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AVATARS, SEXUALIZATION AND AFFECTIVITIES: THE CASE  
OF K-POP GIRL GROUP AESPA

Dissertation to Universidade Católica Portuguesa to  
obtain a Master's Degree in Asian Studies

By

Carolina Covas Grilo

Faculty of Human Sciences

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## Resumo

A música popular coreana, ou K-pop, e os mundos virtuais têm ambos vivenciado um crescente interesse nos últimos anos, pelo que não surpreende a sua recente união, da qual resultaram experiências únicas para as audiências deste género musical. Uma novidade é o grupo feminino de K-pop Aespa, que conta com a presença de quatro membros e os seus respetivos avatares. Apesar do seu conceito criativo, este grupo despertou apreensão por parte de cibernautas em relação ao *design* sexualizado dos ídolos virtuais. Esta dissertação procura, assim, através de uma perspetiva feminista, examinar o contributo dos avatares das Aespa para a sexualização e objetificação dos ídolos femininos, bem como analisar as respostas afetivas de ídolos e fãs relativamente a estas entidades. Trata-se de uma dissertação realizada que sucede estudos dedicados a denunciar o uso “genderizado” das tecnologias, porém com enfoque na indústria do K-pop, e que salienta a necessidade de refletir criticamente sobre uma forma de entretenimento com crescente consumo internacional.

Este estudo foi desenvolvido a partir da aplicação de métodos de pesquisa mistos. Com o propósito de cumprir os objetivos delineados, recorreu-se à seleção e análise visual de imagens promocionais das Aespa, à análise da narrativa presente em conteúdos audiovisuais do grupo, à construção e aplicação de um questionário dirigido a fãs adultas sul-coreanas, assim como à realização de entrevistas a fãs.

Os resultados sugerem que os avatares das Aespa contribuem para a sexualização e objetificação dos ídolos femininos 1) através da sua própria existência e *design* sexualizado, 2) ao serem a força orientadora do conceito do grupo e, assim, ditarem todas as escolhas relacionadas com a estética do grupo, e 3) ao aparecerem como elementos sexualizados adicionais nalgumas imagens do grupo. Os avatares mostraram-se também capazes de exercer poder afetivo sobre os ídolos, que pareceram manifestar sinais de dismorfia corporal em resposta. Por fim, foi possível concluir ainda que apesar dos avatares parecerem ser irrelevantes para as fãs, os ídolos apresentaram capacidade de influenciar as subjetividades e corporalizações das fãs. Estes resultados propõem uma influência indireta dos avatares sobre as fãs através dos ídolos.

**Palavras-chave:** K-pop, ídolos femininos, avatares, tecnologias do corpo, sexualização, objetificação, Aespa

## **Abstract**

Korean popular music, or K-pop, and virtual worlds have each experienced increasing interest in the last years, reason why their union, from which resulted unique experiences to the audiences of this music genre, is hardly surprising. One novelty is the female K-pop group Aespa, which counts with the presence of four members and their respective avatars. Despite its creative concept, this group has raised apprehensions among netizens related to the sexualized design of the virtual idols. This thesis then, attempts to examine, from a feminist perspective, the contribution of Aespa's avatars to the sexualization and objectification of the female idols, as well as analyse the affective responses of the idols and fans towards these entities. It is a thesis that succeeds studies dedicated to denounce the gendered use given to technologies, albeit with a focus on the K-pop industry, and that also emphasizes the need for critical reflection on an entertainment product of growing international consumption.

This study was developed by relying on mixed research methods. In order to achieve the objectives outlined, we selected and conducted a visual analysis of the promotional images of Aespa, analysed the narrative present in audio-visual contents of the group, designed and implemented a questionnaire aimed at adult female South Korean fans, and interviewed fans as well.

The results suggest the avatars of Aespa contribute to the female idols' sexualization and objectification 1) through their own existence and sexualized design, 2) by being the guiding force of their concept and thus, dictating all choices related to the group's aesthetic, and 3) by appearing as additional sexualized elements in some of the group's images. The avatars were also perceived as capable of holding affective power over the idols, who appeared to manifest signs of body dysmorphia in response. Finally, it was also possible to conclude that even though the avatars seem irrelevant to the fans, the idols appeared capable of influencing fans' subjectivities and embodiments. These results propose that the avatars can indirectly influence the fans through the idols.

**Keywords:** K-pop, female idols, avatars, technologies of the body, sexualization, objectification, Aespa

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## **Notes on the Romanization of Korean**

All words written in Korean follow the official romanization rules determined by the National Institute of Korean Language of the Republic of Korea. The romanized words are accompanied by the original words written in *Hangeul*, the Korean alphabet. The names of South Korean public figures also follow these rules, although contrary to Korean custom, their surnames are written after the first names, in order to avoid confusion, considering the citation style chosen (that of the American Psychological Association). On the other hand, the names of the Korean authors cited throughout the text follow the romanization chosen by the authors themselves.

## Introduction

K-pop, or Korean Popular music, is a music genre that appeals to mostly younger audiences for its musicality, but also for its visual aspect. It is a cultural product that fuses different contemporary styles, as well as traditional elements, both musical and aesthetic. This hybridity is often the target of scrutiny by different academic fields, such as Asian Studies, Culture Studies, and Globalization Studies. However, there is one other field that frequently develops research on this cultural product, and that is Gender Studies, which follows a different approach.

Gender Studies have reflected on the K-pop industry as a “machine” that incorporates patriarchal modes of operation (G. Kim, 2019) and principles of masculine domination. Scholars of this field have portrayed this industry as a machine that, more or less evidently, sexualizes and objectifies its idols through a myriad of ways, irrespective of their gender, although female idols, in general, are more sexualized than male idols (Song, 2016)<sup>1</sup>.

Similar to other music markets, the most obvious mechanism adopted by companies to sexualize their idols is the imposition of revealing outfits, sometimes reminiscent of sexual role play, like BDSM<sup>2</sup>, due to its material (e.g., leather) or accessories (e.g., chains, collars). Uniforms and infantile clothing are two other predominant fashion choices that satisfy sexual fetishes and fantasies. These outfits are then combined with choreographies that can vary in their level of provocativeness. It is a highly detailed and thought-out performance that culminates in the coupling of the wardrobe and choreography with suggestive music lyrics. Evidently, various other topics besides romance and sex are addressed in K-pop songs. Nevertheless, even groups like BTS and Stray Kids that sing mostly about friendship, youth and societal issues, are sexualized through their outfits and choreographies.

K-pop idols are also sexualized through the construction of a sexually available girlfriend or boyfriend images. Idols of both genders are, in their majority, forbidden from publicly engaging in romantic relationships, a contractual clause that intends to promote the

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<sup>1</sup> Song (2016) came to this conclusion after analysing numerous music videos of both female and male idol groups.

<sup>2</sup> Set of sexual practices that includes bondage, discipline, domination and submission.

idea that idols belong solely to their fans, thus, perpetuating an image of the idols as mere sexual objects.

There are other ways through which idols can be sexualized and objectified. One such way is through the introduction of new technologies and themes (like futurism and robotics), two seemingly new constant features of K-pop that only recently reached a level similar to that of big Sci-fi cinematographic productions. It is perhaps due to this delay, that these aspects appear to be “new constants” to inattentive spectators, despite having been present, in fact, since the end of the 1990s. The music videos for the songs “Dreams Come True” (1998) and “Yayaya” (1998) by girl groups S.E.S and Baby V.O.X respectively, are two examples of videos that apply futuristic elements, possible due to the resource to new technologies.

It can be understood then, why studies on the impact of these themes and technologies (e.g., artificial intelligence - AI) that sustain them are scarce, at least in this particular music industry. One such impact is the contribution to the sexualization and objectification of idols. Evidently, these themes and technologies are not preconditions for such outcomes, for they are implemented in different manners, telling different stories. However, they can occasionally play a part in idols’ sexualization, a collateral damage from agencies’ search for innovative concepts that can stand out in the saturated K-pop industry. This collateral damage, however, could be premeditated when considering the industry’s view of its idols as commercial products that appeal to the sexual desires and fantasies of its audiences (Jonas, 2021; G. Kim, 2019; Yeran Kim, 2011; C. Oh, 2014).

For some authors, this would fail to be surprising since the South Korean government has been avidly incentivizing the technological development, including that of the K-pop industry, which it is also funding to later capitalize on this tool of soft power (G. Kim, 2019; S.-Y. Kim, 2020). It is doing so in a social context where gender inequality is still demarked and where the collective body is valued over the individual. It is a society that promotes homogeneity, conformity, and unity rather than difference and diversity, including “the unique singularity and normativity of female subjectivity” (Youna Kim, 2002, p. 274).

The big companies that monopolize the K-pop industry, such as SM Entertainment, founded by Soo Man Lee, are actively cooperating with the government in said technological development. This entertainment company was responsible for the implementation of the

system that orients the present apparatus of conception of idol groups, based on a manual of steps deemed necessary to ensure and elevate the popularity of K-pop and its artists nationally and abroad (S.-Y. Kim, 2020). This manual guides the project known as “culture technology”, whose name could be based on the similarities between the detailed and systematized method of production of musical groups and that of a factory.

This manual motivates innovation as well, which is considered necessary for the success of K-pop groups in the highly competitive world of musical production in Korea. As such, SM Entertainment, more than any other company, has come to bet on diverse technologies, from concerts and theatres with holograms of its idols, futuristic concepts in music videos (with special effects), to the recent creation of avatars.

SM Entertainment’s novelty is a female idol group named Aespa that debuted in November 2020. Aespa (figure 1) presents a unique concept among its peers, consisting of four young women (Giselle, Karina, Winter, and NingNing)<sup>3</sup> and their virtual representations - four avatars named ae-Giselle, ae-Karina, ae-Winter, and ae-NingNing.



**Figure 1.** Aespa in a teaser image for their song “Savage”. From left to right: ae-Winter, ae-Giselle, Karina, NingNing, ae-Karina, Winter, Giselle, and ae-NingNing. Source: [https://twitter.com/aespa\\_official/status/1443954171414081537](https://twitter.com/aespa_official/status/1443954171414081537)

The avatars are also idols, albeit virtual ones, whose visibility has been limited to still images and short instances in the group’s music videos and performances. This reduced visibility to date could be due to the fact that these entities were not created with the intent to replace real idols, but as part of the group’s concept, as guiding elements of the group’s

<sup>3</sup> Karina and Winter are both Korean, while Giselle is Korean-Japanese and NingNing, the youngest, is Chinese.

story that can be enjoyed and understood through the music videos and *SMCU* mini-series<sup>4</sup>. This story, which justifies choices related to the group's music and aesthetics, can be briefly explained as follows.

In summary, ae-Aespa<sup>5</sup> are digital versions created based on the personal information that the human members shared online and submitted to a virtual world parallel to theirs. Even though the avatars live in this parallel dimension named FLAT, they can be transported to the real world through a portal named P.O.S that is managed by an AI called Naevis. When this occurs, both real and virtual members are in the highest level of SYNK (of connection). However, a virus known as Black Mamba, the main villain, threatens to disturb this connection. Aespa and ae-Aespa need to unite and defeat this entity that may threaten the stability between both worlds. The fight occurs in KWANGYA, an intermediary realm between both dimensions.

This story plays out throughout their music videos, from “Black Mamba” to “Girls”, with the exception of “Forever” and “Dreams Come True”<sup>6</sup>. In the music video for their debut song “Black Mamba”, the avatars are infected by the virus Black Mamba. Then, in “Next Level”, Naevis contacts the girls explaining what has happened, convincing them to go to KWANGYA so they can defeat the virus. It is in “Savage” that they are transported to the virtual realm with the help of Naevis. At the end of the music video, the members are believed to have defeated Black Mamba, only to be revealed in “Girls” that this was not the case and they go deeper into the virus' den. They finally defeat their enemy at the end of “Girls”. To do so, they depend on weapons that manifest when inside the virtual realm: Karina possesses a robotic arm capable of punching rockets, Winter has the ability to use all sorts of weapons and equipment, Giselle is able to speak and write in any language, and NingNing has hacking skills. From these weapons derive their warrior names: Karina as Rocket Puncher, Winter as Armamenteer, Giselle as Xenoglossy, and NingNing as E.D Hacker.

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<sup>4</sup> *SMCU* refers to SM Culture Universe. SMCU is a project that intends to link all of SM Entertainment's idol groups' stories. The mini-series in question is a series where the story of this universe is told through Aespa's perspective, and is available on the group's YouTube channel

<sup>5</sup> Name given to the sub-unit consisting of only the four avatars.

<sup>6</sup> Both songs were part of different projects by SM Entertainment to remake songs by other artists of the same company. Despite not fitting into Aespa's storyline, the avatar concept was kept in these songs as the virtual idols still appeared in both music videos.

It is a concept that, when scrutinized, reveals an interesting allegory to people's interactions with cyberspace, where they show only parts of themselves (exemplified by avatars that reflect parts of the members rather than being total copies), and where it is easy for the virtual self to become detached from the real (as symbolized by the effects of the Black Mamba virus). Despite its capacity to elaborate on important aspects of human life in the digital space in a captivating and entertaining way, the use of avatars could prove to aggravate other contemporary concerns, namely female representation in the media. This concern derives mostly from the avatars' design, which may contribute to the perpetuation of unreachable beauty ideals, for both idols and fans.

It is worth noting that the avatars typically used in virtual worlds and social media are created by users themselves. The same occurs in videogames, where the player can personalize his or her avatar, or even choose between pre-existing options. However, this freedom of choice was denied to the members of Aespa, as their avatars were designed and managed by a team. ae-Aespa are not the result of one's vision and idea of self, but a manifestation of how others see these girls. These avatars are the reflection of how the industry perceives young female idols and the female gender.

Thus, it is vital to academically expose, as has been done, the problematic of technologies and the body, namely how technology is used in the perpetuation of traditional discourses that promote inequality, sexualization and objectification of women. Most literature on the matter has been focused, for instance, on cosmetic surgery and virtual environments. However, regarding the latter, most studies have dealt with representation through avatars in online worlds and videogames, while K-pop and virtual idols have not been as extensively researched. This gap ought to be filled, considering K-pop's growing influence over its national and international audiences, especially youth who internalize and then reproduce the texts to which they are exposed. In light of this affective power, K-pop should not be solely seen as entertainment, but also critically analysed by studying the varied ways through which it sexualizes and objectifies its female idols and how these phenomena are assimilated by both idols and fans. Such research is crucial to alert to the dangers to women's physical and mental health, while it also evidences some of the obstacles to women's emancipation. These concerns are also personal ones, which together with a profound interest in both the Korean culture and K-pop, have motivated the development of the present thesis that will hopefully promote further discussion on the matter, encouraging

future feminist work that will specify, alongside the present thesis, “sites for immediate political intervention and social change” (Balsamo, 1996, p. 162).

### **Research questions and objectives**

In light of the problematics of Aespa’s concept and the motivations aforementioned, the main research question to be explored in this thesis is “How do the avatars of Aespa contribute to the sexualization and objectification of female idols?”. From this question it is possible to outline different objectives. The first objective resides in understanding in what consist the phenomena of sexualization and objectification, as well as what are technologies of the body. The second objective consists in comprehending how technologies of the body, with particular focus on avatars, are used to sexualize and objectify women. Considering the specific context of the case study, it is equally important to understand, as a third objective, the workings of the K-pop industry and its sociocultural background, so as to then achieve the fourth objective, which lies in the comprehension of how female idols have been traditionally sexualized and objectified. Only then can we proceed to accomplish the fifth objective, which lies in understanding how the sexualization and objectification of female K-pop idols are constructed through the avatars.

Once understood that sexualization and objectification are active phenomena with clear repercussions, impacting those that are directly targeted (here, Aespa) and those who are exposed to it (fans), both of whom first internalize the underlying messages and then exteriorize an affective response, it became relevant to develop sub-questions that address said impacts. The sub-questions are “How are the idols of Aespa impacted by their avatars?” and “How are the female South Korean fans of Aespa impacted by the avatars?”. Consequently, the secondary objectives of this thesis consist in understanding how idols and fans are impacted and how they manifest affective responses, both through body manipulation and construction of subjectivities.

Even though one of the main motivations for this thesis was the growing impact of K-pop globally, only the South Korean community of fans is here studied. The reason lies in the fact that fans from different countries read and interpret the images and texts they are exposed to differently. Additionally, the way they are affected, react and behave is also different. As such, to not restrict the research subject would result in a large-scale analysis difficult to accomplish due to time limitations. Nevertheless, the present thesis is still

valuable since the South Korean audience is, in bigger proportion, the most impacted by the ideals and standards disseminated by celebrities whose image is omnipresent in the country.

## **Methodology**

In order to better develop a thesis focused on the specific context of South Korea, and that deals directly with Korean people, there were some vital resources and skills that had to be honed. One of them was the knowledge of the Korean language, crucial not only to retrieve further information on the topics at hand that would have been inaccessible otherwise, but also to reach and communicate with the research subjects. This knowledge was cultivated over the years through self-study, having resulted from an interest in the Korean culture after exposure to K-pop for the first time in 2016. This same interest motivated two trips to the country, one solo trip in 2019 for the duration of three months, and another under an exchange program during the first semester of the second year of the master's degree, in 2021. Travelling and living in Korea gave access to a better understanding of the social atmosphere in which K-pop emerged and is maintained, and where fans negotiate their fan experiences with female existence. These trips also allowed for the flourishing of friendships with natives, with whom was possible to learn Korean mannerisms in speech and body language that were helpful to adopt a more faithful interpretation of narratives. All of these experiences and skills contributed to the choices of methodology for this thesis and capacity to follow the methodological design.

The main approach used to answer the research questions was the mixed research method, since it allows for “a more complete understanding of the research problem than either approach [, quantitative and qualitative,] alone” (Creswell, 2008, p. 527) could. By resorting to this method, it was possible to collect different types of data, and thus accomplish the established objectives.

Regarding the main research question, the preferred method was a prominently qualitative analysis of the still images of the group divulged by the agency during each album or song release<sup>7</sup> complemented with a quantitative approach. A total of 278 images<sup>8</sup>, from

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<sup>7</sup> Only these images were analysed due to the large number of images (still and moving) available since the group's debut in November 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Since each member and avatar were analysed individually even in pictures where more than one element (real or virtual) was present, the total of images can be considered higher, namely, 423 (11 for each avatar, 94 for the members Giselle, Winter and NingNing, and 97 for Karina).

their debut song “Black Mamba”, their “Forever”, “Next Level”, “Savage”, “Dreams Come True”, and “Girls” comebacks, as well as their company’s “SMCU” concert, were collected from the group’s official accounts on Twitter and Instagram. The retrieval of these images occurred in two moments, first between the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> of April, 2022, and later in July 6<sup>th</sup> of the same year, after the images for “Girls” had been published. As for the analysis, it was conducted during the whole of August, 2022.

Whereas the qualitative research could result in a narrative and descriptive account of “the patterns of meaning that emerge from (...) [an] observation” (Berg, 2008, p. 826) of Aespa’s images, the quantitative method provided a collection of numerical data (Bryman, 2012) that sustained these interpretations and allowed additional findings. The concrete goal was to first, establish a comparison between the members of Aespa and their avatars, focused, for example, on their physical traits, clothing, and attitude. By doing so, it would become clear how the avatars could possibly contribute to the members’ sexualization as their virtual representations designed by others. Secondly, this analysis was conducted to provide an understanding of how the members of Aespa were represented in pictures with and without their avatars, in other words, to ascertain if and how the presence of the avatars further sexualized the members.

The technique used for the qualitative method was visual analysis, from which a series of semiotic meanings located in a feminist discourse were obtained. The analysis was conducted through the construction of a grid organized into four different main categories: physical appearance, concept, attitude, and point of view. Analysing physical appearance implied scrutinizing the face (traits, shape, and eyes), hair (colour, hairstyle, and length), and body (shape). The concept was analysed in terms of clothes (exposure, style, colours, prints, fabric, and accessories), makeup, and ambiance (scenery, colours, lights and effects, decorative and phallic elements). The attitude category encompassed the eye focus (whether the idol is looking at or away from the camera), facial expressions, and poses. Finally, the point of view refers to whether a picture was taken from a low angle, high angle or at eye level, and “shows the dynamics between the observer and the observed” (S.-J. Lee, 2006, p. 1740).

All images were simultaneously analysed in accordance with a coding system adapted from the one developed by Hatton and Trautner (2011). The goal was to obtain a quantitative

measure of the sexualization of the images, while providing a concrete value for the avatars' contribution to the sexualization in images where both virtual and real elements were present.

In their study, Hatton and Trautner (2011) conceptualized “representations of women (...) as falling along a continuum of sexualization” (p. 261), meaning images can range from “not sexualized” to “highly sexualized”. In order to classify the pictures in their study according to these categories, the authors developed a 23-point additive scale that encompassed 11 variables: clothing/nudity, touch, pose, mouth, breasts/chest, genitals, buttocks, text, head vs. body shot, sex act, and sexual role play. Since the authors dealt with text and depictions of sexual acts, they were prompted to add these variables to their scale. However, since these two elements were not observed at all in the present case study, they were removed from the scale, converting it to a 20-point additive scale, where images with a total score of 0-4 were considered “not sexualized”, 5-9 were “slightly sexualized”, 10-15 were “clearly sexualized”, and 16-20 were “hyper-sexualized”. The remaining variables were slightly altered as is described in Appendix A. The scores attributed to each variable and the total score for every image of each idol and avatar are shown in tables B1 to B8 of Appendix B.

Both sub-questions were designed to probe into people's affective experiences in relation to the avatars of Aespa. Even though “experience is ultimately unique to individuals (...) [and cannot be accessed] in any direct way” (Pink et al., 2016, p. 16), it can still be inferred through research methods such as survey research (e.g., interviews, questionnaires, etc.). These allow respondents to share their experiences which are then subjectively interpreted by researchers who resort to techniques such as narrative analysis (e.g., written and oral texts) and articulate their theoretical knowledge on the research problem with their own experiences. As argued by Riessman (1993), narrative analysis is particularly suited for studies of subjectivity because it is an “approach [that] gives prominence to human agency and imagination” (p. 5).

In the case of Aespa, however, personally interviewing the members was not possible. After a failed attempt to speak with SM Entertainment and with the members, it was crucial to develop a second plan of action, which consisted in resorting to narrative analysis as well, but of various contents from Aespa. Therefore, a total of 88 videos from Aespa available mostly on YouTube (all listed in the Annex), including variety shows, reaction videos,

behind the scenes, vlogs, interviews, and showcases, were analysed. When analysing these videos between the 5<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> of September, 2022 (there was a first visualization in March, 2022), focus was given to different texts: the members' facial expressions and body language, as well as their oral narrative, so as to understand in an indirect way if and how they are impacted by their avatars and concept.

While answering the first sub-question depended solely on qualitative methods, answering the second sub-question was assured through a mixed research method, namely the complementation of an online self-administered questionnaire with semi-structured interviews with fans that agreed to further develop their insights on the topic. Considering the goal was to assess how female South Korean fans of Aespa were impacted, it was necessary to resort to a method that would allow the collection of numerous responses that could be statistically meaningful, and that way ascertain the relevance of the research problem. This method was the self-administered questionnaire, since it allows the large-scale retrieval of attitudinal responses and its applicability is based on the capacity of quantitative research to numerically express and analyse non-quantitative data (e.g., attitudes and opinions), and therefore of explaining particular social phenomena (Muijs, 2004). Further reasons for its use are: its easy distribution and access by respondents, most of whom presumably live in South Korea; there is no influence of the researcher; and respondents can answer when and where convenient to them.

The questionnaire was targeted at adult female South Korean fans of Aespa and conducted in Korean, making use of personal Korean skills and the translator app Papago. The questionnaire was only published after being reviewed by two natives (both the original and translated versions are available in Appendix C). It was created with Microsoft Forms and shared on different social media: Twitter, Instagram, DC Inside<sup>9</sup>, YouTube, and Kakao Talk<sup>10</sup>. Its dissemination was widely dependent on fans reposting the link to the questionnaire and sharing with their acquaintances. Since there was no indication that the questionnaire was directed towards adult women, all Korean fans that came across the questionnaire could answer, at least the first section that inquired people on their age and

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<sup>9</sup> DC Inside is a South Korean internet forum where different boards are named "Gallery". The gallery used to disseminate the questionnaire was the official one dedicated to Aespa: "Aespa Gallery".

<sup>10</sup> Kakao Talk is a South Korean messaging app, where users can communicate through private and public chats, as well as create pages dedicated to different topics.

gender. Minors could not answer the full questionnaire as it would require parental consent, which is difficult to verify with the tools used. Any attempt by minors to answer the questionnaire was suppressed by its automatic termination after section one. Evidently, this method was not ideal to guarantee that no minors answered, but it proved to be the best option in light of the conditions at the time. Fans that identified as male were able to answer the whole questionnaire, but their responses were not taken into consideration for the present analysis. The questionnaire was available online from May 13<sup>th</sup> to July 20<sup>th</sup>, 2022, having collected a total of 111 responses from the target group, which were then analysed between the 11<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> of September, 2022.

The questionnaire was organized into five sections. Section one inquired fans about their gender and age. Section two was designed to understand fans' profiles. It had one question to infer how frequently they watched the group's content, another to order the reasons for liking the group, and one question to inquire on the existence of friends that were also fans of Aespa. Section three was only directed towards those that did have such friends, and inquired them on whether they spoke with those friends about Aespa and if so, what were the topics most discussed, presenting the respondents with successive rating scale questions (from "Never" to "Always"). The goal was to evaluate how prevalent the topic of the idols and avatars' appearance is among fans. Sections four and five hoped to understand the different affective responses by fans. Regarding section four, the focus was on fans' beliefs about the female body and how they read and reacted to the bodies of the avatars and the members. Both types of information were retrieved resorting to Likert scale questions (from "Completely Disagree" to "Completely Agree"). Fans were also presented with images of the avatars and members, which they had to classify as "Not Sexualized" to "Extremely Sexualized" through rating questions. Successive Likert scale questions to understand the impacts of the exposure to Aespa's images, as well as a question to determine if fans had engaged in body manipulation (and in what way), were also included in this section. Finally, section five was created to understand fans' beliefs on women and if the image of Aespa can be an obstacle to women's emancipation (through Likert scale questions).

All of the information was retrieved directly to Microsoft Office Excel, where it was processed into graphs and tables. These were then analysed together rather than individually, so as to enable a holistic interpretation of fans' answers.

As aforementioned, this questionnaire was then complemented with semi-structured interviews. The reason lies in the limited information that could be retrieved from the questionnaire, where all questions were close-ended (respondents are asked to choose from a set of pre-defined options). No open-ended questions were used in the questionnaire for two reasons. First, it is more likely that respondents will not complete a questionnaire that takes too long to answer. Such is undesirable for it will reduce the sample and, consequently, the “statistical power” (Muijs, 2004, p. 43). Second, close-ended questions are more suitable for large-scale retrieval of information, due to their faster and easier analysis. As such, semi-structured interviews, which are “qualitative data collection strateg[ies] in which the researcher asks informants a series of predetermined but open-ended questions” (Ayres, 2008, p. 810) were applied in order to better understand the attitudinal responses of some fans. The interviews were also helpful in understanding fans’ sociocultural background and that way, sustain or possibly add to the theoretical framework.

Five fans that were willing to be interviewed shared their contact information. However, only two of these fans (identified as Fan A and Fan B) followed through with the semi-structured interviews. Fan A opted to answer in Korean while Fan B did so in English. Due to the time difference and busy schedule of the respondents, both received a script in the preferred language through e-mail and were given ample time to forward their responses. The scripts, which can be found in Appendix D, were sent on June 29<sup>th</sup>, and the responses received on July 27<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup>, 2022. After translating the Korean responses, both interviews were analysed simultaneously to the questionnaire.

Both the questionnaire and semi-structured interviews were applied while striving to uphold the ethical principles in social research identified by Bryman (2012). All respondents were informed of the research purposes and guaranteed their anonymity. While the ethical principles related to informed consent, deception, and invasion of privacy were hopefully ensured, avoiding harm to the participants was harder to guarantee. Harm is suggestive and, as mentioned by Bryman (2012), it can extend beyond physical harm. Loss of self-esteem and stress, for instance, are two other forms of harm that researches can unintentionally inflict upon participants. Given the nature of some of the questions that probed into perceptions of body image and satisfaction, some harm may have been inflicted by evoking reflection on such sensitive topics. Considering the scope of the thesis, however, it would

have been difficult to avoid such questions, reason why the participants were informed and free to quit at any moment.

In order to theoretically ground the analysis of the case study that hopes to correlate the usage of avatars with the sexualization and objectification of female idols and the implications thereof derived, it was crucial to resort to yet another research method: literature review. After all, reading on “ideas and theoretical frameworks (...) [is important to] both question and increase understanding of the (...) research being carried out” (Race, 2008, p. 488). In the case of the present thesis, literature review implied reviewing existing work on the following matters: technologies of the body, sexualization and objectification in the media, sexualization of female K-pop idols, and the female body in South Korea. Among the numerous books, articles and thesis under these topics that were consulted for the present study after having been found through Google Scholar and retrieved online (most of them between September, 2021, and March, 2022), there are some more relevant for being either seminal references and/or very complete works that exhaustively address their respective topics. These studies are presented in the following section.

### **State of the Art**

Media Studies, together with Women’s Studies, have demonstrated a growing interest towards the study of the technologies of the body. This is understandable considering the rise in cultural products (e.g., movies, animation, music videos, etc.) where cyborgs and AI are often portrayed as an alternative to women. Due to its suppression of organic components, this alternative is incapable of generating fear in men. This fear derives from the castration complex which appears in response to women’s existence in itself as a being without phallus, and as such, imagined as “the other” in opposition to men (Mulvey, 1975). Men, in turn, deal with their fear through the fetishization and objectification of women (Mulvey, 1975). These entities, partially or entirely technological, are then, the climax of this process, frequently sexualized products of a male-dominated industry. They represent a tameable and non-threatening female alternative despite their usual portrayal as deadly weapons.

To Haraway (1991), however, cyborgs can be seen as a symbol of female emancipation, a tool in identity work. In one of the book’s essays, titled “A Cyborg Manifesto”, Haraway sets out to dethrone the dualistic vision of the modern subject with the idea of a post-modern subject: the cyborg. To do so, the author educates the reader on how the cyborg challenges

the biological concept of gender and the traditional concept of identity, simultaneously serving as a metaphor to the new social reality: the information era. This essay stands out from other studies in technologies of the body in that it backs away from the usual fatalism. It presents itself as a manifesto to inspire feminists to use these same technologies to shape the social reality they hope to live in, without denying, however, the need to denounce the usage that has been given to these technologies and that foments feminist concerns.

Besides cyborgs and AI, reproduction technologies, cosmetic surgery, and virtual reality, for instance, have also evoked apprehension. Balsamo's (1996) work is notorious for its extensive analysis on how these and other technologies perpetuate traditional discourses that promote gender inequality, sexualization and objectification of women. This is accomplished through the incorporation of key concepts such as masculine domination, patriarchy, and biopolitics.

Such work of analysing the role of technologies in the perpetuation of gendered narratives that foster gender conformity is further developed by Shapiro (2015) in a study that extends its scope beyond women, as the author highlights the participative role of modification technologies in, ironically, allowing for the emergence of new gender identities (e.g., transexual).

The collective work edited by Jarrín and Pussetti (2021) also delves into the effects of these varied technologies on pre-existing inequalities, but does so in a broader context by covering various regions of the world. This is done while striving to argue on the relevance of violent histories (e.g., colonialism) in shaping locals' desires to engage in body manipulation that adheres to the biopolitical trends generated from these historical episodes and that persist since (e.g., skin lightening). Similar to Shapiro (2015), it also evidences positive uses of these technologies to contest normative bodies, which are thus, either "an example to follow or (...) a pattern (...) to disrupt" (Jarrín & Pussetti, 2021, p. 9).

Though seminal references, some of which elaborate briefly on the topic of cyberspace, these studies, with the exception of Shapiro (2015), do not explore virtual representations. There are, nevertheless, numerous authors that have researched the processes of representation through avatars and its implications, focusing primarily on online worlds and videogames. Among these authors, many have reflected on how gender stereotypes are perpetuated in these environments and, consequently, how they promote sexualization and

objectification of the self and others (see Barlett & Harris, 2008; Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2009; Ferreira & Ganito, 2016; Fox et al., 2013; Fragoso & Rosário, 2008; Kwon, 2011). These authors explain these outcomes through embodiment of users' avatars, which are more influential when visually faithful, detailed, and interactive, basing their arguments on the "Proteus effect", suggested by Yee & Bailenson (2007). This theory, which rests on psychological concepts like behavioural confirmation, self-perception theory, and deindividuation, was an innovative step in this field of study and empirically supported by various works. It argues that embodiment results from users' observations of their behaviours enacted through their avatars, therefore, in a third-person view, which leads them to infer their own attitudes and beliefs. In the case of sexualized characters, users will internalize the predominant features and behaviours, most of which are stereotypes, and this way create a sexualized environment for them and those around them.

Related to the study of these entities is the topic of Japanese virtual idols. Daniel Black is one of the scholars that has conducted more research on the topic, having two articles that stand out. In his 2008 article, Black portrays the virtual idol as an entity that projects the aesthetic ideal of the female body, unreachable due to the fact that, ironically, it is not human. It possesses then, another set of characteristics related to the absence of realism that make up its charm. This way, an interesting paradox surrounding the technologies of the body is evidenced: the technologies used to surpass the biological capacities end up shaping themselves by the "biology of the body" (Black, 2008, p. 48) and sociocultural standards of femininity. Black's 2012 article, on the other hand, sheds light upon how the methods of production and consumption of these idols, and consequently, the parasocial relationships, have changed, evidencing the fan as an active actor in both processes. By manipulating these entities to satisfy his (sexual) fantasies, the fan becomes a producer whose content is consumed by other fans thus propagating sexist beliefs and feelings of control over the female body.

One commonality among the studies mentioned is their reflection on the use given to the different technologies as one that perpetuates detrimental views on women and harmful behaviours towards them, both of which hinder women's position in society by constantly deriving their value from their sexual appeal, that is, by sexualizing and objectifying them.

These phenomena of sexualization and objectification have also been extensively studied, with a particular focus on media images. Among the literature on the matter, the American Psychological Association (APA, 2007) has been one of the most frequently cited. This report was developed, according to its authors, in response to the growing concerns over the frequency with which young girls came across images in the media that sexualized girls and women. In this study, the authors define the concept of sexualization and clarify the different conditions for its occurrence, as well as the frequency with which and how it happens in different media formats. They conclude with proposals on measures to neutralise the impact of this phenomenon, therefore encouraging further academic research and public debate. Despite its focus on the North American context, this report stands out for being extensive and detailed, and for its applicability to different contexts, since it offers different conditions (independent of one another) for the occurrence of sexualization. Moreover, each of these conditions is hardly restrictive by avoiding generalist terminology.

Fredrickson and Roberts's (1997) article where the authors propose and develop what they have termed "objectification theory" is equally important for the topic at hand. In this essay, the authors make a convincing case on their proposal of the nefarious effects on the self after exposure to sexually objectifying images. The authors support their arguments through numerous and credible sources, incorporating theories from different fields (e.g., psychology) to explain how the interiorization of beliefs occurs and can be applied to self-objectification. By doing so, this article perfectly demonstrates the severity of this issue, which calls for collective action from different academic fields.

One other relevant study is Ward's (2016) article, a compilation of all the research on sexualization and objectification on the media published in English academic journals between 1995 and 2015. Besides reviewing key concepts, the author offers solid evidences that verify what objectification theory had posited in 1997, such as the relation between regular exposure to the media and increasing tendency to self-objectify, adherence to sexist beliefs, etc. Simultaneously, the author points out the difficulty in accessing research developed outside the western context, which hinders most attempts at verifying the applicability of theories to other contexts.

Among the studies reviewed by Ward (2016) only one was not by western authors. This article was by S. Y. Kim et al. (2014) and analysed objectification theory in South Korea.

The data discussed in this article was compatible with what has been observed in other societies, highlighting, however, the importance that Korean women give to facial features in addition to the body. This importance reflects their society's visual-oriented nature that puts great emphasis on appearance and has established strict sociocultural standards of beauty. In this regard, K. Han and Jang (2017), J.-W. Jang et al. (2012), and Park and Lee (2021) have developed very opportune studies where they extend on objectification theory in their country, by evaluating the role of sociocultural standards of beauty as a mediator between women's exposure to sexual objectification and self-objectification. Their studies contribute with additional findings, including the suggestion of self-concept clarity as a mediator between the internalization of said standards and self-objectification (Park & Lee, 2021), and the relation between sexual objectification experiences and the intent to perform cosmetic surgery (J.-W. Jang et al., 2012), this way evidencing the gendered use of one of the technologies of the body and bridging the topics of technologies and sexualization.

Even though English studies on the malefices of exposure to sexualized images in South Korean media are scarce, there is a niche of Women's Studies dedicated to denounce the ways the K-pop industry sexualizes and objectifies its female idols, paving the path to future studies where the impacts on the audiences of this specific product are analysed.

One such author is G. Kim (2019), who establishes an interesting parallelism between the female K-pop idols and the young female factory workers of the post-war period. This parallel is based on their mobilization and exploitation by export industries in a patriarchal society with neoliberal ambitions. While the mobilization in the post-war was forced, currently, young girls' entrance into the music industry appears to be out of free will, in search for fame, motivated by a false discourse of neoliberal female empowerment. Having acquired the status of idol, these girls then disseminate the same ideology to their audiences, in a cycle of biopower. Through these "biopolitics of affect" (G. Y Kim, 2019, p. 62), more girls, in an attempt to rise in society, integrate an industry that "repays" their hard work and sacrifice by objectifying them, therefore perpetuating patriarchal mechanisms. The author suggests K-pop affectively operates on its audiences through the visual language of music videos and sexualization of idols, capable of inducing affective responses, including body manipulation through cosmetic surgery.

This idea of K-pop idols' affective power is also addressed by Y. Oh (2018), who elaborates on the affective relations between idols and fans, which are possible in the first place because of K-pop's aesthetics, especially idols' visual allure. The author argues that their visual quality has the power to drive fans' consumption and reproduction of idol images. Although less accusatory than G. Y. Kim (2019) in relation to the industry's practices and without stressing the terms "sexualization" and "objectification", these phenomena are still indirectly addressed. In their own ways, both authors reveal how idols' commodification guides fans' behaviours and beliefs. They present, however, other unique contributions. While G. Y. Kim (2019) is concerned with reflecting on the sociocultural and historical basis for the workings of biopower on South Korean girls, Y. Oh (2018) extends its subjects to international fans with the intent to evidence idols' roles as affective commodities in selling not only merchandise, but also places, in a joint effort with the Korean tourist sector.

Yeran Kim (2011) and C. Oh (2014) too, expose idols' commodification by the K-pop industry, whose profits greatly depend on the appeal to audiences' fantasies of monopolization and sexual desires. Both authors justify the idols' sexualized image in light of the multilateral flows of influence, while still holding the industry and society partially accountable. Yeran Kim (2011) even resorts to the term "*lolita* nationalism" to describe the celebration of idols' bodies as national property at the service of soft power.

While Yeran Kim (2011) chooses to highlight the different strategies implemented to transform the idols' femininity into cultural content at the service of neoliberalism, C. Oh (2014) follows a different approach. C. Oh (2014) elaborates on how this femininity is reflective of a "whore-virgin" dualism, resultant from a distorted western discourse of "girl-power" and "traditional" expectations of Korean women's disposition (e.g., purity and subordination). The end result is the perpetuation of false empowerment, considering these idols have no true agency over their hyperfeminine bodies.

Yet, they are celebrated bodies, including by women, phenomenon that can be understood in light of the evolution the female body has experienced in a short period of time. As T. Kim (2003) points out while reflecting on the meaning of the female body in South Korea, the current body is one that differs greatly from the traditionally hidden one. The current body is a capitalist one, seemingly freer and consumerist, yet, as the author contends, it is still under the control of Neo-Confucianist forces of governmentality. One of

the current mechanisms of control is cosmetic surgery, through which women conform, in great number, to the norm, to a “subjectless” body.

This phenomenon of massive adherence to cosmetic surgery in South Korea soon reached western feminists, whose discourses on this matter, however, and according to S. H. Lee (2016), depicted Korean women as oppressed and suffering from internalised racism. Concerned with these discourses, the author decided to give voice to Korean feminist associations, whose arguments differ considering their geopolitical context. According to them, “*lookism*” is the main problem, a systemic issue that allows the cosmetic industry to thrive and promotes gender inequality. As such, the choice to follow through with cosmetic surgery should be seen as a complex phenomenon, a by-product of the sociocultural and neoliberal forces, in an attempt to ensure success in a society that greatly values beauty. S. H. Lee also argues that their very own neoliberal rhetoric of “self-care” as a way to improve self-esteem and that way fight this issue, is in itself an obstacle, since it replicates the rhetoric used by the cosmetic industry.

S. H. Lee’s (2016) work emphasizes the importance of taking each sociocultural context into consideration to better understand the phenomenon under study so that, eventually, one can contribute to evoke awareness on the matter. After all, forcing one’s cultural beliefs and strategies to different realities tends to promote null or even undesirable effects.

### **Thesis Structure**

The present thesis is organized into three chapters, followed by the Conclusions. Chapter one is concerned with previous theories on sexualization and objectification, which reflect traditional narratives of gender and unbalanced gender relations. This chapter also elucidates on how such discourses serve an apparatus of male dominance and how they can be perpetuated through the use given to different technologies of the body. Special focus is given to digital and AI technologies and the bodies created by them, such as avatars, a concept that is also reviewed in this chapter, alongside the idea of avatar embodiment and its impacts on the self and on perceptions of women. Other concerns associated with cyberspace, such as online misogyny and deepfake pornography, are equally addressed.

Chapter two provides an overview of both K-pop and its industry. This chapter explains the origin of this cultural product and its evolution into its current form in light of the flows

and counter flows of influence, typical of a globalized world. Such a contextualization is accompanied by a reflection on the role of the government to promote the industry and the music genre's growth internationally. As a product of nation branding, it justifies the sexualization of young female idols, an argument that is equally explored while bearing in mind the industry's sociocultural context (alluded throughout both theoretical chapters). This exploration is carried out alongside a clarification on the means through which said sexualization occurs, while revealing the dangers it entails not only to idols, but also female fans due to idols' affective power over them. Chapter two concludes with an introduction to virtual idols, followed by a reflection on their place in the current K-pop scene and their role in reproducing gendered narratives through the portrayal of limited femininities and the sexualization of women.

Finally, chapter three is focused on the analysis of the case study: the girl group Aespa. The chapter is divided into three sections that provide the answers to the main and secondary research questions separately, given the different research methods used and contents studied in each. Throughout this analytical chapter, an effort is made to correlate the findings with the context provided by the previous chapters.

The main findings are then summarized in Conclusions, accompanied by a reflection on their relevance despite the limitations associated with the research conducted. Based on the limitations highlighted and the potential related to the topic at hand, suggestions for future studies are also provided.

# Chapter 1 – Sexualization, Biopolitics and Avatars

## 1.1. Sexualization and Objectification

It should be clarified, first and foremost, that sexualization and objectification are not solely targeted at girls and women. Anyone can be the object of such processes. However, it is also important to recognize that women are, in fact, the primary targets of sexualization, making it a practice “expressly gendered” (Jackson & Vares, 2015, p. 482). It is no surprise then, that the majority of academic literature on the matter revolves around cases of female sexualization and objectification. Occasionally, men too are contemplated in these studies, but mostly to analyse how they are impacted by the sexualized images of women (see APA, 2007; Bigler et al., 2019). From a feminist point of view, this too constitutes an important aspect of research on sexualization, since boys will, just as girls, have the construction of their “self-conceptions” and behaviour guided by the “gender schemas” present in their environment (McKenney & Bigler, 2016, p. 173). While girls risk responding with self-sexualization and self-objectification, boys are in danger of internalizing sexualization and objectification as the norm thus, perpetuating these negative tendencies (Bigler et al., 2019).

Nevertheless, with regards to defining these processes, no definition here proposed is restrictive to any particular gender, nor should that be the goal. The intent here is not only to define these concepts and shed light on how and when they occur, but most importantly, to raise awareness concerning the harm they cause. Evidently, the goal of scrutinizing these notions also lies in the necessity to properly understand them before attempting to analyse how they are executed in the case study.

Defining sexualization, however, is no simple task, as evidenced by the vast number of definitions proposed by different authors. APA (2007) alone has suggested four conditions<sup>11</sup> for the occurrence of sexualization, implying thus four definitions. According to APA (2007), sexualization occurs when:

- a person’s value comes only from his or her sexual appeal or behaviour, to the exclusion of other characteristics;
- a person is held to a standard that equates physical attractiveness (narrowly defined) with being sexy;

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<sup>11</sup> Not all these conditions need be met for sexualization to occur.

- a person is sexually objectified – that is, made into a thing for others’ sexual use, rather than seen as a person with the capacity for independent action and decision making; and/or

- sexuality is inappropriately imposed upon a person. (p.1)

The proposal of four different conditions has permitted the term to be less restrictive, allowing for the detection of instances of sexualization which could have previously been dismissed. For this reason, many authors have based their research on the definitions proposed by APA (2007), which will also be favoured here.

It is worth noting, however, that researchers’ concerns with the sexualization of women, particularly in the media, did not begin with the report published by APA (2007), but have existed, in fact, since the 1970s (Ward, 2016), concomitant to the expansion of the second wave of feminism<sup>12</sup>. Yet, despite the increasing feminist literature throughout the years, little has been achieved in tackling this problem. In fact, there has been an increase in sexualized representations in the media (e.g., television and music videos), especially in western societies (APA, 2007; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Graff et al., 2013; Pacilli et al., 2016), but not exclusively. For instance, South Korean media too has followed this trend, as women gain increasing visibility in their society (S. Y. Kim et al., 2014). Television dramas and K-pop in particular have come to portray different femininities beyond that of the docile and hidden woman, as will be made clear in the subsequent chapter.

Indeed, all around the world, different forms of cultural production have been permeated by sexualized depictions of women. Besides television and music videos, they can be found in music lyrics, advertisements, movies, magazines, sports media, social media, internet (e.g., pornographic websites and pop-ups), and video/computer games. More concerning, still, is their creeping into content catered to pre-teenagers, such as cartoons and animation. Although not mediatic content, products such as toys (e.g., Barbie and Bratz dolls), clothing and cosmetics, and its respective advertisements have also been infused with sexualization.

