

An Analysis of the Influence of K-pop on the Development of Feminism in China

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Abstract: In China, in recent years, feminist content has been on the rise on social media platforms, and many female social media users have begun to recognize and support feminist views. In China, K-pop music and idol, which are also more widely known, have also influenced the perceptions and thoughts of many Internet users. This paper focuses on the influence of K-pop on Chinese social media users' perceptions of feminism. The research methodology of post-subcultural and transcultural studies will help this paper study the changes in K-pop culture and feminist concepts. The conclusion of the study is that the behavior and speech of K-pop fans and the content of the songs in K-pop culture can influence the concepts and behaviors of Chinese Internet users and K-pop fans, and as a result, K-pop culture has contributed to the development of feminism in China.

Keywords: K-pop, feminism, idol, popular culture

1. Introduction

In recent years K-pop has been gaining increasing popularity around the world, some K-pop singers have earned mainstream music prizes and they were leading influencers on major social media like Instagram and Weibo. For example, the boy band SEVENTEEN won a special international music award at the Japan Record Awards and it has 13 million followers on Instagram. Some K-pop idol group's album sales are surprisingly huge, girl group aespa's third mini album's first day sales were up to 1.37million, breaking the highest first-day sales of a K-pop girl group. According to Lewis, there are more than 84.3 million registered hallyu fans in China, K-pop in China is influential in many aspects [1]. For instance, there are many K-pop-related hot topics on Chinese social media, among them feminism is one of the most popular. Recent years have witnessed the rapid development of Chinese feminist movements and the transformations of Chinese people's feminist ideas, but little attention has been given to the connection between K-pop and the development of feminism in China. Nowadays, social media serves as a faster and more convenient way of communication, and it also facilitates the transmission of feminist ideas. From an intercultural perspective, this paper uses post-subcultural theory to examine K-pop's influence on the development of Chinese feminist ideas with the support of social media platforms. Post-subcultural theory, compared with conventional subcultural theory, emphasizes the fluidity and instability of people's group identities due to their greater freedom in choosing their cultural affiliations enabled by internet instant communication [2]. In the following, this paper will give examples of how K-pop reshaped Chinese ideas of masculinities

and femininities, promoted the idea of gender equality, and helped to construct gender group identity, which consequently caused controversies and some conflicts between different gender groups.

2. The Ideas of Masculinities and Femininities

K-pop has several influences on the transformation of feminist concepts in China. It has influenced Chinese people's ideas of masculinities and femininities. This influence can first be how it has changed Chinese public opinion of how men and women should dress differently. A large proportion of the elderly in China have a very traditional stereotype of gender clothing that men should not wear female clothing characteristics, such as dresses. K-pop's influence in this regard lies in the promotion of the gender-neutral costumes by some idol bands/groups, such as F(x) Amber. Indeed, most Korean companies create sexy, cute, or pure images for their female idol bands with their "feminine" make-up, clothes and personalities to attract male fans. As mentioned by Oh, C., the word that represents the Girls' Generation is chastity, while their dance moves have a flirtatious meaning [3]. However, Amber from F(x) has been an exception. Her hair has always been short. And all kinds of her clothes are based on the style of male idols, which is more attractive and powerful, unlike the clothing style of the female groups released by most companies. Amber was often questioned and criticized by netizens at the earliest stage of her career. Her style has also been questioned by some Chinese fans, who generally believe that idol should retain the image of the general public and not dress like a boy. Amber said in various statements that her gender is that of a girl, but gender does not mean she can't wear a very sporty style with short hair. She was just different from most girls, and girls can dress as handsomely as boys. And because of Amber's remarks, many fans and netizens began to turn around, agreeing that women could freely choose their clothing style and that appearance and clothing could not be used to judge one's gender. Many began to support Amber. Because of the influence of K-pop idols, K-pop fans and some netizens who are active on social media are able to accept the neutral style of dressing and support free dressing.

