Korean Soft Masculinity vs. Malay hegemony: Malaysian masculinity and Hallyu fandom*

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This paper examines feedback from a number of male fans of Korean popular culture based in Malaysia. It argues that the model of Soft Masculinity represented in these texts allows men who are marginalised by restrictive and inclusive models of hegemonic masculinity in Malaysia to build new forms of masculine identity through which to express themselves. Building upon the corpus of recent research addressing male fans of texts coded as female-centric, the article concludes that while this engagement represents a form of resistance to state-control in an increasingly authoritarian context, such fandom does not necessarily challenge existing patriarchal hierarchies of gender relations within Malaysia.

Key Words: Soft Masculinity, Hegemonic Masculinity, Hallyu, Malaysia, fandom, trans-pop-consumers.

I. Introduction

As the dominant form of East Asian popular culture, the Korean Wave – or Hallyu – has made a significant contribution to re-defining conceptions of masculinity across the Asia region. Known by researchers as 'Soft Masculinity', this alternative construction of male characters primarily through music and TV dramas presents a female-friendly model of masculinity and gender relations that scholars recognise as appropriate to a modern globalised society. Yet while there is much existing analysis of the impact of such a model upon female fans in East Asia, there is very little attention to the reception of such discourses among male consumers.

This paper goes beyond the East Asian sphere to examine a group of young male fans of Hallyu products in Malaysia. It argues that the Soft Masculinity represented in Hallyu can enable such men to both critique the reductive and exclusive state-defined constructions of hegemonic masculinity within Malaysia, as well as appropriate such signifiers to build new forms of masculine identity appropriate to the Asian context. What is more, through exploring such fandom outside of the East Asian sphere in a Southeast Asian nation (in which Hallyu is constructed as a largely female driven form of entertainment) the project also builds upon the small corpus of existing literature examining male fans of female-coded texts to argue that in contemporary Malaysia such Hallyu fandom becomes 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. The paper finishes by cautioning against such celebratory notions however, outlining that while such constructions can become a form of resistance to state-control, this fandom still represents a new form of male exclusivity and patriarchy that upholds gender inequality, albeit as part of an otherwise progressive critique of hegemonic masculinity in this context.

II. East Asian 'Soft masculinity' and the Korean Wave

Hegemonic masculinity defines ideal male behaviour in a society and is generally designed to justify male dominance over women, so validating social systems of patriarchy (Raewyn Connell 1987, 2005). This construction represents a society's most favoured way of being a man, though one to which, in reality, very few men in any context are able to conform. While there is a copious amount of scholarly analysis addressing this term, such studies have generally been derived from Euro-American sources. Research into Asian men and masculinity in particular remains limited, eclipsed by a copious amount of research focusing upon Asian women and femininity instead (Louie, 2012). When seeking academic insight into Asian masculinities, the most significant source is examinations of intra-Asian cultural interactions in the East Asian region over the last decade (see, for example, Lo, Kwai-Cheung, 2010). This is due to the vibrancy of the CJK (China Japan Korea) economies since the millennium, which has resulted in major economic and technological changes to this region (Louie, 2012), the cultural effects of which have manifested in alterations to constructions of gender.

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). In Japan, Jung sees this as underpinned by nostalgic sentiments for an older conception of masculinity (2009:39), while Louie (2012) notes a difference between metrosexual Western-associated notions of masculinity and those that are 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

instead replaced by relations based upon 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).

These cultural icons have largely emerged since the millennium and coincide with the rise of social media, 'youth culture' and "the increased buying power of women" (Louie, 2012:933), making this a form of masculinity which is therefore highly appropriate to the modern context. Within this context, sexual desirability has been transformed by the increased consumer power of social media, which allows access to and choice between images and information for new and alternative social groups (Louie, 2012: 939). As these new groups of people gain new social power, so new forms of social representation appear.

Soft Masculinity is present in cultural products from countries across the East Asia region, yet undoubtedly it is the growth and export of Korean pop culture (known as the 'Korean Wave' or Hallyu), coming after similar Japanese products in the late 1990s, that has been the most influential in terms of the impact upon and reshaping of East Asian masculinity. Traced to the mid-2000s and the huge success of TV dramas such as *Winter Sonata* and *Dae Jung Geum* along with pop music bands such as 'Big Bang' and 'Super Junior', this Korean pop culture became known for its notable combination of traits viewed as traditionally masculine or feminine into a single performer or performance. Anderson recognises the performers of K-pop (Korean pop music) in particular as incorporating and representing 'multiple masculinities', so offering a more flexible and inclusive model of masculinity than has previously been prominent in this context (Anderson, 2014). As a transcultural product, this phenomenon is part of a 'transcultural hybridization process' that mixes global and traditional Korean notions of masculinity (Jung, 2011:4). Indeed, when describing Korean performers, Sun Jung (2006) refers to the phenomenon of 'hybrid masculinity' and Louie (2012) talks of a blurring of masculine and feminine characteristics in both male and female performers and icons.

