"GIRL CRUSH" IS CROSSING BORDERS

Chinese Women K-pop Fans' Perspectives on the Increasing

Integration of Feminist Messages in K-pop

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ABSTRACT

K-pop has attracted countless attention as a global cultural product. In recent years, a new genre has emerged in K-pop called the "girl crush", which attempts to empower women and challenge patriarchy and gender stereotypes by presenting a confident, independent and powerful female image. Considering the importance of examining the impact and validity of this genre and shifting the perspective to transnational fans, this study aims to explore how Chinese women K-pop fans understand and perceive the "girl crush" genre, especially its role in female empowerment and challenging gender stereotypes. Through in-depth semi-structured interviews with 9 participants, the findings of this study indicate that Chinese women K-pop fans understand the "girl crush" genre in terms of three main elements: new trends, inspiring songs and lyrics, and bold and diverse visual changes. In the aspect of female empowerment and challenging gender stereotypes, although some Chinese women fans believe that the "girl crush" genre can challenge stereotypes and bring a sense of empowerment to a certain extent, most participants demonstrate postfeminist critical thinking, suggesting that the "girl crush" genre in the K-pop industry may be just a superficial phenomenon and more of a marketing strategy to generate profit. Moreover, this study found that Chinese women fans show a participatory interaction with the "girl crush" genre, actively discussing and engaging in it through social media. However, cultural backgrounds and language barriers may affect their understanding of the genre. Finally, some participants suggest that the "girl crush" genre may be more relevant to Chinese fans through localised marketing and the representation of consistent performances and concepts.

INTRODUCTION

Since the 1990s, Korean popular music (hereafter K-pop) has gradually become one of the most important popular products within South Korea (hereafter Korea) and abroad (Jin, 2016). K-pop can be generally understood as a hybrid cultural product, and it is also a comprehensive art form that integrates music, performance, fashion and storytelling (Choi & Maliangkay, 2015). With the sophisticated production and booming development of K-pop, its diverse styles, catchy songs, and impactful visual elements have attracted numerous fans around the world (Oh & Lee, 2014). Although K-pop has evolved to become a vital part of the transnational cultural flows, it has been criticised as a highly gendered industry, which has received attention and criticism from scholars. Specifically, the gendered issues of the K-pop industry are reflected in the way that female idols in the industry are governed and constructed under neoliberal ideologies to maximise economic profits (Kim, 2011). On the other aspect, patriarchy plays an essential role in the production and promotion of girl groups in the K-pop industry, manipulating the femininity of young female idols to meet the role expectations prescribed by the male-dominated society (Venters & Rothenberg, 2022).

Against this background, the "girl crush" genre has emerged under the growing feminist and postfeminist movements in Korea and globally, subverting existing K-pop norms (Li, 2022). This new genre rethinks previous representations of femininity and ways of engaging with female audiences (Dans, 2018), empowering women and challenging patriarchy by incorporating feminist messages into the songs, dances, costumes and music videos of K-pop works (Lin & Rudolf, 2017). However, the "girl crush" has also been critically questioned as conveying empowering messages in an ostensible sense, while its essence may be a marketing strategy and commodification process that conforms to trends and meets diverse needs (Sun et al., 2023). As more and more girl groups adopt the concept of "girl crush", this seemingly feminist-driven genre has become a strong component of K-pop (Li, 2022). Therefore, it becomes even more crucial to examine the possible influence and effectiveness of the "girl crush" genre.

This study aims to explore the understanding and perceptions of Chinese women K-pop fans on the "girl crush" genre, especially the role of this genre in empowering women and challenging gender stereotypes. Most existing studies on the "girl crush" genre focus on the neoliberal agenda related to commercialisation and commodification, neglecting K-pop as a transnational culture and its

transnational fans' perceptions and engagement of this new genre. However, as Cho (2023) argues, the evolving genres and characteristics of K-pop carry distinct meanings across local, regional, and global contexts. Therefore, it is necessary to shift the perspective to K-pop fans in different cultural contexts, especially when exploring the understanding and implications of feminist topics.

Accordingly, this dissertation covers three main chapters. First, the theoretical chapter contains a critical literature review, a conceptual framework that provides insights into the study, and a detailed explanation of the research objective and research question. Second, the methodology of the qualitative semi-structured interviews specific to this study, as well as the ethical issues that the study may involve, will be illustrated in the methods chapter. Finally, findings that respond to the research question will be presented and discussed, including Chinese women fans' understanding of the "girl crush" genre, as well as different critical perspectives and interpretations of this genre in empowering women and challenging gender stereotypes. Besides, more attitudes and richer perspectives from Chinese women fans towards the "girl crush" genre in a transnational context will also be explained.

THEORETICAL CHAPTER

This study explores Chinese women fans' perceptions of the increasing integration of feminist messages into K-pop works, especially the "girl crush" genre and its implications. Accordingly, this chapter will critically review and summarise the existing literature to establish the research background. Following this, key concepts relevant to the study, including feminism, postfeminism, and transnational culture, will be explained and demonstrated as a conceptual framework. Finally, the detailed research aims and research questions of this study will be presented.

Literature Review

K-pop as a Global Popular Culture

K-pop has gradually penetrated into various aspects of the world's popular culture and has brought significant global impact. This landscape can be traced back to the rise of the "Korean Wave" (or "Hallyu"), which originated in Korea in the late 1990s and first gained recognition in East Asia (Jin, 2016; Cho, 2023). This trend has further evolved into the "New Korean Wave" (or "Hallyu" 2.0), benefiting from the development of a range of global media and digital industries as well as the convergence with cultural content. In the late 2010s, the "New Korean Wave" achieved a

transformation from a regional phenomenon to a global phenomenon and brought hundreds of millions of dollars to Korea from music export revenue (Lin & Rudolf, 2017; Huang et al., 2017). In this context, the music industry in Korea is driven by the internal factors of political democratisation, economic development, the abolition of military censorship, and the industrialisation process (Kang, 2017; Oh & Lee, 2014), and is also influenced by Western styles and demonstrates a high degree of cultural hybridity (Epstein & Turnbull, 2014; Jin & Ryoo, 2014; Yoon, 2018). Therefore, K-pop has gradually become a significant trend in today's global popular culture.

With the global popularity of K-pop, some scholars have critically suggested that the K-pop industry has the characteristics of commercialisation and commodification and is often used as a tool of soft power diplomacy. For example, Fairchild (2007) discussed that idols in K-pop are primarily based on carefully constructed consumer relationships. More importantly, Kim (2019) discusses K-pop as a commercial strategy that aims to attract global consumption and increase profits in the marketplace through stylisation, commodification and packaging. In line with this, Venters and Rothenberg (2022) argue that the development of K-pop coincides with the neoliberal agenda merging with Korea's economic ambitions. Moreover, K-pop, as an important cultural product, may also be used to promote South Korea's soft power on a global scale. As Kim (2016) illustrates, the global popularity of K-pop not only further enriches Korea's cultural status but also supports its broader diplomatic and economic goals by creating a positive international perception. Therefore, on the basis of considering K-pop as a cultural product, it should also be taken into account that it is transnational and hybrid in nature and is likely to have wide-ranging impacts in conjunction with its economic and diplomatic purposes.

