



## BNK 48 a Thai-Japanese cultural commodity in the stagnation of Thai music business: Contemporary entertainment business history

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### Abstract

**Aim:** This article explores the meteoric rise of the BNK48 music group in Thailand from late 2017 to the present (early 2018), especially in light of the relatively sluggish state of Thailand's music industry.

**Method:** The study takes a retrospective look at the rise to fame of BNK48 by analysing interviews with the group's members and management team that were published in periodicals and fanzines.

**Findings:** Purchases made for reasons other than practical use can be considered cultural commodity consumption. The success of the idols who share their interests in cartoons, games, and cosplay, as well as the self-improvement efforts of the idols, which is the value attached to the stories, are consistent with the cultures and feelings of young people in the late 2000s, could be seen as the reason "otakus" buy BNK48 products.

**Implications/Novel Contribution:** Through an in-depth analysis of the cultural and emotional ties BNK has forged with its adherents, the current body of research points the way to a body of literature.

*Keywords:* BNK 48, Idols, Thai Music Business

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### INTRODUCTION

From the middle of 2017 to the middle of 2018, BNK48, an idol girl group, sold 18,000 copies of their debut single, "Yak Cha Dai Phop Thoe (Want to Meet You)" or "Aitakatta," and 170,000 copies of their third single, "Shinichi Wan Raek (First Day)," creating a phenomenon in Thailand's entertainment industry. In addition, their second single, "Koisuru Fortune Cookie," also known as "Cookie Siang Thai," has more than 142 million views on YouTube. Throughout a short time frame, they sold out their first concert, which was attended by an estimated ten thousand people. The band played at Rajamangala National Stadium for the 46th International Football Tournament King's Cup as brand ambassadors and presenters for numerous products.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

It is interesting that BNK48 is a form of idol group which has never happened in Thailand before. The founder of Rose Artist Management, who started the project of BNK48, bought the license from Chiba Kotaro's Office48, an AKB48 idol executive in Japan, to pioneer a new form of entertainment business amidst the sluggishness of Thai music business (Jirat, 2018; Pwint, 2016; Suharti & Pramono, 2016; Yazici, 2016), which is evident from profitability issues of GMM Grammy, one of the largest music labels in Thailand, during 2005-2006 as consumers shifted their behavior from tangible products, such as CDs, to digital music. Consequently, GMM's executives had to adjust themselves by entering to the digital music business and changed their music-relating business management strategy, for example, royalty collection, radio, concert organization, and artist management, and could return to profit as a result. Meanwhile, RS Company, another leading music label, also suffered a volatility in earnings during 2009-2009 because of consumers' behavior. The Company management had to change their operation from music business to comprehensive entertainment business which included music download services,

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satellite TV, and oversea artists and entertainment contents import business, so their loss could be lower than expected (Jaiyen, 2011; Weng & Yang, 2016; Yildiz, 2016).

The key point of this article is to explain why BNK48 idol group, which is a new form of artist in Thailand, is very successful and becomes very popular, especially their singles CDs sales and YouTube views reaching 142 million in just one year since their debut.

## METHODOLOGY

This article explores the emergence and success of the BNK48 in the business history dimension, i.e., analyzing business practices of BNK48's executives which were developed or transformed from the previous entertainment business under the context of Thai society during 2000 - 2018, based on interviews with the company's executives and people in the music industry, published in magazines and pocketbooks.

The interpretation of BNK48 as a "cultural commodity" is based on the concept of Jean Baudrillard, a French sociologist. He views that people's consumption of goods normally includes "cultural commodity" which will be purchased for consuming certain values derived from such goods, apart from the actual usages (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008). This article proposes that BNK48 is a Thai-Japanese hybrid cultural commodity (the original dances and lyrics are from Japan and the lyrics are translated and adapted into Thai language and style). The data used for the interpretation include interviews with singers and the company's executives published in magazines and pocketbooks.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### **The Emergence of Idol Artist Group Business in the Sluggishness of Thailand's Music Business**

Firstly, we have to preliminarily understand that singers in form of idol girl groups have started in 1980s Japan. This kind of artists ages from early teens to mid-20s. The idols' image that many people see is their cuteness. Their roles are not limited to singing, but they can perform as actresses, models, talk show hosts, and advertising presenter. In the early period, the emergence of idol artists in Japan grew mainly in Japanese markets (Stevens, 2012). Later, they expanded to outside Japan. This was obvious when Yasuchi Akimoto, the producer of the famous AKB48 in Japan, created an idol group based on a concept of audition to be the most-members girl group in the world and applied franchising model which never happened before (Douglas, 2002). After AKB48's forming in Akihabara, Tokyo, Akimoto has formed other idol groups in the same model in other cities of Japan, such as SKE48 in Nagoya, NMB48 in Osaka, and HKT48 in Fukuoka, then expanded to foreign countries such as JKT48 in Indonesia, TPE48 in Taiwan, and SNH48 in China (Douglas, 2002).

