



Trammelled stars: the non-autonomy of female K-pop idols

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ABSTRACT

South Korea is well known for its industrialist approach to the creation of idol groups. This article demonstrates the correlation between exploitive managerial practices, widely employed in the production of idols, and their resultant effects on individual autonomy. We first situate the agency-idol system in Korea's contemporary neoliberal landscape, before proceeding to outline how the recruitment and training of female performers deliberately fosters dependence. Next, we illustrate how bodily shaping — in the form of weight loss and plastic surgery — and objectification serve to delimit personal autonomy. Exacting beauty standards, in turn, contribute to the imposition of highly restrictive somatic identities, affording idols little to no room for agentic experimentation. Increased dependency, in conjunction with the forced assumption of dollified personas, amounts to an effective reduction in autonomous capacity, re-enforcing the notion that K-pop is a site of patriarchal disciplining.

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Introduction

The global appeal of South Korean (hereafter Korean) popular music has arguably reached its zenith. Performing at the 63rd Grammy Awards, the supergroup BTS dispelled any residual doubts concerning Korea's propensity to manufacture world class acts. Despite recent changes in the Korean music business, idol groups remain the most profitable vehicle for native entertainment companies, generating trillions of *won* annually.¹ The irrefutable success of idol-driven K-pop has, however, not been without cost. A recent spate of high-profile suicides, most notably the death of the singer Sulli, have served to highlight the industry's dark side. Emphatically, beneath K-pop's lustrous veneer, grueling training regimes, exploitive working conditions and abusive managerial practices, characterise the production of idol groups. This paper is an attempt to critically locate the systemic forces facilitating the non-autonomy of trainee and fledgling stars.

Concretely defining K-pop proves difficult, being a mosaic blend of 'storytelling, music, group dance, body performance, and fashion show' (Choi and Maliangkay 2015, p. 5). Aurally speaking, K-pop fuses dance, techno and hip-hop influences, pairing catchy hooks with memorable lyrics to create stimulating, though unexacting, soundscapes (Lie and Oh 2015, pp. 349–350). The visual spectacle of K-pop acts is of commensurable importance.

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Same-sex ensembles of young and attractive performers, stylishly dressed and executing synchronic dance moves, are a staple of the genre (Yoon 2019, p. 138). By and large, K-pop follows in the footsteps of *Hallyu* 한류, or 'Korean Wave,' denoting the consumption of Korean cultural products abroad. Beginning in the late 1990s with the export of films and terrestrial dramas, *Hallyu* is now in its second iteration, commonly referred to as the New Korean Wave or *Hallyu* 2.0 (Jin 2016, p. 4). Recent manifestations of *Hallyu* have, and continue to be, spearheaded by K-pop idol groups, who help fuel the expansion of the Korean cultural sector into foreign markets. K-pop then is intrinsically melded to economic ambition, having been conscripted into the national neoliberal agenda. As Lie (2015, p. 130) drily observes, 'the K in K-pop has more to do with *Das Kapital* than with Korean culture or tradition.'

But why our focus solely on female idols? Although both male and female performers are subject to similarly intense training and draconian management, gender specific pressures render the experiences of the sexes unique. Foremost, the role of patriarchy in the production and promotion of Korean girl groups cannot be downplayed. The majority of mainstream K-pop idols are actively encouraged to indulge feminine stereotypes, cultivating demure, cutesy and nurturing personas (Lin and Rudolf 2017, p. 30; Yoon 2019, p. 147). While the creation of the 'fuckable fantasy woman' has long been a preoccupation of music moguls worldwide, strategies to boost listenership in Korea are especially reliant on the objectification of the female body (O'Brian 2002, p. 238). Moreover, female idols are typically held to narrower beauty standards than their male peers, often forced to undertake regimen aimed at 'correcting' their appearance. Indeed, notions of hegemonic femininity are nowhere more pronounced than within the star-manufacturing facilities responsible for the generation of new idols. Lastly, we might note the increased vulnerability of young women and girls to the demands of managers and agency executives, the majority of whom are middle-aged men. To quote Pipher (1994, p. 22), 'adolescent girls are like saplings in a hurricane,' that is to say females exposed to power asymmetries are at greater risk of abuse. Only through gendering the recruitment, training and marketing of idol groups, can we fully appreciate the coercive mechanisms entrapping female performers in positions of relative subservience.

Although the celebrity body has inspired plentiful scholarship, research continues to focus on the global North (Jian *et al.* 2021, p. 175). Analysis of female stardom encounters similar problems, with a disproportionate number of studies devoted to English-speaking caucasian women. The connection between female celebrity and bodily autonomy has, in recent years, peaked the curiosity of social scientists. Patrick (2022, p. 178), for instance, underscores Britney Spears' reclamation of sexual agency following the termination of her conservatorship. As such, this paper endeavours to fill a lacuna in celebrity research, while simultaneously building on existing scholarship. Variances between the Euro-American and Korean understanding of idol culture necessitates a working definition. Elfving-Hwang (2018, p. 193) distinguishes between idols and talents, with Korean television personalities, actors and sports stars falling into the latter category. Galbraith (2018, p. 202), moreover, draws attention to the young age of idols, their excellent interpersonal skills and reliance on fan support. Equally important is the factory-like approach to the production and training of idols, differentiating them from Western pop stars.

