

Bachelor's Programme in International Business

Idols & Ideals: Ethical challenges in the Korean music industry

Sofia Leinonen

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Author Sofia Leinonen

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Abstract

This thesis examines the ethical challenges within the Korean music industry, focusing on various aspects including K-pop idol training, beauty standards, mental health concerns, contractual issues, fan culture, and idol survival shows. The study employs a secondary data analysis approach by researching existing literature, industry reports, and media materials to gain insights into these ethical dilemmas. Through content analysis, key themes and patterns related to each category are identified and explored.

The analysis reveals unethical training systems and strict regulations imposed on K-pop trainees, leading to mental health consequences such as stress and anxiety. The perpetuation of ideal physical appearances, including extreme dieting and cosmetic surgery, highlights societal pressures artists face. Contractual issues, such as exploitative "slave contracts," and the impact of fan behaviour, particularly invasive actions by sasaeng fans, are also studied. Additionally, idol survival shows are analysed in relation to their ethical implications on participants and the industry.

Overall, this thesis contributes to understanding of the ethical issues challenging the Korean music industry, offering insights into industry practices, artist well-being, and fan culture. The findings underscore the need for ethical considerations and reforms within the industry to ensure the welfare of artists and the integrity of business operations.

Keywords Ethics. Business ethics. K-pop. Music.

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Tämä opinnäytetyö tutkii eettisiä ongelmia Etelä-Korean musiikkiteollisuudessa. Työssä tulee esille eri näkökulmia, kuten idolivalmennus, kauneushanteet, mielenterveys, sopimusoikeudelliset kysymykset, fanikulttuuri ja idoli tosi-tv ohjelmat. Tutkielmassa käytetään toissijaisten tietolähteiden analyysimenetelmää tutkimalla olemassa olevaa kirjallisuutta, raportteja ja mediamateriaaleja. Sisällönanalyysin avulla tekstissä tunnistetaan ja tutkitaan kunkin kategorian keskeisiä teemoja ja malleja.

Tutkielma paljastaa epäeettisiä valmennusohjelmia ja sääntöjä, joita K-pop idolit joutuvat käymään läpi. Lisäksi tekstissä pohditaan Ihanteellisen ulkonäön, kuten äärimmäisten dieettien ja kauneusleikkausten aiheutuvista haitoista artistien henkiselle hyvinvoinnille. Tutkielmassa käydään läpi myös sopimusoikeudellisia kysymyksiä, kuten hyväksikäyttäviä "orjasopimuksia", ja fanien käyttäytymisen vaikutuksia, erityisesti sasaeng-fanien ongelmallista käytöstä. Lisäksi idoli tosi-tv-ohjelmia analysoidaan niiden eettisten vaikutusten osalta osallistujiin.

Opinnäytetyö tarjoaa syvällisen ymmärryksen Korean musiikkiteollisuuden kohtaamista eettisistä haasteista, tarjoten näkemyksiä teollisuuden käytännöistä, artistien hyvinvoinnista ja fanikulttuurista. Tulokset korostavat tarvetta eettisiin harkintoihin ja uudistuksiin alalla, jotta artistien hyvinvointi ja eettinen toiminta.

Avainsanat Etiikka. Bisnes Etiikka. K-pop. Musiikki.

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Preface and acknowledgements

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Mikkeli, 15 April 2024
Sofia Leinonen

1 Introduction

The Korean music industry is a widely known global phenomenon, standing at the intersection of commerce, creativity, and culture. From the eye-catching music videos to catchy tunes, K-pop has captivated audiences worldwide transcending language barriers and geographical boundaries. Yet, beneath the glitz and glamour lies a complex landscape fraught with ethical challenges and dilemmas that demand closer examination.

This thesis researches the ethical challenges within the Korean music industry, providing information on the various issues faced by entertainment agencies, artists, and stakeholders. While K-pop has experienced unprecedented success globally, concerns exist regarding the exploitative training systems, harmful beauty standards, obsessive fan culture, mental health issues and overall treatment of artists. These issues underscore the need for critical analysis of ethics within the industry to foster positive change and ensure the well-being of everyone involved.

The significance of the Korean music industry demands a deeper understanding of its ethical challenges. Therefore, the central research question guiding this thesis is: What ethical challenges prevail in the Korean music industry and what are their implications for stakeholders involved?

The objectives of the research are as follow:

- Critically analyse the diverse ethical challenges within the Korean music industry, including exploitative training systems, beauty standards, contractual complications, and mental health concerns.

- Analyse the systemic factors driving these challenges, explaining the power dynamics, cultural norms, and industry practices that perpetuate exploitation and inequality within the industry.
- Propose recommendations for promoting ethical business practices, fostering a more sustainable and equitable industry, and empowering stakeholders to address systemic issues of exploitation, inequality, and injustice.

This research holds significant prominence in contributing to the ongoing discourse on ethics in the entertainment industry, especially the ever-growing K-pop industry. The findings and recommendations illustrated in the text are intended to add to the discourse and inspire stakeholders to prioritize well-being, transparency and social responsibility by illuminating various issues and their negative effect.

