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# **Korean Pop Music |** An Emerging Subculture to Transform Masculinity Among Young Jordanians

## Abstract

Korean Pop Music (K-Pop) and its hybrid trans-nationalistic appeal, including soft masculinity, have enjoyed worldwide influence in recent years even in unexpected regions such as the Middle East, which was out of South Korean government's initial plans. While there are myriads of attempts to explore the concept of masculinity in the Middle East as a result of globalization and cultural influences of the West, attempts that delve into East Asian influences are relatively scarce. By analyzing existing literature about Hallyu and K-Pop in the Middle East and by infiltrating the burgeoning K-pop communities in Amman, this research project aims to explore the shift from the deep-rooted hegemonic masculinity to a more East Asia-influenced among fans.

Given the transcultural and transnational aspects of the phenomenon, this research project will employ a set of anthropological techniques such as participant observation, structured and semi- structured interviews to gather insightful data. The entailing results may shed light on whether or not K-pop has manifested itself as one of the influences that facilitates the emergence of transnational masculinity among K-pop communities in the Middle East, or more particularly, in Jordan.

Keywords: *transnationalism, globalization, masculinity, Middle East, Korean Pop Music, Hallyu, subculture.*

## Introduction

On November 19, 2017, as V — the *visual*[27] of South Korean idol group BTS — smiled and gently blinked to his fans during a makeshift *ending focus*[28], the crowd erupted in jubilation. His fervent supporters, mostly young female, from all over America had come

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[27] *Visual* is an official position in a K-Pop group, usually assigned to the member who is considered the most beautiful of the group.
[28] At the end of every performance, the camera will focus on the face of each member of a K-Pop group, this close-up is termed the *ending focus*.

together at the Microsoft Theater, Los Angeles to witness a historical moment of K-Pop: BTS as the very first Korean idol group to perform at a major music event in the West, namely the 45th American Music Awards. Dubbed "a dream come true", K-Pop fans had waited for this moment for so long that tears could not help falling down their cheeks. The ARMY[29] then began to chant the full names of seven BTS members, loud and clear, all in an incredible harmony and synchronization that one could almost think that it came from a single, amplified voice. The cheering and chanting did not seem to abate even after the group had returned to the backstage, leaving their fans still in happy tears and overwhelming satisfaction. What is left is colorful banners and signs that showered the group with compliments about their talents and looks.

While still in Vietnam and undoubtedly not a part of this event in person, I could only follow the performance online by means of a streaming channel on YouTube. That very ending focus on V, however, was enough to provoke an intense feeling that I had never noticed before: amazement and more specifically, pride. Young ladies in America going crazy for a boyband? Very common. Well established names such as the Backstreet Boys, Westlife, or N*SYNC had already enjoyed that privilege two decades ago. But the same young ladies running amok for a group from Asia that performed songs not even in their language? Now that is uncommon.

In 2009, more than one hundred replies to Japan Today's poll "Why do Asian pop stars have a hard time succeeding in the U.S. market?" suggest that Asian artists "are not attractive," "lack of talents," "look too childlike." One decade later, the triumphant success of BTS has rendered such narratives unreliable. The South Korean boy group has rejoiced in the same reception that world-famous giants such as the Backstreet Boys once had during the peak of their careers in the late 1990s. International reception to Asian musicians has changed dramatically in the past years. In the next chapters, I would like to argue that K-Pop has shown itself as a real game-changer to influence such a paradigm shift. To call it a "game- changer" (Glasby 2019) is to have accepted that K-Pop has taken part in a crucial and revolutionary job in reshaping global perspectives about East Asians in general and East Asian males in particular, under a globalized context. Previously Western film and television are rife with stereotypes including unfair representations of East Asian males (Paner 2018).

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[29] ARMY or A.R.M.Y. (아미) is BTS's official fandom name. It was officially established on July 9, 2013, after the first recruitment closed.

Not until recently have East Asians started to receive a relatively fairer depiction in Western TV and film industry as Crazy Rich Asians, the first Hollywood movie with all Asian leads, performed unexpectedly well in the market (Abad-Santos 2018). Before that, Asians in general and Asian males in particular have been largely invisible in film and television (LaForce, 2018.) If anything, they were usually assigned roles that are either foolish, unattractive, and comical as a stark contrast to the non-Asian main characters (Shaw 2018). This kind of portrayal is evident in Two Broke Girls (2011-2017) where Han — the main character of South Korean descent — was constantly subjected to jokes regarding his look and his racial background. Actor Peter Shinkoda says, concisely, "when it comes to casting Asian American males, Hollywood doesn't make many opportunities for us." It is important not to ignore the blatant "Yellow Face" that has been done in Hollywood for decades. In the twentieth century, it was common for 'white actors' to play non-white characters in the American film industry. These characters typically poked fun at stereotypes of Asian men and further added to their repression, for instance: Breakfast at Tiffany's (1961), Remo Williams (1985), and I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry (2007). As a consequence, Asian men are usually viewed as unattractive, submissive, and weird by the general public outside Asia. Asian males' identity in the international contexts, if anything, has been fraught with misconceptions and stereotypes (Brown 2018). Hollywood still rarely cast male actors of Asian descent to play major roles in their movies; Asian characters on the most popular TV shows as of 2020 are still stereotypical, and the idea of fair presentation for Asian men is still all but quixotic. The unsettling reality is that these unfair portrayals did not only influence the general public in the United States but also to that of other regions in the world. Nevertheless, I would argue that such perceptions of Asian have been undergoing a change in a globalized context, among which Hallyu[30] and K-Pop is part and parcel.