As a final point, it remains to outline the meaning of dependency and its conceptual usefulness in highlighting the non-autonomy of female idols. In particular, we call upon the notion of strong asymmetric dependency, broadly defined as the ability for powerful entities to control the actions, resources and physical mobility of their weaker opponents (Winnebeck *et al.* 2021, p. 8). This does not, however, assume dependency to be a static abstraction. On the contrary, a great deal of fluidity can be observed among social actors, who continually attempt to fortify or reduce their interdependence via, what Emerson (1962, p. 35) calls, 'balancing operations.' Significantly, strong asymmetric dependencies differ from other forms of power disparity in respect to the injuries — both physical and psychological — sustained as a consequence of the relationship. Henceforth, we work from the assumption that high levels of dependency serve to erode private autonomy, acting to maroon individuals of especial vulnerability.

This, in turn, brings us to the meaning of autonomy. Following Heilinger (2010, pp. 240–245), we believe autonomy to be inextricably linked to personal sovereignty, or rather a prerequisite to leading self-determined lifestyles. Autonomy then can be understood as a capacity, or perhaps skill, requiring active obtention as opposed to inert assumption. As Rössler (2021, p. 24) has extensively discussed, autonomy might even be understood as the wellspring from which all expressions of fully actualised agency flourish.² Generally speaking, social scientists recognise two forms of autonomous behaviour, termed global and local respectively. Global autonomy refers to human action in its entirety, whereas local autonomy designates various exploits performed under specific circumstances. Put simply, local autonomy points to situations where actors behave, or fail to behave, in a manner considered autonomous. Through collating scattered observances of local autonomy, we are able to interrogate the wider phenomena of dependency in the Korean music industry. However, in lifting the veil on the non-autonomy of female idols, it is not our purpose to disempower individual performers. Conversely, we will demonstrate how exploitative business practices create conditions of dependence that, in turn, erode the autonomous capacity of female artists. While a vast scholarly literature has grown up around K-pop, attention to the specific treatment of idols is often sidelined. In response, we take K-pop's human subjects as our starting point, situating their experiences at the forefront of our enquiry.

I

Neoliberal alliances: the agency-idol system and big capital

Before examining the diurnal exploitation of female idols, it is necessary to understand the conglomerate entertainment agencies dominating Korea's popular music industry. Following the 1997 Asian financial crisis, resulting in Korea's bailout by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), K-pop has enjoyed an 'undisturbed honeymoon' with big capital, designated of axial importance to the country's economic development (Choi and Maliangkay 2015, p. 3). Successive governments have continued to promote the cultural sector as instrumental to Korea's growth, thus locating K-pop at the forefront of the national embrace of neoliberal values (Kim 2018a, p. 522).³

To date, three major corporations exercise an oligopoly over the production of idol groups, they are SM Entertainment, YG Entertainment and JYP Entertainment. A host of smaller companies, generally modelled on their senior competitors, have emerged in recent years, though the supremacy of the 'Big Three' remains largely uncontested (Lee 2017, p. 173). Common to all agencies, however, is a preference for the total management strategy, designed to oversee every aspect of the idol manufacturing process (Lee 2013, p. 101).⁴ The globalisation of K-pop, as well as intense competition for domestic market share, have prompted a relentless drive towards efficiency and productivity. Idol groups are developed with assembly line precision, implementing tried and tested formulae all but guaranteed to recuperate costs. Effectively, the total management strategy necessitates the factory-like creation of Korean pop stars, including the strict management of idols' personal lives (Shin 2017, pp. 116–118). Through supervising all stages of idol assemblage — recruitment, training, music production and marketing — entertainment agencies maintain a degree of quality control, insuring themselves against financial loss. Critically, the idol blueprint is motivated not by artistic but commercial interests, money, after all, constitutes the 'alpha and omega of K-pop' (Lee 2015, p. 120).

