

**“Too Fat to be an Idol”: A Case Study of Weight and Health Debate in K-pop Fandom on
TikTok**

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Adviser: Apryl William

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Abstract

This study examines the fan discourse surrounding the weight gain of K-pop idol Yoo Jeongyeon (TWICE) as a case study to explore fatphobia within K-pop fandoms on TikTok. The research, through a critical discourse analysis of comment sections, raises critical questions about how social media's culture of constant visibility perpetuates fatphobic narratives and their intersection with South Korea's idol system, which emphasizes perfection and curated public personas. This research draws on 3 TikTok videos in which key themes such as health, beauty, body comparison, and the impact of fandom culture were found, offering insights into the role of digital platforms in reinforcing or challenging societal beauty standards. The analysis demonstrates how K-pop fandoms on TikTok not only reflect cultural anxieties about femininity and beauty but also contribute to the perpetuation of rigid, fatphobic ideals in both the idol industry and broader digital spaces. Through this study, I argue that the scrutiny of Jeongyeon's body is a reflection of the deeply embedded cultural norms surrounding beauty and the pressures of idol culture and how they are being globalized.

Key Words: Gender, Body Dissatisfaction, Parasocial Relationship, Celebrity, Body Size, K-pop

Introduction

In 2021, popular K-pop idol Yoo Jeongyeon (유정연), more generally known as Jeongyeon, a member of the prominent nine-member girl group TWICE, became the subject of intense fan debate due to her recent weight gain. This study focuses on fan discourse surrounding Jeongyeon as a case study to explore how fatphobia operates within K-pop fandoms on TikTok. This research raises critical questions about what role the culture of constant visibility on social media plays in perpetuating fatphobic narratives. How do these narratives intersect with South Korea's unique idol system, which emphasizes perfection and heavily curated public personas? What does this reveal about the broader relationship between fandoms, beauty standards, and the digital space? Through this examination, I argue that the discourse surrounding Jeongyeon and her weight gain is not only due to fatphobia but also the image that has been created by idol culture and the panopticon-like culture around female idols specifically.

Jeongyeon's journey to becoming an idol was filled with ups and downs. She first auditioned for JYP Entertainment as a child but did not pass the selection process. However, she successfully joined the company in 2010 after passing a later audition at fourteen years old. She trained for about four years, and in 2014, she was expected to debut in a new JYP girl group alongside some of her now bandmates. However, the project was ultimately canceled. This setback led her to participate in the reality girl group survival show *Sixteen*, where 16 JYP trainees competed for a spot in a nine-member girl group called TWICE. The show introduced her to a broader public, and she was ultimately selected as one of the final nine members. Jeongyeon made her official debut as a member of TWICE in October 2015. Since her debut, Jeongyeon has stood out for her androgynous visuals, which were atypical for the time, and strong vocal abilities. She gained popularity not just as a member of one of K-pop's most

successful girl groups but also as an individual idol. She was even ranked among the top 20 most popular idols in South Korea according to Gallup Korea's annual music poll from the years 2016-2019. (한국갤럽Gallup, 2016; 한국갤럽Gallup, 2017; 한국갤럽Gallup, 2018; 한국갤럽Gallup, 2019)

However, this all changed in June 2020, Jeongyeon was diagnosed with a spinal disc herniation, which required surgery and subsequent steroid treatment, leading to her noticeable weight gain. Despite having recovered from surgery in October 2020, her entertainment company, JYP Entertainment, announced that she would be continuing her hiatus due to anxiety and panic disorder (Oh, 2020). She briefly resumed group activities in January 2021, attending and performing at the 30th Seoul Music Awards (Park, 2021; RandomKvideo, 2021), but her hiatus soon resumed in August 2021 due to ongoing mental health struggles (Han, 2021). Jeongyeon finally returned to group activities in February 2022 for the North American leg of TWICE's 4th World Tour "III." Despite all these ups and downs with Jeongyeon's physical and mental health, instead of sending well wishes, fans seemed to be most focused on her weight and whether she was gaining or losing it.

In our current age of technology, social media is more important to our lives than ever before, especially for teens. According to the Pew Research Center, 47% of U.S. teens in 2023 reported being online "several times a day," and 46% claimed they were online "almost constantly" (Anderson et al., 2023). Among the social media platforms used in their research, TikTok is now one of the most popular platforms among American teens. However, TikTok's influence extends beyond mere entertainment; it serves as a platform for fandom communities to flourish, allowing users to share fan art and theories, discuss the latest media releases, and make video edits of their favorite characters and celebrities (Maddox & Gill, 2023).

By interrogating the dynamics of TikTok, this study contributes to understanding the intersections of social media, beauty standards, and fandom culture, shedding light on how digital platforms like TikTok serve as battlegrounds for reinforcing and challenging societal norms.

Literature Review

The K-pop, or Korean pop, industry is incredibly unique and innovative, making it essential to understand its structure and culture to accurately interpret fan discourse. K-pop broadly refers to popular music from Korea, it serves as a catch-all term as it encompasses genres such as hip-hop, R&B, rock, and electronic music (Lee & Pyun, 2023). Unlike popular music from English-speaking countries, which is simply referred to as “pop,” music from outside the Anglosphere is often named using the first letter of the country’s name combined with “pop.” This naming convention is what has given rise to “K-pop” as a term (Kim et al., 2021).

However, K-pop is less about the genre itself and more about how its structure is built around worldwide consumption through its many forms, such as “music source [e.g., streaming], albums, performances, and broadcasting” (Lee & Pyun, 2023, 1426). In essence, K-pop can be best described as music from idol groups that are popular in Korea and internationally.

K-pop music can also be considered a “cultural industry,” defined as a form of “commercial culture” that is standardized and mass-produced (Jeon et al., 2021, 98). This concept first entered the South Korean lexicon in 1994 with the establishment of the Cultural Industry Bureau under the Ministry of Culture and Sports, which expedited the production of cultural exports like films, music, video games, etc. (Jeon et al., 2021). This initiative led to the creation of the first South Korean idol group, H.O.T., in 1996. (Lee & Pyun, 2023). From then to

now there has been continuous innovation in the production, distribution, and consumption of K-pop. Since then, the industry has gone through continuous innovation in terms of production, distribution, and consumption of K-pop. This rapid growth can be seen in the number of idol group debuts: approximately 150 idol groups debuted between 1996 and 2021, compared to 223 groups debuting between 2011 and 2019 alone.

