Cultivating A&Rs in K-pop

The Funnel Production Ecosystem in the Contemporary Popular Culture Industry

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Abstract

Studies of the K-pop industry, often cited as a paradigmatic example of contemporary popular culture shaped by strong fan communities, have tended to fall into two camps. One camp frames K-pop production through a Fordist lens, likening it to commercial, factory-like manufacturing, while the other emphasizes the agency of fans in producing, circulating, and distributing cultural objects in today's digital era. Both perspectives, however, often overlook the lived realities of fans who seek careers within the contemporary popular culture industry. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in Seoul, South Korea, this paper investigates the professionalization of K-pop fans into A&R (artists and repertoire) roles at *hagwons* (private tutoring centers), exploring the challenges and tensions inherent in this transition. We analyze how aspiring K-pop producers are socialized into what we call K-pop's *funnel production ecosystem*, an environment in which available resources converge to shape highly polished cultural products. By examining the experiences of K-pop fans undergoing professionalization training at hagwons, our findings illuminate the contradictions fan-producers encounter as they navigate a production model that positions every participant to bear substantial A&R responsibilities. Through an exploration of how fan-producers manage the tension between personal passion and professional identity, we position K-pop as a valuable case study for understanding the complexities of fandom, professionalization, and labor in contemporary popular culture industries.

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Keywords: K-pop, cultural production, professionalization, popular culture, A&R, fan communities

Introduction

The unprecedented global success of K-pop in the past decade, driven by groups such as BTS and BLACKPINK, has not only attracted new fans but also inspired many to pursue careers in the K-pop industry. Motivated by dreams of shaping popular culture, these aspiring producers are turning to *hagwons*—private tutoring centers that have expanded beyond traditional academic subjects—to acquire the necessary knowledge and credentials to apply to Korean entertainment companies responsible for crafting the idol-centered products they admire. As for-profit institutions, each hagwon aims to establish itself as the premier institution for K-pop professionalization. Hagwons that are successful in presenting themselves as legitimate professionalization sites for K-pop industry job seekers in turn secure symbolic capital within the K-pop production ecosystem to ensure a steady stream of revenue from individuals pursuing their dreams of becoming producers. However, while often seen by industry outsiders as the only route to enter the glitzy world of K-pop, the lack of standardization and the recent emergence of such hagwons have sometimes attracted industry criticism for being untrustworthy and even predatory toward passionate fans seeking jobs in the K-pop industry.

This paper draws on the collaborative field research conducted by the two authors in Seoul, South Korea, between 2023 and 2024, to examine the professionalization of K-pop fans at hagwons. Structurally, these hagwons function as intermediaries between aspiring K-pop industry professionals and the highly selective, closely guarded entertainment companies. The authors participated in classes as enrolled students and, with permission from hagwon staff, also observed select sessions across three different institutions. Supplementing these observations with interviews with students

and instructors, the paper traces how fans are systematically groomed for future roles as K-pop producers. The paper explores how the K-pop industry operates within what we define as a funnel production ecosystem that centralizes production authority in the role of A&R, a position with a long history in Western music industries but has only recently been established and spotlighted in the context of K-pop.[1] In this funnel ecosystem, a wide array of inputs—including market research, financial resources, professional expertise, and creative talent—are channeled through increasingly selective stages, all directed toward the singular objective of producing a successful idol group or hit song. We focus on how Korean fans are being trained for a generalist A&R position, a central creative authority who is expected to possess a comprehensive understanding of K-pop's production ecosystem, encompassing seven distinct but highly integrated stages from market research to concert planning.

By positioning the K-pop hagwon as a key emerging actor within the broader K-pop production ecosystem, we adopt an ecological perspective to examine how aspiring K-pop producers, who are themselves fans of the genre, navigate the complexities of today's idol-centered pop culture industry.[2] The rise of K-pop hagwons stems from their roots in Korea's formal education system, where hagwons are culturally regarded as spaces for extracurricular instruction designed to help students outperform their peers and improve academic standing.[3] In this context, we conceptualize

1. For a historical account of A&R work in the US recording industry, see Brian Ward and Patrick Huber, *A&R Pioneers: Architects of American Roots Music on Record* (Country Music Foundation Press:, 2018).
2. In this essay, we use the terms *pop culture* and *popular culture* interchangeably to refer to media and cultural artifacts marketed to and enjoyed by mass audiences. However, it is important to note that there are significant semiotic distinctions between the two. In his ethnography of the Korean music industry, Gelles-Soh observes that non-K-pop music producers increasingly distance themselves from "pop music" even as they continue to create music intended for broad audiences across different genres. Gelles-Soh will address the qualitative differences between *pop* and *popular* in a subsequent essay.
3. Caroline Joung and Daniel Porter Morgan, "Examining the Impact of Hagwons and the South Korean Education System on the Entity Mindset Development of Young

the K-pop hagwon as a liminal space where aspiring producers grapple with the tensions between their personal passions as fans and the depersonalized demands of professional K-pop production. By examining how fans are cultivated into A&R professionals, this paper reconsiders the positionality of fans within a globalized digital media environment. Through ethnographic analysis of how K-pop fans learn to navigate and struggle with the transition to industry producer, we seek to open a sociological inquiry into the organization of digital venues where pop music is distributed, remixed, and consumed. For clarity, we note that "producers" in this context refers to individuals involved in the industrial production of K-pop and those training for generalist A&R positions, distinguishing them from music producers who specialize in overseeing the creative process of song production (the third stage of K-pop production). Unless otherwise specified, all references to "producer" in this paper pertain broadly to industry production roles that span all seven stages of K-pop creation.

This theoretical and empirical focus addresses a critical gap in existing studies of K-pop and popular culture, which often fall into two general camps. The first adopts a Fordist perspective, reducing pop culture production to a linear, mechanized "conveyor-belt" assembly line. This approach has frequently reinforced orientalist misconceptions, portraying Korean popular culture as mere factory output dependent on the exploitation of human labor. Contrary to this, our study demonstrates that, rather than operating according to a Fordist model emphasizing mass production of standardized products, the K-pop industry operates within what we term a *funnel production ecosystem*, one that concentrates substantial resources on producing singular products with uncertain prospects, each of which has the potential to make or break the companies involved. The second camp tends to view fans as a decentralized, newly empowered class, united by digital technologies that enable direct participation in the production and

South Korean Adults," *Culture & Psychology* (2024), https://doi.org/10.1177/1354067X241300980.

distribution of media. While our research does show that K-pop entertainment companies highly value building devoted fan communities that are willing to spend on and distribute media, this does not eliminate the significant qualitative and material differences between being a fan and being an industry producer.