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<sup>12</sup> This wave began in the 1960s, lasting approximately two decades. Besides continuing the work initiated in the first wave (that focused on suffrage and other legal issues, such as the right to property), its major focus resided in tackling issues of both public and private nature. These included injustices related to sexuality (e.g., rape), reproductive rights, domestic violence, workplace safety, etc. (Anand, 2018).

The ways sexualization has been accomplished and disseminated by these cultural products are varied. These include: nudity, revealing or suggestive clothing<sup>13</sup>, poses that imply sexual activity or availability (Pacilli et al., 2016), or even the articulation of two or more of these. Sexual behaviours towards women (e.g., actresses, models, movie characters, etc.) like “leering, ogling, staring, and catcalling” (APA, 2007, p. 5) have also been reported to occur often. The seemingly inoffensive stereotypical roles of domestic women overly concerned with their appearance (APA, 2007), with little to no traits but being emotional, fragile, and nurturing, have also contributed to reducing women to a passive object, praised for her sexuality. In addition, sexualization has been detected in dialogue (Ward, 2016) through statements that convey the core beliefs on which sexualization is grounded<sup>14</sup>. Sexualization is thus a “complex set of interlocking factors” (Bigler et al., 2019, p. 530), not simply reduced to one sole characteristic (Pacilli et al., 2016).

The increasing number of sexualized depictions of girls and women in the media accomplished through these means has been normalized to the point that we can now talk about a “sexualized cultural trend” (D. Choi & DeLong, 2019, p. 1352), in which audiences participate too. Members of the general public unknowingly (or not) support these tendencies by either enthusiastically consuming sexualized content or actively creating (e.g., pornography) and/or performing hyper-sexiness (D. Choi & DeLong, 2019). Either case is the result of the internalization of sexualized images through early-on and continuous exposure.

According to D. Choi and DeLong (2019), who anchored their idea on Gerbner’s cultivation theory<sup>15</sup> (1972), viewers who are constantly exposed to these images are encouraged to accept them as an accurate depiction of reality; of how a woman should look and behave. Young viewers are particularly susceptible, as they are in a developmental phase where they experience identity and pubertal changes (S. Y. Kim & Seo, 2011; McKenney &

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<sup>13</sup> Women have also often been “‘dressed down’ to look like little girls” (APA, 2007, p. 12) but in sexualized ways, stressing their innocent and sexual sides simultaneously, which raises conflicting messages. This is a predominant performance in the K-pop industry, as will be explored in chapter two.

<sup>14</sup> From advice on how to self-improve for the sole reason of garnering the attention of men (by satisfying his supposed ideal; APA, 2007) to sexual and depreciative comments, lyrics, texts, etc.

<sup>15</sup> According to this theory, people immersed in virtual reality (e.g., watching television) for long periods are more likely to perceive social reality as is commonly depicted by the media in question, consequently shaping their attitudes and behaviours. Cultivation theory can thus be seen as a framework for the analysis of how the exposure to media affects people’s perception on “selected issues and aspects of real life” (Gerbner, 1972, p. 160), which then might translate to changes in body image, eating and drinking habits, tolerance of violence, etc.

Bigler, 2016). Bigler et al. (2019) argue that “the internalization of sexualized messages is likely to affect youths’ interpretation of and emotional reaction to the physical, social, and cognitive changes that occur between late childhood and early adulthood” (p. 532). This means that girls are especially in danger of internalizing socio-cultural values for appearance (S. Y. Kim & Seo, 2011) and having their identity and puberty changes framed by these values that highlight the importance of sexual allure, given their higher levels of “cognitive maturity” upon puberty (McKenney & Bigler, 2016, p. 174).

The media then, appears to facilitate and even hasten, the introduction to a culture of sexualization, already a standard practice initiated in puberty. This is a time when teenagers are taught to perceive girls’ bodies as “public domain” (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997, p. 193), as it becomes customary to evaluate them based solely on their physicality (e.g., through sexual comments about their maturing bodies).

This implies that, previous to sexualized media depictions, people were already made to internalize and cultivate pre-conceived ideas of what women should be, pointing to the importance of one’s social environment. As to how this internalization comes about, Fredrickson and Roberts explain it through Costanzo’s (1992) theory of effective socialization, according to which, internalization “begins with compliance to minimally sufficient external pressures, proceeds through interpersonal identification, and ends with individuals claiming ownership of socialized values and attitudes” (Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997, p. 177).

It follows then, that if one’s peers give equal or greater importance to appearance, particularly the media’s ideal, one will be more effectively persuaded to invest in their appearance in accordance (Trekels & Eggermont, 2020). Girls will thus, be compelled by their social surroundings to uphold the beauty ideal disseminated by the media, while failing to find their worth beyond their sexual value. In other words, they will resort to self-sexualization, a process defined by D. Choi & DeLong (2019) as “the voluntary imposition of sexualization to the self” (p. 1362) and by APA (2007) as “treat[ing] and experience[ing] (...) [oneself] as [a] sexual object” (p. 2). Moreover, together with boys, they will reportedly become more critical of other girls, burdening them with their sexualized expectations (Trekels & Eggermont, 2020). As Bigler et al. (2019) point out, having internalized the

messages they are exposed to, girls may end up creating a sexualized environment not only for themselves but for those around them.

Yet, young women are not the only ones impacted. Throughout their lives, women have the importance of investing in their appearance forced upon them. Failing to attain or keep the idealized body leads to constant feelings of shame (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Wolf, 2002). It appears that only in old age do many women find an escape, when they re-evaluate their priorities and principles, slowly improving psychologically (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Until then, by striving, in vain, to fight aging and keep relevant in society (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), women are constantly haunted by this sexualizing and (sexually) objectifying culture.

What is, however, sexual objectification? If objectification were to be defined as the act of reducing human beings to objects, therefore, denying them autonomy, will and emotion (Park & Lee, 2021), then sexual objectification would be the act of treating a person as a body (or the assembly of body parts) for the (sexual) pleasure of and consumption by others (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Park & Lee, 2021). When sexual objectification occurs, people have their “bodies, body parts, or sexual functions separated out from their identity” (Fredrickson et al., 1998, p. 269), as if these alone could represent all a person is. Evidently, this carries adverse effects.

Sexualizing and objectifying cultural trends, to which the media strongly contribute, often lead to objectification of others and self-objectification, as explained by objectification theory<sup>16</sup>, proposed by Fredrickson and Roberts (1997)<sup>17</sup>. This theory posits that a culture that chronically objectifies girls and women (e.g., through exposure to sexual objectifying images), gradually leads them to internalize an observer’s perspective of their physical selves<sup>18</sup>, in other words, to self-objectify (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), and to endorse the unrealistic media ideal body (Dakanalis et al., 2014). Consequently, they too will treat themselves as objects evaluated based on their outward appearance (Dakanalis et al., 2014),

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<sup>16</sup> As suggested in the State of the Art and as reported by K. Han and Jang (2017) and S. Y. Kim and Seo (2011), this theory has been empirically tested and proved in the South Korean context by various native authors, albeit in the Korean language.

<sup>17</sup> Conscious of the possible diversity in women’s experiences and responses to sexual objectification caused by differences in ethnicity, class, sexuality, age, etc., Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) were careful to include research findings on women from different groups according to these characteristics.

<sup>18</sup> This internalization follows the same logic proposed previously, that is, based on Gerbner’s (1972) cultivation theory and Costanzo’s (1992) theory of effective socialization.

which ends up under constant monitoring. Nevertheless, it is important to understand that people are different, so the degree to which women internalize this observer's perspective differs according to the individual (Son, 2006). For instance, individuals with higher self-concept clarity<sup>19</sup> have been proven to be less likely to self-objectify (see Park & Lee, 2021).

Similar to self-sexualization, self-objectification may be reinforced by one's social environment, through a third-person effect (TPE), as suggested by Y. Choi et al. (2008). TPE proposes that the effects of women's exposure to objectified media depictions are not direct, but rather, mediated by women's perception of men's expectations of the female body after they too have been exposed to idealized media images (Y. Choi et al., 2008)<sup>20</sup>. The basis for this argument, according to the authors, falls on two premises: people believe others to be more influenced by media body images than themselves, and this perception leads to negative behavioural consequences (e.g., shame and disgust with one's body). In fact, many women are aware of the unattainability of idealized media bodies<sup>21</sup>, as reported by the authors. However, considering body image to be a multidimensional mental construct of oneself impacted by others' opinions (positive and negative; Y. Choi et al., 2008), some women inevitably "fall victim" to self-objectification thus, supporting the idea of indirect effects. Nonetheless, it remains to be proven whether self-objectification is solely the result of TPE, considering the majority of literature suggests the correlation of direct exposure with self-objectification (APA, 2007; Ward, 2016). It would not be unwise then, to admit a joint influence.

In the various studies that have suggested a correlation between girls and women's exposure to sexually objectifying media content with self-sexualization and self-objectification, test subjects have also reportedly experienced body image dissatisfaction and shame, appearance anxiety, and low body esteem (Bigler et al., 2019; Dakanalis et al., 2014; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; McKenney & Bigler, 2016; Ward, 2016), through an intermediary that remains to be determined, due to lack of consistent empirical data.

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<sup>19</sup> Self-concept clarity refers to the extent to which people know themselves; how clear, cognitively organized and consistent throughout time people's beliefs about the self are (Crocetti & Van Dijk, 2018). It provides an idea of how likely they are to make decisions for their overall well-being and the probability to fall mentally ill or engage in self-destructive behaviours. People with lower self-concept clarity tend to be less confident in who they are and in their capabilities thus, more easily "affected by (negative) external cues" (Crocetti & Van Dijk, 2018, p. 3343).

<sup>20</sup> The study conducted for this article seems to support TPE, yet, as the authors alert, all data must be carefully interpreted in light of the experimental settings and population sample (in this case, majorly Caucasian).

<sup>21</sup> As will be discussed in chapter three, Aespa's South Korean fans also appear to be aware of this.

Nevertheless, some authors argue sexual objectification (from interpersonal relationships and/or media content) lead to these phenomena through the internalization of sociocultural standards of appearance<sup>22</sup> (J.-W. Jang et al., 2012; K. Han & Jang, 2017; Park & Lee, 2021).

In addition, self-objectification can result in “a shortage of peak motivational states<sup>23</sup> and scant awareness of internal bodily states” (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997, p. 186) therefore, less opportunities for complete immersion (D. Choi & DeLong, 2019) and consequent intellectual cultivation and performance<sup>24</sup>. In light of this proposition, S. Y. Kim and Seo (2011) conducted a study on South Korean female adolescents to examine precisely how their learning commitment and performance anxiety were affected by exposure to sexual objectification present in K-pop music shows. They found that adolescents who became overly concerned over their appearance saw their immersion hindered. Once more, internalization of socio-cultural values of appearance was concluded to be the most significant intermediary for these phenomena. Given adolescents’ vulnerability to socio-cultural pressures (as previously explained), the internalization of said values will occur more strongly (S. Y. Kim & Seo, 2011). It becomes clear how severe girls’ exposure to objectified content can be, particularly, to those already subjected to peer and family criticism (two other factors that contribute to said internalization; Park & Lee, 2021).

All these negative experiences can then, increase the chance of stress<sup>25</sup>, depression, sexual dysfunction (Bigler et al., 2019; D. Choi & DeLong, 2019; Fredrickson & Roberts,

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<sup>22</sup> Variable that is believed to affect plastic surgery intention among, not only South Korean adult women, but adolescents as well, through various channels (e.g., physical monitoring; J.-W. Jang et al., 2012).

<sup>23</sup> Peak motivational state is the body and/or mind’s optimal state to voluntarily achieve something challenging and meaningful (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Women’s peak motivational states can be disrupted by others calling out their appearance, making women more self-conscious, which is detrimental to achieve and maintain a peak motivational state (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997).

<sup>24</sup> Pacilli et al. (2016) were able to correlate young boys and girls’ exposure to same-gender sexualized images with a decrease in their cognitive abilities, although the authors were unable to ascertain which processes, besides working memory depletion, mediated this outcome. Fredrickson et al. (1998) obtained the same results in relation to college women, who, instead of looking at sexualized images of other women, had to wear sexualized clothing themselves.

Some authors argue that awareness of negative stereotypes relating to one’s social group might be involved in this decrease of performance (particularly those tasks implicated in the stereotype), by damaging one’s self-confidence or awakening negative thoughts, both of which reduce motivation (Ratan & Sah, 2015). This is referred to as Stereotype Threat.

<sup>25</sup> K. Han and Jang (2017) found that feelings of shame and low body esteem led to an increase in stress for South Korean female university students preparing to join the labour force. This can be understood in light of the value Korean society gives to people’s appearance (K. Han & Jang, 2017; J.-W. Jang et al., 2012; S.-A. Lee, 2015; Park & Lee, 2021), a feature that is openly recognized as an important specification for job applicants (especially women; K. Han & Jang, 2017; S.-A. Lee, 2015).

1997; Shapiro, 2015; Ward, 2016), and eating disorders<sup>26</sup> (Bigler et al., 2019; D. Choi & DeLong, 2019; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; S. Y. Kim & Seo, 2011; Shapiro, 2015; Son, 2006; Ward, 2016), all reportedly more recurrent in women<sup>27</sup> (Son, 2006), and the latter showing a worrisome tendency in South Korea<sup>28</sup> for its incidence in teenagers. Indeed, there has been an increasing interest in the body among Korean teenagers (N.-Y. Lee, 2014), who, in light of a social ideal of thinness and disdain for overweight people (considered less ambitious and attractive; G. Lee et al., 2009) have begun to engage more often in weight control behaviours. According to G. Lee et al.'s (2009) study on more than 5000 students, such engagement is in spite of teenagers' actual weight, as the majority seem to have normal weight, but tend to misperceive it. This is especially true for girls (N.-Y. Lee, 2014), who have a tendency to perceive themselves as overweight (G. Lee et al., 2009). On the contrary, even though boys are more likely to be overweight than girls, they are also more likely to underestimate their weight and thus, less likely to diet, for instance.

Besides the dangers of self-objectification, objectification also leads to undesirable interpersonal effects. Much like sexualization, perceiving someone as an object denies them the right to be valued for their other human traits, such as competence and morality (Bigler et al., 2019; Ward, 2016), often leading to discrimination and inequality of opportunities<sup>29</sup>. Furthermore, experimental evidence seems to support a tendency to disregard girls' bodily autonomy, translating into adherence to sexist beliefs (Ward, 2016), higher tolerance for sexual harassment, rape myth acceptance (Bigler et al., 2019; Ward, 2016), and subsequent increase in the likelihood of engaging in sexual violence (Bigler et al., 2019). Sexualization and sexual objectification are thus, clearly detrimental processes, specially concerning when

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<sup>26</sup> This physical and mental exhaustion, combined with financial burdens (e.g., due to appearance management purchases) and failure to believe in their capabilities (e.g., intellectual), is what allows masculine dominant structures to thrive, draining women of their strength and time to protest (Wolf, 2002).

<sup>27</sup> Evidently, not all mental health issues in women are related to sexual objectification. However, objectification theory can still, without denying physiological differences (e.g., hormonal), articulate social and psychological factors to explain the higher incidence of mental disorders in women (Son, 2006), who are more often the target of this process.

<sup>28</sup> South Korean women are reportedly more willing to engage in extreme dieting and other risky appearance management behaviours, such as cosmetic surgery, especially when compared to western women (K. P. J. Kim et al., 2014). This is likely due to the importance attributed to facial features in addition to the body when it comes to the notion of beauty in South Korea (K. P. J. Kim et al., 2014; S. Y. Kim et al., 2014).

<sup>29</sup> Forcing women to equate physical beauty with power and success (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). This is particularly drastic in South Korea, where the body (and face) is a symbol of social status (Gelézeau, 2015; N.-Y. Lee, 2014).

practiced on women by other women, since it constitutes an additional obstacle to their emancipation.

## 1.2. Biopolitics and Technologies of the Body

Biopower<sup>30</sup>, a term coined by Michel Foucault, describes a state's power to manage life, namely that of its population. It operates on the life of the subjects, whose bodies become "a direct medium of (state) power" (E.-S. Kim, 2009, p. 10). As a power of governmentality, it gradually replaced rulers' "right of seizure"<sup>31</sup> (Rabinov, 1984, p. 259), which could no longer assist in the governance over increasingly larger populations (Castro, 2004). Such a transition was necessary in the advent of industrialization (Arnason, 2012) and, later on, capitalism (Castro, 2004; E.-S. Kim, 2009; Rabinov, 1984). After all, for industries to flourish it was imperative that workers be healthy, efficient and disciplined, in other words, "docile bodies" (Foucault, 1975/1978). This meant integrating the mechanisms of biopower into multiple institutions besides factories, like schools, the army, medical facilities, etc.<sup>32</sup> (Arnason, 2012; Castro, 2004; Rabinov, 1984). The political measures issued were done so with the intent to improve overall conditions of the life of populations and, consequently, the well-being of the nation by increasing production (which reflected positively on the economy).

The power so far described is but one form of biopower, titled "anatomy-politics of the human body" (Rabinov, 1984, p. 262). There is, however, another form, the "bio-politics of the population" (Rabinov, 1984, p. 262), far more insidious. The mechanisms involved are ones of governance over individuals' bodies with the goal of managing human populations, either reducing or boosting them. This entails the management of reproduction, behaviour, health, etc., through the development of policies which, due to their nature, tend to be at the heart of multiple debates over their morality<sup>33</sup>.

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<sup>30</sup> The term appeared printed for the first time in Foucault (1976/1978).

<sup>31</sup> Seizure of land, objects, time of the subjects, and also their lives (Rabinov, 1984); the "right to take life or let live" (Arnason, 2012, p. 297).

<sup>32</sup> The South Korean developmental phase during President Chung Hee Park's ruling (1961-1979) is a perfect example of a period where the state led the country towards prosperity by raising obedient workers and educated minds.

<sup>33</sup> A famous example is the One Child Policy in China (1980s-2016) which was implemented in order to address the rapid population growth by limiting most households to one child. In regard to the South Korean context, there have also been a few occasions where the state sought to reduce the fertility rate through rigid policies related to reproduction. For instance, through the Family Planning Program (1960s-1990s), the state worked

Both forms of biopower could be enacted through a common element: sex (Rabinov, 1984). Sexuality was, and still is, a tool to impose discipline in the individual and collective bodies. However, this has been accomplished through successive discriminatory policies, revealing a “gender-divided manner of operation” (J.-H. Cho, 2009, p. 37), as it focused on processes such as reproduction and transformations of the body, which impacted women (and ethnic minorities) more negatively (Rabinov, 1984). It comes as no surprise then, that biopower and biopolitics be at the heart of multiple feminist literature. Authors like Balsamo (1996), J.-H. Cho (2009) and G. Kim (2019), despite their focus on different contexts, shed light on the various ways biopower is enacted, raising awareness over how people, especially women, can have their bodies, behaviours and ambitions manipulated to fit into a societal ideal. This ideal is one of a soulless body responsible for the health of her offspring and the “the solidity of the family institution” (Rabinov, 1984, p. 268); an ideal that represents no threat to her biological other and, consequently, no threat to the current social order, that of masculine domination<sup>34</sup>.

Granted, both female and male “bodies exist within social and cultural contexts” (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997, p. 174) and as such, the two are continuously moulded by sociocultural forces, these too changing throughout time. They are but symbolic constructs (Balsamo, 1996), where different discourses (“social norms, power relations, and individual desires”; Shapiro, 2015, p. 201) collide. However, in comparison, the female body is more constantly and intensely scrutinised.

With the arrival and progress of technology, the body, particularly the female one, has been more actively subjected to continual production, changing with the help of technological intervention (Shapiro, 2015). And although new technologies have the potential to rewrite the human body and its ascribed social meaning, consequently challenging gendered experiences (e.g., traditional gender roles and stereotypes), they too are used as an “apparatus of control” (Balsamo, 1996, p. 21). In other words, these technologies can help reinforcing traditional gender power relations (Balsamo, 1996;

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to encourage abortion, contraception, and sterilization at a national scale, and even forced them on women with disabilities, single and/or poor mothers (Sunhye Kim et al., 2019).

<sup>34</sup> Bourdieu (1998/2001) suggests that masculine domination finds its *raison d'être* on biological determinism, that is, the idea that genetic differences, which translate into sexual differences, determine men and women's social positions. This idea is socially and incessantly perpetuated as it is learnt by men and insidiously internalized by women, who are taught the view of the dominant, which is made to appear undeniable (Bourdieu, 1998/2001).

Shapiro, 2015), serving as tools in two of the processes biopower finds itself creeping in: reproduction and transformations of the body. For this reason, they are commonly referred to as “technologies of the body”.

Technologies of the body can be understood as technologies that enhance the human body (S.-A. Lee, 2015), in both aesthetic and functional aspects. They exist and continue to be developed, reportedly, to improve quality of life. This is achieved through bodily changes that promote immediate improvements (e.g., prostheses) or that indirectly affect how people engage with the world (e.g., cosmetic surgery, which can boost one’s self-esteem, promoting a positive outlook on life). From the moment the human body is manipulated, either by interacting or fusing with technology, it becomes a techno-body, and its owner a techno-human or cyborg (S.-A. Lee, 2015).

Rather than simply the union of Man and machine through physical changes, as often perceived (due to media portrayals), the cyborg signifies a transformation of the human condition of existence (S.-A. Lee, 2015), as initially proposed by Haraway (1991). Haraway perceived it as a symbolic construct, a tool for feminism, due to its unchained nature to any preconceived concepts of biological gender and traditional identities. After all, as an entity not fully human, partially cybernetic, it does not carry the expectations often imposed on women on what they should be or strive for in life. Moreover, it allows the performance of different identities, since it is free from dualistic concepts that are used to refer to identity (e.g., sex and gender). Despite the author’s perceived potential of the cyborg as a feminist tool, the technologies that create it, have been used to the detriment of women.

There are thus, currently numerous technologies that fall under the category of “technologies of the body” and that are of concern to feminist theory. Some of them, such as cosmetic surgery, reproduction technologies (e.g., assisted reproductive technologies, contraception, abortion, imaging technologies, etc.), as well as genetic, pharmacological, and prosthetic enhancement, are biotechnologies, belonging to the medical end of the spectrum, which does not necessarily imply the improvement of one’s health. After all, similar to other technologies of the body, such as tattoos and bodybuilding, there is often an aesthetic motivation as well. At the opposite end of the spectrum can be found the most recent technologies, those that allow an interaction of the body with the digital world.

In light of the different technologies, S.-A. Lee (2015) has identified three types of techno-bodies, all of which have become widespread in South Korea, a technology powerhouse. The author proposes then, the existence of the bio techno-body, the digital techno-body, and the virtual body. The bio techno-body is the result of biotechnologies' penetration of the human body, which is manipulated through plastic surgery, use of medication (or other substances), application of prostheses, etc. The digital techno-body, on the other hand, is one that has been connected with digital media technology, such as smartphones and wearable devices (e.g., smartwatches), through which people maximize their visual and tactile senses (S.-A. Lee, 2015). Finally, the virtual body goes beyond a connection with digital media technology, as it is actually created by it and has no physical body. Virtual bodies are often associated with avatars and game characters, but S.-A. Lee (2015) contends they can also exist as information without any form, such as virtual assistants (e.g., Siri), which operate with AI.

Considering technologies as “practices that produce specific cultural effects” (Balsamo, 1996, p. 21), there are, evidently, many feminist concerns regarding such technologies. All these worries coalesce into a major one, namely, how science has been used, not only to enforce unequal gender relations, but also the ethnic and class-based status quo at different times in history (Shapiro, 2015). This was and is possible because science has come to be “the most legitimized knowledge source” (Shapiro, 2015, p. 87) at the service of the white man, himself representative of culture<sup>35</sup>, according to the dual western system of culture-nature (Ortner, 1972), where women are, in opposition, conceived as closer to nature<sup>36</sup> thus, of lower intellect. In a world where culture finds itself subsuming and transcending nature, it is a convenient duality that provides the foundation for the “universality of female subordination”<sup>37</sup> (Ortner, 1972, p. 5).

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<sup>35</sup> It entails all activities relying on intellectual capability, like science (includes technology), literature, art, etc.

<sup>36</sup> Due to her physical body, associated with childbirth and lactation (Ortner, 1972). Because of these reproductive functions, the woman is made to take on “social roles (...) [of] lower order” (Ortner, 1972, p. 12), acquiring, in turn, a different psychic structure that approximates her to nature, in a vicious cycle where this idea is preserved.

<sup>37</sup> The binary *yin-yang* has also been used to justify this inequality. Similar to Ortner's theory, there has been a tendency to equate men and women with one of these two concepts at the exclusion of the other. While women are often thought to possess only *yin* energy, men only possess *yang* energy (S. W. Lee, 2005), and therefore the idea that both are distinct is maintained. Like culture, *yang* has been interpreted as being of superior value and *yin* of lower, meaning, through this logic, men are justifiably superior to women (S. W. Lee, 2005). However, as S. W. Lee (2005) contends, these two concepts were not initially embedded with value nor were they “fixed substances” (p. 100), but complementary energies, which are present in both men and women.

While Shapiro focused solely on the use of medicine as an instrument of power when developing the previous idea, its applicability to all technologies of the body appears to be appropriate, when considering they all belong to the realm of science therefore, of culture. Thus, all of these technologies risk being used to “augment dominant culture narratives” (Balsamo, 1996, p. 10).

Regarding cosmetic surgery, it has been perhaps the most discussed technology for transformations of the body. Academics have elaborated on how it is so strongly embedded with “cultural signification” (Balsamo, 1996, p. 58), reproducing cultural standards of beauty. Because cosmetic surgery can only function within a framework where the female body is made out to be pathological (Balsamo, 1996), its industry perpetuates a neoliberal discourse of “self-care” (S. H. Lee, 2016) to discipline women into internalizing a flawed identity (Balsamo, 1996). Only so can it influence them to allow such technological intrusion, proving to be not only a physically invasive process, but psychologically pervasive as well, unless it is indeed the outcome of pure self-interest (J.-H. Cho, 2009).

It is important to notice that women who follow through with cosmetic procedures should not be seen as mindless victims, but rather as “savvy cultural negotiators” (Gimlin, 2000, p. 96). Many South Korean women are indeed aware of the forces of control and domination and still choose cosmetic surgery after carefully analysing their limited options (Gimlin, 2000). In a society where “kinship-based social hierarchy and (...) social status” (Sancho, 2015, p. 7) make up its backbone, the body assumes great importance, for it also works as a symbol of social standing (Gelézeau, 2015; N.-Y. Lee, 2014). Professional and marital success too, greatly depend on appearance (Gelézeau, 2015; Y.-J. Lee, 2000; S. H. Lee, 2016; T. Kim, 2003; J.-H. Cho, 2009; N.-J. Cho, 2016/2021), which has come to be “part and parcel of one’s curriculum vitae” (S.-R. Lee, 2018, p. 10), and is limited to one single beauty ideal (S. H. Lee, 2016). This ideal (exemplified in figure 2) consists in pale skin, small and symmetrical V-shaped face, large eyes, double eyelids, straight eyebrows, slim high noses, small mouth, plump lips, thin body, and long slender legs. Women who conform to the norm are



**Figure 2.** Irene from girl group Red Velvet in photoshoot for Grazia. Source: [https://kpopherald.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=201808171640232987671\\_2](https://kpopherald.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=201808171640232987671_2)

praised, while those who do not are likely to be chastised<sup>38</sup> (T. Kim, 2003). The “body project”, that is, the continuous management of the body, becomes then, a survival strategy (Y.-J. Lee, 2000) in the face of “lookism” (S. H. Lee, 2016).

More recently, with the development of AI and technologies of communication, feminist literature has been preoccupied with analysing how the virtual body in cyberspace is involved in the reproduction of traditional narratives of unequal gender relations. While cyberspace allows to cast off one’s real body aside, offering immense possibilities in relation to one’s virtual self (Shapiro, 2015), it has been kept as a realm where the “body-based systems of differentiation and domination” (Balsamo, 1996, p. 128) have yet to be eradicated (Balsamo, 1996; Boellstorff, 2008; Shapiro, 2015).

Online and videogame representations of gender are still majorly based on real world expectations and stereotypes<sup>39</sup> (Ferreira & Ganito, 2016; Fox et al., 2013; Punday, 2000; Shapiro, 2015), and avatars’ appearance strongly influences social interactions, similar to what occurs in the real world (Ferreira & Ganito, 2016; Yee & Bailenson, 2007). Moreover, degrading behaviour towards female online identities is still recurrent, contributing to the perpetuation of sexual and objectifying tendencies. Under these circumstances, it can be understood how some authors may, as Punday (2000) contends, fatalistically find “the very claim that online communication can offer some kind of escape from previous forms of social interaction (...) gendered (male) and itself repeat the traditional, patriarchal metaphysical striving towards disembodied intellectual exchange” (p. 198).

This is true for all technologies of the body, which contribute both to and depend on the objectification of the female body. The dominant use given to all these technologies reduces women to different fragments, each under constant “surveillance of a normative gaze” (Balsamo, 1996, p. 13), pressured to be changed and “perfected”. Such fragmentation is only

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<sup>38</sup> The novel *If I Had Your Face* by Cha (2021) perfectly illustrates the pressure South Korean women feel to adhere to the cosmetic practices (including surgery) and the internalized disdain towards those who do not comply. After all, appearance can be viewed as a matter of etiquette, a moral obligation (Gelézeau, 2015), to such an extent that women whose beauty does not fit the norm are considered incapable and lazy (S. H. Lee, 2016). The book also portrays the jealousy towards those who do not need to invest in such techniques (for they naturally match the beauty ideal). The well-intentioned casual remarks on others’ appearance (Gelézeau, 2015) whether to flatter or offer suggestions on body improvement, are also well evidenced in this book.

<sup>39</sup> Gender stereotypes can be defined as beliefs of what being male or female means, and can be organized into four categories: traits, physical appearance, social roles, and occupations (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2009). In line with these dimensions, women are tendentially perceived as less intelligent and more emotional, and should appear young, feminine, voluptuous but thin. They are, traditionally, expected to take on nurturing roles and occupy jobs that fulfil this expectation, such as nurses and educators, or of lower status and remuneration.

possible due to the already socially internalized belief of the female body as an object, with limited autonomy and solely reproductive responsibilities, valued for its sexuality.

### 1.3. Virtual Experience, Avatars and Deepfakes

As mentioned in the previous section, there is a tendency to recreate real world stereotypes when building one's online identity (Punday, 2000), whether it shares the same gender with its creator or not (Ferreira & Ganito, 2016). Regarding female representations, there seem to be limited possibilities to express femininity, both in online worlds and videogames: they are either “damsel[s] in distress” (Ferreira & Ganito, 2016, p. 17), as exemplified in figure 3, or strong characters but overly sexual (feature that undermines their strength and other capabilities), as the one in figure 4. In both cases, female characters are reduced to non-menacing objects of sexual desire (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2009). This hypersexuality is achieved through the use of highly revealing clothes (e.g., tight and short) and impossible body proportions (e.g., extremely voluptuous breasts and hips, but slim waists).



**Figure 3.** Ashley Graham from the game *Resident Evil 4*.  
Source:  
[https://residentevil.fandom.com/wiki/Ashley\\_Graham](https://residentevil.fandom.com/wiki/Ashley_Graham)



**Figure 4.** Miss Fortune from the game *League of Legends*. Source:  
<https://www.leagueoflegends.com/en-us/champions/miss-fortune/>

Fragoso and Rosário (2008) were able to observe and list these stereotypes in relation to physical appearance, in a study where they analysed the avatars created by players of various nationalities of the online world *Second Life*. Besides the bodies described, certain facial features also predominated, despite the nationality of players. These included fair skin, light-coloured eyes, small noses and full lips, pointing to a predominance of the Caucasian western

beauty ideal disseminated by the media (Ferreira & Ganito, 2016; Fragoso & Rosário, 2008). A slight variance was found in relation to Asian players, who showed a preference for darker and larger eyes, more almond shaped but not particularly indicative of Asian physical traits (Fragoso & Rosário, 2008). Male avatars too showed a tendency to adhere to media ideals, possessing large chests (often shirtless), defined biceps and narrow hips, while their faces were fair with large eyes, strong cheekbones, small mouth, and fine nose (Fragoso & Rosário, 2008).

The same tendencies for female characters were observed in Korean videogames in a study by Kwon (2011), who believed in the importance of analysing the evolution of female characters, as it reflects the changes in the social perspective on women. The author noted that the first characters (around 1995) were not particularly sexualized, as their attire was quite modest and they presented strong, adventurous and independent dispositions. However, throughout the years, sexualization and objectification became commonplace. Female characters began to assume more supportive roles, assisting male characters on their missions, around whom revolved their whole storyline. In addition, their sexual traits became more emphasized and their clothes more revealing, while a set of different femininities appeared, ranging from *lolita* characters to overly sexual ones, all of whom looked young. Then, when intellectual and capable female characters resurfaced, simultaneous to women's social and career advancement in the late 1990s and early 2000s, their personalities were downplayed, as they were portrayed as jealous or full of vanity. This could be interpreted as a mechanism to subdue the feeling of threat inflicted upon Korean men, as was happening in the real world, where women became competitors in the labour market<sup>40</sup>.

All these features here presented are starkly different from those of male characters, constantly portrayed as strong, independent and intelligent, representative of different ages and body types, and wearing normal and non-revealing outfits (Kwon, 2011). In other words, male characters in Korean games have been relatively free from stereotypes, contrary to female characters<sup>41</sup>. The author justifies this in light of a majorly male user community. As the main consumers, their pleasure is of utmost importance to the industry, which sought to

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<sup>40</sup> Idea further developed ahead.

<sup>41</sup> In more recent years, however, there has been an increase in the number of female players of various games, including first-person shooter ones, where there has been an emergence of female characters whose strength equates that of male characters, and who wear realistic battle clothes and hairstyles (Kwon, 2011).

bring to players the capacity to satisfy the desires left unrealized in the real world. To do so, it was crucial to not force upon them threatening masculinities, nor present them with unruly femininities, but desirable ones (sensual yet docile). Through such female characters, particularly the playable ones, male users could secure a sense of control over women they could not reproduce in the real 21<sup>st</sup> century South Korea (Kwon, 2011).

This large-scale production by both women and men of “socially desirable bodies and identities” (Shapiro, 2015, p. 120) shows just how entrenched social scripts are and how freely they can be incorporated by other cultures. The danger here is the dissemination and exacerbation of inequalities in the real world, accompanied by the collective creation of a virtual one where these inequalities are reproduced (Shapiro, 2015).

This reproduction of offline discourses in the online world reflects the apparent impossibility of division between real and virtual worlds (Boellstorff, 2008). Avatars are precisely the medium between these two spaces (Ferreira & Ganito, 2016), “one of the central points at which users intersect with a technological object and embody themselves” (Taylor, 2002, p. 41). Therefore, it would be wise to define these entities, before attempting to proceed with the present reflection.

Etymological studies of the word “avatar” trace its origin to Sanskrit to refer to the form assumed by the gods when they descended to the human world (Biocca, 2014; Fragoso & Rosário, 2008). Such a form was not necessarily anthropomorphic, neither was it material, similar to the entities that represent humans in the digital space (Fragoso & Rosário, 2008). There, avatars are “virtual entities or representations controlled by a human being or human intelligence” (Biocca, 2014, p. 422), represented in numerous ways, such as pointers on the screen, usernames and profile images, and complex graphic characters (Fragoso & Rosário, 2008). They can also differ in their degree of interactivity. Simple avatars such as those of social media are considered passive, non-interactive representations, whereas avatars like those in *Second Life* and *Sims* are highly interactive, therefore, controllable and even embodied<sup>42</sup> (Biocca, 2014).

When the level of interactivity is very high, to the point of inducing the sense of embodiment, that is, experiencing the virtual body as one’s own, users may find themselves

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<sup>42</sup> Embodiment here refers to the sensation of “being located inside, of owning and controlling another body” (Gorisse et al., 2019, p. 3).

strongly affected (Fox et al., 2013). This makes sense when taken into consideration the blurred division between virtual and real worlds, between which people are constantly navigating. It can be argued then, that people not only bring their experiences into the virtual world, but those lived in this same digital space are brought back into the physical one, where they impact and shape the self, as well as social interactions (Boellstorff, 2008; Shapiro, 2015). Both virtual and real selves are thus “in a dialectical relationship, each shaping the other” (Shapiro, 2015, p. 125).

The complexity of the links forged with avatars and, consequently, the extent to which users are affected, has been suggested to depend not only on the level of interactivity, but also on the continuity of engagement, graphic detail (Fragoso & Rosário, 2008), degree of immersion (Barlett & Harris, 2008), and visual fidelity (Fox et al., 2013; Gorisse et al., 2019). In light of Gorisse et al. (2019) criteria for visual fidelity, anthropomorphism, realism and truthfulness, it is expected that users will perceive their avatars as more visually faithful to themselves when these are humanoid, photorealistic and similar looking. Indeed, previous studies addressing this matter have found avatars that behave and look more like their users to be highly influential agents (Fox et al., 2013).

This is extremely relevant when analysing the impact of sexualized avatars on users’ perceptions of themselves and of others. It was in this context that authors such as Barlett and Harris (2008) and Fox et al. (2013), in light of the objectification theory, developed studies that analysed how women and men were impacted when playing games with sexualized avatars. From their studies it was possible to conclude that women wearing sexualized female avatars experienced greater loss of body esteem (Barlett & Harris, 2008) and increased concern with their bodies (Fox et al., 2013), indicative of self-objectification. Moreover, those who had embodied sexualized avatars that strongly resembled them showed greater propensity for rape myth acceptance (Fox et al., 2013). Men too were negatively affected after wearing male characters that depicted the media ideal (e.g., muscular and tall), decreasing both their body esteem and positive feelings towards their body and masculinity (Barlett & Harris, 2008).

As to how this reverberation from the virtual into the real occurs, a few authors propose an explanation through the Proteus effect. This theory posits that avatars’ users will

experience a change in their perceptions and behaviour<sup>43</sup> brought about by their avatars' characteristics and actions (Biocca, 2014; Fox et al., 2013; Shapiro, 2015; Yee & Bailenson, 2007). This is because people tend to “infer their own attitudes and beliefs by observing their behaviours in the same manner they would observe another person” (Fox et al., 2013, p. 932), and virtual spaces present a possibility to observe one's behaviours, enacted through the avatar, from a third-person view. Thus, as the user embodies the avatar, his/her behaviour conforms to that of the virtual representation. In other words, the real unknowingly models after the virtual (Biocca, 2014).

Sexualization of the self and of others after playing sexualized characters then, occurs as users observe these avatars and internalize their predominant features and behaviours, both supportive of the sexualization and objectification of women. As women infer these beliefs as their own, they begin perceiving themselves in a sexually objectified way, as well as other women (Fox et al., 2013), behaviour that “confirms (...) expectations based on the avatar's social identity” (Ratan & Sah, 2015, p. 367). Indeed, studies report that women's beliefs about other women, especially regarding their physical capabilities, were unfavourably influenced (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2009). The same applies to men, who, while not in particular danger of self-sexualizing when playing sexualized female characters, are prone to begin supporting the sexualization and objectification of women (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2009).

From then on, and based on section 1.1, people are not far from demonstrating higher tolerance for sexual harassment and violence. While many might not act upon their sexist and misogynist beliefs in the material world, they often redirect them towards cyberspace. South Korea, in particular, has experienced a rise in online misogynist discourse<sup>44</sup> (J. Kim, 2017, 2021; S.-S. Lee et al., 2021), fuelled by men's frustration at the economic conditions which they greatly blame on women (J. Kim, 2021), their most recent competitors in the labour market. In the follow up of two financial crises, one in 1997 (known as the IMF crisis) and another in 2008, the country entered a phase of neoliberalism, where ideas of

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<sup>43</sup> This behavioural change is both significant and instantaneous (Barlett and Harris, 2008; Yee and Bailenson, 2007), lasting long after playing (Ratan & Sah, 2015).

<sup>44</sup> Triggering, in turn, the resurgence of feminism in the country, particularly in cyberspace (J. Kim, 2017, 2021; Seo & Choi, 2020; Sohn, 2020). This resurgence was also motivated by the long-lasting issues of gender inequality and discrimination and other severe incidents, like the violent murder of a woman in 2016 followed by the light punishment of the male perpetrator (Seo & Choi, 2020).

empowerment permeated the minds of women, who began joining the workforce in greater numbers, as well as attaining more consumption power and independency (Sumi Kim, 2008). Evidently, things were not this simple, for women were led to the labour market for additional reasons, such as the need to sustain their economically unstable families (Sumi Kim, 2008; S.-K. Kim & Finch, 2002; Seo & Choi, 2020). Nevertheless, women began being perceived as competitors.

Besides being a discourse that discriminates, harasses (e.g., insults, threats of violence and rape), misrepresents and objectifies women, South Korean misogyny also focuses on reinforcing traditional gender roles (J. Kim, 2017), precisely to prevent them from thriving in the competitive job market. In such an online environment, the circulation of hypersexualized and pornographic videos and images<sup>45</sup> of women is hardly surprising. Deepfake pornography is one such type of content, circulated among male netizens in a “society where rape culture was already widespread” (Seo & Choi, 2020, p. 377).

Deepfake is a product of AI technology where people’s faces are replaced by those of others in a hyper-realistic way (Westerlund, 2019). Although much of this content (videos and images) is produced for humoristic purposes, the concerning reality is that 96% of deepfakes are pornographic (Ajder et al., 2019), a use that reifies “women’s bodies as a thing to be visually consumed” (Wagner & Blewer, 2019, p. 33). While the majority of these videos replace porno actresses’ faces with those of female celebrities, of whom 25% are K-pop idols (Ajder et al., 2019), common people too have been targeted by this form of “non-consensual exploitation” (Wagner & Blewer, 2019, p. 38). Both celebrities and non-celebrities are negatively affected in different ways (Wagner & Blewer, 2019), experiencing not only identity theft, but distress, fear and humiliation, resulting, in some cases, in leaving the internet completely or even changing one’s name (Hao, 2021).

More recently, with the assistance of 3D modulation, deepfake pornography has evolved to give more control over the female body (Cole & Mailberg, 2019), exacerbating the issue of non-consensual pornography. Content creators and consumers do not see the lack of

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<sup>45</sup> In the last decades there has been a grave issue of illegal pornography, rape videos, and non-consensual illegal recordings (e.g., revenge porn and hidden cameras in public spaces) in South Korea (S.-S. Lee et al., 2021; Seo & Choi, 2020), that has yet to be resolved, despite the nationwide protests and even after the suicide of female celebrities who were victims of such incidents. Hara Goo of girl group KARA, who was already suffering from depression, committed suicide in 2019 after her ex-boyfriend divulged an illegal sex tape.

consent as an issue (Wagner & Blewer, 2019), since to them, deepfake is precisely that, fake (Cole & Mailberg, 2019). It is their belief that it does not count as real sexual assault (J. Kim, 2021), as there is no physical damage inflicted, an argument used to justify their own behaviours and shift responsibility (S.-S. Lee et al., 2021). Some even perceive it as “art”, similar to fanfictions and fanart (S.-Y. Yoon, 2020), which, granted, often sexualize and objectify celebrities too.

While not impossible to manipulate images with this technology, it is easier if the bodies in question are themselves digital models, such as avatars. This means people’s virtual representations, not just their pictures, but their avatars as well, are in constant danger of being used for this purpose. Based on the previous reflection on avatar embodiment and offline repercussions, it is easy to understand how impactful this might be for the user whose identity has been usurped. So, while some dismiss, as has been the case in South Korean society, these acts for not being real world incidents (J. Kim, 2021), where it would be (ideally) unacceptable, they do have real life repercussions, both on the psyche of the victims and on society’s tolerance and acceptance of sexist beliefs, detrimental on many levels.

As S.-S. Lee et al. (2021) point out, these manifestations of sexual harassment in South Korea are a social gender issue, misogynist expressions with the intent of perpetuating gender inequality in a country where, reportedly, the patriarchal social system<sup>46</sup> still operates (Chang, 2008; J.-H. Cho, 2009; Y. Choi, 2020; E. H. Kim, 2002; J. Kim, 2017; Sumi Kim, 2008; Kittiphong, 2022; N.-Y. Lee, 2014; S.-S. Lee et al., 2021; S. W. Lee, 2005; Seo & Choi, 2020; S. Yoon, 2020) and whose forces of control extend to many areas of life, including cultural production (e.g., K-pop). It is thus, relevant to understand how the K-pop industry reproduces patriarchal mechanisms of control in its production and management of female idol groups, which then reflects on the portrayal of limited femininities that hold affective power over audiences. This will be accomplished in chapter two, where both the industry and these femininities are scrutinized, all the while situating the arrival of virtual idols (products of AI) and explaining their role in perpetuating the commodification of the female body.

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<sup>46</sup> Walby (1990) defines it as a “system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women” (p. 20), while Sechiyama (1996/2013) suggests it to be “a comprehensive set of relationships and norms characterized by a gender-based allocation of set roles and a distribution of power that places men in a superior position” (p. 19).

## Chapter 2 – K-pop, Female Idols and Virtual Idols

### 2.1. The K-pop Industry in the Context of Flows and Counter Flows

Korean Popular music, or K-pop<sup>47</sup>, is generally associated with single-sex idol<sup>48</sup> groups dancing in perfect synchronization to catchy songs. Solo artists are also common, following the same meticulous formula, but dancing alongside their backup dancers, instead. Although idols occasionally showcase their vocal skills through ballads, the most popular songs are the cheerful and powerful ones, and therefore the most predominant in the industry. Different music genres are incorporated into such songs, including R&B, rap, rock, hip-hop, electronica, reggae (Sions, 2018), J-pop, African dance music, as well as elements of Korean traditional music (Parc & Moon, 2019). Despite this impressive collection of sounds, evidently part of the appeal of K-pop, visual images take on a significant role (Maliangkay, 2015; Parc & Kim, 2020), if not the main reason for its success, as implied by Y. Oh (2018).

The visual component of K-pop encompasses various elements: choreography, background, clothing, hair, makeup, and idols' inherent beauty as well, all of which shine through the "jaw dropping" music videos. These are reflective of how much effort is put into the visual performance (Parc & Kim, 2020), especially given music's transition to a digital format as recorded music sales collapsed (Epstein & Turnbull, 2014) and piracy rose (Parc & Kim, 2020). Indeed, according to Parc and Kim (2020), digitization might be responsible for the strategies and practices adopted by agencies that contributed to the global success of the genre. For instance, agencies began to release digital albums in response to piracy, a measure that helped in the diffusion of K-pop songs through the internet (Parc & Kim, 2020). In addition, producers began to create albums with a relatively small array of tracks, which meant each one had to be of high quality thus, encouraging the collaboration with international songwriters, facilitated by the existence of online networks (Parc & Kim, 2020). Essentially, the industry was forced to adapt in order to efficiently produce and distribute large quantities of quality music. This may have been the foresight of Soo Man Lee, founder of SM Entertainment, when he organized his own "in house system" (J. M. Kang, 2017;

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<sup>47</sup> Etymology that is traced back to J-pop (Shim, 2017). While J-pop encompasses various genres of contemporary Japanese popular music, K-pop refers only to Korean popular music that is majorly produced with the goal of exportation (Shim, 2017).

