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### Socio-cultural Analysis of Normative Femininity in Oh My Girl Banhana

As part of expanding my musical interest, I have been listening to different K-Pop groups recently. Part of the reason why I never listened to K-Pop till recently was due to its overtly sexualized character. Nonetheless, I came to like a particular song, called “Banana Allergy Monkey”, sung by a South Korean girls trio named Oh My Girl Banhana (See Appendix A and B). This video, based on my liking, seemed to be a great material to analyze, exploring what made it particularly attractive. The analysis shed light on how such features could be manifestations of globalized male-pleasing feminine norms that could unconsciously influence perception of women. Such effect puts pressure on women to conform to these norms at the risk of their physical and mental health, and in some cases their lives, such as through plastic surgeries. As such, the analysis leads to preliminary contemplation on how such effects should be reversed by addressing longstanding social drivers in not just South Korea, but also cultures across globe that marginalize individuals and communities in turn for musical success.

The video is a personal retelling of a monkey with a banana allergy. She initially laments on her condition and on other monkeys looking down on her. However, after discovering that she can enjoy banana-flavored milk instead, she decides not to be dragged down by such matters. The music-producing label, WM Entertainment, explained that this song “...has a positive message and story of happiness about overcoming through hope despite being different or lacking something. The producer who worked on the lyrics and composed the track suffers from an apple allergy” (Elliefilet 2018).

Initial observations from the video brought out stylistic features. First, a trio of explorer-dressed girls in a jungle danced like comical monkeys under a retro 8-bit video game music. This signaled the music video's simple, funny, and upbeat nature, and caught my attention to watch and listen further. It certainly incites a sense of nostalgia for certain age group of male audience. The scene then switched to a bright, positive, colorful fast food restaurant, where they were in stylish high-end fashion with their cute innocent gaze. Such aesthetics could easily pass male viewers' eye candy test. As the scene reverted to the jungle, the music transitioned to a mix of synth and electro-pop infused with dance-friendly drum beats, quite positive and energetic. They continued to dance with comic and cuteness. This style, particularly the vocals, is noticeably different from those of more mainstream K-Pop Girls Group such as Blackpink, Twice, and Girls' Generation, which seems to be more assertive, sexually explicit, and powerful. This could be a deliberate production decision to cater to a niche audience. Progression of this nature continues for the remainder of the four minute long video, with new scenes being introduced. Such scenes include the trio riding a spaceship, riding an airship, and hiking on snowy mountains, all depicting the joy of adventure. This seems to keep the audience entertained with novelty. However, the music video is more of a bricolage of fragmented scenes rather than a development of any meaningful plot. This could be a reflection of post-modernist narrative technique.

Korean academics such as John Lie argues how pop music is profit-driven, perhaps more so due to globalization (2016). Notably, K-Pop has seen a shift from conservative music genre to an increasingly sexualized one (Lie 2015). This may be in part due to westernization of musical styles, in the context of neo-liberalizing national economy in order to bolster international sales, as driven by the IMF bail out during the 1997 South Korean economic crisis (Kim 2017). Puzar and Kim argues that some of the consequences of westernized music has been the focus of K-Pop girls groups to incite male gaze (2011) and

Lolita culture (2011). This can be seen in music videos, live performances, tv show appearances, and social media postings among others.

Patriarchal hegemonic societal structures have been commonly cited as another driver of normative femininity in K-Pop (Epstein 2012). Such structure seems to be due to traditional gender roles in society, regardless of borders, and in East Asian context, combined with more than two thousand years of Confucian influence on upholding social hierarchies. This suggests that through implicit subjugation, female performers are more often sexualized than their male counterparts (Lin 2017).

