

CHANGING NORM: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF SOFT
MASCULINE PERCEPTIONS AMONG K-POP FANS AND
NON-FANS IN MALAYSIA

BY

AINI SUHAILAH BINTI MUKHTAR

INTERNATIONAL ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY MALAYSIA

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SOFT MASCULINE PERCEPTIONS AMONG K-POP FANS
AND NON-FANS IN MALAYSIA

BY

AINI SUHAILAH BINTI MUKHTAR

A Final Year Project (FYP) submitted in fulfilment of the
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ABSTRACT

This study explores the perception of K-pop fans and non-fans in Malaysian towards soft masculinity represented by K-pop idols, employing a qualitative approach with eight purposively sampled participants. Findings reveal six themes for Research Question, showcasing both perspectives of fans and non-fans. Non-fans exhibit varied openness, emphasizing moderation and religious boundaries, while fans express a positive stance, appreciating nuanced forms of soft masculinity and recognizing K-pop's broader impact. The study underscores the evolving understanding of gender norms in Malaysia, emphasizing the importance of cultural dynamics, religious beliefs, and media influences in interpreting expressions of masculinity.

Keywords: K-pop, Soft Masculinity, Hegemonic Masculinity

APPROVAL PAGE

I certify that I have supervised and read this study and that in my opinion, it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for a final year project (FYP) of Degree of English for International Communication.

Dr. Rafidah binti Sahar
Supervisor

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.....
Examiner

This Final Year Project was submitted to the Department of English for International Communication and is accepted as a fulfilment of the requirement for a final year project (FYP) of Degree of English for International Communication.

Dr. Farrah Diebaa Rashid Ali
Head of Department,
English for International
Communication,
KSTCL

This dissertation was submitted to the Kulliyyah of Language and Management and is accepted as a fulfillment of the requirement for a final year project (FYP) of Degree of English for International Communication.

.....

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Mohd Azrul

Azlen Abd Hamid

Dean,

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This thesis is dedicated to me, my loving parents and sisters for always being so supportive, and believing in me.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.0 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Since the 1990s, Korean popular culture, encompassing television dramas, films, and music, has been disseminated to adjacent Asian nations. The Korean Wave, the global dissemination of Korean cultural items, has extended its reach to Europe, the Middle East, South America, and, most recently, the United States (Song & Velding, 2020). Manifested through the copious amount of content disseminated on the Internet, such as fan-generated. According to Herman (2018), K-pop male bands like BigBang, SHINEE, BEAST, 2PM, EXO, and BTS have been at the forefront of the recent Korean Wave, gaining popularity through platforms such as blogs, e-magazines, and YouTube channels.

The current spike in popularity of male K-pop bands was prominently highlighted at the 2017 Billboard Music Awards, where BTS triumphed over Justin Bieber, Selena Gomez, Ariana Grande, and Shawn Mendes in the fan-selected Top Social Artist Category (Lipshutz, 2017). Shortly after that, TIME (2017) magazine designated BTS as one of the top 25 important individuals on the Internet in 2017. Researchers specialising in K-pop have emphasised that the worldwide expansion of K-pop represents a unique transnational occurrence that alters the influence of globalisation. Specifically, it redirects the impact from what is traditionally considered the cultural periphery (non-Western world) towards a cultural centre (i.e., the Western world), or it redefines the cultural periphery as a new cultural centre (Lyan & Levkowitz, 2015).

K-pop has surged into a remarkable cultural wave in Malaysia, permeating every aspect of daily life, from storefronts and social media to electronic media. Noteworthy collaborations with prominent brands like McDonald's, chart-topping presence on local

radio channels, and large-scale concerts in the capital city have cemented K-pop's status as an integral part of Malaysian popular culture.

According to Alhamzah (2021), Malaysia is the first of 12 Asian nations where a special set meal is made available. BTS's Malaysian Army was among the first to obtain the unique meal combo developed in partnership with McDonald's and BTS. Also, a local radio channel in Malaysia, Hitz FM, and the Korean Tourist Organization introduced a new K-pop talent show program. This show later got a high rating, validating the public's acceptance and demand for K-pop music (Ayuni & Hafeeza, 2020).

In addition, ASTRO offers the KBS World Channel, which airs Korean dramas, music, and reality shows to cater to the audience's craving for Korean entertainment (Gan, 2019). The Korean wave has gained immense popularity on social media, leading to the establishment of the Malaysian KPOP Fans' Facebook page for statewide discussions and interactions with Korean fans (Dzul, 2016). The pervasive presence of K-pop across many media platforms in Malaysia has facilitated convenient access for locals to engage with this genre. Therefore, examining the social intricacies of local K-pop enthusiasts is advantageous. Furthermore, it is apparent that Malaysians have integrated Korean culture into their daily life across multiple social domains.

In K-pop, there is a strong emphasis on its visual elements, which are highlighted by its eye-catching clothing, painstakingly produced music videos, and precisely timed choreographies (Ayuningtyas, 2017). The custom of publishing teaser photos further demonstrates this emphasis on visuals before releasing an album or music video. Furthermore, male idols receive similar grooming and care as their female counterparts in terms of beauty, to the point that they are viewed as equally gorgeous and occasionally even more so than female idols.

This notion is called East Asian soft masculinity, which is a hybrid product created through the fusion of Japanese 'bishonen' (pretty boy) masculinity, global metrosexual

masculinity, and traditional ‘seonbi’ masculinity from South Korea (which is influenced by Chinese Confucian wen masculinity) (Tunstall, 2014, as cited in Ayuningtyas, P., 2017).

K-pop male bands’ ability to display various forms of masculinity has been cited as one of the key ingredients to their global success (Anderson, 2014). Terms that Korean fans and media invented, including ‘kkotminam’ (꽃미남, translated to “good looking men like flowers”) and ‘jim seung dol’ (짐승돌, translated to young male bands showing powerful force like that of a ‘beast’), well represent a wide spectrum of masculinities K-pop male bands present (Byun, 2013). K-pop male bands are often not committed to one version of masculine expression. Rather, they traverse multiple masculinity versions according to their music style. For a sweet love song, for example, band members perform Kkot mi nam masculinity in soft-coloured clothes, dance to cute choreography, and make gestures such as blowing kisses, all overemphasising their youthful innocence. The same band switches to a Jim Seung Dol version for their rebellion-themed song. They show “tough” and “manly” characteristics by drawing upon elements of “gangster” and hip-hop aesthetics, such as muscular shirtless bodies, dark-coloured outfits, ripped jeans, or graphic t-shirts (Byun, 2013).

Through such versatile gender expressivity, K-pop male bands strongly appeal to female fans across countries as they satisfy female fans’ varied desires for their ideal men and male stars, which may not be present in their own countries (Oh, 2015). Scholars have conceptualised such flexibility of K-pop male bands’ gender expressions in terms of “versatile masculinity” (Jung, 2011a), “transnational masculinity” (Jung, 2011b), “alternative masculinity” (Oh, 2015), and “overlapping masculinity” (Anderson, 2014). Furthermore, many K-pop studies have stressed a broader implication of K-pop male bands’ global popularity, showing how a transnational flow of cultural products can work to (re)construct the notion of masculinities (Oh, 2015).

In particular, scholars note an emerging and influential new model of masculinity that Jung (2009) calls ‘pan-East Asian soft masculinity’ visible in popular culture

throughout this region. In visual terms, Geng Song describes such soft masculinity as “male images that are exceptionally feminine to Western eyes” (Geng Song, 2016), while Louie refers to the ‘girlish’ looks and demeanours of Japanese boybands (2012: 936) and likewise describes how notions of Chinese masculinity have ‘softened’ and become ‘more feminine’ (Ibid: 930). According to Jung, this is a result of sentiments of longing for an earlier idea of masculinity in Japan (2009:39). At the same time, Louie (2012) notes a difference between metrosexual Western-associated notions of masculinity and those embraced by the younger generation in East Asian countries. Thematically, this construction of masculinity embodies a significant lack of aggressiveness and sexual dominance. Traditional masculine notions of competitiveness and conformity are replaced by relations based on friendship and love (Louie, 2012: 934). Such constructions demonstrate sensitivity and understanding towards women, who are constructed as friends rather than sex objects, while men are also non-threatening and kind (Ibid).

In Malaysia, masculinity is predominantly characterised by traditional and conservative norms, commonly referred to as hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity refers to the prescribed behaviours and characteristics society deems ideal for men. It legitimises male authority over women and reinforces patriarchal social structures (Ainslie, 2017). The structure symbolises the most esteemed embodiment of masculinity within a society, although only a small number of men, regardless of the circumstances, are capable of adhering to it. This construct of masculinity is deeply rooted in religious, cultural, and political influences. As such, this study aims to explore how soft masculinity is perceived among K-pop enthusiasts and those less engaged with the genre in Malaysia. A central objective is to delve into the influential role of Malaysia’s multifaceted gender norms in shaping these perceptions.

1.1 PROBLEM STATEMENT

The surge in K-pop's popularity among Malaysian teenagers has brought about a notable shift in perceptions of soft masculinity, necessitating a comparative study to examine the implications of K-pop obsession on lifestyle and cultural norms. The rise of data fandom and the global spread of K-pop have blurred cultural identities, influencing the construction of soft masculine perceptions among Malaysian K-pop fans (Zhang & Negus, 2020). This influence extends to gender dynamics, as seen in the negotiation of K-pop and Islam among young Indonesian Muslims, revealing the complex interplay between religious values and popular culture in shaping soft masculine perceptions (Mulya, 2021).

Soft masculinity in K-pop differs significantly from traditional Korean and Malaysian masculinity norms. Traditional Korean masculinity is associated with patriarchal authoritarianism, a rigid notion of hard masculinity influenced by compulsory military service, and the concept of 'seonbi' representing Confucian traditional masculinity (Leung, 2012, as cited in Ainslie, 2017). In Malaysia, hegemonic masculinity is closely tied to physical prowess and the role of the family's head and is intertwined with Malay ethnicity and Islamic faith (Ainslie, 2017).

However, K-pop idols challenge established norms of hegemonic masculinity by embracing vulnerability in their music, performances, and messaging. Some depart from emotional detachment, openly sharing personal struggles, representing a form of subordinate masculinity that contrasts prevailing societal norms (Connell, 1995, as cited in Putri & Mintarsih, 2020). In light of these developments, investigating the implications of K-pop's popularity on soft masculine perceptions among Malaysians becomes imperative. This research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted impact of K-pop on the construction of soft masculinity, shedding light on the implications of K-pop obsession and its influence on lifestyle choices, gender perceptions, and cultural norms.

1.2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

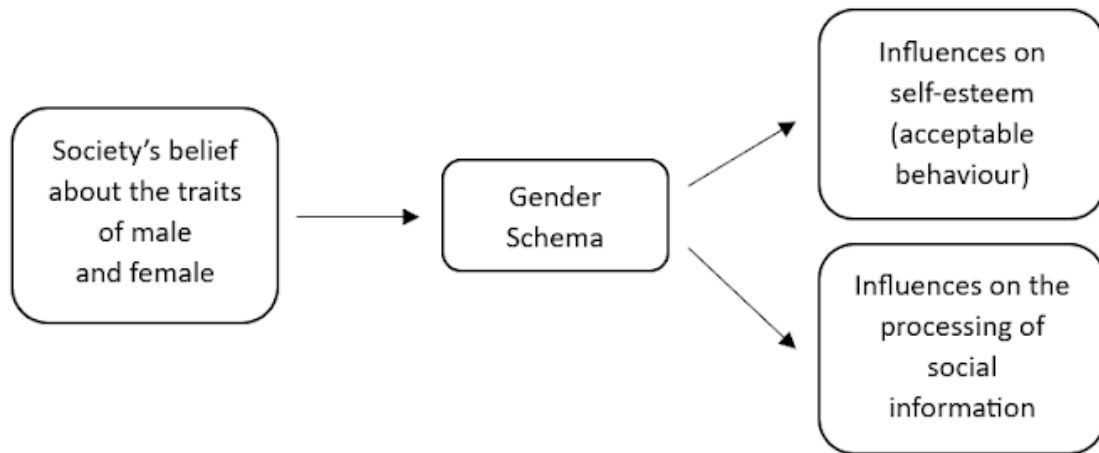


Figure 1.2 Gender Schema Theory (Bem, 1981)

Gender Schema Theory (Bem, 1981) suggests that individuals construct mental frameworks or schemas for understanding and organizing gender-related information. These schemas shape how we perceive and interact with the world, influencing our behaviour, attitudes, and self-concept. In essence, our cultural and societal norms, often referred to as gender roles, are internalized, and they guide our understanding of what it means to be masculine or feminine.

Relating Gender Schema Theory to soft masculinity, it is essential to consider how these gender schemas influence the perceptions of individuals, both K-pop fans and non-fans, in Malaysia. These schemas could influence how they interpret and define soft masculinity within the context of K-pop. These schemas may play a role in shaping the way soft masculinity is perceived and understood, as individuals filter their interpretations through the lens of their gender schemas by society's belief. This paper will investigate how this schema influence perceptions and can provide valuable insights into the impact of gender norms on the understanding of soft masculinity in Malaysia.

1.3 RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The research objective of this paper is to explore the perception of K-pop fans and non-fans in Malaysia towards the soft masculinity represented by K-pop idols.

1.4 RESEARCH QUESTION

The research question for this paper is as follows:

1. How do K-pop fans and non-fans in Malaysia perceive soft masculinity as represented by K-pop idols?

1.5 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This comparative study on soft masculine perceptions among K-pop fans and non-fans in Malaysia holds significant importance in several respects. Firstly, it contributes to the growing body of literature addressing the complexities of contemporary masculinity by examining how K-pop, as a cultural phenomenon, challenges established norms. By exploring the perceptions of individuals both inside and outside the K-pop fandom, this study provides valuable insights into the evolving definitions of masculinity, not only within the East Asian context but also in a multicultural society like Malaysia.

Secondly, this research is essential in understanding the dynamic interaction between global pop culture and local societal norms, shedding light on how cultural globalization influences the perception of masculinity in diverse cultural settings. Additionally, it offers a nuanced perspective on the impact of popular culture on individuals' perceptions, allowing for a deeper understanding of how entertainment media contributes to the reshaping of gender roles and identities.

Finally, this study is relevant for educational and awareness initiatives, as it underscores the importance of promoting diverse and inclusive views of masculinity in both media representations and societal values, fostering healthier and more inclusive narratives of gender identities.

1.6 OPERATIONAL DEFINITIONS

1.6.1 K-pop

K-pop is a style of popular music that is particularly notable for its use of music videos as an audiovisual marketing tool in South Korea (Kim, 2017).

1.6.2 Soft Masculinity

Soft masculinity can be described as "male representations that appear notably feminine in a Western context" (Geng Song, 2016, as cited in Ainslie, 2017). East Asian soft masculinity is a complex amalgamation, formed through the synthesis of Japanese '*bishonen*' (pretty boy) masculinity, global metrosexual masculinity, and traditional '*seonbi*' masculinity from South Korea, influenced by Chinese Confucian '*wen*' masculinity (Tunstall, 2014, as cited in Ayuningtyas, 2017).

1.6.3 Hegemonic Masculinity

Hegemonic masculinity defines the preferred behavioral norms for men within a society and is commonly constructed to rationalize male superiority over women, thereby upholding patriarchal social systems (Raewyn Connell, 1987; 2005, as cited in Ainslie, 2017). This ideal emphasizes distancing from femininity and accentuating features like muscularity, a strong jawline, and a prominent brow, which convey strength and virility (Kimmel, 2011; Little & Hancock, 2002, as cited in Song & Velding, 2020).

1.6.4 Gender Norms

In the 1970s, feminists coined "gender" to differentiate socially constructed aspects of male and female roles from biology (Cislaghi & Heise, 2020). These gender norms are learned in childhood through socialization and further shaped by family, schools, workplaces, religion, media, and other social institutions (Bem 1981, Tenenbaum and Leaper 2002, as cited in Cislaghi & Heise, 2020).

