

Refashioning the Korean Gender Dichotomy: Female performance in music videos by K-pop girl
groups

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Abstract

This study examines changes over time in the portrayal of femininity in 33 K-pop music videos by girl groups. . This paper argues that, despite different historical and cultural specific gender performance expectations in Western and Eastern societies, particular gender stereotypes are today becoming global phenomenon. As multinational media corporations increasingly control the production of K-pop videos, the image of girl groups within the genre become increasingly sexualized, thus suggesting the globalization of a sexualized female stereotype has been fashioned.

Keywords: k-pop, Korean pop culture, femininity, portrayal, music videos, Korean women, images

South Korea is a country that has risen in global prominence after years of isolated following the war in the 1950's. Today, South Korea is an American ally, and this is one of the reasons why South Korea exports its pop culture, especially popular music, to America. South Korean pop music, referred to as K-pop, has had a global audience during the past two decades but scholarly research on K-pop is limited.

In K-pop, all boy or all girl groups comprise the majority of musical groups this genre, thus most K-pop videos display a gender specific performance. The focus of this paper is on girl group music videos to study how the portrayal of femininity has changed in K-pop since the 1990's. How has the femininity portrayed in K-pop throughout the years changed? Did factors like the nationality of the music producer, the media company, and the kind of portrayals shown in the music videos differ?

This paper argues that, despite different historical and cultural specific gender performance expectations in Western and Eastern societies, particular gender stereotypes are today becoming global phenomena. As multinational media corporations increasingly control the production of K-pop videos, the image of girl groups within the genre become increasingly sexualized, thus suggesting the globalization of a sexualized female

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Theory

Feminists argue that throughout the centuries the meaning of the concepts of femininity and woman have been determined by men. However, with the introduction of post-modern theory in the 1980's, those once hegemonic definitions are now open to different interpretations. Lemert (2013) suggests these differing perceptions originate from diverse cultures, which now interact as a result of globalization and global media

technology. For example, South Korean culture is accommodating new demands arising from globalization, such as consumerism and the increasing use of media. One notable aspect of change is the portrayal of femininity in South Korea's popular culture. Three theoretical perspectives are particularly useful to understand depiction of gender and femininity in South Korean culture: Simone de Beauvoir's "Woman as Other" (1949), *Refashioning the Korean Gender Dichotomy* and Laura Mulvey's "Male Gaze" (1975).

In "Woman as Other" (1949), de Beauvoir describes how both sexes have been associated with different meanings; "The man represents the positive... woman is the negative" (p. 259). Not only has "man" become a positive symbol, it is the hegemonic center, the "ideal" of personhood. For de Beauvoir, a woman is locked into a subjective position relative to the active position of men, and a woman is assumed to be secondary to men due to the hormones associated with her reproductive organs. According to de Beauvoir, "Humanity is male, and man defines woman, not in herself, but in relation to himself; she is not considered as an autonomous being" (p. 260). Here de Beauvoir claims, historically and philosophically, that the male sex has been considered the hegemonic center and the female has always been considered "the other;" she states, "He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other" (p. 260). For de Beauvoir, in every culture there has always been the "Absolute" and the "Other," which includes dichotomies such as Christians and Jews, whites and blacks, colonists and indigenous people, and the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. While there is an established "One" and the "Other," there are variations on who the "one" is and who is the "other." For example,

de Beauvoir explains that to a group of women, a man is the “Other;” whereas to a group of local men, the “foreign” man is the other.

Women’s numeric size, de Beauvoir notes, is unlike Jews or blacks in that there are just as many women as there are men in the world. So de Beauvoir then asks, “Why do women not contest male sovereignty?” (p. 260). She argues that similar to indigenous people who rebel against the colonizers, like “the blacks in Haiti,” women need to go beyond “symbolic agitation” and defy the hegemony that men have established (p. 260). Women need to move past socially constructed division of sexes and stop accepting their secondary status. De Beauvoir states, “They have won only what men have been willing to conceded to them; they have taken nothing; they have received” (p.261).

Drawing upon the work of de Beauvoir, Judith Butler’s “Gender Performativity” (1990) has also become a classic in women and gender studies. Butler’s main theory is that gender is not biologically determined but, rather, a social action one “performs.” Butler quotes de Beauvoir, “one is not born, but rather, *becomes* a woman” (p. 1). Butler agrees saying that gender is “the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of a fixed, abiding, essential self.” (1990) Thus gender is not something one is born into, but something that comes into being through the competition of a performance.

