

K-pop Idol Promoting Feminism in South Korea: A Case from Red Velvet

Samantha Septiani

International Relations Department
Bina Nusantara University
Jakarta, Indonesia
samanthaseptiani@binus.ac.id

Ella Prihatini

International Relations Department
Bina Nusantara University
Jakarta, Indonesia
ella.prihatini@binus.edu

Abstract

South Korea has achieved remarkable success in promoting its pop culture products ranging from music to films. K-pop and K-drama are the two main exports that have helped to improve the country's international image, aside from accumulating substantial economic gains. Many K-pop idols are extremely popular, especially those in the boy and girl groups. Yet, it is interesting to examine whether this fame will eventually help them to shape how fans are perceiving feminism? Particularly amidst a deeply entrenched patriarchy society rooted in Confucianism. Using the experience of two members of the *Red Velvet* (a girl group) who openly expressing their support towards feminism, this study finds that the decision was deemed selfish and risking the entire group. The backlash that the idols received is rather harsh and exaggerated.

Keywords

Red Velvet, Korean Feminism, K-pop, South Korea, Korean Wave.

1. Introduction

Several years ago, Korean culture or known as the "Korean Wave" has spread throughout the world, especially in Asian countries. South Korean culture, known as music (K-pop), dance (girl group/boy group), drama (K-Drama), as well as food, fashion, skincare/makeup, and language (Hangul) have become a global trend. The Korean Wave is indeed being used by the South Korean government as a policy tool to enhance diplomacy. The South Korean Foreign Minister Kim Sung-hwan, argues that the Korean Wave promotes Korea's national interests in enhancing the country's international image. South Korea's cultural fame became one of the factors of the economic miracle for the South Korean nation after the crisis and advanced the country's economy by contributing 30% of GDP. As a result, the success of the Korean Wave may have significantly helped the country's economy (Zhang 2020).

The Korean Wave was marked by the success of K-drama *Winter Sonata* and *Full House* in the early 2000s (Bok-rae 2015), then followed by the trend of famous K-pop groups with many members that sang while dancing. Super Junior is one prime example of a famous Korean boy group in the world. Even this boy group managed to sell all their concert tickets in every country they visited. Not only boy groups, but girl groups also have the same influence as boy groups. Entertainment companies work really hard to produce quality members of their idols. These examples give an impact on the world that South Korea has something to be proud of and then become an asset of South Korean pride. It also opens the door for the South Korean nation to promote South Korean culture as well as creative industries on a global scale. That's where South Korean culture is known and influences the creative industry to create new economic resources for them besides science and technology (Bok-rae 2015).

A study by Raven (2020) concludes that K-pop music has had many influences, such as how the country of South Korea can be successful through its culture, but they also want to instill a sense of love for domestic products. South Korea will also carry out cultural distribution so that many people from various countries are interested in the Korean Wave to see what kind of work ethic in the South Korean entertainment industry can produce quality works and be known throughout the world. By seeing firsthand how South Koreans innovate and promote South Korean culture, they can learn how culture can be an important component. It is hoped that other countries can be inspired in developing their culture to the international level (Raven 2020).

1.1 Objectives

As K-pop is very popular worldwide, it is interesting to examine whether K-pop idols are also having a huge impact on their fans regarding values and ideology, in this case feminism. With a society deeply entrenched in patriarchy and Confucianism, this study aims to examine the experience of K-pop idols in expressing their support towards feminism in South Korea.

2. Literature Review

Chung (2015) explained that South Korea is a republic that is included in the East Asia region covering the southern part of the Korean peninsula. South Korea became a Republic after separating from North Korea in 1984. South Korea has three main teaching pillars as a belief system that is still firmly held today, namely Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism. Of the three beliefs, Confucianism is the most influential in Korean society. South Korean society is perceived as a homogeneous population as they tend to share the same values and faiths. Under these circumstances, Confucianism can be easily accepted and without much differences of opinion so that it affects all aspects of Korean people's life, namely moral standards, education, ancestral rituals, and perceptions of Korean philosophy (Chung 2015).

