

Analysis of Queer Female Fandom: Popularity, Economic, and Gender Ideals

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Abstract: With the fast development of the K-pop industry which contains a wide variety of idols and bands, Queerness is strategically harnessed by entertainment companies as a powerful means to advertise their idols and profit, recognizing the growing female and youth market power globally. This phenomenon not only reflects how the K-pop industry adapted to contemporary cultural norms but also underscores its transformative influence in shaping discussions around gender and sexual identity on a global scale. This article analyzes the reasons why Queer idols are sought after and loved by a wide range of fans. This article argues that this phenomenon shows the fans' pursuit of free expression. At the same time, this phenomenon shows the rise of women's consciousness and the rebellion against traditional male power, expressing women's desire to break stereotypes and pursue their ideas. In addition, the power of capital is also what drives the development of Queer idols.

Keywords: Queer, K-pop industry, women's consciousness

1. Introduction

The discussion and display of Queerness have gained increasing popularity on a global scale, finding various forms of expression, with one notable avenue being the entertainment industry. Idols and celebrities often lead fashion trends and pose images that their fans admire, thereby influencing their preferences and lifestyle choices. This phenomenon is observable in various cultural contexts. For instance, in China, teenagers often seek to emulate their admired celebrities, leading to social comparison among youth [1]. These celebrities also create significant influences on the public as their influence is not only limited to their actions and style. They also act as role models, which is a reason why they become an attractive choice for brands seeking representatives for their advertising strategy. Brands often leverage the star power and fandoms associated with these celebrities because young consumers view them as a source of motivation, actively engaging with advertisements featuring their idols [1]. This underscores the profound impact of celebrities on the public, showing how they can shape societal perceptions and consumer behavior. Their display of Queerness and non-binary gender expression also opens up their audience's perception of the issue.

In the past two decades, the representation of Queerness in the major media and entertainment industry has undergone significant transformations. Although the concept of Queerness was developed and established a relatively long time ago, the concept has been getting increasing attention in recent years. This pattern is revealed in various facets of popular culture, with one notable example being the increasing popularity in the academic examination of soft masculinity within the K-pop

genre. K-pop artists have embraced cross-gender dressings and diverse gender expressions, effectively integrating Queerness into their performances and production [2]. However, the reception of these changes is diverse. Some fan communities may still feel apprehensive about openly expressing their interest in Queer idols, as highlighted in a study by Jeehyun Jenny Lee et al. [3]. Yet, there are also instances of encouragement and empowerment, particularly among fan groups such as Asian Americans from the LGBTQ+ community, who find solace, support, and a sense of unity in Queer celebrities and K-pop idols [4]. This growing trend of Queerness in popular culture and media serves a dual purpose. On one hand, it symbolizes the increasing awareness of gender diversity and inclusivity within the public sphere. Simultaneously, it plays a pivotal role in shaping the aesthetic perceptions of the current generation, who are exposed to a more diverse and inclusive representation of gender and identity. This dynamic, reflective of evolving cultural norms, highlights the intricate interplay between media, society, and the broader discourse on identity and expression.

As Queer female idols cast a strong influence across the globe as a rising phenomenon, this paper aims to focus on Queer popularity, and economic and gender influences to unpack the emerging attention on fluid gender expression.

2. Case Description

In current Queer culture, hybrid gender expression is global. With the rise of the internet and increasing globalization, Queerness in many cultures beyond the United States such as Thailand and Italy, which Jackson referred to as "global Queering," quoting from Altman [5]. Queer female idols show many signs that do not align with traditionally established gender standards for women. Instead of embedding girly elements in their performance, Queer female idols may have short haircuts, manly clothing, and tattoos all exhibiting mixed persona that lies in between gender boundaries of male and female.

Against the background of K-pop, many idols in a neutral style stand out. They distinguish themselves from other band members by showing signs of more masculinity [6]. Their dress, hairstyles, and makeup, as well as their roles, challenge traditional gender norms, making them more creative in the industry and symbolizing the ever-changing landscape of gender expression in K-pop.

The sensation of Queer female and male idols is not limited between nation boundaries or ethnic boundaries. Many countries have the same type of celebrities who are widely recognized and loved by the public. They exhibit a rebellious attitude in style, and their popularity is partly due to this "feminist beauty" they exhibit [7]. It has also been argued that Queer idol is an image of femininity, with women trying to reconcile with the patriarchal standards of female beauty that most people have previously been exposed to. Later, in the 2021 performance, some young androgynous style idols were also recognized, and their popularity influenced the Chinese audience's social and cultural perception of Queerness.

