

# The Meaning of Imitation amongst K-Pop Cover Dancers in Surabaya

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## Abstract

*Korean Wave* is quite popular these days and the growth of the Korean wave is also followed by the growth of popular idol groups in South Korea. Examining a dance cover group which quite popular in Surabaya, this research discusses the act of imitation. Cover dance is one of the fan activities which mostly done by hyper-fans. In Indonesia, some people tend to imitate or impersonate some particular things and this phenomenon has become a common thing. This research argues that *Fresh* as hyper-fans group imitates Korean boy groups in order to be famous and “demi-idols”. This research aims to reveal the meaning of imitation for K-pop cover dancers, especially in Surabaya. This research uses a qualitative approach and purposive sampling to find the data. Kang’s term “demi-idol” is used as the theory in this research because this research adopts Kang’s study about cover dance in Thailand. The method used is an in-depth interview with *Fresh* members followed by interpreting the data. The analysis shows how imitation among K-pop fans becomes a new way to be famous, an alternative way to go global, to be similar to their idol, and to do some negotiations as hyper-fans. Imitation also becomes part of globalization through fan activities. This research finds that *Fresh* turns into demi-idols through cover dance, thus they also build their own fandom through their success as being K-Pop cover dance group.

**Keywords:** demi-idol, fandom, fresh, hyper-fans, imitation, K-pop cover dance

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## 1. Introduction

Lately, there are a lot of people, especially teenagers, who are in love with everything that is related to Korea, in other words, they are infected with the Korean wave. Korean wave or also known as *Hallyu* is Korea’s recent swell in the entertainment industry that has gained big interest from abroad, particularly South East Asia. Korean wave is one of the signs of the increasing popularity in South Korea in which the culture spreads around the world. Korean wave started in 1990 and has significantly developed until now. In the late 2000s, K-pop or Korean Popular Music succeeds to gain interest from people, especially youth around the world through young idol groups that have been prepared to entertain them. Korean television programming exports have increased so dramatically in 2003. They earned \$37.5 million; the difference is big, compared to 1999, which was only \$12.7 million (Shim 2006, 28). The meaning of *Hallyu* itself has been stretched to more aspect—not only for drama and music—including food, clothes, language, even medical services. In other words, the Korean wave or *Hallyu* has affected this world globally.

Discussing *Hallyu* is always close to K-pop which has become one of the most dynamically distributed forms of pop culture in the global pop market through social distribution networks (Seok 2009). Korean pop music became a significant model for youth culture throughout Asia over the last decade. The explosion of the K-pop phenomenon in Indonesia has significantly influenced the transformation of the local pop industry; for example, dozens of ‘I-pop’ (Indonesian idol pop) companies have appeared and produced K-pop-inspired local idol groups (Jung and Shim, Social distribution: K-pop fan practices in Indonesia and the ‘Gangnam Style’ phenomenon 2014, 490). These imitations the attracted criticism of the group for its lack of originality nonetheless successfully entered the local popular music scene by nationalizing Korean popular music into local Bahasa language (Peichi 2013, 203). Some fans consider that the originality is not really important as long as they can enjoy things-related about their idols. Jenkins

claimed that fans find the ability to question and rework the ideologies that dominate the mass culture they claim as their own (Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* 1992, 290).

Fandom or fanatic kingdom is a place for fans to support their idol and place to build a close relationship with other fans. This statement is proven as in Plath's study about fans community, she analyzes about the meaning of K-pop amongst teenager in Surabaya. She uses KLOSS as her object because KLOSS is the biggest K-pop community in Surabaya. Paath uses qualitative as her method, she uses snowball technique to find the participant and conducts the interview. In other words, fandom is seen as a psychological symptom of a presumed social dysfunction; the two fan types are based in an unacknowledged critique of modernity (Lewis 1992, 9). Fanatic fans are often imitating their idols, one of the various ways is the cover dance which is being popular amongst fans because they can imitate or place themselves as their idols through imitating the choreography.

