

# The Flower-Boy Phenomenon: Complicating Soft Masculinity in the “Dynamite Era”

Seth Ziolkowski

Intended Major: Arts, Media, and Culture

## ABSTRACT

In 2020, South Korea’s K-pop boyband, BTS, established that the Korean Wave is ascending to new heights in the U.S. with the release of their record-breaking song *Dynamite*. Considering their androgynous aesthetic, BTS’ mounting visibility in American pop-culture poses a potential challenge to conventional Western binaries and racialized stereotypes. To engage this phenomenon, I reviewed contemporary scholarship on the Korean Wave, examined online discourse regarding BTS/soft masculinity, and conducted a brief interview with fan and non-fan respondents. Given the dynamic interplay of social, cultural, and political factors, this research showed that there is both possibility and pushback for mainstream soft masculine representation as a result of what I refer to as the *Dynamite era*.

## INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE

In 2020, Big Hit Entertainment debuted the *BTS (방탄소년단) 'Dynamite' Official Music Video*, the Bangtan Boys’ first ever all-English single, on their YouTube channel. Beyond their catchy lyrics, hypnotic sound, and flawless choreography, BTS has a visibly distinct “flower-boy” aesthetic, also referred to as “soft masculinity” (Black et al. 157; Jung 4). For this research, I focused exclusively on the transnational export of male K-pop idols by drawing special attention to BTS and their global fandom known as ARMY. K-pop, by design, is a culturally hybridized, strategically manufactured commodity, and the gender ambiguity of male K-pop idols is a primary component to their global reach and appeal. The mounting visibility of BTS in American pop-culture raises vital questions concerning the influence of soft masculinity in the U.S., especially when heteronormativity and Euro-American beauty/masculinity has largely dominated transnational media flows. Thus, the purpose of this research was to complicate existing soft masculinity discourse in the *Dynamite era* while considering the current factors influencing the development of, and resistance to, a budding flower-boy phenomenon in contemporary American society.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

YouTube: Some BTS fans participate in the creation and circulation of compilation videos known as “FANTasy narratives,” which emphasize the boyband’s soft masculine aesthetic and bromance behavior. Such video and their comments reveal a desire among certain female fans for homoerotic content which may at times reinforce the “Koreaboo” stereotype. (Kwon 12).

Twitter: As a result of COVID-19, the U.S. has witnessed a rise in anti-Asian hate speech, which has at times placed BTS in the crosshairs of xenophobic and racist opposition. However, on Twitter fans utilize the platform to combat such hate speech through the circulation of hashtags like #StopAsianHateCrimes.

Reddit: Threads on Reddit suggest that the soft masculinity of by BTS has the potential to influence the sexual preferences of heterosexual females and improve the dating life of East Asian men living the West. Discourse on Reddit implies that soft masculinity has become more attractive in the *Dynamite Era*.

Interviews: The interview with a female ARMY highlighted the appeal of BTS’ “Love Yourself, Speak Yourself” message and their soft masculine image among females. The male *Dynamite* fan and the male unfamiliar with BTS or *Dynamite* both commented on the femininity of the BTS members. Although the interviews represent a limited representation of a whole population, the responses imply a varied perspective from heterosexual males towards BTS and their aesthetic. Further inquiry among a larger population is necessary.

## METHOD(S)

To employ this research, I first examined pre-COVID and pre-*Dynamite* scholarship pertaining to the reception and influence of BTS’ soft masculinity among American audiences. Then, I analyzed relevant online discourse surrounding BTS’ *Dynamite* across digital platforms such as YouTube, Twitter, and Reddit. These platforms are critical in examining fandom engagement and flows of flower-boy imagery. YouTube, for example, is not merely a “content hub” for all-things K-pop; rather, it is digital space where ARMYs possess unfettered agency to consume and produce BTS-related content (Kim 210). Similarly, Twitter allows the ARMY fandom real-time engagement with BTS, and often serves as a platform for online political activism. Reddit, on the other hand, functions as a curated, mostly unmoderated chatroom in which varying degrees of discourse regarding BTS occur. In conjunction with these research methods, I conducted brief interviews with a current ARMY, a *Dynamite* fan, and non-BTS/*Dynamite* fan as preliminary research for future inquiry on the broader reception of soft masculinity.



Art by @megtagsillustrates

## CONCLUSIONS

This research paper sought to complicate soft masculinity by considering the social, political, and cultural factors in contemporary American society as they relate to BTS’ revolutionary potential in challenging hegemonic gender binaries. Compared to South Korea, where flower-boy imagery became commercialized through “FANTasy culture,” and subsequently mainstreamed in East Asia through pop-culture, the current landscape in the U.S. suggests both drawbacks and advantages for such a phenomenon to occur (Kwon 10). These factors include the sustained visibility of BTS and other male K-pop idols, ongoing trends in fashion and cosmetics, growing anti-Asian sentiment related to COVID-19, and increased attraction to soft masculinity/East Asian masculinity among pop-culture audiences. As the *Dynamite era* unfolds, and further scholarship is produced, a sweeping flower-boy phenomenon in America may not be entirely inconceivable. In fact, Universal Music Group recently announced a “strategic partnership” with BTS’ label Big Hit Entertainment and a major U.S. media partner in their pursuit of fashioning a next-generation global K-pop boyband (UMG 2021). Thus, American audiences could see a potential surge in diverse representations of soft masculinity in the coming years.

## REFERENCES

- Black, Daniel, et al. *Complicated Currents: Media Flows, Soft Power and East Asia*. Monash University EPress, 2010.
- Jung, Sun. *Korean Masculinities and Transcultural Consumption: Yonsama, Rain, Oldboy, K-Pop Idols*. Hong Kong University Press, 2011.
- Kim, Youna. *The Korean Wave: Korean Media Go Global*. Taylor and Francis, 2013.
- Kwon, Jungmin. *Straight Korean Female Fans and Their Gay Fantasies*. University of Iowa Press, 2019.
- Universal Music Group. “Big Hit Entertainment and Universal Music Group Announce Expanded Strategic Partnership.” *UMG*, 18 Feb. 2021, [www.universalmusic.com/big-hit-entertainment-and-universal-music-group-announce-expanded-strategic-partnership/](http://www.universalmusic.com/big-hit-entertainment-and-universal-music-group-announce-expanded-strategic-partnership/).