

Beyond The Spotlight- Lived Experiences and Psychological Pressures in the K-Pop Industry

ADWITA R. SHINGARE
R. N Podar School

Abstract- *In recent years, many youngsters have developed a strong interest in Korean Pop (K-pop) and aspire to become Korean artists or join the overseas entertainment industry. This research was conducted to raise awareness among the younger generation that success in the K-pop industry is not an easy path to achieve. While many admire the fame, popularity, and glamorous lifestyles portrayed online, most fans remain unaware of the reality behind the smiles and public image. K-pop, which began in the early 1990s with groups like SoBangCha (소방차), has now gained global recognition. Despite its success, the industry often places extreme physical and mental pressure on idols. Strict diets, exploitative long-term contracts (often referred to as “slave contracts”), intense training schedules, mental health struggles, and dangerous fan culture, such as sasaeng behaviour, are common issues faced by artists. These pressures are often linked to the need to maintain a flawless public image, which is cultivated through rigorous training, fan expectations, and intense competition within the industry. This qualitative research concludes that although many harmful practices still exist, gradual changes are beginning to occur. Increased fan awareness and social media support have empowered idols to speak up, leading to reduced exploitation and slightly improved working conditions in the industry.*

Keywords: *K-Pop, Slave Contracts, Sasaeng, Idol Welfare, Mental Health.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Korean Pop (K-pop) has grown into a global phenomenon, admired for its music performances and carefully crafted public images. To fans around the world, idols appear confident, cheerful, and successful, often giving the impression that fame and success come naturally with talent and hard work. However, this image represents only what is visible on stage and on screens.

K-pop began its journey in the early 1990s and steadily gained popularity over time (K-pop |

Britannica, n.d.). During the mid-2000s, the Korean Hallyu Wave helped introduce more polished and internationally appealing groups such as Super Junior and Girls’ Generation to global audiences. Today, it has become a worldwide industry, attracting millions of fans and inspiring young people to dream of becoming idols.

Behind this glamorous image lies a harsh reality. Many young boys and girls enter entertainment agencies at a very early age, sacrificing education, personal freedom, and normal childhood experiences. Idol life involves long hours of training, strict diets, extreme competition, strong fan expectations, mental pressure, and contracts that often favour agencies. Former MBLAQ member Thunder revealed in an interview that after debuting at a young age, he lacked basic life skills such as online shopping or managing bank transfers, showing how trainees miss out on everyday experiences (Alec, 2025).

In addition to these challenges, idols often face mental stress, public criticism, and pressure to maintain a perfect image. For example, Han Jisung from Stray Kids was reported to suffer from psychological anxiety, and in December 2019, JYP Entertainment confirmed that he took a temporary hiatus to focus on treatment (Korea JoongAng Daily, 2019). Such incidents show that even successful idols may feel overwhelmed due to the demands of the industry.

The process of becoming an idol is also highly uncertain. Thousands compete, but only a few are selected as trainees, and even fewer debut. Entertainment companies control group formation, concepts, and creative decisions, while success depends not only on talent but also on timing, group chemistry, and luck. Even after debut, only a small

percentage achieve long-term success, while many continue to struggle under constant pressure.

This research does not aim to prove that all K-pop agencies are bad. Instead, its purpose is to highlight certain unnoticed realities behind the spotlight. Being a K-pop idol or trainee is not just about smiling on stage or following a clear path to success—it involves challenges, sacrifices, and risks that are rarely discussed openly. This study intends to help readers understand that idol life is far more complex than it appears, and that the journey to fame is demanding and uncertain.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Stalking and Lack of Privacy (Sasaeng Behaviour)

One major reality faced by K-pop idols is the lack of personal safety and privacy. As public figures with global recognition, idols are known internationally by millions of fans who admire and support them. However, among these fans, some are sasaengs—individuals who stalk idols, invade their privacy, wait outside their homes, and in extreme cases attempt to enter private spaces. This behaviour creates constant pressure and fear for idols and their families, making them feel that their personal safety is at stake because of their career choice.

