

Conceptually androgynous

The production and commodification of gender in Korean pop music

Petter Almqvist-Ingersoll

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Thesis supervisor: Johanna Overud, Ph. D.

ABSTRACT

Stemming from a recent surge in articles related to Korean masculinities, and based in a feminist and queer Marxist theoretical framework, this paper asks how gender, with a specific focus on what is referred to as *soft masculinity*, is constructed through K-pop performances, as well as what power structures are in play. By reading studies on pan-Asian masculinities and gender performativity - taking into account such factors as *talnori* and *kkonminam*, and investigating conceptual terms *flower boy*, *aegyo*, and *girl crush* - it forms a baseline for a qualitative research project. By conducting qualitative interviews with Swedish K-pop fans and performing semiotic analysis of K-pop music videos, the thesis finds that although K-pop masculinities are perceived as feminine to a foreign audience, they are still heavily rooted in a heteronormative framework. Furthermore, in investigating the production of gender performativity in K-pop, it finds that neoliberal commercialism holds an assertive grip over these productions and are thus able to dictate 'conceptualizations' of gender and project identities that are specifically tailored to attract certain audiences. Lastly, the study shows that these practices are sold under an umbrella of 'loyalty' in which fans are incentivized to consume in order to show support for their idols – in which the concept of *desire* plays a significant role.

Keywords: *Gender, masculinity, commercialism, queer, Marxism*

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INTRODUCTION

Picture a room. High ceiling, large windows, and ornate walls painted in a worn pastel blue. Along these walls we find golden furniture in a baroque style and the wooden floors are partially covered with old, Persian rugs. Then, sweeping in on a swing from our left, his hair barely grazing the floor is a young man in a loose-fitting shirt, tighter pants, and a deep dark choker around his neck. His lipstick is subtle, yet visible, and his eyes are carefully highlighted with eyeliner and mascara¹. This is Jungkook, one of seven members of the popular Korean boy band BTS – or Bangtan Boys – in the music video for their hit song “Blood, Sweat, and Tears”. His looks and the video’s setting may seem foreign to many, but physically (and musically), he is right in tune the rest of his band members – and many other Korean pop-groups. BTS may be particularly popular among fans worldwide but are by no means unique. They are part of a music and fashion movement that has since the mid-90s found an ever-increasing fan base domestically, as well as internationally: K-Pop.

Cut to a new scene. Jungkook is now holding a blue lollipop in his hand, slowly licking his index finger whilst continuously maintaining direct eye contact with the camera². We are here introduced to a transformation from the visible surface to another type of performance. It is corporeal, suggestive, provocative, and something not commonly seen in audiovisual performances in the Western part of the world – at least not in male dominated groups. Indeed, we do not have to look for long to find the same type of sensual gesturing in videos by American artists, such as: Demi Lovato, Miley Cyrus, or Selina Gomez, but, on the other side of the heteronormative gender spectrum, things are a bit more scarce. BTS gender performance is commonplace in Korean pop music and may appear as feminine to the Western world, although as this thesis will scrutinize, by Korean standards this is not at all the case.

What is K-Pop?

When people hear the term “K-pop”, a thought often lands at a generalized interpretation of “Pop” as a specific genre of music. Coming from Korea, it would be safe to assume that the “K” in K-pop was a prefix to the genre, much like the “J” is in its Japanese equivalent.

¹ See Appendix 3:1

² See Appendix 3:2

However, if beginning to explore the term, one will find that Korean Pop is a carefully tailored audiovisual product, designed to be marketable to an as broad audience as possible. Consisting of a wide variety of genres, ranging from hip-hop to country to death metal, K-pop has an inherent capacity to engage a global audience into its commercial project. Similar, perhaps, to the American Disney Channel's business model, Korean record companies now recruit new artists by, among other means, hosting auditions whose target audience are individuals in their young teens, to then train the selected few, now *trainees*, in different types of performance arts: dance, singing, acting, etcetera. The song "Gangnam Style" by popular artist PSY, notably the first video to reach over two billion views on the video sharing platform YouTube³, tells the story about the urban Gangnam district in the South Korean capital Seoul where young artists spend years mastering skills such as dancing and singing before they are introduced to the general public. To be successful as a performer within this genre, however, one does not only be able to merely sing and dance. K-pop idols often also possess great talent in acting and can through this carry themselves exceedingly well in various television appearances. PSY, much like BTS, as described in the introduction and whom prescribe to a more polished and generalized K-pop aesthetic, both prove valuable examples of K-pop's marketability, the emergence of social distribution networks⁴, and how easily the audiovisual project can be incorporated into these channels.

Suk-Young Kim, professor of performance studies at UCLA, says it best when she writes: "*K-pop is a genre of excess. All its aspects – the intense training, zealous fan practices, and the overall frenzy that surrounds the industry...*"⁵. K-Pop is not just a genre of music – it is a collective noun for a wide variety of genres, theatrics, and other performances that all have a significant influence over the societies that foster them.

Purpose and research questions

As Kim also mentions, more than other music industries, K-Pop is an excessive, expansive business whose influence spans across multiple different markets, such as:

³ Hyunsun Catherine Yoon, Sae Kyung Yu, Seung Hee Yoo, *Framing Gangnam Style*, Journal of Arts and Humanities vol. 6, no. 8. ISSN: 2167-9053, 2017, pp. 1

⁴ Jung, Sun; Shim, Doobo, *K-pop fan practices in Indonesia and the 'Gangnam Style' phenomenon*, International Journal of Cultural Studies, vol. 17, no. 5, 2014 pp. 495

⁵ Kim, Suk-Young, *The Many Faces of K-pop Music Videos: Revues, Motown, and Broadway in "Twinkle"*, Journal of Popular Culture, vol. 49, no. 1, 2016 pp. 139

clothing/accessories, cosmetics, television, radio, web-streaming services etcetera, and could, in a sense, be seen as a driving force behind constitutions of social waves and identity expression. This, in relation to its rapid international expansion, makes K-pop an important phenomenon to study as its influence on international communities is becoming increasingly visible – as we shall see in ‘Previous research’. The purpose of this study is to, in a combination between interviews with K-Pop fans, as well as semiotic analysis of the visual material they are exposed to, look at what gender norms are prevalent in K-pop, with a particular focus on masculinity, how they are communicated, and how they are interpreted by fans in the west. Secondly, following this analytical track, I investigate the power structures behind said gender norms and form a theoretical framework around what drives their (re)construction.

The research questions I will be constructing this narrative out of are:

- How is gender constructed and reconstructed through K-pop performances?
- What type of underlying power structures are present and how do they affect these constructions?

PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Although K-pop as a phenomenon has been on a steady rise outside of South Korea and Japan since the mid-1990s, little research has been conducted on its effects on international communities. Except for studies such as Mary Ainslie’s article on *Hallyu*⁶ fandom in Malaysia⁷ and Yang Hsing-Chen’s study on flower boys at a Taiwanese beauty school⁸, much of the articles found are related to K-Pop in a global setting have been on topics such as marketability, economics, and not identity and sexuality. On a domestic level, a fair bulk of research have been written that deals with the cultural rituals surrounding K-pop and their effects within Korean, and other Asian, societies. These studies look more closely at the existing performative traditions and how they are translated into contemporary Korean popular music and television, as well as the popularization of Hallyu fandom and how it is regarded by other Asian fans.

⁶ Hallyu (한류), or Korean Wave, is a term that refers to the spread of Korean popular culture internationally. Predominantly in Asia.

⁷ Ainslie, Mary, *Korean Soft Masculinity vs. Malay hegemony: Malaysian masculinity and Hallyu fandom*, Korea Observer, 2017

⁸ Hsing-Chen, Yang, *Flower boys on campus: performing and practicing masculinity*, Journal of Gender Studies Vol. 23, No. 4, 2013

Herein, we find some crucial concepts that are necessary to outline if one is to form an understanding of K-pop aesthetics and gender performances, namely: *Flower boys*, *talnori*, and *soft masculinity*.

The emergence of the Flower boy and normalization of a “soft” masculinity

K-Pop has, through the aid of social media outlets such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, grown exponentially within the past couple of years, which has sparked an interest for it in various international news media. In an article from CNN in early 2019, for example, the writer expresses that South Korea is currently leading the global beauty industry for men and stresses that the West still has a way to go before the same concepts would become viable options there⁹. Of course, it should be noted here that the emphasis is not on the *if*, but rather *when* these beauty trends will become recognized by a larger public in Western countries. Another article, from the LA Times, outlines the fear of K-pop’s strong influence on masculinity in surrounding countries to Korea, believed to have devastating results. Here is Tang Haiyan, coach at the ‘Real Man Training Club’ in China:

“If you are promoting these effeminate figures ... it’s a calamity for our country.”¹⁰

Similar responses to Hallyu, or the Korean Wave, can also be found in other East Asian countries, such as Malaysia. In the previously mentioned study by Mary Ainslie, the author says that because of the hegemonic and physical nature of masculinity in Malaysia – here seen as a tool for the current government to assert dominance over its population – the *soft power* that K-pop has brought with it is seen as a threat to the national identity¹¹. The new beauty ideals and forms of expressions, Ainslie writes, offer alternative ways to form and express one’s identity to the preferred working-man household, and are in this sense seen as rebellious by the individuals in power.