<sup>48</sup> Idol, in the particular case of K-pop, refers to young pop singers who debuted after having been exhaustively trained and strategically produced by an entertainment company (Y. Oh, 2018).

Shim, 2017), a machine that produces music and idols on a mass scale, as will be clarified ahead.

In this digital environment where visual images predominate over sound, music videos have come to be “the most capital-intensive object in the K-pop value chain” (Laurie, 2016, p. 217), as they are widely circulated throughout social media, from YouTube and Vimeo, to mobile chat applications (Laurie, 2016). In addition to the revenue that video platforms such as YouTube generate<sup>49</sup>, it is through it that many people are introduced to the genre (Y. Oh, 2018), so if K-pop groups are to succeed, their music videos must be captivating, if not hypnotic.

This current form of K-pop is the result of more than two decades of strategic decisions by entertainment companies. Despite the transitions from analogue to digital that accompanied the appearance of new technologies and the increasing importance of the visual, the genre’s core has remained unaltered. The advent of what is now known as K-pop can then be traced back to the early 1990s (I. Kang, 2015; J. M. Kang, 2017; Lie & Oh, 2015), owing to the entrepreneurial, or perhaps, opportunistic mind of Soo Man Lee.

Having experienced modest success as a folk singer in South Korea during a period where the authoritarian regime censored the media, Lee moved to California to pursue his studies in engineering (Lie & Oh, 2015). There, he got to experience completely different genres of music, which captivated him, particularly dance pop (Lie & Oh, 2015). Inspired by his time in the United States, Lee founded his own entertainment company in Seoul in 1989<sup>50</sup>, producing groups where he incorporated both elements of western dance pop and J-pop. His first boy group, H.O.T., debuted in 1996, following the formula of American and Japanese boy bands (Lie & Oh, 2015). Their success led to subsequent debuts of profitable groups like girl group S.E.S. and boy group SHINHWA.

Lee’s company incorporated and upgraded the system applied by Japanese agencies, one that simulates an assembly line of in-house production and management. Lee also implemented the idol training system (J. M. Kang, 2017; J. O. Kim, 2015; Y. Oh, 2018),

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<sup>49</sup> YouTube and music streaming applications are not the main source of revenue, however, and neither are physical album sales, despite K-Pop fans’ commitment to buying the albums which are filled with trading pictures of their idols. According to Y. Oh (2018), the major sources of profit are other types of merchandise (e.g., accessories, clothing, stationary, snacks, keychains, plush toys, etc.), concerts and fan meets, and most importantly, endorsement deals.

<sup>50</sup> Soon after South Korea became a democratic country (in 1987).

which constitutes the first phase of this “mill” that sustains the K-pop industry, and is often the target of academic and public scrutiny. Although already explained elsewhere, it is worth summarizing in what consists this training system and the assembly line it integrates. After passing auditions<sup>51</sup>, the young boys and girls become trainees (연습생 read as *yeonsebsaeng*) until they debut<sup>52</sup>, if they endure the highly competitive environment inside entertainment agencies. Throughout their trainee days, which can last years, even decades<sup>53</sup>, on top of honing their dancing and singing skills, they are taught how to act, model, and even languages, such as English, Japanese and Mandarin (Shim, 2017). If they manage to improve and complete all their monthly evaluations, they might find themselves in the final line-up for the next group to debut under their agency, provided they fit the image previously planned for the group (J. M. Kang, 2017). From then on, they will start practicing and recording songs that have been written and produced for them by workers of the agency itself or by hired foreign producers, composers, and songwriters<sup>54</sup>. After debut, managing and styling are also ensured by professionals inside the company.

All these processes are part of a manual that explains SM’s “modus operandi” (S.-Y. Kim, 2020), known as “culture technology”, term coined by Lee. The manual is detailed to the point it instructs employees on

when to bring in foreign composers, producers, and choreographers; what chord progressions to use in what country; the precise color of eyeshadow a performer should wear in a particular country; the exact hand gestures he or she should make; and the camera angles to be used in the videos (a three-hundred-and-sixty-degree group shot to open the video, followed by a montage of individual closeups; Seabrook, 2012, para. 36)

This manual was developed to ensure K-pop groups’ success, initially, in the domestic market, and later on, internationally (I. Kang, 2015; S.-Y. Kim, 2020). East Asian and Southeast Asian markets were the first to be conquered, due, in part, to the existence of group

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<sup>51</sup> In contrast to the initial stages of the industry, in which young people were mostly scouted (Y. Oh, 2018).

<sup>52</sup> Chances of debuting or even succeeding after debut in the K-pop industry are very slim, as the market is saturated. It is particularly precarious for girl groups, who make up the majority of idol groups, but also the majority of those that disband (Jonas, 2021). To ensure better chances of success, many young people opt to audition first for major agencies, like SM, YG, JYP (J. M. Kang, 2017), and HYBE (home to BTS).

<sup>53</sup> Jihyo of the popular girl group Twice was a trainee for 10 years.

<sup>54</sup> Among Korean entertainment agencies, SM is leader in such collaborative work (Parc & Kim, 2020). According to the authors, by June 2020, SM had a collaborative network with 864 international songwriters. Not only original tracks but cover songs too are often products of these collaborations. Several songs by S.E.S. were official covers and Aespa has followed the same path. For instance, S.E.S.’s popular song “Dreams Come True” (1998) was a cover of “Like a Fool”, originally by the Finnish group Nylon Beat (Parc & Kim, 2020). In 2021, this version by S.E.S. was covered by Aespa.

members from countries belonging to these regions, but also because of the “careful study of localized tastes” (S.-Y. Kim, 2020, p. 25).

According to S.-Y. Kim (2020), SM’s culture technology is sustained by three forces: the K-pop industry, the state’s national policy, and “the morphing discourse on culture and technology in the postindustrial era” (p. 24). As a product that derived from the implementation of such a manual and consequently saw great success abroad, K-pop came to be one of the state’s major bets to propel the country’s reputation and its industries internationally. The continuous growth of K-pop motivated the state to assist the industry economically<sup>55</sup> thus, further capitalising on it (J. Choi, 2015). Moreover, given culture technology’s incentive on creativity and innovation, K-pop soon came to be a product where culture encouraged the merging of various technologies (S.-Y. Kim, 2020), compelling the state to support technologic industries, benefiting both simultaneously.

K-pop came to be an object of nation branding, where the success derived from the creativity and innovation of a few (idols and their agencies) was celebrated as a national achievement (S.-Y. Kim, 2020). As an object of nation branding, it has collaborated with various national industries besides technology ones. Tourism, for instance, has enjoyed the benefits of working synergistically with K-pop, which can be credited to the South Korean government<sup>56</sup> (J. Choi & Maliangkay, 2015). The export-oriented media industry too, has benefited from idols’ “multimedia branding” (Laurie, 2016, p. 216), as they participate in varied contents, such as K-dramas, variety and reality shows, collaborations with webtoon<sup>57</sup> artists, etc. In this sense, K-pop is a “meta-commodity” (J. Choi & Maliangkay, 2015, p. 8) that endorses multiple industries, as well as other cultural goods (e.g., cosmetic, fashion, and gastronomy).

Due perhaps to this export-oriented nature of K-pop as well as the flows of influence, this product has incorporated “international” elements (e.g., foreign members, outsourcing, incorporation of varied music genres and sounds, etc.) that lead academics to perceive it as

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<sup>55</sup> These economic policies, now known as “Creative Economy”, began during President Myung-Bak Lee’s administration (2008-2013) and continued on to later presidencies, (S.-Y. Kim, 2020).

<sup>56</sup> Also invites K-pop idols to “advocate [other] policy messages, from (...) law and justice, general election, health to financial management” (H.-K. Lee & Zhang, 2021, p. 525), making idols their ambassadors (S.-R. Lee, 2018).

<sup>57</sup> Webtoon is a free platform where *manhwa* (만화; Korean comics) artists divulge their stories. Initially a website and app existent solely in South Korea, today it has been translated to other languages, as the company opened branches throughout the world.

a cultural hybrid. While not incorrect, the term “hybrid” implies the existence of national features as well, to which K-pop owes its essence and part of its success. This “Koreanness” can, in fact, be traced back centuries.

According to Sim et al. (2017), K-pop is in possession of four features that link it to *gwangdae*<sup>58</sup> (광대) culture. The first feature is “the expert cultivation system” (p. 296). According to the authors, the system of mutual commitment where trainees work hard to hone their skills and agency workers train and polish them, is only natural in Korean society, one of perseverance<sup>59</sup>. Likewise, *gwangdae* formed groups that shared their knowledge and skills with one another, allowing for the upgrading of these same individual and collective skills (Sim et al., 2017). The second commonality is “the opportunity to grow performers through competition” (p. 297). Similar to the current entertainment agencies and idol groups, *gwangdae* groups competed with each other as their art became more popular (Sim et al., 2017). The third feature is “*pungja* and *haehak*” (풍자 and 해학; satire and humour; p. 297). While many lyrics in K-pop songs are cheerful and reflect on love, there have been groups (e.g., BTS and Stray Kids) who have, similar to *gwangdae* performances, incorporated satire and humour in their lyrics to criticize certain aspects of South Korean society, such as the “class culture” (p. 308). Finally, both idols and *gwangdae* sang in the Korean language, incorporating, for instance, idiomatic expressions unique to this cultural heritage.

Evidently, both performances are completely different, but their commonalities serve to prove that K-pop is more than a genre that results from the engulfment of foreign talent and music genres. It is also a legacy of traditional Korean culture. A culture that has undergone countless changes from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, having been subjected to the policies of a military government and external influences under Japanese colonial rule and US military presence (Sim et al., 2017). These changes culminated in the emergence of novel styles, as well as the formation and management of groups under record companies (Sim et al., 2017). Pop dance girl groups (e.g., Pearl Sisters; figure 5) also began to emerge (Lie & Oh, 2015), although most of their performances occurred in US military camps, where the “music performance culture flourished” (Sim et al., 2017, p. 300). Among the most popular music

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<sup>58</sup> It refers to the performers specialized in singing, *pansori* (판소리), dancing, acrobatics, playing instruments, etc. that were commissioned by the courts to perform plays, from mid-Goryeo Dynasty (918-1392) to the Joseon Dynasty (1392-1910; Sim et al., 2017).

<sup>59</sup> According to W. Jang and Kim (2013), the endurance of such intense and prolonged training is driven by cosmopolitan striving, in other words, the “collective motivation toward upward mobility” (p. 95).

genres during the 1970s and particularly 1980s, were trot, ballads, folk, rock and pop-rock, although most were censored or even banned by the authoritarian regime<sup>60</sup> (Lie & Oh, 2015). With the eminent transition into a democratic state, the fusion of foreign music styles with traditional music became possible, paving the path for a decade (1990s) of immeasurable innovation in the South Korean music industry. The result: K-pop as we know it; a product that enjoys worldwide consumption.



**Figure 5.** Korean female duo Pearl Sisters. Source: [https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/art/2022/10/398\\_201044.html](https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/art/2022/10/398_201044.html)

As this cultural product expands, so too have fandoms grown, enjoying an increasing level of authority over the production of idol groups<sup>61</sup>. Fans have become “adjunct producers” (J. Choi & Maliangkay, 2015, p. 10) in what can be defined as the second phase of culture technology, characterized by its “interactiveness” (S.-Y. Kim, 2020, p. 25). Fans and audiences are encouraged to become involved in major decisions that guide the destiny of trainees, including, for example, who will debut and what concepts fit each idol. Idol survival shows<sup>62</sup> (e.g., Produce 101 and Girls Planet 999) and “Rookies Entertainment Mobile Application”<sup>63</sup> developed by SM Entertainment, are two examples of this.

Fans can also exert this decisive power indirectly, namely through their consumption patterns and active dialogue on social media, providing information to the agencies that can then prepare the following comebacks and groups according to the trends. For instance, there has been a rise in what is commonly described as powerful and dark concepts for male idol groups (e.g., Ateez; figure 6) and girl crush concepts for female idol groups (e.g., Itzy; figure 7), driven by international audiences’ strong adherence to these. However, in order to appease domestic audiences as well, these same groups adopt refreshing and more cheerful concepts occasionally, a strategy that allows them to showcase their apparent versatility.

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<sup>60</sup> Either for being associated with Japanese music or communism (e.g., trot), or considered immoral (e.g., rock and pop-rock; Lie & Oh, 2015).

<sup>61</sup> In line with the theoretical framework offered by the “circuit of culture” suggested by du Gay et al. (1997), which posits that the modes of consumption (here, the different engagements of audiences) “do not exist in a vacuum” (Zaborowski, 2016, p. 15), but affect production (and vice versa).

<sup>62</sup> Audiences’ votes have the most impact on deciding who passes each round.

<sup>63</sup> Fans can give their feedback through the app, guiding the production of the future groups of the company.



**Figure 6.** Poster of male group Ateez for the music video of their song “Hala Hala”. Source: <https://twitter.com/ATEEZofficial/status/1082562573428436992>



**Figure 7.** Female group Itzy in a teaser image for their song “Dalla Dalla”. Source: <https://twitter.com/ITZYofficial/status/1088088994007511040>

## 2.2. The Female Idol

The term “concept”, used in the previous section, is a crucial aspect in the K-pop industry. It refers to a specific theme that a company defines and attributes to its idol group either as a consistent identity or for a single comeback. It can thus be “used in the diachronic development of a group” (Y. Oh, 2018, p. 111), as groups tend to gradually experiment different concepts. These are created through a combination of different elements, which include the songs’ genre and lyrics, choreographies, the music video’s mood (lighting, settings, colours, etc.), and the idols’ costumes, hairstyle, and makeup. As these concepts can portray different “vibes”, from cute and cheerful to sexy and dark, they can function “as a site in which (...) groups practice multiple masculinities and femininities” (Y. Oh, 2018, p. 111), and even androgyny, as male and female idols articulate both characteristics (e.g., SHINee’s Taemin and f(x)’s Amber; figures 8 and 9 respectively). Even within a group’s pre-established theme, the different members can take on particular roles (Yeran Kim, 2011). For instance, female idols can play characters such as cute, exotic, strong, naughty, etc. The vast possibilities of concepts and characters allow groups to sell their uniqueness, which is very important in such a saturated industry (Y. Oh, 2018), while presenting an opportunity for K-pop to extend the scope of fandoms (Yeran Kim, 2011).



**Figure 8.** Taemin from boy group SHINee. Source: <https://www.allure.com/story/taemin-k-pop-interview-mascara-and-masculinity>



**Figure 9.** Amber Liu, former member of the girl group f(x). Source: [https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/art/2020/09/398\\_283642.html](https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/art/2020/09/398_283642.html)

In the specific case of girl groups, their concepts tend to “position them in relationship to a man” (Jonas, 2021, p. 8), as their songs mostly deal with matters of heterosexual love<sup>64</sup>. Moreover, despite the variety of concepts available, groups tend to follow certain trends. This seems true for all generations of K-pop. The first generation of girl groups (late 1990s to early 2000s), like Baby V.O.X (figure 10) and S.E.S. (figure 11), followed soft, playful (Maliangkay, 2015) and cute concepts (G. Kim, 2019; Yeran Kim, 2011), selling innocent and non-sexual femininity (I. Kang, 2015). Female idols of the second generation (early 2000s to early 2010s) began to be more openly sexualized (I. Kang, 2015; G. Kim, 2019), while maintaining an innocent charm and image of chastity<sup>65</sup>, which contributed to their “ambiguous femininity” (G. Kim, 2019, p. 65). Two of these groups were Girls’ Generation (figure 12) and KARA (figure 13). They were also debuting at younger ages<sup>66</sup>, compared to those of the first generation. During the third generation (early 2010s to 2018), sexualization began to be much more explicit (G. Kim, 2019), examples being EXID (figure 14) and AOA (figure 15). Finally, the current generation (fourth) of idol groups, like Itzy and Aespa, is dominated by girl crush concepts, in which hyper-femininity is refused while seemingly

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<sup>64</sup> Not all songs are about love, some also focus on friendship, for example.

<sup>65</sup> Female chastity, sacrifice, passivity and compliance have been greatly valued virtues by Korean patriarchy (S. W. Lee, 2005).

<sup>66</sup> Trend that has remained to this day. It has become common for groups to debut while some of their members are still minors, and there are even cases where all are minors. For instance, the oldest and youngest members of the group New Jeans were 17 and 14 years old, respectively, at the time of their debut (August 1<sup>st</sup>, 2022).

fierce and confident idols spread a message of girl empowerment (J. Lee & Yi, 2020). Sexualization is still present, subtly or evidently, but “embraced”.



**Figure 10.** First generation girl group Baby V.O.X.  
Source:  
<https://www.allkpop.com/article/2021/10/the-beginning-of-girl-groups-1st-generation>



**Figure 11.** First generation girl group S.E.S.  
Source:  
<https://www.allkpop.com/article/2021/10/the-beginning-of-girl-groups-1st-generation>



**Figure 12.** Second generation girl group Girls' Generation in the music video of their song “Oh!”.  
Source:  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TGbwL8kSpEk&ab\\_channel=SMTOWN](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TGbwL8kSpEk&ab_channel=SMTOWN)



**Figure 13.** Second generation girl group KARA. Source:  
<https://www.sbs.com.au/popasia/blog/2014/01/15/karas-nicole-jiyoungs-departures-girl-group-explained>



**Figure 14.** Third generation girl group EXID in a teaser image for their song “Hot Pink”. Source:  
<https://www.koreaboo.com/article/netizens-uncover-prostitution-concept-in-exids-hot-pink-mv/>



**Figure 15.** Third generation girl group AOA in a teaser image for their song “Miniskirt”. Source:  
<https://www.allkpop.com/article/2014/01/aoa-look-sexy-wearing-stockings-in-new-teaser-images-for-upcoming-single-miniskirt>

Despite the evolution of girl group concepts towards selling empowerment, female idols have continuously been subjected to their agencies and audiences' surveillance, pressured to maintain a certain beauty ideal (described in chapter one). From extreme diets (G. Kim, 2019) to plastic surgery<sup>67</sup> (Y. Oh, 2018), idols are coerced by their agencies into practicing rigid body manipulation, in a now systemic management of female idols' bodies (G. Kim, 2019).

Similarly, as referred above, their sexualization never ceased, it was solely performed differently, through their change in clothing, lyrics and attitude. In fact, it seemed to increase<sup>68</sup> (Epstein, 2015; Epstein and Turnbull, 2014; G. Kim, 2019), slightly decreasing recently in the fourth generation, at least in what concerns blatant sexualization.

One constant aspect that has been reported to contribute to sexualization (blatant or subtle) is the uniform (Epstein, 2015). According to G. Kim (2019), female idols in uniforms "homogenize themselves as an erotic spectacle" (p. 36), perfectly depicted by figure 16. The degree of uniformity within one group can vary: all members might be wearing identical costumes (most common in girl groups), they might be simply dressed in matching combinations (common even for boys; Maliangkay, 2015), or in completely different outfits that still follow the concept of the group.



**Figure 16.** Girls' Generation in the music video of their song "Genie". Source: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6SwiSpudKWI&ab\\_channel=SMTOWN](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6SwiSpudKWI&ab_channel=SMTOWN)

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<sup>67</sup> Idols themselves have openly discussed the pressure from their agencies to follow through with such extreme manipulation. Ashley from the now disbanded group Ladies' Code and Peniel from male group BTOB shared their experiences on episode seven of the Podcast *Get Real*. Both idols were pressured by their companies to shave their jaws, for instance, but never went through with the procedures.

<sup>68</sup> Epstein (2015) attributes this increase to a context of "growing competition within the industry, a seemingly inexorable move towards greater permissiveness in attitudes towards sexuality in Korean popular culture, and an awareness of the role of (...) physical attractiveness (...) as a key selling point" (p. 37). All of which have resulted, in part, from the collision of patriarchy with consumer culture (Epstein, 2015).

Infantilization is one other aspect that persisted, incorporated into all forms of performance in different ways, such as clothing and behaviour. If idols of a group follow a sexier image, they will still find themselves behaving in an infantile and docile manner through the occasional expressions of *aegyo*<sup>69</sup> (애교) and childish poses. Girl crush groups also engage in *aegyo* and experiment with different outfits and styles, childish included (e.g., school girl skirts, patterned jumpers, fluffy socks, etc.). Much like the uniforms as indicators of a patriarchal demand for female obedience and affect (G. Kim, 2019), the deployment of cuteness through infantilization “further perpetuates a pornographic nature of male supremacy” (G. Kim, 2019, p. 39). The message transmitted by these images is of docility and subordination to male desire (G. Kim, 2019), especially when these infantile images are articulated with sexual tension and availability. This “schizophrenic female subjectivity” (G. Kim, 2019, p. 78) of “virgin-whore” (C. Oh, 2014), chastity versus promiscuity, has come to be the trademark of female performance in K-pop, designed by the industry (G. Kim, 2019).

It appears then, that the spectrum of female idols’ performance is relatively short, as they perform one of three femininities: infantilized, hyper-sexualized or, more often, a combination of both (Jonas, 2021). It could be argued that the increasing sexual appearances could be a sign of liberation, since the female body was an invisible, “subjectless” one (T. Kim, 2003) for a long time. Besides their heads, women (particularly noble) were never to expose their bodies, whose shape could not even be perceptible (T. Kim, 2003). Women’s concealment was not only through their clothing, which entailed chest binding (Y.-J. Lee, 2000; Yoo, 2008), but by physically restricting them to the inside<sup>70</sup>, where they could, more easily, be segregated from men. More recently, however, with Korea’s transition from an industrial society to a consumerist one, women became important mostly as consumers (T. Kim, 2003), their bodies gaining exposure, evolving into visible and beautified bodies, whose manipulation is even encouraged (T. Kim, 2003; S. H. Lee, 2016; Y.-J. Lee, 2000).

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<sup>69</sup> It refers to a behaviour that combines “female coquettishness (...) with decency, humor, submissive sexuality, and affective readiness for male counterparts” (G. Kim, 2019, p. 20).

<sup>70</sup> The public and private spheres were those of men and women respectively; where most of their lives took place (S. W. Lee, 2005).

While the increase in exposure is an important step in the release from patriarchal mechanisms of control<sup>71</sup>, it was also appropriated by the beauty and culture industries. In the K-pop industry, in particular, the truth of the matter is that, most female idols do not have any authority over their music, bodies and image (Epstein & Turnbull, 2014; G. Kim, 2019). All of the femininities previously described are manufactured by entertainment agencies, and therefore problematic. There seems to be barely any real sexual agency<sup>72</sup> (G. Kim, 2019), hence, no actual liberation (Epstein & Turnbull, 2014). Moreover, it appears a great number of idols have professed their discomfort over the clothing and dances imposed on them (Epstein & Turnbull, 2014).

Even the recent concept of *ssen unnie* (쎄언니), meaning strong sister, could prove to be problematic in its sale of empowerment, for its “embodiment of contradictory elements” (J. Lee & Yi, 2020, p. 19). *Ssen unnie* carries the connotation of a blatant, rash, and rebellious woman (J. Lee & Yi, 2020), who does not conform to the social expectations of the female role and body, and is a title often attributed to idols like Hwasa (figure 17) and Jessi (figure 18). As suggested by the authors, the “sister” part of the name implies the holder of this title is a figure other girls can look up to, a role-model to emulate in the search for alternative femininities. With such a premise, the concept of *ssen unnie* is, undeniably, one with the power to bring change to the current perception of what it means to be a South Korean woman (J. Lee & Yi, 2020). In fact, the first step, the distancing from patriarchal norms of femininity, has already been taken. Idols that perform this concept explore a blatant sexual imagery and speech, which differ from the typical femininity portrayed, and is, reportedly, their own informed choice. While brazen sexuality could be interpreted as a way of undermining the project of *ssen unnie* for re-inviting the male gaze (out of possible fear of losing male fans; J. Lee & Yi, 2020), other readings should not be discarded. It could very well be their own way of empowering themselves.

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<sup>71</sup> It was one of the most notable ways through which Korean women contested traditional patriarchy (Yoo, 2008), alongside body manipulation, which defiled the principle of the sanctity of the body. The first women to take this step did so during the Japanese colonial rule (1910-1945), and followed the western feminist ideology of the “New Woman” (Yoo, 2008). In place of the long hair and chest binding dresses that covered the whole body, these women cut their hairs and began to wear short skirts (above knee-length) and heels.

<sup>72</sup> When it does actually appear to be an artistic and personal choice of female idols, the industry and society, ironically, react differently. After all, it is a more threatening way through which women’s sexuality transpires, one that reveals empowerment and escapes the cannon (S. Kim, 2008). In 2018, for instance, during the annual award ceremony MAMA, Hwasa from female group MAMAMOO was immensely criticised for her sexual performance, marked by her red skin-tight latex bodysuit (figure 17).



**Figure 17.** Hwasa from girl group MAMAMOO performing at MAMA 2018. Source: <https://www.soompi.com/article/1277811wpp/mamamos-agency-responds-reactions-hwasas-2018-mama-performance-outfit>



**Figure 18.** Jessi in a teaser image for her song “Nuna”. Source: <https://kpoping.com/kpics/Jessi-NUNA-Concept-Teaser-Images>

Another concern manifested by J. Lee & Yi (2020) is the concept’s ongoing complicity with the idea that power derives from what is toxically masculine, therefore ironically turning to patriarchal beliefs. The symbols of toxic masculinity in question range from “hypermasculine mannerisms” (J. Lee & Yi, 2020, p. 19) to objects often used for violence like baseball bats (as in figure 19) and guns. Even though there is no reasonable basis for the idea that guns and bats are the domain of men, this association by the authors must be understood in light of their context. After all, South Korea is a country where all men must go through military training, and are therefore capable of holding guns, in opposition to the majority of women.



**Figure 19.** Members of girl group CLC posing with baseball bats in scene from the music video of their song “Hobgoblin”. Source: <https://www.melon.com/musicstory/inform.htm?mstorySeq=4496&ref=twitter>

Nevertheless, as aforementioned, among all the concepts, *ssen unnie* is the most liberating, when resulting from personal choice (e.g., Jessi and Hwasa). Issues arise, however, when this concept becomes fabricated (e.g., CLC) as occurs with the other concepts and femininities. When that happens, both idols and fans end up interiorizing an ambiguous message of empowerment (Epstein, 2015; Epstein and Turnbull, 2014; G. Kim, 2019), as the sexual liberation shown on screen is imposed and manufactured by an “androcentric creative team” (Jonas, 2021, p. 6). Such an imposition is particularly distressing when the idols are minors<sup>73</sup>, which most of them are when debuting (Song, 2016), nonetheless, perceived as justifiable in light of their work as “agents of patriotic nationalism” (Yeran Kim, 2011, p. 342), propelling the South Korean cultural industry into the global market. As long as girls’ bodies are celebrated for their soft power (what Yeran Kim, 2011, calls “*lolita* nationalism”), girls’ commodification and sexualization will remain inconsequential for the society at large and obviously, the industry, which is still grounded on patriarchal modes of operation (G. Kim, 2019; Jonas, 2021).

Indeed, the relation between female idols and their agencies is an imbalanced one, built on “gender-, age-, and class-based hierarchies” (G. Kim, 2019, p. xxiv), reflective of its still patriarchal society, which permits their exploitation. They are unfairly paid and lack union protection (G. Kim, 2019) under their “slave-contract[s]” (J. Choi & Maliangkay, 2015, p. 10), that dictate numerous aspects of their lives. It has become standard knowledge, yet unaddressed, that most idols are forbidden from having romantic relationships<sup>74</sup>, must comply with curfews, must keep a certain weight, and some are not even allowed a phone (Y. Oh, 2018). These are some of the methods by which agencies enforce their control on idols and trainees, the most unpredictable elements (Y. Oh, 2018) in their meticulous production.

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<sup>73</sup> In Korea, the age of majority is 19, while the age of (sexual) consent is 13 between minors, and 16 between a minor and an adult. However, the age of consent for both instances was 13 until recently (2020), having changed only in light of public unrest towards the high incidence of child sexual abuse.

Considering idols are all over 14 years old (except for BoA, who debuted in 2000 at 13), the sexualized performances imposed on young female idols have been justifiable in the eyes of the law. Nevertheless, the socio-cultural milieu is changing, and South Korean audiences have come to resist some of the industry’s antics. For instance, the recent debut of the aforementioned girl group New Jeans has been highly contested among Korean netizens not only for the amount of exposure (S. Lee, 2022), but also because of some of their song lyrics that carry sexual connotations (e.g., their song “Cookie”).

<sup>74</sup> Crucial to sustain the sense of ownership of fans over idols.

In light of this, G. Kim (2019) could not help but compare the exploitative conditions of these young idols to those of the young female factory workers during the developmental state of President Chung Hee Park (1961-1979), gruesomely explored, and victims of gendered violence by their peers, superiors, and even the regime, which publicly used prostitution<sup>75</sup> to keep American troops stationed in the country (J. Han & Ling, 1998). Even the term “assembly line”, used to refer to the methods of production in K-pop, is a clear indication of how the K-pop industry reproduces the manufacturing one. While in K-pop, professionals are outsourced to train local trainees, whose images are distributed abroad, in factories, foreign raw resources are processed by local workers to be exported (G. Kim, 2019). Factory workers saw, and female idols see, their work be capitalized by exportation industries, the first at the service of capitalism, and the latter at the hand of its recent extension, neoliberalism.

As neoliberal commodities, female idols serve the state’s Foucauldian governance over audiences (G. Kim, 2019). The author argues that the idols are an “everyday pedagogy that tells people how to understand, articulate, and argue on social values and practices” (p. 19). As cultural products, they hold the potential to work as powerful “ideological apparatus[es]” (I. Kang, 2015, p. 55) over audiences, particularly fans, influencing their lifestyle choices and teaching them personal cultivation (H.-K. Lee & Zhang, 2021; S.-R. Lee, 2018), and this way, disseminating and strengthening the discourse of “self-improvement”. This influence is conspicuous to the point of encouraging fans to pursue even plastic surgery (G. Kim, 2019). While not all fans go as far, they do find themselves engaging in other forms of body manipulation in response to the idol images they are exposed to (as will be evidenced in chapter three), supporting Rols’ (2020) comparison of idols to visual interfaces that are “good at teaching (...) [their] rules” (p. 118), mediators “between the fan and her ideal body shape” (p. 116). Idols’ biopower appears undeniable, put in practice ever since S.E.S. debut in 1997, during the IMF crisis that brought about neoliberal policies.

The financial crisis had an immense impact on the lives of South Korean citizens, particularly those from low and middle class. It was a time where neoliberalism and its emphasis on individual competition pushed both men and women to become better versions

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<sup>75</sup> The women in question were even referred to as “patriots”, “nationalists” and “servants of the nation” (J. Han & Ling, 1998, p. 69).

of themselves<sup>76</sup>. This had its tolls. Even though families had been left economically devastated, pursuit of a better self demanded further spending on education and manipulation of the body, which became one other aspect through which individuals could “maximize their human capitals and increase their future income”<sup>77</sup> (J.-H. Cho, 2009, p. 36). People sacrificed their time too, as they dedicated their lives to their jobs and families. Trapped in a “neoliberal economy that demand[ed] their affective [and] service labors” (G. Kim, 2019, p. 40), people turned to culture for a distraction, for enjoyment and affection. Among other cultural products, K-pop groups, particularly female, provided this liberation from the taxing day to day reality, as “affective commodities” (G. Kim, 2019, p. 40). It appears to remain the case, as the country preserves its workaholic culture (see S. Kang, 2020).

According to G. Kim (2019), K-pop affectively operates on its audiences in two ways: the visual language of the music videos and the sexualization of female idols. The author suggests that the “biopolitics of affect” (p. 62) work through the (usually) bright and cheerful atmosphere of the music videos. This atmosphere transpires and induces positive emotions, blurring the personal hardships of spectators and undesirable social realities even if temporarily (Jenol, 2020), thus acting “as a means of socio-behavioral control” (G. Kim, 2019, p. 62). Moreover, through their luxurious settings and clothing, music videos incite audiences’ desire for upward social mobility (G. Kim, 2019), already instigated by the neoliberal society. Evidently, this is advantageous to the state, as its citizens keep motivated to work<sup>78</sup>. It is also valuable to entertainment agencies, whose pool of hard working and talented trainees increases, alongside their replaceability (H.-K. Lee & Zhang, 2021).

The simultaneous infantilization and sexualization of female idols also contributes to arousing positive emotions and sensations, for instance, by offering male audiences the “ideal” girlfriend (Jonas, 2021), sensual but submissive (G. Kim, 2019). Men can also find

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<sup>76</sup> This “neoliberal rationality (...) [began being spread through] self-help books, experts, mass media, schools, etc.” (J.-H. Cho, 2009, p. 26). Consequently, discourses of “self-development” and “self-care” have become widespread (S. H. Lee, 2016), alongside the idea that all decisions taken to indulge in such “care of the self” (J.-H. Cho, 2009, p. 33) are free. Whether truly free or not, the societal result has been one of conformity, suggestive of constraint by biopower.

<sup>77</sup> In the case of women, this maximization implies a youthful and healthy appearance (J.-H. Cho, 2009). “Healthy” here refers to the objectified notion of “healthy”, one that cares only for appearance in light of the socially internalized beauty ideal that has begun to be contested but that still prevails throughout the world, South Korea inclusive.

<sup>78</sup> The virtue of hard work is manifestly promoted by reality shows (e.g., audition programmes like Produce 101), alongside “responsibility for oneself (...) and entrepreneurialism” (H.-K. Lee & Zhang, 2021, p. 531), all of which make up a successful neoliberal individual.

in the emphasized docility of female idols an opportunity to “remasculinize” themselves (C. Oh, 2014), for they too have become more effeminate in recent decades<sup>79</sup>. Female fans are equally allured, for they can dream of “autonomy, glamour, intimacy, power, [and] recognition” (G. Kim, 2019, p. xix). Additionally, they are provided with an image to emulate in the search for social approval and success (G. Kim, 2019), without feeling threatened by a blatantly sexualized image they could not dream to pursue in their current society.

There are, however, risks associated with this schizophrenic sexuality (G. Kim, 2019; Yeran Kim, 2011), to both idols and female fans, who are already susceptible, but not necessarily sentenced, to self-sexualizing and objectifying<sup>80</sup>, as well as perpetuating stereotypes<sup>81</sup>. Trapped in constant monitoring to not disrupt the balance sexuality-docility can prove to be draining. Moreover, as G. Kim (2019) contends, it becomes difficult to come “to a sense of (...) [one’s] identity and subjectivity” (p. 84), the reason why many idols have experienced anxiety and depression. Agencies’ announcements of a certain idol’s hiatus due to mental health disorders has become a recurrent phenomenon. Although these disorders might have been occurring from the beginning, only in recent years has it become habitual for agencies to seemingly care for idols’ mental health by allowing them time off work.

Their mental health is further aggravated as they deal with audiences’ criticism. Female idols, more than male ones, tend to be mostly criticized for their body (Gu, 2020)<sup>82</sup>, either too fat or too skinny, but also for the femininity they present, never pleasing everyone. Even though this femininity is constructed and imposed by others and rarely self-made, girl groups find themselves at the crossroads of different accusations. On the one hand, they are criticized for complying with the submissive patriarchal woman, and on the other, for being too promiscuous (Laurie, 2016) and transgressing patriarchal control over women’s bodies and desires, therefore breaking the “fantasy about the perfect love and womanhood” (Gu,

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<sup>79</sup> The beauty industry and the discourse on “self-care” have also pressured South Korean men to take care of their bodies and appearance, indulging in the same beauty practices as women (e.g., skin-care).

<sup>80</sup> Which could work as a gateway to body manipulation, as suggested in the first chapter.

<sup>81</sup> Which could deplete “the female sociological imagination for gender equality and justice” (G. Kim, 2019, p. 92). It will be later analysed if this is indeed the case for fans of Aespa.

<sup>82</sup> When analysing comments on social media, Gu (2020) concluded that male idols are more likely to receive positive comments about both their talents and appearance, while comments towards female idols are mostly focused on their appearance and body shape, and tendentially negative.

2020, pp. 64-65). The most drastic consequence of this has been the recent suicide of idols like Sulli from girl group f(x)<sup>83</sup>.

One could thus interpret the industry's continuous effort in producing virtual idols as an escape from such misfortunes and other scandals (Hoang, 2019) derived from humans' unpredictability. Moreover, they can carry on with the agenda of biopolitical control without raising as much public discomfort, as will be explained in the following section.

### **2.3. The Virtual Idol**

In the current digital age, all idols are arguably virtual (Zaborowski, 2016), as they primarily operate in the digital world (Black, 2012). They are dependent on different technologies to produce and divulge their music and image, and to communicate with fans, whose primary means for listening to music is through a speaker, physically separated from the idol (Zaborowski, 2016) performing on screen. Nevertheless, both are different entities. As Zaborowski (2016) contends, virtual idols are not people (since they are not human), they are not characters (because they don't simply play a narrative role), nor are they personas (for they are not mediating someone). It is thus, difficult to define them in light of any previous existing categories<sup>84</sup>. For the sake of simplicity, they shall be here considered as idols who dwell solely in the digital realm, created out of digital data (Black, 2006), voiced by human singers, and animated through AI technology.

As technological entities of yet limited autonomy and highly predictable, they are still less attractive to wider audiences (Black, 2012), although intriguing for their novelty. In contrast, "real" idols are capable of arousing people's fascination precisely because they are unpredictable and their control over their public personas can be lost at any moment (Black, 2012). Moreover, real-world idols can certainly exert affective power over their audiences, which is partially complicated for virtual idols, as of now. As previously mentioned, idols'

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<sup>83</sup> In recent years, many South Korean idols have turned to suicide as an escape from different issues. In 2017, Jong-hyun from boy group SHINee committed suicide after battling depression, reportedly in light of the pressures associated with idol life. Sulli, under constant scrutiny of audiences for her more open sexuality, also succumbed to depression and then suicide, followed soon after by her best-friend Hara Goo (referred to in chapter 1), who was visibly shaken by Sulli's death and fragilized by online sexual harassment. However, they were not the only idols who had to face constant criticism and abuse, for this is a recurrent phenomenon, already familiar to K-pop fans around the world. It is not uncommon to find numerous videos on YouTube analysing and comparing idols' bodies, talents, personalities, etc., often accompanied by shaming remarks.

<sup>84</sup> Aespa's avatars are more of a particular case, for they could be the real members' personas, given their narrative origin (created out of the members' information shared online), but also entities of their own (since they are created only out of a fraction of the members' characteristics and traits) who interact with the members.

affective power is heavily associated with their appearance<sup>85</sup>, and people are more likely to become fans of visually attractive celebrities (Y. Oh, 2018). In this regard, virtual idols have also amassed a significant following, particularly among Eastern consumers, who appreciate virtual celebrities with a youthful appearance (Hoang, 2019). However, if a fan is to remain so for long, strong bonds must be created with the idol. Hence, the importance of one other factor: familiarity (Y. Oh, 2018).

In the K-pop industry, this is assured through different visual contents, especially reality shows (Y. Oh, 2018) and “behind the scenes” videos. In these programs, idols show their vulnerabilities and characters off stage, descending from the pedestal to a level in which common people dwell, and thus building intimacy with the audiences<sup>86</sup>. It remains to be seen if virtual idols can form such a relationship with the general audiences. In the case of Aespa’s avatars, it appears to be a difficult endeavour, as will be later discussed. Nevertheless, there is a small niche of technology enthusiasts to whom virtual idols hold more affective power and are more real than the traditional idol, who plays a carefully planned persona to please the mainstream audiences (Zaborowski, 2016). In contrast, virtual idols have one constant personality and no possibility to disappoint (e.g., developing romantic relationship with someone that is not the fan)<sup>87</sup>.

The industry has been aware for some years of the existence of such enthusiasts and the potential for the success of virtual idols in an increasingly tech-savvy society. Although virtual idols might look like a recent phenomenon as they become more commonplace, particularly in the K-pop industry, they have, in fact, been present from the beginning, since the late 1990s. However, rather than South Korea, it was a Japanese talent agency, HoriPro, that developed the first virtual idol in 1996, named Kyoko Date (Black, 2006, 2012;

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<sup>85</sup> Teenagers, in particular, deeply appreciate the idols’ appearance, desirable for its complete distancing from common aesthetics (the looks of ordinary people), especially school uniforms that are mandatory and strictly regulated (Y. Oh, 2018). According to Y. Oh (2018), this is the reason why female idol groups, despite their numerous male fans, still have more female fans, many of them teenagers.

<sup>86</sup> It is common knowledge in the K-pop fan community that many people become fans of certain groups precisely after watching these programmes and fan video content such as the popular “Unhelpful Guide”. In these comedic videos, all members of a group are introduced to the viewers through short clips of their funniest moments, showcasing their charming personalities and talents.

<sup>87</sup> The “romantic betrayal” is among one of the unpredictable behaviours associated with human idols (leading to scandals), which make total control over them impossible, therefore, motivating the industry’s bet on virtual idols. According to Black (2006), there may be other reasons for this: virtual idols’ perfect bodies and beauty is kept throughout time since they do not age, they cannot die nor throw tantrums, and are possibly less expensive in the long-term (since they do not need to be trained, for instance).

Zaborowski, 2016), shown in figure 20. In retrospective, both the timing and location for the appearance of the first virtual idol are barely surprising. The turning of the century was a time where technologies progressed at a fast pace, including computer-generated animation (Black, 2012). In addition, the themes of virtuality and cyborgs were not new in Japanese popular culture<sup>88</sup> (Zaborowski, 2016).

Despite Kyoko Date's short-term success (Zaborowski, 2016), the music industry kept on honing the potential held by virtual idols, effort that was soon after reproduced in other countries, like South Korea, Germany, United Kingdom, etc. (Black, 2008). In what concerns South Korean virtual idols, its history begins in 1998 with ADAM (created by Adam Soft), modelled after an actor and voiced by an unknown singer. Similar to Date, ADAM's success was short-lived<sup>89</sup>, but he still got to release two albums and participate in advertisements. For a while, however, no other virtual idols were introduced in K-pop, although Japan kept growing its repertoire with acts like Yuki Terai and Hatsune Miku, the latter still successful domestically and abroad. They returned to the K-pop scene in 2018 with group K/DA (figure 21), a collaboration between Riot Games (the company behind the game *League of Legends*, LOL), Korean entertainment agency Cube, and two western singers<sup>90</sup>.



**Figure 20.** Virtual idol Kyoko Date. Source:

<http://web.archive.org/web/19991007170235/http://www.horipro.co.jp/talent/PD001/>



**Figure 21.** Virtual idol group K/DA. Source: <https://www.leagueoflegends.com/en-us/event/kda-official-fan-club/>

<sup>88</sup> Examples being the popular animations *Ghost in the Shell*, *Cyborg 009*, and *Battle Angel Alita*.

<sup>89</sup> Possibly due to the high production costs and limited technology that restricted the scope of activities.

<sup>90</sup> The members are characters from the game LOL, voiced by members Miyeon and Soyeon from K-pop group (G)-I-dle, and American singers Madison Beer and Jaira Burns.

The success experienced by K/DA (whose members were already loved by the global fanbase of the game) could have been the trigger for the current virtual idol trend in South Korea. From then on, many other virtual idols have continuously debuted. Among them, there have been idols whose appearance resembles that of cartoon characters, such as Apoki (a space bunny that debuted in 2019 as a virtual influencer and in 2021 as a singer; figure 22) and rapper Hip-Kongz (a male gorilla) who debuted in 2022, just like Sagong\_ee\_ho (a trio of anthropomorphic characters; figure 23). There have also been idols designed to appear more human, like the members from girl group Etern!ty (figure 24), which debuted in 2021, Han YuA and Rozy (figures 25 and 26) who debuted in the same year (starting out as virtual influencers), and Saejin from recently debuted boy group SUPERKIND. All virtual idols are made with deep-learning AI technology so as to better simulate realistic expressions and movement, the most fluid and natural being Rozy and Saejin.



**Figure 22.** Virtual idol Apoki. Source: <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=367696095563359&set=pb.100069689142908.-2207520000.&type=3>



**Figure 23.** Virtual idol group Sagong\_ee\_ho. Source: [https://twitter.com/SAGONG\\_EE\\_HO/status/1559499273963655168](https://twitter.com/SAGONG_EE_HO/status/1559499273963655168)



**Figure 24.** Virtual idol group Etern!ty. Source: <https://planet-aia.com/>



**Figure 25.** Virtual idol Han YuA. Source: <https://www.virtualhumans.org/article/who-is-virtual-human-music-artist-han-yua>



**Figure 26.** Virtual idol Rozy. Source: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y8v\\_UXdBQtw&ab\\_channel=%EC%8B%A0%ED%95%9C%EB%9D%BC%EC%9D%B4%ED%94%84](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y8v_UXdBQtw&ab_channel=%EC%8B%A0%ED%95%9C%EB%9D%BC%EC%9D%B4%ED%94%84)

Aespa’s avatars and K/DA belong to a third category of virtual idols whose design is fairly flexible, sometimes looking like comics or animation characters, but most often, as something in between realistic humans and animation. The major differences between them lie in their origin, fluidity, and expressions, with K/DA members moving more naturally.

From this repertoire, it is possible to observe a predominance of female virtual idols, phenomenon “consistent with a tradition of imagining the technologically fabricated body as female” (Black, 2008, p. 46), and compliant with the commodification of women. They are the result of the female body’s translation into digital information, which is more easily manipulated through different software (sold to fans in the case of Yuki Terai), offering numerous options of consumption (included sexual) that are not possible with traditional idols (Black, 2006, 2012). In this sense, the female body becomes a “technological artifact” (Black, 2012, p. 217) that is owned by fans, possibly perpetuating beliefs of control and ownership over women and their bodies<sup>91</sup>. While only a few have their digital data accessible to audiences, all virtual idols and influencers are still designed in accordance with the masculine gaze (Ji et al., 2022) and manipulated by companies to serve their agendas. Even though they could be celebrated as replacements in the “industrialized commodification of [real] bodies” (Black, 2012, p. 213), they are still representations of women’s bodies from which profit is generated. In the end, they did not rupture the capitalization on women’s bodies, but contributed to it instead.

<sup>91</sup> Similar to what occurs with deepfake pornography, but actually incentivised by the industry.

