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“뭐가 그리 두려워내 진짜 모습을 숨겼는지?”¹
Kpop’s Influence in Redefining “Masculinity” within
Heteronormative Regimes

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¹Translation: “What made me so afraid that I hid my true self?”. Taken from the song *Epiphany* by BTS.

Abstract

This paper goes in depth discussing the Kpop industry's influential contribution towards redefining the term “masculinity”. As we move into more progressive and liberal movements within society, the gendered terms that have constricted many individuals are becoming more obsolete as they have undergone critique and analysis. Using an approach that focuses on the cross cultural forms intersecting “queer identity” and “gender fluid” expressionism, we can analyze these new concepts outside of the gender norm. While there will never be one way to perceive masculinity because each culture defines this term differently, but we can understand these perceptions by analyzing cultural productions. As society has built gender to be a strict construct within entertainment and social media platforms, the Kpop industry should be credited for making bold moves to break down this form of toxic masculinity. Not only did the evolution of the Kpop industry show the impact it had on utilizing gendered products and fashion for all, but it also helped build conversation about the essential tenets of the social category of gender itself all across the globe. People are now more aware that there are intentional forms of gender within everyday consumer items that help build up the heteronormative status quo. Cross-cultural forms of gender legibility reveal the way heteronormativity regiments masculinity in society by forcing fixed ideals upon individual gender expression. Yet, as individuals are breaking down gender norms in cultural productions like K-pop, and their gender fluid practices encourage us to re-evaluate definitions of masculinity.

“Tradition once dominated the ideals and expectations for men in South Korean culture, then the boy bands came along”²

- David Yi

Introduction to Kpop

_____The “Hallyu Wave” also known as the “Korean Wave”, is defined as “the global popularity of South Korea’s cultural economy exporting pop culture, entertainment, music, TV dramas, and movies.”³ Even though this movement still has a long way to become appreciated globally as there are still many stigmas surrounding it, there are many different cultures and communities that celebrate this form of art with more joining every day. Why is this? Well, this rising genre holds unique qualities that purposely attract new fans and communities, one being the queer community. This genre is bold in emphasizing the importance of loving one’s self, “speak yourself”⁴, and of mental health, which in turn reflects powerfully on many young adults. This progressive style of expression specifically influenced many queer young adults to explore the different voices of Kpop culture.

In the wake of feminist and queer liberation movements, social categories of gender have undergone critique and analysis. The binary construction of gender that society is currently

²Yi, David. “How K-Pop Changed the Meaning of Masculinity in South Korea.” Allure. Conde Nast, April 15, 2020. <https://www.allure.com/story/k-pop-and-masculinity>.

³Roll, Martin. “Korean Wave (Hallyu) - Rise of Korea's Cultural Economy & Pop Culture.” Martin Roll Business and Brand Leadership. Martin Roll Company, March 19, 2021. <https://martinroll.com/resources/articles/asia/korean-wave-hallyu-the-rise-of-koreas-cultural-economy-pop-culture/#:~:text=Hallyu%20is%20a%20Chinese%20term,just%20to%20name%20a%20few>.

⁴RM, Member and Leader of BTS

unlearning includes the established qualities associated with the word “masculinity”⁵. Although there will never be one way to perceive masculinity because each culture defines this term differently, we can understand these perceptions by analyzing cultural productions.⁶

Cross-cultural forms of gender legibility reveal the way heteronormativity regiments masculinity in society by forcing fixed ideals upon individual gender expressions.⁷ This is seen through effeminate behavior displayed by males being rigorously proscribed by society’s status quo.⁸ By analyzing the gender norms of South Korea via the global phenomenon of K-pop, and investigating incongruities between Western (Euro-centric and American ideals) and South Korean versions of masculinity, an argument that cross-cultural comparisons of masculinity help explain essential tenets of the social category of gender itself. Through this, individuals are breaking down gender norms in cultural productions like K-pop, and their gender-fluid practices encourage us to re-evaluate definitions of masculinity.

A Background of Korean History

_____ While Kpop is becoming more recognized globally as a genuine modern pop art form, people still underestimate this genre. This seemingly upbeat, colorful, and childish genre that has been associated with Kpop paints over the many significant milestones it has influenced during the progression of South Korea. Many credit “Gangnam Style,” by artist PSY, for the start of

⁵Elfving-Hwang, Joanna K. “Man Made Beautiful: The Social Role of Grooming and Body Work in Performing Middle-Aged Corporate Masculinity in South Korea.” *Men and Masculinities* 24, no. 2 (December 9, 2020): 207–27. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184x20976730>.

⁶Ainslie, Mary J.. “Korean Soft Masculinity vs. Malay hegemony: Malaysian masculinity and Hallyu fandom.” *Korea Observer* 48 (2017): 609-638.

⁷Ibid

⁸Maliangkay, Roald. “The Effeminacy of Male Beauty in Korea.” The Newsletter. IIAS, December 2010. <https://www.iiias.asia/the-newsletter/article/effeminacy-male-beauty-korea>.

Kpop, as it was the first viral Kpop song in 2015. Others credit BTS for the start of Kpop– this being because they were the first artists associated with the name “Kpop” that consistently went globally viral in 2016. The Kpop movement came to light in the 1990s, as artists who were seen as controversial then paved the way to what we now know as Kpop.⁹

The history of the Kpop industry goes back farther than the genre of “pop”. We can trace the history of Korean modern music starting during the time of social and political change in the 1960s.¹⁰ Popular music started to change from the general public listening to traditional Korean music to electronic rock. This new controversial musical genre was a “combination of imitation and reinterpretation that took from Jazz, soul, psychedelic rock, and folk songs”¹¹, which strayed far from the two main types of traditional Korean music: Folk and Classical. Folk music was described as “energetic”, yet this new form of energy was not similar.¹² What created this sudden shift?

During this time, many historical events, such as the Liberation from Japan and the Korean War, were creating social shifts in society.¹³ The president of South Korea, Park Chung Hee, was not well-liked by many. He was a dictator that would soon be responsible for the country to fall into turmoil socially and politically.¹⁴ While he focused his efforts to grow the economy, which was called the “Miracle on the Han River”, his form of ruling was heavily

⁹Roll, Martin. “Korean Wave (Hallyu) - Rise of Korea's Cultural Economy & Pop Culture.” Martin Roll Business and Brand Leadership. Martin Roll Company, March 19, 2021.

¹⁰YouTube. The Korean Society, August 3, 2018.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CURw4smBaxk&ab_channel=TheKoreaSociety.

¹¹Ibid

¹²Ibid

¹³“Economic-Political Unrest Erupts in Violent Protests in South Korea.” The New York Times. The New York Times, May 10, 1990.

<https://www.nytimes.com/1990/05/10/world/economic-political-unrest-erupts-in-violent-protests-in-south-korea.html>.

¹⁴Ibid

opposed by the public.¹⁵ The next generation youths were the major source of rebellion towards the government. Students protested heavily against the dictatorship, which created pushback from the government to limit the legal rights of youths.¹⁶ The younger generation started to pull away from traditional Korean sounds as they had become captivated by the rising presence of Western music.¹⁷ The presence of GI soldiers in Itaewon influenced more activities for Western people, which especially affected Itaewon's nightlife. GI soldiers would come to nightclubs relying on musical entertainment.¹⁸ As rock and roll was a popular genre in America, many aspiring Korean rock musicians performed for large audiences that consisted mainly of soldiers.¹⁹ The lead guitarist of one of the first rock groups, Kim Hong Tak, says that the presence of US soldiers and Western culture created a lasting shift in the music industry.²⁰ Rock and roll was the current genre of music in America, and with the message of rebellion, many youths empathized with its energy during the Korean War. By establishing a new prototype for a rising music genre, influenced Korean artists to explore rock and roll music culture and interweave their own sound within the genre. The government opposed the message that rock and roll projected as it influenced rebellion. This in turn got rock bands prohibited and albums confiscated. It became dangerous to be a public rock musician as many got arrested on sight by police. Even if the lyrics were not geared towards any political meaning, rock music was seen as a sign of youthful rebellion.²¹ This matter created major divisions between friends and family as people were

¹⁵Ibid

¹⁶BBC. "South Korea - Timeline." BBC News. BBC, May 1, 2018.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-15292674>.

¹⁷Park, T.K., and Youngdae Kim. "A Brief History of Korean Hip-Hop." Vulture. Vulture, January 15, 2019.

<https://www.vulture.com/2019/01/a-brief-history-of-korean-hip-hop.html>.

¹⁸ TheKoreaSociety. "The History of Kpop." YouTube. The Korean Society, August 3, 2018.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CURw4smBaxk&ab_channel=TheKoreaSociety.

¹⁹Ibid

²⁰Ibid

²¹Ibid

encouraged to turn in musicians that they knew of. Kim Hong Tak relays the hardships that musicians felt by being stifled to practice their passion. rock and roll began to “die out in a way” because the government enforced the prohibition of albums from well-known artists such as guitarists Shin Joong Hyun, Park In Soo, Kim Choo Ja, and Kim Jung Mi. While this genre did not last long due to political ruling, rock is known to be a significant turning point in Korean music history.²²

In 1987, there was a call for a new form of government: democracy. Before this time, South Korea was not a global phenomenon in the political or economic sphere regarding other nations. It wasn't until the Seoul Olympics of 1988 that Korea started to gain global recognition. This turning point was pivotal in Korean history because it became the time of “generational and cultural change”. Not only did this show change social behavior in the daytime, but also nightlife.

