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Honors Thesis

KOREAN POP IDOLS: THE DARK SIDE OF THE LIMELIGHT

by
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Submitted to Brigham Young University in partial fulfillment
of graduation requirements for University Honors

Communications Department
Brigham Young University
April 2023

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ABSTRACT

KOREAN POP IDOLS: THE DARK SIDE OF THE LIMELIGHT

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Bachelor of Arts

Korean pop music has risen to an international consciousness during the surge of the cultural Korean wave. However, many are still unaware of the struggles that idols face when pursuing a career in this industry. Many artists in the industry struggle with their physical and emotional health due to rigorous schedules in training and as a performing group, high expectations of performance and appearance, and restrictive contracts known as “slave contracts” that limit their personal freedoms and financial resources. These factors lead to the industry being highly damaging to the stars that participate in it.

In this documentary, I take research from academic studies, news events, public commentary online from the Korean pop community, and my own investigation conducted through interviews to draw conclusions about how this exploitative environment looks today in a modern world.

The conclusion I come to in my documentary is that, while many harmful expectations and behaviors remain the same in the Korean pop industry, there are

changes starting to happen to allow idols more freedom and decrease the frequency of slave contracts. I attribute this gradual change to the involvement of fan bases with their idol groups through social media empowering these celebrities to stand up to their companies via lawsuits. This impact of public opinion on companies' consumer base is now widespread enough with the internet that many agencies are highly responsive to fans' concerns, meaning the fans act as advocates for the artists by holding their company responsible.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the support of my family in my career and academic goals as I have pursued this thesis and encouraging me in my goals, even when it would have been easier to give up. I would also like to thank the dedication and care of my mentors, both on my honors thesis committee and in my program. I am specifically grateful for Melissa Gibbs, who has taught me hard work and determination through her advice and example as she has helped me grow for years here at Brigham Young University. A thank you to my friends as well, who supported and cheered me on as I pursued this project despite the sacrifices I sometimes had to make.

I am deeply grateful to see how many people have believed in my capability to complete this even when I doubted it myself, and my love and appreciation of the team that has helped carry me to the completion of this documentary is indescribable. Thank you all for everything you do to inspire me to be better every day.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Title.....	i
Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iv
Table of Contents.....	v
I. Introduction	1
II. Methodology.....	5
III. Project Presentation	6
IV. Results and Analysis.....	7
V. Conclusion.....	10
Works Cited	11

Introduction

Since the rise of Korean pop to international attention, many researchers have studied the phenomenon to understand the source of its popularity and the social impact of its development. Though sources vary in when they pinpoint the origin of Korean pop to be, several sources confirm that the current system was formed under John Hiromu Kitagawa, an American-born Japanese man that formed his own idol training agency in Japan. It was Kitagawa's vision of creating a music group that were singers, dancers, and actors simultaneously that propelled a new movement that led to the idol system as it is now in West Asia, or the "Pop Pacific". These music "idols" are different from typical American musicians or celebrities. They have a unique recruiting and training process to allow them to officially debut publicly with their company and begin to tour and produce music. The process to fame is very linear and very strict in comparison to Western music, where musicians form their own careers and pitch themselves as fully developed artists to record labels, sometimes without any formal training.

The idol system as we know it today utilizes a recruiting system that finds potential talent around the world with all ages and nationalities. Recruiting agencies often look for potential stars in outside of Korea in nearby countries such as Japan, China, and even the United States, particularly in Hawaii and California. The recruiting involves a lengthy audition process, with potential trainees ranging from adults attempting to break into the industry and kids as young as six, though typically children are recruited anytime from eight to twelve years old.

Once finishing the audition process, new trainees are taken into an intense multi-year process to become pop idols. Many trainees drop out of school in order to dedicate

their time fully to practice. For many trainees, a work day may be up to 15 hours, with practicing until the late hours of the morning. These schedules are sometimes required by the company, but other time are voluntary by the artists as the only way to succeed in the program and eventually debut due to high expectations. Trainees are also limited in their freedom to take a second job as this is seen as a distraction from their contractual obligations. Many trainees, after years of work, may try multiple times to debut and become a full-fledged idol without success, leading to a difficult situation if they've dropped out of school and don't have a degree to allow them other career options.

