

**Mental Health Crisis in South Korea**

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## Mental Health Crisis in South Korea

### 1. Introduction

#### 1.1 Problem Statement

The Republic of South Korea was once known as a hermit kingdom but soon became a globalized society as it underwent massive changes. In 1910-1945, Japan colonized Korea resulting in the separation of the country at the end of the Korean War in 1953. The battle was far from over as the people of South Korea were left to face the aftermath of war, the separation of their beloved nation, and the long road they had ahead towards democratization. Although the economy faltered during the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, South Korea was able to overcome the financial hardship. All these events shaped a hermit kingdom to become the country we know today as the Republic of Korea (ROK). Although South Korea has blossomed as one of Asia's leading nations when it comes to entrepreneurship and economic growth, the rapid industrialization and economic development resulted in the lack of social development and welfare strategies and policies (Sun-In 1995).

Throughout the evolution, South Korea was a nation influenced by Confucian ideals such as filial piety, family hierarchy, and strong ties between generations (Yang & Rosenblatt 2008). These ideals built a collectivist nation, one that emphasizes conformity and ensures that everything is done for the good of the group, not on a single individual. The socioeconomic changes have challenged these ideals as the value placed on filial piety is being abandoned. Instead, people are encouraged to adopt an individualistic culture, one that emphasizes freedom and personal achievement. The social pressures faced by the youth in the educational system as well as the adults in the workforce are really affecting the mental health of people in South Korea. The main problem of this development is that the concept of mental health continues to be stigmatized in South Korea as it is viewed as a weakness.

Stigma against mental health is problematic as it acts as a barrier for individuals with mental disorders to receive help. People develop a fear of mental illness which then prevents them from getting properly diagnosed, leading to the impediment of early diagnosis and prevention (Park & Jeon 2016). According to the World Health Organization (WHO), 85% of people with severe mental illness do not receive treatment. Without treatment, symptoms can worsen leading to high stress and an impairment in the person's ability to perform their social and occupational roles. According to Park and Jeon, it is also believed that those who suffer from mental disorders have a harder time reintegrating themselves into society as they can feel like outcasts during remission, the period of recovery, becoming dejected and left to conceive a negative perception of themselves. This will only result in the deterioration of life satisfaction, resulting in relapse, the return of active symptoms, continuing the vicious cycle of rehabilitation and hospitalization (Park & Jeon 2016).

In the last decade, South Korea has been ranked top among the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in terms of suicide rates. According to data collected from the OECD, South Korea has faced dramatic increases in life expectancy and reductions in infant mortality rates which indicates a great and wide coverage of the population through their universal health insurance (Kim 2012). Although a lot of focus has been placed to reform the healthcare system, not enough attention has been given to the quality of mental health care in South Korea. As the 2015 OECD report for the Republic of Korea Health System Review states:

Public education and awareness campaigns on mental health are not well established.

With increased concern about suicide prevention, several campaigns have been attempted mainly at the local level, but they have not been well planned (p.72)

The high suicide rates in the ROK are significant as they indicate a nation that needs to place a greater focus on the mental health of its citizens. More effort needs to be made to destigmatize mental disorders and provide mental health awareness to the population as suicide rates and depression tend to be highly correlated. If South Korea continues to overlook the importance of mental health, it will ultimately lead to a negative impact on their economy as the suicide rates continue to increase.

## **1.2 Purpose of the Study**

A mental health crisis is occurring in South Korea as the suicide rate has become the highest among developed countries. Over the years the suicide rates in South Korea have risen, but to change the alarming increase of such deaths, more efforts need to be made to destigmatize mental illness and encourage people to seek help. In a short span of time, South Korea has become an international powerhouse when it comes to technology and culture, but how can a country that is advanced in their medical technology and have the fewest people dying from physical health problems struggle to bring awareness of mental health problems? Why is mental health so segregated in the general health care system offered in South Korea and what can be done to strengthen the mental health care system?

To answer these questions, we must first investigate what is affecting the mental health of the people in South Korea and analyze the government's current efforts to increase mental health awareness. To properly decrease the suicide rate in South Korea, we must fully understand what has caused it the increase and analyze the effects that mental health problems have had on society. Therefore, I plan to investigate the suicidal trends, psychological factors and predictors of suicidal

ideation of three different groups of people in South Korea: youth, elderly, and idols (Korean celebrities) by analyzing different research and studies pertaining to each group.

High academic pressures and familial expectations are causing high stress in young adults and teenagers. Due to these expectations, many are driven to suicide as the social pressures become too much for them to handle. As the younger generation focuses more on their education, the elderly is being abandoned by their families. The older generation is left to care for themselves leading to a high number of suicides among this group as they do not wish to become a burden on their families. Lastly, the Korean culture has rapidly globalized worldwide through *hallyu* (Korean wave) as it introduced Korean food, Korean dramas and most impactful of all, Korean pop to the world. As Korean idols are constantly being pushed by their companies to produce music, promote, tour, and diet in an endless, tireless cycle, the focus remains on how much money can be gained from such activities and the health of the individual is compromised. Over the years, more Korean idols are committing suicide due to the pressure and harsh criticism that follows a lifestyle in the spotlight. As the people of South Korea look up to their favorite idol groups to provide them with comfort through hardship, they are further emotionally scarred and pressured when they see those they love end their life. By analyzing these trends, we can investigate what is driving people over the edge and what is being done to prevent others from falling down the same path. If more efforts are not taken by the government to place a greater emphasis on the mental health care system and bringing awareness to mental health in South Korea, it will harm the nation as an increase in mental illness and suicide rates will negatively affect the economy as it deteriorates the dependency ratio (active population divided by non-active folks like seniors and young people) (“The economic toll of high”, 2017). As more lives are lost, the active people bear the burden of caring for children, youth and the elderly continuing the endless cycle of academic, familial, and societal pressures.

