



‘Fierce Girls, Flower Guys’: The Discursive Representation of Gender Identities through English in K-pop Lyrics

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ABSTRACT

K-pop music has enjoyed growing popularity in the global market over the years, resulting in research on the industry in various sociocultural aspects. Among these is its high relevance to gender norms and identities, which has been approached in analyses of several K-pop music components, including corporate practices, costumes and choreography. However, little attention has been paid to the language of its lyrics. At the same time, a huge literature on discourse and gender, which is constituted by studies on a wide range of text types, seems to fall short in research on lyrics as a gendered discourse. The present study therefore seeks to fill these gaps by analyzing English parts of K-pop lyrics performed by girl groups and boy bands to investigate how male and female identities are

	represented to international audience. For this purpose, contemporary K-pop lyrics that contain English, launched in 2023-2024, were collected. The English parts of the data were processed by corpus software to extract common words that constitute the texts. It is found that first- and second-person pronouns and determiner are among the top-10 most frequent lexis in the English parts. They were analysed qualitatively in terms of transitivity and collocational patterns. Their textual patterns point to the ways gender stereotypes are debunked in English parts of the given lyrics, e.g. women represented as powerful, assertive, confident, and taking control of the relationship and men as desperately love-struck, vulnerable and submissive. Keywords: K-pop, lyrics, gender identities, discourse analysis, transitivity analysis
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Introduction

The past decade has witnessed a remarkable rise of K-pop culture to international prominence. Entering the global market with Wonder Girls' debut on the Billboard Hot 100 in 2009, K-pop music did not experience significant international success until October 2017, when BTS reached No. 7 on the Billboard charts with their album *Love Yourself: Her*, breaking into the American music industry known for being notoriously difficult to penetrate (Thomas, 2018). In recent years, various K-pop groups have consistently held sold-out world tours and been invited to perform at prestigious international music festivals.

Along with the surge in global popularity, the significant use of English as a lingua franca in recent K-pop songs, with more than 50% or, in some cases, even a total 100% of the lyrics, has become more common. This not only allows producers and performers to interact with the world but also to constitute the K-pop culture as an emerging "third space", a grand platform for culture hybridization and transformation where cultural identities are contested and evolved (Bhabha, 1994).

An important aspect of "cultural identities" constructed via the inclusion of English in K-pop lyrics relates to gender representation. Against the backdrop of gender inequity in the Korean society, the K-pop music industry's tendency to exploit binary gender distinction in the creation of idols, e.g. as girl groups and boy bands, and the world's growing interest in gender equality, the present study seeks to investigate how male and female gender identities are represented through the use of English in K-pop lyrics. This is hoped to contribute to a deeper understanding of the interplay

between language, gender, and K-pop in the context of global cultural exchange.

The paper is structured as follows. Background information about gender, discourse and the K-pop music industry is first provided before data collection, methods and analytical frameworks are described. Then, results are reported and discussed, followed by concluding remarks.

Literature Review

Gender, Language, Discourse and Lyrics

The term *gender*, unlike *sex*, which refers to the biological characteristics, expresses the view that being male and female is “socially or culturally learned, mediated or constructed” (Sunderland, 2004: 14). This socio-culturally constructionist view entails that gender is enacted, accomplished and produced through language (Sauntson, 2020). One can employ language to assert one’s gender identity or challenge social expectations by developing particular speech features and building personal gender images (Mendoza-Denton et al., 2008)

The relationship between language and gender has been approached from several perspectives. Among these are the focus on language use by different gender groups. For example, it was argued that “women’s language” was less vulgar, more emotional and supportive, with less swearing, weaker expletives, more empty adjectives, adverbs, tag questions, hedges and rising intonations (Lakoff, 1975). These features are linked to patriarchal ideologies and hegemonic gender hierarchies, in which women held subordinate social status (Tannen, 1990).

Another central approach to the relationship between gender and language is discourse analysis. Based on the idea that gender is socioculturally situated, looking at discourse – what people do with language in their speaking and writing – is particularly relevant to the topic of gender and language. Discourse can reflect not only how speakers and writers position themselves and their interlocutors in terms of gender but also how people, entities and activities, e.g. girls, boys, cooking, parenting, etc., are perceived with regards to gender. As suggested by Sunderland (2004), the focus of discourse analysis in relation to gender encompasses both gender identities of language users and one’s beliefs about gender. This corresponds to the systemic functional linguistic view that language is functional at the interpersonal and ideational levels (Halliday & Matthiesen, 2014). A large number of studies illustrate this inseparability between discourse and gender, covering a wide range of text types, e.g. classroom discourse (Akther, 2023), magazines (e.g. Talbot, 1995), news (e.g. Caldas-Coulthard, 1995),

advertisements (e.g. Kniazian, 2014) and children's literature (Čermáková & Mahlberg, 2022)

Within a large literature on gender and discourse, little could be found on the relationship between gender and song lyrics, a distinctive kind of language use with specific forms and purposes. The few existing studies tend to focus on the ways lyrical contents feature gender dichotomy, stereotypes and sexist discourse (e.g. Anglada-Tort et al., 2021; Dukes et al., 2003). For example, males in lyrics are found to be depicted as independent, confident, demanding, and even aggressive but females are often positioned in a role subordinate to males, dependent, submissive, supportive and exploitive (e.g. Hall et al., 2012), degraded as the possession of males or sex objects, hungry for love and willing to satisfy male appetites (Jhally, 2007). Betti et al. (2023) observe that in lyrics males and females are rigidly connected and assigned to different domains and scenes: math-and-science-related words are found to be associated with males, conjuring up an image of resourceful elite, while words describing females are restricted to art and family affairs.

Several factors account for this tendency for stereotyped gender representation in lyrics. Among these are music genres. Rap has consistently been reported to be particularly loaded with hegemonic masculinity, misogyny and female degradation, producing and legitimizing persistent hypersexually aggressive and violent objectification of women (Grönevik, 2013). Moreover, rap lyrics are found to typically contain references to sexually objectifying narratives of females as a way to assert status for power differentials (Carbone et al., 2024). Other genres, including Pop, Country, R&B, Rock & Roll, are found to be less likely to contain negative depictions of hypermasculinity or hyperfemininity. Pop music, in particular, is argued to depict women in a more positive way and provide space for feelings and vulnerability, where women could be as active as men, while men take the role of being love-sick, dependent and possessive of partners (Krasse, 2019).

