

Rhetoric of American Identities

Retoryka amerykańskich tożsamości

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Queerness of Hallyu 2.0: Negotiating Non-normative Identities in K-pop Music Videos

Nienormatywność Hallyu 2.0: negocjacja tożsamości nienormatywnych w wideoklipach koreańskiej muzyki popularnej

Abstract

This paper discusses the visual encodings of non-normativities in the selected K-pop music videos and seeks to establish them within the aesthetic of gendered desirability that deviates from what is considered a social norm in South Korean culture. The first part presents a short history and current boundaries of Korean pop music and the construct of gender and its (inter)relation with sex and rhetoric of desire are discussed. The next section maps out the changes in the understanding of normativity and the concept of queerness. The final part of the paper relates the theories and practices of non-normative identities to the visualities from post-2007 K-pop music videos, using examples to illustrate and contextualize them. The authors focus on the representations of masculinities and show how selected texts can be read as spaces of liminality defying normative cultural and social rules.

W artykule omówiono wizualne kody nienormatywności w wybranych teledyskach koreańskiej muzyki popularnej, podejmując próbę osadzenia ich w estetyce atrakcyjności płci, która odchodzi od tego, co uważa się za normę społeczną w kulturze południowokoreańskiej. W pierwszej części przedstawiono zwięzłą historię i obecne granice południowokoreańskiej muzyki popularnej, następnie omówiono konstrukt płci kulturowej i jego wzajemną relację z tak zwaną płcią biologiczną oraz wyrażaniem pożądania. W kolejnej sekcji prześledzono zmiany w rozumieniu normatywności oraz pojęcie queer. Analiza przykładów teledysków k-pop powstałych po roku 2007 i obecnych w nich przedstawień męskości pozwoliła na odczytanie wybranych teksów jako przestrzeni liminalności opierających się normatywnym zasadom kulturowym i społecznym.

Key words

K-pop, identity, gender, queerness, non-normativity, rhetoric of the body
K-pop, tożsamość, płć, queer, nienormatywność, retoryka ciała

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Introduction

Since originating in early 1990s, Korean pop music has undergone several transformations which led to the creation of a subculture centered around what became known as K-pop, a genre of popular music unique to South Korea that incorporates various, mostly American and Japanese, elements. Its establishment was one of the results of the paradigmatic shift in the government's understanding of audio-visual media industry that followed after it was revealed that *Jurassic Park*, American blockbuster, “generated revenues greater than 1.5 million Hyundai cars – two years’ worth of Hyundai’s car export” (Choi 2008, 149). This coincided with the increase in the number of members of the Korean Diaspora returning from the United States to South Korea and introducing styles of hip-hop, rap, dance, rock, techno, soul, and R&B to the youth. Conservative Korean audiences were not comfortable with American content, but they embraced the aforementioned styles after localizing them and mixing rap, dance elements, and singing in the same songs. Hee-Eun Lee (2006) traces the origins of Korean popular music (K-pop) by focusing on hybridity of the genre and suggesting that they incorporate Korean artists who:

effectively use their voices as a musical instrument, delivering not only background sound effects, but also hybrid forms of American rhythms. In this way their performance appears visually global, while their Korean lyrics and vocal effects are acoustically local. Omitting politically radical issues, this hybridized Korean hip-hop/dance music has managed to make the once-strange into the familiar, and the once-familiar has been made strange. (138)

However, the hybridization of K-pop is not just about the music styles: a singer's body, personality, performance, and stories told through lyrics and music videos are all goods targeted at what Sun Jung calls “trans-pop-consumers:” people who are culturally hybrid, technologically savvy, and pursuant of a global consumerist lifestyle (76). Both the creation and the consumption of K-pop occur within the framework of South Korea's “turbo capitalism”: a consumer society based on globalization that is undergoing very fast structural changes (Sun 2011, 76). According to Cho Han Hye-Jeong, the spread of South Korean popular products which she calls a “pastiche of American popular culture” is “nothing but a result of the manufacturing sector [that] has extended into the popular cultural sector” (34-35).

Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that despite the undeniable impact of globalization, the unique socio-politico-economic context of South Korean society led to the ultimate creation of a unique aesthetic of K-pop music videos that deviate from both of their sources (Western and Asian) and should be read predominantly in the South Korean context. As Lee (2006) points out:

while Korean popular music and MVs might, at first glance, appear similar to their western counterparts – given their meter, instrumental arrangements, genre types, lyrics, and visual styles – it is important to underscore that the Korean music industry has remained resistant to wholesale embodiment of the core values advanced by external, “global” media corporations. Korean pop has employed visualized music as a means of appropriation and re-elaboration. (136)

The 21st century K-pop music videos serve as symbolic and material sources of identity (Lee 2006, 136) and often approach the construction of gender and sexualities by challenging and/or going beyond concepts that are believed to be common knowledge in the spheres of sex, gender, and expressions of desire by employing specific visual encodings that are discussed in this paper. Their analysis within the framework of not just aesthetic but also rhetoric, a discourse called by Claudia Gorbman (2004) “the art of persuasion” (14), allows for the consideration of certain conventions and clichés inherent in music videos. Some of the Western critics understood the rhetorical proprieties of the music video medium as “cultural acts, intertextually located in the viewer's own experience” (Rybacki and Rybacki 1999) and as “woven into a complex cultural context that includes performers, industries, and diverse audiences who attribute a wide variety of meanings to the music and visuals” (Schwichtenberg 1992, 117). In other words, while the exploration of their rhetoric “focuses on [their] manipulations of the audio-viewer” (Gorbman 2004, 14), the examination of their aesthetics enables to ask question about the gendered and racialized nature of beauty. Thus, both discourses prove to be valuable in the discussion of non-normative identities in K-pop music videos.

Expressions of Gender: Performative Reinforcement of Identities

For the majority of modern history, the concept of gender seemed to be deceptively simple. Its understanding revolved around the perceived causal relationship between the so-called biological sex, cultural categories of “men” and “women,” and (believed to be default) heterosexual expressions of desire. However, Western feminist theories of the end of the 20th century established crucial distinction between sex and gender. Thus, the former was recognized to be a construction rather than a biological fact, “a determination made through the application of socially agreed upon biological criteria” (West and Zimmerman 1987, 127), leading to the establishment of general categories of males and females as well as the less common category of intersex people. Shifts in the understanding of sex undermined the notion that men and women are culturally different because of their bodies and that social inequalities can be justified by biological differences favoring men and positioning women at the bottom of the social ladder. In the West, gradual theoretical reconceptualizations broke the previously mentioned convergence and opened the way for alternative understandings of all of the above-mentioned categories, with Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity and formation of the self opening a new chapter in the long process of the destruction of oppressive patriarchal conception of gender. In her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* from 1990, she proposed that (gender) identity is not a fixed category but a performance consisting of various repetitive actions that are not necessarily chosen. By emphasizing that “the insistence upon the coherence and unity of the category of women has effectively refused the multiplicity of cultural, social, and political intersections in which the concrete array of ‘women’ are constructed” (Butler 1990, 19), she allowed for the reinvention and reinterpretation of gender and sexual identities and the disruption of the congruence between sex and gender. Furthermore, she argued that the presumed causality between sex, gender, and expressions of desire is an artificial cultural construct perpetuating power relations that produced it (Butler 1991, 29).

Butler's revolutionary works are considered to be the foundation of the queer theory that encompasses both queer readings of texts and queer theorizing and can be considered one of the most efficient tools for the study of non-normative identities and the potential for the formulation of queerness in the Korean incarnation of the medium of music videos.