At the start of the 1990s, nightclubs started to become more popular in Itaewon due to the massive number of US soldiers who would come to be entertained by dance music. The nightlife was described as having a “Euro disco” influence and bands played music that was targeted towards American-European dance music. Not only did more musicians perform songs that had western influence, but R&B also became much more prevalent in the club scene. One of the most famous clubs that hosted heavily up-and-coming hip-hop artists was Moon Night. This club was where many hip-hop dancers, rappers, and singers went to practice their art.²³

Before dance became a main attraction to the music entertainment industry, youths were listening to “Trot music”, which is also known as Korean country music. The emphasis on

²²Ibid

²³Ibid

melody played a huge role in the song to make it a hit. A standout melodious chorus is still used in modern-day Kpop.²⁴ We see also since R&B was slowly becoming more mainstream; music groups such as SOLID started producing records with a melodic aspect that was gearing towards hip-hop pop instead of exclusively hip-hop. This would be considered as the rise of modern Kpop.²⁵

Rise of BTS

_____As of now, the importance of worldwide recognition is the underlying purpose of the Kpop industry. By incorporating bits of English within western-style rhythm, songs started to gain appreciation from Europe and America. BTS was the Kpop group that launched consistent global recognition for the Kpop industry with many hit songs, some of them are “DNA”, “Boy With Luv”, and “Dynamite”. According to Tamar Herman, “Many K-pop groups now create concept albums, album series, and story worlds, [but] none have done so as effectively and organically.”²⁶ While many attribute the rise of other groups gaining recognition to BTS, which did launch more opportunities for other groups, it was the new concepts and style that made more groups appeal to a wider fanbase. Audiences see that BTS does not stick to one genre. We see through the evolution of BTS’ music that progressive concepts started within their 2015 album, *The Most Beautiful Moment in Life, Pt.1*, as breakout song “I Need U” is credited to have

²⁴Choe, Jeong bong, and Roald Maliangkay. *K-Pop: The International Rise of the Korean Music Industry*. London: Routledge, 2015.

²⁵Park, T.K., and Youngdae Kim. “A Brief History of Korean Hip-Hop.” *Vulture*. *Vulture*, January 15, 2019. <https://www.vulture.com/2019/01/a-brief-history-of-korean-hip-hop.html>.

²⁶Herman, Tamar. “Songs That Defined the Decade: BTS' 'I Need U'.” *Billboard*. *Billboard*, November 21, 2019. <https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/k-town/8543872/bts-i-need-u-songs-that-defined-the-decade>.

been “less of a song and more of a revolution”²⁷. What made this song so revolutionary to the industry? The presentation and music video visuals were beautifully intertwined with the lyrics of the song. What we see as “typical” for groups’ use of elaborate storylines in music videos now, is still being credited to BTS for “laying the groundwork for the future of the group, and in turn, their rise to international superstars”.²⁸ Even more so, what made it revolutionary to young adults and teenagers? It was the rawness and vulnerability the lyrics and music video had by portraying “the start of one’s young adulthood, in which beauty coexists with uncertainty, and focuses on the uncertain future more than the glamour of youth.”²⁹ The amount of meaning that the song reflects especially with queer-identifying people is what drew many listeners to appreciate their message.³⁰ While American and European artists such as Taylor Swift, and Justin Bieber, and One Direction at the time were exploding in popularity with young adults, their lyrics were arguably consisting of more shallow meaning and centered on romantic aspects of a heteronormative relationship, which is something that many in the queer community could not relate as easily to. Which resulted in BTS becoming a voice and representative for many who were struggling with their own daunting exploration.

Groups that followed in their footsteps also focused their art on topics of youthfulness, empowerment, and self-love and are now making bigger waves globally just like BTS. For example, Stray Kids is becoming more of a household name within the youth community as their youthful, electronic energy is one that is exciting and comforting to many. This group is a little

²⁷Ibid

²⁸Ibid

²⁹Ibid

³⁰Oh, Chuyun. “Queering Spectatorship in K-Pop: Androgynous ‘Flower Boys’ and Western Female Fandom.” *Journal of Fandom Studies*, 2015.

different from BTS as they have different points of emphasis in their performance style, lyrics, and musicality. This is because they are a part of a different “generation” than BTS. What many don’t know if one isn’t a hardcore “stan” of Kpop is that different generations of Kpop groups have differences in style on purpose as each generation is purposefully gearing their music to a specific audience. While fans can of course overlap interests in various generations, they will tend to notice that the overall music style is usually emphasized with what was associated with them at the prime of their career.³¹

Kpop Industry’s Definition of “Generation”

The categorization of groups is split into generations. There are four generations of boy groups, and each generation has its own music history surrounding it. Boy groups can have a variety of genres within their music repertoire – style, aesthetic, concept, sound, and choreography – and this is what really determines the generation.³² First-generation artists are credited for creating “a new pop sound that incorporated Western-style pop music”.³³ The second generation was estimated to have started around 2003, with big-name groups such as BigBang, Super Junior, Girls Generation, and SHINee leading the top charts.³⁴ The most well-known generation came from groups such as BTS, GOT7, and EXO who debuted between 2011-2013 and are considered to be a part of the third generation. The most distinguishable

³¹Sofia Santelices Sofia Santelices “KPOP History 101: Generations of Idol Groups throughout the Years.” Preen.ph. Preen.ph, October 1, 2019. <https://preen.ph/101194/kpop-history-101-generations-of-idol-groups-throughout-the-years>.

³²Ibid

³³ TheKoreaSociety. “The History of Kpop.” YouTube. The Korean Society, August 3, 2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CURw4smBaxk&ab_channel=TheKoreaSociety.

³⁴Choe, Jeong bong, and Roald Maliangkay. *K-Pop: The International Rise of the Korean Music Industry*. London: Routledge, 2015.

accomplishments of the third generation boy groups would be their fast rise on an international scale. This generation was considered to have the most groups that have gained global recognition and loyal followers.³⁵ The third generation were groups that debuted with a hip-hop/punk-rock/pop vibe. While not all groups are considered to be exclusive in the “third generation” style, it is the common musical theme used by groups. Fans observed many of the groups’ fashion evolve from imitating American-style hip-hop clothing to what is considered high fashion and “out of the box” effeminate clothing.³⁶ This will be talked about more in-depth using BTS as an example. More modern Kpop concepts that have a heavier emphasis on elaborate dance choreography, various genres in one album, and centers around an electro-pop genre are considered to be the fourth generation.³⁷ With this, millennial groups are rising with the pop genre as their main focus.

BTS and JIMIN

Fastly rewinding in the BTS timeline, the group debuted in 2013 with “No More Dream”, one of two singles that were in the debut album, “2 KOOL 4 SKOOL”. This music video concept mirrored the hip-hop concept with the boys being styled in all black and white where some designs consisted of many chains, baggy black jeans or leather pants, and punk style tank tops.³⁸

³⁵Sofia Santelices Sofia Santelices “KPOP History 101: Generations of Idol Groups throughout the Years.” Preen.ph. Preen.ph, October 1, 2019. <https://preen.ph/101194/kpop-history-101-generations-of-idol-groups-throughout-the-years>

³⁶Ainslie, Mary J.. “Korean Soft Masculinity vs. Malay hegemony: Malaysian masculinity and Hallyu fandom.” *Korea Observer* 48 (2017): 609-638.

³⁷Sofia Santelices Sofia Santelices “KPOP History 101: Generations of Idol Groups throughout the Years.” Preen.ph. Preen.ph, October 1, 2019. <https://preen.ph/101194/kpop-history-101-generations-of-idol-groups-throughout-the-years>

³⁸ibighit. “BTS (방탄소년단) 'No More Dream' Official MV.” YouTube. YouTube, June 11, 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rBG5L7UsUxA>.

This paralleled American hip-hop fashion during the time. Nowadays, people are still debating whether these Idols were appropriating African-American culture.³⁹ This type of fashion also played into the firm limits that masculinity held back then. The image that all these male Idols had to portray was rebellious, macho, bad boy with swagger, which was what was depicted as the ideal type of masculinity in the media.⁴⁰

Toxic masculinity, according to Professor Oh, “is associated with ‘suppressing emotions or masking distress,’ ‘maintaining an appearance of hardness’ and using ‘violence as an indicator of power.’ When a man doesn’t possess these characteristics, he’s often seen as ‘feminine or weak, especially in Western cultures.’”⁴¹ This can be seen through the videos that BTS produced before exploring more of the pop realm starting in 2015. This isn’t to say that their music videos were toxic, but because of the limitations of masculinity, this form of appeal to the audience was within strict confines that people now would see differently. Suga later reflects on the evolution of hip-hop saying in an Amazon Music Interview, “When I was growing up, all the hip-hop artists wore really baggy pants and clothing. But right now, it’s skinny fit everything. If a hip-hop artist dressed like that back then, some would’ve said, ‘You’re not a real hip-hop musician.’”⁴² It wasn’t until “I Need U” that the group started finding other positive ways of expressing their

³⁹Hurt, Michael. “There Would Be No k-Pop without Cultural Appropriation. Is That Bad?” South China Morning Post. SCMP, October 17, 2018. <https://www.scmp.com/culture/music/article/2168815/k-pop-ultimate-cultural-appropriation-or-south-korea-improving>.

⁴⁰Maliangkay, Roald. “The Effeminacy of Male Beauty in Korea.” The Newsletter. IIAS, December 2010. <https://www.iias.asia/the-newsletter/article/effeminacy-male-beauty-korea>.

⁴¹Oh, Chuyun. “Queering Spectatorship in K-Pop: Androgynous ‘Flower Boys’ and Western Female Fandom.” *Journal of Fandom Studies*, 2015.

⁴²“Exclusive BTS Interview Hosted By Jaeki Cho | Amazon Music.” YouTube. Amazon Music, July 7, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DKvufL0uWY>.

own forms of masculinity through vulnerability.⁴³ This was why it became known as a breakthrough within music culture.

One particular member struggled a lot with images of masculinity before even the start of his debut. This was Jimin, who was one of the main dancers and a main vocalist of BTS. He had always been criticized for his feminine voice and physical appearance. Jimin is a natural soprano as he is usually known for his unique high-pitched vocals. While his vocals are stunning, many people can't get past the fact a male would have such clear vocals that would usually be heard by a female singer. Not only does his vocals get criticized by many trolls, but his facial appearance is also structured femininely. He is compared many times for his beauty alongside female Idols. While many may think this an insult, fans celebrate the duality he possesses. This is something that took him a long time to appreciate in himself as he was self-conscious of his differences when he was a trainee and at the start of debuting.

