

Gender Boundaries and Stage Discourse: A Case Study of Gender Equality Challenges in Digital-Era Music Variety Shows — Taking "Rap for Youth 2025" as an Example

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Abstract. With the rapid development of digital culture, music variety shows have emerged as essential platforms for youth cultural expression and negotiation of social values. Rap for Youth 2025, a leading Chinese hip-hop competition program, has brought to light prominent issues of gender discrimination, notably the persistent disrespect and marginalization of female contestants by their male counterparts. Drawing on international hip-hop feminist theory, this paper systematically analyzes representative incidents from the show to reveal how gender boundaries are constructed, maintained, and challenged within its competition format and production culture. Through a detailed examination of both the overt and subtle manifestations of gender bias—including male rappers' avoidance of female rivals, interruptions, and derogatory language—the study unmasks the structural inequalities embedded in the entertainment industry. Further, by exploring the resistance and proactive strategies of female rappers, as well as the advocacy of the program's sole female mentor, the paper highlights diverse forms of female agency in reclaiming public voice and stage presence. The discussion also extends to the responses of audiences and digital communities, illustrating how social media amplifies both gendered controversies and calls for change. Ultimately, this research contributes to the growing body of scholarship on gender equality in digital popular culture, offering both theoretical frameworks and practical recommendations for promoting gender inclusion and justice in Chinese music variety television.

Keywords: gender equality, digital culture, Rap for Youth 2025, hip-hop feminism, structural inequality

1. Introduction

The globalization and digitalization era are reshaping cultural production and dissemination, with music serving as a crucial carrier for youth culture. Hip-hop, originating from American urban street culture, goes beyond music and dance to become a space for self-expression, identity formation, and social critique. International scholarship has highlighted the male dominance of hip-hop culture but also emphasizes how female participants continuously challenge traditional gender roles to gain voice and visibility [1,2].

In China, hip-hop culture began relatively late but has rapidly developed alongside reality competition shows like Rap for Youth. The 2025 season of this show sparked widespread attention and debate due to male rappers' blatant bias and disrespect towards female contestants — manifested in their unwillingness to battle female rappers, interruptions during speeches, and derogatory language — highlighting the ongoing difficulties of gender equity in this cultural space.

This paper focuses on this case to investigate how gender boundaries are constructed, reproduced, and contested in the digital-era Chinese mainstream music variety show context. Through analyzing key events and participant responses, it aims to reveal how female rappers negotiate structural inequality and push cultural change toward inclusiveness. This research not only offers original academic insights but also practical significance for promoting gender justice in the entertainment industry.

2. Literature review and theoretical framework

2.1. Development of international hip-hop feminism

Hip-hop feminism is a critical theoretical approach connecting feminism and hip-hop culture, highlighting how women assert agency in male-dominated cultural spaces [1,2]. Despite experiencing gender discrimination and stereotyping, female hip-hop artists employ innovative language, visual expression, and community-building to break gender constraints. Globally, hip-hop feminism fosters self-empowerment strategies and is recognized as a model of gender politics amid diverse cultural intersections.

2.2. Structural gender inequality and stage boundary construction

Structural gender inequality manifests in cultural production and dissemination mechanisms, with men holding concentrated discursive power and women often marginalized [3,4]. Competitive reality shows represent explicit arenas where gender power is exercised. Boundary theory [5] posits that gender boundaries are continuously constructed and reproduced through norms of behavior, language, and social interaction. Male rappers' refusal to battle female rappers exemplifies maintaining these boundaries.

2.3. Research on female rappers in China's digital culture

In recent years, research on female rappers' status in China's hip-hop scene has increased [6,7]. Female rappers confront resource scarcity and social prejudice, enduring harsher growth environments than their male counterparts. While digital platforms offer freedom for expression, entrenched traditional gender attitudes persist in online discourse and industry structures. Variety shows, as key cultural platforms, facilitate the publicization of gender issues, aiding social awareness transformation.

