UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI

Homoromantic Tension and Sapphic Desire:

A Queer Reading of 2nd Generation K-pop Music Videos

Master's Programme of History

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Abstract:

In this thesis I conduct a visual analysis of 2nd generation K-pop music videos from 2005 to 2008. After an initial viewing of 156 music videos, I chose 5 music videos to focus on as part of the following analysis. I implement a queer reading of the visual aspects of the music videos in order thematically analyse queer themes emerging from the sources. I link the arising themes from the analysis to a larger context of South Korean history, paying close attention to social, cultural, and political history of Korea regarding queerness. I implement queer theory and methodologies of Queer Asia in order to analyse the source material from an anti-colonial perspective that takes places the study into the cultural context of the source material. Queer Asia as a methodology emphasises anti-colonial academic methodologies and theories.

My research question focuses on the differences of queer thematics in K-pop music videos and the lack of queer rights in South Korea: what kind of queerness is present in 2nd generation K-pop music videos and why is there queerness in K-pop music videos despite legal challenges and lack of equal rights that queer people face in South Korea?

A queer reading of the music videos revealed nuanced and complex queer themes that are tied to South Korean historical context and societal values. I argue that despite systematic and legal oppression of queerness and queer rights, there is a long history of queerness in South Korea that is visible in South Korean media depictions. Due to long censorship of queerness in media and societal ostracization, the queerness in K-pop music videos is often intentionally opaque, only visible once viewed through a queer gaze. I argue that through a simultaneous emergence of Boys Love media and K-pop, the marketability of queerness in K-pop became a financial benefit for entertainment companies to include queer themes. However, it is the fans of K-pop that queer the experience of K-pop in the absence and lack of queer representation through their devotion and own queer identities. As such, visible queerness in K-pop has potential to lead to cultural, societal, and legal changes regarding queer rights in South Korea.

1. Introduction

1.1 Research topic and research question

Since its emergence in the late 1980s, K-pop (Korean popular music) has developed from a local entertainment industry into a global phenomenon. In the last three decades, K-pop has reached wider audiences across the globe and diversified in terms of musical styles, aesthetics, and audiences. K-pop as a form of popular media and as a music genre has reached diversified audiences through increased inclusive representation of peoples and identities, such as increased representation of queerness. In this thesis, I will analyse queerness in K-pop music videos of the late 2000s through a queer reading and visual analysis. Queer visibility and representation in K-pop and Korean popular media has inarguably increased and become more overt since 2018 when the "first openly gay K-pop idol[1]" Holland debuted.[2] Since the late 2010s multiple mainstream Korean series have had queer characters and subplots,[3] queer celebrities have gained more popularity and visibility,[4] idols have taken part in entertainment shows hosted by openly gay celebrities and talked openly about queerness on national television shows,[5] and multiple idols came out in 2025.[6]

Safe to say, queerness in South Korean entertainment industry has become more visible in the last decade despite continued legal struggles for equal rights for queer individuals in South Korea. Where does the difference in social and cultural representation of queerness and the lived reality of lack of legal rights for queer people in South Korea derive from?

In this thesis I will dive into the roots of queerness in K-pop through a queer reading of K-pop music videos from 2005-2008. This thesis will tackle the following research questions in regards to

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[1] Idol refers to a performer who has debuted under a South Korean entertainment company as a solo artist or as part of a group. Cho, 2023: 26.

[2] Holland, 2025.

[3] Including trans character in 이태원 클라쓰(eng. *Itaewon Class*) and a gay sub-plot in 무브 투 헤븐 (eng. *Move to Heaven*).

[4] For example Poong Ja, a transgender YouTuber and entertainer has been featured on many entertainment shows both online and offline along with popular Korean celebrities. 깡시안, 2023; 빨리요, 2023; 스튜디오 훅 : STUDIO HOOK, 2022; 시즌비시즌 Season B Season. 2022; 풍자테레비, 2026; NamuWiki, 2026.

[5] In a YouTube show, 홍석천의 보석함**,** hosted by Hong Seok-Cheon and Kim Ddol-ddol, famous idols have joked about "gay" versions of their group names with the two gay hosts, such as turning the name Ateez into "Gayteez" or Seventeen into "Gayventeen". Hong Seok-Cheon was the first South Korean celebrity to come out as gay. In a survival show Boys Planet, aired on Mnet, a participant, that went on to become one of the winners of the season, openly discussed his experience as a Boys Love (BL) actor. A participant of Boys2Planet went on to star in a dating show for gay men, His Man 4, after participating in the survival show. 김똘똘 DDOLDDOL, 2026; 홍석천의 보석함, 2025a, 2025b, 2025c; Chun, 2025; Kwon & Pyo, 2025; Lee, 2026; Mnet, 2026; Mnet K-POP, 2023; Mnet Plus, 2026.

[6] Including Bain, a member of Just B and two members of KATSEYE, Megan and Lara. Bain, 2025; Dodson, 2025; Gauci, 2025; Kim, 2025; Kwon & Pyo, 2025; Wang, 2025.

queerness in K-pop music videos: what type of queerness does a queer reading reveal? How does the queerness in the music videos relate more widely to social and cultural history of South Korea? Where does the difference of increased cultural representation and lack of queer rights in South Korea stem from? This thesis concludes to a discussion on the differences of queer representation legally and culturally in contemporary South Korea through a reflection on the modern history of queerness in South Korea. I argue that patriarchal values and a heteronormative societal structure that have roots in the history of occupied Korea and the nation-building process of South Korea since 1950s influence greatly the lack of queer rights in contemporary South Korea. Simultaneously, rich history of queerness in Korea and the financial benefit for the K-pop industry have influenced the increased visibility of queerness in media through the monetisation of homoeroticism and global outreach of K-pop.

This master's thesis builds on the work of academic scholars of K-pop, fandom studies, and queer reading of Korean cultural products. The theme of this thesis is closely related to East Asian Boys' Love (from now on BL) culture, the research of which is exemplified by Tom Baudinette who focuses on fandom studies especially in the BL space of East Asian popular culture. This thesis builds also on the queer K-pop studies as researched by Kwon Jungmin and Christine Michelle L. Santos as well as on the queer studies of South Korea by Todd A. Henry. In addition, it follows in the academic example of queer reading of Korean media works, as exemplified by John Whittier Treat in his queer reading of a classic Korean novel *Wings* (1936) by Yi Sang.

