

Stereotypes: A Study on the Construction of Female Images in K-pop Girl Group Music

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Abstract. The influence of K-pop girl group music is increasing, and its audience is growing more diverse. The development of K-pop girl group music reflects the progress of feminism, but traces of stereotyped female images can still be observed. This paper explores the construction of these stereotypes from the perspective of gender construction in the development of K-pop girl group music. To date, few scholars have systematically studied K-pop girl groups and their music through text analysis to uncover the meanings behind the music that is now widely appreciated. This study attempts to address the gap in understanding of how female images are constructed and how female stereotypes have evolved in K-pop music. The study employs thematic analysis to examine three main aspects: the construction of female images, research methods, and research findings. From a feminist perspective, men are often in a dominant position in the media, while women are intentionally marginalized or stereotyped. The research findings indicate that prior to the fourth generation of K-pop girl groups, music works were predominantly focused on the theme of love, with groups largely favoring a sexy and glamorous style. Dance movements were primarily characterized by softness and femininity. After the fourth generation, music themes began to shift towards self-empowerment and dreams, while group styles diversified to include sweet, cool, and fierce aesthetics. Dance movements have also become more powerful and incorporated many hip-hop elements. Additionally, the variety of music genres has expanded, showcasing diverse forms of female beauty. The study reveals that in the process of developing K-pop girl group music, there are tendencies that deviate from or even alienate mainstream gender consciousness. However, the evolving stereotype of female images in K-pop music suggests greater possibilities for future development.

Keywords: K-pop girl group music, stereotypes, construction of female images, feminism

1. Introduction

pop girl groups, an abbreviation for female groups in Korean popular music, have undergone significant changes in their modes of dissemination and characteristics from the first generation to the current sixth generation. In recent years, Korean pop music has diversified continuously, and the younger generation has witnessed the international rise of numerous emerging K-pop groups. Notably, BLACKPINK, as the first Asian music group to perform at the renowned Coachella music festival in the United States, created a historic milestone for Asian artists in the global music industry. As a result, K-pop girl group music quickly became a global sensation, adored by young people worldwide. The expression of female consciousness and the breaking of stereotypes brought about by K-pop girl groups have influenced an increasing number of young people, making research in this area highly relevant.

This study employs thematic analysis to explore the stereotypes in the construction of female images in K-pop girl groups. The focus is on the gender construction presented by K-pop girl groups: these texts subtly influence people and shape their perceptions of women, potentially leading to cognitive distortions and biases about gender roles, thus forming gender stereotypes [1]. The study confirms that stereotypical narratives still exist in K-pop girl group music, but they also exhibit contradictory and alienated characteristics. These stereotypes, constructed in a multifaceted manner, reflect a split tendency in how K-pop girl groups mirror social reality and predict societal consciousness. This study attributes the contradictory representation of these stereotypes to a textual paradox: on one hand, there is a concession to secular culture, affirming the audience's memory and expectations of female significance; on the other hand, K-pop girl groups attempt to distance the audience from closed narratives by opposing traditional mainstream aesthetics, using diverse texts to challenge the power imbalance in the gender binary interaction.

2. Main Part

2.1. Construction of Female Images

Stereotypes are memory representations of the most typical attributes of a group and are defined as the common recognition of these typical attributes by people [2]. In the process of framing construction, media, including K-pop girl group music, often emphasize what they consider to be the core qualities of individuals or groups, highlighting these qualities and "labeling" them as unique to that group. This construction deliberately overlooks or discards qualities shared with other groups, leading to simplified or generalized portrayals, which are the essence of stereotypes

The construction of stereotypes [3] is widely present in cultural products such as music videos, films, and others. In most cultural works, women are typically depicted as gentle and beautiful, often playing roles that need rescuing. For instance, in Disney animations, princesses are usually portrayed as beautiful yet helpless and passive, with the stereotype that they can only achieve happiness through marriage to a male. This reinforces the societal model of women's passive and subordinate roles [4]. Due to this passive and subordinate portrayal, women's professions in real life are often depicted as auxiliary and less competitive [5]. This traditional division of labor is remembered and consumed by the media, solidifying into societal symbols of women's professional roles. Based on inherent traits such as "loving children" and "being family-oriented," women are often depicted in service-oriented professions that require more time investment or caregiving responsibilities [6].

