The Korean Wave as a source of implicit cultural policy: Making of a neoliberal subjectivity in a Korean style

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Abstract
The Korean Wave provides an effective vehicle for implicit cultural policies concerning the formation of a neoliberal subjectivity of young-generation South Koreans. By looking at two web dramas casting K-pop idols (commissioned by the Financial Services Commission and by Samsung) and a pop idol audition programme, we offer a detailed understanding of the prevailing discourse of youth in contemporary Korea and how this is naturalised across the boundaries of policy, business, media and fandom. The implicit cultural policy formulates a desirable self in a ‘Korean style’ by highlighting some of the psychological qualities of post-industrial creative workers and exploring Korean society’s existing inventory of the productive ethic and Confucian ideals. The juxtaposition of post-industrial and industrial ethics, and the tension between entrepreneurial self and collective self, impose a double burden on youth, leaving them little scope to contest the pervasive ‘desirable selfhood’.

Keywords
cultural policy, implicit cultural policy, Korean Wave, K-pop, neoliberal self, neoliberal subjectivity, reality TV, web drama

The ‘Korean Wave’ (the Asian-regional and global popularity of South Korean pop culture) is a multifaceted phenomenon. When it comes to its relationship to cultural policy, the existing literature offers broadly two different perspectives. Asia-based cultural
studies scholars demonstrate a critical take on the mainstream policy imperatives and discourses centred on the contributions of the Korean Wave to the nation’s soft power and global competitiveness; instead, they draw our attention to the possibilities of cross-cultural sensibility and connections mediated by the Korean Wave (e.g. H Cho, 2005; Y Cho, 2011; Chua and Iwabuchi, 2008; K Lee, 2008). Meanwhile, cultural and media policy researchers focus on the embeddedness of the Korean cultural economy in proactive cultural policy encompassing subsidies, investments, infrastructure provision and export support (e.g. Chung, 2019; Jin, 2014; Kwon and Kim, 2014; H-K Lee, 2018). Both groups of scholars look at the government’s ‘explicit cultural policy’ (and associated discourses) concerning Korean culture going outbound; yet their viewpoints are different. For the former, the policy is neoliberal because it instrumentalises culture and associates it with economic value (K Lee, 2008: 181–3), and it institutionalises/ bureaucratises the Korean Wave that emerged as a cultural phenomenon (Choi, 2015). For the latter, however, the policy exemplifies limits of neoliberal globalisation and state capacity to actively negotiate with it (Jin, 2014; H-K Lee, 2018).

While calling for cross-disciplinary dialogue between the culturalist and policy studies approaches on the convoluted nexus between pop culture, the state and the market, this article intends to bring more complexity to our understanding of the linkage between the Korean Wave and cultural policy by exploring ‘implicit cultural policy’ where pop culture – especially key components of the Korean Wave products such as K-pop idol stars, K-pop audition programmes and web dramas featuring K-pop idols – is utilised to cultivate neoliberal selfhood in young-generation Koreans. According to Jeremy Ahearne (2009, 2014), cultural policy can be categorised as explicit and implicit. Explicit cultural policy is composed of actions taken and discourses spoken by the cultural ministry and its agencies towards clearly demarcated fields that produce and circulate narrowly defined culture – arts, media and pop culture. Meanwhile, implicit cultural policy refers to indirect governance of culture as a way of life, which is designed to ‘work in discursive and symbolic mode on the values, norms and reflex reference of a target population’ (Ahearne, 2014: 2). This involves activities, programmes and discourses provided and popularised by institutions, organisations and groups operating beyond the narrowly perceived cultural policy arena. The idea of implicit cultural policy challenges the perception of culture as autonomous aesthetic expression and communicative practice, by seeing it as a societal sphere, where individuals’ and communities’ subjectivity, ethic, morality and way of life are shaped.

We argue that the Korean Wave provides effective means of inward-looking implicit cultural policy concerning the formation of a neoliberal subjectivity of young-generation Koreans. In South Korea, pop culture is an essential part of what Angela McRobbie calls a ‘creativity dispositif’, that is, a collection of projects, schemes, instruments, manuals, guides, TV programmes and other forms of popular entertainment, which together assist youth in figuring out how to maintain themselves and possibly prosper in the neoliberal ‘creative’ economy. Pop culture provides a platform where certain ideas of the ideal selfhood are presented, advocated and normalised; indeed, many governmental bodies, public agencies, non-profit organisations and business corporations tap into elements of pop culture to effectively deliver their agenda to the young generation. Its appeal, as a means
of implicit cultural policy, resides in the lively and youthful images with which it is associated, the availability of attractive and talented pop stars and idols, innovative cultural genres and formats, and the nation’s remarkable capacity to produce well-made, trendy cultural products. In this way, implicit cultural policy is neatly packaged with and fused into entertaining cultural products that are consumed within the realm of personal enjoyment, cultural consumption, media fandom and audience engagement.

