7 K-Pop Idols

Media Commodities, Affective Laborers, and Cultural Capitalists

STEPHANIE CHOI

The K-pop industry is one of the fastest-expanding industries in the world. Unlike the global music markets that have faced consistent decreases in album sales, the South Korean market has had a gradual increase since 2014 – its album sales exceeded 10 million in 2016; 16.9 million in 2017; 22.8 million in 2018; and 25 million in 2019 – thanks to K-pop fans, who have strategically and competitively consumed their idols' music.[1] K-pop groups are dominating international music charts – EXO Baekhyun's *Delight* (2020) ranked No. 1 on iTunes charts in sixty-nine countries, and EXO's *OBSESSION* (2019) and BLACKPINK's "How You like That" (2020) in sixty. In 2020, BTS released four number-one albums faster than any other group since the Beatles, and their song "Black Swan" reached number one on iTunes in 103 countries – more than any song in history.[2] By the end of the 2010s, K-pop had become even more saturated, with millions of aspiring performers hoping to become the next BoA and BTS.

If aspiring idols were inspired by the rags-to-riches stories of BoA and BTS, numerous investors saw K-pop idols as a one-time jackpot. The flow of reckless investments has resulted in small companies producing the same style of idol groups, going into financial peril, and disbanding the groups within a few years. These companies are often denigrated as "idol factories" that force teenagers to look and act in certain ways, sacrificing their privacy, education, family life, friendships, and romances to maintain a loyal fan base.[3]

Western media have continued to describe K-pop stars' limited agency as "the dark side of K-pop."[4] However, the Western counterparts also suffer from chronic structural problems of unfair contracts, sexual abuse, and exploitation behind the commercial myth of musical authenticity. Among the examples are Brian Epstein's molding of the Beatles's image, Michael Jackson's childhood history of abuse, Ke$ha's sexual assault lawsuit against her producer Dr. Luke, Lauren Jauregui's leaked audio that described her group Fifth Harmony as "literal slaves," and Scooter Braun's legal ownership of Taylor Swift's music catalogue. Attempts to control artists' agency are endemic in the global music industry.[5]

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The goal of this chapter is not to perpetuate the myth of K-pop as magical and/or abusive but rather to reveal the complexity and fluidity of human relations in the popular music industry. Keith Negus's study of genre cultures in the British music business of the 1970s and early 1980s is critical of defining culture industries in Fordist terms, because that ignores the historical specificities that contextualize the development of the music business.[6] He also points out the impossibility of theorizing cultural production in general terms, due to differences in "aesthetic form, content, working practices, means of financing and modes of reception and consumption" in each industry, because "all industries are cultural."[7] It will be productive, then, to discuss the K-pop industry not as a standardized culture built on a Fordist business model but as a critical site in which diverse social relations are created, subverted, and negotiated.

This is why field research is important in examining an industry as culture. On the one hand, trained experts sustain the industrial system; on the other hand, there are always thinkers who question capitalist principles that alienate laborers and reject human-essential capacities, discuss the laborers' calling and raison d'être in economic activities, and take actions within and beyond the given social structure of the industry. While the former is readily noticeable through top-down, media-based cultural studies, listening to the latter requires participant observation, interviews, and personal networks in the field. From 2015 to 2018, I interviewed more than seventy people, including K-pop idols and trainees; entertainment company CEOs; workers in A&R, marketing, and casting divisions; TV show producers; music video directors; reporters and journalists in Korean and American media; academics; and fans from Korea and around the world. All the interviewees are active in the K-pop industry and wished to remain anonymous because they discussed sensitive issues that might affect their employment status or public image. For this reason, I have replaced their names with letters (e.g., Worker A, Idol B, Rapper C, Company D).

I identified four groups of participants and institutions in the K-pop world: the K-pop industry (i.e., Korean entertainment companies and the mass media), the South Korean government, idol singers, and fans. In an industry where idols' bodies serve as unstandardized products through volatile media (re)presentations, how do entertainment companies produce idols? How do idols manage their multiple roles and expectations as media commodities, affective laborers, and cultural capitalists? How does the government intervene in this global trade of affective commodities like K-pop, protect the human rights of the idols, but also benefit from the soft power that the idols produce as national icons? Last, how do fan communities circulate this commodified intimacy and make themselves de facto

shareholders of entertainment companies? Although I have categorized actors in the K-pop world, I will explore how K-pop is sustained as a culture formed through interactive communications, conflicts, and negotiations.