A living example of this is Jeon Jungkook, a popular member of BTS. In December 2023, he publicly expressed discomfort after individuals waited outside his home and gym, directly requesting that they stop. In June 2025, a woman was arrested for attempting to enter his residence by repeatedly trying to guess the door passcode late at night (The Korea Times, 2026). These incidents highlight the real dangers idols face beyond performances and public appearances. They also explain why many idols hesitate to speak openly about such experiences, as they fear being misunderstood or negatively judged by their fandoms.

Fan Psychology and Idol Image

Fans usually communicate through the sharing of physical text or art, as well as gathering in fan conventions and fan meetings. As technology continues to evolve, fan communities have become

increasingly prevalent across nationality, ethnicity, and internet-based platforms (Groene & Hettinger, 2016). Accordingly, fan studies have become an important topic for academia not only in media and communication, but also in fields such as Economics, Arts, Psychology, Anthropology, and Sociology (Tinaliga, 2018).

Most fans are usually rooted in a particular music genre such as punk, heavy metal, indie, jazz, or pop. In the case of K-pop, strong fan culture plays a major role in creating the perfect image of idols. Fans expect idols to always look happy, talented, and perfect, which increases pressure on them to maintain that image at all times.

Criticism, Public Opinion, and Pressure from Society
Apart from fans, idols may also face criticism from people connected to the industry or from the public. While such situations are common in the entertainment industry, they can strongly influence fan opinions and increase pressure on idols.

A recent example happened when social media comments widely attributed to KATSEYE member Daniela's father surfaced online (Instagram and X). In response to fan speculation about the lineup, the account posted, "THE SHOW MUST GO ON! With or without a member. KATSEYE IS BIGGER THAN ONE GIRL." Screenshots of the remark spread quickly across social media platforms before being deleted, and many fans interpreted the message as dismissive toward Manon's absence. Additional replies allegedly stating that "five is fine too" further increased debate within the fandom.

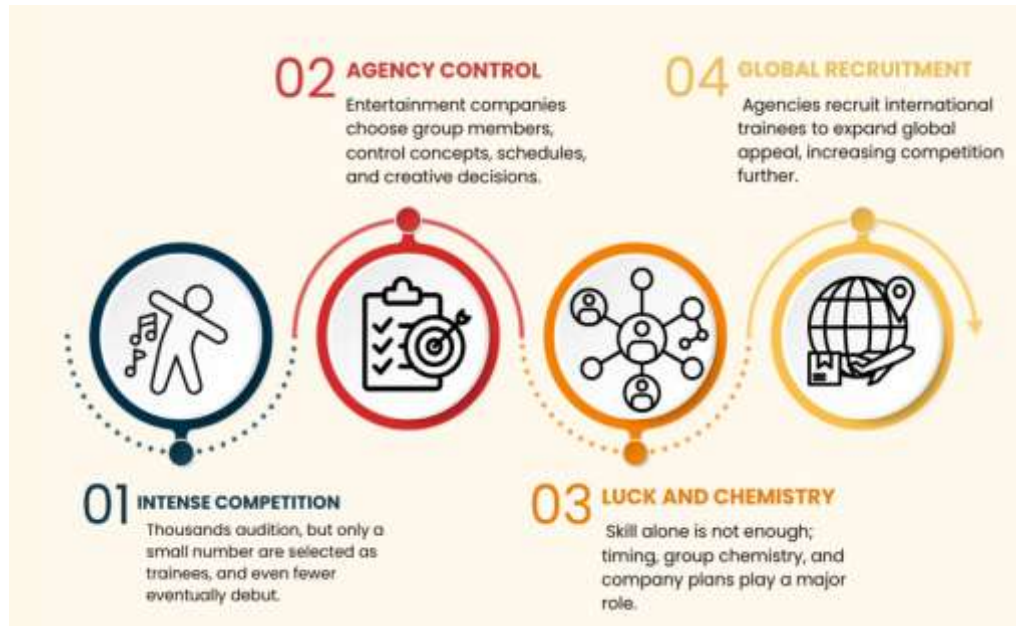
The controversy soon extended beyond the comments, with hashtags such as "#StandWithManon" trending in online fan spaces. This shows how easily public opinion can change and how criticism, even from people related to the industry, can create pressure on idols and affect their image (Kyung-Min, 2026).