### 1.3 Clarification of Terms

According to Wakefield's Harmful Dysfunction Model (1992), a condition should be defined a mental disorder if it meets either of these two criterion: (1) The condition results from the inability of some internal mechanism (mental or physical to perform its natural function therefore something inside the person is not working properly and/or (2) Condition causes some harm to the person as judges by the standards of the person's culture. Negative consequences are measured by the person's own subjective distress or difficulty performing expected social or occupational roles. Therefore, a mental disorder is defined in terms of harmful dysfunction as it is either caused by the failure of an internal mechanism to perform its natural function and/or if it causes harm to a person as they face judgement from those around them (Wakefield, 1992).

Many terms in psychology are used interchangeably depending on the research purpose. Throughout this paper the terms of mental illness and mental disorder will be used reciprocally. To understand what these terms represent, their definition will be clarified.

Mental illness, mental disorder and mental health are similar concepts within two different perspectives. Mental health suggests positive psychological functioning, the strength and promotion of competence and health. Mental illness and mental disorder suggest psychological dysfunction, focusing on the psychopathology and treatment of the disease (Shin 1996). The mental health perspective is a basis that suggests how important an individual's environment is to foster positive human growth (Nelson et al. 1985).

Depression is a common and serious mood disorder that as those who suffer from depression experience persistent feelings of sadness, hopelessness, and lose interest in activities they once enjoyed. According to the American Psychiatric Association's (2013) *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5<sup>th</sup> ed.; DSM-V), to be diagnosed with depression,

symptoms must be present for at least two weeks. The DSM-V outlines the following criterion to make a diagnosis of depression:

The individual must be experiencing five or more symptoms during the same 2-week period and at least one symptom should be either (1) depressed mood or (2) loss of interest or pleasure.

1. Depressed mood most of the day nearly every day.
2. Markedly diminished interest or pleasure in all, or almost all, activities most of the day, nearly every day.
3. Significant weight loss when not dieting or weight gain or decrease or increase in appetite nearly every day.
4. A slowing down of thought and a reduction of physical movement (observable by others, not merely subjective feelings of restlessness or being slowed down).
5. Fatigue or loss of energy nearly every day.
6. Feelings of worthlessness or excessive or inappropriate guilt nearly every day.
7. Recurrent thoughts of death, recurrent suicidal ideation without a specific plan, or suicide attempt or a specific plan for committing suicide.

To receive a diagnosis for a mental disorder such as depression, the symptoms must produce clinically significant impairment or distress in one's personal, social, or occupational life (APA, 2013).

Depression is a condition that remains invisible if not spoken about and should not be diminished and classified as a form of sadness. Sadness is a normal emotion that everyone experiences due to a trigger whether it be a broken heart, death of a loved one, loss of job, etc. Depression does not always need a trigger as people can have everything and are yet unable to experience a sense of joy and pleasure. Depression is associated with the serious disruption of everyday activities that can also lead to a self-diminishing, negative thought pattern. Such thoughts can ultimately lead to self-harm and suicidal inclinations that do not normally arise from non-depressive sadness (Truschel, 2019).

To fully understand the state of mental health in South Korea, the study will focus on suicide rates among the population as depression is a strong predictor of suicide. According to Jang et al. (2018), depressive disorder is strongly associated with completed suicide and about 60%

of all suicides are estimated to stem from depression and other mood disorders. In South Korea, 80% of suicide deaths are associated with the symptoms of depression (Park et al., 2013). Brazier (2018) states that suicidal ideation is defined as the means thinking about or planning suicide. Thoughts can range from a detailed plan to a fleeting consideration, but it does not include the final act of suicide (Brazier, 2018). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2019) defines suicide as death caused by injuring oneself with the intent to die and defines a suicide attempt when someone harms themselves with the intent to end their life, but they do not die as a result of their actions.

As a strong correlation between depression and suicide is indicated from multiple studies (Park et al., 2013; Chung & Joung, 2012; Park, 2014; Shin et al., 2012), it is important to realize the impact mental disorders and illnesses can have on a person's mental health to help decrease suicide ideation and suicide completion amongst the population of South Korea.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 State of the Field**

As the suicide rates in South Korea continue to be the highest amongst the OECD countries, research has been done to investigate what is driving the population to suicide. Through extensive research, many are trying to investigate the correlation between suicidal ideation and various factors such as mental health, physical health, societal pressures, and academic pressures. To fully understand the suicide phenomenon research has been broken down to target different groups: elderly, students, adults, working force, females, males, and North Korean defectors. For this study, extensive research on the youth and elderly was found, but most of the research has been collected based on the quality of life of those living in Seoul. Although suicide rates are higher for those

living in rural areas, little research has been done to analyze the correlation of suicide and mental health of the rural population. Little research can also be found on the role entertainment industries play on the mental health of Korean idols and the effects of idol suicide on the Korean population. Despite these limitations, important implications for understanding the relationship between mental health and suicidal ideation can be found with the existing data.

## **2.2 Mental Health Amongst the Youth of South Korea**

The sharp increase of suicide rates amongst the youth of South Korea is shocking as suicide is the leading cause of death for Korean youth aged 15-24 (Park et al., 2014). As the number of completed suicides by youth in the ROK continues to rise, it is important to examine what is driving young South Koreans to engage in the act of self-destruction.