K-pop as a "Girl Industry" under Neoliberal Ideology and Patriarchal Structure

Drawing upon the global influence and development of K-pop, the complex structures and mechanisms of the industry have been widely criticised for the commercialisation and non-autonomy faced by female idols within the industry. For instance, Kim (2011) explores how K-pop, as a "girl industry", is largely shaped and driven by neoliberal strategies. Specifically, neoliberalism is a practice that introduces market-driven economic policies and permeates discourses on commodification, profit, and capital accumulation in different aspects of life (Harvey, 2006). In this context, neoliberal strategies in K-pop refer to prioritising economic gains over personal well-being within the industry (Kim, 2011; Venters & Rothenberg, 2022). For Korean idols, especially female idols,

this is primarily manifested in the way professional entertainment agencies carefully select, train, and present them as targeted cultural content, creating a series of derivative commodities and economic profits (Kim, 2011).

During this process, K-pop female idols are often subjected to control and constraint by male managers and agency executives (Venters & Rothenberg, 2022). In line with this, Venters and Rothenberg (2022) also discuss that K-pop female idols experience patriarchal and even abusive management practices that are prevalent in the industry. This is because not only are the image representations of these young women often regulated by strict aesthetic standards, but the ideologies they embody as carriers are also governed through competition, strategic training, management, and self-reinvention (Kim, 2011). This echoes the definition of patriarchy as "a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women" (Walby, 1990: 20) and in which men generally have higher power and economic privileges in vital institutions (Eistenstein, 1979). Therefore, as Kang (2017), Venters and Rothenberg (2022) criticise in their research, under the regime of neoliberal strategies and patriarchal structures, female idols are largely lacking in autonomy and are oppressed to a certain extent, resembling consumable products more than autonomous individuals.

Gender Stereotypes and Female Empowerment in K-pop

In the context of neoliberal strategies and patriarchal structures, K-pop is considered to be a highly gendered and sexualised industry (Li, 2022), encountering discussions about gender stereotypes related to the images of female idols (Brassier, 2023). Specifically, many mainstream K-pop female idols have been actively cultivated as beautiful, demure, cute and well-educated femininity and image (Lin & Rudolf, 2017; Oh, 2014; Yoon, 2019). Similarly, Kim (2019) summarises that the K-pop industry mixes the image of women from cute and innocent to ambiguous femininity to sexy traits. Oh (2023: 55) describes this phenomenon as setting "gender prototypes". In this process, female idols encounter the male gaze of a patriarchal society (Mulvey, 1975) and are subject to standardised scrutiny (Li, 2022). Moreover, many K-pop girl groups are likely to display different femininity qualities according to specific gender, generational and cultural groups (Kim, 2011). For example, Wonder Girls displays sexy features for adult male fans, and Girls' Generation displays cute images for different generations of male fans in Japan (Kim, 2011). In response to this phenomenon, Lin & Rudolf (2017) indicate that K-pop will, to some extent, perpetuate and reinforce gender stereotypes

as it portrays female idols as more sexualised and objectified and has a potential impact on women fans' gender attitudes.

However, a few studies interpret this phenomenon critically, arguing that K-pop can potentially empower women and challenge traditional gender norms. For example, Lin and Rudolf (2017) recognise that K-pop female idols may bring a sense of empowerment because their images and performances promote freer expression of women in society. In addition, Lee's (2013) research demonstrates that K-pop fan communities can provide women fans with opportunities to discuss gender and connect with people with similar experiences. Similarly, Oh & Kim's (2018) study further supports this idea and analyses that K-pop fandom can support fans' self-expression and challenge gender stereotypes, recognising the potential of empowering women through K-pop. Taken together, K-pop is increasingly being scrutinised by international and local audiences with different feminist backgrounds and consciousnesses, and to a certain extent, has sparked different discussions on feminist issues.

The "Girl Crush" Genre

As topics about feminism are increasingly discussed in mainstream media discourse around the world, the feminist movement in Korea is also gaining momentum (Li, 2022; Sun et al., 2023). Against this background, the K-pop industry has rethought previous representations of femininity and ways of engaging female audiences (Dans, 2018), proposing a new genre that subverts existing K-pop norms: "girl crush". Specifically, the "girl crush" genre attempts to present a confident, independent, sexy, but powerful female image (Sun et al., 2023), which is similar to the "girl power" in the Western context (Chang, 2020: 75). In line with this, the "girl crush" genre also seeks to show the autonomy and subjectivity of female idols through bold and edgy music lyrics, "masculinised" clothing, hairstyles and attitudes (Sun et al., 2023: 4157). For example, TripleS's *Girls Never Die*, with lines like "I will not give up", coupled with powerful and bold choreography and performances, exemplifies how the "girl crush" is challenging the previous representations of femininity in K-pop.

Regarding the "girl crush" genre, two existing researches have largely informed this study and laid a research foundation. Firstly, Li's (2022) study employs a social semiotic method to conduct a detailed analysis of (G)I-DLE's *Tomboy*, one of the representative works of the "girl crush" genre and explores the extent to which this work can convey a message of empowerment for women, from both a

postfeminist and a popular feminist perspective. To be more specific, Li (2022) critically exposes the discrepancy between feminist expression and actual feminist advocacy in a highly commercialised industry such as K-pop, and the impact of this genre on the daily practice of feminism in Korean society needs to be considered. More importantly, the "girl crush" genre has become a marketable label in the process of commercialisation and commodification under the neoliberal system, which means that it may be unlikely to lead to any social change but instead perform to reinforce certain specific gender images (Li, 2022). In this context, the controversial aspect of postfeminism may need to be noted, as these business strategies can be considered as a re-masculinisation of culture (Jones, 2000) and may easily align with business interests, framing feminist messages as a means to empower consumers in the marketplace (Murray, 2013). In other words, whilst works within the "girl crush" genre express feminist perspectives, they may be situated within an industry system that still confines them to traditional stereotypes or as a profit-driven marketing tool.

Secondly, the study by Sun et al. (2023) employs critical discourse analysis to explore from a postfeminist perspective how the empowering trends within the "girl crush" genre interact with K-pop fans' perceptions of feminism. This study interprets that the "girl crush" is characterised by the interplay between capital, gender power relations and the spread of female consciousness, where female idols usually do not have the power to choose (Sun et al., 2023). Therefore, although the "girl crush" genre conveys a confident, empowering feminist attitude that challenges stereotypical and traditional gender norms, it remains a performative form of female empowerment.

Sun et al.'s (2023) findings also resonate with Li's (2022) study, demonstrating K-pop as an industry with deep-rooted gender issues. Whether the advocacy of feminism is accurately conveyed and whether women are indeed being empowered cannot be answered affirmatively, but instead is more of a pseudo-feminism. Moreover, although both studies have illustrated to a certain extent that the "girl crush" genre may convey some feminist messages, they are more critical of this as a commodified interaction under neoliberal ideology and a marketing strategy to meet diverse needs and further seek market value.