By examining the role of A&R within K-pop's funnel production ecosystem and the ways hagwons are professionalizing fans into A&Rs, we explore the material realities of K-pop production and the industry's demand for its employees to embody a "fan-producer" identity: a split persona navigating both the passion of fandom and the rigor of professional production. As K-pop's production methods are increasingly emulated by cultural industries in countries like China, Japan, and Thailand, understanding its dynamic production ecosystem offers valuable insight into the future landscape of global pop culture. We hope the model we propose here can provide a framework for considering the complex intersections of ethnonationalist pride, globalized fan-driven digital culture, and a market economy shaped by the inherent risk of producing pop culture.

The Role of Production in a Fan-Driven Economy

Since Henry Jenkins's landmark work *Textual Poachers* (1992) established fans and fandoms as serious subjects of academic inquiry, there has been a growing interest in how fans are not merely passive consumers but actively shape cultural production, especially in today's digital age.[4] In this foundational study of fan communities, Jenkins sought to persuade skeptical readers that the attitudes and practices of fans warrant careful scholarly attention, implicitly underscoring how fans have historically been imagined as social pariahs, stigmatized for their engagement with publicly circulating texts.

4. Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture* (Routledge, 1992).

This portrayal often imagines fans as individuals who have excessively immersed themselves in fictional worlds, incapable of critically engaging beyond the texts provided to them, and behaving like "cultural dupes"—passive victims of media.[5] As "pathological spectators,"[6] fans are sometimes depicted as struggling to distinguish reality from fiction or as driven by inappropriate desires that blur the lines of public propriety, ultimately marking their consumption as deviant.[7] Much of the scholarly work in response to these popular perceptions has focused on demonstrating that fans and their activities are far more complex than these pathologized portrayals suggest.

In these scholarly accounts of the fan's role amid the rise of the early twenty-first-century digital media environment, often referred to as "Web 2.0,"[8] the fan has evolved from a solitary media consumer to an active participant in the production and circulation of content. Digital platforms like Twitter, YouTube, and TikTok have enabled users to engage with narrative worlds in ways that blur the lines between fans and producers. This shift reflects a broader cultural logic where following, remixing, or aligning with content online can qualify as fannish activity. Scholars such as Jenkins and Bruns have theorized this transition through concepts like "participatory culture" and "produsage," emphasizing how digital affordances have empowered users to cocreate, distribute, and influence media in ways once reserved for professional producers.[9] The argument is that this empowerment of the internet user has collapsed the traditional hierarchy between producer and consumer, giving rise to a crowdsourced mode of participation that drives

5. Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures* (Routledge, 2002), 50.
6. Janet Staiger, *Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film Reception* (New York University Press, 2000), 54.
7. Suzanne Scott, *Fake Geek Girls: Fandom, Gender, and the Convergence Culture Industry* (New York University Press, 2019).
8. Tim O'Reilly, "What Is Web 2.0," O'Reilly Media, September 30, 2005, https://oreilly.com.
9. Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York University Press, 2006); Axel Bruns, *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life, and Beyond: From Production to Produsage* (Peter Lang, 2008).

the creation of new digital productions and artifacts. In K-pop-specific fan studies, the K-pop fan is often seen as an exemplar of the new, empowered fan who reappropriates professionally produced pop culture products, remixing them into new forms of media that offer fresh opportunities for cultivating identity and building communities.[10]

However, the problem with flattening production and consumption into the generalized concept of produsage is that it fails to account for the complex production cycles of modern creative industries like the contemporary K-pop industry. This critique becomes especially salient in our ethnographic study of K-pop professionalization hagwons, where the blurred lines between fan and producer are not erased but institutionally managed and stratified. K-pop fans, as global digital users, are instrumental to the success of K-pop acts. Observers have documented how fan creations and their organizational power have contributed significantly to the popularity, longevity, and social impact of their favorite idols.[11] Yet, despite the empowerment of fans in digital culture, the sociological distinction between producer and consumer has not evaporated. On the contrary, in our fieldwork, we find that this binary remains deeply embedded in both pedagogy and institutional practice. For fans training to become producers, much of their experience involves confronting the risks and responsibilities of professional production: the possibility of losing one's livelihood over a failed release, the pressure to align with company branding strategies, and the potentially

10. Michelle Cho, "BTS for BLM: K-Pop, Race, and Transcultural Fandom," *Celebrity Studies* 13, no. 2 (April 3, 2022): 270–79, https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2022.2063974; Saeji, "Embodying K-Pop Hits through Cover Dance Practices"; Chuyun Oh, *K-Pop Dance: Fandoming Yourself on Social Media* (Routledge, 2023).

11. Michelle Cho, "K-Pop and the Participatory Condition: Vicarity, Serial Affect, and 'Real-Life Contents,'" in *The Cambridge Companion to K-Pop*, ed. Suk-Young Kim (Cambridge University Press, 2023), 231–47, https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108938075; Ju Oak Kim, "Reshaped, Reconnected and Redefined: Media Portrayals of Korean Pop Idol Fandom in Korea," *Journal of Fandom Studies* 3, no. 1 (March 1, 2015): 79–93, https://doi.org/10.1386/jfs.3.1.79_1; Cedarbough T. Saeji, "Embodying K-Pop Hits Through Cover Dance Practices," in *The Cambridge Companion to K-Pop*, ed. Suk-Young Kim (Cambridge University Press, 2023), 116–36, https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108938075.

irreparable damage a poorly received project can inflict on an artist's or company's reputation. Rather than collapsing the producer-consumer distinction, the hagwon system renders it a line that must be carefully navigated, one that carries real stakes and professional consequences.

While these hagwons highlight their own track record in successfully transforming fans into producers, they also emphasize the difficulties of maintaining a career in the K-pop industry. Students are frequently cautioned about the high turnover rate, with many fans-turned-producers leaving the industry soon after securing their first position. Our interviews with hagwon owners and instructors, many of whom are current or former music industry professionals, consistently confirmed this trend. They cited the normalization of overwork, the lack of work-life balance caused by erratic schedules, and low pay as key contributing factors. One owner, whom we will later refer to as the head of Hagwon B and who had previously worked in human resources within the K-pop industry, estimated that the first-year turnover rate among industry workers is as high as 60 percent. The pedagogical role of these hagwons raises important questions about the blurred lines between fandom and production, as well as the challenges of transforming fan passion into a sustainable career in pop music production.

In the following sections, we explore the boundary between fans and producers through the professionalization process of K-pop fans at newly emerging hagwons in Korea. Our analysis addresses several key questions: Why do entertainment companies often struggle to hire and retain fans transitioning into producer roles? Are the skills and mindsets that fans develop as "produsers," in Bruns's terms,[12] inherently at odds with the expectations of formal media production work? Additionally, what role do these emerging hagwons play in or for the K-pop production ecosystem? We begin our exploration by providing a sociological overview of the K-pop industry to contextualize the role of hagwons and the experiences of aspiring fan-producers.