The younger generation of South Korea suffers as the current educational system and the pressure they receive from their family to succeed academically has become an overbearing weight on their shoulders. According to Lee et al. (2010), suicidal teenagers in South Korea indicated academic pressure to be the greatest stressor in their life including difficulties with career choice, low academic achievement, amount of academic work, and lack of rest. In addition, receiving results on university entrance examination and poor academic performance contributes to depression and suicidal ideation (Lee et al., 2010). Students place a great emphasis on their grades and ranking in school as they are constantly compared to their peers. Creating competition between classmates can be dangerous as students start to identify their self-worth in their performance (rank and grades) which can lead to poor academic satisfaction. In addition, constant criticism from their family and social pressures can force them past their breaking point.

The educational system in South Korea is one envied around the world as they regularly top international exams in math and literacy. Students spend countless hours studying and preparing for the *suneung*, the college entrance exams known as the College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT). This exam not only impacts whether a student will have the opportunity to go to college but plays a role when applying to prestigious universities. The main goal is to attend any of the SKY (Seoul National, Korea, Yonsei) Universities to pave the path of becoming successful as “admission to a prestigious college is especially important because the reputation of the college one attends greatly influences one’s career” (Kim & Dembo, 2000, p.95). Parents desire for their children to get good scores on the CSAT leads them to place pressure on their children to study diligently. Such pressure makes a child fear disappointing their parents to the point where failure academically is having a great impact on their mental health. One study from Park (2013) found that depressive symptoms stemming from academic stress lead to suicidal ideation among adolescents. Therefore, it is important to further analyze the relationship between poor mental health and suicide amongst the South Korean youth.

A study by Park et al. (2014) analyzed data collected from interviews and surveys on the topic of mental health and suicide from 172 randomly selected participants between the ages of 18-24. The dependent variable, suicide proneness, was measured through the following five yes/no questions: “Over the last month...” (1) “have you ever felt that you would be better off dead or wished to die;” (2) “have you desired to hurt yourself in any way;” (3) “have you ever thought about suicide;” (4) “have you ever planned to commit suicide;” and (5) “have you ever attempted suicide?” (p. 104). The independent variable, depression, was measured through the participant’s responses to a general question (“Over the last two weeks, how often have you been bothered by any of the following problems?”) scored on a 4-point Likert scale extending from 1 (not at all) to

4 (nearly every day) to various topics such as: “little interest or pleasure in doing things;” and “thoughts that you would be better off dead or of hurting yourself in some way” (p. 104). Aside from measuring depressive attitudes, the participant’s acceptability of suicide, survivor status, family strain, and reasons to live were also measured (Park et al., 2014).

Park et al.’s (2014) study indicated that the correlation between suicide proneness and depression was statistically significant as it is the most consistently associated and a strong predictor of the likelihood of suicidal proneness for youth in South Korea. The study also found that family relation contributes to both depressive feeling and suicidal proneness as students are struggling from parental pressure to achieve academic success resulting in academic pressure as a significant stressor (Park et al., 2014). As the youth of South Korea continue to be pressured by their family to succeed, their mental health continues to be comprised.

A separate study by Chung and Joung (2012) further supports the strong link between depression and suicidal ideation as they used data collected by a national Korean survey questioning risk behaviors and suicidal behaviors of 48,814 middle school and high school students. The dependent variable of the study was suicidal behaviors which were categorized as suicidal ideation and attempted suicide as subjects were asked to respond to questions in a yes/no fashion. Examples of the questions included: “Did you ever consider attempting suicide during the past 12 months?” and “Did you actually attempt suicide during the last 12 months?” (p. 450). Chung and Joung’s (2012) study focused on three independent variables, but only the effect of psychological factors on suicidal behaviors will be analyzed. Depression as a psychological factor was recorded through questions such as: “Were you feeling so sad or hopeless for at least two weeks or more that you stopped doing some usual activities during the last 12 months?” (p.450). The results of the study showed that depression is the most significant risk factor for suicidal

ideation and attempted suicide as it was strongly linked to suicidal behavior among youth (Chung & Joung, 2012).

Chung and Joung (2012) and Park et al.'s (2014) studies, both found that depression is a huge factor in suicidal ideation amongst the youth of South Korea as the current educational system is taking a toll on their mental health. To decrease the rate of suicide of the youth in the ROK, the government needs to make a better effort in treating depression as it is an important aspect in the prevention of suicide. However, the cultural stigma attached to psychological disorders makes depression very difficult to treat. As students face failure in an academic setting, they feel like they are left with no choice but to commit suicide. By placing too much pressure on the youth to succeed academically, more lives are being lost in a society that needs its younger generation for the economy to continue to thrive. Therefore, it is important to understand that youth suicide in South Korea is a problem that has stemmed from the impact the pressure found in the academics, familial, and societal expectations have had on the mental health of its younger generation. Thus, suicide prevention efforts should not only rely on the treatment of psychiatric disorders but should also focus on the social and cultural contexts of Korean society.

### **2.3 Mental Health Amongst the Elderly in South Korea**

South Korea is the leading country amongst the OECD in suicide rates, but among the nation, the elderly has the highest suicide rates in the population compared to those in the adolescents. According to Shin et al. (2012), suicide rates among those aged 70 years and older have been constantly increasing since 1985. There are many reasons as to why the suicide rates amongst the elderly in South Korea have increased, but one main reason is the prevalence of mental illness in the population. As there is an increase in the proportion of Korean elderly people living

alone due to rapid ageing and the breakdown of traditional family structures, there continues to be an increase in suicide rates and progression in the severity of mental illness amongst the elderly population. Before discussing methods of prevention, the relationship between mental health factors and suicidal ideation amongst the elderly people who are either living alone or living with others must be investigated. In a society with high suicide rates, it is also important to analyze the correlation between suicidal ideation and mental health in comparison to that of physical health to gain a better understanding of what is affecting the mental health of the elderly (Park, 2014).

