

# From Idols to Ideals: The Influence of Korean Culture on Adolescents Body Image

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## ABSTRACT

Anorexia nervosa is a severe mental health disorder prevalent among adolescents in South Korea, where rising beauty standards, heavily influenced by K-culture and social media, are linked to body dissatisfaction (National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), 2021). The present review addresses gaps in how South Korean cultural ideals, particularly related to K-culture, impact body image and contribute to disordered eating among teenagers. A systematic review assessed the relationship between Korean cultural standards and adolescent body image. Three key themes emerged: media's influence on body image, the link between body image distortion and eating disorder risk, and the impact of sociocultural factors on body dissatisfaction. Media, especially K-culture, was found to contribute to unhealthy beauty standards, promoting body dissatisfaction and disordered eating behaviors. Psychological-related factors such as anxiety and weight misperception were related to heightened eating disorder risks. Lastly, sociocultural pressures to conform to idealized body standards were found to exacerbate body dissatisfaction further. Ultimately, this study highlights the significant role of South Korean media and cultural pressures in shaping adolescents' body image and increasing disordered eating risks. Addressing these societal influences is critical for promoting healthier body perceptions and reducing eating disorders among teens. Future research should explore intervention strategies to minimize these cultural pressures.

## Introduction

Anorexia nervosa is a severe mental health disorder characterized by an intense fear of gaining weight and a distorted body image, leading individuals to restrict their food intake severely (National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), 2021). In South Korea, the number of reported anorexia cases reached 5,735 in 2023 alone (National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), 2021; Statista Research Department, 2024). Moreover, the economic burden of these disorders reached over USD 5.4 million in 2015, with the highest prevalence in adolescent girls (J.-H. Lee et al., 2021; S. M. Lee et al., 2021). This striking information points to an escalating public health issue among adolescents, signaling a need for attention to research on the underlying causes (Statista Research Department, 2024). One key factor in understanding the increase in anorexia cases is the role of beauty standards. Body Image (BI) reflects how a person thinks and feels about their body and appearance and is influenced by physical traits, self-esteem, and societal pressures (Mental Health Foundation, 2023). These pressures become especially significant during the teenage years as individuals experience physical changes and heightened sensitivity to social judgment (Burychka et al., 2021). Additionally, social media plays a role in this process by presenting teens with idealized images (Vuong et al., 2021). As a result, this exposure can lead to dissatisfaction with one's body and, in some cases, disordered eating (Yang et al., 2020). Furthermore, when adolescents compare themselves to these often unrealistic and idealized portrayals, feelings of inadequacy can arise, leading to body dissatisfaction. This dissatisfaction is a key risk factor for developing disordered eating behaviors as they attempt to alter their bodies to match these perceived ideals. Beyond disordered eating, this dissatisfaction can also contribute to other mental health outcomes as teens struggle with the gap between their

appearance and the societal standards they are exposed to. Adolescents are especially vulnerable because their sense of self-worth is closely tied to their appearance (Roberts et al., 2022).

In recent years, the global spread of Korean culture, or “K-culture,” has coincided with this increase in eating disorders (Hyun et al., 2014). In South Korea, societal emphasis on appearance is deeply ingrained, with music (K-pop), television dramas, fashion, and social media promoting idealized beauty standards (Hyun et al., 2014). Originating in the late 1990s and expanding rapidly in the 2010s, this cultural phenomenon has been propelled by social media platforms making content easily accessible. K-pop attracts a predominantly young audience, and social media has allowed fans to promote their favorite artists and shows actively, enhancing their international reach (Kuta, 2022; Martin Roll, 2021; Sugathadasa, 2023). However, K-pop idols' polished and often unattainable beauty standards also set unrealistic expectations for adolescent fans. The emphasis on slim physiques, flawless skin, and specific facial features has increased body dissatisfaction among young people who feel pressured to conform to these ideals (Jiotsa et al., 2021). This, in turn, can lead to harmful behaviors such as extreme dieting or disordered eating as they strive to achieve the “perfect” appearance promoted by K-pop culture. While some fans may adopt healthier habits inspired by their idols, the overwhelming emphasis on physical perfection can reinforce harmful beauty standards. (Tresna et al., 2021).