K-pop Fandom and Fans' Perceptions Towards the "Girl Crush" Genre

K-pop fans have spread across the globe, and its carefully choreographed melodies, lyrics, and uniquely designed visual elements have received a viral response from numerous fans (Cho, 2023;

Oh & Lee, 2014). Besides, as fans support K-pop idols by purchasing records, attending live concerts, and actively discussing a variety of topics, the practice of transnational fan communities in social media has emerged (Maros & Abdul Basek, 2022). In line with this, digital technology and various social media have brought associated participatory culture and allow fans to build online communities that can control themselves, namely K-pop fandom (Maros & Abdul Basek, 2022). Um et al. (2014) discussed the uniqueness of K-pop fandom, which is that fans from different nationalities, ages, and genders regard the entire fandom as one big family. As Jenkins (2006) points out, in today's global convergence, fans do not just hope for interpretive appreciation but a whole world where they can immerse themselves, perform and reproduce the norms and practices embodied by idols. Therefore, K-pop fandom demonstrates a global integration of fans, as well as active participation and practice in related topics.

When considering topics related to feminism in K-pop, as mentioned earlier, K-pop's fan communities primarily provide opportunities for women fans to discuss gendered topics and help interact with different K-pop fans to cultivate a sense of belonging, improve self-esteem, and inspire positive emotions among fans (Lee, 2013; Laffan, 2021). Moreover, some studies have provided evidence of how K-pop fan communities provide a platform to challenge traditional gender norms (Oh & Kim, 2018). Therefore, as discussed by Brassier (2023), fan groups, especially women fans, are not only consumers of K-pop but also significant content co-creators.

Focusing on the "girl crush" genre, a few studies illustrate that some fans have recognised the collective feminist empowerment and strength gained through sisterhood conveyed by the works of this genre (Li, 2022; Lin & Rudolf, 2017). However, Sun et al. (2023) point out that the K-pop fan communities have turned to more conscious feminist dialogues and criticisms, revealing the superficiality of its empowerment meanings and realising that the "girl crush" genre is likely to be a pseudo-feminist marketing strategy. Furthermore, some fans are concerned about the "girl crush" genre as a mainstream form of female empowerment in K-pop, indicating that this form of empowerment is not a resistance to the male gaze or patriarchal structure. Instead, they reject traditional expressions of identity and see the "girl crush" genre as a subtle reinforcement (Sun et al., 2023). This implies the critical attitude of K-pop fans towards the "girl crush" genre and their feminist consciousness.

Conceptual Framework

In the literature review section, a critical examination of existing research illustrates how K-pop, as a global pop culture phenomenon, intertwines neoliberal strategies and patriarchal structures with feminist narratives. In line with this, the "girl crush" genre is revealed as a marketing strategy for the ostensible empowerment of women. These reviews underpin the background of this study and inform the gaps in the research content. Besides, this study also requires a clear conceptual framework to introduce and illustrate the key concepts underpinning the research question and findings. Specifically, feminism, postfeminism and transnational culture are identified as the basic conceptual frameworks for this study.

First, feminism continues to evolve as a critical theoretical model that focuses on equality between the two genders (Disch & Hawkesworth, 2015). According to Hooks (2000), feminism can be considered a movement to end gender oppression, bring social justice to all women, and consider the interconnectedness of gender, race, and class oppression. Besides, the concept of intersectionality proposed by Crenshaw (1989) explicitly recognises the mutual construction of social divisions and identities, providing a concept for understanding the inseparability between different social inequalities. Therefore, in this context, feminism provides a critical lens for this study to help understand the dilemmas and empowerment issues faced by female idols in K-pop with different degrees of sexism and stereotypes and the different oppressions and powers they intersect and mutually reinforcing. In addition to this, as Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer (2017) discuss, while feminism has always been a helpful perspective for understanding popular culture, feminism itself has undeniably become a popular culture. This helps to understand whether K-pop's increasing "girl crush" themes are driven by feminism or is a consideration of catering to popular trends.

Secondly, it is also crucial to apply postfeminism to guide this study. Compared with feminism, postfeminism further emphasises the influence of neoliberalism and popular culture (Banet-Weiser, 2004; Nash & Grant, 2015) and is closely linked to the concept of choice in consumerism (Gill, 2008). Besides, Gill (2007) suggests that postfeminism is best characterised as an element of sensibility, providing a framework for understanding how contemporary media channels and negotiates feminist thought. In this context, postfeminism is closely related to consumer culture and mass media, which can be used to analyse contemporary cultural products. In addition, Banet-Weiser (2018) discusses postfeminist practices and commodities as an emerging culture realised in popular trends

and commercial media, evolving into a set of political and cultural discourses. This explains how the "girl crush" genre adopts symbolic vocabulary such as independence, empowerment and autonomy to aspire to and praise female power, becoming a popular trend under neoliberalism and integrating it into various media, commodities and consumer interactions.

More importantly, the conceptual framework of this study will also refer to the aspect of "postfeminism as transnational culture" proposed by Dsekun (2015: 960). Dsekun (2015) highlights that postfeminism is not only aimed at the Western world, but should be understood as a transnational culture to better explain the impact of this culture on women in different parts of the world. In this new conceptual perspective, "transnational" refers not only to the spread and flow of culture, practices and subjectivities beyond and across the boundaries of nation-states and regions but also to a transnational critical thinking mode (Dsekun, 2015: 965). For this study, K-pop has crossed various geographical and cultural boundaries, setting an example of transnational cultural mobility, and the "girl crush" has emerged as a new postfeminist expression within K-pop, characterised by rich mediatisation, commodification, and consumerism. The conceptual framework of "postfeminism as transnational culture" will help to understand how fans from different cultural backgrounds critically view the genre's acceptance and the dynamics of women's empowerment, as well as to better interpret the complexity of K-pop as a global cultural phenomenon.

Research Aim and Research Question

Based on the above literature review and conceptual framework, this study identifies several research gaps that need to be fully explored. Firstly, existing research has mainly focused on the global dissemination, commercialisation and commodification of K-pop, as well as the dilemmas of oppression and non-autonomy faced by female idols within the industry. Additionally, existing studies have contributed to the exploration of how the "girl crush" genre redefines and reimagines femininity in K-pop, the online acceptance of the concept by Korean fans, and female empowerment. Nevertheless, these studies are mainly confined to the Korean context and rarely involve the representation of the "girl crush" genre and fans' perceptions in other cultural contexts. As Cho (2023) discusses, the evolving genres and characteristics of K-pop have different meanings in local, regional and global contexts. Similarly, Sun et al. (2023) suggest that the topics related to K-pop and feminism have usually been examined from the perspective of production and the neoliberal service economy, and there has been a lack of research that has shifted the focus to how transnational fans of K-pop

perceive and deal with the "girl crush" genre and how they interact with the trend of female empowerment. Secondly, for Chinese fans, existing research on this group and K-pop mainly focuses on topics such as patriotism and transnational cultural consumption because they may face pressure from patriotic trials (Xia, 2021) as well as different role conflicts caused by China's responses to the "Korean Wave Ban" policy (Gong, 2022). Finally, it is meaningful to focus on women K-pop fans because they are not only consumers in K-pop, but also important content creators (Brassier, 2023). Therefore, this study aims to explore Chinese women fans' understandings, perceptions, and implications of the "girl crush" genre in K-pop, as well as the associated gender stereotyping and female empowerment issues. This study concludes with the following research question:

> • How do Chinese women K-pop fans understand and perceive the "girl crush" genre, especially its role in empowerment and challenging gender stereotypes?

