



Redefining Womanhood in Generation Z: An Analysis of Gender Representation and Awareness in K-pop Culture

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Abstract. This study aims to explore gender awareness and representation in current K-pop industry through analyzing music videos, lyrics, and social media of three K-pop girl groups Red Velvet, LOONA, (G)I-DLE against gender discrimination in K-pop industry and patriarchal society in South Korea. The study adopts a qualitative approach with content analysis, including textual analysis and media analysis. The results of this study indicate that more people have been aware of the fact that women are not limited to single gender role imposed by society, and South Korea has begun to break gender norms and stereotypes, embody female power, and represent non-heterosexuality through K-pop culture. To conclude, representations of women are often defined by how men see women (termed the 'male gaze'), or by how society expects women to look and behave; however, more cultural products of K-pop girl groups whose audience is mainly generation Z convey the message of refusal and resistance to what society expects female to look and behave, and determination to just be who they are.

Keywords: K-pop, gender awareness, gender representation, generation Z

1 Introduction

K-pop began with an electronic hip-hop show in 1992, after which the novelty music form became an instant hit in the South Korean region. [1], K-pop refers to a kind Short for Korean popular music, a form of popular music originating in South Korea. With the development of the times, Korean k-pop culture is expanding its influence and becoming a global music trend. At the same time, the majority of the population has suffered due to the long-standing social atmosphere of male superiority over women in Korea. As people become more educated and open-minded, more and more people are aware of the gender inequality in Korean society. This inequality gradually extends to other aspects, such as discrimination and suppression of sexual minorities. In this situ-

ation, many voices want to reverse this hostile atmosphere in Korean society and protect the rights and dignity of women and sexual minorities [2]. Based on the above, the gender implication in k-pop has become the focus of public opinion. People focus on the lyrics or music videos of k-pop music and look for aspects related to "sex" and "male-female relationships" and raise great discontent about them. In addition, more and more music creators are using k-pop to show the power of women and express their resentment against the inequality in Korean society. Therefore, this study focuses on analyzing gender representation and awareness in K-pop culture.

2 Methodology

In this research, the authors adopted a qualitative research method, content analysis, which includes textual analysis and media analysis. It helps study cultural artifacts, which include texts of various formats, such as pictures, audio and video. In addition, content analysis is for the objective and systematic description of the manifest content of communication [3]. Researchers utilized this technique to determine the concepts, themes, and underlying meanings of three K-pop girl groups' s music videos, lyrics, as well as the content of social media. A qualitative approach uses various theories to complete the social construction, so when studying cultural products in human society, qualitative approach is a better choice.

3 Results and Discussion

3.1 Definition of Key Concepts

K-pop is a combination word, including "K" and "Pop". K stands for South Korea, pop stands for popular music. Therefore, K-pop can be interpreted as South Korean popular music. Gender Awareness is terminology for the "Ability to view society from the perspective of gender roles and understand how this has affected women's needs in comparison to the needs of men." (United Nations Fund for Women,2005)

In other words, is an individual who has a critical view and has a sense of reconsidering the gender role in society. Have the sense to understand and observe how and why these genders were formed and built. With the development of the K-pop industry, the style and gender concepts represented in the k-pop images are completely disparate. The background that this paper is mainly focused on is generation Z, which can be defined as the first generation to have grown up with access to the internet and portable digital technology from a young age, also can be called "digital natives". Gender awareness discuss in the K-pop field, is able to be aware of how gender was constructed in the K-pop industry and try to understand why gender was constructed in these specific ways. Before entering the main interpretation of gender representation relative to K-pop media, there is some background information related to gender issues during the period of generation Z in South Korea.

3.2 Background—Gender Discrimination in K-pop Industry

Gender inequality, especially for female identity, still exists in various industries, also include in the k-pop field. The status quo of gender discrimination and social gender issues are significant in the South Korean K-pop industry.

