

Unpacking K-pop in America: The Subversive Potential of Male K-pop Idols' Soft Masculinity

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Through an in-depth analysis of American fans of K-pop boy bands, this study explores the racial implication of the popularity of male K-pop idols whose performance of masculinity is different from hegemonic masculinity in the United States. Although American fans are appreciative of K-pop male idols and their music, our findings indicate that K-pop fans are not entirely free from the dominant perspective in the United States that relegates K-pop and K-pop male idol masculinity in the hierarchy of culture and race. In addition, the respondents' reception of K-pop male idol's soft masculinity as culturally and racially bounded in Korean culture and Korean men, runs the risk of essentializing the effeminate features of Asian men, and limits K-pop's burgeoning subversive potential to challenge racialized masculinity in the United States.

Keywords: K-pop, BTS; hegemonic masculinity, racialized masculinity

The K-pop boy band BTS, debuting on the U.S. Billboard 200 charts at number one in May 2018, marked a defining moment of cultural significance; they became the first and only Asian act to top the authoritative U.S. pop culture chart. While BTS has been regarded as the vanguard of K-pop's emerging success in America, other K-pop boy bands have also been gaining visibility in the U.S. pop culture scene, steadily holding sold-out concerts in the United States, and performing at renowned music festivals. MONSTA X, for example, performed at the 2018 iHeartRadio Jingle Ball alongside established American pop artists.

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Date submitted: 2019-09-22

¹ The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to the interview participants for their valuable contributions and the anonymous reviewers for their insightful feedback.

² This research was supported by the MSIT (Ministry of Science and ICT), Korea, under the ITRC (Information Technology Research Center) support program (IITP-2020-0-01749-001), supervised by the IITP (Institute of Information & Communications Technology Planning & Evaluation).

Since BTS's high-profile debut in the American mainstream media through their Billboard Music Awards appearance in 2017, popular culture critics have been almost unanimously optimistic in their description of K-pop's explosive popularity in the American music industry, the latter especially infamous for being a notoriously tough nut to crack (Matsumoto, 2017; Thomas, 2018).

Alongside their music and choreography, popular culture critics and media have paid special attention to the fashion, makeup, and overall "androgynous" styles sported by BTS and other male K-pop artists. There have been conflicting reactions to the "softer" masculinities that the K-pop boy bands embody. While some ridicule male K-pop idols for being gay or feminine (Dahir, 2018; Martin, 2018), others consider their soft, "versatile masculinity" (S. Jung, 2011, p. 163) as potentially disrupting racialized masculinity in the United States, particularly the stereotype of emasculated Asian men. Some proclaim that the male K-pop idols are redefining masculinity and conventional male beauty standards by diverting from the normative qualities, such as masculine fashion and style that is expected of men in the West (Wood, 2018; Yam, 2019; Yim, 2018).

Indeed, the popularity of the male K-pop idols in the United States is a curious development, considering the history of American society's tendency to emasculate Asian masculinities (Lo, 2001; J. H. Park, Gabbadon, & Chernin, 2006). Then, what does the popularity of K-pop boy bands in the United States suggest? Does the growing popularity of K-pop in the United States indicate a cultural shift in music consumption, in which Korean or non-Western music are now consumed freely by fans without stigma, just like other American pop music? Is the popularity of male K-pop idols among American fans an indication of potential subversion of racialized masculinity in the United States? Alternatively, do the seemingly feminine male K-pop artists merely reinforce the popular stereotypes surrounding Asian masculinity?

While various studies have examined K-pop's increasing popularity and their cultural significance in the United States (Jin, 2016; I. Oh, 2013; Shin & Lee, 2016), a dearth of studies critically investigate the consumption of K-pop among American fans in relation to race and masculinity. Through an in-depth analysis of American fans of K-pop boy bands, this study explores the racial implication of the popularity of male K-pop idols who portray the types of masculinity that are different from hegemonic masculinity in the United States.

Stigma of Consuming Popular Culture of the Racial Other

Studies of popular culture have examined how the social construction of stigma surrounding popular culture and their fandoms shapes the experiences of fans (Fiske, 1992; Jensen, 1992; Lopes, 2006; Williams, 2011). Lopes (2006) claims that the stigma surrounding popular culture is maintained and reinforced through the practice of "Othering": the creation of social distinction among respondents of official (or dominant) and low culture, spoiling the social identity of fans of popular culture "in terms of intelligence, rationality, sociability, maturity, morality or addictive and violent behaviors" (p. 396). Studies suggest that the identity of fans of popular culture in the non-West is subjected to double marginality, as their fandom is simultaneously both popular culture and a culture of the racial other (Otmazgin & Lyan, 2013; Yoon, 2018).

Despite the increasing consumption of pop culture across borders, there is still a dearth of literature that critically examines American fans' negotiation with Asian popular culture. In her study of Japanese anime in America, Napier (2007) seeks to understand the relationship between Western fans and Japanese anime beyond the framework of Orientalism and maintains that the fantasy of Japan in the Western imagination serves as an important factor behind anime's popularity. This fantasy stems less from the difference in nationality and ethnicity but more from the desire of wanting something culturally and aesthetically different from the West in the age of globalization.

