

# The Influence of Korean Pop Stars' Image Presentation on Chinese High Schoolers' Gender Role Perception

Jinjing Huang<sup>1,\*,#</sup>, Mohan Li<sup>2,#</sup>, Chuchu Liu<sup>3,#</sup>, Luya Chen<sup>4,#</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Greenhill School, Addison, Texas, USA

<sup>2</sup>Beijing 21st Century School, Beijing, China

<sup>3</sup>Beijing Etown Academy, Beijing, China

<sup>4</sup>Ready Global Academy, Columbus, Ohio, USA

*\*Corresponding Author*

*#These authors contribute equally to this work.*

**Abstract:** In recent years, K-pop has become a cultural phenomenon in China, particularly among high school students. This study investigates the influence of Korean pop stars' image presentation on Chinese high schoolers' perceptions of gender roles, including masculinity, femininity, and gender equality. By employing a mixed-method approach—combining questionnaires (n=180) and in-depth interviews (n=12)—the study explores how frequent engagement with K-pop content correlates with evolving gender perceptions. Statistical methods such as Spearman's rank-order correlation and OLS regression analysis reveal that while the impact is generally positive, it remains moderate. Notably, female high schoolers show greater sensitivity to gender-related portrayals in K-pop compared to their male counterparts. Interview data further suggests that students' perception shifts are not solely shaped by K-pop, but also influenced by their pre-existing beliefs and the specific idols or groups they follow. The findings underscore K-pop's dual role: challenging traditional gender stereotypes while simultaneously reinforcing certain norms through commercial packaging and industry practices. This research provides valuable insights for educators, parents, and policymakers to better understand how global pop culture intersects with youth identity development and gender ideology in modern China.

**Keywords:** K-pop; Gender Stereotypes; Youth Identity; Masculinity and Femininity; Chinese Teenagers

## 1. Introduction

K-pop, or Korean pop music, recently has had a

remarkable growth in popularity worldwide, especially among Chinese high schoolers. Through a statistics survey in China in 2023, around 31% of respondents agreed that K-pop was widely known with related goods available [1].

Chinese high schoolers are in a critical development stage, with their gender role perception - the understanding and awareness of the roles, behaviors, rights and responsibilities of men and women at the social, cultural, and individual levels gradually being shaped. K-pop idols often challenge traditional gender stereotypes, promote gender equality, and showcase a diverse range of gender expressions through fluid portrayals of masculinity and femininity through lyrics, dance videos, and public images of idols. These representations influence fans, who internalize these portrayals and, as a result, may undergo shifts in their understanding of gender roles [2]. Take the song "TOMBOY" of the girl group (G)I-DLE as an example. The group does not only include handsome and individualistic costumes, breaking the sweet style of traditional girl groups, but also have powerful and free dance moves, demonstrating women's self-confidence and strength, conveying the attitude against gender stereotypes. All these concepts present a brand-new gender role expression to high schoolers, enabling them to think differently from traditional understanding and perception of gender roles. Nevertheless, some claims that K-pop simultaneously reinforces traditional stereotypes through hyper sexualization and unequal representation of genders in the industry [3].

This study focuses on exploring the influence of the image presentation of Korean pop stars on Chinese high schoolers' gender role perception

including gender equality and gender stereotypes. By using questionnaires and interview surveys with the help of Python coding in analyzing data, this study aims to conclude how high schoolers interpret and internalize the gender information transmitted by K-pop idols. Additionally, it provides theoretical support and practical implications for educators, parents, and all sectors of society to understand the psychological world of contemporary high schoolers.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 K-Pop Image Presentation

#### 2.1.1 Evolution of K-pop idols' image

Over its five generations, K-pop's mainstream image has undergone significant transformation. Early male idols, such as BIGBANG, embodied a sharp, rebellious "bad boy" aesthetic, but over time, male idols, best represented by global phenomenon BTS, began adopting a more androgynous style, incorporating softer makeup and non-traditional clothing, redefining masculinity as more versatile and inclusive[4]. In contrast, early female idols were marketed with an emphasis on youthful innocence, reflecting Korea's conservative Neo-Confucian ideals. However, there were exceptions, such as YG Entertainment's girl group 2NE1, whose 2011 hit "I Am The Best" faced controversy for its bold challenge to conventional gender norms [5]. By the 2010s, the girl crush concept became a common style, and the portrayal of female idols shifted dramatically toward more powerful representations influenced by Western pop culture trends. Female idols with short hair and song themes of women empowerment, like (G) I-DLE's "Tomboy," gained widespread acceptance in mainstream media.

