

Title: How K-pop Mirrors Gender Roles

Category: Women's and Gender Studies

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1. Introduction

When I first moved from Sweden to South Korea in third grade, my school principal came all the way out onto the soccer field to stop me from playing; soccer was a “guy” sport, and girls should be doing “girl” activities such as hopscotch. I noticed how the image of a passive and submissive woman is celebrated in the Korean society¹ like no other, when actual Korean women are not so passive nor so submissive by nature. I began reading up and collecting articles about female empowerment, and came to the conclusion that there must be a source that communicates to girls that they are not capable and are limited even before they try. Taking into account that listening to music is the dominant hobby of a great majority of the population, as well as the fact that the lyrics of some popular songs are highly restrictive of gender roles (Weitzer & Kubrin, 2009), I analyzed how K-pop reflects and constructs gender in society.

In Section 2, literature review on sex and gender, gender as social construction, and gender role in music lyrics is made. Research methodology is introduced in Section 3, and in Section 4, K-pop lyrical analysis is performed based on pre-defined categories. Section 5 presents the statistical analysis and the relation with the Korean society based on social construction theory. The concluding remarks follow in Section 6.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Sex and Gender

On the most basic level, differing amounts of sex hormones is the most fundamental difference between women and men. There have been claims of cognitive differences, emotional

¹ For the purposes of this paper, “Korea” and “South Korea” is used interchangeably.

differences, and physical differences as a result of the dissimilarity of men and women. The first claim refers to how there may be a biological difference in mental capacities, and the second alludes to varying emotional ranges, as well as proneness to be inherently aggressive or nurturing. The third claim calls attention to how the female body is designed to bear and give birth to children, whereas the male body is built relatively bigger, stronger, and excludes the same reproductive organs (Philips, Steele, & Tanz, 1987). However, the explanation of the assumed differences has moved on to discuss the neurophysiological difference, that men and women have distinct brains in aspects to size, complexity, and organization (Philips, Steele, & Tanz, 1987). Recent studies show how social stimuli can effect brain development - that hormones can be controlled by environmental factors, not only biological ones. Thus, even if a correlation between the brain and gender roles is found, the correlation may be a result of social experience rather than born factors (Francis & Skelton, 2005).

2.2 Social Construction Theory

The social construction theory insists that we take a critical stance toward our taken-for-granted ways of understanding the world, including ourselves (Burr, 1995). This theory generally sees meaning, including identities, as socially situated and constructed through social interaction (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). Therefore, the social construction theory focuses on how gender is constructed and expanded upon by assumptions and perceptions that society impresses upon individuals. Based on this theory, behavior that is categorized to be feminine or masculine is also a product of such social factors. It also focuses on how different social identities such as social class, age, sexuality, etc. can affect individuals in their process of forming their identity. Studies

show that children's and adolescents' instinct to be accepted also pushes them to develop gender identities that would be deemed admirable and as a prototype by their peers and the society (Francis & Skelton, 2005).

Furthermore, social constructionist and feminists have come to agree that language is the primary source of the construction of a person, a group, and on a wider level, a society. What kind of a person one is, the type of experiences, one's identity and personality, etc., are all affected by language. In other words, the fact that we can express and communicate our thoughts, beliefs, opinions, and experiences only by using concepts and forms of language already in existence shows that our behavior is the product of language. Even the belief that there are three categories of psychological processing - thoughts, feelings, and behavior - is in itself a function of language (Francis & Skelton, 2005).

However, this process of language cannot create gender roles by individuals alone. Language is a social phenomenon - it is used to communicate, express, identify, and ultimately to unite a group of people with similar core beliefs in order to create a community. In this light, the more frequent a type or nuance of language is used, the more influential and fundamental it becomes in shaping the society as a whole (Burr, 1995). The importance of music and lyrics step in at this point - results of one survey show that out of 2760 14 and 16 year-old in 10 different southeastern cities, the average spent 40 hours dedicated to listening to music per week (Channels & Commercials, 1996). A vast amount of teenagers that are in the process of forming their identity, especially that of their gender, are exposed to language in the form of music. In another study, approximately 17% of male adolescents and 25% of female adolescents replied

that they liked their favorite songs specifically because the lyrics were a reflection of their feelings (Channels & Commercials, 1996).

