

**BANGTAN SONYEONDAN IN AMERICA:  
SOFT MASCULINITY PERFORMANCE AND AUDIENCE RESPONSE**

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**ABSTRACT**

Before their name resonates in American music charts and award shows, BTS experienced a shift in their display of masculinity, from showcasing complicit masculinity towards hegemonic norms to challenging the socially accepted values of being men by performing soft masculinity. Nonetheless, they still manage to snatch tens of thousands of fans' hearts, especially in the United States. Since female fans dominate the fandom, BTS's male fans are often overlooked in existing studies. With the purpose of analyzing BTS's display of soft masculinity and comparing female and male fans' perceptions of non-hegemonic masculinity, this research studies BTS's performances and does not only focus on female fans' views on soft masculinity but also those of male fans. Online surveys and in-depth interviews were conducted to unravel American fans' perception of soft masculinity. Using Jung's concept of soft masculinity alongside with Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity, this research found that although soft masculinity is widely accepted among American BTS fans, hegemonic masculinity continues to remain among male audience.

**KEYWORDS:** *K-Pop, BTS, soft masculinity, hegemonic masculinity, America, audience response*

**INTRODUCTION**

Ever since *Hallyu*, a term globally known for the Korean wave (Lee & Nornes, 2015), Korean entertainment industry, especially Korean Pop or K-Pop, has focused on conquering music charts worldwide especially in the US. One of the things that contributes to K-Pop's worldwide success is its hybridity (Bok-rae, 2015). "Hybridity" does not only refer to Korean music that is highly influenced by Western music, but it also refers to the gender representation of the male idols. Jung (2011) argues that these idols show pan-East Asian soft masculinity which combines Korean *seonbi*—refined scholars and gentlemen—masculinity and Japanese *bishonen*—the "pretty-boy" phenomenon—masculinity, and global metrosexual masculinity. Jung's concept has been applied by many K-Pop male idols including BTS, short for *Bangtan Sonyeondan* (Korean phrase for Bulletproof Boy Scouts). A world phenomenon K-Pop boyband, BTS have successfully held a world tour titled *Love Yourself World Tour*. Their concert tickets were sold out in Asia, Europe, and America.

While showcasing this type of soft masculinity in their performances and daily lives, BTS, consisting of seven members namely with Jin, Suga, J-Hope, RM, Jimin, V, and Jungkook, has been resonating in the modern-day popular culture and mainstream media. BTS has won numerous

awards from South Korea's Melon Music Awards to American Music Awards, Billboard Music Awards, and many other notable award shows. BTS was selected as one of the 25 most influential people on the internet, according to TIME magazine (2017). MTV European Music Awards also crowned BTS with the "Biggest Fans" award in November 2019. BTS receiving the "Biggest Fans" title is not shocking at all since BTS has an army of loyal and supportive BTS ARMY, which stands for Adorable Representative MC for Youth. BTS ARMY is a vast and influential fan base. They have started fundraisers to celebrate BTS's success or BTS members' birthdays. George Pennacchio, a reporter from ABC7, even tweeted about BTS ARMY's solidarity in creating positive change by doing charities (Herman, 2018).

Different studies have been conducted on BTS and the K-Pop industry. Some research focus on K-Pop as transnational popular culture, gender commodification in K-Pop music, and East Asian popular culture and masculinity ideals (Dal, 2018; Ingersoll, 2019; Louie, 2012), and K-Pop music industry in the context of United States and South Korea's bilateral history (Lie, 2015; Kim, 2017). Some others focus on audience analysis, such as female fans' fetishization and queer desire towards K-Pop's androgynous gender expression, and Indonesian, Japanese, and Western female audience reception of K-Pop soft masculinity (Oh, 2015; Ayuningtyas, 2017; Kozhakmetova, 2012; Song & Velding, 2019). However, little is known about male fans of K-Pop boy bands. Therefore, this research aims to shed some light on this by comparing BTS's American female and male fans' perceptions of their soft masculinity.

Textual analysis on BTS's different performances and data sampling are used in this research. The data were first collected from a questionnaire distributed to 40 American BTS fans, in which 30 identified as female and 10 identified as male, through Instagram direct message. Four in-depth interviews via text were then conducted to two female and two male fans to further elaborate their answers. Sun Jung's concept of soft masculinity (2011) alongside with R. W. Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity (1995) are used in this research. The following analysis is divided into two subsections; the former is the analysis of BTS's display of masculinity through their performances, and the latter is the American audience perception on the idols' display of masculinity.

