

K-Pop Idol Trainee Selection Process in Thailand

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the K-Pop idol trainees selection process in Thailand, employing in-depth interviews and document research via YouTube video interviews spanning from August 13 to October 28, 2023. It unveils a tripartite process. Firstly, the pre-selection phase encompasses logistical planning by Korean record labels (“K-Labels”), including scheduling and venue selection. Secondly, the selection process employs both open and closed methods, evaluating candidates’ individual characteristics and skills. Finally, the post-selection phase includes additional assessments as a trial period before agreements are finalized. The inclusion of Thai members in the group, driven by Glocalization, boosts visibility and garners strong support from Thai fans, aiding promotional efforts and leading to increased consumer engagement in Thailand. The study also uncovers issues concerning creative labor concepts, focusing on four main areas. Financial Arrangements vary in the extent of assistance beyond essential living expenses in Korea, with debut idols expected to reimburse costs from earnings. Work-life balance lacks regular weekends off, offering only occasional breaks or Korean national holidays. Physical and mental well-being of individuals are highlighted, particularly the impact of strict diet plans. Lastly, contract-related issues are crucial for legal compliance and mutual agreement, amidst challenges like language barriers and visa issues for foreign idols.

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Introduction

Over the years, the music industry has solidified its global influence, notably achieving a substantial revenue increase to \$28.6 billion in 2023 from \$26 billion in 2022, marking the highest figure since 1999 (IFPI, 2024a). This success underscores the industry's commitment to transparency and its potential for further growth.

The IFPI Global Music Report 2024 highlights the remarkable growth of the Asian music market, now the third largest globally, with Japan, China, and Korea now ranking among the top ten global music markets due to a 14.9%

increase. Notably, Japan secured the second rank, China the fifth, and Korea the seventh position. These developments signify the increasing appeal of music from these regions and emphasize the global influence and economic significance of the Asian music industry.

In addition to the Asian market's achievements, four K-Pop groups, namely Seventeen, Stray Kids, Tomorrow X Together, and NewJeans have gained substantial recognition globally, ranking among the Top 10 Global Recording Artists of 2023. These groups are

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celebrated for their talent and broad appeal, with Seventeen securing the second position globally, just behind Taylor Swift (IFPI, 2024b).

The success of these K-Pop groups highlights the genre's ability to unite fans from diverse backgrounds, showcasing its growing presence in the global music arena and its commitment to fostering connections across the globe.

The roots of K-Pop's global journey can be traced back to H.O.T, a K-Pop group formed under SM Entertainment in 1996, and their concert in Beijing in 2000, which ignited interest in K-Pop and Korean culture in China, leading to the popularization of the term "Hallyu" (Korean Wave) (Yoo, 2000). As K-Pop gained traction on the international stage, a strategic shift occurred, integrating members from target audiences' nations, such as China, to enhance local resonance and appeal.

SM Entertainment's introduction of Han Geng, the first non-Korean member--who is Chinese--in the K-Pop industry, marked a significant step in engaging Chinese fans (Xia, 2020). Han's participation in Super Junior 05 in 2005 signaled K-Pop's increasing inclusivity, inspiring a more diverse future for the genre.

In subsequent years, Nichkhun, a Thai-born artist, became the first non-Korean member of a K-Pop Idol boy group, 2PM, under JYP Entertainment in 2008 (Lee, 2018). His success paved the way for other Thai talents like BamBam from the group GOT7, who debuted in 2014; Sorn from the group CLC, who debuted in 2015; Lisa from the group Blackpink, who debuted in 2016; Ten, a current solo artist, who officially debuted with the group NCT U in 2016; and Minnie from the group (G)I-DLE, who debuted in 2018. Their impact inspires aspiring trainees, continuing the legacy of Thai K-Pop Idols. Recent debuts like Natty, from the group KISS OF LIFE; Yorch, a former Thai actor, from the group POW; and Chiquita with Pharita from the group BABYMONSTER, who debuted in 2023, highlight this ongoing trend in the industry.

The impact of Thai K-Pop Idols on the global music scene is undeniable, as Thailand's role as a hub for K-Pop auditions and talent discovery grows. A significant audition event in 2023, co-hosted by The Korean Cultural Centre (KCC) and Ador Entertainment, a representative label for NewJeans, attracted around 2,500 enthusiastic teenagers, showcasing the dedication and ambitions of the Thai K-Pop community. This event emphasized cultural exchange and the unifying power of K-Pop.

Each K-Pop audition in Thailand enhances the nation's reputation as a center for emerging K-Pop talent and underscores its essential role in the

global K-Pop community. This reinforces the universal appeal of music in bridging geographical and cultural divides, elevating Thailand's presence and inspiring K-Labels to organize auditions in Thailand to nurture local talent (Tangsathaporn, 2023).

Research Objectives

The main objective is to scrutinize the K-Pop idol trainees selection process in Thailand. In addition, the sub-objective is to scrutinize the recruiting methods and evaluation principles used in the selection process of K-Pop idol trainees in Thailand.