## Hypothesis

Given this context, the present review will explore how Korean culture impacts adolescents' body image and self-perception. We hypothesize that the promotion of these unrealistic beauty standards significantly contributes to body dissatisfaction and unhealthy behaviors among adolescents. To investigate this, we conducted a scoping review of the available literature.

## Methods

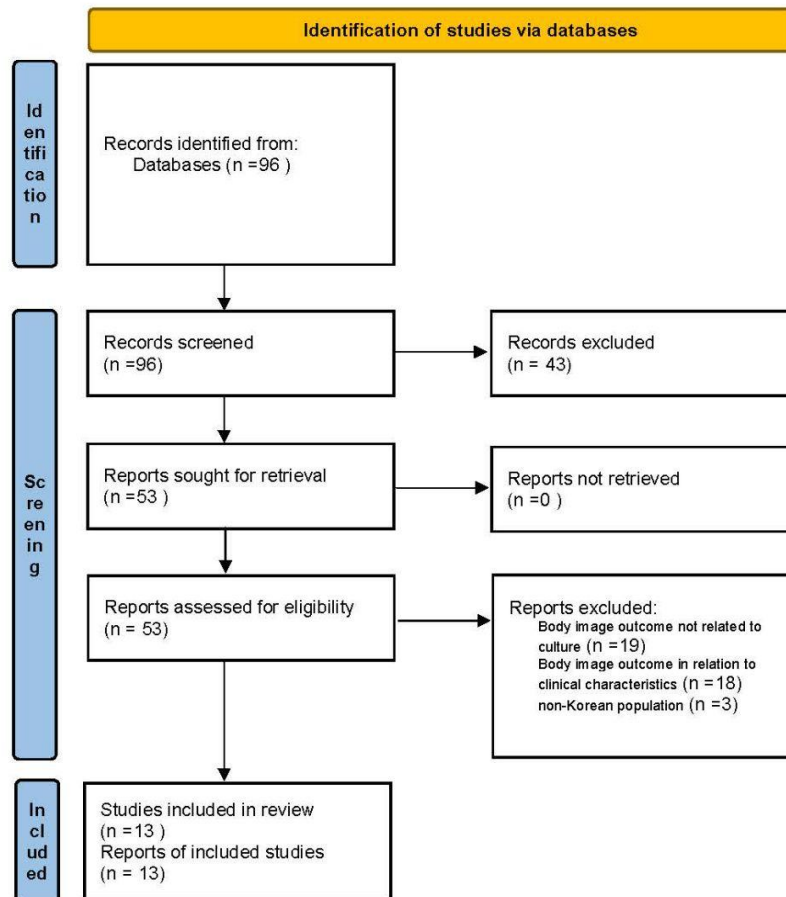
The present systematic review was conducted on July 24th, 2024. We sought to analyze the impact of Korean culture on adolescents' body image and well-being. The review followed a structured protocol that guided the search process, selection, and synthesis of results. The database utilized for the search was PubMed. Keywords employed in the search strategy included the following terms:

("Korea\*" OR "KR" OR "South Korea\*" OR "K-beauty" OR "K beauty") AND ("Teen\*" OR "teenager\*" OR "adolescents") AND ("body image" OR "eating disorder" OR "body dysmorphia" OR "weight misperception" OR "weight perception")

The terms above were chosen to obtain relevant studies, particularly those focusing on the influence of Korean cultural standards on body image and related health outcomes among adolescents. To be included in the analysis, studies had to meet the following criteria: 1) focus on the Korean population; 2) population included teenagers only (12 - 18); 3) include outcomes related to body image, such as self-perception, eating disorders, or body satisfaction. Studies were excluded if they met any of the following criteria: 1) did not involve original data collection, including meta-analyses, reviews, scoping reviews, and systematic reviews ( $n = 3$ ); 2) were case reports ( $n = 2$ ); 3) focused on non-Korean populations ( $n = 15$ ); 4) targeted age groups other than teenagers ( $n = 0$ ); or 5) did not report any outcomes related to body image ( $n = 17$ ). The study was included for further screening if the title or abstract did not provide the necessary information. Full texts were then reviewed, and articles were additionally excluded if they met any of the following criteria: 1) body image in relation to non-eating related clinical or medical outcomes ( $n = 18$ ), 2) body image not related to culture ( $n=19$ ), 3) non-Korean population ( $n = 3$ ). Ultimately, 13 articles moved onto the data extraction phase to be included in the present review (see **Figure 1** below).

