

Access*: Interdisciplinary Journal of Student Research and Scholarship

Volume 7 | Issue 1

Article 6

2023

How Boy Bands Across the World are Changing Masculinity

Maria Babko

University of Washington Tacoma, maria429@uw.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.tacoma.uw.edu/access>



Part of the [Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Ethnicity in Communication Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Babko, Maria (2023) "How Boy Bands Across the World are Changing Masculinity," *Access*: Interdisciplinary Journal of Student Research and Scholarship*: Vol. 7: Iss. 1, Article 6.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.tacoma.uw.edu/access/vol7/iss1/6>

This Undergraduate Research Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Teaching and Learning Center at UW Tacoma Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Access*: Interdisciplinary Journal of Student Research and Scholarship by an authorized editor of UW Tacoma Digital Commons. For more information, please contact taclibdc@uw.edu.

Abstract

This paper analyzes the BTS music video, *Dynamite*, from a sociological perspective and seeks to identify deeper meanings of the portrayal of masculinity from the visual encodings of the video. The first part discusses sociology and its sub-component definitions and how they will be applied to the music video analysis. The second section identifies the characters, the BTS boys, and the narrative that discusses their dancing and having fun, as seen in the music video. The third part uses sociological analysis to make sense of the visuals providing a comparative view of K-pop boy bands as a whole, as well as Western boy bands. The final section of the paper determines the hidden meanings that arise from the sociological analysis of the music video and the broader topic of boy bands, as their feminized and homosexual tones blur the lines of gender and sexuality, in part due to their audience of females and LGBTQ+ people.

Keywords: BTS, Kpop, boy bands, gender, sexuality, masculinity

How Boy Bands Across the World Are Changing the Definition of Masculinity

Music groups consisting of attractive young men singing and dancing, more famously known as boy bands, have been a part of the music industry for years. The term “boy band” was coined in the 1980s, but boy bands have been around much longer than that, dating back to the late 1800s with African American barbershop quartets (Bowenbank, 2022). Currently, one of the top boy bands is a K-pop (Korean pop) music group known as BTS. First debuting in 2013, BTS has steadily grown to become a worldwide phenomenon, receiving multiple Grammy nominations. With numerous No. 1 hits on the Billboard Hot 100, they have garnered millions of fans known as their “ARMY” (“BTS: Biography, Music & News”). My analysis will focus on the BTS music video, *Dynamite*.

Dynamite has been one of the group’s biggest songs, holding multiple world records, including the most viewed YouTube video within 24 hours, the most viewed YouTube music video in 24 hours, and the most viewed YouTube music video in 24 hours by a K-pop group (Suggitt, 2021). I will analyze *Dynamite* through a sociological lens to gain a better understanding of the underlying meanings of masculinity from the imagery of the *Dynamite* music video, as well as examining how BTS is viewed by society in general. This essay will break down how boy bands are changing the definition of masculinity by not conforming to its dominant ideas, but instead portraying themselves with more feminine and homosexual overtones through clothes, actions, and backgrounds.

Theoretical Framework: Sociology of the Media

Sociology “involves the study and understanding of human interaction” and “analyzes how various group structures are organized, how they work, and the meaning individuals bring to and get from the groups in which they live” (Bankston, 2000, p. 496). More generally, sociology is about how people interact with society and what observations are made about those interactions. However, within the scope of this essay, I will focus on the sociology of the media. Sociology of the media is about “how groups and institutions function (institutions are generally understood to be ways of patterning and organizing social life)” (Berger, 2019, p. 135). The institutions that pattern our lives are companies such as Disney, Meta, TikTok, etc. which control the output of media. The sociology of the media explores how media shapes our views, opinions, stereotypes, and identities. My analysis will dive into how society interacts with the media, in this case the BTS music video *Dynamite* and the patterns that can be observed from it.

Sub-Components of Sociology

Sociology as a study is based on three conceptual subcomponents; the first of these is deviance. Deviance “refers to behavioral patterns that are different from typical or conventional (some would say normal) ones” (Berger, 2019, p. 144). Deviance is about the actions people take and whether those actions fit into what is viewed as “normal” in society.