In this thesis I will focus on analysing music videos from 2005-2008, a time period that is encompassed in the 2nd generation of K-pop that is defined as spanning from 2004 to 2011.[7] The South Korean musical tradition of K-pop can be traced back to the late 1980s, which is the start of the 1st generation of K-pop. In the year 2026, as this thesis is being written, the current generation is referred to as the 5th generation. K-pop groups are divided into different generations chronologically according to debut dates of the groups, but are not always necessarily distinct from each other in terms of musical style, themes, or visuals despite generational differences.

The 2nd generation of K-pop has been specifically chosen to allow an analysis of the opaque queerness beyond a heteronormative reading of K-pop music videos in a time of cultural, societal, and political shifts in South Korea in the early 2000s. By opaqueness I refer to the haziness of a subject beyond a translucent obstacle: an opaque queerness that one can see glimpses of but that is obscured by the heteronormative lens. I argue that not only is the queerness in these music videos

[7] Cho & Lee, 2025: 28.

opaque intentionally and that a queer reading is not an alternative reading of the material but a case of making the opaque transparent by switching the analytic lens to a queer one.

In the early 2000s South Korea was heavily impacted by the 1997 IMF financial crisis, which was a catalyst for political and economic policy changes in Korea. New policies surrounding the entertainment industry reflected heavily on the 2nd generation of K-pop artists and managements, as possibilities for a wider reach were enhanced by governmental support for performing arts.[8] In addition, *hallyu*, the spread of South Korean popular culture overseas since the 1980s, had taken root abroad by the early 2000s, including in Japan, China, Taiwan, and Malaysia. The 2nd generation of K-pop was the beginning of intensified and government-supported *hallyu* globally, which led to K-pop gaining a global audience, not least thanks to the globalization of K-pop since 2010 and the popularity of PSY's *Gangnam Style* (2012).[9]

1.2 Queer decolonial methodology

The multidisciplinary topic of this thesis, queer south Korean history analysed through a visual queer reading, combines themes of queer and feminist history, media analysis, cultural studies and Asian studies. In addition, this thesis falls into the subcategories of social and cultural history in the field of historical research. As such, the methodologies employed in this thesis combine theories of multiple academic disciplines in an attempt to pay respect to the diversity of the topic and in order to conduct a holistic analysis of the source material.

The time period of 2005-2008 was chosen after an initial viewing of 156 2nd generation K-pop music videos as distinct themes were identified. All primary sources analysed in this thesis are publicly available on YouTube and as such are free to view and to use for research purposes. As the material is publicly available and does not concern personal information of individuals, no anonymisation of the material was necessary. While not all music videos were published on official channels of management companies, the validity of the sources was cross-checked for authenticity. After the initial recognition of main themes that emerged from the initial viewing, five music videos were chosen as representative examples of the topics discussed in this thesis: The Lady's *Attention* (2005), Buzz's *남자를 몰라* (2006) and *My Love (And)* (2006), CSHJ The Grace's *The Club* featuring Rain (2006), LPG's *팔베개* (2006) and SeeYa's *가니* (2008).

[8] Cho, 2023: 25, 26.
[9] Cho, 2023: 27, 28, 29; Cho & Lee, 2025: 28-31.

The analysis of the music videos relies on the methodologies of visual analysis and1 queer reading. Visual analysis is executed through the analysis of visual components of the music videos, including but not limited to camera movement, scene longevity, positioning of objects, and colour. A queer reading of the analysis is executed through the identification of visual queer themes and subjects in the music videos. Following the example of Elliot Freeman, in this thesis "queer" is used as an umbrella term for people and behaviour beyond cisheteronormativity; as a descriptor of actions and depictions; and as a verb for actions of resistance against normative values and ideologies with an aim to challenge societal norms based on a cisheteronormative model of existence and identification.[10] As such, queerness in the music videos is seen for example in the relationships they portray, in the actions of the characters on screen, in the shifting of perspectives, and in the context of the music videos. Another reason that I chose to use the word queer in this thesis is the prevalence of the term (퀴어, kwui-eo) among South Korean queer communities and academia.[11] As such, queer is a term used academic research surrounding the topic but also a term that contemporary South Korean queer people identify with.

This thesis relies heavily on queer theory, which has its roots in literary theory and analysis, as it focuses on challenging and contradicting cisheteronormative assumptions and exposing systematic and normalised anti-queer sentiments in different societal areas while simultaneously emphasising intersectional perspectives and methodologies.[12] Following in the example of previous scholars, I too recognise the activist roots of the word "queer" and the theorisation of queerness that shifted a derogatory term into an empowering descriptor equivocally referring to strangeness.[13] As the queer is strange, so it is fluid, mobile, and constantly fluctuating, disrupting normative notions of desire in its messiness to describe desires, gender expression, and bodies.[14] In this strangeness and messiness lies the empowerment of the term in this thesis as well: queerness is not limited to certain terms and conditions, but rather exhibits itself in its ambiguousness. Queer theory challenges systematic invisibility of queerness and through the action of queering everyday norms are challenged, including those imbedded in research methodologies.[15] Queer theory is enacted throughout all

[10] Freeman, 2023: 448.
[11] For example, multiple queer rights activist groups and events use the word queer in their name (서울퀴어문화축제 eng. Seoul Queer Culture Festival,한국퀴어영화제 eng. Korean Queer Film Festival, 퀴어락 eng, Korea Queer Archive) and a history book about Korean queer history is called 퀴어 한국사 (*kwui-eo hanguk-sa*). 서울퀴어문화축제, 2026; 한국퀴어영화제, 2026; Korea Queer Archive, 2026; Kyobo, 2026.
[12] Baudinette, & Santos, 2024: 160; Doty, 1993: xv; Murphy & Lugg, 2016: 371. Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2013: 145.
[13] Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2013: 145.
[14] Murphy & Lugg, 2016: 371; Nash, 2010: 132; Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2013: 144, 145.
[15] Murphy & Lugg, 2016: 371; Nash, 2010: 133, Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2013: 149.

processes of this thesis through the practice of constant analysis and self-reflection concerning my positionality as a researcher relating to the topic at hand.