Furthermore, social scientist Knobloch-Westerwick found that despite contradictory beliefs that young listeners might not understand all the details in lyrics, they still understand enough of what they hear to obtain a general idea of the message the lyrics express. Thus, music lyrics have a profound impact on young adults that are in the process of forming gender identities, and it is important for music lyrics to be written with this fact in mind (Fuld, Mulligan, Altmann, Brown, Christakis, & O'Keefe, 2009).

2.3 Gender Role in Music Lyrics

Popular music lyrics largely serve two roles - they act as a guide to introduce and educate listeners to emotions, and they also help listeners come to terms with situations and experiences in their lives. This role of music is crucial because it shows how music is not only listened to for the sake of entertainment, but to understand and learn about oneself on a deeper level (Freudiger & Almquist, 1978).

In addition, lyrics can serve as a stereotypical model or socialization agent, especially for identifying what gender is. For example, the lyrics that little girls are made of “sugar and spice and everything nice” (nursery rhyme “What are Little Boys Made of?”) and how boys are made of “snips and snails and puppy-dogs' tails” is a reflection of community culture as a socialization agent, since it draws a clear line between girls and boys in the first place, and also assumes each gender has a different characteristic. The fact that such sexist lyrics are sung and chanted by children of such young age clearly show that gender is more deeply stemmed in socialization

than from biological factors (Barkan, 2010). However, the reason popular music lyrics are of a greater focus than nursery rhymes is since it has a greater audience and serves as a greater socialization agent. Therefore, popular music lyrics are of a great interest to sex-role research (Freudiger & Almquist, 1978).

In a study conducted by Cobb and Boettcher (2007), conclusions were made that exposure to misogynistic music lyrics led to increased sexist views. Furthermore, it has been proven that stereotyped gender roles have roots in lyrics containing sexual portrayals of women that support the idea of “acceptance of women as sexual objects and men as pursuers of sexual conquest” (Martino, Collins, Elliott, Strachman, Kanouse, & Berry, 2006).

An alarming side of viewing women as sexual tools is that women are stripped of their humanity. When a group of people that consist of half of the population are no longer viewed as human beings, they are not treated with respect an individual deserves, and therefore makes it easier to show violence or discrimination against them (Cummings, Harris, Mitros, Mueller, & Shumrick, 2007).

