

The Internal Causes of Pressure and Anxiety in the Living Environment of K-pop Idols

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Abstract:

K-pop idols play a crucial role in South Korea's cultural and economic development, with numerous new groups emerging annually. They present a polished image that promotes the country, but behind this facade lies significant mental health distress. This paper aims to analyze the long-term mental health issues faced by K-pop idols, highlighting the need for increased awareness and intervention to address these challenges. The study employs case analysis to investigate this issue. Reviewing historical materials and news reports identifies numerous instances of extreme behavior by idols suffering from mental illness. The paper focuses on a particularly representative case, detailing how intense industry pressures and personal struggles culminated in the idol's suicide. Further analysis of various cases reveals two primary causes of mental health issues among K-pop idols. This study aims to shed light on the harsh realities faced by K-pop idols and advocates for greater attention to their mental health, hoping to mitigate the severe consequences of this ongoing issue.

Keywords: K-pop idols; mental illnesses; psychological; depression.

1. Introduction

Korea is a country influenced by Confucian ideals that built a collectivist state, one that emphasizes consistency and ensures. As a result, the concept of mental health has been stigmatized in South Korea, because it is seen as a weakness. The stigma around mental health is problematic. This is because it is a barrier to people with mental disorders receiving help. People develop a fear of mental illness that prevents them from getting a proper diagnosis. This phenomenon is very common in South Korea, from the elderly to the children all have some degree of mental health problems. In addition. There is a special group of people in South Korea who have been suffering from psychological problems for many years this is the K-pop idol [1]. The term "K-pop" is most often used to refer to popular music that originated in Korea. K-pop originated in the 1990s. As K-pop idols, they need to go out into the world, not only singing and dancing to show themselves, many idols need to often participate in activities in various fields, such as TV series, movies, and variety shows, and even have many activities with fans.

As a result, Korean culture rapidly globalized through the Hallyu, which introduced Korean food, Korean dramas, and the most influential K-pop music to the world. Korean idols are constantly making music, promoting, touring,

and so on, driven by the company [2]. However, in recent years, an increasing number of South Korean idols have committed suicide due to the pressure and harsh criticism of living in the spotlight. But it seems that this has become a habit for the K-pop industry. On December 18, 2017, a K-pop idol of a very famous K-pop idol group committed suicide by carbon monoxide poisoning in his apartment. After his death, a suicide note that he left was found that read, "I am broken from inside. The depression that had been slowly eating me up finally devoured me and I couldn't defeat it" According to a reporter, this idol wrote that when he consulted his doctor about his depression, the doctor blamed his personality for his inability to combat the depression; on September 8, 2008, a South Korean celebrity killed himself by burning charcoal in a car which attracted extensive media coverage. With less and less voice and more and more coverage, Korean idols seem to be trapped in a predicament that cannot be released. At the same time, the survey results showed that after the death of the idol who used charcoal to commit suicide, the rate of using charcoal to commit suicide rose from 0.85 percent before death to 4.8 percent. The study suggests that the suicides of Korean idols can affect other South Koreans. Celebrity suicides trigger a copycat effect that is not only substantial but long-lasting [3]. In an attempt to reflect and improve this social phenomenon,

by analyzing this phenomenon and trend, this paper can study what causes a large number of Korean idols to have mental health problems and eventually go to extremes.

2. Background

Idol is one of the most popular professions in South Korea, and a large number of new idol groups make their debut every year. Many years ago, the living environment of Korean idols was very bad. Both male and female idols will suffer different degrees of persecution in physical and psychological aspects. So far, every year, a large number of idol group members are revealed to be suffering from various psychological problems such as depression. In the 2021 *Causes of Death Statistics* released by Statistics Korea at the end of September 2022, one set of data is particularly shocking: since 2007, suicide has surpassed other causes such as cancer and car accidents to become the number one cause of death among people aged 10 to 39 in South Korea. Korean society emphasizes success, achievement, and meeting social expectations, and individuals who do not meet these expectations may face social pressure and discrimination. In addition, the social stigma of mental health in Korean society can also discourage K-pop idols from seeking help or openly discussing their mental health issues, leading to untreated mental health issues that can eventually lead to suicide [3].

