

*Redefining Masculinity in Korean Drama, Films and Music:
Exploration of Dynamics of Fan Culture in Malaysia and Changing Gender Landscapes*

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Abstract

As the ‘Hallyu’, or the Korean wave swept across the globe - it came with implications for how consumers of popular culture perceive and engage in the making or remaking of gender norms. It popularized the idea of ‘soft masculinity’, marking a major shift from the filmic hegemonic representations of gender in Hollywood and Bollywood - with significant consequences for women and sexual minorities. The phenomena also ignited heated debates. This paper explores what Hallyu has to offer to a Malaysian audience onboard, across the spectrum of races, ethnic groups and genders. It attempts to build a picture of the effects of Hallyu in Malaysia through interviews conducted with local audiences of Korean content. It also questions how fandom and viewership of Korean content may translate into positive or negative attitudes towards sexual and other minorities in a complex political context and how it may aid in curving out a space for other masculinities. Taking into account the obstacles on the way, it attempts to situate the viewership in a globalized moment - whereby certain local and global forces are coming into contact with each other to shape, construct or deconstruct traditionally perceived gender norms and other traditions.

Keywords: Masculinity, Korea, Malaysia, K-Pop, Gender, Sexual Minority

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1. Introduction

Banyak dikatakan ttg Kpop. Harap gadis2 Msia kembali kpd lelaki tall, dark & hensem. Bukan pale, skinny & pretty. Itu bukan lelaki sejati.

(A lot has been said about K-pop. I hope Malaysian girls return to tall, dark and handsome men. Not pale, skinny and pretty. Those are not real men).

This was a tweet posted by Malaysia's Youth and Sports minister Khairy Jamaluddin on January 11, 2015, as it was quoted in a study on K-pop and Malaysia. It focused on the construction of gender roles both in tradition and current political spectrums in Malaysia and attempts to trace how it has been manipulated and weaponized by the country's governments and other political actors to secure authority and power (Ainslie, 2017).

Fandom of Korean content in Malaysia, as indicated by several research, has significantly contributed to altering the scenario. It promoted a build-up of 'other masculinities', as Ainslie suggests, becoming "a form of resistance against the religious and racially defined politics".

She elaborates, "Malay men and masculinity become a vehicle through which authorities can control, manipulate and compete" in the country's populist politics, which largely embodies a disposition of conservative policymaking that seeks to utilize the religious faith of the majority.

The *Hallyu* wave, as a global phenomenon, has been studied in different contexts.

One research in the Arab world has emphasized on definitions of fandom in contemporary cultures of global connectivity. It denotes, "fans act as global mediators and facilitators of culture", and they are "cultural ambassadors who spread K-pop among their friends and relatives" (Lyan and Otmazgin as cited in Elaskary, 2018).

Therefore, fandom in contemporary contexts is understood as active agents, rather than passive receivers of social engineering and phenomena.

In Malaysia, it began with the worldwide success of the K-pop album titled "Sorry, Sorry" by the Korean band Super Junior in 2009.

Prior to this, "Winter Sonata", a 2002 Korean drama became a "smash hit" in Malaysia (Kim² et al, 2022). Other early hits include "Gangnam Style", a K-pop song released in 2012 in YouTube, Running Man (2010), K-pop Countdown (*Inkigayo*) and several other TV shows, as well as Korean events held in Malaysia, such as Korean Lifestyle Roadshow and K-Food Fair in 2016.

The popularity reached to the extent of Korean music getting translated by Malaysian musicians and being sung in Malay, such as "*Sonata Musim Salju*", the Malay adoption *Winter Sonata*'s title song, performed by local singer Hazami (Betty M., n.d.).

In 2011, Astro Hitz, one of the most prominent of Malaysia's radio channels, broadcasted "K-pop Hitz Talent Show" (Kim et al, 2017; Kim² et al).

The *Hallyu* wave and the local Islamic culture are often described as involved in conflicts with each other. Most notably, in instances such as a K-pop band appearing on a video in

2015 with Malay girls and kissing on their foreheads (Kim² et al) and Malaysian fans holding a candlelight vigil for Kim Jong-hyun after he was found dead in his Seoul apartment (reported as a suicide) in 2017 (Adlina et al, 2021).

Yet certain similarities between these two distant cultures were also highlighted in different studies. In the words of respondents of a study, notable ones were “their *adab*” (etiquette), as Koreans on screen “prioritise and respect senior citizens and the elders”, “use formal language when with seniors” (honorifics) and “informal with friends”, the “moral values” and the “more realistic” nature of the content, promoting “self-love” and being “not too sexy in dramas; intimate scenes are not being shown too much” (Khalid and Wok, 2020).