### **BTS: HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY REVISITED?**

BTS have come a long way ever since their debut in 2013. They started as a hip hop group, and since then, their music has evolved, and they have gained worldwide recognition. Formed in 2010, BTS initially had a very masculine concept. Their early music videos, such as *No More Dream* and *We Are Bulletproof pt. 2*, showcase conventional masculine themes, with dark and dirty settings, choreography that shows physical strength and aggression, and "bad boy" personas seen from the wardrobe, makeup, and gestures from all of the members. This old concept of theirs is in accordance to their masculine group name, *Bangtan Sonyeondan* or Bulletproof Boy Scout, and their fanbase name, ARMY. Moreover, some of their songs early in their careers support hegemonic masculinity. According to Connell (1995), male competitiveness, especially over objectified women, constitutes the core principal of hegemonic masculinity in this society. Their songs *War of Hormones* and *Boy in Luv* which were released in 2014, only a year after their debut,

were so problematic that they were protested by BTS's fans due to misogynistic and disrespectful lyrics.

In *War of Hormones* featured in their album *Dark & Wild*, RM raps about how much he enjoys looking at a girl with revealing clothes. moreover, there is another part of the song where Jungkook's part when translated becomes, "girls are like equations, and us boys do them," implying a sexual innuendo where a girl does not have any agency, and she is simply a sexual object. The last one would be when all of them sing, "girls are the best present," as if girls are objects that could be owned by them (Sharma, 2018). The music video of *War of Hormones* is just as worse. The video portrays a girl being chased by the septet, and each of them tries to win her attention. There is also a line that could be translated into, "your backside is the best too," with the choreography of BTS members shaking their buttocks. One time, V slaps Jimin's behind while singing that line, implying that they are referring to the girl's backside. The music video clearly shows that the septet are fighting over the girl whom they objectify, highlighting the male competitiveness over objectified women which are the principal of hegemonic masculinity according to Connell.

Furthermore, the song *Boy in Luv* is not better when it comes to problematic lyrics and visuals. The song is about one girl, and the members are fighting over her, wanting to be her *oppa*, a Korean term originally for female addressing an older male—like an older brother, but over time the meaning shifts and could be interpreted from a female's older brother to her romantic interest. The lyrics "I want to be your *oppa*," is repeated multiple times, leaving no room for options for the girl that they are fighting over. There is one scene where Jin pins the girl against the lockers, and he forces her to come in a room with all the seven members, where they take turns "serenading" her, in which consent seems irrelevant since the girl is not given much choice (Mahmood, 2019). Both BTS's songs *War of Hormones* and *Boy in Luv* showcase the hegemonic norm of masculinity where men establish their dominance by dehumanizing women, reducing their worth to as much as a trophy's.

BTS did not stay silent when the protest surfaced. They immediately reviewed the lyrics and put out a statement, saying that they realized they made a mistake with the lyrics, and that they are sorry (Jun, 2016; Sharma, 2018). Their leader, RM, also released a statement saying that they now know their mistakes, and they have been studying a lot ever since. The BTS members and producers said that they have been educating themselves with social and intersectional issues ever since their fans called them out on the problematic lyrics and music video. Not only that, but RM also said that their lyrics are forwarded to professors of gender studies to be examined for political incorrectness (Sharma, 2018; Mahmood, 2019). Ever since the incident, BTS has been careful in delivering the right messages in their songs. Their *Love Yourself* series is proof that they indeed learned from their mistakes. As UNICEF goodwill ambassadors, BTS was involved in the launch of "Generation Unlimited," which goal is to secure appropriate opportunities for youth, especially girls (Chia, 2018). Not only that, but BTS's speech at the United Nations was also proof that they have changed. Quoting RM from his speech, "No matter who you are, where you are from, your skin color, your gender identity, just speak yourself. Find your name and find your voice by speaking yourself" (UNICEF, 2018).

