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**“Rock Your Body!”: Examining the Performance of  
Masculinity of the Backstreet Boys, One Direction,  
and BTS**

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## **Abstract**

Masculinity has become an extensively discussed topic in gender studies since the decade of the 90s, after Judith Butler's gender performativity theory revolutionised the way in which gender is viewed. Studies on refashioned masculinities typically focus on prominent famous personalities, such as politicians, actors, or musicians, due to their global influence as mediatic bodies, but masculinity as performed by boy bands has not been as abundantly examined. Boy bands, as influential gendered models, have a big impact on the social construction of gender of younger generations. Thus, by conducting an analysis in chronological order, from the late 90s to the 2020s, this dissertation will aim at examining masculinity as performed by 3 influential boy bands, with the intention of perceiving a shift in performances of masculinity. By analysing their music videos, photoshoots and personality traits, this paper will inspect the performances of masculinity of the Backstreet Boys in the late 90s and early 2000s, One Direction in the 2010s, and BTS in the 2020s. The overall analysis seems to prove that there has been an evolution from boy bands reinforcing their heteronormativity through hegemonic acts of masculinity, to a more permissive performance of gender by celebrities, legitimizing a fluid and non-restrictive discourse on gender performativity.

**Keywords:** Boy bands, masculinity, gender performance, Backstreet Boys, One Direction, BTS

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## Introduction

Gender performativity is a term that was first coined in 1990 by Judith Butler in her book *Gender Trouble*, where she claimed that gender could be seen as an action that “requires a performance that is repeated,” which will simultaneously re-enact and reexperience “a set of meanings that are already socially established” (Butler 1990, 178), implying, thus, that gender was constructed through a sequence of acts. Hence, as gender performativity is “a public action” commonly established by “individual bodies that enact these significations by becoming stylised into gendered modes” (178), analysis on individuals’ performance of gender have become a significant focus for gender studies. Authors such as McGhee and Frueh (1980) have previously observed the importance of examining gender performance enacted by celebrities, as well as the significance of their portrayal in television. Media, as an influential ideological state apparatus (Margulies 2018, 185), presents and spreads mediatic bodies that might influence younger generations, thus arguably becoming referential models for social constructions of gender. Nonetheless, not a lot of importance has been shed to the performance of gender of popular musicians, who might be labelled as highly influential gendered models for younger generations, nor has there been a study that focuses on diachronic or spatial shifts on the discourses on gender that those mediatic bodies legitimise.

The aim of this dissertation, thus, is to explore the transformations in hegemonic Western masculinity from the late 90s to the 2020s by focusing on male gender practices as performed by one of “the most successful male acts in pop music” (Hansen 2018, 195), boy bands. In order to perform a recent analysis, the boy bands featured in this paper will start with the Backstreet Boys, considered the highest-selling boy band in 1999 by music magazines such as the *Rolling Stone* (Skanse 1999) and, thus, influential at the turn of the century. The decade of the 2010s will be analysed through its most famous boy band, One Direction, and the following decade will be examined through BTS, the Korean boy band that currently tops the US Billboard Hot 100 chart. The boy bands included in this study seem to portray a different version of masculinity in line with their decade of influence, which might be perceived as an argument that vindicates the perception of masculinity as an abstract concept, capable of replacing what Butler described as the socially established “highly rigid regulatory frame” (1990, 43) for a more fluid construction of gender performativity. The analysis conducted seems to point to an evolution on the performance of masculinity, with boy bands representing a more fluid and permissive performance of gender nowadays than what might have been socially acceptable at the turn of the century. Through an extensive analysis of the performance of

masculinity in music videos, interactions, and photoshoots of boy bands with an amount of influence in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, this paper will try to demonstrate that there has been, indeed, an evolution in accepted gender performances, from a need to reinforce their heteronormativity and a more constrained representation of gender in the Backstreet Boys, towards a refashioning of masculinity in members of One Direction, and concluding with an active confrontation of hegemonic discourses and an attempt to legitimise a more permissive expression of masculinity by BTS.

