

Cultural Racism in South Korean Popular Culture: K-Pop Beauty Standards as A Practice of Social Exclusion

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ABSTRACT: The K-Pop industry in South Korea is not only a popular entertainment sector, but also plays an important role in creating and maintaining certain social norms, particularly through uniform visual beauty standards. Beauty standards in K-Pop, such as fair skin, slim bodies, small faces, sharp noses, and double eyelids, serve as a form of invisible racism in South Korean pop culture. This study uses a critical sociological approach by referring to Pierre Bourdieu's theory of symbolic power, which explains how dominant beauty norms are considered natural and ideal tastes, thereby ignoring groups with physical features that do not conform to these standards. In this context, K -Pop beauty standards are not neutral, but rather a mechanism that alienates minority groups in South Korea as well as individuals whose bodies do not conform to these standards. The social impact of this practice includes increased social pressure, acceptance of body stigma, and reinforcement of racial prejudice that affects how people view themselves and form social relationships. Thus, beauty standards in K-Pop can be considered a form of cultural racism that works symbolically and systemically, making pop culture an important place in shaping and maintaining social exclusion in South Korea.

KEYWORDS: K-Pop Industry, Beauty Standards, Cultural Racism, Social Exclusion, Symbolic Powe

I. INTRODUCTION

South Korean popular culture, or K-Pop, has become a striking global phenomenon that has transcended national borders. Millions of fans across continents have emerged and changed the world of popular culture, with the regional pop music industry now becoming a global phenomenon that dominates the international music industry (Lie, 2015). K-Pop's cheerful music, polished dance routines, intensive visual productions, and multimedia marketing strategies have generated a wave of influence known as Hallyu or the Korean Wave. This wave refers to the penetration of Korean culture into mass media and international popular culture consumption. Hallyu consists not only of music, but also television dramas, fashion, cuisine, cosmetics, and lifestyle, so that K-Pop refers to cultural commodities that contain certain aesthetic values, lifestyles, and identity images. This phenomenon further strengthens South Korea's position as an important global cultural producer in the modern technological era.

In many cases, K-Pop is narrated as a creative expression that transcends ethnic and cultural boundaries, and this has a major impact on the entertainment industry and the perception of identity and aesthetics of its fans, especially the younger generation (Oh & Lee, 2013). K-Pop is considered to have the ability to overcome cultural differences, create a space for dialogue between artists and fans around the world, and bring Asian culture to a global level. On the one hand, K-Pop has developed into a soft power force that gives its country of origin extensive global influence, and on the other hand, Korean music, language, and culture have spread to various cultures. On the other hand, if we look deeper into its representative practices, including body image ideals, there is a significant contradiction between K-Pop's narrative of global openness and the reality of narrow representation.

This study finds that K-Pop's racial and aesthetic representations are still very limited and often reflect certain exclusive beauty standards, even though K-Pop is now a global industry that spans more than one country. In K-Pop culture, the dominant beauty standards emphasize certain physical features, such as fair skin, V-shaped faces, large eyes, slim bodies, and delicate facial features. This is often associated with "white skin" aesthetics or appearances that follow broader aesthetic standards (Kim, 2018, Howard, 2018). Studies of popular culture show that these Korean beauty standards have influenced how people in various countries view beauty, creating social pressure to conform to these ideal aesthetic criteria.

In this regard, the representation of bodies and appearances in the K-Pop industry does not reflect the racial or aesthetic diversity that exists in global society, even though the industry has successfully penetrated the global market. K-Pop artists selected to perform on the international stage usually meet certain aesthetic standards, which are set by the industry as "international standards," even though they are understood in the context of Korean culture. This practice can be considered a form of cultural racism because it is a social mechanism that limits and excludes bodies and identities that do not meet the dominant aesthetic standards.

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In popular culture, cultural racism is a type of discrimination or marginalization that is not only based on biological beliefs about race but also through cultural representations, symbols, aesthetics, and social norms that consider one identity to be better or more worthy of appreciation than another. Cultural racism operates through symbolic representation practices that assign certain values to specific cultural forms or expressions. This differs from biological racism, which is rooted in the construction of genetic hierarchies (Hall, 1997). Beauty becomes a complex battleground because aesthetic standards are not merely visual preferences but symbolic practices that have social, economic, and cultural consequences for who is considered “valuable” and who is excluded from those values.

Factors such as representation, stereotypes, media bias, and cultural hierarchies are often discussed in cultural criticism and academic studies of racism. However, one important issue that is still not thoroughly discussed is how the K-Pop industry's beauty standards promote cultural racism, especially through the representation of artists' bodies and the accompanying aesthetic narratives. Beauty standards are an active means of spreading cultural racism in the K-Pop industry, which is considered a global phenomenon. By examining how the visual aesthetics promoted in K-Pop can reinforce certain exclusive symbolic narratives that have the potential to marginalize groups that do not meet these criteria.

