



Spaces of Beauty: Exploring K-Pop's Impact on Gender Identity and Body Image

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INTRODUCTION

K-pop, also known as Korean popular music, has emerged as a cultural phenomenon with a global reach, originating from South Korea. In addition to its musical impact, K-pop has had a significant influence on beauty standards, particularly through the portrayal of K-pop idols who embody the ideals of South Korean beauty. This influence extends beyond the realm of music and encompasses fashion, style, and overall appearance, thereby shaping perceptions of attractiveness and body image on a global scale.

South Korea is renowned for its meticulous beauty standards, which have become deeply ingrained in its culture. These standards often prioritize an "innocent and feminine look" for women, characterized by features such as small faces, large eyes, pale skin, and a slim physique. On the other hand, male beauty standards in Korea focus on attributes like height, pale skin, and a clean-shaven face. However, Western beauty standards have gradually influenced male beauty ideals in Korea, leading to an emphasis on fitness and a more muscular physique. Consequently, idols may strive to achieve an appearance that borders on the exaggerated, resembling characters from anime. The global spread of K-pop has amplified the impact of Korean beauty standards on a broader scale. As K-pop idols gain international fame and recognition, they become influential figures who shape perceptions of beauty and attractiveness. The unattainable "idol look" in K-pop sets a high standard for physical appearance that fans around the world may aspire to replicate.

The transparency of idols regarding their appearance and the extreme measures they undertake to meet these standards can have both positive and negative effects on fans' self-esteem and body image. K-pop idols often resort to strict dieting practices in order



to conform to the beauty standards prevalent in Korea. These diets can be extremely demanding, involving rigid meal plans, calorie restrictions, crash diets, and even cosmetic procedures to achieve the desired aesthetic. The pressure to maintain a specific physique can have detrimental effects, including exhaustion, fainting on stage due to low energy levels, and mental health issues stemming from body dissatisfaction.

IDOLS AND DIET

Several K-pop idols have openly discussed the strict diets they have undergone in order to meet the industry's demanding beauty standards. Xiumin from EXO faced criticism about his weight and resorted to extreme measures, such as the coffee diet, where he ate only one meal every other day and consumed excessive amounts of coffee to rapidly lose weight. T.O.P from BIGBANG was pressured by YG Entertainment to reach an ideal weight before debuting, leading him to follow a dangerous diet consisting of unsweetened jelly, mineral water, and occasional red beans as a snack, along with excessive workouts. Momo from TWICE was instructed by JYP Entertainment to lose 15 pounds in just one week and followed the extreme "MyProAna" diet, which caused side effects like weakness and overall unwellness. Soyou, formerly of SISTAR, followed a one-meal-a-day diet consisting of four quail egg whites and a glass of milk, combined with a rigorous workout routine, which raised concerns about malnourishment. IU also adopted the MyProAna diet, resulting in rapid weight loss but causing dizziness and overall weakness. These examples shed light on the extreme measures some K-pop idols have taken to conform to beauty standards, often compromising their health and well-being. The diet known as MyProAna, which gained popularity among certain K-pop idols, is an extreme and unhealthy regimen that emphasizes severe calorie restriction.

The diet plan followed by IU, a prominent K-pop artist, includes minimal food intake, such as an apple for breakfast, one or two sweet potatoes for lunch, and a protein shake for dinner, leading to potential side effects like weakness, fainting, and overall unwellness due to the significant calorie deficit it enforces. Despite the promise of rapid weight loss, the MyProAna diet carries substantial health risks, including nutritional deficiencies, weakness, and other detrimental impacts on the body. IU's personal experience with this diet prompted her to recognize its harmful effects and seek professional assistance to transition to a more balanced and nourishing eating routine. The diet's association with communities promoting anorexia, as implied by its name, underscores the dangers of adopting such extreme dietary practices for the sake of achieving quick weight loss, emphasizing the importance of advocating for healthy eating habits and discouraging harmful behaviors that can compromise one's overall



well-being. Several male K-pop idols have openly discussed the strict diets they have undergone.

