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### Lights, Camera, Action! Defining the Idol in Contemporary Asia

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Lights, Camera, Action! Defining the Idol in Contemporary Asia

Nathalie López Del Valle

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*Abstract*

Most of the academic literature analyzing K-Pop and J-Pop have focused on their historical development, marketing strategies and/or fandoms, typically forgetting about the figure at the center of it all: the idol. This paper addresses this research gap directly by asking: how does a person become an idol? Contrary to commonly held perceptions, idols frequently demonstrate that they are active in the process of their own production, meaning that the process of idol identity formulation is not a one-way process, as it would be in a factory. Rather, idols, producers, trainers, and the public all collaborate to create the idol's narrative identity and public image. Idols use different strategies when communicating this sense of identity to audiences during public appearances in a way that allows them to leverage said identity for their own benefit. I illustrate these strategies in the following paper by using a performance theory and narrative identity theory informed framework to analyze the interview content found in *Produce 48*, *Ride on Time's King & Prince S1*, *Arashi's Diary Voyage* and in-depth interviews with SHINee. This allows us to have a firmer grasp on what it is about idols that sways audiences to engage in internet wars on their behalf and scream their names at the top of their lungs in Olympic stadiums.

Keywords: K-Pop, J-Pop, idols, narrative identity, performance theory

## Introduction

For more than a decade now, anyone who uses the internet regularly is highly likely to have come across the terms “J-Pop” and “K-Pop” at some point. Perhaps they have watched one or two videos because the YouTube algorithm has recommended a music video. Maybe after they watched one video, they kept watching more and more videos until they became fans and now K-Pop and/or J-Pop is a part of their daily lives. At the center of what we call J-Pop and K-Pop is undeniably the *idol*. But who is that person that we refer to as idol?

Most of the literature on the subject focuses on the historical development of the two industries, their marketing strategies or fan behavior.<sup>1</sup> Important though these dimensions are, they cannot fully explain how and why idols are able to amass so many fans or the extreme loyalty some of these fans display despite having had minimal or no personal one-on-one contact with these idols. This seems to be the work of more than just a top-down marketing strategy. Most fans will report that they became fans or at least interested in an idol after being charmed by an idol’s performance on stage or their “personality” as portrayed in a particular moment.<sup>2</sup> This indicates that we must begin to consider the idol as an agent that collaborates with a management team, whom I conceptualize as backstage actors, to put on a performance of “idolness.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See for example: Anita Elberse and Lizzy Woodham, “Big Hit Entertainment and Blockbuster Band BTS: K-Pop Goes Global,” *Harvard Business School*, June 8, 2020; and John Lie, “Seoul Calling,” in *K-Pop: popular music, cultural amnesia, and economic innovation in South Korea*, Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2015, p.122-95.

<sup>2</sup> See for example this comment by darkbluebird: “but then, i decided to watch a show with them, and i fell in love right away with them (the members themselves) and just started hearing and downloading every sns-d song, bought their igab album (jessica version) and became a sone by the summer of 2013.” Found on [https://www.reddit.com/r/SNSD/comments/3ju2za/when\\_did\\_you\\_become\\_a\\_fan\\_where\\_how\\_what\\_era/](https://www.reddit.com/r/SNSD/comments/3ju2za/when_did_you_become_a_fan_where_how_what_era/).

<sup>3</sup> In this paper, I will not be making overt reference to how the decisions made by backstage actors, i.e., production staff, affect the overall narrative we see because as an outsider it is not possible to have a clear picture about how much of what we see is decided by these backstage actors. I instead acknowledge the possibility that backstage actors have had a role to play in all of the idol narratives made available to the public and opt to go along with the narrative instead of against it in my analysis.

Typically, an idol's agency tends to be either completely disregarded or not fully developed within the existing literature on the subject. This is despite the multitude of occasions in which idols have explicitly "broken" the illusion of being a team with their companies or fellow group members by venting their anger or disappointment through social media or on camera.<sup>4</sup> Oftentimes, they will use these platforms and situations to directly ask fans for help or sympathy, thus mobilizing their status as an idol in their favor.

In response to this research gap, I will be asking "how does a person *become* an idol?" To answer this question, I will be analyzing the interview content found in specific shows focusing on specific idols. This content will be coded and analyzed through narrative identity theory and Erving Goffman's performance theory. My goal is to explore how idols construct and perform their identity as an idol through their promotional activities, while also considering how the social environment and audience might influence the final performance.

Moreover, idols must often also adopt the role of cultural ambassador since their positionality as entertainers allows them to transcend national borders in a non-threatening way.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> In 2014 ZE:A's leader, Moon Junyoung, posted a series of tweets exposing his company, Star Empire's, CEO for mismanagement: <https://www.soompi.com/article/653263wpp/zeas-leader-junyoung-leaves-warning-message-for-his-ceo-star-empire-to-issue-official-statement-after-review>. When dating rumors started swirling around Hyuna and then Pentagon's E'Dawn, their company, CUBE Entertainment, released a statement denying the relationship. This was contradicted hours later by both Hyuna and E'Dawn (now known as Dawn) when they met with Yonhap News for an interview in which they confirmed their relationship. <https://www.straitstimes.com/lifestyle/entertainment/hyuna-admits-she-has-been-dating-pentagons-edawn-for-two-years>. Also, in 2019 then NGT48's Yamaguchi Maho (she has since graduated from the group) used a livestream and her Twitter account to denounce her management company, AKS, for not taking action to punish those responsible for divulging her location to the man who would go on to physically assault her when she got home. <https://www.billboard.com/articles/news/international/8493058/j-pop-girl-group-ngt48-apologizes-discussing-assault-yamaguchi-maho>. Lastly, ex-AoA member Mina has made a series of bullying accusations against her previous fellow AoA member Jimin and their management company, FNC Entertainment, through her Instagram account. <https://www.scmp.com/magazines/style/news-trends/article/3096337/k-pop-bullying-scandal-aos-mina-lifts-lid-10-years>.

<sup>5</sup> It's worth noting here that K-Pop idols, especially those from nationalities other than Korean, such as Chinese, Taiwanese, Thai, etc., might encounter situations in which they are essentially forced to "forfeit" or hide their nationality and personal beliefs about nationhood when said position threatens controversy. See the following articles for an example, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/17/world/asia/taiwan-china-singer-chou-tzu-yu.html>. Sometimes the pressures put on idols to embody nationalist sentiments in a non-threatening way is not an

Nevertheless, the idol must leverage fan loyalty and their identity as entertainers to successfully navigate and balance political tensions, cultural clashes, and public perceptions due to their high visibility as public figures. Their positionality, training process, social environment, and exposure to the public eye all work together to reorient an idol's self-narrative into that of an idol.

I hold that the reason why the idol in their functionality as a cultural ambassador of Japan or South Korea can exert international influence is precisely because of their personality and image which attracts public attention. Therefore, a thorough examination of the creation process of their identity is warranted. This analysis will permit us to have a firmer grasp on why and how it is that idols have such influence over international understandings of the country they represent and what exactly it is about them that sways audiences to engage in internet wars on their behalf and scream their names at the top of their lungs at Olympic stadiums.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Regarding my theoretical framework, I combine narrative identity theory with Erving Goffman's performance theory to analyze interviews with different idols in a variety of settings. The combination of these two approaches allows me to systematize my analysis of interview content and write an exploratory, rather than exhaustive, research paper.

Firstly, regarding Goffman's performance theory, how Goffman has framed the dynamics of social interaction and the presentation of self within these by using theatrical analogies is extremely well suited to studying the world of idols, the role idols occupy within this world, and the life story narratives that come out of it. Additionally, since this world and idols' off-stage or

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accomplishable task. <https://www.soompi.com/article/419568wpp/kara-criticized-for-not-speaking-up-for-dokdo>, and <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-54513408>. For a more comprehensive study of this issue, see Olga Fedorenko, "Korean-Wave celebrities between global capital and regional nationalisms," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 18, no. 4 (Dec. 2017): 498-517.

off-camera version is inaccessible to outsiders, Goffman's theory allows me to acknowledge this without sacrificing the possibility of analysis. I will adopt Goffman's use of theatrical analogies, such as actor, performance, audiences, script, and stage cues to name just a few. Additionally, he notes that during a performance, there are several dynamics a sociologist should be aware of.<sup>6</sup> For example, there is the difference between the impression an actor gives, supposedly directly and intentionally through their words and actions, and the impression an actor gives off, essentially the interpretation or reception of an actor's performance by an audience. The use of theatrical analogies, especially that of performance, will be complemented by a narrative identity lens. Just as Dan P. McAdams, Ruthellen Josselson, and Amia Lieblich quote William James in the introduction of their book: "We are all storytellers, and we are the stories we tell,"<sup>7</sup> this theory seeks to examine the different ways in which individuals formulate inner narratives of experience which allow them to define and expand the self.

In summary, these two theories are combined into the optimal theoretical framework necessary for this study. First, by combining the positionings of both, we find that stories are performed, and the scenes or tones of these stories may change according to the audience its directed toward as well as the setting and medium in which that narrativization of life story is performed. Second, we understand that the life stories that individuals formulate about themselves are influenced not only by the historical and cultural context in which they are formulated and performed, but also by the relationships that populate an individual's social context. In the case of idols, this social context is very wide, spanning from idols' relationships with fellow group

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<sup>6</sup> Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, London, United Kingdom: Penguin Books Ltd., 1990.

<sup>7</sup> Dan P. McAdams, Ruthellen Josselson, and Amia Lieblich, eds., *Identity and Story: Creating Self in Narrative (Narrative Study of Lives)*, Massachusetts, United States of America: American Psychological Association, 2006, p. 10.

members, management, and fans —toward whom interview content is usually explicitly directed toward— as well as the people whom they regularly interact with in their off-camera/off-stage lives. Lastly, certain themes are regularly privileged in idol narratives of selfhoods in the context of interviews. These themes include: the relationship with fans, the relationships within the group, their work ethic, and the “personal” dream of being on stage and performing. The frequent highlighting of these themes needs to be examined as a type of story that is privileged within the cultural contexts of South Korea and Japan where these idols are produced, and by the economic incentive from the company’s perspective to foster scripts that are likely to increase fan loyalty and overall profitability of the idol’s image. The analytical tools described in this section allow this paper to address not only these concerns, but also consider the possibility of idol improvisation during the performance of a script while still following the general stage cues.

### Methodology

I analyze the interview content in three different reality/documentary shows, as well as assorted recent interviews for K-Pop group, SHINee. These shows are *Produce 48*, *Arashi’s Diary Voyage*, and *Ride on Time’s King & Prince S1*.<sup>8</sup> In the case of SHINee, I will focus on four video interviews and use magazine interviews as supplemental materials.<sup>9</sup> Each of these, except for *Produce 48*, which is a survival show with the goal of creating a new girl group with twelve of the contestants, all follow specific groups with large fan bases at different stages in their careers. I have opted to include idols in different stages in their careers to have a more representative

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<sup>8</sup> *Produce 48*, directed by Joon-young Ahn, aired on Music Network (Mnet), June 15, 2018-August 31, 2018; *Arashi’s Diary Voyage*, produced by *Netflix*, January 2019- December 2020; *Ride On Time*, produced by *Netflix*, 2018-present.