The elderly population is being neglected and forgotten by their family members as the young are under pressure to succeed. Data gathered by the Korea National Statistical Office (2011) indicates that the proportion of Korean elderly living alone was 13.6% in 2001 but had increased to 20.1% in 2009. Those living alone have also recorded poor physical and mental health such as high functional impairment and higher rates of emotional disorders (Korea National Statistical Office, 2011). Park's research acquired data from the 2009 Korea National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (KNHANES) conducted by the Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to investigate a population of 10,533 individuals through face to face interviews. 1,753 of the individuals interviewed were elderly people aged 65 years and over. The type of elderly person was classified as either "living alone" or "living with others (one or more people)" (p.95). The average age of elderly people living alone was 73.4 years and 71.8 years for those living with others. The dependent variable, suicidal ideation, was measured with the following question yes or no question: "Have you thought seriously about suicide in the past 12 months?" (p.95). The independent variable was classified into two categories: socio-demographic factors and physical and mental health status. The socio-demographic variables were sex, age, educational attainment, and household income. The physical health and mental health variables were obtained through

levels of perceived stress (“light or no ” or “some heavy”), experience of feeling depressed for at least 2 weeks (yes, no), and physical illness (yes, no) with further questions on the type of physical health (Park, 2014, p.95).

The results of the study showed that suicidal ideation during the past year was significantly associated with socio demographic variables such as: sex, age, education, monthly household income and living arrangements. The results indicated that elderly people with a low educational attainment and low level of monthly household income comprised a higher proportion of those expressing suicidal ideation. The data collected also revealed that the elderly living alone had more suicidal thoughts compared to those living with others. In addition, experience of depressed feelings, perceived stress levels, self-rated health status, a limitation in daily activities, and alcohol use were significantly related to suicide ideation. Most astonishing of all was the indicator that experiencing depressive feelings for two or more weeks were significantly associated with suicidal thoughts among both elderly groups: those living alone, those living with others, demonstrating that depressive feelings are a major contributor to elderly suicidal ideation (Park, 2014).

In a study by Shin et al. (2012), a sample of 1,548 participants were taken from a larger prospective study researching dementia and its risk factors to examine the influence of physical and mental health factors on suicidal ideation as previous studies reported that between 71% and 95% of the elderly people who committed suicide had been previously diagnosed with a mental disorder. The participants fell into three groups: suicide ideation without history of suicide attempt group (SIG), suicide attempt group (SAG), and a control group. The relationship between suicide ideation/history of suicide attempt and sociodemographic variables, mental health factors, and physical health factors was analyzed. The study found that depression had the highest correlation with suicide ideation among other factors such as emotional problem, physical problem, and

socioeconomic problems. Major depression was present in approximately 1-2% of the subjects and 10-15% suffered from less severe depressive symptoms (Shin et al., 2012).

Mental Illness is a subject that needs more attention as the amount of suicides by the elderly increases. Cattell (2000) states that depression is a huge indicator of elderly suicide as many studies have reported that somewhere between 60% and 90% of elderly suicide showed a prevalence of major depression and other mood disorder. Both Park (2014) and Shin et al.'s (2012) studies also highlighted the impact depression can have on suicide ideation as depression has been identified as one of the most important risk factors for suicide in the elderly. Although research has further exemplified how mental health can affect an individual, suicide in South Korea has been recognized as an individual problem rather than a social issue as a strong social stigma on the topic remains (Park, 2014). The findings of these studies highlight the need for suicide-intervention services targeted to the high-risk elderly population as early identification of a mental disorder can lead to effective therapeutic intervention.

#### **2.4 Mental Health Amongst the Idols in South Korea**

As mental health starts to become a problem within the youth and elderly population in South Korea, an increase in the amount of suicides amongst Korean idols (celebrities) have also occurred. Although there is not a surge in numbers of idol deaths, the loss of young lives to those belonging in the famous Korean pop groups such as SHINee, f(x), and KARA have negatively affected their fans. Korean idols play a huge role in South Korea's economy as "K-pop has swiftly become South Korea's number one cultural export: the currently most popular K-pop band, BTS, alone contributed 3.6 billion dollars to the country's GDP last year" (Valge & Hinsberg, 2019). The soft power of K-pop has placed immense pressure on idols from their entertainment companies to

maintain the façade of perfection. One single error from an idol can define the rest of their career. We need to further explore the world of K-pop to truly understand what is compelling idols to commit suicide and whether such deaths have an everlasting effect on society.

To many becoming a K-pop idol seems like a dream come true, but the harsh reality is that it takes a lot of critical training to undergo the road of becoming an idol. The Korean entertainment industry is an incredibly competitive work environment where constant change must be done to remain relevant as new groups and old groups compete with one another to remain active. Talented people are recruited at a young age and are selected to train anywhere between 5-10 years under harsh scrutiny before they can debut (Cheng, 2018). As trainees, individuals must take singing, dancing, acting, and language classes as the globalization of K-pop has made language learning an important skill to obtain. Many trainees are underage and must learn to juggle school and trainee life as most start their day as early as 5am and end as late as 1am the next day. As trainees sign a contract with their company, quitting might result in them having to pay a large sum of money back to the company for living expenses, vocal coaches, choreographers, stylist, and staff salaries (Chua, 2017).

