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# THE K-POP BODY—BEAUTY STANDARDS, PATRIARCHAL AUTHORITARIANISM, AND THE BIG OTHER OF KOREAN POPULAR MUSIC CULTURE

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## INTRODUCTION

Conceptions of beauty and beauty standards are pivotal in contemporary South Korean culture. They act as focal points for social structures and their recent overemphasis in everyday life, especially among younger generations, has led researchers to coin the term »lookism« (외모지상주의, oemojisangjueui) (see Park et al. 2019). In conjunction with the belief that one can read one's personality from their initial impression (*insang*, 인상) (see Elfving-Hwang 2021), beauty is often associated with moral values (Elfving-Hwang 2013) and success in career and love (An 2017), contributing to the rise of beautification and cosmetic surgery (Cho 2018; Elfving Hwang 2016, 2021). This has led to a complex discourse about beauty, characterized by highly standardized attributes accelerated by advertisements in South Korea. The overemphasis on outward appearance is commonly linked to body shaming and is identified as a cause of mental distress (Lim 2007; Benjamin 2018). The human body plays a major role in performing these beauty standards, serving as the medium through which these ideals become tangible and imitable.

In this socio-cultural environment, K-pop music culture is embedded. In the dazzling and glistening world of K-pop, the bodies of Korean idols are one of the main forces behind the global success of K-pop. As the materi-

alization of beauty standards, the bodies of K-pop idols function as the hallmark of a pop-culture that has established its success based on its captivating visuality. On a global level, it affects how people perceive South Korea not only as a global economic player or a cultural export powerhouse (music, movies, TV dramas, games, literature, sports, food, cosmetics, etc.) but also through the mediation of values, norms, and ideals.

K-pop idols are central to these transcultural exchanges, as they embody and personify these values, especially images and standards of beauty. It is important to note that these are not exclusive values of Korean culture and society; hence, I do not address these values as ›Korean values‹. These values, norms, and ideals can be found in other cultures but may differ in their emphasis. In the course of idolization, imitation, mental health, parasociality, and social shifts, it is crucial to understand how globally distributed industrial beauty standards are shaped by industry values and norms. This research addresses questions concerning how K-pop's beauty standards are negotiated with the broader socio-cultural ideals of beauty through feedback-loops, who embodies K-pop's beauty standards, how they affect K-pop idols in the process of subjectivation, and what socio-cultural function they can take on as ›the big Other‹. While extensive and insightful research has been conducted on the topics of bodies, beauty, and beauty standards in South Korea and K-pop (see Lee 2012; Elfving-Hwang 2013, 2016, 2018, 2021; Cho 2018), an in-depth cultural psychoanalysis of the function of beauty standards in K-pop music culture, in relation to the bodies of K-pop idols, can provide an additional perspective.

To investigate these questions, I[1] will turn my focus to the bodies of K-pop idols as the performed materialization of values, norms, and ideals of beauty. Drawing from Judith Butler's critique of subjectivation, Hannelore Bublitz's understanding of the socio-cultural role of the body, and Slavoj Žižek's interpretation of Jacques Lacan's ›big Other‹ to situate the role of K-pop's beauty standards in the broader socio-cultural context, I will examine the socio-cultural function of beauty standards through the bodies of K-pop idols. Though K-pop has a unique cultural and aesthetic tradition and provides a distinctive experience, its history has been heavily influenced by Western popular music (see Hong et al. 2022). Additionally, ›Western‹ influences on Korean beauty images have been examined by Hyeon-kyeong An

1 As the author of this study, I acknowledge my positionality as an Asian European person with a fundamental understanding of the Korean language, educated in German academia, and as an academic fan with over a decade of experience in K-pop's music culture at the time of conducting this research. There is a non-negligible probability that the interpretation is influenced by that position.

(2017), and influences on Korean body practices have been examined by Joo-hyun Cho (2018). These observations open the possibility of examining aspects of beauty images and K-pop's beauty standards using theories developed in ›Western‹ cultural contexts.

