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The K-Pop Industry: Current Issues, Policies, and Opportunities for Improvement

Introduction

While K-pop has been extraordinarily popular both in South Korea and around the world, the K-pop industry has historically been riddled with sexism, harsh work conditions, and eating disorders related to body image, and the industry remains this way today. Tragedies in the K-pop industry are quite common, especially those related to suicide and overworking, depression, and sexual exploitation both during performances and behind the scenes (Kim, 2018, p. 189; Martin and Yoon, 2019, p. 1). This paper discusses predominant issues in the Korean K-pop industry, analyzes the current mechanisms that have been created to deal with these issues, and suggests possible solutions that would support the physical and mental health of those involved in the K-pop industry in Korea.

Since the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997, K-pop has been a staple of the Korean economy (Kim, 2018, p. 185). K-pop is generally regarded as a fun, happy genre that could be characterized by large bands of singing and dancing stars wearing the latest fashion. K-pop and K-dramas have become a symbol of ‘Korea cool’ and a modern Asia (Seo et al., 2020, p. 604). While power in the K-pop industry is consolidated within a few large media conglomerates (Kim, 2018, p. 189), there are some smaller independent labels. Media conglomerates are

vertically integrated and are structured to produce and maintain the success of K-pop stars and hit songs (Kim, 2018, p. 197). K-pop is also fundamentally a national effort (Seo et al., 2020, p. 604). In addition to media conglomerates, Korean institutions including the government, universities, marketing agencies, and other intermediaries contribute to the creation and consumption of K-pop both within and outside of South Korea (Seo et al., 2020, p. 604).

Issues in the K-pop Industry

While K-pop and K-dramas certainly exemplify characteristics of Korean culture, K-pop especially has been deeply influenced the United States (Kim, 2018, p. 185). According to Kim, K-pop was substantially influenced by Motown Records (p. 185), especially the “catchy hooks, sleek choreography, [and] matching outfits” (p. 190) of Motown Records’ girl groups in the 1960s (p. 192). In addition, Motown pioneered the “‘factory-type operation’” (p. 192) to create records, which dictated that performers appeared and behaved according to the optimal ‘mold’ (p. 192). While such a system produced profitable and popular music, it was also characterized by patriarchalism, which likewise became a fixture of the K-pop industry (p. 192).

Sexism and patriarchalism have been prevalent in the K-pop industry since its inception (Kim, 2018, p. 185). Globalism has also assisted in reigning in female empowerment to please international audiences (Seo et al., 2020, p. 614). While female beauty standards in K-pop’s early days encouraged naturalness with minimal makeup, increasing international demand for K-pop incited male executives to encourage makeup and the “‘China Doll’” appearance for female stars (Seo et al., 2020, p. 510, 612). K-pop stars’ dances, too, are indicative of male control; Kim suggests that “perfectly synchronized, military-style choreography” (Kim, 2018, p. 191) performed by female K-pop bands exemplifies elements of patriarchalism in South Korea (p.

191), and these performances are largely designed and directed by men (Kim, 2018, p. 192). Military choreography is often accompanied by identical uniforms that reduce the female K-pop stars' individuality (p. 201). Moreover, it is the dominance of males in the production of K-pop that leads to the cultivation of an "obedient, disciplined, and sexualized labor force" of female K-pop stars (p. 200) despite potential internal resistance to domination and sexual performances. Indeed, to some Korean and international audiences, it appears that female K-pop stars are "forced" (Seo et al., 2020, p. 610) to exude an aura of sexiness rather than wanting to do so (p. 610). Hazzan (2016) notes that the K-pop industry expects both male and female stars to act sexily and wear sensual outfits during performances (Hazzan, 2016, p. 45). Male stars, however, are typically not under as much pressure to dress scantily and perform sexually suggestive dances, and they often freely admit details from their sexual lives, while female stars generally cannot (p. 45, 48).

