

K-POP AND SUICIDE—MARGINALIZATION AND RESISTANCE IN THE KOREAN POP INDUSTRY

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Introduction

The suicides of the famous K-Pop idols Goo Hara, Choi Jin-ri,¹ also known as Sulli, and Cha In-ha drew enormous media attention worldwide, particularly in South Korea at the end of 2019. According to a report by the WHO (World Health Organization) in 2019, the suicide rate in South Korea was the tenth highest in the world and the second highest in countries of the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development)—20.2 cases per 100,000 inhabitants in 2016 (see WHO 2019). Most Korean suicide victims are elderly, retired citizens, people with high financial debts, as well as students and pupils who cannot bear the pressure to perform in school and university. In the heart of Seoul, the Mapo-Bridge, also known as the suicide bridge, symbolises the high suicide rate of the country. The aforementioned numbers coincide with the high suicide rate of Korean celebrities. In an article from January 4, 2020, journalist Kim Dae-o stated that he has reported on thirty suicides by Korean celebrities in the last twelve years and was asked by several celebrities to conduct the last interview before their planned suicide (see D. Kim 2020).

The singer, actress, and model Sulli achieved fame as a member of the K-Pop girl group f(x) (SM Entertainment), which she officially left in August 2015 after a one-year hiatus. She kept up her presence in the media by freely expressing her opinion on critical social topics such as cyberbullying, which she experienced herself during her relationship with rapper Choiza. She was

1 With East Asian names, surnames precede given names according to the convention of the home country; hence East Asian names appear with the surname first (e.g. Goo Hara, instead of Hara Goo; Choi Jin-ri, instead of Jin-ri Choi).

also one of the talk show hosts on *The Night of Hate Comments* (JTBC), she supported the ›Comfort Women‹ Memorial Day (see Park 2018) and the ›No-Bra Movement‹. Sulli received praise and support but also hate comments on social media for her commitment. After her death in October 2019, several petitions were posted and the ›Sulli Act‹ for stricter rules against cyberbullying was proposed (see Kang 2019).

Singer, actress, and close friend of Sulli, Goo Hara was a member of the popular girl group KARA (DSP Media), with which she was active from 2008 to 2016. At the end of 2018, Hara made headlines due to her involvement in a legal dispute against her ex-boyfriend Choi Jung-bum. This dispute affected both her private life and her career. After several trials, it was revealed that she was a victim of secret sex-tape recordings by her ex-boyfriend, who tried to blackmail her with revenge porn and eventually published the tapes. The release of this sensitive content entailed public cyberbullying against her in the course of victim-blaming on her social media channels. After a first suicide attempt in May 2019, she was found dead in her apartment in November of the same year.

The death of Cha In-ha in December 2019, an actor and member of the boy group Surprise U, led to public discussions of copycat suicides, although no final message was found and no autopsy was conducted (see Jung 2019). From 2008 to his death in December 2017, Kim Jong-hyun was a member of the popular K-Pop boy group Shinee (SM Entertainment), a singer-songwriter, producer, radio host, and author. He talked openly about his ›depressive feelings‹ (kor.: 우울감, u-ul-gam). In an interview with *Esquire* magazine, for example, he stated: ›My feelings of depression or inferiority were always dominating me‹² (Esquire 2017). As it was revealed in a suicide note, he took his life after struggling with depression and the ›pressure of being in the spotlight‹ (Wang 2017) for several years.

These four well-known examples of suicides are no exceptions and add to previous suicides in the K-Pop industry; this appears to be a common phenomenon in the K-Pop culture in general. In contrast to suicides of Korean idols, celebrities, and idol trainees in the past, the cases of Hara and Sulli sparked the first public ›Protest Against Femicide‹ on 28 December 2019 in Seoul. In the course of these protests, the term ›femicide‹ was for the first time used to also describe a suicide due to misogyny and patriarchalism. Local and global media outlets espoused several causes for these suicides, including the high pressure to perform in the K-Pop industry, depression, and cyberbullying. In Korean media outlets hate comments were the dominant reason (e.g.