The second subcomponent is anomie. Anomie “is derived from the Greek word *nomos*, meaning ‘norms.’ It means, literally, no (a) norms (*nomos*)” (Berger, 2019, p. 139). When looking further at anomie, Coser (1971) explained it as follows

When social regulations break down, the controlling influence of society on individual propensities is no longer effective and individuals are left to their own devices. Such a state of affairs Durkheim calls anomie, a term that refers to a condition of relative normlessness in a whole society or in some of its component groups. Anomie does not relate to a state of mind, but a property of the social structure. It characterizes a condition in which individual desires are no longer regulated by common norms, and where, as a consequence, individuals are left without moral guidance in the pursuit of their goals. (pp. 132–133)

Anomie, as described, is a step farther than deviance in that instead of labeling just one person as deviant, a whole group of people are identified as not relating to “common norms.”

The third and final subcomponent of sociology is alienation. Alienation “refers to a feeling of estrangement and separation from others. A person who is alienated feels like ‘a stranger’ (alien), with no connections to his or her society or to some group in that society” (Berger, 2019, p. 139). This is the furthest step, after deviance and anomie, where people are cut off from society and become isolated. These three subcomponents of sociology provide the basis for understanding how people fit into and work in various groups.

Application to the Music Video

These three subcomponents will be used to dive deeper into the analysis of the BTS music video. In doing so, ideologies will be revealed that might not be noticed on first viewing. To critically assess the underlying ideologies, my analysis will shift from observing the manifest function to the latent function. Manifest functions are defined as

“obvious and intended functions of some activity, entity, or institution,” while latent functions serve as a contrast; they are “hidden and unintended” (Berger, 2019, p. 318). From the perspective of the BTS music video, this paper will first look at the surface level of the actions and images of the video and then use sociological analysis to reveal deeper meanings that are beneath that surface level.

Key Trends and Symbols of *Dynamite*

Major Characters

BTS is made up of seven members: Jungkook, RM, J-Hope, Jimin, V, Suga, and Jin. Each member is prominently featured in the music video and generally portrays similar images as the others. The members are all young, handsome, Korean males and are portrayed as upper-class. They are all wearing jewelry, such as necklaces, earrings, and bracelets, as well as make-up. Some members are also featured wearing different styles of sunglasses (RM, J-Hope, Jimin, V). The group constantly switches outfits throughout the music video, including but not limited to: bright pastel-colored clothes, full denim outfits (Jungkook and Jimin), graphic tees and yellow-colored flared jeans (J-Hope), bright and patterned clothes (V and Suga), and brightly colored and patterned dress shirts, blazers and suits (whole group).

The Narrative

The music video starts with an intro featuring the whole group, then quickly jumps to Jungkook finishing putting his clothes on in a bedroom. He is also shown dancing and singing. There continue to be quick shifts between scenes, with dancing throughout. The scenes include RM in a record store, J-Hope inside a donut shop with Jimin outside the shop, V next to an ice cream truck, and Suga on a basketball court.

There are group dance sequences featured throughout as well as some with just two or three of them. Many of the poses and dance moves made by BTS members in the music video are in a similar style to Michael Jackson's—the moonwalk, the high kick, the hand(s) going over the hair and down the back of the neck, and the toe stand with the hips popping out. After the 2nd chorus (2:30), there is a scene showing Jungkook dancing by himself and then the camera pans to the right where it shows Suga, RM, V, J-Hope, and Jin dancing together with their right arms leaning on the next person's shoulder. The camera then pans back, and the scene now shows Jimin dancing with Jungkook. As the two of them take off their denim jackets and throwing them away, the other group members show surprised reactions and point at the camera. What follows is a quick sequence of the two alternately dancing, making faces, and throwing peace signs at the camera. The music video then launches into a solo shot of Jimin, back in his pastel clothes and quickly joined by Jungkook in a similar outfit. Jimin jumps on Jungkook's back to hug him, all the while they are both seen smiling and laughing. The final sequence includes all group members dancing on a pink stage in the middle of a grassy field with huge blasts of pastel-colored smoke in the background.

