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Crafted for the Male Gaze: Gender Discrimination in the K-Pop Industry

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Crafted for the Male Gaze: Gender Discrimination in the K-Pop Industry

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Abstract

This paper explores the ways in which the Korean popular music industry has maintained and promoted pre-existing cultural patriarchy. The discussion highlights how seeming opportunity for women to enter the industry has resulted in increased objectification and legitimacy of the domination of the "male gaze." The paper provides an evaluation of the career, marginalization, and precarity of female music artists ("idols") both with respect to the issues they face and in comparison, with their male counterparts. The paper addresses how ageism and sexualization in the music industry has influenced and reinforced social norms. The discussion concludes by noting a cultural shift that may have the potential to augment the perception and value of women.

Keywords: K-pop, Gender discrimination, Gender roles, Korean culture, Infanalization, Hypersexualization, Agency

Introduction

Following World War Two and the 1970's, the world has witnessed what economist Karl Polanyi (1944) coined as the Great Transformation in economic ideology, mainly to that of a free market economy. This has brought with it key changes such as globalization and financialization, but it is important to note that because the shift has mainly been sourced in the treatment of the labor force, several consequences have fallen to laborers. In particular, this shift has enhanced gender gaps and reinforced faulty reasoning behind gender-based discrimination in the workplace. The Korean popular music (K-pop) industry is a workplace influenced by this ideological shift and the gendered consequences culminate from both ideological assumptions and traditional South Korean (hereafter referred to as Korean) gender roles. Economist Seeraj Mohammed argues that women's labor is seen as less valuable than men's and that where a workplace becomes feminized—either through a higher percentage of women employed or a general association of the labor with femininity—the value of the labor decreases (2008, p. 29). The K-pop industry has codified both aspects of feminization in its relatively short history. By analyzing primary sources such as interviews, social media, and musical content, in this article, I discuss the ways in which 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. While K-pop represents a possible pathway for many young Asian women to pursue dreams of success and share their artistry, they can become trapped in a difficult-to-break cycle of discrimination due to a rigid set of gender mores—hyper valued for their bodies without the agency to dictate what is done with them (Hong, 2014b, 120).

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Traditional Gender Roles

Historical interpretations of Korean gender roles are androcentric and traditionally place women outside the locus of public culture (Ruhlen, 1998, p. 40; Kim & Kim, 2015). For Korean women, these gender roles are rooted in the creation of the country itself, in both the country's origin myth of Tan'Gun, and the widespread adoption of Confucianism as a national philosophy in the 2nd century, continuing through the advent of Christianity later in the 18th century (Ruhlen, 1998, p.41; Kim & Kim, 2015). The core of these ideologies place women in inferior positions to men in culture. In Confucianism, the concept of the five central relationships relocates women to one relationship: man and wife. Additionally, codified norms such as the pressure to be married at a young age—to a family-chosen spouse—and to enter motherhood early are also tenants of this philosophy (Lee, 2012). The Confucian expectations for women are best expressed by the title of Helen Lee's (2012) article, "I'm my mother's daughter, I'm my husband's wife, I'm my child's mother, I'm nothing else". This statement can be interpreted to mean that women may face multiple obstacles when trying to establish a personal identity within Korean society and that the identity they have is directly dependent on the relationship of the males around them. The Korean public rapidly adopted Christian ideology (Catholicism and Protestantism) in hopes of modernizing the country (Kim & Kim, 2015, p. 35).[2] Under this new popular belief system, women were afforded more prominent social power, including personal identities through baptismal names. However, "the public sphere in South Korea remained androcentric and hostile because of the Confucian legacy" (Kim & Kim, 2015 p. 295). Furthermore, through various ideological changes, the country has retained rigid binary gender expectations. Neoliberal economic and political shifts have also had a strong impact on gender relations, including in how the gender binary plays out clearly in K-pop.

Contemporary Gender Roles and Neoliberalism

As neoliberal ideology was adopted worldwide "gender discrimination in labor markets," sourced "especially [from] the division of labor in the household", saw the systematic justification to uphold women's primary role in the domestic sphere (Mohammed, 2008, p. 30). Therefore, because the role of provider is expected to fall on the male figure, the money earned by "women who enter the labour market [is] treated as [supplemental for the family]" (Mohammed, 2008, p. 30). To manifest this, companies shift priority away from skill training or long-term career considerations, deeming the female labor force as temporary or casual. This dismissive mindset, supplemented by a devaluation of the work women perform, has led to sexist policies. In Korea, workplace discrimination can also take shape during the hiring process through microaggressions and aesthetics requirements (Holiday & Elfving-Hwang, 2012).