Elaskary noted the major attributes which make the Arab audience feel more comfortable watching it in comparison to other Western content, “less/lack of nudity or violence” (2018).

Altogether, the similarities and the differences, often told as working against local and politicized restraints on gender and sexuality, has turned the *Hallyu* wave into a phenomenon predictably “sustaining for a long term” in Malaysia. Not one, but multiple studies have shown findings in support of such predictions.

In contrast, it has also been reported that Hallyu fandom has contributed to the “destruction of masculinity” in the neighboring country, Indonesia. The researchers largely attributed it to a more nuanced version of “toxic masculinity” and the expectation created by Korean contents for its viewers, “meet the criteria like “perfect” men like K-drama” (Husodo and Sethio, 2021).

It is worth noting that in the home country of *Hallyu*, South Korea, the question of masculinity has often been treated differently. The historical records mention that it was “bifurcated along class lines”, with “fighting prowess” reserved for “commoners” and values like “self-control”, “adherence to moral and ritual norms” for the higher class (Tikhonov, 2007).

The 17th century Korea saw a rather earlier wave of “lovesick” male heroes, told in folktales. Studies have attempted to explore “possible political effects” of male characters “being lovesick”, and how they “manage(d) to negotiate with cultural norms while reproducing the significance of the male body” (Lee, 2016).

Tikhonov says, Korea under Japanese colonization saw the arrival of “nationalised masculinity” in communal imagination. The song “Juvenile Man” (*Sonyon Namja*), written during a Tokyo baseball tournament in July, 1909, became an anthem of resistance against Japan’s colonial control and invigorated dreams of masculine Korean warriors liberating them from oppressors. It was published twice in the “fiercely anti-Japanese” newspaper “*Sinhan Minbo*”.

In post-colonial Korea, male domination and patriarchy shaped the society. The head of a Korean family, known as *Hojuje* - takes up the responsibility “for the production of gendered *kungmin* or national subjects”, defined as “father or mother, wife or husband, and daughter or son”, reinforcing the traditional gender roles and binaries (Na et al, 2014).

As of contemporary times, the Korean masculinity has again been divided into two categories: the traditional and the new, “aesthetic androgyny”, largely recognised as the

“flower boy” image branding and characterizing contents for global audiences. The South Korean military is described as a “a primary site for institutionalization and propagation of hegemonic masculinity within Korean male populations” (Tavassoli, 2020).

This “soft masculinity”, largely embodied by BTS and the K-pop bands, has been balanced by more “tough, manly, and beast-like” idol groups appearing on the stage. Researchers have argued that often within the same boy band, the construction of masculinity is ‘performed collectively’, which they chose to call “distributive masculinity” (Manietta, 2010).

Feminist studies also speak of the ‘phallogocentric’ characteristics of Korean nationalism, where ‘planting the Korean flagpole’ becomes a symbolic act of sexual invasion on a foreign land, with the pole becoming the ‘penis’ and the penetrated, non-Korean White woman’s body, standing for the invaded land/territory of conquest. Such male fantasies were shared in certain expressions in Korean language, such as “*taegukirul-gotda* (planting the flag)” and “*baekmarul-tada* (riding a White horse)” (Cheng, 2021).

In contrast, the K-pop culture was perceived in studies as embodying “double marginality” in the American context, “as their fandom is simultaneously both popular culture and a culture of the racial other” (Lyan, Otmagzin and Yoon as cited in Lee et al, 2020). According to scholars, this was coupled with the history of “American society’s tendency to emasculate Asian masculinities”.

In the modern context of *Hallyu* wave, one more term makes its appearance in countries such as India: metrosexuality. It is defined largely as the male urge to beautify themselves, through purchasing and using male beauty products. This new tendency was attributed mostly to the influence of *Hallyu* (Arambam, 2019).

It can be argued that nowhere in the known geography celebration of Korean content was spared from the scrutiny of gender norms, be it India, China, America or other countries. Studies that tried to map the wave in Malaysia reported that it was ‘rather late’ to arrive and initially was not viewed favorably, but soon took a curve of a more ‘aggressive’ acceptance - leading to the upsurge of Korean products entering Malaysia’s market and an eagerness to learn the Korean language in Malaysian young adults (Adis et al, 2018).

It has significant implications for both the reconstructions of gender norms and cultures (as a host country) in Malaysia, too. As a multicultural nation, how it embraces the wave and what is produced in the end remain to be seen. This is, of course, not without questions on foreign policies.

But more specifically, as a driving factor of changes in Malaysian masculinities, both in its majority and minority race groups, it urges and demands to be studied more closely.

2. Findings and Discussions

2.1. Contemporary Cultural Background of Malaysia

With Korean pop culture’s rise to prominence, as with many other audiences from different cultures, Malaysians too have often reacted with culture shocks towards representation of masculinity in the K-pop industry.

