



Child idols in South Korea and beyond: Manufacturing young stars at the intersection of the K-pop and influencer industries

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Abstract

This article explores how the influencer and traditional entertainment industries are converging in the “child idol” phenomenon—a celebrity genre and system that had existed prior to the emergence of the influencer industry but has now been remixed with the influencer industry’s convention and refashioned as the stepping stone to lubricate children’s journeys toward professional idol careers in the wake of K-pop culture. We examine the “child idol” phenomenon as a case study wherein children perform as a younger version of K-pop idols under entertainment agencies’ in-house training systems, with calibrated construction of social media personae by influencer agencies and their parents. Despite ongoing attempts to protect children in the industry, undertaken by the Korean government and human rights organizations, the exploitative environment of child stars becomes even more serious as it becomes a template adopted by other countries emulating the success of K-pop.

Keywords

Child celebrity, child idol, child influencer, K-pop idol system, social media, South Korea

Introduction

Competition is rife among South Korean (hereafter Korean) idol groups, with an average of 70 new groups launching annually (Ham, 2021). One of most notable, NewJeans,

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debuted in July 2022 produced by ADOR, a subsidiary of the Korean entertainment company HYBE (best known for the Korean idol group BTS). NewJeans immediately gained worldwide popularity, with more than 100 million Spotify streams in their first month (Cho, 2022). By January 2023, the group had won nine awards from various music award ceremonies both in Korea and the United States (Sophie-Ha, 2023). The group is notable for two further reasons: first, the five members' demographics are diverse, with three Koreans and two Australians from East Asian backgrounds, all of whom speak fluent English, which facilitated their "global breakout" (Benjamin, 2022); and second, and more importantly, the average age of the members was only 16.4 at the time of their debut. Two members of the group were already famous as child celebrities online before their debut. Hyein (b. 2008), despite her mature look at the age of 14, worked as a child influencer from the age of 8 and was later a member of the idol-like child group U.SSO Girl (kimjiwon, n.d.). Another member, Danielle (born 2005), also has a similar career trajectory having worked as a child model appearing in several Australian and Korean TV shows since the age of 5 and was best known for her "exotic" White-Korean biracial look (tuleconghoa, 2022). K-pop idols debuting at an early age is increasingly an industry convention. BoA, the solo female artist from the first K-pop idol generation, debuted at 13 years old in 2000 (Russell, 2014). However, what sets NewJeans's case apart is the unique manner in which underage members like Hyein and Danielle have been recruited globally and systematically cultivated into idols from their pre-teen years. This has been achieved and amplified through a symbiotic collaboration between the K-pop and influencer industries within today's social media landscape.

Many famous K-pop agencies like SM, YG, and JYP, including ADOR, regularly host global auditions to recruit both domestic and international teenage K-pop aspirants.

These agencies pay particular attention to children with existing social media popularity, including child influencers. For example, SM recruited the famous child YouTuber Na Haeun (born 2009, with 5 million subscribers as of writing) as a K-pop trainee in 2022 (Han, 2022). Child entertainment and edutainment companies also use K-pop in their global marketing. For example, the child education YouTube channel Pocket TV (run by Daeko, the biggest child education company in Korea) targets both domestic and overseas audiences. It posts K-pop-related videos (e.g. children doing K-pop dance covers) with non-Korean subtitles, recruiting both domestic and international children as the "channel crews" (Pocket TV, n.d.). K-pop training programs have also been launched competitively overseas (e.g. ACOPIA, n.d.; *Korea.net*, 2016).

The industry has routinely been criticized for its lack of focus on children's health and safety. Children in the K-Pop and influencer industries are often subject to "slave contracts" with agencies (Saif, 2022), demanding significant emotional and physical labor. Child sexualization is another issue with female K-pop idols frequently sexualized across the media despite their age (Kim, 2011). White-Korean mixed-race child influencer Ella Gross rose to stardom on Instagram, and then joined the "YG family" based on media fetishization of her biracial appearance as "the perfect mixture of West and East" (Abidin and Lee, 2023). Similarly, the media often present NewJeans as objects to be consumed, endorsing their "exotic and marvelous beauty" while ignoring their status as children (e.g. Lee, 2022).

Yet in Korea, child celebrities continue to be presented as idols for cultural consumption. Similar to Danielle and Hyein of NewJeans, for example, Rora, who had worked in a child idol group U.SSO Girl at the age of eight with Hyein, was recruited for YG's brand-new girl group BABYMONSTER (2023). The K-pop industry actively collaborates with Multi Channel Network (MCN) companies and social media businesses. In partnership with MCNs, SM trains social media famous child Internet celebrities as potential recruits for their next idol groups (Lim, 2022) giving rise to a new "child idol" (키즈돌 "kids[-]dol" in Korean) celebrity genre. Child idols are similar to K-pop idols, but younger, with pre-teens and early-teens performing music and dancing like K-pop idols, working under entertainment agencies, mostly in teams with other children. U.SSO Girl, where Hyein from NewJeans and Rora from BABYMONSTER worked as previous members, exemplify this genre.

This article illustrates how the emerging influencer industry and K-pop industry have collaboratively created the "child idol" genre, refining an exploitative system where children are manufactured and presented for global consumption. Using case studies from the Korean entertainment industry, we examine the emerging business model locating, creating, managing, and marketing this child celebrity genre built on global demands for K-pop.

