ABSTRACT

Manuscript type: Research article.

Research Aims: This paper examined visual concept in Blackpink photo teaser as the promotion strategy in social media.

Design/methodology/approach: This research was carried with qualitative approach, using Roland Barthes semiotics analysis to identify sign and symbol to identify visual meaning of Blackpink photo teaser and how the group is being presented through social media.

Research Findings: Blackpink photo teasers have visual appeals which is consistent with the brand of the group. The girl crush and duality concepts of black and pink characters representing beautiful and strong persona were the message intended to be delivered through social media to the audience.

Theoretical Contribution/Originality: This research explored the message contained within the visual concept in promotional photo teasers of a K-Pop group. Blackpink, as a social media strategy in promoting the new album. It is notable that the group wanted to project certain image through the photo teasers of the new album.

Practitioner/Policy Implication: This research noted that the promotional strategy of a brand, in this case, the K-Pop group, in social media takes into consideration the brand identity and message appeals other than the visual aspect.

Research limitation/Implications: This research only focused on one K-Pop group and a new album. Further research can be done covering multiple groups or multiple new albums to identify variety of concepts and strategies in social media.

Keywords: social media strategy, K-Pop, K-Pop album, photo teasers
INTRODUCTION

The Korean wave, which primarily started with the popularity of Korean drama in East Asia, and the local industry has advanced several cultural forms including Korean popular music, Korean drama, Korean cuisine, and Korean fashion which penetrated the global market (Dal & Tae, 2017). Korean Pop or K-Pop has become global cultural phenomenon for the last decade by the spreading of K-Pop music in various countries around the world. K-Pop is a part of the “Hallyu” or Korean wave. Korean wave is not a hegemonic cultural impression but a “world wave” which embraces all kinds of culture in a global village (Rae, 2015). Currently K-Pop, mainly carried by idol groups is driven by dance music and groomed by conglomerate music agency such as YG Entertainment, JYP and SM Entertainment.

In 2012, when the Gangnam Style by PSY became viral in YouTube, many flashmob performances and dance covers were posted in social media, which also attracted international media. When the music video was uploaded on September 28, the video was accessed by people in 222 countries and became the first YouTube music video which reached one billion views. Gangnam Style’s popularity abroad became an example of how global culture and visual culture was facilitated by social media and networking platform (Shin, 2016). Another example of the impact was when a K-Pop girl group who was famous internationally is SNSD with the single ‘The Boys’, became the first time a Korean group appeared on an American talk show (Kim, 2017).

Nowadays there are many K-Pop groups which gained popularity globally, one of them is BLACKPINK. BLACKPINK, stylized as BLACKPINK is one of the most famous South Korea girl groups formed by YG Entertainment. This group which consists of four members, debuted in August 2016 with the single ‘Whistle’. BLACKPINK has achieved record-breaking success. At the 2019, BLACKPINK is the highest charting female K-Pop group, with the single hits “Ddu-Du Ddu-Du” as the most viewed Korean music video on YouTube within 24 hours since it was released (Herman, 2018). A few months later, BLACKPINK reached another milestone when the same single became the fastest K-Pop music video which gained 550 million viewers.

It is the norm of K-Pop when a group is releasing a new album, a set of teasers, usually photo or video, will be posted to ‘tease’ the audience of the new release. The same goes to BLACKPINK, they released a set of visually appealing photo teasers on their social media account, including Instagram.

This paper explored visual concept in BLACKPINK photo teasers that were used as a promotional material in social media. Through the analysis, the meaning of the visual symbol and sign in the teaser were also identified.

LITERATURE REVIEW

K-Pop began surfacing in the mid 1990s. K-Pop Industry is characterized by unique globalization strategy of outsourcing creativity (G) ➔ internalizing local manufacturing of creativity (L) ➔ exporting K-Pop globally through YouTube (G) (Oh & Jung Lee, 2013). YouTube allows the audience to be immersed in music through the consumer’s choice because of K-Pop’s dance music along with extremely fancy, sexy and artificially sophisticated music video. Therefore, social media has contributed to music video global success (Negus, 2015).