By looking at two web dramas casting K-pop idols in leading roles, and a K-pop idol audition programme, we will provide a detailed understanding of the prevailing discourse of the Korean youth today and how it is affirmed and naturalised across the boundaries of policy, business, media and fandom amidst the nation’s increasing fascination with the Korean Wave. Unlike the existing (Western) account of the neoliberal subjectivity characterised by freedom, autonomy and coolness, the implicit cultural policy hinged on the Korean Wave is keen to formulate a desirable self in a ‘Korean style’. It emphasises some of the psychological qualities of post-industrial creative workers, but it also explores the Korean society’s existing inventory of the productive ethic, a legacy of the economic catch-up between the 1960s and 1980s. Furthermore, it is embedded in the Confucian ideals of familial piety and collectivism, which are still influential in contemporary Korea.

Implicit cultural policy and the neoliberal subjectivity

Neoliberalism is not simply about a revival of the free market ideology of the 19th century but is also ‘a scheme for reordering the social and a design for refashioning the conduct of the self’ (Foucault, 2010 [1978–9]; McGuigan, 2014: 228). As Wendy Brown (2005) notes, it is a constructivist project. That is, the neoliberal self is not ontologically given but it is a product of becoming that involves the production, institutionalisation and dissemination of a particular set of identities, beliefs, norms and common sense. Those activities often engage public authorities, business organisations, educational institutions, experts, media outlets and celebrities (Brown, 2005; H-K Lee, 2018: ch. 6; McRobbie, 2016: 67; Miller and Rose, 1990). Similarly, Ahearne (2009: 114, and 2014) notes implicit cultural policies occurring not only in the governmental sphere but also within the field of media and capitalistic commerce. Indeed, the emergence of a neoliberal self is underpinned by indirect and subtle mechanisms such as discourses, expert knowledge, research and management techniques concerning ‘psychological features’ of the subject (Miller and Rose, 1990: 1–2). This process turns the governing of a post-industrial economy into a ‘personal matter’ involving ‘the values, decisions and judgements of citizens in their professional and personal capacities’ (1990: 18).

From this perspective, and also in relation to the explicit policy of creative industries, scholars have offered interesting discussion on the attributes, aspirations and personal capacities of the post-industrial and creative workforce. We are particularly interested in the understandings of the neoliberal self of Jim McGuigan and Angela McRobbie, two influential commentators on contemporary cultural policy and creative economy respectively. McGuigan (2014: 223–4, 2015) discusses how the neoliberal socio-economic transformation brought about the formation of a new ‘preferred self’,
which ‘combines the idealised subject(s) of classical and neoclassical economics – featuring entrepreneurship and consumer sovereignty – with contemporary discourse of “the taxpayer” . . . and a “cool” posture’. The preferred self is a rational economic actor who is guided by ‘a calculus of utility, benefit, and satisfaction against a microeconomic grid of scarcity, supply and demand, and moral value-neutrality’ (Brown, 2005: ch. 3, p. 3), and who strategically invests in human capital development. They are competitive and self-reliant individuals who are seldom interested in looking for collective responses to the precarity in their labour and the problems shared with others. If McGuigan posits economic rationality at the core of the neoliberal self, McRobbie (2016) sheds light on how such rationality is voluntarily limited by young people’s passion for creativity, autonomy and self-expression. In the UK context, she points out that the discourse of creativity serves as a kind of ‘labour reform’, turning cultural labour into ‘human capital’ (Foucault, 2010 [1978–9]: 224–33). This labour reform ‘undertaken through the promotion of the self-entrepreneurial ethos embedded in the creative economy was a logical extension of what had already been put in place within the more conventional world of work and employment’ (McRobbie, 2016: 66). Her main concern is artists and creative workers who are entrepreneurs of themselves: an individualised workforce of those who are motivated, self-initiated, self-regulated and entrepreneurial. They are an example of post-industrial workers who are ‘drawn to the autonomy, creativity and excitement that jobs in these industries can provide, they also accept as normal the high risks associated with this work’ (Neff et al., 2005: 308). McRobbie (2016) aptly discusses that the other side of these workers’ pursuit of psychic rewards such as autonomy, self-discovery, pleasure and a sense of adventure is the individualisation of risk, precarious jobs, the absence of a safety net and the lack of collective responses to issues of earning and working conditions.

In South Korea, it was in the aftermath of the 1997 financial crisis that a new neoliberal subjectivity emerged, in conjunction with the pervasive policy discourse of the ‘knowledge economy’ and the ‘knowledge-based society’ ardently advocated by President Kim Dae-Jung (1998–2003). As such, the forming of the post-industrial self-hood started as a top-down discursive project. The powerful narrative of the knowledge economy put forward the knowledge worker (‘new intellectual’) as a new model citizen that the nation desperately needed in order to develop new economic sectors and survive the intensifying global competition (K Lee, 2008: 183). The knowledge worker was broadly defined as a flexible, entrepreneurial and creative worker, passionate about learning new skills and using them to create new values (H-K Lee, 2018: 93–4; Song, 2007). The knowledge economy discourse assumed that everyone could and should become a knowledge worker: not only inventors, innovators and creatives but also ordinary people could generate added values and enhance the productivity in their workplace (Yun, 1999). Self-management, self-development, self-enterprise and the ceaseless drive to learn new knowledge were regarded as the core traits of knowledge workers. When it comes to ‘youth’, the discourse was peppered with the rhetoric of ‘the human capital of youth’, ‘creativity’, ‘creative (cultural) capital’, ‘venture company (start-up)’ and ‘flexible labour’ (Song, 2007: 331). The ideal selfhood was also effectively portrayed by media coverage of sports celebrities who attained remarkable success in the US: they were not only examples of self-governing, competitive (globally competitive),
hardworking and successful individuals but also ideal citizens who demonstrated responsibility to family and the nation (Y Cho, 2008).

