Masculinity dynamics in International Relations: The Case of BTS

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Abstract: This thesis addresses masculinity norm dynamics in an increasingly globalized world. It does so through a critical discourse analysis of BTS, one of the first K-pop acts to reach a global audience, by asking the question: *How do BTS construct their masculinity in relation to Western masculinity norms?* Through the lens of norm localization theory, as presented by Amitav Acharya, it highlights how Western cultural products were disseminated and received on a world scale, and how several different constructs of masculinity emerged in popular music. It contends that BTS construct their presentation of masculinity by adopting both Western and East Asian standards of masculinity in their performances aimed at a Western audience. In doing so, they present a hybrid image of soft masculinity that is generally well-received in Western media. This presents a break in attitudes toward softer versions of masculinity in the West, which were previously ridiculed and pushed to adhere to more dominant versions of masculinity.

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1.1 Introduction

K-pop as well as other forms of Korean popular media have seen a meteoric rise in Western society in the last decade. With the success of *Gangnam Style* by Psy in 2013, and more recently with the successes of the hit series Squid game and the popular K-pop groups BTS and Blackpink, Korean cultural products have been on a consistent rise within Western popular culture.

This succes of K-pop together with other forms of Korean media is generally characterized as the Korean Wave or *Hallyu*.[1] Since the production of popular culture media in Korea ramped up in the 1990s the dissemination of said products was initially focused on East and South-East Asia. However, since 2008 Korean popular culture products have started to reach every corner of the world leading to what Dal Jin calls the New Korean Wave or *Hallyu 2.0*.[2] A major part of this New Korean Wave and the enormous success it has seen is the emergence of social media, which has led to easier access to Korean media, not only in East Asia but also in the Western Hemisphere. The Korean government has taken a more active approach to design cultural policy for private companies to advance this new wave of Korean pop culture. Ultimately, *Hallyu 2.0* is bringing Korean culture to a global audience and in doing so it contributes to transnational cultural exchange from areas that are usually seen as the destination for Western cultural products, especially in the 20th century.[3]

This new wave of Korean cultural content and the success it is having is interesting from an international relations (IR) standpoint because it seems to challenge traditional cultural and social values present in the West. This thesis will look at one specific social construct that might be challenged; the Western perception of masculinity. It will do so through a multimodal discourse analysis of perhaps the biggest international Hallyu success, K-pop band *Bangtan Sonyeondan*, or BTS.

Why masculinity and why K-pop? Masculinity and men's studies have been underrepresented in IR studies. For a discipline that is historically so dominated by men and

[1] Dal Jin, *New Korean Wave: Transnational Cultural Power in the Age of Social Media* (Urbana, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2016), 4 https://login.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2443/login?URL=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e000xww&AN=1100869&site=ehost-live.

[2] Jin, New Korean Wave, 4-5.

[3] Jin, New Korean Wave, 5-6.

'manly' practices, such as war and diplomacy, research on forms of masculinity and how IR might be influenced by them is rather limited. Similarly, how IR research might be upholding certain views and frameworks on masculinity has hardly been discussed. This is problematic because authors such as Charlotte Hooper argue that the dominant forms of masculinity present in western society have had influence in shaping how traditional Western hegemonic powers operate.[4] What IR, and specifically feminist authors, have engaged in thus far has primarily focused on the dichotomy of the role femininity plays in what was perceived to be a masculine world (both the IR discipline as well as real-world politics).[5] This thesis tries to add to the IR masculinity discourse by looking at how men form their masculine identity in regard to other presentations of masculine identities. Therefore, this research is not interested in the position of women in IR or world politics per se. Rather, it engages with identity forming in a world in which Western norms of masculinity and femininity are viewed as dominant, and how these dominant norms might be contested or adopted by non-Western norms.

This brings me to the case study that will be explored here. With the success of *Hallyu 2.0,* western society has been exposed to more and more cultural products it had not seen before. While the Korean Wave encompasses all forms of popular media, K-pop specifically is an interesting case study, because, unlike Korean television shows, the music industry seems to be rooted more in reality, especially in how actors are presented to the public. Furthermore, from a personal perspective, K-pop and specifically BTS have introduced me, a white, European male, to an expression of masculinity I was unfamiliar with.

The research question that this thesis will attempt to answer is: *How do BTS construct their masculinity in relation to Western masculinity norms?*

This thesis falls in an overall wider discussion about the Western dominance of IR. The main goal is not to find or establish dominant representation of Western rationale and identity and their non-Western counterparts, although that was certainly the goal from the outset. Rather, following Pinar Bilgin, it hopes to think past 'Western' IR through a curiosity in what the productions of similarities in 'non-Western' thinking may provide to the discipline of IR.[6] In this sense, the emergence of K-pop on the world stage as cultural phenomenon is interesting

[4] Charlotte Hooper, "Introduction," in *Manly States: Masculinities, International Relations, and Gender Politics*, *Manly States* (Columbia University Press, 2001), 3-4, https://doi.org/10.7312/hoop12074.
[5] Hooper, "Introduction," 12.
[6] Pinar Bilgin, "Thinking Past "Western" IR?," *Third World Quarterly* 29, no. 1 (2008): 18-19.

because it is a non-Western cultural presentation that has entered, and some might say dominated, Western popular culture. To further examine this phenomenon and the implications it has or might have on global cultural power structures this thesis will employ a critical discourse analysis of K-pop's biggest stars, BTS.

1.2 Methodology

The method used is based on Florian Schneider's approach to critical discourse analysis (CDA), but slightly adapted to conform to the materials that will be used. Schneider's approach is based in the Foucauldian presumption that communication affects people and the societies they live in. It follows the constructivist idea that people construct the world around them through interactions with the world and each other. In order to make sense of the world, people make assumptions about what is true. By communicating and interacting these ideas with others, people or societies construct a background of knowledge that defines them and gives meaning, a discourse. In turn, this discourse has its own role in how our social world is constructed; who has the power to influence discourse is also influenced by the set of practices and ideas flowing out of discourse.[7] CDA presupposes that social power relations are embedded in discourse. Power relations are both exercised and negotiated in discourse.[8] Generally then, CDA is concerned with the analysis of texts to expose and describe these power relations. Texts in this sense do not merely refer to written and spoken text, but also to instances where text is used in combination with other semiotic forms. Discourse in this sense is then a form of semiosis through which social processes present themselves.[9] Critical discourse analysis is thus suitable for this research because masculinity in that sense is a social construct. Social expectations of men are tied to how men are presented in discourse and vice versa.

CDA does have its limitations in this research, specifically in regard to its focus on language. Because of a lack of knowledge of the Korean language, it is difficult to recognize specific tendencies through written and spoken Korean language. Translations and subtitles, if those are available, are a way of dealing with this barrier but should be recognized as transformations of the original. Most of BTS' songs are written in Korean and the members

[7] Florian Schneider, "Making Truths: The Power of Discourse," in Studying Political Communication in East Asia (unpublished manuscript, 2022), 106-108.
[8] David Machin and Andrea Mayr, "Introduction: How Meaning is Created," in *How to Do Critical Discourse Analysis: A Multimodal Introduction* (SAGE Publications, 2012), 4.
[9] Evgeniya Aleshinskaya, "Key components of musical discourse analysis," *Research in language* 11, no. 4 (2013): 424-426.

speak exclusively Korean in most of their video appearances as well. Because of this limitation, this study will focus more on the presentations surrounding the music, rather than the music itself, because that is how most of the content is perceived by a non-Korean audience. A lot of the musical message might be missed through language, but at the same time could be present in a specific dance, how a music video is presented, or how they express themselves in interviews.
Thus, materials were drawn from different modes of performances that were targeted at a Western audience.

The methodology is based on Schneiders presentation of CDA, all be it with some modifications to fit the sources used. Chapter two provides an overview of masculinity research both within and outside IR to establish an overarching context this research is situated in. This thesis aims to explore how different cultural representations interact with each other, and what implications that might have for IR. Norm research is vital in this sense because norms and values present in societies underpin regional social dynamics but also transnational interactions. The analysis is setup by establishing specific strands of discourse or themes established in chapter three. First, the idea of norm localization is introduced, and consequently themes that underpin representations of masculinities are established through a discussion of presentations of Western masculinities in Anglo-American popular music. Chapter four uses these themes to analyse presentations of masculinity in K-pop, by first presenting why BTS is interesting as a case study. Followed by a critical analysis of discourse presented by and about them. During coding, the statements were structured by their specific discourse strands and checked for cultural references. The materials were analysed for signs that indicate that certain ideas or arguments are presented as self-evident, to expose any underlying ideology.[10] Finally, the above mentioned elements will be interpreted to discover what they mean in a broader social and political context. Consequently, the last chapter builds on this analysis by reflecting on implications the results in chapter four might have on masculinities, cultural interactions and IR's perception of them.

[10] Schneider, "Making Truths," 133-137

2. Literature review

To situate this research this chapter explores the existing literature on three different levels. First, it will take a look at masculinity discourse in IR and provide a new way of exploring feminist discourse by embracing a holistic approach. Second, it will explore some of the interdisciplinary concepts on masculinity, specifically hegemonic masculinity and hybrid masculinity, and discuss examples of some of the dominant forms of masculinity and their historical roots. Finally, this chapter sets out to discuss the role music plays in shaping global norms as a cultural product.