K-Pop Idols were known not only from their singing quality and skillful choreographies, but also their manufactured attractiveness to commercialize, such as girly, fair and delicate skin, sexy face, tall, slim, and well-toned bodies. (Kim, 2017). A study with a title Sexuality Objectification in Music Video: A Content Analysis Comparing Gender and Genre found that music videos provide the most sexual objectification. The analysis compared sexual objectification across gender and genres (R&B, pop, and country). Sexual objectification is more prominent in pop music and R&B rather than country music (Aubrey, 2011). According to Jung (2014), the success of K-Pop songs derives from combination of several factors, namely the use of the existing K-Pop fan base, the buy-in major media outlets and celebrities, the active participations of global audiences, and the unique features of the music video.

A study about The Globalization Of K-Pop:
The Interplay Of External And Internal Forces provided a comprehensive and systematic analysis about the increasing popularity and global circulation of K-pop in recent years. A systematic approach to identify and analyze key trends happening in the external environment that shape the industry in which K-pop operates, and consequently how the entertainment companies can anticipate these trends and changes in their internal strategies to facilitate K-pop’s global expansion and growth. This paper indicated that the globalization of K-pop is a process of the interplay between external circumstances and internal organizational factors.

Over the past decade, the world has become increasingly connected due to the advent of social media and digital distribution which have been made possible by technological advancement. Unlike conventional media such as TV, the emergence of global online video platforms such as YouTube allows transnational flows of media content which has made possible for music to reach the widest possible audience ever. Social networking platforms coupled with transnational online communities become the first medium where people from every part of the world connect and interact, instantly share, discuss, or deliver music. YouTube provide the first mechanism for K-pop to reach the widest possible audience ever with much lower barrier compared to conventional media. To capitalize on YouTube to maximize potential global reach, the formula of K-pop put the same emphasis on visual as on audio.

K-pop in general seems to be focused on catchy melodies, eye-popping choreography, visually attractive group of boys and girls, colorful and vivid colors to achieve a positioning that would be effective for transnational consumption. Furthermore, K-pop is also a combination of global pop sounds and musical styles and incorporate repetitive English word into the chorus that would further minimize the language barrier. K-pop’s appeal is broadened by tapping into universal needs and values. K-pop’s user-generated contents such as cover dance and reaction videos greatly enhance K-pop’s global exposure across the world. In addition, Kpop artists are actively engaged on social media which enable a more personal and intimate relationship to be built between artists and international fans. Loyal and engaged fan communities contribute back to K-pop’s worldwide media presence through a wide array of actions such as casting a vote in international award and downloading music to push up the rank on music chart, which successfully create a trend and capture the attention of high profile media.

The research entitled The Britney Spears Universe: Social Media and Viral Marketing at its best discuss about the use of social media during the launch of Britney Spears single ‘Hold It Against Me’ and the associated album Femme Fatale in early 2011. The interplay of postings on Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook combined with comments on Britney Spears webpage, BritneySpears.com can be seen as a prime example of social media usage to support new product introductions (Kaplan, 2012). From those previous research, the author argued that photo teaser in social media plays an important role to bring the song’s success. So the question is what is the strategy implemented in photo teaser and how it works to attract the audience.

Research Method

This article examined the social media strategy of BLACKPINK promotion represented in the photo teasers. This paper also utilized semiotic analysis, which is concerned with the meaning in the board sense (language, image, objects), generates meaning or the processes by comprehending or attributing meaning. Roland Barthes was the first to apply ideas of semiotics developed from linguistics, to visual images, for example food advertisements, photography and motion pictures. According to Barthes, it is divided into two meaning; denoted meaning (first order or basic meaning) and the cultural meaning or connoted meaning (second order meaning). In other words, denoted meaning refers to the recognition of hat is registered by the image and connoted meaning refers to possible invitation to the image interpret, give meaning to the forms even against or beyond the author’s intentions (Curtin, 2009).