The risks idols face do not come only from fans. In some cases, people connected to entertainment agencies have also contributed to breaches of privacy. In March and April 2025, an individual

claiming to be a former employee of YG Entertainment shared unreleased and pre-debut content related to BLACKPINK on social media platforms(Desk, 2025). Such incidents show that

idols may face vulnerability even within professional environments that are expected to protect them

The Path To Debut



Even after debuting, only a small percentage of idols achieve long-term success, while many continue to struggle under pressure.

How does idol worship work?

The idol's perfect image is built by constant pressure, criticism from haters, harsh dieting patterns, and intense practice. Because of this, the K-pop girl figures are often described as someone with ideal body standards, such as having a slim body, white skin, a thin face, and a high nose. Thus making fans adore. (Universitas Ahmad Dahlan, n.d.)

Why the K-Pop Industry Is a High-Risk Path for Young People

Choosing a career in the K-pop industry is a high-risk path for young people. Many trainees begin training at a very young age and devote their educational years entirely to becoming artists. As a result, they often have limited options outside the industry if they do not succeed or decide to leave. This creates a

situation where success feels necessary for survival rather than choice.

The coming generation strongly believes in expressing their thoughts and individuality. However, restricted self-expression, intense expectations, constant evaluation, and pressure to maintain a perfect image can make coping difficult. Many idols have openly spoken about mental health struggles caused by this pressure. Suga from BTS has spoken about his battles with depression, social anxiety, and OCD, and Jimin also shared his silent struggle with depression. RM mentioned that everyday life can sometimes feel like a struggle (Indian Express, 2025), while Jay B from GOT7 revealed that he was diagnosed with clinical depression (Wikipedia contributors, 2026). Taeyeon from Girls' Generation (Times & Times, 2019), Kang Daniel (Abelman, 2021), and Heo Gayoon (4Minute) (Osen, 2026) have also spoken about depression and panic disorders. Members of TWICE, Jeongyeon and Mina, took breaks due to anxiety and panic disorder(Gyu-Lee, 2021), and Sulli from f(x) had earlier spoken about social anxiety and mental health struggles (BBC

News, 2019). These examples show that even successful idols are not free from emotional pressure, and that health must always come before fame, success, or public image.

For many idols, this creates a “do or die” situation, where there is little room for failure or alternative paths. The idol journey is therefore not simply a path to fame but a demanding commitment with long-term emotional, personal, and professional consequences. The pressure to succeed, satisfy fans, and maintain a perfect image makes the K-pop industry a risky career choice for young people.

III. RESEARCH QUESTION

Based on the above discussion, this research focuses on understanding the hidden realities of the K-pop industry.

The study aims to answer the following questions:

- What realities do K-pop idols face behind the glamorous image shown to fans?
- Why is choosing a career in the K-pop industry a high-risk path for young people?

IV. METHODOLOGY

The study involved reading articles, reports, news stories, and book reviews related to the K-pop industry. Social media features such as recommendation systems, fan culture, online trends, and engagement patterns were also studied.

Existing case studies and widely reported incidents involving K-pop idols and trainees were reviewed to understand common problems and challenges faced behind the spotlight.

No surveys or experiments were conducted. This research is based on observation, analysis, and comparison of already available information to understand the hidden realities of the K-pop industry.

V. FINDINGS

From this research, we can understand that idols' lives are very difficult and different from what they seem to be. It is not always lights, camera, action, but emotions, bullying, and much more criticism faced from their fandoms and even their own agencies. Many idols face serious issues such as stalking, invasion of privacy, health issues, mental well-being problems, and their life being at stake.

An important point that emerged is that idols often suffer due to stalking or invasion of privacy by *sasaeng* fans. Incidents involving Jeon Jungkook show that idols are not safe even in their own homes. This creates fear and constant stress in their daily lives.

A key issue identified is that idols also face mental pressure and psychological problems because of the expectations from fans and the industry. For example, Han Jisung from Stray Kids was reported to suffer from psychological anxiety, and in December 2019, JYP Entertainment confirmed that he took a temporary hiatus to focus on treatment (Korea JoongAng Daily, 2019).