12. Bruns, *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life, and Beyond*.

A Sociological Overlay of the K-pop Industry and the Pedagogical Role of Hagwons

The industry behind the global success of K-pop is a fascinating tapestry comprising cultural, economic, and social dynamics. Rooted in Korea's rapid postwar modernization and economic ascent, K-pop's highly polished, idol-oriented structure reflects broader social values such as collectivism, hard work, and hierarchical respect that are central to Korean society. As Sujeong Kim and Sooah Kim (2015) insightfully observe in their analysis of the "ethos of collective moralism" in K-pop, the industry's rigorous idol training system promotes discipline and dedication, aligning with Korea's emphasis on educational and occupational achievement.[13] At the same time, K-pop channels youth aspirations and ambitions, especially as it taps into a globally interconnected generation skilled in digital engagement. However, the industry's oligopolistic structure—dominated by the "Big Four" companies (HYBE Corporation, SM Entertainment, YG Entertainment, and JYP Entertainment)—affords these companies significant control over K-pop production, idol training, marketing, and distribution. As Solee Shin (2017) argues in her comparative analysis of J-pop, K-pop, and C-pop's respective production systems, the K-pop industry reflects Korea's broader industrial framework, one that is characterized by centralized decision-making, vertically integrated hierarchies, and rivalry among a small number of conglomerates that have grown into powerful global brands.[14]

Critics in both academic and media contexts have frequently described the K-pop industry as a "factory,"[15] a metaphor that conveys a normative

13. Sujeong Kim and Sooah Kim, "The Ethos of Collective Moralism: The Korean Cultural Identity of K-Pop," *Media & Society* 23, no. 3 (2015): 5–52.
14. Solee Shin, "Niche, Ethnic and Global Operations: Models of Production and Circulation of East Asian Popular Music," *European Journal of East Asian Studies* 16 (2017): 5–35.
15. Gooyong Kim, *From Factory Girls to K-pop Idol Girls: Cultural Politics of Developmentalism, Patriarchy, and Neoliberalism in South Korea's Popular Music Industry*, (Lexington Books, 2019); John Seabrook, "Factory Girls," *New Yorker*, October 8, December,

judgment and suggests the industry's reliance on Fordist principles of standardized, assembly-line production. Yet this metaphor has evolved beyond its rhetorical origins to function as a self-reinforcing ideology. Often visualized through images of conveyor belts and mechanical repetition, it sustains narratives of exploited idols and fans, controlled by profit-driven companies and a nation-state intent on expanding its soft power. Such a rigid framework, however, oversimplifies the everyday realities of the industry and constrains both empirical inquiry and internal conversations about institutional change. Our fieldwork suggests that these accounts often overlook the essential human practices—such as research, analysis, ideation, hiring, training, and reflection—that sustain the industry's operations and its contributions to global popular culture. The industry professionals, hagwon instructors, and aspiring jobseekers we interviewed and studied alongside consistently emphasized that the K-pop industry is fundamentally human rather than machinic or bureaucratic. When we asked our interlocutors for their thoughts on the frequent comparison between K-pop and a factory, many responded that such accounts fail to recognize the depth of thought, care, and self-reflection that inform K-pop production at every stage.

In Korea, hagwons have traditionally been studied as for-profit institutions offering supplementary education in subjects like math, English, and science to students navigating the nation's hypercompetitive academic environment.[16] However, following the 1997–1998 Asian financial crisis, rising unemployment and job insecurity in Korea's labor market spurred the growth of hagwons providing vocational training for adults.[17] Our fieldwork revealed that within these vocational hagwons, staff and instructors

https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/10/08/factory-girls-2; John Lie, *K-Pop: Popular Music, Cultural Amnesia, and Economic Innovation in South Korea* (University of California Press, 2015).

16. Sang Hoon Bae and Kee Ho Choi, "The Case of Institutionalized Private Tutoring in Korea: Defective Public Schooling or a Universal Desire for Family Production?," *ECNU Review of Education* 7, no. 1 (2023): 12–41, https://doi.org/10.1177/20965311231182722.
17. Myung-Hee Park and Ilwoo Paik, "The History of Korean Private Tutoring Market Development and Its Implication," *Educational Research for Tomorrow* 29, no. 2 (2016): 23–50.

scrutinize job postings, invite industry professionals for guest lectures, and develop detailed playbooks outlining strategies to navigate every stage of the job application process.

For the purposes of our research, we focus on hagwons that prepare individuals for general employment at K-pop entertainment companies. Although these institutions may offer specialized courses in areas such as A&R, marketing, training and development, and visual direction, the broader goal is to equip students with the skills needed to enter a K-pop company and advance within its internal structure as regular employees (*jigwon*). In our analysis of hagwon syllabi, we found that the curricula are designed to serve both newcomers pursuing their first role in the popular music industry and individuals transitioning from unrelated fields such as public administration or even nursing. By examining the experiences of fans training to become producers, we gain insight into the often-overlooked demands and invisible labor that sustain the production of K-pop. We found that the creative labor of industry professionals, who work collaboratively to realize a broader artistic vision for the final product, is often overlooked in dominant Fordist narratives that depict K-pop companies as rigidly centralized and governed by authoritarian, top-down control.

In these hagwons, the K-pop fan is simultaneously positioned as an object of inquiry, representing the target audience whose perspectives and habits must be understood and as a subject who possesses deep knowledge about K-pop, embodying the next generation of K-pop producers. Since many of the students at the hagwons we examine are themselves fans who must learn to adopt a producer's mindset in order to create music that attracts new fans, they occupy an uneasy position straddling the producer-consumer divide. This results in conflicting demands: Students are encouraged to think and see like producers rather than consumers yet their fan-based knowledge, particularly their expertise on specific K-pop idols, is continuously leveraged and informs their labor, such as when writing business or album concept proposals. Put simply, this segment of K-pop's fan base inhabits a liminal space between individual consumption and formal, collective production, a

space made increasingly visible through their involvement in hagwons and gradually recognized by the industry as a potential talent pipeline.

Beyond the role these hagwons play in the broader K-pop ecosystem, it is important to analyze the multiple layers of narratives that compose the sociocultural fabric of this particular "art world."[18] Here, work and employment within the K-pop industry, not simply K-pop itself, emerge as the central cultural object shaping the relationships among the actors involved. Information about these hagwons and their activities is readily accessible to students through search engines and digital platforms such as Naver (Korea's leading search engine) and Instagram. The materials consumed by our research subjects, including interviews with "successful" students, job placement statistics, and course advertisements, collectively construct a narrative of success, or at least a pathway to greater opportunity. The courses offered at the hagwons we studied frequently consist of lectures delivered by industry professionals, exposing students to diverse, and sometimes conflicting, personal stories of work and career development in Korea's popular music industry. Some narratives offered competing perspectives that left students confused, while others delivered sobering accounts that challenge students' fantasies and romanticized notions about creative careers. These experiences often culminate in assignments requiring students to produce drafts of personal statements and portfolios, which are typically followed by individualized consulting sessions with hagwon owners whose authority is established through their students' successful placements or their own industry backgrounds.

