Influence Of Mistreatment Of South Korean Pop Idols To The Rise Of Suicide In The South Korean Entertainment Industry

Background

After the Korean war in the 1950s, South Korea, was one of the world's poorest countries. By the 1990s and so on South Korea became a world leader in technology including automobile production and shipbuilding. Since then, Koreans face competition in everyday life, from school to work. Success in Korea is defined as getting good grades, entering top universities and being employed at well-paying companies (Evans,2015). Students are often taught how to be better than others, not how to help and cooperate with others. In the past few years, researchers have provided ample support for the assertion that Korean students are getting "abused" by the intense educational system that does not consider their health nor their happiness (Hu, 2015). According to the Korean Statistical Information Service (KOSIS), a government supported website that provides data on Korea from environment, transportation, welfare to education, states that some say the life of youth in South Korea is not about freedom, personal choice or happiness, it is about production, performance and obedience (2017). Since the early 2000s, suicide is the fourth most common cause of death in South Korea; on average, 40 people commit suicide every day. South Korea has the highest suicide rate among the OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) nations, which include countries such as Germany, the U.K., and Japan, (Signh,2017). Compared to workers in European countries, Korean workers get less support from colleagues and superiors at work (Park,2009). Sixty percent of people who committed suicide in Korea were suffering from depression, that depression either came from work or school (Kim, 2014). Therefore, suicides could have been prevented with appropriate psychological treatment, but too many people in South Korea have outdated views of psychological illness. Many think that when someone is suicidal, he or she simply lacks a strong will to live; he or she is weak. (Young, 2014). Thus, when people in South Korea tend to feel suicidal, they tend to repress it due to the fact that, they don't want society to view them as weak. According to the OECD Making Mental Health Count report below chart shows the percent change in suicide rates per 100,000 population and as seen, Korea suicide rates per 100,000 population is at sky-rocketing numbers. (2013).

Introduction

The past the decade or so, South Korea, entertainment industry has grown phenomenally, in the international aspect, due to the promotion and distribution of their media. Social media has played a huge role in the spread of K-pop (Korean Pop Music). According to Dr. Edward Kessler, the founder/director of the Woolf Institute and Fellow of St. Edmund's College, states, social media is not just a communication tool; it is also a connection tool. It enables affiliation and interest group formation (2013). Due to those media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, Facebook and many more, K-pop has taken the world by storm with its millions of followers. To be a K-pop star, one has to audition at K-pop company (SM, YG, JYP ENTERTAINMENT etc..) if selected, must sign a contract and get inscribed in group or be an individual act (solo artist). These companies often train these aspiring artists in dancing, singing and more, in order to

become the “perfect idol”. In the past few years idols, not just, in music but actors and actresses have been coming out with stories of depression and how they were being mistreated in within their companies. In 2017, famous south Korean singer-songwriter Kim Jong-Hyun, the main vocalist of south Korean boy band SHINee committed suicide in his home. The next day his suicide note was found, and his note described his issues with depression and pressure placed on him by his company (SM Entertainment) (Stiles, 2017). His death heavily impacted Korean as well as international fans. This has led to the question; has the mistreatment of South Korean pop idols led to the rise of suicide among the South Korean Entertainment industry? The answer is important due to the fact the lifestyle requires a mentality that most Koreans adopt; that hard work, and only hard work, is the key to success. The mistreatment of South Korean pop idols has significantly led to the rise in suicide among the South Korean industry due, to entertainment companies strict contract implements, training treatment, and health and body image.

