

Sexualized Depictions of AKB48 Girls in Their Summer Music Videos

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ABSTRACT

A pop idol group in Japan, AKB48, has female members capable of attracting the opposite sex into their fans. In this study, I will analyze the depictions of women portrayed in AKB48's five summer music videos. To reach the objective of my analysis, I will use the theory of male gaze, specifically on the way the members are depicted in the videos. From my analysis, I discovered that through the perspective of male gaze, the idols are depicted as alluring, seductive, and playful. It can be assumed that the portrayal might be a strategy used to hoist their popularity over the other girl groups in Japan. Therefore, the sexualized depiction of the idols is actually proven to be successful in making the group popular.

Keywords: japanese idols; music video; male gaze; sexualized depictions.

INTRODUCTION

Music videos, the combination of music and movies, have the ability to provide audiences with aural and visual experiences. It takes a major part in the modern era's pastimes and in the music industry itself (Zhang et al., 2010). Music videos accompany pop music, also known as commercial popular music, in order to broaden its popularity. Globalization introduced foreign genres of pop such as Japanese pop. Japanese pop, shortened into J-Pop, is produced by Japanese people for young to middle-aged consumers. AKB48 is known to be Japan's most popular idol group to the point that they inspired Indonesian artists to follow their footsteps. The group earned a spot among the highest-earning musical acts in Japan and is positioned fifth among worldwide best-selling girl groups. Although the group is deemed to be the top in the entertainment industry, there are controversies over their music videos. Their music video "Heavy Rotation" was reprimanded due to impropriety, displaying minors in lingerie, kissing and sharing a bath. Gravure-themed music videos portray the members in seductive garments; it can be viewed as an approach to sexualize underage girls. Because of the gravure content, many men are attracted to the idols and become fans of those particular idols. Many of them realize that this type of self-promotion is the most beneficial to their career. An AKB48 member named Sashihara Rino promised to perform in a bikini if she was voted first place in a popularity contest between fellow members (Gia, 2015). Later, she won and this proved how much gravure attractions can boost an idol's popularity.

AKB48 continues to release music videos throughout the summer, and the girls' bodies are regularly displayed on the screen. Music videos sometimes feature gravure themes to depict what is considered to be an attraction to the viewer, such as an idol's body part. This is because the summer season is closely related to the heat, pools and beaches. In the summer music videos, the girls wear revealing clothes like bikinis. It is a recurring theme to appeal to men with it. Gravure themes in the music videos are shown from time to time that are related to displaying the idols' body parts and other things considered to be an act to attract the viewers. The idols sometimes appear seductive in the music videos. Since Japanese fans are accustomed to gravure contents from idols, they will not find the sensuous parts abnormal because those seem more or less similar to gravure. From ten years and beyond, almost all of AKB48's summer-themed

songs achieved glorious fame. The fact that the group's popularity mainly comes from the summer releases is also present. While that may sound positive, at the same time it denotes that innumerable audiences are able to access their music videos which contain male gaze content.

More than a few of AKB48's summer music videos depict the girls through a specific perspective. They point the camera shots at certain body parts of the idol, furthermore using the choreography to imply some portrayals at them. I am going to use Laura Mulvey's theory of "Male Gaze" to identify the portrayal of the idols in the music video. In her book *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, the male gaze is described as the situation where women in the media are viewed from the eyes of a heterosexual man. These women are represented as passive objects of male desire. Women in their traditional role are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*. "The man controls the film fantasy and also emerges as the representative of power in a further sense: as the bearer of the look of the spectator, transferring it behind the screen to neutralize the extra-diegetic tendencies represented by woman as spectacle". Women are represented as passive objects of male desire. Passive objects refer to the fact that they are powerless when they are in the eyes of men. In relation to the text that will be discussed, this representation is talking about the shots that fixate on a woman's body. Even if the viewers are not heterosexual men, such as fellow women or homosexual men, they unwillingly see women through a heterosexual man's perspective. This theory is essential to analyze the depiction of AKB48's music video through the male gaze. Objectification occurs as the shots focus on the idols' body parts: their face, breasts and butts. Suggestions of nudity, dance movements that indicate sexiness, and wearing swimsuits or other revealing costumes also add to the objectification attempt. This objectification can be considered as sexualized portrayals of the female body. I apply this theory into the analysis and identify the objectification attempts to find the portrayals that the music videos are trying to imply.

