Racialised Soft Masculinity and the Authenticity Trap

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A few days ago, I watched FunkyFrogBait's video called "The 'Performative Male' Problem". The premise of the meme is quite familiar: men who carry tote bags, drink matcha, read bell hooks, or listen to Clairo are accused of adopting these habits for one and only objective: to impress women. The label suggests insincerity and a kind of calculated softness. These so-called "performative males" then fall under the category of manipulators. But what FunkyFrogBait shows, though, is that the joke is not harmless. It works by ridiculing and shaming men who step outside narrow masculine norms, and in doing so, it repeats the same logic that mocks women as "basic" for liking certain things. The insult is therefore less about the objects themselves than about enforcing boundaries.

Scrolling through the comments, I found a remark that shifted the frame again. Someone noted that many of the mocked tastes are not unusual at all in East Asia. And as I recalled my year spent in Taipei, I realised that they are indeed part of everyday life for a lot fo young men there. A Labubu keychain on a backpack, a tote bag in one hand, a matcha drink in the other, a playlist of Laufey or Clairo. None of this signals fakery in that context. It is simply ordinary taste. That contrast makes clear that the accusation of being "performative" is not just about gender authenticity but about enforcing a cultural baseline of masculinity.

With this essay, I follow that thread. I begin with small examples from online culture, then turn to the longer histories that make those examples intelligible. And finally, I want to ask how we might talk about masculinity without letting the word "performative" carry the weight of cultural disdain.

Everyday objects, ordinary tastes

The meme always circles around the same props. A canvas tote bag with a slogan, a matcha latte photographed in soft light, a copy of bell hooks's books on the table, a playlist filled with Clairo or Laufey. These items are listed as if they were clues in a case where the culprit is the man holding them, proof that he is not sincere but "staging" a role.

Picture the scene: you are walking in Los Angeles, you see a young man sitting at the terrace of a café. He is sipping on a green drink while reading a book by a feminist author. You take him in picture for the world to see. Soon, the comments fill with suspicion. He is not drinking matcha because he likes it, he is drinking it to look sensitive. He is not reading bell hooks because he is curious, he is reading her to impress. And there we are: the objects are stripped of their everyday use and turned into evidence of fraud.

Now, shift the scene to Shibuya on a weekday evening. A man steps off the metro with a canvas bag over his shoulder. Inside, his laptop and a change of clothes. He stops at a café where matcha is the normal beverage. The playlist in the background is filled with soft indie voices because that is what the shop plays. Nothing here is coded as a performance. It is simply the texture of daily life.

This contrast shows how fragile the accusation of being "performative" can really be. The same objects, depending on the context, can be read as fakery in one setting, and as unremarkable in another. The label does not only question sincerity, it also assumes a cultural baseline of masculinity. When that baseline is treated as universal, difference is flattened and older stereotypes about East Asian men can be quietly repeated.

The lineage of labels

In fact, the "performative male" meme sits within a longer history of terms that police men who fall outside narrow ideals of masculinity. Rather than claiming a single linear history, it is possibly more accurate to treat these labels as part of a family of discursive moves that perform similar social work: they mark deviation as feminised, queer, or fake, and then they ridicule it.

For much of the twentieth century, the simplest form of this policing was probably the casual use of the word "gay" as an insult. Scholars show that this was rarely about a person's sexual orientation and more often a shorthand for "not masculine enough". David Eng's work Eng (2001)on Asian-American masculinities demonstrates how moves like these can also be

racialised, thus rendering some masculinities persistently suspect.

Later, cultural figures such as the "new man", the "new lad", and the "metrosexual" reflected shifting debates about masculinity in the 1990s and 2000s. Cultural commentary and scholarship trace how the "new man" ideal, which was celebrated for sensitivity, was quickly contested and replaced by a recuperation of laddishness, while the metrosexual, popularised by Mark Simpson, was alternately embraced for his style and mocked as vain. These shifts illustrate what Connell (Connell 1995; Connell 2005) described as the dynamic between hegemonic masculinity and its subordinated alternatives: softness is tolerated only when it can be contained or reinterpreted as ironic.

With the rise of online subcultures, a new vocabulary appeared. Terms like "beta male" and "cuck" were mobilised in manosphere spaces, especially to shame men who are deferential or non-dominant. And more recent insults such as "soy boy" perform a similar boundary-making in digital form. Each of these terms mocks men who are seen as weak or politically progressive, and therefore effeminate. While these terms are recent, the mechanism itself is not. Martino Martino (2000) documents how homophobia and heteronormativity function as tools for regulating boys' behaviour in school settings. And Reigeluth and Addis Reigeluth and Addis (2021) give empirical evidence that boys experience constant pressure to prove and defend their masculinity. These findings help to explain why such labels gain traction even if the labels themselves are new.

Particularly, the "soft boy" emerged in indie and digital spaces as a figure who is emotionally expressive, aesthetically styled, and often ironic. Muldoon Muldoon (2023) notes that this figure is both celebrated and distrusted. On the one hand, it is praised for rejecting toxic masculinity, but on the the other hand, it is also suspected of using sensitivity as a tactic. The "performative male" inherits this double bind. Indeed, it carries the suspicion of the soft boy, the contempt of the soy boy, and the old reflex of equating sensitivity with queerness.

