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“IDOL”: Examining the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality in boybands

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“IDOL”:

Examining the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality in boybands

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Abstract

In response to the socio-political climate of recent years, there has been a growing category of socially-engaged pop music. These works can be explicitly connected to their ideas about gender, race, and age. While boybands may not be perceived to create activist works of art, they do often have large public platforms with potential to reach out to a mass population of dedicated fans. They are given the power and privilege of a life in the limelight. As such, their messages may carry deeper meanings than at first glance. This thesis explores the impact of successful boybands by examining The Beatles, *NSYNC, and BTS in their intersection with race, gender, and sexuality, as well as their influence on youth culture. Their actions and influence in the discussion of race in America, as well as the foundation of some of these bands' music in hip-hop were analyzed. I discuss how these bands perform their own gender on and off the stage. This project also takes a look at the impact of boybands on the notion of sexuality and the construction of sexual identity among their fanbase. Finally, I argue that the relationship between art (i.e., music, performance, and poetry), the artist, and their audience is a key to understanding the significant role of these bands in shaping today's youth culture both in the United States as well as across the globe.

Introduction

The landscape of pop music has changed in recent years as more artists are making music in response to the socio-political climate. The works of socially-engaged pop music can be explicitly connected to their themes about race, gender, and sexuality. Beyonce's *Lemonade*, Janelle Monae's "Turntables," and H.E.R.'s "I Can't Breathe" are all included in this category of pop. However, many popstars are not making this type of activist art. Though, due to their platform, the messages within their work and actions may be more complex than at first glance. Boybands, in particular, often have very dedicated fans that give them the power of a large public platform. Thanks to their widespread popularity, boybands have the ability to encapsulate moments of time, specifically the values of younger generations through their music and messages. In fact, the global popularity of these bands is visible among the younger generations. By examining the rise to and mechanism that sustained the popularity of boybands, my thesis aims to explore the multiple dimensions of socio-cultural impact of boybands as public icons and pop cultural mentors on youth with a particular attention to the dynamic relationships between the realm of youth culture and pop music, and their intersection with collective ideas about race, gender, and sexuality. The main analysis will focus on The Beatles in the 1960s, *NSYNC of the 1990s and early 2000s, and BTS in the 2010s and 2020s.

These bands were specifically chosen due to the scale of their popularity during the time of their collective identity as a band in relation to their audience. These bands were marketed to youth, which is an essential aspect of the definition of boyband. Thus, bands, like Boyz II Men, were not included due to their main marketing strategy of

appealing to an older audience (Shapiro and Yu). Specifically, The Beatlesⁱ were chosen as they became a blueprint for future boybands with the introduction of the fan phenomenon, Beatlemania, as well as their ability to maintain their artistry in the face of fame. The Beatles have also been studied academically, which offers a base of analysis and research for this topic. Then, *NSYNCⁱⁱ was chosen because they experienced some of the greatest success of the popular boybands in the 1990s, according to *Billboard* (“10 Biggest Boybands”). Finally, BTSⁱⁱⁱ was chosen for their modern representation of the boyband. In May 2019, BTS became the first group to spend five weeks as No. 1 on the *Billboard* 100 Artist Chart (Zellner). They also represent an evolution of the popular boyband in America, as they are from South Korea and perform mostly in Korean. The Beatles, *NSYNC, and BTS were chosen for analysis due to their different representations of boybands across generations.

In order to understand these boybands and their significance, the historical and social context of their rise to fame and the duration of their popularity, their artwork, including lyrics, music, and music videos, as well as their fans were examined. This analysis explores how these bands achieved global popularity, how they maintained their popularity, and if they left an impact. These questions were analyzed with a focus on themes of race, gender, sexuality, cultural studies, and globalization, among others. It focuses on the recent history of the boyband phenomena in the United States. Overall, this is an analysis on how boyband culture has molded society in relation to the values of youth culture.

Methodology

The main method of research was conducting a series of archival inquiries in order to develop a formal analysis of boybands, which included a close reading of primary and secondary sources. These sources included interviews with the artists, criticism of music, and academic texts on cultural studies, media, gender, and more. They also were made up of archival sources, including music videos, lyrics, and album art. As such, this is a multi-faceted, multi-focal research analysis; however, it is not ethnographic, so no direct interviews with human subjects were conducted. The theoretical texts on race, gender, sexuality, cultural studies, and globalization were used to address and understand the historical and social context of these boybands' rise to fame and the duration of their popularity. This thesis was informed by a number of scholars and their frames of study, including Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy, and Judith Butler. These theoretical frameworks and texts helped provide support to the claim that boybands have impacted generations of youth through their actions and music.

Moreover, this research was informed by a number of important modes of critique, including an intersectional feminist approach to the study of gender, anthropological exploration of the body in relationship to others, and a closer look at the notion of race from the standpoint of critical race theory to examine race and racism that exists in pop culture and mainstream social norms, as well as cultural studies of pop culture as an insightful site of inquiry about how we identify ourselves and our collective norms. Together, this transdisciplinary approach to the study of the boybands provides another layer of importance and significance to the facts and connections between

production of music, performativity of the artists in the public eye, and the responses from their fans.

Project Significance

This analysis showcases an important connection between pop culture and academics. It is important to understand the cultural studies of pop culture, in order to discern how we identify ourselves and our collective norms, as well as exhibit the important multidirectional relationship between artist, audience, and artwork. Moreover, this connection helps identify what messages are being spread through pop culture and how it impacts people. Furthermore, this thesis expands on the previous scholarship of The Beatles, *NSYNC, and BTS. Focusing on multiple bands showcases the relevance of popular boybands within society and the significance these bands have had across generations. It signifies that boybands each have their own influence; however, boybands have consistently made an impact on youth culture. By connecting two seemingly different areas of study, this thesis is important in its relation to youth and their cultural mentors. By understanding the impact of these mentors, one can understand the values which steer younger generations. By exploring the cultural importance of boybands, this thesis aims to connect youth and pop culture with academia.