Boy bands, hence, seem to be influential agents used to portray, validate, and establish gender practices for younger generations, as “boy bands do not just have young members; their portrayal and representation make them squarely about youth itself” (Duffet 2012, 188). Nonetheless, the influence and significance of boy bands as gendered models could be affected by arguments on the authenticity of their acts. As argued by Matthew Stahl, “boy bands embody contradictory representations of their own individuality and authenticity and the corporate nature of their genesis and presentation” (2002, 307), typically embodying performances that abide with the hegemonic discourses of their time. Nonetheless, regardless of the importance of the questioning of authenticity of boy bands, analysing their performance of gender might be noteworthy, because, as stated by McGhee and Frueh, “heavy television viewing may contribute significantly to children's acquisition of stereotypic perceptions of behavior and psychological characteristics associated with males and females” (1980, 185). Therefore, regardless of the authenticity of the performance of gender of boy band, they might influence their younger fans by means of becoming stylised gendered models and, thus, work at establishing and regulating normative gender performances among their viewers.

### **Backstreet Boys: Hegemonic Masculinity in the 90s**

The 90s was considered a golden period for boy bands in the music industry (Barron et al. 2002), as the techniques used to create bands such as Take That and New Kids on the Block in the previous decade were perfected. As a result, some of the most famous boy groups were created in the decade of the 90s, being idolised by millions of teens, but the Backstreet Boys could be classified as the most popular boy band at the turn of century (Skanse 1999). Created in 1993, the Backstreet Boys originated in Florida under the representation of Louis Pearlman and Wright Stuff, also responsible for other successful bands such as ‘NSYNC and New Kids on the Block. Although they were created at the beginning of the 90s, their popularity peaked between 1996 and 2000 (Jamieson 2007, 246), becoming the number one boy band with the

most sales after the release of their album *Millennium*, one of the highest selling albums of 1999 (Skanse 1999). Concerning their appearance, the style of the Backstreet Boys, similarly to most of the boy bands of the 90s, found its roots “in Black male R&B groups of the 1980s and 1990s,” as they “wore matching or coordinated outfits, and performed tightly choreographed dance routines in their music videos and/or live shows” (Pruett 2020, 12), becoming a global marketable product and “a homogenising source of generic American culture” (Stahl 2002, 309) and, thus, examples of normative practices of gender for young, white, heterosexual men in the 90s. Discourses of masculinity in the 90s tend to be regarded as “conflictive,” as this decade gave rise to “sensitive, new male heroes” in actors and other famous personalities (Marlin 2003, 239), leading to a new crisis of masculinity that became significantly more urgent due to the “explosion of communications technology and media outlets” (Hunter 2003, 73). Consequently, many institutions strived towards stabilizing gender norms and to reiterate hegemonic masculinity practices (Marlin 2003, 241). As part of 90’s cultural production, the Backstreet Boys display characteristics common amongst boy bands in the 90s and early 2000s and feasibly perform according to the attitudes towards masculinity in this period.

When analysing the way in which boy bands do masculinity, clothes could be labelled as a key component to examine, as “fashion functions as a principal mean by which men’s visible gender identities are established” (Barry 2018, 638). Male fashion in the 90s was heavily inspired by hip hop styles, mainly characterised by sagging pants and baggy t-shirts, a fashion trend that was considered “part of the “virulently masculine” style emphasized by hip-hop-oriented clothing” (Penney 2012, 326). These clothes were used as a way of resistance for youth hip hop culture, but “in the fashion front, members of hip-hop crews gain status from competition to craft and display new styles” (Baxter et al. 2008, 99), becoming then a mainstream fashion trend among teenagers as a new style of “defiant masculinity” (101). The Backstreet Boys could also be seen wearing and styling these oversized clothes. An example of this could be found in the music video for “As Long As You Love Me” (Backstreet Boys 2011, 1:15), where they can be seen wearing oversized jeans and black shirts and, thus, feasibly displaying this “virulently masculine” style. Nonetheless, even if most of the boys wore similar outfits, styled according to mainstream 90s male fashion, in most of their public appearances, AJ McLean seemed to incorporate different clothes or styles. In most of the music videos of Backstreet Boys, he can be seen wearing sleeveless, sheer shirts, different from the outfits worn by the other members, which could be perceived as a strategy to display AJ McLean’s strong, yet lean, arms covered with tattoos, feasibly regarded as an attribute of his masculinity. Additionally, he could also be seen wearing clothes that might be described as gender neutral



or even non-normative according to stereotypical discourses of fashion, like crop-tops and diamond jewellery pieces (figure 1). Clothes such as crop-tops tend to be traditionally categorised not only as women’s fashion, but as a particular type of apparel that are “central to sexualised presentations of adult femininity within contemporary culture” (Pilcher 2009, 463). By wearing these items that are usually categorised as female clothes, AJ McLean arguably confronted stereotypical gender norms on fashion. Therefore, it could be stated that the Backstreet Boys wore clothes according to normative discourses of fashion in the 90s and 2000s, but AJ McLean arguably negotiated gender boundaries on performance of masculinity through his clothes.

