

Exoticized Femininity in Transition: The Construction and Re-Sexualization of South Korean Girl Groups

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Abstract: This paper explores the transformation of East Asian female idols in the global popular culture, focusing on the shifting aesthetics in K-pop—from the “cute” and “sexy” concepts of the early 2000s to the emergence of the “girl-crush” persona and its hybridized global image in groups like Blackpink. While these shifts are often celebrated as a move toward empowerment, they frequently mask the underlying patriarchal structures of the K-pop industry, which continues to exert control through disciplinary regimes and commodified Orientalism. By synthesizing existing literature, industry analyses, and media texts, the paper argues that these aesthetic changes do not represent a linear progression toward liberation, but instead reflect the adaptive repackaging of femininity within neoliberal capitalism. The global commodification of idols continues to be shaped by the intersections of gender, race, and Orientalist consumption, amplified by digital platforms and algorithmic economies. The paper concludes by highlighting how empowerment discourses in K-pop remain constrained by the industry’s structural and market-driven imperatives, emphasizing that visibility does not equate to liberation.

Keywords: K-pop; Girl-crush aesthetic; Cultural commodification; Algorithmic sexualization

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1. Introduction

The representation of East Asian female idols in global popular culture has undergone a conspicuous transformation over the past two decades, shifting from “innocent cuteness” and hyper-feminized sexual appeal to the post-2010 rise of so-called girl-crush aesthetics, and eventually to the hybridized global images embodied by groups like Blackpink. While this trajectory is often celebrated as a move toward empowerment and agency, scholars have warned that such shifts often mask a continuity of patriarchal control and commodified Orientalism^[1,2]. The K-pop idol industry’s systematic training regimes, contractual restrictions, and body surveillance have long been recognized as mechanisms of what Foucault^[2,3] termed “disciplinary power,” producing bodies that can be endlessly re-styled to suit market needs while remaining structurally subordinated^[4]. From the early 2000s, “cute concept” groups such as Girls’ Generation embodied the commodified “girlish innocence” that, as Kinsella^[1,5] notes, was already entangled with sexualized readings in both domestic and foreign markets. In parallel, hyper-sexualized performances by idols and singers—whether through exposed choreography or body-fragmenting camerawork—reaffirmed what Mulvey^[1,6] described as the “male gaze” within mediated performance. By the mid-2010s, girl-crush concepts emerged, presenting idols as strong, independent, and assertive. Chang^[7] and Wen^[8] observe

that these concepts incorporate postfeminist aesthetics—self-confidence, control, and professionalism—yet remain “depoliticized” in their detachment from collective feminist struggle, aligning with McRobbie’s ^[9] critique of “double entanglement,” where feminist gains are simultaneously taken into account and undermined. However, aesthetic change does not necessarily entail structural liberation ^[2,9].

While there is substantial research on K-pop aesthetics, gender politics, and globalisation, existing studies often examine single concepts (e.g., cute, sexy, or girl-crush) or isolated market dynamics. There is a lack of systematic synthesis tracing how aesthetic shifts operate within persistent industrial, cultural, and technological structures, and how these shifts intersect with Orientalist logics and algorithmic economies. This paper argues that the shift from “cute/innocent” to “girl-crush/global hybrid” does not represent a linear emancipation of East Asian female idols. Instead, it reflects an adaptive repackaging of femininity within patriarchal neoliberalism, where empowerment aesthetics serve as a marketable skin over a stable structure of control. Drawing on existing studies, industry analyses, and media texts, the following sections will examine how this re-packaging operates at the intersections of industry discipline, postfeminist depoliticization, Orientalist consumption, and algorithmic recirculation, ultimately revealing the paradox of “strong appearance, compliant structure” in the global spectacle of East Asian girl groups.

2. From “Cute” and “Sexy” to girl-crush: Shifting aesthetics and persistent structures

The trajectory of female idol aesthetics in the Korean pop industry is often narrated as a linear progression from the cute concepts of the late 1990s and 2000s, through the overtly sexy styles of the early 2010s, to the girl-crush personas that have dominated the last decade. Yet, as McRobbie ^[9] cautions, shifts in surface style should not be mistaken for structural transformation. Each aesthetic mode is embedded in, and serves, the same disciplinary system, albeit in different guises designed to capture new markets and sustain audience engagement.

The cute concept, exemplified by groups such as S.E.S., Fin.K.L, and Girls Generation, capitalised on what Kinsella ^[5] identifies as the commodification of girlish innocence — a carefully constructed persona of youth, purity, and emotional openness. While marketed as wholesome, this aesthetic was never immune from sexualised readings. Mulvey’s ^[6] theory of the male gaze explains how even ostensibly “innocent” imagery is mediated through visual techniques that eroticise and fragment the female body. In music videos, choreographies often incorporated subtle gestures, camera close-ups, and costuming that reinforced this dual coding of innocence and desirability.