He talks about the mindset transition that he went through during a promotion interview of their album, *Love Yourself*. In the interview, he says, "I think I wanted to appear like a strong man".⁴⁴ We can see the overcompensation through Jimin's performance style which had exaggerated and obvious typical signs of masculinity (e.g., flexing and showing abs). This started to change as BTS started to embrace the motto "Love yourself" to their fans and themselves. In a *Rolling Stone* Digital Cover Story, he opens up about his own personal struggle with loving himself, "We've been telling people to really love themselves," says Jimin. "This

⁴³Herman, Tamar. "Songs That Defined the Decade: BTS' 'I Need U'." *Billboard*. *Billboard*, November 21, 2019. <https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/k-town/8543872/bts-i-need-u-songs-that-defined-the-decade>.

⁴⁴Ran, Jung Hyun. "[ENG Sub] Bts Love Yourself Seoul DVD - Interview (DISC 2) - VIDEO DAILYMOTION." *Dailymotion*. BigHit, April 10, 2019. <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x75lsk2>.

year, I began to tell myself these things".⁴⁵ Having Idols who one can look up to who is capable of being open and be seen as a regular human is something that made BTS so relatable and so inspirational.

Now, Jimin embraces the duality of his facial features and style and feels less obligated to appear just masculine. He says, "Now...I don't have to pretend. I can just be myself, talk about myself without pretending anything."⁴⁶ This interview was during the time that they started getting recognized in the US with their hit "DNA". The album was mainly electro-pop music, with collaborations with Nicki Minaj. We see the group performing for numerous American hosted shows: *The Ellen Show* hosted by Ellen Degeneres, *The Late Night Show* hosted by Jimmy Fallon, *Jimmy Kimmel Live!* hosted by Jimmy Kimmel, and *The Late Late Show* hosted by James Corden. The album appealed to many teenagers that loved the electronic energy that had influences from Major Lazer, Justin Bieber, Steve Aoki, and Charlie Puth.⁴⁷ This is to not say at all that they were copying or imitating western style musicality, but they integrated electro-pop to the already popular melodious ballads and became even more popular worldwide. Since pop was the most listened to music, the Kpop industry was determined to make their own form of pop that we now associate with modern Kpop.⁴⁸ Going above and beyond to make sure to appeal to as many people as they could, producers and performers were focused on the "diversity of styles in one album".⁴⁹

⁴⁵Hiatt, Brian. "Jimin on Perfectionism, MISSING Army, His Love of Dancing, AND Bts' Future." *Rolling Stone*. *Rolling Stone*, May 16, 2021.

<https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/bts-jimin-interview-cover-story-1167267/>.

⁴⁶Ibid

⁴⁷Hiatt, Brian. "The Triumph Of BTS." *Rolling Stone*. *Rolling Stone*, May 16, 2021.

<https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/new-bts-song-2021-worlds-biggest-band-1166441/>.

⁴⁸Kelley, Caitlin. "K-Pop Is More Global than Ever, Helping South Korea's Music Market Grow into a 'Power Player'." *Forbes*. *Forbes Magazine*, April 28, 2019.

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/caitlinkelley/2019/04/03/kpop-global-bts-blackpink-grow/?sh=2dd455b024e2>.

⁴⁹Ibid

This is important because it allowed for audiences to see different sides of the Idols. This would help boost many groups into the global charts. Another change that this brought was variety in other areas besides musical style. Performance visuals also became more important, and varying fashion styles became more emphasized onstage⁵⁰. As we see, Kpop Idols are very well known for their eye-catching and bold fashion statements. This has helped boost promotions for groups as collaborations with fashion companies and designers have become more common. For example, a campaign of the winter collection of Louis Vuitton with BTS as the House Ambassadors just came out, where it went viral on all social media platforms. While the line was advertised for the menswear lines, designer Virgil Abloh said his fashion ambition this time was the “idea of challenging preconceived notions and reimagining established codes,”⁵¹. This made the members of BTS perfect spokespeople for this concept.

BTS speaks out against toxic masculinity in various ways such as wearing skirts, fishnets, corsets, wearing makeup and jewelry in many of their photoshoots with fashion magazines. They also consistently wear genderfluid pieces onstage as they celebrate freedom of expression. These forms of BTS’s style represents an important fashion statement against toxic masculinity. The public responded with enthusiasm and support with effeminate fashion styles, which prompted other third generation groups to start breaking out of gender norms as a common trend. What has now become iconic performance pieces consists of Exo member Kai’s leather crop top, Suga’s fishnets, RM’s corset, and many more pieces that became a new definition of “sexy” for male Idols.

⁵⁰Roll, Martin. “Korean Wave (Hallyu) - Rise of Korea's Cultural Economy & Pop Culture.” Martin Roll Business and Brand Leadership. Martin Roll Company, March 19, 2021.

⁵¹Mulenga, Natasha. “BTS Transformed INTO Runway Models for Louis Vuitton's F/W21 Show.” Teen Vogue. Teen Vogue, July 7, 2021. <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/bts-louis-vuitton-fw21-show>.

Academic Discussion

While focusing on mainstream media does not seem to have validity as a voice within academic arguments, it is impossible to not take into account modern forms of public opinion as the Kpop industry has grown integrated within global scrutiny. The use of a public platform is emphasized with great importance for both Idols and companies. While it raises their status as any celebrity would desire, it also is a part of a “precise media manufacturing system”.⁵² Kpop Idols should be considered to be in a separate category than Western artists. From the beginning, the Kpop industry was adamant on producing a form of “transnational identity”⁵³ that Idols must adhere to in order to appeal globally. Global recognition has been the main ambition of the industry and to be able to obtain worldwide appreciation a versatile image of masculinity was created. While all societies still correlate sexuality and gender expression, the appeal of male Idols is actually constructed to have a transcultural appeal to global audiences. Masculinity cannot be defined by one society as it varies from each culture, yet the Kpop industry found a way to construct a “hybrid masculinity”.⁵⁴ Before this though, we must discuss the definition of masculinity.

What is Masculinity?

This begs the question, What is masculinity? What defines the “right ways” to practice being a man? Well, there isn’t a right answer. So now we have to change our question to how are

⁵²Roll, Martin. “Korean Wave (Hallyu) - Rise of Korea's Cultural Economy & Pop Culture.” Martin Roll Business and Brand Leadership. Martin Roll Company, March 19, 2021.

⁵³Jung, Eun-Young. “Transnational Korea: A Critical Assessment of the Korean Wave in Asia and the United States.” (2009).

⁵⁴BBC. “Flowerboys and the Appeal of 'SOFT Masculinity' in South Korea.” BBC News. BBC, September 4, 2018. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-42499809>.

we able to define masculinity? While we know that the answer is subjective to everybody's own personal belief, "the standard" is an ideology that is fed to us from many sources daily.

Nowadays, social media feeds the mass audience their views and opinions every day. From TikToks to movies, we are influenced by what labels we see on a person. In *Navigating Trans and Complex Gender Identities*, the authors discuss the effects that everyday depictions of gender binaries create saying, "Through popular culture, gender norms are disseminated and bodies are regulated in ways that maintain white, cisgender, able-bodied heterosexual men as the norm".⁵⁵ While we see more diversity breaking into worldwide standards of beauty, the western standard still dominates. When it comes to queer expression, there have been many stigmas that have been produced that is purposefully constructed to be too intimidating for individuals who are unsure of their identity to explore. Many people are too scared to explore due to the amount of discrimination and stigmas that surround the sensitive topic of sexuality. For example, Hoskin, one of the authors, argues that there is a major correlation between media representation and preference for sexual inversion (also known as homosexuality). She says, "Considering this relationship [media], it's not surprising that sexologists' conflation of sex, gender, and sexuality via the theory of sexual inversion appeared within mass media and dominant knowledge".⁵⁶ This is detrimental to the perception of queer as it isolates an individual from feeling comfortable enough to even ask questions of their own sexuality. By directly associating sexuality to gender expression, many men who identify as heterosexual but explore fashion fluidity have their sexuality questioned in a derogatory way.⁵⁷ The term that was coined in 1994, "metrosexual,"

⁵⁵Green, Jamison, Rhea Ashley Hoskin, Cris Mayo, and SJ Miller. *"Navigating Trans* and Complex Gender Identities."* London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020.

⁵⁶Ibid

⁵⁷Ibid

supposedly acted as a gateway to define and acceptance men who expressed what were seen as more “feminine” routines, yet, this term is still one that has a lot of stigma around it.⁵⁸ Another problem is that it limits the reason to just one category: sexuality. We have seen clearly that cultural values play a heavy role in the influence of male behavior as many South Korean men are prominent in self-grooming and looking presentable. While Asian identifying public figures such as movie stars, TV stars, and social media figures are getting more attention nowadays in the media, I confidently still credit the Kpop industry for gaining recognition and appreciation of Asian beauty worldwide. Even still, there are many that still scorn Asian beauty and effeminate expressionism.

Hybrid Masculinity

So, what is hybrid masculinity? It is “multi-layered, culturally mixed, simultaneously contradictory, and most of all strategically manufactured”.⁵⁹ It isn’t the same as androgyny, though some of their styles can be put into that category. It is a purposefully evolving image of masculinity. The third generation of Kpop groups started to stray away from the “hip-hop, tough-guy image” and focused heavily on “pretty boy and soft masculinity”. Yet, we see within the fourth generation that the versatile image is becoming more popular as many groups perform different concepts within one album. One song may show off their “aegyo” within a “refresh concept”.⁶⁰ This means that the song will have more melodic emphasis and stay much more

⁵⁸BBC. “Flowerboys and the Appeal of ‘SOFT Masculinity’ in South Korea.” BBC News. BBC, September 4, 2018. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-42499809>.

⁵⁹Manietta, Joseph Bazil. “Transnational Masculinities: The Distributive Performativity of Gender in Korean Boy Bands.” Proquest, 2015.

