

The Evolution of K-POP Girl Group from the Perspective of Feminist Development

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Abstract:

For more than 20 years, Korea's pop music industry has developed rapidly, forming a music industry that can represent Korean culture: K-POP. In recent years, K-POP cultural works that contain feminist concepts have attracted more and more attention and discussion. This phenomenon is not only a trend but also a cultural symbol of the times. From the perspective of feminism, this paper analyzes the evolution of the style of K-POP girl groups and discusses the current situation of K-POP girl group feminism, as well as the existing conflicts and contradictions. According to the analysis in this article, K-POP provides a platform for feminist expression, but it also faces challenges. The style of the K-POP women's group has changed many times, and the concept has also changed towards freedom and liberation. This reflects the influence of feminism on the development of K-pop girl groups. But at the same time, there are problems with this change based on the influence of commercialization and other factors. The first problem is the contradiction between their works and feminism, which makes their works appear empty. The second is the contradiction between the image of the idol and the connotation of the work. Therefore, the promotion role of K-POP girl groups in feminist awakening needs to be further developed.

Keywords: K-pop; girl groups; feminism; commercialization

1. Introduction

With the globalization of Asian pop music, the development of mass communication channels, and the strong support of the South Korean government for the entertainment industry, the globalization of K-POP has accelerated and is widely popular among young people around the world. However, as a high-

ly diffuse existence in modern culture, it is not only a kind of music but has become a way of cultural expression, which is very powerful in changing the values of this generation, including the view of mate selection, self-cognition, and gender cognition.

As a highly commercialized industry controlled and dominated by capital, commercial interests promote the content presented by K-pop culture to meet the

market demand, and the images of female idols are mostly shaped under the needs of commercial interests. With the popularity of feminism, to cater to popular trends and aesthetics, there are more and more works in K-pop culture that promote feminism and emphasize women's power. Feminism has become a commodity symbol in K-pop culture.

This paper aims to study the development of K-POP girl groups from the perspective of feminist development, the current situation under the background of commercialization, and the contradictions they face, and explore the influence of feminism in K-POP culture.

2. Origin and Development of K-POP

2.1 The Style of the Early Girl Group

At the beginning of the 21st century, the Korean economy was hit hard and fell into a serious economic crisis, and due to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) crisis. To divert the audience's attention from practical problems, the Korean pop music industry began to create attractive idol groups that cater to the public's aesthetics to relieve social tensions. Most of the female idols were portrayed as cute, sexy, and childish, and the female idols were shaped into the object of male sexual fantasy from a male perspective.

During this period, the female idol groups presented more traditional female images in the hearts of men, the K-POP girl group focused on attracting male fans. One of the signs of a girl group's success is the high percentage of male fans, which can attract "uncle fans" and is very popular in the South Korean army. Therefore, the image of the girl groups during this period was designed to meet the market demand dominated by men, so most of the girl groups were based on simple girls next door. In music videos, they usually wear pure and energetic makeup, coupled with mature and sexy costumes or dance movements. The lyrics constantly mention "Oppa" (A nickname for a girl to a boy in Korean) and show their love for "Oppa" in a cute way. The characteristics of the image of a girl group at this stage illustrate that "how to express women's subjectivity can only be activated and realized through men's gaze and men's emotions" [1].

Because K-POP was still in the stage of exploration and development during this period, and the market was relatively surplus, the style of the girl group gradually diversified in the later stage. There are retro-style girl groups, sexy styles, and girl crush styles that show women's power. These girl groups have achieved good results, and their styles have all received a good response in the market.

2.2 The Style of a Sexy Girl Group

In each stage of the development of K-POP culture, the image of the girl group is not single, but a certain style is more popular. The change in female idol image shaping is inseparable from the development of the K-POP industry, the changes in the social environment, and the market demand at that time.

Because the girl group market is gradually saturated, the competition is fierce, and most female fans are attracted by boy groups, so to attract male fans to consolidate the market, the style of K-POP girl groups has gradually changed to focus on sexy style and create female idols from a male perspective. In the highly competitive Korean pop music industry, showing a unique image is a strategy to attract audiences who are used to repeating the image of artists [2]. During this period, most of the girl groups were dressed in exposed clothes, and the lyrics are full of hints and the style is ambiguous. Some girl groups debuted in a pure style, but they were forced to transform into a sexy style because they were not popular in the market. In the music video of these sexy-style girl groups, the shots are mostly from a male perspective. The members wear skimpy clothes, the dance moves are mostly to show the body, and many actions and prop designs include sexual hints. K-pop female idols use sexual discourse and become sexual idols, that is, the body becomes an identity and strength for women [3].