He further argues that Confucianism is moral philosophical teaching that came to Korea from the time of the Silla, Goguryeo, and Baekje kingdoms. Over the centuries, this teaching has had a great influence on various aspects of Korean society's life, whether political, social, or cultural. In Confucianism, there is the philosophy of "High Men, Low Women", which is the basis for men to dominate women. The teachings of Confucianism are run by determining the roles and positions between women and men in the family and society. The limited role of women and a low position by the teachings of Confucianism minimizes the rights and power of women so that women become a minority. The differentiation of sexual roles between men and women is entrenched in all fields of the society. Women as a minority are considered to have their lives determined by men and must follow their husbands and husbands' families. Discriminatory ethics against women and the patriarchal family system in Korea as well as male chauvinism originate from Confucianism.

The prevailing gender in Korean society is determined by society's view of the relationship between men and masculinity and between women and femininity (Chung 2015). It means the male gender is related to the masculine gender, while the female gender is related to the feminine gender. However, this relationship is not an absolute correlation. Feminine and masculine traits are also socially and culturally constructed by Korean society. For example, women are considered to be gentle, beautiful, emotional, and motherly. While men tend to be strong, assertive, mighty, and rational.

With the entry of modernization and globalization, the human mind begins to open to change. Compared to ancient times, the ideal figure of women is in accordance with Confucian values, namely to be devoted to parents and husbands, to have sons, not to get jealous easily, not to commit adultery, not to be fussy, and not to steal (Chung 2015). Women in traditional South Korean society have historically been taught from a young age to prepare for their future roles as wives and mothers. In general, women are not prepared to participate in social life in a society like men, but they are expected to support their husbands. His ultimate goal is to be a good son, a good wife, and a good mother. In his study also explained that women are limited to only being at home and taking care of the household, not allowed to work outside unless their family has a shortage and with the husband's permission, and are not allowed to receive higher education, but now women are active in various fields of work and make a significant contribution to society.

Over time, South Korea experienced fairly rapid development of industrialization and modernization. Compared to the era before globalization, South Korea is known as a country that adheres to a patriarchal culture that is quite strong

even today. It can not be separated from the teachings of Confucianism embraced by traditional South Korean society. Youna Kim in her book *The Korean Wave: Korean Media Go Global* explains that Confucianism greatly affects Korean families, education, philosophy, religion, social and political systems, and manners in everyday life. The greater the access of women in various fields, the awareness of women about equal rights and status with men is increasingly open, although the ultimate goal of women to obtain equality takes a long time. The changing situation in Korea also affects the portrayal of today's women who are represented through songs created in the K-pop industry that have successfully raised the name of South Korea in the eyes of the world (Kim 2013).

Jive (2014) explains that K-pop is an abbreviation of Korean Pop which is specifically related to "Korean Pop Music". Most of the Korean pop music artists and groups are members of girl bands and boy bands whose popularity has penetrated domestic boundaries and are popular in foreign countries, including Indonesia. K-pop is currently booming in the world community, including in Indonesia. The music is pleasant to hear and the visuals of the artists are attractive, making K-pop easily accepted by the wider community. Indeed, in the world of the media industry in Korea, appearance is the first important thing that is judged by the public. That's what makes K-pop artists dress up in such a way by their agencies so that they deserve to be shown in the media.

The mass media has brought people into new cultural patterns and determined people's perspectives and behavior. The most visible changes in behavior patterns are aspects of lifestyle. This aspect is most visible in the environment of the younger generation. Changes in behavior toward social norms and cultural values are considered part of the current trend. The culture industry in fact does not only increase the level of consumerism in modern society. However, it also affects internal things within each individual. K-pop is currently booming in the world community, including in Indonesia. Robert Burnett in his book entitled *The Global Jukebox The International Music Industry* explains that music from K-pop is good and easy to listen to and the visuals of the artists are attractive, making K-pop acceptable in the wider community. Indeed, in the world of the media industry in Korea, appearance is the first important thing that is judged by the public. That is why K-pop artists dress up in such a way by their agency so that they deserve to be shown in the media.