Although Napier (2007) does not probe deeply into the question of race, the literature on anime fans in America reveals the costs of being fans of Japanese anime. Studies on stereotypes of Japanese anime fans in America reveal that anime fans are stereotyped as socially awkward, introverted, and geeky, reflecting Western stereotypes surrounding Asians in general (Reysen et al., 2016). In addition, fans face higher levels of negative prejudice if they are perceived as heavy consumers of Japanese culture (Reysen et al., 2016). They are often subjected to the "Weeaboo" derogatory fan label, denoting Western fans who are obsessed with Japanese culture (McGee, 2012). These misconceptions and stereotypes surrounding Japanese popular culture and anime fans prevent the anime fans from confidently revealing their fan identity in public (Taylor, 2005).

Otmazgin and Lyan's (2013) study on K-pop fandoms in Israel and Palestine also illuminates race as a significant factor in the reception and experiences of fans of non-Western texts. They examine how stigma is exacerbated in fandoms of K-pop as racially marked texts, which are not only perceived as peculiar, but are also marginally positioned in the global hierarchy of cultural flow. K-pop fans in Israel and Palestine are not only sanctioned for engaging in fan activities that their families and friends regard as a distraction to living a productive life, but also for liking a culture deemed as too exotic and untrustworthy by mainstream Israelis. Yoon's (2019) study on K-pop fans in Canada also reveals that structural forces, notably how the "otherness" of K-pop as a foreign culture is socially constructed, shape fans' engagement with the transnational text. Asian fans are ridiculed for their Asian cultural tastes, whereas White fans are subjected to accusations of fetishizing Asian culture.

Views on the Consumption of Korean Popular Culture in the United States

Conflicting views prevail in the scholarly discourse of the transnational flow of culture. The dominant discourse of the transnational cultural flow notes the dismantling of the global hierarchy in the exchange of culture and the birth of hybrid identities. Bhabha (1994) puts forth the notion of the "third space," suggesting that the transnational flow of culture works to join nations and galvanize the fusion of cultural identities. The third space is anticipated to engender a greater understanding for other cultures among individuals who share and consume culture of the "Other," propelling societies to move away from the assumption of cultural essentialism and cultural purity.

Although there is no straightforward answer to whether the transnational consumption of K-pop engenders a third space, Yoon (2018) provides an insightful observation of how Canadian fans are able to engage and imagine alternative modes of globalization to Western-centered processes of globalization. Canadian fans challenged the cultural hierarchy that locates K-pop as subordinate to American popular

culture and were drawn to the softness in K-pop, such as the humble character of Korean artists. Similarly, according to H. Jung (2018), American fans are attracted to K-pop's hybridity with a "notion of appreciation, not exoticization," (p. 57), perceiving K-pop as a form of culture that American society can learn from. In particular, American fans perceive the *uri-ness*—the "strong sense of unity and belonging" (p. 61) of K-pop fandom culture and Korean popular culture as an alluring soft power of K-pop. In a study of Asian Canadian fans of K-pop, Yoon and Jin (2016) examine how the fans' racial identification with K-pop enables them to feel empowered. The increasing popularity of K-pop and the "Asian coolness" associated with the popular culture enable Asian diasporic K-pop fans to negotiate their racially and culturally marginalized subject positions in multicultural, but still predominantly white cultural landscape in Canada.

On the other hand, other scholars are critical of the potential subversion of global hierarchy in the transnational flow of culture. Despite the alleged flattening of the world, the center is still in control of how periphery cultures are consumed, perceived, and interpreted (Iwabuchi, 2005; D. C. Oh, 2017a, 2017b). White-centered reception practice is argued to reinforce the marginalization of racially marked texts in global hierarchies, by advancing the center's interpretation of the text and its stereotypes about non-Western texts (S. Jung, 2011), and fetishizing non-Euro-American artists as the "Other" (Papastergiadis, 2000).

A few studies have asserted the need for critical scholarship of the popularity of Korean popular culture in the West. For instance, D. C. Oh (2017b) claims that racial prejudice is implicated in the Western reception of Korean pop culture because White racial logic pervades the consumption of K-pop. In his study of White YouTube creators of K-pop reaction videos, he explains how White fans' admiration of K-pop is practiced within the boundaries of the dominant racial logic that "privilege(s) Whiteness and White standpoints at home" (D. C. Oh, 2017b, p. 2279). In one specific instance, one YouTuber described how K-pop faces prejudice in her home country but failed to link it to anti-Asian racism and White supremacy. According to D. C. Oh (2017b), YouTubers' colorblind reflection of K-pop's reception in Western contexts privileges their racially superior position, whose interpretations fail to defy the center-periphery order in the transnational flow of culture. Within the local context that privileges White logic, White fans are bestowed with "uneven discursive power" (p. 2282) to fetishize K-pop idols or to trivialize Korean pop culture.

