

The Research on the Portrayal of Soft Masculinity by K-pop Idols on Social Media

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Abstract: As a result of “the Korean Wave,” K-pop as a form of music has flourished over the world. The music genre is also noted for its visual-oriented production, and K-pop boy groups are pointed out for their identifiable aesthetics, which defy hegemonic notions of masculinity. Despite numerous research carried out on the new form of “soft masculinity” that many idols exhibit and how this alternate masculinity will influence society, there is a gap in carrying out specific case-by-case evaluations of idols on how soft masculinity is purposefully performed through social media. This project will hence analyze how a “soft masculine” image is portrayed online with media by conducting in-depth case studies of four popular male idols through three major social media platforms YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok, where official content is released. Patterns were then identified and summarized into findings. Results showed that fashion pieces are soft in color and material, they engage in child-like activities and behaviors, and are more expressive and vulnerable with their emotions. By doing so, they are able to curate an approachable image without completely leaning toward femininity, making them more appealing to female audiences. This alternate form of masculinity has challenged traditional norms, but most fans still recognize soft masculinity as a performed persona for media. In real life, hegemonic masculinity still prevails.

Keywords: k-pop, masculinity, social media, soft masculinity

1. Introduction

Hallyu, translated as “Korean Wave”, is the cultural flourishing of “Korean coolness” via a multitude of South Korean cultural areas, including pop music, cinema, e-sports, and cuisine. Acting as “a new paradigm for culture export” [1], Hallyu first began by influencing neighboring countries China and Japan with the first and second periods with media products followed by Korean celebrities [2]. In its third and current period, the phenomenon of Hallyu has now gained traction globally by successfully breaking through mainstream media with PSYs “Gangnam Style” being the first music video to achieve 1 billion views on YouTube. Over the span of a few decades, Hallyu has drastically altered the international impression of Korea from a war-split nation to a flourishing entertainment powerhouse. It has long become a symbol cultural identity in Asian immigrant groups [3] and can even act as “cultural mediators” between politically hostile communities [4].

One defining characteristic of Hallyu is Korean pop music (K-pop). Short for Korean pop music, K-pop brings together a multitude of musical genres such as hip-hop and R&B. It has a heavy

emphasis on visual presentation instead of its sound and is known for its mechanical training scheme to produce talented idols. It first began with Seo Taiji and the Boys breaking into the Korean market over-saturated with “pop stars... framed and controlled by television and radio... too often filmed standing motionless in bland studios [5]”. By combining Western Hip-hop elements with refreshing choreographies, their provocative appearance managed to last in the youths’ hearts and opened up the genre of K-pop. By the new millennium, K-pop has developed into a full-fledged industry with major entertainment companies such as SM Entertainment, JYP Entertainment, and YG Entertainment who continue to churn out superstars across Korea and Asia such as BoA, Wonder Girls and BigBang with their highly tactical and systematic star-making programs. The heavily visual industry with its attractive stars, choreographies, fashionable clothes coincided with the rise of satellite broadcasting, making it well-suited to this new medium [6]. From then on, K-pop has had a large representation through medias such as television, and more so on social media platforms. Thus, as an integrated industry which blends across mediums of production through media, the transnational hybridity K-pop possesses allows it to be such a global phenomenon [7].

One characteristic about K-pop is its unique aesthetic when it comes to male idols. Male K-pop idols are particularly noticed for their flamboyant hairs, delicate makeup and softer looking features when compared to the traditional macho-man standard usually displayed in media. For example, world-renowned K-pop group BTS’s members can be spotted with pastel hair, clad with jewelry, and are seen to represent skincare brands – all traits traditionally associated with femininity. However, K-pop masculinity was not always like this. In fact, the first K-pop group “Seo Taiji and the boys” chose to distinct themselves by mimicking the styles of western Hip-hop artists [8]. H.O.T, the next most prominent boy group, broke into the industry with multicolored paint strips under their eyes. From their tan skin, relatively bare faces, and street style clothing, the early K-pop aesthetics of K-pop were still derived from Western Hip-hop influences, with famous idols like “Rain” finding inspiration from Usher and 50 Cent [9]. Fast-forward half a decade later, the masculinities of K-pop idols have shifted to encompass certain feminine qualities [8] not just as an aesthetic, but a “new traditional” as a cultural brand [10]. “Tradition one dominated the ideals and expectations for men in South Korean culture. Then the boy bands came along” [8], says David Yi (2020); it is evident that masculinity has become symbolic to the K-pop industry and the Korean cultural brand.

2. Literature Review

Since birth, the male sex comes with a multitude of associated characteristics which most boys are then enculturated into, and males who exhibit those characteristics will be accepted into “normality”. The hegemonic masculinity is a hierarchy of masculinities; it recognizes that not all masculinities are equal, but hegemonic masculinity “holds an authoritative position over other masculinities and will dominate other types in any particular historical and social context” [11]. It is a practice which legitimizes gender inequality as it stresses the subordination of women [12], and men who practice hegemonic masculinity are respected and socially dominant.

