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Honors Thesis Proposal

April 28, 2022

Honors Creative Project Thesis Proposal

Working Title: Pop Idol Culture and Abuse: The Dark Side to the Korean Wave

Project Purpose

The purpose of this thesis is to make a documentary that will analyze the treatment of Korean pop music, or K-pop, idols by their contractors and their fan base and the physical and mental effects of the profession.

Project Importance

K-pop and K-pop idols have come into the global spotlight in the rise of what is colloquially called the “Korean Wave”, a term used to describe the globalization of Korean culture through music and television, particularly in the United States. As a result of this phenomenon, several research studies have been released in the past decade pinpointing the origins of the wave, the aspects that have made K-pop extremely successful and evaluating the actions of the different fanbases for idol groups. It has only been recently that any studies have been published showing the emotional and physical hardships K-pop idols experience as a result of their work.

Currently, few Americans are aware of the exploitive nature and commercialism of K-pop. This documentary would serve as a way to reach a more general population outside of

researchers or intense K-pop fans, to both educate them on the rise of K-pop and the truths of its treatment of its stars. The goal I have with creating this documentary is to reach young Americans, likely ages 13-30, that are either distantly familiar with K-pop or passionate fans of it, to educate them both on the bigger picture of K-pop within globalization and Korean culture and the mistreatment of idols that goes unnoticed in the public eye. As a journalism student, I believe one of the most important first steps towards change is to inform people of a problem or of an unseen angle to a story, and I hope this documentary will do exactly that.

Project Overview

I am currently collecting and referencing academic research done on both the Korean wave and the current culture surrounding K-pop idols. Much of my research focuses on the origins of pop idol groups, the terminology and patterns surrounding idols, and the expectations that pop idol culture places on the stars. It is important for me to understand both the rise of K-pop on a global scale as well as some of the systems put into place that create idol culture in order to more fully understand what effect it could have on idols.

There are few studies discussing in detail the effects suffered by K-pop idols. From the research I have done, it seems that K-pop culture is influenced primarily by large corporations such as JYP, YG and SM entertainment that control the industry with cooperation from the government to commercialize these idols and turn them into both a source of income and a symbolic cultural ambassador for Korea on the international stage.¹ These idols are scouted at

¹ Joanna Elfving-Hwang, "K-pop idols, artificial beauty and affective fan relationships in South Korea," in *Routledge Handbook of Celebrity Studies*, ed. Anthony Elliott (Routledge: 2018), 190-202. shorturl.at/rHQSU.

surprisingly young ages, some as old as five to eight and are often encouraged to sign intensive contracts that leave them financially dependent on these companies.²

In addition, after a rigorous training period of several years, if an idol manages to find success, they are often forced to work for longer than desired in order to pay off debt accumulated under their contracts, which are dubbed as “slave contracts” for their manipulative nature.³ Being forced to work with few days off and little sleep, including working through physical injuries or mental illness, leads these idols to deteriorate quickly in terms of their health. Idols also face the risk of being accosted by obsessed fans, commonly known as Sasaengs, who hold the idol in such high regard that they are willing to resort to unreasonable and violent measures to invade the idol’s private life in a way that the idol will remember them.⁴ Fan expectations also drive the work of K-pop idols, placing a lot of pressure on the stars to format their work to please their audience and maintain a certain public image.

My goal with this documentary is to explore each of these aspects to the dark side of K-pop through my own investigation in Korea and by obtaining interviews with idols and fans in Korea that are experiencing the effects of the culture themselves. I will be visiting South Korea for five weeks in the summer with Dr. Kevin John on the global communications study abroad with the intention of filming video and interviews for the documentary while there.

In the two months leading up to my travel to Korea, I will work on doing research on two fronts. On the one hand, I will be compiling what research I can find, from academic studies, social media posts, and news articles, to better understand the nature of K-pop idol culture as it

² Francesca Padget, “What Are the Difficulties of Being a Korean Pop Idol and to What Extent Do They Outweigh the Benefits?” *Academia*, (2017): 1-30. <https://rb.gy/nzjaof>.

³ “K-pop Revealed: What Are ‘Slave Contracts?’” SSML San Dominico, last modified January 3, 2021. shorturl.at/frEL8.

⁴ Francesca Padget, “What Are the Difficulties of Being a Korean Pop Idol and to What Extent Do They Outweigh the Benefits?” *Academia*, (2017): 1-30. <https://rb.gy/nzjaof>.

has developed over the years and what the system looks like today. Further research can help me get a better grasp of the direction and writing of my documentary. On the second front, I will be making contact with potential interviewees and arranging to have the equipment and assistance needed while in Korea. I will plan where and how to film video to supplement my story and arrange the interviews. For now, based on my current focus and intention with this documentary, I am hoping to interview an idol in training, a somewhat successful idol, a K-pop fan, some general Koreans to get a feel for public opinion, an expert on K-pop and culture trends in Korea, and a representative from one of the major idol contracting companies. I also recognize that, as interviews can be difficult and unpredictable, I may have to be flexible with what interviews I'm able to get and may need to find other ways of telling different parts of the documentary based on what turns out. I will also be working with my professor to find locations and opportunities to film while on the trip, as well as find students to collaborate with and arrange to bring along whatever camera equipment we may need for the project.