Method

To analyze how the K-pop and influencer industries co-evolve in manufacturing child idols, we conducted "situational mapping" to "identify the major human, non-human, discursive, and other elements influencing a situation, as framed by those in the situation as well as the analyst" (Clarke, 2003: 559, cited in Markham and Lindgren, 2014: 12). Media studies scholars Markham and Lindgren (2014) suggest that with situational maps researchers can identify and (re)assemble various layers that intersect each other in complex ways, clarifying a social phenomenon.

In the field of social media pop cultures, human and non-human actors—including industries, influencers, consumers-as-audiences, and social media platforms—are often engaged in different sub-fields and discourses but nevertheless intersect forming a particular situation of cultures through ongoing (in)direct interactions (Abidin and Lee, 2022). In today's social media landscape, an influencer ecology emerges as a complex social phenomenon and situation. This ecology comprises multiple actors, including influencers, their staff (often their family members, particularly for children), consumers-as-audience, and various industries such as influencer agencies, advertisers, platform companies, and other media stakeholders (Stoldt et al., 2019). These entities continuously interact with each other within the evolving environment of an influencer ecology, shaping its state, conditions, and dynamics. The ongoing interactions among these diverse actors create intricate networks, leveraging the existing connections between social media users, creators and consumers, industry stakeholders, and even governments. Think about how an influencer scandal often begins as gossip and then escalates into a social issue, amplified through the network of social media users, online journalists, and industry participants (e.g. Abidin and Lee, 2023).

With this understanding, we first mapped the contexts and circumstances around the K-pop and influencer markets. By contextualizing the discourses about children within the markets, we delineated the “boundaries” of the industry where the two markets are intricately interwoven. This allowed us to identify key actors in the co-evolution of the K-pop and influencer industries: child influencers/aspirants, their parents, fans-as-audiences, and the industry players. This focus helped us narrow down the scope to focus on the “child idol” phenomenon. In the second mapping stage, we moved to a more empirical phase, examining the dynamics and symbolic interactions among the key actors identified in the first stage within the network. This mapping was based on a more specific topic and demographic setting. Below we share how we developed our mapping process.

We initially wanted to explore how children are situated and marketed at the junction of the two industries, the influencer industry and the K-pop industry. This question led us to examine two main things: (1) the process by which children are groomed into celebrities within the K-pop idol system and the underlying reasons, and (2) the curation of children as influencers and their subsequent trajectories within the industry. The first author examined blog posts and comments about underage K-pop idols written in both Korean and English, sourced from popular K-pop online communities (theqoo, Instiz, soompi, koreaboo, and allkpop) along with news articles shared in the communities. From this initial data collection, several recurring themes emerged, such as underage K-pop idols’ previous paths as child influencers and the identification of famous or emerging child influencers often dubbed as “the next K-pop idols.” These observations led us to closely examine the child influencer industry, where children are framed as new digital capital to commodify and marketize, particularly through the lens of the visual economy (Abidin, 2020; Ågren, 2022). The first author then followed several famous child influencers in Korea (e.g. Awesome Haeun) and tracked relevant influencer-related hashtags in Korean, such as #키즈인플루언서 [#kids influencer], #키즈모델 [#kids model], across platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and the local search portal site Naver. Both Instagram and YouTube are the most popular social media platforms where child influencers are showcased; Naver is also useful for having been a popular platform for blogging, especially among mommy bloggers (Kim, 2014). These data often contained idol-related markers, including the hashtags #키즈돌 [#kidsdol], #아이돌지망생 [#idol aspirants], descriptive comments like “preparing to be an idol” and “currently in idol training,” or detailed information about “how to make your children as child influencers [or child idols].” While many of these social media posts and accounts were managed by parents, some were overseen by child-focused entertainment agencies and idol agencies. For this reason, to understand industrial conventions and systems involved in manufacturing and marketing child influencers, the first author further investigated these companies’ PR materials, including their talent pool, social media channels, and training programs. Combining different data sets was effective in identifying various key actors, their dynamics, desires, and potential tensions, all of which collectively contribute to shaping and mobilizing the situation.

In our analysis, we scrutinized how children are framed and portrayed in an influencer ecology across a wide array of different sources, including social media and community posts as well as PR materials. We focused on how the child influencer industry continues

to thrive, leveraging the conventional frameworks and representations of children in the industry, despite differences between multiple actors. From this process, we identified the “child idol” (키즈돌 “kids[-]dol” in Korean) as a *new* child celebrity genre in Korea, which had existed before the emergence of the influencer industry but has now been remixed with the influencer industry’s conventions and refashioned as the stepping stone for children’s journeys toward professional idol careers. This mapping of child idols was based on the primary data corpus described above as well as multi-year studies on the influencer ecologies and children’s social media that the authors have been undertaking for their ongoing projects for more than 8 years. In this article, we paid attention to specific famous child idol groups, such as U.SSO Girl and Vitamin, their respective agencies, and collaborative partners/companies. We then contextualized these case studies within the broader child celebrity industry, including Disney’s Mickey Mouse Club in the United States, the *jimusho* system in Japan, and the in-house K-pop training system in Korea, alongside relevant regulations and policies. In following different maps and identifying key actors in the child idol phenomenon, we focused particularly on how the entertainment industry has developed a business model to produce this new celebrity genre and how children are presented within this highly commercial environment.

