

Bondage of Standard: Interaction Between K-pop Culture and Male Gaze

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Abstract: In the context of contemporary social entertainment prosperity, Korean pop culture, known as K-pop, subtly and gradually influences young people and the world due to its globalization and attraction to a large number of young viewers. However, because of the restrictions of artistic expression in the past, which created a patriarchal social system, and the glutton of pursuing fans finance, the male gaze is still present in typical manifestations of Korean entertainment culture such as music videos, song lyrics, and television dramas, and has an undetectable effect on women's self-awareness and perception of beauty standard. Contacting interviews and going through case studies, the paper analyzes the embodiment of the male gaze in Korean popular culture and its influence on women and concludes that established under aesthetic hegemony and following the male gaze, K-pop culture gradually undermined women's self-awareness and conclusion that their pursuit of diverse beauty due to its popularity and expansion.

Keywords: K-pop, male gaze, women, beauty standard

1. Introduction

The male gaze is the act of depicting women in visual arts and literature from the perspective of male heterosexuals, objectifying and sexualizing women to achieve an idealized view of women in the eyes of men and broadening this idealization to include all females to please a heterosexual male audience. The male gaze is a phenomenon that has been around for centuries. Because men's physical characteristics and power positions are historically stronger than women's, men have long played the role of "conquerors" in history. Thanks to this overwhelming "conquest", men can rightfully place women in a "vassal" position, demanding that women become objects that delight their senses.

Due to the later development of feminism in Asian society, men in East Asia have been in the position of "superior" and higher social status for a longer time; The dramatic dominance of men is more acute in East Asian societies, so the analysis of the East Asian male gaze is of great significance for the discussion of feminism.

Due to geographical factors, the countries of East Asia share the basic characteristics of a patriarchal society. In a patriarchal society, women are objectified by society and become vassals of men. For men, vassals need to be easily controlled. Therefore, beauty for men is weak, fragile and has no symbol of resistance; young age also plays a "controllable" role in this standard. Second, as

vassals, women are required to be able to bring superiority to men. In the era when women's consciousness is not awakened, women have no perception of unfair treatment and objectification—because this seems to be a long-standing social contract, and at the same time, this social contract complements the class concept of the old society, and women believe that because men are the dominant leaders of society, in order to obtain power, status and excellent quality of life, it is necessary to please men, and as women, the act of flattering men is to make themselves cater to the aesthetics under the male gaze, so as to make them happy. Men take pleasure in conquering and controlling the other sex, so the image of a fragile, thin woman is more in keeping with male preferences for women, the source of East Asian aesthetic standards: pale, slender, and youthful.

Today, with great achievements in the development of gender equality issues, the male gaze still exists in media, art, and literature. It should be noted that in today's vibrant media industry, popular culture has a profound impact on people. As more and more advertisements, posters, and films feature women in bikinis and elaborate make-up, it is natural to assume that this is a sign of female sensuality or that this is the only way female characters can be represented. This is what is called the sexualization of women when the woman's value is derived solely from her sexual attractiveness or behavior and not from any intrinsic beauty. Objectification and sexualization are somehow intertwined. Women who are often sexualized are also objects of objectification. To be objectified means to treat a person as an object without any thought or feeling of one's own. This type of social phenomenon continues in East Asia today.

The spread of this underlying standard on the internet is aggressive and destructive to women's sense of self. Young women unconsciously use these frameworks to constrain themselves in this environment. Their subconscious whispered to them: "To be white, to be thin, to be beautiful." This is the standard of being a "good woman". Moreover, the K-pop culture based on this aesthetic hegemony is also constantly providing new markets for men's gaze and strengthening the requirements for women's appearance.

Since Korean pop culture is a popular culture with a large degree of internationalization, a large audience of teenagers, and a greater impact on gender consciousness, it is helpful to explore the phenomenon of the male gaze in popular culture as an example, which is helpful for women to realize self-awareness, promote gender equality movement and "liberate" aesthetic standards.