Although this heightened focus – both by foreign governments and media - on Korean beauty ideals and transformative masculinity seem particularly predominant right now, these practices

⁹ Rapp, Jessica, *South Korean men lead the world’s male beauty market. Will the West follow suit?*, CNN, 2019-01-28, URL: <https://edition.cnn.com/style/article/south-korea-male-beauty-market-chanel/index.html>.

¹⁰ Dixon, Robyn, *To fight K-pop’s influence in China, a club teaches young boys to be alpha males*, Los Angeles Times, 2019-04-26, URL: <https://www.latimes.com/world/la-fg-china-masculinity-pop-idols-backlash-20190426-story.html>.

¹¹ Ainslie, Mary, *Korean Soft Masculinity vs. Malay hegemony: Malaysian masculinity and Hallyu fandom*, Korea Observer, 2017 pp. 618

are by no means a recent phenomenon. Expressions of male beauty through what Western, and other Asian, ideals could be viewed as feminine have a long tradition on the Korean peninsula, as well as neighboring countries like Japan. The use of the term *flower boy*, or *kkonminam*, as a socio-cultural designation for young, beautified men in South Korea, is said to have been coined in the late 1990s, although the use of ‘flower’ for this cause, in particular, has an origin that date back to the 10th century¹². It shares similarities with the Japanese concept of *bishōnen*¹³, which is used to describe a young man whose good looks transcends gender norms. As a side note, it is perhaps ironic, then, as sociologist John Lie points out, that our most common conception of K-pop artistry, PSY, might be a poor example of a typical *kkonminam*, particularly to Japanese fans, as he is “*neither cool nor handsome*”¹⁴. More than that, however, *kkonminam* is seen as having the capability to deconstruct gendered attributes and create new norms that encompass both feminine and masculine materialistic and corporeal features¹⁵. In Chuyun and David Oh’s article “*Unmasking Queerness...*”, the authors discuss the K-pop industry’s fascination with, and its fans’ love of, androgyny and blurring the lines of masculinity¹⁶. They find that practices such as cross-dressing performances in Korea has roots as far back as the Silla Dynasty¹⁷ and make the argument that the androgynous nature of some K-Pop acts is based in these old traditions, also commonly referred to as *talnori*.

The implementation of *kkonminam* into modern popular culture is argued to be, partly, led on by a willingness to normalize a positive image of Koreans in Japanese society whom had for an extended period of time been under scrutiny for being “inferior” to the Japanese, as a result of decades of conflict and the occupation of Korea between 1910 to 1945. Furthermore, researcher Sun Jung argues that conventional attitudes towards Koreans in Japan were also subject to their portrayal in media during the 1980’s and 90’s, due to a plethora of articles

¹² The Hwarang, or Flowering Knights, were a military unit in the Silla kingdom consisting of young, male individuals that were known for their extraordinary physical beauty and clothing.

¹³ Jung, Sun, *The Shared Imagination of Bishōnen, Pan-East Asian Soft Masculinity: Reading DBSK, YouTube.com, and Transcultural New Media Consumption*, *Intersections: Gender and Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific*, Issue 20, 2009 pp. 3

¹⁴ Lie, John, *K-Pop: Popular Music, Cultural Amnesia, and Economic Innovation in South Korea*, University of California Press, 2014 pp. 122

¹⁵ Holliday, Ruth, Elfving-Hwang, Joanna, *Gender, Globalization and Aesthetic Surgery in South Korea*, *Body & Society* vol. 18, no. 2, 2012 pp. 73

¹⁶ Oh, Chuyun & Oh, David C., *Unmasking Queerness: Blurring and Solidifying Queer Lines through K-Pop Cross-Dressing*, *The Journal of Popular Culture*, Vol. 50, No. 1, 2017, pp. 9

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 12

related to anti-government protests¹⁸, and that through the introduction of male characters adhering to a *soft masculinity*¹⁹ into television shows inspired a new attitude towards, primarily, Korean men. What Oh, Oh, and other researchers like Sun Jung, have found is that bishōnen and flower boys are concepts that have been shown to be particularly popular amongst women fans because they are proposed to offer a more “female-friendly” masculinity²⁰; a masculinity that focuses less on physical strength and power and more on beauty concepts. This brings us to an interesting conundrum directly related to Korean and Japanese traditional conceptions of the masculine: because of the overall heterosexist climate in these countries, the expression of male gender through what an Eurocentric audience could perceive as *queer* practices, such as cross-dressing, cannot be read as inherently queer, or specifically related to homosexuality. Because of this, as Jung argues, the artists are through these performative traditions provided with somewhat free reins to explore the traditionally feminine - without *actually* contesting the boundaries of what is considered masculine, or even masculinity²¹ itself.

So, what does one do with a social landscape that allows for men to explore femininity in this way? What is there from trying out new concepts of gender in popular culture, other than to perhaps create a friendlier image of foreign men? As previous research has shown, the K-pop industry has, in a rapid fashion, shown great promise when it comes to mercantilism. The cause of transforming masculinity and transition market is then spurred on by, what Meredith Jones calls, “makeover culture”²² - which encourages consumers constantly to change towards something “better”, more beautiful – is then relatively easy. Although Jones’ work mainly deals with the underlying social aspects regarding cosmetic surgery, it has been brought into the Korean context by Elfwing-Hwang who argues that the body in Korea is now seen more as an *investment* than something that need to be “fixed”. In this sense, the term ‘flower boy’ is not static, but an everchanging grouping of new beauty ideals.

¹⁸ Jung, Sun, *Bae Yong-Joon, Soft Masculinity, and Japanese Fans: Our Past Is in Your Present Body* in Korean Masculinities and Transcultural Consumption, Hong Kong University Press, 2010 pp. 36

¹⁹ Jung, Sun, *The Shared Imagination of Bishōnen, Pan-East Asian Soft Masculinity: Reading DBSK, YouTube.com, and Transcultural New Media Consumption*, Intersections: Gender and Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific, Issue 20, 2009 pp. 2

²⁰ Ainsle, Mary, *Korean Soft Masculinity vs. Malay hegemony: Malaysian masculinity and Hallyu fandom*, Korea Observer, 2017 pp. 610

²¹ Jung, Sun, *The Shared Imagination of Bishōnen, Pan-East Asian Soft Masculinity: Reading DBSK, YouTube.com, and Transcultural New Media Consumption*, Intersections: Gender and Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific, Issue 20, 2009 pp. 13

²² Jones, Meredith, *Clinics of Oblivion: Makeover Culture and Cosmetic Surgery*, PORTAL Journal of Multidisciplinary International Studies, vol. 8, no. 2, 2011 pp. 11

Considering the focus areas of the research presented above, this study takes gender performances, beauty ideals, and the commercialism that surrounds K-Pop and investigates how soft masculinity and its composition is expressed through performance and viewed by the Western consumer.

THEORY

As we can see from previous research, the creation and recreation of masculinity in Eastern Asia is indeed a complex topic where traditional gender performativity, such as talnori, has been tailored to fit a modern entertainment market. Before we move into the analysis of the data, we need to define the theoretical aspects of how this soft masculinity is constructed through performances, and what reasoning that underlie the formation of Hallyu. Researchers such as Sun Jung, Hsing-Chen Yang, Suk-young Kim, and Chuyun and David Oh have all presented recent studies surrounding gender and gender performance that are important to take into account when engaging in this topic. In this part of the thesis, I will present my theoretical basis on which I have based my analysis, as well as the choice of research method.

First, there is a brief description of feminist and queer theories and their efforts to scrutinize the formation of epistemologies stemming from heteronormative positivism. Thereafter follows a section on gender performativity based in a reading of Judith Butler's *"Bodies that Matter"* and *"Gender Trouble"*, in collaboration with Jung, Oh, and Oh's articles on manufactured masculinity and queer identity, where I lay the groundwork of my argument related to constructions of sexuality in K-pop. I will then look into the theoretical framework behind the analysis of gender commodification by bringing postmodern concepts together with a Marxist reading of social constructionism. Lastly, is a short presentation into Appadurai's *'mediascapes'* and how the spread of sound and images influence our perceived imagined.

Feminist theory - Questioning an epistemological positivism

From reading theoretical, and philosophical, inquiries about women's rights and subjectivity that emerged during the 20th century, we understand that science, and in this case specifically social sciences, have been highly affected by an epistemological *positivism* that interprets data

as inherently objective and ‘true’ regardless of the researcher’s own standpoint²³. So, how do we begin to question these constructions of knowledge in a manner that problematizes their lack of inclusiveness as it relates to gender? Feminist theory, and subsequently Queer theory, offers us tools to adequately begin to question this epistemology – our way of knowing²⁴ - in various fields of science by highlighting the hegemonic power structures that influence gender – our perceptions of feminine, as well as masculine.

It is important to point out that although the subjectivity of ‘woman’ and femininity has been highly debated since the mid -20th century, the study of masculinity as a concept has been relatively limited and was not considered a subject worth studying until the 1980’s and 90’s as a result of a surge in the number of men’s rights movements, religious groups dealing with men’s issues, and anti-feminist activists²⁵. Like Australian researcher Nick Mansfield explains, since most prior social research had been carried out by men, their work was also seen as being studies on the masculine in themselves²⁶.