As such, one of the main concerns in this thesis is my positionality as the researcher as a white European researching South Korean history and topics and the risk of recreating (neo)colonial perspectives. For this reason, I emphasise the need for a decolonial methodology in this thesis in order to not (re)create harmful and violent colonial pasts by reading the source material from a Westernised perspective.[16] Decolonial methodology emphasises a respect of the source material and the environment in which it was created, so as not to ignore the socio-cultural specificities of the topic and as a way to bring forth societal change and democratise research by allowing research subjects to have control.[17] In addition, decolonial methodology questions the values that are taught in Euro-American academic institutions as well as theories that are based on these academic premises. Instead, decolonial methodology offers a way to place histories outside of theories based on Westernised values and ideologies in hopes to not (re)create neocolonial perspectives on the researched topic.[18]

Indeed, queer theory itself has been criticized for its US-Eurocentric production that denotes those outside of American and European academia as passive readers of the theory.[19] However, since 2005 there has been a shift in theorisation of queer theory towards anti-imperialism and de-Americanisation due to the critique by academics Jack Halberstam and José Esteban Muñoz on the normalisation of neoliberal homonormativity in the field.[20] In similar vein, scholars such as Kuan-Hsing Chen have advocated for a methodology of Queer Asia, inspired by 'Asia as a method', that shifts the focus on Asia while maintaining the "ambiguity, playfulness and non-determination" of the terms Asia and queer.[21] Queer Asia simultaneously challenges the Euro-American centric norm of queer theory and notes the historical reduction of 'Asia' to East Asian-centric and Sino-centric perspectives, which excludes the rest of Asia to be mediated through imagined centres such as China, Japan or the "West".[22]

Michelle H. S. Ho and Evelyn Blackwood note the emergence of a direction of Asian queer studies in 2010 that questions Euro-American values embedded in classic queer studies that assume

[16] Denscrombe, 2025: 235; Finden, 2024: 462; Hui, 2023: 1076.
[17] Denscrombe, 2025: 235.
[18] Denscrombe, 2025: 238; Jung, 2025: 790, 791.
[19] Chiang & Wong, 2017: 121.
[20] Chiang & Wong, 2017: 121.
[21] Chiang & Wong, 2017: 122, 123; Chiang, Henry & Hok, 2018: 298. See Chiang, Henry & Hok (2018) for Asian Trans studies.
[22] Chiang & Wong, 2017: 122,123; Kao, 2021.

traditionalism of gender and sexuality that is not relevant to many Asian contexts.[23] Ho and Blackwood note that in the methodology of queer Asian studies, "queer" shifts attention to a new critical perspective on "the study of Asias and Asians", while the focus on Asian queerness emphasises non-Euro-American, decolonial perspectives on queer studies.[24] Following the theory of Queer Asia, in this thesis analysis focuses on (South) Korea as a geopolitical, cultural, and social sphere. (South) Korean queerness is analysed in its specific context, not as a product of globalisation nor mediated through (neo)colonial assumptions and perspectives. As the coloniality of queer studies has been attributed to knowledge production in English publication,[25] I have paid attention to include multilingual literature whenever feasibly. However, my own lack of linguistic ability excludes academic works published in Korean, hindering attempts to relocalise the perspective of this thesis completely from an Anglophonic one.

In addition, I will be borrowing theory and methodology from the tradition of queer history, that is both an act of queering methodologies as well as a methodology itself for writing queer history. In historical records, queer history is often not written down in sources, as is the case for Korean queer history as well.[26] Indeed, Todd A. Henry, a scholar on queer South Korean history, notes that the repression and criminalisation of queerness has historically discouraged documentation and verbalisation of queer experiences.[27] For this reason, queer history brings to light the invisible by reading against the grain and focusing on what is left unspoken instead of on what is visible at first glance, a form of interdisciplinary scavenging for material.[28] While in my thesis the material is not read "against the grain", queer historical methodology is a useful theoretical background from where to build on an alternative reading of historical material, in this case a queer reading of media.

Queer Asian media studies emerged in the early 2000s, with different roots from Euro-American queer cinema tradition.[29] Audrey Yue notes that the emergence of an Asian queerscape and a queer hybridity in scholarly context as a "double consciousness of Western and Eastern perspectives" gained popularity in research as a way to take into account local contexts and adaptability to "queer globalization" in an analysis of "queer hybridity", an interdependence of globality and locality as local queer cultures are born in Asia.[30] Indeed, queer Asia as a methodology notes the lack of

[23] Ho & Blackwood, 2024.
[24] Ho & Blackwood, 2024; Chiang, Henry & Hok, 2018: 299; Cho, 2020: 263-264.
[25] Kao, 2021.
[26] Freeman, 2023: 448; Kim, 2023: 48.
[27] Henry, 2020a: 6.
[28] Boyd, 2008: 186; Murphy & Lugg, 2016: 369.
[29] Yue, 2014.
[30] Yue, 2014.

distinctiveness between sexual and gender identities, which is prominent in Euro-American context, but which are often entangled and indistinguishable from one another in Asian contexts.[31]

Caitlin L. Ryan and Jill M. Hermann-Wilmarth emphasise that queer reading is not an action of imposing sexualities onto subjects but a way to pay attention to normalised assumptions in regards to texts.[32] Queer reading is a way to replace texts to a space beyond the heteronormative one.[33] Chaenens, Van Bauwel and Biltereyest emphasise that both a heteronormative as well as a queer interpretation of a text is a valid one as it notes the different interpretations of audiences and readers.[34] A queer reading provides an opportunity for queerness in media either through intended subtext or through audience's interpretations.[35] Indeed, in queer media studies it has been accepted that audiences are not only consumers of texts, be that films, literature, or other forms of media, but active meaning-makers.[36] Alexander Doty notes that queer readings are not merely "alternative" or "sub-cultural" readings.[37] Similarly, this thesis is not an alternative reading of K-pop music videos but a queer interpretation of the source material.

