Stars Surrounded by Darkness
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Abstract: K-pop has experienced a surge in global popularity, largely attributed to the globalization strategies implemented by the entertainment industry, including the establishment of a star system. Within this system, female idols have been theorized as sexualized pretty dolls by their companies. The aim of this study is to examine how the presentation of female idols has altered over time. Through the lenses of gender display and objectification frameworks, and employing content analysis as the research method, the study analyzes music videos from different generations in K-pop. From the coding results, the study concludes with the inherent inequality faced by female idols within the industry and explores the complexities of popular feminist themes in the current generation, which can simultaneously empower and constrain them.

Introduction

K-pop has demonstrated continuous success in the global music industry, with the soaring popularity of groups such as BTS and Blackpink. While K-pop girl idols are celebrated for their remarkable music and dance abilities, their appearance is equally significant. Typically conforming to Korean beauty standards that emphasize youthful and feminine looks, girl idols are often associated with reinforcing female stereotypes by performing their gender through their music videos and other products. This study aims to investigate whether the presentation of K-pop female idols has changed over time.

This study opens with a literature review of the K-pop star system and entertainment companies' goal of globalization. According to Kim (2013, p. 8), K-pop is a "deliberately planned industry" that embodies capitalist marketing and neoliberal governmentality, where idols' bodies are regulated in a market-oriented way. The entertainment agencies have created a systematic way of production, particularly in the case of female idols, who not only undergo extensive training, but also must comply with the beauty standards set by the industry. I conceptualize the idol industry in relation to aesthetic labor, drawing on Goffman's framework of gender display and Mulvey's concept of gazes. I then elaborate on my operationalization, which involves analyzing the music videos of mainstream female idol groups across generations, to conclude that female idols are constructed as ideal girls based on observed nonverbal behaviors. I also argue that although some female idols resist traditional gender roles in their music videos, aligning with postfeminist sentiments and the commercialization of popular feminism, these idols still fail to escape the capitalist manipulation by their labels. Looking ahead to the future of gender in K-pop, I argue that while the genre may not be a driving force behind feminist movements, it is an avenue for its audience to explore and navigate their own gender and sexual identities.

The Idol Industry

What makes K-pop attractive to a wide range of audiences is its unique star-making process that highlights physique and voice-choreography (Oh, 2013). Entertainment companies — notably SM Entertainment, YG Entertainment, and JYP Entertainment (or the "Big Three" entertainment houses) — adopt an in-house idol training system, or "academy system," that incorporates "production" and "management" (Shin, 2009; Shin & Kim, 2013).

Entertainment agencies recruit their trainees through auditions, street castings, and TV programs. Global auditions are also held for candidates abroad (Lee, 2013). Consider the example of the 2022 SM Kwangya Global. While there were no requirements for nationality, applicants must have been born between 2003 and 2011 (Cha, 2022). Those who passed the auditions then entered an apprenticeship which usually lasted two or more years (Lee, 2013). Training programs included singing, rapping, dancing, acting, composition, foreign language skills, manners, and more. (Ahn, 2011; Lee, 2013; Shin & Kim, 2013). Furthermore, trainees needed to participate in physical fitness lessons and beauty therapies (Oh, 2013). Visual appearance was particularly emphasized among girls. As Venters and Rothenberg (2022, p. 9) noted, in addition to a slim hourglass-shaped body, "ideal face structures, consisting of V-shaped jawlines, large eyes, and a small nose, are enthusiastically pursued." As a result, idol aspirants

were pressured to undergo extreme dieting and cosmetic surgery to conform to these beauty standards.

Like an assembly line, entertainment companies focus on creating the right "formula" while making idols. When forming a new group, producers first think of the "image" of that group and then select suitable trainees (Lee, 2013). That image is also versatile to meet the market's expectations. For example, the image of the famous girl band Girls' Generation has evolved from innocent young girls to confident independent women (Ahn, 2011). In pursuit of balance, each member needs to have a distinct talent or characteristic to appeal to a wider range of fans. Common positions in a group include a leader, visual, vocalist, rapper, dancer, and "maknae," or the youngest (Carpio, 2021).

It is these idol-producing strategies that enabled entertainment houses to generate profits, by exploiting artists dependent on their contracts. Regardless of how successful a group might be, agencies exercise a considerable amount of control over the members' careers. The term "slave contract" was used to describe the unethical terms of employment and unfair distribution of earnings. Even though the maximum length of trainee contracts was reduced under the ruling of the Fair Trade Commission in 2009 (Lee, 2013; Venters & Rothenberg, 2022), some idols, such as the boy group B.A.P (Lee, 2014), filed lawsuits against their label for suspension of contract due to mistreatment.

An overview of the idol industry shows capitalist firms' neoliberal governmentality where idols, especially females, have a lack of agency. Depicted as a "factory-like manufacturing system," Kim (2019, p. 33) argued that "today's K-pop idols are conditioned as an obedient, disciplined, and sexualized labor force, directly manufactured by male corporate elites in the K-pop industry to serve the interests and needs of capital."

