



Empowerment and Objectification in Peruvian K-Pop Dance Cover Girl Group on YouTube

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Abstract. Girl groups, K-pop groups made up of Korean women, generate music videos that promote values associated with genre in their fandom. At the same time, the fandom generates dance covers from these video clips, imitating choreography dance of girl groups taking their aesthetics and visual approach as a base. Therefore, this article analyzes the representation of female beauty in the staging of the dance cover videos made by Peruvian fan girl group Crossroads; since consumption, idealization and imitation of original videoclips of K-pop girl groups NMIXX and Kep1er, hosted on YouTube platform. From an interpretive paradigm, a digital ethnographic study was designed and two techniques were applied: content analysis and semi-structured interview. A content analysis guideline was applied to two K-pop videos by Korean girl groups NMIXX and Kep1er, debuting in 2022, and two dance cover videos by Crossroads. In another hand, a semi-structured interview guide was applied to the Crossroads girl group leader. Categories of analysis correspond to the elements that make up the staging: scenery and decoration; make-up and hairstyle; clothing and accessories; lighting and finally, expression and movement of figures from a gender perspective. The main finding of this research evidence a post-feminist discourse in the fandom that participates in dance covers, but at the same time its contents follow the patterns of patriarchy typical of Korean culture and that are evident in the imitations they perform. This study contributes to research lines of critical studies on digital communication and gender studies.

Keywords: K-pop · Fandom · Dance Covers

1 Introduction

The Korean wave, also known as Hallyu, is the international expansion of cultural products from South Korea, such as novels, movies, music, food, cosmetics, etc. [1]. This phenomenon is due, first of all, to technological advances since the 90s with the advent of the internet, smartphones and social networks. And secondly, Korean pop culture has spread thanks to fans, who actively spread Hallyu with their acquaintances [2].

1.1 Idol System and Artist's Market

K-pop, from its origin, is a product with mercantilist objectives [3]. Although the word K-pop refers to music made in Korea, this industry is actually built as a globalizing project; which is characterized by its particular formula of forming groups of young people of the same sex, with emphasis on their physical appearance, catchy melodies and choreography [4]. Within this model, entertainment agencies carefully select future K-pop talent; to later train them intensely for years before debuting as professional artists [5]. The three largest entertainment companies; SM Entertainment, YG Entertainment, and JYP Entertainment introduced this talent management known as the “idol system” [4]. The present business model provides the youth group with education in foreign languages, manners, dance, acting, etc. [6]. Idols are representatives of the nation and should reflect the modern and successful image of Seoul, fitting the ideal oriental look, that is, being tall and thin [5, 7]. Likewise, said musical production system involves expert composers and producers [8], as well as choreographers who allow artists to deploy coordinated and precise movements [7]. Therefore, K-pop artists lack creative autonomy and authenticity [1].

Similarly, K-pop uses large-scale distribution strategies through mass media [3]. The development of the internet and social networks meant a fundamental change in marketing and promotion, since it allows the rapid mass production of songs and records [8]. Along with releasing music videos and teasers on YouTube, which use the latest film trends, agency marketing teams manage social media accounts to maximize their potential, attract new clients, and stimulate audiences [9]. Likewise, artists have a presence in the traditional mass media by appearing on television shows and on the radio [8]. This content is published on digital platforms so that the interaction with fans has a global reach [3].

1.2 Girl Groups: Objectification and Sexualization of Women in K-Pop

Gender roles in Korea are based on the philosophy of Confucianism, where women are placed in a lower position than men [10]. K-pop preserves these traditional and patriarchal codes considering women as docile and disposable labor [11]. Since the debut of Girls' Generation (SNSD) and Wonder Girls in 2007, the number of girl groups is growing annually, with at least ten girl groups debuting per year [11]. K-pop female idols popularity make the most lucrative contribution as a Korean product both in the domestic and overseas markets in comparative with male groups [12]. The prevailing representation of K-pop female idols show us the hegemonic femininity in Korea today [11]. This is how many Korean women follow the trends set by female idols from their way of dressing, their makeup to the extreme diets they follow [13].

