A Feminist Political Economy of the Korean Popular Music Industry

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Abstract

Gender disparity is an emerging issue in contemporary South Korea. Despite the significant increase in gendered concerns, there has been a lack of discussion on gender inequality problems in the Korean popular music industry. For this reason, this thesis aims to investigate gender inequalities and power relations embedded in the male-dominated Korean popular music industry by analyzing the texts, images and music of Korean girl groups through the lens of a feminist political economy. In doing so, this study utilizes textual analysis in order to examine how gendered hierarchy and patriarchal power, acting as industrial practices, exploit Korean girl groups in the Korean popular music industry. The primary findings suggest that Korean girl groups are commodified as a marketable field of business; they are fetishized through the exhibition of their pressured femininity and passive uniformity, and they are reproduced as a form of sexual commodity within the gendered-hierarchical system of manufacturing Korean pop groups. In conclusion, this thesis proposes a critical perspective on a gendered mechanism of the Korean popular music industry as a site of power struggle.

Keywords: feminist political economy; gender inequality; Korean girl groups; Korean popular music industry; political economy of communication

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Introduction

1.1. General Contexts

In the midst of social movements around equity in gender, burgeoning in the 2010s, we find ourselves asking how important it is to be aware. Gender discrimination and sexual harassment are topics that have recently come to the forefront. This is because some gendered arguments have been triggered by the #MeToo movement[1] (hereafter MeToo), and the media have delivered reportage on sexual crimes. Remarkable feminist activism, driven by the MeToo or other types of gender equality action, has sparked debate on gender and sexual violence issues all around the world, in full public view. The media have also assisted in keeping people updated on these issues. From an overview of both the streets and the mediascape, we can apparently see the climate changing, despite many barriers such as presenting manipulative discourses on anti-feminism in social media, producing false evidence against feminists for speaking out in public and reproducing MeToo fatigue as framed by media.

Due to those obstacles, most women are not likely to raise their voices when they are among those who have already experienced such barriers in their lives. We therefore need to ask the following question: What makes them silent? In particular, the situation at every workplace where women encounter gender inequality does not allow women to reveal those issues externally. There is discrimination against them in workplaces. In the case of South Korea (hereafter Korea), women still encounter a glass ceiling, which they are unable to break through in a male-dominated society. They find it difficult to secure a job after getting married or becoming pregnant. Most women in workplaces are not likely to go on maternal leave, even though public positions are more stable than any other sector in terms of the opportunities provided to women to rejoin

[1] #MeToo movement: The phrase MeToo was coined by American civil rights activist Tarana Burke more than a decade ago. It is used for survivors of sexual assault. The phrase MeToo was picked up by Alyssa Milano, an actress, in 2017, and used to tweet #MeToo. Due to the allegations of sexual abuse against American film producer Harvey Weinstein, #MeToo has rapidly gone viral with millions of tweets of #MeToo, enabling women to reveal their experiences of sexual violence publicly (Fortado, 2018).

work after pregnancy. Korean media describe those women who are not allowed to go back to work as women disconnected from a job. In order to change the climate, some companies have allowed men to avail themselves of parental leave. However, due to the instability of their jobs, both women and men prefer not to use parental leave. It can be used as a rationale, especially for women, to fire the person. Do we put the value of equity into practice at work, and are we all, regardless of gender, truly embracing it? It is a fact that there is sexism in the workplace. We can barely find gender equity at work.

In addition, we frequently hear of harassment of women by men in workplaces, about spy cameras being installed in women's toilets, violence against women in public places, illegal prostitution used to facilitate business deals, media misrepresentation of women involved in sexual incidents as witches, etc. All these practices target women. How can we not think that they are derived from deep-rooted sexism and gender inequality in contemporary Korean society?

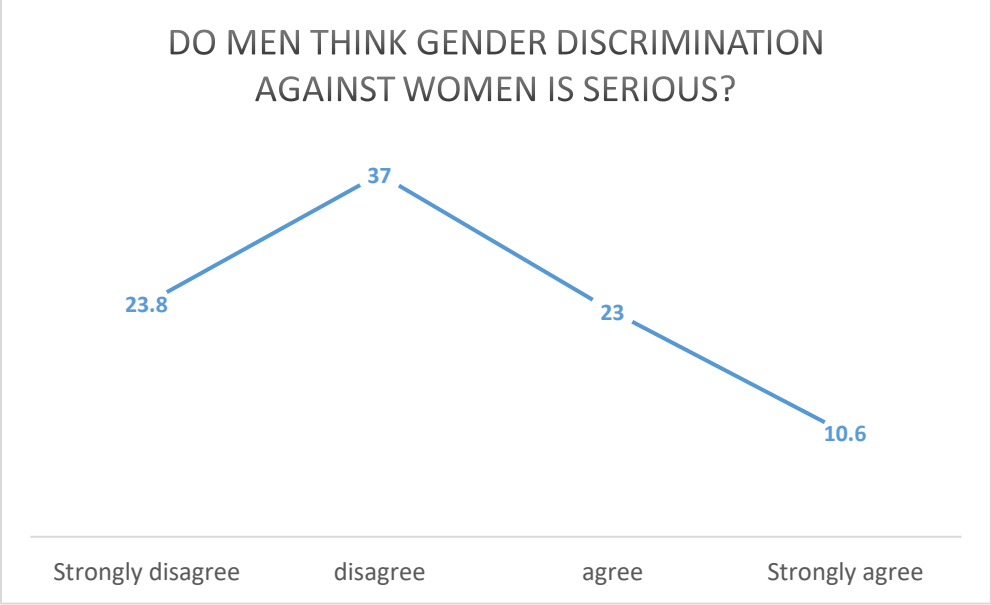

Figure 1. Do men think gender discrimination against women is serious? [Graph]. Copyright 2019 by *SisaIn.*
Retrieved from https://www.sisain.co.kr/?mod=news&act=articleView&idxno=34344

Sexism in any industry is a critical issue, but it is prevalent in many schools, institutions, organizations, and so forth as a consequence of the gender gap in employment, because the glass ceiling in Korea is solid. In 2018, Korea ranked 30th out of 36 OECD nations for rates of women's employment (Jeong, 2019). In a recent report by the World Economic Forum, Korea is ranked 115th out of 149 countries in wage

equity between men and women. According to the World Bank, in politics, women account for only 17% of the seats in the national parliament (Jeong, 2019). Moreover, studies on gender inequality in the labor market have tried to figure out "how the disadvantage associated with being a woman interacts with other socioeconomic markers" (Browne and Misra, 2003; Kim, 2017, p. 1082). Women who experience gender discrimination are likely to be paid less and to be in a minority (Kim, 2017, p. 1083).

However, the majority (60.8%) of Korean men in their twenties do not agree that Korean women face gender inequality (Cheon, 2019). According to a report by *SisaIn* (2019), 37%of young men believe that the gender inequality that Korean women have experienced is not a serious problem, while 23.8% of men in their twenties do not accept the fact of gender inequality at all. In addition, 38.2% of men in their twenties believe that they themselves have experienced gender-based discrimination (Cheon, 2019). In this sense, those men think of themselves as minorities. The findings of *SisaIn*'s report suggest the atmosphere of the entire Korean society.

1.2. Korean Popular Music Industry Contexts

To quote Seolhyun Kim[2]:

> When I first debuted, there were some images that focused on certain parts of my body. There were also a lot of things that I couldn't say. We, Korean idol girl groups, are experiencing the same thing now. We find it unreasonable and unpleasant, but there's nothing we could do. It hurts to see this happen. I think I want to fix the situation. Even though I have to experience that, I want to do this for the other young women in the Korean popular music industry (*GQ Korea*, 2018, para. 20–21).

Seolhyun Kim (hereafter Seolhyun) first gained popularity due to a short-term (2015-2016) television advertisement (Figure 2) for SK Telecom,[3] one of the Korea's major telecommunication operators.

[2] Seolhyun Kim is a member of the Korean girl group Ace of Angels (see also AOA p. 4) from FNC Entertainment. Her first name and stage name are the same. She is an actress as well as a pop music performer and became popular as a result of having been a model in an advertisement for SK Telecom (see Figure 2 below).

[3] SK Telecom is a major telecommunications corporation from the SK Group, one of the Korean chaebols. It provides various services from wireless internet to broadband.

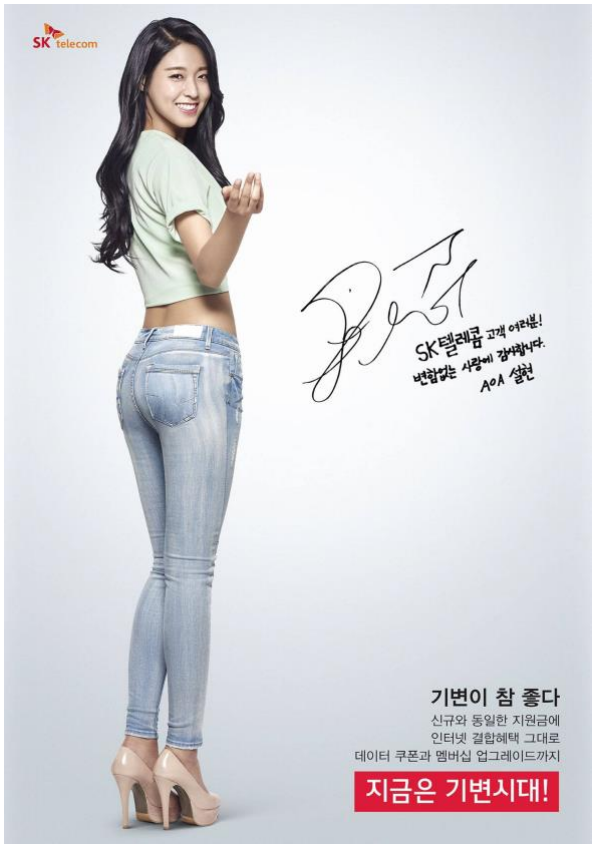

Figure 2. Seolhyun in the advertisement for SK Telecom. [Photograph]. Copyright 2017 by *Koreaboo*.
Retrieved from https://www.koreaboo.com/stories/seolhyun-shares-new-sexy-butt-sexy-librarian-photos-new-ads/

It is not surprising that the photograph exaggerates her body's sex appeal as part of its branding to promote the new service being advertised. It seems as if the company did not care about the actual content of the commercial message, as the advertisement focuses on the aesthetics created by Seolhyun's body and posture.

Seolhyun is not free from the male-gazed reproduction linked to this exploitation. That image has not been sold as a form of official merchandise branded by the company nor is there an intention to sell the image itself as a commodity. However, men (or male fans of Seolhyun) want to possess the image as a type of large-sized sticker or as a paper-doll similar to a real sexual doll. Indeed, someone stole a standing signboard of Seolhyun at a branch of SK Telecom while she was a model of the brand. One of the biggest second-hand online communities kept reselling the signboard, and the demand was high.

Furthermore, an online news article (*KMIB*, 2015, November 6) stated that the signboard was being consumed as an 'it-tem[4]' for men who live alone. Also, Seolhyun had to pose like that (see Figure 2 above) whenever she appeared in any type of television show, and her reputation was at its highest ever at that time during her entire career. This is a good example to show how a female K-pop star is consumed, commodified and exploited as a form of K-pop content disguised as a sexual doll, which is why this thesis employs not the cultural studies perspective but the feminist political economy lens. Feminist political economy can talk about a text itself by breaking down the processes embedded in the power-driven issues.

However, ironically, it seems Seolhyun is free to raise her voice against the industry's unfairness in front of the male-dominated world that comprises her workplace. Although the year of AOA's debut was 2012, the focus on Seolhyun's perfect body catapulted the group to the top tier of girl groups in a couple of Korean popular music (hereafter K-pop) charts as well as in the K-pop industry. Body image is a selling point among girl groups and a key way of promoting themselves, as a young woman's body and the associated sexual images can be commodified to transform the girls into any kind of product, which is broadly acceptable and common in the Korean popular music industry.

All the members of AOA are over the age of twenty. The majority of K-pop performers are aged between eighteen and twenty-five and are regarded as old when they reach their mid-twenties. In this sense, Seolhyun could possibly have made her statements because she turned twenty-four in 2019. She is not a new artist in the industry. Although she may have been going through some gender inequality experiences in her work environment, the K-pop industry, she was able to utilize her position in the industry to speak out on some of these issues publicly. Her interview and pictures were published in a major fashion magazine, *GQ Korea*, which mostly focuses on male grooming.

[4] It-tem is a Korean English (Konglish) term. The word "it" means fashionable, trendy and popular. The word "tem" means a sort of abbreviation of an English word, "item."

Nevertheless, her pictures, published by *GQ Korea*, operated by Doosan Magazine,[5] did not conform to the typical way of portraying a young woman from Korean girl groups (see Figure 3 below). It is still hard to make an outright claim of gender discrimination in the K-pop industry. Raising voices in favor of women is likely to be regarded as a challenge against the dominant power of men and the resulting gender hierarchy embedded in the K-pop industry.

Figure 3. Seolhyun's portrait [left]. [Photograph]. Seolhyun's resolution. [right]. [Photograph]. Copyright 2011 & 2018 by *GQ Korea*. Retrieved from http://www.gqkorea.co.kr/2011/04/15/aoa-%ec%84%a4%ed%98%84-%ed%99%94%eb%b3%b4/, [Right] http://www.gqkorea.co.kr/2018/12/24/%ec%84%a4%ed%98%84%ec%9d%98-%ea%b2%b0%ec%8b%ac/

Most of the female celebrities target male tastes (as seen in Figure 3, published by *GQ Korea* in 2011 and 2018). There are a few exceptions in the industry, but in Korea, these are not easy to observe. For instance, even Beyoncé, one of the iconic celebrities engaged in feminist awareness and practice across the world, is "a woman who some would consider to still be ruled by the male gaze and seen as an object by male fans" (Cooper, 2016, p. 204).

Most young women artists wear a school uniform and pose as high school girls. This means the K-pop industry focuses on a girl's appearance to sell a girl group as a

[5] Doosan Magazine: A publishing media company owned by Doosan Group, which is one of the Korean chaebols.

cultural product and allows audiences to consume the images based on the girls' beauty, which has the potential to be reproduced as an objectified and commodified version of the sexuality of a woman: "The widespread sexual objectification of women in K-pop performance subconsciously teaches men and boys that women and girls are sexual objects that exist to please them" (Saeji, 2013, p. 329).

While these are internal systemic problems in the K-pop industry, this thesis also examines some other external issues within K-pop contexts by investigating the outputs of the industry itself, that is, both its products and the motives behind them. Korea promotes K-pop as a form of cultural product, and this thesis regards idol girl groups in Korea as one aspect of this process. Then how can these cultural products be an output? The answer to this question can be interpreted through the political economic lens by employing textual and semiotic analysis.

Cultural content featuring Korean girl groups is a product that regular people access to view and discuss. In this regard, this thesis attempts to show that textual and semiotic analyses are appropriate for examining the content produced by the K-pop industry within the systematic, hierarchical processes of commodifying women as sexy, pretty and cute. Within these contexts, female artists in the K-pop industry, as well as K-pop fans, are becoming aware of feminist issues, especially involving some K-pop stars connected to the MeToo debates. In this way, K-pop and MeToo are both relevant to an examination of male-dominant authority beyond and behind K-pop content, especially that of girl groups, from a feminist perspective.

In recent times, gender issues have been on the rise in Korea, thereby taking Korea by storm. In particular, it is obvious that the MeToo movement has contributed to an expansion of awareness regarding gender issues. The Korean cultural industry has been part of this expansion. Some women have revealed how badly they have been treated by the strict gender hierarchies of their workplaces. Consistent with feminist activists' observations, most of the cases have been driven by the traditional hierarchical relationship between men and women.

Although the MeToo movement's feminist-driven activism has had a strong impact on society, there are people who still cannot speak up about their concerns in front of the world. Specifically, it seems obvious that feminist views, which equate the

rights of women to those of men, are neither helpful nor acceptable to men, at least in the K-pop industry. If some members of girl groups advocate feminism publicly, then the men who call themselves fans are no longer supportive.

In this flow of anti-feminism, one particular book stands out—*Kim Ji-young, Born 1982*—a novel by Cho Namjoo about a woman suffering from the sexism of contemporary Korean society. It is regarded as the Bible of feminism among feminists in Korea. However, fans of the book can simultaneously incur social stigma and isolation because, regardless of gender, they can be branded as feminists. In this connection, many female celebrities associated with the book have had to prove whether they are feminist or not and have subsequently been obliged to take down all photos of themselves holding the book. One instance of this is the case of Irene from the group Red Velvet.[6] Some of her fans stopped supporting her after she admitted to reading the novel and called it a fictionalized reflection of casual sexism in Korea. People who had called themselves her fans allegedly burned her photos and boycotted merchandise featuring her image, thereby criticizing her solely for her seemingly feminist reading preferences.

In addition, Suzy,[7] a member of the girl group named Miss A,[8] was at the receiving end of intense criticism when she used her influence to advocate a feminist perspective, which may have led to a certain movement or activism. Suzy spoke out in favor of a Blue House petition seeking justice for Yewon Yang,[9] who had revealed that she had been sexually harassed during a photo shoot. Suzy shared a screenshot of her signed petition and uploaded a lengthy written statement on her Instagram feed, explaining that she wanted to shed light on the incident by using her social media influence to make more people aware of and interested in the issue in the hope of

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[6] Red Velvet is a Korean girl group from SM Entertainment that debuted in 2014. There are five members: Irene, Seulgi, Wendy, Joy and Yeri (who joined in 2015).

[7] Suzy is a former member of Miss A. She is now an actress in Korea.

[8] Miss A is a disbanded Korean girl group from JYP Entertainment. The members were Suzy, Fei, Jia and Min. Suzy has since made a contract with a new company to pursue a career as an actress.

[9] Yewon Yang said that, while working as a professional model, she had been locked in a studio by a photographer and forced to pose for sexually oriented pictures, then threatened that the photos would be published online. She also alleged that other photographers had sexually harassed and assaulted her during the photo session, with some having touched her genitals without her consent (*The Korea Herald*, 2018, October 11).

securing justice for Yang. Later, a series of controversies erupted regarding the petition because Suzy had accidentally revealed a business name. Detractors began to criticize Suzy for signing the petition and for using her influence in a way that spread misinformation. Suzy had to apologize for being unaware of the fact that the studio was not responsible for the sexual assault.