The main research question that is the focus of this discussion is: How do beauty standards in K-Pop culture reproduce racism in South Korea and what is their impact on social representation at both the local and global levels?

II. METHODOLOGY

The term “methodology” comes from the Greek words “logos,” meaning ‘science’ or “study,” and “methodos,” meaning “way or means.” Therefore, methodology can be defined as the science of studying systematic methods for obtaining information. In scientific research, “methodology” is a term that refers to a conceptual framework that explains the approaches, assumptions, and principles that shape the choice of specific research methods.

Methodology has become increasingly important in social science and humanities research because the objects of research are not neutral or static; they are laden with relationships between power, values, symbols, and constructions of meaning. As a result, complexity must be addressed by the methodological approach used. Pierre Bourdieu developed the idea of symbolic power, which is a theoretical framework relevant to understanding the dimension of power in social practice. This idea provides a strong theoretical foundation for analyzing how power subtly works through symbols, language, and seemingly natural representations. Research can be incorporated into an analytical framework that not only provides a descriptive explanation of phenomena but also reveals the mechanisms of symbolic power hidden behind social practices. This can be achieved by linking the definition of research methodology to the concept of symbolic power.

A. Symbolic Power Concept - Pierre Bourdieu

Pierre Bourdieu is one of the most prominent sociologists in understanding the relationship between power, cultural practices, and social structures. In his monumental work, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, Bourdieu emphasizes that aesthetic preferences are the result of broader social structures, in which individuals are conditioned to internalize certain aesthetic norms that reflect existing social hierarchies. According to Bourdieu, aesthetic preferences are closely related to social and cultural concepts (Bourdieu, 1984).

According to Bourdieu, the ability to determine what is considered valid values, norms, or standards in a particular culture, even though these criteria appear natural or objective, is called symbolic power. This symbolic power is more than just influence; it is deeply embedded in the social structure so that these norms are considered “proof of truth” rather than social constructs. When dominant cultural actors or institutions establish certain standards of beauty as widely accepted norms, these standards have significant symbolic power and are socially accepted as “true” beauty. Often, people who do not meet these symbolic standards are considered less attractive or less than ideal. However, these differences are merely cultural aesthetic variations. When these aesthetic symbols are used to limit social judgments of certain bodies, such actions can be understood as a form of symbolic violence, a form of power subtly and unconsciously imposed by individuals on themselves, so that the reproduction of social hierarchies appears normal or natural.

In the world of K-Pop, beauty standards—such as fair skin, body shape, or certain facial features—are codified by record labels and promoted through various media, including advertisements, social media content, and artist appearances. By assigning social value to the “desired” body, it indirectly devalues bodies that do not meet these parameters. Not only are the artists themselves affected, but also the beauty industry, fans, and general perceptions of beauty, especially in countries that continue to consume the dynamic culture of K-Pop, such as Indonesia, Japan, China, and the West. Furthermore, criticism of this aesthetic culture has emerged in various online discourses, including K-Pop fan communities around the world who criticize how the industry's beauty standards rarely feature racial diversity or features that differ from the dominant aesthetic. Some critics explicitly say that the K-Pop community often ignores the representation of artists from different racial backgrounds and places a strong emphasis on the dominant aesthetic.

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The K-Pop industry in South Korea operates within a highly uniform visual system, where beauty serves as a key asset in the production and consumption of popular culture. Dominant beauty norms—such as fair skin, small faces with V-line shapes, high noses, wide eyes, and slim bodies—are not only aesthetic choices but also social tools that determine who is worthy of appearing and being accepted in the mainstream entertainment industry. Several studies show that these norms are systematically reinforced by entertainment companies and mass media, creating shared expectations both domestically and internationally (Elfvig-Hwang, 2013; Jung, 2011). Fair skin plays an important role in shaping the Korean concept of beauty, which is closely related to the history of social class, modernity, and social stratification. In the context of K-Pop, discrimination based on skin color is considered a normal practice, where fair skin is associated with professionalism and global appeal. Idols with darker skin often face pressure to “lighten” their appearance through heavy makeup, special lighting, or post-production image manipulation (Lee, 2016; Shin, 2020). This practice not only perpetuates skin color hierarchies but also reinforces internal racism that distinguishes between “acceptable” and “unacceptable” bodies. Beyond skin color, beauty standards in K-Pop also emphasize uniformity in facial features considered perfect. Small faces, high noses, and wide eyes are symbols of modern and cosmopolitan beauty. The pressure for uniformity encourages the normalization of plastic surgery as part of idol professionalization. Procedures such as double eyelid surgery, jaw reshaping, and nose jobs are often seen as reasonable career investments, not merely personal decisions (Holliday & Elfvig-Hwang, 2012; Miller, 2018). As a result, idols' bodies are treated as social projects that must be constantly adjusted to market demands and industry rules.