K-pop is not only challenging Chinese people's stereotypes about men's or women's dressing style but also their understanding of what personalities make people men or women. Many previous generations of Chinese still have old-fashioned ideas about gender, such as that women should be feminine, sexy or gentle, while men should be masculine, virile or cheerful. However, many social media users and the younger generations have been influenced by more open-minded ideas, and K-pop idols are part of this change in mentality. Many idols wear heavy make-up for stage performances and music video shoots, not only the female idols but also the male idols. And there is a difference between the dance movements mentioned in Jonas's article about men and women: Whereas boy groups are known for incorporating acrobatics, flips and b-boying (even weapons dances), girl groups perform routines that resemble an arsenal of synchronized swimming techniques [4]. And now many male idols' MVs not only have a sense of power dance, which is a dance that the audience thinks men will dance, but also add some sexy, soft body movements to express the part that the audience generally thinks is a woman's dance. And female idols are no longer just showing sexy or cute dances; they are also dancing some very handsome and power-sensitive dances. At first, when these Korean idols appeared in the eyes of Chinese netizens, there would be a part of the netizens who thought that these idols should not have such makeup, believing that they were effeminate. Until now, they have been accused, but they have been more accepted and understood because the more perfect appearance of makeup brings a good perception, so that more people begin to accept that both men and women can make makeup because they all have the right to make their appearances look more perfect. And there's a lot of videos about women's powerful dances on various short video platforms in China, just like men's dances. Girls can be not only sexy or cute but also powerful and even more handsome than men. And the commentary area of the videos also slowly changed, from why to dance this style of dance to praising the girls for dancing this powerful dance more handsomely.

Just like there are still netizens who accuse Amber, who has a neutral look as mentioned above, of not looking like a tomboy. Nowadays, many Korean idol groups are trying to break the stereotypes of men and women by producing songs to change these views. A good example is (G)I-DLE, a Korean girl group whose song “Tomboy” was released in 2022 and became very popular. While there are many videos of Tomboy MV on Chinese social media platforms such as Douyin, the song’s brainwashing melody as well as its catchy lyrics show people that girls can be tomboys in their appearance as well as in their character and temperament. This emphasizes that girls can have the character traits and temperament of boys, when people hear this song, they can also change the stereotypes in their minds about the temperament of men and women. Girls can have the character traits of boys, they can be cool and independent, with an appearance that is not refined but looks like a tomboy, not well-behaved like a doll to be manipulated. On Chinese social media platforms, there are a lot of videos of “Tomboy”, including dance covers, song covers, and make-up imitations. Because of the song’s popularity, the idea that women can break down prejudices and do things that men can do has been brought to the attention of more Chinese netizens. The majority of social media users still believe that women and men are inherently good at different things and that men and women can do different things, just like the stereotype that women are better at bringing up children and men should go out and work. But after the song went viral on major social media apps, the winds of many media outlets changed, and so did the views of many internet users. Women can have the same strengths and abilities as men; women are independent; and don’t look at women with different characteristics with prejudice.

3. Cases of Gender Inequality

K-pop has also promoted the idea of gender equality and mobilized female Chinese fans to fight against unequal treatment and even sex-harassment in various forms including the Me Too movement. More and more women become aware of their gender dilemma: people hold prejudices about women’s working abilities and they tend to be harsh on women’s appearances. Even female idols are faced with the same situation: entertainment companies and even fans are more critical of their appearance and body shape, saying that if they are too skinny, they don’t have beauty and look horrible; they are too fat, they don’t have the responsibility and self-discipline of an idol because they failed to keep their body in shape. The strictness of the standards for the appearance of female idols from Lin and Rudolf’s view: ...particularly female idols, have been struggling to create and maintain their facial and bodily perfection, which usually involves endless dieting, regular skincare, and plastic/cosmetic surgery [5]. However, most fans are more tolerant of male idols, and the criticism is usually only focused on their charisma and professionalism.

There are also a few female idols who have been criticized for their facial features, and one of the starker examples is Jeon So-yeon of the group (G)I-DLE. Jeon So-yeon was criticized on the internet for her appearance and for cyberbullying during the (G)I-DLE audition because Jeon So-yeon’s looks do not fall into the public’s aesthetic standard for female idols. She was also criticized for her unattractive dress in the talent show, for not being suitable for a female idol at all, and for saying that she should take care of her appearance before coming back to the talent show.

In fact, many of the criticisms of female idols come from the male fanbase, who view women from the perspective of a male and patriarchal society, picking on women’s bodies, facial features, and dresses to varying degrees. By contrast, most Chinese female fans can deeply relate with these idols and they argue with male fans online to defend their idols. This has led to a dichotomy between male and female fans. After several rounds of online fights, nowadays, the Chinese Internet has become less judgmental about Jeon So-yeon’s face value, and most fans and Internet users care more about Tian’s strength as an idol, while more people have begun to oppose those who criticize women’s face value.

K-pop is also connected with rising anti-sex harassment movements like MeToo.