Running alongside cute was the explicitly sexy concept, deployed with varying intensity by artists such as Hyuna, After School, and EXID. Here, the eroticisation was overt: body-hugging outfits, sexually suggestive dance moves, and cinematography that lingered on specific body parts. Bernstein’s ^[10] notion of “bounded authenticity” helps explain how such performances could be framed as the idol’s self-expression while remaining fully orchestrated by production teams. The 2014 viral fancam of EXID’s Hani performing “Up & Down” is a case in point: its commercial impact came not from a planned promotional campaign but from the viral circulation of a performance that visually emphasised sexualised movement.

By the mid-2010s, shifting gender discourses in South Korea and the expansion of K-pop’s global market created the conditions for the rise of the girl-crush aesthetic. Groups like 2NE1, f(x), ITZY, (G)I-DLE, and Blackpink embodied a style marked by powerful choreography, androgynous or high-fashion styling, and lyrical assertions of independence. Chang ^[7] interprets this as part of the *ssen unni* (“strong sister”) discourse — a celebration of confidence, self-reliance, and dominance within performance. Wen ^[8], analysing Blackpink: *Light Up the Sky*, shows how this persona aligns with postfeminist sensibilities: strength is articulated through personal resilience, aesthetic mastery, and global cosmopolitanism rather than collective political struggle.

However, these performances remain firmly within the industry’s framework of patriarchal neoliberalism. McRobbie’s ^[9] concept of “double entanglement” is particularly relevant: the aesthetics of empowerment are embraced while the structural conditions of production — contractual restriction, intensive surveillance, and body governance — remain untouched.

Ventels et al.^[4] remind us that the labour of appearing empowered is itself aesthetic labour, demanding the same forms of self-discipline and corporate oversight that characterised earlier concepts.

Thus, the movement from cute to sexy to girl-crush should not be read as an emancipatory arc. It is better understood as a strategic recalibration of marketable femininities, each tailored to specific demographic segments and global audiences. While the girl-crush persona may outwardly reject the submissiveness of earlier concepts, it remains tethered to the same systems of surveillance, management, and commodification. This dynamic becomes even more complex when these aesthetics intersect with Orientalist eroticism in the global marketplace — a subject to which the next section now turns.

3. Orientalism and the global market for “Exportable Difference”

The globalisation of Korean girl groups has not only extended their reach but also intensified the dynamics of what Edward Said^[11] terms Orientalism: the process by which the “East” is constructed in the Western imagination as exotic, desirable, and fundamentally different. Within this framework, female idols become vehicles for what hooks^[12] calls “eating the other” — the commodification of racial and cultural difference as a consumable product. In the K-pop context, this difference is not simply discovered by foreign audiences; it is strategically manufactured within the Korean entertainment industry to maximise transnational profitability.

Kim^[1] has shown how the “idol republic” is embedded in the production of “exportable difference” — a set of aesthetic and performative codes that mark idols as distinctly Korean or East Asian while allowing for hybridisation with global pop trends. This often involves the use of “split and doubling” visualities: a performer may embody both innocence and sexual allure, traditionalism and modernity, in a single concept. The strategic incorporation of cultural markers — hanbok-inspired costumes, Asian hair accessories, or visual references to traditional art — into otherwise Westernised pop performances exemplifies what McRobbie^[9] has described as cultural odour: a deliberate infusion of national or regional signifiers to give the product a marketable “flavour.”

Bernstein’s^[10] notion of “bounded authenticity” is crucial here: the inclusion of “Eastern” elements is carefully controlled, ensuring that they remain palatable to foreign audiences while sustaining their appeal to domestic consumers. For instance, Blackpink’s 2020 “How You Like That” music video juxtaposes high-fashion Western styling with a backdrop of lotus lanterns and hanbok-inspired dresses, producing an aesthetic that is legible as both global luxury and “Korean heritage.” This aesthetic hybridity not only reinforces their international brand identity but also commodifies cultural difference as a form of capital.

Yet, this process also re-inscribes gendered Orientalism. As Mulvey^[6] would suggest, the visual codes used to present “Eastern” femininity — whether in traditional dress or modernised versions — are often filtered through a sexualised gaze. The same lotus lanterns or hanbok silhouettes can frame the idol in ways that accentuate bodily curves or choreographic gestures, integrating exoticism with eroticism. Kim^[2] notes that this re-sexualisation is not purely imposed from outside; it is co-produced by Korean management companies that understand the value of selling “safe” otherness to Western markets.