These issues often carry over into idoldom once artists debut. Idols are expected to work long schedules with few allowances for mental and emotional health. Because of the amount of content they are expected to turn, with concerts, music production, going live on social media, variety show appearances, and exclusive fan events and interactions, an idol's responsibilities often fill the majority of their day with few lines between personal life and their work. Several cases across the years have seen idols struggling with physical health issue as a direct result of their extensive work days. Han-Geng with Super Junior, says he suffered from kidney problems, chronic gastritis, and a disk herniation along with declining emotional health from not having a day off in years (Francesca Padget).

Idols are also expected to mold to a certain persona both on and off stage. Companies will assign members of a group to a personality trait, such as "shy", "sexy", or "funny" to perform in any public appearances. Often contracts will require stars to not date or not drink in public in order to keep up the appearance of a young attractive persona for consumers to project their romantic fantasies on. There are high beauty

standards in the industry that lead to artists eating extremely little and turning to excessive exercise, medication, and very often plastic surgery, which is often seen as necessary measures to advance their careers (citation **Routledge Handbook of Celebrity Studies**). Idols must also walk a thin line between being portraying themselves as humble and responsible members of society while also allowing themselves to be sexualized for audience appeal.

One major phenomenon that pushes these expectations in the Korean pop industry is the existence of slave contracts. Recently, several studies have investigated an increase in lawsuits idols have filed against their companies for contracts that required an unrealistic amount of practice time with no consideration for artists' health and overly extensive contract durations. Several suits fight against the company holding idols to a debt after their training, where profits are taken from idols to pay off the money invested in them while training. These debts are often exploitative in nature, where some agencies have refused to disclose the exact amount of the debt to their stars, meaning that many idols earn virtually nothing for years after debuting. This leaves artists reliant on the company since they have limited financial freedom and no allowances to find work elsewhere to pay off their debt.

All of these elements center around the control that companies exercise over their idols to make them into products of consumption for fan bases. Korean pop is particularly marketed for fans to feel connected with their idols in one-sided "parasocial" relationships, further encouraged by the amount of content that idols create for their followers. Some fans follow their idols to an obsessive extent, stalking them and physically assaulting or harassing them at times to get their attention. Fans can also

impose their own expectations on idols to perform in their assigned personalities, expressing displeasure when the stars deviate from their typical public persona.

However, there are also many positive values to Korean pop. Many idols are used as cultural ambassadors to spread Korean influence around the world. The Korean wave, or the rise of Korean culture in the international consciousness, is largely due to the growth in popularity of Korean music. Idols also serve as positive role models for fans and a “safer” conservative entertainment apart from some of the more explicit themes found in Western music. The community that Korean pop fans form also shows signs of increasing feelings of emotional resilience and belonging among younger people. Fan bases have also taken up social issues to a great extent, such as Korean group BTS’ fan base ARMY, who started their own social media pages sponsoring different charity campaigns and matched a one million dollar donation that Korean group BTS made to the Black Lives Matter campaign. These kinds of movements seem to suggest the positive impact that Korean pop idols bring to fan communities and their own country.

Methodology

Current research on the Korean pop industry seems to focus extensively on the potentially damaging nature of many idol work responsibilities and separately on the potential Korean pop has as a social movement in modern times. However, there was no available research looking at how the costs to idols and the nature of slave contracts has potentially changed in the modern day in light of some of these changes, such as BTS fans becoming more involved in current issues.

With this in mind, I created a documentary for both Korean pop fans and those unfamiliar with the genre to learn more about the exploitative nature of some of its aspects, but also to connect how the industry has changed today and to posit potential reasons why. This work was largely based on academic research into the effects and history of Korean pop, news articles, and social media channels of fans expressing their thoughts around the industry and from former and current idols speaking about their experiences. I also conducted my own interviews with an employee in the Korean pop industry, a professor, a BTS fan, and a former idol trainee. I was able to use these elements to both inform my research and to be featured in my documentary.