Literature Review

K-Pop

K-Pop, short for Korean Popular Music, has become a global musical phenomenon in the 21st century, extending its influence far beyond Korea's borders. Its appeal lies in its catchy tunes, intricate choreography, and visually striking music videos. This unique blend of creativity and talent has captured the attention of a worldwide audience, solidifying K-Pop's position in the global music scene.

The surge in K-Pop export revenues, growing by 23.6% between 2021 and 2022, can be attributed to deliberate efforts to expand its reach in global markets. K-Pop Idols actively collaborate with international artists and engage in cross-cultural initiatives, aided by digital platforms like social media and streaming services. These platforms, along with fan engagement events, bridge linguistic and cultural gaps, fostering deeper connections between K-Pop artists and their global fan base (KOCCA, 2023).

K-Pop Idols are at the core of the genre, known for their multifaceted talents in singing, dancing, and stage performance. They not only connect with fans through online and offline platforms but also serve as cultural ambassadors, blending music, visual appeal, and cross-cultural interactions. Their influence showcases the fusion of various art forms and dialogues (Elfvig-Hwang, 2018).

In 1995, Lee Soo-Man, the founder of SM Entertainment, pioneered the K-Pop trainee system, which continues to play a crucial role in shaping K-Pop idols to this day. Trainees, often teenagers, undergo rigorous training, which includes dance, vocal, and language lessons. They follow demanding daily regimens, focusing on both artistic skills and physical appearance, often leading to strict diets and fitness routines. The pursuit of perfection may even involve cosmetic procedures to meet industry standards. This

comprehensive approach reflects the dedication required to become versatile K-Pop icons (Venters & Rothenberg, 2022).

The financial aspects of the trainee system reveal a nuanced structure. Trainees, upon transitioning to revenue-earning artists, enter a repayment phase to compensate the agency for their training expenses. This financial arrangement underscores the complex interplay between artists and agencies, emphasizing the balance between talent development and financial considerations, essential for the industry's sustainability (Yim, 2019).

Singer and Leading Musical Actor Selection Process

Specialized research on K-Pop Trainee Selection is lacking in academia. This study aims to fill this gap by examining the criteria for selecting singers, focusing on vocal skills, and leading musical actors, considering both singing and dancing abilities. The research is motivated by the close connection between these practices and the broader music domain, showcasing the interconnected nature of the entertainment industry (see Figure 1).

1. Singer Selection Process

1.1 Preliminary Phase - In the initial stage, label participants embark on comprehensive planning, creating a strategy to define the ideal singer they aim to develop. This crucial step sets the foundation for all subsequent talent scouting activities, aligning with the label's vision and goals (Ruangsakul, 2001).

1.2 Recruiting Methods - The talent recruitment process employs various strategies, informed by studies from Ruangsakul (2001) and Witchulata and Toopkaew (2013). These strategies are integral to the subsequent discussion.

(1.2.1) Independent Talent Search - Record labels employ a multifaceted approach to identify new talent, blending strategic planning and scouting activities. Proactive search methods, including street casting in areas frequented by teenagers, reveal the label's understanding of its primary audience. Talent showcases provide tailored stages for promising artists. Collaboration with other corporate entities and digital platforms, such as social media, enhances talent identification. These methods capture the complexity of talent sourcing within record labels, showcasing the industry's commitment to innovation.

(1.2.2) Direct Talent Submissions to Record Labels - Emerging talents interact directly with record labels by submitting singing demos, creating opportunities to showcase their skills. Modeling agencies play a role in connecting talents with the label. The label's network-centric strategy,

involving affiliations with senior members and industry relationships, offers further pathways for talent integration.

1.3 Evaluation Principles - Aesthetics, including physical appearance and charisma, play a significant role, contributing to an artist's visual persona and marketing impact. Vocal talent is equally essential, with personality traits, behavioral patterns, and tonal quality influencing an artist's identity and public perception. The interplay of these factors defines an artist's impact in the music industry.

2. Musical Actor Selection Process

2.1 Planning Phase - In the initial stage, the producer, director, choreographer, and other contributors conduct a comprehensive review to define the attributes, demeanors, and visual portrayals of each character in the musical. This forms the foundation for subsequent production stages (Boonglun, 2012).

2.2 Audition Modalities

(2.2.1) Open Auditions - These inclusive sessions are publicized through various channels and attract performers of all levels, fostering diversity in talent selection (Medieval Times, n.d.).

(2.2.2) Closed Auditions - Selective and exclusive, these auditions evaluate participants who meet specific criteria and receive direct invitations (ActUpNorth, 2023).

2.3 Casting Methods - Three casting methods shape the selection process, as supported by studies conducted by Boonglun (2012) and insights provided by Wongnarathiwat (2019).

(2.3.1) Script Reading - Participants undergo evaluations that include script readings and vocal showcases. Detailed discussions assess their understanding, insight, and alignment with the artistic vision.

(2.3.2) Improvisational Approach - Participants adapt to evolving scenarios, demonstrating resourcefulness and creative expressions. The evaluation emphasizes adaptability, creativity, and handling unexpected situations.

(2.3.3) Personal-interview Method - This tailored method engages participants in comprehensive conversations to explore their personality, interpretation, and compatibility with roles. It deepens the assessment beyond scripted scenes.