3. Case study — multidimensional manifestations of gender inequality in rap for Youth 2025

3.1. Program structure and gender composition overview

Rap for Youth 2025 is one of China's premier hip-hop competitive variety shows, employing formats such as “battle” and “call out,” wherein contestants select opponents for live performance duels. Although both male and female contestants participate, the gender ratio is heavily skewed towards

males. The competition format implicitly embeds gender symbolism: male contests are often regarded as the principal arena showcasing strength and skill, while female contestants tend to be marginalized, reflecting the deeply rooted male-centered culture within hip-hop.

3.2. Male contestants' refusal to battle female opponents and interruptions — direct signs of gender bias

In episode three, several male contestants explicitly refused to “call out” female rappers for battles—a behavior interpreted as gender-based avoidance and discrimination, signaling skepticism and undervaluation of female competitors' abilities. Moreover, some male contestants repeatedly interrupted female rappers during their speeches or performances, demonstrating blatant disrespect. These interruptions disrupt the fairness of the competition and symbolically restrict women's right to voice onstage.

Female rapper Zhong Xin openly confronted this behavior live on the program, asking, “Why am I deprived of the opportunity to battle on stage just because I am a woman?” This candid statement became a focal point of heated discussion on social media platforms such as Weibo and Zhihu, anchoring gender issues as a core controversy in the season.

3.3. Lil Asian's provocative remarks — sarcasm and intersecting discriminations

Male contestant Lil Asian responded sarcastically with “I don't know you” when questioned about not choosing a female opponent. Netizens condemned his tone as dripping with contemptuous, passive-aggressive “shade” that openly disrespected female rappers. Furthermore, his dismissive attitude extended to foreign contestants, revealing multiple layers of social bias. The show's editing repeatedly featured this segment, amplifying public condemnation of gender and ethnic discrimination.

3.4. Female mentors' and rappers' active voice and rights defense

Wan Nida, the only female mentor of the season, consistently voiced strong support for female rappers, stressing the importance of equal treatment between male and female contestants to uphold competitive fairness. Her resolute attitude symbolized female empowerment within the program, inspiring a sense of identification and mobilization among female participants and fans alike.

Together with other female rappers like Zhong Xin, a collective voice of resistance emerged, articulating awareness and assertiveness within an environment traditionally marginalizing women through onstage challenges and vibrant social media engagement.

3.5. Media and audience reaction and social issue activation

Following the broadcast of Rap for Youth 2025, incidents of male rappers' disrespect towards female peers rapidly trended on Weibo, sparking millions of discussions. Public opinion intensely focused on gender equity, questioning both the entertainment industry and broader cultural structures entrenched with gender bias.

Users on Zhihu and Weibo engaged in critical debates around topics such as competitive fairness, gender stereotyping, and industry responsibility, offering concrete suggestions including enhanced gender sensitivity training and competition rule reforms. This collective discourse generated significant social momentum, pushing gender topics in digital culture towards openness and transparency.

3.6. Gender symbolism embedded in competition format and industry structure

The “call out” segment transcends mere competition mechanics, serving as a symbolic battleground over gender power relations. Male contestants’ avoidance of female competitors reflects entrenched stereotypes such as “men must not lose to women,” enforcing gender boundaries on the competitive stage. The show’s failure to regulate or penalize such behavior signals an implicit tolerance of structural gender inequalities within entertainment production.

Female rappers face systemic disadvantages concerning resource allocation (stage time, publicity), competition scheduling (priority and partner selection), and subsequent career opportunities, forming a vicious cycle that curtails their growth and voice in hip-hop culture.

3.7. Illustrative cases of female rappers

Zhong Xin: As a leading female rapper representative, her forthright and determined stance against gender discrimination became a symbol of the season’s gender discourse. She embodies women’s resilience and confidence within a male-dominated culture, prompting public reconsideration of female rappers’ legitimacy and value.