2 Translation by the author, orig.: ›저의 우울감이나 열등감이 언제나 저를 지배하는 감정이었어요‹ (Esquire 2017).

KBS News 2019; MBC 2019) for suicides. Cyberbullying has been addressed by the Korean government by their attempt to counteract with new laws. Following Durkheim's premise that suicide is a socially determined act, a multiperspective analysis of the social reality regarding K-Pop idols is necessary.

Suicide, the critical gaze and the fetishistic gaze

According to sociologist Émile Durkheim, the intention for a suicide can never be fully grasped by outsiders (i.e. people other than the victim/perpetrator) and even eludes psychological observation and monitoring (Durkheim 2005: xli). Although »suicide is an individual action affecting the individual only«, taking »the suicides committed in a given society during a given period of time ... as a whole« (ibid.: xliv) reveals the phenomenon's social interconnection. Therefore, scholars can analyse the social contexts concerning a group of people, in this case, K-Pop idols, where suicides occur. Using the (biased) media discourse and the circulating reasons for the suicides of K-Pop idols, I would like to go a step further. In contrast to the mostly empirical, psychiatric-medical coined term »suicidology«, I analyse the ideological conditions and their enforcement as an additional factor of the aforementioned idols' social situations. I argue that ideologically charged practices in the K-Pop industry, social media, and fan culture can lead to marginalization and, in extreme cases, to suicides of K-Pop idols.

In his frequently cited work *Suicide* (first published 1897), Émile Durkheim defines the act of suicide as follows: »The term *suicide* is applied to all cases of death resulting directly or indirectly from a positive or negative act of the victim himself, which he knows will produce this result« (Durkheim 2005: xlii, orig. emphasis). In contrast to deaths caused by external influences or deaths caused by hallucinations of the victim, suicide is a conscious act directed against oneself and can be found in every society.

Durkheim describes four different causes of suicide which are determined by two social dimensions: social integration and social regulation. The dimension of social integration determines the egoistic suicide that results from excessive individuation, exclusion, detachment from society and social groups; the altruistic suicide results from high inclusion in a social group, so that the group's values are considered to be more important than those of the individual (e.g. martyrdom or self-sacrifice). The dimension of social regulation determines the anomic suicide as a result of a distorted order, diso-

orientation, and a too-rapid change (e.g. economic crises); the fatalistic suicide derives »from excessive regulation, that of persons with futures pitilessly blocked and passions violently choked by oppressive discipline« (ibid.: 239).

While Durkheim dedicates extensive chapters to three of these four forms in his work, a definition of fatalistic suicide can only be found in a footnote in the chapter about anomic suicide. Although he points out examples of fatalistic suicides by slaves and prison inmates, the lack of a deeper analysis, here, shows that he considered it less important than the others. Later research sought to give a more precise definition and to provide additional analyses to grasp the nature of fatalistic suicides (see Stack 1979; Pearce 1989; Lester 1990; Park/Lester 2006; Lee 2012; Park/Lester 2014).

The sociologist Frank Pearce argues for a more thorough analysis of the fatalistic suicide and defines it as a result of total control over individuals regulated by detailed, abstract rules or surveilled by a continuous critical gaze of others. This is leading towards a lack of »space for them [to] intelligently ... interpret their social role in a way that will fulfil their own needs as well as society's« (Pearce 1989: 135). I argue that this form of suicide applies to the cases in the K-Pop industry as the idols are subject to this critical gaze. The highly visualised K-Pop idols occur within the trialectics of publics, media producers, and stars where »all three compete *and* cooperate to assign value and meaning to celebrities and to those who take an interest in them« (Marcus 2019: 4, orig. emphasis).