## BEAUTY STANDARDS AND IDEALS IN K-POP MUSIC CULTURE

With regard to TV-personalities, actors and actresses, musicians and so on, beauty functions as a selling point and attention-grabber, and its impact has been analyzed by researchers throughout the decades (e.g., Kamins 1990; Mills et al. 2017). This is no different in K-pop. Even though what is considered beautiful may differ between pop cultures, the significance of beauty and outward appearance is similarly crucial in K-pop (Elfving-Hwang 2018). When it comes to the composition of a K-pop group, at least one member is designated for the role specifically linked to beauty ideals—the ›visual‹ (비주얼, *bijueol*) or ›face of the group‹. The visual is a role nominated by the company for marketing purposes and usually denotes ›the most beautiful member‹ of the group. The role's function is to provide the group recognition value. It is not uncommon for the visuals of a group to transition into acting or modeling after their idol careers. Examples of influential visuals in K-pop include Irene (Red Velvet), Jin (BTS), Jisoo (Blackpink), and Eunwoo (Astro). Typical topics in the K-pop discourse found on social media platforms revolve around hierarchies of ›top visuals,‹ which idols are considered ›ugly,‹ discussions about plastic surgery, and makeup. The beauty standards in K-pop music culture are highly standardized and can be traced back to similarly highly standardized beauty standards in Korean society at large. A typical process for assessing these beauty standards is the photogrammetric facial analysis used by surgeons in practice, research (Rhee et al. 2008), and in controversial TV shows, like *Let Beauty* (렛미인, *let mi-in*) or *Plastic Surgery Promotion* (성형수술을 조장, *seonghyeongsusureul jojang*). Specifics include straight eyebrows, aligned teeth, a straight shoulder line, long legs, a thigh gap, a V-line shaped face, porcelain white skin, double eyelids, heart-shaped lips, an ant waist, ›11 abs‹ (vertical lines of definition in the abdominal area), ›honey thighs‹ (꿀벅지, *kkulbeokji*, controversial slang term to describe thick and curvy legs of women), and a high, straight nose bridge.

To achieve these standardized goals, K-pop idols undergo strict and often unhealthy diets, especially during the promotion of a new album or a new single. These diets can take on extreme forms, which can be traced back to the immense time pressure within the industry. Some of the most well-known diets include the IU diet by singer IU, which she presented on the show Midnight TV Entertainment (한밤의 TV연예, hanbameui TV yeonye, SBS 2013); the diet by BTS's member Jimin which he presented on the show Please Take Care of My Refrigerator (냉장고를 부탁해, naenjanggoreul butakhae, Lee 2017); and the infamous ›Paper Cup Diet,‹ popularized by the girl group 9Muses presented on Star Beauty Show (Soompi 2013). These diets are further promoted by fans and influencers on the internet, complete with concrete instructions and documented self-experiments, e.g. itsjinakim or Iljueoter (일주어터). These diets can snowball into online trends with thousands of followers worldwide (del Fonso 2023). Other means include makeup, skin treatments, color type analysis (clothes, jewelry, makeup, nail polish, and hair color in relation to one's skin tone), 15-step hair spa, or AI skin analysis.

Plastic surgery is by far the most disputed means of achieving the Korean and K-pop beauty standards. On social media platforms and forums, such as Hallyuplus (international) or Sungyesa (Korean), people create spaces to discuss both speculated and actual plastic surgeries of K-pop idols. These discussions have evolved alongside the development of high-quality surgeries and the emergence of a booming beauty tourism industry, also known as ›K-beauty‹ (Almazan 2024, Sharma 2024). According to a report by the International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery (2022), relative to the country's population, South Korea has the highest density of plastic surgeons worldwide, with most of them located on the so-called ›plastic surgery street‹ in Apgujeong-dong in Gangnam, Seoul. Due to K-beauty's national and international impact, Korean social scientists have analyzed the plastic surgery industry and criticized its prevailing ideologies of gendered appearance (Lim 2002, 2004; Chung 2007; Nah et al. 2009).

