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“Yea I’m a f* Tomboy”: “girl crush,” postfeminism, and the reimagining of K-pop femininity

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ABSTRACT

“Girl crush” is a relatively new genre in South Korean pop music (hereafter “K-pop”). Unlike the stereotypes of female idols being cute and submissive, idols of the “girl crush” genre usually show provocative “girl power,” challenging the patriarchy by incorporating feminist messages in their works. In March 2022, a girl group (G)I-DLE released a song entitled *Tomboy*, which went viral for its outrageous music video delivering a bold statement about women being independent, fearless, and abandoning toxic heterosexual relationships. This study conducts a social semiotic analysis of *Tomboy* with a postfeminist lens and comes up with three findings: first, the music video of *Tomboy* has shown a postfeminist sensibility by exhibiting an entanglement of feminism and antifeminism; second, *Tomboy* has tackled a queered theme by focusing on women’s collective empowerment and sisterhood against patriarchy; third, “girl crush” has revealed the limitations of celebrity feminism, making the relationship between “girl crush’s” success and feminism questionable.

KEYWORDS

K-pop; girl crush; (G)I-DLE; postfeminism; popular feminism; celebrity feminism

Introduction

On March 14, 2022, a South Korean pop music (hereafter “K-pop”) girl group (G)I-DLE released their latest album *I Never Die*. The title song *Tomboy* instantly went viral for its outrageous music video (hereafter “MV”) and lyrics which make a strong statement about women being independent, fearless, and abandoning toxic heterosexual relationships. In the MV, the members of (G)I-DLE dress in tight overalls, punk rock short skirts, sporting high-heels, and confidently showing their bodies with a domineering attitude. Singing lyrics like “your mom raised you as a prince, but this is queendom, right?” while showing a male barbie doll being “murdered” by five female dolls representing the five members, the song unabashedly makes a strong statement of women exerting power over men while enjoying their own sexuality.

The song *Tomboy* naturally fits into a K-pop genre called “girl crush (Ssen unni).” Different from the originally romance-encoded meaning in the English language, “girl crush” is a concept featuring female idol(s) “who looks strong and expresses what she thinks and feels directly and provocatively” (Chang 2020, 74). As Kelley (2018) also

explained in a *Billboard* article, the “girl crush” concept “goes harder as idols morph into badass, tomboyish and occasionally sexy women.” Different from the “soft-spoken and pretty face” (Kelley, para. 6), these tougher and perhaps more intimidating girls began to appear in the industry in the 2000s, pioneered by groups like 2NE1, f(x), and the more recent Blackpink, Mamamoo, and (G)I-DLE. While expressing feminist messages through their music on the one hand, they usually still remain a traditional feminine and even hypersexualized look on the other. As Chang (2020, 75) further observed,

“[S]exy” is one of the most important elements of the Ssen unni in conservative Korean society, because her sexiness stems from her unique personality and stylishness. In other word, being sexy is the efficient way the Ssen unni controls her identity and gives a strong voice to the fans.

Situated in the K-pop culture, this article conducts a case study of *Tomboy* as an example of the “girl crush” genre. It not only deconstructs the MV to examine its postfeminist characteristics but also argues that the MV instigates a reexamination and reimagining of femininity, female empowerment, and queerness in a highly gendered K-pop culture. It further points out that, aside from the feminist empowerment message embedded in the MV, feminism is still not an openly discussed topic in K-pop, and “girl crush” is inevitably located in a patriarchal and corporate culture with a hegemonic aesthetics of women that is hard to subvert.

From hypersexualization to “girl crush”

K-pop is a highly gendered and sexualized industry. Oh (2023, 55) observed that Korean idols “set gender prototypes” by being “innocent schoolgirls or boys, the seductive, sassy “girl crush,” or the rebellious, powerful boy groups.” In this process, an “ideal K-pop body” was established in the 2000s, demonstrated by “juvenile and thin with a pale East Asian skin tone ... racial and ethnic ambiguity, flawlessly polished faces, and transnational, ageless, and cosmopolitan looks” (56). The pursuit of such homogeneous beauty has also promoted the “K-beauty” products, the popular plastic surgery culture, and the glossy fashion that go with the idols. Under such circumstances, female idols are especially under a standardized scrutiny and are inevitably in the position of being gazed (Mulvey 1975) by a patriarchal society. Hence, their representation has always been associated with words such as cute, innocent, and sexy.

Oh (2014) also examined the gendered femininity in K-pop by studying the dancing body of the famous idol group Girls’ Generation. Tracing their body moves and showcase of body curves in MVs and on stages, Oh observed their gender performance as “hyper-girlish-femininity that prioritizes submissiveness, pureness, and cuteness over the Westernized notion of powerful and independent womanly sexiness” (56). Moreover, since Asian men are often effeminate in a universalized gender discourse (if not stereotypes), Girls’ Generation even “masculinize Asian men” by being “more feminine to fit into that patriarchal structure” (58).

