

Formation of Idols in K-pop

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LIFE OF AN IDOL

K-pop idols have taken this musical genre to the next level, to a global expansion (Goodburn, 2008), beyond its origins in South Korea, reaching the whole world. They are highly musically talented persons, but companies take their agendas to such extremes that there is such a physical and psychological toll that some idols have experienced burnout, anxiety, and some even have committed suicide due to the terrible pressure (Epstein, 2017).

The lifespan of an idol is of approximately seven years in average, but there are some idols whose fans love them so much that they can last longer, as is the case of BTS, a group that recently reached 10 years of career. As it is a short career, they must produce many musical albums, promote them, perform many



Image. Freepik, 2023.

Thanks to their dedication, perseverance, and personal sacrifice, idols are acknowledged both by the South Korean government (main promoter), who actively supports them in their growth and local and international promotion, as well as by other music celebrities who have become their fans.

concerts in a short time both locally and internationally, and even do publicity work as actors and models, to complement their work life, while they watch their food intake and have intensive training, with long hours

at the gym, and very rigorous rehearsals. The stages that an idol must complete to be able to grow professionally are pre-debut, debut, and finally their career, although many do not reach the debut stage (Lie, 2018).

PRE-DEBUT

Most starting idols take up this path in their adolescence, chosen in auditions through South Korean entertainment companies, where many show up but only a minority get picked out. They usually live away from their families, in households with basic facilities, with their group, with no salary, or in some cases they receive stipends for special projects of symbolic character, and they must pay for their subsistence and services.

The agency will only bear the costs for lodging, food, and basic expenses for their formation. This stage can take years (in some cases up to five years), until the idols are ready to debut, so they enter a physical, fitness, artistic abilities, development of image and style, participation in cooperation programs, content footage and variety shows, and interaction and management with their fans training.

Image. Wayhomestudio in Freepik, 2023.

Auditions can be in person, or sent from other parts of the world, videos where they demonstrate the musical competencies in singing, dancing, martial arts (in some cases), musical composition and production, art direction, and often rap, trying to differentiate themselves from the rest of the candidates.



DEBUT

Should they pass the previous stage, they enter the debut stage, where they get a 5–7-year contract, although some could be longer or shorter, depending on the negotiation between the idol and the agency. They create a name that always has a symbolic meaning giving a color to the fans to identify themselves with the idols, which is incorporated into the clothes, posters, and other support articles. K-pop group members can be from four to seven persons, exclusively of men or women, and in some cases mixed groups. The latter is groundbreaking as it gives a twist to the entertainment musical industry, with new concept designs in groups, attracting a wider and more varied audience, opening new possibilities which once were unthinkable (Kim, 2014).

Images: Kiranshastry, Muhammad Atif and Freepik in Flaticon, 2023.

They have a very tight concert agenda, where the cost of the ticket can go from 50 to 500 dollars (USD), and in some VIP cases, even higher.



They receive a previously agreed salary, and can receive bonuses for their success and popularity, plus royalties for the songs they compose and/or produce, additional payments for their participation in the promotion of products, brands, and events.



They have health and insurance benefits, discounts in restaurants (some owners comp their meal on the house) and stores.



Some agencies can provide language and acting classes, physical training, among others that could be of interest both for the agency and the idol.

Compensations can be higher for some idols than for others, even being able to become millionaires.

Source: Kim, 2019.

Idols are legally compelled to meet the terms and conditions established by their agency. They must meet very exhaustive rules, which may vary according to the agency, such as:



Banning dates, tattoos, as well as the consumption of alcohol and tobacco



Compliance of long and tiring work schedules which can go up to 18 hours daily (including weekends and holidays)



Very tight, short, or extravagant clothing policies



In some cases, the prohibition of personal social networks

They may use those established by the agency, such as Weverse, created by Big Hit Entertainment (BTS's agency), which is a platform for fans to interact with their idols in a limited way, either through the community or through the lives that Idols sometimes do, to access the artists' exclusive content, to participate in online events, and to purchase concert tickets before they are available to the public.