The Depictions of the Girls as Alluring

The girls are perceived as alluring when their attractiveness excites others. To prove that the idols have beauty and completely fit the labels of 'alluring,' the camera often directs their shots towards certain parts of the idols' bodies. They tempt the viewers with parts that are desirable. The shots vary from showing their faces, especially focused on their eyes and lips, their breasts, and also their butts. Having sexy lips is one of the traits for a woman to be considered alluring. A study held by JAMA Facial Plastic Surgery in 2017 informs that lips with a surface area that is 53.5% bigger than the women's natural mouth size that take up about 10% of the lower third of their face are deemed as attractive. The sexiest ratio for lips is 1:2; this means that the upper lip is half the size of the bottom lip (Popenko, 2017). If the idols' lips fit the ratio of the study above, it means that they are considered to have sexy lips and they are attractive. In the music videos *Sayonara Crawl* and *Ponytail to Shushu*, the idols are seen mouthing the lyrics to the song while moving their heads to create minimum movements. The lip-sync movements they did grabbed the viewers' attention. The shot allows the viewers to see that the idols have attractive pink, glossy lips. The color pink on their lips imply femininity, cuteness and prettiness. "Curiosity and the wish to look intermingle with a fascination with likeness and recognition: the human face, the human body," so Mulvey writes in the book *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. Because of the shots, the viewers become curious, and they want to interact with the idols that have attractive faces and bodies.



Source: Sayonara Crawl by AKB48 (2013)

Breasts are one of the major parts that differentiate the bodies of males and females. In the media, women's breasts are occasionally displayed to attract others. In the male gaze theory, displaying women's body parts to the audience is a form of objectifying women. Objectifying women, in this case, is referring to how the audience is forced to view women through a heterosexual man's perspective. Regardless of the audience's gender, they have to see the idols as alluring when their breasts are sexualized. In *Everyday, Katyusha*, the background is blurred to the extent that the viewers immediately see the breasts instead of anything else. It excites the audience when the girl's breasts simply peek over from the garments, whether it is done intentionally or unintentionally. It allured the audience when excitement ensued. Not showing the breasts whole insinuates playfulness from the girls. Even though they are shown to be doing normal activities such as washing cars and enjoying the breeze of the beach, it can be perceived differently because they are no ordinary girls, but idols. One of the shots in *Ponytail to Shushu* displays the girl's armpit, and it can be seen clean-free of body hair. Girls that do not have body hairs are believed to be attractive. Their attractiveness that is capable of exciting the audience is considered alluring.



Source: Ponytail to Shushu by AKB48 (2010)

If the idols' butts suit the viewers' tastes, then excitement can ensue from them, further labeling them as alluring. In the music videos, the idols may display their butts with or without intention. The music video "Manatsu no Sounds Good" shows a row of the idols' butts as the video starts. Most of the idols' backs can be seen since the shot is taken from behind. By doing that, either intentionally or unintentionally, her action is perceived as exciting. She appears attractive while doing so, therefore she is considered as alluring. There are multiple shots towards the idols' butts that occasionally come in a medium close-up shot where the viewers can see their butts and their thighs partly. It is repetitive—but it is a strategy to keep the image of their bodies in their fans' minds. It will become scenes that the fans will always remember. The beauty standard for women usually revolves around the idea of slim bodies, not flabby body parts and smooth skin. Many audiences became fans of the idols after watching the music videos. With the amount of skin exhibited in the music videos, the idols are depicted as alluring

in success. Some comments on the videos mentioned how the members looked energetic, young, beautiful and gorgeous. In this case, their alluringness excited the audience to the point they declared in the comments section that the idols are beautiful and gorgeous in their eyes. These remarks from the viewers indicate that the idols were able to express their alluringness from the music videos. The words used to describe the women—beautiful and gorgeous—are synonymous with the word ‘attractive’. So, energetic, young, beautiful and gorgeous combine into alluring. The idols are said to be attractive by the viewers.



Source: Labrador Retriever by AKB48 (2014)

The Depictions of the Girls as Seductive

Seductive refers to the fact that someone is sexually attractive. It means that the beauty makes someone wish to be sexually pleased by that person. Despite the girls’ actual ages, portraying their ways of seducing the audience and sexiness is the main priority. Seductiveness can be revealed by showing a lot of skin in the music videos. It does not necessarily have to be the breasts or the butts, but act in a way that can seduce men. Seduction usually occurs when the bare part of the body is revealed, such as removing garments to exhibit their chests or making sexually-provoking movements such as gyrating butts. This method can earn the members more supporters.