The key to the popularity of K-pop idols and groups as a cultural product lies in its idol system, which fosters parasocial relationships between fans and idols. This system relies on entertainment companies “sourcing and managing” sustainable talent” but also “finding the ‘magic formula’ that results in a consumable product that resonates with as broad an audience as possible (Elfvig-Hwang, 2018, 193). Central to this is the ‘trainee system’ employed by major entertainment companies, such as SM, JYP, and YG Entertainment. These companies audition potential future idols, often starting at an early age, and put them through rigorous multi-year training programs. Trainees must undergo intensive training that includes but is not limited to dance classes, singing lessons, stage coaching, and, for non-Korean trainees, lessons in the Korean language (Elfvig-Hwang, 2018). Further, many are not allowed to date and must adhere to strict schedules and regimes, with some even living in company dormitories during their training (Elfvig-Hwang, 2018). Through the years many trainees are either dropped by the company or leave; thus, idol groups aren’t always made up of the most talented trainees, but rather those who could withstand the grueling trainee process “graduate” to idols (Elfvig-Hwang, 2018).

Once a group is formed, each idol's public persona is meticulously crafted. The Korean idol system takes media engagement to another level compared to Western media, requiring idols never to drop “the facade of performing the ‘role’ assigned to her or him within the group.”

(Elfving-Hwang, 2018, 193). This combination of intense training, persona construction, and fan engagement are the building blocks of K-pop's global appeal.

Parasociality and K-pop Fandom

Parasocial Relationship and Celebrity Worship

In today's social media climate, parasocial relationships have become increasingly common and are continually evolving to accommodate our increasingly globalized media landscape. Originally defined as the “face-to-face” relationship between celebrities and fans by Horton and Wohl (1956), the concept has shifted as media has developed (p. 215). Despite changes in how these relationships form, it is generally accepted that parasocial partnerships are built on a sense of intimacy, perceived closeness, and identification that are formed when people are repeatedly exposed to a persona (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p. 216; Chung & Cho, 2017, p. 483; Palmgreen et al., 1980, p. 184). These relationships are also typically one-sided, where the fan feels close to the celebrity although the celebrity does not (Auter & Palmgreen, 2000, p. 79).

Undoubtedly, the rise of social media has created an uninterrupted gateway to celebrities, resulting in the evolution and increased complexity of parasocial relationships.

Self-disclosure—sharing personal or secret information to create a sense of intimacy—is critical within this context (Cozby, 1973; Wheelless & Grotz, 1977; Chung & Cho 2017, p. 483). Without self-disclosure, celebrities may be preserved as “distant, unfriendly, and more importantly, untrustworthy,” thus preventing the development of these parasocial bonds (Chung & Cho, 2017, p. 491).

The significance of self-disclosure is especially apparent in fandom spaces, where it fosters feelings of closeness that mirror friendship. These parasocial interactions not only increase fans' emotional commitment and loyalty to a celebrity, but they also offer potential

business opportunities—converting fans into loyal consumers of the celebrity's products and services (Kim & Kim, 2020). However, the one-sided nature of these parasocial bonds often leads to celebrity worship, where fans feel they know the celebrity intimately, despite the celebrity being unaware of their existence (Jung & Hwang, 2016, p. 5; Maltby & Day, 2011, p. 483). Celebrity worship can be categorized into three levels, which increase in intensity:

1. **“Entertainment-Social”**: the attraction to the celebrity results from the content they create as a form of entertainment or social activity (Maltby et al., 2002, 1163; Maltby & Day, 2011, 3; McCutcheon et al., 2002).
2. **“Intense-Personal”**: the reflection of personal compulsive feelings about the celebrity, like wanting to know about the personal details of their lives (Maltby et al., 2002, 1163; Maltby & Day, 2011, 4).
3. **“Mild Pathological”**: more extreme behaviors and fantasies regarding the celebrity, and can drive some to be willing to do something illegal for their favorite celebrity. At this level, fans may see their favorite celebrity as an escape from the “harsh” world (Maltby et al., 2002, 1163; Maltby & Day, 2011, 4).

The varying intensity of celebrity worship is often explained through the Absorption-Addiction model, which suggests that, as a fan's admiration intensifies, they may develop an “obsession with the details of... [their] favorite celebrity’s life” (McCutcheon et al., 2002, p. 76), which can result in “greater identification” and attachment to their favorite celebrity (Brotokusumo & Swasti, 2024, p. 49; Waterman, 2008). Additionally, absorption is achieved through “an effortless focusing of attention rather than by determined concentration,” which in turn creates a “heightened sense of reality” that makes fans believe they have a special

connection with a certain celebrity, thus motivating them to learn more about their “object of attention” (Maltby & Day, 2011, p. 4; McCutcheon et al., 2002, p. 81).

Despite the potential drawbacks, celebrity worship often involves communal activities, such as strategic streaming or collective album buying. These collective efforts often help fans gain a sense of “satisfaction, self-meaning,” and a sense of connection to both the celebrity and other fans (Brotokusumo & Swasti, 2024, p. 51; Kim et al., 2023).

Parasociality in K-pop Fandom

Since the late 1990s, Korean cultural exports—such as dramas, films, and music—have gained increasing international popularity, a phenomenon known as the Korean Wave, or Hallyu (Jung, 2015, p. 74; Seo & Kim, 2020; Lim & Giouvris, 2020; Messaris, 2016; Brotokusumo & Swasti, 2024). Hallyu K-pop can be divided into four waves:

[First Wave (late 1990s to early 2000s)] young boys and girls bands, including H.O.T., NRG, S.E.S., Baby V.O.X., and Shinhwa; [Second Wave (early 2000s to mid-2000s)] solo singers, including BoA, Rain, and Se7en; [Third Wave (mid-2000s to late 2000s)] return to young boys and girls bands, including TVXQ, Super Junior, and Wonder Girls; and [Fourth Wave (late 2000s to ~ early 2010s)] riding the current social media boom, featuring the latest idol boys and girls bands, Big Bang, 2 PM, 2NE1, Girls’ Generation, and SHINee. (Jung, 2015, p. 76)

In the earlier waves, K-pop’s international fan base was mainly centered in East and Southeast Asia (Jung, 2015, p. 79). However, during the fourth wave of K-pop, the use of social media platforms like YouTube, Twitter/X, and Facebook helped expand its reach to a broader global audience, including American and European fans (Jung, 2015, p. 80; Choe & Russell, 2012). Social media allowed K-pop groups to foster parasocial relationships with fans by

engaging them in participatory activities like flash mobs and cover dance contests, where fans felt more involved in growing their favorite idols' popularity (Jung, 2015, p. 81). For instance, 2NE1's "I AM THE BEST—Dance Cover Contest"²² was hosted on YG Entertainment's YouTube channel, which made fans feel acknowledged and connected (Jung, 2015, p. 81-83).

Beyond fan interaction, K-pop's unique global appeal extends far beyond the music itself. K-pop's distinctive elements—such as fashion, choreography, stage performances, and unique group concepts—are often regarded as “modern and cool,” setting it apart from other cultural exports (Brotokusumo & Swasti, 2024, p. 50). In K-pop and fandom culture more broadly, celebrity worship activities like attending concerts, streaming music, and voting for idols in awards shows like the MAMA Awards and the Seoul Music Awards contribute positively to fan well-being and life satisfaction (Brotokusumo & Swasti, 2024, p. 51; Kim et al., 2023; Chia & Poo, 2009). Fandom communities help their members distract themselves from the stresses of the world around them, which can help with feelings of loneliness and provide a sense of community and belonging (Brotokusumo & Swasti, 2024, 51).