Globalization has led to new ideals of hegemony as there is exposure to more forms of masculinity. As the criteria of what it means to be “an ideal man” begin to shift, audiences are becoming more receptive to different masculinities. One arising form of masculinity has been “soft masculinity”. It incorporates more traditionally female traits, such as being more open to expressing emotions [13]. Dubbed as “pan-East Asian soft masculinity” by Jung, this new form of masculinity originates from an amalgamation of South Korea’s “traditional Confucian seonbi masculinity”, Chinese wen-masculinity and Japanese bishonen masculinity [13]. This poses a stark contrast to the hegemonic masculinity, and there is now an alternative ideal of what it means to ‘a man’ among specific groups. Within the Korean context, “soft masculinity” juxtaposes against the hegemonic Korean “militarized-masculinity”: a state discoursed form of masculinity which validates strength and loyalty to the family

and state [14]. The popularity of this ‘new masculinity’ has thus disrupted the “pattern of practice” in hegemonic understandings of gender [15].

Many studies have evaluated the influence on K-pop’s “soft masculinity” and its effects on audiences. Stolze recognizes Kpop’s contribution to re-structuring the concept of masculinity by breaking down the conventional with their “gender-fluid practices” [16]. In an interview with BTS’s fans, they talked about their appreciation for the idols being vulnerable, such as “having intimate talks”, and promoting the theme of “self-love” through their music [17]. These values go against traditional norms of ‘staying tough’ and ‘exerting dominance’, both commonly associated with toxic masculinity. The lack of aggressiveness promoted by soft masculinity thus appeals to the female audience. Coinciding with the rising power of young female consumers in the economic market [18], this allows for “transforming notions of sexual desirability in both men and women”.

However, many scholars agree on the subversive potential of “soft-masculinity” despite it seemingly posing to be a challenge against hegemonic masculinity. Argued by Jeehyun Lee from the University of Washington, Kpop’s soft masculinity is a form of racialized masculinity [19]. For example, the MTV awards added a K-pop category which separates BTS from main awards, yet Canadian and Australian artists were not [20]. In his interview, a male American BTS fan also explains that although he supports “soft masculinity”, he would not identify with it. He believes that “Korean men are generally less masculine compared to American men”, and that he is able to “tolerate” different masculinities [17]. This poses the dilemma that although K-pop has broken into mainstream Western media, they will always be coined as “a temporary foreign novelty rather than a legitimate player” [21]. Thus, this shows that soft masculinity is tolerated and even accepted exactly because it is racialized and otherized, and that being an alternative form of masculinity does not equate being a challenge to the current mainstream masculinity.

The above studies lay out the context of two viewpoints on the effects of soft masculinity on audiences. Although there are many papers conducted on the phenomenon on K-pop’s masculinity and soft masculinity, only a few mentions the intersectionality of male idols’ masculinity in the realm of “mainstream media”, and the conscious reception of K-pop’s soft masculinity as a media personality. This is important for highlighting how “soft masculinity” is specifically presented on social media. By assessing the intersectionality of K-pop’s soft masculinity, this paper aims to raise questions on soft masculinity’s influence on current hegemonic beliefs and invite critical thinking on the shifting hegemonic norms.

3. Methods

This paper aims to investigate the presentation of the K-pop male idol’s “soft masculinity” in media. It will be investigated by observing different spheres of media and analyze how idols are presented and the specific characteristics the idols or the presenters try to emulate. Content observed will include official content, fan content, as well as non-fan content. Official content will include official posts from Instagram, videos from TikTok and YouTube, and even appearances on reality shows. Fan-generated content will include photos/ videos, as well as blog posts edited by fans on social media. As this paper wants to analyze the characteristics of their masculinities from an intersectional point, Western-centric media such as Instagram, TikTok and YouTube will be the main platforms of observation.

To carry out the observation, five male K-pop idols were selected. The selection occurred by choosing one member from the top 4 followed male-group accounts on Instagram: BTS, Stray kids, NCT and TXT. Within those groups, the most searched member is then chosen, this making the following members being the ones analyzed: Jungkook (BTS), Yeonjun (TXT), Hyunjin (Stray Kids) and Jaemin (NCT).

To observe, the idols will be searched on the platforms (Instagram, TikTok and YouTube) where official content will be viewed and analyzed. The specific posts will be chosen to be the five recent posts from October 2022 under their name tag. Thus, around 15 posts/videos would be viewed for each idol. Similar patterns of characteristics and behaviour would then be coded and identified.

