

MISOGYNISTIC IN THE K-POP INDUSTRY: ANALYZING GENDER BIAS TOWARDS FEMALE IDOLS

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ABSTRACT. Misogyny, which includes enforcing strict beauty standards, unequal treatment, harassment, and objectification, has always been a problem in the K-pop industry. Using content analysis, the study focuses on how the media presents how misogyny operates in the K-pop industry. It examines how companies treat female idols, how female K-pop idols are portrayed, and how gender dynamics affect their career path. The study offers a viewpoint on the unequal treatment of women in K-Pop due to their gender, the cause of such treatment, the impacts on their mental health, and the perspectives and experiences of female idols as they navigate the patriarchal norms controlling the industry. The results show that misogyny is a common issue in the K-pop industry. Also, the harassment and objectification they experienced limited their freedom.

Keywords: Misogyny, K-Pop industry, Female idols

MISOGINIS DALAM INDUSTRI K-POP: MENGANALISIS BIAS GENDER TERHADAP IDOLA PEREMPUAN

ABSTRAK. Misogini, yang mencakup penerapan standar kecantikan yang ketat, perlakuan tidak adil, pelecehan, dan objektifikasi, selalu menjadi masalah dalam industri K-pop. Dengan menggunakan analisis konten, penelitian ini berfokus pada bagaimana media menampilkan cara misogini beroperasi dalam industri K-pop. Penelitian ini menjelaskan cara-cara perusahaan memperlakukan idola perempuan, bagaimana idola K-pop perempuan digambarkan, dan bagaimana dinamika gender mempengaruhi jalur karir mereka. Penelitian ini menawarkan sudut pandang tentang perlakuan tidak adil terhadap perempuan dalam K-pop karena jenis kelamin mereka, penyebab perlakuan tersebut, dampaknya terhadap kesehatan mental mereka, serta perspektif dan pengalaman idola perempuan saat mereka menghadapi norma-norma patriarkal yang mengontrol industri tersebut. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa misogini adalah masalah umum dalam industri K-pop. Selain itu, pelecehan dan objektifikasi yang mereka alami membatasi kebebasan mereka.

Kata-kata kunci: Misogini, Industri K-Pop, Idola perempuan

INTRODUCTION

Cited from Hogarth (2013), The Korean Wave (*Hallyu* in Korean) is the term coined by the Chinese media towards the end of the last millennium to describe the sudden, surprising surge in the popularity of Korean entertainment products in China. Another popular entertainment product that started the Korean Wave was Korean pop music, generally called K-pop (Hogarth, 2013). According to Hogarth (2013), K-pop belongs to the third type of globalization. By definition, K-pop entails the export of music "made in Korea" to global consumers because the domestic music market is drastically hampered by its trifling size and rampant, albeit diminishing, piracy. Recently, K-pop has influenced people worldwide and has gone global with its catchy music and unique culture among fans. However, behind the positive and negative sentiments concerning the K-pop industry, it is widely believed that female K-pop idols are frequently subject to

various types of mistreatment, especially by K-pop companies.

Mosse (1993) explained that the feminist movement is a response to the inequality that occurs in society due to discrimination and social injustice as well as the downturn of one group in society, which in this case is women, caused by patriarchy. Female idols in the K-pop industry have experienced gender-based mistreatment by their companies and fans. This mistreatment usually includes sexual harassment and imposition of objectifying beauty standards. For Instance, Sulli, a female idol who took her life, was frequently bashed for the way she dressed (e.g., wearing shirts without a bra). She was also insulted as a "fake feminist" for stating her opinion about abortion and gender issues, which led to hatred and sexist slurs addressed to her (Park & Kim, 2021). Although mistreatment in the K-pop industry happens to both male and female idols, the ones who get mistreated more often are the female

idols. Female idols usually get bashed, slutshamed, and hated more than male idols.

Misogyny in K-pop is not an unusual topic to talk about. According to Jonas (2022), women in the K-pop industry have experienced the negative influences of feminization through four lenses: a triple shift, catering to the male gaze, decreased agency, and a shortened career timeline. As a result, girl group idols are more frequently exploited, as companies swap priority to nurture artists for profit maximization. Several issues related to the K-pop industry and culture, for example, tweeting about misogyny in South Korea (Park & Kim, 2021), feminism in K-pop fandom (Y. Lee, 2019), and misogyny attitude (Zeinert et al., 2021; Rottweiler & Gill, 2021; Rische, 2023). Despite these significant findings, there are still gaps in research regarding misogyny, specifically in the K-Pop industry. What factors contribute to this issue within the industry? What actions have companies taken to prevent this problem, or are they themselves the perpetrators? These questions are the particular focus of this study.