To conclude, the thesis seeks to deepen the understanding of the ethical challenges within the Korean music industry in hopes to create a more ethical, equitable and sustainable industry for stakeholders, artist and audiences worldwide by addressing challenges head-on.

2 Literature review

2.1 Introduction

This literature review explores ethical challenges in the Korean music industry, concentrating on the rigorous training systems, beauty standards leading to extreme measures and results, controversies in popular idol survival shows, and the impact of mental health issues. Additionally, it explores the contentious issue of "slave contracts" through legal disputes involving groups like EXO, Omega X, and B.A.P. The review also addresses ethical challenges posed by fan culture, predominantly the invasive actions of sasaeng behavior, exposing the darker side of an extreme fandom.

2.2 Literature Review

Korean pop music, also known as K-pop, has emerged as a powerful and influential force in the competitive global music industry. From 2012 hit 'Gangnam Style' to the Global powerhouse that is boy band BTS, K-pop has seen a rise in popularity and fanbase alike, the industry having had a global market value of approximately 10 billion US dollars in 2021 (Eser, 2023). With its infectious melodies, visually stunning performances, and a fan base that spans continents, the Korean music industry, known colloquially as Hallyu, has garnered immense popularity, being the 7th largest music market in the world in 2023 (Amos, 2023). A study by Messerlin and Shin (2017) challenges prevailing explanations and provides a nuanced understanding of K-pop's rise, positioning it as a global force in the music industry. The authors emphasize the growth and internationalization of K-pop exports, highlighting the industry's success in capturing global audiences. However, beneath the glamorous surface lies a complex web of ethical challenges that demand critical exploration and scholarly attention.

This literature review examines the multifaceted scene of the K-Pop, discussing the ethical dilemmas within the prominent industry. As the business gains notoriety on the global stage, the ethical consequences of its practices come under scrutiny. From factory-made identities and restrictive beauty standards to allegations of contractual slavery and instances of artist exploitation and the prevalence of mental health issues, the Korean music scene faces many ethical challenge (Valge & Hinsberg, 2019)

By integrating perceptions from scholarly works, industry reports, and media materials, this literature review aims to provide a comprehensive overview of business ethics surrounding the Korean music industry using various case studies. Through a critical examination of existing literature, I seek to identify key themes, patterns, and gaps in understanding, laying the groundwork for a nuanced exploration of the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead. This literary review acts as a prelude to a broader inquiry into the ethical issues and practices within the prominent industry, aiming to go beyond the flashing lights and captivating choreographies.

2.3 Ethics and business ethics

Understanding ethics is crucial when discussing ethical business practices. Dimmock and Fisher (2017) consider various ethical viewpoints and challenges modern companies face, such as the importance of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). In examining the ethical environment of the Korean music industry, parallels can be illustrated with De George's (1994) assertion that ethics, though universal, are often influenced by cultural variations.

Moriarty (2021) briefly defines business ethics as the study of professional practices and the codes of conduct managing business activities, emphasizing its intricate nature and complex development. This definition summarizes the myriad of ethical considerations faced by industries such as K-pop, which operate within a global scale. Damian and Cohen (2010)

investigate ethical reasoning, emphasizing its separation from mere rules and conventions. Additionally, it is important to note that business ethics can be used to determine whether a company's conduct and decisions are appropriate (Stanwick, 2014) Their insights provide a foundational framework for understanding and addressing ethical challenges within an influential industry such as the Korean music industry.

Building upon the business context, it is time to examine the various ethical challenges faced in the world of K-Pop. This section will explore crucial issues such as mental health concerns, contractual complexities, and the pervasive issue of artist exploitation. Jeong (2020) details how various K-pop idols have shed light on the strict rules imposed on trainees aspiring to become idols. The rigorous training system, lasting a decade or more, contains rules such as isolated meals for male and female trainees, a strict no-dating policy until three years post-debut, limited access to personal phones, a severe diet plan with prohibited foods, and weekly weight checks posted publicly. This study discusses the challenges faced by trainees and the extreme measures taken to comply with agency regulations.

2.4 Background

The roots of the K-pop can be traced back to the 1990s, when it initially gained popularity as a vibrant and distinctive musical subculture within South Korea (Li, 2022). This is also brought forth by Oh and Lee (2014), where it is identified that before the appearance of the legendary boy group Seo Taji & Boys, the South Korean Government was not receptive to similar types of popular music. During the 90's, however, the industry began refining its unique blend of irresistible melodies, choreography, and visually captivating performances. A substantial turning point ensued with the global breakthrough of Psy's "Gangnam Style" in 2012, the song's music video being the first in the world to receive billion views on popular video streaming service YouTube (Ng, 2015). Lenze (2015) highlights the role of online platforms like

YouTube, Tumblr, and Instagram in fostering cultural interactions and mentions the significant impact of South Korean cultural exports, such as Psy's "Gangnam Style," on global audiences. This iconic song marked South Korea's presence on the international music scene and opened doors for other K-pop acts. The industry's shift from regional success to global recognition accelerated, leading to the emergence of influential groups such as BTS (Seppälä, 2022).