Race and Its Connection with Boybands

In 1964, there were riots throughout the southern United States for the Civil Rights Movement. The Beatles, who were touring at the time, said in an interview that they did not support segregation. Shown in the documentary, “The Beatles: Eight Days a

Week,” The Beatles believed, “you couldn’t treat other people like animals” (Howard). In fact, they refused to play the stadium in Jacksonville, Florida if there was any segregation. They were aware this would irritate a lot of Americans; however, they knew their own beliefs and understood the power they held (Howard). After their interview, Jacksonville integrated their stadium, which marked the end of segregation for all big stadiums in the U.S. (Howard).

Although The Beatles were not icons in the Civil Rights Movement, the way in which they used their power to refuse to play segregated shows and force integration within stadiums was incredibly important. Antiracist actions in areas of pop culture, like boybands, where the connection to race seems less tangible are critical, due to the fact people internalize the racist ideas portrayed to them through society, education, and media. Ibram X. Kendi discusses internalized racism in his book, *How to Be an Antiracist* (ch. 8). Kendi declares, “To believe in a racial hierarchy is to believe in a racist idea,” with the idea that a racial hierarchy means there is something wrong with people of color, rather than the systems in place (Kendi ch. 8). The Beatles expressed, through their actions, that they did not believe in a “racial hierarchy” in music (Kendi ch. 8). They did not want Black people relegated to the back of the stadium at their shows. The Beatles believed Black fans should be provided an equal opportunity to see them up close. As The Beatles were the ones sending this message to millions of their fans, people would listen. They were one element of pop culture not persecuting Black people in the United States, which was influential to the ideas young fans were internalizing, both Black and white.

Then, in 1970, Jackson 5's "ABC" knocked The Beatles' "Let It Be" out of its No. 1 position on the *Billboard* Hot 100 chart ("Motown Weekend"). This marked a shift in the landscape of boybands, as the Jackson brothers, Jackie, Tito, Jermaine, Marlon, and Michael, had pioneering roles in the creation of the modern boyband. The Motown Records' group was polished in their music, style, and moves. According to author Maria Sherman, "On paper, much of what these Motown groups did screamed boy band," as they sang, danced, and played their instruments alongside each other (Spanos). Jackson 5 set the standard for boybands as their first four singles hit No. 1 on the charts (Fong-Torres). However, they also demonstrated that "white audiences would listen to, love, and collaborate with black artists" (Spanos). Jackson 5's "infusion of R&B, soul, gospel, jazz, rock and roll, and pop delighted audiences nationwide beyond groups of young women" (Spanos). Jackson 5 appealed to audiences across race, gender, and age. According to music writer Jack Hamilton, Motown's slogan "'The Sound of Young America' – not white American, not black America, *young* America — was audacious in its belief that such a sound could exist." However, with the help of Jackson 5, Motown Records' owner, "laid down a bet against the racism of the American public and actually won" (Hamilton). Motown Records, a Black-owned business that made music centered around Black artists, along with Jackson 5, were able to reach a wide audience, while performing music influenced by genres that have Black roots. Jackson 5 indicated a shift in American society, while also creating a blueprint for future boybands.

BTS has built upon this blueprint as an incredibly important group for Asian representation in the U.S. music industry. Nicole Santero, a 28-year-old Asian American, highlighted for *Time* the significance of BTS' mainstream success in terms of

representation, as she, “never really saw people like [herself] on such a mainstream stage” (Bruner, “BTS: TIME's Entertainer of the Year”). In a time when violence against Asian Americans is prevalent, representation matters. Although the burden is not on BTS to educate everyone about Korean culture, they choose to introduce traditional Korean elements in their music and performances. They have used common Korean instruments in their songs, worn traditional clothing during their performances, and even highlighted historic Korean buildings in their music videos and performances. For example, the music video teaser for their song “IDOL” showcases BTS wearing traditional hanboks, while dancing in a historic Korean building to a song that is “built around classical Korean instruments, with the steady clang of a kkwaenggwari, a brass gong, introducing the rest of the tune,” according to Tamar Herman’s *Billboard* article on the teaser (“BTS Share Teaser Video”). Moreover, BTS performed “IDOL” on *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon* in September 2020 wearing traditional hanboks at Gyeongbokgung Palace in South Korea (“BTS: IDOL”). They brought elements of Korean culture to their mainstream U.S. television performance – exposing viewers to Korean culture. BTS’ introduction of the Korean culture and language to Western pop culture is important in the fight against cultural racism. Their music and popularity showcase that there is no cultural hierarchy – music, the sound of culture, is just as important in English as it is in Korean (Kendi ch. 7). They help exemplify that one must, “see all cultures in all their differences as on the same level, as equals. When we see cultural differences, we are seeing cultural difference – nothing more nothing less” (Kendi ch. 7). BTS’ music and content expose Western pop culture to elements of Korean culture – introducing their cultural differences. Through knowledge of and exposure to other cultures in the

mainstream, people are given the opportunity to understand that all cultures are equal.

BTS has a major influence in terms of opening up Western pop culture to Korean culture.

Moreover, BTS has also acted against racism in the past year. BTS was one of the few K-pop groups to speak out as a group during the Black Lives Matter movement in the summer of 2020 after the murder of George Floyd. The group donated \$1 million to the Black Lives Matter organization, as well as tweeted to their 26 million Twitter followers, “We stand against racial discrimination. We condemn violence. You, I and we all have the right to be respected. We will stand together. #BlackLivesMatter” (Rowley).

Although tweeting does not always equate to antiracism, it was a huge step for a K-pop group to use their platform to speak out against racism, due to the fact that the K-pop industry has a deep history of racism, cultural appropriation, and building itself on the hard work of Black artists (de Luna). Korea is a homogenous country; thus, as K-pop has become a very popular global industry over the past few years, these issues have come to light. Fans often reach out to companies to push for education for their staff, stylists, and artists about racism and cultural appropriation (de Luna). Members of BTS have taken time during their livestreams to apologize for past racist actions, such as appropriating Black hairstyles and culture, as well as learned about the history and culture of hip-hop and R&B from rappers Coolio and Warren G (BTS, “RM’s Hello 2017!”; “[ENG Sub]”). They have exemplified an effort to educate themselves and acknowledge their mistakes. BTS speaking out is an important step in standing against racism within the K-pop industry.

