

The Korean Pop Industrial Complex

Within the past decade, Korean Pop, more commonly known as K-Pop, has rapidly become a global sensation. South Korean artists have hit the Billboard Hot 100 chart at least eight times. In 2019, BTS became the first K-Pop group to be nominated for a Grammy. Adored due to its distinctive blend of catchy tunes, clean choreography, and glamorous idols, the K-Pop industry has grown along with the rise of Hallyu, a Chinese term which describes the popularity of South Korean culture internationally.¹ Via Korean pop, drama, skincare regimens, and more, South Korea has become a fixture in popular culture worldwide.²

In an increasingly globalized society, many think that the rise of K-Pop is a force of moral good. Cultural globalization allows people from all parts of the world to understand one another and appreciate different ideas, meanings, and values. In turn, this enables the ability to empathize and relate to others, no matter where they are from. K-Pop is also a way for South Korea to develop its “soft power”, which describes the “intangible power a country wields through its image, rather than through hard force,” such as military or economic power.³

However, for K-Pop performers, the journey to fame is a grueling one. Stories of tired performers putting up a happy front to excitedly greet fans is not uncommon in an industry where exploitative contracts, demanding beauty ideals, and even human rights violations are mainstay. K-Pop performers work long hours which go largely undercompensated, as the money their content earns is often funneled back into corporate hands or toward chipping away at looming debt.⁴ Plastic surgery, too, is an open secret in the industry.⁵ Many trainees are expected to go under the knife, with the most common procedures designed to achieve highly-coveted features like double eyelids or a straighter nose. Of additional concern, sexual exploitation is a quiet phenomenon and a common truth for women in Korean entertainment. Young performers are often taken advantage of by power brokers behind closed doors. In a culture which often stigmatizes sexuality, these scandals are obscured from public view.⁶ Moreover, the K-Pop industry exists to meet and cater to the demands of a hungry fanbase, who are consistently starved for new content. Fans are often criticized for propagating a system which treats its artists poorly.

Still, many assert that K-Pop is a net good. Although the exploitative habits of the industry are suspect, performers voluntarily enter their contracts. Additionally, Korean culture emphasizes work ethic. According to the OECD, “South Koreans work more hours per week on average than all but one other country, and almost 50% more than famously industrious Germany.”⁷ To criticize the K-Pop industry based on the dedication of performers, some argue, would be inconsiderate of differing cultural values.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Do listeners have a moral obligation to stop supporting the K-Pop industry if they know that performers are mistreated?
2. If people voluntarily enter contracts, does it matter that the terms of the contract are exploitative or otherwise unethical? How can we distinguish between coercion and voluntary agreement?
3. Is the entertainment industry inherently exploitative?

¹ Vox, "How K-pop became a global phenomenon"

² MartinRoll, "Korean Wave (Hallyu) - Rise of Korea's Cultural Economy & Pop Culture"

³ Nye, Joseph, "Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics"

⁴ Entertainment Cheatsheet, "The Shocking Dark Side of BTS and Other K-Pop Groups"

⁵ The Atlantic, "The K-Pop Plastic Surgery Obsession"

⁶ Vox, "K-pop is being rocked by a sex scandal. It's part of a bigger societal problem"

⁷ CNN, "South Koreans are working themselves to death. The government hopes to change that"

