

The Effects of Korean Beauty Standards on Korean Pop Idols

South Korea is widely known for the most plastic surgery procedures per capita: 13.5 per 1,000 people (Lee, Hyo Won). For many years, Koreans have obsessed over the idea of beauty and it has become a cultural struggle amongst many Koreans, mostly affecting females. Lately, these standards in Korea have been spotlighted as Korean pop music, or K-pop, has been spreading globally. With the rise of new generations of groups forming, conforming to the beauty standard plays a huge role for becoming an idol. While Korean pop stars' success has brought them riches, fame, and thousands of adoring fans, Korea's strict beauty standards can lead to dangerous outcomes for Korean pop idols.

First of all, what exactly are Korean beauty standards? Beauty writer Wendy Wang says female Korean beauty standards push for an “innocent and feminine look.” This youthful appearance consists of having a small face, large eyes, pale skin, and a slim body. Beauty standards for men are tall, pale skin, and a clean-shaven face. Male standards aren't as restricting as women's but they're similar in causing men to look androgynous, pale, and skinny. However, recently Western beauty standards have had an impact on male beauty standards by influencing them to “emphasize fitness” and attain a “buffed-up body” (Wang). These standards are seemingly trying to make K-pop idols have a cartoon-ish appearance, like an anime character (Fig.1). K-pop idols sometimes reference anime shows in their songs and music videos which



Fig.1 SHINee's Taemin as Rasiel from “Katekyo Hitman Reborn” (Huston)

may be a part of their concept. Writer E. Huston compiled a list of some idols who looked almost identical to some anime characters,

which were quite accurate from the hairstyle to the clothes. It's almost as if these characters had come to life. Whether it was a concept the idol was going for or if it was purely coincidental, it's a great example of what the standards are encouraging idols to look like.

In both Korean and Western beauty standards, celebrities are the ones who promote these ideals and tend to influence society's view on the type of appearances that are considered to be attractive and that aren't. In Korea, pop idols are in control of the beauty standards and often promote unrealistic standards. One harmful effect of Korea's strict beauty standards is that K-pop fans may have an unhealthy and altered perspective on body image. As a K-pop fan myself, I often keep up with my favorite idols and I've noticed that a lot of idols' facial features have changed with the help of certain plastic surgery procedures or even from weight loss through dieting. I don't think that idols changing their appearances is necessarily a bad thing because they can make decisions for their own bodies. However, I do think that idols who drastically change their appearance feed into the toxic beauty standards of trying to look a certain way so that they're more appealing to the public eye. K-pop stars' actions have added importance because K-pop fans may feel insecure about themselves because they don't look like their idol or even try to change their appearance to be considered beautiful.

Another way K-beauty standards can be harmful is they can lead to extreme dieting, which leads to other outcomes like poor health, depression and eating disorders. Since a slim body is a part of the standard, idols may be forced to a diet that causes them to lose an unhealthy amount of weight in a short period of time, which is usually before a new song/album is released. In an *Insider* interview with the K-pop group Great Guys, member Ho Ryeong says that they "don't have much time for eating," and aren't "free to eat what [they] want" (Soheili). This type of lifestyle idols are living can be detrimental to their health as starving and losing weight rapidly

can lead to risks like headaches, malnutrition, or hair loss. Idols may also develop eating disorders as they eventually get used to barely eating any food.

Depression is also an effect from dieting and a 2017 study showed that weight concern was reported to be a main cause for depression in South Korea (Brewis et al 1). This shows that idols may end up obsessing over their weight, therefore causing them to want to diet to get to their desired weight, which may then lead to a poor effect on their mental health. With the stress of preparing for a comeback while trying to constantly maintain a presentable appearance, it's no surprise that some idols will give in to the immense pressure. Some idols like f(x)'s Sulli and SHINee's Jonghyun have reportedly committed suicide after battling with depression that was caused by the idol lifestyle (Tracy 3-4). These idols and a few others were twenty-five to twenty-eight years old when they committed suicide, all having similar reasons to do so. Amber Liu, member of f(x) says that being an idol is "fun at first, but later the loneliness and all that stuff settles in" (Tracy 3). Although idols may seem to be happy all the time, they may be secretly dealing with mental or physical problems that could be seriously affecting them. The pressure from these beauty standards that causes idols to live such unhealthy lifestyles just to please society is truly scary as idols have resorted to taking their own lives so they won't have to suffer anymore.

Lastly, some Korean idols resort to surgery to change their appearance. Facial features like double eyelids, small nose, and a v-shaped chin are commonly preferred. The popularity of the double eyelid procedure surfaced in Asia during the Korean war around 1950-53. The procedure was developed by American military plastic surgeon Dr. D. Ralph Millard who performed the procedure on Korean war brides who married American soldiers (Lee, C.). Double eyelid surgery is a common procedure many idols undergo and is a feature that is considered

attractive to this day. V-line surgery is another procedure that changes the shape of their chin into a slim and pointy V-shape. This is one of the most dangerous procedures to get done as writer Laura Kurek says that it “ involves shaving--and occasionally breaking--the jawbone to achieve a delicate, V-shaped chin” (3). This procedure can lead to risks like possible nerve damage or jaw asymmetry.

While on social media, I’ve seen quite a lot of pictures and videos of K-pop idols that I’ve noticed have been edited to make their skin appear lighter, which is referred to as “whitewashing” (Fig.2). Idols are often whitewashed by many photographers and even the filters they use to take selfies.

Many K-idols actually have a tan complexion which is often looked down upon by the media since a milky-white skin tone is seen as a sign of “wealth and beauty” (Garner 1).

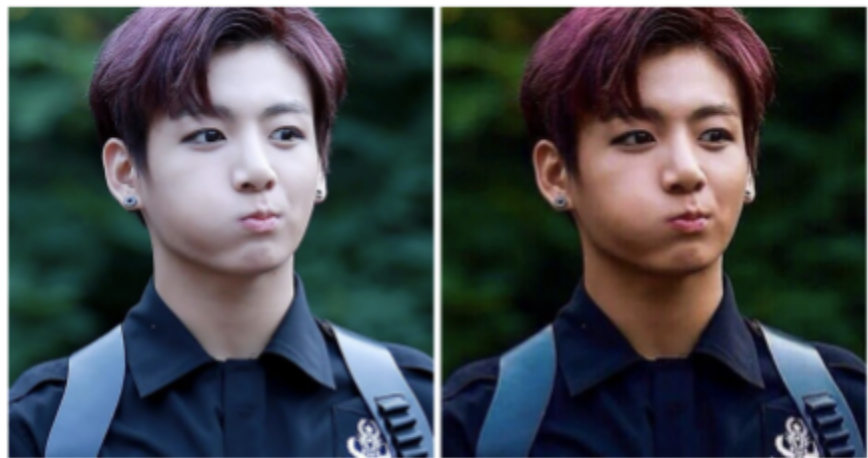


Fig.2 Whitewashed edit (left) and original photo (right) of BTS’s Jungkook (Koreaboo)

Therefore, skin bleaching is another beauty practice that is used among Koreans and can be achieved through methods like bleaching products and professional injection procedures. This too has dangerous risks as many bleaching products contain mercury, which can cause poisoning and infections.

I find these standards to be quite toxic and it’s upsetting seeing idols feel the need to change their appearance to appeal to their fans. I don’t think it’s the idols’ faults for wanting to fit in but it’s more like the result of society’s influence on deciding what’s beautiful and what

isn't. I just wish people wouldn't be so harsh on idols' appearances and hope that someday these standards will loosen up.

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