Cover dance is being popular amongst K-pop fans these days and even some of the K-pop fans are joining several communities. The fan has notoriously been regarded as a dupe, a passively blind receptor to corporate propaganda and establishment ideology, and an obsessive, strange social outcast (Gray 2003, 67). However, it is not completely true because fans also could be the active agent in the global flow. Cover dance is the term which is usually used by people or fans who imitate or impersonate the choreography of certain groups or artists along with the same costume, hairstyle, and accessories. The main point of cover dance is not about the creativity but the resemblance with the idols, starting from the movements, costumes, body posture, and the expression while performing on the stage, just exactly the same with the real ones (Milania 40). Due to the popularity of *Hallyu* in Surabaya, the writers are interested to examine the meaning of imitating idol group for K-pop cover dancer. Even though there are several popular cover dancers in Surabaya such as SBC which is the tough competitor of Fresh, but the writers chose Fresh because they suit the writers' criteria. The important criteria are they have won several cover dance competitions in Surabaya more than other cover dance performers and they are quiet popular among *K-pop* fans. Actually, there are several studies about cover dance, for example as Milania's study about masculinity issue in cover dance. The writers and Milania have the same object but different focuses. Milania found that there is the negotiation of gender performativity between two participants as male dancer cover performers while impersonating the member of Korean girl band.

The writers argue that *Fresh* imitates Korean boy groups in order to be famous, thus makes them become "demi-idols". The previous study has done by Kang, he analyzes about male K-pop fans who impersonating Korean girl bands instead of boy bands. Kang proposed that the transnational trans-gendering in Thai K-pop cover dance opens up new possibilities for imagining and embodying the Thai self as developed, queer, and Asian. In this research, the writers adapting Kang's study which he creates "demi-idols" term to describe his study. This research is adopted from Kang's study about a cover dancer in Thailand which he also discusses imitation, and the most interesting about his study is the term delayed authenticity and demi-idols. The writers will apply those two terms as the main theory and supported by Jenkins' theory about fans.

## 2. Methodology

This research uses the qualitative method. Qualitative research emphasizes verbal descriptions and explanations of human behavior. Qualitative research also emphasizes carefully detailed descriptions of social practices in an attempt to understand how participants explain their own world (Jackson 1969, 17). This research also uses an interpretive approach which according to Jackson, it examines how people make sense of their lives, how they define their situation and how their sense of self-develops in interaction with others (Jackson 1969, 9). Interpretive approach is suitable for this research because it deals with audience responses or perception. A semi-structured interview is used in this research to gather the data. In-depth interview used by the writers to gather data from the participants. According to Johnson, the in-depth interview usually begins with commonsense perception, explanation, and understanding to some particular phenomenon, thus it aims to explore more about experience or perception and reveal hidden meaning from particular phenomenon (Marvasti 2004, 21). By using an in-depth interview, the writers also gain wide and deep knowledge from participants' answers about the issue.

The primary data of this research are the recording performance and the interview results from participants which is a cover dance group from Surabaya, Fresh. The secondary data is taken from printed and unprinted materials—journals, books, websites, and reports—which are reliable to be cited in this research. The writers chose Fresh to be interviewed because they have achieved several trophies from various cover dance competition which be held in Surabaya or outside Surabaya.

This research used purposive sampling to meet the needs of this research itself, purposive samples are selected after field investigations on some group, in order to ensure that certain types of individuals or persons displaying certain attributes are included in the study (Burg 2001, 32). Fresh is chosen by the writers because this group is quite popular among K-pop fans in Surabaya and this group also has achieved several trophies. The population is several cover dance groups in Surabaya and the writers chose Fresh as the sample along with the categories that have decided by the writers. Fresh has fifteen members but the active ones are just five out of fifteen according to their intensity in the group activities. In order to obtain valid data, the writers chose the interview target based on these categories: Fresh member, winning competitions more than three times or more, participating K-pop events more or less five until ten times intensively.

To collect the data the writers uses two data collections. The first is observation, the writers only observed the object's activity without being included in the activity itself. To conduct observation, the writers attended the events or known as "festival" among K-pop fans which usually held by several fandoms in Surabaya. The writers had attended three events for this year, the first event was on March 29<sup>th</sup>, 2015 at Royal Plaza Surabaya, the second event was on June 7<sup>th</sup>, 2015 at BG Junction Surabaya and the last event was on September 20<sup>th</sup>, 2015 at Royal Plaza She Surabaya.