<sup>9</sup> “SHINee’s Key Cooks a Meal & Talks New Music | Exclusive Interview,” *iHeartRadio*, published on *YouTube* on March 15, 2019; “SHINee Mukbang + Group Dance to Taemin’s ‘Move’ | Exclusive Interview,” *iHeartRadio*, published on *YouTube* on August 3, 2018; “TAEMIN from SHINee Talks About His Journey From Debut Until Now | Exclusive Interview,” *iHeartRadio*, published on *YouTube* on April 1, 2019; “What makes SHINee scared? | [SHINee] EXCLUSIVE!,” *SBS KPOP*, published on *YouTube* on February 28, 2021.

sampling. While watching each episode, I have focused on the dialogue in the interview content of each and have been coding the data according to the following categories: artist, dream, ideal, the stage, failure, determination, fans, group, growth, dedication, image, “real,” individual, and adaptation. This data will be analyzed in the following sections of this paper through the lens of my theoretical framework.

In the following table, more information on each of the shows I have opted to include in this study may be found. These criteria include format, accessibility, the length of the career of the idols featured on the show at the time it was filmed, the date in which the show was produced and subsequently broadcasted, length, and a rough estimate of the popularity of these idols. It is important to note that it is difficult to judge and compare popularity for idols across Asia. In Japan, physical album sales are still the main source of revenue for idols, though it is important to acknowledge that bulk buying albums and singles is a common practice for fans since this practice allows them to demonstrate support for their idols as well as increase their chances of enjoying certain benefits such as pulling a ticket for a fansign. In the case of a K-Pop group like SHINee, I have opted to use streaming data instead to demonstrate their popularity across the world.

Table 1: Inclusion Criteria

	<i>Produce 48</i>	<i>Arashi's Diary Voyage</i>	SHINee Interviews	<i>Ride on Time, King &amp; Prince SI</i>
Format	Survival reality show	Documentary	Interviews	Documentary
Accessibility	Found online with fansubs	Netflix Series	Found on official YouTube channels	Netflix Series
Length of Career	Most Koreans were trainees who had not debuted or had failed debuts with short careers of a year or less. For the Japanese idols who participated, the amount of experienced varied from around 9 years to just 1 or 2 years since debut.	19-21 years since debut; show was filmed over two years	10-12 years since debut	First eight months after debut showcase
When was the content aired/produced?	2018	Dec. 31, 2019- Dec. 31, 2020; filming began in 2018	2018/2019/2021	2018
Popularity of idols <sup>10</sup>	All Korean albums of the final girl group, IZ*ONE, are certified Platinum	56.7 million records sold	1 billion combined streams on Spotify	Debut single, "Cinderella Girl," sold more than 577,000 records in its first week, the first debut single to surpass

<sup>10</sup> Gaon Music Chart's Certification Criteria may be found here: <http://gaonchart.co.kr/main/section/certification/list.gaon>. Spotify streaming data found on Spotify application.

				500,000 sales in 12 years
Running Time	1,440 mins	266 mins	183 mins	94 mins

As may be notice while reading the table above, the number of minutes that I analyzed per show is quite different. Firstly, in the case of *Produce 48* where 96 idols and idol hopefuls form the cast, I have restricted my study to the interview portions of the show. I go into more detail as to the content and format of the program in the following section but suffice it to say that despite the vast length of the program, it is divided among 96 contestants. In the cases of the other three, the number of minutes per group is drastically less but the cast is also much smaller. Namely, there are six members in King & Prince, five members in Arashi, and four members present in the SHINee content I analyze. Therefore, cross-comparison is still possible. Additionally, in the case of Arashi, I do not analyze all of *Arashi's Diary Voyage* episodes in full. This is because I chose to focus on interview content in which idols share their views about what being an idol entails so I have limited myself to the most relevant episodes. Lastly, it is worth noting that despite the potential for expansion in this paper, the content I have selected to analyze cannot possibly

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Arashi and AKB48's total sales data as recorded by the Oricon Chart may be found here: <https://www.oricon.co.jp/confidence/special/52827/2/>. Information for King & Prince's "Cinderella Girl" sales found: <https://aramajapan.com/news/music/king-prince-sets-sales-record-with-debut-single/88711/#:~:text=Johnnys%27%20newest%20group%20King%20%26%20Prince,a%20debut%20single%20this%20decade.>

represent all idols perfectly. Due to time constraints, I have chosen to limit the scope of this paper to the content I judged to be most conducive to answering my main research question.

### **Produce 48**

*Produce 48* is the third season of the *Produce 101* survival reality show series produced by CJ E&M and AKATV for Mnet. Additionally, this season stands out because it was the product of a collaboration with Akimoto Yasushi, the producer of AKB48 and sister groups. Consequently, the show features contestants who are trainees from Korean entertainment companies as well as active members of AKB48 and sister groups. Starting out with 96 contestants, the female idols and idol hopefuls participate in a series of individual and team evaluation missions where they must memorize and perfect a song and choreography within a limited amount of time. This performance was then showcased in front of trainers and live audiences.<sup>11</sup> All contestants were ranked and eliminated based on audience voting; and at the end of the program, the top 12 trainees would go on to form a new “global” girl group called IZ\*ONE.<sup>12</sup>

Regarding the presentation of the show’s contents and its participants, editors opted to generally adhere to five main types of scenes. These were lesson scenes, where participants performed what they had prepared until then for the evaluation mission before the trainers to receive criticism and/or praise; practice room scenes when the audience was able to observe how

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<sup>11</sup> It is worth noting that in the first couple of episodes, the contestants participate in two grading evaluations. The first of these was a pre-prepared performance that was performed in front of the “trainers” or “judges,” South Korean industry professionals with many years of experience. The regular trainers were: Lee Hong-ki, Soyou, Bae Yoon-jung, Chou Young-jun, May J. Lee, and Cheetah. These initial performances were judged and then assigned a grade: A, B, C, D, or F. The trainees were then grouped into classes according to the grade they received and given a second opportunity to change their grade in the second grading evaluation. However, the grade the trainees received did not determine how successful they were in the show and some of the final 12 contestants who went on to form IZ\*ONE were part of classes F and D.

<sup>12</sup> After an in-depth investigation, South Korean court has found evidence of vote rigging in the Produce 101 series. <https://metro.co.uk/2019/11/07/produce-101-scandal-director-admits-manipulating-votes-izone-x1-11056698/>. The final line-up consists of Lee Chaeyeon, Kim Minju, Jo Yuri, Kim Chaewon, Miyawaki Sakura, Nabuki Nako, Honda Hitomi, Choi Yena, Kang Hyewon, Kwon Eunbi, Ahn Yujin, and Jang Wonyoung.

the trainees interacted with their groups and how much effort and dedication the trainees display for performing; ranking scenes after each evaluation performance; performance scenes; and solo interview scenes. This section mainly focuses on the analysis of the content in interview scenes. In *Produce 48*, participants are constantly interviewed in individual interview rooms where the staff members ask them about their thoughts and feelings. For example, they will typically ask questions regarding specific situations that happened just before the interview, how they feel about the upcoming performance, and more general questions such as why they have come to *Produce 48* and why they wish to be an idol.

### *Japanese idol & Korean idol*

*Produce 48* begins with the first encounter between the Japanese idols and the Korean trainees. At that moment, we hear the Korean trainees saying they had big expectations for the performances that the Japanese idols would be giving in just a few minutes for the evaluation. They go on to explain that this expectation stemmed from the fact that the Japanese girls had already debuted, so they expected a skilled and professional performance from them, like that of a K-Pop idol. They were also charmed by their bright attitudes and charming fanservice.<sup>13</sup> However, their opinions of the Japanese would take a 180-degree turn once they saw their performances, stating that they were disappointed because their expectations were not met. The Korean trainees would go on to talk about how shocked they were at the amateurishness of the J-Pop idols' performances. In the case of the Japanese idols,<sup>14</sup> they expressed awe for and feeling intimidated by the Korean trainees because of how skillful and powerful their performances looked.

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<sup>13</sup> Examples of typical fanservice include, "heart throwing," the performance of mini skits, cheerful and practiced self-introductions, etc. NGT48's Yamada Noe excels at this. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qy9Uw246bmU>.

<sup>14</sup> In this section, I draw a distinction between the participants from Japan and those from South Korea by referring to the Japanese contestants as idols and the South Korean contestants as trainees. Despite the fact that the

Clearly, participants of both nationalities came to the first evaluation with very different expectations of what an idol-like performance is. In response to one of the trainer's question to the HKT48 team about J-Pop's training system, we hear them answer: "It's more important for the Japanese idols to look cute than to perfectly synchronize their dancing." (Imada Mina)<sup>15</sup> And "for us, it is more important to show that we're having fun than to sing or dance perfectly. / Yes, exactly. Because that's what's most important as an entertainer." (Muto Tomu and Iwatate Saho)<sup>16</sup> Conversely, the trainer highlights the importance of learning to dance in synchronization for K-Pop idols.

Evidently, the K-Pop and J-Pop idol training systems operate in the pursuit of two vastly different ideals. For K-Pop, a perfect idol is the idol who performs perfectly on stage. For J-Pop, the perfect idol is the one that can soothe their fan's heart by providing entertainment through funny antics, showing they are having fun, and looking cute. Naturally, this also means that an idol's relationship with fans is conceptualized in slightly differing ways. More precisely, what an idol can and should do for a fan is different. For K-Pop idols, they dedicate time to polishing their skills primarily in singing and dancing to show fans "the best side of themselves" and a great performance. For J-Pop idols and the AKB48 groups in particular, "idol you can meet" is at the core of their self-definition as idols up until this moment when two differing ideals clash. This means that most of a J-Pop idol's schedule is consumed by fan meeting type activities and entertainment show appearances. Furthermore, their focus when on stage is not on how perfectly their body is executing the choreography or their voice is hitting the notes, rather it is on interacting with fans in a positive way to make sure they have fun. This difference can be thought of as K-

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show refers to both as trainees, I felt it necessary to directly acknowledge the level of experience the Japanese contestants have vis a vis the South Korean ones.

<sup>15</sup> *Produce 48*, Episode 1, 2018, 1:14:00-1:14:07.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:14:30-1:14:40.

Pop idols are more inward looking while J-Pop idols are more outward looking. This is made even more explicit when the Japanese idols talk about how their training system works in sharp contrast to the Korean training system, in which an idol hopeful may spend up to several years. “We only debut after a month. That is why we don't know the basics. We never had vocal training. We never did. It is not like we learn the basics before debut. We did it on our own without a trainer. I learned watching seniors.” (Muto Tomu, Iwatate Saho, Shinozaki Ayana and Konami Mako)<sup>17</sup> However, the narrative that the J-Pop idols create in the first few episodes indicates a dissatisfaction with the status quo in the AKB48 groups which emphasizes satisfying the fans at the expense of self-fulfillment. “AKB48 is different from other girl groups. We're not popular because we're amazing singers or dancers, so we're not confident even though we know that we're popular.” (Miyawaki Sakura)<sup>18</sup> Lack of self-confidence was often referred to by the Japanese idols during solo interviews.