Meanwhile, Naeun, a member of the Korean girl group Apink,[10] also faced widespread criticism for allegedly advocating feminism publicly because her phone case bore the saying “Girls can do anything.” This phrase seems to have a similar connotation to “Boys, be ambitious.” This phrase is popular in Korea, as society still showcases favoritism for boys. In this regard, the statement “Girls can do anything” is likely to be interpreted as a challenge, and it has the potential to be read as a statement contradicting “Boys, be ambitious.” At the moment when a popular K-Pop idol supported her fellow women with a catchy women’s empowerment phrase, it suddenly made some people uncomfortable.

In sum, it is obvious that women, at least those related to the K-pop industry, do not feel comfortable supporting gender equality or feminist activity through a public statement or photo. It seems that they do not even prefer to voice their opinions in favor of gender equality or the deconstruction of the gender hierarchy in Korean society. This is because the climate toward statements in favor of gender equality is even more hostile now than before.

Following the flow of feminist discussion in Korea, “public awareness of gender issues has definitely changed, but we still have a long way to go” (Jones, 2006, p. 223). Thus, this thesis reveals, mainly through analyses of images, how sexism, gender power and hierarchy have been constructed and maintained in the K-pop industry and how they work through the production, consumption and exhibition of Korean girl groups in terms of gender inequality as a form of commodified exploitation. The observations of this study apply to other sectors in contemporary Korea that also suffer from gender hierarchy and inequality. Therefore, this thesis offers a critique of the long-term popularity of K-pop globally as well as a feminist perspective on the factory system that

[10] Apink is a Korean girl group from PlayM Entertainment (previously A-Cube Entertainment). The members are Naeun, Eunji, Bomi, Namjoo, Hayoung and Chorong. It debuted in 2011. One of the original members, Yugyeong, left the group in 2013.

is the starting point of the commodification and exploitation of Korean youth. This critique is achieved through textual and semiotic analyses of K-pop content, especially in relation to Korean girl groups, and the industrial procedures that commodify young women.

This thesis provides a critical perspective on how power relations and gendered hierarchies are embedded in the Korean popular music industry, how they have been constructed and how their industrial practices produce and reproduce Korean girl groups' sexualization and objectification by exploiting female labor as a form of commodity in order to promote cultural products as nation-branding resources. The country's biggest export is K-pop with sexist content (Volodzko, 2016). The purpose of this thesis is to investigate women's struggles in the K-pop industry, represented in the texts created by male-dominated industrial practice.

1.3. Overview of Research Questions

By investigating the gender hierarchy and power relations embedded in the Korean popular music industry in the midst of the growth of a feminist perspective, this thesis explores the following questions:

RQ1) How is gender hierarchy constructed to portray Korean girl groups' sexuality as reflected in the visual content produced by the K-pop industry?

RQ2) How does gender power exploit the bodies of Korean girl groups as commodified labor?

RQ3) How is sexism in the K-pop industry integral to the gendered hierarchical process of production, consumption and reproduction of Korean girl groups?

The entire process of producing, distributing and consuming girl groups' sexuality is driven mostly by men or at least by a male-dominated industrial system. In this sense, "males are the dominant players in the process of commodifying girls as sources of entertainment and profits" (Johnson, 2011, p. 191).

More specifically, the primary objective of this thesis is to determine the aspects of the K-pop industry's gendered power and hierarchy, as reflected in manufacturing, consuming, reproducing and exploiting Korean girl groups' sexuality as a nation-branding strategy. In addition, this thesis examines feminist political economy as a

theoretical framework. The Korean popular music industry has not been seriously analyzed from the perspective of feminist political economy. Therefore, this study aims to bridge this gap by applying a feminist lens to the gendered structure of the K-pop industry. As a feminist political-economy analysis of the K-pop industry, it also includes a critique of the ways in which men interact with each other and of how feminine and masculine gender roles affect female sexuality (Johnson, 2011).

This study aims to explore in depth the issue of gender inequality in the K-pop industry in relation to the consumption of girl groups' sexuality as entertainment. At the macro level, most Korean women still experience a gendered glass ceiling in employment as well as unfairness in their workplaces. Females working in the Korean popular music industry are no exception. Although many scholars have been conscious of such gender issues, the present time appears appropriate to discuss the hegemonic power of the male-dominated Korean popular music industry and the gender hierarchy embedded in the industry's practices. Moreover, it is crucial to evaluate the current status to spread K-pop's social and cultural influences in the realm of globalization.

1.4. Situating the Thesis

This thesis aims to embrace inclusivity of gender by encouraging a feminist analysis of the K-pop industry in Korean scholarship in order to draw more attention to what lies below the surface of the K-pop industry in a context of the rapid growth of K-pop globally. This growth provides an opportunity to reveal the gendered hierarchy and power relations embedded in industrial practices in K-pop, especially in sexist practices that produce, distribute and exhibit Korean girl groups as a form of nation-branding commodity. This thesis aims to bring the conversation about gendered industrial practice to the forefront. Furthermore, this thesis can be successfully located in the context of communication research in relation to political economy and popular culture.

In critically examining gender hierarchy and power relations in the K-pop industry, this thesis situates itself at the intersection of political economy and cultural studies. In an effort to fill the gap in communication research by examining the K-pop industry, this study utilizes a feminist perspective. Moreover, it criticizes the dominant power exercised by men in the K-pop scene in particular and in society as a whole.

As is stressed in the following chapters, Korean scholarship lacks discussions of feminist approaches to the K-pop industry. A feminist framework is interdisciplinary and is therefore a useful tool to unveil how gender works in general. Also, why is it important to explore K-pop right now through a feminist political economic lens? The answer proposed by this thesis necessarily deals with the importance of inclusivity of gender, race and class, which political economy theory deals with across the world. The K-pop industry is the site of a power struggle, more specifically a women's struggle, in relation to the sexism embedded in its gendered hierarchy. It is not a problem that only Korean women have been through. It takes place everywhere in male-dominated societies all over the world. In this sense, this thesis aims to reveal how the struggle has been conventionalized behind the romanticized exteriors of K-pop by adding to the discussion of feminist political economy in relation to the K-pop industry.

Chapter 2.

The Korean Popular Music Industry from a Political Economy Perspective

This chapter will discuss how the concept of a political economy in communication has been established and discussed among political economists. It will then show how their arguments are relevant to the questions this thesis is concerned with. It will also suggest why the political economy theory is necessary to understand the questions that this thesis has. More specifically, the chapter will explore, first, how scholars have defined a theory of general political economy which has been built up in the discipline of communication from a historical perspective. Second, while the concept of political economy has been defined across the fields, it will examine what kinds of questions have been at the centre of the controversies and how this thesis develops research questions by being located in a political economy of communication. Finally, by identifying critical ideas in the political economy of communication, this chapter will determine how this framework relates the objectives, the issues and the arguments of this thesis.

2.1. Political Economy Theory

The political economy of communication

Before discussing the political economy of communication, this thesis needs to explore what political economy is from a wider angle. The word political, which should not be disconnected from the word economy, refers to a significant outlook of power embedded in social relations. According to Press et al. (1989), “political economy is the science of wealth and deals with efforts made by man [sic] to supply want and satisfy desires” (Mosco, 2009, p. 22). More specifically, classical political economy refers to social customs, practices and knowledge used to manage wants and desires from the household to the community across the world (Mosco, 2009).

A general definition of political economy is “a study of control and survival in social life” (Mosco, 2009, p. 3). According to Mosco (2009), control specifies how a society organizes, manages and adapts to issues in all societies. Survival refers to

people's practices in producing resources that keep their society continuing. However, it does not mean there is a single definition of political economy across all disciplines. Political economy theory is a useful tool to take a closer look at the social production of meaning in relation to the construction of social relations (Mosco, 2009). Borrowing from Mosco, it can be said that a social relationship is based on the social exchange of meanings.

There is another definition of political economy relating to ideas such as history, totality, moral philosophy and praxis that all political-economic schools would like to share regardless of their distinctions. Political economy scholars like to investigate the totality—defined as "a big picture of society" (Mosco, 2009, p. 4)—of social relations which constitute the political, economic, social and cultural spheres of life. The main questions of political economy are "how power and wealth are related; how these are connected to social and cultural life; and how all of these influence and are influenced by our systems of media, information and entertainment" (Mosco, 2009, p. 4).

Evaluation of political economy theory offers improvements for the theoretical frameworks of political economy in communication research. Mosco (2009) argues that political economy theory provides an essential perspective for communication research. Political economy scholars in communication highlight communication at the expense of the theory of political economy. Communication scholars using the lens of political economy study social relations. In particular, they focus on power relations, which control the production, distribution and consumption of resources as commodities. This process, from production to consumption, has a significant impact on the choices based on human behaviour. In this sense, political economy theory has been focused on ownership by individuals or institutions, on the deployment of power and capital in unfair and unjust ways and on social classes and relations, etc. (Lee and Jin, 2018, p. 50).

With respect to these keywords, the idea of social relations is linked to the concept of structuration, which is the process of formulating social relations in relation to gender, class and race (Mosco, 2009). Furthermore, political economists seek to understand the relations between economic inequalities and the power of owners who possess the means of production, which is related to the question of who is able to access the means of production and who is not (Mosco, 2009).

Political economy scholars point out that political economy theory is the foundation of Marxist thought. According to Marxists, a political economy describes how capitalism systemizes social life and relations (Lee and Jin, 2018, p. 40): “The relevance of Marxist concepts for investigating and intervening in struggles is involved in the production of knowledge and media content” (Fuchs and Mosco, 2016, p. 284). According to Eagleton (2003), Marxism is a relevant concept to critique the idea of capitalism (Fuchs and Mosco, 2016). In this sense, capitalism is the critical idea to enable an understanding of what political economy is interested in critiquing. Capitalism is a specific way to put resources in order, and it transforms them into commodities. This procedure is that of commodification, which means that something changeable has a use value that is marketable as a form or product. Its value can be exchangeable. The resources can include raw materials as well as the labor of workers producing the commodities.

In a capitalist society, workers make their living by selling their labor to capitalists. According to Lee and Jin (2018), “human beings recognize capitalist society as a specific way of allocating resources at least fair and just” (p. 50). In contemporary society, capitalism is considered as the only way to distribute wealth. However, workers are mostly not able to become capitalists, whereas capitalists are able to keep accumulating wealth. In a capitalistic sense, this unfair wealth accumulation results in unnatural social relations between those who own the means of production and the workers or, in other words, between the rich and the poor, which means that capitalist society becomes the site of power struggles. This is because power decides who are the owners (the capitalists) and who are the oppressed (the workers). Hence, political economy is mainly about criticizing reality and, especially, critiquing capitalism.

The perspective of political economy theory is parallel to that of production studies. Production studies mainly examine aspects of labor. Examining labor issues objectively can explain “organizational structures, professional practices and power dynamics” (Lee and Jin, 2018, p. 43). In particular, production studies prefer to examine those who have been “excluded in industrial hierarchies of cultural and economic value” (Mayer, 2016; Lee and Jin, 2018, p. 43). In other words, scholars in production studies concentrate on insecure economic statuses in industry. This point overlaps with the interests of critical political economy scholars. It is the precise juncture where political economy and production studies using a political economy lens can argue about how

power relations are embedded in modern practices. However, it also lacks a gendered perspective to investigate the fabric of the industry and women's labor in industrial praxis. According to Miège (1989, 2003), different labor processes are related to different types of media production within the contexts of capitalist relations in society (Mosco, 2009). That is, there is a relationship among a specific type of media product, structural control of the company and the process of production (Mosco, 2009).

In the attempts of political economy scholars to examine the social and economic development of media with respect to power relations, media has been considered as "a sign of development" (Mosco, 2009, p. 8). Lee and Jin (2018) argue that a political economy is an integrated perspective with political and cultural interests. Political economy scholars theorize the resulting questions based on the following ideas. First of all, the theory deals with a wide range of political-economic and policy issues. More specifically, political economists critically examine economic challenges such as insecurity, inequality and unfairness in social relations. According to Horton (1948), who focuses on economic aspects rather than political ones, the term *political economy* should be "applied to broad problems of real cost, surplus and distribution" (Mosco, 2009, p. 23).

Political economists emphasize equity of gender, class and race for those who have been disadvantaged in industrial systems and practices. Besides this, the theory looks at society from a totalizing perspective (Mosco, 2009). In other words, political economists prefer to see society as a whole when it comes to economic interactions with nation states, whereas production studies scholars prefer to look at a society in isolation (Lee and Jin, 2018). Political economy theory is interested in questions of equity, justice, fairness, etc. with respect to social behaviour in relation to gender, class and race.

The fundamental, vital questions of political economy relate to globalization. The current trend of globalization is no longer limited to particular geographical areas. Hence, political economy in communication research is international and addresses issues that arise globally. This is why political economy scholars began to shift their attention to investigating patriarchal power and labor exploitation and combined these interests with feminist and labor approaches in the field of media and communication research. In this regard, power relations in the Korean popular music industry, as a site of power

struggles and, more specifically, gender struggles, have to be examined from a political-economic perspective.

Political economists emphasize that the oppressed must develop a keen sense of social consciousness in order to challenge unequal, unjust or unfair power relations. In terms of women being oppressed, this thesis uses the term *oppressed* to refer to power relations and women's struggles in the K-pop industry as a site of hegemonic power operated by men. It is essential to understand that political economy integrates a perspective of "the descriptive and the prescriptive" (Mosco, 2009, p. 23). According to Smythe (December 4, 1991; Mosco, 2009, p. 23), "the body of practice and theory are offered as advice by counsellors to the leaders of social organizations of varying degrees of complexity at various times and places" (Mosco, 2009, p. 23).

The definition of the political economy of communication is based on social practices and has been developed among intellectuals in political contexts. The political economy of communication requires us to think about the particular layers of social relations that manipulate power and about who controls people, procedures, objects and protests in relation to survival in reality (Mosco, 2009). It leads us to consider the way activism against power in governments and markets operates. On the one hand, control refers to both individuals and groups. Its processes are political when control is involved in social organizations, institutions and communities. On the other hand, survival refers to production. Its processes are economic, which refers to "the production of what a society needs to reproduce itself" (Mosco, 2009, p. 25). This definition leads us to think about the relations between political economy and human activity embedded in organic processes (Mosco, 2009). He argues that the concept of communication is interested in situating social processes and social relations as the cornerstone of research. Communication is a social process of exchange.

The feminist political economy of communication

This section, unlike the previous discussion, focuses on what is missing in the political economy of communication from a feminist perspective. In trying to fill this gap, it will survey various studies in the field of feminist political economy theory. The previous section considered the political economy of communication from a historical point of view, but the following discussion concentrates on academic work in the area of

feminist political economy. Eisenstein (2004) asserts that the concept of feminism takes multiple forms in different societies and traditions from ancient to contemporary times. Feminist theories examine gender influences on how individuals look at who they are and where they live in (Lorber, 2005; Trier-Bieniek, 2016).

A feminist economy of communication deals with a variety of issues concerning the lack of attention to gendered problems in communication in the political economy of communication. The main topic of feminist political economy is women's poverty, that is, inequalities in economic status that affect women. According to Lee (2011), "the ultimate goal of a feminist political economic approach is to understand why women are poor and how redistribution of wealth is essential to women's status" (p. 84). In the field of sociology, women's poverty is seen as a crucial issue. In adopting this point of view from sociology, researchers in communication studies investigate "the meanings and the symbols in communication systems" (Lee, 2011, p. 84).

Lee (2011) also points out that the lens of political economy is a useful tool to understand women's status, especially in relation to poverty, within industrial practices. It is undeniable that many industries have gendered inequality problems. Lee's research (2011) also examines what these problems are and how they have been justified in the context of industrial practices from the perspective of feminist political economy. However, Lee argues that political economy is a male-dominated field that lacks a feminist perspective even though many political economists discuss inclusivity of gender, race and class. In *The Political Economy of Communication* (2009), Mosco points out that the objective of studying the political economy of communication and gender is to decide "how best to theorize gender" (p. 197) within the context of political economy and to theorize gender by critiquing issues of inequality, insecurity, injustice, unfairness, etc. This requires an examination of "how power is used to shape the production, distribution, and use of information as a commodity within the contexts of institutions" (Mosco, 1988, p. 3; Lee, 2006).

To address the lack of a feminist perspective in political economy, scholars of political economy have begun to employ gender approaches to examine the intersections of gender and power in relation to "social reproduction, the duality of gender and class and the mutual formation of patriarchy and capitalism" (Mosco, 2009, pp. 196-197). Even as power in social class constitutes gendered hierarchies of

production that exclude women, it erodes many traditional practices that limit the available human resources (Mosco, 2009). A class analysis of communication examines labor hierarchies in the business of producing and distributing media and information by addressing the presence of significant gender divisions within an overall class-divided system (Antcliff, 2005; Huws, 2003; Lee, 2007; McLaughlin and Johnson, 2007; Mosco, 2009).

According to Lee (2011), a feminist political economic approach to communication aims to examine "the gendered production, distribution and consumption of goods and resources" and "how ideology is used to stabilize the unequal social relations" (p. 83). A feminist political economy aims to understand the relationship between gender ideology and capitalist production (Lee, 2014). This approach is different from other feminist approaches. A feminist political economic approach emphasizes gender relations in industrial structures. In other words, a feminist political economy reveals structural gender inequalities embedded in power relations.

The 2011 annual report of the Ms. Foundation for Women says that "women are impacted differently from men because women fall into poverty more easily and lose jobs at a faster rate than men due to the financialization of the US economy" (Martinez, 2012; Lee, 2014, p. 271). There are no studies of industries describing the unequal distribution of power and wealth (Lee, 2014). Even in the contemporary information society, as Lee (2006) points out, it seems that women are disproportionately responsible for monotonous and hand-operated work compared to men's engagement in the information society.

