

VIRAL SENSATION OR CULTURAL CONCERN?
EXAMINING THE IMPLICATIONS OF GIRLS AND WOMEN PERFORMING
SEXUALIZED DANCE ON SHORT VIDEO PLATFORMS

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the implications of sexualized dance by girls and women on short video platforms in China, like Douyin and Xiaohongshu. Through video analysis, literature review, personal reflection, interviews, and case studies, this thesis examines how sexualization is performed, what risks it brings, and how unhealthy beauty standards in K-pop made popular by social media may lead to early sexualization. The thesis also looks at the hidden impact of self-sexualization under structural gender pressure, how the public interprets sexualized content, and the strengths and gaps of China's internet safety policies in protecting minors. This research blends cultural critique and embodied practice to ask: How do short-form dance videos on Chinese platforms shape, spread, and normalize sexualized representations of girlhood? What is dance really communicating—and how should we, as dance teachers, parents, and viewers, think about that?

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INTRODUCTION

In March 2024, HYBE, a well-known Korean agency released a song called “Magnetic” by ILLIT. This song was then popular all over the world, bringing high popularity and love to the ILLIT group. At the same time, numerous discussions have been held about the music video for this song on Xiaohongshu, a social media platform in China. Some people think that the music video promotes pedophilia. The average age of five members of Illt is 18 years old, with the youngest being only 16 years old. After their debut, their styling suddenly shifted toward a noticeably childlike aesthetic, a change most evident in their latest music video. A news article mentioned “The scene settings in the new song MV are like a carefully arranged trap. At the beginning, a girl is imprisoned in a dim basement surrounded by cold walls and a striking red scarf. This depressing atmosphere reminds people of their bound childhood and lost freedom. As the MV progresses, the display clips of the five members are full of subtle hints.”¹ This caused me to think, not about whether the purpose of this music video shooting was to serve pedophiles, but about how women are objectified and sexualized in East Asia. When this sexualization and objectification have been active in the public's vision for a long time through increasingly developed short dance videos, the public's habit of female objectification makes me feel terrible.

This thesis takes “Magnetic” as a starting point to examine a deeper phenomenon: the normalization of sexualized female bodies in short-form dance videos, particularly on social media platforms like Douyin, Xiaohongshu, and Instagram Reels. As performances by young girls that mimic adult sexuality—and by adult women adopting infantile, doll-like aesthetics—circulate widely online, they contribute to a disturbing cultural numbness toward the

¹ “韩女团MV涉嫌恋童？‘K-pop本质是热血不是软色情’_团体_风格_少女,” Copyright © 2017 Sohu.com Inc. All Rights Reserved., n.d., https://www.sohu.com/a/774274484_100037811.

sexualization of girlhood. The line between “empowered sensuality” and “soft pornography” becomes increasingly blurred. In Chinese online discourse, the word “擦边(CaBian)” is frequently used to describe suggestive content that flirts with taboo without crossing overtly into pornography. But who gets to define the line? And how do these blurred boundaries affect children, audiences, and dancers themselves?

My thesis is a personal response to these questions. Taking inspiration from Magnetic, I began exploring how the overall aesthetic of K-pop performances—including choreography, styling, camera work, and visual framing—intersects with the hyper-feminized portrayals of women in animation (such as exaggerated eyelashes or infantilized gestures), and how algorithm-fed repetition comes together to create a movement language that feels both alluring and disturbing. As I wrote my thesis, I was also developing a dance piece called “Baby I Just Trying To Play It Cool, But I Just Couldn’t Hide That. I Want You, I Want You!” about a response to being sexualized and watched. I shared my articles and research with my dancers. We had open conversations about female objectification, media influence, and body autonomy, and these discussions became a key part of shaping the choreography.

This written thesis accompanies the performance by offering a critical framework through six chapters. Chapter 1 unpacks the definition of “sexualized dance,” exploring the distinction between intentional sexiness and “擦边(CaBian)” dance. Chapter 2 examines the psychological and physical effects of sexualized dance on children. Chapter 3 shifts focus to media and algorithmic aesthetics, analyzing how platforms reinforce specific beauty standards among minors. Chapter 4 investigates how K-pop constructs and exports specific standards of sensuality, including my own experience navigating that world. Chapter 5 turns to audience behavior and cultural attitudes, looking at how parents, teachers, and young viewers interpret or

normalize such dances. Finally, Chapter 6 analyzes regulatory efforts such as China's "清朗行动 (QingLangXingDong)" (Clean Cyberspace Campaign), reflecting on both state censorship and platform-based moderation.

By interweaving cultural theory, personal reflection, and embodied practice, this project asks: What role does dance play in the normalization of sexualized images of girls and women?

Chapter 1: Defining Sexualized Dance

1. “擦边 (Cabian)” vs. regular sexy Dance.

On today's short video platforms, such as TikTok or Xiaohongshu (a Chinese app), many people will post dancing videos. Sexy dance videos are very popular. For example, a popular street choreography dancer and dance teacher named Yikai has a total of 215 videos on Douyin(Chinese TikTok), with 5.276 million likes and 318,000 followers. His dance style is quite sexy, usually combining power and control with extended lines. When I refer to "sexy dance," I usually mean street jazz choreography and heels, but it also includes other dance styles that use body movement, costumes, and music to express sensuality. However, there are numerous controversies surrounding this type of dance in China. For centuries, Confucian ideology has significantly shaped societal expectations for women, promoting virtues such as chastity, humility, and submission. These values have historically been enforced through cultural norms, family expectations, and even legal systems. However, as feminist consciousness grows, more women are reclaiming autonomy over their bodies and rejecting the notion that their worth is tied to their bodies. Some viewers think this is a behavior of the Mandarin term 擦边(Cabian). “The term 擦边 (Cabian), originated from the table tennis term "擦边球" (edge ball), which refers explicitly to a ball hitting the edge of the table. In a match, if the ball lands on the upper edge of the table, it is considered a valid point, whereas if it hits the lower edge, it is not. Both cases are called "擦边球" or “cabanqiu.” After its evolution, "擦边 (Cabian)" specifically refers to the phenomenon of gaming the system in life.”² In the context of the internet and video platforms, 擦边 (Cabian) refers to “vulgar behavior on live streaming and short video platforms

² 腾讯网, “擦边·自由与失控_腾讯新闻,” Copyright 1998 - 2025 Tencent. All Rights Reserved, December 20, 2024, <https://news.qq.com/rain/a/20241220A09K6F00>.

that attracts attention through revealing clothing and provocative actions.”³ Some viewers think that this is just dancing. The purpose of the dance is to display oneself and one’s talents, and sexiness is just a free expression of the dancer. Due to these differing perspectives, some viewers, after watching a sexy dance video, engage in “鉴擦(jian ca),” meaning they evaluate whether the main subject in the video is engaging in 擦边 (Cabian) behavior. This kind of evaluation typically carries the intention of belittling and stigmatizing the performer.

Another group of viewers, mostly feminists, believe that we should stop evaluating whether someone is engaging in “擦边 (Cabian).” While “擦边 (Cabian)” is seen as a problematic behavior, assessing this behavior often turns into a personal attack, which can create divisions within the female user community. Instead, they argue that attention should be directed toward those who consume “擦边 (Cabian)” content.

I think we should study the behavior of the “擦边 (Cabian)” dance without attacking individuals, engaging in a discussion from the perspective of dance research rather than moral judgment. Currently, the debate over whether a dance is “擦边 (Cabian)” is due mainly to unclear boundaries. A post in a Chinese social platform, Douban Group, raised the question “How to distinguish between '擦边 (Cabian)' and sexiness.”⁴ Many people think it is not easy to distinguish. One of the users, ZZKY, said, “I think '擦边 (Cabian)' carries an obvious tendency to cater and please, with an overt sexual implication. It is highly intentional, aiming to fulfill others’ fantasies, lowering oneself, and treating oneself as an object. In contrast, the way I understand a truly sexy person is that she takes pride in her beauty. She confidently and generously presents

³ “擦邊 - 维基词典，自由的多语言词典,” Wiktionary, n.d., <https://zh.wiktionary.org/wiki/%E6%93%A6%E9%82%8A>.

⁴ “如何辨别擦边与性感,” n.d., https://www.douban.com/group/topic/255911007/?_i=0860154c4_HfwC.

herself with self-respect and self-love. Her sexual appeal does not rely on exaggerated or affected seduction.”⁵

The concerns regarding“擦边 (Cabian)” seem rooted in an aversion to being sexualized or sexualizing others, especially young girls.. The American Psychological Association's Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls (2007) defines sexualization as:

“A person’s value comes only from his or her sexual appeal or behavior, to the exclusion of other characteristics;

A person is held to a standard that equates physical attractiveness (narrowly defined) with being sexy;

A person is sexually objectified—that is, made into a thing for others’ sexual use, rather than seen as a person with the capacity for independent action and decision making; and/or;

Sexuality is inappropriately imposed upon a person.”

Any one of these points is enough to indicate sexualization. All four are not required.⁶

Based on these definitions, I reanalyzed some dance videos on the Douyin platform and summarized the following:

Most social media dance videos, even ones considered sexy, like a heels class, are filmed horizontally, with the entire person visible within the frame. The focus is on the expression of dance movements and technique. These videos are often shot in dance studios or spacious areas

⁵ “如何辨别擦边与性感.”

⁶ Eileen L. Zurbriggen et al., “Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls,” Data set, *PsycEXTRA Dataset*, January 1, 2007, <https://doi.org/10.1037/e582702010-001>.

suitable for dancing. Jojo Gomez's class video⁷ on Instagram serves as a great example. Jojo is a well-known professional dancer, choreographer, movement coach, and creative director based in Los Angeles. She's recognized for her powerful, sensual, and performance-driven commercial dance style. In her classes, she often wears a bikini top, shorts or thong. Her choreography is highly sexual in expression, yet showcases strong dance technique, physical power, and confident expressions of personal sexuality.

In contrast, most “擦边 (Cabian)” videos are filmed vertically, with only the upper thighs and above appearing in the frame. The focus is on body parts, and the dance movements primarily consist of gentle swaying, twisting, and facial expressions. A great example of this is: “0.00 复制打开抖音，看看【长晴呀的作品】爱擦 愿意擦 下辈子还擦 <https://v.douyin.com/5fYr-1b5lgY/e@o.qE qEh:/ 12/07>”⁸ The video is set in a typical Chinese living room. The creator wears a black sleeveless top, ultra-short shorts, sheer black tights, and studded stiletto heels, revealing her slim waist and limbs, with long hair draped over her shoulders. As the music plays, her movements include rhythmic pops of the hips and chest, creating a highly sensual visual style. When the person performing appears to be a minor, the content becomes especially troubling.

2. Interpretation of Movements: How a Dance Is Viewed Differently

Our subjective perceptions shape the way we interpret information. Just as a thousand viewers can have a thousand different interpretations of Hamlet, the meaning of a dance

⁷ “Instagram,” n.d.,

<https://www.instagram.com/p/DGRRn08y0P7/?igsh=dGZqbWV4Z2h1bnpw>.

⁸ “爱擦 愿意擦 下辈子还擦,” October 21, 2023, accessed March 25, 2025, <https://v.douyin.com/xJKfyH-n68k/e@o.qE qEh:/ 12/07>.

movement is often determined by the context and cultural background surrounding it. In the book *Encyclopedia of Body Language*, I found some interesting examples of how physical gestures can carry different meanings depending on context. Although the book separates male and female behaviors and tends to portray women as more “emotional”—a perspective that may reflect gender bias—it still offers insightful observations. For example, one’s hand through one’s hair could indicate a need to fix messy hair or a way to cool down on a hot day. However, if no practical reason exists, the movement may carry deeper symbolic meaning that requires contextual analysis.⁹ Here are several examples of a woman touching her hair:

A woman who is unprepared for an interview may run her fingers through her hair, showing that she is worried about the outcome. The same behavior can be seen in an exam hall when a student finds the questions difficult and feels anxious. If a female student does this while a teacher explains something, it likely means she is confused. The teacher should try a different approach to help her understand before moving on.

