

A Visual Analysis of the Female Gaze in Korean Pop Culture

Linyu Yang^{1,a,*}

¹College of Letter and Science, University of California, Davis, 1 Shields Ave, Davis, United States of America

a. ylyyang@ucdavis.edu

*corresponding author

Abstract: This paper uses image analysis to better investigate the images under the female gaze and uses current literature to show the importance, history, and influence of the female gaze. Through research and analysis, it is found that the male images under the female gaze in K-pop are very diverse and do not generate some stereotypes like the female images under the male gaze. The female images under the female gaze do not expose private parts and emphasize the body's curves but express the female's power. Furthermore, due to the increasing number of female K-pop fans, the female gaze is becoming increasingly important in the Korean market, as part of the consumerism to attract women to buy goods. Female perspectives are highly inclusive and pay attention to self-expression, so society needs more female gaze to improve the diversity of social aesthetics and reduce gender bias.

Keywords: Female Gaze, K-Pop, Social Aesthetics

1. Introduction

The phrase "Female Gaze" comes from the *Visual Pleasure and the Narrative Cinema* written by Laura Mulvey in 1975 [1]. In contrast to the well-known "Male Gaze", according to Daniel and Rod, the female gaze is "the ways in which women and girls look at other females, at males, and at things in the world" [2]. The female gaze also focuses on the visual activism of expectation, preference, desire, sex, logic, identification, behavior, and so on. While the male gaze, which shows the male's desire aspect, has dominated the field of film for a long time, the female gaze has been neglected and rarely discussed. Most research discusses the male gaze's advantages and disadvantages while ignoring the female gaze's role in today's market and stage. As Ayala said, "In only seeing the male perspective, we completely forget and ignore the female one, which then leads to a lack of understanding and appreciation for the female perspective" [3]. It is important to note that the female gaze here is not designed to create a narrow perspective that is completely opposite to the male gaze but to introduce more diverse conversations and establish an equal perspective [4].

The rise of Korean-pop culture has become increasingly popular worldwide with many female fans, which introduces the female gaze to the stage of social aesthetics and brings more female perspectives to the public. As the representative of the female gaze, K-pop can provide more female views. Through the effect of K-pop and social media, the female gaze has recently produced more and more influences on and changes in social aesthetics and the advertising economy.

Celebrities' costumes, make-up, and appearance in K-pop products, such as posters and advertisements, can all reflect the influence of the female gaze. This paper discusses the images of

male and female pop stars under the K-pop female gaze and why corresponding entertainment companies should build such public images. In addition, this paper also studies the origin and influence of *kkonminam* and "Girl Crush" under the female gaze in K-pop, focusing on album posters and pictures of male and female stars made by their fans, respectively. Combined with literature and reference materials, this paper summarizes the influence of the female gaze on social aesthetics and its potential influence on the future.

Through the analysis of framing, costume, color, make-up, and time, this paper shows that male images have multiple styles, including youthful, solid, and delicate styles, which reflect the high tolerance of the female gaze. The female images show the female's power through female stars' cool costumes and the shapes of their bodies, which indicates that aesthetic appreciation of the female gaze is inclusive and diversified in style and focuses on self-expression. The female gaze could flourish and develop the definition of both men's and women's identities, allowing diversity in social aesthetics.

2. Male and Female Images in K-pop

2.1. Male Images in K-pop



Figure 1: BTS.

(Photo Credit: https://ibighit.com/bts/eng/discography/detail/love_yourself-answer.html)

BTS is a K-pop boy group with a huge number of fans around the world. According to the data provided by Tizzard "In terms of gender, a whopping 86.34 percent (348,377) identified as female, while only 11.3 percent were male" [5]. As a K-pop group with a large number of female fans worldwide, BTS can well reflect the elements of the female gaze in K-pop. Members in BTS are different from the stereotypes of men who are obviously muscular or aggressive. The male image in K-pop is refined, clean, and can vary in style. Figure 1 is an album poster. A professional photographer took this photo, so the commercial use intention is included in the album sold. Thus, it has a certain purpose of attracting the audience (mainly female). In order to stimulate the desire of female fans to buy the album, the company also carefully designed and curated the content in the photos.

