

Body and Gender: Postfeminism and Representation of Girl Groups in K-pop Music Videos

Jiayi Chen^{1,a,*}

¹*Department of Journalism and Communication, Jinan University, Guangdong, 510000, China*

a. 1543841287@qq.com

**corresponding author*

Abstract: As South Korean pop music (K-pop) gains popularity globally, people start to realize the exploitation and gender discrimination undermined in the patriarchal society that girl groups go through. This study aims to examine how exploitation is inflicted on female idols and how it influences fashion trends and the evolution of the representation of girl groups in the K-pop industry through analyzing music videos (MV) and the lyrics of title tracks from different K-pop girl groups from the 3rd generation to the 5th generation with postfeminist lens. The results of the study indicate that K-pop girl groups undergo three stages of transformation in media representation. First, girl groups experience hypersexualization or infantilization by wearing high heels, miniskirts, and school uniforms, in order to satisfy male gazes from male fans. Second, the popularity of girl crush makes girl groups choose boots and leather clothes to indicate girl power, which explores the female fanbase. Third, K-pop producers conceptualize girl groups to satisfy different ideologies, meaning that members of girl groups have to give up authenticity to achieve synchronization and coherence. To conclude, dominated by a patriarchal society, girl groups satisfy the male gaze while empowering sisterhood and questioning heterosexuality with the influence of feminism, which indicates a postfeminist landscape.

Keywords: Postfeminism, K-pop, Girl Group, Media Representation, Body Politics

1. Introduction

To promote economic recovery, the Korean government actively initiated the “strategic promotion of the neoliberal culture industry” during the Kim Young-sam administration [1]. With the promotion of the culture industry, more state revenue has risen to support cultural activities, which gave rise to specialized culture production and even the overseas expansion of Korean culture markets. John Lie has summarized the reasons for the rapid development of South Korea into four factors: cheap labour, land reform, the developmentalist state, and the international environment [2]. The mechanism of “miracle” economic growth was also adapted to the K-pop industry, which exploited idols and trainees heavily. Female idols experienced more exploitation because of gender inequality in South Korea. As girl groups gain popularity and attention globally, the K-pop industry continuously commodifies young female idols to represent different female images with the changing preferences of the audience.

Most of the studies regarding K-pop and female idols have focused on how neoliberalism and Western pop music intertwined to influence the K-pop industry and finally resulted in cultural hybridity; the personality, subjectivity, and sexuality were formulated by American hypersexualization while they were indoctrinated to be decency, docile and innocent which is considered to be a traditional good girl in Korea [3]. What differentiates this study from the previous ones is that more emphasis is put on the transformation of images that girl groups present in front of the audience instead of solely focusing on the socio-economic factors that influence the formation of them. In this respect, this paper aims to study the transformation of representation of girl groups from Generation 2 to Generation 6 by analyzing the music videos including lyrics, performances, clothes, choreography, etc. Scholars have noticed that K-pop culture tried to comprise feminist ideas to cater to the feminism movement. Therefore, postfeminism is applied to be the theoretical foundation of this paper to discuss what efforts girl groups made to be “feminist”, what feminism values they embraced, and what changes have happened to the media representation of girl groups. The significance of this study is to focus on the transformation of representation influenced by feminist movement which not only shows the reflection of consumers’ desire for female and how it changes the K-pop industry, but most importantly, it presents the efforts that girl groups have made to fight against patriarchy society and break the stereotype which considers girl groups as robots without “artistic autonomy and personal will” [4].

