

Research on the Exploitation of Artists in the K-Pop Industry

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Abstract

The Korean pop music (K-Pop) industry has garnered fame in the recent years and has had a great economic impact on South Korea [1]. It is best known for its music, performances and content creation but behind the glitz and glamour of the idol industry lies the dark truth of exploitation of its artists particularly minors. This paper examines the exploitation of artists, the trainee system, debut process, sexualization of minors and the impact of sasaeng fans. The unfair contracts, long working hours, the toxic beauty standards, limited rights over their craft which often leads to physical and mental health issues for these young artists'. The K-pop industry has been under scrutiny for its treatment and sexualization of minors. The intrusive and obsessive behaviors of the sasaeng fans further exacerbate the situation leading to concerns over the well-being of the artists. It also covers the government's role and intervention in protection of minors and the protection of artists. However, more needs to be done to address these issues within the industry and strong measures need to be taken to ensure the well being of the artists and protection of minors within the industry.

Keywords: K-pop, exploitation, sexualization.

1. Introduction

The term K-Pop comes from the words "Korean" and "Pop music". It is a genre of music originating from South Korea, often characterized by upbeat rhythms, catchy lyrics, fresh concepts, and challenging yet cohesive choreographies. K-pop is best known for its multiple-member boy groups and girl groups. Unlike other pop artists and bands, K-pop groups do more than just signing. They dance to difficult choreographies while singing, keeping in mind their best camera angle, their expressions, and their stage presence. They also create content for their YouTube channels, take part in TikTok challenges, and promote on TV Programs. Some of them are chosen as brand ambassadors for things ranging from home appliances to high-end luxury clothing brands [2]. Hence, they're referred to as idols in Korea because they are more than just people who sing and dance. They have a huge influence in Korea and now all around the world through their music and campaigns like the 'Love Yourself' campaign, a collaboration between the United Nations and the mega boy group BTS. Hence, being an idol comes with a lot of responsibilities, so to make their debut they have to go through a rigorous and competitive training system amongst which only a lucky few get a chance to debut. This training system is designed to

groom trainees as young as 10 years old focusing on everything that is required to become an idol. From¹ singing, dancing, acting, TV show workshops, modeling workshops, self- grooming workshops to selfie lessons, they have to learn it all [3]. This often leads to long working hours, tight schedules, having to juggle between training and school, maintaining a certain weight, and trying to fit into the toxic Korean beauty standards, which could take a toll on their physical and mental health, especially when most trainees are no older than high schoolers [4]. But their miseries don't just end here, once they debut, they have to work for long hours with unfair wages and have to pay off their trainee debt and try to make a name for themselves in the already saturated industry. The companies often exploit their artists by unfair contracts, unequal distribution of royalties, and favouring the popular member over the rest[5].

2. The Trainee System

K-pop is well known for its rigorous training system which the trainees have to undergo to win a chance to debut. The trainees are selected through global auditions which are held both online and offline or are cast by casting staff on the street or through social media. The trainees should meet certain criteria set by the companies that they are looking to cast for their newest venture. Most companies do not allow people no older than 18 years of age to audition for the trainee system which means the majority of the trainees are minors.

2.1 Online Auditions

The participants must submit video recordings of themselves either dancing or singing, their biodata and their most recent pictures to the companies through online forms or by email, amongst which only a handful are selected for an audition through a Zoom call. If a candidate is selected and all the required formalities are fulfilled, they can join the respective training headquarters in Korea.