In addition, M. K. Park (2015) examines Psy's meteoric rise to stardom in the United States against the backdrop of the hostile American popular music scene for Asian and Asian American artists who continue to face racial stereotypes. Instead of disturbing the ideological constructions of Asian masculinity, Psy reinforces Asian stereotypes, as his success is "in large part to the ideological underpinnings associating Asian males with the trope of buffoonery and emasculation" (M. K. Park, 2015, p. 208). BTS's popularity in America was also critically discussed. Musicians of color have often been relegated to separate award categories in the U.S. music industry, and Liu (2019) examines how the newly added K-pop category separates BTS from main awards such as the Best Artist award, while Canadian artist Shawn Mendes and Australian artist 5 Seconds of Summer are not designated as separate categories despite their non-American nationalities.

While an increasing number of studies have examined K-pop's popularity in the West, only a few studies have situated the transnational consumption of K-pop in relation to race. This study situates K-pop as

a racial text and examines how fans of various cultural identities relate to the hegemonic modes of interpretation applied to K-pop, especially the masculinity of male K-pop idols, in the United States.

K-pop Male Idols' Presentation of Soft Masculinity

Before K-pop male idols' success in the U.S. market, S. Jung (2010) attributed the popularity of K-pop male idols in East Asia to their "soft masculinity" embodying the *bishonen* (masculinity with feminine aesthetics) features of manga and anime characters. Defining K-pop idols' masculinity as "chogukjeok (transnational) pan-East Asian soft masculinity" (para. 3), S. Jung assessed their masculinity as hybridized and culturally odorless, and therefore devoid of national characteristics, which enables their masculinity to freely travel across borders. Observing the nascent popularity of K-pop beyond East Asia to the West, S. Jung predicted that K-pop male idols' masculinity would soon be discussed under the term "global soft masculinity" (para. 13).

K-pop male idols' soft masculinity and feminine aesthetics, which are mostly absent in Western boy bands, are often regarded by Western fans as refreshing, fashionable, and interesting (Bennett, 2016; Yim, 2018). When investigating the budding crossover success of K-pop acts in America, contemporary male K-pop acts are made up of "young, fashionable stars who are not afraid to display their sexuality and chiseled bodies" (M. K. Park, 2015, p. 199). Additionally, using popular Korean boy band 2PM as a representative example, S. Jung (2011) attributes the international popularity of K-pop bands to their "versatile masculinity" (p. 165), a form of hybrid masculinity in which different types of masculinities—*kawaii* (or cute), beast-like, and soft masculinities—are performed across varying media channels. For example, while 2PM displays sexy and tough masculinity through choreography that usually involves the members ripping off their shirts to show off their toned bodies during stage performances, they simultaneously perform cute gestures including "girly and sweet facial expressions and voices" (p. 165) on reality TV programs. C. Oh (2015) describes these conflicting forms of masculinity as "liminal masculinity," which denotes the performance of "both unconventional and conventional heterosexuality/homosexuality and femininity/masculinity" (p. 71). This multilayered masculinity is purported to challenge hegemonic notions of White masculinity, and empower the female gaze, by positioning K-pop male idols as the object of desire of Western female fans.

The positive consideration of K-pop male idols' soft masculinity can potentially challenge the normative assumptions of Asian masculinity in U.S. popular culture, where the masculinities of minority races have traditionally been "problematized and devalued" (Kimmel, 2005, p. 415). Asian men especially have been depicted as a "demasculinized stereotype" (Sue & Kitano, 1973, p. 95), supposedly embodying qualities that include loyalty, shyness, introversion, and diligence. Although these stereotypical traits may not be entirely negative, they nevertheless fail to fit into the idealized American standards of heterosexual romantic relationships (Sung, 1985), as Asian men have "generally not (been) mentioned as dashing heroic and have not been popularized in the American media as masculine lovers" (Mok, 1998, p. 2). The popularity of male K-pop idols could potentially challenge the desexualization of Asian men in the American imagination because they are now widely accepted as sexy, handsome, attractive, and masculine (Anderson, 2014; C. Oh, 2015).

However, other scholars are wary of this optimism. Song and Velding (2020) find that American young adults who are non-K-pop fans read soft masculinity through dominant gender and racial norms in the United States, which deem ideal masculinity as White, heterosexual male. They conclude that the non-K-pop fans' perception of K-pop male masculinity as not masculine enough, and therefore ambiguous, reinforces gender and racial hierarchies, while also increasing cultural distance between the United States and Korea. As our study is concerned with American K-pop fans, we will examine how they negotiate the enduring stereotypical perception of K-pop male idols in their consumption of K-pop, and the implications of that negotiation.

Method

This study addresses the following research questions. How do American K-pop fans describe the masculinity embodied in Korean boy bands? As American fans consume K-pop, how do they describe and negotiate the potential conflict that comes with their adulation of the racially marked popular culture and its presentation of soft masculinity? Does the popularity of male K-pop idols among American fans indicate the resistance to and potential subversion of racialized masculinity in the United States?