As a response Mansfield’s theories on masculinity and subjectivity, gender research about the masculine might be more important now than ever: When efforts to return to a historical dominant male role model seem to be gaining more support, attempting to “*reinvigorate some model of the masculine that is seen to be under threat*” - a primitive masculinism²⁷, focused on establishing dominance over others by means of physical strength and aggressive assertiveness. We have seen this in the news articles I mentioned earlier, for example, where it has gone so far as sovereign states openly promoting this by questioning the “manliness” of foreign influences.

Furthermore, this topic has only recently, some 20-30 years after the Western boom, seen a spike in interest from researchers operating within Asia²⁸ - which would speak to its immediate necessity. Since the perceivably alternative, by Western norms, performative aspect of K-pop has existed within Korean and Japanese communities for quite some time, it is pivotal that we discuss gender construction from their domestic perspective. Of course, Butler’s writing of performativity would often be read as conceptually transcending intersectional factors such as ethnicity, race, and class, but it is not without cause that I choose to include an historical

²³ Sprague, Joey, *Feminist Methodologies for Critical Researchers*, Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2005 pp. 32

²⁴ Ibid., pp. 31

²⁵ Howson, Richard, *Challenging Hegemonic Masculinity*, New York: Routledge, 2006 pp. 1

²⁶ Mansfield, Nick, *Subjectivity: Theories of the Self from Freud to Haraway*, New York: NYU Press, 2000 pp. 92

²⁷ Ibid., pp. 104

²⁸ Ikeya, Chie, *Masculinities in Asia: A Review Essay*, Asian Studies Review vol. 38, no. 2, 2014 pp. 244

perspective in reading her material. What follows here, then, is therefore a presentation of Butler's arguments on gender performativity, in collaboration with Jung, Oh, and Oh to emphasize the factors that has helped shape, and reshape, specific Korean masculinities.

Gender performances

In postmodern 'tradition', sexual identity and gender works as fluid constructs that are constantly constructed and reconstructed by narratives and corporeal expressions. Leading the charge in promoting these concepts - referred to countless times throughout the late 20th and early 21st century - Judith Butler's '*Gender Trouble*' and '*Bodies that Matter*' have played a pivotal role in how other contemporary researchers understand power and its relationship to linguistics and the shaping of norms. Therein, Butler argues that gender is not a static binary, but a concept that flows depending on how it is performed. Where most expressions, based partly in a foundationalist standpoint²⁹, help enforce our conceptualization of femininity and masculinity within this heteronormative binary, there are some performances, she says, that put these two terms into question. These are described as *queer*. The term *queer*, here, relates to the diffusion of sexual identity which transgresses heteronormative expressions, and even though it is considered a rather Eurocentric term³⁰, it is still widely used by the Korean researchers that are, by necessity, included in this study.

Much like the gender performances in Butler's *Gender is Burning* - which discusses Paris is burning: a documentary about the *drag ball culture* in New York during the 1980's - studies of masculinity often find themselves closely intertwined with *queer theory*, perceivably because scrutinization of masculinity often occurs in spaces where subjects are constituted as 'unmanly' by inheriting feminine, or diffusing, traits. Keeping this definition in mind, I would here like to return and elaborate on the two examples briefly touched upon in the discussion on previous research conducted on the topic of gender and K-Pop: Oh & Oh's '*Unmasking Queerness...*' and Jung's '*The Shared Imagination of Bishonen*'.

It is the belief by Oh & Oh that the cross-dressing in K-pop present the viewer with multiple queer identities that challenge, diffuse, the hegemonic gender structures Korea. While these

²⁹ Butler, Judith, *Gender Trouble*, New York: Routledge, 2007 pp. 4

³⁰ Oh, Chuyun & Oh, David C., *Unmasking Queerness: Blurring and Solidifying Queer Lines through K-Pop Cross-Dressing*, The Journal of Popular Culture, Vol. 50, No. 1, 2017, pp. 10

cross-dressing performances are important in how they scrutinize the heteronormative framework that dictates masculinity in Korea, they argue, the way that they are constructed:

Their [boybands VIXX and Infinite] performance challenges Korean masculinity but the humor negates homosexual possibilities.³¹

This is an important distinction to bring with us as we later move into the analysis because it alludes to a duality within the performance itself; It is argued that it possesses the power to reshape our perception of masculinity, but not to the extent where it can question heteronormativity.

Somewhat contrary to this quote, however, in “*Gender is Burning*”, Judith Butler brings up an interesting point in how norms, expectations, are translated and mimicked by their counterparts, in specific relation to drag/cross-dressing. There, Butler expresses that even though drag itself has received some criticism for functioning in an overwhelmingly subversive purposes when it comes to questioning gender norms – in that it exaggerates preexisting notions of femininity for entertainment purposes – it does not mean that the practice in theory could not be used in a “*reidealization of hyperbolic heterosexual gender norms*”³², in a Western setting. Jung agrees with the concept that the versatility of gendered performances by male K-pop idols can put gender-binary normativity into a flux. At the same time, Jung says that the promotion of cross-dressing in K-pop is not based on the same intentions as Western drag but is rather carefully manufactured to appeal to a female audience, which, as we will see later, would speak to the power structures in play. This argument then brings us to the next theoretical standpoint of this thesis which deals with the conscious construction of gender for profit.

A Queer Marxism

I have previously mentioned how historical aspects of Korean society has had a direct impact on how contemporary masculinity can be performed relatively freely without being labelled as particularly extravagant or queer. Following the rationale of the section on power above, I

³¹ Oh, Chuyun & Oh, David C., *Unmasking Queerness: Blurring and Solidifying Queer Lines through K-Pop Cross-Dressing*, The Journal of Popular Culture, Vol. 50, No. 1, 2017, pp. 11

³² Butler, Judith, *Gender is Burning: Questions of Appropriation and Subversion in Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, New York: Routledge, 1997 pp. 127

would here like to add to that another factor that must be accounted for when interpreting the construction of gender within the context of K-pop, as well as globally. Namely: capital.

Again, even though the postmodern understanding of other constructionist categories of societal factors like: race and class, often are, as argued by professor of cultural studies James Penny, “...routinely refigured as merely another aspect of the cultural work affected by the play of signification and power.”³³, I would, however, argue that despite this apparent schism³⁴, gender performance relation to capital plays a significant role in how we “learn” sexuality in contemporary, neoliberal communities. The Marxist concept of ‘reification’, or “dehumanization of individuals of the exploited classes”³⁵ as French philosopher Castoriadis aptly describes it, plays a significant role in the commodification of gender and should, as Kevin Floyd points out, following the rationale of Miranda Joseph, be read in correlation to Butler’s understanding of gender performance³⁶.

Floyd and Joseph believe that capital and gender identity can be seen as interconnected concepts where capitalistic, neoliberal ideas, and legislative measures have historically affected our perceptions of sexuality and constituted genders. As described by Miranda Joseph, where Marxism offers us an apt method of economic determinism and the driving forces behind material production, on which the K-pop industry is largely based, it does little by means of explaining “contemporary social formations”³⁷ originating in linguistic and performative expression. Postmodernity, as described under “Gender performances”, does however provide us with the tools needed to interpret these new social formations, but lacks in terms of intersectionality related to socioeconomic influences.

I would here tend to agree with Floyd and Joseph that these two theoretical concepts could – and should – be read in relation to one another as they aptly complement each other’s weaknesses. For instance, in *Profit and Pleasure*, Rosemary Hennessy brings up the example of how labor laws and economic shifts have altered the view on what it means “to be a

³³ Penney, James, *After Queer Theory: The Limits of Sexual Politics*, London: Pluto Press, 2014 pp. 72

³⁴ Floyd, Kevin, *The Reification of Desire: Toward a Queer Marxism*, Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2009 pp. 3

³⁵ Castoriadis, Cornelius, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005 pp. 140

³⁶ Floyd, Kevin, *The Reification of Desire: Toward a Queer Marxism*, Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2009 pp. 80

³⁷ Joseph, Miranda, *The Performance of Production and Consumption*, Social Text no. 54, 1998 pp. 26

woman”³⁸. In their view, by inviting women into the job market, there was a critical shift about family compositions and life, and subsequently what the working woman was “supposed” to be. Still the main caretaker, but this new persona had more independent characteristics than before and could contribute in other ways than the unpaid labor she already engaged in at home – labor related to something Hennessy refers to as society’s *collective survival*³⁹. Ultimately, the construction of gender is dependent on narrative and performance, but this ongoing process should not be considered as exclusive to the reification of the male and female bodies which, as mentioned, is a cornerstone of Marxist theory.

Power and desire

Building off of Marxist theory and the means of production, we can see that there are several interconnected means of exercising power within Korean gender performativity. Now we must ask ourselves: What structures are predominant in this field of study? The previously mentioned homogenous aspects of Korean and Japanese societies play an important role in gender norms are recreated and established despite performances that could be said to question them. Butler’s theories on this topic, in correlation with Oh, Oh, and Jung’s interpretations on her work, serves us well in this respect because they emphasize the importance of heteronormative values in Korean gender performances - which connects us to distinct gender structures. More so, I would also like to turn to Foucault’s *Measure of labour* to lay a base on which to build arguments related to *Marxism* and *desire*.

