

The Girl Crush Style in K-Pop: Feminist Empowerment or Patriarchal Reproduction Under Capitalist Logic

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Keywords: K-Pop, Postfeminism and Neo-Liberalism, Fandom, Gender Representation, Cultural Industry.

Abstract: In recent years, the Girl Crush style, which is shown as powerful, confident, and edgy, has gained significant traction in K-pop. This article analyzes Girl Crush style to explore the integration and contradictions between the development of K-pop girl groups and the transmission of feminist ideas. The study finds that the empowerment associated with this style often remains superficial. While the girl crush image embodies confidence, strength, and rebellion, its core driving force remains the profit motives of the entertainment industry and the expectations of the traditional male gaze. The article further argues that the feminist themes promoted by Girl Crush ultimately serve commercial objectives and reinforce existing gender norms within the constraints of capitalism. Based on this analysis, the article proposes several specific strategies--enhancing idols' creative autonomy, expanding the proportion of female producers, and embedding authentic female perspectives in content--to foster genuine feminist expression, increase gender consciousness, and sustainable industry development in K-pop over the long term.

1 INTRODUCTION

With the popularity and expansion of the feminist movement, the voices of more and more women have been heard by people through the wide dissemination of the media. However, against the backdrop of capitalist commercial consumption logic and the rapid expansion of the media industry, narratives of female empowerment are gradually becoming commodified (Harvey & Gill, 2011). K-pop music is a genre of popular music originating in South Korea, known for its meticulous visual design, complex choreography, and diverse musical styles. Since the 21st century, it has gained global popularity. As an important component of South Korean cultural exports, it has successfully stimulated economic growth while showcasing the national culture. Over the past two decades, the style of South Korean girl groups has undergone significant changes, transitioning from innocent, cute, doll-like imagery to a more sensual aesthetic, and now primarily embracing the Girl Crush style (Pužar, 2011). Unlike its original romantic connotations in English, "Girl Crush" refers to female idols who are confident, assertive, and able to express their thoughts and feelings directly and provocatively (Chang, 2020).

Positive terms such as confidence, independence, and strength have become hallmarks of Girl Crush-style girl groups. Their bold performance styles and lyrics filled with strength and rebellion have shattered traditional stereotypes of female groups in the market, offering a reimagining of female power and sparking positive discussions about female empowerment among their fan base (Li, 2022). However, while the lyrics and music videos showcase the theme of female empowerment, the costumes and stage performances still reflect a male gaze, and the songs themselves are mostly produced by male teams. Whether this superficial expression of feminism truly breaks the patriarchal system and fights for women's rights, or is simply a new form of commodifying women by entertainment companies to cater to market demand, remains controversial.

Related studies indicate that the so-called "female empowerment" in K-pop is merely individualizing, commodifying, and commercializing empowerment through neoliberal feminism and post-feminism. Entertainment companies use "empowerment" as a marketing strategy to serve a male-dominated industry and mask the underlying deep-seated social structural issues (Kim, 2019 & Dimri, 2023). Therefore, when girl groups interpret songs in the Girl

Crush style to showcase female strength, they inevitably fall into the trap of commodification and marketization.

Against this backdrop, this paper will engage in a profound discussion centered on the question of whether the Girl Crush style in K-pop represents a genuine act of resistance against patriarchy and empowerment for women, or whether it is merely a product of commercialization. Through an analysis of existing literature and an examination of the current state of popular culture, the article will reveal the intertwined dynamics and contradictions between the narrative of female empowerment in K-pop culture and patriarchal capitalism. This research not only enhances the understanding of how the K-pop industry operates but also offers a new perspective for exploring feminist movements within the East Asian cultural context.