This solidified construction of female attributes also extends to material attachments, such as clothing, indirectly reaffirming women's subordinate social roles through these attachments [7]. Early popular women's fashion featured tightly bound upper bodies, floor-length skirts, and elaborate lace decorations. Entering the 19th century, with the rise of the women's rights movement, "trousers" became a means for feminists to express power in public settings and became the object and goal of clothing reform [8]. In the media construction of female images, the choice between skirts or trousers metaphorically represents the conflict between patriarchy and feminism, serving as a textual representation that either confirms or challenges gender stereotypes [9]. For instance, in some stage performances and music videos of fourth-generation K-pop girl groups, there has been an increase in the use of trousers as the primary performance attire, combined with more powerful dance movements to showcase a youthful and cool style. The choice of trousers has become a partial symbol of feminist liberation.

In summary, previous studies have confirmed the presence of stereotypical constructions of female images in K-pop girl group music. These constructions are reflected in the external material aspects, such as clothing, as well as in the emotional and behavioral narratives presented [10].

2.2. Research Methods

This study employs thematic analysis to interpret the process of female image construction in K-pop girl group music. Thematic analysis focuses on identifying and describing both explicit and implicit meanings within texts. The thematic analysis in this study treats the works of K-pop girl groups as narrative processes, examining discursive texts with representative significance. During the process of editing and transformation, K-pop girl group works are converted into research commodities, colonizing narrative actions [11], and the symbolic meanings of these works are analyzed to explain the cultural framework of female construction implicit in the narratives. The themes related to the construction of stereotypes in K-pop girl groups are generally abstract entities that bring meaning and identity to recurring experiences and their variant forms. Thematic analysis captures and unifies the nature or foundation of these experiences into a coherent whole [12].

3. Research Findings

Through the thematic analysis of selected K-pop girl group music works, more nuanced explicit narrative methods of constructing female images can be identified, which produce different interpretations of whether these texts affirm or challenge stereotypes in the construction of female images [13]. The counter-presentations of female-themed texts in K-pop girl groups found in this study mainly focus on the following points.

3.1. Changes in the Construction of Feminine Ontology

As a template for female stereotypes, both early and modern K-pop girl groups have not abandoned the construction of the "traditional woman." For instance, Girl's Day, a K-pop girl group that debuted in 2010, released the track Something in 2014. The lyrics, written in the first person, revolve around a woman's sadness and heartbreak after being deceived in love. The lyrics state, "You deceived me again, I'm afraid of being alone... feeling devastated because you hit the mark, why go back and forth like this..." On stage, the members wore skirts and high heels, and their dance movements embodied a soft and sexy style. Similarly, recent K-pop girl group works exhibit comparable stereotypical constructions. IVE, a K-pop girl group that debuted in 2021, released the track CRUSH in 2024, which primarily centers around a young girl's desire for love and high expectations for her love interest. The lyrics include, "If it were with you, I would surely fall in love; I'm head over heels for you..." In the music video,

most members are dressed in brightly colored short skirts or camisoles, and the dance movements are soft and cute in style. The musical works of different groups from these two periods fulfill the audience's idealized expectations of women. These performances of traditional female images carry narratives that permeate the power structures within public spaces, informing the audience of a community's continuity with traditional culture [14].

3.2. Representation of Gender Displacement

In some K-pop girl group music works, female idols are constructed with meanings entirely opposite to stereotypical female roles, embodying traits traditionally associated with masculinity [15]. These idols often present themselves through highly masculinized stage costumes or song expressions. For example, XG, a girl group that debuted in 2022, released *WOKE UP* in 2024. This was XG's first fully rap song, blending 808 bass with unique East Asian music elements. Each member delivered distinctive and charismatic rap performances, showcasing a strong hip-hop vibe. The lyrics state, "Riding the wind and breaking through immediately because we hold the priority... cruising in a convertible... wearing a big watch on my wrist... I wake up with such strong energy, so don't make me mad..." The musical style and lyrical expression clearly convey a masculine tone, a presentation typically dominated by male artists in traditional music. In the music video and stage performances, the members of XG primarily wear hip-hop style pants, complemented by many punk-style accessories. The styling concept and special effects are also heavily futuristic, with one member even shaving her long hair into a buzz cut for her appearance. This "gender-bending" narrative of female idols dynamically interprets the production process of non-typical female images in K-pop girl group music, opposing the existing power relations of gender culture.