Doty notes that the queerness in popular culture derives from "influences during the production of texts", "historically specific cultural readings and uses of texts by" queer people, and "adopting reception positions that can be considered "queer" in some way, regardless of a person's declared" sexual or gender identity.[38] Following Doty, this thesis is not focused on how queer people are represented in media but rather implements a queer perspective on popular culture.[39] Accordingly, the subject of this thesis is not queer people and identities in K-pop music videos but a queer perspective on music videos. Indeed, Thomas Baudinette and Kristine Michelle L. Santos note that the queerness of (international) K-pop fans that actively queer K-pop.[40] Similarly, in this thesis viewers are regarded as active meaning-makers of the source material, not passive consumers of popular culture.

[31] Kao, 2021; Chiang, Henry & Hok, 2018: 308. Alexander Doty notes that in US-centric academia queerness is often strongly linked to sexual identity that is referenced through gender (Doty, 1993: 5).
[32] Ryan& Hermann-Wilmarth, 2013: 149.
[33] Chaenens, Van Bauwel & Biltereyest, 2008: 336.
[34] Chaenens, Van Bauwel & Biltereyest, 2008: 342.
[35] Persaud, 2020; Doty, Alexander 1993: 1.
[36] Persaud, 2020.
[37] Doty, 1993: xii, 16.
[38] Doty, 1993: xi.
[39] Doty, 1993: 3.
[40] Baudinette & Santos, 2024: 159.

1.3 Thesis outline

My analysis focuses on three main themes that are organised into three respective chapters. In Chapter 2, I focus on homosocial relationships as exemplified in two music videos by Buzz. I argue that male connection is portrayed through violence as a socially accepted way of showing physical touch among men. I link the portrayal of masculinity in the music videos to South Korean history under colonial and authoritarian rule that has led to a development of a patriarchal and ethnonationalist society with heteronormative values.

In Chapter 3 I focus on gender expression by analysing music videos by SeeYa and Lady. I argue that gender is performed through actions and intentionally (re)produced in the music videos. Gender expression is not tied to only the gender of the character but rather has to be actively performed. I link the theme of non-normative gender expression and transness to the history of Shamanism in South Korea, which is tied to the trans history of Korea.

In Chapter 4 I analyse the intentional skinship among members of K-pop groups, focusing on the closeness portrayed through physical affection among members of girl groups in their music videos. I argue that sensuality among women is more apparent than among men in the music videos of the time period. I then link the sapphic desires to the history of lesbianism and sapphic marriages in South Korea, arguing that in a patriarchal society, female desire is ignored and down-played, which makes portrayal of sapphic desires less controversial in media compared to desire among men.

I conclude this thesis with final arguments on why queerness can be found in early 2nd generation K-pop music videos despite lack of queer rights and historical repression of queerness in South Korea. I argue that long historical roots of queerness in Korea have not been erased despite governmental attempts to eradicate queerness from among its citizens in different times in history. In addition, in the 21st century queerness in K-pop has become a marketable aspect to entertainment companies. Queerness is thus portrayed in K-pop due to the economic benefits that it provides, which in turn enables the queering of the industry and the fandom surrounding it, regardless of the original aims of the K-pop companies.

2. Homosocial relationships

2.1 Homoromantic tension

A prominent genre of K-pop music videos that portray queerness in the early 2000s is coming-of-age music videos with male protagonists. While there are multiple music videos belonging to this same category, such as Gavy NJ's *Happiness* (2005) and SG 원너비's *살다가 (As I Live)* (2005), I will focus on analysing two music videos by Buzz (버즈): *남자를 몰라* (*namjareul molla,* hereafter *Molla,* eng. *You Don't Know Man*) (2006) and *My Love (And)* (2006). These music videos are representative of the category of coming-of-age music videos as they portray the most prominent themes of the genre: coming-of-age male friendships and the consequences of different life choices. In addition, the two music videos in question are a pair of videos as *My Love (And)* is a complimentary video and a sequel to *Molla*, filling in plot holes and continuing the story of the first music video. What is notable is that both music videos are not merely music videos but closer to a short film as the music is interrupted by dialogue and other sounds of the scenes, a prominent feature in the coming-of-age music videos of the time period. The videos are also longer than the length of the songs, as *Molla* last for 06:49 minutes and *My Love (And)* for 08:08 minutes, while both songs last 4 minutes each.

Molla begins with funeral scene where mourners are weeping for the lost life of a protagonist we have yet to meet. At this point the camera focuses on two mourners in particular, a young woman and a young man, who seem to be especially affected by the death in question. The scene then changes to a bird's eye view of school grounds and the introduction of the two male protagonists, one in a blue tank top and the other in a Taekwondo suit. The two protagonists have a physical fight on the rooftop of the school as classmates cheer them on and end up in the hospital, lying in beds next to each other. Recovering in the hospital, the boys connect and become friends. Together with a girl who visits the boys in the hospital and reprimands them for fighting, the trio are a group of friends that share moments of connection together. The music video then moves on to a scene of the distrainment of the Taekwondo-boy's family home, and he is forced to move away as the boy-in-blue and the girl are left behind, watching the moving-car drive away. The music video ends with a scene in a Taekwondo gym where the two male protagonists are reunited as the boy-in-blue visits the other boy happily. The scene however transitions into a scene of violence as the two boys, now young adults, are in the midst of a fight, bloodied, and loosing.

My Love (And) music video continues from the scene seen in the previous video of the moving car driving away and the scene transitions to the taekwondo-gym scene of reunion between the boys. The

viewer learns that the reunion at the gym, where the Taekwondo-boy teaches a class of kids, happens 7 years after the departure. The now-young-men go have a drink together and are reunited with the girl from the first video, making the trio whole again. The music video continues with scenes of the daily life of the trio as the boys help the girl at her shop and she cooks for the boys in turn. Suddenly in the middle of a meal, the boy-in-blue gets a call and rushes out, which the viewer learns is to a fight against a gang with his own gang as the scene changes from a domestic dinner-scene to a fight scene in a warehouse. When the boy-in-blue returns to the other two, he sees from outside the building that the Taekwondo-boy gives a ring to the girl, who gladly accepts it and the two embrace. The music video then shows clips of blissful life of the young couple preparing for a wedding in contrast to scenes of the boy-in-blue's life of crime and violence. When the two young men meet once again at the taekwondo gym, they go for a drink together but end up being attacked by the gang the boy-in-blue had fought before. The two young men fight the gangsters but the taekwondo-boy gets stabbed and dies. The scene then transitions to the funeral scene that opened the *Molla* music video, as the viewer now understands the context of the tragedy. Mourning, the boy-in-blue stands back from other mourners and is startled as suddenly a hand grabs his shoulder. The dead boy is behind him, dressed in his school uniform and the music video ends with the protagonists playfully fighting on the street in their school uniforms as the girl joins them, reuniting the trio once again as they slowly walk off into the distance.