While effective, the creation of K-pop idol groups is both costly and protracted. To give but one example, SM Entertainment spent an average of 2.6 million dollars to scout, coach and premiere members of the popular group Girls' Generation (Kim 2018b, p. 190). Equally, the median training period for members of Girls' Generation was a little over six years, with the lead vocalist Jessica spending approximately ninety months as a trainee (Lee 2013, p. 107). Henceforth, entertainment agencies immediately deploy idol groups in all manner of commercial activities, with the expressed purpose of quickly recovering their outlay. To facilitate such a business strategy, the agency-idol system situates itself at the heart of a multi-industry assemblage, comprising of television, radio, cinema and advertisement. From their debut onwards, idols are paraded in front of studio cameras, cameoed in television dramas or films, and expected to endorse a wide array of consumer products.⁵ The music is, of course, not entirely overlooked, with idol groups crisscrossing Korea performing at small-scale, often free, concerts — known as *hangsah* 행사 — hosted by municipal governments or local media stations. In extreme cases, idols might perform at five or more *hangsah* per day, a onerous schedule by any standards (Lee 2013, p. 115). Round the clock timetabling not only results in chronic overwork but even fatalities. In 2014 the five-member girl group Ladies' Code were involved in a deadly car accident, after their tour bus hydroplaned into an expressway crash barrier while speeding in rainy weather.⁶ Overbooking frequently results in sleep deprived managers racing between venues, where exceeding speed limits remains the only recourse to fulfilling murderous schedules (Jin and Lee 2019, p. 163). Accordingly, from the get-go, female idol groups are treated as little more than cash cows by their conglomerate creators, personal welfare being forever secondary to profit margins.

The dehumanising effects of K-pop's production model are by no means anomalous, but rather the latest iteration in a long history of female labour exploitation in Korea. Briefly positioning entertainment companies in respects to Korea's legacy of workforce abuses, goes some way in historicising the mishandling of female idols. With the end of the Korean war in 1953, efforts began to revive the Southern peninsula's shattered economy. In order to kickstart the Republic's development, state officials took a direct role in organising markets and encouraging export-oriented industries. From the early

1960s onwards, the Korean government cultivated close ties with emerging conglomerates, awarding subsidies and tax breaks to those corporations propelling growth (Lie 1992, p. 293). For the most part, young single women staffed Korea's factory floors, specifically mobilised by the state to carry out the scutwork of capital accumulation (H. M. Kim 2001, p. 56). Female labourers endured regular maltreatment, subject to long hours, high accident rates and low wages, not to mention sexual and physical abuse (Kim 2019, p. 32). Widespread belief in the docility, subservience and malleability of women was no doubt instrumental in their application as inexpensive, if not semi-disposable, labourers. Cheap goods produced by inadequately paid female workers fuelled Korea's economic transformation, ensuring the Miracle of the Han River is as much a story of gendered violence as it is developmentalism (Park 1993, p. 141).

Korea's bailout by the IMF in 1997 obliged seismic changes in the fiscal logic of the state. Foremost, government regulation gave way to free market orthodoxy, with capitalist principles replacing the quasi-authoritarian management of the economy. As aforementioned, the cultural industries took on new importance in post-IMF Korea, beginning with president Kim Dae Jung's (in office 1998–2003) implementation of cultural policies aimed at generating national wealth (Yim 2002, p. 41). In short, culture shifted from an entity to be preserved merely for posterity's sake to a source of profit making (Kang 2015, p. 51). Coinciding with Korea's neoliberal envelopment was the initial trialling and success of female idol groups. This is no coincidence, with K-pop embodying Korea's recalibration from manufacturing-based to service-centred economy, specialising in the exportation of cultural products and digital technologies.⁷ Despite economic restructuring, many facets of the K-pop production model resemble the factory conditions endured by women in the post-war years. While consumer goods have been exchanged for cultural commodities, local labour continues to be extorted for the purpose of manufacturing consumables for the global market.⁸ Moreover, as with factory girls in the industrialisation period, female idols are poorly paid, sexualised and forcibly deferential towards male corporate elites (Kim 2018b, p. 200). Crucially then, the unethical business practices characterising Korea's development, continue to shape the employment experiences of women working in the entertainment industry today.

In summary, female K-pop idol groups are what Kim (2019, p. 27) terms, a 'cultural genre of neoliberalism,' that is to say the manufacturing of female stars is inextricably linked to Korea's current economic rationale. Vulnerable young women and girls are interned into 'greedy institutions,' where moneymaking takes precedence over safety and wellbeing (Coser 1974). Needless to say, such circumstances naturally foster dependency relations, with power imbalances between idols and management executives enabling systemic abuses. As outlined in the introduction, strong asymmetric dependencies act to erode individual autonomy, further problematising the blatantly exploitive idol-agency system.

II

Stellar nurseries: idol recruitment and training

Having now contextualised the means of production, we shall proceed to examine the cutthroat recruitment of aspiring stars, as well as the Spartan-like training regimes idols are expected to undertake. In light of the fact K-pop is dominated by only a handful of

powerful conglomerates, there is but 'one royal road to stardom,' that is via the training academies operated by major entertainment companies (Lie 2015, p. 126). Admittance to prestigious training schools is competitive at best, ensuring most entrants receive months, if not years, of ex-curricular singing and dance coaching. Private training centres known as *hagwon* 학원, specialising in readying idol aspirants, represent a burgeoning industry, enrolling children from as young as six-years-old (Ho 2012, p. 473).⁹ To a great extent, performance focused *hagwons* act to initiate the process of bodily disciplining, often dictating the manner in which adolescent girls must look and behave. Instructors working at Def Dance Skool in Seoul's upmarket Gangnam district, for instance, confessed to encouraging minors to slim down or amend other aspects of their appearance (Heifetz 2016).