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Objective of Study

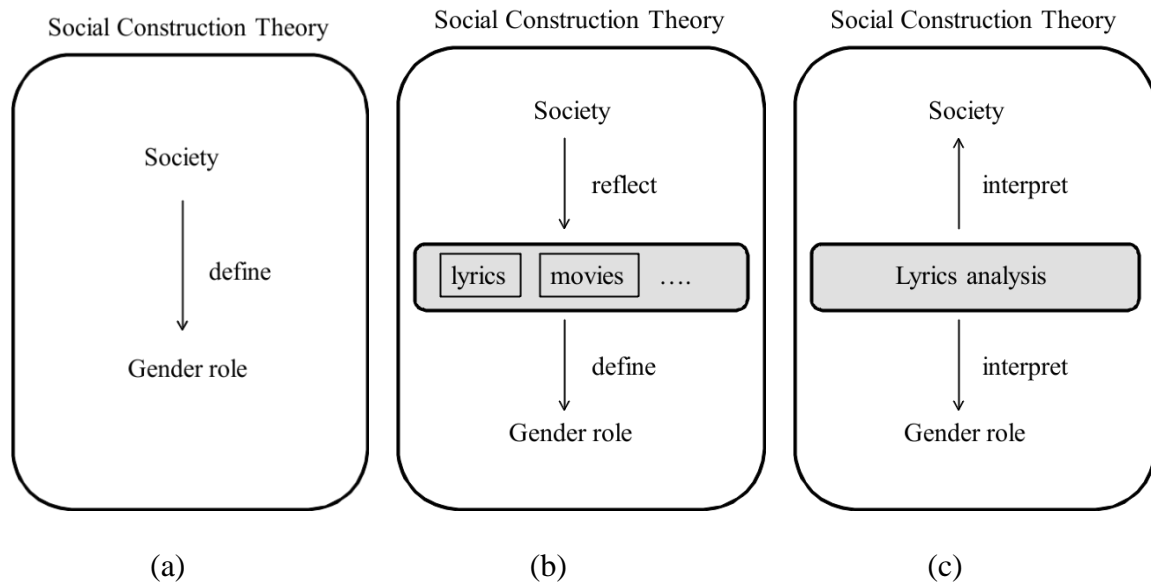


Figure 1. (a) basic social construction theory, (b) the effect of media on social construction theory, (c) interpretation of gender role in a society based on lyrics analysis

Figure 1 (a) represents the most basic social construction theory. Figure 1 (b) shows a mid-process of how society defines gender roles by using media. The society reflects its standards for different gender roles in the media, and the media in turn affects the general population, and solidifies gender roles. Figure 1 (c) is the model that will be used in this study, which uses Figure 1 (b) to understand the standards society has in the first place, as well as how gender roles are fixed in our society via media. Many forms of media exist, but this study will focus on music lyrics specifically.

3.2 Music Selection

M.net (Music Network; <http://www.mnet.com>) is the music and entertainment channel of CJ E&M in South Korea, and is Korea's go-to music chart. It ranks songs by their Digital Music Sales Score (50%), Album Sales Volume Score (15%), Social Media Score (15%), Popularity Score (10%), Broadcast Score (10%), and Live Broadcast Real Time Voting Score (10%). The top 50 songs from each year's annual M.net chart from 2008 to 2015 were selected to ensure that the music lyrics analyzed in this study have a wide audience. Only dance and rap music were selected since K-pop is inclusive of only those two genres. Amongst the 400 top 50 songs between 2008 and 2015 (50 songs/year x 8 years = 400 songs), only 49.5% of songs were labeled as dance or rap music, which left the list of songs to analyze to 198 songs.

3.3 Classification Criteria: Definition of Categories

Based on the past study on the misogynistic lyrics analysis of the American rap songs (Weitzer & Kubrin, 2009), the following categories are defined to be misogynistic: (1) derogatory naming and shaming of women, (2) sexual objectification of women, (3) distrust of women, (4) legitimization of violence against women, and (5) celebration of prostitution and pimping. However, since K-pop and American rap music are different, two more categories are newly introduced in this study: (6) passive women and (7) active women. In order to code all categories effectively, a code label was assigned to all categories.

These categories and the associated code labels are summarized in Table 1. In Table 1, "(0) none" is the one that does not include the gender-related lyrics and "(8) Misogyn" is the integral part of (1), (2), (3), (4), and (5).

Table 1. Categories and codes to describe the gender inequality

index	code label	brief description
(0)	None	neutral
(1)	NamSha	derogatory naming and shaming of women
(2)	SexObj	sexual objectification of women
(3)	DisWom	distrust of women
(4)	LegVio	legitimation of violence against women
(5)	ProPim	celebration of prostitution and pimping
(6)	PasWom	passive women
(7)	ActWom	active women
(8)	Misogyn	NamSha + SexObj + DisWom + LegVio + ProPim

4. K-pop Lyrics Analysis

4.1 None

138 out of 198 (69.7%) songs do not include any gender discrimination. Korean language in general does not communicate as directly as in English. It uses a greater range of unique figurative language (Bacolod, Bae, Cunanan, Chavez, Igno, Manahan, & Vidal, 2012). In that sense, nearly all the songs seemed to contain messages about gender roles or different characterization of women and men. However, because these implications were so subtle, they were not counted unless they were direct.

