



Breaking Gender Stereotypes: Redefining Masculinity in BTS's Music Videos

Julia Defriyanti Futri*, Juanda

Universitas Komputer Indonesia, Bandung, Indonesia

*Corresponding Email: juliadefriyanti14@gmail.com

Abstract. The music industry has historically used hegemonic masculinity which emphasizes physical power, aggressiveness, and dominance to represent masculinity. In contrast, BTS subverts this conventional idea in the Boy with Luv music video by showcasing a kind of soft masculinity that is expressive, kind, and unconstrained by strict gender stereotypes, in contrast, Mic Drop's dark colours, daring attire, and forceful gesture represent a rougher, street-style masculinity. This study investigates both MVs emblems overcome gender stereotypes in popular culture using a visual semiotics approach and masculinity theory. In order to derive the meaning, the writer also employed the qualitative descriptive, which is based on Roland Barthes' semiotic theory as a sign system divided into denotation and connotation. As a public figure, BTS plays an essential part in society, particularly for the younger generation, who are more self-aware and in love with themselves. Nothing is wrong if the man possesses both masculinity and femininity. The most evident way that BTS has revolutionized masculinity is through their physical appearance. According to the report, BTS not only broadens the definition of masculinity in K-pop but also has an impact on the worldwide entertainment sector, which is becoming more accepting of more adaptable and liberating gender expressions.

Keywords: BTS, Gender Stereotypes, Hegemonic, K-Pop, Masculinity.

1. Introduction

Gender identity is a deeply personal aspect of one's identity, but societal standards and anticipations often limit an individual's ability to express themselves freely. Gender theory has offered a framework for comprehending how gender responsibilities and expectations are socially produced, as well as how people can challenge and accept who they truly are. K-pop, or Korean pop music, has become pop music, has become incredibly popular all over the world in recent years. But the emergence of K-pop has also criticized for the rigid gender norms and beauty standards of the business. With their own character and powerful songs, the seven-member boy band BTS has dismantled traditional gender stereotypes. Tension is constantly present in gender relations. The degree to which a particular form of hegemonic masculinity resolves these conflicts and tends to either stabilize or recreate patriarchal power under novel

circumstances makes it hegemonic. It is possible in fact, it is inevitable to confront a pattern of conduct (i.e., a manifestation of masculinity) that offered such a solution under previous circumstances but not under the current ones.

Masculinity is hegemonic when power is defined in terms of physical force and control. “Force and competence are translations into the language of the body which define men as holders of power, women as subordinate [and] this is one of the main ways that the superiority of men becomes ‘naturalized’. The masculinization of power as physical strength, force, seed, control, toughness, and dominance is thus achieved through the male body [1,2]. In fact, given the history of American society’s propensity to emasculate Asian masculinities, the rise in popularity of male K-pop idols in the US is an odd phenomenon [3,4].

Hegemonic masculinity, as defined by Raewyn Connell [5], is an analytical tool used to pinpoint male attitudes and actions that support gender inequality, including some men’s dominance over other (often minority groups of) men as well as men’s dominance over women. The broad notion that hegemonic masculinity is “A Culturally Idealized Form” and “Is both a personal and a collective project” [6] has been utilized, discussed, and improved upon over time [5]. But the most significant influence has come from the expansion and export of Korean pop culture (sometimes referred to as the “Korean Wave” or “Hallyu”), which imitated comparable Japanese goods in the late 1990s. most significantly, East Asian masculinity was altered [7-10].

This study examines at how Boy with Luv’s visual components help to redefine masculinity, providing a different framework from both mainstream media depictions and traditional Western hegemonic masculinity. This study attempts to close the gap between gender studies and media aesthetics by applying gender discourse analysis and visual semiotics. The following are the three research questions that this study formulated: 1) what essential visual components are used in the music video for Boy with Luv? 2) what role do these visual components play in the MV’s redefining of masculinity? 3) What kind of masculinity does Boy with Luv’s aesthetics and visuals represent?

2. Literature Review

The concept of hegemonic masculinity, first introduced by [5] first used the word “hegemonic masculinity” to characterize the dominant masculinity in a society that maintains male dominance and subjugates other masculinities. This concept highlights how masculinity is constructed by society and is often associated with power, control, emotional regulation, and physical strength [5]. Ryalls (2013) asserts that popular music has long employed hypermasculine tropes such as dominance, aggression, and emotional detachment in order to upload hegemonic masculinity [11]. Meanwhile, recent shifts in media representations question these traditions. By embracing intimacy, emotional openness, and creative self-expression, BTS, for example, redefines masculinity and subvers traditional hegemonic norms. Their song, live performances, and public personalities represent a more open and flexible notion of masculinity that embraces a greater variety of masculine identities.