While aesthetics are an important unisex aspect of Korean culture, for women, the pressure to appear as what is deemed acceptable is greater due to discriminatory institutions. Some companies "enforce specific height and weight restrictions for women graduates", and being overweight or 'not pretty enough' can result in a resume being passed over (Holiday & Elfving-Hwang 2012; Lee, 2012). In an interview for sociologist Dr. Helen Lee's (2012) article, a woman revealed that her male coworkers admitted that they "definitely ask for pictures" on resumes so they could only hire "hot girls" at companies such as Samsung. This reinforces a toxic mindset that women are not equated to the level of education they have worked for, rather they are reduced

[2] For further information on the history of Christianity in Korea, please see Kim & Kim 2015.

to objects for the selection of the male gaze.[3] Under fierce competition among several well and overqualified applicants, applicants can turn to plastic surgery to alter their features in the hopes to increase their competitiveness.

In the domestic sphere, women continue to face a double standard. The appearance of their bodies is weaponized against them from grade school (Holiday & Elfving-Hwang, 2012).[4] In 2015, during a street interview in Seoul, Korean YouTuber Joo Won interviewed groups of teenage girls, asking them if they thought they were overweight. The majority of participants responded yes, despite being visibly healthy weights. When asked for a reason, participants responded that "guys prefer skinny bodies," thus highlighting the pressure to conform to patriarchal gender roles that situate a woman's worth to her relationship with a man (Won, 2015). This pressure, influenced by expectations from the media and the workplace, creates a popular but unhealthy body image—one that can be unachievable without plastic surgery and extreme dieting.[5] Thus, though neoliberal ideology prefers to relegate women to the domestic sphere, women continue to face gender-based discrimination. This exemplifies the double shift Korean women must contend with, knowing that they will be scrutinized in either social sphere.

Gender Roles and the K-pop Industry

The previously mentioned gendered expectations in the workforce are amplified in the K-pop industry. Polanyi (1944) describes the drive of this phenomenon as an imbedding of the society in the economy, rather than the economy being suited to the structure of the society. Mohammed (2008) further elaborates that large corporations swap their concern for labor welfare in favor of a short-term attitude towards labor due to increased global competition and pressure from financial markets to enhance profit (p. 4). The result of this supercharged consumerist culture is the reduction of celebrity artists ("idols") into mere objects on the market. In order to meet market demand, the job description of an idol includes embodying characters nestled in ever changing concepts that are designed to generate sales while sacrificing their private lives to scrutiny from the public at any time. The job title 'idol' becomes more associated with the definition of deities, removing them from the intention of a performer or artist. This transformation is achieved through intense training that molds the individual into an exemplary figure embodying *cha khan* kid traits, earmarked by innocence and moral upstanding (Hong, 2014b, p. 124). Deviation is met with intense criticism or negative viral discourse called scandals. Scandals can happen over something insignificant, or in some cases, nationally shocking revelations. Though the severity of consequences for having a scandal has been decreasing in recent years, a double standard for women remains.[6]

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[3] Another woman Lee interviewed shared that while at a meeting with a male coworker, he asked her to sit in front of him so he "had something pretty to look at" and was told to pour drinks for everyone, despite being the superior of some of the men present (2013).

[4] The plastic surgery craze can start among middle school aged girls, who are caught up in a childish one-up game to prove themselves prettier and can lead to toxic cycles of plastic surgery addiction later in life (Hong, 2014b, 142).

[5] Yet, after a woman marries, these rigid gender expectations do not end. A woman falls into her role as housewife, and is typically expected to halt her other aspirations such as education or career. Family is and always has been a central tenet of Korean culture (Ruhlen, 1998 p. 41).

[6] Two examples of previously unimaginable public displays are idols with tattoos on public display, such as BTS's Jungkook, or two members of boy group NCT, Lucas and Jungwoo, who were seen smoking cigarettes. Yet Joy, a member of the girl group Red Velvet, was still harshly criticised in August of 2020 when a group of her 'fans' did not like that she wore a shirt that said "we should all be feminists" (Bhandary, 2020). They filmed and posted themselves burning Red Velvet merchandise and pictures of her in response.

