The Globalisation of K-Pop and K-Beauty: Paradoxical Pressures on Young Korean Women

In a globalising world, feminine beauty ideals are complex, changing – and oppressive. New research** into how young Korean women interpret “K-beauty” ideals set by celebrities of widely-exported Korean popular culture or “K-pop” teases out paradoxes between the global and the local and the cultural “labour” it takes to assimilate and reconcile them. The research investigates women’s experiences and understandings in South Korea, where local beauty ideals value what is innocent, demure, passive, coy or girlish.

K-beauty also juxtaposes hyper-sexualised images against cute, girl-next-door innocence: childlike white skin and rosy cheeks but curvy bodies, as one participant said. This brought forth a labour of – selective – resistance: while decrying the sexualisation, participants downplayed criticism of cuteness (which reinforces oppressive feminine stereotypes of vulnerability, neediness and dependency), perhaps because cuteness passes for local. Interestingly, although similar juxtapositions abound elsewhere, participants interpreted the sexualisation as Western licentiousness and the cuteness as Korean conservatism.

Finally, the paradox of the “harmonious kaleidoscope” masks conformity behind variety. As one 23-year-old noted, beneath the diversity of K-pop characters lies a single Westernised aesthetic: “small face, small nose, large eyes, small mouth, fair skin, V-shaped jaw”. Women even received cosmetic surgeries like double-eyelids as graduation presents. Such transformations take serious work, yet participants complied. On the streets of Korea, women are mimicking K-pop celebrities.

The researchers conclude that oppressive global-local hybrids threaten a double domination. Cultural labours and interpretations seek to pacify the threat of the global but normalise local dominating of women like that infantilising cuteness. K-pop’s government-endorsed commercial triumphs and soft power suppress much critique. Rather than diluting dominance with diversity, hybridisation redoubles it. So, while perhaps an international cultural victory, pacification marks a gender retreat.

**The full study results are available in an article authored by Yuri Seo, Angela Gracia B Cruz and ‘Ilaisaane ME Fifita: “Cultural globalization and young Korean women’s acculturative labor: K-beauty as hegemonic hybridity”. International Journal of Cultural Studies, 23(4), 600-618, 2020.