While the trio does include the girl, the two Buzz music videos focus on the relationship of the two boys. There are multiple ways in which the relationship of the two male protagonists is portrayed as intimate and close, the first instance being when the two boys are fighting on the roof. The camera encloses the two boys inside the shot, while the crowd cheering them on is left outside the shot, on the sidelines. Another instance happens when the two boys are in the hospital, the camera shows the two leaning towards each other as they watch television together (figure 1). What constantly breaks the contact of the two boys is the presence of the girl. In nearly all scenes that the three are together, she is always positioned in between the two boys. Only when the boys turn their backs to the girl for a small moment of privacy are the three in the same frame without the girl being in the middle as she is forcefully excluded from the embrace of the two boys (fig.2).

Figure 1: Namjareul Molla, 03:43: The two male protagonists are watching television together in hospital.

The continued disruption of physical closeness between the two boys by the girl in the trio feels intentional in its prevalence. The presence of the girl works as a buffer of homoromantic tension between the two boys and the girl's relationship with the boys works as a way to decline any assumptions of non-heterosexual desire between the boys. Alleviating homoromantic tension, the presence of the girl is a reminder of the heterosexual desire of the boys.

Figure 2: Molla, 05:20: The two protagonists share a moment together before the other boy moves away.

The intimacy between the two boys is portrayed through long scenes of shared eye contact in high tension scenes between the protagonists. Such scenes often include an element of competition, as when the two boys are fighting on the roof and when they are sitting in hospital beds next to each other and challenge each other to drinking through prolonged eye contact (fig. 3 and 4). Similarly, as the two boys are drinking alcohol together, they challenge each other to a playful contest, a show of masculinity and competition two prove themselves in the eyes of the other boy.

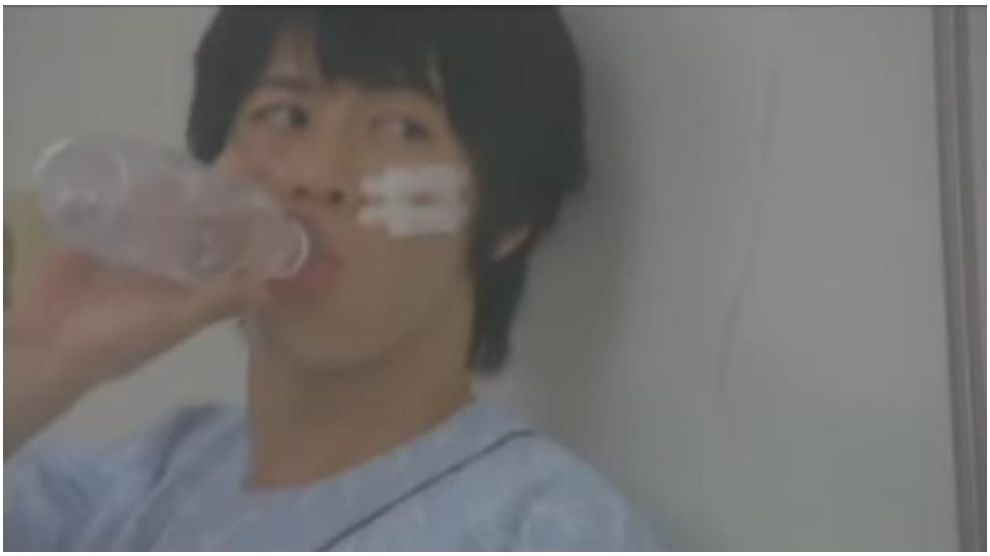

Figure 3: Molla, 02:39: The two protagonists staring at each other in hospital beds.

Figure 4: Molla, 02:46: The two protagonists staring at each other in hospital beds.

The intimacy of the relationship of the two boys is portrayed also through comparison with the girl of the trio. In the funeral scene of the *Molla* music video, the boy and girl are shown mourning in the same frame as the camera transitions from focusing on the crying girl to the weeping boy in the back (fig. 5 and 6). The feelings of the mourning woman and man are compared in this scene through the similar portrayals anguish and sorrow at the death of the other boy. However, the man is secluded to the back, not amid the other mourners like the girl. The emotions of the boy and the girl are similarly compared in the scene where the friend is stabbed. The boy-in-blue falls to the ground, devastated by the death of his friend as rain falls down on him and the body of the other boy. As the scene changes, the girl is simultaneously smiling up at the falling rain by the door of her shop, happy about the rain drops, unknowing yet of the tragedy that has taken place.

Figure 5: Molla, 00:34: The girl is in focus and closer to the camera.

Figure 6: Molla 00:36: The boy is in focus, situated further behind while the girl is at the front.

Colours are an impactful visual aid in the storytelling in *Molla* and *My Love (And)*. In the beginning the two boys are dressed differently, one in a blue tank top and the other in a white taekwondo suit, emphasising their opposing sides, but in the hospital both are in the same hospital uniform, portraying their equality and ability to become closer in a neutral setting (fig.7). Later in the fight scene in *My Love (And)*, the gangsters are wearing black, while the boy-in-blue is wearing a grey suit and the taekwondo-boy a white suit, similar to his taekwondo suit. In this scene the black represents the enemy, while morally the boy-in-blue is on a grey area, whereas he has dragged his innocent friend in white to his darker world, that ends up being the death of the friend.

Figure 7: Molla, 02:36. The two protagonists are becoming friends as they stay in the hospital together.

The changes in the colours of the clothes of the protagonists portray the change in their relationship, but also the shift in the people that they grow up to be. The music video ends with both boys wearing school uniforms, a statement of their equal standing as students as they got to know each other (fig.8). They have diverted back from their different paths to familiarity and innocence as the protagonists happily embrace each other, the tragedy of the friend's death erased.