The silent culture is very prominent among men; Although some men reject the hegemonic values, they still would not voice their objection because doing so will strip them away from their

privileges as the superior sex (Connell, 1995). Be that as it may, men are not passive consumers of masculinity, dominant values do not merely overpower them, and they do not accept them without consideration. The fear of being seen as effeminate and then ostracized by the patriarchal and misogynistic society are what lead men into participating in the silent culture. In this case, BTS made a mistake; however, they admitted to it and bettered themselves afterward. BTS did not participate in the silent culture because they also used their privileges as male idols to deliver positive and empowering messages ever since.

The essence of hegemonic masculinity is heterosexuality, so qualities opposite of that—emotionality to effeminacy—are considered to be the subordinated masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Although BTS's past performance as well as name suggest that they identify with the dominant norms of masculinity, BTS slowly depart from hegemonic masculinity since 2015. They replace their "bad boy" persona with soft masculinity. They are showcasing the opposite qualities such as "tender charisma," as seen from their vulnerability, and "politeness," as seen from their behavior towards reporters and fans. As suggested by Jung (2011), these qualities represent pan-East Asian soft masculinity. The preference of soft and tender men compared to dominant men is also apparent among K-Pop idols' fans, which is the shift from hegemonic to soft masculinity is not uncommon in K-Pop music industry (Jung, 2011). In order to understand BTS's masculinity, we use both Connell's and Jung's concepts to analyze BTS's performance in their concerts and TV reality shows.

There are numerous times in which BTS members show how comfortable they are in showing their vulnerability through their emotions, such as crying and having intimate talks. The *Love Yourself* series (2017-2018) by BTS, which consists of three albums and one video release, has the theme of "self-love," and it is the reason for BTS's worldwide fame, especially in the United States. *Love Yourself: Answer*, which is the conclusion of the series, has made history as the first K-Pop album to ever reached one year on the Billboard 200 (McIntyre, 2019). Not only partnering up with UNICEF to launch an anti-violence campaign called Love Myself, but BTS also spoke in the United Nations for its event to launch UNICEF's Youth 2030 program, urging youth to speak themselves (Kelley, 2018). Their talk about self-love and self-acceptance was well-received by the audience and has since inspired many (Wang, 2018). In their *Love Yourself* series, BTS explored the stages of love, in which they conveyed the message of finding and loving the self before loving another is the most important thing. These K-Pop idols encouraged their fans to acknowledge and embrace every mistake that they have ever made while still practicing self-love and self-acceptance. This message that BTS tries to deliver shows vulnerability, and it is rarely present in male idol groups. Suga and RM, rappers of BTS, both talked about their struggles of facing depression and social anxiety in their mixtape titled *Agust D* and single titled *Always* (Haasch, 2019). During BTS 3rd Muster, which is a fan meeting event where BTS gave an exclusive performance for BTS ARMY in November 2016, BTS's V cried on stage because his grandmother had just passed away when they held a concert in the Philippines two months prior. Jimin, one of the lead vocalist of BTS, cried too while listening to V's story, he then quickly rushed over to V to hug and comfort him. Jungkook, the group's main vocalist, also shed tears after seeing his friend V broke down on stage. As argued by Jung (2011), men's ability to express outward emotions is an embodiment of an ideal "new man." Their vulnerability shows "tender charisma," which is a hybrid of masculinity and femininity—manly charisma and feminine tenderness.

BTS's display of vulnerability is also shown through their music and live performances. Their message of self-love, self-acceptance, and embracing vulnerability are not only written in their lyrics and visualized through their concept but are also performed in their daily lives. The capability to be emotionally vulnerable and to express intimacy are stigmatized to be exclusively associated with feminine virtues, in which being masculine means to escape from those values altogether (Connell, 1995). It is not only desirable but also imperative for a man to be emotionally detached in order to be valued and included. This attempt is not made solely to establish individual masculinity, but to maintain gender hierarchy. Hegemonic masculinity persists in holding men's dominance over women, and if femininity is a trait specifically for women, then men would stray far from it (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Emotional detachment denotes strength; meanwhile emotional expression denotes weakness, and this is not acceptable for men because they would be devalued. Male dominance in gender hierarchy is not established through excessive emotionality, and hegemonic masculinity emphasizes the segregation between male and female, masculine and feminine (Connell, 1995).

BTS challenge this norm of hegemonic masculinity repeatedly, by being openly vulnerable in their music, their performances, and even their message. Suga, RM, and V showcased departure from emotional detachment when they shared their burdens, allowing themselves to be vulnerable. These are instances that show how BTS identifies with soft masculinity, or what Connell considered as subordinate masculinity, since it is the opposite of the dominant norms of masculinity in the society.