The critical gaze can be expanded with Laura Mulvey's definition of the so-called male gaze. According to Mulvey, the male gaze is a fetishising gaze by male viewers, male movie protagonists, and men in control of the film phantasy watching, and thus objectifying, female movie characters, (see Mulvey 1989, first published 1975). This definition has been criticised extensively since its first publication in 1975, as it has left out the female gaze and other portrayals of gender identities as potentially objectified targets of the gaze (see Bowers 1992; bell hooks 1992; Schuckmann 1998; Goddard 2000; Neville 2015). In the following analysis, I will use the fetishizing gaze surrounding K-Pop idols in a general sense (including male gazes and female gazes), although sexuality and gender identity play a big role in constructing K-Pop idols' images and their consumption (see Jung 2011; Han 2016). Exceptions from this general usage will be made at certain parts.

Being brought up by the Korean media, the question of the ›Werther-effect‹, named after the protagonist of Johann Wolfgang Goethe's epistolary novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, also known as copycat-suicide, must be raised (Suzuki 2019; Jung 2019). It denotes the temporal increase of the suicide rate shortly after a highly publicized suicide of a celebrity occurred. Since

Hara and Sulli were famous for their activities as idols and their friendship towards each other, which is portrayed in several social media posts, an analysis of the Werther-effect, including the case of Cha In-ha, could add more insight into this phenomenon; due to the length of this chapter, however, it will be left out in the analysis. In the following, I will focus on different contexts regarding the K-Pop industry, social media, and K-Pop fan culture that promote an imbalance in the dimensions of social integration and social regulation, which eventually indicate a non-functioning of society.

The social reality of K-Pop idols

Lee Soo-man, founder of the biggest K-Pop talent agency SM Entertainment, is famous for his ›Cultural Technology‹ concept. As a former singer, engineer graduate, and fascinated fan of American pop music, especially of Michael Jackson, he developed a holistic picture of the qualities of a successful entertainer. After a drug incident involving his first produced artist in 1993, he also developed a strictly regulated in-house-training system, which extends far into the private life of upcoming idols. This so-called ›trainee system‹ is an essential and well-known characteristic within the K-Pop industry ever since. These regulations and discipline for the realisation of a perfected holistic image allow only a few, sometimes no, liberties for those idols, since they are subjected to this hegemonic discourse.

In this discourse (in the following: K-Pop discourse), idols must undergo a strict diet and eating disorders are common side effects (see e.g. singer IU, Ladies' Code's Sojung, singer-songwriter Seo In-guk). Prohibited from dating, the trainees sometimes are not even allowed to meet their families. In addition, they have limited and in some cases no access to cellphones, and have to conform to certain beauty standards; plastic surgery is a common practice. Amber Liu of the group f(x) points out that these diets appear to be particularly predominant in the everyday life of idols; in an interview on *CBS This Morning* she points out as follows:

I think for girls, the biggest thing, at least in my circle and for myself, is just to be skinny. Everybody's just like ... ›Oh, I'm going to try this diet, I'm on this diet right now.‹ ... It's scary, you know. I've definitely done some of them. I've really screwed up my body. ... But for girls, it's what we talk about all the time. Like ›we can't eat,‹ or ›what diet are you on? Oh, I tried this procedure today, do you want to try it?‹ It's scary and it's very unhealthy (CBS 2020: Video).