#### 2.1.2 Gender image in K-pop

K-pop is renowned for its cutting-edge image presentation, often challenging traditional femininity in Korea while promoting a more fluid understanding of masculinity [4,6]. Although K-pop presents diverse gender presentation, society and the industry enforces stereotypical roles for male and female idols. Male idols are known for their lavish fashion and softer masculinity, but this non-traditional appearance reinforces stereotypes on Asian men in Western countries, often causing biased perceptions and judgment. Female idols, however, are restricted to three categories: cute,

hip-hop, or sexy, which limits their creativity and freedom to be more vocal about their own thoughts and experiences [7]. For example, BLACKPINK is known for their powerful image on stage, but the members often showcase their softer side during reality shows to also appeal to the male gaze. These disparities highlight the mixed gender representation within the K-pop industry.

### 2.2 Gender Role Perception Development in China

Gender schema theory [8,9] and social cognitive theory[10] would suggest that children, during the early childhood years, are developing their thinking and attitudes about the differences between males and females. In addition, gender schema not only have an impact on how people process information, but also on the attitudes and beliefs that direct "gender-appropriate" behavior, which refers to gender role perception [11].

#### 2.2.1 Traditional gender role perception in china

Historically, traditional gender role perceptions in China have been shaped by a patriarchal family structure, emphasizing male dominance in lineage and decision-making [12]. Consequently, men are traditionally regarded as breadwinners and leaders, while women are expected to assume domestic responsibilities such as child-rearing and household management. This traditional gender role dynamic is more pronounced in rural regions than in urban areas, where modernization has led to a gradual decline in some of these stereotypes [13].

#### 2.2.2 Shifting gender role perceptions in modern china

In recent decades, China has undergone substantial shifts in gender role perceptions, largely influenced by broader social and economic transformations. The advent of social media, characterized by its rapid proliferation, has profoundly shaped gender expectations among the youth. Additionally, policies promoting gender equality have contributed to shifts in gender role perceptions, as evidenced by the increasing participation of women in the workforce and higher education levels, which has challenged traditional caregiving expectations, especially in urban areas [14].

However, regions with imbalanced sex ratios often reinforce traditional norms [15]. Furthermore, the gender awareness of managers influences decisions related to gender equity. While management personnel recognize

women's abilities, they often hold traditional views, highlighting the need for educational programs to enhance awareness [16].

Consequently, a hybrid of traditional and modern gender perceptions has emerged. According to Zhang and Deng [17], 65.1% of high schoolers exhibit an androgynous gender role type, with boys being more likely than girls to demonstrate trends toward androgynous development, that is, individuals embodying both masculine and feminine traits.

### 2.2.3 The role of social media in gender role perception

A global analysis of Google Trends data from January 2020 to January 2025 reveals consistently high levels of search interest in terms such as "gender role," "gender stereotypes", "masculinity and femininity", and "LGBTQ+". This sustained attention underscores the growing global discourse on gender-related topics.

In the Chinese context, gender perception is deeply shaped by cultural norms and rapidly evolving social influences, particularly through media [18]. Among these influences, body image-related content plays a prominent role in shaping societal attitudes [19]. Social media platforms such as Weibo and Xiaohongshu serve as mirrors of the ongoing discourse on gender stereotypes, reflecting dynamic shifts in public opinion and social attitudes [20]. Drawing on social cognitive theory and the looking-glass self-theory, it is evident that the images and narratives disseminated through media platforms play a crucial role in shaping individual perceptions of gender roles, particularly on youth [21]. The study finds that generation Z exhibits a notable diversification in gender role perceptions, largely driven by varied media portrayals.

## 2.3 Research Hypothesis

Based on literature review, the study aims to test the following hypothesis:

H1: The frequency and intensity of K-pop engagement and their association with more open-minded gender role perceptions

The study aims to elucidate the complex ways in which K-pop engagement interacts with and potentially transforms gender role perceptions.

## 3. Research Methods

### 3.1 Questionnaire Overview

The survey was designed to explore the effects of K-pop on Chinese high schoolers' gender role perceptions. The survey was divided into three modules: Demographics, K-pop Preferences, Engagement and Activities, and The Impact of K-pop on High Schoolers' Understanding of Gender Role Perceptions, including their views on male and female traits and gender equality. For the latter part, a standard 5-point Likert scale was used to ask respondents to assess their attitudes to different arguments.