In opposition to the beauty hype in South Korea, the so-called Escape-The-Corset (탈코르셋, tal-koreuset) movement has emerged in tandem with the #MeToo movement as well as the no-bra movement. Yeongyo Shin and Selee Lee write (2022: 6): »The ETC-M rejects the standard of beauty imposed by society on women and aspires for women to regain control over their bodies by not engaging in laborious work in the form of rigorous beauty routines.« In their study, they examine the influence of the ETC movement on new forms of Korean fashion (›K-fashion‹). K-pop culture is not unaffected by these social movements. Well-known K-pop idols who do not fit into the

K-pop beauty standards, have seen success and have been praised by fans for their portrayal of alternative beauty features. Among these idols are Jennie (Blackpink, round face), Tzuyu (Twice, no heart-shaped lips), Seulgi (Red Velvet, monolids), and Felix (Stray Kids, no spotless skin). Hwasa (Mamamoo, no pale skin), among other K-pop idols, even actively opposes the beauty standards and promotes an alternative beauty standard by sharing her personal story of being called »fat and ugly« by her teacher and singing about loving oneself (song »I Love My Body«; Benjamin 2023).

## K-POP IDOL SUBJECTS—FORMING BODIES THROUGH IDEALS OF BEAUTY

In the following paragraphs, I analyze the subjectivation of K-pop idols by drawing from Butler's conceptualization in *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997). According to Butler, subjectivation is the subordination under a discourse that is structured by demands for continuity, visibility, and place, which simultaneously enables the individual to act. First, I show how »regulatory power maintains subjects in subordination by producing and exploiting the [aforementioned] demand[s]« (Butler 1997: 29). I then examine the »inassimilable remainder, a melancholia that marks the limits of subjectivation« followed by an investigation of »the iterability of the subject that shows how agency may well consist in opposing and transforming the social terms by which it is spawned« (ibid .). When it comes to the subjectivation of K-Pop idols, I focus my analysis on the body and how beauty standards are inscribed into it. This is followed by an examination of the societal control dispositives and the media-economic infrastructure, focusing on the K-pop beauty standards and the subjectivation of K-pop idols. Insights into the industry, which plays a crucial role in the subjectivation process of K-pop idols, are limited to interviews, media reports, and other media (e.g., documentaries, casting shows, interviews) that document the process of subjectivation in the trainee stage. Therefore, media-aesthetic and narratological aspects must be considered in the following analysis.

In this context, bodies are conceptualized according to Bublitz's framework: The construction of bodies is neither a single act nor a causal process deriving from one subject, but emerges from cultural and infrastructural conditions (see Bublitz 2018: 189).[2] Bodies embedded in the media portray and

2 Direct and indirect quotes from Hannelore Bublitz (2018): *Das Archiv des Körpers. Konstruktionsapparate, Materialitäten und Phantasmen* have been translated by the author of this research.

reveal territories of (libidinal and aesthetic) desire for attractiveness, improvement, and optimization (see Bublitz 2018: 183 f.). This desire for attractivity, improvement, and optimization is also evident in K-pop music culture.

The first dimension of subjectivation is informed by the demand for visibility enforced by the regulatory power. In the process of becoming K-pop idols, young trainees in their teenage years undergo a rigorous in-house trainee system before they join an idol group. Often starting from a young age, e.g., G-Dragon (Big Bang, 8 years old), Jihyo (Twice, 8 years old), or solo-singer BoA (11 years old), they practice singing, dancing, foreign languages, and public etiquette, among other things for several hours a day. The regular evaluations are highly competitive due to the large number of trainees. Active and former idols report that they usually have no access to phones to call their friends and parents during the trainee period. Additionally, trainees are bound to the company for several years by contracts that require repayment of the training provided. These contracts often lead to underpayment in the early phase after a group's debut. For example, the K-pop boy group B.A.P sued their former company, TS Entertainment, for unfair working conditions and profit distribution, and the termination of their contract (Kpop Herald 2014). In this trainee system, training as a social praxis becomes not only the core practice for learning necessary skills as a K-pop artist but also inscribes certain norms, values, and ideals into the bodies of the trainees in a mimetic process (Minarik 2022: 79 ff.). While trainees practice to become K-pop idols, which is informed by routines and regulations, social and aesthetic norms, values, and ideals are materialized through their bodies—the K-pop body. They become visible in tandem with the subject's demand to be recognized as a K-pop idol. K-pop beauty standards as standardized norms, values, and ideals, are therefore intrinsically tied to the body and presuppose the subjectivation of K-pop idols through the trainee process. The evoked demand for visibility as a K-pop idol is not detached from society: »this subjectively articulated demand to be seen cannot be traced back to the subject's intention but is socially produced by societal control dispositives and the media-economic infrastructure« (Bublitz 2018: 179). In K-pop music culture, the demand for artistic visibility in the form of K-pop idols is informed and produced by the K-pop industry's rules and norms, its media narratives, and desired aesthetics. Thus, it positions itself at the center of K-pop music culture and as a necessity for becoming artistically visible as a K-pop idol. This is reflected in the national Circle Chart and the Billboard K-Pop 100 music charts, which are dominated by Korean idol groups produced by the K-pop industry's record labels and production

companies, such as SM Entertainment, YG Entertainment, JYP Entertainment, and Hybe Corporation.