Another immediate observation from this display of female virtual idols is the limited corporeal representations, which contribute to “aesthetic simplification” (Ji et al., 2022, p. 785). They either possess a slim and infantilized body<sup>92</sup> (e.g., petite frame and small breasts) or unnatural proportions (e.g., slim body with medium to big breasts, small waist, large hips, and long legs). In contrast, their clothing is more diverse, although when wearing sexual clothes, these are far bolder than those worn by real-world idols (e.g., K/DA and ae-Aespa).

This implies there are different strategies taking place. In the case of the petite idols, whose cuteness is emphasized, their pretty image and charm are designed to be above average just enough to not alienate or possibly offend audiences’ sensibilities (Black, 2008). This is particularly relevant if the target audiences are children and young teenagers who are under parental supervision. As for the more blatantly sexual virtual idols, their audiences clearly differ, encompassing young adults, most of whom have already been exposed to similar depictions in popular culture and videogames<sup>93</sup>. They are therefore more receptive of such depictions, especially when considering their recent discovery of sexuality. Meanwhile, idols such as Rozy who possess a body less exaggerated but still difficult to attain, and perform cheerfulness and docility, perfectly embody the femininity prized by the industry and society. This task, on the other hand, is much more difficult for real-world idols, who “can stage a performance of this femininity, but [will never be like] the virtual idol [who] is nothing but such a performance” (Black, 2012, p. 219).

As alerted by Ji et al. (2022) in relation to virtual influencers, and in line with chapter one’s discussion, these corporeal representations may negatively impact female audiences’ body image, as they compare themselves to these images and self-evaluate. However, there is still scarce empirical data that can testify this theory. Hence, the importance of the present thesis where, in the following chapter, suppositions on the impacts of Aespa’s sexualized virtual idols on both their real counterparts and on fans are verified through narrative analysis of the group’s videos in the case of the former, and survey research in the case of the latter. This will be done after first analysing Aespa’s promotional images to understand exactly how the avatars contribute to the sexualization and objectification of the real female idols.

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<sup>92</sup> In line with Japanese virtual idols like Kyoko Date, who “reflect a high level of concern with realism” (Black, 2008, p. 41) when comparing to overtly sexualized female portrayals common in Japanese animation.

<sup>93</sup> Videogame culture is very big in South Korea, where different generations play all sorts of videogames in “pc cafes”, stores where one pays a low fee per hour to play videogames on the dozens of computers available.

## **Chapter 3 – The Case of Aespa**

As initially stated, the scope of this thesis lies in analysing how the incorporation of new technologies into the concepts of K-pop groups can contribute to the sexualization and objectification of female idols. From thereon derived the following research question: “How do the avatars of Aespa contribute to the sexualization and objectification of female idols?”. In addition, and in light of the research developed so far surrounding the impacts these processes have on women, other questions naturally arose. These are concerned with the reading made by idols and fans of the avatars and how they are impacted by them. Rearticulated into question format they are as follows: “How are the idols of Aespa impacted by their avatars?” and “How are the female South Korean fans of Aespa impacted by the avatars?”.

As questions that required different methodologies, their answers will be given here separately, alongside the analysis necessary to provide such answers. The main research question will be addressed first, through a visual analysis of Aespa’s images complemented by a quantitative measure of their level of sexualization, followed by the two sub-questions which rely on other methods, such as narrative analysis (in the case of the first sub-question) and survey research (for the second sub-question).

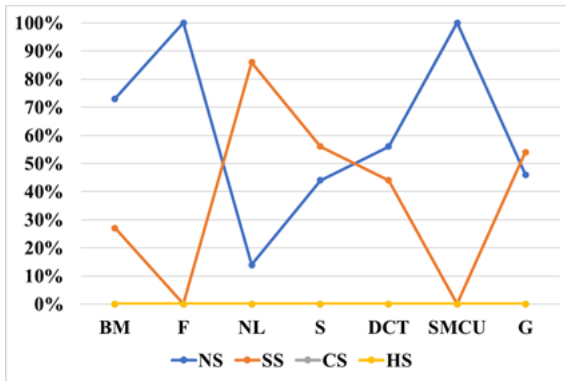
### **3.1. How the Avatars of Aespa Contribute to the Sexualization and Objectification of Female Idols**

#### **3.1.1. Visual Analysis of Aespa’s Images**

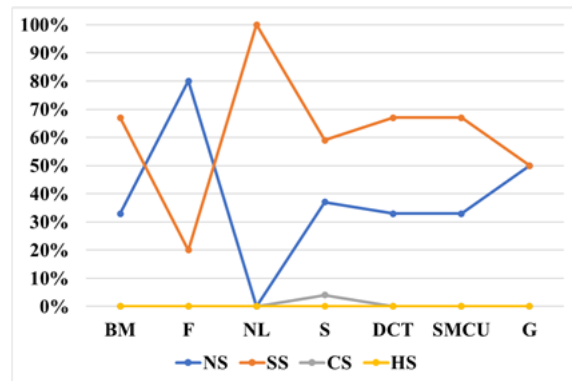
One of the first findings when conducting an analysis of the 278 images of Aespa through the mixed research method previously described was the absence of any sexualization trend throughout the group’s comebacks. As shown in graphs 1 to 4<sup>94</sup>, there was no tendency for either member to be more or less sexualized throughout time, that is, throughout the story that guides their concept.

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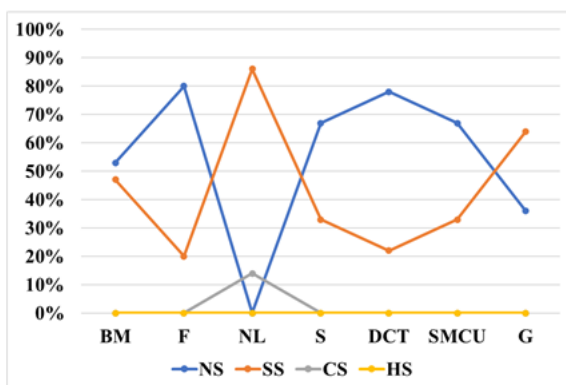
<sup>94</sup> These graphs indicate the percentage of images in every comeback that were considered “not sexualized” (NS), “slightly sexualized” (SS), “clearly sexualized” (CS), and “hyper-sexualized” (HS).



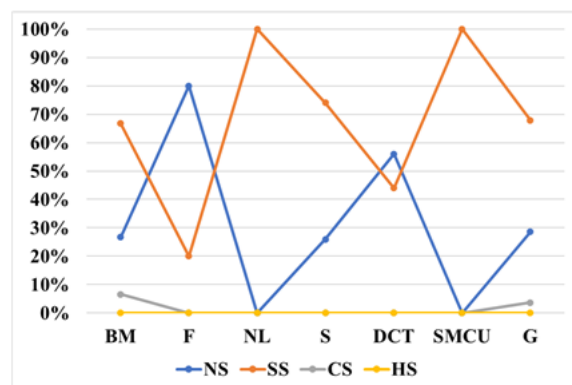
**Graph 1.** Trend for the different levels of sexualization in Giselle's images.



**Graph 2.** Trend for the different levels of sexualization in Karina's images.



**Graph 3.** Trend for the different levels of sexualization in Winter's images.



**Graph 4.** Trend for the different levels of sexualization in NingNing's images.

Even within each comeback, the scores obtained through the additive scale varied between images<sup>95</sup>. For this reason, the findings resultant from the analysis will not be here described in line with the comebacks' temporal order. Another reason for this decision lies in the replication of findings for the different comebacks, as will become apparent ahead. As such, and to avoid repetition, it was decided to report the findings by aspect under analysis in the following order: physical appearance (face, body, and hair), concept (clothes, makeup, and ambiance), attitude (eye focus, facial expressions, and poses), and point of view.

In terms of physical appearance, and as expected in a female K-pop group, where its members must match the beauty ideal in Korea, all members possess similar features (refer to figure 27), including the Chinese member, NingNing. All four have an oval V-shaped face (particularly pronounced in Karina), fair skin, a straight nose, fairly plump lips, straight eyebrows and almond-shaped dark brown eyes (although in all images they wear coloured

<sup>95</sup> As will be scrutinized ahead.

lenses, often grey, blue, and light brown) with double eyelid. While all are beautiful according to these standards, Karina is considered the main visual of the group, position attributed to those whose “beauty” overshines that of the other members. This is also in part due to her body proportions, as she is thin, a bit curvy and possesses the ideal height (167cm). Even though the other members are not as tall, particularly NingNing (161cm), they are all under strict regulation of their weight and body shape (slightly hourglass), maintaining a slim figure throughout their different comebacks (visible in figure 28).



**Figure 27.** Aespa in a teaser image for “Black Mamba”. From left to right: Karina, Giselle, Winter, and NingNing. Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CG-NJsjh0L/>

Regarding their hair, originally, all had dark brown or black hair, although they are often changing the colour as well as hairstyle, common practice in K-pop groups. Similar to their coloured lenses, they have also experimented with varied hair colours (e.g., light brown, blonde, bright red, light pink, etc.) except for Karina, who always wears dark tones, such as black with blue or purple highlights, or dark brown with red highlights. As the member who adheres the most to the Korean beauty ideal, the consistent preference for dark hair can be interpreted as a marketing strategy to portray this member as the traditional, yet modern, beauty. One other contribution to this image is her consistently long and often straight hair, like most members except Winter, who has cut her hair short for “Savage”.



**Figure 28.** Aespa in a teaser image for “Girls”. From left to right: ae-Winter, Giselle, ae-Karina, Karina, Winter, ae-NingNing, NingNing, and ae-Giselle. Source: [https://twitter.com/aespa\\_official/status/1544335445290393601/photo/1](https://twitter.com/aespa_official/status/1544335445290393601/photo/1)

When it comes to the avatars, they were designed to also replicate the beauty ideal aforementioned, surpassing the members in all aspects, as if to compensate for their “flaws” and “imperfections”. Their face is more pronouncedly V-shaped and thinner, their eyes bigger with more visible double lid, their noses more petite. Their eyes are also naturally light coloured, apparently desirable, since the real members, as well as the majority of idols in the industry, often hide their natural eye colour behind lenses. ae-Giselle has light grey-green eyes, ae-Karina has blue eyes, ae-Winter hazel eyes, and ae-NingNing light purple eyes. Their bodies are thinner, curvier, with big breasts and hips, small waists and their legs longer. Such depictions are often contested as unrealistic by netizens, as well as detrimental for setting unreachable standards, similar to the female representations in videogames and online worlds, as discussed in chapter one.

It could be argued that realism was never the goal when designing these avatars, as their animation-inspired look seems to suggest. As to why the company opted for this design rather than one that more closely resembled humans, it could be, in part, due to the Uncanny Valley Effect. According to this theory by Mori (1970/2012), people’s positive emotional responses towards technological entities (e.g., robots, avatars) are “enhanced up to a point of human realism, after which (...) [people become] quickly repulsed” (Hamilton, 2009, p. 7) and even uneasy.

As for their hair, contrary to the real members, it was kept the same throughout the comebacks. ae-Giselle has shoulder-length blonde hair, ae-Karina has long and wavy blue hair, ae-Winter has calf-length blonde and pink hair, and ae-NingNing waist-length and wavy light grey and pink hair.

Such consistency was also noticeable in the avatars’ outfits, barely changing throughout time, except for the addition of a jacket and earrings to ae-Giselle, and different boots for ae-Winter. This means they kept their highly exposing clothing in most images, as shown in table 1. All avatars wear outfits that are skin-tight and/or see-through. They wear either short skirts or shorts, low-cut shirts, tops or dresses with visible cleavage, and their midriffs are exposed.

**Table 1.** Degree of exposure of the avatars. The table shows the number of images of each avatar categorized according to the degree of exposure based on the criteria defined for the variable “Clothing/Nudity”.

	<b>Unrevealing</b>	<b>Slightly Revealing</b>	<b>Somewhat Revealing</b>	<b>Highly Revealing</b>	<b>Swimsuits &amp; Lingerie</b>	<b>No clothing</b>
<b>ae-Giselle</b>	0	2	0	4	5	0
<b>ae-Karina</b>	0	0	0	11	0	0
<b>ae-Winter</b>	0	0	0	11	0	0
<b>ae-NingNing</b>	0	0	0	11	0	0

All outfits are decorated with sequins and/or bright colours, similar to figure skaters and gymnasts’ clothes, combined with a retro style, a contrasting element to their virtual and futuristic essence. Such a choice, or rather, strategy, could be read in light of the recent revival of retro<sup>96</sup> style and music in the K-pop industry, popular among audiences, who have, in recent years, been exposed to “retro” South Korean television (e.g., variety shows, K-dramas, etc.), food, and general fashion (H. Y. Kim & Choi, 2016). Retro’s incorporation could also be seen, however, as a marketing strategy to instil a sense of nostalgia (H. Y. Kim & Choi, 2016; M. Oh & Kim, 2022) and familiarity<sup>97</sup>, which balance the fear of the unknown that these virtual entities still represent, while the metaverse has yet to become humans’ main realm of existence. They could have been envisioned as a source of comfort due to retro’s potential to overturn concerns about the dreary future through the awakening of nostalgic sensibilities<sup>98</sup> (H. Y. Kim & Choi, 2016). This is particularly relevant to young-adults in South Korea (the main audience of Aespa) who struggle for lack of prospects about their future in a highly competitive economy. They can then, satisfy their “nostalgic basking” (Suominen, 2007, p. 4) in this particular consumer good that is the K-pop group Aespa. Moreover, the fact that the avatars’ clothes as well as physicality remain the same may have a profound psychological effect on those who see and establish a relation with them, since

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<sup>96</sup> Originating from Latin, it refers to a returning, and could be interpreted as “seeking and yearning for acquainted set of rules and familiar fictional worlds” (Suominen, 2007, p. 3). Applied to fashion, it is about turning to an old style and recreating it in a modern way, while instilling nostalgia on the consumer (H. Y. Kim & Choi, 2016).

<sup>97</sup> Major factor in “retro” (M. Oh & Kim, 2022)

<sup>98</sup> Whether personal or collective/historical. In South Korea, various historical episodes, good or traumatic (e.g., Comfort Women issue) are intensely relived by subsequent generations that did not experience them directly. In this case, the retro fashion may evoke positive emotions related to the decades of prosperity lived by South Korea prior to the financial crisis in 1997, that contrast so strongly with the present harsh reality of many age groups.

their crystalized appearance can offer a sense of stability and comfort to the viewer who knows what to expect from an unchanging, familiar entity. By providing this feeling of familiarity, the avatars may be less threatening, better received by fans<sup>99</sup>.

On the whole, their clothing is unarguably overtly sexy, especially when comparing to that of the real members, who did wear some sexy clothes, but were tendentially less exposed. Despite the diversity of outfits worn in each comeback, the real members' exposure was limited to low necklines (very few with visible cleavage), skirts and shorts, and visible midriffs, justifying the results presented in table 2.

**Table 2.** Degree of exposure of the members. The table shows the percentage of images of each member categorized according to the degree of exposure based on the criteria defined for the variable "Clothing/Nudity".

	<b>Unrevealing</b>	<b>Slightly Revealing</b>	<b>Somewhat Revealing</b>	<b>Highly Revealing</b>	<b>Swimsuits &amp; Lingerie</b>	<b>No clothing</b>
<b>Giselle</b>	27,33%	63,83%	8,51%	0%	0%	0%
<b>Karina</b>	12,37%	60,82%	19,59%	7,22%	0%	0%
<b>Winter</b>	19,15%	64,89%	12,77%	3,19%	0%	0%
<b>NingNing</b>	7,45%	57,45%	28,72%	6,38%	0%	0%

While exposure was present to a lesser degree, the members did wear items and hairstyles that could be associated with sexual role play, namely BDSM and infantilization, which did not happen with the avatars. There were even images reminiscent of Pet Play<sup>100</sup>, as evidenced by table 3.

**Table 3.** Sexual Role Play. Number of images of each member that were considered reminiscent of different types of sexual role play.

	<b>BDSM</b>	<b>Infantilization</b>	<b>BDSM + Infantilization</b>	<b>Pet Play</b>
<b>Giselle</b>	18	17	1	0
<b>Karina</b>	9	9	0	1
<b>Winter</b>	12	12	0	0
<b>NingNing</b>	6	9	0	1

<sup>99</sup> Not entirely farfetched when considering previous studies' results. In Schöbel et al. (2019) experiment, the authors confirmed people's preference for avatars they are familiar with, with whom they can develop some sort of relationship and even emotional attachment.

<sup>100</sup> Sexual practice where one of the partners plays the role of a pet by wearing clothing or accessories that are reminiscent of a certain animal and acting like it.

Chain necklaces and bracelets were common accessories, especially during “Savage”, and while these alone cannot point to BDSM, they were, on a few occasions, combined with other conspicuous elements such as leather (perceived as a symbol of sado-masochistic desires; W.-H. Lee & Oh, 2001), collars, chockers and even locks, all working together to evoke a sexual imagery. As mentioned, these were particularly common during “Savage”, but they were also noticeable in “Next Level” and “Girls”. The resource to these elements during these particular comebacks, as well as darker clothes, evoking a goth<sup>101</sup> vibe, can be understood in light of the guiding story. In “Next Level”, “Savage” and “Girls”, the members are either preparing to fight or actually fighting their antagonist. As such, they are armed with a powerful and dominant aura<sup>102</sup>. Any threatening sensations this empowered performance may arouse are balanced out by the chains and chokers<sup>103</sup>, which forbid the girls from achieving true dominance as they wear the shackles of the submissive.

As for infantilization, this was constructed through not only the use of childish clothing (bows in clothes and hair, school girl skirts, fluffy accessories, etc.) and hairstyles (e.g., pigtails), but also through their poses (e.g., feet pointing inward), facial expressions (e.g., pouting), props (e.g., emoji and heart balloons) and scenery (e.g., teenage room). Since infantilization is a common trope in K-pop girl concepts<sup>104</sup>, even in girl crush ones, as introduced in chapter two, it comes as no surprise they be found in Aespa’s images too (mostly in “Forever”, “Dreams Come True”, “SMCU”, and “Girls”).

Figures 29 and 30 are clear examples of how ambiance also assumes a crucial role in the sexualization of the idols. In figure 29, Giselle’s purity is highlighted by the celestial white light coming from behind her, giving the impression that she is an unsullied female body, pure and virgin, state that is threatened by her passive yet inviting facial expression. In figure 30, Karina’s seductive antics are amplified by her sensual environment, created by the light

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<sup>101</sup> Gothic features and elements have been reported to be often present in K-pop fashion, whether through garments, accessories (e.g., chains, chockers and crosses) or dark smoky eye-makeup, and can often carry erotic connotations (see Y.-K. Lee, 2013).

<sup>102</sup> To which contributes their darker smoky eye-makeup, also present in “Savage”, but not in the other comebacks where the eye-shadow is lighter, occasionally accompanied by dark and thin eyeliner.

<sup>103</sup> When initially incorporated into K-pop fashion, chains and chockers might have been symbols of rebelliousness as argued by Y.-K. Lee (2013). Nowadays, however, this reading is less plausible given how common these elements are among girl crush groups, which dominate the market.

<sup>104</sup> One may wonder if this strategic incorporation of infantilization is mostly directed at foreign markets, as the industry takes advantage of the western conception of East Asian women as dolls, both infantilized and sexualized (Raymundo, 2019), and feeds it in turn.



**Figure 29.** Giselle in a teaser image for “Forever”. Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/Ck0HF9yhghH/>



**Figure 30.** Karina in a teaser image for “Black Mamba”. Source: [https://www.instagram.com/p/CG2es2LhX\\_h/](https://www.instagram.com/p/CG2es2LhX_h/)

smoke effects that provoke a sense of haziness and pleasurable intoxication in the viewer. Her golden and silver accessories too serve their purpose, as their reflective properties create mysterious effects, only

possible under dim lights. This way it is “create[d] a kind of beauty of the shadows” (Tanizaki, 1933/1977, p.29), appealing for being soothing and intimate, impossible under other conditions such as direct strong lighting. Numerous images of Aespa are set in conditions of dim light<sup>105</sup> (e.g., figures 31 and 32).



**Figure 31.** Karina in a teaser image for “Next Level” 1. Source: [https://twitter.com/aespa\\_official/status/1392494787530399745?ext=HHwWgoCpbWokdMmAAAA](https://twitter.com/aespa_official/status/1392494787530399745?ext=HHwWgoCpbWokdMmAAAA)



**Figure 32.** NingNing in a teaser image for “Girls” 1. Source: [https://twitter.com/aespa\\_official/status/1544697932800151552](https://twitter.com/aespa_official/status/1544697932800151552)

In addition to light reflection and “smoky light”, there are other effects like those in figures 33, 34 and 35<sup>106</sup> that should be analysed for their strategical execution. In these images, the members appear to be going through a process of transfiguration, where they

<sup>105</sup> There are, nonetheless, various other images of the group where shadows are completely eliminated by strong sources of light, such as camera flashes.

<sup>106</sup> In images with dark backgrounds, the members’ porcelain-like skin is highlighted and the attention of the viewer directed towards the exposed body parts.

abandon their material bodies and become spectres. In light of their concept, their transformation could also be interpreted as the act of abandoning the real for the virtual, as their physical bodies are unsustainable in the dimension where they must face their antagonist. It is a plausible reading when considering episode two of their miniseries *SMCU*, where it is shown how the girls enter the virtual realm: by fusing with their avatars, leaving their bodies behind. The idea of an unsustainable and flawed female body is once more evidenced, but so is the opportunity to escape from the shackles of materiality towards a dimension with the potential to rewrite stereotypes and traditional narratives of gender, to which the body is often closely tied. The latter interpretation is a hopeful one that is hindered by the fact that the avatars actually emphasise stereotypical female bodies, and are even more sexualized than the members.



**Figure 33.** Winter in a teaser image for “Savage” 1. Source: [https://twitter.com/aespa\\_official/status/144214220765006234](https://twitter.com/aespa_official/status/144214220765006234)

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**Figure 34.** Karina in a teaser image for “Savage” 1. Source: [https://twitter.com/aespa\\_official/status/144214198916883660](https://twitter.com/aespa_official/status/144214198916883660)

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**Figure 35.** NingNing in a teaser image for “Savage” 1. Source: [https://twitter.com/aespa\\_official/status/1443229122872840192](https://twitter.com/aespa_official/status/1443229122872840192)

Ambiance also includes colours (e.g., red, orange and dark pink were often used in more intimate and sensual images, like figures 31 and 32) and scenery. In “Black Mamba”, “Dreams Come True” and “Girls”, there are images set in natural environments. While the images in “Black Mamba” (figure 36) and “Girls” (figure 37) are set outside, in an exotic wildflower meadow and volcanic space respectively, those of “Dreams Come True” (figure 38) are situated inside a greenhouse. The way the members dress, pose and interact with all these spaces transpires a harmonious co-existence, as if that is where they, women, belong. This idea is further emphasized by nature’s invasion of indoor spaces (like the greenhouse),

as if following the girls wherever they are. The nature-culture binary suggested by Ortner (1972) is perfectly evidenced here.



**Figure 36.** NingNing in a teaser image for “Black Mamba” 1. Source: [https://www.instagram.com/p/CG5Di\\_KB6gp/](https://www.instagram.com/p/CG5Di_KB6gp/)



**Figure 37.** Aespa in a teaser image for “Girls”. From left to right: Karina, Winter, Giselle, NingNing. Source: [https://twitter.com/aespa\\_official/status/1542523427021459463](https://twitter.com/aespa_official/status/1542523427021459463)



**Figure 38.** Giselle in a teaser image for “Dreams Come True”. Source: [https://twitter.com/aespa\\_official/status/1471042451658113025](https://twitter.com/aespa_official/status/1471042451658113025)

Images in “Black Mamba” and “Girls” depict scenes occurring during sunset and sunrise respectively. The sensation produced is that of calmness and intimacy, while evoking a sense of mystery, particularly during sunset, instances before the night (bearer of secrets and the unknown) settles. It is during the night, when only the moonlight penetrates the windows, that “Dreams Come True” takes place. Here, the viewer gazes upon a secret, pure and supernatural existence - fairies (the members) - a sight only available to night dwellers. The members are kept inside a greenhouse, as if they were delicate creatures that ought to be protected from any defilement. Their safety is guaranteed by the greenhouse, kept intact by strong Roman columns, conspicuous phallic elements and symbols of masculinity. Are they then, truly being protected, or kept as decorative items, whose beauty pleases the eye of their male keeper? Even in case of the former, are they such fragile bodies that need protection?

This objectified existence is more evident in “Forever”, where the members are kept inside a snow globe (figures 39 and 40). Inside an object that symbolizes childhood innocence and purity, the members become further infused with these traditionally valued virtues. Similar to the greenhouse, the snow globe offers both a safe house and prison to the girls, who are restricted to the inside world, to the private dimension, as was done in Korea for centuries.



**Figure 39.** Aespa in a teaser image for “Forever”. From left to right: Giselle, Winter, Karina, NingNing. Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CK2r1eiBAf8/?hl=en>



**Figure 40.** Snow globe from teaser image for “Forever”. Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CK0HF9yhghH/>

Their innocence is abruptly ruptured in figures like 37, where the colourful flowers from “Dreams Come True” and “Black Mamba”, the white snow’s purity of “Forever”, and the teenage bedroom and arcade from “Girls” are replaced by the dark volcanic rocks. Similar to the volcano as a symbol of creation and power, the girls are reborn as empowered, even if only virtually. A similar scenery is also present in “Savage”.

There are, however, numerous images that are not set in nature, but in ambiguous spaces, like figures 41 to 43. The lack of decorations and use of a single colour for the background suggest the members exist, in that instance, in a transitional space or in the void. It is as if the girls are navigating the path between the real and the virtual worlds. In these spaces, they meet their avatars, preparing to fuse with them to finally arrive in KWANGYA.



**Figure 41.** Giselle (left) and ae-Giselle (right) in a teaser image for “Savage”. Source: [https://twitter.com/aespa\\_official/status/1443954386569351170](https://twitter.com/aespa_official/status/1443954386569351170)



**Figure 42.** Karina (right) and ae-Karina (left) in a teaser image for “Savage”. Source: [https://twitter.com/aespa\\_official/status/1443953865234141191](https://twitter.com/aespa_official/status/1443953865234141191)



**Figure 43.** NingNing (right) and ae-NingNing (left) in a teaser image for “Savage”. Source: [https://twitter.com/aespa\\_official/status/1443954161976954891](https://twitter.com/aespa_official/status/1443954161976954891)

There are yet other spaces worth of scrutiny. They are places where the members' consciousness lies trapped after having succumbed to the Black Mamba's hypnosis<sup>107</sup>. Images such as the ones below depict the members as truly powerless, as they are tied (44), swallowed (45), and held captive under strict surveillance (46). Together with their plain clothing and passive poses, the threatening background and technological imagery produce images where the girls' passivity, weakness and innocence are exacerbated (although offering slight resistance through their defiant eyes in figures 45 and 46). The members are portrayed as prey of technology, which freely manipulates them in a manner that could evidence its use as an apparatus of male dominance.



**Figure 44.** Karina in a teaser image for “Savage” 2. Source: [https://twitter.com/aespa\\_official/status/144286670370512896](https://twitter.com/aespa_official/status/144286670370512896)

3



**Figure 45.** NingNing in a teaser image for “Savage” 2. Source: [https://twitter.com/aespa\\_official/status/1443229122872840192](https://twitter.com/aespa_official/status/1443229122872840192)



**Figure 46.** Winter in a teaser image for “Savage” 2. Source: [https://twitter.com/aespa\\_official/status/144322910656116326](https://twitter.com/aespa_official/status/144322910656116326)

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Fans of the popular Japanese animation *Ghost in the Shell*<sup>108</sup> may find figure 44 reminiscent of a popular scene where technological bodies are fused with human brains, producing cyborgs of equal appearance, as if machines from a factory. Aware of this similarity, Karina becomes, in the eye of the viewer, a girl engulfed by technology, soon to be manipulated and transformed into a “perfected” existence alongside many other girls. It is a concerning interpretation when taken into consideration such a process is actually occurring, not in these same moulds, but through other bodily manipulations. Such is

<sup>107</sup> Refer to episode two of the *SMCU* mini-series.

<sup>108</sup> Japanese cyberpunk media franchise based on the manga series *The Ghost in the Shell* by Masamune Shirow (1989). The animation mentioned in the text refers to the 1995 film adaptation, directed by Mamoru Oshii. This film is set in mid-21<sup>st</sup> century Japan and it follows the cyborg security agent Motoko Kusanagi as she hunts down a hacker, the Puppet Master. More than an action film, it also strives to reflect on the matter of self-identity in a technologically advanced society.

especially true in South Korea, where, as seen in previous chapters, society strictly conforms to one standard of beauty and femininity, and the cosmetic industry has flourished in order to appease but also foment this necessity for enhancement.

Sexual submissiveness is once more highlighted, particularly in this same image, suggestive of bondage<sup>109</sup>. Karina’s ecstasy (shown through her facial expression) and full surrender (arms and legs hanging freely) greatly contribute to this interpretation. It is important to note that being sexually submissive or masochist is not necessarily proof of men’s dominance over women, for it can be a sexual preference (not here criticized). Its mention in this analysis has the sole purpose of pointing out the sexualized elements in the image.

Besides being the image where the influence of technology is most conspicuous, it is also Karina’s most sexualized image, scoring a total of ten points in the sexualization scale. Although it could be a coincidence, the quantitative analysis did suggest a possible tendency for comebacks where technology (specifically, virtuality) is more deeply incorporated to be, on average, more sexualized<sup>110</sup>. For instance, all members were, on average, more sexualized during their “Next Level” comeback, as shown in table 4 (grey highlight).

**Table 4.** Average sexualization score of each member for each comeback.

	<b>Black Mamba</b>	<b>Forever</b>	<b>Next Level</b>	<b>Savage</b>	<b>DCT</b>	<b>SMCU</b>	<b>Girls</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>
<b>Giselle</b>	3,93	3	5,71	4,7	4,44	3,67	4,96	4,59
<b>Karina</b>	5,33	3	6,57	4,85	4,56	5	4,57	4,87
<b>Winter</b>	4,2	3,4	7,29	4,26	3,56	3,33	5,21	4,62
<b>NingNing</b>	6	3,67	7	5,44	4,33	6,33	5,46	5,46

In “Next Level”, the members exist in a virtual dimension, surrounded by abstract digital shapes (figures 47 and 48) and digital versions of real-world nature (figure 49) and buildings (e.g., cathedral; figure 50). While the scenery by itself might not produce sexualized images, the whole digital concept does so by guiding the choices for these particular backgrounds and clothing, that must be analysed together. Considered unconventional outfits under

<sup>109</sup> Sexual practice where the submissive element in the relationship is tied up by the dominant partner.

<sup>110</sup> Keeping in mind, however, that the different comebacks did not have the same number of images.



**Figure 47.** Aespa in a teaser image for “Next Level”. From left to right: NingNing, Winter, Karina, Giselle.

Source:

[https://twitter.com/aespa\\_official/status/1391770010935193607?ext=HHwWjsCr7e7cx9AmAAAA](https://twitter.com/aespa_official/status/1391770010935193607?ext=HHwWjsCr7e7cx9AmAAAA)

normal conditions, here they remind those worn by female characters in a fantasy videogame: warrior clothes (figures 48, 49 and 50) and medieval-inspired outfits (figure 47) that, rather than providing protection (e.g., through armour) and mirroring their strength, leave them unnecessarily exposed (cleavage, midribs, and thighs).



**Figure 48.** Karina in a teaser image for “Next Level” 2. Source:

[https://twitter.com/aespa\\_official/status/1390501658786811906?ext=HHwWhMCi-Yb5hswmAAAA](https://twitter.com/aespa_official/status/1390501658786811906?ext=HHwWhMCi-Yb5hswmAAAA)



**Figure 49.** Winter in a teaser image for “Next Level”. Source:

[https://twitter.com/aespa\\_official/status/1390864046560145413?ext=HHwWisCJoebeq80mAAAA](https://twitter.com/aespa_official/status/1390864046560145413?ext=HHwWisCJoebeq80mAAAA)



**Figure 50.** NingNing in a teaser image for “Next Level”. Source:

[https://twitter.com/aespa\\_official/status/1391588815119163392?ext=HHwWgICt6fCp9e8mAAAA](https://twitter.com/aespa_official/status/1391588815119163392?ext=HHwWgICt6fCp9e8mAAAA)

Regarding the avatars, they appeared only in 11 images each, accompanied solely by their corresponding member (four images), by the other avatars (figure 51) or by all members and other avatars (seven images). As such, they did not experience as many conditions of ambiance as the real members, which was perhaps overcompensated by their hypersexualized bodies. They were never present in natural (either flowery or volcanic)



**Figure 51.** ae-Aespa in teaser image for “Black Mamba”. From left to right: ae-Giselle, ae-Winter, ae-Karina, ae-NingNing. Source:

<https://www.instagram.com/p/CHiQPoS8Bipl/>

and infantilized (teenage room) spaces, nor enclosed (in a greenhouse and snow globe). They were also never held captive by Black Mamba. Their absence from these spaces and conditions portrays them as more resilient, less innocent or submissive.

The avatars are present mostly in images depicting the real world, such as inside a warehouse, backstage, arcade, and a living-room. With the exception of backstage, all the other spaces are decorated in retro and vintage styles, complementing their own design. Although the members also appear in these places, the avatars are mostly depicted in these conditions only, conditions that intensify the feeling of familiarity otherwise lost if they were to be shown in their own environment, the virtual dimension. Their presence in real spaces is also preferable since it allows them to stand out, rather than blending in with the background, as occurs in the few instances they are in a virtual setting (figure 52). This way, focus is actually given to the members, the foreign and disruptive elements to the harmonious virtual image. As previously shown, the avatars also appear in the transitional space alongside their corresponding members, with whom they are on equal terms (neither more nor less dominant).



**Figure 52.** Aespa in a teaser image for “Next Level”. From left to right: ae-NingNing, NingNing, ae-Winter, Winter, Karina, ae-Karina, Giselle, ae-Giselle. Source: [https://twitter.com/aespa\\_official/status/1391770010935193607?ext=HHwWjsCr7e7cx9AmAAAA](https://twitter.com/aespa_official/status/1391770010935193607?ext=HHwWjsCr7e7cx9AmAAAA)

They were also subjected to less diverse lighting effects, being mostly under bright lighting and camera flashes, conditions that allow the viewer to better focus on their exposed body parts. Only in “Savage” can they be seen under dim light, which increases the shadows, consequently emphasising the contours in their bodies, particularly in the breasts, hips, and buttocks areas (refer to figures 41 and 42). Albeit differently, both conditions induce the viewer to reduce the avatars to their body parts and the sexual allure they possess. In other words, their sexualization and objectification, already accomplished through their design, clothing and poses, are augmented.

With regard to attitude, contrary to what was observed in studies of old covers of Korean women’s magazines (see S.-J. Lee, 2006) and of classical nude paintings of women by

Korean artists (see Sohyun Kim & Chun, 2020), the majority of images of the real members of Aespa had them looking at the camera (as shown in table 5).

**Table 5.** Eye focus of the members. The table shows the percentage of images of each member where their gaze was directed away or towards the camera.

	<b>Not looking at the camera</b>	<b>Looking at the camera</b>
<b>Giselle</b>	8,51%	91,49%
<b>Karina</b>	17,53%	82,47%
<b>Winter</b>	15,96%	84,04%
<b>NingNing</b>	13,83%	86,17%

Moreover, in most of these images they were serious, angry, seductive or smiling, rarely showing passive, insecure or even fearful expressions, although these did occur as well. This clearly demonstrates a shift in how women<sup>111</sup> are viewed, as they were previously portrayed and preferred as passive bodies with passive gazes, who did not face the viewer, therefore creating a sensation of voyeurism<sup>112</sup>. As Sohyun Kim and Chun (2020) point out, there was a certain “voyeuristic joy” (p. 243) that derived from the desire to dominate and control the female body. Having the idols look directly at the camera challenged this female passivity and male dominance, as it left the viewer less comfortable to objectify them (S.-J. Lee, 2006).

However, voyeurism was not necessarily eliminated even in these images where the members faced the camera. The members often wore see-through clothing or pieces that had gaps, providing glimpses of skin. According to W.-H. Lee and Oh (2001) and Sohyun Kim and Chun (2020), this is one other form of voyeurism. There were also some images of Aespa where voyeurism was actually simulated through the use of fish eye lenses. In figures 53 to 55 the idols interacted sensually with the camera as if discovering a secret camera, object they do not condone having been secretly installed. The voyeur is acknowledged and the performance proceeds.

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<sup>111</sup> Who were actually hardly painted previous to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as it was considered improper to gaze upon and enjoy a woman’s figure (S.-J. Lee, 2006). Even older erotic paintings were quite conservative, as the artists opted not to focus so much on the sexual act itself or sexual techniques. When bodies were exposed, women were either covered by clothing or by the male body (see W. W. Kim, 2020).

<sup>112</sup> One of the main components of eroticism, alongside narcissism, fetishism, masochism, and sadism (W.-H. Lee & Oh, 2001).



**Figure 53.** NingNing in a teaser image for “Dreams Come True”. Source:

[https://twitter.com/aespa\\_official/status/147176716588823347](https://twitter.com/aespa_official/status/147176716588823347)

6



**Figure 54.** Karina in a teaser image for “Dreams Come True”. Source:

[https://twitter.com/aespa\\_official/status/147176713274485965](https://twitter.com/aespa_official/status/147176713274485965)

0



**Figure 55.** Giselle in a teaser image for “Dreams Come True” 2. Source:

[https://twitter.com/aespa\\_official/status/147176720502111846](https://twitter.com/aespa_official/status/147176720502111846)

8

The avatars’ previously described characterization of being more resilient, less innocent or submissive, is further strengthened by their confident poses and facial expressions, as well as their gaze directed towards the camera. As shown in table 6, the avatars were mostly depicted facing the camera and when they were not, they were looking at their real-life counterparts, acknowledgement that was rarely shown by the members in relation to the avatars.

**Table 6.** Eye focus of the avatars. The table shows the number of images of each avatar where their gaze was directed away or towards the camera.

	Not looking at the camera	Looking at the camera
ae-Giselle	0	11
ae-Karina	3	8
ae-Winter	6	5
ae-NingNing	3	8

Regarding poses, another criterion in the analysis of attitude, there is a clear contrast between the diversity performed by the idols and the “confident and sensual” template applied to the avatars. The idols’ poses included, among many others: infantile (e.g., sitting with legs stretched; figure 56), pure (e.g., reaching for something while executing a delicate and calm gesture as in figures 36 and 57), passive and fragile (e.g., fallen on stairs or fearfully holding hands in front of chest; figures 38 and 58 respectively), confident and challenging

(e.g., figures 48 to 50), sensual (e.g., arms lifted and slightly covering their faces – figure 30; leaning forward – figure 31; laying on their side – Karina in figure 37; emphasising their body shapes – figure 52; hands resting on their thighs and necks – Giselle in figure 52; etc.).



**Figure 56.** Karina in a teaser image for “Forever” 1. Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CKu9YxwB4B/>



**Figure 57.** Karina in a teaser image for “Forever” 2. Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/Ck0HF9yhghH/>



**Figure 58.** Winter in a teaser image for “Savage” 3. Source: [https://twitter.com/aespa\\_official/status/1444678699027103746](https://twitter.com/aespa_official/status/1444678699027103746)

Whether explicitly sensual (like figure 30) or not, various poses (including infantile, passive and confident) were classified as suggestive according to the quantitative analysis, as evidenced in table 7. In some instances, some were even charged with clear sexual tension, albeit to a much lesser degree.

**Table 7.** Members’ poses. The table shows the percentage of images of each member where their poses were categorized according to the degree of sensuality based on the criteria defined for the variable “Pose”.

	Not Sexual	Suggestive Pose	Sexual
<b>Giselle</b>	47,87%	44,68%	7,45%
<b>Karina</b>	50,52%	43,30%	6,19%
<b>Winter</b>	31,91%	58,51%	9,57%
<b>NingNing</b>	43,62%	46,81%	9,57%

The avatars, on the other hand, only posed confidently and/or sensually (e.g., by emphasizing their body shapes). Figure 59 evidences all three conditions: confident, sexy, and sexy with a confident attitude. Most of the time, their poses were suggestive, as evidenced by table 8.



**Figure 59.** Aespa in a teaser image for “SMCU”. From left to right: ae-Winter, NingNing, ae-NingNing, Karina, Winter, ae-Giselle, Giselle, ae-Karina. Source: [https://twitter.com/aespa\\_official/status/1472582682878279690](https://twitter.com/aespa_official/status/1472582682878279690)

**Table 8.** Avatars’ poses. The table shows the number of images of each avatar where their poses were categorized according to the degree of sensuality based on the criteria defined for the variable “Pose”.

	Not Sexual	Suggestive Pose	Sexual
ae-Giselle	1	10	0
ae-Karina	4	7	0
ae-Winter	1	9	1
ae-NingNing	3	8	0

Finally, the angle (point of view) can also contribute to the sexualization of an image, for instance, by simulating voyeurism through the use of high angles as occurs in figure 54.

This same angle was used to construct other types of sexualized images, like infantile ones (reminiscent of sexual role play). When combined with “infantile” elements (e.g., clothes, expressions, props, etc.), the use of high angles provided the sensation that the viewer is looking down on a child who, in turn, is looking up while acting clumsy (figure 60), waiting for a reward (figure 61) or even punishment (figure 62).



**Figure 60.** NingNing in a teaser image for “Girls” 2. Source: [https://twitter.com/aespa\\_official/status/1539271206884773888](https://twitter.com/aespa_official/status/1539271206884773888)



**Figure 61.** Giselle in a teaser image for “Girls”. Source: [https://twitter.com/aespa\\_official/status/1544335445290393601](https://twitter.com/aespa_official/status/1544335445290393601)



**Figure 62.** Giselle in a teaser image for “Dreams Come True” 3. Source: [https://twitter.com/aespa\\_official/status/1471767205021118468](https://twitter.com/aespa_official/status/1471767205021118468)

Similarly, low angles and eye level shots can stimulate varied sexualized interpretations. Low angles did so in two different ways. First, their use provided intimate views of the idols that the viewer would not normally have. In figures 63 to 65, for instance, the members are posing with their legs spread apart while being shot from below, giving the viewer access to gaze upon their genital area<sup>113</sup>. Similar to the snake in the images, the viewer too possesses a slithering animal’s point of view, from the ground upwards. Considering the symbolism of the snake in Aespa’s story, it is fairly easy to extrapolate its meaning onto the viewer, formerly a passive observer but here, a predator, ready to devour the idols who are distracted (figures 63 and 64) or resigned to their fate (figure 65). The snake then, can clearly have a sexual connotation, exacerbated by its phallic shape.



**Figure 63.** Winter in a teaser image for “Savage” 4. Source: [https://twitter.com/aespa\\_official/status/1440692394601504774?ext=HHwWjCjrbGGr\\_4nAAA](https://twitter.com/aespa_official/status/1440692394601504774?ext=HHwWjCjrbGGr_4nAAA)



**Figure 64.** Karina in a teaser image for “Savage” 3. Source: [https://twitter.com/aespa\\_official/status/1441054763185893378?ext=HHwWhMCj2YHr0\\_8nAAAA](https://twitter.com/aespa_official/status/1441054763185893378?ext=HHwWhMCj2YHr0_8nAAAA)



**Figure 65.** NingNing in a teaser image for “Savage” 3. Source: [https://twitter.com/aespa\\_official/status/1440692375672688652?ext=HHwWmMCsqaSFr\\_4nAAAA](https://twitter.com/aespa_official/status/1440692375672688652?ext=HHwWmMCsqaSFr_4nAAAA)

<sup>113</sup> Moreover, Karina and NingNing’s furry outfits and crawling poses are suggestive of Pet Play, therefore contributing to the images’ sexualization.

Conversely, low angles also provided a dominant depiction of the idols, particularly when complemented with facial expressions of superiority. For example, in figures 66 and 67, the idols are looking down on the viewer in an empowering manner, with serious stares rather than sexy or passive. However, the viewer can also interpret these images in a sexualized way, that is, with a masochist's gaze. After all, images have their own agency, allowing a multitude of interpretations, and such a reading is fairly quick to make in these images where the idols' outfits are somewhat sexual and in figures like 68, where the idol is making a seductive expression.



**Figure 66.** Aespa in a teaser image for “Savage” 1. From left to right: Giselle, Karina, Winter, NingNing. Source: [https://twitter.com/aespa\\_official/status/1441417144428756999?ext=HHwWjoCsrbdQ-IAoAAAA](https://twitter.com/aespa_official/status/1441417144428756999?ext=HHwWjoCsrbdQ-IAoAAAA)



**Figure 67.** Aespa in a teaser image for “Savage” 2. From left to right: Giselle, Karina, Winter, NingNing. Source: [https://twitter.com/aespa\\_official/status/1444316342438424578](https://twitter.com/aespa_official/status/1444316342438424578)



**Figure 68.** Karina (right) and ae-Karina (left) in a teaser image for “Black Mamba”. Source: [https://www.instagram.com/p/C\\_HahyvpBJJP/](https://www.instagram.com/p/C_HahyvpBJJP/)

As for eye level shots, these were used in the majority of images (as shown in table 9), particularly in those where there was more proximity with the idol, providing a sense of familiarity and closeness between idol and viewer. Occasionally, this closeness was platonic (like figure 69), but in most images there was actual sexual tension (refer to figures 29 and 30), a display of availability that perpetuates the imaginary girlfriend role played by female K-pop idols who are forbidden from dating and committed to fanservice.



**Figure 69.** Winter in a teaser image for “SMCU”. Source: [https://twitter.com/aespa\\_official/status/1472582762318405632](https://twitter.com/aespa_official/status/1472582762318405632)

**Table 9.** Point of view of the members. The table shows the percentage of images of each member taken from a low angle, at eye level or from a high angle.