For instance, Felix from Stray Kids has revealed that he follows a diet where he only eats one meal a day or sometimes just a huge carrot, especially during End of the Year stages. This extreme dieting practice has been brought to attention by fans, highlighting the challenges that idols face in order to maintain certain body standards. Similarly, Junho from 2PM shared details about his diet after returning from military service. His strict regime included consuming boiled cabbage, 2 pieces of chicken breast, and 2 sweet potatoes per day to manage his weight. Baekhyun from EXO humorously mentioned on a show that idols, particularly NCT members, have had a tough time with their diets. He recalled the strict dieting practices during their trainee days, where they were limited to minimal food intake, such as one gimhap for the entire year. Kai from EXO briefly touched on the challenges they faced in the past regarding their diets and how their current situation has made those experiences worthwhile. Although he did not provide specific details about the diet regimen, these examples shed light on the extreme measures male K-pop idols have taken to adhere to industry beauty standards, often resorting to highly restrictive diets to achieve certain body shapes and appearances.

EATING DISORDERS IN KPOP IDOLS

Eating disorders are unfortunately prevalent among K-pop idols, with several well-known cases serving as examples due to the diets their agencies and companies force them to take. One such disorder is bulimia, which IU, a popular K-pop artist, openly discussed her struggle with. The complications of this disorder include breakdown of the teeth, depression, anxiety, substance use disorders, and an increased risk of suicide. Individuals with bulimia often experience depression, anxiety, and mood swings as a result of their eating behaviours and concerns about body image. These emotional struggles can lead to feelings of guilt, self-disgust, and low self-esteem. Moreover, bulimia can distort one's perception of their body shape and weight, causing a negative self-image and perpetuating feelings of inadequacy and self-criticism. This can result in social isolation and strain relationships, as the preoccupation with food, weight, and purging behaviors hinders social interactions.

In severe cases, individuals with bulimia may even experience suicidal thoughts due to the emotional distress and physical complications associated with the disorder. Additionally, bulimia can lead to serious medical complications, including electrolyte imbalances, dehydration, gastrointestinal problems, heart issues, tooth decay, and kidney failure. These physical health risks further exacerbate the mental health challenges faced by individuals with bulimia. Overall, the pressure to maintain a specific body weight and appearance in individuals with bulimia has profound effects



on their mental and physical well-being. The pressure to achieve success after her debut led her to engage in cycles of binge eating followed by purging behaviours such as vomiting or excessive exercise. Another common eating disorder is Anorexia nervosa, commonly referred to as anorexia, is a severe eating disorder characterized by extreme food restriction, a profound fear of weight gain, and a distorted perception of body weight. Individuals with anorexia often exhibit symptoms such as severely limiting their food intake, engaging in excessive exercise, and resorting to purging behaviours like vomiting or misuse of laxatives in order to lose weight. Additionally, they typically have a distorted self-image of their body and an intense fear of gaining weight, which can manifest in physical symptoms such as extreme weight loss, fatigue, hair loss, and absence of menstruation.

Anorexia can impact individuals across various demographics, including age, sex, gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and economic status. While it predominantly affects adolescents and young adult women, there is an increasing prevalence among men and children as well. Research indicates that anorexia affects approximately 1% to 2% of the general population and 0.3% of adolescents. The underlying causes of anorexia are not entirely understood, but it is believed to stem from a combination of biological, psychological, and environmental factors. Factors such as genetic predisposition, perfectionism, anxiety, societal pressure for thinness, and traumatic experiences are thought to contribute to the development of anorexia. Treatment for anorexia is essential and typically involves a multi-faceted approach that includes psychological therapy, nutritional counselling, and in some cases, hospitalization.

The primary goals of treatment are to restore a healthy weight, address distorted thoughts related to food and body image, and manage any co-occurring mental health conditions like anxiety and depression. If left untreated, anorexia can result in severe complications such as malnutrition, osteoporosis, heart damage, and even death. Therefore, it is crucial to seek help early on to prevent the serious consequences associated with this eating disorder as seen in the case of former Oh My Girl member JinE. She experienced anorexia after receiving comments about her weight and resorted to extreme measures to lose weight, resulting in serious health issues. Anorexia involves severe restriction of food intake, leading to dangerously low body weight and other health complications. Anorexia nervosa, a subtype of anorexia, was battled by Ladies' Code's Sojung. She lost a significant amount of weight even before her debut and continued to do so after developing the disorder. Anorexia nervosa is characterized by an intense fear of gaining weight, distorted body image, and extreme efforts to control weight through restrictive eating behaviours. Jang Na Ra, on the other hand, struggled with bulimarexia, a combination of bulimia and anorexia.