However, it is important to point out that the binary categories of gender and sexual desire that have influenced Western thinking about identities for so long, have had different meanings and performances in South Korea. Between the 1960s and 1990s, when the contemporary perception of queerness was evolving there, people of South Korea recognized a number of non-normative categories that

described those existing on various intersections of sex, gender, and sexuality. The 1990s brought about the reconceptualization of queerness and an attempt to connect local queer communities with Western activists and scholarship by incorporating Anglophone terms and creating South Korean queer cultural traditions that Lessard (2019) sees as part of the ‘Hallyu queerness:’ a queerness that “emerges through or as a series of material, psychic, and symbolic displacements: of desires, affects, identities, and embodiments, but also of the geographies and economies in which they circulate” (158).

On the (New) Korean Wave: K-pop and (Non)normative Identities

Throughout this paper, K-pop artists are referred to as performers and music videos (and/or their fragments) as performances. These terms are selected intentionally as the reading of MVs is informed here by the framework of a performance as a mode of behavior centered around the interaction between the audience and the performer. As Richard Schechner (2003) clarifies, “[E]ven where audiences do not exist as such – some happenings, rituals, and play – the function of the audience persists: part of the performing group watches – is meant to watch – other parts of the performing group” (22). Thus, music video can be considered such performance without visible audience but with the function of the audience preserved: both the crew involved in the video production and people who later watch the spectacle on their computer screens or its fragments performed on stage during concerts allow for the inclusion of the audience–performers interaction. Since ancient times, performances have been focusing on the narrative, physical, and social transformations, negotiating the existing systems of belief, and transgressing social norms. On the one hand, “[p]erformance is an illusion of an illusion and, as such, might be considered more “truthful,” more “real” than ordinary experience” (Schechner 2003, xix). On the other hand, “performances are usually sub-junctive, liminal, dangerous, and duplicitous [and so] they are often hedged in with conventions and frames: ways of making the places, the participants, and the events somewhat safe. In these relatively safe make-believe precincts, actions can be carried to extremes, even for fun” (Schechner 2003, xix). Thus, K-pop music videos can explore the liminal space betwixt and between the normativity (understood as heterosexuality) and the South Korea-specific gender-bending concept of queerness by embracing non-normative visualities and overcoming the cultural boundaries of gender. It is important to point out that even though one experiences “music’s rhetorical pull apart from language, seemingly apart from all social referents, in what is usually thought a pure, personal, subjective way” (Walser 1993, 135), the interpretation of a music video and its “signification always occurs in social contexts structured through political categories such as gender, class and race;

and musical meanings are thus inseparable from these fundamental constituents of social reality” (Walser 1993, 135). For this reason, the paper refers to a number of scholarly publications that are culturally and socially rooted in South Korea.

Fashioning the Queer Self and the Rhetoric of a Moving Body

In *Korean Masculinities and Transcultural Consumption. Yonsama, Rain, Oldboy, K-pop Idols* (2011), Sun Jung discusses “South Korean masculinities as deconstructed and hybridized in relation to South Korea's particular socio-political context and transcultural dynamics” (2011, 25), acknowledging their heterogeneous and hybridized nature as opposed to the idea of the stereotypical South Korean masculinities as hegemonic, patriarchal authoritarian, and violent. Furthermore, she directly connects these “soft” masculinities to the globalization and the increased impact of popular culture and, with it, K-pop bands, tracing them to the last decade's trends of idol boy bands mimicking the behavior and choreography of girl bands, embodying what Jung calls “manufactured versatile masculinity” which is “multi-layered, culturally mixed, simultaneously contradictory, and most of all strategically manufactured” (2011, 165). The following section discusses how K-pop music videos use fashion, make-up, body movement, and the futuristic imageries, to not only construct soft masculinities of the performers but also to blur the lines between genders and explore liminal gender expressions. First, BigBang's *Fantastic Baby* (2012) is considered due to the utilization of hairstyles and make-up, followed by the discussion of fashion choices in music videos by EXO and XIA.