Furthermore, these actions, specifically their donation to Black Lives Matter in 2020, meant a lot to their fans. By offering support to their Black fans, who spend a lot of

time and effort supporting them, BTS recognizes, like The Beatles, there is no “racial hierarchy” and Black fans matter (Kendi ch. 8). As Ibram X. Kendi discusses in *How to Be an Antiracist*, being judged by those closest to someone can feel “suffocat[ing]” (ch. 8). Although Kendi is describing his own experience, he exemplifies the importance of feeling supported by those one reveres. This support from artists they support, may lessen the “suffocat[ion]” Black fans feel from internalizing messages of oppression (Kendi ch. 8). Although this “burden” may exist in other areas of their life, BTS may create some peace in fans’ minds by standing with and supporting fans, especially as artists of color themselves (Kendi ch. 8). Yassin Adam, a Black fan who runs popular BTS social media accounts, told *Time* that BTS’ discussion of racism, “will bring more awareness to this issue people like me face in this country... I see myself in them, or at least a version of myself” (Bruner, “BTS: TIME's Entertainer of the Year”). Yassin Adam recognizes not only the importance of BTS’ statement for the fans, but also the importance it had for the spread of the movement (Bruner, “BTS: TIME's Entertainer of the Year”).

Throughout BTS’ fandom, there were several fan accounts dedicated to raising money for different organizations and educating people on social issues, so they had an infrastructure in place to launch #MatchAMillion (Iasimone). The goal was for fans to match BTS’ donation, which they did in less than 24 hours. This is a feat only a well-organized, dedicated group could put together. It is also only a feat a large fandom could accomplish. This dedication showcases the importance of boybands, who have an immense and often devoted following, speaking out against racism. They have the ability to inspire and lead their fans to create change. Although there is much more work to be done to commit the K-pop industry and its fans to antiracism, this donation by BTS and

the reaction by fans exemplify the significance of boybands using their platform to speak out against racism.

Although boybands can create positive messages about race, they also have dark histories with racism. As already noted, BTS has had a past of cultural appropriation within their music and styling; however, *NSYNC also relied on other cultures to build their popularity. *NSYNC experimented with mainly Black art forms, without having, “any explicit discussion of race,” according to author Maria Sherman in her article, “The Future According To NSYNC: 20 Years of ‘No Strings Attached.’” They took influences from hip-hop and R&B culture, in both music, style, and dance (Sherman). Their choreographer, Darrin Dewitt Henson, included the Black Power fist in their choreography for “Bye Bye Bye,” which “if it was someone who [he] felt was going to bastardize it...would have never done it” (Sherman). However, members on many occasions appropriated Black culture by wearing cornrows, durags, and other traditionally Black hairstyles. This reflects pop culture, which is often built upon cultural forms popularized or created by Black people without recognizing from where it is coming.

It is crucial to note the importance of hip-hop as an artform developed predominantly by Black people. In fact, Jordan Davis, an Anthropology PhD student at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, researched rap as an intersectional Black space:

Rap music and hip hop culture are vital to the study of the black experience in the United States both musically, and for the role that both have played as spaces for developing and maintaining emic systems of

value, meaning, and ideology for the black community amid constant onslaught by the dominant social order. (Davis)

Hip-hop culture plays an important role in the “black experience” because it is mainly created by the Black community (Davis). Hip-hop uses “people and experiences which are externally iconic to blackness” within its lyrics to create meaning in this Black space (Davis). Ibram X. Kendi recognized the importance of hip-hop in his own life in Queens, New York: “That interplay of blasting tunes from the store to the car trunk, to the teen walking by, practicing her rhymes, to the cipher of rappers on the corners...The sound of hip-hop was all around us” (ch. 7). Hip-hop was rooted in the culture of Kendi’s neighborhood – it was a sound of his community. It was a sound of Black culture. Hip-hop is a space where Black people are celebrated, “while much of the United States remains hostile to black and brown bodies” (Davis). Thus, hip-hop is important to Black culture because it “normalizes blackness in a society that takes blackness as abnormal” (Davis).

While hip-hop was started in the Bronx, it has grown globally. In their essay, “Hip-Hop & the Global Imprint of a Black Cultural Form,” Marcyliena Morgan and Dionne Bennett note, “as global hip-hop maintains the tradition of American hip-hop, it must also account for equally powerful local traditions of art, culture, and protest. It must represent life on a local level” (190). Global hip-hop must recognize the established practices of American hip-hop, while also understanding the locality and community of hip-hop with context to the customs of those global creators (Morgan and Bennett 190). BTS maintains these hip-hop forms. Their first single was heavily influenced by 90s hip-hop with lyrics that critique the pressures of the South Korean educational system (BTS,

“No More Dream”). They consistently create art that depicts Korean “life on a local level” (Morgan and Bennett 190). BTS respect the traditions of American hip-hop, while also recognizing its origin as a Black art form. While they do profit off of this art form pioneered by Black people, BTS also showcased an effort to learn its history.

However, *NSYNC experimenting with art created by Black people without acknowledging and understanding its roots feeds into the “racial hierarchy” discussed by Kendi (ch. 7). Without a frame of reference to the importance of hip-hop in Black culture, *NSYNC appropriated Black culture. They exploited it for their own gain, both musically and financially. By not referencing the history of hip-hop or the struggles of the people centered in it, *NSYNC helped set the standard that Black culture is “culturally inferior” – that it is okay to use the culture without understanding it “in relation to [its] history, and all individuals and groups in relation to their cultural history,” as stated by anthropologist Ashley Montagu in 1942 (qtd. in Kendi ch. 7). *NSYNC sends a message to their fans that “blackness [is] abnormal,” by not acknowledging the people at the heart of the culture they love (Davis). Once again, fans internalize these messages from their idols – both racist and antiracist. Whether their boyband supports the plight of people of color to end racism or takes from these marginalized groups can leave a lasting impact on fans receiving these messages.