Several forms of masculinity are identified under Connell and Messerschmidt (1995) framework, including: Socially idealized, dominant masculinity is known as hegemonic masculinity [5]. Marginalized masculinities that are frequently connected to non-heteronormative identities are known as subordinate masculinities. Complicit masculinity is the term used to describe men who enjoy male privilege despite not entirely adhering to

hegemonic norms. Being excluded because off one's race, class, or other social characteristics is known as marginalized masculinity.

The concept of soft masculinity, according to Wolfman et al. (2021), soft masculinity is essential in dismantling conventional gender binary classifications and providing males with various forms of expression that are not limited by patriarchal norms [12]. People can negotiate their identities in a genuine and empowering way by adopting a softer, more fluid portrayal of masculinity, especially in settings where strict gender stereotypes are frequently enforced. In the global K-pop industry, where male idols like BTS have been credited with changing public ideas of masculinity, the concept of soft masculinity is particularly evident. Many of their fans have questioned and reinterpreted their own conceptions of gender identity and masculinity as a result of BTS's representation of masculinity, which blends emotional expressiveness, self-care, and style that defies conventional gender norms. This is a prime illustration of how popular culture may affect gender role expectations and cultural standards.

Boy With Luv and other songs from their repertoire demonstrate a move toward relational and collaborative masculinity, where love and vulnerability are viewed as assets rather than flaws. In addition to their dancing and song, BTS and other male K-pop performers have drawn particular attention from the media and popular culture critics for their general "androgynous" looks, makeup, and fashion. The "softer" masculinities that the K-pop boy bands represent have elicited mixed responses. While some ridicule of male K-pop for being feminine, others believe that their kind, "versatile masculinity" could challenge the image of emasculated Asian men and other forms of racialized masculinity in the US [13].

To analyze how BTS constructs masculinity through the visual elements, the study employs by Roland Barthes was one of the first to spread Saussure's semiological program and a prominent structuralist in the 1960s. an expression (signifier) in connection to content (signified) is what Barthes referred to as a sign [13]. One can incorporate such a main sign system into a more extensive sign system. If the primary sign's extension turns into the secondary sign system's phase. Denotative semiotics is the major sign in this instance, whereas connotative semiotics is the secondary sign. The idea of meaning was introduced by Barthes as denotative and connotative. The genuine meaning that people associate with a term, the appearance of an item, and that cannot be questioned is known as denotative meaning according to Barthes. Cultural interpretation shapes connotative meaning, which only participants of that culture may fully comprehend. This implies that people will understand things differently depending on their culture [14].

Barthes developed the two components of Saussure's signifier and signified paradigm into two levels of signification. The primary system, also known as the denotative system, is the initial level of meaning. He then develops the primary system into the secondary system, also known as the connotative system. Only a society with the same culture at a given period can comprehend elements in the second level of interpretation, or the connotative, which are influenced by cultural interpretation. The E-R-C idea was created by Barthes. Expression, Relation, and Content are represented by the initial E-R-C. expression is the sign's form or signifier. Relation is the relationship between the signifier and the signified. The signified or the idea behind the sign's interpretation is its essence content [14].

By examining two different BTS music videos Boy With Luv and Mic Drop, this study expands the conversation in contrast to previous research, which frequently concentrates on single music video or a particular manifestation of masculinity. Although previous research emphasizes BTS's challenge to conventional masculinity, this masculinity into three



categories (metrosexual, seonbi, and bishonen) and looks at how they are changing how people throughout the world view gender. Furthermore, this study focuses on the visual semiotic components that support BTS's gender depiction in contrast to earlier research that mostly addresses lyrical content. As a result, this study offers a comprehensive viewpoint on how popular culture changes in addition to examining masculinity in K-pop.

