

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

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Abstract

The suicides of the popular K-Pop idols Kim Jong-hyun in 2016, Sulli (Choi Jin-ri), Goo Hara, and Cha In-ha in 2019 drew a lot of global attention, particularly in South Korea: After leaving the group f(x) in August 2015, Sulli polarized publicly due to her new, ›unconventional‹ image and her outspoken statements on social issues. Her posts on Instagram—for example where she displays herself without wearing a bra under her clothes—were perceived as progressive and feminist by the media and fans on the one hand and interpreted as a sign of mental illness on the other hand. Goo Hara's posts, after she left KARA in January 2015, caused similar public reactions. The suicide of Cha In-ha, shortly after Sulli's and Hara's suicides, also caused public interest and raised concerns on so-called ›copycat suicides‹ in South Korea. Before his suicide in 2016, Kim Jong-hyun talked openly about his depression and his fear of societal stigmatization by doing so at the same time.

On the occasion of these tragic events, issues such as the high pressure to perform in the K-Pop industry, including related concerns on cyberbullying and depression, were discussed publicly on various media platforms. I argue that the respective suicides result from a powerful hegemonic structure deeply rooted within South Korean society. Based on Émile Durkheim's (1897) analysis of the correlation of suicide and society connected to the ›fetishistic gaze‹ as a social panopticon, I am pointing out the ideologically driven marginalization of K-Pop idols. Their suicides appear to be the last option of resistance within the South Korean society, particularly the K-Pop industry. Concluding this paper, my analysis on the ›Burning Sun scandal‹ (2019)—an uncovering of crimes that involved several K-Pop idols—reveals issues on social inequality that led to further public protests against gender disparity and the so-called spy cam culture.