

# "Allergic to being a queen": Exploring Platform Identity Politics in the Representation of Women in K-pop Music Videos

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**Abstract:** The 2023-released music videos *Allergy* and *Queencard* by (G)I-DLE offer a cinematic reflection on the contemporary anxieties young women encounter due to beauty standards perpetuated by social media. While extensive research has primarily focused on the direct influence of social media on female identity, there has been scant exploration of these themes through the perspective of music videos. Employing the Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) approach, this study examines the depiction of women in these videos, tracing their evolution from self-doubt to self-acceptance in the face of overwhelming digital influences. These narratives, enriched with symbolic imagery, accentuate the chasm between online facades and intrinsic self-worth, also spotlighting wider societal pressures. The portrayal and reception of these narratives suggest that music videos are emerging as powerful mediums for societal reflection and critique.

## 1. Introduction

"Why ain't I pretty, Why ain't I lovely, Why ain't I sexy, Why am I me?" Korean girl group (G)I-DLE's two music videos (MV) released in 2023, titled *Allergy* and *Queencard*, explore the anxiety that the flood of information on social media is causing young women. In these cinematic creations, the protagonist finds herself ensnared in a relentless cycle of self-doubt as she scrolls through the lives of internet celebrities on her feed. She embarks on a transformative journey to reshape her appearance, only to realize that true transformation transcends the physical. What truly matters is not the appearance she presents but the love and acceptance she extends to herself. This poignant dilemma mirrors the current societal landscape in South Korea, where one's appearance is often synonymous with personal success, and the relentless standards of "beauty" relentlessly weigh on women's shoulders.

Prior academic inquiries have predominantly focused on the impact of social media on women's self-identity in the digital realm. Notably, Perloff introduced a range of perspectives and frameworks that explore the influence of social media on body image concerns among young adult women[1]. Conversely, Guzzetti's study meticulously documented the construction of online social identities by two young women through their interactions on social media platforms[2]. However, there remains a relative scarcity of studies delving into how the language of audiovisual storytelling within music videos dissects the impact of social media on the formation of women's identities in cyberspace.

This paper aims to address this gap by closely examining these two music videos as case studies. Employing the Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) framework, we endeavor to conduct a comprehensive exploration of this intriguing subject. In the evolving landscape of K-pop music videos, an increasing emphasis is placed on conveying profound concepts and themes through rich audiovisual elements, all within a few minutes of music. This makes these videos ripe for in-depth analysis. This research takes its inception from the portrayal of women in these music videos and aims to decode how internet users navigate their identities when immersed in the vast realm of social media, as evidenced in these MVs. Through this exploration, we seek to gain deeper insights into the intricate conundrum of identity in this era of massive data dissemination.

## 2. Online identity negotiation through the lens of female image

(G)I-DLE's two music videos offer profound insights into the impact of social media on today's younger generation within the context of Korean societal norms regarding women's image. As the popularity of social media continues to rise, scholars are increasingly recognizing its profound influence on users' aesthetics, cognitive processes, and ways of thinking in this era of big data. Cass Sunstein's concept of "information cocoons," as discussed in his work *Infotopia*, sheds light on how individuals' attention to information is steered by their personal interests[3]. Essentially, people tend to cocoon themselves within areas of information that align with their interests, often neglecting broader perspectives. This cocooning

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phenomenon primarily results from information filtering. Within social environments, social comparison is pervasive, with individuals constantly measuring themselves against others to gauge their relative status[4]. Perceptions of relative status can significantly impact one's self-concept and overall well-being[5]. Social networking sites facilitate these social comparisons, intensifying the desire to measure up to others[6].

In the face of the vast influx of information through social media, users engage in intricate negotiations that ultimately shape their own cognition and identity. Social media serves as a platform for users to showcase themselves via user profiles, fostering multi-user dialogues and collaborative activities that contribute to the construction of their unique identities[7]. Within this process, users undertake the negotiation of their online identities, representing the "self-concept arising from the identification of the social group experienced online" [8]. This negotiation of identity encompasses two vital aspects: self-verification and behavioral confirmation[9]. Essentially, individuals seek validation from others that aligns with their self-concept, while simultaneously allowing others' expectations to guide their self-perception and behaviors, reinforcing these expectations[10]. For example, as illustrated in Guzzetti's study, two young women establish their roles as both learners and teachers within cyberspace, validating their identities through feedback from others[2]. It is through these dual stages that individuals complete the negotiation of their online social identities.