Figure 8: My Love (And), 07:52: The protagonists are playful and joyful in their reunification.

2.2 Violence as male connection

One constant in the coming-of-age of male protagonist music videos is the prevalence of violence among men. In *Molla* the two boys fight each other in the beginning of the music videos, leading to the hospitalisation of both boys. By the end of the story in *My Love (And)* the boys are fighting together, not against each other but united against the gangsters. The consistency of violence in the videos of this category is tied to the male protagonists of the videos, and such, to the portrayal of masculinity. Violence is normalised as part of the growing-up experiences of school boys, and while some grow out of it, others continue on a path of violence, which often lead to a tragic end in the coming-of-age music videos.

Molla and *My Love (And)* portray the relationship of the two boys as well as the different lives that they lead through contrasting scenes of colourful life of an engagement and the dark life of a gangster in the midst of violence. However, there are two scenes where the boys lie on the ground together, at the end of fights, both defeated. The scenes are comparable but differ significantly in their contexts: in the first scene both protagonists have exhausted each other while fighting against each other, whereas in the other the Taekwondo-boy lies on the ground, stabbed, bleeding, and dying, while the boy-in-blue lies on the ground devastated in anguish over the death of his friend (fig. 9 and 10). Physical fights have led the boys to states of exhaustion and defeat.

Figure 9: Molla, 02:29: The two protagonists lie on the ground, exhausted after their fight.

Figure 10: My Love (And), 07:10: The protagonists lying on the ground after a fight in which the other was stabbed to death.

What is notable is that in the scene where the boys are fighting each other, their physicality is portrayed through aggressive contact. In the music videos, physical touch is a way to show the changing relationship between the two boys. The contrast between the scenes of violence and those of teasing contrast the differences of physical touch between men. While the teasing punches convey friendliness and closeness, an aggressive punch is violent and threatening. The action itself stays the same, a punch, but the context and the surroundings change the meaning: both love and aggression between the male characters are shown through the same action.

The masculinity that is depicted in *Molla* and *My Love (And)* is typical of the type of ideal masculinity presented in coming-of-age music videos of the early 2000s. Masculinity is tied to the male protagonists and is tightly linked to aggression and violence due to Korea's militant-authoritarian history. Idealised forms of masculinity in South Korea are tied to a heteropatriarchal societal structure that represses other forms of masculinity that are deemed incorrect, immoral, or even harmful to the society at large, such as queerness. The repression of queerness as well as hegemonic masculinity in South Korea can be traced back to the early steps of the country's nation-building project. Queerness, and anti-queer sentiments, in contemporary South Korea are tightly bound to the historical construction of a South Korean state as dictated in many instances since the Korean War by authoritarian governments.

In the aftermath of the Korean War, South Korea introduced ID-cards but denied citizenship from person who deemed ideologically compromised. This meant that suspected 빨갱이 (eng. "commies", communists and socialists) were denied citizenship, a group that included homosexuals.[41] In South Korea queer people and their desires were deemed as dangerous for the nation-building project as they were seen as a threat to an anti-communist agenda of the country.[42] Notable is the similarity between 1950s South Korea and the anti-homosexual agenda of the Cold War US, where homosexuality was shunned due to the perceived national threat that homosexuality imposed on the anti-communist agenda.[43] Homosexuality was deemed against national values, which exemplifies the link between queerness and citizenship in South Korea: a queer person was not a citizen of a newly-born South Korea. As such, idealised South Korean masculinity has roots in ideological standing that deviates citizens from non-citizens, anti-communists from communists.

Under an authoritarian regime that idealised the Confucian model of parental governance in South Korea between 1970s and 1990s, non-normative sexualities were repressed and restricted by the government in the developmentalist heteronormative, patriarchal social order of the country.[44] South Korean definitions of masculinity are heavily impacted by the Korean war and its aftermath, including the building of a South Korean nation and the authoritarian ruling governments of the late 20th century that deemed queerness a stain in the national image. However, at the same time the ideal image of a Korean man and masculinity was societally openly challenged as emphasis on national building moved away from anti-communist patriotism (such as fighting in the Vietnam

[41] Ruin, 2020: 325.
[42] Kim, 2016: 104; Kim, 2020: 177.
[43] Kim, 2020: 177.
[44] Cho, 2020: 268-269.

War) to focusing on national economic growth through developing industries.[45] Masculinity was not anymore shown through fighting in a war but rather through business endeavours as the hypermasculine attire shifted from a soldier's uniform to the suit of an office worker. In *Molla* and *My Love (And)* the attire of the fighting men is not that of a soldier but instead the men are wearing suits as they fight. Masculinity, while still emphasising violence, is not represented in the videos through patriotism.

As Judith Butler has famously theorised, gender is a performance, [46] and as such, masculinity is not an inherent quality of a person but rather a performance one has to upkeep and maintain in order to be perceived as such by others. Similarly, homosexuality in a South Korean context has been deemed as an action rather than an inherent quality of a person. While in a Euro-American context since the late 1900s homosexuality was been viewed through medicalisation, in which homoerotic desires were seen as a symptom of another species of human, in South Korea homosexuality in the developmentalist period of 1960s to 1980s was something men "fell" for "or were "seduced" into (빠지다, *ppajida*)".[47] While a medicalised attitude towards homosexuality emphasises identity and innate nature of a person, in South Korean perspective homosexuality was an act that one can be persuaded into, not an inherent aspect of a person's identity.[48] If one can be seduced into homosexuality, one can also be persuaded from the grips of homosexual desire.