The misogyny often observed in the K-pop industry provides an opportunity to analyze the Korean perspective on women and the industry's misogynistic environment. Therefore, this study examines why female idols are mistreated, the impact of strict Korean beauty standards, and the reasons behind certain Korean views on women.

METHOD

This content analysis addresses the intricate subtleties of misogyny in the K-Pop industry. First, information is selected from news articles, interviews, social media posts, industry reports, and additional media representations of female idols from 2010 to 2023. The statistics regarding gender inequality in South Korea reveal the extent to which women are discriminated against to date. South Korea's position of 108th out of 153 countries in the Global Gender Gap Report (World Economic Forum, 2019) serves as further evidence of this fact. In a gender-biased society, women are more likely to be sexually objectified and to be held to much higher standards when it comes to their physical appearance.

Additionally, women are typically portrayed as delicate, dependent, submissive, and nurturing characters, while men are typically portrayed as authoritative, assertive, and prone to aggression. These portrayals of women are consistent with traditional gender stereotypes (Lin & Rudolf, 2017). Dimri (2023) argues that in recent years, South Korea has been bitterly divided over gender issues, as evidenced by the election of Yoon Suk-Yeol as the

current President of South Korea in 2022. Yoon Suk-Yeol has repeatedly denied the existence of gender-based discrimination against women in South Korea. He has risen to power by pandering to anti-feminists, which often consist of young South Korean men who believe that they are being discriminated against, with progressive policies that aim to empower women at the expense of men.

Using a purposive sample approach ensures that various sources representing different viewpoints and experiences in the industry are included. The collected data is then carefully arranged thematically using well-known theoretical frameworks like gender studies and feminist theory (Ferguson, 2019) as a guide. The study uses constant comparison techniques to identify and thoroughly analyze frequent patterns and themes related to misogynistic behaviors and gender biases toward female idols. Three-way coding and cross-referencing with published literature are used as triangulation techniques to increase the validity and dependability of the results. This thorough and methodical approach fits in perfectly with the research objective of explaining how misogyny occurs in the K-pop industry and how it affects female idols. With a transparent and thorough methodology, this study aims to make a meaningful contribution to the conversation about gender inequality (Lorber, 2001) in K-Pop and promote fair treatment and rights protection for female idols, fostering an environment that is more empowering and inclusive within the industry.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Gender roles in Korea have historically been interpreted in an androcentric manner, placing women on the margins of public culture (Ruhlen, 1998; Kim & Kim, 2014). The nation's founding myths, like the widespread adoption of Confucianism as a national ideology since the second century—which persisted until the introduction of Christianity in the 18th century, and the story of Tan'Gun, are the sources of these gender norms for Korean women.

Tan'Gun is the mythical forefather and founder of the Korean People (Kim, 1948). According to Grayson (2015), This myth is very complex and unusually rich in symbols and motifs, resonating with other mythic traditions. In the myth, we see an explanation for the origin of human culture, for the origin of the ruling clan of the state, for the origin of the nation (a people with a clear identity), and for the state itself. Seen in this light, the foundation myth of Chosŏn from the beginning has

been a highly political narrative offering a comprehensive explanation for the origin of 'contemporary' society and the state.

These ideologies essentially assign women to inferior roles in society in relation to men. These biases are also reflected in how female idols are portrayed in the media, particularly in the K-pop industry, where studies show instances of misogyny and gender bias. As a result, gender inequality is still a major problem in South Korea in a variety of contexts and areas. Dirmi (2023) explained that even though prejudiced beliefs regarding women remain entrenched in South Korean society, the majority of men act as if women have attained full equality and are portraying themselves as victims of an unjust society to gain leverage over men.

In K-pop, female idols frequently face discrimination and pressure to meet rigid beauty standards. The way boy groups and girl groups are treated in the K-pop industry is still very different from one another, which highlights the prominent gender biases in the industry. There is an inequality in autonomy in the industry because female idols typically wear revealing outfits (Lin & Rudolf, 2017), whereas male idols frequently portray authority through their wardrobe choices. Male groups enjoy more freedom to experiment with choreography, while female groups are restricted to conventional, hypersexualized routines (Jonas, 2022). A simple Google image search using the keywords "K-pop girl groups" could provide explanations for why K-pop often receives criticism from its own fans for sexually objectifying women. Revealing costumes, erotic choreographies, close-ups of female idols' bare legs and waving crotches and hips, as well as depictions of sexual suggestiveness, have become props of music videos and live performances of mainstream female idols (Lin & Rudolf, 2017). This bias also exists in other areas of dance expression. The situation keeps female idols stuck in a concerning cycle of hypersexualization or infantilization, rarely allowing for authentic expression or the sharing of intimate moments (Jonas, 2022).