Data and Methods

Our data consists of over four hundred hours of participant observation across three hagwons in Seoul, Korea, between 2023 and 2024. To ensure anonymity, we refer to the hagwons as Hagwon A, Hagwon B, and Hagwon C.

18. Howard S. Becker, *Art Worlds* (University of California Press, 2008), https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520934870.

All three were hagwons aimed at providing practical training and employment mentoring to popular music industry job seekers (including K-pop, indie, hip-hop, and other genres of popular music). Of the three, only Hagwon A's eight-week-long professionalization program was supported by government funding and did not charge students course fees. Due to the stipulations of governmental funding, prospective students had to undergo an interview and screening process. In contrast, Hagwons B and C offered eight-week flagship courses supplemented by shorter four-week electives, one-day workshops, and online classes, covering topics ranging from Photoshop to identifying pop music genres. Generally, students in these hagwons met once a week for lectures, with additional group work outside of class as needed. Enrollment in Hagwons B and C was open to anyone who paid a modest fee of several hundred US dollars, with class sizes ranging from six to twenty students. All three hagwons offered their flagship courses multiple times per year.

The profiles of instructors at the three hagwons varied. Hagwon A primarily employed industry professionals affiliated with a specific K-pop company due to its corporate ties whereas Hagwons B and C drew from a more diverse pool of former and current industry professionals who had worked for prominent K-pop companies or collaborated with well-known K-pop artists. Hagwon B also offered courses for students open to work in indie or hip-hop labels, which were treated as distinct genre categories from K-pop, and recruited instructors with experience in such labels.

The coauthors obtained written consent from the owners, staff, and instructors of the hagwons to take courses for research purposes as well as IRB approval prior to fieldwork. We each introduced ourselves to the other students as researchers at Hagwon B in our respective fieldwork, and in the case of Hagwons A and C, the staff helped introduce us to the students as researchers. The two authors conducted participant observations both separately and concurrently. At Hagwon A, we joined two consecutive cohorts of students for specific modules between August and December 2024, attending lectures, participating in group discussions, and observing student

activities. We supplemented our observations with interviews with staff and semi-structured interviews with eleven students, which comprised 20 percent of the student body. These interviews were recorded and transcribed. At Hagwons B and C, we enrolled in separate courses as students, completing all required lectures, group projects, and individual assignments alongside other participants. Outside the classroom, we met with classmates for group discussions in coffee shops or over Zoom. Communication between in-person meetings was facilitated through KakaoTalk, Korea's dominant messaging app, which is widely used for everyday activities ranging from chatting to banking and shopping. Our participant observation at Hagwons B and C was further supplemented by interviews with the owners and instructional staff. All students across the three hagwons ranged in age from their early twenties to thirties, with approximately 90 percent identifying as female. Many of the students we encountered had no formal background in music or related work experience; instead, it was their identity as K-pop fans that inspired them to pursue a career in the industry.

For this paper, we conducted a thematic and discursive analysis of the curricula and overall operation of the three hagwons to understand how students' understanding of the K-pop industry evolved over the course of training. Drawing on interview data and ethnographic fieldnotes from class lectures and assignments, we identified key themes and recurring patterns that shed light on the nature of these hagwons and their role in shaping students' professionalization trajectories. While Hagwons B and C offered multiple courses tailored to specific occupational tracks within the K-pop industry, such as fan marketing and concert production, our review of course materials and instructor interviews revealed that all three hagwons emphasized the importance of cultivating a comprehensive understanding of K-pop production, regardless of students' intended specializations. Notably, the curricula across all three institutions consistently emphasized the central role of the A&R position, as instructors framed it in both lectures and assignments as the point of convergence for multiple facets of K-pop production.

In the following section, we examine the significance of this educational emphasis. Our fieldwork revealed that hagwons conceptualize K-pop production as a process in which diverse inputs such as market research, fan insight, and creative talent are synthesized through the A&R role into a unified output. This pattern suggests that the K-pop industry is better understood through the lens of a funnel-shaped production ecosystem rather than through a traditional Fordist model.

The Funnel Production Ecosystem in the K-pop Industry

Increasingly, scholars have adopted ecological language to describe the operations of music industries and cultures, motivated both by a need to capture their inherent dynamism and by practical concerns about music sustainability.[19] Although debates persist over the strengths and limitations of ecological approaches in popular music studies,[20] we analyze the K-pop industry as a production ecosystem in order to foreground the interplay between diverse human actors and nonhuman material agents within its production environment. In our view, the emergence of K-pop professionalization hagwons highlights the industry's adaptive nature, one that dynamically responds to a rapidly evolving media and cultural landscape. Hagwons, in turn, represent a unique set of actors that help redistribute resources and information, carving out a niche within the broader K-pop production ecosystem. In the following sections, we analyze this niche, focusing on how the realities

19. Jim Rogers, "Deconstructing the Music Industry Ecosystem," in *Media Convergence and Deconvergence*, ed. Sergio Sparviero, Corinna Peil, and Gabriele Balbi (Springer International, 2017), 217–39, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-51289-1_11; Jeff Todd Titon, "Music and Sustainability: An Ecological Viewpoint," *World of Music* 51, no. 1 (2009): 119–37.

20. Brent Keogh and Ian Collinson, "'A Place for Everything, and Everything in Its Place'—the (Ab)Uses of Music Ecology," *MUSICultures* 43, no. 1 (2016): 1–15.

of K-pop production influence the curricula of these hagwons and their pivotal role in connecting aspiring producers with companies looking for skilled talent.

Across the three hagwons where we conducted research, a central objective is to equip students with the core competencies needed to navigate the highly selective hiring processes within the K-pop industry. Each hagwon takes pride in its ability to place students in highly sought-after positions within the K-pop industry, assuring that those who complete the full course will gain a comprehensive understanding of the workflow, division of labor, and professional demands in idol production. These demands encompass all aspects of K-pop album production, from concept planning and idol training to marketing and promotion. The production process is summarized in figure 1.