3.3. The Completely Opposite "Self" Image in Gender Presentation

In different contexts of K-pop girl groups' public appearances, female idols sometimes present completely opposing "self" images. This contradiction may arise from the conflict between external attachments and internal temperament [16]. For instance, in the music video for the song *TOMBOY*, released in 2022 by the K-pop girl group (G)I-DLE, the members are mainly dressed in pink and red, with skirts, high heels, and detailed makeup and hairstyles in some scenes, displaying the traditional feminine qualities expected of female idols. However, the song itself expresses a female image that breaks free from the bonds of love, with a bold, cold, independent attitude that challenges stereotypes. The dance moves are sharp and powerful, embodying a cool and fierce dance style. The lyrics include lines such as, "Now I'm drinking happily, do you long for a blonde Barbie doll? You've come to the wrong place, I'm not a puppet to be played with... love hasn't left a scar on me... I will be a cool tomboy, that's my attitude..." This type of performance reveals the contradiction between masculine and feminine qualities in the construction of female images, presenting them as a unified yet opposing entity [17].

4. Conclusion

Through thematic analysis, this study examines certain K-pop girl groups and their musical works, confirming prior theoretical content while also revealing many interesting, unconventional, and even anti-stereotypical constructions. These findings suggest that K-pop girl groups, in the process of their development, show tendencies to deviate from or even alienate mainstream consciousness in the construction of female images.

First, this study confirms the persistent fixed biases in female construction that have been emphasized in previous research. These stereotypes include the notion that women are typically gentle and have very low aggression; they are more likely to engage in subordinate jobs such as in the service industry. Although our findings verify that female idols sometimes wear pants in music videos and stage performances, regardless of the style of the K-pop girl group, they are still predominantly constructed to favor skirts or other clothing in line with traditional female stereotypes.

However, the study also reveals that, in recent years, K-pop girl group music works sometimes exhibit postmodern techniques [18], where the feminine exterior is hidden, and masculine features and temperament are highlighted. In the construction of female K-pop idol images, there is a tendency toward a softer, more androgynous, or "gender-neutral" representation, with women wearing pants and adopting rebellious hairstyles and makeup, which minimize traditional female characteristics to the greatest extent. By repeating this technique, along with the handsome performances of male idols, the idealized image of the "perfect woman" is shattered. This kind of construction, which starkly contrasts with early representations of female idols, leaves more room for narrative imagination. As a result, female images are given representations that deviate from reality, even subverting traditional memories of women by embodying individualism through "masculine" traits or behaviors filled with power symbols. This opposition to traditional mainstream aesthetics challenges conventional cultural stereotypes [19], while also meeting the psychological demands of the emerging "new women" in a rapidly developing society.

Overall, K-pop girl groups have broken away from the closed narrative of the "traditional woman" in their construction of female images, striving to escape the representation of women based on the male gaze in both material and consciousness. Instead, they use diverse texts to challenge the so-called absolute truth, which is the result of the interaction between media diversity and the diversification of people's consciousness. In many K-pop girl group music works, female idols break away from the rigid

memories of stereotypes held by the majority. Through constructions that oppose traditional mainstream aesthetics, they influence audiences and showcase the rise of female power and feminism, thereby legitimizing the reversal of gender power dynamics. However, this diverse narrative often carries a sense of compromise. The female idols represented in K-pop girl groups frequently exhibit contradictory personality traits, which may be the result of the alienation of K-pop girl group texts as commercial products. In cultural conflict narratives, these texts supplement, compromise, and engage in introspection, avoiding excessive promotion of either so-called reality or rebellious imagery, thus catering to various audience groups within the social ecosystem [20]. This contradiction ultimately contributes to a heterogeneous and multi-layered narrative framework for the construction of female images in reality, while also leading to changes in female stereotypes and the development of feminism, providing more possibilities for multiple interpretations of meaning.

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