Unequal Treatment and Strict Beauty Standards

Furthermore, in South Korea, being pretty matters in order to get a job (Hamdon & Timur, 2020). Female idols are constantly subjected to strict and frequently unrealistic beauty standards in a variety of media platforms, and their appearance is the subject of relentless scrutiny and criticism. This phenomenon not only reinforces negative body image ideals but also causes considerable psychological

distress for female idols, which has an impact on their confidence and general well-being. The need for pretty women in the workplace can relate to South Korea's everyday culture since the 19th century, when, according to Park and Kang (1994), women are like 'flowers of the office.' The phrase 'flowers of the office' describes female staff's perceived role in Korean companies. As 'flowers,' they served to brighten up the otherwise masculine atmosphere of the office. They were offered limited tasks, commanding low status and poor remuneration. For example, around 1980, women in the workplace were only allowed to do 'women's work' such as cleaning, decorating the office, and making tea for male colleagues and visitors. The phrase insinuated that women were regarded as inferior, submissive, and 'decorative' in other people's eyes, primarily men (Hamdon & Timur, 2020). Female idols are under much pressure to maintain a perfect look, which causes them to put up with constant dietary restrictions, follow strict skincare routines, and frequently turn to cosmetic enhancements to achieve physical perfection (Lin & Rudolf, 2017). These pressures can affect them both physically and mentally. It is an open secret to Koreans and K-pop fans that idols often had plastic surgery before they debuted (Fuhr, 2015). Lee (2012) details how plastic surgery, which is primarily shaped by this lookism in popular culture, has become normalized as economically necessary for success (e.g., in job and marriage markets) not only in Korean society but also transnationally vis-a-vis Hallyu's unsurpassed popularity.

'Traditional' girl group idols are images culminated through overarching patriarchal expectations; they should stick thin, have big eyes and doll-like features, and have long, thin legs (Kuwahara, 2014). Cited by Jonas (2022), dehumanizing the idol to the fanbase, she must be impossibly both a virgin and sexually experienced—ready to fulfill her (male) fan's desires. Not looking the part, aging beyond the short timeframe of desirability, or gaining the title of wife or mother causes an idol to enter a permanent state of sexual unavailability, and the fantasy she portrays is broken. To prevent this, girl group concepts stray from female empowerment and sharing lived experiences because they do not sell in a culture still dominated by misogyny (Steger, 2016; Kwon, 2019).

Limited Career Opportunities

Gender roles are intertwined with workplace management, and women face the brunt of discrimination in the name of 'maximizing profits'

(Mohamed, 2008). The idol industry has also seen a two-fold interpretation of feminization of the workforce, first, through the systematic devaluation of what is considered 'women's work,' and then through a higher proportion of women in the labor force than men. The result is the mistreatment of girl group members and the subsequent emergence of gendered spheres in the industry to elevate the value of content from boy groups and male members (Jonas, 2022). Often, girl groups are also managed by an androcentric creative team, which manifests discrimination in the form of extreme body policing, exclusion from the creative process, and an overall lack of agency (Hong, 2014). A gendered timeline is an expected facet of the neoliberal workplace. Grown, Elson, and Cagatay (2000) argue that when labor performed by women is considered "casual, irregular, flexible, [and] precarious" when compared to what is considered "man's work," those women who enter the workforce are more likely to exit it quicker than their male counterparts (as cited in Mohammed, 2008). Women quit work because of various reasons, including microaggressions, active sexist policies, and general societal pressures urging them to exit the workforce.

One such pressure comes when a woman receives the title of mother or wife. This is a career-ending life event in the idol industry, as every girl group member who has gotten married or becomes a mom has left her career as an idol (JeonAe, 2020). Typically, her group has disbanded after as well. However, for male idols, this is not necessarily the case. There are more idol fathers than mothers, and most fathers are still active. Consider the idol couple Yul Hee of LABOUM and Min Hwan of F.T. Island (JeonAe, 2020). After their marriage and the birth of their child in 2018, Yul Hee left her group, and Min Hwan remained in his (Jonas, 2022).

