



Research on Korean Idol-Making Industry Based on Culture Industry Theory

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Abstract. The Korean pop mature system is well known around the world, and its industrially produced idol groups such as BTS and Blackpink have not only taken Asia by storm, but have even swept Europe and the US, with their works topping iTunes, YouTube and other charts and even breaking records. However, in recent years, Korean idol culture has been severely criticized for its negative news, such as fans collecting money to make charts, social media wars, and data falsification by program groups to make money. At present, studies on Korean idol industry are limited to gender perspective and international cultural exchange perspective, but rarely examine its mature mechanism, industrialized operation and mass production from a critical perspective. This paper attempts to analyze Korean pop culture from the perspective of cultural industry and finds that Korean pop not only presents various characteristics of cultural industry theory, but also has a negative impact on Korean society. This paper will be beneficial to supplement the lack of cultural criticism on the research of idol-making industry.

Keywords: Idol-making industry · Culture industry · Korean

1 Introduction

Introduced by Adorno, a representative of the Frankfurt School, the culture industry is a concept criticizing the commodification and standardization of mass culture in a capitalist society. The cultural industry is a system of entertainment industries that reproduces and disseminates commercialized, non-creative cultural products on a large scale by virtue of modern technology. The essence of the culture industry is to serve the capitalist powers-that-be through ideological penetration [1].

Cultural industry theory is one of the important theories to study and criticize mass culture. At present, Korean idol culture, which has evolved into a mature commercial industry, has prevailed around the world. This paper will analyze the idol-making industry in Korean based on culture industry theory and study the emergence of Korean idol culture and its impact on society. The paper covers several parts. Firstly, it briefly introduces the points of cultural industry theory; Secondly, after revealing the regular pattern of Korean idol-making industry, it will carry out cultural criticism from the level of social influence; Finally, it will summarize the main points of this study.

2 Literature Review

Through the literature search in Google Scholar database with “Korean cultural industry” as a keyword, this paper found that there were not too much relevant English literatures, only about a dozen or so relevant documents, whose analysis perspectives included culture, globalization, gender and music itself, and few of them were critical from the perspective of cultural industry. Using the same keywords to search CNKI database, only seven articles were found, but they were not related to the cultural industry. It can be seen that the critical analysis of Korean idol group training is still in the exploration and development stage. The following briefly introduces the main points of the existing results.

From gender perspective, in their global - local articulation, Yeran Kim emphasised the deliberate and systematic transformation of young femininity into cultural content as national resources in the contemporary girl industries [2]. According to Gooyong Kim, the chapter claims that throughout contemporary Korean history, the country’s young, submissive, disposable female bodies have been repeatedly manipulated and exploited in the name of national modernization and expansion under various agendas and slogans [3]. K-pop idols are known for being celebrities who act, endorse, model, and advertise in addition to singing.

From globalization perspective, according to Yang Jonghoe, the development of nationalism has given Koreans, particularly younger generations, the ability to critically examine both imported Western culture and their own indigenous culture [4]. At the same time, due to better living conditions throughout their formative years, they had accumulated more cultural capital than previous generations. As a result, people tended to consume popular culture based on their own preferences and quality. They also had a tendency to distinguish between nationalistic ideology and cosmopolitan cultural consumption. In addition, the recent intense movement of popular culture among East Asian countries supports the emergence of an East Asian popular culture. Initially, East Asian popular culture was portrayed as a hybrid modernity that blended Western and Asian civilizations. But it seemed to be evolving into a distinct regional culture, moving away from Western civilization and toward Asian culture. The Korean Wave, according to Woongjae Ryo, was a sign of new global and local changes in the cultural and economic spheres, implying that Asian countries were increasingly accepting cultural production and consumption from neighbouring countries with similar histories and cultural backgrounds, rather than from politically and economically powerful countries [5]. K-pop, according to John Lie, became such an easy “sell” to foreign customers precisely because there wasn’t anything “Korean” in it [6]. In this sense, the K in K-pop was merely a brand, part of Brand Korea that had been the export-oriented South Korean government. In addition, Ingyu Oh reckoned, instead of explaining the globalization of K-pop by cultural hybridity, people should explain this successful phenomenon by the logic of “globalization - localization - reglobalization” [7]. Korea fills a structural void between the Western and East Asian music industries in the global music market.