Yet, the popularity of the government-led knowledge worker campaign lost its currency after the bursting of the dot-com boom in the early 2000s. What followed was a void of top-down discourse of desirable self, implying that its construction would now be an ongoing project involving multiple public authorities, non-profit organisations, business corporations and commercial media. More recently, the government under Park Geun-Hye’s leadership advocated the idea of the ‘creative economy’ and called for every citizen’s potential contribution to it, recycling many elements of the knowledge economy discourse (H-K Lee, 2018: ch. 5). But with Park’s sudden fall through impeachment, this idea quickly disappeared from the nation’s public policy and media. Our case studies highlight the decentralised nature of implicit cultural policy, diffused across different realms from policy to commerce and from cultural production to cultural fandom. If the knowledge worker campaign was targeted at the broad spectrum of the population, the contemporary making of a desirable self focuses on ‘youth’. The emerging discourse of the deserving youth and their post-industrial work relies on two contrasting narratives.

The first narrative highlights the harsh socio-economic realities faced by youth – ‘the 880,000-won generation’, ‘3 po’ (giving up three important things in one’s life, that is, dating, marriage and childbirth), ‘yingyeo’ (human surplus or redundant human beings) and ‘hell Korea’ (Kyunghyang Shinmun, 2015; Weekly DongA, 2015). This narrative, produced and shared by youth themselves and critics of neoliberalism, points to the uselessness of young Koreans’ human capital accrued via university education and extracurricular activities in the extremely competitive job market and the feeling of helplessness they feel about their life. The second narrative defines youth as ‘cheong-chun’ (the traditional literary analogy of youth to spring season) who should overcome hardships through endurance and self-development to become full members of society. These contrasting narratives are interconnected in the sense that the former directly speaks to the precarity experienced by the young generation while the latter offers insight on how they can maintain themselves and survive the harsh socio-economic conditions.

It is within this context that we can consider how the Korean Wave and overseas promotion of Korean culture could function as a template for ambitious young Koreans – as self-appointed cultural ambassadors or promotors of Korean food – to pursue self-actualisation, personal development and life-changing adventure via passionately organising global tours where they cook Korean food or introduce Korean culture to local audiences. In this process, the participants broaden their horizon, develop global perspectives, learn to take risks, increase their self-confidence and acquire entrepreneurial skills, which will be invaluable assets for their future career and life. Yet, we are more interested in looking into how the discourse of youth is materialised in pop cultural products and widely disseminated through everyday media. Notably, many governmental and non-governmental organisations are keen to utilise elements of the Korean Wave and K-pop to attract public attention and deliver their agendas to the young generation. Public authorities often invite K-pop idol groups and stars to advocate their policy messages, from tourism promotion, nation branding, law and justice, general election, health to financial management. For example, in the 2012 presidential election, major parties exploited K-pop’s dynamic and youthful images by using K-pop songs as their main
campaign songs (Oh and Lee, 2014: 116). In 2016, a female K-pop idol, on behalf of the National Election Commission, encouraged youths’ participation in the general election. Similarly, business conglomerates, which often organise so-called ‘public interest campaigns’, now tap into Korean Wave idols and imagery as useful resources. Those public and corporate campaigns typically focus on national pride, national survival (in times of crisis), entrepreneurship and good citizenship. It is across such a broad context of implicit cultural policy that pop culture products assist young Koreans to envision a neoliberal self. The neoliberal subjectivity demonstrates some of the typical qualities of post-industrial creative workers, but it also relies on the old industrial and Confucius ethics, as we will explain soon. In the following two sections, we will investigate two forms of pop culture used for implicit cultural policy. The first is two examples of web dramas produced by a business corporation (Be Positive, Samsung) and a governmental agency (Choco Bank, Finance Services Commission): both cast members of EXO, the globally popular K-pop group. The second is Produce 101, an audition programme which is a vehicle for the making of K-pop stars. The web dramas were produced with a relatively small budget and for internet release, while Produce 101 is a high-budget signature programme for a cable music channel owned by CJ ENM, one of the biggest media conglomerates in Korea. While our case studies will show that neoliberal selfhood is constructed across these different forms of contemporary pop culture, it is important to understand that both the web dramas and the audition programme clearly target youths in their teens and twenties who are K-pop fans. Many Korean web dramas cast K-pop idols to appeal to young audiences (Kim and Jang, 2015), and some dramas, such as Samsung-produced A Better Tomorrow, depict becoming a K-pop idol as a dream job that requires ceaseless hard work physically and emotionally. Meanwhile, the audition programme reveals the making of K-pop idols and their desirable qualities. Furthermore, the two web dramas and Produce 101 have attracted overseas audiences, being part of the Korean Wave phenomenon.

