

The Collapse and Rebuilding of K-POP Idols' Persona

Hanning Sun^{1*}, Hanyue Zhang²

¹*Shanghai Film Academy, Shanghai University, Shanghai, China*

²*Henan Drama Academy, Henan University, Zhengzhou, China*

**Corresponding Author. Email: sunhanning@shu.edu.cn*

Abstract. This study focuses on the "anti-scandal system" in the K-POP industry—a mechanism to mitigate reputational damage caused by scandals—and addresses challenges such as global reputational risks and the social media-driven spread of scandals. Adopting mixed research methods, it combines case studies (e.g., the withdrawal of Ju Haknyeon from THE BOYZ and the persona building of NewJeans) with a questionnaire survey (180 valid responses, with respondents primarily being students aged 18-25) to explore the operation of this system and its impact on idol-fan relationships. Findings reveal that idol personas have gradually undergone a strategic shift: for instance, from "divine idols" to "human partners," emphasizing authenticity and modularization to enhance resilience against scandals. Capital-driven risk control measures—including strategic rotation across transnational markets (e.g., adjustments to regional strategies by S2 Entertainment following KISS OF LIFE's racial controversy) and legal-cum-PR tactics—effectively mitigate damage. Questionnaire results indicate that 62.5% of respondents evaluate scandals based on their severity, while only 22.98% disapprove of all the idol's mistakes, reflecting the audience's hard bottom lines and limited tolerance. This study uncovers the characteristics of K-POP idols as "human brands" and examines how industry mechanisms, fan psychology, and capital operations collectively maintain idol personas amid scandal crises, offering insights into the evolving governance models in persona management within the cultural industry.

Keywords: K-pop, Idol system, idol human brand attachment, cultural industry.

1. Introduction

Against the backdrop of the booming social media and entertainment industry, the K-POP sector has established a highly influential cultural production system through its global distribution and industrialized idol-development models. As the core output of this system, idols are no longer confined to the singular identity of "performers." Instead, they forge deep emotional bonds with fans via high-frequency interactions on social media—such as live-streamed daily updates, targeted fan community management, and customized content creation—gradually evolving into "Human Brands" with personified traits [1]. The value of these "brands" extends beyond the commercialization of music, films, and other works; it is rooted in fans' profound identification with their personas, values, and even lifestyles, permeating dimensions such as consumer decision-making, social circle formation, and cultural identity.

However, the uniqueness of "Human Brands" lies in their intrinsic linkage to idols' personal conduct. In the early stages of K-pop's development, idols engaging in fan-unacceptable behaviors—such as publicized romantic relationships or smoking—often triggered a "career collapse" crisis: fans would mass-unfollow due to the "shattering of an idealized image," brands would swiftly terminate partnerships to mitigate risks, and agencies would struggle to restore market trust, ultimately leading to a precipitous decline in the idol's career. In recent years, however, this pattern has shifted markedly: numerous top-tier idols, despite short-term public controversy following similar scandals, have sustained no substantial damage to their commercial collaborations, fan bases, or industry standing. This "scandal resilience" is closely tied to factors such as transformed information dissemination logics in the social media age, the maturation of fan culture, and upgraded industrial risk management mechanisms—reflecting new features in the K-POP industry's governance of "Human Brands" and crisis response.

This paper analyzes how the K-POP industry protects idols as "Human Brands" through a complex "anti-scandal system". This system addresses three key pressures: substantial pre-debut investments, global reputational risks in cross-cultural markets, and social media-driven viral scandal amplification. Entertainment agencies turn idols into commercially controllable assets, manipulating their "intimate relationships" with fans. Fans' emotions are dominated by capitalist logic, as agencies institutionalize risk management to cut corporate risk costs [2]. It examines the system's mechanisms and ethical implications using existing literature.

2. Literature review

K-pop epitomizes the global commodification of idol culture. Its 2022 music exports exceeded \$2.3 billion, driving growth in tourism, beauty, and tech. Yet virtual idol experiments reveal tensions between hyperreal aesthetics and fans' craving for perceived authenticity [1,3].

Recent research on East Asian idol-fan dynamics—especially in K-pop and China's celebrity industries—has uncovered the interplay of emotional labor, media systems, and capital. Central is the paradox of idol charisma: they are celebrated for perceived extraordinariness (talent, aesthetics, relatable narratives) but rely on routinized fan labor (streaming, voting, anti-defamation) to sustain appeal [4]. This commodifies intimacy, making idols marketable yet fragile.

When idols fail to maintain constructed exceptionalism—via scandals, "normalcy," or decline—fans may detach, reflecting disillusionment and structural fatigue. Scandals act as symbolic ruptures: they expose instability in idol-brand constructions, prompting mass withdrawal or "defensive loyalty" [5, 6]. Such crises often serve capital by spurring new visibility and discourse cycles, echoing Han Byung-Chul's "transparency society" where scandal becomes spectacle.

To manage reputational risks, agencies use persona modulation (e.g., authenticity branding), modular group structures, and market diversification. Rituals like public apologies institutionalize fan expectations of accountability, reinforcing consumer authority over idols' emotional expression [2].