Idol Recruitment and Contract

The idea of idols as puppets of the industry derives from idols' limited agency, especially in the first three to four years after their debut. They are not simply musicians but also affective laborers who perform "fan service" – that is, verbal, physical, textual, and/or musical performances that offer pleasure – and work ceaselessly to maintain a close relationship with their fans. For this reason, entertainment companies select idol trainees based on several factors, such as appearance, *kki* (aura or stage presence, including charisma and sex appeal), talent (singing, dancing, and/or rapping), *inseong* (politeness, kindness, and sincerity), and teamwork.

Prospective idols must be extraordinarily attractive or talented to pass the audition. Once they are selected as trainees, they are expected to demonstrate *inseong* and cooperative teamwork until they join a debut team. Some private institutes (*hagwon*) for vocal and dance training partner with entertainment companies and send their students to company auditions, while other aspiring idols make their debuts through television audition shows. Most companies hold weekly auditions at their building while the cast division goes on an audition tour inside and outside Seoul, or even overseas. The casting division often goes to middle and high schools, singing/dancing contests, and K-pop festivals to discover good-looking and talented teenagers. It is common for companies to sign non-Korean idols who can speak other languages so that the idols can speak for their group without a translator at overseas promotions.[8]

Entertainment companies occasionally recruit trainees solely based on their appearance. Some companies host beauty pageants for preteen girls and boys in order to track potential idols for several years. Worker C at the new artist development department at Company D explains that if the potential idols are too young, casting managers will maintain contact with them without signing a trainee contract. Even though they are not under contract, the managers give an impression that the company is interested in them, by regularly contacting and asking them to inform the company if they receive an offer from another company.[9] Once the preteens enter adolescence, the company will sign a contract with discretion after evaluating how their appearance will change as they mature.

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Worker C explains how the casting managers take profile pictures of audition applicants:

> We take photos of the entire body, then divide the parts into knees, the waist, then the bust. Next, a full shot of the face. Then we divide the face into the forehead and the nose. Then we take photos of their profile and repeat the same process. Next, we tell them to uncover their ears and take photos of their ears. Then we take another photo, from the ears to the forehead. After that, we tell them to turn around while saying "ee" to check the dental interlocking, because as kids grow up, their bones grow as well. There is the possibility that their faces will become asymmetrical. Especially in boys' case, their chin and cheekbones will grow, so if they have a slightly asymmetrical [face] then they have to correct their habits or have orthodontics. We also report which parts they should modify and supplement – for instance, if [the applicant's] jaw is too sharp, then we report that they need to reshape the jaw lines [through cosmetic surgery], or that they should have their cheekbones sculpted, or that they need eye-length extension surgery. Correcting a body shape is nearly impossible. You just have to make them exercise, but there's no way to fix it. Bow legs may be fixed, but it takes a long time.[10]

Both female and male idols are under pressure to look attractive through diet and cosmetic surgery. After four years of rigorous training, JinE made her debut in 2015 as a member of Oh My Girl, although soon after, she went on hiatus for a year due to extreme weight loss, anorexia nervosa, amenorrhea, hypothermia, and hypotension. In 2017, she left the group. It is common for idols of both genders to share their diets with their fans. BTS member Jin states that he was once on a crash diet where for an entire year he ate only two packs of chicken breast a day: "I was told to take vitamins, but I refused to do so to lose more weight, so I eventually suffered from malnutrition."[11] Another BTS member, Jungkook, was not allowed to bulk up before he became an adult, because his company wanted him to "maintain a boyish image."[12]

Idol C states that liposuction is the most common surgery that female idols undergo, as they are compelled – by both the company and their own fans – to be thin. According to her, an idol with a height of 160 centimeters (about 5'3") must maintain a weight of 40 kilograms (about 88 pounds).[13] Idol B says he was 180 centimeters (about 5'9") tall and weighed 60 kilograms (about 132 pounds) right after the debut, as he had "tuna sandwiches and chicken breasts every day – the company told us to do so. We had to do whatever they ordered, so I just did whatever they wanted me to do."[14] Fans and the public do not hesitate to tell idols to lose weight or undergo cosmetic surgery. Idol B recalls the online comments he received in his early career: "Now I don't get hurt by people saying that I'm ugly. But back then, it was so hurtful when they said I was ugly. 'How dare you

make a debut as an idol [with such an appearance]?' There were definitely many fans among those who criticized my appearance."[15]