2.4 Evaluation Principles (Boonglun, 2012) - Key factors in casting choices include personality traits, physical attributes, voice quality, and skills in acting, singing, and dancing. Commercial appeal and audience recognition are also considered, acknowledging the connection between art and commercial success. Subtle characteristics like personality, behavior, and attitude play a role in bringing characters to life.

Commitment and dedication are vital, given the intensive rehearsal demands of live musical productions.

3. K-Pop Trainees Selection Process

3.1 Recruiting Methods

(3.1.1) Street Casting: Casting representatives spot individuals with striking appearances and offer them an audition (Valley, 2020).

(3.1.2) Online and On-site Scouting: Exceptional individuals from competitions, appearances, or online platforms are invited for

focused auditions (Yoo, 2020).

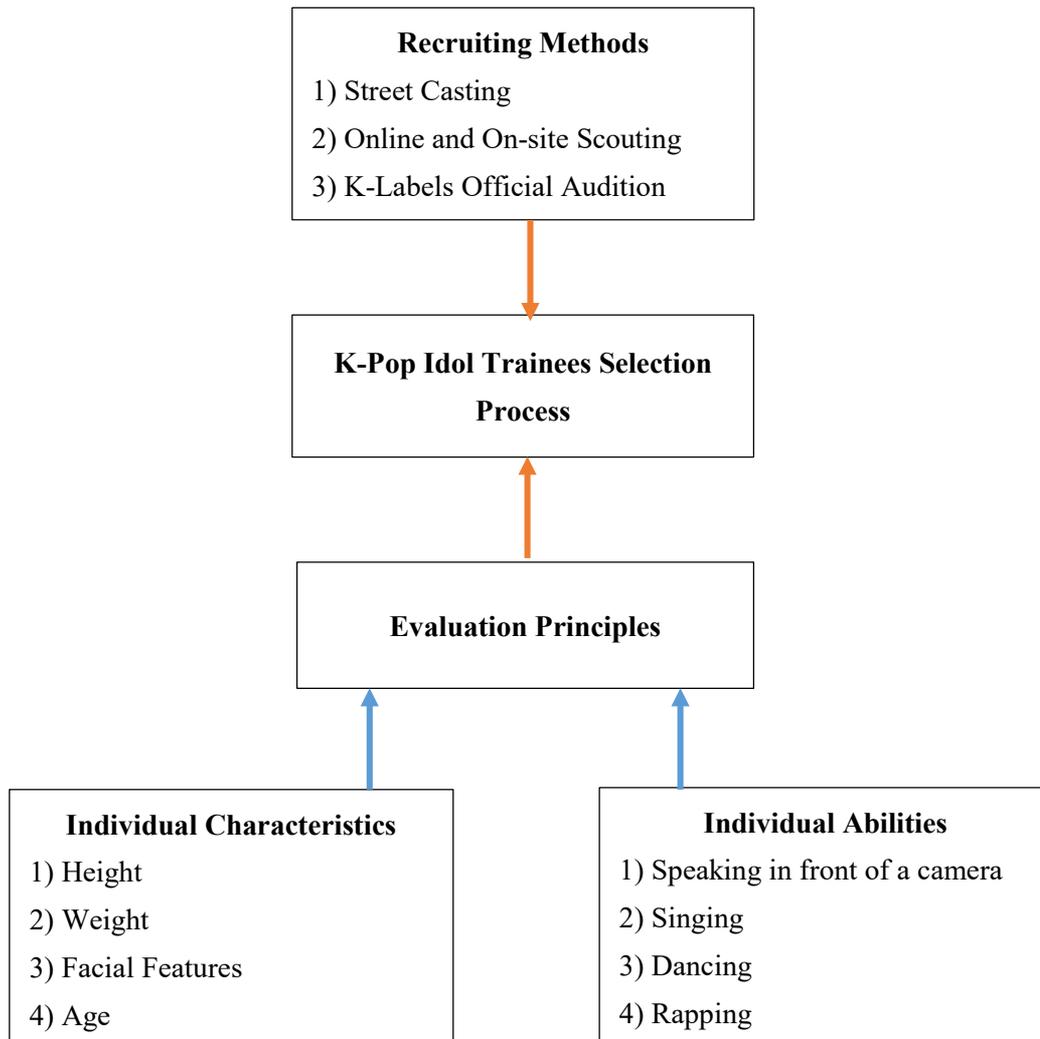
(3.1.3) K-Labels Official Audition: Labels regularly organize auditions, sharing details through their social media channels (Isman, 2020).

3.2 Evaluation Principles (Isman, 2020)

(3.2.1) Individual Characteristics: Physical appearance, including weight, height, facial features, and age, plays a vital role in the initial casting.

(3.2.2) Individual Abilities: Auditionees are evaluated based on their speaking proficiency, singing, and dancing capabilities during the audition process.

Figure 1: K-Pop Idol Trainees Selection Process Diagram



Glocalism and Glocalization

Glocalism explores the interplay between local and global influences, emphasizing the integration of global perspectives with local actions. It reflects the deep connections between global forces and local circumstances, spanning human behaviors, cultures, economies, and societies. The concept aids in understanding the intricate interactions in today's global world (Mihir, 2022).