Women played an integral role in modernizing South Korea's economy and endured harsh working conditions in export-driven industries including clothing and shoe production (Kim, 2018, p. 195), and female K-pop stars are subjected to comparable conditions in contemporary South Korea (p. 189). To Korean women laid off from conventional jobs during the Asian Financial Crisis, the K-pop industry appeared lucrative and fun (p. 199). For decades, however, K-pop bands have fought against "'slave-like contracts'" (Park, 2011, p. 3) enforced by their K-pop conglomerates, which aim to control stars' lives and income and often include concealed clauses that disadvantage the signee (p. 3). These contracts may allow labels to overwork their K-pop stars and can have disastrous consequences, as demonstrated by Ladies' Code's over-booking and sleep-induced car crash in 2014 (Kim, 2018, p. 189). In addition, female stars are sometimes coerced into unwanted sexual acts in return for career-boosting

favors despite laws against it (Kwon, 2009, p. 3). K-pop contracts often lead to near-constant labor and a poor work-life balance (Kim, 2018, p. 189). Maintaining socially accepted beauty is also arduous work, as K-pop stars must balance plastic surgery and naturalness (Hazzan, 2016, p. 44). Seo et al. (2020) posit two labors of beautification: “The labor of production and the labor of concealment” (Seo et al., 2020, p. 609). While beauty standards and plastic surgery are integral components of South Korean society, K-pop stars’ pressure to look naturally beautiful only adds to the stress of the limelight. Ultimately, exhausting training and a constant expectation to please audiences weigh heavily on young K-pop stars’ physical and mental health (Tracy, 2020, p. 66).

Unfair contracts and poor work conditions may ensure short-term profits but are harmful to the Korean economy in the long-run, as many popular K-pop bands such as TVXQ ultimately disbanded over unfair contracts and discontent with shady compensation practices, including “profit sharing” (Park, 2011, p. 3). K-pop conglomerates perceive idols as cash cows (Kim, 2018, p. 190). Long-term contracts often collect 90 percent of K-pop stars’ revenue and are exceedingly difficult to escape (Kwon, 2009, p. 3), much like many music contracts in the United States (Hazzan, 2016, p. 44). Yet, these contracts do ensure that those involved in each stage of K-pop production receive compensation. In addition, K-pop stars themselves can be extraordinarily expensive to train, as conglomerates may easily spend \$5000 per month per student and may spend upwards of \$2.6 million on a K-pop star’s combined training and debut (Kim, 2018, p. 190). If media conglomerates and contracts were more transparent about compensation practices, and if working conditions in the K-pop industry improved, maintaining the unity of K-pop bands and retaining K-pop stars may create greater profits in the long run than unfair work environments and business models.

Societal expectations for the ideal body and face have made eating disorders prevalent in the K-pop industry. The expectations are certainly contradictory as well; female stars with large breasts and curvy bodies are the ‘standard,’ but these women are also expected to have slim figures (Seo et al., 2020, p. 610). In some cases, K-pop stars who gained weight or failed to lose weight were shamed in front of their fellow stars (Hazzan, 2016, p. 45). Through the K-pop industry, bodily expectations for the masses have also changed (Seo et al., 2020, p. 612). Indeed, the bodies of ordinary women in the Korean public are often “‘nearly identical’” (p. 612) to those in K-pop. In medical literature, Dr. Christina Rhee warns fellow physicians of Korean beauty fads involving overdrinking water while consuming minimal amounts of food to emulate K-pop stars’ diets (Rhee, 2019, p. 2013A). She details a case in which her patient, a Korean woman who was not a K-pop star, drank five liters of water a day while restricting salt intake (p. 2013A). This was the “‘Skeleton-skinny diet regime’” (p. 2013A) encouraged by a famous K-pop star who was not required to disclose potential health risks related to the diet (p. 2013A). In addition, according to Amber Liu, a K-pop star in the group f(x), she and her fellow stars were generally “‘taught to starve’” (Tracy, 2020, p. 67). While unhealthy beauty standards are prevalent in all cultures, the issue is arguably most widespread in South Korea due to the extreme societal pressure to perform and appear beautiful.