Similarly, using two girl groups’ U.S. market endeavors as examples, Jung (2013, 108) criticized the K-pop industry for attempting “to garner their biggest success ... not by offering new musical styles but by negotiating and repackaging their Asian female sexuality in attempts to play to the realities – and fantasies – of the U.S. pop market.” With a

postcolonial lens and Orientalist theorization, Jung thought the fact that Korean female idols have to deal with Western exploitative reading reflected the inevitably sexual imagination embedded in the Korean entertainment industry.

Kim (2019) discussed the variety and cultural politics of female idols' representation in K-pop, and pointed out that there is a "hybridization" from cute and innocent, to ambiguous femininity, and then to explicit sexualization in the industry's representation of women. Dividing K-pop into three "generations" based on the idol groups' debut and active years, Kim (2019, xxxiii) observed that the Generation I (1997-2007) female idols fell into the "ambiguous femininity" of being cute and innocent. Generation II (2007-2010) also belongs to "ambiguous femininity" but with a growing sexualization. And Generation III (2011 onward) "has been typified as an explicit sexualization since 2011." In addition, from a biopolitical point of view, Kim (2019, 62) criticized the popular MVs for being "a pleasurable pedagogy of neoliberal governmentality that conditions them to learn and perceive the world by sensory stimuli such as emotions."

However, what Kim did not summarize was the emergence of "girl crush" during the "second generation" era. Together with the growing feminist movement in Korea (see Hasunuma and Shin 2019; Shin 2021), "girl crush" came like a storm to topple the existing K-pop norms. Although some "girl crush" representations, including the idols' outfits and demeanors, may still look overly sexy and appealing to the male gaze, their female agency and subjectivity can also be accentuated through their flamboyant lyrics and bold performances. Chang (2020, 75) thus compared "girl crush" in K-pop to "girl power" in the Western context, as both of them "embody disparate tendencies of being "sexy," "angry," and "powerful."" Here, the meaning of "sexy" in "girl crush" is transformed from being submissively sexy to powerfully sexy, as the female idols are making strong and empowered statements through proudly showcasing their bodies and sexualities.

Postfeminism, popular feminism, and the "double entanglement"

Postfeminism has been under debate since it was raised in the 1990s. While Angela McRobbie (2004, 255-6) claimed that postfeminism signaled an "undoing of feminism," making feminism "cast into the shadows" and "dismantling itself," other scholars viewed it as an upgrade "in relation to" the previous feminist movements with an emphasis on the impact of neoliberalism and popular culture (see Nash and Grant 2015; Banet-Weiser 2004). As Duffy, Hancock, and Tyler (2017, 262) well summarized, postfeminism had been described as "after" "against" "within" and "distinct from" feminism, but after all, it is an "important organizational phenomenon, discernible in corporate cultural discourse and artefacts that ought to be subject to critique." And of course, criticism of postfeminism also exists, with some identifying it as a "remasculinization of culture" (Jones 2000) and "easily aligns with corporate interests, situating messages of women's freedom in the marketplace as "empowered consumers"" (Murray 2013).

To understand the meaning of postfeminism in the context of today's mass culture, it is important to refer to Gill, who identified postfeminism as a "sensibility" (Gill 2007) that "is not only created, expressed and circulated, but also received and reproduced" (Banet-Weiser, Gill, and Rottenberg 2020, 4). To Gill (2008, 41), postfeminism is women's reexamination and reenactment of their sexual agency in a neoliberal and commercialized world. Instead of being sexualized objects, a postfeminist woman is generally "a young,

attractive, heterosexual woman who knowingly and deliberately lays with her sexual power and is always “up for it” (that is, sex).” As Zorlu (2022, 223) also explained, “Postfeminist empowerment often entails a re-embrace of conventional notions of femininity and naturalization of binarized differences between women and men, as well as the substitution of sexual objectification of women’s bodies for sexual subjectification and empowerment through a renewed emphasis on the body.” This understanding is aligned with McRobbie’s (2004, 255) definition that postfeminism is an “undoing of feminism, while simultaneously appearing to be engaging in a well-informed and even well-intended response to feminism.” In other words, a “deliberate knowingness” of their sexual appeal in a highly commercialized and consumer-centered world distinguishes postfeminists from other feminists.