(G)I-DLE's music video delves into the transmission of female stereotypes via social media as its focal point. Korean popular music (K-pop) girl group music videos frequently function as visual promotional tools, often centering around thematic lyrical narratives. These videos prioritize the presentation of the performers' visual image over showcasing their musical achievements[11]. While mainstream media plays a significant role in perpetuating cultural stereotypes regarding body image aesthetics, social media inundates users with idealized depictions, including the promotion of ideal female figures. Exposure to these ideals often leads to increased dissatisfaction with women's own bodies[1]. Research by Abrahamsson reveals that Korean media often portrays female figures as cute and sexy, placing excessive emphasis on appearance and an interest in men[12]. Korean respondents frequently acknowledge that Korean media influences the aesthetic standards of others, commonly associating beauty with a slim physique[13]. However, it's important to note that these stereotypes are continually challenged. Muhammad and Nafisah's analysis of six songs released by Korean girl groups over the past three years highlights how these lyrics subvert traditional gender stereotypes[14]. It becomes evident that the artistry of Korean girl groups strives not only to challenge these norms but also to inspire Korean women to break free from outdated aesthetic conventions. *Allergy* and *Queencard* not only convey this resistance and determination but also offer a poignant critique of the detrimental impact of social media on the younger generation, a source of pervasive anxiety.

### 3. Method

This paper adopts a Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) framework as its research method. MDA is a widely utilized approach in the analysis of various forms of media, including advertisements, promotional materials, films, television shows, social media content, journalism, and news reports[15-17]. Within these studies, MDA explores the interplay of multiple semiotic modes, such as text, image, sound, and gesture, to comprehend how meaning is constructed across different communication contexts.

In this study, the primary focus centers on (G)I-DLE's K-pop music videos for the songs *Allergy* and *Queencard* from their *I feel* album, released in May 2023. These music videos share related and coherent narrative content. Notably, as of August, the *Queencard* music video has garnered an impressive 200 million views on YouTube, underscoring its extensive reach and influence. Additionally, this research encompasses videos released through official social media accounts on platforms like YouTube and Bilibili, which serve as supplementary materials for comprehending the intended message conveyed by the music videos. These supplementary materials include Character Introductions, Comeback Interviews, production conferences, and more, all contributing to a comprehensive analysis of the music videos' intended message.

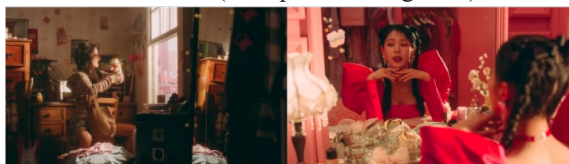
Music videos represent intricate texts that blend various forms of communication to convey meaning and elicit emotions. Drawing inspiration from the research of Pratiwy and Wulan, who conducted a detailed analysis focusing primarily on language and visual elements[18], this paper will adopt a similar approach. However, it will extend this method to encompass the nuanced complexities of music videos, exploring how the amalgamation of music, visual aesthetics, and performance coalesces to shape the overall meaning and interpretation of these two music videos. Furthermore, this analysis will delve into how the multifaceted elements, including music, visual imagery, dance, and lyrics, interact synergistically to convey insights into the impact of the deluge of social media information, particularly its effects on the discipline of female image and the perception of identity.

### 4. Female image in mainstream aesthetics: identity performance and imitation

The construction of the music video's plot draws inspiration from cinematic storytelling techniques. Each member of the (G)I-DLE team not only showcases their dance prowess but also embodies characters in line with the narrative script. This creative approach allows us to observe a rich array of characters, each representing distinct female archetypes. At the center of the story is the protagonist, portrayed by Soyeon, who embodies a woman grappling with a diminished sense of self-identity, often caught in the relentless cycle of comparing herself to glamorous Internet celebrities on Social Networking Sites

(SNS). Visually, she is characterized by her thick-rimmed glasses, freckles, disheveled curly hair, and a somber, dark gray plaid dress that she wears at home. In stark contrast, the Internet celebrities she aspires to emulate consistently exude dazzling appearances and impeccable fashion sense. Within this portrayal, Minnie takes on the role of the high-profile coach Kusa; Miyeon embodies a princess-like Internet celebrity boasting millions of followers; Yuqi represents the embodiment of Generation Z's penchant for sharing news. Shuhua and Yuqi, on the other hand, portray clerks working in a lingerie shop.