Such scholarly interpretations position the soft masculinity of the Korean Wave (and other East Asian popular culture from this region) as globalised and transnational in nature. However, this construction is undoubtedly a regional East Asian phenomenon, representing the plurality and hybridity of this region and what Geng Song calls "a growing cultural convergence among East Asian countries" (2016:4). Indeed, while these products are recent, the phenomenon takes its roots from traditional Confucian-inflected conceptions of Masculinity prominent in East Asian cultures and comprises a unique blend of both East Asian traditional conceptions and more modern Western-originated metrosexual influences. Jung (2009) even refers to the concept of 'mugukjeok', which refers to the non-nationality of Korean idols, and indicates that due to the similar characteristics of Soft Masculinity, it can be difficult to tell apart the nationality of such performers, who can freely travel across these national boundaries given the lack of specifically national traits embodied in their image.

III. Masculinity in Southeast Asia and Contemporary Malaysia

While such 'cultural convergence' may characterise popular culture in East Asia, this pan-East Asian construction of Soft Masculinity is very different to the contemporary models of hegemonic masculinity found further south in Southeast Asia, a situation that begins to explain both the animosity towards and the appeal of such models in this very different context. The heavy control and exclusivity of hegemonic masculinity in Malaysia can begin to explain why Korean popular culture and its model of Soft Masculinity may be highly problematic in this context, yet also appeals to some Malaysian men as an attractive and alternative model of masculinity in which to invest. Southeast Asia is a geographically separate region to that of the East Asian countries.[1] These nations are also much more linguistically, reli-

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1. All too often, Southeast Asia is included within collections and research articles purporting to analyse East Asia. It is only in very recent years, with the increasing visibility and importance of the Southeast Asian nations on the global

giously and ethnically diverse than the more homogenous East Asian nations, and in many cases have problematic and volatile relationships with their immediate neighbours, to the extent that a regional Southeast Asianized form of representation would be much more difficult to envision.

The cultural dissonance with Soft Masculinity is particularly apparent in Malaysia, where Hallyu is very much the dominant form of East Asian popular culture. Southeast Asia is a major destination for Hallyu exports, where it remains an important means of furthering Korean interests as a significant form of Soft Power in a region rich in natural resources and full of consumers eager for Asian-based forms of popular culture (see, for example, Shim, 2013; Ainslie, 2016). Korean pop culture has now been present in Malaysia for a significant period and represents an alternative, yet highly popular, form of entertainment (Lim, 2015).

Yet in contrast to the feminized appearance and notions of 'friendship' and 'love' associated with the East Asian model of Soft Masculinity, hegemonic masculinity in Malaysia is closely connected to physical masculine prowess and a man's position as head of a family, as well as entwined closely with the majority Malay ethnicity and the dominant Islamic religion. Studies indicate how hegemonic Malaysian masculinities are derived from notions of "power, strength, sexual prowess, and patriarchal positions" (Goh, 2012:177) and how having a family and becoming a 'protector' and 'provider' in the form of a husband and father is an important means of defining oneself as a man (Khoo, 2005). Scholars connect this heavy focus upon 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, Khoo 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 (Khoo, 2005). Such hypermasculine actions compensate for

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stage, that scholars have begun to recognise this region as a completely geographically, culturally and politically separate part of the world.

male lack (realised as effeminateness and powerlessness), a position that is personified (and then rectified) through dangerous women with active libidos who must be controlled (Ibid: 20).

Hegemonic masculinity in contemporary Malaysia is also further complicated by its entwinement within particularly inflexible and narrow racial and religious parameters, which are closely connected to the importance of race divisions and racial hierarchies to current political power struggles within this nation. Such attributes begin to explain why East Asian Soft Masculinity (represented through Hallyu) may provide an attractive form of alternative identification for young Malaysian males. Within Malaysia, around 50% of citizens are classified as Malay, with large non-Malay Indigenous (11%) and Chinese (22%) and Indian (7%) minorities (Malaysia Demographics Profile, 2016). As the majority race, political organisations compete over Malay support in order to consolidate their own political power, so furthering racial division within the country. One way to claim the Malay vote (and, through this, the political sphere) is through achieving religious legitimacy. In Malaysia, all Malay citizens are constitutionally considered to be Muslim,[2] and this creates a situation in which political parties attempt to 'out-Islamise' each other in order to claim the Malay vote.

Controlling definitions of masculinity and male sexuality is part of this attempt to claim political legitimacy through further consolidating this state-controlled close relationship between Malay ethnicity and Islam that political competitors rely upon (Goh, 2012:170; Goh, 2013; Khoo, 2005). Malay men and masculinity become a vehicle through which authorities can control, manipulate and compete over definitions of Islam, and so are a key part of retaining (and competing over) power. As a part of this struggle over definitions of Islam, particular (heterosexual and patriarchal) norms and codes of appearance and behaviour are normalized and imposed upon Muslim-Malay

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2. With very few exceptions, all Malays are constitutionally required to be Muslim. The Syariah Criminal Offences Enactments also exists as a dual system alongside secular laws as provided by the Constitution of Malaysia and it is a criminal offence for Muslims to disobey religious laws.

men, to the extent that researchers understand that "Malay-Muslim cohesiveness" is actually built upon "the insistence and consolidation of heteronormative masculinity" (Goh, 2013). Within this ethnocentric construction, researchers also point to the worrying fortification of patriarchal privilege as an inherent part of masculinity in Malaysia, with specific emphasis upon the use and reconstruction of Islam as a means to further this notion (Maznah Mohammed, 2010 in Goh, 2012:174).