Wan Nida: As the female mentor, she not only offers support but also actively leads gender-conscious narratives, becoming an influential figure guiding female contestants to overcome gender-based constraints.

Other Female Contestants: Their perseverance in competition and stylistic diversity enriches the program’s content while challenging traditional gendered performance norms.

Through its layered lens, the analysis exposes the gender inequity woven into Rap for Youth 2025—from micro-level behaviors and program mechanics to macro-level socio-cultural structures—while foregrounding female rappers’ acts of resistance and self-empowerment. In doing so, it lays a critical groundwork for future theorizing and reform.

4. Structural roots and cultural mechanisms

4.1. Competition format and “victory as gender symbol”

Battle formats inherently assign symbolic meanings to gender. Male rappers’ refusal to challenge female opponents reflects internalized gender stereotypes and identity threats. The show’s failure to regulate such behaviors facilitates the perpetuation of gender biases.

4.2. Male-dominated hip-hop culture and gender socialization

Hip-hop culture has traditionally positioned masculinity as strength and competitiveness, designating women as “others” whose creativity and expression are limited. Male authoritative cultures remain deeply rooted in the Chinese hip-hop scene, with male discourse dominance hard to shake.

4.3. Audience gender double standards

The audience exhibits clear gender double standards. Male contestants’ misconduct is often excused, while female rappers face accusations of “hype” or “seeking attention.” This social cognition hinders female rappers’ social acceptance and equitable status.

4.4. Gender bias in resource allocation

Female rappers receive clearly fewer resources, exposures, and contract opportunities, creating a vicious cycle limiting career progress and voice expansion, reflecting the broader industry's structural gender imbalance.

5. Female resistance and agency — breaking boundaries and empowerment

On the stage of Rap for Youth 2025, faced with collective gender bias and disrespect from male rappers, female contestants have not passively accepted such marginalization. Instead, they have exhibited a high degree of agency by employing diverse modes of resistance to break through structural barriers, gradually achieving empowerment. This section analyzes these dynamics from four intertwined dimensions: individual actions, collective support networks, digital media empowerment, and socio-cultural context.

5.1. Individual confrontation and struggle for discursive power

Female rapper Zhong Xin's outspoken response on the show exemplifies strong subjectivity and agency. She not only confronted male contestants' discriminatory behaviors onstage but also amplified her voice through media and social platforms. Her critical question, "Why am I deprived of the opportunity to battle on stage just because I am a woman?" challenges not only the immediate acts of gender discrimination but also broader competition rules and societal gender norms. This candid, critical articulation breaks free from traditional market narratives that cast women as passive or secondary, manifesting female artists' determination to claim discursive power in public cultural spaces.

5.2. Role modeling and collective solidarity led by female mentors

As the only female mentor on the program, Wan Nida's vocal advocacy for female rappers embodies an influential model effect. Her firm defense fuels a virtuous cycle of female solidarity, mutual support, and role-modeling within the female rapper community. Such top-down backing serves as a crucial counterforce against male-dominated cultural practices, highlighting the practical value of feminist leadership in the new digital cultural landscape.

5.3. Digital media as a tool for female empowerment

Digital platforms such as Weibo, Bilibili, and Zhihu have provided female rappers with alternative channels free from mainstream media control. Female artists and their allies use these spaces to disseminate video clips, create original content, and engage in interactive discussions, cultivating layered and multi-directional information networks. This significantly enhances public cognition and resonance around gender inequality issues. From a cultural empowerment perspective, the openness of digital culture enables women to carve out new spaces for visibility and influence, building social and cultural capital in ways previously inaccessible.

5.4. Cultural context and diversified strategies

Within China's unique socio-cultural milieu, female rappers must navigate a delicate balance between conservative gender expectations and modern cultural self-expression. Beyond direct

confrontation, women rappers also employ innovative musical content, challenge gender stereotypes through their images, and showcase a diverse range of performance styles to dispel prevailing prejudices. These artistic innovations constitute both cultural breakthroughs and strategic gender politics, reflecting the complexities of “cultural resistance” and “generational agency.”