By the year 2020, K-Pop is no longer an unfamiliar term to almost anyone with an internet connection, given its immense accessibility on the virtual world. In fact, it is the sixth-largest recorded music market in the world[31], and the export of K-pop has propelled South Korea to an estimated $5 billion music industry, according to a report published in

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[30] Hallyu, or the Korean Wave: is a term regarding the conscious effort of South Korean government to export Korean culture to other regions in the world.

[31] IAJ Yearbook 2018: IFPI Global Music Report 2018 (Page 4)". Recording Industry Association of Japan. Archived from the original on 2018-06-18. Retrieved 2017-06-18 https://www.riaj.or.jp/riaj/open/open-record!file?fid=1638

the Korea Creative Content Agency in 2017. K-Pop is still growing and has spread to almost every corner of the world, even in unexpected regions such as the Middle East and Africa.

On Twitter, hashtags such are #BTSinRiyadh and #RiyadhWelcomesBTS invaded the micro- blogging platform as soon as the seven-member band arrived in Saudi Arabia on a Thursday morning. The city of Riyadh also lit up in purple in honor of the band's arrival. Criticism of the decision to play in Saudi Arabia erupted almost at the same moment the concert was announced in July, dividing BTS's fans, with many citing the 2018 murder of Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi Arabian consulate in Turkey and the kingdom's human rights record (Hollingsworth 2019). It also seems at odds with the group's involvement in UNICEF's End Violence campaign and their own "Speak Yourself" speech to the United Nations, given Saudi Arabia's history of censorship, its restriction of women's rights and that same-sex sexual activity is illegal. On October 11, 2019, the seven-piece played to an audience of about 30,000 in a venue with a capacity of almost 70,000. The group was greeted by about 100 fans at the airport as they arrived in the country. Many more flew in from other Middle Eastern countries such as Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates to attend the concert.

The fact that BTS were so welcomed in Saudi Arabia despite their vocal advocacy for human rights, including LGBTQ+ and women's rights, and at the same time backlashed by the criticism from their international fans, triggered my curiosity. Furthermore, BTS was not the first K-Pop act to have received such welcomeness in the Middle East. Prior to the mega- success of the seven-member worldwide sensation, other K-Pop groups such as EXO and INFINITE had received similar acceptance, and their fans are still growing every day, with merchandise and posters hung up on their walls at home. I am intrigued by such a reception. How did K-Pop make it to a region so strict about their traditional values? What is it like to be a Middle Eastern K-Pop fan? How do Middle Eastern fans think about the values and messages carried by K-Pop? How did South Korean boy groups manage to be dominant in the Middle Eastern demographics over girl groups? What is so appealing about K-Pop masculinity that attracts millions of young Middle Eastern girls including Muslims? Are there any cultural conflicts between South Korean and Middle Eastern values and beliefs? Are there similarities?

This ethnographic study of K-Pop in the Middle East traces the development of the Hallyu and K-Pop in the Middle East, examines what it means to be "masculine" in the

Middle East and the K-Pop world, and culminates in the collision of the two worlds regarding the perception of masculinity. I argue that K-Pop, as a part of globalization, has influenced the way Middle Eastern fans perceive masculinity, particularly from hegemonic masculinity to emergent masculinity that is softer in approach.

Through participant observation, structured and semi-structured interviews as the most suitable means of data gathering for this research, I hoped to shed light on K-Pop as a real game-changer that helps undermine stereotypical notions of East Asian male, yet to contribute to the lacking body of studies and analyses of masculinities in the Middle East.

## Literature Review

For my analyses on the transcultural and transnational appeals of K-Pop boy groups, I consulted the work of Manieta (2010) which focused on the distributivity of gender in Korean boy bands. By analyzing the interaction that takes place in "Aegyo[32] Contests," Manieta noticed the transition in K-Pop boy bands' image from pretty-boy, soft-masculine to a more "tough, manly, and beast-like" in a very flexible way. He then argued that by combining their hyper-masculine image with "soft masculinity" performances, some boy bands adopt a strategy by which their group's collective hybrid masculine image is constructed cooperatively through discourse, distributing the gender-work across its members. Manieta called this "distributed masculinity," depends on the discursive work done by all participants involved, including band members and TV hosts.

