Pop, Girl Groups, Anime, Soap Operas: How East Asian Media's Negative Portrayal of Women Shapes Adolescents' View on Gender Equality and Self Image

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Abstract. Media has long been shaping people's perspectives and media in the patriarchal world has been constructing a typical portrayal of what women ought to resemble. This study aims to reveal how media in East Asia has been shaping women and how it has been affecting teenagers. Through gathering findings from different articles, it is found that women are often sexualized and commercialized under the heavy male gaze, acting for men's benefit, especially in East Asia where patriarchy had stuck along. With males dominating the industries and holding the wealth and power uniformly in most parts of the world, they have active control over their passive surroundings. Men choose what to represent according to their own standards and interests, injecting the male gaze onto all of the media they have touched upon. With its wide prevalence, people assimilate and subconsciously adopt the male gaze, which diminishes women. Adolescents can be strongly affected by this portrayal, such as encountering body dysmorphia, internalization of the male gaze, early attachment to pornography, etc.

Keywords: East Asia, women portrayal, patriarchy, media, adolescent.

1. Introduction

What defines a woman has been debated. History has never stopped scrutinizing women for what they do and how they behave, and under the rapid informational and free, capitalistic market era, the portrayal of women has been put into more questions than ever. This paper wishes to explore the impacts of media entertainment and capitalism's portrayal of women, especially K-Pop, Anime, and Soap Operas, on adolescents in South Asia. As pop culture and digital media become progressively "popular" in the world, it is inevitable to see people turning to K-pop groups, soap opera shows, anime, and celebrities as a form of entertainment that appears in many aspects of life. GenZ, the most active users of the internet, are especially heavily influenced by these entertainment forms. "22% of teenagers are enrolled in social networking programs about 10 times a day" [1]. Fully 95% of teens have access to a smartphone, and 45% claim they are online 'almost constantly [2]. The teenage years are vital to a person's construction of values and beliefs.

Only during infancy do humans undergo as much development in a short time. Children gain half of their adult body weight during adolescence, develop the ability to reproduce, and undergo a remarkable change in their brains and they are especially susceptible to influences since they are still in the process of learning about the world [3]. They are in the building of their personalities. There have been researches claiming South Asian media characterizes women as sexualized, infantized, and commodified. In the context of a long history of patriarchy in this world, it is hard to define what counts as a "male gaze", what counts as "sexualizing" and what is a "perfect body". For instance, in modern Korean history, female musicians and entertainers have primarily played a role in either embracing the cultural hegemony of the empires or appeasing patriarchal aspirations. Both Japan and the United States experience similar phenomena [4]. Media can mean games, social media apps, video-watching apps, K-pop, and anime. K-pop or "hallyu" is short for Korean pop culture. It has been quite an influential power in East Asian society. The industry produces all-round "idols" who maximized entertainment by dancing and singing. Anime is animated pictures, first popularized in Japan with over-beautified images of human beings. There is research that suggests media may impact

sexist views as well. Media may influence a wide range of views, including how individuals see violence and their paranormal beliefs [5].

Knowing that a healthy environment matters especially a lot for adolescents who are the future holders of society, this paper will focus on if, how, and why South Asian social media has the tendency to portray women as submissive, innocent, sexualized and flawlessly beautiful, and what negative portrayals make adolescents feel and perform.

2. Characteristics of Women in East Asian Media

2.1. Sexualization

K-pop manifests all-round, idealized versions of humans, “idols”, who look good, can sing, and can dance. When K-pop first started, there was a style called Motown. Instead of displaying creativity or talent, Motown women's groups exhibited conformity or uniformity by simply copying the sexual and physical traits of male producers in the business.

With the increase in demand for entertainment such as music, graphic pictures in popular music videos, shows, and stimulating content in media, the competition of who survives intensifies [5]. The rule of this game is usually whoever gets the audience's attention wins, and usually, the sexiest catches the most eyes. This rule heavily exacerbates the over-sexualization of female pop stars. "Survival of the sexiest" has evolved into a popular strategy for commercial success in the music business as a result of this intensifying rivalry.