Table 1. Roland Barthes Semiotics
Through the visual analysis of the photo teasers posted in the social media, how BLACKPICK is presented and promoted to their audience through its release can be identified.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Photo Teasers for Album Release as Promotional Content

Ddu Du Ddu Du was released on 15 June 2018 by YG Entertainment. Ddu-Du Ddu-Du became the most viewed Korean music video on YouTube within 24 hours since it was released (Herman, 2018). A few months later, BLACKPINK reached another milestone when the same single became the fastest K-Pop music video to gain 550 million viewers. Ddu-Du Ddu-Du was written and co-produced by YG Entertainment in house producer Teddy Park, who was behind K-Pop biggest hits like PSY’s “Daddy” and CL’s “Lifted”. This song is the lead single from their EP Square Up.

Ddu-Du Ddu-Du is not an actual word but a sound of a gun shooting, which is an onomatopoeia. The Ddu-Du Ddu-Du music video contains swag, bombastic, and blaring beats, infectious sound and strong lyrics. The lyrics talk about being a symbol of chic and confident females and are an expressions of BLACKPINK identity.

Before the song release, BLACKPINK’s official instagram account released the first photo teaser of four members on 12 June 2018. Each photo teaser actually has the same layout, framed with square shape. Those photo teasers entitled SQUARE UP suggested the name of the new BLACKPINK’s album.

Vinerean (2017) discussed the concept of strategic social media marketing and how it provides value and opportunity for conversation between the audience and the company. In this case, the photo teasers were used to increase interest from the fans, or other audience about the new album. Creative social media strategy is also about having content which can appeal to the audience, visually or experientially (Ashley & Tuten, 2015), thus photo teasers could work for the purpose of not only promoting the release, but also to get the audience engage with the visual experience.

In the photo teaser, member Jennie was wrapped in half moon print top from Marine Serre and Chainlink beach pants. The pose and outfit exuded cool and rather fierce image.

In this photo teaser, Rose, wrapped in sequins black dress and diamond earings with her long hair, suggested that she is a symbol of beauty and female goddess through her appearance.

Member Jisoo wore Calvin Klein x Andy Warhol top with pink hair painted her as a rebel against her own image and the people who have placed expectations on her based on this image. Jisoo who was always spotted with long black hair, shown in a refreshing image in a pink bob wig in the teaser, which showed a much fierce, fashion forward image.
In the next photo, Lisa with a new look wearing checkered top and clip on earrings. Lisa’s appearance in this photo is casual and sporty, seemingly showing her tough image.

Another photo teaser, which was a group shot showed four member of BLACKPINK in one frame. This photo teasers presented with four members of BLACKPINK; Jennie, Lisa, Jisoo and Rose. The four members of BLACKPINK were wearing high-end fashion brand. Jennie, wrapped in Vivianne Westwood plaid cool wool tartan jacket in red. Lisa with Alexander McQueen black puff sleeve wool jacket, Jisoo, wearing Saint Laurent and Paco Rabanne top, and Rose wrapped in Y/Project twisted tulle off shoulders dress. The members of BLACKPINK were wearing glam look make up with focus on eye makeup including the using eye shadow, straight eyebrows and cat eyeliner. The appearance of BLACKPINK members in the photo teasers portrayed them as expensive, classy, and fabulous girls.

The teasers were consistent in its visual with squared frame and black and pink colors, suiting the group’s name and album name. The concept image of the members also looked consistent, displaying the girls’ attractive features yet strong persona.

**Photo Teasers’ Role for Social Media Strategy**

BLACKPINK, as a group and a concept in itself, is an identity designed to be a dichotomy between beauty and talent, sophistication and intensity. Through the photos, it can be seen that the image they were going for was female strength and beauty. The color scheme, dominated by black and pink, is consistent with their concept. Many people like that and find it fulfilling emotionally, which works as the appeal of the concept for the audience.