Initially, the historical interpretation of Korean gender roles as masculine and feminine outside of male-centered public cultural centers. For Korean women, these gender roles are rooted in the creation of the state itself, in the myth of its origins. According to one “2019 poll from Hankook Research Company, where 58.6% of Korean men in their 20s reported that they strongly opposed feminism. About 26% of men in their 20s marked the intensity of their opposition as a 12 on a scale of zero to 12.”[4]

Additionally, the pop industry is a workplace that amplifies the discriminatory effects of neoliberalism, a phenomenon driven by ideas that describe it as socially embedded rather than economically structured. The result of an overloaded consumerist culture is to turn idols into mere objects on the idol market. In order to meet market demand, the job description of idols includes roles nestled in ever-changing concepts that are designed to generate sales while sacrificing value. Also, women in K-pop face a triple transformation - onstage, offstage, and in their private lives. While at work, their actions are often filmed and packaged as consumer products for fans [5]. An explicit example would be one of the former members of the girl group F(X) suicide partially because of the intensive social media harassment since she shared comments related to the gender topic. [4]

Last but not least, when comparing the content of the girls' group and the boys' group, significant differences between the images emerge. In general, the girl group depicts one of three concepts: cute, hip-hop, or sexy. Boy groups, on the other hand, are free to portray a range of concepts, from boyfriends to powerhouse images such as boy action stars. Almost without exception, boy groups have clearly begun to shift away from traditional love songs and through social commentary as one of their themes [5].

4 Analysis of Music Videos, Lyrics and social media

Gender awareness in k-pop can be interpreted through the following three perspectives: first, breaking conventional gender stereotypes and roles imposed by social expectations; second, highlighting female power; third, representing diverse sexualities and genders. The authors chose three girl groups, Red Velvet, (G)-Idle, and LOONA, who all debuted after 2014, which indicates that their audience are mostly composed of generation Z, to analyze gender representation and awareness in their music videos, lyrics, and social media. Here is the introduction of three groups' basic information.

Red Velvet is a girl group including five team members: Irene, Seulgi, Wendy, Joy, and Yeri. It debuted on August 1, 2014, and was formed by S.M. Entertainment. The kinds of music performed and sung by them often consist of deep concepts, since S.M. Entertainment is one of the companies that is focusing on expressing meaningful thoughts and notions in various aspects, such as social conflicts, gender equality etc.

LOONA is a girl group that were revealed member by member over one and a half years. Different from debut of other K-pop groups, HeeJin, HyunJin, HaSeul, YeoJin,

ViVi, Kim Lip, JinSoul, Choerry, Yves, Chuu, Go Won, and Olivia Hye had shown up successively through their own special solo albums, and the whole 12-member group was officially debuted as LOONA in August 2018. This unprecedented way of debut enabled every member's characteristics to shine through and be seen by their audience. Nearly all of LOONA's songs convey gender messages and show the power of women.

(G)I-dle is a girl group formed by Cube Entertainment in 2018, which includes five members: Miyeon, Minnie, Soyeon, Yuqi, and Shuhua. Their group name consist of girl and I-dle two parts, I-dle in Korean means "child". Different from other K-pop groups, the songs produced and released by this group are often composed and written by themselves. In their songs, they not only fully show their talents in song production, but also including with their own attitudes and thoughts during the process.

Music Video is the main channel that the Korean K-pop groups or artists show the concepts and themes of their albums. One music video can mainly be divided and mixed into two parts: the dance performance part and the main "storyline" part. The dance performance part mainly shows the choreography for this music. It often purely shows the charm and performance skill of the artists. While main "storyline" part often without dancing but more with the sense that tell some "stories." Interpret music video mainly from themes, colors, choreography, makeup, and costume.

4.1 Break Gender Stereotype (From Male Gaze to Female Gaze)

Male gaze represents stereotyping of steer types portrays women, rendering them victims of gaze. In contrast, female gaze is a liberation of the gaze period. In the music video of (G)I-DLE's TOMBOY, whose lyricist and composer are both leader Soyeon, images of male gaze are indicated.

At the beginning of the MV, a small perspective window is used to take photos of Minnie, who is in a very small room. As an object of scrutiny, Minnie makes a motion to shoot to show her desire of freedom. Soyeon also appears in a tiny and depressing room, which means the limited space for girls. She sees a Barbie doll in the mirror, but she doesn't want to be that thus fight is indispensable. In addition, her lyrics "Do you want a blond barbie doll? It's not here, I'm not a doll (like this if you can)" also responds to her rebellion. When it comes to Miyeon, she is walking in a dark hallway, and an image of a camera used to spy is then showed. This scene satirizes the numerous incidents of sneak shot in South Korea. Every year since 2016, there have been several demonstrations of more than 10,000 people against sneak shot. In almost every demonstration, there is a new case of malicious sneak shot. The slogan My life is not your 'porn' rang out across South Korea.

