



Opinion: Imaginary Friend and ITZY's Post-SNEAKERS era

By Iris Cabin

To preface this writing, I do not follow ITZY as a fan of the group. However, I have known of them since their debut. In other words, I am somewhat knowledgeable about the group, the members and their releases. (Perhaps my attempt at learning the choreography of their 2020 release — WANNABE — also bolster my credibility.)

This piece reflects my personal opinion, narrating my thoughts regarding ITZY's releases throughout the years as a K-Pop listener.

Thus, what is stated is not meant to be taken as facts. It is also possible that my opinion may change after publishing the piece. Therefore, take my opinion with a grain of salt!

In February 2019, ITZY **debuted** with their promoted track titled *DALLA DALLA*. They also released strong **follow-ups** with songs such as *ICY* (July 2019), *WANNABE* (March 2020), *Not Shy* (August 2020), *나.II.01. In the morning* (April 2021) and *LOCO* (September 2021).

Together, these songs associated ITZY's releases with loud, maximalist production, and charismatic, energetic choreography.

Notably, the group also had many notable tracks in their extended plays. *WANT IT?* (February 2019), *CHERRY* (July 2019), *IT'z SUMMER* (July 2019), *Sorry Not Sorry* (April 2021), *SHOOT!* (April 2021), *#Twenty* (September 2021) and *SWIPE* (September 2021).

With great reception from both fans and general K-Pop listeners, the group followed a strong trajectory before falling short of expectation with their July 2022 title track named *SNEAKERS*.



SNEAKERS HAPPENED... WHY?

While the group follows its signature maximalism, *SNEAKERS* was unpopular among the English-speaking K-Pop communities on the internet. Perhaps this shift in public reception could be explained by the **sonic and visual designs for *SNEAKERS***. ITZY's previous releases in 2021 followed girl-crush styling and album design. In contrast, this 2022 track has a hot pink album cover along with a chanting chorus: "Put my sneakers on / Tie 'em up, ready, get set, go / Put my sneakers on / Put 'em up, put 'em up." Overall, *SNEAKERS* presented a more **bubbly aesthetic**, conflicting with the audience's expectation for a more mature vibe.

Another factor that may account for the change in the public's perception was the **broader market** of K-Pop. ITZY was situated within the fourth generation of K-Pop groups. Specifically, the group's debut arguably marked the beginning of the generation. Talking mainly from a marketing perspective, the K-Pop market was not as competitive in 2019 compared to 2022. Therefore, ITZY's earlier releases did not have much **competition** from fourth-generation K-Pop girl groups.

2022, however, was a prominent year for fourth-generation girl groups. Many prominent acts within the generation released their first body of works then. In January, Kep1er debuted with *WA DA DA*. In May, LE SSERAFIM debuted with *FEARLESS*. In August, NewJeans debuted with three lead tracks (*Attention*, *Hype Boy* and *Cookie*).

There may have been multiple ways which these debut tracks impact the reception for ITZY's *SNEAKERS*. *Kepler's WA DA DA* presented a loud, energetic track with energetic accompanying choreography. In fact, the chorus also bore some similarities to that of *SNEAKERS* as Kepler members chanted "Wa Da Da Da / Running, vroom vroom vroom / Like a supersonic / Wa Da Da, Wa Da Da, run." These elements overlapped ITZY's signature style. This could mean that people who enjoy ITZY's works focused on Kepler's highly anticipated debut.

Groups like *LE SSERAFIM* gained much attention ever since its members were announced. They had high-profile trainees like Sakura and Chaewon, who were formerly members of a popular group called I*ZONE. This group also had the novelty of being the first girl group HYBE had debuted since GLAM disbanded in 2015. While *LE SSERAFIM's FEARLESS* was remarkably minimalist in complete opposite from ITZY's signature sound, the surrounding factors around the HYBE girl group may influence K-Pop listeners and media to pay close attention to *LE SSERAFIM*.