Additionally, the industry's female labor forces are sexualized and made into commodities. They have laws governing women’s bodies since they are cultural assets. They define what is meant by "attractive" and put it on display [4]. Being particularly attractive, whether through plastic surgery or other modern means, becomes a manifestation of Korea's robust internalized patriarchy [6]. Extreme close-up images of the idols in leotards fetishize women’s body parts and highlight explicit sexual innuendos, particularly the buttocks gyrating, bouncing, and rubbing in the film. For instance, the generation III group "Stellar" put on a promotional event called "Guys, I'll do anything you tell me to do—Marionette" as a preview for the song. In essence, Stellar's members are being stripped for this Facebook game [7].

Apart from K-pop culture, females are sexually portrayed in other genres of social media. Anime is pictures of drawings in motion or animated pictures. It usually has exaggerated features. For instance, lots of female characters were drawn with big, glistening eyes, blonde hair, and big boobs. In a study, it is presented that women are underrepresented in anime and usually expected to be sexualized both physically and mentally. They are often times more curvaceous, and provocative than in reality. The findings of the study are consistent with the idea that anime features sexist competitions and that viewing this material is linked to hidden sexist ideas [5].

2.2. Commodification

K-pop’s business comes from quick mass production and idol groups (girl groups). The idols earn money from the agency groups that shape and mold their characteristics while the agencies host concerts. K-pop fans are engaged consumers who look for close ties with others through purchasing sentiments of pleasure, dominance, and ascension [8].

In a way, appreciating a K-pop star is similar to playing a game. To feel the pleasure, players spend money on buying the skins and the weapons for the character. Idols themselves do not have the power to make the decisions. The company or their agencies decide their event attires, their makeup, their dance moves, their music, and even often times their personality or character display features. Idols lack autonomy and are trained as real barbie dolls.

Anime has similar trends. Being in fandom means feeling a connection in the community. Some fans buy fan products such as mystery boxes of little cards with the characters' pictures on them, bracelets with the characters' names on them, or even human-sized cushions of the character to hug them at sleep.

A yearly "sex special" was first published by the Japanese women's magazine Anan in 1984. In 1989, the magazine made news with its cover, which read, "Become Beautiful through Sex." [9].

2.3. Ethereal Beauty

The idols' looks indirectly reflect and bring out to the audience what beauty means in Korea. The fixed belief in beauty has a strong influence on society as it propagates that only attractive women are given preferential attention in society. Such a mindset has a significant impact on Korean girl groups as well. Each female in the ensemble works really hard to conform to expectations and win over the audience. The females in these girl groups must appear alluring and stunning to maintain their position at the top [10]. They constantly have to battle with other attractive girls to win the interest and attention of these fans.

Same with anime or any game products, to attract players and make viewers visually stimulated and interested, the characters have overly exaggerated beautiful features which makes them almost too good to be true. Such standards can be reflected through the lens of the average citizens, especially teenagers.

2.4. Obedience

According to the concept of "commodification," K-pop idols are "conditioned to be an obedient, disciplined, and sexualized workforce, directly made by male corporate elites in the K-pop business to serve the interests and requirements of capital" [11,12].

K-pop idols are the carriers of trends in the East Asian community. From a capitalistic view, they are manipulated by the agencies to fit the liking of the viewers. Not only are the idols obedient to agencies, but their image in society is also implying a sense of docility. For instance, the blockbuster girl group "Girls' Generation (SNSD)" broke records in 2007. "In daily pornography, sexually objectified women are shown in positions and attire that make them look like young girls. Being adorable is fantastic, but being adorable in a way that is feeble and defers to more dominating forces like male desire and exploitation is not. When a male passenger passed by, mannequins in an exhibit sprang to life, as shown in SNSD's first music video for 'Gee'. This 'illustrates how the male gaze and male attachment are necessary for the activation and realization of female subjectivity and sexuality'"[4].