4.2 Derogatory Naming and Shaming of Women

Only 1 out of 198 (0.5%) songs contained derogatory naming and shaming of women:

I'm sick of them puss

puss puss

bitch you a freaking puss puss x2

(Jimin and Iron, Puss)

Interestingly, this song was released in 2015. Korean lyrics do not include vocabulary that is directly degrading towards women such as “bitch,” nor sexually degrading language such as “puss.” Even if Korean words like “bitch” are used in a song, the general public shuns such language, and songs including such undignified language never has gained popularity in the past. However, this song *Puss* is a turning point, and all the more important, since it reflects how K-pop not only influences other realms of music, but also is influenced. The usage of “bitch” and words alike are so often heard in American music, that the meaning is usually not emphasized as much and easier to ignore. Thus, the fact that the song *Puss* gained popularity even while using debasing language against women shows an ironic face of globalization and degradation of women in popular music (Choi, 2011).

4.3 Sexual Objectification of Women

K-pop lyrics do not include radical expressions that sexually objectify women. For example, K-pop lyrics do not include American rap’s street culture² (Weitzer & Kubrin, 2009).

However, there were still some lyrics that implied women were good for nothing but for sex:

Shake that booty that booty booty

Just because you have a pretty face doesn’t mean you’re a woman

Just because you have a pretty mind doesn’t mean you’re a woman

You need one more (booty)

(Park Jin Young, Who’s your mama?)

² American rap’s street culture display that “men typically avoid commitment, marriage, and caring for children; instead, women are to be sexually used and then quickly discarded”(Weitzer, & Kubrin, 2009).

Implications that all that is important to a woman is her looks, that a woman cannot be valued or loved if she is not pretty according to societal standards disclaim that women can feel worthy of themselves based on their abilities or substance (Sommers, 1995).

Another example is:

I think I'm ugly

And nobody wants to love me

Just like her I wanna be pretty I wanna be pretty

Don't lie to my face cuz I know I'm ugly

(2Ne1, Ugly)

In some sense, this desire to be accepted and valued by the society by being pretty “just like her” has led to a boom in the plastic surgery industry in South Korea. Of course, every woman has bodily autonomy, and has the right to do as they please with their appearance. However, it is true that the increase of plastic surgery has resulted in loss of personal individuality and identity (Tang Wan Hui, 2015). Every year, there are news articles and studies that show women's confidence is being eroded as years pass by due to the increasing emphasis on "lookism" in the media. Songs that focus on the importance of looks alone, like the example given above, direct impressionable teenagers into believing such social fallacies as looks are the most important factor in judging someone. Research shows that confidence and leadership abilities have a strong correlation (McCosh, 2012). Thus, Korean lyrics objectify women, which in turn lower their confidence, leading to a lesser likelihood of assuming a leadership position.

4.4 Distrust of Women

Displaying suspicion towards women in music lyrics has the negative impact of separating women and men in society. Overgeneralizing women to have evil intention when actively interacting with men not only block men from viewing women as equal human beings, but also gives a negative connotation to outgoing women (Alvare, 2009). One type of such lyrics portrays women to be controlling and inconsiderate towards men:

If you think girls are easy, you'll get hurt

I've been saying yes to you,

I've been complimenting you

And you really think it's for real

Crazy in love, hurt by me

An obvious conclusion to love

(Baek Ji Young, Good Boy)

Another type of such lyrics showcase women as gold diggers who use their looks and sexuality just for men's wealth:

I'm not your fountain but why do you

only drink coffee or alcohol that I buy?

You're like the controversial character, Bat Girl

You torture my heart with a whip called hope

(Dynamic Duo - BAAAM)

However, K-pop lyrics demonizing women do not go to extremes that American rap music does, which frequently include how women lie to men that they are pregnant to steal money, and how some women falsely accuse men of rape to get remittance (Weitzer & Kubrin, 2009).

4.5 Legitimation of Violence Against Women

There were no lyrics in K-pop that legitimize violence against women. American rap, though, contain lyrics that fall under this category - these rap songs typically discuss how men can punish women if they dress inappropriately, talk back to men, or get drunk (Weitzer & Kubrin, 2009).