The choice of one's clothes often has important meaning. They operate as visual symbols through which different identities, especially non-normative ones, can be constructed and communicated. While the outfits worn by members of K-pop bands can change during one video several times from tight-fitted suits to baggy hip-hop and skater outfits, it is often utilized to emphasize the almost genderless, classless, and often futuristic or fantastic identities of the performers and the characters they embody. Furthermore, one's presentation through the choice of fashion is recognized and discussed as one of the most important ways of communicating one's identity to others, next to codes of gesture and conduct (Holliday 2001), with fashion specifically being referred to as the “important - indeed vital - medium in the recreation of the lost self or ‘decentred subject’ . . . for the individual to lay claim to a particular style may be more than ever a lifeline, a proof that one does at least exist” (Wilson 1985, 122), thus appreciating its value regarding the construction of identities that are marginalized, oppressed, and non-normative.

The outfits change repeatedly in the span of one video, further subverting

the expectations towards the performers, thus showcasing liminal identities. Furthermore, the visual nonconformity and the genderless style is expressed through the juxtaposition of bright colors, asymmetry, and deviation from the conventions in all the aspects of appearance. In K-pop, “movement and image are far more important than the music itself” (Willoughby 2006, 103) and that “desire to arrange one’s body, to queer oneself through movement” (Probyn 1995, 15) becomes a defining element of the performance as the sexualized body language and dance choreographies facilitate the transgression of the binary boundaries.

This transgression is often accomplished primarily through extensive, artistic make-up, and colorful, elaborated hairstyles, and example of which can be found in BigBang’s *Fantastic Baby* (2012). Big Bang, which is considered one of the most successful K-pop bands since the commercial success of their 2012 album *Alive* (Masserlin and Shin 2017) was formed by YG Entertainment in 2006 with five members: the group's leader G-Dragon, T.O.P., Taeyang, Daesung, and until 2019, Seungri.



Image 1 Asymmetric hairstyle of G-Dragon in BigBang’s *Fantastic Baby* (2012)

While it is rare for the individual performs to have control over the material they produce, BigBang's performers are known for being involved in the production of the songs, many of which are written by G-Dragon (Bergen 2011, Russell 2014). As the video opens with one of the members, G-Dragon, sitting on a stone throne in what resembles an abandoned construction site. He is shown with the first and perhaps the most striking of this video’s asymmetric hairstyles: the almost neon bright, red hair is flowing down on his right side, mirrored by the tangled

cables of the same color on the left. The duality and parallels between human and the synthetic and robotic are a common theme in many of the discussed videos, emphasizing the otherness.

Notably, the colors are fluorescent, drawing the viewers' attention to the hair-styles and clothes as well as vibrant nail polish and eye lenses which are often used to enhance the feeling of strangeness and otherness. Many of the outfits discussed below not only subvert the stereotypes of the masculine fashion but also become world-building tools enforcing the futuristic settings of the videos. While some rely on the abstract, unfamiliar shapes, and the combinations of fabrics, metal, and plastic, others can be clearly recognized as gendered but associated with sexualized female fashion (such as: extensive jewelry, generously cropped, revealing shirts, dresses and skirts).



Image 2 Kai performing soft and tough masculinities in EXO's *Power* (2017)

Another K-pop band utilizing items of clothing subverting and queering gender stereotypes and incorporating the rhetoric of gendered desirability that deviates from what is considered a social norm in South Korean culture is EXO. The group was formed by SM Entertainment in 2011 and debuted a year later with the single MAMA, was one of the first groups with non-Korean performers. Originally with twelve members split between two sub-groups performing in Korean (EXO-K) and Mandarin (Exo-M) respectively, EXO has been performing exclusively as one group since 2014, and currently has nine performers. In two videos, *Power* (2017) and *Obsession* (2019), the attention is focused especially on the band member known by his stage name Kai. In *Power* which introduces a team of soldiers