2.1 Study of masculinity in IR

The study of men and masculinities has been rather underdeveloped in international relations studies. As Charlotte Hooper argues, the primary form in which masculinity has been discussed is through feminist discussions on the epistemological limitations of IR. Specifically how mainstream IR follows the idea that international relations reflect men and masculinity and rejects or excludes women and femininity.[11] However, the study of masculinities might present to IR as the antithesis mentioned above appears to be short-sighted. If one follows the idea that masculinities and femininities are social constructs of gender, and are variable rather than set in stone, the study of gender becomes more interesting for IR. Following this idea, Hooper lays out that it is worth looking into how specific gender identities are embodied by groups to produce patterns of behaviour. If there is a range of historically and culturally specific masculinities, how are they embodied by men? Furthermore, processes of gender formation and identification might inform IR on conventional topics in the same way cultural and ethnic processes might. [12]

Hooper is not the only one arguing for a more holistic approach to gender in international relations. Eric Blanchard also emphasizes that feminist IR research has demonstrated that world politics is gendered, and fuelled by presumptions about gender identities. But this has not led to a wider recognition of the study of men and masculinities as important in IR.[13] Blanchard argues that research on internal and external relationships between masculinities and femininities would help IR's understanding of processes in world

[11] Charlotte Hooper, "Masculinities, IR and the "Gender Variable": A Cost-Benefit Analysis for (Sympathetic) Gender Sceptics," *Review of International Studies* 25, no. 3 (July 1999): 476, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210599004751.
[12] Hooper, "Masculinities," 478.
[13] Eric M. Blanchard, "Rethinking International Security: Masculinity in World Politics," *The Brown Journal of World Affairs* 21, no. 1 (2014): 61-62.

politics. This applies to security issues, such as the behaviour of militia groups and elite decision-making clubs, but also to more social and cultural issues such as our understanding of individual beliefs and, perhaps most important for this research, the emergence globalized norms.[14] Finally, similarly to Hooper, Blanchard argues that by studying men and masculinities, IR scholars can highlight sources of power and privilege that are obscured in accounts of world politics. By critically investigating masculinities as a socially constructed, and historically and culturally bounded set of practices, IR can challenge conventional arguments that accept masculinity as a normative standard.[15] The study of masculinities in international relations, or the lack thereof, thus presents opportunities to uncover power structures in both the political and the cultural forms of manhood. Furthermore, it is an interesting angle to approach the contestation of dominant Western norms that have been present in IR and popular culture. Finally, both Hooper and Blanchard argue for a multidisciplinary approach when dealing with masculinities in IR. A multidisciplinary approach is inescapable because most of the major conceptualisations of masculinity theory have come from the social sciences. This is something sociologist Raewyn Connell, one of the principal authors on masculinity, also recognizes. She contends that a global perspective is important for our understanding of masculinities. Global phenomena are vital in constructing the local, geopolitical struggles. Western imperialism and colonialism, global markets and transnational media all influence the construction of identities. Masculinities are a feature of global society and gender structures could thus be seen as global structures.[16] The following section will introduce some of the key concepts in masculinity research.

2.2 Hegemonic and hybrid masculinities

One of the core concepts in the study of masculinities, both within IR and in other disciplines, is hegemonic masculinity, popularised by Raewyn Connell. Although the conceptualization of masculinities and its theories are ever-evolving, social sciences often define masculinity as "a social construct that encompasses behaviours, languages and practices, existing in specific cultural and organizational locations, which are commonly associated with men and thus

[14] Blanchard, "Rethinking International Security," 75-76.
[15] Blanchard, "Rethinking International Security," 62.
[16] R. W. Connell, "Globalization, Imperialism, and Masculinities: the need for a Global Perspective in Studies of Men and Masculinities," in *Handbook of Studies on Men & Masculinities* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2005), 72, https://doi.org/10.4135/9781452233833.

culturally defined as not feminine".[17] Hegemonic masculinities then refer to presentations of masculinity that have become culturally dominant. According to Connell and Messerschmidt, the primary feature of the concept is the interplay between a plurality of masculinities and the hierarchy that exists between them. Socially dominant masculinities show themselves through cultural acceptance, institutionalization, being at the heart of discourse, and the delegitimization and or subordination of alternatives.[18] Hegemonic masculinities are not homogenous, instead, they are constructed, might change over time and are continuously challenged.[19] Furthermore, hegemonic masculinities are not actively imposed on and by society but are part of a cultural belief system that is grounded in societies' consciousness and taken as universal. They are culturally ingrained in all parts of society and internalised by individuals through upbringing, education, and mass media amongst others.[20] In this sense, hegemonic masculinities are internalised in society as norms. To tie this back to IR, Hooper argues that the discipline has been heavily implicated in constructing and promoting Anglo-American models of hegemonic masculinities, further exacerbated by the process of globalisation.[21] The study of masculinities, and hegemonic masculinities specifically, should thus focus on how these Western norms are constructed and/or challenged as norms on a global scale.

Now, questions arise about what we should understand as Anglo-American models of masculinity. What do they entail? Sandra Connor et al. describe orthodox masculinity as one of the prime forms of Western hegemonic masculinity. There are several aspects to this orthodox or traditional masculinity. First and foremost, these traditional masculinity norms expect men to project their strength and dominance over women and less powerful men. It expects men to adhere to restrictive stereotypes such as being tough, powerful independent and stoic.[22] Furthermore, it promotes the objectification of women and the degradation of

[17] Stephen M. Whitehead and Frank Barrett, "The Sociology of Masculinity," in *The Masculinities Reader*, ed. S. Whitehead and F. Barrett (Cambridge: Polity Press), 15-16.
[18] Raewyn W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept," *Gender & Society* 19, no. 6 (1 December 2005): 846, https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243205278639.
[19] Connell, "Hegemonic Masculinities," 852-853.
[20] Takeyuki Tsuda, "What Makes Hegemonic Masculinity so Hegemonic? Japanese American Men and Masculine Aspirations," *Identities* 29, no. 5 (3 September 2022): 672, https://doi.org/10.1080/1070289X.2020.1851005.
[21] Charlotte Hooper, "Conclusion," in *Manly States: Masculinities, International Relations, and Gender Politics*, *Manly States* (Columbia University Press, 2001), 219-220, https://doi.org/10.7312/hoop12074.
[22] Sandra Connor et al., "Perceptions and Interpretation of Contemporary Masculinities in Western Culture: A Systematic Review," *American Journal of Men's Health* 15, no. 6 (29 November 2021): 1, https://doi.org/10.1177/15579883211061009.

homosexuality to fortify the heterosexual individual as an idealised form of masculinity.[23]

Hooper, similarly, sets out what she calls Anglo-Saxon masculinity based on partially overlapping and competing historical archetypes. She describes several different characteristics that can be attributed to this form of masculinity. A Greek model that likened manhood to free speech, citizenship, and politics. A domestic ideal, where men have responsibility and authority as the father. A model based on patronage where risk-taking, and military heroism is highly valued. And finally, a rationalist model, that idealises individualism, reason, and self-control, while also modelling men as breadwinners and voices of rationality in public life. Hooper argues that combinations of these models are still relevant in society.[24]

Above mentioned archetypes might be dominant in Western society and are often mentioned in describing the construction of masculinity in the context of globalization. However, as Futoshi Taga correctly notes, these models are based on a Western perspective brought forward by English-speaking academics. Non-Western masculine perspectives were often pushed to the side-lines of academic work and are underrepresented compared to Western masculinities.[25] Recently, however, there has been an increase in studies on non-Western masculinities. Taga sets out some dominant forms of masculinity in East Asia, both traditional and modern. Historically, Confucianism has been an important driver behind gender relations in East Asian countries. Distinctive of this Confucian attitude of gender relations and masculinity was that men occupied the public space and women occupied the domestic space. It viewed frail philosophers who forwent money and physical labour as the preferred form of male development.[26] Furthermore, this traditional East Asian masculinity was seen as tolerant towards male homosexual relationships.[27]

However, attitudes changed in post-WWII East Asia, where *saraiiman* or salarymen became the dominant image of masculinity. Salarymen, a predominantly Japanese concept, referred to white-collar employees of private companies. In a domestic setting, the salaryman husband was the heterosexual provider and dominator of women. Notably, most men did not adhere to this ideal image of a white-collar worker and instead constructed their identity

[23] Connor, “Perceptions and Interpretations,” 2.
[24] Hooper, “Masculinities,” 477-478.
[25] Futoshi Taga, “East Asian Masculinities,” in *Handbook of Studies on Men & Masculinities* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2005), 129, https://doi.org/10.4135/9781452233833.
[26] Lawrence Monocello, ""Guys with Big Muscles Have Misplaced Priorities": Masculinities and Muscularities in Young South Korean Men's Body Image," *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry*, (2022), 3, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11013-022-09784-3.
[27] Taga, “East Asian Masculinities,” 131.

through leisure and activities in a private setting. In Korea, a similar notion of men as salarymen existed. However, a Korean husband was expected to spend most of his time and energy at work while the wife took over the role of head of the family.[28]