“Politeness” is also one of the qualities that Jung mentioned to be the core of soft masculinity (2011). BTS members are famous for their humble, professional, and polite behaviors toward their fans and reporters. In Confucian-based cultures, bowing in a 90 degree angle is done to older people as sign of respect. However, BTS members are often seen doing the 90 degree angle bow to reporters, fans, even other idol bands younger than them to greet them (Kpopmap, 2018). Youtube vlogger Bethany Struble also said that when she saw BTS rehearsal at the American Music Awards, BTS were very polite to the staffs and they were always punctual, which is a rare sight compared to other celebrities (Cha, 2017). Another instance was when BTS's main vocalist, Jungkook, tried to greet a fan in a wheelchair during their concert (Zatat, 2019). Although a mob of fans swarmed the idol, he received a lot of praise from the fans because of his actions.

On another note, BTS ARMY would know that their idols love to compete in games that they play in *Run BTS!*, a variety show starring the septet in which they get to finish missions, complete challenges, and other activities that result in earning prizes or receiving punishments. In some episodes, they are divided into groups to compete in sports games, for instance, they did relay race in episode 5, bungee jumping in episode 9, Winter Olympic Games in episode 16, volleyball in episode 53, badminton in episode 54, and many other sports. Whether or not it is for entertainment purposes, BTS always show enthusiasm in each game that they compete. For the prize, there are times when the winner gets a present, food, or immunity for the next competition. For the punishment, most times, they would get less food; other times, they would dress up in the winner's merchandise when they get to the airport so that the paparazzi will take their pictures in a way to promote the merchandise.

One might make the assumption that BTS members participate in hegemonic masculinity, however research findings show that the septet also competes for games that are deemed to be

more on the feminine side of the spectrum. For instance, BTS members did cooking competitions more than once. Episodes 35, 36, 57, and 58 are exclusively about the septet cooking and being assessed based on the taste of their food. Other than that, they also did a fashion show contest in episode 30, and in episodes 45 and 46, they made pottery and latte art, crafty activities that are often associated with femininity. In all these episodes, the audience could see the same enthusiasm and competitiveness that BTS has in the sports games episodes. If the norm of competition between men in hegemonic masculinity is an attempt to dismiss feminine virtues, BTS revealed that it is not the case for them. The members are competitive, but their competitiveness is not to display “non-femaleness” because there are numerous occasions where they still incorporate feminine activities in their competition.

On a different note, BTS members have shown to be very supportive to each other. For instance, in BTS’s most recent documentary that hit the theatres in August 2019, *Bring the Soul: The Movie*, Jungkook injured his heel to the point that it needed stitches. Due to the injury, he was not able to adequately perform on stage with his bandmates at the O2 Arena, London (Aubrey, 2018). In the documentary, Jungkook was shown to be very disappointed in himself, and he even cried multiple times. He seemed to be affected by the unfortunate turns of event, as he expressed his frustration in the documentary that was grossed for over \$12.6 million. However, the other six members made no hesitation in consoling their youngest vocalist. They were seen comforting him on stage while performing, and they also gave Jungkook a warning to rest instead of focusing on the fact that he had to sit their first London performance out.

In a YouTube video uploaded by BANGTAN TV titled BTS (방탄소년단) ‘방탄회식’ #2018BTSFESTA, BTS are seen to be having a dinner party and an intimate conversation. Jin, the eldest in the group, praised Jimin’s dedication and hard work by saying that Jimin inspired him. Whenever Jin feels tired, he always sees Jimin, who works harder than everyone else by perfecting his moves, although he is one of BTS’s best dancers. The fact that Jimin dedicates his time and energy into rehearsing does not challenge nor threaten Jin; on the contrary, Jimin inspires him to be better each day. In the same video, J-Hope, BTS’s lead dancer and rapper, says that fellow rappers in the group, RM and Suga, helped him a lot through their journey together. RM and Suga were underground rappers and producers long before they got together as an idol group, and this makes J-Hope felt less experienced in terms of rapping and producing songs. However, it did not make them act all competitive; in fact, they supported and helped each other to reach success.