4.6 Celebration of Prostitution and Pimping

There were no lyrics in K-pop that celebrate prostitution and pimping. In American rap music, lyrics reflect American Harlem and street culture that glorifies and legitimizes prostitution and pimping as jobs for just moneymaking (Weitzer & Kubrin, 2009).

4.7 Passive Women

This category had the most number of subtle language indicating women to be inactive and passive. In almost every song, there were some form of indirect language describing women to be unassertive, but the 18 songs explicitly state women to be passive or submissive. The songs selected mainly depicted women to be incapable of acting for themselves and needed a man's help - a similar structure to the typical Disney princess storyline:

Ah, my prince!

When are you gonna come save me?

Like a white dream

Will you lift me in your arms and fly?

(Girls' Generation - I GOT A BOY)

Also, there were lyrics that indicated women to be needy and timid, such as;

When our eyes meet, my heart pounds

I try to get even the tiniest bit of your attention

Oh my prince, where are you looking?

I'm right here

You're so handsome, I just need you

I can't live without you

(AOA - Heart Attack)

Such lyrics that depict women to be passive and submissive especially affect impressionable teenagers to develop stereotypical images of being feminine, and encourage girls to follow that image.

4.8 Active Women

In this category, female artists displaying misandry by sexually objectifying men and displaying distrust in men, as well as promoting a tough, independent image of women. Interestingly enough, all of the songs that are categorized here are sung by female artists.

First, there were lyrics that in turn, sexually objectified men:

You're like a desperate dog

You still don't understand what I'm saying?

You need to get punished, come out to the back

(EXID - Ah Yeah)

Second, there were lyrics that again, in turn, suggested that men should not be trusted:

Half the words that come out of your mouth are lies

And I fell for it and fell for it I fell for it endlessly

You need to meet a girl like you someday

You need to feel this pain, then you'll know how I feel

(2NE1 - Hate You)

Under this category, some songs included that there were men that approached women for financial reasons - namely, that there were male gold diggers:

You're probably wearing the clothes I bought you

You probably put on the cologne I bought you

And right now, you're probably

Meeting her and laughing

(Ailee - I Will Show You)

Lastly, there were many songs that encouraged women to become active and confident:

Don't worry about it, girl!

Be honest from now on

Be confident from now on

Show your heart right now

Right now this moment tonight

(Lee Hyori - U-Go-Girl)

5. Statistical Analysis and Discussion

5.1 Analysis of K-Pop dance and rap music

For the lyrics analysis, each line of K-pop lyrics was marked with the code labels in Table 1 for statistical analysis. Table 2 shows the frequency of each category for K-Pop dance and rap music (2008-2015) and Figure 2 illustrates the associated ratio analysis. Amongst the 400 Korean songs from 2008 to 2015, 198 songs were categorized as K-pop - dance and rap music.

	(0) None	(1) NamSha	(2) SexObj	(3) DisWom	(4) LegVio	(5) ProPim	(6) PasWom	(7) ActWom	Total
2008	20	0	2	0	0	0	3	3	28
2009	24	0	1	1	0	0	1	4	31
2010	18	0	2	0	0	0	2	3	25
2011	16	0	3	0	0	0	4	6	29
2012	18	0	1	1	0	0	1	3	24
2013	14	0	1	1	0	0	2	0	18
2014	15	0	4	0	0	0	2	0	21
2015	13	1	4	0	0	0	3	3	22
2008~2015	138	1	18	3	0	0	18	22	198
	(0) None	(8) Misogen					(6) PasWom	(7) ActWom	Total
2008~2015	138	22					18	22	198

Table 2. Analysis result of K-Pop dance and rap music (2008-2015): frequency of each category described in Table 1 (repetition was allowed in counting).