In more recent years, Taga argues, the outlook on masculinities in East Asia has started to shift in a direction that challenges the above-mentioned form of hegemonic masculinity and perhaps signalled a return to the Confucian forms of masculinity. Negative connotations with the salarymen arose in popular culture. Similarly, men's movements that call into question assumptions about masculinities have emerged since the mid-90s. Although the traditional sexist view on gender is still very prevalent, especially in Korea where the patrimonial family remains an important principle, more men experience identity conflicts when it comes to gender.[29]

One of the alternative masculinities that has emerged in the region, specifically South Korea, is what some have coined *kkonminam* or *flower boy*. *Flower boy* refers to men who are pretty and take great care of their appearance and have characteristics that could be considered feminine. Sun Jung argues that this soft masculine image is constructed through the hybridization of both female and male identities.[30] This hybridization is often mentioned in the form of hybrid masculinity, which refers to "the selective incorporation of elements of identity typically associated with various marginalized and subordinated masculinities and – at times – femininities into privileged men's gender performances and identities".[31] To give an example of this; Western men are often seen as not caring about their appearance, yet great attention is put on the muscular masculine body. By being slim, having a career in modelling or acting, and paying attention to one's body image, men can present a hybrid or androgynous image that incorporates attributes of both femininities as well as masculinity. Now, the *kkonminam* image should be seen as a bit more nuanced than just the representation of effeminate characteristics in presentation of masculinity. Jung argues that because of the overall conservative climate of South Korea, the presentations of what a Western audience might interpret as queer, present in the *flower boy* phenomenon should not be specifically related to homosexuality. Rather he argues that the artist are presenting *kkonminam*

[28] Taga, "East Asian Masculinities," 132
[29] Taga, "East Asian Masculinities, " 134-135.
[30] Sun Yung, "The Shared Imagination of Bishōnen, Pan-East Asian Soft Masculinity: Reading DBSK, Youtube.Com and Transcultural New Media Consumption," *Intersections: Gender and Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific* 20, 2009, http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue20/jung.htm.
[31] Tristan Bridges and C. J. Pascoe, "Hybrid Masculinities: New Directions in the Sociology of Men and Masculinities," *Sociology Compass* 8, no. 3 (2014): 246–58, https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12134.

presentation of masculinity as a performative tradition and thus do not actually contest boundaries of what masculinity entails.[32] This presents an interesting playfield that is fundamentally different from Western presentations where queer attributes are connected to homosexuality regularly.

Finally, regarding the *flower boy* phenomenon, Lawrence Monocello mentions that this hybrid form of masculinity has become culturally dominant and that even men who aspire to present a more traditional masculine image, employ practices of soft masculinity.[33] Although hybrid masculinities are often referred to as subordinate masculinities, they can thus become dominant in certain social spheres, in this case, popular media, and promote attributes to which the overall dominant masculinity construction might adapt. Furthermore, hybrid masculinities are interesting from an individual perspective because they allow for a more individualized construction of masculinities. Men can construct their masculine identity by adopting attributes of both dominant and subordinate masculinities, constructing their own hybrid masculinity in the process. The next section looks to contextualize how this might happen on a more global scale, specifically in the arena of popular music.

2.3 Music, soft power, and globalization.

Since K-pop has become a global phenomenon, it is important to contextualize the transnational cultural and political effects of music in a global setting. How does music work as a platform for social change, in particular gender? There are a few ideas that are worth expanding on here. First, the theory that music as a cultural product should inherently be seen as something political. According to James Garrett, artists help contribute to the reproduction and/or the creation of common sense. Because the formation and critique of common sense are politically motivated, every form of art can thus be seen as having some sort of political dimension.[34] One could relate common sense as used by Garrett to the building of norms. Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink describe norms as 'a standard of appropriate behaviour for actors with a given identity'.[35] Common sense can be reframed as an explicit or implicit standard which leads people to behave in a certain, appropriate, way. These standards

[32] Yung, "The Shared Imagination."
[33] Monocello, ""Guys with big muscles," 4.
[34] James Garratt, *Music and Politics: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 36 https://doi.org/10.1017/9781139505963.
[35] Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, "International Norm Dynamics and Political Change," *International Organization* 52, no. 4 (1998): 891, https://doi.org/10.1162/002081898550789.

are often implicit because they have become so widely accepted over time that they are seen as obvious.

International norms were initially seen as intrinsically good; however, there have been numerous critiques that Western norms are often valued over alternative norms in an international setting. This is problematic because it supposes the presence of a prescribed identity that is based on a shared assessment of what 'good' norms are. However, as Stephan Engelkamp and Katherina Glaab argue, the moral nature of norms, especially on a global scale, should be seen as ambiguous rather than set in stone.[36] International norms are increasingly seen as ever-contested, especially when it comes to intercultural contact. Because each actor's cultural background is different there is not always a shared recognition of what a norm should be, which means that norms are always contested in one way or another.[37] Music as a cultural product can then be seen as one of the ways through which this contestation happens.

Another key concept that seems key to how music affects social change is soft power. As conceptualized by Joseph Nye, soft power is getting others to aspire the outcomes you want through admiration and attraction rather than threat and coercion. It relies on the ability to shape the preferences of others, which Nye inherently links to having attractive cultural and political values. Furthermore, he proposes that soft power is inherently connected to public diplomacy. Soft power is produced through resources that display the norms and values of a country, be it through cultural products or policy. Public diplomacy is then an effort to mobilize these practices and present them to other countries. This can be done through broadcasting or subsidizing cultural exports.[38] This is also what connects K-pop to the theory of soft power and public diplomacy because earlier research has pointed out that *Hallyu 2.0* is promoted by the South-Korean government through designed cultural policies.[39]

Finally, Luis Lemos explains why music is such an interesting case when discussing the shaping of gender norms on a global scale. According to Lemos, this is a two-way street; on one hand, music has become more globalised due to the increase in cultural exchanges and the reduction of traditional barriers that limited these exchanges. On the other hand, in an

[36] Stephan Engelkamp and Katharina Glaab, "Writing Norms: Constructivist Norm Research and the Politics of Ambiguity," *Alternatives* 40, no. 3–4 (1 August 2015): 210-211, https://doi.org/10.1177/0304375415612270.
[37] Antje Wiener, "A Theory of Contestation—A Concise Summary of Its Argument and Concepts," *Polity* 49, no. 1 (January 2017): 112-114, https://doi.org/10.1086/690100.
[38] Joseph S. Nye, "Public Diplomacy and Soft Power," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616 (2008): 94-95.
[39] Jin, New Korean Wave, 5.

increasingly globalised world, music impacts the acceptance, integration and rejection of norms and values by different societies.[40] Following Ann Werner, music can be seen as a process of constructing meaning and discourse on gender, class and race. The consumption of music can then be seen as a cultural phenomenon, where it is part of identity formation and social life and where its meaning depends on how people use it. Furthermore, power structures in the production of music can explain patterns of gender and power in culture and society.[41] It is exactly these power structures that have been relatively understudied in masculinity studies, while they could offer great insight into how the current international gender order has been reproduced and transformed in specific contexts.[42] As such, this thesis is situated to discuss how music can serve to change historical outlooks on masculinity by providing alternative outlooks on them. The following chapter will outline how masculinities present themselves in Anglo-American popular music to establish themes for a comparison with K-pop. Furthermore, it will seek to explain how they were disseminated on an international level and, perhaps more importantly, if and how they changed international gender norms.

[40] Luis Lemos, "Crossing Borders, (Re)Shaping Gender. Music and Gender in a Globalised World," *E-Cadernos CES*, no. 14 (1 December 2011), 208, https://doi.org/10.4000/eces.931.
[41] Ann Werner, "What Does Gender Have to Do with Music, Anyway? Mapping the Relation between Music and Gender," *Per Musi* 39 (2019): 3-4.
[42] Nikki Wedgwood, "Connell's Theory of Masculinity – Its Origins and Influences on the Study of Gender," *Journal of Gender Studies* 18, no. 4 (1 December 2009): 337, https://doi.org/10.1080/09589230903260001.

3 Masculinities in Popular Music

To set the stage for comparison with K-pop it is vital to look at how Western masculinities were constructed and disseminated through popular music. Based Amitav Acharya's theory of norm diffusion, this chapter will not only discuss some constructions of Anglo-American masculinities in popular music and associated, but it will also address how they were presented and perceived by a global audience. Finally, based on the discussion, it will present themes through which masculinities are performed, which form the basis of the analysis in chapter four.