Homosexuality in different parts of society has been exposed and attempted to be disposed of through systematic infiltration of queer spaces. In the South Korean military in the late 2010s officers have used digital technology in order to weed out homosexual individuals and expose their deviant behaviour. The punishment for homosexual acts in enacted as active-duty soldiers are subjected to regulations that criminalise consensual and off base acts of homosexuality, and "the private practice of anal sex" turned into "charged matters of public concert and national security".[49] The active attempts of the military to eliminate homosexuality from its ranks notes the continued links between anti-queer sentiments and the safety of the nation in South Korea. Military involvement in the private sex-life of soldiers outside of the base emphasises the continued governmental focus on controlling its citizens through oppression of queerness. The active

[45] DiMoia, 2017: 248.
[46] Butler, 1999: 33.
[47] Cho, 2020: 269.
[48] It is however important to note that in contemporary South Korean queer activism, queerness is tied more tightly to identity than earlier in South Korean history and the struggle for queer rights is linked to personal and identity politics.
[49] Henry, 2020a: 4.

repression of queerness is a way to define idealised masculinity in the country, a version that excludes male homosexuality.

While homosexuality and same-sex love has existed in Korea for centuries, the word 동성애 (*dong-seong-ae*, eng. homosexuality) replaced other terms referring to homosexuality in the 1920s and 1930s in Korea, during a period when the country was under Japanese colonisation and the act and desire of homosexuality was medicalised as a disease.[50] As same-sex desire did not lead to reproduction like heterosexuality, it was deemed as perverted as it did not serve a growing empire and contribute positively to the military might of the empire.[51] The nation building and the upholding of the empire is dependent on the (re)productivity of its subjects, in which case actions and desires that do not benefit the empire were deemed dangerous. They were "disqualified" from definition of "modern love" in colonial Korea where reproductive duty was a "sacred duty" for Korean women.[52] Governmental control of queerness is not a product of post-Korean War period as it can be traced back to the imperial ideologies of Japanese colonisation of Korea. Throughout the 20th century from the time of Japanese occupation to the anti-communist nation-building era of the late 1900s, queerness has been deemed as dangerous for the society and as such an act and a tendency that needs to be removed from among the Korean people.

Despite attempts to wean out homosexuality from (South) Korea, queer spaces have existed in Seoul throughout the 20th century and beyond. In the 1950s, men looking to have sex with other men frequented Myeong-dong, Sindang-dong in the 1960s and Nakwon-dong in Chongo, Eulji-ro in the 1970s, areas that focused on sexual relations, but not on community building.[53] In contrast to cruising areas, Itaewon formed into a space of queer community in the 1990s. Itaewon is situated near a former US military base and the area of Itaewon was known for its alienness of looser governmental control and surveillance, where "Westernised gay bars" and clubs emerged.[54] Itaewon transformed into the new gay space in the city.[55] In contrast to spaces occupied by gay men, lesbian space have concentrated in Mapo-gu and surrounding neighbourhoods since the 1990s.[56] In 2007 the lesbians residing in the areas of Mapo, Yongsan and Seodaemun-gu grouped together for community building under the name MaYongSeo.[57] Seoul has hosted queer spaces throughout the

[50] Chen, 2020: 124.
[51] Chen, 2020: 124.
[52] Chen, 2020: 136; Ha, 2020: 151.
[53] Cho, 2020: 277; Kang, 2020: 9.
[54] Cho, 2020: 277.
[55] Kang, 2020: 11.
[56] Kang, 2020: 12.
[57] Kang, 2020: 17.

20th century despite governmental control and eradication attempts. However, it is notable that gay men and lesbian spaces in Seoul have been historically separate, noting the lack of community identity among the larger queer community in South Korea.

Kim Hyojin, a scholar on BL and queer studies, notes that South Korean conservative values regarding queer rights and women's sexuality can be traced back to Confucian cultural traditions as well as wide-spread Christianity in the country.[58] Christian communities often protest against queer rights and events, including queer festivals, that they claim promote homosexuality.[59] In South Korea, queerness in not only an individual's identity, but rather affects both the family as well as the whole self-image of the state due to Confucian ideas of filial piety to both parents and the state. A developmental South Korean nation was built on patriarchal societal values and hypermasculine norms that have an enormous impact on the attitudes towards queerness in a post-war South Korea of the 20th and 21st centuries.

2.3 Systematic homophobia in South Korea

While governmental authorities have made active attempts to repress queerness, homosexuality has simultaneously and contradictory been viewed as a problem that is not pertinent to South Korea and its citizens. Propaganda against the notion of homosexuality even existing in South Korea was rampant in the authoritarian post-war period between the 1960s and the 1980s in South Korea, as for example during the AIDS crisis, the Korean news claimed that the issue was not of importance in South Korea as there are no homosexuals among Koreans in the country and that the issue was only among the foreigners residing in South Korea. Even in academic publications, queerness has been traditionally deemed a foreign import and a threat to a collectivist notion of Korea. The history of the country is overwhelmingly written from a cisheteronormative perspective, despite historical evidence of homosexuality from Choson Dynasty (1392-1910) and beyond.[60]

Homophobia in South Korea is rooted in nationalist ideology of nation as a family and vice versa, which has enabled larger societal discrimination against non-married citizens and legal control over groups outside the heteronormative nuclear family model.[61] Institutional discrimination against homosexuality and homosexual couples keeps queer individuals from job security in South Korea as well as exposes them to economic discrimination as many employment benefits and financial

[58] Kim, 2022: 98.
[59] Kim, 2016: 81, 82; Im, 2022.
[60] Cho, 2020: 269; Kim, 2016: 86; Henry, 2020a: 6; Henry, 2020b: 207, 222, 241.
[61] Cho, 2020: 279.

systems rely heavily on nuclear family structures, which leads individuals to choose to live a heteronormative life of marriage in order to survive.[62] What is notable is also the gender, class, and age differences of queer people in regards to who is affected most significantly by economic instability. Lesbians are more likely to face economic instability in South Korea compared to their gay men counterparts.[63] In the aftermath of the IMF Crisis of 1997, governmental policies emphasised the security of a heteronormative family unit, reinforcing traditional family values and heterosexual marriages.[64] Queer people are unsafe and face instability in a society that values heteropatriarchal structures but also legally in a disadvantage as lifestyles outside of a heteronormative nuclear family are discriminated against. The problems faced by queer people in South Korea are not merely societal and attitudinal but legal and systematic.