Defining "beauty" should not be a conclusion since it is an individual right. The rise of feminism has led many women to wake up to the idea that dressing up is not about pleasing others but about being self. This is accurate, however, because the current beauty standards were created under the gaze of men. This familiar standard of beauty is not true beauty. To pursue the same aesthetic is not to please oneself but to heighten the male gaze and thus to fall into such a standard. Considering the influence of K-pop, is it worthwhile to learn how the male gaze represents K-pop and its influences? Through a detailed analysis of the male gaze in K-pop culture, the author hopes to gain a deeper understanding of women's self-awareness, female awakening, and aesthetic standards under the male gaze, as well as to reflect on gender awareness in the emerging K-pop culture industry.

2. Literature Review

Studies and extensive data on the phenomenon of the male gaze in K-pop culture and its effects on women are less. This is remarkable for two reasons: first, K-pop is a new type of popular culture that has developed in recent years, which is different from the male gaze shown in traditional films, art, and literature; second, the influence of pre-20th-century Korean culture on a global scale is very limited. It is important to note, however, that the Korean government strongly supports the growth of the idol industry to promote economic development. A report by Iga Permatasari notes that over the past decade [1], global pop culture has focused on South Korea. The "Hallyu", or "K-pop," began to become South Korea's public diplomacy to promote Korean culture. As a tool of public diplomacy,

Hallyu not only controls the leadership of the South Korean government but also encourages private participation in the promotion of Korean culture.

According to academic definition, the male gaze has its roots in works of art and literature. Loreck, from Monash University, sees the male gaze as the act of portraying women and reality from the perspective of a heterosexual male, objectifying female sexuality to please a heterosexual male audience [2]. That is, from a masculine and heterosexual point of view, women are represented or reproduced as sexual objects to satisfy the pleasure of heterosexual male viewers.

Current studies analyzed the situation of female idols and explored the strict appearance requirements of female idols in the industry. In 2022, scholar Jonas noted the stricter aesthetic requirements and unfair treatment faced by female idols in the patriarchal society of South Korea [3]. Research from Laurie Venters and Alexander Rothenberg on Korean idols points to the invisible control of women by this “artificial beauty”: Strict standards of beauty, in turn, contribute to the imposition of highly restrictive somatic identities, offering idols little or no room for actress experimentation [4]. The increased dependence, coupled with the forced employment of clumsy characters, amounts to an effective reduction in autonomy, reinforcing the idea that K-pop is a place of patriarchal discipline.

Meanwhile, some studies further focused on the popularity of Korean celebrities, which significantly promoted the development of the Korean cosmetic surgery industry. Aesthetic standards are not only binding on industry practitioners; they are spreading among female audiences. In the article, Chau Nguyen reveals the fact that Korean society is highly competitive, and similarly, Koreans strictly follow this “competition” in appearance. Once they notice a flaw in their appearance, they become anxious. This anxiety about appearance has fueled a boom in the South Korean cosmetic surgery industry [5]. Wang’s 2015 study on the Korean cosmetic industry noted that Korean pop culture and celebrities have largely encouraged the continued expansion and growth of the Korean cosmetic industry [6].

For specific music videos and lyrics, scholars Chang and Ambara Andanawari Muhammad have explored the question of the existence of the male gaze and the images displayed by Korean idols in their respective studies [7]. Through detailed analysis of the music videos and lyrics, they all agree that Korean pop culture is moving in a positive direction, breaking down gender biases and aesthetic standards.

However, even if it is necessary to acknowledge the value of the artwork itself, scholar Joanna Elfving-Hwang delves into the relationship between idols and fans in K-pop [8]. The social relationship between fans and idols has laid a solid foundation for the development of the idol economy and the transmission of cultural content that idols want to express. Previous studies have wrongly focused on the work itself, ignoring that in iconoclastic cultures, the icon is the greatest representative of the values transmitted.

Dialectically, Kwon’s study from the perspective of male idols delves into the manifestation of gender diversity in Korean pop culture and the embodiment of “soft masculinity” [9]. Focusing on the case of male idols provides an alternative perspective on the issues of this study, as well as a more comprehensive view of Korean pop culture.