This situation shows that beauty in K-Pop cannot be separated from the logic of commercialization of the body. Entertainment companies act as the main actors in defining and maintaining visual standards, while idols are made into objects that must meet these expectations for the sake of their careers. Within this framework, the inability to meet beauty standards often results in exclusion, either through minimal media exposure or limited debut opportunities (Jung & Lee, 2019). The limited representation of non-Korean idols or those with physical characteristics that differ from the mainstream norm further emphasizes the monolithic nature of K-Pop culture. Although the industry claims to be a global phenomenon, racial diversity remains severely limited. Foreign idols are often introduced symbolically and are still required to conform to Korean beauty standards, including physical appearance and visual style (Oh, 2017). This reflects how Korean visual identity is strictly maintained, even amid cultural globalization. Therefore, beauty standards in K-Pop culture should not be understood as personal aesthetic preferences, but rather as a social structure that reinforces racial exclusion and hierarchy. These standards operate symbolically and covertly, making cultural racism appear normal and unproblematic. In the long term, this normalization not only affects idols, but also shapes fans' views of the ideal body and racial identity, both in South Korea and globally.

III. PEMBAHASAN

A. Beauty Standard in K-pop

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B. Racism as a cultural practice

Racism in the context of South Korean popular culture, especially in the K-Pop industry, does not always manifest as clear acts of discrimination or overt racist statements. Instead, racism operates subtly through cultural practices that have been normalized and reinforced by institutions. From a sociological perspective, this form of racism is often referred to as symbolic racism, which operates through symbols, norms, and social standards that appear neutral but result in the systematic exclusion of certain groups (Bonilla-Silva, 2018).

Within K-Pop culture, racism manifests through professional standards and visual criteria determined by the entertainment industry. These standards determine who is considered “worthy” of performing, debuting, and being promoted as an idol. Visual criteria that emphasize physical homogeneity—such as specific facial features and light skin—serve as a selection mechanism that indirectly excludes individuals with non-Korean racial backgrounds. This practice shows that racism is not always expressed through direct rejection, but rather through the normalization of exclusive aesthetic standards (Essed, 1991).

A monolithic approach to Korean identity reinforces this practice of cultural racism. K-Pop culture presents Korean identity as something homogeneous and uniform, so that racial differences are seen as deviations from the norm. Within this framework, diversity is not valued as an asset, but rather as a threat to the established visual image. As a result, cultural exclusion occurs when non-Koreans or those who do not fit the mainstream standards are systematically marginalized from mainstream representation in the entertainment industry.

The concept of everyday racism helps explain how racism in K-Pop operates in everyday practices without being recognized as discrimination. Through casting decisions, visual styling, role distribution, and marketing strategies, the entertainment industry maintains a racial hierarchy that is considered normal and professional. These practices are rarely questioned because they are wrapped in industry logic and market preferences, even though they structurally create representation inequality (Essed, 1991).

The presence of non-Korean idols in the K-Pop industry often does not directly indicate racial inclusivity. Many studies show that foreign idols tend to be placed in tokenistic positions, introduced as symbols of diversity without truly challenging the dominant standards of beauty and visual identity. Non-Korean idols are still required to conform to Korean aesthetic norms, either through physical changes or the removal of racial characteristics that are considered different (Oh, 2017). This tokenism actually reinforces the structure of cultural racism because diversity is only accepted as long as it does not disrupt the monolithic image of the industry. Thus, racism in K-Pop culture can be understood as an institutionalized and structural cultural practice. Through symbolic racism, cultural exclusion, and everyday racism, the K-Pop industry maintains a racial hierarchy without having to explicitly express it. This practice shows that racism does not always operate through verbal or physical violence, but rather through the normalization of standards and representations that

C. THE STRUCTURAL ROOTS OF RACISM IN K-POP BEAUTY STANDARDS

The uniform beauty standards in the K-pop music industry stem from social constructs rooted in South Korea's historical and cultural context, rather than being a naturally occurring phenomenon. To understand why racism occurs through these beauty standards, it is necessary to identify several interrelated structural components in order to comprehend it.