For those lucky enough to debut, constant dieting is expected as idols need to maintain a certain weight to look appealing on-stage. Idols usually go on harsh and unhealthy diets that can only guarantee short-term weight loss as many will go through a yo-yo effect from constantly losing and gaining weight. Besides dieting and practicing, many will have packed schedules as marketing and promoting their work is essential to success. Footage of idols fainting and collapsing on stage have shown how idols are being overworked as they risk exhaustion and other health problems. Despite having to undergo training and work in a strict environment, many idols must face the criticism from their audience, fans, and netizens (internet citizens). “All K-pop stars must present

the perfect façade of a supremely talented and gorgeous, single, heterosexual star, seemingly accessible to fans of the opposite sex” in order to maintain their fanbase and keep netizens happy (Valge & Hinsberg, 2019). Many are prohibited from dating as it may cause jealousy from fans. Companies view their idols as identities they can manufacture and control in order to make profit from their success in the industry. To further understand how this unethical industry can affect the mental health of these talented artists, we will be analyzing the most recent suicides of two K-pop idols: SHINee’s Jonghyun and f(x)’s Sulli.

On December 18, 2017, K-pop idol Kim Jonghyun committed suicide by carbon monoxide poisoning in his apartment. The sudden death of SHINee’s main vocalist shocked many as he was flourishing in his solo career as a singer-songwriter, record producer, and radio host. Just a week before his death he had held a concert titled “Inspired” for his solo album. After his death, a suicide note that he left was found that read, “I am broken from inside. The depression that had been slowly eating me up finally devoured me and I couldn’t defeat it” (Cheng, 2018, pg.1). According to Cheng (2018), Jonghyun wrote that when he consulted his doctor about his depression, the doctor blamed his personality for his inability to combat the depression. Due to SHINee’s popularity as a 9-year group, the impact of his death was striking to the world.

Jonghyun’s death re-highlighted the severity of mental health disorders in South Korea and challenged the idea of such a disorder being viewed as “not real”. According to Cheng (2018), depression is frequently attributed to a negative attitude or a bad personality in Asian cultures leaving treatments to seem as unnecessary, a waste of time, and useless. However, the impact of Jonghyun’s death rekindled the importance of mental health as people witnessed how someone successful could succumb to their depression. Sadly, it was not much later until tragedy struck in the K-pop industry once again.

On October 14, 2019, singer and actress Sulli from f(x) was found dead in her Seoul home. Prior to her death, Sulli was suffering from severe depression as she was the subject of many hate comments. Due to her relationship with Dynamic Duo's rapper Choiza, who was 14 years her senior, Sulli was slut shamed and criticized throughout their public relationship from 2013-2017. In 2015 Sulli was condemned for being "selfish" as she withdrew from the group f(x) to focus on her solo career in acting. Sulli was later criticized for her support of the abolition of abortion in South Korea and continuously slut-shamed, called crazy and a psycho for her choice to omit wearing a bra. As the online verbal abuse continued, Sulli was placed under an intense working schedule despite the severity of her depression. Knowing that Sulli was dealing with depression, her company SM Entertainment had her go on "Night of the Hate Comments", a Korean variety show where artists read their hate comments out loud, which would only cause her to reexperience the all the negative emotions evoked from the cyber bullying she was receiving ("Sulli committed suicide", 2019).

The neglect from her company in helping her overcome her mental disorder as well as the constant cyberbullying occurring in Sulli's life pushed her over the edge as she could no longer handle the backlash, she was experiencing daily. Through Jonghyun and Sulli's deaths, it was made apparent that there was something wrong with the K-pop industry as more artists were starting to struggle with their mental health. A month after Sulli's death another idol, Goo Hara from KARA, a close friend of Sulli, had committed suicide after being embroiled in a public dispute with her former boyfriend who was blackmailing her to release an explicit video of them together at the same time that she was struggling with her own depression (Kwon, 2019). Although the severity mental illness can have on a person was evident with the loss of Jonghyun, little was done to help other artists, two years later, when they were facing criticism, hardships and

combatting their own mental disorders. Without enforcing a change in the industry, the loss of Korean idols can become problematic as copycat suicides are bound to take place.

A study from Chen et al. (2014), used data gathered from a national statistics collection of suicide morality for South Korea between September 2007 and December 2009 focusing on charcoal-burning suicides. On September 8, 2008, Ahn Jae-Hwan, a South Korean celebrity, killed himself by burning charcoal in a car which attracted extensive media coverage. At the time, charcoal-burning was not a common method of suicide. Therefore, Chen et al. (2014) desired to investigate the effect the celebrity's death had on the people of South Korea. The results of the study indicated that there was a sharp increase in the use of charcoal-burning after Ahn's death as the method accounted for 4.8% of suicides compared to the 0.85% before his death. The finding indicated that a copycat effect was triggered by the celebrity suicide which was not only substantial but long lasting as there was a dramatic increase in overall suicide rates as an over 30% rise occurred during 2007 and 2009. Although Ahn's death might not be the cause of the increase in suicides over a long period of time, it is still worrisome that the increase in charcoal-burning suicides may have contributed to the already rising suicide rates in South Korea (Chen et al., 2014).

Celebrity suicides are particularly prone to suicide modeling as they are extensively covered by the mass media. This can become problematic as idols have a large social impact as the role models of many young viewers. In Jonghyun's case a rise in suicides were seen after his death as "according to Statistics Korea, 13,670 people took their own lives in 2018, up 1,207 (9.7%) from a year before" (Suzuki, 2019). The entertainment industry in South Korea is a big culprit in creating a toxic environment that makes idols more susceptible to developing a mental illness. By controlling everything an idol does to maintain a façade of perfection and upholding them to unattainable beauty standards, more harm is being done to the Korean society. The government

relies on this industry to globalize South Korea as K-pop has helped promote Korea to international neighbors, improving the economy. But if more is not done to nurture the mental health of Korean idols by providing them with proper counseling throughout their career, an increase in suicides will continue as it will negatively affect the mental health of the youth of South Korea who look up to these idols for support during their own hardships and trials.