3.1 Norm localization, how norms spread

Central to this thesis is how norms, in this case, masculinity norms, are diffused on a global scale, and consequently if and how they are adopted by different regions. According to Acharya, the core issue of this norm contestation is the dynamic between emerging transnational norms and pre-existing regional systems of norms and social orders. He argues for a theory of localization in which foreign norms, even though they might not 'click', are incorporated into the existing local norm system.[43] Earlier theories often described this interaction between domestic and outside norms as rigid, with either acceptance or rejection as an outcome. This was based on the idea of moral cosmopolitism in which norms that are propagated on a global level are considered universal. Because of this universal quality, resistance against these norms was often seen as immoral. Norm diffusion in this sense is then seen as a teaching process in which 'good' universal norms should replace 'bad' regional norms.[44] Acharya's theory on norm localization follows a different principle. He describes localization as an 'active construction of foreign ideas by local actors, which results in the former developing significant congruence with local beliefs and practices.'[45] In this sense, it is not foreign actors who decide how norms are internalized, but rather local actors who decide to adapt norms. Furthermore, the implementation of norms does not completely change a belief system, but rather strengthens the existing ingrained beliefs by excluding certain elements of these new norms which might threaten the existing social order. This is a question of demand and belief; If local norm-takers believe their existing institutional norms

[43] Amitav Acharya, "How Ideas Spread: Whose Norms Matter? Norm Localization and Institutional Change in Asian Regionalism," *International Organization* 58, no. 2 (April 2004): 241, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818304582024.
[44] Acharya, "How Ideas Spread," 242-243.
[45] Acharya, "How Ideas Spread," 245.

are inadequate they might adapt certain aspects of international norms to strengthen them.[46]

Norm localization theory thus stresses the importance of local actors in the process of norm diffusion. Although international norms might be introduced by foreign actors, their implementation depends on the local's willingness to adopt them. Therefore, norm diffusion strategies that focus on adding to existing norm structures in the target region are more likely to succeed than strategies that seek to overthrow them.

In the context of Anglo-American masculinities, the localization theory is important because it emphasises the local instead of the foreign. America's cultural diplomacy is usually described from a perspective which emphasises the role America has in changing and constructing international norms but often fails to appreciate local actors' involvement in welcoming these new norms. Furthermore, it can be a useful vehicle to discuss Western dominance in global popular culture. One could argue that a Western dominance in popular culture simultaneously reflects a dominance of norms advocated by it. Acharya's theory can be used to paint a different picture that emphasizes the ambiguous nature of norms and how they might be assimilated by different cultures.

3.2 Dissemination of Western norms through music

The dissemination of Western and liberal values through music can be discussed in two ways; through state-led efforts as part of a tactic of cultural diplomacy, and as a form of relationship building by non-traditional actors. In a historic context, the role of music in advancing American norms has primarily been linked to the process of cultural diplomacy during and following the Cold War. It is placed in the context of the war of ideas between capitalism and communism, in a time where states committed as many resources as possible to sway foreign societies to pick their ideological system. Thus, it is often perceived as a top-down practice, exemplified by state-led programs, such as the Cultural Presentations program in the United States, which saw heavy involvement of state departments in the dissemination of cultural products on a world stage.[47] Danielle Fosler-Lussier presents musical diplomacy as a tool in the creation of a shared identity, similar to Benedict Anderson's concept of imagined communities. Through music, individuals could imagine themselves as connected to others within a global order. By building a genuine world community, based on American or liberal values, communism could be defeated. Cultural diplomacy in this context was thus about

[46] Acharya, "How Ideas Spread," 246-248

[47] Danielle Fosler-Lussier, "Conclusion: Music, Mediated Diplomacy, and Globalization in the Cold War Era," in *Music in America's Cold War Diplomacy*, (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), 224.

changing the frame of reference in which people think about themselves and others.[48]

More recently arguments have sprung up that have come to value private actors, such as NGOs and multinational corporations, over state actors in disseminating Western culture. Sarah Smith et all. argue that due to new technological tools such as the internet have made this shift possible. Similar to the state-led efforts during the cold war, much of this new phenomenon is inspired by neo-liberal norms, however, it is perceived as a mutual exchange of culture rather than a one-way effort to spread liberal values.[49]

Now, the question arises as to how effective these practices were or are. Here I would like to refer to ideas brought forth by Jessica Gienow-Hecht. She argues that the dissemination of American culture on the global stage was rarely passively accepted. If it was not outright rejected, as happened in many Middle Eastern and some Asian countries, it was often adapted in forms that spoke to local tradition or culture. Furthermore, she argues that even in Western European countries this was the case. Even though countries such as Germany and France adopted some of the American cultural products this did not necessarily encompass an adaptation of cultural and political values.[50] Thus, similar to Acharya's theory of localization, norms and values propagated by, in this case, the United States, were not blindly adopted but rather critically evaluated in regards to how they would add to regional culture.

One example to highlight here is how Western pop culture was presented in East Asia specifically. Beng Huat Chua and Younghan Cho argue that, following the American cold war strategy of cultural diplomacy and their overall military presence in the region, the consumption and production of American pop culture and Asian pop culture have become so intermingled that it is hard to point to individual characteristics as American or Asian. Furthermore, even though Asian governments often viewed the comeuppance of American-Asian pop culture as a decay of their society's moral and ethnic standards, the mass appeal it had led to a growing dominance of American popular product in the Asian region.[51] For South-Korea specifically Chua and Cho contend that American popular culture was the visual and symbolic representation of modernity. As rich brotherly nation and through missionary

[48] Fosler-Lussier, "Conclusion: Music," 218-219

[49] Sarah E.K. Smith, Peggy Levitt, and Rebecca Selch, "The Imagined Globe: Remapping the World Through Public Diplomacy at the Asia Society," *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society* 34, (2021),421-422.

[50] Jessica C. E. Gienow-Hecht, "Cultural Transfer," in *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations*, 2004, 270-71, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511806445.017.

[51] Beng Huat Chua and Younghan Cho, "Editorial Introduction: American Pop Culture," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 13, no. 4 (1 December 2012): 485-486, https://doi.org/10.1080/14649373.2012.717596.

work by American churches, the US was promoted as benefactor and contributor to Korea's modernizations.[52]

Gienow-Hecht provides insight in how this process of cultural transfer had effects in the homeland by referring to ideas brought forth by Edward Said 'that the West culturally dominated the Orient by creating an artificial cultural vision of the latter as its contrasting image, idea, personality and experience.'[53] This 'othering' seems to have had a profound effect on local minorities in the West. For example, Kuo et al. argue that depictions of otherness in Western culture had a profound effect on LGBTQ+ Asian-Americans who felt undervalued and underrepresented in Western media.[54] Even though American culture might have been presented as homogenous to other societies, even from within not everyone could subscribe to the image or feel represented in Western culture. Cultural products might depict what is presented as the dominant identity, however, these 'dominant' identities are always contested even within the same social group. Non-Western masculinities and their dissemination might present opportunities for local minorities to feel represented in popular culture. Kuo et al. found that K-pop presented an opportunity for Asian-Americans to identify with a popular culture product, where before they hardly could.[55]

To refer this back to masculine representations I would argue that these ideas present an interesting framework when looking at Anglo-American masculinities in music. Namely, forms of masculinity presented in popular culture do not necessarily reflect how society, as a whole, perceives what it means to be men, but rather how specific groups do. In an age where the internet has made it possible to consume cultural products from all over the world, how masculinities are constructed should be seen as an individual process. However, the question then arises how representations of masculinities in music should be seen? In line with arguments made by Lemos, the music industry is a heavily commercialised entity where individual artists are in large part dependent on multinational corporations for their success. In the global distribution of music, these companies are the main actors and influence meanings in music, often reinforcing existing gender hierarchies that exist within their social and political environments.[56] This is not to say that individual artists do not have the authority

[52] Chua, "Editorial Introduction," 487-488.
[53] Gienow-Hecht, "Cultural Transfer," 274.
[54] Linda Kuo et al., "Performance, Fantasy, or Narrative: LGBTQ+ Asian American Identity Through Kpop Media and Fandom," *Journal of Homosexuality* 69, no. 1 (2 January 2022): 163, https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2020.1815428.
[55] Kuo, "Performance, Fantasy, or Narrative,"
[56] Lemos, "Crossing Borders," 208.

to present themselves in the way they want, they do, but they are heavily influenced in their representations by what the industry expects of them. To succeed they must appease the dominant group.

Despite the above-mentioned hierarchy in the music industry, how the presented masculinities are perceived depends heavily on local and individual perceptions of culture. With the rise of the internet, people have more influence on what cultural products they consume, thus they can seek out presentations of masculinities that they feel represent them.

3.3 Western masculinities in music

To provide a basis for comparison between Western and non-Western masculinities in pop music it is important to identify different themes through which masculinities are performed and discussed. In order to do so, this section will provide an overview of Anglo-American masculinities in music and their connotations, to provide the context in which BTS' representations will be analysed.