Under Globalization

In the mid-2000s, followed by the soaring popularity of K-pop in Asian markets, Korean entertainment companies tried to cross cultural boundaries to break into the U.S. market. To fit into the Western imagination of Asian women, female idol groups were manipulated as being docile sexual objects under the control of their male managers. Jung (2013) analyzed two groups: Wonder Girls (WG) and Girls' Generation (SNSD). While most of both groups' music was girlish, romantic love songs when performed in their home country, their music switched to erotic songs with provocative lyrics degrading women when debuted in the U.S. — exploiting racial and gender stereotypes. Their on-stage facial expressions and body-touching dance moves further played to the male gaze. Eventually, although their songs and visual images targeted the U.S. market, neither accomplished establishing themselves (Jung, 2013).

Then, in the mid-2010s, K-pop idol groups managed to penetrate the U.S. market following the achievement of Psy. A well-known female group among them is Blackpink. Their single "DDU-DU DDU-DU" reached No. 55 on the Billboard Hot 100 chart and became the fastest music video from a Korean girl band to gain 100 million views on YouTube (Herman, 2018). Contrary to WG and SNSD, Blackpink pursues a girl crush concept. "DDU-DU DDU-DU" reveals a strong and tough woman image with lyrics directly confronting "haters" and traditional femininity (Lee & Yi, 2020). Most significantly, Blackpink's popularity did not fade in the global market. In their most recent comeback, their album "Born Pink" won No. 1 on

Billboard's Top Album Sales chart, breaking another K-pop record (Garcia, 2022). Inspired by Blackpink, more and more groups have been pursuing a girl crush concept, advocating for female empowerment. But today, the current K-pop market has seemed to hit a saturation point due to an overcrowding of "strong girls" (Daly, 2022). Amid these changing K-pop trends, my study is, thus, interested in the question: How do female idol groups present themselves differently over time, in relation to their gender performance?

Aesthetic Labor and Gender Display
   Categorized as a type of aesthetic labor under the umbrella of display work in the service economy, the idol industry reveals inequalities at the intersection of gender, race, and class (see Mears, 2014; Mears & Connell, 2016; Otis, 2016; Balogun & Hoang, 2018). In a neo-Confucian male-dominated society, Korean female idols are expected to conform to either the stereotypical Western imagination of Asian women as sexual and vulnerable — illustrated by the examples of WG and SNSD — or to the traditional gender role of submissive and innocent maidens whose worth is dependent on men (Lin & Rudolf, 2017; Jonas, 2022). Building on Goffman's (1956) notion of gender display, West and Zimmerman (1987) contend that in the interactive activities of "doing gender," individuals express femininity and masculinity based on sex category, which sustains socially arranged gender hierarchies.
   In the K-pop world, femininity is described through the metaphor of "Asian dolls" in the Lolita ideal, manifesting the insulting normalization of the Westernized male gaze, instilled with pop obsessions (Puzar 2011). Excessive femininity is deliberately displayed in the dressing styles and choreographies of girl idols. Dancing with bare legs and high heels in uniformly patterned movements demonstrates "their sexual bodies emphatically in passive postures" (Kim 2011, p. 339). To maintain a dollified cute image, they are decorated with youthful accessories and clothes such as ribbons and school uniforms when performing onstage (Kim, 2011). Since dollification, in conjunction with commodification, simultaneously constructs a fetishizing sense of flawless beauty (Puzar, 2011), female idols are often mandated to engage in beauty practices (Yoon, 2018). Body laborers (e.g., makeup artists, hair stylists, plastic surgeons) boost their body capital (Balogun & Hoang, 2018) and produce the perfect "dolls" of pureness and submissiveness by reflecting a hybrid of Western and Asian beauty ideals (see Leem, 2017). Both artists and staff must therefore maintain a constant awareness of gender norms and are held accountable for conforming to them in the idol industry.
   Mulvey's (1988) concept of gaze highlights women's "to-be-looked-at-ness" in visual media. The image of women is depicted as enjoyable objects to be passively looked at by the active gaze of men. Through the lens of dominance approach that recognizes the tenacious system of male dominance, the unequal treatment of women is a result of power structure constructed by the patriarchal society (Mackinnon, 1984). Nevertheless, the juxtaposition of sexuality and cuteness in the idol industry obscures this power dynamic and justifies the male gaze under the neo-Confucian structure. The girl idols' fandom consists of a significant number of middle-aged men known as *Samchon*, or "uncle," fans. The depiction of these men's relationship with the girl idols as uncle and niece, and their endorsement as familial support, minimizes the sexual connotation of staring at teen girls' bodies and normalizes their potentially pedophiliac actions (Kim, 2011; see also Epstein & Turnbull, 2014). Moreover, as beauty

ideologies and practices are associated with global culture (see Edmonds, 2010), the influence of Western hegemony is shown in the widespread use of "double-eyelid surgery, rhinoplasty, and cheekbone surgery, [and] jaw surgery" (Leem, 2017, p. 658). Together, female idols are crafted for Westernized masculine gazes in conjunction with the gaze of men within Korea.

According to Lee and Yi (2020), while the concept of "strong sister," or *ssen-unni*, is prevalent among female idols nowadays, seemingly undermining the traditional shackle of weak femininity, the concept actually strengthens patriarchal perceptions. Blackpink is not the pioneer of embodying *ssen-unni* in their performances. In fact, that concept has been in K-pop since mid-2000, with groups like 2NE1 incorporating militaristic objects and outfits in their music videos. Nevertheless, the employment of these materialistic hypermasculine symbols demonstrates a sense of ambiguous resistance as it upholds the association between male and power and speaks nothing for social transformation of gendered norms, thus failing to portray the true liberation of women.