Web drama: teaching youth how to survive

Web drama fever in Korea

In Korea, the web drama is an increasingly popular form of entertainment aimed at young and mobile audiences, and is a new carrier of the Korean Wave. It is a type of web series, that is, a serialised, episodic TV content produced for internet distribution. While web drama in the Anglophone context includes both professionally (commercially) and independently made series (Christian, 2018), web drama in Korea tends to refer to a serialised drama that is ‘professionally made’ and released primarily through online platforms (Kang, 2017). It consists of several episodes, each of which typically runs for 10–15 minutes. While it includes a variety of genres, from drama, romance and school life to SF and thrillers, the most popular themes are first love and getting a job for the first time, reflecting two of the main concerns of the target audience (Kang, 2017: 766). Web drama is cheap to make and, thus, works well as a platform for new producers and directors to test their ideas and for K-pop idols to easily debut as actors, extending their transmedia appeal. Seeing its soaring popularity (e.g. the Love Playlist series has attracted a total of
600 million views since 2017), terrestrial TV stations and cable channels, too, have begun web drama production (*Hankook Ilbo*, 2020) and K-pop entertainment agencies have produced dramas targeted at overseas K-pop fans (Kim and Jang, 2015). There are multiple outlets but the dominant one is Naver TV Cast. As of 15 August 2019, it lists a total of 272 series, the majority of which are in the genre of ‘romance/comedy’. The rise of web drama blurs TV and the internet and diversifies drama financiers, sponsors, producers and distributors beyond those working in the traditional TV industry. Although web drama hardly replaces terrestrial and cable TV drama in terms of visibility and influence, it has already become a part of everyday entertainment for those in their teens and twenties (*Hankook Ilbo*, 2020).

The low production costs, short production period and easy online broadcasting encourage a diverse range of institutions and organisations to produce web dramas for the purpose of public education, policy advocacy, advertisement and corporate PR (Kang, 2017; Kim and Jang, 2015; KOCCA, 2016: ch. 6). For policy makers, web drama can be a useful medium to disseminate their agenda among young people, especially those related to the problems today’s young generation is facing, from unemployment, economic hardship and financial management to starting up their own business. Their agenda tends to shape the storyline of the drama to a certain extent: for example, public agencies are featured as a source of support and, in the case of Choco Bank, financial information is provided via its protagonist’s advice for his clients. Interestingly, Samsung has produced web drama series to effectively communicate with youths and to show its support for those ‘cheongchun’ who pursue their passion. Its romantic comedy dramas, which convey strong moral lessons, have been very popular: for example, *Feeling for Challenge*, featuring Xiumin from the boy group EXO attracted 10 million views in five days (*Asia Economy*, 2015). It should be noted that in Korea, business conglomerates play key roles in shaping the desirable self of youth via extremely competitive recruitment and the numerous competitions and prizes they organise, where undergraduates demonstrate creative capacities in the areas of writing, film, design, webtoons, posters, music and so on. In particular, Samsung is one of the most prestigious employers (50,000 people took the Global Samsung Aptitude Test in October 2019), and its recruitment policy influences the job-hunting strategies of many university students and graduates. Producing web dramas is a soft means for this powerful conglomerate to envisage and advocate the ideal type of youth. Many of the dramas produced by public bodies and big companies cast A-list K-pop idols and have gained huge popularity domestically and internationally: a ranking of web drama indicates that *Be Positive* (Samsung), *Falling for Challenge* (Samsung) and Choco Bank (Financial Services Commission) are ranked as the 4th, 5th and 10th most-viewed web dramas.

*Be Positive* (2016, six episodes) was produced by Samsung and directed by Byung-Heon Lee, a famous film director. D.O., a member of EXO, plays the role of Hwan-Dong, a film studies student. The story is centred on Hwan-Dong, who struggles to find funding to make a final-year film. His professor asserts the university’s embrace of the logic of commercial film by saying that there will be no funding unless Hwan-Dong casts a star actress who is an alumna and his ex-girlfriend. Hwan-Dong persuades her to join at a fee of 5 million won ($4,167). With only 0.5 million won lent by his father, he and his mate work at a construction site at the hourly rate of only 6,030 won ($5) to raise the
rest. He starts working on a film synopsis for a Samsung film competition and is invited for interview. Although he fails to win the prize, he decides to continue to make his film with support from his sister, friends, the actress, the professor and others. He thinks that it is the beginning, not the end and he will fight and win.