2. Literature Review

Scholars also study how the Western audience perceives K-pop female idols when they are “within the entanglements of race and sexuality in America’s popular imagination” to discuss the transnationality and cultural hybridity of K-pop culture [5]. Influenced by America’s pop culture, the K-pop industry highly commercialized young femininity to strategically transform it into “cultural content as national resources” in the process of dehumanization, nationalization, and sexualization [6]. However, the argument that claiming K-pop culture is the imitation of American culture is rebutted by Chuyun Oh, who uses the term “multicultural mutant Koreaness” to describe authenticity “as a fluid contemporary identity”, and claims that the discussion about the true origin of culture is westernized “by the white supremacy” [7]. Besides cultural hybridity, scholars also stressed the relationship between feminism and female idols. “Girl Crush” is a new trend in K-pop culture that coincides with the development of the feminist movement. When it aims to show provocative girl power, scholars question the relationship between “girl crush’s” success and feminism since female idols are still exploited unconsciously by patriarchal society [8]. In conclusion, most of the studies that discuss girl groups in K-pop emphasized the cultural hybridity and trans-nationality, or the sexualization and exploitation that patriarchal society inflicted on girl idols from a feminist perspective. There are few studies; however, notice the changing representation of girl groups in the public coincident with the development of the feminist movement. This transformation of representation matters, for it not only demonstrates people’s changing perceptions of female attractiveness influenced by the feminist movement but also reflects girl idols’ changing perceptions of their bodies.

3. Postfeminism and Body

Postfeminism has become to be debated in the early 1980s which was used to describe the attitudes and behaviors of young women. The definition of postfeminism still remains to be ambivalent. McRobbie argues that postfeminism should be explored through “double entanglement”, and that confirms the “co-existence of neo-conservative values” in the process of liberalization regarding diversity in nationality, sexuality, and kinship relationships [9]. Gill involves media culture in

postfeminism studies and coins the notion of “postfeminist sensibility”, suggesting that postfeminism should be considered as “a critical object” that describes the structural feelings and ideas in female media [10]. Butler summarizes the definitions of postfeminism as “linear, backlash, or sex-positive — are particularly prevalent in public discourse”, and then rebuts these definitions by arguing that feminism is complex and paradoxical not monolithic, and pointing out the ambivalence of postfeminism which rejects feminist activism while declaring its irrelevance[11]. Scholars criticized the language of empowerment and individual freedom of choice in postfeminism and explained how neoliberal and postfeminism aligned to tell females how they were empowered through consumption. In that scenario, the female’s body which receives even more sexualization was also involved in the discussion. Gill also comprised the status quo that sexual practice was normative and commodified a “technology of sexiness” to replace “innocence or virtue” since young women need to perform in heterosexual marketplace, while McRobbie highlighted how females need to embody “famine masquerade” of high heels which ensures the dominance of male when participating in politics or businesses [12-13]. As intersectionality and transnationality intertwined to influence feminism, Riley, Evans and Robson coined the term “postfeminism 2.0” to describe the makeover paradigm that characterizes the expectations on female body and mind [14].

4. Method

Music videos (hereafter MV) in K-pop act to produce visual representations of music and idols’ performances, which enables K-pop to invent visual properties and commodities. In this respect, K-pop girl group MVs are “ a paradox of (re)presentation,” which presents artists and reflects their ambitious components of Korean culture while objectifying female identities and commodifying idealized beauty [15]. In other words, K-pop MVs are reflections of current girl groups’ representations that are popular in K-pop culture. Therefore, this paper will apply textual analysis to analyze media representations of girl groups by referring to K-pop MVs of girl groups’ title tracks. The MVs that will be analyzed are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Basic information of Girl Groups and their title tracks in this study

Girl group	Title track	Debut time	Generation
Hypersexualization			
Sistar	<i>Touch my body</i>	2010	3
AOA	<i>Miniskirt</i>	2012	3
Fiestar	<i>Mirror</i>	2012	3
Infantilization			
TWICE	<i>Cheer up</i>	2015	4
Girl crush			
Red Velvet	<i>Peek-A-Boo</i>	2014	4
(G)I-DLE	<i>Nxde</i>	2018	5
ITZY	<i>Wannabe</i>	2019	5
Conceptualization			
New Jeans	<i>Ditto</i>	2022	6