Manieta's analysis goes along with Karl Marx's work "The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof" when it comes to commodification. Oxford dictionary defines "fetish" as "something that a person spends too much time doing or thinking about". It is indeed that the K-Pop world is a place where fetishization of human bodies, personal characters, and materialism exists. Another definition of "fetish" that echoes Marx's concept of fetishization is "an object that some people worship because they believe that it has magic powers." Marx comments that under capitalism, commodities become a fetish because of the social values that we have assigned to them unconsciously. For example, tickets to a BTS concert are more expensive than tickets to a

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[32] Aegyo (Korean: 애교) in Korean refers to a cute display of affection often expressed through a cute voice, changes to speech, facial expressions.

VICTON concert because there are too many BTS fans but limited seats, yet fans still attribute a 'magical' power to BTS and consider that BTS are more 'valuable' than VICTON. Commodity becomes "magical" in the sense that they seem to be independent from the people who produced them. In Marx's words: "A commodity is therefore a mysterious thing, […] because the relation of the producers and the sum total of their own labor is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labor".

Although Marx's theory was based on the analysis of factory labor, the concept can be applied to K-Pop as well. Marx contends that commodities (understood as an object with a value and in this case, cultural products) are now related to each other through the social relation and sum of the labor they put in, not the use-value. As discussed above, K-Pop is a type of cultural or ethnic commodity. It echoes how Marx describes commodities. For instance, Manieta's work shows that the masculinities in K-Pop boy bands are "distributed" dependent on contexts and requests from fans. By looking at the interaction that takes place in "Aegyo Contests," a common segment on Korean variety TV, he shows how each group member's masculinity is negotiated and defined through requested performances of aegyo. Aegyo is a concept that is shaped by culturally shared ideas of cuteness in South Korea. One aspect of aegyo is a speech style that is strongly associated with women and femininity (cf. Moon under review, Abelmann 2003). This collective expression of hybrid gender shows that gender's performative nature allows for creative expressions of femininity and masculinity beyond that of just an individual. The process suggests how groups can express collective gender identity and how that identity is molded interactionally. A member's masculinity expression does not stay unchanged but rather undergoes a change dependently on their fans' requests. Given the fact that fans are willing to pay, and the longevity of a K-Pop idol group depends almost entirely on fan supports, the concept that the group has to follow is also dependent. Therefore, the relationship between fans and the celebrities and the process through which fans labor to obtain their idols' labor is worth exploring.

Why are K-Pop idols so appealing to fan? Jacques Lacan's theory on "mirror phase" can help us understand the reasons why K-Pop idols are so desirable to their fans. Lacan's theory is a reading of Sigmund Freud's work on ego. When looking at themselves in the mirror, infants do not immediately recognize their own reflections but rather, they believe that the image in the mirror is an idealized version of themselves. Given that babies are

physiologically incapable of controlling many of their body parts, the image in the mirror looks so complete and in-control compared to the fragmented and powerless perception of their body. As Elizabeth Grosz (1990) summarizes, "the mirror stage is a compensation for the child's acceptance of lack" since it gratifies them by providing a "promise or anticipation of (self)mastery and control the subject lacks". Lacan argues that this begins the process of generating an "internalized psychic sensory image of the self" where the things in one's mind are more perfect, and the relations established are more "fantasied". Moreover, the child builds his/her ego based on that idealized image one sees in the mirror. As the mirror phase will eventually pass and the child is now conscious of the reflection of himself, he has to confront the gap between the idealized version of himself in the mirror and the actual imperfect self that he is in reality.

However, the journey to fulfill such a gap is rather an arduous and almost impossible one, as Lacan points out that "lack, gap, splitting will be [a human's] mode of being". We will always struggle to fulfill that gap, sometimes through fantasizing and sometimes through seeking for an identificatory image. The attractive and capable celebrities become a mirror image for many; they become the subjects of fantasy and the standard that others constantly attempt to achieve by filling their lacks and weaknesses (Chan 2014). This concept is crucial to analyzing the K-Pop products and also fans.

Laura Mulvey's analysis of Hollywood films through psychoanalysis is also helpful to comprehend how audiences consume media. In "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (2009), Mulvey argues that cinema offers two major types of pleasures. First is scopophilia, "in which looking itself is a source of pleasure". She references Freud's notion of scopophilia, which he associates with "taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze" (Mulvey 2009:17). Thus, the audiences derive pleasure and a sense of power by viewing others as objects. The second is narcissism, "pleasure in being looked at"; the audience identifies with the actors in the movie as surrogates of themselves. Mulvey also suggests that films are not merely made to be watched, but they are there to create "an illusion of looking into a private world" (Mulvey 2009:17). As the audience watch a movie, they become the guests into the private world built from the materials and the concepts of the movie itself. Even though Mulvey's theory is based on cinematography, I would argue that K-Pop employs similar narrative devices, given its heavy emphasis on visual components like music video and choreography. In a K-Pop performance, most groups employ a "concept," which is visible through the costumes, the

choreography, the music video, or the stage background. All elements contribute to a larger story that the artists want their audience to be engaged in, alongside with their music and lyrics. Thus, watching a K-Pop performance is "looking into a private world" – the private world that the artists are trying to convey through a complex set of images and sounds.