In the later part of music video, the theme turns to the resistance of girls, which is also an transformation from male gaze to female gaze. Soyeon is making cakes during her rap part, and the ingredient is toxic in order to dazzle the boy who gazed her. Miyeon detonates the car, with her suitcase filled with the man who peeped at her before. In other words, Miyeon blows up not only the small room, but also gaze and bondage. The voyeur is hung and, in turn, scrutinized, in contrast to the female members.

The inspiration of tomboy clearly declare the concept of rebellion. The leader Soyeon got the inspiration from her confusion of femininity and masculinity, because to her, people can't be defined by their gender and she just act as she wants to. "I don't know what femininity means to others, if I didn't follow this action mode, you can just call me tomboy." said by Soyeon in her stream on 27th March, 2022. Although tomboy is a biased word to Soyeon, she still wanted to use this word to show her indifference to what other people think. As an idol as well as a female rapper, Soyeon always wants to break the stereotype of the society. Therefore, she used a lot of rebellious words in her rap that couldn't be said by a female idol based on a traditional Asian culture.

*Your mom raised you as a prince
But this is queendom, right?
I like dancing, I love ma friends
Sometimes we swear without cigarettes
I like to sex, on drinking whiskey
I won't change it, what the hell?*
(Lyrics from Soyeon's rap, 2022)

Break gender stereotype also represented in Red Velvet's Psycho and Bad music video's female images. From the media, female image showing with dark red lipstick with smoky eyeshadow and black nail color. These female images differ from the ordinary gender concept of a young female, especially idol, image in k-pop industry, often with pink or orange color showing an innocent girl's image often produced under a patriarchal society. While the Psycho and Bad Boy music video, delivering coldness and serious emotions toward audiences. In the music video, the facial expression is a significant part of expressing the concept and ideas. In the Bad Boy music video, Repeated gazing and staring toward the audience related to the concept "Female Gaze". Pistols, weapons, fire, and one "shooting" choreography are also presented in this MV. These are often accompanied by males' presence in the patriarchal society. While These symbols shown in this music video are presented with the female power. Showing rebellion against the "male gaze".

The lyrics of the same song are also expressed from the female perspective. "Caught my eye out of all these people (Ah ha)." "Provoking my curiosity (Ah ha ah ha)" The whole lyrics are based on the "female gaze", putting women as the subjects and gazing at males. Changing the position of mundane and traditional male and female positions. "You know, I'm pretty hot these days" "So you can feel all the eyes on me (Ooh oh)" [6]. These lyrics show an ordinary female image that may attract males under the "male gaze", Seeing women as the sexual object. In this part, it is a way to rebel against this gender discrimination.

LOONA's So What also represented breaking gender stereotype. In the old days, women played their roles according to socially formed rules, such as a wife who could cook and a mother who was gentle with children. As Judith Butler (1988) said, "Woman", and by extension, any gender, is an historical situation rather than a natural fact. There is a stereotype that women are soft and gentle, and they always assist men. Since the awakening of feminine consciousness, girls try to break this norm. In this mv, Kim threw a torch hard at the moon, then the moon shines by itself instead of the reflection light from the sun. It is believed that the sun represents men while the moon

represents the soft women. So this performance has two symbol: breaking the stereotype of women and urging women maximum their value.

Furthermore, in the past, women were deprived of many rights by those in power, such as the right to participate in state affairs, the right to legislate, etc. At the same time, it also deprives women of the right to education, which prevents them from having a broader perspective and seeing the world beyond their knowledge. Women live in a world made up by men and act according to the rules set by them. At the same time, men also want women to lose their sense of self and follow their orders, but this is not the case. In this mv it shows the women resistance. Vivi, who is seen throughout almost the entirety of the music video with a bandana over her mouth, plays like a robot. Even if she was deprived of the ability to speak to restrict her self-expression, she is still struggling by rebellious costume and scrawl. It shows the development of gender awareness. Besides, the other members of LOONA also lost an important part of themselves, for example, the one who hear no evil is blissful ignorance of the world. Only if the girls gather, their lost part could be awaked.