The pressure in the industry led her to develop bulimia, which caused severe anxiety and disordered eating behaviours affecting her physical and mental health. Although not explicitly mentioned in the search results, binge eating disorder is another common eating disorder that can affect K-pop idols. This disorder involves recurrent episodes of consuming large quantities of food in a short period, often accompanied by feelings of loss of control and distress. These examples shed light on the prevalence of eating disorders among K-pop idols, highlighting the intense pressures they face within the industry that can contribute to the development of disordered eating behaviours and serious health consequences.

The pressure exerted on K-pop idols to adhere to specific body weight and appearance standards has a profound impact on their mental well-being, resulting in a range of detrimental effects such as depression, anxiety, eating disorders, and even suicide. This pressure often leads to an unhealthy obsession with weight, extreme dieting practices, and the development of serious mental health conditions like anorexia and bulimia. The constant scrutiny and expectations placed on K-pop idols to maintain a certain body image can have detrimental effects on their mental health, leading to conditions such as depression, anxiety, and panic disorders. The stress of meeting industry standards, enduring intense training, and facing public criticism can contribute to the development of these mental health issues among artists. The emphasis on maintaining a slim physique in the K-pop industry can result in the adoption of extreme dieting habits by idols, potentially leading to the development of eating disorders. Idols may engage in harmful practices such as severe calorie restriction, meal skipping, or minimal food consumption to meet weight expectations, putting their health at risk in the process.

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Tragically, the intense pressure and mental health challenges faced by K-pop idols have driven some artists to take their own lives, as seen in cases like Sulli from f(x) and Jonghyun from SHINee. The toxic environment within the kpop industry, combined with the relentless pursuit of perfection, can exacerbate existing mental health issues and contribute to suicidal ideation among idols. The disparity between the body image ideals promoted in the K-pop industry and individual body mass index (BMI) can lead to negative consequences for mental health. This discordance can foster feelings of inadequacy, low self-esteem, and contribute to mental health difficulties for both idols and their fans, highlighting the detrimental impact of unrealistic beauty standards in the industry. The condition within the K-pop industry to conform to specific beauty standards can indeed lead individuals to lose their authentic identity as they strive to meet unrealistic expectations. This pressure is exacerbated by practices such as publicizing idols' weights, which perpetuates an unhealthy obsession with body standards and encourages comparisons that can have long-term effects on body image.



Moreover, the transparency of idols regarding their appearance can create a false sense of beauty among fans, potentially driving them towards unhealthy behaviours and dissatisfaction with their own bodies. The difference between body image and BMI, known as body image discordance (BID), is a significant factor that can negatively impact mental health, especially in the context of K-pop. The popularity of K-pop globally has contributed to a negative body image perception, affecting both idols and fans alike.

The reinforcement of traditional Korean beauty standards by the genre and media can have detrimental effects on mental well-being, further emphasizing the challenges faced by individuals striving to conform to these standards. Despite the pervasive influence of Korean beauty standards in the K-pop industry, there is a noticeable shift among Gen Z towards more inclusive beauty standards. Some K-pop idols are leading this change by breaking away from traditional norms and embracing their unique features, inspiring millions with their individuality. This shift challenges the objectification of human bodies and promotes a more diverse perception of beauty, offering a glimpse of hope for those struggling to maintain their authentic identity in the face of unrealistic expectations. To advocate for body positivity and self-love in the K-pop sector, companies have the opportunity to implement various measures that can cultivate a healthier atmosphere for both idols and supporters. Strategies such as challenging conventional beauty norms, encouraging authenticity, providing mental health assistance, conducting educational campaigns, and promoting positive role models can all contribute to fostering a more positive environment within the industry. By actively challenging and redefining traditional beauty standards, K-pop companies can promote diversity and inclusivity among their artists. This approach can help in celebrating individuality and different body types, ultimately creating a more positive space that embraces uniqueness.