During a criminal investigation, if a woman runs her hands through her hair, she is very stressed. This could be due to the long interview or because she is deceptive. For an investigator, this is a sign to press harder. Lying is stressful because it requires quick thinking, careful wording, and keeping track of details, which can be exhausting.

If a woman is at home, relaxing in front of the TV and flipping her hair, she feels comfortable and confident. However, if her spouse is around, she might be trying to get his attention, perhaps to notice her new hairstyle or something else she wants to talk about.

⁹ Elangovan, Alan. 2020. *Encyclopedia of Body Language : What Every Movement Says*. Partridge Publishing Singapore. <https://www.vlebooks.com/vleweb/product/openreader?id=none&isbn=9781543757828>.

If a woman flips her Hair at work, she may be trying to get her colleagues' attention. For example, in a meeting where her ideas are being ignored, she might use this non-verbal cue to catch the leader's eye. This helps build trust and makes it easier for her to share her thoughts. It also naturally draws attention, giving her a chance to speak.¹⁰

In a dance context, music, costumes, and the performance environment significantly influence the meaning of movement.

It is worth noting that the same movements may have different meanings in different dance types and cultural contexts. For example, if a girl playfully moves her hips while spending time with her family in a park, the movement appears natural and appropriate. However, if the same hip movement is performed in tight, revealing, or sexually suggestive clothing, accompanied by sexually suggestive music, it can appear to take on a sexualized meaning. Dr. Tomi-Ann Roberts, a psychology professor at Colorado College, studies emotion, gender, and the psychological effects of women's and girls' sexual objectification. In an interview with Elizabeth Gough Schultz, MFA in Dance from UC Irvine and author of *The Sexualization of Girls in Dance Competitions*, and Dr. Roberts, a psychology professor at Colorado College specializing in gender and the effects of sexual objectification, she mentioned "Putting a bikini on a little girl and having her dance around on stage is way worse than having her naked running through a sprinkler in her front yard because if she's naked and running around, she's being herself, she's being a child. If you put her in this costume and on stage and you social media the hell out of her, she is being put on display as an object."¹¹ Dr. Roberts is highlighting the difference between

¹⁰ Elangovan, Alan. 2020. *Encyclopedia of Body Language : What Every Movement Says*. 111-115. Partridge Publishing Singapore. <https://www.vlebooks.com/vleweb/product/openreader?id=none&isbn=9781543757828>.

¹¹ Elizabeth Gough Schultz, "The Sexualization of Girls in Dance Competitions," 2018, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1zk1g4wt>.

natural, uninhibited childhood behavior and the intentional sexualization of young girls through performance and social media exposure. She argues that a little girl running naked through a sprinkler simply expresses joy and freedom in her body—there is no imposed meaning beyond her own experience. However, when a child is dressed in a bikini, placed on stage, and heavily publicized, she is being framed as an object meant to be observed and evaluated. This shifts the meaning of her presence from natural play to performance for others, reinforcing societal expectations of how girls should present themselves. Similarly, in Chapter Five, during my interviews with Chinese street jazz teachers who instruct children, they also unanimously mentioned that their choices of dance movements for kids were based on judgments of whether they felt natural and age-appropriate. While searching for video materials on Chinese short video platforms as examples of the sexualization of children, I noticed a common phenomenon, the specifics of which will be covered in greater detail in Chapter Five. When a very small number of viewers questioned whether the girl's clothing and dance were overly sexualized, the majority did not agree with these concerns. They viewed the clothing, music, and dance moves as ordinary and acceptable. Some people also argue that women's freedom to dress as they choose is a form of female liberation. This perspective raises a critical question: does the freedom to dress genuinely empower women, or is it still influenced by underlying patriarchal structures? While some view it as a sign of autonomy, others argue that societal norms and media representations continue to shape women's choices in ways that may reinforce existing power dynamics. This leads to the broader debate: patriarchy or empowerment? Online video platforms have become a tool to extend this discussion.

3. 赋权 (Empowerment) 或 父权 (Patriarchy)?

Empowerment and Patriarchy are both pronounced "Fu Quan" in Mandarin, which I find really interesting. This linguistic coincidence makes me wonder: when we talk about women gaining power, are we truly moving toward empowerment, or are we still navigating within the framework of patriarchy?

In recent years, feminism has become a hot topic in China, sparking widespread debates about women's freedom to dress as they choose. One discussion revolves around whether wearing revealing clothing challenges traditional Confucian values, which emphasize modesty and obedience, or whether it simply conforms to another set of societal expectations under the guise of empowerment. Are women challenging outdated moral standards and advocating for bodily autonomy, or are they still subject to external judgments and commercial influences?

Dr. Julian Rappaport, an American psychologist, considers empowerment "...as a process: the mechanism by which people, organizations, and communities gain mastery over their lives."¹² Dr. Rappaport also said that "empowerment means helping people gain more control over their own lives. If this is the goal, we must critically evaluate public policies and our role in supporting those who depend on social services."¹³ But under consumerism, the concept of empowerment is often marketized to cater to consumer demand rather than truly bringing structural social change. Feminist slogans on T-shirts, the promotion of "confidence" in K-pop and social media, and the body positivity movement all claim to empower women, yet they often align with market demands rather than drive real change—turning into consumer-friendly

¹² Julian Rappaport, "Studies in Empowerment," *Prevention in Human Services* 3, no. 2-3 (May 7, 1984): 1-7, https://doi.org/10.1300/j293v03n02_02.

¹³ Julian Rappaport, "In Praise of Paradox: A Social Policy of Empowerment Over Prevention," *American Journal of Community Psychology* 9, no. 1 (February 1, 1981): 1-25, <https://doi.org/10.1007/bf00896357>.

messaging, sexualized aesthetics, or "inclusive" marketing instead of challenging industry norms.

In dance, the relationship between empowerment and commodification is also complicated. For example, Lisa, a Thai member of the South Korean girl group Blackpink, has 105 million followers on Instagram. “Recently, her first full-length studio album, *Alter Ego*, debuted at No. 1 on Billboard’s Top Album Sales chart (dated March 15), selling 28,000 copies in the U.S. in the week ending March 6, according to Luminate.”¹⁴ In September 2023, Lisa performed at Crazy Horse Paris, a famous cabaret venue in Paris, France, known for its choreographed striptease, musical performances, and variety-style stage shows. Her performance sparked widespread debate on Chinese social media. Many Chinese audiences associated the show with striptease, which is legally prohibited in China due to its classification as obscene entertainment. Meanwhile, most Western audiences did not find it problematic. This cultural perception gap prompts reconsideration of where the boundaries between 'empowerment' and 'objectification' truly lie.

In an interview with Andrée Deissenberg, the Crazy Horse Paris's Chief Creative & Brand Officer, she claimed that feminism is "very much a part of the continuing renewal of this wonderful institution."¹⁵ She referenced how, “in the 1940s, burlesque dancers were breaking taboos by revealing their bodies—not to please men, but for the sheer pleasure of performing.”¹⁶ She positioned their acts as a form of rebellion and noted that over half of today’s audience

¹⁴ Keith Caulfield, “LISA’s ‘Alter Ego’ Debuts at No. 1 on Top Album Sales Chart,” *Billboard*, March 13, 2025, <https://www.billboard.com/music/chart-beat/lisa-alter-ego-debuts-number-one-top-album-sales-chart-1235920974/>.

¹⁵ Jérémie Basson, “A One to One With Andrée Deissenberg - Crazy Horse Paris,” *Crazy Horse Paris*, December 16, 2022, <https://www.lecrazyhorseparis.com/en/international-womens-day/>.

¹⁶ Basson, “A One to One With Andrée Deissenberg - Crazy Horse Paris.”

members are women. This perspective raises my question: does the presence of a female audience automatically mean that these performances are no longer objectifying the female body?

Another article introducing the Crazy Horse Paris performance first mentioned the influence of 1960s French feminism on women's emancipation and the development of the sexual revolution in France. "Crazy Horse, influenced by these cultural shifts, embraced these new societal codes to infuse its spectacle with a fresh burst of energy and modernity."¹⁷

What unsettled me even more was the subsequent description: "Beauty rules at the Crazy: To become a 'Crazy lady,' aspiring performers have to meet exacting criteria, designed to quicken the heartbeat of those who are privileged to witness their performance. Club rules say these icons of beauty must be between 1.68 and 1.72 meters in height—no more and no less—with long legs and a proud—and natural!—chest with its two points 21 cm apart and a navel 13 cm above the pubic region. This may sound as if beauty is being reduced to mere numbers, but what the Crazy calls its 'Golden Rules' have worked for more than six decades—and have been revised over the years to include both dancing and acting skills, with, above all, added sophistication and personality."¹⁸

The objectification of female dancers is blatantly exposed in this passage. I find it difficult to reconcile this rigid physical standard with the previous claim that the Crazy Horse aligns with feminist ideals.

¹⁷ Come to Paris, "History of the Crazy Horse Paris," n.d., <https://www.cometoparis.com/secrets-and-stories-of-paris/history-of-crazy-horse-s970>.

¹⁸ Come to Paris, "History of the Crazy Horse Paris."

It makes me question whether the Crazy Horse's feminism is merely a convenient façade to mask its true intentions. While the cabaret claims to embrace female empowerment, its performances often rely on the sexualization of women's bodies, carefully curated to appeal to the audience's gaze. This raises the question: Is it truly about celebrating women's autonomy, or is it a strategic rebranding that aligns with contemporary feminist rhetoric while still operating within a framework of commodification and spectacle?

By adopting an empowerment narrative, the Crazy Horse portrays itself as socially aware, yet it remains embedded in a system where women's bodies are packaged, marketed, and consumed. Does this so-called empowerment offer real agency to the performers, or is it simply a modernized form of exploitation disguised as artistic expression? This tension between self-expression and commercialized objectification complicates the relationship between feminism and the spectacle of performance, making it unclear whether the show is challenging societal norms or reinforcing them under a new guise. Now that we've established a working definition of Cabaret and/or sexualized dancing, let's examine the impact this dance can have on children.

Chapter 2: Impacts of Sexualized Dance on Children

1. Why Does It Have an Impact? How Does It Affect Children?

In China, where romantic relationships or even crushes before the age of 18 are generally considered unacceptable, most people take it for granted that the words "sexuality" and "children" should not be associated. However, I believe this assumption carries a sense of neglect and fear. The lack of sex education in families and schools directly results in children obtaining information about sexuality from questionable external sources.

Children at different stages of development have varying abilities to process information, leading to different understandings of sexuality. Therefore, it is important to recognize how sexual development is affected by children's experiences, as well as understand what is normal at certain ages and what is not.¹⁹ "It is normal for children between the ages of 3 and 6 to be curious about their own and others' bodies and genitals. This strong interest in body parts and functions offers parents many opportunities to communicate their culture's ideas about boundaries—both psychological and physical."²⁰ Therefore, even if parents or teachers permit or encourage children at this developmental stage to perform dance movements that draw attention to their private areas, regardless of whether they are clothed, I believe it is inappropriate. Such practices may lead to confusion and the development of distorted understandings of bodily boundaries. Furthermore, China's internet and television platforms lack a content rating system, which means

¹⁹ Diane E. Levin and Jean Kilbourne, *So Sexy so Soon: The New Sexualized Childhood, and What Parents Can Do to Protect Their Kids*, 2008, <http://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BB12363840>.