### **3. Combatting the Mental Health Crisis in South Korea**

Throughout the years, it has become evident that a mental health crisis is occurring in South Korea as the suicide rates of the youth, elderly, and idols have risen. Various research has highlighted the impact mental health has on the life of a person as a strong correlation between depression and suicide has been discovered (Park et al., 2013; Chung & Joung, 2012; Park, 2014; Shin et al., 2012; Lee et al., 2010; Park et al., 2014). To help the suicide rate in South Korea decrease overtime, there needs to be a change in the society to destigmatize mental disorders. Without improving the mental health of the population, it will be difficult to decrease the rate of suicides as it becomes the only option for people to escape the difficulties faced when encountering a mental illness. Depression is a serious mental illness that can range in severity, but many myths, misunderstandings, and stigma continue to be barriers to treatment. To treat depression effectively, it is important for an individual to seek help and get properly diagnosed. The problem with a society that stigmatized those with mental disorders is that it makes it complicated for people to seek help. Left untreated, depression can become life-threatening. Therefore, we must analyze the current effort South Korea is making to prevent suicide among its population and discover what can be done to improve that effort.

### **3.1 Suicide Prevention Amongst the Youth of South Korea**

In Korea, suicide by jumping from a height is the third leading method of suicide, but it is the most popular method among the younger people. The most notorious suicide location in South Korea is the Mapo Bridge located across the Han River in Seoul. In 2011, a life insurance company attempted to turn the bridge into a “Bridge of Life” by imprinting photos of smiling people and heartwarming messages. When people walk near the bridge, sensors will light up the guardrails to illuminate messages offering hope (Kim et al., 2019). A rescue team was also placed near the bridge that relies on emergency calls and CCTV footage of the bridge to monitor pedestrians near the bridge. If someone lingers near the bridge too long or tries to jump over a sensor goes off to alert the rescue team. The rescue team will then send boats and divers to scour the riverbend in hope of finding the victim alive (Journeyman Pictures, 2015). Although the “Bridge of Life” campaign started with good intention, all messages and pictures were later removed in 2019 as the messages written did not seem to address suicide prevention at all. Instead, a new fence was installed on December 2016 to prevent people from jumping off the bridge (Jang, 2019). Although great prevention has been implemented to decrease the amount of suicides on the Mapo Bridge, there needs to be a greater effort to target the cause of suicide ideation amongst the youth South Korea, depression and anxiety derived from academic pressure.

Due to the lack of counseling for the youth in South Korea, they are not provided with alternatives when facing mental health problems leading them to conclude suicide as their only option. To help the youth of South Korea, the government should implement school-based suicide awareness programs as it would allow students to freely explore a range of issues such as self-esteem, health, personal values, and academic concerns. Through such a program, the emotional well-being of vulnerable adolescents can be cared for by the gatekeepers or properly trained staff

hired can identify at-risk individuals. The youth of South Korea are plagued with a lot of problems whether it be facing depression, having survived a suicide attempt, having lost a close friend to suicide, or suffering from stressful family expectations and relationships. By implementing a school-based suicide awareness program that all students need to undergo during their school career, young people are not only taught about suicide but are made aware of the emotional impact mental disorders can have on an individual. Introducing the topic of mental health can help to destigmatize it as well as bring awareness to the topic so that they can not only help themselves but become compassionate and supportive of others undergoing personal difficulties. Although similar programs are taking place in South Korea, it is important that the government enforces such programs to all schools to receive their full effect (Park et al., 2014).

Aside from targeting the school community, efforts must be made to educate the families of the South Korean youth as family stress has been a significant source of both depression and suicidal proneness (Park et al., 2014). Parental education needs to occur through a community-based approach that can address suicide risk factors and identify high-risk individuals and families. A report from May et al. (2005) indicated that a community-based approach implemented in a native American community helped decrease teen suicide rates as it mobilized the community to have ownership of the suicide problem occurring and find solutions to the problems and issues faced by community members. Through community-based programs, behavioral health services, clinical and outreach programs can be incorporated into the community system to help a wide range of people aside from the youth. As everyone in the community plays an essential role to help prevent the increase in suicide rates, it creates a sense of cultural continuity through the teamwork of preserving and recovering their own cultural heritages. As the cultural values that once held the society together are now being forgotten in a society caught between Confucianism and capitalism,

it is essential for a community system to maintain cultural continuity to develop youths' selfhood. Disruption to self-continuity amongst youth places them at a higher risk of suicide as the foundation with their community gets lost (Park et al., 2014).

Therefore, creating a connection between community members and implementing suicide awareness programs in schools can help improve the overall mental health of South Korean youth. To effectively decrease the suicide rates, more people need to become aware of the impact social and academic pressures have on the mental health of the current youth. By properly educating parents, peers, and teachers on mental health, suicide, and academic issues, it targets the root of the problem by giving people an opportunity to speak out instead of leaving them with no other choice but to act out.

### **3.2 Suicide Prevention Amongst the Elderly of South Korea**

In attempt to tackle the rising suicide rate in South Korea, The Korea Association for Suicide Prevention (KASP) was created in December 2003 to educate the public about the rising suicide rate and asked the media to help in reducing copycat effects from occurring by limiting its coverage on suicides. KASP was a strong supporter of promoting counseling, calling Life Line (a suicide hotline), or seeking self-help groups when a person was overcome by unhappiness and stress. In 2011, the National Assembly created the Korean Suicide Prevention Center which passed the Suicide Prevention Act, which provided legal foundation for suicide prevention efforts. According to Kim et al. (2019), in Asian countries, pesticide/herbicide ingestions account for more than 60% of all suicides, in South Korea it accounted for 18% of all suicides. It was especially a problem amongst the elderly population in South Korea as it accounted for 45% of suicides in rural areas. Through this prevention act, Korean authorities banned paraquat (a type of pesticide) use in

2011 which helped the number of suicides from pesticides/herbicide ingestion to decrease by 60% in 2014 compared to 2011. Amongst the elderly, the prohibition inflicted a sharp decline in suicide rates from 81.9 of elderly individuals per 100,000 in 2011 to 55.5 in 2014. The Korean Suicide Prevention Center started to distribute a 'pesticide safety box' where farmers could safely lock up pesticides which helped it from falling into the wrong hands. Although forcing farmers to lock up their leftover pesticides is a good prevention method, keys are usually kept nearby allowing access to remain. Therefore, it highlights the importance regularly monitoring elderly living alone in rural areas need to further prevent suicide efforts from occurring (Kim et al., 2019).

