictional world allows them to sidestep many of the moral and nationalistic expectations projected onto K-pop idols. Their lore tells us they are former idols from Earth who now live and perform from Caelum. By displacing their origin story, PLAVE can evade overexposure and avoid direct associations with Korean sociocultural issues. Fans are explicitly discouraged from speculating on their real identities, and until recently, this narrative discipline held strong. Yet even this localized success reveals the group’s ambiguous position in the global K-pop landscape. In the interview quoted in the introduction, the CEO of VLAST emphasized PLAVE’s potential to reach a “foreign” and “global” audience, but this rhetoric was centered on North America and Europe—not Southeast Asia, where the group already shows measurable engagement. This gap between audience reception and corporate aspiration reflects a broader tension in K-pop’s globalization strategies, where the “international” often remains narrowly defined in Euro-American terms.

Despite their strong niche following, PLAVE still struggles with mainstream recognition—both in Korea and abroad. Many fans take to the comment sections of videos like *Killing Voice* or *Way 4 Luv* to remind others that “PLAVE are real people.” This constant need for clarification speaks to a structural ontological ambiguity; PLAVE is not misunderstood because their

concept is difficult, but because their form defies existing templates of how K-pop should be consumed, seen, and believed. This was made especially visible in an episode of KBS documentary series, Kim Eana's (2024) *Third-Person Perspective*, which follows fans of PLAVE. One of the fans mentions, "I got into them and they happened to be Virtual Idols, not the other way around."⁴ This statement is a central paradox in PLAVE fandom; affective attachment precedes ontological recognition. Fans do not resist the group's virtuality, but they accept it, retroactively, because emotional resonance has already been established.

This tension between form and affect or identity and immersion are deeply generational. Veteran entertainer Kim Shinyoung got into a controversy for saying that PLAVE wouldn't be able to come on her radio show because she cannot understand how they work. Later, she publicly apologized and confessed that she learned of PLAVE through her niece (Hong 2025). For younger fans, avatars are not "fakes," they are native subjects in a media environment increasingly structured by hybrid presence. For older gatekeepers of the industry, the absence of a visible, verifiable body challenges the very conditions under which idol-hood can be performed.

This moment is emphasized in the encounter between three members of PLAVE and veteran idol Daesung on the variety show *Zip Daesung*.⁵ In the video, Daesung hosts the episode while PLAVE appears only as virtual avatars on a screen. Many Korean commenters express awe and disorientation at Daesung's ability to carry on a live conversation "talking to the air" (Korean, Topic 6). One user notes, "I really kept wondering if this made any sense...Daesung talking to no one the whole time was amazing."⁶ This comment captures more than just humor—it marks a generational break in how presence and interaction are defined in media. In the English comments (Topic 2), some viewers reflect on needing explanation from others to understand PLAVE's format—mirroring Kim Shinyoung's admission that her niece introduced her to the group. What emerges is not just a cultural gap but a semiotic one a shift in what "being there" means and who gets to define the terms of believability.

And yet, PLAVE's lack of physical visibility does not exempt themselves

4 The original text is as follows: "좋아하게 됐는데 알고 보니까 버츄얼이었다."

5 *Zip Daesung* is a YouTube variety show hosted by Daesung, former member of BIGBANG.

6 The original text is as follows: "진짜 보는 내내 이게 맞나 싶었다...아무도 없는 곳에서 혼자 떠드는 대성이 대단하다."

from the moral economies of K-pop. In 2024, a controversy emerged when a Twitter user linked one member's alleged real-world identity to misogynistic lyrics in a past mixtape. The result was not just backlash but a full-scale identity excavation; fans uncovered the performer's age, background, and pre-PLAVE activity. This moment exposed the limits of narrative insulation—no matter how airtight the lore, virtual idols are still embedded in real-world ethical economies.

This vulnerability stands in sharp contrast to PLAVE's carefully curated image. During a press conference, the CEO emphasized the group's commitment to "authentic content" and revealed that they had rejected songs from external songwriters to protect their artistic integrity (Yun 2024). While all five members are credited as producers on their songs—an increasingly common signal of authenticity in K-pop—it's important to distinguish this from actual creative authorship. The CEO didn't claim PLAVE created their own tracks entirely but instead framed these decisions as part of a strategy to cultivate genuineness despite technological mediation. Such language echoes discourses familiar from groups like BTS, where artistic involvement becomes a proxy for sincerity. For PLAVE, however, sincerity must also function as a substitute for visibility. Their "realness" must be conveyed through voice, interaction, and emotional consistency—because their bodies are, by design, unavailable.