Consequently, the characters' environments are distinctly contrasting as well. The protagonist's bedroom exudes an ordinary girl's living space, with dim lighting and furnishings that mirror an everyday setting. Natural sunlight streaming in through a lattice window serves as the primary source of illumination in her room, setting the stage for the symbolic act of launching a paper plane later in the video. By contrast, Miyeon's bedroom is adorned with opulent elements like a dressing table, a walk-in closet, and a princess bed, reminiscent of a microcosm within Barbie's world (as depicted in Figure 1).



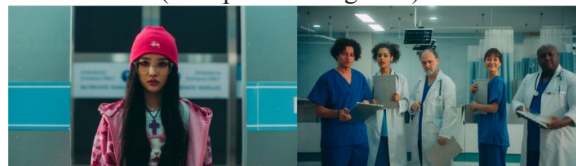
**Figure 1** Room comparison

The lyrics of the song also incorporate numerous symbolic elements. Platforms like TikTok and Instagram symbolize popular social media channels, Kim Kardashian epitomizes notions of cool and sexy, and Ariana Grande represents notions of cuteness and prettiness. The lyric "Only I don't have Chanel" accentuates luxury goods as objects of display and status. Within the "How to be a queen" class, the criteria for achieving queen status are distilled into four steps: being pretty, embracing sexy lips and hips, donning fabulous lingerie, and maintaining unwavering confidence. It becomes evident that the confluence of these visual elements simplifies and embodies the idealized image of women. Moreover, the influence of these disciplinary words gradually permeates the characters portrayed by (G)I-DLE, reinforcing the evolving norms that shape their identities.

To illustrate the influence of male discourse on women, the video strategically introduces male characters into the narrative. One such character, Tom.boy, serves to create tension between Minnie and Miyeon, mirroring the storyline's development. Meanwhile, a misunderstanding scene between Shuhua and Yuqi effectively conveys both their confidence and subtle unease. These narrative episodes intricately explore the dramatic dynamics of gender interactions through the portrayal of male characters. By doing so, they provide a foundation for depicting the emotions and attitudes of the female characters. Additionally, the reaction shots of male characters serve as a means of emotional validation, underscoring the idea that the allure and impact of female characters remain intertwined with male perspectives.

While a significant portion of the story is dedicated to showcasing the charm and influence of the female characters, it is apparent that this portrayal serves a deeper purpose, perhaps aimed at deconstructing prevailing stereotypes. As the plot unfolds, it becomes evident that beneath their seemingly flawless exteriors, the female characters grapple with their own unique challenges. Despite her apparent popularity with the opposite sex, Minnie experiences loneliness and yearns for genuine friendship. Even with her striking beauty, Miyeon often questions her own attractiveness, lamenting, "Why ain't I pretty?" Her awareness of mainstream aesthetic preferences leads to constant frustration as she strives to conform. This narrative highlights the complexities of female image in media communication and underscores the internal struggles that women face due to societal norms. Under such oppressive circumstances, women seem to unconsciously conform to these standards in a bid to secure public approval. Paradoxically, this ongoing internal struggle between self-worth and societal expectations only serves to reinforce the perpetuation of the stereotypical female image.

This study posits that the deliberate use of pink and blue as the primary colors in the videos serves not only aesthetic purposes but also conveys metaphors related to identity and plot development through color symbolism. The incorporation of pink is multi-faceted; it aligns with traditional femininity while also signifying specific plot points. Firstly, the character represented by "princess" Miyeon is consistently enveloped in pink. Secondly, the lingerie store is predominantly adorned in pink, and pink lighting sets the tone for party scenes. Furthermore, the costumes of Miyeon, Shuhua, and Yuqi are intricately detailed with pink elements in these scenes. Additionally, when Soyeon, the protagonist, grapples with self-doubt early on, her clothing prominently features pink elements as a means of aligning with mainstream aesthetics. In contrast, blue is primarily reserved for hospital scenes, symbolizing the space where Soyeon takes action in pursuit of her ideal image. This deliberate color contrast enhances the narrative by linking the protagonist's inner struggles with her actions. Beyond its visual appeal, it infuses deeper meaning into emotional and narrative communication (as depicted in Figure 2).