The survey was conducted over a 12-day period from December 16 to December 28, 2024. After screening through qualification questions and filtering out respondents who did not meet the target population criteria, 180 valid responses were retained for analysis, resulting in a validity rate of 60%.

### 3.2 Interview Overview

In the interview phase, they interviewed 12 Chinese high schoolers who were passionate about K-pop to gain a more detailed and multi-faceted understanding of the impact of K-pop on their perception of gender roles. The interview questions are extensions of questions in questionnaires. The structural interview questions began with asking the participants to introduce their favorite K-pop groups, the similarities and differences they observed between male and female groups, the current level of gender equality in society, specific examples of how K-pop challenges or conforms to traditional gender roles, and whether K-pop triggers high schoolers to reflect on gender. The respondents were asked to answer the questions in sequence, and the interviewer recorded their responses.

## 4. Research Analysis

### 4.1 Questionnaire Analysis

This section presents the findings derived from the questionnaire, which contains 13 questions regarding respondents' basic information, k-pop background, perception of masculinity and femininity. The analysis combines descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, regression modeling, and visual representations to explore how Korean pop stars' image presentation influences Chinese high schoolers' perceptions of gender roles.

#### 4.1.1 Data preparation

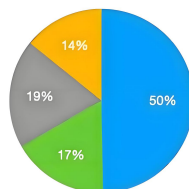
The questionnaire collected a total of 180 valid

responses from Chinese high schoolers. Missing and outlier values were addressed through appropriate methods, such as deletion or imputation. All categorical data were converted into numerical values according to established standards to facilitate statistical analysis. The dependent variables include perceptions of masculinity and femininity, as well as awareness of gender equality. The independent variables consist of the duration of K-pop engagement, the frequency of engagement, the types of activities attended, and the respondents' gender.

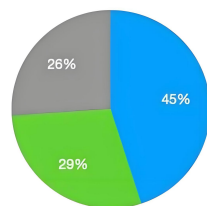
#### 4.1.2 Descriptive statistics

As shown in Figure1, of the 180 valid responses, there are 136 female and 44 male respondents. A larger group, 31.12% of the respondents, reported that they have been fans for 1 to 3 years, and 35.00% of respondents have liked K-pop for over three years, which represents a significant portion of individuals with a long-term interest in K-pop. Additionally, 45.00% of respondents reported that they interact with K-pop content daily, and another 28.89% of respondents engage with K-pop weekly, The remaining 26.11% of respondents engage with K-pop content only occasionally, representing a smaller group with less frequent involvement.

● Less than 1 year ● 1-3 years  
● Over 3 years ● I am not a fan but aware of it



(a) Duration of K-pop Engagement



(b) Frequency of K-pop Engagement

#### Figure 1. K-pop Engagement Survey Results

For various K-pop-related activities attended, the most common one is listening to music, accounting for 34.07% of responses. Buying physical albums or merchandise ranks second at 19.35%, closely followed by buying digital albums at 19.15%. Creating fan content, such as editing videos or writing fanfiction, makes up 15.93% of the activities. Lastly, attending concerts or fan events represents 11.49% of the total (Figure 2).

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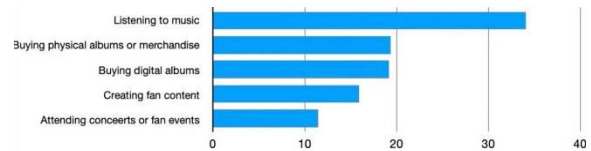


Figure 2. What Activities Do You Participate in?

#### 4.1.3 Gender role perception score

The gender perception score is an aggregated measure from responses to questions about expanded and traditional masculinity, traditional and empowered femininity. These variables were measured using Likert scales, with scores ranging from 1 to 5. A higher score indicates a higher level of agreement with a more open view, whereas a lower score indicates a higher level of agreement with a more traditional view.

#### 4.1.4 Masculinity

Participants generally agree that male K-pop idols expand their understanding of masculinity (Mean=3.68, Median=4.0), particularly regarding emotional openness and beauty. However, the perception of male idols reinforcing traditional masculine traits is more neutral (Mean=2.92). Many participants feel male idols have little or no influence on their masculinity perceptions (Mean=2.77) (Figure 3).