This study plans to conduct in-depth interviews with Chinese women K-pop fans to obtain their perceptions and feelings about the "girl crush" genre, aiming to fill the gaps in previous research through a new transnational perspective and to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the transnational dissemination of the concept and its impact on fans.

METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

This chapter aims to illustrate the methodology of this study, including the rationale that guided my data collection through qualitative semi-structured interviews, as well as the design for the purposive sampling strategy, interview schedule, and thematic analysis. Finally, this chapter examines the ethical issues that may be involved in the research and the reflexivity of the researcher.

Methodological Rationale

This study adopted a qualitative research method, specifically the semi-structured interviews, to obtain the participants' perceptions and interpretations of the "girl crush" genre and their feelings, attitudes and experiences. Compared to quantitative methods, qualitative methods are more effective in exploring complex phenomena, allowing the researcher to gain insights into participants' experiences, perceptions, and accompanying meanings in a natural setting (Denzin, 2008; Bryman, 2008). Besides, qualitative research has the potential to provide in-depth and rich empirical evidence

(Agius, 2013), as well as a more flexible, descriptive, inductive, and contextual framework (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

In this context, I employed a quantitative method of individual semi-structured interviews. I identified the strengths of this approach that could provide for this study, including flexibility, depth, and relationship-building with participants. To be more specific, semi-structured interviews allow researchers to take a flexible approach to reformulating and reframing the questions based on conversations and the understanding and responses of different participants (Fielding & Thomas, 2016). Accordingly, I had the opportunity to utilise more flexible phrasing (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) and to incorporate different open-ended and theory-driven questions to help adapt to the research aims (Galletta & Cross, 2013). During this process, participants also had more opportunities to expand on their ideas. They also had the chance to clarify their doubts and misunderstandings about the questions (Seidman, 2006). This conversational state encourages participants to express their insights and experiences more accurately and deeply, as well as free narratives and richer perspectives on the topic (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018; Wengraf, 2001). These advantages facilitated a comfortable relationship with my participants (Kallio et al., 2016). In addition, this study chose individual interviews instead of focused group interviews because it can avoid the influence of other respondents' opinions and forced self-disclosure (Silverman, 2019), providing participants with a more private and relaxed space. Finally, the individual semi-structured interviews for this study were conducted on Tencent Meeting, as this is the online meeting software that Chinese participants were most likely to use, avoiding potential inconveniences.

Research Design

Sampling Strategy

This study used purposive sampling, and the strategy was informed and improved from the pilot study. Purposive sampling is a method with predetermined criteria that aims to randomly select sampling units from the population with the most information about the characteristics of interest (Guest et al., 2006). This means that purposive sampling has the potential to identify participants who are most likely to contribute relevant and helpful information (Kelly, 2010). For this study, I targeted a sample size of 10 participants and set three conditions that participants needed to meet, including being a Chinese K-pop fan, self-identifying as a woman, and knowing the "girl crush" genre. Given

the study's aims and the research questions, participants who meet these three conditions will be more likely to hold different and meaningful views on the themes and issues discussed (Campbell et al., 2020; Robinson, 2014). Besides, compared to the pilot study, knowing the "girl crush" genre was a new condition I added to this study because it helped to focus more accurately on a specific target group.

To achieve this sample selection, I first edited the recruitment and invitation information, which included the research aims, an overview of the topic, a specific profile of the recruitment object, and a detailed interview format. Then, I posted the recruitment information on Xiaohongshu (RED), an emerging Chinese social media platform similar to Instagram, which had over 300 million users in 2019 (Shen et al., 2023). When posting the recruitment information, I also included K-pop-related hashtags, which helped me use the social media algorithm to recommend my post to more potentially interested fans. This strategy was also improved from the use of WeChat group chats for recruitment in the pilot study, as fans are generally more active on social media rather than communication software. At the same time, I am also aware of the possible shortcomings associated with this sampling approach, including that recruiting participants via specific social media platforms may lead to a degree of bias between the views of fans willing to actively participate in the study and those of the wider fandom. Finally, I successfully recruited 10 participants, but due to an unforeseen circumstance where a subsequent participant was unable to participate in the interview, the final study included contributions from 9 participants, as detailed in the participant profiles (Appendix I).

Interview Schedule

Designing an interview schedule is a crucial step before conducting individual semi-structured interviews, and it usually contains a set of questions to be explored (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). I planned each interview to last between 30-60 minutes and divided the questions into three segments, taking into account the way of constructing an interview schedule as guided by Galletta and Cross (2013). The first segment was the opening, in which I briefly introduced the purpose of the study, ensuring that the participants were aware of their rights and briefly posed several questions related to the topic that guided participants into the study and created a narrative space for the participants' experiences (Galletta & Cross, 2013). Then, more specific questions were asked in the second segment to explore the complexity of the topic. In the last segment, I asked the participants if they had any questions or anything to add, providing them with a space to form final thoughts (Galletta & Cross,

2013), and ended by thanking them for their contribution to the study. Throughout the process, each interview question was linked to the research aims and questions and was arranged in the appropriate part of the interview, reflecting the intentional progress of in-depth exploration (Galletta & Cross, 2013). To better achieve this goal, I revised some of the questions that I felt were too open in the pilot study and supplemented them with meaningful follow-up questions and prompts. Moreover, I also recorded some key points of the interviewees' responses with pen and paper during the interview process to ensure a coherent progression and in-depth exploration. The full interview schedule is provided in Appendix II.

Thematic Analysis

This study employed a thematic analysis to process and analyse the information gathered from the semi-structured interviews. As a flexible approach, thematic analysis is suitable for exploring complex social phenomena and experiences and is widely used to identify, analyse and report patterns or themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In other words, thematic analysis has the potential to process diverse information and is applicable to different complex research questions and theoretical frameworks. As this study aims to gain insights into Chinese women K-pop fans' perceptions of the "girl crush" genre, thematic analysis provides a suitable framework for understanding and deconstructing these diverse and complex perspectives. On this basis, thematic analysis supported me in combining deductive and inductive approaches, guiding my deductive analysis of the information in this study based on existing feminist and post-feminist conceptual frameworks while also being able to generalise new themes and insights from the interviews (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006; King, 2004), demonstrating different meaningful clusters (Scharp & Sanders, 2018). Before conducting the analysis, I performed the transcription and translation steps, preserving some non-lexical discourse, pauses and participants' intonation through different punctuation and brackets (Bailey, 2008) and then translating the Mandarin Chinese transcripts into English. After this, this study followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six stages of thematic analysis, which involve familiarisation, coding, theme generation, theme review, themes defining and naming, and writing up. The detailed thematic analysis grid for this study has been provided in Appendix III, including themes, sub-themes, and quotations used to elaborate on the themes.