2.2 Offline Auditions

The offline auditions are usually walk-in auditions conducted in various cities in Korea, Japan, China, Thailand, America, Australia and Canada. The participants are required to dance, sing or rap and are asked various questions to see if they have what it takes to become an idol. [6]

2.3 Trainee Life

The trainees are put into various classes for dance ranging from hip hop, ballet, etc. They are also trained to sing and rap simultaneously. They take lessons in acting, learn how to take pictures and learn different foreign languages mainly Japanese Chinese and English. The trainees are also required to learn about different cultures since the fan base for K-pop is growing outside of Korea. The trainees are also expected to maintain a certain weight and are sometimes asked to undergo plastic surgeries to look conventionally good-looking. Amongst all of this, they have to give a monthly evaluation test on dancing, singing and rap. After these evaluations, the underperforming trainees are scrutinized and often asked to leave the training programs, leaving behind their dream of becoming an idol[4]. Once a trainee becomes too old to debut, they are dropped by their companies and their trainee contracts are terminated. Hence, being under constant pressure to perform well, look good and go through the uncertainties of their future, many young trainees are often diagnosed with anxiety and other mental health issues. Due to the

[1]AFM Radhakriton, "K-pop is making billions for South Korea" <https://asiafundmanagers.com/in/kpop-and-economic-impact-on-south-korea/>

[2]India Roby, "K-pop idols are taking over luxury fashion, one at a time" <https://www.nylon.com/fashion/kpop-high-fashion-ambassadors-jennie-chanel>

extreme diets, some fall into eating disorders and malnutrition issues[7]. The training period is so intense, that it could potentially be seen as an exploitation of minors and taking advantage of their dreams to put them through all this hardship.

3 Life after Debut

After having won a place in the final debut lineup, their life takes a complete turn. The average age for the oldest member ranges from 18-20 and the youngest member could be as young as 12 years old[8]. Once they debut, the trainees soon realize that behind the glitz and glamour lies a darker reality of exploitation, particularly the treatment of artists by the management as well as the general public. They are against the constant scrutiny of the public[9]. Their every move is over-analyzed and could be misinterpreted leading to a huge backlash by the general public. They are required to give their all on stage while also looking flawless. Now, the general public becomes their evaluator which is even scary as the public leaves no stone unturned to criticize these young idols. They are required to be on their best behaviour as their every move is on camera. This way it makes it difficult for the idols to have a private life. In their rookie years, the idols are the most exploited as they are required to work overtime attending all the music shows, pre-recordings, and TV programs while also practising their choreography, live singing and learning their lines for interviews. Hence, the rookies are subjected to long working hours and limited rights over their work while also not being paid well. The long working hours of practice, recording and performing can lead to physical and mental exhaustion as well as a lack of personal time and rest[10]. Once they debut, they have to pay off their trainee debt i.e. the fees for the classes during their training period. As a result, they are subjected to unfair contracts and low wages[11]. Most less popular artists from smaller companies never get paid until their contract is over because their trainee debts are so high[12]. Due to the unfair contracts, the idols receive minimum compensation for their work, with a significant amount going to their management companies and other stakeholders. Furthermore, the lack of transparency in financial dealings often leaves artists vulnerable to exploitation and financial instability. These contracts also limit the artist's creative freedom and control over their public image. Since the artist are bound by long-term contracts they have limited career opportunities because they are restricted from pursuing other projects that their companies don't approve of.

4 Sexualization of Minors

The K-pop industry places a strong emphasis on concepts and portraying certain images that they are trying to sell. Young idols are made to wear age-inappropriate clothing, sing inappropriate lyrics and dance suggestively to lure in more adult fans. Needless to say, there's nothing wrong with wearing whatever you want but what's concerning is that the K-pop industry has a long history of fetishization of minors and their obsession with Lolita concepts. This can also influence their younger fans to be like their idols and as a result, it could lead to overall fetishization and sexualization of minors and this could eventually become a norm. This industry purposely promotes their underage idols to showcase their innocence as well as their sexual appeal at the same time[13]. These idols are often seen performing highly sexualized songs in either childlike costumes or school uniforms[14]. Especially in this industry, it becomes difficult to separate the art from the artist. So, it becomes difficult to disjoint the celebrity and the craft from one another, encouraging adult fans and the general public to continue to sexualize young girls and boys. This industry has a long history of debuting minors hence it's seen as a norm to debut at such a tender age. The young idols simply conform to the inappropriate treatment as it is what they have

been seeing their senior idols do and go through the same path as them on their way to fame and success. This could lead minors to the dangerous notion that they have to act a certain way or wear a certain piece of clothing to be acknowledged or desired. This could also lead to anxiety-related disorders as they become older and feel like they're no longer needed or famous in the industry. There have also been cases of company officials seeking sexual favours from their idols in the case of the boygroup Omega X which came to light very recently[15].

