

The Influence of K-pop on Chinese Fans' Gender Perspectives: A Comparative Analysis Based on BTS and Blackpink

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Abstract. As the platform economy continues to infiltrate all aspects of people's lives, internet platforms have emerged as key arenas for the development of pop music. K-pop, a globally recognized pop culture phenomenon known for its globalized marketing strategies and stage performances that reinforce gender binary traits, is epitomized by BTS and BLACKPINK. These groups have significantly influenced the gender perceptions of their fans worldwide. This research employs the methods of textual analysis and critical discourse analysis to comparatively analyze two songs by BTS and BLACKPINK, their respective stage performances, and the comments of Chinese fans. The research reveals that BTS, as a male idol group, has transitioned from reinforcing traditional masculinity to expressing universal values. On the other hand, BLACKPINK, as a female idol group, despite incorporating elements of power and cultural hybridization, has yet to break free from the stereotypical image of women within the traditional binary concept of gender. The interplay between agencies' globalization strategies and the participatory culture of fans has had a dual impact on the gender concepts of Chinese fans. Firstly, the dissemination of universal values has further expanded the cultural influence of K-pop. Secondly, the participatory fan culture has perpetuated the gender digital divide, which is a manifestation of post-feminist modernity in popular culture.

1 Introduction

With the concept of the East Asian cultural sphere, which theorizes cultural regionalization the development of China's platform economy depends on regional infrastructure, governance, and practice [1]. This framework provides a contextual understanding of the dissemination and reception of K-pop idol groups within Chinese fan communities. To enhance K-pop groups' global influence, Chinese fan communities actively engage with and shape the image of K-pop idol groups through online platforms [2]. Furthermore, the media plays a crucial role in shaping authenticity, as Chinese fan communities participate in and influence the gender and sexual orientation image of K-pop idol groups while constructing their own identities under the influence of these idols [3]. These dynamics shed light on the costs and anxieties experienced by Chinese fan communities within the context of the platform economy and globalization and analyze their impact on K-pop idol groups [4].

By synthesizing the findings from the above literature, people can observe the multifaceted impact of K-pop idol groups on Chinese fan communities. Firstly, within the context of the platform economy and globalization, K-pop idol groups shape the cultural identity and identity construction of Chinese fan communities through music, image, and fan participation. Secondly, the global influence of K-pop idol groups, alongside their interaction with Chinese fan communities,

not only expands the cultural reach of K-pop but also exacerbates the existing gender digital divide. Additionally, factors such as queer culture, media image construction, and reality TV shows play significant roles in the influence of K-pop idol groups within Chinese fan communities.

All the aforementioned studies have made significant contributions to understanding how Chinese fans participate in the construction of gender images of idols. However, further exploration and discussion are needed to examine how the gender performances of idols impact the gender concepts of Chinese fans.

This study aims to investigate the influence of K-pop idol groups in the platform economy on Chinese fans' perceptions of gender, focusing on their music styles, stage performances, and visual representations. The research primarily employs textual analysis and discourse critical analysis to examine two international songs by BTS and BLACKPINK, along with their corresponding stage performances. Additionally, the study incorporates Chinese fans' comments to provide a comprehensive analysis. The underlying premise and objective of this research is to demonstrate the substantial impact that K-pop idol groups can have on Chinese fans' perceptions of gender.

2 Method

This research has chosen two singles, namely BTS's "Dynamite" and BLACKPINK's "Pink Venom," along

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with their related texts, for comparative analysis. The main objective of this study is to analyze the impact that these two internationally renowned Korean groups had on the gender perceptions of the Chinese audience. To achieve this goal, the research primarily focused on analyzing the lyrics of the two songs, the official music videos, and how they were performed on these international platforms. Additionally, the paper examined the comments left by Chinese fans on these videos. By employing the method of textual analysis, the study conducted thematic analysis and critical discourse analysis(CDA) on the research sample [5]. The analysis was based on the constructive procedure of grounded theory, which involved obtaining the analyzed text directly through actual observation, without making any research assumptions [6].

