

The Influence of the Development of the Global Feminist Movement in the 21st Century on the Image Transformation of K-pop Female Idols

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Abstract: From the beginning of the 21st century to 2022, it is generally recognized that more and more entertainment agencies decided to introduce K-pop girl groups with strong and independent performing styles. With the search for Korean feminist movements, this review will concentrate on the image transformation of female idols from the first generation of K-pop to the third generation of K-pop through their performances and fan-related activities. Furthermore, pieces of evidence used mainly by this review are collected from previous research, Spotify and YouTube. By analyzing several samples, it can be concluded that there are association correlations and interactional relationships between the development of Korean feminism and the image transformation of K-pop female idols.

Keywords: K-pop, sexism, Korean culture, music.

1. Introduction

K-pop, a culture once flourished only in Asia, has become a global phenomenon in recent years. Female idols in this industry first came out with a cute and innocent image, and then gradually made an overall image change from “tender girls” to “female alpha”. With increasing fandom, girl groups such as Mamamoo and Blackpink reached millions of followers on social media, breaking the single criteria that determine whether a girl group can achieve business success in the music industry. However, there have been limited numbers of research conducted on the relationship between the growth of Korean feminism and the image change of K-pop female idols. In order to clarify it, this review analyzed the history of Korean feminism and the impact of each of the events discussed on the lyrics, performing styles and attitudes of K-pop females. Most pieces of evidence are music videos from K-pop idols’ YouTube channel, lyrics from Spotify, recordings of fan meetings posted on YouTube, and related articles searched from academic search engines. After analyzing the Korean female-liberating movement and feminist book Kim Ji-young: Born 1982 with the subsequent behaviors of Korean female idols, it can be observed that there have been several changes in female idols’ image after the Korean feminist activities. Meanwhile, the internet usage caused by the increasing popularity of K-pop idols has affected teenagers’ perception of topics about feminism in turn. In this case, the findings of this study offer a new perspective on the causes of this image change that entertainment companies can consider when making relevant decisions.

2. Image Analysis of K-pop Female Idols

In the K-pop industry, 2017 can be defined as a year in which new trends that started the year before last expanded in full swing, as Wonder girls and Girls' Generation, the second generation of idols that are popular in South Korea and abroad, disbanded and retired after 10 years of activities respectively in the same year, marking the end of an era. While the second generation of idols retreated to the background, the third generation of candidates was hailed as the most reliable NO.1 in Korea by the boy and girl idol groups BTS and TWICE, and gained huge popularity in overseas organizations, creating a new wave of Korean music[1]. Thus, this paper will use 2017 as a timeline to compare the performance differences between the first, second and third generation of female idols. There are three main performing styles: cute, sexy and hip hop[2], with the third one gradually evolving into a more inclusive and increasingly popular performance style - Girl Crush.

2.1. The First and Second Generation of K-pop Female Idols

In the first generation of K-pop idols, the image that most popular idols portrayed is “innocent and cute girls”, emphasizing a childish attitude. BoA, the first K-pop idol successfully conquer the Japanese market, was regarded as “The Queen of K-pop”. In 2002, she released the album “NO.1” with a “first love” theme and won the Best Music Video/Dance Award on MAMA(Mnet Asian Music Award)[3,4]. In terms of the content theme, BoA repeated the lyrics such as “you are still my NO.1” and “don't blame him for his betrayal”, displaying females' humble position in the love relationship[5]. In the second generation of K-pop idols, the performances of Korean female idols have become more diverse but they were still influenced by the male gaze. The lyrics of Gee, a popular Girls' Generation single, repeated “What shall I do?” “fool” “I don't know”, which fundamentally infantilizes mature adult women and portrayed them as naive girls who are dependent on older males to teach them the meaning of love[6]. On the contrary, 2NE1, the hip-hop girl group introduced by YG Entertainment in 2009, showed a pioneering spirit of feminism in the K-pop industry by portraying a “bad girl” image. Their second single “Fire” was widely accepted by the public, which further helped them to win the Best Music Video, Best New Artist and Mnet Award in 2009 MAMA[7]. With words like “the passion in my heart is more powerful than the fire” and “I want to go crazy”, 2NE1 not only broke the traditional concept of women's dependence but also began to emphasize the subject status of women[8]. Even though they also had contents like “Can you come back home” and “I will sing for handsome you”, their contribution to the rising popularity of the concept--girl crush, can't be ignored[9]. Additionally, many sexy K-pop girl groups emerged in the same generation. The representative group is AOA, whose song “Miniskirt” won first place on Inkigayo on 2014.2.9[10]. The choreography of “Miniskirt” contained lots of hip-twisting movements and their contents were also designed to be sexually attractive. For instance, the lyrics are about “My vertiginous heels, my black stockings” and “Why aren't you paying attention to me? Why are you acting like you don't care”[11]. Unlike innocent girl groups, their expressions of seeking male attention are more sexual and direct.