5 Government's Role

In early 2009, 3 members from the most famous group of that time, TVXQ filed a complaint to the Seoul high court against their management company SM Entertainment over their unfairly long 13-year slave contracts and unfair distribution of their earnings. The penalty for breaking the contract would cost them 2 times the profit that the group was estimated to have earned at that time. Soon after a series of hearings and other artists coming forward claiming that these long contracts weren't fair on their part, the South Korean Fair Trade Commission set the standard for the contracts between the artist and the agency to be no longer than 7 years. This later came to be popularly known as the TVXQ law[16]. Following many cases of exploitation of minors in the Korean entertainment industry, in 2014 a bill was passed against the protection of exploitation of minors. Under this law, underage artists will be guaranteed the basic rights to learn, rest and sleep. Weekly working hours for children under 25 years cannot exceed 35 hours and for ages 15-18 cannot exceed 40 hours. It will also be illegal to coerce minors to wear revealing stage outfits and dance to suggestive music. Following this, minors will not be allowed to work in public for music festivals and award shows after 10 pm[17]. In 2024, South Korea enforced a law to safeguard young idols from forced weight loss and beauty procedures. The new law reportedly grants the city council the authority to conduct psychological assessments and provide counselling for trainees, offering vital support to mitigate stress triggers and promote the overall well-being of these young talents[18].

6 Sasaeng Fans

Sasaeng comes from the Korean words 'sa' meaning private and 'saeng't shortened from 'saenghwal' meaning life. It is the term in Korean for an obsessive fan who partakes in obsessive and intrusive behaviour. They take part in activities that can be harmful as well as invasive of idols' personal lives. They are often seen following their idols in their unofficial schedules, secretly taking pictures of the artists, and extorting the artist's personal information like phone numbers and flight details[19]. There have also been cases of sasaeng fans hacking into the idol's accounts and stealing the idol's personal belongings[20]. There have also been cases of sasaeng fans waiting outside the dormitory of their idols causing inconvenience not only to the idols but also to the residents of the nearby area[21]. There were also cases of sasaeng's forcefully trying to enter the idol's hotel rooms when they were on tour abroad[22]. The poor idols cannot catch a break from being in the cameras and to add to this, the sasaeng fans make it worse. The idols feel constantly threatened and violated by their behaviour. The idols are also at risk of being harmed physically as the sasaeng fan can be violent and aggressive if their idols don't act, the way they want them to[23,24]. This takes a huge toll on the idols both mentally and physically. There have also been multiple cases where the idols are seen requesting the sasaeng fans to stop this behaviour and be respectful of their personal space[25].

7 Conclusion

The treatment of artists in the K-pop industry raises serious concerns about their exploitation, particularly minors. The rigorous training systems and the pressure to fit into the unreal beauty standard pose a risk to the well-being of the idol trainees. The unfair contracts, long working hours, unequal pay and public scrutiny also add more to this problem. The over-sexualization of minors and the exploitation and intrusive behaviour of sasaeng fans make the situation worse than it already is. The government's intervention has led to many bills passed in favour of the idols like the set number of working hours for minors, the protection of minors and the limitation of the period of slave contracts. However, to tackle this vicious cycle of exploitation and sexualization of idols, more comprehensive measures need to be taken. Fairtrade contracts, protection of artists' rights and promoting a healthy work environment. In conclusion, the industry should promote ethical practices and prioritize the well-being of the artist over their commercial gains. They should protect their idols against sasaeng fans and create a Safer work environment which functions on mutual trust and respect.

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