Despite the ambiguity in the *ssen-unni* concept in confronting the underlying problem of gender inequality, from a Western feminist point of view, Lee and Yi (2020) noted a strong correlation between *ssen-unni* and third-wave feminism. Resonating with anti-essentialist ideologies, the generational feminism and youth cultures of the third wave extend the idea of intersectionality by suggesting flexible ways of presenting feminine identities to actualize girl empowerment, such as through sharing personal stories (Gilmore, 2001; Mack-Canty, 2004). Yet, this implies that women are personally authoring these narratives: In K-pop, it would require songs intended to voice female empowerment or fight societal sexism to have substantial authentic input from artists (Mack-Canty, 2004). Yet, for Blackpink and 2NE1, most of their songs are produced by Teddy Park, a famous songwriter at YG Entertainment (Taylor, 2020). To put it in another way, since their songs may not reflect their personal experiences or intellectual thinking, they are only performers and not the owners of their songs. I propose that although there has been an increase in the girl crush concept among K-pop female idols groups, unless they can actively participate in the producing scene, these idols are unable to communicate and embody egalitarian messages that go beyond hierarchical gender norms and are therefore confined as pretty "Asian dolls."

Methods

Objectification theory builds on the notion of gaze to recognize how women are treated as mere bodies for pleasure. Their bodies are sexually evaluated by viewers, resulting in their deliberative objectification in visual media through these gazes (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). By using content analysis, scholars have conducted studies regarding portrayal of objectification in music and other media fields (see Flynn et al., 2016). Goffman (1979) identified a model to decode gender behaviors, which later scholars applied in examining music videos for the operationalization of gender role display (see Wallis, 2011). Therefore, to answer my research question about how female idol groups have changed through generations with respect to sexual objectification and gender display, I employed content analysis to examine the music videos of 20 groups over time. Groups were selected through purposive sampling that deem to be popular or representative of that generation and their sampled songs. The generations ranged from Gen 2 (2004-2007), when K-pop started to become a global phenomenon, to Gen 2.5 (2008-2013), Gen

3 (2014-2015), Gen 3.5 (2016-2017), and Gen 4 (2018-present). Since there is no strict definition of the time period of these generations, I drew my timeline from *Idology* (Squib, 2020)[1]. Three of the selected groups' most-viewed music videos[2] on YouTube (n = 59)[3] were watched numerous times and coded accordingly.

To measure gender display conveying dominance and subordination, this study first adhered to Wallis's (2011) coding scheme for nonverbal behaviors while considering prior research on girl bodies by Osborn (2021). On the one hand, subordinate and overtly sexual nonverbal gender displays included "touching hair, delicate self-touch, smiling/[winking]…a childish finger to/in the mouth…suggestive dancing, a sultry look" (Wallis 2011, p. 166). On the other hand, the dominant counterparts involved "flinging hands/fingers, showing force… showing passion while singing" (Wallis, 2011, p. 166), and aggressive facial expressions. Second, body exposures were measured. As camera work contributes to the construction of gaze (Dibben, 1999), the close-up shots of any exposure of the artists' "butt cracks and/or cheeks, stomach/navel with belly button exposed, legs from knees to upper thighs, the back fully exposed…the shoulders," and the chest line were also noted (Frisby & Aubrey, 2012). All these variables were coded for either presence (1) or absence (0) in a unit of 10 seconds.[4] Whether idols are treated as objects was further analyzed to investigate sexual objectification. Third, each set of the artists' outfits was coded once as "neutral [or] slightly provocative (clothing that reveals more of the chest, abdomen, or the thighs than in everyday work/school attire)" (Wallis, 2011, p. 166).[5] Finally, the English translations of the lyrics in each video were analyzed separately to determine any presence of resistance to the male gaze. Data sources are listed in Appendix A, and all the information is as of December 2022. The next section will discuss the findings in terms of gender display and objectified gazes respectively.

Findings

I.   Gender Display across Generations

To show how gender display has evolved across different generations of K-pop, I first calculated the percentage of such display for each music video in a sampled group. I then computed the averages for each group, taking into account the differences in the length of the videos. Table 1 shows the means of the percentage of gender display that occurred in a music video in a generation. It is evident that variables that are regarded as dominant nonverbal behaviors are rarely displayed in female idol groups' music videos, while those that are stereotypical feminine behaviors result in higher percentages.

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[1] According to Koreaboo, it is the longest-running K-pop critic webzines in Korea.

[2] Some MVs were uploaded by two different channels, so their views were summed up.

[3] Since one Gen 4 group debuted less than a year and only had two major comebacks by the time of data collection, they had one fewer sampled MV.

[4] In Wallis (2011)'s study, the unit of analysis is 30 seconds. I chose a unit of 10 seconds to further increase the comprehensiveness of the codes.

[5] Wallis (2011) divided the codes for outfits into three categories: neutral, slightly provocative, and provocative. But due to cultural differences and the conservative nature in Korean idol performances, I only adopted the first two categories.