	<b>Low angle</b>	<b>Eye level</b>	<b>High angle</b>
<b>Giselle</b>	23,40%	53,19%	23,40%
<b>Karina</b>	26,80%	52,58%	20,62%
<b>Winter</b>	19,15%	55,32%	25,53%
<b>NingNing</b>	24,47%	52,13%	23,40%

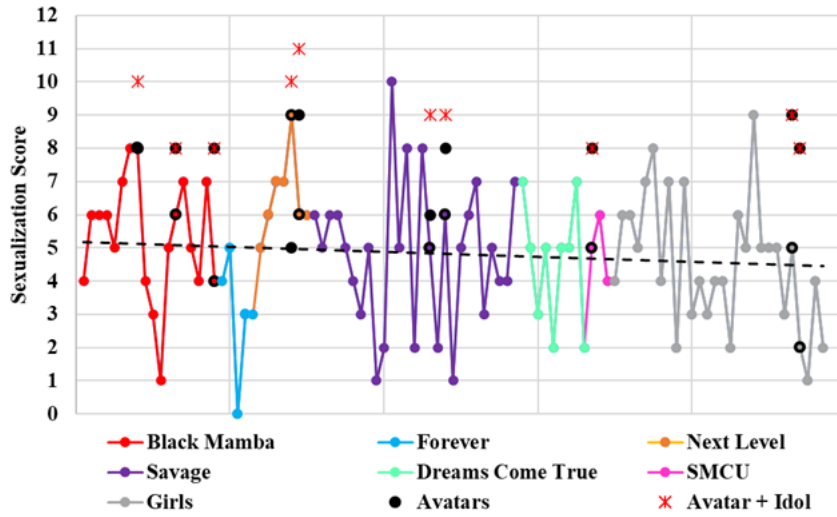
In the case of the avatars, the majority of shots were taken at eye level (refer to table 10) with no clear strategy. Moreover, most of these shots were taken from afar, allowing the viewer to contemplate their full bodies. The low angles were equally mostly taken from afar and their use allowed for an emphasis on their inner thighs and buttocks, while distorting the images to make their legs seem even longer (e.g., figures 42 and 51). As for the high angles, these mostly served to emphasise their breasts by providing a better view of their cleavages. There was also no clear distinction in each angle's contribution to portraying the avatars as more dominant and confident, as these entities already expressed these through their poses and faces. As such, no angle could contribute to their infantilization either, as it was inexistent.

**Table 10.** Point of view of the avatars. The table shows the number of images of each avatar taken from a low angle, at eye level or from a high angle.

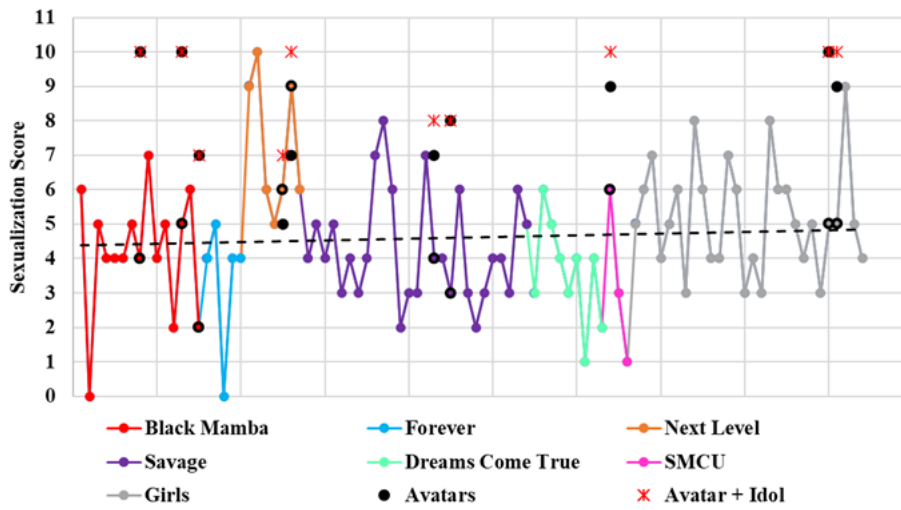
	<b>Low angle</b>	<b>Eye level</b>	<b>High angle</b>
<b>ae-Giselle</b>	3	6	2
<b>ae-Karina</b>	3	8	0
<b>ae-Winter</b>	4	6	1
<b>ae-NingNing</b>	5	4	2

From the exhaustive analysis conducted so far of each aspect, we can begin to draw some conclusions on how the avatars contribute to the members' sexualization. Based on the avatars' design and rare presence in Aespa's images and music videos, which denies them the chance to be portrayed in other ways than the sexualized ones augmented, for instance, by the conditions of ambiance (e.g., lighting) and angles previously described, the avatars' contribution can be interpreted to occur in three ways:

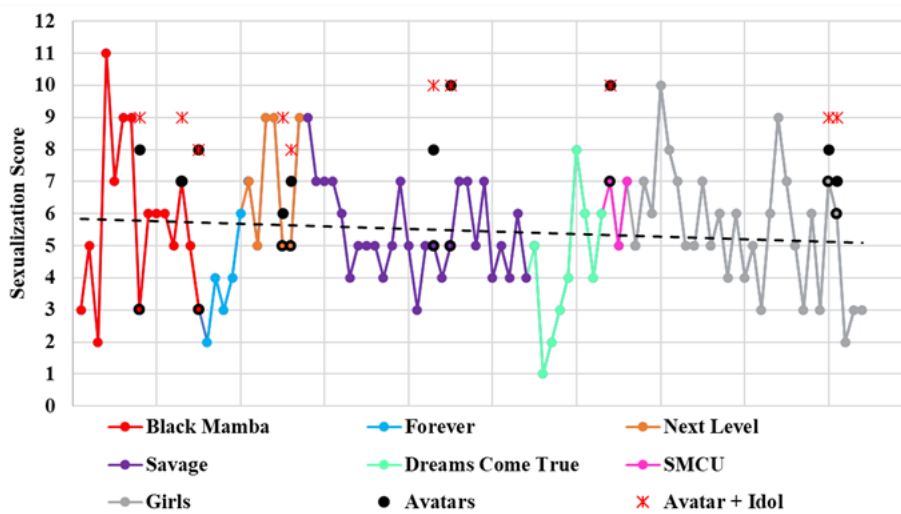




**Graph 6.** Karina and ae-Karina's sexualization scores throughout the comebacks.



**Graph 7.** Winter and ae-Winter's sexualization scores throughout the comebacks.



**Graph 8.** NingNing and ae-NingNing's sexualization scores throughout the comebacks.

Looking at graphs 5 to 8, it becomes clear that, for all members, in most images where avatar and idol were present, the avatar was more sexualized than the idol. In these cases, the overall score was either equal or above that of the avatar, who was thus the major contributor to the overall score's increase after scoring more for more variables (refer to tables B9 to B12 in Appendix B for more details).

Except for Winter, there were images where both idol and avatar were present where the other members scored the same as their avatars. This occurred once for each member: once during "Next Level" for Giselle (figure 52<sup>116</sup>) and once during "Black Mamba" for both Karina (figure 68<sup>117</sup>) and NingNing (figure 70<sup>118</sup>). In these images, both idol and avatar contributed equally to the overall score's increase, scoring more for



**Figure 70.** Cropped image from teaser photograph of Aespa and ae-Aespa for "Black Mamba". From left to right: Winter, ae-NingNing, ae-Karina, Giselle, ae-Giselle, NingNing. Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CHfif-BBKLr/>



**Figure 71.** Winter (right) and ae-Winter (left) in a teaser image for "Next Level". Source: [https://twitter.com/aespa\\_official/status/1392132428534190080?context=HHwWgMCosazE7NEmAA](https://twitter.com/aespa_official/status/1392132428534190080?context=HHwWgMCosazE7NEmAA)

different variables. While in Giselle's case, the equal score between idol and avatar was mostly the result of the avatar's clothing and the idol's pose, touch and expression (rather than clothing), for Karina and NingNing, the idols were able to match the avatars' scores due to their facial expressions, as well as skin exposure and poses, which consequently offered bigger focus on certain body parts (e.g., breasts).

There were some instances where Karina and Winter were depicted in a more sexualized manner than their avatars. In these particular images (both during "Next Level": once for Karina, figure 52, and twice for Winter, figures 52 and 71<sup>119</sup>), the members were the major contributors to the overall score's increase, as they scored more for more variables. Their

<sup>116</sup> In tables B9 to B12, this figure is identified as NL\_ae-all1.

<sup>117</sup> In table B10, this figure is identified as BM\_ae-K1.

<sup>118</sup> In table B12, this figure is identified as BM\_ae-all1.

<sup>119</sup> In table B11, this figure is identified as NL\_ae-W1.

higher scores can be understood in light of their skin exposure that allowed for more focus on their breasts and inner thighs, as well as on their poses, which emphasised their hips. On the contrary, the avatars were somewhat concealed and standing upright (figure 52) or only half of their body showing, and therefore less exposed (figure 71), this way explaining their lower scores.

Even when comparing the avatar's scores with those of the members in images where the latter are alone, there is a tendency for the avatar to be more sexualized. This is particularly pronounced in Giselle's case, who, only on a few rare occasions, reached the same scores or even surpassed those obtained by the avatar, although never reaching its highest value (12). The other members, on the other hand, did not experience as big of a difference between them and their avatars in relation to their sexualization, as many of their scores when alone were equal and even superior to the highest values obtained for the avatars. There was even less discrepancy in NingNing's case, who was often seen scoring similar values to those of the avatar, and even commonly matching and surpassing its highest values (8 and 10).

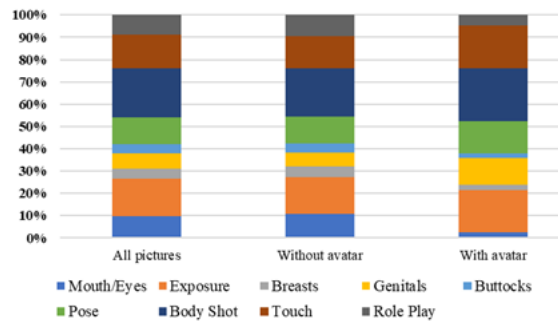
With the exception of the few images where the members scored more than the avatars, the results suggest that, for all members, their avatars had a significant role in further sexualizing images which, had they been only of the members<sup>120</sup>, would be considered "not sexualized" or simply "slightly sexualized". Despite this contribution, the results also show that the avatars need not be present for the members to be just as or more sexualized than their virtual representations. This being the case, how are the members being sexualized when alone and when accompanied? What differs between both conditions?

Graphs 9 to 12 were created to answer these questions. In each column of these graphs are represented the relative percentages of each variable, in other words, how frequently each variable scored in relation to the other variables when conducting the quantitative analysis focused solely on the idol. This graphic analysis was conducted for all images (left column), images where the avatars were absent (middle column) and images where the avatars were present (right column). This allowed us to visualize the contribution of each variable to the sexualization of each member in each condition, therefore allowing us to understand how the members' sexualization was constructed with and without avatar, in addition to all the

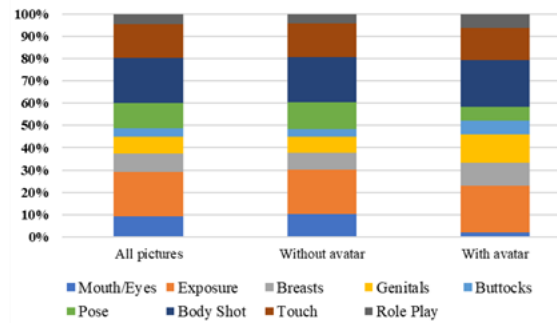
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<sup>120</sup> Dressed and posed in the same manners, scoring the same.

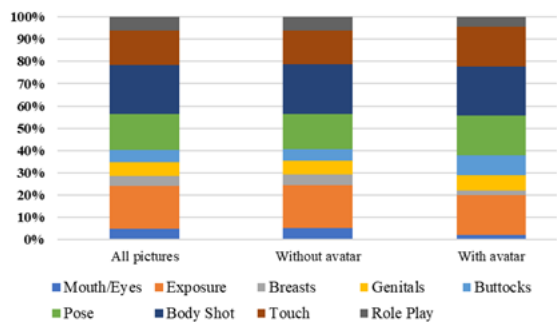
other aspects previously analysed (e.g., lighting, scenery, eye focus, etc.) that were not contemplated in this quantitative analysis.



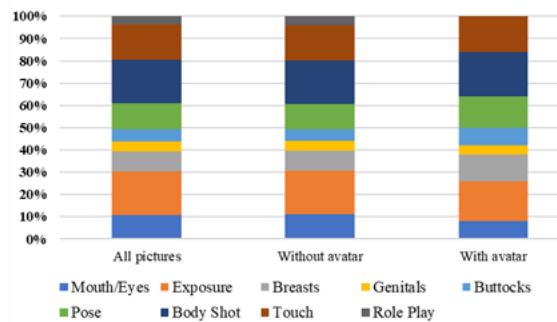
**Graph 9.** Relative percentage of each variable for the totality of Giselle's images (left column), Giselle's images without the avatar (middle column), and Giselle's images with the avatar (right column).



**Graph 10.** Relative percentage of each variable for the totality of Karina's images (left column), Karina's images without the avatar (middle column), and Karina's images with the avatar (right column).



**Graph 11.** Relative percentage of each variable for the totality of Winter's images (left column), Winter's images without the avatar (middle column), and Winter's images with the avatar (right column).



**Graph 12.** Relative percentage of each variable for the totality of NingNing's images (left column), NingNing's images without the avatar (middle column), and NingNing's images with the avatar (right column).

As can be interpreted from the left column of each graph, the variables that contributed the most to the sexualization of all members were, in hierarchical order, the body shot, exposure, touch and pose. The order for the remaining variables differed slightly between the members:

- Giselle: mouth/eyes dynamic > sexual role play > focus on genitals/inner thighs > focus on breasts/chest > focus on buttocks/hips.

- Karina: mouth/eyes dynamic > focus on breasts/chest > focus on genitals/inner thighs > sexual role play > focus on buttocks/hips.

- Winter: sexual role play > focus on genitals/inner thighs > focus on buttocks/hips > mouth/eyes dynamic > focus on the breasts/chest.

- NingNing: mouth/eyes dynamic > focus on the breasts/chest > focus on buttocks/hips > focus on genitals/inner thighs > sexual role play.

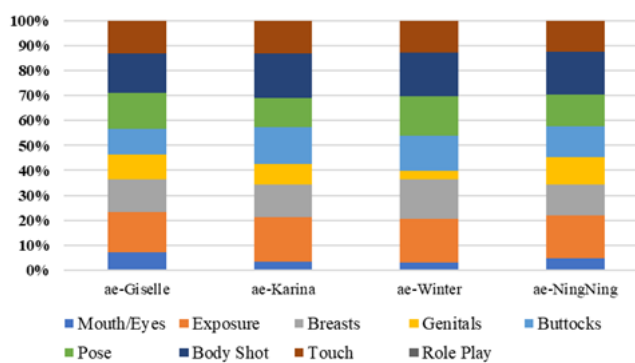
For each member, these trends were exactly the same in images where the idols were not accompanied by their avatars (middle columns), as expected, considering these pictures represent close to 90% of each member's images. As for images where the avatar was present (right column), it appears that the order of prevalence of each variable changed slightly. This was not a significant change, however, indicating once more, that the methods through which the members were sexualized did not really differ whether they were accompanied or not by their avatars. They kept being sexualized mostly by the types of shot chosen, touch (mostly on themselves and sometimes by others), level of exposure, and poses. Any contribution by the avatars to the members' scores was only in matters of casual touch, which was, just like other interactions (e.g., staring), always initiated by the avatars (e.g., figures 70 and 72), once more proving their proactive "personality" that contrasts with the members' passivity.



**Figure 72.** Winter (right) and ae-Winter (left) in a teaser image for "Black Mamba".

Source:

<https://www.instagram.com/p/CHEgNEilmwV/>



**Graph 13.** Relative percentage of each variable for the totality of each avatar's images.

In contrast, all avatars experienced a more balanced contribution by all variables, except sexual role play (absent in all), to the construction of their sexualization, as evidenced by graph 13. The variable that generally fell far behind is "mouth/eyes dynamic", since the avatars were often smiling or expressing confidence, rather than behaving seductively. In some instances, their expressions were even intimidating.

Since the majority of variables scored in most images<sup>121</sup>, the avatars' images scored higher values more frequently, therefore explaining the results in graphs 5 to 8, where it is shown that all avatars always scored total values above five in the sexualization scale, most of them scoring ten or above on a few occasions. In light of these values, they were always considered either "slightly sexualized" or "clearly sexualized" according to the scale

<sup>121</sup> Some variables even scored in all images.

proposed in the beginning of this chapter. Finally, this balanced and constant contribution of most variables in all of the avatars' images also explains why the avatars appear more sexualized than the members at a first glance without any deep scrutiny.

The data acquired during the analysis through the additive scale allowed two other relevant conclusions, namely which member and avatar were more sexualized. The answers can be deduced from the data available on tables 4 (orange highlight) and 11<sup>122</sup> (grey highlight) respectively. These tables show the average values of the total scores obtained for the images in each comeback, as well as the average of the total scores for all images. As can be inferred from the values highlighted, Giselle's avatar was the most sexualized, while Giselle herself was the least sexualized member (table 4). The most sexualized member was, in fact, the youngest, NingNing, who is also the Chinese member. She scored her highest value (11) at 18 years of age, during "Black Mamba" (figure 73).



**Figure 73.** NingNing in a teaser image for "Black Mamba" 2. Source: [https://www.instagram.com/p/CG5Di\\_KB6gp/](https://www.instagram.com/p/CG5Di_KB6gp/)

**Table 11.** Average sexualization score of each avatar for each comeback.

	<b>Black Mamba</b>	<b>Forever</b>	<b>Next Level</b>	<b>Savage</b>	<b>DCT</b>	<b>SMCU</b>	<b>Girls</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>
<b>ae-Giselle</b>	10,5	-	7,5	7,5	-	6	9	8,73
<b>ae-Karina</b>	8	-	7	7	-	8	8,5	7,73
<b>ae-Winter</b>	9	-	6	7,5	-	9	9,5	8,27
<b>ae-NingNing</b>	7,75	-	6,5	9	-	10	7,5	7,91

All members were taught how to model (poses and facial expressions) during their time as trainees in their company (문명특급 - MMTG, 2021b). Among them, NingNing was the one that trained the longest (around five years) under SM Entertainment, time during which

<sup>122</sup> Considering the reduced number of images where the avatars were present and unbalanced distribution throughout the comebacks (for instance, the avatars appeared four times during "Black Mamba", but only once in "SMCU"), it would prove statistically insignificant to compare the average values for each comeback in these table as was done for the members.

she was a minor. As such, she had the most time to interiorize and perfect the sexualized poses and expressions idols are expected to perform. This does not justify, however, the clothing choices. One other possible justification lies in her Chinese origin and reveals xenophobic sentiments. These are understood in light of the growing antagonism towards China by Korean citizens that is founded on both historical and contemporary reasons (Shin et al., 2022), and that has even impacted Korean fans' acceptance of both active and in-training Chinese K-pop idols<sup>123</sup>. It could be theorized that her sexualization would be more accepted, or less contested, due to her nationality, which makes her an unwelcomed outsider, therefore not shielded by the South Korean feminist movement. It could also be that her more demarcated sexualization in relation to her teammates is but a legacy of decades of social prejudice against Chinese women in the country, most of whom were migrant wives of rural South Korean men, who mistreated them (H.-K. Lee, 2008). These are, evidently, merely suppositions. After all, NingNing could also be the member most comfortable with expressing her sexuality.

### **3.1.2. Closing Remarks**

As has become clear, Aespa is a group that transpires multiple ambiguities. Some of these ambiguities are a legacy of female K-pop groups (particularly girl crush ones), such as the dualities infantilization-explicit sexualization, passivity-proactiveness, and submissiveness-dominance. All of these are constructed through the amalgamation of different elements including clothing, facial expressions, poses, ambiance, etc. While these did not prove particularly exacerbated by the avatars, other ambiguities surged by incorporating them into the group's concept. These AI elements exalt the defenceless nature of the idols towards the technological unknown, while offering at the same time, an opportunity to fend off this fear by seemingly offering empowerment through the construction of a new identity, a digital yet familiar one. Such an entity can more freely navigate the virtual dimension and face the dangers related to technology, which are symbolized by the members' capture by Black Mamba (figures 44 to 46). Yet, the avatars, particularly their design, aggravate real world problems, namely the perpetuation of unrealistic standards and stereotypes about the female body.

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<sup>123</sup> NingNing's debut was relatively controversial, as netizens protested the debut of one more idol of Chinese origin (Lewis, 2020).

It is equally concerning that these entities and the concept they guide reinforce an idea of the real-world woman as weak. Even though the idols portray various femininities throughout their story (demonstrating more flexibility in contrast to the avatars' performance rigidity), those that highlight their strength the most are staged in the "virtual world". This is particularly visible in "Girls", where some images set in the "virtual world" (including the music video) are more sombre and "adult", their expressions more severe, contrasting with those set in the "real world", which are more colourful and even childish. The members are thus treated as weak and innocent in their physical bodies, revealing strength only when inside the virtual ones. It raises the questions: Can they only exhibit power in cyberspace? Are these girls truly flawed beings that require fusing with technology to achieve their physical and mental potential? "Girls" perfectly summarizes the concept of Aespa, a girl crush group selling empowerment but only when the right conditions are met, that is, in the virtual realm, and only in the future. While the construction of a space where women can rise above the real-world constraints is indeed desirable, the real-life struggles cannot be dismissed as they are still those of the majority of women in numerous societies, South Korean included. These struggles are not only related to economic and political inequalities, but also constant threats of misogynist violence (see B. Jang, 2022; Rashid, 2022; Yang, 2021).

### **3.2. How the Idols of Aespa Are Impacted by Their Avatars**

#### **3.2.1. Analysis of Aespa's Audio-Visual Content**

The following is Fan A's opinion on Aespa's avatars, collected during a semi-structured interview for the present thesis:

The members have avatars because of the concept presented by the company, but I don't think they are greatly affected. In the first place, they (the avatars) don't perfectly look like people, but like characters from a cartoon or game that don't actually exist, so I think they (the members) might think of them (avatars) as completely separate entities from themselves. Also, because fans and the public alike all say this a lot "What is the need for avatars? The members of Aespa are prettier", I don't think the members think they want to resemble the avatars or have to manage (their appearance) as much as the avatars. (Full interview transcript in Appendix D)

As confided by this fan, the members might not be impacted at all by their avatars. This is a plausible reading if one overlooks previous studies on the impacts digital representations and characters can have on viewers and players (Barlett & Harris, 2008; Behm-Morawitz &

Mastro, 2009; Fox et al., 2013; Gorisse et al., 2019), and focuses on the fact that the avatars are part of a concept imposed on the group by their company, and one often mocked by the members themselves. This mockery is visible when the members exclaim while laughing “She’s a great dancer!” (NingNing in aespa, 2021g, 3:20), “Wow, they’ve been practicing dancing!” (Karina in aespa, 2021j, 3:13), “Wow, your SYNK with her is great today!” (Giselle in MTV ASIA, 2021, 3:30), and “ae-Giselle, dye your hair and change your clothes!” (Giselle in Tencent Video Entertainment, 2021, 1:44). Not only do they mock their concept, but they also appear embarrassed by it, particularly when they have to comment or explain elements such as the weapons both they and the avatars possess (see aespa, 2021j, 2021k, 2021l). It is a concept difficult to adhere to, and the members have in fact confessed in 1theK Originals (2021) to have found their group’s name and concept strange, as well as confusing, only becoming accustomed later on<sup>124</sup>. They have even alluded to the avatars’ uselessness for their success, for these entities are barely present in their music videos, promotional pictures and performances. One such moment was during their interview with Billboard when Winter said “Our aes used to go ‘Peekabo’ and pop out briefly in our music videos, but this time we’re dancing together. Please look forward to it.” (Billboard, 2021, 8:08). To present day, the avatars have yet to appear more often. It is understandable then, that both idols (and fans) might find it hard to take the concept seriously, while keeping a certain distance from their virtual representations.

Among the members of Aespa, Giselle appears, at first glance, the most distant. When asked for one similarity with her avatar, Giselle could not think of any, having later answered with NingNing’s suggestion “Both from SM” (hello82, 2021, 2:54)<sup>125</sup>, showing little interest towards her avatar, equally noticeable in other occasions (see 문명특급 - MMTG, 2021a). In the Billboard interview she commented on her first time seeing her avatar: “Well, first of all, I didn’t realise it was me. She had shorter silver hair and dressed cool, so I thought «Oh, what, is this me? ». I think her facial expressions are kind of similar, but I don’t yet feel like I’m her, I feel more like we’re friends” (Billboard, 2021, 9:53). Even though she says their facial expressions are similar, she sounds unconvinced while doing so. It is important to note,

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<sup>124</sup> This was later contradicted during another interview, where Giselle shared that rather than being confused by their concept initially, they “were pretty glad, and (...) thought it was a good move because moving forward, there has to be something new, also within the music industry (...) it’s not only about technology but it also has a lot to do with music and with our personalities. It can all be relatable” (MTV ASIA, 2021, 2:00).

<sup>125</sup> Later that year, in another interview, she said they had one thing in common, which was their passion for rapping (aespa, 2021k).

however, the part where Giselle says “I don’t yet feel like I’m her”. Rather than saying the avatar does not feel like her, Giselle said the opposite, suggesting the member could be going through a process of shaping herself to match the digital representation. It is a discreet indicator that the avatar is having an impact on the member who detrimentally and unconsciously compares herself to the avatar. Even though her avatar is not one she can control as it occurs in videogames, Giselle could be embodying the avatar to some extent, leading her to unknowingly change her self-perception through the Proteus effect as she observes the avatar’s characteristics from a third-person view (Biocca, 2014; Fox et al., 2013; Shapiro, 2015; Yee & Bailenson, 2007), and to manifest the need to conform to the avatar’s appearance<sup>126</sup>. In light of her words, her previously discussed incapability to identify any similarities with ae-Giselle could be read differently. Rather than uninterested, she could have been insecure to dare compare herself to the avatar, whose image she has yet to parallel, in line with what happened to women who experienced low body esteem after playing with sexualized female avatars (Barlett & Harris, 2008).

Such comparison is not unique to Giselle, however. Karina has said “I think my ae is the most similar to me, in terms of visuals, so it was kind of surprising at first. It was an interesting experience overall, having an avatar that looked like me” (Billboard, 2021, 9:19), “ae-Karina is made of my data, so I’m guessing her thoughts would be similar to mine. Though I’m not ae-Karina, so I don’t know what she thinks” (aespa, 2021k, 5:18) and “ae-Karina doesn’t make mistakes, but I can make mistakes. (...) So I actually envy her.” (aespa, 2021k, 5:46). From these commentaries, it is clear that Karina has compared herself to the avatar appearance and skill wise. Her acceptance of the avatar as physically similar to her might make her more prone to visualize herself in a third-person view. Her avatar could thus, prove to be a more influential agent than the others that do not so closely resemble the respective real members. Consequently, and given the avatar’s sexualized appearance, Karina could prove to perceive herself as a sexualized body too, even if she is aware of their separate existences<sup>127</sup>, although no such conclusion could be reached from this analysis. In her third commentary, it also becomes apparent that the avatar’s existence as a perfect entity

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<sup>126</sup> Since Aespa are a unique case where their avatars are not playable characters, these are merely suppositions based on extrapolation of results of previous studies focused on videogame avatars.

<sup>127</sup> After all, the online world and videogame players that participated in the studies discussed in chapter one also had this awareness, which did not hinder their self-sexualization as well as of others.

that does not make mistakes, can affect Karina's confidence in her own abilities. Technology's apparent flawlessness evidences the human's imperfection.

Winter was the member that most explicitly shared how her avatar negatively affected her: "She was so much prettier than I expected. I was sure that she was supposed to be based off me, but she was pretty much on the next level in terms of beauty. She looked like a Disney princess, and I have to say that I felt some pressure" (Billboard, 2021, 9:32). The latter part was said while laughing nervously, a possible attempt to relieve the discomfort or anxiety that accompanied the episode told by Winter. It could also be a more casual and less direct attempt to quickly move on with the interview so as not to dwell further on the topic. Either justification highlights the discomfort brought about by her reflection on how the avatar's appearance made her feel. It is also evident from her confession that she compares herself to the virtual representation and sees it, like Giselle, as something she has to emulate in terms of appearance, evidencing possible loss of body esteem and increased concern with her looks. The existence of the avatars has clearly disrupted the idea that the virtual should reproduce the real. From the members' discourses, the avatars became the original, while the girls have to be moulded into accurate representations of the virtual entities.

On the other hand, NingNing demonstrates a more relaxed and indifferent attitude towards her avatar and is vaguer in her commentaries, such as "I thought 'This girl has a really beautiful voice'. She's totally like me" (Billboard, 2021, 9:09). From such a short observation, it is difficult to understand whether she is referring to the avatar's appearance or skill when she says "totally like me". When directly discussing the avatar's appearance, NingNing highlighted only one difference between them: "She has bigger eyes than me" (aespa, 2021k, 5:40), without commenting further. The language barrier, as she is not yet fluent in Korean, could make it difficult for NingNing to elaborate on her opinion about her avatar, while also explaining her constant aloofness<sup>128</sup>. Nonetheless, she does appear to be far less threatened by the avatar as she nonchalantly speaks about it in both instances. This could possibly be indicative of a higher self-concept clarity, in other words, of more confidence in herself, therefore of less propensity to be negatively affected by external stimuli (Crocetti & Van Dijk, 2018) such as her sexualized virtual depiction.

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<sup>128</sup> Visible in most videos, particularly when she is not answering or participating in an activity, and appears distracted.

It seems then, most members are already, although unconsciously, in a process of identification with their avatars, which is reinforced by the discourse of avatar and idol as one entity, forced upon them by their company, and that they must often profess until they eventually interiorize it. This rehearsed discourse is present in explanations such as “aespa’ means becoming together with avatars, our alter egos, and experiencing another world” (Giselle in aespa, 2021k, 4:37) and “ae and I are one, we can’t be separated”<sup>129</sup> (show host Eunjae Lee reading her prompt in 문명특급, - MMTG, 2021a, 3:48).

What are then, the most evident consequences of this identification process and comparison with the avatars? The analysis of all the videos listed did not identify any direct manifestations of the members’ exposure to their avatars and deep involvement with their concept. However, it was possible to observe in these videos an obsession with appearance and appearance management that could either find root in their avatars or, most likely, in their social environment (industry and society) but aggravated by the avatars’ existence that is so widely focused on appearance. The latter is a plausible assumption, considering it has already been established that the avatars are capable of affecting the members. How then, is this obsession manifested?

The need to constantly manage their appearance has led them to become highly conscious and critical of it. This is noticeable in their body language, such as the constant retouching of their hair, but also through their conversations between each other and with the camera (the viewer). For example, Karina has revealed discomfort in relation to wearing a twin ponytail hairstyle saying “Everyone will know how my head looks” (aespa, 2021i, 0:33), head that is often described by her teammates as having a “quail egg” shape (see aespa, 2021i; 1theK Originals, 2021). Giselle also appears conscious of her head and face sizes, often posing with her hands framing her face so as to appear smaller (e.g., see aespa, 2021a, 2021h). Another obsession related to the face is its “puffiness”. For instance, Karina has shared avoiding to look in the mirror in the morning because she looks “really puffed up” (aespa, 2021b, 5:31) during this time of the day. K-pop fans are aware of this concern that is often shared by idols, as they confess skipping dinner or breakfast so their faces, in addition to their body, will look slimmer. This need to control the food intake is a recurrent

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<sup>129</sup> Explanation for a verse in Aespa’s debut song “Black Mamba”, where they say “I’m the Aespa, there can’t be two”.

event for Aespa as well, as confessed by the members, particularly Winter. Even though she enjoys eating desserts, she had to develop some self-restraint, having even stopped eating bread (see aespa, 2021h). She also confessed hating to exercise, doing it solely out of obligation (aespa Brasil 2, 2022) <sup>130</sup>.

This way, and although unintentionally, the members support and spread the message that only through discomfort and sacrifice can one look pretty and be successful. Such a message is further reinforced by statements like “To look pretty, I must endure the pain” (aespa, 2021e, 1:05), professed by NingNing while laughing. She is also the one that has acknowledged the damage inflicted on her hair from the frequent colouring, at least in two instances: “I’ve said it a few times already but my hair got so damaged after getting it bleached last time” (aespa, 2021d, 2:56) and “Hair damage, Next Level” (STUDIO CHOOM, 2021, 4:21). Professing these statements in such a cheerful manner while claiming a message of “staying healthy is the most important” (NingNing in zoom, 2021, 12:15) constitutes a paradox that can prove detrimental not only to themselves, but to fans as well when considering the idols’ potential to influence fans’ lifestyle choices. Under the discourse of self-improvement and personal cultivation (H.-K. Lee & Zhang, 2021), they can insidiously contribute to fans’ interiorization of the idea that the skinny, nutrient deprived, damaged, and restrained body in need of constant monitoring is ideal and healthy. Fans are taught to revolve their lives around their body, to self-objectify, just like their idols.

Wearing makeup is also a necessity for most members, who do not feel confident without it, pointing once more, to their concern over appearance. For instance, NingNing vehemently disagreed with Karina when the latter professed thinking of NingNing’s bare face as cute (see 1stonkpop, 2021) <sup>131</sup>, although this could be an attempt to be humble. At the same time, Karina fails to acknowledge her own natural beauty, as can be interpreted from her confession “I’m afraid my makeup will fade, so I always bring my mirror to constantly check” (Harper’s BAZAAR Korea, 2021, 0:17). Out of all the members, only Winter appears to deviate from this concern, confessing that she actually restricts the use of

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<sup>130</sup> This video is a repost by a YouTube channel that provides Portuguese subtitles for fans. The original video could not be found.

<sup>131</sup> This video is a repost by a YouTube channel that provides English subtitles for international fans. The original video could not be found.

makeup to work, and immediately cleans it off as soon as she has finished her job (see aespa, 2021f).

Their obsession with appearance is further evidenced by their frequent search for approval by their fans. The members were often filmed inquiring the fans if they thought their pictures had come out pretty (see aespa, 2021a) or asking for their opinion on their hairstyles and outfits (see aespa, 2021e).

When watching their own content as in their reaction videos to the “Next Level” and “Savage” music videos, they mostly focus and comment on their appearance, particularly their clothes and hairstyles. Unsurprisingly, their most used words, not only during their reaction videos but in any video, revolve around this topic, and they include: pretty, fierce, cool, cute, beautiful, fancy, hot, swag, etc.

It has become clear at this point how appearance management, a moral duty (Gelézeau, 2015) for Aespa and all other K-pop groups, becomes an obsession (N.-Y. Lee, 2014) for the members, who have internalized the need for constant surveillance of themselves<sup>132</sup>, revealing the pervasive workings of biopower. Such an obsession eventually takes over even their social life, for instance, by making appearance the main topic of their conversations<sup>133</sup>. It is almost certain that in each video the members will be recorded discussing their clothes, hairstyles, and nails (e.g., in the behind-the-scenes videos for their music video recordings and jacket shootings), and even comparing their features, as occurred in aespa (2021i) and 1theK Originals (2021). In the first video, Winter compares hers and Karina’s head sizes, commenting on how she prefers Karina’s “quail egg” shaped head. In the second video, Winter confesses agreeing with some fans’ comments on how they are jealous of Karina’s nose and how this same member has been and will be beautiful her whole life.

Appearance assumes such a tremendous importance in their lives that it becomes a virtue, much more valued than other aspects. For instance, when requested to compliment each other, they always focus on appearance, praising the others’ hair, facial features, outfit, and

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<sup>132</sup> Unsurprising when considering the people around them who motivate further reflection on this topic, such as fans’ comments focused on appearance and interviewers’ preference to dedicate large sections of their shows to the members’ appearance, asking them to elaborate on what they are wearing, on their hairstyles and fashion preferences (e.g., see aespa, 2021i; 슬기 zip, 2021).

<sup>133</sup> This does not mean they do not talk about other topics, as they have talked about their dreams, hobbies, favourite foods, etc., although to a much lesser extent. These topics can be found, for instance, on their behind the scenes for music video recordings and their variety shows.

makeup (e.g., see aespa, 2021c; OwK-pop Subs, 2021<sup>134</sup>; Tencent Video Entertainment, 2021). This is relatively concerning, considering the members appear and proclaim to be very close, sharing their clothes and insisting on eating and doing household chores together (슬기 zip, 2021).

### **3.2.2. Closing Remarks**

All these manifestations (e.g., focus on physical beauty and appearance management behaviours) derive from a sense of dissatisfaction with one's body and low body-esteem (K. P. J. Kim et al., 2014), both indicative of body dysmorphia. Body dysmorphia is worsened when people compare their bodies to those of others. In the case of Aespa, it is aggravated by the constant comparison with other members whose bodies are perceived as more ideal (yet do not differ significantly). Considering the members can find in the avatars a second source of comparison, it can be theorized (but empirically unverified) that these entities also cultivate insecurities in the members, who will further incur in the behaviours described. Moreover, the exposure to the sexualizing and objectifying avatars, themselves mediatic content, can aggravate the members' dissatisfaction and body esteem since they align with the sociocultural values of appearance (K. Han & Jang, 2017; Park & Lee, 2021) already internalized as they grew up (S. Y. Kim & Seo, 2011). This could prove to be the case as some members already feel the pressure to correspond to their virtual counterparts.

How then, does this reflect on their fans? Previous theory discussed in chapter two and re-introduced in the analysis above hints at idols' potential to influence their audiences as affective commodities, but are fans truly indoctrinated by their idols to support and adhere to an ideal of appearance through what G. Kim (2019) names the "biopolitics of affect"? Do idols hold such affective power over their fans to serve the neoliberal rhetoric of self-development that perpetuates the need for consumption by women, thus upholding the capitalist social and political order? What about the avatars? Can they impact the fans in a similar fashion to the real members? The following analysis may provide some answers.

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<sup>134</sup> This video is a repost by a YouTube channel that provides English subtitles for international fans. The original video could not be found.

### 3.3. How the Female South Korean Fans of Aespa Are Impacted by the Avatars

#### 3.3.1. Analysis of the Questionnaire and Interviews

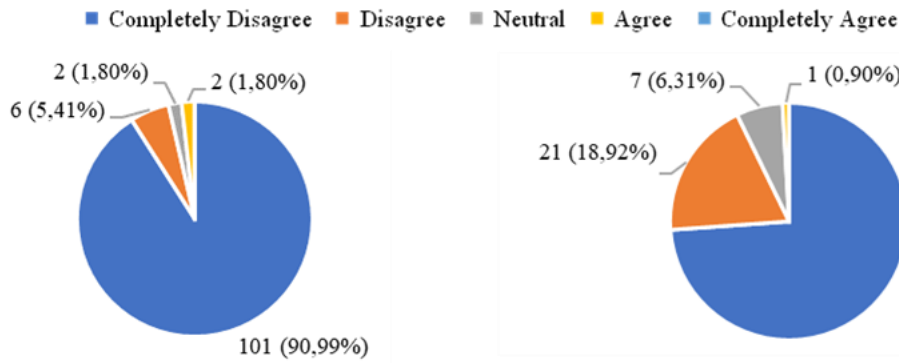
Before proceeding with an in-depth analysis of the questionnaire's results that will provide an answer as to whether the avatars of Aespa impact Korean female fans, it is fundamental to understand the demographics of the Korean fandom. Table 12 indicates the number of respondents for each age and gender groups.

**Table 12.** Demographics (age and gender) of Aespa's Korean fandom according to the data collected from the questionnaire.

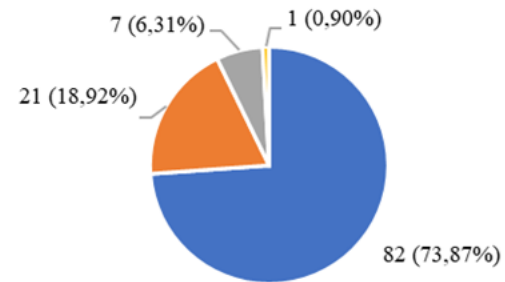
	<b>Below 18</b>	<b>18 - 25</b>	<b>26 - 33</b>	<b>34 - 41</b>
<b>Female</b>	58 (29,29%)	79 (39,90%)	30 (15,15%)	2 (1,01%)
<b>Male</b>	23 (11,62%)	4 (2,02%)	1 (0,51%)	1 (0,51%)

According to table 12, both women and men of various ages answered the questionnaire, among whom 85% identified as female. This could imply that Korean female fans of the group are more active on social media and/or exist in bigger number than male fans. The latter would not be surprising, considering the girl crush concept is often considered by the K-pop community as more appealing to girls and women than boys and men, at least in the Korean context. In addition, close to 30% of the fans that initiated the questionnaire were young girls. However, as aforementioned, the impacts of the group's image on this particular sub-group of fans could not be studied, a gap that could be filled in the future. As such, all conclusions from here on apply only to adult female fans, while the case of minors can only be assumed based on extrapolation of results. It is also worth noting that no comparison was made between age groups, particularly in the search for a possible correlation between age and the different beliefs (e.g., perception of a body as ideal). The reason for this lies in the shortage of responses by women belonging to the age groups of 26-33 and 34-41.

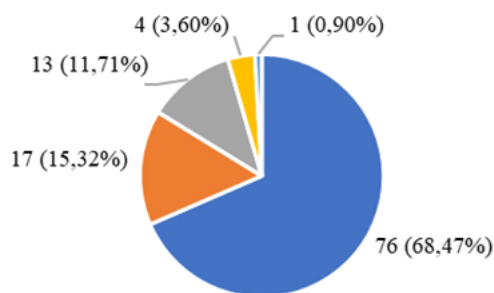
The first aspect that ought to be understood is whether the avatars hold the potential to impact the fans directly. To do so, it is worth scrutinizing graphs 14 to 21.



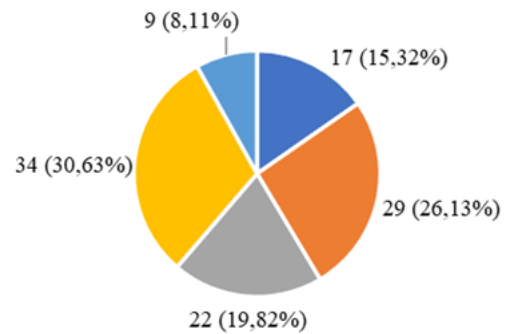
**Graph 14.** “I tend to compare my body to the bodies of the avatars of Aespa”.



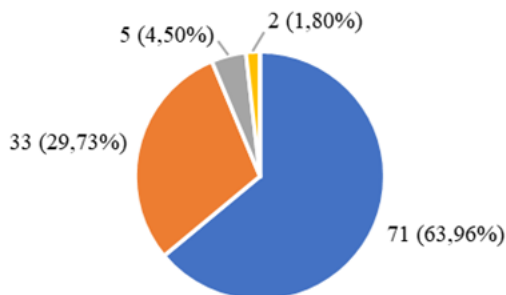
**Graph 15.** “I would like to look (facial features) like the avatars of Aespa”.



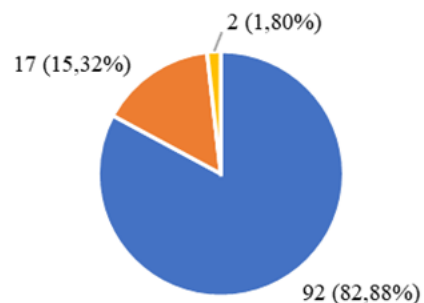
**Graph 16.** “I would like to have a body like those of the avatars of Aespa”.



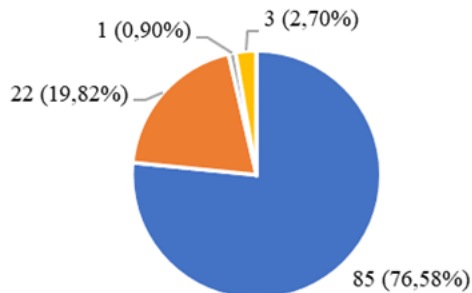
**Graph 17.** “The avatars of Aespa have the ideal female body”.



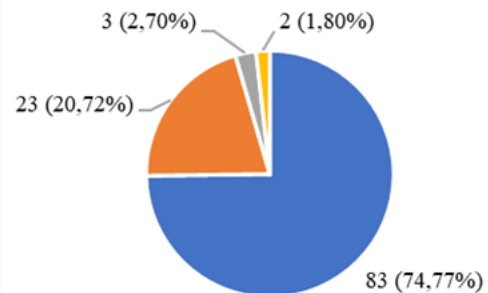
**Graph 18.** “The avatars of Aespa have a realistic female body”.



**Graph 19.** “I feel ashamed for not making an effort to look (facial features) like the avatars of Aespa”.



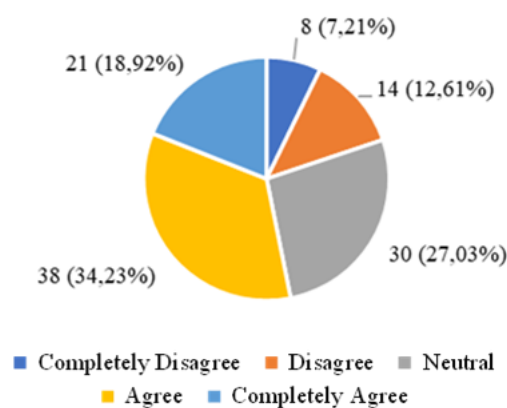
**Graph 20.** “I feel ashamed for not making an effort to have a body like those of the avatars of Aespa”.



**Graph 21.** “I like to regularly dress and use makeup like the avatars of Aespa”.

From these graphs, it is clear that most fans (96%) do not compare their bodies with those of the avatars (graph 14), nor would want to have an appearance (graph 15) and body (graph 16) like theirs, even though some of them (39%) perceive the avatars' bodies as ideal<sup>135</sup> (graph 17). This is perhaps due to their awareness over how unrealistic these bodies are (graph 18), as evidenced by the 94% of fans that either disagreed or completely disagreed with the affirmation “The avatars of Aespa have a realistic female body”, in turn possibly explaining why these fans do not feel ashamed for not making an effort to look like the avatars (graph 19) and have a body (graph 20) like theirs. One other reason could be the lack of interaction with these avatars, which fans barely see, much less command as would occur in online worlds and videogames. They are merely characters that appear occasionally and are not even fans' own avatars. As such, embodiment, from which could derive the distortion of self-perception and the need or desire to conform to this female portrayal, seems unlikely. Consequently, so are the feelings of shame.

The overall (95%) lack of desire to dress like the avatars (graph 21) can be easily understood when considering the apparent lack of interest in these entities, but also because their outfits are far too revealing for most South Korean women. As evidenced by graph 22, 53% of fans considered these outfits “sexy”.



**Graph 22.** “The avatars of Aespa wear sexy clothes”.

Despite this, it is impossible to ignore the presence of at least two people who do agree with the affirmations from graphs 14 to 21. Considering the total of adult female fans was

<sup>135</sup> When questioned in what way the members of Aespa represent the ideal, Fan A shared that the notion of ideal lies mostly in thinness and with not being short. As for Fan B, an ideal body is one that is curvy, has long legs and clear white skin, while an ideal face is small and has big eyes. Both accounts align with the ideal described in chapter one.

only 111, there could be various female fans in the whole Korean fandom<sup>136</sup> that feel this way, and are thus directly affected by the avatars. These people's exposure to the images of the avatars has led them to be conscious of their appearance as they compared themselves to these entities. It has also made them upset for their incapability to reach the standards represented by the avatars, who they try, at least, to emulate fashion wise. Nevertheless, the general inclination is for fans to not be directly affected, neither self-sexualizing nor self-objectifying.