This design is not culturally neutral. PLAVE operates within a visual and narrative space that is deliberately decoupled from traditional Korean iconography. Unlike other groups that invoke *hanbok* (Korean traditional clothing), Hangeul, or national holidays as part of their branding, PLAVE's only clear gesture toward Koreanness has been a Chuseok *hanbok* video—an industry-standard move, not a cultural performance. Their avatars are drawn in a *manhwa*-inspired style, but their narrative origin (*Caelum*) and relational system (*Asterum*, *PLLI*, and *Terra*) are fully de-territorialized.

In my initial hypothesis, I suggested that PLAVE's limited international traction may stem from a lack of culturally legible "Koreanness." The case, however, is more complicated. As scholars like Miyake (2023) and Luo and Kim (2024) argue, East Asian virtual bodies are often consumed through techno-orientalist logics—expected either to display ethno-national purity or futuristic detachment. PLAVE side steps both. They are not "self-orientalist" in the style of Ling or Imma, nor are they dystopian avatars of capitalist perfection. But this also means they are unreadable within dominant frameworks of global K-pop visibility. Miyake (2023) refers to this as representational opacity; PLAVE

is Korean in voice, humor, and fan interaction, but visually and narratively ambiguous. Their refusal to participate in ethnic or aesthetic coding makes themselves difficult to locate within global expectations of authenticity. They are too Korean to be global and too abstract to be legibly Korean. And yet, their fans make them legible—through glossaries, memes, ritual language, and emotional labor. In doing so, PLAVE becomes not just a group to be understood, but a system to be learned.

Conclusion

This study has examined PLAVE not simply as a technological innovation within K-pop, but as a cultural formation that consolidates—and reveals—many of the genre's latent logics. Far from existing on the margins of the idol industry, PLAVE illuminates the infrastructure that has long undergirded K-pop's success: affective labor, visual coherence, genre legibility, and relational immersion. Their existence as virtual performers is not a rupture from the K-pop system but rather a crystallization of its mechanics, performed through new media constraints.

The topic modeling analysis of over 150,000 YouTube comments across PLAVE's content—ranging from live performances and variety show appearances to music videos—reveals a consistent pattern of fan engagement that privileges sincerity over certainty. While many viewers initially express confusion regarding PLAVE's ontology, this uncertainty is quickly displaced by references to their vocal skills, emotional delivery, and “genuineness.” These forms of engagement align with what D. Kim (2025) describes as meta-authenticity, wherein authenticity is not verified through physical presence but through consistent interaction and emotional resonance. For PLAVE, the absence of the body does not erode belief; instead, it invites the fandom to reorient its criteria for what constitutes “realness.”

Moreover, the group's reception reveals important tensions around generational perception, technological literacy, and narrative expectation. The Kim Shinyoung controversy and the *Zip Daesung* appearance both illustrate a structural semiotic gap; where older entertainers remain tethered to traditional markers of bodily proof and proximity, younger fans exhibit fluency in digital hybridity, engaging PLAVE not as simulations but as fully situated cultural actors. This shift is not merely aesthetic—it signals a broader transformation

in how media presence is understood and navigated in post-pandemic digital cultures.

At the same time, PLAVE's case challenges common frameworks in discussions of techno-orientalism. As discussed in the literature review, East Asian virtual bodies are frequently read through polarizing tropes: either hyper-technological and dehumanized or culturally essentialized and spiritually pure. PLAVE escapes both readings. They neither adopt a cyberpunk dystopian style nor actively perform Koreanness through symbolic national motifs. However, this ambiguity also renders them visually and culturally illegible to audiences accustomed to more familiar aesthetic codes. This is particularly evident in their limited traction within Euro-American fan spheres, even as they develop a highly active core fandom across Korea and Southeast Asia. Their abstraction, while strategically de-nationalized, may therefore hinder broader global recognition—ironically contradicting their own CEO's stated aspiration for international expansion.

Crucially, PLAVE's refusal to break character, their consistent commitment to in-lore interaction, and their strategic emphasis on fan-driven interpretation collectively mark a shift in how idols are authenticated and consumed. Their fans not only interpret but actively stabilize PLAVE's identity through the circulation of memes, glossaries, and even glitches. These shared rituals of interpretive labor reinforce a sense of presence that is not grounded in visibility, but in fidelity to performance and emotional coherence. The result is a fandom in which belief is co-constructed, and realness is enacted as a communal practice.

In this way, PLAVE does not exist outside the K-pop ecosystem—they function as a diagnostic mirror of its current state. Their anonymity does not offer escape from moral scrutiny, as recent controversies have shown, and their virtuality does not exempt themselves from the aesthetic expectations of the industry. Instead, they expose how K-pop's most enduring logics—around sincerity, effort, and fan intimacy—are not dependent on physicality at all. What began as a conversation about artificial intelligence, motion capture, and avatar performance ultimately reveals something more foundational; K-pop's ontology has always been mediated and constructed through belief, ritual, and emotional negotiation. PLAVE does not disrupt this logic. They make it visible. In short, PLAVE is not the future of K-pop; they are its present, being made legible.