⁶⁰Oh, Chuyun. “Queering Spectatorship in K-Pop: Androgynous ‘Flower Boys’ and Western Female Fandom.” Journal of Fandom Studies, 2015

upbeat with soft electronics. Idol groups would typically wear bright colors with this type of concept and want to emphasize their facial expression on stage as “cute and young”. Opposite of this, another song within the album may be heavily hip-hop which has more emphasis on bass notes with rap being highlighted within the performance. Groups would typically wear clothes that mimic western-style hip-hop with their own twist. This form of hybrid masculinity is recognized and appreciated by fandoms as it appeals to more people since it is not just contained to one genre or image.

While many people outside of South Korea would label a man who wore makeup on a daily basis as “gay” or question his masculinity, this practice of beauty and visual upkeep is common to see on the streets of Seoul’s Gangnam district.⁶¹ The simultaneous emphasis on both masculine and feminine qualities within one individual puzzled many at first, yet with time it became celebrated as the appeal of both qualities became a good kind of confusion.

Not only was individual gender hybridity incorporated into performances, but also group hybridity. Joseph Manietta, an undergraduate at Missouri State University, claims that a form of “distributed masculinity” within a group was a strategy to make a whole group more appealing to viewers. With some presenting more feminine qualities and others more masculine, groups were able to obtain more loyal fans as it was a strategy to produce even more versatility in audience preference.⁶²

During this queer liberation movement that younger generations lead, there are many people who explore new forms of the gender binary spectrum. Progression in fluidity and

⁶¹Yi, David. “How K-Pop Changed the Meaning of Masculinity in South Korea.” Allure. Conde Nast, April 15, 2020. <https://www.allure.com/story/k-pop-and-masculinity>.

⁶²Manietta, Joseph Bazil. “Transnational Masculinities: The Distributive Performativity of Gender in Korean Boy Bands.” Proquest, 2015.

freedom of gender expression is still being limited to the overall stigma thinking of sexuality being the main correlation, which is constructed by the history of the Western ideology of viewing homosexuality.⁶³

In *Whipping Girl* by Julia Serano, the author discusses the concepts of transsexualism, queer terminology, and experiences. A quick disclaimer, I will be focusing more on gender definitions and public response. This is to clearly define terminology that I am using as part of my paper that is relevant to the Kpop industry and beauty standards. This is also to show a comparison of the gender spectrum within Korea and the US.

The first term that I believe is important to discuss is oppositional sexism.⁶⁴ This is a concept buried within society as part of its foundation. Serano writes, “While often different in practice, cissexism, transphobia, and homophobia are all rooted in oppositional sexism, which is the belief that female and male are rigid, mutually exclusive categories, each possessing a unique and non-overlapping set of attributes, aptitudes, abilities, and desires”.⁶⁵ This is important to discuss because it shows that worldwide every heteronormative regime, like South Korea’s, is premised on oppositional sexism. While there is a push for new identities to be recognized on the gender spectrum, people who feel threatened, oppositional sexists, have always pushed back on this. Why is this? It is because, with the potential change of a power dynamic, they are not willing to “blur the boundaries required to maintain the male-centered gender hierarchy that

⁶³Oh, Chuyun. “Queering Spectatorship in K-Pop: Androgynous ‘Flower Boys’ and Western Female Fandom.” *Journal of Fandom Studies*, 2015

⁶⁴Serano, Julia. *Whipping Girl a Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity*. Berkeley, CA: Seal Press, 2016.

⁶⁵Ibid

exists in our culture today”.⁶⁶ We see this type of pushback clearly in the beginning days of Kpop.

ChunYun Oh, a professor of Performance Studies and Diaspora at San Diego University, explored the emergence of new masculinity through K-pop. She describes the genre of K-pop as a dance-driven performance that is intentionally choreographed to “fetishize” musicians’ physical attractiveness and virtuosity. It is a “visual consumption”⁶⁷ that sells images and performances and not necessarily music. She suggests K-pop Idols have created an environment where the androgynous traits of K-pop male performers open room for queering female desire and spectatorship. Further, Oh explains how K-pop Idols are “expected to show cute attitudes, called *aegyo* in Korean” and how it is part of what sells. Oh iterates how androgyny evoked by effeminate appearance or feminine behavior is not linked to homosexuality in Korea and yet in the US mainstream media, dancing is associated with homosexuality based on the assumption that “real men do not dance”.⁶⁸

As discussed before in this paper, Idol Yang Joon-il, who is now called the “the 1990s G-dragon”, was highly controversial back then.⁶⁹ While G-dragon is a popular artist during this generation and was able to express his art during a time when fluid gender expression is more widely accepted and embraced, Yang Joon-il was met with harsh criticism from the public as in the 1990s these forms of expressions were highly controversial. He was described by both TV media sites and journalists as having, “boyish look and flamboyant fashion”.⁷⁰ While this is

⁶⁶Ibid

⁶⁷ Leung, Sarah. “Catching the K-Pop Wave: Globality in the Production, Distribution, and Consumption of South Korean Popular Music.” (2012).

⁶⁸

⁶⁹ Yi, David. “How K-Pop Changed the Meaning of Masculinity in South Korea.” Allure. Conde Nast, April 15, 2020. <https://www.allure.com/story/k-pop-and-masculinity>.

⁷⁰ Ibid

ironic now since, after 20 years, that is the style most typical of a male Kpop Idol, it was dangerous to express himself. Why was it dangerous for him? Professor Chuyun Oh says, “Queer identity is essentialized as simple resistance toward heterosexuality, and queer bodies are specifically “marked,” such that they easily become theatrical spectacles.”⁷¹ People who were uncomfortable with “gender blurring” made an unanimously hated spectacle. Yang Joon-il was “hated by many for his unusual looks and songs” and was barred from TV programs.⁷² He claimed the Korean government refused to renew his visa due to his controversy.⁷³ With this, his career became a faded memory. While we now celebrate Idols who broke through the norms and made way for others, he was never appreciated for his controversial stance. He is an example of the influence that social dynamics have from being directly opposed by the public, showing that there are real consequences for Idols’ controversial transgressions.

Both misogynistic and oppressive responses to gender fluidity still remain everywhere in the world. As discussed above, Kpop stars are still trolled with comments such as (put nicely), “He looks like a girl”, “Why is he wearing makeup?”, “He looks gay” in every chat room, social media comment section, and especially under the YouTube comments. While the Kpop fandoms defend their beloved Idols and clap back at trolls, I believe these comments will never stop due to the patriarchal power structure, maintained by a heteronormative regime. It is very hard to break a foundational value.

It was only in the past century where the queer-identifying community made many leaps of progress. This leaves a question, what now defines “queer”? Even nowadays, the spectrum

⁷¹Oh, Chuyun. “Queering Spectatorship in K-Pop: Androgynous ‘Flower Boys’ and Western Female Fandom.” *Journal of Fandom Studies*, 2015

⁷²Yi, David. “How K-Pop Changed the Meaning of Masculinity in South Korea.” *Allure*. Conde Nast, April 15, 2020. <https://www.allure.com/story/k-pop-and-masculinity>.

⁷³Ibid

keeps adapting. People don't typically consider the stereotypes that surround the sexuality spectrum to be defined through "white culture". To clarify, this is because "Queer is often understood as a Eurocentric concept with the implication that the non-West queer subject should follow Western models".⁷⁴ Scholar Mary J. Ainslie, who is an Assistant Professor at the School of International Communications, University of Nottingham Ningbo Campus, further testifies how the Korean wave – "Hallyu" – made a significant contribution to re-defining conceptions of masculinity across Asia. Not only do the K-pop groups display "soft masculinity", but they also present a female-friendly model of masculinity and gender relations that is suitable for a modern globalized society. This form of masculinity embodies a significant lack of aggressiveness and sexual dominance.⁷⁵ We see this as the turn of Kpop became one where boy groups were starting to focus more on vulnerable lyrics and "soft boy" images within their music videos. She argues that though there are various uses of this term, its roots are derived from Euro-American sources.⁷⁶ What she means is that the form of cisgender masculinity, even though it is different in every culture, because of the overwhelming authority of "white societal values", it is impossible to not be impacted by it. An interesting observation she makes is the effect of "white culture" on the queer community.

As society regularly stereotypes people as "gay" if they go against cisgender practices, we see that our subconscious is automatically influenced by what we have learned from the norm. We must recognize that the constructs of masculinity and femininity have been assigned to gender and that the gender identity norm is "situationally performed" yet gender norms aren't

⁷⁴ Elfving-Hwang, Joanna 'Not So Soft After All: Kkonminam Masculinities in Contemporary South Korean Popular Culture' Conference Proceedings of the KSAA 7th Biennial Conference, Paper no. P049. (2011) p. 2–21

⁷⁵ Ainslie, Mary J.. "Korean Soft Masculinity vs. Malay hegemony: Malaysian masculinity and Hallyu fandom." *Korea Observer* 48 (2017): 609-638.