Table 1

	Gen 2	Gen 2.5	Gen 3	Gen 4
Dominance				
aggressive facial expression	3%	3%	1%	1%
showing force	3%	0%	1%	0%
passionate singing	1%	1%	0%	0%
flinging hands	2%	0%	2%	2%
Subordination				
touching hair	0%	3%	5%	5%
delicate self-touch	0%	1%	1%	0%
sultry look	0%	11%	1%	0%
suggestive dancing	0%	9%	0%	0%
smiling (wink)	36%	36%	31%	29%
childish finger to/in mouth	1%	2%	1%	0%

There are two reasons why the percentages of dominance display are generally low in female idol group music videos: calculation and coding constancy. Firstly, while some music videos may have higher percentages of masculine display, they are often averaged out with others that have 0%. For instance, in 2NE1's (Gen 2) "I AM the Best" music video, I documented 32% aggressive facial expressions, 18% showing force, and 9% flinging hands. However, when averaged out with the rest of Gen 2 music videos, these percentages became significantly lower. Secondly, to maintain a consistent standard of coding, some elements that may symbolize masculinity are not counted. For example, in 2NE1's music videos, aggressive facial expressions often connote showing madness alongside other cues from body gestures.
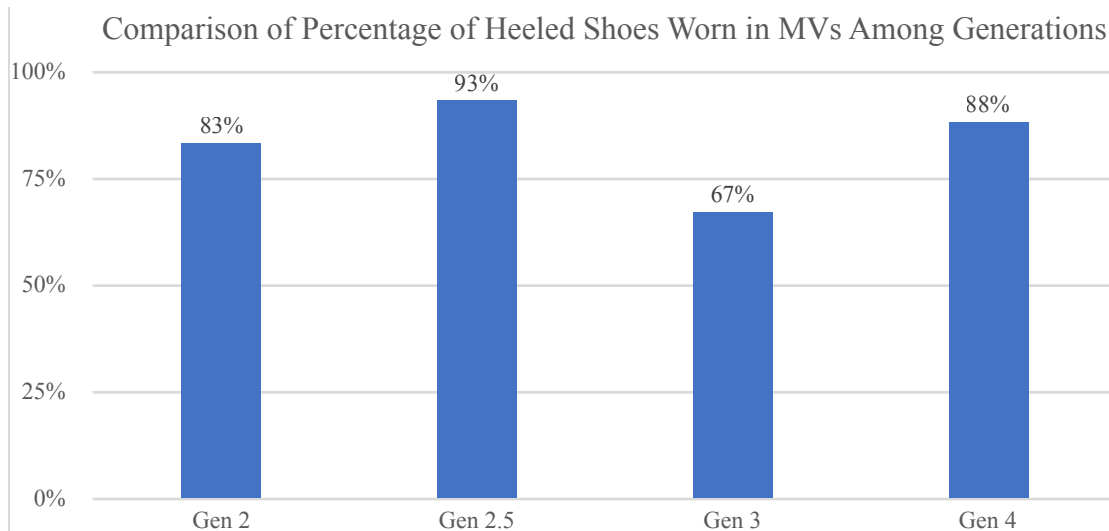
Therefore, behaving solely emotionally distant and indifferent is not coded as aggressive. Similarly, 2NE1 shows force by destroying a physical object or firing weapons. It is not equivalent to holding a toy-like gun or doing a single punch in the camera. As fewer female idol groups pursue a straightforward "badass" concept with explicit violence, the percentages of dominant display become lower as the generations progress.

For variables of subordinate display, smiling has a relatively high percentage for female idols in all four generations. Most early Gen 2 music videos (i.e., SNSD's "Gee") were made up of shifting between close shots of members' smiles and choreography. Conceptualizing the idol industry as a form of aesthetic labor explains smiling as a practice of their commercial values. Associated with femininity, smiling suggests sociability by conveying a message of warmth and friendliness (Reis et al., 1990). As a part of aesthetic labor, emotional labor in service work often requires employees to smile at customers, suggesting a sign of deference. Conforming to heteronormativity, female workers' projection of feminine facial expressions appeals to male guests' heterosexual masculinity (Barber, 2016). Overall, as their emotions are commercialized, idols are also objectified as models of passivity, which confirms Puzar's (2011) theory of dollification.

Touching hair is a variable whose percentage increases over the generations. It is a form of feminine touch included in Goffman's (1979) study on gender images in advertisements. Goffman argued that ritualistic self-touching indicates a sense of delicacy and preciousness of one's body, which separates from the utilitarian use of hands in manipulating or holding. By engaging in this behavior, women are aligned with the societal expectation of femininity. A comparative study between the U.S. and India further found no significant difference in the prevalence of feminine touch portrayed in magazine advertising, implying that self-touching has a common meaning of subordination across cultures (Griffin et al., 1994). With globalization, utilizing an increased occurrence of touching hair in music videos is thus foreseeable.

In the context of outfits in music videos, it is noteworthy that a majority of female idols are depicted dancing in heeled shoes, including high heels, block heels, heeled boots, and heeled sandals (see Graph 1). High heels have historically been associated with women as sexual objects, and women walking in high heels are often perceived as more attractive (Morris et al., 2013). A project by Dilley et al. (2015) investigated the relationship between wearing high-heeled shoes and the display of "emphasized femininity," defined by Connell (1987) as the compliance with men's desires. The freedom to choose footwear may contribute to women's identity-building despite the physical pain to their feet. However, if viewed from the perspective of female idols' limited agency over their bodies (Venters & Rothenberg, 2022), it could also be argued that entertainment companies are decorating these women with heeled shoes to conform to sexualized gender norms and to enhance their sexual appeal in performances evaluated by gendered expectations (West & Zimmerman, 1987). As a result, female idols are often portrayed with hyperfemininity.