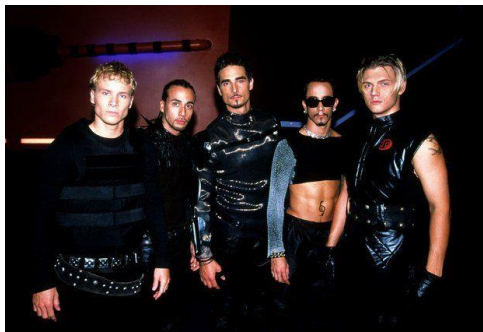


Figure 1: Backstreet Boys. 2019. “Episode 14: Tours | BSB 23 Chromosomes.” YouTube Video, 1:00. Uploaded April 9<sup>th</sup>, 2019. Accessed May 27<sup>th</sup>, 2021.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RaVqE8zikck&list=PLFQKiEANTnKxJnJz7Jd1Tv1CqZfRvvoa&index=10>

Nonetheless, even if McLean wore clothes that could be classified as non-normative according to stereotypical discourses of fashion, classifying him as a non-conformist with gender practices might not be accurate. Marketed as the rebel member of the group, AJ McLean seemed to exemplify a particular role usually found within hegemonic masculinity constructions, which include men that, “while invested in grooming and fashion, are also engaged in traditional expressions of masculinity including engagement with sporting culture, sexual promiscuity, and excessive partying and substance abuse” (Waling 2019, 104), as well as actively trying to “maintain strong, tough, and confident personas” (Oransky et al. 2009, 58), perchance in means of reinforcing their masculinity, behaviours that could feasibly be applied to McLean. In several interviews, the other members described McLean as someone that took care of his image, especially grooming his beard, but also as a man that enjoyed being surrounded by women, going to parties, and consuming alcohol and drugs, thus reinforcing his masculinity through his actions. Apart from his personality, AJ McLean also incorporated pieces in his outfits that might be analysed as devices to strengthen his classification as normatively masculine. One example of these pieces, and arguably something that distinguished McLean from the other members, were his sunglasses, which might be perceived

as a tool employed to make him seem more mysterious, covering his eyes and, consequently, his expression, which viably made him acquire an impartial and emotionless stance (see figure 1). Emotional detachment tends to be labelled as a normative performative act in hegemonic masculinity discourses, as “emotional detachment is one way in which gender hierarchies are maintained. Expressing emotions signifies weakness and is devalued, whereas emotional detachment signifies strength and is valued” (Bird 1996, 125), emotions and emotionality being typically labelled as a normatively feminine practice. By using sunglasses, it could be stated that AJ might be trying to follow this discourse to display himself as the “bad boy” of his group and, thus, to reinforce his position as feasibly the most masculine member. Therefore, as AJ McLean actively performs according to hegemonic masculinity discourses, his heteronormativity might not be questioned, regardless of his employment of fashion in a non-normative way.

Lastly, to fully analyse the masculinity that the Backstreet Boys performed in the 90s and early 2000s, it might be necessary to focus on the messages spread through their most viewed music videos, “Everybody,” “As Long As You Love Me,” and “I Want It That Way.” The first feature of their music videos is that they include a dance routine. Dancing is not typically accepted by hegemonic discourses on masculinity, as most Western societies’ “cultural paradigm situates dance as primarily a “female” art form” (Risner 2009, 58). Nonetheless, the Backstreet Boys, as it was common among boy bands before them, actively break this gendered construction and incorporate dance in their performances. In “As Long As You Love Me” (Backstreet Boys 2011, 1:23), the Backstreet Boys perform for a female audience while wearing unbuttoned shirts, and in the routine for the music video of “Everybody” (Backstreet Boys 2011, 0:56), the members engage in a slow dance with women. There are certain common traits among these performances. One of them would be the exposure of the Backstreet Boys’ bodies, as most of their outfits include sleeveless or unbutton shirts. This could feasibly be perceived as a way to display their bodies in an attractive manner which, according to R.W. Connell, might be related to how “true masculinity is almost always thought to proceed from men’s bodies”, because “the body is a natural machine which produces gender difference” (2005, 45). Accordingly, it could be argued that, by displaying their lean, yet muscular, bodies, the Backstreet Boys try to perform according to these discourses of masculinity. The second commonality in these music videos is the employment of women to arguably reinforce the perception of the Backstreet Boys as heteronormative, desirable men. According to Mike Donaldson, “females provide heterosexual men with sexual validation” (1993, 645), which implies the importance of validation for the social construction of