Closely related to postfeminism is the concept of popular feminism raised by Sarah Banet-Weiser, who, after seeing “girl power as almost exclusively about consumer power” and “the normative repudiation of feminism and feminist politics and values in everyday life” (Banet-Weiser, Gill, and Rottenberg 2020, 9), decided to revisit the meaning of postfeminism. To Banet-Weiser (2018, 1), feminism is now popular for three reasons. First, it is circulated in popular and commercial media; second, it is “being liked or admired by like-minded people and groups”; third, it signals “a terrain of struggle, a space where competing demands for power battle it out.” In this case, popular feminism has harvested many followers for its not-so-hardcore advocacy, its emphasis on media visibility, as well as its easy accessibility. In an environment where different streams of feminism compete to circulate, Banet-Weiser (2018, 1) observed that popular feminism “is networked across all media platforms” and thus highly accessible for most people in society. Such networked feminism is also discussed by Darwin and Miller (2021, 875), who observed that postfeminism is associated with a “fourth wave” feminism which emerged when “feminist dialogues moved into cyberspace in the 2010s, enabled by social media platforms like YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram.”

Moreover, in a conversation with Rosalind Gill and Catherine Rottenberg, Banet-Weiser, Gill, and Rottenberg (2020, 9) pointed out that popular feminism is a “happy” feminism that is “existing along a continuum, where spectacular, media-friendly expressions such as celebrity feminism and corporate feminism achieve more visibility, and expressions that critique patriarchal structure and systems of racism and violence are obscured.” In other words, popular feminism downplays a lot of systematic issues regarding the struggles of feminism, and focuses on the more visible ones that could have more salient social influence.

In this case, “girl crush” certainly falls into a popular feminism spectrum except that it does not directly claim itself to be “feminist,” probably due to a highly misogynist society. As Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer (2017, 884) observed, “feminism has always been a useful lens through which to *understand* popular culture. However, we now are living in a moment when feminism has undeniably *become* popular culture.” With more and more K-pop female idol groups adapting the “girl crush” concept, this seemingly feminist-driven genre has become a powerful component of K-pop culture, making the examination of the effectiveness and influence of “girl crush” more important and necessary.

Another crucial concept regarding postfeminism is the “double-entanglement” raised by McRobbie which is highly applicable to today’s K-pop scene. According to McRobbie (2004, 255–6), “double-entanglement”:

[C]omprises the co-existence of neo-conservative values in relation to gender, sexuality and family life ... , with processes of liberalisation in regard to choice and diversity in domestic, sexual and kinship relations ... It also encompasses the co-existence of feminism as at some level transformed into a form of Gramscian common sense, while also fiercely repudiated, indeed almost hated.

To unpack this concept in a K-pop context, it is important to take a look at the current anti-feminist situation (or what Banet-Weiser called “popular misogyny”) in Korea at large. While the #MeToo movement and feminist awareness are rising, Korea has also witnessed a vicious anti-feminist backlash in society. For example, during the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, a Korean female archer, two gold-medals holder An San experienced massive online bullying because of her short hair and seemingly feminist demeanor (Park 2021). In 2022, the newly elected Korean president Yoon Suk-yeol even used anti-feminist agenda as an important part of his campaign (Gunia 2022). And in the K-pop world, female stars are increasingly being criticized for allegedly feminist actions, even amid the growing #MeToo movement in the country (Herman 2018). An example would be an idol named Irene from the girl group Red Velvet experiencing harsh criticism from male fans after revealing on her social media that she had read a feminist novel.

Given the current anti-feminist situation in the K-pop world and in Korean society in general, the emergence and surging popularity of “girl crush” does not come as a surprise, as artistic expression is always a way of expressing grievances about socio-cultural or political issues. However, what can be inferred from this situation is that the conflict also demonstrates how “girl crush” with a clear feminist intention is living in between this so-called postfeminist “double-entanglement.” For one thing, feminism is being recognized by the female idols, fans, and society (even by the haters); for another, the neo-conservative anti-feminist backlash also prevails to challenge what would have been “common sense.” Moreover, another “double-entanglement” happens when “girl crush” presents rebellious messages to make women’s voices heard, but at the same time, does not distance itself from the hegemonic aesthetics and neoliberal consumerist culture in order to reach a broader audience. In this sense, “girl crush” illustrates a complex postfeminist sensibility that is worthy of further examination.

Method: social semiotic analysis

This study conducts a Social Semiotic Analysis (SSA) of (G)I-DLE’s MV *Tomboy* from a feminist standpoint. It has three research goals: (1) to deconstruct the MV and interpret its semiotic resources; (2) to analyze the MV’s postfeminist traits and contradictions; (3) to discuss the influence and implications of the MV in the larger K-pop context, in order to inspect how effective “girl crush” really is in terms of challenging K-pop’s established gender norms.

While Saussure (1983) claimed that the relationship between signifier and signified is arbitrary, Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) argued that it was motivated and shaped by social constructs and the sign-makers’ interests of meaning-making. Thus, what is important about social semiotics is that it goes beyond analyzing the basic relationship between the signifier and signified, and focuses on the sign-maker’s motivation, positionality, and the sign-making process. The emphasis on people as the agents of creation is crucial in Kress and van Leeuwen’s theorization of social semiotics. In their view, the

interpretation of a sign is also part of the semiotic production, through which one could inspect the intention of the sign-maker and thus join the sign-making process. This idea is particularly of use to this study since the author is not only analyzing, say, the relationship between an icon and its meaning, but also going further to examine and interpret the relationship between textual and visual signs, the motivation of the participants, the social context where these signs are attached to, as well as how these signs are representative of a postfeminist sensibility.