Butler uses the example of drag performance to show men performing, not their biological sex, but their behavioral gender; “At its most complex, [drag] is a double inversion that says, ‘appearance is an illusion.’ Drag says... ‘my ‘outside’ appearance is feminine, but my essence ‘inside’ [the body] is masculine.’ At the same time it symbolizes the opposite inversion; ‘my appearance ‘outside’ [my body, my gender] is

masculine but my essence ‘inside’ [myself] is feminine” (p. 137). Drag performance demonstrates how a person may identify him or herself in terms of sex and gender, and the two may not be connected. “The performance of drag plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed” (p. 137). Butler once again touches on de Beauvoir’s statement that one is not born into one’s gender, but must *become* one’s gender, predominantly through performance.

Butler identifies three parts to one’s identity -- “Anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance” – and explains how the relationship between all three shapes one’s identity (p. 137). When one part does not match the others, it is viewed negatively in the larger society, such as being female but identifying and performing as the masculine. “Genders are part of what ‘humanizes’ individuals within contemporary culture; we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right” (p. 140). Butler concludes that gender is an identity derived from “*a stylized repetition of acts...* in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self” (p. 140). Gender is a separate part of one’s identity compared to Refashioning the Korean Gender Dichotomy : publically performed, sex is also a social construct that requires constant behavioral and physical actions.

Utilizing de Beauvoir’s concept of women as other, Laura Mulvey (1975) argues that women in media are viewed as sexual objects because they are constructed from a heterosexual male’s view. Women are subjected to “scopophilia,” which is the pleasure experienced by the male audience looking at women (Mulvey, 1975, p. 16). Men are “watching [media images of women], in an active controlling sense,” thus women become “an objectified other” (Mulvey, 1975, p. 17). According to Mulvey (1975),

within the gender binary, there is another dichotomy between who receives pleasure from looking. Males gaze upon the subject, a passive female (p. 19). Mulvey says, “women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact” (p.19).

These three theoretical frames all suggest how women are subjectified by men. Women in K-pop music videos today can be seen as “others”; they are female performers who are subject to the gaze of the heterosexual male audience and to the social control of the men manage their careers. However, this has not always been the case as the image of Korean women has changed over time.

Literature Review

Portrayal of Femininity in Korean Culture

According to Lie (2012), with the dissemination of Confucianism throughout the monarchy in the 1300’s, Korean women’s femininity became regulated by patriarchy and tradition (p. 341). Palley (1990) notes that Korean gender-based expectations include being a dutiful and respectful wife, being a loving and devoted mother, and bearing a son

Refashioning the Korean Gender Dichotomy These cultural norms impact how
Korean women today are presented in the media.

According to Yu (2007), when female actresses began to be shown on the big screen in the early 1920’s, “two major images... were mainly found in the melodrama and horror genres,” the dichotomy that is often called the “Madonna/whore” complex (Nash, 2006, p. 3). The Madonna image is of a wise woman who is the epitome of demure femininity and chastity, while the whore is a “wicked woman who is either a femme fatale or a seductress” (Yu, 2007, p. 261). The Madonna image suggests that

women are weak, thus they are portrayed as “victims or the embodiment of endurance during the cruel history of women” (Yu, 2007, p. 261). Madonna women are shown surviving in a patriarchal Korean society by producing sons or becoming comfort women for men. An (2013) suggests that images of Korean women results from the virtues of subordination and endurance they are taught (p. 25).

Yu (2007) notes that the image of the whore is often presented as a Korean woman who wants freedom away from the gender-related expectations of society. These women indulge in their desires and escaped the restrictions of marriage, such as subservience to their husbands and children as a wife and/or mother. However, the whore is also portrayed negatively for being sexual, for selfishly following her own desires, and by not devoting her entire life to their family.

For Korean women, the “devout Madonna” image is one that actresses, and women in general, are expected to imitate. In recent years South Korean society has been improving conditions for women, especially with increasing numbers of Korean women entering the workforce (Yu, 2007, p. 267). The “seductive whore” social construct may, thus may better suit the modern image that women in Korea now wish to possess. Women who have the freedom to fulfill their own sexual and emotional desires are seen in

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Women in Music videos

With the establishment of MTV in 1981, music videos became a significant part of Korean youth popular culture. Kim (2005) notes that “music videos were first introduced and then produced in Korea in the early 1990’s” (p. 201). As demand for Korean pop culture expanded globally, the production costs (e.g. clothes, settings, story-

line, concept, choreography, styling) of K-pop music videos have also increased. K-pop music videos today attract an international audience. Thus to be successful, K-pop girl groups must compete with female musical artists from around the world, some of whom express sexuality to sell music.