IV. Dissatisfaction with and state concern around constructions of Masculinity in Malaysia

This paper contends that East Asian and Korean popular culture can offer new forms of cultural identity for the disaffected Southeast Asian consumer and in particular, given the new form of masculinity these products embody, the Malaysian male. East Asian pop culture has been an increasing presence during the last decade of economic and social change in Southeast Asia, and Korean products have enjoyed significant success in countries with growing economies and increasingly media-literate populations, such as Malaysia. Existing research addressing East Asian popular culture in Southeast Asia illustrates that such popularity is intimately connected to the alternative forms of cultural identity and negotiation that such products can offer in this changing context. Siriyuvasak and Shin argue that Hallyu can offer an alternative model of identity for social and ethnic groups who are marginalised during a time of increased social polarisation and political instability (Siriyuvasak and Shin, 2007), while Ainslie (2016) addresses the ways in which consumers across Thailand interact with Hallyu products as a means to assess and critique their own changing position in this nation. Lim also demonstrates how Malaysian consumers engage with Korean products through social media, interpreting such actions as inventive forms of resistance towards centralized state control (Lim, 2015).

Given this connection to such internal assessment and critique,

the 'trans-pop-consumerism' (Jung, 2011: 75) of Hallyu by men in Malaysia should be interpreted as a form of rejection and rebellion against the state-promoted reductive culturally-narrow constructions of masculinity. Most obviously perhaps, this rejection would be apparent among the large internal non-Malay and non-Muslim minorities of Malaysia. Alternative and non-Malay forms of masculinities in Malaysia are yet to be fully explored and there is, as yet, very little research into non-Malay masculinities in Malaysia or the ways in which Malaysian citizens directly respond to such constructions. Instead the small corpus of existing research focuses upon Malay Men and the damaging impact of Hegemonic Masculinity upon this social group (see, for instance, Goh, 2012; Goh, 2013; Khoo, 2005). Non-Malay citizens cannot ethnically and/or religiously conform to the narrow racial and religious parameters promoted by the Malaysian state as the ideal form of masculinity, and are excluded from such discourses. Likewise, the strong emphasis upon racial and religious definitions as a form of identity problematizes their own relationship to the state, and in this push to identify Malaysian-ness as Islamic and Malay, such minority citizens become unMalaysian and 'other' (Goh, 2013:17).

Along with the large minorities in the country, the political and social developments of the contemporary era, together with dwindling support for the current government,[3] also make adherence to such state led discourses increasingly undesirable for all young Malaysians, regardless of race. Since the early 2000s the growing middle-class in Southeast Asian countries have increasing consumer spending power and consumer-based lifestyles (Chua, 2000 quoted in Jung 2011), all of which enable and encourage access to alternative cultural forms.[4] These "trans-pop-consumers" (Jung, 2011: 75) are, in

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3. This situation was reflected in the diminishing support for the ruling Barisan National political party, a coalition of parties that has governed the country since the 1970s and in which the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), a nationalist Malay party, has significant influence. Having stayed in power since the 1970s, BN notably lost the popular vote for the first time in the 2013 general election.

4. The social changes that brought about cultural phenomena such as Soft Mascu-

part, defined through their cultural hybridity, which can include alternative political and religious interpretations that clash with and threaten the racial and religious hegemony upon which state power relies. Within this culturally hybrid and increasingly globally aware contemporary context, the narrow conceptions of masculinity and gender roles favoured by the Malaysian state appear far less relevant. Indeed there is strong support for secularism amongst the growing urban Malay population[5] who reject religious and cultural definitions from the state as well as the racialized politics such classifications represent.

Within this context, the attraction of Hallyu and its model of Soft Masculinity as an alternative form of masculine identity can also explain why authorities express so much animosity towards this form of entertainment. As Malaysian society becomes increasingly exposed to new images and lifestyles as part of a globalised system of consumerism, rulers run significant risk of losing political control as the increasing access to alternative cultural products presents potential challenges to state control, the ruling party and the political status quo. Given its political importance, authorities seek to tightly control constructions of Masculinity within contemporary Malaysia in order to maintain Malay hegemony and, correspondingly, the Malay vote. The performance of masculine alternatives in particular threatens the foundations of such hegemony and notions of a "fixed immutable Malaysian male domain upon which many Malaysians have forged their gender and sexual securities", so explaining why such atypical behaviour is often greeted with extreme vilification and reviled (Goh,

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linity are connected to the economic vibrancy of East Asian economies since the millennium. Given the comparable rapid economic growth in Southeast Asian countries over the past decade, similar cultural changes are evident in this region, all of which also lead to a questioning of dominant cultural definitions.

5. In Malaysia, the Malay population are subject to the Sharia Code of Offences Act, a set of religious laws that override the Malaysian constitution and Malaysian Civil Law for Muslims in Malaysia. Given that all ethnic Malay citizens are considered to be legally Muslim and cannot legally change their religion, the personal freedoms of Malay citizens are severely limited by law, a situation that many find increasingly unfair and are increasingly challenging.

2012: 180). This process encourages and profits from the persecution of non-heteronormative men. For instance, effeminate men, who are known as *Lelaki lembut* (literally, 'Soft Man') a position comparable to the attributes of East Asian Soft Masculinity, are frequently regarded as homosexual and often the subject of significant persecution that is condoned and even encouraged by authorities (Aziz, 2012, in Goh, 2012:168).