The girl group videos celebrate and empower female artists in their roles as performers of the K-pop genre. However, these feminine identities are reified and reduced to the commodification of idealized beauty [14]. In this way, revealing costumes and explicit choreography are used, which evidence the sexual innuendo of female idols in music videos [15]. The artists meet the standards of the Asian ideal: slim, tall body, fair skin, thin face and upturned nose [5, 16]. However, the image of girl groups is not intended for men, as the fandom is mostly made up of women between the ages of 10 and 20,

who not only identify with female artists, but also them. Are referenced in a range of settings [17]. In addition, the use of Lolita concept is identified, where there is a balanced sexual attractiveness with innocence, fragility and infantilism [15]. This concept refers to *aegyo*, described as a cute and adorable flirting style; similar to the Japanese concept of *kawaii* [18]. On the contrary, the girl crush concept presents us with a style and attitude different from hyperfemininity, that is, it represents the ferocity, rebellion, aggressiveness and masculinity of women [19]. Idols try to fit in and portray the various concepts with stereotypical personalities such as sexy, innocent, cute, girl next door, etc. [10, 14, 20]. The goal of entertainment agencies is to create girl groups that embody the “ideal” girlfriend, which is marketed to male fans; while female fans imitate them to attract a male partner [10].

1.3 Latin American Fandom Participation

This musical genre is aimed at adolescent women; for the visual aesthetics of the concepts, the attractiveness of the idols, the fashion, the choreography and the variety of styles such as pop, hip-hop, electronic, reggaeton, rock, etc. [2, 17]. Despite the geographical remoteness, cultural and language differences; K-pop has penetrated the Latin American youth market [21, 22]. Like other fandoms, Latin American fans spend a lot of their time and are heavily dependent on digital media: YouTube, Facebook, Twitter [8]. Their participation consists of sharing news and photos of the artists, circulating and viralizing music videos. The participatory analysis of fans has stood out for not being merely consumers of content but playing an important role such as in the translation of K-pop lyrics [4].

Additionally, the K-pop fandom carries out offline activities that contribute to the expansion of Hallyu by organizing K-pop-themed conventions, parties where artists are celebrated, gatherings to screen music videos; and they perform contests or dance presentations in auditoriums or on the streets (“K-Pop in public”) [22, 23]. But compared to other fandoms, K-pop fans in Latin America affectively consume Korean culture, adapting to new beliefs, values, and practices [21]. Hard work, resilience, dedication, and following your dreams are virtues embodied in K-pop artists, so they are aspects that they admire, replicate, and take as a role model [24]. However, many of the comments on social networks and YouTube are related to the physical beauty of the artists rather than their talent for dancing or singing [17].

1.4 Imitation Art in K-Pop Dance Covers

On the other hand, a great example of the incorporation of Korean culture are dance covers [5], a term used to refer to people or fans who imitate and personify the choreography of a group or soloist along with a costume and hairstyle. Similar or exact [25]. The agencies understand the importance of loyalty to the fandom, allowing them to fantasize about being a member of the group, so they upload videos of the choreographies.

K-pop music videos function as dance tutorials, showcasing the perfection of the artists’ performance, with high-quality costumes and sets [5]. These videos, in addition to demonstrating the difficulty in synchronization and the hours of practice; they encourage fans to learn the routines and upload their own videos to social media [17]. This is how,

inspired by the work of their favorite artists, they cover the singing and dancing routines; synchronizing their lips and body movements to provide a show for the audience [7]. The main point of the dance covers is not based on creativity, but the closest possible resemblance to the idols is sought, taking the movements, costumes, posture, gestures and expressions when performing the performance, just as the original artists would do in the scenario [25]. Thus, K-pop cover dance groups are proof of the reappropriation and interaction of fans with the original material [4]. Dance covers activity optimizes fandom participation, showcases fan talent, and promotes the original song [5].