At present, studies on the Korean idol industry are limited to the gender perspective and international cultural exchange perspective, but rarely examine its mature mechanism, industrialized operation, and mass production from a critical perspective. The study of humanities and social sciences should be two-way, not only analyzing the

inspiration brought by its success, but also keeping an eye on the hidden dangers behind its success. Therefore, this paper will take the cultural industry as a theoretical entry point to analyze the mechanism behind the industrial manufacturing of Korean idols and its anti-enlightenment implications.

3 Culture Industry Theory

In the name of art, the cultural industry, which has a strong and hidden capitalist class ideology, is actually selling cultural commodities for profit and turning the leisure time of the public into another kind of exploited labor. While people buried themselves in cultural pleasure, their physical, mental and even subconscious activities have been manipulated. In sophisticated industrial civilizations, the cultural industry has been widely generated as a system of entertainment business that reproduces and disseminates cultural products on a huge scale through the use of modern technology [1]. This concept hints at the essential properties of modern popular culture, suggesting that it is nothing more than a product of the system of commodity production and consumption.

There are some key traits of this theory. Above all, art production has been factorized, crafted or produced. Art is an appreciative and discriminatory literary activity, but in the cultural industry art has become custom-made, mechanically reproduced and mass-produced, and art is no longer what Marx called “free spiritual production” [8]. This sort of production is referred to as standardisation since it lacks original substance and style, as well as mass production and mechanical reproduction that adheres to predetermined guidelines. As a result, uniformity has supplanted uniqueness, mediocrity has supplanted grace, and ugliness has supplanted sublimity.

Next, artworks are commoditized and consumed. Commodity refers to maximizing profits by means of satisfying the needs of the target consumers. When a cultural product becomes a commodity, it is the market, not the creator, that decides how to produce it. In this process, the attributes of the commodity overwhelm the attributes of art. Art thus metamorphoses from the spiritual realm into an artifact with only use value, thus depriving art of any rebellious and critical function it should have [1].

To continue, artworks are characterized by pseudo-individualism. “Personalization” is a typical ploy to sell cultural commodities, which are always branded with the glamorous glow of genius and unique personality to conceal the standardization of emotion and form, formatting and uniformity of style. Pseudo-individualism is not only due to the standardization of production methods, but is also determined by its ideological nature. It shapes the so-called individuality as society likes and needs it, and “individuality is reduced to the universal capacity, the contingency, which can exist only if it is fully universal.” As Adorno directly pointed out: “In contrast to Kantian, the culture industry’s categorical imperative no longer has anything to do with liberty.” It declares: “You shall conform, without instruction as to what; conform to that which already exists, and to that which everyone thinks as a reflex of its strength and omnipresence,... Compliance has supplanted consciousness. [1]”.

Furthermore, artworks exploit consumers by providing cultural pleasure. Cultural pleasure refers to the explosive pleasure immediately achieved through indulgence, and exploitative points to the gratuitous appropriation of objects belonging to others, a process in which spiritual satisfaction is exchanged for material payment [9].

Eventually, capitalist ideology invariably manipulates the population. Capitalist ideology is the sum of different ideological theories and concepts prevalent in capitalist countries, reflecting the goals and demands of the bourgeoisie as the ruling class. It covertly infiltrates the production activities of art works and subliminally manipulates the thinking of the people, making them willingly submit to the current reality and achieving the purpose of the superstructure to maintain social stability.

4 Korea Idol-Making Industry

4.1 Regular Pattern Based on Cultural Industry Theory

In this paper, idol means celebrities trained by brokerage company (i.e. YG, SM, GYP) to perform singing and dancing on the stage. It usually presents as a group of girls (i.e. Blackpink, Girls' Generation, Wonder Girls, WJSN) or boys (i.e. BTS, Bigbang, Exo, Super Junior) and sometimes the group is made up of both girls and boys (i.e. Trouble Maker, Akdong Musician, Sogyumo Acacia Band). In the context of the Korean idol-making industry, characteristics of the culture industry are presented as follows.