Choco Bank (2016, six episodes) was commissioned by the Financial Services Commission, one of the financial authorities in Korea, to promote the country’s financial reform, which was centred around new financial products and technologies, such as ISAs (individual savings accounts), crowdfunding, fintech, internet banking (an internet-only bank), mobile payment and so on. Although its main aim is to introduce these products and technologies, the drama, which features Kai, another member of EXO, tells a story of youth finding and pursuing their dreams. Kai plays the role of Bank (the name chosen by his father, who wished his son to be rich). Bank is unemployed after having failed to get a job in the commercial banking industry, which is his mother’s hope. She wants Bank to have a stable life, after having seen her husband suffer from business bankruptcy that worsened his chronic illness and led to his death. Meanwhile, Choco recently opened a chocolate shop but struggles to pay rent. By chance, Bank joins Choco and helps her to raise funds via crowdfunding and increase her sales by providing free financial advice to her customers. Although Bank wants to run his own business with Choco, he gets a job at a commercial bank to fulfil his mother’s wish. Finally, the mother approves his passion for start-up business, so he quits the banking job to realise his dream.

Be positive, pursue your dream and never give up

Unlike the discourse of human capital that sees labourers as capitalists (Foucault, 2010 [1978–9] 224–33; H-K Lee, 2017), Korean youths’ human capital is not easily translated into jobs and wages. This means that their idealised self essentially manifests in how they negotiate the unfavourable economic prospects and devise personal responses to them. The two dramas shed light on the constant pressures and the feelings of uncertainty the youths must manage in their search for post-industrial jobs. It is telling that the Asian financial crisis of 1997 forms an important backdrop for both dramas. Their parents might have failed to reinvent themselves as ‘knowledge workers’ so they cannot be relied upon. Now, it is the young generation’s turn to self-develop into an ideal workforce of those who are capable of surviving, and even thriving, in the harsh neoliberal social conditions.

In Be Positive, Hwan-Dong will be unemployed unless he produces an impressive final-year film and gains attention in the film industry. He laments that his generation lives in the ‘risky and barren world where dating, marriage, childbirth, buying a house, social relationship’ have become ‘a luxury’ (Be Positive, episode 1). In Choco Bank, Bank has been unemployed for five years. Choco graduated from a university in Seoul, and even studied chocolate making in France; however, her business does not make enough income to pay the rent. The harsh economic reality is extremely demoralising. Bank confesses to Choco:

It is hard to get a job and it is hard to give up getting a job... it is equally hard to face/meet people as I am unemployed... (Choco Bank, episode 2)
The dramas normalise a set of psychological strategies, such as ‘pursuing your own dream’, ‘being passionate’ and ‘enjoying what you are doing’. For Choco, ‘success is nothing special. Doing what you want to do and eating what you want to eat. That is success’ (*Choco Bank*, episode 2). Despite suffering from poverty in the past and her shop not making much money, she makes efforts to feel happy. As such, choosing a career that ‘makes your heart throb’ involves overcoming the feeling of uncertainty with unceasing resilience. Hwang-Dong’s ex, who is now a famous star, had the experience of failing 100 auditions, which he thinks is a clear indication of her passion for an acting career. Bank’s experience is similar: despite the stability of a banking job, he eventually chooses to start up his own business, the nature of which is yet to be known.

These young people’s passion, which constitutes the ground of multiple forms of emotional labour (Couldry and Littler, 2011), is underpinned by a lot of material labour and the Korean society’s ‘productive ethic’, such as industriousness, endurance and self-help, essential virtues required for every citizen during the period of rapid industrialisation from the 1960s to the 1980s. Choco slept only four hours per day when she was learning chocolate making. To fund film production, Hwan-Dong and his mate work as manual labourers. In another Samsung-produced web drama, *A Better Tomorrow* (2014), the protagonist – whose dream is to become a K-pop idol – busily delivers lunch boxes to earn his living while practising performance skills whenever he finds time. Working extremely hard both emotionally and physically, these young people seem to find little room to be ‘rebellious’ and ‘cool’, and have no time for ‘thought[s] of contradiction’ (Couldry, 2008). They try to be positive and keep going. Hwan-Dong wants to live ‘a life where we can make choices, not a life of giving up’ (*Be Positive*, episode 1). His imaginary mentor affirms:

> If you do not give up, the dream will become true... It is better to say that a dream is made [by yourself] rather than a dream comes true. (*Be Positive*, episode 4)

In the dramas, digital participatory media is an essential infrastructure of post-industrial creative economy, where creativity and the talent of youth can be discovered and ‘duly’ rewarded. Virtual space is where their human capital can be recognised and valued by active audiences. The dramas regard digital technology and online communication rather naively as an important means to identify business and career opportunities. Choco uses crowdfunding to raise funds to keep her business going. A friend of Choco films Bank giving financial advice to her customers and uploads it onto a UGC (user-generated content) site. This brings instant fame to Bank and Choco’s shop, and Bank is even approached by a news reporter and a potential employer. The use of UGC as an effective branding and marketing tool is also featured in Samsung’s *A Better Tomorrow* (2014). Here, the female protagonist secretly films the male protagonist, a K-pop idol wannabe, singing and dancing together with a forgotten singer. The video provides the latter with exciting job opportunities while nobody asks questions about privacy and the potential hard work required to keep an online audience.