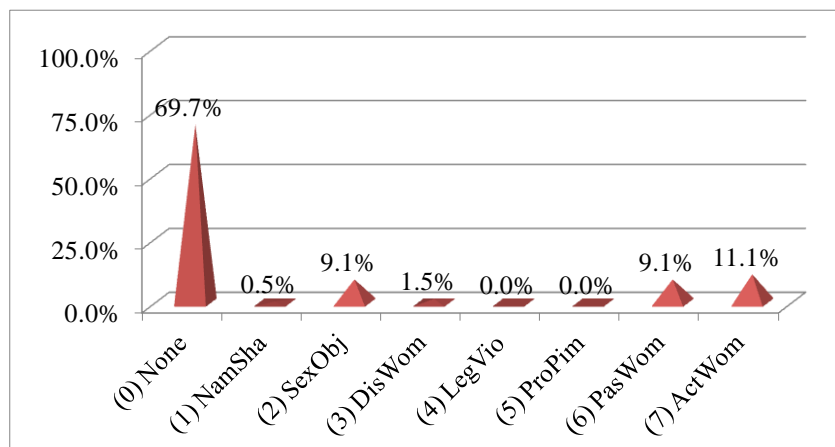


Figure 2. Analysis result of K-Pop dance and rap music (2008-2015): ratio between None, NamSha, SexObj, DisWom, LegVio, ProPim, PasWom, and ActWom categories.

Only 11.1% of K-pop songs contain misogynistic lyrics. For the categories from (1) to (5), the ratios are distributed as 0.5%, 9.1%, 1.5%, 0.0%, and 0.0%, respectively. There were almost no songs within categories (1) and (3) - each holding only small percentages of 0.5% and 1.5%. Interestingly, there were absolutely no songs within categories (4) and (5), but a considerable number of songs having lyrics categorized in (2) with 9.1%.

Because of a Confucian background in Korean society, 9.1% of K-pop describes women as category (6): submissive or docile beings. According to Confucius, women exist to serve their men and help their children grow upright (Levi, 2013). Moreover, the gender gap within South Korea still remains unresolved and critical. South Korea has the highest gender wage gap amongst fellow OECD nations at a jaw-gaping 36.3% in 2013. Only 15.7% of the Korean parliament represents women, and *The Economist* ranked South Korea as the lowest of all OECD nations in its “Glass-ceiling index” in 2013, 2014, and 2015 (Schwab, Samans, Zahidi, Bekhouche, Ugarte, Ratcheva, Hausmann, & Tyson, 2015). Women in South Korea comprise only 1% of all corporation board members, and only 2% of executive committees (Süssmuth-Dyckerhoff, Wang, & Chen, 2012). Women, especially the younger generation, are still characterized by culture and society to be “feminine” - cute, domestic, and submissive. Such assigned gender roles thus play a significant role in the South Korean society. Public assertion of female power is dismissed and shunned, so Korean wives put up with the pretense of maintaining the traditional image of an obedient wife (Hermanns, 2006). In some sense, this maintenance of acting “feminine” has overflowed into the 21st century, as statistics show.

In category (7), 11.1% of songs promote empowerment of women or contain misandrist lyrics. Although South Korea has, in large, been a patriarchal society due to its Confucian background

(Park, 2001), its reinforced focus on female education, increasing female employment, as well as further promotion of women's economic capabilities has led women to shift their focus from domestic duties to social status. More and more females question and fight against patriarchal ideals. Studies have shown how it is now expected of husbands to share domestic and child-rearing responsibilities, and wives freely criticize husbands who do not adopt such a basic outlook (Park, 2001). It is not surprising, therefore, that South Korea faces one of the highest divorce rates in the world at 36% in 2013, and the number of females remarrying increased by 227.6% between 1982 and 2012. Female employment has increased from 39.1% in 1980 to 54.9% in 2012 (OECD, 2007). Through such statistics, it is evident that female empowerment in the society is occurring.

The category (8) misogynistic lyrics were also compared with (6) passive women and (7) active women. (8) misogynistic lyrics, which include all categories between (1) and (5), was characterized to directly debase women. For the categories (6), (7), and (8), the ratios are distributed as 11.1%, 9.1%, and 11.1%, respectively. (6) degrades women in indirect and implicit ways. Nonetheless, categories (1) to (6) all lower the status of women compared to men, while (7) acts as an outlier and promotes empowerment for women, so it is noteworthy that 20.2% of all K-pop lyrics are degrading to women.