The person who best expresses this dissatisfaction and the negative consequences of this ideal for the self is Miyawaki Sakura,<sup>19</sup> who had been known as the Ace of HKT48 and ranked #3 in the last General Elections. “I did get a high ranking, but I'm not sure if it was based on my abilities or if it happened because it was in Japan. I've been a member of HKT48 for the past seven years, but, in all honesty, I don't think that I am that talented as an artist. I always doubt myself and feel anxious.”<sup>20</sup> Also, in reaction to her teammates in HKT48 and other AKB48 groups

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 1:04:38-1:04:55.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 31:40-32:00.

<sup>19</sup> “The other trainees don't even sleep and keep practicing. I'm scared I won't be able to stay in Class A if I don't work hard. [Are you tired?/starts crying, tilts head, small whimper] It's not that I'm tired. The trainees who just joined for a year dance better than I do. I've been an idol singer for seven years. I worked so hard but my body wouldn't move right. So I realized that I'm still not skilled at all. I feel like I haven't accomplished anything in the last seven years. I was angry at myself.” Ibid., Episode 2, 1:37:28-1:38:45. Also, it is worth noting that Sakura receives a lot of screen time in the show, especially at the beginning.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. 49:20-49:45.

receiving Fs and Ds during the grading evaluation, she says: “They have so much pride in their teams. They all worked hard as singers in Japan. When I saw them getting those low grades, I felt sad too. Korean entertainers are respected even when they come to Japan. But as soon as Japanese idols leave Japan, they lose recognition. And I feel like I have just realized that now and that fact makes me feel resentful.”<sup>21</sup> Facing this situation, Sakura and the other Japanese idols who joined the show decide to restart their careers in search of a way to satisfy their need for self-fulfillment. “I was so sad about just letting time pass without improving my abilities as an artist. I hope Produce 48 gives me an opportunity to turn my life around. I will work hard.”<sup>22</sup> [...] So when I sing, I want to show them that Japanese people can do this too when they put their minds to it. All I am thinking is ‘I’m going to show them my 100%.’”<sup>23</sup> Despite experiencing strong negative feelings about herself, Sakura decides to portray an image that is also positive, indicating to the viewer that she’s someone who will put in the work needed to remake herself into the person she wants to be. Since participants in the show need viewer’s votes to make it into the final group, this type of narrative is the most logical one to maintain since it appeals to audiences positively. In this way, Sakura performs in a way that is in line with both the J-Pop ideal of an idol who inspires others by being open and relatable, while at the same time beginning the transition into an idol according to K-Pop’s ideal of a hard work ethic and placing a strong value on performance skills.

In the case of the Korean trainees, these individuals have been in the training system for either a few months or several years with the goal of debuting. It is notable that at the beginning, though they have the performance skills that the Japanese idols want to acquire, they have little to no experience interacting with the public and performing fanservice or personas that are attractive

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., Episode 1, 2:06:45-2:07:00.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., Episode 2, 49:46-49:58.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., Episode 1, 2:07:05-2:07:18.

to audiences. This was especially visible during the first Group Battle Evaluation mission. The Japanese idols portrayed a friendly and cheerful disposition, saying things like “I was nervous, but thanks to the National Producers, I’m really happy” (Yabuki Nako)<sup>24</sup> while smiling brightly when the time came to appeal to fans for votes. As the show progresses, it is discernible that the Korean trainees slowly begin adopting some of these fanservice techniques into their interview sessions and thank you speeches. For example, when Lee Chaeyeon is announced as the twelfth member of the group, she says “I’ve been dreaming about this for a long time. Thank you so much for making this happen, National Producers.” (Lee Chaeyeon)<sup>25</sup> In this way, she creates a direct connection between her success as an idol and her fans, making them feel more involved in her life while also strengthening their support for her.

Another important theme constantly highlighted throughout the show and by the participants themselves is the tension between the individual and the team. More precisely, this tension became most apparent when the time came to choose the positions of the team members in preparation for a performance mission. To receive more camera time and hopefully receive more votes, most trainees wished to have important roles, particularly that of center and main vocalist. However, because there was so much competition for these roles, not all would have the opportunity. And even when they did, the trainers often did not agree with the group’s decision and would harshly criticize them, even going as far as to say that they would probably lose if the team kept that person as the center or main vocalist. It was then up to the group and the individual to negotiate the situation and chose what and who to prioritize. “I really wanted to be the main

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<sup>24</sup> 8:30-8:40. She would go on to receive the largest amount of votes out of all the contestants in this round of the competition, the first team battle. It’s also worth noting that she went out of her way to deliver this message in Korean to a predominantly Korean live audience. A clip of this moment can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=633710nJYLE>.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., Episode 12, 3:22:10-3:22:20.

vocalist, but I never was in the center of any performance nor sang any highlight part until now. I was never the main of anything. [sigh] I thought I had to say goodbye to it like this.” (Jo Yuri)<sup>26</sup>

In these situations, the individual participant would typically express their desire to be the center of the performance but also a reticence to bring harm to the group’s performance, partly out of consideration for the teammates and partly for the sake of the overall performance itself. In the case that a new center or main vocalist was suddenly chosen, or someone who felt that they were not good enough was kept as the center, this type of situation led to much stress and anxiety for that person and the group since being the center is also seen as a responsibility. “I’m not good enough to be the main vocalist, but I decided to be one for the sake of the group. [crying in closet] I don’t know how to improve myself. I’m so scared.” (Wang Ke)<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, more often than not, the teams were able to reach a positive resolution and express the feelings that they experienced while framing that decision in a positive light. For example, Takahashi Juri says, “[During group meeting] I think- I want to improve and overcome my shortcomings, but it’s a group battle and I want our team to win. I thank you girls for giving me this opportunity, but we should change the positions in order to win.” (Takahashi Juri)<sup>28</sup> The participants like Takahashi Juri, Miyawaki Sakura, and Kim Minju<sup>29</sup> who were able to present a relatable but ultimately

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., Episode 6, 43:28-43:45.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., Episode 3, 1:41:42-1:42:25. This scene occurs after a disastrous vocal evaluation in which the team members were harshly criticized by the trainer. The leader, Eun Chae, decides to go with trainer Soyou’s advice and presents the idea of changing the main vocal to the team. Everyone quietly agrees, except Ichikawa Manami, the original main vocal. As per Soyou’s suggestion, Wang Ke is the new vocal and is struggling to sing the high note in Gfriend’s “Love Whisper.” The camera follows her until we see her sitting inside a small closet curled in on herself and crying. She tries speaking in between sobs.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., Episode 4, 20:20-21:00.

<sup>29</sup> To be honest, I had no idea what level my skills were at before this. But compared to some of the other girls, I think I fall short a lot when it comes to singing and dancing. [crying] I was trying to do well, but I’m not doing as well as I thought I would. [early practice] I think that people who try their hardest get to see the fruit of their labor one day. [Practice diary: I fall short in many ways right now, but I believe I’ll do better if I practice hard. Let’s do this!] Ibid., Episode 2, Speaker: Kim Minju, 1:20:52-1:21:42.

inspiring image of self-growth through their interviews and improvement were generally able to reach the last stage of the competition.

Ultimately, the tension between the individual's desire and what is best for the team as a unit is seen to be resolved through the creation of a shared feeling of unity and prioritizing the performance. Kwon Eunbi, as the leader of her group, affirms that “those who are not 100 percent perfect are supposed to become perfect as a team [...] I can guarantee that we will be able to show a completely different performance from today's if we practice hard enough [...] We rely on one another now, so we'll cheer up and practice hard for the rest of the time.”<sup>30</sup> The role of a leader, like Kwon Eunbi, is to mediate between team members in order to be able to surpass these moments of tension between the group and the individual for the sake of the survival of the group and the perfection of the performance. Miyazaki Miho, who also served as the leader of a different group, went as far as to say that “I want everyone to feel the same.”<sup>31</sup> Another participant said: “I looked around and realized I have so many friends. There were moments when I felt so alone, but it was all in my head. It is not about me being in the center. I realized that all 96 of us would become one and perform together on stage.” (Miyazaki Sakura)<sup>32</sup> In this way, she connects the need for unity to the quality of the performance directly.

Viewed all together, the participants of *Produce 48*, together with the production team, create a meta narrative about idols. This story begins by sharply contrasting K-Pop and J-Pop idols' definitions of idol and then moves toward a more homogeneous self-definition and self-expression of idolhood. First, the J-Pop idols were accustomed to focusing on creating an approachable,

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., Episode 6, Speaker: Kwon Eunbi, 1:17:30-1:18:05.

<sup>31</sup> Here, she uses the phrase “同じ気持ち,” which directly translates to “same feeling.” Ibid., Episode 4, 49:00-49:30.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., Episode 3, 33:10-33:30.

relatable, and cheerful idol persona or idol self because that type of performance was what Japanese society had grown to prefer and that was the way the AKB system defined “idols you can meet.” In that sense, they conceptualized “making the viewer happy” as their main task as idols. On the other hand, the K-Pop trainees have the expectations that an idol should be qualified as a good or bad idol depending on their skills. Another contrast was made between individuality and the group, and throughout the program’s story line, all the participants grow to accept that they must prioritize the group performance’s needs over their individual desires if these did not align. By the end of the show, there is no notable difference between the interviews of the Japanese idols and the Korean trainees as there was in the beginning. Rather, all had adopted a similar type of speech that presented a similar self-definition of their roles as idols. This can be potentially read as the loss of the AKB idols’ individuality. Additionally, they would go on to adopt Korean language, sing songs mostly in Korean, and dress the “K-Pop” way. Even the trainers, such as Bae Yoon Jung, pointed out that the Japanese idols seemed to be more hardworking than the Korean trainees because the Japanese went out of their way to focus on memorizing and practicing their Korean for interactions with fans and their parts in songs. Through the lens of the camera, the Korean trainees seemed to not work as hard to memorize Japanese parts when it was their turn to do so.

Finally, it is worth considering whether the decision of the Japanese idols to participate in this show was motivated by a search for agency. Marx has previously written on the hidden structure of the Japanese entertainment industry that coerces idols to continue with their original *keiretsu* or face blacklisting.<sup>33</sup> Additionally, previous scholars have also addressed the seeming

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<sup>33</sup> For a more detailed explanation about the Japanese entertainment industry’s hierarchy, see W. David Marx, “The Jimusho System: Understanding the Production Logic of the Japanese Entertainment Industry,” in *Idols and Celebrity in Japanese Media Culture*, edited by Patrick W. Galbraith and Jason G. Karlin, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

“helplessness” and “replaceability” of female J-Pop idols, especially within AKB48 and sister groups.<sup>34</sup> In seeking to become skillful in singing and dancing like K-Pop idols are known to be, may it be that idols understand skills and artistry as two elements which provide a solid foundation for a more positive understanding of self-identity and their role as idols? These themes will continue to be explored in the following sections.