The second dimension of subjectivation is informed by the demand for continuity enforced by the regulatory power. As already societally shaped subjects, candidates enter the trainee system with a preconceived understanding of socially mediated norms, values, and ideals of beauty that are influenced by preceding idols among other factors. An important narrative in K-pop is the construction of an idol's role model (Moon 2021). This understanding extends into the trainee phase and the idol phase. The highly regulated trainee system can be understood as the regulatory power necessary to become visible as a K-pop idol, informing the demand for continuity as a K-pop idol. In its practices, the trainee system provides a clear path, informed by technicity and quantification, toward standardized goals. In the process, trainees are brought to their mental and physical limits, challenging their desire to become a K-pop idol. Failure to attain or even defy K-pop's norms, values, and ideals in this phase can lead to sanctions, verbal and physical abuse, a continuous fear of being sorted out, and mental health issues, such as depression or body dysmorphic disorder, and suicide (see Saeji et al. 2018; Zysik 2021). On the other hand, K-pop offers alternatives to daily lived subjectivation, creating socially influential subjects (»dream job«), while being rigorous in the way people can achieve this alternative subjectivation. In an interview with CBS, former f(x) member Amber Liu described her time as an idol: »You're told what to do, what to say, what to think, what to look like« (CBS 2020). Former 9Muses member Sera Ryu stated in an interview: »I felt so out of my depth and also trapped in a sense« (KST 2021). These described experiences overlap with media narratives and portrayals in documentaries and reality shows. In the documentary *9Muses of Star Empire*, 9Muses manager Sunghun Cho scolds the girl group members: »Once you become a star, your word would be the law, but unfortunately for now we know more than you do. So it would be wise to throw [away] your pride until you get there.« In the reality show *Cheongdamdong 111* produced by FNC Entertainment, it is portrayed how Yeong-son Kim, narratively constructed as ›the witch‹ of the company, berates the members of the girl group AOA: »From a regular person's view, you have to become a role model. If they think ›I can do that,‹ what would they love you for and want to be like you for?«

The third dimension of subjectivation is informed by the demand for space enforced by the regulatory power. The material as well as symbolic space for becoming a K-pop trainee and later a K-pop idol is exclusively provided by the industry. Individuals are therefore at the hands of decision-makers of the industry if they want to become K-pop idols. They have little

to no choice outside of the idol-making machinery to be recognized as K-pop idols (»we were powerless, and there was little we could do to change our own fate,« KST 2021). In the process of subjectivation, the power to provide this symbolic and material space to meet the demand for space lies solely in the hands of the industry.

To be recognized as K-pop subjects, idols and trainees chase an industry-induced phantasma. »The body is the synthetic, attractive surface *that reveals what one is not: a phantasma, an unattainable ideal, that nevertheless constitutes the motor of performative body modifications and can only do so because of its unattainability*« (Bublitz 2018: 181, orig. emphasis). This unattainability—which denotes the »inassimilable remainder« and limit as well as drive of subjectivation (see Butler 1997: 29)—is not only prevalent in the trainee phase, but also extends far into the idol phase. Idols continuously modify their bodies in an effort to get closer to the beauty standards. These modifications, evoked by the promise of »controllability, manageability, and producibility of the body« (Bublitz 2018: 71), are socially highly impactful, as can be observed in numerous discussions on social media platforms and in comment sections of videos covering this topic. One such highly debated case revolves around Nayeon (Twice) straightening her teeth in 2023.

The K-Pop idol becomes an emblem of the postmodern subject, in which »the technical phantasma of engineer-like controllability and producibility [unites] with the body as an aesthetically designed, expressively presented art subject« (Bublitz 2018: 181). The embodied aesthetics of beauty become the key criteria for social competence, inclusion and exclusion, belonging, social affiliation, and distinction. Discussions about beauty and beauty standards therefore indicate the idols' social competence and situate them as subjects in the larger discourse of lookism (Yoon 2022; Hu 2023).