To start, artistic production has been factoryized, crafted or produced. Traditionally, music and dance were elegant and audiences could only appreciate them if they had a certain level of appreciation, attracting an elitist audience. In this context, music and dance are designed to stimulate the senses, and audiences can be attracted to them only through rhythmic melodies and seductive images. At the same time, music and dance become mechanically reproduced works of art that lose the "auto" [10]. To expound, K-pop music is created by some regular patterns as well. Music is designed to follow a certain format, leading to popular music where one can guess the subsequent sequel by listening to only the first verse. Failure to adhere to this harmonic consistency is considered rebellious and not approved or further developed, thus the cultural industry undermines the rebellious nature of literary works.

To continue, artworks are commoditized and consumed. The audience's preference has become the wind vane for Korean agencies to produce artists. A noteworthy feature is that each Korean idol group has developed their own branding and marketing characteristics, allowing them to effectively target specific gender, generational, and cultural preference groups. This is where today's female idols differ from groups like Pinkle and Baby V.O.X, who all had a generally feminine image that appealed largely to girl subculture groups in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Every idol group's market success or failure is decided by how existing (and even commonplace) features, such as sexual, musical, and subcultural codes, are merged and structured to create an original and enticing image of each idol. A group's members are then classified to a certain style or genre, such as lovely, exotic, strong, or wicked. Girls' Generation, for example, exemplifies the typical "artificial beauty" popular in Japanese girl idols, with girls dressed in school or army uniforms and stereotypically cute girls, and inspiring a large male fan base across generations, whereas Wonder Girls represents erotic femininity aimed at male adult fans. 2NE1 takes a different approach, with the girls dressed in an American hip-hop and punk style and using their song lyrics to encourage their female fans to be strong and independent of males; they have a big following among girls in their own age range, specifically those in their teens and twenties [11].

In addition, artworks are characterized by pseudo-individualism. Trainees go through the same model to receive training, then become a mature product, an idol who can perform on the stage and earn money. In the standard system, trainees receive education from a different perspective. For skills, girls train in dancing, singing, stage manners, acting, and foreign languages for a couple of years before their official debut to join a girl idol group, as is well known [12]. Regarding appearance, they have cosmetic surgery after professional evaluation, exercise to shape a perfect body, as well as learn to make up and dress up. In terms of behavior, skills to talk, behave are delivered to them and even skills to smile are included. Also, trainees receive exceedingly strict examinations on a regular basis. This standard of production is bound to produce approximately the same product without specific character. If put this case in Erving Goffman's theory -the Presentation of Self in Everyday Life [13], trainees themselves, together with the teachers who deliver classes to trainees, the agency who invest money to shape trainees, and even the doctors who operate surgeries make up of the "theater team", and what they do are all in the back of the stage. While the performance of idols is on the front stage. They will adjust their behavior, which is regarded as impression management in the theory, according to fans' and market's feedback.

What is more, artworks exploit consumers by providing cultural pleasure. Culture pleasure is presented as auditory stimulation from music, visual stimulation from screen. People spend leisure time to even cost money to enjoy for the purpose of pleasure. During this process, the audience invests time and money without earning something in turn.

Ultimately, capitalist ideology invariably manipulates the population. People indulge in idols and crazily pursue them under invisible entertaining and cultural manipulation, resulting in people enjoying current entertainment rather than criticizing the reality. That is to say, they agree more with reality. People gradually become more of one-dimension rather than two-dimension [14], they lose the ability to realize the negative let alone amend the reality.

4.2 Social Evaluation Based on Cultural Criticism

4.2.1 Instrumental Rationality Completely Overrides Value Rationality

The Culture industry put utilization in the first place, and fully use fetishism to attach a halo of idolization to cultural commodities. By idolization, the process of exchanging cultural commodities can maximize value. In the context of the Korean idol-making industry, it is a highly industrialized mechanism. Fans are transformed into loyal consumers and a vehicle for bringing commercial benefits. The fame of stars is maximized to earn money in a quick time, with an emphasis on China's market.