It is also interesting to notice youths’ ambivalent relationship with older generations, who are their parents, (potential) employers, landlords or clients. They may be mentors, supporters and/or exploiters. Representing the older generation who once lived the
high-growth period before the 1997 financial crisis, Hwan-Dong’s professor advises young people on the necessity of self-reliance:

Do not rely on the once-available benefit [such as university support for film making] to achieve something. This would make things harder. Just do it [by all means] and be positive. *(Be Positive, episode 3)*

In *A Better Tomorrow* (2014), the owner of a takeaway restaurant who hires the protagonist (a K-pop idol wannabe) is also a landlord and an owner of an entertainment agency. This owner may be a helping hand but also can be seen profiteering from the abundance of emotional and material labour of youth. In the same drama, however, the female protagonist (a Samsung employee) is strongly encouraged by her boss to go beyond her comfort zone and be ambitious to test her innovative ideas at an in-company competition. In *A Better Tomorrow* and *Choco Bank*, parents opposed their sons’ choice of post-industrial and risky careers but eventually gave approval and support. In these web dramas, the youth realise that the older generations can be their supporters, as Hwan-Doing concludes that ‘my family and friends’ are ‘the shared owners of my dream’ *(Be Positive, episode 6)*. Apparently, the neoliberal self is a complicated – even paradoxical – construct that does not radically break away from the existing social norms and Confucian ideals, such as filial piety and respect for elders and experts.

**Produce 101: producing the ideal youth**

*Korean reality audition programmes*

Reality shows are another popular product of the Korean Wave, with K-pop related audition programmes being a recent addition. The reality TV format can be seen as a means of implicit governance, or an instrument for ‘educating, improving and shaping subjects’ (Ouellette and Hay, 2008: 14; see also Couldry and Littler, 2011). Indeed, the growth and development of this genre of TV coincides with ‘the normalization of neoliberal common sense’ by its endorsement of neoliberal narratives (Redden, 2018: 405). As Ouellette and Hay (2008: 2) observed, many popular reality TV subgenres involve ‘testing, judging, advising and rewarding’ of people, providing us with guidelines on how we should live as enterprising subjects in a neoliberal capitalist society. It was *Super Star K* (launched in 2009) that was the first K-pop related show to achieve significant success, and similar programmes, such as *K-pop Star* and *Star Audition*, soon followed (Oh and Lee, 2014). These shows attracted millions of ordinary young people dreaming of becoming idols to take part in auditions. The existing research has noted that reality TV shows emphasise the neoliberal concept of meritocracy, where everyone has an equal opportunity to achieve success via participation. While the selling point of reality audition TV is the ability of the audience to ‘participate’ in its production, the idea of audience interactivity gaining any meaningful control over programme content is actually a myth (Andrejevic, 2004). By participating in the programme and voting for contestants, the audience is contributing to the legitimisation of the neoliberal narratives within the programmes themselves (Couldry, 2008).
In 2016, *Produce 101* season 1 was launched on the music channel Mnet by CJ ENM. Instead of featuring ordinary people like previous audition shows, the *Produce* series features 101 K-pop idol trainees (either all female or all male, depending on the season) from many different entertainment agencies. The trainees go through rounds of elimination to compete for audience votes, with the final top 11 members forming a temporary K-pop group for a year. The show became immensely popular, prompting three more seasons to run from 2017 to 2019. More than 10 million votes were tallied during the finale of the second season, meaning that almost one-fifth of South Korea’s population participated in the voting (Herman, 2017). With the success of *Produce 101* (*PD101*), several other networks have also jumped on the bandwagon to produce similar idol audition shows, and its Chinese remakes also gained massive followings in China. Not unlike the *PD101* competition model, K-pop idols are churned out as cultural products by entertainment companies via a ‘trainee system’, where young people are cast and undergo several years of training in singing, dancing, foreign languages, modelling and acting to become all-rounded entertainers. Through this system, K-pop stars achieved significant success locally and globally, and they are now seen as treasured national assets. With that, the public’s perception of K-pop idols has also changed drastically from the previous vulgar image to one of being professional and creative, leading to an increasing number of youths seeing ‘idol’ as their dream careers (Oh and Lee, 2014). As youth strive to become K-pop idols by going through the trainee system, K-pop has become ‘not just a random response to neoliberal globalization, but also a systematically planned, monitored, manifestation of entrepreneurial self’ (Y Kim, 2013: 8). *PD101* brings the whole training and idol development process into the public view. In the following section, we will analyse the discourses in *PD101* season 2 (*PD101S2*), the most popular season of the show thus far.

**Be responsible, develop yourself and work in a team**

Similar to the web dramas discussed earlier, *PD101S2* promotes the virtues of responsibility for oneself, hard work and entrepreneurialism as desirable and essential qualities for success. Trainees are always shown to take responsibility for their own ‘mistakes’ and ‘failures’ both during practice sessions and in performances. In one instance, trainee Kim Samuel, who was often praised for being a good dancer, placed last in his group after an evaluation. When asked about his ranking, he says:

I can’t think of anything else other than my own insufficiencies that had caused this evaluation result. (*PD101S2*, episode 7)

The trainees rarely give a reason other than their own ‘insufficiencies’ to explain any undesirable situation. Besides blaming themselves for failures, subjects in the individualised society also look for ‘no remedies other than trying harder and harder still’ (Bauman, 2001: 106). In *PD101S2*, ‘hard work’ is always presented as the best solution to manage any failure and achieve success. Professional trainers on the show often speak of hard work as the only way to overcome difficulties. When a group of lower-ranked
Trainees are grouped together due to competition rules and are shown to be dejected and not doing well, a vocal trainer tells them,