More starkly, in an experimental study by Karsay and Matthes, young women watched either a pop music video with high levels of sexual objectification or a pop music video with low levels of sexual objectification [10]. Women’s self-objectification and subsequent media selection behavior were measured. It was shown that exposure to objectified media increases self-objectification, which in turn increases the preference for materialized media content.

Based on the basis of previous literature on the male gaze in K-pop, this paper analyzes in detail the phenomenon of male gaze constructing binding aesthetic standards and points out that this construction subtly affects women’s anxiety and restrictive behavior about their appearance and

makes up for how it affects the aesthetic standards of female fans themselves in the social relationship built by fans and idols, making them gradually approach the male gaze.

3. K-pop and the Male Gaze

3.1. Korean Cultural Background

Confucianism is a belief system founded by Confucius in the 5th century BC that focuses on the importance of personal ethics and morality. Although it originated in China, Confucianism also influenced many countries around China as Confucius spread his teachings and gained many followers. Korea was one of the countries that was greatly influenced by Confucianism in China. 1392 saw the beginning of the Joseon dynasty when the rulers stopped supporting Buddhism and began to adopt Neo-Confucianism as the ruling ideology [11]. This was the Confucianism of China from the Song Dynasty to the Ming Dynasty, which drew on some of the ideas of Taoism and Buddhism. The conservative central philosophy and values of Confucianism dwelt in the social structure and attitudes of Korea from 1392 to 1910. Women were influenced by a patriarchal and Confucian-based society during this period. Women were expected to follow their fathers until they were married, to be a housewife after marriage and to follow their husbands' orders, and to follow the eldest son if the husband died. Women are expected to be of good character, well-spoken, modest, and diligent in needlework. This is known in Confucian culture as the three obediences and four virtues. Not only that but women in the Joseon Dynasty were bound to divorce their husbands even if they wanted to. A woman who disobeyed her in-laws did not give birth to a male heir, committed adultery, spoke excessively and so forth were all grounds for a man to divorce a woman. Even the above-mentioned behavior was considered a woman's sin at that time [12]. Therefore, the Confucian culture that flowed into Korea was an important factor that strengthened the patriarchal society in Korea. It can be seen that women in Confucian culture were considered subordinate to men and had to live in deference to men from birth to death.

3.2. The Genesis of the Male Gaze in K-pop Culture

The influence of the male gaze in popular culture is subtle and severe. The idol community has a large number of young viewers and fans, with women making up the majority, but male fans still cover a non-negligible portion. High-profile female groups Black Pink, Red Velvet and TWICE have 38 per cent, 37 per cent and 59 per cent of male fans, respectively, according to the statistics. According to the traditional male aesthetic, a beautiful woman is sexy, cute or pure. In addition to pandering to an existing male fan base, this cemented aesthetic standard first influenced idol culture and the creation of their artwork; In other words, the development of Korean popular culture did not escape the shackles of the male gaze in the first place. Second, this aesthetic standard has been around for centuries, so it must have had a profound effect - women still unconsciously acquiesce in its existence. For female fans, the focus on the idol community subtly and indirectly influenced women's sense of self and attitudes towards aesthetic standards. When a person focuses on another individual, i.e., likes an idol, it generally represents her or his affirmation of the idol's appearance and other characteristics. Moreover, when artists are on display, they are usually packaged and dressed more perfectly than the average person. This perfection makes fans subconsciously want to be better than the idol, but there is a catch- aesthetic standard in the female idol's perfect qualities under the male gaze. This invisible control of consciousness and thought is a consequence and further helper of the male gaze — a vicious circle that drags women into the mire.