As part of such a reaction, there has been a corresponding state-led backlash against potential cultural challenges from outside of Malaysia, including the Soft Masculinity represented in Korean cultural products. This is in contrast to East Asia, as while 'periodic moral panics' (Louie, 2012: 941) by political leaders over the new pop culture images and their effect upon the behaviour of young people has also been observed in East Asian countries, despite this concern "there have been no large scale campaigns against the new ideals" (Louie, 2012: 941). This is not the case in Southeast Asia and Malaysia, and notably such concerns around the importing and influence of East Asian pop culture often tends to be manifested through concern around the impact this has upon constructions of gender and gender roles. For instance, Tambunan notes how Indonesian fans specifically express discomfort with constructions of gender and sexuality in Hallyu products, while Thu notes a similar level of concern among Vietnamese consumers (Tambunan, 2015: Thu, 2015). Authorities and media in Philippines also express concern at what they see as a loss of national identity amongst the nation's youth who favour K-pop (quoted in Louie, 2012: 936).

In Malaysia, controlling the dissemination and desirability of texts that could potentially undermine authoritarian structures of control is a priority for society's rulers in the current climate, and Korean popular culture has likewise been targeted as undesirable and potentially damaging to Malaysian gender relations by Malay-centric organisations. For instance, following the aftermath of a 'fan meeting' event by the K-pop male group B1A4 in which a number of Malay Muslim women engaged in physical contact with the band members, Khairy Jamaluddin, the Malaysian Minister of Youth and Sports, took

to social media site Twitter to express his views, specifically disputing the masculinity of Korean men. In a Twitter posting dated January 11th 2015, he said in Malay:

> Banyak dikatakan ttg Kpop. Harap gadis2 Msia kembali kpd lelaki tall, dark & hensem. Bukan pale, skinny & pretty. Itu bukan lelaki sejati. (A lot has been said about Kpop. I hope Malaysian girls return to tall, dark and handsome men. Not pale, skinny and pretty. Those are not real men).

V. Male fans of female-coded (Hallyu) texts

While this paper contends that the Soft Masculinity of Hallyu offers an alternative form of Asian-based masculinity for men who are dissatisfied and ignored by state-promoted constructions of identity in Malaysia, it also recognizes that male Malaysian Hallyu consumption is further complicated by the gendered boundaries that problematize any form of male identification with and investment in such texts in Malaysia.[6] In Malaysia, Hallyu is constructed as a female-coded medium, a position compounded by its incarnation through female-centric products such as romantic dramas and cosmetics as well as boybands that exemplify the characteristics of Soft Masculinity and whose followers appear to be largely constructed as female.[7] This also follows a general trend in wider Hallyu analysis, in which both popular and academic studies of Soft Masculinity and Hallyu con-

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6. Hallyu scholarship focuses overwhelmingly upon female consumers, yet there is little concrete evidence to suggest that audiences are so exclusively female. However, certainly within Malaysia, Hallyu products are specifically culturally coded as women's texts.

7. Malaysia has strict codes of conduct for performers, with questions having previously been raised about performers such as Elton John and Beyonce. Such performers are occasionally denied permission to perform in the country or have their performances regulated. Many girl pop groups are considered to be 'too sexy' for the Malaysian stage and could be controversial, and as result many female Hallyu groups do not perform in the country, making Hallyu a form of entertainment incarnated largely through male pop groups.

sumption tend to concentrate upon female consumers. Overwhelmingly, on both a popular and scholarly level, the Hallyu audience is often assumed to be female, and female consumers are often considered to be the only 'image makers' and driving force behind these new performers. While the gendered nature of Hallyu fans may certainly be true (and significant), this emphasis has perhaps resulted in an ignoring of other fans and fan groups.

The study of male Hallyu fans is therefore a neglected area and there is very little attention to male consumers and/or their fan groups and little empirical information as to how these new images have impacted upon male consumers. However, in recent years, social media has made visible atypical fans, and as a result there is a growing body of research addressing male fans of female-coded texts. This increase in scholarly attention towards such consumers was spurred on by the increasing visibility of male fans of texts such as Twilight (Click et al., 2016) and the much studied phenomenon of Bronies (see, among others, Amon, 2016; Burdfield, 2015; Hautakangas, 2015; Jones, 2015; Robertson, 2014). While such research tends to stay within Euro-American parameters, the findings still serve to illustrate the benefits of consuming and identifying with female-coded texts for male consumers, and the potential for investment with such texts to provide a form of cultural resistance against reductive constructions of masculinity.

Such research argues that male fans of female-coded texts are fulfilling a lack within their own lives, one specifically not filled by the hegemonic masculinity that structures their existence (Click et al., 2016: 18). Consuming female-coded texts can provide a means to address men's frustrations with the limits of hegemonic masculinity and carve a new form of masculine-based identity (Click et al., 2016: 6). This new form of masculinity comes about by "dissolving the boundaries between and around media texts perceived as masculine and feminine, as well as the social judgments resulting from assumptions about for whom media texts are appropriate" (Click et al., 2016: 18). When such 'boundaries' and 'assumptions' are broken down, then there are "increase[d] opportunities for more fluidly gendered

perspective-taking and identification" (Ibid). The inherent creation of this 'frustration' and 'lack' is very much evident in the exclusivity of hegemonic masculinity in the multiracial and multicultural contemporary Malaysian context. The 'dissolving' and 'fluidity' of the boundaries associated with consuming texts constructed as socially inappropriate is also particularly attractive to Malaysian men who reject the narrow parameters of Malaysian hegemonic masculinity and/or are not permitted access to these racially and religiously narrow definitions. This project therefore not only addresses the lack of research into non-Malay masculinities in Malaysia, but also expands existing literature examining male fans of female coded texts by identifying such fans in an alternative cultural context outside of the Western world.