1.6.5 Fandom

Fandom is commonly characterised as a subculture that revolves around the consumption of products, brand communities, and consumer tribes within the field of consumer research (Fuschillo, 2018). Within the realm of the arts, namely in music, loyalty is commonly manifested as "fandom," where music enthusiasts conjure pictures of the deeply devoted individual or fervent throng, entranced by the captivating allure of their beloved subject (Obiegbo et al., 2019).

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 OVERVIEW OF THE CHAPTER

This literature review provides an overview of a comprehensive exploration of masculinity, beginning with a theoretical foundation that challenges essentialist perspectives and highlights the dynamic nature of masculinities shaped by social practices. The chapter delves into soft masculinity, particularly in the context of East Asian popular culture, focusing on the Korean Wave and its influence on reshaping traditional notions of masculinity. It examines the roots of soft masculinity, its hybrid nature, and its impact on changing gender roles in contemporary society. The concept of hegemonic masculinity is then introduced, emphasizing its multifaceted and dynamic nature and its role in sustaining power imbalances. The chapter further investigates masculinity norms in Malaysia, where the intersection of Hallyu and traditional values challenges hegemonic constructions, providing Malaysian men with alternative forms of masculine identity. Past studies contribute insights into the perception of masculinity, particularly within K-pop fandoms, highlighting the cultural interconnectedness shaping evolving notions of masculinity. The chapter concludes by introducing the Gender Schema Theory as the theoretical framework guiding the study, offering a structured approach to examining the nuanced dynamics of soft masculinity in the Malaysian cultural context.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The essence of masculinity, traditionally perceived as inherent to being a man, has undergone intricate scrutiny in disciplines such as sociology, media studies, and psychology (Ainslie, 2017). Contrary to essentialist perspectives linking masculinity to male biology, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) propose a more dynamic view, asserting that masculinities are configurations shaped by social practices, thereby varying with

gender relations in specific social contexts. Rather than a fixed biological attribute, masculinity emerges from social values, historical context, cultural struggles, and societal changes (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

Beynon (2002) outlines pivotal factors contributing to the complexity of masculinity, encompassing historical context, age, physique, sexual orientation, education, status, lifestyle, geography, ethnicity, religion, beliefs, class, occupation, culture, and subculture. Reflecting contemporary academic preferences similar to 'feminisms,' scholars now employ the plural term 'masculinities' to denote the diverse manifestations of masculinity, encapsulating how it is understood, enacted, experienced, and lived (Beynon, 2002).

One manifestation, termed hegemonic masculinity by Connell (Beynon, 2002), represents the prevailing ideal of being a real man in specific times and places. It is constructed through consensual mediation or power and achievement, serving as a normative framework that not only prescribes the correct way to be a man but also ideologically justifies the subordination of women to men. This form of masculinity is dynamic, evolving, and locations.

Beynon (2002) identifies six influential aspects shaping masculinity in the 20th century: the rise of women, 20th-century wars, changes in the world of work, the ascent of consumerism and celebrity culture, the emergence of the gay movement, and evolving perceptions of masculinity. These factors impact men's self-perception in personal and public spheres, contributing to what is often perceived as a crisis in masculinity.

Hence. This section will further review soft masculinity, hegemonic masculinity, masculinity norms in Malaysia, past studies, and the theoretical framework applied in this paper.

2.1 SOFT MASCULINITY

Soft masculinity is evident in cultural outputs from various East Asian countries. Korean pop culture, known as the ‘Korean Wave’ or Hallyu, is particularly influential in reshaping East Asian masculinity (Ainslie, 2017). Emerging in the mid-2000s with the success of TV dramas like *Winter Sonata* and *Dae Jung Geum*, as well as music bands such as ‘Big Bang’ and ‘Super Junior,’ Korean pop culture is recognized for blending traditionally masculine and feminine traits within a single performer or performance (Ainslie, 2017). Anderson (2014) acknowledges K-pop performers as embodying ‘multiple masculinities,’ presenting a more flexible and inclusive model of masculinity than previously prominent in the region.

Seen as a transcultural product, this phenomenon is part of a ‘transcultural hybridization process,’ blending global and traditional Korean notions of masculinity (Jung, 2011). Scholars like Sun Jung (2006) and Louie (2012) describe this as ‘hybrid masculinity,’ highlighting a convergence of masculine and feminine characteristics in both male and female performers. While such interpretations position the soft masculinity of the Korean Wave as globalized and transnational, it remains fundamentally a regional East Asian phenomenon, reflecting the plurality and hybridity of the region.

Despite its recent prominence, the roots of this phenomenon can be traced back to traditional Confucian-inflected conceptions of masculinity prevalent in East Asian cultures. Geng Song (2016) defines it as “a growing cultural convergence among East Asian countries.” Jung (2009) introduces the concept of ‘*mugukjeok*’, emphasizing the non-nationality of Korean idols. Due to the shared characteristics of soft masculinity, distinguishing the nationality of these performers becomes challenging, allowing them to freely traverse national boundaries without embodying specifically national traits.

Soft masculinity is a term used to describe a new form of masculinity emerging in the entertainment industry, particularly in K-pop. According to Tunstall (2014), soft masculinity is a hybrid product constructed through the amalgamation of South Korea's traditional '*seonbi*' masculinity, Japan's '*bishonen*' (pretty boy), and global metrosexual masculinity. This new form of masculinity contrasts with Korean traditional masculinity, defined by patriarchal authoritarian masculinity, hard masculinity rooted in compulsory military service for men, and true '*seonbi*' (Confucian, traditional masculinity referring to young noblemen) (Leung, 2012).

In recent years, K-pop has become a global phenomenon, and the emergence of soft masculinity in K-pop male idols has attracted the attention of scholars and researchers. According to Kim (2017), soft masculinity is a performance that is constructed and marketed by the entertainment industry to appeal to a global audience. This performance is characterized by a combination of traditionally feminine traits, such as sensitivity, emotional expressiveness, and physical beauty, with traditionally masculine traits, such as strength, athleticism, and leadership.

The emergence of soft masculinity in K-pop has also been linked to the changing gender roles and expectations in contemporary society. According to Connell (2005), masculinity is a social construct shaped by cultural, historical, and political factors. Soft masculinity can be seen as a response to the changing gender roles and expectations in contemporary society, where men are expected to be more emotionally expressive and sensitive. This new form of masculinity challenges the traditional notions of masculinity that are associated with dominance, aggression, and physical strength.

Geng Song (2016) defines soft masculinity as an exceptionally feminine male image to Western eyes. The author argues that Soft Masculinity is a new form of masculinity that has emerged in East Asian popular culture, particularly in the context of Korean and Japanese media. Geng Song (2016) notes that soft masculinity is characterized by a more emotional and sensitive portrayal of male characters, which challenges traditional notions of masculinity that are associated with aggression, dominance, and control. The author also

highlights the impact of soft masculinity on gender relations and power dynamics, arguing that this form of masculinity has the potential to create more egalitarian gender relations.

On another note, Louie (2012) describes soft masculinity as a form of masculinity that is highly appropriate to the modern context, emerging since the millennium and coinciding with the rise of social media, youth culture, and the increased buying power of women. The author notes that soft masculinity is present in cultural products from countries across East Asia. Nevertheless, the growth and export of Korean pop culture have been the most influential in terms of the impact upon and reshaping of East Asian masculinity. Louie (2012) argues that soft masculinity challenges traditional notions of masculinity by embodying a significant lack of aggressiveness and sexual dominance and by rejecting traditional masculine notions of competitiveness and conformity.

Meanwhile, Jung (2009) sees soft masculinity as underpinned by nostalgic sentiments for an older conception of masculinity in Japan. The author argues that soft masculinity challenges traditional notions of masculinity by embodying a more emotional and sensitive portrayal of male characters, which is associated with a more caring and nurturing role for men. Like Louie (2012), Jung (2009) also notes that soft masculinity is often associated with the rise of consumer culture and the increasing importance of emotional labour, which has led to a shift in how masculinity is constructed and valued in society. The author also highlights the impact of soft masculinity on gender relations and power dynamics, arguing that this form of masculinity has the potential to create more egalitarian gender relations.

According to Song and Velding (2020), soft masculinity is characterized by a more androgynous appearance and behaviour. This contrasts with the traditional Western concept of hegemonic masculinity, which emphasizes physical strength, aggression, and dominance (Kimmel, 2004). Soft masculinity is often associated with a more sensitive and emotional expression of masculinity, often seen as more feminine in Western societies (Connell, 2005).

Jung (2011) argues that soft masculinity in K-pop is a form of transcultural consumption that appeals to fans across Asia and beyond. He suggests that K-pop idols' androgynous appearance and behaviour challenge traditional gender norms and offer a new form of masculinity that is more fluid and flexible. This new form of masculinity is not necessarily seen as inferior or less masculine but rather as a new way of expressing masculinity that is more inclusive and accepting of different gender expressions.

However, Song and Velding (2020) found that young American college students perceived K-pop band members as lacking masculinity based on their perceived small body size, soft skin, and absence of facial hair, among other things. These descriptions resemble a stereotypical image of Asian males in the United States. This suggests that the concept of soft masculinity is not universally accepted or understood and that it is still subject to cultural and societal norms and expectations.

Ainslie (2017) points another view in the local context, in which the author argues that soft masculinity provides an alternative model of masculinity that challenges the hegemonic masculinity model in Malaysia. The author notes that soft masculinity is primarily presented through music and TV dramas and is recognized by scholars as appropriate to modern globalized society, including in Malaysia. In her paper, Ainslie (2017) highlights the impact of soft masculinity on male fans of Hallyu products (Korean Wave) in Malaysia, arguing that such fans use soft masculinity to critique the reductive and exclusive state-defined constructions of hegemonic masculinity within Malaysia and to appropriate such signifiers to build new forms of masculine identity appropriate to the Asian context. The author finds that Hallyu fandom has become a form of resistance against the religious and racially defined politics that seek to divide and control citizens during a crucial period of political upheaval in Malaysia.

However, the perception of soft masculinity among fans varies. According to Lee et al. (2020), some fans view soft masculinity as a way to deconstruct gender categories and challenge traditional notions of masculinity. Others view it purely as a fan service and pure entertainment. According to Butler (1990), gender is a performance constructed and

maintained through repeated acts. Soft masculinity can be seen as a performance constructed and maintained by K-pop male idols to appeal to their fans. Hence, soft masculinity is a concept that has been explored in various ways by K-pop male idols.

2.1 HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY

Hegemonic masculinity, a concept introduced by Raewyn Connell in the 1980s, has been a focal point in gender studies, particularly in understanding the dynamics of power and dominance in constructing masculinity (Messerschmidt, 2018). It refers to the culturally idealized form of masculinity often associated with power, authority, and control, shaping the behaviours and identities of men within a given society (Barry, 2018). This concept has been subject to various interpretations across cultural representations and experiences, highlighting its locally significant and dynamic nature (Nas, 2022). Hegemonic masculinity is not a fixed or coercive personality but rather a mechanism of domination, encompassing a range of behaviours and expressions that establish male dominance within the gender order (Yang, 2020). It is also associated with violence and blood, emphasizing its embodiment in certain contexts (Fatmawaty et al., 2022).

Hegemonic masculinity, as elucidated by Connell (1998), serves as the prevailing and idealized form of masculinity within a given society. Characterized by traits such as strength, aggression, and control, this concept is employed to rationalize male dominance over women and uphold patriarchal power structures. Importantly, Connell (1998) underscores that hegemonic masculinity is not a static construct but a dynamic and contested one, subject to continuous negotiation and redefinition.

In contrast, Messner and Sabo (1990) offer a more nuanced perspective, emphasizing that hegemonic masculinity is not confined to a mere collection of individual traits but is intricately woven into a complex social process. They argue that this process involves the construction and maintenance of gender hierarchies, often entailing the marginalization and exclusion of alternative forms of masculinity, such as those embodied

by gay or effeminate men. Furthermore, Messner and Sabo (1990) draw attention to the role of influential institutions like sports and the military in perpetuating hegemonic masculinity, reinforcing the notion of innate male superiority.

The meanings of hegemonic masculinity are not static. They can change within specific contexts and social interactions, reflecting the dynamic nature of gendered meanings and the influence of other elements within the gender order (Barry, 2018). Furthermore, the concept has been instrumental in theorizing the relationship between masculinities and various crimes, such as rape, murder, and violent assault, shedding light on the intersection of masculinity and criminal behaviour (Sollund, 2020). Additionally, hegemonic masculinity has been depicted as a dominant and dominating form of masculinity, exerting significant influence and authority over the definition of what it means to be a "real man" (Newman et al., 2022).

In literature, the representation of hegemonic masculinity has been explored in archetypal African novels, emphasizing its critical impact on contemporary audiences and the need for further research on hypermasculinity (Alsyof, 2018). Moreover, the concept has been linked to capitalist consumerism and postfeminist culture, highlighting its role in obscuring societal power dynamics (Lindsay & Lyons, 2017). The influence of hegemonic masculinity extends beyond individual behaviours, as it has been associated with broader societal structures and power dynamics, particularly in neoliberalism and nationalism (Gibbs & Scothorne, 2020).

Connell (2005) builds on this understanding by asserting that hegemonic masculinity is a multifaceted social and cultural phenomenon shaped by historical and political forces. This perspective broadens the scope beyond individual behaviour, highlighting the role of hegemonic masculinity in justifying and sustaining prevailing power structures, particularly within the context of globalization and neoliberalism. Connell (2005) also emphasizes the repercussions of hegemonic masculinity on gender relations and power dynamics, pointing to its potential to marginalize and exclude women and other marginalized groups.

In a critique of hegemonic masculinity, Kimmel (2017) contends that it embodies a toxic and harmful manifestation associated with violence, aggression, and domination. Aligning with Connell's earlier assertions, Kimmel argues that this form of masculinity is utilized to rationalize and perpetuate patriarchal power structures, reinforcing the belief in men's inherent superiority over women. Furthermore, Kimmel (2017) draws attention to the influential role of media and popular culture in constructing and perpetuating hegemonic masculinity, where portrayals emphasize the desirability of men being strong, aggressive, and dominant.

In comparing these perspectives, it becomes evident that while Connell (1987, 2005) and Messner and Sabo (1990) emphasize the dynamic and multifaceted nature of hegemonic masculinity, Kimmel (2017) provides a more critical lens, labelling it as toxic and harmful. The collective literature underscores the role of hegemonic masculinity in sustaining power imbalances, either through its idealized traits or institutional reinforcement, shedding light on the intricate interplay between masculinity, power, and societal structures.

In conclusion, hegemonic masculinity represents a complex and multifaceted concept that influences the construction of masculinity within diverse social, cultural, and historical contexts. Its dynamic nature, influence on criminal behaviour, and intersectionality with other social structures underscore its significance in understanding gender dynamics and power relations within society.

2.2 MASCULINITY NORMS IN MALAYSIA

In East Asian popular culture, 'cultural convergence' has given rise to soft masculinity, a construct distinct from the contemporary models of hegemonic masculinity observed in Southeast Asia, particularly in Malaysia (Ainslie, 2017). The distinctiveness of this construct in Southeast Asia can be attributed to the marked contrast in cultural, linguistic, religious, and ethnic factors between the East Asian and Southeast Asian regions. The

geographical separation, greater diversity in Southeast Asian nations, and complex relationships with neighbouring countries pose challenges in envisioning a unified Southeast Asianized representation (Ainslie, 2017).

The cultural dissonance with soft masculinity is notably pronounced in Malaysia, where the dominance of Hallyu (Korean Wave) characterizes the landscape of East Asian popular culture (Ainslie, 2017). Southeast Asia serves as a significant destination for Hallyu exports, advancing Korean interests and exerting Soft Power in the region (Shim, 2013; Ainslie, 2017). Despite being present in Malaysia for an extended period, Korean pop culture, with its model of soft masculinity, presents a complex scenario. The feminized appearance and themes of 'friendship' and 'love' associated with the East Asian soft masculinity model sharply contrast with the attributes of hegemonic masculinity in Malaysia, entwined with physical prowess, family leadership, Malay ethnicity, and the dominant Islamic religion (Ainslie, 2017).