The research is adopted from Kang's studies about cover dance in Thailand with his term "demi-idols". The writers follow up Kang's study and use the term "demi-idol" as the theory used to reveal the meaning about cover dance amongst K-pop fans. Fanatic fans are included can be claimed as hyper-fans because they tend to imitate their idols starts from their style, costumes, and even the way they talk even though their idols have a different language. Thus, from this step, the term demi-idols emerged. According to Kang, The cover groups are demi-idols, linked to the popularity of the bands they cover, but also considered performers in their own right (Kang 2014, 564).

### **3. Discussion**

After interviewing Fresh members about how they imitate their idol in terms of cost theme, style, choreography, and expression, the writers examined these elements one by one. The writers have interviewed five members of Fresh. The data was collected on October 17<sup>th</sup> and November 13<sup>th</sup> and October 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2015 with in-depth interviews as the method of this research.

#### **3.1. Imitating the costume and style**

The costume is one of the important elements in cover dance. Through costume, people can identify which group they imitate. The costume is a set of clothes worn in order to look like someone or something else, especially for a party or as part of an entertainment. Costume holds the main role as one of the judges' qualifications for the participants in order to win the competition. As the popular dance cover group in Surabaya, Fresh owns three similar costumes to their idol. According to them, a similar costume is really important to improve their performance on stage and impress the judges. They always feel like the real idol whenever they are performing in front of K-pop fans due to the similarity of their costume, so, wearing similar costume boosts their confidence. Fresh also adds some accessories to attract their audiences, they usually add sparkling bracelets, clip-on, and confetti to catch audiences' attention. Adding accessories manages to please the audiences so that their performance is less boring because they offer something different through their costume. All of their idols inspired costumes are copied from a K-pop boy group named BTS' first debut song entitled "No More Dream", the second and third costumes are also inspired by the same from the group. If Fresh members cannot find the same costume, thus they just bring the materials needed and let the tailor do the work. They even have their own tailor to help them in making similar costumes. Another way to obtain such outfits is through online shops which supply similar costume from certain boy groups.

“If we can’t find it in store, we just buy the material then bring it to the tailor, we have our own tailor that is why it is easier, thus we can ask the same model with the real one.” (Tio)

Just like the real idols that have their own stylists, Fresh also has their own tailor who is in charge of making similar costumes. They just need to show the picture of the original outfits and the tailor will make the replica.



*Figure 1. Similar costume with BTS (Fresh’s personal documentation)*



*Figure 2. BTS’ Costume (Taken from BTS’ Official Page)*

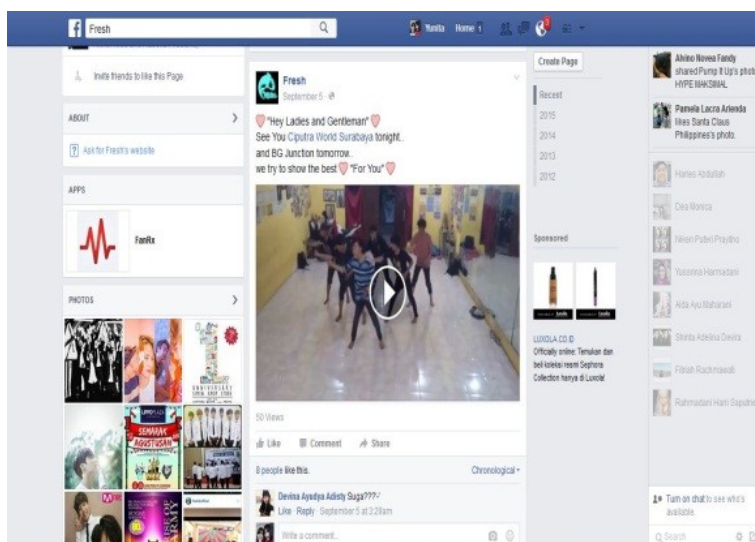
Based on the figures above, it is clear that Fresh imitates BTS’ looks from top to toe. As a professional cover dance group, Fresh does not want to disappoint their fans. In this performance, they also copied the exact concept of BTS by gathering other members to be their back up, dancers. As a group which covers a boy group’s dance, Fresh members do not want to perform as cross-dressed dancers due to the gender issue. They think that if they perform as a girl group with girly accessories, they will lose their manly side and others will judge them. Apart from the costume, their styles are also inspired by their idols. One of the Fresh members said that he used to follow his idol’s style.