To address our research questions, both focus group and individual interviews were conducted with 27 young adults from the United States throughout the summer of 2018 and 2020. The respondents were mostly made up of visiting students who attended a Korean university's six-week summer program and full-time foreign students. Unlike research efforts on foreign K-pop fandoms that have employed a singular race approach in their interview samples (E. Jung, 2009; D. C. Oh, 2017a, 2017b; I. Oh & Park, 2012; Williams & Ho, 2016), American fans were recruited from various racial backgrounds, with the aim of understanding how their different racial and cultural backgrounds interacted with their consumption of K-pop. Although respondents displayed varying levels of interest in K-pop, they all identified themselves as K-pop fans.

We initially chose a focus group as the main method, because the shared and varying experiences of American K-pop fans can be closely observed in focus groups (Jowett & O'Toole, 2006). In addition, focus groups privilege a look into a wide range of perspectives and experiences of members whose similarities and differences can be highlighted through interaction with others (Lambert & Loiselle, 2008). Six focus group interviews were conducted, among which four were of mixed race, while two sessions were comprised of Asian respondents only.

Seven individuals were interviewed separately to delve into respondents' personal experiences and for the richness of data. Four individual interviews were conducted with respondents living in the United States. Most of the focus group sessions were conducted in a classroom inside the university building, while individual interviews were held face-to-face at nearby cafes and online through Zoom. Individual interviews averaged approximately 40 minutes each, while focus group sessions lasted 50 to 100 minutes. The dialogues in interviews and focus groups were recorded and later transcribed for analysis.

All the interviewees were American citizens, hailing from diverse ethnic backgrounds: 13 Asian respondents (five male, eight female); eight White respondents (all female); three Black respondents (all

female); one Pacific Islands respondent (female); one Hispanic respondent (female); and one Middle Eastern respondent (female). The respondents are also diverse in terms of age—ranging from 18 to 29 years old—and educational background, with several students pursuing a minor in Korean language or East Asian Studies. All the respondents identified as K-pop fans, with years as K-pop fans varying from one to eight years (See Table 1).

Table 1. Respondents' Profile.

Respondent	Age	Gender	Race	Number of years as a K-pop fan
1	21	Female	Black	7 years
2	20	Female	White	4 years
3	20	Female	White	2 years
4	22	Female	Black	2 years
5	19	Female	Black	3 years
6	21	Female	White	5 years
7	20	Male	Asian	7–8 years
8	23	Male	Asian	1.5 years
9	22	Female	Pacific Islander	5 years
10	20	Female	Asian	8 years
11	19	Male	Asian	1.5 years
12	18	Male	Asian	6 years
13	21	Female	Asian	2 years
14	22	Female	Hispanic	8 years
15	21	Female	Asian	2 years
16	21	Female	Asian	6 years
17	21	Female	Asian	6 years
18	19	Female	White	5 years
19	21	Female	Asian	2 years
20	21	Female	White	1.5 years
21	20	Female	White	3 years
22	23	Female	White	4 years
23	21	Female	Middle Easterner	1 year
24	27	Male	Asian	8 years
25	29	Female	Asian	3 years
26	28	Female	Asian	10 years
27	20	Female	White	2 years

The Stigma of Liking a Racially Marked Text

Unanimously, the respondents were all vested in Korean idol groups. Notably, an overwhelming majority of the mentioned artists were male, with most of the respondents indicating multiple favorite male solo and group acts, including popular boy bands, such as BTS and EXO, to even lesser known K-pop acts, such as A.C.E. and Astro, and even artists from outside the K-pop genre, such as Crush—a Korean R&B singer. The respondents readily engaged in enthusiastic discussion of why they liked these male artists. Some of them expressed that they admired the hard work that these artists put into their craft, while some also praised their sense of style, describing them as “well-groomed,” “stylish,” and generally more fashionable than their American counterparts. More interestingly, a closer scrutiny of their responses hinted at a certain romantic and sexual attraction. For example, respondent six giggled as she confessed that “their looks are a plus,” while another described EXO’s members as “gorgeous” and “objectively good looking.”

Yet, despite these professions, the respondents acutely noted that these male K-pop artists demonstrate a certain form of masculinity not completely aligned with Western standards. For most of the respondents, their favorite Korean artists embodied soft masculinity that contrasted with that of the strong and rugged form of masculinities permeating the American media. The reasons behind the purported softer masculinity of Korean male idols are manifested in various factors. Some respondents attributed this to them as looking very “pretty” as a result of “wearing makeup and stuff,” or because of their “slender physic,” with some recalling experiences in which they had seen male idols doing “full out girl group dances” or crossdressing:

I don’t know if it’s that they are not attractive (to other Americans), it’s just that our (American) standard of men is different. When we think of a man, he should be strong or manly. But, when you look at Korean men, especially K-pop stars, they are very feminine, and they dye their hair a lot, and wear BB cream and tint. Or, they wear very tight clothes, earrings and rings . . . They are very accessorized. (Respondent nine, Pacific Islander female)