This shows that even successful idols may feel overwhelmed due to pressure and high expectations. Another observation is that idols may face criticism not only from fans but also from people connected to the industry. A situation happened when comments widely believed to be from KATSEYE member Daniela's father spread on social media during a controversy related to Manon's absence from activities (Kyung-Min, 2026). The comments saying that the group could continue without one member caused arguments among fans and increased pressure on the members. This shows how public opinion and criticism can easily affect idols and create stress for them.

Another aspect highlighted is that idols are not only at risk because of fans, but sometimes also due to people connected to their agencies. The leaking of private or unreleased content by former employees shows that idols' privacy can be violated even within professional environments (Times of India, 2025).

The research also shows that choosing a career in the K-pop industry is a high-risk path for young people. Trainees start at a very young age and dedicate most of their time to training, often sacrificing education and personal freedom. This leaves them with very limited options if they want to leave the industry. Overall, the findings show that beyond the spotlight, the K-pop industry involves pressure, insecurity, and emotional challenges that are often hidden from the public.

VI. RESEARCH GAP

In this study, we seek to extend existing research on the K-pop industry by addressing the gaps in understanding the long-term realities faced by idols after their active careers. The study investigates the impact of four key factors: (1) post-idol career uncertainty, (2) social and personal life challenges such as marriage and identity, (3) public criticism and backlash faced after speaking about industry realities, and (4) the effects of popularity-based exclusion or removal from groups. In addition, interrelationships among career instability, fan expectations, and mental well-being are examined.

Post idol career uncertainty- We are all sure of one thing—that K-pop idols devote their entire teenage years to becoming idols. Because of this, they might not be well-developed in other areas of life, even though they may excel in their career. However, what happens if the entertainment industry they depend on removes them? This is exactly what happened with:

Danielle (NewJeans) – She was the only member from her group whose contract was terminated. ADOR Entertainment explained that she was involved in unauthorized independent activities, due to which her contract was ended (Correspondent et al., 2025). ADOR has also filed a damages lawsuit seeking approximately \$30–31 million against Danielle, a member of her family, and Min Hee-jin. The label claims they bear significant responsibility for the dispute and the group's delayed return.

This shows that an idol's career can be uncertain, and even after years of dedication, their position in the industry is not always secure.

Social and personal challenges - As we know, K-pop idols are under pressure 24/7 because of some fans following them (sasaengs), some writing fan fictions, some trying what not to go into their house, and some trying to defame them. The idols are also humans; they may also have feelings.

So, if they tell their fandom good news like their marriage, having a child, etc., some idols face criticism.

Sunye (Wonder Girls) – After marrying in January 2013, the backlash intensified in 2014 and she decided she would not return to the group (Times & Times, 2018).

Chen (EXO) – He received extreme hate in 2020 when he expressed about his marriage and him becoming a father. Fans signed petitions to SM Entertainment asking him to leave, as he “hurt” the group members' reputation by this decision (Eun-Byel, 2020).

So such big decisions in their lives also have a big impact on their life as a K-pop idol.

Public criticism and backlash faced by some idols after spilling some tea about the realities of the industry - Some K-pop idols have chosen to speak openly about the reality of the entertainment industry. However, going against the system or “spilling tea” has often led to backlash, criticism, or even removal from their groups.

Daisy (MOMOLAND) – There is a divide in opinions regarding her sharing of K-pop industry secrets. While many international fans appreciate her honesty about rigged survival shows and unpaid wages, others see her actions as a betrayal of the industry that gave her a platform. This criticism increases especially when her content focuses on other idols instead of only targeting companies (Gyu-Lee, 2020).

Jay Park – After a controversy related to his past comments, he was labelled as a “rebel” and removed from his group. Although he later became a successful solo artist and CEO, he initially faced

strong criticism from domestic fans for his “westernised” and defiant attitude.

This shows that idols who speak up about the industry often face negative consequences, making it difficult for others to openly share their experiences (천성우, 2011).

The effects of popularity-based exclusions -

In the K-pop industry, selection and continuation in a group are not always based only on talent. Factors such as visuals, image, and public appeal can also influence decisions, sometimes leading to exclusion.