Referencing Scottish philosopher Adam Smith, Foucault argues that there is power in *exchange* in that we *need* to consume – participate in the trade of goods – to survive⁴⁰. How do we know, however, what things are needed for us in order to sustain? Food and water, of course, these are objects that have been commodified since the dawn of economy. But here, there is another flavor of power that is tied closely to the socioeconomics of K-pop, namely: dictating what objects are essential for satisfaction. It should be mentioned that the concept of desire was not part of the initial scientific approach, but rather something that was found during the data collection phase of this study. Therefore, without emerging ourselves into the intricacies of

³⁸ Hennessy, Rosemary, *Profit and Pleasure: Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism*, New York: Routledge, 2000 pp.5

³⁹ Ibid., pp. 6

⁴⁰ Foucault, Michel, *The Order of Things: An archeology of the human sciences*, New York: Routledge, 1989 pp. 244

psychoanalysis, we should carry with us the notion of power of exchange as we move into the later parts of analysis as this measure has been found to have a great impact on K-pop fandom. Both in terms of one's own materialistic possession, as well as the satisfaction of supporting one's idol(s).

Mediascapes

Considering the efforts within the K-Pop industry to create beauty norms that transcends gender, as well as promotes an undefined form ethnic ambiguity, and their option of doing this through various social media channels and television, the promotion of soft masculinity should therefore be addressed with the consideration of the global effects of a highly digitized version of contemporary *mediascapes*⁴¹. The creation and distribution of certain inflections through pictures, videos, and promotional material that work as a conduit in the construction of our own perceived "reality", as well as narratives and prolegomena for new thoughts and/or ideas⁴².

Not only do I find that Appadurai's theory applies to a local *imaginaire social*⁴³ – a construction of ideas built off experienced meanings of symbols in a given community - of what constitutes masculine and feminine, but also affects *how* we consume. The distribution of images and narrative for marketing purposes has been an ongoing practice for centuries and as our common mediascape has grown exponentially with the introduction of the internet and social media, the spread and access to material goods have become increasingly easy.

Furthermore, as Jung describes Korean music and television as a product of Japanese media, which in turn is an adaptation of influences from the West, the spread of K-pop gender identities might prove to be easier than we think due to similarities in audiovisual material, as well as how recent technological advances have added to our mediascape and created new outlets for companies to market through. The video, for example, has proven to be a successful tool in the marketing of music – a media which the K-pop industry has put a heavy focus on since even though the production cost of the videos are high, the spread is virtually free due to online media channels such as Facebook and YouTube⁴⁴.

⁴¹ Appadurai, Arjun, *Modernity at large: cultural dimensions of globalization*, University of Minneapolis Press, 1996 pp. 33

⁴² Ibid., pp. 36

⁴³ Castoriadis, Cornelius, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005 pp. 127

⁴⁴ Jung, Sun; Shim, Doobo, *K-pop fan practices in Indonesia and the 'Gangnam Style' phenomenon*, International Journal of Cultural Studies, vol. 17, no. 5, 2014 pp. 493

In the coming Method section, I shall elaborate further how symbolic analysis of these music video can be useful in forming an understanding of what gender norms are being projected, and how they are interpreted by the viewer.

METHOD

In this section of the thesis, I will go over my choice of method for the project; briefly describe how each method was implemented, including some personal reflections on how these helped in gathering the final data for the analysis. Firstly, though, I would like to shortly motivate my selection process for the below described qualitative interviews.

There are several factors that need to be addressed when applying limitations on what demographic of informant would be suitable in any study. What type of data am I looking to gather? What are my intentions, and what are my assumptions on where to find answers? Having carefully considered my research questions, I found that, ultimately, as the goal of the study was to investigate gender performances on a deeper level, it would be most fruitful to interview individuals that are somewhat familiar with concepts surrounding K-pop, as well as artists and groups – both old and contemporary. As I will describe in detail later in this section, the material for my semiotic analysis was chosen depending on artist mentions from the interviews and I had for this reason a larger need for informants that were engaged in the K-pop community and could describe their impressions of the visual content further than on a surface level. I then began inquiring on what sources could provide suitable people and turned to fan groups.

Qualitative interviews – drawing meanings from discourse

The first part of the data collection for this project was carried out through qualitative research interviews with K-pop fans on their interpretations of the visual representations of their idols, as well as K-pop as an industry, and how it in turn affects their constructions, and reconstructions, of gender. The choice to conduct interviews was mainly based in the constructionist nature of the narrative and how meaning is formed in the exchange between individuals. What one is looking for should not be verifications of any presupposed ideas regarding the subject, but rather *meanings*: how experiences are interpreted, lived, and not how

objective records of “reality”. Catherine Reissman writes that analysis in *storytelling* is not just about the content but also why a story is told in a certain way⁴⁵. Therefore, there will be an additional focus on how the informants express themselves, in conjuncture with the content of their answers.

Informants were found by means of contacting various fan groups on social media such as Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. Initially, the moderators of each group were contacted to ensure that there was no risk of infringing on any set rules of conduct within the community and ask permission to post a general request to the members of the group with a brief description of the research project. Gaining access to the field proved relatively easy as many individuals showed interest in sharing their experiences and opinions on K-pop. A total of six interviews were held – five individuals, as well as one group interview consisting of three individuals - and were all conducted via web-based platforms in real time. The informants had prior been sent a letter that outlined their rights and responsibilities as participants in the study, in accordance to the Swedish Research Council’s CODEX for social researchers⁴⁶, specifically requirements regarding Information, Informed Consent, Confidentiality, and Use of the data collected from each individual. After expressed verbal and/or written consent had been given by the informant, the interview was scheduled.

The interview guide focused on three main topics: First, the informant’s own interest in K-pop. Questions here ranged from when the informant was first introduced to K-pop, what made them stay interested, and if they have any favorite artists and groups. Second, the informant’s views on media coverage and commercialism surrounding K-pop. This to see if the interviewees’ interest in K-pop extended beyond listening to music and watching videos to reading media articles and participating on social media, for example. Third, we discussed the subjects’ view on appearances and style of the artists that they follow with a specific focus on live performances, music videos, and K-dramas⁴⁷. Further, questions regarding gender expression were sometimes flipped as to be specific to either masculine or feminine norms – one could for instance share a statement regarding one’s perception of masculinity in K-pop and then be asked to go through the same thought process as it pertains to femininity. I found this technique

⁴⁵ Reissman, Catherine, *Analysis of Personal Narratives in The SAGE Handbook of Interview Research: The Complexity of the Craft*, SAGE, 2000 pp. 371

⁴⁶ Swedish Research Council, *Ethics for Human Subjects Research: Informed Consent*, URL: <http://www.codex.vr.se/manniska2.shtml>

⁴⁷ Korean dramas, or *hanguk drama*, are television series in which K-pop entertainers often do guest appearances.

fruitful in that it often allowed the informant to ponder a scenario that they had not considered before.

The interviews were then transcribed and *open coded*⁴⁸ according to Grounded theory where I went through the documents line by line and highlighted responses with a marker. These were later, in the *axial coding*⁴⁹, divided into categories depending on the specific theme of the question and answer. The categories I worked with at the preliminary stage were: Visual content, Concepts, Commercialism, and Gender. Interview answers, along with contextual cues, from each interview were then copied out of the transcript and pasted into a new document, where they were again color-coded depending on specific topic. For instance, the group 'Gender' had subcategories related to whether the informants were speaking about masculinity, femininity, androgyny, or other narratives deemed relevant to their experience with gender.

All interviews were conducted in Swedish and have in the transcribing stage been translated by me into English. While this can in some instances raise some ethical dilemmas, I feel confident enough with my own knowledge of English to perform these translations without causing any significant change to the content or emotion expressed in the data. Furthermore, the reader will note that I throughout the analysis have chosen to speak of the informants by either their pseudo-name or the pronouns *they*, *them*, *their*, in instances where they have not expressively identified their own gender identity. This is in respect of their own expression which I will not perceive as binary.