Whether trained in a *hagwon* or not, the majority of idol hopefuls pass through the systemic audition process engineered by leading talent agencies. Although highly selective, 60% of K-pop apprentices are cast in this manner (M. Lee 2013, pp. 555–556). Demonstrably, of the three million tryouts auditioning for SM every year, only a fraction are accepted to its in-house academy (Shin and Kim 2013, p. 265). Back-of-the-envelope calculations reveal approximately one successful trainee for every thousand applicants (Lie 2015, p. 124). Recruitment is not only conducted locally, international talent scouts sift candidates mustered elsewhere in Asia and the United States (Fuhr 2016, p. 196). In tandem with open calls, agencies frequently recruit potential stars by way of street castings. As the name suggests, street castings involve headhunters approaching physically attractive children and teenagers, inviting them to attend private auditions. As with the sports industry, the age at which trainees can be cast is worryingly low, f(x)'s Krystal, for example, was approached for contract shortly before her sixth birthday. Street castings might also be conducted with the aim of discovering performers satisfying predetermined criteria. Most famously, the artist BoA was signed to SM aged only eleven, in response to extensive market research indicating the need for a pre-teen idol to grow international revenue streams (Fuhr 2016, p. 164).

Upon entrance to entertainment houses idol aspirants are conferred the status of *yunsupseng* 연습생, perhaps best translated as 'trainee.' From the offset, *yunsupsengs* are treated as malleable capital, bodies first to be sculpted and then sacrificed on the altar of popular consumption. Crossing the academy threshold entails giving up myriad personal freedoms, as labels seek to control all areas of abecedarian life. Most trainees live in agency-managed dormitories, enabling access in and out of the building to be closely monitored. Competition is encouraged at every turn, with superior accommodation being awarded to high achieving *yunsupsengs*. Lower ranking trainees, on the other hand, are forced to barracks together in communal mega-dorms, where cheap sleeping mats take the place of beds (Chong 2020). Moreover, *yunsupsengs* are expected to renounce all romantic relationships, give up their smartphones and generally reduce contact with the outside world, including with their parents and other relatives (Howard 2017, p. 107; Jeong 2020; Soheili 2019). Specific details regarding the conditions endured by noviciates are scarce, with many *yunsupsengs* contractually obligated to keep silent on the particulars of their treatment and training.

With an eye to transforming prospective idols into marketable stars, industry executives prescribe gruelling training programmes, lasting in excess of sixteen hours a day (Lee 2013, p. 105). For the most part, *yunsupsengs* wake up around 7:00

AM, with their first dance class beginning at 8:00. After two or three hours of practise, trainees break for an early lunch, before reconvening for two further hours of dance instruction. Afternoons are packed out with singing workshops, lessons in etiquette and foreign language tutorials, most commonly in Japanese, Chinese and English. A final bout of dance practise concludes the day, though trainees are required to go over routines and vocal exercises, eventually getting to sleep between midnight and 2:00 AM. K-pop curriculums are thus extensive, with one manager claiming JYP training centres offer around sixty-seven different subjects (Lie 2015, p. 125). Down time is rarely permitted, even national holidays are seldom observed, with agency staff taking the day off while *yunsupsengs* remain behind in their dorm rooms, brushing up on dance moves and language skills (Chong 2020). Monthly evaluations are held to assess the progress of individual trainees, typically in the presence of senior staff members, including the CEO and marketing bosses (Lee 2013, p. 106). Assessments before the directorate not only encourage inter-student competition, but serve to publicly shame underachievers, establishing hierarchies among *yunsupsengs* themselves.

A brief word should be given to the oft-cited ‘slave contracts,’ obliging trainees to accept prolonged and unethical terms of employment. As a general rule, legal accords signed by idol apprentices serve to protect the financial interests of the agency. Students who breach the terms of their contract are required to repay the full cost of their training, often totalling hundreds of thousands of dollars (Williamson 2011). On the flip side, managers can terminate contracts for the slightest behavioural infringements — known as ‘morality clauses’ — leaving *yunsupsengs* vulnerable to dismissal over non-offences as trivial as dating (Kil 2017). Oppressive contracts, coupled with the longevity and expense of the idol pedagogy, ensure trainees work under conditions akin to debt bondage. While a ruling of the Fair Trade Commission in 2009 reduced the maximum length of trainee contracts, as well as curtailing the prolific inclusion of illegal clauses — such as mandating trainees inform the agency of their exact location at all times — flimsy regulation leaves *yunsupsengs* dependent on the dubious moral compasses of corporate executives.¹⁰ To date, trainees continue to go unpaid and, even after debuting, wages are astoundingly low. Female idols typically receive a 20% profit share, which is in turn divided among all members of the group (Tai 2020). At least one government report found the average salary of idols to be as little as \$10,000 per annum (Lie 2015, p. 125).