The expansion of the 48 Group originates from AKB48 in Japan in the midst of economic recession in the late 1980s to early 2000s when its revenues from technology industry had declined considerably. Japan had to find other ways to earn more income and supported itself. Looking at the model of entertainment culture export in Korea which could generate huge revenues to the country, Japan established the Cool Japan Project in 2010 to export Japanese cultures to the world in order to bring revenue into the country. The project focused on six areas including fashion, pop culture manga/comics, music, movies, food, various services, local products, and tourism (Douglas, 2002; Peerapich & Thanyawat, 2018).

For BNK48, a Japanese-style idol group founded by Jirat Bawonwattana who has experience and fondness for AKB48. He bought the franchise AKB48 from Chiba Kotaro's Office48 and founded BNK48 Official Company to operate BNK48 idol group business by applying AKB48's business model. It started with an audition of young girls, held in late 2016, to select BNK48 members and made its official debut in June 2017 after five months of dancing and singing practices. Interestingly, from historical information of entertainment business in Thailand, girl band or young girl group is not a new form of music performance. Before BNK48, there were many female music groups such as Dojo, Bubble Girls, and Kamikaze, but these girl groups had to face many challenges. In late 2000, leading music labels in Thailand did not invest in their artists as much as before due to the sales of CDs and music downloads fell drastically. Most of remaining artists were teenager or adult bands who could earn money from their performance in pubs, for example. This reduction of artists investment has continued for almost 10 years (Peerapich & Thanyawat, 2018).

K-Pop, entertainment cultures and trends from Korea, has grown into a subculture and been popular since 2002, beginning with the arrival of music and TV programs, followed by movies, literatures, online games, celebrities, and artists, which were warmly welcomed by most of Thai people (Phattajarin, 2009). The overseas trends of Korean artists' popularity became a model to Thai leading music labels, such as Grammy, for the creation of Thai artists. The artists had to be hard-trained; their singing and dancing performance had to be elegant and in the case of group artists, the dance had to be united (Jaiyen, 2011). However, the use of Korean artists' creation as a model for the record's artists' development might indirectly lead to the sluggishness of the music industry in aspects of the reduction of both quantity and frequency of artists' creation and releases of their works to the market since the K-Pop model was a long-term contract with teenager artists and they had to spend many years for training before officially publicized (Kang, 2014).

Although the major music labels in Thailand adapted to the market trends and consumers' culture to recover from the declining earnings, the sluggishness of Thai music business continued as happened during the year 2000-2010. An article in *The Guitar Mag* magazine, July 2018, said that Thai music industry might collapse before 2020, because nowadays, even pirated mp3 discs, which were sold at a cheap price, have a selling issue (Rocco, 2014). Back to the topic mentioned in the beginning, which is: while Thai music business has been dull for more than 10 years, why is the Japanese-style BNK48 idol group successful in selling singles CDs for many copies? The topic will be discussed in the next section.

### **Marketing of BNK48 Japanese-Thai Hybrid Culture Commodity: Analytical History**

As mentioned earlier, BNK48 is the idol group whose founder bought the copyright license from Chiba Kotaro's Office 48. The agreement between Office48 and the franchise bands outside Japan, for example, JKT48, TPE48, MNL48 (Philippines), and BNK48, states that every 48 band must make songs from the original versions of AKB48, or sent from Japanese team, and put lyrics in the local languages (Peerapich & Thanyawat, 2018). So, music, one of the BNK48's products, has an odor of Japanese culture quite a lot, and the Office48 also takes part in the business plan of BNK48 as Jirat Bawonwattana, BNK48 Official executive, said that they proposed a business plan for the BNK48 to Office 48's consideration, as well as the rules of conduct of BNK4's members which were drawn up by Japanese management and Jirat's team (Jirat, 2018).