Companies Strict Contract Implements

When an aspiring K-pop star gets officially inscribed in a company they have to sign a contract. These contracts are known as ‘slave contracts. ‘Slave contracts’ is a term associated with the contract a K-pop singer signs when he or she is joining a company. The contract is listed with terms and conditions that the artists consider not fair or unjust. The contract works by starting a debt when the artist signs on. This debt includes all expenses paid by the company: rent, food, electricity, haircuts, clothing, and all staff payments. This means that trainees’ debts are huge, any money they make as an idol goes towards paying back their company. However, these company do not need to be transparent about the debt, known as the BEP (Break-even Point), meaning that most artists have no way of knowing how much they have paid off, or how much they are making. (2014). Thus, a majority of the idols that are at these companies have to pay huge amounts of money, that sometimes take years to make break- even- point if ever. In some cases, idols have taken their company to court for unfair treatment, which includes distribution of profits, length of contracts, and intensive schedules. In 2009, three members of ‘DBSK’, were the first major group to take their company to court, cited unfair distribution of profits, and excessively long schedules which only allowed them 3-4 hours of sleep per day. (Han, 2019). K-pop singer and actor No Minwoo sued SM Entertainment citing a 17-year long contract and stated that when he showed any signs of opposition, SM halted all support activities. Later, when he started activities again on his own, SM Entertainment proceeded to block his television appearances (2015). Han Geng, former member of ‘Super Junior’ sued SM Entertainment for unfair distribution of profits, as well as stating that he was forced to do things against his will, fined when he disobeyed the company (2013).‘B.A.P’ sued TS Entertainment over ‘clauses that violate civil rights and go against what is outlined by the Fair Trade Commission(2014). Three members of ‘EXO’ sued SM Entertainment for failure to manage their group properly and develop plans for their future; Kris claimed that they had never considered or respected his opinion or health when scheduling the group’s promotional activities (2014). Luhan left claiming that the company was unable to give him good future development plans, as he wanted to pursue acting (2014). Tao claimed he was not given sufficient time to rest in between injuries and felt isolated from his home country (2016). These utter numbers of lawsuits reveal the legal problems within these companies as well, it shows how little is being done to address the problem. Some companies have made changes under the terms and conditions in the past few years. This shows signs of improvement; however, this alone is not enough because the idols are not the primary concern for the company, rather, money is; contracts are still 10 years long,

and idols are still mistreated, demonstrated by their continuing to sue companies even now. The tables below gives a visual on the K-pop group amount made, as well company sales and net income. While some groups make billions (See Table 1), others only make 4,800 USD a year (2014). Thus, demonstrating the huge gap between established groups and rookie groups. Although some idols may make a lot of money, little of it actually goes to the artist themselves. Groups who already make a small amount in sales, receive even less for their income and it takes far longer to pay back their debt, even while their company makes billions. (See Table 2). What can be taken from these companies is that ‘its all about the money’ and they have very little regard, if none, for their artist(s).

Training Treatment

Before an idol or a group makes their debut many of them go to ‘training’. Many well-known artists in the industry have been quoted saying its extremely hard and tiring. 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 (2010). Training consists of vocal, dance, and language lessons, the latter of which has become increasingly important with the spread of K-pop around the world. This spread has also resulted in a greater participation of international trainees; however, these trainees have to experience even more difficulties as they not only have to learn Korean alongside other languages, but also endure the effects of loneliness and culture shock. They also often experience racism from other trainees. (2015). This discrimination continues at a higher level in the company, for example, it was noticed that the Korean members of ‘EXO’ received significantly more screen time than their Chinese counterparts (Siegel). Lessons are usually 3 hours long each and extra practice is expected after in preparation for the monthly evaluations, though practice time can sometimes be as much as ‘14-15 hours a day (2015). Some of trainees sometimes leave school to pursue a K-pop career. This can often create a very competitive environment, because everything is on the line. Sometimes training is taken too far, a vast number of trainees and or idols who were trainees stated reports of being injured. A trainee of Alpha Entertainment was reportedly told to push through training after she pulled an inner thigh muscle during dance class (Pagdet ,2017). Thus, demonstrates the lack of care these idols receive from these companies. According to an interview done by Neil Hannigan, a former trainee states that several of the girls self-harmed in order to cope with the pressure. The lack of concern from the company, managers, and other trainees is arguably more shocking than the actual incidence of self-harm (2015). With the mistreatment, the competitive nature of the idols, and the lack of care from these entertainment companies, it would definitely not be a surprise that these self-harming incidents lead to actual suicide. Some say the training treatment has improved in the past years, but due to the huge number of cases involving self-harm and suicide, this problem is still very prevalent.