The general lack of affective response to the avatars could find reason, as previously introduced, in a clear understanding of these entities as mere occasional props, feeding fans' beliefs of them as irrelevant (therefore, difficult to relate, compare or embody), as shared by Fan B, who supposes the concept is attractive to fans, but believes the main reason for supporting the group lies in the actual members (full interview transcript in Appendix D). Fan A shared a similar observation:

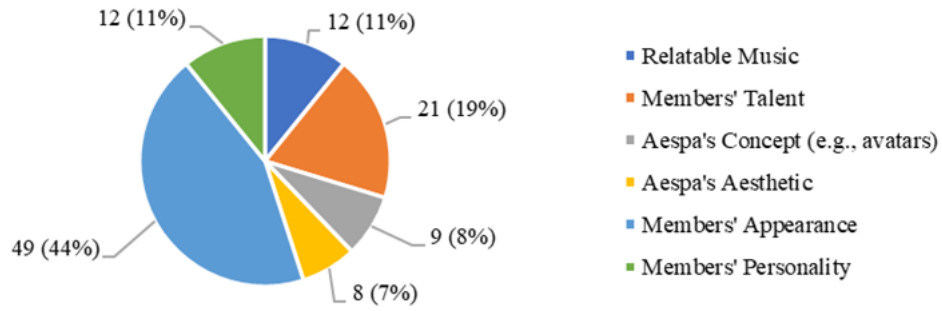
I think they are a group that can succeed even without the avatar concept. In fact, I've seen a lot of comments/conversations on YouTube and various internet communities saying that this concept is unnecessary. I think rather than the concept, they succeeded because (people liked) the members' visual, personality and the music (melody not the lyrics).

Their beliefs find support in graphs 23 and 24, where it becomes clear that most people do not like Aespa for their concept (avatars included), but for other reasons, among which the idols' appearance appears most relevant (main reason for 44% of fans), supporting Y. Oh's (2018) argument that idols' beauty is a major factor in the attraction of fans. According to graph 24, the second reason is mostly the member's talent, followed by the member's personality as the third reason. The fourth and fifth reasons tend to be the relatable nature of Aespa's music and the group's aesthetic respectively. The concept is considered by more fans (36%) as the least important reason for liking the group. With appearance being such an important factor, it is no surprise that it is also a topic often discussed among fans<sup>137</sup>, contrary to the avatars' appearance (graph 25).

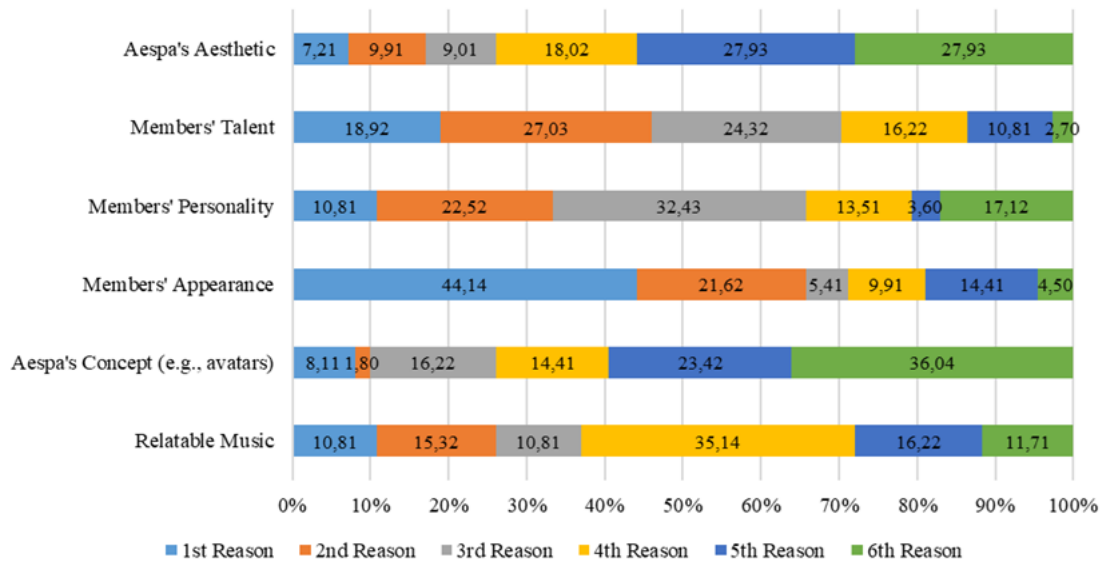
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<sup>136</sup> Although no statistics have been found for the exact number, it likely surpasses the 87000, considering their 87768 followers on the Korean music streaming platform Melon, as of September 12<sup>th</sup>, 2022. A significant part of these fans could be women and young girls, since they corresponded to 56% and 29% respectively of the 198 people who answered at least section one of the questionnaire (table 12).

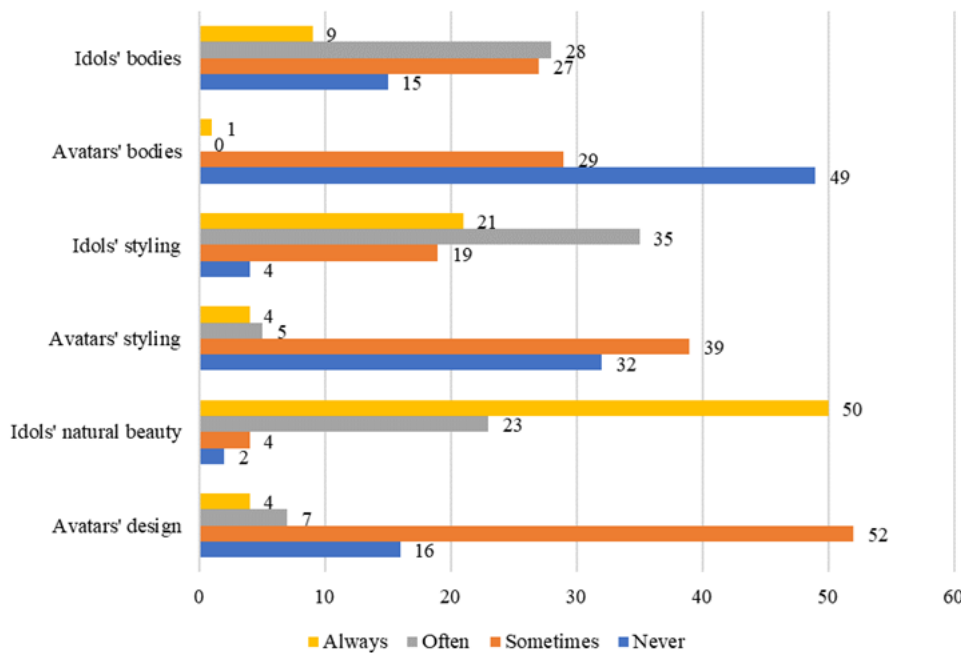
<sup>137</sup> Only 85 out of the 111 fans said they had friends that were also fans of the group, and only 79 of those 85 fans spoke with their friends about Aespa. It should be clarified that fans do not only talk about Aespa's appearance. Fan A, for instance, shared also talking about the music, the concept, and the group's contents.



**Graph 23.** Main reason for liking Aespa.



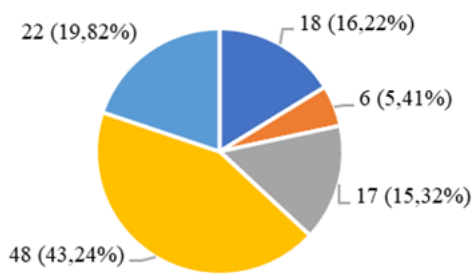
**Graph 24.** Reasons for liking Aespa. For each of the reasons it is shown the percentage of fans that consider it the main (light blue), 2nd (orange), 3rd (grey), 4th (yellow), 5th (dark blue) or 6th (green) reason for liking the group.



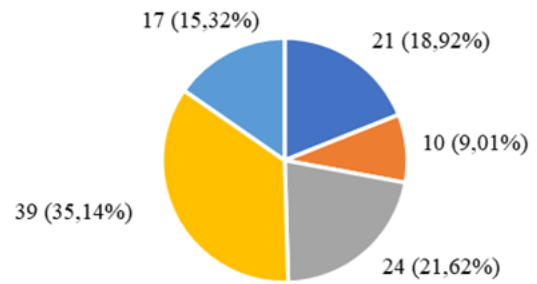
**Graph 25.** Frequency with which each topic is discussed. The bars represent the number of fans that always, often, sometimes or never talk about each topic.

Having concluded that the avatars are mostly irrelevant to the fans, much less capable of directly affecting them, can they, at least, indirectly affect them? In other words, can the real members of Aespa act as intermediaries in the process of fans developing an affective response to the avatars? For this to be the case, the avatars should be able to affect the idols (deemed possible in section 3.2), who in turn would need to hold affective power over the fans. As theorized in chapter two, K-pop idols are capable of exerting affective power over fans, and Aespa does not appear to be an exception, as revealed by graphs 26 to 33.

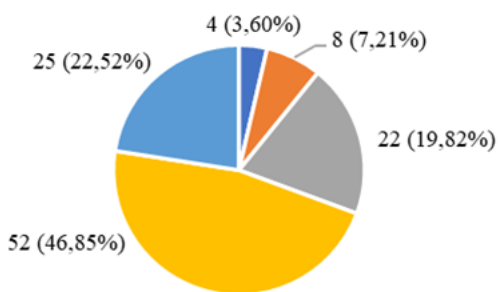
■ Completely Disagree ■ Disagree ■ Neutral ■ Agree ■ Completely Agree



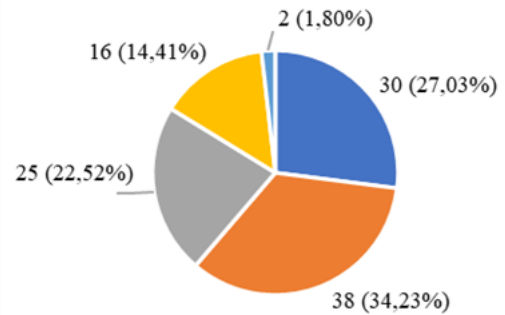
**Graph 26.** “I would like to look (facial features) like the human members of Aespa”.



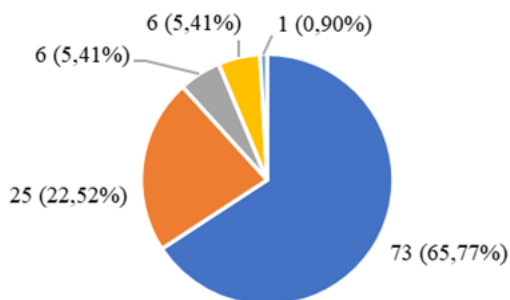
**Graph 27.** “I would like to have a body like those of the human members of Aespa”.



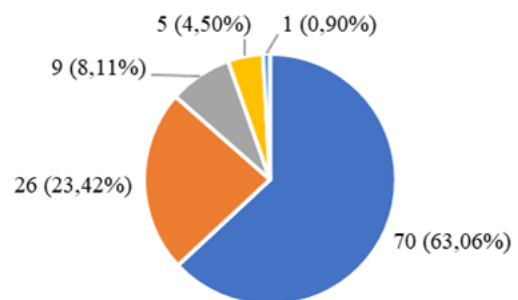
**Graph 28.** “The human members of Aespa have the ideal female body”.



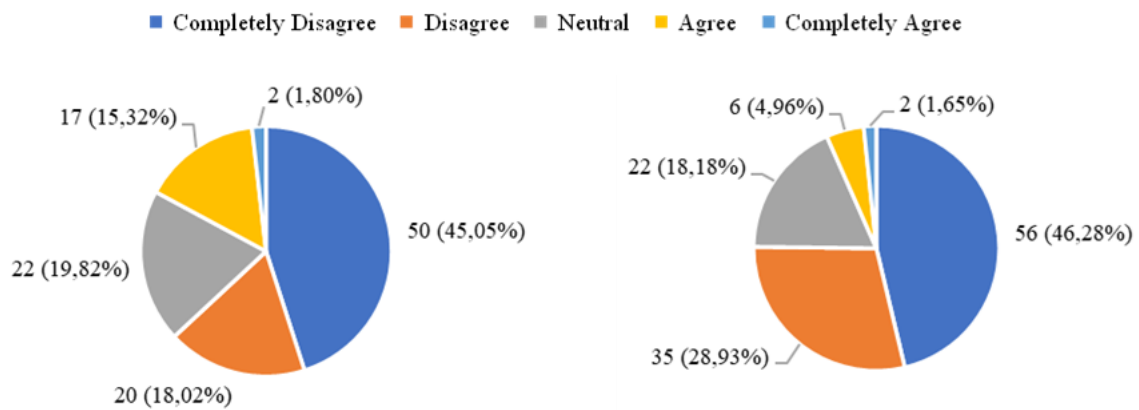
**Graph 29.** “The human members of Aespa have a realistic female body”.



**Graph 30.** “I feel ashamed for not making an effort to look like the human members of Aespa”.



**Graph 31.** “I feel ashamed for not making an effort to have a body like those of the human members of Aespa”.



**Graph 32.** "I tend to compare my body to the bodies of the human members of Aespa".

**Graph 33.** "I feel insecure about my body after looking at pictures and videos of Aespa".

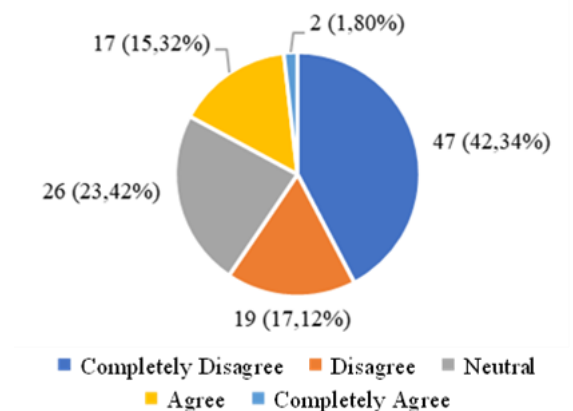
The results indicate that 63% of fans have a desire to look like the real members of Aespa (graph 26) and 50% to have a body like theirs (graph 27), possibly since they believe it to be ideal<sup>138</sup> (69%; graph 28). This desire is in spite of their awareness over how unrealistic the members' bodies are (61%; graph 29), which can, nonetheless, also offer them consolation for not being able to reproduce the members' physique, consequently, justifying the general lack of feelings of shame for not putting in the effort to look like them (88%; graph 30) and have bodies like theirs (86%; graph 31). Evidently, such feelings of shame are not a necessary consequence of a desire to look or have a certain body, since the degree to which people self-objectify is different (Son, 2006), therefore so is the propensity to develop low body-esteem and shame. Fans could also be aware that irrespective of the amount of effort, looking like someone should not be an ultimate goal nor a feasible one. Either reasoning is merely speculation awaiting consolidation by future studies.

The desire for such a body in spite of the awareness of how unrealistic and unhealthy it is was also articulated by Fan A during the interview, where the fan justified this paradox by pinpointing the desire for such a body on an exterior force, revealing the pervasiveness of societal discourses: "I think bodies like those of the (...) members are much slimmer than the average, so I don't consider them realistic nor healthy. However, because slim bodies are preferred, I think I would like to have such a body." What both Fan A and the questionnaire's results suggest is that Aespa's female fans are in a process of negotiating their individual

<sup>138</sup> When asked if Korean women tend to imitate the body and appearance of women depicted in the Korean media (question 13), Fans A and B agreed that, from what they have perceived, many South Korean women pursue bodies and appearances similar to those of media personalities (Aespa included) because they are depicted as "ideal".

consciousness and principles with societal ideals and expectations, therefore explaining their seemingly contradictory affirmations. It seems then, that fans are aware that the “ideal” is not a personal one, being at a stage where they have not yet fully claimed ownership of the societal discourse on what women should be. Nevertheless, this discourse will be gradually internalized as long as they feel the need to adhere to the normative body that has been institutionalized in the industry and society.

Their awareness over how unrealistic Aespa’s bodies are could possibly also justify why 63% of fans believe they do not compare their bodies with those of the members (graph 32). Moreover, if they do not establish comparisons, it becomes possible to understand why they would not even feel insecure about their bodies after being exposed to Aespa’s images and videos, as 75% of fans believe (graph 33). This lack of insecurity could, once more, derive of both an understanding of the unrealistic nature of the bodies in question and the fact that people gain nothing out of emulating someone else. It could also be that these fans feel comfortable in their bodies even if these could be “better”. However, there is also a possibility that the fans mostly associate their time interacting with Aespa’s content as entertainment, which could counter any negative thoughts and emotions (e.g., insecurity) that may derive from this exposure. Fans could be dissatisfied with their physique and not be able to pinpoint Aespa’s contribution to this dissatisfaction, as they believe to neither feel insecure after watching the group’s content (graph 33) nor worry more about their appearance after becoming fans (60%; graph 34). It could be possible that a) there is, in fact, no relation; b) fans could indeed not be capable of establishing this association; or c) they simply did not worry about their appearance previous to becoming a fan of the group, so they did not experience an increase in such a concern. Once more, the interpretations can be multiple.



**Graph 34.** “I worry more about my physical appearance ever since I became a fan of Aespa”.

There are, nevertheless, some fans who did explicitly correlate their body dysmorphia to their exposure to Aespa’s images. Fan A, for instance, confessed “As I look at pretty people every day and talk about their appearance, I become more concerned about my appearance than before” and that “I’m not as thin as the Aespa members, so after seeing their

slim bodies and thinking they are «good», I feel a little dissatisfied with my body.” As a result, Fan A began to diet and exercise. Yet, this fan was not the only to engage in some sort of body manipulation.

Whether fans were dissatisfied with their bodies (either as a result of being exposed to Aespa or not) or believe that it is natural to improve one’s body and strive for the ones that correspond with the ideal (like Aespa’s) in light of the self-improvement discourse, 35% of them admitted to having been motivated by this exposure to manipulate their body and appearance in one or more ways. Table 13 shows how many fans engaged in each type of body manipulation and how many of those fans did just one of those manipulations. Table 14 reveals the combinations of body manipulations alongside the number of fans that practiced each combination.

**Table 13.** Number of fans that engaged in each type of body manipulation. E = Exercise; D = Diet; S = Surgery; CA = Changing Appearance (e.g., makeup, hairstyle, etc.).

Nothing	E	Only E	D	Only D	S	Only S	CA	Only CA
72	27	11	19	3	3	1	13	5

**Table 14.** Number of fans that engaged in each combination of body manipulations. E = Exercise; D = Diet; S = Surgery; CA = Changing Appearance (e.g., makeup, hairstyle, etc.).

E + D	E + CA	D + CA	E + D + CA	D + CA + S	E + D + CA + S
11	3	2	1	1	1

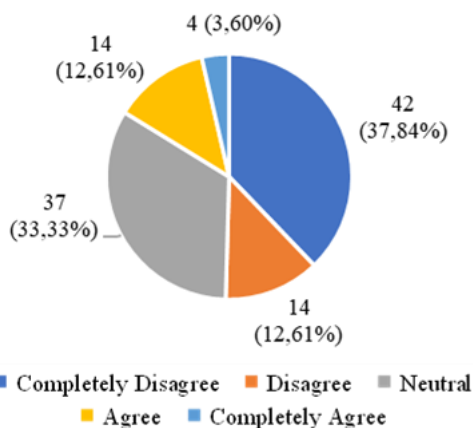
These results reveal that the exposure to and interaction with Aespa have incentivized fans to manipulate their bodies, in both harmless ways, such as exercising and mildly changing appearance, but also through risky management behaviours, like dieting (particularly if done without guidance) and going through cosmetic surgery. Left answered was how these manipulations made fans feel, although such information was shared in the interviews. Fan A shared: “I had mixed feelings at first. Before, even though/when I gained weight, I lived well, but because I started feeling conscious, I didn’t feel necessarily good. But now, I think it (exercise) is for my health and I’m enjoying it.”

Although Fan B started exercising before Aespa’s debut, this fan does find the members’ figure as motivation to continue, revealing that such motivation gets stronger after seeing their “fit body shape”. This motivation to lose weight is the result of a tendency to establish

a comparison with the members' bodies, which happens, according to the fan, when trying on outfits worn by the idols (an interest shared by more fans as shown in graph 35), an occasional occurrence, particularly when the fan tries to lose weight. These words are in spite of having previously shared that:

If I have to try to be like them and do my job/study, my health will be worse fastly and I will get stressed instantly. I believe trying to look like celebrities is toxic. People have their own characteristics and they can enhance them but cannot be the other people. The dream of becoming like a certain person is not achievable<sup>139</sup>.

Fan B's discourse appears supportive of the feminists' cause, but it reveals some incoherences. Even though the fan is exercising out of a commitment to be healthy and have a "fit" body, the source of motivation is hardly a healthy body. The fan professes not wanting to look like the idols, also answering in the questionnaire that their bodies are not healthy, but simultaneously sees them as a motivational force. It can thus be inferred that not only does Fan B interpret healthy and fit as different traits, but has also interiorized society's idea that bodies like those of the members are fit, when they are actually underweight. Fan B appears to be one more person who lives with an internal conflict that is perpetuated by pervasive discourses on the body, which are not easily overcome.



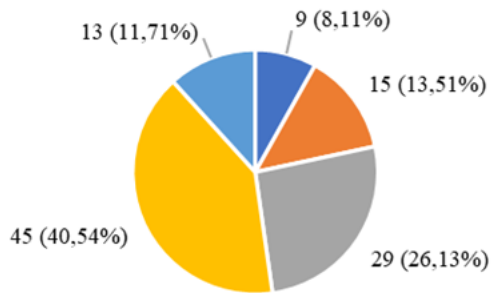
**Graph 35.** "I like to regularly dress and use makeup like the human members of Aespa"

The results have thus allowed the conclusion that the real members of Aespa have the capacity to hold affective power over their fans, enough to manifest a response such as body manipulation, including an extreme one like surgery. It also became clear that this exposure reinforced certain beliefs on the female body, namely how the members' bodies represent

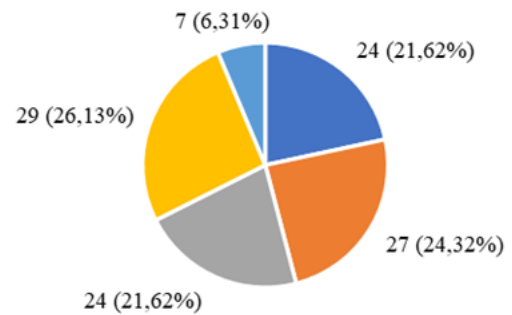
<sup>139</sup> Excerpt from the original (unaltered) transcript of the interview with Fan B, who opted to answer in English.

the ideal (also verified for the avatars). What other subjectivities have been reinforced or constructed as part of an affective response to Aespa? Graphs 36 to 41 will help provide with an answer.

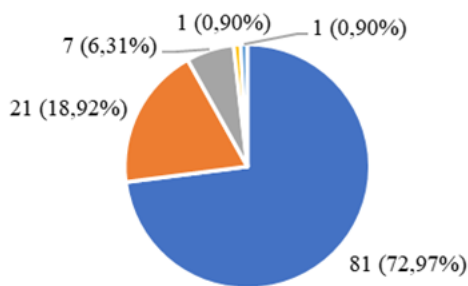
■ Completely Disagree ■ Disagree ■ Neutral ■ Agree ■ Completely Agree



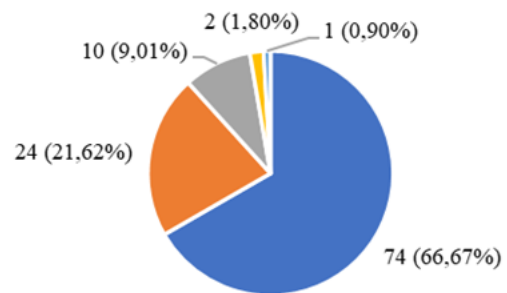
**Graph 36.** “If I have a body and appearance like those of Aespa, I will be a better person”.



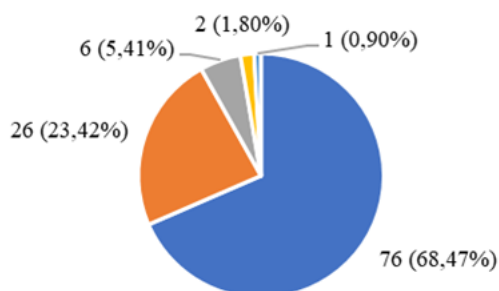
**Graph 37.** “Women that have a body and appearance like those of Aespa are better / more competent”.



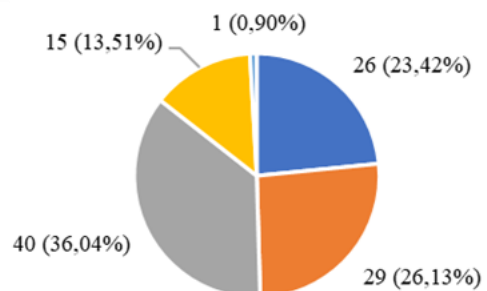
**Graph 38.** “I think it is important to have a body and appearance like those of Aespa because they match those of men's idealized woman”.



**Graph 39.** “Women should make an effort to have a body like those of Aespa”.



**Graph 40.** “Ever since I became a fan of Aespa I judge other women's appearance more”.



**Graph 41.** “Bodies like those of Aespa are healthier”.

Fans' responses to the last section of the questionnaire expose, once more, conflicting beliefs, revealing uncertain prospects for the full emancipation of women in South Korea.

On the one hand, fans exhibit harsh expectations on their body (graph 36) that are then transposed to other women (graph 37). In other words, fans have interiorized that they will be better people if they possess bodies like those of Aespa, and so will other women, suggesting the importance of appearance in defining people's worth. However, fans do not appear to support this idea for the sake of corresponding to men's desires (graph 38), suggesting that men's expectations of the female body may not play such a crucial role in women's self-sexualization and objectification as suggested by Y. Choi et al. (2008), at least at a conscious level. However, the results do not completely deny the theory of Third-Person Effect, as they do not exclude the role of women's social environment. Rather than wishing to appeal to individual men, these fans' belief could be rooted in the association between beauty and success, which has become intrinsic to their society, and can thus justify the results represented by graphs 36 and 37, symbolic of their survival strategy (Y.-J. Lee, 2000). When questioned about whether success in Korea depends on women's appearance, Fans A and B confessed believing it does, even when in search for part-time jobs, as confessed by Fan B, who was also quick to share that the same is valid for men.

On the other hand, fans believe women do not have the obligation to strive for such bodies (graph 39), even if they would, according to their thought process, benefit from it. In addition, even though fans base their idea of "ideal bodies" on those of Aespa, they do not necessarily judge other women's physiques for not aligning with those of the members (graph 40). These results suggest that Aespa do not appear to present an obstacle to women's emancipation, in the sense of standing against each other for "petty" reasons, or becoming more critical of one another, consequently hindering the collective fight to ensure equal gender relations. So even though they say other women will be better with such bodies, it appears they say so because they know that women who do not conform to society's expectations will experience backlash, as argued by T. Kim (2003).

However, as the results discussed above seem to propose, Aespa may be hindering emancipation in an indirect way. That is, by preserving unachievable standards of beauty that are equated with success and even health (graph 41), and as such, fuelling the detrimental belief that the bodies in question are better. Consequently, the majority of women (who cannot conform with the ideal) will always be perceived as lacking by women themselves (even if out of "concern") and perpetuating the societal habit of pointing out

other people's flaws<sup>140</sup>. Women will be unconsciously engaging in paradoxical behaviours to their feminist belief of "Women should not make an effort to have a certain body".

Graph 41 is worth further scrutiny as it reveals an interesting conflict. Half of the fans clearly disagreed with the affirmation "bodies like those of Aespa are healthier", while among the other half, most were unsure on how to answer. Their "Neutral" response could reflect the conflict between what is socially desirable and what is unrealistic. Fans might have been incapable to disagree with the statement due to their interiorization of what is socially beautiful and better, but also incapable of agreeing because fans are now aware of the unhealthy ways through which such bodies are attained<sup>141</sup>.

Further on the topic of "Neutral" responses, it is equally of interest to reflect on their high prevalence throughout the questionnaire. Such responses either suggest the fans are not inclined to answer positively or negatively for lack of previous consideration for the topics at hand (meaning, they have no formed opinion), or that they would prefer to not dwell much on the matter, finding an escape from the uncomfortable reflection the questions may arouse. Even though "Neutral" options are ambiguous and of difficult interpretation, they were deemed important to maintain in the questionnaire. The reason lies precisely in the existence of respondents who need this option for the reasons previously specified and who might not have finished answering the questionnaire or would have answered randomly had this option not been available. Evidently, both are undesirable situations, for they would negatively affect data reliability.

Nonetheless, these responses are useful for the possible meanings they hold. They may highlight a certain discomfort in discussing topics of body image, sexualization, etc., or a lack of discussion on these matters by the respondents with people around them. The first instance could presume the existence of body image issues. The second instance, on the other hand, could reveal the polemical nature of the debate surrounding this topic that has left the

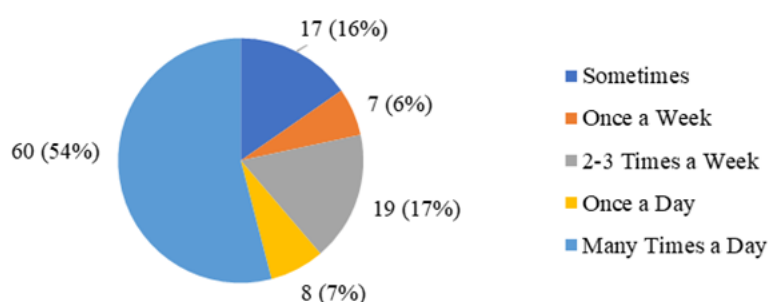
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<sup>140</sup> This habit has been often commented on by South Korean acquaintances, YouTubers and writers, as well as experienced in person. Fans A and B have also briefly commented on it in their answers to question three of the interview, where they were asked to reflect on whether Korean women are judged by their society for their body and appearance.

<sup>141</sup> Throughout the years, idols have come to openly talk about the detrimental diets they practiced and how they suffered. The lack of proper nutrition combined with extreme physical effort led many artists to faint in public, including during performances.

country divided, as confessed by South Korean acquaintances<sup>142</sup>. Such a situation has made many people, particularly women, afraid to voice their problems and beliefs, which could be reflected in their “Neutral” answers.

Finally, it was also possible to verify that 54% of fans are avid consumers of Aespa’s contents (music videos, performances, interviews, variety shows, etc.), as shown in graph 42. The graph also shows, however, that among the other 46% of fans that do not watch these contents many times a day, there are various fans that only watch a few times a week or sometimes, followed by those that watch once a day or once a week.



**Graph 42.** Frequency of content enjoyment. The chart shows the number (and percentage) of adult female fans that watch Aespa’s contents sometimes (dark blue), once a week (orange), 2-3 times a week (grey), once a day (yellow) or many times a day (light blue).

This question on the frequency with which fans watch Aespa’s mediatic contents was applied with the intent to understand whether there is a correlation between the time of exposure (or frequency of content enjoyment) and the various beliefs previously discussed (e.g., desire to look like a member). Once more, considering the small universe of respondents and the unequal distribution obtained for each category, this was not possible.

### 3.3.2. Closing Remarks

From the previous analysis, it can be concluded that the avatars of Aespa are both irrelevant as well as incapable of directly affecting most fans. Such can be ascertained from the general lack of desire to emulate either the avatars’ appearance and body despite believing the latter to be ideal. Fans do not even compare themselves to the avatars, nor feel ashamed for not attempting to look like them, appearance and body wise.

<sup>142</sup> Who had warned of the possibility of the questionnaire being poorly received and perceived as controversial, which would result in the collection of very few responses.

On the other hand, their power may work indirectly through the real members of Aespa, who did prove capable of holding affective power over the fans, of impacting them in different ways, both in the construction of subjectivities and through body manipulation. Their appearance is a major factor as it presents a source of inspiration, an image to emulate for the social benefits it brings as a socially ideal body. It also fuels diverse paradoxes that showcase the inner struggle of negotiating individual and external beliefs and expectations on the self and on what being a woman in South Korea entails.

In the following and final section, the Conclusions, we will develop further on the biopolitics of affect employed by Aespa on the fans, by bringing together the theories on sexualization and objectification, technologies of the body, and biopolitics with the results obtained. This way, it will become more evident how the avatars' contribution to the sexualization of female idols can take a role in female South Korean fans' self-infliction of body vigilance, therefore perpetuating biopolitics of beauty in the country.

## Conclusions

Based on previous literature and personal experience of years of exposure to K-pop as a fan, it has been argued throughout this work that female K-pop idols are sexualized and objectified by their industry in various ways. They have been imposed different yet stereotypical performances of femininities which result from a detailed management of their bodies, outfits, as well as their songs and choreographies. It has been pointed out as well that the implementation of technologies and themes such as futurism and robotics has also contributed to sexualize and objectify female idols, having based this statement mostly on the female group Aespa. Previously to their debut, netizens raised concerns on Twitter over the virtual members of the group, the avatars, which they believed to be hyper-sexual characters that set unfair standards of female beauty with which the idols could compare and be negatively affected as a consequence.

In light of these feminist apprehensions, the natural course of action resided in evaluating whether the avatars of Aespa do indeed contribute to the idols' sexualization and objectification and if so, how do they accomplish this. Answering this question required an analysis of the group's promotional images, which, in a first instance, confirmed the typical methods applied to sexualize and objectify female K-pop idols (e.g., exposure and ambiguities), and secondly, revealed three ways through which the avatars do indeed contribute to these processes. First, and most obvious, is the avatars' existence as overtly sexual virtual representations of the members of Aespa. Similar to the real members, the avatars adhere to the standards of thinness, yet they have far more prominent female attributes, such as large breasts and hips, slim waists, and extremely long legs. Simply put, they possess unnatural body shapes as contested by netizens. Moreover, they dress in more brazen ways, exposing more skin and wearing tight clothing. By creating a design that focuses so evidently on women's sexual appeal, Aespa's creative team is openly sexualizing them. They are also objectifying as they literally created a non-human body, or even, an assembly of body parts, meant to be consumed by audiences. In addition, the members have no authority and control over these virtual entities, which deprives them of agency over their own representations, over their digital bodies. This is yet one other way through which idols are denied agency, not only to create their own digital selves, but also to control and decide how they are to be used, evidencing mechanisms of masculine domination.

Second, the avatars were argued to sexualize the members by being the guiding force behind their concept, and consequent aesthetic and fashion choices. Even though most images did not differ significantly from those typical of female K-pop idols with a girl crush concept, there were some, for instance, where the members saw certain traits such as submissiveness further evidenced by their sexualized interaction with technology.

Third, as additional sexualized bodies in the members' images, the avatars contributed to a more sexualized interpretation of these images, therefore sexualizing the members albeit indirectly. Besides occasional casual touches with the members, there were no other interactions with them that could contribute to their sexualization. Moreover, there was no clear distinction in each of the members' sexualization between their images when accompanied by their avatar and when this entity was absent. In this regard, the avatars' contribution to the idols' own sexualized performances is fairly insignificant.

Since one of the driving concerns for this thesis lies in how the idols may be affected by their virtual representations, it was also relevant to ascertain if and then how this did occur. To do so, numerous audio-visual contents were analysed with a focus on body and oral narrative, leading to the conclusion that the members can be negatively impacted by the avatars, as they have proved to incur in comparisons with them. It was concluded that the avatars' stirred, at least in some members, insecurities that underline a sense of low body-esteem and dissatisfaction. How these are then translated into more obvious affective responses remains unverified. It can only be hypothesized that the behaviours the members already so intensely practice, such as appearance management will be aggravated.

In light of previous theories on the affective power of idols and celebrities, who, as media figures, can reenforce the social expectations on women, their bodies, and roles, it became crucial to understand as well, how Korean female fans of Aespa read and interiorize this virtual and sexualized construct, in other words, how they are impacted. The research method applied was a questionnaire, which revealed that while fans do not seem directly affected by the avatars, they can be indirectly so, as the avatars have proven to be capable of exerting affective power over the real members, who in turn, can exert this same power on their fans. While fans' responses in relation to avatars showed consistency, in that despite considering their bodies ideal, there was no desire to emulate them nor any signs of engaging in comparisons with them, fans' answers to the questions related to the real members

evidenced multiple paradoxes. For instance, and in general, fans did not pinpoint Aespa as an additional source for their dissatisfaction with their own bodies and appearances, even though they did profess wishing to look like their idols (who are believed to have ideal bodies), indicator of their possible engagement in comparisons, despite denying doing so. This desire is also in spite of the general awareness of how unrealistic and unhealthy such bodies are, hence, having argued during the analysis that fans are going through a process of negotiating their individual consciousness with societal ideals and expectations.

This interpretation of the results corroborates G. Kim's (2019) notion of biopolitics of affect. Idols' conformity with the normative body reinforce audiences' interiorization of the social benefits of possessing such a body, as specifically revealed by the fans interviewed, who associated appearance with success and opportunities, therefore supporting S. H. Lee (2016) and Gelézeau (2015) findings on the body as a signifier of social status and capability. As an additional element through which to compete in society, the body is inevitably one other sight for the neoliberal discourse of self-improvement, which leads fans to agree with the belief that they and other women will be better if they have bodies like those of Aespa that represent the ideal. By submitting to this discourse, fans are both objectifying themselves and others, since they are deriving their value from their body, as posited by Fredrickson & Roberts (1997), even if they are aware of the external pressures. In light of their confessions and awareness, the necessity to actively adhere to the "body project" through body manipulation can, in fact, be seen as a survival strategy (Y.-J. Lee, 2000). Yet, according to the results, most fans did not engage in body manipulation, at least in response to Aespa's images. This means they could either have already been complying from before their entrance into the fandom, or they have never done so, in which case, these results would support the idea that people respond differently to the texts they are exposed to, in other words, the extent to which people self-objectify, for instance, is different. Meaning, not everyone feels compelled to "survive" through body manipulation.

Of special relevance are the fans that did manipulate their body motivated by their interaction with Aespa's contents, which evidences the group's power to inspire fans to engage in the "body project", showcasing their role in the perpetuation of the self-improvement discourse. Those who benefit most are the industries that have partnered with K-pop idols, such as the cosmetic and diet ones, and in turn, the national economy. The effects of biopower go full-circle in an insidious way, one that feeds off the affective power

of idols to whom people turn for entertainment and pleasure. We can thus also agree with T. Kim (2003), in that the current body appears to be under control of governmental forces, in conformity with one norm, a subjectless body. This is specially the case for Aespa's idols who have far less agency than the fans, among whom less than half actively pursue the normative body.

What is then, the role of technology in this complex phenomenon of biopolitics of affect in the K-pop universe? From the analysis conducted, it could only be theorized that, in the case of these avatars, they have an indirect role in the whole process. They are serving an agenda of male control that depends on women's sense of being "lacking" and who must thus, continue spending and working to perfect themselves. Haraway's hope then, is crushed. Even though technologies could be used as a feminist tool, they were here usurped to represent an obstacle. These avatars, rather than a post-modern subject that is not shackled to a biological concept of gender and a traditional concept of identity, reflect a post-modern subject that is, in fact, shaped by the biology of the body, as contended by Black (2008), and that replays traditional narratives, supporting the works of Balsamo (1996) and Shapiro (2015). Moreover, and although outside the scope of analysis for this thesis, the avatars fall short on the goal of female empowerment as the story and concept of the group seem to strive for. Similar to Engelbrecht's (2018) reflection on the first representations of Lara Croft, these avatars are simply hyperfeminized and sexualized bodies who fight off evil alongside one another without male intervention, but that have no real substance; they have no relatable characteristics and story. Additionally, this concept transpires the idea that women cannot exhibit power in the real world, delaying their empowerment to the future when Aespa's metaverse concept can actually be relatable to women. This is one other way in addition to their lack of agency, that Aespa spread a false sense of empowerment, finding that builds on the works of G. Kim (2019), Yeran Kim (2011), and C. Oh (2014).

Evidently, various results could generate different interpretations and those proposed here were the ones based on the knowledge retrieved from the sources chosen and from personal experience in the country and communicating with Korean citizens. However, in order to gather more certainties, it would be ideal to develop further studies, considering also the limitations presented by the research methods used. For instance, it would be preferable to personally interview the members of Aespa to understand how they manifest affective responses towards their avatars, since these could merely be presumed here. In relation to

the fans, it would also have been ideal to interview more than two people, for the answers to the questionnaire could only provide an understanding of part of their experience, given its close-ended questions. Future research could strive to fill these holes, as well as analyse differences in affective responses according to fans' ages and time of exposure to Aespa's contents, which was not possible here due to the limited number of responses collected. In addition, studies on minors, who were theorized as the most vulnerable to sexualized content and yet could not be researched here, should also be conducted.

Nevertheless, the present thesis still presents itself as an important contribution to the fields of Asian Studies, Women's Studies, and Media Studies. It provided not only more information on the impacts of the exposure to sexualized media in the South Korean context (particularly of adult female fans of K-pop), which is very scarce for English readers, but it also elaborated more on the biopolitics of affect in motion in this cultural product, reflecting on fans' affective responses, which were merely theorized in previous works like that of G. Kim (2019). Moreover, it presented and explored an innovative argument (possible to the unique concept of Aespa) that fused Women's Studies' concerns on technologies of the body with other feminist concerns related to sexualized media. This argument proposed a circuit of reverberations on different levels that make us rethink how production and consumption occur with the mediation of technology, which exerts agency over the idols who then redefine themselves, with consequences on fans' subjectivities and embodiments. In light of both K-pop and other media's increasing resource to different types of technology, not only avatars, this argument opens the door to conduct research on various contexts and extend the scope of audiences analysed for their affective responses.

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## Appendixes

### Appendix A. Description of the Variables of the Modified Additive-Scale

***Clothing/Nudity (0-5 points):*** Images where the idols or avatars wore:

- Unrevealing clothing scored 0 points.
- Slightly revealing clothing (e.g., shirts with modestly low necklines or exposed arms and shoulders, or even shorts and skirts) scored 1 point.
- Somewhat revealing clothing (e.g., exposed midriffs or visible cleavage) scored 2 points.
- Highly revealing (or skin-tight) clothing scored 3 points.
- Swimsuits and lingerie (or any other outfit that is hardly considered clothing) scored 4 points.
- No clothing scored 5 points (did not occur once).

***Touch (0-3 points):*** Images where the idols or avatars were:

- Neither touching nor being touched scored 0 points.
- Casually touching themselves (e.g., hand resting on their legs, touching their hair, arms crossed, etc.), clasping hands with others or resting their arm on someone else's shoulder, scored 1 point.
- Touching provocatively (e.g., seductively touching one's lips) scored 2 points.
- Touching in an explicitly sexual manner scored 3 points (never occurred).

***Pose (0-2 points):*** Images where the idols or avatars were:

- Not performing poses related to sexual activity, scored 0 points.
- Posing in a suggestive manner or inviting of sexual activity, including lifting one's arms overhead, leaning or sitting, as well as accentuating one's shape, scored 1 point.
- Posing more evidently for sexual activity (e.g., lying down, sitting with legs spread wide open) scored 2 points.

***Mouth/Eyes dynamic<sup>143</sup> (0-2 points):*** Images where the idols or avatars:

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<sup>143</sup> Originally titled simply "Mouth", this variable was renamed and re-thought entirely so as to encompass the idols and avatars' stare. Mouths and eyes should not be looked at separately, for both actively participate in the

- Had their lips closed, were smiling or actively singing, talking or yelling, scored 0 points.

- Were gazing sensually or posing their mouths in a manner somewhat suggestive of sex (e.g., lips parted slightly, but not smiling) scored 1 point.

- Had a mouth/eyes dynamic explicitly suggestive of sexual activity (e.g., mouths wide open but passive, tongue showing or something, such as a finger, inside their mouth) scored 2 points.

***Breasts/Chest; Genitals/Inner Thighs<sup>144</sup>; Buttocks/Hips<sup>145</sup> (0-2 points each):*** All of these variables were analysed separately but following the same logic, that is, whether these body parts were focal points of the images or not. As such, images where these body parts were:

- Not visible or not a focal point (the eye of the viewer was not directed towards them) scored 0 points.

- Somewhat emphasized (e.g., focal point but still mostly concealed by clothing), scored 1 point. Numerous images scored 1 point not due to the exposure of the body parts in question, but mostly because the outfits “arous[ed] the curiosity to see more” (S. Kim & Chun, 2020, p. 243).

- A major focus (e.g., prominent cleavage, pulled down pants) scored 2 points.

***Head vs. Body Shot (0-1 point):*** Images where:

- Only the idols or avatars’ heads (and region above the chest) were visible were considered headshots and scored 0 points.

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making of any facial expression, from which meaning can be interpreted. Scoring more on this variable because of a mouth that is passively open while the eyes do not express sensuality would be incurring in a misjudgement that would impact the overall score and consequent mis-classification of the image in the sexualization scale.

<sup>144</sup> The original variable was only concerned with the genital area as a focal point, but it was here decided that inner thighs, specifically the areas closest to the genitals, are also relevant to a sexual reading of images. After all, depending on how these areas are dressed or decorated, the eye of the viewer can be led to the whole region, thereupon causing the viewer to focus on it and to see the idol/avatar mostly for hers/its sexuality.

<sup>145</sup> The original variable was only focused on the buttocks, but considering the emphasis given to the hips in the construction of sexualized female depictions, and Korean fans’ criteria for classifying an image as sexualized (how big and/or emphasized breasts, buttocks and hips are), the variable was adapted to incorporate the hips as well.

- Any other images where more of their bodies was exposed, meaning the focus would never solely be in their faces/heads, were classified as body shots (even if only upper body shots) and scored 1 point.

***Sexual Role Play (0-1 point):*** As in Hatton and Trautner's (2011) study, there were a few images where symbols of sexual role play, like infantilization (e.g., child-like clothing or scenery) and BDSM (e.g., collars/chockers, leather accessories and clothes, chains, etc.) were present, therefore, justifying the implementation of this variable. These images scored 1 point, while those where there were no signs of sexual role play scored 0 points.