²⁰ Sandy K. Wurtele and Maureen C. Kenny, "Normative Sexuality Development in Childhood: Implications for Developmental Guidance and Prevention of Childhood Sexual Abuse," *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development*, January 1, 2011, 10, https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Sandy_Wurtele/publication/245022218_Normative_sexuality_development_in_childhood_Implications_for_developmental_guidance_and_prevention_of_childhood_sexual_abuse/links/549489eb0cf2ec1337581933.pdf.

that children can easily be exposed to sexualized content, including highly suggestive dance performances, without any guidance or restrictions. Unlike in some countries where media is categorized by age appropriateness, Chinese children often consume the same entertainment content as adults. This unrestricted exposure may lead to misconceptions about body image, relationships, and self-worth, as they absorb messages from media without the critical thinking skills necessary to process them. Additionally, without proper discussions around these topics, children may internalize certain negative sexualized portrayals as norms, affecting their self-perception and behavior from an early age.

The Report of the American Psychological Association Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls offers several theories to explain how the sexualization of girls and women could influence girls' well-being:

- “Socialization theories describe how girls receive and anticipate direct rewards and punishments from socialization agents regarding sexualization.
- Sociocultural theories point out that girls exist within a cultural milieu in which direct reinforcement is not always necessary for internalization or activation of a sexualized standard to be cultivated or for girls to engage in early sexualized behaviors.
- Cognitive theories highlight the automatic and unconscious nature of some of the schemas and other cognitive structures that develop through socialization.
- Psychoanalytic theories point to early experiences as formative in the development of the self.

- Objectification theory combines all of these approaches to argue that girls' observations of the world around them contribute to an internalization that produces self-sexualization.

»21

In the context of sexualized dance on social media, socialization theory suggests that girls may receive positive reinforcement (e.g., likes, compliments) when performing suggestive moves, encouraging them to continue engaging in such behavior. Girls may feel that they can exert some control over positive outcomes by self-sexualizing.²² Objectification theory explains why girls who repeatedly observe and perform sexualized dance might internalize these portrayals, viewing themselves as objects rather than individuals with agency.

2 The Consequences of Sexualization

Sexualization at a young age, whether self-imposed or forced, can have profound and lasting effects on girls, often persisting into adulthood. One of the most concerning consequences of self-objectification is cognitive fragmentation,²³ which results in cognitive resources being divided among multiple concerns, preventing full engagement in a single activity. Instead of fully engaging in an activity, part of the brain remains occupied with appearance-related thoughts, leading to decreased academic, professional, or athletic performance.

²¹ Eileen L. Zurbriggen et al., "Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls," Data set, *PsycEXTRA Dataset*, January 1, 2007, <https://doi.org/10.1037/e582702010-001>.

²² Christine R. Starr and Eileen L. Zurbriggen, "Self-sexualization in Preadolescent Girls: Associations With Self-objectification, Weight Concerns, and Parent's Academic Expectations," *International Journal of Behavioral Development* 43, no. 6 (September 18, 2019): 515–22, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0165025419873036>.

²³ Zurbriggen et al., "Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls," January 1, 2007, 21.

This phenomenon has been demonstrated in various studies. The Swimsuit vs. Sweater Math Test study by Fredrickson et al. (1998)²⁴ examined the effects of self-objectification on cognitive performance. Participants were asked to try on either a swimsuit or a sweater before completing a math test. The results showed that women who wore a swimsuit performed significantly worse on the test than those who wore a sweater. This effect was attributed to heightened self-objectification, as wearing a swimsuit made women more focused on their appearance rather than the cognitive task. This preoccupation reduced their working memory capacity, ultimately impairing their performance.

Beyond academic studies, I have personally had a similar experience. After posting a short dance video online, I found myself repeatedly distracted, checking the platform for views, likes, and comments over the next one to three days. This preoccupation significantly interfered with my daily life and studies. If a 26-year-old adult like myself can be so easily affected by the awareness of being displayed and objectified, how much more vulnerable are children posting dance videos online? This mirrors the self-objectification process described in psychological research—when girls engage in sexualized performances, they may become hyper-aware of external evaluations, leading to distraction, anxiety, and reinforcement of their role as objects rather than autonomous individuals.

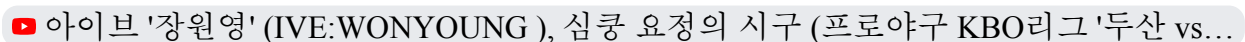
Sexualization of young girls and women may function to keep them “in their place” as objects of sexual attraction and beauty, significantly limiting their free thinking and movement in the world.”²⁵ Self-objectification doesn’t just affect how girls feel about their bodies—it can also

²⁴ B L Fredrickson et al., “That Swimsuit Becomes You: Sex Differences in Self-objectification, Restrained Eating, and Math Performance.,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 75, no. 1 (January 1, 1998): 269–84, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.75.1.269>.

²⁵ Zurbriggen et al., “Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls.”

impact how they move. One study looked at why girls are often said to “throw like a girl,” meaning they tend to use less of their body when throwing, mostly just moving their arm without full extension. Researchers had 200 girls aged 10 to 17 throw a softball as hard as possible. They found that girls who were more focused on how their bodies looked and who saw their bodies more as objects performed worse. In other words, being overly aware of their appearance seemed to hold them back physically, limiting how strong or effective their movements could be.²⁶

A good example of how focus on appearance can shape physical performance is a ceremonial first pitch event featuring KPop band IVE member Wonyoung. On the afternoon of June 19, she threw and hit the ceremonial pitch ahead of the 2022 Shinhan Bank SOL KBO League game between the Doosan Bears and KT Wiz, held at Jamsil Baseball Stadium in Songpa District, Seoul

 아이브 '장원영' (IVE:WONYOUNG), 심쿵 요정의 시구 (프로야구 KBO리그 '두산 vs...

. In the video, Wonyoung appears with flawless makeup, perfectly styled hair, and a sweet facial expression. She is dressed in a pair of light-wash, form-fitting jeans and a cropped short-sleeve top that shows her belly. Her gestures are highly posed and performative, which, together, clearly illustrate how attention to outward appearance can limit or alter the nature of physical movement, even in a simple athletic task like a pitch.²⁷ In contrast, when J-Hope, a popular male K-pop idol in BTS, threw the ceremonial first pitch, he wore a long-sleeved sweatshirt layered with a jacket, loose pants that extended below the knees, and a baseball cap. His throwing motion was smooth, casual, and confident.²⁸

²⁶ Zurbriggen et al., “Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls.”, 21.

²⁷ 뉴스엔·Newsen, “아이브 '장원영' (IVE:WONYOUNG), 심쿵 요정의 시구 (프로야구 KBO리그 '두산 Vs KT') @22.06.19 #NewsenTV,” June 19, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=npV7QRW_nLA.

²⁸ KOREA NOW, “Reason Why BTS’ J-hope Threw the First Pitch at a Korean Baseball Game,” October 24, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kbooRxxz8FiQ>.

Although both were performing the same ceremonial act, Wonyoung's pitch appeared far more performative and visually oriented than J-Hope's. Her movements conveyed an emphasis on aesthetics aligned with her idol persona, projecting beauty and sweetness, rather than physical ease or athletic intention. This contrast reflects broader gendered expectations in K-pop: female idols are often required to maintain an image of visual perfection even when engaging in non-performative tasks, while male idols are given more freedom to appear relaxed and natural.

Moreover, the structural oppression of women in society makes it difficult for women to escape the constraints of beauty ideals completely. As social media brings influencers closer to their audience, young girls increasingly compare themselves to these highly curated images. This constant self-evaluation fuels body dissatisfaction and anxiety, reinforcing the larger societal structures that pressure women to conform to unattainable beauty standards. Consequently, psychological problems follow. “Being a woman or girl in a culture that objectifies the female body creates multiple opportunities to experience anxiety along with its accompanying vigilance.”²⁹ “Vigilance” here refers to the internalized self-monitoring and constant alertness that women may develop in response to living in a culture that objectifies their bodies. When women are treated like objects of beauty, their value feels tied to looks. So they may hesitate to speak up, take risks, or move freely, physically and mentally. Chrissy R. Starr and Zurbriggen are psychological scholars who specialize in topics related to gender, sexualization, body image, and the impact of media on women. They explored how self-sexualization relates to self-objectification, body image concerns, self-efficacy, academic performance, and career goals in preadolescent girls. The study involved 89 participants. The researchers showed the girls a set

²⁹ Barbara L. Fredrickson and Tomi-Ann Roberts, “Objectification Theory: Toward Understanding Women’s Lived Experiences and Mental Health Risks,” *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 21, no. 2 (June 1, 1997): 173–206, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-6402.1997.tb00108.x>.

of colored paper doll images—one depicting a sexualized figure and the other a non-sexualized one—and asked them to make choices based on these images to assess their attitudes toward sexualization. were created using an online dollmaker. In each doll pair, skin tone, eye color, and hair color were identical. One doll was dressed in “sexy” clothing that was tight and revealing (e.g., a low-cut shirt with midriff showing) and had makeup, a complicated hairstyle, and pursed lips. The other nonsexualized doll wore stylish but nonrevealing clothing (e.g., a sweater and long flowing skirt). This doll had similar length hair in a less complicated style, wore no makeup, and was smiling.”³⁰

Appendix

Doll pairs for currently look like (first pair) and prefer to look like (second pair) questions.



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³⁰ Starr and Zurbriggen, “Self-Sexualization in Preadolescent Girls: Associations With Self-Objectification, Weight Concerns, and Parent’s Academic Expectations,” 3.

³¹ Starr and Zurbriggen, “Self-Sexualization in Preadolescent Girls: Associations With Self-Objectification, Weight Concerns, and Parent’s Academic Expectations,” 8.

They used two questions to measure self-personalization: “Which doll do you think looks most like you?” and “If you could look like one of these two dolls, which would you like to look like?” Girls were asked to point to the doll that best fit their answer. Girls were coded “as demonstrating self-sexualization if they chose the sexualized doll for at least one of these two questions.”³²

They found that roughly two-thirds of girls (68.5%) showed signs of self-sexualization. Approximately a quarter of the girls (23.6%) indicated that they wanted to and did look like the sexualized doll, whereas 32 girls (36.0%) indicated that they did not look like the sexualized doll but wanted to look like her.³³

“Shame arises from a fusion of negative self-evaluation and the potential for social exposure.”³⁴ Social exposure refers to the possibility of being seen, judged, or evaluated by others. When girls internalize unattainable beauty ideals, they may develop coping strategies to align with these expectations. For some, this manifests as restrictive eating or excessive exercise; for others, it results in seeking cosmetic procedures to alter their physical appearance. Starr and Zurbriggen’s research found that self-objectification and weight concerns were positively correlated.³⁵ Many studies further demonstrate that women are significantly more likely than men to suffer from eating disorders: “62.3% of teenage girls and 28.8% of teenage boys report trying to lose weight. 58.6% of girls and 28.2% of boys are actively dieting. 68.4% of girls and

³² Starr and Zurbriggen, “Self-Sexualization in Preadolescent Girls: Associations With Self-Objectification, Weight Concerns, and Parent’s Academic Expectations,” 3.

³³ Starr and Zurbriggen, “Self-Sexualization in Preadolescent Girls: Associations With Self-Objectification, Weight Concerns, and Parent’s Academic Expectations.”

³⁴ Fredrickson and Roberts, “Objectification Theory: Toward Understanding Women’s Lived Experiences and Mental Health Risks.”