The Mood

Throughout the video, there are a lot of self-touches to the face and body, as well as gentle touches between group members. The backgrounds are all quite vibrant, featuring bright pinks, yellows, and blues. The music and lyrics match, with a fun bubblegum pop beat and lyrics that talk about “shining through the city with a little funk and soul. So I'ma light it up like dynamite.” Overall, the mood of the video is light and happy, with a group of guy friends just being silly and having fun with each other.

Changing Masculine Identity: Analysis of *Dynamite*

BTS as a Boy Band

When looking at the music video from a sociological perspective, the analysis identifies how *Dynamite* constructs certain images, particularly the concept of masculinity and what it means to “be a man.” My analysis will begin by defining three types of masculinity: hegemonic, subordinate, and inclusive. The first, hegemonic masculinity, is generally “white, heterosexual, and middle class” (Katz, 2020, para. 2). Hegemonic masculinity has to do with “the creation and maintenance of a social stratification of masculinities within an intramasculine hierarchical structure that promote[s] patriarchy,” ultimately having homophobia at the center (Cleland, 2014; p. 1272). Additionally, hegemonic masculinity has the “notion that women are objects...who arouse men’s heterosexual urges” (Nylund, 2004, p. 146).

On the other hand, subordinate masculinity is related to “men of color, gays, poor, and working-class” (Katz, 2020, para. 2). Subordinate masculinity is a complete contrast to hegemonic masculinity but acts as the supporting character to help bring hegemonic masculinity to life. Since the basis of hegemonic masculinity is having an “intramasculine hierarchical structure” (Cleland, 2014; p. 1272), subordinate masculinity is needed to create and maintain that structure.

Finally, inclusive masculinity suggests that “as cultural homophobia significantly declines, a hegemonic form of conservative masculinity will lose its dominance, and softer masculinities will exist without the use of social stigma to police them” (Anderson, 2009, p. 96). “Homophobia” is defined as a combination of “a culture of homophobia, femphobia, and compulsory heterosexuality” (Anderson, 2009, p. 7). With this definition,

inclusive masculinity is shown to step away from the structured and oppressive ideas of hegemonic and subordinate masculinity, bringing a space where any type of masculinity can exist. Currently, the dominant masculinity, the one that is the most powerful and well-known, is hegemonic (Katz, 2020, para. 2). In the music video, the BTS members who are featured wearing fun and colorful clothes, wearing makeup and jewelry, laughing and making faces at the camera, and singing and dancing with each other present a contrast with the dominant images of what it means to be a man as described in hegemonic masculinity. The group's looks and actions, shown as more feminine and with homosexual tones, are more in line with inclusive masculinity.

Before discussing how the sub-components of sociology relate to the music video, it is important to note how labeling theory is brought into play, particularly as it relates to deviance. Labeling theory is understood as claiming that “[c]riminality is not an inherent quality of a particular class of actions, but rather...the result of a process of social definition: ‘We must not say that an action shocks the common conscience because it is criminal, but rather that it is criminal because we reprove it’” (Durkheim, 1964, p. 81; as cited in Jones, 1981, p. 1011). This means that the action itself is not deviant; instead, it is society that labels the act as deviant. With this in mind, though it may seem there are representations of deviance, anomie, and alienation featured in the music video, they are not the reality. The BTS boys may be straying from the hegemonic norm of what it means to be men, but there is more to the sociological concepts than just this single piece. Examined through the three sociological concepts, we see a particular divide created between the specific subject and society. When someone is labeled as deviant, they are meant to be seen as not “normal.” This labeling

leads to a sense of anomie and alienation, where an individual is isolated from society. With the “rise of K-pop media and fan culture on the global scale” (Kuo et al., 2020, p. 147), BTS is not shunned or divided from the rest of society. Instead, they are dominating the music industry and are celebrated by millions.