Aiello (2006, 90) pointed out that social semiotics' fundamental aim "is to look systematically at how textual strategies are deployed to convey certain meanings." Thurlow and Aiello (2007, 312) also stated that "social semiotics ... look to *extend* these interests by viewing all semiosis as social action embedded in larger economic and cultural practices and power relations." Sun and Luo (2016, 514) further opined that "the approach [SSA] allows researchers to understand and explain how people produce and communicate meanings with semiotic resources in specific social contexts, settings or micro-settings." Therefore, this study regards (G)I-DLE's *Tomboy* MV as a set of semiotic resources that contain rich textual and visual signs of female idols exerting their power and agency to combat a male-dominant environment. Moreover, this study regards (G)I-DLE's artistic expression as a social and cultural performance that instigate a postfeminist sensibility.

More specifically, an interpretive method is adopted for this study. Inspired by Roland Barthes' (1975) structuralist analysis of narrative which focuses on the function, action, and narration of narratives, and Chuyun Oh's (2014, 55) framework of analyzing "video-text, lyrics, and choreography along with the performer's gendered bodily representation," this study walks through and interprets the textual and visual signs and narratives of the MV by paying particular attention to its semiotic functions. And then, it applies a critical lens to inspect the MV's implications, contradictions, as well as its relationship with the postfeminist ideologies in a neoliberal and commercialized social setting. This way, a detailed, comprehensive analysis of the MV in relation to its postfeminist reference is executed.

Deconstructing *Tomboy*

Tomboy depicts a story of five young women (enacted by (G)I-DLE members) disparaging a man (enacted by a male barbie doll) as they are fed up with his control. Although there is only one man, he functions as a collective representation of men, since each (G)I-DLE member has addressed him as an ex-boyfriend. It is worth noting that the song's composing team contains one of the group members, Jeon Soyeon, and the lyrics are written by her as well. The engagement of a group member adds evidence and credibility to the song being an exertion of "women's voice."

The MV started with a view of a luxurious red sports car parking in front of a theater, symbolizing the girls' independence and wealth. Then, the five members bang the trunk of the car with dismissive smile on their faces. The theme *Tomboy* then appears on the screen. It is the member Minnie who starts the song while holding a glittering pistol, rapping:

Look at you, you can't handle me.

You took off hook, feel like Coke like brr.

Look at my toe, my ex's name as tattoo.

I got to drink up now. I like it even if you don't.¹

The strong opening sets the rebellious tone of the song. As Minnie sits at a table with her legs crossed, she shoots her pistol in the direction where there is a picture of a male barbie doll. The words she raps illustrate that she does not care about the man anymore, and by having an unbothered expression on her face, she shows an unruly attitude toward the man who probably does not approve of the way she does things. Next, the camera shifts to another member, Soyeon, who sits on a red couch with her legs spread wide open, which is startlingly different from the more feminine posture of Minnie. Holding a heart-shaped mirror with a narcissistic facial expression, she sings angrily:

Why are you cranky, boy?

What's all the frown on your face?

Do you want a blond barbie doll?

It's not here, I'm not a doll.

Here, Soyeon first addresses the target as a "boy," thus clarifying their target. And then, she brings out an obvious feminist message by refusing the popular cultural trope which uses a blond barbie doll to symbolize a desirable woman. Her body language also contradicts the traditionally well-behaved woman, as she is wearing a tight overall outlining her body shape while spreading her legs, an action almost too wild for a supposedly submissive and cute woman according to the K-pop stereotypes. While singing, she puts a finger into her mouth and pulls it toward one side, making an irritated face. Besides Soyeon's lavish body language, there are also many visual signs in the space such as her extravagant accessories, a huge cartoon face on her chest, and above all, numerous graffiti on the walls with words such as "queendom," "this is my attitude," and "I'll be the tomboy." The words here, together with the lyrics she sings, function as "anchorage" (Barthes 1977, 156) that "fix the floating chain of *signifieds* in such a way as to counter the terror of uncertain signs." In other words, the dazzling signs expressed through Soyeon and her surroundings all demonstrate the idea that this is an empowered woman's space and this is a strong and independent woman's attitude.

Next, another member Miyeon shows up in a hallway where there hang many posters of a missing man who is represented by a male barbie doll. As Miyeon tosses her curvy long hair while walking cheerily as if on a runway with a big and suspicious suitcase, she sings:

People say it's crazy. What's the loss to me?