Such »authoritarian business practices« and working conditions for K-Pop idols nowadays have been shaped by developmentalism and neoliberalism to compete in a global market (see Kim 2019). As a politico-economic strategy for rapid industrialisation and economic growth since World War II, state-led developmentalism has been very successful. This is especially true for »the Korean government's aggressive globalization campaign in the 90s« until the campaign »resulted in the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis« (Kim 2019: 5). Although neoliberalist ideas and concepts have been implemented to overcome the crisis, neoliberalism has not replaced authoritarian developmentalism but, rather, they both merged (ibid.: 5). Because of the state's investments, regulations, and control of the culture industry, this change in economic strategies affected the K-Pop industry. It also marked the beginning of K-Pop *idol groups*: the first male idol group H.O.T. was formed in 1996, and the first female idol group S.E.S. was formed in 1997 (ibid.: 68). This neoliberal developmentalism coincides with a rapid increase in suicides in South Korea (see Park/Lester 2006). Comparing the contemporary K-Pop industry to Korea's manufacturing industry from the 1960s to the 1980s, the K-Pop industry achieves its »fortune by exploiting cheap, docile, and abundant workers« to capitalize »on the competitive spirits, perseverance, and physical strength of young trainees and idols who dream of being successful and famous« (Kim 2019: 10). As a result of the aggressive »state-led capitalist development« (ibid.: 10), market saturation, and the fast pace of popular music/culture trends in South Korea, K-Pop idols are under continuous competitive pressure. Besides perfect performances, the idols have a tight schedule ranging from small promotional performances, concerts, diverse tv-shows to fan meetings and language schools which are an integral part of their everyday lives. Signs of fatigue and collapses on and off stage are no exception; this is sometimes even filmed by backstage personal and fans.

Another example of the harsh working conditions in the K-Pop industry can be found in the reality TV show *Cheongdam-dong 111*, produced by FNC Entertainment. In the show, the entertainment company reveals its work environment and promotes its idol groups. Being in control of the production, FNC Entertainment portrays power harassment including verbal and physical abuse as normal. An example occurs in the 5th episode of said show: Kim Seol-hyun, K-Pop idol and member of the girl group AOA, is punished by her group leader Park Jimin and verbally abused by the director of the entertainment department for weighing over 50kg; this appears to be the maximum weight acceptable for female K-Pop idols in the industry, regardless of their height. The social hierarchy's power structures and their abuse can also lead to bullying within a K-Pop group itself, which Jimin has been accused of by former

group member Kwon Mina (Kim 2020). It is also portrayed that female idols need to eat salad, while at the same time male idols of the group F.T. Island are allowed to eat pizza. Although this scene is a constructed narrative, it overlaps with the experiences of K-Pop idols portrayed on various public platforms.

This leads to increasing internalised self-surveillance, as described by Michel Foucault's writings on the disciplining exercise of power (Foucault 2019, first published 1975). The disciplining actions of the company are conveyed and transferred into the public sphere by a desirable portrayal of a 'good' idol through variety shows and reality TV shows and other media platforms. Through this mechanism, the audience becomes an additional external surveillance apparatus regarding the idols. This is a panoptical apparatus that is enforced by critical and fetishizing gazes of fans, producers, journalists, and other idols as I will show in the following paragraphs. Drawing on Foucault's notion of *homo economicus*, Gooyong Kim argues that

conditioned and promoted by state initiatives, K-Pop, and to be more specific K-Pop female idols, have been an integral part of neoliberalism's grand transformative project that turns society into a massive marketplace by conditioning the audience's value system and code of thoughts and conducts (ibid.: xxii).

Contracts in the K-Pop culture, between idols and the talent agencies, are another condition constituting the reality of K-Pop idols (ibid.: 12). Most of the time talented individuals are cast at a young age, in some cases as young as five years old, and bound to the agency by a contract lasting several years. It is also a common practice that idols must repay the costs for their training after their debut, as is stated by former K-Pop idol Way (Crayon Pop) in an interview with the Media Company Asian Boss (Asian Boss 2019). The expenses for the trainee phase and the production costs for the debut album can amount to two billion Won or 1.4 million Euros. It is for this reason that idols experience high pressure to succeed, which, as they were told in their training, can only be achieved by hard work and perfection. A guarantee of success is not given, thus, K-Pop idols »in general are hyper-exploited workers who have been disciplined in military camp-like training facilities« (Kim 2019: 12). Any resistance against these circumstances is eliminated as early as possible in the trainee phase through competition and potential expulsion. Since no other options than talent agencies exist to enter and be successful in the K-Pop industry, becoming a K-Pop idol is inevitably linked to these economic and social conditions. To escape these suppressing working conditions, many successful K-Pop groups negotiate new contracts with their agencies, which

can affect the groups' and the agencies' image as well as further collaborations in a negative way. In the case of the former up-and-coming K-Pop boy-group B.A.P. (Best Absolute Perfect), the group sued their company TS Entertainment in 2014 to terminate their contract. The members accused the company of unfair working conditions and profit distribution. They stated that they only received US\$ 16,000 each, while the company made more than US\$ 7 mil. profit in two years (kpopherald 2014). Results of the lawsuit have not been disclosed, but the group returned to the company one year later (Billboard 2015).