2 Methodology

The research was carried out from the interpretive paradigm with a qualitative approach [26]. A digital ethnographic study was designed with the aim of analyzing the reproduction of female beauty in dance cover videos made by the Peruvian female fandom based on the consumption of K-pop music videos. The word dance cover refers to the imitation made by fans of the choreography of a Korean group or soloist with an exact or similar wardrobe and hairstyle [25]. Crossroads is the Peruvian dance cover group that was selected for this research. This group was formed in 2022 with the initiative to innovate Kpop in public in Peru and demonstrate the talent of Peruvian dancers. It is currently made up of 15 female members. In order to show patterns or differences, two K-pop music videos by the Korean groups NMIXX and Kep1er, debuting in 2022, and two dance cover videos by the Peruvian group Crossroads, which imitate the original videos of the groups, have been selected. Mentioned (see Table 1). The original videos hosted on YouTube were selected for their viewing reach with an average of over 80 million views as of September 2022. Likewise, both debuts were highly anticipated by fans. In the case of NMIXX, for being the new girl group of JYP Entertainment. And in the case of Kep1er, for being part of the Girls 999 audition reality show, where they competed to win the hearts of fans, so that they vote for them and can debut in the group. The dance cover videos were selected for their reach on social networks and for the reproduction of the staging of the original material. Likewise, videos called “K-pop in public” were selected, which are most often recorded in open spaces such as squares; drawing the attention of passers-by in order to gain popularity, get more followers and views on your content.

A content analysis guide was applied based on the elements that make up the staging: scenery and decoration; make-up and hairstyle; clothing and accessories; lighting and finally, figures expression and movement [27]. Likewise, a semi-structured interview was conducted with the leader of the dance cover group Crossroads.

3 Results and Discussion

3.1 Representation and Objectification in Dance Covers

After the analysis of the sample of dance covers and the musical references that give rise to it (see Table 1), it can be deduced that feminine beauty is represented from gender stereotypes and the function and existence of the body is based on the valuation, pleasure

Table 1. Selected videoclips

Videoclip	Type	Girl group	Date	Views
O.O	Original videoclip	NMIXX	22/02/2022	98 M [28]
WA DA DA	Original videoclip	Kep1er	03/01/2022	151 M [29]
[K-pop in public] “O.O”	Dance cover videoclip	Crossroads	15/06/2022	8.4 K [30]
[K-pop in public] “WA DA DA”	Dance cover videoclip	Crossroads	19/03/2022	7.3 K [31]

and consumption of others [32]. The dances of the Peruvian fans show that the success of the girl groups does not lie, in most cases, in the homoerotic fantasy; but in the fact that women enjoy from the combinations of clothes, hairstyles, dance, and personalities [17]. The women of the Crossroads collective interpret the activity of dance covers as a tribute to K-pop celebrities, who represent their human ideal in terms of appearance and talent [5]. Likewise, K-pop artists are perceived as an ideal of feminine beauty, fans learn from their idols how to act, dress, please; and to be professionally and romantically successful [4]. Fandom women dream of being part of this ideal, building them as fantasy subjects [17]. In this way, when interpreting female idols, they participate in behaviors and attitudes that sexualize and objectify women. This freedom and control over their bodies, from an apparent post-feminist discourse, empowers women when doing dance covers, but also reveals an erotic spectacle where women are sexualized and placed as an object of desire.

3.2 Stage Adaptation in Dance Cover According to Original Concept

For the proposal of locations and scenarios used in dance covers, these are reproduced from music video concept. For example, if the video has the girl power or girl crush aesthetic as its concept, where the daring, strength and confidence of the woman are highlighted; then, to provide this message in a visual way, the space where the dance cover was recorded use a desaturated palette [19]. In the same way, rigid, firm and strong structures are observed in order to demonstrate rebellion and female adventure. In the case of NMIXX’s O.O cover video [28, 30], most of the video is recorded in front of the Palace of Justice of Peru, an imposing neoclassical structure that denotes strength and seriousness. This dance cover tries to imitate the dystopian and subdued environment of the original video setting. On the other hand, cute and adorable concepts include scenarios that demonstrate a feminine side showing images projecting innocence and childishness, with spaces full of colors and shapes. This can be seen with the radical change of scenery when the rhythm of the song O.O goes from having a strong and rude instrumentalization to a more fun and jovial one. In that case, *Plaza de Barranco* was presented as scenario where leafy trees, flowers and colored houses can be seen. This colorful, feminine, and vibrant scenery was taken as a reference from the original music video with childish colors.

