

BODY IN CONSUMER CULTURE: AN ANALYSIS ON KOREAN POP (K-POP) SONGS

Aris Siswanti

Brawijaya University, Malang, East Java, Indonesia
arissiswanti@ub.ac.id

Abstract: Korean pop music has been a major force in *Korean Wave* – the expansion of South Korean popular culture to many countries – in the past years. It is popular for its fun tune and dance moves as well as interesting lyrics. K-pop artists are also well-known for their attractive and beautiful physical appearance, making them contemporary icons of beauty for people in many parts of the world. This study analyzes K-Pop songs in relevance to their contents referring to body and beauty in consumer culture. The songs are selected from the songs released in between January and August 2014 which are popular on Korean music charts or considered popular tracks of the albums. By analyzing the English lyrics and also referring to related contexts such as the visual aspects and socio-cultural aspects, this study discovers that the songs embody the concept of body in consumer culture, that body is the vehicle of desire and self-expression, and the ideal body must be young, beautiful, full of energy, fit, and fun.

Keywords: *k-pop song, consumer culture, body, beauty*

INTRODUCTION

Korean pop music (hereafter *K-pop*) has been a major force in *Korean Wave* – the expansion of South Korean popular culture to many countries – in the past years. It is especially popular in Japan and other Asian countries, South America, Europe, and Australia. Three contributing factors to this success are music genre, dance, and singers' appearance (Korean Tourism Organization, 2011). *K-pop* presents easy-listening, fun contemporary music with interesting lyrics and engaging dance moves by attractive-looking, youthful artistes, who become contemporary icons of beauty for people in many parts of the world. *Korean Wave* contributes to the development of tourism in South Korea. For example, 10% of tourists visiting South Korea between 2007 and 2010 came because of *Korean Wave* (Korean Tourism Organization, 2011).

Consumer culture is a system of consumption dominated by consumption of commercial products. Some of its characteristics include “the pervasive and rapid circulation products” and “the special importance given to the use of consumer goods in the allocation of individual status, perceived well-being and quality of life” (Arnould, *n.d.*). Rather than simply to meet their basic needs of food, clothes, and housing, people need more products and services to express their existence. One of the necessities is beautiful body or physical beauty. Consumer culture views body as the vehicle of desire and self-expression, and the ideal body must be young, beautiful, full of energy, fit, and fun (Featherstone, Hepworth and Turner, 1991).

Several facts suggest that the pursuit of physical beauty is a global phenomenon. In the US, the salon industry makes about \$60 billion in annual sales (Professional Beauty Association

and Nail Manufacturers Council, cited in cited in Female Factor). Asian countries like South Korea are a preferred place for cosmetic procedures, as they offer relatively cheaper procedures done by qualified specialists. Moreover, taking the procedures in the country also gives the opportunity to enjoy shopping and visit beautiful places. Dr. Moon Hyoung Jin from Navy Plastic Surgery, Seoul says that South Korea has become the world's favorite destination for cosmetic plastic surgeries. The most popular treatments are bone-structure reconstruction, rhinoplasty, and eyelid surgery (Setyanti, 2012).

The phenomena of physical beauty and *K-pop* make an interesting topic to analyze. As one of the contributing factors of the success of *K-pop* is its youth and beauty, it is interesting to investigate further how *K-pop* songs embody the concept of body through the song lyrics. In addition, according to Patcher (1975, in Featherstone, Hepworth and Turner, 1991), popular heroes in consumer culture are no longer the mighty, the creators of kingdoms, the authors, and highfliers. Now, the heroes are movie actors and singers.

The object of analysis is fifteen Korean songs released between January to August 2014. The titles are *200%* by Akdong Musician; *30 Sexy* by Rain; *Beautiful* by Park Bo Ram featuring Zico; *Body* by Taeyang; *Body Language* by San E featuring Bumkey; *Day 1* by K-Will; *Eyes, Nose, Lips* by Taeyang; *Her* by Block B, *La Song* by Rain, *Mr. Mr.* by Girls Generation; *Shower Later* by Gary, *Something* by TVXQ, *That Kind of Guy* by BRO, *Touch My Body* by Sistar; and *Your Scent* by Gary (Leesang) and Jung In. The songs were selected because they were number 1 on Gaon and/or MNet Countdown, two of the most popular Korean music charts during said period, or are important tracks that are performed in concerts by the artists, proving their popularity among the local and international audiences. Most of the lyrics are in Korean, but this study analyzes the English lyrics provided by websites which provide the English translation and Romanization of the song lyrics, which

makes it easier for international audience to understand the songs. The data, the lyrics that use references about body and/or beauty are further analyzed to discover how they conform to the concept of body in consumer culture by Featherstone, Hepworth and Turner (1991). Social and performance backgrounds of the songs may be taken into account in interpreting the meanings of the lyrics.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Female Beauty: Fair-Skinned, Slim, Youthful, Delicate, and "Top-To-Toe" Beautiful

A beautiful woman is a woman who is fair-skinned. This is reflected in the lyrics of *Shower Later*, which is about a man describing the woman he during their love making.