Gender, Sexuality, and Boybands

The Beatles did not set out to be icons who changed the way people viewed masculinity or even give young, mainly girl, fans the opportunity to express their sexuality publicly (Ehrenreich et al.). However, according to Beatles’ expert and

Professor of English and Popular Music at Monmouth University, Kenneth Womack, they did write a few songs that were fairly feminist for the 1960s (Pazzanese). These songs, such as “Drive My Car” and “Ticket to Ride,” were about sexually empowered women who did what they wanted (Pazzanese). Often, this female character knew who she wanted to be, what she wanted, and was not afraid of men getting in the way. An example of this woman is in The Beatles’ “Drive My Car,” where they describe a woman who knows who she wants to be: “Asked a girl what she wanted to be/ She said baby, can’t you see/ I wanna be famous, a star on the screen/ But you can do something in between” (The Beatles, “Drive My Car”). By creating these powerful female characters in some of their songs, The Beatles introduced themselves into the conversation about gender equality and the sexual empowerment of women. Gender is intertwined with the art they create.

Though The Beatles’ songs promote sexually empowered women, Beatlemania revolutionized young women, or at least women who are sexually attracted to men, showcasing their sexuality. It is important to note that for this analysis, it was assumed that the majority of boyband fans are young women; however, not all fans are attracted to men or attracted to the men in these bands. According to authors Barbara Ehrenreich, Elizabeth Hess, and Gloria Jacobs, in their essay “Beatlemania: Girls Just Want to Have Fun,” “it was rebellious (especially for the very young fans) to lay claim to sexual feelings. It was even more rebellious to lay claim to the *active*, desiring side of a sexual attraction: the Beatles were the objects; and the girls were their pursuers” (90). In a society that was becoming highly sexualized, teen girls were supposed to remain pure; thus, “to assert an active, powerful sexuality by the tens of thousands and to do so in a

way calculated to attract maximum attention was... in its own unformulated, dizzy way, revolutionary” (Ehrenreich et al. 90). In fact, to give into Beatlemania and “abandon control...was, in form if not in conscious intent, to protest the sexual repressiveness, the rigid double standard of female teen culture” (Ehrenreich et al. 85). For a teenage girl to showcase her support for The Beatles, it was to protest the sexually repressive culture forced upon young women (Ehrenreich et al. 96). The Beatles gave young girls a forum in which to express their sexuality, just as The Beatles did through their music.

This expression of sexuality expands beyond Beatlemania into the fandoms of *NSYNC and BTS, allowing women to respond to “boys who are offering themselves as sexually desirable and visually pleasurable objects of consumption. It...allows girl fans to negotiate their own gender identification,” according to George Washington University professor Gayle Wald (Bozza). Christopher Martin, Professor of Digital Journalism, wrote that fans could “subvert the veneer of prudent and predictable sexuality and vicariously experiment with the mysteries and pleasures of sexual taboos that might be wrapped up in the persona” of these bands (61). These boybands give girls an outlet to express their own gender, as well as their sexuality. This, again, intertwines their life as artists and their art with gender.

However, The Beatles and their music were “idolized” by these young girls due partly to their performance of a non-conforming masculinity. Ehrenreich, Hess, and Jacobs determined, “what was both shocking and deeply appealing about the Beatles was that they were...at least not easily classifiable in the rigid gender distinctions of middle-class America” (102). Paul McCartney recognized these gender norms as he later remembered, “in America, [they were] all getting house-trained for adulthood with their

indisputable principle of life: short hair equals men; long hair equals women. Well, we got rid of that small convention for them” (Enhrenreich et al. 102). This gender non-conforming look was created by their manager, Brian Epstein. He changed their style from the leather jackets and long hair, bad boy aesthetic, from their club days to, “single-breasted, three-buttoned mohair suits, with narrow lapels and even narrower pants,” according to Beatles expert and author, Mark Lewisohn (Farber). This new look was also characterized by the iconic mop tops of their early years. The Beatles, through their new style and their success, “advanced the image of a new kind of man” (Farber).

This image helped them appeal to their fans and open them to further sexual empowerment because, “the Beatles construed sex more generously and playfully, lifting it out of the rigid scenario of mid-century American gender roles... They seemed to offer sexuality that was guileless, ebullient, and fun – like the Beatles themselves and everything they did” (Enhrenreich et al. 102). The Beatles showcased a sexuality that did not play into gender inequality as their image did not fit the normative ideal of masculinity (Enhrenreich et al. 102). The Beatles expanded the possibilities of sexuality, as well as shifted the normative ideal of masculinity by their performance of gender.

In fact, The Beatles exemplify Judith Butler’s notion that gender is a repeated performance. Butler, an American philosopher and gender theorist, writes in her book *Gender Trouble*, “The various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all” (Butler ch. 3). On stage, The Beatles projected their gender as different than the masculine norm of the time, by wearing their hair long, full suits, and boots, that not only set them apart from other music groups at the time, but more significantly, their success on the global stage shifted the bodily norms of

masculine sex appeal. However, they grew to dislike the image attached with being The Beatles (Frontani 127). The “acts of gender” they performed as The Beatles were different than their individual performative acts because those acts were inherently intertwined with their status as pop icons (Butler ch. 3). However, their performance of gender as pop icons was transformative in shifting the normative ideal of masculinity due to the fact that they were popularizing different masculine traits and styles.

BTS also showcases a shifting normative ideal of masculinity through their performance identity. Their style includes different fashion, sometimes in traditionally feminine clothing, jewelry, dyed hair, and make-up (Yi). K-pop emphasizes presenting as beautiful to an audience, which is not a descriptor often attached to traditional forms of masculinity. These idols perform a repetition of acts that are both founded in the masculine and feminine norms, so BTS performs a more fluid approach to gender through their acts in both feminine and masculine spaces. Moreover, BTS, as well as *NSYNC, dance, which is often a space that is not considered to be traditionally masculine. This adds to their ever-expanding performance of gender. Boybands, through their repeated “acts of gender,” showcase to their fans and pop culture a shifting normative ideal of masculinity (Butler ch. 3).