In this article, we have removed identifiable elements of child influencers and their parents from our original data to protect them from potential risks from this study. For the same reason, we have slightly altered the wording of quotations to minimize searchability. Markham (2012) suggests this form of “data fabrication” as a creative ethical solution to protect the privacy of research participants in the searchable and traceable environment of digital media culture. This is particularly important for children online whose privacy choices are mostly made by their parents (Leaver, 2021). However, the names and social media handles of agencies remain intact to maintain data integrity and our critical perspective on the child idol industry. We do not anonymize the names of K-pop idol stars nor several child influencers who are already globally famous since their stardom has already been reified as cultural texts.

Below, we zoom out briefly to situate the work and then review the business models of child-specialized entertainment agencies by contextualizing the child idol phenomenon within pop culture. We identify four major issues relating to the child idol phenomenon: the commodification of child bodies; the normalization of child labor; a lack of respect for children’s agency; and an absence of meaningful regulation of these industries. Finally, we discuss the implications of these issues as child idols go global.

Child star industries

Children have been part of the global entertainment industry for more than a century. From child actors in Hollywood to child influencers today, profits precede meaningful protections. When legal and policy protections do emerge, they do so often after issues of child exploitation are revealed, such as the emergence of the Coogan law protecting child actors in the United States after notable examples of high-profile child actors being exploited by parents and producers (Abidin, 2020). The emergence of child influencers, both as part of family groups and as sole influencers managed by parents and others, has also occurred without clear rules and policies governing this activity, which can lead to

similar issues (Reardon, 2022; Verdoodt et al., 2020). As both the K-pop and the influencer industries have matured, both offer younger and younger children as “digital capital” in both online and traditional media settings (Ågren, 2022). This section offers a broader context for examining exemplars of the intersecting child star and child influencer industries, looking at the historical emergence of these young influencers but also looking forward to the implications of their more widespread normalization as part of global online pop culture. This article contributes to mapping these trends, with specific attention to the increasingly globalized nature of child influencer and child star systems.

Children as new idols

The K-pop industry is globally known for its (in)famous in-house trainee system [연습생 시스템, *yeonseupsaeng system*], wherein teen idol aspirants are professionally trained for years to become full idols (Lee, 2018). While unique for its standardized process of recruitment, training, and debut, star-manufacturing systems in the United States and Japan have targeted teenagers since the 1950s. Both countries’ cases served as precedents of the K-pop industry and subsequent child idols.

In 1955, Disney launched *The Mickey Mouse Club* TV show in the United States where tweens and early teens sang and danced as Mouseketeers, gaining fame and popularity (Armstrong, 2010). The show launched a new genre of teen pop culture, where tweens feature on TV shows, perform pop music, and rise to “teen idol” status, building a large teenage fanbase (Marshall, 2017). Since the 1990s, Disney has launched various child TV shows on its cable Disney Channel and recruited talented children, some of whom have years of training in song and dance (Armstrong, 2010). As a “star-finding machine” (Armstrong, 2010: 210), the Channel positions potential Hollywood stars based on their media careers as teen idols, including Britney Spears joining Mickey Mouse Club at 12, and Miley Cyrus joining teen sitcom *Hannah Montana* at 14 (Kennedy, 2017; Marshall, 2017).

In 1960s Japan, Johnny & Associates (hereafter Johnny’s) introduced a Disney-like system, creating groups of young boys as a new “idol” [アイドル, *aidoru*] genre (Nagaike, 2012). This *jimusho* idol-manufacturing system [事務所 (trans. “office”) meaning ‘agency’], entails agencies controlling every part of idol production and management, including their training, media debut, career, and public image (Marx, 2012). When early teen boys join *jimushos* like Johnny’s, they practice singing, dancing, and acting, debuting with other members as an idol group (Marx, 2012). Boys in this training stage are called Johnny’s Jr., starting to accrue popularity and build their fanbase, occasionally appearing in media as backup dancers for existing idols (Nagaike, 2012). Parasociality is an imaginary connection that audiences and fans build with media characters (Horton and Richard Wohl, 1956). Parasocial *jimusho* approaches include sharing idols’ behind-the-scenes personae, including their pre-debut ones, to build a sense of intimate connection with fans (Marx, 2012; Nagaike, 2012). The *shōnen* [少年, trans. boy] image and identity seen throughout Johnny’s Jr. career is effective at forging and maintaining parasocial connections with female fans (Nagaike, 2012).

Inspired by Johnny's success, new *jimushos* were founded, expanding the industry, and launching female idol groups as well: e.g. Morning Musume in 1998 by Hello! Project and AKB48 in 2006 by DH (Galbraith and Karlin, 2012). As tweens started to audition as idols, a subgenre emerged and blossomed in popularity, called *junior idol* [ジュニアアイドル, *junia aidoru*] or *chidol* [チャアイドル, *chaidoru*, shortening of 'child idol']. For example, Hello! Project, a Japanese musical collective of female idols under the agency Up-Front Promotion, launched Hello! Project Kids in 2002, consisting of 15 pre-teen or early teens girls, was chosen from a nationwide audition (HiP Wiki, n.d.). The project is a representative *chidol* project, with two groups, Berryz Koubou, and °C-ute, being popular until 2017 (HiP Wiki, n.d.).

While the details differ slightly, the idol genre in the Disney and *jimusho* systems shows how children are strategically molded and presented for public consumption. Teen idols function as "lifestyle role models" for child audiences, showcasing "appearances and personal qualities that are considered socially appropriate and trendy" with fashionable clothes, makeup, and hairstyles (Aoyagi, 2005: 3). The K-pop idol in-house system is inspired by both, but is now more advanced in terms of expansion in the era of social media, absorbing younger children, even from overseas, into "the system."