Indeed, pockets of audition and competition shows have sprouted up over the years, emphasizing participants with high levels of talent in combination with attractive appearances. Once accepted to the company, the rigorous job training for idols teaches them every aspect of being an idol—from singing, dancing, and rapping to intense dieting, plastic surgery, and learning how to present themselves diplomatically in public. Yet, idol-hood remains precarious, as this hard work can result in years of fruitless effort. No trainee is guaranteed to debut, but even with debut, an idol is not guaranteed success. The industry is saturated with groups, and typically less than ten groups are highlighted as the most popular. Failure to make the top 10 can equate to missing out on performance stages and awards until the group can create an eye-catching niche for themselves. Due to this precarity, hopeful idols must completely devote themselves to the training process and sacrifice personal freedoms.

As previously stated, gender roles are intertwined with workplace management, and women face the brunt of discrimination in the name of 'maximizing profits' (Mohammed, 2008, p. 4). 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 so as to elevate the value of content from boy groups and male members. Girl group idols find their labor devalued and their time in the workforce precarious as they are placed on a timeline that expires much quicker than their boy group counterparts. During their career, women are expected to satisfy the patriarchal—and by extension neoliberal—demands of their company. 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, 2014b, p. 109).

The activities of girl groups become formulaic due to the social expiration date imposed on them. The result is an overwhelming observational feeling that members of large girl groups are simply pretty faces given shallow concepts because they will quickly be replaced by a younger and prettier idol in a few years.[7] Aspects of this formula include hyper sexualization and infantilization to manifest the male gaze's hegemonic sexual fantasy that girls and young women around 16-25 years of age are the most desirable. Even with great success, girl groups are still not afforded as much agency in their creative process as boy groups are, and much like in the Western music industry, they rarely receive industry recognition.

Triple Shifts and Offstage Standards: Privacy and Scandals

The women of K-pop face a triple shift—on stage, off stage, and in their private lives. At work, their behavior is constantly filmed and packaged for fan consumption.[8] While one might expect there to be boundaries to protect the rights of the idol, these lines quickly become blurred in the pursuit of increasing their popularity. For example, during the filming of BLACKPINK's reality show "BLACKPINK House", footage showed the idols as they slept through the night, completely erasing the barrier of privacy (Suh, 2018). In addition, off camera, an idol has to be cautious about their actions, for passersby with mobile phones or Dispatch, a major Korean

[7] Or be overshadowed by another member in her own group. Screentime is a precious commodity. In a group larger than 9 members, such as Blockberry Creative's LOONA, getting more than two seconds of solo screen time in a music video is difficult, and an idol can see correlation between their popularity among fans and their screen time.

[8] Sometimes free on YouTube, sometimes as purchasable content on made-for-streaming platforms such as Netflix and even K-pop content specific platforms such as V-live and Weverse

paparazzi company, are also watching. Managing their private lives comes in the form of "No Dating" clauses in contracts, enforced curfews, and carefully curated social media presences.[9]

By tailoring every aspect of their life to fit under the umbrella of a *cha khan*, idols walk a constant tight rope of remaining in a good light. Through social media, fans have the opportunity to 'feel like they know the idol,' a borderline dangerous feeling of familiarity that can result in toxic interactions between idols and online users. Consider Suran, a solo musician who formed a friendship with boy group BTS's Suga. After the song they collaborated on, *Wine,* came out in 2017, she posted a photo on her personal Instagram that contained a word that some BTS fans thought was a code for Suga's stage name (suranelenashin, 2018). They later attempted to connect several of her Instagram photos to a secret relationship between the singers, culminating paranoia into anger online that prompted Suran to write an apology and prove she was not dating the other idol (*Suran Responds To*, 2020). She was later the victim of more cyber bullying in 2020 when she posted a screenshot of fellow solo artist IU's song, *eight* (also featuring Suga), starting the wheels of the dating rumor mill again (*Suran Responds To,* 2020). She quickly released another apology trying to explain that she simply wanted to show support for the song. Yet the consequence of the scandal extended beyond a loss of Instagram followers. For Suran, she also lost the opportunity to be public about this friendship, which is a huge marketing loss and could possibly hold her back from increasing her popularity and success.

Criticism is taken seriously in the idol industry. Scandals have disbanded groups shortly after debut, such as GLAM from Big Hit, and cost companies tens of thousands in sponsorships (Yoon, 2015). In 2015, Tzuyu, Taiwanese member of JYPE's popular girl group Twice, then 16, was handed the Taiwanese flag to hold during a segment of a variety show. In response to this, she was accused of being a Taiwanese independence activist, resulting in a cancelation of ads and sponsorships for the group. Tzuyu, though blameless in this scenario, was forced to release a company mandated apology video where she stated that "There is only one China and [...] I am proud to be Chinese no matter what" (jypentertainment, 2016).