2 THE EXPRESSION OF FEMALE EMPOWERMENT IN K-POP

2.1 Autonomy and Self-Expression

Before the emergence of the Girl Crush style, female idols in K-pop were mostly portrayed as submissive, cute, or sexy. However, in contrast, female idols under the Girl Crush concept often emphasize confidence, independence, and authenticity in their lyrics and stage performances. This kind of image-building, to some extent responds to feminist demands for autonomy, allowing female idols to express their views more proactively. Therefore, the rise of Girl Crush style has infused K-pop female idols with unprecedented autonomy and self-expression. As mentioned in Chang's research, the "Ssen unni" phenomenon in K-pop, which is known as the Girl Crush style of female idols, reflects the desire of female fan groups for stronger female role models (Chang, 2020). These new-generation idols have broken the traditional passive and submissive role of women with their powerful voices, conveying the determination of women to "no longer remain silent". As a result, the Girl Crush style has given female group members a certain degree of agency in their performances, allowing them to have the courage to show that "I am who I am" and become role models for fans who admire their bold self-expression.

It is not just about the lyrics; the autonomy and self-expression of female idols are also conveyed

through their styling and stage presence. Members of Girl Crush groups often exude a commanding presence on stage. Their confident dance moves and bold, direct looks into the camera that convey a sense of agency and strength. This growing tendency toward performances centered on "independence and autonomy" marks a shift in the emergence of new-generation K-pop girl groups. The Girl Crush style has enabled more female idols to break free from the constraints of traditional gender stereotypes, thereby embodying the feminist ideal of encouraging women to speak out for themselves.

2.2 The Reshaping and Blurring of Gender Roles

The rise of the Girl Crush style has also reshaped and blurred traditional gender role boundaries. McIntosh & Butler argue that gender is not a fixed identity but a performative process constructed through repeated behaviors and social norms (McIntosh & Butler, 1991). Compared to the past, many K-pop girl groups today dare to boldly incorporate elements previously considered "masculine," such as powerful dance styles, edgy bald hairstyles, and strong rap lyrics. This fusion of elements fundamentally challenges binary gender stereotypes, allowing women to present a more diverse range of identities in popular culture (Li, 2022). From the 2000s to the early 2010s, South Korea often "dollified" female idols to cater to the male gaze's aesthetic of fragility. The Girl Crush style deliberately broke this stereotype, representing women as cool and powerful, thereby blurring the traditional boundaries between male strength and female weakness (Pužar, 2011).

As the most direct audience of the K-pop market, fans also accept and love the "cool" and "handsome" performances of female idols on stage. This indicates that society's definition of femininity is becoming more relaxed and diverse. Through their strong and powerful performances, female idols have redefined traditional femininity and broken through the rigid framework of female images in popular culture (Shen, 2023).

2.3 Post-Feminism, Neoliberal Feminism

In K-pop culture, narratives of female empowerment are often expressed through post-feminist and neoliberal feminist perspectives (Kim, 2019). Gill points out that post-feminist media culture emphasizes individual choice and self-empowerment, but in reality often conceals structural gender

inequality (Gill, 2007). Many post-feminist characteristics can be seen in the concept of Girl Crush. On the one hand, it promotes female independence and strength, emphasizing individual choice and autonomy; on the other hand, it simplifies female empowerment into a consumable and measurable commodity. In the music videos of the Girl Crush girl group, there is no shortage of bold displays of sensuality and strength. While these scenes and body language appear to convey confidence, this "confidence" largely remains confined to the cultivation of self-image rather than a challenge to gender inequality. This phenomenon reflects neo-liberal feminism, which reduces empowerment to individual success and choice, placing the individualistic notion of "being oneself" at the core (Dimri, 2023).

Kim's research reveals that the empowerment discourse prevalent in K-pop music largely reflects a form of neoliberal feminism: it showcases female subjectivity by instilling positive psychology-style inspirational narratives and stories of "growing up in adversity", but rarely touches on structural gender inequality (Kim, 2019). This has turned feminism into a depoliticized symbol. In the Girl Crush style, female power is packaged as a marketable commodity, often avoiding a genuine challenge to the patriarchal system while presenting "empowerment" as a consumable pop element (Li, 2022). Therefore, in the K-pop industry, what can see more are "cool-looking" female images rather than genuine gender equality reforms that challenge social structures.