Besides such disciplinary actions, male and female K-Pop idols are also subjected to further aesthetic ideals. In contrast to the expectations towards a »star«, a contemporary K-Pop idol has to fulfil different ones. They must be »perfect«, a role model for others, and are obliged to portray a perfect image on and off stage. To differentiate idols and groups and to fill market niches, different image markers like sexy, cute, or rebellious are constructed; the »sexy« image dominates the K-Pop industry. Again and again, K-Pop idols are squeezed into sexualized image constructions. »Squeezed« is not only meant in a metaphorical sense but also literally. Although both male and female idols are affected by this sexualisation, female idols are especially affected, as it is stated by Amber Liu:

I cannot deny that there is a big difference between male and female levels in the K-Pop industry. ... I can't speak for everybody but there is a big divide. ... But for boys it's definitely a lot more lax. I obviously know that they have ... a lot of rules for them too (CBS 2020).

The K-Pop industry in South Korea reflects the general unequal distribution of men and women in higher job positions. According to the Global Gender Gap Report in 2020 by the World Economic Forum, South Korea placed 108th of 153 recorded countries; in the category »Economic Participation and Opportunity« on 127. The CEOs and other executive positions in Korean Pop industry companies are occupied by men. This one-sided occupation shapes company structures and institutions, as it is described by Robert Connell (1999). It also shapes the commodity itself, especially in the Pop industry. This one-sided social situation promotes a continuation of patriarchal structures and practices and marginalises the role of women and other gender identities in K-Pop companies (see Kim 2019).

Carol Duncan writes about artistic painters and women as objects in the paintings: »By portraying them [women] thus, the artist makes visible his own claim as a sexually dominating presence, even if he himself does not appear in the picture« (Duncan 1993: 81). This also applies to K-Pop producers as the

highest authorities in the production and artistic processes. By producing sexualised K-Pop groups, male producers and executives demonstrate their dominating presence. Since sexualisation is used in various image presentations, such as cute, rebel, cool, and so on, these portrayals draw fetishistic gazes onto the subjects.

A notable example is the K-Pop girl group AOA (FNC Entertainment), which was initially formed as a cute all-female rock band, but later capitalised on sexualisation and fetishisation after an image change. Mulvey writes about the male gaze: »the sexualized image of woman says little or nothing about women's reality but is symptomatic of male fantasy and anxiety that are projected on the female image« (Mulvey 1989: xiii). While their costumes and performances are in most cases designed or choreographed by women, they reflect a projection of male fantasy, based on male producers, as it is ingrained in the patriarchal company structures as well as in male and female consumer fantasies.

The tight, movement-restricting costumes of K-Pop idols demonstrate an intersection between the »image as bondage« and the »image as woman« (Mulvey 1989: 10) and are an essential part of the fetishism itself: »Women without a phallus have to undergo punishment by torture and fetish objects ranging from tight shoes and corsetry, through rubber goods and leather« (ibid.: 8). Even though these uncomfortable costumes are continuously criticised by fans, some idols use the costumes as an emancipatory tool. While the criticism has been acknowledged and solutions have been implemented by designers, most idols are still subject to this process of sexualisation.