Originally designed in the late 1990s by Lee Soo-Man, former chairman of SM Entertainment (n.d.)—one of the oldest and biggest K-pop entertainment agencies—"the system" has become a powerhouse of the K-pop idol industry (Jin, 2020; Kim, 2018; Lee, 2018). Teens with star material—judged mainly on their appearance and singing ability—are recruited via official auditions or unofficial scouting. They join entertainment agencies that vigorously manage media training and provide weekly testing. Those who survive the highly competitive system debut as idols (Lee, 2018). The in-house training system is the basis of idol production; agencies manage and curate how their idols are presented and consumed in the media from the very first day when they enter as children, similar to the *jimusho* system. However, there is a difference. The Japanese idol system and culture are based on feelings of mutual dependence and relatability, which fans cultivate with their idols (Richardson, 2016). Rather than showing the "professional" and "perfect" images on the stage, many Japanese idols intentionally insert their "amateurish performance" in vocality and choreography to create moments of relatable intimacy with fans (Richardson, 2016). In contrast, the Korean system aims to produce "professional" and "perfect" idols with star charisma and aura (De Souza, 2018: 131–132; Turnbull, 2017) aiming to become a "super star" (DatJoeDoe, 2017; Travis, 2021). Agencies recruit child aspirants who seem to best fit a specific position in an idol group, and train them for the role: a person with a distinctive physique as a "visual" or 'face'; a person with the best singing technique as a 'vocalist'; and a person with dancing skills or rapping skills as a "dancer" or a "rapper" (Carpio, 2021). Children in the Korean training system thus undergo much more demanding training.

The K-pop idol trainee system has been criticized regarding trainees' human rights (National Human Rights Commission of Korea). Trainees now enter the system at pre-teen ages, lowered from late teens previously (Kang, 2019). Training has intensified, ranging from acting, modeling, and language learning for the global market, to the daily monitoring of media use, and the detailed management of physical appearance, weight, and cosmetic surgery (Lee, 2018; Venters and Rothenberg, 2022). Media scholar Jong-Im

Lee (2018) found that trainees frequently suffer from eating disorders, and experience tremendous stress because of career uncertainty, financial precarity, endless testing, and extreme management and surveillance in their everyday lives (e.g. no phone and no dating). Trainees and idols are expected to live in a dorm with others, while competing with each other every day to succeed in the idol dream, which continues until some reach stardom, usually 5 to 8 years after their official debut (Lee, 2018; Suh, 2020). Children in the system lack parental protection and formal education, as they are frequently required to skip school or drop out to prioritize “professional” training while being away from home (Lee, 2018). Nevertheless, hardships and struggles during the training period are considered inescapable for personal achievement and future success in line with the neoliberal discourse embedded in the K-pop industry (Kim, 2018; Lee, 2018).

In K-pop’s global expansion over the last two decades, two things are noticeable. First, becoming an idol is now considered the main pathway to a professional career as a star in the Korean entertainment industry. Once teens debut as idols, their assorted media appearances during the idol period are strategically arranged by agencies for the next “star” stage. Vocalist members release solo singles, establishing them as “singers”; “visual” members build their acting career upon their idol debut by starring in TV dramas and films; members with MC talent frequent entertainment shows to become “multi-entertainers” (Carpio, 2021). Considering that many newly launched idol groups never reach stardom, with all but a few forgotten and disbanded (Ham, 2021), idols in the K-pop industry are no longer a subgenre of “star,” but a pathway to the next level of “super star” within the celebrity hierarchy (Lee, 2018: 30–33). Similarly, for people overseas, to debut as a member of a K-pop idol group guarantees future success in their home countries when they return. This has been the case for many K-pop idols with Chinese backgrounds. After making his debut at the age of 16 in the boy group Wanna One in 2017, Taiwanese Lai Kuanlin returned to China and is now one of the most successful stars in the Chinese and Taiwanese entertainment industries, appearing in various TV shows (Felix, 2022). Like Lai, many foreign idol members use their K-pop idol career as a stepping stone to the next star level; the global popularity of K-pop helps them build their stardom and pursue more opportunities in the market of their home countries more easily (Cho, 2020). As such, children now join the K-pop system for better opportunities beyond being K-pop idols.

Second, age has become one of the most important factors in idol production. Many big agencies note a strict age limit in their open calls; The Black Label’s 2022 audition call reads “eligibility: born after 2004, and” only open to those under 19 (Sophie-Ha, 2022). In the late 1990s, late teens or early 20s could debut as idols after a few months of training, but in the 2020s children over 14 are frequently rejected in auditions for being “too old” (Kang, 2019).

As the in-house training system becomes standardized in the K-pop industry, the competition becomes intense, with more than 1,800 trainees “officially” registered to 316 agencies across the country in 2021 (Korea Creative Content Agency, 2022). Among these trainees, less than 1% debut, but their “debut” does not guarantee any success (Hyun and Choi, 2020). Children develop media trajectories from a younger age, hoping to seize a chance to debut as a K-pop idol and pursue their dream—or their parents’ dream—in the entertainment industry. In the 2000s and early 2010s, this was done mostly

via TV shows, whereas in the 2020s it is via social media. For example, Sunye, a former member of the girl group Wonder Girls, was selected as JYP's trainee from the reality show, "JYP's 99% Challenge" in *Good Sunday* (2001), at age 12 and trained until her debut in 2007 (halves-in-unison, 2013). While auditioning for reality programs has been an "idol path" for K-pop aspirants and trainees to start and build their media careers, this path is now redirected through social media. As seen in cases like the mega YouTuber Awesome Haeun becoming an SM trainee, and influencer Ella Gross joining the YG family, big agencies like SM and YG now actively recruit child influencers for their brand-new idols (Abidin and Lee, 2023; Han, 2022).