Still, regarding love life, female idols were often hated more when they had dating scandals. For example, when BLACKPINK's Jennie was rumored to be dating BTS's V, she was heavily criticized by V's and BTS's fans, whereas V received significantly less backlash than Jennie. Usually, K-Pop fans often bashed female idols by calling them female-degrading slurs when most of V's fans are girls. This is an example of internalized misogyny, the "phenomenon when women subconsciously project sexist ideas onto feminist concepts, other women, and even onto themselves" (Eva Marriott-Fabre, 2022). Another case of internalized misogyny in the K-pop industry is when a female idol got into a bullying scandal; most K-pop fans immediately bashed her without waiting for

clarification from her and her company. Meanwhile, when a male idol gets into a bullying scandal, most K-pop fans respond with supportive comments that it was fake news, sending support for him to be strong enough to face that case or anything that shows that they are in denial.

Harassment and Objectification

Moreover, the study revealed how common it is for female idols in the K-pop industry to face objectification and harassment. Female idols are often objectified and sexualized beyond their professional roles as performers, becoming little more than objects of desire for industry insiders and fans alike. Cited from Lin & Rudolf (2017), in a 2012 documentary titled "9 Muses of Star Empire," the senior executive of the management company is revealed to have pressured the designer to shorten the skirts of the girl group Nine Muses. The purpose of this order is to get the girls' "honey thighs" more attention from the media. The documentary, however, focuses on the situation faced by female idols, who have little power to alter their sexualized clothing and provocative choreography but frequently feel ashamed or horrified by them. A further instance, in trying to get into the American market, influential K-pop artists BoA and Wonder Girls were portrayed by their management companies in a way that perpetuated the stereotype of Asian women in Western media as exotic, sexual products (Jung, 2010). The act of objectifying female idols deprives them of their agency and autonomy, therefore perpetuating an exploitative culture and strengthening harmful gender stereotypes. Constant exposure to this kind of objectification can make female idols feel vulnerable and helpless, which can make it harder for them to stand up for themselves and their rights in the industry.

According to Jonas (2022), the fantasy girl groups portray hinges on their notion of sexual purity. Even though girl groups can portray oversexualized themes in concepts, it is layered with an air of naivety and innocence, a beckoning to the male audience to claim her. Due to this gossamer assumption between the idol and the audience, an idol crossing the fantasy line can shatter the illusion and end the idol's career. This investment risk can motivate companies to implement "No Dating" clauses and curfews. Lin and Rudolf (2017) described that Sexually objectifying female artists may be the most overt way that K-pop reinforces sexist attitudes against women. However, K-pop also reinforces sexist attitudes in a more subverted way by organizing or manipulating young female idols'

femininity to meet role expectations in the patriarchal society. It is not difficult to notice that most of the girl idols' performances are charged with sex appeal and *aegyo*, with sexual suggestiveness often balanced with an innocent, fragile, and childlike Lolita concept that was designed mainly to satisfy ajeossi (middle-aged men's) fantasies.

One of the most popular misogyny cases in the K-Pop industry was when Irene, a member of Red Velvet, showed on *Vlive*—a South Korean streaming service that allows artists to stream videos live over the internet and chat with fans in real-time (de Freitas, 2022)—that she read a book called *Kim Ji Young, Born 1982* that provides various lenses to view its feminist themes (Yang, 2022). After she did that *Vlive*, many Korean male fans burnt, tore, and threw away her merchandise, mostly photo cards. Another case was when Naeun, a member of Apink, posted a picture of her on Instagram. There, it can be seen that Naeun was holding her cell phone using a cellphone case that reads "GIRLS CAN DO ANYTHING." However, this simple declaration was met with a deluge of hatred sent her way by Korean netizens. The netizens did not appreciate an idol daring to display a feminist stance; consequently, the photos were taken down. (Dimri, 2023). Because of that photo, she was accused of promoting feminism. These show that the misogyny and patriarchy are still deeply rooted in South Korea.