Also, traits of artists, including gender identities and races, are also observed to relate to gender representation in lyrics. Since 1990s, male and female artists have been found to show higher similarities in expressions and lexical distributions in lyrics (El Sanyoura & Xu, 2020). Also, female artists' lyrics have been found to contain more rebellious and feminist messages, voicing discontent and struggles for empowerment and sexual liberation (Krasse, 2019). Nonetheless, self-objectification in female artists' song lyrics is reported as more common than their male counterparts', with emphasis on physical attractiveness and hyperfeminine attributes under conventional beauty standards (Avery et al., 2017). Also, larger fractions of lyrics by male artists, especially non-white ones, are found to contain more sexist contents (Smiler et al., 2017). The explicit descriptions of body parts and sexual behaviors, common in rap lyrics by black and brown male artists, are viewed

as a marker for stronger power relations, diffusing neoliberal ideologies of hegemonic masculinity and objectification and, thus, reinforcing patriarchal hierarchies (Carbone et al., 2024). In contrast, lyrical contents by female artists tend to be more gender neutral and address romantic relationships. Finally, black and brown female artists are found to prefer markers of success and social capital, rather than sexualized scenes involving the male gaze (Avery et al., 2017).

Against the backdrop of previous studies exemplified above, it seems that research on discourse of song lyrics has primarily concentrated on certain music genres and white or black artists. Virally prevalent as K-pop has been, studies are scant on K-pop lyrics performed by idol groups—East-Asian brown artists who produce lyrics in the form of pop music. The present study seeks to contribute to research on language and gender by examining gender representation in English parts of K-pop lyrics. The focus on English is premised upon the fact that consumers of K-pop are audiences worldwide, not limited to Korean speakers. Paying particular attention to English parts in the songs can shed light on how K-pop lyrics contribute to gender dynamics in the globalized world.

Gender Equity in South Korea and the K-pop Industry

Gender equity in South Korea can be characterized by a significant gap between men and women. Despite the introduction of neoliberal policies following the Seoul Olympics in 1988 and the influence of the *MeToo* Movement since the late 2010s, patriarchal ideologies and hierarchies continue to dominate the Korean society (e.g. Manek, 2023; You and Shin, 2022). Specifically, Korean women are subjected to severe scrutiny based on appearance, both in domestic and social spheres (Yoon, 2022). This materializes the concept of the male gaze, where men are positioned as spectators and women are objectified and sexualized as "petty, sexy-yet-submissive, non-threatening dolls" (Lin & Rudolf, 2017, 31). Additionally, Korean women face a higher rate of sexual violence and harassment in the workplace, with 11% of female employees reporting incidents compared to 3.4% of male employees (Tan, 2023). Furthermore, Korean women experience significant professional inequality, as evidenced by a substantial wage gap (₩57.55 million for women versus ₩78.06 million for men), a lower employment rate (60.0% for women versus 76.9% for men), and stereotyped occupational segregation accompanied by a "femininity-less valuable" bias (South Korean Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, 2023).

Such differentiations also apply to the K-pop industry, dominated by a few leading production companies: SM, YG, JYP, and HYBE. These companies are notably market-capitalism-oriented, exercising overwhelming

top-down control by producing and tailoring idol groups to cater to specific market niches. The commercialism and the industry's idol-production system have long been criticized for sustaining rigid gender binaries and sexual norms (Safitrie & Rukmayadi, 2022).

The “manufacturing” of idols has established “set gender prototypes” that highlight exemplary figures. Idols are essentially trained to (1) possess “all-round media entertainers’ capabilities”, not restricted to singing and dancing, (2) achieve a camera-friendly appearance and body shape, often through plastic surgery, and (3) be submissive enough to adhere to company-arranged images. These images range from innocent schoolboys or girls, seductive and sassy girl-crush types, to rebellious and masculine beast-boy types (Hong, 2014; Oh, 2023), aiming to make the audience feel empowered, overjoyed, and visually satisfied (Laurie, 2016).

However, the growing recognition of gender equality has been influential to the production of K-pop idols. First, the increasing visibility of feminism has led to the creation of ‘unconventional’ female identities. In 2009, the androgynous female performer Amber Liu made her groundbreaking debut as a member of the girl group F(X), marked by her unique coolness and liminality, characterized by short hair and loose tanks and trousers. This was considered a bold attempt to challenge gender binaries and a signal of a cultural shift that empowered the K-pop female audience to identify with “free-thinking independence” (Martin, 2003: 272). More recently, the K-pop idol system has witnessed the rise of the *Girl Crush* (썸언니: ssen unni) concept, popularized by such artists as BoA, CL, and Lee Hyori *Blackpink*, *Mamamoo*, and *(G)I-DLE* in the past two decades. As its Korean name “썸언니” (literally “strong sisters”) suggests, the *Girl Crush* concept is characterized by powerful, direct, and occasionally tomboyish or provocative traits (Chang, 2020), presenting a stark contrast to traditional female images in patriarchal contexts. It rejects infantilization, lookism, and hyper-sexualization by incorporating dress codes such as sports sweaters and fishnet stockings (Kelley, 2018), and even promotes “passionate friendship” between females (Blakemore Evans, 1996, p. 221). The concept represents a feminist voice in the K-pop industry.

While the *Girl Crush* concept stands out as the predominant female identity projection among K-pop girl groups and artists, male performers have a broader spectrum of identities, notably the *Beast Boy* and *Flower Boy*. The former refers to projection of male idols with tough and traditionally masculine personalities, aligning with patriarchal values. In contrast, the *Flower Boy* concept frames male idols with an effeminate appearance, typically adorned with makeup, jewelry, unisex clothing, and displays of vulnerability and liminal masculinity (Oh, 2023). Despite not conforming to traditional

gender norms, the *Flower Boy* projection has steadily gained popularity in both local and global markets. To meet local audience preferences, some companies even enforce a boyishly slender and fresh image on their idols, rather than a muscular one (Choi, 2020).