### **King & Prince’s Beginning**

*Netflix’s Ride on Time* is a documentary series that follows some of Japan’s top male idols, all managed by Johnny & Associates. The first four episodes, grouped together as *King & Prince S1*, follow the members of Johnny’s newest male idol group, King & Prince. They debuted on May 23, 2018 with their first single “Cinderella Girl,” the six members’<sup>35</sup> ages ranging from 19 years old to 22 years old at the time. “Cinderella Girl” went on to sell more than 577,000 copies in its first week, becoming the first debut single to do so in over 12 years.

The success of King & Prince is not surprising considering that their agency has been the top male idol producer in Japan for many decades now. Additionally, the training system allows rookies who have not debuted yet plenty of exposure to the public as backup dancers for senior groups within the agency. These trainees are known as Johnny’s Jr. and they can also feature regularly in the weekly music variety show *Shounen Club*. The members who would go on to form King & Prince were regular performers on this show. Also, before their official debut in 2018, King & Prince started as two separate “rival” units, Mr. King and Mr. Prince. Namely, Hirano Shō,

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<sup>34</sup> Yuya Kiuchi, “Idols You Can Meet: AKB48 and a New Trend in Japan’s in Music Industry,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 50, no. 1 (Feb 2017): 30-49.

<sup>35</sup> There are now five members. Iwahashi Genki entered a prolonged hiatus on November 2018, citing that he would be seeking treatment for his panic disorder. He officially departed the group on March 31, 2021.

Nagase Ren and Takahashi Kaito were grouped in Mr. King while Mr. Prince consisted of Kishi Yuta, Jinguji Yuta and Iwahashi Genki.

The show *Ride on Time* follows this new group during the first eight months of their new lives as official idols. The documentary records them during their schedules filming dramas or completing photoshoots, meeting up with family and friends when they visit their hometowns, and sharing their thoughts in individual interviews. It is this last type of scene that will be the focus of this section.

### *Defining and Adapting: Polishing Idolness*

As rookie J-Pop idols under Johnny & Associates, the members of King & Prince are seemingly open about their transition process from a Johnny's Jr. trainee to a full-fledged idol. With ancestors such as SMAP, KAT-TUN and Arashi (嵐), King & Prince has impressive role models whose careers they aspire to live up to as the newest group in Johnny's genealogy. However, it is striking that compared to what was encountered in the show *Produce 48*, the members of King & Prince chose to present themselves as awkward newbies still far away from being "true idols." How then do they define "idol"? And what type of narrative do they use to demonstrate to the viewer their determination and progress on the path towards becoming a "true idol"?

Contrary to the impression that the Korean trainees in *Produce 48* desired to give, King & Prince members often reiterate that they are lacking and still in the process of formulating their roles within the group, as well as their group's identity. Takahashi Kaito shares his definition of idol: "These are things I like to keep in mind as an idol. [Laughter, Appreciation and Hard Work]

[...] It makes me realize that it's important I always keep smiling. That's what an idol is to me.”<sup>36</sup>

In this way, Takahashi relates the figure of the idol with positive feelings and culturally valued merits, while displaying his firm belief in this definition of an ideal idol and his own efforts to conform to this definition. On the other hand, Hirano Shō points out the characteristics “typical idols” are supposed to embody from his point of view:

[Do you often think of how long you will be doing this?] I do. I am really not cut out to be an idol. I like singing and dancing because it is fun. But it takes more than that to be an idol. You have to say things that will make their hearts throb. I really can't do that. I tend to look up to men who are very manly. People tell me I'm manly too. I doubt a manly person would wear rabbit ears.<sup>37</sup>

Hirano defines idols in a strikingly different way than Takahashi. While Takahashi focuses on the positive, Hirano focuses on how idols “must” present themselves to audiences to satisfy the external expectations of fans. He also defines himself as someone who is decidedly not able to put on such a performance since it clashes with who he considers himself to be. However, unlike Takahashi whom the show defines as “everyone’s innocent younger brother,” Hirano is actually the center for King & Prince. In this case, the role of the center is assigned by the company instead of by viewers or fellow group members. This may be understood as the agency’s tacit acknowledgement of Hirano’s idol potential since being the center is both a responsibility and a privilege. And so, despite Hirano’s disagreement, it can be understood that others’ have defined him as an idol, though not a “typical one.”

When I was filming the drama, a staff member told me that because I didn't act like a typical idol, they felt an affinity with me. I was told often that they felt closer to me because I would show them my real self. If I were to put up a facade, the fans I would gain would only like me through a filter. So, I don't want to lie to them. I want people to like me for who I am naturally, which is why I act this way.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> *Ride on Time*, King & Prince S1, Episode 4, aired 2019, on *Netflix*, 18: 43-19:12.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, Episode 2, 9:05-10:00.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 12:00-12:48.

With this, we understand that others define Hirano as an idol because of his relatability and because he chooses to present his idol self as his real self. He is aware of this effect. This is the quality that draws others to him, earning him his spot as the group's center. This is in line with the J-Pop idol ideal encountered in *Produce 48*.

For other members of King & Prince, the journey to the present and the process of adaptation has been interpreted differently. For Nagase Ren, his experience as a Johnny's Jr. in the recent past and now as a newly debuted idol have had a distinctively positive impact on his personal development. He says:

I'm naturally very shy. Because of my family's work situation, I've moved to many places, about five or six cities. Because I transferred schools so many times and had to make new friends each time, I became very shy. As a kid, I didn't talk at all. I was naturally a gloomy kid. But Johnny's helped me in changing my personality. [...] Saying that I was reborn may be an exaggeration, but that's how much I've changed. I enjoy hanging out with people, eating out with people and talking to people. That is how I improved my communication skills. I changed a lot.<sup>39</sup>

Nagase directly relates his process of becoming a livelier and more sociable person to his years with Johnny's and his process of becoming an idol. He also hints that this new Nagase is someone he is prouder of than his past self, someone he is more willing to accept. The current him that he describes is also much more marketable as an idol than his "gloomy" past self. Conversely, Iwahashi Genki actually faces new and imposing challenges to his performance of self after becoming an idol. He explains that from a young age he has had difficulties with others because of his panic disorder, particularly at school where he was bullied. He conceptualizes his panic disorder as a lifelong condition and a handicap that he will have to manage for the rest of his life, including in his career as an idol. He deals with this situation by "creating" two separate Iwahashis.

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., Episode 4, 18: 43-20:45.

“Finding how I can express myself while living with this disease is a personal struggle of mine right now. That's why I could never go up on stage as the Iwahashi Genki that I am right now, the way I am on my days off. I can only show the idol version of myself. Or else, I'll have a panic attack. But in a way, instead of hiding it, talking about it like this makes me feel better.”<sup>40</sup> One Iwahashi is seen as his weak self who could never be a satisfactory performer. However, Iwahashi also says that this is the self that is being projected at the camera in this moment, meaning that this is not a performance in the same sense that singing, and dancing on-stage would be. It also indicates to the viewer that he is placing his trust in them by revealing his “weakness” and painful past in front of them, fomenting a feeling of closeness with the viewer and an understanding that you are getting to know his “true” self. On the other hand, there's Idol Iwahashi who can perform and meet audience expectations on stage by adapting to the situation. Idol Iwahashi seems to be devoid of all the imperfections of off-stage Iwahashi. Nevertheless, the “off-stage” version of Iwahashi that he “is right now” is also acting in accordance to the J-Pop idol ideal since he is fomenting a sense of closeness by presenting himself as someone who is imperfect and, thus, relatable.

Furthermore, in harmony with this ideal, Hirano expresses a unique interpretation of his relationship with fans: “I don't see them as complete strangers. The fans, I mean. They're closer. I know I shouldn't, but I see them as relatives.”<sup>41</sup> But I want to look good in front of them. It's like Sports Day! Like doing your best in Relay Race because your family is there.”<sup>42</sup> According to Hirano, fans are people he knows, who are like family. Because he knows them, he holds them in high esteem and performs for them so they will have a good opinion of him. He goes as far as to

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., Episode 3, 15:15-15:50.

<sup>41</sup> Most of Hirano's seniors in Johnny's refer to fans as “girlfriends,” so it is peculiar that Hirano changes the narrative to say that to him they're family instead.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., Episode 4, 5:15-5:33.

say, “Even if we couldn't make eye contact at the concert, I want everyone who is watching me and who is connected with me to stay alive. I really do. The reason I'm continuing this job is because I want to lift everyone's spirits.”<sup>43</sup> Like the Japanese idols in *Produce 48*, Hirano conceptualizes his main duty as an idol to serve as inspiration for others by providing them with entertainment and thus making them happy. This indicates that while he may not be fully aware of it, or claims to be, Hirano already complies with the most important requirement of J-Pop's ideal idol by having a mature understanding of his relationship with fans and defining his role outwards.

In terms of the role of each of the members as part of a group, the consensus that they communicate is that they ought to take turns in sharing the spotlight so that they can create a balanced image in front of audiences. This seems to be the case partly because they are a rookie group that is still finding their own identity but also because the public is still getting to know the group as a team and the members as individuals. It seems to be that Iwahashi is the one who is most actively reflecting on the necessity of putting the individual aside for the sake of the group in this particular stage of the group's career.

As a Jr.'s member, that was my biggest claim to fame [ranked #1 for five years straight as the guy you would want as your boyfriend], but it's nothing more than a past achievement. Even so, I am very honored that I was ranked first place in those boyfriend rankings. I couldn't be more honored. And so, now that we're a group, I want to make the five of them shine and make our group even bigger so that we can provide all sorts of entertainment to the people who have been supporting us. That's how I want to repay them.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., Episode 1, 22:00-22:30.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., Episode 3, 5:16-6:00. Additionally, he says: “If the six of us appear on music shows or perform at concerts and all of us are shining, the audience will begin to lose interest. When the six of us are together, I think about how everyone else will shine and how I can help them shine.” Ibid, 4:10-4:42.

For the time being, Iwahashi has chosen to step back from the spotlight into a supporting role for the sake of the group, and all the other members express the same idea. That is, to eventually reach a point in their careers when, like their seniors in the company, they can all meet the requirements for standing in the center confidently and successfully.<sup>45</sup>

Moving forward, the members all present a unified front, stating that they think of their new role as idols as a lifelong one and so they express a commitment to the public and the rest of the group accordingly. One member, the leader, Kishi Yuta, goes as far as to compare it with marriage, saying “It's basically the same thing. I mean, we'll always be together.”<sup>46</sup> And thus, he firmly establishes a life-long commitment, not just to the other group members but to the fans as well.