As outlined, the triple shift forces women to remain cautious off camera. Take for example, Irene of SM's girl group, Red Velvet, who was cited in a 'poor attitude scandal' in October 2020 after a former stylist posted on his personal Instagram, accusing her of acting poorly (Turner, 2020). Though Irene apologized and many members of the industry immediately came to her character's defense, this example illuminates the more restricting gender roles women face (Turner, 2020; *Red Velvet's Irene,* 2020). Which behaviors are deemed acceptable have been circularly shaped by traditions and the androcentric professional sphere that seeks to cater to these patriarchal preferences.

Dealing with the Male Gaze: Concepts and Marketing

When comparing the content of girl and boy groups, stark lines cut between the images they portray. Popularly, girl groups portray one of three concepts: cute, hip-hop, or sexy. Following the *hwarang* (flower boy) philosophy, boy groups are free to portray a range of concepts, from action star, to gangster, boyfriend, superhero, etc. With very few exceptions, girl group songs center on breakups, crushes, relationships, and similar themes with concepts that position them in relationship to a man. However, boy groups have noticeably begun to move away from traditional

[9] Ashley Choi formerly of Ladies Code recently spoke about the 10:30 pm curfew she and her members had as young idols on her podcast Get Real, which was not lifted for several years (DIVE Studios Podcasts, 2020). Additionally, some idols are not allowed to maintain or open personal social media accounts under company mandate.

love songs and adopted social commentary as an overarching theme. Even though social commentary has been an available topic since the 90's via Seo Taeji and the Boys, since 2013, BTS and, most recently, Stray Kids have popularized this concept, expounding on personal mental health, intergenerational struggles, social commentary on Korea's education system and even social media bullying (Big Hit Ent, 2020; jypentertainment, 2020).

In contrast, Girl's Generation (or SNSD), regarded as the 'Nation's Girl Group'—who helped introduce K-pop to the world through *Hallyu*/the Korean Wave—has not adopted the same themes (KBS World, 2015). Upon analysis of SNSD's most famous songs, *Gee* and *I Got a Boy,* the lyrics disempower women in pursuit of a relationship, orienting them "around men in order to gain attention" (Sooyoung Kim, 2013). Writer Kim Sooyoung (2013) posits that *Gee* suggests that the girls are "utterly clueless children who dumb themselves down to attract a partner" as they repeat the phrases "What should I do?", "fool", and "I don't know" (Sooyoung Kim, 2013).

In addition to content themes, the outfits and choreography that are paired with these concepts further elucidate the level of autonomy groups have over their profession. While women are more likely to be dressed in less fabric, men are more likely to be in outfits that convey control. Analyzing the extension of the choreography between the sexes, one notices the freedom of expression and style for boy groups and the "traditional" choreography for girl groups. Whereas boy groups are known for incorporating acrobatics, flips and b-boying (even weapons dances), girl groups perform routines that resemble an arsenal of synchronized swimming techniques. Their arms swing and bounce similar to a baby's, they touch their breasts, waists, and buttocks while shaking their hips towards the camera, they crawl around on the stage and in between each other's legs. In essence, they perform either an infantilized or hyper sexualized choreography, but often a combination of the two concepts. Consequently, it is also worth mentioning that when female idols have the opportunity to portray complex concepts it is not without a 'balance' of stereotypical disempowered portrayals or skewed morality.[10] On very rare occasions are girl groups freely able to express themselves, or share their lived experiences[11] .

To highlight how the androcentric market orients groups, let's compare girl group AOA's (에이오에이) *Miniskirt* (2014) and boy group Monsta X's *Trespass* (1theK, 2015). In *Miniskirt*, the idols don the proverbial garb, paired with a choreography that involves the idols gyrating their hips while they sink to the floor, dragging their hand along their bodies, grasping their breasts and buttocks and pointedly shaking their buttocks towards the camera (AOA (에이오에이), 2014). At one point they unzip the side of the skirt to reveal garters. In *Trespass*, the idols wear black street style outfits and later prison uniforms as the main theme of the video portrays the idols as criminals who stage a jailbreak (read: bad boy concept) (1theK, 2015). The choreography has the idols stomping and punching, sneering and lifting their shirts to reveal their abs while they sing about the lack of manners their love has.