The root of misogynistic and gender roles in Korea is caused by the nation's founding myths and the adoption of Confucianism as an ideology that has been explained above. However, among the five central relationships in Confucianism, women are primarily assigned the crucial role of wife to a man. In addition to imposing strict norms, this philosophical framework promotes early motherhood and marriage to a family-selected partner. According to H. K. Lee (2013), who explained this in her article, "I'm my mother's daughter, I'm my husband's wife, I'm my child's mother, I'm nothing else," women in Korean society frequently find their identities deeply entwined with their relationships to men and face many obstacles when trying to create their own unique identities. While Christianity, including Catholicism and Protestantism, was quickly adopted in Korea to modernize the country, it did provide women with more social agency, as evidenced by the bestowal of personal identities through baptismal names. However, Kim and Kim (2015) observed that the public sphere's perpetual androcentric character, rooted in the Confucian legacy, continued. Furthermore, neoliberal political and economic changes have reinforced the nation's inflexible gender

norms, even in the face of ideological changes. The gender binary representation in K-pop is a clear example of these dynamics in action and shows how deeply ingrained traditional ideologies are in Korean society today (Jonas, 2022).

Social attitudes toward women in South Korea and the mistreatment of female idols in the K-pop industry are deeply ingrained in systemic, historical, and cultural factors. Women are frequently expected to conform to traditional norms of femininity and subservience in South Korea's patriarchal society, which is rooted in traditional gender roles and perpetuates unequal power dynamics. This mistreatment is made worse by the entertainment industry's intense competition, which puts pressure on female idols to maintain a perfect image and stick to rigid beauty standards in order to be marketable. Furthermore, the objectification and exploitation of female idols are facilitated by their commodification as consumer goods. This harassment is made worse by social media, where female celebrities are continuously criticized and harassed. These attitudes toward women are further reinforced by Confucian values, which place a strong emphasis on filial piety and hierarchical relationships, thus perpetuating gender inequality. In order to address these problems, it is necessary to question established gender norms, advance gender equality, and stand up for the rights and dignity of women in South Korean society. We can work to create a more inclusive and empowering environment for female idols and women in South Korea overall by addressing these underlying attitudes and structures.

CONCLUSION

It is clear from examining the gender roles that are deeply rooted in Korean culture that androcentric narratives have been reinforced by historical and cultural factors, placing women in inferior roles. This paradigm has its roots in Confucianism, which was adopted as the national ideology and has historically emphasized the value of hierarchical relationships and women's subordination. It is also deeply ingrained in the nation's founding myths. These gender norms have endured, influencing societal attitudes and behaviors despite later ideological shifts brought about by the advent of Christianity and modernization initiatives.

These deeply rooted prejudices are poignantly illustrated by the K-Pop industry. Numerous obstacles confront female idols, such as unequal treatment, strict beauty standards, limited career prospects, and widespread objectification and

harassment. These difficulties reflect larger social problems, such as the stereotypes that women are frequently forced into and the scrutiny and criticism they receive for how they act and look.

As indicated by its low ranking in global gender gap reports, South Korea continues to struggle with gender inequality despite progress in certain areas. This inequality is highlighted by the way female idols are portrayed in the media, where women are frequently portrayed as hypersexualized and submissive. At the same time, men are given more freedom and authority. Moreover, societal pressures, reinforced by cultural and historical factors, perpetuate discrimination against women in the workplace, particularly in the K-Pop industry.

The mistreatment of female idols reflects broader societal attitudes toward women in South Korea, which are deeply ingrained and perpetuated by systemic, historical, and cultural factors. To address these issues, it is essential to challenge traditional gender norms, promote gender equality, and advocate for the rights and dignity of women. This requires a concerted effort to dismantle patriarchal structures, support women's empowerment initiatives, and foster a more inclusive and equitable society for all genders. By acknowledging and confronting these challenges, South Korea can work towards a future where women are afforded equal opportunities, respect, and agency in all aspects of life. To guarantee that women are treated fairly and given the same opportunities and rights as men, this may entail changes to the legal system, workplace policies, media representation, education, and workplace practices. Furthermore, encouraging gender issues awareness and discussion can support dismantling stereotypes and the development of an inclusive and diverse culture.

This research emphasizes how crucial it is to question developed gender stereotypes and develop gender equality in every aspect of society. The research emphasizes the need for structural change to guarantee that women are given equal opportunities, respect, and agency by looking at the experiences of female idols in the K-pop industry. Because it draws attention to the larger societal attitudes and structures that support gender inequality, this has implications for the entertainment industry and society at large.

Lastly, the study has a role in advocating and policy formation for gender equality in South Korea. The study supports attempts to create laws and programs that combat gender discrimination and advance women's rights and well-being by offering evidence-based insights into the difficulties faced by

female idols in the K-pop industry. A more inclusive and equitable future for all genders in South Korea could result from this, as it has the potential to spark positive change at the institutional and societal levels.

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