First, I would like to introduce some thoughts on how masculinities in music are constructed in the first place. Following Frank Lay, Popular music knows many different subcultures that are connected to a certain genre. The makeup and gender distributions of the fanbase attached to these groups vary greatly. For example, boybands attract a predominantly female audience, whereas in the rock and metal genres the audience is predominantly male. What the target audience is could impact how masculinity is displayed, or the other way around. Lay mentions that masculinity plays an integral part in how musical genres are defined, especially if the subcultural fanbase and the producers of music are predominantly male. The popular music business works as a medium to present a certain homogenous, Western, image of what a man ought to be traditionally, but at the same time presents producers of music with a space in which they can challenge this presumed traditional notion.[57] Kai Arne Hansen provides a similar idea in his discussion of twenty-first century popstars. He argues that 'the masculine' in pop music is a flexible thing that is exemplified by the multitude of pop masculinities present in the twenty-first century. Pop masculinities intersect the multiple aspects of identity, such as gender, age and nationality, in representing their masculinity. In doing so, Hansen argues, they both disrupt and support a dominant

[57] Frank Lay, ""Sometimes We Wonder Who the Real Men Are" - Masculinity and Contemporary Popular Music," in *Subverting Masculinity: Hegemonic and Alternative Versions of Masculinity in Contemporary Culture*, ed. Frank Lay and Russell West (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2000), 227-228, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004456631_013.

heteronormative pattern which promotes a certain form of gender hegemony.[58]

Now there are some reservations that should be made here. Although the popular music business is presented as a single entity, this does not mean that there is a universal norm of what it constitutes to be a man in music. Even more so, as alluded to earlier with the discussion on Acharya's theory of norm localization, I would argue that, although they are often presented as such, dominant masculinity presentations in music are only dominant in the sphere of music and do not fully represent masculinities from different cultures. Rather, following Lay's argument, subgenres in pop music form their own construction of masculinities, which in turn might challenge, assimilate or confirm traditional Western expectations.

While the music industry presents a place for men to question their gender and what it means to be a man, at the same time the industry actively commodifies these conscious or subconscious questions of gender identity.[59] The following examples serve to show these perhaps dichotomous interactions.

3.4 Soft voices

The first presentation of masculinity to discuss is that of crooning artists in the early 20th century. Even though these artists were almost exclusively prevalent in the U.S., this representation and its reception is still relevant for this discussion because, as Allison McCracken argues, they still have an impact on how the music industry works today.[60] McCracken describes crooners from the early 1920s as 'mostly young white males who softly sang love songs into microphones'. Singers such as Rudy Vallee and Bing Crosby were some of the first popular stars, capitalizing on the exposure increasingly integrated mass media could provide. They challenged existing gender norms by portraying a more feminine character through romantic and intimate songs and high-pitched vocals made possible by technical innovations in sound recording.[61] The huge popularity of the early crooner singer has had an enormous impact on the presentation of masculinity in popular music, McCracken argues. Not necessarily in how young white singers were perceived by their audience, their

[58] Kai Arne Hansen, "Conclusion: Fade-Out," in *Pop Masculinities: The Politics of Gender in Twenty-First Century Popular Music*, ed. Kai Arne Hansen (Oxford University Press, 2022), 179-180, https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190938796.003.0008.
[59] Lay, ""Sometimes We Wonder"," 229-230.
[60] Allison McCracken, "Introduction," in *Real Men Don't Sing: Crooning in American Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 33.
[61] McCracken, "Introduction," 2-3.

success and pull especially with a female audience was undeniable, but more so how these artists were positioned and seen within the popular music industry and press. Male artists' high vocals and vulnerability were often connected in the media with values opposite of what was considered to be a dominant male archetype, such as homosexuality or arrested development. Consequently, these artists and their fanbases were often devalued. The young innocent artist would grow out of the childish or soft crooning phase and would eventually become or have to become 'masculine' to continue their career successfully.[62]

Thus, even though the crooners were immensely popular, they were pressured to adapt their presentation of gender to appeal to a wider audience. A similar process happened with boybands of the 1990s and 2000s. As implied in the categorization of such groups, the masculinity presented in boy bands was considered more a representation of boyness than manhood. Frank Lay argues that the concept of boy bands is a specific commodification of how successful presentations of young males with effeminate characteristics have been throughout the twentieth century, specifically with a young female audience. Boy bands, Lay argues, specifically play into this success by playing into the stereotypes that seem to do well. By presenting young, often white, men as objects of desire through their presentation and stage performances, these groups are commodified in the same way in which women historically have been. These groups are often purposely formed by the music industry to represent what are the imagined sexual desire of their main focus group; young adolescent girls.[63] What is interesting here is that, similar to the crooners, these boy bands present an image that is desexualised a move away from the conventional sex appeal of men. On the other hand topics mentioned by these groups in their music often engage with the process of becoming said men.[64] Another aspect that needs to be addressed here is how boy bands and their target audience are treated by the general public and media. As mentioned earlier, early crooner singers were often referred to as homosexual or suspect to contain their social impact by aligning them with something that was not culturally accepted. Even though homophobia has largely been left behind, the process of patronizing and trivializing specific groups and their fans has not. By employing these kinds of narratives, the consuming power of the audience is recognized. But at the same time being a fan of these types of artists, and the identities associated with them, are pushed to the outside of what is culturally acceptable.[65]

[62] Allison McCracken, "Conclusion," in *Real Men Don't Sing: Crooning in American Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 313-314.
[63] Lay, "Sometimes We Wonder," 237.
[64] Lay, "Sometimes We Wonder," 237.
[65] McCracken, "Conclusion," 319.

3.5 Reinforcing the hypermasculine

Besides this phenomenon of soft young singers, there are also representations of masculinity which reinforce ideas that paint men as traditionally strong and dominant. Heavy metal's representation of men is often described as heroic and warrior-like. Referring to heavy metal bands from the 1970s and 80s Karl Spracklen has coined the masculinity in metal as heroic masculinity, in which male fantasies of groupies, conquest, and rape are glorified. In doing so, these images reinforced the existing gender order of the twentieth century and normalised the idea that women were inferior to men.[66] This gender order presents the heterosexual male as the dominant masculinity in Western society. In this presentation, the male has the role of impregnator-protector-provider. In that sense, it is a fixed representation of the heterosexual male as the form of male with the most power and legitimacy in society.[67]

Stan Densky and David Sholle also refer to the warrior men as an important image heavy metal presents. Furthermore, they connect this warrior image to the importance of technology and machines in metal. He argues that the technological power of metal, the interaction between heavy noise and technical control of instruments, signifies a mastery of machines by men, and additionally a deployment of machinery against women.[68] This relation between warrior man and machine is primarily being brought forward through performance, Densky and Sholle argue. Big drumkits, stacks of amplifiers and lots of pyrotechnics in stadiums in combination with theatrical and aggressive performances by artists all add to the perceived aggressive masculine image. In the context of 'being with the boys' metal men perform actions that are stereotypically aggressive and taunting, raising a fist for example or throwing their head forward, and at the same time they present gestures that carry a sexual connotation. In doing so they present an overblown macho persona and a certain maleness is badness image.[69]

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[66] Karl Spracklen, "Conclusion," in *Metal Music and the Re-Imagining of Masculinity, Place, Race and Nation* (Bingley: Emerald Publishing Limited), 183, https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e000xww&AN=2276968&site=ehost-live.

[67] Karl Spracklen, "The Old Nationalism and Masculinity: Historical Review," in *Metal Music and the Re-Imagining of Masculinity, Place, Race and Nation* (Bingley: Emerald Publishing Limited), 26-27, https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e000xww&AN=2276968&site=ehost-live.

[68] Stan Denksy and David Sholle, "Metal Men and Glamour Boys," in *Men, Masculinity, and the Media,* ed. Steve Craig (Newbury Park: Sage, 1992), 48.

[69] Denksy, "Metal Men and Glamour Boys," 49-50

Another genre in which hypermasculinity is prevalent is hip-hop. Hip-hop presents a space to bring attention to the 'problems and pleasures of Black urban life in contemporary America. However, after commercial success in the 1990s, the focus of the genre started to shift. It was no longer exclusively about fighting the oppressive but started to include narratives of hypersexuality, misogyny and an intense focus on consumption.[70] According to Lanice Avery et all presentations of men in hip-hop follow two general stereotypes. First, men are presented as aggressive and second as misogynistic. However, this is a rather simplistic presentation of what it means to be hypermasculine in hip-hop. They argue that besides these two dominant stereotypes there are several constructions of masculinity that are important for black men. These include traditional values such as autonomy, independence and achievement, but also responsibility and accountability towards family, morality and self-respect.[71] Although these are primary values in constructing black masculine identities, discussions on the genre have mostly focused on the frequent depictions of hypermasculinity, homophobia and the hyper-sexualization of women. Not without reason because a big part of the content produced by hip-hop artist plays into this stereotyping. Samuel Lindsay and Antonia Lyons argue that the highlighting of this materialistic and overtly consumption-focused presentation of masculinity emerged as a contrast to the image of men as breadwinners and family men. In this sense, they argue, hip-hop tried to reclaim the image of the single man, which was traditionally seen as relinquishing the supposed role of the man, by putting the focus on enacting the playboy and overt consumption.[72]

There are multiple themes that seem to be present in the discussion above which relate to the presentation of masculinity and present Western norms in music. These will consequently form the basis for the analysis. They all relate closely to each other and often overlap in how they are showcased. The first theme that can be distinguished is *emotional intimacy* or lack thereof. Showing or talking about emotion is often viewed as a soft trait and thus does not align with the ideal of a strong man that is supposed to be stoic and independent.[73] Young crooner artist were pressured to change their intimate characters to be accepted as men and were ridiculed for their show of intimacy, similarly their fans were as

[70] Lanice R. Avery et al., "Tuning Gender: Representations of Femininity and Masculinity in Popular Music by Black Artists," *Journal of Black Psychology* 43, no. 2 (2017): 168, https://doi.org/10.1177/0095798415627917.
[71] Avery, "Tuning Gender," 165.
[72] Samuel Lindsay and Antonia C. Lyons, "Pour It Up, Drink It Up, Live It Up, Give It Up: Masculinity and Alcohol in Pop Music Videos," *Men and Masculinities* 21, no. 5 (2018): 632-633, https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X17696189.
[73] Connor, "Perceptions and Interpretations," 1.

well. The second theme that can be discerned is *sexuality*, either by being presented as dominator or by a rejection of homosexuality, sexuality is often presented in music and presents an important theme with which men are supposed to identify themselves. Closely related to the theme of sexuality is *maleness as badness.* the discussion on heavy metal and hip-hop present the theme of men as aggressors against women and against other men. Violence can be physical by employing tools or devices or dancing aggressively or in the sexualization of women through words. The final aspect is that of the *presentation of the body.* How the body is presented is an important aspect of performing masculinity because it impacts how men are perceived. A lack of body hair, using skin products or make up, being slim are all bodily presentations that are traditionally viewed as feminine. Men who try to get rid of their 'boy' image often show off their masculine body as proof that they have grown up.[74] The body is therefore an important visual representation of identity and also one which is always in view or prominent.