3.3 Construction of Security and Beauty from Makeup and Hairstyle

In Korea, not being physically attractive leads to social disadvantages within work, education, and marriage [33]. In the dance covers, the members of the group are concerned about taking care of their image, which is why they use makeup that generates greater security and confidence, as well as allowing them to highlight youth and health. The physical attractiveness caused by the visual effects of makeup positively influences the perception of others on the face of women, as well as allowing them to feel more confident in themselves to interpret the idols they represent. Likewise, the reproduction of Korean straight hair is observed, which makes them look more uniform and well-groomed. In some cases, the members dye their hair inspired by Korean fashion. This accompanied by the loose hair, demonstrates the spontaneity, fun, femininity and youth of the woman.

3.4 Attention, Confidence and Sexuality in Dance Covers Wardrobe

The fans have clothes made to measure that replicate the member they interpret. The changing rooms stand out for being different from each other, but at the same time they generate a sensation of uniformity due to the color and material of the fabrics. This can be observed with the costumes of the WA DA DA cover [31], which are monochrome black and white, mixing fabrics of different densities. In this way, to reflect the rudeness and confidence of the woman, leather and vinyl are used; while feminine delicacy is guaranteed by cotton and tulle fabrics. These wardrobes are usually made up of tight and short skirts, dresses and tops. Emphasizing the waist, hips and legs of the woman. Although the construction of the characters in their representative attire demonstrates sensuality and confidence, women find sexual attention based on their physical characteristics empowering, as they are desired and admired for their appearance and sexuality [34].

3.5 Femininity and Perfection from Lighting Proposal

The lighting of K-pop dance cover videos reproduces the feminine beauty by using an even daylight without contrasts, in post-production it is colored and filters are used so that the tones appear diffuse and delicate pastels. Creating the look of healthy skin where imperfections considered as blemishes, dark circles, acne, pores and hair; they are not visually perceived. Similarly, the same pattern of the Korean industry is observed with desaturation and skin whitening in post-production or video editing. Both in Korea and in other Asian countries, the thought and ideal persist where white skin is considered a symbol of beauty and superiority [35]. This thought impacts the way fans are perceived; and triggers racism and lack of personal acceptance.

3.6 Ambiguity in Choreographic Discourse

Dance cover videos focus on the choreographic reproduction of the music video, also collecting the interpretation, emotion and gestures of the original artists. Female K-pop choreographies combine delicate and stylized movements from the use of arms and hand

movements; with complex steps that reflect the artists skill and agility. Many of the steps also display the silhouette of the woman with movements of the waist, chest, and hips.

Moreover, in the choreographies, fans demonstrate their talent and effort made during rehearsals before filming. Fans try to accomplish the similar work, the timing and the interpretation to be appreciated. Likewise, confident and daring women are observed performing complex choreographies with symmetrical formations that create figures and optical illusions. While the synchronized steps cause visual pleasure. Ambiguity in both covers visible calm and obedient patriarchal discourse; while the feeling of empowerment and security about themselves also arises. On the other hand, the dancers' facial expressions and gestures are also rehearsed to reflect the essence or concept of the music video and song lyrics. If the concept is rude and daring; the look and emotions reflect coldness and seriousness demonstrating feminine power and rebellion. On the other hand, if the concept is sweet and cheerful; their expressions represent the coquetry, innocence and woman confidence. Gestures such as winks, chin lifts, hair flipping, or simply looking at the camera trying to communicate the song's concept are often seen to portray the feminine beauty of K-pop music videos.

4 Conclusions

It is concluded that the analyzed dance cover videos represent female beauty in the staging using a post-feminist construction, where the woman feels comfortable and empowered expressing her sexuality. Although in the past female choreographies were constantly under a patriarchal perspective, now we can see more diversity with stronger and more rebellious concepts. However, the ambiguity of this discourse can be debated, since being a reproduction of the original material created by agencies led predominantly by men; and coming from a conservative and *macho* culture, fans desire and adoption of behaviors and characteristics of conventional beauty Asian ideal. Idealization and imitation of the K-pop performers allows for the acceptance in a patriarchal system where infantilism, submission, and objectification are designed to seduce the male gender. In this context, K-pop genre support a patriarchal apparatus. This study contributes to research lines of critical studies on digital communication and gender studies.

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