hegemonic discourses on masculinity. The use of women in a sexualised manner could be seen in the music videos for “Everybody” (Backstreet Boys 2011, 2:02) and “I Want It That Way” (Backstreet Boys 2009, 2:38), where they also employ lyrics that describe themselves as their fans’ “fire” and “one desire” in “I Want It That Way” (1:18) or ask their female love interest to validate their sexuality in “Everybody” (Backstreet Boys 2011, 2:31). Hence, by means of being surrounded by women and incorporating fragmented and sexualised body images of said female actresses, feature that will not be as common in boy bands’ music videos in the following decades, the discourse that their music videos spread could be that of validation of their position as powerful, heteronormative men. Therefore, even if the Backstreet Boys actively broke the discourse of dance as a non-normative performance of gender for men, by means of displaying their bodies and by presenting themselves as desirable objects of admiration for women in most of their music videos, the Backstreet Boys feasibly tried to reinforce their masculinity by following heteropatriarchal constructions of gender.

### **One Direction: Towards a Refashioning of Masculinity**

Boy bands’ popularity weakened in the 2000, leading to the disbandment of most groups that experienced great success in the previous decade, as the 90s are typically regarded as the most successful years for boy bands (Barron et al. 2002, 96). Nonetheless, in 2010, Simon Cowell decided to create a new boy group that would revolutionise the music industry. One Direction was created in the music show *The X Factor* UK in 2010 after the 5 boys auditioned individually. Cowell, businessman and judge of *The X Factor*, thought that they could become extremely popular as a boy band. As stated by Kai Hansen, the music industry needed a new boy group, and “One Direction breathed new life into the boy band format” (2018, 195), becoming the most successful boy band in the early 2010s, and the first British boy band to become number one in the US music charts (Pruett 2020). The members of One Direction, thus, could be perceived as some of the most influential male celebrities of the 2010s, operating as influential icons of Western masculinity for teens and young adults in this decade.

By means of analysing One Direction’s most famous music videos, certain traits usually linked to hegemonic Western masculinity could be perceived. One characteristic typically bestowed on the members of One Direction in their videos could be related to a stereotypical construction of youth masculinity, that is, attitudes of “boldness, irreverence, aggressive heterosexual behaviour,” usually associated with “wild, drunken parties” and a life marked by a degree of “recklessness and wildness” (Barret 1996, 134), similar to McLean’s performance

of masculinity in the previous decade. Parties, oppositional behaviour, and vandalism might be used to legitimise One Direction's masculinity, as these attitudes tend to be "interpreted by other boys and girls in an ambiguous way: not just condemned, but also tolerated and even celebrated and bragged about as ways of acquiring and proving masculinity" (Haavind 2003, 94). One example of reckless behaviour could be found in the music video for "Best Song Ever," where the members display an aggressive and confrontational attitude towards a figure of authority (One Direction 2013, 2:37), and proceed to destroy an office (3:22), displaying, thus, problematic and aggressive behaviours. Additionally, parties are usually associated with heteronormative discourses, as party culture could be seen "as a gendered phenomenon, one that potentially provides potent resources for the construction of masculine identities" (Sweeney 2014, 804). Thus, the use of parties in the music videos of One Direction could be seen as a way to reinforce their portrayal as masculine young men. The music video for "Midnight Memories" shows the members partying and enjoying themselves at night, just like the title suggests, but they also perform in a reckless manner by stealing a boat (One Direction 2014, 2:18) and misapplying a fire extinguisher (1:22), as well as showing flirtatious behaviour (1:42). Even if One Direction also used women in their music videos, like the Backstreet Boys did before them, they did so in a feasibly less sexualised, and typically humorous, manner, as perceived in "Midnight Memories" and "Best Song Ever" (One Direction 2013, 0:43). Therefore, as One Direction displays characteristics of heteronormative masculinity in their music videos, such as reckless behaviour, party cultures and, even if less notably, the use of females, their performance might lead to a reinforcement of their masculinity.