Competitiveness is not a norm that every man adopts. Connell (1995) argued that “non-competitiveness” exists in male groups; however, less competitive men understand that there is a specific expectation of dominant masculinity to be competitive towards other men. According to Light and Kirk (2000), clear construction of hegemonic masculinity existed in environments which show “domination, aggression, and ruthless competitiveness,” which according to Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) are the behaviors that establish dominance in the gender order because male-competitiveness projects authority. In BTS’s case, they display competitiveness in every game, challenge, and mission that they have to play and finish. Regardless, BTS’s display of male competitiveness is nowhere near eliminating femininity and establishing dominant masculinity.

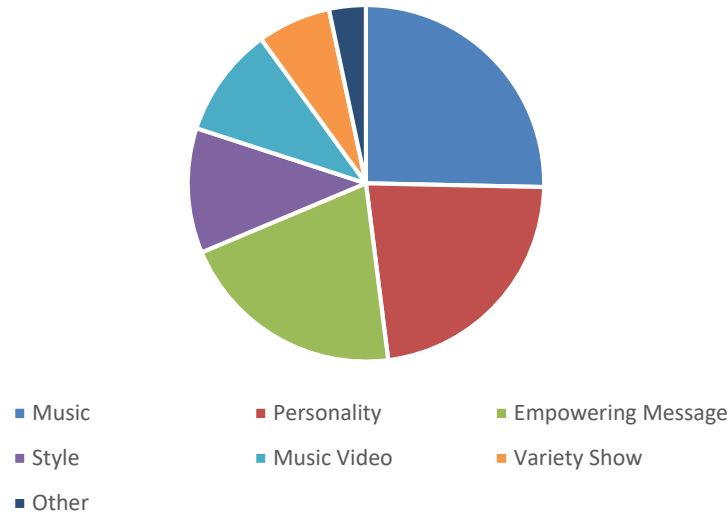
Moreover, BTS members are very supportive of each other, something that indicate that they indeed project soft masculinity.

Based on BTS's masculinity performances from their debut up to now, we found that they do not fully challenge hegemonic masculinity because there were instances where they participated in women objectification. Moreover, although they have since changed their image and perform soft masculinity, this shift is not uncommon in the K-Pop industry. According to Jung (2011), K-Pop idols experience years of training, in which their personas could be manufactured, especially knowing that K-Pop fans prefer idols who adopt soft masculinity. Appearing in TV Show is also another thing crucial for the K-Pop industry because fans could see the idols step out from their stage personas and become their genuine, usual selves (Jung, 2011). Similarly, *Run BTS!*, is a show in which BTS is not portrayed as idols who perform on stage, but as seven regular boys who like to compete in sports games to cooking games. Although BTS show constant performance of soft masculinity in their live shows, variety shows, and daily lives as caught on camera, we cannot know for sure if they are really being their genuine selves, or are they behaving that way because of the training years behind them.

#### **AMBIVALENCE IN AMERICAN ARMYS' PERCEPTION OF BTS AND THEIR PERFORMANCE OF MASCULINITY**

The United States is ranked as the eighth country in the world with the most BTS fans (Koreaboo, 2018). According to Kim (2017), the United States has been South Korea's reference for their popular culture industries—in this case, K-Pop. Therefore, American audience response was conducted in this research.

To analyze how American BTS ARMY perceives soft masculinity, we distributed an online questionnaire through Instagram direct message to approximately 100 people. There were 40 respondents who finally filled in the questionnaire, consisting of 20 men and 20 women. The fans have different reasons why they love BTS. As shown by the chart below, BTS's music, personality, and empowering message—which have been discussed in the previous section—are the top three reasons.



Most of these fans showed their enthusiasm in answering the questionnaire, providing their lengthy opinions on BTS’s soft masculinity and the stigma surrounding it. The questionnaire reveals that the majority of American BTS ARMY are in favor of BTS’s performance of soft masculinity. In the questionnaire, participants were given statements regarding BTS’s display of soft masculinity and whether or not the participants agree with the statements. The majority of the participants are in favor of BTS’s masculinity. The statements and results are listed below.