Graph 1

Comparison of Percentage of Heeled Shoes Worn in MVs Among Generations

	Gen 2	Gen 2.5	Gen 3	Gen 4
	83%	93%	67%	88%

From the data, it can be seen that female idols who perform submissive feminine behaviors and wear feminine attire are engaging in a form of "bridgework." This term, as defined by Otis (2016, p. 914), refers to the "labor that requires interaction between customers whose countries and cultures of origin diverge from those of workers." In the K-pop industry, female idols are trained to exhibit a "universal" form of femininity (i.e., smiling and dressing appropriately), which is institutionalized through Western hegemony. On the other hand, it is important to note that the bridgework framework does not take into account the differences in gender display percentages across different generations of female idols. The way female idols perform a song may also be influenced by their group's marketing goals or the trending concepts of the era, rather than a uniform construction.
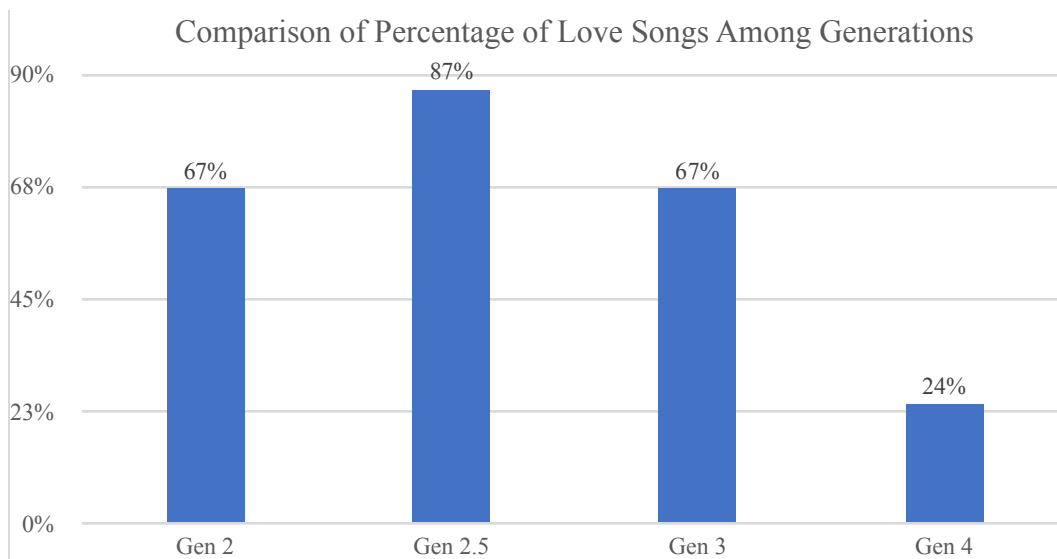
Gen 2 marked the first expansion of K-pop into broader Asian markets, with companies also beginning to incorporate Western markets into their agenda. The following of traditional gender roles and presentation of cute innocent girls' images, as well as the pioneering of bad/cool female types, are both attempts by companies to search for the most effective ways to attract a larger fan base. These concepts all fall into the trap of patriarchy, regardless of which ones groups strove to pursue.

Next, in Gen 2.5, four out of the five sampled groups emerge from small- to middle-sized labels. The common ground of most of this generation's music videos and choreography is the prioritization of filming attractive female bodies. A predominant theme across the music videos and choreography of this generation is the greater emphasis on filming attractive female corporeal bodies. Unlike Gen 2, where innocence in facial expressions often took precedence, Gen 2.5 sees a heightened focus on seductive physical movements as a portrayal of femininity. This shift is evident in the increased percentages of displays indicating subordination, beyond mere smiling or winking. It could be argued that due to limited resources for international outreach, agencies sought to swiftly capture local audiences by resorting to the over-commodification of female bodies. As a result of differing marketing goals, from Gen 2 to Gen

2.5, there is a discernible rise in the prevalence of submissive displays among female idols, bordering on oversexualization.

In Gen 3, idol groups competed with a diversity of concepts. But by Gen 4, the girl crush concept flourished in the K-pop industry. Female idol groups explicitly voiced empowerment, intending to break from the shackles of hyperfemininity. Songs released in this period focused less on romantic love and more on self-confidence (see Graph 2). Smiling in MVs became a sign of confidence instead of a presentation of innocence.

Graph 2

Comparison of Percentage of Love Songs Among Generations

Gen 2	67%
Gen 2.5	87%
Gen 3	67%
Gen 4	24%

Lee and Yi (2020) have suggested an association between the phenomenon of "strong sisters" and the third wave of feminism. With a continually growing feminist movement in Korea following #MeToo, the role of social media platforms is prominent in disseminating feminist activism that is inspired by the West (Shin, 2021). Under this influence, Westernized feminist themes hybridized with Confucian conventions stand out in the Hallyu 4.0 (Boman, 2022). Rooted in media culture, feminism in today's Korean popular culture can be understood under the framework of "postfeminism" (Li, 2022). By absorbing the system of neoliberalism and individualism, postfeminism, better conceived as a "sensibility," articulates personal choice and uses beauty to feel good about oneself (Gill, 2007). Applied to performances, this idea is manifested in the idols' confident attitude and intensified subjectivity (see Favaro, 2017), thus also explaining the rising volume of "egoistic" songs.

