

## Abstract

# A Study on the Gender Awareness and Attitude of Youths through Peer Culture ( I ): Comparison of Gender Awareness and attitude in Peer Culture

Yunjeong Choi  
Sung Jung Park  
Eun Kyung Kim  
In-Soon Kim  
Kim Aera  
Hyokyung Kim  
MinJu Park

The culture of abhorrence and widespread sexual harassment of teenagers reported recently is not unrelated to peer group culture. The media and cultural contents mainly used by teenagers bear the gender-discriminatory perception and carry the hateful attitudes found in the adult generation, which is believed to be passed down to the young generation via a number of media. This situation made the investigation into the gender perspective on

teenagers' peer culture a dire need. Against this backdrop, this study shed light on gender heterogeneity, collectivity, gender-discriminatory feature, and violent characteristics inherent in adolescent peer culture. Adolescent peer culture relates to the way they live every day, so this can cover a broad range of topics. Yet, this study chose seven areas that well reflect gender characteristics: digital culture, pornography consumption culture, body recognition and decorative culture, peer relationship, sexual culture, school life and awareness of feminism. This research examined their ways of living and perception and looked into the findings of the difference in their gender awareness and behavior.

To this end, this study conducted a survey on 8,921 male and female teenagers from sixth graders to 11th graders and analyzed them by gender, grader, and attending school (primary, junior high, and high school). In addition, a group of 25 male and female teenagers and eight field experts participated in focus group interviews so that their peer culture, including about play, relationship, and environment, is understood in a specific and contextual way. The findings are as follows:

First, online areas where male teenagers are active are slightly different from those of female ones, which is due to the fact that their purpose and reason of online participation varies. It is common that both boy and girl students focus on activities such as video games, personal broadcasting, and web cartoons/web novels. Gender-wise, 92.9% of the male respondents play video games, followed by 87.8% of personal broadcasting, and 67.2% of web cartoons/web novels. In comparison, 85.3% of the female ones engage in personal broadcasting; 80.8% in video games; 80.8% in web cartoons/web novels. In short, more male students than female ones get involved in those games by 12.1% points;

more girls than boys read web cartoons/web novels by 13.6% point. Male and female teenagers are also different for SNS activities. While both men and women participated largely for the purpose of communication and being connected with their friends, the rate of female teenagers is higher. In terms of personal broadcastings, an overwhelming majority of male teenagers (87.3%) said they watched video game ones, which is nearly double the rate of that of female teenagers (44.7%).

Second, gender discrimination and abhorrence online are at a serious level, and it has been confirmed that not a few teenagers are exposed to them. About a third of teenagers (34.2% male, 34.6% female) who played video games said they heard or witnessed sexist and sexually abhorrent expressions while playing, and all of those comments were about misogyny. In this way, discrimination and hatred against women are deeply embedded in the game culture, and this tendency was particularly strengthened by male users. It was confirmed that this game culture was related to the perception on female characters in the game. More than one fifth of video game users (20.8% for male and 24.1% for female) said they have seen men ignore or harass women in games, and at least 10% of male teenagers wanted female characters so that they could play those games more excitingly with obscenity and sexual images other than someone with capability.

Third, female teenagers are less satisfied with their appearance than male counterparts are. They were harsher on the way they look and take actions more aggressively to have an ideal appearance. About 70% (69.8%, to be exact) of male teenagers said they were satisfied with their appearance, while only half (54.8 %) of female teenagers said they were so. This difference in the satisfaction level leads to a similar result in the desire for plastic

surgery (those with intention to have plastic surgery were 11.3% for men and 41.0% for women) as well as body weight reduction experience (48.1% for men and 66.6% for women). Also, this is related to the makeup of the adolescents. According to the survey, a majority of female teenagers, 76.9%, wore makeups; this response rate increased with age, with sixth graders recording 54.4% and 11<sup>th</sup> graders marking 89.2%. About 40 % (39.1 %) of female teenagers said they received makeup tips from friends who put on makeups well, and 20.8 % of them got help from their family members, including mothers and sisters. All of these indicate that the makeup culture among teenagers is not only common within their peers but also widely accepted within social relationship.

Fourth, looking into the peer relationship between male and female teenagers exhibited that homophily was evidently found among men as well women, and evaluation criteria of women was different from that of men within each of their peer relationship. In the case of male teenagers, the tendency to form a relationship centered on same-gender gets stronger as their grade lowers, while that relationship of female teenagers become stronger as their grade goes up. Both men and women are showing this propensity so that they are not to be misunderstood to go on a date with someone if they seem close to a friend of the opposite sex (29.6% and 33.5%, for boys and girls, respectively). In addition, survey uncovered that the reputation in peer relationship is determined by character, ability, and appearance for both men and women. Yet, details of them varied. In other words, the ability mentioned as a characteristic of a popular male means excellence in sports and video games, while that of a popular girl indicates outstanding academic achievement. The most frequently mentioned characteristics of a popular male are the sense of wit

and humor, and those of a female being cool and nice, such as being good to others, activeness, loveliness and kindness. As seen here, different standards were applied in accordance with genders.