3. Case Analysis

News about the suicide of a member of a popular girl group that has been around for many years has caused a stir in South Korea. On October 14, 2019, a singer and actress from a famous idol group was found dead in her Seoul home. Before her death, she was suffering from severe depression as she was the subject of many hate comments. She had been suffering from severe depression before she killed herself. This is because she was the subject of many hateful comments. From 2013 to 2017, she was subjected to “slut” shaming and criticism for dating a rapper 14 years her senior. In 2015, she quit the idol group to focus on her solo acting career, but was accused of being “selfish”. She was later criticized for supporting the abolition of abortion in South Korea, and has been called a slut for choosing not to wear a bra, and has been called crazy and psychotic. As the online abuse continued, she gradually suffered from various psychological problems including depression. Nevertheless, she was put on a grueling work schedule, and her company, SM Entertainment, put her on the Korean variety show “Hate Comment Night,” where entertainers read their hate comments aloud, which only allowed her to relive all the negative feelings triggered by the cyberbullying that she had been received before. The

company’s repression and the public’s lack of understanding became the final straw that overwhelmed her [4]. The company she worked for, SM Entertainment, was known for its strict management style and crackdown on artists. Fans’ excessive expectations and demands on her make her encounter a lot of Internet violence only when she is doing what she wants to do.

4. Reason Analysis

4.1 Corporate Squeeze and Industry Competition Factors

Korean entertainment companies have been able to produce many famous and successful idol groups because these entertainment companies will be crazy to squeeze every idol until the last ounce of value in them. From unequal contracts and sky-high fines to unreasonable hours and intensity of practice, entertainment companies treat idols as commodity, forcing them to follow all the rules of the company and not show their true character. The first is the contracts that entertainment companies sign with their idols. ‘Slave contracts is a term associated with the contract an aspiring K-pop singer signs when joining a company. But to what extent is it a ‘slave contract?’ A slave contract is defined as a contract listed with terms and conditions that the artists deemed not fair or unjust [5, 6]. The contract works by starting a debt when the artist signs on, which grows as time goes by. This debt includes all expenses paid by the company: rent, food, electricity, haircuts, clothing, and all staff payments. These debts can be sky-high prices for young or newly minted idols. Therefore, they need to devote their entire income to debt repayment for a long time after they can earn money. On the contrary, if these idols can’t make their debut to become true idols who can perform in front of the public and be loved by the fans, they even have to bear these debts for the rest of their lives [7]. However, the company is not required to be transparent about its debt, known as the break-even point (BEP). This means that most K-pop idols have no way of knowing how much money they have made and how much they still owe the company. As the idol groups continue to release new albums and participate in new events, these new costs will again be included in the idol’s debt payments. This means that these idols’ debts will continue to grow. As a result, it may take years for idols to reach the break-even point to make them debt-free [7, 8].

Overnight practice is required. For example, CL sent demo tapes to YG Entertainment every 3 months for 4 years to show her progress, and Rain had to dance for 2 hours straight to impress the CEO. The auditioning process can be so intense that it has led to some participants

developing depression, including Kiseop, who had suicidal thoughts due to his many failed auditions. After the allotted practice time each day, many trainees are required to practice an additional 3-4 hours. The total length of practice a day can be as long as 15 hours or more [7]. This kind of intense practice is so common in Korean entertainment companies. Some trainees will even choose to practice overnight and only lie on the floor of the practice room for a short rest to get a good score in the month-end exams [9]. At the same time, they also need to control their diet in strict accordance with the requirements of the company. Marco, the first completely non-Asian trainee said on his YouTube channel that ‘we used to have lessons from midnight to 6 am’. Many trainees are still in school while they are training, which gives them more work to accomplish. Although some people drop out of school to attend only trainee training, this may prove problematic when they retire [7].