Semiotics – Interpreting visual media

"The drawing shows me at one glance what might be spread over ten pages in a book". Ivan Turgenev did in *Fathers and Sons* allude to how signs and their interpretation are how we as individuals make sense of the world. The second part of my analysis deals with semiotic analysis of imagery from videos and other photographic materials from performers mentioned during the qualitative interviews. Drawing from Roland Barthes' theory of denotative and connotative analysis as described in Gillian Rose's *Visual Methodologies*, the imagery in question have been coded through a two-step process. Initially, as part of the denotation project,

⁴⁸ Oktay, Julianne S., *Grounded Theory*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2012 pp. 7

⁴⁹ Ibid., pp. 9

still pictures have been isolated and taken out of videos. One, then, looks at the pictures as two-dimensional objects; studying their layout and what they depict in a literal sense. Drawing from the introduction to this thesis, where Jungkook is swinging from the ceiling of a large room, I have taken note of details and conscious cropping of the frame and built a frame which I can conduct the connotative process within. Then, once we have established the basic content and composition of the image, we reach stage two: the connotative phase, in which we ask ourselves “why?”. Stuart Hall offers a comprehensive explanation:

Things ‘in themselves’ rarely if ever have any one, single, fixed and unchanging meaning. Even something as obvious as a stone can be a stone, a boundary marker or a piece of sculpture, depending on what it means...⁵⁰

In semiotic theory, linguistics in relation to visual content is very much dictated by the exchange between members in the specific society. Signs and their meanings are *socially constructed* and defined by how they are described and what values have been prescribed to them within the community in which they have been established⁵¹. In its basic definition, connotation means that what we are seeing, or hearing invokes more than we are presented with, which is the core of any analysis of this type. In semiotic theory, linguistics in relation to visual content is very much dictated by the exchange between members in the specific society. Signs and their meanings are *socially constructed* and influenced by the environment and cultures in which they have been established. The imagery projected by the K-pop industry, whether it be artists themselves, music videos, or K-drama appearances, mirrors societal norms and, thusly, solidifies their existence. However, it would be unwise to consider artistic representation of this kind as merely a projection of already existing perimeters as any media, or other creative outlet, also has the ability to morph and create new norms. The semiotic analysis conducted in this thesis uses this premise to investigate the connection between fans’ conceptualization of what K-pop and gender is to them, contra, what it is *presented* to be? In summary, Jungkook, using a previous example, is in the denotative stage a young, perceivably male, individual eating candy inside 18th century *parlour*, but, in the connotative stage a provocative and sexualized symbol for soft masculinity; the lollipop, a signifier of youthfulness and innocence, makes the imagery feel even more charged.

⁵⁰ Hall, Stuart, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, London: SAGE Publications, 2009 pp. 3

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 6

A total of thirteen music videos were analyzed from artists: BIGBANG, GOT7, MOMOLAND, BlackPink, PSY, NCT 127, BTS, Sistar, MONSTA X, Girls' Generation, and TWICE. Initially, the intention was to divide the data from these methods into separate parts of the analytical discussion. However, since the semiotic analysis is based in the material from the interviews, I found it better to intertwine them as to more directly represent the informants' own testimony. Visual media will therefore be referenced throughout the analysis and are available for viewing as appendixes.

ETHICAL REFLECTIONS

The role of the researcher and reflexivity

At several occasions during the research interviews, I was asked by my informants whether or not I, myself, was a fan of K-pop. Now, that is a difficult question to answer from two standpoints. One: Seeing that K-pop covers such a great range of musical genres, it would be near impossible to not assume that I could not find something that spoke to me, personally. Second, and more importantly, there are some ethical reflections that need to be assessed when faced with this, and similar, question(s). What is my role as the researcher? How will my answer to the question of whether I like K-pop affect the informant and subsequently the interview as a whole? Lastly, how does my own interest in K-pop affect the research process?

*Reflexivity*⁵² is a crucial component of all social research, but especially so when it comes to studies conducted out of a feminist theoretical. According to Guillemin and Gillam, self-scrutiny of this sort is a helpful tool in both considerations relating to reviews conducted by an ethics committee, as well as the researcher's own process. They state that although guidelines from common rules organization, like CODEX in this case, offer useful directions on how to minimize the risk for potential harm of the informants, they do not specify factors that may come up in an interpretative stage of the data collection. Here, it is important for the researcher to remember that their own experiences and preconceptions of a subject are themselves socially constructed, the origins of which need to be continuously revisited to answer the question *why*? Why do I read the data in certain ways? How does it influence the results? These are critical

⁵² Guillemin, Marilys; Gillam, Lynn, *Ethics, Reflexivity, and "Ethically Important Moments" in Research*, *Qualitative Inquiry*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2004 pp. 262

conundrums that need to be reflected upon in order to conduct an as objective study as possible. I found this tool useful during both methods of analysis – the semiotic as well as the qualitative interviews. A common issue with semiotic analysis, especially, is to not too hastily move onto the connotative stage as one’s analytical mind tend to start wandering as soon as a picture is presented. The application of reflexivity, here, has aided me in dedicating sufficient time to each stage. Furthermore, reflexivity in feminist research is also important in relation to the “local” (re)constructions of gender. No matter one’s own identity, the self-expressions will always have an effect on how one is seen by other people and, as follows, how they – in this case our informants - express themselves. These two factors put objectivity on its edge and puts into perspective how abstract the concept is in social research⁵³. Nonetheless, a reflexive approach helps in highlighting and minimize the risk for ethical dilemmas.

ANALYSIS

We have now arrived at the analysis which I have divided into four sections: First, I raise the question of what it is about K-pop that got the informants interested to start with, as well as what kept them engaged in the community. Thereafter follows a segment about “the concept” – a tour into one of K-pop’s most important pillars on which the aesthetics and personalities of the idols are based. Thirdly, I will present the informants’ views on gender expression in K-pop and apply semiotic analysis of video stills for reference and cross-analysis between individual experiences, as well as what gendered messages can be drawn from this material. This section will also include the beginning of the commercialization argument pertaining to gender within K-pop which, subsequently, leads us into the last part: an investigation into the K-pop business as it relates to sexual identity and the commodification of desire.

Appeals of the genre

So, why K-pop? What is it about K-pop that catches someone’s attention, and seductively invites them to stay? In order to form an understanding for *how* fans read gender in K-pop videos and performances, we need to ask *what* it is that sticks out and speaks to them. Once the

⁵³ McCormick, Melinda, *Feminist Research Ethics, Informed Consent, and Potential Harms*, The Hilltop Review vol. 6, no. 5, 2012 pp.24

questions “when were you first introduced to K-pop?” and “what was it that got you interested in K-pop?” were posed, it became evident that most of the informants began their following as a result of an indifference towards Western popular music, as well as the uniqueness of K-pop’s visual agents and up-beat tempo:

Julia: It wasn't just music and you listened to just uh... one artist that you liked. Here it was more like you found a group, you got interesting music videos, then a lot of them have like reality shows so you can get to know them in a completely different way...

...

Matilda: What happened then was that my friend had another friend, it's our common friend, who was looking for some English band on YouTube but typed it in wrong and accidentally clicked on a K-pop video and that's how she... Uh... Started to listen to K-pop music, and then she showed me and after that I became more interested and I'm still interested in it today (laughs) so...

Somewhat humorously, some of the informants happened to come across K-pop “by accident”. A miss-click, a failed spell check when searching for other material has then led to years of fandom and entertainment. Yet, although this answers the question “Why?” it does not entail what it was that made the informants seek out more material. However, there is one interesting exception which gives an initial taste of the second question of this section: What is about K-pop that catches someone’s attention? Informant Daniel attests to having actively sought out to find gender-neutrality in international performance art as part of a theatre school assignment:

Daniel: ...well, I looked for references in popular culture, a relevant frame of reference... I was trying to uhm... basically what it comes down to is that I will be able to perform and if I can't do that then... yeah... and it wasn't until I found K-pop that I got the first taste, so that I could translate it [gender neutral] in my own performance. In my own body.

Although Daniel’s answer to how they came across K-pop is categorically unique, the expressed interest in Korean views on gender would prove to not be, as we will see later. Let us then return to the investigating what others’ reasons for fandom were. Kim, one of the individuals who discovered K-pop by accident, shared their experience:

I: Right. Was it something about that one specifically that started clicking other videos?

Kim: *I think it was just sort of interesting. It's really catchy and stuff but it's not really that kind of K-pop I listen to... Normally. Because it's very, like, a parody video.*

Note here how Kim chooses to liken, specifically ‘Gangnam Style’, to parody. This interpretation is, of course, an accurate expression. The artist PSY, as we know, is the anti-idol in K-pop. Remember Lie’s quote where they write that PSY’s popularity among Japanese fans is particularly low because of his looks and ‘uncool’ behavior⁵⁴. Internationally, it would then be presumed that the spread of his specific style of music and acting would contribute to the ‘weirdness’-factor of K-pop from a Western standpoint. Alex gives an example of this in what got them ‘hooked’:

I: *When were you first introduced to K-Pop?*

Alex: *...Well, [The Fine Brothers] had a video in 2012 that was like “Kids react to K-Pop” ... and at that time I had no idea what K-Pop was but what drew me towards it was that these kids were so negative and resentful... I thought that was sad and was like “give it chance” and see it from their perspective, and that just got me hooked really quickly...*

Further Alex says that the kids who reacted would argue that K-pop was an imitation of American music and that the guys looked like girls. The disagreement with these statements was then what drove Alex to commit to finding out more about K-pop. It is in fact the alternative to Western music that attracted and started the informants’ interest:

Mina: *...for me I think that the content of the songs is also very different from Western music, which I think is good so... I like what they’re singing about in K-pop than in Western music.*

...

Bree: *I love dancing and pretty much all K-pop videos I watched and listened to were very dance-friendly. You also got a choreography from it that I got really hooked on so I learned the dances and eventually also the lyrics and everything.*

Apart from the gender-neutral expression that caught Daniel’s attention, K-pop offers a new charm to the contemporary music and theatrical scenes, and most informants shared that their first real introduction to K-pop were these aspects of the music video. As eloquently put by

⁵⁴ Appendix 5:1 for example.