In the later stage of this period, with the development of feminism and the gradual saturation of the girl group market which mainly focuses on sexy style, the style of the girl group gradually changed from sexy to pure.

2.3 Diverse Girl Group Style

With the high globalization of K-POP culture, K-POP culture has expanded to Europe and the United States. Compared with the pure and sweet style of K-POP girl groups, the European and American market prefers the idol image with attitude and ambition. Secondly, to expand the audience of the fan base and attract female fans who are more willing to spend money, the image of the girl groups also needs to meet the market demand of female fans. In addition, with the continuous expansion of the influence of feminism around the world, women's awareness of independence in society is getting stronger and stronger, and girl-crush-style girl groups have become a new trend. In particular, this style of girl group has achieved good results in the international community and has high visibility, leading to more production companies have begun to launch girl crush style girl groups and works. These works containing the concept of feminism, all show women's power, emphasize women's independence and

self-confidence, mainly focus on self-expression, and reflect women's pursuit of self-value in the new era. Female groups use strong power to express their desire to become independent individuals in society and to establish new standards of beauty against traditional femininity [4].

During this period, the shaping of the image of the girl group pursued a diversified interpretation of the female image and temperament, so the style of the girl group was no longer limited to the girl crush style, but also focused on the concept of the girl group, with the concept of twins, and the girl groups that create a virtual world and have their worldview.

3. The Current Situation of the Concept of Feminism in K-POP

3.1 Positive Meaning

First of all, in the process of adapting and leading the market, K-POP culture is also constantly exploring and expressing feminism, providing a platform for feminist expression. The concept of feminism in K-POP culture has been reflected to a certain extent. The girl group, which focuses on the strong style of a girl crush, usually links women with ambition and emphasizes that women should be independent with the slogans of "I am the queen" and "the world is centered on me". There are also works based on social phenomena, such as criticizing the deep-rooted gender discrimination in Korean society or leaving aside opposition and attack, emphasizing that beauty is diverse, and women should accept all kinds of themselves and self-confidence from the inside out.

The expression of feminism in K-POP girl groups focuses more on emphasizing personality and self-choice, redefining mainstream aesthetics, and conveying positive female images and values. The change in the K-POP girl group style can stimulate the audience's thinking about feminism and improve the attention of feminism in the field of popular culture, which has a certain positive significance.

3.2 The Essence of Commercialization

As a highly commercial entertainment industry controlled and dominated by capital, commercial interests promote the content presented by K-POP culture to meet the market demand, and commercial motives promote the image of female idols to meet market demand. With the continuous improvement of women's thought and status, the discussion of feminism has become more and more popular. The mass media allows people to enter a new cultural model and influence people's views and behaviors [5]. To meet the popular trend and market demand, K-POP girl

groups focus on feminism as their creative theme. There are more and more works promoting feminism in K-pop, emphasizing female power. Feminism has become a commodity symbol in K-pop culture.

Secondly, the proportion of female consumers in the music market is getting higher and higher. K-POP culture has always been said that 'the group that gets female fans gets the market', and girl groups are gradually focusing on female audiences. The concept of music focusing on feminism will attract female audiences to a certain extent, and even trigger empathy and enhance fan stickiness. Feminism has gradually become the wealth code of K-POP, bringing gender dividends to girl groups.

4. Existing Conflicts and Contradictions

4.1 Hypocritical Feminism

The highly commercialized nature of K-POP also leads to conflicts between works and feminism. To pursue interests, capital commercialized the concept of feminism in K-POP and speaks for women to a certain extent under the banner of feminism, but the high degree of commercialization and self-materialization makes feminism a fashion item. The K-POP works that contain the concept of feminism are essentially commodities under the mutual influence of the social and cultural environment and the market. The purpose of creation is to obtain commercial benefits. The value of K-POP idols is produced after commercialization and cannot be separated from the aesthetic examination of the public. Therefore, a series of works related to feminism can't be divorced from its popularity. They must be commercially packaged according to the changes in the mainstream consciousness of society to comply with the fan economy. Feminism has become a commodity element to help idol groups open the market and improve their popularity.