According to the survey statistics, young female fans of girl groups make up a large proportion of the population compared to men, and second; female fans have more spending power than their male counterparts. As a result, female fans' attention to idol groups is continuous and stable. Then in the

process of focusing on female idols, female fans value features such as figure, appearance and dance prowess. In order to preserve and increase the economic base of fans, entertainment companies continue to “transform” female idols in order to cater to this fan aesthetic standard, greatly compressing their free growth space. Moreover, this artificial beauty, in turn, influenced female fans who followed the artwork of the idol group. When they see their idols “trying” to become whiter, slimmer, and better-looking facial features, they subconsciously think that this is right – this recognition stems from their recognition of the idol itself and the glamorous appearance created by idol culture – and pursue a similar direction.

This influence is not limited to the fan group; due to the influence of idol culture, the consciousness of the entire female group is harshly imposed by aesthetic hegemony, especially young women - because their values have not yet been fully defined and are in a stage that is easy to control. Because one of the characteristics of the idol group is “beautiful and outstanding physical characteristics”, most people will subconsciously affirm this definition - they first acquiesce to the existence of “beauty” and then let their aesthetics conform to the beauty created by this authority. Then, after the public began to identify with the values related to “beauty” spread by the idol group, even if different views still existed, it was easy to be domesticated by the general environment and the mainstream. As a result, the aesthetic standards represented by idol cultures, such as white skin, big eyes and slender bodies, evolved into a kind of hegemonism, an extreme definition of “female beauty”, arbitrarily answering the question “What is beauty”. Young women who have not thought hard about this issue are blindly pushed into the frame, and when they feel they do not fit in with the mainstream, they panic – a source of “appearance anxiety.” This panic also coincides with the male gaze’s path, so female panic continues to nourish the male gaze’s flourishing - and the male gaze’s audience becomes the biggest beneficiary.

The effect of the male gaze on women’s social status and gender equality issues was negative. The problem with pop culture’s pandering to the male gaze is affirming the spread of such deformed aesthetic standards and values. In the information age, the huge network of information has a great impact on the subconscious mind, so this transmission even evolves into a kind of compulsion. Women gradually lose the ability to resist in such an environment, at the same time becoming consumers of the male gaze; that is, they begin to accept the standards under the male aesthetic hegemony and consider it “beautiful” they need to pursue this beauty; Secondly, patriarchal ideas have not completely dissipated, men still occupy more social dominance today, catering to male “beauty”, making women aware that it is a convenience, even if they need to dedicate themselves - this will be a disaster because ideas are the basis of progress if women cannot realize the existence of this male gaze and the control of this aesthetic standard on them, they will not issue any criticism and questioning, because they think it is normal.

4. K-pop Girl Groups and Male Gaze

Korean female idol groups that are sexy, cute, and innocent are often favored by male audiences. Usually, after the group releases an album, they will go to some TV stations to perform for the promotion of their new songs. Each TV station has professional camera operators to shoot group candid shots, and each member has their own candid shot. Individuals are filmed individually by the show’s official cameraman. Group candid shots are taken for the entire group performance. There are two different features between individual and group candid shots. Firstly, the group members who have individual direct shots are paid by the company to have individual direct shots, while group direct shots do not require payment. Secondly, only the group camera operator will use the camera and sometimes even stand directly on the stage to shoot. In group photography, the cameraman will shoot each member in the order they sing and will also use the mirror when certain dance moves occur to make the picture richer. The members’ eyes follow the camera’s angle during the

performance and keep their expressions under control or show their expressions according to the style of the song, which is one of the essential trainings for every trainee. At the end of the performance, there is a closing act where the cameraman will focus on the faces of some members. The artist will then make some playful and cute expressions. For example, the Korean girl group Girl's Day, which was launched by DreamTea Entertainment on July 9, 2010, has a song called "Something", in which the artists wear a high-cut skirt that goes up to their thighs. In the dance moves, they lift up the skirt with their hands to reveal their bottoms inside. The expressions during the dance are always like squinting and biting their lips. Even some movements are kneeling on the ground to twist the buttocks of such dance movements. The photographer will especially capture and zoom in on such movements and the artist's expression. It is as if they are doing sexually suggestive movements on the pretext of a sexy style to cater to the audience. The camera's angle is the equivalent of the viewing audience's point of view, with women being gazed at this moment.