Furthermore, boybands are intertwined with gender due to their mainly female fanbases. In fact, society has “a sense that what girls like is dismissible,” according to Professor Gayle Wald (Bozza). For example, The Beatles and their fans were mocked by editor Paul Johnson in his 1964 *New Statesmen* article, “The Menace of Beatlism”: “Those who flock round the Beatles, who scream themselves into hysteria, are the least fortunate of their generation, the dull, the idle, the failures.” However, they are now

considered to be one of the best bands of all time because more men became fans of The Beatles throughout their career. Moreover, in the *New Yorker* article, “Two Theories on How K-Pop Made It to No. 1 in America,” Amanda Petrusich described BTS fans as, “young women going cuckoo, clutching themselves in a kind of hysterical rapture.” Boybands are not taken seriously because their fans are portrayed as “hysterical” by the media (Petrusich). However, these fans have organized to sell out tickets, break records, and become activists. They are the “makers and keepers” of these boybands (Martin 61). Fans are aware of who they choose to support. This is exemplified by fans choosing to support BTS, whose debut album spoke out against the pressures within the South Korean school system (Bruner, “How BTS Is Taking Over the World”). As author and boyband expert, Maria Sherman notes in an interview with the *Wall Street Journal*, young fans “don’t want something that is apathetic, politically or otherwise” (Barr). Fans chose BTS because they appealed to them, both in their music and message; thus, they organized to lift them to the level they are today, even if it means being described as “going cuckoo” (Petrusich).

Moreover, Professor Gayle Wald acknowledges in her essay, “‘I Want It That Way’: Teenybopper Music and the Girling of Boy Bands,” that the “mocking condescension toward” boybands is “facilitated by a gendered hierarchy of ‘high’ and ‘low’ popular culture that specifically devalues the music consumed by teenage girls.” The work of these artists is not valued because it is enjoyed by young women. By describing fans of these bands as “hysterical,” while also alluding to the fact that the objects of their “hysteria” are not worthy, young women are taught their opinions and

what brings them joy are not valid (Petrusich; Johnson). It reinforces the misogynistic standards within American pop culture.

As boybands are typically young men who perform for a mainly female fanbase, gender is an integral aspect of their existence. Their art, style, and performance can all be “acts of gender” that allow them to shift the normative ideal of masculinity, while allowing a space for fans to openly express their sexuality (Butler ch. 3). However, these bands also exemplify the cultural standard that what women enjoy is not valuable. Boybands are both tools that break gender norms and reinforce misogynistic cultural standards.

Boybands and Their Impact on Youth Culture

During the summer of 1967, dubbed the Summer of Love, thousands of mainly young people embarked on a pilgrimage to the Haight-Ashbury neighborhood of San Francisco. This neighborhood symbolized the ideal of the hippie lifestyle. It was about music, hallucinogenic drugs, anti-war, and free-love (Weller). And The Beatles had just released the soundtrack for the summer: *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*.

Sgt. Pepper was the first album released by The Beatles after they stopped touring. This album, released in June 1967, was filled with “odd choral progressions, mysterious instruments, dreamlike effects, and images that did not seem to yield to ‘straight’ interpretation” as noted by journalist Jeff Greenfield in the *New York Times* in 1975. It was inspired by the bands in the Haight-Ashbury district like Jefferson Airplane, the Grateful Dead, the Quicksilver Messenger Service, Big Brother and the Holding Company and the Charlatans, who were “forming social bonds with their audiences and

trying to build a communal ethos out of a swirling mix of music, drugs, sex, metaphysics and idealistic love,” according to music journalist Mikal Gilmore for *Rolling Stone*. Gilmore also noted that the “spacey codes and the florid textures and arrangements” in *Sgt. Pepper* were “clearly derived” from the progressive sounds of many San Francisco and British bands; however, The Beatles “refined” these psychedelic and experimental styles within their new music. As *Sgt. Pepper* hit No. 1 on the *Billboard* charts that summer, The Beatles showcased what they did best throughout their career: they popularized different styles and ideas (Gilmore). They took inspiration from music and bands at the heart of this movement and made it accessible to those not making a pilgrimage to the Haight-Ashbury district. Even The Beatles recognized their own power, for in 1966, Paul McCartney claimed that The Beatles were, “so well established that [they] can bring fans along with [them] and stretch the limits of pop,” but they could not “get by without a little help from their friends” (Greenfield; The Beatles, “With a Little Help from My Friends”).

Beyond its psychedelic sound, *Sgt. Pepper* lyrically brought listeners to the heart of the Summer of Love, even on simple tracks like “With a Little Help from My Friends.” As they sang, “I get by with a little help from my friends,” or even, “I get high with a little help from my friends,” The Beatles highlighted a key theme to the Summer of Love: a collective identity focused on love, peace, and lots of drugs (The Beatles, “With a Little Help from My Friends”). Rather than alluding to counterculture values as they had previously, *Sgt. Pepper* directly and explicitly addresses these beliefs. Four years since The Beatles had captured the hearts of youth across the world, they were able to use their own popularity to spread the core ideals of the counterculture to the

“popular,” or at least to the many youth that listened to them. This is exemplified by the fact that *Sgt. Pepper* spent 15 weeks at No. 1 that summer (Goodman). As Jeff Greenfield noted in an article for the *New York Times*, “By virtue of their fame, the Beatles were a giant amplifier, spreading ‘the word’ on virtually every trend and mood of the last decade.” The Beatles impacted culture by “amplifying” messages of the counterculture through the methods of their own popularity (Greenfield). They spread messages that youth would relate to, specifically with *Sgt. Pepper*, because the counterculture ideals were about community.

As The Beatles had catapulted into pop stardom, a new generation, the baby-boomers, were catapulting into young adulthood. For this generation, youth mattered more than ever before. The baby-boomers experienced an immense amount of power and influence because their generation was the largest group of teenagers and young adults yet to be seen. As this community of young people was so large, boomers were able to look to each other for cultural guidance, rather than their parents. Furthermore, the boomers’ parents grew up in war-time, as opposed to the relative comfort of a boomer’s early days, leading to a disconnect between these generations (“Boomer Basics” 26-27). Due to the baby boomer generation’s immense size and the generational gap between them and their parents, they sought out community with each other. Thus, The Beatles’ message of an identity founded in community connected with many of this generation.