Closely linked to the fetishistic gaze is the practice of »Molka«, an abbreviation for »Mollae Kamera« (몰래카메라), translated into »unknown camera« or »spy cam«. Molka not only signifies a general unconsented recording of people but also explicitly includes the practices of unconsented recording and distribution of sex tapes. According to the BBC documentary *Trailblazers: Fighting Korea's spy cam porn* (2018), ten cases of spy cams are investigated daily, yet at the same time twenty to thirty different videos are uploaded to porn sites. Since most videos capture women undressing (in dressing rooms of department stores or in bath rooms) or sex tapes are used as revenge porn, this practice is defined as male-centric and patriarchic. Interviewee Park Sooyuen, working at Digital Sexcrime Out, states: »Society has taught that when women are filmed, they should feel ashamed of it. People's mentality hasn't advanced at the same pace as technological development« (BBC 2018). And government lawmaker Jung Choun-Sook says: »Korean society has been treating violence against women as trivial, private and insignificant« (ibid.). This

was apparent in the case of Hara, where the public blamed her for her ex-boyfriend's actions.

In 2019 the Burning Sun scandal, involving several celebrities, Korean idols, and police officials connected to the Burning Sun nightclub, added to this so-called »spy cam epidemic« (Bicker 2018). Especially K-Pop idol Seungri (Big Bang), one of the Burning Sun nightclub's directors, and Jung Joon-Young, singer-songwriter and frequent visitor of the Burning Sun nightclub, were indicted for their involvement in prostitution, drug trafficking, rape, and Molka. This scandal, involving Hara as an informant for journalistic research, led to large-scale protests against the treatment of women as sexual objects at that year's International Women's Day as well as to protests in South Korea. After Hara's death, a petition with over 200,000 signatures for stricter punishments against unconsented recording of the sexual act and the recordings' distribution was submitted to the Blue House (Seo 2019), the executive office, and the official residence of the Republic of Korea's head of state. The practice of Molka, through which Hara was victimised, exacerbates the social and mental situation of women in South Korea, not only female K-Pop idols. In this regard, women are subject to a critical gaze of society and the fetishistic gaze of the fans as well as to sexist technological surveillance.

K-Pop fans are known for their deep involvement and their power to make or break an idol's career (see Kim 2018: 7). Some of these fans become diehard, so-called »sasaeng«, fans that represent a criticised, dangerous part of the K-Pop fan culture. They are infamously known for excessive stalking, such as taxi chasing (including professional »sasaeng cabs«), boarding the same flight as their idols, breaking into their apartments and placing spy cams, or sending disturbing packages and letters. The fetishistic gaze objectifies and subjugates K-Pop idols, which can result in such fan's satisfaction.

The critical gaze of the fans is not only exercised in the public sphere or through hidden cameras. Social media operates as an additional public sphere, as described by Christian Fuchs (2017: 248); it provides a contradictory space with progressive, political potential, but also of surveillance and cyberbullying. According to Fuchs, social media as communication systems are a mirror and accelerator of already existing ideologies and practices within a society. Based on the users' anonymity, the inhibition threshold drops and provides additional space for the already widespread bullying in Korean society, as is described and analysed by Trent Bax (2016).

Michael Fuhr's (2016) analysis of the controversy around male K-Pop idol Park Jae-Boem (2PM),³ Korean cyberculture, and netizens (a portmanteau for

3 In 2009, comments made in 2005 by Park Jae-Beom, a trainee at that time, appeared, in which he expressed his discontent towards Korea, the Koreans, and

internet and citizen), shows how fans and anti-fans fight for control over the online public sphere in such controversies. The company's »elimination of one of its most profitable faces« demonstrates the »enormous influence of online networks« and internet fandom (ibid.: 214). Taking this influence of the internet fandom alongside cyberbullying, anti-sites against politicians, celebrities, and pop idols into account, an enormous social pressure in the public online sphere constitutes and poses a »serious social problem in Korea« (ibid.: 215). Together with social pressure instigated by the news, rumors, and malicious messages, Fuhr argues, this can »accelerate, proliferate and eventually lead to irreversible consequences« (ibid.: 215) like suicides. Idols who are outspoken about certain social and political disparities (like Sulli) or are victims of sexist practices (like Hara) are particularly affected. Only in a few cases, the agency sides with their idols and supports them juridically. In most cases apology videos or messages are released, as was the case for Sana⁴ and Tzuyu⁵ (both with the group Twice), or the contract is terminated (as in the case of Park Jae-Beom in 2009).