A structured approach was employed to analyze the selected articles thoroughly, and data extraction was completed. Initially, general information, such as the title, author, and year of publication, was gathered. This provided an organized way to contextualize the studies within the broader literature. Regarding the methods, specific attention

was given to the participants in each study. Key details such as the sample size, gender, and the population being studied were recorded. This allowed for an understanding of how the research applied across different demographics. The process also involved documenting how body image and cultural factors were measured. The body image outcomes and measures, as well as the cultural outcomes and measures, were carefully noted. Lastly, information on the limitations and results of each article was collected. Understanding the limitations helped identify potential weaknesses in the studies, while the results summarized the key findings.



**Figure 1:** PRISMA Flow Diagram for Review

Source: Page MJ, et al. BMJ 2021;372:n71. doi: 10.1136/bmj.n71.

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## Results

The 13 articles that met all the previously determined inclusion criteria were analyzed in the results phase. Most of these studies examined body image among boys and girls; however, two studies focused on girls. The studies analyzed a population of 71,793 students aged between 12 and 18. These findings include participants exclusively from Korea. Upon reviewing the key findings, three main themes emerged that illustrate the relationship between body image and

the risk of eating disorders: the influence of media on body image and eating behaviors, the impact of school on body image concerns, and the link between body image distortion, weight perception, and eating disorder risk.

## Media & Body Image

Prieler and colleagues (2021) focused on the relationship between appearance-related social comparison on social networking services (SNSs) and body esteem, particularly in South Korean adolescents in a cross-cultural context. It explored how self-worth contingent on others' approval influenced body image. Among the 981 female adolescents surveyed in 2017, the study revealed that, unlike in European countries, appearance comparisons on Facebook did not negatively affect body esteem in South Korean girls. However, self-worth based on others' approval still harmed body esteem across all countries, including South Korea. This demonstrates the role of cultural differences and self-worth dependency in understanding the effects of SNS use on body image. Next, H. Jeong and colleagues (2024) hypothesized that watching mukbang and cookbang broadcasts significantly affects Korean adolescents' dietary habits and body image perceptions. Mukbang refers to live-streamed or recorded broadcasts where hosts eat large amounts of food while interacting with their audience. Cookbang, on the other hand, involves cooking shows where hosts demonstrate how to prepare meals, often combining entertainment with culinary skills. Both genres have gained significant popularity in South Korea. (Yun et al., 2020). Using data from the 18th Korea Youth Risk Behavior Web-based Survey (2022), they analyzed the relationship between the frequency of viewing these broadcasts and various health-related factors, including eating habits, BMI, and body image distortion. The results indicated that increased viewership was linked to negative impacts on both eating habits and body image, with notable gender differences in how adolescents were affected. However, the study's cross-sectional nature also limits its ability to establish clear conclusions, highlighting the need for further research better to understand the health outcomes of this digital media content (Jeong et al., 2024). In conclusion, media plays a large role in shaping body image among South Korean adolescents. Exposure to idealized standards affects body perception and eating behaviors, whether through K-pop videos, social networking sites, or broadcasts like mukbang and cookbang (Kwon & Kwon, 2024). These influences vary by context. K-pop videos often lead to body dissatisfaction, while social media comparisons show more nuanced effects (Lin et al., 2021). Food-related broadcasts further complicate these perceptions, influencing eating habits and self-image (Kwon & Kwon, 2024). Despite these insights, many studies are cross-sectional, so more research is needed to understand the long-term impact of media on body image. Promoting media literacy and healthy portrayals is essential to mitigate these effects.