The elderly population worked hard to turn the nation around after the Korean War, but now 49% of Koreans aged 65 and above live in poverty (Journeyman Pictures, 2016). Traditionally South Koreans relied on their family to look after them in old age, but due to the deconstruction of Confucian ideals in the society, many are left to care for themselves. Currently, social workers are assigned to rural areas in South Korea to visit the elderly and give consultation with families of suicide victims. In an interview completed by Journeyman Pictures (2016), a social worker speaks out about current government efforts in helping the elderly located in rural areas of South Korea. He states, "The budget is too tight. The local government cannot handle all cases. That's nonsense!" His comment critiques the inadequate support system the elderly receive from the Basic Old-Age Pension which is about KRW 250,000 a month (OECD, 2019). The elderly is struggling to survive as the monthly basic pension payment is inadequate to cover the minimum cost of living which was KRW 617,000 in 2015 (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asian and the Pacific (UNESCAP), 2015, pg.5). As survival becomes more difficult, the elderly often sees themselves as an additional burden to their children leading them to become depressed and take their own lives.

To fully help the elderly population, connections to other individuals in their community need to be established to decrease the number of elderly in isolation. Although there is a current Mental Health Act that is establishing and expanding the number of community health systems, a divide between community members and health professionals continues to exist due to cultural stigma surrounding mental health. This instills fear in the elderly to visit mental health centers as they do not want to be diagnosed as mentally ill. Therefore, the government needs to assign partnerships between community centers and suicide prevention centers in multiple geographical locations made accessible to the elderly. These programs need to be properly funded to provide activities and resources that can combine the centers to introduce a community center approach instead of relying solely on mental health professionals. This would allow community centers to provide suicide prevention programs and screening programs without the addition of the social stigma of visiting a mental health center. Such a community-based program would need gatekeepers to plan, conduct, and evaluate suicide prevention strategies with community members which in return can also help reduce stigma towards suicide allowing people to properly seek help. A similar program was introduced in Singapore known as Senior Activity Centers (SAC), that offer recreational activities, counselling with mental health professionals, and referral systems for those who require mental health care. Although there is not a direct effect on suicide due to care effect, according to WHO (2016), Singapore has one of the lowest suicide rates amongst Asian countries. Therefore, the creation of a mental health community center network can help the elderly by making suicide prevention resources accessible to them as well as work on destigmatizing mental health at a community level.

### **3.3 Suicide Prevention Amongst the Idols of South Korea**

The various suicide cases of idols such as Jonghyun, Goo Hara, and Sulli revealed the neglect many idols face when suffering from a mental disorder. Although the former idols spoke out about their depression, almost no help was offered to them as they were instead ridiculed and forced to endure their pain alone. Due to the negligence of South Korea creating prevention measures in the past to help cope with mental illness, it now suffers as the lack of interest resulted in negative attitudes and stigma towards mental illness. Although pop culture is considered to be South Korea's most successful export, it comes with a heavy price tag as various idols are often mistreated by their companies, are pressured to emit a façade of perfection, fear failing and fall victim to harsh criticism. The current state on the entertainment industry makes it almost impossible for a Korean idol to not experience several mental health issues.

To help improve the mental health of Korean celebrities, there needs to be a change in the way the current industry is producing its stars. Throughout the trainee process, idols are losing a self of self as it is being instilled in them to become perfect. The industry needs to deconstruct the portrayal of "perfect idols" as it is only causing more harm on the society by introducing unattainable standards to the rest of the population. Although it seems impossible to change the way the industry has been running, to improve the K-pop industry and produce healthier idols, entertainment companies need to focus more on the mental health of their stars. A start would be to implement suicide prevention classes to all their employees. Through such classes, idols can be given an opportunity to share their burdens and seek help. Aside from implementing suicide prevention classes for their stars, each company should train their staff on how to properly identify people who may be at risk for suicide. Such training should especially be completed by the manager of each group as they will have the most contact with the group's members. By increasing

the number of gatekeepers in each company, it will increase the likelihood that those suffering from a mental disorder can be identified earlier in the progression of suicidal thoughts and behavior.

Aside from implementing suicide prevention classes, the government should enforce all companies to employ mental health care professionals and require a set of times an idol must visit them throughout a year. During the trainee period, some companies have monthly check-ins to evaluate the progress of a trainee when it comes to their singing, weight, dances, and acting, but they should also make it a priority to care for the mental health of their underage trainees. Therefore, it is crucial that a primary care professional who can identify, refer, and monitor vulnerable patients is included in the staffing of an entertainment company. Having a primary care professional in the building and making it available to their artists will help destigmatize mental health amongst the company's population and provide idols with the comfort and access they need to seek help and the proper treatment.