Ahn Hyo-seop (GOT7 Lineup) – Before becoming a well-known actor, he was a trainee for GOT7. He revealed that he was excluded from the final debut lineup because he was considered too tall, which did not fit the “planned visuals” and group symmetry the company wanted (Ilmare & Ilmare, 2017).

Lee Gai (Baby V.O.X) – She was reportedly removed from the group after it was discovered that she had lied about her age. She was actually 30, while the other members were in their late teens or early twenties. The company felt that her “older” image did not match the youthful and popular concept they were promoting.

This shows that popularity, image, and market expectations can strongly affect an idol’s career, sometimes even more than talent or effort (De La Cruz, 2025).

VII. FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Further research can include interviews with fans or trainees to better understand real-life experiences. It can also explore how social media can be used to improve idol welfare and mental health support.

VIII. CONCLUSION

To sum it up, being a K-pop idol is not a guaranteed path to success. The main point of this research was to show that K-pop may look glamorous from the outside, but the reality behind it is very different. Many people hate K-pop and call it “overrated,” which is their personal opinion, but I feel that K-pop

does not deserve so much hate without understanding the hard work behind it.

Idols devote their entire lives to this career. From a very young age, they sacrifice education, freedom, privacy, and even their mental and physical health to chase this dream. After putting in so much effort, a single word like “hate” or “overrated” can hurt years of dedication and struggle.

We often forget that idols are humans too. They can get tired, stressed, and emotionally affected just like anyone else. There is no need to know where they live or invade their personal space by stalking them. Instead of crossing boundaries, fans should simply cheer them on, respect their privacy, and support them during their achievements.

Idols do not need stalkers—they need supporters. Understanding this difference is important to truly respect the people behind the spotlight.

Author Profile

I am Adwita Ravi Shingare, a Grade 9 student at R.N. Podar School. I wrote this research paper with the aim of creating awareness among my fellow students and helping them make informed academic and career choices. Through this study, I hope to highlight the difference between the glamorous image of K-pop idols portrayed on television and social media and the hardships they face behind the scenes.

I believe that choosing a career in the K-pop industry is far from easy. Debuting as an idol involves much more than singing, dancing, and wearing makeup. It requires years of rigorous training, discipline, resilience, and meeting the demanding expectations of entertainment companies and agencies. My objective is to encourage young people to look beyond the glamour and understand the realities of the industry before aspiring to pursue it as a career.

REFERENCES

- [1] K-pop | Britannica. (n.d.). Encyclopedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/art/K-pop/additional-info>