## THE K-POP BODY, THE BIG OTHER, AND THE INDUSTRIAL FILTER

To analyze the function of K-pop culture's beauty standard, I refer to the psychoanalytical concept of ›the big Other‹. Lacan defines the big Other as »the place where unconscious speech is articulated« (Lacan 1957: 91), which relates to the symbolic order formulated by figures of authority, under which one subordinates oneself to become a subject (see Lacan 1991: 235 ff.). The big Other is the psychic instance by which one wants to be perceived as something that is considered desirable according to the symbolic order. It

addresses the social ruling system of blind, contingent automatisms: »society's unwritten constitution [...] directing and controlling my acts« (Žižek 2007: 8). I argue that in K-pop, one of these intersubjectively unconscious social ruling systems is its beauty standard, which relates to the big Other. It subordinates not only K-pop idols in their performances but also fans in their prosumption, as well as CEOs and producers in their production, to become K-pop subjects. As I have already shown, there are overlaps between societal beauty standards and the beauty standards of K-pop music culture. As part of the broader Korean society, employees are affected by the societal beauty standards, and, while targeting international markets, by non-Korean ones as well. Summarized in his concept of ›Cultural Technology,‹ Sooman Lee (former CEO of SM Entertainment) developed a strategy for evaluating local and global trends in popular culture and music markets with the goal of targeting foreign markets. His ideas for rigorous market analyses, in addition to the Korean government's liberalized policy on cultural imports by the end of the 1990s, shaped the K-pop industry, leading to the highly ductile genre of K-pop (see Lee 2013: 62) by incorporating beauty trends from other cultures. K-pop producers, who are in the crucial position to modulate the symbolic order (norms, values, and ideals), adjust them to the medium of ›K-pop‹ by means of training (Minarik 2022: 81). However, the symbolic order, i.e., the hegemonic rules of K-pop, nevertheless only »emerges from a gift« from the industry that is being »accepted« by the fans, trainees, and idols (Žižek 2007: 12), thus establishing K-pop as a realm of subjectivation and therefore negotiation.

Figures of authority are mandatory for enforcing the symbolic order. Fueled by perfectionism and neoliberal turbo-capitalism, the CEOs and managers function as figures of authority in the system of subjectivation for K-pop idols. Figures of authority have diverse possibilities for enforcing the symbolic order. In the K-pop industry, by spreading fear, guilt and shame, they demonstrate their role as figures of authority, thus becoming figures through whom the big Other speaks. This is illustrated in documentaries such as *9Muses of Star Empire* (2010, directed by Hark-Joon Lee, produced by Min-Chul Kim), casting shows such as *Produce 101* (2016-present, produced by CJ E&M), and reality shows such as *Cheongdam-dong 111* (2013-2014, produced by FNC Entertainment, portraying the company's daily life and inner workings). These authoritarian practices shape the reality of the trainees and can only be upheld by continuous reinforcement. Through signifying repetition, the word becomes the law (»Zwang,« »compulsion to repeat,« Lacan 2018: 67), which the individual can't ignore, if they want to become a K-pop idol. Therefore, the appropriation of resilience and renouncement of

one's own needs shape the subjectivation of K-pop idols and trainees (KST 2021). A fundamental means of asserting this authority is the ›anatomical gaze‹ (see Bublitz 2018) focused on the bodies of trainees and idols. Assimilated from society, e.g., plastic surgery discourse, a scientific dissection of the K-pop body turns it into a mechanical (movement) device. As the »source and target of measurements, metrication, and numerous regulations and codes of behavior,« the body becomes an object and measure of all things (Bublitz 2018: 39 f.). A prominent example in K-pop discourse is the notion that female idols should weigh under 50 kg, regardless of their height.