Emphasizing the significance of authenticity and self-acceptance can aid idols in feeling more at ease in their own skin. By endorsing genuine self-expression and discouraging extreme measures to conform to unrealistic beauty ideals, companies can establish a culture that prioritizes self-love and acceptance. Offering comprehensive mental health support for idols is essential in addressing issues such as anxiety, depression, and eating disorders. By providing resources and fostering open discussions about mental well-being, companies can help reduce stigma and encourage seeking help when necessary. Implementing educational campaigns within the industry to raise awareness about healthy body image, self-esteem, and the risks associated with extreme dieting practices can be advantageous. Educating idols, staff, and fans about the importance of self-care and mental well-being can contribute to promoting a more positive mindset. Highlighting idols who embrace their natural appearance, advocate



against unrealistic beauty standards, and promote self-love can serve as positive role models for fans. By showcasing diverse individuals within the industry, companies can inspire fans to appreciate their own uniqueness and embrace their individuality. Through the implementation of these strategies, K-pop companies can significantly contribute to the promotion of body positivity, self-love, and mental well-being in the industry.

CONCLUSION

The detrimental effects of unrealistic beauty standards on the mental and physical health of K-pop idols and their fans cannot be ignored. The pressure to conform to specific body ideals has resulted in extreme measures such as extreme dieting, plastic surgery, and body dissatisfaction, which have contributed to the prevalence of eating disorders and mental health issues. However, by shifting the focus towards promoting healthy lifestyles, self-acceptance, and diversity, K-pop companies can help idols prioritize their well-being over unrealistic beauty standards. This can be achieved by encouraging idols to embrace their natural appearance, providing mental health support, and educating both idols and fans about the dangers of extreme diets. By doing so, the industry can foster a more positive environment that values health and authenticity, ultimately promoting the overall well-being of idols and fans alike. Prioritizing mental and physical health over conforming to unrealistic beauty standards is crucial for promoting overall well-being, self-acceptance, and a positive body image. The consequences of prioritizing body image and fitting into standards can have significant negative effects on individuals' mental and physical health. When individuals prioritize body image over mental health, it can lead to low self-esteem, body dissatisfaction, anxiety, depression, and eating disorders. These mental health issues are perpetuated by unrealistic beauty standards that are reinforced by societal norms and media platforms. This negative self-perception and mental health issues can affect individuals of all ages. On the other hand, focusing on fitting into standards rather than prioritizing physical health can result in severe physical symptoms such as fatigue, malnutrition, gastrointestinal issues, and compromised overall well-being. Negative body image and extreme dieting practices can lead to serious eating disorders like anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa, which have a detrimental impact on individuals' overall health. Additionally, social media plays a significant role in perpetuating unrealistic beauty standards, which further exacerbates mental health issues. Constant exposure to idealized images on social media can fuel feelings of



inadequacy, comparison, and the need to alter one's appearance to meet societal expectations. This influence is particularly challenging for younger individuals who face pressures related to idealized beauty standards on social media. However, older adults also experience changes in metabolism and physical appearance that can impact their self-esteem and body image. Therefore, it is crucial to prioritize mental and physical health over conforming to unrealistic beauty standards in order to promote overall well-being, self-acceptance, and a positive body image.

By challenging societal norms and promoting a more inclusive and accepting perspective on body image, individuals can strive for a healthier and more balanced approach to their well-being. In conclusion, the intersection of K-pop, Korean beauty standards, global influence, and dieting highlights the intricate relationship between cultural norms, industry pressures, and individual well-being. While K-pop continues to captivate audiences worldwide with its music and visuals, it also brings attention to the difficulties faced by idols in adhering to strict beauty ideals, which can have significant consequences for both the industry and society as a whole. The culture prevalent in the K-pop industry places a strong emphasis on strict beauty standards and often promotes extreme weight loss, which can potentially contribute to the development of eating disorders among fans.

The idolization of thin bodies and the endorsement of unhealthy dieting practices by certain idols may encourage fans to adopt restrictive eating behaviours and excessive exercise routines in pursuit of unattainable body ideals. It is imperative for both K-pop entities and idols to recognize the impact they wield over their fan base and to assume accountability for advocating healthy body image standards. By promoting self-acceptance, genuineness, and inclusivity, while discouraging extreme dieting behaviours, a more positive atmosphere can be fostered within the industry. Moreover, educating individuals on the risks associated with extreme dieting and offering mental health resources can serve as vital measures in preventing fans from succumbing to detrimental patterns that could result in eating disorders.



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