In the K-pop industry, women are displayed as a commodity in order to make profits, whereas men are engaged in decision-making from the production to the exhibition of women. That is, women rarely control the means of production in any industry in capitalist society. That is, women have fewer chances to become a form of commodity rather than to be owners of resources. In this sense, capitalism reinforces the hegemony of patriarchy in economic structures to prevent women from owning and controlling the means of production (Riordan, 2002).

It is important to focus on how women serve as a form of a commodity in the processes of production, distribution and consumption and to investigate the places

where class and gender join. It is also important to critically evaluate the literature in feminist studies in the discipline of communication. As a result, a feminist political economic approach would enhance the frame of feminist knowledge and clarify women's roles in production, distribution and consumption (Lee, 2006).

2.2. The Korean Popular Music Industry

This section will mainly examine Korean scholarship on the K-pop industry. There are a few critical studies (Epstein and Turnbull, 2014; Jin, 2007, 2014; Kang, 2015; Lee, 2013), but the current trend in academia is celebratory. Most studies "focus on microscopic textual descriptions rather than on larger sociocultural and politico-economic contexts reconfigured by post-IMF neoliberalism" (Kim, 2017, p. 2368).

The numbers of scholars who are interested in K-pop, its fandom, culture and industry (or even in the Korean cultural industry more broadly) has continuously increased. Many students have also become interested in K-pop as a field of academic study. However, it is hard to find evaluations of K-pop and its industry from the perspective of Korean scholars. How have they evaluated K-pop within the context of the 100th anniversary of Korean popular music? How have Korean scholars been interested in investigating the K-pop industry and the system of manufacturing pop groups, where it is increasingly difficult to make them successful in the market? Besides, most pop idols, regardless of gender, promote themselves outside the Korean peninsula or even outside Asia, which is needed for making profits.

The Korean wave and Korea's political economy

In the wake of Korean popular music, the terms "Korean Wave" (Hallyu) refers to the popularity of Korean cultural products such as K-pop, Korean television drama (hereafter K-drama), film and online and mobile games (Oh, 2014). Korean girl and boy groups feature in films and K-dramas and are often utilized politically to promote nation-state PR and Korean diplomacy (Kim, 2017). Amid this utilization, girl groups have a key role as nation-branding players exported as cultural products to represent Korea. According to Oh (2014), the Korean Wave has expanded its popularity through the exports of Korean television programs and K-pop globally from the early 2000s. The start of the Korean Wave was the export of K-dramas such as *Winter Sonata* (2002) to

Japan and *Dae Jang Geum* (2004) to China and other East Asian countries. The point is that the Korean political economic approach boosts the growth of the Korean cultural industry, including all entertainment products from K-pop to mobile games.

K-pop plays a crucial role in Korea's nation-branding and economic development in the cultural sector. Within Korea's post-IMF neoliberalization, K-pop has become one of the driving forces of economic developments as well as a dominant cultural genre. According to Shin (2009), "as a hallmark of neoliberalism, which is an indication of a boundary between culture and economics and between art and commerce became obscure, K-pop is regarded as a culture technology for boosting Korea's postindustrial, service-oriented neoliberal economy along with other strategic technologies, like ICTs" (Kim, 2017, p. 2368). It has begun to be exported as a type of physical product to make huge profits internationally in addition to industries such as smartphones, semiconductors, shipbuilding, etc. that are exported abroad. Due to the economic and cultural significance of K-pop as a field of scholarship, many scholarly studies have focused on understanding how K-pop and Korean popular culture have been developed in general. There has been a discussion of the growth of K-pop, especially in relation to the power of social media and digital platforms like YouTube as significant elements in the substantial global popularity of K-pop.

Concerning the political economic interpretations of K-pop, investigating Korean pop groups has been the primary field of research in terms of situating K-pop as a field of scholarly study. Kim and Yoon (2012) discuss the system of manufacturing pop groups in contemporary Korean popular culture by exploring the aspects of cultural production and consumption driven by these groups. Their study points up the significance of critical political economy because pop music culture and its production are deeply engaged in the system of producing and consuming popular culture. Also, the system has transformed itself. The media portrays popular culture and its system (Kim and Yoon, 2012). The importance of this study is to emphasize the necessity of a critical political economic viewpoint on K-pop and its culture. Besides, Kim and Yoon (2012) determine that the procedure of manufacturing Korean idol groups has become a star-making system due to the growth of K-pop and the increased significance of the system. As the system follows the transformation, the industry also faces changes internally and externally. Kim and Yoon (2012) conclude that the driving force of the K-pop industry has the same characteristics as the advertising industry. This work is meant to show

how the K-pop industry, as the driving force of a cultural industry, has transformed itself into an integrated industry. In this sense, this research uses the perspective of a political economic approach to understand both the K-pop industry and Korean popular culture as a whole.

Concerning the approach of Korea's political economy and K-pop, Chang (2018) examines the spheres behind the K-pop industry. According to Chang (2018), there are a million employees in the K-pop industry in more than a thousand companies related to K-pop and, broadly speaking, the cultural industry of Korea. Chang (2018) argues that K-pop has become the most dominant cultural market in Korea, which has brought development and growth simultaneously. Thus, it is necessary to talk about Korea's development and growth in relation to K-pop and its connected industries. In this context, this thesis situates the significance of a political economic framework as a tool for understanding the K-pop industry as a whole.

Political economy theory deals with power relations pertaining to gender, class, race, etc. In a sense, it is undeniable that the K-pop industry is a site of unequal power relations among gender, class and race even though K-pop is becoming more inclusive in terms of gender, class and race. In terms of race, K-pop has already gone far beyond its original geographical limitation. Race and ethnicity are not limited to the concept of geography.

There is another lens through which to read the phenomena of the Korean Wave in East Asia. Some scholarship previously utilized the concept of cultural proximity in order to investigate Korean Wave in its early stages. Cultural proximity,[11] a term coined by Joseph Straubhaar (1991), has been used as the main idea to understand the spreadable power of Korean Wave in East Asia, especially in China. However, the current stage in the development of the Korean Wave is no longer as amenable to the

[11] Cultural proximity theory was introduced by Joseph Straubhaar (1991). He argues that audiences prefer their own local or national productions because of elements such as the appeal of local stars, local knowledge, topics, issues, environment and the ethnicity of people in the media (Straubhaar, 2007; Berg, 2017, p. 3416). Whereas the idea is applicable to the early stages of K-pop, it is not useful in explaining the global phenomenon of K-pop in its current stage.

theory of cultural proximity. The very recent example of BTS[12] cannot be accounted for by cultural proximity's main thesis.

Cultural proximity was a useful idea to begin with because the international popularity of Korean Wave mostly started in areas near Korea. In a sense, the cultural proximity of K-pop made itself applicable to talking about diversity and cultural favors (Kim, 2019). However, cultural proximity is not a concept that can explain K-pop as a diaspora. Overall, the study of Kim and Yoon (2012) provides a space to discuss the fact that the K-pop industry is a systematic site embedded in industrial practice within the context of power relations. In other words, the K-pop industry can be investigated as a site of power struggle. It also opens up space for conversations about the K-pop industry as a site of gender struggle from a political economic perspective. In this regard, this thesis can be situated among the discourses of the K-pop industry's gendered practices.

When it comes to talking about the concept of capitalism in relation to the industrial system, a feminist perspective is likely to discuss inequality issues in gendered industrial practice. Among scholarly works on K-pop, a number of studies have not taken a feminist perspective but have examined what femininity is in a political economic framework. Many studies explain how political, social, economic and cultural contexts are engaged in the K-pop system and its ways of representing Korean girl groups. Studies of women's representation in K-pop are located among conversations about how women are described in any media in the various contexts of country, institution, workplace, industry and society and how women's labor, as a form of commodity, is sexually exploited by men.

The idea of femininity has usually been at the centre of these conversations because discussion of femininity itself is a form of activism that challenges the male-dominant ideologies behind industrial practices. It is a fact that femininity has been controlled by political, economic and cultural systems and practices (Kim. Y. R., 2011; Aapola et al., 2005; McRobbie, 2009). Theoretical studies have been concerned with phallocentric capitalist social and symbolic structures and their discursive effects on the

[12] BTS is a Korean boy group that debuted in 2013. Also known as Bangtan Boys (Bangtan Sonyeondan in Korean), it has seven members (V, Jin, RM, Suga, J-Hope, Jimin and Jungkook). In 2019, BTS became the first Korean boy group to perform at Wembley Stadium in London.

construction of femininities (Mulvey, 1975; Doane, 1981; Butler, 1993; Kim, 2011, p. 334).

This thesis is located in the same contexts of discussion of femininity, women's bodies and sexualities connected to sexism in a real world where women serve as resources. It is crucial to review the feminist literature on the Korean popular music industry. The K-pop industry does not sell "boys" as a commodity. The K-pop industry can be equal to girl industries in terms of selling bodies as commodities. This is why many feminist studies in the K-pop industry talk about femininity as sexuality or as a sex-appeal resource.

The feminist perspective in academia is mainly conducted through fandom studies. Most scholarly works are located in fan studies and discuss the relationship between fans and feminist practices as cultural practices. Also, these studies relate to audience studies because they discuss the juncture of how fans, as audiences, recognize themselves as women and as feminists. As for feminist practice in the situation of the majority of fans who are mostly women, with respect to feminist activism, Kim (2018) argues that women fans are more actively engaged in feminist movements embedded in the realities that women face.

A number of scholarly studies have investigated girl industries (Kim, J. W., 2011; Kim, Y. R., 2011; Kim, 2018, 2019). The term *girl industries* refers to cultural industries whose cultural contents are produced, distributed and consumed by women (Kim, 2011, p. 334). However, as Saeji (2013, p. 330) argues, "although scholars outside of K-pop contexts have discussed the global rise in 'girl power' especially in the field of popular music using examples such as Madonna, the Spice Girls, and Faye Wong (Fung and Curtin, 2002; Dibben, 1999; Lloyd, 1994; McClary, 1991), few can argue for 'girl power' in K-pop industry."

In communication research, Korea has produced little scholarship on K-pop girl groups. However, there are many interdisciplinary studies on topics relevant to this thesis. Among popular music studies in the context of K-pop, especially in relation to the girl industry in Korea, Kim, J. W. (2011) has made a critical analysis of the visualization and sexualization of Korean girl groups as women's representations. She argues that the cover art of Miss A has certain problematic features.

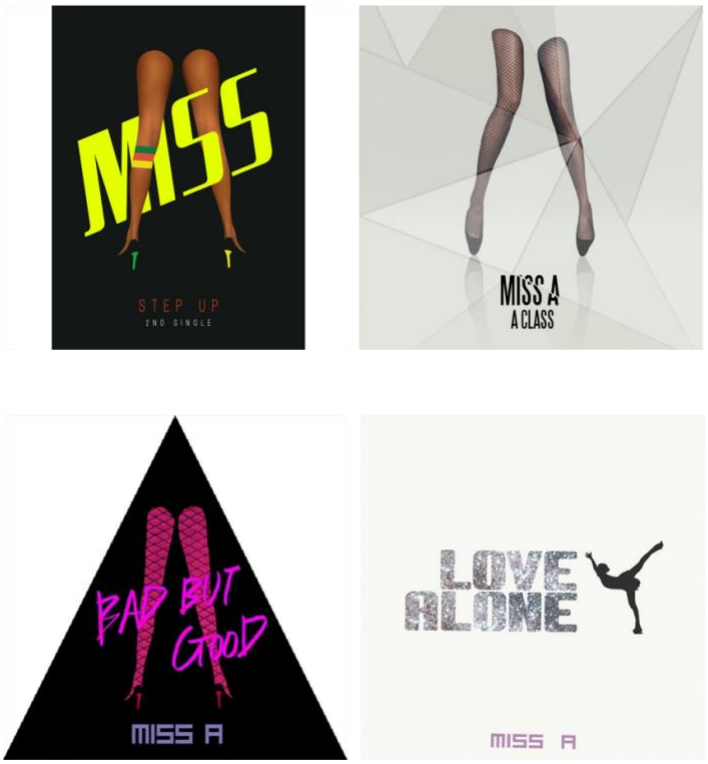

Figure 4. Miss A's album covers (*Step Up, A Class, Bad But Good & Love Alone*). [Digital images]. From Apple Music. Copyright 2019 by Apple Music. Retrieved from [A Class] https://music.apple.com/us/album/a-class/450789230, [Bad But Good] https://music.apple.com/us/album/bad-but-good/380819715, [Love Alone] https://music.apple.com/us/album/love-alone-single/435535411, [Step Up] https://music.apple.com/us/album/step-up/395271275

These covers have something in common. All four use a woman's partial body, a woman's legs, to portray the letter A. These images even include high heels and pantyhose. A woman's legs with high heels is a cliché. A woman wearing sheer tights is also a stereotype. Nevertheless, these clichés have never been changed at all. Skinny legs, pantyhose and high heels are ridiculous in the first place. Hence, there is no difficulty in analyzing these pieces in the context of women's sexuality. The management company, JYP Entertainment (hereafter JYP), was responsible for all procedures to do with the release of this album. However, the point is that Suzy was sixteen (in western age) when this cover art was devised. When we witness these kinds of gendered images, especially sexually objectified images, we cannot help but think about who has made this kind of practice possible in the industry. Could the opinion of the sixteen-year-old girl engaged in making her album have been taken into account?

This analysis, like the research of Kim, J. W. (2011), is vital to make space for more discussion of women's representation in the K-pop scene. There are many issues related to the sexualization and objectification of girls in the K-pop industry. Kim (2018) examines "the proliferation of K-pop idols as a formal universality that commodifies sexualized female bodies within a neoliberal, patriarchal Korean society that functions as historical specificity" (p. 185). More specifically, Kim (2018) discusses the relationship between Korean girl groups and the historical background of Korea's developmentalism. According to Kim (2018), the influential representation of K-pop girl groups offers a useful perspective for understanding "hegemonic femininity at the present moment in Korea" (p. 186). This viewpoint is undoubtedly related to the point that this thesis would like to argue. The hegemonic femininity embedded in identity politics plays an essential role in terms of accumulating wealth and producing content with Korean girl groups. In the context of exporting Korean girl groups as a K-pop product, the idea of femininity is a driving force to make the industry profitable.

In relation to this issue, Kim (2018) examines Korean idol girl groups to understand Korea's sociocultural and political economic background. More specifically, he claims that there has been no critical analysis of the proliferation of Korean girl groups specifically. Also, there is no question that Korean idol girl groups are "conceived, produced, circulated and consumed in regard to contemporary Korean people imagined and/or shared desire, created by various historical junctures" (Kim, 2019, p. 339). Through Kim's researches (2018, 2019), what we see is a glimpse into the political economic approach as an analytical framework to understand the commodification of Korean girl groups.

Moreover, Kim (2019) argues that the K-pop industry has "manufactured and legitimated a popular idea of women's subjectivity in post-IMF Korea" (p. 29). This is an interesting point to connect to the economic developmentalism driven by the economic crisis of late 1990s Korea. It suggests that "Korean girl groups are only able to be reproduced and perpetuated by a combination of systematic patriarchal practices, governmental-driven developmental capitalism and neoliberalism" (Epstein and Turnbull, 2014; Kim, 2019, p. 25). In turn, those concepts are facilitated through Korean girl groups as a nation-branding product. This type of nation branding constitutes a gender-based nationalist developmentalism in K-pop (Kim, 2019, p. 32) because the concept of developmentalism in Korea has been constructed on the idea of working hard and

relying on intensive labor. As a result, this concept has facilitated Korea's industrialization in the export sector (Lie, 1992; Kim, 2019). From this perspective, K-pop girl groups play a role in empowering the notion of patriarchal nationalism (Kim and Park, 2003; Kim, 2019). He suggests a way of understanding how Korean girl groups have become a factor in economic, cultural and social domains in Korea: "Korea's constant reterritorialization between the private and the public, the emerging and the entrenched, the welcoming and the hierarchical, personal identification investment and collective emotional structure and the marginalized and the mainstream … [produce] effects on women's place in society" (Kim, 2019, p. 29).

Another study of "girl industry" by Kim, Y. R. (2011) relates girl industries to "cultural industries and to the popular daily practice of cultural content that is produced and distributed of and for girls, as well as consumed by them" (p. 334). In this study, she critically examines how girl industries have been constructed in K-pop practice and how they convert a girl's body into a commercial product. Kim, Y. R. (2011) points out that girls in K-pop groups are "de-humanized and become cultural content of girl industries and girl bodies are objectified as normative commodities under corporate government mentality" (p. 333). Furthermore, women's bodies, in this context *girl's* bodies, are "re-sexualized and their sexuality is featured as the sexuality of ambiguity in the split and doubling modes of visualization" (p. 333). Kim, Y. R. (2011) proposes a more in-depth interpretation of the relationship between women's bodies and commercialized sexualities as marketable products. In this manner, the feminist political economy lens is essential to unveil the process of commercialization.

According to Oh (2018), the reproduction of K-pop idols in general, not specifically girl groups, reveals that K-pop groups are consumed as desirable and intimate commodities. However, Oh (2018) argues that "Korean pop groups are not just a media product that can be consumed as a commodity but are human agents that are related to affective behaviour and contexts" (p. 105). Nevertheless, Oh's study suggests the characteristic of patterned consumption of K-pop idols. The consumption is mostly an image-oriented consumption. This argument is crucial to suggest how K-pop products tend to contain the value of visualization, and this visualized practice affects the ways of looking at Korean girl groups.

Outside the contexts of gender inequality, especially in relation to women's struggles in the industry, there is one study that examines sexism in New Zealand's film industry. The findings of this study (Jones and Pringle, 2015) show the importance of criticizing the K-pop industry in terms of gendered hierarchy and sexism at the workplace. The authors examine sexism in the context of unmanageable inequalities because there is government-driven intervention for gendered practice in the film industry in New Zealand. The main argument of the study (Jones and Pringle, 2015) is how gender inequalities are produced in New Zealand's film industry in terms of the gap that women have had to experience in their workplace. The study implies that the gender regime in New Zealand stands for the ways in which gender is part of organizational procedures at a specific time in an individual organization and domestic industry. Consequently, the authors argue that male-dominated industries are more likely to connect gendered processes in the industries as a new form of sexism within the contexts of gender inequalities, so that this new form of sexism tends to be justified as male privilege at the workplace and to disregard discrimination and responsibility for the disparity.