Children as digital capital in the era of social media

The social media era has meant that children are increasingly situated as "digital capital" leading to many situations where their talent, images, and data are commercialized and exploited (Ågren, 2022). Children often feature in central roles in the content of family influencers, even at times against their explicit protests (Leaver, 2021). Social media platforms encourage creators of every kind, including child influencers, to build their brand by posting with great frequency to maintain audiences. The desire to show children's labor as pleasurable often leads to the doubling down of labor where children are strategically featured in behind-the-scenes and less polished content purporting to show the playful nature of content creation (Abidin, 2017). For children, social media stardom is even more complicated than stardom in the broadcast era, especially as MCN companies actively recruit child talent as they expand their business to the child sector. In this climate, Internet-famous children rise to stardom strategically via the symbiotic reinforcement of the traditional media industry by elements of the influencer industry to harness, amplify, and exploit children's viral fame (Leaver and Abidin, 2018). The Korean entertainment industry has established a developed version of this symbiosis as a new business model, too, by collaborating with the K-pop industry. This is epitomized in the *newly-reconfigured* "child idol" celebrity genre whose stardom is calibrated and managed by child-specialized entertainment agencies and MCN companies. The following section examines the evolution of the child idol genre into a new business model, using child idol groups as case studies.

Child idol as a business model, idol-accelerator, and new celebrity genre

The child idol genre allows entertainment industries to instantly leverage fame and popularity from child celebrities upon their idol debut and to immediately profit from children's manufactured fame. As the in-house training system of the K-pop idol industry becomes a norm, small and mid-sized entertainment agencies specializing in child celebrities have launched *hagwon* programs [학원, private educational programs]. These include "K-pop academy" and "dance academy" programs for children, cultivating their dance and singing skills, and managing their appearance to be attractive and socially desirable, enough to succeed in the SM, YG, JYP auditions (Lee, 2018). These agencies

are active parts of Internet-based businesses, often branding themselves as MCN companies, recruiting children and managing their media presence (e.g. social media content and advertorial campaigns) under the name of idol-like groups, creating the “child idol” genre. In other words, the “child idol” genre is a business model, ostensibly accelerating children’s media visibility and fame to higher levels of celebrity in the industry. We call this a *star accelerator*, a process invented by entertainment industries, where idol-related, child-targeting businesses combine in an ecosystem profiting from the processes that build and maintain children’s potential stardom and fame across different media platforms (see Figure 1). In social media pop cultures where new celebrity genres such as influencers and Internet celebrities are created for popular consumption (Abidin, 2018), star accelerators comprise social media business, covering child influencers, K-pop training, social media content production, online commerce, and so on. The most well-known child idol group, Vitamin, is a notable exemplar.

The child-specialized entertainment company Clevr E&M launched the child idol group Vitamin in 2015 with girl members who were all in their early teens on debut. The members were recruited from the company’s pool of child talent who had joined the company as child influencers and were further shaped via its K-pop training programs. Vitamin has a “graduation” system, like many J-pop and K-pop idol groups have, in which members “graduate” from the group (metaphorically “leave” the group or “retire”) as they reach a certain age limit, and younger members join instead (Koreaboo, 2017). For child idol groups like Vitamin, this system keeps their average age constant, introducing new children into the group, as existing members “leave” for their professional

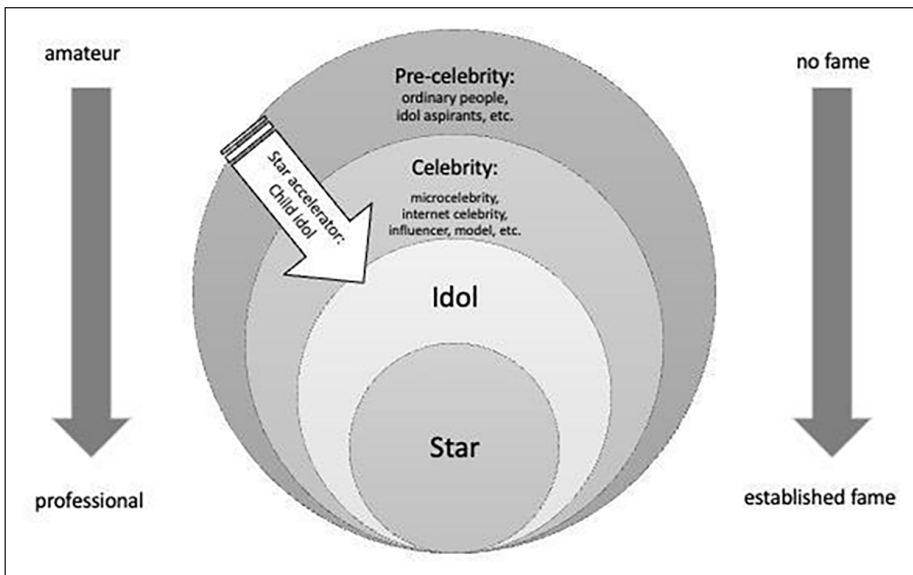


Figure 1. Diagram showing celebrity hierarchy categorized by celebrity status and level of fame.