fighting against a machine on an alien planet, the performers wear paramilitary outfits with oversized jackets and sweaters concealing their bodies. Kai, however, who is the only one with extensive make-up, has a sleeveless shirt with elements made of fishnet fabric that emphasize the muscular arms. Thus, he embodies two most common types of masculinities performed in K-pop, the so-called “flower boys” and “beast idols” which correspond with soft and tough masculinities. While the former are known for “well-groomed, androgynous and polished looks”, the latter’s “public personae are promoted through macho choreography and music styles, and their well-trained muscular bodies onstage” (Oh 2015, 63). As both types are expected to be good-looking, it is common for them to wear make-up, which, when theatrically exaggerated, can signify the liminality and the non-normativity of the gender performance (Oh 2015). In *Obsession*, a more abstract video, a few members of the band are shown wearing clothes exposing significant portions of their upper bodies. Both times these outfits, while not necessarily recognized as stereotypically female, do not match the style of clothes promoting neither tough nor soft masculinities. One could say that they incorporate sexual rhetoric seeking to recognize “the dense and complicated ways in which sexuality, *pace* Foucault, constitutes a nexus of power, a conduit through which identities are created, categorized, and rendered as subjects constituted by and subject to power” (Alexander and Rhodes 2015, 1). In the discussed music videos, this inherently rhetorical sexuality carrying the weight of ideological pressures on bodies and minds (Alexander and Rhodes 2015, 1) is expressed using visual queer coding and thus, goes beyond what is considered normative in the given culture.

Another interesting subversive use of fashion can be found in XIA's *Tarantallegra* (2012) involving JYJ's member Kim Junsu, who is wearing multiple outfits that blur the lines between the masculine and the feminine even more directly. They include a semi-transparent black sweater with deep neckline emphasizing the collarbone, a fitting black outfit with diamond-shaped cut in the middle of the chest, and a long black-and-red dress with knee-long boots and leather trousers. Again, the clothes are paired with dark make-up. Furthermore, the choreography used in the music video relies heavily on the suggestive body language. Although in Western societies the dancing male body is often perceived as effeminate, and, thus, stigmatized, many K-pop performers “actively embrace such male dancing bodies and destigmatize the notion of men dancing” (Oh 2015, 66).

While some of the outfits featured in the previously discussed videos are purposefully exaggerated, and thus can be considered costumes, in *Tarantallegra* they are utilized as means of degendering. However, it is important to note the disparity between the manufactured character of the K-pop performances and the significance of authenticity in the discourses of fashioning one's self which are often

brought up in the context of performing queer identities. Ruth Holliday (2001, 222) emphasizes the role the ability to express and perform oneself through their clothing has for queer people, one of the means which for queer men is the rejection of the accepted, socially enforced patterns and codes of masculinity, by referring to the rhetoric of comfort understood as the ability to “express externally that which one feels inside. In other words, [the] wish to close the gap between performance (acting) and ontology (being), a desire to be self-present to both oneself and others.” While some of Xia’s dresses and tight outfits seem to soften the body shape and emphasize femininity, other emphasize the masculine traits of the body, creating the performance that queers the body and positions it outside of gender binary rather than attempting to “pass” for the female. However, it is important to point out that even though one’s self-expression through fashion is often framed as the act of freedom and a choice, the personas of K-pop idols are carefully manufactured by the agencies (Oh 2015, Kim 2017). Still, the difference between the visual side of his performances with JCJ band and the androgynous and feminine presentation in *Tarantallegra*, in the production of which Xia was directly involved, is striking. Not only is he adhering to the image of soft masculinities promoted by K-pop creators, but also, due to the theatrical and dramatic character of the video, he is pushing the gender expression beyond the androgyny commonly found in other creators. Thus, Xia’s shifting image confirms that “K Pop provides discursive space for South Korean youth to assert their self identity, to create new meanings, to challenge dominant representations of authority, to resist mainstream norms and values, and to reject older generations’ conservatism” (Lee 2004, 429).

Fragmented Selves and the Objectification of a Male Body

Although the common portrayal of robots in science fiction as embodying and symbolizing the non-normative identities and the sexual other — with portrayals ranging from genderless, non-binary, or transgender to promiscuous and overtly sexualized female — has been criticized for a long time, it can still be found in various media. While in many works of science fiction the motif of the otherness of the machine symbolizes the oppression of marginalized groups, the popular practice has been to ascribe the genderless and asexual attributes to the robotic, alien, and monstrous (Stone 1992, Pullen and Rhodes 2013, O’Shea 2018). This section scrutinizes the ways of (de)constructing identities in music videos with clearly futuristic themes which portray the band members as robots, cyborgs, and androids. Furthermore, the rhetoric of gaze is considered as a tool of analyzing the representation of fragmented bodies. The analysis concentrates on music videos from two different groups: *Flower* by XIA (2015) and *Error* by VIXX (2014).