Statements	Percentages of Strong Disagreement
Men who wear makeup are feminine	55%
Men with colored hair are not manly	62.5%
Men with smooth skin are not manly	65%
Men cannot show affection towards other males if they are just friends	82.5%
Men who dance are feminine	85%
Men cannot wear different types of jewelry at the same time	87.5%
Men cannot have an elaborate beauty routine	90%
Men cannot dress up nicer than women or pay attention to fashion trends	95%
Men cannot show vulnerability and emotions	95%

When asked further whether or not they think BTS’s display of soft masculinity is genuine and an attempt to deconstruct hegemonic norms, as much as 87.5% of the participants think that BTS members are genuine. Meanwhile, 7.5% thought that BTS members are genuine, but it is exaggerated to a certain extent because they are almost always on camera. This indicates that there



is a little awareness of the fabricated persona of K-Pop idols on TV shows, as argued by Jung (2011). Before K-Pop idols make their debut, they undergo a period of three to four years as trainees, in which they are not only trained how to sing and dance, but also to be multi-entertainers, which is the time where their personas could be fabricated (Jung, 2011).

Following the questionnaire, we conducted in-depth interviews with four fans in order to gain a deeper understanding of how the fans perceive BTS' performance of soft masculinity. The table below shows short descriptions of these four interviewees.

<b>Name</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Sexuality</b>	<b>Sex</b>
D	Mixed-race	Pansexual	Male
A	Caucasian	Heterosexual	Male
J	Chinese-American	Bisexual	Female
W	Caucasian	Heterosexual	Female

Three of our respondents, namely D, W, and J, make their own meanings by relating BTS's performance of masculinity to their personal experience. Respondent D shared that he identifies with BTS's performance of soft masculinity. Growing up challenging the hegemonic norm, he was bullied a lot. Other people's opinions and judgments made him question his worth, and for the longest time, he had a tough time at school. However, after being a fan of BTS, he started to internalize their music and message, which theme is self-love, and he feels significantly better because he started to love himself. Similar to respondent D, respondent W explained that she had a traumatizing experience involving a man, and this caused her to lose self-worth and her faith towards men. Three years after being an ARMY, she has regained self-love and self-worth while her faith towards men is being rebuilt. Like respondents D and W, respondent J also benefits from BTS's self-love message. She claimed that this message helped her come out as bisexual. Before she was a fan of BTS, she was always in denial with her gender identity because she was afraid that her society might shun her. After she heard BTS's moving U.N. speech about how youth should speak themselves, she realized that there is nothing wrong with being different, and she learned self-acceptance and self-love. Meanwhile, respondent A did not share any personal experiences regarding BTS's music, message, or personality during the interview. He, however, emphasized how BTS's message in their music and personality has helped so many people who are going through tough times. It is what brings ARMY closer as a fandom because BTS have taught them to love and appreciate differences, especially in their U.N. speech.

The fans' perception of BTS' performance of masculinity can also be understood from their engagement in fan productivity. Fan productivity can take different forms such as participating in fan communities, creating video edits, reaction videos, fanfiction, organizing flash mobs, and many other activities. Through fan productivity, specifically fanfictions, they show their agency in fandom. More than half of the American ARMY answered that they participated in reading and creating fanfictions. However, 55.4% of our questionnaire participants who actively engage in fanfiction, either reading, writing, or both, are all female fans. Respondents J and W are included in the majority of American ARMY who take part in reading BTS fanfictions. While respondent J prefers to read stories that do not have any sexual content between the members, respondent W is an avid reader of *smut* genre in BTS fanfictions (*smut* is a genre in fanfiction

which contains sexual content, sometimes it is also called *sexual fiction*). Respondent J said that she feels uncomfortable reading fanfictions with sexual relations between the members because one member would be portrayed as the “bottom” and the other as the “top.” On the one hand, respondent W enjoys reading fanfictions that pair BTS members with each other. When asked whether or not she has an OTP (One True Pairing) between the members, she answered that she loves all BTS pairings. The representation of male femininity in homosexual pairings, which deconstruct the notion of hegemonic masculinity, aims to please the female fans (Oh, 2015). Respondent W also added that she likes to read *smut* fanfictions because she gets to fantasize about the members whom she love. Oh (2015) argued that through the engagement of fan productivity, K-Pop fans could freely express their sexual desire in a public place. With the masculinity that K-Pop idols display, female fans might distant themselves with patriarchal norms that are responsible for the subordination of women (Oh, 2015).