1) Ethnic Nationalism and the Myth of Homogeneity

According to Shin (2006), South Korea has a strong national narrative of “one nation, one race.” This national identity is built upon the purity of the Korean ethnicity, which is believed to have existed for many years. Racial homogeneity is considered a source of strength and social cohesion in Korea, despite the fact that the country has historically interacted with various ethnic groups (Lie, 2014). Shin (2006) explains that modern Korean national identity is based on a narrative of Korean “blood purity,” which has produced Korean ethnic nationalism through a process of selective historiography.

This myth of homogeneity functions as a cultural structure and political narrative. It also shapes perceptions of who is considered “truly Korean” and who is considered foreign (Lie, 2014). In this situation, physical appearance is crucial to becoming a member of the national community. Those with facial features, skin color, or physical characteristics that do not conform to the general standard are often viewed with suspicion or considered “not truly Korean” (Kim, 2009). Even though they may have been born and raised in Korea, they are still not considered Korean (Kim, 2009). This phenomenon produces a visual hierarchy in which certain appearances are considered to represent Korea better than others.

This myth of homogeneity functions as a dominant ideology that is naturalized to the point of being considered normal in Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony (1971). According to Gramsci (1971), hegemony occurs not through coercion, but through consensus, in which the ruling group creates their worldview as universal “common sense.” Furthermore, beauty standards become a visual representation of this ideology by reflecting the physical characteristics of the Korean ethnic majority. As cultural icons, K-Pop

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idols are considered to represent the visual “purity” of Korea, which indirectly eliminates individuals with different appearances (Jung, 2011).

This hegemony works without violence or direct coercion, which makes it more challenging. According to Hall (1997), although there are no written rules stipulating that idols must have a certain appearance, these expectations are so strong and widespread that they become an “unwritten rule” followed by everyone in the industry. If employees do not meet visual standards, they will be advised to undergo plastic surgery, use skin-whitening products, or even leave the industry altogether. This is not because they lack talent, but because their appearance is considered disadvantageous (Holliday & Elfving-Hwang, 2012). This process demonstrates the mechanism of cultural hegemony: it does not coerce, but creates a situation where conformity appears to be the most logical choice.

Furthermore, the myth of homogeneity is widespread in various social institutions, such as family, education, and media. These institutions continue to reinforce the idea that homogeneity is strength and diversity is a threat (Shin, 2006). The story of “5000 years of racial purity” continues to be told in Korean history textbooks, even though historical evidence shows that Korea has always been a society with intense ethnic interaction (Lie, 2014). The mass media, including K-Pop, reinforces this narrative by almost never displaying visual variation. The result is an echo chamber in which Korean society, especially the younger generation, is constantly indoctrinated with the idea that “authentic Korea” is a racially homogeneous Korea. generasi muda, terus-menerus didoktrin oleh gagasan bahwa "Korea yang asli" adalah Korea yang homogen secara rasial

2) The History of Colonialism and Delayed Modernization

According to Shin (2006), the formation of national identity was influenced by trauma caused by the experiences of Japanese colonialism (1910-1945) and the Korean War (1950-1953). According to Kim (2008), South Korea's rapid modernization since the 1960s has led to a need for signs of progress that distinguish Korea from its poor and colonized past. This period, often referred to as the “Miracle on the Han River,” saw Korea's economic transformation from one of the world's poorest countries to a developed country in less than a generation. However, the speed of modernization raised concerns about national identity: how could Korea become “modern” without losing its “Korean-ness”? Shin (2006)

According to Holliday and Elfving-Hwang (2012), modern Korean beauty standards reflect national success and modernity by emphasizing fair skin, small faces, and “refined” features. Elfving-Hwang (2013) states that plastic surgery and appearance modification in Korea are about “embodying the moral self”—becoming a responsible citizen by presenting oneself according to modern standards—and not just about one's beauty. According to Elfving-Hwang (2018), having a “good” appearance in this narrative indicates that one is a productive member of contemporary Korean society, not merely vain.

Ironically, these standards are said to be uniquely Korean, even though they are inspired by Western aesthetics due to post-war American influence (Joo, 2012). In this process, a paradox occurs: Korea adopts elements of global aesthetics but rejects racial representation. The ideal of beauty is features such as a slimmer jaw, a higher nose, and double eyelids, which historically were not common in Korea (Holliday & Elfving-Hwang, 2012). The dominant narrative, however, claims that this is natural “modern Korean beauty,” rather than acknowledging that these standards are influenced by Western aesthetics.