Balancing the “Flower” and “Beast” boy identities becomes particularly challenging in the global market, especially within the Western music industry, where Asian men are often problematized, demasculinized, emasculated, and devalued (Park et al., 2006). The *Flower Boy* image, which aligns with the stereotyped Asian male identities, elicits conflicting reactions from western audiences (Martin, 2018). This in a way leads to a new concept of *Versatile masculinity* in the K-pop industry, a hybrid form of masculinity that incorporates traits of both the “Beast” and “Flower” boys, along with an element of *kawaii* (cuteness), which could serve as an ideal identity projection to penetrate the global market (Thomas, 2018). However, determining the optimal blend of these traits for the versatile version remains an open question, necessitating further empirical investigation.

Finally, apart from the companies and artists, K-pop fans represent another central component of K-pop culture and the depiction of gender representation in the realm. The non-conforming masculinity of K-pop idols not only articulates androgynous traits for the idols themselves but also creates a space that “allows fangirls to bravely and openly negotiate their own gender identification” (Bozza, 2020), freeing them from the need to take a patriarchal female image (Maynard & Gilson, 2021). Additionally, the original power dynamics between males and females is reversed, empowering the female gaze (Lee et al., 2020) and facilitating the emergence of hegemonic femininity and, correspondingly, submissive masculinity. The idea of hegemonic femininity emerges from the development of feminist capitalism, in which male idols show vulnerability and inferiority to female audiences in order to win their love and (financial) support. This is achieved by positioning the audience in the role of offering and taking control of the singers’ feelings and bodies. (Choi, 2020). In the “third space” of K-pop, male idols’ labor conditions, appearances, and behaviors are specifically subjected to their fangirls’ scrutiny, leading to pervasive subversion of the relationship between (hegemonic) female fans and (subordinated) male idols.

Based on the above conceptual fundamentals, it can be seen that gender identity is a central issue in the creation and operation of the K-pop music industry. Although it has received a great deal of attention in cultural studies, it has not been approached from a linguistic perspective as to how language plays a role in the construction of gender identities in the K-pop arena even though, as explained earlier, language is integral to gender representation. For this reason, the present study aims to fill the gap by

investigating functional contributions of English to the representation of gender identities in K-pop lyrics as part of its popularization to the globe.

The study addresses the following research questions:

1. What are common lexical items in English parts of K-pop lyrics that might be associated with representation of gender identities? What lexicogrammatical patterns are associated with them?
2. How do the identified common lexical items and their patterns contribute to representation of male and female identities in K-pop lyrics?

Methodology

Data and Methods

The present study focuses exclusively on English lines in the lyrics sung by K-pop idol groups, excluding original soundtracks, songs performed by music bands or solo singers, and those specially made for commercials or in collaborative projects with Non-Korean artists. To maximize the representativeness of lyrical data, they were collected only from title tracks in either albums of idol groups launched by SM, JYP, YG, and HYBE, or those from other companies that have hit the top 200 on Billboard, such as those by (G)I-DLE, KISS OF LIFE, ZEROBASEONE. This is to ensure the quality of international popularity of the songs compiled for the study. Also, to provide an up-to-date picture, the lyrics collected are those launched on May 1, 2023 – May 31, 2024. It must be noted that four K-pop songs that contain 100% English lyrics were also put in the corpus since they meet the abovementioned criteria. Based on these, a total of 75 title tracks, 34 by female and 41 by male idol groups, were collected, amounting to 25,918 tokens. In order to find out if there are any similarities and differences between lyrics sung by male and female idols, the lyrics were categorised and saved in two separate files, one containing lyrics performed by boy bands (henceforth BB) and the other by girl groups (henceforth GG). Details about the datasets are provided in Table 1 with the names of songs and artists in the Appendix.

Table 1

Data Information

	Token	Number of songs	Number of artists
BB	13,223	41	21
GG	13,049	34	17

Each dataset was then processed through an en-suite corpus software called AntConc (Anthony, 2024). To answer the research questions, we first ran a wordlist of each file to find out what English words are common in each dataset. As pointed out by Gillings et al. (2023), high-frequency words can give us some indication as to the discursive representations prevalent in the data under investigation. In the present study, because the majority of the data is Korean, a frequency list of each corpus enabled us to objectively identify English words that occur frequently to create meanings in K-pop lyrics. Some of the most common English words were then selected for qualitative analysis, in which we apply the concepts of transitivity (Halliday & Mathiessen, 2014) and collocation, to identify lexicogrammatical patterns associated with them and describe how these repeated words and their patterns contribute to meanings related to gender identities.

Analytical Frameworks for Qualitative Analysis

Two major concepts were employed as analytical frameworks for a qualitative analysis of lexicogrammatical patterns associated with frequent words extracted from GG and BB: *transitivity* and *collocation*. The former focuses on grammatical and the latter on lexical relationships between lexical items. Apparently, they may seem to address different aspects of linguistic patterns but in fact they are related and complementary in highlighting the pattern-meaning relationship in language use. As will be explained in detail below, transitivity illustrates that a grammatical construction is not simply a structural formation but also functional in meaning creation and collocation demonstrates that meaning does not come from the focus on individual words alone but from the ways they relate to each other.

Transitivity

The concept of *transitivity* is widely used as an analytical tool in discourse analysis. According to Halliday (2002, p. 181), transitivity is “the set of options whereby the speaker encodes his experience of the processes of the external world, and of the internal world of his own consciousness”. In this sense, language is viewed as a set of meaning-making resources that could be chosen and exploited by users for message transmission. The concept is thus useful in discourse analysis for investigating the ways a clause is used to represent the language user’s mental picture of ‘reality’, which involves particular entities, states and events (Goatly & Hiradhar, 2016). Transitivity involves the selection of: (1) process, i.e. the goings-on central to situations, (2) participants, i.e. characters involved within the process, and (3) their attendant circumstances, such as space, time, manner, etc. The transitivity

components thus operate on a syntactic level through vocabulary classification and clause grammar (Mills, 1995).

In the present study, four major processes are largely involved in the analysis of textual patterns associated with common English words in GG and BB lyrics. First, the Material Process, the process of doing, answers the question of “what happened” or “who/what acts (on whom/what)”. The participant responsible for the action is *Actor*, the one that exerts influence on the situation, and the other participant in the process is the *Affected* (sometimes called *Goal*), those affected by the action or event. An example of this is: *I* [Actor] *kiss* [Material Process] *you* [Affected/ Goal].