In K-pop music videos featuring girl groups, a modified version of the Madonna/Whore dichotomy emerges: “cute/sexy” (Kim, 2005). “Cute” images replace the subservient mother/wife. Instead, there is a cute girl who is waiting for, or pining after, the man of her dreams. According to Kim (2005), these cute girls are often characterized as a “sweet and innocent girl (angelic) that stirs a sense of protection and is non-threatening to men” (p. 206). Additionally, the classic whore image as a “wicked seductress” is replaced with a similar “sexy” image, which Kim (2005) describes as the “provocative and sensual femme fatale (seductress) that threatens men with sex appeal as a weapon” (p. 206). With the increasing number of aging women in Korean girl groups, perhaps it becomes more acceptable for these young women to express their sexuality.

According to Kim (2005), in K-pop the women’s bodies are the main focus rather than a story plot. Additionally, the theme of most K-pop music videos featuring girl groups focuses on romantic love, and the women are portrayed as the object of love.

According to Kim (2005), lyrics in music videos express “romantic feelings of passive Refashioning the Korean Gender Dichotomy notionally from a break-up, and about being considerate of the man one used to love” (p. 222).

South Korean society has become more a modern state, but images of Korean women often share traits found in images from earlier historical eras; “being subservient, quiet, virginal... and... beautiful, fragile women ever in need of a man’s protection”

(Kim, 2005, p. 222). These gender stereotypes are similar to the “Madonna” or “cute” stereotype that women have been portraying in Korean media for decades. Kim (2005) proposes that a new image is emerging, one that is a hybrid of the “cute” and “sexy” concept, which utilizes “a sexy yet innocent girl image by which the focus was on her body dancing sexily” (p. 222). This emergence of this new image of femininity may be a result of global audiences.

Global Influences

Like most musical genres, K-pop started local, but as its popularity increased K-pop became a global cultural product. K-Pop is often described as a “Hallyu,” or the Korean Wave due to the wave of popularity in other countries. As Lee (2011) has noted, “the popularity of Korean pop music and television soap operas in China and Taiwan sparked the Korean wave abroad” (p. 86). Lee (2011) suggests that the reasons South Korean media has spread to other Asian countries is “because Korean dramas typically deal with family issues, love and filial piety in an age of changing technology, and often reinforces traditional values of Confucianism” (p. 86). The global spread of Korean dramas and K-pop music is improving Korea’s image in other countries, this in turn also

Refashioning the Korean Gender Dichotomy not impervious to external influences.

K-pop, as a global music genre, has started to outsource the production; no longer are only local music producers and songs used in albums. Park argues that this “globalization of creativity” is not limited to just music, but includes dance choreographers, composers, and distributors (p. 20). Park (2013) describes the “connect

and develop” method, which is “in favor of borrowing, buying, or outsourcing creativity and innovation to external communities” (p. 20).

South Korea’s most powerful entertainment companies (SM, YG, and JYP) all have had global partners in the producing, composing, choreographing, and distributing of artistic products. Among the three companies, SM has had the most foreigners involved the first three aspects (Park, 2013, p. 21). All three companies use YouTube as a common distributor. With all aspects of creating and distributing music videos outsourced, SM makes the most profit and is considered the “largest entertainment management firm in Korea, with an annual revenue of \$90 million” (Park, 2013, p. 22).

K-pop’s outsourcing of production allows for global influences to affect the images of women seen in K-pop music videos. For example, K-pop performers receive plastic surgery to create more Western features, both facial and body surgeries are common (Rudy, Popova, & Linz, 2011, p. 154). The purpose of this paper is to examine the changes to the images of K-pop girl groups since 1997, and discuss how the globalization of K-pop is impacting the image of female artists.

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Methodology

The data for this paper was obtained through a content analysis of music videos by all-women K-pop groups. Content analysis is defined by Krippendorff (2013) as “a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use” (p. 24). As a text, music videos are analyzed in order to determine how femininity has changed in K-pop since its introduction in 1997. The sample consists of music videos specifically posted to the

Internet site YouTube. YouTube is a video-sharing website that allows “billions of people to discover, watch, and share originally-created videos” (YouTube, 2005).

To select groups for analysis, the phrase “top ten K-pop girl groups” was entered into a Google search engine. An article by *Billboard* (2014) titled “Top 10 K-Pop Girl Groups You Need to Know” (Benjamin and Oak, 2014) was used to identify videos. *Billboard* (2014) defines itself as “the world premier music publication...its popular music charts have evolved into the primary source of information on trends and innovation in music, serving music fans, artists, top executives, tour promoters, publishers, radio programmers, lawyers, retailers, digital entrepreneurs, and many others.” The article by Benjamin and Oak lists all women K-pop groups from the 1990’s through the mid 2000’s. The ten groups on the list are S.E.S, Girl’s Generation, Fin.K.L, Wonder Girls, After School, 2NE1, Baby V.O.X, Brown Eyed Girls, Jewelry, and SISTAR.