4.2 High Demand for Fans and Public Opinion

For K-pop idols, everything they have comes from their fans. Therefore, the idols must always keep a good image to satisfy the fans’ fantasy of them. Hence, fans can enjoy them for a long time. However, fans’ love for their idols can also hurt their physical and mental health. For these fans of K-pop idols, their high cost of effort means they need to get a high-quality return, which means that they should obtain some positive feedback from their favorite idols. As a result, if these idols do some things they don’t like or cannot receive, they will use online violence against their idols [10]. For example, the fans of an idol group, because they felt that the members of the group did not have a good performance in the concert, hurled massive abuse on the Internet and even ran to the idols’ social media accounts to verbally bully them. To destroy the pure girl set imposed on her by others, a member of a popular girl group fell in love with an uncle who was 14 years older than her. She started to post sexy pictures without underwear and fighting the outside world by degrading herself. But society and the public did not let her go. In those years on the Korean net search for her name, search all is scandalous. People said she relied on “sex” to catch eyeballs, and she “no bra” is indecent. A group of people who have never met her and have no idea about her past have been harassing her on the Internet for a long time, even sending her death curses in her studio. But in fact, the reason for posting large-scale photos and making intimate movies is because she thought that men can openly discuss sex and desire, and why not women talk about these things? For example, she is often photographed as “no bra” because she believes that underwear is an acces-

sory and women should not be restricted. She has been speaking for women for a long time but is discriminated against and oppressed by society, which makes her forced into a dilemma. After a long time, she had mental problems [4].

Sasaeng fan—a stigmatized fan identity that refers to individuals who are unhealthily interested in the personal lives of K-pop idols. This group of people, called “sasaeng fans”, will try to obtain their favorite idols’ private information, such as mobile phone numbers, home addresses, and so on [11]. Some crazy people will sit at the door of the idols’ homes to listen to them, and even some people will break into the idols’ homes and try to use the idol’s used items or steal the idols’ personal belongings to achieve their perverted possessives [3]. On January 28, 2011, Singapore’s The New Paper reported that Leeteuk and Heechul, two members of the Korean boy band Super Junior, were involved in a traffic accident the previous evening during rush hour. Eight fan vehicles were trying to get close to the van with the band members, resulting in a six-vehicle pile-up, including the idols’ van [11].

5. Conclusion

K-pop idols are an important support for the development of South Korea, and a large number of new idol groups appear every year. As a sector of South Korea’s entertainment scene, K-pop idols use their polished looks to showcase the country. K-pop idols are not all they appear to be. The intense work and pressure from all sides make K-pop idols suffer from mental illness for years. The purpose of this article is to analyze the causes of K-pop idols’ long-term mental health problems and try to clarify this phenomenon and problems to call for more people to pay attention to this problem, as a result, it can improve the extremely malignant performance of Korean K-pop idols after a long period of mental illness. This study adopts the method of case analysis for data investigation and analysis. Through extensive searching of historical materials, this research found many news stories about K-pop idols who committed extreme acts due to mental illness and then selected the most representative and influential case from many specific cases to introduce in detail. Through the experience of the K-pop idol in this case, it is concluded that she suffered from psychological problems which eventually led to her suicide. Finally, based on other examples found in different periods and different idols, the research draws out the reasons that can best reflect the mental illness of Korean K-pop idols and analyzes and demonstrates these reasons in detail. Through the analysis of the causes of the stress and anxiety of the living environment of Korean idols, it is concluded that the first rea-

son is corporate oppression and industry competition. This causes Korean idols to feel limited in material matters and unable to meet their real needs. As a result, it makes idols feel miserable and uneasy. Eventually, it leads to extremes; The second reason is the high demand of fans and public opinion. This can lead to Korean idols being mentally bullied by fans and the masses. This can cause idols to be mentally tortured and eventually commit extreme acts. Therefore, this study can try to change this trend by revealing the real environment of Korean idol groups and bringing more people's attention to this phenomenon.

This study can more intuitively show the current situation of K-pop idol groups and call for more people to pay attention to this phenomenon. At the same time, this study also reflects the urgent need for Korean idol groups to change this situation to some extent. Subsequent studies will further investigate and study, and try to help Korean idols who suffer from mental illness overcome the difficulties.

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