As Stuart Hall mentioned in his essay, “Notes on Deconstructing the ‘Popular,’” often the construction of popular culture is a struggle between the “dominant culture” and the “excluded”:

There is a continuous and necessarily uneven and unequal struggle by the dominant culture, constantly to disorganize and reorganize popular culture; to enclose and confine its definitions and forms within a more inclusive range of dominant forms. There are points of resistance; there are also moments of supersession. (360, 354)

This cultural struggle can take many forms: “incorporation, distortion, resistance, negotiation, recuperation” (Hall 357). Through *Sgt. Pepper*, The Beatles were messengers of the counterculture ideals. Pop culture incorporated these ideals into their own because an element of the “dominant culture,” The Beatles, took part in the disorganization of pop culture and its ideals (Hall 354). They were disseminating messages to their audience, and young people were listening because The Beatles were spreading messages they wanted to hear. On *Sgt. Pepper*, The Beatles had tapped into what the baby boomers were feeling about the world around them and what they wanted it to be – the Haight Ashbury district. This San Francisco neighborhood was an ideal for youth because of the communal ideal it represented as young people were free to love, hope, and expand their mind. This same ideal was found in *Sgt. Pepper* as it discussed the desire to love, hope, and expand the minds of its listeners. The Beatles were spreading messages from the counterculture built by youth; thus, The Beatles’ messages appealed to youth. The Beatles were disseminating this message about a collective identity to those who could not travel to its original source. However, young people listened even more closely as it came from The Beatles.

As the baby boomers themselves were looking outside of their family unit for community, The Beatles were able to bring them together, through their music. The

popularity of The Beatles allowed them to spread messages of the counterculture to youth. Although The Beatles were not always experimenting with original ideas, they did popularize and refine styles of music. *Sgt. Pepper*, specifically, was an impactful piece of art. It established rock as an artform that contained “ideals of defiance,” as well as “dreams of love, community, and spirituality” (Gilmore). Reporter and Professor Langdon Winner wrote of the *Sgt. Pepper* era, “For a brief while, the irreparably fragmented consciousness of the West was unified, at least in the minds of the young” (qtd. in Gilmore). This was the power of The Beatles – to expose fans to different ideas, music, and worlds and expand their mind. Thus, they helped the youth create a culture of their own.

In March 2000, after two years without releasing new music and a long legal battle to free themselves from their record deal, *NSYNC finally released *No Strings Attached* (Sherman). This draught ending album brought the “pop explosion” to its peak, as youth were empowered to showcase their consumer power and influence over culture (Skanse).

As they had said “Bye Bye Bye” to their record deal in 1999, *NSYNC welcomed in a new era of pop (Sherman). As music journalist Maria Sherman wrote for *NPR*, *No Strings Attached* is, “an amalgamation of new jack swing revivalism, uptempo R&B and hip-hop worship...[it] allowed the group to sonically divorce itself from the competition, through a prescient dedication to genres that would soon take the place of pop and rock atop the charts.” They took influence from hip-hop and Black artists in order to differentiate themselves. With *No Strings Attached*, *NSYNC pointed towards the future of pop, often built by or taken from Black musicians and artists, while representing the

height of the boyband and pop music phenomenon in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Sherman). The album begins with smash hit “Bye Bye Bye” deceiving listeners with a “climbing string crescendo that bleeds into Justin Timberlake’s nasal falsetto, his quickly ad-libbed ‘Hey, hey’ bursting into the five-part harmony” (Sherman). This single exchanged their debut album’s “lovesick” theme for a “sexy self-assurance while maintaining a marketable level of boyband innocence” (Sherman). They wanted to do something different, which led to them pursue an edgier, yet still up-tempo sound. The drum arrangement in “Bye Bye Bye,” as well as its “buzzy electronics” contrasted the vocals of *NSYNC, which set them apart from their competition, The Backstreet Boys (Sherman). In “Bye Bye Bye” and throughout the album, *NSYNC found its inspiration in funk, hip-hop, and dance music (Sherman). These inspirations, although founded by Black artists, set this album apart from other boybands and their previous works.

These new sounds, combined with the draught of music, and the highly publicized legal battle with their old manager, Lou Pearlman, made their fans go wild (Sherman). *No Strings Attached* sold 2.4 million copies in its first week, which was a record that remained unbroken until Adele’s *25* was released in 2015 (Sherman). Moreover, it sold 1.2 million units its first day (Skanse). The previous records were set by The Backstreet Boys with their 1999 album *Millennium* with 1.1 million copies in the first week and then Britney Spears with *Oops!...I Did It Again* in the spring of 2000 (Sherman). These records exemplify the hold pop stars had on the market in early 2000. Youth were able to show their power as a consumer group through these pop icons, and *NSYNC was one of the greatest beneficiaries from these displays. According to *Rolling Stone* journalist Richard Skanse, many people in the music industry were wondering, “whether

*NSYNC's success was a fortunate fluke or the teen-pop explosion moving to a whole new level." Teens were bringing *NSYNC's music to the forefront of pop culture and showing off their consumer power. Moreover, *Billboard* charts editor, Geoff Mayfield claimed, "there's now potential that if you have the right album at the right time, you can do this... it's possible to reach that many people in a week, and that's kind of exciting" (Skanse). *NSYNC's new sound and expansion of pop was reaching millions of people within the first week of release. Those listeners were being prepared for where pop was going and how it would change. As their fans were mostly young people, *No Strings Attached* represented the ability for youth to become powerful consumers. They were showing that they were not "just another player in your game for two" (*NSYNC).

Moreover, *No Strings Attached* showcased that youth have "political power" over pop culture (Marks). This political power came through *Total Request Live*, *TRL*, the MTV show focused on playing music videos voted on by fans and bringing on guests for interviews and games. Although MTV had been around since the 1980s and had even tried a *TRL* concept before, *Total Request Live* was the heart of pop culture in the 1990s and early 2000s. *TRL* was, "a live rumination on current events and viral-type frivolities that checked the archetypal American teenager's pulse daily—with a deadly serious top-10 video countdown determined by fan phone calls and nascent online voting" (Harvilla). "Bye Bye Bye," spent weeks at No.1 on *TRL* (Harvilla). This was due to the fact that their videos incorporated dancing and action-packed scenes, as well as the dedication of the youth voting for them. The music video for "Bye Bye Bye" showcased *NSYNC members being puppets, chased by dogs, involved in a car chase, or even running on top of a train, in addition to their iconic dancing ("*NSYNC - Bye Bye Bye"). In order to be

successful, they had to appeal to the youth watching the show and voting. Thus, they helped set the standard for what types of videos young people were expecting. In fact, *NSYNC consistently battled for No. 1 or No. 2 each week (Harvilla).