Masculinity norms in Malaysia are influenced by traditional attitudes, Islamic teachings, and legal pluralism, shaping gender identities and social behaviours within the country (Alatas, 2022). The dominant form of masculinity in Malaysia is closely connected to the notion of male dominance and the traditional role of men as providers and protectors within the family structure (Alatas, 2022). Past studies have highlighted the impact of masculinity norms on various aspects of Malaysian society, including business, finance, and social behaviour. Additionally, the portrayal of gender roles in television advertisements in Malaysia has shown similar patterns to those in Singapore, indicating the universality of gender-role portrayals in the region (Furnham & Lay, 2019). Moreover, the influence of cultural dimensions, such as uncertainty avoidance and power distance, has been found to shape customer preferences in Malaysia, reflecting the impact of cultural influences on consumer behaviour and choices (Ghazali et al., 2021).

Scholars connect this heavy focus on traditionally masculine attributes to the challenges posed to gender roles by the encroachment of modernity and the difficulty of successfully negotiating such changes. For instance, Ainslie notes how the frequent violent

depictions of hypermasculinity in contemporary Malaysian films function as dramatizations of masculinity in crisis and are a reaction to the inability to cope with changes enacted upon gender roles by modernity (Ainslie, 2017). This compensation for perceived male lack is personified and rectified through portrayals of dangerous women with active libidos who must be controlled (Ainslie, 2017). The entwinement of hegemonic masculinity within inflexible racial and religious parameters further complicates the landscape, contributing to political power struggles in Malaysia (Ainslie, 2017).

These traditional masculinity norms can have negative effects on men in Malaysia. Ainslie (2017) notes that the state is dissatisfied with the existing forms of masculinity in Malaysia and seeks to promote alternative forms of masculinity that align with its vision of a modern, progressive society. However, the author argues that the state's efforts to promote alternative forms of masculinity are often limited by its patriarchal values and its desire to maintain existing power structures. This can lead to dissatisfaction and frustration among Malaysian men who feel unable to fully express themselves or live up to societal expectations (Ainslie, 2017).

In Malaysia, Hallyu is constructed as a female-coded medium, a perception reinforced by its association with female-centric products such as romantic dramas, cosmetics, and boybands embodying soft masculinity characteristics. This aligns with the broader trend in Hallyu analysis, where both popular and academic studies often concentrate on female consumers, overlooking other fan groups and dynamics, creating a huge research gap in those areas (Ainslie, 2017).

Korean popular culture, particularly the Soft Masculinity model, offers a new form of masculinity that challenges traditional masculinity norms in Malaysia. Ainslie (2017) argues that East Asian and Korean popular culture can offer new forms of cultural identity for the disaffected Southeast Asian consumer, particularly given the new form of masculinity these products embody, the Malaysian male. The soft masculinity model in Korean popular culture allows Malaysian men to create new forms of masculine identity and resist state control. However, the author also highlights that such fandom does not

necessarily challenge existing patriarchal hierarchies in Malaysia. Recognizing that these identities are not necessarily progressive or emancipatory and may reinforce existing power structures is important.

2.3 PAST STUDIES

Song and Velding (2020) investigated how young American college students perceived masculinity embodied through K-pop male band members' bodies. The study was based on survey data collected from 772 participants. The study found that gender norms in U.S. society play a significant role in the participants' perception of K-pop band members' masculinity and femininity. Participants reported that K-pop band members lacked masculinity based on their perceived small body size, soft skin, and absence of facial hair, among other things. These descriptions resemble a stereotypical image of Asian males in the United States.

However, the study also found that participants were sensitive to cultural differences in gender norms and expressions. This suggests that there is potential for a changing notion of masculinity through cultural interconnectedness in a global context. The study contributes to the limited empirical studies measuring how gender norms operate across countries by focusing on contemporary young individuals who have been and will continue to be experiencing cultural diversities and an interconnected world more intensely than any previous generation.

Another study by Ainslie (2017) conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews with 21 male Malaysian fans of Korean popular culture to address how Hallyu can offer Malaysian men a means to reject the exclusive hegemonic forms of masculinity provided by the state and likewise provide an alternative form of masculine-based identity more appropriate to this changing context. The findings of this study suggest that Korean popular culture offers a new form of masculinity that challenges traditional masculinity norms in Malaysia.

However, it is important to recognize that such fandom does not necessarily challenge existing patriarchal hierarchies in Malaysia. The paper argues that it is important to examine critically how Korean popular culture is consumed and its impact on the construction of masculinity in Malaysia.

Ayuningtyas (2017) also investigates the perception of Indonesian fan girls towards soft masculinity as represented by K-pop male idols. The study found that fan girls perceive soft masculinity as a desirable trait in K-pop male idols and as a way to challenge traditional gender roles and expectations. The study also found that the fan girls' perception of soft masculinity is influenced by their exposure to K-pop music, fandom, media representation of K-pop male idols, and cultural background. The fan girls who are more exposed to Western culture are more likely to perceive soft masculinity as a desirable trait in K-pop male idols. In contrast, those who are more exposed to traditional Indonesian culture are more likely to perceive soft masculinity as a deviation from traditional masculinity. The author notes that further research is needed to explore the implications of soft masculinity in K-pop and its impact on gender roles and expectations in Indonesian society.

On the other hand, Zahra Fazli Khalaf et al. (2013) explore the perceptions of masculinity among 30 young Malaysian men. The findings of the study suggest that masculinity is a complex and multifaceted concept that is shaped by a range of socio-cultural factors. The study identified several key themes from the participants' views on masculinity. These themes include the importance of physical strength and appearance, the role of family and religion in shaping masculine identity, the influence of peer groups and media on perceptions of masculinity, and the impact of life events such as marriage and fatherhood on the understanding of masculinity.

The study found that a range of socio-cultural factors, including religion, family background, and ethnicity, shaped the participants' perceptions of masculinity. For example, participants from Malay and Indian backgrounds tended to place greater emphasis

on traditional gender roles and family values. In contrast, Chinese participants were more likely to prioritize individualism and personal achievement.

Together, these studies call for a nuanced understanding of how K-pop influences and interacts with cultural, societal, and individual perspectives on masculinity, urging future research to delve deeper into these complex dynamics and their broader implications on gender roles and expectations.

2.4 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Gender schema theory (Bem, 1981) is a cognitive theory that explains how individuals acquire and process gender information. According to this theory, individuals develop gender schemas, mental frameworks that organize and guide the processing of gender-related information. These schemas are formed through socialization and are influenced by cultural norms and values.

Bem (1981) proposed that gender schemas consist of two components: gender identity and gender role. Gender identity refers to an individual's subjective sense of being male or female. In contrast, gender role refers to the behaviours, attitudes, and personality traits considered appropriate for males and females in a given culture.

Research has shown that gender schemas can influence how individuals perceive and remember information. For example, individuals are more likely to remember information that is consistent with their gender schema and to forget information that is inconsistent with it (Martin & Halverson, 1981). Gender schemas can also affect the way individuals interpret ambiguous information. For instance, individuals may interpret a person's behaviour differently depending on whether they believe the person is male or female (Hamilton, 1981).

Gender schema theory has been applied to a wide range of topics, including gender development, gender stereotypes, and gender-based discrimination. For example, research has shown that children begin to develop gender schemas at a young age and that these schemas can influence their preferences for toys, activities, and careers (Bian et al., 2017). Gender schemas can also lead to the formation of gender stereotypes, which are beliefs about the characteristics and behaviours of males and females. These stereotypes can negatively affect female leaders, leading to biased evaluations (Brescoll, 2016).

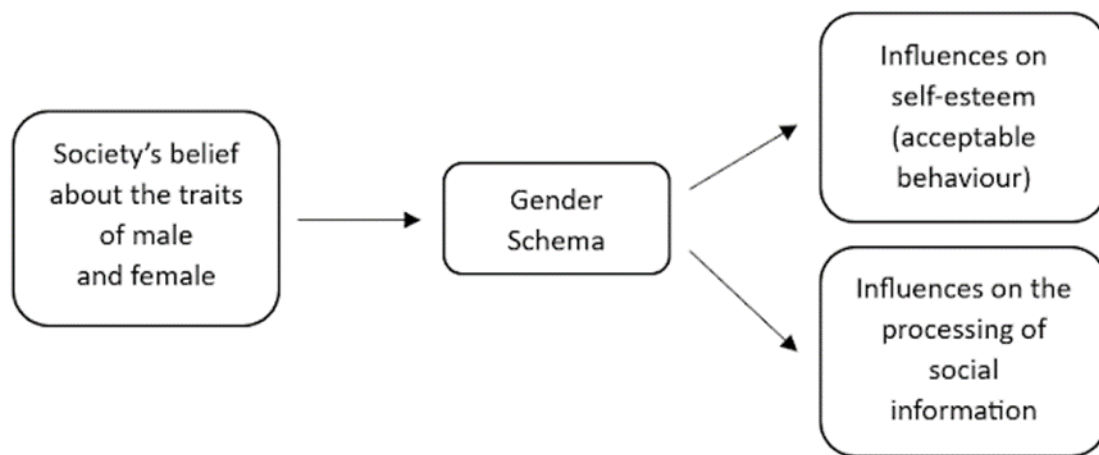


Figure 2.4 Gender Schema Theory (Bem, 1981)

In the context of this paper, Gender Schema Theory will be employed to examine how gender schemas influence the perception of soft masculinity among individuals in Malaysia, particularly within the K-pop fan community and among those who are not fans. The theory suggests that individuals are more likely to remember and interpret information consistent with their gender schema, thereby influencing their perceptions of soft masculinity.

Furthermore, the application of Gender Schema Theory will extend to exploring how gender schemas contribute to the development of gender stereotypes. Understanding

the impact of gender stereotypes on the perception of soft masculinity is crucial for revealing potential biases and societal expectations.

Given that Gender Schema Theory has been extensively applied to various topics, including gender development, stereotypes, and discrimination, it provides a robust and established framework for this study. This theoretical lens will guide the analysis of survey data, interviews, or other research methods employed in the comparative study, offering a structured approach to investigating the nuanced dynamics of soft masculinity in the Malaysian cultural context.

2.5 CHAPTER SUMMARY

Despite a growing body of literature examining the influence of K-pop on perceptions of masculinity in various cultural contexts, there is a notable research gap, particularly in the Malaysian context. The existing studies predominantly focus on Western societies and, to some extent, Indonesian perspectives, leaving a void in our understanding of how soft masculinity is perceived in Malaysia, a society with distinct sociocultural norms.

Furthermore, within the Malaysian context, there is a lack of comprehensive exploration into the gender dynamics of soft masculinity. The studies conducted so far have primarily focused on male perceptions, with limited attention given to the perspectives of females. An in-depth investigation is needed to understand how both males and females in Malaysia perceive and interpret soft masculinity, particularly in the context of K-pop culture.

Additionally, while Ainslie's (2017) study shed light on the influence of Korean popular culture on challenging traditional masculinity norms in Malaysia, there is a need for further research to scrutinize the impact on both fans and non-fans of K-pop. A comparative analysis between individuals who engage with K-pop culture and those who

do not would provide valuable insights into the broader societal influence of K-pop on perceptions of masculinity in Malaysia.

Addressing this research gap is essential for a more nuanced understanding of the role that K-pop and soft masculinity play in shaping gender norms in Malaysia. By incorporating both male and female perspectives and considering the views of K-pop fans and non-fans, future research can contribute to a comprehensive exploration of how cultural influences intersect with traditional norms to shape perceptions of masculinity in the Malaysian context.

The next chapter will explain the method used in this study and the details of the research design, study respondents, instrumentations, and data collection procedures used to answer Research Question 1 and Research Question 2.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.0 INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to study and compare the perceptions of K-pop fans and non-fans in Malaysia towards the notion of soft masculinity represented by K-pop idols. The elements of research methodology, which are research design, sampling, instrumentation, data collection procedures, data analysis procedures, trustworthiness, and ethical considerations, are thoroughly covered in this chapter. To attain the objective of the study, this paper shall answer a research questions which is:

1. RQ: How do K-pop fans and non-fans in Malaysia perceive soft masculinity as represented by K-pop idols?

3.1 RESEARCH DESIGN

The research design of this paper utilized a qualitative approach. Trochim (2020) states, “Qualitative approaches are the general way of thinking about conducting qualitative research”. The reason why the researcher decided on the qualitative approach is due to the research objectives of this study. According to Carol (2016), qualitative research is an investigative method generally used to comprehend certain views and perceptions. The objective of this study is to explore the perception of K-pop fans and non-fans in Malaysian towards soft masculinity represented by K-pop idols.

3.2 SAMPLING

This study applied a purposive sampling strategy. Purposeful sampling is widely used in qualitative research, especially in interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This sampling technique is intended to identify in-depth information for a few participants. The sample for this study is made up of K-pop fans and non-fans in Malaysia, and they are determined by a few background research from the researcher's side. This research sample comprises eight interviewees, all hailing from Malaysia, strategically divided into two equal groups for comparative analysis. The first dichotomy involves four K-pop enthusiasts and four non-fans, allowing for an exploration of varying perspectives based on familiarity with the K-pop culture. The second classification considers gender perspectives to feature an equal representation of four males and four females, providing a comprehensive understanding of how soft masculinity is perceived across different genders within the Malaysian context. This multifaceted approach seeks to unravel nuanced insights into the intersections of familiarity and gender in shaping individual views on soft masculinities, specifically within the context of K-pop.

3.3 INSTRUMENTATION

The method was to conduct a semi-structured interview with K-pop fans and non-fans and inquire about their opinions on soft masculinity represented by K-pop idols. The reason behind choosing interviews as a method to gather data is that interviews are considered qualitative to examine the opinions, experiences, convictions, and incentives of certain individuals on certain topics and are also considered suitable for delicate topics (Gill et al., 2008).

The first part of this instrument was adapted from Ainslie (2017) in her previous study, the author interviewed Malaysian male fans and provided insights into the role of Korean popular culture in shaping and redefining masculine identities among Malaysian men, as well as its broader implications for gender dynamics and cultural influences in the

Malaysian context. The second part of the instrument was adapted by Zahra Fazli Khalaf et al. (2013), in which the author explored the meanings of masculinity among young university men in Malaysia. The list of questions is as follows:

Table: 3.3 List of Interview Questions

No.	List of Interview Questions
1.	For non-fans: Is the participant familiar with K-pop? How? For fans: How did the participant become interested and involved in K-pop?
2.	How are the participant's awareness and attitudes towards the gendered construction of K-pop in Malaysia?
3.	How does the participant perceive the construction of men in K-pop as opposed to men in Malaysia?
4.	What comes into the participant's mind when they hear the word masculinity and soft masculinity?
5.	What characteristics define a man?
6.	What is the role of a man in the participant's life?
7.	How does the participant describe their social and personal lives?
8.	How does the participant interact with this new model of soft masculinity?

3.4 DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES

For this study, a semi-structured interview was used, and the data collection was executed through online interviews, specifically WhatsApp messages with the participants. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) stated that a semi-structured interview gives freedom to the participants to answer the questions, and in a way, it allows the researcher to prepare the interview with pre-constructed questions. This is the rationale choice to conduct this study and generate as much information as possible to better understand the study's findings. Ultimately, this interview enables the participants to express their beliefs, opinions, and perceptions freely regarding the soft masculinity of K-pop idols.

Before the interview, the researcher sent a direct message to those she believed qualified for the study and politely asked their permission to be interviewed. A detailed message about the interview was sent to them. The participants in this research were interviewed privately via WhatsApp messages. The interview was done asynchronously, and the participants were given one day to answer and submit the interview response. All of the responses also must be submitted through WhatsApp messages. The participants' contents and responses were recorded and transcribed before proceeding to the next step, categorizing and analysing thematically. The portion of documented raw data was shown to all participants to check the accuracy of the analysis before proceeding to the next step.