Image 3 Otherness emphasized via fashion choices in XIA's *Flower* (2015)

Flower is both a title of XIA's third studio album and one of the tracks. Its music video depicts a run-down palace bordered off from its surroundings by the seemingly bottomless chasms. In doing so, it uses a fantasy trope of a god inhabiting a high place and combines it with SF themes of robot engineering, technological innovation, and the use of technology to reproduce class- and race-based hierarchies.

The lead performer in *Flower* is presented as androgynous. Unlike in *Tarantallegra*, Xia's clothes are less subversive while still emphasizing and sexualizing the body. What moves him away from the stereotypical macho masculinities and emphasizes his otherness (Kumashiro 1999) is the utilization of the make-up, nail polish, and contact lenses. He is shown as cannibalizing parts of a robot that he receives as an offering from humans depicted as dark-skinned and violent. The act of consumption of the robot is crucial: the close-up on the lips covered in melted gold shows the action as immensely intimate. The camera focuses on his eyes as he undergoes transformation, with the blue light covering his skin: what nourishes him, hurts him in the process.

VIXX, a group formed in 2012 by Jellyfish Entertainment, is known for placing emphasis on storytelling which can be seen in the *Error* music video that tells a story of an android creating a new body for the woman he loves. He not only constructs her body, but also uploads her memories and personality into it. Having been discovered by hostile men in suits, the two manage to escape. At the end of the video the two of them are being disassembled by the machine that uses parts of their bodies to create an artificial heart. Throughout the music video, the protagonists are shown in one of two settings, either as disembodied androids exposed on the assembly line or during dance sequences where somewhat unusually, all men are clustered around each other rather than being scattered around the dance floor.

As androids, they are locked in a machine with their bodies being naked, exposed, but most importantly, unfinished. As they sing their lines, the close-ups concentrate on their faces which are their only finished parts. White irises, simplistic dark make-up, and additional lines painted in the corners of the eyes and mouth of the performers hint at the fact that underneath their pale skin they have robotic parts as well. This brings about the association with nonhuman otherness.

While in science fiction androids are often portrayed as hyper-sexualized, seductive, and sexually available women, it is interesting that these are male performers who are depicted as dismembered and fragmented, and thus not only naked but also vulnerable and exposed.