Second, the Verbal Process is the process of saying. There are multiple participants in the process, ranging from the Sayer, i.e. those that perform the Verbal process, the Target, i.e. the addressee to whom the process is directed, and the Verbiage, i.e. what is said. The following sentence illustrates the Verbal Process clause: *He* [Sayer] *said* [Verbal process] *that* [Verbiage] *to me* [Target].

Third, the Mental Process is the process of sensing, e.g. *see*, *think*, and *fear*. The Mental process is internalized by the *Sensor*, the conscious being that senses. What is perceived, reacted internally or thought about is called the Phenomenon. An example of these are: *I* [Sensor] *love* [Mental Process] *you* [Phenomenon].

Fourth, the Relational Process, the process of being, describes the participants in terms of states or conditions and the relationship between two entities or one entity and its attributes. The involved participants are *Token* and *Value*, with the former referring to the topic of the clause occurring first in the structure and the latter to a description or comment about the topic, e.g. *I* [Token] *am* [Relational Process] *tired* [Value].

Collocation

The term *collocation* was coined by J.R. Firth (1957, p. 11) to indicate the importance of the common co-occurrence of particular words: “You shall know a word by the company it keeps”. Further developments lead to various definitions of collocation. Some focus on the aspect of adjacency within a text (e.g. Sinclair, 1991) while others stress statistical measures of strength of co-occurrence between words (e.g. Hoey, 1991). In this study, we adopt the grammatical approach to collocation, focusing on co-occurring lexical items that also have grammatical relations, e.g. *my world* and *your point*. These grammatical combinations, however, do not necessarily have a remarkably strong “sense of belonging together” and thus may be considered as free combinations (Kennedy, 1990, p. 224). However, this grammatical approach is particularly useful for the present study because it allows for a clear scope

of focus on textual patterns and meaning potentials associated with a determiner, one of the function words frequently found in the data.

Results

In this section, we first report and briefly discuss high-frequency English words in K-pop lyrics to answer the first research question on common linguistic patterns in English parts of K-pop lyrics. Then, some predominant lexical items are investigated qualitatively to answer the other research question regarding the relationship between common patterns and gender identities in recent K-pop lyrics.

High-frequency English Words in K-pop Lyrics

Based on the wordlists yielded by AntConc illustrated in Table 2 below, it can be seen that personal pronouns (*I, you, it* and *me*) and a determiner (*my*) are among the top 10 most frequent words in both corpora. The predominance of the personal pronouns points to the dialogic style of English parts of the lyrics. Although they are function words, which may be seen as more attributed to the stylistic aspect of the songs, the fact that they are very common in both corpora, whether as individual words or as a linguistic category (pronouns), suggests that they are major English linguistic features used for meaning making in the songs.

Table 2

Top 10 Most Frequent Words in GG and BB

No.	GG		BB	
	Word	Frequency	Word	Frequency
1	i	543	you	340
2	you	427	i	291
3	it	242	it	251
4	a	184	oh	214
5	my	181	la	208
6	m	178	me	175
7	oh	166	my	150
8	me	154	yeah	149
9	la	153	that	146
10	yeah	153	to	116

Nevertheless, the two corpora differ in some respects in terms of the predominance of pronouns. While the second-person pronoun *you* tops BB, the first-person pronoun does in GG. This points to a tendency in which GG

focuses on the speaker while BB on the addressee of the utterances. To shed more light on this disparity and its relevance to gender representations, the first- and second-person pronouns and determiner are selected for qualitative analysis through the lens of transitivity analysis and collocation. The third-person pronoun *it*, however, was not chosen for further investigation in this paper because its textual functions are too complex to be dealt with within limited space; they are used to refer to anaphoric and cataphoric antecedents and as an empty subject in a clause. Also, other words that occur in the top 10 most frequent words are not chosen for qualitative analysis here even though they seem to distinguish the two corpora, e.g. the indefinite article in GG and the words *that* and *to* in BB, because, upon reading their textual context, they are not relevant to the research questions about discursive representation of gender identities.

It is worth noting here that keyword analysis, a corpus-based statistical approach to lexical items and their textual importance, is not adopted in this paper due to the small size of our English data and the bilingual Korean-English nature of our datasets. Extraction of high-frequency words from each dataset is deemed an adequate starting point for identification of common regularities in English parts in our K-pop lyrical data.

Qualitative Analysis of First- and Second-Person Pronouns and Determiner in English Parts of K-pop Lyrics

First-Person Pronouns and Determiner

This section looks at textual patterns and meanings associated with the pronouns *I*, *me* and the determiner *my* in English K-pop lyrics, respectively.

The Pronoun I

The transitivity analysis reveals that the pronoun in GG and BB is largely associated with different patterns of processes, contributing to distinct gender identities that, crucially, debunk gender stereotypes in the patriarchal order. First, a number of material processes position *I* in GG as an agent of changed conditions, physical contact, or actions involving force or even violence, e.g. *make*, *break*, *bite*, *hurt*, *kiss*, *rip*, *shoot* and *touch*. This constructs the speaker in GG as a powerful woman confident with and in control of her actions, as illustrated below:

(that's my body, that's my body)
Pull up and I rip it up like ballet (yeah, yeah)
Damn, I really make it look easy (damn, I really make it look easy)
Yuh, know that I make it look easy
(*Easy*, LE SSERAFIM)

Moreover, several material processes of *I* in GG occur in negation, especially with *never*, or with modal auxiliaries that express the speaker's strong intention (not) to do something. For example:

I'll make all of my own dreams come true, ooh-ooh-ooh
(*Puppet Show*, XG)
Who's gonna stop me
That's a topic for another day
You could love or hate
Baby, I will never change my ways
(*Bubble*, STAYC)
I am the top, super lady (oh-oh-oh)
I never lose, yeah ('cause got a superpower)
I am a god, super lady (oh-oh-oh)
I never die, [...]
(*Super Lady*, (G)I-DLE)

On the other hand, material processes associated with *I* in BB are often those of movement or gestures, including *go*, *fly*, *jump*, *keep on chasing*, *running*, *speeding*, *move*, *stand*. These verbs are usually used in BB to point to body language that expresses the speaker's longing for love, as illustrated below.