Although traineeships remain the most common way for would-be idols to enter the entertainment business, recent years have overseen the gradual commercialisation of star recruitment, most notably in the form of televised casting shows. The premise is simple, with producers bringing together a cohort of young girls, typically all in their late teens, to compete for the chance of becoming members of a newly formed idol group. Well-known examples include ‘Unpretty Rapstar’ (2015–2016), ‘Produce 101’ (2016) and ‘Idol School’ (2017), all relying on a mixture of panel judges and audience voting to determine which contestants progress to the next round. As with *yunsupsengs*, contracts between participants and broadcasters are highly predatory, with those trainees appearing in Produce 101 receiving no financial compensation, despite the shows widespread popularity (Jin and Lee 2019, p. 51). In addition to going unpaid, the cast were repeatedly subject to character distortion, with post production edits creating

fictitious feuds between competitors, as well as manipulating girls' individual personalities. Most shockingly, successful contestants were lawfully required to partake in an additional unpaid ten month incubation period, undergoing further training before their eventual debut.

Evidently, the stellar nurseries into which idol aspirants are recruited serve to generate contingents of well-drilled and obedient bodies. As well as endowing trainees with singing, rapping and dance skills, the militaristic operation of K-pop academies purposefully creates conditions of dependence. At the heart of this process is the act of disciplining *yunsupsengs*, involving, as we have seen, a mixture of hierarchical surveillance and continual assessment. Such methods bring to mind Foucault (1995, p. 164), who writes 'discipline is no longer simply an art of distributing bodies, of extracting time from them and accumulating it, but of composing forces in order to obtain an efficient machine.' Institutionally disciplined bodies are thus, as Foucault infers, unlikely to behave contrary to the demands of the panopticon. The young age at which apprentices are enrolled in training schools further ensures their successful conditioning. Developmental psychologists have long recognised adolescence as a critical life stage, especially in respects to the buildout of freethinking. Henceforth, teenagers raised in controlling or coercive environments are at a distinct disadvantage when it comes to the formation of personal autonomy (Berk 2013, pp. 577–578). Consciously or otherwise, the perfidious means through which entertainment agencies dominate the lives of *yunsupsengs*, effectively short-circuits their development as autonomous agents.¹¹

Structural forces are commensurately important to the maintenance of dependency. In this respect, idol training schools resemble what Goffman (1961, p. xiii) infamously termed 'total institutions,' defined as places of 'residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life.' Henceforth, we would do well to recognise the exclusionary nature of the K-pop academy complex, monopolising virtually every facet of trainees' lives. Through restricting movement, limiting social relationships and prescribing counter educations, the self-mastery of *yunsupsengs* is radically impaired. Expressed differently, the quotidian regulation of idol apprentices circumscribes their capacity to acquire autonomous skills. Lack of privacy, limited contact with family and friends, not to mention relentless schedules, leave little room for agentic experimentation. Systemic pressures thereby enforce lifestyles and behaviours partisan to the capital objectives of the agency, while concomitantly fostering a culture of reliance.

Legal shackling is yet another means through which agencies seek to strengthen dependency relations. Quite plainly, the contracts exchanged between trainees and entertainment houses act to formalise power imbalances. As De Vito *et al.* (2020, p. 11) point out, contracts do not necessarily guarantee the protection of workers rights, but instead mask coercive or exploitive labour arrangements. Provisos threatening *yunsupsengs* with tuition repayments, for example, ensure their continued subservience to company executives. Debt also inflicts economic hardships, sometimes compelling unsalaried trainees to sell their possessions in order to meet everyday expenses (Soheili 2019). Likewise, broadcasters look to dominate the lives of performers, pressurising contestants into signing away their freedoms. Unpaid and contractually debarred from suing on the basis of negative publicity or misrepresentation — so-called 'devil's editing' — cast members are systematically disempowered. Ergo, rapacious contracts leave idol hopefuls

with little to no ‘exit strategy,’ once more accentuating their highly dependent status (Stichweh 2021, p. 4). Taken collectively, procedures of structural disciplining and legal entrapment function to diminish the autonomy of idol aspirants.

III

Flesh parade: body sculpting and objectification

K-pop is inarguably a visual medium, with aesthetics frequently taking precedence over sound. Beginning in the early 2000s, gender dimorphism has come to characterise the styling and media presentation of idols. While all performers are expected to be tall and toned, female artists are especially prized for their sultry demeanours, slim waistlines, long legs and white skin.¹² The violent homogenisation of Korean beauty standards can, in part, be attributed to the lucrativeness of music videos — now primarily consumed online — product endorsements and celebrity culture wholesale. Entertainment agencies are thus, for reasons of moneymaking, hitched to a beast of their own creation, attempting to shoehorn idols into a limited set of predetermined archetypes. Girl bodies are, after all, situated ‘at the core of the neoliberal regime of knowledge, power and pleasure’ (Y. Kim 2001, p. 334).

