



K-Pop and Cultivated Global Bodies

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❖ Key Research Points

❖ Abstract

K-Pop as a cultural movement has become inextricably connected to a set beauty standard that has disseminated through the Korean nation and beyond. This research tracks the movements of this phenomena, through the growth of K-Pop globally and digitally. It analyzes the practice of beauty branding used within the South Korean entertainment industry, with particular focus on expectations surrounding body modification and surgery. In doing so, the research further reflects on the internationalization of these beauty as it coincides with the popularity of K-Pop induced medical tourism and online engagement. Duplicitously, these pop culture migrations and digital circulations reveal a new manner of disguising these maintained beauty standards to newer audiences as online body positivity.

❖ Research Questions

- How are standards of beauty disseminated at a local level in South Korea and how are they received by the general public?
- What role does the digital space play in this dissemination extending to international receptors of beauty?
- How have global online communities responded to the homogeneity of K-Pop beauty standards? And how have these responses reflected back on Korean popular culture content in this era of globalization?

K-Pop Bodies and Beauty Branding

- The standardized image of beauty is homogeneous, and usually achieved through surgical practice
- Consumerism is the means to which this standard is disseminated (advertisements, music videos, etc.), and K-Pop idols as bodies are the agents
- These practices are strictly controlled by business entities, restricting the agency of idol in public and private spaces

Medical Tourism and the Internationalization of K-Pop Bodies

- These consumerist images thrive in online spaces, catching the attention of international communities
- The Korean Tourism Organization capitalizes on this growth through it's medical tourism programs, which brought over 99,000 tourists in 2016 (Ping Hung Li, 2021)
- The services offered integrate plastic surgery with traditional aspects of Korean culture to maintain cultural authenticity within modern procedures

Digital K-Pop Bodies Under Body Positivity

- Digital spaces such as social media act as a lens into "K-Beauty" standards for young, impressionable consumers of K-Pop content
- Proliferating a single, homogenous idea of beauty online K-Pop fan spaces has had a negative impact on the self image of young K-Pop consumers – a study in Indonesia reflects a correlation between investment in K-Pop digital content and poor body image (Tresna et al, 2021)
- Online body positivity movements clash with these images of homogenous beauty – K-Pop bodies are forced to evolve to incorporate varieties in beauty
- LOONA's Butterfly MV utilizes aspects of body positivity in it's use of global bodies and lyrics – suggesting the possibility of K-Pop's new ability to market diversity



Figure 2 (Yeon-Je, n.d.)



Figure 3 [Jeongyeon headshot] (n.d)

❖ Conclusion

It appears that K-Pop's global identity is on a continual rise, thanks to its virality in digital systems. While some K-Pop productions offer a counter to standardized beauty cultivations, the industry's continued perpetuation of beauty homogeneity even in more diverse works such as LOONA's "Butterfly" take away the credence of these efforts. Meanwhile, the profitability of "K-Beauty" assures its continued promotion in local, global and online contexts. However, such examples also show us the key role of K-Pop image receptors, who themselves also operate in the diversifying digital space. In the digital economy, these operators have power in responding to and influencing these cultivations. While there are dangers in internalizing the unattainable aspects of K-Pop bodies onto our own, an awareness of these cultivations and their impacts brings the objects of the K-Pop system and their viewers alike into a space where diversity may grow. After all, K-Pop bodies in this age rely on the publicity and virality of online spaces and must adhere to their wants and flows.

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❖ Images

- Figure 1: Seokho, M. (2019) *Butterfly* [Music Video]. Youtube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XEOCbFjRw0>
- Figure 2: Yeon-Je, J. (n.d). [Photograph]. Retrieved March 5th, 2023.
- Figure 3: [Jeongyeon headshot] (n.d). [Photograph]. Retrieved March 5th, 2023.



Figure 1 (Seokho, 2019)

I would like to acknowledge with respect the ləkʷəŋən peoples on whose traditional territory the university stands and the Songhees, Esquimalt and W̱SÁNEĆ peoples whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day.