

Doing Gender in K-pop

The first thing I hear from people whenever I show them a video of my favorite k-pop groups is always the same, “they look like girls.” Oftentimes I ask what makes them say that, and the answers vary, but there's always three constants: makeup, hair style, and clothing choice. With the rise of k-pop in the West, the way that masculinity is presented here vs. there has become increasingly apparent. Which begs the question, how is the concept of “doing gender” shown in femininity and masculinity in the East vs. the West? Through idols' presentations, what can the West learn about masculinity and gender fluidity?

While South Korea is still considered quite conservative in many of its ideals, there are some things that they seem to be more fluid on. Skincare in Korea is a large industry but it is not limited to just women. In fact, Korean men made up for 21% of global sales making it the largest market for mens skincare in the world. Male k-pop idols also often advertise and promote different skincare brands for men and women, examples being ads of the group Wanna One and their promotion of Innisfree's clay face masks. Skincare in Korea is seen as quite important, as there is an emphasis on looking your best. Looking good in Korea is a sign of respect to those around you and because of this, it's not uncommon to see men and women dressing nicely and wearing makeup. In the West we would characterize this as unmasculine of men to wear makeup in public and men may even have their sexualities questioned for doing so. In Korea, this is not typically the case. Men are often seen wearing light makeup in public and dressing nicely, and it's seen as attractive to women that men make efforts to look nice. In the West, we also have stars that wear makeup such as Prince and David Bowie. While these looks made an impact and

Prince's use of makeup was not intended to make men in makeup mainstream or normalized, rather it was intended to be dramatic and against the norm. The bias of sexuality in the US also has a big impact on men and how they choose to outwardly express themselves. The standard of hegemonic masculinity emphasizes how men should behave and present themselves in society. Men who do not fit this outline of hegemonic masculinity in the West have their sexualities questioned, but in South Korea this is not the case. Homophobia in Korea is still quite prominent, yet the idea that men can be beautiful is accepted and embraced, and doesn't define someone's sexuality.

Gender expression in idols is not limited to makeup wearing alone. It is the entire way these groups present themselves through hair and clothing concepts as well. Some male idols have sported long hair for comeback concepts like Lee Taemin in his group, SHINee's, song "Lucifer" and Lee Felix's long hair for Stray Kids song "Thunderous." Experimenting with hair and extensions is also common to see when idols are promoting new songs or albums. Amongst fans, it's known that when a group is about to release something, their hair colors and styles change, foreshadowing a new era and more music. Hair dye of all different colors among idols is very common but in the West, we don't often see male celebrities dye their hair in bold colors, aside from bleach dying. Pop punk artists are most likely to change their hair colors and styles, but I feel that this is going along with their genre of music. When pop punk artists dye their hair, the goal is to be transgressive and provocative, establishing that they're pushing against the norm, while for k-pop idols this is the norm.

In addition to hair styling differences, gender neutral and non-conforming clothing has become an increasing norm with male idols. Doing gender through clothing has become more

generation group that has been experimenting with “doing gender” in their fashion, particularly by wearing skirts. During their promotion of their album *The Chaos Chapter: FIGHT OR ESCAPE*, the members wore skirts for main stage televised performances as well as to many award shows. In the music video for the title track of the aforementioned album, “LO\$ER=LO♡ER”, member Huening Kai and Choi Beomgyu both dress in skirts and carried these looks to the main stage. Another member, Choi Yeonjun has also posted and commented about buying skirts and dresses for his personal clothing collection. While Tomorrow x Together is leading the way for fourth generation idol groups, many other idols have also embraced “doing gender” with their fashion. BTS’s Jeon Jungkook has been open about his desire and goals to wear gender neutral clothing, and has even sported a crop top during the American leg of the group’s “Permission To Dance” tour. While Korea, and Seoul in particular, is being recognized more and more as a fashion capital, celebrities in the West are trying to keep up. Harry Styles has been a clear representation of pushing gender norms in his fashion. Styles received backlash in the West for his 2020 *Vogue* cover in which he wore a dress and skirts in the rest of the spread. Right wing commentator, Candace Owens tweeted out her response to Styles’ cover and said “Bring back manly men.” In the West, it is frowned upon for straight men in particular to dress feminine as it does not conform to hegemonic masculinity and is seen as not manly, while in the East, idols' sexualities are not often questioned for the clothing or makeup they wear.

While Korea seems to have the upper hand in allowing straight men to experiment more with their gender presentation, women do not have the same luxury. The beauty myth is strong in Korea, especially for girl groups. The beauty myth, as discussed by Naomi Wolf, is the idea that women must be beautiful and accessible to men. K-pop girl groups have an incredibly different

treated in k-pop from their dances, lyrics, clothing, and concepts. Choreography for men and women is also very different. Girl groups' choreography is more hand movement focused, graceful, and cute while boy groups' choreography is known to be harder and more powerful. Lee Taemin's solo song "Move" was praised at the time for challenging gender norms in his choreography, as it emphasized a more feminine style of dance. Girl groups however do not have as much freedom to explore challenging gender norms in their choreography or presentation. Hwasa from the group MAMAMOO was severely criticized for wearing a latex bodysuit to the 2018 MAMA awards. While male idols are allowed, and encouraged in some cases, to reveal their bodies for a performance, women are not allowed the same freedoms and are called "sluts" by the media in Korea. Women are expected to act cute and perpetuate the beauty myth, and if they don't, they are chastised by fans and the media. Popular girl group Twice is known for their cute concepts in their music and they often perpetuate the beauty myth especially in their lyrics. The group's song "Likey" emphasizes how women must look pretty, with the singers expressing how they don't feel pretty enough for the man they're trying to impress saying "I hold my breath to pull up the zipper, tighten the waist again, Cheer me up I'm done dressing up Baby, There are so many pretty things to wear." Twice's songs often depict women trying to impress men, but as of recently they're pushing away from this concept with their more powerful songs and concepts such as "Cry For Me" and "I Can't Stop Me" but this is not without some of their fans, particularly male fans, upset at the turn.

While South Korea is still very conservative in many areas, the way they allow more gender fluidity for men specifically is something that the West has been cautious of accepting. I feel that the West has much more room to grow in accepting the fact that straight men should be

Both the East and the West still have far to go on challenging the beauty myth and the way that women are able to present themselves. With the way that k-pop is making waves here in the West, it's becoming hard for the West to ignore and deal with the impact that Korean artists are having on the US, especially the impact they're having on challenging gender norms at home and here.