Table 3. Analysis result of K-Pop dance and rap music (2008-2015): Percentage of categories

(1)~(7) described in Table 1 (repetition was allowed in counting).

	(1) NamSha	(2) SexObj	(3) DisWom	(4) LegVio	(5) ProPim	(6) PasWom	(7) ActWom
2008	0	2	0	0	0	3	3
2009	0	1	1	0	0	1	4
2010	0	2	0	0	0	2	3
2011	0	3	0	0	0	4	6
2012	0	1	1	0	0	1	3
2013	0	1	1	0	0	2	0
2014	0	4	0	0	0	2	0
2015	1	4	0	0	0	3	3
2008~2015	1	18	3	0	0	18	22
Ratio	(1) NamSha	(2) SexObj	(3) DisWom	(4) LegVio	(5) ProPim	(6) PasWom	(7) ActWom
	1.7%	30.0%	5.0%	0.0%	0.0%	30.0%	36.7%
	(1) NamSha + (2) SexObj + (3) DisWom + (4) LegVio + (5) ProPim + (6) PasWom						(7) ActWom
	66.7%						36.7%

In Table 3, the percentage of each category excluding the (0) None category was calculated. Amongst the 30.3% of K-pop lyrics that are defining of gender, 66.7% of the lyrics define women in a degrading manner, whereas only 36.7% of lyrics encouraged women to become independent, confident, and outgoing. Thus, the vast majority of lyrics that are constructive of gender roles include negative connotations toward women.

Along the same lines, even though political and economic empowerment of women is occurring, it is still very slow. Compared to the overall average human development in Korea (ranking 28th in the United Nation’s Human Development Index) but in terms of the gender gap, Korea ranks a dismal 68th (on the Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) index). Once again, the peculiar occurrence of female empowerment somewhat occurring on the social level, but not reflected at decision-making levels - namely “outside of the house” activities - still shows that

Korean women and men need to understand that the two genders are no different and are both capable of being independent (UN, 2015).

6. Conclusion

Based on social construction theory, this study investigates and analyzes how K-pop lyrics reflect gender roles in South Korean society. South Korea has undergone dramatic changes in the past 60 years - experiencing an economic boom also known as “The Miracle of Han River,” political turmoil and democratization, as well as social modernization (Noland, 2002).

Nonetheless, social development such as the gender gap did not improve as quickly as other aspects such as the economy. Even after democratization, female representation in the parliament is so low, that there is a quota at 10% (Soh, 2011). Despite the quota system, the number and effectiveness of passed legislation benefiting females were low, mainly because the female politicians on parliament were largely inactive, and were not voluntarily selected from the beginning (Hermanns, 2006).

In addition to women in the political perspective, women have a long way to go economically. Despite 54.9% of women having a job, a vast majority are employed either part-time or low paying jobs. Every one in 1,300 women are working as executive officers or above that level, which is strikingly lower than men, who have a one in 74 ratio (Yonhap News, 2015).

These statistics clearly display the lack of female leadership in South Korean society, and K-pop lyrics reflect this reality. The emphasis on the importance of looks, as well as continuously mentioning that an ideal woman is submissive and passive shows its toll on the younger generation by the boom in the plastic surgery industry in South Korea, yearly articles

and studies stating the erosion of female confidence, as well as the scarcity of female leaders (Tang Wan Hui, 2015).

In this study, it was found that 30.3% of the 198 songs analyzed constructed gender roles. Amongst the 30.3% that fixated women's roles in society, the majority, a whopping 66.7%, of K-pop lyrics painted a degrading image of women. However, the fact that 36.7% of K-pop lyrics that are definitive of gender promotes empowerment for women is an encouraging sign. Hopefully, more K-pop lyrics will advocate the feminist movement, and socially construct a better reputation and standard for women in South Korea to look up to in the future.

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