The relation of depression as a cause for suicides has been analysed by scholars (see Harwitz/Ravizza 2000) and has been brought up by Korean and international media in regard to the suicides of K-Pop idols (Liew/Lim 2019). However, it is not possible to determine if depression was a concrete cause, despite the analyses of signs and actions afterwards. Depression in South Korea is »one of the most significant public health problems« (Park/Kim 2011: 362) and is classified as an »epidemic« by Korean medical researchers. Depression and suicide are stigmatised in South Korea, as has been shown in an analysis by Park, Kim, Cho, and Lee; they write: »Individuals labeled ›mentally ill‹ are often deprived of their rights and life opportunities« and »they are tagged, labeled and associated with negative characteristics such as unpredictability and dangerousness and are consequently ostracized from society« (Park/Kim/Cho/Lee 2015: 812). In the cases of Sulli and Hara, critics and journalists diagnosed their behaviour and social media posts as an expression of depression and mental instability. These groundless allegations have been conducted against the background of stigmatisation. The idols' progressive stances in questioning existing ideologies become controllable again by these accusations to perpetuate the existing hegemonic situation.

his wish to return to the U.S. This caused an outrage among Korean netizens (for more details see Fuhr 2016).

- 4 An Instagram post of hers (30 April, 2019), for which she is being accused of insensitivity towards the Korean-Japanese colonial past.
- 5 She introduced herself in the Korean variety show *My Little Television* as Taiwanese and held the flag of the Republic of China (Taiwan), which led to an outcry by mainland Chinese K-Pop fans.

The social panopticon and fatalistic suicide

As Terry Eagleton (1991) pointed out, there are six different meanings of ideology, ranging from a very general, all-encompassing notion to an »emphasis on false or deceptive beliefs« (Eagleton 1991: 30). They depend on the focus of their usage. Here, I will follow the third meaning of ideology, which describes discursive promotion and legitimation of interests by a social group taking oppositional interests into account (see *ibid.*: 29). The most important social groups surrounding K-Pop idols in the respective discourse are the K-Pop producers, the fans, and the journalists. Concluding the analysis, it is possible to assign the analysed contexts, which constitute the social frame for K-Pop idols to the following hegemonic ideologies that restrict the possibility to act: conformism, perfectionism, patriarchalism, sexism, and voyeurism.

While non-comparable but colluding, these hegemonic ideologies are constructed and perpetuated in the K-Pop discourse⁶ as a place of subjectivation. To engage in this discourse, an individual is obliged to the process of subjectivation; this includes K-Pop idols, producers, fans, and scholars. Following Foucault, Judith Butler describes this process of subjectivation as paradoxical: »*assujettissement* denotes both the becoming of the subject and the process of subjection—one inhabits the figure of autonomy only by becoming subjected to a power, a subjection which implies a radical dependency« (1997: 83, orig. emphasis). But this subjectivation is not a one-sided imposition of power, it also includes the activation or formation of the subject formulated through the body. This process means that a person can only fulfil its role as a K-Pop idol through the process of an ideological and physical subjection within the K-Pop discourse. Amber Liu describes the perception of this paradoxical subjectivation as follows:

Starting at such a young age and being thrown into the industry, you know, you're told what to do, what to say, what to think, what to look like. ... I was like »okay, if that's what it is, I have to do it. If that's what I want, if I want to chase my dreams, if I want to do this dream job, that's what I have to do« (CBS 2020).

6 Discourse, here, is being understood in the Foucauldian sense: It constitutes relations between different agents, institutions, systems, and processes and is the precondition for the appearance of agents (see Foucault 1973: 68 f.).