The concept of "gaze" (Mulvey 2009) is crucial in Mulvey's argument; it acts as an instrument through which the audience can assert control, bring pleasure, and uncover vulnerabilities. Human beings are indeed gazing at one another in everyday activities. Mulvey also introduces the term "to-be-looked-at-ness". She argues that there is always an imbalanced gender binary in cinema, in which males are active and females are passive. Women's role is to be "looked at" by the characters within the narrative and the spectators in the cinema. Besides, women serve as a constant reminder of castration threat (since women lack the phallus, the symbol of power). In Mulvey's words, women are the "bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning" (Mulvey 2009:15). Women help the storyline along (and sometimes slow down the narratives), not to make decisions and move the story plot along. On the other hand, male leads push the narrative forward by taking actions that lead to changes and significances. Thus, the viewers automatically identify with the main male protagonist instead of the female. This can be seen in K-Pop performances, music videos, and varieties show that K-Pop idol groups take part in. In almost every BTS, EXO, or SEVENTEEN music videos, there are no main female characters, and even if there were their roles would be insignificant. K-Pop fan girls identify themselves with the boy groups themselves though their journey to multiple topics such as family, love, and friendship. Any appearance of a female character in these boy groups' activity only serves as a narrative tool to push the groups' main concepts forwards.

All things above beg the questions: is the same commodification functioning among fans in the Middle East? Has this commodification created a similar "distributed masculinity" and if it has, how are Middle Eastern fans influenced by this flexible masculinity? Literature regarding K-Pop in the Middle East is much needed for any attempt to answer these questions.

While there is a plethora of academic papers that attempted to dissect the influences of Hallyu in the world, attempts that pointed to the Middle East are scarce. The most notable and especially useful one that I could find during my research for precursor works is the work of Mohamed Elaskary (2018), Nissim Otmazgin and Irina Lyan (2013).

I consider these works pivotal and would like to contribute to filling the gap between the narratives that these works offered.

In their paper, Otmazgin and Lyan seek to understand the role played by fans of K-pop in the Middle East in a globalized context. The authors emphasize that fans act as global mediators and facilitators of culture, and they attempt to understand how Israelis and Arabs perceive and assimilate the Korean Wave and culture. In this regard, they argue that Korean culture did not come to Israel/Palestine directly but rather through other cultural avenues. The authors argue that fans are cultural ambassadors who spread K-pop among their friends and relatives. When questioned about the popularity of K-drama and K-pop in Palestine and Israel, interviewed fans mentioned the uniqueness of the storyline and finesse in scene production concerning the former while fun and appealing dance routines that could be mimicked were mentioned regarding the latter. In her paper, Kim (2014) traces the history of the development of Hallyu in the Middle East, arguing that Hallyu has been well received in the Arab world due to the similarities between Korean and Arabic/Muslim cultures. The most important point clarified by Kim is that Hallyu has become part of the "Creative Economy"—an initiative fostered by the Korean government during the last few years. Kim concludes that Hallyu has had tremendous positive effects on Korean exports to the Middle East and on the number of tourists who come to visit Korea.

## Methodology

The goal of my research is to trace the development of Hallyu and K-Pop in the Middle East to find out which role K-pop played and what it offered in the changing perception of East Asian males among middle-class Jordanian female K-pop fans. To achieve this, the need to grasp the fundamental concepts and theories related to the topics and to review previous attempts at understanding such topics was of cardinal importance. For the course of one month ranging from November 2019 to early January 2020, I spent a great deal of time searching on the internet and the library for literature related to Arab masculinity, transculturalism, globalization, and K-pop to make sure that my research design would not be too broad, or off-topic regarding the erratic nature of qualitative data collected for such research. With the knowledge learned during my Anthropology MA at ELTE, I later on attempted to devise a research plan using anthropological theories and methods which facilitated the fieldwork.

Due to my large circle of Jordanian friends in the dormitory and my immense interest in both K-pop and Levant countries, I found Amman, the capital city of Jordan, the ideal location for my field site to take place. Furthermore, after several attempts to research on the internet regarding my sample of the study, I have got in contact with the founder of Jordan K-pop Lovers (JKL), a massive K-pop community of fifteen thousand active members, and this person had agreed to meet as well as to introduce me to possible participants. Due to the characteristics of what it means to be an enthusiastic K-pop fan, the majority of these participants are middle-class young adults with access to the internet and the financial stabilities that allow them to catch up with the latest K-pop products.