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Abstract

This paper examines the K-pop virtual idol group PLAVE as a diagnostic case for understanding K-pop's logics of authenticity, fandom labor, and visibility. Drawing on topic modeling of over 150,000 YouTube comments, supported by close readings of fan discourse and platform behavior, the study proceeds in three movements. It first shows how PLAVE's avatar-based performances generate affective resonance despite ontological ambiguity, with fans recalibrating authenticity through emotional response, interpretive labor, and collective meaning-making—foregrounding sincerity over physical presence. It then examines the challenges this mode of authentication produces, from controversies over generative AI imagery to tensions around cultural legibility and global visibility. Finally, situating PLAVE within debates on techno-orientalism, post-human performance, and K-pop's shifting global dynamics, the paper argues that PLAVE does not rupture K-pop's logic but intensifies its core mechanisms. Their abstraction, moral entanglement, and narrative insulation reveal K-pop's dependence on emotional legibility rather than bodily visibility. PLAVE thus serves not as a novelty, but as a crystallization of the industry's present condition—where belief is no longer anchored in sight, but in shared affective structure.

Keywords: virtual idols, K-pop, PLAVE, techno-orientalism, meta-authenticity, digital fandom, affective labor

Appendix

List of Videos Used for Topic Modeling

Upload Date	Type	Name	Comments	Views	Channel Name
March 11, 2023	MV	기다릴게	15731	12M	PLAVE (Official)
August 24, 2023	MV	여섯 번째 여름	14691	14M	PLAVE (Official)
February 26, 2024	MV	Way 4 Luv	22501	14M	PLAVE (Official)
August 20, 2024	MV	Pump Up the Volume!	21169	14M	PLAVE (Official)
February 3, 2025	MV	Dash	20388	12M	PLAVE (Official)
March 14, 2024	Variety	음방 1위까지 한 버추얼 아이돌-플레이브 실 체 ㄷㄷ 어서 5세대	2948	694k	MMTG
November 20, 2024	Variety	[EN] 외계인한테 플러팅 당한 썰 푼다 / 밥 사효 EP.18 플레이브 편 (밤비, 하민)	1739	285k	효연의 레벨업
December 12, 2024	Variety	[ENG/JPN] 연애 프로 전문 아이돌 vs 절대 안 보는 아이돌 TXT(투모로우바이투게더) 수빈 플레이브 예준 은호 최애의 최애	3076	1.5M	Pixid
December 25, 2024	Variety	[수다인나] 고영배 씨~ 메리크리스마스 그 리고 플레이브 241225	244	144k	유인라디오
January 6, 2025	Variety	[EN/JP] ai(인공지능)아니고 Aㄴ스테름 Idol 입니다 잠깐 기다리면 돌아오는 대성 각 집대성 ep.38	3682	997k	집대성
January 14, 2025	Variety	[ENG/만날외계인인나] 외계인과 영상통화 도 하는 유인라디오 플레이브	306	72k	유인라디오
February 15, 2025	Variety	[SUB] 단독! 플레이브 테라 방문 의혹 기자 회견 플레이브 편 기자의 사심터뷰2	729	99k	기자의 사심터뷰
March 1, 2025	Variety	[SUB] 역대급 재풍잔치 but 유열 아이돌 플레이브 2편 기자의 사심터뷰2	854	118k	기자의 사심터뷰
March 6, 2025	Variety	드디어 미친(positive) 것 같은 플레이브&낭 정순 낭정순 밴드 7화	906	683k	MMTG
March 7, 2025	Variety	I came from the stars and my star is you. (ft. EXO-L) EXO XIUMIN & PLAVE HAMIN	3647	550k	KODE 코드
November 22, 2024	Live	[#2024MAMA] LEE YOUNG JI X PLAVE - Small Girl Mnet 241122 Broadcast	2358	2M	Mnet K-pop
February 18, 2025	Live	PLAVE Killing Voice	29045	4.8M	딩고 뮤직
February 18, 2025	Live	PLAVE (플레이브).zip 기다릴게부터 Dash까지 Show! MusicCore	606	119k	MBCKpop
February 25, 2025	Live	PLAVE - Dash (Show! Music Core)	5357	871k	PLAVE (Official)
March 14, 2025	Live	PLAVE(플레이브) - Island dingo live 덩 고뮤직 DingoMusic	4072	280k	딩고 뮤직

Note: The number of Comments is fixed as of April 2025. Views were updated as of January 2026.