Furthermore, the trauma caused by colonialism has led to a complex sensitivity to outside influences. Korea resists the idea that it “copies” or is “inferior” to other cultures. Instead, it is very open to following global trends, technologies, and styles. In terms of beauty standards, Korea adopts Western aesthetic standards but refuses to acknowledge this influence and, more problematically, refuses to give credit to the cultures that provided the inspiration (Joo, 2012). This explains why the K-Pop industry can use elements from African-American culture, such as hip-hop, R&B, and fashion, but also treat African-Americans in a discriminatory or stereotypical manner (Han, 2015).

Rapid modernization creates pressure to “catch up” with developed countries, and physical appearance is one place where this “progress” can be seen (Elfving-Hwang, 2013). A person can be considered to have “arrived” on the global stage with a “well-groomed” body, white and clean skin, and a “refined” face (Holliday & Elfving-Hwang, 2012). As the most globally recognized cultural product, K-Pop has become the primary display of Korea's “progress.” Therefore, idols must present a “perfect” appearance to represent the country's success (Jung, 2011).

3) The Entertainment Industry as a Visual Production System

The K-Pop industry is a highly organized mass production system. SM, YG, and JYP have strict training systems that control the physical appearance of students (Lie, 2012). According to Oh and Park (2012), idols are visual products that meet market standards. The K-Pop training system shapes the physical appearance of trainees comprehensively, in addition to honing their vocal and dancing skills, which can last from several years to more than ten years (Jung, 2011).

The pressure to standardize appearances according to a proven “formula for success” has emerged as a result of the transformation of idols' bodies (Jung, 2011). Lie (2012) explains that the K-Pop industry uses a highly calculated business model, in which every aspect of idols, including their physical appearance, is carefully planned for mass consumption. Trainees are regularly weighed, measured, and evaluated based on their appearance. Those considered “too dark” are advised to use skin-whitening products, those

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considered “too fat” must follow extreme diets, and those considered to have “unideal” faces are even required to undergo plastic surgery (Holliday & Elfving-Hwang, 2012).

These uniform beauty standards are not only aesthetic standards, but also a business strategy to reduce commercial risk. Racial diversity is considered an “experiment” that could potentially be financially detrimental, so agencies choose to adopt figures who conform to common visual standards. Diversity is considered a “niche market” that is not profitable for the mainstream market according to the capitalists of this industry (Lie, 2012). Agencies argue that Korean fans, who are the most important market base, have a strong preference for uniform appearances, and therefore, diversity could divide the core fan base.

The contract structure in the K-Pop industry makes this system even more rigid. Idols typically have long-term contracts (7-10 years) that give agencies total control over how they look and appear (Jung, 2011). This means that idols cannot negotiate if they want to challenge existing beauty standards, such as maintaining dark skin or refusing plastic surgery. Contracts give agencies the right to choose idols' hairstyles, makeup, clothing, and even weight. In such situations, idols' bodies are no longer their own; instead, they become commercial assets that must be optimized to generate more money.

According to Lie (2012), the K-Pop industry operates on a “winner takes all” principle, meaning that only highly successful groups can survive. This creates tremendous pressure to follow formulas that have been shown to be successful. Innovation or deviation from the norm is considered a risk that could cause a group to fail, and failure in such a competitive industry means the end of a career. Therefore, organizations tend to be very conservative when it comes to visual representation. They do not want to “experiment” with unconventional idols when existing methods have proven to be profitable (Oh & Park, 2012).

The highly advanced industry infrastructure also supports this visual production system. According to Elfving-Hwang (2018), K-Pop interacts with Korea's highly advanced cosmetics, fashion, and aesthetic health industries. Idols become brand representatives for beauty products, reinforcing the beauty standards they represent. According to Glenn (2008), the cycle in which beauty standards are continuously reproduced and normalized occurs when idols with very fair skin promote skin-whitening products. Fans want to look like their idols, so they buy the same products. The idols' appearance is the ideal to be achieved, subsequently.

4) Absence of effective anti-discrimination policies

In the entertainment industry, there are no laws prohibiting racial discrimination during recruitment, promotion, or media representation. Racial exclusion can occur without legal consequences due to this legal framework (Human Rights Watch, 2021). Discrimination based on race, ethnicity, or physical appearance in employment or public services is not prohibited by the Korean Constitution, which protects equality (Choo, 2016).

Public discourse on racism in Korea remains very limited. Park (2020) explains that “homogeneous nationalism” exists in Korea, where racial discrimination is not considered a structural problem. Discrimination based on appearance in Korea is described as “personal preference” or “industry standards,” rather than a structural problem requiring policy intervention. Instead, racism is often considered a “Western” problem (Seol & Skrentny, 2009). Racism is irrelevant to Korean history because racism is something that happens in other countries—particularly the United States, which has a history of segregation and slavery (Kim, 2009).