3. Methods

3.1 Variable

The variable that can be studied in this paper is the response of the people of South Korea to activities or actions to promote feminism. The last variable is the promotion of feminism spread by *Red Velvet* members.

3.2 Research Sources

This paper describes the problem based on the data collected, namely primary data in the form of valid and reliable journals, books, and e-books to support this writing. The author also uses qualitative methods in this study because the author will try to explain the impact of the K-pop phenomenon, especially bands in South Korea, on the feminism movement in South Korea. Therefore, the author believes that the qualitative method is the most appropriate method for the author to use in research. In this study, the authors used a data collection method, namely using a research literature study, namely the method of collecting data and information by carrying out library activities through books, journals, previous research, and others related to the research being carried out.

3.3 Data Retrieval Method

In this study, the authors decided to use the qualitative method as a reference in analyzing cases. Qualitative methods are methods that prioritize aspects of understanding the problem in depth. The type of research that your author uses in this thesis is descriptive-analytic type research. Descriptive describing the symptoms in the community from a case under study. The approach taken is a qualitative approach, namely a research method that produces descriptive data.

3.4 Analysis Method

The qualitative approach is used by the author to understand or understand the study of symptoms. Descriptive analytical research is research that is intended to provide as much data as possible. Qualitative methods are more descriptive of problems, events, phenomena, individual or group thoughts, and social activities and are more likely to use analysis to examine problems. The qualitative method in this study aims to describe or explain the problem based on the data collected, namely primary data in the form of valid and reliable journals, books, and e-books to support this writing.

4. Results and Discussion

Feminism or what is known as the women's movement is a struggle for women who fight for their rights to be equal to men. Feminism is an understanding that wants to respect women so that their rights and roles are more balanced, there is no discrimination, rejects injustice due to patriarchal culture, and rejects history and philosophy that prioritizes men (Rini 2019). Cited from the International Women's Development Agency (IWDA)'s website (2022), feminism is about all genders having equal rights and opportunities. It is about respecting diverse women's experiences, identities, knowledge and strengths, and striving to empower all women to realize their full rights.

Mosse (1996) explained that the feminism movement is a response to the inequality that occurs in society due to discrimination and social injustice as well as the downturn of one group in society, which in this case is women, caused by the patriarchal system that develops in society. The emergence of this response provides new awareness in society and in its development, especially when it is associated with development. This awareness is, for example, in the form of a development paradigm shift that used to use the term or form of Woman in Development which later changed to Woman and Development, and now becomes Gender and Development.

In June 2018 as many as 22,000 women took to the streets of Seoul, South Korea to conduct the Women's March for Justice which became the largest feminist movement in South Korean history. Hundreds of women also ventured to reveal the violence and sexual harassment they had experienced (Shin 2021). Then in November 2018, the feminist movement reappeared by destroying make-up collections and cutting hair into very short pieces without styling. This movement is called Escape The Corset which is one of the feminist revolutions in the form of a movement due to sexual harassment in the world of work or the #MeToo movement in South Korea (Elia 2018). This was carried out as a rebellion against high standards of beauty and as a form of protest over the unpaid wages of workers in the beauty sector (Putri 2018).

In addition to the feminism movement carried out by the wider community, several K-pop idols in South Korea have also been involved in the feminism movement including Bae Joo-Hyun (Irene) and Park Soo-Young (Joy) from the girl band *Red Velvet*, Tiffany Young and Choi Soo Young from *Girl's Generation*, Choi Jinri (Sulli) from *F(x)*, and HA;TFELT from a former member of *Wonder Girls*. For the purpose of this study, the following section will elaborate the experience faced by Irene and Joy of *Red Velvet*.