This chapter has surveyed some of the literature on the political economy of communication relating to feminist political economy and feminist approaches in K-pop. It has situated this thesis within those contexts and identified gaps in the scholarship. Furthermore, it has provided some space to critically examine K-pop texts and the industry that produces them. Also, "research itself is an act of activism, as a form of social intervention" (Lee and Jin, 2018, p. 42). This is the starting point for explaining why this research should be done from this position.

Chapter 3.

Research Methods

This chapter presents the research methods employed in this thesis to investigate how power relations and a gender-based hierarchy are embedded in the industrial practices of the patriarchal K-pop industry. In doing so, this thesis utilizes two methods: textual analysis and semiotic analysis. Textual analysis is used to analyze visual images in the next chapter. It is a useful way to critically interpret television, radio, films, newspaper, magazine and music texts. In this thesis, the texts are mostly images, that is, photographs and moving images. More specifically, in the K-pop industry, there are various types of images that promote Korean girl groups. This thesis focuses on those images.

These texts are examined in Chapter 4 using the principles of semiotics outlined by Ferdinand de Saussure. The present chapter will describe the reasons behind the planning, design and conduct of this thesis and present an overview of the analysis of the data that this thesis has collected and investigated.

3.1. Research Plan

This thesis investigates the power relations subsisting between K-pop girl groups and the patriarchal system of the male-dominated K-pop industry. It assumes that an invisible power beyond and behind the surface may be operating in the K-pop industry and attempts to identify how that invisible power works in the industry. This is a big question if one wishes to continue to work in the industry. The thesis also examines the observations of previous researchers on this issue. Although previous researchers have focused on power relations in the industry, and the industry has pretended to work towards establishing gender equality, there has not been any change in the prevailing circumstances in the industry. Its practices have not progressed towards equity. This observation was the starting point of this thesis. If this thesis results in identifying the changes that must be made in order to achieve gender equity, it will have suggested a valuable step forward.

3.2. Research Object

The subject of this thesis is mainly Korean girl pop groups. This section proposes a breakdown of the girl groups into several classes on the basis of the political, economic and cultural contexts of their participation in the K-pop industry. It will also present the rationale that underlies the choice of research objective.

The term *group* in the K-pop industry means a team of three people or more. Since most K-pop artists work in groups, it is difficult to find a solo artist of any gender, whereas there are several solo artists such as Rain, SE7EN, G.Na, etc. Recently, it has become a common phenomenon for entertainment companies to release one to three persons to form a new unit from pre-existing groups. These variations sometimes include duos.[13] If someone from a group releases a new song separately, that artist is considered a solo artist. This phenomenon is common in the industry because making solo music is riskier than working in a group, but by working solo an artist can earn more by not having to share earnings with other group members.

However, in the K-pop industry, a group consisting of four or five members makes more total profit than a solo artist because the risks are minimal even if the group does not have a good record of sales. If several people release a new song as a unit, they are considered to have brought into existence a new group. In such cases, when companies introduce new groups by bringing together members from existing groups, the new group proves to be more popular than the original group. Sometimes, all the members of a group are popular individually. This is not common, but such cases have occurred. The members of the group can then focus on extending their careers to other fields such as the film industry, or they can accept roles in K-drama. If they are good enough to be solo artists, they tend to choose an alternative path to that of being an idol in a specific group.

The term *group* refers to many things related to industry practices. What are these practices? First, the practices of the K-pop industry have arisen from the K-pop

[13] The term duo in the K-pop industry has not often been used, because K-pop refers to contemporary Korean music mostly performed by more than three members in one group. In the past, there were a couple of duos before the K-pop era. However, there is a recent trend to release units in idol groups so that the term *unit* can be replaced by *duo*, which means two people as a team. Hence, this thesis does not often discuss the term *duo* in K-pop.

culture formulated by the groups. Although there are many aspects to K-pop culture, this thesis will briefly explain what K-pop culture is in order to clarify its relevance to industry practices. K-pop culture has brought about the economic growth of K-pop and its status as a nation-branding product. Technically, the culture was formulated by the Korean Wave, or Hallyu, which has been deeply connected to the spread of K-pop culture. Hallyu has played an essential role in making Korean culture itself visible across the world.

In terms of practices, the industry began manufacturing groups rather than training solo musicians because groups proved to be a more profitable product. As mentioned earlier, it is natural for entertainment companies to train young people who want to be singers. In the past, most of the trainees trained to be individual singers, but their aim, on the other hand, was to debut as K-pop idol artists. At this point, the difference between singers and K-pop artists must be explained. To be trained as a potential member of a specific group means being a K-pop artist. Singers need to perfect their art to be known as singers and songwriters.

On the other hand, being a member of a group means each member brings a different talent, which is the member's strength, but the weaknesses of each member can be hidden when they perform as a group. This means that, to be an effective member of a group, one need not be perfect at his or her art. Although a trainee's objective is a career as a K-pop idol, their debut as such is not guaranteed.

Forming a group can be the reason for removing some of the trainees from an entertainment company. The is one of the industrial practices. In general, most entertainment companies have an unofficial test to select the trainees and design a group, which is an industrial mechanism. Those who cannot pass the test have to leave the company and, to ease this process, the company does not make a binding contract when a particular company selects the trainees.

The industry has been managed by a small number of entertainment companies whose power in the market has grown. These companies determine industrial practices and negotiate from their position of power with those who have the authority to make the final decisions in the industry.

Groups depend on K-pop idols to create fandoms. However, it is not possible to say that there was no fandom in Korean popular music history in the past. There have been several influential fandoms in the history of Korean popular music, which may be regarded as the original models for contemporary K-pop idol fandoms. The fandom also symbolizes an idol artist itself.

Going back to the industrial practices and the more familiar ways of manufacturing an idol group, we can look at K-pop through the lens of history. To the general rule that idols have to be members of groups, as mentioned above, there has been one exceptional case of a solo artist who was also an idol. This was BoA,[14] a legendary solo artist before Korean popular music came to be known as K-pop. Even though female, she was the pioneer who led almost every K-pop group to the mainstream stage globally.

Making an idol group has become a settled rule for success. In this respect, the industry calls both duos and teams made up of more than two people groups, especially in the genre of K-pop. This thesis looks at groups that have at least two members. As this thesis explores the meaning of the term group, it becomes necessary to explore the term *idol*. The idol concept used in Korea has come from Japan. The contexts of using the word *idol* are similar. The idea of an idol means that young entertainers, mostly singers, are manufactured and marketed for Japanese popular culture. Likewise, idols in Korea are categorized in the genre of Korean popular music after the usage of the term *K-pop* is settled down in order to talk about music sung and performed by idols. However, this does not mean that all kinds of contemporary music can be classified as K-pop. “The idol idea embraces the context of both Korean and Japanese music industries associated with the nation-building concept” (Huang, 2011, p. 5). In this sense, both popular music industries seem similar to some extent. Japan adopted the nation-branding strategy, especially linked to tourism, as a nation-state form of making profits when Japan situated itself in the global economy (Huang, 2011). Similarly, Korea utilizes a nation-building strategy to export cultural products, especially K-drama during

[14] BoA is a female solo artist from SM Entertainment. She is the first solo artist which has been trained by a major management agency in Korea. She has debuted in her age of fourteen in 2000. She is regarded as a K-pop singer who has paved her own way for K-pop itself to go abroad. She has succeeded commercially both in Korea and Japan and is the only female artist who sells one million as a foreign one in Japan.

the early stages of the Korean Wave, to construct Korea's global economic presence (Huang, 2011). In this regard, the concept of an idol star in popular culture has been constructed as part of the cultural and economic developmental planning of the nation state.

3.3. Data Collection

In general, the term *girl* is not adequate for academic research or scientific writing. In this thesis, the terms *girl* and *young woman* are used as synonyms in the context of the K-pop industry. More specifically, this thesis considers girl groups that debuted between 2009 and 2019 in the K-pop genre.

In order to examine the K-pop industry as an arena of power struggle, more specifically, the gender-based struggle of women artists, this thesis relies on data about Korean girl groups collected from pre-existing documents (Yoo and Kim, 2017; *AllKPop*, 2018, 2019). It first investigates girl groups in the decade from January 2009 to April 2019 and includes some girl groups that have debuted as recently as the first quarter of 2019. Thus, the findings reflect contemporary trends in the K-pop industry related to the topic of this thesis.

Between January 2009 and April 2019, almost 300 girl groups debuted. The year 2009 was a big year in terms of Korean girl groups and the history of K-pop. Many of the big names among the girl groups, such as 2NE1 from YG Entertainment (hereafter YG), 4Minute from CUBE Entertainment (hereafter Cube), F(x), a Korean girl group, from SM Entertainment (hereafter SM), Afterschool from Pledis Entertainment (hereafter Pledis), Secret from TS Entertainment (hereafter TS) and T-ARA from MBK Entertainment (hereafter MBK), emerged in that year. Most of these groups were disbanded in following years, and most women in those groups are no longer singing or dancing as K-pop artists, although they have stayed on in the entertainment industry. Some of them act in K-dramas or films, while others are still pursuing their careers as singers.

The reason 2009 is so important is that it produced the first hugely successful girl groups, especially Wonder Girls[15] from JYP and Girls' Generation (SNSD)[16] from SM. The year 2009 was when 2NE1 made their debut, and Korean media began calling SM, JYP and YG Korea's top three entertainment companies. Each company promoted their own girl groups, and 2NE1 was the last one in the age of top-three entertainment ranking. That group's debut created a sensation in the industry because 2NE1 focused on musical performance rather than young women's sexiness and femininity. Their central concept, which runs through all their albums, is that they were neither feminine nor sexy. The girl groups that debuted in 2009 differed from other groups in other ways, too. The concept of "girlness" or femininity was not their keyword. Therefore, this work begins the data collection with musical entertainment in the year of 2009. The most significant year in terms of the number of many girl groups that debuted is 2018, but during the first quarter of 2019, from January to April, more than five groups made their debuts (see Figure 5 below), and at least one group debuted every month.

A few of the big entertainment companies such as SM, JYP and YG have had grand plans to train members for groups regularly. However, not all trainees have made debuts that met the companies' expectations. For example, JYP only recently released their new girl group, ITZY, long after TWICE, who debuted in 2015. This thesis has filtered the data because, currently, there are lots of girl groups that are not reachable on any internet sites in Korea.

[15] Wonder Girls is the first idol girl group to have debuted in 2007 since JYP has established. The original members are Sunmi, Sohee, Hyuna, Sunye and Yeeun. Hyuna was the first person who left the group, and Yubin then joined. Then Sunye married a non-celebrity male, so she was officially out of Wonder Girls. Hyerim has since replaced Sunye.

[16] Girls' Generation (SNSD) is a Korean girl group from SM that debuted in 2007. SNSD refers to the alphabetical abbreviation of its name in Korean. It has been called the most successful Korean idol girl group, and it is the center of girl industries exported as cultural products of nation branding.

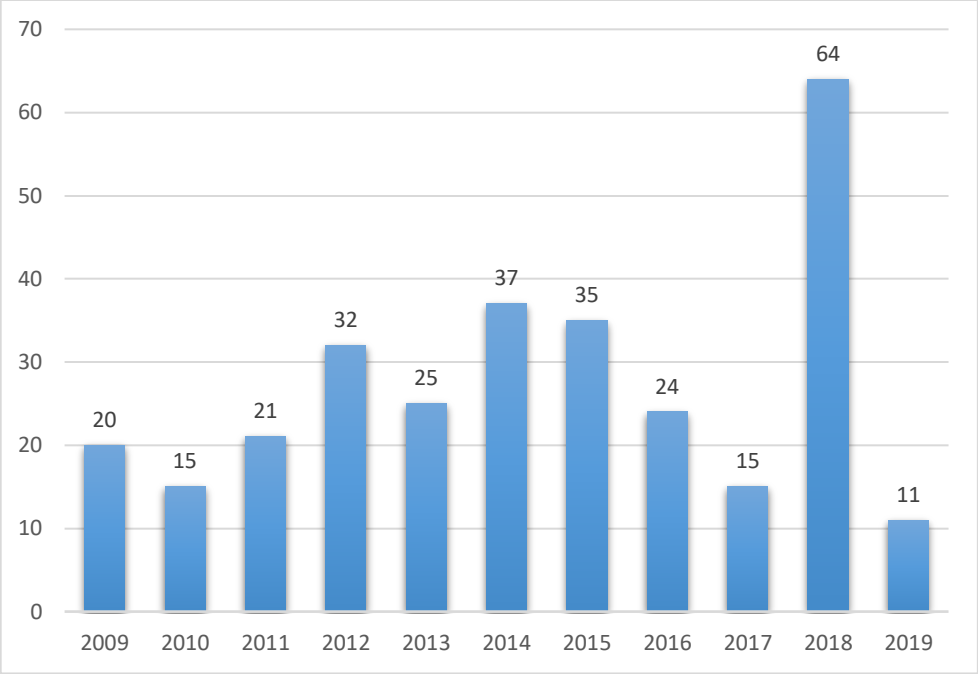

Figure 5. How many Korean idol girl groups debut per year?
From Yoo and Kim, 2017; *AllKPop*, 2018, 2019

As Figure 5 shows, from 2009 to May 2019, 299 Korean idol girl groups debuted. The annual average was approximately twenty-seven. These numbers are drawn from *The Economics of a Girl Group* (Yoo and Kim, 2017) and an article in *AllKPop* (2018, 2019). Yoo and Kim (2017) include the girl groups that debuted in the decade 2007–2017. To include data for the years 2018 and 2019, this thesis relied on other sources (*AllKPop*, 2018, 2019). This thesis filtered its data according to several conditions: 1) a girl group should be findable by Korea's top search engine, Naver;[17] 2) a girl group should have released at least one song (including a digital single) or one album (including a mini album, known as an EP); 3) the girl group must have performed at least once on the four main music programs (Mnet,[18] KBS2,[19] MBC,[20] and SBS[21]); and 4) girl groups created as a project group by a particular television show or as a unit from pre-

[17] Naver is a top used portal sites in Korea (Alexa, 2019).

[18] Mnet is a cable channel for music, but it recently covers a various type of genre of reality television by maintaining a one and only specialized music channel owned by CJ E&M, one of the largest media corporates owned by CJ Group, one of the chaebols in Korea.

[19] KBS2 is a second main channel owned by KBS (Korean Broadcasting System), a national public broadcaster.

[20] MBC is Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation launched in 1969.

[21] SBS is Seoul Broadcasting System which is a television-radio network company.

existing girl groups (excluding groups that were already disbanded) should be counted. As a result, a total of 68 girl groups were studied (Table 1). This thesis investigates the most problematic aspects of the images, names and music associated with these groups.

Table 1. Alphabetical list of the 68 girl groups in this study

- (G)I-DLE
- 12DAL
- A Train to Autumn
- AOA
- Apink
- April
- BABA
- Baby Boo
- BADKIZ
- BERRY GOOD
- Blackpink
- Blue Fox
- Brave Girls
- BVNDIT
- CAMILA
- Celeb-Five
- Cherry Bullet
- Chic Angel
- CLC
- CoCoSoRi
- Cupid
- Dream Catcher (previously MINX)
- Dream Note
- ELRIS
- EVERGLOW
- EXID
- fromis 9
- G-reyish
- GBB
- GFriend
- GIRLKIND
- Gugudan
- GWSN
- H.U.B
- Heygirls (previously Blackqueen)
- Highteen
- HINT
- I.C.E
- ITZY
- IZ*ONE
- LABOUM
- Lady's Code
- Limesoda
- LIPBUBBLE
- LIVE HIGH
- LOONA
- Lovelyz
- Mamamoo
- Marmello
- MIXX
- MOMOLAND
- Musky
- NATURE
- NeonPunch
- OH MY GIRL
- Pinkfantasy
- RANIA
- Red Velvet
- S#aFLA
- SATURDAY
- ShaSha
- SONAMOO
- The Pink Lady
- Tweety
- TWICE
- WANNA.B
- WEGIRLS
- WJSN

Everything in Korea can be located using search engines such as Naver, Daum and Nate, Korea's top three portal sites. Portal sites curate a range of information on various topics from celebrities to Korean politics. Anyone can upload a profile, and when a girl group makes its official debut, its management company posts the group's

information on the internet. If a group is disbanded, its data is deleted, but the data on the members of the disbanded group is retained.

As the influence of K-pop has spread globally, the popularity of K-pop makes Korean television music shows smile thanks to the rising power of various digital platforms such as YouTube, Vimeo and V Live.[22] The significance of appearing on Korean popular music shows, such as MCountDown,[23] Music Bank,[24] Show Music Core[25] and Inkigayo[26] on Mnet, KBS2, MBC and SBS respectively, is regarded as a priority when an idol group promotes itself.

Program appearances count and are reflected in the music charts. Thus, for all the idol groups, the goal of televising their music is to raise their popularity in the charts. This means that the idols, and the producers of those shows, benefit from each other. Furthermore, there is an invisible authority within the culture of producers driven by a competition for appearances and viewership.

3.4. Analytical Frameworks

This thesis aims to analyze women's struggles to succeed as creators of music in the K-pop industry and to sell their music as a commodity as members of Korean girl groups. In order to examine the power relations between K-pop girl groups and the K-pop industry, this study applies a mainly qualitative research method. The qualitative method is more applicable for a topic in the political economy of communication.

The data analyzed consists mostly of texts, images and other items connected with music such as lyrics, videos and performances in text form. Thus, this research uses textual analysis as the primary research method to investigate the research questions. It also uses semiotics, the science of signs, as an analytical framework to support the textual analysis. This section first explores the methodological contexts by providing a

[22] V Live is a mobile-based live-streaming service operated by Naver (see also p. 33).

[23] MCountDown, aired by Mnet on Thursdays, was the first cable music chart show.

[24] Music Bank is a television music show aired by KBS2 since 1981. The original title was GayoTop10 which is the body of all the current television music chart shows. It is aired on Fridays.