For each group listed in the article, four music video links are provided. Some links are to live performances or a musical track with no video. This study omits seven Refashioning the Korean Gender Dichotomy total sample here is 33 music videos.

Each video was coded using a pre-constructed coding sheet (see Appendix A). Various factors were measured in order to determine changes over time in the femininity portrayed in the music videos. The information collected included the name of the group, name of the music video, the year of release, number of views on YouTube, the producer of the music video, his/her nationality, the media company, if the media company is South Korean or multinational corporation, if it is a subsidiary of a multinational, and

when the company was purchased if it is a subsidiary. A short description of the action in each video was recorded. The total number of men, women, and other central individuals in the music video, and their perceived nationality/race (Korean/other) was coded. The portrayal (cute, sexy, Madonna, whore, other) of the girl group, reinforcing actions that support the portrayal, the central objects, and the setting was also coded.

Findings

Overall, the data from 33 K-pop music videos reveal that stereotypical depictions of femininity are common. Table 1 compares the portrayal of women in K-pop music videos by the nationality of the media company producing the video. The data shows that of the 33 videos, 30.3% depict a “cute” stereotype, which is a “sweet and innocent girl (angelic) that stirs a sense of protection and is non-threatening to men” (Kim, 2005, p. 206). This is followed by “sexy” (21.1%), videos that use multiple stereotypical portrayals, such as cute and sexy combines (21.2%), and “whore” (18.2%). There were no videos in which the female K-pop groups presented an image of a “Madonna”/mother.

One conspicuous portrayal found that does not fit into previous studies of images of women in media is of rebellious and aggressive women, found in a three (9.1%) of the music videos, which is labeled here as “KwanSoon.” For example, one KwanSoon video shows the girl members using metal bats to destroy glass cases of records, perhaps implying that they intend to break free from cultural expectations.

Table 1
Portrayal of Women in Music Videos by Nationality of Media Company

Portrayal	South Korean	Non-Korean	Total
Cute	10/29 (35%)	0	10 (30.3%)
Sexy	5/29 (17%)	2/4 (50%)	7 (21.2%)
Multiple	5/29 (17%)	2/4 (50%)	7 (21.2%)
Whore	6/29 (21%)	0	6 (18.2%)
KwanSoon	3/29 (10%)	0	3 (9.1%)
Madonna	0	0	0 (0%)
Total	29 (87.9%)	4 (12.1%)	33 (100%)

The term “KwanSoon” refers to the famous female protestor Yoo Kwan-soon (1902-1920), also known as Yu Gwansun. According to the New World Encyclopedia (2013), because of her participation in the Korean independence movement protesting Japan’s occupation of Korea, Kwan-soon was arrested, tortured, and died as a result at age 17. Kwan-soon's non-violent protests for national independence are less well-known globally than figures such as Mohandas Gandhi and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., despite the fact she is viewed as a woman of historical significance in Korea.

Table 1 also shows the connection between the portrayals of femininity shown in music videos by the nationality the media company producing the video. The data shows that 87.9% of the videos are produced by a South Korean based company. There are some noteworthy differences regarding the type of portrayal of women by nationality. Of the 29 music videos produced by South Korean media companies, 10 (35%) portray a “cute” images of women. By contrast, no non-Korean companies produced images of “cute” women. Instead, non-Korean companies used either sexy (50%) or multiple images (50%) of women. This data indicates that multi-national corporations are more likely to

Refashioning the Korean Gender Dichotomy Korean and non-South Korean media companies use gender stereotyped portrayals of women in their music videos.

Portrayal	Perceived Nationality of Producer		Total
	South Korean	Not	
Cute	9/29 (31%)	1/4 (25%)	10 (30.3%)
Sexy	5/29 (17%)	2/4 (50%)	7 (21.2%)
Multiple	6/29 (21%)	1/4 (25%)	7 (21.2%)
Whore	6/29 (21%)	0	6 (18.2%)
KwanSoon	3/29 (10%)	0	3 (9.1%)
Madonna	0	0	0 (0%)
Total	29 (87.9%)	4 (12.1%)	33 (100%)

Table 2 compares the femininity portrayed in the music videos by the perceived nationality of the producer. Table 2 shows that a South Korean producer is most likely to have the “cute” (31%), “sexy” (17%), and “whore” (21%) concepts of femininity shown in music videos. Notably, all the music videos depicting the “KwanSoon” (9.1%) concept of femininity were created by South Korean producers, perhaps reflecting back on South Korea’s history of rebelling under Japanese colonial rule.

