

## Subject Formation through Ajumma EXP Flash Mob

Yoo Jin Kwon, Korea National Open University

The purpose of this study is to investigate the group self-identified as Ajumma EXP and to uncover the process of subject formation through the Ajumma EXP Flash Mob. The term "Ajumma" is one of the Korean address terms, referring to a middle-aged married woman in Korea. Originally, it denoted an aunt or female relative member in kinship. Calling someone "Ajumeoni" is considered more respectful than "Ajumma." Ajumma is a culturally loaded word, pejoratively denoting a middle-aged and/or married woman who is perceived as somewhat insensitive, uncultured, and of low economic status, often portrayed as tough and aggressive when advocating for self-interests or familial interests (Yeon, 2016). The look of Ajumma is represented as wearing short and permed hair, unflattering clothes, and/or unattractive sun-visor signaling unsophisticated, marginalized, and older women in Korea.

Previous studies on Ajumma have primarily adopted sociolinguistic and sociocultural approaches, exploring the evolution of the term from a kinship address to a non-kinship term and its sociocultural meanings related to women's socioeconomic positions in South Korean society (Kim, 2015; Yeon, 2016). However, recent studies have begun to recognize the productive roles and positive aspects of the Ajumma, framing them as capable and skillful individuals in managing household affairs and navigating societal expectations, highlighting resilience and economic contributions, and reshaping perceptions of public actor roles and women's empowerment (Moon, 2016; Rowan, 2006; Yeon, 2016). Ajumma's body is perceived as physically and sexually unattractive, as women experience bodily change due to delivery and hormone changes with aging.

The present study conducted a case study of Ajumma EXP to understand the experiences of Ajumma flash mob, particularly the aspect of subject formation of the Ajumma EXP members. The researchers adopted a qualitative case study approach analyzing Ajumma EXP's website, mass media coverages, and social media postings. The analysis of the biography of 19 members from their website and interviews with the co-founders provides insightful information regarding subject formation and the style-fashion-dress of the group. The concept of style-fashion-dress, subject formation, intersectionality from cultural studies serve as an analytic framework in analysis (Kaiser & Green, 2021; Tulloch, 2015).

Ajumma EXP, the subject of the current study, is a San Diego-based flash mob group consisting of approximately 40 women in their 30s through 50s, with diverse ethnic backgrounds. The acronym "EXP" in their name stands for experiment and experience (Ajumma EXP, n.d.; Pak, n.d.). The largest group is Korean American. Others include various Asian American, Latino, Black and two Whites. The co-founders organized their first flash mob in 2018, inspired by a previous Ajumma night-out experience. She recollected that the experience was so liberating that they did not care about how they look or how others think. Founders of the group came up with the idea of flash mob dance group and they have successfully completed annual flash mob in seven consecutive years. The flash mob performances have gained significant media attention,

being featured on major broadcasts such as NBC news, Good Morning America, and ABC News, as well as local and online media outlets portraying as a cheerful practice of fighting against stereotypes against middle-aged women and embracing aging with pride (e.g., Youn, 2024, March 16).

Three mega-themes illustrating the subject formation among Ajumma EXP members emerged: agency through dressing, intersectionality, and temporality and Asian diaspora. First, Ajumma EXP exercise agency through minding appearance (Kaiser & Green, 2021). Ajumma EXP draws immediate attention in public because of their iconic appearance. They custom-make large plastic visors and wear short curly wigs and gaudy shirts and baggy pants which is originated from women's work pants, one of the remnants of Japanese colonialism. The look of Ajumma symbolizes low maintenance and a practical attire for those who are always busy with housekeeping and child rearing. That is, the hair style does not much blow-dry; the sun-visors protect them from other's gaze as well as sun; the gaudy clothes probably made out of synthetic fiber symbolize machine-washable and comfortable clothes ruling out the need for matching. Comfort and practicality are the values that contrast with feminine but uncomfortable clothing culture in the modern Western tradition. Despite limited experience in dance, they diligently practice choreography annually, pushing beyond their comfort zones and confronting biases associated with aging.

Second, Ajumma EXP represents that ethnicity, gender, class, and ageism intersect the group in the U.S. The concept of intersectionality comes from women's studies noting that the subject positions of race, class, and gender are not separate issues (Kaiser & Green, 2021). Their performances in the U.S. represent that ethnicity, gender, class, and ageism intersect the group, respond to societal movements such as Black Lives Matter and advocating for gender equality and aging. The co-founder explained that the recent popularity of K-pop and Korean popular culture contributed to the favorable environments for Korean diaspora and Korean cultural heritage in the U.S. and the first flash mob was on Korean-American Day. As the size of the group grows and people with more diverse background join, their major statement focuses more on gender equality and challenge against ageism. They even hold their annual performance on the International Women's Day.

The third theme regards to subject formation of the new Ajumma. By embracing so-called Ajumma look with pride, they reclaim the term Ajumma and make their experience liberating and cathartic. Performing annually, members seem to temporarily adopt the Ajumma identity. Their individualistic identities are temporarily reserved during the performance, which is symbolized by their iconic dress. However, the official website celebrates members' individual lives.

In conclusion, members of Ajumma EXP navigate agency and structure as middle-aged, ethnically diverse women in California. They exercise agency by collectively dressing as Ajumma and performing mainstream dances in public. Through their bold performances, they speak up for middle-aged woman of color as strong and caring accomplisher instead of

aggressive, selfish home-maker. They challenge stereotypes and redefine aging and gender roles, multicultural society by celebrating their lives and making their presence more visible in public.

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