On January 3, 2022, SM Entertainment launched a girl group called GOT the beat. The concept of the song Step Back from GOT the beat is that the female artists in the group are like a current girlfriend of a certain man. The lyrics are about the male's ex-girlfriend. Some of the lyrics in it are, "My man is now on another level, a level you never dreamed of." "For those good men, you exist like poisoned wine. The more you drink, the lonelier you get." "Back up, back up, silly girl." It is like two women competing for a male, which is the same concept as the male gaze. Females think about being hostile to someone who is also a female in order to cater to males from a male perspective.

5. Changes and Issues

With the development of K-pop culture gradually globalized. Now there are many female idol groups whose lyrics dance as well as mv concept has some progress from before. For example, the world's most famous Korean girl group, blackpink, debuted with a girl crush look. The style of girl crush adds more female power and has more unique personality to show a confident and independent stage visual effect. It can be said that the pure, sweet, sexy is completely abandoned and converted into a handsome and cold route to give people a sense of distance and aggressiveness. The South Korean local favorite, TWICE, is a girl's style and South Korea has been producing such similar style girl groups such as Girls' Generation, and Cosmic Girl.

In addition, the album concept of many Korean girls' group has also changed a lot. They have left behind the love of men and women that is the common theme of most songs, and instead have written and composed lyrics about female power and the rise of the self. In recent years, there have been two active Korean girl groups, (G)I-DLE and ITZY. (G)I-DLE released a song called Nxde (nude) in late 2022. The song conveys the ambiguity that exists among the general public about female nudity. "You're born naked, you're the one with the wrong heart" is the central idea of the song. It is up to women to reject the criticism of the female body and to decide how to present the beauty of women. Only people with vulgar ideas would consider women's bodies to be morally corrupt and unethical. Also, as a girl group, monster newcomer ITZY debuted in the style of a hot-blooded girl group from the first album of their debut is filled with an attitude of "I am what I am, and I don't care about the eyes of others" For example, in the song WANNABE has a powerful lyrics that means to live an ordinary life "You don't have to care if it's not ordinary, my life is up to me."

From these changes, it seems that the phenomenon of the male gaze in K-pop is gradually improving. However, All the idols in the group are thin. This was one of the long-standing K-pop aesthetic standards. From the 1920s onwards more and more slim female characters appeared in magazines thus more and more women sought a thin body for beauty [13]. Korean entertainment companies have body management requirements for their trainees many female artists do not weigh more than 80 to 90 pounds. Not only that fans, black fans and the media often use an artist's body shape as one of the criteria for judging their personal career in the arts. For example, Liz from IVE,

who is only 18 years old, is the lead singer of the group. It is often criticized for its strength as a group that has only recently debuted, but Liz has been able to show her consistent singing level most of the time. This is a girl who has been abused by many people for being fat. The idea that “a thin body is also a criterion for judging whether an artist is qualified or not” is gradually forming in people’s minds, but they do not care that artists need to focus more on their dancing and singing strength or the ability to perform. Many artists in K-pop started their careers when they were under 18 years old or when they were just adults. At this age, the mind is not yet mature and not exposed to much social life. The company’s long-standing belief that thinness is beauty has caused many artists to have sick beauty standards and mental illnesses. In 2014, Girls’ Generation member Tiffany revealed in a program that she was the fattest in the group, standing at 162 and weighing 42kg. With such a weight, the company still makes the artists lose weight. Furthermore, JinE of Oh My Girl group, when the group debuted, many people said she was fat, so she started dieting and eventually developed anorexia due to excessive dieting. As a result, she had trouble eating and her life was affected. The same goes for ordinary people, as the influence of K-pop has grown over the past decade, more people are exposed to the “thin” aesthetic standard. Many women on the internet are actually within the healthy range but are anxious about losing weight because their bodies are not as slim as those of K-pop artists. This puts a burden and pressure on them.