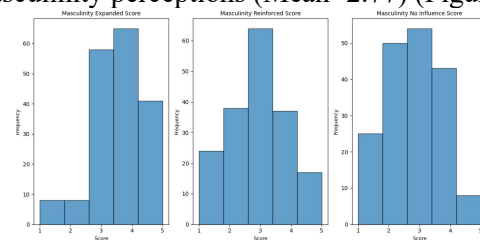


Figure 3. Gender Perception Score Distribution for Questions Regarding Masculinity

#### 4.1.5 Femininity

Participants show neutral views on whether female K-pop idols emphasize traditional femininity (Mean=3.21), while strongly agreeing that they promote empowerment and independence (Mean=3.73). Similarly, many perceive minimal influence from female idols on their femininity views (Mean=2.77) (figure 4).

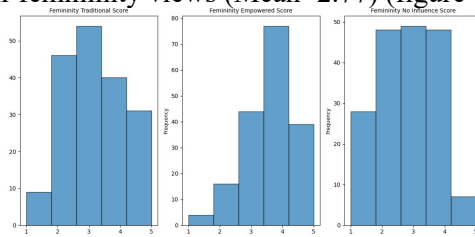


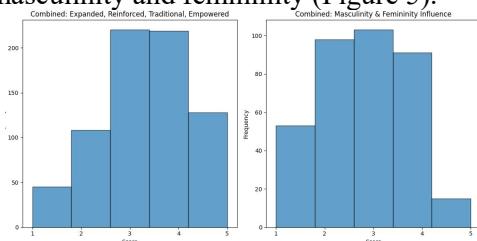
Figure 4. Gender Perception Score Distribution for Questions Regarding Femininity



#### 4.1.6 Combined questions

The combined analysis of the questions related to expanded, reinforced, traditional, and empowered gender roles shows an average score of 3.38, indicating that participants generally agree with progressive gender perceptions promoted by K-pop idols. This suggests that both male and female idols are perceived as influencing ideas of emotional openness, empowerment, and modern femininity, with responses distributed across the full scoring range.

In contrast, the combined influence-related questions scored lower, with an average of 2.77. This indicates that many participants feel K-pop idols have minimal impact on their perceptions of masculinity and femininity (Figure 5).



**Figure 5. Gender Perception Score Distribution for Combined Questions**

Overall, these results reflect a nuanced view, where K-pop idols are seen as supporting progressive gender ideals, but their direct influence on participants' perceptions is perceived to be limited.

#### 4.1.7 Correlation analysis

To examine the relationships between K-pop engagement and various gender-related perception scores, the analysis focused on the following dimensions:

Masculinity Expanded Score

Femininity Empowered Score

Femininity No Influence Score

Masculinity No Influence Score

Influence of K-pop engagement across genders (male, female, and overall)

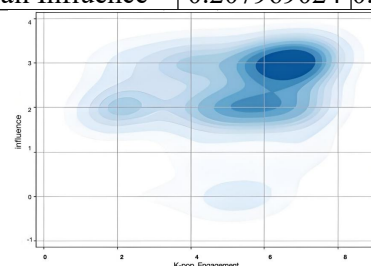
Spearman's rank-order correlation was utilized, and each correlation was computed with corresponding Spearman's R-values and p-values, providing insight into the direction and strength of associations. Heatmap visualizations were used to illustrate the density of data distributions and highlight patterns in the relationships. Statistical significance ( $p < 0.05$ ) guided the interpretation of results.

The analysis revealed that there is a positive correlation between K-pop engagement and masculinity perception scores (Spearman  $r =$

0.31,  $p < 0.001$ ), femininity perception scores (Spearman  $r = 0.20$ ,  $p = 0.007$ ), femininity scores labeled as "no influence" (Spearman  $r = 0.13$ ,  $p = 0.091$ ), gender role influence among female respondents (Spearman  $r = 0.25$ ,  $p = 0.0038$ ) and overall gender role influence (Spearman  $r = 0.21$ ,  $p = 0.005$ ). (table 1) In contrast, the relationship between K-pop engagement and gender role influence among male respondents was weak and negative (Spearman  $r = -0.12$ ,  $p = 0.451$ ). Additionally, no significant correlation was found between K-pop engagement and masculinity scores labeled as "no influence" (Spearman  $r = 0.00$ ,  $p = 0.966$ ). Therefore, these findings suggest that K-pop engagement is generally associated with stronger gender role perceptions, particularly among female respondents (Figure 6).