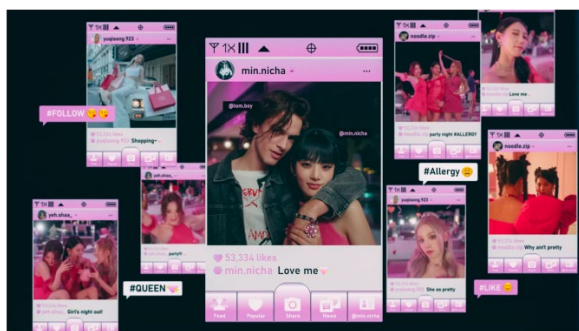


**Figure 2** The use of pink and blue

Drawing from Judith Butler's concept of gender performance, it becomes evident that gender identities, indeed all identities, are not rigid but rather fluid. Individuals shape themselves into thematic identities by enacting or imitating certain behaviors, constituting what Butler terms "performative construction"[19]. Social Networking Sites (SNS) provide a crucial platform for young women to showcase their identities. Within this virtual space, they craft multiple personas, and these personas wield a significant influence through their dissemination on SNS. As Soyeon encounters these

personas through her mobile device, she grapples with feelings of anxiety and insecurity, prompting a series of endeavors to transform herself. This anxiety-driven behavior transcends mere aspirations for personal growth; it is rooted in her desire to alter her appearance to mirror those women in the limelight, thus assimilating into the societal mainstream. This propensity for mimicry extends beyond the heroine, as Miyeon too emulates Minnie's appearance out of her internal frustration, spotlighting the prevailing trend of self-construction based on the emulation of others.

The trend of imitative self-construction is intrinsically linked to the realm of social media, a theme underscored repeatedly in the video. Each character maintains a profound connection with SNS: the female protagonist employs SNS to peer into the lives of Internet celebrities, fostering feelings of anxiety; Miyeon experiences sadness upon encountering official information about her romantic interests. The SNS interface, depicted on screen, constantly refreshes with follower counts, likes, and an influx of comments, all of which constitute the essence of their virtual identities (as illustrated in Figure 3). Concurrently, electronic device screens play a pivotal role in the narrative, introducing intriguing plot twists. For instance, an early scene captures the lively atmosphere of a party where the girls enthusiastically post updates on SNS. The camera then zooms out to reveal these posts on a mobile phone screen before transitioning to a shot of Soyeon interacting with doctors at the hospital while expressing her aspiration to "wanna be like them." This transition technique deftly bridges the virtual and real worlds, showcasing the strong bond between the characters' inner emotions and their yearning to engage with social media.

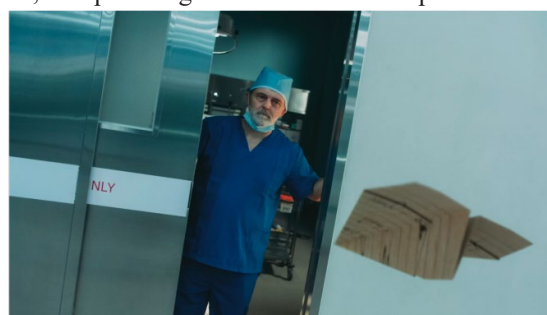


**Figure 3** SNS interface

However, the online information Soyeon absorbs as a follower represents the online personas constructed by these Internet celebrities, often portraying an idealized version of their lives that does not necessarily align with reality. Yet, it is this "Fantastical Authenticity"[20] fostered through social media that profoundly influences the emotional experiences of many online participants, much like Soyeon. Through the interplay of these visual elements, the narrative delves deeper into the contemporary influence of social media, highlighting how individuals manifest, mold, and communicate their identities within the virtual realm.