The whole theme of the music video, whether it is seen in the group’s wardrobe, the backgrounds, or the effects, is centered on bright pastel colors of pink, yellow, and blue. These representations of color create a more feminine feel to the music video. The Michael Jackson moves of the BTS members involve a lot of self-touch and very tilted bodies. Two of the more prominent ones are the hand(s) going over the hair and down the back of the neck and the toe stand with the hips popping out. The actions of the BTS members in the music video are coded as feminine, as “women in the media use their hands to touch themselves” (Tylka & Calogero, 2011, p. 466). These actions are known as “canting postures...[where] positions tilt the body, placing women ‘off-center’ and ungrounded, unable to react quickly and firmly” (Tylka & Calogero, 2011, p. 466). In addition to these feminized aspects, a middle ground is reached between male and female gender representations through the many outfit changes “utilized to emphasize the almost genderless, classless, and often futuristic or fantastic identities of the performers and the characters they embody” (Waszkiewicz & Oleszczuk, 2020, p. 122). Although all these feminine and genderless codes are present, the BTS boys clearly show that they don’t care by laughing, making faces, and having fun in the video. This ties into inclusive masculinity as the group shows their sense of masculinity without any structured and oppressive ideas of hegemonic and subordinate masculinity.

A second aspect of inclusive masculinity is that it can come to fruition “as cultural homophobia significantly declines” (Anderson, 2009, p. 96). In the music video, the BTS boys show a lot of touches between each other, whether dancing together or riding on each other’s backs and hugging. These actions, paired with their feminized or genderless presentation, lead to a construction of sexuality. In part, these types of videos can be a gateway for LGBTQ+ Asian American representation, as seen “through fan participation and imagination, that provides alternative narratives of sexuality, gender, and Asian identity that are supportive to young adult LGBTQ+ Asian Americans who lack sources of visibility and validation from their families and western media” (Kuo et al., 2020, p. 163). These constructions of gender and sexuality are framed from the K-pop perspective, specifically with K-pop boy bands. This leads to the question: Do these constructions differ from a Western point of view?

Western Boy Bands

Boy bands in the West have included big names like Backstreet Boys, NSYNC, and One Direction. Western boy bands, specifically the Backstreet Boys, are described as having “‘girlish’ masculinity.” This “girlish” form of masculinity is “an important source of their success with fans, who use it, singly and collectively, to negotiate their own fluid gender and sexual desires” (Wald, 2002, para. 6). This shows there are many similar constructions of gender and sexuality compared to K-pop boy bands. Many Western boy bands’ primary target audience was female, but their reach became much wider. Western boy bands’ audiences started including “queer audiences (e.g., gay boys, drag kings), which made (presumably heterosexual) adolescents reflect upon their sexual desires” (Moos, 2013, para. 7). This pattern of feminized or genderless images is

reflected in both K-pop and Western boy bands. Both have also created space for the LGBTQ+ community to flourish.

Ideological Analysis: The Latent Function of *Dynamite*

As described before, latent functions show the “hidden and unintended” ideas of the text (Berger, 2019, p. 318). In the case of the BTS music video, the previous analysis using sociology will provide a deeper look. The findings reveal that BTS and K-pop boy bands as a whole, who are handsome, young, and upper class, are portrayed as feminine or almost genderless through their bright and colorful wardrobe changes throughout the video. In addition, the video features many dance moves, as well as colorful background colors and sets. K-pop boy bands blur the line between constructions of gender and how it is reflected in music videos. BTS’ construction of gender is also paired with their construction of sexuality. The BTS members have small touches between each other when they are dancing and riding each other’s backs and hugging. This ultimately makes their sexuality seem ambiguous. As seen before, Western boy bands also share the same types of feminine and homosexualized images as K-pop boy bands. Both have primarily female audiences but have also opened space for LGBTQ+ communities to join as well, demonstrating that boy bands, in general, do not fit the definition of hegemonic masculinity (Katz, 2020; Connel, 1987; Cleland, 2014; Nylund, 2004). Nor do they fit the definition of subordinate masculinity (Katz, 2020). Instead, they can explore with the power to construct these differing masculine images and still be wildly popular. They are not labeled as deviant, nor are they anomic or alienated, but are instead at the top of music charts. BTS, in particular, has grown to be a worldwide phenomenon, giving them the ability to showcase these ideas of inclusive

masculinity (Anderson, 2009) and reaching millions of people. Their audiences, made up of females and LGBTQ+ people, welcome these masculinities and sexualities that stray from the norm. This demonstrates that groups who have been marginalized by the standards of hegemonic masculinity are more open to these ideas, as they reflect a new vision of what gender and sexuality can look like in mainstream media.