2.4.1 The Big Four

The Korean music industry is the home of many entertainment companies, but only a selected few belong to the “the big four”. These companies are respectively SM Entertainment, YG Entertainment, JYP Entertainment and HYBE (Park, 2023), managing the most successful artists and generating substantial profits. Park (2023, p. 2201) continues on to state that “currently, as of 2023, all four agencies experience at least a 20% increase in their revenues. HYBE Entertainment, YG Entertainment, and JYP Entertainment generated 1st quarter operating profits of 41.5%, 461.5%, and 118.8% in 2023”. The success of the “Big Four” has been analyzed in many reports. Oh and Lee (2014) describe how the founder of SM Entertainment, Lee Soo Man, saw the potential of K-pop and eventually made one of the most successful Korean entertainment companies, followed by YG, JYP and HYBE. HYBE, the parent company of BTS, and arguably the most successful of the four, reported a robust performance in the third quarter of 2023, generating ₩537.86 billion (approximately US\$403.19 million) in revenue (Smith, 2023).

2.5.1 K-pop idol training

The K-pop training system, renowned for producing global idols with immense talent and charisma, has long been under scrutiny for its intense nature and the toll it takes on the mental and physical health of aspiring artists.

Kim (2018) describes how K-pop idols are not only expected to be talented singers, but also to excel in all aspects of media performance which includes cultivating a perfect persona for the public eye among other aspects such as dancing and marketability in shows and promotions. While the system aims to cultivate well-rounded performers, the negative sides and mental health implications of the training process are significant.

As a former trainee, Euodias, gave startling insight into the training process of K-pop idols. She describes how dating was banned, and being gay was not accepted (Sunio, 2020). The training period can last from a few months to eleven years (Sunio, 2020). This is corroborated in multiple articles written on the training systems of K-pop idols. In an article for Metro (Baillie, 2018), famous members of boyband BTS state that they had to practice singing and dancing twelve to fifteen hours per day. Padget (2017) explains that many different instances of exploitative training processes, such as Jessica Jung, a former member of Girls' Generation, training to be an idol ever since she was eight years old.

Saif (2022) argues that child exploitation is prevalent in the industry due to idols being signed on from such a young age. Physical fitness, another crucial aspect, introduces its own set of challenges. The expectation for idols to maintain peak physical condition for intricate choreography and stage performances can lead to physical exhaustion and, subsequently, mental fatigue. The pressure to conform to idealized beauty standards prevalent in the industry further compounds the stress on trainees.

2.5.2 Idol Survival Shows

In order to debut, many hopeful trainees enter what are known as "Idol Survival Shows" which, simply put, are reality competition shows. After the skyrocketing popularity of Produce 101, many shows, such as Queendom and I-LAND, have received worldwide attention due to their compelling storylines

and insides into the training process of K-pop idols (Debbarma, 2023). However, these shows are not without their scandals.

The disbandment of X1, a boy band formed through the "Produce X 101" survival show, serves as a prominent case study reflecting the consequences of vote-rigging scandals. After the revelation of manipulation in the show's voting results, the management companies of X1 decided to disband the group due to the inability to reach a consensus on its future (Dong, 2020). This incident underscores the devastating impact of vote manipulation on the careers of aspiring K-pop idols and the complexities involved in managing such crises within the entertainment industry.

The legal fallout resulting from the manipulation of voting outcomes on survival shows has significant implications for the producers involved. In the case of "Produce X 101," producers Ahn Joon-young and Kim Yong-beom were sentenced to jail for their role in manipulating votes and accepting bribes from talent agencies (Lim, 2020; Kim 2020). The court's decision reflects a growing acknowledgment of the severity of such manipulations and emphasizes the need for accountability within the K-pop industry.

2.5.3. Mental Health & Beauty Standards

When discussing mental health in the K-pop industry, it is impossible to separate it from the originating country. South Korea has the world's fourth highest suicide rates, with 28.6 suicides per 100 thousand people predicted in 2024 (Wilson, 2024). Choi (2023) explores the importance of mental health literacy (MHL) programs in addressing the mental health needs of children and adolescents in South Korea, highlighting the alarmingly high suicide rates even further. (Elsa and Palat (, 2023) emphasize the need to understand the prevalence of suicide in South Korea, ; it is essential to consider the historical context as they discuss opinions from Korean mental

health professionals concerning high-profile suicide cases among Korean celebrities such as Jonghyun from Shinee and Moonbin from ASTRO.

The passing of Kim Jonghyun was a pivotal moment in examining the mental health scene surrounding K-pop (Saeji and Al. 2018) as described by the following quote: "For many fans of Jonghyun, this process centered around trying to understand why Jonghyun would have taken his own life, causing them to explore deeply and often for the first time the dark side of Kpop and Korean society." (Saeji & Al. 2018. p. 9.)

Many influential K-pop artists, such as BTS, have had extending to social campaigns such as "Love Myself" with UNICEF to promote societal well-being (Hermanto & Salindeho, 2020). In addition to the harrowing work, it is argued that mixed-raced artists have a more difficult time in achieving success in the industry due to the cultural landscape in South Korea. (Kim. 2023.)