[25] Show Music Core is a television music program broadcast by MBC on Saturdays.

[26] Inkigayo is a television music chart show broadcast by SBS on Sundays.

literature review, then offers a rationale to explain the suitability of the methodology for this research.

Textual analysis

Most media and communication research aim to critically analyze media texts, including images, videos and related phenomena. In general, communication scholars use the term *text* to convey a meaning broader than simply written words as in books, newspapers, magazines and other written or printed documents. Reading texts involves procedures of textual examination of the meanings that the various media portray (Taylor and Willis, 1999, p. 13). In this thesis, the analysis of texts located in the media is a suitable method to discover how media interprets texts and how people read the texts in specific contexts, because textual analysis is about "what texts represent and how people use it to make sense of our lives" (Brennen, 2017, p. 203). The crucial point of textual analysis is to understand the concept of *text* (Brennen, 2017).

Many scholars in media and communication research have been utilizing textual analysis as a research method to examine how media texts convey meaning. In general, textual analysis is performed in order to interpret texts behind and beyond the surface. According to McKee (2001), textual analysis of media collects and analyzes information through academic research in order to investigate the role of media in our lives and how the media look at the world. Therefore, any texts may be analyzed. The primary question of textual analysis may be: "how do we make sense of the society we live in?" (McKee, 2001, p. 8).

The world we live in is equal to the sense of reality we derive from it. Textual analysis is an attempt to apprehend that reality. Anything can be a text. In that sense, newspapers and statistics are texts made from specific parts of the world, the society and reality, that we live in. Every version of reality that we might measure our text against is undeniably another representation that cannot be disconnected from another text (McKee, 2001, p.5). This is why we need to examine carefully the meanings of texts in order to understand the world both internally and externally. From the interpretation and analysis of texts, we can get a better sense of how people understand the reality around them (McKee, 2001, p. 8). The reason this kind of perspective is essential to examining the K-pop industry and its industrial practices is that the industry is made of

people such as creators in various fields and their audiences. The culture and the people create the world, which means reality. At this point, textual analysis is the best way to help interpret the artifacts and the intangibles, such as culture and practices, by going beyond and behind their surface appearances.

Further, when you ask questions from a different perspective, you can reach another layer of knowledge through a different way of thinking. Therefore, textual analysis is an adequate method for the exploration of how Korean girl groups, as they appear in the texts of the K-pop industry, reflect the gender-based industrial practices embedded in the patriarchal hierarchy of the K-pop industry. More specifically, when you apply textual analysis to any kind of text, whether television or radio programs, newspapers, magazines or songs, etc., the aim is not to determine which interpretations are correct but to find all the possible interpretations. It is vital to recognize that there is no correct interpretation of any text. Therefore, this thesis undertakes a qualitative study. The findings may not be generalized, but qualitative methods may

Furthermore, textual analysis is the appropriate procedure to determine how such texts are represented. This thesis emphasizes this characteristic of textual analysis because it is the starting point for a critical examination of textual representations (McKee, 2001). Representations are connected to the power behind the production of texts and the ways of conveying the meanings of texts. Power manipulates thoughts that lead to the production of meanings and, therefore, that power has the potential to impact people's behavior.

Political economy and cultural studies have their own characteristic features (Jin, 2020, forthcoming). Mostly, the political economy of media analyzes "the consequences of for-profit ownership and commodification" (Jin, 2020, p. 31, forthcoming) because political economists focus on "the control of all media by capitalist corporations" (Jin, 2020, p. 31), which is related to the K-pop texts produced by media and entertainment sector. This justifies the use of textual analysis in a thesis located in political economy studies rather than cultural studies. Moreover, from the perspective of political economy studies, the texts analyzed in this thesis reveal the critical issues that this thesis sets out to critique. These issues are embedded in the gender and power consciousness that political economists have been contending with.

Semiotics

Textual analysis can be the best option among the various methods of analysis to interpret texts when the discipline or concept of semiotics by Ferdinand de Saussure is followed in order to assist in understanding how textual analysis works as a method. Semiotics offers “ways of analyzing the structure of communicative systems” (McKee, 2001, pp. 18–19). It is a “nuanced and complicated way in which interpretations of a text can be produced” (p. 19). Semiotics breaks down the various elements of the texts and labels them. The significance of semiotics is that it enables a variety of factors to be analyzed in the process of “arriving from a text at meaning that we, generally and easily, recognize” (p. 19).

We may ask the question: How do those factors work in the texts? The answer is that “semiotics is based on Saussure’s published lectures entitled *Course in General Linguistics* (1974)” (Taylor and Willis, 1999, p. 20). Saussure developed semiotics as a science of signs to be broken down. Signs can be anything, which means texts are signs and, in turn, signs are texts. According to Saussure (1974), relational meanings are made by signs. This means that signs and their meanings are produced historically, socially and culturally. In these respects, “signs generate meanings regarding other signs” (Taylor and Willis, 1996, p. 21).

Anything which is made up of signs can be a text: “Semioticians have analyzed facial expressions, hairstyles and hair colors, teeth, fashions in clothing and eyeglasses and jewelry, body piercing and just about anything you can think of in terms of how they generate meaning and what they reflect about society and culture” (Berger, 2011, p. 47). According to Saussure (Taylor and Willis, 1996, pp. 20–21), “studying signs should throw new light on the facts and point up the need for including meanings in the science of semiology and explaining them by its laws.”

Table 2. Saussure’s semiotics

Ferdinand de Saussure		**This thesis**
Sign	Objects	Korean idol girl groups

Signifier	Various types of texts produced, consumed and exhibited by the K-pop industry
Signified	Texts behind and beyond the surface

Note. The definition based on *semiotics*, coined by Ferdinand de Saussure (1974).

Signs are objects (Table 2). The signifier is made of sounds, words, images and so forth. The signified is made of imagery, concepts and sounds. In this respect, words are signs, but many other things can also be taken for signs (Berger, 2011). However, a sign can be a lie if it turns out that it conveys an opposite meaning based on some stereotypes. For example, when we see a person who has long blond hair on the street, we naturally assume the person is a woman. This is an example of how "the relation between signifier and signified is based on convention" (Berger, 2011, p. 50) and has some significant implications. One implication is that people need to be taught how to interpret signifiers by society or institutions. According to Culler (1986), "the meaning of a signifier is a social product, so the meanings of signifiers needs to be defined with respect to social contexts" (Berger, 2011, p. 52). That is, every object is a social product. People in a society recognize what it is, and then they learn the way of interpretation, as social behavior, in their society.

Therefore, semiotics offers a way of analyzing and understanding how meaning is generated in advertisements, television and radio commercials, photographs, buildings, television and radio programs, films, journal columns, etc. In this sense, the media can be a sign in which semioticians are interested in order to interpret (Berger, 2011). "We may interpret everyday stories, narratives and tales, which are all texts" (Berger, 2011, p. 60). A lot of news and magazine articles surrounding us are semiotic, and they need semiotics to help readers understand what their main point is. Using semiotics is considered as "a procedure of making sense of objects as signs" (Berger, 2011, p. 65).

According to *The Washington Post* (Allen, 1991), glasses are not only optical instruments but also costume, manifesto, clothing for the face as well as societal fetish. This statement shows that the multiple meanings of wearing glasses and means that one object can play a varied and functional role, which implies a societal context that we

share in society. That is, the object reflects shared norms and ways of understanding reality. Semiotics can guide us on how to interpret the meanings and objectives of conversations (Berger, 2011). Overall, semiotics is a useful tool to learn how people determine the meanings of all kinds of texts, objects, etc. (Berger, 2011). It is "the study of everything that can be used for communication—words, images, traffic signs, flowers, music, medical symptoms and much more" (Seiter, 1992, p. 31).

Seiter also explains the advantages of utilizing a semiotic approach by pointing out that semiotics "allows us to describe the workings of cultural communication with greater accuracy and enlarges our recognition of the conventions that characterize our culture" (Seiter, 1992, p. 32; Taylor and Willis, 1999, p. 19). Zoonen (1994) says that "everything can be considered as a system of signs" (p. 74), while Taylor and Willis (1999) point out that "semiotics provides us with a way of interpreting reality through the organization of any texts as signs, which can be utilized in the analysis of sounds as well as of visuals" (p. 13): "Our reality is not only made of up language but also of thoughts and actions" (Berger, 2011, p. 56). Also, "reality consists of various layers of metaphor that influence how we talk, think and act" (Berger, 2011, p. 3).

Semiotic analysis is a useful tool to unveil the messages and meanings behind and beyond the texts, especially visualized texts. It is one of the traditional approaches for analyzing images critically, and critical analysis utilizing semiotics is an adequate method for reading the contexts and nuances behind and beyond the visualizations. These contexts and nuances are created by human beings and function as commodities in various ways. Thus, semiotics can be used to analyze the sexuality and femininity embedded in the industrial practices surrounding girl groups. At the same time, this thesis utilizes a stance of feminist political economy to fill the gap in political economy's lack of feminist interpretations by looking at young women artists in the K-pop industry.

This thesis, therefore, employs textual analysis and semiotics in order to analyze how the K-pop industry reinforces its industrial practices in order to commodify and objectify Korean girl groups as a form of commodity in the processes of production, distribution and exhibition through the texts produced by the industry. More specifically, it shows, in the next chapter, how various types of texts associated with Korean girl groups utilize sexuality and femininity created by male-gaze traditions of making cultural

products, embedded in sexism, as an industrial practice of gendered ideology, primarily male-dominant ideology.

Chapter 4.

Findings and Discussion

This chapter describes the primary findings of the analysis and shows that it is necessary to read the texts from a feminist political economic perspective. The chapter is divided into three parts. The first part describes how girls (young women) are exploited and commodified in the K-pop industry by being consumed as a form of commodity that represents how pure girls are. It presents an analysis of various types of texts such as images, lyrics and statements. The second section is about how women have been represented in the industry. It also deals with visual representations embedded in the industrial practices of K-pop that make the girl industry a niche market to attract other businesses in the context of a capitalist society. The last section suggests the intensive form of commodity exchange in which women in the K-pop industry play a role embedded in the traditional concept of Confucianism as located at the bottom of a gendered hierarchy. All three sections are organically connected in order to reveal women's struggles in the K-pop industry as a power struggle from the perspective of feminist political economy. The chapter aims to depict the timeline of turning a girl in the K-pop industry into a woman who finally becomes a mother.

Figure 6. Overview of findings

Girl(s) and pure femininity and sexuality

Sexuality is a key interest in the field of feminist studies that examine power relations and dynamics (Trier-Bieniek, 2016), so this chapter continues to

> argue the concept of sexuality by expanding the discussion of Chapters 1 to 3. Societies have tolerated and glorified violent masculinity encouraged by rape culture (Trier-Bieniek, 2016). For this reason, women have had to accept masculine violence under a system of "rigid sex roles and [of] viewing women as property" (Cooper, 2016, p. 205) linked to gender inequalities. In this way, the hegemonic system "affords men a dominant position or role in relation to initiating sexual encounters, negotiating desired sexual activities and deciding the start and end of such encounters" (Cooper, 2016, p. 205).

With respect to these contexts, Chapter 1 analyzed images and discussed how such images are embedded in the gendered hierarchy of the K-pop industry and how women's struggles with regard to power relations work in the K-pop industry. The imagery of Korean girl groups is mostly produced by various types of texts involved in media representations of the groups. More specifically, photographs play a key role in a wide range of Korean girl groups' representations and include almost every kind of image from artwork in their albums to selfies in social media (see Table 3).

Table 3. Types of texts

Visual texts	▪ Photographs: press, cover art for albums, officially released images, pictures on official merchandise, selfies, magazine images, etc. ▪ Moving images: teaser videos, music videos, commercial films, television music chart shows, social media live streaming, viral media, etc.
Written texts	▪ Lyrics ▪ Press: interviews, columns, news, etc. ▪ Naming: names of teams, stage names, fan-club names, etc. ▪ Social media captions
Oral/Aural texts	▪ Music styles ▪ Ways of speaking

Before diving into the discussion of what such images represent, this thesis needs to raise the question of who has determined that a teenage girl wants to be a "sexy" woman?

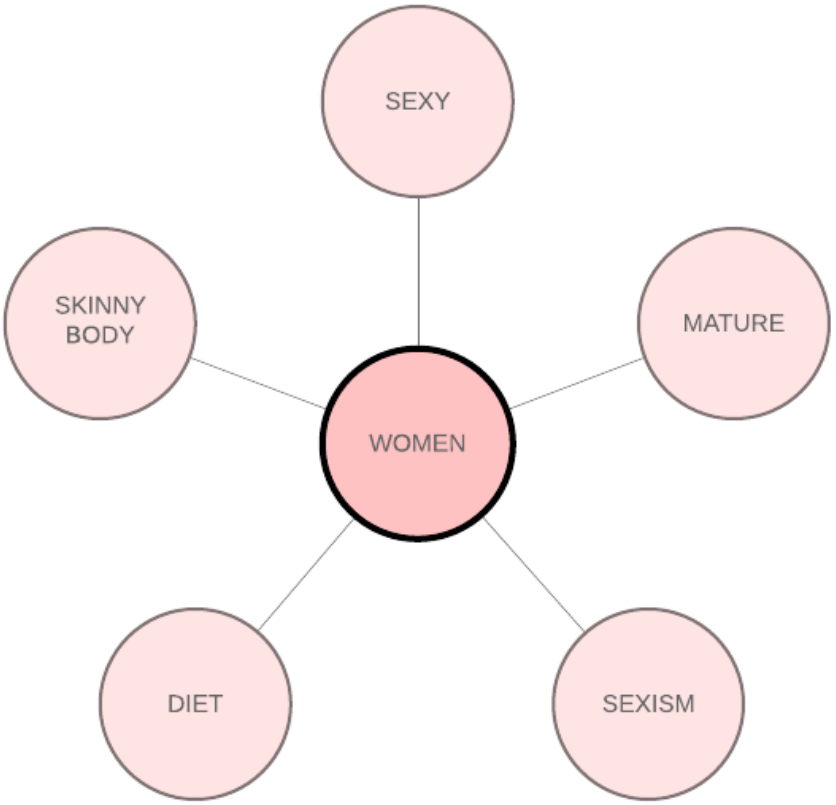

Figure 7. What women should be and have in contemporary Korea

Contemporary Korean society is obsessed with sexiness. If nothing were sexy, life would be a catastrophe. This is not an exaggeration. The word *sexy* applies to almost everything. When it comes to talking about sexiness, discussion is limited to someone or something visualized, and the word *sexy* is used in a gendered context. Furthermore, sexiness applies to invisible things. For example, when someone suggests a brilliant idea at the workplace, others will say that the opinion sounds sexy. If it is not sexy, they may suggest coming up with something sexy. The entire society is desperate to find "sexiness" in everything and everywhere. Sexiness seems invaluable. "Deploying various styles and feminine images from innocent and cute to sexy and mature, S.E.S. made an earnest effort to break into the Japanese market but was not favored as much as in Korea" (Kim, 2019, p. 14).

The representation of sexiness is not limited to girl groups' still images on album covers, in press photoshoots and other types of photography. Their sexiness, as portrayed in still images, is reinforced by many kinds of moving images such as music videos, commercial films, live performances and so forth. This is because almost every management company carefully plans the story when a girl group is manufactured. With

this storytelling as a key strategy for selling a girl group as a product, the members of the group have to act like characters in the story. This means they are forced to maintain the same concept, such as a skinny body or sharp jaw line, as in their initial images. Figure 7 shows how Korean women are usually expected to be.

This practice is related to the history of women's bodies. Traditionally, Korean society has regulated and oppressed women's bodies for men's profit and advantage under men's control. In this process, women's bodies are objectified as a form of commodity whose ultimate purpose is to produce children. Similarly, this type of control over women's bodies can be found in the K-pop industry through objectification of the bodies of members of girl groups. Their bodies are trained and managed to be displayed as products and generate huge profits as part of gendered industrial practices and hierarchies in the K-pop industry. Girl group members need to maintain a diet to show their sexiness, and these diets are managed and controlled by their management corporates. Technically, the companies are not focusing on diet itself but on visually sexualized and objectified bodies. That is, women's bodies are considered as sexiness itself. The Korean girl groups' diets are always a topic of gossip as a form of commodity.

Figure 8. A core diet table in a short term for Korean celebrities made by Korean management companies. [Digital image]. From Instagram. Copyright 2019 by @runuptoday.

Retrieved from https://www.instagram.com/p/By_iHDrlzaL/

Figure 8 is a good example of how a woman's body, or a body as a female Korean celebrity attribute, is expected to be as thin as possible. It is a core diet table posted on Instagram (runuptoday, 2019 June 21) that shows how celebrities can lose weight in a very short time. Figure 8 shows that women's bodies are at the core of the neoliberal regime of knowledge, power and pleasure: "Exploitation and systematic regulation of women's bodies are actively developed in family, institutions, workplaces and media to religion and law" (Brooks, 1997; Kim, 2011, p. 334).

As industrial practices have begun to manage and regulate women's bodies in the field of K-pop, Korean society is also involved in making this notion circulate and taking advantages of it in an active way. Society formulates the discourse about young women's bodies. The discourses of women's bodies are constructed by industrial practices (management companies and K-pop industry operators) and audiences. How

are audiences involved in creating these discourses and regulating girl groups' bodies? Through the industrial practices of decision-makers in the K-pop industry, audiences have learned that this type of body is ideal. This perspective is dangerous because audiences do not think that they take advantage of those stereotypes to construct the ideal type of women's body. Some women even push themselves into the same misconception about women's bodies. Can we say that this is only related to an individual's point of view and behaviour? Can we say that it is not about an objectification of femininity and a commodification of women's bodies? The management companies exhibit and commodify girl groups' bodies as their selling point, which means that their bodies have to be sexy enough to have value in the market. Based on this information, the industry makes the competition of industrial practices in business worse and reproduces women's bodies as a resource with an economic value.