## School & Body Image

Kim and colleagues (2016) explored how individual, family, and school factors influence weight misperception (underestimating or overestimating weight) in Korean adolescents. Using data from the 2012 Korea Youth Risk Behavior Survey with over 72,000 students, the researchers found that attending schools with higher average BMI led to more weight underestimation and less overestimation in both boys and girls. This indicates that peer body norms within schools, magnified by media-driven K-pop ideals frequently encountered in school settings, affect self-perception. A few limitations include self-reported data and its cross-sectional design (Kim & Kawachi, 2016). Self-reported data can be unreliable because participants might not remember things accurately or want to present themselves more positively. Additionally, cross-sectional design only looks at data from one point in time, which makes it difficult to tell if one thing causes another. Additionally, H. Chae and colleagues (2022) hypothesized that body image distortion is common among South Korean adolescents and influenced by factors like school achievement and school media exposure to K-pop. Data from the 14th Korea Youth Risk Behavior Survey (2018), including middle and high school students, revealed that 40.3% of boys and 39.7% of girls experienced distortion of body image. Key contributing factors included school achievement, weight control, and economic status. With K-pop images and media often circulating within schools, these factors amplify unrealistic beauty standards. However, the study's reliance on self-reported data and its cross-sectional design limit the ability to draw direct conclusions (H. Chae, 2022). Overall, these studies

illustrate how media-driven K-culture in schools impacts adolescents' weight perception. They demonstrated that attending schools with higher average BMIs leads to more students underestimating their weight (Toselli et al., 2023). In contrast, fewer students overestimate it, suggesting that peer body norms shape self-perception (Perkins et al., 2015). Academic achievement, weight control, and economic status also play roles, with many adolescents experiencing distorted body views (H. Chae, 2022; Kim & Kawachi, 2016). The findings highlight the importance of fostering school environments that address body image issues, with attention to media influence, to promote healthier self-esteem among students. However, the limitations of self-reported data and cross-sectional study designs make it difficult to understand the causal relationships fully.

## Weight Perception & Body Image

First, J.-S. Choi and colleagues (2017) examined the link between BMI-for-age percentile, body image distortion, and unnecessary weight loss efforts among normal-weight and underweight Korean adolescent girls. Using data from 29,633 participants in the 2013 Korea Youth Risk Behavior Survey, chi-square tests and regression analyses were conducted to explore these relationships. The results show weight perception, as influenced by BMI percentiles, plays a critical role in body image distortion, which causes unnecessary weight loss efforts. Given the pervasive portrayal of thinness in K-pop, which is commonly admired by adolescents, such media images may contribute to heightened awareness and reinforcement of distorted weight norms, further intensifying these perceptions. As for limitations, the study's cross-sectional design made it difficult to determine cause-and-effect relationships. Second, since this study was based on existing data from the Korea Youth Risk Behavior Survey (KYRBWS), the researchers couldn't control for other important factors not included in the survey. Next, Y. Choi and colleagues (2023) studied how weight perception impacts the mental health of Korean adolescents. Using data from the Korean National Health and Nutritional Examination Survey (2010–2019), the study examined actual, perceived, and misperceived weight status alongside depression, stress, and suicidal ideation in 5,683 adolescents. While 20.8% were overweight, 32.7% saw themselves as overweight, and 18.4% misjudged their weight status. Adolescents who viewed themselves as overweight experienced heightened mental health issues, suggesting that self-perception, perhaps influenced by K-pop's narrow beauty standards, could reinforce feelings of inadequacy and impact well-being, regardless of actual weight (Y. Choi & Hong, 2023). Misjudging their weight was strongly linked to worse mental health, with those who misperceived their weight reporting more distress and a higher risk of suicidal ideation.