Ethics and Reflexivity

Throughout the research process, I strictly adhered to the approved ethical guidelines and respected everyone who participated in or came into contact with this study (Bell & Waters, 2018). Specifically, I provided the participants with an informed consent sheet and obtained their signatures two weeks before the interviews. Besides, the interview schedule I prepared tried to avoid leading questions and repeatedly revised the sensitive wording that could be involved regarding the topic of gender. At the beginning of each interview, I ensured that the participants understood that they had the right to refuse to answer any questions they did not want to answer, and they could withdraw from the interview at any stage if they felt uncomfortable. In addition, throughout the research process, I ensured confidentiality and anonymity (Wiles et al., 2008), including not discussing the information provided by the participants with others, as well as ensuring that each participant was not identifiable in any way and was also anonymised for interpretations in the research findings. In line with this, the full transcripts of the interviews are not included in this dissertation because the participants mentioned some personal information and background that could be identified. Moreover, all data are securely stored in LSE OneDrive and will be deleted once the dissertation result is released.

In addition, reflexivity requires researchers to be vigilant and anticipate how research methods and ethics may be compromised (Galletta & Cross, 2013). I am aware that my own behaviours, assumptions, and personality may have influenced the context and meaning of the study, especially when I shared a common identity with the participants to a certain extent, as I also defined myself as a Chinese woman K-pop fan. Whilst this shared identity may have supported me in interacting more naturally and intimately with the participants, particularly in gaining a better insight into and understanding of the participants' perceptions and interpretations (Bonner & Tolhurst, 2002; Berger, 2013), as an "insider", I need to be cautious about the possibility that this factor may lead to a potential loss of credibility and reliability in subsequent research. For example, I may have had biases in translating the participants' interview transcripts (Choi et al., 2012) and the involvement of subjectivity during the interview process and theme extraction process. However, especially in research with feminism, it is essential to assert objectivity and value neutrality (Dinçer, 2019). Therefore, I always remain vigilant and reflexive during the research process, avoiding projecting my own experience and simply using some common identities as a lens to observe and understand the participants' experiences.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the findings obtained from semi-structured interviews in response to the research questions. Specifically, this study applies both deductive and inductive thematic analysis to first develop a general understanding and description of Chinese women fans' perceptions of the "girl crush" genre. Then, this chapter analyses the different critical perspectives and interpretations of Chinese women fans on "girl crush" in female empowerment and challenging gender stereotypes. Finally, different attitudes and possible implications of the "girl crush" genre on Chinese women fans in a transnational cultural context are also demonstrated and explained. During the analysis, direct quotes from participants will be used to support these findings. The relevant literature and existing research reviewed in the theoretical chapter will also be discussed to provide a critical and analytical interpretation of these findings.

Understanding of the "Girl Crush" Genre

A New Trend in K-pop

According to the interviews, when Chinese women fans were asked how they understand the "girl crush" genre, many of them first pointed out that it is a genre that has been rapidly gaining popularity in K-pop in recent years. Besides, participants indicated that many girl groups have adopted this genre as their main style of expression or are moving towards this trend. For example:

> This genre is still pretty popular nowadays, and many audiences love it, especially women[...]
> I feel like they may be attracted by the transformation of girl groups, or it may also be related
> to the rise of the feminist wave in society in recent years [...] (Participant 2)
> [...] I feel like many girl groups are adopting the "girl crush" concept as a theme, such as
> BLACKPINK and (G)I-DLE, and it feels like it is their signature style [...] It has totally been a
> mainstream trend these years. (Participant 7)

These quotes echo what Sun et al. (2023) highlight that the "girl crush" genre is a new and powerful trend. More importantly, the participants' responses suggest that the "girl crush" genre is also well-known and influential among Chinese women fans, and these fans have thought about the driving factors behind the rise of this genre. For example, Participant 2's perspective is similar to that mentioned by Dans (2018), which indicates that K-pop, as a cultural industry with a wide global reach,

has gradually noticed the spread of feminism in mainstream media discourse around the world, and therefore rethought the style of female idols and the ways in which female audiences can participate.

Inspirational Songs and Lyrics

In addition to proposing the "girl crush" genre as one of the new mainstream trends in K-pop, almost all participants indicated that one of their most profound impressions of this genre is the inspirational songs and lyrics that advocate independence and strength:

> *I was deeply impressed by a rap from Jennie in BLACKPINK's early work Playing with Fire. The lyrics made me feel that women are independent and can be strong individuals without relying on men... That's probably the concept that comes across [...] I think the reason why "girl crush" attracts me is that its lyrics always promote women to be more self-reliant, and encourage girls to be confident and self-loving [...] (Participant 4)*

> *When I came across some K-pop groups in the "girl crush" genre, I felt that their songs probably had a few distinctive features. First, the rhythm is relatively strong, especially the drum beats, and second, there will be some rap in the songs. Finally, the content of the lyrics always shows a particularly distinctive personality, such as calling on girls to become their own heroines [...] (Participant 6)*

These responses coincide with the example in Kim's (2011) study, where the girl group 2NE1 used their lyrics to call for women fans to become strong and independent. Besides, such carefully choreographed song beats, melodies, and lyrics can easily elicit a viral response from fans, attracting a large number of girls in their teens to early twenties (Kim, 2011; Oh & Lee, 2014). Similarly, Li (2022) also demonstrates that the "girl crush" genre usually highlights women's autonomy and subjectivity through gorgeous lyrics. In this study, the participants' responses and descriptions imply that inspirational songs are one of the distinctive features of the "girl crush" genre in their understanding, and some feminist messages conveyed by these lyrics may also attract them.

Bold and Diverse Visual Changes

Based on the previous findings of inspirational songs and lyrics, this study also found that Chinese women fans' understanding of the "girl crush" genre is also related to its bold and increasingly diverse visual changes, which are mainly reflected in the makeup, dress, and dance styles of girl groups:

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> *Many girl groups in the past were not quite the same as they are now... Especially in the second[1] and third[2] generations, they used to be more innocent and cute, but since "girl crush" became popular, a lot of groups have gone for a cool, tomboyish, or a bit aggressive look in their clothing and makeup. To be honest, I feel that the innocent style may attract more male fans, but the "girl crush" style seems to attract more women fans to these groups. (Participant 1)*

> *I would say the girl groups are more diverse nowadays. Especially those in "girl crush" style, their sense of power is stronger and bolder, both in terms of their dance styles and makeup. The visual impact is greater, and I can also feel that the kind of female power they convey is also strong [...] (Participant 9)*

According to the responses, participants express that the style displayed by girl groups under the "girl crush" genre is different from the past, especially in conveying feminist messages through a shift from innocent and cute to bold and diverse. This reflects that for Chinese women fans, the "girl crush" genre brings a transformation from submissive to powerful for K-pop girl groups (Chang, 2020). Moreover, the responses from participants mirror that the "girl crush" genre goes beyond the traditional ultra-feminine and sexualised concepts of K-pop, presenting aggressive, ambitious and confident female images and visual elements (Oh & Lee, 2014; Sun et al., 2023). Therefore, the visual changes brought by the "girl crush" genre in K-pop also attract Chinese women fans to a certain extent.