However, as the intensity of celebrity worship grows beyond “entertainment-social” to the “intense-personal” or “mild pathological” levels, it can lead to obsessive and irrational behaviors (Brotokusumo & Swasti, 2024). In K-pop, this can be seen in the presence of *sasaeng* (사생) fans—fans who display extreme behaviors toward their favorite artists, like stalking or sending inappropriate messages (Iwicka, 2018, p. 125). One notable instance involved a fan sending 2PM's Taecyeon a letter written in menstrual blood in 2009 (Iwicka, 2018, p. 136). However, the *sasaeng* phenomenon is not limited to South Korea; on August 22, 2023, SM Entertainment announced plans to take legal action against an American *sasaeng* fan, Judy Hoang, who trespassed into NCT Jaehyun's accommodation, filmed it, and posted it on social

media (Choi, 2024; SM Entertainment, 2023). This highlights that, through online connections and social media, the intensity of celebrity worship can now escalate on a global scale.

The K-pop idol industry plays a significant role in shaping fan behavior through the intense pressures placed on idols from a young age. Idols undergo rigorous training to perfect their physical appearance and skill, often debuting as “finished products” designed for both scrutiny and adoration (Iwicka, 2018). Female idols, in particular, face heightened pressure to conform to South Korean beauty standards, which heavily emphasize thinness (Oh, 2014; Park et al., 2019). This demand for physical perfection extends beyond South Korea, influencing global fan culture. K-pop idols are seen as figures to aspire to, and their diets and fitness routines often become trends among fans (Tran, 2023, p. 235). One such example is solo artist IU, who has openly discussed her struggles with eating disorders and other mental health issues due to these pressures (Tran, 2023, p. 242). Her restrictive diet, consisting of just an apple, a sweet potato, and a protein drink daily, became a viral trend on YouTube, with international fans attempting to emulate her, despite her openness with her struggles (Tran, 2023, p. 236). K-pop's quick growth as a cultural export reflects not only the power of social media as a form of developing parasocial relationships and celebrity worship but also the complex impact of these dynamics on fan culture and the celebrities themselves.

Lookism in South Korea

Lookism, discrimination based on appearance or preference for more attractive people (Chae 2023, 21723), is a pervasive societal issue in South Korea today. This concept has profound implications for body image and self-esteem, particularly among young individuals. A 2009 study revealed that Korean adolescents, both male and female, display more disordered eating behaviors and attitudes compared to their American counterparts (Jung et al., 50). Korean

girls specifically were shown to have the most body dissatisfaction and disordered eating behaviors among all groups (Jung et al., 2009, 42). Another study produced similar results, but it also revealed that American participants exhibited a higher level of celebrity worship than Koreans (Jung & Hwang, 2016, 10). This research was conducted in 2016, when the media landscape was different, so the findings may have changed since then. However, these concerns about weight and body image are not confined to adolescents and young adults. Body dissatisfaction began to manifest as early as 5–6 years old in Korean girls, with about 20% of them either actively dieting, feeling the need to diet, or avoiding food out of fear of gaining weight (Kim & Han, 2021).

The roots of South Korea's appearance-driven culture can be traced back to significant historical and economic events. Interestingly, this obsession with maintaining a slim figure is a relatively new phenomenon in South Korea. Studies document the shift from traditional Confucian ideals to today's more global and economically influenced beauty standards (Kim, 2003; Han et al., 2018, 116). Historically, extra weight on Korean women was seen as an “indicator of higher status and better health” (Kim, 2018, p. 1537). Further, beauty standards in the early 1920s were centered more on facial features rather than the body; however, there was a notable focus on fleshiness. A 1922 article described the ideal face as:

The chin should be rounded... The cheeks ought to be plump enough to obscure the cheekbones. The neck and shoulders should also be full, concealing the collarbones. Breasts should sit on the chest at roughly a 70-degree angle. Wrists should not be excessively slender or elongated like chopsticks. (Gynn et al., 2024, p. 429)

However, in the late 1920s to 1930s, emphasis shifted from the face to the body. A daily newspaper of the time stated, “If you want to be a beauty, you must cultivate streamlined beauty

from the waist” (Gyuu et al., 2024, p. 429). While there is limited scholarship explaining this shift, it may be linked to Japanese colonialism in Korea at the time (1910-1945). Specifically, the influence of Japanese *moga* (“modern girls”)—during Interwar Japan, this referred to Japanese women who adopted Westernized fashions and lifestyles (Rodriguez, 2024). Something important to note is that their fashion was heavily reminiscent of the Western flapper, which often emphasized a “long, thin, [and] lithe” body (Nicholas, 2015). So although there is no clear correlation between the two, it can be a possible explanation for the shift.

The Japanese *moga* had already introduced Western influence into the Korean beauty landscape. However, American influence plays a much larger role in shaping the modern standards we see today. The influx of American soldiers and media during and after the American occupation (1945–1948) exposed Korean women to Western ideals of beauty through films, magazines, and other media. This exposure created significant pressure to conform to these Western standards, leading many women to adopt unhealthy eating pathologies (Jung & Hwang, 2016, p. 4; Kim, 2018, p. 1539).

This influence extended into the plastic surgery industry in the 1950s (DiMoia, 2013), largely through the work of U.S. Marine Corps plastic surgeon David Ralph Millard (Kurek, 2015). Initially focused on reconstructive surgeries on soldiers and children, he soon became known for his influential work in Korea on advancing and popularizing double-eyelid surgery (Kurek, 2015). However, his approach to the surgery was often framed in the context of racial and national superiority (Kim, 2015). For instance, Millard recounts a “slanted-eyed Korean interpreter” who approached him wanting to make his eyes rounder to appear more trustworthy to Americans. Millard agreed, stating, “As this was partly true, I consented” and wanting to “reduce the ‘Asianness’” of his client's face (Kim, 2015, p. 280).

Millard not only performed double-eyelid surgeries and nose bridge heightening to align with Western beauty ideals but also trained local doctors, leaving a lasting legacy (DiMoia, 2013; Kurek, 2015). Many of his patients were Korean women who did sex work and sought to appeal to American GIs (Kurek, 2015). Today, these influences continue to shape contemporary Korean beauty standards, which often include preferences for double eyelids over monolids and a tall nose bridge rather than a flat nose (Kurek, 2015, p. 7; Iijima-Hall, 1995, p. 12).