3. The Social Roles of Women in East Asian Media

Women in east Asia media are traditionally warm, expressive, communal, and nurturing; in contrast, men tend to be viewed as competitive, agentic, and dominant [5]. These "feminine" characters are actually all benefiting others. It is expected of women to treat people with kindness, care, and nurture. Women suffer when males are expected to be competitive, on the other hand, because they are the sacrificing and serving ones. Within all that stereotypes of women, the characterization can be separated into two categories, which corresponds with western media in the sense that there is a Mary, and there is an Eve. There is often a "good girl next door" trope, in which women are pure and young maidens who are assumed to be like the virgin Mary. In the patriarchal status quo's sexual politics, SNSD fetishizes a symbolic construction of childlike innocence as a straightforward sexual object. Children and infants are nimble and easy to manage. "This glorified representation of submissive gender roles further normalizes the patriarchal ideology as 'double blind' female audiences by objectifying and commodifying themselves" [4]. These are characteristics of women to keep at home and marry when it is time for men to settle down [13].

The other trope is the Western corresponding "Eve": Eves are then more dangerous, free-spirited, and sexier. In East Asian mythology there are terms such as "hong yan huo shui", which basically means that beautiful women may bring trouble. Historically, it is the woman or concubine who brings termination to an empire. Women were typically the scapegoats for luring men to do wrong things such as eating the apple in the garden of Eden. They are the wet dreams that get men aroused.

Oftentimes they can get the blame for "acting licentious", or too provocative to men. Men like sexy women; they are naturally attracted to conquering challenging things, but they are also afraid of women being too independent and out of their control.

Women being categorized into the interesting "Eve" that can give men sexual desire and simulation, and the loyal "Virgin Mary" to keep at home had its genesis in evolution. Biologically, humans live for the effectiveness of reproduction. Men and women have different approaches to this evolutionary trend, in which women have to carry the burden of bringing up the children, and men have to just "spread the seed". Therefore, women would look for men who can give them long-term loyalty, resources, and support to marry, yet at the same time, still be interested in the dangerous, handsome, fit, flirty men outside, to want to carry their quality genes.

Men want to spread as many seeds as they can with the least effort. "Because the male is potentially always at risk of unwittingly raising the offspring of another male, two (often complementary) male sexual strategies have evolved to counter this genetic threat: mate guarding and promiscuity" [14].

For guarding, men need a Mary. They have to woo the woman that carries good quality genes and loyalty to get her to reproduce with them. A man typically views a woman's exclusive allegiance or readiness to have children as a sign of status and security. He typically views coy, timid, serious-about-who-to-have-kids women as being loyal to him and eager to stay at home because he does not want his wife covertly bringing home children from another guy and using up his resources. He will nonetheless engage in sexual activity with any lady outside in order to transmit his genes [15].

Therefore, both genders struggle with the power balance of selecting the best offspring. This way of thinking is deeply rooted in human genes and is the most recognized explanation for the phenomenon of people marrying the stable, boring person, getting madly jealous of their spouse yet still cheating on them outside, looking for pleasure. However, the genetic need does get very paranoid: a series of social constructs such as veils, virginity, and foot wrap trap women at home, being objects and possession of men. From sluts, to whores, to gold diggers, wet dreams and sex pistols, caretakers and nurturers, men brand women labels and names eventually domesticate women and take over. When patriarchy takes over, this greed for their wives' reproductive availability secures men's resources and ironically other women's chances of carrying their offspring, leading to more control and heavier inequality, even transferring that misogyny into other parts of life, internalizing it, and suffocating women.

4. How Media gets to Shape the Idea of Women

What makes East Asian media easy in subtly shape the delineation of women, especially through the lens of adolescents remains arguable. Media can entertain people. The audience gets stimulation from the vivid imagery and loud effects of the beautiful moving figures on the screen. Indeed, further down beneath the surface, there are other key factors that vary from a capitalistic means to counter the male audience, male corporate elites in the industry, and a long-term patriarchal culture ingrained in East Asia.