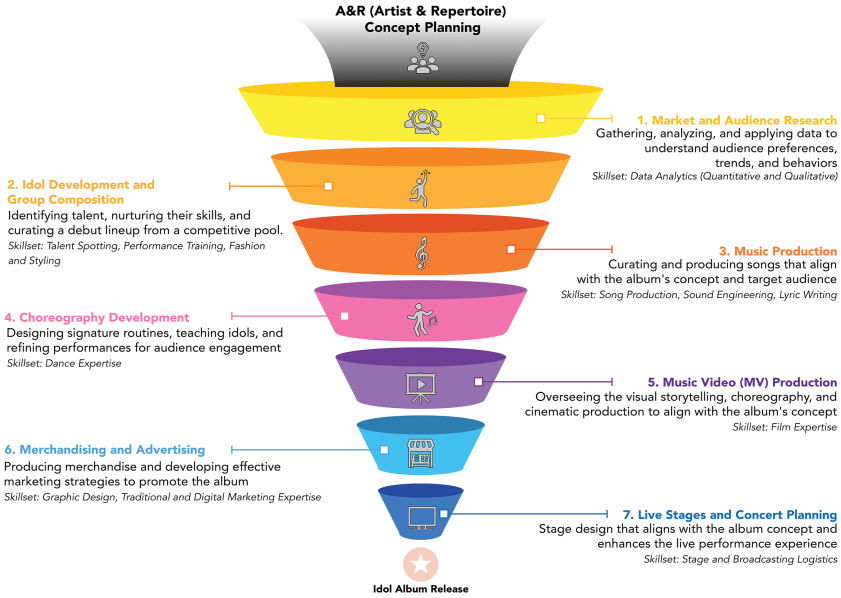

Figure 4.1: A diagram illustrating the funnel production ecosystem of the K-pop industry, highlighting the integrated domains and specialized expertise involved in K-pop album production.
Source: Wee Yang Gelles-Soh

Although K-pop entertainment companies employ specialized roles such as visual directors and fan marketers, we found that students in these hagwons are trained to gain a broad understanding of the entire production process rather than concentrating on expertise in any one specific area. Instructors emphasize that the various stages of production are deeply interconnected and cannot be easily separated. Unlike the Fordist model, which relies on assembly lines to mass-produce standardized, low-cost products, students are taught that K-pop production requires multiple lines of highly specialized labor working collaboratively to create a set of high-quality idol music products. In other words, the K-pop production model challenges the Fordist approach: While there is a division of labor, the emphasis is not on maximizing productivity for mass production but on delivering the highest possible quality in the final, singular product. The ideal idol product encompasses not only an appealing idol who personifies the brand but also a trendy music track, a captivating music video, intricate or catchy choreography, physical merchandise (including the album, which remains the primary revenue source), and digital content to support the release.

The production and revenue cycles of the K-pop industry are closely tied to album releases. Given the high costs of producing full albums, K-pop companies frequently release mini-albums, known as extended plays (EPs), or singles, each anchored by a title track(s) with dedicated choreography and a music video. This title track becomes the centerpiece of promotional efforts and fan engagement. A release is considered successful if it resonates with a broad audience, generates cultural impact, attracts new fans, and encourages existing fans to purchase albums and merchandise as forms of self-expression that also signify their connection to the artist. Successful releases allow companies to recoup their production investments, fund future projects, compensate employees and contractors, and strengthen both the idol's and the company's brand. The symbolic capital of successful releases supports and contributes to the success of future releases. The oligopolistic power of the Big Four K-pop companies in both the domestic and international markets stems from their substantial financial capital, strong brand recognition,

and superior access to talent pools, resources, and distribution channels compared to smaller entertainment companies.

Because the K-pop production process is so heavily centered on album releases, we describe the production cycle as a *funnel production ecosystem* (see figure 1). While each phase of production can be broken down into distinct teams with specialized tasks and skills, these stages are highly integrated both horizontally and vertically. For example, although choreography for a title track typically follows song production, choreographers must consider how the dance will translate on social media and which segments can be marketed as individual hooks. Meanwhile, song production often anticipates specific moments that can feature dance breaks or the distinctive "gestural point choreography" characteristic of K-pop.[21] This setup means that despite a chronological sequence to the creation of a K-pop album, every phase requires attention to interdependent factors across the production process. Describing the K-pop production cycle as a funnel reflects this intricate horizontal and vertical integration, with all efforts focused on crafting a product that strongly resonates with a broad audience. Put simply, the entertainment company channels its resources into a single product, with the belief that any additional effort devoted to it will improve its chances of success. Because most K-pop idols are expected to release new music at regular intervals every year, entertainment companies go through the grueling funnel several times a year.

This distinctive funnel production ecosystem relies on a figure who can oversee and integrate diverse creative inputs into a cohesive final product. That role is officially filled by A&R, a position that requires fluency in every stage of production as well as the capacity to coordinate among specialists while maintaining a unified creative vision. However, while individual projects are assigned to designated A&Rs who serve as final decision-makers, the ethos of A&R extends beyond any single position. Within this system, everyone involved in production is expected to internalize and embody the

21. Chuyun Oh, *K-Pop Dance: Fandoming Yourself on Social Media* (Routledge, 2023).

mindset of A&R. From initial concept planning to final promotional release, each contributor must understand how their work will inform and support the next stage of development, ultimately helping to realize a creative vision greater than the sum of its parts. In this sense, A&R is not merely a job title but a coordinating principle that binds the entire production process together.

Our fieldwork revealed that hagwon curricula explicitly promote this integrative way of thinking. At all three hagwons, the capstone assignment, the culminating project in each course, was designed to reflect the conceptual diffusion of A&R, requiring students to synthesize knowledge and skills from multiple areas of K-pop production. In Hagwon A's flagship course, the most comprehensive among the three, students worked in teams of four or five over the course of two months to conduct market research, draft album proposals, write lyrics, compose songs, and design visual concepts for an imagined debut or comeback. Hagwons B and C assigned similar group projects, though with a shorter three-week time frame. These students developed and pitched music video concepts that included storyboarding, basic filming, and promotional framing. The goal of these projects was not technical mastery but rather a grasp of how different aspects of production must align to serve a cohesive artistic direction. This cohesion is achieved through the bureaucratic diffusion of the A&R concept in professional settings, where every participant is expected to shoulder the responsibility of realizing a creative vision greater than any individual contribution.

When students encountered logistical difficulties, such as time constraints, limited technical skills, or creative disagreements, instructors framed these challenges as intentional features of the exercise. At Hagwon B, the lead instructor told students that this discomfort was precisely the point of the capstone project. He explained that working in A&R often means producing something original under tight deadlines, budgetary limits, and staffing shortages. In one class, students enrolled in a fan marketing course questioned why they were being asked to take on roles such as music producer, director, and researcher. In response, the instructor explained that

a fan marketer cannot effectively promote an album without understanding its underlying creative vision and how adjacent production teams are working in concert to bring that vision to life. Rather than train students in isolated specializations, the curriculum was structured to help them see how every role contributes to the integrity of the final product. According to the head instructor, seeing the bigger picture of production enables individuals to recognize what needs to be done and take initiative to realize the creative vision rather than simply waiting for instructions from a centralized authority. "K-pop dies if people just follow orders," he remarked.