A flirtatious aura, or *kki*, is also a significant asset. Worker A at a cast division states that Idol N, whom she scouted simply because she found him cute, was a flirt: "[Idol N] was annoying while I was setting up an audition schedules for him. He didn't arrive on time, asked irrelevant questions, and kept saying things like, 'I can't go today.' But later I realized that those annoying kids were often good at flirting with their fans."[16] Appearance and flirting skills are important, but performing techniques must also reach an acceptable level before the trainees come onto the market as idols. Once they have been recruited, entertainment companies teach them singing, dancing, foreign languages, etiquette, and other skills. Based on each trainee's personality and talents, the company assigns them a role as a vocalist, rapper, or dancer.

Education curricula generally include singing, dancing, foreign languages, courtesy and manners, elocution, and acting. Some companies cover expenses for music (composition and instrument) lessons, mental health care, academic tutoring, and Korean language for foreign trainees.[17] Because most trainees are teenagers, they practice after school, and some quit school to dedicate themselves to training. Kim Sung-eun stresses her role not only as a vocal trainer but also as a life mentor of the trainees: "[Vocal training] is not just about singing. You should keep an eye on how the trainees' personalities and potentials are shaped as individuals, because you never know how this will lead to growth, just like Seokjin [BTS's Jin]. I never knew Seokjin would listen to and study music to such a deep level.. . . If we build a good foundation for [the trainees], they'll perceive themselves as singers and will study music by themselves. How meaningful and fun would that be?"[18] Kim argues, "One's retirement as an idol shouldn't be the end of one's singing career. Even after they retire as an idol, you should help them survive as a musician."[19]

Trainees practice singing and dancing for several hours a day and take weekly and monthly exams that determine whether or not they will remain in the program. Among dozens of trainees, the company selects a group for the so-called debut team (*debwi tim*). Big companies like SM Entertainment, YG Entertainment, JYP Entertainment, and HYBE reveal their new idol candidates on television audition programs to promote them before the debut. In the meantime, the producers (in-house producers and some CEOs) decide the group's "concept" (*keonsep*) and "worldview" (*segyegwan*), an alternate universe that undergirds the group's concept. For example, EXO's concept and worldview are "aliens with supernatural powers who came from the exoplanet." BTS's early concept was "hip hop-dol" (idols who perform hip hop), whose worldview was to

"secure their music and values from social prejudice and suppression for those in their teens and twenties."

Last, *inseong* and teamwork are important properties for an idol. Worker A explains that it is possible to check trainees' sincere attitudes or *inseong*: "There are kids who are kicked out just because of their *inseong*. There are kids who drive a wedge between trainees and cause drama, or date other trainees and get caught after taking weird photos. There is a lot of drama happening here."[20] When idols are suspected of school violence, drug use, prostitution, or other types of crimes, television and radio stations immediately cancel their appearance on shows to avoid complaints from the audience.

There are two types of contract: one for trainees and the other for idols. Trainee contracts may last for one to two years or may be connected to the idol contract and remain in effect for seven years. In this case, the trainee cannot move to another company but should wait until the current company schedules the debut. The trainee contract requires the company to pay for the trainee's lessons, meals, and lodging, and the company has the right to end the contract if the trainee makes "trouble," fails to improve their singing and dancing skills, or does not pass the monthly exam. "Trouble" may consist of conflicts with other people in the company, dating scandals, and/or crimes.

Once the trainees have been chosen to debut as an idol group, they sign a seven-year idol contract. The company first pays all expenses during the promotion period, such as hairstyling, makeup, and skincare treatment, in addition to lessons, meals, and lodging.[21] However, the majority of small companies sign a contract that compels the idols to pay back the expenses for training, music production, and promotion. As a result, idols from these small companies earn no profits in the first three to four years of their careers, until they pay the "debt" (*bit*). Then they can receive their portion of the profits earned.[22]

By 2015, the amount of investment for debuting an average idol group – of five members who underwent two years of traineeship – reached 940,000,000 KRW (approximately US$830,000). According to the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, the average period of traineeship was 25.6 months. The expenses for a debuting idol group are shown in Table 7.1.[23]

Although the K-pop training course is known for its rigor, it also becomes an important source of fans' love for their idols, because they understand how demanding and difficult the training is. Presuming K-pop idols as puppets of their companies also neglects the latter phase of the idol career. As I will address later in this chapter, idols gain more voice and power in the production process as they develop their career and establish a larger fan base.