Once I leave for Korea on June 28th, my time there will primarily be focused on obtaining as much footage as I can and nearly, if not all, of my interviews for the documentary. After I return home on August 5th, I should have all the original sources I need to piece together with my research and start to piece together a script and outline for the final product. I will spend the month or two after the trip piecing together my footage, obtaining whatever video I have left, and writing and recording a narrative voiceover for the documentary. With this format, the brunt of the research and shooting will be done over the summer whereas the months following will be spent in production and edits as I prepare a final project to defend.

Thesis Committee

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Kevin John.

Faculty Reader: Brother Robert Walz

Honors Coordinator: Dr. Clark Callahan

Qualifications of Thesis Committee

Dr. John graduated from BYU with a bachelor's in public relations and a master's in mass communication. He has been working as Director of the BioComms lab and Adjunct instructor for the past 11 years. He also received his PhD through University of Utah focused on health communication, particularly looking at psychophysiological measures in his studies. Dr. John is particularly interested in exploring connections with fields such as health and communications to show the effects of media on consumers and how to utilize media messages to help inform the general public.

Dr. John's work with media interactions and effects will serve as useful experience to help me understand in my research how media fame and culture interact in the case of K-pop idols, as well as how the movement became globalized through communication channels such as social media and television. Dr. John is also the faculty member organizing the study abroad to Korea, so he will be integral in helping me navigate Korea geographically and culturally, as well as assisting in arranging interviews and video taken during the trip.

Brother Robert Walz received his bachelor's from BYU in broadcast journalism and began teaching at BYU a couple decades later after working extensively as an anchor and reporter in both Idaho and Utah. Brother Walz has traveled abroad to cover in depth international stories during his career, including hurricane Ivan in the Cayman Islands, starvation and drought in Malawi, and a volunteer group distributing wheelchairs in Peru.

Brother Walz's time writing in depth journalism for television, including presenting long form stories through video and personal narration as a reporter, will give me invaluable insight into how to present my own story. We have already discussed how to write the script to be most engaging and the angle from which to narrate the documentary based on modern storytelling styles. Brother Walz has worked on several other documentaries and theses over the years for other journalism students and otherwise and thus has a lot of experience with the process I will go through with my own project, making his advice and perspective essential to this project.

My honors coordinator, Dr. Clark Callahan, will also be integral in helping connect me with faculty and keeping the project on track.

Project Timeline

April 29th- Submit Thesis Proposal

May 15th- Apply to Robert K. Thomas Scholarship

May 30th- Finish collecting my academic research and synthesizing my academic research

June 27th- Schedule my interviews, finalize my itinerary of where I will shoot footage, plan for camera equipment and student assistance.

June 28th to August 5th- Shoot all video and interviews needed for the documentary.

September 15th- Apply for graduation.

October 24th- Complete rough draft of documentary and receive feedback for edits.

November 11th- Complete second draft with accompanying essay and submit Thesis Defense Information Form

November 25th - Defend my thesis

December 5th- Submit Thesis

December 8th- Complete final thesis draft and submit final PDF

IRB and IAUC Approvals

IRB approvals are pending. Due to the journalistic nature of this documentary, and since the interviewees will not be subject to any experimentation or duress, it is unlikely these permissions are necessary. However, we will still seek IRB approval as a precaution.

Funding

The entire cost for the project will include my costs to travel to Korea, extra camera equipment that I may need to buy that will not already be provided by the department, and potentially compensation for students that will work with me on filming interviews and translating. I have already paid for the preliminary payments required for the study abroad through my own funds and a full tuition scholarship awarded by BYU. The plane tickets will cost about \$1900, which I will pay for using a \$1000 scholarship awarded to me by the school of communications and potentially the \$1200 dollars I will receive from the Honors program for an approved thesis. I will also apply for the Robert K. Thomas scholarship to potentially receive more funds to help offset the cost of the trip. Any funds that remain, mostly likely \$400, will go towards purchasing camera equipment, which will likely add up to about \$150 to \$200, and go towards travel around Korea for filming and interviews. I may also use some of these remaining funds to compensate my fellow students for their work on this project with me in filming and translation.

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Culminating Experience

Since my thesis will be a creative work by producing a documentary, I plan to submit the documentary for various television journalism awards such as the Rocky Mountain Emmys, BEA, and Hearst awards. I also plan to submit it to the Gracies, a special organization that gives awards to females in the journalism and television industries that are performing groundbreaking work. I would also be interested in giving a screening of the film in order to receive public feedback and acknowledge my faculty advisory team and fellow students.