"I used to wear idol-like thingies, when I admired Zelo, I collected mask than when I admired Ravi, I collected caps, because he likes to wear a cap but now I am not that into them that is why I just wear those things whenever I feel like wearing them." (Arthur)

He used to imitate his idol appearance off stage to the small things like accessories but as time goes by, he combined his idol's style with his own style. The reason why he changed his style was that people tend to judge that Korean males are flamboyant and less-manly compared to others because of their style. He thinks that when he combines his style with his idol's style, society can accept him even though he likes Korean boy groups.

### 3.2. Choreography and expression

Choreography means various movements in dancing combined with technique to represent the dance itself. According to Kang, cover dance is mainly focusing on choreography instead of the musical lyrics (Kang 2014, 1). The good choreography is exactly the same with the original performers on a music video or stage performance. This aspect also becomes the vital point in a cover dance competition to get a higher point from judges. Fresh has already imitated various boy group choreographies and they also add variation in their performances. Fresh decided to add some variations because they think it would be interesting to win audiences' hearts and not to mention judges' attentions too. Fresh has no choreographer team to help them, hence they create their own choreography together. Fresh founder, Edward, often looks for the latest dance in several boy groups' official YouTube pages. His job is to inform other members about the latest videos and ask them to learn about the choreography. In releasing new songs, there are several steps that K-pop idols do in their official YouTube pages, the first video is a teaser, then it is followed by the music video and if it gains many viewers, they will upload their dance practice video. Fresh learns the choreography throughout those various steps and if it possible they also add some variations. Fresh used to practice almost every day but due to the time limit and each member's personal schedules, they start practicing when the deadline is closer. Similar to their idol, Fresh usually upload their teaser first to attract the audiences' attention before uploading their full performance.



*Figure 3. Fresh uploaded their teaser in Facebook (Personal Screenshot, 2016)*

The purpose of following real idols' way of promoting songs is to make their fans curious so that they will come to events in which Fresh participates in. It shows that Fresh already acts like the real idol by uploading the appetizer, which is the teaser and followed their full performance. Fresh members often answer their fans' questions on their fan base about their schedules and inform them of the exact time.

In the theatrical show, through expression people can tell whether the performers are angry, sad, or even happy. The expression can describe the situation and a facial expression conveys an emotion that tells about the character and the way they react under the circumstances (BBC 2012). This aspect is needed to complete the act on stage and show the emotion to pull out the character well. Expression also used on

music video along with the musical lyrics, if the musical lyrics and the expression do not match, the music video is definitely failed to tell the story behind. In dance cover, the expression is less-important but still it is also needed to complete the performance. Every member of cover dancer performers should imitate the expressions of their idol on stage. Actually, choreography and expression should on the same line depend on the type of the song. Before imitating the expression, Fresh members do a small research and even practice how actually their idol's expression looks like. Dhanu said that he often practicing before a mirror when he wants to perform.

"I will practice the facial expression in front of the mirror; if I get V (a member of BTS) as my model I copy his way of expressing in front of the mirror. Like his smirk then his small eyes, just like that. However, it depends whose position I get, so I am practicing over the time. If I get others, I examine his photo then imitate it." (Dhanu)

Dhanu's answer shows that expression is important for a cover dancer because it also lifts up the score. Somehow, Fresh members also use their idol's expression when they take a photo to post it on their personal social media accounts.

"Not really, I post my selfie but not in the same way as an idol who is promoting comeback (a term used to described K-pop idols' new songs or album), it is more like a personal urge. I got approximately a hundred likes from my friends and sometimes were tagged by fellow K-pop fans who asked to take a picture together. Ozza has a lot of followers like Sehun (an EXO member)." (Dhanu)

From his answer, it implies that he has succeeded to copy his idol style even though at the interview he slightly denied about copying his idol. Some of his fans also post their *selfie* together and tag him. This kind of action has proved that their fans had already acknowledged them as their new idols. The reason why he keeps denying is just that he wants to be seen as the common fan not the replica of his idol, yet the fact is he already becomes his idol replica whether on stage or off stage.