Table 7.1 *Expenses for a debuting idol group*

Type of expense	Total
Lessons (15 million/month × 24 months)	360 million KRW
Trainers from overseas (20 million (two times) × 2 years)	40 million KRW
Lodging (5 million/month × 24 months)	120 million KRW
Meals, etc. (5 million/month × 24 months)	120 million KRW
Album production	50 million KRW
Music video production	50 million KRW
Marketing and promotion	100 million KRW
Costumes, hairstyling, etc.	100 million KRW
Grand total	**940 million KRW**

The South Korean Government's Role in the K-Pop Business

In the early 2000s, the South Korean government and the entertainment industry began discussing the "slave contract" between entertainment companies and entertainers.[24] Three months after actress Jang Ja-yeon died by suicide (her company allegedly forced her into sexual service), the Korea Fair Trade Commission finalized the Standard Form of the Exclusive Contract (*pyojunjeonsoggyeyakseo*) for entertainers, based on the guidelines provided by the Korea Entertainment Producers' Association in June 2009. The contract period for singers was limited to seven years, taking into consideration the long training period.[25]

In March 2017, the Korea Fair Trade Commission released the Improvement of Unfair Trading Convention between Entertainment Companies and Affiliated Trainees after evaluating the trainee contracts of SM Entertainment, LOEN Entertainment, JYP Entertainment, FNC Entertainment, YG Entertainment, Cube Entertainment, Jellyfish Entertainment, and DSP Media. The commission amended six articles from the previous contracts, and all eight companies revised their trainee contracts to include the changes shown in Table 7.2.[26]

Because most idols and idol trainees are minors, entertainment companies are bound by the "Protection of Children and Teenagers," Article 18 of the Standard Form of the Exclusive Contract for Entertainers (Singers) in Popular Culture provided by the Korea Fair Trade Commission:

1. [The production company] guarantees the child/teenage entertainer's fundamental human rights such as physical/mental health, right to learn, right to personal freedom, right to sleep, right to rest, and freedom of choice.
2. When [the production company] concludes a contract for entertainment management, it must check the age of the entertainer, and in case of a child/teenager, it cannot request indecent exposure of [the entertainer's] body or excessively suggestive performances for the purpose of profit or popularity.
3. [The production company] cannot demand popular cultural art labor for an excessive amount of time from the child/teenage entertainer.[27]

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Table 7.2 *Revisions after release of the Improvement of Unfair Trading Convention between Entertainment Companies and Affiliated Trainees*

Before the improvement	After the improvement	Reasons (selected)
When the trainee violates the contract, the trainee must pay a penalty equal to double or triple the amount invested by the company for training. (Valid at YG, JYP, FNC, Cube, Jellyfish, and DSP)	When the company cancels the contract, it may demand a penalty equal to the amount invested for training.	• It is unfair to force the trainees to bear such financial pressures. • Considering the economic status of trainees, they are not capable of rejecting or negotiating excessive penalties.
After the trainee contract is terminated, the trainee is responsible for signing an exclusive contract with the company. However, even before the trainee contract ends, the trainee must sign an exclusive contract with the company upon request. (Valid at JYP, Cube, and DSP)	After the trainee period designated in the trainee contract is terminated, the trainee will prioritize the company for contract renewal or an exclusive contract.	• This article forces the trainee to sign an exclusive contract and thus unfairly restricts the trainee from signing a contract with a third party and unreasonably restricts the trainee's legal rights. • Since the trainee contract is separate from the entertainer contract, under the principle of contract freedom, the trainee should be able to freely determine which entertainment company's contract they will sign following the termination of the trainee contract.
The company may cancel the contract via written notice anytime during the contract period. (Valid at LOEN, JYP, YG, Cube, and DSP)	When the company wishes to cancel the contract due to the trainee's fault, the company must inform the trainee, and the contract can then be terminated thirty days from the day the trainee was informed.	• This article unreasonably deprives the trainee of the benefits during the cancellation period, and may be unfairly disadvantageous to the trainee by loosening the requirements for the company's contract cancellation rights.
The trainee must not demonstrate behavior that demeans popular cultural artists or negatively impacts their entertainment activities, and must not demonstrate behavior that harms the dignity or credibility of the company or its affiliated entertainers. (Valid at SM, FNC, and DSP; SM Entertainment followed the Standard Form of the Exclusive Contract, although since this article has unfair clauses, the commission plans to revise the article on the Standard Form.)	Removed.	• The article sets a duty that is too abstract and vague and allows the company to cancel the contract whenever it determines that the trainees have disobeyed its rules; thus it is unfairly disadvantageous to the trainees. • Since contract cancellation is beneficial to the contracting party's interest, the reason must be valid and detailed. • When determining abstract factors such as the damage to the company's dignity or credibility as the trainees' obligation, it is difficult to verify the trainees' performance of this duty, and thus is disadvantageous to the trainees and may create a legal dispute. • Contract cancellation due to the violation of an abstract and unclear duty makes up the largest portion (28.5%) of legal disputes over artist contracts.