On the other hand, glocalization, introduced by sociologist Roland Robertson, combines globalization and localization. It underscores the nuanced relationship between global influences and local responses. Glocalization suggests that successful globalization strategies should be tailored to fit specific local conditions. The core principle involves incorporating elements that resonate with the local environment, recognizing

the diversity of cultures, economies, and societies. This approach aims to mitigate the potential loss of unique cultural identities and local features resulting from unchecked global expansion (Raksaseri, 2003).

Glocalism and Glocalization in K-Pop.

K-Pop's global rise began with the success of H.O.T and a pivotal concert in Beijing in 2000. Recognizing China's potential market (Shim, 2014), K-Pop strategically addressed challenges by training Chinese talents and utilizing Chinese digital platforms. This success led to a transformative talent development approach (Russell, 2012). SM Entertainment adopted a unique localization strategy, aptly described by Fuhr (2015) and exemplified by Han Geng's entry. K-Pop's influence extended to Thailand, marked by its prominence in the regional K-Pop ecosystem.

Thailand's deep affinity for K-Pop, evident in statistics (Kim, 2023) and fan engagement (Shoowong, 2023), highlights its crucial role in asserting K-Pop's international prominence. Nichkhun's inclusion in 2 PM exemplifies the localized star strategy, blending global musical goals with culture-specific approaches (Sereemanopat, 2017). Thailand's initial fascination with Korean culture, facilitated by K-Series and collaborations with media conglomerates (The Modernist, 2018), contributed to the nation's evolution from a fanbase to an active contributor to K-Pop's global narrative.

Creative Labor

In Richard Florida's 2002 study, introduced the concept of the 'creative class,' a workforce group known for its emphasis on innovation and the creation of meaningful new forms across various sectors (Florida, 2002). Creative professionals, within and beyond this core group, contribute to knowledge-intensive fields by utilizing deep knowledge to offer innovative solutions. Sombat Kusumavalee (2010) further highlighted key traits of the creative class, emphasizing their keen insight and preference for complex pattern creation, often adopting non-traditional lifestyles that boost creative energies (Tiammek, 2020). Managing creative labor presents challenges, particularly with the label 'immaterial labor,' as traditional measurement methods struggle to capture the intangible nature of creative tasks. This difficulty is rooted in Marxian value theory and is compounded by the blurring of traditional work-time boundaries observed by Hardt and Negri in 2017, with flexible schedules and mobile technology connecting work and personal life more than ever (Pitts, 2022).

Creative Labor in K-Pop. Kim's analysis, drawing from Bell and Oakley (2015), highlights the global prominence of the creative economy. Aligned with free-market economics, cultural creations are viewed as lucrative business opportunities in Korea. This strategic approach led to the 'Korean Wave'

during President Kim Dae-Jung's tenure from 1998 to 2003. However, unequal contractual agreements, like "slave contracts" for K-pop artists until the late 2000s, pose significant concerns. These lengthy contracts limited negotiation power, placed younger artists in compromising positions, and led to opaque profit-sharing arrangements, with steep penalties for premature contract termination (Kim, 2017).

Creative professionals in Korea, despite the Korea Musicians Union's establishment in 2017, face challenges with suboptimal working conditions. Incidents such as deaths and suicides within the creative community persist, with limited union influence, particularly in the idol music sector (Kim & Lee, 2022).

Research Methodology

The study on the "K-Pop idol trainees selection process in Thailand" employs qualitative research methods, primarily in-depth interviews and documentary research, to achieve its objectives efficiently (see Figure 2).

Data Sources

This research utilizes two data types: primary and secondary. The primary data is derived from in-depth interviews with a total of 11 individuals, including 3 K-Labels staff, 4 Former Thai K-Pop Idols, and 4 Former Thai K-Pop Trainees associated with K-Labels. Secondary data includes existing information on the K-Pop Trainee System in Korea and the K-Pop Idol Trainee Selection Process in Thailand, with a focus on 20 video interviews available on YouTube.

Data Collection Tools

The primary data collection process involves conducting informal, in-depth interviews with participants, using open-ended questions to encourage the free expression of thoughts and feelings online via Google Meet between October 8 to October 28, 2023. This approach transcends geographical barriers, ensuring consistent data collection despite the researcher's location in a different country. Secondary data will be gathered by searching videos using specific keywords in Thai, English, and Korean. These keywords include "trainee," "ทรานนี่/เด็กฝึก" (Thai), "연습생" (Korean), and "Korea," "เกาหลี" (Thai), "한국" (Korean). The selected videos must depict situations between 2009 and 2019, irrespective of the upload date.