## 5. Identity Derangement: The use of contrapuntal sound and symbolic elements

The perplexity surrounding the recognition of identity stands as a pivotal stage through which the protagonist, Soyeon, undergoes a profound process of identity reconciliation. This stage is undeniably the most prominent and dramatically poignant aspect of the *Queencard* music video. Notably, the notes that the heroine takes during the "How to be a queen" class in *Allergy* serve as the breadcrumbs hinting at her evolving identity. These scribbled thoughts encapsulate Soyeon's aspirations for a transformation in her sense of self and are meticulously folded into a paper airplane by the heroine, ultimately launched out of the window. Subsequently, the scene seamlessly transitions to an impending surgical procedure. The paper airplane embarks on its journey, soaring through the midst of a bustling crowd toward the operating room housing Soyeon, bearing the protagonist's profound yearning for change. Simultaneously, a doctor is seen closing the door to the operating room, effectively framing the screen with the door's threshold. Through a clever camera angle, viewers are left in suspense, unable to ascertain whether the paper airplane successfully enters the operating room. The trajectory of its flight suggests otherwise (as depicted in Figure 4). This narrative twist aligns with the story's denouement, where Soyeon doesn't rely on a physical transformation to achieve a reinvention of her identity. As the gates are shut and the sound of the iron doors colliding resonates, the screen briefly fades to black, encapsulating a moment of contemplation.



**Figure 4** Paper airplanes flying towards the operating room

A shift in perspective initiates a captivating exploration of identity turmoil. The closing scene of *Allergy* frames Soyeon inhaling anesthesia in a direct head-on shot. The commencement of *Queencard* is aligned with this scene, seamlessly transitioning to a first-person point of view, immersing the audience as if they were Soyeon herself, suspended in a state of unconsciousness. As the introductory segment of the music video unfolds, maintaining the first-person perspective, the setting shifts from the virtual realm to reality. Through a simulated blinking transition, the audience is seemingly transported to the hospital corridor. In this surreal environment, doctors and patients alike fix their gaze upon "me," assessing and reacting with surprise, while "me" remains deeply entrenched in a bewildering state of identity confusion.

Both music videos adeptly convey this intricate web of identity confusion through an array of audiovisual

elements. Notably, the most impactful method employed revolves around the presentation of character relationships through clothing and styling. The audience observes Soyeon and each Internet celebrity character donning identical attire and styling, all coexisting within the same scene simultaneously. Within this context, mirrors assume a pivotal role as the primary medium of transformation (as depicted in Figure 5), mirroring the sentiments articulated in the lyrics of "this damn mirror, I'm disgusted" from *Allergy*. These lyrics vividly encapsulate Soyeon's discontent with her true self as reflected in the mirror and her persistent quest to emulate the image of Internet celebrities.

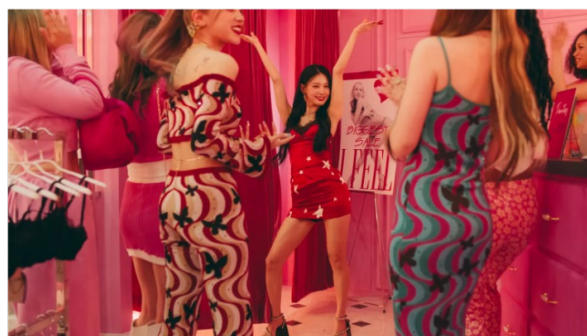


**Figure 5** Identity transformation through the mirror

In terms of editing techniques, the dancefloor scene skillfully employs a rapid jump cut, coupled with the sound effect of a record being scratched, to craft a frenzied atmosphere where the boundaries between reality and illusion blur incessantly. Within the video's narrative setting, the lyrics serve as a form of dialogue. Typically, each idol's part in the song aligns with their performance in the video. However, in this instance, there's a deliberate misalignment of audiovisual elements, i.e., the so-called contrapuntal sound. On the dance floor, Minnie takes center stage, seemingly singing the lyrics in harmony with the music, yet it's Soyeon's voice that resonates, signifying that Soyeon is the one truly standing in the spotlight, having assumed the high-profile role. This shift in identity is subtly foreshadowed in *Allergy*, where the main character encounters Minnie dressed similarly and hears her say, "You can be like me!" Notably, there are nuanced distinctions in their attire at this juncture, with Soyeon wearing a cross and Minnie sporting a five-pointed star. In this study, this element is considered a traceable symbolic marker of identity.