VI. Methodology

In order to address the ways in which 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, this project conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews with 21 male Malaysian fans of Korean popular culture (a full list of participants is included in the Appendix). Some participants were interviewed in person while others answered open questions online. Full ethical approval was acquired prior to the project and all participants were anonymized. A qualitative method was chosen as participants were reluctant to speak with the researchers due to the strong stigma of being associated with female-coded texts and non-normative forms of masculinity in Malaysia, and as a sensitive topic, information was best elicited through allowing participants to explain their feelings in their own words where they could also be assured of anonymity. Participants were identified through Korea-centric networks from social media and university student associations, with further participants identified through snowballing. Local Malaysia-based Korean stu-

dents began the process of making contact with participants as a means to reduce any suspicion of bias or ulterior motives that could have been attached to Malaysian researchers.

All participants were based in (or around) Kuala Lumpur and were long term fans of Hallyu products. The fans had been interested in Hallyu for between a few months and 7 years, so their fandom was established, ongoing and (in most cases) not a recent phenomenon. Several were members of K-pop dance groups, some followed Hallyu groups online while others consumed Korean romantic dramas, with several doing so in secret. The majority of participants were students; 17 were Malaysian-Chinese, with 3 Malay and 1 Malaysian-Indian. The overwhelming demographic of the participants as Chinese Malaysian rather than Malay is perhaps due to the increased pressure Malay men would be under to conform to hegemonic conceptions of masculinity, so making such participants feel far less able to openly demonstrate their Hallyu fandom to society (and, correspondingly, the researcher).

The qualitative data from the Malaysian male Hallyu fans revolved around a number of identified topics. These included addressing how the participants had become interested and involved in Hallyu fandom, their awareness and attitudes towards the gendered construction of Hallyu in Malaysia, how they perceived the construction of men in Hallyu as opposed to men in Malaysia, how such constructions were more appealing to them as consumers, and, finally, how they interacted with this new model of masculinity.

VII. Analysis

From conversations with these male Malaysian fans, it was immediately apparent that Hallyu texts had filled a significant 'lack' in participants' lives in a similar way to that noted in both Western-centric studies of male fans of female-coded texts as well as studies of other Hallyu consumers in Southeast Asia. Hallyu had functioned as an important source of identity, confidence and means of

socializing as a young adult male, an importance that also suggests an inadequacy with the existing codes of representation available in their own environment. For the men, integrating such texts into their lives had been an enriching process during a crucial period of development. Being involved in Hallyu fandom had been important to their self-esteem and had improved their social life to the extent that the participants felt such fandom had improved their lives substantially. They pointed to examples of how they had adopted codes of dress from Hallyu performers:

> I find that the way some Korean dresses up are quite good looking. Their style can be simple yet presentable, so I followed some of the style they dress up. (Participant A)

> My sister first asked me to dress up more nicely like those korean stars so she bought [a] few clothes for me. Now, whenever I see anything nice in pictures, I try to find similar clothes to that. (B)

Others mentioned making friends through joining in with Hallyu-related activities and being admired for adopting Hallyu-associated codes of behaviour and appearance. For instance, being in a (male) K-pop dance group was a means to distinguish oneself in a society that tightly controlled such personal identification along divisive racial and religious lines that the men both rejected and, in many cases, could not emulate:

> because I am in a dance crew people seem to envy me more (D)

> Since I start to come into k-pop culture, I start to mix with the friend [who] like k-pop too and my hobby change too. I start to dance in my uni life as a k-pop dancer and this spirit spreads and make me learn other genres of dance too. (T)

Following on from the social aspects of Hallyu's appeal, participants further indicated that they found Korean pop culture to be more interesting, challenging, 'complex' and engaging than pop cul-

ture in Malaysia, with a particular focus upon the inventive nature of texts (namely TV dramas and pop music). Such comments relayed how the existing local forms of Malaysian media representation were inadequate to address the needs of these consumers. According to participants, the arrival of Korean pop culture in Malaysia had been a milestone in their own social environment, with one remarking "I don't think there was anything like Korean pop culture before in Malaysia" (C). Such comments should not be interpreted as a denigration of Malaysian pop culture, but instead function to underline the importance of Hallyu to the men's own environment and also position Korean pop culture as a form of entertainment more attuned to a citizen eager for texts that represent a rapidly changing context and which can challenge existing notions of self. Indeed for one participant, Korean dramas were simply more 'creative' and 'witty', so offering more challenging and inventive forms of entertainment than Malaysia:

> It was when I first started watching a Korean drama with my parents called Full House when it came out about 5 years ago and I really liked how creative Korean scriptwriters were able to come up with a witty, romance drama that was really good and since then, I would occasionally indulge in other Korean dramas. (O)

Another participant gave a similar statement about a K-pop singer and song:

> [I] Stumbled upon Miss A's music videos on Youtube and was mesmerised by the wonderful melody. (Q)

While another referred to the similar engaging appeal of a Korea variety show:

> I start to know it from the Running Man Variety Show in Korea because their variety show is funny and interesting. (T)

The men also strongly critiqued the Malaysian political establishment and the social and cultural limitations placed upon Malaysian

citizens, constructing an idealized image of Korea and Korean society as a means to highlight such shortcomings. Previous studies of Hallyu in Southeast Asia indicate how Korean texts can provide "an alternative symbol of freedom and creativity for those who feel stifled by their current environment" (Ainslie, 2015), and one that appears more appropriate to consumers in an Asian context than products from Europe and/or America. For these male Malaysian consumers, Hallyu similarly seemed to function as an attractive and alternative symbol of modernity, freedom and creativity, offering an outlet for those otherwise ignored or marginalised in a society that places emphasis upon narrow and antiquated racial and religious constructions of the self:

> "[Korea] use[d] to grow so fast and adapt to the global compare[d] to the countries that have longer history but [have] not developed well." (T).

Such constructions of global competence were then expanded to include an overall discourse of Korea as a harmonious society with a stable and fair political system. Such an image was fed by a strong and consistent dislike of the Malaysian government from all participants, evident in statements such as these:

> [Korea] is very different from Malaysia. I don't think they have problem with their politics. (D)

> I dislike the current [Malaysian] government very much as it is corrupted and it is becoming more and more like dictatorship. (Q)

Most significantly, after describing Korea as "A more developed country than Malaysia" one participant then went on to state "Koreans are very united." (Q), indicating how Hallyu operated as a means to articulate the participant's own dislike of the divisive racial and religious system that citizens are subject to in Malaysia.

Yet such individuals should not be seen as passive receivers of glamorized images, and many expressed an awareness of the idealized nature of these cultural products, demonstrating their position as active and aware constructors of meaning who use such images and

concepts as they see fit. Many pointed out that their understanding was probably inaccurate, and that popular culture was unlikely to be a true reflection of a society, evident in this quote:

> "Korean dramas tend to give me the impression that Korean relationships are extremely complicated and that the person that you live next to may be your long lost mom/ sister. Not only that, I get the impression that Koreans are struggling to find jobs all the time. However, it's probably just my imagination … maybe that is how Korean drama scriptwriters tend to make the plot more interesting." (O)

However while participants expressed awareness of this idealised image in terms of political and social issues, when they referred to the construction of gender and masculinity in Korea, the men seemed far less eager to question the representations in Hallyu. This unwillingness to question or critique such images in Korean products indicates the importance of this particular construction to these consumers, which seemed to function as a blueprint for a more desirable model of male behaviour.

Indeed the participants were very clear about the desirable nature of Korean masculinity and the image of a politically stable, united and modern society was quickly connected to issues surrounding gender relations. One participant claimed that Korean people "always respect elders and men are very nice to women" (J), with others stating that it is important for men in Korean Dramas to be "nice to girls" (D) and "nice when it comes to love" (F). While such comments are undoubtedly problematic and should not be seen as representative of contemporary Korea, within the Malaysian context they suggest that Hallyu carries what may be a more positive image of gender relations for the Malaysian consumer, one that outlines the importance of increased female agency in a society. This emphasis upon female well-being also challenges the strongly emphasized patriarchal relations upon which contemporary hegemonic Malaysian masculinity relies, so providing some evidence of the potential 'dissolving' of rigid socially-constructed gendered boundaries that schol-

ars argue is such an important part of male pleasure from female-coded texts.

Participants were also quick to point out the differences between the hegemonic masculinity represented in Hallyu (and by extension Korea) and the more repressive social obligations placed upon men in Malaysia. Indeed, they appeared very aware of the limits and expectations placed upon men in Malaysia, seeing a definitive difference between constructions of masculinity in Malaysia and the more attractive model offered in Hallyu. When referring to Malaysia, they characterised this construction through an emphasis upon the traditional masculine Malay attributes such as physical toughness and social responsibility. Such responsibility was also attached to having a wife and lots of children and being seen to be the 'provider' and 'breadwinner' of a family. They used terms such as 'manly' and 'buff', yet with little reference to personal style or female appreciation. Explaining the pressures upon men in Malaysia, one participant explained:

> "if someone is handsome it is more important to be manly handsome. And in [the] Malaysian community, it is important to be financially successful and to have a family before turning 30." (M)

When referring to masculinity in Korea, they spoke of a much more appealing image wholly different to the familial obligations they associated with hegemonic masculinity in Malaysia. This was connected to a sense of personal freedom and expression manifested through individualistic aspects such as talent, appearance and personality, one much more attuned to a modern globalised and secular society in which women are recognised as a consumer force. Indeed, the version of masculinity represented in Hallyu products was highly flexible, inclusive and existed in a secular society without racial and religious divisions, so was able to incorporate personal choice. One participant described the ideal Korean man as "talented, cool, handsome, tall" (F). This notion of 'talent' was commented upon by a number of participants, who attached such a description to singing, dancing and/or the ability to play an instrument. Others described physical

appearance, yet in contrast to the 'buff' and 'manly' masculinity of Malaysia, this was "lean, slim good looking men who dress smartly" (O). The flexibility of such a model, compared to participant's experience of the Malaysian situation as stifling and reductive, was also an important part of such appeal:

> Malaysian stars are more manly there is only 1 kind of them but Korean stars there are many kinds like cute, sexy, pretty, handsome, macho, funny. (E)

Such comments place a problematic and troubling emphasis upon appearance and, as a means to achieve this, wealth. This dependence upon capital makes this Hallyu-based model of masculinity accessible only to the globally-connected Malaysian middle-class, and further emphasises the growing cultural gap between rural and urban Malaysia. Yet such a construction should be read as socially progressive in terms of its opposition to the exclusive and reductive form of hegemonic masculinity promoted by the Malaysian state. This is particularly significant given that the majority of participants were young men who were non-Malay and non-Muslim, and so were automatically excluded from the authoritative racialized and religious construction of ideal masculinity in Malaysia.