속는 셈 치고 babe, give a minute (give a minute)
(Take a chance on me, babe)
Pedal to the metal I'm speeding
(*U*, IKON)
You better watch it
Where you go, I'll go
(*Watch it*, THE BOYZ)

Even material processes that designate the speaker's role in changing a situation also point to the speaker's sentimental actions to please the girl, e.g. *I'm bringing party to you. Hope you ready? Ready*. Also, a number of material processes of *I* in BB co-occur with *can't*, suggesting the speaker's inability due to his love for the girl; for instance:

You drive me crazy
And I can't control it

(*King Kong*, TREASURE)

Baby, I want you and hurt you
I can't go without you

(*Watch it*, The BOYZ)

All these patterns contribute to the portrayal of submissive sentimental males, which challenges the patriarchal hierarchy.

Verbal processes of *I* in the two corpora show patterns that correspond to the above findings from material processes. Those found in GG are mainly neutral verbal processes, including *tell*, *talking*, and *say*, with an exception of *warn*, which suggests more power on the side of the speaker, e.g.:

I warned you with a single touch, boy

도망쳐봐, 어차피 날 벗어날 수 없어

(Run away, you can't escape me anyway)

(*Midas Touch*, KISS OF LIFE)

However, those in BB, apart from the same neutral speech verbs as those in GG, are verbal processes that position the speaker as less powerful in the communication, such as *swear*, *promise*, and *testify*. This is illustrated below:

Screamin', I'll testify that
We'll survive the test of time
They can't deny our love
They can't divide us
We'll survive the test of time
I promise I'll be right here
Standing next to you

(*Standing Next to You* – JUNG KOOK)

Next, looking at mental processes associated with *I* in both datasets, we have found a relatively more subtle construction of gender identities in the lyrics. On surface, both corpora share similar patterns, containing cliché mental verb phrases including, *I love you*, *I want you* and *I need you*. Within the apparent similarity, however, lie some differences, which further points to the reversal of gender stereotypes. A case in point is found with the mental processes *want* and *need*. In GG, several instances of these two processes are followed by pronouns and the to- infinitive, constructing demands by the Sensor *I*. This signals the Sensor's power over the Phenomenon, as exemplified below:

It ain't game over 'til I say so, got it?
Automatic when I want for it to please me
Might just make you do the things I want you to (want you to)
(Puppet Show, XG)

By contrast, all cases of *I want* and *I need* in BB are followed by the Phenomena or Circumstance related to girls, projecting the identity of *I* as a man stuck in love, e.g. *I want it all with you*, *All I want is you*, *I need you now*, and *You're all that I need*.

This is also the case with the phrase *I wanna*. In GG emerge a range of wishes the speaker says, e.g. *I really wanna stay all day with you*, *And I wanna go out with you*, *I wanna dash – I wanna run it*, and *I wanna kick*. On the other hand, the phrase in BB demonstrates only the love-related wish by males, consistently representing the speaker as a man desperately in love, for instance:

I wanna get it
Wanna get some more (Break it down now)
This is what we came for, came for
Now we gotta get our game on
(King Kong, TREASURE)

There are also mental process patterns idiosyncratic to each corpus, which contribute to distinct gender identity constructions between the two corpora. In GG, there are several negated instances of the phraseology [*I* + mental process], e.g. *I don't care*, *I don't like that*, *I don't need them*, and *I don't want to*. This pattern helps project the speaker as a confident woman who gives a direct explicit refusal or denial, sometimes despite her vulnerability, as illustrated below:

Let 'em talk, let 'em hate
I don't care, I'm not afraid
(Bubble, StayC)
Finally I know that you're mine
I don't want to fall
Don't wanna play this game of love, oh-eh-oh
There's nowhere to hide
(You and Me - JENNIE)

In BB, in addition to the processes *want* and *need*, the mental process that also emerges across several songs is *feel*, and the verb is also used as part of the construction of a love-sick male lover, e.g.:

I was lost like a child
 비로소 진실을 봤어, yeah
 (I finally saw the truth, yeah)

And I feel so alive
 내 몸의 growing pains
 (Growing pains all over my body)
 Feels like I'm on fire
 (*Chasing that Feeling*, Tomorrow X Together)

Finally, findings from the relational process correspond to those in other process types presented so far. Considering meanings of different Values associated with *I* in GG, multiple female identities are constructed. Some conform to the traditional feminine type characterised by humility, vulnerability or inconfidence with such expressions as *super shy*, *not flawless* and *in trouble*. This is only marginal, however. The dominant semantic group depicts female speakers as the powerful or even the bad girls, breaking stereotypes of femininity in the patriarchal order, with such descriptions as *super lady*, *controller*, *a villain*, *a baddie*, *savage* and *toxic*. The predominance of such qualities of *I* reflects the abovementioned concept of Girl Crush, which resists or challenges the long-rooted conventional ideal of femininity. Also, a number of Values come in negation forms, e.g. *not Cinderella type*, *fearless*, *not afraid*, *not scared*, *untouchable* and *unforgiven*. This can be seen as a linguistic denial of conventional assumptions about femininity. These patterns are illustrated in an extended context below. Given that these findings are English parts embedded in Korean songs, it can be said that these patterns serve to articulate competing discourses about womanhood crafted from Korea to the globe.

Unforgiven I'm a villain I'm a
 Unforgiven 난 그 길을 걸어
 Unforgiven I'm a villain I'm a
 새 시대로 기억될 unforgiven
 (*Unforgiven*, LE SSERAFIM)

In BB, findings from analysis of relational processes of *I* are also in line with other process types, pointing to the subversion of masculinity in the patriarchal system. A majority of Values associated with *I* highlight the soft submissive vulnerable identities of men, as reflected by such expressions as *crazy*, *soft*, *lost*, *falling*, *stuck*, *so dumb*, and *addicted to you*. This type of male identity is also constructed via locative expressions in the phraseological pattern: [I +

BE + prep/ adverbial phrase denoting places]. The pattern is used to indicate where the speaker is or wishes to be, notably in close proximity with the girl he loves; for instance: *I'll always be with you*, *When I should be in your bed* and *It's okay-here I am*. Nevertheless, expressions that materialize a discourse on masculine hegemony, though marginal in the data, can also be found, namely those that construct a threatening male identity, such as *killa*, *a warning sign* and *fire*, and those suggesting the speaker's superiority, e.g. *limited edition*, *the king*, *the brightest star* and *best of best on first class*.