3 Result

3.1 Life is Dynamite

3.1.1 Lyrics

"Dynamite" is an English song that primarily conveys a vibrant and positive attitude towards life, emphasizing phrases like "life is dynamite" and "I'm light it up like dynamite." The song achieves a goal through shorter phrases and energetic rhythms, such as "Cup of milk lets rock and roll" and "Jump up to the top Lebron." While the song does not explicitly address patriarchy and gender issues in lyrics, it instead promotes an optimistic outlook on life through universal expressions.

Released on August 21, 2020, "Dynamite" is featured in the digital album "Dynamite (Daytime version)," produced by British producer David Stewart and released by BIGHIT MUSIC Records (a subsidiary of HYBE Entertainment). It deviates from BTS's traditional style, focusing on a retro electro-funky disco sound that has gained significant popularity in Europe, the United States, and East Asia. The song has resonated well with European and American markets, while also bringing a refreshing vibe to audiences in East Asia. It can be regarded as a song tailored to the aesthetic preferences of the European and American markets and, to some extent, it introduces listeners to BTS's diverse musical styles.

3.1.2 Video performance

The music video for "Dynamite" continues to excel in terms of visual expression and stage performance. It can be found on the popular Chinese video website, Bilibili, where it has garnered over 2.84 million views [7]. The music video is divided into two parts, referred to as the A-side and B-side, each showcasing different attitudes of "Dynamite" through varying camera angles and performance styles.

The A-side predominantly employs wide-angle shots from the main character's perspective, with seamless editing to convey the relaxed and joyful atmosphere of the song. It also emphasizes the importance of individual

subjectivity in life. For instance, the main character is often positioned at the center of the frame, with the camera focusing on the individual (BTS consisting of seven members). On the other hand, the B-side adopts a third-person perspective, where the viewer becomes a bystander observing the protagonist and their story. This perspective avoids the use of wide-angle lenses and instead presents a more straightforward view of the protagonist's actions. Additionally, various montage editing techniques are incorporated to create a sense of narrative rhythm and intensity. Notably, the B-side concludes with a clip from the video shoot, breaking down the barrier between the viewer and the performer, and enhancing the sense of distance between them.

Overall, the music video for "Dynamite" excels in its ability to capture different attitudes and experiences. The inclusion of montage editing techniques and the breaking of the fourth wall add depth and enhance the viewer's engagement with the video [8]. Notably, "Dynamite" made its way to the stage of the Grammy Awards in 2021, and the video capturing this performance has been widely circulated on the internet. This achievement solidifies BTS's position as a significant influence in global pop culture, representing East Asian pop music on the prestigious stage of mainstream awards in Europe and the United States.

3.1.3 Stage performance

During this stage performance, the seven members of BTS adorned brightly colored suits, creating a visually captivating presence. The performance showcased a seamless transition from an indoor stage to an outdoor stage through two continuous one-shot sequences. The finale of the performance featured multiple spotlights converging into one, effectively capturing the essence of the song's message, "I'm light it up like dynamite." Through their Grammy Awards stage performance, BTS skillfully conveyed the energy and spirit of "Dynamite," leaving a lasting impression on viewers. Their ability to captivate audiences and deliver a powerful performance further solidifies their impact on the global pop music scene.

3.2 Taste that Pink Venom

3.2.1 Lyrics

Unlike "Dynamite," "Pink Venom" is a bilingual song that combines both Korean and English. The rap sections of the song are performed entirely in English, which adds to its intensity and impact. Lines such as "I bring the pain like this that pink venom" and "taste that pink venom" convey a rebellious spirit, employing confrontational language such as "makes no sense," "black paint and ammo," "got the body like Rambo," and "this da life of a vandal." This usage of confrontational vocabulary creates an attitude of defiance towards capital, gender, and performance, reflecting a sense of confidence and arrogance in overpowering one's adversaries.

"Pink Venom" is featured in the digital album titled "Pink Venom," released on August 19, 2022, by YG Entertainment Records. The single has achieved significant success, selling over 1.16 million copies on China's QQ Music platform and gaining widespread popularity worldwide. Listeners have been drawn to its captivating hip-hop style, finding it engaging and impactful.