Concepts not centered on hyper sexualization echo the same pattern. Consider boy group ASTRO's 아스트로 *Baby* (2017) and TWICE's *TT* (JYP Entertainment, 2016). The boy group maintains power even as their concept attempts to cater to the female gaze. Rather than being sexualized, the idols portray "nice guys" with charming smiles as the main point of the

[10] See Red Velvet's *Peek-a-Boo* which shows the women wielding guns, crossbows, and hatchets, but for the purpose of luring and killing delivery boys in their home where they later display their shirts as trophies (SMTown, 2017).

[11] *HIP* by MAMAMOO features lyrics with surprising self-awareness of the idol industry, supported by members portraying roles of power, such as president (2019).

choreography. In contrast, even though TWICE's music video concept portrays the women in different Halloween costumes, their lyrical content infantilizes the idols, as they complain about the freedom of making decisions for themselves now that they're "all grown up now," with choreography that echoes a toddler's tantrum (ASTRO 아스트로, 2017; JYP Entertainment, 2016).

These concepts result from predominantly male orchestration.[12] Mohammed (2008) notes that under neoliberal ideology, companies seek "to keep the people of the financial markets happy" (p. 31). Thus, the creative team's object is to portray girl groups as the 'ideal' girlfriend, able to be marketed to a male fanbase and appeal to a female fanbase who can emulate their looks and actions in order to attract a male partner. Likewise, boy groups follow direction from the male gaze and its perception of what women think is an 'ideal' boyfriend in order to appeal to a female fanbase and give male fans a model to emulate. However, boy group concepts afford its members agency in their portrayals, thanks to social mobility. While both groups are routinely sexualized, the balance of over-sexualization skews sharply towards girl groups as few boy groups model hypersexualization for longer than one concept.[13]

Given the expectation to perform an idolized fantasy, an idol must first be aesthetically pleasing. The members of SNSD notably contributed their bodies to their concepts, often donning outfits that display their legs rather than their chests. The image of such perfect legs resulted in the popularization of a plastic surgery procedure called "Girl's Generation Injection" (Oh, 2014, p. 60). Not looking the part has been the reasoning behind many instances of discrimination against idols. Solar, of four-member group MAMAMOO, shared on the show *Boss in the Mirror* in November of 2020 that the girl group was under constant pressure to perform perfectly during their debut because they "weren't visually perfect" and were "too short" (KBS World, 2020). One member in particular, Hwasa, who is curvier than the average female Korean idol, was regarded as a threat to the group's success because she 'looked like she would cause trouble' (Lee, 2020).

'Traditional' girl group idols are images culminated through overarching patriarchal expectations; they should be stick thin, have big eyes, and doll-like features, and long, thin legs (Oh, 2016, p. 60). Dehumanizing the idol to the fanbase, she must be impossibly both virgin and sexually experienced—ready to fulfil her (male) fan's desires. Yet, the tantamount component of this agenda is youth. Youth in this case references purity or innocence, two distinct themes of *cha khan*. Thus, the purported enemy of the idol is herself. Not looking the part, aging beyond the short timeframe of desirability or gaining the title 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 don't sell in a culture still dominated by misogyny (Steger, 2020; Kwon, 2019).

However, looking like a traditional girl group member is not left to genetics. Episode seven of DIVE Studios podcast Get Real, titled "Impossible Beauty Standards", featured idols Ashley Choi, formerly of Ladies Code, BM of KARD, and Peniel of BTOB discussing their experiences with Korean aesthetic standards in the idol industry (2020). What poignantly stands out is the difference between these three idol's experiences in the industry when it came to looking the part.

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[12] As seen in BLACKPINK's 2020 Netflix documentary, even review panels, those that record and evaluate trainees, are male majority (and in the case of this all women group, their review panel was entirely male).

[13] VIXX's *Chained Up* notably portrays the concept of BDSM, where the idols sing about being controlled by a woman, even saying that they are her slaves (RealVIXX, 2015). However, what is important to note is that this was a one time concept much like a girl group singing about empowerment.

While the two men noted a pressure to appear a certain way in the public eye, Ashley had a mountain of expectations that were presented to her that surprised her co-hosts. She noted,

> "They would care about the littlest things [...] for example they would say "oh your knees aren't that pretty" [...] [or] they were like "you gotta get plastic surgery to not let your lips roll up too much because when you smile and your gums show- that's unattractive. [...] It was endless." (DIVE Studios Podcasts, 2020).