Lee's (2016) study of the Korean plastic surgery phenomenon serves as a lens to scrutinize the broader themes of ethics and representation within the Korean music industry. In an episode of MBC's show 'I live alone', a member of popular girl group Twice, revealed that she was put on strict diets during her training period. This is not an uncommon practice within the K-pop industry. In an interview for BBC news (2018), Euodias, a former trainee, says that the management team weighted hopeful candidates in front of everyone, while announcing the result to the whole room.

The intense pressure to maintain physical appearance leads to severe diets, such as the "Paper Cup Diet," which involves eating way less calories than the average human needs to lose weight and demanding exercise regimes (Domzalski, 2017). Way, a former Crayon Pop member, revealed the struggle to adhere to dietary restrictions and the consequences of violating rules (Soheili, 2019). Tran (2023) researches the phenomenon of K-pop

idols influencing global fashion trends and the subsequent impact on fans, concentrating on the IU Diet, a dietary regimen followed by South Korean superstar IU, and how fans engage with it through YouTube's "diet challenges."

Benjamin (2018) describes his interview with a former member of South Korean Girl group 2NE1, Minzy, and details instances of the CEO of YG calling the group members "Really ugly" and the pressure the girls faced from the public. South Korea is known for its rigid beauty standards that affect K-pop idols and the country as a whole.

Furthermore, around 10% of the 51 million people of South Korea has had cosmetic procedures done (Paek, 2023). In a comprehensive article, Wang (2024) details the many desirable aspects K-pop idols and their management companies wish to attain, such as white skin, double eyelids, pointed nose and v-line jaw. Many other publications, such as Boman (2019) that states the importance of attractive features to companies and the general public.

According to an interview with KyuHyun, a member of the boyband Super Junior, he stated, "I didn't have double eyelids in the past. So, my agency at the time of debut made me get double eyelid surgery" (Kyuhyun, as cited in Lee, 2023). In order to protect young K-pop trainees, The Seoul City Council has implemented a groundbreaking ordinance, the "Seoul City Ordinance on the Protection and Support of the Rights of Youth Culture and Art Performers" which was discussed in various media outlets. The legislation proposed by Councilman Kim Gyu-Nam addresses concerns about forced weight loss and plastic surgery within the industry. The ordinance allows for psychological assessments, counseling, and early intervention, aiming to protect teenage idol trainees physically and mentally. The move responds to reports of stringent weight management practices in the K-pop industry and recognizes the challenges faced by young talents. It also outlines plans for career

counseling to assist former idol trainees in exploring new paths beyond debut success (General, 2024).

2.5.4 “Slave Contracts” & Lawsuits

Slave contracts – that is what many contracts between artists and their respective companies have been called. Throughout many years already, the term “slave contract” has been the talk of the town amongst industry professionals and fans alike, when discussing ethics in K-pop. Huth (2021) explains in her research paper on the Korean music industry how the term "slave contracts" refers to contracts that have been criticized for their perceived exploitative nature, where artists, predominantly trainees and new talents, face severe terms and conditions that restrict their freedom and financial benefits. These contracts have been known to last up to 13 years (Fulara, 2021).

SM Entertainment has had several notable cases of high-profile legal disputes with their artists. South Korean-Chinese boyband EXO has had not only one, but four lawsuits raised against the company (Gohil, 2023). Gardner (2023) explains in an article for Koreaboo how members of EXO – Kris Wu, Lu Han and Huang Zitao filed lawsuits against SM Entertainment in 2014 and 2015, respectively, seeking contract nullification. The lawsuits highlighted concerns related to the length and terms of their contracts and issues regarding profit distribution, schedules, and overall poor treatment.

More recently, three remaining members of the group EXO - Chen, Baekhyun, and Xiumin took legal action against SM Entertainment, citing what was described by a law firm as “slave contracts” that lacked payment transparency and imposed unreasonably long contract requirements (Benjamin, 2023). Since then, both parties have successfully resolved their contractual disputes and made apparent changes to the contracts of the trio, though details have not been disclosed.

In 2022, K-pop group Omega X, consisting of 11 members, took legal action against management company SPIRE Entertainment, stating physical, verbal and sexual harassment by their ex-CEO, named Kang Seong-hee (Choi, 2022). The band disclosed, that the abuse had continued throughout their global tour, prompting them to take the initial steps to terminate their exclusive contract with SPIRE Entertainment. In January 2023, the band posted on their Instagram account, thanking fans for their support and announcing their victory against SPIRE Entertainment (Choi, 2022; Chin, 2023). The ordeal had brought to light, once again, the challenges artists face in the Korean entertainment industry.

Debuting in 2012, boy group B.A.P took the K-pop industry by storm with various hits such as “Warrior and “One Shot”, only to sue their management company TS Entertainment for unfair treatment and financial abuse (Wilson, 2022). Lee (2014) explains how the group was only paid very little, approximately 20,000 US dollars per member for the three years they were active. Both parties eventually reached a settlement, but this is not the only case of underpaid work in the K-pop industry.