I contend that the kind of bridgework assigned to female idols extends beyond simply exhibiting femininity. To continually "bridge" the younger generations of audiences globally, regardless of gender, this "work," grounded in consumerism, is fluid and evolves with popular media trends. With the growth of feminist movements, it is not surprising that Gen 4 became committed to popular feminist sentiments. However, it remains questionable whether female idols internalize their aesthetic labor in line with postfeminist values as autonomous beings, or if they remain passive objects, adhering to neo-Confucian beliefs.

Over the generations of K-pop girl groups, there has been a shift from innocent girls mixed with strong women, to a trend of embracing sensual femininity, to a diversity of concepts, and finally to a parade of "girl crushes." While some groups have challenged gender norms through hypermasculinity, others have perpetuated emphasized femininity with relatively high percentages of submissive behavior and overt sexualization of female bodies. In the next section, I will elaborate on objectification theory and test my hypothesis about the correlation between song production credits and opposition to female oppression.

II.   **Sexual Objectification**
        To measure the presence of sexual objectification, I examined three variables: (1) close shots of "exposed" body parts, (2) provocative clothing, and (3) treatment as objects. Graph 3 presents the average close shot units shown in a female idol group music video in each generation. While the results are not salient, there is a positive correlation between the feminine display and close-shot units. For example, close shots are used most often in Gen 2.5 – a generation with the highest average display of subordinate variables. One prevalent shooting sequence is that when the choreography incorporates a hip movement, the camera tends to focus on the butt. Although their flesh is not strictly exposed, they are usually wearing tight clothing that delineates their bodies' curves.

Graph 3

Comparision of Average Close Shot Units in MVs Among Generations
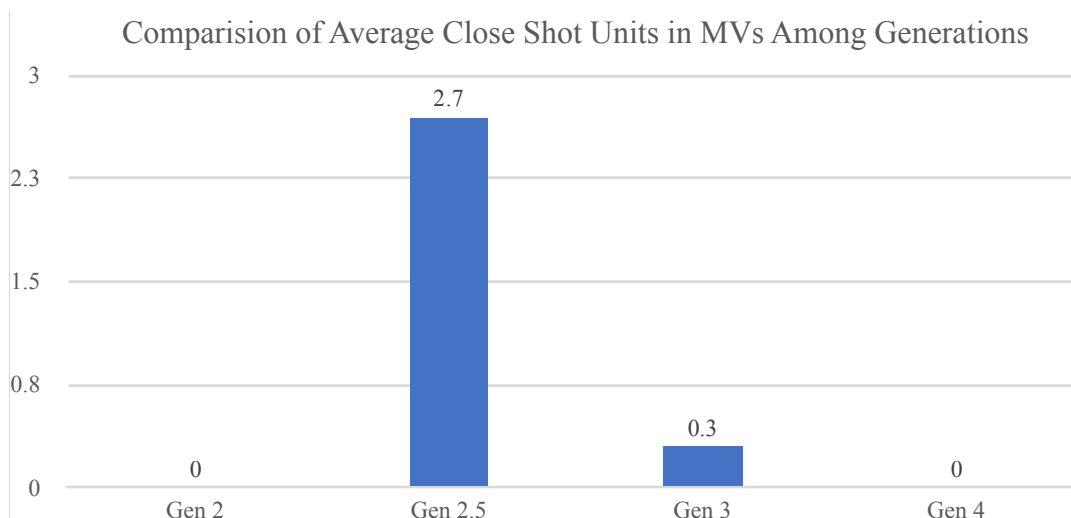
Compared to the data in Graph 3, that in Graph 4 is more prominent. I only analyzed the outfits that the idols wore when dancing collectively; if individual outfits were also coded, the percentage would be higher. Hot shorts and miniskirts — typical symbols of fetishized femininity — play a central factor in the percentages. Among the 28 videos that involve provocative outfits, 78.6% of them pertained to being too short. By adhering to these dress codes, female idols' legs are visually emphasized and take on a significant physical presence (Kim, 2011). For example, in Sistar's (Gen 2.5) "Alone," along with the reflective dance floor, dark setting, and leg-sliding choreography, the monochrome high-cut dresses construct a memorable impression of the legs. This same applies to Gen 4 girl crush groups. In Aespa's

"Black Mamba" and "Savage," short bottoms increase the visibility of their inner thighs, especially with camera positions and squatting actions in the two music videos, respectively. Even for the clothing that I did not code as provocative, female idols' legs can still be drawn as a focal point. After scrutinizing SNSD's (Gen 2) "The Boys," Oh (2014, p. 60) asserted how choreography alone brings an emphasis on their "long, white, slender, [and] nonmuscular" legs. Like ballerinas, tiptoeing and circular dance movements reinforce the notion of gendered legs.