In this sense, the capstone assignments aimed to foster not only interdisciplinary collaboration but also an A&R-oriented way of thinking. This refers to the capacity to recognize how diverse forms of creative labor must come together to produce a single, coherent outcome. Students were expected to inhabit the role of A&R, regardless of their intended specialization, because in the funnel production ecosystem, every position is ultimately judged by its ability to contribute to a unified creative vision. Even those who will not work as A&R professionals are expected to internalize this mindset and apply it in their respective roles. These pedagogical strategies show how hagwons do not simply acknowledge convergence as a feature of K-pop production but actively train students to think and work according to this logic.

As students became socialized into the language and practices of producers, they often encountered a stark contrast between fan expectations and the industry realities faced by A&R professionals. In the following section, we examine these gaps to explore the complex boundary between fans and producers in the K-pop industry.

Confronting the Gap: Aspirations vs. Realities in K-pop Production Training

Our ethnographic findings reveal a shared emphasis among hagwon instructors and students on the A&R role as central to K-pop production. However,

students reported that their training often led to unexpected challenges or uncomfortable revelations that disrupted their fan-driven expectations of pursuing a career in K-pop production.

The hagwons we studied, while employing varied teaching methods, shared a focus on equipping students with a comprehensive understanding of the A&R role, emphasizing its unique demands within the K-pop industry. Instructors specifically highlighted the differences between the A&R role in K-pop and its origins in Western music industries, particularly the U.S. music industry, where the position first emerged in the early twentieth century. In the Anglo-American music industry, A&R traditionally operated behind the scenes as a liaison between artists and record labels—scouting talent, shaping creative direction, and ensuring commercial viability. In contrast, K-pop A&R encompasses a much broader and more integrative scope. Hagwon instructors explained that unlike in the U.S. or the U.K. where A&R is often confined to working with individual artists or bands, K-pop A&R functions as the central orchestrator within a highly systematized production pipeline, overseeing every aspect of an idol's brand. This includes not only music and visuals but also choreography and social media strategy, ensuring all elements work seamlessly to maximize the idol's marketability and appeal. By preparing students for the A&R role, regardless of their intended position within the industry, hagwons enabled them to gain a holistic view of the production process. Courses featured lectures by industry professionals covering each production stage alongside practical assignments such as designing album artwork and developing social media campaigns. As analyzed in the previous section, students were typically required to complete a final album or product proposal, effectively stepping into the role of A&R. This project then formed a crucial component of their portfolios when applying for jobs in the K-pop industry.

Approximately 70 to 80 percent of the students across the three hagwons we surveyed expressed a strong interest in becoming A&Rs, underscoring the role's aspirational appeal. Interviewees described the A&R position as the creative nerve center of the K-pop industry, offering the opportunity to

shape both the look and sound of idols and their album releases. Motivated by the K-pop music that originally transformed them into devoted fans, these aspiring professionals are drawn to the A&R role with the goal of creating the next generation of cultural products that achieve widespread influence and appeal. For these students, becoming A&R represents a chance to shape the very popular culture that inspired them.

However, we also found that student perspectives on K-pop production and their relationship to it generally shifted after completing the hagwon courses. Through our ethnographic research, we identified three key ways in which students struggled as they were socialized into the role of a producer.

Impossible Demands of Technicality as A&R

First, many students faced a stark realization of the gap between the idealized notion of K-pop production they held as fans and the intensive, technical, and highly collaborative reality of the industry. Reflecting the funnel production ecosystem in K-pop, instructors emphasize that every stage of the K-pop production process is critical to the quality and reception of the final product. However, they also stress that the final product is more than the sum of its parts. Aspiring producers are taught to consider how each element contributes to the overall image or concept of an artist.

In particular, students came to appreciate the multifaceted nature of the A&R role, which demands expertise across various areas of production. These domains require specialized skills that can take years to develop, such as applying knowledge of music and dance histories to the creation of K-pop products. Students quickly realized that the role of A&R is not simply to be a jack of all trades but also, in many ways, a master of all. Success in this position requires familiarity with diverse artistic fields, including music, dance, graphic design, film, and photography. A deeper understanding of each area enables one to conceptualize and produce final products that are more intricate, complex, and compelling. Many students, upon completing

the course, expressed newfound admiration for the A&R teams behind successful K-pop releases that resonate with audiences both in Korea and internationally. As one student, Bo-Min, reflected during an exit interview after completing Hagwon A's course:

> One of the biggest shifts in perspective I experienced during this course was that, previously, I would simply think, "Oh, this is good," or, "This is fun and interesting" when consuming content. After taking the course from a planner's perspective, however, I began to analyze where certain elements were adapted from, how they were reinterpreted, and why people enjoy them. I found myself spending much more time reflecting on these aspects.

As Bo-Min's experience illustrates, whereas she previously engaged with music solely as a fan, seeing herself as a producer led her to analyze and evaluate products in terms of their compositional elements and overall effectiveness.

Throughout the learning process, students frequently expressed anxiety about their lack of technical skills required to become a K-pop producer. A common question directed at instructors was whether it was possible to succeed in the industry without specialized technical expertise. While hagwon instructors reassured students that formal music or arts education and university degrees were not essential, they consistently emphasized the importance of developing technical skills. Such technical expertise was important not just for securing a job but for succeeding as a producer capable of creating a quality product that resonates with the masses. For A&Rs, there is a demand for both breadth and depth of technical knowledge.

However, while A&Rs must develop proficiency in a range of skills to conceptualize a new K-pop product, mastering all of them is an unrealistic goal. Even with a lifetime devoted to acquiring these skills, true mastery remains out of reach due to the continual evolution of production methods. Moreover, since a core responsibility of A&R is not only to ensure

their artists keep pace with current trends but also to create new ones, the many domains in which K-pop operates—including music, dance, fashion, and digital media—demand that A&Rs remain constantly informed about the latest market developments across these areas. The A&R role, therefore, presents an impossible task: to be an effective or exceptional A&R in K-pop, one must understand how diverse artistic and technical aspects intersect to create a unique product that can compete in the market. This impossibility is quietly acknowledged by many students at the conclusion of their hagwon training. Recognizing the limits of their current skill set, they often expressed the need to pursue further education in specialized areas such as music theory, visual direction, and cinematography. They sought out this additional training through other hagwons, by job shadowing experienced professionals, or through self-directed learning. As they pursue further education and training, however, there is a sober recognition that no amount of preparation can fully equip them to meet all the technical demands expected of A&R.