The symbolism of stars and butterflies pervades character design, with their meanings subtly hinted through plot development and visual composition. In a scene set within a lingerie store, Shuhua and Yuqi sport clothing and accessories rich in butterfly motifs, cementing their shared identity symbolized by the butterfly. The editing techniques form a mirrored relationship between the two within and outside the mirror, underlining their shared symbolism. Later, Miyeon emerges from a fitting room, prominently featured at the center of the frame in an outfit adorned with star elements, while Shuhua and Yuqi enthusiastically flank her, donning butterfly patterns. As the MV consistently suggests, Miyeon, with star elements, is emphasized at the visual center through the interplay of camera angles and visual

composition (as depicted in Figure 6). This same theme prevails in the dancefloor scene, where Miyeon and Minnie, perennially commanding the crowd's center, wear earrings prominently featuring star motifs. In contrast, Soyeon consistently bears a butterfly tattoo on her body, a detail made particularly evident towards the story's conclusion, as she comes to terms with her identity. This juxtaposition of symbols provides insights into the distinct groups represented by these two elements: stars signify characters who stand at the forefront, commanding attention and possessing the ability to influence others, while butterflies represent characters who are easily influenced and yearn for freedom. The astute use of symbolism enriches our comprehension of different character groups, infusing cultural significance into the MV's emotional and thematic depth, thus aiding the audience in better understanding and empathizing with the narrative.



**Figure 6** Butterfly element and star element

In broad strokes, the overarching narrative of the music videos can be dissected into two distinct segments. Initially, Soyeon is inundated with the deluge of seemingly flawless messages propagated on social media, yet she harbors an innate aversion to these narratives, giving rise to an internal "Allergy." Subsequently, in her pursuit of attaining the ideal image of a "Queencard," she descends into a tumultuous state of self-identity crisis, embarking on various endeavors. These endeavors encompass perusing exquisite lingerie at a lingerie store, enrolling in "How to be a queen" classes, and even considering plastic surgery to transform her appearance. However, each of these efforts appears to be accompanied by an underlying frustration.

Following a pivotal moment of inhaling anesthesia within the confines of the operating room, she embarks on a voyeuristic journey into the lives of Internet celebrities, adopting their personas to express herself more authentically. Ultimately, she halts the surgical procedure, and her unbridled expressions are met with positive validation. This turning point underscores the notion that confidence and self-assuredness are pivotal in not only looking appealing but also garnering applause and recognition from others. From this juncture, her spirit is liberated, and a sense of serenity envelops her as she makes peace with her true self.

As viewers, we are afforded the opportunity to peer beyond the veneer of perfection that Internet celebrities project, gaining insight into the complexities and challenges they conceal beneath their immaculate facades. Through Soyeon's perspective, we are prompted to reflect

upon our own self-identity and self-esteem. The cohesive narrative woven through these two music videos endeavors to impart a positive message to the audience, encouraging individuals to authentically embrace their uniqueness and reconcile with their imperfections or values that may diverge from mainstream aesthetics. Ultimately, it champions the idea that each person can lead a genuine and fulfilling life while embracing their individuality.

## 6. Conclusions

*Allergy* and *Queencard* serve as compelling explorations of the profound impact of social media on young women's body image and self-identity. Leveraging rich audiovisual elements and symbolic symbols, these music videos offer a novel avenue for contemporary research to dissect and discuss this pervasive social phenomenon. The denouement of these music videos accentuates a fundamental truth: authentic self-worth isn't solely contingent on physical appearance or one's online identity status. Instead, it hinges predominantly on self-acceptance and self-appreciation. This conclusion underscores the paramount importance of intrinsic value and self-identity when confronting the pressures and expectations of society. Throughout the narrative, social media serves as an arena for "emotional practice," encompassing aspects of self-doubt, identity emulation, the quest for validation, and ultimately, self-acceptance. Considering the resonance of these music videos and the audience's responses, especially within a predominantly young female demographic, it becomes evident that audiovisual media has emerged as a potent tool for societal critique.

Nevertheless, the success of these music videos has ignited debates about whether idols can genuinely represent the broader public discourse on appearance anxiety. Given the backdrop of South Korea's idol industry, where idols often epitomize or surpass prevailing beauty standards and concurrently function as social media influencers, some viewers contend that (G)I-DLE's portrayal may lack a degree of reliability. However, it's important to acknowledge that the themes explored in these videos remain highly pertinent. Consequently, the question of how to sustain critical thinking and foster inclusivity in such discussions warrants thoughtful contemplation.

Therefore, this study possesses certain limitations. In addition to the contentious topics mentioned above, the research primarily centers on the analysis of content within the music video narratives and does not encompass the role of music videos in the broader transmission process. In reality, audience reactions and controversies surrounding these music videos may also encompass facets of identity negotiation, as well as the agency of both content creators and users within the dynamic interaction between the platform and its users. Therefore, future research could extend its scope to delve deeper into these dimensions as a natural progression of the current research direction.

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