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Table 7.2 (*cont.*)

Before the improvement	After the improvement	Reasons (selected)
The trainee must immediately pay any penalty to the company. (Valid at YG and LOEN)	Removed.	• This article unreasonably restricts the trainees' legal rights by forcing them to pay penalties without negotiation.
In case of a legal dispute over the current contract between the company and the trainee, the court with exclusive jurisdiction will be the Seoul Central District Court. (Valid at YG, FNC, LOEN, Cube, Jellyfish, and DSP)	In case of a legal dispute over the current contract between the company and the trainee, both parties will make an effort to reach an amicable agreement with trust and sincerity; if they cannot, they will resolve the dispute based on the fundamental principles of the Civil Procedure Code.	• The article is unfair to the trainees in terms of the agreement over trial jurisdiction.

While some companies use a standard contract, an industry executive states, "Honestly, the standard form of the (exclusive) contract is disadvantageous for the companies, so what company would observe all [of the articles]? No one cares whether they observe it or not."[28] Although the South Korean government continues to set and revise criteria for the rights of idols and idol trainees, the criteria remain on an advisory level.

Because of the performers' young age and subordinate position in the industry, the company CEO and idols' relationship is often described as paternalistic. John David Ebert, in his biography of Michael Jackson, states that Diana Ross and Berry Gordy were "displaced parental figures of Michael, and thus played roles in the very ancient myth of the birth of the hero, in which the hero's original parents are swapped out for a new set who happened to stumble on the child in the wilderness, where he has been abandoned and then raised him."[29] Typical K-pop stars, as seen in dozens of documentaries and interviews, tell a similar story: Idols are passionate youths who are so diligent and desperate that it would seem unfair if they were not to succeed. Yet they seem to be financially naïve, because they care only about becoming a singer. Then they find the "right" CEO, who can give them that opportunity. The CEO is not merely a business partner but also a father figure who cares about his idols' welfare.

This paternalistic relationship can also be abusive. In October 2018, eighteen-year-old Lee Seok-cheol and sixteen-year-old Lee Seung-hyun, two members of East Light, revealed that they had been exposed to four years of assault, verbal abuse, and death threats from Moon Yeong-il, the in-house producer of Media Line Entertainment. Lee and Lee's lawyer stated, "Until now, Media Line has controlled the members by making them surveil one another. Because all members were minors, they were

worried that the executives of Media Line would find out if they discussed the abuse with their parents."[30] The members were beaten with baseball bats and microphone stands, forced to smoke cigarettes, and choked with guitar strings. They stated that they had not reported the abuse because of their "dream and fear that [they] might not be able to continue performing music once [they] were kicked out of here."[31]

Ideally, once the parents sign the contract and send their children to the company dorm, the company executives should take on the parenting role for teenage idols and trainees. BLACKPINK's Rosé states that YG Entertainment's in-house producer Teddy supports her group as an experienced friend and mentor.[32] Girls' Generation's Tiffany also recalls, "I was fifteen, I didn't have parents around me in Korea, I didn't speak Korean fluently at the time, so I was scared . . . trying to blend in but still have my own opinions and be around K-pop parents [the company executives].. . . My bandmates were at the label starting at ten, so their lives are based around, like, going to practice and rehearse and then going to school and kind of maintaining it all at the same time as ten-year-olds. Yeah, you do need [company executives as] parents to manage that."[33] JYP Entertainment, for instance, offers mental health and sex education for its trainees and terminates the contract when the trainees get failing grades for two semesters in a row.[34]