In terms of visual expression, "Pink Venom" takes a bolder approach compared to "Dynamite," utilizing multiple visually striking scenes, diverse clothing styles, and contrasting character traits. For instance, in the music video, Jisoo from Blackpink embodies the traditional Korean woman, showcasing her skills in playing traditional Korean instruments while singing modern songs. On the other hand, Lisa represents the modern Korean woman, sporting personalized designer clothing, delivering confrontational lyrics, and showcasing rebellious and killer dance moves.

3.2.2 Video performance

The music video for "Pink Venom" also employs bold visual elements, such as the use of red lights and the moon, creating a striking contrast between red and white. It highlights modernity through shots of lightning and cyber-style environments. Furthermore, the video incorporates several scenes of crashes and explosions, conveying a confrontational and rebellious spirit. Overall, "Pink Venom" pushes the boundaries of visual expression, showcasing contrasting styles, character traits, and striking visual effects. The music video successfully conveys a sense of confrontation and rebellion, leaving a lasting impact on viewers.

3.2.3 Stage performance

Similarly, "Pink Venom" was a highly anticipated song that took the stage at the VMAs in 2022 and became the highlight of Coachella in 2023. In contrast to "Dynamite" at the Grammy Awards, the members of BLACKPINK deliberately dressed in attire that catered to the male gaze, featuring ultra-short halter tops and hip-hugging shorts. Their performance was accompanied by a powerful dance routine, enhanced by a multitude of backup dancers, creating an atmosphere of grandiose defiance that elicited a collective cheer from audiences. The dynamic choreography, combined with the presence of numerous backup dancers, contributed to a striking display of defiance that resonated with audiences. Furthermore, the interactive design of the performance signaled BLACKPINK's intention to showcase not only their bodies but also their personalities on an international stage, while simultaneously conveying their voices of confrontation.

It is worth noting that the inclusion of "Pink Venom" in the VMAs and Coachella performances not only showcased BLACKPINK's artistic prowess but also emphasized their determination to challenge conventions and break barriers. Their impactful presence and

powerful performance solidified their status as influential figures in the global music scene.

3.3 Two contrasting discursive turns on audience aspect

Based on the analysis of lyrics, video performance, and stage performance, this research aims to directly demonstrate the influence of K-pop groups on Chinese fans' gender perceptions and how this influence manifests, which sampled and analyzed comments under the aforementioned video texts on audience aspect, revealing two contrasting discursive turns of another side.

One comment praised "Dynamite" as a genuine expression of the group's feelings to uplift their global fans during the challenging pandemic. "Dynamite is a song that BTS created with genuine feeling to energize their global fans during the difficult epidemic, and it's a pleasure! Thank you guys!" (Via ID: Strawberry flavored wonton up Aoyama 0.0). Another viewer shared a transformative experience after listening to the song. "This song completely changed my view of this boy band, I did not understand them, though just rely on beautiful faces to cater to Boys' Love, like most of the K-pop boy groups. Until this year's Apple Music annual list of the BTS song dominated the list, I listened and amazed me. The tune's bright rhythm and ear-catching melody left me with a great shock, completely retracted from the previous view, intending to enter the pit! "(Via ID: Peng Zeno). A fan commented that "Life should be like Dynamite, so I'm an Army (the nickname of BTS fans), I'm pretty and rich, my husband earns more than you." (Via ID: casual624). Through its energetic rhythms and catchy melodies, "Dynamite" has garnered love from many viewers. It challenges the stereotype that K-pop boy groups only derive their appeal from Boys' Love themes. Moreover, the song encourages fans to openly express personal opinions online, fostering self-confidence and subjectivity.

Additionally, the charm of the song has propelled BTS to global stardom (Via ID: cz_cake). Fans consider "Dynamite" as BTS' worldwide breakthrough, attracting numerous fans and gaining significant popularity in Japan, Europe, and the United States (Via ID: cz_cake). These fans also express the belief that music transcends boundaries of race, age, and gender, citing examples of people in their fifties and sixties attending concerts to support their favorite stars (Via ID: dongmushroomrami).