Additionally, in the 1980s, despite economic growth, South Korea's labor market became increasingly "flexible and insecure" (Han et al., 2018, p. 115-116). This situation only worsened following the Asian financial crisis of 1997. This instability in the job market led to an increased emphasis on appearance as a form of human capital. Even those with stable, white-collar jobs feel constant pressure to maintain a slim figure, as conforming to beauty standards is seen as a way to ensure job security and enhance "bargaining power" in their careers (Han et al., 2018, 119). However, their weight management efforts are not solely focused on actual body size but are also driven by a personal concern about being perceived as "too fat" (Han et al., 2018, 119). These employees are not misguided in their assumptions. More general studies have found that job applicants who are considered physically attractive are more likely to receive favorable evaluations and more job offers than their less attractive peers (Dossinger et al., 2023; Dossinger et al., 2019). Appearance is so critical in the job application process that photos are often required to be attached to CVs. Many individuals even go to the extent of photoshopping their resume photos to have a more "hirable face" (Lim, 2018; The Grand Narrative, 2010).

Broader societal pressures in South Korea further reinforce the link between appearance, weight, and job prospects. Despite having one of the lowest obesity rates among industrialized nations, the country still exhibits high levels of stigmatization toward larger bodies (Marini et al.,

2013; Brewis et al., 2017; Han et al., 2018, p. 116). Everyday conversations and mass media play a significant role in cultivating a pervasive culture of lookism, which is nearly impossible to escape (Han, 2003). This constant pressure from broader society, the workplace, and friends and family all exacerbate issues like disordered eating and body dissatisfaction (Han et al., 2018, 116). This emphasis on physical appearance is also reflected in South Korea having the highest per capita rate of cosmetic procedures (Lee et al., 2017). Many individuals undergo surgery in the hope of improving their professional prospects. For instance, Kwon Dae-hee, a young man who believed surgery would boost his career opportunities, tragically lost his life due to medical malpractice (Seo & Hollingsworth, 2021).

The growth of K-pop and Korean pop culture in the late 1990s only exacerbated existing body dissatisfaction. Early K-pop groups like Girls' Generation, known for their innocent and cute concepts, gained immense popularity in the early 2000s. This success perpetuated the modern beauty standard—both among idols and everyday individuals—of being extremely thin, with slender and smooth legs, pale skin, and large eyes to appear innocent and pure (Oh, 2014, p. 60; Jonas, 2021, p. 10). As a result, individuals transitioned from aspiring to unrealistic Western beauty ideals to embracing a new standard influenced by K-pop. This shift was driven by the perception that K-pop idols, who shared cultural and physical similarities, represented a more relatable and attainable standard than the distant and unattainable Anglo-centric ideals. However, despite this perception, these standards continue to reinforce Western beauty ideals such as having double eyelids and a tall nose bridge.

All in all, this body of research collectively illustrates how profoundly lookism is embedded in the fabric of Korean society, influencing both personal and professional spheres. Individuals, particularly women, are compelled to constantly monitor and modify their

appearances through dieting, cosmetic surgery, or digital means like selfies and editing apps (Chae, 2022). This entrenched culture of lookism has been shaped not only by occupational history and economic hardship but also by international influences and the rise of K-pop. Together, these factors have cultivated a beauty standard that permeates every aspect of life in South Korea.

Anonymity and Online Incivility

Predating research on anonymity and online incivility, studies in the 1970s and 1980s using early deindividuation theory found that when individuals become anonymous to others within a group, they experience a loss of personal identity and self-awareness, which can result in “socially unregulated behaviors” (Diener, 1979; Prentice-Dunn & Rogers, 1989).

Deindividuation theory describes how individuals lose their identities and consequently control over their behaviors (Kiesler et al., 1984). It provides a useful framework for understanding the role of anonymity in shaping behavior in computer-mediated communication (CMC) (Rösner & Krämer, 2016, p. 1).

Within CMC, anonymity is a contributing factor to incivility and seems to be linked to the online disinhibition effect, which explains how a lack of accountability online makes individuals feel less hesitant to engage in hostile, abusive behaviors, like flaming—expressing oneself more harshly on a computer compared to other communication settings (Kiesler et al., 1984; Suler, 2004; Wang, 2020, 914). Further research supports that anonymity in CMC fosters a “deregulating effect,” leading to more argumentative and hostile content (Sproull & Kiesler, 1986; Halpern & Gibbs, 2013; Santana, 2014). Due to this, anonymity can degrade the quality of discourse taking place (Suede & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2023). This makes it easier for users to engage in uncivil behavior without fear of repercussions (Sude & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2023). However, it

should be noted most of this research on anonymity and its effects is focused on political or news-based CMC.

On the other hand, some scholars argue that anonymity does not necessarily lead to a loss of personal identity but rather a shift in focus toward a group-based identity, a process known as depersonalization (Spears & Lea, 1992). This view is supported by research that indicates anonymity in online spaces can obscure social category information (e.g., gender, race), enabling users to express their opinions more freely (Dubrovsky et al., 1991; Papacharissi, 2002). In these cases, anonymity may promote free expression and equal participation, despite it also increasing the potential for uninhibited and hostile behavior (Kiesler et al., 1984).

Rösner & Krämer (2016) also highlight how even perceived anonymity in CMC reduces self-awareness, creating conditions conducive to aggressive online behavior. As a result, even on platforms where users are not entirely anonymous, such as social networking sites, incivility and verbal aggression remain prevalent (Rainie et al., 2012; Rösner & Krämer, 2016). This highlights how both anonymity and social norms within online communities contribute to incivility, as individuals may conform to hostile behavioral patterns set by the group (Turner, 1982). In sum, anonymity—whether perceived or real—has a profound influence on behavior in CMC. From fostering aggressive interactions to reducing the quality of online discussions being had, it also allows for broader speech and participation by masking social categories. Although the majority of studies to date have been on the consequences of anonymity in news-based or political discourse, this research can nevertheless offer an essential framework for understanding how anonymity functions in a range of online contexts.

Fatphobia and Incivility in Online Spaces

In the past couple of years, conversations around body positivity and fat acceptance have increased on social media platforms (Webb et al., 2017; Martinez-Sariego, 2022); however, topics like fatphobia and body shaming have also become more prevalent (Prucoli et al., 2022; Tiller, 2022). Fatphobia, as defined by Kate Manne in her book *Unshrinking*, is a feature of societal systems “that unjustly rank fatter bodies as inferior to thinner bodies, in terms of not only our health but also our moral, sexual, and intellectual status” (2024, p. 6). Some of those systems that fatphobia relies on and is rooted in, as pointed out by Manne (2024) and other scholars, include but are not limited to racism, misogyny, transphobia, ageism, sexism, and ableism (Tiller, 2022; Strings, 2019; Oswald, 2024).

However, there is a notable absence of research on fatphobia in online spaces. The research presented demonstrates how social media platforms like Twitter/X and Facebook are showcased as a source of negativity regarding weight stigmatization, particularly towards women (Chou et al., 2014). Additional research corroborated this by revealing that over 50% of tweets including the word “fat” on Twitter/X were negative in nature (Lydecker et al., 2016). More recent studies, for instance, Kamiński et al., have been demonstrating a shift, as they found that tweets that mentioned “body shaming, fatphobia, weight stigma, and weight bias” would garner more likes and retweets; however, posts regarding specifically “fat-shaming” would garner less engagement (2023). Although this research is showing a positive shift, it could be that the lesser engagement in fat-shaming specifically could still speak to our society's aversion to fatness.