Suk-Young Kim, professor of performance studies at UCLA, the K-pop video is more than just a music video; It is a Broadway-scale production where theatre meets music in “*distinctive visual and sonic spheres*”⁵⁵. Much like the music itself, the video transcends a wide array of theatrical and visual styles, to which the budget can seem endless. These are especially prominent in three categories: attire/make up, dancing, as well as geographical setting – all of which are dependent on the artist/groups’ current “*concept*”.

“The concept”

One word that came up, more often than not, during the interviews was *concept*. Here, this ‘concept’ refers to a particular style of music, mood, and/or attitude that the artist/group subscribes to during any specific period. According to my informants, this can happen *between* promotion periods (albums and shows) or, in some instances, *during*. Daniel explains:

Daniel: *A few years ago, it was all about them looking thin, cute, but something that really stuck with me is that you could watch one Girl’s Generation video with a really “cute” theme where they sort of look like babies when they dance, but then if you watch the next video it could be something completely contrasting that... it’s a women’s group... and they’re then focusing completely on the masculine, with tons of attitude and cockiness uhm... and... they have two types, or words, have you talked about aegyo?*

I: *No?*

Daniel: *Well, ok, it’s an expression... if one were to translate it a bit lazily, it’s an expression that basically means that someone needs to look as cute as possible to get their will through (laughs). It’s used just as much by guys and it is by girls and is something that just... exists. It’s not something that has its roots in K-pop but is something that just exists in Korean culture, which K-pop has embraced.*

Aegyo, described as a coquette-esque style of flirting, is a base component of the cuteness concept in K-pop⁵⁶, similar to the Japanese concept *kawaii*⁵⁷, has its opposite in another term known as *fierce*, or:

Bree: *Either they’re the small and cute type, or... There are some that are supposed to be sexy, and then there’s “girl crush”.*

⁵⁵ Kim, Suk-Young, *The Many Faces of K-pop Music Videos: Revues, Motown, and Broadway in “Twinkle”*, *Journal of Popular Culture*, vol. 49, no. 1, 2016 pp. 141

⁵⁶ Utz, Christian; Lau, Frederick, *Vocal music and contemporary identities: Unlimited voices in East Asia and the West*, New York: Routledge, 2013 pp. 279

⁵⁷ Oxford English Dictionary, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/kawaii>, visited on 2019-04-26

Matilda: *And like BlackPink... I think it could also be something similar, or from what I've seen from them is that they have a "girl crush" concept*

Julia: *there's something called a "girl crush" concept, and that's when they're a bit cooler, they might rap a bit more, and if you look at like BlackPink, they're like that...*

Girl crush presents us with a different kind of femininity, one that is grittier, tougher, with a more aggressive attitude - a bit more masculine. Not only does the concept affect the overall sound and attitude of the artists, masculinity and femininity, in this context, also take distinctly different paths in terms visual expressions. By this definition, the Girl crush concept plays an important part of Korean masculinities as it reiterates masculine gender norms in its own femininity and thusly acts as a counterweight to the queerness of male performance. Let us take a closer look at how masculinity, then, is expressed in 'girl crush' and how it compares to that of male groups.

Starting with men's groups, we can see that traditional gender associations such as featuring men with various types of motor vehicles and women with umbrella-clad drinks, are common occurrences in music videos. Looking for instance at BIGBANG's "Bang Bang Bang", members T.O.P, Taeyang, G-Dragon, Daesung, and Seungri are dressed in varying degrees of extravagant jewelry, subtle facial make-up, and with sequin, glittering, leather attire next to American muscle cars and motorcycles. To further accent the grittiness of their surroundings, some scenes show the members crawling and dancing in sand and dirt. We can also find this represented in GOT7's "Look" where the artists are occasionally featured together with muscle cars even though they seem to have no other significance to the overall narrative⁵⁸. Comparatively, then, the mechanical and grittier aspects accenting visual content from male groups are also reflected in videos from *girl crush* groups, such as BlackPink (see Appendix 1:3), as previously mentioned by the informants. Visual material connected to other women's groups, however, that might subscribe to a more *aegyo* concept, are often filmed in daylight and arguably more pleasant settings, such as in: "Party" by Girl's Generation⁵⁹, "Touch My Body" by SISTAR⁶⁰, and TWICE's "Likey"⁶¹, where the artists are featured on a sunny beach, a pool, and a school yard respectively.

⁵⁸ See, for example, BamBam in appendix 1:2

⁵⁹ Appendix 2:1

⁶⁰ Appendix 2:2

⁶¹ Appendix 2:3

In addition to material props, milieu also plays an important role in the projection of gender norms in the K-pop video. As mentioned, depending on the specific theme of a song, the overall appearance, including makeup and clothing, is carefully constructed to emphasize the constructed emotion(s) of the performance and personalities of the artists. Geographical setting is also often used to accent the artists' expression of gender. Where women's groups such as Girl's Generation, MOMOLAND, TWICE, and SISTAR's videos are often situated in bright, open spaces – beaches, pools etc – videos from men's groups often feature darker, grittier, urban settings. Dirt, muscle, and brawn is something traditionally associated with masculinity, and the producers make no exception here.

As discussed in 'Previous research', since the heteronormative presupposition is so prevalent in Korean society overall – giving the artists slack in terms of how they dress, look, and act – this exploration into femininity is matched with gendered settings, sexualized spaces, in order to even out the performance. The boybands are still to come out of the performance as unmistakably male. In NCT 127's 'Cherry Bomb', the artists are, when not dancing, featured in individual slow-motion shots similar to images you would see in fashion catalogues; tilted heads, slightly open mouths, gazing into the camera. Their boyish charm, mixed with subtle makeup, immaculate hair, and glittering jewelry is weighed against a sandy environment riddled with dirt bikes, helicopters, cars, and fighter jets⁶². We can find another example of this type of visualization in 'Alligator' by MONSTA X, in which the slow-motion shots are mixed with dark alleyways/rooms, fire, and hints of physical prowess through (what I assume to be) violence as related to the frequently featured image of a member holding a baseball bat⁶³.

The gender expressions from men's and women's groups would then seem to stem from the same normative framework, in which they are allowed to explore without contesting the power dynamic. However, these videos do show us a critical distinction between concepts that needs to be reiterated: where *girl crush* is specifically used by women artists, *aegyo* is not. Gender performances in *hallyu* are, as Sun writes when describing the boyband 2AM, "*flexible, transformable, and hybridized*"⁶⁴. Using the term *kawaii*, Jung describes Butler's concept of how sexualities and gender is continuously constructed, and reconstructed, by stylized

⁶² Appendix 4:2, 4:3

⁶³ Appendix 4:1

⁶⁴ Jung, Sun, *Korean Masculinities and Transcultural Consumption: Yonsama, Rain, Oldboy, K-Pop Idols*, Hong Kong University Press, 2010 pp. 165

performances, rendering *aegyo* a concept that has the ability to transform masculinity by reiterating femininity norms. Girl crush, on the other hand, would only appear to enforce preexisting ones – both masculine and feminine. In a sense, *aegyo* embodies what I will refer to as *feminine masculinity* – a paradox in its own right. 2AM, and specifically member Jo Kwon, came up during the interview with Matilda while discussing the normalization of *flower boys*. Here, Matilda explains that views on male beautification has, over time, become less and less prominent and that Jo Kwon still receives some attention due to their use of high heels, but not much else. As more male groups are adapting to a new, transformed, masculine aesthetic, use of traits traditionally connected to femininity has become noticeably desensitized:

Matilda: *It feels really popular for a lot of groups to have “Flower Boys” and I think it’s become more normalized, but I don’t know what it’s like for the artist personally or... Because I imagine that the fans have a certain idea... But I think it has become more normalized.*

I: *That they don’t stick out as much?*

Matilda: *Right, I don’t think it’s seen as though someone sticks out...*

...

Bree: *They still have this core belief that you’re allowed to be special, but there are a lot of groups right now which means that more and more sound very similar than when there were fewer.*

As the “rebellious” nature of the flower boy aesthetic becomes more normalized, it simultaneously becomes less, as Hennessy puts it, “in your face”⁶⁵-queer in favor of societies adhering to heteronormative frameworks. However, as I have gone over earlier, the heterosexist structures of Korean society⁶⁶ might have a larger influence over this normalization than one could imagine.