³⁵ Starr and Zurbriggen, “Self-Sexualization in Preadolescent Girls: Associations With Self-Objectification, Weight Concerns, and Parent’s Academic Expectations.”

51% of boys exercise with the goal of losing weight or to avoid gaining weight.”³⁶ “One-year prevalence of anorexia nervosa is 0.16% for females and 0.09% for males. One-year prevalence of binge eating disorder is 0.96% for females and 0.26% for males.”³⁷ In other words, during one year, roughly 1 in 600 women and 1 in 1,100 men have anorexia nervosa, and about 1 in 100 women and 1 in 400 men have binge eating disorder.

Body dissatisfaction also may spur teens to seek plastic surgery. “In Korea, A total of 44.8% of college students have been reported to experience their first cosmetic surgery in their teens.”³⁸ “In the U.S., from 2002 to 2003, the number of girls 18 years old and younger who got breast implants nearly tripled, from 3,872 to 11,326(Olding & Zuckerman, 2004).”³⁹

Emerging evidence suggests that the sexualization of girls has negative consequences on girls’ ability to develop healthy sexuality.⁴⁰ Body objectification was associated with less frequent use of condoms.⁴¹ Girls who objectify their bodies may find it especially difficult to assert themselves during ongoing sexual activity, when bodies are exposed and vulnerable to

³⁶ “Food for Thought: Substance Abuse and Eating Disorders,” Data set, *PsycEXTRA Dataset*, January 1, 2003, <https://doi.org/10.1037/e541112013-001>.

³⁷ Guillaume Molter, “Report: Economic Costs of Eating Disorders | Research Reports | Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health,” Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, January 8, 2025, 19, <https://hsph.harvard.edu/research/eating-disorders-striped/research-reports/economic-cost-s-eating-disorders/>.

³⁸ Sanghoo Yoon and Young A. Kim, “Cosmetic Surgery and Self-esteem in South Korea: A Systematic Review and Meta-analysis,” *Aesthetic Plastic Surgery* 44, no. 1 (October 21, 2019): 229–38, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00266-019-01515-1>.

³⁹ Zurbriggen et al., “Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls.”

⁴⁰ Zurbriggen et al., “Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls.”

⁴¹ Emily A. Impett, Deborah Schooler, and Deborah L. Tolman, “To Be Seen and Not Heard: Femininity Ideology and Adolescent Girls’ Sexual Health,” *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 35, no. 2 (April 1, 2006): 129–42, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-005-9016-0>.

evaluation.⁴² Many women fear appearing “selfish,” or unfeminine, and hence focus not on their own desires and physical sensations but rather on their male partner’s pleasure.⁴³

Through repeated exposure to overtly sexualized content, images become ingrained in a girl’s cognitive framework, shaping her self-perception and reinforcing the belief that her value is tied to appearance rather than competence or emotions. As a result, girls may begin to monitor their bodies excessively, seek external validation, and prioritize maintaining a sexually appealing appearance over developing skills, knowledge, or emotional well-being. This internalization process does not remain passive but actively shapes how girls see themselves, reinforcing patterns of self-objectification that influence daily thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. This cycle, where external objectification reinforces self-objectification, and vice versa, creates a feedback loop that makes it difficult for girls to break free from appearance-focused self-worth.

In today’s era of self-media, where anyone can present themselves online, the media has become one of the most immediate and influential sources of external information for children, especially for girls. As sexualized images of girlhood become increasingly visible across platforms, the boundary between self-expression and objectification grows blurrier. This raises an important question: What role does the media play in shaping girls’ self-perception?

⁴² Impett, Schooler, and Tolman, “To Be Seen and Not Heard: Femininity Ideology and Adolescent Girls’ Sexual Health.”

⁴³ Fredrickson and Roberts, “Objectification Theory: Toward Understanding Women’s Lived Experiences and Mental Health Risks.”

Chapter 3: Media and Aesthetics

1. Internet Use Among Minors in China

I remember that during middle and high school in Xinxiang, a small city in central China (2010–2015), my teachers and mom saw mobile phones and the internet as dangerous threats. We were not allowed to bring our phones into the school, and if we had to use them—for example, to contact our parents after school—they had to remain turned off. However, after experiencing the pandemic(2020-2023), when lockdowns confined people to their homes, learning, entertainment, and daily life became entirely dependent on electronic devices. “In 2019, the number of underage Internet users in China reached 175 million, with an internet access rate of 93.1%”⁴⁴. “By 2022, this number had grown to 193 million, pushing the penetration rate to 97.2%”⁴⁵ (CNNIC .” Data from 2023 shows that 88.7% of underage netizens frequently used the Internet for learning in the past six months. Playing games and watching short videos online are the youth’s main online leisure and entertainment activities, with 67.8% and 54.1% frequently engaging in these activities.⁴⁶ These data clearly show that Chinese minors⁴⁷ are very dependent on the Internet.

2. Recommendation Algorithms

Recommendation algorithms are systems used by digital platforms to suggest content, products, or services to users based on their preferences, behaviors, or other data. The core

⁴⁴ “《2019年全国未成年人互联网使用情况研究报告》发布_中央网络安全和信息化委员会办公室,” n.d., https://www.cac.gov.cn/2020-05/13/c_1590919071365700.htm.

⁴⁵ “《第5次全国未成年人互联网使用情况调查报告》发布--互联网发展研究,” Cnnic官网版权所有, n.d., <https://www.cnnic.cn/n4/2023/1225/c116-10908.html>.

⁴⁶ “《第5次全国未成年人互联网使用情况调查报告》发布--互联网发展研究.”

⁴⁷ Minor Internet users: In this report, they specifically refer to Internet users who are students in primary schools, junior high schools, senior high schools, vocational high schools, technical secondary schools, and technical schools aged 6 to 18.

computational mechanisms behind social media platforms can generally be divided into content preprocessing and content propagation. Content preprocessing involves face recognition, image filtering, annotation, audio transcription, and language translation. Content propagation includes processes like search, recommendation, ad delivery and targeting, content moderation, friend suggestions, and highlighting trending topics.⁴⁸ There are three models of information propagation: subscription, network, and algorithm, showing the propagation of one individual post. In the subscription model, the post reaches those who have subscribed to the poster. In the network model, it cascades through the network as long as users who see it choose to further propagate it. In the algorithmic model shown here, users with similar interests (as learned by the algorithm based on their past engagement) are depicted closer to each other. The more similar a user's interests are to the poster's, the more likely they are to be recommended the post.⁴⁹

Compared to the recommendation algorithms of online video platform TikTok, YouTube primarily focuses on traditional long-form videos, which are mainly accessed through the user search system, meaning most users actively search for the content they want to watch. In contrast, YouTube Shorts, similar to TikTok and Instagram Reels' vertical video platforms, presents content in a linear, autoplay format. As a result, users have minimal control over the next video they see, as the platform automatically selects and plays the following short video based on its recommendation algorithm.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Arvind Narayanan, "Understanding Social Media Recommendation Algorithms," *Academic Commons*, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.7916/khdk-m460>, 9.

⁴⁹ Arvind Narayanan, "Understanding Social Media Recommendation Algorithms," *Academic Commons*, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.7916/khdk-m460>, 10.

⁵⁰ Christophe Cosse, "Recommendation Systems of Short Video Platforms: Auditing Algorithms of Short Format Video Platforms to Understand the Rabbit Hole Effect on YouTube Shorts" (Master Thesis, Delft University of Technology, 2024).

As a leading short-video platform, TikTok relies on a robust intelligent algorithm that personalizes content delivery. The primary goal of its recommendation system is to provide users with content tailored to their preferences without requiring active searching. This algorithm operates with two key objectives: attracting users by curating highly personalized content and retaining them through continuous engagement loops. According to ByteDance's published algorithm principles, users are profiled based on interest characteristics, identity characteristics, and behavior characteristics, which together shape content recommendations and enhance user engagement.⁵¹

Although most video platforms don't publicly disclose the exact workings of their algorithms, it's easy to see from daily use that AI-driven, data-collecting recommendation systems are practically everywhere. No matter your platform, the content you see is heavily shaped by these algorithms, constantly adjusting based on what you watch, like, and engage with. As a result, these recommendation systems don't just personalize content—they create a reinforcing cycle. The more a user engages with certain types of content, the more the algorithm refines its suggestions, leading to an increasingly narrow and specialized feed. This phenomenon, often referred to as The Rabbit Hole Effect, represents a shift from broad, mainstream recommendations to highly personalized ones, which can limit exposure to diverse perspectives while maximizing engagement.⁵²

⁵¹ Zhengwei Zhao, "Analysis on the 'Douyin (TikTok) Mania' Phenomenon Based on Recommendation Algorithms," *E3S Web of Conferences* 235 (January 1, 2021): 03029, <https://doi.org/10.1051/e3sconf/202123503029>.

⁵² Erwan Le Merrer, Gilles Tredan, and Ali Yesilkanat, "Modeling Rabbit-holes on YouTube," *Social Network Analysis and Mining* 13, no. 1 (August 1, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13278-023-01105-9>.

The New York Times article "On YouTube's Digital Playground, an Open Gate for Pedophiles"⁵³ talks about how YouTube's recommendation system unintentionally helps predators find videos of children. The platform's algorithm keeps people watching by suggesting similar content based on their viewing history. But this also means that the algorithm can quickly lead someone watching innocent family videos down a rabbit hole of more videos featuring kids, which predators then exploit. A single, family video of two girls playing in the pool might seem like no big deal. But when YouTube's algorithm starts connecting the dots and recommending more and more similar videos to someone who has watched one, it creates an environment where pedophiles can easily access and binge-watch this type of content. Instead of just being random clips of kids having fun, the system unintentionally funnels these videos into a curated feed, making it dangerous for predators to get videos of children, even without searching.

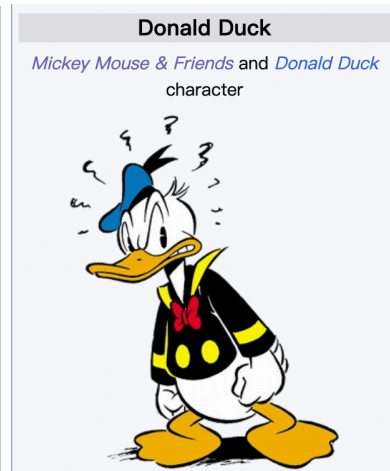
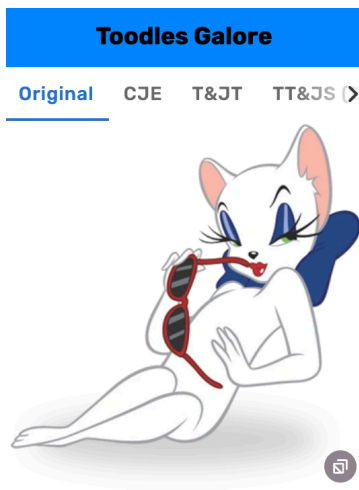
3. "I Want To Be You!" Media's Role In Amplifying Expectations For Girls

In our lives, media such as TV shows, movies, books, cartoons, music videos, and social media influence our perception. We are unconsciously taking in and growing accustomed to content about exploited women from a very young age. According to psychologist Christia Spears Brown of the University of Kentucky, "In just one year, grade school-age children could take in as many as 80,000 'sexy girl' portrayals just watching kid-targeted TV programming."⁵⁴

Here are some examples:

⁵³ Max Fisher and Amanda Taub, "On YouTube's Digital Playground, an Open Gate for Pedophiles," *The New York Times*, June 3, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/03/world/americas/youtube-pedophiles.html>.