3. Method

This study examines how masculinity is portrayed visually in the Boy With Luv music video by BTS using the semiotic theory and the hegemonic masculinity theory [5]. Through visual semiotic analysis and a qualitative descriptive technique, the study investigates how aesthetic components define and construct masculinity. The data includes the visual components of the MV (primary data) and academic publications on gender and semiotics (secondary data). Three parts contribute to the analysis: identifying important visual cues including colour, fashion, and choreography; examining denotative and connotative meanings using Barthes' semiotic framework; and comparing BTS's depiction of masculinity with hegemonic and soft masculinity with hegemonic and soft masculinity. The MV's expressive dance, gender-fluid clothing, and pastel colour scheme are primarily indicative of a change from traditional masculinity to a more accepting, emotionally open identity. The researcher initially downloads and views the music video from the official HYBE Labels YouTube account as part of the data collection process. Second, significant scenes that depict masculinity are noted. Third, screen capture of pertinent moments are made for examination. Fourth, the visual components are organized according to how masculinity is portrayed. The analysis adheres to Barthes' (1977) semiotic theory, which categorizes masculinity according to movements, facial expressions, hairstyles, makeup, and fashion. Following categorization, the researcher deciphers the connotative connotations incorporated into the MV's visual depiction of masculinity.

4. Results and Discussion

Using Barthes' semiotic theory, an analysis of BTS's Boy With Luv and Mic Drop music video reveals a shift in how masculinity is portrayed in the group's visual aesthetics. In order to demonstrate the transition from hegemonic masculinity to soft masculinity, the findings compare the two music videos and concentrate on three primary areas; colour symbolism, fashion and styling, and choreography and body language.

Table 1. The Effect of BTS's MV From Dark to Pastel.

 <p>Figure. 1 The Photograph of Mic Drop MV (0:22)</p>	 <p>Figure. 2 The Photograph of Mic Drop MV (1:31)</p>	 <p>Figure. 3 The Photograph of Mic Drop MV (3:15)</p>
 <p>Figure. 1 The Photograph of Boy With Luv MV (0:22)</p>	 <p>Figure. 2 The Photograph of Boy With Luv MV (1:46)</p>	 <p>Figure. 3 The Photograph of Boy With Luv MV (2:24)</p>

Table 1 shows, the MV for Mic Drop mostly uses powerful, dark colour like black, gray, and red, which denotatively convey a dark and intense atmosphere. Black is a colour associated with power, revolt, and domination. Figure 1; BTS member are sitting in cold fluorescent-lit, white torture chamber wearing monochromatic attire. Figure 2; Suga performs in a dark, industrial environment in a scene that is dyed deep red. Red lighting reflects ideas of defiance and self-assertion by escalating aggression, passion, and urgency. Figure 3; BTS members, clad in dark and black streetwear, dance in front of a huge explosion. According to [5], those colours have connotative that are consistent with hegemonic masculinity, which reinforces ideas of violence, power, and dominance.

On the other hand, Boy with Luv uses gentle pastel colours like pink, light blue, and yellow, which symbolically produce a lively and lively visual style. The colour pink represents tenderness, warmth, and emotional transparency, blue counterbalances the brightness of pink by standing for peace and serenity, and yellow reinforces concepts of happiness and love by bringing fun and enthusiasm. Figure 1; BTS, wearing pink suits, stands in front of an old-fashioned orange and yellow movie theatre with the name “Persona.” Figure 2; BTS, dressed in gentle colour, dances in front of a pastel blue background. Figure 3; Shows Jungkook and J-hope dancing in a dreamy, pink-painted scene with delicate brushstroke textures. The pastel colour scheme connotatively represents a rejection of traditional masculinity in favor of a more expressive, emotionally open personality, which is a crucial aspect of soft masculinity.

Table 2. Fashion and Style: Gender-Fluid Aesthetic vs. Streetwear.

 <p>Figure. 1 The Photograph of Mic Drop MV (0:37)</p>	 <p>Figure. 2 The Photograph of Mic Drop MV (1:12)</p>	 <p>Figure. 3 The Photograph of Mic Drop MV (3:56)</p>
 <p>Figure. 1 The Photograph of Boy With Luv MV (0:22)</p>	 <p>Figure. 2 The Photograph of Boy With Luv MV (0:55)</p>	 <p>Figure. 3 The Photograph of Boy With Luv MV (0:28)</p>