4.2 Female Power (Diversity and Solidarity)

In Red Velvet's Psycho music video, according to the message that the Red Velvet members delivered at one fan party in 2019 after the song was released, this music video pays a tribute to the American Black Swan film directed by Darren Aronofsky, released in 2010. The main characters in the movie are Nina and Lily, one acting as a white swan, and Lily acting like the black swan. There are many interpretations of this movie, one of the versions is that Lily is one of the imaginary personalities of Nina, Nina loses herself during chasing a better art performance with schizophrenia; According to Wendy's interview that was released on Instagram in 2019.12.23, this music video delivers the message that encourages women to find and show their own personality and true self even though others may think they are 'psycho'. It is a story about self-define and self-love. Self-define can be interpreted as breaking out of the framework imposed because of gender and finding their own true characteristics, ambitions, and ideals. By establishing a framework based on their wills and strengthening their inner beliefs, they will be motivated to keep moving forward.

The lyrics of another Red Velvet's song *Queendom* is also related with the female power. " We are Queens in the red castle" " Don't need crown, we were born to dazzle" "The more you look, the brighter the pose" (Genius English Translation, 2021) These lyrics are mainly encourage girls to show their own power, live for themselves and break the social standard and stereotypes. Appreciate the power of female solidarity.

WHY NOT by LOONA also shows female power. The lyrics begin with the clear line "I'm a bad girl", but are followed by "I'm silent when the answer is taken away from me", which reveals the backwardness of woman's discourse in society. The definition of whether a woman is a good girl depends entirely on the words of those in power in society - as long as the woman contradicts the conventional requirements of society, she will definitely be regarded as "different". Then, in the middle of the song, there is a reference to "I seem to be imprisoned again", in which it can be understood

as being surrounded and imprisoned by the world, as a woman who can't do anything, and who is against the rules, being greatly repressed. Finally, the climax of the song comes - "Turn everything upside down!" This is the voice of hope rekindled after women are discriminated, suppressed and restricted, which is going to lead all women standing up and using their own power to turn everything upside down.

Butterfly Effect is a key concept of LOONA. According to official explanation, LOONA causes a Butterfly effect through music for the listeners to gain courage, find oneself, and raise one's voice. Anyone under influence, is another LOONA. "Butterfly" was released through an inspiring music video that was shot in France, China, the United States, Iceland and South Korea. They toured 5 countries across 3 continents for the "Butterfly Effect" that captures the freedom and courage of girls throughout the globe. The video intersperses captivating and powerful dance sequences of the members of LOONA with empowering moments featuring diverse women of a variety of ethnicities, religions, nationalities from all over the world.

Embracing each another's individual differences and coming together is a theme that runs through LOONA's music and visuals. As hinted in the video for "Butterfly," The girls convey the idea that it is ok to be different and encourage them to embrace diversity. Female of different ethnicities and nationalities (including Arab, Chinese, African American and European) and have different disabilities and diseases (including leukemia, visual impairment, disabled leg) appeared in the music video of Butterfly, all staring at the camera in silence. By contrast, at the end of the video, those women who all appeared statically and gazed at the camera calmly before in the video break free, run freely and straightly. Particularly, a white woman with orange hair curled up and held herself tightly and looked nervous, fearful, and helpless at the beginning of the video. However, at the end of the video, her state has completely changed. She stretches out, opens her arms wide, running and dancing freely; she seems footloose and relaxed, which symbolizes the inspiring moment when the caterpillar becomes a butterfly. Accordingly, the music video of "butterfly" symbolizes that women break down barriers and free themselves from the shackles imposed by society, encouraging women from all over the world to be themselves, and also embrace difference and diversity of others.

4.3 LGBTQ etc (Representation of Non-Heterosexuality)

Another theme that the Bad Boy music video expressed is female homosexual love. In scenes shown in the music video, two girls are lying on one bed, wearing pink pajamas, and whispering with each other. This is a way to express lesbianism in a way that is easier for the general public to understand. Elements and a discourse about lesbians that people can understand were integrated to convey diversity gender preference.