I like your small but cute breasts

Your forehead that my hand touches when I brush back your hair

Your eyes that look at me when you're on top of me

Your white skin that is slightly reflected under the lights

...

A white angel is laying next to me

I softly kiss your eyes that are looking at me

(*Shower Later*, lines 5-8; 40-41)

White skin looks beautiful as it shines under the lights, and it suggests innocence and gracefulness of an angel, so the woman is compared to a "white angel". The next image is that the woman has soft hair that the man loves to touch. She is probably long-haired too, as the man "brushes back" her hair. The image of soft, long hair is also expressed in Gary and Joong In's *Your Scent*: "Your hair is tied back so I can see your forehead/It bounces every time you walk" (lines 1-2). The delicateness or innocence is also implied when it says that the woman has small but cute breasts. Smaller breasts may not be as exposing as larger ones, but they look endearing and complete the image of a small and delicate woman. Preference on fair skin and delicate features is also mentioned in *Your Scent* that "After holding your white

skin and soft cheeks/ I want to bother you all night" (lines 10-12). Taeyang's *Eyes, Nose, Lips* also gives a hint on this delicate/small feature of women when the man remembers how soft the woman's fingers' touch on him as he is recollecting his memories about an ex-lover ("Your eyes, nose, lips/ Your touch that used to touch me,/ to the ends of your fingertips. I can still feel you" (lines 16-18).

Youthful beauty is also evident in Akdong Musician's 200%, that the woman says, "Look at me, look at me, look at me/ Like a strawberry (very very) I'm very fresh (don't worry worry)/ You're so innocent..." (lines 20-21). A strawberry is red and fresh, so when the woman is said to be like a strawberry, it may mean that she looks fresh, probably with blushing cheeks, and this freshness also suggests innocence, a trait that is favorable for women.

In addition, San E and Bumkey's *Body Language* includes the lyrics "You look cute in streetwear, businesswear, even a school uniform/ with an innocent face, you talk so dirty" (lines 16-17). Instead of using "beautiful" the song uses the word "cute", which implies the youthfulness of the woman. As this is another song about love-making, it is presumable that they are not under aged. However, the man describes the cute part of his partner that she looks good wearing any outfits, even a school uniform. She is "talking dirty" or get sexual as they are having sex, but she looks cute and innocent anyway. These sets of evidence show that the songs embody the concept in consumer culture that the ideal body must be young and beautiful (Featherstone, Hepworth and Turner, 1991).

Next, a beautiful woman is beautiful from head to toe. This is implied in Taeyang's *Body*. It says that "Your body's so beautiful/ It's beautiful/ Your breast waist hips and toes/ Everything's pretty/ Your body moves, touches, eyes, everything shines (lines 6-10). The female voice strengthens this idea when it says, "My head shoulders knees and toes/ It's better than yours (lines 17-18). The exaggerated description of the woman's beauty is logical as the song is

about a man's admiration on a woman. When someone likes a person, praise can be exaggerated. However, it is evident that the song, as the title suggests, celebrates the physical beauty of a woman, that even when they meet each other often, the woman's beauty still excites him ("I'm still fluttered, though I meet you everyday/ Your pure white skin makes me anxious (lines 19-20). The song also says that "Your prim[e] body seems like your personality (line 45). It seems that the woman's personality is as beautiful as her physical appearance although the song does not describe what her personality is like. Physical beauty is an indication of perceived well-being and quality of life, like how Arnoul (*n.d.*) defines commodities in consumer culture.

Block B's *Her* also shows that a beautiful body is a very important quality for a woman. The lyrics say,

Everyone calls you a masterpiece
 Just a little bit of you, I'll seriously value
 baby ye ye
 ...
 There's nothing more to add to her beautiful
 body
 Normal girls can't even compete
 They'll probably gather together and talk
 badly about you
 Listen carefully
 Be careful of the wolves around you
 ...
 Except for you, everyone is so plain
 Your breathtaking curves
 Makes me faint right away, I need suction
 Among all the fools who just make you feel
 uncomfortable
 You're a flawless boxer
 (*Her*, lines 2-3; 5-9; 21-25)

A woman who has a beautiful physical appearance is called a masterpiece, just like an artwork. It is incomparable and everyone loves her for it. Men find her attractive so that they will chase her like wolves hunting for a prey. The song uses wolves as the metaphor of the men to show that the beautiful woman has triggered their animalistic instinct or desire to

get the woman. They are so excited to get the woman so that they will surround her and ready to catch her anytime. The beautiful woman is not admired by men only. Women love her too and even become envious of her because they cannot match her physical beauty. They will probably talk behind her back. And these envious women or people are called the fools, probably because they admire her but make gossip about her or because they are not as beautiful so they are envious toward her. This description also fits the idea of ideal body as indication of well-being and quality of life.