⁷⁶ Ibid

necessarily essential and intrinsic characteristics of an individual's identity.⁷⁷ Sexuality and gender expression correlate so closely due to the standard image that society has placed on these constructs.⁷⁸ Just as much as one could assume the sexuality of a man to explain why he has feminine characteristics, they could also consider other factors as well, such as cultural influence, personal experience, and for Idols, a mass marketing technique.⁷⁹ There is a long history of the queer community that extends throughout the world, in which Oh argues that the western perception of "queer" dominates the general population's conception.⁸⁰ I believe that the intersecting qualities involve cultural and generational practice more than sexuality. Suga of BTS says, "I believe notions and definitions are always changing, especially along with the cultural phases of the time."⁸¹ There will never be one way to perceive masculinity because each culture defines this term differently, but we can understand these perceptions by analyzing cultural productions. Accordingly, Scholar Jung Lee, argues that the military service requirements that males have to complete make society's vision of masculinity "constructed, reinforced, and legitimized".⁸² This type of societal conditioning can also play in the regimented way of thinking of masculinity on a cultural spectrum. Cross-cultural forms of gender legibility reveal the way heteronormativity regiments masculinity in society by forcing fixed ideals upon individual

⁷⁷ Elfving-Hwang, Joanna 'Not So Soft After All: Kkonminam Masculinities in Contemporary South Korean Popular Culture' Conference Proceedings of the KSAA 7th Biennial Conference, Paper no. P049. (2011) p. 2–21

⁷⁸Ibid

⁷⁹Ainslie, M. J.. Korean Overseas Investment and Soft Power: Hallyu in Laos. *Korea Journal*, 56(3), (2016) 5–33. <https://doi.org/10.25024/kj.2016.56.3.5>

⁸⁰Oh, Chuyun. "Queering Spectatorship in K-Pop: Androgynous 'Flower Boys' and Western Female Fandom." *Journal of Fandom Studies*, 2015

⁸¹"Exclusive BTS Interview Hosted By Jaeki Cho | Amazon Music." YouTube. Amazon Music, July 7, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DKvufLLOuWY>.

⁸²Lee, J., Shirmohammadi, M., Baumgartner, L.M., Oh, J., & Han, S.J. (2019). Warriors in Suits: A Bourdieusian Perspective on the Construction and Practice of Military Masculinity of Korean Men. *Gender, Work and Organization*, 26, 1467-1488

gender expressions.⁸³ Historically, “white societal values” have affected every society across the globe as European settlers expanded and utilized their technological advancements and vast population to enforce their religious, capitalistic, and core values on other groups of people. By colonizing many areas of the world, many other cultures were exposed to their ideology. Many times by force, colonizers were able to influence other societies’ principles. As the Euro-Centric ideals became the standard norm all the way to the modern era, social discourse revolved around following these traditional images of gender and many other philosophies.

Modern Day Western Ideology

As discussed before, while many American fans are avid in their support for this industry, America as a whole is not. Natalie Morin writes, “Despite its passionate global fandom, many feel as if Korean music is only conditionally embraced by the American mainstream — a temporary foreign novelty rather than a legitimate player.”⁸⁴ Now does this seem familiar? This is a similar response many queer-identifying people get as their “out there” expression of queer-identifying qualities is “hard” for many cisgender parents to understand, so it gets summed up to a “phase”. Many people who struggle or don’t choose to validate a new concept just because they can’t understand are suppressing progression for their own agenda. Sometimes, people try to understand it in their own way and make excuses that ultimately oppresses the person’s identity. An example of this is the comments left on many Kpop group’s videos that are aggressively questioning Idols’ sexualities. People support their claim with the argument saying

⁸³Ainslie, Mary J.. “Korean Soft Masculinity vs. Malay hegemony: Malaysian masculinity and Hallyu fandom.” *Korea Observer* 48 (2017): 609-638.

⁸⁴Morin, Natalie. “K-Pop’s Beautiful Men Are Breaking the Rules of Masculinity, but Can America Handle It?” *What Male K-Pop Stars Teach Us About Masculinity*. Refinery29, May 12, 2020. <https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2020/05/9674149/kpop-male-singers-masculinity>.

that because Idols are wearing makeup, are effeminately dressed, or look “pretty”, their masculinity is automatically questioned. Outside viewers, such as Americans, may question the application of flashy earrings that a presumed cisgender teen male is wearing on the street of Itaewon, asking why they are practicing a typical feminine behavior. In South Korea, it is not usually considered exclusively as a feminine trait. Roald Maliangkay argues that what the West considers “effeminate” is actually a new definition of masculinity that is arising.⁸⁵ We see Idols advocate for the freedom of gender expression outside of South Korea as it is less culturally acceptable elsewhere. In a recent interview from BTS, the discussion of the constrictions that the gender binary holds comes up. They responded, “‘The labels of what being masculine is, is an outdated concept,’ as RM explained. ‘It is not our intention to break it down. But if we are making a positive impact, we are very thankful.’”⁸⁶ While many celebrate those who speak out on the platform they are given about issues like this, it is also met with disgust from some communities as it leaves an opportunity to “cast a shadow of doubt over the supposed supremacy of maleness and masculinity”. While we should celebrate the boldness of BTS’ leading example when advocating in redefining gender barriers, we must keep in mind the limitations that the group must confine themselves to as public scrutiny is inevitable for such mass following.

Effects of Kpop

The cultural effects of K-pop have also manifested in alterations to constructions of gender. When describing Korean performers and their “hybrid masculinity,” it spotlights the

⁸⁵Maliangkay, Roald. “The Effeminacy of Male Beauty in Korea.” The Newsletter. IIAS, December 2010. <https://www.iias.asia/the-newsletter/article/effeminacy-male-beauty-korea>.

⁸⁶“Exclusive BTS Interview Hosted By Jaeki Cho | Amazon Music.” YouTube. Amazon Music, July 7, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DKvufiLOuWY>.

blurring of masculine and feminine characteristics in both male and female performers and icons, thus making the representation of gender more fluid.⁸⁷

What makes it even more confusing and frustrating for those who do not understand or dislike this type of expressionism is that they cannot blame it on sexuality. We see from Julia Serrano's accounts of media representation of queer figures that hyper-sexualizing them and emphasizing their feminization was the norm. The reason behind this was to take control of a narrative so it would make sense to the heteronormative.⁸⁸ The audience would not be interested in watching something that they would not understand. Serrano explains that "The media's willingness to indulge the audience's fascination with the surface trappings that accompany the feminization of 'men' also tarnishes nonfiction and serious attempts to tell the stories".⁸⁹ What she means by this is that the altered narration gave misrepresentation to both queer identities and limited the definitions "feminine" and "masculinity". By playing into stereotypical characteristics of a person, it prevented a genuine look at different forms of masculinity. While there are restraints against both gender constructs, males expressing more feminine traits, in my experience, have more stigma surrounding it. The media especially is cautious to not go against the norm too much. This is because the "Mass media images of "biological males" dressing and acting in a feminine manner could potentially challenge mainstream notions of gender, but the way they are generally presented in these feminization scenes ensures that this never happens."⁹⁰

When Kpop Idols started to define a new form of masculinity, it was a breakthrough. It was

⁸⁷Manietta, Joseph Bazil. "Transnational Masculinities: The Distributive Performativity of Gender in Korean Boy Bands." Proquest, 2015.

⁸⁸Serano, Julia. *Whipping Girl a Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity*. Berkeley, CA: Seal Press, 2016.

⁸⁹Ibid

⁹⁰Ibid

unheard of that men would wear makeup and androgynous fashion while being heterosexual. In America, many people would argue that men who do their makeup regularly are limited to gay men. Many get this correlation from the media. YouTubers such as MannyMUA, James Charles, and Jeffree Star used to dominate the beauty community. While they are all talented in artistry, the main reason many people sum up their passion to explore makeup was their sexuality. Now, this notion that self-care and beauty care is connected to sexuality is a narrative that the mass media has played into. Attaching a narrative of hypersexualization to people who practice fluidity in the gender binary helps justify heteronormativity. Another Youtube channel that is a good example of actively breaking down toxic masculinity in an impactful and new way is the TryGuys. This Youtube group is revolutionizing the way that gendered products and ideals are seen in social media.

The Influence of The Try Guys in Pop Culture

_____ How does this relate to the paper? Good question. This channel features four guys, which originally started at BuzzFeed, who try out many different things. Now, this doesn't sound relevant but even just looking at one of their Youtube titles it will make more sense. The first video ever to be produced was "Guys Try on Ladies Underwear for the First Time".⁹¹ This may sound like it would be satirical and the producers and guys could have made it that way, but what made them stand out was the fact that they made entertainment in a way that wasn't a form of toxic masculinity. Three of them - Keith, Ned, and Zach - are white, cisgender, heterosexual men. Not the typical image that people would associate with trying products that are for women.

⁹¹ BuzzFeedVideo. "Guys Try ON Ladies' Underwear for the First Time // Try Guys." YouTube. Buzzfeed, September 12, 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AwFNSmO9pbg>.

Eugene’s nationality is American as he was born in Texas, but is ethnically South Korean. He recently came out in a beautifully powerful artistic video, yet he has always embraced gender-fluid styles as seen in the videos. The Try Guys made their own company that still explores many types of new experiences and many of them do with makeup, fashion, motherhood, and what's seen as more feminine forms of entertainment. This includes very entertaining Drag and pole dancing videos. It is obvious in the videos that the guys evolved a lot in their own self-confidence through these videos. Already, they seemed secure enough in their masculinity to be very open to trying things that many cisgender men would never feel comfortable doing as it would exploit their masculinity. In “The Try Guys Try Drag for the First Time (Retucked)”⁹², all of them became drag queens and performed in a show, they were eager to learn and educate themselves properly about the culture that surrounds this art. Many viewers also see Eugene as a role model within the queer community as he is unapologetically himself. Not only does he embrace his queer identity, but also his Korean identity. He has influenced the other “Try Guys” to do many more “out of the gender binary” videos and it is obvious that he plays a big role in educating them about concepts they may not know about as he sometimes makes a small comment giving them a fact about Asian culture or about fluidity. This environment of acceptance has allowed him to become comfortable and more confident in who he is, and we see him display both feminine and masculine qualities regularly. The influence that the Try Guys hold for many American and global watchers is showing that cisgender men can also break gender norms, not just queer-identifying people.

⁹² “The Try Guys Try Drag for the First Time (Re-Tucked).” YouTube. 2nd Try, LLC staff, April 28, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pUxAvax2B9o>.

Taemin

The Kpop industry is very active when it comes to breaking gender norms and beauty standards. New articles listing BTS or BlackPink as the reason for standards being changed is typical. Yet, take a closer look and there are standout acts of defiance that Idols have used their platform to go against the true status quo of masculinity.