In the last decade, Korean society’s fostering of near-unattainable beauty paragons has generated no small amount of debate. Alongside a sculpted and proportioned body, ideal face structures, consisting of V-shaped jawlines, large eyes and a small nose, are enthusiastically pursued. For idol aspirants, genetic prettiness is seldom enough, leading to their compulsory refashioning, where natural physiognomy is measured out against ideas of feminine perfection. The value attributed to thinness ensures diet is among the first areas of idol life to be extensively policed.¹³ Entertainment houses are notorious for imposing weight loss programs, or implicitly encouraging trainees to restrict their calorie intake. All members of Girls Generation were, for example, kept on a strict diet of 1,200 calories per day, resulting in member Seohyun becoming dangerously underweight (Epstein and Turnbull 2014, p. 332). Moreover, agency staff are in the habit of publicly weighing idols, calling girls up to the scales one by one and reporting their measurements to the master trainer, who adjusts nutriment accordingly (Heifetz 2016; Jeong 2020). Extreme dieting, in combination with punishing dance and exercise schedules, is a frequent cause of hospitalisation, though definite statistics remain conspicuously lacking (Jin and Lee 2019, p. 8). Even the K-pop darling and cultural luminary IU has disclosed her struggles with anorexia, at one point limiting herself to an apple for breakfast, two sweet potatoes for lunch and a protein shake in place of an evening meal (Jeong 2021). Trainees are also subject to label imposed bans on snacking and junk food. Numerous webpage articles divulge the stringent measures taken by entertainment companies to supervise diet. As a result, *yunsupsengs* are forced, out of hunger or rebellious instinct, to surreptitiously consume food in bathroom stalls and other locations hidden from the purview of security cameras (Song 2020).

Apace with non-invasive body modification, idol hopefuls are pressured, in some cases aggressively, to undergo cosmetic surgery. From 2010 onwards, Korea has boasted the highest national per capita involvement in plastic surgery, with approximately one in three Korean women pursuing aesthetic enhancement procedures

(Epstein and Joo 2012, p. 2; Gallop Korea 2015). Among the most common operations includes blepharoplasty, or double eyelid surgery, where the skin around the sclera is reshaped to create an upper lid, enlarging the eyes. Rhinoplasty is equally typical, involving the heightening, flattening or reduction in size of the nose. Less familiar to Western readers is bimaxillary surgery, known more colloquially as a V-line operation, entailing the removal of jawbone segments and the fusion of the remaining halves, shortening the face. Other procedures favoured by Korean women include phosphatidylcholine (PPC) injections, where a fat and muscle inhibitor is administered with the goal of creating slim and proportionally shaped thighs and calves. PPC injections reflect the sway idol culture exerts over wider Korean society, being nicknamed *sonyeosidae jusa* 소녀시대 주사, or the 'Girls Generation Injection,' after the groups famed slim and glossy legs (Oh 2014, p. 60).

The beautification arms race has resulted in the virtual ubiquity of plastic surgery among Korean celebrities. Nascent trainees, as well as established stars, are henceforth expected to be passive recipients of face altering treatments. Cosmetic procedures are generally recommended under the pretext of augmenting, or 'fixing,' an idol's natural appearance, with the ultimate goal of widening their fan appeal. Former Ladies Code member, Ashley Choi, admitted to enduring sustained criticisms in respects to her appearance. Choi was variously advised to shave her jawbone, as well as consider surgically amending her smile, deemed to expose an undesirable amount of gum tissue (McDonald 2020). While agency staff are not permitted to force treatment upon students, they can deploy covert means of persuasion, such as threatening contract non renewal or visibly favouring more compliant *yunsupsengs*. All operations, should they go ahead, are paid for upfront by the label, with the costs being factored into the trainee's aggregate debt (Chong 2020).

From the viewpoint of industry executives, the culminate result of body sculpting is the formation of commercially viable doll-like performers. K-pop's taxonomy as a site of 'dollification' — the instruction of nubile girls in repressive femininity and the cultivation of maidenly sexiness — should come as no surprise (Puzar 2011, p. 91). Even the casual observer will note the overtly pornographic quality in which idols are promoted. Critically, female artists have little to no say in their public exhibition, being required to play along with the aesthetic concepts devised for them by, predominately male, marketing directors (Unger 2015, pp. 29–30). Demonstrably, in 2010, the Korean ministry for Gender Equality and Family uncovered approximately 60% of female idols had been coerced into wearing revealing outfits, not to mention performing sexually provocative dance moves against their will (Epstein and Turnbull 2014, p. 331).

Treatment of the, now disbanded, four-member girl group Stellar, perhaps epitomises the willingness of managers to exploit the erotic capital of young women. Released in 2014, the group's single 'Marionette' was accompanied by a highly suggestive music video, blatantly objectifying the idols and their backup dancers (Kim 2019, p. 73).¹⁴ Wearing only leotards, pantyhose and high heels, the choreography emphasised the girls' buttocks and long legs, having them gyrate, stroke their thighs and squat bounce. One scene in particular sparked notable controversy, depicting member Jeonyul drinking milk, of which a little spills over her lips, running down her chin and exposed cleavage. Following the group's break-up, lead singer Gayoung revealed she and other members had been forced into performing sexualised routines, as well as wearing skimpy costumes

they had voiced considerable discomfort towards (Cha 2018). The infamous milk scene was also captured duplicitously, with the then twenty-year-old Jeonyul being provided a false script, masking the director's intention to have her upset drink approximate semen.