On the other hand, all the male respondents answered that they do not read fanfictions at all. When asked about it, respondent D said it is because he only wants to consume what BTS created. Meanwhile, respondent A had a different opinion. He said he does not read fanfictions because they are too girly, according to his taste, since fanfictions have mostly romance stories. He also does not want to alter BTS’s image in his head from idols to homosexual pairings. Regarding the maintenance of hegemonic masculinity in homosociality (non-romantic, same sex relationship), in the attempt of projecting male dominance, men would dissociate any feminine virtues because femininity is viewed as undesirable, and therefore, will be subordinated (Bird, 1996). Heterosexuality and homophobia are fundamental in hegemonic masculinity. Homosexuality is deemed as counter-hegemonic and inferior because it is seen as the bedrock of male heterosexuality and closely associated with effeminacy (Connell, 1995). Therefore, men who associate with effeminacy and homosexuality would be excluded from the dominant norms of masculinity. Even though respondent A is a fan of BTS who performs soft masculinity, based on respondent A’s answers, it is clear that hegemonic masculinity persists.

The interview respondents also share how they identify with BTS’s performance of soft masculinity. According to the interview, respondent D felt that he identifies with the masculinity that BTS projects, so his answers are relatively the same as the majority of the respondents. He also agrees that masculinity and femininity are within the same spectrum, so somebody can go back and forth depending on the situation. Similarly, respondent W answered that masculinity and femininity are social constructions, and she added that masculinity could not be measured by colored hair, skin condition, or even makeup. Respondent J responded strongly towards all points, but she did mention that BTS’s masculinity is not what is socially accepted in society. She emphasized how BTS is very supportive and loving towards one another. Meanwhile, based on her observation, she does not see men behave that way. She thinks that men are always in a *chest-puffing* contest, where it is always a *man-off*. In that type of homosocial interaction, she also noted that men often make sexist jokes or brag about sexual conquest. These “locker room talk” among men is what Connell (1995) refers to as male competitiveness over objectified women.

Respondent A, on the other hand, answered differently. He responded strongly and similarly to the trend of the questionnaire; however, when asked to elaborate, he said that it is because he thinks that Korean men are generally less masculine compared to American men. He proceeded by saying that there is nothing awful about it since he tolerates differences between

masculinity. However, he indeed stated that he believes in the hierarchy of masculinity, that some men are more masculine than others, instead of men display different types of masculinity within the same spectrum. When asked if he identifies with soft masculinity, he answered,

“No I don’t, I mean, wouldn’t it be weird if I make myself less masculine? Since I’m white, heterosexual, I’d say I’m masculine too, never the outcast. Not that I against it (BTS’s soft masculinity) or anything, I love BTS, it’s just that my friends will definitely see me in a different light if one day I go on and write them an appreciation letter, cry about my feelings, or even dye my hair pink.”

Hegemonic masculinity—where nonhegemonic masculinity is subordinated—continues to prevail in homosocial groups. For instance, respondent A implied that he is afraid to be outcasted if he displays a different type of masculinity. Furthermore, he repeatedly said during the interview about Korean men being less masculine than American men, and America has stronger gender roles. His answers are proof that socialization from peers, families, schools, all the way to media representations, could impact men’s views on the appropriate behaviors of being a man in social institutions. As argued by Connell & Messerschmidt (2005), the reception of gender identity is highly influenced by social constructions. This means that someone’s environment from family to media representations are what shaped his or her views on one’s masculinity.

All four participants were also asked about whether or not the environments that they live in support soft masculinity, and although all of their personal experiences vary, their societies are still not very accepting the nonhegemonic norms of masculinity. Respondent D said that people in his environment do not necessarily support the type of masculinity that the BTS members portray, which is why he was bullied in school, because he identifies with the same norms of masculinity as BTS. Similarly, respondent J also said that her family does not support soft masculinity. She said it is because she came from a conservative Chinese family, and what the septet project as their masculinity is considered undesirable for men. Respondent W mentioned that her family is rather conservative; however, her friends are open-minded about issues of gender. On the contrary, respondent A offered a different answer. He said that he comes from a progressive environment, so the fact that BTS’s masculinity is skewed from the socially acceptable norms of masculinity is not a problem at all. Even so, based on his previous answers, there seems to be a preference for a heteronormative point of view.

