

The Cognitive Construction of Girls' Power Concept in K-Pop

Duanyang Wu

School of English Studies, Xi'an International Studies University, Xi'an, Shaanxi, 710000, China

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Abstract: The construction of girls' power within the K-pop industry has sparked critical debates over its expression of female empowerment. While existing scholarship has examined the disadvantages of the K-pop industry's operation, attention has been paid to systematic barriers is insufficient. This study analyzes the overall construction of girls' power concept from the perspectives of the evolution trend, reflection on visual performance, and lyrics narration. This study then systematically points out three existing obstacles in the girls' power construction process: the paradoxical limited gender expression, the structural gender asymmetries in creative decision-making hierarchies, and the capitalist interference that turns feminist discourse into market-oriented commodities. Through critical discourse analysis, this study reveals how patriarchal capitalism employs post-feminism and neoliberal logic to distort girls' core expression. Based on this, the study proposes feasible suggestions to counter the barriers, including adjusting gender quotas, deepening feminist expression, and getting rid of over-commodification, aiming to dismantle structural barriers while preserving the transformative potential of feminist expression in the industry.

1 INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of 21 century, South Korean popular (K-pop) culture, including its music, TV series, etc., has made a profound breakthrough in the spreading process under the strategy of globalization. The global success of K-pop culture has made it a vivid reflection of South Korea's strong cultural soft power (Lin & Rudolf, 2017). As an important component of K-pop culture, girl groups go by the growth of K-pop culture, developing with the pace and context of globalization.

The concept of girl group has been deeply influenced by the waves of feminism and the progress of feminist movements, especially the third and fourth wave, which advance the feminist agenda and self-independent awareness. In this period, many movements related to gender and sexual issue, such as MeToo Movement, advocate fighting against sexism, encouraging women to give voice to their experience and self-identity, showing emphasis on essential feminist values, influencing various aspects of the contemporary condition, engaging femininity in all social strata, including the construction of South Korean idol group (Murphy, 2019 & Malinowska, 2020). The "Girl Power" concept within the girl group has progressed to become one of the most important

core narratives in the process of K-pop cultural exportation. From the burgeoning girl-next-door type female image of Girls' Generation to the aggressive expression of female subjectivity reflected by BLACKPINK, the K-pop industry has systematically constructed a discourse system of female empowerment through the combination of music production, visual symbols, and performance strategy. The cognitive construction of girls' power concept has been built up, characterized by self recognition, subversion of the traditional female image, etc.

However, there are obstacles to the development of the construction of girls' power concept. Due to the operation system of the K-pop industry, such a concept has a paradoxical nature against the information that girls' power concept originally wants to convey. The limited gender expression and structural inequality within the K-pop industry, alongside the commodified feminism, hinder the construction and perception of magnificent girls' power.

This study will analyze the cognitive construction of girls' power concept within the K-pop context from mainly three aspects: the construction of developing girls' power, the obstacles that exist in the process of

development of the concept, and feasible suggestions for future development.

2 THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE DEVELOPING GIRLS' POWER CONCEPT

The feminist movement under the guidance of feminism has significantly promoted the subversion of women's subjugated positions, private and social alike, by exerting an impact on various aspects of modern societies (Malinowska, 2020). The developing concept of K-pop girls' power is deeply influenced by the waves of the feminist movement, especially the second, third and the latest fourth waves.

2.1 Evolution Trend of Core Concept

The whole process of K-pop girl groups' evolution can be divided into four development stages. The first generation was from the 1990s to the early 2000s, the second generation was from the middle of the 2000s to the early 2010s, the third generation was from 2010s to the year of 2020, and the latest fourth generation refers to the groups which are launched after 2020. Each generation's interpretation of girls' power and the way of representing is quite different from each other.

The core concept of the first generation still stays on the construction of the previous traditional female image, with the core concept of extreme sweetness and innocence, emphasizing being sweet and beautiful enough but without aggressiveness. With the influence of the second wave of feminist movement which challenge the component element of gender roles and women's sexuality and aimed to relax the social restriction of femininity, the second generation has tried to add some special characteristics to the traditional female image of the first generation, emphasizing variation and differentiation elements in each girl group's member's image building (Malinowska, 2020). For example, while perpetuating the sweet style of the first generation, "Gee", one of the songs of the girls' Generation, has added the characters of a mischievous girlfriend. 2NE1 tried to provoke the gender limitation by showing images with queer elements like heavy smoky eyes. When stepping into the third generation, which is deeply influenced by the third and fourth wave of feminist movement that emphasize the awareness of being independent and

appreciation of essential feminist value, more direct expression of feminism and more drastic and controversial style appears, emphasizing the diverse and novel interpretation and expression of the concept of girls' power (Malinowska, 2020). For example, BLACKPINK insists on the strong aggressiveness of "girl crush" style. The latest fourth generation diverges on the basis of the existing pluralistic expression of the third generation. For example, (G)I-DLE insists the concept of speaking up for females should spare no effort by directly and strongly fighting against the standardization of females. The overall trend is the transformation from the traditional female image to the subversive style that breaks the label and limitation used to shackle females.

