

The Awakening of Female Consciousness: Study on K-Pop Girl Groups' Music Videos

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Abstract: Since the 21st century, the Korean Pop music industry (K-Pop) has begun to grow by leaps and bounds, forming a music industry that is representative of Korean culture. Over the course of more than twenty years, K-Pop groups have begun to make new attempts and challenges with their works, especially the girl groups that have received more attention in recent years. More and more people are paying attention to the deeper meaning they want to express behind their works. This study focuses on three music videos by the K-Pop girl groups, (G)I-DLE, ITZY, and Red Velvet. Based on John Fiske's semiotic theory, it conducts a visual analysis of their music videos to investigate how the music videos of K-Pop girl groups reflect the awakening of female consciousness. It was found that all three girl groups expressed their feminist ideas through their music videos, reflecting the further profound development of K-Pop works and the strengthening of female consciousness in Korean patriarchal society.

Keywords: K-Pop, female consciousness, visual analysis, semiotic analysis

1. Introduction

In the last two decades, the Korean Wave phenomenon (Hallyu), especially the Korean Pop (K-Pop) music industry, has been a global success like never before. According to Lin & Rudolf, the cultural ambassador plays an important part in boosting Korean popularity in the world and it is a soft power of Korea, especially in its relationships with other countries [1]. However, the gender policy that the Korean government has implemented, is in conflict with K-Pop content. Actually, K-Pop stresses "lookism" (prejudice or discrimination against someone's looks) and has very sensual content, so it attracts many viewers' attention. The stage performances and music videos act as a visual marketing tool that always places more value on the performers' physical attractiveness than their musical talent [2]. Particularly in girl groups, K-Pop idols frequently wear costumes and have sensual dance choreography because they are expected to fit into socially defined roles that are predominately held by men, such as exotic sexual objects according to Western stereotypes of Asian women and submissive, crumbly, and innocent women based on Korean patriarchy.

Research before has investigated the stereotype of gender roles in music videos and other media, and they find that a woman is more often portrayed as a sexual object compared to a man [3-5]. Furthermore, women are frequently portrayed in ways that stress traditional gender stereotypes, such as by presenting men who are more aggressive, tough, and in positions of superior dominance. Contrarily, women are frequently described as powerless, reliant, and submissive. During the early period, most K-Pop girl groups had a sexy style, such as Girl's Generation, AOA, and Stellar.

However, several K-Pop stars, like Heechul from Super Junior and Amber from f(x), seemed to question gender stereotypes through androgynous imagery. They demonstrated gender equality, particularly for female groups who frequently fall victim to prejudices [2].

However, after the debut of 2NE1, a K-Pop girl group with a strong style, the positive response from female audiences has then prompted concept changes in other 2nd generation K-Pop girl groups and idols. In short, a K-Pop “girl crush” concept has started to be mentioned, which is marked by themes of confidence and female empowerment. Not being cute and playful, girl crush thrives on dark and mature themes, being a total badass. Compared with the sexy style, the girl crush concept resonates better with female fans, so it should come as no surprise that groups like MAMAMOO, EVERGLOW, and BLACKPINK, have gained momentum in the K-Pop scene [6]. These K-Pop groups with the girl crush concept always show their attitudes towards girls’ power through their works.

In March 2022, the K-Pop girl group named (G)I-DLE released their new song *TOMBOY*. When the members sang “It’s neither man nor woman”, once again, gender issues and women’s awakening were being hotly debated by K-Pop lovers in Korea and around the world. In Korean society, the concept of “son preference” has always been prevalent. Korean women keep being in a lower position. Women in Korea are expected to start following the norms imposed on them by society from a young age. For example, in Korea, women are expected to wear makeup at a young age. This does not only stem from the pursuit of beauty, but also from the general consensus in Korean society that it is important for a woman to maintain a dignified appearance in order to show courtesy to others. The discrimination that women face because of their gender is taken for granted by Korean society [7].

Fortunately, in such a social environment, more and more artists, especially the representative K-Pop girl groups join in the fight against inequality and show their own power in their works [8]. However, little research has been conducted in this area. Therefore, the author of this paper would like to explore the representation of women's consciousness behind the most representative works of the popular K-Pop girl groups focusing on their music videos.

2. Research Methods

Specifically, in this research, three popular music videos of K-Pop girl groups are considered, namely, *TOMBOY* by (G)I-DLE, *WANNABE* by ITZY, and *Psycho* by Red Velvet. There are two reasons for choosing these three works.

First, all three works are well-known masterpieces of popular female groups in recent years. According to the latest ranking of the top 50 K-Pop girl groups’ brand reputation, which was announced by the Korean Business Research Institute in August 2022, Red Velvet came in fifth place, (G)I-DLE came in sixth place, and ITZY came in twentieth place [9]. When it comes to the selection of their music videos, the selected works are both the most or the second most played music videos of the three girl groups on the YouTube platform, which proves the representativeness of these three works.