Overall, the basic understanding of the "girl crush" genre by Chinese women fans can be summarised in this study in terms of new trends, inspiring music and lyrics, and bold and diverse visual changes. These findings are generally consistent with the understanding and description of the "girl crush" genre in existing research, and provide a context for further exploring how the "girl crush" genre influences gender stereotypes and perceptions of female empowerment among Chinese women fans.

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[1] Second generation of K-pop: from 2001 to 2011.

[2] Third generation of K-pop: from 2012 to 2017.

Perspectives on Gender Stereotypes and Female Empowerment

Challenging Gender Stereotypes

Through in-depth interviews with participants, this study found that some Chinese women fans suppose that the emergence and popularity of the "girl crush" genre can challenge gender stereotypes to some extent, especially for K-pop female idols. For example:

> *[...] Like 2NE1 has shown a particularly distinctive group character, they can be sexy or cool punk style, with a particularly personal touch. For me, it is like redefining the image of women in K-pop girl groups, so I think it may go to break the stereotypes that mat people have about K-pop girl groups [...] (Participant 7)*

> *I think it will slightly rectify or improve some of the gender stereotypes, because I think that in the past, female groups may have given people the feeling of being more centred around the theme of love, which makes people feel that they were subordinate roles that revolved around men. However, nowadays, many groups come across as self-reliant and centred on their own thoughts and feelings. This is very different from the characteristics of traditional female gender roles, so I think it can bring some improvement to stereotypes [...] (Participant 8)*

In this regard, although K-pop encounters stereotypes about gender and femininity (Brassier, 2023), Chinese women fans in this study argue that the popularity of the "girl crush" genre has a positive effect on challenging gender stereotypes, as it may redefine the image of women and break down traditional female roles. This finding is slightly different from previous studies, such as Lin & Rudolf's (2017) and Li's (2022), which suggest that the "girl crush" genre in K-pop may reinforce traditional gender norms, fulfil socially mandated role expectations, and even further strengthen Korea's consistently patriarchal culture. While there are also studies that demonstrate K-pop's potential to challenge gender stereotypes, they focus on the positive role of K-pop fandom and fan communities (e.g. Lee, 2013; Oh & Kim, 2018).

Empowering Chinese Women Fans

Apart from challenging stereotypes to a certain extent, this study also found that some Chinese women fans hold positive views of the "girl crush" genre on empowerment. For example:

[...] I saw an interview where a fan of Soyeon from (G)I-DLE said that she got a lot of strength from their group's songs and became braver [...] This made me realise that some girls who are depressed and lack confidence can get strength by listening to these songs [...] (Participant 1)

[...] In fact, I don't know what the general public thinks about it. If I only look at the information I receive, I think it can be quite positive. That is because I can get more feminist strength from my favourite idols, and on the other hand, these works can trigger my relevant thinking or reflection [...] For me, ITZY's WANNABE has the power to make me feel more determined to be myself. Especially when I was confused during my undergraduate years and felt anxious about how to navigate romantic relationships, ITZY's works encouraged me and made me more determined to be myself [...] (Participant 2)

I think what impressed me most was a song called July 7 by Red Velvet, which is not particularly famous but was analysed to be related to the 'Sinking of MV Sewol'[3]. This gave me some inspiration because I realised that works about "girl crush" are powerful and can even express resistance and discontent [...] (Participant 4)

According to these quotes, Chinese women fans expressed views similar to those of Lin and Rudolf (2017), that the "girl crush" genre could bring them strength, encouragement, and support, thus delivering a sense of empowerment. Moreover, Chinese women fans also mentioned that feminist works provoked and motivated them to reflect on and be inspired by their personal experiences and different practices on an intellectual level. This reflects that the "girl crush" genre has the potential to bring female empowerment to Chinese women fans in a transnational context.

Critical Perspectives on Gender Stereotypes and Female Empowerment

As previously discussed, Chinese women fans in this study suggest that the "girl crush" genre can go some way to challenging gender stereotypes and bring about different forms of empowerment. However, it was surprising that most of the participants in this study articulated more critical views of the "girl crush" genre. For example:

[...] However, I feel that K-pop is more commercialised. If you look at something like (G)I-DLE when they performed NXDE, the clothes they wore for the performance were still very revealing and sexy. Um... I want to say that their costumes or stage performances sometimes have a tendency to satisfy the male aesthetic, and it doesn't seem to be in line with the song they are singing or the feminist messages

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[3] Sinking of MV Sewol: Korean shipwreck on April 16, 2014.

they are delivering, so I think it is hard to say whether they're really challenging gender stereotypes or showing female strength [...] Also, it is not clear to me whether these idols have feminist ideas and are autonomously trying to convey that. If they don't have this spiritual core, I think their work would be very commercial and ultimately a means of making money [...] Although there is also a possibility that these idols themselves want to convey a feminist message, they may not be able to control the conditions imposed on them by the company. (Participant 2)

[...] As I mentioned before, I felt that it did give me a sense of power and inspiration, but after thinking about it more, I felt that the image and behaviour they actually showed did not match the thoughts they wanted to express or the concepts they created, so I felt that it was more like catering to some trending topics [...] (Participant 3)

I don't think this genre can challenge gender stereotypes because, first of all, these groups' "girl crush" style may not be something they can decide, and in my opinion, although many works call for independence and self-reliance, most of their performances are still in conflict with what they want to call for. [...] And I think K-pop is a male-dominated industry that can rarely convey the spirit of feminism or empower women fans... (Participant 9)

Accordingly, the Chinese women fans in this study demonstrate a critical perspective on the "girl crush" genre. Specifically, Participant 2 expressed concerns about the commercialisation of K-pop, believing that female idols may not be autonomous in conveying accurate feminist messages, or that they cannot choose due to the company's control. Similarly, Participant 3 and Participant 9 also questioned whether the "girl crush" genre is just a marketing tool, as they thought that the images presented by female idols did not match the concept of the work. Therefore, the participants in this study criticised the "girl crush" genre as not being meaningful in terms of challenging gender stereotypes and female empowerment.

In addition, these responses resonate with the argument of some existing studies, suggesting that K-pop idols and genres are carefully constructed in consumer relationships as a commercial strategy under a neoliberal agenda to attract consumption and make profits (Fairchild, 2007; Kim, 2019; Venters & Rothenberg, 2022). What's more, the perceptions of Chinese women fans in this study also coincide with Li's (2022) research, which illustrates that the corporate agenda of K-pop may limit idols to traditional stereotypes, and that the feminist voices of some girl groups may be less than their market value and influence. Thus, the "girl crush" genre has gradually become a marketable label through commercialisation and commodification, rather than a feminist advocacy. In line with this,

Sun et al.'s (2023) study further suggests that the "girl crush" genre is a postfeminist marketing strategy that can meet a diverse range of needs, as Participant 3 mentions, 'like catering for popular topics and trends'. Especially today, when global feminism has received more attention and topics about empowerment are more discussed, this genre presents a form of female empowerment with a performative nature (Sun et al., 2023). Consequently, while feminism is effective for understanding popular culture, feminism itself has become a popular culture (Banet-Weiser & Portwood-Stacer, 2017).