The presence of this legal framework has significant practical consequences. K-Pop organizations can set legally discriminatory “visual standards” without worrying about legal consequences (Lie, 2012). Job postings in the entertainment industry often mention requirements such as height, weight, and even skin color. This would be illegal in many other countries but is widely accepted in Korea (Holliday & Elfving-Hwang, 2012). Auditions for trainee positions often eliminate candidates based solely on appearance, without giving them a chance to showcase their talents.

More complicated still, when racist incidents occur, such as the use of blackface in variety shows or negative comments from idols, there is almost never any significant accountability (Han, 2015). In some situations, public criticism (especially from international fans) can force apologies, but these are not usually followed by major changes or policy shifts. The apologies offered are often too superficial, using phrases such as “We did not mean to hurt anyone” or “We will be more careful in the future” without truly understanding why the behavior was problematic in the first place (Jung, 2019).

Civil society groups focused on minority rights in Korea have very limited resources and very little influence to affect public discourse (Choo, 2016). Anti-racism movements are still very few in Korea, unlike in other countries where they have succeeded in changing policies and social practices. Racial discrimination is rarely discussed by mainstream media unless the incident goes viral. Even in such coverage, the framing often downplays the level of discrimination or attributes it to “cultural misunderstanding” rather than structural discrimination (Park, 2020).

Furthermore, the Korean education system does not adequately address racism and diversity. The school curriculum does not focus on narratives of Korean homogeneity. It does not teach students about critical race theory, intersectionality, or how to identify and challenge discriminatory practices (Shin, 2006). Young Koreans growing up in this environment are often unaware of how racism works and why representation matters. According to Lie (2014), when they become the people responsible for decisions in industries such as K-Pop, they continue to use the same misguided views and make the same mistakes. As a result, the vicious cycle continues.

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D. REPRODUCTION OF RACISM ACROSS SCALES

Standard Beauty standards in K-Pop not only have an impact at the individual or domestic level, but also reproduce racism on a broader scale—both in South Korean society and in the global K-Pop community (Jung, 2019). This impact occurs simultaneously at various levels, creating a mutually reinforcing cycle of reproduction between global consumption and domestic practices. At the domestic level in South Korea, K-Pop beauty standards reinforce existing colorism in society (Glenn, 2008). When idols, aspirational figures, are always portrayed with white skin, society considers white skin a prerequisite for success and attractiveness. The billion-dollar Korean cosmetics industry capitalizes on this insecurity by producing thousands of skin-whitening products (Elfving-Hwang, 2018). The psychological impact is stark: surveys show that the majority of Korean women are dissatisfied with their skin color and use whitening products regularly (Holliday & Elfving-Hwang, 2012).

For Koreans with darker skin or those from multiracial backgrounds, these standards create pressure to “fix” their appearance to conform to the norm (Kim, 2009). This process is part of the social construction of reality, in which repeated internalization transforms vague beauty standards into “objective reality” (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). Through the normalization of these homogeneous beauty standards, discrimination against minority communities becomes increasingly legitimized. South Korea's growing population consists of people of various races and ethnicities, including refugees, workers from Southeast Asia, and children from international marriages (Lie, 2014). According to Park (2020), the beauty standards promoted by K-Pop reinforce the belief that “non-Korean” appearances are inferior.

Multiracial children, also known as *kosian*, often experience harassment at school because their appearance differs from the majority (Kim, 2009). When popular culture and media portray only one type of appearance as ideal, it legitimizes discrimination in everyday life. Essed (1991) defines “everyday racism” as discriminatory practices that are embedded in the daily activities of society, such as questions about appearance, questions about origin, or assumptions about Korean language ability. This is common for minorities (Seol & Skrentny, 2009). Although they may not be significant individually, these practices create an unfriendly environment for those who do not meet the dominant visual standards. The pressure to have a “perfect” physical appearance causes widespread depression and anxiety, especially among teenagers and young adults (Bordo, 1993). South Korea has the highest rate of plastic surgery per capita in the world.

This occurs even though the country is forced to meet certain beauty standards (Haiken, 1997; Holliday & Elfving-Hwang, 2012). K-Pop icons themselves are victims of this system. They experience eating disorders, body deformities, and exhaustion due to the pressure to look the way they want (Jung, 2011). According to Wolf (1991) in *Beauty Myth*, beauty standards control society and limit women's potential by emphasizing their appearance. The impact on the general public can be imagined when public figures who have access to the best resources also face these standards (Gimlin, 2002). Beauty standards put pressure on broader social structures. Not only in the entertainment industry, but also in the workplace, politics, and other public spaces, these standards function as gatekeepers (Elfving-Hwang, 2018).