An Idol who is famously known for his gender fluidity onstage is Taemin. His alluring and sexy concepts are always intentionally performed with “smooth moves and lacks the aggressive flare featured by many contemporary performances.”⁹³ He is widely celebrated by his fans because of his use of duality in every single song of his. Many of his performances have a Dominatrix element to them. He performs with graceful, fluid, and subtle movements which are seen as a more contemporary element. Boy groups typically use a bigger range of motion in the hip-hop style of dancing. He was in a group called SHINee, that debuted in 2008, yet he made a bigger name for himself as a solo artist. With this, “his subsequent successes and artistic impact have led him to be called the ‘Idol's Idol’”.⁹⁴ His hit song, “Move” came out in 2017 and skyrocketed his solo career as his vocals, performance style, and impeccable dance moves were like no other. In an interview with *Billboard*, he says “I wanted to go beyond what K-pop typically is perceived as, and through 'MOVE' I was able to show a concept that’s more edgy, more powerful,”⁹⁵ Taemin kept revolutionizing the way that music could be interpreted and appreciated by both genders, which was his ultimate ambition as a way to make a difference in

⁹³Herman, Tamar. “Taemin Talks 'MOVE,' Gender Stereotypes & Pushing the Boundaries of k-Pop.” *Billboard*. *Billboard*, October 30, 2017. <https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/k-town/8014100/taemin-interview-move-gender-stereotypes-pushing-the-boundaries>.

⁹⁴Ibid

⁹⁵Ibid

the Kpop industry. While his voice is one of the ways he harnesses fluidity, it is his dance moves that are the most. This is intentional as he explains in his interview that “My aim was to find a middle ground, mixing both masculine and feminine movements into the choreography together.”⁹⁶ Many fans have found a niche and home within the fandom to feel comfortable celebrating fluidity and also pull strength from Taemin’s impactful messages of breaking gender barriers through performance.

The standards of beauty were changing due to the younger generation’s shift in preference. New concepts and new ideas that challenge tradition take time to solidify within society. While there are more companies targeting male beauty products as a profitable market, it is still an uncommon practice by most globally. We see the highest product income from South Korean men. While many men use skincare and beauty products regularly, it does not mean that their want to “fluidly” express themselves makes them queer. Queer sexuality is actually less accepted in East asian societies as it is in America.

Being Queer In Korea

So, why does South Korea seem to accept “queer expression” when exclusively looking at the genre of Kpop, but not socially in their everyday environment? Professor Chuyun Oh’s argument is persuasive because it does not deny the queer aspect that is within the presentation, but does argue that it does not guarantee these performers are a part of the spectrum, “Performance can present queerness in between homosexuality and heterosexuality without specifically being marked as queer or homosexual.”⁹⁷ This quote made me instantly think of the

⁹⁶Ibid

⁹⁷Oh, Chuyun. “Queering Spectatorship in K-Pop: Androgynous ‘Flower Boys’ and Western Female Fandom.” *Journal of Fandom Studies*, 2015

song “Libido”.⁹⁸ This was performed by a newer male group, OnlyOneOf, who got a lot of recognition after their choreography for this song went viral online. While the group and company claim the song is about a girl, the highly sexual performance spotlights two men dancing together. One key point of the choreography is when one member grabs the groin of another member between the legs. This was purposely choreographed to showcase the suggestive nature of the song and dance. As I suspect was the reasoning behind releasing this song, the dance went viral on many social media platforms, with people commenting about how they were now interested in learning more about them. The number of views on this video speaks for itself as it sits at 3.4 million views. While this is a topic that has been debated and even criticized as “queerbaiting” – a marketing technique for fiction and entertainment in which creators hint at, but then do not actually depict, same-sex romance or other LGBTQ+ representation – it is relevant to show that queerness can be presented and celebrated, but is not an authentic experience in the performer’s personal ideology.

Appropriation versus Appreciation

As discussed briefly before, the fine line of appreciating versus appropriating another community remains dangerous to cross. We see this as many Idols and companies have been called out for appropriating African/ African-American culture while doing hip-hop concepts, and we also see Idols and fashion stylists getting called out for islamophobia with offensive

⁹⁸ “[Mv] Onlyoneof (온리원오브) 'Libido'.” YouTube. Genie Music, April 8, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IMW1PICg-Ss>.

headwear.⁹⁹ The queer realm is broad as many of the fandoms are supported by millions of people who identify within the queer spectrum: sexuality and/or gender. Many queer fans have given credit to Kpop Idols and Kpop as a whole for helping them on their identity journey . Overall, fans have avidly vocalized gratitude for Kpop being a place they could turn to.

We see appreciation practiced as the Kpop industry's ultimate goal is global recognition. Idol's are specifically trained to become global superstars as we see them practicing multiple languages - usually Korean, English, Japanese, Spanish, and Malay - with this, we see groups collaborating with a number of artists across the world, not just from America. As BTS are the most globally recognized, they especially have to be careful with everything that gets publicized. There is a viral video of BTS member, Jhope, reminding other members to not touch the woman who came onstage as it is seen as disrespectful in Indonesia. Their positivity and influence on important topics such as racism, sexuality, and mental health is what makes them such a well loved music group.

While mental health is something that many Idols have spoken out about, self-love is the biggest statement that they emphasize to their audience. Many people who know only a little bit of Kpop or as I refer to them as the people who say, ““Yes! I have listened to BTS and only BTS’ group” do not ever look up the lyrics that they listen to. So many of the upbeat songs that would not seem to hold power have the most meaningful lyrics. For example, Fourth gen Stray Kids have been making electro-pop/ hip-hop music in which their lyrics address the struggle of having to navigate youthful mistakes, speaking on racism and which appeals to many people who struggle within multiple oppositional binaries, and also self love. As fourth generation

⁹⁹Dahir, Ikran. “This K-Pop Girl Group Is Being Accused of Appropriating Indian Culture.” BuzzFeed News. BuzzFeed News, July 21, 2016. <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/ikrd/omg-ohmygirl>.

bands are the newest in the Kpop industry, it is common to see them the most expressive in makeup looks, groomed hair, and fashion/

Kpop Male Influence

A little background history of male beauty standards before we dive into the influence of the Kpop industry on masculinity. In the 1980s to 90s, the aesthetic of a salesman, “suits, luxury watches, and a traditional strong male look was the norm”.¹⁰⁰ While the Hallyu wave, which marks the start of the Kpop industry, had a lot of effect on the definition of masculinity, other societal factors changed the way male attractiveness was viewed. During this time male standards in personality were being put to the test with Kdramas hosting more “honest, respectful and openhearted ways of the characters”¹⁰¹ for male roles. Traditionally, East Asian males were narrated in dramas as aggressors, tough, and macho as this was traditional standard of how masculinity was perceived at the time. While the on-screen shift was welcomed by younger generations, it was met with backlash from older women. The younger generations responded with heavy appeal for the male to present as sweet and caring in the on-screen relationship rather than show dominant traits.¹⁰² Shifts in perception were not exclusive to just music. People were wanting to see a new form of “masculinity”. When “modern literature and film began to question the roles assigned to men and women in traditional Confucian society”¹⁰³, the presentation of the male being overly masculine was a valid argument. There were also political conversations

¹⁰⁰Maliangkay, Roald. “The Effeminacy of Male Beauty in Korea.” The Newsletter. IIAS, December 2010. <https://www.iias.asia/the-newsletter/article/effeminacy-male-beauty-korea>.

¹⁰¹Jung, Sun. *Korean Masculinities and Transcultural Consumption: Yonsama, Rain, Oldboy, K-Pop Idols*. Hong Kong University Press, 2011. Accessed August 24, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1xcrmm>.

¹⁰²Ibid

¹⁰³Ibid

happening because “to many, issues of gender equality had for too long had to take a back seat to the wider aims of democratization”.¹⁰⁴ In many different ways, women felt unheard and not respected in a male-dominated society. This was clearly seen when an overwhelming amount of women were laid off first as the Korean market fell into hard times in 1997.¹⁰⁵

As capitalist corporations, prioritizing companies, and developing countries became extracted to Western companies. The financial market started to destabilize and with this, there was a drop in female employment overall in South Korea. As a result, females were left jobless and this stemmed a wave of anger throughout women all over South Korea, “the desire for a different ideal male figure also arose out of anger many women felt over being the first to be laid off after the so-called ‘IMF crisis’ hit in July of 1997”.¹⁰⁶ While women having jobs was frowned upon as a whole in society, the efforts to hold women at secondary status fueled a revolutionary way of thinking throughout women. The ideal of masculinity changed with women.

The form of masculinity that was acceptable was geared towards Western approval. While male beauty was seen as facial hair, sharp features, and a dominant personality, this quickly put Asians at a disadvantage because their naturally round faces, soft complexions with glowing skin, and almond-shaped eyes were hard to mask. As seen on TV, males were portrayed as “tough gangsters, detectives, and rebellious young men.”¹⁰⁷ It wasn’t until the mid-1990s, when Seo Taiji and Boys, H.O.T, and other groups introduced new concepts of male beauty to

¹⁰⁴Maliangkay, Roald. “The Effeminacy of Male Beauty in Korea.” The Newsletter. IIAS, December 2010. <https://www.iias.asia/the-newsletter/article/effeminacy-male-beauty-korea>.

¹⁰⁵Ibid

¹⁰⁶Ibid

¹⁰⁷Jung, Sun. *Korean Masculinities and Transcultural Consumption: Yonsama, Rain, Oldboy, K-Pop Idols*. Hong Kong University Press, 2011. Accessed August 24, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1xcrmm>.

the general public, East Asians started seeing beauty separate from western standards.¹⁰⁸ An example of this comes from Kevin Woo, who was a former member of a second-generation Idol group called U-KISS. He had come from San Francisco in 2008 to make his Idol debut and was confronted by a heavy culture shock. He was unfamiliar with the use of makeup and didn't understand at first why it was customary for men also to be applying it daily, "I was very confused when I saw how Koreans defined masculinity," he says. 'I remember growing up in America, and most male celebrities on TV were very manly, muscular, and had facial hair. In contrast, Korean male celebrities were almost the opposite. The ideal Korean man was more on the feminine side, had a slim figure, and put makeup on'.¹⁰⁹ It is interesting to see foreign trainees who join Kpop groups become affiliated to Korean culture as many viewers assume that they are already familiar with behavior such as self care, beauty regimen, and fashion.