5. Girl Groups in MV

5.1. “Sexy” and “Cute”: Reflection of Male Gaze

5.1.1. High Heels and Miniskirts: Vengeful Women and Summer Queen

Women are said to connote “to-be-looked-at-ness” for the strong visual and erotic impact encoded in female appearances; hence, women are “simultaneously looked at and displayed” [16]. Girl groups are fabricated by the male gaze which requires girl idols to be voluptuous and mature to satisfy sexual desire. In the third generation of K-pop girl groups, this excessive femininity received even more emphasis to attract male fans as a result of the enlarging market. Besides the normal hypersexualization that directly shows the voluptuous body of females, girl groups always present their femininity and sexuality by applying it to different female images. Two popular trends are “Vengeful Women” by Fiestar and AOA, and “Summer Queen” by Sistar. For instance, the style of “vengeful women” was depicted in *Mirror* by Fiestar in Table 1, which characterized the girl who breaks up with a boy as suffering from heartbrokenness, with dark colors in the MV and strong beats in the music. Members in girl groups are dressed in dark miniskirts and high heels to emphasize their young, slim, and hot bodies, singing “The reflection in the mirror, acting like a crazy person...save me save me...” which implies male’s understanding of women in love that are likely to indulge in heterosexual romantic love. On the contrary, the “summer queen” is a positive and healthy girl who is dressed in tank tops and shorts with high heels to display their long legs. In Table 1, *Touch My Body* by Sistar expresses their happiness through hip twist dance which highlights their slim and hot bodies. Bright colors and objects with summer elements, such as ice cream, swimming pool or buoys, enable them to exhibit healthy sexual attraction. However, the song is still limited in expressing heterosexual love, ignoring female subjectivity.

5.1.2. Sneakers and School Uniforms: Innocent and Vigorous Girl

Hypersexualization attracted large groups of fans to K-pop culture, but some erotic performances cannot be displayed on TV because of censorship, which also stigmatized the K-pop industry. What’s worse, girl idols who are sexualized incurred sexual harassment in daily life, which brings huge mental damage to girl groups. On another scale, girl industries in Korea began to “accelerate the stylization of girls’ everyday lives” to construct a desirable girl image that is docile and neat [6]. School uniforms catch the market by advertising how they can bring young girls attractive bodies as girl idols with miniskirts and white knee-high socks to highlight sexual and positive innocence [17]. In *Cheer up* mentioned in Table 1, some members of TWICE wear sneakers, school uniforms or t-shirts and short pants with long hairstyles and sweet smiles, indicating the childlike appearance of young pretty girls. Infantilization took place of hypersexualization by emphasizing youth and innocence to depict a docile, tidy, and vigorous girl image, which is regarded as a “good girl” in patriarchal society.

5.2. Girl Crush: Awakening of Feminism

5.2.1. Boots and Leathered Clothes: Confident and Aggressive Women

The feminism movement forced companies to attach more importance to balancing feminism ideas with conservative narratives about femininity. With the enlargement of female fanbases concerned with feminism, girl groups began to choose “girl crush” instead of hypersexualization, aiming to cater to more female fans. The girl crush concept embodies a deep fondness and connection with a woman, devoid of any romantic or sexual attraction, and signifies an exceptionally close female bond that

goes beyond typical friendship, characterized by an exceptionally high degree of emotional closeness [18]. In *Wannabe* mentioned in Table 1, members of ITZY were dressed in black leather clothes and boots to epitomize their girl power and coolness instead of high heels or package hip skirts, which show sexual attractiveness. The lyric was no longer limited to heterosexual love but shifted to express girls' attitudes to break stereotypes: "Whatever I be, it's up to me, so please, I do what I wanna", which encouraged young girls to be "bad girls" who rebel against conservative norms to achieve their dreams. The choreography transformed the focus from showing women's young and soft bodies to highlighting girls' infinite power via intense dance, aiming to show how women are able to conquer difficulties with confidence and power.