Other more recent research found that other more visually focused social media platforms, like Instagram, function as a tool for both motivation and inspiration when it comes to fitness “through fear of being an abject body.” (Toffoletti and Thorpe 2021, 834). The abject body is a concept from Julia Kristeva’s *Power of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1980). It

describes the parts of the physical self that invoke disgust within ourselves because they can challenge our sense of self (Ross, 1997). Similarly, a 2022 study found that one of the most common topics of discourse on Instagram was weight control, with an emphasis on having a “disciplined body” — “a leaner, more attractive body” that is crafted through exercise and diet with a disciplined mind (Bailey et al., p. 836). Thus, it can be assumed on platforms such as Instagram that the “abject body” is a fat body. In this context, Piedra & Varea (2023) look at a specific fitness campaign on Instagram called *Operacion Feria* [Festival Mission]. This was a campaign posted by a gym account concerning a Spanish celebration called *Feria de Abril* [April Festival], where women leading up to the event try to lose weight to fit into notoriously figure-hugging flamenco dresses. The Instagram advertisement was a graphic of a “woman with her back turned to the viewer, having a hard time putting on a very tight flamenco outfit... [The text saying] Festival mission 2022. You are still on time.” Shockingly, only 20% of comments were reinforcing the messages of the campaign image, with a staggering 80% challenging it (Piedra & Varea, 2023). This might corroborate the similar positive shift found in the research by Kamiński et al. (2024) mentioned previously.

Fatphobia is often covered vicariously in research about eating disorder communities. Pro-eating disorder communities have long existed across various platforms, including personal blogs, Tumblr, Twitter/X, YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok. For instance, a 2003 study found that 500 active websites were specifically dedicated to pro-ana (pro-anorexia) content (Chesley et al., 123). Considering the landscape of social media, there would probably be no way to see the true scope of these communities today. More importantly, the thing these communities often share is the idea that restrictive eating disorders are a lifestyle choice rather than mental disorders (Juarascio et al., 2010, 393). Although many users of these sites feel like they have been affected

positively through the sense of community these groups foster, studies have found that those exposed to these communities who have no history of eating disorders are profoundly affected (Cspike & Horne, 2007, 203), often seeing decreases in self-esteem and body image but increases in self-comparison (Bardone-Cone & Cass, 2007, 544).

Method Section

In my research, I will be conducting a critical discourse analysis (CDA) and textual analysis of select TikTok posts. CDA is a form of qualitative research that focuses on language and discourse as they both come as a result of and are regulated by social relationships and societal power dynamics (van Dijk, 1995, 18; Jacobsen et al., 2022, 64). The data selection process for my research began on September 17, 2024, and was completed on January 18, 2025. In approaching this topic, I chose to cover three videos and their comments. Given the extensive analysis required, including examining a wide array of comments and the posts themselves, this scope provides a manageable and sufficient amount of content for this specific case study. To collect this data, the search term “Jeongyeon weight gain” was used in the TikTok search bar to retrieve the most relevant videos. This term was chosen to capture a range of content discussing Jeongyeon's weight change. The videos selected had to mention or bring attention to Jeongyeon and her weight gain, either in the video or in captions. To narrow down what videos to include involved intense scrutiny; these TikTok posts had to meet specific criteria: a minimum of one million total views and a minimum of 10,000 likes to ensure a large enough level of engagement and at least 40 comments to provide sufficient data for discourse analysis. Videos that had less than 40 comments or were off-topic were excluded from the analysis. However, considering the stark difference in the number of comments under each video, it was decided to cap the comments covered per video at 200. The 200 comments chosen were those that were aggregated

at the top of the comment section. The final chosen videos were from the creators @momorinkk, @_ryujinswife, and @chae...x.twice.

By utilizing this approach, I aim to understand the underlying power dynamic and societal norms that inform and are embedded within the discourse reflected in these comments. Additionally, analyzing the visuals (e.g., text, video, photos, tags, hashtags, etc.) featured within these posts can provide supplementary material to enhance what is being seen in the comments. Through this dual analytical approach, which emphasizes both the linguistic and visual, a comprehensive analysis of the discourse and underlying biases concerning weight, specifically concerning Jeongyeon and potentially K-pop fandom more broadly, can be achieved.

Analysis


In analyzing the fan discourse surrounding Jeongyeon's weight gain on TikTok, five key themes emerged across my three selected videos, illustrating how ideas around fatness and body size operate within K-pop fandoms. The discussion surrounding Jeongyeon's body extends beyond mere observations of physical change; it reflects the deep-seated expectations of female idols in a highly curated and surveilled industry. My analysis uncovers how this discourse is shaped by broader cultural anxieties surrounding beauty, health, and femininity, highlighting how social media platforms like TikTok reinforce and challenge these norms. The emerging codes include (1) What is healthy? What is or is not fat? What is normal?; (2) fatness and beauty; (3) comparison, both between Jeongyeon and other idols as well as fans' reflections on their bodies; and (4) overcompensation and fandom culture. Through this analysis, I explore how these narratives intersect with K-pop's idol culture and the broader impact of digital spaces on reinforcing rigid beauty standards.

What is Healthy? The Medical Justification of Fatphobia

A significant portion of comments—approximately 53% (105 out of 200)—particularly in videos #1 and #3, revolve around the question of what constitutes "healthy." Within these discussions, many frame Jeongyeon's weight gain as a medical issue, with users attempting to rationalize her changing body through references to her herniated disc, medications, and anxiety diagnosis.

In video #1 by @momorinkk, several comments explicitly link Jeongyeon's weight gain to medical conditions and treatments. For instance, @Yes-Si Krystal states, "*She actually had a disk from her neck mess up... took meds and gained weight so bad for her neck and anxiety.*" These comments reflect an implicit belief that weight gain is only acceptable if it is medically justified, and it is framed as something abnormal that requires explanation.

This discourse reinforces the idea that fatness, in general, is unnatural unless external circumstances can explain it, which can range from being justified to unjustified (e.g., laziness versus medication). Further, within the context of South Korea and idol culture, the emphasis on her medical history suggests that Jeongyeon, as an idol, needs an explanation for her weight gain—one that absolves her of personal responsibility and maintains an image of her as someone who is not "naturally" fat.

In video #3 by @chae...x.twice commentor said, "*she didn't want to gain weight, she gain weight because of the medications she used*" with another @ stated, "*Her weight gain is only caused by her medication so when she gets off the medication her metabolism will return to normal, that doesn't mean she will lose a bunch of weight but she probably will.*"

The phrase "*she didn't want to gain weight*" suggests that weight gain is inherently undesirable and something to be avoided. This reflects broader societal beliefs that gaining

weight is always a negative outcome, one that people should want to actively resist unless external forces, like medication, make it unavoidable. In the context of K-pop, where idols are expected to maintain a hyper-controlled image, this comment reinforces the expectation that female idols should always be actively working to stay thin. It also subtly implies that Jeongyeon's weight gain is more acceptable because it was not a personal choice—had she wanted to gain weight, the harsh criticism towards her would be justified.