According to Holliday & Elfving-Hwang (2012), “lookism,” or discrimination based on appearance, is a practice that is considered normal. In Korea, a person's resume typically includes a photo, and physical appearance is also considered important when selecting candidates (Holliday & Elfving-Hwang). As the most visible cultural sector, K-Pop normalizes this lookism and supports the idea that appearance is a legitimate form of social capital (Bourdieu in Gimlin, 2002). K-Pop beauty standards have a significant and complex impact worldwide. According to Rondilla and Spickard (2007), K-Pop has a huge fan base in several regions, including Asia, Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East. All of these regions also have issues with colorism. K-Pop fans from these countries receive visual messages about beauty standards after watching K-Pop content.

Studies show that they not only enjoy music, but also accept the desire to whiten their skin (Glenn, 2008; Rondilla & Spickard, 2007). According to Jung (2019), idols become role models, and Korean beauty standards become global standards. However, these standards essentially originate from Korean society itself. Yoon (2019) explains that racial representation in K-Pop leads to a “racist beauty hierarchy” that is accepted by fans around the world. This causes Korean beauty standards to apply in countries with very different cultural contexts, not just in Korea.

E. GLOBAL IMPLICATIONS OF K-POP BEAUTY STANDARDS FROM AN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS PERSPECTIVE

This journal uses a sociological approach as its basis, but an international relations perspective can provide additional insight into how K-Pop beauty standards influence South Korea's cultural diplomacy and global perception. The Korean Wave (*Hallyu*) has been promoted as a soft power tool by the South Korean government since the late 1990s (Kim, 2013). K-Pop is considered a tool to enhance Korea's reputation, attract foreign investment, and increase Korea's geopolitical power through government programs and the Korean Foundation for International Cultural Exchange (Lee, 2011). However, there is a major contradiction with this soft power strategy: Korea wants to be seen as a modern and global country, but its cultural representation is very homogeneous and exclusive (Shim, 2006).

From an international relations perspective, this creates a gap between the projected reality and the actual reality, which can jeopardize the long-term success of soft power (Ainslie, 2017). The ability to get what one wants through attraction rather than

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coercion is called soft power, according to Nye (2004). However, to be effective in the long term, this attraction must be authentic and consistent. According to soft power theory, cultural appeal should generate legitimacy and goodwill, but when the promoted culture contains elements of racial exclusion, it can cause negative reactions around the world (Ainslie, 2017). According to Han (2015), incidents of racism involving Korean idols or variety shows often become controversial around the world.

Examples include the use of blackface, racist comments against dark-skinned idols, or stereotypical treatment of viewers from other countries. According to Lee (2011), these events put South Korea's reputation as a country aspiring to be a world cultural leader at risk. According to a report by the Korean Foundation for International Cultural Exchange (2023), one of the biggest challenges in maintaining the positive image of the Korean Wave is the controversy surrounding racism, especially among the global younger generation who are increasingly concerned with issues of social justice. Although the Korean Wave has been phenomenal in spreading Korean culture throughout the world, South Korea itself is closed to cultural influences from other countries, especially from the Global South (Shim, 2006).

This has led to inequality in cultural exchange. Korea expects the world to consume its cultural products, but does not allow for variation in its own industry (Kuwahara, 2014). From an international relations perspective, this can be considered cultural hegemony because Korea, with its strong cultural industry, can control global market aesthetic and consumption standards without acknowledging variation (Williams, 1977; Choi & Maliangkay, 2014). According to Shim (2006), the Korean Wave is a type of "hybridity" that is chosen, combining beneficial global aspects while maintaining local cultural identity. Because of this paradox, Korea wants to take advantage of globalization (global markets, international income, geopolitical influence) without sacrificing its negative consequences (accepting variation, changing domestic standards, and accepting international criticism).

Hollywood, despite still having problems, has improved racial representation due to pressure from domestic and international social movements (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). Korea is more closed in terms of diversity compared to the soft power strategies of other countries, such as Hollywood, Bollywood, or Japan (anime). Conversely, Korea has not experienced enough pressure to change its practices (Park, 2020). Due to pressure from domestic and international social movements, Hollywood has improved racial representation despite still experiencing problems (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). Compared to the soft power strategies of other countries such as Hollywood, Bollywood, or Japan, Korea's diversity is more closed. Conversely, sufficient pressure has not yet forced Korea to change its practices (Park, 2020). Due to pressure from domestic and international social movements, Hollywood has improved its racial representation, although problems remain (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). Compared to the soft power strategies of other countries such as Hollywood, Bollywood, or Japan, Korea's diversity is more closed. Conversely, significant pressure has not yet forced Korea to change its practices (Park, 2020).