2.2. The Third Generation of K-pop Female Idols

In 2017, when the third generation started, more and more female idols with no conformity to the male gaze entered the public eye. Women concentrate more on themselves than their emotional lives, and groups with girl crush styles like 2NE1 have gradually prevailed worldwide. Another YG girl group BLACKPINK, which debuted in 2016, released a popular song “DDU-DU DDU-DU” including lyrics like “My smile is for me” and “Hit you with that ddu-du ddu-du” in 2018, creating new K-pop history on Billboard Hot 100[12]. Also, In 2019, BLACKPINK's ‘In Your Area Tour’

became the most successful concert tour by a Korean female group in history. After one year, BLACKPINK came back with their new single “How You Like That”, which helped BLACKPINK take TWICE’s place on the Best Female Group Award in 2020 MAMA[13]. In this song, members of BLACKPINK responded to people who hate them by singing “Laugh all you want, because you’re the one who ends up looking bad” and “Bring out your boss bitch”[14]. Although they also have songs like “Lovesick Girls” and “Don’t know what to do”, BLACKPINK’s success in the entertainment industry further helped the girl crush concept to be circulated around the world under the foundation of 2EN1. On the other hand, cute girls still owned a great part of the K-pop market. The second “Nation’s Girl Group” TWICE won the Best Female Group Award in 2016, 2018, 2019 and 2021 MAMA, and their hit single “What is love” won the Song of the Year and Best Dance Performance Female Group on 2018 MAMA[15]. Members repeated the phrase “I wanna know know know What is love”, which is similar to “Gee” from Girls’ Generation[16]. The popularity that the two Nation’s Girl Groups received seemed to reflect the social standards and expectations toward women in Korean society, where they are still considered immature and incomplete. At the same time, it is recognized that there has been a great decrease in the number of sexy female groups. After the dissolution of the representative sexy female groups, SISTERS and AOA, few companies launch idols with a sexy performing style. This is because the line between sexy performance and erotic performance seemed to be blurred by some companies and the censorship in South Korea is strict about this concept, leading to fewer and fewer sexy concepts available to be used. For instance, in order to make a quick buck, Stone Music Entertainment required members of Stellar to make sexually suggestive gestures and wear pornographic clothes in their music videos “Marionette” and “Vibrato”[17]. These girls are forced to cater to the patriarchal aesthetic, and left viewers with the impression of being vulgar and man-pleasing, which reinforced the stereotype of “sexy”. And due to the censorship, they had to cancel the dancing movement of simultaneously twisting their hips to the camera with hands behind their backs, when entering Mcountdown, a music chart show on South Korea’s Mnet TV channel[18]. In addition, while sexy female groups gradually faded into the background, Korean entertainment innovated a new insight that decreased the influence of traditional gender roles by emphasizing self-consciousness and subjectivity. Groups with unique performing styles like Itzy and (G)I-DLE entered the stage at 2019 and 2018 respectively. In Itzy’s song “Dalla Dalla”, they expressed their feeling about being a rebellious teenager rather and weakened the concept of gender, which is completely different from what has been portrayed in the first and second generation of K-pop. The distinction in gender is intentionally blurred, and (G)I-DLE’s lyrics of “TOMBOY” “It’s neither man nor woman” are also accorded with it[19]. The change that Korean entertainment had made to these idols in the late third generation of K-pop can be effective evidence of increasingly prevailing feminism and individualism.

3. The Development of Korean Feminist Movement in 21st Century

Since 2022, there is still apparent gender inequality in South Korea, which ranked 99 out of 146 nations, according to the World Economic Forum’s Global Gender Gap Report 2022. However, Korean females are also fighting for their rights fiercely, leading to numerous impactful feminist movements. In 2015, the feminist website Megalia was built for the gender war incurred by the discussion of MERS in the Korean online community. Their main strategy was mirroring, meaning that Megalians would mimic misogyny’s behavior to raise people’s awareness of pervasive discrimination against women. Lee stated that “Megalia emerged out of the matrix of misogynistic online communities where the blaming of Korean women worked as a glue or homosocial bond among Korean men, a means of self-appeasement for their failure, and a leisurely activity for having fun.”[20]. After 3 years, a global feminist movement called #MeToo takes hold of Korean society. According to the founder Tarana Burke, the meaning of #MeToo is to show empathy to

underprivileged females who have experienced sorrow and discrimination because of their gender[21]. Subsequently, Korean females were greatly influenced and inspired by it, and then changed it to a feminist movement against sexual harassment and violence. In order to raise awareness, Korean females organized various activities to advocate gender equality and the prohibition of illegal filming. According to AFP reporter, Hawon Jung, a total of 193 people came forward to share their stories about sexual harassment and violence continuously during the marathon, which lasted 2,018 minutes or 33 hours[22]. Additionally, Korean female organizations contributed to the rapid growth of feminism and the extension of the #MeToo movement. Korea Women's Associations United(KWAU), which carried the spirit of solidarity, has been at the forefront of women's campaigns to address a variety of issues affecting women. It also effectively evolved tactics and agendas to match the requirements of the period, resulting in several successes. A year after the #MeToo parade, Korean women celebrated international women's day and requested solutions for all kinds of violence in various fields in Gwanghwamun Square. Some of the purple-colored words that lighted up the throngs of the 35th Women's Conference were '#MeToo We change the world' and "Feminism perfects democracy." [23].