Similarly, Stellar, a Korean girl group, claimed to have been only paid 9,000 US dollars in the 7 years they were active, despite making the company profit through various hits (Kay, 2020) while being unwittingly over-sexualized and forced to perform in a manner the members felt uncomfortable with. All of the legal cases mentioned in this section of the literature review highlight the importance of contract transparency and fair labor practices within the music industry.

2.5.5. Fan Culture

Fan culture is a phenomenon that thrives on the committed engagement of audiences with numerous media forms, both online and offline. Lamerichs (2018) provides a thorough overview of fandom and its diverse activities within the field of fan studies. While being a ‘fan’ is a common practice, many

ethical issues arise from a certain group of K-pop fans, harming artists and other consumers' reputations. The following citation from a website for the International Centre for Defense and Security describes how problematic fan culture can be created:

“The power of the public and K-pop companies to dictate the behavior of stars and the objectified image of idols cultivated by the companies have created an at times problematic fan culture that is obsessively possessive of artists who are no longer seen as ordinary human beings.” (Valge & Hinsberg, 2019)

Furthermore, Iwicka (2018) details the phenomenon of sasaeng behavior, categorised by invasive and extreme actions by fans towards K-pop idols. This type of problematic fan has plagued the industry, posing serious threats to the personal lives and well-being of artists. Numerous incidents involving popular groups and idols highlight the severity of the issue, such as sending blood letters to artists and breaking into their hotel rooms.

2.6 Review: Gaps in information

While extant literature explores exploitative contracts and artist mistreatment, there is also a need for an in-depth analysis that could bring forth the unique perspectives of artists, which could be achieved by interviewing them. However, this might be difficult to produce, as contracts and other cultural issues might prevent artists from stepping up with knowledge of mistreatment.

2.7 Summary & Conceptual Framework

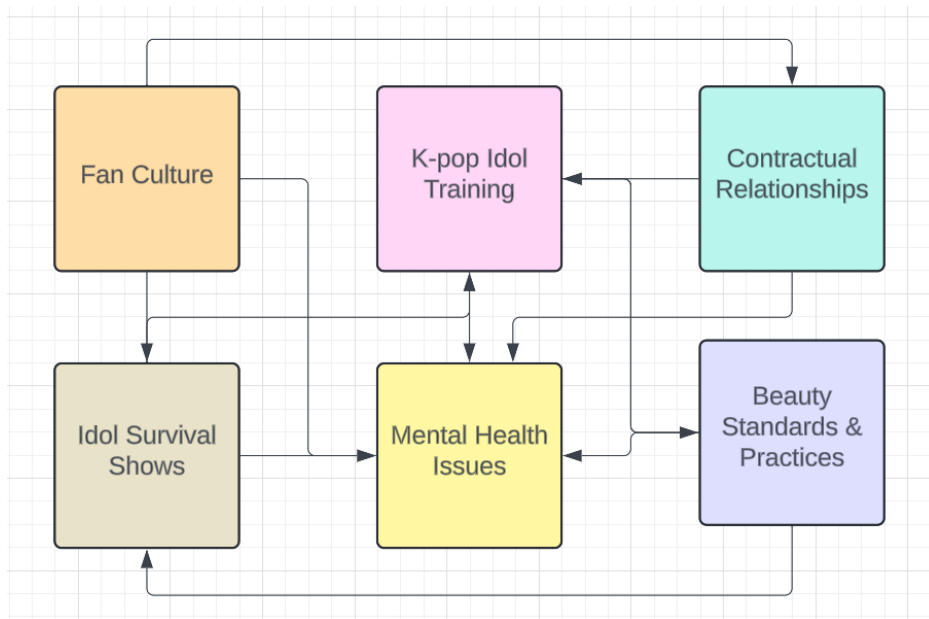
This review examines various aspects, including the K-pop training system, beauty standards, idol survival shows, mental health concerns, "slave contracts" and legal disputes, and fan culture. The training system's intense

nature and its impact on mental health, beauty standards leading to extreme diets and plastic surgery pressures, idol survival shows' controversies, and the industry's struggles with mental health crises are examined. The review also highlights the prevalence of "slave contracts," drawing attention to legal disputes with groups like EXO, Omega X, and B.A.P; while discussing the problematic aspects of fan culture, particularly sasaeng behavior.

The review identifies gaps in existing literature, emphasizing the need for in-depth analysis through interviews with artists. Future research suggestions incorporate a comparative analysis of ethical practices among major entertainment companies and investigate the ramifications of K-pop training systems on artists' careers and lives.

Finally, the literature review aims to contribute to understanding K-pop industry ethics, drawing from diverse sources and case studies. However, limitations such as potential bias in sources, language barriers, and reliance on secondary data have to be acknowledged. The findings set the stage for future inquiries into business ethics, artist treatment, and human rights within the Korean music industry.

The conceptual framework below aims to broaden the understanding of interconnectedness within these categories. It helps identify systemic problems and highlights the holistic nature of ethical issues prevalent in the industry. The conceptual framework creates a visual representation of the most prevalent issues and contributes to the depth of the analysis in that way.