Analyzing the video under the assumption that WM Entertainment is attempting to please wide male audience leads to further insights. Even though the music video is about banana allergy monkeys, the video does not present the trios as literal monkeys. It presents them as K-pop stars with elements of stereotypically cute cartoon monkeys. Their dance does involve monkey-like arm movements depicting monkeys, but largely retains the element of highly coordinated K-Pop idol dance style. For example, the amount of lower body shaking seems more than necessary to depict a monkey dance. Furthermore, some scenes present no elements of monkey-ness, other than the fact that they are surrounded with bananas, and short monkey-colored overalls that they dance in. Even the name of the trio unit, *Oh My Girl Banhana*, uses the Korean phrase, *banhana* (반하나), which means to fall in love. The fact that this word is overlapping with a banana, which is alluding to a male body part, is quite obvious. The video thus seems to use the monkey elements as a way to enhance the not only the cute and pretty but also the sexual nature of the trio, inevitably reinforcing androcentric body and beauty ideals. Another key element that contributes to the cute attractive nature of the video is the trio's rich expression of emotions for attracting the viewers. Their expressed emotions range from excitement, pleasure, surprise, and longing, all adding to the trio's attractiveness. By nature, they are passive, as if being put inside a dolls house. The choice of

staging a trio named *OMG Banhana* were deliberate as well. The trio was selected and produced from its parent group, Oh My Girl (OMG). The video gives more innocent and cuter impression compared to those of OMG, which might be explained by two of the trio being the youngest members of OMG (WM Entertainment 2020). Given that the third member is OMG's leader and main vocal, the trio retains the authority of OMG and features its freshness at the same time. This shows how this video is meant to cater to specific audience within the parent group's fan base. Within the trio, there are further elements of differentiation such as their hair styles, fashion, and gestures. While the focus is on the trio, the remaining members from the group nonetheless make supporting appearance in the video, leaving room for the rest of the fan base to join in. In fact, no male is present in the video, making it a sanctuary for male audience.

This is not to say that K-Pop is driving global normative femininity, or even gaining undeserved recognition. It is merely one of the many examples that reinforces gender norms on a global scale. The group also produced a Japanese music video, which illustrates how such normative femininity is not local to South Korea, but also to other countries (See Appendix A). The main difference with the Japanese version is that the music video is set in a more common-place environment entirely in a college campus, with the trio in casual fashion and makeup, performing around a crowd of both female and male extras. Notably, unlike many K-Pop music videos, this video seldom shows performers in high heels, but rather in typical but nonetheless feminine walking shoes. The trio is wearing excessively large and colorful monkey ears and tails to accentuate their cuteness. Although there is no direct mention, the concept of having three monkeys could be coming from a historic usage of three wise monkeys ("hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil"), a longstanding Japanese pictorial maxim often referenced in Japanese culture. Nonetheless, it could be a clever association of attractive female idols with well-regarded historical images. These suggest

Japanese audience liking ordinary idols living in one's neighborhood, as opposed to super stars living in a dreamland. What is similar, aside from the music and the Japanese lyrics, is the cute and happy nature of the trios, keeping the audience in pleasure. Perhaps, a deeper level of analysis could be made through Foucault's notion of using biopower as a mechanism of control, particularly through inciting emotional and sexual passions.

In terms of the larger K-Pop phenomenon, there are more similarities such as in how long legs are perceived to be impressive (Epstein 2012). Surprisingly, in Japan, there are female fans that are going as far as cosplaying as the Girls' Generation members for concerts and events, uploading their pictures online (Epstein 2012). Also, major Japanese record companies such as Tower Records note the significance of K-Pop catering to new audience within the Japanese industry (Epstein 2012). The company stated that K-Pop groups differentiate from Japanese counterparts that depend more on having a cute image, mirroring the analysis from the Japanese adaption of OMG Banhana's music video. This is inline with John Lie's comparison of mainstream K-Pop and J-Pop artists (Lie 2016). Extending discussions to other countries, Epstein notes popularity of K-Pop in other Asian countries such as Thailand, based on statistical maps created from YouTube viewership (2012). Thus, albeit country-wise difference, there is depiction of globalized norm for attractive females to have traits that appeal targeted audiences.

Critiques of this extent leads to the question of whether the music video has musical value that could outweigh the apparent harmful reinforcement of normative femininity.