For example, after the series, *You Who Came From the Stars*, broadcast in 2013, Kim Soo Hyun quickly became popular and welcomed his career peak - over 16 brands invited him to be their spokesperson. He earned exceeding a billion dollars during that time period [15].

4.2.2 People Are Deeply Trapped in the Logic of Technically Rational Thinking

The rapid development of science and technology has penetrated into every corner of real society, and the field of culture and art has also been penetrated, thus giving rise to

the cultural industry. People are wrapped up in the culture industry and fall into it, and unconsciously start to think and solve problems with the logic of science and technology, and eventually, people are brought into the logic of technical-rational thinking and lose themselves without knowing it.

Nowadays, the way to prove the excellent ability and influence of idols is not professional awards, but various technical-based data. The data includes the volume of new albums, volume of products endorsed by idols, views of TV shows that idols attend and so on. Fans collaborate - pool money to buy the albums and products, and swipe through the videos again and again in order to prove their idols' popularity and influence.

For instance, fans will loop the same song to boost airplay and thus help their idol's rank at the top of the charts or even break records. In 2018, a fan of BTS named ARMY distributed 1,000 Spotify accounts to chart their album 'Love Yourself: Tear'. It's no coincidence that in 2020, the new song of BTS, Dynamite, broke the records, which was still not recognized by Spotify's algorithm [16].

4.2.3 Personal Desires Are Suppressed

The culture industry does not purify aspirations, it represses them. The gap between reality and aspiration makes people realize that aspiration is approximately a blank check which is bound to fall through, and that falling brings greater loss.

In the context of the Korean idol-making industry, under aspiration of stars on TV, whatever stunning appearance or skills or ability to earn money, youngsters are encouraged to imitate and are willing to become as shining as them, even become another star in the future. 80% of Korean high school students have gone to agencies receiving training as trainees [17]. However, in fact, it is exceedingly difficult to achieve, which brings loss.

4.2.4 Information Paradox Makes the Mass Ignorant

The message transmitted to the masses is often twofold: the surface message is often freedom, equality, happiness, resistance to injustice, and totalitarianism, while the deeper hidden message transmits the inevitability of adaptation and acceptance of the real order, resulting in anti-enlightenment.

In the context of the Korean idol-making industry, those lyrics in music seem to be bold, individual, striving for free. In fact, it aims at making the audience indulge in that entertainment. It bulked up the means and vehicles, namely the MV and music, for the production and dissemination of popular culture, manipulating a non-spontaneous, materialized false culture, becoming a tool for binding consciousness and an accomplice to authoritarianism.

As Adorno said, "The total effect of the culture industry is one of anti-enlightenment, enlightenment, that is the progressive technical domination of nature, becomes mass deception and is turned into a means forfeiting consciousness. It impedes the development of autonomous, independent individuals who judge and decide consciously for themselves, which would be the precondition for a democratic society [1]." A more ingenious and effective way than before was used to deceive and enslave the masses by

creating a culture of entertainment, thus showing most prominently the regression of the Enlightenment into ideology and the stage of mass obscurantism.

5 Conclusion

Based on the cultural industry theory, this paper analyzes and criticizes the idol-making industry in Korea. It's found that the Korean idol-making industry is a typical cultural industry indeed. It produces standardized dancers and singers in the entertainment business as products, which possess the features of culture industry theory including art production has been factorized, crafted or produced, artworks are characterized by pseudo-individualism, artworks exploit consumers by providing cultural pleasure, capitalist ideology invariably manipulates the population. Several effects are apparently exerted such as instrumental rationality completely overrides value rationality, people are deeply trapped in the logic of technically rational thinking, wishes are repressed, information paradox makes the mass ignorant. It is an undeniable fact that the idol industry is hostage to consumerism and cynicism, and its negative impact on culture and audiences cannot be ignored. By addressing the pain points of the idol industry, the negative effects of the industry can be better avoided. This paper is beneficial to supplement the lack of cultural critical research on Korean idol-making industry, and also helps the society to pay attention to the above problems.

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