First, from the framing aspect of Figure 1, the center of the image is seven members of BTS. They sit next to each other and clearly show their full faces. The picture's background is a blue canvas, reflecting that they were shot in the studio. Therefore, the picture pays more attention to the image of the subject. The composition centered on the subject emphasizes that the main characters of the picture are the members of BTS, allowing the audience to look better at the subject's appearance. In addition, the BTS members on the screen also reflect the elements that attract female audiences, including their clothing, bodies, expressions, and gestures. They all wear bright-colored shirts and sneakers on this poster. The appearance reflects a youthful and energetic image of college students, which indicates that some women prefer images with a youthful temperament. Each person in the picture is also dyed with bright light hair colors such as purple and red, which are different from the common primary hair color, reflecting the high tolerance of the female gaze for hair color selection. Members sit on public exercise equipment, which is also an element of youth and strength. Their eyes are all staring at the camera without smiling, creating a sense of atmosphere that the audience is being watched and focused on, which can improve the connection between the subject and the audience to generate better attraction. This picture only shows one style of K-pop poster. The K-pop groups in other posters are also variable. In addition to the school style, they can also shoot posters with black swans, vampires, street kids, and other themes. Thus, these posters of K-pop male groups can reflect the high inclusiveness of the female gaze. Under the female gaze, men are not only powerful and strong but also gentle, naughty, mature, and emotional. In addition to make-up, styling can also be rich and varied. In conclusion, the female gaze is a more inclusive perspective for male images.

Apart from the diversity of the female aesthetic reflected in the official posters, the fan-shot images are even more revealing. Under the female gaze, men do not have to have a full set of abs or be very forceful. The image of the male gaze can also have many female characteristics, such as tenderness, vulnerability, and sensibility. For example, two photos taken by female fans Nuna V and kibbyzzO at BTS concerts are representative [6,7]. Since the two pictures were taken by female fans, they can represent more aspects of the real female gaze. These pictures show the female gaze's preference for more styles of Korean idols and their broad tolerance for male images. Specifically, in Nuna V's picture, the member is thin, wearing women's shirts, and his hair is light blue [6]. The image was post-processed to make the skin tone of the figure white and the lips red, which creates a picture of an elf. This image is different from the stereotype of a man. For example, a man must be strong and reliable. On the other hand, the picture shows a vulnerable aspect of a man, which can also appeal to female viewers and stimulate their desire for protection. Thus, under the female gaze, the male images sometimes show feminine elements and styles that combine femininity and masculinity together to create a gender-ambiguous image.

However, the photo by kibbyzzO reflects another preference of female fans [7]. The man character Jungkook in the picture sits on the floor and does not look at the camera. The image does not show the subject's full face, but the side of his face shows a distinct jawline. He wears short sleeves that show his muscular arms and ripped jeans that show his leg muscles. From such images, it can be inferred that some female fans also like strong images, which could provide 'them a feeling that they are protected.

The strong contrast between these two styles reflects the diverse styles of men under the female gaze. Their images do not necessarily have to be sexually attractive to women; for example, they can also wear female clothes and heavy make-up. Therefore, the female gaze allows image diversity, encouraging more people to experience different styles they like. Therefore, the female gaze can inspire and encourage people of different genders to express themselves more authentically.

2.2. Female Images in K-pop



Figure 2: ITZY.

(Photo Credit: <https://itzy-ryujin.blogspot.com/2019/03/190306-itzy-hq-pictorials-for-itz-different-album.html>)

The female gaze not only expresses the desire and preference for the male image but also forms some requirements for the female image. Therefore, in addition to analyzing male images in K-pop to explain the female gaze, female images are also an indispensable part of the analysis of the female gaze. The female images in K-pop are generally aggressive, firm, and powerful. They express women's power and their desire to break the norm of being delicate females. Figure 2 is a poster of a K-pop female group – ITZY. This group also has more female fans. Koreaboo mentioned that “ITZY had a slight majority female fan base in album sales, with 57.5% female and 42.5% male”, so it can also reflect the female image under the female gaze [8]. The faces of the girls in the pictures are fabulous and they do not smile, showing an aggressive atmosphere. They confidently offer different looks, one with a bun, one with a high ponytail, one with curly hair, one with short hair, and one with straight hair and a hat. Five people show different fashion models of women who are different from the images under the male gaze which emphasize breasts, legs, and body curves. These girls are wearing bike-style clothes, reflecting the powerful side of women. The reason why such images attract a large number of female fans is that they can arouse the resonance of female fans. For example, they can choose handsome clothing styles and show women's confident and independent side. By expressing the powerful and hard side of women, female fans would believe that they have the ability to deal with difficulties and even though they do not have the same physical power as men, they have their own power to face problems, life, and work. As a result, the K-pop girl group reflects the female gaze's characteristic of expressing women themselves and showing power.