Christopher Small would comment that the video certainly embodies musicking, as they are partaking in a musical performance. However, given his belief that musicking serves people to explore what humanness means, he would question the heavily profit-driven nature of K-Pop, which certainly applies to this music video. In fact, as a musical sociologist, we would be concerned with production, distribution, and public reception of musicking. Estelle

Jorgensen would appreciate the immense power of K-Pop giving agency to South Korea in achieving consequent economic stimulus and soft power recognition. This comes from her idea of music giving agency to the creators. Saeji argues that K-Pop has been successful enough to hold conservative Korean administrations back from banning their appearance in mainstream national media (2013). In fact, the government is therefore allowing K-Pop to be an unofficial global representation of South Korean culture (Kim 2011). However, it is unclear if the agency exists in the trio themselves. Although they commend much popularity from their fans, and can influence them, their actions as music performers are still under the control of their music label, WM Entertainment.

Another element of this issue is what is being omitted from the discussion, which would be largely posed by disability studies philosophers. For example Judith Butler would argue that this video should not only spark discussions about feminine norms, but more importantly about socially constructed gender and how it omits the LGBTQ community (2006). Margrit Shildrick would agree to this, highlighting how “non-normative constructions of sexual identities, pleasures[,] and agency that more adequately encompass multifarious forms of embodied difference” (2007). Dan Goodley would note further omission based on the concept of intersectionality, where gender issues are interconnected with race, sexuality, feminism, and social class (2017). He might also discuss the role of South Korea’s capitalistic economy in driving the reinforcement of gender norms. Furthermore, he might discuss the international perception of K-Pop and its musical status. This is from the idea brought about by Copland on possibly seeing how this music video is entirely intended for the sensuous plane and would therefore see it to be in low hierarchy of music (1939). This would certainly be less of a case in a few more decades, as the increasing majority of society will be exposed and be on positions to critique music. For example, counter culture in music lead by John Lennon was controversial during the 1970s, but presumably, as the generation

that grew up on his music matured to takes roles in making music rankings on prestigious music media and evangelizing the music, there has been more public recognition of him and his music as positive legacy.

Because sexualization of K-Pop stars has accumulated over the last few decades, further sexualization will most likely take place if no change in consumer behavior is made. Bohye Song argued this on his empirical analysis of K-Pop music videos from mid 2000s and 2010s, suggesting that more sexually explicit content were observed over time (2016). This can be said for both male and female idols, with following across the globe. Consequently, individuals will be increasingly pressured to mold themselves into objects of desirability. The prevalence of plastic surgery can be considered as a metric of the amount of individuals in a country trying to conform to normative body attributes. Notably, South Korea has the highest number of plastic surgery per capita, ranging from non-invasive skin and hair operations to invasive procedures such as breast implants, liposuction, and facial reconstruction (Epstein 2012). Lie sees this to be particularly interesting for a traditionally Confucian Korean society as it has been culturally frowned upon to disfigure body parts that were provided through parents' birth, highlighting just how disruptive the proliferation of normative beauty images have been in the span of only two to three decades (2016). Such pressure could not only be attributed to business ventures promoting music sales, but also by fandom cultures that create secondary contents to further promote obsession on bodily attributes (Epstein 2012). As mentioned later, some individuals would even harm others to maintain such cultural status quo.

There are most likely K-Pop Korean music artists that do not subscribe to the idea of making music to sell, but to express personally relevant messages. Although the majority of top selling performers are from K-Pop background, there are a few from other backgrounds, such as NELL (one of the top-selling only rock bands) and rising indies band particularly

HYUKOH (Kaneko 2018). Unfortunately, they are both male groups, suggesting more challenges for female bands to be successful. Artists could even have direct response to the culture of sexualization. If there could be more recognition and popularity for such artists, K-Pop could cater to such audience and change its nature. This could in the end achieve more genuine popularity from wider audiences, as such efforts would include traditionally marginalized members of society.

Implementing proposition is certainly a challenge. There have been outspoken Korean artists that have been criticized for showing feminist behavior (Herman 2018). A notable example of this is Sulli, a former member of a K-Pop girls group “f(x)” who committed suicide presumably due to year of online harassment due to vocalizing about feminism and woman’s rights (Tan 2019). She was known for her outspokenness, a trait not common in K-Pop, revealing her private life and thoughts which oftentimes deviated from expectations of idols to be ideal and perfect performers (Tan 2019). Despite such a tragic incident, gender inequality in the music industry continues to be promoted through gender norms. This suggests that there are still very few members in the industry that vocalize concerns against a larger group that is against such interests. Hence, the way to respond is not only trying to reduce online harassment and cyberbullying, but also look into how drivers of such phenomenon can be mitigated, ideally without compromising with the musical and societal benefits that K-Pop, and more generally pop music, brings.