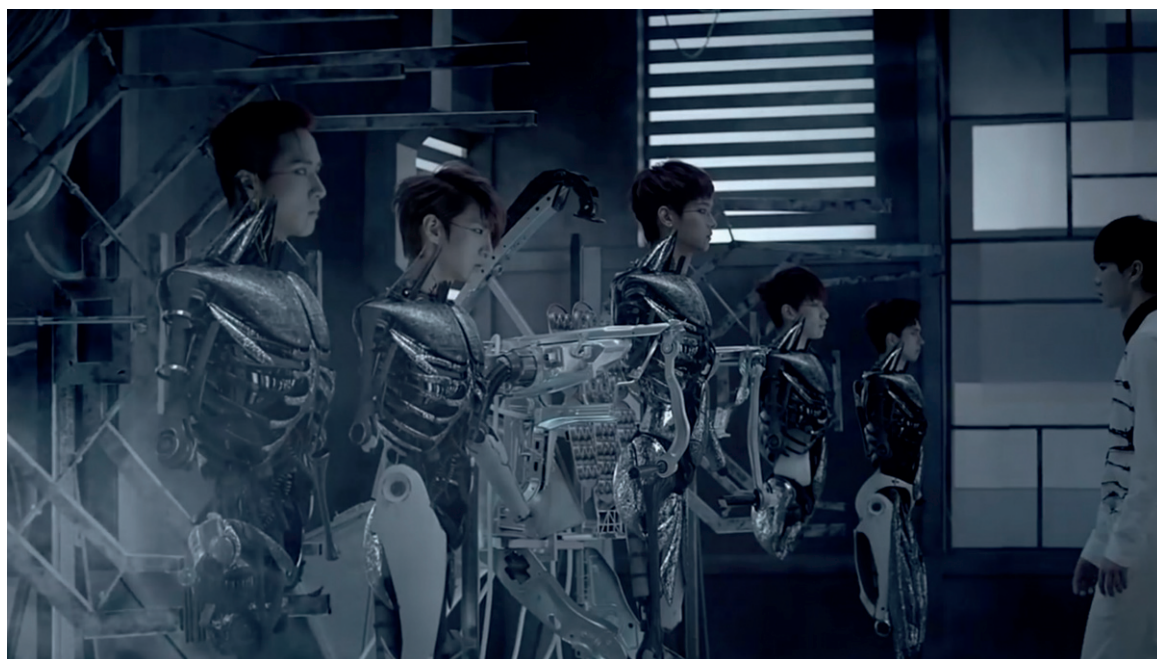


Image 4 Performers as fragmented androids in VIXX's *Error* (2014)

The close-ups allowing viewers to examine their faces that are left intact can point to technological fetishization which Charles Soukup referred to as “technoscophobia:” “a semiotic convention that merges technology with the human body and sexuality, reducing the latter to fetishized commodities” (Yee 2017, 86). The performers are not only objects of viewer’s gaze, but also, similarly to the *Flower*’s nonhuman leader, they are separated and lack the ability to move or look at each other. The physical approximate does not change this alienation. Although objectification is more often discussed in the representations of women, “women’s bodies, and men’s bodies too these days, are dismembered, packaged, and used to sell everything from chain saws to chewing gum” (Kilbourne, 1999, 26–27) which leads to the reinterpretation of the body as an object that is “disciplined, manipulated and viewed by others” (Rohlinger 2002, 70).

The choreography of the second part of VIXX's music video complements the previous images of fragmentation and alienation by positioning the performers together and allowing for the expression of tenderness via the physical touch. The physical contact is as constant as it is tender and intimate and every time they step away from each other, their hands touch again reassuringly. Finally, when the story reaches its culminating point and the machine destroys the bodies of the two lovers, performers are shown as committing suicide one by one. This is portrayed with them gesturing towards their heads. Hands, which allowed them to express gentle feelings, now spur an explosion of electricity which causes them to collapse onto the ground. The softness of the movements, explicit glances, and the tenderness of the touch make it clear that it is the men who share the true closeness and bond rather than the man and the woman who, in the end, merge and turn into an artificial heart.

As Deana A. Rohlinger (2002, 71) analyzes the portrayals of eroticized men in advertisements, she discusses the rhetoric of touch, drawing on Goffman's interpretation of the use of touch by female models in order to convey their "ornamental nature." The touch between men that is both soft and explicit can be read as conducive of non-normativity. According to Rohlinger (2002, 62), the construction of masculinity is closely associated with the physical strength and as such it is portrayed through muscles and athletic abilities or body. Thus, on one hand, it is the femininity and not masculinity which tends to be promoted with focus on the body and physical beauty. However, the exposure of the muscular body can also be used to emphasize the stereotypical qualities of maleness. On the other hand, when the performers are shown as vulnerable, as in the examples discussed in this section, they are presented as embracing the feminine qualities.

Conclusions

To conclude, analyzed within the theatrical framework of performance, K-pop music videos prove to be spaces of liminality that allow for the transgression of social boundaries of gender and sexuality. Discussed music videos centered around male performers incorporate make-up and accessories typical for the images of femininities in order to defy normative cultural standards and reject tough masculinities shaped by the social rules concerning the desired maleness. Numerous metaphors of fragmented and disembodied androids and futuristic settings further position the aforementioned performers as the alienated Others, emphasizing their queerness via the non-normative utilization of touch and intimacy.

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