Table 2 shows, dark-toned accessories, oversized streetwear, and military-inspired ensembles are some of the fashion choices in Mic drop that denote highlight an authoritative and defiant aesthetic. Figure 1; BTS members are dressed in black, oversized streetwear, such as bandanas, chains, and harness accessories, featuring prominent logos. Harnesses and all-black clothing convey strength, defiance, and power. Figure 2; against a chilly industrial backdrop, J-Hope may be seen sporting a large camouflage jacket and bucket hat. Hip-hop culture, which has long been connected to aggressive masculinity, is connected to the bandanas, bucket hats, and striking graphic designs. Figure 3; V emerges in monotone black clothes, putting a bandana over his forehead, standing with hand motions referencing revolt. Connotative, these ensembles support a toughness that is classified as masculine and go hand in hand with Western hip-hop aesthetics, which frequently highlight strength and rebellion. Oversized silhouettes; A strong, distant persona is reinforced by loose, baggy clothes that promotes mobility and conveys confidence. Mic Drop's diss-track energy is in line with V's hand-over-mouth motion (figure 3), which represents defiance.

Boy with luv, on other hand, has delicate accessories, flowy fabrics, and pastel outfits that make them appear softer and more sophisticated. Figure 1; BTS members stand in front of a vintage movie backdrop while wearing brightly coloured suits (pink) with flowing textiles. By embracing tenderness and emotional expressiveness, the pink suits challenge conventional notions of masculinity. The textiles' flow represents elegance and motion in contrast to Mic Drop stiff shapes. Figure 2; V's grinning and executing a laid-back choreography while wearing a pastel pink ruffled shirt and flower ring. Pictures 3; V wears a sparkling pink silk blazer, gentle makeup, earrings, and hair dyed a vibrant blue. The idea that masculinity must be characterized by strict or combative styling is contested by these choices, which

connotatively embrace a gender-fluid aesthetic. V's silk outer (Picture 3) challenge traditional men's fashion standards by showcasing gender-fluid aesthetics (Paoletti, 2012).

Table 3. Body Language and Choreography: Forceful vs Gentle Expression.

 <p>Figure. 1 The Photograph of Boy With Luv MV (1:13)</p>	 <p>Figure. 2 The Photograph of Boy With Luv MV (2:30)</p>	 <p>Figure. 3 The Photograph of Boy With Luv MV (1:28)</p>
 <p>Figure. 1 The Photograph of Boy With Luv MV (0:22)</p>	 <p>Figure. 2 The Photograph of Boy With Luv MV (1:32)</p>	 <p>Figure. 3 The Photograph of Boy With Luv MV (0:38)</p>

Table 3 shows, the choreography of Mic Drop is characterized by aggressive, quick movements, powerful arm motions, fierce footwork, and daring positions. In terms of denotative, these gestures exhibit strength and confidence, and in terms of connotative, they are consistent with traditional masculinity, which emphasizes control and power. On the other hand, Boy with Luv's choreography is smooth, coordinated, and playful, combining open-palm motions, easy stances, and happy faces from the performers. In a denotative sense, this produces a warm and inviting visual style. By encouraging an identity that is loving, approachable, and emotionally expressive, it connotatively challenges the conventional notion that masculinity must be violent.

Pop Culture's Shifting Representation of masculinity and BTS The analysis of Boy With Luv reveals that BTS actively redefines masculinity by challenging traditional hegemonic norms and promoting emotional openness. This is consistent with the wider cultural trend, especially in K-pop, where men can embrace sensitivity, emotions, and beauty without sacrificing their masculinity thanks to soft masculinity. BTS emphasizes an androgynous, emotionally expressive, and compassionate kind of masculinity in contrast to Western masculinity, which frequently upholds a strict division between masculinity and femininity (Bridges 7 Pascoe, 2014). Men can be both strong and sensitive, assertive and affectionate, as their song, fashion, choreography, and public personas all support. This study confirms earlier findings that K-pop performers like BTS help change gender norms around the world, especially in terms of how younger generations view masculinity. They are role models for fans who want to navigate a more fluid and emotionally honest masculinity, thus their influence goes beyond just music.

Why is BTS' s Effort Important? Audiences from all over the world have been making gender stereotyped remarks about K-pop idols because of their looks, both male and female. Because they display particular looks or appearances and reveal their emotions, male K-pop idols frequently encounter toxic masculinity. As a result, many artists refrain from expressing their feelings or identities in an open manner. Not only does this hurt these K-pop stars, but as K-pop is gradually gaining popularity around the world, their followers and audiences may also take the representation negatively. BTS has the ability to positively affect and impact the world as one the most well-known artists in South Korea and the entire world. Through their music, campaigns, vocal opinions, and appearances, BTS has been defying traditional gender norms. BTS is progressively bringing attention to the value of diversity and the liberation from gender label restrictions through its numerous, small-scale acts. With BTS as one of the starting step, more artists and audiences from South Korea or even around the world can join their path to break harmful gender stereotypes.