5.2.2. "Barbie" and "witch": De-sexualization and Against Male Gaze

Another way to show girl power is to de-stigmatize the concept of "witch," who was considered to be evil in the past, and de-sexualize "Barbie" who is considered to be perfect in the male gaze. In ancient times, witches were regarded as evil spirits, and as a result, women who looked different or did wrongdoings were condemned to be with them and suffered from killing, torturing, and abuse. However, with the development of feminism, feminists de-stigmatized "witch" to end this gender-based violence. *Peek-A-Boo*, mentioned in Table 1, tells a story about five witches (Red Velvet) who killed a delivery man at midnight and exhibited his T-shirt in the cabinet. MV is in dark and red colors with specific elements, such as diamonds, the moon, and red costumes, which represent female power, authority, violence, and terror. Ironically, the tragedy of this delivery man was based on his gender, which is exactly reflected in reality—females are suffering from gender-based violence and male gaze. The de-sexualization of Barbie is a welcoming concept applied by many girl groups. (G)I-DLE mentioned in Table 1, for example, satire how females were forced to be "perfect" like Barbie dolls via representing a doll in the cabinet, singing "Yes, I'm nude" to refuse the male gaze that objectifies females in patriarchal society. In conclusion, girl crush emphasizes girl power and the rebellion against male gaze that it inflicts on young girls in patriarchal society. However, this revolt against patriarchy is not complete. As commodities in patriarchal society, they are still required to be slim and docile as idols, which makes girl crushes lose their original value.

5.3. Conceptualized and Objectified Girl Group

Highly commercialized means girl groups have little artistic autonomy. Even though K-pop is always criticized for a lack of authenticity, its eye-catching visual design and beautiful girl idols still attract increasing numbers of fans. Visual design and idol image construction are essential in K-pop culture within the context of changing social trends and illegal downloading of music, which result in companies wanting attention on the performances and idols that can build a steady fanbase [19]. Moreover, with the development of female fan communities, fans are no longer satisfied by direct erotic desire but enjoy complex, artistic and aesthetic works. Hence, some girl groups from the 4th generation transformed to connote certain ideological concepts, such as Red Velvet who is famous for their "witch" representations in MVs. Girl crush can be regarded as a concept that is welcomed by most girl groups in general, but girl groups still express differentiation through nuance in their concept construction, centered on the idea of exhibiting girl power. NewJeans can be a girl group that broke the deadlock; they focus on the "emotional growth of women themselves during their teenage years" instead of repeatedly expressing "I am the queen" or "Be yourself" [20]. In *Ditto*, members of NewJeans were dressed in school uniforms with long straight hairstyles, playing and laughing in the school. The heroine (MV did not tell her identity, but some fans guess she represents NewJeans's fans who watch those girls in front of the screen to live with them) held the camera and recorded her

life with NewJeans who was always by her side and be her friends. This “cute girl next door” image is designed for NewJeans and then purchased by the fans who are moved by this concept.

However, girl groups who are criticized for having little autonomy begin to highlight their free will. Plus, people are tired of idols without authenticity and eager to know the “real” side of them, which encourages idols to break stereotypes and express their true selves. Jennie from BlackPink, for example, is famous for her attitude that wants to break the stereotype of K-pop idols who are regarded as losing autonomy and authenticity via expressing themselves on social media and stages. Hence girl groups try to express themselves by designing their own performances.

6. Conclusion

Girl groups experience the transformation from hypersexualization and infantilization to girl crush, with continuous objectification in that process. Feminism is a stimulus that enfranchised girl groups from being completely docile, submissive, and uncomfortably voluptuous, but its limited power still cannot give back full autonomy to girl groups. However, girl groups still try to fight against the forcing power of patriarchy by eliminating limitations for less famous girl groups and calling for attention from females in the K-pop industry. This study only focuses on how girl groups themselves represent different media images, ignoring other powers that deal with the patriarchal burden on girl groups and how those powers help to reframe the representation of girl groups. For example, fandom, which needs to be discussed in future studies, is also a strong power in K-pop that can influence the existence of girl groups, for they can reframe the discussion with discursive practice.

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