Given the characteristics of the research, the main methodology employed for this research was participant observation (1) to explore the JKF and to grasp a sense of what it is like to be a K-pop enthusiast in Amman; semi-structured interviews (2) to gather thick descriptions from the participants, which includes their social backgrounds, personal life, and their perspectives about the constitution of masculinity as a K-pop fan. During my three weeks in Jordan, I lived in the same household with a Jordanian friend whose sister and friends are K-pop enthusiasts, and together with them, I participated in a lot of casual meetings in a bar called Dali. Through these meetings I had the chance to engage in their banters to grasp a sense of their life as young adults living in a city heavily influenced by globalization yet see things in their perspectives regarding various topics such as politics, entertainment, and social issues such as gender and women's rights. Just after a few days as I found myself in good rapport with two participants, I asked them if I could arrange an in-depth interview to delve deeper into their stories and their thoughts. For other participants, especially the members of the JKL, I had the founder of this community to find participants for me, which resulted in seven other females, including the founder herself. Through dialogues, semi-structured and open-end interviews in coffee shops chosen by them, I have obtained data that virtually reflexes their lives and their perspectives regarding various topics as K-pop enthusiasts. These data have rendered themselves helpful and extremely valuable for my further analyses on the topic.

Given the flexible native of my research on K-pop and the changing perception of K-pop enthusiasts in Amman, I have employed a qualitative approach to both the research designs, methodologies, and analyses of the research. This is the rationale for why semi-structured and open-end interviews were chosen, given these methods offer a wide range

of choices, if not total freedom, for my participants to give out information. Yet the chosen types of interviews had also facilitated probes and questions that generated contexts for the interpretation and analyses. My aim was to understand how my participants became interested in K-pop and K-pop masculinity, given that the society they grew up and have lived in has manifested a type of masculinity in stark contrast with K-pop masculinity.

Regarding the analyses, I chose to employ cultural materialism to facilitate my interpretation of the data gathered. Cultural materialism, coined by Marvin Harris in his 1968 text, The Rise of Anthropological Theory, promotes the idea that infrastructure, consisting of "material realities" such as technological, economic, and reproductive factors mold and influence structure and superstructure. Given that K-pop, a cultural product made with underlying socio-economic motives, falls into the category of "infrastructure" and "masculinity" as well as "perception of masculinity" belong to the category of "superstructure", cultural materialism perfectly fits in as the most appropriate theoretical framework that supports my hypothesis that K-pop cultural products took a part into the changing perception of masculinity among middle-class Jordanian female enthusiasts.

It is important to note that I do not speak Arabic, therefore the communication with some of my participants was troubled at some points. For example, during an interview in Dali without my Jordanian friend, my participant was very excited and about the gender topic but had a hard time trying to explain what she really meant in the English language. This is to say that I may have encountered ethnocentrism when attempting to interpret the dialogues with her because some of her speeches were obscure in the English translation and I had to interpret them using my own knowledge and experience. Plus the limitation of time in the field, given that I had to fund my own trip to Jordan, I could only afford to stay there for three weeks and thus the number of participants was insufficient and for the members of the JKL, I could only meet them once. Also I had to leave Jordan on February 12, whereas the JKL had a large event on the 14. I believe that if I had more time there I could have attended this event to grasp the atmosphere of the JKL community and to spend more time with my participants. Fortunately, the founder of JKL had handed me a catalog of her community, in which virtually everything about the JKF was described in detail.

I also interviewed several Middle Eastern students who do not identify themself as K-Pop fans during my time in Kerekes Dormitory, Budapest to grasp their stance on

masculinity. The data gathered were then compared to that of K-Pop fans to see whether there were other sources of influences that generated such change in their perception.

## Findings and Discussions

With data gathered from the fieldwork and interviews, my findings on K-pop culture and its influence on Middle Eastern fans can be divided into three categories: cultural influence, identity, and sense of belonging, and emergent perspectives.

### *Cultural influences*

Regarding cultural influence, Middle Eastern fans, particularly the members of the JKL, confirmed to have been exposed to an array of cultural influences from South Korea such as language, social behaviors, and self-expression. For example, age. In South Korea, age is an important factor in communication, and that one must show respect depending on age. The majority of the attendants tend to care more about age when it comes to communication. Even when they did not take it seriously, some of the attendants casually made jokes about age so that their younger friends had to do them some favor. This can be seen in these attendants' language; they tend to be more formal and call those who older than them "oppa" and "unnie." Furthermore, the age system in South Korea is quite different to that of the world: South Koreans count pregnancy time! They also automatically added one extra year to their actual age. Self-expression also manifests a change, particularly body language, many of the attendants start using the heart sign to show love and affection, or to act cute. They explain that to look cute and to be cute is very important in K-pop.