⁵⁴ Lois M. Collins, "How Sexualization of Girls Creates Long-term Problems That Harm All Children," *Deseret News*, December 19, 2023, <https://www.deseret.com/indepth/2020/9/17/21432749/media-netflix-cuties-sexualizes-girls-tv-video-games-toys-sexual-harassment-assault/>.



The pictures above are of Minnie Mouse, Mickey Mouse, Toodles Galore, Tom Cat, Daisy Duck, and Donald Duck. Each pair of characters of the same species, such as Minnie Mouse and Mickey Mouse, is a couple.

By comparing the costumes of male and female characters of the same species, it can be seen that Minnie and Daisy are both wearing high heels. Minnie's skirt is very short, and the hem of the skirt floats and reveals her underwear. The same is true of the female character, Toodles Galore. She wears exaggerated makeup and eye shadows, long eyelashes, teasing tall eyebrows, and half-squinted eyes. Her sexy, big red lips are biting her glasses, showing how the female

character is extremely sexualized in a cartoon whose audience is mostly made up of children. If a real woman replaces the identity of a cartoon character, I wouldn't doubt that this is a pornographic film. These details are very unnecessary for the animation content, and from the male perspective, even female animals have to wear makeup and look sexy to be worthy. In contrast, the male characters' costumes, facial expressions, and body movements all reflect their subjectivity. This proves that our girls have been instilled with such a clear binary gender role from such a young age, reinforcing stereotypes about women and conceptions of femininity.

When children grow up, they will use the internet even more, which means they are more easily affected by social media. To be specific, daily social media use is linked to lower appearance, weight, and self-esteem issues in teens.⁵⁵ A study conducted by Papageorgiou, Fisher, and Cross⁵⁶ interviewed 24 girls in Perth, Western Australia, about how sexualized images on social media influence teenage girls. These girls indicate that the main concern about teenage girls using social media is body image. They felt insecure and self-conscious about their appearance when they used Instagram. The use of social media affects body image in four main ways: expectation, comparison, striving, and validation.

- Expectation: While celebrity images can influence girls' beauty standards, many girls see those looks as unrealistic or unattainable. What actually makes them feel worse about their own appearance are the sexualized images shared by people closer to their own age, especially those with large followings on social media.

⁵⁵ Helen Thai et al., "Reducing Social Media Use Improves Appearance and Weight Esteem in Youth With Emotional Distress.," *Psychology of Popular Media* 13, no. 1 (February 27, 2023): 162–69, <https://doi.org/10.1037/ppm0000460>.

⁵⁶ Alana Papageorgiou, Colleen Fisher, and Donna Cross, "'Why Don't I Look Like Her?' How Adolescent Girls View Social Media and Its Connection to Body Image," *BMC Women S Health* 22, no. 1 (June 27, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12905-022-01845-4>.

- Comparison: Viewing images on social media will make these girls compare themselves to celebrities and peers, whether the images are sexualized or not.
- Striving: The girls have expectations for a certain appearance and compare their appearances. After discovering their shortcomings, they change their behavior to address them, such as increased dieting and fitness.
- Validation: The number of likes, comments, and followers of pictures on social media is evidence of the girls' desire for external validation. By analyzing this data, they can understand the audience's preferences and adjust their appearance accordingly.

In this chapter, the data from the Office of the Central Committee for Cybersecurity and Information Technology in China shows that compared to 2019, the number of Minors using the Internet in 2022 increased by 180,000, and 97.2% of minors in China now use the Internet. This indicates that the Internet has become an integral part of Chinese children's daily life, resulting in an increased demand for learning, entertainment, social interaction, and other aspects. The popularity of the Internet has also increased people's use of new media platforms, such as YouTube and TikTok. We understand how video websites use algorithms to automatically recommend new videos to users based on their playback history. This algorithm perpetuates the Rabbit Hole Effect, where users are constantly offered videos with similar content. This may embolden potential predators. Finally, we explain that the images on social media are influenced by four aspects: expectation, comparison, striving, and validation, which change the aesthetic and behavior of adolescent girls. We also analyzed the large number of sexualized female cartoon characters in the content watched by young children, which undoubtedly has a cognitive impact on young children. Let's take our investigation even further by examining how K-pop feeds into this system of sexualization.

Chapter 4: K-pop in Shaping Sensuality Standards

1. Personal Experience

When I was 10 years old, in the fifth grade (2008), I was living in Xinxiang, a small city in Henan province, central China. I was a student at Xinxiang Experimental Primary School. That year, I was introduced to a new musical sound and aesthetic for the first time: K-pop. “In South Korea, K-pop has been known since the late 90s and at the beginning of the 2000s, with the entry of Japanese pop music and Western music that began to affect the musical style of South Korean musicians /artists. Furthermore, the wave of Korean pop culture known as Korean wave or Hallyu (한류) started to spread in Southeast Asia, China, and Japan (Shin, 2012:150).”⁵⁷ By the time I turned 13, I had completely fallen under its spell. My love for K-pop sparked my interest in learning K-pop dance, which eventually led me to start studying street choreography. As my fascination with K-pop grew, so did my interest in Korean culture—I fell in love with Korean food, started to learn Korean on my own, dreamed of studying in South Korea, and even auditioned for the Korea Entertainment company. During my teenage years, I was deeply immersed in the carefully curated fantasy of K-pop.

The deeper I fell into the K-pop world, the more it shaped my aesthetics. Every day, I absorbed new influences through K-dramas, K-pop music, and K-pop dance, gradually altering my sense of beauty. I began dressing like my favorite idols, trying to emulate their style. I even started dieting, though I failed repeatedly, leading to cycles of weight fluctuations that made me feel frustrated and ashamed. By the time I was 15 or 16, I started seriously considering plastic surgery and liposuction. I constantly tried to convince my mother that getting double eyelid

⁵⁷ Alex Sobur et al., “The Meaning of K-Pop and Self-Concept Transformation of K-Pop Fans in Bandung,” *MIMBAR Jurnal Sosial Dan Pembangunan* 34, no. 2 (December 10, 2018): 414–22, <https://doi.org/10.29313/mimbar.v34i2.3729>.

surgery, a very common eye procedure in East Asia, which involves either making a small incision to remove excess fat from the eyelid or using sutures to create a visible crease. The goal is to make the eyes appear larger. In South Korea, plastic surgery is especially normalized, with the country having the highest number of cosmetic procedures per capita globally (from ISAPS data in 2014)⁵⁸. Still, my mother firmly refused.

Our arguments over plastic surgery became frequent, and I felt increasingly insecure, especially knowing that five of my classmates had already undergone double eyelid surgery. My mother's firm opposition left me with no choice but to temporarily give up on the idea. But instead, I turned to makeup as a coping mechanism to combat my insecurities throughout high school.

As I grew up and entered university, my obsession with K-pop gradually faded. In recent years, I've started looking back at my past thoughts and aesthetics with a more critical eye. I now realize that my excessive focus on my body was largely shaped by K-pop's influence—and it wasn't just me. Back then, the Korean Wave had a massive impact on young people in China, shaping not only beauty standards but also self-perception and lifestyle choices.

2. The History Of K-pop

Korean music has long been shaped by foreign influences due to different periods of colonization. Traditional Korean music was influenced by China, and during Japan's occupation, Japanese musical elements were introduced. After the Korean War, in 1953, American music became the dominant influence on South Korean pop culture.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Paul I. Heidekrueger et al., "Global Aesthetic Surgery Statistics: A Closer Look," *Journal of Plastic Surgery and Hand Surgery* 51, no. 4 (November 15, 2016): 270–74, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2000656x.2016.1248842>.

⁵⁹ John Lie, *K-Pop: Popular Music, Cultural Amnesia, and Economic Innovation in South Korea*, 2014, 12–14, 29, <http://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BB17380643>.

In the history of South Korean popular music, a significant turning point was marked by the introduction of the group Seo Taiji and the Boys (Sŏ T'ae-ji wa Aidŭl), which debuted in 1992. Their performances incorporated rapping and breakdancing, signaling a shift in South Korea's music scene. Seo Taiji and the Boys redefined the industry, establishing youth as the primary audience for popular music in South Korea. This era is widely recognized as the beginning of what we now know as K-pop.⁶⁰

Seo Taiji and the Boys challenged and ultimately dismantled many traditional conventions of South Korean popular music. After their explosive debut, the use of the pentatonic scale, which had been widely used in traditional Korean music, steadily declined.⁶¹ Over time, American influences gradually replaced Japanese influences in K-pop, shaping its sound, lyrics, and visual aesthetics. Until today, American pop culture has continued to influence K-pop culture.

Following this transformation, groups like Deux (1993) and Turbo (1995) solidified hip-hop's presence in South Korean pop culture, while Roo'ra (1994), Cool (1994), and Koyote (1999) helped establish a post-disco, hip-hop-influenced dance pop genre.⁶² From the standpoint of K-pop, the most consequential effect of the Sŏ Tae-ji revolution was that it spawned idol groups. In the context of K-pop, 'idol' describes a young performer who rises to fame after years of rigorous training within an agency-run system.

⁶⁰ Lie, *K-Pop: Popular Music, Cultural Amnesia, and Economic Innovation in South Korea*, 2014, 57–59.

⁶¹ Lie, *K-Pop: Popular Music, Cultural Amnesia, and Economic Innovation in South Korea*, 2014, 58.

⁶² Lie, *K-Pop: Popular Music, Cultural Amnesia, and Economic Innovation in South Korea*, 60–61.

The K-pop industry as we know it today began to take shape in the late 1990s when it became more industrialized. Lee Sooman, the founder of SM Entertainment, is known for introducing Korea's idol system. He developed an in-house training program where young people were selected through auditions and given intense training before debuting as K-pop idols. This training included not only singing and dancing, but also things like language lessons to prepare them for global success. Trainees were evaluated regularly, and those who didn't show enough potential were often cut from the program. Those who made it through were put into boy or girl groups to debut. Grouping idols helped reduce financial risk for companies, since the company paid for all the training. Each member was given a distinct image, such as cute or sexy, to appeal to different fans. After their debut, agencies managed nearly every aspect of an idol's career, including hiring songwriters and choreographers. Idols themselves had little control over these decisions.⁶³

The defining moment in K-pop history arrived in 1996, with the breakout success of H.O.T. (High Five of Teenagers).⁶⁴ Formed by SM Entertainment in 1996, the group consisted of Moon Hee-jun, Jang Woo-hyuk, Tony Ahn, Kangta, and Lee Jae-won. "H.O.T. created a social sensation. Screaming girls thronged the group's concerts. Young men adopted the group's "H.O.T. cut" hairstyle (long in front, short in back) and B-boy style (oversized shirts and slacks). Merchandise affiliated with the group ranged from candy to perfume, and it sold well."⁶⁵ The idol group model in South Korea was heavily inspired by Japanese idol culture. The trainee system, the emphasis on perfected performances, and the cultivation of loyal fan bases all have

⁶³ Jennifer M. Kang, "Rediscovering the Idols: K-pop Idols Behind the Mask," *Celebrity Studies* 8, no. 1 (January 2, 2017): 136–41, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2016.1272859>.

⁶⁴ Lie, *K-Pop: Popular Music, Cultural Amnesia, and Economic Innovation in South Korea*, 63.