BM was good-naturedly shocked. He'd never even considered being told his knees weren't attractive. As well, he shouldn't, but to Ashley, this harsh aesthetic critique was just another obstacle to overcome in the workplace. The pressure to medically alter one's appearance seems to be an amplification of the larger feminization of women in the Korean office.

Concerning the flexibility male idols have, the Western concept of a gender binary and subsequent gender roles becomes complicated. What could be perceived as more 'feminine' identifiers in Western binaries, such as scrutiny to personal hygiene and wearing makeup, are accepted in the Korean gender binary. Such regular actions as showing *aegyo* or cuteness or maintaining regular manicures extends to be an expectation for male idols. In addition to this cultural difference, in terms of male idol's gender roles, a version of traditional filial piety to one's entertainment company precludes the expectations male idols have in Korean society. The idol's primary gender role is to be a 'good son' to their company, and upon fulfilling this as an upstanding public figure and employee, boy group idols are afforded social mobility that girl group idols are not. Though at the advent of the K-pop industry, the overall attitude towards male idols was critical due to perceived feminization of their labor, in contemporary idol culture, thanks in large part to the success of groups like Big Bang, BTS, and EXO the profession is not seen as detrimental to masculinity.

A Lack of Agency: Songwriting and Decision Making

Mohammed (2008) points out that "Where women are active outside of households they face discrimination" typically in the form of less power and reduced access to information networks and powerful positions (p. 28). The gender gap between involvement of male and female idols in their own music elucidates this workplace discrimination. Since 2018, the idol profession has become more serious, and the participation of idols in their music making process has sharply risen to even be considered expected. Yet, this expectation has almost exclusively fallen to male idols. While groups such as BTS and GOT7 have boasted heavy direction over their albums in recent years, Stray Kids has taken it a step further, retaining almost all decision making ability over their music, noting the importance of their unmitigated storytelling to their profession (Singh, 2020; Bell, 2019).[14] In contrast, if a girl group idol is not a solo act, the likelihood of her participating in the group's production process is much lower and thus she must rely on her creative team to create impactful content. However, it is often the case that the overwhelming majority of opinions and direction for girl group content come from androcentric sources, including producers, mixers, video directors, visual directors, etc. As mentioned previously, given the task to portray girl groups as the male gaze's ideal girlfriend, the result is inaccurate ideas of what love, relationships, and desired traits in a partner are to women and girls.

[14] This was confirmed by their parent company, JYPE. Whereas companies are notorious for their extreme oversight of group material, the CEO and staff were recorded admitting they do not touch StrayKids' music because the members asked them not to.

Some girl group idols do participate in production. Notably, three of MAMAMOO's four members are ranked among the highest female idol producers in Korea (KOMCA, n.d., *Kpop Idols Who,* 2020).[15] However, only 12 total female idol producers are found on KOMCA's, Korea's official copyright association, top 100 idol producers (*Kpop Idols Who,* 2020). Likewise, separate charts published by KOMCA, show a list of the top 80 male idol producers, whereas the female idol producers only earn top 30 (*Kpop Idols Who,* 2020).[16] Thus, this highlights the lack of involvement of women idols, despite the abundance of these artists.

In the world of idol production, sexism also overshadows product recognition. In 2017, Suran's single, *Wine*, received the Hot Trend Award during the Melon Music Awards (Mathew, 2017). Suran was seen second guessing whether to accept the award as Suga of BTS, who helped produce the song, immediately made his way to the stage among wild cheers (nleeshaz, 2017). In addition to making his way to the stage first, he accepted the award first, spoke first and for twice as long as Suran. Meanwhile, Suran's head was blocked by the microphone in front of her until she spoke and physically lowered it herself (nleeshaz, 2017). Regardless of whether he was told previously that he would be able to join Suran on stage, this highlights the industry's placement of the perspective on celebrating men without question. The artist was unsure if she should receive the award for *her* song.

So too does sexism extend into offstage content creation. As exemplified in BLACKPINK House, the women are forced to move from their dorm for the duration of the show to a specially constructed house with a hot pink roof in the heart of a busy Seoul neighborhood (BLACKPINK, 2018). Their house consists of areas that then company CEO YG himself chose as areas he thought every girl would need, including an area specifically to take Instagram photos, but not separate bedrooms (BLACKPINK, 2018). At the beginning of the series, YG told the confused idols the news. YG then prompted them by asking why they weren't thanking him since he was allowing them to "live like princesses" (BLACKPINK, 2018). They dutifully replied how grateful they were despite apparent discomfort. This example demonstrates how the women of K-pop are more often told what they like and prefer rather than having the agency to do it themselves.