3.5 DATA ANALYSIS PROCEDURES

The data for this study was collected through WhatsApp's messages with a set of open-ended questions. The participants were asked privately in the first place to set a date and time with the researcher for the interview sessions. The whole interview session with the participants was recorded through WhatsApp's voice message and transcribed by the researcher. This study manually used thematic analysis to analyse the data in this qualitative research. The thematic analysis enables the researcher to categorize and produce themes or patterns that will be extracted from the data collected. Additionally, this type of analysis

clarifies the data that was collected in specific details according to various subjects through the interpretation of the researcher (Boyatzis, 1998).

This present study applied a six-phase approach to thematic analysis as proposed by Creswell et al (2007) in analysing qualitative data of the study. The first phase was by exporting the answers from WhatsApp message of each participant and pasting them in a Excel sheet. The responses of the participants in this study were listened read while making notes and highlighting the main items of the data. This phase aims to become familiar with the information given and guide the researcher to get the initial interpretation of the data, which facilitates coding.

The second phase consisted of generating initial codes of the data and it was part of the systematic analysis of the research. The process of coding was where the data from the interview was labelled and it must be relevant to the research questions of the study. Generally, it provided the summary and the content of the data in a more understanding and systematic way. This present study used physical process coding in which the codes were written down from the extracted data and highlighted the text associated with it. The end of this process was where the data were fully coded and it was relevant for the study.

Thirdly, this phase focuses on searching the themes where the codes will be shifted to themes. In this phase, the themes of the current study were constructed based on reviewing the coded data to identify the comparison between the codes. The candidates' themes then be in the form of a thematic map or table and were reviewed before moving to the next phase.

The fourth phase consisted of reviewing the developed and potential themes. The themes in this phase were checked thoroughly against the collated extracts of data and identified whether those themes were in coloration with the data of the study. This phase also enabled the researcher to merge the potential themes or split them into more specific or coherent themes.

Next, the researcher needed to make sure that the themes that were reviewed must be to the entire database. The process of defining and naming the themes took place in phase 5. In this phase, deep analytic work should be applied to be able to clearly state the best themes of the research. To achieve that, the themes should be ideal, specific, related to the research questions, and in a singular focus meaning that it is not repetitive. The themes should also be defined in an informative, concise, and memorable in that describes the participants' language and concepts.

The final phase of this thematic analysis was producing the report in which the analysis was written in a formal process. The report of the data should be written clearly, logically, and relevant to the study. These guidelines of thematic analysis were important as they produced a good analysis of the data.

3.6 TRUSTWORTHINESS

3.6.1 Member Checking

Member checking is a valuable tool in ensuring the accuracy and reliability of the study. After conducting the interviews, the researcher summarised the findings and invited participants to review and provide input on interpreting the data (Thomas, 2017). The researcher also ensured that the participants' perspectives were adequately represented by asking if they had any additional insights. The questions were phrased differently during the interview to minimise potential misunderstandings. Once the transcriptions were completed and analysed, the participants were contacted again via WhatsApp to allow them to double-check or correct any misinterpretations of their perspectives on the data.

3.7 ETHICAL CONSIDERATION

The researcher ensured transparency and accountability by maintaining these principles throughout the research. Therefore, the researcher carefully addressed various ethical considerations in this study. These considerations involved informing the participants about the voluntary nature of their participation, providing them with sufficient information about the study, explaining the criteria for their selection as participants, obtaining their consent through consent forms, and ensuring the confidentiality of their information. The permission forms, which outline the objectives and details of the research, enable participants to give their informed consent with greater understanding.

In addition, the participants were informed that their involvement in this study was optional and that they should contact the researcher if they desired to discontinue the interview. Furthermore, the researcher ensured the participants' privacy by assigning them pseudonyms. These ethical principles enable the participants to provide their viewpoints on this research and then allow the research to be evaluated (Kalu, Felicity & Bwalya, Jack, 2017).

CHAPTER 4

DATA ANALYSIS, RESULTS, FINDINGS, AND DISCUSSION

4.0 INTRODUCTION

This chapter will lay out the findings of this study. The findings and results from the participants were analysed manually and were coded into several themes and sub-themes. The findings of this study answered the following research question:

1. How do K-pop fans and non-fans in Malaysian perceive soft masculinity as represented by K-pop idols?

This chapter discussed the themes that emerged from the analysis of the study, including social demographic background, and two sections of themes. The first section consists of the findings from the fans' perspective: Theme 1: K-pop Fandom and Engagement, Perceptions of Soft Masculinity and Masculinity in K-pop, and Theme 3: Cultural Influences and Expectations. Next, the second section consists of points of view from non-fans perspective: Theme 1: Soft Masculinity Representation in K-pop, Theme 2: Cultural Perspectives on Masculinity, and Theme 3: Behind the Scenes of K-pop. The data and responses from the participants were divided and put according to the sub-themes under the main themes of this research.

4.1 SOCIAL DEMOGRAPHIC BACKGROUND

These findings showed the identity of the participants, including their age, gender, and status of familiarity with K-pop. Familiarity with K-pop pertains to individuals' interest levels in the genre, categorising them as either fans or non-fans. This distinction helps to gauge the extent of their connection and exposure to the world of K-pop, providing insights into their preferences and affiliations within the musical genre. This section also provided results on their engagement status with K-pop, ranging from zero involvement to casual listeners and dedicated long-term fans. This spectrum captures the diverse nature of participants' connections with K-pop, reflecting varying interest levels and active participation.

4.1.1 Demographic Information of Participants

Table 4.1.1 Demographic information of participants

	Age	Gender	Familiarity with K-pop	Engagement with K-pop
Participant 1	23 years old	Female	Non-fan	Zero
Participant 2	23 years old	Female	Non-fan	Casual listener
Participant 3	23 years old	Male	Non-fan	Casual listener
Participant 4	25 years old	Male	Non-fan	Zero
Participant 5	23 years old	Female	Fan	6 years
Participant 6	23 years old	Female	Fan	7 years
Participant 7	24 years old	Male	Fan	10 years

Participant 8	23 years old	Male	Fan	5 years
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The study comprises eight participants: six individuals aged 23 and the remaining two aged 24 and 25. The gender representation is evenly balanced, with four participants identified as female and four as male. Additionally, the participants exhibit a dichotomy in their engagement with K-pop, with half being avid fans and the other half classified as non-fans.

Analysing the level of engagement with K-pop, the non-fan participants (Participants 1 to 4) indicate either zero engagement or casual listening. Participant 1 and Participant 4 express zero engagement, while Participant 2 and Participant 3 identify as non-fans but engage as casual listeners.

On the other hand, the fan group (Participants 5 to 8) demonstrates varying degrees of engagement spanning from 5 to 10 years. Participant 5 and Participant 6, both females, identify as fans with engagement periods of 6 and 7 years, respectively. Among the male fans, Participant 7 has been involved for ten years, while Participant 8 has a 5-year history of engagement with K-pop.

4.2 FINDINGS OF RQ INTERVIEW ANALYSIS



Figure 4.2 Thematic Map of Research Question

4.2.1 Theme 1: Fans: Perceptions of Soft Masculinity by K-pop Idols

In the first theme, this paper explores the participants' views on soft masculinity and also looks into the fans' acceptance towards the soft masculinity shown by the K-pop idols. The sub-themes in this section were divided into two consisting views on soft masculinity, and acceptance of soft masculinity.

4.2.1.1 Sub-theme 1: Views on Soft Masculinity

This study focuses on the participants' views on soft masculinity as K-pop fans in the first sub-theme. Participant 5's soft masculinity perspective leans towards appreciating femininity-related qualities. She emphasized distinctive charm, manner, and demeanour, suggesting a nuanced understanding beyond traditional notions of masculinity. She claimed, "...in the K-Pop industry, male artists exude a distinctive charm with their refined manner of speech, graceful demeanour, and meticulous self-care routines." She may value a more emotionally expressive and multifaceted form of masculinity.

Participant 6 also expressed a view that soft masculinity aligns more with femininity, and softer traits indicate an acceptance of a broader spectrum of gender expressions.

"... soft masculinity, I think, is a soft version of masculinity where the men are feminine in terms of emotion, fashion, and visual. I think soft masculinity is when a man can express their feeling well, follow trendy fashion, and use skincare and cosmetics to look glowing and pretty."
(Participant 6)

She likely recognizes that masculinity can embody various characteristics and is not confined to stereotypical expectations. However, she also shared her story of Malaysian locals with negative views of soft masculinity. Based on Participant 6, the negative assumption about K-pop idols undergoing plastic surgery is somehow popular, and it reflects a prevalent stereotype in society. She said that she was aware of this situation due

to the thousands of hateful comments bombarding the local news posts whenever the sites post about K-pop idols.

“...most Malaysians who are not K-pop fans are always assuming that all K-pop artists have the surgery to change their faces by calling them plastics. They also criticize the male K-pop artists for having fair skin, which is not manly. K-Pop artists are also hated because they wear makeup, care about skincare, and express their emotions freely.”
(Participant 6)

This stereotype may contribute to the stigmatization of individuals associated with softer expressions of masculinity, perpetuating narrow beauty standards.

On the other hand, Participant 7 claimed the concept of soft masculinity is challenging traditional concepts of masculinity, suggesting a progressive outlook as he said, “...soft masculinity challenges the traditional concept of being man like they are allowed to show emotions and express feelings.” He is open to questioning societal norms and may be inclined toward embracing a more fluid and inclusive definition of masculinity.

Participant 7 also highlighted the unfair treatment that has been faced by K-pop idols, suggesting a recognition of societal biases against those embracing softer or non-traditional forms of masculinity. This participant may perceive an unjust societal response to individuals who deviate from traditional gender norms.

Additionally, Participant 8 recognized that although masculinity has often been related to strength, strength can also come from softness, and describing soft masculinity as kinder, softer, and more emotional and compassionate indicates an appreciation for the positive qualities associated with softer expressions of masculinity.

“... when you care, show emotions, empathy, you risk getting hurt. However, I believe that there is strength in facing those emotions. It needs courage and willpower to put yourself in a position to get hurt purposefully. Compared to ignoring, not caring, and shutting out your feelings so that you will not get hurt. While you may appear strong in the

eyes of others because nothing people say will affect you because you do not care because you are “strong”, at the end of the day, it is cowardice.”

He connected soft masculinity to the feelings one needs to embrace, although it might cause them to get hurt. However, it is better than looking like a coward in the end. His connection to a preference for the K-pop genre suggests a potential link between musical taste and perceptions of masculinity.

4.2.1.2 Sub-theme 2: Acceptance on Soft Masculinity

For the next sub-theme, this paper will discuss the acceptance of soft masculinity by the participants. First, Participant 5 associated soft masculinity with someone bright and fun to get along with, which suggests a positive view. Although masculine men always surround her life, she also has a fair share of experience with effeminate men and claims, “...I find nothing wrong with them.” She may appreciate the positive and enjoyable aspects of softer expressions of masculinity, fostering a more inclusive perspective.

Furthermore, Participant 6 accepted soft masculinity as long as the individuals adhering to soft masculinity fulfil their responsibilities as men. She said, “...being soft masculinity does not mean that someone is not a man anymore, and the responsibility for them is still equal to other men.” She recognized that gender roles can be flexible while still acknowledging traditional responsibilities.

Similarly, Participant 7 also accepted soft masculinity while emphasizing the importance of fulfilling responsibilities as a man, indicating a balanced view. This participant may value a blend of traditional and non-traditional gender expressions, recognizing that masculinity is not defined solely by conforming to established norms.

Moreover, Participant 8 viewed soft masculinity as something that needs to be adapted and considered, suggesting an acknowledgement of the evolving nature of societal norms. He claimed that being soft and compassionate does not mean the individual is weak

or vulnerable, but it is the opposite. This participant may be open to reevaluating traditional expectations and adapting to a more inclusive understanding of masculinity.

4.2.2 Theme 2: Fans: K-pop Influences

This theme explores how participants connect with and are influenced by K-pop in Malaysia. It looks into the fans' involvement before and during their participation in the fandom. The sub-themes in this section were divided into four: K-pop popularity in Malaysia, engagement with K-pop, and motivation to be a fan and the reality of K-Entertainment.

4.2.2.1 Sub-theme 1: K-pop Popularity in Malaysia

For the first sub-theme, which discusses the K-pop popularity in Malaysia, Participant 5 entered the K-pop scene with prior awareness of its hype. She already knew about K-pop even before becoming a fan after five years of familiarity with the genre. This suggests that K-pop had already made significant waves in Malaysia, creating a buzz that reached even those who might not have actively sought it out.

Participant 6 was exposed to K-pop through her friends, indicating the social influence of peer circles. Friends play a crucial role in introducing and sharing cultural interests, showcasing how K-pop becomes a shared experience among close-knit communities. Similarly, Participant 7 not only got exposed to K-pop through friends but also perceived it as a trend before she became a real fan afterwards. This implies that K-pop has transcended being just a musical genre and has become a cultural phenomenon, influencing trends and lifestyle choices among the youth.

However, the discovery of K-pop by Participant 8 was different from the others, as he was going through personal exploration highlighting the proactive nature of some individuals in seeking out new cultural phenomena. He said, "...honestly, I do not know

when the turning point occurred. I never really knew the genre until when I was in high school. Before that, I listened to Fall Out Boys, Pierce the Veil, and All American Boys.” It suggests that K-pop’s popularity depends not solely on social influences but also on personal curiosity and exploration.

4.2.2.2 Sub-theme 2: Engagement with K-pop

In the second sub-theme, this paper explores how the participants engage to be more involved in the K-pop scene. Participant 5 made an effort by joining a fan club to take their engagement with K-pop to a deeper level. Fan clubs are often platforms where fans actively participate, share information, and celebrate the achievements of their favourite idols. This level of engagement suggests a strong emotional connection to the K-pop culture.

Participant 8 also actively tried to learn more about K-pop and discover new songs, showcasing a proactive and enthusiastic approach to engaging with the genre.

“...I went on to discover CNBLUE, BEAST, Girls’ Generation, AOA, Sistar, Girl’s Day, Miss A, Shinee, and well, let us just say my listening range expanded. I also started to watch Kdramas and learned how to read Korean because of it. Even memorized songs by the lyrics.” (Participant 8)

His interest in Korean culture is becoming wider and not only limiting the K-pop genre. This indicates curiosity and willingness to explore beyond what is immediately presented, revealing a dynamic and evolving relationship with K-pop.

4.2.2.3 Sub-theme 3: Motivation to be A Fan

This section's third sub-theme discusses the participants’ motivation to become a fan. Participant 6 said, “...I fall in love with how good the music is and how it can lift someone’s mood.” Her appreciation for K-pop’s good music and its mood-lifting qualities aligns with

a common motivation for being a fan. Additionally, her transformation into a serious fan during the COVID-19 era due to boredom underscores the role of K-pop as not just entertainment but also a source of comfort during challenging times.

Participant 7 also fell in love with the music and culture, suggesting a holistic connection with K-pop. She said, “...I decided to follow and eventually fell in love with the music and culture.” It goes beyond the auditory experience, indicating an appreciation for the broader aspects of K-pop, such as fashion, visuals, and the associated lifestyle.

4.2.2.4 Sub-theme 4: The Reality of K-Entertainment

For the third sub-theme, which is the reality of K-Entertainment, Participant 5 recognized that the masculinity portrayed in K-Entertainment differs from real life, in which the media only shows what the viewers want to see rather than the reality. Most of the perfect portrayals of romantics and consideration are for boosting the ratings and getting public approval. This point of view highlights the participant’s awareness of media representations. She can easily distinguish between entertainment portrayals and everyday experiences.

On the other hand, Participant 8 had another point of view, noting that senior idols may appear more masculine than newcomers who have just debuted. The senior idols had much experience, which made them mature enough to handle problems and hardships, and they may appear more rigid to the world as days pass by since they know the hard reality of being a celebrity.