## Appendix B. Tables

**Table B1.** Scores for Giselle's images. NS = Not Sexualized; SS = Slightly Sexualized.

Figure ID	Mouth & Eyes Dynamic	Clothing/ Nudity	Focus Breasts/ Chest	Focus Genitals/ Inner Thighs	Focus Buttocks/ Hips	Pose	Shot	Touch	Sexual Role Play	Total	Result
BM_G1	1	1	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	5	SS
BM_G2	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	3	NS
BM_G3	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	3	NS
BM_G4	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	4	NS
BM_all1	1	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	4	NS
BM_all2	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	3	NS
BM_all3	1	1	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	4	NS
BM_ae-G1	0	1	0	1	0	2	1	1	0	6	SS
BM_G5	1	1	0	1	0	0	1	1	0	5	SS
BM_G6	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	2	0	4	NS
BM_G7	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	2	NS
BM_G8	0	1	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	5	SS
BM_ae-all1	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	4	NS
BM_all4	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	4	NS
HBD_ae-all1	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	3	NS
F_G1	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	3	NS
F_G2	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	3	NS
F_G3	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	NS
F_G4	1	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	4	NS
F_all1	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	4	NS
NL_G1	1	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	6	SS
NL_G2	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	2	0	8	SS

NL_G3	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	2	0	5	SS
NL_all1	1	1	0	1	0	0	1	1	0	5	SS
NL_ae-all1	1	1	0	1	0	1	1	2	0	7	SS
NL_ae-G1	0	2	2	0	0	0	1	1	0	6	SS
NL_G4	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	3	NS
S_G1	1	1	0	2	1	1	1	1	1	9	SS
S_G2	0	1	0	1	2	1	1	1	1	8	SS
S_G3	1	2	1	0	0	0	1	0	1	6	SS
S_G4	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	3	NS
S_all1	0	1	0	1	0	0	1	1	1	5	SS
S_all2	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	2	NS
S_G5	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	2	NS
S_G6	1	2	0	1	1	0	1	0	0	6	SS
S_G7	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	2	0	5	SS
S_G8	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	3	NS
S_G9	1	2	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	9	SS
S_G10	1	1	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	5	SS
S_G11	1	2	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	6	SS
S_all3	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	2	NS
S_all4	0	2	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	5	SS
S_ae-all1	0	1	0	1	0	0	1	1	0	4	NS
S_all5	0	1	0	1	0	1	1	1	0	5	SS
S_ae-G1	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	3	NS
S_G12	0	1	0	0	2	1	1	1	0	6	SS
S_G13	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	3	NS
S_G14	1	0	0	1	1	2	1	0	0	6	SS
S_G15	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	3	NS
S_G16	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	2	NS
S_all6	0	1	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	6	SS

<b>S_all7</b>	0	1	0	1	0	1	1	1	0	5	SS
<b>S_all8</b>	0	1	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	4	NS
<b>S_G17</b>	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	4	NS
<b>DCT_G1</b>	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	3	NS
<b>DCT_G2</b>	0	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	6	SS
<b>DCT_all1</b>	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	4	NS
<b>DCT_all2</b>	0	1	1	0	0	1	1	1	0	5	SS
<b>DCT_G3</b>	0	1	1	0	0	1	1	0	0	4	NS
<b>DCT_G4</b>	1	1	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	6	SS
<b>DCT_G5</b>	0	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	5	SS
<b>DCT_all3</b>	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	4	NS
<b>DCT_all4</b>	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	1	3	NS
<b>SMCU_ae-all1</b>	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	1	0	4	NS
<b>SMCU_G1</b>	0	1	0	1	0	0	1	1	0	4	NS
<b>SMCU_G2</b>	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	3	NS
<b>G_all1</b>	0	1	0	0	0	2	1	1	1	6	SS
<b>G_G1</b>	1	1	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	6	SS
<b>G_G2</b>	1	1	0	1	0	1	1	0	1	6	SS
<b>G_G3</b>	1	0	0	0	0	2	1	0	1	5	SS
<b>G_all2</b>	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	4	NS
<b>G_all3</b>	1	0	1	0	0	2	1	1	1	7	SS
<b>G_all4</b>	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	3	NS
<b>G_G4</b>	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	3	NS
<b>G_G5</b>	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	4	NS
<b>G_G6</b>	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	2	1	9	SS
<b>G_G7</b>	1	1	1	1	0	2	1	1	1	9	SS
<b>G_G8</b>	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	1	4	NS
<b>G_G9</b>	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	1	4	NS
<b>G_G10</b>	0	1	0	1	0	2	1	1	1	7	SS

G_all5	1	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	1	5	SS
G_all6	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	1	1	5	SS
G_all7	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	8	SS
G_G11	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	3	NS
G_G12	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	1	0	4	NS
G_G13	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	NS
G_G14	0	1	0	1	2	1	1	1	1	8	SS
G_all8	1	1	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	6	SS
G_all9	0	2	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	4	NS
G_ae-G1	0	1	0	1	0	1	1	0	1	5	SS
G_ae-all1	0	1	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	4	NS
G_G15	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	NS
G_G16	1	2	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	6	SS
G_all10	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	2	NS

**Table B2.** Scores for Karina's images. NS = Not Sexualized; SS = Slightly Sexualized; CS = Clearly Sexualized.

Figure ID	Mouth & Eyes Dynamic	Clothing/ Nudity	Focus Breasts/ Chest	Focus Genitals/ Inner Thighs	Focus Buttocks/ Hips	Pose	Shot	Touch	Sexual Role Play	Total	Result
BM_K1	1	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	4	NS
BM_K2	1	2	0	0	1	0	1	1	0	6	SS
BM_K3	1	2	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	6	SS
BM_K4	1	2	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	6	SS
BM_all1	0	2	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	5	SS
BM_all2	1	2	2	0	0	1	1	0	0	7	SS
BM_all3	1	2	1	0	1	1	1	1	0	8	SS
BM_ae-K1	1	3	1	1	0	1	1	0	0	8	SS
BM_K5	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	4	NS

<b>BM_K6</b>	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	3	NS
<b>BM_K7</b>	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	NS
<b>BM_K8</b>	1	0	0	0	0	2	1	1	0	5	SS
<b>BM_ae-all1</b>	0	3	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	6	SS
<b>BM_all4</b>	0	3	1	1	0	1	1	0	0	7	SS
<b>BM_K9</b>	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	2	0	5	SS
<b>BM_K10</b>	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	2	0	4	NS
<b>BM_K11</b>	1	1	0	1	0	1	1	2	0	7	SS
<b>HBD_ae-all1</b>	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	1	0	4	NS
<b>F_K1</b>	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	4	NS
<b>F_K2</b>	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	5	SS
<b>F_K3</b>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	NS
<b>F_K4</b>	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	3	NS
<b>F_all1</b>	0	1	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	3	NS
<b>NL_K1</b>	0	2	1	0	0	1	1	0	0	5	SS
<b>NL_K2</b>	0	2	2	0	0	1	1	0	0	6	SS
<b>NL_K3</b>	1	2	2	0	0	0	1	1	0	7	SS
<b>NL_all1</b>	0	2	1	1	0	0	1	1	1	7	SS
<b>NL_ae-all1</b>	0	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	9	SS
<b>NL_ae-K1</b>	0	2	2	0	0	0	1	1	0	6	SS
<b>NL_K4</b>	0	2	1	0	0	1	1	1	0	6	SS
<b>S_K1</b>	0	1	1	0	0	2	1	0	1	6	SS
<b>S_K2</b>	1	1	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	5	SS
<b>S_K3</b>	0	2	1	0	1	1	1	0	0	6	SS
<b>S_K4</b>	1	1	0	1	0	1	1	1	0	6	SS
<b>S_all1</b>	0	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	5	SS
<b>S_all2</b>	0	2	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	4	NS
<b>S_K5</b>	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	3	NS
<b>S_K6</b>	1	1	0	1	0	0	1	1	0	5	SS

<b>S_K7</b>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	NS
<b>S_K8</b>	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	2	NS
<b>S_K9</b>	1	3	2	0	0	2	1	0	1	10	CS
<b>S_K10</b>	0	3	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	5	SS
<b>S_K11</b>	1	3	1	1	0	0	1	1	0	8	SS
<b>S_all3</b>	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	2	NS
<b>S_all4</b>	0	3	1	1	1	0	1	1	0	8	SS
<b>S_ac-all1</b>	0	1	0	1	0	0	1	1	1	5	SS
<b>S_all5</b>	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	2	NS
<b>S-ac-K1</b>	0	2	0	1	0	0	1	1	1	6	SS
<b>S_K12</b>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	NS
<b>S_K13</b>	0	2	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	5	SS
<b>S_K14</b>	0	1	0	1	1	1	1	0	1	6	SS
<b>S_K15</b>	1	1	0	1	0	1	1	1	1	7	SS
<b>S_K16</b>	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	3	NS
<b>S_all6</b>	0	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	5	SS
<b>S_all7</b>	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	4	NS
<b>S_all8</b>	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	1	4	NS
<b>S_K17</b>	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	1	1	7	SS
<b>DCT_K1</b>	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	0	7	SS
<b>DCT_K2</b>	0	1	0	1	0	1	1	1	0	5	SS
<b>DCT_all1</b>	0	1	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	3	NS
<b>DCT_all2</b>	1	1	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	5	SS
<b>DCT_K3</b>	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	2	NS
<b>DCT_K4</b>	0	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	5	SS
<b>DCT_K5</b>	1	1	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	5	SS
<b>DCT_all3</b>	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	0	7	SS
<b>DCT_all4</b>	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	2	NS
<b>SMCU_ac-all1</b>	0	1	1	1	0	0	1	1	0	5	SS

SMCU_K1	1	1	1	0	0	1	1	1	0	6	SS
SMCU_K2	1	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	4	NS
G_all1	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	4	NS
G_K1	1	1	1	0	0	1	1	1	0	6	SS
G_K2	0	1	0	0	0	2	1	1	1	6	SS
G_K3	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	5	SS
G_all2	0	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	7	SS
G_all3	0	2	0	1	0	2	1	1	1	8	SS
G_all4	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	4	NS
G_K4	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	0	7	SS
G_K5	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	2	NS
G_K6	1	2	1	1	0	0	1	1	0	7	SS
G_K7	0	1	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	3	NS
G_K8	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	4	NS
G_K9	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	3	NS
G_K10	1	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	4	NS
G_all5	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	4	NS
G_all6	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	2	NS
G_all7	0	1	0	1	0	2	1	1	0	6	SS
G_K11	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	5	SS
G_K12	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	1	9	SS
G_K13	1	1	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	5	SS
G_K14	1	1	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	5	SS
G_all8	0	1	0	1	0	1	1	1	0	5	SS
G_all9	0	1	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	3	NS
G_ae-K1	0	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	5	SS
G_ae-all1	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	2	NS
G_K15	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	NS
G_K16	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	4	NS

<b>G_all10</b>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	2	NS
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**Table B3.** Scores for Winter's images. NS = Not Sexualized; SS = Slightly Sexualized; CS = Clearly Sexualized.

<b>Figure ID</b>	<b>Mouth &amp; Eyes Dynamic</b>	<b>Clothing/ Nudity</b>	<b>Focus Breasts/ Chest</b>	<b>Focus Genitals/ Inner Thighs</b>	<b>Focus Buttocks/ Hips</b>	<b>Pose</b>	<b>Shot</b>	<b>Touch</b>	<b>Sexual Role Play</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Result</b>
<b>BM_W1</b>	1	1	1	0	0	1	1	1	0	6	SS
<b>BM_W2</b>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	NS
<b>BM_W3</b>	1	1	1	0	0	1	1	0	0	5	SS
<b>BM_W4</b>	1	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	4	NS
<b>BM_all1</b>	0	1	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	4	NS
<b>BM_all2</b>	1	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	4	NS
<b>BM_all3</b>	0	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	5	SS
<b>BM_ae-W1</b>	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	4	NS
<b>BM_W5</b>	0	1	0	1	1	2	1	1	0	7	SS
<b>BM_W6</b>	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	4	NS
<b>BM_W7</b>	0	1	0	1	0	1	1	1	0	5	SS
<b>BM_W8</b>	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	2	NS
<b>BM_ae-all1</b>	0	1	0	1	0	1	1	1	0	5	SS
<b>BM_all4</b>	0	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	0	6	SS
<b>HBD_ae-all1</b>	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	2	NS
<b>F_W1</b>	0	0	0	0	0	2	1	1	0	4	NS
<b>F_W2</b>	0	2	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	5	SS
<b>F_W3</b>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	NS
<b>F_W4</b>	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	4	NS
<b>F_all1</b>	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	4	NS
<b>NL_W1</b>	0	3	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	9	SS
<b>NL_W2</b>	1	3	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	10	CS

NL_W3	1	2	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	6	SS
NL_all1	0	2	0	0	1	0	1	1	0	5	SS
NL_ae-all1	1	2	0	0	1	0	1	1	0	6	SS
NL_ae-W1	0	3	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	9	SS
NL_W4	0	2	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	6	SS
S_W1	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	1	0	4	NS
S_W2	0	1	0	0	0	2	1	1	0	5	SS
S_W3	0	1	0	0	0	2	1	0	0	4	NS
S_W4	0	1	1	1	0	1	1	0	0	5	SS
S_all1	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	0	3	NS
S_all2	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	4	NS
S_W5	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	3	NS
S_W6	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	1	0	4	NS
S_W7	0	1	1	1	0	1	1	2	0	7	SS
S_W8	1	1	0	1	0	2	1	2	0	8	SS
S_W9	0	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	0	6	SS
S_W10	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	2	NS
S_W11	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	3	NS
S_all3	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	3	NS
S_all4	0	1	1	1	0	1	1	2	0	7	SS
S_ae-all1	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	1	0	4	NS
S_all5	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	4	NS
S-ae-W1	0	0	0	0	0	2	1	0	0	3	NS
S_W12	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	6	SS
S_W13	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	3	NS
S_W14	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	2	NS
S_W15	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	3	NS
S_W16	0	1	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	4	NS
S_all6	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	2	0	4	NS

<b>S_all7</b>	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	3	NS
<b>S_all8</b>	0	1	1	1	0	0	1	1	1	6	SS
<b>S_W17</b>	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	5	SS
<b>DCT_W1</b>	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	3	NS
<b>DCT_W2</b>	0	1	0	1	0	1	1	2	0	6	SS
<b>DCT_all1</b>	0	1	0	1	0	1	1	1	0	5	SS
<b>DCT_all2</b>	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	4	NS
<b>DCT_W3</b>	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	3	NS
<b>DCT_W4</b>	0	1	1	0	0	1	1	0	0	4	NS
<b>DCT_W5</b>	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	NS
<b>DCT_all3</b>	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	4	NS
<b>DCT_all4</b>	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	2	NS
<b>SMCU_ae-all1</b>	0	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	6	SS
<b>SMCU_W1</b>	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	3	NS
<b>SMCU_W2</b>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	NS
<b>G_all1</b>	0	2	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	5	SS
<b>G_W1</b>	1	2	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	6	SS
<b>G_W2</b>	0	2	0	1	1	1	1	0	1	7	SS
<b>G_W3</b>	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	4	NS
<b>G_all2</b>	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	5	SS
<b>G_all3</b>	0	1	0	0	0	2	1	1	1	6	SS
<b>G_all4</b>	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	3	NS
<b>G_W4</b>	1	2	1	1	0	1	1	1	0	8	SS
<b>G_W5</b>	0	2	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	6	SS
<b>G_W6</b>	0	1	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	4	NS
<b>G_W7</b>	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	4	NS
<b>G_W8</b>	1	1	0	0	0	1	1	2	1	7	SS
<b>G_W9</b>	0	1	0	1	0	1	1	1	1	6	SS
<b>G_W10</b>	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	3	NS

G_all5	0	1	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	4	NS
G_all6	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	3	NS
G_all7	0	1	1	0	1	1	1	2	1	8	SS
G_W11	0	1	0	1	0	2	1	0	1	6	SS
G_W12	1	0	0	0	1	2	1	0	1	6	SS
G_W13	0	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	5	SS
G_W14	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	2	0	4	NS
G_all8	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	2	0	5	SS
G_all9	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	3	NS
G_ae-W1	0	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	5	SS
G_ae-all1	0	1	0	1	0	1	1	1	0	5	SS
G_W15	1	2	1	0	1	1	1	2	0	9	SS
G_W16	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	2	0	5	SS
G_all10	0	2	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	4	NS

**Table B4.** Scores for NingNing’s images. NS = Not Sexualized; SS = Slightly Sexualized; CS = Clearly Sexualized.

Figure ID	Mouth & Eyes Dynamic	Clothing/ Nudity	Focus Breasts/ Chest	Focus Genitals/ Inner Thighs	Focus Buttocks/ Hips	Pose	Shot	Touch	Sexual Role Play	Total	Result
BM_NN1	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	3	NS
BM_NN2	1	1	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	5	SS
BM_NN3	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	2	NS
BM_NN4	1	3	2	0	1	1	1	2	0	11	CS
BM_all1	0	3	2	0	0	0	1	1	0	7	SS
BM_all2	0	3	2	0	0	2	1	1	0	9	SS
BM_all3	1	3	2	0	1	0	1	1	0	9	SS
BM_ae-NN1	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	3	NS
BM_NN5	1	1	1	0	0	1	1	1	0	6	SS

<b>BM_NN6</b>	1	2	1	0	0	1	1	0	0	6	SS
<b>BM_NN7</b>	1	2	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	6	SS
<b>BM_NN8</b>	0	2	0	0	0	2	1	0	0	5	SS
<b>BM_ae-all1</b>	1	2	1	0	0	1	1	1	0	7	SS
<b>BM_all4</b>	0	2	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	5	SS
<b>HBD_ae-all1</b>	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	3	NS
<b>F_NN1</b>	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	2	NS
<b>F_NN2</b>	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	4	NS
<b>F_NN3</b>	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	3	NS
<b>F_NN4</b>	1	1	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	4	NS
<b>F_all1</b>	1	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	6	SS
<b>NL_NN1</b>	1	2	1	0	0	0	1	1	1	7	SS
<b>NL_NN2</b>	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	1	1	5	SS
<b>NL_NN3</b>	1	3	2	0	0	0	1	1	1	9	SS
<b>NL_all1</b>	1	2	2	1	0	1	1	1	0	9	SS
<b>NL_ae-all1</b>	1	1	0	1	0	0	1	1	0	5	SS
<b>NL_ae-NN1</b>	0	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	5	SS
<b>NL_NN4</b>	1	2	0	0	1	1	1	2	1	9	SS
<b>S_NN1</b>	1	1	0	2	1	2	1	0	1	9	SS
<b>S_NN2</b>	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	0	7	SS
<b>S_NN3</b>	0	2	1	0	1	1	1	1	0	7	SS
<b>S_NN4</b>	1	1	0	0	1	1	1	2	0	7	SS
<b>S_all1</b>	0	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	0	6	SS
<b>S_all2</b>	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	4	NS
<b>S_NN5</b>	1	2	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	5	SS
<b>S_NN6</b>	1	1	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	5	SS
<b>S_NN7</b>	1	1	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	5	SS
<b>S_NN8</b>	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	4	NS
<b>S_NN9</b>	1	2	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	5	SS

<b>S_NN10</b>	1	2	0	0	0	1	1	2	0	7	SS
<b>S_NN11</b>	0	3	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	5	SS
<b>S_all3</b>	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	3	NS
<b>S_all4</b>	0	2	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	5	SS
<b>S_ae-all1</b>	1	1	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	5	SS
<b>S_all5</b>	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	4	NS
<b>S-ae-NN1</b>	1	2	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	5	SS
<b>S_NN12</b>	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	7	SS
<b>S_NN13</b>	1	1	1	0	0	1	1	2	0	7	SS
<b>S_NN14</b>	2	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	5	SS
<b>S_NN15</b>	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	7	SS
<b>S_NN16</b>	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	4	NS
<b>S_all6</b>	0	1	0	1	0	1	1	1	0	5	SS
<b>S_all7</b>	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	4	NS
<b>S_all8</b>	0	1	0	1	1	0	1	1	1	6	SS
<b>S_NN17</b>	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	4	NS
<b>DCT_NN1</b>	0	1	0	1	0	1	1	1	0	5	SS
<b>DCT_NN2</b>	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	NS
<b>DCT_all1</b>	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	2	NS
<b>DCT_all2</b>	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	3	NS
<b>DCT_NN3</b>	0	2	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	4	NS
<b>DCT_NN4</b>	1	2	0	1	0	2	1	1	0	8	SS
<b>DCT_NN5</b>	1	1	1	0	0	1	1	1	0	6	SS
<b>DCT_all3</b>	0	2	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	4	NS
<b>DCT_all4</b>	1	2	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	6	SS
<b>SMCU_ae-all1</b>	0	2	1	0	1	1	1	1	0	7	SS
<b>SMCU_NN1</b>	0	2	1	0	1	0	1	0	0	5	SS
<b>SMCU_NN2</b>	1	2	1	0	0	0	1	1	1	7	SS
<b>G_all1</b>	0	2	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	5	SS

G_NN1	0	2	1	1	0	1	1	0	1	7	SS
G_NN2	0	2	1	0	0	1	1	0	1	6	SS
G_NN3	1	2	1	0	1	1	1	2	1	10	CS
G_all2	0	2	1	0	0	2	1	1	1	8	SS
G_all3	1	1	0	0	0	2	1	1	1	7	SS
G_all4	0	2	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	5	SS
G_NN4	1	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	5	SS
G_NN5	1	1	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	7	SS
G_NN6	1	1	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	5	SS
G_NN7	1	1	0	1	0	2	1	0	0	6	SS
G_NN8	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	1	0	4	NS
G_NN9	1	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	6	SS
G_NN10	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	4	NS
G_all5	1	1	0	0	1	0	1	1	0	5	SS
G_all6	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	3	NS
G_all7	1	1	1	0	0	2	1	0	0	6	SS
G_NN11	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	9	SS
G_NN12	0	1	1	1	0	2	1	1	0	7	SS
G_NN13	0	1	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	5	SS
G_NN14	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	3	NS
G_all8	1	1	1	0	0	1	1	1	0	6	SS
G_all9	0	1	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	3	NS
G_ae-NN1	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	7	SS
G_ae-all1	0	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	0	6	SS
G_NN15	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	2	NS
G_NN16	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	3	NS
G_all10	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	3	NS

**Table B5.** Scores for ae-Giselle’s images. SS = Slightly Sexualized; CS = Clearly Sexualized.

Figure ID	Mouth & Eyes Dynamic	Clothing / Nudity	Focus Breasts/ Chest	Focus Genitals/ Inner Thighs	Focus Buttocks/ Hips	Pose	Shot	Touch	Sexual Role Play	Total	Result
BM_ae-G1	0	4	2	0	1	1	1	0	0	9	SS
BM_ae-all1	1	4	2	1	1	1	1	1	0	12	CS
BM_ae-all2	1	4	2	1	1	1	1	1	0	12	CS
HBD_ae-all1	0	4	2	0	1	1	1	0	0	9	SS
NL_ae-all1	0	3	1	1	0	0	1	1	0	7	SS
NL_ae-G1	0	3	0	1	1	1	1	1	0	8	SS
S_ae-all1	1	3	1	1	0	1	1	1	0	9	SS
S_ae-G1	1	1	1	0	0	1	1	1	0	6	SS
SMCU_ae-all1	1	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	6	SS
G_ae-G1	0	3	1	1	0	1	1	1	0	8	SS
G_ae-all1	0	4	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	10	CS

**Table B6.** Scores for ae-Karina’s images. SS = Slightly Sexualized; CS = Clearly Sexualized.

Figure ID	Mouth & Eyes Dynamic	Clothing / Nudity	Focus Breasts/ Chest	Focus Genitals/ Inner Thighs	Focus Buttocks/ Hips	Pose	Shot	Touch	Sexual Role Play	Total	Result
BM_ae-K1	1	3	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	8	SS
BM_ae-all1	0	3	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	8	SS
BM_ae-all2	0	3	0	2	1	0	1	1	0	8	SS
HBD_ae-all1	0	3	1	0	1	1	1	1	0	8	SS
NL_ae-all1	0	3	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	5	SS
NL_ae-K1	0	3	0	1	2	1	1	1	0	9	SS
S_ae-all1	0	3	1	0	1	0	1	0	0	6	SS

<b>S_ae-K1</b>	0	3	1	1	1	0	1	1	0	8	SS
<b>SMCU_ae-all1</b>	0	3	1	1	0	1	1	1	0	8	SS
<b>G_ae-K1</b>	1	3	1	0	1	1	1	1	0	9	SS
<b>G_ae-all1</b>	0	3	1	0	1	1	1	1	0	8	SS

**Table B7.** Scores for ae-Winter's images. SS = Slightly Sexualized; CS = Clearly Sexualized.

<b>Figure ID</b>	<b>Mouth &amp; Eyes Dynamic</b>	<b>Clothing / Nudity</b>	<b>Focus Breasts/ Chest</b>	<b>Focus Genitals/ Inner Thighs</b>	<b>Focus Buttocks/ Hips</b>	<b>Pose</b>	<b>Shot</b>	<b>Touch</b>	<b>Sexual Role Play</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Result</b>
<b>BM_ae-W1</b>	0	3	2	1	1	1	1	1	0	10	CS
<b>BM_ae-all1</b>	0	3	1	1	1	1	1	2	0	10	CS
<b>BM_ae-all2</b>	0	3	1	0	1	1	1	2	0	9	SS
<b>HBD_ae-all1</b>	0	3	1	0	0	1	1	1	0	7	SS
<b>NL_ae-all1</b>	0	3	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	5	SS
<b>NL_ae-W1</b>	0	3	1	0	1	1	1	0	0	7	SS
<b>S_ae-all1</b>	0	3	1	0	0	1	1	1	0	7	SS
<b>S_ae-W1</b>	0	3	1	0	1	2	1	0	0	8	SS
<b>SMCU_ae-all1</b>	1	3	1	0	1	1	1	1	0	9	SS
<b>G_ae-W1</b>	1	3	2	0	1	1	1	1	0	10	CS
<b>G_ae-all1</b>	0	3	1	0	2	1	1	1	0	9	SS

**Table B8.** Scores for ae-NingNing's images. SS = Slightly Sexualized; CS = Clearly Sexualized.

<b>Figure ID</b>	<b>Mouth &amp; Eyes Dynamic</b>	<b>Clothing / Nudity</b>	<b>Focus Breasts/ Chest</b>	<b>Focus Genitals/ Inner Thighs</b>	<b>Focus Buttocks/ Hips</b>	<b>Pose</b>	<b>Shot</b>	<b>Touch</b>	<b>Sexual Role Play</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Result</b>
<b>BM_ae-NN1</b>	0	3	1	1	1	0	1	1	0	8	SS
<b>BM_ae-all1</b>	0	3	0	1	0	1	1	1	0	7	SS

<b>BM_ae-all2</b>	0	3	0	1	1	1	1	1	0	8	SS
<b>HBD_ae-all1</b>	1	3	1	0	1	1	1	0	0	8	SS
<b>NL_ae-all1</b>	0	3	1	0	1	0	1	0	0	6	SS
<b>NL_ae-NN1</b>	0	3	1	0	1	1	1	0	0	7	SS
<b>S_ae-all1</b>	0	3	0	1	1	1	1	1	0	8	SS
<b>S_ae-NN1</b>	2	3	1	0	1	1	1	1	0	10	CS
<b>SMCU_ae-all1</b>	1	3	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	10	CS
<b>G_ae-NN1</b>	0	3	1	1	0	1	1	1	0	8	SS
<b>G_ae-all1</b>	0	3	1	1	0	0	1	1	0	7	SS

**Table B9.** Joint scores for Giselle’s images with her avatar. SS = Slightly Sexualized; CS = Clearly Sexualized. Cells in white indicate Giselle and the avatar scored the same for that variable (including zero), grey cells indicate the avatar was the only element scoring for that variable, orange cells indicate Giselle was the only one scoring for that variable, blue cells indicate both elements scored but the avatar scored more for that variable (therefore, the value is that of the avatar), and cells in purple indicate both elements scored but Giselle scored more for that variable (therefore, the value is that of the real member).

Figure ID	Mouth & Eyes Dynamic	Clothing / Nudity	Focus Breasts/ Chest	Focus Genitals/ Inner Thighs	Focus Buttocks/ Hips	Pose	Shot	Touch	Sexual Role Play	Total	Result
<b>BM_ae-G1</b>	0	4	2	1	1	2	1	1	0	12	CS
<b>BM_ae-all1</b>	1	4	2	1	1	1	1	1	0	12	CS
<b>HBD_ae-all1</b>	0	4	2	0	1	1	1	1	0	10	CS
<b>NL_ae-all1</b>	1	3	1	1	0	1	1	2	0	10	CS
<b>NL_ae-G1</b>	0	3	2	1	1	1	1	1	0	10	CS
<b>S_ae-all1</b>	1	3	1	1	0	1	1	1	0	9	SS
<b>S_ae-G1</b>	1	1	1	0	0	1	1	1	0	6	SS
<b>SMCU_ae-all1</b>	1	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	6	SS
<b>G_ae-G1</b>	0	3	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	9	SS
<b>G_ae-all1</b>	0	4	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	11	CS

**Table B10.** Joint scores for Karina’s images with her avatar. SS = Slightly Sexualized; CS = Clearly Sexualized. Cells in white indicate Karina and the avatar scored the same for that variable (including zero), grey cells indicate the avatar was the only element scoring for that variable, orange cells indicate Karina was the only one scoring for that variable, and blue cells indicate both elements scored but the avatar scored more for that variable (therefore, the value is that of the avatar).

Figure ID	Mouth & Eyes Dynamic	Clothing / Nudity	Focus Breasts/ Chest	Focus Genitals/ Inner Thighs	Focus Buttocks/ Hips	Pose	Shot	Touch	Sexual Role Play	Total	Result
BM_ae-K1	1	3	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	10	CS
BM_ae-all1	0	3	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	8	SS
HBD_ae-all1	0	3	1	0	1	1	1	1	0	8	SS
NL_ae-all1	0	3	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	10	CS
NL_ae-K1	0	3	2	1	2	1	1	1	0	11	CS
S_ae-all1	0	3	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	9	SS
S_ae-K1	0	3	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	9	SS
SMCU_ae-all1	0	3	1	1	0	1	1	1	0	8	SS
G_ae-K1	1	3	1	0	1	1	1	1	0	9	SS
G_ae-all1	0	3	1	0	1	1	1	1	0	8	SS

**Table B11.** Joint scores for Winter’s images with her avatar. SS = Slightly Sexualized; CS = Clearly Sexualized. Cells in white indicate Winter and the avatar scored the same for that variable (including zero), grey cells indicate the avatar was the only element scoring for that variable, orange cells indicate Winter was the only one scoring for that variable, and blue cells indicate both elements scored but the avatar scored more for that variable (therefore, the value is that of the avatar).

Figure ID	Mouth & Eyes Dynamic	Clothing / Nudity	Focus Breasts/ Chest	Focus Genitals/ Inner Thighs	Focus Buttocks/ Hips	Pose	Shot	Touch	Sexual Role Play	Total	Result
BM_ae-W1	0	3	2	1	1	1	1	1	0	10	CS
BM_ae-all1	0	3	1	1	1	1	1	2	0	10	CS
HBD_ae-all1	0	3	1	0	0	1	1	1	0	7	SS
NL_ae-all1	1	3	0	0	1	0	1	1	0	7	SS

NL_ae-W1	0	3	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	10	CS
S_ae-all1	0	3	1	0	1	1	1	1	0	8	SS
S_ae-W1	0	3	1	0	1	2	1	0	0	8	SS
SMCU_ae-all1	1	3	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	10	CS
G_ae-W1	1	3	2	0	1	1	1	1	0	10	CS
G_ae-all1	0	3	1	1	2	1	1	1	0	10	CS

**Table B12.** Joint scores for NingNing’s images with her avatar. SS = Slightly Sexualized; CS = Clearly Sexualized. Cells in white indicate NingNing and the avatar scored the same for that variable (including zero), grey cells indicate the avatar was the only element scoring for that variable, orange cells indicate NingNing was the only one scoring for that variable, and blue cells indicate both elements scored but the avatar scored more for that variable (therefore, the value is that of the avatar).

Figure ID	Mouth & Eyes Dynamic	Clothing / Nudity	Focus Breasts/ Chest	Focus Genitals/ Inner Thighs	Focus Buttocks/ Hips	Pose	Shot	Touch	Sexual Role Play	Total	Result
BM_ae-NN1	0	3	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	9	SS
BM_ae-all1	1	3	1	1	0	1	1	1	0	9	SS
HBD_ae-all1	1	3	1	0	1	1	1	0	0	8	SS
NL_ae-all1	1	3	1	1	1	0	1	1	0	9	SS
NL_ae-NN1	0	3	1	0	1	1	1	1	0	8	SS
S_ae-all1	1	3	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	10	CS
S_ae-NN1	2	3	1	0	1	1	1	1	0	10	CS
SMCU_ae-all1	1	3	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	10	CS
G_ae-NN1	0	3	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	9	SS
G_ae-all1	0	3	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	9	SS

## **Appendix C. Self-Administered Questionnaire**

### **English Questionnaire**

I'm a graduate student in the department of Asian Studies in the Catholic University of Portugal, currently writing my master thesis. I am currently researching how Korean fans interpret Aespa's concept and how it affects their perception of themselves. I ask for your honest opinion when answering this survey. (All of the data will be used solely for the purposes mentioned above.)

---

#### **SECTION 1**

##### **1) What is your gender?**

- Female
- Male
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

##### **2) How old are you?**

- Less than 18
- 18-25
- 26-33
- 34-41
- 42-50
- More than 50

#### **SECTION 2**

##### **3) How frequently do you watch Aespa's contents (music videos, interviews, variety...)?**

- Rarely
- Once a week
- 2-3 times a week
- Once per day
- Many times a day

##### **4) Why do you like Aespa? (Please rank the following reasons)**

- I relate to their music

- I think the members are talented
- I like their concept (avatars, virtual world)
- I like their aesthetic (clothes, props and decorations...)
- I like the appearance of the members (facial features, makeup, hairstyle...)
- I like the members' personalities

**5) How many of your close friends are fans of Aespa?** (Please choose a number.)

\_\_\_\_\_

**SECTION 3**

**6) Do you speak with those friends about Aespa?**

- Yes
- No

(Jumps to question 7 if yes. Jumps to question 8 if no.)

**7) How frequently are the following topics mentioned in your conversations about Aespa?**

	Never	Sometimes	Often	Always
“The avatars’ design (e.g., facial features)”				
“The idols’ natural beauty (e.g., facial features)”				
“The avatars’ styling (e.g., makeup)”				
“The idols’ styling (e.g., makeup)”				
“The avatars’ bodies (e.g., proportions)”				
“The idols’ bodies (e.g., proportions)”				

**SECTION 4**

**8) Select how much you agree with each sentence.**

	Completely Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Completely Agree
The avatars of Aespa have the ideal female body					
The human members of Aespa have the ideal female body					
The avatars of Aespa have a realistic female body					
The human members of Aespa have a realistic female body					
The avatars of Aespa wear sexy clothes					
The human members of Aespa wear sexy clothes					

**9) On a scale from 0 to 5, how sexualized do you think each picture is? (0 being "not sexualized at all" and 5 "extremely sexualized".)**



	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>(a)</b>						
<b>(b)</b>						
<b>(c)</b>						
<b>(d)</b>						
<b>(e)</b>						

**10) On a scale from 0 to 5, how sexualized do you think each picture is? (0 being "not sexualized at all" and 5 "extremely sexualized".)**



	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>(a)</b>						
<b>(b)</b>						
<b>(c)</b>						
<b>(d)</b>						
<b>(e)</b>						

**11) Select how much you agree with each sentence.**

	Completely Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Completely Agree
“I tend to compare my body to the bodies of the avatars of Aespa”					
“I tend to compare my body to the bodies of					

the human members of Aespa”					
“I feel insecure about my body after looking at pictures and videos of Aespa”					
“I worry more about my physical appearance ever since I became a fan of Aespa”					
“I feel ashamed for not making an effort to have a body like those of the avatars of Aespa”					
“I feel ashamed for not making an effort to have a body like those of the human members of Aespa”					
“I feel ashamed for not making an effort to look like the avatars of Aespa (everything: style, hairstyle, makeup...)”					
“I feel ashamed for not making an effort to look like the human members of Aespa (everything: style, hairstyle, makeup...)”					

“I like to regularly dress and use makeup like the avatars of Aespa”					
“I like to regularly dress and use makeup like the human members of Aespa”					
“I would like to look like the avatars of Aespa (facial features)”					
“I would like to look like the human members of Aespa (facial features)”					
“I would like to have a body like those of the avatars of Aespa”					
“I would like to have a body like those of the human members of Aespa”					

**12) Becoming a fan of Aespa:** (Please choose one or more options)

- motivated you to change your appearance (haircut, makeup...)
- motivated you to change your appearance through cosmetic surgery
- motivated you to exercise
- motivated you to diet
- none of the above

**SECTION 5**

**13) Select how much you agree with each sentence.**

	Completely Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Completely Agree
“If I have a body and appearance like those of Aespa, I will be a better person”					
“Women that have a body and appearance like those of Aespa are more competent”					
“Bodies like those of Aespa are healthier”					
“Women should make an effort to have a body like those of Aespa”					
“Ever since I became a fan of Aespa, I judge other women’s appearance more”					
“I think it is important to have a body and appearance like those of Aespa, because they match those of men’s idealized woman”					

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**14) Would you be available for an interview? (Respondents’ identity will remain anonymous).** If so, please leave your contact information below.

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## Korean Questionnaire

안녕하십니까. 저는 석사 논문을 쓰고 있는 포르투갈 가톨릭 대학교의 아시아학부 대학원생입니다. 저는 한국 팬들이 에스파의 컨셉을 어떻게 해석하고, 이러한 점들이 스스로에 대한 인식에 어떤 영향을 미치는지 사례를 조사하고 있습니다. 이 설문 조사에는 여러분의 솔직한 의견만을 부탁드립니다. (모든 데이터는 위에서 언급한 목적을 위해서만 사용되고, 응답자의 신원은 익명으로 유지됩니다.)

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### 섹션 1

#### 1) 성별은 무엇입니까?

- 여성
- 남성
- 기타: \_\_\_\_\_

#### 2) 몇 살입니까?

- 18 세 미만
- 18-25 세
- 26-33 세
- 34-41 세
- 42-50 세
- 50 세 이상

### 섹션 2

#### 3) 에스파의 콘텐츠를 얼마나 자주 보십니까 (뮤비, 인터뷰, 예능...)?

- 가끔씩
- 일주일에 1 번
- 일주일에 2-3 번
- 하루에 1 번
- 하루에 여러 번

4) 왜 에스파를 좋아합니까? (아래의 보기 중, 에스파를 좋아하는 이유의 순위를 매겨 주십시오. )

- 에스파의 음악에 공감합니다
- 멤버들이 재능이 있다고 생각합니다
- 에스파의 컨셉을 좋아합니다 (아바타, 가상 세계)
- 에스파의 비주얼을 좋아합니다 (옷, 소품과 장식...)
- 멤버들 외모를 좋아합니다 (얼굴의 특징, 메이크업, 헤어스타일...)
- 멤버들의 성격을 좋아합니다

5) 친한 친구 중에서 에스파의 팬이 몇 명입니까? (숫자를 선택하십시오.)

\_\_\_\_\_

### 섹션 3

6) 그 친구들과 에스파에 대해 이야기합니까?

- 네
- 아니요

(Jumps to question 7 if yes. Jumps to question 8 if no.)

7) 에스파에 관해 친구들과 이야기를 할 때, 다음 주제가 얼마나 자주 등장합니까?

	한 번도	가끔씩	자주	항상
아바타 디자인 (얼굴의 특징...)				
멤버들의 외모 (얼굴의 특징...)				
아바타 스타일링 (메이크업...)				
멤버들 스타일링 (메이크업...)				
아바타 몸 (신체 비율)				
멤버들 몸 (신체 비율)				

섹션 4

8) 각 문장에 얼마나 동의하는지 선택해 주십시오.

	전혀 그렇지 않다	그렇지 않다	중간이다	그렇다	매우 그렇다
"에스파의 아바타는 이상적인 여성의 몸이다"					
"에스파의 멤버들은 이상적인 여성의 몸이다"					
"에스파의 아바타는 현실적인 여성의 몸이다"					
"에스파의 멤버들은 현실적인 여성의 몸이다"					
"에스파의 아바타는 섹시한 옷을 입는다"					
"에스파의 멤버들은 섹시한 옷을 입는다"					

9) 0에서 5까지, 각 사진이 얼마나 성적 대상화된 것 같습니까? (0은 "전혀 성적 대상화되지 않았다" 이고 5는 "매우 성적 대상화되었다".)



	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>(a)</b>						
<b>(b)</b>						
<b>(c)</b>						
<b>(d)</b>						
<b>(e)</b>						

10) 0 에서 5 까지, 각 사진이 얼마나 성적 대상화된 것 같습니까? (0 은 "전혀 성적 대상화되지 않았다" 이고 5 는 "매우 성적 대상화되었다".)



	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>(a)</b>						
<b>(b)</b>						
<b>(c)</b>						
<b>(d)</b>						
<b>(e)</b>						

11) 각 문장에 얼마나 동의하는지 선택해 주십시오.

	전혀 그렇지 않다	그렇지 않다	중간이다	그렇다	매우 그렇다
“제 몸을 에스파의 아바타 의 몸과 비교하는 편입니다”					

“제 몸을 에스파의 멤버들의 몸과 비교하는 편입니다”					
“에스파의 사진/영상을 보고난 후에 몸에 대한 자신감이 없어집니다”					
“에스파 팬이 되고 난 후, 스스로의 외모에 더 신경씁니다”					
“에스파의 아바타 같은 몸을 가지기 위해 노력하지 않아서 부끄러움을 느낍니다”					
“에스파의 멤버들 같은 몸을 가지기 위해 노력하지 않아서 부끄러움을 느낍니다”					
“에스파의 아바타 같은 외모 (전부 다: 스타일, 헤어, 메이크업...)를 가지기 위해 노력하지 않아서 부끄러움을 느낍니다”					
“에스파의 멤버들 같은 외모 (전부다: 스타일, 헤어, 메이크업...)를 가지기 위해 노력하지 않아서 부끄러움을 느낍니다”					
“에스파의 아바타처럼 옷을 입고 화장하는 것을 좋아합니다”					

“에스파의 멤버들처럼 옷을 입고 화장하는 것을 좋아합니다”					
“에스파의 아바타를 닮고 싶습니다 (얼굴의 특징)”					
“에스파의 멤버들을 닮고 싶습니다(얼굴의 특징)”					
“에스파의 아바타 같은 몸을 닮고 싶습니다”					
“에스파의 멤버들 같은 몸을 닮고 싶습니다”					

**12) 에스파 팬이 되는 것은...** (하나 이상의 옵션을 선택하십시오.)

- 외모를 바꾸는 것에 영향을 미쳤습니다 (헤어, 메이크업...)
- 성형수술로 외모를 바꾸는 것에 영향을 미쳤습니다
- 운동을 하도록 영향을 미쳤습니다
- 다이어트를 하도록 영향을 미쳤습니다
- 위 중 어느 것도 해당하지 않음

**섹션 5**

**13) 각 문장에 얼마나 동의하는지 선택해 주십시오.**

	전혀 그렇지 않다	그렇지 않다	중간이다	그렇다	매우 그렇다
"에스파의 몸과 외모를 가진다면 더 나은 사람이 될 것 같다"					

“에스파의 몸과 외모와 같은 몸매와 외모를 가진 여성이 더 낫다”					
“에스파의 몸과 같은 몸이 더 건강하다”					
“여자는 에스파의 같은 몸을 가지도록 노력해야 합니다”					
“에스파 팬이 되고 난 후, 다른 여자들의 외모를 더 판단하게 됐습니다”					
“남자의 이상형에 더 가깝기 때문에 에스파와 같은 몸매와 외모를 갖는 것이 중요하다고 생각합니다”					

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**14) 인터뷰 가능할까요? (응답자의 신원은 익명으로 유지됩니다). 가능하시다면, 연락처를 아래에 적어주세요.**

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## Appendix D. Interviews

### Interview with Fan A – Korean and English Transcripts

**Q.1.** 한국 사회에서 여성의 외모와 몸매가 개인적 성공이나 사회적 성공에 영향을 미친다고 생각하십니까? 아니면 영향을 미치지 않는다고 생각하십니까? 당신의 생각을 알려주세요. (Do you think women's personal or social success in South Korean society depends on their appearance and body? Or do you disagree? Please, let me know your thoughts.)

Fan A: 네. 물론 정도의 차이는 있겠지만, 영향을 준다고 생각합니다. (Yes. Evidently, there is a difference in degree, but I think it has an impact/influence.)

**Q.2.** 한국에서 여성이 외부의 영향이나 압박감 없이 자유롭게 자신의 신체와 삶에 대해 결정할 수 있다고 생각하십니까? 즉, 한국 여성의 신체와 삶에 대한 결정이 자유 의지에서 비롯된 것이라고 생각하나요 영향을 받은 것이라고 생각하나요? 아니면 둘 다 영향을 미친다고 생각하나요? 당신의 생각을 알려주세요. 예시가 있다면 예시도 함께 적어주시면 감사하겠습니다. (Do you think that women in South Korea can freely make decisions about their own body and life? In other words, do you think South Korean women's decisions about their body and life are out of free will, influenced or both? Please, let me know your thoughts. If you have any examples, please share them.)

Fan A: 아니오. 자신이 속해있는 집단과 미디어의 영향을 받는다고 생각합니다. (No. I think we(/I) are(/am) influenced by the media and our(/my) own circle of people.)

**Q.3.** 한국 여성들이 외모와 신체에 대해 사회적인 시선으로부터 평가받는다고 생각하나요? 아니면 그렇지 않다고 생각하나요? 당신의 생각을 알려주세요. (예시가 있다면 예시도 함께 적어주시면 감사하겠습니다.) 또, 당신은 외모나 몸에 대한 평가를 받은 적 있나요? 아니면 주변 지인 중에 외모나 몸에 대한 평가를 받은 사람이 있나요? (Do you think Korean women are judged by their society for their body and appearance? Or do you disagree? Please, let me know your thoughts. If you have any examples, please share them. Also, have you ever been judged based on your body and appearance? Or do you know women acquaintances who have?)

Fan A: 평가받는다고 생각합니다. 저의 경우 ‘살이 찼다’ 혹은 ‘살이 빠졌다’라는 말을 여러 번 들었습니다. (Yes, I think women are judged for it. In my case, I have heard the words “You gained weight” or “You lost weight” many times.)