In the K-pop industry, consumer's socialized androcentric desires place female bodies as symbols of "desire within Korean consumer capitalism" (Holiday & Elfving-Hwang 2012). In order to maximize their usability, girl groups swap dreams of growing to become singer songwriters or producers to be marketable objects. As of December 2020, BLACKPINK is the best-selling girl group in the world (KOREAN SALES, 2020). They have been active since 2016, yet only just released their first full length album in late 2020.[17] Instead of spending time in the studio, the women have primarily become models, with each of the four idols representing multiple brands, including luxury brands such as Chanel and Dior (admin, 2020).[18] One of the members, Rosé, remarked in their 2020 Netflix documentary that modeling dominated their schedules so much that she only found time to practice music in the forgotten hours of the night (Suh). In the name of preserving such a formidable and valuable profit resource, YG Entertainment has not allowed the women of BLACKPINK to flourish in the same way other idol groups have. Rather

[15] Unsurprisingly, this increased involvement correlates with concepts of empowerment and increased popularity overseas.

[16] The average credits for girl groups are around 25, whereas boy groups are around 50 (*Kpop Idols Who*, 2020).

[17] This is highly unusual, as typical groups release one to two half or full length albums a year.

[18] The fan-viewed mistreatment of BLACKPINK has prompted hashtag trends on Twitter in response to the women not being invited to awards shows or other public events. As recent as December 27 2020, the hashtag FREEBLACKPINK trended worldwide (Twitter, 2020).

than continuing to create musical content, BLACKPINK appears to be more valued for their silence. Thus, women idols have found more success as solo artists, outside of the constructs of a girl group.[19] There, they are much more likely to dictate their own involvement in their profession.[20]

A Ticking Timeline: Casual Labor and Parenthood

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, p. 29). This can be through 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. In the idol industry, this is a career ending life event, as every girl group member who has gotten married or become 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. In fact, there are more idol fathers than mothers, and the majority of the 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.[21] Referring to the importance of the family structure in Korea, supplemented by the assumed gender roles falling to each member of a marriage, the husband is expected to be the primary income bringer. Any income brought by the wife is supplemental and she is assumed more valuable in the domestic sphere, with increasing pressure to transition at the advent of a child (Mohammed 2008, p. 30). Furthermore, this gendered expectation amplifies in the idol industry due in part to the nature of each idol's generated fantasy.

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 idol and audience, when an idol crosses the fantasy line, it can shatter the illusion and end the idol's career. This investment risk can motivate companies to implement "No Dating" clauses and curfews.

However, women face another aspect of societal pressure on their career timeline. In addition to weighing the consequences of making personal life choices, girl groups have been plagued with what Korean media calls the 'seven year curse' (Ahn, 2019). That is, after seven years many girl groups either disband or see a member exit the group when their members are around their late twenties. This has occurred to several prominent groups such as 4Minute and 2NE1 (raith, 2018). Due to omnipresent societal pressures informing them that they will become irrelevant past the age of 25, girl group idols recognize that they will be replaced by a younger, prettier group of idols doing the exact same thing as them, and thus choose to leave the industry to pursue other career opportunities or personal goals. This comes in contrast with boy groups, who

[19] Yet, as we have seen, solo acts are still caught in the maelstrom of idol criticism.

[20] Two women who have achieved greater creative control and musical success after exiting their girl groups are Hyuna and CL.

[21] Another example is Chen, member of uber popular boy group, EXO. Despite having an enormous fanbase, he has remained a member of his group after he and his now wife were married and had a child in early 2020 (Sun-Woo Kim, 2020).

have persisted past this late twenties expiry date, with groups such as Super Junior having members into their 40s and still having wildly popular comebacks (Haddad, 2019).

In fact, since the 90's, of the groups that debuted and disbanded, girl groups outnumber boy groups dramatically. Approximately 237 girl groups are active and 213 have disbanded, while 256 boy groups have debuted and 78 have disbanded (*Disbanded Kpop Girl*, n.d.; *Disbanded Kpop Boy*, n.d.; *Kpop Boy Groups*, n.d.; *Kpop Girl Groups*, n.d.). Indeed, it also shows that the workforce is feminized due to the plethora of women employed and thus symptomatic of the "unequal treatment of women workers [...] justified by employers who opportunistically use [...] inaccurate arguments" (Mohammed, 2008, p. 30). In this case, those arguments are not only the existence of the career timeline, but of the devaluation and flippant regard the idol industry and fanbase has for girl group idols.