The second comment expands on this idea by positioning weight gain as a temporary deviation from an expected norm. The mention of metabolism "*returning to normal*" suggests that thinness is Jeongyeon's true or correct state, while fatness is merely an unfortunate event. This further perpetuates the idea that weight gain is a condition to be fixed rather than an acceptable or natural state of being. Further, by positioning her body size as a side effect rather than a natural possibility, this discourse implies that Jeongyeon should lose weight once her medical situation changes. This kind of rhetoric reflects a wider societal discomfort with fatness, reinforcing the expectation that bodies should strive toward thinness and maintain it as the norm. Ultimately, it upholds the K-pop industry's broader demand for female idols to conform to strict beauty ideals, where any deviation, no matter how justified, is framed as a temporary and undesirable state they should work hard to move past.

This emphasis on thinness as the default or "correct" state intersects with broader assumptions about health. Many users, in attempting to justify or rationalize their discomfort with fatness, framed it as a health concern, deeming Jeongyeon's weight gain inherently "unhealthy." In response, others defended her, arguing that she looked completely normal and was likely healthier than other idols. These conflicting perspectives highlight how deeply

ingrained the belief is that a heavier body is automatically linked to poor health, reinforcing the idea that thinness equals health.

This discussion also frequently uses BMI as an indicator of health, even though BMI has been widely criticized as an outdated and flawed measure of individual health (Tylka et al., 2014). This also raises the question of why fans know so much information about their idols, from their medical diagnoses to their exact weights. By positioning health as a prerequisite for body acceptance, fans uphold fatphobic beauty standards under the guise of concern.

A minority of comments directly challenge this assumption, offering a counter-narrative. Some fans argue that idols should not be required to look a certain way to be deemed “worthy,” while others point out the extreme thinness standards in K-pop can be just as harmful as weight gain. However, these perspectives remain overshadowed by the dominant discourse, which continues to tie worth and acceptability to an idealized body type, whether implicitly or explicitly

Fatness and Beauty: The Idol Standard and the Acceptability of Weight

A recurring subtopic within the broader discussions about health is the relationship between weight and beauty and how it impacts attractiveness. Many comments reveal a struggle to reconcile Jeongyeon’s weight gain with conventional beauty ideals, highlighting the tension between fatness and desirability in K-pop. Even supportive comments such as “*Jeongyeon is so pretty, though,*” by @067, often appear in response to fat-shaming. Yet, they inadvertently reinforce the idea that beauty and weight are inherently at odds, framing Jeongyeon as an exception to the rule. An alternative reading of this comment suggests an attempt to preserve her beauty by denying the premise of fatness altogether, implying that if she is still “pretty,” she

therefore must not be fat. In both interpretations, beauty remains defined in opposition to fatness, reinforcing narrow aesthetic norms.

More overt fatphobia, though not always visible in the comment section, was repeatedly referenced directly in two out of three TikTok videos analyzed, as seen in Figures 1 and 2. In Video #1, a text overlay quotes a hate comment that states, “*she’s so fat, she’s not fit to be an idol,*” while Video #2 includes a screenshot from another video that states, “*the way you can tell shed much rather be at home snacking on fish chips.*” These comments go beyond criticizing appearance and suggest that Jeongyeon’s body disqualifies her from idolhood altogether. Her weight is positioned as a sign of laziness or lack of discipline, reinforcing the belief that thinness is not just a beauty ideal but a job requirement. These narratives imply that no matter her vocal ability or prior popularity, failing to maintain a slim figure renders her unworthy of her position as an idol.

One particularly striking comment reads, “*She looks like a fat Hanni, like if Hanni didn’t give af.*” Hanni, a member of the newer and younger girl group NewJeans, has also been subjected to fat-shaming, yet was notably and swiftly defended by both Korean and international fans (Koreaboo, 2024). This comparison suggests that being overweight reflects a lack of self-respect or personal effort, equating thinness with self-control and diligence. Fatness, on the other hand, is framed as a failure; a failure that is both aesthetic and moral. By positioning Jeongyeon as a kind of “failed” version of Hanni, who more clearly fits K-pop beauty standards, the commenter reinforces the notion that an idol’s legitimacy and valor are deeply tied to their physical appearance.

This scrutiny reflects larger beauty norms within South Korean culture, where thinness is closely tied to femininity, success, and desirability. This is only further amplified by the K-pop

industry, where these ideals are institutionalized through strict dieting practices and weight monitoring, fostering a culture of body surveillance, not just in the public but also in the private sector (Oh, 2018). Within this context, Jeongyeon's weight gain is not simply viewed as a personal matter but as a deviation from the industry's idealized aesthetic that has come to be expected by the fans, making it a focal point of public discourse.

Comparison: Between Idols and Fans Themselves

Comparison is a dominant theme in the discourse, occurring on two levels: between Jeongyeon and other idols, and between Jeongyeon and the fans themselves. Many comments juxtapose Jeongyeon's body with that of her TWICE bandmates or other K-pop idols who have undergone weight gain/loss transformations. For instance, one user, @zyozyo, writes:

“The vid showed how JH (Jihyo) looked before and now, which is from chubby to sexy and fit. By making this comparison, it's like they're saying JY (Jeongyeon) needs to be like JH to prove that she is worthy of being an idol.”

Although this comment is in good faith, calling out how this comparison between Jeongyeon and fellow idol Jihyo might push the idea that Jeongyeon has to change to regain her 'idol' status. However, it still upholds the binary opposition between “chubby” and “sexy,” reinforcing the idea that slimness is a prerequisite for idol-worthiness.

Beyond comparisons to other idols, some fans relate Jeongyeon's weight gain to their own body image, either finding solace in her appearance or using it as a point of contrast. Comments like those by user @nina💖, “*she's literally the only idol younger me would've related to, and it would make me so sad that everyone talks about her weight and not her talent,*” demonstrate how fans use idols as reference points for their self-perception. However, others use her weight as a cautionary tale, implying that letting oneself “go” leads to undesirability or that

her current appearance is not something they would want for themselves. This was seen in a particular comment posted as a reply to a positive comment praising Jeongyeon's beauty, which posed a rhetorical question: "*Would you switch your body with hers?*" This question, while subtle, carries a strong implication—it challenges the idea that Jeongyeon remains attractive despite her weight gain by shifting the focus from admiration to personal desirability. The underlying message suggests that while one might verbally express support for her, they would not want to look like her themselves, reinforcing the notion that her current body is undesirable in comparison to thinner idols or even the commenter's bodies. By framing Jeongyeon's body as something one would not want to inhabit, the commenter subtly reinforces fatphobic attitudes while maintaining plausible deniability. It allows them to undermine praise for Jeongyeon without making overtly hateful remarks, instead using a question to cast doubt on whether anyone would truly want to look like her.