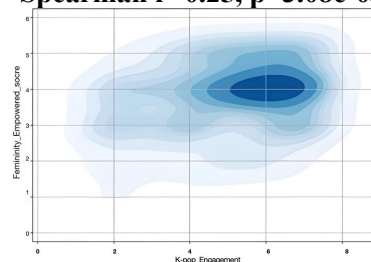
**Table 1. Spearman's Rand-Order Correlation Result**

Analysis	Spearman r	p-value
K-pop Engagement vs Masculinity	0.306252792	2.9011E-05
K-pop Engagement vs Femininity	0.199949103	0.00712082
K-pop Engagement vs Femininity No Influence	0.126038036	0.09180986
K-pop Engagement vs Masculinity No Influence	0.003229793	0.96567727
Female Influence	0.246597994	0.00380259
Male Influence	-0.116511123	0.45134836
Overall Influence	0.207969024	0.00508726

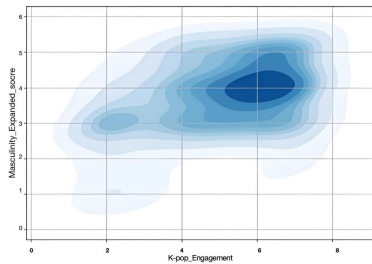


**(a) Female Influence**

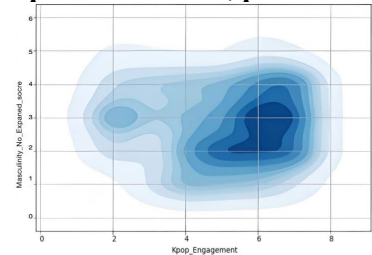
**Spearman  $r=0.25$ ,  $p=3.08e-03$**



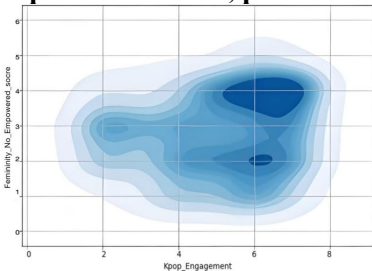
**(b) K-pop Engagement vs Femininity**  
**Spearman  $r=0.20$ ,  $p=7.12e-03$**



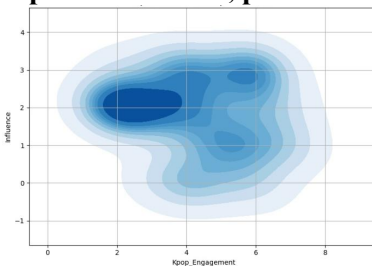
**(c) K-pop Engagement vs Masculinity**  
**Spearman  $r=0.31$ ,  $p=2.90e-05$**



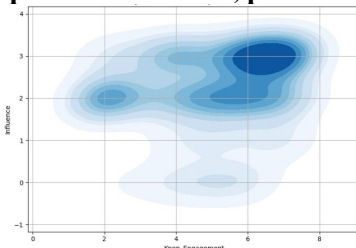
**(d) K-pop Engagement vs Masculinity**  
**No Influence**  
**Spearman  $r=0.00$ ,  $p=9.66e-01$**



**(e) K-pop Engagement vs Femininity**  
**No Influence**  
**Spearman  $r=0.13$ ,  $p=9.18e-02$**



**(f) Male Influence**  
**Spearman  $r=-0.12$ ,  $p=4.51e-01$**



**(g) Overall Influence**  
**Spearman  $r=0.21$ ,  $p=5.09e-03$**   
**Figure 6. Heatmap Visualization for**  
**Correlation Analysis**

#### 4.1.8 Regression analysis

To investigate the relationship between K-pop

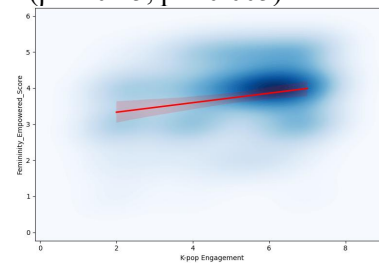
Engagement as the independent variable and Gender Role Perceptions as dependent variables, the study applied Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression analysis. The regression formula used was:

$$Y=\beta_0+\beta_1X+\varepsilon \quad (1)$$

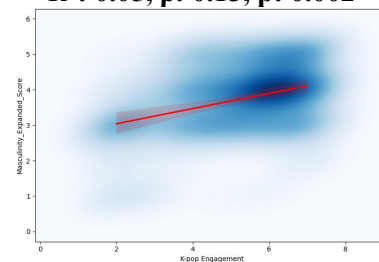
where Y represents the dependent variable (e.g., Influence of Gender Perception, Masculinity, or Femininity), X is the independent variable (K-pop Engagement),  $\beta_0$  is the intercept,  $\beta_1$  is the coefficient for K-pop Engagement, and  $\varepsilon$  is the error term.