Previously, Mansor has discussed how Johnny's idols are encouraged by their company to adopt marketable celebrity personas that convey a sense of closeness with fans by projecting an image of authenticity while fulfilling female fantasies.<sup>47</sup> In King & Prince, we observe how the members are in the initial stages of constructing their public presentation of self as idols. The members adopt different strategies when performing narratives of self, but they continue to embrace an image that is akin to a relatable and approachable boy-next-door who is able to present their more vulnerable sides to the audience. The Arashi section of this paper examines a group of mature Johnny's idols, who serve as King & Prince's role models.

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<sup>45</sup> “When the time comes that any of us could be the face of the group, we'll be invincible. I want to find our strength quickly and fortify it, to make it so that no one can beat us. That's my goal.” Ibid., Episode 4, Speaker: Hirano Shō, 20:25-20:45.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., Episode 1, 4:08-4:20.

<sup>47</sup> Aliah Mansor, “Johnny's Idol Persona Constructions and Transcultural Female Fandom Consumption,” *At the Interface/Probing the Boundaries* 99 (2018): 13-30.

## SHINee

Debuting on May 25, 2008 under SM Entertainment, the five members of SHINee went on to release hit after hit in both South Korea and Japan. In recognition of all their achievements and steady popularity, they are currently known as “the Princes of K-Pop” despite having debuted thirteen years ago. With almost all the members in their thirties now, their longevity is a testament of their success in an industry in which most groups do not reach the five-year mark or else disband around their seventh-year anniversary.<sup>48</sup>

In terms of musicality and image, SHINee is known for experimentation and versatility rather than having a set sound and concept. Historically, the group has released songs that may be called contemporary R&B, hip-hop, dance pop, funk rock, electronic music, and/or deep house, to name just a few examples. It is precisely because of this musical versatility, and the group’s overall stable and powerful vocal and dance skills as both a group and solo artists that all the members are viewed as “professionals” or “idol’s idol” even among their peers.<sup>49</sup>

Despite their long period of activity, it proved nearly impossible to find a SHINee focused reality show similar in format to those analyzed in the other three sections. Because of this reason, I have instead chosen to work with two recent in-depth group video interviews and two recent in-depth individual video interviews with members Key and Taemin. This material was supplemented with recent textual interviews found in online magazines with the group and the individual members. In terms of format, all four interviews’ final edited version last less than an hour and featured only the member/s talking with the interviewer/s on screen. In the case of the *IHeartRadio* interviews, the atmosphere was a bit more informal because of two main reasons: 1) the

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<sup>48</sup> Only the youngest member, Taemin, is under 30 years old. He’s 27 years old at the time of writing.

<sup>49</sup> <https://www.koreaboo.com/lists/15-idols-groups-named-legendary-sunbaes-shinee-inspiration/>.

conversations occurred as the interviewer and SHINee all shared a meal together; and 2) this seems to not be the first time the members are meeting the interviewer, Stacy Nam.<sup>50</sup> On the other hand, the *SBS KPOP* interview is more formal in comparison because the members and the interviewers have had minimum contact prior to the interview, and both interviewers have experience as music critics, so the conversation mostly focused on talking about the musical characteristics of SHINee's new lead single, "Don't Call Me." The following sub-section will focus on the discussion of the main themes addressed in these four video interviews.

### *Blossoming into Artist*

SM Entertainment houses some of the biggest names in K-Pop history, including Shinhwa, S.E.S., BoA, TVXQ!, Super Junior, Girls' Generation, Exo, and Red Velvet. Each new generation of K-Pop idols has come with changes to the K-Pop production scheme. Since they debuted in 2008, SHINee is thought of as belonging to the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 2.5 Generation of K-Pop idols, while the groups that are debuting in the present belong to the 4<sup>th</sup> Generation.<sup>51</sup> This means that SHINee's career and their relationship with their management company has been evolving together with each generation of the K-Pop industry. In a piece for *Allure*, SHINee's Key shares what the situation was like back in the first few years of their career:

I don't know if this is the right word, but SM made us. We didn't create [SHINee]. We were a produced group. We had a set image and songs that went along with it. It wasn't until 2015, seven years after my debut, that our staff asked for our opinions. I think that was the epiphany moment, like, "Okay, I need to make these decisions." I realized I wasn't sure what to choose.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Stacy Nam also seems to be a SHINee fan, Shawol, herself judging by the content of her Twitter. The banner of her page is even a screenshot of her interview with Taemin.

[https://twitter.com/stacynam?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Eauthor](https://twitter.com/stacynam?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Eauthor).

<sup>51</sup> <https://www.koreaboo.com/lists/breakdown-kpop-4-generations-according-idology-magazine/>.

<sup>52</sup> <https://www.allure.com/story/key-shinee-essay-a-k-pop-star-turns-30>

Key's "epiphany moment" is reminiscent of Arashi's Sakurai's own moment of awakening in which he was pushed to reconceptualize his relationship to his music and his company. The starting point for both Arashi and SHINee then was not so different. However, nowadays, things are different in K-Pop. Starting with the 3<sup>rd</sup> or 3.5 Generation, groups began debuting as "self-produced" idols. Notable among them are Seventeen, (G)-IDLE's Soyeon, and Pentagon's Hui. Seventeen, the first group to debut with this image, was officially launched in May 2015, the same year Key reports as the year in which their relationship to their music and company began transforming. In this new paradigm, idols are now co-producers and co-owners along with their companies. For senior idols, this was experienced as a type of graduation or elevation of status.

However, this is not to say that the members of SHINee had never participated in the process of songwriting, music composition and arrangement of their albums before 2015. In fact, Jonghyun was likely the first artist to have a high level of involvement in musical production within their company. Since SM Entertainment was effectively the "leader" of the K-Pop industry for around a decade, this is no small feat.<sup>53</sup> Jonghyun even contributed to the lyrics of one of the group's earliest singles, "Juliette." He would go on to write around a hundred songs for SHINee, his solo albums, and other K-Pop idols.<sup>54</sup> Additionally, Minho has also been active in musical production by participating in writing the lyrics for his rap parts even in the group's first album, *The SHINee World*. In this way, the members of SHINee, along with other K-Pop idols, have been progressively claiming ownership of their musical careers by increasingly participating in the production process. Thus, the finished "product" is not a result of a one-sided production process

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<sup>53</sup> The "Big Three" companies used to be SM Entertainment, YG Entertainment, and JYP Entertainment. Their artists led the world of K-Pop in popularity and sales. This hierarchy has recently changed with the booming overseas success of BTS. <https://www.scmp.com/lifestyle/k-pop/news/article/3120731/who-runs-k-pop-big-hit-backers-bts-kakao-label-iu-and-cj-enm>.

<sup>54</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_songs\\_written\\_by\\_Kim\\_Jong-hyun](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_songs_written_by_Kim_Jong-hyun)

like Key describes when looking back at the first years of SHINee's career. Now, the balance has shifted, and the relationship is one of cooperation and co-production. This is a narrative that is framed in terms of "empowerment." Key goes on to say, in a different interview, that when the group released "View" in 2015, "for me, it felt like we found SHINee with that song."<sup>55</sup> This impression of empowerment is also conveyed when the members discuss their creative vision and frame their work as "artistic."

The presentation of creative license and artistic vision are slightly different depending on whether the topic of discussion is a group or solo release.<sup>56</sup> In the case of a SHINee release, such as "Don't Call Me,"<sup>57</sup> compromise and the group's image are prioritized. For example,

There could be a member who's not 100% satisfied in terms of the preference. However, SHINee with this album needs to put aside how many people are going to love the song. That strong impact and the song should be easy to be visualized, making stylists and music video directors be ambitious, as well as the choreographers. There's no doubt about it, so we chose this song. (Key)<sup>58</sup>

In this way, SHINee presents themselves as a team that is mature and aware of its priorities. Highlighting not only their individual roles as performers, they also mention the roles of backstage actors, i.e. stylist, choreographers, and directors, and the importance of properly collaborating with them in order to produce a good final product. Additionally, as is the case with Arashi, each of the members of SHINee confidently speaks for the team as a representative of the group, creating an impression of a strong united front that shares "the same feeling." Conversely, each of the members' presents their individual releases as moments of opportunity to present their own creative vision and show who they are. But this freedom to create is accompanied by the pressure

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<sup>55</sup> "SHINee Mukbang," *iHeartRadio, YouTube* on August 3, 2018, 12:15-12:20.

<sup>56</sup> As of 2019, all SHINee members have had their solo debut.

<sup>57</sup> "Don't Call Me" is the lead single and name of SHINee's 7<sup>th</sup> album, released on February 22, 2021.

<sup>58</sup> "What makes SHINee scared?," *SBS KPOP, YouTube*, February 28, 2021, 11:58-12:25.

of living up to the company's and public's expectations by themselves without the support of the other members.

For example, Taemin was the first SM Entertainment idol to release a solo album while still being a part of an idol group. With six full-length solo albums released by the time of writing,<sup>59</sup> Taemin has an incredible amount of experience for his young age. In his individual interview with Stacy Nam, Taemin frames the story of his journey to stardom as one that began when he was still an infant, naming role models such as Michael Jackson and Rain. He recalls seeing them perform on television and says:

[...] I would look at artists like him and think, 'wow, that's so cool. I want to try that too.' and started following along to their dance. Instead of thinking I want to become like them, it was more like I thought it was cool and followed along but it fit me so well. So, starting from liking dance, I gradually came to have an interest in song and music but I would say dance was the starting point.<sup>60</sup>

With such an origin story, Taemin reinforces his image as artist by telling a narrative that illustrates that music and performance have always been essential to his self. After gaining experience as part of a group for around six years, he went on to release his first solo album, *ACE*. This opportunity was very enticing but also a new challenge to the identity he had been creating for himself for the last couple of years as a group idol.

[...] I felt so good. But I was also worried and thought, would the members be okay? There are members, aside from me, who are so good, would it be right for me to have my solo debut first? I had these thoughts. But this chance was afforded to me so I thought I will do the most with the opportunity I am given. At that time, I had a lot of ambition to perform solo so I may have appeared neglectful of my members. They would say that is not the case but I do think that may have happened at some times. But after doing it [debuting solo] it really hit me that SHINee gives me comfort, it's truly like my family. It's a place for me to

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<sup>59</sup> He debuted at 15 years old. He will be turning 28 years old this July 18, 2021.

<sup>60</sup> "TAEMIN from SHINee Talks About His Journey," *iHeartRadio, YouTube* on April 1, 2019, 2:00-2:25.

return to, even if I fail. I have a place to return to. I was so thankful to my members. I was so thankful to them for supporting me.<sup>61</sup>

Rather than simply strengthening his individuality, Taemin presents his experience debuting as a solo artist as one that reinforced his bond with, love for, and commitment with SHINee. He fashions this story as a lesson for growth that motivates him to better show his appreciation to the group in the present and future. In this way, like the idols discussed in the previous sections of this paper, Taemin also refashions negative emotions, such as the greed, fear and burden that accompanies standing on stage alone, by drawing positive meaning from the experience. In this way, idols present themselves as figures that can inspire others even in their apparently weakest moments. This is a crucial skill to appeal to the public by leveraging the self and the life story to gain fans and establish fan loyalty.