This opposition to hegemonic Malaysian masculinity was further emphasized by the experiences of the fans themselves, who had been marginalised and ridiculed due to their investment in Hallyu. The participants were very much aware of the construction of Hallyu as women's entertainment and their status as 'alternative' and unusual oddities as male fans of these texts in Malaysian society.[8] The participants themselves saw no conflict between their own masculinity and their status as Hallyu fans, insisting that they knew many male fans who were interested in this entertainment. Yet in keeping with the

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8. Indeed, it was not easy to approach this set of fans, and there was an immediate suspicion as to the motivations of the researchers, a suspicion that seemed connected to the previous ridicule and animosity they had endured as male fans of female-coded texts (fears that could only be allayed by the Korean students who assisted with the project).

overwhelmingly gendered nature of animosity and critique that scholars note is directed towards male fans of female-coded texts, participants had experienced criticism and a questioning of their masculinity due to association with such texts (see Robertson, 2014 and Jones, 2015), evident in statements such as: "They would think that I am less masculine because I enjoyed watching Korean drama." (participant A). Another participant highlighted the feminization of Hallyu against the masculine-coded American entertainment, and the social expectation that he should be consuming the latter: "they would question why I liked it when I should be watching more masculine shows such as *Breaking Bad or The Walking Dead"* (O).

Many noted that as consumers of Hallyu, their sexuality in particular had been questioned as well as their masculinity and even, for some, their 'Malaysianness'. As one participant stated "when you say you like Kpop they think you are gay." (J). Many had tried to hide their association with Hallyu due to this questioning: "To be honest, my friends do not know that I like Kpop" (F) and one directly referenced vernacular language associated with concealing homosexuality:

> I'm more of a closet Korean Drama lover than an open one as some of my friends tend to be critical about Korean pop culture, therefore I tend not to openly admit my liking for it (O).

As most of the participants were not Malay and not Muslim, such accusations also served to 'other' minority races within the country and further the hegemony of Malay ethnicity.

However, it is important to question such seemingly progressive conclusions. While Hallyu fandom may be attractive to male Malaysian fans (particularly those from racial minorities) and socially progressive due to the alternative versions of masculinity and gender relations such products represent, the men's fandom of and engagement with these texts still appeared to support patriarchal power structures in Malaysia, and, for the fans, did not necessarily lead to a questioning of conventional gender roles and relations. In this way the phenomenon appears to have much in common with the

Euro-American fan culture of 'bronies', that is structured "more by masculine tastes and values than appreciation of feminine media forms" (Click et al., 2016: 4). Indeed while there may be a desire to see such fandom as contributing to the breakdown of gender roles and divisions, scholars note that such male fandom often contains elements of heteronormative culture, visible in the desirable masculinity of the male lead (in romantic texts) and the bonding process over the texts (of the fan communities). Despite the recognition Soft Masculinity may place upon the female consumer, many of these Malaysian Male fans did not use such texts as a means to reassess and explore gender divisions in society or further their relationships with female friends. The participants instead sought to re-adjust popular perception of Hallyu as female-coded in order to construct a new form of male-based identity, rather than deconstruct the text itself and the practice of gendering popular culture.

For instance, rather than agree or even consider that Hallyu may be primarily aimed at and consumed by women in Malaysia, some participants strongly disputed the construction of Hallyu as women's entertainment and considered the positioning of themselves as fans of female-coded texts to be unfair and even offensive. This is evident in statements from participants which strongly resist and discredit Hallyu as an exclusively female-orientated text, despite its construction as such and its overwhelmingly female fan base in Malaysia, so indicating a desire not to be associated with and seen as enjoying a text that also appeals to women. Rather than dispute the actual designation of texts as male or female orientated, the participants appeared to dispute the coding of Hallyu as female, so suggesting that they accepted and even agreed with gender divisions in popular culture. One participant argued that "Korean drama is not all about things female[s] would usually prefer" (A), citing the presence of more 'masculine' characteristics alongside the female-orientated romantic dramas. Another argued that the expansion of Hallyu beyond the female consumer was an improvement in terms of the social legitimacy this gave Hallyu, stating "it seems better nowadays. More people started to watch Korean drama ⋯ Korean music too is not just for women" (B).

Likewise, Hallyu fandom ultimately did not seem to deepen the men's own relationships and friendships with women, and instead seemed to function more as a means to deepen their (platonic) relationships with other men. Certainly, one supposed benefit of involvement in Hallyu fandom could be the potential to perhaps gain more access to women in a society where social circles can be separately gendered, and studies note that male fans of 'romantic texts' can use such associations to better understand and improve their close relationships with women (see, for example, Click et al., 2016). While some of the participants did find their way into such fandom through female fans (such as sisters), these friendships and relations with women were not a continued part of the fandom and its practices. Instead social circles, in keeping with conservative traditions, remained largely separated by gender.