Notably, shifting perceptions of "tafang" (persona collapse) shape "anti-collapse" systems. Idols symbolize behind-the-scenes capital, their reputations thus capital-shaped; Gen Z's evolving values also play a role.

These studies highlight contradictory logics in idol systems: performance vs. personhood, affection vs. labor, spectacle vs. sincerity. This paper analyzes the operational rules and ethical implications of the "anti-collapse" system from business strategy and social cognition perspectives. Primarily, the paper uses art world theory to discuss how idols, entertainment companies, and fans

collaborate to form a scandal prevention mechanism in the K-pop industry, which is the analytical focus.

3. Research methods

To gain a better understanding of the perspectives regarding this incident from both the company and the fan base, the authors adopted two research approaches. Through case analysis, the authors analyzed the company's handling of the incident; through a questionnaire survey, the authors investigated the fan community's perceptions of the incident.

3.1. Case study method

This study selected "THEBOYZ Ju Haknyeon's withdrawal" and "NEWJEANS' persona creation" as cases (typical in K-pop) to explore the industry's coping mechanisms for idols' scandals and fans' attitudes via in-depth analysis. Primary and secondary information (company PR, fans' comments and parties' responses) was collected for comprehensive analysis.

3.2. Questionnaire survey method

To obtain first-hand data on fans' perceptions and attitudes toward idols' "tafang" (behavioral misconduct), this study used a structured questionnaire. Based on idol-fan relationship theories and persona collapse research, it covered five dimensions: demographic characteristics, star-chasing experiences, scandal behavior definitions, tolerance levels, and fan withdrawal mechanisms. Multiple-choice, multi-response items, and Likert 5-point scales were integrated to ensure validity.

This questionnaire was primarily distributed to K-pop audiences on Xiaohongshu and Douban platforms, with the age distribution ranging from 18 to 25 years old, including both students and employees.

Via stratified random sampling, 200 questionnaires were distributed to Chinese pan-entertainment consumers (focusing on K-pop audiences), with 180 valid responses (90% valid rate). SPSS was used for analysis to clarify fans' cognition of K-pop idols' misconduct, examine their attitude patterns/evolution, and identify factors predicting sustained fandom amid misconduct.

4. Result of case study

4.1. Persona transformation strategy: from "divine idol" to "human partner"

Amid public opinion crisis and market trust deficit, the idol industry urgently needs to reconstruct persona logic. Traditional "divine idols"—with their perfect settings—are prone to collapse, making an authenticity-oriented and modular shift toward "human partners" a key industry breakthrough.

4.1.1. Idol persona de-sacralization and authenticity reinforcement

NEWJEANS eschews the confrontational narratives of traditional K-pop groups, focusing instead on East Asian youth's collective coming-of-age struggles. Through low-saturation imagery—desks, gymnasiums, rainy seasons—the group portrays the region's hidden pains, positioning itself as “fantasy friends” to guide fans toward self-reconciliation—thus dissolving idols' condescending stance toward fans. It has been achieved that enhancing emotional attachment necessitates the strengthening of "a sense of intimacy" rather than merely emphasizing visual aesthetics [7].

4.1.2. Persona modularization and group risk diversification

When THE BOYZ's Ju Haknyeon faced controversy over private meetings with Japanese adult film actresses and a disputed exit, the company and remaining members responded swiftly to appease fans. Weeks later, THEBOYZ proceeded with scheduled concerts and comebacks, showing effective crisis management.

Ju Haknyeon was positioned as an "honest man" for the team's emotional communication, complementing other members' personas. This complementarity diversified audience demands and mitigated individual failure impacts. Fellow member Kim Younghoon also calmed fans—his "fromm" apology letter was seen as sincere, aiding mitigation.

Though the company terminated the contract within 48 hours to limit losses, undisclosed violation details sparked "scapegoat" speculation. This shows modularization must pair with transparent crisis communication; otherwise, it may worsen trust breakdowns.

4.2. Capital risk control: from “crisis communication” to “systematic hedging”

4.2.1. Transnational market rotation mechanism

Major entertainment companies have built risk-diversified networks via global market expansion—starting in South Korea and expanding into Japan, Southeast Asia, China, Europe, and the U.S.—to avoid "single-market dependence." Due to differences in fan focus, information access speed, and acceptance across markets, negative public opinion spreads with cross-market time lags, providing a valuable buffer for public opinion management. For example, in March 2025, KISSOFLIFE members were accused of "reinforcing racial stereotypes" (for Black hip-hop styling and mimicking Black speech/gestures during a birthday live broadcast), triggering boycotts by Western fans and a loss of over 200,000 followers in a day. Its agency, S2 Entertainment, responded by withdrawing from North America's KCON LA and shifting marketing focus back to South Korea, maintaining revenue and popularity through domestic tolerance for cultural differences.