- [2] De La Cruz, E. (2025, January 8). LEE Gai breaks her silence 20 years after being exposed of faking age to debut as an idol. Kpop Starz. <https://www.kpopstarz.com/articles/321898/20250107/lee-gai-breaks-her-silence-20-year-s-after-being-exposed-faking-age-debut-idol.htm>
- [3] Ilmare, & Ilmare. (2017, May 18). Actor And Former JYP Trainee Ahn Hyo Seop Reveals Why He Couldn't Debut As A Member Of GOT7. Soompi. <https://www.soompi.com/article/986707wpp/actor-former-jyp-trainee-ahn-hyo-seop-reveals-couldnt-debut-member-got7>
- [4] 천성우. (2011, March 16). Singer Park explains abrupt departure - The Korea Herald. The Korea Herald. <https://www.koreaherald.com/article/10337200>
- [5] Eun-Byel, I. (2020, January 20). Upset fans demand that Chen leave EXO - The Korea Herald. The Korea Herald. <https://www.koreaherald.com/article/2209733>
- [6] Times, K., & Times, K. (2018, August 9). Sunye, star of now-disbanded K-pop group Wonder Girls, is making a comeback. South China Morning Post. <https://www.scmp.com/magazines/style/people-events/article/2158948/sunye-star-now-disbanded-k-pop-group-wonder-girls>
- [7] Gyu-Lee, L. (2020b, January 9). Rigging claims: Momoland's ex-member Daisy faces agency legal action. THE KOREA TIMES. <https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/entertainment/k-pop/20200109/rigging-claims-momolands-ex-member-daisy-faces-agency-legal-action>
- [8] Correspondent, D., Correspondent, D., & Chronicle, D. (2025, January 19). Deccan Chronicle. Deccan Chronicle. <https://www.deccanchronicle.com/entertainment/ador-seeks-court-order-to-block-independent-deals-by-newjeans-members-1855181>
- [9] Gyu-Lee, L. (2021, August 19). TWICE's Jeongyeon to halt group act again due to mental health issues. THE KOREA TIMES. <https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/entertainment/k-pop/20210819/twices-jeongyeon-to-halt-group-act-again-due-to-mental-health-issues>
- [10] Garcia-Navarro, L. (2024). Rose Trained To Be a Perfect K-Pop Girl. Now She's Trying To Be Herself. The New York Times Magazine, 13-13.
- [11] Korea JoongAng Daily. (2019, December 16). Stray Kids' Han takes a break. <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2019/12/16/etc/Stray-Kids-Han-takes-a-break/3071539.html>
- [12] BBC News. (2019, October 17). Sulli: The woman who rebelled against the K-pop world. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-50051575>
- [13] Osen. (2026, January 15). 4Minute Heo Ga-yoon reflects on brother's death, life's meaninglessness. The Chosun Daily. <https://www.chosun.com/english/kpop-culture-en/2026/01/15/AOQBWKDW3NDBVAV26BLEOLDQDE/>
- [14] Abelman, D. (2021, April 13). Kang Daniel on Mental Health, astrology, and "Yellow" | Interview. Allure. <https://www.allure.com/story/kang-daniel-yellow-mental-health-astrology-interview>
- [15] Times, K., & Times, K. (2019, June 18). K-pop star Taeyeon of Girl's Generation reveals battle with depression on Instagram. South China Morning Post. <https://www.scmp.com/magazines/style/people-events/article/3014974/k-pop-star-taeyeon-girls-generation-reveals-battle>
- [16] Sansone, R. A., & Sansone, L. A. (2014). "I'm your number one fan"- a clinical look at celebrity worship. Innovations
- [17] Wikipedia contributors. (2026, April 9). Jay B. Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jay_B
- [18] Alec. (2025, December 9). Former MBLAQ member Thunder begins new musical chapter |

- allkpop. Allkpop. (ACPCH 2018).
<https://www.allkpop.com/article/2025/12/former-mblaq-member-thunder-begins-new-musical-chapter>
- [19] Xportsnews. (2026, February 26). BTS' Jung Kook's candid livestream reveals pressures behind idol life. THE KOREA TIMES. <https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/entertainment/k-pop/20260226/bts-jung-kooks-candid-livestream-reveals-pressures-behind-idol-life>
- [20] Kyung-Min, P. (2026, February 26). KATSEYE faces fan division after Manon's hiatus, parent comments spark backlash. THE KOREA TIMES. <https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/entertainment/k-pop/20260224/katseye-faces-fan-division-after-manons-hiatus-parent-comments-spark-backlash>
- [21] Desk, T. E. (2025, March 31). Who is YG Leaker? The former YG Entertainment employee exposes Blackpink members Jennie, Rose, and Lisa in a controversial video leak. The Times of India. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/web-series/news/korean/who-is-yg-leaker-the-former-y-g-entertainment-employee-exposes-blackpink-members-jennie-rose-and-lisa-in-n-word-controversy-video-leak/articleshow/119816172.cms>
- [22] The Dark Side of a K-POP Idol -The untold truth- Undercover the tough life of a Kpop Artist | BTS BlackPink Twice EXO PSY Monsta X eBook : Leon, S.C.: Amazon.in: Kindle Store. (n.d.). <https://www.amazon.in/K-POP-untold-truth-BlackPink-Monsta-ebook/dp/B07V9PN6Q6>
- [23] Universitas Ahmad Dahlan. (n.d.). Celebrity worship and body image among young girls fans of K-pop girl groups - Ubaya Repository. <https://repository.ubaya.ac.id/40110/>
- [24] Cahyani, D., & Purnamasari, Y. (2019). Celebrity worship on early adult K-Pop fangirling.
- [25] Proceedings of the 4th ASEAN Conference on Psychology, Counselling, and Humanities