A skinny body is evaluated as good-looking, especially for women. Women are pressured to have thinner bodies as much as they can. Society needs this, and skinny bodies are sold as a commodity, making huge profits. The rising significance of skinny bodies for women is connected to a shared value about being sexy. Being sexy means being a success in Korean society. This type of image is not far from the manipulated visualization of a "mature" (synonymous with "sexy") woman who was once a "pure" and innocent girl in terms of girl groups' marketing. Success in one's career is considered as another type of sexiness. In this regard, women's office outfits are consumed sexually, and workplaces are also full of sexism.

Given the social and cultural need for a skinny body, any girls in K-pop groups who fail to keep their bodies healthy are blamed. This is not because of concern for actual healthiness but rather for "purity." Objectification of women's bodies is so common that women's bodies are regarded as public goods. If a member of a girl group gets sick and is unable to perform live, people blame the management company and then start to formulate rumors about the group.

Choa, a former member of AOA, left the group in the midst of many rumours circulating about her personal life. Here is part of the statement uploaded on Choa's Instagram at the time: "I know that the more you all show interest in me, the more rumors there will be. I am not pregnant, I did not get an abortion, nor am I leaving the group because of a marriage" (Beansss, 2017, para. 2). On her Instagram page, Choa posted a letter to

explain why she left the group. She told fans that she had been dealing with depression and insomnia for the past two years. Despite her bright image on the outside, she had often wanted to cry during promotions. In order not to make fans worry, although her struggle with depression deepened, she had to pretend to be happy. However, the more she forced herself to do so, the sicker she became.

> Skinny bodies and glamorous, pretty faces with clear skin that conform to western beauty standards are considered best for Korean girl groups. This kind of western beauty standard seems to require a mannequin rather than a real human body. It symbolizes a perfect woman's body with no facial expression being displayed. Girl groups have to pass their right to manage their own bodies to their entertainment companies. The corporates market them to audiences who are willing to control women's bodies on the basis of their authority as consumers. These hierarchical positions make women in these male-dominated cultures lose the possession of their own bodies. As Marilyn Monroe in *The New York Times* (1962) said: "We're what's OK with the movie business. *Management is what's wrong with the business.* To blame the troubles of Hollywood on stars is stupid. These executives should not knock their assets around (*The New York Times*, 1962, August 6).

In the middle of the sixth episode of *Mad Men* season 2 (2008), Joan Holloway, portrayed by Christina Hendricks, expresses her grief about the death of Marilyn Monroe (1926-1962), saying, "She was so young. This world destroyed her," but a male character, Roger Sterling, portrayed by John Slattery, responds, "Really? She was a movie star who had everything and everybody, and she threw it away." It is one of the most interesting scenes from *Mad Men* (2007-2015). It is a vivid depiction of the gulf that separates the perspectives of women and men on an industry whose practices have caused the death of a woman in the industry.

Historically, the traditional type of Korean family man considered women as objects for the male gaze. As a result, women have been placed in a gendered hierarchy governed by patriarchal power, passive objects that need the male gaze. Berger (1972) argues that women subjected to the male gaze tend to see themselves as passive. Mulvey (1975) points out that the coupling of masculine, active seeing and feminine, passive being tends to embody the concept of fetishism. Mulvey (1975) argues that men are likely not only to regard women as fantasy objects but also to think that women themselves would like to become sexual objects. According to Winship (1987), women's body parts such as hair, eyes, lips, hands and legs are portrayed by visual media texts through closeups that exaggerate women's sexuality. The young, amiable, sexualized

bodies of K-pop girl groups convey “the political unconscious,” (Jameson, 1981, p. 142) “exemplifying what is important, what to think and how to govern oneself” (Kim, 2019, p. 25).

Among various images, album cover art, known as artworks, including texts and images, are one of the most important transmitters of such messages. The purpose of cover art is to introduce a group’s identity, style of music and performance style, and the group’s identity as a compressed piece of imagery. This thesis aims to critique gendered power utilized as a male’s authority when specific (especially final) decisions are made behind industrial practices. Men tend to identify their gaze with the female sexual images they are looking at (Kim, Y. R., 2011).

Such sexual images of girl groups are manufactured through industrial practices. Simultaneously, the process of identification is embedded in the production, distribution, exhibition and reproduction of women’s sexual images. It is a repetitive procedure due to the industrial system’s need to make profits by persuading consumers to engage in that kind of consumption. This is naturally connected to exploitation of women’s labor as a form of commodity. When girl groups succeed in their careers economically, the commodification is solidified. For example, Girls’ Generation (SNSD), which has been training for more than five years, is the most successful case of promoting a nation-branding cultural product globally as well as women as a form of resource and has led to satisfactory results in the market (Lee, 2010). At this point, many corporates in other fields of business are interested in marketing strategies to create a product such as a new Korean girl group.

The stress on girl idols’ performances is highlighted through their smiles, loose gestures and uniform movements (Kim, Y. R, 2011). Their patterned routines are connected to what girl groups sell through imagery texts. For example, Table 4 below shows how many images are produced and consumed before and after an album is released (see Table 4).

Table 4. Types of images produced and consumed

Before an album release	**After an album release**

Announcement to promote album purchases ➔ This type of notice has, generally, a blurred image and text. It reveals the price and release date. Blurred images and texts make audiences curious. Teaser images (sometimes repeating photos in the album) ➔ The images are uploaded via social media by each member of a group along with collective photos. These images play an important role in creating the first impressions of a group and an album. Members should maintain the concept of a teaser image whether it portrays a sexy woman or a "pure" teenage girl. Music video preview	Release of merchandise such as frames, photo cards, etc. Selfies uploaded on every social media channel of girl group's official account Performance videos, television shows, etc. ➔ Numerous moving images from the commercial, videos they upload, television programs, etc. Screenshots and meme images via live streaming on digital platforms ➔ Mostly produced by fans and reproduced as an objectification.

As stated in Chapter 2, women's poverty is one of the main interests of the feminist political economy of communication. The following statement from a television news program shows how women's poverty makes girl groups accept gender inequalities directly connected to women's struggles to make a living. The program from MBC, entitled *True Story,* interviewed two former members of the girl group, Baby Boo, Dayul and Daon, who reported that:

> We had performed approximately 500 times for the last four years, but we had never got paid from the company. We had never felt safe when we were at the building in which we had lived. Moreover, the owner of the corporate kept forcing us to get a plastic surgery and to go on a diet. Even he had never paid our training fees. (*Joins*, 2019 May 8)

This statement makes it clear how the industrial practices of K-pop exploit women's struggle as a form of labor, but this is only part of the problem:

> Once recruited, future idols sign agreements known as slave contracts, which can last over a decade, limiting their contact with the outside world and offering piddling compensation in return. Trainees live in dormitories where they're taught to sing and dance, told what to eat, when to date

> (single performers are more attractive to fans) and how to behave. These last two details are crucial, because in a highly Confucian society like Korea, when chat forums start to ring with rumors that a female pop star is dating or that she has acted impertinently, that's the knell of her career. (Volodzko, 2016)

Figure 9. CLC at the premier of their 6th mini album. [Photograph]. Copyright 2017 by *IlyoSeoul*.
Retrieved from http://www.ilyoseoul.co.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=197359

Once a girl group's concept is fixed, all members are required to maintain it. For example, CLC's concept for their 6th mini album (see Figure 9) was "goddess." Subsequently they had to act and look like goddesses wherever they appeared. Maintaining concepts explains why Korean girl groups tend to prefer a certain type of costume or outfit. Ironically, the headline of the article containing this photo is "CLC, We Do the R&B: Our Charming Point is Various Colors" (*Voice of the People*, 2017).

Figure 10. CLC. [Photograph]. Copyrigh 2017 by *CBS NoCutNews.* Retrieved from https://www.nocutnews.co.kr/news/4825857

The photo above (Figure 10) illustrates the concept of uniformity from head to toe. All six members wear white blouses with frills, red miniskirts and white Mary Jane style high heels. Their hair styles look exactly the same. There is some variation in hair color, but all have lengthy, curly hair. What does this uniformity mean? What does this photo portray? How about the angle of the shot? It undeniably highlights their skinny legs, which take up almost half the picture area. The members of CLC look like a collection of mannequins or barbie dolls. The headline of the article where this photo appears makes the male gaze even more apparent. It reads: “CLC, the 6th change: From girl crush to mature women” (*MK Star Today*, 2017 August 3). The exaggeration of uniformity as a virtue locates CLC at the bottom of the gendered hierarchy as passive agents who all act alike.

Figure 11. CLC's third mini album teaser image. [Photograph]. From Twitter. Copyright 2016 by @CubeCLC
Retrieved from https://twitter.com/CUBECLC/status/702297224277991424

This image (Figure 11) is the extended version of CLC's conceptual photo. It reminds us of female Disney characters as well as of children all wearing the same costume. Uniformity and passivity are reflected in various types of images formulated by the industrial practice of a male-dominated industry.

Figure 12. Joy in an advertisement for Espoir. [Photograph]. Copyright 2019 by *Fashionbiz*.
Retrieved from http://www.fashionbiz.co.kr/TN/?cate=2&recom=2&idx=172480

This photo (Figure 12) is an official commercial picture for Espoir, a Korean beauty brand from Amore Pacific, a cosmetic corporate. Joy from the group Red Velvet became a model for this brand recently. In general, beauty brands, especially cosmetics, target women and offer a wide range of products, but Espoir is one of the brands that focuses on makeup products specifically for young women.

Joy recently opened a personal account separate from Red Velvet's group account. She updated her photos to her own Instagram, including pictures taken by someone else when Joy was shooting the commercial for Espoir. When Joy uploaded her photos, online news outlets began to upload headlines focusing on her body shape and outfit with captions such as "Joy wearing shorts and off-shoulder top in a sexy and perfect body shape" (*Insight*, 2019, May 29) and "Joy, the sexy queen showing off her body shape" (*IncheonIlbo Online News*, 2019, June 3). These headlines reflect concepts that the industry and its practices have created.

Figure 12 does not seem to relate to any specific makeup product that Espoir wants to advertise. Rather, it seems more like an image that might advertise a typical summer beverage. This is because her outfit tries to convey a sense of summer, with the top and shorts she wears brief and tiny like beachwear. The photo utilizes a sunbed, some pieces of fruit and greenery that could portray a specific scene of summer. In terms of setting, if it delivers what the idea of what summer looks like, it is successful. The picture is a full of summer vibes. As you see, this kind of interpretation is able to show how the idea of something has been constructed by the use of a symbolic setting. In turn, it is easy to see how industrial practices take advantage of stereotypes to create imagery that works as a form of entertainment promoting the consumption of women's bodies.

Also, in the picture above (Figure 12), Joy's posture does not suggest what the product or brand is. She smiles and leans on the sunbed, looking directly at the viewer. The story of this photo has no context or information to explain why she smiles and sits there, and Joy does not take any action in the image. Rather, the entire context of the image seems to show that a woman in any image is expected to be passive. It is a way of portraying women that it is deeply embedded in problematic, gendered hierarchies of family, community, institution and society. These gendered hierarchies limit the roles of women in real life and help reinforce the glass ceiling in workplaces. Women rarely have a chance to compete fairly with men and are forced to play limited roles in limited positions. As a result, women seldom have an opportunity to speak out about their problems. In this way, the industrial practices in K-pop maintain their authority by describing what men want as if it is also what women want. The contexts of limitation apply to any procedure when management companies exploit trainees or K-pop groups to justify what they do as the road to success.

The K-pop industry is deeply connected to the advertising industry because the majority of K-pop girl and boy groups are also models or ambassadors for particular brands, products, cities, policies, institutions and so forth. Advertising any type of product relating to female consumption or preferences is mainly based on male-gaze images.

A specific airline has raised a problem regarding an image of TWICE (see Figure 13) that undervalues the labor of women in air travel. The problem with this kind of representation is that industrial practices transform the whole story behind the labor.

Figure 13. TWICE's season's greetings image. [Photograph]. From Twitter. Copyright 2018 by @JYPETWICE_JAPAN
Retrieved from https://twitter.com/JYPETWICE_JAPAN/status/1049857227291422720

In other words, male-gaze industrial practices are not only meant to visualize what men want and imagine as sexual fantasies but also to affect the story of reality. Images and stories of women are entirely distorted by the male gaze. The image of "TWICE Airlines" (Figure 13) will remind K-pop audiences of *Genie* (2010), one of the million hit songs, from Girls' Generation (SNSD) (see Figure 14).

Figure 14. Girls' Generation's conceptual image of *Genie* (2010). [Photograph]. Copyright 2013 by *MK*.
Retrieved from http://news.zum.com/articles/5104690

Figure 15. Lovelyz wearing a school uniform. [Photograph]. Copyright 2014 by *Ajunews*.
Retrieved from https://www.ajunews.com/view/20141103214100300

Figure 16. fromis_9 wearing a school uniform. [Photograph]. From YouTube. Copyright 2018 by Stone Music Entertainment. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iFUHS1Ei7qw

The history of school uniforms is not a Korean one. Korea has no heritage of wearing school uniforms, which originated from Japan. During Japanese colonization, a concept of uniformity was constructed, and Koreans were not allowed to take any kind of collective action to preserve their own cultural heritage. The idea of uniformity was so entrenched that wearing school uniforms has still not disappeared. In the 1980s, the Korean government issued instructions for not wearing school uniforms, but the trial was unsuccessful. The value of uniformity has been revived in contemporary Korean society, and almost every middle and high school in Korea has its own uniform, while most kindergartens and elementary schools let students wear uniforms too. Ironically, the school uniforms in Figures 15 and 16 do not look similar to any real ones. The length of skirts is too short, and even for the girl groups, Lovelyz and fromis_9, the skirts make it difficult for them perform due to the short length. Wearing a short skirt limits movement. Also, underwear may be inadvertently revealed by the gestures or choreography.

Korean women, from childhood, are forced to be feminine, calm, soft, kind and so forth. These characteristics are regarded as essential for a good daughter, wife or mother. Women themselves have never agreed to this type of perspective and practice. Why should women be the feminine, calm, soft and kind ones? Who decides that women

should be like that? The industry even emphasizes that young women should display uniformity and passivity as the key virtues of women.

GFriend, another Korean girl group, often wear a minidresses or miniskirts, but their performance looks powerful. Their debut song, *Glass Bead* (2015), rose suddenly in Korea's music charts because of one video from YouTube, which showed one of the members falling while performing the song outdoors in wet, slippery conditions due to rain. Anything can happen when Korean idol groups are performing live. However, in the performance for Glass Bead, the choreography involves kicking the legs forward while wearing miniskirts portrayed as part of a school uniform. As the video of the girl falling down has spread, GFriend's music has grown in reputation and has often been spotlighted.

Sun (2018) argues that GFriend's musical identity is girlish yet powerful in that it combines a girlish "purity" through images of teenage girls with powerful choreography that resembles the movements of men. In turn, their powerful choreography contrasts with their girlish style of music. However, at this point, GFriend is still forced to be girlish as much as they can. The idea of power does not belong with an image of girls to enable that powerful performance to become their own style. The pursuit of girliness is regarded as an element of success, not the power of the music itself, but the virtue of a Korean girl group, which should be always charming. This kind of strategy is applicable to ways of speaking and of being polite when girl and boy groups perform at live music shows or concerts.

The K-pop industry has never acknowledged that the objectification and sexualization of girl groups is problematic. It has never considered why these practices are serious or how the gendered hierarchy is justified in the context of male-dominated industrial practices. Kim, Y. R. (2011) points out neither producers nor audiences question why girl groups' imagery is so sexualized. They merely talk about sexual images as wrong, which promotes a negative discourse among audiences. Even those who are responsible for gendered industrial practice and hierarchy take advantages of negative discourse to promote girl groups as a form of commodity within the frame embedded in sexism that they have made. On television music shows, especially those broadcast by MBC, KBS and SBS, the networks regulate men's nipples because they do not allow boy groups to be topless when they perform. The television music shows are

sexism itself when they apply to a regulation as an intervention. On the contrary, girl groups wear extremely tiny tops and shorts.

Figure 17. A screenshot from *Señorita* sung by (G)-IDLE. [Photograph]. From YouTube. Copyright 2019 by 1theK.
Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G8APgeFfkAk

Figure 17 is a screenshot from a music video entitled *Señorita* from (G)-IDLE. The group (G)I-DLE debuted in May 2018, and the management company of the team is Cube. It is not a small company in the manufacture of K-pop groups. It has three girl groups: CLC, A Train to Autumn and (G)-IDLE. They each have a different style but appeal to the same audiences. Among these three groups, (G)-IDLE is the latest. It consists of six members, four of whom are Korean. One is from China, and another is from Taiwan. The group's multiethnic membership is designed to target global Asian audiences.

As stated above, (G)-IDLE is the latest group from Cube. This means that its members were mostly born between 1997 and 2000. All look young enough, as Figure 20 shows. However, the majority of the scenes from their music video *Señorita* represents them as call girls. This is related to the lyrics of the song, but to begin with, let us focus on what the associated images portray. In Figure 17, all six women sit or lean on a couch. In the background appears what looks like a hallway in a hotel, with yellow dimmed lights hanging on the walls and a line of green doors arranged behind the six group members. Their facial expressions are not exaggerated but are not the typical

expressions that K-pop utilizes to signify purity. They are not smiling, and their expressions are not easy to read. They look emotionless. The music video's synopsis can be interpreted as a story about call girls, with the setting implying that the women are waiting for men who want call girls.

At the point of interpreting the image, why should companies be mentioned? In the case of Cube, it is not a new company just entering the business of K-pop entertainment. It has produced several popular idol groups such as HighLight, which was Beast, a Korean boy group, and before this, 4Minute, a Korean girl group, since disbanded, and BtoB, another Korean boy group, and its CEO was known as one of the starting members of JYP. Some groups have previous trainees, for example, Hyuna and Kigwang Lee, from JYP. The CEO is an expert in the K-pop scene, but the company still exploits women's sexuality as a form of commodity to accumulate wealth.

Figures 18 to 24 below are screenshots from the music video *Hi* (2015) by the Korean girl group Lovelyz. With respect to school uniforms and images of teenage girls, a certain fetishism is created by exaggerating partial bodies. The majority of the scenes in this music video use camera techniques such as close-ups or zooms to objectify parts of girls' bodies and appeal to a pedophiliac male gaze. Figure 18 (see below) shows a woman's legs with a miniskirt and a white pair of socks. It makes audiences imagine a young girl wearing a school uniform. More than half the scene dwells on the legs. Sunshine layers the legs, which exaggerates them from the perspective of fetishism.