“That being said, K-pop men are not men. They are teenagers, boys. The ones we see on media started their career at a young age. They’re probably 17-18 when they debut, and you can observe the change in their demeanour over time. Older K-pop groups do not appear to have this flower boy type of presence. You can feel their growth and the change from being soft to much more masculine behaviour. I mean, aren’t we all like that? All

adults used to be that nice, innocent and caring. However, when they grow up, things change, and you no longer have the luxury to be that soft anymore. People will step on you the moment the opportunity appears. “Grow up.” Things have changed. You cannot be soft, or you will not survive in a world that ultimately expects you to be strong.” (Participant 8)

This opinion adds depth to the understanding of K-Entertainment dynamics and also life. He recognizes the influence of experience and seniority in shaping perceptions of masculinity.

4.2.3 Theme 3: Fans: Cultural Perspectives

In this third theme, this paper explores the multifaceted perspectives of cultural influences and societal expectations in Malaysia. There are six subthemes under this context: cultural knowledge, the roles of a man in life, views on masculinity, the reality of Malaysian men, religious views, and societal expectations.

4.2.3.1 Sub-theme 1: Cultural Knowledge

For the first sub-theme, this paper focuses on the cultural knowledge the fans know of and may relate to the context of a soft mascot being discussed. Participant 5 said that although many hateful comments and criticism are coming from locals towards K-pop idols, especially concerning their soft traits, it differs from the fan’s side. She claimed, “... K-pop fans in Malaysia often accept how masculinity is perceived in Korea. They consider it as cultural norms for the men to act softer.” The acknowledgement that fans in Malaysia accept Korean masculinity as a cultural norm demonstrates cultural awareness. This participant recognizes the importance of understanding cultural differences in shaping perceptions of masculinity.

Likewise, Participant 6 also highlighted the disparity in culture between Korea and Malaysia, hence rejecting the unacceptable hateful behaviour of Malaysian locals towards K-pop idols. She stressed an awareness of the contextual factors influencing perceptions. This participant also emphasized the need to consider cultural nuances when interpreting expressions of masculinity.

4.2.3.2 Sub-theme 2: The Roles of A Man in Life

For the second sub-theme, the participants shared their views regarding the roles of a man in life. Participant 5 described a man's traditional role as being a provider or protector, which aligns with conventional expectations. This participant's perspective reflects a belief in the traditional responsibilities associated with masculinity since she was first introduced to and grew up in that surrounding.

Similarly, Participant 6 also emphasized the role of a provider associated much more with men in her life, such as providing good advice, money, emotional support, and being a protector. She also said, "...it is good if he can repair what is broken, but it does not matter as long as he cares and does something about it." It indicates a more comprehensive understanding of men being okay if he is not good at something since the effort still counts. She combines emotional and practical aspects, demonstrating a multifaceted view of the male role.

Participant 7 also described the roles of a man as being a protector, faithful, and a good provider while adding "... in terms of financial and emotional to our loved one." This aligns with conventional expectations of masculinity, similar to Participants 5 and 6. While Participant 8 also had the same belief, he also added the role of a man as a pillar to lean on. However, this pillar can be either soft, tough, or both, creating the opportunity for every man without the necessity for toughness; as he said, "...it can be comfortable to lean on pillars that have soft pads on them rather than a pure concrete one." This participant recognizes that strength can manifest in various ways, challenging rigid stereotypes.

4.2.3.3 Sub-theme 3: Views on Masculinity

Next, this study focuses on the participants' views on masculinity in the third sub-theme. Participant 5 associated masculinity with strength, confidence, and dominance. This perspective aligns with traditional notions of masculinity that emphasize physical and assertive qualities. The participant's viewpoint reflects a common societal understanding of what it means to be masculine.

On the other hand, Participant 6 defined masculinity based on a combination of strength and consideration. This nuanced perspective suggests acknowledging both traditional and empathetic attributes associated with being a man. It highlights the importance of emotional intelligence alongside physical attributes.

Moreover, Participant 7 believes that masculinity is necessary for men to embody manliness, physically or mentally. This perspective echoes traditional expectations of masculinity that emphasize qualities traditionally associated with being a man. The emphasis on both physical and mental attributes adds depth to this viewpoint.

Meanwhile, Participant 8 noted that some individuals who possess masculinity are also attracted to K-pop. This observation introduces an interesting dimension, indicating that interests such as K-pop may intersect with or influence perceptions of masculinity. It suggests that masculinity is not a monolithic concept and can be influenced by diverse interests.

Participant 8 also highlighted several negative views on masculinity, particularly toxic masculinity. He expressed his discomfort with the toxic masculinity doctrine of society, which controls how men should behave.

“Men should listen to Beethoven and Chopin’s rock, metal, and classical pieces. That is the pinnacle of an absolute man. “Real men” should not be

watching men dancing in public to appeal to their female audience. Men are supposed to “get a real job”, and “if it is not hard and physically challenging, then it aint a real job”. Men are supposed to lift weights instead of dancing, shooting instead of painting. Violin? No! Drums! Guitar!” (Participant 8)

He highlighted an awareness of the harmful aspects associated with rigid and traditional notions of masculinity. This participant may reject behaviours that perpetuate harm or reinforce negative stereotypes. He also criticized societal expectations in Malaysia regarding masculinity. He challenged the narrow definition that excludes softer expressions as a part of man’s nature, although some parts of himself admit the truth behind it.

“It is a dominant doctrine among men that being soft makes you weak. At the same time, I do believe that it is true in a sense. After all, the more you care, the more it hurts. Men do not have the luxury of being weak. People will not go their way to get you out of the pit hole. Often, you will be the one that saves yourself.” (Participant 8)

4.2.3.4 Sub-theme 4: The Reality of Malaysian Men

The next sub-theme will focus on the reality of Malaysian men, in which Participants 5 and 8 share their points of view in this context. Participant 5 described Malaysian men as having a traditional masculine image: “...characteristics such as facial hair, which is often deemed attractive in Malaysia, stand in contrast to the beauty standards in South Korea.” This participant’s view reflects the societal expectations of masculinity in the Malaysian context.

Participant 8 also observed that men in Malaysia appear tougher at times in order to protect themselves against the world. He said, “...the need to be strong to face the world. Like we are always reminded that one day we need to be independent and that no one will be able to care for us when we grow up.” He implies an awareness of the prevailing societal image and recognizes the influence of societal expectations on the growth of masculinity in a person.

4.2.3.5 Sub-theme 5: Religious Context

In this sub-theme, Participant 5 emphasized the importance of respecting religious convictions and expressing concerns about the blurring boundaries between femininity and masculinity that have become clearer as the day goes by. She considers religious values and acknowledges the intersection of cultural, religious, and gender norms.

“I believe that individuals are free to express themselves in ways that align with their personal beliefs, provided it respects their religious convictions and upholds a fundamental respect for women. Nevertheless, there is a legitimate concern for the future as the traditional boundaries between masculinity and femininity become more blurry, potentially leading to shifts in systemic and societal norms. Knowing how to balance self-expression and preserving cultural and systemic norms.” (Participant 5)

Participant 7 also stated that such soft traits are acceptable and need to be considered as long as they do not oppose the sacred teachings of religion, which indicates a nuanced understanding of the importance of moderation. He also recognizes the need to align personal beliefs and cultural expressions of masculinity.

4.2.3.6 Sub-theme 6: Society’s Expectations

In the last sub-theme, Participant 6 described masculinity as how a man would like to show up and how society measures them, which she acknowledges as the role of societal expectations. She recognizes the interplay between personal identity and external perceptions. Participant 8 also defined masculinity as how a man is expected to behave, and they cannot afford to look weak in public. This participant acknowledges the external pressures that shape perceptions of masculinity.

“Would society accept a crying man and a woman has to ‘pujuk’ him? Some may do, but it is not the norm, and I am not talking locally; I am talking globally. Some studies found that men are less desirable when they are soft. Women cannot rely on them or be protected by them.” (Participant 8)

4.2.4 Theme 1: Non-fans: Perception on Soft Masculinity by K-pop Idols

This theme provided insight into the non-fans' perception of soft masculinity as represented by K-pop idols. Two sub-themes are developed while analysing the data under this theme. The first sub-theme was views on soft masculinity, which discussed their overall opinion and perception towards soft masculinity in general and towards K-pop idols. The second sub-theme was their acceptance of soft masculinity, which showed their consideration and comfort with the concept of soft masculinity.

4.2.1.1 Sub-theme 1: Views on Soft Masculinity

All the non-fan participants generally share the same view towards the soft masculinity representation as shown by K-pop idols. For the first sub-theme, participant 1 articulated a positive stance on soft masculinity by expressing the need to reduce hegemonic masculinity. She mentioned, "I absolutely enjoy the new model of soft masculine because it reduces the unhealthy traits of hegemonic masculinity".

This suggests an acknowledgement of the existing dominance of traditional masculinity and a desire for a shift toward a more balanced and nuanced form of masculinity. She also associated soft masculinity with being gentle and pleasant, indicating a preference for these traits over more rigid masculine stereotypes. The mention of achieving the right balance between masculinity and femininity suggests an understanding that gender expressions can exist on a spectrum. Moreover, she also claimed that "soft masculinity is even greater..." promoting the effect on men's mental health who are becoming more emotionally expressive of their feelings instead of bottling it up inside.

Participant 2 contributed another point of view by suggesting that soft masculinity blurs the lines between femininity and masculinity. She mentioned that "...they are those

men who like things that women like such as the colour pink, soft colours, dislike facial and body hairs, and integrate into characteristics that are more often associated with womanhood." This perspective challenges traditional gender norms, recognising the fluidity in gender expressions and an appreciation for a more inclusive understanding of masculinity.

Participants 1 and 2 also mentioned that they encountered Malaysians associating soft masculinity with terms like 'sissy' and 'effeminate.'

"Growing up, some of my guy friends think that male K-pop idols look like females or have feminine traits. They often joke about them being skinny and make fun of them acting 'aegyo'." (Participant 1)

"I am aware of that gendered construction of K-pop in Malaysia where most Malaysians (considered them as non-fan) view K-pop idols as not the 'real man' where they should possess the traditional attributes of man such as having strong body muscle, a bit tanned skin, having facial and body hairs, involve in hard labor. To Malaysians, male K-pop idols are viewed as '*lelaki lembik*' or effeminate men." (Participant 2)

This indicates a societal perception that may contribute to a less favorable view of soft masculinity. The use of these terms reflects entrenched stereotypes and reveals a potential source of resistance or discomfort within society toward non-traditional expressions of masculinity.

Participant 3 reinforced positive views by associating soft masculinity with "...a man who has soft elements such as gentle conversation, pleasant response, and others." This opinion aligns with Participant 1's perspective, indicating a shared sentiment among participants that positive and desirable traits characterise soft masculinity. Participant 4, however, used the term 'sissy' to describe soft masculinity, introducing a negative connotation. This perception suggests a contrasting view, emphasising the existence of societal stereotypes that associate soft masculinity with derogatory terms.

4.2.1.2 Sub-theme 2: Acceptance on Soft Masculinity

The second sub-theme focused on the participants' acceptance towards the soft masculinity shown by K-pop idols. Participant 1 expressed positive views and demonstrated acceptance by mentioning enjoyment since her partner also practices soft masculinity and is always gentle with her: "I also enjoy the soft masculinity of my partner who is always gentle with me." This first-hand experience in discovering the new concept of masculinity made the participant feel comfortable and open to knowing more about the concept.

Participant 2 also exhibited acceptance by stating that they are fine with men embodying soft masculinity. She said, "... this 'soft masculinity' model where men seem to be not in their innate state of having the characteristics or attributes of a traditional strong man, to some extent I think it is fine for a man to be that way." This simple acceptance reflects a willingness to embrace diverse expressions of masculinity without judgment.

On the other hand, Participant 3 emphasised the importance of treating individuals with respect and recognising the need for societal acceptance. The participant also highlighted, "...they do not choose to be soft due to hormonal, family and other factors. We need to treat them as well as we treat others. It's just that their personalities are a little different as it seems...", suggesting a mature understanding of the innate nature of one's expression of masculinity. Participant 4 echoed the sentiment of treating individuals with respect, reinforcing a theme of acceptance despite the negative connotations introduced in the first subtheme.

4.2.5 Theme 2: Non-fans: Behind the Scenes of K-pop

In this second theme, this paper finds two suitable sub-themes based on the interviews discussing the behind the scenes of K-pop which are the K-pop popularity in Malaysia and also the reality of K-entertainment.

4.2.5.1 Sub-theme 1: K-pop Popularity in Malaysia

In the first sub-theme, Participant 1 considers K-pop as one of the mainstream music genres worldwide, hence explains how she became familiar with K-pop even though she is not a fan of the genre. She claims, “...I have seen it on television, the radio, and on social media...,” indicating its widespread popularity on a global scale.

Additionally, Participant 2 said that she was exposed to K-pop by her sisters ever since she was a kid. Growing up, her high school friends were also avid fans of K-pop. Hence, she clearly could not escape from becoming familiar with and recognizing the idols and their songs despite not becoming a fan herself. It was to the extent that she unconsciously searched for K-pop songs to listen to, as she said, “...I to some extent also like listening to K-pop but not a fan but I did not dislike it.. You got me right?” suggesting a long-standing presence of K-pop in global entertainment, even reaching younger audiences and somehow turning them into a casual listener.

Similarly, Participant 3 was also exposed to K-pop during his teenage years because he was surrounded by K-pop fans, particularly his brothers and girlfriends. Despite not becoming a fan, he had some interest in some of the songs to the point that he and his friends considered performing a K-pop song during a school festival. This point of view highlights that K-pop truly has its appeal to a younger demographic globally and enough to make a person comfortable liking the music without becoming a fan.

Participant 4 was also exposed to K-pop through family, indicating the role of social networks in the global dissemination of K-pop culture. He also mentioned that “...the music is kinda catchy...,” indicating that he was attracted to the songs.

4.2.5.2 Sub-theme 2: The Reality of K-Entertainment

In the second sub-theme, Participants 2 and 3 gave some overview of the reality of K-Entertainment, which may contradict how Malaysians always perceive Koreans. Participant 2 believes that many Korean men are perceived as more caring, romantic, and considerate than Malaysian men, as seen in TV shows and dramas. However, in reality, this is not the case. She claims, "...I have heard that Korean men are just as bad as any man in the world, especially in Korea where hidden cameras are one of the top crimes there." This points to potential stereotypes or misconceptions about Korean men compared to Malaysian men.

, Participant 3 recognizes the hard work put in by K-pop idols to achieve success. He highlights the sacrifices those idols need to put behind in order for them to become successful despite people only seeing the rainbow and sunshine of results through the screen. He also notes the mandatory military service; he also sheds some light on the challenges and sacrifices made by K-pop idols needing to enlist in the military even though they work hard to keep their pretty faces. He also points out, "... from one angle, it illustrates how much their government attaches great importance to the masculinity of a man who can be used for national defense." This point of view notes that the Korean government still upholds the value of masculinity despite having a soft masculinity culture among the citizens.

4.2.6 Theme 3: Non-fans: Cultural Perspectives

This theme provided insight into the participants' perception of masculinity and the role of a man in general while incorporating the views from religious and cultural contexts. Four sub-themes are developed while analyzing the data under this theme. The first sub-theme was the role of a man in their life, which highlights the relationship of their male family members and friends. The second sub-theme was their perception of masculinity in general. The third sub-theme focused on views on Malaysian men while comparing them to K-pop idols. For the last sub-theme, it discussed about the role of a man in a religious context.

4.2.6.1 Sub-theme 1: The Roles of a Man in Life

For the first sub-theme regarding the role of a man in the participants' lives, Participants 1 and 2 think that men play a role as both financial and emotional providers. They also see men as people who can solve problems in various situations and show a supportive side.