The marketing of BNK48 is based on the "idols you can meet" concept defined by Yasushi Akimoto, AKB48's producer. The concept is to select the group members from young girls aged from early teens to mid-teenagers from around the country through the audition process. Most of candidates who passed the audition have normal looks usually found in the streets, not noticeably pretty, which is the strength of the group. Because of these looks, their fans can easily appreciate and feel a bond with the members, so they follow the group around very closely. Additionally, the management team uses a method of encouraging the members to compete with each other, in order to develop their skills and ability, by opening new generation admission immediately after the first generation began to be recognized. With many members in the group, the diversity provides opportunities to the audiences to be fond of at least one of the members and finally became a fan of AKB48 (Peerapich & Thanyawat, 2018). BNK48's marketing strategy follows the direction of AKB48 by starting with the project BNK48 We Need You which was first announced at the AKB48's concert in Yokohama, Japan, that BNK48 would be formed. Later, the audition was held for members' selection in Thailand with a total of 1,357 applicants. The selection process did not choose the candidates who were good in dancing and singing but chose from their attitude and ambition (Jirat, 2018).

According to an interview with BNK48, many people found that some members, for example, Kaimook, Kaew, Cherprang, and Jaa, did not have the basics of singing and dancing; they had to start from zero and try very hard to practice and improve their singing and dancing skills. At the same time, some members, such as Noey, considered themselves not good-looking and had nothing special, so the fans did not even notice that she was in group.

From this information, BNK48's marketing follows the concept of "Idols You Can Meet" by selecting members with no basic skills of singing and dancing and non-noticeable ordinary looks. This makes the fans feel comfortable to follow and cheer very closely to see how they will improve to be quality idols. The key selling

point of BNK48 is the story of each member where they go and how they grow. This is what the fans of the group or specific members want to know or be part of the story the members created (Peerapich & Thanyawat, 2018). The BNK48 Official Company uses many channels to present the story of BNK48 members, including BNK48 Senpai television program, which aired on Channel 3SD between March 1-30, 2017, and social media, which is the important channel that Jirat stated in the business plan submitted to the Office48 in Japan that it would serve as a main channel to present BNK48. The result of plan was a digital live studio at EmQuartier Shopping Mall. In the studio, BNK48's members will take turns to talk and meet with the fans and BNK48 Official will live broadcast to BNK48's fans and interested audiences through Facebook Fan Page. This can bring people who are not familiar with BNK48 to know more about the idols (Peerapich & Thanyawat, 2018). In addition, BNK48 members keep updating their stories on social media, such as Facebook and Instagram to let the fans follow their story regularly (Stevens, 2012).

It is interesting that why the idols stories can be products which the fans keep following. Analyzing from the available facts, the first answer I got from following the Facebook page of BNK48's fans is: some of BNK48's fans are the fans of AKB48 before, so they are familiar with the culture of following stories of the idols presenting daily activities and efforts to improve themselves through fan-accessible media, so the fans can follow, cheer, and support their favorite idols. Another interesting point is that some BNK48 members are AKB48 followers, such as Jennis and, especially, Cherprang who admire AKB48, Office 48's approaches to encourage the fans, and opportunity to see someone grows and develops. With this reason, she auditioned as a member of BNK48 to support this idea (Issue, 2018). This can be said that BNK48 members are familiar with the culture of using narratives about idols lives to communicate with the fans.

Actually, using the artists' stories as a selling point for fans to follow and buy products to support their favorite artists is not a new model. Leading music labels in Thailand have implemented before, for instance, the releases of magazines presenting news, movements, and works of artists, as well as letter-responded columns, to distribute to the fans who pay for subscription of such labels. The difference between the previous use of artists stories as attracting products for the fans managed by major music labels and the case of BNK48 is the story itself. BNK48 members present stories from their daily lives and self-development efforts to be idols. The BNK48's story will be updated consistently through social media. Moreover, their stories conform to the cultural trends of young people who are likely to be the main fans of the group. In my opinion, this is based on the idea that during the late 2000s to mid-2010s, there was a growing trend, among young people, for self-improvement training or reading life coach books which organized of written by influencing speakers and writers to inspire the recipients to make a successful life change. This was a result of insecurity that young people felt in their lives because of the changing of economic conditions entrepreneurs were likely to hire employees by short-period contracts or pay wages based on the amount of work produced instead of long-term contracts as before. Meanwhile, young people in the late 2000s to mid-2010s demanded for financial freedom in their lives so they could manage time and be satisfied by defining their own life styles rather than just living in economic and social norms which determined their behaviors. Consequently, the consumption of idols stories presenting constant efforts to pursue dreams and self-improvement conforms to the cultures and feelings of young people in the late 2000s.

