

# *Feminist Endeavors in the Visibility Economy: A Case Study of the Idol Industry—(G)I-DLE's "Nxde"*

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**Abstract:** With the spread of popular feminism, there is an increasing trend of media content utilizing feminist-related ideologies as topics. In this paper, we examine feminist endeavors within the idol industry, a significant representative of the visibility economy, using the example of the K-pop girls' group's song and music video, "Nxde." What impact do such media contents have? Furthermore, are the produced and widely circulated songs and performances aimed at arousing women's consciousness of liberation, or do they blur the core of feminism, ultimately leading to compromises with patriarchal society?

## 1. Introduction

"Nxde" is a song released by the South Korean girl group (G)I-DLE on October 17, 2022. The title means "nude but not for u," signifying the freedom for women to be naked and have autonomy over their bodies. The lyrics satirize the commodification and eroticization of women's bodies in society. In the music video, the members appear with blonde hair and red lips, paying homage to Marilyn Monroe several times.

Immediately after its release, the song reached second place on South Korea's music chart Melon in real-time. It later achieved first place on major Korean audio charts (iChart, Melon, Genie, Bugs, Flo, VIBE), reached 50th place on the Billboard Global chart, and won a total of seven first-place awards on South Korea's major music broadcasts. The "Nxde" music video has been viewed over 280 million times on YouTube.

Challenging the male gaze and advocating for women's freedom to be naked, this song has undoubtedly made a significant impact worldwide. However, its display of feminism is worth examining. Popular feminism is often criticized for being visualized without challenging serious structures of inequality.

The feminist expressions presented by the idol industry raise questions about whether they represent the empowerment of women and the destruction of the male gaze or whether they are choices driven by profit-seeking under the visibility economy. The following analysis examines "Nxde" from three aspects: the music video and the song itself, the K-pop industry, and representation<sup>[1]</sup>.

## 2. Showing, which is based on the premise of being "the object to be seen."

We will explore the representation of this concept through the expression of the song and music video. In this section, we will use semiotic analysis to extract and analyze some of the classic elements in the music video.

First, according to the composition of the song and the rotation of members, the entire MV is roughly divided into 13 scenes. For each scene analysis, based on the logic of semiotics, it is divided into visual symbols and phonetic symbols (lyrics), with video symbols, including nonverbal symbols and verbal symbols. Next, we will explore some representative elements in each part.

Second, throughout the entire music video, there are many tributes to classics, such as Marilyn Monroe, Madonna, the musical "Moulin Rouge," Venus, and so on. For example, Minnie imitates the classic style of Monroe in her opening part, paying homage to the film "Gentlemen Prefer Blondes." This is the first time to show homage to Marilyn Monroe. At the same time, she sings the lyrics "Hello my name is yeppi yeppi (cutie) The way I talk is kinda dumb, But I've got a sexy, sexy figure." Later, Yuqi's part also featured a poster of Monroe on the wall. Soyeon presented Monroe's blonde hair and Madonna's classic spiked bra in her part, and the camera was given to a newspaper which was criticizing Hollywood for denigrating female entertainers.

More directly, in Yuqi's part, there is a scene of a white dress being blown up by the wind in Marilyn's classic style. And in the chorus, there is a Musical Moulin Rouge style (with elements that imply a tragic story of a woman).

Next, in many places in the MV, there are scenes of standing next to the Venus statue. And at the end of the MV, there is a painting of a nude woman being destroyed, representing a homage to Banksy's self-destructive paintings. Another thing that can't be overlooked in the music video of the whole song is an animated image of a sexy woman with blond hair and red lips. She appears in the opening, articulation, and many other places, and each of her appearances is accompanied by a very pronounced emphasis on sexuality. It is obvious that her boobs and buttocks are emphasized. Her waist to hip ratios were exaggerated and female sexual characteristics were emphasized and magnified.

In the lyrics, a sharp criticism is added at the end, stating, "I was born naked, and the pervert is you," clearly defining the theme and promoting that women's nudity should not be sexualized, suggesting that women's bodies are simply human bodies.

However, in the overall music video, the singer's blonde hair and red lips are consistently striking, and the high level of exposure in the costumes suggests a focus on female sex appeal. There are two notable points in the visual information. One is the sexy animated image of a blonde-haired woman from the opening to the entire song, and the other is the multiple homages and imitations of Marilyn Monroe.

The animated image is wearing a low-cut, tight-fitting dress with an exaggerated waist-to-hip ratio, clearly emphasizing the boobs and buttocks as female sexual features. The music video also shows provocative scenes in which the breasts of the animated image are seen to be swaying<sup>[2]</sup>.

Furthermore, the imitation of Marilyn Monroe's style focuses solely on the sexually constructed Monroe. Film scholar Richard Dyer points out that Monroe's star image was primarily created in response to the male gaze. The central elements of Marilyn Monroe's star image were her blonde hair and the associated fixed patterns, particularly her perceived stupidity, sexual signals, and coquettishness. She also garnered attention for her hourglass figure displayed in films. Thus, she became one of the most popular sex symbols from the 1950s to the early 1960s. In this music video, which is replete with homage and imitation of her, Monroe's struggles, true character, and candid irony towards herself are nowhere to be seen; only the "sexy" icon of Marilyn Monroe is portrayed.