Fifth, male and female teenagers are found to have unsafe relationship and sexual intercourse problems. A majority of teenagers, or 77.0% of them, experienced mild physical touches, and 17.7% of them answered that they strong ones, including kiss. The experience of those touches was more common with boys than with girls. Overall, the acceptability of those affectionate behaviors between those who are seeing each other is higher, and the experience of non-consensual touch is also more common among boys than among girls. Among those who have had sex with their boyfriend or girlfriend (3.9 %), 61.3 % of them practiced contraception. Considering that the survey examined the rate of contraceptive experience, it can be estimated that the rate of anti-contraceptive sex would be higher. Also, there are frequent cases of coercion and stalking among those who are seeing each other. About one-third of adolescents, 67.4% (63.5% of which are men) experienced compulsion from each other when dating. The rate of gender gap in those issues was only 0.5% point among sixth graders, but that was 10.4% point among 11<sup>th</sup> graders. With age, more cases of such events were found with girls. In addition, the rate of stalking was higher with girls (19.5% for girls and 14.4% for boys), with higher graders undergoing more of it. At 11<sup>th</sup> graders, the gender gap in this issue reached 7.1% point.

Sixth, it is found that adolescents usually quenched their sexual curiosity and acquired relevant knowledge through the Internet or online. According to the survey, 54.3% of male and female teenagers acquired sexual knowledge through online or mobile devices, which is much higher than school education (22.7%) or

adults (13.5%), including parents and teachers. The frequency of watching online pornography is also not low. It is confirmed that 57.4% of male teenagers and 39.1% of female teenagers watched pornography, 42.8% and 73.2% of whom, boys and girls, respectively, watched porn contents in a continued manner. To be brief, more male students than female ones did that.

The high dependence on online contents in relation to gender leads to the acceptance of gender bias found in the existing generation, the reinforcement of their gender perception among the teenagers and the risk of sex crimes online. In particular, in most of the gender concept questions investigated in this study, stronger conventional wisdom was found in male adolescents than in female adolescents, especially with regard to the transfer of responsibility for sex crimes. Also, in terms of the effectiveness of pornography, male teenagers have a greater risk of being addicted to pornography (18.1% for male and 10.0% for female); bigger desire to try it practically (15.6% for male and 8.5% for female); more impulse to sexual harassment or sexual assault (3.1% for male and 1.7% for female).

The problem is that the use of illegal filmed, sexually violent, or male-centered sexual fantasy contents can be misunderstood as what actually takes place in reality. This can lead to sex crimes, doing damage or harm to others. Male teenagers are twice as likely to perform criminal activities as female teenagers, including sending photos of their body parts to someone (2.4% for male and 1.3% for female), distributing illegally taken images (1.2% for male and 0.6% for female), and making deepfake-employed wrong doings (1.9% for male and 1.0% for female). On the other hand, the request of a face-to-face meeting (15.3 % for men and 22.3 % for women) and personal information (4.9 % for men and 17.9 %

for women) was more experienced by female teenagers than male ones. Due to this reality, not a few female teenagers are afraid of digital sexual violence. Sexual violence has become one of the daily fears among female teenagers: 47.2 % of 11<sup>th</sup> graders fears crime from illegal filming; 45.5 % of 10<sup>th</sup> graders girls feared injuries, violence, rape, and others; 43.6 % of ninth graders worried about personal information being distributed online.

Seventh, the gap in the awareness on gender equality between men and women adolescents was not small. Growing up, male teenagers showed the level of their recognition on the equality decreased and the sentiment on anti-feminism increases, more widening the disparity when they became high school students. While male teenagers solidify traditional stereotypes as they grow older, female teenagers tend to break away from those gender stereotypes. For feminism, those male students in puberty believed that men and women have equal rights and diverse social movements for women violate men's rights, placing men on unstable position. Yet, most of their counterparts appear to go against those views.

Anti-feminism is related to the ignorance and misunderstanding of feminism. 45.5 % of male teens reported they did not know what feminism was, and 61.9 % of those who said that they knew feminism understood this as woman's superiority and misandry. Only 29.7% of them perceived feminism as gender equality, a significant difference from 72.5 % shown by female adolescents. This gap of 42.8% point evidently displays that there is a huge recognition imbalance between genders.

Findings of this study suggest two policy implications as follows:

First, the online environment of teenagers should be improved and the education of media literacy should be strengthened. It is

necessary to restrict the environment in a strict manner where teenagers can easily access pornography and to consider ways to stop adult advertisement and sex-evoking contents, easily found even on public portals. In addition, in an environment where teenagers can encounter as many unfiltered contents as they want, media literacy education needs to be strengthened so that they can practice on “good online citizenship” and critically view those sexist and hateful online contents on their own, other than indiscriminately accept them.

Second, it is needed to change the school environment where teenagers stay long. Most directly, it is proposed that sex education be more practical and paradigm shift be made. Judged from the channel of sex education and the understanding on genders among teenagers, sex education in schools is neither productive nor satisfactory, without delivering any clear effect. Currently, schools offer such sex education that poorly understands the level of sex information of adolescents and thus fail to provide needed contents to them. It is necessary to abolish the gender education standard, which has been under much criticism, make paradigm shift in school sex education, and utilize a 15-hour school sex education in a more practical way.

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