*"I don't know what is happening to me but recently I found myself acting cute a lot. When I want something from my brothers, I just put a cry baby expression on my face, and I keep nagging like those Korean drama girls until he gives me what I want."* (Haya, 24, Jordan.)

*"I just can't stop pushing my heart sign to everybody's face when I agree and when I want to express that I like what they say or something. At first it was not that often but later on I literally use the heart sign for anything."* (Riizmazz, 25, Jordan.)

Does adopting K-Pop slangs and style of speech affect the everyday life of the fans? Muna (27) shares her story about being emotionally invested in K-Pop and the reaction of her husband:

*"My husband initially was uncomfortable with my room full of BTS posters, you know he can get jealous sometimes. He sometimes finds my spontaneous aegyo weird and cringy but it's just a part of me and I can't change that."*

The story behind Muna is a long and incredible one. When I first talked to Muna on Facebook, I assumed that she was just another teenage girl who fell for the androgynous beauty of K-Pop idols. Not until when I came to Jordan did I learn that Muna is, in fact, a 27-year-old Muslim woman. She was married at the age of 20 through a traditional arranged marriage, and she also the mother of two beautiful children. Muna had a long history with K-Pop. It is in her words that she "grew up" with K-Pop ever since the second-generation idols tugged her heartstrings. Being the founder of "Jordan K-Pop Lovers", an online community of more than fifteen thousand active members, Muna turned her love for K-pop into a business that feeds her entire family by organizing offline events and selling K-Pop merchandise. Muna has appeared several times on national TV channels of multiple countries. In 2017, South Korean TV channel MBC invited her to the country of kimchi for a talk show. Despite her adulthood taking away the time and dedication she once had for K- Pop, Muna still manages to integrate herself being a K-Pop enthusiast to the life of a wife and a mother. When asked if she has experienced any difficulty regarding life, Muna shared that she has, for so many times, experienced conflicts and obstacles that she almost quits. For instance, her husband was not happy with her behaviors and beliefs that she has adopted from South Korean drama and music.

*"Me acting cute like a baby is considered immature and does not go along with my husband's way of living. He did not react much to my life as a K-Pop girl, but deep down I knew he hated it with a passion [laughs]."*

The Jordanian government also paid Muna a few visits to investigate what she was doing with her community. The authority asserted that Muna had to make a report for each of her activities because being the founder of such a large community could create "unwanted consequences" if she stayed undocumented. However, most of Muna's offline meetings went well with no troubles.

When my friend Bara introduced me to Jumana (28) during a meeting at Dali Cafe, I experienced an overwhelming feeling of shyness because Jumana evinced an aggressive expression that I was not trained sufficiently to deal with. I later learned that that first impression was rather misleading, Jumana is, in fact, the sweetest person I had ever met.

During the whole conversation with me, Jumana could not stop showing her heart sign as to agree with everything I said.

*"Wallah I cannot stop doing this, I think it has become a part of me already!"*

How about male fans who have adopted aegyo and this style of speech of K-Pop? Haya (24) shares that her male K-Pop friends were constantly subject to discrimination and unwanted reaction because in Jordan or virtually any other Middle Eastern countries, the Korean cute style of speech and aegyo expression are considered gay.

*"When you act cute as a boy, people will think that you are gay, and you know being gay here is a taboo."*


### *Identity and sense of belonging*

K-Pop also offers a sense of belonging, given the identity it has granted on its follows. We are living in a world filled with upsetting news such as the threats of global warming, arms race, terrorist attacks, and most recently, the coronavirus that has taken the lives of more than 243,000 people, to feel frustrated is all but understandable. At the same time, we have popular cultures that create and impose impossible standards on young adults, for example, what their bodies should look like or whether they should own the latest iPhone or not, the need to catch up with everyone else is urgent. Those who fail to catch up with the world may feel lost and unhappy, thus explains their essential needs to find something to hold on to as comfort. K-pop idols and fandoms appear to be the perfect contender for this very need, for it offers a sense of having a community behind, and no matter what happens, this very community will always be with them.

A fandom, for example, BTS's ARMY, TWICE's ONCEs, BLACKPINK's BLINKs, gives its member a sense of belonging to a community where they do not have to try so hard to fit in as in real life. Just similar to how one Manchester United fan would feel when their favorite team won a match, K-pop fandoms exulted in their idols' success. During my conversations with the participants, I have heard several times phrases such as "my idol's success is my success." In other words, they enjoy the success of their idols as of their own, and whatever they do with their own life does not matter that much. This echoes Jacques Lacan's theory on "mirror phase" where K-Pop fans idealize their favorite musicians, and the success of these musicians will somehow compensate for the lack of success and happiness that they may have experienced in real life.

Back to Jumana, despite her sweet and seemingly happy personality, she suffers depression, abusive family as well as her toxic relationship. Jumana shares that she found comfort in the K-Pop community because it offers her a haven filled with support and positivity, which is in stark contrast with her life in Jordan.