4. Conclusion

The hegemonic masculine ideals that dominate both Western and Eastern cultures are challenged by BTS' s embrace of soft masculinity, which has allowed them to successfully redefine traditional masculinity through their music, performers, and public appearances. In order to break down inflexible gender norms and promote an inclusive society, their androgynous fashion choices, emotional transparency, and emphasis on self-love enable a more fluid concept of gender expression, particularly among their global audience. By utilizing signs, symbols, and visual aesthetics, BTS' s music videos *Mic Drop* and *Boy with Luv* convey opposing depictions of masculinity from a semiotic standpoint. Dark colour schemes, forceful choreography, and streetwear attire are used in *Mic Drop* to represent strength, control, and revolt; these elements are consistent with conventional ideas of hegemonic masculinity. In contrast *Boy with luv* opposes strict gender stereotypes by creating a softer, more expressive masculinity through the use of pastel colours, lively motions, and gender fluid clothes. Being one of the most well-known musical groups in the world, BTS' s views on masculinity are highly significant in both culture and society. They encourage people to embrace honesty and reject toxic masculinity by questioning conventional gender conventions. Because they promote more inclusive and diverse representations of masculinity in the entertainment sector, their influence goes beyond music. The study of soft masculinity in global pop culture and pragmatics evaluations of the effects of language on gender identity will remain crucial research fields in the future for understanding shifting gender dynamics.

References

- [1] Safa, N., Sharples, R., & Dunn, K. (2023). The impact of stereotypical constructions of masculinity among the Rohingya population living in the Kutupalang Rohingya camp in Bangladesh. *Gender, Technology and Development*, 27(2), 207-226.
- [2] Lei, J. (2022). Colonial stereotypes and martialized intellectual masculinity in late Qing and early Republican China. *Modern China*, 48(2), 420-454.
- [3] Steains, T. K. (2024). Softboys and Mixed Race Asian Masculinity Online: The TikToks of Jiyayjt. *Australian Feminist Studies*, 39(119-120), 118-141.
- [4] Song, G. (2022). "Little fresh meat": The politics of sissiness and sissophobia in contemporary China. *Men and Masculinities*, 25(1), 68-86.



- [5] Connell, R. W., & Messerschmidt, J. W. (2013). Hegemonic masculinity: rethinking the concept. *Revista Estudos Feministas*, 21, 241-282.
- [6] Jewkes, R., Morrell, R., Hearn, J., Lundqvist, E., Blackbeard, D., Lindegger, G., ... & Gottzén, L. (2015). Hegemonic masculinity: combining theory and practice in gender interventions. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 17(sup2), 112-127.
- [7] Nurnisya, F. Y., & Hasna, S. (2023). Revealing Masculinity in BTS's Music: Between Self Identity and Market Desire. *Jurnal ASPIKOM*, 8(2), 257-272.
- [8] Leung, S. (2012). Catching the K-Pop wave: globality in the production, distribution, and consumption of South Korean popular music. *Senior Capstone Projects*, 149, 1-85.
- [9] Lee, A. J. S. (2019). Manly colors: Masculinity and mobility among globalizing Korean men. *Kalfou*, 6(2), 199-230.
- [10] Fedorenko, O. (2017). Korean-Wave celebrities between global capital and regional nationalisms. *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 18(4), 498-517.
- [11] Ryalls, E. (2013). Emo angst, masochism, and masculinity in crisis. *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 33(2), 83-97.
- [12] Wolfman, G., Hearn, J., & Yeadon-Lee, T. (2021). Hollow femininities: The emerging faces of neoliberal masculinities. *Norma*, 16(4), 217-234.
- [13] Elfving-Hwang, J. (2011). Not so soft after all: Kkonminam masculinities in contemporary South Korean popular culture. In *7th KSAA Biennial Conference*, 49, 1-21.
- [14] Thompson, C. J., Pollio, H. R., & Locander, W. B. (1994). The spoken and the unspoken: a hermeneutic approach to understanding the cultural viewpoints that underlie consumers' expressed meanings. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 21(3), 432-452.