If it was me, if I didn’t get a choice to choose, I would practise even if I ‘die’. Isn’t this a chance to prove yourself? (PD101S2, episode 4)

Trainees are also expected to be entrepreneurial individuals who constantly strive to become better versions of themselves. This is prominent during the ‘Basic Idol Skills Evaluation’ stage, where the trainees are given three days to learn the same song and dance. They are then individually filmed and evaluated on their performance. While each trainee has their own strengths, trainees who show their unwillingness or inability to perform well at their weaker aspects are reprimanded. Trainee Ha Min-Ho, who is a rapper, points out that it is unfair that trainees who are vocalists do not get evaluated on their rapping skills, but rappers have to be evaluated on their singing skills. However, a trainer tells the trainees ‘[If you keep thinking] “I’m a rapper, so I don’t like to sing”, then you definitely can’t become A level’ (PD101S2, episode 2). Yet the striving for constant improvement of neoliberal subjects is actually for the benefit of institutions in power (Couldry and Littler, 2011; Türken et al., 2016). As more and more trainees strive to become better in all ‘basic’ idol skills, it increases the pool of all-rounder trainees available for entertainment companies to pick from when forming idol groups, causing these trainees to become workers who are easily replaceable. The need to constantly improve to acquire skills and abilities beyond what is actually required is now the norm in Korea’s creative industries, where young cultural workers such as designers feel the need to develop competence in a variety of other areas such as engineering and management to remain competitive in the precarious job market (C Kim, 2017).

However, while having to be ‘in a constant state of readiness (or employability)’ (McRobbie, 2016: 5), trainees cannot be seen as being overly ambitious. There are many cases where they drop in rank when audiences feel that they are being overboard in trying to bring attention to themselves. For example, trainee Joo Hak-Nyeon was shown as strongly wanting to take up the key ‘centre’ position for his group performance even though he did not appear to be competent enough. After which, there were many online comments criticising his behaviour, such as ‘Joo Hak-Nyeon really need to throw away his greed for the centre’ (papa, 2017). While the discourse of entrepreneurship and trying one’s best is consistent in the programme, it is difficult to determine at which point it becomes ‘too much’. Perhaps, it is easier to make sense of it alongside the discourse of teamwork, which was equally prominent in the show. In Western reality shows, the idea of teamwork is often nominal (Ouellette and Hay, 2008). In PD101S2, however, trainees are often shown giving up individual benefits for the team. When team leader Yoon Ji-Sung had to pick a group member for one performance, he chose another trainee who was a strong vocalist even though it would lead to him having lesser parts in the song. He explains:

We have a part of the song where everyone has to sing together, and there is a part with very high notes. We need someone who can sing and reach all the notes for that part. So even if my own position becomes a little dangerous, I have to choose Sung-Woon. (PD101S2, episode 9)
The emphasis on modesty and development as a group seems to go against the anti-collectivist views of the typical Western neoliberal ideology. Even though teamwork and community are treated with high importance, \textit{PD101S2} is still ultimately an individual competition. Overall, the ideal trainee depicted in \textit{PD101S2} draws deep parallels with Wendy Brown’s (2005: 43) description of a model neoliberal citizen, ‘who strategizes for her- or himself among various social, political and economic options, not one who strives with others to alter or organize these options’. Youth in the Korean society are expected to take responsibility for their own successes by working hard, being entrepreneurs of themselves by constantly improving their skills and accepting their positions without questioning the fairness of the system. Above that, they are also expected to exemplify Confucian values of being humble and a good team player.

Like many other reality shows, the construction of the ideal self in the programme is heavily guided by ‘experts’ (Ouellette and Hay, 2008; Rose, 2006), who in this case are the trainers (‘experts’ in the K-pop industry). The trainers are products of the same system, having achieved success by possessing the same ideal characteristics of responsibility, industriousness, entrepreneurship, teamwork and humility. By having them guide the trainees, institutions do not need to make explicit rules and policies to convince the audience of what an ideal youth should be like. Audience participation is another key tool \textit{PD101S2} use to legitimise this version of an ideal youth. The audience are referred to as ‘national producers’, and the programme’s 100% audience vote format is continuously emphasised. It is intriguing that audiences see responsibility, hard work and constant improvement as essential values that trainees should have to be ‘ deserving’ of their votes, no matter how good-looking or how talented they might be. The presenter of the programme is also referred to as the ‘national producer representative’, creating the impression that the rankings she announces are results determined by the audience’s wants and votes. As noted in the Conclusion, however, the claim turned out to be false, potentially putting this project of forming a neoliberal self into question.