**Q.4. 한국 사회가 아직까지 가부장적 가치관의 영향을 받고 있다고 생각하나요? 아니면 그렇지 않다고 생각하나요? 당신의 생각을 알려주세요. 예시가 있다면 예시도 함께 적어주시면 감사하겠습니다. (Do you think South Korean society is still influenced by Patriarchal values? Or do you disagree? Please, let me know your thoughts. If you have any examples, please share them.)**

Fan A: 네 여전히 영향을 받고 있다고 생각합니다. 다만 예전보다는 그 영향력이 줄어들었다고 생각됩니다. (Yes, I think it is still influenced. However, I think its influence has diminished compared to before.)

**Q.5. 일반적으로, 한국 사람은 아직도 딸보다 아들을 더 선호하는 편이라고 생각하나요? 아니면 그렇지 않다고 생각하나요? 또, 딸과 아들을 다르게 대우하고 다른 방식으로 키운다고 생각하나요? 아니면 그렇지 않다고 생각하나요? 최대한 자세히 설명해 주세요. 예시가 있다면 예시와 함께 부탁드립니다. (Generally, do you think that Korean people still tend to prefer sons over daughters? Or do you disagree? And do you think sons and daughters are still treated and raised differently? Or do you disagree? Please explain in detail. If you have any examples, please share them.)**

Fan A: 아니요. 요즘에는 딸을 더 선호한다는 이야기를 많이 들었습니다. 다만 이것이 가부장적인 생각에서 벗어나지는 않았다고 생각합니다. 여전히 딸과 아들을 다르게 대우하고 다르게 키우는 경우가 많은 것 같습니다. 예를 들면, 아들이 사고를 치는 경우 딸의 경우보다 조금 더 관대하게 생각하는 경향이 있다고 생각합니다. 가정뿐만 아니라 사회적으로도 남자들에게 관대하다고 생각됩니다. (No. These days I've heard there is more of a preference for daughters. However, I do not think this means a “straying” from Patriarchal thinking. I think there are still many cases where daughters and sons are treated and raised differently. For example, I think there is a tendency to be more tolerant of sons getting into trouble than daughters. I think not just at home, but even socially, there is more tolerance for men.)

**Q.6. 일반적으로, 한국 사람은 여자가 주부여야 한다는 생각이 아직도 있다고 생각하나요? 아니면 그렇지 않다고 생각하나요? 당신의 생각을 알려주세요.**

**(Generally, do you think there is still the idea that women should be housewives? Or do you disagree? Please, let me know your thoughts.)**

Fan A: 그 생각은 예전보다 많이 줄어들었다고 생각합니다. 맞벌이부부가 늘어났기 때문입니다. 그러나 여전히 양육, 집안일 등에 있어 여자가 더 많은 부담을 지고 있다고 생각합니다. (I think this idea is much less prevalent compared to before. This is because the number of working couples has increased. However, I think women are still more burdened with parenting, housework, etc.)

**Q.7. 현재, 한국 사회가 얼마나 성평등하다고 생각하나요? 이전에 비해 얼마나 많이 변했다고 생각하나요? 한국에 성 차별이 존재한다고 생각하나요? 아니면 그렇지 않다고 생각하나요? 당신의 생각을 알려주세요. 또, 성 차별을 받은 적이 있나요? 아니면 주변에 성 차별을 받은 적이 있는 여성들을 알고 있나요? (Presently, how gender-equal do you think South Korean society is? How do you think it's changed? Do you think there is gender discrimination? Or do you disagree? Please, let me know your thoughts. Also, have you ever been discriminated against based on your gender? Or do you know any women who have been discriminated against?)**

Fan A: 예전에 비해 여성의 사회진출 기회는 늘었지만 성차별은 여전히 존재합니다. 여전히 채용에 있어 남성을 암묵적으로 우대하는 경우가 있습니다. 최근 한국의 큰 은행에서 고의로 성적을 조작하여 여성들을 탈락시키고 남성들을 채용했던 사실이 밝혀지기도 했습니다. (Although women's opportunities for social advancement have increased compared to before, gender discrimination still exists. There are still cases of implicit preference for men in hiring. Recently, it was revealed that a large Korean bank deliberately manipulated records/grades to exclude/eliminate women and hire men.)

**Q.8. 사이버 공간(SNS, 온라인 세계, 온라인 게임 등등)에서 한국 여성들이 자유롭게 자신이 여성임을 밝히고 사진을 공유할 수 있는 안전한 공간이라고 생각하나요? 아니면 그렇지 않다고 생각하나요? 당신의 생각을 알려주세요. (Do you think cyberspace (SNS, online world, online games...) is a safe space for Korean women to freely identify themselves as women and share their own photos? Or do you disagree? Please, let me know your thoughts.)**

Fan A: 한국여성들이 자신이 여성임을 밝히고 사이버공간에서 사진을 공유하는 경우는 매우 흔하고 아주 일상적으로 이루어집니다만, 자신의 개인정보가 담긴 사진을 공유하기에는 안전하다고 생각하지 않습니다. (It is very common for Korean women to reveal that they are women and share photos in cyberspace, but I don't think it's safe to share photos containing their personal information.)

**Q.9. 사이버 공간(SNS, 온라인 세계, 온라인 게임 등등)에서 한국 여성은 고정관념과 여성혐오에서 벗어날 기회가 있다고 생각하나요? 아니면 그렇지 않다고 생각하나요? 당신의 생각을 알려주세요. 예시가 있다면 예시와 함께 부탁드립니다. (Do you think Korean women can escape from real world stereotypes and misogyny in cyberspace (SNS, online world, online games...)? Or do you disagree? Please, let me know your thoughts. (If you have any examples, please share them.)**

Fan A: 저는 게임을 하지 않지만, 게임을 하다가 자신이 여자라는 것을 밝히면 남자 게이머들에게 여성차별적 욕설을 듣는 경우가 종종 있다고 들었습니다. 어떤 공간이냐에 따라 다르겠지만, 남성들과 함께 있는 공간이라면 여성혐오에서 벗어나기는 쉽지 않다고 생각합니다. (I don't play games, but I've heard that if you reveal yourself to be a woman while playing games, you often hear misogynistic abuse/slurs from male gamers. It depends on what kind of space it is, but I don't think it's easy to escape misogyny if it's a space shared with men.)

**Q.10. 당신이 생각했을 때, 한국 여성들이 공개적으로나 온라인에서나 자신의 의견을 자유롭게 표현한다고 생각하나요? 당신의 경우는 어떤가요? 당신의 생각을 알려주세요. (Do you think Korean women feel comfortable expressing their opinions publicly or online? What about you? Please, let me know your thoughts.)**

Fan A: 이것은 개인차가 커서 쉽게 단정지을 수는 없지만, 한국 여성들 중에서는 하고싶은 말을 다 하지 않고 사는 사람들이 더 많을 것 같다고 생각합니다. 일단 저는 제 의견을 자유롭게 표현하기보다는 주변을 의식하는 편입니다. (It is not easy to decide/answer because there are big individual differences, but I think there are many Korean women who live without saying everything they want to say. At least/at any rate, I tend to be conscious of my surroundings rather than freely expressing my opinions.)

**Q.11. 한국 언론은 한국 여성들을 현실적으로 묘사한다고 생각하나요? 만약 그렇다면 어떤 부분에서 현실적으로 묘사하나요? (Do you think Korean women are realistically portrayed in the Korean media? In what ways?)**

Fan A: 한국언론들은 남성들에 비해 여성들에게 더 엄격한 잣대를 들이밀며 다양한 압박을 준다고 생각합니다. 현실적이라기보다는 여러 이상(ideal)을 보여준다고 생각합니다. (I think the Korean media imposes stricter standards on women than on men and puts various pressures on them. Rather than realistic, I think it portrays several ideals.)

**Q.12. 일반적으로 한국 여성들은 한국 언론이 묘사하는 여성의 모습에 대해 어떻게 반응하고 어떻게 해석한다고 생각하나요? 당신의 경우는 어떤가요? 당신의 생각을 알려주세요. (In general, how do you think Korean women respond, interpret, and internalize the Korean media's portrayal of women? What about you? Please, let me know your thoughts.)**

Fan A: 일반적으로는 언론이 묘사하는 여성의 모습에 대해 영향을 받는다고 생각합니다. 저 역시 ‘여자라면 이렇게 외모를 가꾸어야 해’라든지, ‘여자라면 이렇게 행동해야지’ 같은 생각을 무의식중에 갖게 된 것 같습니다. (In general, I think (women are) influenced by how the media portrays women. I, too, have unconsciously had thoughts like, ‘If you are a woman, you should take care of your appearance like this (look like this)’ or ‘If you are a woman, you should act this way’.)

**Q.13. 일반적으로 한국 여성들은 한국 언론에서 묘사하는 여성의 신체와 외모를 모방하는 경향이 있다고 생각하나요? 당신의 생각을 알려주세요. (In general, do you think Korean women tend to imitate the body and appearance of women depicted in the Korean media? Please, let me know your thoughts.)**

Fan A: 네. 그것이 이상적인 것으로 보이기 때문에 모방하는 경향이 있다고 생각됩니다. (Yes. I think because they (the body and appearance) look ideal, (women) tend to imitate it.)

**Q.14. 시청자들이나 팬들이 가장 중요하게 생각하는 아이들의 특징, 특성은 무엇이라고 생각하십니까? (What attributes do you think viewers and fans value the most in idols?)**

Fan A: 외모, 컨셉 등의 비주얼적 요소와 노래, 춤 등의 퍼포먼스적 요소가 가장 중요하다고 생각합니다. (I think visual elements such as appearance and concept, and performance elements like singing and dancing are the most important/valued.)

**Q.15. 개인적으로, K-pop 그룹에서 가장 마음에 드는 점들은 무엇입니까? 에스파의 경우는요? (Personally, what do you like most about K-pop groups? What about Aespa?)**

Fan A: 보통의 케이팝 그룹에서 가장 마음에 드는 점은 음악입니다. 음악이 취향에 맞기 때문에 좋아합니다. 에스파의 경우는 음악뿐 아니라 외모, 실력, 성격 모두 좋아해서 팬이 되었습니다. (What I like the most about a “normal” K-pop groups is the music. I like the music because it suits my taste. In the case of Aespa, I became a fan because I liked not only the music, but everything, the looks, skills, and personality.)

**Q.16. 개인적인 경험으로 어떤 그룹의 팬이 되는 결정적 요인은 아이돌의 비주얼에 있다고 생각하나요? (From your personal experience, do you think that the decisive factor in becoming a fan of a group is its idols' visual?)**

Fan A: 아니요. 비주얼은 처음에 관심을 갖게 되는 요인이고, 팬이 되는 결정적 요인은 성격이라고 생각합니다. (No. I think the “visual” is the factor that gets people interested in the first place, and the decisive factor in becoming a fan is (idols’) personality.)

**Q.17. 에스파가 만약 현재의 비주얼이 아니었다면, 사람들은 에스파에 관심이 없었을 거라고 생각하나요? (Do you think people wouldn't be interested in Aespa if it weren't for their visuals?)**

Fan A: 관심이 없는 것은 아니겠지만, 현재의 비주얼이기 때문에 이만큼 관심 받는 것이라 생각합니다. (I don't think people would not be interested, but I do think because of their current visual (appearance) they are receiving this much interest.)

**Q.18. 에스파의 아바타가 그룹의 성공에 필수적인 요소라고 생각하나요? 아바타(존재, 몸, 외모, '성격' 등등)에 대해 어떻게 생각하나요? 그룹의 컨셉에 대해 어떻게 생각하나요? 당신의 생각을 알려주세요. (Do you think the avatars of Aespa are essential for the success of the group? What do you think about the avatars of Aespa (existence, body, appearance, personality...)? What do you think about their concept? Please, let me know your thoughts.)**

Fan A: 전혀 아니라고 생각합니다. 아바타라는 컨셉이 없어도 성공할 수 있는 그룹이라고 생각합니다. 실제로 유튜브와 여러 인터넷 커뮤니티에서 이 컨셉이 필요없다고 얘기하는 것을 많이 보았습니다. 컨셉보다는 멤버들의 비주얼, 실력, 그리고 음악(가사 말고 멜로디)이 좋아서 성공했다고 생각합니다. (I don't think so at all. I think they are a group that can succeed even without the avatar concept. In fact, I've seen a lot of comments/conversations on YouTube and various internet communities saying that this concept is unnecessary. I think rather than the concept, they succeeded because (people liked) the members' visual, personality and the music (melody not the lyrics).)

**Q.19. 에스파에 관해 친구들과 이야기를 할 때, 멤버들의 외모랑 몸에 대해 자주 이야기 하신다고 하셨습니다. 그러한 대화의 예를 들어주실 수 있을까요? 에스파와 관련된 다른 주제에 대해서도 이야기를 하나요? 만약 한다면, 어떤 주제로 이야기를 하나요? (You said that when you talk to your friends about Aespa, you often talk about the members' appearance and body. Can you give an example of such a conversation? Do you talk about other topics related to Aespa? If so, could you let me know those other topics?)**

Fan A: 예를 들면, 어떤 헤어스타일을 했을 때 더 예쁜지에 대한 이야기를 자주합니다. '윈터는 단발일 때 더 예뻐.' 혹은 그날 업데이트 된 사진이나 영상을 보고 멤버들의 외모를 칭찬합니다. '오늘 카리나 진짜 예쁘다.' 다른 주제에 대해서도 이야기를 많이 합니다. 음악, 컨셉에 대해서도 이야기하고 멤버들의 스케줄이나 콘텐츠에 대한 이야기도 합니다. '이번 타이틀곡의 가사는 다소 어렵지만 비트가 마음에 든다.' '다양한 모습을 볼 수 있는 콘텐츠가 있으면 좋겠다.' '여러 음악방송에 출연해주길 바란다.' 등과 같은 이야기를 합니다. (For example, we often talk about what hairstyle makes the (members) look prettier: "Winter is prettier with short hair". Or after seeing the daily picture or video updated (on SNS) we praise the members' appearance: "Karina looks really pretty today". We also talk a lot about other topics. We also talk about the music, the concept, and the members' schedule or contents. "The lyrics of this title song are a bit difficult, but I like the beat."; "It would be nice if there were contents where I can see various sides (of the members)"; "I hope they will appear on several music shows", among other conversations like these.)

**Q.20. 왜 이러한 주제 (외모랑 몸)에 대해 주로 이야기한다고 생각하나요? 그리고 이 주제에 대해 이야기할 때 어떤 느낌이 드나요? (Why do you think you mainly talk about these topics? And how do you feel when you talk about these topics?)**

Fan A: 케이팝 그룹은 외모가 중요하게 여겨지고, 팬들은 그들의 외모를 좋아하기 때문이라고 생각합니다. 저도 그들의 외모를 좋아해서 이야기하지만, 약간의 괴리감을 느낍니다. 머리로 루키즘을 지양해야 한다고 생각하지만 아름다운 사람들에 끌리는 것을 부정할 수 없기 때문입니다. (I think appearance is regarded/considered important for K-pop groups, and that's because their fans love their looks. I too, like their appearance, so I talk about it, but I feel a “sense of disparity”. That’s because within my head, I do think that lookism should be avoided, but I cannot deny being attracted to beautiful people.)

**Q.21. 에스파(및 다른 걸그룹)가 팬이 자신의 신체를 관리하고 인식하는 데에 영향을 미친다고 생각하나요? 아니면 그렇지 않다고 생각하나요? 당신의 생각을 알려주세요. (Do you think Aespa (and other K-pop groups) influence how fans perceive and manipulate their bodies? Or do you disagree? Please, let me know your thoughts.)**

Fan A: 영향을 준다고 생각합니다. 매일 예쁜 사람들을 보면서 그들의 외모에 대해 이야기하다보니 저의 외모에도 전보다는 신경을 쓰게 되었습니다. (I think it influences. As I look at pretty people every day and talk about their appearance, I become more concerned about my appearance than before.)

**Q.22. '에스파의 멤버들과 아바타는 이상적인 여성의 몸이다'라는 의견에 동의했습니다. 멤버들 경우, 어떤 면에서 이상적이라고 생각하나요? 아바타 경우는요? 둘 다 한국에서 미인이라고 생각하는 스타일과 일치한다고 생각하나요? (You agreed with the statement “Aespa’s members and avatars have the ideal female body”. In the case of the members, how are they ideal? And in the case of the avatars? Do you think they match the Korean beauty ideal?)**

Fan A: 멤버들과 아바타 모두 키도 작지 않고 날씬하기 때문입니다. 그러나 아바타보다는 에스파 멤버들이 한국에서 생각하는 미인과 일치한다고 생각합니다. 아바타보다 멤버들이 더 예쁘기 때문입니다. (Because both the members and the avatars are slim and not short. However, I think Aespa members match better (correspond more to) the beauty ideal in Korea than the avatars. This is because the members are prettier than the avatars.)

**Q.23. '에스파의 멤버들은 이상적인 여성의 몸이다'라는 진술에 동의했는데, '현실적인 여성의 몸이다' 그리고 '에스파의 몸과 같은 몸이 더 건강하다'라는 진술에 동의하지 않았습니. 그러나, '에스파의 멤버들 같은 몸을 닮고 싶습니다'라는**

진술에 동의했습니다. 그럼, 그런 몸을 갖고 싶은 이유는 무엇인가요? (You agreed with the statement “Aespa’s members have the ideal female body”. However, you disagreed with the statements “Their bodies are realistic” and “Bodies like those of Aespa are healthier”. What then, do you think is the reason for wanting to have a body like that?)

Fan A: 에스파 멤버들 같은 몸은 평균보다 훨씬 날씬한 몸이라고 생각하기 때문에, 현실적이지 않으며 또한 건강하다고 생각되지 않습니다. 그러나 날씬한 몸이 더 선호되기 때문에 그런 몸을 갖고 싶다는 생각은 있습니다. (I think bodies like those of the Aespa members are much slimmer than the average, so I don't consider them realistic nor healthy. However, because slim bodies are preferred, I think I would like to have such a body.)

**Q.24. '에스파의 사진/영상을 보고난 후에 몸에 대한 자신감이 없어집니다'라는 진술에 동의했습니다. 자세히 설명해 주시겠습니까? (You agreed with the statement “I lose confidence in my body when I see images/videos of Aespa”. Could you elaborate?)**

Fan A: 저는 에스파 멤버들만큼 날씬하지 않기 때문에 그들의 날씬한 몸을 보고 좋다고 생각하고 나면 저의 몸에 대해 불만족스러움을 약간 느낍니다. (I'm not as thin as the Aespa members, so after seeing their slim bodies and thinking they are “good”, I feel a little dissatisfied with my body.)

**Q.25. '에스파의 몸과 외모와 같은 몸매와 외모를 가진 여성이 더 낫다'라는 진술에 동의했습니다. 왜 그렇게 생각하나요? 당신의 생각을 알려주세요. (You agreed with the statement “Women that have a body and appearance like those of Aespa are better”. Why do you think so? Please, let me know your thoughts.)**

Fan A: 그들은 예쁘고 날씬하기 때문에 사회가 원하는 외적 기준을 만족시키기 때문입니다. (Because they are pretty and slim, they meet the external standards that society wants.)

**Q.26. 왜 에스파의 팬이 된 후 운동이랑 다이어트를 하기 시작했나요? 어떠한 기분이었나요? (Why did you start exercising and dieting after becoming a fan of Aespa? How did you feel after this change?)**

Fan A: 처음에는 복합적인 기분이었습니다. 그전엔 살이 쪼어도 잘 살았는데 의식을 하기 시작하니 기분이 좋지만은 않았기 때문입니다. 하지만 지금은 저의 건강을 위한 일이라고 생각하고 즐겁게 하고 있습니다. (I had mixed feelings at first. Before, even

though/when I gained weight, I lived well, but because I started feeling conscious, I didn't feel necessarily good. But now, I think it (exercise) is for my health and I'm enjoying it.)

**Q.27. 에스파의 아바타 사진 중에서 (a), (b)와(e)는 아주 (레벨 4) 성적 대상화되고, (c)와(d)는 (레벨 3) 성적 대상화된다고 했습니다. 에스파의 멤버 사진 중에서 (a), (b)와(e)는 (레벨 3) 성적 대상화되고, (c)와(d)는 별로 (레벨 1) 성적 대상화되지 않다고 했습니다. 왜 그렇게 생각하나요? 당신의 생각을 알려주세요. (You said that among the pictures of the avatars of Aespa, (a), (b) and (e) were very (level 4) sexualized, and (c) and (d) were (level 3) sexualized. You said that among the pictures of the members, (a), (b) and (e) were (level 3) sexualized, and (c) and (d) weren't particularly (level 1) sexualized. Why do you think that? Please, let me know your thoughts.)**

Fan A: 아바타 사진의 c, d 역시 노출이 있어서 성적 대상화가 된다고 보이지만 a, b, e 는 엉덩이와 가슴이 부각되었기 때문에 그보다 더 성적 대상화 된다고 생각합니다. 멤버들 사진 역시 a, b, e 는 가슴과 엉덩이가 다소 부각되어 보이기에 그렇게 대답했습니다. c, d 는 상대적으로 노출이 적고 무난한 포즈를 하고 있다고 보입니다. (Although images (c) and (d) of the avatars also look sexualized/objectified because of the exposure, I think (a), (b), and (e) are more sexualized because the buttocks/hips and breasts are emphasized. As for the photos of the members, I considered (a), (b), and (e) that way because their chest and buttocks/hips were somewhat prominent. (c) and (d) are relatively less revealing and seem to be in a normal pose.)

**Q.28. 멤버들은 자신의 아바타에 대해 어떻게 생각하는 것 같아요? 멤버들은 어떤 식으로든 영향을 받는다고 생각하나요? 멤버들은 어떠한 기분이신가요? 당신의 생각을 알려주세요. (The members of Aespa are represented by these avatars. Do you think the members are affected in any way? How do you think they feel, being represented like that?)**

Fan A: 멤버들은 회사가 제시한 컨셉 때문에 아바타가 있기는 하지만 크게 영향을 받는다고 생각하지는 않습니다. 애초에 사람과 완벽히 닮은 모습이 아니라 실제로 존재하지 않는 만화나 게임 속 캐릭터 같은 모습이기 때문에 자신과는 아예 별개의 존재라고 생각할 것 같습니다. 또한 팬들과 대중들 모두 아바타가 왜 필요하나 에스파 멤버들이 더 예쁘다라는 말을 많이 하기 때문에 멤버들 역시 아바타를 닮고 싶거나 아바타만큼 관리해야겠다거나 하는 생각을 하진 않을 것 같습니다. (The

members have avatars because of the concept presented by the company, but I don't think they are greatly affected. In the first place, they (the avatars) don't perfectly look like people, but like characters from a cartoon or game that don't actually exist, so I think they (the members) might think of them (avatars) as completely separate entities from themselves. Also, because fans and the public alike all say this a lot "What is the need for avatars? The members of Aespa are prettier", I don't think the members think they want to resemble the avatars or have to manage (their appearance) as much as the avatars.)

### **Interview with Fan B –English Transcript (original version)**

**Q.1. Do you think women's personal or social success in South Korean society depends on their appearance and body? Or do you disagree? Please, let me know your thoughts.**

Fan B: Yes, it does effect. Even when people try to get a part-timer job. But I believe it is same for men and in other countries.

**Q.2. Do you think that women in South Korea can freely make decisions about their own body and life? In other words, do you think South Korean women's decisions about their body and life are out of free will, influenced or both? Please, let me know your thoughts. If you have any examples, please share them.**

Fan B: Depends on person. Surely, Korean women care about others' opinion on their appearance. But here are women who are aware of being judged and what kind of stereotype/prejudice the society make and demand women to be. They still want to keep in shape, put makeup on and dress up more 'girly'. We can not say that their body and life is out of their control. Cause they already know and even criticize the expectation of society toward women and still want to keep their own style. In my case, I know how strict the expectation is but do work out to have more 'feminine' body shape and prefer ' girly' outfits.

**Q.3. Do you think Korean women are judged by their society for their body and appearance? Or do you disagree? Please, let me know your thoughts. If you have any examples, please share them. Also, have you ever been judged based on your body and appearance? Or do you know women acquaintances who have?**

Fan B: Yes. I guess I explained in my answer for question 2. It is getting better, time by time. In Korea, it is very common that your family members (especially female one) judge your appearance.

**Q.4. Do you think South Korean society is still influenced by Patriarchal values? Or do you disagree? Please, let me know your thoughts. If you have any examples, please share them.**

Fan B: Yes. Also, the criticism against patriarchal values is getting more powerful. On the other hand, there are some people who believe Korean society is not patriarchal or there is no discrimination against women in Korea.

**Q.5. Generally, do you think that Korean people still tend to prefer sons over daughters? Or do you disagree? And do you think sons and daughters are still treated and raised differently? Or do you disagree? Please explain in detail. (If you have any examples, please share them.)**

Fan B: Not really. In Korea, recently, the preference for daughter is slightly more powerful. But they do raise/treat sons and daughters differently. For examples, sons are expected not to cry. Korean parents are more sensitive about the scars on daughters' face than sons'.

**Q.6. Generally, do you think there is still the idea that women should be housewives? Or do you disagree? Please, let me know your thoughts.**

Fan B: Not anymore. Korean society expects women to work. But they have to be a perfect mom at the same time.

**Q.7. Presently, how gender-equal do you think South Korean society is? How do you think it's changed? Do you think there is gender discrimination? Or do you disagree? Please, let me know your thoughts. Also, have you ever been discriminated against based on your gender? Or do you know any women who have been discriminated against?**

Fan B: Discrimination based on gender does happen in Korea, constantly. It is getting better because more and more women learn about feminism. But the discussion about gender equality is happening in a toxic way. Men and women are criticizing with each other rather than about society. In this way, Korean society can not be gender equal but full of hatred.

**Q.8. Do you think cyberspace (SNS, online world, online games...) is a safe space for Korean women to freely identify themselves as women and share their own photos? Or do you disagree? Please, let me know your thoughts.**

Fan B: I don't use cyberspace that often so I am afraid if I can answer this question well. But I heard there are some cyberbullying groups using their acquaintances' pictures on cyberspace.

**Q.9. Do you think Korean women can escape from real world stereotypes and misogyny in cyberspace (SNS, online world, online games...)? Or do you disagree? Please, let me know your thoughts. If you have any examples, please share them.**

Fan B: I can not understand what 'escape' means in this question. If it is about being aware of it and not caring about it, then yes, Korean women can escape from it.

**Q.10. Do you think Korean women feel comfortable expressing their opinions publicly or online? What about you? Please, let me know your thoughts.**

Fan B: Yes. I talk and discuss about social issues with my friends. I have seen many women expressing their own opinions online and offline.

**Q.11. Do you think Korean women are realistically portrayed in the Korean media? In what ways?**

Fan B: Yes. In the past, what the Korean media portrayed was biased but now it became diverse.

**Q.12. In general, how do you think Korean women respond, interpret, and internalize the Korean media's portrayal of women? What about you? Please, let me know your thoughts.**

Fan B: In the past, it was close to what Korean men / society expected about the ideal Korean woman. Now, I can see there are a lot of efforts to portray more diverse types of women. (characterwise)

**Q.13. In general, do you think Korean women tend to imitate the body and appearance of women depicted in the Korean media? Please, let me know your thoughts.**

Fan B: Yes. About body and appearance media depict one 'ideal' image strictly. Women pursue to follow the social expectation up after watching TV shows, video on Youtube etc.

**Q.14. What attributes do you think viewers and fans value the most in idols?**

Fan B: Appearance, talent and personality.

**Q.15. Personally, what do you like most about K-pop groups? What about Aespa?**

Fan B: Their choreography.

**Q.16. From your personal experience (in your case), do you think that the decisive factor in becoming a fan of a group is its idols' visual?**

Fan B: Personal preference.

**Q.17. Do you think people wouldn't be interested in Aespa if it weren't for their visuals?**

Fan B: No. Because people want idol groups to be pretty and handsome.

**Q.18. Do you think the avatars of Aespa are essential for the success of the group? What do you think about the avatars of Aespa (existence, body, appearance, personality...)? What do you think about their concept? Please, let me know your thoughts.**

Fan B: I don't think so. I guess their concept is attractive to fans but the main reason for becoming fans is the actual members.

**Q.19. You said that when you talk to your friends about Aespa, you often talk about the members' appearance and body. Can you give an example of such a conversation? Do you talk about other topics related to Aespa? If so, could you let me know those other topics?**

Fan B: I talked about how pretty the members are and who is my bias. Mostly we talk about their appearance.

**Q.20. Why do you think you mainly talk about these topics? And how do you feel when you talk about these topics?**

Fan B: Because they are outstanding.

**Q.21. Do you think Aespa (and other K-pop groups) influence how fans perceive and manipulate their bodies? Or do you disagree? Please, let me know your thoughts.**

Fan B: I don't think so. I think the judgement from their family members may effect more.

**Q.22. You agreed with the statement “Aespa’s members and avatars have the ideal female body”. In the case of the members, how are they ideal? And in the case of the avatars? Do you think they match the Korean beauty ideal?**

Fan B: Curvey bodyshape, small face, long legs, big eyes, clean skin etc. All members have those characters. I am not sure about the avatars. I saw some pictures but I don’t remember clearly.

**Q.23. You agreed with the statement “I tend to compare my body with that of the members”. How often do you compare and how do you feel then?**

Fan B: When I try on some outfits that I saw on them. I believe it happens occasionally. Especially when I try to lose weight. I feel more motivated.

**Q.24. You agreed with the statement “Aespa’s members have the ideal female body”. However, you disagreed with the statements “Their bodies are realistic”, “Bodies like those of Aespa are healthier” and “Women should try hard to have a body like those of Aespa”. What then, do you think is the reason for wanting to have a body like that?**

Fan B: Because their body is made with endless efforts and a lot of money. Furthermore, it is part of their jobs to keep in shape. I heard it is included in their daily schedule to visit aesthetic salons. If I have to try to be like them and do my job/study, my health will be worse fastly and I will get stressed instantly. I believe trying to look like celebrities is toxic. People have their own characteristics and they can enhance them but cannot be the other people. The dream of becoming like a certain person is not achievable.

**Q.25. Why did you start exercising after becoming a fan of Aespa? How did you feel after this change?**

Fan B: Actually I am not a fan of Aespa (Even though I don’t dislike them). I am doing work out since two years and my motivation gets stronger when I see their fit bodyshape.

**Q.26. You said that all the pictures of the avatars of Aespa were extremely (level 5) sexualized. You said that among the pictures of the members, (a) and (e) were extremely (level 5) sexualized, (c) and (d) were very (level 4) sexualized, and (b) was a bit (level 2) sexualized. Why do you think that? Please, let me know your thoughts.**

Fan B: I decided it by examinig how big the brests and hips are depicted and how much those parts are exposed.

**Q.27. The members of Aespa are represented by these avatars. Do you think the members are affected in any way? How do you think they feel, being represented like that?**

Fan B: The legs in pictures a, b, c, d, e (avatars) are extremely long. The picture (a) is little disturbing (members). To me it is too sexual but can not explain why...

## Annex. List of Aespa’s Audio-Visual Contents

### Variety shows:

- “Knowing Brothers” episode 283  
<https://kshow123.tv/show/knowing-brother/episode-283.html>
- “Knowing Brothers” episode 303  
<https://kshow123.tv/show/knowing-brother/episode-303.html>
- “Weekly Idol” episode 513  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AZy\\_HI6XmdU&ab\\_channel=1stonkpop](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AZy_HI6XmdU&ab_channel=1stonkpop)
- “hello 82 Indonesia”  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yhpofND-Jog&ab\\_channel=hello82](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yhpofND-Jog&ab_channel=hello82)
- “Ssom Ssom Ssom”  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IL7ZCens4xw&ab\\_channel=MnetK-POP](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IL7ZCens4xw&ab_channel=MnetK-POP)
- “Prison Interview”  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=djyIg63i9o4&ab\\_channel=1theKOriginals-%EC%9B%90%EB%8D%94%EC%BC%80%EC%9D%B4%EC%98%A4%EB%A6%AC%EC%A7%80%EB%84%90](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=djyIg63i9o4&ab_channel=1theKOriginals-%EC%9B%90%EB%8D%94%EC%BC%80%EC%9D%B4%EC%98%A4%EB%A6%AC%EC%A7%80%EB%84%90)
- “Re: masterpiece”  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=85i3GC9AVfU&ab\\_channel=SMTOWN](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=85i3GC9AVfU&ab_channel=SMTOWN)
- “Re: masterpiece Special Episode” pt.1  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LDp\\_dD00-SI&ab\\_channel=SMTOWN](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LDp_dD00-SI&ab_channel=SMTOWN)
- “Re: masterpiece Special Episode” pt.2  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PUvGP9RZs4c&ab\\_channel=SMTOWN](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PUvGP9RZs4c&ab_channel=SMTOWN)
- “Re: masterpiece Special Episode” pt.3  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IsLI92Xd\\_Z4&ab\\_channel=SMTOWN](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IsLI92Xd_Z4&ab_channel=SMTOWN)
- “Pink Blood Quiz Show”  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j7LcE-BVBC0&ab\\_channel=SMTOWN](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j7LcE-BVBC0&ab_channel=SMTOWN)
- “Kwangya Station Aespa”  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AufnvYx0xwY&ab\\_channel=SMTOWN](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AufnvYx0xwY&ab_channel=SMTOWN)

- “After Dad Falls Asleep”

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kVcg2nPjFDQ&ab\\_channel=%EC%98%A4%EB%9D%BD%EC%8B%A4%ED%8C%A1ArcadePang](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kVcg2nPjFDQ&ab_channel=%EC%98%A4%EB%9D%BD%EC%8B%A4%ED%8C%A1ArcadePang)

- “Answer to Unlock”

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3VRhU9UyEkI&list=RDLVkVcg2nPjFDQ&index=2&ab\\_channel=%EC%98%A4%EB%9D%BD%EC%8B%A4%ED%8C%A1ArcadePang](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3VRhU9UyEkI&list=RDLVkVcg2nPjFDQ&index=2&ab_channel=%EC%98%A4%EB%9D%BD%EC%8B%A4%ED%8C%A1ArcadePang)

- “MerrY MerrY aespa” pt.1

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-GuPw7kUMAE&ab\\_channel=aespa](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-GuPw7kUMAE&ab_channel=aespa)

- “MerrY MerrY aespa” pt.2

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MxCE1sn2dLk&ab\\_channel=aespa](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MxCE1sn2dLk&ab_channel=aespa)

- “MY time, aespa! – Giselle and NingNing”

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ByraneOaLIQ&ab\\_channel=aespa](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ByraneOaLIQ&ab_channel=aespa)

- “MY time, aespa! – Karina and Winter”

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l70hgNTAPdo&ab\\_channel=aespa](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l70hgNTAPdo&ab_channel=aespa)

- “MY time, aespa! Art Time”

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7wRs-2PfZGk&ab\\_channel=aespa](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7wRs-2PfZGk&ab_channel=aespa)

- “MY time, aespa! PE Time”

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xcr\\_8x9G8fI&ab\\_channel=aespa](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xcr_8x9G8fI&ab_channel=aespa)

- “MY time, aespa! Special Activity”

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5I-3Bahhr7M&ab\\_channel=aespa](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5I-3Bahhr7M&ab_channel=aespa)

- “Forever Fairies” pt. 1

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uaGWqxIzW10&t=1s&ab\\_channel=aespa](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uaGWqxIzW10&t=1s&ab_channel=aespa)

- “Forever Fairies” pt. 2

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G86AwZk960I&ab\\_channel=aespa](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G86AwZk960I&ab_channel=aespa)

- “Forever Fairies” pt. 3

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JwgT6p3d6tI&ab\\_channel=aespa](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JwgT6p3d6tI&ab_channel=aespa)

- “H.B.D Winter”

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tNc0RnNAmFg&ab\\_channel=aespa](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tNc0RnNAmFg&ab_channel=aespa)

- “TMI Interview”

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xaQMEikeZ3o&ab\\_channel=aespa](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xaQMEikeZ3o&ab_channel=aespa)

Reaction videos:

- “aespa 'Next Level' MV Reaction”

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YBAhQBJksMw&ab\\_channel=aespa](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YBAhQBJksMw&ab_channel=aespa)

- “aespa 'Savage' MV Reaction”

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LlkrAhjDGo&ab\\_channel=aespa](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LlkrAhjDGo&ab_channel=aespa)

#### Behind the scenes:

- “Black Mamba MV”

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IwAvRPWyTw0&ab\\_channel=aespa](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IwAvRPWyTw0&ab_channel=aespa)

- “Black Mamba Jacket”

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6FY2B2ORi5k&ab\\_channel=aespa](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6FY2B2ORi5k&ab_channel=aespa)

- “SYNK”

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eTIMNsnAPyM&ab\\_channel=aespa](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eTIMNsnAPyM&ab_channel=aespa)

- “Debut Stage”

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o1AEJLWIEI0&ab\\_channel=aespa](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o1AEJLWIEI0&ab_channel=aespa)

- “Music Show for Black Mamba”

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3EfqbzvLj3o&ab\\_channel=aespa](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3EfqbzvLj3o&ab_channel=aespa)

- “Forever MV”

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vMeoR3og40s&ab\\_channel=aespa](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vMeoR3og40s&ab_channel=aespa)

- “Forever Performance Stage”

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oImGj\\_JuSrM&ab\\_channel=aespa](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oImGj_JuSrM&ab_channel=aespa)

- “Next Level MV”

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sRVfjgqz0pA&ab\\_channel=aespa](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sRVfjgqz0pA&ab_channel=aespa)

- “Next Level Jacket Shooting”

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j4YMtK9j\\_zQ&ab\\_channel=aespa](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j4YMtK9j_zQ&ab_channel=aespa)

- “Next Level Performance Stage”

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XgFm3WMv5wI&ab\\_channel=aespa](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XgFm3WMv5wI&ab_channel=aespa)

- “[BE ORIGINAL] for Next Level”

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AHrUrrPTmQk&ab\\_channel=STUDIOCHOOM%5B%EC%8A%A4%ED%8A%9C%EB%94%94%EC%98%A4%EC%B6%A4%5D](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AHrUrrPTmQk&ab_channel=STUDIOCHOOM%5B%EC%8A%A4%ED%8A%9C%EB%94%94%EC%98%A4%EC%B6%A4%5D)

- “SM Culture Universe ep.1”

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5PSHerY3RdU&ab\\_channel=aespa](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5PSHerY3RdU&ab_channel=aespa)

- “Music Show for Next Level”

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FPGk1A9Op1M&ab\\_channel=aespa](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FPGk1A9Op1M&ab_channel=aespa)

- “Savage MV”

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-7PROqYN2Lk&ab\\_channel=aespa](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-7PROqYN2Lk&ab_channel=aespa)

- “Savage Jacket Shooting”

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1JVSupDY088&ab\\_channel=aespa](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1JVSupDY088&ab_channel=aespa)

- “Savage Performance Stage”

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J5myFhxi9fE&ab\\_channel=aespa](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J5myFhxi9fE&ab_channel=aespa)

- “aespa in New York”

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7HsdU04tRUI&ab\\_channel=aespa](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7HsdU04tRUI&ab_channel=aespa)

- “Aespa is now Givenchy ambassador”

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JFDUMn5z6-A&ab\\_channel=aespa](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JFDUMn5z6-A&ab_channel=aespa)

- “DAZED with GIVENCHY Photoshoot”

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dnovLCb8lSQ&ab\\_channel=aespa](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dnovLCb8lSQ&ab_channel=aespa)

- “New Bag – GIVENCHY Photoshoot”

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fLMsRh\\_W9OI&ab\\_channel=aespa](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fLMsRh_W9OI&ab_channel=aespa)

- “Dreams Come True MV”

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HF2jnoNJeP8&ab\\_channel=aespa](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HF2jnoNJeP8&ab_channel=aespa)

- “Gayo Daesang Behind”

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cAOP3sckZx8&ab\\_channel=aespa](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cAOP3sckZx8&ab_channel=aespa)

- “SM Artist Season’s Greetings”

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s74VG5sFJO8&ab\\_channel=aespa](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s74VG5sFJO8&ab_channel=aespa)

#### Vlogs:

- “New York Vlog” pt.1

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-jT2LIuH96Q&ab\\_channel=aespa](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-jT2LIuH96Q&ab_channel=aespa)

- “New York Vlog” pt.2

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j4CCDUF889c&ab\\_channel=aespa](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j4CCDUF889c&ab_channel=aespa)

#### Interviews:

- “SYNK Time NingNing”

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SAt62jd2db4&ab\\_channel=aespa](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SAt62jd2db4&ab_channel=aespa)

- “SYNK Time with Winter”

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5bi0H7VNqKE&ab\\_channel=aespa](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5bi0H7VNqKE&ab_channel=aespa)

- “SYNK Time Karina”  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qQ02F-GfgXM&ab\\_channel=aespa](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qQ02F-GfgXM&ab_channel=aespa)
- “SYNK Time Giselle”  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CQtxO3pzyc4&ab\\_channel=aespa](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CQtxO3pzyc4&ab_channel=aespa)
- “Billboard Korea”  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o0lVqLcagcw&ab\\_channel=Billboard](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o0lVqLcagcw&ab_channel=Billboard)
- “24 hours with aespa”  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ozj-5cqoqXE&ab\\_channel=Vogue](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ozj-5cqoqXE&ab_channel=Vogue)
- “Nick Cannon”  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3W4VD3ZFuM8&ab\\_channel=soldado](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3W4VD3ZFuM8&ab_channel=soldado)
- “Question Parade”  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=boxEVuTRFP8&ab\\_channel=hello82](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=boxEVuTRFP8&ab_channel=hello82)
- “Tokopedia”  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X0rEuyQCN5Q&ab\\_channel=%EB%A7%88%E%9D%B4%EB%A7%88%EC%9D%B4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X0rEuyQCN5Q&ab_channel=%EB%A7%88%E%9D%B4%EB%A7%88%EC%9D%B4)
- “ELLE Song Association”  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KPcb9eyENBg&ab\\_channel=ELLE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KPcb9eyENBg&ab_channel=ELLE)
- “Harper’s BAZAAR Korea”  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4PadcThEedw&ab\\_channel=Harper%27sBAZAARKorea](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4PadcThEedw&ab_channel=Harper%27sBAZAARKorea)
- “MTV News”  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=woLLLCxXE68&ab\\_channel=MTVNews](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=woLLLCxXE68&ab_channel=MTVNews)
- “IDN Times”  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FDMqf5Up\\_do&ab\\_channel=IDNTimes](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FDMqf5Up_do&ab_channel=IDNTimes)
- “SOHU Korea 20210226”  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UxO-G5-05WQ&ab\\_channel=aespaBrasil2](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UxO-G5-05WQ&ab_channel=aespaBrasil2)
- “SOHU Korea 20211026”  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=irJ-Ww4NRvs&ab\\_channel=SOHUKOREA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=irJ-Ww4NRvs&ab_channel=SOHUKOREA)
- “Artist on The Rise”  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hmZbsfel4jM&ab\\_channel=aespa](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hmZbsfel4jM&ab_channel=aespa)
- “MTV Asks”  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L0U Udli1Ppg&ab\\_channel=MTVASIA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L0U Udli1Ppg&ab_channel=MTVASIA)

- “The First Time with Rolling Stone”

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2zPjsLT5-nc&ab\\_channel=RollingStone](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2zPjsLT5-nc&ab_channel=RollingStone)

- “The Daily Show”

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pxV0ozN4clA&ab\\_channel=TheDailyShowwithTrevorNoah](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pxV0ozN4clA&ab_channel=TheDailyShowwithTrevorNoah)

- “W Korea”

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m1skU-mCHX4&ab\\_channel=WKOREA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m1skU-mCHX4&ab_channel=WKOREA)

- “E NOW”

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WQfPhVtec7A&ab\\_channel=zoom](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WQfPhVtec7A&ab_channel=zoom)

- “Kuwo”

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DzCUtedDbAQ&ab\\_channel=aespadaily](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DzCUtedDbAQ&ab_channel=aespadaily)

- “Tencent on Weibo”

<https://video.h5.weibo.cn/1034:4690905345753160/4691021865419045>

- “IDDP”

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8rNmPbOTAis&t=2s&ab\\_channel=1theKOriginals-%EC%9B%90%EB%8D%94%EC%BC%80%EC%9D%B4%EC%98%A4%EB%A6%AC%EC%A7%80%EB%84%90](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8rNmPbOTAis&t=2s&ab_channel=1theKOriginals-%EC%9B%90%EB%8D%94%EC%BC%80%EC%9D%B4%EC%98%A4%EB%A6%AC%EC%A7%80%EB%84%90)

- “Portrait Mode – Harper’s BAZAAR”

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lAy1dvAHQXw&ab\\_channel=Harper%27sBAZAAR](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lAy1dvAHQXw&ab_channel=Harper%27sBAZAAR)

- “InsertLive”

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O7mUEQoYLaM&ab\\_channel=OwK-popSubs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O7mUEQoYLaM&ab_channel=OwK-popSubs)

- “detikhot Indonesia”

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G\\_f\\_r4CaWi8&ab\\_channel=WinterPlanetVNSubteam](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G_f_r4CaWi8&ab_channel=WinterPlanetVNSubteam)

- “Kpop Starz”

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GRSwBggIItg&ab\\_channel=aespaSubsOfficial](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GRSwBggIItg&ab_channel=aespaSubsOfficial)

- “MMTG” pt.1

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bOiQovwrn2g&ab\\_channel=%EB%AC%B8%EB%AA%85%ED%8A%B9%EA%B8%89-MMTG](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bOiQovwrn2g&ab_channel=%EB%AC%B8%EB%AA%85%ED%8A%B9%EA%B8%89-MMTG)

- “MMTG” pt.2

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4LzZ-Dw9-nc&t=1s&ab\\_channel=%EB%AC%B8%EB%AA%85%ED%8A%B9%EA%B8%89-MMTG](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4LzZ-Dw9-nc&t=1s&ab_channel=%EB%AC%B8%EB%AA%85%ED%8A%B9%EA%B8%89-MMTG)

- “What’s in my bag” pt.1

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xUEKF5FNmPQ&ab\\_channel=aespa](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xUEKF5FNmPQ&ab_channel=aespa)

- “What’s in my bag” pt.2

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rNS283VxzMc&ab\\_channel=aespa](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rNS283VxzMc&ab_channel=aespa)

- “SM Congress 2021”

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SsM4QeEdGEM&ab\\_channel=SMTOWN](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SsM4QeEdGEM&ab_channel=SMTOWN)

- “Seulgi.zip” episode 1”

<https://navernow.onelink.me/o5cK/wcixpghf>

#### Showcase:

- “SYNK DIVE: aespa 'Savage' SHOWCASE”

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xBpkheRn60E&t=1s&ab\\_channel=aespa](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xBpkheRn60E&t=1s&ab_channel=aespa)