Furthermore, this rhetorical strategy highlights how idol bodies are positioned as both aspirational and scrutinized within fandom spaces. Fans are encouraged to idolize these celebrities, but only as long as they meet strict, idealized beauty standards. The moment an idol deviates from these norms, whether through weight gain, aging, or any other physical change, they risk becoming an object of comparison and questioning rather than admiration. In Jeongyeon's case, her body is no longer just her own; it becomes a reference point for others to gauge their own attractiveness and worth. The notion that her body is something undesirable to embody suggests that idols are not just expected to maintain certain appearances for their careers but also to fulfill an imagined standard of desirability that fans impose on themselves. This reinforces the toxic relationship between K-pop, body image, and self-worth, where an idol's

appearance is not only subject to personal preference but also used as a metric for fans' own body evaluations. Thus, rendering their bodies as objects of consumption.

The dual nature of these comparisons—idol-to-idol and idol-to-fan—highlights how fandom discourse is not just about the celebrity but also deeply entangled with fans' self-image and internalized cultural ideals. Idol bodies function simultaneously as aspirational figures to emulate and cautionary figures to critique. In Jeongyeon's case, her body becomes a symbolic battleground: no longer simply her own, but a mirror through which fans negotiate their own worth, desirability, and discipline. This dynamic reflects a deeper entwinement of personal and parasocial relationships, where fans project their insecurities and aspirations onto the bodies of the celebrities they follow.

Defensive Fandom and Overcompensation

Among the comments of the selected TikTok videos is a consistent appearance of fans making an effort to defend Jeongyeon. This defensive position they are taking is not just emotional or spontaneous; it follows recognizable patterns shaped by the norms and culture of K-pop fandom. In response to direct hate comments or hateful commentary highlighted within the videos themselves or the comments, many fans do not simply counter the negativity with affirmations of Jeongyeon's worth or beauty. Instead, they engage in a mode of defense that is entangled with the hyper-competitive nature of K-pop fandom, particularly through tactics like invoking sales metrics or performance statistics as validation.

Across the three videos, this type of defensive commentary made up a significant proportion of the overall discourse: 17% in Video 1, 23% in Video 3, and the majority of comments in Video 2. One of the most frequent comments, either directly stated or alluded to, was the concept of "outsold." The phrase "at least she outsold your fav" or similar variations is a

common form of fandom retaliation. It operates as a form of moral high ground rooted not in personal values but in measurable success, typically album sales, concert attendance, or digital streaming numbers. In this framework, Jeongyeon's worth as an idol isn't defended based on her talents, resilience, or character, but on her commercial success and group popularity. Their defense is conditional to her success. This reflects how deeply fandom spaces have internalized the logic of capital and competition, where success is equated with legitimacy, and legitimacy becomes the only acceptable counter to hate.

This kind of overcompensatory defense is not without consequence. While intended as support, it often reinforces the very structural frameworks that contribute to the initial body-shaming. For instance, in Video 2, one commenter, @Julie Perez, writes, *"thank you for doing the Lord's work honestly the only pig here is that bitch and whoever agreed with that ugly ass anti."* The comment is in response to a screenshot featured in the video (Figure 2), which displays a screenshot of a derogatory post that reads, *"The way you can tell shed rather be at home snacking on fish chips."* Here, the term "anti" refers to anti-fans—individuals who hate a specific celebrity and can present behaviors such as posting hate comments and following the celebrities intently in order to hate on them (Hind, 2007). However, in defending Jeongyeon from this fatphobic jab, the commenter replicates the language of dehumanization, using terms like "pig" and "ugly" to insult the original poster, further perpetuating the violence they are protecting Jeongyeon from.

This dynamic reveals a deeper contradiction at play: fans aim to protect their idols from harm, yet often do so by reproducing the same logics of shame and appearance-based worth that underpin the original hate. It is a defense rooted in the all-or-nothing nature of stan culture—where defending one idol often means tearing another person down. This can

potentially be tied to the anonymity of many K-pop fan accounts or the level of celebrity worship they have towards their favorite idol (Maltby et al., 2002, 1163; Maltby & Day, 2011, 4; Rainie et al., 2012; Rösner & Krämer, 2016). The concept of “outselling” becomes not just a flex but a moral claim: “Jeongyeon is better because she performs better.” While this seems like a badge of pride, it reinforces the idea that idols must justify their existence and humanity through achievement, productivity, and beauty.

Furthermore, this reactionary mode of support highlights how deeply K-pop fans have been conditioned by industry standards. Instead of challenging the notion that body size should affect one’s value as an idol, many fans opt to divert attention toward Jeongyeon’s professional accomplishments or shift blame onto other individuals. This lack of any real confrontation with fatphobia reinforces the idea that worth must be earned. In doing so, fans unintentionally perpetuate the exact pressures they claim to reject—recasting Jeongyeon not as a person deserving dignity regardless of appearance, but as someone who has “earned” her protection because she has proven her excellence.

These fan responses, while seemingly supportive, ultimately complicate the landscape of defense in K-pop discourse. They demonstrate that even within communities that profess love and loyalty, the tools of defense are often shaped by the very industries and ideologies fans might otherwise wish to critique. Jeongyeon’s case reveals that fan culture can be both a shield and a weapon—one that protects idols from explicit hate while reinforcing the implicit norms that make such hate possible in the first place.

Discussion

The wider digital discourse surrounding Jeongyeon’s weight gain is not occurring in a vacuum, but rather it is deeply embedded within the larger context of Hallyu’s global expansion

and social pressure that have spread along with it. Since the late 1990s, Korean cultural exports such as dramas, films, and, most notably, K-pop have surged in global popularity (Jung, 2015). As K-pop entered its fourth wave in the late 2000s, social media platforms such as YouTube and Twitter helped expand the genre's reach far beyond East Asia, establishing a solid global fan base (Jung, 2015; Choe & Russell, 2012). Through these platforms, fans engage in participatory practices that foster parasocial intimacy, from organizing flash mobs to replicating idol dances and fashion, and this is only expanding with the rise of new social media platforms like TikTok. Yet, this digital closeness can also amplify harmful dynamics like severe celebrity worship, mild pathological behavior, and obsessive scrutiny and behavior (Brotokusumo & Swasti, 2024; Iwicka, 2018). This sort of behavior is reflected in Jeongyeon's case, specifically, how these fan engagements can quickly become toxic and even spread South Korea's own intense standards of beauty on a global scale.