2.8 Conclusion

This literature review has shed light on many ethical concerns in the K-Pop industry from restrictive beauty standards to exploitative contracts. It has unveiled the dark side of an industry that is otherwise known by unparalleled success, while still grappling with questions concerning human rights and questionable ethical practices. Understanding these issues is imperative not only for the continued well-being of artists but also for the reputation of a renowned industry. As the 7th largest music industry, it is important to understand how it influences perceptions and shapes the future trajectory of the music industry as a whole.

3 Methodology

This section defines the methodological approach employed to research the ethical challenges within the Korean music industry in this thesis. The research is based on secondary data exclusively with insights drawn from a variety of sources including peer-reviewed academic journals, industry reports and media outlets. The data analysis section explains the usage of content analysis and synthesizes the themes found in extant literature. Ethical considerations are central to this research, with a commitment to responsible use of secondary data through obedience to ethical guidelines for citation and proper referencing of sources.

3.1 Overall Methodology

As states above, this research implements an exclusive secondary data analysis approach into the ethical challenges within the Korean music industry. A comprehensive and in-depth investigation was conducted by synthesizing and examining existing literature, industry reports, and media materials. This method offers a thorough understanding of ethical issues in the Korean music industry.

Secondary data was composed from a wide spectrum of dependable sources, including peer-reviewed academic journals, industry reports from reputable organizations and articles from recognised media outlets. The diversity in sources ensures a nuanced exploration of the ethical dilemmas faced by the Korean music industry. The analysis encompasses a broad range of sources, capturing the perspectives of industry experts, artists, legal professionals, and other stakeholders as presented in existing literature and media reports.

3.2 Data Analysis

The analysis involves a meticulous examination of the collected secondary data. Within the context of my thesis, content analysis refers to a organised method used to analyse textual, visual, or audio content to identify patterns, recurring themes, and key insights related to ethical challenges within the Korean music industry. Content analysis involves coding and categorizing data to uncover underlying meanings and messages present in the content (Bengtsson, 2016). The themes used for this research are stated below.

- **K-pop idol training:** Examining the experiences of trainees within entertainment agencies, concentrating on the intensity of training programs, rules and regulations imposed, and the effect on trainees' well-being.
- **Beauty Standards:** Exploring content related to the perpetuation of ideal physical appearances, including discussions on extreme dieting, cosmetic surgery, and societal pressures on artists to adapt.
- **Mental Health Concerns:** Linking content related to mental health challenges faced by artists, including discussions on depression, anxiety, stress, and the impact of industry difficulties on mental well-being.
- **Contractual Issues:** Analyzing content related to contractual agreements between artists and management companies, concentrating on issues of exploitation, transparency, and power dynamics.

- **Fan Culture:** Exploring content related to fan behavior, including discussions on ‘sasaeng’ activities, ethical implications of fan-artist interactions and invasion of privacy.

Ethical considerations primarily revolve around the responsible use of secondary data. The study followed ethical guidelines for citation and proper referencing of sources, ensuring the integrity and accuracy of the information utilized in the analysis. The objective is to contribute to the ethical discourse surrounding the Korean music industry through a comprehensive and ethically conducted review of existing data.

4 Findings

The findings from the analysis of secondary data regarding the ethical landscape of the Korean music industry reveal a multitude of concerning issues that affect artists' well-being, rights, and overall industry dynamics. The following paragraphs will expand on the findings of this research.

The analysis of secondary data reveals significant ethical concerns surrounding the harsh training systems prevalent in the Korean music industry. Various sources such as Padgett (2017) and Baillie (2018) highlight the intense and competitive nature of training programs and systems as hopeful trainees fight for their spot in limelight. As many former trainees and industry insiders have stated, artists lack personal freedom, shedding light on strict rules and unsettling demands by entertainment companies raising questions of artists well-being and rights.

The competitive nature of the industry has led to many idol survival shows, where aspiring artists compete for debut opportunities (Debarma, 2023). Instances of manipulation in voting results and allegations of unfair treatment have tainted the credibility of such programs. High-profile incidents, such as the disbandment of X1 due to vote-rigging scandals, highlight the ethical complexities inherent in reality competition programs (Lim, 2020; Kim, 2020).

Collected data from Elsa and Palat (2023) also underscores the prevalence of mental health challenges among artists in the Korean music industry. A report from Wilson (2024) points to alarmingly high suicide rates in South Korea. Furthermore, cases of depression, anxiety, and other mental health issues among K-pop artists have sparked discussions of fair labour practises and unattainable demands placed by companies and the industry as a whole (Saeji and Al. 2018).

Moreover, artists, particularly idols, face colossal pressure to conform to idealized physical appearances, often resulting in extreme dieting practices and excessive usage of cosmetic surgery. Reports and media articles document (Lee; 2016, Lee, 2023) cases of artists being pressured to undergo surgical procedures to meet industry expectations, sparking debates about the ethical implications of perpetuating narrow beauty ideals such as the case of Kyuhyun of Super Junior. However, a notable legal reforms have been implemented to address the current exploitative practises in the Korean music industry to prevent further harm which could indicate a step in the right direction (General, 2024).

