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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.

Created by large national entertainment companies, K-pop spread regionally in the 1990s through television dramas and fashion, then went global with K-pop music like the 2012 hit “Gangnam style”. K-pop music targets youth, and K-beauty is gaining cult-like followings among youth consumers in Asia and the West. Rather than simply Western globalisation in reverse, it represents a global-local hybrid: glocalisation. Indeed globalising cultural products from anywhere are seldom adopted unchanged: they meet resistance and get hybridised. Research often examines culture-importing countries, but how does glocalisation play out in this exporter?

Following an interpretive method, the researchers interviewed 20 upper-middleclass women aged 19–24 at a prestigious private university in Seoul who considered themselves knowledgeable about K-pop. While not necessarily typical, they represented a K-beauty target demographic exposed to global consumption trends. A focus group of another 11 students further revealed how the students made sense of three interrelated paradoxes from the interviews: “manufactured naturalness”, “hyper-sexualised cuteness”, and a “harmonious kaleidoscope”.

Manufactured naturalness emerged as K-pop warped a minimalist Korean approach to make-up and fashion to fit a Hollywood aesthetic. Ironically, the resulting natural look comes far from naturally. It demands elaborate and expensive makeup, skincare, fashion and bodywork (including cosmetic surgery: Korea is the world capital). The students realised the contradictory labours required: producing the look and concealing its artificiality.

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 dominations 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.