The labels change, the platforms change, but the work they do remains constant. They discipline men who deviate from hegemonic masculinity by branding them as fake. As Connell reminds us, hegemonic masculinity is not fixed but relational and adaptive: it evolves in response to challenges, and so do the discourses that defend it.

But the suspicion of softness is not applied evenly. It reflects a racialised hierarchy in which East Asian masculinity is pre-positioned as deviant.

The racial script behind the performative male

On the surface, the "performative male" meme appears to mock men for adopting soft aesthetics, emotional openness, and sometimes feminist language. But the suspicion it expresses, that these traits are not just feminine but fake, is not applied evenly. It reflects a deeper cultural logic, a logic that is racialised in effect even if not in intent. The meme may not necessarily target East Asian men but its logic is nourished by a racialised structure in which East Asian masculinity has long been coded as feminised, aestheticised, and suspect. The meme just repeats this logic even if it does not name it.

As noted earlier, many of the meme's visual and behavioural markers are East Asian-coded. These are not neutral signifiers, they carry aesthetic associations that, in Western contexts, are often racialised as delicate and feminised. Even the term "soy boy" carries a lot. Soy is native to East Asia and deeply embedded in East Asian cuisines. Soybeans contain dietary oestrogens. And supposedly, consuming these oestrogens would "feminise" men. But apart from this nutritional pseudoscience, it is a symbolic gesture that links softness to East Asian identity. The insult performs a racialised sleight of hand: it mocks men for being effeminate while drawing on cultural symbols that feminise East Asian masculinity by default.

David Eng's analysis of Asian-American masculinity is particularly important here. In *Racial Castration*, Eng argues that Asian men in Western discourse are "neither fully masculine nor fully heterosexual", positioned as perpetual outsiders to dominant masculinity. This means that when an East Asian man performs softness, he is not seen as deviating from hegemonic masculinity. Rather, he is seen as confirming what was already suspected. The meme's logic, that softness is performative and therefore suspect, is nourished by that racialised framing.

Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity helps to clarify the structure. Hegemonic masculinity is not a fixed ideal but a relational hierarchy maintained by subordinating other masculinities such as queer, working-class, and racialised men (Connell 1995; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). East Asian masculinity is often placed in this subordinate position, not through overt exclusion but through feminisation. The policing of "effeminate" behaviour is one way this hierarchy is defended. But for East Asian men, the accusation of performativity does not land on a blank slate. it lands on a body already framed as inadequate, one that is not merely marginalised but subordinated. This distinction is really crucial, especially when contrasted with other racialised masculinities. Black masculinity, for example, is often hypermasculinised and thus positioned differently within the hierarchy.

This creates a double bind (Frye 1983): a situation in which all available options lead to

penalty. The "performative male" is mocked for being soft. The East Asian male is mocked for being soft, and for trying not to be. If he embraces softness, he confirms the stereotype. If he performs assertiveness, he risks being seen as overcompensating or insincere. His masculinity is not just policed, it is disqualified. The "performative male" does not invent this logic. It inherits it. And in doing so, it reinforces a racialised structure of gender in which some men are always already outside the frame.

Circulation and the Politics of Recognition

Consider the figure of an Asian-American young man in Los Angeles, sipping matcha while reading bell hooks. Within the meme economy, he can be seen as a "performative male": his consumption of feminist texts and aestheticised beverage fits the template of curated and self-conscious masculinity. But his legibility is not neutral. Because unlike a white man whose performance might be read as ironic, trendy, or mockably "soft", the Asian-American man's performance is filtered through a racialised script that already codes him as feminised and insufficiently masculine. What appears as deviation for the white man appears as confirmation for him. The same gestures that destabilise hegemonic masculinity when performed by white men are also read as racially predictable when performed by East Asian men.

This dynamic illustrates what Judith Butler Butler (1990) and Butler (2004) calls the politics of recognition: not all performances are equally legible as gender. Recognition depends on norms, and those norms are structured by race as well as gender. Sara Ahmed Ahmed (2000) extends this point by showing how racialised bodies are already read as strange or suspect, such that their actions are never encountered on a blank slate. The Asian-American mans performance of softness is not judged in isolation. Rather, it is judged against a pre-existing racial script that marks him as always already subordinate.

Digital circulation intensifies these dynamics. Memes thrive on recognisability and repetition, but recognisability is unevenly distributed. As Lisa Nakamura Nakamura (2007) and Wendy Chun Chun (2006) argue, digital platforms reproduce racial hierarchies of visibility: whiteness circulates as the unmarked norm, while racialised masculinities are either hypervisible in stereotyped forms or rendered invisible altogether. Thus, the performative male meme travels most easily when applied to white men, whose deviation from hegemonic masculinity is legible and mockable. East Asian men, by contrast, are either excluded from the memes frame or included only as confirmation of their supposed lack. In both cases, the meme reproduces a racialised politics of recognition in which some masculinities are always already disqualified.

Conclusion

The performative male meme may look trivial, but it reveals how digital culture enforces old hierarchies in new forms. What is mocked as fakery in one context is simply ordinary life in another, yet the suspicion always falls unevenly. For East Asian men, every gesture is overdetermined, whether read as softness or overcompensation.

To see this is to recognise that the problem is not tote bags or matcha, but the narrow scripts of masculinity that memes so efficiently recycle. If we want to move beyond them, we need new ways of talking about masculinity that don't equate performance with fraud, or difference with deficiency. Only then can softness, style, or care be understood as ordinary human expression rather than evidence on trial.

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