The analysis utilized heatmaps to visually display the density distribution of data points with overlaid regression lines in red were included to clearly indicate linear relationships, allowing for a straightforward observation of trends between variables (Figure 7).

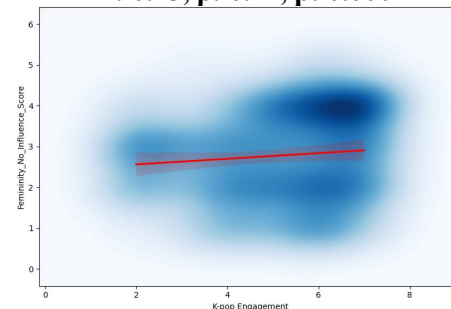
The bivariate regression showed a weak positive link between K-pop engagement and gender perception influence ( $R^2 = 0.021$ ,  $\beta = 0.08$ ,  $p = 0.050$ ). Adding gender revealed male participants reported significantly lower influence ( $\beta = -0.45$ ,  $p = 0.005$ ).



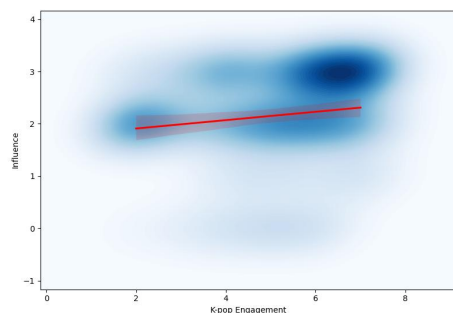
**(a)K-pop Engagement vs Femininity**  
 **$R^2: 0.05$ ,  $\beta: 0.13$ ,  $p: 0.002$**



**(b)K-pop Engagement vs Masculinity**  
 **$R^2: 0.13$ ,  $\beta: 0.21$ ,  $p: 0.000$**

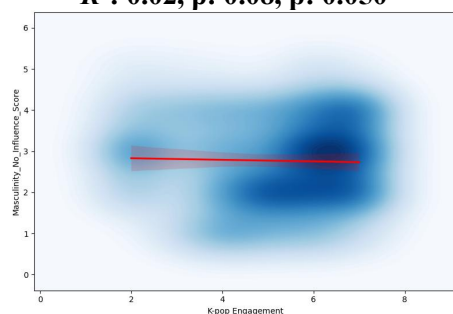


**(c)K-pop Engagement vs Femininity**  
**No Influence  $R^2: 0.01$ ,  $\beta: 0.07$ ,  $p: 0.166$**



**(d)K-pop Engagement vs Gender Role Influence**

$R^2: 0.02, \beta: 0.08, p: 0.050$



**(e)K-pop Engagement vs Masculinity No Influence**

$R^2: 0.00, \beta: -0.02, p: 0.695$

**Figure 7. Heatmap with Overlaid Regression Lines**

For Masculinity Expanded Scores, K-pop engagement showed a moderate positive association ( $R^2 = 0.126, \beta = 0.21, p < 0.001$ ), while gender was not significant in the multivariate model ( $p = 0.26$ ). Femininity Empowered Scores had a small but significant positive link with K-pop engagement ( $R^2 = 0.052, \beta = 0.13, p = 0.002$ ). This remained significant in the multivariate model ( $\beta = 0.12, p = 0.006$ ), while gender showed no significant effect ( $p = 0.24$ ). For Femininity No Influence Scores, K-pop engagement showed a very weak, non-significant positive association ( $R^2 = 0.011, \beta = 0.07, p = 0.17$ ). Similarly, no significant association was found with Masculinity No Influence Scores ( $R^2 = 0.001, \beta = -0.02, p = 0.78$ )