Implied nudity is one of the ways to present their seductiveness. AKB48 chooses to display it by adding several suggestions of nudity in the summer music videos. The opening scene of *Ponytail to Shushu*’s music video exhibits a changing room where the girls prepare for the beach. This is a method of suggesting that the camera is peeking into the girls’ changing room where they may be changing clothes or even naked. Inside, the idols are conversing while blurred shadows cover their lower bodies. As long as some parts of their bodies are seen unclothed, they are implied as nude in the music video. In another shot, a girl’s shoulders and arms are not covered by a single fabric, and her chest is covered by the locker door. From the bare locations of her body parts, the shot is portrayed as if she is nude. The idea of a nude idol excites those who perceive them, possibly in a sexual way. Her nudity can be considered as an attempt of seduction; the idol tries to seduce the viewers by making them think that she is naked. Her nudity is seen as attractive by the audience, and her bare body parts have no flaws like scars or freckles, thus she is attractive and seductive. Nudity is often implemented in erotic scenes. It is a method meant for seduction. Once the audience is seduced, they have viewed the woman in the male gaze perspective. “To be naked is to be seen naked by others and yet not recognized for oneself,” and “nudity is placed on display” were said in Robert Schultz’s *When Men Look at Women: Sex in an Age of Theory*. In the figures attached above, some parts of the idols’ bodies are displayed bare. They are seen as naked by the audience, and are placed as objects for seduction. The suggestion of nudity shots tries to seduce the audience. The audience ought to be seduced by the view, and they visualize that the idols are naked behind the objects. When the audience imagines that the girls are actually aware that they are being looked at, the depiction causes the idols to be perceived as seductive.



Source: *Ponytail to Shushu* by AKB48 (2010)

The choreography varies in each video, but there are dance movements that can be considered as provocative. There are choreographies where the idols appear as if they are removing their garments. They also curve their chest forwards to flaunt it and move their butts in a gyration as a part of the dance. In *Manatsu no Sounds Good*, the girls dance and make gestures as though they are removing their bikinis by moving their hands from below to the top of their heads. When the camera shot is taken from the side, the audience can see the curves of the idols' bodies. Not only do slim curves indicate beauty, it also portrays that the idols have seductive bodies. The audience can also see the idols' breasts and legs; if their breasts are large and their legs are not flabby, they are perceived as attractive. Their dance movements are portrayed as seductive, and it excites the audience sexually. This choreography intends to show the idols' sexual attractiveness. The moment they do movements as such, they are depicted like they are seducing the viewers. Scenes where women remove their clothes are oftentimes seen in the media, believed to be seductive since nudity is implied and the audience becomes seduced. Seduction happens because they appear as if they wish to be naked, and want the viewers to see them with their garments removed. It further portrays the idols as seductive.



Source: *Manatsu no Sounds Good* by AKB48 (2012)

In the music video *Ponytail to Shushu*, the girls are dancing, and they stretch their arms out while their chest moves forward. This choreography attempts to seduce the audience. Whenever a woman flaunts their breasts, especially like how the music video shot did, people think that the idols' breasts are large and attractive. With their arms stretched out, the audience can clearly view their upper body parts. They wear swimsuits that cover their bodies minimally. It is portrayed that the idols may also want others to see their breasts. This portrayal causes the idols to appear naughty in the eyes of the audience. Movements related to the butt may imply an invitation to a sexual intercourse. In *Manatsu no Sounds Good*, the idols dance and gyrate their butts. The choreography can be seen as a way to flaunt their butts to the audience watching. Gyrating moves are usually associated with sex movements, and so, girls who gyrates their butts are depicted as trying to seduce the audience. The seduction implies that the idols want to show their sexual attractiveness; they move the specific body parts that they want to flaunt. The shots that specifically directed the attention to the gyrating movements arouse the male desire. The

dance movements that they did seduced the audience, and the idols are depicted as seductive. The group and the idols are able to gain more popularity. However, for the idols to be perceived as seductive means that they are being viewed as sexualized objects through the male gaze perspective.



Source: Ponytail to Shushu by AKB48 (2010)

The Depictions of the Girls as Playful

Playful is seen as being happy, full of energy, and eager to play. The theme of the five music videos is summer, so nearly all of the settings are located on the beach. Considering that the most common wear in beaches is swimsuits, they too wear swimsuits in the music videos. The garments they wore are the ones with many colors to portray their playfulness. They are shown doing fun, childish activities from various shots and choreographies that depict them as playful. Decorations placed in the music video shots also imply the idols' playfulness. Playfulness is regarded positively in young girls, and children are socialized by adults to regard playful characteristics shown by girls as attractive (Barnett, 2019). It is one of the traits that men search for in a woman. Cheerful, childlike, gentle and gullible are some of the feminine items in Bem's Sex Role Inventory (Bem, 1974). When the idols are portrayed as cheerful, childlike, gentle and such, they are feminine. The distinction of the idols as pure, playful and feminine, but also seductive has the power to attract many. When combined, the message the music videos are trying to tell becomes stronger.