Second, these three music videos all have unique plots and scenario settings. Unlike some music videos that only use simple sets to show the beauty of female group members, all three works tell stories about the awakening of female consciousness, which greatly expresses their attitudes.

The author of this study uses semiotics analysis proposed by John Fiske, in conjunction with a descriptive qualitative research methodology. A qualitative approach is the result of social construction using a variety of existing theories.

According to John Fiske's theory, semiotics explains an incident, trying to illustrate it by moving visuals with social codes [10]. The following are John Fiske's three levels of social codes. 1) Reality level: appearance or fashion, makeup or face, custom or dress, expression or body language through facial expression, movement, action, and environment. 2) Representation level: camera, lighting,

characters, setting, and music or audio in the music video to support the scenes of the story. 3) Ideological level: Combining performance and reality through various social codes to bring particular ideologies such as genes, class, feminism, capitalism, and orientation [11].

While these levels are usually used for television, they may also be used for music videos, since both have the same subject of impressions. From this theoretical framework, this paper uncovers how the awakening of female consciousness is expressed in these three MVs.

3. Analysis for K-Pop Girl Groups' Music Videos

3.1. Plots of Girl Groups' Music Videos

All of these KPop girl groups in these three music videos want to show their powers and live their own life, instead of being controlled and interfered with. They do not want to be the objects of others. They have their own attitudes.

In (G)I-DLE's MV *TOMBOY*, they show the rebellion of girls. In the beginning, they are the ones being looked at, who are closed in a narrow small room. However, lately, they turn out to be the ones watching audiences and dancing in a wide square. Being looked means that they are objects. Watching others means that they are free and subjective [12].

In ITZY's MV *WANNABE*, four girls with different identities are trapped. They obey the orders of others but they are confused and unhappy. Nevertheless, one of them is always sober. She cuts her hair, and then all the other girls begin to change themselves to become what they wanted to be and enjoy their life. They do not want to care about what others think and they want to show that "everyone tells me what kind of girls I need to be, but I decide to be myself" [13].

In Red Velvet's MV *Psycho*, they tell a story about the struggle of five split personalities within a person as a way to fight against discrimination and violence against women and think about how women can better understand themselves. Four girls are treated unequally because of their gender, and one of them takes them into a shelter to bring them to final liberation and rebirth in the midst of their struggle [14]. Instead of just showing their beauty and glamour, they express the liberation of women through their music and video works.

3.2. Semiotics Analysis in Girl Groups' Music Videos

In this part of the research, the author gives a deeper analysis of some scenes that show social codes of the female consciousness in these videos. First, through John Fiske's semiotic theory, *TOMBOY* MV from the girl group (G)I-DLE is analyzed.

3.2.1. *TOMBOY* – The Resistance and Liberation of Women

From the beginning of the MV, Minnie closes the trunk of the car, which makes the audience feel that they are trapped. Then, a series of scenes make audiences feel depressive.

On the representation level, the beginning scenes show that Minnie, Soyeon, and Miyeon are closed in different narrow small rooms. The lighting and tone of the MV are dim, which gives a sense of depression. On the reality level, it can be felt that their facial expressions are all unhappy because they are both being spied on by others. However, they want to gain freedom by rebelling and destroying the bondage to the ego.

On the reality level, what can be seen is that, in this MV, the Barbie doll is a widely used element. In the traditional view, Barbie dolls are the objects that girls like and want to be because they are exquisite and beautiful. However, in this music video, the girls do not want to be Barbie. When Soyeon is looking at the mirror in the small room, she suddenly drops the mirror after seeing the face of Barbie in it. The lyric she sings is "Why are you cranky, boy? Do you want a blond Barbie doll?"

It's not here, I'm not a doll." The Barbie doll is beautiful, but it is only a thing to be played with by others. She wants to be herself, instead of the Barbie doll.

Lately, Soyeon throws the boy Barbie into the juice extractor to destroy it. The boy Barbie means the one who spies on these girls. On the ideological level, it also reflects the situation of the girls in the society of South Korea, being controlled by men. Then, the boy Barbie is hanged in the middle, with the spy of the five girls. They are successfully freed from control and rebel against it.

In these scenes, the girls enjoy their freedom. Yuqi and Shuhua are driving a car in a wide square and this responds to the film *Thelma and Louise* which also shows the power and the growth of the girls.