**Table 2. Ordinary Least Squares Regression Result**

Model	Variable	Coefficient(3)	Standard Error	t-value	p-value	[0.025	0.975]
Bivariate Influence	const	1.749845073	0.214254022	8.16715156	5.63292E-14	1.32704028	2.172649866
Bivariate Influence	Kpop Engagement	0.079942161	0.040566742	1970633024	0.050316432	-0.000111472	0.159995793
Multivariate Influence	const	2.438410457	0.321313079	7.58889264	1.77086E-12	1.804312848	3.072508066
Multivariate Influence	Kpop Engagement	0.054921495	0.040757671	1.347513091	0.179537386	-0.025512024	0.135355013
Multivariate Influence	Gender	-0.452670308	0.159793057	-2.832853426	0.005148871	-0.768015066	-0.137325549
Bivariate Masculinity	const	2.612498505	0.222593778	11.73661965	6.29825E-24	2.173236198	3.051760812
Bivariate Masculinity	Kpop Engagement	0.213929266	0.042145786	5.07593486	9.65318E-07	0.130759577	0.297098956
Multivariate Masculinity	const	2.901728641	0.340091692	8.532195014	6.28518E-15	2.230572242	3.572885041
Multivariate Masculinity	Kpop Engagement	0.203419399	0.043139686	4.715365839	4.87302E-06	0.118285076	0.288553722
Multivariate Masculinity	Gender	-0.19014301	0.169131899	-1.124229148	0.262438174	-0.523917574	0.143631553
Bivariate Femininity	const	3.068798313	0.222070159	13.81904859	5.52712E-30	2.630569306	3.50702732
Bivariate Femininity	Kpop Engagement	0.131649616	0.042046645	3.131037368	0.002036543	0.048675571	0.214623661

(Table 2).

In conclusion, the regression analysis indicates that K-pop Engagement is positively associated with changes in gender perceptions, particularly with changes in expanded masculinity and empowered femininity. However, the strength of these associations is relatively weak, and gender differences were only observed in the context of gender perception influence, where male participants reported lower levels of influence compared to females.

## 4.2 Interview Analysis

The interviews shed light on high schoolers' perceptions of gender dynamics within the K-pop industry and their broader societal implications. The results show that high schoolers who are more aware of the gender conflict in K-pop tend to be more indignant to the current gender inequality. Some students affirmed that the treatment of male idols and female idols are different. In other words, male idols often receive more adoration and leniency from fans. Respondent A09, a fan of the girl group (G)-idle, mentioned that this reflects broader societal inequalities, with many examples extending beyond entertainment.

It was found that the difference in high schoolers' gender role perceptions stem from two factors. First, students themselves have existing beliefs which may determine their attitudes toward gender-related topics. Second, the influence K-pop has on gender role perceptions - including gender equality, feminism, and challenge towards gender norms- depends greatly on the type of girl/boy group they pay attention to. As the respondent noted, "the difference is really that you will know more about the related content if you're obsessed with a specific group" (Respondent A07). This shows that challenging gender norms through K-pop is not straightforward.

Multivariate Femininity	const	3.371447219	0.339170382	9.940276031	8.86702E-19	2.702108986	4.040785452
Multivariate Femininity	Kpop Engagement	0.120652146	0.04302282	2.804375583	0.005604745	0.035748452	0.205555839
Multivariate Femininity	Gender	-0.198964654	0.168673719	-1179583015	0.239749127	-0.531835021	0.133905712

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

### 5.1 Research Conclusions

This paper confirms the correlation between engagement in K-pop and gender role perception among Chinese high schoolers, as it encourages discussions on gender-related topics and challenges traditional norms through its concepts, lyrics, and visuals. K-pop's diverse gender expression appeals to a group of audiences that care about gender-related issues, making them more likely to express frustration with gender inequality in society. Showcasing the positive connection between K-pop engagement and gender role perception openness can educate parents of young K-pop fans about the benefits of K-pop's diverse gender presentation.

### 5.2 Research Limitations

This study is limited by its small sample size, which does not fully represent high schoolers in China. Additionally, the virtual nature of this project could affect the quality of questionnaire responses and the effectiveness of interviews. Future research could benefit from larger samples and the inclusion of in-person interviews to gain insights on sensitive topics related to gender perceptions among K-pop fans.

### 5.3 Research Outlook

In the future, investigating and comparing K-pop's impact on high schoolers from other countries could provide information on how K-pop shapes gender perceptions across different cultural contexts, offering a more complete understanding of the current research.

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