

The Flower Boy Phenomenon: Complicating BTS' Soft Masculinity Within Competing K-pop Discourses

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ABSTRACT

In 2020, the K-pop boy band *Bangtan Sonyeondan* (hereafter BTS) garnered further recognition and visibility in the American pop-music scene with their record-breaking hit *'Dynamite'*. As an alternative representation in pop-culture, some scholars suggest BTS' pan-East Asian soft masculinity may have the potential to challenge hegemonic masculinity (Lee et al., 2020) whilst elevating the female gaze (Oh, 2015). Other scholars indicate that soft masculinity functions merely as a fan service and does not significantly alter dominant gender dynamics or inequalities (Kim, 2022). For this research, I analyze how K-pop fans in the U.S. negotiate, consume, and circulate soft masculine imagery in online spaces while drawing attention to competing discourses around BTS' soft masculine aesthetic. In doing so, I interrogate the following questions: What does online discourse reveal about the acceptance or rejection of alternative masculinity/ies? What advantages or drawbacks does the current social, cultural, and political landscape in the U.S. suggest about BTS' revolutionary potential? Rather than assert a definitive view, this research sought to complicate discourses on soft masculinity by considering racial and cultural notions about Asian men in the U.S. as well as stigmas surrounding K-pop and fans of K-pop.

INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE

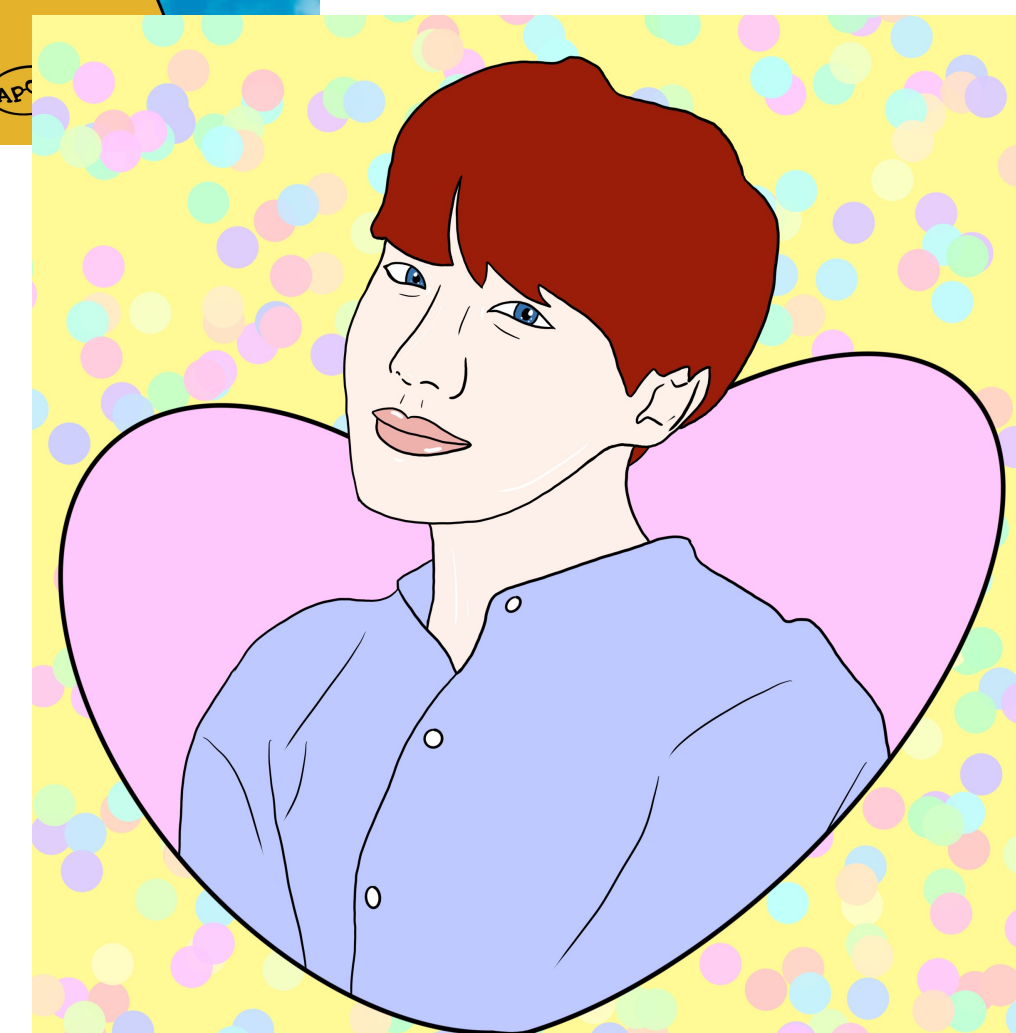
In the current era of globalization, the global media landscape has become increasingly interconnected and complex, thus problematizing traditionally held views of unidirectional media and cultural flows from the "core" to the "periphery" (Thussu, 2007). Contra-flows from non-Western regional media centers, like South Korea, complicate notions of Western-led cultural imperialism; indeed, such contra-flows may even challenge the existing hegemonic order. The Korean Wave—the intensified production, distribution, circulation, and consumption of South Korean popular culture within East Asia and beyond—is a particularly unique case study of contra-flow (Iwabuchi, 2007). This paper interrogates the transnational popularity of K-pop by using BTS as a case study. Beyond their catchy lyrics, hypnotic sound and flawless choreography, BTS embody a visibly distinct aesthetic known as *kkonminam* (literally translated "flower pretty boy") otherwise referred to as "pan-East Asian soft masculinity" (Jung, 2010). The mounting success and visibility of BTS, especially since the release of *'Dynamite'*, raises vital questions concerning the sociocultural implications of an alternative representation of masculinity in popular culture; particularly, when heteronormativity and Euro-American masculinity (hegemonic masculinity) has largely dominated media/cultural flows. Rather than assert a definitive view, I seek to complicate existing, and often competing, discourses on soft masculinity to demonstrate the complexity of this topic in the American context.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