Let us, however, again return to the more masculine ‘girl crush’ and its interpretation among our Western K-pop fans. According to informants Bree, Matilda, Victoria, and Julia this concept is assumed to be a critical instrument in order for the K-pop industry to successfully

⁶⁵ Hennessy, Rosemary, *Profit and Pleasure: Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism*, New York: Routledge, 2000 pp. 52

⁶⁶ Oh, Chuyun & Oh, David C., *Unmasking Queerness: Blurring and Solidifying Queer Lines through K-Pop Cross-Dressing*, *The Journal of Popular Culture*, Vol. 50, No. 1, 2017, pp. 13

establish itself on the Western market. Victoria offers some additional insight when comparing girl crush to *aegyo*:

Victoria: *Hmm. I would say that these girls that are a bit cuter, they would be more difficult to make them appeal to a Western audience because we want to promote the idea that femininity can be powerful and grand, and stuff, and that might make the West see the cuteness as a step backwards, or at least some might interpret it like that.*

This statement raises an interesting supposition. Although this study was not designed to be comparative between Korea and other countries, Victoria's thought points to an assumed marketing play from the production companies based on societal norms and perceptions of gender roles. This creates a need for an analytical process in which the record labels, or companies as they are most often referred to by the informants, become the subject of a sort of *sexual enunciation*: who is it that *actually* speaks, to who, and with what intentions?⁶⁷

Artistry and the commercialization of gender

Although the informants are relatively positive to the occurring transformation of masculinity stemming from K-pop, the relationship between the Hallyu and gender norms is problematic in two primary areas that I have briefly touched upon in previous sections. First, the effort to change ideas of the masculine by embracing, or emulating, attire, looks, and performances which are generally perceived as feminine leads to further reconstruction of persisting notions of femininity. The perceived openness towards a *soft masculinity* also hints at an effort to normalize the *queer* in society, but it is a seemingly false rejection of the heteronormative because of the reiteration of feminine "traits". Furthermore, if we ponder the possibility that this redirection is in part a marketing play from the record labels, then the commoditization of gender becomes a paradox in that it is offering us a transformation of a more traditional masculinity but at the hands of a capitalist hegemonic system. The subject, in this context, is dependent on a heterosexual matrix of symbolisms in order to make sense to us⁶⁸ – for what is *soft masculinity* without a generalized conception of what *masculine* means? Alex, using professional athletes to highlight his view on the subject:

⁶⁷ Grosz, Elisabeth, *Femininity and language* in Jacques Lacan: *A feminist introduction*, Routledge, 1990 pp. 177

⁶⁸ Hennessy, Rosemary, *Profit and Pleasure: Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism*, New York: Routledge, 2000 pp. 115

Alex: *On the other side, I think that the image we have of soccer players – strong, tough, partly violent, typically masculine – makes men see that as the ideal and want to emulate it. When they then see male K-pop artists who embrace their femininity with makeup and other things, the exact opposite of their preconceived ideals, there is a sort of physical reaction to avoid it.*

Further, the underlying homogeneity of the K-pop movement shines through in how marketing strategies seem to be based off of the reconstruction of a heterosexual matrix. Even though a theme of the interview material to this study has been the transformation of masculinity through the embracing of traditionally feminine practices, it is still conducted, as mentioned above by A. reiterating the same feminine gender norms, and B. a heteronormative agenda.

Indeed, as prior research has shown, there is an incentive from the production companies to transform not only *transcultural hybridity*⁶⁹ but beauty hybridity, as well. The K-pop industry has taken important steps towards the androgynous for men, as well as women, in order to appeal to a larger audience. As the informants have interpreted it, though, it would seem that the *girl crush* concept is heavily dependent on maintaining both masculine and feminine gender roles, least it would not stand out as a contrast to *aegyo*. Attempts for women in K-pop to appear more masculine has proven a successful construct, more so in markets outside of Korea and Japan however, and efforts towards a social androgenicity have been met with *some* positive attention. Daniel offer some insight into possible reason for this:

Daniel: *One theory could be that their beauty standards often are... If we look at it like this: what is perceived as beautiful there is... there's like no difference depending on sex. What's considered attractive is... if I were to generalize, "This is the standard. This is what is considered beauty", there's not a big a difference between sexes, but... I don't know, let's say that it could be a big nose, thin blah blah blah... I think that we, for better or worse, have a broader spectrum of what could be considered beautiful and what is not.*

Matilda is, however, skeptical towards the validity of those attitudes:

Matilda: *...the only thing I can think of is Amber from "f(x)" she received a lot of attention earlier because she was also seen as pretty androgynous... But, she hasn't been that active on the K-pop scene, at least not with her group but... And, she's still pretty popular from what I've noticed because it showed that you can be however you want, and you don't need to be feminine if you're a girl. But I think... When she is a guest on various shows, they usually give her pretty*

⁶⁹ Jung, Sun, *Korean Masculinities and Transcultural Consumption: Yonsama, Rain, Oldboy, K-Pop Idols*, Hong Kong University Press, 2010 pp. 166

caustic comments, so you can see that maybe it isn't as OK for a girl to not be feminine.

What we can discern from Matilda's testimony is a clear skepticism related to the transformation of femininity. Since the practice has no tangible, prior, reference in Korean society, the attempt can be interpreted as falling flat due to the strength of preexisting norms for women. Girl crush therefore works because its origin is too heavily based in heteronormativity – androgenicity could in this sense be too abstract.

Late capitalism has always, in part, been driven by innovation⁷⁰ and by focusing on marketing K-pop's more successful feminine masculinity domestically, by setting new standards of what is acceptable to wear, do, how to move, and by putting a price on learning these "skills", the production companies can further commodify the masculine. Similar to Esquire in the early 20th century⁷¹, the performance of soft masculinity offered by the K-pop industry is made into a question of capital where the extent of one's participation is limited by economic means to do so. This becomes even more evident in the commercial focus on selling physical albums rather than digital copies of the artists' music, as well as the sale of exclusive fan experiences and access to shows. However, it is not only the fans that are paying.

A business of desire – black oceans and loyalty rewards

We have now not only seen that gender is a product of performances, but also that the performances are carefully tailored to produce the gender expressions that are most lucrative. What is left, then, is to investigate how these performances are produced, to whom, and at what cost.

The K-pop industry has been under scrutiny by the media for some time^{72,73}; primarily for emerging stories of so-called *slave contracts*⁷⁴ and the subsequent physical, and mental,

⁷⁰ Hennessy, Rosemary, *Profit and Pleasure: Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism*, New York: Routledge, 2000 pp. 30

⁷¹ Floyd, Kevin, *The Reification of Desire: Toward a Queer Marxism*, Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2009 pp. 98

⁷² Williamsson, Lucy, *The dark side of South Korean pop music*, BBC, 2011-06-15

⁷³ Griffiths, James, *Can K-Pop stars have personal lives? Their labels aren't so sure*, CNN, 2018-09-22

⁷⁴ The Korean term for this, 노예 계약 (noye gyeeyag), describes an agreement between a "trainee" and a record label. Some of which, according to an article from the BBC in 2011, can be as long as 13 years.

distress it brings on the artists. Even though the informants to this study agree that news outlets tend to focus too much on negative aspects of K-pop, they do raise some concern for the performers in general. There were a couple of stories that were brought up during the interviews who outlined public “scandals” involving boybands Super Junior and EXO:

I: You mentioned earlier that you’ve read a little bit about artists that aren’t feeling well – working themselves to death and such – is that something that you’ve seen become more common?

Kim: I think that uh... I hope it’s gotten better now with all the scandals surrounding EXO and Super Junior but it’s hard to see what goes on behind the curtains. How they’re actually feeling. Like I said, I hope that it’s better now but it’s hard to know.

I: Could you tell me briefly what happened with Super Junior and EXO?

Kim: Super Junior had a Chinese member who quit. It was, among other things, something about him being really, really, sick but was still forced to perform at some... Some big award show or something like that despite him being... Well, he was supposed to be in bed. After that he quit and sued SM Entertainment. And the other thing was with EXO’s Kris and Luhan quit due to similar reasons. There was something like that their human rights were violated, or something like that...

As with rumors in general, it would be tough for us to get a full story about what transpired between these artists and the record labels, which I do, however, find less interesting than the informants’ interpretations and thoughts on the matter. Kim later expresses that the idea that someone would consider three hours of sleep, an alleged reoccurrence for the members of EXO and Super Junior during this time, is horrible. The same example was mentioned in later interviews, as well. Here is Matilda on the subject:

Matilda: You’ll notice that with how many new artists are debuting all the time so I think that many K-pop fans are familiar with the system that there are people that come to audition, and then they’re trained in both song and dance, and then maybe they’ll get a certain image that they have to uphold and then a new group is formed, and there are some production companies that are more known than others to practice stricter training for groups such as EXO and Super Junior, I guess. SM is infamous for practicing really tough training. But there are those who... I mean, I’ve seen companies that abuse it because, like, it’s easy to manipulate children, because there are a lot of children who go to these big companies and want to be famous artists.

Notice here the mention of specific production companies and their perceived mistreatment

of young artists. SM, JYP, and YG are labels that are mentioned frequently during several of the interviews, where SM seems to be infamous for their tough training programs. Bree:

Bree: You notice that they have a high workload from reading about it and sometimes they look really tired on stage but still try to keep a straight face. The long training period prior to their debut, I think, creates quality in their work. Like... They produce better music, their voices are great, they become closer to each other, they... Know what they are allowed to say and what not to say, they can dance... It's a lot of different things.

What still holds SM in high regards among fans is what Bree describes as a “love-hate” relationship with the company. On the one hand, they are seemingly pushing their artists to the extreme, which at times seem to lead to hardship. On the other hand, fans appreciate the effort that this treatment makes them put into their work, which creates quality content for the followers. This takes us to an interesting phenomenon that is one of the backbones of the industry: loyalty. To investigate this further, we need to look at what factors make up the groundwork for the industry’s conception of the term “loyalty”.