⁶⁵ Lie, *K-Pop: Popular Music, Cultural Amnesia, and Economic Innovation in South Korea*, 63.


roots in Japan's idol industry, which was pioneered by companies like Johnny & Associates in the 1960s.⁶⁶

3. The Evolution Of The K-pop Girl Group Concept

When I look back at the development of K-pop girl groups, I see a change in the persona and image of girl groups :

- 1990s–2000s: Innocent and Cute Images

During this period, girl groups like S.E.S. and Fin. K.L. adopted images that emphasized innocence and youthfulness. Their music videos and performances often featured schoolgirl uniforms and playful themes, projecting a pure and wholesome image. The obsession with cuteness was nearly ubiquitous across all South Korean girl groups, reinforcing a youthful, delicate, and endearing aesthetic that became a defining characteristic of early K-pop.

 [1080p] 베이비복스 - 야야야 M/V ⁶⁷

Baby V.O.X (베이비복스) was a first-generation South Korean girl group active from 1997 to 2006. The dance in the music video is mainly a gender-neutral hip-hop style. The outfits include girly white dreamy pajama styles, long-sleeved and long-pants suit sets, and loose hip-hop streetwear with short sleeves. In the music video, the set includes a pink indoor scene and a virtual blue scene, both of which highlight their girlish image.

- 2010s: Transition to Sexy and Mature Concepts

⁶⁶ Dal Yong Jin, "Comparative Discourse on J-pop and K-pop: Hybridity in Contemporary Local Music," *Korea Journal* 60, no. 1 (January 1, 2020): 40–70, <https://doi.org/10.25024/kj.2020.60.1.40>.

⁶⁷ Baby V.O.X Archive, "[1080p] 베이비복스 - 야야야 M/V", February 4, 2017, YouTube, 4mins 7secs, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mUJlyGxZNZc>

In the 2010s, there was a noticeable shift as groups such as Girls' Generation, AOA, and EXID began incorporating more sensual elements into their performances. This included choreography featuring high heels, miniskirts, and bodycon outfits, signaling a move towards a more mature and sexy image.

▶ AOA - 짧은 치마 (Miniskirt) M/V ⁶⁸

Miniskirt was AOA(3rd generation)'s commercial breakthrough single, reaching number 11 on South Korea's Gaon Digital Chart, making it their first top twenty entry. In the opening scene of their music video, on a large bed, one of the artists is dressed in white mini-shorts and sleepwear. A slow shot lingers on her thighs—a highly sexualized camera angle. For the dance scenes, the group wears tight miniskirt suits, high heels, and black stockings. This uniform style enhances the objectification effect. The highlight of the choreography is the "Zipper Move": one of the most iconic moves where the performers mimic zipping up a skirt, adding an extra layer of suggestive touch. There are also several moves where they spread their fingers to emphasize the curve of their hips. In this generation, girl group styles are highly polarized—either innocent or sexy. I believe this period marked one of the most objectifying phases for women in K-pop.

2020s: A Return to the Innocent and Cute Concepts

▶ NewJeans (뉴진스) 'Ditto' Official MV (side A) ⁶⁹

Recent girl groups have revived the cute and playful concept, but compared to the 1990s–2000s, there is a noticeable increase in artificiality, both in costume design and idol

⁶⁸ AOA "AOA - 짧은 치마 (Miniskirt) M/V", January 15, 2014, YouTube, 3mins 41secs, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q6f-LLM1H6U>

⁶⁹ HYBE LABELS "NewJeans (뉴진스) 'Ditto' Official MV (side A)", December 19, 2022, YouTube, 5mins 33secs, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pSUydWEqKwE>

performance styles. The carefully curated aesthetics and highly polished stage presence reflect a more strategic and manufactured approach, distinguishing them from the more organic charm of earlier generations.

An analysis of K-pop music videos from 2004–2005 and 2014–2015 reveals a gradual increase in sexual suggestiveness over time. Research indicates that the level of direct sexual depiction through physical affection in 2014 and 2015 remained similar to that of 2004 and 2005. This suggests that the recent rise in sexual suggestiveness is due to an overall increase rather than a shift in the way sexualization is presented. On average, the presence of provocative clothing in music videos has increased from 1.32 to 4.08 instances per video over the past decade.⁷⁰

4. The K-pop Dance Impact On Children

As the K-pop industry has evolved, entertainment companies have increasingly treated it as a commercial enterprise, with the primary goal of attracting fans and generating economic profit. In this context, it is unsurprising that audiences become immersed in the carefully crafted fantasy that K-pop presents.

For many fans, K-pop dance provides a sense of identity and belonging. As Chuyun Oh, a Fulbright scholar and Associate Professor of Dance at San Diego State University, wrote, “they identify K-pop dance as a ‘home’ from which they, at least temporarily, see a sense of belonging.”⁷¹ This strong emotional connection has contributed to the widespread popularity of K-pop cover dance, which revolves around imitation. Oh further explains that “K-pop cover

⁷⁰Bohye Song, “Seeing Is Believing: Content Analysis of Sexual Content in Korean Music Videos” (MA Thesis, Southern Utah University, 2016).

⁷¹ Chuyun Oh, *K-pop Dance*, 2022, 4, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003212188>.

dance is a practice of imitation – dancers lip-sync in Korean, wear makeup and dress like K-pop idols, and replicate the original choreography. Identity passing is inevitable in cover dance, and similarity matters more than originality.”⁷²

Under the influence of this cover culture, I have observed a significant number of young girls on the Chinese short-video platform Douyin mimicking K-pop idols. These videos often feature underage girls performing adult choreography, wearing similar costumes, and dancing to songs with sexually suggestive lyrics— content that has been widely embraced by the public.

One particular video caught my attention, and it’s a good example of how K-pop dance normalizes the sexualization of kids.⁷³ In the video, a little girl dressed in fancy costumes performs the choreography of the song, which includes hip and chest rolling, as well as hand gestures that touch her hips and chest. Her facial expressions feature exaggerated smiles, flirtatious eye-closing and winks, along with performed air kisses. This song’s lyrics go as follows:

"Kiss me, under the Paris twilight
Kiss me, out on the moonlit floor
Kiss me, under the Paris twilight
(uh-huh)
So kiss me."

Both the lyrics and the dance moves are highly inappropriate for an eight-year-old. For example, the hair-flipping movement at the beginning is often used in body language to convey feminine allure. The girl’s facial expression is also overly mature, which I find quite uncomfortable. Interestingly, this video has 1,460 likes and 88 comments, none of which raise

⁷² Oh, *K-Pop Dance*, 7.

⁷³ HelloDanceKids 心儿, “穿粉色系千金风跳Lisa这支小甜歌，氛围感拉满💕” Oct 25, 2024, DouYin, 19seconds, <https://v.douyin.com/CeiX91Cw/> P@K.jC 06/29 xSy:/

similar concerns; they're all praising the girl's beauty and cuteness, and even showing admiration. This phenomenon raises important questions about the normalization of adult aesthetics and sexual suggestiveness in children's performances, particularly within the K-pop influence.

This phenomenon raises important questions about the normalization of adult aesthetics and sexual suggestiveness in children's performances, particularly within the K-pop influence. But beyond the performances themselves, what do these viral dance videos reveal about broader societal aesthetics? Why are such problematic dances not only taught to minors by dance instructors but also filmed and shared online by parents—and, in many cases, enthusiastically embraced by online audiences?

In Chapter 5, I explore how people around these performances—teachers, parents, and content creators—perceive this trend. Based on a series of informal interviews, I present some of their personal views on why these dances are taught, shared, and enjoyed, and what they believe this says about audience taste and cultural acceptance.

Chapter 5: Cultural Acceptance and Audience Dynamics

1. Parents', Teachers', and Kids' Perspectives: What Drives Acceptance or Rejection of These Dances?

Long, waist-length black hair cascades down, leaving the neck exposed. A tight-fitting leopard-print long-sleeve top barely covers the chest, revealing the lower ribs and navel. The lower body is clad in loose black leather pants, with a fluffy fur belt draping down to the knees. The dance movements include an upper-body wave, with the hands tracing from the mouth down the chest to the abdomen. This is followed by a pose where both knees bend, hands press against the left thigh, and the head circles from the right in a full arc, lifting up from the left. Next, the right hip quickly pops up and drops, leading into a rolling motion of the hips and buttocks.

With the SG's lyrics "Yeah, Sexy Girl," by DJ Snake, Ozuna, Megan Thee Stallion, LISA of BLACKPINK, the dancer kneels with legs spread apart, performing a body wave from the head down, close to the floor, while lifting the hips high. With knees straightened, a few twerking motions follow, after which the hands glide up from the calves to the thighs while the head and upper body rise. The dance ends with the dancer caressing their neck and chest, throwing their head back, and turning their back to the audience at a 45-degree angle, finishing with two consecutive upward hip thrusts.

I found this dance video on the Xiaohongshu profile of a girl born in 2016. The song choice, costume selection, and dance movements are highly inappropriate for a child. However, all the comments under the video were full of praise.

As I continued browsing through the content posted on this account, I discovered that it is managed by the girl's mother, as the child herself does not use a phone. The account exclusively

features videos of the girl dancing, with most performances in jazz dance and K-pop styles. Each video showcases carefully coordinated outfits, and in the comments, people frequently ask where the girl's clothes are from. The mother often responds by recommending a specific brand's account. I came across an interesting comment on this account. A dance teacher of a young girl commented on her video, calling her a "Hot Girl!" The girl's mother responded, "So happy to receive a compliment from the teacher! Keep going and become even hotter!"

I was quite shocked. It suddenly made me realize how vulnerable an 8-year-old girl is—how easily a child can be shaped by the negligence of her parents and other trusted adults, like dance teachers. This also connects to a broader issue in the digital age—social media has transformed childhood and parental roles. As more and more parents start posting videos of their children to the Internet, “Gradually, some parents began to actively promote their children by creating and posting content involving them when they realized it was becoming a source of income. Parents can direct the children's behavior to ensure it is suitable for the platform. However, the issue here is that once the intent behind the posting changes from enjoyment to compensation, the child's status then changes to that of a worker. In this context, an innocent video of a child dancing is no longer just about self-expression or fun— it becomes a performance shaped by what gains traction online, sometimes at the expense of the child’s well-being.”⁷⁴

If a young girl receives praise for being “hot” rather than for her skill or creativity, she may unconsciously start valuing appearance and external validation over her artistic growth. And if her parents see such content as a means to attract engagement, they may unknowingly push her

⁷⁴ Maggioni C. Casseus, “Mom’s Social Media Account Featuring Her Kids: New York’s Amended Coogan Act Exemplifies the Method to Regulate Parental Exploitation,” *Scholarship @ Hofstra Law*, n.d., <https://scholarlycommons.law.hofstra.edu/hlr/vol52/iss3/10>.

further into this role. The line between self-expression and commodification blurs, raising serious ethical concerns about how children are shaped in a digital landscape where virality and profit dictate behavior. It's unsettling to realize how easily the perspectives and limitations of the adults around them can mold a child's mindset. What seems like a casual comment today could quietly shape their self-worth and long-term aspirations.

This also highlights the huge responsibility that teachers hold in shaping their students' self-perception and values. A dance teacher's words carry weight, and their role extends far beyond teaching technical skills. They help shape a child's confidence, self-worth, and understanding of what truly matters in their craft. If teachers are not mindful of the language they use or the values they hold, they may miss the opportunity to correct the misguided influence of parents, or worse, lead a child down the wrong path when there was no issue to begin with.

I interviewed several experienced Street Jazz Dance professors and teachers in China to learn about how they consider pedagogy in the digital age of K-pop. Interviews were conducted over the phone in March 2025. I will refer to them as Teacher A, Teacher B & Teacher C to maintain their anonymity. I've paraphrased our conversation below. Teacher A was my Street Jazz Dance professor during my undergraduate college years. She has over ten years of teaching experience. Teacher B has seven years of teaching experience. Teacher C has 13 years of teaching experience and also taught my Street Jazz class during my time in undergrad; her main style focuses on Waacking. She is also a mother of a 7-year-old girl. All of these artists emphasized that classes for adults and children are not conducted similarly.