The respondents’ discussion on masculinities embodied by K-pop male idols naturally led to a conversation on stigma surrounding the consumption of K-pop as they recounted how their peers had expressed strong disapproval of the feminized physical features of male idols. When further probed if they were comfortable with revealing their identity as K-pop fans, most people used words like “embarrassed” and “ashamed,” as many of their peers and family perceived K-pop as “weird,” and K-pop male idols as too “feminine” and “gay,” revealing a stigma surrounding the consumption of K-pop in general:

My family and my area that my actual home is, like my friends’ parents and stuff, they don’t get the whole K-pop thing because they think that if men dressed like that, then they’re just interested in other men. Like they just automatically assume that that’s them portraying themselves as, like, their feminine side? That they can’t be feminine without being interested in men. (Respondent two, White female)

Our interviews suggest that the stigma surrounding the femininity of K-pop male idols is one of the reasons behind why there are more female K-pop fans than male K-pop fans. As respondent seven explains, "If you are a guy and you are a fan of K-pop, there is a stigma that people are like 'Oh, you are kind of being gay.'" The popular perception of "K-pop fans as gay" may also indicate the reason behind the difficulty in finding White K-pop male fans who may feel a stronger pressure to adhere to the notion of ideal masculinity as White and heterosexual.

Asian male respondents did not regard Asian masculinity as inferior to Western masculinity or as unattractive, with some vocalizing their appraisal of Korean men's style:

I am totally straight but I think Korean guys actually look hella good, like they're well-groomed and their style is a lot more put together than some people that I've seen. I know that's also another personal preference, it's not for everybody. (Respondent 11, Asian male)

While they defended the soft masculinity of Korean men, their awareness of the prejudiced perception toward K-pop idols' masculinity would, in certain circumstances, deter them from publicly declaring their penchant for K-pop.

I feel like there is a stigma to listening to K-pop in general. Because everyone thinks it's weird—"weird" is the word to say. I definitely know people that are ashamed of telling people they listen to K-pop and they would never admit it. I would never like, outright play it. If I was in the car with my friends and if I play it, I know it's going to be super awkward. (Respondent seven, Asian male)

As racialized subjects under the dominant racial norms in the United States, Asian male respondents were aware of both the racial and the gendered gaze that function in the discourse of male K-pop idols' soft masculinity. Respondent 24, who is Korean American, said that he was careful about introducing K-pop to his White male friends, because he did not want to "skew their opinion," and reduce their perception of K-pop to a genre of pretty boys and Korean artists to men who are simply well-groomed and wear makeup:

If I were to confidently show my White friends who absolutely don't know [what] Korean music is, I don't know if I would want to show them BTS to be honest . . . If I showed them Dean or Jay Park (more masculine hip-hop artists like Western artists); they might actually have a better time.

Another salient explanation in describing the stigma surrounding K-pop was its foreignness. Non-Asian fans in particular were subjected to interrogation from friends and family as to why they are obsessed with non-Western, Asian culture. The respondents recalled instances in which they were pestered with questions over why they listened to music performed in a language that they could not understand. The respondents' descriptions of their family and friends' reactions to K-pop revealed a general tendency for the wider American public to lump Asian cultures together as a monolithic whole, and

to mistake one Asian race for another (Ancheta, 2006), dismissing K-pop and Korea's cultural specificities. When trying to make sense of their peers' inability to comprehend the possibility of them even liking K-pop, some respondents explained that this general incapacity to understand stems from the general negative perception about liking "things of different Asian cultures."

I felt that there was more of a stigma against liking things of different Asian cultures. Like, the Japanese and the anime, and with Korea and K-pop and stuff like that. So I was like, not one to talk about it with other people. (Respondent three, White female)

Some respondents also attributed the stigma as a spillover effect from the negative view on Japanese subculture, most notably anime and the derogatory fan identity Weeaboo, in America. Borne out of the derogatory fan identity Weeaboo, mostly referring to White fans of Japanese culture (McGee, 2012), "Koreaboo," an emerging term that has yet to be discussed academically, is frequently used to describe non-Korean K-pop fans who are allegedly pathologically obsessed with Korean culture. When probed about the definition of what makes someone a Koreaboo, the respondents offered various examples, including episodes in which they were accused of being a Koreaboo and taunted for wanting to "become Korean" because they were K-pop fans, and showed interest in Korean culture. Collectively, our respondents claimed that female fans who show adoration for K-pop male idols, and Korean men in general, were most subjected to this term. Respondents offered accounts of how they have heard of female fans who "specifically go toward Korean or Asian guys" in clubs and other social settings, and how these people would also "go out and see a Korean guy, backtrack, stare at him, and then rate him." However, for some others, just their mere adulation of male K-pop artists was enough to cause them to be subjected to the same labeling process:

I was in my university before K-pop got really big. You wouldn't want to say you like K-pop, because they'd be like, "Why would you like K-pop? Like, are you obsessed with the Korean culture? Do you want to date Koreans?" Which is why I would never outwardly say that I like K-pop. (Respondent 16, Asian female)