On the musical side, Taemin and the rest of SHINee have perfected performances that present challenges as opportunities for positive personal growth and professional development. Regarding the decision-making process when planning a comeback, Taemin presents himself as someone who enjoys reinventing his image and trying new things during his performances. He firmly frames this as a distinctly positive energy that places him within a metanarrative of artists who supposedly also do the same thing, reinforcing his professional image.

It's something that I'm constantly thinking about. Because instead of repeating the same thing over again, I don't know why but I am always attempting something new. But if you look at other solo artists, or artists from other groups, they are always trying something new, it must be an instinct. Of course, there may be artists that find what makes music uniquely theirs and work in that way but the desire to try something new is, how can I say it, it's more fun. The challenge is fun. Trying different things is like trying on different clothes instead of always wearing the same outfit. We make different attempts in this way.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 13:35-14:10.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 26:30-27:06.

Additionally, he thinks of trying new sounds and new concepts as an opportunity to present different sides of himself to the public. Rather than simply fearing the possibility of vulnerability and the exploitation of that vulnerability, Taemin reinforces his inspirational persona by instead saying that he is successful precisely because he shows himself through his music and performance. “[About “Move”<sup>63</sup>] To be honest, even if I am doing what I want to do, if it wasn't received well, I felt it would make me distressed so I did worry about it a lot. [...] The reception was in part, I believe because it was so different, and so new. Above all that was me. I truly felt like I was showing who I am.”<sup>64</sup> Taemin’s teammate, Key, had a different experience while debuting as a solo artist but also sees his solo music as an opportunity to express the multiple facets of himself to the public and relates expressing himself through music as a positive activity that gives him a sense of self-satisfaction.

Like Taemin, Key was also daunted by the novel experience of standing on stage without the rest of SHINee. He felt this burden heavily, constantly thinking “I have to prove that I can stand alone on the stage.”<sup>65</sup> This pressure of living up to the expectations of those around him, both the public and the company, showed in his first performance of “Forever Yours” on Music Bank. The next day, he looked back at his performance and found he was unsatisfied with himself. So, he changed his mind set and told himself, “It's okay to do it freely. Let's do it comfortably.”<sup>66</sup> He noticed the improvement immediately. Key not only presents himself as a performer capable of overcoming this type of challenge quickly, but also as someone with a complex artistic vision that carefully considers every aspect of a performance. “So, what I think, I'm not only interested

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<sup>63</sup> “Move” is Taemin’s second solo Korean album and the name of its lead single.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 27:38-27:55.

<sup>65</sup> “SHINee’s Key Cooks,” *iHeartRadio, YouTube*, March 15, 2019, 27:54-27:58.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 28:50-28:55.

in fashion, I think that if you're an artist, you have to combine music, and art, and great videos and artworks and financial things. You have to take everything and find a way to combine everything perfectly so when I choose outfits, I ask myself how my outfit is going to show my identity through these clothes. And for stage too, how are you going to explain this song with your outfit?"<sup>67</sup> In this way, he presents both his definition of "artist" and how he perfectly fits into that definition, reinforcing our own perception of him as an "artist."

Lastly, he also displays his awareness of the public by explaining that he deliberately chose to announce the release of his solo album in a dramatic way through a surprise performance at a fashion show. The purpose of surprising people then was to forcefully show others that he is an artist.

[...] With my music I wanted to shock people and show them as quickly so they can see "I can do music too. I can perform on stage too." I wanted to show this quickly. [...] Cause people think that I'm not a big fan of music but I am. Cause I did a lot of variety shows, I did a lot of musicals, dramas, so they just think I'm just a celebrity. [...] Music was always number one for me but there haven't been many chances for me to share this [with the general public]. I thought that in the future I must show my performances [as an artist] on stage so I took the opportunity during [Charms] presentation to do this.<sup>68</sup>

One of his main identities then is that of an "artist." Likewise, to have multiple selves is conceptualized as normal and non-contradictory. Similar to Taemin, in order to be a proper "artist," Key believes in the importance of showcasing identity through music and performance, in other words, by owning the performance and infusing it with meaning and making it a part of his identity. Key took the opportunity while he participated in the production of his first solo album, *FACE*. "So, FACE means, there's two meanings. "Face it" and "real face". [...] Face means it's just me. I have ten different sides of Key and I want you guys to listen to this, like different charms of Keys.

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 35:00-35:45.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 30:42-32:30.

I've included ten sides of Key in this album so it's like my face, it has that kind of meaning. And also, when you say, "Face it," that meaning as well. So being daring, honest, I wanted to show this is me."<sup>69</sup> However, the album title is leveraged to show not just his individuality, but his belongingness to a team as well by following a pattern found among the names of other member's first solo album releases.

And ACE, BASE, FACE,<sup>70</sup> of course, we're connected with each other. We cannot leave each other. We're our team. Not only for that reason but we created a connecting link through that. It's a solo album but it's not that I've become a solo artist. It's just...for example, a soccer team, you can be a part of the team and still come out to do other things. And when there is a big game, you become a team again to play the important game together. So just like-oh sorry, no. Like Avengers. We are in the same place, but there are times we work separately.<sup>71</sup>

Again, Key reinforces the perception of a unified and indivisible front with the rest of SHINee, harmonizing with the rest of his teammates. Lastly, it seems that because the analyzed content does not follow the format of the shows analyzed in the other three sections of the idol speaking directly to the camera, i.e., the audience, there was little reference to the fans themselves. However, one thing was clear from the references that were made. For SHINee, as a K-Pop group with a professional artist image, the most important thing that they can "give back" to fans is a well-prepared stage performance, perfectly embodying the understanding of "idol" that Korean trainees had in *Produce 48*. "Everything that I prepare and do is for my fans, of course. Like I said, it is a gift for you guys [the album]. Fans always tell me "do everything you want to do." They say this to me, but it's what I want to say to my fans."<sup>72</sup> Additionally, while still obviously feeling a certain degree of pressure to meet public expectations, having enjoyed such a long career already and

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 43:10-44:18.

<sup>70</sup> *ACE* is the name of Taemin's first solo album, *BASE* is Jonghyun's first solo album, and *FACE* is Key's first solo album. In this interview, Key claims that this was not pre-decided between the members at all, rather it just started as a type of joke.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 44:25-45:26.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 55:50-56:10.

entering a new phase of their lives, their 30s, allows the SHINee members to conceptualize their “duty” to the public in different terms than say the participants of *Produce 48*. Like Arashi, the main people they seek to satisfy are the fans who have stuck with them for many years rather than just an unknown audience. Furthermore, to be true artists and feel fulfilled, rather than simply seeking to meet expectations, SHINee show themselves to be in the process of shifting gears to a more inward-looking focus.

In order to meet expectations, we always give our all and work hard to put out the best quality album. When we do release an album, we hear good things around us, like the fans' reactions and good reviews. In order to show the development and progression of our musicality and performance, more than finding gratification through results, now we strive for happiness in carrying out our promotions. To enjoy ourselves while working instead of setting a goal and working hard to achieve it, we want to delight in what we do. / Adding to what Taemin said, in the beginning, our time can mostly be characterized by saying we worked so hard. When we reached about the halfway point from debut until now, we felt a lot of pressure, thinking about what we should show next, what can we do to improve. But now, what Taemin said is correct. We want to be happy and share what we do best [as SHINee]. (Taemin and Minho)<sup>73</sup>

This shift signals another strategy SHINee is employing to present themselves as artists and in the process exert more agency over themselves and their careers, gradually sidelining the expectations and opinions of the company and the general public and putting their own definitions, thoughts, and feelings center stage.

### **Arashi's Diary Voyage**

Officially debuting on November 3, 1999 with their debut single “A · RA · SHI,” Arashi (嵐) would eventually become one of Japan's most legendary acts, continuously topping the Oricon chart with their newest albums and singles and constantly appearing all over television and

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<sup>73</sup> “SHINee Mukbang,” *iHeartRadio, YouTube* on 2018, 2:08-3:20.

advertisements. Their *5×20 All the BEST!! 1999-2019* would even be named the most global album of 2019, outselling Taylor Swift and BTS, with over 3.3 million units sold.<sup>74</sup> Despite this resounding success, in the midst of their 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary tour, *5x20*,<sup>75</sup> the group made the sudden announcement that they had decided to enter an indefinite hiatus starting on January 1, 2021.<sup>76</sup> *Arashi's Diary Voyage* is a documentary series produced by *Netflix* following the five members from mid-2018, when they began planning their *5x20* tour, until December 31, 2020 when Arashi held their last concert before officially entering into their hiatus.

For the purposes of this study, I have deliberately chosen to analyze just nine episodes out of the original twenty-four. For the most part, the series shows four types of scenes. These are: conversation scenes, between the members or the member and an acquaintance; backstage scenes where we see the members planning concerts, practicing, and interacting with staff members; “on-stage” scenes of the members during concerts of the *5x20* tour; and individual interview scenes. Since the latter is the focus of this paper, I have chosen the nine episodes that most heavily incorporate individual interview content.

### *Essence of Arashi*

By the time this documentary begins filming, all the members are already in their 30s, meaning that they have reached a midlife point from which narrative identity researchers usually tend to select the participants of their studies. This is because these scholars tend to conceptualize people in their 30s as having had enough experience to craft a life story narrative cohesively.<sup>77</sup> All the Arashi members debuted in their teens, from 16 years old to 19 years old, so they have spent

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<sup>74</sup> <https://www.ifpi.org/arashi-awarded-global-album-of-2019-for-their-20th-anniversary-compilation-5x20-all-the-best-1999-2019/>.

<sup>75</sup> This tour consisted of 50 shows across Japan.

<sup>76</sup> The official announcement was made on January 27, 2021.

<sup>77</sup> McAdams, Josselson, and Lieblich, eds, *Identity and Story*, 2006.

more than half of their lives as members of the group. Consequently, in their self-introductions, and in their special Diary episodes, all the members highlight Arashi as the main theme around which they define who they are, equally as self-defining as other basic demographic factors such as age and gender.