“I do not have many men, only a brother, a father, and a romantic partner. My father typically provides for me and my family and drives me to places I need to be. As for my brother, he is six years older than me and has just started a family. Therefore, we barely talked. The last time I talked to him was months ago, in October. His role is to do what my father does when he is unavailable like driving me somewhere and, on rare occasions, giving me money. My partner plays many roles. He provides for me, always pays for the food when we are out together, and drives.” (Participant 1)

“My dad gave me so many things I needed and wanted. He holds a huge responsibility of supporting the family. He works and provides for us, the whole family. My father has paid for my education from kindergarten to university. He also taught me many things when it comes to academic stuff.” (Participant 2)

However, only Participant 1 expresses not-so-great views on masculinity and mentions things like traditional patriarchy and negative traits. She seems critical of traditional gender roles and the way that society has embedded specific gender roles in their life. She related masculinity with several negative connotations such as egoistical, aggressive, and low level of emotional capacity. She also mentioned, “...there is an unhealthy side of masculinity which relates to patriarchy; for instance, my brother never does any house chores and cannot even cook anything.”

Moreover, Participant 3 sees men as the backbone of the family, trying hard to be the perfect man for everyone. They believed “...in the family aspect, men are responsible for supporting the lives of their wives and children.” Participant 4 also described men as protective figures, emphasizing their role in looking out for others.

4.2.6.2 Sub-theme 2: Views on Masculinity

For the second sub-theme, which is the perceptions of masculinity, Participants 1 and 2 connect masculinity with physical traits like a strong face, big muscles, and body hair. They link a man's appearance with their idea of what it means to be masculine. Participant 1 said, "...when it comes to masculinity, I first thought of sharp facial features, big muscles, body hairs..." Participant 2 also had the same view regarding the concept of masculinity. They were the common attributes of a man, and she added another perspective: "...they do the rough job such as lorry driver, work at the offshores, etc."

Besides that, Participant 3 links masculinity with being rough, capable of doing various things, and having a firm tone. This suggests a more traditional and tough view of what it means to be a man. Participant 4 associates masculinity with the image of a Hollywood actor, particularly "...Ryan Reynolds...", showing that media shapes their perception.

4.2.6.3 Sub-theme 3: The Reality of Malaysian Men

For the third sub-theme, which is the views on Malaysian men, Participant 1 believed that Malaysian men struggle to express themselves, hinting at a potential communication challenge, a sense of reserved emotions, and the fear of being labelled as weak. Additionally, Participant 2 thinks Malaysian men stick to traditional ways of taking care of their appearance, reflecting cultural expectations similar to what Participant 1 has hinted at.

"...compared to Malaysian men who are more traditional in self-presentation. Malaysian men are more masculine in terms of physical appearance as they have strong physical attributes and more manly in the way they portray themselves by growing facial hairs, for example, which is normally deemed attractive in Malaysia." (Participant 2)

Meanwhile, Participant 3 highlights that having a handsome face is not a requirement for being a good husband in Malaysia, challenging superficial standards of attractiveness.

4.2.6.4 Sub-theme 4: Religious Context

For the last sub-theme, some participants share their views about the role of a man from the religious context, particularly Islam. Participant 2 clearly emphasizes the importance of men not dressing like the opposite gender and crossing what is already forbidden in the religion. She claims that doing cosmetics, wearing women's clothes, and wanting to have the same facilities as what has been given to women are clearly out of the boundaries of a man.

On the other hand, Participants 3 and 4 share the same opinion, which they highlight the importance of moderation in idolizing soft masculinity represented by K-pop idols and not becoming obsessed within a religious context. Participant 3 said, "...it is not wrong if it is just entertainment, and that does not erode one's identity and religious values in oneself." This suggests a connection between their views on masculinity and religious beliefs.

4.3 DISCUSSION

4.3.1 Introduction

Based on interviews with both non-fans and fans of K-pop idols in Malaysia, participants generally hold positive and comfortable views towards the soft masculinity represented by K-pop idols. The study suggests that participants, despite varying levels of knowledge and familiarity with soft masculinity, tend to accept this new concept. Some participants, however, express distinctive views on the reality of K-entertainment and the notion of toxic masculinity.

In essence, the findings indicate that all participants consider soft masculinity as a potential new normal. However, they emphasize the importance of practising it moderately and within religious boundaries. The study reflects a general openness among participants to embrace evolving concepts while being mindful of cultural and religious sensitivities.

4.3.2 Fans: Perception of Soft Masculinity by K-pop Idols

Exploring participants' views on soft masculinity as K-pop fans unveils a rich tapestry of perceptions, challenging and embracing evolving notions of gender expressions. In this theme, it is evident that soft masculinity is perceived through diverse lenses. The participants appreciate soft masculinity as a nuanced form that extends beyond traditional expectations. They emphasise refined speech, graceful demeanour, and meticulous self-care, challenging stereotypical notions of masculinity. According to a study by Ainslie (2017), Korean Soft Masculinity may have allowed Malaysian male fans to express themselves through new masculine identities, but that does not necessarily challenge traditional masculinity or to the extent of the existing patriarchal gender hierarchies.

Furthermore, the participants also bring attention to societal stereotypes, particularly in Malaysia, where K-pop idols are stigmatised for practices like plastic surgery, reflecting broader societal biases against softer expressions of masculinity. The phenomenon of ethnocentrism often results in a lack of appreciation for cultural diversity and an unwillingness to accept those who are different (Lee et al., 2020). This mindset can lead to the formation of negative stereotypes, prejudices, and discriminatory behaviours towards members of other cultural groups. These negative attitudes are often rooted in cultural differences, language, religion, family structure, and outward appearances such as clothing or food preferences.

Some participants emerge as a voice advocating for the progressive nature of soft masculinity, highlighting its potential to challenge traditional concepts. In a study conducted by Heath (2016), the author finds soft masculinity as a concept that encourages men to form deeper emotional connections and express themselves in ways that go against traditional expectations of how heterosexual men should behave. Recognition of societal biases against those embracing softer masculinity suggests an awareness of the injustices faced by individuals deviating from established gender norms. The participants also introduce a philosophical perspective, viewing soft masculinity as a manifestation of strength in embracing emotions and empathy, challenging the conventional association of masculinity solely with physical toughness. Modern notions of masculinity are evolving in response to shifting societal expectations regarding male behaviour (Connor et al., 2021).

Moving to accept soft masculinity, participants collectively exhibit a positive and inclusive stance. The acknowledgement of soft masculinity as bright, fun, and fulfilling responsibilities aligns with a broader understanding that transcends rigid gender norms. Though no specific studies associate soft masculinity with a bright and fun personality, Muldoon (2023) claims it to possess qualities of compassion, sophistication, and emotional intelligence. Also, they are now seen as individuals with noble intentions and a clear grasp of their emotions (Holt, 2019). Some participants also offer a balanced view, accepting soft masculinity while emphasising equal responsibilities. This indicates an awareness that gender roles can be flexible while recognising traditional responsibilities. Similar to the

claim by Ayuningtyas (2017), while physical appearance was always considered the primary factor in determining a person's gender identification, numerous other factors now come into play. Regarding male idols in K-pop, the fact that they use makeup and have an attractive appearance does not necessarily imply that they lack masculinity.

4.3.3 Fans: K-pop Influences

As observed in the findings, the exploration of K-pop popularity in Malaysia reveals diverse pathways through which individuals become acquainted with and engage in the K-pop scene. All participants, who are fans of K-pop idols, were introduced to K-pop through various channels, whether through prior awareness, exposure from friends, or personal exploration; the genre's influence has permeated Malaysian culture, suggesting its widespread popularity and cultural impact. According to Ryu et al. (2018), the rising popularity of Korean pop music among non-Koreans can be attributed to various factors, including the captivating visual and audio elements of the music itself, as well as the influence of peers, individual self-confidence, and media exposure. It becomes evident that K-pop has made significant waves in Malaysia, reaching individuals who may have yet to seek it out actively. Additionally, empirical data on Chinese K-pop fandom suggests that K-pop fan labour is creative labour, contributing to the continuous growth of the K-pop industry and the global influence of K-pop culture (Sun, 2020).

The participants' engagement with the K-pop scene also showcases varied efforts to deepen their involvement with the idols. They even participate in fan clubs and actively explore songs and Korean culture beyond the K-pop genre, highlighting individuals amid and evolving relationships in K-pop. Atiqah Abd Rahim (2019) states that fandoms should interact with other fandoms that share similar interests because this facilitates information sharing, which leads to positive relationships between fans. For K-pop fans, the fandom serves as a means of communication. This multifaceted engagement suggests a curiosity and willingness to explore beyond immediate perceptions, contributing to a richer and more

involved experience with the genre. Théberge (2015) states that these fan groups are typically linked to one another to aspire to their favourite celebrities.

Common motivations for becoming a K-pop fan include an appreciation for the music's quality and ability to lift one's mood. The transformative role of K-pop as a source of comfort during challenging times, particularly highlighted during the COVID-19 era, underscores its significance beyond mere entertainment. For example, K-pop fandoms, especially BTS, were crucial in spreading important public health messages during the COVID-19 pandemic, reaching communities worldwide without access to such information (Chang et al., 2021). Besides, they also utilised social media platforms to show their support for the #BlackLivesMatter movement and actively participate in discussions surrounding political, racial, and gender issues (Sacoman, 2021).

Additionally, the fans' love for music and culture reveals a holistic connection with K-pop, extending beyond the auditory experience to encompass broader aspects such as fashion, visuals, and associated lifestyles. According to research by Ahmad & Beng (2016), the Hallyu movement in this nation has helped Malaysians gain a deeper understanding of Korean society and culture by fostering more positive perceptions of Korea and igniting interest in the Korean language and culture.

Participants also discern between media portrayals and real-life experiences in discussing the reality of K-Entertainment. A study from Putri (2021) points out that K-pop content frequently strongly emphasises physical appearance, which may deviate from how K-pop is portrayed in the media. The awareness that media representations may differ from reality indicates a critical understanding of entertainment dynamics.

4.3.4 Fans: Cultural Perspectives

In exploring cultural knowledge among fans of soft masculinity, the participants collectively showcase awareness of cultural differences and the impact of societal

expectations on perceptions of masculinity. The acknowledgement that Malaysian K-pop fans accept Korean masculinity as a cultural norm demonstrates an understanding of the importance of cultural nuances in shaping perceptions. In a recent study, Yoon (2022) explores the phenomenon known as '*Koreaboo*,' which refers to K-pop fans who deeply appreciate all aspects of Korean culture, language, and people. This research highlights how K-pop fans go beyond just enjoying the music and actively engage with Korean culture. Similarly, Hisham et al. (2022) and Min et al. (2018) shed light on the mediatisation and transcultural fandom surrounding the Korean Wave. These studies demonstrate how international fans embrace K-pop and consume other forms of Korean popular culture, such as K-dramas. This awareness extends to rejecting hateful behaviour towards K-pop idols in Malaysia and emphasises the need to consider contextual factors when interpreting expressions of masculinity within the fan community.

Moreover, participants share a spectrum of perspectives regarding the roles of a man in life. Traditional expectations of men as providers and protectors are highlighted, aligning with conventional beliefs. This is similar to a study by Fazli Khalaf et al. (2013), in which the attributes of the role of a man associated with this category include being the primary provider for the family (the breadwinner), displaying a strong work ethic, exhibiting effective leadership skills (being decisive), demonstrating problem-solving abilities, possessing a wealth of knowledge, and being a nurturing father. The authors also claim that these attributes are often shaped by their religious beliefs and the perspectives inherited from their parents, particularly the father's.

The participants also showcase a spectrum of perspectives in the discussion on masculinity. Traditional notions of masculinity, such as strength, confidence, and dominance, are aligned with societal expectations. Besides, the participants introduce a nuanced definition, blending strength with consideration and highlighting the importance of emotional intelligence alongside physical attributes. According to Randell (2016), a concept known as hegemonic masculinity refers to a highly esteemed and culturally influential set of traits. These traits include emotional and physical strength and a propensity for taking risks. The concept of hegemonic masculinity is rooted in power

dynamics, where men who do not conform to the dominant norms of masculinity often face oppression and are seen as marginalised or subordinate.

Hence, some of the participants critique toxic masculinity, revealing discomfort with societal expectations that rigidly dictate men's behaviours. There is a debate surrounding the social and cultural construction of sex and gender. Scholars have argued that both are influenced by societal and cultural factors (Butler, 1990; Fausto-Sterling, 2008). Research has demonstrated that gender norms can influence emotional expressions, and individuals often conform to stereotypes when performing their gender roles (Randell, 2016). The author also finds that boys are taught to suppress signs of weakness or emotional vulnerability. The rejection of harmful aspects associated with traditional masculinity, as well as the critique of societal expectations, indicates a resistance against perpetuating negative stereotypes. This participant challenges the narrow definition that excludes softer expressions as a part of man's nature, recognising its truth.

4.3.5 Non-fans: Perceptions of Soft Masculinity Representation in Kpop

The first research question of this study was to find out Malaysians' perception of soft masculinity as represented by K-pop idols. There were many opinions on the concept of soft masculinity but most of them shared the same understanding on this matter. Most of the participants said that soft masculinity can blur the lines between femininity and masculinity as well to the point that it could reduce the hegemonic masculinity that has been practiced for ages within their society. Similar to the claim by Yusanta (2019), a K-Pop boyband can embody the fluidity that exists between masculine and feminine identities. It's evident from every one of their performances. They are capable of embodying both masculine and feminine ideas simultaneously. The author also claims that men with a six-pack body and a masculine demeanour could also display their sweet and feminine side. This was particularly evident in the acknowledgment of soft masculinity's potential to reduce the unhealthy traits associated with traditional masculinity which

supports Yusanta's view which this idea is viewed as a way to free men from toxic masculinity.

Furthermore, the participants highlighted the positive attributes of soft masculinity, associating it with traits such as gentleness and pleasantness which have been discussed in recent research. Based on research, soft masculinity is truly described as a form of masculinity that embodies feminine traits, and it is associated with pleasantness and tenderness (Dewi & Kurniati, 2022). Some participants also associated it with soft traits such as color pink, soft colors, less facial and body hair as well as integrated characteristics that are more often related to womanhood. This finding is similar to a study by Song & Velding (2020) which the respondents point out traits of K-pop idols as skinny, soft skin, no facial hair and smooth faces. This positive reception indicates a preference for qualities that deviate from rigid masculine stereotypes, reflecting a broader societal recognition of the potential benefits of embracing a more diverse expression of masculinity. The mention of achieving a balance between masculinity and femininity further suggests an understanding that gender expressions can exist on a spectrum. K-pop idols are neither overly masculine nor feminine, and the notion of masculinity and femininity exist in a sharp binary opposition is ignored (Song & Velding, 2020).

However, it is noteworthy that societal associations with terms like 'sissy' and 'effeminate' were encountered by participants, indicating existing stereotypes and potential sources of resistance or discomfort within the broader Malaysian society towards non-traditional expressions of masculinity. The claim that K-pop is effeminate is often associated with the concept of "soft masculinity," which is embodied by male K-pop stars known as 'kkonminam' or 'flower boys'. These individuals are characterized by their slender physique, fashionable attire, and use of makeup (Monocello, 2022).

Moreover, participants demonstrated varying degrees of openness towards soft masculinity. The experiences and attitudes shared by participants illustrated a spectrum of acceptance within the Malaysian context. Some participants explicitly expressed acceptance, with instances of personal enjoyment and comfort in their associations with

soft masculinity. This acceptance was not solely limited to the realm of K-pop idols but extended to personal relationships, as evidenced by the positive experiences shared by participants. This is in contrast with the study conducted by Ayuningtyas (2017), which some of the participants prefer not to have partners who are like K-pop idols, since for them, the soft masculinity shown are tolerable only on stage, but not in daily life.

4.3.6 Non-fans: Behind the Scenes of K-pop

The participants collectively illustrate how exposure to K-pop from a young age has become commonplace, leading to a familiarity with the genre even among non-fans. K-pop is positioned as a mainstream music genre with widespread popularity worldwide, emphasizing its visibility on various media platforms such as television, radio, and social media which was experienced by some of the participants. According to Au Xin Yi et al., (2022), in terms of Korean drama and music, the "Hallyu" has a great influence on Malaysian audiences. Local programming has started to incorporate Korean dramas and music due to demand and popularity. The genre's ability to transcend borders, infiltrate global entertainment landscapes, and influence the younger demographic is evident in the narratives. This is because audiences in Malaysia found the content easily accessible through media, and they preferred it.