Sales, particularly those of physical albums and concert tickets, are still exceedingly important in K-pop. Although digital downloads and contemporary streaming services now offer music fans a vast variety of artists and songs at a few clicks of a button, the physical album, in contrast to Lie’s prediction of the CD as a dying media⁷⁵, still reigns supreme in the Korean market according to the informants. Julia, quoting JYP, offers their view on why records remain relevant:

Julia: JYP for example, he owns one of the biggest K-pop companies [JYP Entertainment, BigHit] and he said that “Sure, digital charts are important but there anyone can listen [online]”. It’s the physical albums that measure how loyal the fans are and how many will attend the concerts. If you’re prepared to buy an album, you’re prepared to buy merch, and then concert tickets, so it’s pretty big. It’s a pretty big part of that measurement.

It is important to highlight that many record labels in Korea JYP Entertainment are publicly traded corporations, that not only need to make a profit but also answer to shareholders. As JYP is quoted saying here, subscribing to streaming services and listening to music online offers little insight in how much profit can be made from concert ticket sales, for example. Actual purchases of albums, however, helps establish an estimate on how much revenue can

⁷⁵ Lie, John, *K-Pop: Popular Music, Cultural Amnesia, and Economic Innovation in South Korea*, University of California Press, 2014 pp. 125

be expected. What it boils down to, then, is how to sell these records. Although the purchase of the album might not have an impact on *how* the fans listen to the music, according to Julia, Victoria, and Mina, there are couple of other incentives to order physical CDs. Having a copy both offers a personal memento and shows loyalty and support to the artist in question:

Victoria: I can say that if I've become a fan of an artist or a group, and if I buy an album, then I have like a physical thing that says that I'm a fan of them, and that can feel good because a lot of it is digital. The rest is digital, so it's nice to have something physical to hold uhm...

Mina: I've bought a few, and I buy them for a couple of reasons. First, is because I like the group, I don't actually listen to the album but only on Spotify or YouTube, but I still think it's really fun to open it and see uhm... the pictures you get with it and extra stuff.

Julia: I've started buying quite a few albums and I think it's a lot of fun! Because when you get the package in the mail and it's like something that represents that era, because they have different concepts on every album, so you get that and you can collect your favorite, and then you can like see them in your bookshelf – that you have them.

The three of them, along with Kim and Alex, see the commercialism surrounding K-pop as part of their interest, their hobby, but do also recognize how the industry is driven by money and to what extent it is willing to go to increase sales. When discussing loyalty and purchasing power, it was brought up that there is other merchandise interconnected to the record sales that can incentivize fans to purchase several copies of the same album in order to collect different photocards that are included in the sleeve. For instance:

I: ...Do you collect anything? Albums and stuff?

Kim: No. No, I was there like I mentioned and bought some stuff then, but they aren't any collectibles. I'm not the kind of person that would buy 10 albums just to get into an event or something like that.

...

Victoria: The K-pop industry is really smart because they are very... they create this little adrenaline rush for us with buying, buying, buying, and they want to make as much money as possible, really. So, they encourage people to buy the same album over and over to get all the photocards and stuff. I don't feel like that has affected me that much, but it has become a big part of K-pop.

What Victoria is touching upon here is something referred to a *loyalty award*, which is predominant in the Korean context but not as common on the international market. Expressed

loyalty, by being an active member on a specific artist site or having a premium membership of a club, means that you can access concert tickets and merchandise that other fans cannot. Sometimes with exclusive rights to attend shows. It is clear here that, as Kim points out in “*The Many Faces of K-pop Music...*”, Korean production companies possesses something that their international counterparts lack: a business plan⁷⁶. Having briefly studied South Korea, and K-pop, at university, Daniel offers some additional insight into the business model:

Daniel: *...So, these three that tried to break off because they thought they were doing slave work; they weren't getting paid, they all lived together... anyway, so this company made sure that the three people that had left couldn't get other jobs in the music industry, or in any kind of artistic field in the whole country. So, I think... there are a lot of these types of situations that aren't accounted for, sadly. I think that the majority, even, is treated fairly poorly and aren't paid. It's only the big groups that are making money, like BTS... Super Junior have been really big so I don't know... and EXO too...*

The power dynamic between executive heads and their talent is telling. Regardless of this type of treatment, however, and perhaps because of the perceived rarity of it, the love-hate relationship between the record labels and fans remain stagnant. Partly due to an expressed feeling of inability to offer help.

Daniel: *Korea is very bureaucratic in the sense that those who are in power have an incredible amount of power, so you can't really win any sort of legal battle against these people.*

As there is little that the fans can actually do to counteract the actions of the record companies, and also have seemingly little will to do so, one can see that the business model of fandom here is locked-in in terms of loyalty to the group/solo artist mainly through purchasing power. In addition to this, I find another way for how the industry is able to sell loyalty: By establishing a sense of *desire*. In fact, one of the major concerns that have been raised in relation to the slave contracts is the performers lack of, or prohibition to engage in, a personal life. This is, supposedly, to additionally encourage fans to support their artists by maintaining the thought of a potential romantic relationship between the two parties. We can see this manifest itself in the, for example, *aegyo* concept where the individuals are taught to assume a role of innocence, virginity, whereas in *girl crush* there is a greater focus on independence. Breaking the illusive

⁷⁶ Kim, Suk-Young, *The Many Faces of K-pop Music Videos: Revues, Motown, and Broadway in “Twinkle”*, *Journal of Popular Culture*, vol. 49, no. 1, 2016 pp. 138

idea of obtainability for the fans carries with it the risk of boycott through, for instance, not buying records or organizing manifestations. For example: the infamous term *black ocean* refers to a phenomenon in which fans at a concert/performance will show disapproval of an artist's conduct in their personal life by turning off lights, cell phones, glow sticks etcetera, and fall silent during the artist's time on stage – leaving them with a sensation of performing to nothing but a vast, pitch dark, ocean. A famous example of this took place in 2008 during Dream Concert, where Girls' Generation were presented with ten-minute black-out⁷⁷ as a response to their, alleged, involvement with members of Super Junior; an all-men group. The industry's delicate relationship to desire is especially visible here, as one has realized that keeping the fans interested in these groups romantically, they will continue to support their idols through buying more merch and albums.

⁷⁷ Griffiths, James, *Can K-Pop stars have personal lives? Their labels aren't so sure*, CNN, 2018-09-22

CONCLUSION

In short, following the logic of the analysis, I have found through reading of theories of Korean masculinities, qualitative interviews, and semiotic analysis of music videos that gender in K-pop is created through performances that are the product of a commercial agenda. Dictated by various ‘concepts’, the projected aesthetic of the artists is decided by the record companies and subsequently sold to please specific audiences. By emphasizing powerful narratives related to ‘loyalty’, one has managed to create a market in which one of the products is gender identity. As my informants have attested to, the K-pop industry, assumingly much like other corporations, is driven by financial gain and has with the help of new mediascapes – the internet and social media – been able to rapidly expand their product and focus on extending international markets. Whereas these new media have made the spread of the music and *soft* aesthetic relatively cheap and easy, the price tag that they put on continued support for the fans is the opposite. Additionally, through their practices, there also seem to be little care for the performers themselves as they have, as we have seen, been continuously mistreated and in some instances essentially banned from the industry following expressed feelings of said mistreatment by their employers. As the industry is growing rapidly, more and more artists are being produced at a matching rate for a low price.

The development of consumerism being able to mass produce gender norms is problematic for several reasons. One of them being that it gives a further method for maintaining traditional gender roles. As I have shown in the analysis, even though Korean masculinities are being acknowledged for being especially female-friendly – in fact, they are being sold as such – they are still based on a heteronormative agenda, in which concepts assigned to women artists offer the possibility to explore opposite gendered traits (masculine) but do so without being able to contest the actual underlying hegemonic structure. *Aegyo*, the Korean cuteness concept, does allow male artists to explore feminine traits, which has been widely recognized, but can seemingly only do so to a certain extent as to not actually disrupt existing gender parameters. The analysis of visual material has further indicated that there is more going on in the background that we would see from a denotative phase. From a surface level, we are seeing an uplifting effort to create a space where young men can explore their own identities, but still seems to have a necessity to include traditionally masculine aspects: dirt, dark, cars, and weapons, that even the balance between masculine and feminine. Another rise for concern is of course the effect that the K-pop industry has shown to have in a political setting, with specific

examples being China and Malaysia, where the marketing of Hallyu's "effeminate figures" to foreign nations have proven to cause hostile reactions among local governments, and potentially cause long-lasting harm in their own population.

The neoliberal agenda in the commodification of masculinity here is clear and I would thusly like to pose another research question for future studies, namely: what are long-term effects from the gender fabrication that big industry offers? The participants in this study remain optimistic towards the presentation of *soft masculinity* into Western communities as it, in their view, promotes an outlet for people to be "themselves". I would tend to agree with the sentiment that a female-friendly masculinity is one that could potentially break heteronormative hegemonies and reform the ways we see gender, but the plans and methods that I have found while conducting this study do however not spark confidence.

At the very end of writing this thesis, I again asked myself what K-pop is, and can truthfully say that one could probably write a few dissertations on its various definitions, none of which will aptly describe its magnitude. For my informants, K-pop is a hobby: a way to spend their time that brings them joy. It is a sense of belonging to a community of positive individuals who share a common interest, fascination, for Korean pop culture, attire, and dancing. That is a feeling that cannot be bought.

Or so it would seem.

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