I'm Ohno Satoshi. From Arashi. The eldest. Technically the leader. 38 years old. I joined the industry at 14. I made my debut with Arashi when I was 18. So exactly 20 years, being a part of Arashi. That's where we are today. / I am Matsumoto Jun. I am one-fifth of Arashi. Let's see...For all the projects we currently have in the works, I serve as either creative director or producer. That's what I'm involved in./ I am Ninomiya Kazunari of Arashi. I'm 36. Currently, I'm thankful to still be playing a role in this group called Arashi. / I am Sakurai Shō. Regarding the roles I play within Arashi, on the music side, I produce the rap tracks. Within the group...well...I tend to play the role of a group coordinator. / I'm Aiba Masaki. I've invested most of my life in Arashi. I think that sums it up. You know, looking back now, really, most of my memories are with Arashi. My memories before that, hmm, if I try hard enough, I can vaguely recall memories of life as a simple student. But most of my memories, they come from being in Arashi.<sup>78</sup>

It comes as no surprise that most of the members chose to introduce themselves in relation to their role in Arashi specifically, nor is it entirely shocking to hear Aiba say that most of his memories are from after his debut with Arashi considering that the group was almost 20 years old by this time. In their individual Diary episodes, Arashi's role in each of the member's life stories would be even more highlighted. We hear each of the members introduce themselves as so: "Hello, my name is X. I was born in X on X. [One or two sentences about their lives before ARASHI]. I entered Johnny's Jr. when I was X y/o/in X year of middle school for X reasons." Each member would then go on to elaborate how they got into Johnny's & Associates and describe their life as a Johnny's Jr., usually in rich detail with episodic retellings. Everything they would go on to talk about afterwards centered explicitly around Arashi, their life as an entertainer, and/or Johnny's & Associates. Anything that did not have to do with these elements of their lives was either edited

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<sup>78</sup> *Arashi's Diary Voyage*, Episode 1, aired 2019-2020, on *Netflix*, 12:10-14:22.

out in post-production or never mentioned in the first place. The little elaboration that we hear the members give about their lives as children and Aiba's own admission that he remembers little else create the impression that it is the latter reason.

How then do the five members understand their identity? Aiba replies that he does not know. "I mean, the whole question of 'What kind of person is Aiba Masaki?' When I was first asked that question, even I didn't know the answer. There were so many sides of me. I'd ask myself, 'Which is the real me?'"<sup>79</sup> Aiba's confusion leads the viewer as well to question the self that all of Arashi has been performing up until then and ask: is it real or not? However, confused or not, Aiba's understanding of himself seems to already exhibit a lot of complexity. He is someone with many different Aibas coexisting inside. Faced with a question that presupposes that there is only one side to the self, Aiba is confused as to which Aiba to pick and present as the "real" Aiba Masaki. Within the field of narrative identity, one of the primary debates is whether identity defining life stories tend towards being integrative and unifying or whether life stories can reflect the cohabitation of "multiple aspects of the self," conflicting or otherwise, or, as Aiba says, "different sides of me." Empirical studies demonstrate that both types of life stories exist among individuals, neither kind of narrative being a conclusive marker of "stability" or "instability" in that individual's mental health.

Later on in "AIBA's Diary" episode, while sharing a meal with friends, Aiba says:

[Have you changed?] I'm not sure if I've changed. [I bet not] I haven't noticed if I did. But I can't tell myself. [lively atmosphere, friend laughs] "What kind of person is Aiba Masaki? I don't know, eh." When I thought about why I don't know-since I was a kid, since I was in middle school, I was put into this world of adults, experienced lots of things, and suppressed lots of my feelings. [Yes, I can understand that.] "In this situation, I should do

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., Episode 7, 6:52-7:32.

this. Then why don't I do this? I should do this." There were so many things like that, so I couldn't tell what my own true feelings were.<sup>80</sup>

In this brief passage, Aiba draws a direct line of connection between the multiplication of his identity with his role as an entertainer and the social environment of that career. This seems to indicate then that ‘something’ about being an entertainer, that is to say the pressure an idol like himself must endure and the expectations he had to live up to, encouraged him to suppress his feelings and multiply his identity as a necessary survival measure. Sakurai goes on into more detail about their initiation as Johnny’s Jr. and how their roles as idols have affected their relationship with each other and themselves.

By being back up dancers for their seniors who have already debuted, they [Johnny’s Jr.] can learn a lot. "So this is how they perform." [...] They're [the members] like childhood friends to me. And hometown pals. But now, they're some kind of business partners. During the time we spent in Johnny's Jr., we were all treated equally. The stuff we learned then and was passed on to us, that's the foundation we all have. But from the moment we debuted, we embarked on our own. From then on, we all discovered our own individuality and originality. For me, that happened to be hip hop and broadcasting. Rapping and being on news shows is so punk. [chuckle]<sup>81</sup>

In the second half of this quote, Sakurai creates the impression that after their debut, the members’ search for individuality led them to begin blossoming into “true” and professional entertainers, artists, and “idols” with their own distinct color, which in turn strengthened the group as a whole. In Sakurai’s narrative, he chose to pursue rap. Rapping and hip-hop challenged and inspired him to work on himself to be a genuine artist with his own distinct brand of rapping and hip-hop. This “awakening” began when he encountered other Japanese hip-hop musicians who provoked him into rethinking his preconceptions of his role in Arashi as the rapper of the group.

[...] After our debut, I happened to be given the rap part. That was about two or three years after we debuted. I was very fortunate to meet VERBAL from m-flo.<sup>82</sup> "Sakurai, if you're going to rap you should write it yourself." [imitating his voice] It was a real shock. [...] It's

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 24:16-25:00.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., Episode 8, 1:41-4:00.

<sup>82</sup> m-flo is a Japanese hip-hop group that debuted in 1997.

our job to sing songs originally written by someone else. That's what I thought our job was. But to create or write songs ourselves was...I had never even thought about it. When you said I should do that, I thought, "Ahhh, I guess I could try that." At that time, I must have thought, "You know, maybe I'd like to give it a try." That's because if.... That's because if I never wrote anything myself, the rap I would sing in the future would just be rap-like and definitely not hip-hop. It would end up like a song that just sounded like rap. That's what I must have felt.<sup>83</sup>

Sakurai conceptualizes VERBAL's words as a turning point in his career, pushing him to discard his previous understanding of his job as an idol and crafting a new definition of Sakurai Shō, the idol. This new definition includes Sakurai having more creative agency and input over his and Arashi's musical career. The reason for this sudden change of heart then is that rather than a fake and lackluster imitation of a rapper and hip-hop artist, Sakurai found that he wanted to be someone more akin to the artists he admired, like Snoop Dogg and VERBAL. So, he begins learning more about rhyming, hip-hop and music composition to grow into an artist. Other members, Ninomiya and Matsumoto in particular, also began to take more of an interest into the production side of their music and performances. Ninomiya would go on to delve in musical composition for the next couple of years, eventually producing songs for Arashi. Meanwhile, Matsumoto would grow into becoming the creative director and/or producer of Arashi's concert tours, albums and music videos, an unprecedented leadership role for an idol. Matsumoto is often shown in action during the backstage scenes of the documentary.

However, each of the member's search for artistry and their individual success in their chosen specialty areas cannot completely account for the group's success as a whole and how and why the group has stayed active for more than 20 years without losing any member. The members frequently address the nature of the group's bond as the main characteristic that makes Arashi unique.

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 8:00-8:30; 18:00-19:04.

We've walked hand in hand, worked together with the same goal in mind for the past 20 years. Without anyone jumping ahead, or being left behind, or losing anyone, or gaining on anyone, with the four of us-I mean five, including me. We've kept it together without breaking apart. We've always shared our hopes and helped each other. That's given me a lot of courage and has made me stronger. At any rate, standing side-by-side, looking at each other, we've traveled and reached this stage in front of all these people, telling us "Congratulations." It makes me realize just how lucky we all are. I plan on holding that hand forever and walking with everyone forever. (Ninomiya Kazunari)<sup>84</sup>

It is then each of the member's sense of responsibility to each other and the group as an entity itself that has kept the members walking "side-by-side" for 20 years.<sup>85</sup> However, this sense of responsibility and feeling of unity was a product of time and not existent in the way that it is "now" from the moment of the group's debut. Ohno, the leader, says: "You know, with this group, I'm so thankful for them. I have so much love for them. But ten years ago, I probably didn't feel that. I was...To be honest, I was too busy dealing with myself at that time. I couldn't think about it then."<sup>86</sup> The maturity of this bond and mutual understanding is demonstrated to viewers in the following scene:

[crying] All I wanted was for the other four members to be happy. That's all. All I've ever prayed for was ARASHI. Then when I hear Aiba-chan say that kind of thing,<sup>87</sup> it makes me happy that I prayed. [laugh] That's how much I love the other members of the group. You may think, "Don't do it!" But it's my responsibility to do that. What Aiba said makes me happy. "Because he's the leader!" For the leader to quit means I really have to be prepared for it. I mean, the leader is quitting! I'm the only one who understands it. Yes.<sup>88</sup>

Ohno seems to conceptualize his own existence, especially because he has the role of the leader of Arashi, as deeply interconnected with the existence of both the group and each of the other four

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., Episode 5, 10:10-11:25.

<sup>85</sup> As an explanation for why he has decided to stay with the group, Ohno said, "Once Johnny had created the group, there was no way I could go off and suddenly quit. I had a sense of responsibility to the group. The responsibility of supporting the other four members and being a group of five." Ibid., Episode 16, Speaker: Ohno Satoshi, 15:30-15:52.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 33:12-33:34.

<sup>87</sup> The staff told Ohno that during the filming of his individual Diary episode, Aiba told his friends that he thinks that Ohno had been crushed by the weight of responsibility as the group's leader because the leader has to sacrifice himself for the sake of the group. Upon hearing that, Ohno, who had been drinking, gets very emotional and starts crying.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.,16:35-17:54.

members. For him, being the leader is not only about a sense of responsibility, but also about sacrifice. This role seems to hold a great deal of emotional significance for him, both positive and negative. This passage highlights the positive emotions, such as love, that Ohno feels in direct connection to his role as the leader of a senior idol group. But the negative toll of that same role, which Aiba's acknowledgement of made Ohno so emotional, seems to also be at the root of the group's decision to go into a hiatus. It is no secret that Ohno was the one who presented the idea of going into a hiatus to the group. Though no explicit details are given, during the group's official hiatus announcement, he said "I want to be free to live my own life."<sup>89</sup> In this way, Ohno demonstrates that he holds conflicting emotions for his career as an idol in a group.

Lastly, what exactly is Arashi to Arashi? Matsumoto Jun says: "[...] But when it comes to what ARASHI is, it is us. It's not a single job. the word "ARASHI" itself is us. Naturally, we are what we are thanks to the help of so many. But we, the members are at the center of that. These past 20 years, us members have been supported by everyone."<sup>90</sup> Like the SHINee members, Matsumoto directly acknowledges the importance of backstage actors' contributions in forging a performance into a final product, while at the same time upholding that Arashi is, at the end of a day, an existence that revolves around five specific members. Staff members, even Kitagawa Johnny, may come and go but Arashi will continue to exist as long as these five members stay together.

### *Giving Back to Fans*

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<sup>89</sup> <https://www3.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/en/news/backstories/355/>.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., Episode 21, 15:40-16:18.

Another prominent theme in this documentary is that of the gratitude or 感謝 that the five members feel towards their fans, a feeling that they claim to feel now more than ever as the curtain draws to a close on this chapter of their lives. To properly express their thankfulness, they center their activities from 2018-2020 around this concept, expressing that this is their priority. For example, “How do I feel right now? Well...all I can do is give back to the fans. Yes. / I think now is the time for us to give back to our fans. / It's not just for us [their activities]. It's for all the fans who have supported us until now. This is something we absolutely have to do.” (Ohno Satoshi, Aiba Masaki, Matsumoto Jun)<sup>91</sup> The understanding that Arashi projects about their relationship with their fans seems completely natural in the context of this documentary and their long career. However, in stark difference with the lines said by the participants in *Produce 48* and the members of King & Prince, their thoughts about fans appear to take on a deeper complexity.