Current Policies Related to the Korean Entertainment Industry

Within the past decade, the South Korean government has enacted a number of constructive policies to regulate South Korea’s entertainment industry and improve the lives of K-pop stars. Actress Jang Ja-yeon’s suicide in March of 2009 galvanized South Korean politicians and regulators to scrutinize business practices in entertainment and create new laws to

protect individuals' physical and mental health (Kwon, 2009, p. 3). In the aftermath of Jang's suicide, South Korean Representative Choi Mun-sun spoke out against the "slave-like" entertainment contracts and claimed that they were human rights abuses (Kwon, 2009, p. 3). These contracts were later reformed in 2010, when the Supreme Court of South Korea ruled that contracts longer than 10 years were invalid (Park, 2011, p. 3), and the maximum contract period was capped at seven years (Park, 2011, p. 3). In addition, the Korea Fair Trade Commission (KFTC) reformed the contract process in 2011 and dictated that all entertainment contracts must use a standardized form, eliminating contract discrepancies and trickery to protect signees (Kwon, 2009, p. 3).

South Korea's Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism has suboffices dedicated to Hallyu and K-pop (Kelly 2019; Song, "South", 2020). This Ministry predominantly focuses on the exportation of K-pop and K-drama and ensuring adequate working conditions in the entertainment industry for adults and minors (Lee 2014; Song, "South", 2020). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, Korean media conglomerates met frequently with the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism to discuss the impact of the pandemic on Korean entertainment and to create alternative venues to generate revenue for the K-pop industry, both online and in-person (Song, "K-Pop", 2020).

In 2014, the Korean National Assembly passed legislation to protect minors in the Korean entertainment industry (Lee 2014). This legislation sets a maximum number of working hours for minors under 15 years old and for those between 15-18 years old and prevents minors from working between 10 PM and 6 AM, a measure intended to provide the aspiring stars with more time to sleep (Lee 2014). Through this legislation, the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism also debars minors from being coerced into dressing or dancing in a sexual manner,

which is enforced through fines of \$10,000 (Lee 2014). In addition, regulations passed in 2014 restrict “rogue agents” (Park 2014) in the K-pop industry from signing and taking advantage of minors (Park 2014). According to this legislation, all K-pop agencies must register with the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism to acquire authorization to recruit minors for K-pop training (Park 2014). Moreover, the regulations prohibit agents from coercing minors into selling sex (Park 2014).

Throughout the past decade, the South Korean government has made substantial progress in improving working conditions for adults and minors in Korea’s entertainment industry. There are opportunities for further improvement, however, and these opportunities will be discussed in the subsequent section.

Looking Forward: Potential Policies for the K-pop Industry

To address the K-pop industry’s deep-rooted issues, comprehensive changes must be enacted at all levels of the K-pop production process. Hazzan’s thoughts on the future of the K-pop industry are a good starting point: “As women’s influence on Korean society grows, [we] will hopefully see improvements in how K-pop idols are treated” (Hazzan, 2016, p. 48). In addition, Kim (2018) and Seo et al.’s (2020) arguments that the patriarchal nature of the Korean entertainment industry is partly to blame for K-pop stars’ unhealthy working conditions in both the physical and mental sense are useful in thinking about constructive solutions. From these perspectives, increasing the number of women with positions of power within Korean media conglomerates and K-pop labels may have a substantial and beneficial impact on the K-pop industry. Female executives may be able to lessen the amount of coercion in the K-pop industry—coercion to dress sexier, work more, and lose more weight. Increased female

representation at the executive level can be facilitated through a quota system, but such measures have already faced fierce opposition from Korean men who perceive themselves as being unfairly disadvantaged by quotas (Shim 2019). From my perspective, money is the best motivator. If South Korea were to pass a law providing companies that hire female executives with marginal tax breaks in proportion to the percentage of female executives working at the company, perhaps Korean companies would be incentivized to hire more women.

This solution would pose another issue, however: These women may be hired on the basis that they will overlook—or even support—male executives’ ability to dictate and coerce, which would defeat the objective of the legislation. To remedy this, I propose that Korean media conglomerates and labels that hire female executives from nations ranking in the top five most feminist countries according to the Gender Inequality Index (GII) would receive bonus tax breaks (“Gender Inequality Index” 2019). In 2019, these nations were Switzerland, Sweden, Denmark, Netherlands, and Norway (“Gender Inequality Index” 2019). Hypothetically, female executives who are native to these—or similar—countries would be more accustomed to and versed in feminism and would be more assertive and steadfast in improving and maintaining K-pop stars’ working conditions, especially those of female stars. To prevent this from depriving native Korean women fair opportunities to secure executive positions, however, a cap can be placed on the amount of tax breaks such a system would provide, thereby limiting the influx of foreign workers. This policy may make progress in reducing the patriarchal nature of the K-pop industry.