The Pronoun 'Me'

The pronoun in both datasets occurs with a variety of process types but mainly in the imperative structure. A number of *me* instances are made to elicit expressions of love for the speaker, e.g. *Come and kiss me*, *Just love me like that* (BB) or *Hold me tight*, *Bring me the spark*, *Got me feeling otherworldly tonight* (GG). However, the imperatives in GG and BB tend to have different uses, which in turn provides more evidence in support of the representations found with *I*.

In GG, *me* occurs not only as part of directives to elicit expressions of love from the guy but also to challenge him, to exert power over or rebellion against him, as well as to express the speaker's wishes for independence, as exemplified here: *Call me superlady*, *Catch me if you can*, *Don't chase me*, *Cry me a river*, *Follow me*, *Give me the freedom*, *Just leave the whole thing up to me*, *Treat me like a lady*, *Come try me*, *Come on watch me shine* and *Come and take a ride with me* (*I got a credit card and some good company*). This kind of discourse also emerges with utterances with *me* that are not imperatives, particularly with the verb *stop*, e.g. *No one can stop me*, *Nothing gonna stop me* and *Who's gonna stop me* [*That's a topic for another day*]. Finally, even when the speaker does not win or has lost a guy's love, her confidence and self-assurance are also expressed through utterances with the pronoun *me*, for instance:

[...]
Was never sure if I loved you
But I was always sure you wouldn't love me back

I got better things to do with my time
[...]
Aespa, big girls making money
Aespa, you're a number one fan
Now you can only see me at a sold out show
Will I ever go back? (No)

(*Better Things*, AESPA)

In BB, the pronoun occurs repeatedly in imperatives that demands

physical attacks, e.g. *Just come over and bite me*, *Crush me*, *Hit me one more time* and *Tie me*. Such imperatives serve to objectify and represent males as victims willing to be hurt by girls for love. In other cases, where attack-related processes are not the Theme of the imperatives, we find those that position males as particularly desperate, including *Help me now* and *Please don't make me a fool*, with *now* and *please* to intensify the speakers' desperation. These patterns of *me* in BB can be attributed to the idea of hegemonic femininity discussed above.

The Determiner 'My'

The analysis of the predeterminer *my*, unlike that of the above, focuses on its following noun phrase collocates, rather than what processes are represented in association with the word. This is because, unlike the above pronouns, the determiner alone cannot function as a participant in any kind of processes. Instead, it is important to examine what is referred to in the lyrics as belonging to the speaker and what meanings emerge from the collocations.

It is found that both GG and BB share some patterns in common, which point to the genre of love songs: (1) *my* often collocates with the nouns *love* and *life*, e.g. *You're my love*; *Save my life*, (2) it is used to refer to nouns denoting body parts to (metaphorically) talk about the speaker's love, e.g. *Take my hands*, *Look at my heart*, *My heart is burning* (GG), *My heart is going crazy*, *You're in my head*, *You're my adrenaline* (BB). While references to body part nouns are found common across the two corpora, GG exhibits a few 'unconventional' references to body part nouns, which serves to project a non-stereotypical female identity, who makes a bold assertion about her body; for instance:

My boob and booty is hot

Spotlight 날 봐

I'm a star, star, star

퀸카 I'm top

I'm twerkin' on the runway

(*Queencard*, (G)I-DLE)

The above reference to female breasts and bottom, which are generally not referred to explicitly in public discourse, makes a daring assertion about the female body, reflecting a feminist perspective that celebrates the female body as a source of pleasure, fertility, and empowerment, not that of shame, horror or an object for the male gaze for their pleasure. This feminist stance in GG is also echoed through the use of

my in collocation with abstract nouns that convey meanings related to power, confidence and independence, including *my attitude*, *my control*, *my expertise*, *my lead*, *my rights*, *my own decisions*, *my motto*, *my pace* and *my energy*. These phrases contribute to the discursive construction of a strong confident female identity, for instance:

Follow my lead
Just leave the whole thing up to me
My expertise
Yeah, yeah

(*Puppet Show*, XG)

Also, the discourse of girl power is also articulated through the collocation between *my* and noun phrases that denote areas or space, e.g. *my zone*, *my borderline*, *my door*, and references to female friends, e.g. *my girls* and *my girlies*. These phrases contribute to the projection of assertive carefree independent women who value their territories and female company, as illustrated below:

You, little demon in my storyline, don't knock on my door, I'll see you out
(*How sweet*, NEW JEANS)

By the morning, feel like magic
I got all I need, you know nothing else can beat
The way that I feel when I'm dancing with my girls
Perfect energy, yeah, we flawless, yeah, we free
There's no better feeling in the whole wide world
(*Perfect Night*, LE SSERAFIM)

In BB, apart from body part nouns that collocate with *my*, the identity of a lover is variedly contributed by noun phrases from a range of semantic fields, for instance:

If you want me, I'll be there, you're my destination
(*Crush*, ZEROBASEONE)

You're my earth, wind and fire
Earth, wind and fire
(*Earth, Wind and Fire*, BOY NEXTDOOR)

I'm addicted, I'm addicted to you
Umm, my nectar (my nectar)
(*Nectar*, THE BOYZ)

The above illustrations, again, contribute to the major representation of male identities as vulnerable submissive guys who are badly in love with women. Even the same phrases used in both GG and BB can also differentiate male and female identities sharply. Two cases in point are *my name* and *my way*. While the two phrases in BB suggest male vulnerability due

to love, those in GG articulate the voice of a challenging assertive woman who is also in love. This is illustrated below:

BB:

Hi, hello (hello), my name is what you want it to

[...]

I can't go without you

(*Watch it*, THE BOYZ)

불러줄래? 'Cause you're my way

Come on (ooh-ooh, ooh, yeah)

(*In Bloom*, ZEROBASEONE)

GG:

when you say I'm your dream

You don't even know my name, do you?