Yet, as mentioned previously, even in this feminized workplace, whereas emerging boy groups had once faced backlash at engaging in a frivolous industry, due in large part to the enormous success of BTS, the profession has been put in a new light of important cultural exchange and international ambassadorship. Not only has BTS been regarded as the nation's darlings, they have been internationally recognized as important cultural figures by the UN, the US government, and TIME magazine—they have received Korea's highest cultural award from the President himself, and the list goes on. Though it should be noted that BTS actively campaigns for intercultural understanding and genuine kindness, this group once faced backlash and pressure from a public that saw them as just another group of kids with a silly dream. Now, they have largely paved the way for other groups to have a platform for their voices and bring important societal struggles to the public ear. Unfortunately, this cultural shift has largely only been afforded to boy groups. The industry seems to be budding off a realm of valued "man's work" and retaining its attitude of feminized "women's work" as girl groups still struggle to have the same freedom with their artistry and gain adequate recognition for their cultural contributions.

However, despite operating in an industry built against them, groups such as MAMAMOO are fighting to give their voices a prominent place in the argument, and thanks to both Korean and international fans, their popularity is increasing by the year.

Conclusion

The adoption of neoliberal ideology has seen a systematic devaluation of labor through the shift from attempting to maximize employment to the goal of maximizing profit. When looking solely to maximize profit, companies are more likely to see labor as tools or objects, removing them from their rights as individuals or making it harder for them to rely on one another and unionize to have more power. The K-pop industry exemplifies this in its history of gender discrimination and lack of initiative to place women on equal footing with men.

In Korea, the adoption of neoliberal policies and call to radical feminist reform took place within the last half-century; however, the adoption and subsequent spread of ideas were quicker than almost any other state following the same progression (Song, 2009). Gender roles evolved along these lines as well, but not to total equality.

In the K-pop industry, the majority of idols, groups, and groups disbanded are women and girl groups. This exemplification of a false progression summarizes the conception of the idol industry as a workplace that provides dreamers a place to succeed. While most idols endure the same military-like training regimen, women experience a daunting realization that they are not valued as much as their counterparts and their careers are more precarious.

Yet, with a love of singing, dancing, or even just performing, more young dreamers enter the industry for a chance at success. This bargain companies take does not result in parental-like encouragement to see talent flourish and thrive, but a rigid implementation of a series of marketing decisions that have proven to work in the past—thus the notion of the K-pop idol machine or the K-pop formula. As innocence and sex are the winning combo, girl groups begin to see their agency decline—they are infanilized and hyper sexualized through the outfits they wear, the choreography they learn, and the lyrics they perform to appeal to the public.

Meanwhile, though the industry has seen a recent spike in idol involvement in the music making process, only a tenth of the most credited idol producers are female. The lack of involvement denotes two detriments to girl group members. First, that they do not have a significant input on the concepts they portray and thus cannot reliably veto a concept they are uncomfortable with, and second, they must rely on an androcentric creative team to accurately convey what the female experience is. What results is an inaccurate portrayal of women and a two-fold implementation of the idea of feminization of the workforce.

Yet, with the knowledge that they as professional idols are temporary and easily replaced by another eager trainee, girl groups do their jobs and they do them well, even though their labor is valued less than their male counterparts. Unfortunately, when they gain agency through the decision to become a mother or spouse, the industry no longer has use for them as they are no longer marketable.

The notion of the K-pop formula and idol machine is beginning to rust. Groups have begun to tear at the barriers the world has wrapped around the genre of K-pop. This new generation of musicians are questioning imposed binary gender roles. They question not only superficial bubble gum pop but toxic masculinity and the new challenges their generation faces as well. However, girl groups are far from receiving the same consideration or rights as their male counterparts. Empowerment for female idols could come about through increased participation in the creative process, women accepting positions of power in companies, and the dismantling of the idea of feminized labor, or valuing both male and female labor equally. It will be difficult to penetrate the traditional national ideology that certain, primary gender roles are static, but as Korea has proven, the nation adopts change quickly (Song, 2009). Change in the idol industry could come just as swiftly. It is my hope that with this paper, the conversation of gender equity in the workplace can enter not only the sphere of feminist academia, but also the broader reaches of internet fandoms to encourage dialogue and conscious consumerism, and perhaps catalyze the dismantling of gender discrimination, at least in the idol industry.[22]

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[22] Though BLACKPINK and SNSD match and exceed many popular boy groups in numbers, as noted previously, it is without the agency their male counterparts are afforded.

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