Recent tendencies to market alpha-girl groups, notably Blackpink, as symbolic of an independent, charismatic and sexually emancipated femininity are questionable at best. As with the commercialisation of female empowerment in Europe and the United States, K-pop aurally broadcasts messages of subjectivity and inclusion, while continuing to indulge notions of hegemonic beauty and patriarchal compliance.¹⁵ Although meaningful efforts to step beyond objectification are routinely attempted — Loona's 2019 music video 'Butterfly' being a prominent example — the general trend for semi-naked, thin and surgically reworked bodies persists. Subsequently, the question remains, to what degree can managerial gambits, purposing to corporally sculpt and sexualise idols, be seen to influence autonomy?

Foremost, it must be acknowledged that label-orchestrated initiatives to shape the female body amount to nothing less than slow violence. Not only do extreme dieting and plastic surgery endanger the physical health of idols, but are liable to inflict abiding psychological harm. The institutionalised search and accentuation of corporeal 'faults' can, over time, result in emotional trauma and the destruction of bodily confidence. Trainees are, for all intents and purposes, caught up in an endless battle for approval, commendation that can never be awarded owing to the fantastical benchmarks against which attractiveness is judged. The extremely narrow range of beauty paradigms available to idols resembles, what Butler (1997, pp. 85–86) terms, the 'discursive production of identities,' wherein the curtailment of behavioural modes induces the creation of delimited subjects. Thus, in an environment where flawless looks are tantamount to self-worth, the forced adoption of totalising identities prompts a net downgrade in autonomous capacity.

Efforts to facilitate heteronomic points of view apropos the body are strengthened through the deployment of surveillance. Communal weigh-ins, diet prescription and movement tracking all help supplant autonomous action, installing the belief among trainees that breaches in conduct will be detected. Awareness of being watched inevitably precipitates self-censorship, where idols internalise the somatic ideals pressed upon them by agency staff as a means of avoiding punishment or disapproval. Likewise, control of diet serves to further entrench dependency relations. Not only are trainees reliant on their managers for sustenance, but non-fulfilment of weight quotas or calorie counts often results in further restrictions to meal choice, encouraging meekness and compliance. At heart, the gradual internalisation of dysmorphic beauty standards occasions docility, leaving idols passively willing, or even grateful, to accept modifications to their appearance. This, in turn, diminishes personal agency, freethinking having been fatally compromised by institutionally regulated mindsets.

By extension, it is necessary to underscore the substantial influence the public gaze exerts over idols. We might again call on Foucault (1980, p. 155), who surmises the inspecting gaze has the power to create interiorising subjects, that is individuals who act as their own overseer, transforming their image and behaviour to comply with popular archetypes. The idol body, already an object of intense scrutiny, is further exposed to the 'politics of appearance' in visual media, particularly music

videos, which have the potential to reach hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of viewers (Bordo 1993, p. 27). In anticipation of being intently observed, idols are likely to engage in self-policing, trying ever harder to refine their somatic persona. As Mears (2011, p. 99) has identified in the context of the fashion industry, the gaze is a 'superb formula for controlling bodies,' complimenting the preferences of the agency for obsequious and uniform subjects. Denied meaningful choice, idols involuntarily relinquish their bodily autonomy, submitting to the demands of the gaze and performing as doll-like, sexualised objects.

Less obvious from the foregoing discussion is the influence of authenticity in the formation of autonomous identities. As Rössler (2021, pp. 127–128) makes clear, autonomy requires individuals to engage in projects and maintain beliefs that consolidate their sense of self. Failure to behave authentically — i.e. infrequent participation in meaningful activity — can engender feelings of alienation. Deliberately alienated or estranged subjects experience, through lack of identification, reduced autonomy, having fewer opportunities to connect with their authentic selves. Idols, habitually constrained by exterior intentions, may well suffer from feelings of detachment, having been forced to reckon with somatic ideologies alien to their personal values. Patriarchal instruction in weight, body and face shape consequently inhibit an idol's ability to remain true to herself, infringing upon her right to a fully autonomous and volitional way of life. All things considered, it is no exaggeration to say that the imposition of delimiting corporeal identities hinders the autonomy of female performers.