Furthermore, some young female rappers leverage their cross-cultural backgrounds, internet vernacular, and cross-disciplinary collaborations to develop empowerment models that transcend regional and cultural boundaries, promoting an expanded female voice within the globalized hip-hop scene.

5.5. Comparison and insights from international hip-hop feminism

International hip-hop feminism foregrounds women’s assertion of subjectivity and protest against gender oppression via hip-hop culture [1,2]. rappers craft empowerment within local contours: they absorb global feminist currents yet answer to China’s distinctive gender scripts. Their cultural voice enacts “harmony in diversity”, weaving strategic concession with unapologetic defiance to navigate—and subtly reconfigure—a complex social terrain. This hybrid approach enriches feminist theory globally, offering important practical perspectives on gender politics in digital cultural spaces.

5.6. Summary

In summary, female rappers in Rap for Youth 2025 demonstrate robust resistance and constructive empowerment via outspoken personal agency, female mentor-led solidarity, digital media amplification, and diversified cultural strategies. They not only demand equal competitive opportunities onstage but also leverage the digital cultural environment to awaken gender consciousness within the Chinese hip-hop community and beyond. This embodied practice of female subjectivity not only constitutes cultural activism but also marks a crucial phase in the ongoing gender emancipation process, representing a broader trend of expanding female boundaries and influence in the digital media era.

6. Outlook and recommendations

6.1. Responsibilities of producers and platforms

Variety shows should optimize competition formats to eliminate gender stereotypes, set explicit gender equality rules, and enhance gender sensitivity training for contestants and production teams, promoting cultural transformation in the industry.

6.2. Promoting inclusive digital cultural ecosystems

Encourage diverse gender expressions, support female rappers’ original content, and minimize gender biases in talent evaluation to refocus competition on artistic and skill merits.

6.3. Enhancing gender awareness among industry and audience

Host gender equality-themed events and public education campaigns to encourage audience reflection on gender prejudice and foster a healthy interactive industry environment.

6.4. Academic attention and cross-disciplinary collaboration

Advocate for more research focusing on China's female hip-hop expressions and digital culture, and promote collaboration between cultural industries and academia to enrich comprehensive gender media research.

7. Conclusion

The overt disrespect that male rappers frequently display towards their female peers in Rap for Youth 2025 starkly reveals the persistent and, at times, intensifying construction and contestation of gender boundaries in the rapidly evolving landscape of China's digital music variety shows. This case study demonstrates how gender inequality is not merely an individual or interpersonal phenomenon but is deeply woven into the rules, production practices, and evaluative standards of mainstream entertainment platforms. Despite these structural obstacles, female rappers and mentors have increasingly asserted their presence and agency, refusing to remain silent or marginalized. By directly challenging gendered exclusions—both on stage and through digital platforms—female participants have spurred public debate, encouraged new forms of solidarity, and contributed to the progressive transformation of hip-hop culture.

Notably, the role of the sole female mentor and the collective engagement of female contestants highlight the importance of both individual resistance and networked, community-based strategies for empowerment. The amplification of gender controversies and advocacy for equality by netizens and social media further demonstrate how public discourse in the digital era can serve as both a battleground and a catalyst for gender justice.

These developments underline the vital responsibilities of media producers, showrunners, and digital platforms in fostering equitable and respectful environments. Only through the integration of gender awareness into all facets of show production—ranging from competition format design to participant training and feedback mechanisms—can entertainment programs move beyond tokenism and performative inclusion. Ultimately, ensuring fair and inclusive gender competition within music variety shows is not just about correcting wrongs or conforming to social expectations; it is fundamental to safeguarding the vitality, creativity, and sustainability of popular digital culture itself. By supporting diversity and equal voice, Chinese music variety shows have the potential to become exemplary sites of cultural innovation and drivers of broader gender equality in society.

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