6. Suggestions and Reflections

As mentioned above, the male gaze phenomenon in K-pop is actually already in the process of change but based on the standard of beauty for a long time in a fixed model, “white thin young” is beautiful is normalized by people. Therefore, it is impossible to change the public’s concept of beauty and accept the concept of diversity all at once. Changing people’s narrow definition of “beauty” will not only allow more women who are not in today’s aesthetic standards to come forward but also avoid the harm caused by aesthetic limitations, for example, cyber violence for not looking good enough, isolation from classmates for being obese, and other prejudices brought about by appearance alone. In order to minimize this phenomenon, people should take action to make people accept the diversity of aesthetics and the definition of beauty. For the general public, adults unconsciously export their own ideas to their children or others’ children, and these ideas are silently influencing children. For example, many people consider “fat”, “dark skin”, and “single eyelids” as a disadvantage. Some parents think that although their child is very cute, what if the skin colour lighter will be better? Even more, some adults said to children that they should let their mothers take them to get double eyelids. During the student period, teachers become an essential part of people’s school life. Learning seems to have something to do with looks. Some teachers will say to girls that they should not only be pretty on the face but also should be pretty in grade. Such words from parents, teachers or other adults may not have a deeper meaning, just a kind of joke, but because of this, their unintentional words on the child are a certain influence.

Now is the era of developed self-media. People can release some science videos to tell more people how much harm is caused by curing aesthetics; not only that, as some children see, cartoons should also add more content with practical significance. At the education level, teachers should be taught first before teaching students. The content of the teacher qualification exam should also include aesthetic teaching, teachers in the process of educating students to avoid exporting their own values and aesthetic standards, and more can play a role in such a situation now. Scholars in the field could also publish more literature or books on the subject so that the public can become aware of the problem and make improvements. Schools could also do campaigns or posters to make students aware of the need to step out of their aesthetic comfort zone and accept different kinds of beauty. Finally, there is the family. Parents have a great influence on their children. Ideally, parents should avoid exporting their own aesthetic ideas and educate their children about how far aesthetics can go to make

a positive difference in their children's future. However, of course, the family is complex, and it all needs to be considered based on the parents' personality, level of education, family financial ability, and many other factors. Therefore, with the power of self-publishing or books in related fields to help even different family backgrounds can be aware of the dangers of a solid aesthetic and for improvement measures hopefully.

For artists, companies should stop instilling 'toxic aesthetics' such as weight restrictions and micro-adjustments. Introduce more groups with different body types and focus more on the artist's ability rather than how thin and white they are. Because most of the groups launched now are still unified in their aesthetic standards, fans and idols themselves may think that being thin is something that artists need to have and that maintaining perfection all the time is something that artists need to have. It may be a loss of interest from the company's point of view to launch a group with different body types, but once it is launched, it is a breakthrough step for K-pop as a whole. It opens up a larger market and, at the same time, makes aesthetic diversity more acceptable. Also, put aside must be thin must be white; into people can be thin can also be plump a little. Accepting any body shape and skin colour, whatever people want to.

7. Conclusion

The main part of this article concludes that the phenomenon of the male gaze in the K-pop industry has had a negative impact on both artists and the general public to varying degrees. The male gaze is a phenomenon that makes women anxious about whether their bodies and looks will meet the standards of today's popular aesthetics. Although some people have made changes for this reason, the problem is still not eradicated. Therefore, based on this result, people should accept the diversity of aesthetics through education, science, publicity, and more to make more people understand the dangers of only pursuing popular aesthetics and what to do. This paper can contribute to the future aesthetic change to a certain extent so that more people accept aesthetic diversity and promote the development of the K-pop industry while enhancing women's self-awareness not to be affected by the male gaze and other male-dominated social phenomena and do their best to reduce the phenomenon of the male gaze. Since the literature on K-pop and the male gaze is scarce, the content of this article tends to focus more on the author's interpretation of these social phenomena. Also, this article does not quantify or generalize. In light of these limitations, future research directions should increase quantitative or statistical, and hopefully, more relevant literature will emerge to support some of the arguments.

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