Playfulness shows from the colors in the music videos. The swimsuits worn by the idols in the summer music videos are colorful. In *Sayonara Crawl*, they wear bikinis in a mixture of bright colors. It is to indicate energy, brightness and also playfulness from the girls. The color blue of the ocean as the setting contrasts with the color of their swimsuits. Their music video location, the beach, is commonly associated with the idea of summer, fun, and joy. It supports the visualization that the idols are playing at the beach with one another, dancing and singing happily. The colorful balloons behind insinuates that the idols are playful; they play with balloons together like children, but they also display their attractiveness to the audience. In another video, *Everyday, Katyusha*, they are depicted as playful by the combination of colors and their action of dancing on the grass instead of the sand. The idols are viewed as active, joyful and united. They may be inviting the audience to play and dance with them on the grass despite having the sand and the water near them, thus they are perceived as playful. The playfulness depicted in the music videos cause the idols to appear attractive in the eyes of the audience watching.



Source: Everyday, Katyusha by AKB48 (2011)

Activities that are related to children are viewed as playful. Some of the scenes attempt to depict the idols as playful by showing them as they play around with each other. The music video “Sayonara Crawl” displays the idols playing in the pool. They are on colorful swim rings while balls float around them in the pool. Similar to the beach, the pool is associated with fun more often than not. The colors indicate the combination of fun, joy and playfulness. The placement of many colored balls which filled the pool indicates that the idols are having fun. Three of the idols in the shot are holding hands while smiling. An action like such implies that they are young, and they still enjoy playing in the pool with their friends. “Innocence” paints a good, pure, unaware and naïve portrayal (Jane, 2020). It suggests them as playful and fun, not knowing that they are alluring and seducing men with their actions. However, their actions are depicted as playful. In *Labrador Retriever*, two of the idols are burying another in sand while the other watches from her seat. Their attractiveness makes them different from ordinary girls; even if they are playing, the idol exposes her legs while the other puts her bare shoulders on view. Playfulness is shown from such kinds of actions, thinking whether or not they did it with intention to attract the viewers.



Source: Labrador Retriever by AKB48 (2014)

Choreographies that imitate children’s games appear playful to the audience. The girls can show their playfulness when they seem like children. They create trains with each other and move around as a part of the choreography in the music video *Labrador Retriever*. In most cases, children are the ones seen making trains and playing with their friends. On the other hand, the idols are clearly no longer considered as children. However, the idols also do the same activity in their choreography, and are perceived identical to children. As the idols do this, they are seen as sources of joy and perceived as energetic girls. They appear innocent and naïve. They attract and seduce the audience with other actions such as seductive movements in the music videos. When the audience thinks that the idols attracted and seduced them either with intention or not, the portrayal of them as childlike causes them to be depicted as playful. The more childish they look, the more they contrast with the two earlier depictions. The idols hug one another like ordinary girls do and they appear to be having fun with each other in the

“Manatsu no Sounds Good” music video. The shot portrays them as playful considering that they are playing with each other. Meanwhile, they also exhibit their attractiveness to the audience. It is as if they become children-like in some parts, but turn alluring and seductive from time to time as well. The audience may feel played by the idols, but it successfully depicts them as playful instead. It portrays that they are transitioning from young and childish girls to mature and attractive women.

CONCLUSION

The five music videos depict the idols as alluring, seductive and playful. Despite arising controversies, the group has always decided to continue their activities and dominate the entertainment industry. All of the depictions make the idols appear as attractive in the eyes of the viewers, but they are also being constantly sexualized through the male gaze perspective shots. The male gaze is a way of perceiving women from the eyes of a heterosexual man and represents them as passive objects of male desire. It is often applied in the media such as films, advertisements, or music videos that are directed to many types of audience. Regardless of their young ages, the idols continuously act like how the male gaze views them—in order to gain popularity. When male gaze is used, women are meant to be passive objects of male desire. “Passive” refers to the fact that the objects, the female idols, are powerless against the perspective of male gaze. Yet the idols are aware that they are becoming objects of male desire, and they purposefully utilize the perspective to gain popularity. As the idols let themselves become objects of male desire, it causes them to no longer become passive.

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