2.2 Reflection on Visual Performance

From the perspective of semiotics, huge changes can be found from the first generation to the fourth generation girl group, representing the symbolic meaning behind visual language. S.E.S's "I'm Your Girl" and BLACKPINK's "Kill This Love" are chosen to show a strong contrast between the innocent and sweet image of the previous generation and the subversively aggressive female image created by the later generation.

In the performance of "I'm Your Girl", members of S.E.S. wore the same series of sweet uniforms, showing the innocent and pure image of a schoolgirl, symbolizing the social expectation of girlish sense. As a semiotic representation of collectivism, school uniform indicates the submission to social restriction. The Macaron aesthetic features soft colors echoing societal demand for harmless cure, expressing a protege image under the gaze of society.

BLACKPINK's style is different from the previous generation's soft and innocent style. In the performance of "Kill This Love", the costume of each member is militarized and differentiated, contain semiotic meaning of power, reconstructs the female body into gears of war. The militarized costumes reflect the declaration of war to the patriarchy, showing defensive aggression and creating a dangerous but charming visual sense of oppression. The strategy of color-using for the stage emphasize the collision of conflict color, creating tearing sensation, putting female's power into the situation of destruction and rebirth, with members' triangle formation in the centre of the stage, gaining the dominant power instead of the object position under gaze (Chang, 2020).

The visual performance style of girl groups has changed from being innocent for gaining develop

space, which finally became standardized production of cultural industry, to using the violent aesthetic to split sugar-coating and shifting the stage into battlefield of feminism declaration. While BLACKPINK tramples the roses at the beginning of their MV, they also destroy the pinky fantasy of previous generation.

2.3 Reflection on Lyrics and Narrative Construction

The lyrics and narrative construction of girls' power can be reflected on the topic like self-love, anti-patriarchy, emotional independence, etc. The change from the first generation to the fourth generation is obvious through the analysis of language style of lyrics, the content of songs, the narrative theme, etc. "Gee" of Girls' Generation and (G)I-DLE's "Tomboy" are presented to show the gap between the previous and latest female expression.

In Girls' Generation's "Gee", the language style features passive voice and vocabularies of paedomorphism, as well as the metaphor rhetoric, all form the passiveness of female when she is in romantic relationship. The narrative lyrics put "me" as an object under male gaze, like the metaphor rhetoric comparing female to doll, "staring at you like doll on the music box", which objectify female, indicating the unequal power structure in romantic relationship. The theme of "Gee" focus on sweet sorrow caused by unrequited love, in which female try to attract crush's attention by performing cute, and male play the role of a deliverer who give the young girl continuous motivation to pursue love, in which process love is the eternal goal for the whole life of female.

Deeply influenced by the third and fourth wave of feminist movement, especially the MeToo Movement which emphasize the obligation for each individual to promote the achievement of gender equality and construct a society that is fair and equal for both genders, (G)I-DLE's music works are total subversion of the previous kind of traditional narration with the aim to speak up for female (Murphy, 2019). "Tomboy" is one of the most typical songs. The language usage in this song characterized by the use of swearing and slang expression, alongside the active voice and rhetoric of irony. Provocative words like "Yes I'm a freak" provoke the linguistic regulation of female under the honorific language system of South Korea. All the actions in the song are narrated from the first person perspective, for example "Ye I'll be the Tomboy, I don't wanna play this ping pong, I would rather film a Tik Tok, I like

dancing I love ma friends, sometimes I swear without cigarettes, I like to eh on drinking whiskey, I won't change it what the hell", expressing subjective intention of female. As "tomboy" is criticized in tradition time period, here it is reconstructed to be the symbol of glory. Destruction of traditional gender image also involves, reflected by misappropriation of male quality that traditional male-quality semiotic such as smoking and tattooing are repossessed by female. For the narration aspect, "Tomboy" use fragmentation instead of linear structure. At the beginning, the identity of tomboy is directly declared without narrative foreshadowing. Several scenes such as destroying the wedding ceremony and street graffiti are fragmented, instead of being connected within a complete storyline, reflecting subversive spirit.