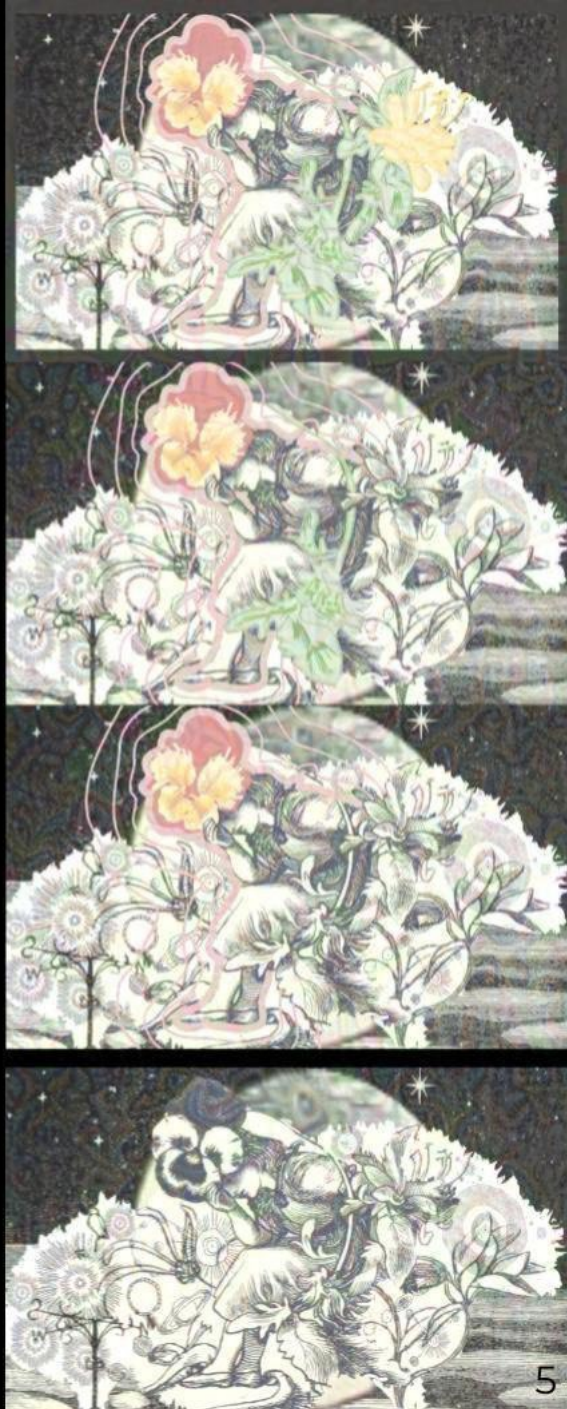
NewJeans's debut was also highly influential, leading K-Pop listeners to a very different sound from ITZY's *SNEAKERS*. With the success of *Attention* and *Hype Boy*, 2022 K-Pop was dominated by Y2K-inspired fashion and choreographies that appeared laid back. This did not quite align with the maximalist style *SNEAKERS* had.

It was possible that these external factors diverted the attention of K-Pop listeners from ITZY's release of *SNEAKERS*.

Afterwards, ITZY generally did not enjoy the same level of public's attention compared to their pre-*SNEAKERS* tracks. In my personal opinion, their 2022 track titled *Cheshire* would have been more appreciated by the general K-Pop listeners if *SNEAKERS* did not clash with their expectations.

ITZY showed awareness of their decline in popularity. Notably, *BET ON ME* (July 2023), a b-side track, seems to convey the group's conviction in this situation: "It's true I will fall and fall again / A few will be standing till the end / But still / I want to, I want to choose me." The chorus also reiterated their inner strength, stating "Still, I choose me / There's no other way / I bet on me / It can get scary, but / Without courage to fall, You will never fly."

However, the impact of *BET ON ME* was largely limited to the group's fandom. This outcome was most likely because of the EP's title track, *CAKE*, which shares many attributes to *SNEAKERS*. The message and vocal delivery



were remarkably playful. One memorable aspect of the song is its use of repetition. In multiple points in the track, the members repeated the track's title: "Cake, cake, cake, cake, cake / It's a piece of cake, cake, cake, cake." After these sections, ITZY immediately follows them up with "Ooh wee, la la la , la la la, la, la / Ooh wee, la la la , la la la, la, la." Similarly, One viral excerpt of the song features the member Yuna saying, "Shake it, shake, shake it, shake, shake it, shake / bust it up, bust it up, bust it up / we're so busy, yeah, like my birthday." These repetition could annoy or appear too juvenile for some listeners. As *CAKE* created a similar listening experience as *SNEAKERS*, appreciation from the public was not as great as what ITZY experienced pre-*SNEAKERS*.

Nevertheless, ITZY seemed to have found their footing again with their *January 2024 EP*. Three tracks that caught my eyes were *BORN TO BE*, *UNTOUCHABLE* and *Mr.Vampire*. As suggested by the red-black album design, these three tracks sounded less youthful compared to *SNEAKERS* or *CAKE*.

Not only did the EP and the track share the same name, the song *BORN TO BE* also embodied the album cover. Its music video showed a lava floor where the members danced on. The visual elements were also predominantly in black, grey, red, orange and desaturated blue. Overall, the lyrics conveyed the members' fearlessness and confidence as performers. Visually, the sheer amount of dancers included in the video emphasised the power the choreography required from every performer. These aspects came together to reflect boldness and self-assurance which ITZY were known for.

Similarly, *UNTOUCHABLE* discussed a similar message. The members sang, "Blow, I'm a storm, I'm on fire / Whoever trying to stop me / Does not mean a thing to me." Throughout the track, they exuded the cockiness of someone who had evidence to back them up. In a way, they had proven their stage presence and dance skills in *BORN TO BE*. *UNTOUCHABLE*, then, served as a follow-up statement to

remind the K-Pop listeners of their talents.

In contrast, *Mr. Vampire* was the most mellow out of the promoted tracks. It discussed love, expressing the fascination towards a person referred to as Mr. Vampire. Personally, I disliked the beat of the song, finding it a little questionable. However, adding the track to their EP was reasonable. Sonically, it served as a continuation to songs like *SNEAKERS* or *CAKE*, especially with a more youthful and carefree vocal delivery compared to the other two promoted tracks.