3 CONTRADICTIONS AND CAUSES OF EMPOWERMENT PERFORMANCE

3.1 Attributes of Empowerment: Consumptive and Performative

Although the concept of Girl Crush appears to be full of female empowerment, its empowering attributes have strong consumerist and performative characteristics, creating a contradiction between its name and reality. On the one hand, the so-called "female power" is used by major entertainment companies as a gimmick and marketing strategy to cater to market demand and attract fans to consume (Dimri, 2023). According to data from Circle on girl group album purchases, the proportion of female fans among the most popular new girl groups exceeds 60%, and they have achieved sales figures

comparable to those of boy groups, reaching over one million copies. The growing presence and influence of female fans have led talent agencies to place greater emphasis on the thoughts and behaviors of this demographic in their operational strategies, beginning to tailor their idol based on the perspectives of female fans. As a result, Girl Crush-style girl groups, which resonate with and are adored by female fans, have emerged as the ideal vehicle for this trend. Sun et al.'s study on the Girl Crush trend in K-pop girl groups found that fans generally perceive this concept of female empowerment as highly commodified "pseudo-feminism"--it largely perpetuates the existing patriarchal power structure within the industry and does not genuinely subvert gender power dynamics (Sun & Paje et al, 2022). Therefore, it can be argued that the so-called "empowerment" of Girl Crush is more like a carefully crafted product by entertainment agencies, whose primary objective is to cater to market profitability rather than genuinely advancing female rights.

As Harvey and Gill point out, in the context of capitalist media, elements such as sexiness and feminism can be easily commodified and consumed—women appear to be displaying sexual autonomy, but in reality, these images are still defined and produced by a male-dominated production system (Harvey & Gill, 2011). The "power" presented by K-pop girl groups is mostly limited to the visual impact of their stage performances and has not been truly transformed into improvements in the status of women in real life. The narrative of female empowerment in K-pop has been overly individualized and commercialized, becoming part of a marketing strategy (Kim, 2019 & Dimri, 2023).

3.2 Male Gaze

On the other hand, while the Girl Crush style superficially portrays strong female figures, its presentation remains heavily influenced by the male gaze. While girl groups advocate for independence and self-reliance, many of their clothing designs and visual language still adhere to traditional aesthetic norms, catering to the fantasies of male audiences. In stage performances of songs themed around female freedom or empowerment, female idols still wear revealing outfits, extremely high heels, and have camera angles focused on specific parts of their bodies, which reinforces the objectification of the female body (Zahra, 2024). The male gaze, which remains pervasive in South Korean entertainment culture, subtly erodes women's sense of agency and reinforces existing aesthetic standards (Chen &

Zhang, 2023). Even though female fans now make up the majority of the fan base, the K-pop industry remains reluctant to lose its male audience. This is one of the reasons why the male gaze persists. In a patriarchal society, the criteria for evaluating female imagery are still dominated by men, and the empowerment that the Girl Crush style aims to convey often remains superficial. Female idols also struggle to truly escape the objectification they face.

3.3 Industrial Structure and Capital Logic

The underlying causes of the above contradictions are closely intertwined with the structural characteristics and capital operation logic of the K-pop idol industry itself. "Female empowerment" is more of a commercial strategy and market demand than a genuine expression or voice. When female voices grow louder, agencies capitalize on this by launching Girl Crush-style girl groups that appeal to female fans. However, this empowerment concept lacks a solid value foundation, and once new market trends emerge, the empowerment concept may be adjusted or even abandoned.

Additionally, the upper management and production teams within the K-pop industry have long been dominated by men. This industry structure limits the influence female group members have in conceptual planning and creative processes, making it difficult for them to truly express their ideas. Furthermore, every action and word of female group members is strictly controlled and regulated by their agencies. This indicates that within the K-pop industry, there remain invisible boundaries around authentic feminist expression: while female groups can sing about power, they cannot truly become advocates for female rights. Lin & Rudolf's empirical research also found that the K-pop industry contains elements that may reinforce gender inequality: fans who invest more deeply in the industry tend to exhibit more unequal gender attitudes, which is particularly evident in societies with lower levels of gender equality (Lin & Rudolf, 2017). It is clear that the emergence of the Girl Crush style has not truly shaken the existing male-centered power structure of the K-pop industry, but has instead been cleverly integrated into the existing system to create new commercial growth points.