On the representation level, in the second half of the music video, the setting changes. All three girls escape from the small rooms and join the other two in the open field to dance to their heart's content. In the end, the trunk is opened. Balloons fly out of the trunk, signifying liberation and freedom. The last scene is in a cinema where the five girls are watching the film. They are the ones watching, instead of being watched. They have got back the right to show themselves as independent individuals [15].

3.2.2. *WANNABE* – Free from Restraint

ITZY's work *WANNABE* is further analyzed through John Fiske's semiotic theory, especially on the reality level. In the story, five girls have some changes, especially their customs and behaviors, which show their awakening. In the beginning, it is clear from their outward expression that they are reluctant about what they are doing and are repressed inside. The setting of the scene also sets the mood. For example, on the dance floor, the dim lighting and the crowd in strange costumes create a weird atmosphere, making Yeji feel out of place. The rows of neatly arranged school uniforms represent the strict stereotypical system, which means that Chaeryeong is being watched.

After that, they are liberated and start to be their real selves. This change can be seen in the symbols of the music video. For example, Ryujin's haircut is seen as a turning point in this music video. On the ideological level, people often think that wearing long hair is more in line with the image of women from the traditional impression of gender. Cutting hair is often seen as a symbol of rebellion. It can be considered as breaking the restraint and emphasizing more on the theme that MV wants to express. Here is the analysis for two specific scenes from the MV.

On the reality level, one environment is a luxurious and classical room. Her custom and appearance show that Lia is a girl from a rich but restrained family. She is playing with a doll. However, she is unhappy and then destroys the doll. She is like the doll. Although she enjoys a rich life, the life of a grand lady means a lot of restraints. Finally, she steps onto a table full of food. This scene pays homage to the movie *Daisies*, which is a symbol of resistance.

Moreover, on the reality level, the change in Yuna's custom shows her awakening. Yuna stands at the backstage in a conservative dress and high heels. She wears what the public thinks is more appropriate because she cares about how people look at her. Finally, she takes off her jacket and high heels and walks barefoot freely on the runway in a beautiful yellow halter dress. She wants to blossom to her fullest and be herself.

3.2.3. *Psycho* – The Struggle against Violence and Inequality

Unlike the first two music videos, Red Velvet's *Psycho* is a more visual representation of the long road against violence against women.

Like *WANNABE*, the use of the custom reflects the state of mind of the characters. In this MV, most of the costumes of the five girls are black and white or light-colored. This shows the bleakness of women's lives under unequal treatment. Only in one dressing room, they dress in brightly colored

costumes. This dressing room can be seen as a shelter for the protection of women fleeing from unequal treatment, and it is only here that the lives of female victims are given color.

There are also other symbols in this video. For example, Seulgi sits at a weaving machine, symbolizing the role of the traditional housewife while Irene works in a textile factory. In the last century, this was the location where Western women often worked. Their costumes are both classically styled, suggesting tradition and conservatism. Faced with household inequality and workplace oppression, women show depression in their expressions.

Furthermore, the scenes of Yeri show reality level and representative level from the custom and setting. She wears a light-colored floral dress with twist braids, dressed like a little girl. She jumps on the mattress. The mattress lets people think of the mattress performance at Columbia University, which was used to fight against rape on campus [16]. The movement of Yeri reflects the sexual assault experienced by girls.

The theme of domestic violence is also covered in this video. Wendy's disheveled hair, haggard eyes, and lipstick scratched at the corners of her mouth suggest that she is a victim of domestic violence. She sees others, but she chooses to remain silent about her own suffering and that of others. This video also shows a prospect of gender equality which is expressed through Joy's role. She drives in a direction opposite to the normal direction of motion with a black and white background. This does not exist in the real world. It means Joy is different from other characters in time and space. As a pioneer of resistance, her task is to lead and help other victims.

At the end of the music video, the five girls are laughing happily in a paradise where they belonged. However, the final scene is like real heaven. The real world will not be so simple, and the girls' escape path may be a road with no return to heaven.

4. Conclusion

The three MVs of (G)I-DLE, ITZY, and Red Velvet show their thinking and awakening through the plots and scenes. Through the analysis of the three MVs, the author concludes that the women in South Korea have begun to show their desire to rebel against the unequal and oppressive treatment in the K-Pop industry. These three MVs epitomize the work of today's K-Pop girl groups. In contrast to the past, K-Pop girl groups are no longer just focusing on beautiful looks but showcasing diverse styles. They are growing more and more well-liked as the stereotype of weak women and Korea's patriarchal culture gradually begin to fade and the image of strong, independent, and self-assured women emerges. They are focusing on expressing their attitudes and ideas, using their songs as a weapon to express the awakening of female consciousness as a way to influence and inspire more people. K-Pop girl groups will produce more works with substance and depth. More women will be able to think from their works and have the courage to change the status quo and be themselves.

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