Interestingly, most respondents agreed that White fans were more subjected to the Koreaboo label than others. Respondent 19, who is Korean American, stated that although she was not worried, her White friends feared being singled out as Koreaboos. In focus group sessions that were only comprised of Asian fans, respondents were most vocal about the reason why White female fans were more vulnerable to the label. White female fans are often accused of cultural appropriation, which respondent 14 criticized as White people's tendency to "just try to take it as their own, without actually respecting it and trying to learn more about it" and for desiring Asian men just because of their race:

The biggest thing is fetishizing Asian men and Asian women. They just think Asian men are specifically Korean men. I have also seen so many people on Twitter just pretend to be Asian (laughter) just trying to get away with it. They are like "I am part Korean." But they are just full White. I don't know why you have to pretend to be Asian. (Respondent 15, Asian female)

The respondents' experiences hints at the racial undertones inherent in the Koreaboo label, in which individuals are perceived to be performing racialized identity not of their own and displaying an intimate attraction toward Korean men and are subsequently labeled and sanctioned for doing so. Employing Goffman's (1963) conceptualization of stigma as socially constructed through a labeling process, the Koreaboo label can be understood as a process that regulates and normalizes the stigma attributed to K-pop, presenting fans and the impassioned predilection of the foreign pop culture as the antithesis to normalcy. Some aspects of the Koreaboo label, such as cultural appropriation, warrant critical assessment. However, the general tendency of American society to label K-pop fans as Koreaboo is problematic, as it works to uphold the racial hierarchy by constructing K-pop as an undesirable Asian culture and exoticizing the romantic desire for Korean men.

"I Don't Hide It, but . . .": K-Pop Fans' Stigma Management

The probability of non-White fans of American boy bands being called derogatory names or stigmatized for doing so is substantially low. This is universal across the globe in the transnational flow of culture. The periphery's consumption of the West's culture is taken for granted, while the reverse often elicits stigma, as they are often portrayed as inferior to the dominant Western culture. Therefore, when it comes to K-pop, the general association of fandoms with low culture and deviance (Fiske, 1992) is exacerbated by the fact that it is a racially marked non-West culture, thereby positioning K-pop fans to double marginality. K-pop fans not only have to make great efforts in distancing themselves from the deviant fan identity, but they also have to defend themselves against the general stigma surrounding the foreign pop culture involving non-Whites.

In response to the stigma associated with the consumption of K-pop, the respondents engaged in strategies that vacillated between "passing as normal" in public and expressing their identity as "K-pop aficionados" in communities described as "safe zones." Respondents have revealed their attempts to "pass as normal" during interactions with people who are not K-pop fans, people who would find K-pop as an oddity, or strangers in general. According to the respondents, being a fan of K-pop is therefore not a public identity, but one that is more private, expressed only to people with whom they are well acquainted with, or who explicitly exhibit acceptance of the foreign pop culture:

I still don't like bringing it up that much, in terms of talking about it to people I don't know. Like, I have friends with me who happen to bring up the conversation, like talk about it, then it's fine . . . But in front of someone I just met, most of the time it doesn't necessarily come up all that much anyway. Like, if you ask about my hobbies, I am not going to say K-pop and Korean shows and stuff like that. (Respondent three, White female)

To make their private fan identity public, respondents engage in a specific strategy, described by one of them as "dropping clues." They would try to steer the conversation to Korean culture, see the reaction of their peers, and make them talk about K-pop first, before they vocalize their interest. Their identity as K-pop fans is therefore dependent on the reaction of other people, and their perception of K-pop:

I will kind of try to figure a way to say something so that someone else talks about K-pop first to me. But I don't just bring it out . . . Like, if it's like, "What are your hobbies?" I would be like, "Oh, I like to travel. I am going to Korea." And then I have them like, bring it (K-pop) up to me first. (Respondent one, Black female)

Even with friends, respondents would be careful in fully expressing their adulation of K-pop idols. Many of our respondents described their Korean associations at universities as safe zones to freely talk about K-pop. Asian fans especially named their Asian communities as gathering spots to discuss and carry out K-pop-related activities. Otherwise, fans would connect with other fans online, or meet people at concerts to vocalize their love for K-pop. The respondents described the act of fans getting together as "nerding together in private." Although most of them began their statement with "I don't try to hide it," their accounts reveal that the stigma coerces them into privatizing their fan identity and allowing it to only strategically manifest in specific settings.

During the focus group sessions, non-Asian respondents were most active in their response to the stigma surrounding the Koreaboo label—the label, which our respondents revealed is mostly deployed to non-Asian fans. They would engage in the process of disidentification (Goffman, 1963), the process of disassociating oneself from a stigmatized identity, with Koreaboos to minimize the ridicule and mockery targeted at K-pop fans. They had to put a lot of effort on disidentifying as they professed their knowledge and interest in Korean culture. For example, some of them would try to express their genuine interest in learning the Korean language by stating how they are currently taking Korean classes at their university. One of the Black female respondents also proudly and excitedly stated information about an essay she is writing about Korean beauty products for one of her classes, which developed from her interest in K-pop. Additionally, some went into details about the musicality and aesthetics of K-pop to express their expert knowledge in K-pop and appreciation for different kinds of music other than American mainstream music. By leveraging K-pop's purported musicality and artistry, in addition to their genuine knowledge of Korean culture, fans can differentiate themselves from pathological fans who supposedly fetishize Korean men and culture.