[74] Kai Arne Hansen, "Conclusion: Fade Out," in Pop Masculinities: The Politics of Gender in Twenty-first Century Popular Music, (Oxford University Press, 2022), 180-182.

4. A Bangtan Sonyeodan Presentation of Masculinity

4.1 Introducing BTS

The subject of this analysis of new masculinities in music is the K-pop band BTS. BTS or *Bangtan Sonyeondan,* which translates to Bulletproof Boy Scouts, is a product of BigHit Entertainment, now Hybe, consisting of 7 members in their mid to late 20s. RM, Jin, Suga, J-Hope, Jimin, V and Jung kook are widely regarded as the innovators of K-pop's success in the United States and the Western market in general. They are the first Asian act to top the U.S. Billboard top 200 charts.[75] There has been a generally positive reaction to their rise in the U.S. popular music industry. BTS continually sells out concerts and has gained a tremendous and sustained amount of attention in Western popular media.[76] They appear on late-night shows frequently for both interviews and performances, and in addition they are featured in cover stories by established media outlets in both music and popular culture, namely *Rolling Stone* and *Esquire*. Furthermore, not only their music is highlighted, but often attention is also placed on their sense for fashion and overall androgynous presentation. While some outlets have ridiculed them for this representation, there has been mostly praise for how these male K-pop idols are 'redefining masculinity and conventional male beauty standards by diverting from the normative qualities'.[77] Their perceived role in rearranging gender norms and identities is precisely why BTS is an interesting subject concerning masculinities in music.

BTS got increasingly popular in the United States and Europe in 2015 and 2016, but things really took off when attention of mainstream Western media started in 2017, with numerous late-night and award-show appearances.[78] Therefore, 2017 was taken as a starting point for materials. The materials selected include tv performances, tv interviews, written interviews, a speech at the United Nations, video clips, cover shoots and more. As for the media analysis, some written articles about BTS from western outlets are included, such as Rolling Stone and Billboard, as well as some performances on live tv, such as *Kimmel Live*.

[75] Dave Holmes, "The Boundless Optimism of BTS," *Esquire*, 23 November 2020, https://www.esquire.com/entertainment/music/a34654383/bts-members-be-album-interview-2020/.
[76] Jeehyun Jenny Lee, Rachel Kar Yee Lee, and Ji Hoon Park, "Unpacking K-Pop in America: The Subversive Potential of Male K-Pop Idols' Soft Masculinity," *International Journal of Communication* 14, no. 0 (9 November 2020): 5900-01.
[77] Lee, "Unpacking K-pop," 5901
[78] Jeff Benjamin, "The Year Pop Went Global: What "Despacito" and BTS Meant In 2017," *Billboard*, 21 December 2017, https://www.billboard.com/music/music-news/despacito-bts-global-pop-year-in-music-2017-8077811/.

These are important because this study is inherently concerned with how representations are perceived. Following the earlier mentioned idea that CDA should not only study discourse but also the social dimensions through which it is practised, this chapter will examine how BTS sustains, challenges, and transforms western masculinity dynamics.

4.2 BTS' performance of masculinity

To start this analysis, I looked at several instances in which BTS presented itself to a western audience in order to determine how they present their masculine identity. Samples from several different forms of presentations were picked and coded for the themes: From talk-show interviews on late-night television, award show performances, written interviews in publications such as *Rolling Stone* and *Billboard*, lead man RM's speech at the launch of their United Nations campaign Youth 2030, and finally their recently published concert film *BTS: Permission to Dance on Stage*.

Emotional Intimacy

The first theme examined was how BTS present themselves on an emotional level. Firstly, what stands out in the materials selected is that the individual members are not shy to complement each other, nor are they afraid to discuss emotional and sensitive topics. In an interview with *Esquire* at the start of the pandemic in 2020 member Suga says the following about expressing emotions and mental struggles:

> There is this culture where masculinity is defined by certain emotions, characteristics. I'm not fond of these expressions, What does being masculine mean? People's conditions vary day by day. Sometimes you're in a good condition; sometimes you aren't. Based on that, you get an idea of your physical health. And that same thing applies mentally. Some days you're in a good state; sometimes you're not. Many pretend to be okay, saying that they're not 'weak,' as if that would make you a weak person. I don't think that's right. People won't say you're a weak person if your physical condition is not that good. It should be the same for the mental condition as well. Society should be more understanding.[79]

There are several things to unpack in this statement. First, Suga refers to a culture of masculinity that is defined by characteristics that do not appeal to him. Further elaborating on this, he implies that in this culture you have to pretend to be okay and not express emotions even when you are having a tough time. Suga actively pushes back against this traditional

[79] Holmes, "The Boundless Optimism of BTS."

idea that by pretending to be okay when they are not, men appear to be strong by not showing their emotional weakness. Suga elaborates even further on what his underlying thought process could be by using the 'as if' structure, implying that showing emotion and reflecting on your well-being is a trait that he views as strong rather than weak (note that this is a translation so it is not clear if the as if structure has the same implications in Korean.) Furthermore, he says that society should be more understanding of emotions that are seen to be a sign of weakness. This could be a reflection on Western society since earlier research has shown that Western society in general strives to maximize positive emotions and minimize negative ones in its individualized nature.[80] However, it can also be seen as a critique of South-Korean society since its collectivist nature places a lesser value on the expression of an individual's emotion of sadness and anger and promotes the masking of negative emotions.[81]

The leader of the group Kim Nam Joon, often referred to as RM or Rap Monster, expressed similar sentiments during BTS' United Nations speech that launched their UNICEF campaign "Love Myself". During the speech he speaks about themes such as embracing mistakes and faults saying:

> Maybe I made a mistake yesterday, but yesterday's me is still me. Today, I am who I am with all my faults and my mistakes. Tomorrow, I might be a tiny bit wiser, and that'll be me too. These faults and mistakes are what I am, making up the brightest stars in the constellation of my life. I have come to love myself for who I am, for who I was, and for who I hope to become.[82]

Although a little more ambiguous the statement still implies some of BTS' thoughts on emotion. Specifically, that negative experiences do not reflect on one's personality badly but can provide an opportunity for growth. Later saying that one has to 'speak yourself' and express who you truly are in order to love yourself and grow.

Similarly, the group itself does not always seem to adhere to this idea and hardly talk about their own experiences in depth. In a 2018 *Billboard* interview when asked about the recent death by suicide of K-pop idol Jonghyun. RM says that "it was a shock to everyone,

[80] Sunny Youngok Song, Alexandria M. Curtis, and Oriana R. Aragón, "Anger and Sadness Expressions Situated in Both Positive and Negative Contexts: An Investigation in South Korea and the United States," *Frontiers in Psychology* 11 (13 January 2021): 4, https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.579509.
[81] Song, "Anger and Sadness," 5.
[82] Claire Sanford, "Kim Nam-Joon BTS 2018 United Nations Speech Transcript," *Rev* (blog), accessed 14 December 2022, https://www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/kim-nam-joon-bts-2018-united-nations-speech-transcript.

and I really sympathized with him" before saying "that's about all we can say."[83] This answer is intriguing because it implies that there exists some kind of taboo on expressing oneself on underlying issues such as depression. This seems to stem from a phenomenon that is similar to Western society where seeking therapy is seen as a sign of weakness. In South Korea pressure on performance is high which has led to some of the highest rates of suicide in the world. Combined with the practice that values the collective sentiment over the individual this indicates a taboo on subjects such as depression.[84] However, even though RM seems to be reluctant to express himself on these emotional issues, one of his bandmembers certainly does not shy away from that taboo, with Suga saying:

> I really want to say that everyone in the world is lonely and everyone is sad, and if we know that everyone is suffering and lonely, I hope we can create an environment where we can ask for help, and say things are hard when they're hard, and say that we miss someone when we miss them.[85]

Suga certainly puts an emphasis on wanting to create a world in which issues such as depression and suicide and the causes that lie underneath them are more accepted. By framing it in the context as a world issue, one could also make the argument that BTS' believe that the taboo on expressions of loneliness and sadness is something present in both Korean and Western culture, in that sense, they subvert expectations of both cultures in discussing these kinds of issues.