4.1 Irene

One member of the girl band *Red Velvet*, Irene, admitted that she read a feminist book. The book in question is "Kim Ji-Young, Born In 1982" by a feminist Cho Nam Joo, a book that has become increasingly popular in Korea since its publication in 2016. This novel is about Kim Ji-Young and her experiences growing up as a girl and woman in South Korea, along with exploring the many sexism that society tolerates. Many enjoyed this novel because it talks about the many problems that women in South Korea experience (Suho 2018).

Irene quickly got a negative response after recommending the book. The male fans even burned and cut Irene's photo card and uploaded it on Twitter as a form of their disappointment (see Figure 1). Even one of the accounts known as Irene's biggest fan account did the same thing just because Irene was considered to be promoting feminism (AsianJunkie 2018). Through fan forums on DC Gallery and Twitter, a fanboy was furious after hearing Irene's answer, and expressed their frustration and said that Irene was a feminist. Some of these fans apparently didn't like the theme of the book Irene had read (Rini 2019).

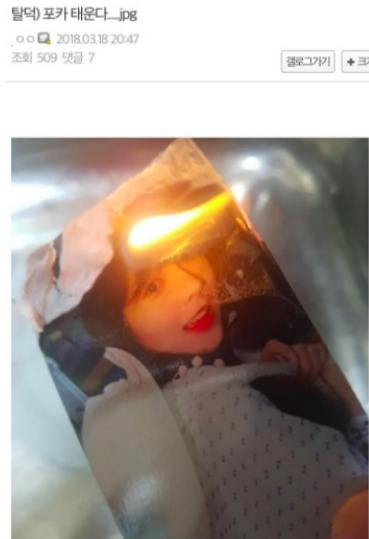


Figure 1. Irene's photo card that was burned. (Source: Arias 2018).

4.2 Joy

Another member of the *Red Velvet* group, Joy, who promotes the feminist movement, is very clearly visible through her Instagram social media account by uploading a photo using a T-shirt says "We All Must Be Feminists" on August 19, 2020 (AsianJunkie 2021). Yet, interestingly, Joy wore the T-shirt under a jacket that almost make it hard to read the lines deemed as promoting feminism (Figure 2-3)



Figure 2. Joy wears "We All Must Be Feminists" clothes. (AllKpop 2020)

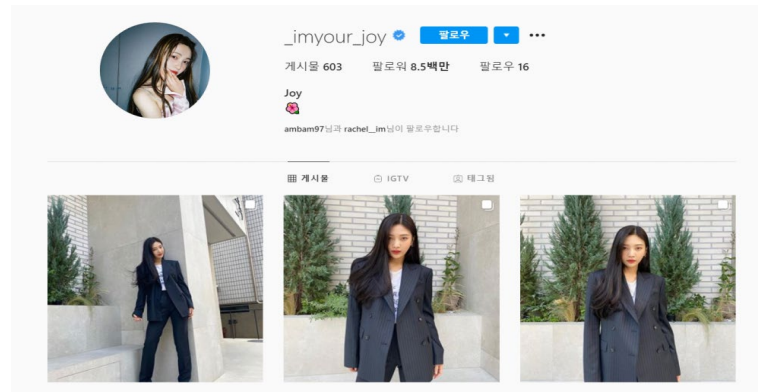


Figure 3. Joy's Instagram account. (AllKpop 2020)

Table 1. Comments about Joy wearing a T-shirt "We Should All be Feminists" (AsianJunkie 2021).

Support	Against
"People are making a big deal over nothing. Who cares if she wears that shirt?"	"This is going to affect the rest of the group, why is she wearing it?"
"What's wrong with wearing that shirt?"	"Joy is for sure a feminist. This is clear evidence."
"I think everyone knew Joy was a feminist already. She clicked 'like' on a feminist's post before."	"A girl group has the guts to show they are feminist. all their fans will leave."
	"She's so selfish, she knows this will cause controversy but she still chose to wear it."
	"I'm going to switch over to being a BLACKPINK fan."
	"Isn't she wearing it because it's sponsored?"
	"She's still pretty in it."
	"As long as she doesn't affect her members.."