The Stage- / It'll always be a dream world. / It's a world we create together. / Sometimes I find myself wondering, "What is that fan experiencing as she's watching us?" / "What did it take for her to be sitting in that seat? How much makeup did she have to put on? How long did it take for her to get dressed up, to choose her outfit? How long has she been looking forward to this? And now the big day is here." Protecting the emotions of those fans always came first. Yes. / For me, there's no lie in what I'm doing. That's why I want our fans to believe there's no lie either. (Ninomiya Kazunari, Sakurai Shō, Matsumoto Jun)<sup>92</sup>

By thus exemplifying how they are constantly thinking about fans' perceptions and feelings and linking that with the creative vision they have for the performances that they showcase in front of fans, the given impression is that everything that they have done up until now as Arashi has been as a gift for fans in return for their support. This type of characterization makes fans find idols more endearing and in turn feel that since their feelings of love and appreciation are reciprocated, meaning that all the time and money they have spent supporting the group has been a worthy

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., Episode 1, 19:30-19:50.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 19:52-21:25.

investment. Perhaps the best example found in this documentary of such a characterization of this relationship is the thank you speech Sakurai gives at one of their 5x20 concerts. He begins by recalling memories of two audience members he saw at two concerts from several years ago.<sup>93</sup> He then gives meaning to his reminiscence by saying: “What I'm trying to say is I look at you closely and remember a lot memories. I think you all know about ‘fanservice’ stuff, like ‘do this!’ ‘Give me that!’ If that's what you call ‘fanservice,’ then I'm sorry but I don't do much of those. But I wave at as many of you as I can. I look in the eye of as many of you as I can. I remember as many of you as I can.”<sup>94</sup> With just a few words, Sakurai has managed to create the impression that he cares deeply for his fans in a way that shows appreciation and love in his own sincere manner, not “just” copying the actions of what is fashionable “fanservice” among idols. Accompanied by concrete examples, this performance has untouchable credibility.

### *The Now and The Future*

From the moment they took their decision to go into an indefinite hiatus until the moment the curtain closed, and then they went home after their *This is ARASHI LIVE 2020.12.31* live stream concert, Arashi was in a unique position that probably no other idol group had ever been in. Usually, an idol group’s ending chapter is either sudden or quiet, with little time to reflect on the meaning of that ending and the past years or months of their career, much less share it in front of a camera. They announced their hiatus two years prior, packed those two years with as many

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<sup>93</sup> “It's been 20 years. We couldn't have made it this far without you. Thank you. A lot has happened. I think it was four years ago. I think it was in Fukuoka in those family seats there. A man had come by himself and the seat next to him was empty. Maybe it was his girlfriend or his wife, but her funeral photo was in that seat. And I think it was in Miyagi-Yes, it was Miyagi. When we were singing ‘Pikanchi Double,’ when the platform was moving along there, I saw a guy who was holding a fan of me and a big transparent folder next to it. Maybe she was in high school or university. I'm sure it was his daughter's photo. He was really looking at me. After that, we sang ‘Hatenai Sora.’” Ibid., Episode 5, Speaker Sakurai Shō, 7:10-8:37.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 8:38-9:15. This scene takes place during one of the group’s 5x20 concerts, on November 30, 2018 at Fukuoka Yafuoku! Dome.

activities as they could, and accumulated a total of 21 years of experience as a unit of now 30 year olds. This put the members in a unique position to be able to look back, create a narrative, and reflect on and perform meaning from their experiences and about their identity as both individuals and a group.

Ultimately, in 2020, there were things we wanted to do but couldn't. But the biggest thing, I know it sounds pretentious, I want to leave a legacy. [...] We weren't always a perfect pentagon. The pentagon we formed would often change shape. So what shape are we now? I think it's shrunk down like this [using hands] into a single point now. In fact, it has no shape now. We're like a point now. That's what it feels like. I think it's really great that we're not a perfect pentagon. That's our uniqueness. I've always thought that's what's so great. But now, I think we're more like a single point. That's what I think. (Sakurai Shō)<sup>95</sup>

Facing an uncertain future after such a long career, the members opt to portray one last stand of complete unity and harmony. This is most poignant when Matsumoto Jun expresses his creative vision for the *This is ARASHI LIVE 2020.12.31*. As the creative director, he is the member who is in charge of creating a public projection of Arashi's feelings and thoughts through performance.

Now, it's very simple. It's about "love of the members", "love of ARASHI", "love of ARASHI fans". It's all around us. It's us. It's our fans. It's the crew. There's this kind of power of love that will coagulate together. That's the kind of concert and the kind of day it will be. Each and every song and each of the lyrics is our message to everyone. We had fun. We were happy. We enjoyed things. Sometimes things were rough. All those things. We'll mix all those things together and give them to everyone. I hope everyone accepts it. But who knows how they'll feel.<sup>96</sup>

Rather than a one-sided enforcement, Matsumoto opts to share his own feelings of uncertainty at the end of this speech. Beginning with sharing his views of all the positive aspects of ARASHI's career and relationship with its social environment, he ends on an indecisive note, creating an impression of sincerity and making the viewer believe that Matsumoto is confident enough and close enough with his fans to share his real and unfiltered feelings. Ultimately, we cannot know

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., Episode 23, 0:58-5:00.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 19:44-21:00.

whether *This is ARASHI LIVE 2020.12.31* truly was the final page in Arashi's story or whether the group will someday make a comeback from their hiatus. But, throughout every step of the way, the members of ARASHI have decided to portray themselves as sincere and open people who have each fully assimilated their identities and roles as one-fifth of Arashi, feeling a deep commitment with each other and their fandom. At every step, the members take care to portray a united front as well as connectedness with their fandom, admitting to vulnerability but always ultimately spotlighting the positive aspects of their experiences as Arashi.

### Conclusion

As seen above, the answer to my research question is far from simple and straightforward. The findings of this study are promising but still represent only a beginning in the field of research being constructed on the idols at the center of what we call K-Pop and J-Pop. Due to time and space constraints, I had to limit myself to the analysis of only four cases and there is no guarantee that they represent the wealth that might be found in idol narratives and performances of these if we take the whole population into account. Additionally, there are several instances in which the narratives of the idols I studied hint at other central themes that I simply did not have the space to analyze. A cross-comparison of male idol and female idol narratives will most likely yield rich results if the researcher pays attention to how gender plays a role in determining the degree of agency that an idol may wield upon their career and the subsequent sense of fulfillment they may derive from such an involvement. Another area of possible future research would be a comparison of lyrics written by idols versus those simply assigned to idols.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Stephen Epstein and James Turnbull. "Girls' Generation? Gender, (Dis)Empowerment, and K-Pop." In *The Korean Popular Culture Reader*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2014. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822377566-019>. This is one example of a study that analyzes the lyrics found in popular K-Pop girl group songs.

Additionally, it is worth noting that not only idols, but also ordinary people have been using new technologies, such as livestreaming, to become internet celebrities or “influencers.” The popularization of modalities such as Instagram and Tik Tok has allowed users to portray a curated and idealized version of themselves to an anonymous audience. This mediated representation may be tailored in terms of the visual portrayal of the body, the personality that is adopted in front of the camera, and the life story that is communicated with the goal of leaving a specific impression upon the viewer. The way these users utilize webspace to perform an idealized self is reminiscent of the type of performances and fan interactions that idols have employed for more than a decade. Thus, in studying idols’ identity creation process and the way that that process is communicated and performed on screen by idols, a comparison of the way these two populations engage webspace as a stage in which to perform may be possible. In summary, there is room for aspects of this study to be applied in the study of other populations.

The findings of this paper may be summarized as follows. In the case of J-Pop, the ideal idol is defined first and foremost as an “entertainer,” who seeks connection with audiences by presenting a friendly and relatable self. On the other hand, K-Pop’s ideal idol primarily focuses on training their body to perform on stage with little to no mistakes, and thus show the public the “best side of themselves.” It is crucial to note here that neither definition can be said to truly describe the superior idol. Both K-Pop and J-Pop seek to produce idols that embody these definitions of ideal idol, but as is seen most strikingly in *Produce 48*, both types of ideal idols have positive and negative repercussions on the individual themselves. In the case of the K-Pop trainees, they defined their self-worth according to their skill set and how this skill set was then thus evaluated by the judges. Conversely, the J-Pop idols were able to cultivate great popularity among fans in their day-to-day promotional activities, but also reported that they did not have self-

confidence because they thought they had little to no skills. These two ideal idol definitions have historically been designed to satisfy specific markets, South Korea and the global market on the one hand, and the Japanese domestic market on the other. The people who become idols must then negotiate between the forces of this social environment and the weight of precedence to craft a performed identity that meets expectations. They must also find a balance between meeting expectations and creating an identity that can be accepted and integrated into the self rather than rejected. Therefore, that process of identity creation and identity performance is not simply acting out a character assigned by the company. Instead, the idol has an active and crucial role to play in this process.

This mediation is most easily observable during interviews. Though sharing many of the same core themes, trainees, rookies, and senior idols all formulate and embody different interpretations of these. Namely, in the cases of *Produce 48* and *King & Prince*, the idols and competition participants all express a strong awareness of the arbitration process that occurs between a group and an individual when a “team performance” is still in the initial stages of coordination. This is a period filled with challenges for the idols and they must eventually come to an agreement together regarding the balance between the individual’s wishes and the group’s needs. This balance has already seemingly been achieved in SHINee and Arashi, who present a flawless united front. Another main theme found among senior groups was the process of evolution into an artist that plays a collaborative role alongside their production company by actively participating in the decision-making process of their music and performances. In the case of the rookies and trainees examined in this paper, this process has not yet begun as they are still learning how to perform idolhood first.

Lastly, regarding interactions with fans and the presentation of self to the public, all of the examined idols were found to craft narratives that highlighted a positive resolution. Though both K-Pop and J-Pop idols would share their experiences with failure and negative emotions, all of these stories would inevitably be finished in a way that indicated that the speaker had learned a positive lesson from the experience, eventually found a solution, or was simply able to overcome the circumstances through sheer will and dedication. These types of narratives paint the idol as an inspirational persona that wins the admiration of their audience through the evolution of the storyline and the self that it portrays. In conclusion, idols are people who consistently perform positive and relatable presentations of the self with the goal of connecting with audiences. As their careers progress, idols tend to shed their “idol” label and opt to self-identify as “artists” to mark their individuality and self-agency in front of the public. In this way, the idol chooses to craft an identity that meets the requirements of either K-Pop or J-Pop’s ideal idol, while also negotiating this ideal with their real circumstances and adapting it into their *own* life story. This story is then performed in ways that create a desired positive impression upon the audience and inspire fans to open their hearts and pockets.

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