The sweet "Gee" has imprisoned female in the fake romantic fairy tell, but the declaration of "Tomboy" ruins the pinky shackles. It's not only about the evolution of girl group's narration, but also the provoking process of turning female collective from the object to the subject that is empowered by self (Varianna & Kusumawardani, 2024).

3 OBSTACLES

Although the construction of girls' power has made breakthrough achievement, from the traditional regulated innocent female image to various styles of confident female, obstacles exist in this provoking process. With the raising of the feminism consciousness in South Korea, demand for producing idol groups which can break the traditional gender performance has been surging, the girl power concept becomes a strategy for marketing differentiation by attracting fans' admiration and appreciation by showing special personality of confidence, independence and great power and strength. Its core is about breaking the traditional tender and innocent image of female and present rebelliousness and neutral charm which can be regarded as subversion of traditional one. The root of the rise of girl power is oriented by market profit, which means the idol groups are still under control of South Korea's patriarchal management. Although members of girl groups appear to be cool and independent, seem to subvert traditional image of females, they are still incorporate with demands of market which is dominated by male. To a large extent, the construction of girl power concept probably cannot be regarded as empowerment of feminism, in the contrast, it is actually a production of

commodification of feminism. The main obstacles can be concluded as limited gender expression, structural inequality and over-commodified feminism.

3.1 Limited Gender Expression

The girls' power's construction reflected on girl groups' performance contains paradox. Their expression of girls' power seems to challenge the traditional regulation of female, however, it's still restrained within patriarchal aesthetic system. As Gooyong Kim states, the nature of frequent design of pelvic thrusts and body rolls is strategic pander to male gaze. Although the expression has been packed as girls' power, the visual language still indicate the logic that sexualized female body can be used as changeable commodity (Kim, 2018).

Paradox exists in the tension between female expression of girls' power and the commodification. In many MV and stage performances of girl groups, the costumes reflect dual nature of military semiotic and sexiness. The military semiotic represent strength and power is reconstructed by sexualization, becoming commodified violent aesthetics (Zahra, 2024). The camera movements have frequently moved from the panorama which present the overall dancing design to the close-up view that focus on certain part of member's body, thus the expression of power and strength is weakened with the emphasize on materialization of female body. The lyrics and narration are also empty, using the advocacy of emotional independence as commercial gimmick, reducing the issue of gender discrimination and critics to the superficial declaration of sentiments. Such narrative perspective has fallen into the trap of postfeminism, using personal choice to cover the collective struggle, lacking the exploration of complex female-dominant subjectivity.

3.2 Structural Inequality

The imbalance of gender power in the K-pop music-production system directly causes the lack of female-perspective narration. The vertical integration of K-pop industry has degraded and marginalized female producer to technical executor instead of the subjectivity of narration (Kim, 2018). Many represented female expression of girl power is in accordance with male's imagination instead of true expression from female subjectivity (Dimri, 2023).

Most entertainment companies within K-pop industry insist male-dominated concept-decision layer, thus female perspective is excluded from the

early stage of creation (Jonas, 2021). Male-dominated filter exists in the process of designing core concept and creating narrative lyrics. Both the concept, lyrics and narration should follow the gender compliance check, kicking out the elements that contain the concept of true feminism which is not expected to appear in the market (Sun & Paje' et al, 2023). Even if female get the chance to design her own concept and create female-perspective narration, the process would be hindered by the clearance from male supreme executive.

The tension exists between female creating right and male's power of review. Sometimes a female producer's original inspiration of comes from the criticism of sexualization, considering marketing risk, male production manager may probably asks her to revise, the final version may use metaphorical expression to replace the direct critique. Male's interfere erodes the antagonism. Female producer has to pass the concept clearance by changing radical narration into digestible cultural commodity. True expression of feminism and girls' power is diluted through this whole process.

3.3 Commodified Feminism

K-pop industry shifts expression of feminism and girls' power into commercialized branding elements, realizes the compilation and conversion of controversial narration. As Dimri points out, the nature of feminist expression is marketplace feminism, concealing structural oppression by purchasing the fantasy of female empowerment (Dimri, 2023).

In both MV and stage performance, commercial elements appear frequently. Members of girl groups are always sponsored by luxury brand, wearing the clothes, shoes, gloves, bags offered by sponsorship. This phenomenon reflects the visual language of neoliberal feminism, indicating that female power need to be realized by consuming action (Sun & Paje' et al, 2023). The entertainment company and the famous brand may hype female idols' fantastic performances as redefining female's power, covering the nature of combining expression of feminism and female's power with profit-oriented marketing strategy.