Overall, ITZY appeared to **regain** appreciation and attention from the public with this EP. They picked up the darker tone and girl-crush aesthetic from *01. II. 01. In the morning*. This decision resonated with me and I believed it resonated with many other casual listeners as well.



ITZY's newest release — *Imaginary Friend* (October 2024) — features emotional lyrics, directed at their fans. Specifically, ITZY compares the group to the fans' imaginary friend, perfectly capturing characteristics of the relationship between fans and K-Pop artists. Some stand-out lyrics include “When there’s monsters on your ceiling / I’ll keep you safe and I’ll keep you dreaming / You know, I’m your imaginary friend ... It’s you and I until the end.”

Given its vulnerability and a more minimalist production, *Imaginary Friend* is much more similar to *BET ON ME* than to their signature maximalist tracks. The calmer atmosphere the song exudes is reflected in the song’s description by JYP Entertainment. Officially, the song is described as a sonic combination of “vintage pop guitar, acoustic band sound, and melodious vocals.” Moreover, they also break away from the strong and high-energy dance. Instead, the group opts for a more delicate and greater emphasis on hand and arm movements.



Based on my perception, *Imaginary Friend* experiences **great reception** from fans and casual listeners. One possible explanation is its promotional decision. This track is accompanied by another title track, *GOLD*. The other title track features headbanging in their choreography. It aligns the group's public association with bold sounds and strength in their choreographies. Consequently, *Imaginary Friend* does not contradict the audience's expectation like *SNEAKERS* did.

Even though the lyrics of the song itself already has an emotional impact, I would go further and claim that the **context** surrounding their post-*SNEAKERS* works gives more depth to *Imaginary Friend*.

With the knowledge on their career trajectory, the song reflects the resilience of the members for showing such vulnerability after experiencing a prominent shift in public perception.

Moreover, the lyrics on comforting the fans as an imaginary friend is more impactful, given the fact that ITZY's status as one of the trailblazers for fourth generation K-Pop. They have achieved many milestones in terms of record numbers. It would not be an overstatement to say that the group must have also reached many listeners who have found comfort in their music.

Note:

- I do not have affiliations to any K-Pop companies, including JYP Entertainment, or K-Pop acts.
- I do not have any ownership rights over any songs, EPs or albums released by ITZY, Kepler, LE SSERAFIM or NEW JEANS. Please see the links offered on the next page to visit the works as published by its rightful owners and/or creators.
- This work offers a **commentary** based on my personal observation and beliefs, with references to ITZY's works throughout the year. I also make a few references to other groups such as Kepler, LE SSERAFIM or NEW JEANS to frame my analysis.

Sources

- The images of ITZY members are my screen captures of the group's music video for *Imaginary Friend* — <https://youtu.be/NrUlydECU-8?feature=shared> (accessed 23 December 2024).
- The release dates for ITZY's tracks used in this writing are based on the JYP Entertainment website — <https://itzy.jype.com/Default/DiscographyList?PgIndex=2&AmSeq=1> (accessed 23 December 2024).
- The lyrics of *SNEAKERS* are based on the music video, specifically the caption provided by the company which translates Korean to English (accessed 23 December 2024). — <https://youtu.be/Hbb5GPxXF1w?feature=shared&t=44>
- The debut date of KEPIER is based on the WakeOne website — <https://wake-one.com/en/artists/kepler/first-impact/> (accessed 23 December 2024)
- The debut date of LE SSERAFIM is based on the Source Music website — <https://sourcemusic.com/artist/profile/LE%20SSERAFIM> (accessed 23 December 2024)
- The debut date of NewJeans is based on a news article — <https://www.koreaherald.com/article/2925583> (accessed 23 December 2024)

- The lyrics from *BET ON ME* are based on the music video, specifically the caption provided by the company which translates Korean to English (accessed 23 December 2024). — <https://youtu.be/RmTq3cJqyCo?feature=shared&t=95> / <https://youtu.be/RmTq3cJqyCo?feature=shared&t=65>
- The lyrics from *CAKE* are based on the music video, specifically the caption provided by the company which translates Korean to English (accessed 23 December 2024). — <https://youtu.be/0bIRwBpBcZQ?feature=shared&t=139> / <https://youtu.be/0bIRwBpBcZQ?feature=shared&t=55>
- The lyrics from *UNTOUCHABLE* are based on the music video, specifically the caption provided by the company which translates Korean to English (accessed 23 December 2024). — <https://youtu.be/5e3rKlnegeU?feature=shared&t=35>
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- The description of *Imaginary Friend* is based on the JYP Entertainment website — <https://itzy.jype.com/Default/DiscographyView?AamSeq=255&AmSeq=1&PgIndex=1> (accessed 23 December 2024).
- The date of GLAM's disbandment is based on an archived news article — <https://web.archive.org/web/20160303211748/http://mwave.interest.me/enewsworld/en/article/85262/glam-officially-disbands-following-da-hees-trials> (accessed 23 December 2024)