As discussed in Ashley & Tuten (2015), brands make use of various types of appeals to engage with the consumers in social media. Different, repurpose promotional content in social media is also desirable in the successful achievement of the strategy (Vinerean, 2017). For the photo teasers, it is not only the concept or philosophy behind the creation of the images, but also the visual aesthetic part of it that drew people in. To get the audience maintain the interest of the upcoming, the group can separate the various set
of teasers they prepared into multiple platforms. These days, with additional features and application, photo editing and layouting have become the support in making the social media feed, including Instagram, looks more inviting. Therefore, it can also enhance creativity in presenting the photo teasers.

The marketing strategy is created to cater to the audience’s needs and wants. In this case, it can be a little different since the product offered is in form of entertainment, which targets enjoyment and experiential sides of the consumers. BLACKPINK, like other K-Pop groups, have their own audience. Their target audience includes those finding the concept cool or relatable, or that they prefer their sound over the other girl groups.

They have become global due to the fact that the concept can be easily accepted by many people around the world. BLACKPINK is a brand on its own, and for the audience to get or understand the brand, the message needs to be consistently delivered. What has been working for the group is that their brand message and identity, which were shared and displayed in their social media account, are somehow relatable. It may be related to consumer’s psychology. However, that could be the value of the strategy. If by looking at the photos and they feel a sense of satisfaction, whether by the beauty aspect only, or by the fact that the concept packaged through the teasers is right up their alley, then it makes the point.

Social media content strategy needs to be interesting and engaging, thus brands have to focus on providing entertainment and promoting interaction for the audience (Godey, et al., 2016). Having an effective impact, promotional content or strategy needs to satisfy consumers’ need, whether it be physical or emotional (Zhu & Chen, 2015). In this case, the satisfaction could come from looking forward to the new release and the photo teasers elevate the anticipation and curiosity of what the new song and album would be like. Through the visual, fans have the opportunity to predict the song and music video concept for example.

The appealing factor in social media and the content is not only related to the visual aspect of the teasers but can also delve into the story or message it wants to portray. Advertising content can become a persuasive art form when it creatively combines elements (Ashley & Tuten, 2015). Persuasive relates to how people believe some-thing and for BLACKPINK and other groups, the teasers become the item for advertising and promoting the new album. Through the teasers, audience would see them as a group of beautiful and strong ladies and that would be what was expected from the public for the release and the concept. However, there were more into it.

The photos, other than providing strong, appealing visual of the group also have a message built around it and having seen and analyzed the release, the group wanted to present their character as idols with unique appeal, the strong aura, and glamorous beauty. What the audience would be curious to see next might be if the photo concept would materialize as such in the music video, which usually marks the release of the album title track. Moving along to the music video release from the album, a deeper message was shared, in which they also presented that there are both sides of personas and images that they have. The cool, glamour look presented in the teasers were only one side of the life they are living.

In K-Pop, image or photo teaser is normally used and release before an album release of the artists or idol groups. Considering the many competitions present and the need to be unique, many factors go behind the making of teasers or the concept in general. To promote interest for wider audience, certainly it cannot rely only on visual aspect. How they present the brand and identity of the group, completed with a unique appeal and message would help to generate interest and anticipation for the release.

CONCLUSION

BLACKPINK’s photo teasers for their album release has elements of appeal and it successfully worked for their image they were going for. The consistent visual concept with the group identity has helped them stand out and the message they wanted to portray was delivered through their content. The audience could see them having strong persona and beautiful appearance which are their attractive point. The music video, following the teasers, showed a continuation of the story shown in the image and shared distinctive message and different image from the teasers that they wanted the audience to know and be aware of. In the other words, the teasers acted as an introduction of the title song, which is introduced through the music video. To see their concept as a whole, the fans need to see the video and understand the complete message.
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