Teacher B explained that the key difference lies in the teaching approach. For children, more engaging and playful language is used to spark their interest, whereas for adults, a more

approachable tone is adopted to help ease any anxiety. When I asked whether there were differences in the course content, Teacher B stated that in her classes, there were no specific distinctions based on age. The curriculum is structured according to technical levels rather than age groups.

Teacher A mentioned that she considers age differences when designing her courses, but she focuses more on technical difficulty rather than the appropriateness of the dance itself. However, she emphasized that the word "sexy" would never appear in her children's jazz class, as she prioritizes enthusiasm, positivity, and confidence in young students. In adult classes, she guides students to explore more diverse forms of expression based on the feel of the music and the dance movements. She also mentioned that dance teachers have a significant influence on children's aesthetics, as kids are highly skilled at imitation. Therefore, she emphasized that at the dance studio where she currently teaches, there are specific guidelines for teachers' attire, makeup, hair color, tattoos, and piercings, aiming for a natural, healthy appearance, avoiding too dramatic an appearance. She also shared that she appreciates dance styles that exude confidence and power, and she incorporates similar styles and attitudes into her teaching.

Teacher C said that part of the meaning of teaching for her is to promote the culture—she believes dancers have a responsibility to share their art. When teaching children, she tries to adjust her language to make it more understandable for them, even though most of the kids she teaches are actually more technically skilled than the average adult beginner.

When asked whether she avoids overly feminine or sexy dance movements in children's classes, she explained that Waacking, as a dance style, was originally born out of resistance to discrimination against marginalized groups such as the American LGBTQ+ & Black community.

It was created to celebrate femininity, and under the influence of today's mainstream Waacking aesthetics, it still carries a strong adult tone. Although the style has evolved over decades and now includes dancers of all kinds, the mainstream aesthetic still centers around expressions of sensuality and the celebration of feminine beauty. In her own and her friends' experience teaching children's Waacking classes, they try to avoid using explicitly sexual language. Instead, they use words like "confidence" or "queen energy" to help kids understand and embody the movement. However, she added that she believes parents have a greater influence on children. One of her students' parents takes her seven-year-old daughter to watch Vogue Balls, which are underground dance competitions rooted in Black and Latinx LGBTQ+ communities. They often feature categories such as voguing, runway, and fashion, where participants express identity, creativity, and performance art. In China, Vogue Balls is a more underground scene than waacking. They tend to be more flamboyant, overtly sexual, and explicit in both movement and costume. She said that she wouldn't introduce such content to her daughter at an early age, but if a child asked her about it, she wouldn't hide the truth either.

All of these teachers were gracious enough to share their thoughts on K-pop dance. Teacher A said she thinks K-pop dance is fun to watch, but she wouldn't choose to teach or perform it because she doesn't like seeing kids dance or use expressions to please others. She also mentioned that none of her students are super into K-pop dance. Teacher B said that as a dancer, she wouldn't feel comfortable doing girl group-style K-pop dance. It just feels awkward to her, doesn't match her personality or taste, and gives her a sense of being turned into a product. Teacher C said that there must be a reason why so many people love K-pop, and that the development of K-pop and Korean street dance has been mutually supportive. Although she's not personally a fan of the style, she said she respects it.

In an interview with Parent D, a dance enthusiast and 36-year-old mother of a 10-year-old boy and a 7-year-old girl, she said she doesn't think it's inappropriate for girls to dance K-pop. She sees K-pop as youthful and positive.

After watching the video I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, (A girl born in 2016, dressed in an adult-like outfit, performs a sensual street jazz dance in a dance studio.) Parent D said the girl danced really well, and she didn't see any issue with it. However, she mentioned that she probably wouldn't dress her daughter in similar outfits. As for the dance moves, she didn't think there was anything problematic. When I asked about the meaning behind the more suggestive movements, she said she hadn't really thought about what specific dance moves might imply or communicate. She also mentioned that if parents are considering a future in the entertainment industry for their kids, it's understandable to start sharing content on social media early. When I brought up concerns about the safety of posting children's dance videos online, D said that children's safety can be protected through supervision from both institutions and parents.

The three teachers have different ways of identifying, assessing, and accepting sexualized content. After watching the dance video of the young girl shown at the beginning of this chapter, Teacher B commented that it was "too much." Teacher A and B believed that girls at that age should not express themselves in such a way, and that the dance movements were inappropriate for a child. Both of them quickly recognized the sexual messaging conveyed through the choreography. However, Teacher C expressed that, in her view, the majority of the movements in the video were not problematic, except a few movements, such as kneeling on the floor while the upper body moves close to the ground, and twerking, which were not appropriate for young girls. She explained that expressing sensuality doesn't necessarily mean trying to attract the opposite

sex. It could simply be a way of embracing and expressing one's sense of charm. For example, people often assume that wearing revealing outfits in sensual heels dance videos is meant to draw male attention. However, heels is a dance style that focuses on body lines and movement aesthetics. It would be inappropriate to interpret every display of beauty and self-expression as catering to the male gaze. She went on to say that she agrees such sensual movements should be avoided in children's performances, and that they are more appropriate when interpreted by women aged 16 or older.

When discussing the issue of young girls' costumes in performances and videos, the interviewees expressed differing opinions. Teachers A and B felt that the girl's top in the video was inappropriate and overly adult-like. While it didn't directly expose private areas such as the chest, the overall style leaned toward an adult aesthetic. In contrast, Teacher C and Parent D saw nothing inappropriate about the outfit. They pointed out that the girl did not expose her chest—only her belly was visible—and she was wearing loose-fitting pants on the bottom. Teacher C mentioned that she often dresses her own daughter in similar styles, which might be influenced by her own bold and trendy fashion sense. She enjoys dressing her daughter up and making her look pretty. When I asked whether clothing choices might affect the meaning conveyed through dance, all three teachers agreed that costume plays an important role in shaping a dance's message. However, they also noted that audiences have become accustomed to this kind of children's performance attire, and sometimes, choreographers prioritize aesthetics over deeper considerations about what the costume may imply.

During this interview, what stood out to me the most was that all four interviewees mentioned they hadn't thought deeply about many aspects, so they didn't see them as issues.

These potential issues include how dance movements convey messages or whether the degree of exposure in costumes affects the expression of a dance piece. This suggests that many dancers and audiences may naturally accept certain visual and physical expressions without deliberately analyzing their meaning or impact. I believe this is influenced by dance education, cultural background, and personal experience.

During my dance training in China, the focus was primarily on technique and aesthetic expression. At the same time, dancers were rarely encouraged to analyze the social or gender-related meanings behind body language. As a result, dancers in China may not develop the habit of critical thinking in this regard. The mindset of “this is just part of dance” or “it has always been this way” leads both dancers and audiences to overlook the potential social implications.

This shared attitude of “not seeing a problem” in the interviews is a phenomenon worth discussing. In my further research, I hope to explore whether most people “haven’t thought about it” because these topics are not considered issues that need discussion in their environment, or if this unconscious acceptance continuously reinforces certain established ideas, such as perceptions of sexualization.

2. Viewer Behavior: How Likes, Shares, and Comments on Videos Shape Content Creator Behavior on Social Media

In the previous chapters, we examined how social media and influencers influence audience perceptions through their content, often resulting in negative impacts. However, this influence is not unidirectional. Fans’ interactions, feedback, preferences, and even collective

behaviors, in turn, shape the expressions, behaviors, and even the aesthetic orientations of content creators, internet celebrities, and celebrity idols.

While these creators appear to have the agency of free creation, their videos can essentially be seen as transactions—exchanging their image and content for followers and likes.⁷⁵ For most independent content creators and idols, the ultimate goal is to attract more admiration, as audience engagement directly translates into commercial value.

This results in data-driven content shifts, where creators adjust their output based on audience reactions and platform algorithms. Fan expectations and image management further reinforce this dynamic, compelling creators to continuously refine their appearance, video style, and online persona to align with prevailing aesthetic norms and trends. This not only affects their social capital, measured in terms of followers and engagement, but also reflects their subtle yet profound compliance with platform regulations and cultural standards.

In 2021, I worked as a dance coach for the Shanghai team of AKB48 under their management company. During that time, I came to know many young performers whose experiences shed light on the intersection of idol culture, gender, and media. One former member, whom I will refer to as E to maintain her anonymity, transitioned into working as an independent content creator after going through a contract termination. Her experience offers valuable insight into the challenges faced by young female idols.

AKB48 is a large-scale Japanese female idol group that debuted on December 8, 2005, with renowned lyricist Yasushi Akimoto serving as the general producer. The group was founded

⁷⁵ Eloise Lucia Burchell, "Algorithms, Aesthetics, and Agency: An Exploration Into the Performance of the Self Amongst Young Women on TikTok," *RE:THINK Journal of Creative Ethnography*. Vol. 4, Issue 1, Spring 2023, no. ISSN 2516-8088 (n.d.): 17–28.

with the idea of transforming the notion of “idols” from distant celebrities into “idols you can meet”—performers whose growth fans could witness and share in. Over the years, as AKB48’s fame continued to rise, many of its members expanded into various sectors of the entertainment industry beyond singing.⁷⁶

When we talked about what being an idol meant to her, E said that an idol is someone who offers emotional support to others and brings people happiness. E pointed out that one key difference between Japanese and Korean idol groups lies in their approach to training and debut. Korean idols typically go through a long period of intensive training before debuting, and they are expected to appear as “finished products” once they debut. In contrast, Japanese idols often debut much earlier in their development, and fans are encouraged to follow their growth over time, typically over the course of a 7 to 8-year contract with groups like AKB48, watching them evolve into mature performers.

Based on my own observations during my time working with AKB48 Team SH, the members’ schedules typically included performances, rehearsals, dance classes, vocal training, acting lessons, music video shoots, promotional activities, video recordings, and handshake events. Among all these activities, I found the handshake events particularly unsettling. The transactional nature of this physical and emotional access made me feel particularly uneasy.

“Handshake events are typically seen by record companies as a strategy to boost the sales and visibility of their artists. Supporters can obtain “entry tickets” to these events through various means, such as purchasing albums or photobooks, entering raffles held at concerts or theater performances, or bidding in online auctions. With a ticket, participants can exchange it

⁷⁶ 维基媒体项目贡献者, “AKB48,” 维基百科, 自由的百科全书, April 17, 2025, <https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/AKB48>.

for an official admission pass at the designated time and location. They are then allowed to physically interact with their favorite idols by shaking hands, and engage in brief verbal exchanges during the interaction.”⁷⁷ When I asked if E felt any objectification and sexualization when in AKB48, she replied that as an idol, she needed to attract fans, and being objectified and sexualized was part of this job. E mentioned that she would sometimes take fans’ opinions into account, such as suggestions about her hairstyle or clothing, based on the comments they left on her social media posts. E also mentioned that she had to be especially careful about her words and behavior, as they were often magnified and interpreted by fans. However, the strongest sense of restriction during her time with AKB48 did not come from the fans, but from the company itself. Toward the end of her time there, she felt increasingly unhappy. At the time, she couldn’t quite explain why—she just felt unwell. It was only after leaving that environment and entering a new line of work that she gradually realized she had been treated as a tool. In 2021, E’s grandmother fell ill, and she was deeply worried, hoping to return home to see her. However, the company repeatedly denied her requests. At first, they cited her involvement in rehearsals for an upcoming performance as the reason she couldn’t take time off. Later, they warned that violating the company’s arrangements would result in a hefty financial penalty. Her reflection reveals how the idol system can depersonalize performers, reducing them to instruments for commercial gain.