Health and Body Image

Fainting is very common in the K-pop industry, with idols crammed schedules, strict dieting and little to none mental health check-ups. For example, in 2016, SinB dislocated her shoulder after a dance performance on ‘Inkigayo’, and despite the injury, she completed the performance holding her hand back to prevent any further damage. In 2016, Kai injured his left ankle ligament whilst practicing, but still attended the group’s upcoming concerts (Yu,2016). In South Korea the ‘ideal body type’ is to be both tall and thin, ideal height of 162 cm (approximately 5 feet and 4 inches) and weight of 42 kg (about 93 pounds) (2018). These ‘beauty standards’ are

dangerously unhealthy, because they can cause an individual to be underweight and malnourished. Idols on a daily are encouraged to lose weight, which unsurprisingly, can lead to eating disorders. IU a famous singer/songwriter went on a variety show called ‘Healing Camp’ and spoke about her experience with bulimia: she states,” My heart was empty. I always felt anxious after I made my debut and from a certain time, I filled the void through food...Rather than feeling good, I always had that feeling of anxiety thinking there’s still something lacking.... At that time, I ate until I threw up and I even sought treatment” (Pao,2014). According to an interview done by Yejun of ‘F.CUz’ he talked about how him and the members were encouraged to lose weight. He explained his own diet consisted of fruit or salad and he lost 15kg in the process. Afterwards, when he was allowed to eat meat again, he wouldn’t as ‘I still thought that if I eat meat, I’d get fat again, so I deliberately tried throwing up’(2010). A large problem within the industry relating to eating disorders is the reluctance to acknowledge them, and bulimia and anorexia are often labelled as ‘reflux esophagitis’ (occurs when stomach contents like acids, frequently back up into the esophagus) instead (2014). Despite idols coming out with these eating disorders a mass number of South Koreans to ignore it, due to Koreans lack of mental health knowledge. Plastic surgery is a common practice in South Korea, particularly in the K-pop industry where idols are encouraged to have ‘The K-pop combo’ which consists of double-eyelid surgery, a slit at the side to make their eyes bigger; fillers to raise the bridge of the nose; and v-line surgery to create a more delicate appearance (2012). This can cause many idols to feel self-conscious due to the fact that, because they look a certain way, they feel as though they have to change everything about themselves in order to be considered beautiful or handsome, this can result in depression and other psychological issues. The photos below are just some the few individuals in the industry who have experienced some kind of body dysmorphia as a result of their company and strict South Korean ‘beauty standards’.

Solutions

According to research done by the department of Family Medicine at Hallym University, some 60 percent of people who attempt suicide are suffering from depression (Young,2017). Kim Eo-su, a professor of psychiatry at Yonsei Severance Hospital states that “One out of three depression patients stop mid-treatment”. One of the biggest issues is that many patients think they can overcome depression on their own through a religious life or through exercise.” (Young,2017). South Korea has one of the worst mental health problems in the industrialized world, but Korean people routinely ignore symptoms, this is in part because of stigma: 78 percent of Koreans think depression means a person is weak (Watkins,2018). In order to get rid or bring down the number of individuals that think this, education is key. Koreans, but most importantly the youth, should be educated about mental health as well as implement it as part of the curriculum in South Korean schools. This will get word out and lead to more knowledge on mental health. Some of the limitations to this solution would be funding. If, mental health classes were to be introduced, there has to be money to fund it, and schools will need to find teachers who are willing to teach the topic. South Korea spends an infinitesimal amount of money on improving the mental health of its citizens. In 2016, only $7 million was spent on mental health (Singh,2017). According to Worldometers, a statistical organization that has an international team of developers, researchers, and volunteers that make world statistics available in a thought-provoking and time relevant format to a wide audience around the world, shows currently there are fifty-one million people living in South Korea (2019). When you compare the money spent on mental health and population 7 million is barely enough to cover to one-third of

the population. Creating more mental health programs, services and treatment centers in South Korea, will push more people especially those in the entertainment industry to get treated more often. A limitation to this solution is funding. In order for these mental health facilities, programs and services to get started, there has to be some kind of money put in place. Making a rule that every single company, not just the entertainment ones, must require daily checkups on their idols/employees. If the person or persons needs mental health treatment their companies should not hold them back from getting the treatment, they need. However, some people might feel reluctant to leave their job to get treatment because they might not be that financial stable.

Conclusion

To conclude, South Korea has a huge suicide problem that needs to be address not just in the entertainment industry but all of South Korea. Due to K-pop recent rise in popularity many entertainment companies have been mistreating many idols, in terms of profit distribution, training treatment and health and body image. South Korea should spend more time on educating the youth about mental health, create more mental health facilities, programs and services, and make a rule/policy that every single company, not just the entertainment ones; must require daily checks up on their idols.

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