Nonetheless, and even if heteronormative acts could be found in a significant number of One Direction's music videos, it could be argued that the members also display and perform non-normative masculine acts. One trait about One Direction that was not observed in the Backstreet Boys and could be seen as subversive according to heteronormative discourses is their intimacy, examples of which could be found in multiple of their interviews, concerts, and videos, like in their music video for "History" (2016, 0:14), where they hug and display their affection publicly. Men being affectionate with other men is not typically considered an acceptable practice according to heteronormative discourses. Intimacy in same-sex male relationships, according to Heath, is typically associated with non-heteronormative attitudes and bodies, as "gay men subvert the norm of masculinity by becoming emotionally involved with one another" (Heath 2003, 431). As argued by Peter Theodore and Susan Basow, males tend to view homosexuality as a threat for their self-identity and masculinity, usually compelling them "to internalize society's gender expectations and consequently develop

anxiety over not fulfilling those expectations” (2000, 32), because, when cultural agents are aware of societal assumptions, they are also aware of the consequences of being alienated or Othered if those expectations are not fulfilled (Foucault 2006, 131). Nonetheless, the fact that the members of One Direction actively displayed their affection towards each other in interviews, concerts, and music videos by means of hugs, kisses and open-physical contact could arguably be seen as them rejecting and countering this heteronormative discourse. Not only did the members perform public displays of affection, but they neither tried to deny the fan-made homosexuality rumours that arose due to the closeness of two particular members, Harry Styles and Louis Tomlinson (Pruett 2020), nor seemed to be bothered by them, which could be seen as another argument to potentially prove how One Direction actively challenged this discourse. Therefore, One Direction feasibly defies and rejects heteronormative discourses on same-sex male relationships and intimacy by means of being affectionate with each other.

Lastly, to fully analyse the performance of masculinity of One Direction, their fashion style will be examined, and this appraisal will be carried out by means of analysing the member that was regarded as the most fashionable in One Direction (Pike 2021), Harry Styles, as he used to wear the most different and diverse outfits, and he is known nowadays for his gender non-conforming fashion choices. Multiple fashion magazines observed that Styles’ outfits drastically changed after One Direction’s disbandment, probably due to him untying himself from the strict rules that contribute to the fabrication of boy bands’ image (Peterson 2005, 1085). Nonetheless, the fact that Styles’ attire was different from the overall image of the band when he was still in One Direction (figure 2) could be considered of high significance, as it would imply that Harry Styles arguably displayed agency, term that denotes “freedom, autonomy, rationality and moral authority” (Davies 1991, 42). Additionally, this gradual shift towards non-conformist fashion could be related to the notion of self-actualisation. Abraham H. Maslow stated in his book *Motivation and Personality* that self-actualisation “may be loosely described as the full use and exploitation of talents, capacities, potentialities, etc. [...] They are people who have developed or are developing to the full stature of which they are capable” (1954, 150). Styles’ interest in fashion and his openness to evoke a more fluid and non-normative version of masculinity through his clothes could lead, thus, to identifying Harry Styles as a competing force due to his self-actualisation as a fashion icon, shifting from following hegemonic discourses on fashion to challenging these discourses through his clothes and, thus, legitimising a more fluid version of masculine performativity.



Figure 2: Pike, Naomi. 2021. “163 Photos That Prove Harry Styles Hasn’t Always Worn Lilac Feather Boas.” Vogue, uploaded March 4<sup>th</sup>, 2021. Accessed May 16<sup>th</sup>, 2021. <https://www.vogue.co.uk/gallery/harry-styles-style-evolution>