The discussion of their predilection for Korean culture was accompanied by their impassioned critique of the insularity of Koreaboos, often deriding them as culturally ignorant. According to the respondents, their knowledge of Korean culture is a crucial element in legitimizing their fan identity as "cultured" K-pop fans, as distanced from a Koreaboo. By equipping themselves with in-depth knowledge about Korea and Korean culture, K-pop fans can also differentiate themselves from the general American public, who according to most of our respondents, "were not interested in culture outside the U.S." The respondents' interest in K-pop accordingly became a marker of their well roundedness and openness to learning diverse, new cultures, which help to elevate their fan identity in the face of stigma.

During the focus group sessions and interviews, most of our respondents negotiated their fan activities within the confines of acceptability and tolerance set by the dominant discourse of race. Although some of the respondents discussed the notion of American essentialism—which respondent five described as the tendency of the United States to be "really self-involved and really into things that are Western culture," most of them did not contest the racial connotations in the stigmatization surrounding

the consumption of K-pop as a racially marked culture. The respondents' protective rather than confrontational strategies indicate that the dominant perception of K-pop in America can limit the potential of K-pop, and can inadvertently contribute to the maintenance of cultural and racial hierarchy.

Subversive Potential of Soft Masculinity

As we discussed earlier, the tendency to compare the masculinity demonstrated by K-pop male artists against the standards of American men was a pervasive pattern that dominated most of our respondents' attempts to make sense of the aversion that some people displayed toward the singers, including family members and friends from their inner social circles. Evidently, despite our respondents finding themselves in a tricky predicament when faced with constant questioning from their peers and family about the "problematic" aspects of soft masculinity exemplified by K-pop male idols, the respondents stated that they nevertheless find K-pop idols attractive.

What is the implication of K-pop fans' unmitigated love for K-pop idols despite the stigma surrounding K-pop? According to D. C. Oh (2017a), American fans' heterosexual interest in K-pop idols has a subversive potential, as it can enable fans to imagine masculinities beyond the rigidity of American masculinity. BTS is especially feted by Western news media outlets for being at the forefront in redefining traditional notions of masculinity. They not only sport pastel colored outfits and frequently change their hair styles, beauty routines that are deemed feminine in the West (Lovely, 2018; The Daily Vox Team, 2018), but are also not afraid to shed tears during the award ceremonies, and openly communicate their feelings to fans (Bennett, 2016; The Daily Vox Team, 2018). Although not frequently discussed, international male K-pop fans have also voiced their support for Korean idols' purported subversion of toxic masculinity, claiming that male idols have encouraged them to view masculinity as "being yourself" (Glasby, 2018).

Similarly, our respondents commented on how K-pop idols' masculinity can question the rigid understanding of masculinity in the United States and demonstrate that men "don't have to be tall, buff, and play football to be masculine." For example, respondent 25 described BTS masculinity as creative, and credited them for "liberalizing what masculinity means." Despite the disruptive potential of the soft masculinity of male K-pop artists in expanding the boundaries of masculinity, it seems premature to argue that K-pop male idols popularity in the United States challenges racialized masculinity in the United States.

Apart from a few of our respondents of Korean origin who have the experience of growing up in Korea, most respondents (perhaps unwittingly) conceded to stereotypical images of feminine Asian men by endorsing the femininity of male K-pop idols. Respondent one recalled showing her friends fan-made YouTube videos of androgynous male Korean pop stars including Sungjong and Ren, members of boy bands INFINITE and NU'EST, respectively, and even asking them to guess whether they were male or female. She went on to show other similar videos, because she stated that they were "funny." In addition, some respondents agreed with the alleged gayness of Korean male artists, with respondent 23 even going so far as to concede, "the gay part (of nonfans' accusations) is easy to justify, because it's like, how their culture is." Respondent seven similarly explained this gayness as a quintessential facet of the Korean

culture. As he recalled, "Yeah, some of them were like, 'Why are those guys acting all cute? Are they gay or something?'" (Laugh) "And I am like, 'Oh no, that's ideal. That's a part of the Korean culture.'"

Despite our respondents' benign intentions of defending K-pop idols' soft masculinity as characteristic of Korean culture, equating K-pop male idols' feminine and effeminate masculinity with Korean culture can be problematic in its conflation with stereotypical representation of Asian men and Asian cultures in the United States. Acceptance of the femininity and gayness of Korean masculinity as a facet of wider Korean culture can run the risk of naturalizing these racial differences as traits that are regarded as true, and impedes alternative approaches in the negotiation of the category of race (Hall, 1997; J. H. Park et al., 2006).