Curse me brutally, you'll lose to me.

While singing the last part, Miyeon looks into the peephole on a door. Immediately, the viewers experience an interactive moment as the camera turns around and puts them in the position of being watched by Miyeon. This play of camera angle gives off a sense of mystery and repression to the viewers, who have adapted the inferior position of the man inside the door.

This scene is followed by the appearance of another member Yuqi, who is wearing an expensive fur coat while driving the sports car seen in the beginning of the MV. With the fifth member Shuhua on the passenger's seat, Yuqi sings:

Stuff like love can't make a single scratch on my body.

I'd rather not if I have to put your perfume that smells rotten.

These two lines express the attitude of the women who do not need a heterosexual romantic relationship anymore. While it is unknown if the man has really been killed, he has already been associated with the word "rotten," which is a symbolic representation of something unwanted or dead. In addition, Yuqi drives the car in a quite frantic fashion together with Shuhua, even breaking the gear lever in the end. Just like Soyeon and Miyeon, their body language is clearly showing their untroubled attitude when abandoning a man, and the lyrics they sing have further anchored such mood.

The song then enters the chorus with the key line: "Yea I'm a f-[redacted] tomboy." As a redacted sound is literally part of the song, the bad girl attitude is accentuated. In this scene, the five members convene and line up in a red studio, all wearing tight pink clothes and sporting high heels, emphasizing their thin waist and long legs. And then, the camera shifts to the outside where Yuqi and Shuhua are making sexy dance moves on the hood of the car, which is a typical symbolism with sexual connotation as the car generally represents males and masculinity in popular culture. The two women are both wearing short skirts, stretching their arms toward the sky while shaking their hips against the car. Moreover, in one scene, Yuqi lies on her back on the hood of the car, fully extending her body; and in a following scene, she lies on her stomach on the same place while swinging her legs, showing a typical girly pose of innocence. While the two women are under the spotlight and enjoying their own body and sexuality, they are nonetheless hypersexualized and becoming the target of male gaze. As Oh (2014, 57) opined, "the more visible she is, the more she is objectified and is invisible because what makes her visible is determined by male desire." However, with a postfeminist lens, it may also mean the women are claiming their victory over men by fully showcasing their happy attitude and self-determined sexuality. In this case, the MV demonstrates a contradiction that, while the female idols' messages and attitude are bold and rebellious, their submissive and girlish choreography sustains a sexist and heteronormative aesthetics. In fact, such contradiction could be detected throughout the rest of the MV.

The song then enters part two, where Soyeon stands behind a kitchen table cooking her recipe. While stretching her tongue out in a seductive way, she raps:

I don't wanna play this ping pong.

I would rather film a Tik Tok.

Your mom raised you as a prince but

this is queendom, right?

I like dancing. I love my friends.

Sometimes we swear without cigarettes.

I like to eh on drinking whiskey.

I won't change it, what the hell?

This part is surely the highlight of the song both textually and visually. Textually, Soyeon claims her and her friends' space as "queendom," and stresses a sense of sisterhood by saying "I like my friends" "sometimes we swear without cigarettes." And then, she seems to be scolding the man who did not like her behavior and wanted her to change. Visually, this part is also the most dramatic as Soyeon is cooking alone in a brightly decorated kitchen but gradually becomes brutal by putting the male barbie into a blender, as well as throwing a knife at the fridge door while declaring her "queendom." She eventually stabs a knife in a big, heart-shaped cake that sits on the table with cute biscuits and feminine pearl decorations on it. On the cake, there are also the words: "What the hell?" Here, Soyeon brazenly disarranges what would traditionally be considered a "women's space" while carrying out a domineering attitude towards a man. She also stresses her preference for a strong sisterhood over a heterosexual relationship, and that the man will not make her change. However, again, her seductive facial expressions and curvy pose on the table have also demonstrated a hint of hypersexualization.

The song then enters a similar chorus as the lyrics goes:

Say I'm pretending that I'm crazy. What's the loss to me?

Swear at me brutally, you're lost to me.

Stuff like love can't make me drop a single teardrop.

I'd rather not if I have to smile at your pointless words.

Yea, I'm a f*[redacted] Tomboy.

Yea, I'll be the Tomboy.

This is my attitude.

Yea, I'll be the Tomboy.

During this chorus, the camera first shuffles in between Shuhua and Miyeon, as the former tears apart a ticket and walks inside a theater while the latter sits on the sportscar with an intense glare while stepping on a big suitcase that is quaking. Here, the MV presents culturally specific symbolic signs: as Shuhua rips a ticket apart and Miyeon steps on a shaking suitcase, the audience gets the idea that a man has been murdered. It is also worth noting that in this scene, the camera pans to follow the two members' bodies, especially giving close-up shots of their naked thighs, which undoubtedly invites a sexualized gaze. Following this scene, the camera gives screen time to all five members as they change to tight, all-black outfits while dancing synchronically. And then, the camera shifts to Soyeon, who picks up a heart-shaped lollipop from the ground and asks:

Said you get it?