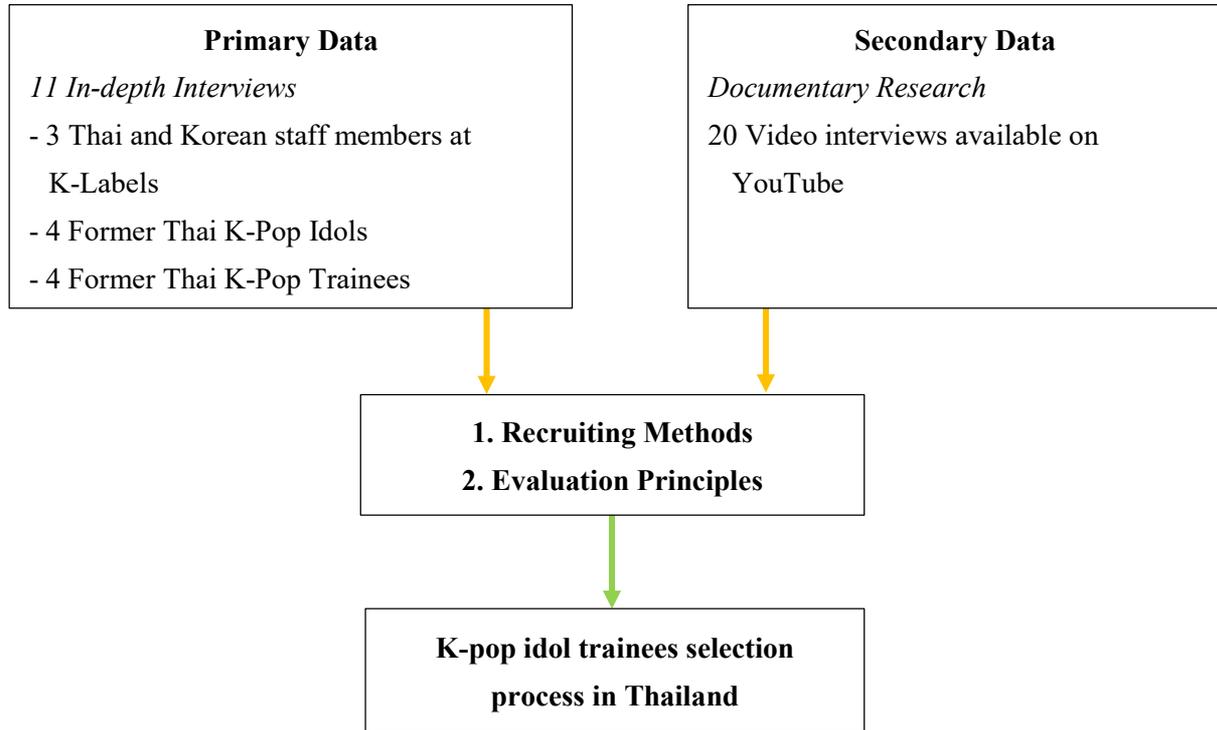
Data Analysis

This qualitative research approach involves continuous data analysis during collection to refine interview questions, ensuring they align more closely with the study's objectives. After the conclusion of the data collection phase, the

researcher acts as the primary analytical instrument and plans a comparative analysis tailored to interpret interview findings, focusing on personal interpretation without external influence. This

analysis is enriched by relevant concepts and theories foundation to the research framework.