4.1. The Need for a Perfect Ideal Girlfriend to Daydream about Due to Heavy Pressure

After a long day of work, people need relaxation. Through the heavy pressure of work (especially living in Asia), people get very anxious about marriage and living. Culturally, Asians are more conservative towards sex, virginity, and physical relationships. Previous research revealed that Asian students substantially exhibited sociosexual restrictiveness and interpersonal sexual behavior on all measures, compared to non-Asian students [16]. There are fewer people marrying in the status quo. It is not easy to find a suitable partner when it is hard to earn money and marriage is expensive. In traditional families, men are still seen as the breadwinners of the family, thus they would feel more pressure and want to marry less when their income state is unstable. Therefore, people are choosing to stay single and fulfill their own wishes for ideal partners through the virtual-girlfriend image in anime and girl groups in the media.

4.2. The Male Crew, Male Gaze, Dominating the Industry, Capitalizing, Catering to a Male Audience

K-pop and anime are exceptionally great at manifesting a wet dream and model girlfriend. Female bodies are commodified as sexual commodities and subject to industrial regulation. K-pop female superstars redefine and modify the need for sexy, alluring female images as a sexiness technology in Korea's patriarchal capitalism as a type of cultural capital [4]. Through the long history of patriarchy, all industries have been long dominated by men. "Girl groups are marketed towards the male gaze, by largely male creative staff and with fewer idols participating" [17]. The women's lack of agency, whether in the lyrics, body language, or social interactions, is the most prominent aspect of their content [17]. Men understand what men like, and through their portrayal, through the male gaze, women are portrayed as more promiscuous and more attractive than ever. Female idols are brainwashed into thinking this is the way they act. When they act as such, their popularity increase, more fans support them and go to their concerts and they are tricked into believing such a way can help them gain power, while in reality, this belief leads to their self-exploitation. Hypersexuality is due to low self-esteem. Korean idols tend to evidence such an explanation. When they do not receive the proper appreciation from others, they escalate their hypersexuality in an effort to make up for their lower self-esteem. It is the desire to receive approval from others. The K-pop female idol is forced into an embarrassing performance of sexual dance routines by this vicious cycle, which causes "voracious [narcissistic] preoccupation in self wants and the obstruction of their fulfillment" [4].

In Japan, gameplay has been more popular among boys rather than girls. Games with animal characters, such as Animal Crossing: New Leaf and puzzle games, are well-liked among girls. In conventional role-playing games, male characters are more frequently the main or player-controlled characters [18]. To benefit or attract male players, the dressing of females can be especially exposing. In a study on games and gender stereotypes, for instance, it was found that some female gamers commented how many female characters are all cute. Others concurred that compared to male figures, female characters show more skin. Men may unintentionally absorb these ideals and use that technique of mental modeling while under stress.

4.3. Reachable Pornography and Rigorous Visual Simulation

Anime, similarly, has sexual content. The reasons for anime's popularity among teenagers include but are not only limited to rollercoaster-rich content, bright colors, and rigorous effects. It provides almost a parallel universe that allows the imagination to run wild. Indeed, some of these cartoons are kid-friendly and do not all incorporate sexual content, but undeniably a large portion does.

Pornographic, age-inappropriate content can be easily reached adolescents, especially when parents lack the actual content knowledge of it. Not only are most of the anime delineating an ethereally gorgeous portrayal of women with sparking large eyes, curvy bodies, and a soft, kawaii, come-get-me disposition but there are also many categories of anime dedicated just to sexual arousal. For instance, "akunyuu" (Big Boobs) is a hentai subgenre with large-breasted female characters. The hunt for attractive or attractive-looking characters is popular in this type of anime, such as Bakunyuu Maid Kari. This fascination stems from a desire to find fulfillment by admiring attractive (sexy) body types. Some anticipate finding certain sexual moves. Teenagers who want to feel competent while talking to their classmates about anime have the drive to do so [19].

The teenager may have never intended for it but opened the floodgates by accidentally clicking into it while watching other anime, or just want to fit in to look cool and trendy or watch for fun without realizing it was a sexual representation of women.