You get the song, right? You'll get what I mean "Tomboy."

Here, Soyeon decides to address “us” who are watching the MV, thus providing another interactive moment with the viewers. As the audience are suddenly given the attention and chance to think and reply, the song immediately moves to a bridge and gives “us” a shocking “revelation” of what “Tomboy” is:

Lalalala lalala lalala

It's neither man nor woman, man nor woman

Just me, (G)i-dle.

It's neither man nor woman, man nor woman

Just me, loving Tomboy

In this verse, the MV first shows a female barbie doll having a fancy dinner with the male barbie, and the latter suddenly dies of food poisoning. And then, two other female barbie dolls drive the dead body away. In the next scene, the five female barbies surround the man with one of them holding a gun, apparently signaling his fate. While the symbolism is quite obvious in this context, what is more significant is the lyrics. By saying “it's neither man nor woman,” the audience gets reminded that the (G)I-DLE members are not traditional “tomboys” who are “girls behave in a manner usually considered boyish” (Meriam-Webster); however, they are also not traditional “barbie dolls.” Even though their dresses and make-ups are not so different from other pretty and sexy K-pop female idols, the fact that they have embedded feminist messages in their appearances and actions has shifted the dynamics of power in this situation. More specifically, they are not only redefining femininity by keeping the old stereotypes while embracing new feminist texts, but also challenging the stereotypes about being a “tomboy” by stressing that it is not about dressing or acting like a boy or a girl, but being oneself.

Findings

Popular feminism and contradiction of signs: between feminism and antifeminism

In the MV of *Tomboy*, popular feminist signs could be seen in many places and are clearly placed with purposes. First of all, (G)I-DLE's sheer existence as a “girl crush” group is already a prominent popular feminist sign, as “girl crush” groups are known to be exerting untraditional K-pop styles and attitude with their music and performances while generating large followers in the popular cultural realm. Second, in the MV, owning a shiny sports-car signifies the female idols' financial power, a room full of graffiti of empowering words and messages gives off “bad girl” and “girl power” vibes. In several scenes, the members are dressed in a Western punk rock style, with dark-colored vests, miniskirts, high-heel boots, and excessive metal accessories, demonstrating their “anti-status quo disposition” (Dunn and Farnsworth 2012, 136). Another example is Soyeon's takeover and remake of the kitchen which used to be a sign of domesticity for women. As she makes a mess in the kitchen while throwing the male barbie doll into the blender and “kills” him, an obvious anti-men statement is made in a way of entertainment. As the MV is well received by the fans, these blatant signs have demonstrated that popular feminism is “accessible, even admired” (Banet-Weiser 2018, 1).

However, there is also contradiction of signs among the song's lyrics, attitudes, and certain scenes, thus exhibiting one of the defining traits of postfeminist sensibility – the coexistence and intertwinement of feminism and antifeminism. More specifically, the lyrics are highly feminist and provocative to challenge the patriarchal male dominance, including claims like “this is queendom” and “this is my attitude.” Also, the members' attitudes and facial expressions are mostly angry, unbothered, or domineering, expressing a clear anti-men sentiment. However, at the same time, the members still employ extremely feminine outfits and body languages, which could easily invite male gaze. A good example would be Yuqi's sexy dance on the sportscar. While one can hardly not relate the scene to a traditional pole dance that welcomes sexualized watch, it could also be seen as a confident showcase of her body and sexuality and her embrace of her own independence and wealth. By boldly presenting such contradiction, Yuqi is, knowingly, exhibiting her sexuality to claim her power and be a representative of the postfeminist sensibility.

Another salient contradiction is that, while Soyeon sings in the beginning of the song that “I'm not a doll,” in the end, all five of them become barbie dolls (even with one of them being blond). Although the goal of these dolls is to kill the male barbie, it is undeniable that they contradict their words by turning into sexualized signs. Nevertheless, from a postfeminist perspective, this also shows that the members are challenging the traditional connotation of barbie doll as a sexualized object for the male gaze. They, instead, decide to redefine what barbie dolls can do and thus recontextualize the sexualized signs in a particular “girl crush” context. Their action, thus, also reflects the “entanglement of feminist and antifeminist ideas” (Gill 2007, 147).

All in all, (G)I-DLE members have turned what would be considered non-feminist or antifeminist signs into their feminist advocacy. Both the five members and the five barbie dolls shift their positions from being “objects” to “subjects” and exert enormous agency in terms of disparaging and even “killing” the man; but at the same time, they do not abandon a stereotypical barbie doll image because that is part of their postfeminist identity. It is through this entanglement of objectivity and subjectivity, of feminism and antifeminism, that the audience senses pride and rebellion in (G)I-DLE's representation of themselves. While the song is bashing patriarchy through lyrics and performances, the visual signs still bring feminine pleasure that is not only agreed upon by popular culture but is also reclaimed by the female members themselves. And such entanglement and interplay of signs demonstrate a postfeminist sensibility that is filled with contradictions, but also becoming a popular form of female empowerment.