In Malaysia, the uptick surge in gender-bending beauty products did not always correspond well with the local populations, as evidenced by several studies. It has put in question certain gender norms and often, the dress codes prescribed in the society. The issue of the fandom, thus, has already been politicized multiple times.

The culture shocks as expressed in Malaysia by certain quarters and fractions of the society, but mostly, the political actors, are however, not always uncontrasted without cultural welcomings. It integrates the *Hallyu* wave through likening it with certain local values while often advocating distance from others (Khalid and Wok).

In a country priding itself as ‘multicultural’, the Korean wave is still often seen as a ‘foreign’ culture, marked with fear at times of losing out ‘our own culture’ to it (Kim et al). In such context, how the much contested ‘soft boy’ image of Korean music, film and drama might have impacted the local convictions of ‘*Lelaki Lembut*’ or ‘soft man’ (Ainslie) and what consequences or outcomes it might carry for women and sexual minorities remains an intriguing question.

It often goes beyond the traditionally upheld regulations of ‘modesty’, perceived as overall affecting only one race - albeit the majority Malays. The demographics of Korean fandom in Malaysia is composed of all races, each with its own norms and traditions.

Altogether, the consumption of Korean content still forms a question on many grounds. It often also signals a generational change in Malaysia.

Lately, the previous hostile attitude from local religious authorities too was partially reversed by overwhelming support from the Muslim world for the performance in Qatar World Cup 2022, by the BTS idol Jungkook.

At the same time, the decision to perform was questioned by many of the Western fans of BTS, on certain ethical grounds of the gulf state’s human rights record and especially reports of crackdowns on LGBT members of the society (Manongdo, 2022).

Yet there is an emerging new generation of Malaysians who feel more comfortable in dressing up in gender-bending ways. Most universities, if not all, are the primary locations where these young students are frequently seen.

One Chinese respondent said, “Makeup gives people confidence, it would be better if it’s not restrained by gender”. As with many other cultures affected by the wave, these young Malaysians too have adopted it as a confidence booster.

However, it is still in stark contrast with the norm, where almost every race, except the Chinese, are expected to dress in certain ways. These dress codes, usually the most manifest expressions of the ‘gender’ construct, are most strictly observed by the Malays, with nearly all Malay women wearing the Tudung (Hijab), just as Indian men and women wearing Pottu (usually a red or black dot known as Bindi in India). While such regulations are always much more relaxed for the male members of every race, they aren’t expected to dress up in ways that might be perceived as too unmanly or surprising.

It might be said that a large share of Malaysia’s populations are heteronormative in their daily cultural practices. As one Chinese respondent puts it, “as a country with lots of rules that we

need to follow, Malaysians need to be more rational and think more about what they can do before following all the Korean trends”.

2.2. Research Method

With this cultural background in mind, students were often approached discreetly, using both convenience sampling and voluntary response sampling methods in order to gather data.

A survey with 10 interview questions (4 close-ended and 6 open-ended) were designed for respondents, and they were free to choose between offering their identity and staying anonymous. They were also free to skip questions which they did not wish to respond to. The survey was posted primarily on social networking applications, in a number of groups with different characteristics, such as dedicated Korean fanbases, sexual minority advocacy groups and student groups in general. With a target of reaching 100 respondents, some were also approached face-to-face in University campuses.

Almost all of the respondents chose to remain anonymous.

2.3. Findings

2.3.1. Age Groups

I think it did affect some generations but for the older generation I don't think so, because I'll still hear things like, you dressed too boyish, or why are they (males) wearing makeup, they look so girly and stuff like that.

This is an excerpt from a response from the only female student interviewed during the research who identified as a lesbian herself.

Young students and audiences of Korean content made up the largest share of the respondents, belonging to a predominant age group of 17-25. A strong enthusiasm around Korean content was observed in this group, transcending race, religion, languages and genders.

However, 73% of the respondents who were approached face-to-face declined to proceed further upon knowing the topic.

2.3.2. Race

In a total of 105 respondents, 70 (66.7%) were young Malay students, followed by 28 (26.6%) Chinese and 7 (6.6%) Indian respondents.

36% of the Malay students had a positive attitude towards the image of ‘soft masculinity’ projected in Korean contents. In contrast, 43% of the Chinese and 38% of the Indian respondents said they were more open to the idea of ‘new’ or ‘other masculinities’ and did not object to it.

2.3.3. Acceptance

An overwhelming 83% of the total respondents identified as casual viewers of Korean content, while 17% of them identified as fans. Overall, only 9% of these fans were willing to touch upon the topic of queerness and sexuality.