Moreover, the participants provide insights into the reality of K-Entertainment, offering perspectives that may contradict prevailing perceptions. The narratives challenge stereotypes about Korean men, noting that while media portrayals may present them as caring and romantic, reality may present a different picture. This observation sheds light on potential misconceptions about Korean men, indicating a nuanced relationship between media representation and actual experiences. According to Ayuningtyas (2017), some of the Indonesian fan girls perceive soft masculinity in K-pop male idols as a form of performance, as they recognize the gender identity only as a marketing strategy that conducted purposefully to attract fans especially female fans. For example, 'mibaek', or skin whitening, is a tactic used by South Korean celebrities and stars to achieve success

and convey romantic themes, fantasy, and trans-Asian sensitivity in their media representations (Park & Hong, 2021).

Furthermore, the discussion on the challenges and sacrifices faced by K-pop idols offers a glimpse into the complexities within the industry. Participants collectively highlight the hard work and sacrifices behind the scenes, emphasizing the contrast between the glossy exterior presented to the public and the challenges faced by K-pop idols. Based on Song & Velding (2020), their respondents highlighted on the band members' diligent work ethic, which enabled them to perform very effectively and with unwavering confidence. They emphasized that becoming a K-pop idol requires significant effort, dedication, and extensive training. The aforementioned criteria unquestionably align with the anticipated characteristics of "typical" masculinity in the United States (Connell, 2005).

One of the participants also mentions that mandatory military service that is obligatory for all South Korean men including celebrities underscores the intersection between cultural values, expectations, and the entertainment industry. According to Joo et al. (2023), every non-disabled Korean man is required to fulfil their military service duty as mandated by the constitution. Male celebrities experience a significant interruption in their careers due to military service, as both effective management and regular public appearances are crucial for their success in the highly competitive entertainment sector (Kim & Sherry, 2022). Most Malaysians except the fans expect the Korean idols to be weak and soft, much related to their misconception of soft masculinities. The irony is, that the said idols who practice soft masculinity are the ones who have the masculine attribute by enlisting in the military and protecting their country.

4.3.7 Non-fans: Cultural Perspective

A consensus emerged among participants regarding men's dual role as financial and emotional providers, problem solvers, and supportive figures within family dynamics. The concept of a man as the primary breadwinner for the family has long been linked to the

idea of being a provider (Chandra & Suprajitno, 2022). Cultural and societal expectations have shaped this perception of masculinity and the associated responsibilities. However, this perspective is not uniform, with some participants challenging traditional masculinity and associating it with negative traits and patriarchy by claiming their male family members do not contribute to household chores. According to Ning & Karubi (2018), gender socialisation in Malaysian families is heavily influenced by patriarchal values. As a result, women often find themselves burdened with disproportionate household responsibilities. This imbalance often leads to women leaving the labour force, which in turn contributes to family conflict.

Perceptions of masculinity varied, with some participants associating it with physical attributes like a strong face, big muscles, and body hair. These claims are similar to those of Song & Velding (2020), who describe certain aspects of male appearance as muscular, strong jawline, and prominent brows that convey strength and virility. The authors further said that this so-called hegemonic masculine ideal uses pictures of a Western, White, able-bodied, heterosexual, middle-class or upper-class man to represent “normal” masculinity. Other participants also linked masculinity with roughness in nature, capability in various tasks, or the imagery of Hollywood actors, illustrating the diverse cultural factors influencing views on masculinity.

In the religious context, particularly within Islam, participants emphasised the importance of adhering to religious boundaries. There was a shared view regarding the necessity for moderation in idolising soft masculinity within a religious context. The Muslim community, in particular, has consistently voiced their concerns regarding the detrimental impact of this prevalent culture on Malaysian Muslim youth (Kim et al., 2023). The authors claim that these concerns have been increasing. Their legitimacy is backed by the mass media, previous research findings, and religious parties' viewpoints that have emphasised the adverse impacts of the Korean Wave. Many fans tend to imitate the fashion choices of their idols, which may not align with certain cultural or religious beliefs, and they may feel compelled to adopt unhealthy eating habits to achieve the slim physique often associated with Korean celebrities (Kim et al., 2023). Entertainment, while accepted,

should not compromise one's identity or religious values, indicating a nuanced connection between views on masculinity and religious beliefs.

4.3.8 Conclusion

In summary, the discussions among fans and non-fans regarding the perception of soft masculinity in K-pop reveal similarities and differences, offering a nuanced understanding of how cultural, societal, and individual factors influence perspectives.

4.3.8.1 Similarities

Both fans and non-fans acknowledge positive attributes associated with soft masculinity, such as gentleness and pleasantness. This indicates a broader societal recognition of the potential benefits of embracing a more diverse expression of masculinity. Both groups express the idea of balancing masculinity and femininity, recognizing that gender expressions can exist on a spectrum. This suggests an evolving understanding of gender norms beyond traditional stereotypes. Moreover, fans and non-fans encounter societal resistance and negative connotations of soft masculinity. Terms like 'sissy' are mentioned, indicating entrenched stereotypes and societal expectations that may hinder complete acceptance. Lastly, both groups highlight the diverse cultural dynamics shaping perceptions of masculinity within the Malaysian context. The discussions underscore the complex interplay of cultural expectations, media influences, and religious beliefs.

4.3.8.2 Differences

Non-fans demonstrate varying degrees of openness toward soft masculinity, with some explicitly expressing acceptance while others acknowledge societal resistance. Fans, on the other hand, collectively exhibit a positive and inclusive stance towards soft masculinity.

Furthermore, non-fans discuss the global influence of K-pop, emphasizing its visibility and impact on the global music landscape. Fans, however, delve into their motivations for becoming fans, highlighting the transformative role of K-pop as a source of comfort during challenging times. Additionally, non-fans also discuss societal expectations and stereotypes associated with K-pop idols, including misconceptions about their soft masculinity. At the same time, Fans provide a more nuanced perspective, challenging and embracing evolving notions of gender expressions and advocating for the progressive nature of soft masculinity. Lastly, fans demonstrate a deeper awareness of cultural differences and the impact of societal expectations on perceptions of masculinity, especially within the context of the fan community. Non-fans, while acknowledging cultural nuances, may delve less deeply into these aspects.

The similarities between fans and non-fans suggest a shared understanding of the positive aspects of soft masculinity and the challenges posed by societal resistance. The differences highlight those fans, through their deeper engagement with K-pop, develop a more nuanced and accepting perspective. The global influence of K-pop contributes to diverse entry points into the fandom, while cultural influences and expectations play a more prominent role in shaping fans' perceptions.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

5.0 OVERVIEW OF THE CHAPTER

This chapter will provide an overview of the summary of the study, implication of the study, limitations of the study as well as the recommendation of the study.

5.1 SUMMARY OF THE STUDY

In conclusion, this thesis has explored Malaysians' perceptions of soft masculinity as represented by K-pop idols, drawing insights from both non-fans and fans. The findings reveal a complex landscape where soft masculinity is generally embraced as a potential new normal, yet encounters resistance and negative connotations within broader Malaysian society.

Non-fans, while acknowledging the positive attributes of soft masculinity, demonstrated varying degrees of openness towards its acceptance. Some expressed explicit acceptance, citing personal enjoyment and comfort in their associations with soft masculinity, while others encountered societal resistance, evidenced by terms like 'sissy' and 'effeminate.' These non-fans emphasized the importance of moderation and adherence to religious boundaries when practicing soft masculinity, reflecting a nuanced connection between evolving concepts and cultural sensitivities.

Furthermore, non-fans highlighted the dual role of men as financial and emotional providers within family dynamics, shaped by cultural and societal expectations. The study uncovered varying perceptions of masculinity, ranging from physical attributes to roles in family life, illustrating the diverse cultural factors influencing views on masculinity.

The exploration of fans' perspectives provided a more nuanced understanding of soft masculinity. Fans exhibited a positive and inclusive stance towards soft masculinity, appreciating its nuanced forms that challenge traditional expectations. They emphasized qualities such as refined speech, graceful demeanour, and meticulous self-care, challenging stereotypical notions of masculinity. Fans also recognized the transformative role of K-pop beyond entertainment, acknowledging its influence in spreading public health messages and engaging in discussions on political, racial, and gender issues.

While both fans and non-fans acknowledged societal resistance and negative connotations associated with soft masculinity, fans exhibited a deeper awareness of cultural differences and the impact of societal expectations within the fan community. This suggests that deeper engagement with K-pop contributes to a more nuanced and accepting perspective, highlighting the global influence of K-pop on diverse entry points into the fandom.

To reiterate, the study emphasizes the evolving understanding of gender norms in Malaysia, with soft masculinity being considered a potential new normal. The findings underscore the importance of considering cultural dynamics, religious beliefs, and media influences when interpreting expressions of masculinity. As Malaysians navigate the complexities of embracing diverse expressions of masculinity, it becomes essential for societal discussions to foster inclusivity, challenge stereotypes, and recognize the nuanced nature of evolving gender norms. Education and awareness campaigns should be developed to promote a healthy and inclusive understanding of masculinity, allowing individuals to express themselves authentically within the cultural and societal context.

5.2 IMPLICATION OF THE STUDY

The study's findings have significant implications for various stakeholders. Firstly, university educators can leverage the insights to develop educational programs that foster a nuanced understanding of masculinity, encourage healthy discussions, and create inclusive student environments. Additionally, media literacy programs could empower individuals to critically evaluate portrayals of soft masculinity in media, particularly in the context of K-pop influence. The study also highlights the potential for religious dialogues to explore the intersection between evolving gender norms and religious values, fostering community understanding. Lastly, employers and organizations can use the study's insights to create workplace cultures that embrace diverse expressions of masculinity, challenge stereotypes, and promote inclusivity.

5.3 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

While the study provides valuable insights, several limitations should be considered. The sample size and representation may restrict the generalizability of findings to the broader population. Future research could benefit from a more diverse and representative sample. Moreover, the temporal context of the study reflects perceptions at a specific moment, and ongoing societal shifts may influence attitudes toward masculinity. Longitudinal studies could offer a more dynamic understanding of these changing perceptions. Also, self-reporting bias may have influenced participants, suggesting the need for future studies to incorporate mixed-methods approaches to triangulate findings. Lastly, considering the dynamic nature of the K-pop industry, continuous monitoring of industry dynamics is essential for the ongoing relevance of research in this area.

5.4 RECOMMENDATION OF THE STUDY

To build on the current study, future research avenues could include cross-cultural comparative studies to explore soft masculinity perceptions in different cultural contexts. Longitudinal studies would provide insights into the long-term impact of soft masculinity representations. Furthermore, researchers may consider incorporating intersectionality factors, such as race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, to understand how multiple identities intersect with perceptions of masculinity. Additionally, a more in-depth analysis of media content, specifically focusing on K-pop music videos and dramas, could enhance understanding of how media representations contribute to perceptions of soft masculinity. Lastly, future studies could delve deeper into the intersection of soft masculinity with specific religious beliefs, exploring how individuals reconcile evolving gender norms with their religious values. These recommendations aim to address the limitations of the current study and contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of soft masculinity in the Malaysian context.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Dear, participant. I would like to express my sincere gratitude for your willingness to be a part of this interview. I am currently conducting a study titled "Changing Norms: A Comparative Study of Soft Masculine Perceptions Among K-pop Fans and Non-Fans in Malaysia." The primary objectives of this research are twofold:

To explore the perceptions of K-pop fans and non-fans in Malaysian towards soft masculinity as represented by K-pop idols.

Before we delve into the interview questions, let's establish a common understanding of the terms we'll be discussing. "Soft masculinity" refers to a more nurturing, empathetic, and emotionally expressive form of masculinity, while "hegemonic masculinity" represents the dominant societal expectations and norms associated with traditional male behavior.

This interview will consist of 8 questions, which I will be sending your way via WhatsApp. Kindly submit your written interview answers via the application as well. Please feel free to respond at your convenience within the next day.

It is also important to note that your privacy and confidentiality are of utmost importance. Your identity will be kept private and confidential, and the information gathered during this interview will not be revealed to any third party. The research findings will be presented in an aggregated and anonymized form to ensure the protection of your identity.

Once again, thank you for your time and willingness to participate in this study. Your contribution is immensely appreciated.

APPENDIX B

Participant 1

1. Yes, I am familiar with K-pop. I believe it is one of the mainstream music, worldwide so I am familiar with the genre. I have seen it on television, the radio, and on social medias.

2. When it comes to masculinity, I first thought of sharp facial features, big muscles, body hairs, egoistical, aggressive, and low level of emotional capacity. For me, the word masculinity has a lot negative attributes.

For soft masculinity, the first thing that comes to mind is the right balance of masculinity and femininity. Someone who has a stand and integrity, but remains gentle and kind.

3. Characteristics that define a man is masculine, strong, egoistical, dominant, and a provider.

4. I don't have many men in my life, only a brother, a father and a romantic partner. My father typically provides for me and my family, and he drives me to places I needed to be. I rarely confide in him emotionally but when I do, he does listen and suggest solutions.

As for my brother, he's 6 years older than me and just started a family. Therefore we barely talked. The last time I talked to him was months ago, in October. His role is to do what my father does, when he is unavailable. Like, driving me somewhere and on rare occasions, gives me money.

My partner plays a lot of role. He provides for me, he always pays for the food when we are out together, he drives, and I often confide in him emotionally. His role is being there for me every day even though he's far away from me.

5. I would say my social and personal lives have a great amount of healthy masculinity. I believe masculinity is about being a provider and my father is the ultimate provider. My father and partner also always drive me anywhere I need to be. I also enjoy the soft masculinity of my partner who is always gentle with me. There is an unhealthy side of masculinity which relates to patriarchy, for instance, my brother never does any house chores and cannot even cook anything. But other than that, I think he is a great provider for his and our family.

6. I absolutely enjoy the new model of soft masculine because it reduces the unhealthy traits of hegemonic masculinity. Soft masculinity is even greater. I enjoy that more men realise that soft masculinity doesn't mean being gay. It's just being human. Being masculine but remains empathetic because there is strength in being kind. And with more awareness on men's mental health nowadays, it is nice to see that more men are becoming emotionally expressive of their feelings and communicating better instead of bottling it up inside.

7. Growing up, some of my guy friends think that male k-pop idols look like females or have feminine traits. They often joke about them being really skinny and make fun of them acting 'aegyo'. But in this modern era, I think people are more accepting of it.

8. If I am judging with what I am exposed to of kpop or kdrama, I'd believe that Korean men are romantic, expressive, and more empathetic compared to men in Malaysia. I have not met many romantic men in Malaysia. Most of them barely express themselves and do not know how to love. Probably scared of being labelled as a simp. But I have heard that Korean men are just as bad as any man in the world, especially in Korea where hidden cameras are one of the top crimes there.

Participant 2

1. Yes, I am somewhat familiar with K-pop. I think it is because I was exposed to it ever since when I was a kid. One of my sisters was very much into K-pop back then when she was in high school and I was just a little girl. Growing up, I was also surrounded by people who liked K-pop. My high school friends were all K-pop fans. In high school, I got to know from my friends and some K-pop groups such as Infinite, got7, Big Bang, Exo, etc. Being in uni, I met with classmates who also love K-pop. My roommate is a die-hard fan of BTS K pop group. She would listen to their songs anytime anywhere. When in her car, she would also turn on their song on her radio which I also hear. And there are some of the songs that I find good to listen to. So yeah, I am familiar with K-pop as I was and am still surrounded by K-pop fans. therefore, I to some extent also like listening to K-pop but not a fan but I did not dislike it.. u got me right?