TRL was identified with boybands, especially the war between the Backstreet Boys and *NSYNC, who fought for the top spot each show (Harvilla). This “cultural identity” was constructed from the first episode, where Backstreet Boys’ “I’ll Never Break Your Heart” and *NSYNC’s “Tearin’ Up My Heart” came in at No. 1 and No. 2 (Marks). AJ McLean from the Backstreet Boys sums up the importance of *TRL* and boybands to youth culture in the 1990s as he claims, “MTV had to play the video because the fans wanted it...once the fans banded together and forced MTV’s hand, they didn’t have a choice” (Marks). Young people had an outlet to determine what they, along with other viewers, were watching that day. They were influencing pop culture directly – by calling in and voting online. As Craig Marks wrote for *Vulture*, “Young people’s purchasing power was matched with a measure of political power in MTV’s *Total Request Live*, an outlet to vote for their favorite artists and have their picks ritualistically blasted into their living rooms every afternoon after school.” Young people were determining what music and videos to which they were exposed day after day. Professor of English and American Studies at George Washington University, Gayle Wald explains, “Girls were able to see themselves as the authors of culture...They were pulling all the strings. The show became this really fun excuse for them to display their consumer power” (Marks). The fans were “reorganiz[ing] pop culture” through their own volition (Hall 354). The fans gave *NSYNC the platform to show people where pop was going and introduce different influences on the pop world (Sherman). Perhaps, it was the fans

who had an impact on youth culture. They spread *NSYNC's message through buying and playing their albums, voting for them on *TRL*, and even doing the "Bye Bye Bye" dance. They were using the pop culture machine *TRL* to incorporate *NSYNC, their performances, and their forward looking pop to the mainstream (Hall 357). Best said by Maria Sherman, *NSYNC, "etched its place in time with harmonies and production and moves that would stand the test of it."

During 2020, many people felt their world stop, as the Coronavirus swept around the world. Worries increased surrounding health and safety, financial situations, and living life every day. As youth's anxiety rose and the world continued at its stand still, BTS released their album *BE* in November 2020.

BE came after BTS' own world stopped, as they had to postpone massive stadium tours, promotions, and stop meeting their fans in person. However, BTS speak directly to the life experiences of a generation of youth, as well as older generations, as they released an album about what they faced during quarantine. This work addresses their feelings and the stories they want to tell during the Coronavirus pandemic. Journalist Jeff Benjamin wrote in a review for *Rolling Stone*, "the septet use their latest release *BE* to offer something more intimate, comforting and honest, but no less uplifting." With a "folky production," their lead single softly introduces the theme of the album: "Life Goes On" (Benjamin). With the lyrics, "On my pillow, on my table/ Yeah, life goes on," BTS allude to the fact in "Life Goes On" that life continues. They recognize that although "one day, the world stopped," life is still going on – they still have to eat, sleep, and remain human (BTS, "Life Goes On"). The song reminds listeners that the world is still turning, and one can find strength within oneself even if the world does not seem as if it

will return to normal anytime soon (Benjamin). BTS offers a message of hope within “Life Goes On,” while also recognizing the struggles everyone is currently facing (Benjamin).

Moreover, fans have found a lot of comfort in this album because BTS shared more of the creative process with fans. They revealed, “though frequent live stream broadcast chats how they were overseeing and project-managing not just the music, but the visuals, storytelling, genres, music videos, and even the number of tracks (Benjamin). BTS inviting fans along with them in the making of the album with social media, alludes to BTS’ ability outside of their music to influence and appeal to youth culture: social media.

Social media has been integral to BTS’ success, as they are able to connect with fans all over the world. It is also a large aspect of connecting with youth. According to Pew Research Center, in 2018, 95% of teens had a smartphone or access to one, with 45% of teens reporting they were online on a near-constant basis (Anderson and Jiang). Without an online presence, BTS could not have an impact on youth, especially globally. In fact, Arjun Appadurai, an anthropologist specializing in globalization studies, claims that media is a large aspect of our “global cultural economy,” defined as cultural interactions and transactions between cultures (219). Media helps to determine how information is presented to people, so it influences the narratives audiences believe (Appadurai 219). Media plays a major role in helping people understand other cultures, especially during this age of globalization (Appadurai 219). BTS currently has 34.9 million Twitter followers and had spent 210 weeks as No. 1 on the Billboard Social 50 chart as of the last week of data collection on December 26, 2020 (BTS_twt; “Social 50

Chart”). They are able to connect to millions of people across the world with one tweet, YouTube video, or live broadcast. Although cultures are always changing, BTS has a huge platform to connect people all around the world to learn about other fans’ cultures and perspectives, including BTS’ own culture.

Moreover, social media has been integral to spreading BTS’ messages to the mainstream. Michelle Cho, a professor of East Asian Studies at the University of Toronto, theorizes that BTS owes a lot of their success to their social media because it drew in U.S. TV shows. This exposure helped them become more mainstream. She analyzes further that they had to rely on their fans through social media in order to gain media interest (Hollingsworth). Once again, fans built the cultural influence of these boybands. Fans, attracted to BTS’ messages of hope, worked to give BTS a mainstream platform to further spread their message by constantly tweeting, trending BTS related content on Twitter, and ensuring that BTS stayed in the discussion. Thus, BTS’ music and positive messages have reached an incredible amount of people due to their fans. According to Stuart Hall’s theory on cultural production, pop culture opened up to BTS due to the “negotiation” introduced by BTS fans (Hall 357). Popular culture modes, such as late-night talk shows, music artists, or even award shows, understood the viewership and promotion they would get from fans by having BTS on their show or featured in their music (Hall 357). However, as BTS has become more popular, fans have become more selective on who and what gets access to BTS. They are continuing their “negotiations,” but they are working to ensure that BTS’ message remains as pure as possible (Hall 357). Pop culture has partially welcomed BTS due to their fans’ power; however, fans continue their work to make sure pop culture gives BTS’ the respect they think they deserve.