As a soft power strategy, the Korean Wave contains an important paradox (Nye, 2004; Shim, 2006): Korea wants to be loved globally but does not want to accept diversity domestically. The same beauty standards promoted by K-Pop artists undermine the connection between the global image Korea promotes as a modern, dynamic, and attractive country and that of minority and non-Korean countries. In the long term, this exclusion could undermine the legitimacy of Korea's soft power and trigger a backlash from a global audience that is increasingly demanding fairer representation (Korean Foundation for International Cultural Exchange, 2023). However, to understand racism in everyday cultural practices, this analysis must be complemented by a sociological perspective (Gramsci, 1971; Hall, 1997); this includes how homogeneous beauty standards are normalized, how cultural hegemony makes exclusion seem natural, and how individual actors (idols, fans, industry workers) become complicit in this larger system. A more comprehensive understanding is gained by combining the perspectives of International Relations and sociology: IR explains the geopolitical and reputational implications of exclusionary practices, while sociology explains the internal mechanisms of the spread of these practices.

F. GLOBAL CHANGE EFFORTS AND HOPES

In recent years, the K-pop industry has shown a shift towards inclusivity and global cultural awareness, although this transformation is still ongoing and has not yet fully touched the structure of the Korean entertainment industry. Based on the analysis in K-pop as a Mirror of Culture: Issues of Representation and Racism in Modern Korean Culture, K-pop initially served as a tool of South Korean soft power to introduce a modern and competitive image of the nation at the international level (Nye, 2004; Jang & Paik, 2012). However, behind its success, there has been criticism of homogeneous representation and prominent racial bias, especially in terms of beauty standards and cultural appropriation (Hall, 1997; Kim, 2020). Nevertheless, the development of cultural globalization and increasing social awareness have encouraged change. The emergence of non-Korean artists such as Lisa Manoban from Thailand shows that the K-pop industry is beginning to open up space for ethnic and national diversity. Although Lisa has become a global icon, she has also faced stereotypes and bias from the Korean media, which portrays Southeast Asia as inferior (Jewwuttipong, 2025; Sirinya, 2023). This phenomenon shows that K-pop's inclusivity still faces limitations, but the direction towards change is clearly visible.

Apart from within the industry, the push for change towards inclusivity also comes from international fan activism. K-pop fans now function not only as passive consumers but also as active social agents who criticize issues of racism, sexism, and cultural appropriation that arise in the Korean entertainment world. In line with the concept of cultural re-appropriation proposed by

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Iwabuchi (2010), global fandom now forms a cross-border dialogue space where the values of social justice and diversity are fought for. For example, when idols or agencies commit acts that are considered culturally insensitive, large fanbases such as ARMY (BTS) and BLINK (BLACKPINK) often demand public apologies and cultural education. In some cases, public pressure from fan communities has prompted major agencies such as YG Entertainment and SM Entertainment to respond with corrective measures and a commitment to cultural awareness training for their artists (Oh & Park, 2021).

This shift is also in line with the theory of soft power described by Nye (2011), whereby cultural appeal can be a tool for diplomacy and influence without coercion. However, as outlined in the text, K-pop's soft power also presents a paradox: on the one hand, it presents a modern and inclusive image of Korea; on the other hand, it still contains discriminatory practices such as colorism and aesthetic homogenization that are detrimental to local identities (Choi, 2018; Lee, 2022). Nevertheless, the combination of academic criticism, industry awareness, and pressure from international fans points to a new direction for K-pop as a global cultural product that is more reflective of social justice values. Therefore, it can be concluded that although challenges remain significant, K-pop is moving towards a more mature form of global inclusivity, with the active participation of global fans as a moral and social force driving structural change in the Korean entertainment industry.

IV. CONCLUSION

K-Pop K-Pop as a global cultural product demonstrates how South Korea uses soft power to create a positive, contemporary, and progressive national image. K-Pop has successfully penetrated international markets and become a highly effective instrument of cultural diplomacy through its music, aesthetics, narrative creativity, and media technology. However, alongside this success, issues such as racism, stereotypes, and unfair representation have emerged, showing that soft power not only promotes culture but also opens up space for criticism of values within popular Korean culture.

Racism in K-Pop is a reflection of the process of cultural globalization that has not been fully balanced by the multicultural understanding of South Korean society. This is more than just an individual occurrence. As a result, the K-Pop industry must reaffirm its commitment to more sensitive, inclusive, and respectful cultural representation, which is the basis of globalization, if Korea wants to maintain its strong position as a global cultural force.

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