Figure 2: Schematic Diagram of the Study



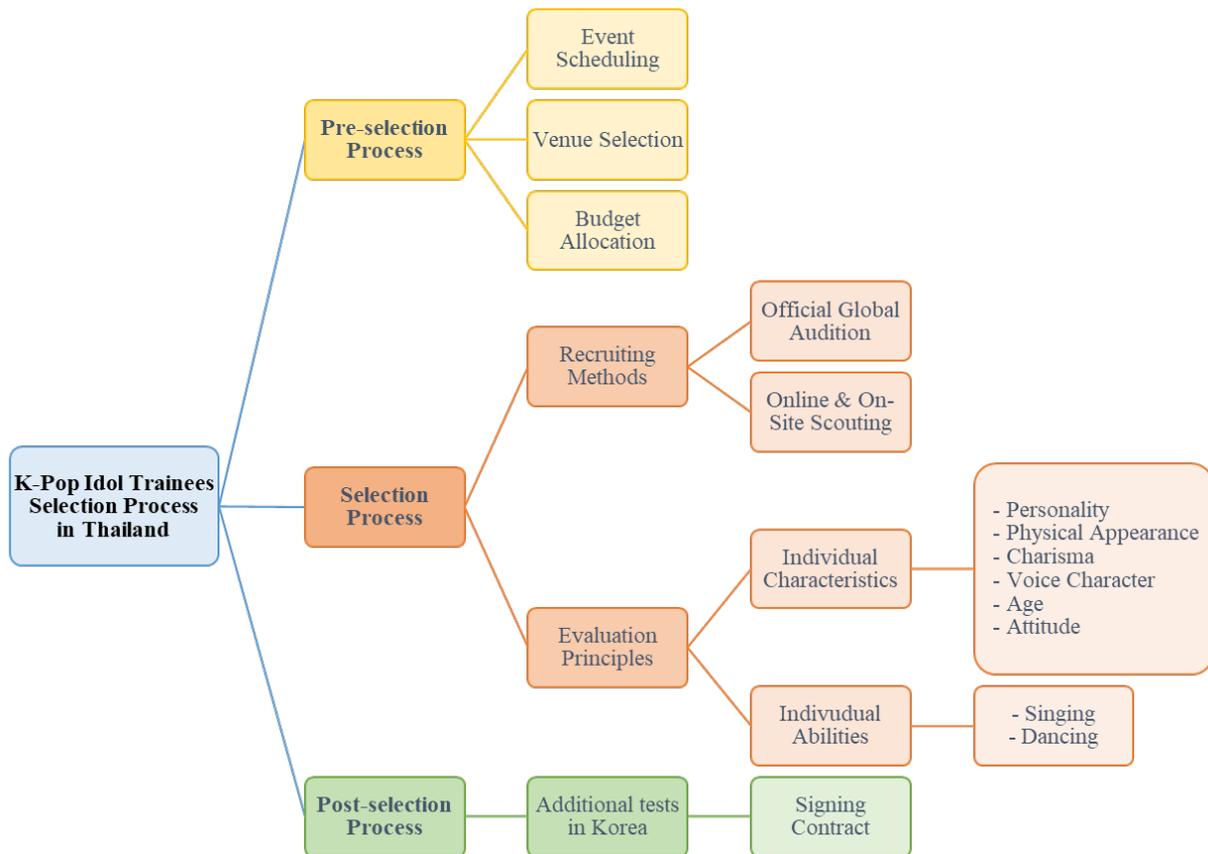
Research Findings

K-Pop Idol Trainees Selection Process in Thailand

The study presents meticulous outcomes in line with its principal objective of analyzing the K-Pop idol trainees selection process in Thailand. This analysis is derived from all 11 in-depth interviews, along with documentary research, and

particularly focuses on 20 video interviews available on YouTube. The findings are categorized into three main sections: the pre-selection process, the selection process, and the post-selection process (see Figure 3). These sections further divide the findings into insights from Thai and Korean staff members at K-Labels and perspectives from former Thai K-Pop Idols and former Thai K-Pop Trainees.

Figure 3: Diagram of K-Pop Idol Trainees Selection Process by K-Labels in Thailand based on the Research Findings



1. Pre-selection Process

1.1 Insights from Thai and Korean staff members at K-Labels

In preparation for a global audition in Thailand, organized by K-Labels, the dedicated team engages in a meticulous planning phase. Key considerations include deciding on the method of application submission--online or physical--and whether to require introduction videos from participants. The team also carefully selects dates and venues, prioritizing locations where label staff will be present. Budgeting is a crucial aspect, with a detailed calculation of expenses to ensure the event's financial viability, taking into account potential profit or loss.

1.2 Perspectives from Former Thai K-Pop Idols and Former Thai K-Pop Trainees

Leading up to the audition, the preparatory stage serves as a crucial period for participants to showcase their abilities effectively. This involves dedicated practice, particularly in singing and dancing, with careful consideration given to song selection based on the participant's skills and the label's preferences. Participants may train independently or under professional guidance to refine their talents. This active preparation is

integral to impressing during the audition, shaping participants' readiness and performance, and influencing their chances of success. For K-Labels, this phase is a strategic business preparation, while for Thai talents, it focuses on character and skills development.

2. Selection Process

This section will delve deeper and present two main insights: One about the recruiting method and another about the evaluation principles used during the selection process.

2.1 Recruiting Methods

(2.1.1) Insights from Thai and Korean staff members at K-Labels - In the early stages, K-Labels did not prioritize talent based on ethnicity or nationality. However, the addition of international members to K-Pop groups aimed at localization and expanding profit avenues beyond Korea. Particularly in Thailand, Nichkhun's pioneering efforts notably enhanced the visibility of Thai talents' potential and competencies in the K-Pop industry.

In Thailand, K-Labels employ two primary methods for talent selection during the recruitment phase. A) *Official Global Audition*.

Recognized for its inclusive nature, these auditions are organized on a large scale with extensive promotional campaigns. They stand out for being genuinely "open to all," eliminating the need for agent representation, thus making them accessible to a diverse range of talents. The openness of these auditions captures the rich diversity inherent in various music genres.

B) Online and On-Site Scouting. This method identifies talents showcasing exceptional skills on social media, often initiated by the labels or through collaborations with music academies. Labels contact academies for talent recommendations, sometimes based on participation in talent competitions. Promising talents undergo thorough evaluation, and selected individuals are then invited to more comprehensive audition processes, either at the global audition venue or in private sessions. This approach ensures a thorough and selective identification of prospective artists, contributing to the label's ability to discover and promote fresh talent.

(2.1.2) Perspectives from Former Thai K-Pop Idols and Former Thai K-Pop Trainees - Approximately half of the interviewed individuals actively applied for the audition through self-application, participating directly in K-Labels' official global audition. The remaining half, in contrast, were scouted through connections within music academies, personal contacts, or participation in music competition events. Those scouted underwent a more exclusive and private audition session, differing from the ordinary applicants who participated in the official global audition at a designated venue.

2.2 Evaluation Principles

(2.2.1) Insights from Thai and Korean staff members at K-Labels - In the audition process, particularly in the idol category, various factors play a pivotal role in selection. These factors include personalities, physical appearance, which leverages Thailand's diverse cultural backgrounds such as Thai-Chinese and Thai-Western heritages, enabling talents to seamlessly assimilate into global contexts. Additionally, singing and dancing abilities, along with overall charm, are crucial considerations.