Figures of authority who control the subjectivation process in the K-pop industry, form a conglomerate of gatekeepers in a physical, mental, and ideological sense. They hold a strong grip on the industry's norms, values, and ideals, acting as a filter for who can join the K-pop industry or not. This is what I refer to as the *industrial filter*—a filter informed by ideologically charged standards of a certain industrial discourse, continuously negotiated with specific socio-cultural norms, values, and ideals to uphold the unstable power of influential decision-makers working in the media-industrial complex. One way to enforce the K-pop industry's norms, values, and ideals is the beauty standards derived from society and modified to serve the industry's purpose. This is how individuals who want to become K-pop idols are subjected. It is the CEOs and managers who function as filters and reinforcers of existing standards and innovators of new ones. In the documentary *9Muses of Star Empire* (2010), it is portrayed how 9Muses' CEO Joohak Shin discusses the costumes for the group, insisting on short pants to portray the idols' ›honey thighs,‹ while simultaneously sexualizing them. This example furthers the narrative of the authoritarian and patriarchal position in which K-pop's CEOs find themselves.

The industrial filter is first and foremost influenced by the patriarchal structure of Korean society and enforced by the predominantly male CEOs and managers. These structures also affect female and queer people in the industry through power relations, production relations, and cathexis, as described by Raewyn Connell for the industrial setting in general (see Connell 2005: 73 f.). Thus, the patriarchal structures of the K-pop industry shape subjectivation as well as hegemonic beauty standards. Through the CEOs' and managers' power in decision-making and evaluations, societal patriarchalism is inscribed in the idols and trainees. According to the gender gap report (World Economic Forum 2022), South Korea ranked 99$^{th}$ out of 146 evaluated countries and, despite efforts to tackle gender discrimination and misogyny in recent years, remains ranked in the lowest third. Efforts to overcome gender discrimination even face drawbacks as the administration under Presi-

dent Suk-yeol Yoon, who was successful with his anti-feminist rhetoric in the 2022 presidential election, pushes for the abolition of the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family (Lee 2024). At the same time, a growing political divide along gender lines can be observed in South Korean society (Gong 2024). With a majority of them in leading positions, men shape the organizations' »internal division of labour and systems of control« not independently of gender (Connell 2005: 73). Subjected to the patriarchal society themselves, the K-pop CEOs, managers, and producers transfer these values into the industry and interpret the beauty standards according to their beliefs, which they impose on both female and male trainees. As Gooyong Kim has shown, »explicit sexualization of female idols« (Kim 2018: 200), based on Korea's patriarchal values, is demonstrated through sexualized imagery in K-pop music videos produced by men. As an example, he refers to the manufacturing of Girl's Generation's *The Boys* (2011), produced by at the time SM Entertainment chairman Soo-man Lee, American choreographer and songwriter Teddy Riley, and Korean songwriter Young-jin Yoo. While the sexualization of women and the female body remains prevalent in K-pop, more recent examples, such as New Jeans' »Hype Boy« (2022), under the direction of Hee-jin Min, songwriter Ylva Dimberg, and choreographer Eun-ju Kim, demonstrate successful alternative portrayals of the female body. Nevertheless, the production process and products remain sites of contestation for body and beauty images along patriarchal structures.

The patriarchal authoritarianism of the K-pop industry appropriates the beauty images circulating in Korean society and reshapes them in both their function and content. The trainee and idol subjects are—based on their desire to become idols or artists—obliged to conform to the demands of their CEOs, managers, and producers. In the documentary *9Muses of Star Empire* (2010), it is portrayed that idols are told to »throw [away] their pride« and comply with the managers' norms for a ›well-behaving idol‹. Former idols, such as Amber Liu (former member of f(x)) and Way (former member of Crayon Pop), support these media portrayals, as mentioned in a previous quote. This conformity is inscribed in the body and is less about adhering to commands and more about adopted self-observation and self-measurement to avoid punishment.

The self-assessment and self-surveillance in K-pop go hand in hand with the contemporary self-surveillance and self-improvement culture in general (see Bublitz 2018: 39 f.). At the same time, as K-pop idols are role models who embody societal and cultural values, norms, and ideals, society itself becomes a surveillance apparatus for the idols—a social panopticon (see Zysik 2021). They are looked up to, down upon, and serve as orientation in anomic

times. Due to social media, the feedback idols receive is more visible and direct than it has ever been before.