3. Cause Analysis

3.1. Meet the Identity Expression of Fans

The love and pursuit of Queer stars show the psychology of fans pursuing freedom and advocating self-expression. Many fandoms believe that these Queer female idols empower them to consider multiple forms of gender expression beyond traditional gender norms [7]. They also help their fandoms to consider crossing the boundaries of exploration for "self-image, intimate relationships, and sexual desires" [7]. Some scholars believe that their Queer style creates a space for imagination, identity, and self-expression. This is connected with the gender ideals that these Queer female celebrities, or the industry behind them, advocate and advertise.

Studies have also investigated fandom's display of Queerness as "a means for cross-gender identification for female idols" and to "explore gender and sexual identity" [8]. Shin named this dressing and style performance of mimicking their idol "fancos". Being attracted to K-pop idols, the popularity of cross-dressing arose. Many women chose to dress up according to the male idols they liked and this became a regular phenomenon in Seoul during the 2000s [8]. Cross-dressing is not a significant characteristic of K-pop. Female idols would be "masqueraded as men" and some male idols would dress womanly for "fan service", reversing the gender performances traditionally expected [2]. In both idols and fandom, cross-dressing or Queerness is becoming more prevalent and acceptable, revealing female displays of masculinity more often. The increase in the need for free identity expression therefore also fosters the popularity of Queer female idols. In the cultural influence aspect, Queer female idols are presented as ideals or personas that the fandoms can modify according to their desire. The appearance of Queer female idols provides ground for fandom to "fans", a means for them to "construct their gender and sexual identity" within the current society where heterosexual appeals are more prevalent. It also shows that to fans who have fluid gender expressions and non-binary gender expressions, Queer female idols will reinforce the fandom's perception of gender and culture [8].

3.2. Breakthrough Traditional Male Empowerment

In Zhao's opinion, women may feel empowered for no longer being the passive object of stare in men's view but actively finding the beauty that they enjoy [7]. This is a rebellious attention to the "polarized gender role" in the current society that the fandoms admire [7]. Culturally speaking, the female was often considered as the gender being observed, resulting in the sexualization and objectification of women in different forms of media including advertisements. Gill stated that the objectification of women was historical [9]. During periods, women are expected to encompass the ideal beauty of housemakers or in current society be expected to be independent and successful. Although on the surface, the expectation leaned more towards female empowerment that the crowd accepts and pursues, Gill argued that it is an internalized mode of sexualization: that choosing to be sexualized to gain the power to make men obsessed with their beauty is not female empowerment but instead more undetectable objectification [9]. In both circumstances, the admiration of female empowerment is in common. This may be because of gender differences and power dynamics in current social norms, namely silent oppression under patriarchy.

3.3. Capitalism Push in the Entertainment Industry

The core of fandom and entertainment is controlled and driven by capitalism because of its ability to create wealth and influence. Simultaneously, the entertainment industry can further influence the world with the grander audience: their thoughts and perspectives [10]. There is a strong linkage between media and capitalism as Klikauer pointed out, many of the cultures that people consume today are the results of mass media and TNMC (transnational media corporations) [11]. According to this theory, Capitalism and the media must coexist to reinforce consumerism and profit, making the two interdependent. Their impact on people is enormous because they can market and reshape ideologies to a wide audience and potentially manipulate the beliefs of crowds [11].

The entertainment industry has the same power to influence and spread its culture as the media. The cooperation of binary stars with capitalist markets led to the rapid rise of popular culture. Especially with the rapid rise of internet and social media use, increasing market power for women and growing influence from teens, LGBTQ+ and queer people will inevitably become commonplace. It can be argued that the rise in queer popularity is also influenced by the dynamics of the capitalist market and the audience. Capitalism is also described as a system that shapes people's "values,

behaviors, and personal motivations" as they engage in it for profit. Given the profitability of market forces, the industry will follow this trend. Consistent with the global queer discussed in Jackson's paper, there is a consensus that the market is an important force in nurturing global queerness [9]. It is also questionable whether female idols can freely choose to express queerness, or whether they will eventually be modified according to market demand [6]. The growing spread of queer in multiple countries is testament to the growing importance of queer in the international market, acknowledging its current influence.

4. Conclusions

This paper shows the influence of queer female idols, as well as the beauty and gender ideals they promote in current culture. These artists boldly challenged traditional and patriarchal perceptions of what women should look like, thus becoming powerful symbols of rebellion against the status quo. Queer female idols not only challenge perceptions of femininity, but also influence their fans to reconsider the prevailing social status, in which women are often seen as passive observers rather than active participants. They provide an opportunity for fans to shift modern culture toward greater gender and sexual diversity by being able to define their own self-expression, explore and seize dominance of gender and sexual identity.

Moreover, queer globalization and the role of the media in promoting its growth cannot be underestimated. Queer idols have transcended borders and impacted audiences around the world. Media, especially digital platforms, play a vital role in disseminating information, enabling fans from around the world to connect, share and engage with the narratives of these artists. The transformative impact of queer female idols is a testament to their role in reshaping gender ideals, challenging social norms, and paving the way for a more diverse and inclusive future.

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