4.2.2. Legal measures and cold processing

For scandal incidents—especially rumors, slander, and malicious attacks—entertainment companies now skillfully combine legal action with public relations. Legal measures are no longer empty threats: companies take tough deterrent steps, such as filing criminal/civil lawsuits against malicious rumor-mongers, deploying legal teams for online forensics, and filing cases promptly. This not only deters potential rumor-spreaders and protects the legitimate rights and interests of idols and companies, but also cultivates a public image of "victims/falsely accused" to gain fans' sympathy, aiming to create a "symbolic false system" and bolster fans' sense of security [3].

5. Result of questionnaire

The results of the questionnaire survey in this study:

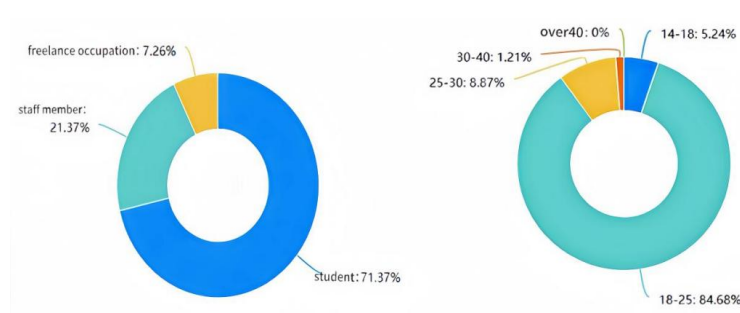


Figure 1. Age and occupation proportion distribution in the questionnaire survey

According to Figure 1, the current K-Pop fan base is primarily aged 18-25, with students making up 71.37% and boasting long-term fandom experience. Idols forge emotional bonds with fans via their charm (e.g., professionalism and attractiveness), fostering the “Fan Economy [4].” This emotional dependence, transcending ordinary consumption relations, has become a key psychological factor in fans' decision to disengage.

Table 1. Statistical data of fans' attitudes after multiple "scandals"

Attitude	Account for
Cannot accept making mistakes	22.98%
Accumulate based on the degree of error	62.5%
It is not a matter of principle. Continue to support	14.52%

Table 1 results reveal fans' hierarchical perceptions of idols' “scandals”: they maintain a “hard bottom line” in moral judgment—zero tolerance for legal violations or lack of integrity—yet show some tolerance for non-principled life or career mistakes. This "limited tolerance" overall reflects that fans' emotional flexibility toward idols, rooted in recognition of basic social norms, aligns with the notion that "rational logic restrains emotional dependence [8]."

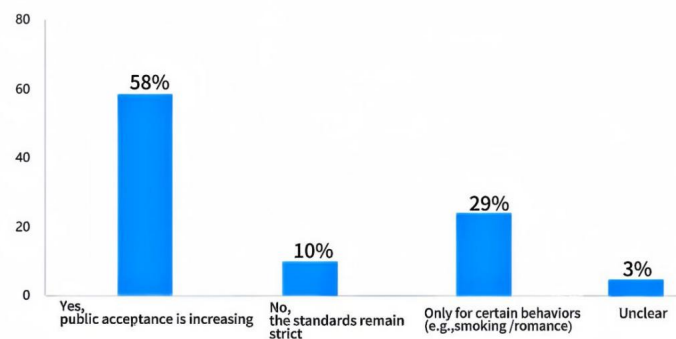


Figure 2. Public perception of K-pop culture's gradual “decriminalization”

Figure 2 shows that fans, alongside the K-pop industry's fan culture and capital operation mechanisms, influence public perception and acceptance of idols' behaviors. The industry strengthens fans' emotional identification via crafted idol images while guiding public opinion through crisis PR to “decontaminate” idols' negative incidents—thus enhancing overall industry tolerance.

K-pop fans' scandal attitudes stem from subculture (emotion/industry-driven), reflecting fan traits and K-pop ecosystem rules.

6. Conclusion

This study used a mixed-methods approach to investigate K-pop fans' attitudes toward idol scandals and reputational crises. The authors found that core K-pop fans (18-25-year-old students) exhibit intense emotional bonds with idols, intertwined with consumption, shaping scandal responses. They demonstrate stratified moral tolerance: near-zero for legal/fundamental ethical violations (e.g., integrity) but leniency toward non-principled missteps, reflecting broader societal frameworks. The industry mediates reactions through dual mechanisms: reinforcing identification via curated original personas and using market rotation mechanisms and appropriate legal measures, aiming to mitigate damage and cultivate ecosystem tolerance. At its heart, fan reactions blend young fandom identity, deep emotional bonds, and industry manipulation within social morals. This exposes the idol system's logic: profiting from emotion means crisis control is baked into the business.

The research also had some limitations: the questionnaire survey lacked an international scope, collecting only the opinions of Chinese fans regarding the scandal. However, the K-pop industry has an audience that spans countries around the world. Therefore, the authors believe that future improvements can focus on the following three areas: generational and cross-cultural variations in scandal responses; how emerging technologies (e.g., metaverse, AI-generated idols) redefine scandal parameters and emotional bonds; and longitudinal studies on scandal trajectories to map evolving tolerance thresholds and industry countermeasures.

Authors contribution

All the authors contributed equally and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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