Although the official poster is designed to appeal to female fans through years of experience in fan preferences, the photos taken by fans and their comments can better reflect the images under the female gaze in K-pop. For instance, a picture taken by a female fan at a concert by the Korean girl

group, Twice, shows that the team members are muscular and their gestures express a sense of power [9]. They also wear sexy clothes, and their confident expressions and dance moves encourage fans to express themselves with equal confidence. In response to the picture, some female netizens commented that "they can show power and sex appeal at the same time" and "confident women are the most beautiful" [9]. Therefore, it can be seen that women can freely express their various images, self-confidence, and strength under the female gaze.

2.3. Male Image in Korean Cosmetic Advertisement

As the female gaze also impacts the aesthetics of the market and society, many cosmetics companies also begin to look for male artists to represent their products. This phenomenon and the advertising pictures also prove the influence of the female gaze on the aesthetics of society. For instance, a facial mask advertisement of the Korean make-up brand Innisfree hired Wanna One, a Korean boy band to represent their products [10]. Their fans are predominantly female, and cosmetics buyers are also mostly female, so cosmetics companies can better attract female consumers through the popularity of the male band. In the picture, the boys hold the mask in their hands and apply it to their faces. Their faces are very white and clean, which shows the effect of the product is perfect. In addition to attracting women to consume such products, such advertisements also show that men can use cosmetic products. Thus, by using male images in cosmetic advertisements, the company is able to introduce more male customs effectively. The advertisement also suggests that men will be more attractive if they take care of their skin and look the same as the male images in the pictures. Therefore, the female gaze sends a message that most females prefer a tidy and clean appearance.

3. K-Pop Related Images and Influence of Female Gaze on Social Aesthetics

3.1. The Emergence of *Kkotminam* under Female Gaze and its Influence on Commodity and Global Aesthetics

In K-pop Culture, most of the images of male groups that appeal to female audiences are called *kkotminam*, meaning a man who is beautiful like a flower. Although the word also describes a good-looking or handsome man, it includes the meaning of beauty, which is normally used to describe a female. The word *kkotminam* well reflects the aspect of male beauty under the female gaze. The *kkotminam* image usually has soft and delicate features, and male celebrities can also use so-called "feminine" products, such as lip glaze, colored eye shadow, and curling iron. Thus, the K-pop culture introduces "soft" masculinity and expands the definition of the "attractive male image". The standard of masculine beauty has a long history in Asia. During Korea's Silla Dynasty, there was a trained group of pretty young boys called *hwarang* (literally "flower boys"), who were the warriors that protected the country and they "ported crimson eye shadows, powdered faces, and slicked back hair – as a spiritual practice " [11]. Therefore, the power of beauty is indispensable in Korean culture. This pursuit of beauty is not only for women but also for men.

Kkotminam's male image has always been unpopular with male groups, who think such men are too feminine and appear weak and delicate. This is also a kind of social prejudice, while the female gaze can make masculinity take a diverse form in a more inclusive definition. Under the female gaze, a man can simultaneously possess a somewhat "feminine" appearance and some qualities that are usually considered "masculine", such as strength and sanity. In addition, the male under the female gaze can also show their vulnerable aspects and emotional feelings. Since the female gaze is the interpretation of female desire, Ayala mentioned that the above preference for male image and quality reflects that "these female desires include wanting to make the audience know how women really feel to leveling the playing field on every aspect of life between men and women" [3]. As a

result, rather than objectifying men, the female gaze expresses more aspects of self-expression, which also explains *kkotminam*'s varied shapes and themes. These features satisfy the female fantasy and better explain the complexity and diversity of female characteristics.