Table 1 displays comments from readers in the news site following the release of that article. Majority of comments are condemning Joy for risking her group as a whole for wearing such a fashion statement. From the comments made by some of Joy's fans, the result was that more of them gave negative comments regarding their posts wearing the T-shirts. One of them quoted as far as saying *"A girl group has the guts to show they are feminist. all their fans will leave."* Another commenting her act is a display of selfishness as declaring her support to feminism is deemed as calamity for her group. As a reply, Joy said she was proud and did not care about the bad response to the feminist movement she had done (AsianJunkie 2021).

The impact of negative stereotypes and stigma that celebrities or idols have on identity or the feminist movement has also been recorded in America. This shows that South Korea is not the only country that has difficulty accepting feminism. Bir (2021) in his research shows that although most Americans do not identify as feminists without a clear definition, more and more celebrities are aligning themselves with feminist goals. Some are ready to face public backlash and others have managed to gain the public's trust. According to research, 85 percent of men and 65 percent

of women refuse to identify as feminists, and only 18% of women and 11% of men thought the term was a compliment (Bir 2021).

Bir (2021) suggest the common theme that emerges is to be authentic, consistent, and support statements with concrete actions that benefit the feminist struggle. Community leaders also risk their reputations if they come across as inauthentic, misinformed, unprepared or if comments or actions from their past conflict with their convictions, especially with their feminist beliefs. Interviews conducted with five of the leading publicists in the entertainment industry revealed that identifying as a feminist helps improve the reputation of public figures if they truly believe in the cause and actively participate in the movement. Despite the possible backlash, feminist celebrities earn respect in the long run if they are authentic and transparent in their activism (Bir 2021).

K-pop music has had many influences, such as how the country of South Korea can be successful through the promotion of its culture by South Korean idols. By seeing firsthand how South Koreans innovate and promote South Korean culture, they can learn how culture can be an important component. It is hoped that other countries can learn in developing their culture to a higher level (Raven 2020). Seeing this success, it is undeniable that one of the factors is the real form of the feminism movement that is built and shared with the world community through the younger generation who have the potential to build their economic resources through their own culture. South Korea has also succeeded in changing the existing stigma and showing that the power of feminism through culture, especially K-pop, is so real. This shows indirectly that Korean music can have such a big impact on world culture. Not only for South Korea but extending to surrounding countries (Kim 2019).

5. Conclusion

Nowadays, the word “feminism” seems to receive a rather negative connotation. A study by Bir (2021) suggests that most of the American public (85% among men and 65% among women) do not approve with being labelled as “feminist”. The perception towards the advocacy of improving women’s rights and gender equality has distorted into a more destructive rather than constructive movement. Furthermore, when celebrities are expressing their supports towards feminism, people might think that they merely seeking attention from the public and they get backlash from the general public. However, as discussed in the discussion section, this paper has demonstrated that when K-pop idols promote feminism in South Korea, the public opinion is divided between those who support and against. With the latter being more commonly found among fans, it is clear to suggest that feminism continues to be a taboo ideology in South Korea. *Red Velvet* personals, Irene and Joy, were widely condemned for expressing their support towards feminism by liking a novel and wearing T-shirt that hardly reads “We Should All be Feminists” under her jacket. Due to the limited source of data being analyzed in this paper, more research is needed to explore as to how and why the stigma surrounding feminism has been so negative and deeply entrenched in South Korea, aside from the Confuciasim which has been widely assumed reinforcing patriarchy in the country.

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Biographies

Samantha Septiani is in her last year undertaking a bachelor's degree in International Relations at Bina Nusantara (Binus) University, Jakarta, Indonesia. Her research interests include gender, media, and policies.

Ella S. Prihatini teaches International Relations at Bina Nusantara (Binus) University, Jakarta, Indonesia. She received her PhD in political science and international relations from the University of Western Australia (UWA). She holds a BA in International Relations (Binus University).