In addition to these challenges, contractual complications, such as the prevalence of "slave contracts," focus on issues of artist exploitation and the unequal power dynamics between artists and management companies, such as in the cases of EXO and B.A.P (Gohil, 2023; Wilson, 2022). Moreover, invasive fan culture, demonstrated by "sasaeng" behavior, threatens artists' privacy and safety (Iwicka, 2018).

5 Discussion and Analysis

This section will focus on interpreting the findings that were presented in the previous section. Both, the literary review and findings revealed issues that demand further critical examination and notice. The following section will delve deeper into the implications and interconnectivity of the findings.

The inherent factors contributing to ethical challenges within the Korean music industry can be seen from a deeper analysis of the key themes of the findings. The intense training systems, for example, are not solely driven by the pursuit of artistic excellence but are also influenced by commercial obligations, cultural factors and the competitive nature of the industry. Similarly, beauty standards mirror broader societal norms regarding perceived beauty and appearance, perpetuating unrealistic ideals and aggravating issues of body image dissatisfaction, not only among artists, but also among stakeholders, which can be also seen from the high rate of cosmetic surgery with South Korea.

Furthermore, contract complexities emphasize power relations and the hierarchical nature of the industry, wherein artists can find themselves susceptible to exploitation due to limited bargaining power. The artists being of young age also contributes to these issues as they do not always realize the intricate nature of contracts and what is being agreed upon. This inequality is further compounded by cultural factors that prioritize deference to authority and conformity, making it tricky for artists to assert their rights. Additionally, the phenomenon of invasive fan culture underscores the blurred boundaries between public and private spheres in the age of social media. Unlike Western fandoms, K-pop fans actively support their idols through organized fan clubs, fan meetings, and coordinated efforts to achieve chart-topping success. While this itself is not an issue, it explains why companies often ignore problematic fan behaviour as it financially benefits the

companies to encourage fan engagements. However, these issues should be addressed as they contribute to artists' well-being and an overall understanding of how parasocial relationships can be potentially harmful.

The analysis reveals the intersectionality of ethical challenges within the Korean music industry, in which various factors intersect and compound each other's effects. For example, the pressure to conform to beauty standards intersects with contractual complexities, as artists may feel obligated to undergo cosmetic procedures or adhere to restrictive diet plans to meet industry expectations and to keep their spot within the company. Similarly, mental health concerns intersect with fan culture, as invasive behaviours by fans can exacerbate artists' stress and anxiety, leading to detrimental effects on mental health.

Recognizing the intersectionality of ethical challenges, stakeholders within the industry can maintain and develop more comprehensive approaches to address the aforementioned issues. Rather than treating only isolated issues, it is detrimental to consider the interconnected nature of factors contributing to unethical practices. Another way is to collaborate to implement holistic solutions to fix these problems and build a better industry as a whole. This approach can lead to fostering a culture of respect, honesty and ethical responsibility, which is needed in any sustainable practice.

The findings can also have significant implications for future policy making and regulatory frameworks controlling the Korean music industry. Recommendations include stricter regulations to prevent exploitation and ensure fair labour practices in companies regarding the artists they manage. Policies should prioritize mental health support, transparency in contractual agreements and the education of artists and companies on these issues.

In conclusion, the discussion and analysis of ethical challenges in the Korean music industry underscore the need for intensive efforts to address systemic issues of exploitation, inequality, and mental health stigma. By prioritizing ethical practices and advocating for the rights and well-being of artists, the industry can strive towards a more equitable and sustainable future.

6 Conclusions

This thesis delves into the ethical challenges and practices within the Korean music industry, focusing on various aspects such as training systems, beauty standards, contractual complexities, mental health concerns, and fan culture.

The primary objectives of this thesis were to critically explore and analyse the ethical challenges present in the Korean music industry, examine their underlying causes and implications, and propose recommendations for ethical business practices. Through a thorough review of existing literature and case studies, these objectives were achieved by shedding light on the exploitative practices prevalent in the industry, highlighting the impact on artists' well-being, and identifying opportunities for improvement in ethical standards.

Additionally, this study directed to investigate the intersection of cultural norms, industry practices, and global market dynamics shaping the Korean music industry.

6.1 Managerial implications

The findings of this thesis have substantial managerial implications for stakeholders in the Korean music industry, including entertainment companies, managers, artists, and regulatory authorities. Firstly, the identification of exploitative practices such as "slave contracts" and companies knowingly enforcing plastic surgery and restricting artists' autonomy require greater transparency and accountability in contractual agreements and talent management practices.

Furthermore, the recognition of mental health concerns among artists underscores the importance of providing access to mental health support services. While this is not an easy task, considering the mental health stigma in South Korean, it still remains one of the most significant challenges to the industry. Managers and subsequent companies play a crucial role in

understanding and supporting artists' mental health and promoting a positive work environment with appropriate access to health services and a focus on employer self-care.