At least 38% of the respondents identifying as viewers overgeneralized their views on Korean actors, with phrases like ‘all of them are gay’ or often, ‘cute men’. This has shown that fandom and viewership is broader than the openness towards sexual minorities or other masculinities in general and they do not always necessarily translate into acceptance.

The male idols that topped the list of these fans include Jungkook, Suga and Kim Taehyung of BTS, Lee Dong Wok and G-Dragon. In contrast, the top female idols were Lisa of Blackpink, Nayeon, Jeongyeon and Chaeyoung of Twice and Hyunjin of Le Sserafim.

The films and dramas most frequently mentioned by these fans were *Miracle in Cell No. 7* (2013), *Parasite* (2019), *Train to Busan* (2016) and *The Heirs* (2013), *Ugly Alert* (2013), *The Girl Who Sees Smells* (2015), *Strong Girl Bong-Soon* (2017), *Prison Playbook* (2017-18), *Hotel Del Luna* (2019) and *Touch Your Heart* (2019).

Some fans who identified either as queers or feminists often mentioned films like *Two Weddings and a Funeral* (2012), *Night Flight* (2014), *The Handmaiden* (2016) and *Love and Leashes* (2022).

On a larger scale, acceptance towards Korean content itself has often intersected with questions of race, religion and politics with significant implications.

It has been observed that the Malaysian audience tends to interpret their acceptance or fandom of Korean content more through ‘cultural affinity’ and similarities than through questions surrounding genders. This has played a significant role in responses from female Malay students, many of whom said they liked the way Koreans respect their elders and value their families.

2.3.4. Metrosexuality

Perhaps due to voluntary response sampling, 30% of the Malay respondents were amongst the group identifying as members of the queer community. However, only 10 out of 17 male respondents who like to dress differently have actively chosen to identify themselves as metrosexuals. Some of them said that Korean culture serves as a source of encouragement to break some social barriers and overall has a positive effect on their lives. 8 (45%) of them said that Korean content helped set new trends in Malaysia and broaden tolerance towards other masculinities.

2.3.5. Advocacy Groups

As a more informed group, respondents associated with advocacies for sexual minorities often tended to have more negative views towards the assumption that Korean content enhances acceptance of LGBT. And some have also questioned the South Korean society and state on LGBT rights.

One respondent working in a Malaysian LGBT rights organization puts it this way, “Korean society is still not accepting towards LGBT. They are notoriously anti-feminist - an attitude which I think plays a role in their hatred towards LGBT. The gender-bending clothing worn by idols help in tearing down traditional ideas of masculinity but not by much”.

29% of student respondents said it has a positive effect, while others chose not to answer the question.

One of these students said, “I think that the Korean wave did help to broaden the view of masculinity as not defined only by looking strong or having facial hair, but also by having a great mind set and great emotional structure”.

Overall, it has been observed that while a significant share of the respondents did identify as queers or supportive of LGBT community, most of the respondents still did not have much insight into the topic.

Many of the Korean content consumers interviewed could be categorized as laymen, with sometimes a large portion of them familiar with the term ‘LGBT’ but not able to recognize the term ‘queer’. For them, merely consuming Korean songs, films and dramas did not translate into much significant changes in their attitudes or views towards the topic.

3. Conclusion

The primary limitation of the study was a lack of access to local language contents and resources.

The interviews were conducted in English only, and thus had to leave behind respondents more comfortable in Malaysia’s local languages, such as Bahasa Melayu, Chinese, Cantonese, Mandarin or Tamil.

It was also limited to only one city, Cyberjaya, in the state of Selangor - albeit a hub of education for local and international students. The surveys were conducted in Multimedia University (MMU), Limkokwing University of Creative Technology as well as a local LGBT rights group organization.

Except for Korean contents, how the other contents, local or international, may be impacting the same gender landscape was also beyond the scope of this study.

It still received and collected valuable inputs from the youth as consumers and primary subscribers of the *Hallyu* wave, which is hoped to prove beneficial for future studies.

However, it aimed to construct only a fragment of a bigger picture, not a holistic one. It can still be said that Korean content enjoys a widespread popularity in Malaysia, across race, religion or ethnic backgrounds.

For example, in Multimedia University, there is a Korean language club created by the student fans of Korean content. The university also offers a Korean language course as part of extracurricular activities.

However, this fandom does not always necessarily translate into a wider acceptance of sexual minorities or 'other' masculinities, while still having an overall positive effect on the audiences and seldom, the society.

In this respect, it can be said that viewership is broader than the agency of fandom or perspectives. It might or might not generate changes in traditionally held views or values in strictly heteronormative societies such as Malaysia, but still opens a window towards a different world.

In the turbulent time of today, where many social norms and regulations are being contested and the term 'culture' is losing its monolithic meanings, such windows at least serve as ventilators in the background, often silently. And their roles in it cannot be entirely ignored.

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