This highlights that weight perception can impact mental health more than actual weight. As for the limitations, some may have affected the accuracy of (Y. Choi & Hong, 2023) findings. For example, the use of self-reported data on mental health conditions is a limitation because such data can often be subjective, and participants may not fully understand or accurately report their mental health symptoms. This could result in underreporting or overreporting of conditions like depression, stress, or suicidal ideation. Then, Hyun et al. (2014) focused on the prevalence of body image distortion and its association with eating disorders among Korean adolescents. The study surveyed 2,117 adolescents from middle and high schools and found that more than half of the participants (51.8%) had distorted views of their bodies. Specifically, the researchers found that body image distortion was more common among older adolescents and those who were overweight or obese. This suggests that the way adolescents perceive their bodies may play a crucial role in driving harmful behaviors related to food and weight control, ultimately increasing the risk of eating disorders. The study's cross-sectional design and reliance on self-reported data were also the limitations of this paper, as they may not fully capture the complexities of body image and its long-term impacts (Hyun et al., 2014). Jung and Jun (2022) investigated the relationship between eating disorders, subjective health, and oral health in 54,848 adolescents. This study used data from the Korea Youth Risk Behavior Web-based Survey and found that adolescents with eating disorders tended to report poorer subjective overall health. Surprisingly, these same adolescents reported better oral health compared to those without eating disorders, which could be due to specific behaviors related to eating disorders, such as increased dental care or vomiting, leading to increased awareness of oral symptoms (Jung & Jun, 2022). The findings highlighted the connection between physical and mental health, particularly among adolescents



struggling with eating disorders. The study underscored the need for early intervention and preventive measures targeting physical and psychological well-being. Its cross-sectional design limited the study, making it difficult to establish the subjective nature of health assessments. Lee (2012) explored the issue of weight misperception among non-overweight Korean adolescents using data from the Korea Youth Risk Behavior Web-Based Survey, which included over 180,000 students across three years (2005-2007).

The study found that a significant portion of adolescents who were not overweight perceived themselves as overweight, with 14.9% of boys and 22.2% of girls reporting misperceptions about their weight. This misperception was more common among girls and was linked to harmful dieting behaviors, such as fasting, purging, and using diet pills. This highlights the need for better education about healthy body image and weight perceptions, particularly in schools (Lee, 2012). Limitations included the self-reported nature of weight and behavior data, which could be subject to inaccuracies, and the focus on Korean adolescents, limiting the generalizability of the findings. Lee et al. (2020) examined the relationship between weight misperception and mental health in a large sample of 62,276 adolescents from the 2017 Korea Youth Risk Behavior Survey. The study found that adolescents who overestimated their body weight had higher rates of stress and suicidal ideation compared to those who had an accurate perception of their weight (Lee et al., 2020). Overall, the study emphasized the importance of addressing weight perception in mental health interventions for adolescents, particularly for those who overestimate their weight. Limitations included the cross-sectional nature of the data and the reliance on self-reported behaviors, which may not fully capture the nuances of mental health. S. M. Chae (2010) aimed to understand the stages of change and critical factors influencing weight control behaviors in Korean adolescents. Most of the 435 participants who completed questionnaires and body measurements were in the pre-contemplation (42.1%) or contemplation (43.0%) stages. Precontemplation is when individuals are not yet considering a behavior change, often due to a lack of awareness or perceived need. In contrast, contemplation is when individuals are aware of the issue and think about making a change but have yet to commit to action. Factors such as the perceived benefits of weight control, body shape, and past experiences with weight management increased the likelihood of moving from precontemplation to contemplation.

The findings suggest the importance of weight perception in shaping how adolescents view their bodies and manage weight (S.-M. Chae et al., 2010). However, the study's reliance on self-reported data introduces potential biases (social desirability bias), and the cross-sectional design limits its ability to determine causality in weight control behavior changes. Adding on, E. Jeong (2023) explored the factors contributing to extreme weight control behaviors (EWCB) among non-obese adolescents who mistakenly believe they are overweight. Using data from the Korea Youth Risk Behavior Survey, the analysis focused on 4,286 non-obese high school students, 66.5% of whom were girls. The study emphasizes how misperception of weight can distort body image, prompting unhealthy and unnecessary weight control behaviors (E. Jeong, 2023). Nonetheless, the study is limited by its focus on non-obese adolescents, which may not capture the broader context of weight control behaviors across different BMI categories, and the cross-sectional nature restricts the ability to conclude the long-term impact of these behaviors. Lastly, Shin and Nam (2015) examined weight misperception among Korean adolescents and associated socio-demographic factors using data from 3,321 adolescents aged 12–18 from the Korea Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (2007–2011). The findings showed weight misperception, particularly among underweight girls who overestimated their weight, was associated with inappropriate weight control behaviors. This highlights how distorted weight perceptions can negatively impact body image and lead to harmful practices aimed at controlling weight (Shin & Nam, 2015). However, the study's cross-sectional design limits causal inferences, and the reliance on self-reported weight and height data could lead to inaccuracies in BMI categorization and misperception rates. In summary, the reviewed studies highlight the critical role of body image distortion and weight perception in increasing the risk of eating disorders among Korean adolescents, suggesting that the idealized, thin images portrayed by K-pop idols may further influence these perceptions. Also, the consistent association between weight misperception and disordered eating behaviors underscores the need for early interventions, better education on body image, and more comprehensive approaches to mental health support for adolescents.