Based on my experience working with AKB48 Team SH, I witnessed many girls entering the idol industry at a very young age, typically between 16 and 18, and sometimes as young as 14. Entering the system with little life experience, they quickly adapted to a work culture that normalized being looked at, judged, and objectified. Long-term contracts, low pay, and strict behavioral control reinforced this dynamic. While the industry outwardly promotes ideas of

⁷⁷ 维基媒体项目贡献者, “握手會,” 维基百科·自由的百科全书, April 3, 2025, <https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E6%8F%A1%E6%89%8B%E6%9C%83>.

growth, what often happens is a quiet internalization of objectification as part of daily life. Over time, this not only shapes how these girls see themselves, but also how audiences, especially young fans, learn to view the female body: as something to be consumed, evaluated, and possessed. E's reflection, along with my own observations, underscores the deep and lasting impact of entering such a system too early, one that blurs the line between aspiration and exploitation.

Women are often seen as the “second sex”—more vulnerable, bound by many rules, and easily influenced by outside pressures. That's why it's important for girls to receive the right guidance from a young age. Ideally, this starts with their parents. But when parents give the wrong kind of guidance, I believe teachers, who often have more knowledge and experience, have a responsibility to step in and help. However, when teachers also face their own limits and blind spots, it becomes necessary for the government to take action. Policies and laws become the last layer of protection.

In the next chapter, I will look at how China's Clean Cyberspace Campaign (清朗行动) tries to manage online content for young people, and what that means for education, media, and control.

Chapter 6: Regulation and Content Control

1. Policy in Action: The Case of China's “清朗行动” (Clean Cyberspace Campaign)

The two Chinese characters 清朗 (Qing Lang) have specific meanings. The character 清 (qing), according to the Xinhua Dictionary, has several meanings: 1. Water or other liquid, gas is pure and transparent, without mixed substances. 2. Quiet 3. Leaving nothing behind, completely clean." The character 朗 (lang) means: "bright, well-lit."⁷⁸ Together, the two characters signify "clean and bright."

The 清朗 (Qing Lang) series of special operations is a cyberspace governance campaign led by the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC), with the participation of multiple departments, including the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, the Ministry of Public Security, the Ministry of Culture, the State Administration for Market Regulation, and the National Radio and Television Administration. This campaign aims to regulate the internet environment across all platforms, including portal websites, search engines, website directories, Weibo, WeChat, mobile applications, cloud storage, job recruitment sites, and travel platforms. The governance scope covers illegal and non-compliant text, images, audio, and video content, making it a large-scale "cleanup" and "sweep" of cyberspace⁷⁹.

I searched on the official website of the Office of the Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission and the Cyberspace Administration of China reveals that the term 清朗 Qing Lang first appeared in April 2014 in an article titled "The Cyberspace Administration of China: Reject

⁷⁸ hwxnet.com, “清字的解释-在线新华字典,” hewnet.com, n.d., <https://zd.hwxnet.com/search.do?keyword=%E6%B8%85&x=0&y=0>.

⁷⁹ “2016年国家网信办牵头开展‘清朗’系列专项行动剑指网络顽疾形成持续震慑_中央网络安全和信息化委员会办公室,” n.d., https://www.cac.gov.cn/2016-11/25/c_1119991081.htm.

“Pathological Clickbait' and Build a Clean Cyberspace Together.”⁸⁰ This article summarizes a symposium held by the Cyberspace Administration of China on April 21, 2014, in Beijing. During the symposium, major Chinese websites unanimously recognized the severe harm that pornographic and obscene content posed to minors and public morality. They pledged to fulfill their social responsibilities by not disseminating or providing access to such content and not gaining traffic from harmful information. At the meeting, then-Deputy Director of the CAC, Ren Xianliang, emphasized that news and commercial websites, as vital information dissemination platforms, must strictly fulfill their responsibility to "eliminate pornography and vulgarity." He called for a zero-tolerance policy, strengthening internal self-regulation, and establishing long-term supervision mechanisms. The CAC also vowed to enhance supervision and management to ensure a clean and healthy cyberspace. From this article, it is evident that when the Qing Lang Campaign was first introduced, its primary focus was on cracking down on pornographic websites.

Recently, the CAC released "Key points of rectification of the 清朗 (Qinglang) series of special actions in 2025," which includes the following eight aspects⁸¹:

“Regulating the online environment during the Chinese New Year – Cracking down on extreme polarization, false information, vulgar and obscene content, and illegal traffic diversion.

Regulating false information from “self-media” – Standardizing information labeling to prevent public misinformation and eliminating pseudo-professional content.

⁸⁰ “国家网信办：拒绝‘病态点击率’共建清朗网络空间_中央网络安全和信息化委员会办公室,” n.d., https://www.cac.gov.cn/2014-04/22/c_126417056.htm.

⁸¹ “中央网信办发布2025年‘清朗’系列专项行动整治重点_中央网络安全和信息化委员会办公室,” n.d., https://www.cac.gov.cn/2025-02/21/c_1741837533079135.htm.

Cracking down on malicious marketing in short videos – Targeting fake staged content, deceptive personal branding, marketing schemes, and controversial topic manipulation while enhancing content labeling.

Preventing AI technology abuse – Strengthening AI-generated content management and cracking down on fake AI-generated information and online manipulation by bot armies.

Targeting corporate smear campaigns – Combating false accusations against companies, fake product reviews, and defamatory content to optimize the business environment.

Regulating the online environment for minors during summer vacation – Strengthening content supervision for minors and cleaning up information on children's smart devices and related platforms.

Addressing issues in online live streaming and tipping – Cracking down on deceptive tipping practices and preventing minors from engaging in tipping while enforcing stricter regulations on live-streaming reward functions.

Combating the manipulation of negative public sentiment – Cracking down on exaggerated hype, instigating group conflicts, spreading fear, and online violence.”

According to Wang Zhian, a former journalist and program host at China Central Television (CCTV) and the chief investigative journalist at The Beijing News. Zhian later moved to Japan and launched his personal YouTube channel, Wang Bureau Case Review, after being completely censored by the Chinese government. The statistics from the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) indicate the following:

“In 2016, the Clean Cyberspace campaign was conducted only once. From 2017 to 2019, there were no Clean Cyberspace operations.

In 2020, the campaign took place twice.

In 2021, it was carried out seven times.

In 2022, it occurred six times.

In 2023, the number increased to 11 times.

In 2024, the campaign was also conducted 11 times.”⁸²

From these measures, it is evident that the CAC has gradually expanded its scope of supervision and regulation.

However, the lack of specific legal regulations or the vagueness of existing laws has granted law enforcement agencies considerable discretionary power. It has become commonplace for ordinary citizens to find their comments or posts suddenly deleted. Using excuses such as protecting minors and cracking down on pornography, the authorities are, in reality, “adjusting and supervising” public thought and entertainment to maintain the Communist Party’s control.

2. Wu Liufang's 擦边(cabian) Incident: Unclear Rules and Self-Censorship on Platforms

At the end of 2024, an incident involving a content creator known for “擦边(cabian)” content led to disciplinary action. The central figure was Wu Liufang, a former Chinese gymnast

⁸² 王志安, “吴柳芳事件大结局：习近平缔造的‘清朗运动’如何维护‘体制贞操’？ | 清风已经不困了 | 擦边视频 | 抖音 | 20241226,” December 26, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xY4KblyB6Lo>.

and world champion who retired due to health reasons. In April 2024, she reappeared on Douyin under the alias "56 Xuejie," posting over 50 dance videos that were considered provocative. Her outfits were revealing, and the dance movements were characterized by small body undulations. The videos were filmed in various locations, including indoor bedrooms and outdoor streets.

On November 22, Olympic champion Guan Chenchen left a critical comment under one of Wu's videos, stating that the content was inappropriate for an athlete's public image. This remark triggered widespread discussion and controversy. Shortly after, Wu's Douyin account was restricted from gaining new followers, though the restriction was lifted on December 1, leading her follower count to surge to 6.31 million. However, on December 24, Douyin's Security Center issued an announcement accusing Wu's MCN agency, "Dahaixingchen," of using multiple accounts to spread vulgar content for engagement, which was deemed highly inappropriate. As a result, Wu's account was muted, her monetization privileges were suspended, and artificially inflated followers were removed, reducing her follower count to 44,000.

This incident sparked extensive societal debate regarding the career transitions of retired athletes, the regulatory boundaries of platform governance, and broader social tolerance. On December 9, Douyin's Vice President, Li Liang, issued a statement emphasizing:

1. Wu Liufang's rapid follower growth resulted from media coverage and not Douyin's algorithm.
2. In China, content moderation on any platform must strictly follow two principles: national laws and regulations, and platform community guidelines. These are the only

rules governing content decisions, and platforms neither have the authority nor should they exceed these regulations.”⁸³

Li’s statement confirmed that Wu’s followers were gained through legitimate means, but her account was ultimately suspended due to government directives. Given that Wu had been posting similar 擦边(cabian) content for eight months prior without penalty. I’m curious about the real reason behind her sudden punishment.

Journalist Wang Zhian pointed out that the Wu Liufang incident exemplifies the unwritten rules of Chinese-style censorship—turning a blind eye until an issue escalates. If Wu had engaged in borderline content discreetly, these rules might have allowed her to continue. However, once the controversy gained widespread public attention, she was no longer just an individual; she became a symbol of the system. In the public eye, she was tied to the national honor associated with Chinese athletes. As a result, her borderline content was no longer seen as a personal choice but as an offense against the system itself—“a desecration of the system’s chastity.”⁸⁴

The reason why thousands of other 擦边 (cabian) content creators have not been penalized is due to the opacity of the law, and this opacity is deliberately created by the censorship mechanism, which intensifies self-censorship among individuals. If the boundaries were clear enough, there would be fewer people trying to push them. However, the current lack of clarity is intentionally designed, leading to more people mastering the unwritten rules and more creators testing the limits.

⁸³ “微博,” 微博Lite, n.d., <https://m.weibo.cn/status/5109626114676032>.

⁸⁴ 王志安, “吴柳芳事件大结局：习近平缔造的‘清朗运动’如何维护‘体制贞操’？ | 清风已经不困了 | 擦边视频 | 抖音 | 20241226.”

This not only contributes to the issue of soft-core erotic videos but also raises concerns about the government's and the ruling party's restrictions on people's rights and the lack of transparency. If laws were formulated with logical precision, the use of power would inevitably be constrained in the end.

CONCLUSION

This research started with a question: Where is the line between empowerment and sexualization in dance? After a year of research, my answer is that the line lies in whether the parties involved have sufficient self-awareness and agency. Along the way, I examined how young girls are taught to move, how algorithms promote certain bodies and styles to the forefront, and how trendy pop aesthetics influence what is perceived as beautiful, desirable, and acceptable. Through interviews, personal experience, and critical analysis, I saw how girls are often sexualized before they even understand what that means—and how their bodies are trained to fit into systems that benefit from their visibility, obedience, and charm.

Ultimately, this is not just about dance. It is about how difficult it is to grow up as a girl in a world that constantly looks at you, judges you, and tells you how to be and not to be. It is about how even joy—like dancing can be shaped by outside expectations. As a dancer, a choreographer, a teacher, and someone who once admired K-pop with no second thoughts, dance and movement are no longer just about presenting beauty or creating visual effects to me—it's how I connect with myself and the world. It has become an anchor for my reflection and questioning, giving me the courage to challenge what the world often sees as normal. This thesis is my way of saying: we need to look more closely. We need to offer protection with gentleness. And we need to listen—especially to those who are still learning how to express themselves through their bodies.

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