This kind of fetishism is easy to find in other videos and photographs of K-pop girl groups. The camera-walking of television music shows often starts at the bottom of a body and then moves to the top. It is customary to objectify women's bodies by emphasizing the shortness of skirts they are wearing and the height of their heels in the contexts of sexuality and femininity.

Figure 18. A screenshot from *Hi* sung by Lovelyz. [Photograph]. From YouTube. Copyright 2015 by Wooliment.
Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zbnRfBGjeaw

Figure 19. A screenshot from *Hi* sung by Lovelyz. [Photograph]. From YouTube. Copyright 2015 by Wooliment.
Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zbnRfBGjeaw

In the song *Hi*, all the members of Lovelyz wear the same costume and act like one person, which is portrayed in their choreography. Their movements are extremely precise, as if just one person is moving, dancing and acting. Likewise, it is regarded as

normal for a woman to be objectified with no individual personality. Women are considered as a collective, one that is passive and has no individual characteristics.

Figure 19 depicts a childlike moment, as one of the members of the group hugs a teddy bear. She leans on an armchair and, of course, wears a miniskirt, reminding viewers of a school uniform, in a room decorated like a cozy, girlish space with floral-patterned wallpaper and lace curtains. The atmosphere of the scene is warm, and most of the colors are bright and warm. However, the girl in the image does not look comfortable. The scene is created for the male gaze and reminds viewers of childhood among boys. The idea that girls like fluffy dolls and boys like cars is the basis of the image. Men expect that a girl who likes a teddy bear must be soft, calm and kind. It means girls cannot be wild and strong like boys but are forced to be “good girls” according to concepts embedded in Korean society that are only applicable to women. This male gaze promotes the idea that girls should be fetishized by focusing on women’s bodies and actions, embedding them in male fantasies.

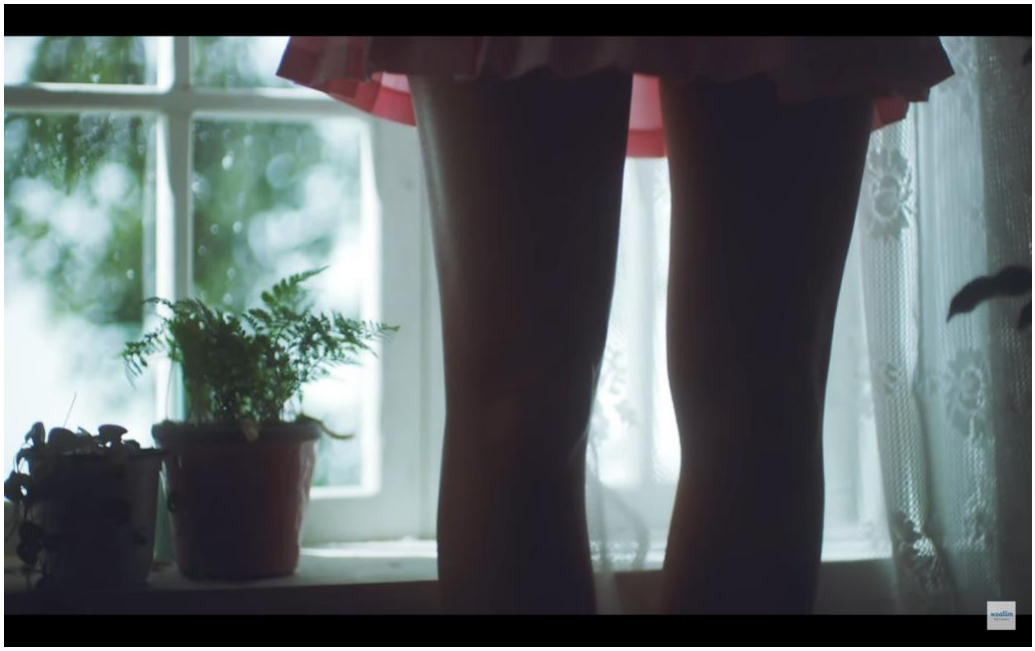

Figure 20. A screenshot from *Hi* sung by Lovelyz. [Photograph]. From YouTube. Copyright 2015 by Wooliment.
Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zbnRfBGjeaw

Figure 20 is the most exaggerated depiction of what men want to see in the context of fetishism. In this picture, even the inside layer of the skirt is visible. We can ask, why is this kind of image needed to promote a song entitled *Hi*? What is the

message of the entire story the music video tells? Some parts emphasize women's bodies, while others show the group's collective choreography.

Showing women's bodies is regarded as a mise-en-scène in the music video industry. Producers consider this the best way to sell a Korean girl group as a form of commodity wrapped up as a pretty and cute "girl" product targeting male appetites, a pretty and cute girl who should be able to become a sexy woman whenever men demand it.

Figure 21. A screenshot from *Hi* sung by Lovelyz. [Photograph]. From YouTube. Copyright 2015 by Wooliment.
Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zbnRfBGjeaw

Figure 21 is a picture of what men demand to justify their sexual fantasies reflected onto girl's bodies. It is not surprising that only portions of the bodies fill the frame as the video approaches the end. One girl stands or sits, and another lies on the bed. In Figure 21, there are two young women in one picture. In this video, several scenes portray two women as twins; they wear the same blouse and miniskirt and have a similar curly hairstyle. The main point of the scene displaying a girl in a bed is to emphasize the invisible man who is looking at the girls from outside the frame.

Figure 22. A screenshot from *Hi* sung by Lovelyz. [Photograph]. From YouTube. Copyright 2015 by Wooliment.
Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zbnRfBGjeaw

Figure 22 is a clear example of how the invisible male gaze is the centre of the frame. Someone is looking at a girl lying on a bed. She is still wearing a white blouse, pink skirt, and white socks. She closes her eyes, and her posture is not that of a person who is in bed in normal circumstances. Moreover, there are bubbles floating above her body. The bubbles are not layering over the whole frame to make this scene aesthetically beautiful by covering parts of the woman's body. The bubbles surround her body from head to toe. Children like blowing bubbles, and children are "pure." Bubbles are clear and transparent. By spreading bubbles above the young woman's supine body, the virtuousness that girls should have is symbolized and it connected to the sleeping girl lying on the bed without any movement. Her posture even looks like that of someone who has fainted and fallen down onto the bed. The use of settings such as a bed, a prone person and a gaze looking down at the entire scene is designed to depict a girl as a symbol of purity and innocence.

Images and videos of women tend to indicate that a man is the person who looks at women in a specific scene or is the agent at the centre of the storyline whatever the images and videos are about. For this reason, women's beauty is one of the most effective elements to veil the true purpose of the contents. By suggesting a standard

type of female beauty, the exploitation of women's bodies both as objects and as commodities is given a rationale for what the male gaze wants.

Figure 23. A screenshot from *Hi* sung by Lovelyz. [Photograph]. From YouTube. Copyright 2015 by Wooliment.
Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zbnRfBGjeaw

As Figure 23 shows, the focus moves into the feet of the prone woman. This is one of the most fetishized images in the video. The male gaze does not try to hide what men want. It shows the fetishism directly. This image is not simply an image of legs and feet. In relation to the previous image (Figure 22), the way of looking at a girl lying on a bed has been adjusted to exaggerate one part of the girl's body. The socks she wears are clean, and the atmosphere created by the sunshine covering her legs and feet, part of sweater lying over her body and the duvet looking cozy under her suggests fetishism. Fetishized women's bodies as an aspect of industrial practice have long been considered an aesthetical expression of art. The K-pop industry actively utilizes women as an expression of beauty or art, but this also objectifies and exploits women's sexuality as a commodity. Figure 24 shows a similar fetishism (see below). It is an image of a girl blowing bubbles while the bubbles float above her body as in Figures 18 and 24.

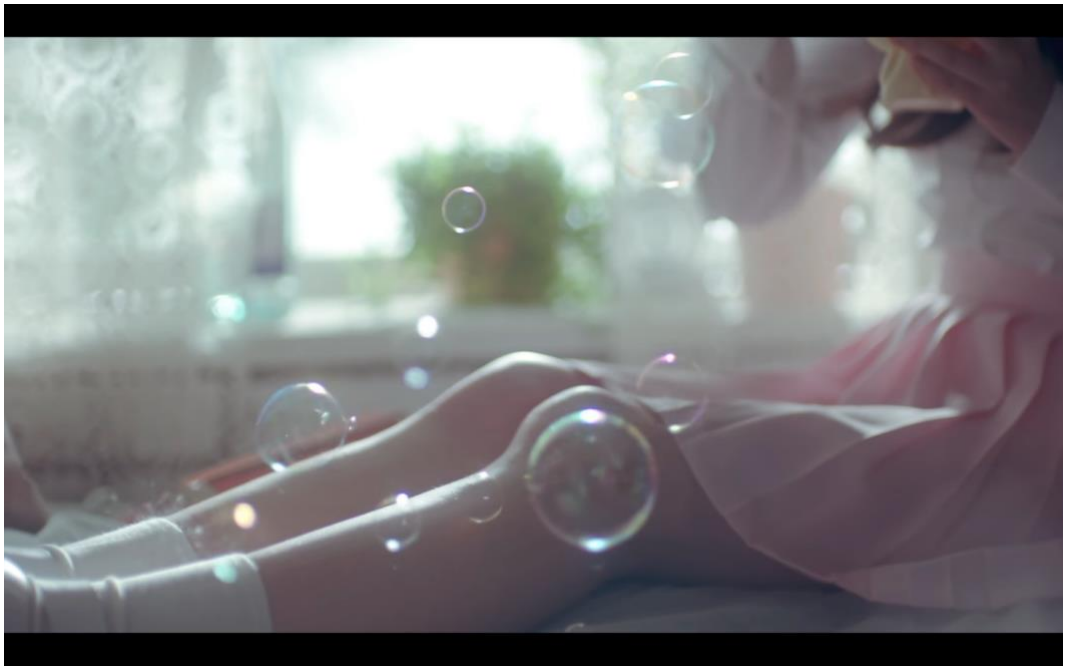

Figure 24. A screenshot from *Hi* sung by Lovelyz. [Photograph]. From YouTube. Copyright 2015 by Wooliment.
Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zbnRfBGjeaw

However, there is one difference between these two images. In Figure 24, the focus is on the bubbles and the girl's legs. We can assume that this is the same girl who was lying on the bed because she is now sitting on the bed with a bubble maker and her outfit has not changed. The scene shows transparent bubbles rolling over her legs. In this sense, the focus of this frame is not the bubbles but her legs. Women's bodies, especially women's legs with transparent bubbles, become a symbol of innocence and purity.

Overall, as we have already seen, "the very existence of different male-gaze addresses on images and videos" (Kaplan, 1988, p. 89). The images in Lovelyz's *Hi* have many connotations regarding women's bodies and women's virtue in Korea. It is undeniable that those connotations are embedded in the vertical, gendered hierarchy of the patriarchal K-pop industry. In fact, utilizing fetishism as an aesthetical practice of art and women's beauty has been considered as a common thing for creating content. The problem is that it is much easier to find the fetishism in content related to women's bodies. As a result, fetishism can be a way of producing images and videos that focus on partial bodies as a form of entertainment for men. Also, fetishism causes "deep fake" images and videos related to pornography and other issues to threaten women in reality.

A few months ago, one male staffer from a variety television show installed a spycam in a disguised compact battery in the hotel rooms of Bomi, a member of the Korean girl group Apink, and Se-kyung Shin, an actress (*Metro*, 2018). The spycam was found and reported by them, and the man has been sentenced to imprisonment for the unlawful act. Thus, fetishized images may lead to crimes in real life. They threaten women in reality. In fact, Korea has had an unsolved issue of spycams. Furthermore, Apink and other girl (or even boy) groups have been threatened by terrorists in their live performances as well as private events. This is somewhat related to the way of portraying women in the media.

In relation to the issue of spycams, fetishism embedded in industrial practices affects the way K-pop contents are reproduced. For example, when you search for Hani from EXID on YouTube, you will find many fan-made videos created mostly by men containing women's sexual postures (see Figure 25 below). Most screenshots from this video focus on Hani's body.

Figure 25. Hani from EXID performing *Up and Down*. [Photograph]. From YouTube. Copyright 2014 by pharkil.
Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cmKuGxb23z0&t=1s

These three images of Hani, the girl in Figure 25, come from one male fan's video on YouTube (pharkil, 2014, October 9). Ironically, this kind of fan video has enabled EXID's *Up and Down* to gain a huge amount of popularity. This is because there are thousands of fan videos like this. The majority of Hani's fan cams contain images

focusing on her body and choreography. It may be easy to think that it is just a part of the choreography for the song, *Up and Down*, and she is a K-pop singer. In this way, the exploitation of women's sexuality "has been expanded and intensified with development of visual media, such as music video" (Song, 2016, p. 1). Ironically, this type of fan consumption of K-pop idols' videos and live performances is considered a powerful element of feminine ideals while, in fact, constructing a wrong type of femininity (Saeji, 2013).

However, many images and videos reflecting the male gaze are surprisingly similar in depicting women's bodies as objects of entertainment. Images exaggerating sexuality can be a selling point in the market, a point that is entirely planned, designed, produced and distributed by male-gaze practice. This is not a simple problem. The way of consumption turns in a more sexually driven direction, and this affects how men accumulate wealth, especially girl group makers who think that women are marketable.

I am not a GIRL anymore

In the early 2000s, a song entitled *Adult Ceremony* (2000) appeared. The singer was Park Ji-yoon, a solo artist who had released her debut song, *Skyblue Dream,* in 1997 when she was still a high school student. In *Skyblue Dream* she sings: "I, as a teenager, am going to keep dreaming when I am getting older as an adult." The song is meant to encourage teenagers to keep dreaming and, simultaneously, to remind adults of their teenage dreams. As the message of *Skyblue Dream* spread among both teenagers and adults, both the song and the singer became popular. Park became the most famous solo female artist in Korea when she was only seventeen.

Before and after *Skyblue Dream* (1997), there have been lots of songs featuring various types of storytelling. However, in the age of K-pop, it is rare to find songs that do not speak about romance. It is obvious that the theme of love can generate a broad spectrum of stories because of the wide range of definitions of love. Despite the diverse meanings of love, K-pop songs usually want to show the romance stories between women and men. Dream is often depicted in K-pop songs, but it is not an attractive enough subject to make a group's overall concept catchy. This is why utilizing the image of a teenager is consumed instantly and quickly when a girl or boy group debuts. Almost

every group that has tried a teenager concept cannot go back and must transform its youthful image to a mature one.

In the meantime, high school students in Korea are mostly between seventeen (first year of high school) and nineteen (third year) in Korean ages. Park turned twenty in 2000. In Korean culture, twenty means a lot. It contains an idea of freedom and implies that you are now an adult and can do anything you want, especially everything you have not been allowed to do before this because of legal age limits However, those who have just turned twenty do not get access to everything they want. This shows that young Korean people are still too restricted. They are pressured to study hard. Although not every young person is a student, Korean society regards them as students who have to work hard in order to enter university. In other words, every effort made by young people is connected to higher education as a duty, and it is hard to accept when a young person fails to go to university. In this sense, dreams are considered something special and precious among young people. This is why the song *Skyblue Dream* was so popular at the time.

However, the statement “I am not a girl anymore” focuses on a girl’s maturation. The full version of the statement is “I am not a girl but a woman.” This emphasizes the meaning of being mature more clearly. More specifically, it implies the physical changes women’s bodies undergo. When a girl is little, she does not relate to any sexuality. Ironically, women’s bodies are consumed by emphasizing the idea of purity and innocence so that the physical changes imply the connection between girlish purity and womanly sexiness. In relation to physical changes connoting innocence, it is naturally connected to the concept of virginity. When a girl is under nineteen, she is considered a virgin. The images and contexts tell the story of a young woman’s sexuality although the sexuality is wrapped up as a virtue that women must have.

Framing women’s bodies based on the hegemonic male gaze often applies to the K-pop industry and has done so for more than a decade. From 2009 to 2019, more than 300 girl groups debuted compared to more than 140 Korean boy groups.[27] These numbers are not small. Some of these groups have disappeared, some have disbanded, and some are still performing. This come-and-go environment may seem natural,

[27] The way of counting may be distinct due to the different sources used for the comparison.

applying to any industry in capitalist society. If the number of girl and boy groups were merged, it would be huge.

Approximately, 300 girl groups' names indicate gender unlike most of the names of Korean male groups. Some boy groups' names indicate gender, but not many. In other words, girl groups emphasize that they are "girls." This emphasis on gender is problematic because identifying them as girls justifies male power. The naming suggests that men want women to internalize the gendered hierarchical system because naming a K-pop group is a key part of the idol manufacturing system operated mostly by men. Within the K-pop industry, the girl group industry is a subcategory to export a cultural product for nation branding. Boy groups whose names indicate their gender are not likely to be exploited by being called "boys," whereas girl groups are likely to be exploited when they are named as female.

Using the word *girl(s)* is common when Korean girl groups are given their group names. This thesis is not a comparative study, so it does not contrast how *girl(s)* is used for women's group with how *boy(s)* is used for men's groups. However, the point is that using the word *girl(s)* reflects pressured femininity and sexuality. The word can be interpreted in various contexts and, in the K-pop industry, means more than just female. In general, girly images do not even convey any sexual context, but the words underline women's sexuality (see Table 5).

Table 5. Connotations and denotations in Korean girl group names

Indications of gender	girls, ladies and women
Stereotyped concepts	red/purple/pink/white, baby, soft, calm, emotional, angel, crystal, shine, bright, pure, transparent, clear
Sexual connotations	lips, fantasy, **land (e.g., Disneyland), fox

As Table 5 shows, many girl groups indicate their gender as girl, ladies and women. Interestingly, *girl* itself is common in their naming practices, but *ladies* and *women* are not frequently used. This is because, as mentioned earlier, the nuanced meanings of *lady* and *women* sound mature and sexy. In turn, *lady* and *women* lack the implications of purity and innocence that men fantasize about. The stereotyped concepts

are also interesting. They are probably driven by the concept of dualism. For the sexual connotations, the texts are related to women's bodies as fetishism and the male fantasies that refer to the things that women are expected to love or to be.