Therefore, as Harry Styles feasibly began to challenge normative fashion practices while he was still a member of One Direction, the analysis of his fashion choices may be a key aspect in One Direction’s refashioning of masculinity. Styles’ fashion sense started to change towards 2013, when he started to wear unbuttoned shirts, skinny jeans, and heeled boots, and his hair was significantly longer (see figure 2), complete opposite outfits to the ones worn by the Backstreet Boys in the previous decade, and significantly different from the clothes worn by the other members of One Direction. This fashion style tends to be classified as *grunge*, which proves to be of high significance, as rock and roll stars are known for actively defying gender norms (Gregory 2019, 83). Indie Rock stars, as stated by Taylor Houston, are known for defying hegemonic gender constructions by acquiring a gender bender attitude, describing the “indie rock scene as less macho and misogynist and producing more androgynous performances” (2012, 160). By means of showing interest in grunge fashion and ideology, Harry Styles could be non-conforming to fashion norms and opting for a more fluid and flexible approach to styling, inspired by the gender bender notion of Indie Rock fashion. From 2013 onwards, Styles’ fashion sense progressively evolved towards a more feasibly androgynous style until it became the one that it is nowadays, where he openly defies gender norms by wearing certain pieces of clothing that challenge hegemonic discourses on male fashion, comparable to the pieces worn by K-Pop boy bands in the 2020s. One example of Styles defying male gender norms could be the outfit that he wore to BBC radio on February 14<sup>th</sup>, 2018 (Figure 3). He can be seen wearing a pearl necklace and red nail polish, which are “not widely considered part of the culturally accepted adornment repertoire for men,” especially nail polish, because “we, as a culture, have designated colored nail polish as appropriate for women,” and the fact that he chose red nail polish could also be significant, as it might imply that Styles is knowingly

partaking in “the prospect of gender bending or deliberately breaking social norms around gender performance” (Edwards 2010, 364) by choosing a flashy nail polish. Harry Styles seems to paint his nails regularly nowadays, but he was already seen wearing nail polish in 2015, when he was still in One Direction. Therefore, it could be stated that Styles, as a member of a boy band, actively partook in non-normative gender norms, especially when it came to fashion, publicly challenging hegemonic discourses and, thus, refashioning masculinity.



Figure 3: Pike, Naomi. 2021. “163 Photos That Prove Harry Styles Hasn’t Always Worn Lilac Feather Boas.” *Vogue*, uploaded March 4<sup>th</sup>, 2021. Accessed May 16<sup>th</sup>, 2021. <https://www.vogue.co.uk/gallery/harry-styles-style-evolution>

## **BTS: The Gender Bender Attitude of K-Pop**

The last section of this paper will be devoted to the analysis of the performance of masculinity of the most popular boy band of the 2020s, BTS. The K-Pop band BTS debuted in 2013, but their popularity exponentially grew internationally at the beginning of 2019 mainly due to their fandom’s activism in social media platforms thanks to *Hallyu*, or “Korean Wave” (Bakó 2020, 152), a phenomenon that describes the global spread of Korean popular culture. The popularity of BTS is such that they have presumably “tied the Beatle’s record by earning three Billboard No. 1 albums in one year,” as well as breaking multiple records in YouTube and debuting “at number one on the US Billboard Hot 100 chart” (Parc et al. 2020, 21). Accordingly, BTS could be labelled as the most popular boy band of the 2020s and, thus, pivotal for this analysis. Furthermore, this might imply that there has been a shift in the direction of globalisation in the last decade, with cultural products being exchanged from “cultural periphery (non-Western world) to a cultural center (i.e., Western world)” (Song et al. 2020, 5). The boy bands analysed in the previous sections were created by major Western entertainment companies, mostly American music labels, thus representing, within their subversiveness, performances of gender that could be analysed according to hegemonic Western masculinity discourses, as “masculinist

identity is most readily available to the most privileged group of men—straight, white, middleclass, able-bodied and young” (Day et al. 2003, 312). Nonetheless, due to globalisation, Asian music, specifically K-Pop, has become a global sensation, and “the big difference is that the performers have distinct Asian physical features” (Hogarth 2013, 135), performing in a manner that reflects traditional Asian values of masculinity. Therefore, considering that “the meanings of masculine identities are prescribed by time, place, race/ethnicity and sexuality” (Day et al. 2003, 312), BTS masculinity will be analysed whilst acknowledging the intersectionality of gender and ethnicity.