However, Gooyong Kim argues that this message of growth and self-help and the way it is imbodied in BTS' colourful presentations of their videos is part of a shallow treatment of such social issues. Rather, he argues that it is a successfully planned marketing strategy that plays into depressed audiences desire for social recognition of these issues by presenting idols as understanding, sympathetic and motivational. By playing heavily into these sentiments, but at the same time remaining on the surface of these complex issues, they

[83] E. Alex Jung, "BTS Speaks Out In Seoul: The K-Pop Megastars Get Candid About Representing a New Generation," *Billboard* (blog), 15 February 2018, https://www.billboard.com/music/music-news/bts-interview-billboard-cover-story-2018-8099577/.
[84] Katrin Park, "South Korea Is No Country for Young People," *Foreign Policy* (blog), accessed 14 December 2022, https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/11/05/south-korea-suicide-rates-mental-illness-squid-game/.
[85] Jung, "BTS Speaks Out In Seoul."

present a fantasy of hope while also reinforcing the existing status quo.[86] In doing so, it could be seen as an effective commercialization of these topics to appeal to a broader audience.

Sexuality

The analysis shows that regarding expressions of sexuality BTS is a bit more vague and reserved, especially when it comes to their own romantic experiences. This is hardly surprising since some reports have shown the K-pop industry to be a highly regulated space in which the public image of idols, especially around their romantic preferences and relationships, is heavily controlled.[87] It was thus not surprising that references to their sexuality or any relationships were hard to find. Even when they do comment on love and relationships, such as during an interview on the American broadcast Entertainment Tonight, it is usually a reflection on what the concept of love means to them. Reflecting on the question what does true love mean to you? RM reflects:

> We always, like when we don't have a boyfriend or girlfriend, we always say like oh I'm so lonely I want to date, something like that. But I think, I thought the biggest love we are all searching is like the love for oneself. So, I mean if you want to love others, I think you should love oneself or myself first.[88]

What is interesting in this statement is that RM does not exclude the idea of one of the group members or himself dating men. However, by hardly reflecting on his own experiences and consequently relating the question of love to self-love he creates a distance between his private life and his life as a K-pop idol. This is intriguing in two ways. First, it departs from the Western practice where men and especially celebrities are very open about dating and their relationships and often present them with a sense of pride. In K-pop, however, it is common practice for idols to play into their perceived and performed sexuality by presenting themselves as single and queer because of the phenomenon of shipping culture. Shipping in this context refers to the practice in which fans reimagine their favourite idols in same-sex relationships. One particular aspect that Timothy Laurie notes is the practice of 'skinship', where Western fans view physical contact between idols as a synthesis of an implied sexual

[86] Gooyong Kim, "BTS, Alternative Masculinity and its Discontents," in *The Soft Power of the Korean Wave: Parasite, BTS and Drama*, ed. Youna Kim, (London: Routledge, 2021), 136-138 https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003102489.

[87] James Griffiths, "Can K-Pop Stars Have Personal Lives? Their Labels Aren't so Sure," CNN, 22 September 2018, https://www.cnn.com/2018/09/21/entertainment/kpop-dating-hyuna-edawn-music-celebrity-intl/index.html.

[88] Entertainment Tonight, "BTS *Full Interview with ET: Watch! (Exclusive),"* YouTube, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PczCrxMzeV8.

tension.[89] There is a tension here specifically because engaging in physical touches is seen a normal practice in non-romantic relationships in South-Korea.[90] BTS, however, hardly seem to engage in the phenomenon of queerbaiting. Although there might be the occasional touch and rubbing of the shoulder, such as during an interview on the *Tonight Show With Starring Jimmy Fallon*, or on cover shoots such as in the *Rollingstone* and *Billboard* presentations, there are hardly any instances of suggestive imaging in BTS' performances.[91] The argument could thus be made that BTS presents a rather neutral outlook on their own sexuality and in doing so conforms to a heteronormative standard.

Maleness as Badness

As shown in the discussion on emotional intimacy, BTS presents itself as a group focused on personal growth with a positive message of hope. However, this was not always the case. Before BTS broke through on the global stage, they started out as a rap group with a different image. One of their debut songs from 2014, *Boy In Luv*, paints a rather different picture of the group, where they lean much heavier into a 'badboy' persona of hip-hop.[92] Over an up-tempo hip-hop beat BTS put on their low voices and are seen throwing chairs and tables around in a high school classroom. At one point, one of the members is seen slamming a locker shut in front of a girl and consequently grabbing her by the arm and dragging her to a classroom where the other members are standing. Then, one by one, they are seen trying to persuade the girl by offering her roses and dancing in front of her.

Despite the video predating the selected period, it is worth mentioning because it indicates that they have completely changed their tone since. They have moved away from a presentation of hegemonic masculinity and instead have rebranded themselves through soft masculinity.[93] The video for their hit *Dynamite* for example, which was the first full English song they released, is characterized by a sunny backdrop, a plethora of colours and smiles

[89] Timothy Laurie, "Toward a Gendered Aesthetics of K-Pop," in *Global Glam and Popular Music*, ed. Ian Chapman and Henry Johnson (New York: Routledge, 2016), 221-222, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315743127-19.

[90] Debbie Lemke, "Safe Space or Marketing Method? K-Pop and the LGBTQ+ Community," *The Oxford Student* (blog), 30 April 2021, https://www.oxfordstudent.com/2021/04/30/safe-space-or-marketing-method-k-pop-and-the-lgbtq-community/.

[91] The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon, "Jimmy Interviews the Biggest Boy Band on the Planet BTS | The Tonight Show,", YouTube, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W4mmfzFazoI.

[92] 1theK, "[MV] BTS(방탄소년단) _ Boy In Luv(상남자)," YouTube , 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m8MfJg68oCs.

[93] Adinda S. M. Putri and Adriana R. Mintarsih, "Bangtan Sonyeodan in America: Soft Masculinity Performance and Audience Response," *International Review of Humanities Studies* 5, no. 1 (2020), 220-221.

everywhere, with music clearly inspired by disco.[94] BTS has moved away from their initial aggressive tone and have embraced what McCracken would call high pitched crooner voices for most of their new songs.

Furthermore, during a 2021 interview with ABC Nightline the leader of the group, RM, was asked about their thoughts on gender equality and reflected on criticism they received about misogynistic content they produced in their earlier career. In response, RM indicates that a professor in women's studies reviewed his previous lyrics and has since been reflecting on whether he had been insensitive towards gender equality.[95] What is interesting about this transformation is that it could be seen as the opposite of the phenomenon McCracken described where boyband members moved toward a more hypermasculine presentation of themselves to get rid of their youthful image and be taken seriously. BTS, however, seems to have taken an opposite trajectory by embracing a youthful and colourful image and distancing themselves from their initial hypermasculine presentation. By showing that they are susceptible and open to criticism and reflecting on their previous behaviour they actively move away from a maleness is badness image.

Have BTS moved away entirely from their version of a maleness is badness masculinity? I would argue that in some instances they still do employ the theme, all be it in a more subtle manner than hip-hop or metal artists do. During the performance of their hit-song 'Butter' at the 2022 Grammy awards, for example, BTS play heavily into a James Bond inspired theme. Dressed in all-black suits, the performance starts with Jin sitting behind a stack of military intelligence hardware. Meanwhile, Jung Kook enters the stage as if he is rappelling down from a roof in front of a security monitor, while at the same time V is flirtatiously talking to one of the female guests Olivia Rodrigo. This is accompanied by James Bond inspired music. Consequently, they also embrace their usual image once the song itself start. The performance is broken up by a sequence in the middle during which they manoeuvre themselves through lasers.[96] While they employ certain tropes that are unmistakably a reference to the character of James Bond, and his image as womanizer, they do so in their own way by incorporating tightly choreographed dances, as they do for most of

[94] HYBE LABELS, "BTS (방탄소년단) 'Dynamite' Official MV," YouTube , 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gdZLi9oWNZg.

[95] ABC News, "BTS partners with Korean president as special presidential envoys | Nightline," YouTube, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NWwPyY7OHig.

[96] BANGTANTV, "BTS (방탄소년단) 'Butter' @ The 64th GRAMMY Awards," YouTube, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HbkBVxU5K5A.

their performances. Thus they combine both a masculine image of the spy with elements of their own performances as K-pop idols.

Presentation of the body

Finally, the analysis shows how BTS embrace the *kkonminam* image while at the same time not shying away from presenting a more traditional male image of the body. There are several aspects to the presentation of the body that are interesting. Firstly, typical for the presentation of the *flower boy*, BTS members hardly ever present themselves with facial hair. This could imply they want to keep on presenting themselves as youngsters, because during a Rolling Stone interview Jimin says the following: "I don't think I've ever really thought of being not a part of this group, I can't imagine what I would do on my own. I think when I become older, and I grow my own beard."[97] The implication made here is that even though they present an image of a flawless skin without hair, growing a beard is still something they might strive for in the future, similar to how a beard presents a masculine image in the West.