Likewise, while male fandom of Hallyu certainly challenges constructions of masculinity in Malaysia, the study also produced evidence that some fans were (re)creating gendered boundaries and divisions as part of their fandom. Among these male Malaysian Hallyu fans there was a level of animosity towards female fans of Hallyu, much of it coded in language that suggested that such female fandom was not 'genuine' and was flippant. The terms 'girly' and 'trashy' were also used as a negative description of some female-coded aspects of Hallyu products such as romance dramas. One fan also attempted to openly dispute female Hallyu consumers, and when presented with the construction of Hallyu texts as female-coded in Malaysia argued: "I disagree, most of my female friends that I speak to are more interested in American sitcoms and dramas" (S). For one participant there was also an evident hierarchy of masculine-orientated texts within the Hallyu canon, with fandom of K-hiphop functioning as a means to re-masculinize Hallyu texts away from the female-centric K-pop and K-dramas, as this derogatory comment regarding K-pop and 'fangirls' suggests:

"I like K-hiphop but I don't like K-pop. I think boy groups try to just attract fangirls. The songs are just catchy and they focus more on how to

look good for girls." (N).

The suggestion is that in embracing K-hiphop over that of K-pop and K-dramas, the participant is creating a new discourse of patriarchy, having been excluded from present hegemonic Islamic/ Malay-centric discourses of masculinity in Malaysia.

VIII. Conclusion

The popularity of Korean products among certain male Malaysian consumers is significant due to the alternative form of masculinity such texts represent during a period when constructions of identity are both tightly controlled by authorities and increasing contested by citizens. From studying Hallyu fandom amongst a small number a young Malaysian males, it is clear that for these individuals such texts assist in constructing an accessible and alternative form of masculine identity in a context where society makes hegemonic masculinity only accessible to consumers of a certain race, religion and/or political position. The model of Soft Masculinity contained in Hallyu products is very different to the repressive forms of masculinity participants associate with contemporary Malaysia, instead adhering to notions of personal expression and freedom. Korean society then becomes a desirable model of gender relations through which participants' can project their own frustrations and dissatisfactions with Malaysia. As a result of consuming such female-centric entertainment, these Malaysian men are subject to a questioning of their masculinity similar to that noted by studies documenting male fans of female-coded texts in Western societies, and even resort to hiding their fandom.

However it is important that such fandom is not interpreted as a complete rejection of patriarchy, but rather a critique of current state control and the adoption of a different and pre-existing form of masculinity from outside the country. This does not necessarily dispute patriarchy and gender divisions, but rather forms new boundaries and constructions, albeit ones that express participants' own dislike of

the racialized nature of the contemporary Malaysian state. More research is needed to assess to what extent, if at all, participants may act upon their own frustrations, and certainly the significant questioning of the political system (evident in the diminishing support for the ruling organization and the large street demonstrations of recent years) points to a wider dissatisfaction in contemporary Malaysia. It would seem that the existing reductive and racialized nature of Malaysian politics may be difficult to sustain in a society that is beginning to receive more and more texts that offer citizens alternative constructions of society, albeit constructions that perhaps do not necessarily also challenge gender relations.

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Appendix:

Table of participants:

No	Partici-pant	Race	Age	Religion	Length of time interested in Hallyu	Hallyu preference	Member of any Hallyu groups/activities
1	A	Malay-sian Chinese (MC)	21	Buddhist (not very religious)	5 years	Variety shows	No
2	B	MC	19	Buddhist	2 years	K-Dramas	No
3	C	MC	21	Muslim (not religious)	2 years	K-pop	In a Big Bang fan club
4	D	MC	21	Gave no religion	7 years	K-pop	In a Korean dance group
5	E	MC	23	Buddhist (not very religious)	5 years	K-pop	In a Korean dance group
6	F	Malay	21	Muslim (not religious)	1 year	K-pop	No
7	G	MC	22	Christian	8 years	K-pop	No
8	H	MC	22	Gave no religion	2 years	K-pop	No
9	I	MC	25	Christian (very religious)	8 years	Variety shows	Didn't say.
10	J	MC	20	Christian	1 year	Variety shows	In the Korean Society at university
11	K	MC	23	Gave no religion	5 years	K-pop	No
12	L	Malay	26	Muslim (not religious	A few months	One Kore-an show – 'signal'	No
13	M	MC	25	Buddhist (religious)	5 years	K-Dramas	No
14	N	MC	21	Gave no religion	4 years	K-hip-hop	Member of some Korean Facebook groups
15	O	MC	23	Christian (religious)	5 years	K-Dramas	No

16	P	MC	27	Christian (very religious).	3 years	Didn't say.	No
17	Q	MC	18	Buddhist (not very religious)	2 years	K-pop	No
18	R	Malay	20	Muslim (not very religious)	5 years	K-Dramas, old Korean songs.	In the Korean Society at university
19	S	MC	20	Gave no religion	3 years	K-Dramas and Variety shows.	No
20	T	MC	21	Buddhist (not religious)	7 years	K-pop and Variety shows.	In a Korean dance group
21	U	Indian Malaysian	23	Buddhist (not religious)	7 years	Dance, K-pop	Didn't say