“It's neither man nor woman, just me loving Tomboy”: building a queered queendom

When (G)I-DLE repeatedly sings “it's neither man nor woman,” there are many interpretations of this provocative and groundbreaking statement. As mentioned earlier, it could mean that they challenge the definition of “tomboy” by claiming that it is neither about being like a man nor a woman; but it could also have a queered explanation that they prefer women over men. Especially when they sing “just me, loving Tomboy,” it opens alternative readings of what and who they like. The uncertain meaning of “Tomboy” in this context demonstrates a “gender ambiguity” mentioned by Oh and Oh (2017),

which shows an “Asian queer aesthetics” that “has the potential to liberate individuals and to allow alternative sexual identities, moving away from stereotypes of homosexuality embedded in Western culture” (22). As (G)I-DLE members are not explicit about the meaning of “Tomboy” and about their sexual orientation in the MV’s narrative, such “Asian queer aesthetics” is being revealed.

In addition, the sisterhood in this song is highlighted in many ways. As a girl group, (G)I-DLE naturally has group integrity based on sisterhood in their daily practice. As Zhao (2021, 1034) explained in her study of another K-pop female group Blackpink, “in all-female K-pop groups, the members have been trained together, lived together, grown up together, and experienced difficulties together since a young age. This kind of same-sex environments common in the K-pop industry further encourages queer tensions and fantasies.” In *Tomboy*, besides showing friendship and intimacy through synchronized dance moves and interactions, there is no man really interfering with the members’ relationship since the only man (represented by the male barbie doll) is always the target of their collective hatred, thus even reinforcing a womanly bond. When Soyeon sings “I like dancing. I love my friends/Sometimes we swear without cigarettes/I like to eh on drinking whiskey/I won’t change it/What the hell?” It evidently tells a story of having too close a relationship with her female friends that it made the man mad and jealous. The way Soyeon settles this conflict with the man by saying “I won’t change it” and “what the hell” while stabbing a knife into a cake function as a loud statement showing her preference for a queer relationship over a heterosexual one.

It is important to note that a “queer relationship” here does not necessarily mean a lesbian relationship, but, borrowing Gerhard (2005)’s definition, refers to “narratives, images, and plot structures that can be read as queer, whether or not the characters, actors or writers involved identified themselves as queer” (37). In this case, the sisterhood among the (G)I-DLE members could be read as queer, as it is different from a traditional, heterosexual, or homosexual relationship represented in the mass media, but an intimate one within same-sex that enables the women to individually and collectively find their voices and power through shared anger and grievances. This relationship also works in a postfeminist context to challenge the standard definition of “tomboy” and of heterosexual romance.

Moreover, this queer relationship among the members can also be validated by and extended to the fans, as Chang (2020, 75) observed,

The female fans who embrace the girl-crush concept become the enthusiastic supporters of their strong and unique sisters, who are able to criticize social problems directly and express women’s feelings about their lives, loves, and even their economic situations. They are not afraid that people might regard them as lesbians because they know their attraction to the Ssen unni is not a sexual one in terms of traditional gender norms; rather, it is a kind of admiration for successful women who have proven their abilities, talents, and determination.

Here, Chang highlighted how “girl crush” is generating a social phenomenon of sisterhood in female K-pop fandom, an inspiring and empowering one, that is not about sexual desire but about the appreciation of female abilities, courage, and talents. In this case, queerness and feminist empowerment are interlocked, demonstrating an important purpose of the song *Tomboy*: building a “queendom.”

When Tomboy becomes commercialized: the dilemma of “girl crush”

Since postfeminism came into being, there has not been an established definition of it. But no matter how unsettled the meaning is, the common ground is quite clear, that it is situated in a neoliberal and highly commercialized environment, closely associated with popular culture and young women, as well as having high media engagement and visibility (see Banet-Weiser, Gill, and Rottenberg 2020).

In this sense, (G)I-DLE’s *Tomboy* fits into the postfeminist “criteria” as it is contextualized in the K-pop industry which hails young fans within a highly commercialized and mediated environment. It also has the potential to especially influence the female population and raise awareness of self-empowerment through their bold and powerful artistic expressions. In fact, their voices have been well heard as the song performed “Perfect All-Kill”² on charts (Cho 2022), received positive reviews, and reached 43 million views a week after it was released on YouTube, and is still rising. However, whether (G)I-DLE’s success with *Tomboy* is mainly due to their feminist advocacy remains debatable. More specifically, although the feminist messages are evident in the MV, (G)I-DLE members have not openly stated that the song is a feminist statement or been vocal about its content and implications. This is likely due to marketing concerns since feminism is generally a sensitive topic in the Korean entertainment industry and in society. However, it also indicates that (G)I-DLE, under corporate scrutiny, has essentially dodged the core systematic issues discussed by feminism and continued to pursue commercial value.