## THE K-POP BODY AND SOCIETAL FEEDBACK LOOPS

According to Bublitz, digital and synthetic beauties, i.e., »aesthetical objects of the consumer industry and social markets of attractivity« (Bublitz 2018: 178), act as objects of projection that instruct body performance and body images; hence they take on the position of role models. This role is manifested through body techniques, e.g., makeup, cosmetic surgery, or diets, that establish belonging through habitus and endow subjects with »some kind of ›social magic‹ with symbolic recognition« (Bublitz 2018: 190). By means of these practices in the K-pop discourse, subjects are recognized as K-pop subjects, and idols are recognized as K-pop idols, whose embodiment of K-pop beauty standards serves as a social practice (Lee 2018: 3).

In the position of role models and as »parasocial kin« (Elfving-Hwang 2018), the idols and beauty standards of K-pop are not simply an industry-induced product that society should dully consume, but are constituted through feedback-loops: »It is through feedback loops that responses to an aesthetic desire of the observers are translated into body modifications« (Bublitz 2018: 184). Society, and especially the fans, act as an additional control apparatus through body shaming and body affirmation based on their perceived entitlement to judge. Forms of feedback loops include on- and offline practices, such as comment sections on social media posts or fan-sign events, where fans directly interact with K-pop idols.

At the time of debuting, K-pop groups have already gone through a lengthy feedback process. With showcases, online promotion, pre-debut singles, castings, vlogs, etc., the production companies obtain insights into potential fans' preferences. In the case of YG Entertainment's girl group Babymonster, evaluation videos of the members, the pre-debut song »Dream,« as well as song and dance covers were uploaded months before their official debut on their official YouTube channel. Besides changes to details or giving the ›product‹ its last touch, it is possible that bigger changes, like terminating contracts or replacing group members, are made. This was the case for Source Music's girl group Le Sserafim, where member Garam Kim's contract has been terminated due to bullying allegations (Strait Times 2022). In the process of continuously negotiating the ›product‹ with its con-

sumers, the derived beauty standards of the K-pop industry are utilized to maximize profits.

Exposed to a critical, anatomical gaze by their managers, CEOs, and fans, idols who do not fit or align with the beauty standards face scrutiny and hate comments. Whether they are called »too fat« (Umji (Gfriend), Seolhyun (AOA)) or »too skinny« (Wendy (Red Velvet), Yuna (Itzy)), fans, and staff members and accompanying narratives shape the reality of K-pop idols. For example, Hyun-suk Yang, founder and former CEO of YG Entertainment, body shamed the members of his own produced girl group 2NE1 for being ›ugly‹ (Benjamin 2018). Furthermore, in this environment, double standards between male and female idols, due to patriarchal structures, pose another issue. While female K-pop idols are regularly scrutinized, male idols are praised for breaking the rules and are considered progressive regarding body images and beauty standards. A Google search conducted on April 15, 2024, with the words »overweight kpop idols« provided results almost exclusively covering female K-pop idols and included the word ›fat‹ in the search results. Surveys conducted by Nora Geng for Medium (2022) illustrate these gender imbalances in age, attraction, weight, costumes, sexualization, positions on feminism, and relationship status, favoring male over female idols in all categories. Prominent examples include, on the one hand, the defamation of Irene (Red Velvet) for reading the feminist novel *Kim Ji-young, Born 1982* by Nam-joo Cho, and, on the other hand, the appraisal of Jimin (BTS) for wearing a sweater with the slogans »Radical Feminist« and »Gender Equality«.

Not only are idols and their conceptions of beauty affected by the industry and fans, but they, in turn, affect society as well. Gerda Pagel (2012: 33 f.) explains that the subject in technically high-developed societies situates itself »more and more« in the (Lacanian) imaginary to stabilize, qua collective identification, at an ideal, idol, or an ideology that fills its lack of being. This is how K-pop idols, and more precisely their (beauty) images, fill the lack in societies' subjects through a »techno-imaginary« (Bublitz 2018: 187) and inspire in various ways a desire to become an idol or to conform to their beauty images. The consumer, as a subject, is not only confined to their subordination here but is also able to act. »The artificial-aesthetically presented body ensures, in its theatrical performance, singularity as well as social connectivity« (Bublitz 2018: 184). Thus, filling the lack of being is not a passive routine but an active negotiation of presented norms, values, and ideals—including beauty standards—that are bound to a socio-cultural setting. In this realm of negotiation, subjects are enabled to adopt, dismiss, or reinvent norms, values, and ideals that can lead to a transformation of and