The definition of masculinity was evolving due to the influence that Kpop boy groups were presenting towards adoring fans. Now, why did this develop so fast? David Yi says that it is due to the competitiveness that Koreans "obsess" over.¹¹⁰ We can see how high the competition is for younger generations globally through academics, extracurriculars, and even hobbies. To be accepted into prestigious opportunities, one's list of talents and skills must be extensive. In Korea, they have officially added beauty as a factor as well. Many youths have to add a photo of themselves to job agencies that they desire to be considered for.¹¹¹ This is unacceptable in America due to an obvious threat of discrimination, but in Korea the dominant demographic is

¹⁰⁸ TheKoreaSociety. "The History of Kpop." YouTube. The Korean Society, August 3, 2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CURw4smBaxk&ab_channel=TheKoreaSociety.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid

¹¹⁰ Yi, David. "How K-Pop Changed the Meaning of Masculinity in South Korea." Allure. Conde Nast, April 15, 2020. <https://www.allure.com/story/k-pop-and-masculinity>

¹¹¹ Ibid

Korean as it consists of 96% of the population that resides there.¹¹² While I believe it is different in Korea due to less diverse populations, having to send in a photo to companies still shows that appearance is a high standard that is kept in their society. From Tiktoks, there is an emphasis on Asian fashion and makeup looks that “wow” the audience. This may be seen as out of the box from an American perspective, but being particular with finessing your look every day is normal in Korea, as it is important to always make an impression. This is not just towards the youth, but parents also buy into the high stakes that their children must be “perfect” to succeed. “ Similar to the way parents invest heavily in their children’s education, common high school or middle school graduation gifts from parents to their children are double eyelid surgeries.”¹¹³ This is because, “[this includes the] ever-changing music industry, where physical attractiveness would certainly be an asset and can even guarantee a higher commercial value”, says Professor Chyun Oh in an interview about the impact of Kbeauty in the Korean market.¹¹⁴

With makeup becoming more utilized as a tool to men than a weapon, the overall concept of masculinity had to change. Openly gay Kpop Idol, Holland, speaks on the relationship between makeup and gender saying, “that in Korea, makeup has no gender or sexuality. Makeup is not just for women or necessarily feminine. It's for everyone”.¹¹⁵ We see the boost in public acceptance globally from BTS using genres that accentuate “bright eye shadows, pastel-colored hairstyles” while also showing that they are taking care of their complexion, which is not normal

¹¹²too, Kenneth Kimutai. “Ethnic Minorities and Immigrants in South Korea.” WorldAtlas. WorldAtlas, July 18, 2019. <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/ethnic-minorities-and-immigrants-in-south-korea.html>.

¹¹³Yi, David. “How K-Pop Changed the Meaning of Masculinity in South Korea.” Allure. Conde Nast, April 15, 2020. <https://www.allure.com/story/k-pop-and-masculinity>

¹¹⁴Oh, Chyunyun, “Unmasking Queerness: Blurring and Solidifying Queer Lines through K-Pop Cross-Dressing.” J Pop Cult, 50: (2017) 9-29. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jpcu.12506>

¹¹⁵Yi, David. “How K-Pop Changed the Meaning of Masculinity in South Korea.” Allure. Conde Nast, April 15, 2020. <https://www.allure.com/story/k-pop-and-masculinity>

to see from men. Effeminate fashion and facial makeup in performances are now considered “ideal boyfriend material” for many of the adoring fans of Kpop boy groups.¹¹⁶ This change caused not only women to become more interested in K-beauty as their favorite Idols would endorse brands, but also men started to become influenced to be able to become as desirable as an Idol. With this, K-beauty and Kpop intersect and become successful together, “Bands like Wanna One, BTS, and Exo have all been tapped by South Korean brands over the years to collaborate on different products and lines.” Now, we do see celebrity endorsement in America too, with internet celebrities, Instagram stars, and celebrities collaborating with brands to sell or make a product, but it is different. Why is it different? It is because “A celebrity endorsement holds a different type of weight in the Asian market”.¹¹⁷ While having a well-known spokesperson may be appealing to consider buying a product from an advertisement, “In Korean, endorsements come across as more believable because things like skincare are such a huge part of their culture.”¹¹⁸ We see the ideal look on the Idols and because they can show consistent results with products they absently mention on a V-live, it becomes an unofficial endorsement. Another reason is the loyalty of fans to different Idols and different groups. From buying out albums to support groups to selling out Louis Vuitton sunglasses that Taehyung from BTS wore one day, the fans are ready to be immersed. The Kpop industry purposely coerces and sets a narrative of each of the members that makes them appealing as ideal boyfriends to viewers.¹¹⁹ This makes a stronger loyalty and following rooted in each fan, which is why commercial gain

¹¹⁶Ibid

¹¹⁷Ibid

¹¹⁸Bryant, Taylor. “How K-Pop Artists Influence K-Beauty.” Nylon. Nylon, January 24, 2018. <https://www.nylon.com/articles/k-pop-k-beauty-popularity>.

¹¹⁹Ibid

from products or endorsement of even another person or group has a heavy impact on the general public.

Kbeauty and Marketing

From a statistical standpoint, it is also evident the rise of Kpop correlates with the rise of K-beauty. While the cosmetic and skincare market was already a huge industry due to females, now that there is heavy consumption of products in male reports as well, brands can “capture” both markets. The strategies that marketing companies use to appeal to males are different than females since it is the thought that goes through the consumer who's shopping for a product that counts. According to David Yi, “Men want to look like these swag-y guys who are the pinnacle of male beauty. [While] women want to feel closer to these guys by using their products”.¹²⁰ Either way, a celebrity endorsement shows that there is a higher marketable chance for both parties to buy products to fit their desired appeal. In South Korea, many males maintain skincare regimens, grooming practices, genderfluid fashion, and even exercise the use of cosmetics but to outsiders, such as Americans, this type of behavior is contradictory to their definition of masculinity.¹²¹ This difference in masculine constructs stems from the global recognition of K-pop, which is referred to as the “Hallyu Wave”.¹²² The western construction of masculinity is defined by heteronormative ideals that are ingrained into the values of American society. Instead,

¹²⁰Yi, David. “How K-Pop Changed the Meaning of Masculinity in South Korea.” *Allure*. Conde Nast, April 15, 2020. <https://www.allure.com/story/k-pop-and-masculinity>

¹²¹Elfvig-Hwang, Joanna. “Aestheticizing Authenticity: Corporate Masculinities in Contemporary South Korean Television Dramas.” *Asia Pacific Perspectives*. Center for Asian Pacific Studies, 2017. https://www.usfca.edu/sites/default/files/arts_and_sciences/center_for_asia_pacific_studies/elfving-hwang_-_aestheticizing_masculine_authenticity_in_so_korea.pdf.

¹²²Ainslie, Mary J. “Korean Overseas Investment and Soft Power: Hallyu in Laos.” *Korea Journal* 56, no. 3 (2016): 5–33. <https://doi.org/10.25024/kj.2016.56.3.5>.

Westerners conflate South Korean masculinity with Western associations of femininity.¹²³ Yet, the South Korean form of self-expression and self-care is not femininity; it is its own definition of masculinity.

Cosmetic companies such as BeREADY and SNEAKY, whose most marketable items are specifically targeted towards men, show that both the products and application processes are considerably different from women's.¹²⁴ Makeup is applied to both men and women for the purpose of emphasizing their respective features, yet in America, if a man wears makeup to emphasize his facial beauty, he is met with confusion regarding his use of "girly" makeup.¹²⁵

Appearance is highly valued in South Korean culture in a way that doesn't readily translate to American culture. In South Korea, both males and females are highly judged by their level of physical appearance, which not only can affect their status but also can lead to fewer opportunities for success. For this reasoning, the average South Korean male will often use makeup to enhance their appearance.¹²⁶ In contrast, Western mainstream media only portrays males wearing products as makeup artists. An example of this is James Charles, who uses his platform to emphasize creativity and art through complicated makeup looks.¹²⁷

¹²³Maliangkay, Roald. "The Effeminacy of Male Beauty in Korea." The Newsletter. IIAS, December 2010. <https://www.iias.asia/the-newsletter/article/effeminacy-male-beauty-korea>.

¹²⁴Warfield, Nia. "Men Are a Multibillion Dollar Growth Opportunity for the Beauty Industry." CNBC. CNBC, May 20, 2019.

¹²⁵Newell-Hanson, Alice. "How Korea's Male Beauty Obsession Is Challenging Gender Norms." i. i-d, January 20, 2016. https://i-d.vice.com/amp/en_uk/article/7xvqbq/how-koreas-male-beauty-obsession-is-challenging-gender-norms.

¹²⁶Rapp, Jessica. "S. Korea LEADS Men's BEAUTY Market. Will the West Ever Follow Suit?" CNN. Cable News Network, March 3, 2020. <https://www.cnn.com/style/amp/south-korea-male-beauty-market-chanel/index.html>.

¹²⁷Warfield, Nia. "Men Are a Multibillion Dollar Growth Opportunity for the Beauty Industry." CNBC. CNBC, May 20, 2019. <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/05/17/men-are-a-multibillion-dollar-growth-opportunity-for-the-beauty-industry.html>.

As younger generations of South Korean men flock to these marketed products, there has been an uptake of 44% in the amount of money spent on skincare by men from 2011-2017.¹²⁸ This shows that appearance is becoming even more emphasized in South Korean society. Further, three-fourths of young adult Korean men reported that they usually applied makeup at least once a week.¹²⁹ This transition also reflects the sudden rise of the K-pop industry both in South Korea and globally. K-pop groups have provided South Korea with a platform to promote many of their cosmetics, skincare products, and other marketable items. Idols are seen as influencers and are promoted on social media sites, across billboards, and on television.