There is a difference between female and male participants’ answers when asked about their perceptions toward men. Female participants both experienced a change in viewing men, meanwhile the male participants do not. Respondent J said, “I always thought that men are competitive, cold, and perverts,” referring to how she previously perceive men. She added,

“But BTS is different. They’re so loving, affectionate, respectful, and emotionally expressive. I swear I hardly ever find these traits in men that I encounter daily. They (BTS) also never got into any scandal where they are seen disrespecting women. The issues with their songs are ancient old and it was during a period where they didn’t have much control over their music.”

Respondent W also shared a similar story:

“All my life I thought men suck. I really did. They are insensitive, and what they do is ogle at women’s body parts. I first got into BTS because of their songs, but when I understood their message and their whole purpose in creating music... I was astounded. Never in my life, I’ve seen a friendship so pure and honest, supportive, and very, very vulnerable. This was when I realized that men aren’t all that bad. I was just looking at the wrong bunch.”

The female respondents agreed that the values that men adopted are those of hegemonic masculinity. Both respondents J and W, in a way, mentioned that the men they know are emotionally distant, competitive, and participate in women objectification. However, BTS offers them a new light in which men could behave, and that is what made them loyal as ARMYs.

Last but not least, there are also a difference between the male and female participants’ answers when asked about their preferences in a partner. When asked whether or not they would date someone who resembles BTS’s appearance and personality, both female respondents said yes, and also emphasized their personality instead of appearance, although they agreed that BTS members are attractive. Quoted from respondent W, “I’d rather date someone soft than someone toxic,” as she stated her preference towards soft masculine men. Meanwhile, the responses from the two male participants indicated that hegemonic masculinity still persists to some extent. On the other hand, the male respondents’ answers were the contrary because both said that they would not date someone who resembles BTS. Respondent D said, “while I identify with their masculinity, I am not particularly attracted to it. If I were to date a guy, I like more traditionally masculine ones.” However, he further explained that BTS’s personality is something he could be very attracted to. He thinks that BTS are kind and loving people, and he would love for that quality to be present in his partner. As for respondent A, he prefers someone with feminine traits to be his significant other, and if BTS members were girls, he said he would date them because BTS projects the type of femininity that he likes in a person. As said by respondent A, “when they are acting cute, considerate, warm, and loving... I’d like for those traits to be in my girlfriend because it’s very feminine, and I like that.”

From both the questionnaire and interviews, overall BTS ARMYs view BTS’s performance of soft masculinity positively. In accordance to Jung’s argument (2011), male K-Pop idols gain a lot of fans, mainly female, because of their performance of soft masculinity. Female fans think that soft masculinity is the “new ideal” because masculinity and femininity are hybridized to create men who are soft and tender, whom they prefer compared to dangerous and dominant men (Jung, 2011). However, unlike the female respondents, we learned from the interviews that the male ones show a degree of ambivalence in their perception of BTS’ soft masculinity as their preference towards hegemonic masculinity is still visible.

## CONCLUSION

In homosocial groups, hegemonic masculinity is maintained by consistently diminishing the feminine, which makes the hierarchy between the dominant and subordinate masculinity very much apparent. Korean idols such as BTS did conform to hegemonic masculinity, although they

have rebranded themselves by performing soft masculinity since then. BTS ARMY in America is fully aware that their idols now display nonhegemonic masculinity, which is something that their society still has problems accepting.

From the questionnaire and interviews, we found that American fans' perception of pan-East Asian soft masculinity portrayed by BTS is positive, which is rather expected. However, the preference for heteronormative norms in homosocial setting is still evident, shown explicitly by the white, heterosexual male respondent. Although tolerating the differences between his masculinity and BTS members' masculinity, he would not identify with it because doing so will strip away his privileges. Meanwhile, the female participants did not have any problem with soft masculinity because, as women, they are not pressured to adopt hegemonic norms of masculinity, and even if they are against it, they will not receive the same treatment as their male counterparts.

Popular culture plays a significant role in introducing a new form of masculinity through K-Pop and shaping the representation of gender identity. Be that as it may, as much as the idea of soft masculinity is spread all over the globe, it is not yet fully accepted as an alternative of hegemonic masculinity because it is still subordinated. As BTS continue their rise to global fame and pan-East Asian soft masculinity continues to spread worldwide, further research could be conducted on the intersection of race and gender between K-Pop male idols and Western fandom. Given that soft masculinity has been introduced by popular culture and is slowly gaining acceptance, studies regarding soft masculinity need to be maintained.

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