4 DISCUSSION

4.1 De-Symbolization

The primary task of accurately conveying feminist ideas in K-pop culture is to transform "female empowerment" from a superficial marketing symbol into a deep-rooted value. Talent agencies and creators should go beyond using feminism as a marketing tool and avoid stopping at slogans and visual symbols. Instead, they should give it real meaning. Only when empowerment is no longer seen as a label that can be freely traded will audiences be able to feel the sincere resonance of values from it. Entertainment agencies should truly implement the value of feminism and drive self-reflection and reform within the K-pop industry, rather than continuously exploiting the "Girl Crush" aesthetic (Sun & Paje et al, 2022). When feminist ideals are no longer merely used as trendy elements for superficial dissemination and decoration, but are genuinely reflected in the words and actions of artists, audiences can see beyond the surface and truly understand and accept the gender equality messages being conveyed. For the K-pop industry, when female empowerment is grounded in authenticity and autonomy, the emotional connection between idols and fans becomes stronger and more enduring. Similarly, this shift will help the K-pop industry overcome criticism and accusations of "pseudo-feminism", thereby enhancing its reputation and influence in the global cultural market.

4.2 Breaking the Male Gaze

Secondly, it is essential to actively break the dominance of the male gaze on the form of expression of idols. The K-pop industry should proactively shift its perspective when producing content, avoiding the tendency to cater solely to male aesthetic preferences when portraying female idols. In music video production and stage direction, there should be fewer objectifying shots of female bodies, with more emphasis on their talent, skills, and emotional expression. This change can guide audiences to interpret performances from the perspective of appreciating female agency rather than through the habitual male gaze. Additionally, when more female professionals take control of the narrative behind the scenes, idols can break free from the male gaze and escape their objectified status, presenting a more authentic and genuine portrayal of female beauty (Chen & Zhang, 2023). Such changes will not diminish or restrict the market influence of K-pop music works. On the contrary, they can unlock new

cultural symbols and consumer groups, such as those seeking to break free from traditional binary gender oppositions and pursue self-identity. Additionally, these changes will help the K-pop industry enrich its aesthetic expression and create music from a fresh perspective.

4.3 Structural Changes in Gender Ratio

Adjusting the gender ratio and power structure of the K-pop industry is the most critical fundamental measure for achieving true female empowerment and expression. Currently, women account for a very low percentage of key positions in talent agencies, production teams, and creative planning. This means that women lack sufficient voice in the early stages of content production. Only by consciously promoting and appointing female managers and producers can the industry inject more female perspectives and establish a sense of equality. In addition, it is also important to strengthen the training and guidance of female group members in creative skills. Companies should encourage members to participate in the creation of lyrics and songs. Female idols can no longer be passive puppets who simply accept information, but participate in the creative process and boldly express their ideas.

It is also crucial to guarantee female artists basic rights and equal treatment in their professional development (Zahra, 2024). This includes eliminating strong gender discrimination in the workplace, giving female artists the same autonomy and respect as male artists, and allowing them the freedom to wear flat shoes, long skirts, and warm clothing. These structural changes will gradually break down the patriarchal model inherent in the idol industry and create an environment that is more supportive of women's freedom of expression.

5 CONCLUSION

Through years of continuous development, K-pop music has secured a prominent position in global popular culture, garnering a dedicated fan base from diverse regions and exerting a significant influence on global pop music trends. This article argues that under the influence and construction of neoliberal feminism and post-feminism, the "Girl Crush" style, which promotes female independence and strength, is largely superficial. Even when attempting to break traditional binary gender stereotypes, it fails to bring about profound changes in industrial and social

structures. The K-pop industry packages feminism as exquisite products, but under the demands of a patriarchal society, this packaging remains difficult to escape from the male gaze.

Although this article has identified numerous existing issues, when artists, economic companies, fan communities, and society as a whole take collective action and persist in their efforts, the current problems and structures will be gradually dismantled. In the future, it is essential to actively promote self-reflection and transformation within the K-pop industry, guiding audiences to understand songs and performances from the perspective of appreciating female agency. Additionally, more female producers and managers should be introduced to collectively present authentic and powerful female empowerment from the production end to the reception end, thereby fostering a gender-equitable industry environment. In summary, this article provides a positive impetus for change in the K-pop industry, offers valuable references for women's empowerment, and helps K-pop maintain its commercial vitality while achieving a more authentic expression of feminist ideals.

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