The critical and fetishistic gaze of the agencies and the public enforce these hegemonic ideologies in different ways. By observing the idols with different ideologically charged gazes, a social panopticon for a disciplining exercise of power and imposition of certain perceptions of ruling social groups—here, the producers in collaboration with journalists and fans—is being constructed around the existence of idols. As a result, they become the focal point of diverse marginalising processes by internalising imposed ideologies. Regarding female K-Pop idols, Gooyong Kim explains: »In this model of voluntary internalization of exploitative social relations between genders, women, especially any female K-Pop wannabes, trainees, and idols, become and exercise an ideal neoliberal subject« (2019). Voluntary exploitation is also applicable to male K-Pop idols since they are also subject to the authoritarian neoliberal practices in the K-Pop industry.

Suicide and social resistance

Exposed to this strictly regulated and controlled social reality, which Sulli, Hara, Jong-hyun, and Cha In-ha have tried to resist and change with social media posts, juridical means, and a public, political positioning, their suicides can be interpreted as an effect of the currents of fatalism. Here, fatalism is understood as a ›conditional fatalism‹, which subsumes two complementary ways ›that people come to accept the extant social arrangements as the only possible ones« (Pearce 1989: 122). It occurs when on the one hand ›individuals experience distressing social conditions ›as unavoidable ›facts of life« ... [and on the other hand it] refers to some aspect of the collective conscience which has the capacity to make individuals accept their life situations as unquestionable« (Lockwood 1982: 103 f., cited in Pearce 1989: 122). Although the situation is experienced as unavoidable, in relation to the discursive power construction that describes the subjectivation as a constant process, the produced subject is never completed. This means that the possibility of real resistance is given at any time, since it ›appears as the effect of power, as parts of power, its self-subversion« (Butler 1997: 93).

Coinciding with the definition by David Lester, that the fatalistic suicide is not only an escape but also a political act of resistance against currents of fatalism inducing practices and ideologies (see Lester 2014), I understand the suicides of K-Pop idols as a political resistance, which undermines the hegemonic order. Although an intentional suicide to raise awareness for a political message is usually coined an altruistic suicide (see Park/Lester 2006), a me-

dia-hyped fatalistic suicide of a K-Pop idol has the potential to raise awareness demonstrating its political dimension. In the cases of Sulli, Hara, Jonghyun, and Cha In-ha, their suicides were not political statements as such, but led to protests and petitions by their fans to make a political statement. These protests and petitions eventually led to law changes (Sulli Act) and changes on social media sites, like Kakao (Im 2019).

The analysed social factors and ideologies are not complete but provide an extension to the causes discussed in the general discourse and are a first step towards an analysis encompassing several contexts. Only through integrative analysis of further social contexts regarding K-Pop idols, a more precise picture of an ideological determined, social reality can be drawn.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that K-Pop idols are subject to marginalising ideologies that at times overlap. These ideologies are imposed in different contexts by critical and fetishistic gazes, constructing a social panopticon around them and evoking a sense of fatalism, eventually leading to fatalistic suicides. By examining patriarchal company structures and their developmentalist and neoliberal roots, I tried to show how ideologies of conformism, perfectionism, patriarchalism, sexism, and voyeurism lead to several marginalisations of K-Pop idols. That means that K-Pop idols are being pushed into a fatalistic position that can lead to a fatalistic suicide as the final option to escape the marginalised position.

While suicide is a very personal act, it is deeply integrated into social constructions, mechanisms, and apparatuses of power. Suicides, and especially suicides of celebrities such as of K-Pop idols, who embody certain ideals and serve as personified projection surfaces for certain fantasies, indicate disparities in society at large. The celebrity suicides evoke strong feelings in people closely related to the victims and also in the fans. These feelings, in particular the anger about the discrimination and marginalisation of women, led to massive protests on International Women's Day in South Korea in 2020. The suicides of K-Pop idols can therefore be a turning point of reevaluating hegemonic ideologies and practices.

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