As idols are pushed to embody idealized appearances from a young age, fans internalize these expectations and come to see them as natural or deserved. Within this framework, Jeongyeon's weight gain is not merely a personal change but a perceived violation of what an idol "should" be, despite her status as a long-time beloved and successful idol. This reflects the deep connection between K-pop fandom and South Korea's culture of lookism, where appearance is treated as a form of social and economic capital. Even though Jeongyeon is based in South Korea, the reactions she receives online from both Korean and international fans mirror these localized pressures, showing the export of harmful body norms alongside Korean cultural products. As Brotokusumo & Swasti (2024) note, fans often feel a sense of emotional investment in the physical health and overall well-being of their favorite idols. However, this emotional investment can be double-edged, shifting easily from support to control and surveillance.

Given this context, international fans who participate in discourse around idol appearances are not only consuming a global product; they are also adopting and reproducing the cultural logics underpinning it. Idol bodies, like Jeongyeon's, become sites where both desire and discipline are projected, scrutinized, and debated. The responses to her weight gain reflect a convergence of parasocial intimacy, media-fueled celebrity worship, and globalized beauty norms that are not just Korean but have been taken up and reinforced by fans worldwide. What this reveals is not only the reach of Hallyu but the reach of fatphobia itself; how it travels, mutates, and becomes mutable in transnational digital spaces. Though that is not to say that fatphobia has not existed or been perpetuated in the West, but rather it is what is considered "fat" or "unhealthy" that is changing and expanding due to the infusion of differing cultural logics.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study offers valuable insights into fan discourse surrounding body image in K-pop, several limitations should be acknowledged and addressed in future research. My research is only focused on a single case study, the idol Jeongyeon, and the fan discourse surrounding her weight and health. This narrow scope allowed for a close reading of specific examples, which can offer some insight into how such issues might extend beyond this individual case. However, it does not capture the full extent of body shaming in the K-pop industry, which affects both male and female idols in varying ways.

Additionally, the analysis is based on just three TikTok videos, which limits the generalizability of the findings. With more time and a larger sample size, the project could have developed a more comprehensive understanding of fan behavior and discourse surrounding Jeongyeon, which could have exposed different codes than the ones I found. The study also centers on international TikTok fandom, but access to specific demographic information about

commenters was unavailable, as such data is only accessible to video creators, and the data that is available is very general (e.g., age ranges, viewer locations, gender breakdowns, watch time, and view trends). Consequently, I am unable to make definitive claims about who is engaging with the content or how variables such as nationality, age, or gender may influence their responses.

Future research could build on this work by examining multiple idols who have faced similar situations across different genders, eras of K-pop, or types of controversy to better understand broader patterns of fat-shaming in fandom spaces. Comparative approaches may highlight recurring themes or changing dynamics over time, particularly in how fans respond to male versus female idols. Additionally, a larger dataset of videos and comments could support more robust discourse analysis, potentially using quantitative methods to identify trends across multiple platforms. In addition, one could incorporate more specific user demographics through surveys, interviews, or platform analytics to provide a more nuanced understanding of how international fans internalize and respond to K-pop's beauty standards on a personal level.

Concluding Thoughts

This research aimed to examine how fan discourse surrounding Yoo Jeongyeon's weight gain reflects broader fatphobic narratives that thrive in K-pop, like the tie between weight and the ability to be an idol. Additionally, how these narratives intersect with Korean history and with beauty, and how the idol system is a manifestation of that history and markets it globally. My initial argument was that the discourse surrounding Jeongyeon and her weight gain is not only due to fatphobia but also the image that has been created by the idol industry, marketing these idols as products rather than artists. Based on the central themes I found of surrounding health, beauty, body comparison, and divisive fandom, I have found that argument to hold mostly true. However, what surprised me was the consistent presence of users across all three videos, working to challenge misinformation and add nuance to the ways weight and

health were being discussed, even if it was falling on deaf ears. Ultimately, this research demonstrates how K-pop fandom discourse does not just reflect Korean societal beauty standards but how it actively participates in their globalization, mutation, and broader enforcement. Understanding these dynamics is incredibly important not just for analyzing fandom culture, but also in being able to recognize how deeply body surveillance has become embedded in celebrity and internet culture transnationally.

Appendix

Figure 1

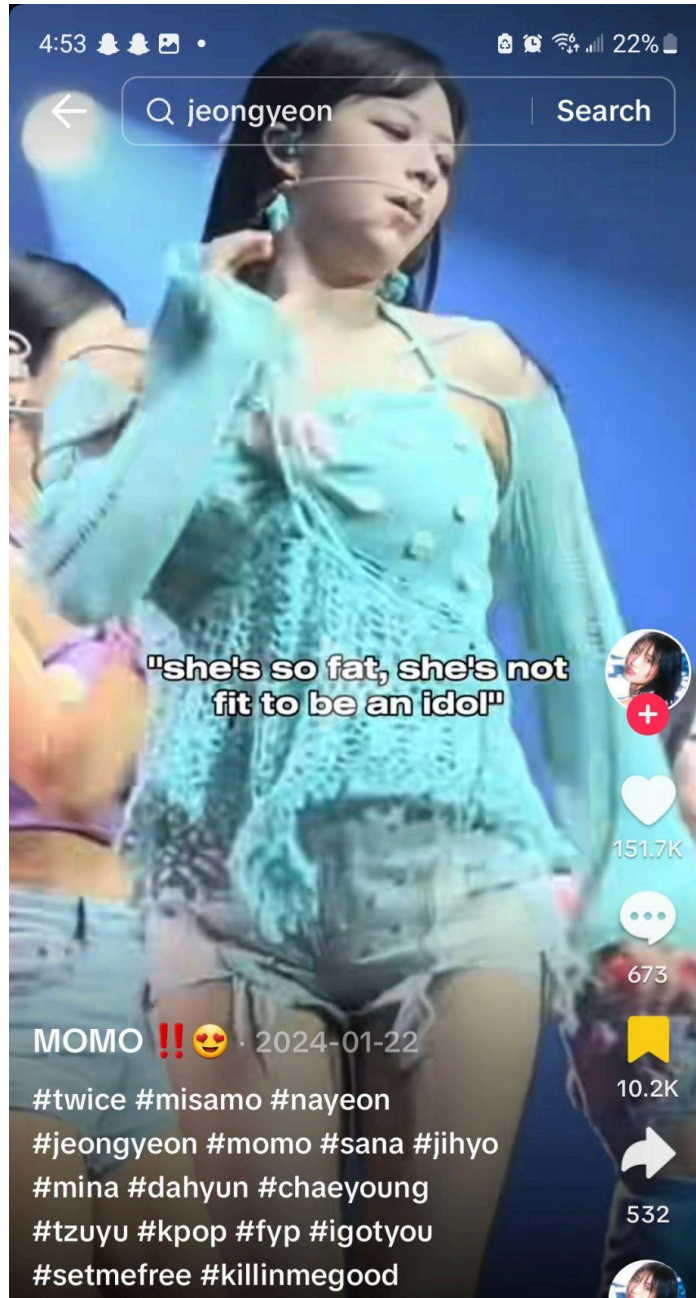


Figure 2



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