Conclusion

In closing, the sociological analysis of the BTS music video *Dynamite* revealed that K-pop boy bands can portray themselves with non-conforming gender and sexuality norms through their clothes, actions, and backgrounds and still hold a high place in the music world. Western boy bands shared a similar image and are still quite big in the music industry. It was also brought to light that it is because of boy bands' particular audiences, consisting of females and LGBTQ+ people, that these groups can stray from gender and sexuality norms while remaining free of labels such as deviant, anomic, or alienated. The willingness of boy bands to challenge traditional notions of masculinity has become a catalyst for broader social progress. Through their alternative representations of gender and sexuality, boy bands like BTS play a pivotal role in cultivating more inclusive and accepting societies. As these ideas become more widely accepted, they will gradually erode the stigmatization of non-conforming gender identities and sexualities. This will lead to fostering a safer and more supportive environment for individuals to express their authentic selves. It is evident that BTS and other boy bands not only wield significant influence over the music industry but also profoundly impact the definition of masculinity in mainstream media. Their global reach and diverse fan base open doors to meaningful conversations about what inclusive

masculinity can look like in society. Ultimately, their impact transcends entertainment and actively contributes to the shaping of a more progressive and harmonious world.

References

- Anderson, E. (2009). *Inclusive masculinity: The changing nature of masculinities* (Vol. 22, pp. xi–xi). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203871485>
- Bankston, C. L. (2000). *Sociology basics* (Ser. Magill's choice). Salem Press.
- Berger, A. A. (2019). *Media analysis techniques* (6th ed.). SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Bowenbank, S. (2022, February 9). *Billboard explains: The magic of boy bands*. Billboard. <https://www.billboard.com/music/music-news/billboard-explains-boy-bands-1235029089/>
- Billboard. (2023). *BTS: Biography, music & news*. <https://www.billboard.com/artist/bts/>
- Coser, L. (1971). *Masters of sociological thought: Ideas in historical and social context*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Cleland, J. (2014). Association football and the representation of homosexuality by the print media: A case study of Anton Hysén. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 61(9), 1269–1287. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2014.926765>
- Katz, J. (2020). Reprint retrospective: Advertising and the construction of violent white masculinity: From BMWs to Bud Light. *Advertising & Society Quarterly* 21(2), doi:10.1353/asr.2020.0015
- Nylund, D. (2004). When in Rome: Heterosexism, homophobia, and sports talk radio. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, 28(2), 136–168. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0193723504264409>
- Jones, T. A. (1981). Durkheim, deviance and development: Opportunities lost and regained. *Social Forces*, 59(4), 1009–1024. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2577978>

- Kuo, L., Pekuorez-Garcia, S., Burke, L., Yamasaki, V., & Le, T. (2020). Performance, fantasy, or narrative: LGBTQ+ Asian American identity through Kpop Media and fandom. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 69(1), 145–168.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2020.1815428>
- Moos, J. J. (2013). Boy bands, Drag Kings, and the performance of (queer) masculinities. *Transposition*, (3). <https://doi.org/10.4000/transposition.325>
- Suggitt, C. (2021, April 16). *BTS smash two more world records with single “dynamite.”* Guinness World Records.
<https://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/news/2021/4/bts-smash-two-more-world-records-with-single-dynamite-655802>
- Tylka, T. L., & Calogero, R. M. (2011). Expose the illusions, crack the codes: Contextualizing visual media to mold a new reality. *Sex Roles*, 65(7–8), 461–468.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-011-0039-9>
- Wald, G. (2002). “I want it that way”: Teenybopper music and the girling of boy bands. *Genders*, 35.
https://web.archive.org/web/20141109014156/http://www.genders.org/g35/g35_wald.html
- Waszkiewicz, A., & Oleszczuk, A. (2020). Queerness of hallyu 2.0: Negotiating non-normative identities in K-pop music videos. *“Res Rhetorica,”* 7(2).
<https://doi.org/10.29107/rr2020.2.8>