Controlling Self-Expression, Human Relationships, and Affective Outcome

To be commercially successful, idols must tolerate several restrictions. As Rapper E, who gave rap lessons to idol trainees and wrote songs for idols at Company S, recalls,

Rapper E: [The idol trainees] were good [at rap], but their attitudes and behaviors were a lot different from those of other rappers their age. I could strongly feel that they were controlled – or mature, to describe it in a good way. They were extremely polite, and I could feel that they were censoring themselves. But it was not like they were suppressed; I rather felt like they were educated to be immaculate persons – you know how Company S pursues that kind of image. The A&R team also told me that I should avoid writing lyrics that are too sexual or political. In sum, the musicians [at Company S] were very decent, well-educated, well-disciplined people.

Author: I also felt that the idols [at Company S] were already business-minded. It was not like the company was forcibly suppressing or controlling free spirits.

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Rapper E: I think the idols are aware of how big the reward is. The company's previous achievements tell them what they will get later. They are aware of the fact that they will get bigger freedom and rewards once they go through struggles and restrictions.[35]

When I asked what Idol B thinks about fan complaints against the punishingly hectic schedules managed by his company, he replied, "Some say the company is abusing us, but honestly, we are in the same boat, and the company is obviously trying to treat us well. After all, it's fans who will leave us if we don't appear often [on the media]."[36] It is common for companies to control the idols' behavior, relationships, and online activities, especially in their early career before they have a fan base.

The company and fans take a special interest in an idol's friendship with other members of the band, outdoor activities, and love life. Through analyses of idols' interactions with each other on television shows, social media, real-time chats, and fan-filmed videos, fans constantly evaluate friendships among the idols. Almost all of the fans I interviewed told me stories about their idol's best friend in the group. Based on the chemistry between two members, fans develop a "shipping" relationship that becomes a primary source of fan fiction (see Chapter 13 in this book). Then successful idols must be capable of controlling their relationships. Idols explain that they learn how to display their friendship in public in the most natural way. During my interview with Idol A, we watched a television interview of his group. Idol A observed that his group members were intentionally touching each other, although the touch seemed completely natural and habitual to me – it was a way of displaying a shared homoerotic or homosocial connection with each other before their fans.[37]

It is difficult to maintain a solid fan base when idols are caught dating, drinking, smoking, or doing any other type of "misdemeanor" outside the dorm. Fans do allow their idols to go outside but urge them to take responsibility for what they do. Because fans are the ones who are paying the "debt" – by buying concert tickets and merchandise – idols must show gratitude and appreciation by "working hard," not by dating in public or going out to bars and clubs. For our interview, Idol B met me at 2 o'clock in the morning, to avoid both his fans and his managers, who wouldn't let him go out. His manager eventually called him around 4:30 a.m. To avoid giving the wrong impression to any fan who might be watching, we kept a distance of ten to twenty feet from each other.

A company will ask its idols to be kept informed of their romances, in case of dating scandals and rumors. Super Junior member Heechul states that his company, SM Entertainment, encourages its idols to date each other, because it is more convenient to handle dating scandals within the company.[38] Meanwhile, small companies try to prevent idols from dating

by confiscating their cell phones, although the idols will eventually contact others via social media.[39]

Idols' Roles and Agency in the Production

In the early stage of their career, idols' musical tastes and opinions are rarely taken into consideration. A company will recruit the broadest pool of idol trainees, choose a concept, and select the trainees who best fit that concept. Those who fail to join the debut team may wait for another chance or leave the company. Due to the lack of debut opportunities, trainees often make their debut with a concept or worldview that does not reflect their musical taste and artistic preference. Idol C, who left his group after a seven-year contract, states, "My company wanted to make an idol version of a hip hop crew. I like hip hop, so the plan sounded nice to me, but the company really worked with no plan. After all, the production had changed after the company collected random tracks via acquaintances. Because [the company people] recklessly received songs from their friends or famous people, our group's music eventually became more similar to Japanese rock sound than to hip hop."[40]