Unlike the harmonious commenting scene surrounding "Dynamite," the music video for "Pink Venom" generated more heated discussions among viewers, with extensive arguments regarding the song's brainwashing and ear-pleasing qualities. The majority of comments expressed dissatisfaction with the melody, criticizing it for following the same old-fashioned and uninnovative pattern as previous songs. However, some viewers provided rational analysis by highlighting both the strengths and weaknesses of the song. They acknowledged that "Pink Venom" incorporated a fusion of traditional East Asian instruments and electronica in its arrangement. They praised the creative drum beats

that harmonized well with the rap style. Additionally, they appreciated the on-camera performance of the group, describing it as a combination of female beauty and male strength. The viewers also commended the group's performances of lens work for its aesthetic appeal. It is worth noting that Blackpink's music style has always been known for its fast-paced raps and impactful stage performances, earning them the nickname "MoDi" (Emperor of Ink) in Chinese fan discussions. This nickname is derived from Blackpink's Chinese acronym, "FenMo," where "Fen" translates to "pink" and "Mo" refers to the ink used for writing brushstrokes (used metaphorically to refer to "Black").

In conclusion, according to Chinese fans' perception, innovativeness in terms of song melody and arrangement is an important factor in evaluating a pop idol group. Thus, as a K-pop boy group, BTS effectively tapped into the psychological gap caused by the epidemic and released "Dynamite," a fast-paced and lively song that conveys the idea of music without boundaries. This not only challenges stereotypical gender performances associated with boy bands among Chinese fans but also rebuilds people's sense of agency that was gradually eroded during the catastrophe. The songs by BTS also downplay gender awareness and break down barriers of race, gender, and national boundaries with their sincere performance style. In contrast, when praising the pinnacle achievement of female groups, patriarchal concepts such as historical emperors are utilized to title Blackpink. However, this does not prevent fans from expressing their dissatisfaction with songs by female groups.

The findings of this study suggest that BTS and BLACKPINK have had a significant impact on the traditional binary gender perceptions of Chinese fans. This influence can be attributed to the distinctive qualities of their songs, their performances that challenge traditional gender boundaries, and their inclusive international perspectives.

4 Discussion

The aforementioned findings indicate that the K-pop boy groups, represented by BTS, has transitioned from solely shaping masculinity and gender identity to creating music with universal life perspectives. They align their musical works with global events and market demands, breaking down barriers imposed by national borders, language, and ethnicity. This approach enhances their musical influence and positively reshapes Chinese fans' binary gender perceptions. On the other hand, Blackpink, as a prominent representative of K-pop girl groups, still grapples with challenges stemming from traditional cultural values in East Asia. Fans don't only expect the group members to conform to their idealized image of a beautiful and strong woman, evidenced by visually captivating dance performances, but also desire a combination of a strong female physique and a perfect figure, projecting their aspirations onto the group. Additionally, Chinese fans demand a high level of creativity in Blackpink's songs, seeking a fusion of

diverse artistic styles while maintaining a distinctive personal identity, which makes a challenge for the production team and the group's ability to deliver visually. Undoubtedly, this discursive strategy by Chinese fans aims to preserve a prominent position for a female duo in the music industry, preventing them from being replaced. Based on existing research, the study suggests that the reason for this gap is a combination of the "globalization" strategy adopted by the agencies behind idol groups and the development of participatory culture among Chinese fans.

The "globalization" strategy implemented by the agencies behind these pop groups has contributed to the widening gap between the perspectives of Chinese fans and the diverse values prevalent worldwide. This strategy is rooted in cultural regionalism and has faced criticism regarding its theoretical basis in globalization. The globalization strategy tends to promote cultural regionalization [9]. South Korea, as a significant developed country in East Asia, has embraced the concept of "culture as a nation" as a primary cultural policy. Its platform economy development model bears similarities to that of Europe and the United States, with minimal government intervention in enterprises. In contrast, China exhibits a strong government-business linkage, facilitating the widespread integration of platform-based infrastructure across all societal levels [1].