Having consensus within the marginalized members might pose challenges as well. The documentary, “Deaf Out Loud” indeed shows just how difficult it is to consolidate opinions on controversial issues such as cochlear implants even within the deaf and hard-of-hearing communities (Matlin 2018). This can be likened to how a female artist could sexualize themselves in her musical performance as a tool of agency to gain popularity that will allow her to, in the long term, have wide reach of audience to communicate her true



intentions in promoting feminism and women's rights. Like those in the Deaf community that would criticize use of cochlear implants as denying their right to remain "hearing-free", some feminists might criticize such artists from denying their right to remain "sexualization-free".

Although achieving an inclusive society, where every individual willing partake in equal treatments of others, existing social models show that it is difficult to transition straight from isolating society. For example, it is much more common to liken a country's multicultural model to a salad bowl, as opposed to a melting pot, as in the case of U.S. The point of this example is that promotion of gender equality will not persuade everyone to follow it, especially those that are perpetuating normative femininity. To achieve systematic gender equality, there should essentially be mandated policies imposed by governments and business regulators. This would certainly be an extension of historical movements in women's suffrage, gay marriage, and right to reproductive control, all going through cycles of progress and fallback.

Preventative measures could most likely take the form of informing people in the consequences of ignorantly consuming not just pop music, but products in general that aims to sell to masses at a cost of subjugating certain members of community. In terms of education, this could mean putting more weights liberal arts subjects that shine light on historically marginalized and exploited members of society. This does not have to be specific to feminism and gender studies, but could cover wider subjects such as racial, economical, religious, and social issues, among others, as the goal of these subject is to be able to apply the critical thinking framework to other fields. Ideally, such effort should not be limited to K-12 and higher education, but also to adult learning, or more generally lifelong learning.

In conclusion, my current analysis suggests that globally, pop music industry's profit-driven nature is accelerating societal reinforcement of normative beauty/aesthetic values on women. This implies that me participating in pop music culture facilitates such norms and

pressure on marginalized members of society to adhere to them. This is not to say that I will immediately stop watching pop music. It does seem beneficial that pop music industry pleases and entertains wide audience, even in some cases like K-Pop contributing to its nation's economy and soft power. However, what I do want to suggest is that we should be aware of its global-scale sociocultural consequence. One important metric of progress in society is certainly how it promotes gender equality, rather than the amount of well-selling music that is made by sacrificing that. As an African proverb says, "If you want to go fast, go alone; but if you want to go far, go together".

Word count: 3128

[Appendix A: 1 Min Excerpt of “Banana Allergy Monkey” \(Korean + Japanese version\) with English Lyrics](#)

Appendix B: “Banana Allergy Monkey” Full English Lyrics

Just thinking about it makes me laugh  
A monkey that can't eat a single bite of a banana?  
Even I think that's so pathetic  
Don't look at me like that  
I don't need your pity  
I know you're covering your mouth and laughing at me

*(chorus 1)*

I'm a banana allergy monkey  
But still I like bananas  
I'm a banana allergy monkey  
But still I like bananas

Oh yeah, oh yeah, oh oh oh  
Oh yeah, oh yeah, oh yeah ang

Something unbelievable has happened  
My mom is holding milk  
That tastes and smells like banana  
I was so shocked, my eyes grew round  
I was drunk from the sweet scent  
The yellow banana color that's coming up through the straw

*(chorus 2)*

I'm a banana allergy monkey  
But I'm happy that there's banana milk  
I'm a banana allergy monkey  
But I like that there's banana milk  
Oh yeah, oh yeah, oh oh oh  
Oh yeah, oh yeah, oh yeah aww

What do I do? If I don't have bananas  
What do I do, what do I do?  
Banana banana banana

*(chorus 1)*

*(chorus 2)*

I'm a banana allergy monkey

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