The emphasis on female sexuality and the display of female sexuality and beauty in the music

video may, in turn, familiarize women with "self-objectification." In this light, rather than promoting "nude freedom," this song seems to promote "sexy freedom." This "sexy freedom" resembles a counterfeit freedom that emerged after the second wave of feminism, where remaining inequalities are seen as the result of women's own choices. Originally, this song was intended to express the idea of replacing the passive position of being "seen" with the active position of "showing" one's body. However, ultimately, even if women are provocatively showing their bodies, it remains within the framework of gender norms where being the "seen object" is a prerequisite for "showing."

### 3. The limitations of K-pop

In addition to examining its content, we must also consider the limitations of K-pop songs and idols.

K-pop is a cultural industry that aims to gain fans' empathy and profit through created popular and commercial music, videos, and other media works. From the beginning, K-pop has played a significant role for female fans. Since 2017, K-pop has been popularizing performances that break existing femininity and express anger and dissatisfaction through aggressive rap and powerful dance. This trend of "girls crush" has begun to emerge. K-pop has emphasized the expression of women fans' individuality and sense of agency. The release of songs like "Nxde" aligns with the recent developments in the K-pop industry and the preferences of female fans. However, the purchasing power of male fans and a wide range of viewers cannot be ignored. Therefore, the styling with sexy clothing was balanced. Female fans were moved by expressions of feminism, while male fans enjoyed sexy dances and cute idols. This song is perfectly commercialized within the visibility economy, where feminism is the key to revenue, and the media's "exploitative use of feminist ideals" is evident here<sup>[3]</sup>.

In the K-pop industry, female idols themselves become commodities, which is a rule of the industry. In the visibility economy, female idols are granted erotic capital by wearing revealing clothing and adhering to strict body management. Galbraith Patrick argues that the representation of female idols becomes a commodity for male audiences to consume, akin to peeking at their desires, and this commodity value is promoted by derivative goods such as fan goods and handshake events, which create the illusion of narrowing the distance between idols and fans, even though they are unrelated to music. They cannot escape sexual objectification in this situation, and the "nude freedom" performed in such circumstances also cannot achieve gender neutrality.

Because of these limitations, the song's seemingly harsh critique remains a mere performance that does not critique the structures of inequality and devalues many feminist values to gain acceptance in a male-centered society<sup>[4]</sup>.

### 4. Representation and Power

Representation is an expression of meaningful power, and at the same time, representation has the power to shape society. One of the issues regarding the representation of women is the portrayal of women as sexual objects. Criticism has been made regarding the use of women's sexual images to attract attention (as eye-catchers) through the male gaze. In media content, sexual objectification is overwhelmingly directed towards women's bodies. The emphasis on women's breasts and buttocks that is commonly seen in the music video of "Nxde" is exactly the kind of depiction of women as impersonal "objects," with sexual organs as the central focus. This is probably the reason why there is a sense of discomfort with the MV despite "Nxde" being a song that promotes feminist ideology<sup>[5]</sup>.

Furthermore, representation (presented by media) also has the power to shape the direction and future of our society. The intention of this song is to proclaim that women's bodies should be desexualized, and nudity in its pure state should not be eroticized by the male gaze. However, the

emphasis on and repetition of sexiness in the MV actually reinforce the stereotype that women's "nudity" is associated with reproduction and sex within a patriarchal society<sup>[6]</sup>.

## 5. Conclusion

As the influence of popular feminism has expanded in recent years, the changing and developing direction of K-pop, a product of the visibility economy, is more closely related to the development of feminism than one might imagine. However, the production of biased content for the sake of popularity and profitability often reinforces gender stereotypes in the opposite direction. Looking at other artistic productions, Japanese artist Akko Gorilla posts on Instagram without shaving her armpits. It is possible for women to show their refusal to manipulate their bodies based on male-dominated aesthetic norms, such as not shaving body hair. While the artistic expression of "Nxde" speaks of women's liberation, instead of sexually portraying themselves to appeal to men, it is worth considering starting from a more pure perspective, such as going without makeup or a bra, to express "nude freedom."

As an introduction book or guide, popular feminism sometimes plays a role in inspiring people. After "Nxde" became popular, many women began to accuse the sexual harassment they had received on TikTok using the "nxde" hashtag and the last lyrics ("I was born naked, And you're the pervert"), forming the "hashtag feminism" movement of "Nxde." This can actually be seen as a positive development. I look forward to the emergence of high-quality feminist content in the future.

With the development of popular feminism and the awakening of women's consciousness, along with relatively successful attempts at popular feminism such as "tomboy" and "nxde," in recent years, women's sense of agency and feminist-related topics have been increasingly appearing in the K-pop industry. The portrayal of various girl groups has also shifted from "becoming objects of heterosexual identification" to "becoming objects of same-sex identification." Paradoxically, while girl groups are rushing to align themselves with the Girl Crush concept, Girl Crush itself has become solidified as a specific style, becoming rigid and boring. For example, in terms of clothing, there is a heavy use of hard materials such as leather, denim, and metal to convey a sense of strength, while in music, there is a tendency to use hip-hop styles and extensive rap to express rebellion. Women's subjectivity has become a cheaply produced commodity, and as long as you piece together some popular elements and add some energetic songs and hot dances, you can easily make the idols on stage "appear to have subjectivity."

But can this commodification of women truly produce women's sense of agency? Are the works of idols, and even the idols themselves, calling for women's subjectivity, promoting and enlightening the consciousness of women fans' subjectivity, or are they a beautiful lie in a patriarchal society? Questions about the entire industry and society are expected to be further explored.

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