even opposition to hegemonic beauty standards. As examined here, this possibility of negotiation applies to all subjects in the K-pop discourse but is linked to their discursive roles (idol, trainee, CEO, producer, manager, fans, stylists, etc.), varying in possibilities, agency, and barriers. In K-pop, we see this transformation unfolding in K-pop idols' increasing portrayal of and stances toward alternative beauty images, shifting the perception of what is understood as beautiful. One of the most mediated instances of resisting the hegemonial beauty standards is the story of girl group member Hwasa (Mamamoo), who reported in interviews that she was rejected during auditions due to her appearance and body type until she was accepted as a trainee by RBW's CEO Do-hoon Kim and eventually debuted. This debut was affected by adverse media coverage and negative reactions on social media regarding Hwasa's non-conforming appearance (Chan 2023). Throughout her career, she successfully carved her own image in opposition to these negative reactions, revealing a resonance with people in the K-pop discourse and the potential for future shifts that could undermine the hegemonial beauty standards. However, this transformation of beauty images is limited to the *content* of K-pop's beauty standards and does not directly impact their socio-cultural *function*.

While presentations, perceptions, and performances of beauty and beauty standards may shift, the socio-cultural function of beauty standards in the subjectivation process of K-pop idols persists. The continuing discussions surrounding beauty images and their emphasis for K-pop music culture, reflect the sublime status of beauty standards in the K-pop discourse. Its sublimity is based on a delusion that overshadows the fact that K-pop's beauty standards are constituted solely by each individual's communication and is perceived as a means induced by a »hidden subject who pulls the strings of the great Other (the symbolic order)« (Žižek 1991: 18). Having a beauty standard is constitutional for a K-pop discourse—a predetermined, irrefutable axiom for K-pop and its bodily materialization—while its construction and interpretation, realized in the various negotiated beauty images, may vary. Through various forms of communication in the K-pop discourse, e.g., personal and public discussions, media reports, social media posts by fans and idols, interviews, and visual and dialogical portrayals in reality shows, movies and TV series, K-pop subjects performatively reinforce, especially through aesthetic judgments, the function of beauty standards in K-pop, whether by criticizing or complementing certain images. Hence, the hegemonic beauty standard in K-pop is not merely a projection embodied by the idols alone, but is, in various forms, performed by every individual subjected to the K-pop discourse as a social practice.

# CONCLUSION

I have argued that not only certain criteria of beauty play a crucial role in the subjectivation of K-pop idols, trainees, fans, producers, and other K-pop subjects, but also that the function of beauty standards, images, and ideals in the K-pop music culture plays a part in the subjectivation process. I examined how beauty standards are inscribed into the bodies of K-pop trainees and K-pop idols in the process of subjectivation, inducing permanent modification. The trainee system and training as a social practice have been revealed as the focal point of subjectivation. This training is predominantly informed by the patriarchal authoritarian structure and market capitalist interests of the industry, denoted as the industrial filter, to materialize values, ideals, and norms of standardized and quantified beauty through the K-pop body. The K-pop body becomes a field of negotiation between the industry, Korean society, and global cultural exchanges through feedback loops. Thus, it contributes to the subjectivation of K-pop fans around the globe. By addressing K-pop's beauty standards as the ›big Other‹ of society, I conceptualized the status and role of beauty standards in the K-pop discourse as being potentially open for transformation as well, even though they remain a constitutive element of the K-pop music culture. Through »the body, in the form of ›digital beauties,‹ that undergoes a regime of visibility and an economy of attention as aesthetic objects of consumer industry and social attractivity markets« (Bublitz 2018: 178), individuals perform their subjectivity that is characteristic not only of K-pop but of our contemporary era.

The presented theoretical research draws from a variety of mediated narratives found in documentaries, reality shows, and castings shows, as well as interviews and publicized statements in news reports to grasp the discursive construction of K-pop's beauty standards and their function in K-pop's music culture and its industry. Efforts have been made to draw from varying sources and to make their backgrounds transparent. Nevertheless, this data is limited, prone to one-sided interests and perspectives of the sources, thus providing only a partial perspective on the topic discussed. Future research is necessary to provide a more detailed picture of this paper's theoretical argumentation about K-pop's beauty standards, their socio-cultural function in K-pop music culture, their interconnection with Korean culture, and their role in transcultural flows.

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