career development as K-pop idols. Once children are selected as group members, they undertake the typical K-pop idol activities, such as releasing albums, holding fan meets, performing singing, and dancing at offline festivals and events, but not in TV music programs like SBS Inkigayo where the “real” K-pop idols star. All these performances are managed and controlled by the agencies, as though a preliminary stage of the professional K-pop in-house system. This is akin to the labor-exploitative system of the traditional child manufacturing model of Johnny’s, where trainees were asked to provide their labor for free or underpaid, performing as backup dancers or holding fan meets in regions, in hopes that they would become professional idol one day (Nagaike, 2012). The members of Vitamin are also put in a similar situation where their labor is systematically exploited for free, to increase their media visibility. They are constantly asked to perform pleasurable and cute girl images, enough to be featured in social media channels run by the agencies. They also appear as child models for the agencies’ ecommerce, such as the online shopping mall Clevr Mall where they sell children’s clothes as well as Vitamin’s albums and goods for fans. As this combined child idol business model has proven successful, other child-specialized entertainment agencies adopt it and launch competitive child idol groups: e.g. Little Cheer Girl (early-teen girl group, 2015–present, by Rainbow Company), Mini Little Cheer Girl (pre-teen girl group, 2019–2021, by Rainbow Company), U.SSO Girl (early-teen girl group, 2017–present, by On1. Entertainment). The child idol market is growing rapidly, inviting overseas children to join the phenomenon. On1 Entertainment, one of the biggest child-specialized entertainment agencies, launched the Korean-Taiwanese early/pre-teen boy group Super Kids in partnership with Apple Studio, a child dance academy in Taiwan (Superkids Official, n.d.).

Child idols are particularly prominent and are made visible on the social media channels run by agencies. The agencies strategically have their child talents participate in popular social media vernacular genres to cultivate Internet fame and foster a dedicated fandom. Agencies like Clevr E&M post TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts of viral K-pop dance challenges with their child idol members where the children can display their emerging idol visual capital and dance skills, imitating original K-pop stars’ movements in the challenge (see Figure 2) (for K-pop dance challenges, see Abidin and Lee, 2023). Fame and fandom for child idols are also developed through sharing their personal lives via YouTube vlogs, building parasocial relationships with followers (e.g. “Introduce Chaemin’s boyfriend! A Vlog of her first date with her boyfriend in a long while!” (e.g. see ClevrTV, 2022)).

In curating the social media personae of child idols, the underlying logic is that Internet fame can be seamlessly transferred to stardom when child Internet celebrities and influencers transition from the “amateurish” influencer industry to the “professional” star industry (see Figure 1). Social media content, including vlogs and K-pop challenges, serve as springboards for these child idols, enabling them to transition smoothly to the next level in the celebrity hierarchy and professionally develop their media careers as “celebrities” and ultimately “real” idols.

To summarize, child idols are not just a new celebrity genre invented by entertainment agencies, but are the purposeful product of a “star accelerator” process built by the media management system of the K-pop and influencer industries, constructing and refining children’s fame, idol qualities, star charisma, and online aura. For this reason, being part

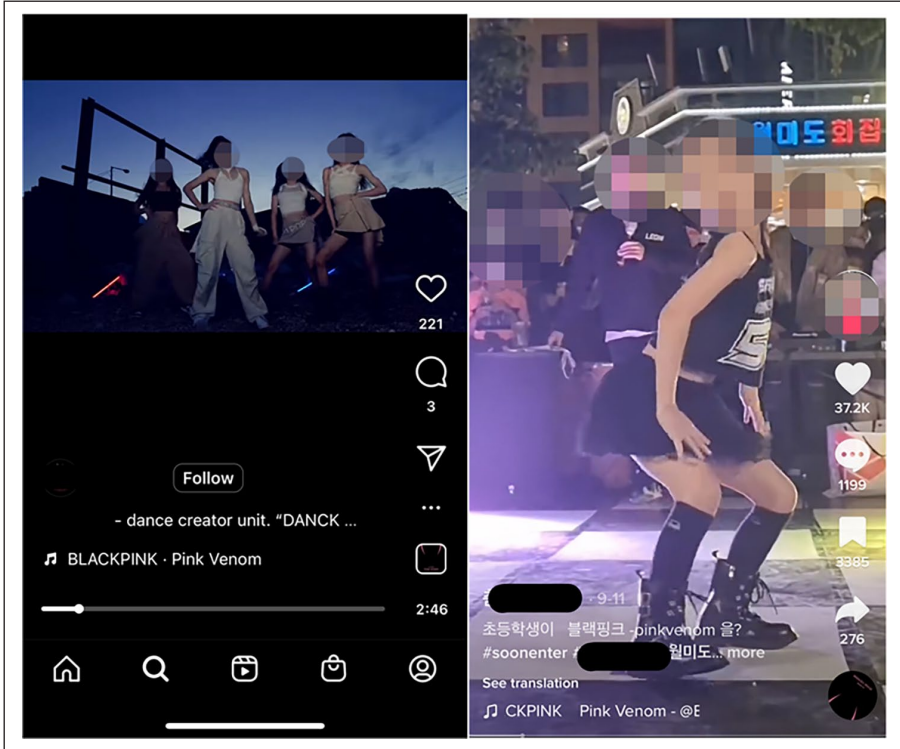


Figure 2. Child-special agencies' Instagram (left) and TikTok (right) content showing child talent doing cover dances of BLACKPINK's Pink Venom. Source: Author's screengrab. Original source details deleted.

of the child idol genre now precedes becoming a K-pop idol, as seen in “successful” cases like Hyein and Rora.