The significance of these attributes varies among labels. In Label A, emphasis is on unique charisma, followed by voice character and physical appearance. In Label B, age is a paramount consideration, valuing youth for talent development. Personalities, appearance, and abilities are also considered, but age stands out. The background of auditionees, including both analog and digital footprints, is crucial. Past issues or undesirable records, even if the individual is talented, may impact selection decisions.

(2.2.2) Perspectives from Former Thai K-Pop Idols and Former Thai K-Pop Trainees - The interviewees highlighted that, beyond singing and dancing skills, attributes like personality, charisma, physical appearance, and confidence were crucial during the audition process. They emphasized the importance of capturing the attention of staff and judges, emphasizing that it's not just about talent but also about conveying the potential to develop into successful idols. For those scouted through academies, there was a focus on aligning their image and personality with what labels were looking for. The interviewees underscored the importance of physical appearance and confidence in enhancing overall appeal.

Furthermore, K-Labels have observed that Thai talents tend to exhibit long-term loyalty, particularly evident from prior Thai K-Pop Idols. This loyalty is believed to stem from the cultural values of Thai individuals, especially their emphasis on being thankful, showing appreciation, and practicing kindness, a sentiment closely aligned with the Boonkhun (บุญคุณ) ideology.

3. Post-selection Process

3.1 Insights from Thai and Korean staff members at K-labels

Due to confidentiality, Labels A and B did not disclose specific details about their process for bringing selected Thai trainees to Korea. However, they revealed that they usually cover the airfare and accommodation costs in Korea, facilitating a smooth transition for these trainees. Additionally, all trainees, regardless of nationality, receive daily lunch expenses from their respective labels. This financial support is primarily provided during the early stages leading up to their debut, serving as strategic investments to ensure trainees have the necessary support at the beginning of their careers, potentially setting them on the path to success.

In the training period, Labels A and B offer contrasting experiences. Label A provides a structured regimen similar to typical office or school days, incorporating scheduled training, self-guided practice, and study sessions, along with regular days off and standard holidays. In contrast, Label B offers a more intense training environment with long hours and minimal breaks, aiming to push trainees to their limits. Generally, trainees do not receive health services, such as regular check-ups and mental health support through consultations with psychiatrists or therapists. However, foreign trainees benefit from Korean language and cultural classes, which aim to alleviate cultural and linguistic barriers and promote mental adaptation in a foreign environment.

Prior to formal contract discussions, the labels conduct one or two internal assessments to make well-informed decisions. Both labels

emphasize that the process follows Korean laws and is a joint decision made with mutual understanding and agreement. Typically, contracts for new entrants last 7 years. When it comes to renewals, discussions are respectful and understanding. The length of renewed contracts varies from 2 to 5 years, depending on each group's specific needs and dynamics.

3.2 Perspectives from Former Thai K-Pop Idols and Trainees

Upon selection in Thailand, individuals relocate to Korea, either self-financed or with support from K-Labels through a predefined agreement. Generally, the label covers accommodation and lunch expenses. However, beyond these provisions, trainees are responsible for their own finances. Once idols debut, there is a noticeable change in financial dynamics. Earnings are managed by the label, creating a structured financial framework. It is crucial to note that every expense, spanning from the initial training phase and debut preparations to song productions and appearance makeovers, incurs a corresponding financial responsibility or debt to the label.

Throughout training, trainees maintain a rigorous schedule, including self-practice, group sessions, and trainer-led training for holistic development. They train seven days a week, averaging twelve to fifteen hours daily, with breaks coinciding with cultural events like Lunar New Year and Thanksgiving. However, there was a lack of regular physical check-ups provided. Steroid injections were used to speed up injury recovery, resulting in chronic pain for some. The strict dietary regimen and weight monitoring enforced targets with disciplinary actions. Mental health support involved open discussions with label. Linguistically, half of the trainees lacked formal Korean classes, instead receiving instruction from label staff and fellow Korean trainees. Cultural differences were not expressed as overt discrimination but as a perceived distance from Korean counterparts. One interviewee suggested that mental and cultural support might not be the label's obligation but rather the trainees' responsibility for adaptation to different environments and circumstances.

None of the eight interviewees immediately signed contracts with K-Labels. Instead, a thorough approach involved additional assessments, discussions between labels, trainees, and guardians, and a trial training period lasting about a month. Only after this process did trainees formally join, and contracts were finalized. Notably, contract duration was not a major concern. The main issue was securing the correct visa type for trainees or idols, as one interviewee debuted without one. This led to her having to leave and re-enter the country every 90 days due to Korean immigration rules. Additionally, she was denied

opportunities on national music shows because the label was reluctant to cover taxes for foreign performers' working visas.

Discussions

The K-Pop Idol trainees selection process in Thailand, derived from in-depth interviews and video interviews comprise three mandatory steps. These steps align with the selection processes for singers and musical leading actors, exhibiting nuanced distinctions within their similarities, necessitating further detailed exploration.