(*Supershy*, NEW JEANS)

뛰어들 테지 더 뜨겁게, 독하다 해, that's my name

(I'll jump in even hotter and harsher, that's my name)

I never bow on my way, yeah

Lady, lady, call me 'super lady'

(*Super Lady*, (G)I-DLE)

The Second-Person Pronoun 'You'

The above analysis of textual patterns associated with first-person pronouns and determiner reveals different ways gender identities of the speakers are represented in GG and BB. This section examines how gender identities of the addressees in the songs are represented through frequent occurrences of *you*. The use of *you* as the Subject is investigated first and then *you* as the Object and Adjunct.

The Pronoun 'You' as the Subject

Transitivity analysis reveals that the addressee in GG have multiple identities, depending on process types. In the case of Material, Verbal and Mental processes, *you* tends to be projected as equal or inferior to the speaker as he is consistently challenged, warned, or even blamed. In the case of the Material process, which makes up the majority of processes attributed to the Subject *you*, the verbs usually occur with modal auxiliary verbs. These patterns turn the utterances into suggestions or predictions about the addressee's actions. For example:

Hey baby, I'm so toxic
 위험할수록 재밌잖아 It's alright (Alright)
 (The more dangerous, the more fun, It's alright (Alright))
You will end up in my hands my love
 (Midas Touch, KISS OF LIFE)

Through such speech acts, the speaker positions herself as superior to the addressee, echoing the girl power discourse as found in analysis of first-person pronouns. Nevertheless, there are also cases in which *you* are associated with material processes that have impacts upon the speaker; for instance:

You just get my heart pump, pumping
 Every time that you're here around me
 (Bubble Gum, NEW JEANS)

In the case of mental process, the verbs are often used to comment on the addressee's feelings, in turn suggesting the speaker's self-confidence, such as:

I would never do you wrong, you'll regret it when I'm gone
 (Batter Up, BABYMONSTER)
You could love or hate
 Baby, I will never change my ways
 (Bubble, STAYC)

The most common expression in the pattern *you* + *mental process* in GG is the discourse marker *you know*, which is invariably followed by strong assertions made by the speaker. This in turn projects a challenging, some even confrontational, tone to the addressee e.g. You know I'm not scared; You know, I'm savage; You know, nothing else can beat the way I feel and You know, you're in trouble.

On the other hand, the relational process of *you* as the Subject in GG constitutes a different discourse. In the pattern *you* + *BE*, the Values assigned to the addressee are often positive, creating compliments made by the speaker on the addressee, e.g. *You are so special*, *You are the reason my heart skips drops*, and *You're the top*. Nevertheless, negative Values are also found with the relational process of *you*, e.g. *You're trouble right from the start* and *Toxic lover, you're no better*. Also, male's soft identity is also remarked on in GG, e.g. *You're so delicate* and *You're a softie*.

In the case of BB, however, the addressee *you* as the Subject is dominantly represented as more powerful than the speaker through all four types of processes, as illustrated here:

Material process: You drive me crazy; You'll save me; You make me leave my heart out there

Verbal process: You could call me your baby; Oh, you say, "Good night, meet me next life" But where are you now?

Mental process: Hey, can you hear my heartbeat?

Relational process: You're my love, I'm falling (falling); You're my whole life

It should be noted that BB is also full of *you know* but, unlike GG, what follows the phrase tends to be complaints about the speaker's trouble, misfortune, confusion or personality, e.g. *You know I'm stuck on Mars, I'm so dumb, you know*, although a few cases of criticisms on the addressee can also be found, e.g. *You're bad, you know*. Also, like GG, relational processes of *you* in BB represent the addressee in both positive and negative ways, though mainly positively, e.g. *You're all I want, You're all that I need, You're glamorous, dangerous and You're selfish*. It is worth noting that when we look at patterns of *you* in BB, criticisms on girls start to emerge while the girl-power discourse exists dominantly in GG, whether we look at *I* or *you*.

The Pronoun 'You' as the Object

When *you* function as an object in a clause, it tends to represent the addressee as the Goal of material and Phenomenon of mental processes performed by the addresser in both datasets, e.g. *I'll make you mine, This time I want you* and *I might cut you off* (GG); *I found you* (Come to me), *I'll make you scream* and *I'll set you free* (BB). These patterns of *you* indirectly construct the addresser as vulnerable men and women in love or as those with influence over the addressee.

The Pronoun 'You' in Prepositional Phrases

The high frequency of *you* in both corpora, especially in BB where *you* is ranked first, is attributed to its occurrences in prepositional phrases. Frequently repeated patterns in GG are *with you* and those in BB are *for you*. In GG, the phrase adds information that the addressee is (hoped to be) with the speaker in some activities, e.g. *With you, it's a party; I wanna stay all day with you* and *I wanna go out with you*, pointing to a vulnerable side of female identity in GG lyrical discourse. In a similar vein, the phrase *for you* in BB largely contributes to the projection of soft submissive manhood, indicating that the addresser performs an action that benefits the addressee, e.g. *I could've died for you; We throwing party just for you* and *(I) Wrote a thousand songs for you*.

Discussion

While the use of English in contemporary K-pop lyrics, whether partly or entirely, is seen as a way for K-pop artists to respond to globalization and to engage with the world, not just with Korean speakers (Miller et al., 2004), results from the analysis above have shown that predominant patterns of English in K-pop lyrics, realized through high-frequency personal pronouns and their associated lexicogrammatical patterns, also serve as a discursive articulation of resistance in the construction of gender identities. This is aligned with the nature of pop culture, where “power relations are negotiated and contested, with minority popular culture always existing alongside dominant culture” (Hall, 1981). In this case, the domineering patriarchal ideology in the Korean sociocultural context is challenged by reversed versions of masculinity and femininity discursively contributed by English parts in K-pop lyrics. On the one hand, in place of stereotypical softness and vulnerability, the English discourse in GG lyrics constitutes the Girl Crush concept, highlighting hegemonic femininity, with women represented as powerful, assertive, confident, independent and being in control of her relationship. This not only challenges and confronts the patriarchal and male gaze ideology, but also celebrates feminism through linguistic patterns that point to rebellion and pride in the female body and company. As observed by Lee (2004), K-pop girl groups have lavished much energy to show resistance by rejecting the authority and conservative binary gender norms. These findings, especially those related to female artists, tend to align with those found by some of the previous studies discussed in the literature review section, e.g. Krasse (2019) and Avery et al. (2017), as they similarly point to the feminist message articulated through lyrics by female artists. On the other hand, males tend to be discursively represented as ‘Flower Boy’ in English parts of K-pop lyrics, desperately love-struck, vulnerable and even submissive in the relationship, although the discourse that sustains existing gender stereotypes and hierarchies also exists, albeit marginally. It is interesting that the findings related to male identities in the present study seem to diverge from those in previous studies, e.g. Carbone et al. (2024), which suggest strong hegemonic masculinity in male artists’ lyrics. This may be attributed to differences in music genres and races of the artists as the *Flower Boy* identity seems particularly distinctive of the construction of K-pop male idols (see Literature Review).