YouTube: Some BTS fans take on the role of prosumers by creating and circulating video compilations known as "FANTasy narratives" that emphasize the members' soft masculine features and bromance-like behavior. These compilations reveal a homoerotic desire among certain female fans which at times may reinforce the "Koreaboo" stereotype (Kwon, 2019) while also functioning to elevate the female gaze (Oh, 2015).
Twitter: Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic there has been a rise of anti-Asian hate speech which at times places BTS in the crosshairs of xenophobic and racist opposition. To combat instances of hate speech, the ARMY fandom leverages Twitter for political activism by circulating messages using hashtags like #StopAsianHateCrimes.
Reddit: Discourse on the subreddit *r/AsianMasculinity* suggests that BTS' popularity in Western markets has influenced the sexual preferences of heterosexual females and improved the dating life of East Asian men. Such discourses imply that soft masculinity (as opposed to toxic masculinity) has become more desirable during the *'Dynamite'* era.
Interviews: A female fan highlighted that BTS' message "Love Yourself, Speak Yourself" along with their soft masculine aesthetic is appealing to her and other female ARMYs. The male *'Dynamite'* fan and the male unfamiliar with BTS or *'Dynamite'* had varied opinions regarding the members' masculine-feminine appearance which suggests differing perceptions among heterosexual males positioned in the U.S. Because the interviews represent a small sample size, further inquiry into the perceptions of soft masculinity among American audiences is necessary.

METHOD(S)

To employ this research, I critically evaluated pre-pandemic and pre-*'Dynamite'* scholarship pertaining to K-pop and pan-East Asian soft masculinity. I, then, analyzed online discourse/behavior surrounding BTS' soft masculinity across various mainstream platforms such as YouTube, Twitter, and Reddit. These digital platforms are discursive spaces for examining fandom engagement and flows of flower boy content. YouTube, for example, is a site where ARMYs exercise agency to consume and produce BTS-related content and to express their desire for soft masculinity; Twitter is a space often used by fans to organize with other fans, sometimes for political activism; Reddit offers a space for anonymous users to engage in varying degrees of discourse regarding BTS, K-pop, and soft masculinity. In conjunction with these methods, I conducted interviews with a current ARMY, a *'Dynamite'* fan, and non-BTS/*'Dynamite'* fan as preliminary research on American audience reception of soft masculinity.



Art by @megtagsillustrates

CONCLUSIONS

This paper sought to complicate online discourses regarding BTS' soft masculinity with consideration for various social, cultural, and political factors in contemporary American society. Despite the growing popularity of BTS in Western markets and fans' desire for alternative masculinity/ies, racial and cultural notions about Asian men can shape negative perceptions of K-pop and fans of K-pop, thus hindering soft masculinity as a counter-hegemonic force. Through this research, I found it important not to generalize all K-pop idols groups as the same thing, just with different packaging. Or to apply K-pop as an all-encompassing lens to understand BTS, especially when they stand outside of traditional K-pop conventions. As a point of reflection, my positionality as a white, heterosexual, cisgender male, born and raised in the U.S., placed certain limitations on my interpretative process. In attempting to peel back the seemingly endless layers of K-pop and soft masculinity, I am ultimately left with more questions than answers which speaks to the complex and contradictory nature of this topic. To expand upon this research, I recommend employing a bi-focal approach through a structural analysis and audience reception analysis of the impact of soft masculinity, whether positively or negatively, among Korean men.

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