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Project Title: Soft Masculinity and Gender Bending in Kpop Idol Boy Bands

Synopsis: This project seeks to investigate the ways in which audiences respond to the various performances of masculinity presented by Kpop boy bands.

Abstract: In recent years, South Korea's culture industry has experienced rapid expansion in the global market with an increasing number of foreign consumers being drawn to Korean pop music. This transnational saturation of Korean culture is commonly referred to as the Korean Wave (Hallyu). A main component of Hallyu, Korean idol boy bands have garnered significant popularity due, in part, to their carefully manufactured images. The highly elaborate fashion, hairstyles and liberal use of makeup, combined with their sculpted, muscular bodies is representative of the South Korean masculine aesthetic. Sun Jung (2009) describes this gender performance as a transcultural "soft masculinity" which has emerged as a result of the hybridization of various foreign influences. Drawing upon a symbolic interactionist framework, this study seeks to investigate if the way these boy bands "do gender" is challenging the way audiences understand and consume images of masculinity. This is to be achieved by examining 6 music videos by popular male idol groups, recording the top 50 comments from each of these videos, and conducting qualitative content analysis in which themes pertaining to masculinity are discerned by employing techniques of qualitative coding. Limitations of using online social media, specifically Youtube, as a platform for data collection and analysis are considered and discussed. Preliminary findings suggest that while some criticized the atypical performance of masculinity in these videos, there is growing recognition among virtual audiences of the increasing acceptance, and in some cases, preference for the gender bending images presented by these Kpop boy bands.