In this context, “exportable difference” is not a benign celebration of cultural hybridity; it is a market strategy that fuses national branding with gendered exoticism. The industry’s ability to toggle between cultural signifiers, globalised pop codes, and varying degrees of sexualisation allows it to maintain the profitability of female idols across multiple markets. Far from challenging Orientalist logics, these strategies sustain them — even in their most hybrid and seemingly empowering forms.

4. Digital platforms, algorithmic amplification, and the co-production of sexualization

The circulation of K-pop girl group performances in the digital era is shaped as much by platform logics as by the intentions of producers or idols themselves. Bishop’s^[13] analysis of “algorithmic gossip” offers a useful framework:

algorithmic systems privilege content that elicits strong affective responses, whether admiration, desire, or controversy, thereby amplifying the visibility of sexualised imagery. In the case of K-pop, these systems intersect with industry strategies to ensure that “viral moments” — often featuring tightly choreographed, body-focused segments — become central to both domestic and international promotion.

Huang’s ^[14] survey data underscores the extent to which audiences recognise, and even expect, sexualisation in idol performances. Respondents in Huang’s study noted the high frequency of sexually suggestive content in choreography and costuming, and a significant proportion agreed that idols carry an implicit obligation to fulfil sexual fantasies. This perception aligns with Mulvey’s ^[6] account of the male gaze, but here the gaze is no longer solely mediated by industry camerawork; it is also reproduced by fans who clip, remix, and circulate performance moments that conform to eroticised tropes.

The proliferation of short-form video platforms such as TikTok and Instagram Reels has further intensified these dynamics. Wen ^[8] observes that certain choreography sequences are designed with “challenge” formats in mind, making them easy for fans to replicate and share. These moments often hinge on repetitive gestures, hip isolations, or hand-to-body movements that are visually legible even without full musical context, lending themselves to decontextualised consumption. When these gestures trend, they are not merely fan creations but part of a feedback loop in which platform metrics influence stage design, and stage design anticipates algorithmic amplification.

Importantly, the co-production of sexualisation in this environment is not confined to male spectatorship. As Banet-Weiser ^[15] argues in her work on popular feminism, the performance of empowerment in digital culture is frequently commodified and sold back to audiences, who participate in its circulation while reinforcing the same market logics that constrain it. In the K-pop context, female fans may replicate “empowered” choreography as an expression of solidarity, yet the act of replication — and the visibility it garners — also serves the industry’s commercial aims.

This duality is evident in fan-produced fancams and edits that focus on specific members during high-impact moments. While these can highlight technical skill or charisma, they often reproduce the same fragmentary framing — close-ups on hips, legs, or facial expressions — that characterises official broadcast cuts. The aesthetic conventions of fancam culture thus blur the line between audience resistance and complicity.

Zahra’s ^[16] study of media discourse surrounding female idols shows how this ecosystem contributes to heightened vulnerability. The hyper-visibility generated by digital platforms exposes idols to intensified online harassment, with sexualised content becoming a focal point for both adoration and abuse. This aligns with Bernstein’s ^[10] contention that commodified sexuality, even when framed as agentic, remains embedded in unequal power relations that leave performers disproportionately exposed to reputational and emotional harm.

In this sense, digital platforms do not simply distribute existing sexualisation; they actively reshape it. The interplay between algorithmic curation, industry production choices, and participatory fan cultures creates a closed circuit in which sexualised imagery is both the product and the promotional engine. Far from diluting the patriarchal control described earlier, these mechanisms extend it into the seemingly decentralised space of user-generated content, ensuring that the circulation of idols’ images continues to serve the dual imperatives of visibility and profitability.

5. Conclusion

This study highlights the paradox of “strong appearance, compliant structure” in the evolution of K-pop girl group aesthetics, revealing how the shift from “cute” and “sexy” to “girl-crush” and global hybrid identities reflects a strategic rebranding of femininity rather than a true emancipation of female idols. While these aesthetics may appear empowering, they remain deeply embedded in the same patriarchal neoliberal framework that controls, commodifies, and surveils the idols’ bodies. The global appeal of K-pop relies on the interplay of Orientalist tropes, cultural hybridity, and algorithmic amplification, which continue to commodify racial and gendered difference for profit. This analysis extends beyond K-pop, urging a broader interrogation of how global popular cultures negotiate the intersections of gender, race, and

commodification. Ultimately, the case of K-pop illustrates that visibility, even when framed as empowerment, remains constrained by the logics of neoliberal capitalism and does not equate to true liberation. Future research should further examine the structural conditions of idol labour, fan practices, and the complex political economies that shape these contradictions in global cultural contexts.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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