In addition to the idols stories of daily life and self-improvement ambition, which is the same selling point as AKB48's, another cultural commodity that BNK48 adopts from AKB48 in marketing direction is the "Handshake Events" held to provide the fans a chance to meet and talk to their idols closely. The ticket to the event is attached to the singles CDs. In the events, the fans will bring the Handshake tickets to the venue and queue in the lane navigating to their favorite members in order to talk and shake hands with them. The meeting time of each fans is fixed and scheduled by BNK48 Official. From the past Handshake Events, there were more than 10,000 fans who bought the CDs to get the tickets and join the events to meet their favorite idols. Some fans encouraged their idols, and some came to get encouraged from the idols. Both fans and idols exchanged their happiness in the Handshake Events. (Peerapich & Thanyawat, 2018).

It can be said that the Handshake Event is a product that creates an idol-fan relationship based on AKB48's "idols you can meet" marketing concept. Members of BNK48 have also created the meaning of idols as encouragers who provide positive force to the fans (Peerapich & Thanyawat, 2018). This is a value that meets the needs of fans

under the social context of young people in the late 2000s to the present who feel insecure about life and want to be inspired, as analyzed above.

Another issue that has contributed BNK48 to the marketing success is Thai lyrics of the songs. The lyrics were adapted from Japanese version into the narratives Thai people would appreciate and removing some details that Thai audiences might not understand. Although the Japanese team, in the beginning, wanted Thai team to translate the AKB48's Japanese lyrics in every detail, the BNK48's music director, who also wrote Thai lyrics, explained to the Japanese that the word-by-word translation and adherence to the original narratives would not be appropriate due to grammatical limitation and Thai audiences would not get the stories and narrative ways in the same sense as Japanese audiences did (Hawkins, Best, & Coney, 2009; Peerapich & Thanyawat, 2018).

Adaptation of the songs from Japanese style to Thai-oriented narrative, with language and content Thai people would be familiar with, along with the melodies, choreography, and exotic Japanese style dress, are the key factor that support BNK48's songs to satisfy the audiences. One of the high-profile music composers and artists in Thai entertainment industry mentioned about the song Koisuru Fortune Cookie, the highly popular single, that it was very popular because of the lovely lyrics, well-arranged and easy-to-recognized rhythm part, and appropriate release time because Thai music industry has lacked this kind of music for a long time (Peerapich & Thanyawat, 2018). The last issue to be discussed in this article is another factor driving BNK48 to be popular among fans. The popularity of Japanese pop music, or "J-pop," in Thailand has begun since the 1980s and declined after "K-pop" from Korea became more popular. As a consequence, the activities areas of "J-pop" fans are on the internet only.

In addition, some BNK48's fans are admirers of manga/comics, video games, online games, cosplay, and Japanese idol artists this kind of fans are called in Japanese as "Otaku" which has been rooted in Thailand since the late 1970s, the time many Japanese manga has become popular until today, such as Doraemon and Dragon Ball. They also develop their admiration into cosplaying to imitate the dressing of characters from manga or games. The activities become the meeting events for teenage otakus, while adult otakus, who still keep their obsession, change into potential buyers of products from their favorite cartoons and games.

These otakus have become the fans of BNK48, the idol artists who can satisfy the tastes of these otakus, who are Japanese manga and games enthusiasts and cosplayers. The BNK48 members have a variety of cute looks which are similar to the characters from Japanese manga in terms of cuteness and diversity. For the fans who are games enthusiasts, BNK48 members who like playing games, such as Cherprang, Jennis, Nink, and Mobile, will be congenial to them. The cosplaying fans will be fond of members who also like cosplaying before becoming BNK48, such as Cherprang and Music. This conforms with the consumer behavior principle stating that a factor that causes consumers to buy a product is the involvement between them and the product which matches their taste and interest (Hawkins et al., 2009), as well as the idea of cultural commodity according to Jean Baudrillard's explanation. The consumption of cultural commodity is when a consumer purchases a product to consume the value or meaning that comes with the product, not only the usage of such product. If we see BNK48 as a "cultural commodity," which is interpreted from the perspective that "otakus" purchase BNK48 products to consume values or meaning to see the success of the idols who are interested in cartoons, games, and cosplay, similar to themselves, as well as the self-improvement efforts of the idols which is the value attached to the stories and is consistent with the cultures and feelings of young people in the late 2000s.

## **CONCLUSION, RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS**

The results of the study are: BNK48 is a cultural commodity that has a selling point of creating feelings for the fans to keep track of the band members' growth and development through their stories in online media and the activities arranged by the management team in according to the direction of AKB48a model of the idol group in Japan. BNK48 makes the fans feel attached to their favourite members and inspired to live by watching the members' competition become the shows' leader. This is a marketing method that is different from the Thai music business in the past. Despite trying to create a bond between the singers and their fans, they could not create a feeling like the BNK48 does.

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