Although it is too early to define BTS' impact, they are already leaving behind a positive influence with their music by writing songs about loving yourself, mental health, and finding hope when the world stops. Through works like *BE*, BTS showcases their ability to make music which brings people hope, and with a social media platform like theirs, it is bound to be a long-lasting impact on those who are willing to listen.

Conclusion

Boybands are an important aspect of analysis for understanding the relationship between youth culture and pop music in their intersection with gender, sexuality, and race. However, it is important to note that these bands are not perfect. They have made racist comments, appropriated cultures, and created songs with misogynistic themes. Despite these actions, these bands were the people the fans chose to support. Their fans saw something in their art – whether it was music, lyrics, or dance. It is the fans who lifted them up to the status of cultural icons, where they could stand against racism, fight gender norms, and push culture forward. The fans gave these bands the power to create change; thus, it is the fans who truly decide who moves pop culture forward. The fans put in the work to match the efforts of their boybands. As BTS' j-hope recognizes, “Us and our fans are a great influence on each other... We learn through the process of making music and receiving feedback” (Bruner, “BTS: TIME's Entertainer of the Year”). It is the relationship between artist, art, and audience that holds the power of boybands. The impact of boybands and the power to create this impact is found in this relationship – it lies within the art, through the artist, and is empowered by fans.

Endnotes

ⁱ The Beatles defined the 1960s. Although John Lennon and Paul McCartney met in 1957, The Beatles did not become the Fab Four until 1962, when Ringo Starr finally joined John Lennon, Paul McCartney, and George Harrison (Ulaby). According to entertainment journalist Colin Bertram in his article “How the Beatles Got Together and Became the Best-Selling Band of All Time,” The Beatles were also signed by their manager, Brian Epstein, in 1962. In January 1963, the Beatles released their first U.K. single, “Please Please Me,” which hit No. 1 on U.K. charts (Bertram). Then, in May 1963, they released “From Me to You,” which went to No. 1 on many British charts and reached 116 in the “Bubbling Under” section of the Hot 100 in the U.S, according to *Billboard*’s “Beatles Timeline.” This was the first time the Beatles appeared on an American chart. At the end of 1963, Beatlemania, arrived in the U.S. with “I Want to Hold Your Hand,” which hit No. 1 on the *Billboard* singles chart on February 1, 1964. In February 1964, the Beatles performed on three episodes of *The Ed Sullivan Show*, which were viewed by over a third of the American population. On April 4, 1964, the Beatles control the *Billboard* Hot 100’s top five spots. The Beatles had 20 No. 1 singles on the *Billboard* Hot 100 chart throughout their career. Moreover, The Beatles also headlined one of the first major stadium concerts in Shea Stadium in front of 55,600 fans (Bertram). During their career, The Beatles released 12 studio albums, through which they played with their sound, album art, and production. In January 1969, the band performed their music for the last time in public on a London rooftop (Bertram). They released their last two albums, *Abbey Road* and *Let It Be*, in 1969 and 1970.

ii *NSYNC became a group due to Chris Kirkpatrick, according to Anthony Bozza's *Rolling Stone* Article "'N Sync: Weird Scenes Inside the Glitter Factory.'" In 1995, he gathered JC Chasez, Justin Timberlake, Joey Fatone, and Lance Bass in Orlando to join RCA Records through Lou Pearlman's record label, Trans Continental Management. They spent a year touring Europe before breaking the U.S. market (Bozza). According to Keith Caulfield's *Billboard* Article "Chart Rewind: In 2000, 'N Sync Soared In Atop the Billboard 200 With 'No Strings Attached,'" they released their first album, *NSYNC, in March 1998, which debuted at No. 82 on the *Billboard* 200 chart. In June, it hit the Top 10 and stayed there until March 1999. Their 1998 Christmas album also hit the Top 10. In 1999, the band began a legal battle with RCA after trying to leave before their contract was up. They settled out of court in December, which allowed them to release their second album, *No Strings Attached* on March 21st, 2000. *No Strings Attached* sold 2.4 million copies in its first week. *NSYNC released their third and final album, *Celebrity*, in 2001, before going on hiatus. They came back together to perform at the 2013 MTV Music Video Awards; however, they currently have no reunion plans (Caulfield).

ⁱⁱⁱ BTS, a South Korean boyband/K-pop group, debuted in June 2013. BTS, originally short for Bangtan Sonyeondan (Bulletproof Boy Scouts in English), now stands for Beyond the Scene according to Raisa Bruner’s “Everything to Know About K-Pop Group BTS.” Each member trained for years under Big Hit Entertainment before their official debut as group. BTS is made up of members RM, Jin, SUGA, j-hope, Jimin, V, and Jungkook. Members either came from the underground rap scene in Korea, auditions, or were spotted on the street. Each member has their own role within the group. RM, SUGA, and j-hope are rappers, while Jin, Jimin, V, and Jungkook are vocalists. Jimin, j-hope, and Jungkook are also members of the dance line. BTS released their first album *2 Cool 4 Skool*, with lead single “No More Dream,” in 2013 (Bruner, “Everything to Know”). According to Tamar Herman’s “How BTS Took Over the World” timeline, BTS released eight more albums before being recognized internationally with their *Wings* album in 2016, which peaked at No. 26 on the *Billboard* 200 chart. In 2016, they topped the Social 50 chart for the first time. In 2017, BTS released *Love Yourself: Her*, with single “DNA,” which they performed at the American Music Awards, becoming the first K-pop group to perform at a major U.S. award show (Herman, “How BTS Took Over the World”). BTS has released five Korean albums since 2017, while selling out stadiums all over the world (“DISCOGRAPHY”). In 2020, BTS released their single “Dynamite,” which topped the *Billboard* Hot 100 chart and received a Grammy nomination (Moon). BTS also performed to a virtual audience of over 750,000 for their virtual concert, “Map of the Soul ON:E” (Moon). From topping *Billboard* charts to speaking at the United Nations, BTS are taking over the world.

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