To fully understand, thus, the masculinity that BTS performs, it might be necessary to analyse East Asian masculinity discourses and how transculturation has worked at hybridising Korean masculinity values with Western constructions, as well as how Western notions of masculinity could feasibly be found in BTS’ music videos. Transculturation could be defined as a process of globalisation that “assumes and celebrates the selective, generative, and inventive nature of linguistic and cultural adaptation” (Zamel 1997, 350). This notion implies, thus, that cultural products undergo a process of adaptation and modification due to globalisation, perchance to become more attractive for the target culture. Sun Jung asserts that transculturation has also altered the images of Asian masculinity spread globally through *Hallyu*, as “South Korean masculinity is multifariously reconstructed and re-identified based on the ambivalent desires of audiences who mobilize mixed cultural practices” (2011, 4) leading thus to an embrace of hybrid Korean masculinity, arguably the reason behind the global success of bands such as BTS (Song et al. 2020, 5). As Korean masculinity has been feasibly hybridised with both Western and tradition East Asian values of masculinity (Jung 2011), both features could be perceived in K-Pop boy bands, such as BTS. K-Pop masculinity, thus, conceivably implements notions of hegemonic Western masculinity. Some examples of this Western influence could be found in BTS’ music videos. Taking as an example “No More Dream”, their debut song, BTS acquires a tough concept, displaying a rebel attitude (Hybe Labels 2013, 0:17), dancing in a dirty set with graffiti drawings, trying to present themselves as strong and muscular men, including moves in their dance routine that display their body (3:28), and wearing dark clothes, baggy trousers, gold chain necklaces, and baseball caps (figure 4). These features show a strong influence of Western music aesthetic, such as hip hop, which might be comparable to the Backstreet Boys’ style. Nonetheless, BTS does not employ actresses in their videos, contrary to the tradition in hip hop and to most of the Backstreet Boys’ music videos. Not only do these characteristics arguably denote hegemonic Western masculinity ideologies, but they could also be related to black masculinity, as “hip hop, specifically gangsta rap music, reflects



a stereotypical black masculine aesthetic,” which “oftentimes encompasses hypermasculinity” (Oware 2010, 22). Consequently, BTS trying to perform according to black masculinity, and hypermasculinity, discourses through this hip hop aesthetic might be seen as an attempt to counterbalance the notions of “soft masculinity” usually associated to Asian bodies (Jung 2011, 29) and acquire, thus, a more hegemonically masculine demeanour.



Figure 4: Hybe Labels. 2013. “BTS (방탄소년단) 'No More Dream' Official MV.” YouTube video, 4:49. Uploaded June 12<sup>th</sup>, 2013. Accessed May 27<sup>th</sup>, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rBG5L7UsUxA>

Nonetheless, BTS’s newer content potentially promotes notions of masculinity closer to traditional discourses of East Asian masculinities, typically regarded by scholars as soft masculinity. Confucianism, one of the most influential ideologies in traditional Asian cultural constructions, vindicated that “a softness of manner and even a homosexual behaviour did not threaten a man’s manliness” (Taga 2005, 129). Futoshi Taga expounds that Confucianism’s concept of masculinity in China, and most other East Asian countries, was based on a balance between “*wen* (mental or civil ideals) and *wu* (physical or martial ideals),” and that this balance “lead to masculinity at its highest” (130). Scholars have argued that *wen* ideals were significantly superior to *wu* in Asian societies, as they were believed to be the fundamental values of good scholars and kings. However, Western discourses on gender performance tend to associate characteristics of *wen* with normatively feminine practices (Louie et al. 1994), which could be the main reason for the perception of Asian masculinity by Western standards as soft masculinity. These *wen* ideals could be found in the performance of masculinity of BTS, both in their music videos and in real life, by means of implementing pieces of traditional Asian clothing that might be described by Western viewers as non-masculine, such as *hanbok* and hand fans (Hybe Labels 2018, 2:58), being openly and publicly affectionate with one another (BangtanTV 2014, 6:58), comparable to what could be observed in One Direction in the previous decade, and displaying emotionality, opposite to the emotional detachment displayed

by AJ McLean. Accordingly, BTS might be perceived as an example of the hybrid masculinity performed by K-Pop celebrities, but their newer, and globally popular, content seems to display and, thus, validate, traditional Asian values of masculinity, typically regarded by Western discourses as non-gender-normative masculine acts.