Do's and don'ts for supporting artist mental health:

- **Do Provide Access to Mental Health Services:** Guarantee that artists have access to qualified mental health professionals and resources.
- **Do Promote Open Communication:** Encourage artists to express their feelings and concerns without fear of judgment.
- **Do Educate Artists and Staff:** Conduct workshops or training sessions on mental health awareness and self-care practices.
- **Do Foster a Supportive Work Environment:** Cultivate a workplace culture that values mental health and emphasizes the importance of well-being.
- **Do Encourage Self-Care Practices:** Advocate for regular breaks in training, healthy work-life balance, and stress-reducing activities.
- **Don't Ignore Signs of Distress:** Take any signs of mental health issues seriously and address them promptly.
- **Don't Stigmatize Mental Health Problems:** Avoid dismissing mental health concerns or perpetuating stigma within the workplace.
- **Don't Overwork Artists:** Avoid excessive workloads that can contribute to stress and burnout.
- **Don't Neglect Confidentiality:** Respect artists' privacy and confidentiality when dealing with mental health issues.
- **Don't Dismiss Self-Care Needs:** Recognize the importance of self-care for both artists and staff in maintaining well-being.

The study of fan culture and its ethical implications highlight the need for managerial action within companies. Setting boundaries and

understanding why obsessive fan culture can harm artists is essential in taking measures to protect artists. Moreover, entertainment agencies should enforce taking legal action against fans that threaten the safety and privacy of artists.

The Do's and Don'ts of managing fan behaviour:

- **Do Establish Clear Boundaries:** Define boundaries between artists and fans to protect artists' privacy and well-being.
- **Do Educate Fans:** Provide education and guidance to fans about appropriate behaviour and respect for artists' personal lives.
- **Do Take Legal Action When Necessary:** Enforce legal measures against fans who engage in threatening or harmful behaviour towards artists whether it is offline or online.
- **Do Prioritize Artist Safety:** Make artist safety a priority in all interactions with fans and public events.
- **Don'ts:**
- **Don't Enable Obsessive Behaviour:** Discourage and address behaviours that can lead to obsessive or intrusive interactions with artists.
- **Don't Tolerate Threats or Harassment:** Take a zero-tolerance approach to threats, harassment, or stalking directed at artists.
- **Don't Exploit Fan Culture:** Avoid exploiting fan enthusiasm for profit at the expense of artists' well-being or privacy.
- **Don't Ignore Security Concerns:** Address security risks and concerns related to fan interactions promptly and effectively.

6.2 Limitations

Limitations exist in most studies, including this thesis. Despite attempts to conduct a comprehensive analysis, there are limitations and challenges that should be acknowledged to retain academic integrity. Most ardently, the heavy reliance on secondary data may limit the scope of analysis and ensuing discussions. Restricted access to real-time information and actual industry insight also limits research reliability. Additionally, language barriers, specifically in accessing Korean-language sources, may have resulted in omitting related literature and perspectives. Future research endeavours should strive to overcome these limitations by employing diverse research methodologies and collaborative approaches to data collection.

6.3 Future Research

To continue this research, there are several possible avenues to explore. More comprehensive lived experiences of artists would provide valuable insights in the actual reality of the conditions of an idol in the Korean music industry. Additionally, comparative analyses of ethical practises amongst countries and other music industries would expand on the knowledge of how various industries differ from one another. Moreover, longitudinal studies examining the effect of possible future regulations on the industry and idols would be particularly interesting and insightful as they would provide insight into long-term impacts and differences. By addressing these research gaps, future studies can contribute to the ongoing discourse on ethical business practices and sustainability in the Korean music industry.

6.4 Implications for International Business

The ethical challenges presented in this thesis are of significant importance to international business, especially in the context of cultural exchange and

globalisation. To operate and interact within the said industry, businesses require understanding of these issues to be successful and to work and function accordingly.

The Korean music industry, identified for its global influence and reputation, displays both opportunities and risks for international businesses. Companies seeking to enter the Korean market or collaborate with Korean entertainment agencies may benefit from the industry's vast reach, continuously rising popularity and dedicated fan base. Nonetheless, they must also navigate ethical considerations, such as the treatment of artists and obedience to labour standards, to mitigate reputational risks, pick appropriate business partners and ensure sustainable collaborations.

International businesses joining the Korean music industry must adapt to local practices and norms while demonstrating cultural sensitivity. Understanding the significance of K-pop, its impact on the Korean society and all the ethical challenges that come with the industry is essential for effective marketing, branding and future partnerships. Respecting traditional values, such as emphasis on the collective culture and hierarchy will help to facilitate successful collaborations and enhance cross-cultural communication.

The ethical challenges within the Korean music industry emphasize the importance of corporate social responsibility (CSR) for international businesses. Corporations operating in or associated with the industry must prioritize the health, safety and rights of artists, as well as uphold ethical standards in their business practices. Embracing CSR initiatives, such as sponsoring mental health awareness and supporting fair labour practices, enhances brand reputation and trust among stakeholders and consumers.

Additionally, international businesses wishing to enter the Korean music industry must adhere to regulatory constraints and conduct

thorough due diligence to ensure compliance with laws. This includes understanding contractual obligations, labour principles, and intellectual property rights within the entertainment industry.

To conclude, international business within the Korean music industry underlines the importance of ethical conduct, sustainable practices, cultural sensitivity, compliance to regulations and finally, stakeholder engagement. By embracing these principles, international businesses can navigate the complex industry and contribute positively to its sustainable growth and development within a global spectrum.

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