Intersection of Kpop and Kbeauty

Companies have capitalized on the idea that fans desire to resemble their Idols. Through this increase in makeup use, the effects of the “Hallyu Wave” have changed the way South Korean men express gender and masculinity. The K-pop industry gives us an opportunity to think about masculinity, gender, and sexuality in a new sense; one that is new and controversial. Their influence allows them to break through the heteronormative regime and we see the effects through a big pushback against K-pop on social media spaces that are popular with the alt-right ideals who are vehemently against the breaking down of gender norms.

¹²⁸Market Insights Reports. “Beauty and Personal Care in South Korea.” Beauty And Personal Care In South Korea | Market Insights Reports, 2020. <https://www.marketinsightsreports.com/reports/10232390290/beauty-and-personal-care-in-south-korea>. .

¹²⁹Newell-Hanson, Alice. “How Korea's Male Beauty Obsession Is Challenging Gender Norms.” i. i-d, January 20, 2016.

There are young and fashionable places in Korea, such as Gangnam street in Itaewon or Myeong-dong, that would be a shocking sight to foreigners because of the emphasis on beauty products and presentation. These streets host high-end salons specifically for males who get touched up cosmetically and grooming-wise. This is very common for younger men to go to before job interviews, dates, and a day out. Many come out of the salon with “perfect skin and perfect hair”.¹³⁰ The “*kkonminam*” also known as “flower boy look” or the “Kpop look” is what men want these days. It will garner a public response from women on the street and admiration from other men. By looking like an Idol, one’s status is already higher. This appeal to look more like a Kpop Idol is what changed “masculinity” in common men, “The way they (Kpop stars) play with masculinity, what it means to be a beautiful man in a heterosexual or non-heterosexual way, it opens up possibilities for men on the street and eventually makes it more acceptable.”¹³¹ By practicing this more and more, it redefines the status quo.

As touched on before, street fashion is seen as usual in Korea. While Americans make memes out of celebrities in sweatpants, this is unacceptable as an Idol, “As a Kpop Idol, it is always a must to look good on and off the camera. Thus a celebrity should manage herself or himself properly. Especially when it comes to their physical appearance”.¹³² This has resulted in many Idols, male and female, developing eating disorders due to the constant pressure of presentation.¹³³ To be able to make an impression, you must do so consistently. To not be dressed

¹³⁰Yi, David. “How K-Pop Changed the Meaning of Masculinity in South Korea.” *Allure*. Conde Nast, April 15, 2020. <https://www.allure.com/story/k-pop-and-masculinity>

¹³¹Tavassoli, Sammy. “The Woes of Flowerboy Image.” *Confluence*, May 5, 2020.

<https://confluence.gallatin.nyu.edu/context/first-year-writing-seminar/the-woes-of-the-flower-boy-image>.

¹³²Yi, David “How K-Pop Empowered Men Everywhere to EMBRACE MAKE-UP.” *Esquire*. Esquire, June 21, 2021. <https://www.esquire.com/style/grooming/a36743526/k-pop-influence-mens-makeup-bts/>.

¹³³Soheili, Komeil. “K-Pop Stars Discuss Dark Side of Industry: Gym, Diet, Dating.” *Insider*. Insider, December 2, 2019. <https://www.insider.com/kpop-dark-side-gym-diet-dating-great-guys-crayon-pop-2019-10?amp>.

to the nines will garner many public responses. [This will be talked about more with the category of social media response]. While Korean culture is known to have strict beauty standards, the Kpop Industry with even harsher measures has broken out of the status quo and celebrated different beauty styles. The standard of slim build, soft features, poreless skin, and perfect hair is still heavily presented in Idols.¹³⁴ Still, some have gone against the status quo and have started a conversation within society that questions the upheld standard. For example, we see J-hope, a BTS member, who got cyberbullied heavily by both fans and trolls for his nontraditional physical appearance. His talent as the main dancer was overshadowed for many years by his features. Many people told him that he didn't belong in the group due to his "lack of attractiveness." Now, he is celebrated by many adoring fans for his looks because the beauty standard has evolved from a template to people celebrating Idols' unique features¹³⁵. We see this with Jimin's feminine features and creased eyelids, RM's facial structure, and Suga's round face.¹³⁶ Many of the BTS members redefined the attractiveness of futures through their tenacious road to success. They are now globally recognized for their looks and have influenced many worldwide to see the attractive appeal in Asians that many cultures were prejudiced against. I would agree that the Kpop industry boosted "Asian beauty" globally and is now recognized by other cultures and as a standard of beauty. Social media is celebrated by many, as it not only gives instant access to new concepts, it also allows people to become exposed to new things much faster. This is important when it comes to educating both young and old of all different cultures about awareness. As

¹³⁴Yi, David "How K-Pop Empowered Men Everywhere to EMBRACE MAKE-UP." Esquire. Esquire, June 21, 2021. <https://www.esquire.com/style/grooming/a36743526/k-pop-influence-mens-makeup-bts/>.

¹³⁵ Halliwell, Kate. "An Extremely Thorough Breakdown of Every Era of Bts." The Ringer. The Ringer, February 19, 2020. <https://www.theringer.com/music/2020/2/19/21143180/history-of-bts-eras-new-album-map-of-the-soul-7>.

¹³⁶Ibid

positive of an impact it has had on the world, there are many negative effects that social media has on both individuals and communities.

The Toxicity of Social Media

With the constant being a goal of gathering public reaction and recognition though can also be toxic in the industry. This appeal is purposefully orchestrated as the media market targets both celebrated trends and also controversial ones. To discuss the downsides of constant public scrutiny first there is a lot of toxicity and exaggeration on the is As Kpop Idols have had numerous controversies that have forced them to separate from their group, sometimes with the consequences being argued as bigger than the “crime” committed, the first priority that both the Idol’s management team and their company does is write statements to the public. This in turn starts trending on Twitter and Reddit threads. The Kpop fandom is a large community and Idol’s are most of the time sentenced to a mass media “trial”. Even when different cases become “unproven” or the Idol are found innocent, the mark of public humiliation and public opinion is like a brand. Many Idols have suffered irreversible mental health complications from controversies and many careers have been irreversibly ruined, all because trolls that are able to remain anonymous have publicized things that cannot be taken back. This is not at all to say that Idol’s are never at fault, just because they are public figures does not mean that they are perfect and are not exempt from facing consequences. This is just to highlight the danger and significant impact that global opinion can have on public figures.

There is a Kdrama that recently came out called, True Beauty. The TV show is derived from a webtoon about a girl who got so heavily bullied for her “natural face” that makeup was

the only way for her to survive high school. She becomes “transformed” by makeup and is seen as the popular pretty girl by all her jealous classmates. To keep up this “charade,” she must buy and apply makeup to herself any time she wants to go out because unfortunately, she was permanently traumatized by public opinion due to the amount of bullying she received online and in person at her old high school.¹³⁷ This opens up a more extensive discussion of public opinion. The consensus that surrounds each individual is evident through Kdramas, live TV shows, and interviews. Public opinion is something that is constantly being vocalized. While there is a humbling nature in how Korean society functions as an “always do better, it’s never enough” motto, the highly critical nature where everything is analyzed can become detrimental to many people’s self esteem in Korea.

Normalizing “beauty” outside of the gender binary is an essential step in the progression. While we see Kpop Idols breaking gender norms through fashion and cosmetics, there is still conservative thinking in society. While concepts such as “skinship”¹³⁸ between males are seen as typical from following vlogs and documentaries, sexuality is still a sensitive topic. Many rumors surround specific Idols about their sexuality, but both as a marketing strategy and societal expectation, many are unable to speak up about themselves.¹³⁹ Suga from BTS has spoken on multiple occasions of him not caring about gender when romantically involved. Yet, he cannot officially define his pansexuality because the industry refuses him to come out with a statement. From what I have read about the opinions of the Korean community, Queerness is still more

¹³⁷“True Beauty.” Rakuten Viki. Accessed August 24, 2021. <https://www.viki.com/tv/37374c-true-beauty>.

¹³⁸Joanne. “4 Distinctly Korean Habits to Know before Going To Korea.” Sejong Korean Language School. Sejong, October 6, 2020. <https://www.sejong.com.sg/4-distinctly-korean-habits-to-know-before-going-to-korea/>.

¹³⁹Oh, Chuyun. “Queering Spectatorship in K-Pop: Androgynous ‘Flower Boys’ and Western Female Fandom.” *Journal of Fandom Studies*, 2015

acceptable in America than there. We see that even with crossdressing, genderqueer is a concept that is still in its early phases and has not been introduced as much as it has in the West.

Conclusion

The Kpop industry is a climbing market that is appealing to more people every day. Not only is the pop culture industry growing, but so is the beauty market as these two powerhouse marketing techniques intersect closely. The influences that Idol's have had on breaking gender norms is important to acknowledge as it is a global phenomenon. Many heteronormative regimes are being directly faced with new concepts that is leading to overall exposure. The only way to progress is to first be exposed. The definitions that are associated with the gender binary are becoming more obsolete as people begin to feel more comfortable to explore. This issue addressed multiple levels of toxicity that reside in our community today. The goal is to educate individuals that repress the fluidity of gender, as it is an oppressive construct with the purpose to reinforce the heteronormative patriarchy. People who use derogatory phrases deny themselves and others a chance of learning about queer sexuality, gender expression, typical Asian practices, and racial microaggressions. Often in doing so, they also suppress the true identity of their queer peers due to their "uneducated" opinions. This work is important as it allows for a larger conversation pertaining to racial, sexual, and gender discrimination that is prevailing in our world now. Additionally, it supports the conversation of hidden queer identities by normalizing nontraditional masculinities among the general public by dispersing information on how times change the concept of masculinity. The Kpop industry has given many around the world a chance

to be exposed to new concepts and ideas that challenge the norm. In this, it is redefining a new norm that is able to be accessed by all.