I conducted my research to form my understanding of how to conduct the interviews. I then scheduled and filmed and led the interviews myself, with proper permission from each participant that I could use their names, faces, and words in the piece I was creating. I then compiled this research into a script, recorded the voice track, and used both my own footage and videos from online to create the documentary.

Project Presentation

The final documentary can be found at the following Youtube link:

<https://youtu.be/8mjcJ69XQZk>

Results and Analysis

After performing my research, I came to the conclusion that Korean pop appears to have changed in some aspects to become more accommodating of idols, though there are still many parts that remain the same. It seems that the changes being made are fairly recent and early in their development, indicating to me that these are signs of Korean pop moving in a different direction rather than that it has significantly changed since earlier research was done.

Specifically, there are still intense pressures put on idols both physically and mentally. Many, in both their training and after their debut, are still working long hours with few breaks. This could be due to the influence of Korean culture, which values hard work and community responsibility leading idols to push themselves beyond contractual requirements. Beauty standards and idols performing in company-crafted roles in public appearances are also still prominent norms that are likely to remain as Korean pop is focused around making their idols appealing to a market.

However, one trend that I found in recent years was an increase in the amount of lawsuits idols filed against the companies they worked for. There was a sudden jump in these types of lawsuits within the last decade compared to the early days of Korean pop, and many of the issues that they were centered on were the same trends seen in traditional slave contracts: receiving no income from their company, having excessive practice times, and other cases of threat and harassment as the company exercised power over their talent. In the beginning, these lawsuits were mostly settled out of court and idol groups would often take serious hits to their career afterwards. However, more recent lawsuits have proved more beneficial to idols, and there are examples of several groups

that won their suits and were able get out of restrictive contracts. One Korean pop company even closed down after losing several lawsuits that their artists filed.

Another difference I found in this context was the role that fans played in the lives of the idols they follow. In the early days of Korean pop, the relationship between fans and idols was one-sided, with fans feeling close to the group but being largely unaware of problems within the industry. However, as social media has become more prominent in today's society, fans are able to access a range of information quickly and unite together across the world to create a notable force that can influence company decisions. Fans have used this network to inform each other of the issues that idols face and make their voices heard in issues where they feel the company is exploiting their talent. Because of the power that this consumer base wields, companies have shown to be largely responsive to what these fans think. This may play a key role in helping artists to win these recent lawsuits and give Korean pop lovers power as advocates in the dynamic between idols and agencies.

This combination of factors seems to have helped ease the restrictions placed in contracts even though the pressures of the industry are still largely similar. This does indicate a trend in the direction of those pressures eventually changing as well as the industry shapes itself according to the priorities of its consumers. Research would be needed to expand on this documentary's findings and verify if there is any scientific merit to them, as this is one of the only pieces of research connecting fan advocacy to slave contracts.

This documentary, as noted previously, while being based in academic research and reliable sources, is still only a connection of that research rather than an in-depth

academic study. I was able to receive some of my own data from the few interviews I could conduct, but there would potentially have to be a more extensive process to speak with current trainees and idols, including seeing some of their contracts, to fully prove whether the claim I make is true. I was also limited in what footage I could obtain of the subject matter, considering I was not working with any other crew and my thesis is academic in nature, not a professional work. I had to be flexible in the shots that I chose to use since I could only utilize what I found online that was available to be downloaded or the little video I could film on my own. There were also extensive technical issues with my audio and video during interviews, so I had to often work with lower quality footage than was hoped. However, despite this, the documentary's basis and claims stand and, despite its shortcomings, the project brings new light to the modern situation of Korean pop idols.

Conclusion

There are still many issues with the pressures and expectations that Korean pop idols face in their industry that are harmful to their physical and mental health. However, as fans have become more involved in advocating for these artists and companies have become more responsive to public criticism, particularly in cases where lawsuits are brought against them, idols are starting to gain power and independence and contracts are becoming less restrictive, making restrictive slave contracts less common. The trend still needs to be properly studied, but this trend may indicate that, eventually, the pressures in Korean pop will change to be more reasonable and accommodating of idols' needs in the course of their careers and that these stars might have more freedom to lead a private life as they want in the future.

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