Reducing the harmful nature of forced ‘sexiness’ in K-pop performances could also be solved by appealing to conglomerate’s capitalist principles. A law could be created that dictates that if a K-pop star is required to dress sexily for a performance—and if the possibility of this

requirement was not explicitly disclosed in a signed contract—then the K-pop star in question is entitled to 2% more of his or her total earnings in addition to the take-home pay, which is on average 10% of the star's total earnings¹ (Kwon, 2009, p. 3). While sexual performances are an integral component of the adult K-pop industry, K-pop stars should be compensated for engaging in performative activities that they may not have originally consented to. This policy may also reduce the likelihood of potential lawsuits and band breakups, which are expensive in the long-term.

Addressing the unfairness of contracts in the K-pop industry could be remedied by imposing laws that ensure signees' due diligence during the contract signing process. There have been instances in which K-pop stars' contracts were written in foreign languages, such as KARA's contract in Japanese (Park, 2011, p. 3). A law could require that K-pop stars' attorneys read each contract and discuss their conclusions in-depth with the stars to eliminate the possibility of contract 'traps' in which the signee is unaware of the full consequences of the contract. For any prospective stars without attorneys, the government could provide attorney services for the contract review process using taxpayer revenue. In addition, this law would require that media conglomerates write contracts in the signees' preferred language, which may have already been remedied by the KFTC's standardization of Korean entertainment contracts in 2011 (Kwon, 2009, p. 3).

One additional policy to protect minors from suppressive K-pop contracts could be the creation of an education system for the parents of minors being recruited into the K-pop industry. This educational 'bootcamp' would be a two to three hour-long info session in which parents learn about the advantages and disadvantages concerning committing their children to intensive

¹ Media conglomerates take 90% of K-pop stars' total earnings, while stars retain 10% (Kwon 3).

K-pop training programs that feed into the K-pop industry. In addition, parents' attendance at this bootcamp would be mandatory every three years. Administrators of this program would work closely with South Korea's entertainment unions to ensure that they are accurately conveying the current state of the K-pop industry to audiences.

South Korea's general preference for slim but curvy female bodies with large breasts may be too engrained in Korean society to be likely to change—in the near future, at least. A policy that dissuades such preferences would be similar to Korea's quota system for females in the workplace; the policy would be opposed by many Korean men and women and would be interpreted as infringing on personal preferences, values, and beliefs regarding beauty and health. Korean people's preferences must evolve willingly for significant change to occur. Therefore, I believe that only if Koreans are influenced by 'body positivity' movements within South Korea and abroad will significant change occur. Legislation that may have a substantial impact on improving the health of the younger demographics of the Korean population could address dangerous dieting habits encouraged by K-pop stars, such as the dangerous diet that physician Christina Rhee describes (Rhee, 2019, p. 2013A). A potential policy could allocate government funds to TV, radio, and YouTube advertisements that disclose the possible side effects of popular diets espoused by stars in the K-pop industry. These would be similar to existing anti-smoking ads on TV networks. In addition, a team of government officials could be tasked with working with popular social media platforms such as YouTube and Instagram to add diet-related disclaimers to videos encouraging potentially harmful diets.

South Korea's K-pop has become a global phenomenon and has proven astonishingly lucrative for the Korean economy. While K-pop is a source of joy or livelihood for people around the world, it is important to recognize the 'dark side' of Korea's entertainment industry.

The South Korean government has made strides in regulating the K-pop industry in recent years, but further progress can be made in bettering working conditions, encouraging the growth of feminism and body-positivity, and ensuring that aspiring and current stars do not fall victim to unfair contracts and malicious business practices. Koreans must not overlook the working conditions in K-pop in favor of its moneymaking potential to ensure that K-pop's success is sustainable in the long-term.

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