YouTube Views	Portrayal						Total
	Cute	Sexy	Multiple	Whore	KwanSoon	Madonna	
<100,000	3	1	0	1	0	0	5 (15.2%)
100,000-500,000	2	0	1	0	0	0	3 (9.1%)
500,000-1,000,000	0	1	0	0	0	0	1 (3%)
1,000,000-10,000,000	3	2	2	3	0	0	10 (30.3%)
10,000,000-50,000,000	1	2	3	2	2	0	10 (30.3%)
50,000,000-100,000,000	0	1	0	0	0	0	1 (3%)
>100,000,000	1	0	1	0	1	0	3 (9.1%)
Total	10	7	7	6	3	0	33 (100%)

Table 3 shows the connection between the portrayal of femininity shown in the music videos and the number of views they received on YouTube. Half of the music videos that showed the “cute” concept had 0-500,000 views on YouTube, and then the other half had between 1,000,000->100,000,000 views on YouTube. This data is impacted by the small percentage (21.2%) of music videos that came out between 1997 and 2005, which would have the smaller amount of YouTube views. The music videos with the larger number of YouTube views were for music videos released between 2006 and 2014 (78.8%). The data shows that the sexy, multiple, and whore concepts make up more than half of the music videos, all consistently have between 1,000,000 to 50,000,000 views on YouTube. Music videos with the most views (over 100,000,000 views) are more likely to portray the cute, multiple, and KwanSoon concepts.

Discussion

The data overall shows that gender stereotypes are perpetuated in music videos, regardless of the media company or nationality of the producer. Furthermore, the findings show that multinational media corporations increasingly sexualize the image of girl groups within K-pop music videos, thus constructing a global female stereotype.

Additionally the findings showed that while local South Korean media companies also

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character.

use of the KwanSoon

The theories of Butler’s (1990) and Mulvey’s (1975) seem both help to explain the findings. The girls that make up K-pop girl groups “perform” their gender in their music videos, through “bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds” (Butler, 1990, p. 140). The performance includes dancing or acting parts of the story line, being

“cute” and often smiling, being “sexy” through a provocative hip swaying and sultry eye contact with the camera, or being a “whore” concept by touching of one’s own body for the pleasure of a male viewer. In other words, most of the music videos portray “a set of repeated acts” that reinforces a stereotypical gender performance (Butler, 1990, p. 33).

The data did reveal that some music videos included a gender performance that Kim (2005) referred to as “multiple” -- a new hybrid image which utilizes both the “cute” and the “sexy” images -- such as a “sexy yet innocent girl image by which the focus was on her body dancing sexily” (p. 222).

As noted earlier, Mulvey argues that women in media are viewed as sexual objects because they are filmed from a heterosexual man’s view, which applies to these K-pop girl group music videos since they were all produced by men. Over the two decades studies here, the music videos became increasingly sexualized. Videos released in the late 1990’s feature close-ups of the girls’ faces. By contrast music videos that were released after 2006 included more sexualized shots featuring the girls’ body parts such as breasts, derriere, and legs. Furthermore, the girls’ outfits in music videos become more Refashioning the Korean Gender Dichotomy multaneously looked at and displayed... for strong visual and erotic impact” (p. 19).

While this data cannot reveal why a young woman may engage in such stereotypical gender displays, K-pop music videos are partially designed to attract a male heterosexual audience to increase sales and company profit. Butler (1990) identifies three parts of one’s identity -- “anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance” – all of which impact the interpretation of another’s gender performance (p. 137). In order for music videos to be viewed positively by a heterosexual male audience, the anatomical

sex, gender, and gender performance of what is considered appropriately feminine must all match.

The one prominent exception to such gender stereotyped performance appeared in the category labeled here as “KwanSoon,” which includes behavior that is characterized by actions that are typically associated with masculinity. For some viewers, these music videos imply that women who literally “kick ass” are more powerful than girls who passively perform within the established Madonna/Whore and cute-sexy binaries. The aggressive or rebellious behavior shown by the few KwanSoon characters in music videos suggests that it is possible to break from the stereotypical gender performance and still draw a large audience as these music videos still had millions of YouTube views. While the majority of music videos present stereotypical images of women, perhaps this new gender performance of the “KwanSoon” image will ignite more videos to break from gender stereotypes and refashion K-pop female artists into a strong female role model for the millions of K-pop viewers across the world.

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