Due to the rise and development of feminism, female aesthetics has gradually become important in public aesthetics. According to Mayliangkay, the 1997 Asian financial crisis also had a big impact on the masculine image of macho men. Since female products are mostly sold by using female images in advertisements, in order to represent female aesthetics, some companies begin to create *kkotminam* images to attract female consumers and create products that are popular with females [12]. Therefore, through the financial crisis, the handsome male images show their importance in social aesthetics and their positive impact on the economy.

As women's consumption power gradually increases, more and more companies need to take women's aesthetics into account to promote and sell products. Korean entertainment company creates different styles of boy bands that are versatile and fit the image of *kkotminam*. Such groups attract a large number of female fans and can make a profit by selling albums, posters, and related merchandise. Some cosmetics brands use male celebrities as endorsers, which not only encourages female fans to buy products but also gives men more choice in cosmetics. Because most cosmetic products are endorsed by women, men think that cosmetics belong to women's products. A male endorsement of a product can help to weaken this perception and encourage men to start consuming such products. In addition, the trend of making more male-oriented advertisement gradually forms a new standard of social aesthetics. Li stated that the “‘Korean Wave’ has influenced Chinese consumers for a long time, even challenging people’s tastes and aesthetics across boundaries” [13].

In recent years, *kkotminam* has been gradually embraced by European and American culture and has further influenced the global aesthetics. The recent global popularity of the K-pop group BTS is a good example of this trend. The popular K-pop culture is also being seen by the world. It breaks the popular belief that all *kkotminams* are weak because such a combination is not only about beauty and appearance but also about excellent musical works and great qualities behind the stage such as hard work, courage, and perseverance. What’s more, a good example of female gaze’s influence in the United States is the singer Harry Styles. In Kallas’ article, she mentioned that “he started changing the way he talked and expressed himself, wearing nail polish and ‘feminine’ clothing, being more experimental in his songs, and speaking up for what he believes in” [14]. Therefore, the female gaze expresses that people can try any styles they want and no one could define their personality but themselves. On contrary, the male gaze brings too many objected definitions for women, which may simplify the social aesthetics and even reduce the confidence of females. Therefore, it is necessary to see from a different perspective and explore more about females. In this way, the influence of the female gaze will also make both male and female images more diversified and liberal.

3.2. The Emergence of “Girl Crush” under Female Gaze and its Influence on Commodity and Global Aesthetics

In recent years, due to the influence of the female gaze, more and more "Girl Crush" concept groups begin to be popular with the public. The "Girl Crush" concept reflects the style of a Korean girl group. Unlike previous attempts to cater to the male gaze, "Girl Crush" does not emphasize sex appeal and cuteness but embodies female power. “Girl Crush” groups may wear “feminine” clothing such as short skirts, shorts, and suspenders, but these elements do not intentionally emphasize breasts or curves. They tend to use the images of female agents and soldiers. They wear heavy makeup, emphasizing and amplifying women’s characteristics.

The dance and music of these “Girl Crush” groups are also very powerful. The reason why such female groups are popular among female bands is that they break the constraint of the male gaze on

female image and style. Through such images, women can boldly express and create their own images, and also prove the importance of female power to the public.

This “Girl Crush” style also enriches the products on the market. Women's clothing and makeup products have been designed with more diversity. Female characters can be cute, sexy, hot, and mature. The emergence of this style promotes the female fashion culture and affects the economic development, because women can better show themselves and create their favorite images by consuming these products. Furthermore, the aesthetics of “Girl Crush” generated by the female gaze emphasizes female power, which proves that women want to break the stereotype of femininity. The rise of the influence of “Girl Crush” not only helps the development of feminism but also makes the public aesthetic more diverse and inclusive.

4. Conclusion

Through the analysis of the images of male and female stars in K-pop culture, it can be concluded that the female gaze is more inclusive and encourages diversity and self-expression. Male figures can be strong and emotional at the same time. Under the female gaze, women express their power, attractiveness, and confidence, which reflect their desire to show female strength and break the prejudice of women. This research focuses on Korean Pop culture. Although K-pop culture is very popular with women, it cannot fully represent the female gaze as a whole. Therefore, it is necessary to study more cases and compare the perspectives of different female groups to have a more comprehensive understanding of the female gaze.

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