This phenomenon demonstrates the limitation of “celebrity feminism,” which naturally connects with “popular feminism” (Jackson, 2020). Celebrity feminism has generally received criticism from scholars for its failure to take into account “the social, cultural, and economic roots of these inequalities in favour of the neoliberal ethos of individual action, personal responsibility, and unencumbered choice as the best strategy to produce gender equality” (Keller & Ringrose 2014, 132). While (G)I-DLE exhibits a postfeminist sensibility by knowingly sexualizing themselves as a way of empowerment and by fearlessly stating what they want, they simplify and essentialize feminist struggles faced by everyday women physically, economically, and culturally. Furthermore, while the “girl crush” groups exert their feminist voices without actually claiming it, such voices could also be commodified by the corporate agenda. According to Chidgey (2021, 2), “celebrity is the very embodiment of a marketable commodity. Within industry circuits, the celebrity sign, and the human behind it, operates as a brand capable of turning expressions, services and products into commodities, including activism.” Therefore, it is hard to tell how much “girl power” and advocacy (G)I-DLE, as well as other “girl crush” groups, really embody, i.e. are they speaking up to empower all women under the patriarchal and misogynist repression, or are they speaking up for a corporate branding of being a “cool feminist” in society?

Situated in a patriarchal and neoliberal context, (G)I-DLE members’ sexual attractiveness may still play a main part in the song’s popularity, and their feminist intention may boil down to a celebrity feminism that lacks the power to affect the everyday feminist struggles. Thus, it remains unclear if (G)I-DLE’s success with *Tomboy* could equal the success of feminism. In fact, as a corporate product, they may not have to be the representatives of and advocates for feminism in order to be successful. Their accomplishment is an embodiment of many elements, including feminist and antifeminist ones. Thus,

Tomboy truly demonstrates a postfeminist dilemma as it is an entanglement of feminism and antifeminism, self-empowerment and self-sexualization, as well as social recognition and denial. Finally, as for celebrities under corporate control, their feminist voices cannot entirely be authentic, since much corporate agenda could be played into their representation. As a result, they have to downplay the actual feminist messages in public in order to maintain an equilibrium regarding gender in the K-pop industry.

Conclusion

This study applies a postfeminist lens to conduct a case study of a highly acclaimed “girl crush” MV *Tomboy* by (G)I-DLE to deconstruct and decipher its meaning and implication. The findings are three-fold: first, the MV of *Tomboy* has shown a postfeminist sensibility by exhibiting an entanglement of feminist and antifeminist signs; second, by focusing on women’s collective empowerment and sisterhood, *Tomboy* signals the intertextuality between feminism and queerness, highlighting the power achieved through sisterhood that is also validated by the fans; third, while *Tomboy* has carried out empowering messages for women, the fact that it is situated in a highly commercialized K-pop industry has also brought about the drawbacks of celebrity feminism. As a result, there may be a gap between (G)I-DLE’s provocative expressions and their actual feminist advocacy. In this case, a postfeminist sensibility is further revealed as it remains unknown how powerful or effective “girl crush” really is to the everyday practice of feminism in Korean society. Against a neoliberal backdrop and with the inevitable corporate interest in the K-pop industry, whether “girl crush” is empowering those who need to be lifted or empowering a branded womanhood remains questionable.

Moreover, since (G)I-DLE and other “girl crush” groups are still in a corporate system, they are unlikely to become the leaders of social change but perform to reinforce certain gendered images. While they have the agency to create lyrics and rhythms to make a feminist statement, the corporate agenda and social pressure may still restrain them in a traditional, stereotypical representation. As a result, their feminist voices are likely to be lower than their market values and influence, and their concept of “girl crush” is further being commercialized and commodified, becoming a marketable label more than an advocacy.

This article does not mean to disqualify the effort by (G)I-DLE and other “girl crush” groups, but hopes to initiate a discursive field for the feminist nature of “girl crush” in general. Further studies could continue to pursue the meaning and significance of “girl crush,” as well as analyzing how women in K-pop are struggling to make an authentic feminist voice.

Notes

1. The song has both Korean and English lyrics in it. This study uses the official English translation posted on (G)I-DLE’s YouTube channel.
2. Perfect All-Kill (Korean: 퍼펙트 올킬) or PAK is a music chart achievement in South Korea when a song simultaneously reaches number one on the real-time, daily, and weekly components of iChart, a music chart ranking aggregator operated by Instiz.

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