What's more, in the MV of Heart Attack by Chuu, Chuu has a crazy crush on Yves, who is also the girl - and this, in turn, directly contrasts to the lesbian community. In the first half of the mv, Chuu loves to take pictures of Yves and she gives her favorite music to Yves, etc. At the second half of the mv, the two girls managed to get together and they did the sweet little things between lovers, feeding each other strawberries, dancing together, taking pictures of each other - but at the end of the mv, everything repeats itself, and it turns out that the second half was all Chuu's imagination. This

ending largely reflects the problems faced by the real lesbian community in the society that they are often not able to get the love they long for, and their love for the same sex could lead them to be misunderstood or even discriminated.

In addition, there is a social media analysis of LOONA that shows its support to non-heterosexual groups. LOONA's fans, named Orbits, have developed the meme "STAN LOONA", which has earned itself an entry on Urban Dictionary — "A popular phrase used by twitter gays under every popular tweet encouraging readers to stan Korean girl group LOONA" — cementing the group in modern pop culture. It has become a digital phenomenon. In June, the LGBT+ community pride month, all people around the world takes streets in order to speak their minds out and ask for more right for lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgenders, all type of sexuality and not binary gender in this world since only 26 countries around the world allow LGBT+ marriage and there are still around 70 countries that penalize LGBT+ actions even to death. Because the LGBT used "STAN LOONA" frequently in social media to support the girls, LOONA gradually became a LGBT+ icon for showing support to the community. This situation led the "STAN LOONA" to start appearing in some actual Pride Parades of LGBTQ groups. Accordingly, this digital phenomenon originally appeared in social media also happened as actual event, and keep attracting more people's attention. The "STAN LOONA" took all over the world and got the attention of all the K-POP fans at the events. Therefore, the meme STAN LOONA enables LOONA and the LGBTQ groups to connect and support each other.

5 Limitations

First of all, the problem faced by the k-pop industry is the image restriction. In case of TOMBOY, K-pop gender norms still exist in the clothing. They express the idea against the conventional femininity and masculinity, but they still need to wear the cloth which is tight and exposed. Indeed, in South Korea, idols, as commercialized products, are more limited by companies and authorities. They also need to cater the mainstream aesthetics to please and attract the fans, comparing to the first implicit queer image (who is also called tomboy) appeared in K-pop—Amber from f(x). Amber is an androgynous Chinese American member of girl group f(x), a girl group of SM entertainment debuted in 2009 after the legend Girl's Generation, and it was treated more like an experiment to test what style the public will accept the most and to express the concepts in their songs [7].

In addition, the less revolutionary nature is also a limitation of the existence of k-pop industry. Using Amber as the example again. She actually looks similar to many of K-pop's male stars. They have somewhat androgynous looks: they wear make-up and unisex clothes, dye their hair, and wear jewelry to adorn themselves with. She does rebel against the standard imposed on girls, but only by embracing the standard that in recent years has been imposed on boys. She is, then, allowed to break out of the mold, but this is made possible because she is integrated into another mold that is familiar and admissible. It is as if she has to reassure the public that she is not so weird and different

to normative gender imaging after all [7]. The reason why Amber can step out to become the special one varies. Firstly, her nationality, Western background and ambiguous sexual identity and preference enable the Korean public to accept her as a tomboy. Additionally, the manipulation of entertainment company is indispensable. Amber's image, to some extent as an experiment of SM entertainment which is a larger company, do benefits from the power of the company than the expression of (G)I-DLE, whose company Cube Entertainment is of a smaller scale.

Generally speaking, idols are indications of the current social environment rather than revolutionary attempts. However, considering the existence of song makers like Soyeon and the exploration of global market, K-pop has more possibilities and the image of female idols can be diversified.

6 Conclusion

By analyzing the lyrics, social media, and music videos of the K-pop girl groups Red Velvet, LOONA, and (G)I-DLE, the author found that South Korea has begun to break conventional gender stereotype, embody female power, and express several sexualities and genders through K-Pop industry; in contrast to the past generations, when K-pop was more often dominated by patriarchal perspective, now the images of women become stronger, more diverse, independent, and confident. In addition, the number of celebrities who are bravely speaking out for female power is also increasing, the awareness of gender equality in South Korean society is gradually improving, and K-pop has become an essential part of gender representation that influences most young people of generation Z.

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