As men prefer beautiful women, less attractive women are less favorable choice. Bro's *That Kind of Guy* tells about a man who will still love a woman who is not quite attractive.

Even if you put airbags in your breasts
Even if you grow caterpillars under your eyes

There is one truth that cannot be hidden
Your face is offensive

Did you just get shot? I'd be crazy to date you

(*That Kind of Guy*, lines 25-29)

If guys who aren't so great keep coming to you

It's not that you're unlucky, it's not that you haven't waited enough

It's just that you're a bad catch

(*That Kind of Guy*, lines 31-33)

It seems that the woman has a flat chest that she needs to put on airbags to make it look bigger. She has under-eye bags so that it looks like she grows caterpillars under your eyes. Under-eye bag is known to be one of the appearance issues in South Korea and other countries. People try eye creams or surgical treatments to remove the puffiness. While the song says that the man likes the woman despite her lack of beauty, it is clear that there is some emphasis on how unattractive the woman is, that her face is "offensive" as if she has just got shot, and men are not interested in her because she is a "bad catch", probably because she is not beautiful enough. Moreover,

the man in this song describes himself as not good-looking or tall but still reliable ("Even though he's not good-looking/ A guy who with a broad chest that you can lean on and rest/ That kind of guy would be crazy to date you/ ...Though he's not tall and a wealthy heir/ A guy who is at least 180cm and makes 60k a year/ ... If I were to be that kind of guy" (lines 7-19)). It is interesting to know if the man will still like the woman if he is more beautiful himself.

The struggle for perfect physical beauty is shown in *Beautiful* by Park Bo Ram (Featuring. Zico Of Block B). The song tells about a girl whose appearance has changed so that people hardly recognize her. People ask her if she has cosmetic treatments and for which parts of her body the treatments are. She says she goes on a diet and it is hard. She does it to look pretty like other girls so that she gets loved as well. Now that her appearance has improved, she is more confident and is able to love herself more. Striving for physical perfection takes a lot of efforts which may include strict diets or cosmetic (non)surgical treatments, which are famous in South Korea. According to International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgeons (cited in Stone, 2013), "one in five South Korean women has had some form of cosmetic surgery, compared to around one in 20 in the U.S." furthermore, Stone (2013) also mentions that "South Korean employers scrutinize the looks of the applicants -- in search for physical attractiveness -- in addition to their professional qualifications." Such obsession on perfect beauty is reflected in this song. Being beautiful means being socially acceptable, so the success of achieving the intended beauty improves a person's confidence and how the person perceives their being or existence.

They say I got pretty, everyone is shocked
They say they couldn't recognize me (oh my god)
What did you get done and where? I don't know what you're talking about no (no way, no no way)

One banana, two eggs It's so hard to become pretty like the others (You don't know, you will never know)
From your head to your toes

It's too much So much to watch out I wanted
to be loved like you too That's why I was even
stronger

You got pretty, words I wanted to hear
every day Words I never heard before But it's
different, everything is different now ...

(*Beautiful*, lines 1 - 15)

Short skirts, skinny jeans, doesn't matter, I
can wear them now (I'm good) (I want to be
bold and not care about what others think) All
day, I'm only looking in the mirror

I like seeing how I'm changing every day The
me of today is prettier than the me of yesterday
(*Beautiful*, lines 19 - 23)

Overdoing it was worth it I hope I don't
sound too inhumane (*Beautiful*, lines 39-40)

Male Beauty: Tall, Strong, Handsome, and
Adorable

K-pop songs do not only show the standards
of female beauty. They also give some references
on what male beauty is like. In *Mr. Mr.* the girl
group Girls Generation tells about why this
man is special. The lyrics say, "... I'll tell you
the real secret

/ Of why you are a special Mr. / ... You
have the key to open the future/ So have a
dream that is bigger than a little boy's/ Place
me in your shining eyes/ My Mi, Mi, Mister,
Rock this world/ Be stronger Mr. Mr. (*Mr. Mr.*
lines 17-24). The man is has strength that when
he has big dreams he will make them come
true. Interestingly, the man is also described
as having "shining eyes", which make him
attractive. Referring back to *That Kind of Guy's*
description, an ideal man is good-looking and
at least 180cm tall (lines 7; 16). And even though
the man in the song does not meet these criteria,
he says that he has a "broad chest that you can
lean on and rest" (line 8) and "smiles brightly"
(line 18). It can be inferred that a strong and tall
physical built and good- looking face defines
male beauty in these songs.