5. Negative Effects of such Portrayals on Adolescents

5.1. Teenagers Highly Likely to Adopt the Idol's Beauty Standards

After seeing what they adore behave, having lived in this world constructed by male gaze, it is inevitable for adolescents to internalize such beauty standards. The under-aged fans despite the fact that young followers are frequently fully aware of the manufactured nature and performances of their heroes, it does not always follow that the fans would mimic their aesthetic or appearance more often [20]. These portrayals are influential to teenagers. Being in the process to learn about the outside world, adolescents' perceptions are building up, and studies have shown that South Korean kindergarten students expressed a desire to be slimmer, and this desire was associated with the amount of time they had spent watching K-Pop TV [21].

5.2. Body Image and Appearance Anxiety

Several studies showed that anticipating a male look caused substantially more body shame and social anxiety about one's physical appearance than anticipating a female gaze. The logic is that females under male-gaze are asked to be curvier, with huge breasts and slim waists that are not what normal humans have, or not what is easy and comfortable. Accommodating to a male gaze is accommodating to what others want of females, thus not the most healthy and comfortable for themselves. Only 4% of women globally believe they are attractive, while 72% of women feel pressure to appear beautiful, according to a survey by the skincare company Dove titled "The Real Truth About Beauty" [21]. The issue is that women feel pressured to appear good in today's culture. They devote all of their attention to learning how to look better, and these subliminally poisonous beauty standards suffocate them.

5.3. Internalizing Male Gaze

Even adolescents who never intended to seek sexual experience can be influenced by indirect sexual content, the imageries, and the portrayals. From anime, TV shows, and short videos, all the portrayals of women on the internet can make women internalize such portrayals and subconsciously adopt the male gaze. Those who are long exposed to the television world can be largely influenced and likely to perceive these portrayals as what the world actually requires women to do, which explains the relationship between women's representation, gender stereotypes.

5.4. Putting down Women's Value and Subjugating them to Patriarchy

The portrayals of women represent not only a visual catering to males, but the fundamental logic behind means submission to patriarchy whose social-wise is down-putting women, women's worth, and women's value. When women watch movies, they are more likely to identify with the protagonist, who is mostly male, and who takes an active stance. The male protagonist who desires the passive objects around him puts spectators in a stance of looking down upon women. Yet if chosen to not identify with the male protagonist, women are forced to be the objects that are looked at. There is no place for feminine activity. Such a phenomenon empowers men and diminishes women.

5.5. Infantizing Sex

Different from adults, who are at least warned and acknowledged of the idea of the male gaze and femininity, adolescents find the ideas from media obscured. Kids find them normal because they see less to understand what is normal. Racy performances by the female group Kara in August 2012 sparked controversy and prompted requests for changes to the Juvenile Protection Law. The comments at the time emphasized how sexually provocative acts affected young people. The regulation holds content creators and broadcasters accountable for content monitoring, however, a frame analysis of Kara's performances in comparison to those from early 2013 showed that none of the agencies had altered the sexually objectifying performance frame on their broadcasts. There were

no changes made to the new law's final form, which was passed in March 2013, to deal with these problems more severely than before [22].

6. Conclusion

The research with support from various empirical studies concludes that there is a substantial influence of media on the portrayal of women and effects on adolescents. Through reasoning, it is found that due to the power that men hold, men are able to reflect their male gaze onto the media. Women in their lenses are sexualized, objectified, and in essence, men-serving. Adolescents, however, having their values still building in the process and very curious to learn the world around them, may not realize the subtly imprinted sexualization in women's characterization in games, in anime, or their favorite idol groups. This leads to the internalization of the male gaze, subconscious misogyny and a series of secondary problems such as appearance anxiety, trapping young girls' time and energy on solely beauty instead of life skills, etc. Fighting patriarchy is hard, but future studies can be done to explore how to make changes and how to especially focus on the development of adolescents since they are the ones holding the future.

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