This lucrative symbiotic partnership between the K-pop industry and the influencer industry readily positions children as key elements of social media pop cultures. Building on the examples presented, below we synthesize four major issues arising from the popularization of the child idol phenomenon.

Discussion

The consumption of child idols grows rapidly, and while becoming a child idol has been positioned as a pathway to future success, there are significant problems with the current system for the child idols themselves, and for their audiences. We focus on four main issues below.

Commodification of child bodies

As seen in the examples above, child idols are inherently commodified both in their training and in the way they are consumed by audiences. Many K-pop scholars have warned that the increasing popularity of K-pop has normalized the practice of commodifying idol bodies and the seamless surveillance system of controlling the bodies, appearance, and even private lives of K-pop stars, who are strategically presented in ways that encourage fans' sexual and intimate fantasies (Choi, 2020). Young female idol bodies are particularly fetishized, reified by revealing clothes, provocative dance movements, and agencies' policing their appearance and weight, through diet and plastic surgery (Kim, 2018, 2011; Venters and Rothenberg, 2022). When K-pop girl groups like Girls Generation and BLACKPINK are actively and proudly promoted by the Korean government as "national cultural resources" as part of the Korean Wave (Kim, 2011: 340), the sexualization of girl bodies is normalized, and even encouraged at a national level (Kim, 2011). When children are presented as miniature K-pop girl groups using the same fashion and performance styles as "real" K-pop idols—given that most child idols are girl groups—children are no longer positioned as subjects in need of adults' protection. Rather, they are positioned as adults with their bodies being gendered and sexualized visually for sex appeal (Kim, 2011). This is problematic for audiences, too, as both K-pop and social media are a "peer-to-peer cultural industry" (Marsh, 2016: 372) where children see child idols as celebrity figures and thus role models and conduits for social connection. This is particularly concerning given that child commodification has now become established as a *norm* and uncritically exercised by many actors in the industry, despite being in K-pop studies for almost a decade (see Kim, 2021a; Marsh, 2016; Martínez and Olsson, 2019).

Normalization of child labor

Second, child labor is normalized and even encouraged by children's parents and the entertainment industry as a form of "child education." In our data on parents' blogging on Naver about child-specialized agencies and their training programs, many parents see educational value in sending their children to K-pop training programs:

"(after a few months of training) when she googles her name, she can see her name online with pictures. That makes her feel confident about herself. It feels nice watching her [as her mom]." [Naver blog post of a mother of a child influencer, source anonymized]

I strongly encourage parents to bring their children to the K-pop programs, if your children are showing talent. For both children and parents, having some experience is really important. It's important to give it a try as early as possible." [Naver blog post of a mother who have sent their child to the K-pop training program offered by the child-specialized agency, source anonymized]

As the comment above exemplifies, many parents highlight the importance of "educational support" for their children from a young age. The "support" includes: sending their children to proper training programs and finding good agencies; discovering their children's talent at a young age; and taking care of their children's media schedules as a

manager-and-mother. However, these parenting practices occlude children's labor and exploitative conditions common in the child media industry (Leaver, 2021). Children's voice and agency are routinely dismissed in this career-building plan, which is often unilaterally chosen by parents. Entertainment companies consistently deploy the rhetoric of child education rather than labor. K-pop training programs have steadily grown, with many agencies advertising their businesses as "educational programs" (Jeon, 2018: 32–33; Lee, 2018). As outlined earlier, a prime example of this is SM's announcement to launch the SM Institute by providing a K-pop specialized education curriculum for grades K-12 that is available both offline and online (Business Wire, 2020). The rhetoric of education here needs critical investigation since it only serves to mask the labor and exploitative conditions that many children endure.

Lack of children's agency and standardization of their dream

When the idea of child education and the media industry intersect, children's agency or interest are rarely addressed. Instead, a variety of interests and talents that children have are redirected to the idol phenomenon, and their agencies are circumscribed within the narrow boundaries of the idol culture, as with the example of Vitamin already discussed.

This aligns with the informants in Lee's (2018) study, who were being trained under K-pop agencies, only the artistic skills and interests useful in producing idols are allowed to develop. Children's media agencies are driven by the standardized commercialism of K-pop, and these standards constrain the development of child idols. Often these K-pop norms are further reinforced by parents.

In East Asia, children's social success is often equated with family's reputation and success (Choi and Nieminen, 2013). In the 21st century where K-pop idols and stars are seen as a prestigious social class, guiding their children into the media industry at their early age, starting from child influencers, to child idols, and ultimately to K-pop idol status, is positioned as responsible parenting (Ho, 2012). However, this approach tends to overlook the voices and agency of the children themselves, as career decisions are made unilaterally by parents within the child-exploitative system. When children's voices, including their talents and career pursuits, are redirected by adults to fit within the narrow confines of idol culture—simply because it is currently thriving—children are only relegated to passive objects to be exploited in the name of personal growth, while their agency and desire are dismissed and removed.