Additionally, even if Korean boy bands exhibit this hybrid masculinity, K-Pop idols such as BTS arguably implement subversive performances of gender that further challenge gender conventions. The first practice common among K-Pop boy bands that might be in complete opposition with hegemonic discourses of masculinity is the active donning of make-up, fact that may differentiate them from the boy bands previously analysed. Cosmetics such as foundation, eyeliner, eyeshadow, and lipstick are worn by K-Pop boy idols, both in their music videos, live performances, and concept photos (figure 5). Make-up is typically regarded as a normative practice of gender for women (Poulin-Dubois et al. 2002), but in K-Pop, make-up is actively worn by both female and male personalities, as “putting on make-up has become common among Korean men” (Oh 2015, 63), challenging thus this stereotypical gender performance and feasibly legitimising a gender bender attitude towards cosmetics. Additionally, due to their international success, social media platforms such as YouTube display fan-made tutorials on how to do this male makeup (Abelman 2017), encouraging male fans to partake in this non-normative practice of gender, a remarkable trait of BTS. This Korean boy band actively encourages their fans to express themselves and to challenge and reject heteronormative discourses on gender. In their “Love Yourself” campaign with UNICEF, BTS’ leader encouraged their younger followers to express themselves regardless of “who you are, where you are from, your skin colour, your gender identity” (UNICEF 2018, 5:25), which feasibly shows how BTS, as role models for younger generations, spread and legitimise a more permissive discourse on gender performativity. Another gender stereotype that BTS actively break is the incorporation of attire that is typically classified as female clothing or stereotypically regarded as sexualised female clothes (Flood 2013, 101), such as skirts, corsets, chokers, and fishnet, items that could be seen in their music videos and concept photos for “Black Swan” (Hybe Labels 2020, 1:52) or “Blood, Sweat and Tears” (Hybe Labels 2016, 2:24). Even if AJ McLean did incorporate non-normative clothes in his outfits (see figure 1), he feasibly tried to reinforce his masculinity through his rebel attitude, whereas BTS do not try to legitimise their masculinity and, in contrast, engage in practices labelled as soft masculinity. Additionally, the fact that they incorporate these pieces in their performances in Western countries, such as the United States, could be regarded as a further challenge of hegemonic discourses of masculinity at a global level. Therefore, by means of acquiring characteristics

typically labelled by Western discourses as normative performances of femininity and encouraging younger generations to reject restrictive discourses on gender and to express themselves freely, BTS, as well as other male K-Pop idols, actively challenge hegemonic discourses on gender performativity, legitimising, thus, a more fluid performance of masculinity.



Figure 5: BTS (@bts.bighitofficial). 2020. “Concept Photo - 지민 (Jimin).” Instagram Photo, November 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2020. Accessed May 27<sup>th</sup>, 2021. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CHF7Zwbh3HE/>

## Conclusion

This dissertation aimed at examining the expressions of masculinity as performed by influential boy bands from the late 90s to the 2020s in means to attest that there has been an evolution on the constrictive margins of gender performativity, experiencing an evolution towards a more fluid and permissive discourse on masculinity. The first boy band analysed, the Backstreet Boys, might portray a different version of masculinity through their style, but, nonetheless, the analysis seemed to state that their music, personality and interactions with women and other men followed heteropatriarchal constructions, thus arguably reinforcing hegemonic discourses of masculinity. In the 2010s, One Direction’s performance of masculinity seemed to slightly alter the constructions of gender that were spread by boy bands in the previous decade. Despite feasibly legitimising certain discourses on hegemonic masculinity, especially young masculinity practices, such as reckless behaviour and partying, certain members, but more specifically, Harry Styles, feasibly aimed at legitimising a more fluid and permissive construction of gender, refashioning masculinity by means of styling non-normative clothes. However, even if Styles could be seen as an example of a competing force, defying gender norms, the rest of the members of One Direction did not challenge said discourses and seemed to follow heteropatriarchal constructions of gender.

Nonetheless, it could be stated that hegemonic discourses on masculinity are experiencing a drastic change in the 2020s, and the impact of K-Pop as a global product might be perceived as an influential promoter of this shift towards gender fluidity. As K-Pop idols, BTS seem to embrace the hybrid Korean masculinity typically found within Korean cultural products, incorporating both Western and Asian constructions of gender performativity. Although their older content seemed to follow hegemonic discourses of masculinity, their more recent, and globally popular, activities have proven to defy gender norms. By means of performing what might be labelled as soft masculinity, BTS challenges normative constructions of gender by means of displaying emotionality, being affectionate towards each other, wearing clothes categorised as women's fashion, and actively wearing cosmetics and taking care of their skin, performances labelled by Western discourses as normatively feminine. Not only do they actively challenge hegemonic discourses, but their online popularity has had a great impact on how teens perceive gender. By means of becoming influential gendered models at a global scale, BTS is actively changing societal conventions on gender norms, inspiring and encouraging younger generations to express themselves freely. Accordingly, similarly to the message that BTS sent to their followers in their UNICEF speech, boy bands in the 2020s seem to encourage fans to challenge repressive discourses on gender performance, legitimising, thus, a more permissive and accepting discourse on performances of gender and masculinity.

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