As they develop their careers and establish a fan base, idols engage in making music, selecting themes, and expressing their individuality in music production. Girls' Generation's Tiffany states, "Because there are so many things to juggle, I've got to be really hands-on in terms of the creative direction, like, what kind of music and what kind of fashion and videos.. . . I'm just very passionate and expressive, and they were just like, 'No one loves this more than you, no one loves us more than you, we trust you!' and it led to me taking control and also being able to create a subunit out of it."[41] Albums by a solo artist or a subunit group (a smaller group within the group) can give idols a great opportunity to showcase their musical virtuosity, artistic sensibility, and thoughts. Idol D explains, "For a group album, I make music based on our concept and stories that need to be added to the album. There's a certain theme set up [for the group], so sometimes we cover something trendy. When I make music alone, I don't think about my group. I just find a subject that pops up in my head . . . because that's most genuine, as if your unconscious mind is reflected in your dream. I try to make my music only when I have such intuitive moments."[42]

As multimedia entertainers, idols also develop their talents in art and fashion. SHINee's Key, for example, helped design the stage costumes for the group's single, "View" (2015). K-pop male idols used to customarily wear tailor-made suits on stage. However, Key pointed out that suits do not match the sounds of deep house and suggested that his members wear off-the-rack clothes – this style later became a new norm in K-pop.[43] Key

also prepared a thirty-five-page PowerPoint presentation to explain his ideas on stage costumes to the company and coordinated the costumes for SHINee's 2015 and 2016 concert tours.

Fan Management

As much as idols are subject to meet the demands of their fans, fans are also expected to follow the rules set up by their idols and entertainment companies. During the era of the first-generation idols (between the late 1990s and early 2000s), fan clubs were run by fan club executives who volunteered. They were the liaison between the company and fans, managing food and transportation and delivering gifts from fans to the company. In return, the fan club executives stayed in touch with idol managers, acquired advance information about the idols' schedules, and met idols when they made their deliveries to the company. Only those who were well known in the fandom through active, long-term participation in offline events could be elected to fan club executive positions.[44]

With the debuts of the second-generation idols (between the mid-2000s and early 2010s), entertainment companies started creating in-house fan club management divisions. As soon as a company debuts a new idol group, it recruits members for its fan club. To join, fans pay annual membership fees and will receive a gift box that contains a photo book with messages from the idols; access to the idols' exclusive messages, photos, and videos; and priority when purchasing concert tickets. Meanwhile, idols' schedules are announced to the public on the official website.

In-house fan management brought several changes to the idol-fan relationship. Removing the hierarchy between the fan club executives and nonexecutive fans standardized the proximity to idols across the fandom. Fans are now able to communicate with idols directly through social media under the company's fan management. Maintaining fair access to idols has become one of the most important values in the K-pop business. For this reason, neither idols nor fans consider *sasaeng* (people who hack idols' cell phones, follow their private schedules, or trespass on their property) "fans," because respecting idols' privacy is one way of maintaining a healthy and respectful idol-fan relationship.

Conclusion

In an active participatory culture, such as K-pop fandom, celebrities assume several roles: Their mediated images circulate as textual commodities; they please their fans through "fan service" performances as affective

laborers; and their publicity and music productions transform into cultural influence that allows them to accumulate more cultural and economic capital. While K-pop idols have many obligations and restrictions, music offers them a space of empowerment through which to express their thoughts and build a reputation, wealth, and relationships. Fans are also active consumers and promoters of K-pop productions. Through active interactions with idols and other fans, K-pop fans learn how to maintain a healthy idol-fan relationship. "True" fans respect idols' privacy, maintain ideal idol-fan relationships, and sustain the K-pop economy; those who do not will be expelled from fandom and lose company fan club membership.

When BTS's J-Hope was asked, "How do you measure success?" he answered, "When I see people around me smile in any situation."[45] The K-pop industry is easily labeled as a machine, but despite its fast-paced, profit-oriented nature, there is endless effort, caring, and support by people who value each other's hard work, personal growth, and labor rights. If there is a "dark side" in K-pop, there should be a "bright side" as well, because all industries are intertwined in the complex affective flows and multidirectional cultural dynamics.

Notes

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