When we further probed our respondents about what they meant by K-pop masculinity being a part of Korean culture, our respondents perceived K-pop idol masculinity as bounded in Korean culture and Korean men. When asked if they were comfortable with seeing White men portray the masculinity of K-pop male stars, most of our respondents, regardless of race and gender, stated that they would find it very "awkward," "not natural," and that, back at home, they would not be taken "seriously." According to our respondents, K-pop male idol's soft and feminine masculinity is not acceptable as an everyday portrayal of masculinity in the United States, especially by White men. If White men were to portray the soft masculinities of K-pop idols, they would have their sexuality questioned. Respondent 27 commented, "If men were portrayed as soft, they wouldn't fit into hegemonic masculinity. If you don't fit into this strong masculinity, you are gay." Respondent 20, a White female, further bolstered this argument by stating that Korean culture's insensitivity and unawareness of homosexuality, compared with the West, enables Korean men to look feminine and gay: "Here (Korea), homosexuality used to be not even a thought. So then you had the freedom to do that kind of stuff. But then in the West it's like, it's grown something so quickly into something that as soon as you see that you can hint or imply because it's an option. Uhm, so that just kind of changes the perception (on masculinity)."

Asian respondents also seemed to agree that the K-pop male idols' masculinity, while conventional in Korea, cannot be an alternative form of masculinity that can be displayed by White men in the United States without eliciting suspicion. Respondent 16 emphasized the "differently built" physic between Asian and White men and claimed that the friendly and "skinship" relationship Korean men have with their male friends, such as "pinch(ing) each other's cheek," is "not acceptable in America." As respondent 25 explains, for White men in the United States, "the idea (of developing the aesthetics of K-pop idols) would be very scary and intimidating."

Although K-pop male idols' fluid, liminal masculinity (C. Oh, 2015) has been argued to challenge rigid gender binary and empower the female gaze of Western fans by disrupting gender dynamics that have prioritized the male as the spectator, we argue that they are still limited in their potential to challenge the marginal position of racialized Asian masculinity in the United States. In the United States, K-pop idols masculinity is not "culturally odorless," and does not always "travel freely" as S. Jung (2011) purported, but is instead racially and culturally bounded (p. 166). Although described as attractive, the feminine aspect of K-pop male idols' masculinity continues to be the aesthetic domain of Korean men whose culture enables and encourages it. The logic of "their culture versus ours" fixes soft masculinity to a

racial and cultural characteristic, accentuating the difference between Asian masculinity and White hegemonic masculinity.

Popular culture is a site where power relations are negotiated and contested, with minority popular culture always existing alongside dominant culture (Hall, 1981). Employing Hall's perspective of popular culture, the stigma attributed to K-pop and K-pop masculinities can be read as the dominant culture's attempt to maintain hegemony and difference, while the popularity of K-pop cannot be seen as a manifestation of pure resistance to dominant culture. The fact that our respondents had to engage in justifying the soft masculinity of K-pop male idols, at times through resorting to available stereotypes of Asian men, and at other times through their understanding of Korean culture, is telling of how K-pop and Asian masculinity is understood in the context of racialized masculinity in America.

Conclusion

Despite K-pop's rising popularity in the United States, its consumption remains stigmatized because of its racially marked position in American culture that has constructed stereotypes about Asian masculinity. The pleasure derived from the consumption of Korean male artists' soft masculinities is subject to frequent interrogation. To cope with the stigma associated with K-pop, fans engage in negotiation strategies, which are private rather than confrontational against the racial and cultural hierarchy in the United States. Their passive defense illuminates that their consumption of K-pop is not completely free from the social structures that privilege American culture over that of the non-West.

However, K-pop fans' social position as fans of racially marked texts does not preclude them from deriving genuine pleasure in consuming K-pop. As Jenkins (2017) notes, fans' negotiation "represents a middle position between adoration and resistance" (p. 384) toward the dominant culture. Encouraged by their interest in K-pop, the respondents go on to engage in counterdominant activities, such as participating in Korean clubs at school, taking Korean language classes, and visiting Korea to learn more about its culture, all of which suggest the subversive potential that comes with consuming a peripheral text. In addition, our respondents note that the popularity and appeal of K-pop male idols in the United States is challenging the rigid notions of what constitute as masculine in the United States.

Despite the disruptive potential of K-pop male idol masculinity, we claim that it is limited in challenging the racialized and subordinate position of Asian masculinity in the United States. K-pop male idol's soft masculinity is largely perceived as the domain of Korean culture and Korean men, locating K-pop masculinity to an exclusive racial and cultural category. The understanding of K-pop male idol masculinity as stemming from an Asian culture further accentuates its difference from White, hegemonic masculinity, inadvertently contributing to the maintenance of the binary opposition of Asian and White masculinity. This oppositional logic can limit the realization and imagination of different types of Asian masculinity in the United States.

By describing the nexus of global fandom, the stigma associated with popular culture, and the consumption of non-Western popular culture in the United States, this study illustrated how American fans participate in the consumption of popular culture in the global context, while negotiating with the racial

and cultural hierarchy in the local context. While existing studies of K-pop male idols have examined the potential of their soft masculinity to challenge rigid gender binaries, this study contextualized their masculinity in the dominant American culture and addressed the racial implications of their popularity. We suggest that future studies further investigate the racial hierarchy that still governs the global flows of culture.

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