*"There were so many times I wanted to kill myself, but I could not. I cannot stand living here in the [sic] Jordan! My mother is very controlling, and she would not even let me out if she knew that I am here with you guys. She's always screaming and complaining. Whenever she is not happy, she puts everything on me. Look at this tattoo, she would literally kill me if she knew [...] My [sic] boyfriend is also the worst! He takes advantage of me. He is unemployed and lives on my money. I know it's stupid, but I just cannot quit him. I really want to escape this place to go to Budapest with you guys."*

*"The new generation of K-Pop is crap, but I like the fandoms, they are cool. I have made so many friends online, and they always have my back. The very thing that my family can never do for me."*

### *Emergent perspectives on masculinity*

Jumana also shared an opinion that matched with almost every other participant's replies to my questions regarding masculinity. She believes that it is because the men around her life are so aggressive, arrogant, and controlling that she finds comfort in the type of men portrayed by K-Pop idols: a humble, understanding, and softer type of men. Sarah concludes:

*"It is not that I don't like Arab men, it's just that so many of them make me feel like I'm not being listened. And yeah, I do think that it's because of the aggressive men here that I fall in love with South Korean men more and more every day."*

Muna also revealed quite a personal story regarding her love life. Because of the arranged marriage, she was never in love with her husband during the first four years of marriage:

*"Even after four years and I had become a mother of two, I was still not in love with him. I don't know why. Every day I dreamed of going to South Korea, I had never been there but I'm sure it would feel like home. I know every single street in Seoul because of the dramas I have watched and of course, Google Earth. I just wanted to escape."*

Muna's seemingly unhappy marriage took a turn when she made Jordan K-Pop Lovers her business. She made a living out of it. Muna's husband then joined her in the business, and he was somehow "converted" to a Hallyu fan.

*"It's money so of course, he helped me with that. The funniest thing is that as he interacts with Hallyu he has become more and more understanding, and cute [laughs]. He is still not a fan of K-Pop though because the music is too much for him, but he sure is digging Korean dramas and the variety shows that my K-Pop idols attend."*

Regarding the Middle Eastern participants that identify themselves as non-fans, both Mahmood (24) and Zeina (22) agreed that Middle Eastern men can be aggressive, but that is not by nature but rather by the culture that they grew up in. Zeina shares that she grew up in a society where men were taught to be aggressive and controlling towards their sisters, and any man who fails to accomplish this will be made fun of or considered to be "less manly" or a "coward."

*"You know my brother, right? He looks so nice and soft, doesn't he? Everyone in my family makes fun of him just because he did not try to control me. How stupid is that?"*

*"I think girls here like big and loud guys, not because of anything but they were taught like that. Those guys call themselves masculine but jokes on them, to be masculine it requires a lot more than that and not just how you look and the way you talk."*

To some extent, the view of Arab men as aggressive and East Asian men as gentle is still a generalization that needs more studies and research attempts to explore further. However, the pattern that shows from my pool of data is almost a unanimous one: Middle Eastern fan girls love South Korean celebrities so much because of the way they are portrayed: humble, beautiful, soft and understanding. Whether or not these attributes were manufactured by South Korean producers themselves, these qualities in a man do show that hegemonic masculinity is not the only type of masculinity, and that one can still be "handsome" and "manly" even with softer attributes as seen in K-Pop idols.

*"You know what? I think Asian men are super attractive. Just look at their skin, it's so beautiful and it looks like they know how to take care of themselves. Who needs a beard to show that you are 'manly'?"*

As the objective of this research is to understand the influence of K-Pop on Middle Eastern fans and their perception of masculinity, the following section is my attempt to discuss and position my findings into two major aspects: (1) the role of K-Pop in the aforementioned paradigm shift in the perception of masculinity among Middle Eastern K-

Pop fans, particularly the participants of my research and (2) unexpected results and limitations that suggest further attempts at researching.

As K-Pop relies on the immense accessibility of the internet and the strength of its fandom, I would assume that the majority of K-Pop fans are from middle-class families. To receive and to react to K-Pop, one has to possess the necessary devices to go online such as computers, smartphones, an internet connection; yet to buy K-Pop merchandise such as light sticks and CDs, as well as posters and card members from abroad, one has to also possess the financial means to afford such necessity. This shows in Marx's work on fetish and commodity. It is evident that K-Pop products are a type of commodity sold to a certain social class who can afford it, and in return, this social class also influence the manufacture of K-Pop products themselves. At the end of the day, K-Pop is produced by demands and trends. These middle-class young adults interact with K-Pop as a part of globalization and experienced either a conflict or a joint in perspectives. The perspective that I would like to emphasize in this section is the perception of masculinity among Middle Eastern K-Pop fans.