The Limited Scope of "Fan Expertise"

Second, the hagwon assignments quickly exposed the limitations of what might be called "fan expertise." Most students identified as K-pop fans, and their understanding of the industry was shaped by their engagement with previous works from their favorite groups. In other words, their personal passions and interests as fans served as a specific lens through which they interpreted K-pop and its inner workings. The boundaries of this perspective became most apparent when students encountered unfamiliar albums, groups, or music videos during class or group discussions, which sometimes challenged or reframed their preconceived notions about particular artists or companies.

During a four-week introductory 101 course at Hagwon C, designed for those new to entertainment industry professions, the instructor was

discussing multilabel structures in K-pop and asked the class if anyone could name any labels under HYBE, which is the largest Korean entertainment company by market capitalization. The room fell into an awkward silence until one of the authors, So Yoon, broke it by answering: KOZ Entertainment, a label acquired by HYBE in 2021. Only then did another student hesitantly mention PLEDIS Entertainment, which HYBE had acquired in 2020. Observing the students' uncertainty, the instructor gently reminded them, "What I just asked you is basic knowledge. You need to explore the broader industry structure and its key players. These are the kinds of questions entertainment companies will ask in job interviews, so you need to be prepared." Similar moments of hesitation occurred throughout the courses, such as when the instructor asked students to name Korea's five largest music distribution or live entertainment companies.

During an A&R module at Hagwon B, a student asked an instructor for advice on writing album proposals. The instructor responded, "I sometimes see people relying on unverified fan theories. If something hasn't been officially verified or legitimized, you probably shouldn't include it or use it as the basis for your argument [in your proposals]." The head instructor of Hagwon B, who was also present, added, "Whatever proposal you write, it must have solid justification. If you claim that consumers tend to do something, you need to provide actual comments or data as evidence. Even if your direction turns out to be incorrect, your argument still needs to be grounded in evidence."

These examples reveal the limits of fan expertise in two important ways. First, as discussed above, the so-called fan perspective is rooted in knowledge gained through deep engagement with select artists. However, industry professionals do not regard insights from a single fan perspective as a legitimate basis for decision-making. When instructors critique students during professionalization, telling them they are too constrained by their personal interests and need to adopt a broader perspective, their intent is to challenge the privileging of any single fan's viewpoint and to emphasize that industry production extends far beyond individual fan experiences.

Second, we see that fans' preferences and knowledge become important primarily in aggregate rather than as individual, biographical experiences. Instructors routinely ask students to provide data on collective fan behavior, such as patterns in online comments, social media metrics, or findings from fan focus groups, in order to substantiate claims about consumer preferences or proposed directions for album production. Thus, the limitations of fan expertise lie not only in the constraints of personal perspective but also in the industry's dependence on a narrowly defined, data-driven legitimacy. In this context, professionalization as a producer involves recognizing the limits of one's personal knowledge and learning to identify what counts as valid knowledge within the industry.

Monetization as a Gradation of Fandom

Third, the courses explicitly emphasize material demands, specifically the necessity of creating commercially successful products, which introduces a specialized language for discussing fan behaviors and fandom that often conflicts with students' personal sensibilities as fans. From the fan's perspective, each student cherishes a unique, personal, and intimate connection with the idols and products they love. This relationship feels deeply individual and resistant to abstraction or replication, even as students recognize other fans who share their admiration. However, adopting the mindset of a producer requires a more pragmatic and detached approach. In this view, fan relationships are primarily understood as the company's key revenue source and the foundation upon which producers build their own livelihoods.

In a core module at Hagwon A, representatives from a music startup specializing in fandom culture introduced a framework for identifying and classifying fan behavior. This framework organized fans into six levels, ranging from Level 1, representing a latent or potential fan, to Level 6, denoting a fan so devoted that they become a recognized figure within the fandom itself. To illustrate, the lecturer described a Level 1 fan as someone who has

been casually exposed to K-pop content, while a Level 6 fan was exemplified by a devoted supporter of Taeyong (an idol from the K-pop boy group NCT) who carried a large handmade sign promoting his song "Tap" around the city to encourage strangers to stream the track. The act was photographed, circulated widely online, and contributed significantly to the song's visibility and promotional momentum.

This classification model places all individuals along a spectrum of fandom, resembling how contemporary evangelical movements view every person as a potential convert. Implicit in the framework is the notion that fans can be cultivated or "upgraded" from one level to the next, with higher-tier fans perceived as more valuable for their contributions to the artist and the business. The underlying message is clear: The more deeply fans engage, the more likely they are to go the extra mile in supporting both the artist and the entertainment company, whether directly or indirectly. Through this tiered logic, aspiring producers are taught that a fan's casual interest can be nurtured into active advocacy, drawing in new audiences and generating sustained value for the artist's brand. In this model, fan activity becomes a key driver through which investments in an artist yield compounded returns. Put bluntly, the more dedicated a fan is, the more value can be extracted from their engagement. Students learn that any successful idol project should aim to cultivate fans who will not only consume content but also circulate, promote, and even create new content related to the idol. Within this framework, fans are valued in proportion to the benefits they bring to the idol and company, a form of value extraction that digital media scholar Tiziana Terranova has termed the appropriation of the internet's "free labor."[22]

In her exit interview at the end of Hagwon A's program, Ji-won reflected on how her perspective shifted as she transitioned from a fan to a job seeker in the K-pop industry:

22. Tiziana Terranova, "Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy," *Social Text* 18, no. 2 (2000): 33–58.

> I have always believed that the love fans give to artists is one of the purest forms of love—completely unconditional. Yet so many companies exploit that love, almost holding it hostage. I was already aware of this as a fan, and now, seeing it from the perspective of someone hoping to work in entertainment, I realize it's the same. People enter this industry because they want to support the artists they admire, but in reality, they end up facing low pay, excessive workloads, and a similar kind of emotional blackmail. The reality really hits you once you're on the inside.

For Ji-won, her experience led to a deeper understanding of the K-pop industry as a profit-driven system and the precarious reality faced by anyone working within it. Like Ji-won, many students found themselves caught between two perspectives: that of a fan and that of a producer. As fans, they believed in the artistic integrity of K-pop and were motivated by a genuine passion to advance the genre. As producers, however, they came to view fan relationships as assets to be fostered and as essential tools for generating revenue and ensuring the company's survival. Despite their feelings of alienation, we observed students gradually adopting the language of industry professionals, actively discussing strategies to attract new fans and to deepen existing connections through innovative marketing campaigns.

The Duality of Fan-Producers

The challenges K-pop fans face when attempting to transform their personal passion for the genre into a viable career reveal the inherent tensions between the dual identities of fan-consumer and fan-producer. While fans often possess a deep, intuitive understanding of why certain pop culture products resonate with them, professional training quickly exposes the limitations of this fan-based knowledge. The skill set and mindset demanded for actual production are far more complex and require a distinct form of creative discipline. This tension highlights the gulf between the creative

freedom fans imagine producers enjoy and the material realities of professional production within the K-pop industry.