1. Pre-selection Process

The planning phase of the K-Pop Idol trainees selection process in Thailand introduces distinctive elements, focusing on logistical aspects like scheduling, venue selection, and resource allocation. Unlike other musical genres, K-Pop lacks a fixed prototype for idols, embracing diversity and various talents. However, despite the discovery that talent scouting in the K-Pop industry is impartial regarding nationality and focuses on training, commercial pressures and capitalist dynamics underscore the importance of tailoring products to local preferences, especially in Thailand, a significant K-Pop market (Kim, 2023). Particularly, alongside the leverage gained from a diverse cultural mix appealing in looks or traits, Thailand's fervent national pride, as encapsulated in the sentiment 'Thais love and unite altogether' from the Thai National Anthem, suggests that effectively promoting groups with Thai members can lead to substantial support from the Thai audience. This approach reflects both cultural values and strategic considerations within the globalized K-Pop landscape.

Additionally, the industry's confidence in its talent development system is evident as it strategically places members in roles based on personalities and contributions beyond musical proficiency. Specific roles, such as main vocal, main rapper, and main dancer, contribute to overall group harmony. K-Pop groups also consider roles like "Mood Maker" and "Visual," recognizing attributes beyond musical skills, emphasizing a holistic approach to idol formation (Hong, 2019).

2. Selection Process

2.1 Recruiting Methods - In Thailand, K-Labels' recruitment methods for K-Pop Idol Trainees differ from broader K-Pop practices. Limited street casting is observed, attributed to time constraints and potential language barriers (@smaudition_official, 2023). Diverse audition methods are employed, with variations based on label size. Larger labels, like SM Entertainment, introduce a pre-application process for focused

interactions, while smaller labels advertise auditions openly, often in unconventional venues (@dctfamily_official, 2023). This decision not only adds a unique dimension to the audition experience but also potentially offers benefits to the students within that academy, creating a symbiotic relationship between talent recruitment and local educational institutions. An additional layer to the audition process is the incorporation of closed or exclusive auditions, tailored for individuals initially scouted through music academies, personal connections, or participation in music competition events. This strategic approach seeks to diversify the talent pool, emphasizing a more inclusive and comprehensive talent acquisition strategy within the dynamic landscape of K-Pop in Thailand. Integrated, these audition methods ensure a wide array of talents are considered, enriching the diversity and depth of the talent pool.

2.2 Evaluation Principles - The K-Pop Idol Trainee selection process prioritizes individual abilities in singing and dancing, with a distinct emphasis on physical appearance. However, societal changes advocate for a paradigm shift, promoting diversity in both stylistic attributes and physical appearance within the K-Pop industry (Miller, 2023). This shift aims to empower talents who deviate from conventional beauty standards, particularly through the Very-Low-Calorie Diets (VLCDs) often used by K-Labels to induce rapid weight loss, in which VLCDs can cause potential health risks, such as cholelithiasis, ketosis, and elevated serum uric acid concentrations (Joshi & Mohan, 2018). The objective is to normalize such differences within societal perceptions. Recognizing the importance of technical skills challenges traditional notions of attractiveness, fostering a holistic appreciation for the multifaceted dimensions contributing to success as a K-Pop Idol (Lee, 2023). Charisma, an innate attribute challenging to cultivate, holds paramount importance during auditions. Additionally, commitment, attitude, and confidence are integral intangible qualities in the selection process, highlighting the industry's focus on holistic characteristics beyond technical skills.

3. Post-selection Process

In this specific phase, the introduction of additional assessments following the initial selection of candidates from Thailand represents an innovative approach. This multi-tiered selection process yields benefits for both trainees and K-Labels. Functioning as a trial period, it provides potential artists an opportunity to familiarize themselves with the training environment before committing to a binding agreement.

As the post-selection process involves relocating trainees to Korea for the training period, in addition to being financially supported by labels, it is crucial for trainees to recognize that living expenses in foreign countries, integral to their training, can be substantial. Insufficient preparation in this regard may deter aspiring trainees, prompting them to reassess or abandon their ambitions.

It is essential to prioritize the physical and mental well-being of talents, particularly as K-Labels may not consistently include regular breaks in schedules to promote optimal productivity and well-being. As a result, talents must prepare for potentially intensive schedules to achieve their goals. However, it is vital for talents to seek help promptly for injuries and refrain from frequent steroid injections to prevent complications, as indicated in the Corticosteroid Adverse Effects study (Yasir et al., 2023). Additionally, mental health is critical in talent management. Drawing from personal experiences with Thai Record Labels, the researcher highlights existing communication sessions between labels and talents. Nonetheless, there is a pressing need to normalize engagements with mental health specialists, whether facilitated by the label or autonomously pursued by aspiring talents.

Finally, contracts for trainees, often spanning extended periods, outline regulations that require meticulous attention, particularly concerning the financial support provided by the label during the period of the binding contract and the necessary precautions for fulfilling financial obligations. Misinterpretations of this terminology can result in discrepancies in contractual terms. To mitigate this risk, professional interpreters are indispensable to ensure accurate comprehension and safety before committing to agreements. Additionally, a related issue concerns the legality of staying and working permits. It is crucial for trainees and idols to exercise vigilance and promptly report any irregularities, thereby averting potentially precarious situations.

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