After examining how fresh imitate Korean boy group through costume, style, choreography, and expression, it can be inferred that Fresh has already acknowledged themselves as idols. In order to answer the second research question, the writers are going to explain how Fresh members perceive their cover dance performance as the way of becoming idols. In this chapter, the writers will examine Kang's terms for fans which are hyper-fan and demi-idols. As stated above, costume, style, choreography, and expression have its own role in a cover dance competition in order to make the imitator looks like their idol. Fans are not passive agents in fandom because they can produce and consume at the same time. In this case, Fresh is the active agent which consume K-pop but also can produce something through their cover dance activities. Along with its growth in the world, Korean Wave had already dominated Indonesia too. Since the late 2000s, Indonesia has become the fastest-growing social distributor hub in the region and for young Indonesian pop consumers; K-pop has become one of the most deeply social distributed cultural products (Jung and Shim 2014, 486). Fresh is one of many K-pop fans in Indonesia, especially in Surabaya, who joins cover dance competitions to show their interest in Korean Wave. Fresh is a semi-professional cover dance group which has turned into new idol amongst other K-pop fans and has succeeded in attracting many attentions. It indicates that Fresh is included as hyper-fan, as Kang stated in his study that semi-professional cover dance performers constitute a class of "hyper-fans" who become "demi-idols," with fan followings in their own right (Kang 2014, 559). In another word, hyper-fan means the sense of a fan who is so deeply devoted and emotionally attached to a star that he replicates them (Kang 2014, 20).

### 3.3. Hyper Fans who turned into Demi-Idols

Fans are claimed as an active consumer in fandom and have been stereotyped negatively among society. Some fans stated that the more they consume idol-related things, the closer their bond with their idol. Fans have built their own close bond within the fandom through various ways and one of those ways is cover dance. Some Indonesian people tend to imitate popular phenomenon and cover dance is one of those popular phenomena. According to Jung and Shim, the Indonesian pop industry and its consumers have embraced diverse types and styles of foreign music historically (Jung and Shim 2014, 490). Through this popularity of K-pop, Buyung as the founder decided to form Fresh with his close friends. *Fresh* is a



popular cover dance group from Surabaya, which debuted in 2012 with approximately fifteen members in total. However, the active members are just ten to five out of fifteen due to personal reasons. Fresh has their own fan base in Facebook, YouTube account, and LINE group. Fresh named their fans as Refresh and the majority of their fans are teenage girls. As stated above, Fresh considered as hyper-fans who automatically turn themselves into demi-idols step by step. According to Kang, the term demi-idols emerged due to the solemn activities which are done by hyper-fans, and one of them is cover dance (Kang 564). Fresh attract their own fans through their solemn performance when they are in dance competitions. It is proved by the way their fans scream-over them and chant their names whenever they are performing.



*Figure 5. Fresh performance in BG Junctions (Fresh Official Facebook, 2015)*

Figure 5 shows the enthusiastic of their fans and most of them will record and upload Fresh's performance on their social media accounts. Sometimes they will also ask *Fresh* members to take a photo together. It proved that *Fresh* has succeeded gain their popularity through cover dance and gathered their own fans in the union. In figure 5 also shows the excitement of Refresh by filled the venue as if they were attending the real idol's concert.

In their very first performance, Fresh got an interesting compliment from one of the judges. The judges said that they were not just covering but also performing the song just like their own song, so they can deserve the first place in the competition. From the statement above, even in their very first performance as an amateur cover dance performers, Fresh has proved themselves as an idol even though they are imitating the real idol. The hype of cover dancing becomes the first reason for Fresh members to debut themselves as cover dancers. Fresh members have no intention to be famous at the beginning but once they got good responds from others, they slowly change their mindset.

Two of Fresh members stated that they want to be famous just like their idol; even Arthur said that he wants to be his idol's competitor in the future and keeps improving his skills to be in the same level as his idol. According to Adorno, culture with truth-value encouraged and empowered a process of active engagement, thinking self-development, and understanding in the subject (Witkin, Adorno on Popular Culture 2003, 55). What meant by engagement here is a deeper connection with art in order to enrich life with a deeper understanding of sense in art. Cover dance, in this case, is included as an art for K-pop fans, which keeps being imitated or repeated over and over again until they are familiar with this subject. As it is familiar to others, it will definitely turn into the new part of the culture. There are some Indonesian K-pop fans who treat cover dance activity as a means of being popular in the community. Fresh members who are hyper-fans had already proved that through cover dance since they manage to gather their own fans apart from their fandom, making them special among other fans. They are also well-known among other K-pop fans at the same time. Cover dance has its own meaning for them; it was a mere hobby then it turns to be a profession that brings them to fame.