The emphasis on the A&R role within hagwon instruction is not necessarily intended to train all students to become A&Rs, a position typically reserved for a select group of seasoned professionals. As discussed previously, instructors make a point of correcting students' misconceptions about the role, particularly the belief that working in the industry will allow them to collaborate with idols who align with their personal tastes or to exercise full creative freedom without regard for budgetary or resource constraints. The curriculum's emphasis on having students inhabit the role of A&R serves a broader pedagogical purpose: It instills a sense of personal limitation and existential humility in the face of the immense challenge of creating the next wave of pop music. This humility involves recognizing that one's current skills and knowledge are never sufficient to produce a hit; instead, continuous re-education, upskilling, and curiosity about the world are essential. The A&R is not someone who simply imposes a personal vision onto the world, assuming that a well-crafted product will naturally find an audience. Rather, to be A&R is to remain attuned to an ever-evolving cultural landscape and to understand one's creative labor as deeply dependent on it. The role requires grappling with the vast and ever-shifting knowledge needed to synthesize the diverse elements that make up K-pop while still producing something innovative and widely resonant. Within the funnel production ecosystem, success means delivering a final product that exceeds the sum of its parts. Each contributor must carry the weight of both uncertainty and ambition, embodying the integrative responsibility of A&R to bring a shared vision to life. As emphasized across all three hagwons, if that vision fails to translate into a product that generates buzz and captivates a large enough audience to invest their time and money, the livelihoods of not only the idol but of everyone in the production chain are at stake.

As hagwon students quickly discover during their training, fan-producers inevitably wear dual masks. On one hand, as fans, they hold on

to the belief that their emotional connection with idols is personal and irreplaceable. Their individual passion for the genre inspires them to create new pop culture that sustains the intangible "magic" of fan relationships. From this perspective, fan connections are private, unique, and beyond quantification. On the other hand, as producers, they must adopt a more pragmatic outlook, viewing these same fan relationships as resources to be cultivated and leveraged for economic survival; this includes their own, as well as that of the idols and companies they support. In this context, the true product is not the idols or their albums but the potential relationships that can be formed with a broad and largely anonymous audience. Transforming fan relationships into commodities for mass consumption risks undermining what many fans perceive as a deeply private bond. Through their training on identifying which fan behaviors and market trends count as valuable data, aspiring producers learn to set aside their personal enjoyment of K-pop even as they draw on that passion to inform and energize their professional work. They are expected to channel their emotional investment into creating products that others, even those who may not share their exact tastes, may experience and appreciate in personally meaningful ways.

Through their hagwon training, students come to understand that this duality reflects broader industry realities. In this high-stakes environment, the livelihoods of fan-producers depend on their ability to cultivate genuine fan relationships through commodified products. When successful, these connections and the relationships forged through new releases can elevate pop culture artifacts into works of art that move beyond their commercial origins. However, when a product fails to generate buzz on social media or attract new fans, not only are individual fan-producers at risk but the entire production ecosystem can face serious financial repercussions. In this high-stakes environment, being a fan-producer means shouldering the burden of the creative mastermind—A&R—and producing art under relentless pressure, where every release is a gamble and the margin for error is razor thin.

Conclusion: Funnel Production Ecosystems and Exclusions

In this paper, we adopt an ethnographic approach to illuminate how the K-pop industry functions as what we call a *funnel production ecosystem*, a framework of production that expends all available manpower and financial resources toward realizing a single pop culture product. Through the funnel production ecosystem, we challenge the depersonalizing and often orientalist narratives that reduce the K-pop industry to a Fordist model of streamlined cultural production. At the same time, we also show the limits of approaches that elevate the power and influence of fandom communities without locating the fan within an ecology of production. By highlighting the K-pop industry's challenges in cultivating and retaining creative talent and examining how private institutions are emerging to address these gaps, our work aims to encourage deeper conversations about the evolving ecosystems of transnational, genre-blending popular culture industries. In an age where an overwhelming volume of audiovisual media floods digital platforms annually, the K-pop industry distinguishes itself not by merely industrializing production but by centering human talent as an irreducible element in crafting high-quality media that resonates across cultural, geographical, and national divides. The funnel production ecosystem reveals the material and structural pressures faced by K-pop producers as they navigate an increasingly competitive information economy with constantly shifting dynamics.

There remains considerable scope for further investigation into how the funnel production ecosystem is not unique to the K-pop industry but rather represents an increasingly prevalent model of digital media production within the contemporary global media landscape. Other Asian pop music industries—including those in Japan, China, the Philippines, and Thailand—have begun to emulate K-pop's production values and aesthetics, resulting in the emergence of their own culturally inflected pop music

that has achieved notable success. K-pop has also demonstrated growing convergence with adjacent cultural sectors such as gaming and television, catalyzing innovative cross-media collaborations exemplified by projects like Netflix's K-pop musical film *K-pop Demon Hunters* and virtual K-pop concerts hosted on platforms such as Fortnite. Building on the findings of this study, both authors are currently pursuing broader research on the evolving K-pop industry, with particular attention to how its production principles influence other sectors and how various stakeholders navigate the contradictions inherent in producing a globally circulated yet distinctly Korean form of pop music.

Beyond the realm of K-pop, the dynamics of the funnel production ecosystem are mirrored in the production processes of blockbuster films, television, and games, where the overriding objective is to capture a broad audience through singular releases distinguished by high production values and advanced technologies. As a conceptual framework, the funnel production ecosystem illuminates how human, financial, and technological resources are strategically allocated across diverse genres to generate media products of the "highest" (though always contestable) quality, capable of attaining the status of popular culture. It offers a useful heuristic for scholars, enabling us to move beyond simplistic binaries that either condemn popular culture as mere commercialism or idealize it as an inherently empowering space for digital users.

While pop culture is ostensibly produced for mass consumption, it is crucial to recognize that most pop culture artifacts never achieve widespread popularity nor are they all created solely with the aim of attracting a mass audience. Rather, the production of digital media artifacts is shaped by a diverse array of agents and pathways, each with its own logics and intentions. The increasingly dominant funnel production ecosystem, with its emphasis on high production values and large-scale appeal, continuously shapes industry standards. Yet this very system also creates openings for the emergence of new genres and alternative styles of pop culture that do not seek to compete on the same terms, instead thriving in the niches and margins.

The professionalization courses we observed often invited students to question their own aspirations for pop culture, prompting them to consider how new and meaningful works might be created in today's rapidly evolving digital landscape. In turn, as scholars, we might draw from this exercise and approach the study of popular culture production as an open-ended inquiry rather than one circumscribed by ideologies of mass production or consumption. By attending to the multiplicity of agents, production modes, and audience engagements, we allow for an understanding of pop culture as a dynamic and continually evolving field, marked as much by its exceptions and innovations as by its dominant forms.

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