\textbf{Conclusion}

The youth in our two case studies cannot be simply defined as calculative actors as their economic rationality is overshadowed by the passion for risky creative careers, which in turn has to negotiate with the Korean society’s existing norms and expectations. As McGuigan (2014: 223) points out, ‘the neoliberal self cannot be found concretely in a “pure” form’ and there seem to be many varieties. In the Korean case, the juxtaposition of post-industrial and industrial ethics and the tension between the individual, entrepreneurial self and the collective self in the neoliberal subjectivity put the youth under a double burden – they have to negotiate with too many things to dare to enjoy the pleasure and freedom promised by post-industrial and creative work.

The making of a neoliberal self through pop culture is a constructive project, where gaps and fissures may emerge, as its effect depends on the agency of the targeted young people as well as strategies of pop culture producers. Pop culture such as TV can sometimes also function to expose neoliberal myths, being a tool for reflexivity (Couldry and Littler, 2011; Littler, 2018). Indeed, \textit{PD101S2} generated discussions about precarity in the idol market and excessive competition generated by these programmes (Ahn, 2016).
However, as many have cautioned, it is important to take the agency of audience into consideration without romanticising it (Couldry and Littler, 2011): the audience were preoccupied with the final result of the competition rather than the exploitative nature of the programme. Some of them suspected the possibility of the programme’s votes being fabricated, leading to police investigations in 2019 that revealed that several key producers of the *PD101* had rigged votes in all four seasons of the show in return for financial favours. The irony is that these members of audience have reinforced neoliberal selfhood by taking the scandal as an issue of ‘unfair competition’ and ‘employment fraud’. While they heavily condemn *PD101*’s producers, suspect the reality TV format and question the meritocracy myth, they hardly contest the desirable selfhood which is at the centre of the show: if the results were really entirely determined by audience votes, then they would not have a problem with the show and it would be seen as ‘fair’ (*Korea JoongAng Daily*, 2019). Meanwhile, viewers’ feedback on *Choco Bank* and *Be Positive* on Youtube and Naver TV Cast indicate that both domestic and international audiences take these web dramas mostly as an extension of K-pop idols’ transmedia presence, showing their love for the members of EXO with no interest in questioning the dramas’ moral messages.

We wonder if pop culture producers can – and under what conditions – offer a reflexive space where neoliberal subjectivity is critically reconsidered and its alternatives are imagined. It might be worth noting that the phenomenal success of the boy band BTS is attributed to its promotion of an alternative discourse of youth (youths who are honest about their weaknesses, come to terms with their failures, have the courage to give up their dream and love themselves instead of seeking external approval), which has struck a chord with domestic and global fans alike (*Munhwa Ilbo*, 2019). Yet for its management company, which aggressively seeks profit, the band’s unconventional telling of youth is a source to create derivative commodities (*JoongAng Ilbo*, 2019). Furthermore, the narrative of the ‘real self’ that has been adopted by other idol groups can be seen as the K-pop industry’s timely response to what resonates among a target youth constituency. While the narrative of the unconventional self unsets the typical script of neoliberal selfhood, it is becoming a new K-pop motif and perhaps expanding the scope of ‘creative dispositif’ so that it can accommodate ‘mildly’ rebellious voices.

It is important to look for varying possibilities of ‘oppositional agency’ in cultural consumers and producers, which would contest the hegemony of the dominant narrative of youth and creative work (Couldry and Littler, 2011). At the same time, however, we see some powerful alternatives to the neoliberal selfhood taking the forms of populism, far-right nationalism and attacks on liberal political values (Brown, 2019). For example, in Korea, the discourse of youth’s hardship and disaffection is increasingly interwoven with sentiments of anti-feminism, anti-immigration and the victimhood of young male Koreans, instigating unprecedented ‘culture wars’ (CNN, 2019; *Sisain*, 2019). What we witness is the ‘messiness’ of the emerging terrain of alternatives where neoliberal selfhood is mitigated and contested (Couldry and Littler, 2011; C Kim, 2017; McRobbie, 2016: 15–16), counter-conducted (Death, 2010), and reworked and reinforced (Brown, 2019). In this messiness, the multitude of agencies challenge or rearticulate neoliberal subjectivity in partnership with different political forces, resulting in varying effects and consequences. We call for research on those alternatives, beyond the idea of a singular
oppositional agency, and especially their connections to implicit cultural policy, pop culture production and audience participation.

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**Notes**
1. Examples include Bibimbap Backpackers, Kimchi Bus and Arirang School. See https://www.huffingtonpost.kr/haesun-choi/story_b_4851312.html, https://intropage.net/kimchibus and https://world.kbs.co.kr/service/contents_view.htm?lang=k&menu_cate=people&id=&board_seq=347613 (accessed 8 August 2021).
2. See: https://tv.naver.com/p/webdrama
3. See Spectory (http://spectory.net/, accessed 13 March 2020) to see many examples of competitions and prizes organised by business corporates as well as public organisations. Their main targets are young people, especially undergraduates in creative arts and humanities. This is a very important field where Korea’s future creatives test their ideas and skills and shape their orientation under the direct influence of corporates. Yet, how this field operates and affects the creativity of undergraduates is yet to be researched.
4. See https://www.hankyung.com/society/article/2019102073161 (accessed 10 August 2020)
5. The web drama ranking list is available on constv.co.kr (accessed 15 August 2019).

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