Suicide prevention amongst idols is essential as Korean celebrities play a huge role in the increase of suicides amongst the general population especially amongst the youth. When an idol commits suicide, extensive media coverage occurs contributing to the rise of copycat suicides. Celebrity suicide has been found to be one of the most significant predictors for youth suicidal ideation among high school students in South Korea (Lee et al., 2010). The media can play a better role in delivering news about suicide by teaming up with suicide prevention advocates to help educate and foster innovative strategies about suicide prevention and mental health problems. Providing more education on suicide and mental illness, can help eliminate the stigma that is currently keeping people from seeking the treatment they need. Therefore, a change must not only occur in the media, but in the entertainment company as well to help decrease suicide amongst idols and prevent the prospect of copycat suicides.

#### 4. Conclusion

The Republic of South Korea has one of the highest life expectancy rates in the world, but its fast-changing society has had a negative impact on the quality of life as suicide has become an epidemic. As the suicide rates in South Korea continues to be the highest among members of the OECD, the government needs to place a greater priority in trying to destigmatize and increase mental health awareness across the nation.

For the youth, the overwhelming burden of qualifying for a prestigious university and entering a practical career has become a big reason for the increase in suicide rates as they are forced to dedicate their time to become an outstanding candidate. As Lee et al.'s (2010) study found, academic pressure was the greatest stressor among South Korea's youth and poor academic performance contributed to depression and suicidal ideation. By placing high expectations on the youth of South Korea to succeed academically, many become burdened by social pressures and are plagued by the fear of failure. Without the proper help, the youth become vulnerable to depression, a huge indicator in suicidal ideation (Chung and Joung, 2012; Park et al., 2014). To prevent the further loss of more youth from society, the government needs to target the problem at a school-based and community-based level. By offering school-based and community-based suicide awareness programs, it allows students and community members to become educated about issues involving suicide and mental disorders. By focusing on the social and cultural contexts of Korean society, more people become knowledgeable about the topic, and members of the community become better at identifying those at-risk from suicidal ideation. As the current youth of South Korea is aging, it is essential to diminish the academic pressure they face. If nothing is done to change the current educational system, South Korea's youth will abandon a Confucian society for that of capitalist society that solely focuses on an individual's success. With the loss of

a Confucian society, the youth are abandoning their duty to their family as they become trapped in an endless cycle of work to achieve success.

The elderly account for the population with the highest suicide rate in South Korea as they are being abandoned by their family and are not given the adequate resources for survival from the government. The generation responsible for the country's economic miracle has been poorly rewarded and instead choose suicide to prevent from becoming a burden on their families. As South Korea is facing the dilemma of becoming an aging society, there has been a rapid increase in the amount of elderly that live alone (Shin et al., 2012). As a result, there continues to be an increase in suicide rates and mental health problems as many shown signs of depression before taking their lives. Depression has been identified as the most important risk factor for suicide in the elderly, but little is being done to help the overwhelming population of elderly suffering from mental disorders (Park, 2014; Shin et al. 2012). Increasing the monthly pension for retired elderly can be difficult as it will negatively impact the already struggling youth of South Korea, but resources can be allocated to provide community-based suicide prevention centers to the elderly. As suicide amongst the elderly is primarily evident in those living in rural areas, placing community-based programs in high-risk geographical location can make receiving help more accessible to everyone. Aside from proving the elderly suicide prevention classes, it can also help unite the community as they would need to come together and plan suicide prevention strategies. In return, it can help the elderly population in destigmatizing mental disorder, allowing them to properly seek help.

As Korean pop has swiftly becoming a world phenomenon, the youth in South Korea have always turned to their favorite K-pop groups to find comfort from their overbearing academic pressures as they listen to music, watch videos and support their favorite idols to become

revitalized. Many use the content as a source of motivation to overcome their hardships when life gets tough. Although this deep connection and admiration for a group or person can be a positive experience, it can soon cross the line to become something dangerous when a life is lost. The increase number of suicides from people belonging to popular idol groups has become alarming as it can trigger a copycat effect to occur. Chen et al. (2014) found that when South Korean celebrity Ahn Jae-Hwan committed suicide by charcoal-burning, the mass media attention it received sparked a copycat effect as there was an increase in charcoal-burning suicides; a method that was not commonly used prior. Suicides involving celebrities can be particularly concerning as they are prone to suicide modeling. As idol's suicides are extensively covered in the mass media it can become problematic as many look up to these idols as their role models leading to very similar methods of suicide to be used if a fan decides to take their own life. Therefore, the media needs to play a better role when delivering news on suicide and instead should partner with suicide prevention advocates to educate people on suicide and mental health. Entertainment companies also play a huge role in the lives of Korean idols and therefore should take responsibility in caring for their stars by providing them with the proper resources they need to receive help. By providing their idols with suicide prevention classes, giving them access to primary care professionals, and properly training their staff to recognize people who may be at risk for suicide, companies can effectively preventing the current suicide trend occurring amongst idols. It is important for more measures to be taken in improving the mental health of Korean celebrities because when an idol commits suicide it does not only negatively affect the entertainment industry, but society as whole.

If nothing is done to change the current mental health crisis occurring in South Korea, it will result in a high economic cost to society. Frequent deaths from suicide take an emotional toll on communities resulting in the harm of a society's economic productivity ("The economic toll of

high”, 2017). Therefore, the government needs to increase accessibility to good mental health care to solve the problem they have created by placing economic prosperity above the mental health of individuals. Although it seems that nothing will be gained by placing importance on mental health, the government needs to think of the long-term benefits that can be gained by correcting their skewed values. While the suicide rates are higher in the elderly compared to that of South Korea’s youth and idols, the fertility rate of women in the ROK continues to decline. This can be dangerous as a low birth rate will only result in the diminishment of an active labor force in an already aging population. Therefore, if South Korea does not make it a priority to deconstruct the stigma and taboo surrounding mental health, their mistake of placing economic prosperity over mental health will prove to be costly as it will ultimately become the reason its economy will suffer.

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