K-POP idol is a kind of assembly line product, the idols presented are packaged by the company, and what fans see is what the entertainment company wants fans to see. In addition, the K-POP industry has a complete industrial chain, has a unique business model. From the selection and training process of members to visual, music production, image design, and even interviews, there are professional teams to formulate and complete. Most idols are only responsible for performance not expression, so they can't have too high requirements for idol self-awareness. The Korean entertainment industry has decided what female power should look like instead of allowing idols to express their feminist consciousness [6]. As a result, most

of the feminist works presented by K-POP are just empty slogans.

4.2 The Contradictions Faced

There is a contradiction between the image of K-POP girl groups and feminism. The female image in popular culture represents the standard definition of female image in society. The female image should be diverse, but the female idols' image does not break away from the K-POP industry's consistent requirements for female artists, to pursue a single white, young, and thin. Moreover, the works containing the concept of feminism in K-POP girl groups often advocate aesthetic freedom, freedom of dressing, and no anxiety about appearance. But this has a strong sense of separation from the exquisite idol image. Most of the works advocate gender equality, and women should be independent and confident. However, the lyrics only repeatedly mention the slogans of feminism, which are empty and have no connotation. The members in the music video usually wear sexy and gorgeous clothes, showing perfect bodies and delicate faces. The information conveyed by the lyrics has a strong sense of separation from the female roles presented in the music video. Because the Korean Wave is widely spread around the world, many fans can't understand the lyrics and only pay attention to the idol image presented in the music video, which will cause misunderstandings about the song, leading fans to focus only on the exquisite appearance of the idol group [7]. It also often happens that K-POP female idols feel uncomfortable in performances because of weight loss or excessive diet. K-POP idols also need strict body management in daily life without a schedule to maintain a slim figure.

The extreme image management of female idols is in opposition to the content to be presented by music works. Ordinary women are vulnerable to this single aesthetic standard, which is a process of passive acceptance and internalization, which not only strengthens the materialization of female idols but also intensifies the anxiety and pressure of female groups on their image.

The idol itself is the product of the gaze, and the image shaping of the girl's idol is inseparable from male aesthetics and gaze. The male gaze represents a stereotype of women [8]. This conflicts with the core concept of feminism. Both the sexy girl groups or girl crush style girl groups, can't be separated from the essence of sexualization. Female idol groups express their desires in a potentially empowering way, but the audience is usually mainly male. The expression of female consciousness is accompanied by the shyness and feigned innocence of returning power to men [9]. Especially most of the group's works are dominated by male producers. Therefore, the feminist

concept of female idol groups is still influenced by male aesthetics, and the image of K-POP girl groups seems to change from blatant attraction to men's emphasis on women's power [10]. But this change is hypocritical. The early K-POP female idols were the direct product of the male gaze, so the current female idols are the product of the female gaze under the male gaze. This also contradicts the feminism that should be expressed in musical works.

5. Conclusion

From the perspective of feminism, looking at the changes in the style of girl groups in K-POP culture, it can be found that the style of girl groups is affected by the social environment and market demand, and it is a process of continuous adaptation to the market. With the awakening of feminism, society's attention to feminism has increased, and K-POP works containing feminist concepts will also face stricter censorship standards.

Feminism in K-pop culture has always been limited to a conservative scope, which has led to K-pop's failure to achieve female empowerment in the true sense. To better express feminism, producers should not just shout empty slogans, but also deepen the perspective of women and speak from the perspective of public figures. Works that lack cultural depth will always be eliminated by the market. Producers should not only respect the commercial nature of K-POP but also dare to break the limits. It shows diverse female roles in musical works containing feminist concepts and breaks the stereotype of female image. Strengthen the voice of female producers in the team, encourage female producers to participate in the music production, help the works more directly feedback the female perspective, and enhance the feminine awareness of the works. Let idols also participate in music production and stage design. When idols have higher autonomy over their works, the content expressed will also be more convincing. It is also necessary to base on the social phenomenon and carry out a deeper exploration to reflect the real situation and difficulties of the female group in society. Expose more women's problems. The K-POP industry should use music as a weapon to influence and inspire more people and launch more meaningful and in-depth works.

Whether the interpretation of feminism in K-POP culture is empty or not, it still provides a platform for the expression of feminism. It conveys women's resistance to the traditional expectations of society and their determination to be themselves. Stimulating the audience's thinking about feminism, promotes the awakening of female consciousness, and raises the attention of feminism in the field of popular culture. Promote the spread and development of female consciousness to some extent. An imper-

fect feminist awakening is also an awakening.

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