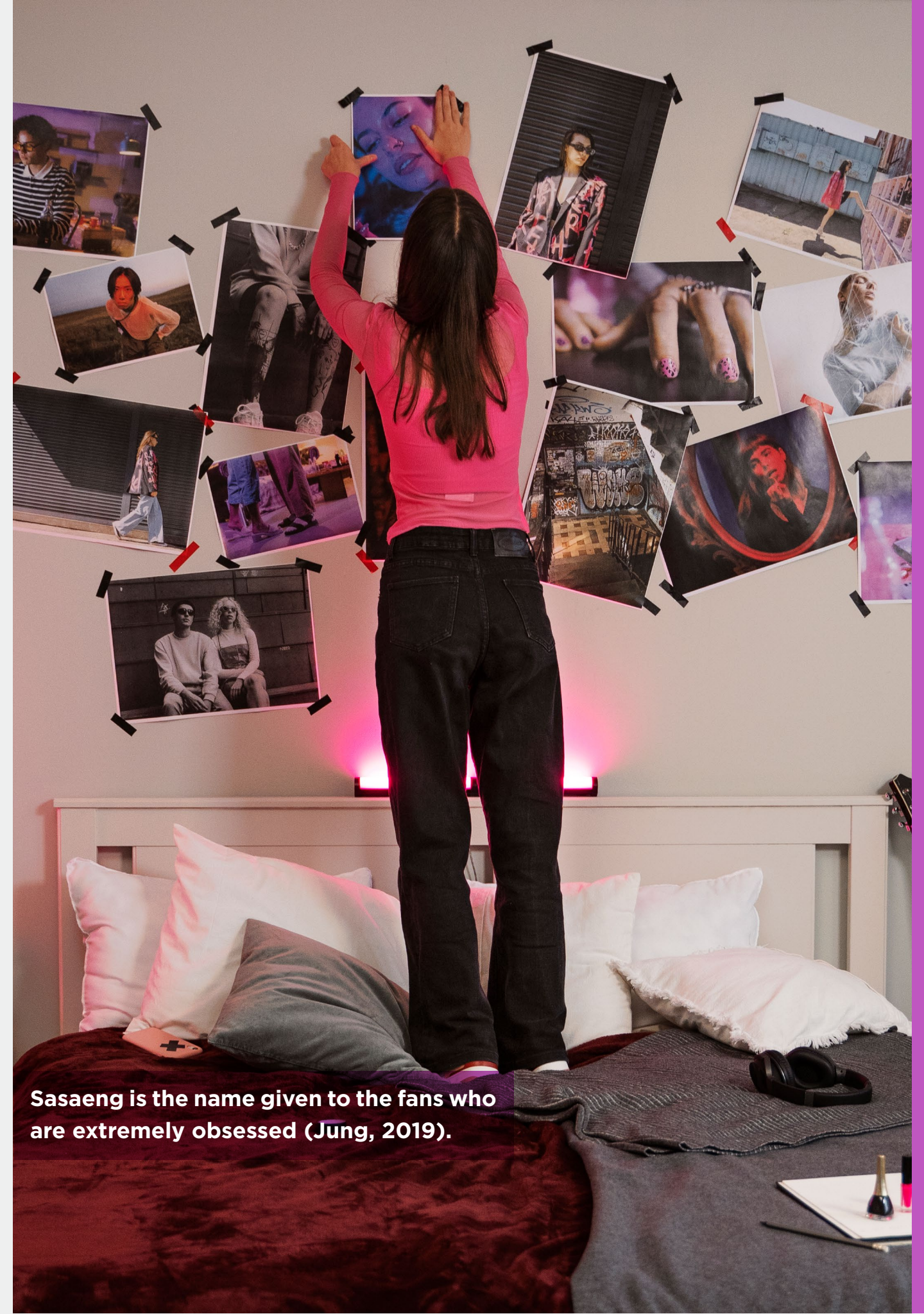


CAREER

Idols' careers are filled with challenges and problems, where the most common are stress and extreme exhaustion due to their performance (some idols have fallen asleep on stage, as it happened to Jimin from BTS). This pressure has affected their physical condition and their mental health, which has led many idols to abandon this path or even to commit suicide pressured by having to maintain "a perfect image" for K-Pop (in some cases with plastic surgery), although there also are layoffs for not honoring the contract, for disputes or negotiations, giving them a compensation payment and freeing themselves from the agency. The disassociation process can have a negative impact on the idol's career and reputation if the reasons behind the dismissal are public or controversial. This also affects the dynamics and stability of the group the idol belonged to (Kim, 2018).

Another very important topic has been harassment and cyberbullying, normally from the haters who disapprove of their work or behavior, but also from their fans, who are so obsessed with them that they want to touch, kiss, and hug them without their permission (and inappropriately), they follow them everywhere they go, try to obtain their personal information illegally, send them constant messages or even unrequested food, they stalk them showing up at their places or their jobs, jeopardizing their safety.

Image: Freepik, 2023.



Sasaeng is the name given to the fans who are extremely obsessed (Jung, 2019).



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Idols are constantly compared to other groups and artists, as the agencies' goal is for them to be on the top of all local and international specialized musical industry billboards, where Billboard 100 Hot is one of the most important. Its venue is in New York City (USA), and everyone who is there is highly recognized and acclaimed; it is difficult to get there, but most of the leading artists are K-pop, among others (Lee, 2016).

Normally, fans are loyal, passionate, and respectful with the privacy of their idols, they protect them from criticism and malicious comments, some fans are even feared by critics as they know they take things seriously and affect their reputation and social networks in a compelling way.

Image. Freepik, 2023.



There is a well-known South Korean law called Anti-stalking Law, approved in 2016 to protect idols from their fans, and which establishes legal and civil sanctions for anyone who breaches the safety and privacy of celebrities.

THE FUTURE OF IDOLS

What happens to the idols once their approximately seven-year contract ceases?



They go into the military service, which is mandatory in South Korea, and which lasts approximately two years, but for the idols it is only 18 months and the Government extends the recruitment period until the age of 35 (Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, 2017).



They get married and form a family.



They have solo careers, especially in the United States and Asia, although they can expand their frontiers, towards Latin American and European countries, depending on their commercial strategies (Koo, 2017).



Groups usually go apart and each member focuses on the part of the career they like best, they can go from singers to actors, from singing in a group to going solo.



They become main investors of the shares of the company who hired them, securing a future where they can maintain and even improve their lifestyle.



They can become television or events hosts.



They exploit other creative areas such as painting or sculpture.



Others become producers of other idols and even cooperate with artists. This is very important so as not to lose the fans, who unconditionally support them.



Others will become trainers of the next generations of idols.

As K-Pop expands, we will see more idols of different nationalities, mixed groups, and more experimentation of musical genres to satisfy all audiences. But will the future of idols be presented with opportunities, with more growth and more freedom?

The following questions develop from this situation:

- How should talent management processes be improved in the South Korean entertainment companies, based on recruitment and selection, training and development, performance evaluation, and compensation and benefits to increase the satisfaction of idols since the first contact until the closing of the contract?
- Which strategies based on human talent should the South Korean entertainment companies incorporate to guarantee the integral wellbeing of the complete professional career of an idol?

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