Graph 4

Comparison of Percentage of Provocative Outfits Appeared in MVs Among Generations
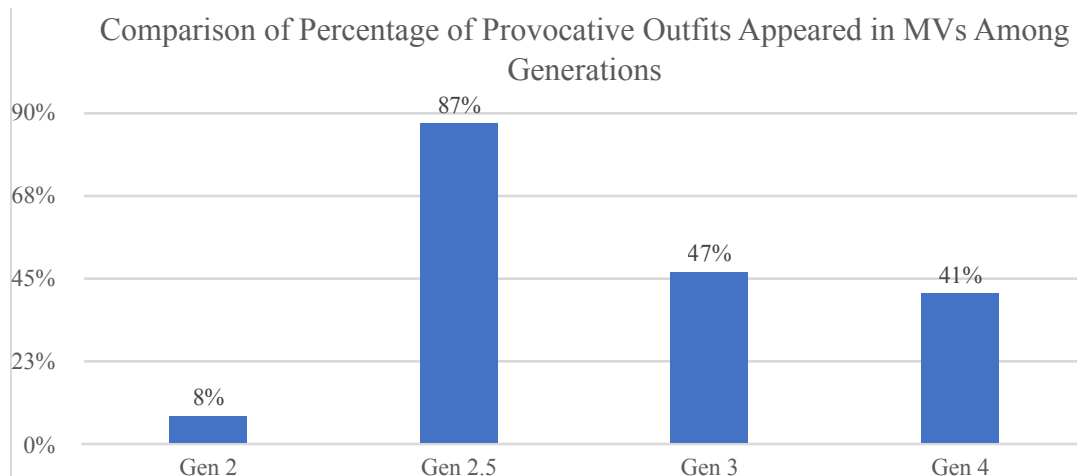
Three music videos across generations include moments when female idols are overtly depicted as lifeless objects. First, in "Gee," SNSD (Gen 2) are portrayed as animated and cute mannequins. Their subjectivity is activated only through the male character's gaze and heterosexual affection (Kim 2019). Second, EXID (Gen 2.5) are objectified in "Up & Down," where their body parts can be split in half and (disparately) stuck together by a magician wearing a lion headpiece. Third, (G)I-dle's (Gen 4) "Tomboy" embeds a storyline where the girls are turned into Barbie dolls that move awkwardly. By treating female idols as objects, the music videos seem to normalize the phenomenon of female submission to male desires and exalt fetishism (Kim, 2019).

The overall results affirm previous studies of objectification in music videos (Aubrey & Frisby, 2011; Frisby & Aubrey, 2012). Through camera techniques and provocative attire, female artists are sexualized and confined to stereotypical gendered appearances. Separated from their faces and identities, their bodies exist for public consumption and pleasure (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Nevertheless, resistance can be established in some music videos characterized by hypersexualization and objectification. Visual imagery and lyrics can provide extra context to the music, such as by containing lesbian relationships, weaponized sexuality, matriarchal images, and other things that subvert the male gaze (Osborn, 2021). In fact, EXID's (Gen 2.5) "Up & Down" and (G)I-dle's (Gen 4) "Tomboy" illustrate resistance to the male gaze and expectations of women through their plots, in which the male characters who try to manipulate the girls are either poisoned or hanged. Instead of being cast in the roles of victims, EXID and (G)I-dle are portrayed as perpetrators of femme fatale violence, subverting the norms of sexuality and

violence. In this portrayal, their bodies are not objectified, but instead are presented as the carriers of power and control (Doane, 1991).

Another commonality between EXID and (G)I-dle is that one of their members was involved in the song production process. Whether idols are credited in a song results in substantial disparities in the scheme of lyrics and complexity of stories. Though more songs feature resistance as generations progress, qualitative differences lie in the depth of lyrics and the overarching themes. One significant distinction between songs that credit members and those that do not, aside from the indication of self-agency, is that the former speaks to the experiences of a broader female audience. They tackle greater societal issues such as the male gaze, freedom of expression (i.e., political advocacy and choosing what to wear), and gender stereotypes. In contrast, songs that lacked member's involvement, regardless of what generation they were released from, convey a straightforward message of rebellion or self-boast. Admittedly, the high level of confidence displayed by female idols is undeniable, at least in their music videos, and their lyrics can be personal. For example, in Le Sserafim's (Gen 4) "Antifragile," Kazuha's and Sakura/Chaewon's lines are "Don't forget my pointe shoes I left behind / What more must be said" and "Don't underestimate the path I've walked I go to ride 'til I die, die," respectively. These lines reflect their strong and determined personalities, especially given Kazuha's background as a professional ballerina and Sakura and Chaewon's prior debut experiences. However, as their previous song "Fearless" also draws attention to their tough but vibrant past, the resulting exaggeration of their experiences becomes a label for self-commercialization.

Credited songs were also similar in their higher gender display percentage for masculinity/dominance and femininity/subordination, provoking queer sentiments. Nonetheless, their outfits may be subject to sexualization: EXID's attire in "Ah Yeah" sexualizes businesswomen, resembling the trend in Gen 2.5, and one set of the outfits in "Tomboy" is short and tight, correlating to stereotypical provocative female idols' clothing. Moreover, these videos all include scenes of sexy dancing, which may invite the male gaze despite being presented in an assertive manner. Corresponding to the postfeminist sentiment of empowerment being established through sexuality (Tasker & Negra, 2007), the female idols replicate the media norm that preaches "confidence is sexy," and remodels self-governance to a construction of an image grounded in neoliberal capitalism, enlisting women to pursue aesthetic labor (Favaro, 2017).