The concept of "gaze" by Mulvey is extremely important for me to understand why K-Pop male idols appear so appealing to the majority of my participants. She believes that in cinema narratives where female roles are treated no more than a passive object, women spectators have two possible options: she either identifies with the female object of desire and feel defeated, or she can temporarily take on a "trans-sex identification" through which she identifies with the male gaze. Given that my female participants were brought up in a country where Islam plays a crucial role in its culture, I would argue that Jordan, as well as other Islamic countries, is a private world similar to Mulvey's cinema where women are passive, and men are active. Thus, by identifying with the male boy groups, fangirls will feel more active and full of control, which compensates for what they might have lacked in real life. This echoes deeply my application of Jacques Lacan's theory on "mirror phase" on K- Pop.

I would argue that idols are similar to the idealized version of ourselves in Lacan's theory on the "mirror phase." They function as the perfect example that we strive to follow to fill up the gap between the idealization and the reality. As Haya shared that her favorite K-Pop group EXO winning on music shows makes her "extremely happy" as if it were her own, and this reaction from Haya is not unique. Other participants confirmed the existence of this reaction in their K-Pop life as well. When I analyzed the records and the

fieldwork notes that I made, I noticed a pattern in my participants that the more enthusiastic someone feels about their idols' achievements, the more difficult and challenging that her real life is. For example, Muna being the most enthusiastic about BTS out of all the participants, yet she experienced an unhappy marriage with her husband during the first four years. Jumana is also a K-Pop fanatic and is crazy for South Korean men, yet she lives in an abusive family and a toxic relationship. From here, I would argue that K-Pop, a genre of music filled with upbeat melodies and uplifting lyrics, offers a safe haven for its followers. Especially when it comes to female fans from countries rife with conservative values regarding gender, they tend to "escape the reality" by idealizing their favorite boy groups because it gives them the power to feel free and active.

Another pattern that I notice from my pool of data is the similarity in the stories of my participants. Eight out of ten female participants mentioned their trouble with local men who they deemed to be "aggressive" and "arrogant" and that they all look for a new type of men who are humble and understanding, yet soft but reliable. K-Pop males fulfilled this exact wish. In the world of K-Pop and where K-Pop has started to have an influence, I believe that there exists an "emergent masculinity" that promotes a type of masculinity that is in stark contrast with the ubiquitous toxic masculinity. This softer and fluid type of masculinity can be seen in Manieta's work on the distributive performativity of gender in Korean boy bands. He argues that gender in K-Pop boy bands is not fixed but rather fluid and can be performed in several degrees of speech styles dependent on the demand of their fans. Jung (2011) showed that over time K-pop idol groups have shifted from projecting only a "soft" masculine image to constructing a culturally transformable hybrid masculine image. In this shift it has become necessary for all band members to express multi-faceted, "manufactured versatile masculinity".

On a different note, given the scarcity of literature about K-Pop in the Middle East and the lack of diverse demographics in my pool of participants, I am aware of the limitation of my research. For instance, almost all of my participants are Jordanians, given that I could only afford to go to Jordan with a humble Vietnamese passport. If I could afford to do more exploration and interviews in other Middle Eastern countries, more results and interpretations could have emerged.

However, I believe that my research can contribute greatly to the dearth of literature about K-Pop and Hallyu in the Middle East as well as analyses of masculinity in

the regions. With that in mind, I hope that my works will serve as a helpful source for later attempts to delve into such topics.

## Conclusion

This paper has raised many questions about the gender appeals of South Korean boy groups, and whether it functions the same way in countries outside of East and Southeast Asia, where K-Pop has dominated for decades. With my analyses on the data gathered from fieldwork and interviews, I have answered a large part of those questions as well as provided a glimpse into the K-Pop world in the Middle East.

While K-Pop introduces idealized images of soft masculinity to the lives of Middle K-Pop fans, I would say that it is not the driving factor that directly create such a change in the perception of masculinity. Rather, it was circumstantial backgrounds of the fans (e.g., family conflicts, gender repression, sexism, etc.) that pushed these fans to the journey of finding something uncertain but "better" than their current situations. Thus is the influence of soft masculinity of K-Pop of these fans. To assume that K-Pop solely created the transformation is to neglect other social factors and to overestimate the influence of K-Pop as a music genre. However, this thesis has offered a lot of insights into the lives of Middle Eastern individuals as a K-Pop enthusiast as well as the way they perceive masculinity in the region. For me, this is important. Given the lack of literature about similar topics that focuses solely on the Middle East, I believe that this thesis can be one of the steppingstones for future attempts at researching masculinities as well as East Asian influences in the Arab world.

Finally, to conclude the findings of this thesis, I would like to quote Muna when asked about her view on K-Pop influencing a change in her husband's "masculine" behaviors:

*"I don't know how to say this but obviously after having learned about K-Pop as a part of my business, he became more understanding, humbler, and more loving. For the first time ever after four years being married: I finally fell in love with my husband."*

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