4. Results

Observation identified three major commonalities across the four idols. The first commonality is that the fashion pieces are often soft in material and color. For example, clothes that have softer materials such as silk and cotton and knitted materials. Both Jungkook and Jaemin are often seen in larger cardigans and, in the case of Hyunjin and Yeonjun, more androgynous pieces of clothing such as a bodycon cropped tops and sheer cardigans can be seen.

Another trend that is seen is that they are aware of their images and present themselves as charismatic to both fans and team members. However, their ideals for charisma deviate from hegemonic ideals, instead they perform what is deemed attractive for soft masculinity, making them appear more empathetic and approachable. This is seen with Yeonjun complimenting one of his members as “cute” in a YouTube video. It is also shown with “aegyo”, defined as performed winsomeness [22], such as Hyunjin speaking in a high-pitched voice when interacting with his members, Jungkook using the finger heart and Jaemin winked charismatically at the camera. On the other hand, Jungkook has a more “competitive” image, seen with the “fire” effects that are often associated with him in the observed YouTube videos. This shows a conscious effort in reinforcing this trait of his personality. However, his “competitiveness” is non-threatening as it was exhibited over flying yoga, a conventionally female activity.

A third pattern that was observed in the YouTube videos were the range of activities they participated in: flying yoga, pillow fighting, skin routine, letter writing and photography. Much of these activities cannot be deemed strictly feminine, but also do not adhere to hegemonic masculinity. Both flying yoga and pillow fighting involve a display of physical strength, but the activities themselves are non-dominating – this instead creates a playful image for the idols instead, making them seem more approachable to the audience.

5. Discussion

Overall, although K-pop idols do not adhere to the norms of hegemonic masculinity, they do not automatically perform hyper-feminine traits. What ensues is the performance of a mixture: exhibiting masculine traits like “competitiveness” through conventionally childish or feminine activities.

As observed, there is a pattern of wearing clothes with softer, pastel colors that come in more gentle textiles. These trends and stylistic choices are usually associated with feminine traits. However, most pieces of clothing still come in masculine cuts, such as blazers and oversized t-shirts with a broad-shoulder design. As one of the major channels to express sexual identity, the idols have essentially adopted an androgynous style. Doing so makes the idols physically appear more ‘soft’ and ‘gentle’. Meanwhile, there are also more feminine silhouettes of clothing seen on Hyunjin and Yeonjun, yet this androgyny is not linked to homosexuality – instead, these traits appeal to the female gaze as they make the idols appear more vulnerable and subjected to the female gaze.

Another trend that the idols personally perform is their almost child-like personality traits and the activities they partake in. This is seen especially with aegyo, winsomeness traditionally adopted by Korean women to negotiate the imbalance they face in a patriarchal structure [22]. However, when reversed within the setting of the female gaze, the roles are reversed, and the soft masculinity the idols exhibit with their openness to express winsomeness portrays them as vulnerable. Yet, this role reversal is merely an illusion as the appeal women receive is still under a patriarchal framework: the

women gain satisfaction by imagining that they are in a male's position. Partaking in childlike activities also paints them in a more innocent image and reduces the aggression that physical activities may emphasize.

The final trend is the expressiveness of the idols' personalities: many are seemingly unafraid to be vulnerable and empathize with female audiences by engaging in more relatable activities and conversations, such as skincare and complimenting each other. They act in a manner where they are more approachable to the female audience with common topics and interests, thus painting them as more egalitarian.

Yet, despite all the soft masculinity characteristics idols exhibit to make them more popular among female fans, there is still a consensus that it is "too good to be true". Although exposure to soft masculinity has altered perceptions of gender definitions, fans acknowledge that soft masculinity is more for "a stage performance" [23]. Additionally, in an interview asking a white, heterosexual male BTS fan whether he identifies with 'soft masculinity', he claims that although he is not against it, showing soft masculinity in real life would make him appear "less masculine," and he will be an outcast [24]. This reveals that despite being aware of the positivity of soft masculinity, hegemonic masculinity is still seen to be the prevailing norm, as the respondent hesitates to identify with it for fear of losing his own privileges.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, K-pop idols perform characteristics where masculinity is purposefully "watered down" by traditionally childish and feminine activities for a more relatable, egalitarian image. This can be seen with the three patterns found through the observations conducted: softer appearances, child-like behavior, and more emotionally expressive personalities. These traits are neither hyper-masculine nor hyper-feminine but are curated images that specifically appeal to female fans. Idols are thus approachable with their seeming reliability and lack of aggression. As a result, this alternate masculinity has helped many challenge the rigidity surrounding gender concepts. However, many fans are still aware of the limitations of soft masculinity and view it more as a stage persona. When placed in real life, where there is still a general preference for hegemonic masculinity, soft masculinity will still be questioned. Additionally, a false narrative of feminism is created, with female fans believing that there is a reversal of roles in displaying attraction (such as the female gaze). Yet, in reality, the mixture of feminine with childish traits for appeal is still operating under a patriarchal framework.

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