Imperfection of policies

Policy and regulation of child well-being in the Korean media industries are underdeveloped. The Korean government has recently made some attempts to protect children's basic human rights in the industry. In 2019, the government introduced the Standard Contract for Trainees in Popular Culture and Arts Industry [대중문화분야 연습생 표준계약서], and in the following year revised the Enforcement of Decree of Popular Culture and Arts Industry Development Act [대중문화산업예술발전법, hereafter Popular Culture Act] detailing children's right to education and rest (National Human Rights

Commission of Korea, 2020). The Korean government's media regulation agency also published two guidelines to protect human rights of children and adolescents in the traditional media industry and new media industry in 2020: A Guideline to Protect Children And Adolescents In Personal Internet Broadcasting [인터넷개인방송에 출연하는 아동·청소년 보호를 위한 지침] (KCC, 2020b), A Standard Production Guideline to Protect Rights of Children and Adolescents in Broadcasting [방송출연 아동·청소년의 권익보호를 위한 표준제작 가이드라인] (KCC, 2020a). These regulations appear to make some progress for children's well-being and human rights in the entertainment industry (e.g. Koh, 2023). For instance, it has been witnessed when underage K-pop idol members have had to leave early after 10pm during filming due to the night curfew for underage actors set by the Popular Culture Act (Lee, 2014; see also Yoongi, 2019). However, many of these are just "guidelines" and not compulsory. Even if they are obligatory, like the Popular Culture Act, they are often disregarded behind the scenes. Our data from parents' blogs suggests that these regulations are frequently and casually violated in "less visible" settings, such as non-TV-related social media production sites. Many mom bloggers note that "it's difficult to keep my child awake after 2 am, but we all know that things are always delayed when photoshooting" (Naver blog post of a mother of a child influencer, source anonymized) and "it is our moms' jobs to feed them during the night shooting and help them cheer up throughout the midnight work. This is the key to the success of your children" (Naver blog post of a mother of a child influencer, source anonymized).

In addition, many laws, policies, and guidelines focus on adolescents and the narrowly-defined K-pop industry, with no consideration of younger children, such as pre-teen child idols. Thus, the wellbeing of young children who are heavily influenced by social media from their birth may fall into the blind spot of the regulations that are mostly focused on teenagers and K-pop.

There is a need for binding policies to protect the well-being of children in the child idol system, respecting their agency, labor, and well-being. Of concern, a number of K-pop aspirants and idols report being physically and sexually harassed by agencies (Saif, 2022). As younger and younger children across the globe join child idol systems and the system is now popularly adopted in East Asia, such as China and Japan (*Jcast News*, 2017; Zuo, 2021), inviting children from overseas to join the Korean entertainment system (Koreaboo, 2023), proper regulation is urgently required.

Conclusion

In this article, we have explored the emergent phenomenon of child idols, wherein young children are incorporated into the idol-making system in line with the global expansion of the K-pop and influencer industries. Understood within the broader global push for regulation of child influencers and stars in online media, this paper contributes further evidence for clear regulation and guidance of the industries as they converge and intersect. Our discussion of this phenomenon, and the new celebrity genre formed via the star accelerator process, illustrates an urgent need to protect children's wellbeing and rights in the era of global social media.

Several stakeholders in the industry have begun attempts to make the environment better and healthier for children. A Korean government agency started a counseling program for K-pop idols and child aspirants (Kim, 2021b). K-pop fan communities have criticized child exploitation in the industry, especially around a series of launching of new girl groups with members at a very young age (e.g. SooYoung, 2023). This awareness-raising effort is supported through media content produced by influencers and content creator channels, including former trainees (e.g. soobeanie_, 2018), and K-pop fans (e.g. @jenn_soo, 2022). They work as opinion leaders in calling out the toxic idol systems where many children are situated. However, these concerns are often framed as clickbait, arousing audiences' attention in the "dark side of K-pop" while covering issues like trainees' eating disorder or K-pop stars' tragedies at the level of gossip. As an example, the celebrity gossip YouTube channel TheThings Celebrity (2017) recorded 2.5 million views as of writing with their video on extreme dieting and plastic surgery forced on K-pop trainees.

The relatively long-standing and mature K-pop industry, and now well-established pathways for young children to be trained to be child idols from an increasingly young age, have global implications. The "youngest" child idols have been competitively launched in Japan (e.g. the "six year-old Ai-chan" [あいちゃん6さい]) in 2017 (*Jcast News*, 2017)) and China (e.g. the group Panda Boy with boys between seven and eleven years old in 2021 (Zuo, 2021)). Many national jurisdictions are considering or launching some form of policies around the activity of child influencers, as well as their producers and parents, addressing issues of child exploitation and commercial logics of extraction (Ågren, 2022; Collins, 2022). France has the most notable legislation regulating child influencers, which came into effect in late mid-2021, situating any activity where children under 16 feature on social media for any form of payment explicitly as child labor, and regulating it as such (Weiss, 2021). Most other national governments are only just beginning to explicitly address child influencers or idols in policy. In the US, the Coogan Law which protects child labor in traditional media industries generally does not apply to online content (Abidin, 2020). Importantly, in an update of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (2021), children's online privacy was explicitly flagged as a child's right, even if that privacy was being threatened "from children's own activities and from the activities of family members, peers or others, for example, by parents sharing photographs online." Given these global trends and rapid changes around children on social media, it is too risky to rely on self-reflection and individual voluntary efforts of parents, industries, or fans, for change.


Child idols are but one prominent example of children being commodified and exploited in the digital media environment. The globalization of K-pop and child idol development via a star accelerator process highlights child exploitation of this form as an increasingly global issue, even as it is informed and shaped in local contexts. We conclude by emphasizing an urgent need for policymakers, educators, and industries to more meaningfully and consistently intervene in the emerging culture of child idols, child influencers, and children as potential stars. Practical, feasible, and meaningful measures to protect children's rights, agency, and well-being and to better equip them for the highly commercialized social media environment are needed as soon as humanly possible.

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