### **3.4. Imitating yet still maintaining manliness**

From the analysis and the respondents' answers above, masculinity issues that keep emerging during the interview. As Indonesia is known as a country that most of the citizens are Moslem and rich of certain

traditions, the issue of masculinity is quite sensitive. Due to the growth of wide communication through media, there are various perceptions about gender issues and sexual preferences. Fresh members firmly stated that they do not want to do cross-dressed performance when they imitate K-pop idols. They do not want to be seen as sissies although Fresh members have already been judged as less-manly to some people because of their cover dance activities. According to Oetomo, someone is labeled as sissy when she or he appears androgynous in dress, physical features, or both, or behave androgynously (Parker, Barbosa and Aggleton 2000, 47). There are some negotiations which are shown by Fresh members through their costumes, expression, style, and choreography. These negotiations are clearly shown in as they always choose the manly performance instead of the flamboyant one because they do not want to lose their manly side. Jung in Suh argued that *kkotminam* or flower boy has taken over the masculinity concept in South Korean popular culture along with soft, gentle character, and attractive face delicately lies in their hybridity (Suh 2016, 13). The negotiation is still persistent, when Fresh members are *on stage* they are showing Korean soft masculinity, in which they are applying make-up and some accessories, while they are *off stage*, Fresh members are back to Indonesian masculinity. In Indonesia, especially for Javanese, proper masculinity is seen as distant and reserved (Carswell 2014, 11). It means that men are embraced control, order, and strength in order to show their masculine side to the public. Most of the Indonesian men are seen as strong since they are the head of the families while Indonesian women are seen as the domestic ones.

The judgment about boys who are interested in K-pop is still quite strong because back to the first statement that Korean males or K-pop male idols to be more specific are considered as flamboyant. Most of the Indonesian youngsters especially boys prefer pop or alternative rock in which they can show their masculine side instead of K-pop due to the flamboyant images. Despite this stereotype, Fresh members always try to maintain their masculinity side in order to prove that they are still holding the concept of masculinity albeit the fact that they are K-pop cover dancers. Being selective in choosing the choreography is one of their ways to show their masculinity, Kohlberg stated that a man's gender identity allows them to examine himself as a man within a precise culture, thus young boys yearn to imitate the masculine model which can lead to a deeper connection to the model in performing their gender identities (Harris 1995, 37).

#### 4. Conclusion

Imitation is a close phenomenon in our surroundings which seems to be common activities in Indonesia because beyond this activity, it brings out something surprising. K-pop is not all about consuming activities within fandom but also about the production which is done by fans who got inspired by their idols. Through this phenomenon, K-pop fans have also proved that they are active 'prosumer' in their fandom. There are many ways to show their activeness as fans and one of those ways is cover dance. Fresh is the exact example in which fans are able to become idol's replica through cover dance. Fresh members are the successful hyper-fans who unconsciously turn themselves as demi-idols in their own surrounding which are K-pop fans. The act of imitating their idol has made them being one step higher compared to other fans. Although, they somehow still being judged as the weird ones because of their interest and have faced some struggles in achieving their goals, Fresh keeps imitating K-pop idol groups. Cover dance has brought them into a new level in which Fresh already has their own fans and some official fan page apart from their fandom.

Fresh members do not always completely imitate their idols while performing in front of others as they also consider several things. Masculinity issue emerges during their negotiation in performing some choreography because some people are still having a stereotype toward K-pop male idols as the less-manly ones. Fresh members want to prove that even though they are imitating K-pop male idols, they are still masculine like others. In the Suharto Era, men in television are seen as strong characters in almost every movie and television programs, as a result, they have always been given the challenging part. Hence, there are some differences when Fresh members are *on stage* and *off stage*; they are both adapting Korean soft masculinity and Indonesian masculinity. Imitation has become one of the ways in which people can achieve instant popularity according to their tenet or spirit. In this case, Fresh's same hobby and interest



in K-pop have conveyed them to become local idols who are adored by many teenagers especially young girls in Surabaya. The writers hope that this research will help other researches about imitation or other issues which are fairly close with the current issue.

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