Furthermore, also in line with the *flower boy* image, they hardly ever present themselves without make-up. Most of the time, however, it is rather subtle, only having a light shine on the face and some eyeshadow, especially compared to other male K-pop artists such as G-dragon who employs a much more expressive strategy when it comes to makeup.[98]

Finally, in representing the body, BTS present a rather subtle androgynous fashion style. Often they wear colourful suits and jewellery during late night performances and in music videos. Furthermore, they present a slim but fit image through their energetic dance performances on stage but hardly show a muscled body. Apart from their colourful hairstyles they hardly challenge any clothing norms compared to Western representations. Compared to presentations such as Glam rock one could even say that BTS hardly challenges Western norms at all. In fact, sometimes, such as during their UN speech, they reinforce a presentation of the body that would be expected in such settings, in this case by donning conventional suits in which they are hardly recognizable as K-pop idols. [99]

All in all, I would argue that BTS presents a hybrid image of masculinities but that it is rather limited in how far they go. BTS conforms mostly to Western clothing norms but

[97] Brian Hiatt, "The Triumph of BTS," *Rolling Stone*, 13 May 2021, https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/new-bts-song-2021-worlds-biggest-band-1166441/.
[98] Minjeong Kim and April Lopez, "The Deployment of Gender for Masculine Balance: Analyzing Multi-Platform K-Pop Performances," *Feminist Media Studies* 0, no. 0 (25 November 2021): 1, https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2021.2006259.
[99] Washington Post, "BTS' Speech at the United Nations (Full Speech from 2018)," YouTube, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZhJ-LAQ6e_Y.

supplements this with colourful hairstyles, light makeup use and jewellery. Especially compared to more expressive androgynous presentations, such as that of G-dragon,[100] BTS could be seen as a timid version of androgynous and genderbending images presented in K-pop. However by showing kinship, presenting a generally optimistic outlook during their performances and speaking about topics such as self-acceptance and growth, they embrace a soft masculine character that was often ridiculed in Western history.

4.3. Western media perception

To conclude this analysis, I looked at how Western media view BTS in regard to masculinity. There are two contrasting presentations that stood out during the analysis. On the one hand BTS are perceived as a presentation of the 'new man' by introducing wholesomeness and soft masculinity traits to the Western audience. On the other hand Western media also fall into old habits by ridiculing or trivializing the enormous pull BTS has and painting them and their fans as quirky. The latter falls in line with the historic reception of crooner voices as described by McCracken. Two examples that highlight this are a 2018 article in *The New Yorker* and a sketch on a popular late night show with Jimmy Kimmel.

In the *New Yorker* the author describes the audience reaction to the band's performance at the Billboard Music Awards:

> Still, the audience reaction shots from the band's performance at the Billboard Music Awards earlier this month revealed young women going cuckoo, clutching themselves in a kind of hysterical rapture. They hollered along to the song's English chorus: "I'm so sorry, but it's fake love."[101]

By referring to the fans as 'young women' and using words like 'cuckoo' and 'hysterical' the image of a rabid fanbase that is not representative of social is created. A 2018 BBC article produces similar notions by making the direct comparison with the fandom of another boy band, One Direction. The author does this by telling the story of a 'superfan' who moved to Korea for BTS and consequently concluding that 'It's a fandom even Directioners struggle to match' indirectly implying that the fans of BTS are even more crazy than that of other boy bands.[102] The implication is interesting because in the same article the author acknowledges that part of why the group is so successful is because of the thoughtful tone in their songs and

[100] Kim, "The Deployment of Masculine Balance," 12-13.
[101] Amanda Petrusich, "Two Theories on How K-Pop Made It to No. 1 in America," *The New Yorker*, 29 May 2018, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/two-theories-on-how-k-pop-made-it-to-no-1-in-america.
[102] "BTS Superfan Moves to South Korea to Be near K-Pop Band," *BBC News*, 19 January 2018, sec. Newsbeat, https://www.bbc.com/news/newsbeat-42718123.

their discussion of sensitive topics such as anxiety and gender politics. By mentioning both topics together it paints the idea that only young women are engaged with these sensitive topics. In doing so the authors consciously, or subconsciously, places BTS and their fans on the fringes of perceived normalcy, implying that unless you are a young women you would have no interest in BTS or their representations.

Now, these generalizing statements are few among the overall acceptance shown by Western media. Multiple articles refer to BTS as a band rather than a boyband, which in a way legitimizes them as an accepted act, and consequently disconnects them from the implications associated with the term boyband. The author of a 2020 *Esquire* article highlights their display of emotional intimacy which previously would have been considered to be effeminate or non-masculine by western standards:

> Their affection with one another, their vulnerability and emotional openness in their lives and in their lyrics, strikes me as more grown-up and masculine than all the frantic and perpetual box-checking and tone-policing that American boys force themselves and their peers to do. It looks like the future.[103]

Holmes offers a clear rejection of the notion that being emotionally intimate is a trait unbecoming of Western men. He goes even further by relating masculinity to those traits offering them as values that signify being male more than traditional values such as being strong and stoic. Similarly, a *Rolling Stone* article from 2021 notes the groups comfort with showing emotions to a wider public and the comfort with which they adopt make-up and colourful hairstyles in their presentation to the wider public. The views expressed in these articles that they intrinsically connect these displays of emotional intimacy and the bodily presentation with make-up with the challenge of traditional masculinity. In doing so the authors show an understanding of what traditional masculine norms entail, while at the same time describing those norms as rigid or box-checking. These qualifications indicate a negative connotation with traditional values and could be seen as a challenge in its own right.

This is further amplified by how they describe the fandom behind BTS. While the earlier mentioned instances painted the BTS' fanbase in a condescending or minimizing manner, that practise is turned around by many covering the band into something positive, describing them as devoted or influential.[104] The collective power of the ARMY, as the BTS fanbase is called, is reflected on as a driver behind the success. The reframing of a devoted fanbase as a positive phenomenon by highlighting activist actions, such as donating to civil

[103] Holmes, "The Boundless Optimism."
[104] Jung, "BTS Speaks Out."

rights movements, as well as more trivial actions, such as providing translations for video appearances, can be seen as an acceptance or acknowledgement of legitimacy of BTS by Western media.

Finally, there were some interesting mentions in which the presentation by BTS were seen as slightly played up or at least thickened for a Western audience. One specific example of this was in the Billboard article where the author held an interview over zoom. Jung notes that 'they're calmer and less eager to impress than they were on their recent, occasionally awkward American press tour,' referring to them as groggy and 'today, their voices are noticeably deeper, more sonorous'.[105] Similar to the previously mentioned argument by Goonyong Kim, it seems to imply a realization that BTS' performance is in part exactly that: a performance where specific characteristics are overtly presented to appeal to a certain audience.

[105] Jung, "BTS Speaks Out."

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This thesis has attempted to show that BTS, as K-pop masculinities, construct their presentation by adopting elements from both Western and non-Western masculinity norms. BTS present a form of hybrid masculinity by combining the East Asian androgynous *flower boy* phenomenon, with more traditional masculine values such as heterosexuality. Following Amitav Acharya's theory on norm localization, BTS could be seen as adopting these norms to strengthen their position as global superstars by toning down both their initial hypermasculine image as well as the *flower boy* presentation into a more deliverable and less extreme version. They construct their presentation by showing emotional intimacy and kinship yet do not shy away from more traditional characteristics such as men as a womanizer. In doing so, they have been perceived positively in most Western popular media, which praise their optimism and androgynous presentation as redefining Western masculinity norms.

However, due to the highly controlled and industrialised industry that is K-pop, there is an uncomfortable subtext regarding whether BTS' presentation is an accurate reflection of their identity, a rather commodified image to appeal to a world audience or both. The argument could be made that the K-pop presentation of masculinity is specifically crafted for K-pop as a mode of performance and does not actually reflect either Western or non-Western perceptions. Nonetheless, even though their image might not be entirely genuine, the success BTS has had in the US and other Western countries indicate that their presentation appeals to a Western audience. This not only presents a clear change in attitude towards softer versions of masculinity and their fans in Western society, which were previously ridiculed and pushed to the edge of normalcy but might also signify a change in the overall dynamics between Western and Non-Western culture. In this sense, BTS' success appears to have ushered in a new stage in cultural transfer. Aided by the emergence of the internet, the traditional one-way traffic of cultural products from the West to other regions seems to have become a more equal exchange in which different cultures might adopt the cultural influences of others if they see fit. Western society at least seems to be more open to adopting other cultural norms instead of pushing its own.

As for the implication of this thesis for the overall direction of IR, I hope that it presents an opportunity to delve into topics that might be seen as niche or at the fringes of geopolitics. The topic of masculinities allows for the further exploration of the ambiguous nature of identity forming in the IR discipline and might tell us more about changing

dynamics of gender in both cultural and political exchanges. Furthermore, it will be interesting to see if other K-pop acts that combine hypermasculinity with the *kkonminam* phenomenon in a more extreme way, such as Stray Kids, will manage to break through to a global audience. And consequently, to see if they are received by the same open arms as BTS have.

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