Furthermore, Participant 5 brings a relatively new and thought-provoking perspective, indicating that the understanding and interpretation of the "girl crush" with gender stereotypes and female empowerment may be different among Chinese women fans related to the formation of their identity and gender awareness:

> I feel that the empowerment brought by "girl crush" may not be so obvious for me because I
> have more critical consideration and thinking [...] But I think this style may be more influential
> for those fans who may not have enough awareness of gender issues, or still be constructing
> their gender identity, so the meaning and interpretation of this genre may be simply to bring
> power and break some stereotypes for them [...] (Participant 5)

This implies that different gender identities and levels of gender consciousness may influence Chinese women fans' understanding and perceptions of the "girl crush" genre. Some fans who are exploring or constructing their own identities may have a less critical understanding of the "girl crush" genre, so they are more likely to regard it as a powerful expression of feminism. However, fans who are more aware and thoughtful about gender issues may interpret the genre more critically and explore the ideology behind it.

In general, when discussing gender stereotypes and female empowerment, the responses of Chinese women fans in this study demonstrated a complex understanding and perception within the conceptual framework of feminism and postfeminism. On the one hand, some participants believed that the "girl crush" genre had a positive impact in empowering girls and challenging gender stereotypes, demonstrating a useful feminist perspective for understanding popular culture (Banet-Weiser & Portwood-Stacer, 2017). On the other hand, some Chinese women fans reflected "a critical mode of thinking across borders" (Dosekun, 2015: 965) under postfeminism as they critically interpreted the issues of commodification and industry oppression under neoliberalism behind the

"girl crush" genre from Korea. They also indicated how the "girl crush" genre employed symbolic vocabularies such as independence, empowerment and autonomy to cater to trends and interact with consumers, transforming feminism itself into a popular culture. In this aspect, as Sun et al. (2023) discuss, the "girl crush" genre is a manifestation of the commodification of women's bodies and the associated forces of capital in the industry and K-pop fans have turned to more conscious feminist dialogue and criticism, exposing the "girl crush" concept as a pseudo-feminist marketing strategy.

Attitudes and Implications in the Transnational Cultural Context

It is worth noting that the findings of this study are all based on a transnational perspective, because their essence is the complex views of Chinese women fans on feminist expressions in K-pop. Within this context, this study also explored some attitudes, obstacles, engagements and suggestions of Chinese women fans that go beyond existing research, thus establishing a richer perspective and understanding.

Firstly, this study found that despite participants' complex critical views on the impact of the "girl crush" genre on gender stereotypes and female empowerment, some Chinese women fans held positive attitudes towards the genre as a whole. For example:

> *Overall, I think the emergence of this genre is good, because it may have positively influenced the thoughts of many people who watch it. And I think its audience is relatively wide, especially now that the Internet is well developed, and the age of star chasing is also quite young [...] and some fans who are under great pressure and anxious after work can also get some comfort from the genre. (Participant 1)*

> *[...] From my own perspective, I personally like songs with some feminist messages, and I will express my love and support for these works on social platforms, or to repost them or something... (Participant 6)*

Therefore, some participants expressed their personal appreciation and support for the "girl crush" genre and recognised some positive influences they may bring, especially for the younger generations. Similarly, Participant 4 and Participant 7 stated that they would actively talk to their friends about the "girl crush" genre and would extend the conversation to topics related to the Chinese cultural context:

I usually discuss the elements in the music video with my friends. The direction of the plot and the implicit meaning of certain elements arouse us to think about it and we may also have different opinions, which makes the talk more interesting. (Participant 4)

I usually discuss with friends who are also into K-pop... Our discussions were mainly focused on the work itself, but also some extended discussions. For example, we feel that feminism has been prevalent in China in the past two years, and people's consciousness is awakening, so we will occasionally discuss it based on this cultural background [...] (Participant 7)

[…] My friend and I have discussed how our liking for certain K-pop groups seems to change based on gender issues. Specifically, my friend prefers K-pop boy groups, and she said she would appreciate a male idol more if he was respectful to women. Even though I prefer girl groups, I have the same idea that I like idols more if they show respect for gender issues in certain situations. (Participant 8)

These responses demonstrate the transnational flow of cultural practices (Dosekun, 2015) and reflect the attention and engagement of Chinese women fans. In line with this, Chinese women fans' active sharing on social media platforms and interactions with friends demonstrates what Jenkins (2006) discusses: fans are likely to participate in a culture that can be immersed in and contains different practices in the process of global integration. However, it needs to be noted that some of the Chinese women fans in this study indicated that they often regard K-pop as a form of entertainment and face a certain degree of language barrier, so their understanding of the "girl crush" genre may be affected by their own cultural background:

From a cultural perspective, there is a certain language difference between China and Korea, and most Chinese fans cannot understand the meaning of Korean lyrics when listening to songs. Therefore, if you just listen to the melody and don't look into the lyrics or watch the music video, there should be many Chinese fans who do not realise the feminist messages contained in it. (Participant 1)

I think among Chinese people who like K-pop, only those fans who have some exposure to feminist content can observe the relevant content contained in the lyrics, music videos and performances. Otherwise, the "girl crush" genre maybe just a group style for most people. Even many fans may only focus on the auditory and visual performances, ignoring the content of the lyrics... (Participant 2)

Actually, I initially liked K-pop for my own amusement, and it was not likely to rise to the level of feminism or other social issues or impact my gender identity[...] But I noticed that their concepts and diverse content have also been combined with local Chinese marketing these years, making it more visible to Chinese fans. (Participant 5)

Therefore, the meaning of the "girl crush" genre can vary due to language barriers and different attitudes towards K-pop. For example, K-pop is confined to entertainment and has less significance in reflecting on and reshaping gender identity and related gender issues. Besides, Participant 5 mentioned that the diverse concepts and content of K-pop have been combined with some local Chinese marketing to attract more fans. In line with this, some Chinese women fans in this study have also provided some potential suggestions for how the "girl crush" genre, as a transnational culture, can be related to Chinese fans:

> *I think, first of all, idols who follow this style should ensure their performance is consistent with the feminist content they want to express. Secondly, I think that when they promote their new works on various social media platforms in China, they can use more attractive Chinese titles and posters to arouse topical discussions among fans. I think these may help... (Participant 3)*

> *I think K-pop dance challenges are a great way to do this, for example, the recent song Girls Never Die has attracted a lot of netizens and fans learning and dancing to the song together in various short videos and social media platforms. I also learned about this song through dance challenges [...] and some of the videos include scrolling translated subtitles so I can understand the lyrics. (Participant 6)*

To sum up, this section analyses the different attitudes of women fans towards the "girl crush" genre in the Chinese cultural context, including the active participation phenomenon, communications and discussions with people of the same cultural background, but also considering that Chinese fans may may face certain language barriers and see K-pop as entertainment. Finally, participants offered potential ways for meaningful transnational communication of the "girl crush" genre in China through a combination of local marketing, consistency of performance and concept, production of Chinese language materials, and the launch of a dance challenge.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study explores the understanding and complex perceptions of Chinese women K-pop fans towards the "girl crush" genre through qualitative semi-structured interviews. The thematic analysis further supported this study, guiding a deductive analysis of the information based on existing feminist and post-feminist conceptual frameworks while generating new themes and insights from the interviews.