The commodified logic is incorporate with affective capitalism. The fan's agreement with female empowerment has been concreted into the album sales, sales of concert tickets and ambassadorship of luxury brand (Sun & Paje' et al, 2023). The entertainment companies smoothly change the expression of feminism into fans' cognition, directly

getting large amount of profits through fans' fondness with their idols and consuming of feminism-embodied products. Fans are encouraged to repeatedly purchase large number of album, using money to promote the ranking of their idols, as this kind of actions can prove the value of female idols. Fans have accepted the point that purchasing the cultural products is equal to supporting female's value. In this process, the real meaning and significance of the expression of feminism and female's power is diluted by the commodification operation to a large extent, as the nature of feminism is distorted to be commodified instead of the original meaning of relating to social gender issue.

4 FEASIBLE SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE DEVELOPMENT

As obstacles exist in the construction of girls' power, some ways to break the obstacles and promote further development of girls' power concept and feminist expression are needed.

4.1 Adjusting Gender Structure in Producing Process

Excellent female music producers are ought to be encouraged to join in the productive process, especially the discussion and decision of core concept and the choice of narrative perspective. The meaning and expression of female power is supposed to be designed by female, instead of male using the patriarchal framework to restrict female expression. Girl groups' member who is considered mature in thought and has high artistic quality can be promoted to cooperate with independent female musician or director, creating music production from female perspective without male's interfere.

The existing fixed producing model is supposed to be deconstructed. Before making a debut and being a true idol, female trainees should be exposed to various categories lessons, including gender study theory, usage of arrangement software, audio engineering, arrangement principle, etc., instead of only focusing on performance lesson such as dancing and singing as well as facial expression management.

4.2 Deepening Female's Empowerment Expression

It is a paradox that girl groups' members all wear figure-highlighted costumes such as miniskirt, crop

top, tube top, hot pant, black silk stockings, long boots, high heels, etc., while they are singing lyrics that express the opinion that girl should be confidence, girl should not be limited by others' thought, etc. While they are expressing girls' confidence, their costumes at the same time highlight the beautiful figure and limit their free actions, which is contrary to the idea their performance want to show. The clothes girl groups' members wear on the stage should be improved with the premise of comfort, instead of deformed aesthetic level, which serve the male gaze and patriarchal aesthetic to a certain extent.

The female expression should not be limited at superficial level, it is ought to go further. The awareness of girls' power is not supposed to be narrowed down to the level of dealing with romantic relationship, simply follow the logic of falling in love, being betrayed, awakening and revenging. The narration should go beyond the loving issue to the social issue, such as domestic abuse, workplace gender discrimination, sexism concept, etc. There is no need to metaphorize the direct critique to gender discrimination. Gender issue is of great significance at socio-cultural level, thus it deserve people's attention and awareness.

4.3 Breaking out of Condition of Commodification

In order to get out of the limitation of over-commodification of female expression, non-profit action should be taken. Non-profit feminist art-creation monetary fund is supposed to be established and supported by the government to encourage female music producer to do non-profit creation which can have wider spread than profit-oriented production, letting more and more female gain the awareness of feminism and girls' power.

Girl groups' female expression of girls' power should be related to social or even global issue. Through this process, true expression of girls' power is reflected and realized.

5 CONCLUSION

This study critically examines the cognitive construction of the girls' power concept within the K-pop industry, tracing its evolution across different generations of girl groups, analyzing visual and lyrical narratives, and identifying systemic barriers to authentic feminism expression. The research highlights the progressive shift from traditional

innocent female image to more assertive, subversive representations. However, these empowerment narratives are constrained by patriarchal capitalism, which distorts feminism expression into marketable commodities. Three key obstacles emerge: paradoxical gender expression that sexualizes female bodies under the guise of empowerment, male-dominated hierarchies that marginalize female creative agency, and neoliberal commodification that reduces feminism to a profitable branding strategy.

To counter these challenges, this study proposes systematic reforms, including increasing female participation in production decisions-making process, diversifying and deepening narratives beyond romantic tropes to address systemic gender issues, and establishing non-profit platforms to decouple feminism expression from profit motives. These suggestions aim to reclaim the radical potential of girls' power as a tool for societal transformation rather than commercial exploitation.

Looking beyond K-pop industry, this analysis underscores the tension between cultural industries and feminist movements globally. As K-pop continues to shape transnational perceptions of gender, its contradictions mirror broader struggles in neoliberal societies, where empowerment rhetoric often masks persistent inequalities. Future research could use intersectional approaches, incorporating race, class, as well as queer theory, to deepen understanding of how globalized pop culture both reflects and challenges societal norms. Ultimately, the study calls for a reimagining of cultural production, which prioritizes authenticity over marketability, fostering genuine solidarity in the fight for gender equity.

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