4. The Influence of Feminist Movement in South Korea to the Transformation of K-pop Female Idols

South Korea is known for its plastic surgery industry and other beauty products. It is widely recognized that plastic surgery became very common in Korean society starting in the late 1990s, showing their concerns and the strict requirement of appearance. Additionally, women claimed that they would devote more hours of their lives to achieving their ideal beauty than males, and they also feel more dissatisfied with their bodies[24]. And research has shown that "the use of a higher number of makeup products was associated with femininity rather than non-femininity." [25]. In 2018, a Korean YouTuber Lina Bae started a female-liberating movement on YouTube. In Lina's videos, she showed her daily life as an overweight female and confessed that body shame and anxiety about appearance have tortured her for a long time since she doesn't conform to the traditional aesthetics. In order to fight against the social standards of feminine beauty, she faced the camera and removed all of the makeup, and encouraged her audience to live confidently and embrace our own bodies with the sentence-- "I decided to stop trying to be pretty" [26]. Since 2022, her first video has been watched by millions of people, causing a lot of controversy in Korean society. Accordingly, K-pop group MAMAMOO launched their new song "HIP" in the next year, aiming at value and love yourself. Within lyrics like "Ripped T-shirts, protruding lips, greasy hair, accidentally leaking underwear, it doesn't matter, it's fashion on me", they attempted to break the social expectation that women must be dressed up and pretty[27]. At their concert in 2019, Hwasa(member of MAMAMOO) stated that "I will become create a beauty standard if I don't fit into it." [28]. These are acts of defiance against limitations that they believe the social expectation has set on them. Therefore, people can conclude that there is an association correlation between Lina Bae's female-liberating movement and the single from MAMAMOO. In the same year, Kim Ji-young: Born 1982, a Korean film adapted from a novel of the same name, was released in South Korea on October 23, 2019. It tells the story of an ordinary woman, Kim Ji-young, who was born in 1982 and lives in 2019. The original novel is a symbol of the feminist movement in Korea. Since the name "Kim Ji-young" is so common in Korean society, "Kim Ji-young, born in 1982," represents the most common Korean woman in her thirties. Many female idols have been influenced by this book. After two years, Sooyoung of Girls Generation named her reality program Choi Sooyoung, Born in 1990, since this book had made a significant impact on her[29]. Unlike her image in Girls' Generation, Choi Sooyoung is able to publicly support and popularize a feminist book while working as an idol, which indicates a great change in their image delivered to the audience. Subsequently, Irene from Red Velvet(the winner of 2017's MAMA

Best Female Group) shared this book in the fan meeting of Level Up Project in the same year[30]. As a part of the idol's job, the image that the idol presents in the fan meeting club is also important, and it can be observed that female idols share their attitudes toward the gender issues occurring in Korea when attending it.

5. The Positive Influence of the Development Of K-pop on the Feminist Movement

It can be assumed that there has been an interactional relationship between the development of K-pop and feminism. Due to the increasing Internet availability, the usage of social media such as Twitter has gradually become a common phenomenon among young users. As of December 2021, around one in every three South Korean social media users aged 15 to 19 answered they used Twitter. Users in their twenties were next, with 21.9 percent of respondents saying they use Twitter[31]. Meanwhile, feminist movements like #MeToo also gathered a lot of attention on Twitter and this hashtag has been used over 19 million times[32]. Approximately two-thirds (65%) of U.S. people who use social media thought that some of the information they see on these platforms is related to sexual harassment or assault. 29% of those polled answered that much of what they see on social media is focused on this problem. These sorts of posts are widespread among social media users from various groups[33]. Accordingly, the popularity of K-pop indirectly increased young users and let them get access to feminist information. Then the transformation of the preference of K-pop fans will also have an effect on the performing styles and lyrics of K-pop female idols, resulting in an overall image transformation.

6. Conclusion

Overall, the purpose of this paper is to argue the influence of the development of the global feminist movement in the 21st century on the image transformation of K-pop female idols. Research has supported the background information of Korean social issues corresponding to the feminist movement and the contribution of media communication to this change. By studying several cases, it can be concluded that the performance style of female idols from the first generation to the third generation has undergone a dramatic change due to the pervasive use of social media and the spread of feminism in Korean society. In summary, although there are causal relationships and association correlations in the case analysis, quantitative research is required for further confirmation.

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