Thus far, this thesis has selected several songs to interpret the lyrics behind the literal meanings of representing women's sexuality from the perspective of the male gaze. In the K-pop industry, the sexualization of girl groups takes many forms. These are embedded in their songs and music videos as pressured sexiness by portraying male fantasies (Kim, Y. R., 2011). *Up and Down* (2016) sung by EXID, *Señorita* (2019) sung by (G)I-DLE and *Make Me Ah* (2016) sung by Rania, for example, all unveil the signs embedded in the practice of writing lyrics from a male perspective while borrowing women's sound.

Up and Down illustrates a more direct way to appeal to men by describing a sexual motion with the words *up* and *down*. As the image of Hani from EXID depicts above (see Figure 25), her choreography exaggerates the up and down movements and reminds viewers of the ups and downs of a roller coaster. At the same time, it connotes the feeling of moving up and down. In a similar context to that of *Up and Down*, *Señorita* also displays women as objects for the male gaze. Rania's *Make Me Ah* focuses on what men want from women.

The lyrics of the songs, originally in Korean, are given in Table 6 below, translated into English. The reason why the lyrics sung by girl groups are important is that a particular woman in every girl group's song appeals to women's desire to make men theirs. Ironically, this type of woman is not acceptable in a traditional and conservative society such as Korea's. However, the K-pop industry keeps producing this type of female image, through lyrics that represent women leading men sexually. The three lyrics in Table 6 below are typical examples of women leading men sexually, a concept reinforced by adding sexual gestures and performance in the visuals.

Table 6. Lyrics

***Up and Down* (2016)**	***Señorita* (2019)**	***Make Me Ah* (2016)**
Up and down (repeat) I don't know, your eyes pretend to be innocent You put me up and then bring	Why are you staring at me like that? Without giving you anything I don't avoid my eyes, ah	When I see you, I'm feeling crazy My heart is only up to you I make a stage for you

me down
Then I feel loco oh oh
You drive me crazy like being forced to ride a roller co coaster
Such a monster
(HEY BABY BOY)
Stop spinning me around and around
(HEY BABY BOY)
Stop being so risky
Stop touching me, stop vaguely touching me
(You you why why you you why why)
Up and down, up up and down
I keep shaking up and down
Why don’t u know don’t u know don’t u know
Clearly show me your heart
Why don’t u know don’t u know don’t u know yeah hey
Up and down (repeat)
Your words, your face, they confuse me
You leave traces (shake shake shake shake)
Pretending it’s not there, pretending you don’t know, playing games with me
You flirt with me (shake shake shake shake)
(HEY BABY BOY)
Stop spinning me around and around
(HEY BABY BOY)
Stop being so risky
Stop touching me, stop vaguely touching me
(You you why why you you why why)
Up and down, up up and down
I keep shaking up and down
Why don’t u know don’t u know don’t u know
Clearly show me your heart
Why don’t u know don’t u know don’t u know yeah hey
Just do what you wanna. do what you wanna
Stop teasing me and give me some clarity
I don’t need useless words
I need your truth not your

Why do you come so close?
We don’t know much yet
What should I call you?
A little bit fast
Whatever, I don't care, I don't care, I don't care (vamos)
Something's even worse
Whatever I'm okay, I'm okay, I'm okay
What should I do?
Oh whoa oh oh
Ooh oh oh whoa oh oh
Ooh oh oh whoa oh oh
Come here, come here, come here, come here
Oh whoa oh oh
Ooh oh oh whoa oh oh
Ooh oh oh whoa oh oh
(Hey señor)
Please come to me
Hold me tight
I want to know about you
I fell in love with you
It is true
Just love you so, love you so, love you so
Please call me
Señorita (señorita)
Señorita
Señorita (señorita)
Señorita
Why do you laugh so much?
My heart keeps coming to you (vamos)
I have to send you (ay)
Just focus on me
Is it important for others?
Hold me in full, I don't even have a name
Please tell me
Oh whoa oh oh (hmm hmm)
Ooh oh oh whoa oh oh (hmm hmm)
Ooh oh oh whoa oh oh
Hey señor
Please come to me
Hold me tight
I want to know about you
I fell in love with you
I don't know, it is true?
Just love you so, love you so, love you so
Please call me
Señorita (señorita)
Señorita
Señorita (señorita)

Feel me, oh baby you
You don't know my heart, you always stay like this
If I come to you, you're farther every day
I know that I got you
You know that I need you
I know that I got you
You know that I need you
You keep on coloring me, like I'm yours
Like I'm shaken for the first time
As if I'm your girl, tame me
Hurry, hold me stupid
I'm not sure where I'm going, Don't hesitate
You make me ah
Why do you keep shaking me baby?
Ah
I'm being shaken, why?
I feel in you
My heart is a gated cage, you won't let me out
My gauge is burning up, I can't stop it
Don't worry, hurry, sweetly, stay
I don't know what to do, you're farther everyday
Hurry, hold me stupid
I'm not sure where I'm going, Don't hesitate
You make me ah
Why do you keep shaking me baby?
Ah
I'm being shaken, why?
I'm hooked to you the right way
My heart was stolen
Why am I so crazy?
You can't reject me
You stole everything of me
I really fell for you
Your dazzling eyes
I can only see you babe
I'm really going crazy, I'm blazing
I'm losing it
You make me ahh
I make you uhh
Until my name is slipping
Right up off your tongue
Say can you feel it?

jokes Don’t make me stand at a crossroads, don’t make me cry (Up and down, up up and down, up up down) I keep shaking up and down Why don’t u know don’t u know don’t u know Clearly show me your heart Why don’t u know don’t u know don’t u know yeah ey Up and down (repetition)	Señorita You, ooh, ooh, ooh You, ooh, ooh, ooh You, ooh, ooh, ooh You, ooh, ooh, ooh (Señorita) You, ooh, ooh, ooh (Señorita) You, ooh, ooh, ooh (Señorita) You, ooh, ooh, ooh (Señorita) You, ooh, ooh, ooh Hey señor	I got you numb Break off that bomb, that loud That freak, that gushy stuff (check it out) Face got you sprung and Brain got you dumb and Keep banging down my door And I let you come inside For the night where it’s hot like an oven Slide until I open wide like I’m hummin Why do you keep shaking me? You make me ah Why do you keep shaking me baby? Ah I'm being shaken, why? I'm hooked to you the right way My heart was stolen Why am I so crazy? You can't reject me You stole everything of me I really fell for you Your dazzling eyes I can only see you babe I'm falling for you You can't reject me, ah

Note. *Up and Down* from Phoebeli (2015), *Señorita* from Genius (2019), *Make Me Ah* from JessicaSone99 (2017)

Whereas the performance of *Up and Down* is too strong to overlook Hani’s gestures in terms of portraying the movement, for the lyrics, it is much easier to understand the meaning if one remembers that men write them even though they are sung with women’s mouths. This is a good example of how the male gaze is embedded in romanticizing itself. The focus is on the up and down movement, with its sexual connotations, while the figure in the lyric keeps saying that she is “ready” but that you, a man, hesitate too much and, hence, she is going to make the man feel good. The lyrics may sound like they are describing a forceful woman going for what women want, but it is not really about women’s desires. It reveals a male fantasy contained in a hierarchy that men have formulated.

Señorita has a different way of portraying a woman in a similar situation. The woman in *Señorita* is less active than the woman in *Up and Down*. However, there is a scene in the song’s video (see Figure 17) that makes audiences imagine that the women

in the video are call girls, and this is also reflected in the lyrics. A woman is waiting for a man who does not appear. She is not able to make her own decisions. She has been placed by men at the bottom of the gendered hierarchy. Rania's *Make Me Ah*, on the other hand, is more like *Up and Down*. The woman here is not calm, silent, soft or patient. She lacks these virtues that women are expected to have and says, "I am ready, but I cannot wait on your (male) hesitation, so I am going to leave if you do not satisfy me." The problem in such K-pop songs is not the focus on relationships between women and men but the depiction of these relationships as linear and vertical.

In the procedure of making an idol group, with only a few exceptions, a management agency decides everything from songs to costumes (Saeji, 2013). Thus, analyzing anything from a group's lyrics to its fashion styles "reveal[s] less about the performers' artistry and more about the agencies, and how they understand the popular culture industry" (Saeji, 2013, p. 330). In this sense, lyrics help uncover girl groups' positioning as a form of sexual commodity as they dance and sing on the stage like pretty dolls. This is why this thesis uses lyrical analysis to support how women's sexuality within the K-pop context is produced, consumed and represented even though textual or semiotic analysis would not normally break down the lyrics themselves. Furthermore, K-pop lyrics have a uniform pattern in order to reproduce an ideal type of women (or men in boy groups' songs), which is related to the ideal of a woman who is feminine, pure and sexy simultaneously.

K-pop girls and maternity: Should women be mothers?

The problem is how the K-pop industry has treated women. In the industry, young women are manufactured to earn outrageous profits from their exploitation. Although male stars are certainly exploited, the women are the ones who suffer from heavy double standards. These standards are linked to the problem of women's pay and the way their personal lives are judged (Volodzko, 2016). Ironically, in the K-pop industry, a woman is expected to be willing to become one's mother. This may sound weird after the previous discussion about the purity of a girl and the sexiness of a woman, but as stated above, a woman is expected to be a multi-player: daughter, beloved girl, wife and mother. This is not just an expectation. It has historically been the Korean idea of the ideal woman. The image in Figure 26 below is not directly related to concepts of albums, songs or performances. It is from the television show *Hello Baby*

(2009-2013) and clearly illustrates the multiple demands placed on women by men in a male-dominated industry and society.

Two girl groups, Girls' Generation (SNSD) and Sistar, have not been included in the analysis for this thesis. However, they need to be mentioned in connection with this television show in which young women take care of someone else's baby. When *SNSD's Hello Baby* season 1 (2009) was aired, the popularity of SNSD was the highest of any girl group.

The role of women as mothers is similarly reflected in another television show, *We Got Married* (2008-2017). This program is the most popular show featuring girl and boy group members in the cast. Its format follows the lives of newlyweds. As everyone knows, most K-pop group members are not that old. They are sometimes too young even to get married. The ostensible purpose of the show is to educate real couples who will get married or are already married. Many girl and boy group members appeared on the show and became hugely popular as a result. Exposure through television was the favored choice when the program was broadcast in the late 2000s.

When it comes to the depiction of the brides in the show, the women are expected to play the role of good wife, but, simultaneously, to be sexy women whom everyone likes or, more accurately, an ideal type of woman whom every man likes. The women are expected to be appealing to the men who enjoy watching the show as if they are the women's actual husbands. The character of a bride indicates what the male-dominated Korean society wants from women. This construction of images interprets what women are expected do in their families, communities, institutions and workplaces as largely a matter of sacrifice and virtue.

Hello Baby foregrounds the role of a woman in the family as wife and mother and stresses the romanticized story and warm relationships between unskilled young mothers and children. It is all about a fantasy driven by male-dominated industrial practices. Whether women are young or not, as a born-to-be women, "girls" will be mothers and, as such, should see sacrifice as their duty. Calling young women moms is another way of reflecting what men want from their families. Furthermore, the K-pop industry promotes images that show a woman and a baby together (Figure 26). Holding a baby is seen as natural and entertaining a child as a woman's duty. This kind of image

suggests that all women are wives and mothers even if the young women from Korean girl groups have never given birth.

Figure 26. Girls' Generation (SNSD)'s *Hello Baby*. [Photograph]. Copyright 2009 by BlueBright.
Retrieved from http://blog.daum.net/glsgnphoenix220/177

Ironically, the value of becoming a mother applies only to those who have never actually given birth. If a young woman from any Korean girl group becomes pregnant, she is banished from the group. One example is Yulhee, a previous member of Laboum, a Korean girl group. She married Minhwan from FTIsland, a Korean boy band, and recently had a child with him. Of course, she needed to leave the group as a result. When she announced what she had gone simply by becoming a wife and mother, the response was cold; she was a pop idol. She is a woman too, but, as an idol, she was not allowed to become someone else's girlfriend, wife or mother.

Chapter 5.

Conclusion

This thesis has examined how power relations and gendered hierarchy in the K-pop industry work in the production, distribution and consumption of Korean girl groups and how industrial practice is embedded in the male-dominated K-pop industry. Chapter 1 discussed some of the struggles of women in the K-pop scene, while Chapter 2 situated these struggles within feminist political economy. Chapter 3 described and justified the study's research methods, and Chapter 4 demonstrated how the K-pop industry has implemented its gendered industrial practices through the texts representing Korean girl groups, mainly visual texts.

The thesis has looked at various types of texts produced by the K-pop industry that promote the sexuality and femininity of the young women in girl groups and exploit that sexuality and femininity as a commodity in television shows, music chart shows, concerts, and other types of K-pop performance using certain industrial practices (Saeji, 2013). Various music genres, along with culture, are connected to our everyday life. The connection involves ideas that spread in real life with far-reaching effects. Finally, something would be meaningful if it had a huge influence across the world, such as K-pop, and promoted the notion of gender equality. K-pop creates its own culture. It has been slowly changing, and it will be changed further. It certainly must be changed. In drawing from political economists, this thesis is, in itself, a form of activism to promote qualitative social change. If a paradigm shifts, awareness and practice should shift too. People are responsible for awareness and practice.

This study suggests that it is vital to evaluate how the K-pop industry has been accumulating wealth by selling women's sexuality disguised as the best nation-branding force to raise Korea's economic and cultural status. While analyzing the data, I came up with several questions for future study of why so many Korean girl groups disappear within a couple of years. These questions are related to industrial practices. No one has examined how many girl or boy groups have failed to develop long-term careers or explored why girl groups disappear or are disbanded so much more easily than boy

groups. Such questions call for further research because the significance of K-pop as an interdisciplinary academic field is rising rapidly.

This thesis reveals the gendered industrial practices of the system of manufacturing K-pop girl groups and creating their content. The K-pop industry is the most successful Korean cultural industry internationally. However, there are similar problems of gendered practice that male-dominated Korean society has not tried to change and has justified in a sophisticated manner, in particular, the exploitation of women's sexuality as a commodity in order to promote K-pop as a national brand. Such practices have undermined the status of women and belittled women's struggle in real life because the male-dominated industry needs sexism. Indeed, gendered industrial practices have been making the industry more patriarchal under the gendered hierarchy formulated by the male-dominated industry. The statement below is a good explanation of how power works in a patriarchal hierarchy:

> People in higher power are more likely to cheat in a game where they can win money, take candy from children, and lie. People in power often are able to say what they want and take what they desire. However, people who do not have power feel constrained in various aspects. People in lower power feel a greater threat, have higher cortisol levels, greater sympathetic autonomic nervous system activation, and greater blood pressure. Their minds are more inhibited; when they speak, they hesitate, interrupt themselves, and [do] not say what they actually think. Imagine being a young woman of lower power facing a committee full of males. Silence becomes an obvious ending to that story. (Lee et al., 2018, p. 37)

Arguably, the K-pop industry looks like the pornography industry without nudity in terms of the mechanisms that the K-pop industry and pornography industry use to exploit women's labor and sexuality. It is a factor of nation-branding as a front-runner of Korean culture so that K-pop contents cannot contain any nudity fundamentally. Like the porn industry, the K-pop industry's system of production, distribution and consumption has taken advantage of women, more precisely, women framed by the male gaze. What men want keeps making the industry sexually driven. The majority of profits related to girl groups have gone to men in various ways.

It is not surprising that, when you put a random name from any Korean girl group into a search box on portal sites or social media, there will be numerous images and texts. Some have started using deep fake techniques, a hot-button issue in the field of communication and computational research. It is not secure within the K-pop industry.

Deep fake issues are emerging also in Korean girl group content. Not surprisingly, the majority are related to promoting prostitution, which is unlawful in Korea. This kind of result is connected to men's interests. It is a fact that men demand such content.

Consequently, the practices of K-pop from production to consumption ensure that Koran girl groups are utilized as a nation-branding strategy for economic profits whether they are considered as a form of commodity or not. The point is that the ways of consuming Korean girl groups reveal how Korean society has justified patriarchal industrial practices in the K-pop industry and elsewhere. In turn, these industrial practices determine how Korean idol girl groups are shown to audiences. The girl groups need to look sexier and play their roles as passive agents in a gendered hierarchy. In this sense, the K-pop industry is the key to justifying the gender, class and wealth inequalities embedded in industrial practices that ignore the problems of sexualization, objectification and pedophilia related to women.

This thesis has aimed to investigate the prominent sexist industrial practices reflected in the texts produced by the K-pop industry. Amid the rising global influence of K-pop, only its bright side has been studied so far. However, it is time to evaluate K-pop and its practices as a male-dominated decision-making system. Most cultural industries worldwide are male dominated, but when it comes to the K-pop industry, the inclusivity of K-pop has relegated women in the industry to an inferior status and forced them to abide by patriarchal industrial practices in order to make audiences keep consuming images of women as sexual objects. The gendered practices are tightly connected to other industries in Korea. We are in the golden age of Korean idol groups. Many companies are promoting girl and boy groups, but most of the groups disappear without having much success. Those who disappear get no reward for their time and effort after being forced to spend a large part of their youth contributing to a system that does not guarantee success or wealth. In turn, those who still look at K-pop as a niche market or consider idol groups as a marketable force keep thinking they can accumulate wealth by selling women's sexuality. When this thinking turns out to be wrong, women are ones who are held responsible for the failure. This is why a study of the K-pop industry through the lens of feminist political economy is necessary. This study has not intended to explore something new in the K-pop industry but, hopefully, will contribute to the self-evaluation the industry needs to do in relation to its industrial practices and its exploitation of women's labor exhibited in the K-pop contents that global K-pop

audiences feel, communicate and appreciate. Furthermore, in an educational context, not only women but also men (it does not matter how they are aware of K-pop or not) should be awakened to critically examine the messages delivered via the daily communications embedded in our routines when using both old and new media.

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