2. When I hear the words, what comes to my mind is, that masculinity is the traits of being a real man, which means having the attributes of a man who is strong, though, rough, having strong body muscle, facial hairs, do the rough job such as lorry driver, work at the offshores, Etc. soft masculinity on the other hand is when the man is not interested in the attributes of masculinity that I've mentioned earlier. I think soft masculinity blurs the line between masculine and feminine. they are those man who likes things that women like such as the color pink, and soft colors, dislike facial and body hairs, and integrate in characteristics that are more often associated with womanhood.

3. In my opinion, the characteristics of a man can be seen through their- I) physical appearance. For this aspect, the typical attributes/characteristics that would define a man are that they have a big strong body, looks tough, is physically strong, has facial and body hairs, and of course for sure, they are human being with the chromosome of XY. Another aspect apart from physical characteristics is the behavior that defines the characteristics of a man - assertiveness, independence, and the ability to lead people in a group. so yeah, I think these are among the characteristics that define a man.

4. Men in my life revolve around my family. My father, and brothers. To me, they play very big roles in my life. My dad provided me with so many things that I needed and wanted. He holds a huge responsibility of supporting the family. He works and provides for us the whole family. My father has paid for my education since I was in kindergarten to university. He also taught me a lot of things when it comes to academic stuff. I always sought his help with my homework back in my primary school days even though it can be scary sometimes when I didn't understand things 🤔 my brothers, would also provide me with some financial support sometimes. They would also be giving me life advice sometimes.

5. My social life is quite boring I would say. This is because I am the type of person that don't really mingle around with people. I only have a very small circle of friends. To be frank, I don't even have many male friends except for a few of my classmates in university. Besides, I was in an all-girls high school for 5 years, which could also contribute to this point. My social life includes going out with my friends, gossiping with them about the latest news or info, and interacting with them via social media networks and media. My personal life on the other hand, as for now, I am still studying and I am now in the final year of my degree, my personal life revolves around doing student stuff such as meeting with my lecturer supervisor for my thesis writing and finishing my thesis.

6. I think this 'soft masculinity' model where men seem to be not in their innate state of having the characteristics or attributes of a traditional strong man, to some extent I think it is fine for man to be that way. however, it is not to the extent of being like women such as wearing women's clothes, doing makeup like women do, and wanting to have the privilege or the facilities that have been given to women because this is already too much. Plus, being Muslim, I believe that it is Haram (illegal) for men to act like the opposite gender as what they have been assigned to since birth.

7. Yes, I am aware of that gendered construction of Kpop in Malaysia where most Malaysian
(considered them as non-fan) view Kpop idols as not the 'real man' where they should

possess the traditional attributes of man such as having strong body muscle, a bit tanned skin, having facial and body hairs, involve in hard labour. To Malaysians, male Kpop idols are viewed as *lelaki lembik* or effeminate men. My attitude towards this phenomenon is that I am pretty much neutral. It does not affect me in any way as I am not a fan.

8. In my opinion, Kpop men are already used to looking 'beautiful' which comes from the effort of having strict body and skin care and all these efforts resulted in them looking more presentable in a sense that they are more fresh looking I would say, they are more presentable to the eyes of the Korean as this is how their beauty standard set up to if compared to Malaysian men who are more traditional in terms of self presentation. Malaysian men are more masculine in terms of physical appearance as they have strong physical attributes and more manly in the way they portray themselves by growing facial hairs for example which is normally deemed attractive in Malaysia.

Participant 3

1. Yes, I am familiar with K-pop. When I was 10 to 12 years old, I was exposed to K-Pop groups such as Super Junior, Big Bang and Girl Generation. Among the people around me who are interested in the band are my brother and my girlfriend in primary school. Among the Super Junior group songs that I still remember are Mr Simple and Bonamana. And the K-pop phenomenon that broke out at that time once made me and my friends think of performing the songs of those Korean groups at school.

2. I am of the view that the word 'masculinity' refers to a man who has character and acts like a man and does not have the softness of a woman. 'Soft masculinity' on the other hand is a man who has soft elements such as gentle conversation, pleasant response and others.

3. For me, the man character is a gender whose nature is rough, able to do various things and the tone of conversation is firm and not flattering.

4. The role of a man is to be the backbone of the family whether as a father, brother or son. In the family aspect, men are responsible for supporting the lives of their wives and children. Islam elevates the role of men through duties such as being an imam to lead prayers, being the head of state, being given the right to pronounce divorce as well as being the dominant recipient in the management of inheritance.

5. Many men around me understand the responsibility of being a man. Some of them work 2-3 jobs to support their families. There are also those who take care of their elderly parents at home, completing the trust as a son. Even my brothers who are married try their best to make their wives and children happy.

6. A soft masculinity is a character that will exist around us. Sometimes, they don't choose to be soft due to hormonal, family and other factors. Therefore, for me, we need to treat them as well as we treat others. It's just that their personalities are a little different as it seems. We have to adapt to their attitude.

7. In my opinion, we can celebrate whatever we like as long as it is not excessive, neglectful and against religion. That's how we interact with this K-pop entertainment. It is not wrong if it is just entertainment that does not erode one's identity and religious values in oneself. It becomes a problem when these K-pop artists are glorified so terribly that it makes self-respect no longer valuable.

8. Men who are trained in the Korean music industry are the ones who have to work hard in their mission to become celebrities. And most of them also do plastic surgery on the face to look more attractive and stylish. However, that does not reflect the overall reality of Korean men. In Korea too, almost every man will be called up for military training. From one angle, it illustrates how much their government attaches great importance to the masculinity of a man who can be used for national defense.

I think so in Malaysia too. The only difference is that a handsome face is not the main criteria for choosing a partner as a husband.

Participant 4

1. Yes. Bcs if my sister and then songs are kinda catchy.
2. masculinity: ryan reynolds soft masculinity: lelaki lembut?
3. someone who is protective, firm but gentle and most importantly someone who you can depend on
4. a role of a man is a provider and a protector. Also a leader.
5. social: antisocial, personal: conservative
6. Is just treat them as human beings. Treat them with respect and move on
7. people in malaysia can idolise them but not to a point where it becomes an addiction where people will perceive it as an obsession.
8. they are still men, some are born differently, have different surroundings and were brought up with different situations, so i would say they are not very different its just they have a different kind of masculinity due to their surroundings

Participant 5

1. Yes, I am very much familiar with K-Pop. I have been a fan since 2018 but I am always aware of its hype since 2013. I started to become more of a dedicated fan in 2018 when I started watching survival shows, reality shows and created a fan account to get closer to the fanclub community.

2. Masculinity is the traits that are often associated with men like strength and dominance. Soft masculinity on the other hand is sort of leaning towards femininity for example when men possess more feminine and soft traits.

3. I believe a man is someone who is confident, strong and brave.

4. The men in my life have always been my provider or protector.

5. My social and personal lives are mostly surrounded by women. The men in my life has always been masculine instead of soft masculine. However, I do encounter some men who are much more effeminate. I find nothing wrong with them, in fact I think they are usually more bright and fun to get along with.

6. I believe that individuals are free to express themselves in ways that align with their personal beliefs, provided it respects their religious convictions and upholds a fundamental respect for women. Nevertheless, there is a legitimate concern for the future as the traditional boundaries between masculinity and femininity become more blurry, potentially leading to shifts in systemic and societal norms. It's very important to know how to balance self-expression and preserving cultural and systemic norms.

7. As a K-Pop fan, I am aware that K-Pop fans in Malaysia often accept the way masculinity is perceived in Korea. They consider it as cultural norms for the men to act softer. However, it is to be noted that most of the observation comes from entertainment mediums which

may have slightly changed the behavior and standard compared to regular male in South Korea in order to gain more ratings, viewers and loyal fans.

8. In the K-Pop industry, male artists exude a distinctive charm with their refined manner of speech, graceful demeanor, and meticulous self-care routines. In contrast, Malaysian men project a more traditionally masculine image, even when compared to men in the entertainment industry. Notably, characteristics such as facial hair, which is often deemed attractive in Malaysia, stand in contrast to the beauty standards in South Korea.

Participant 6

1. I become interested in K-Pop because of my friend during 2012 because of how good the music and how can it lift someone's mood. I started to become K-Pop fans seriously during pandemic which is on 2021 where the government required everyone to go into quarantine and work from home because of Covid-19. I personally think that a lot of people started to become K-Pop fans during that time because of boredom. The music and variety show from K-Pop artists help with entertaining myself and make me feel better.

2. I think masculinity is how a man would like to show up and how a society measure a man. There are a lot of characteristics for the masculinity which is how strong the man is, how considerate are them to the women and what are their achievement. It is also about how they look like sometimes. For soft masculinity, I think it is a soft version of masculinity where the men are little bit feminine in term of emotion, fashion and the visual. I think soft masculinity is when a man can express their feeling well, follow the trendy fashion and use skincare and cosmetics to look glowing and pretty.

3. I think a man is someone that is naturally born as a man biologically. Man is someone who can differentiate between the good and bad things where they can think realistically and make good decision. A man is someone that can act gentle towards women and children and being helpful to the society. A man is someone that can be relied on.

4. The role of man in my life is that he can help me with things that I cannot do such as picking up something that is heavy. He should also provide good advice for me and help decide on things. Other than that, the man's role is to help with house maintenance. It is good if he can repair what is broken but it does not matter as long as he cares and does something about it. His role is also to protect the loved ones and keep them safe.

5. My social and personal life is a bit boring as I do not really make new friends and just befriend the friend that I already have during high school and foundation. I don't really communicate with people either through online or offline and I seldom go out with people because I prefer to enjoy my time alone. I spend a lot of my time with my phone and laptop to watch dramas and videos while trying to explore and learn new things.

6. I think there is no problem with soft masculinity if the man still recognizes themselves as man. It is because a lot of people these days are being comfortable to act as opposite gender which is a wrong thing to do. Being soft masculinity does not mean that someone is not a man anymore and the responsibility for them is still equal to other men.

7. Most of Malaysians who are not K-Pop fans are always assuming that all K-Pop artists have done surgery to change their faces by calling them plastics. They also diss the male K-Pop artists by having a fair skin which is not manly in their opinion. K-Pop artists are also being hated because they wear makeup, care about skincare and express their emotion freely. I am aware about the situation because whenever a local news published the story about K-Pop artists, people are always sending hateful comments towards the artists and the fans. The attitude is really not acceptable as people need to know that the culture of Korea and Malaysia is different and the same goes with the beauty standard.

8. I think men in K-Pop have a combination of handsome and pretty with a fair skin meanwhile the men in Malaysia have dark skin which is very different. The men in K-Pop have a good fashion taste as Korea is a country with trendy fashion while the men in Malaysia are not really into trendy fashion and more into comfortable everyday wear. Other than that, men in K-Pop can cry and tell their worries without having to face criticism

meanwhile the men in Malaysia need to be tough just like how the society tell them to. I don't really care about the masculinity and soft masculinity as long as the man can handle responsibility and commitment.

Participant 7

1. I became interested in kpop during my primary school years due to the influence of my Chinese friends and can be considered a trend back then so I decided to follow and eventually fell in love with the music and culture.

2. masculinity is about how a man has to be manly either physically or mentally while soft masculinity challenges the traditional concept of being man like they are allowed to show emotions and express feelings.

3. Being a man not only about strength or good looking but able to show empathy, consideration and know how to take care of himself especially in terms of hygiene

4. Being a protector, faithful,
and a good provider in terms of financial and emotional to our loved one

5. Boring and fun depends on my surroundings and situations.

6. I find soft masculinity should be a consideration as long as the traits of it do not oppose our religion and beliefs.

7. I would say the beauty standards of kpop because due to the unfair treatment of female and male idols when having to stick to specific standards and always being criticised when they tried to change it.

8. It is true that kpop men and Malaysian men are different but it does not make them less manly due to their appearance as long as they are able to show good personalities of a man that is a proof what being a man is all about.

Participant 8

1. Honestly, I don't know when the turning point occurred. I never really know the genre until when I was in highschool. Before that, I used to listen to Fall out Boys, Pierce the Veil and All American Boys. But if I have to choose a song I believe it's Fantastic Baby by BigBang. I went on to discover CNBLUE, BEAST, Girls' Generation, AOA, Sistar, Girl's Day, Miss A, Shinee, and well let's just say my listening range expanded. I also started to watch Kdramas and learned how to read Korean because of it. Even memorized songs by the lyrics.

2. Manly and Soft Manly? In relation to this IV context, a more masculine male would probably avoid the kpop genre. But I disagree, I've got male friends that aren't exactly soft but has Sana as his wallpaper. And I don't think listening to Kpop makes you soft? But I do think softer men prefer the genre more.

3. Stereotypically, men have to be strong. You don't cry or show emotions. You need to suck it up for the ones you care as vulnerabilities makes you unreliable. While stereotypical, it is somewhat the truth. We need to be resourceful and wise. After all, would you rather rely on yourself or men that can't give you what you need?

4. I would say provider, a pillar than you can lean on. But you can't lean on pillars that shakes. That being said, it can be comfortable to lean on pillars that have soft pads on them rather than a pure concrete one. Please tell me you get what I am saying.

5. While I am very sociable in nature, people who don't know me always say I have that mean look on me, that is of course until they realize I'm not what I appears to be in their eyes. In terms of my private life. I do not share them as much, especially mistakes of the past. While I know a lot about the people around me, I don't think they knew me as much. "I know you more than you know me" is a concept that I have mainly live by for a long time now.

6. It is something that I believe more men should adapt to. It is a dominant doctrine among men that being soft makes you weak. While I do believe that it is true in a sense. After all, the more you care, the more it hurts. Men do not have the luxury to be weak. People won't go out of their way to get you out of the pit hole. Often times, you will be the one that save yourself. I believe that strength can come from being weak/soft. When you care, show emotions, empathy, you risk getting hurt. But I believe that there is strength in facing those emotions. It needs courage and willpower to purposefully put yourself in a position to get hurt. Compared to ignoring, not caring, and shutting out your feelings so that you won't get hurt. While you may appear strong in the eyes of others cuz apparently nothing people say will affect you cuz you don't care because you're "strong", at the end of the day, it's cowardice. Avoiding to confront yours and others feelings simply due to the uncertain probability of you getting hurt in the process. But I do understand the fear. It is something that men are expected to behave. Would society accept a crying man and a woman has to puke him? Some may do, but it is not the norm, and I'm not talking locally, I'm talking globally. I believe that some study found that men are less desirable when they are soft. Women can't rely on them, can't be protected by them. But again, we must consider, is being soft and compassionate equals to you being weak? Being weak makes you vulnerable but does soft equals to weakness which makes a man vulnerable? I do not think so. We're human, we're supposed to have feelings. Sorry long

7. In Malaysia, I believe that guys who liked kpop is seen as soft and weak because of how the kpop artists appear to be. Men should listen to Rock, Metal, Classical pieces from Beethoven and Chopin. That is the pinnacle of an absolute man. "Real men" shouldn't be watching men dancing in public to appeal to their women audience. Men are supposed to "get a real job" and "if it is not a hard and physically challenging, then it ain't a real job". Men are supposed to lift weights instead of dancing, shooting instead of painting. Violin? No! Drums! Guitar!

8. From what I can observe, men in kpop appears to be softer. A lot of them seem to be kinder, emotional and compassionate. They can be seen crying on tvs (reality shows). Men

in Malaysia appears to be tougher. They always have this sense of having to be responsible for something. The need to be strong to face the world kind of thing. Like we are always reminded that one day we need to be independent and that no one will be able to take care of us when we grow up. That being said, kpop men are not men. They are teenagers, boys. The ones we see on media platforms, they started their career at such a young age. They're prolly 17-18 when they debut and you can observe the change in their demeanor over time. Older kpop groups do not appear to have this flower boy type of presence. You can feel their growth and the change from being soft to a much more masculine behavior. I mean aren't we all like that? All adults used to be that nice, innocent and caring. But when they grow up, things changed and you no longer have the luxury to be that soft anymore. People will step on you the moment the opportunity appears. "Grow up" things have changed you can't be soft or you won't survive in a world that ultimately expects you to be strong.