Firstly, the findings demonstrate that Chinese women fans' understanding of the "girl crush" genre includes three main elements: new trends, inspiring songs and lyrics, and bold and diverse visual changes. These basic findings are generally consistent with the descriptions and interpretations of the "girl crush" genre in existing studies.

Secondly, in the aspect of female empowerment and challenging gender stereotypes, some Chinese women fans suggest that the "girl crush" genre redefines women's roles and provides a new form of gender expression by portraying independent, autonomous and self-conscious female images in visual and auditory elements in K-pop. Therefore, the "girl crush" genre may challenge gender stereotypes to a certain extent. At the same time, for some Chinese women fans, the "girl crush" genre has certain positive significance in terms of empowerment, as the genre brings them strength, encouragement, and support and also provokes and prompts them to think and reflect on feminist-related topics. These findings reflect a useful lens for feminism to understand popular culture.

However, more importantly, the participants in this study generally demonstrate a postfeminist mode of critical transnational thinking mode and echo how existing research has illustrated the "girl crush" genre as a postfeminist expression. Specifically, Chinese women fans critique the commercialisation, commodification and patriarchal oppression of the K-pop industry, suggesting that the female empowerment of the "girl crush" genre and the challenge of certain stereotypes in this industry may only remain superficial. In other words, Chinese women fans perceive the "girl crush" genre as a marketing strategy that caters to trends and multiple demands, and potentially transforms feminism into a cultural product. Besides, they regard that the K-pop corporate agenda may limit idols to traditional stereotypes, and that the images presented by female idols do not correspond to the concepts of the genre.

Furthermore, by exploring a richer perspective on participants' attitudes, this study found that Chinese women fans displayed a highly participatory interaction with the "girl crush" genre, such as actively discussing with friends and engaging on social media platforms. However, it should be noted that Chinese women fans may face a certain degree of language barriers, so their understanding of the "girl crush" genre may be affected by their own cultural background. Finally, participants in this study suggested that the "girl crush" genre could be more relevant to Chinese fans through integration with local marketing, unifying the representations and concepts.

This study contributes a meaningful transnational perspective, exploring how Chinese women fans understand and perceive the "girl crush" genre as a postfeminist expression, especially how this genre interacts with female empowerment and gender stereotypes. Although this study has shed light on how the global culture are understood and viewed differently in different cultural contexts, the studies still have limitations. First, the sample size of 9 Chinese women fans in this study may be inadequate, especially since they were found to be of similar age through interviews, meaning that they cannot fully represent Chinese women K-pop fans. Second, considering that K-pop is constantly evolving and is dynamically influenced by various factors, it may imply that the findings in the study may not have long-term validity. These limitations also point out directions for future research to some extent. For example, future research could focus on real-time trends in K-pop and turn to the perceptions of different cultural backgrounds on a particular trend. Besides, to further explore the interaction between Chinese women fans and the "girl crush" genre, shifting the perspectives to topics such as gender identity, nationalism, and the intersection of politics and entertainment in China and Korea may be meaningful.

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APPENDICE

Appendix I: Participant Profiles (Abridged from publication)

Appendix II: Interview Schedule (Abridged from publication)

Appendix III: Thematic Analysis Grid

Themes	Sub-themes	Examples of Quotes
	New trend/Popular	P2: "This genre is still pretty popular nowadays, and many audiences love it, especially women[...] I feel

		like they may be attracted by the transformation of girl groups, or it may also be related to the rise of the feminist wave in society in recent years [...]"
Understanding of the "girl crush" genre	Descriptions of the songs and lyrics (inspirational, advocate independence and strength)	P4: "I was deeply impressed by a rap from Jennie in BLACKPINK's early work 'Playing with fire'. The lyrics made me feel that women are independent and can be strong individuals without relying on men... That's probably the concept that comes across [...] I think the reason why 'girl crush' attracts me is that its lyrics always promote women to be more independent and self-reliant, and encourage girls to be confident and self-loving [...]"
	Descriptions of makeup, dress and dance style (diverse, bold)	P1: "Many girl groups in the past were not quite the same as they are now... Especially in the second and third generations, they used to be more innocent and cute, but since 'girl crush' became popular, a lot of groups have gone for a cool, tomboyish, or a bit aggressive look in their clothing and makeup. To be honest, I feel that the innocent style may attract more male fans, but the 'girl crush' style seems to attract more women fans to these groups."
Perspectives on Gender Stereotypes and Female Empowerment	Challenging gender stereotypes	P7: "[...] Like 2NE1 has shown a particularly distinctive group character, they can be sexy or cool punk style, with a particularly personal touch. For me, it is like redefining the image of women in K-pop girl groups, so I think it may go to break the stereotypes that mat people have about K-pop girl groups [...]"
	Bringing empowerment	P2: "[...] In fact, I don't know what the general public thinks about it. If I only look at the information I receive, I think its positive impact is large. On the one hand, I can get more feminist strength from my favourite idols, and on the other hand, it can trigger my relevant thinking or reflection [...] For me, ITZY's 'WANNABE' has the power to make me feel more determined to be myself. Especially when I was confused during my undergraduate years and felt anxious about how to navigate romantic

		relationships, ITZY's works encouraged me and made me more determined to be myself [...]"
	Criticisms	P3: "[...] As I mentioned before, I felt that it did give me a sense of power and inspiration, but then, after thinking about it more, I felt that the image and behaviour they actually showed did not match the thoughts they wanted to express or the concepts they created, so I felt that it was more like catering to some trending topics [...]"
More Attitudes and Implications in the Transnational Cultural Context	Overall attitudes	P6: "[...] From my own perspective, I personally like songs with some feminist messages, and I will express my love and support for these works on social platforms, or to repost them or something..."
	Engagement	P7: "I usually discuss with friends who are also into K-pop... Our discussions were mainly focused on the work itself, but also some extended discussions. For example, we feel that feminism has been prevalent in China in the past two years, and people's consciousness is awakening, so we will occasionally discuss it based on this cultural background [...]"
	Barriers	P5: "Actually, I initially liked K-pop for my own amusement, and it was not likely to rise to the level of feminism or other social issues [...] But I noticed that their concepts and diverse content have also been combined with local Chinese marketing these years, making it more visible to Chinese fans."
	Suggestions	P6: "I think K-pop dance challenges are a great way to do this, for example, the recent song 'Girls Never Die' has attracted a lot of netizens and fans learning and dancing to the song together in various short videos and social media platforms. I also learned about this song through dance challenges [...] and some of the videos include scrolling translated subtitles so I can understand the lyrics."