McRobbie (2009, p. 12) criticizes this postfeminist ideology as a "double entanglement" that "comprises the co-existence of neo-conservative values in relation to gender, sexuality and family life…with the processes of [liberalization] in regard to choice and diversity in domestic, sexual and kinship relations." While the "taken into accountness" is celebrated through autonomy, feminist politics are dismantled "by aggressive individualism, by a hedonistic female phallicism in the field of sexuality, and by obsession with consumer culture" (p. 5). In the case of K-pop, even with the increasing volume of songs that aim to resist the societal construction of gender, the overwhelming use of individualistic lyrics and materialistic symbols (i.e., luxury cars, shopping bags, and tanks decorated by diamonds) theoretically have nothing to do with feminist concerns of overcoming patriarchy. Thus, McRobbie (2009) concludes that postfeminism is an "undoing" of feminism.

Furthermore, in the context of popular culture, postfeminist culture incorporates and naturalizes various aspects of feminism to a form of compelling popular feminism (Tasker &

Negra, 2007). Feminism is branded, wrapped in gender equality, and marketed for sale through the platform of media (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Based on this framework, the girl crush concept that advertises female empowerment is a product sold by entertainment companies on YouTube. Being a platform for circulation, social media provides visibility and accessibility for this popular feminist content where, in this cyclical process, its popularity grows as it gains more visibility, which in turn allows for even greater visibility (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Meanwhile, this visibility of popular feminism is shaped by neoliberal capitalism that has no political vision beyond the market and its measures (Rottenberg, 2018). In Korea, even though feminist activities are gaining traction, particularly in the context of sexual harassment (Shin, 2021), feminism remains a sensitive topic in the entertainment industry. Female idols across generations rarely openly state their feminist positions (if any) in public, perhaps due to concerns over anti-feminist backlash and marketing considerations in a society that holds certain neo-conservative gender values (Li, 2022). Therefore, virtually no song can escape its destiny from being commercialized, regardless of members' participation in the production process. Commercialization promotes the idea of postfeminism as the market shapes feminist ideology.

Conclusion

After a systematic study of the presentation of girl groups across generations in their music products, my findings indicate that while the thematic messages of girl groups' songs and performance styles have evolved in response to globalization and popular feminism, female idols continue to be confined to the norm of sexualization, with limited autonomy over their bodies. Acknowledging the inequality and power dynamics within the K-pop star system, I believe that female idols should be granted more individual freedom rather than being manipulated as pretty idols. One way to achieve this is by involving them more in the song production process, particularly in songwriting, allowing them to express their concerns and interests. However, there are two main obstacles that hinder this progress: age and market reality. Since the average debut age for idols is around 18, with some debuting as young as 14, it is skeptical whether they receive adequate education and socialization to develop personal values and navigate gender politics. In cases where female idols possess songwriting abilities, it is more common to see credits for their work in groups from small- to middle-sized companies. This could be attributed to larger entertainment agencies already having abundant resources, such as sophisticated production capabilities, strategic planning, and promotion teams, to ensure the outcome and quality of the final products. Adopting an assembly line approach is probably the most efficient way for these agencies to generate profits within the shortest possible time and with minimal risk, prioritizing addictive melodies and catchy phrases over the depth of lyrics to capture a mainstream audience. Producing profound songs with a small audience would miss the purpose of commercial production.

Amid an era of globalization, the Korean entertainment industry is responsive to the changing demands of global markets. The concept of popular girl groups has transformed across generations to meet the changing ideals of femininity: As feminist movements gain momentum worldwide, the previous trend of hyperfemininity has gradually given way to the commodification of transnational postfeminist culture through the emergence of the girl crush concept. At the same time, this ambition for globalization has limited the range of themes

explored in popular music. Even when female idols are involved in song production, their creativity is often constrained by market ideologies of popular feminism.

Based on the findings of qualitative content analysis, songs that demonstrate a form of resistance often exhibit a "double entanglement" that undoes feminism by emphasizing empowerment through sexuality alongside notions of individualism and materialism. Consequently, considering the present obstacles and circumstances, I argue that the potential for K-pop to advance feminist movements is relatively limited. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that within the K-pop industry, the boundaries between femininity and masculinity can be blurred, as evidenced by the low percentages for both dominance and subordination gender displays. Under this queer culture, accompanied by female idols' practice of cross-dressing performances and androgynous fashion styles, K-pop can be a source for its consumers to explore their gender and sexual identities.

While this study contributes to the existing research on K-pop mainly within the context of gender, it faces some limitations. The primary one is its relatively low reliability due to the absence of an inter-rater in coding the music videos. While I tried to minimize inconsistencies in the codes by watching the videos multiple times and following a guideline, some codes may still contain ambiguities. Future studies could enhance the reliability by involving multiple raters in the coding process while completing the data on Gen 4 girl groups as this era comes to an end. Furthermore, to improve the external validity of the findings and explore whether the resistance demonstrated in female idol groups' music videos promotes a queering effect or empowers its audience, it would be worthwhile to measure the public perception of the songs on social media platforms such as Twitter. This would allow for a broader assessment of the songs' impact and reception. Extending the research to a comparative study among different nations' viewers could also shed light on how cultural factors influence how fans interpret and attribute meaning to gender and sexuality.

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Appendix A

Data	Sources
Lyrics and Song Interpretations	Genius YouTube Seoulbeats AtrocityCL
Music Videos	YouTube
Member Profile	kprofiles
Complimentary K-pop News	allkpop soompi koreaboo