K-pop songs points out that looking adorable
is considered beautiful for men and women.
In K. Will's *Day 1*, the man is telling the girl his
feelings. He says that " Of all the ugly guys/ I'm

the best looking/ ... So I'm not that handsome/
but I think I look cute when I smile" (lines 10-
15). So the man is not good-looking but not the
ugliest one either. Most importantly, he looks
cute when he smiles. It suggests youthful beauty
is as important for men as it is for women.

Women love beautiful men as much as men
love beautiful women. In TVXQ's *Something*,
the man has many girls adoring him because
he looks like an idol. He is fully aware of it and
happily accepts the adoration. "Countless girls
all told me that they like me/ Saying I look like
an idol or something/ To be honest, I'm not that
surprised/ All eyes are locked on me, wherever
I go/ ... Normal and average/ If you're sick of
guys like that/ Then come put it all in," (lines
10-3; 28-30). The confidence that is expressed in
the lyrics is visualized in the music video. The
singer is confidently singing and posing among
several women. Taking this as an example of
what a (South Korean) male idol looks like, it
shows that an idol is neat, well-dressed , and
dandy, and this is the image of a man that are
wanted by many women.

Beautiful Body: Energetic, Fit, and Fun

Another image of beautiful body in consumer
culture that can be found in the K-pop songs
is the energetic, fit, and fun body. This is
particularly suggested by the songs' telling
about dancing and partying. In Rain's *30 Sexy*,
the man invites his sexy lady to dance, saying
"Cause I'm 30 sexy/ Hey sexy lady/ It's only
you and me on top of this stage right now/ ...
Party-ya-yi-ya- oh baby" (lines 1-11). Another
song of Rain, *La Song*, also includes invitation
to dance and party: "Just party today, yeah,
I'm actually a bit dressed up today, even my
shoelaces/ ... Let's dance time" (lines 15-16;
20). Similarly, Sistar's *Touch My Body* says "
Touch my body/ I know you want it, come to
my side/ ... Yeh baby dancing with me you're
my star/ Touch my body, we'll go faster, little
by little/ Oh everybody, higher than the blue
sky/ I like this rhythm, you and I under the hot
sun" (lines 4-5; 11-14). Based on this evidence,

a beautiful body is a body that is energetic, fit, and fun, as dancing usually require a lot of energy, especially when it is a long dance or dancing to fast beats, not dancing slowly. Dancing and partying also support the idea of youthfulness that has been discussed earlier. Based on these songs, beautiful people have beautiful, youthful appearance as well as beautiful and youthful body.

Beautiful Body: A Vehicle of Desire

As the many of the songs suggest sexual contents, there are some lyrics that show that body is a tool to express someone's desire. It is evident in Sistar's *Touch My Body*, which asks the other person to touch the body so the two people can get intimate to each other. In Rain's *La Song*, the man says he does not need Maserati or Ferrari because his body is rich enough (lines 9-10). It suggests that having a beautiful body is the key to satisfy people's (sexual) desire. A soft skin can arouse a partner's desire that he "like a tiger" wants "to violate" his partner (*Body Language*, lines 5-6), a metaphorical statement on a man's physical desire on the opposite sex, which is similar to the metaphor of wolves in Block B's HER song lyrics that has been discussed earlier. The evidence is more clear in the lyrics of *Body* by Taeyang, which says,

Your body's so beautiful
It's beautiful
Your breast waist hips and toes
Everything's pretty
Your body moves, touches, eyes, everything
shines
I got that body
You got that body
Now you and me lets make somebody
(lines 6-12)
She said:
My head shoulders knees and toes
It's better than yours

(lines 16-18)

Cause I ain't
never seen a body like yours

You make me go

(lines 26-32)

The man describes the woman as having perfect beauty and perfect body (pretty breast, waist, hips, toes, eyes, etc.) He says that he has beautiful body too although there is no description of what it is like because this song is about the man's admiration on the woman, which makes it more suitable if the emphasis is given to show off the beauty of the woman. Because they both are attractive people, they should get together and express their physical desire, as "let's make somebody" is an explicit invitation to love making. These song lyrics support the consumer culture concept by Featherstone, Hepworth and Turner that besides the tool of self expression or actualization, body is a vehicle of desire.

CONCLUSION

The study findings show that the *K-pop* songs show a similar concept about body and physical beauty with that is believed in consumer culture. Body is viewed as the vehicle of desire and self-expression, and the ideal body must be young, beautiful, full of energy, fit, and fun. Body and beauty are important assets to express and maintain someone's existence. These findings also need to be taken cautiously, as there the English translation may have altered the original meaning intended in the Korean version. However, the study has found a lot of evidence that is consistent with the conclusion. The study does not focus on the feminist view on commodification of women's body or on the concept of inner beauty, which may be presented in the song lyrics. These leave opportunities for further studies on this topic.

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