## Discussion

The present review examined how Korean cultural influences, such as media, societal expectations, school environments, and weight perception, shape body image. K-culture and social media were found to promote specific beauty ideals that many adolescents feel pressured to conform to (Jeong et al., 2024; Prieler et al., 2021). Psychological factors, such as anxiety and weight misperception, also play a significant role in increasing the risk of eating disorders (S.-M. Chae et al., 2010; J.-S. Choi & Kim, 2017; Y. Choi & Hong, 2023; Hyun et al., 2014; K. Lee, 2012; K. H. Lee et al., 2020). Additionally, societal expectations, particularly in school environments and among adolescents with more educated mothers, were linked to higher levels of body dissatisfaction (H. Chae, 2022; Kim & Kawachi, 2016)). The strong influence of K-culture and social media on body dissatisfaction highlights the need for interventions that promote healthier body perceptions (Merino et al., 2024). Clinically, this research emphasizes the importance of creating programs that address the specific cultural factors affecting adolescents' mental health, as these media-driven pressures play a significant role in shaping body image. Overall, this study adds to the existing literature by reinforcing the need for interventions that promote healthier body perceptions and address the harmful impact of societal expectations on mental well-being. Future research should explore the long-term effects of media exposure, focusing on the impact of K-culture on adolescent body image.

Regarding weight perception, expanding on the current findings, future studies could investigate how weight misperception evolves from adolescence into adulthood and how these distortions impact long-term mental and physical health. In practical applications, health education programs in schools should focus on helping students develop a more realistic understanding of their body weight and the natural diversity of body types. This study lays the groundwork for future work addressing the complex relationship between weight perception and mental well-being, encouraging more targeted interventions promoting body positivity. Lastly, given the significant influence that school environments have on adolescents' body image, future research should focus on the long-term effects of these settings on students' mental health and body perception. More specifically, longitudinal studies should be considered in exploring how factors such as peer influences, academic pressures, and the overall school culture contribute to body image concerns over time. Additionally, further investigation into the effectiveness of school-based programs implementation of targeted anti-bullying policies that address weight-related teasing and promote access to mental health resources could offer a clear understanding of how to create healthier school environments that support students' well-being.

## Conclusion

The influence of South Korean beauty standards on adolescent body image is a growing concern, particularly as K-pop and social media continue to promote unrealistic ideals. Addressing these cultural pressures through interventions that challenge harmful beauty norms is essential for supporting a healthier self-image and reducing the risk of disordered eating among adolescents. By extending the scope of research and implementing critical media education, we can prevent these damaging effects and foster a more favorable environment for adolescents.

## Limitations

The current review has a few limitations. First, most papers included a cross-sectional design, which restricted the establishment of clear connections. Second, the reliance on self-reported data introduced the possibility of inaccuracies, as participants may misreport their body perceptions or behaviors. Third, our review only used one database, which limits access to other studies that may have been included in this review. Lastly, our review had a very small scope and a limited number of papers addressing the topic. Future research should consider several improvements to address these limitations, such as a longitudinal design to determine whether these cultural influences predict the emergence of body image issues, not just an association. Studies should also rely on more objective measures to reduce

the inaccuracies inherent in self-reported data. For example, incorporating clinical assessments, body composition scans, or other standardized tools to measure body image could offer more precise and reliable data. Lastly, future reviews could include other databases in their search.

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