Therefore, Hybe Entertainment and YG Entertainment, the agencies behind BTS and Blackpink respectively, have adopted distinct "globalization" strategies to enhance the global influence of their artists. Hybe Entertainment, through its subsidiary BIGHIT, which manages BTS, has focused its investments primarily on BTS among its limited roster of artists [10,11]. They have hired an international production team to create an all-English song that caters to the aesthetic preferences of the European and American markets. This strategy aligns with a cultural regionalization approach that targets capitalist countries. On the other hand, YG Entertainment boasts a diverse and stable profit model with a wide range of artists [12]. The company's success is not solely dependent on Blackpink as an idol group, unlike BIGHIT's reliance on BTS. In this case, Blackpink's development model emphasizes the integration of both local and international markets. They cater to the traditional East Asian concept of female sexual fantasies while also meeting the market demands for pop feminism and self-empowerment [13].

For Chinese fans, the presence of the Great Wall of the Internet poses a significant obstacle to transnational cultural exchange. They can only catch glimpses of globally recognized artworks through reproductions on domestic video platforms, leading to a cultural divide between them and the diverse values prevalent worldwide. Therefore, through the "Culture Dynamite" of BTS, Chinese fans have been exposed to the influence of pluralistic values from around the world. This exposure has allowed them to envision the possibility of breaking down racial, national, and gender barriers, challenging the dichotomous worldview that persists. Conversely, the persona of "Pink Venom" embodied by

Blackpink has not only resonated with Chinese fans' aspirations for their ideal selves but has also reminded them to remain vigilant against the continued existence of patriarchal oppression in reality.

Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that the platform economy, serving as a medium for participatory culture and the sharing economy, is not as open as it may appear [1]. The digital divide in terms of gender intersects with the participatory culture of fans. One way in which the medium provides imaginative resources is through the construction of identification with the idol. Idolatry, or the idol-fan dynamic, is perpetuated within a realm of fantasy, where individuals view the idol as a projection of an idealized self [3]. Consequently, female idol groups face a greater challenge in meeting the expectations of fans who adhere to China's traditional binary view of gender. Even then, female groups often struggle to receive the same level of harmonious evaluation as male idol groups. In contrast, male idol groups convey a sense of vitality, positivity, and harmony, which undermines the power dynamics, oppression, and inequality associated with patriarchy. This portrayal garners unanimous approval from Chinese fans. Although participatory culture seemingly promotes gender equality, it inadvertently exacerbates the gender digital divide due to the discursive strategies employed.

To break the barriers of patriarchy, Chinese fans prioritize a sense of female empowerment as it suggests the members of female idol groups have worked hard to dismantle the myth of self-reliance perpetuated by pop feminism and neoliberalism [13]. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that this perspective exists within a cultural context where heterosexuality remains orthodox and has not fundamentally altered the traditional gender status gap, as exemplified by the status of BTS [14].

5 Conclusion

The adoption of a "globalization" strategy by idol group agencies, combined with the development of Chinese fan participation culture, has led to the emergence of the gender digital divide in popular culture. This phenomenon is deeply rooted in the interplay between cultural regionalism in the globalization strategy and the infiltration of pop feminism into fan participation culture, facilitated by the platform economy. In this process, Chinese fans find themselves navigating the complexities of post-feminist media culture, simultaneously being vigilant against patriarchy and unintentionally reinforcing heteronormativity in their aspirations for self-empowerment.

This outcome is an inevitable result of the integration of pop music into the capitalist market. On one hand, the capitalist world represented by idol group agencies gains financial profit and power, while on the other hand, fans as consumers fulfill their desires for self-image projection while fulfilling the dreams of others. At first glance, this may seem like a mutually beneficial arrangement, but upon closer examination, it becomes evident that the exacerbation of the gendered digital

divide can perpetuate gender inequality and widen the gaps based on race, class, and capital.

This study offers a comprehensive exploration of the gendered performance styles and stage performances of K-pop idol groups through the lens of interactive texts, which shed light on how cultural regionalism and pop feminism have influenced the gender perceptions of Chinese fans. While adopting a critical discourse analysis approach from multiple perspectives, it becomes evident that the success of top idol groups relies on factors such as visualization, regionalization, and marketization. Notably, government systems and economic foundations play a crucial role, while intangible value assets, including cultural genes, often remain overlooked. Moving forward, one of the key challenges lies in exploring the complex relationship between mediated materiality and gender within the context of the platform economy.

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