Women are more easily exposed to sexual harassment, such as being photographed in a bus, a toilet, a dressing room, or even in a private location. In order to fight against sexual harassment, the MeToo movement (The movement encourages women to speak up about experiences of sexual harassment and abuse, seeks to hold perpetrators accountable for their actions, and provides survivors with support [6]. First emerged in Western countries and was introduced to Korea, and the influence of the MeToo movement on Korea can also be proved by Garner's description: the movement has now begun to help make progress in K-pop. With activism and media attention, there's significant movement towards huge change – like #MeToo [7]. As more and more K-pop idols voiced their criticism on sexual harassment, many Chinese fans under their influences are also spreading posts on social platforms about how to resist sexual harassment and how to deal with sexual assault. And it is precisely because of the development of K-pop that the attention of the case of sexual harassment of K-pop singers is very high, which also increases women's alertness to sexual assault. For example, the sexual assault case against an underage girl by former EXO member Wu Yifan has gained a lot of attention, with many Chinese news outlets tracking Wu's accusation and eventual sentencing. This is the heat and influence Wu Yifan brings as a former K-pop boy band member. The popularity of the K-pop idols made more people pay attention to the incident, and the negative impact was the biggest. The sexual assault of an underage woman by a male idol was such a bad incident that it triggered many Chinese citizens to pay attention to sexual assault and think about the relationship between ordinary men and women in society. Many people began to help those who had been sexually assaulted fight back on the internet, and they also began to publicize the protection of women against sexual harassment and assault. What happened to the K-pop star can make fans more empathetic to the injustices happening to women around them, encourage them to fight back when they encounter these things themselves, and encourage them to speak out and offer help to girls who have experienced these things.

4. Gender Conflicts

The huge influence of K-pop has also put some gender-related topics in the public spotlight and led to widespread discussions on not only Korean but also Chinese social media platforms. Such social media "events" have engaged female fans as a group and helped to construct their group identities as both fans and women. These events often involve fierce conflicts between male and female gender groups and sometimes even lead to internet violence or even suicides in real life. One example is the death of Sulli.

In 2019, the news of Sulli suspected suicide due to depression immediately spread on the network and was reported by many media outlets in China. Chinese netizens also started a heated discussion on this topic, which made many people who had not known Sulli aware of her. Sulli is a girl group member, and she was once cyberattacked by netizens for making a move in favor of feminism. Sulli's bold and revealing clothing, posting pictures of herself without a bra on Instagram, and being caught without a bra during a live broadcast were attacked by many netizens, not only because they didn't fit with Sulli's previous persona but also because they were seen as out of character and unappreciated by many Chinese fans at the time.

Sulli just didn't wear a bra, and such feminist-like behavior made her suffer from internet violence for a long time. Even if there are fans who support Sulli on the internet, they may be afraid to speak out on social media due to the pressure of public opinion. Sulli once said on a programme that she hoped that people would not have any prejudice about wearing underwear or not and wanted to break people's stereotypical thinking. And the internet was more unappreciative of her words and behavior, even attacking her with words. In the end, Sulli may have committed suicide due to depression from the internet violence.

Sulli's death triggered a heated debate, which also made more Chinese netizens aware of the incident and created a new perception. Many netizens and fans have expressed their sympathy and condolences for Sulli's death, and there are a few fans on social media platforms who have expressed their remembrance of Sulli. And there is also a large part of netizens and fans who believe that those who cause Sulli depression cyber violence over Sulli's speakers should be punished; those who lead cyber violence and implement cyber violence are not innocent and should be responsible for Sulli's death. Many Chinese social media platforms reported Sulli's suicide and wrote in the news that the cause of Sulli's depression was the process of cyber violence and that Sulli incurred cyber violence because of her behavior about feminism. Since her death, many netizens learned about Sulli and the freedom to wear a bra, updating their perceptions and agreeing with Sulli, even learning about feminism. Both Sulli's death and Sulli's comments have broadened the spread of feminism and exposed more people to different ideas to provoke thought about freedom of dress and feminism. The influence of the ideas brought by Sulli can be said to have contributed to the development of feminism in China in disguise, causing women to protect and care for each other and to identify with themselves and their community.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, since K-pop has great influential power and attracts a lot of attention in China, it enables K-pop idols or news to have an impact on feminism in China. Firstly, K-pop's influence on women's appearance and dress has led to a greater acceptance of unisex and transgender custom. In terms of character and femininity, the music in K-pop encourages women to be independent and not dependent like men, even if they are tomboys. Secondly, in terms of the current inequality between men and women and the incidents of sexual assault and harassment, the same things that are happening in K-pop resonate with the fans and those who follow K-pop, pushing for the awakening of women's consciousness to help the victimized groups of women and spreading awareness of such things. Lastly, understanding feminism more from the fiery Sulli suicide helps identify with the freedom to dress and act like a feminist.

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