Conclusion

To conclude, we have argued that the recruitment, training and bodily modification of female idols negatively impacts their personal autonomy. Non-autonomy is, for the most part, achieved through the establishment of dependency relations and imposition of restrictive somatic identities. Korea's aggressive espousal of neoliberalism in recent decades has placed increasing emphasis on the export value of cultural products. In response, the Korean music industry has progressively implemented a Fordist approach to the creation of idol groups, prioritising profit over human rights. The militaristic recruitment and training of idols purposefully encourages dependence, on the premise obedient bodies are a safer longterm investment. Adolescent trainees, socially isolated and subject to draconian coaching, are left with few opportunities for developing autonomous behaviours. The refashioning of idol bodies is yet another way in which entertainment companies attempt to reduce autonomy. Control of diet, weight loss monitoring and plastic surgery recommendation, conspire to manifest an environment where hegemonic beauty standards are foisted onto performers. In combination with the public gaze, idols find themselves under immense pressure to adopt the corporeal identities devised for them by corporate executives. The forced assumption of somatic personas invariably leads to a reduction in bodily autonomy, as well as feelings of alienation and estrangement. Female K-pop idols thus experience degrees of non-autonomy correlative to the patriarchal and abusive managerial practices endemic to the industry.

Notes

1. The Ministry of Culture estimated BTS's chart-topping single 'Dynamite' would generate 1.7 trillion *won* (1.96 billion USD) for the Korean economy alone.
2. The need to formulate autonomy as an acquired capacity has also been voiced by Pauen and Welzer (2015, pp. 21–26). York (2013, p. 1339), drawing on Moran (2000), interprets autonomy as 'situated agency,' contending self-sovereignty might be exercised even in the face of social constraints.
3. This is despite the fact idol groups typically contribute to Korea's economic growth indirectly, either through attracting tourists or endorsing consumer products. See Kim (2019, pp. 8–9); Turnbull (2017).
4. The origins of the total management strategy lie with Lee Soo Mann, founder of SM Entertainment. After establishing SM in 1989, Lee's first successful act found himself embroiled in a drugs scandal, flatlining his career. The experience taught Lee the value of total control, even when it came to managing the personal lives of his performers. See Seabrook (2016, pp. 151–152).
5. Choi and Maliangkay (2015, p. 5) have described television as a 'colony genre' of K-pop, with idols being a standard feature of many talk, game and quiz shows. Networks are increasingly reliant on entertainment companies furnishing them with idols to maintain ratings. This is not to say, however, that television is entirely beholden to K-pop. For unestablished idol groups, guest appearances or live performances on major channels are essential for reaching a wider audience. See Kim (2018, p. 56).
6. EunB was pronounced dead at the scene, while RiSe, having slipped into a coma, died four days later from her injuries. The three other band members sustained only minor abrasions, though psychological trauma should not be discounted.
7. Accompanying Korea's myriad economic changes came societal reformulations of the female body. As a post-industrial nation, Korean women increasingly function as 'consumer bodies,' or rather individuals who are chiefly valued for their spending power. Consequently, women and girls are no longer just workers, but entities suitable for advertising the 'emblems of capitalist consumption.' See Kim (2003, pp. 97–98).
8. Park (2013, p. 28) has termed this process 'globalisation-localisation-globalisation,' highlighting the fact entertainment agencies recruit foreign songwriters to produce music for natively trained idols, that is in turn marketed internationally.
9. Not all *hagwons* cater for idol hopefuls, with the majority being equivalent to cram schools where students receive extra tuition in academic subjects. The young age of students enrolled in performance-centric training academies is not exceptional. A recent survey found that 83% of Korean five-year-olds were sent to some form of *hagwon*. See Se-hwan (2017).
10. The Korean Fair Trade Commission's investigation came about in response to three members of the boyband TVXQ (Dong Bang Shin Ki) filing a legal complaint against SM. The plaintiffs argued their thirteen-year contract was too restrictive, and awarded them only a fraction of the profits they generated for the company. The Seoul Central District Court ruled in their favour, warranting industry-wide changes. See Howard (2017, p. 107); Lee (2013, pp. 557–558).
11. The Korean music industry is far from alone in deliberately nurturing non-autonomy. Child stars elsewhere undergo similar conditioning, see O'Connor and Mercer (2017).
12. Whiteness occupies a conspicuous place in Korean stardom, being of especial importance to female idols. The term *mibaek* 미백 encapsulates the practice of cultivating 'bright, immaculate, and glowing skin' (Park and Hong 2021, p. 300).
13. Being slim in Korea is not merely an issue of looks, but social morality. As Kim (2014, p. 294) makes clear 'thinness, for Koreans, is rather perceived as a symbol that exhibits positive personal qualities and helps people survive in a competitive society.' Consequently, slenderness is approximated with the wider stereotypes of wealth, beauty and popularity.

14. Needless to say, Stellar's 'Marionette' is by no means unique in its flagrant objectification of idols. One could cite numerous examples of dehumanisation in Korean music videos from the mid 2010s. Orange Caramel's 2014 single 'Catallena,' for instance, presents the three-member girl group as different types of sushi. Set down on beds of rice, scantily clad and legs akimbo, the idols are, quite literally, ferried along conveyer belts to be eaten and enjoyed by male customers.
15. For the commodification of female empowerment in Europe and the United States, see Gill (2008) and Rottenberg (2018).

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