However, these resistant lyrical discourses may not be instantly embraced as a discursive expression of gender equality. This is because, firstly, however reversed the gender representations may seem, the portrayal still narrates a story wherein one takes control over the other and hence simply

repeats asymmetrical power relations in the patriarchal ideology. In essence, the gender re-construction in GG and BB still sustains the existing focus on hegemony in gender dynamics. Moreover, while the discourse of self-objectification by females found in this study may be seen as an attempt to confront with the male gaze and illustrate initiatives in gender dynamics, it actually relies on the patriarchal premise that women's worth comes from their physical and sexual appearance (Whelehan, 2010), which would add up to the re-articulation and reinforcement of male gaze eventually (Choi, 2020). Finally, the reversal of gender stereotypes in the patriarchal system cannot be simply taken as an effort to reconstruct gender roles but, more or less, a marketing gimmick with a salient commercial motive—differentiated from dominant conservative images to reach a broader audience in the neoliberal era (Lee & Hyangsoon, 2024). This in turn serves to constitute the growing Feminist Capitalism and Celebrity Feminism ideals, which primarily aim to gain commercial success by satisfying female consumers' interests, and attract and maintain a diverse fandom (Steger, 2020).

Conclusion

The present study sets out to enrich research on discourse and gender by analyzing linguistic and textual patterns in English parts of K-pop lyrics, a popular yet underexplored cultural genre performed by non-western artists, in relation to gender identities. As the findings suggest, common transitivity and collocational patterns in the given discourse tend to project gender identities that contrast with dominant gender norms in Korean society and at the same time allow K-pop idols to align themselves with global movements towards gender equality. However, the resistance discourse, as we discussed, still adheres to the idea of unequal power relations between genders and even sustains the domineering patriarchal and capitalist ideologies.

It must be noted, however, that insights from this study are based solely on analysis of lyrics, an artist's one-sided monologue-style performance of a song (Gallee, 2016). Future research may embark on multimodal discourse analysis, integrating textual and audiovisual representations, e.g. lyrics, music arrangements and choreography. Also, because the present study looks at K-pop songs launched recently in a year, the dataset is relatively small and hence not quantitatively dealt with in some aspects, e.g. frequencies and dispersions of different processes and collocations relevant to the pronouns under study, which would give further insights into gender representation through lexicogrammatical patterns in English parts of K-pop lyrics. Future research on this topic could benefit from using a larger dataset and a quantitative approach to patterns associated with first- and second-person pronouns. Finally, since the study focuses exclusively on English parts of K-

pop lyrics, further studies may address the interaction between English and Korean in the songs. Nevertheless, given the growing popularity of K-pop music and current interest in cultural aspects of communication, the focus on English and the complexity of gender-related discourse in K-pop lyrics found in this study can be of relevance to EFL and cultural classes, where language, songs and sociocultural issues can be integrated to promote communicative and cultural competence in English language learning. Also, the music industry, including that of K-pop, might benefit from the present study in seeing what messages have been highlighted to global communities so far and evaluating the extent to which they could impact audience perceptions of gender identities around the world.

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Appendix

Lists of Song Titles and Artists in GG and BB

Female artists (GG)

No.	Artist	Song Title
1	Aespa	Spicy
		Better Things
		Drama
		Supernova
		Armageddon
2	BABYMONSTER	BATTER UP
		SHEESH
3	(G)I-DLE	Queencard
		I DO
4	ILLIT	Super Lady
		Magnetic
5	ITZY	CAKE
		UNTOUCHABLE
6	IVE	Baddie
		HEYA
7	JENNIE (BLACKPINK) ^[1]	You & Me
8	Kep1er	Galileo
		Shhh
9	KISS OF LIFE	Bad News
		Midas Touch
10	LE SSERAFIM	UNFORGIVEN
		Perfect Night
		EASY
11	NewJeans	Super Shy
		Bubble Gum
		How Sweet
12	NMIXX	Party O'Clock
		Soñar (Breaker)
13	Red Velvet	DASH
		Chill Kill
14	STAYC	Bubble
15	tripleS	Girls Never Die
16	TWICE	ONE SPARK
17	XG	PUPPET SHOW

Male Artists (BB)

No.	Artist	Song Title
1	ATEEZ	Crazy Form WORK
2	BOYNEXTDOOR	But I Like You But Sometimes Earth, Wind & Fire
3	D.O. (EXO)	MARS
4	ENHYPEN	Bite Me CRIMINAL LOVE Sweet Venom Fatal Trouble
5	EXO	Cream Soda
6	iKon	U
7	Jung Kook (BTS)	Standing Next to You
8	NCT 127	Fact Check
9	NCT DREAM	ISTJ Smoothie
10	NCT U	Baggy Jeans Get A Guitar
11	RIIZE	Love119 Impossible God of Music
12	Seventeen	MAESTRO
13	SHINEE	HARD
14	Stray Kids	S-Class LALALALA
15	SUHO (EXO)	1 to 3 LIP GLOSS
16	THE BOYZ	WATCH IT Nectar BONA BONA
17	TREASURE	B.O.M.B KING KONG
18	TWS	plot twist
19	TXT	Chasing That Feeling Deja Vu
20	V (BTS)	Slow Dancing FRI(END)S
21	ZEROBASONE	In Bloom CRUSH SWEAT Feel the POP