Anti-queer sentiments in South Korea are systematic and queerness has been targeted intentionally in history as part of a developmentalist authoritarian nation building project. Queerness has been undermined as a foreign import, which does not belong to the family of Koreans in South Korea. Problems of accessing economic security due to system based on the ideal of heteronormative nuclear family, while not a problem only to queer people, forces many do decline queer lifestyles in favour of financial stability. The societal issues faced by Korean queer people are topics discussed in contemporary queer media and art, such as in the queer adaptation of Romeo and Juliet, Juliet and Juliet by LAS, that addresses societal prejudice and lack of legal rights for queer people, fantasising of a same-sex utopia.[65] For example, *Move to Heaven* (2021) addresses the societal prejudice and lack of familial support that gay couples face, *Love in the Big City* (2024) addresses Christian attitudes towards homosexuality.[66] Societal problems are addressed in media depictions of South Korean queer lives, which points to the discrimination faced by queer people in South Korea.

2.4 Intertextuality within Asian queer media

What is notable in the category of coming-of-age music videos is the thematic similarity to other forms of queer media. The queerness in Buzz's music videos derives not only from the content of the videos of themselves but also from the cross-textual connotations of the queer themes in the music video. The similarities between *Molla* and *My Love (And)* and the Taiwanese film *Your Name*

[62] Shin, 2020: 311-312.
[63] Shin, 2020: 300.
[64] Shin, 2020: 312.
[65] Im, 2022.
[66] Chung & Kim, 2021; Park, 2024.

Engraved Herein (2020) are striking: both depict the friendship of two boys who grow up together, face hardship together and grow to live different lives.

Similarly to *Molla* and *My Love (And)*, in *Your Name Engraved Herein*, the homosexual tension between the boys is dulled by a girl as one of the main characters decides to associate himself with a girl in order to stave off rumours of his homosexuality. In addition, violence is a prominent theme in the film as male masculinity is acted through violence. Homophobic attacks are violent in their aims to punish other boys for expressing undesirable sexuality that is not deemed appropriately masculine in the society. The close shots of the protagonists' closeness and slow shots of tension are not dissimilar from the tension created through similar visual techniques in *Molla* and *My Love (And)*. The similarities between the music videos and depictions of homosexuality in *Your Name Engraved Herein* emphasises the queerness of the themes present in the music videos: even if not intended to so, the music videos depict the struggles and lives of queer experiences, which is emphasises by the similar depictions of overt queer stories in the film.

It is not unheard of that queer codes and innuendos have been hidden in media depictions for the sake of appealing to a queer viewership as well as to the larger mainstream that will not catch on to the hidden meanings.[67] However, a tradition of heteronormative reading of South Korean media and literature has been noted by scholars. John Whittier Treat notes that a classic Korean author Yi Sang's work has been reduced to heterosexual interpretations as discussions of queerness have been side-stepped, such as in the case of a line from Yi's poem that states: "In my bowels I feel the weighty barrel of the gun and its slippery mouth against my tightly shut lips".[68] As such, even in cases of blatant homosexual desire and experiences, some scholars have chosen to intentionally ignore the queer interpretations of the Korean texts.

Although *Your Name Engraved Herein* was published over a decade after *Molla* and *My Love (And),* it is notable that the same themes are depicted in the film as in the music videos. In the music videos that were released in the early 2000s, the homosexual tension is not addressed directly but rather veiled in its opaqueness for those with eyes to see. In contrast, the film released in 2020 discusses queer rights and issues directly through a deployment of themes familiar from coming-of-age music videos in early 2000s K-pop. While there was no way to make such connections when the music videos were released, the content of the film released in 2020 reveals the queer opaqueness present in media depictions of earlier periods.

[67] Bengry, 2013: 245-246, 261.
[68] Whittier Treat, 2020: 97.

A significant difference is also in the context in which the film was released compared to that of the music videos. Taiwan legalised same-sex marriages in 2017, three years before *Your Name Engraved Herein* was released: the film was released in a societal context of legal protection and equal rights for queer people in Taiwan. In South Korea, the termination of a clause of the Youth Protection Act that banned all depictions of homosexuality in South Korean media came into action in 2004,[69] merely two years before the music videos were released. The lifting of the ban allowed for the production and popularity of queer South Korean films in the mid-2000s, such as *The King and the Clown* (2005).[70] The banning of representations of homosexuality can be traced back to the 1960s, when a governmental "Detailed Enforcement Plan for the Purification of Decadent Culture", homosexuality, together with pornography and female nakedness, was stated as immoral for the visual culture of the nation.[71] Governmental legislation has made homosexuality in South Korea illegal to depict in media for decades until mid-2000s, which has an impact on the depiction of queerness in media during the ban as well as in the years to follow.

The increased popularity of BL (Boys Love) media in the early 2000s impacted societal norms and relations among young men. Wei Wei argues that the increased visibility of BL media in China changed a stigmatised act of *gao-ji*, engagement in male homosexual conduct, into a trendy act instead, erasing some of the homophobic connotations of the word as well. In addition, the popularisation and fascination around male-male sexual desire created a space for boys and young men to engage in homosocial relations among heterosexual peers.[72] As BL media was especially popular among young women, feminine desire and its objects affected the reformation of masculinity in China, in which a female gaze was determining the desired form of social masculinity.[73] Similarly to China, the popularity of BL in South Korea (discussed more below) could have affected the depiction of male friendship in South Korea as well.

[69] Kim, 2022: 94; Kwon, 2022: 80-81, 83.
[70] Kim, 2022: 95.
[71] Kim, 2020: 186, 187.
[72] Wei, 2022: 56.
[73] Wei, 2022: 61.

3. Gender expression

3.1 Non-normativity as expression of (gender) identity

Another way in which queerness is present in early 2nd generation K-pop music videos is through non-normative expressions of gender identity. Male idols are often portrayed androgynously through extravagant hair styles and strong eye makeup and multiple music videos have female idols dressed in traditionally masculine clothing, such as in suits. However, scholars have pointed out that international K-pop fans tend to view male K-pop idols' gender expression as androgynous and soft when in fact it is a normative gender expression that caters to South Korean hetero-patriarchal norms and ideals.[74] International fans are more likely to view South Korean normative masculinity as androgynous compared to their own local expressions of masculinity. However, this does not mean that all flamboyant and androgynous expression of gender in South Korea caters to heteropatriarchal norms. It is important to note that while male androgenicity can be deemed, to a degree, as a norm according to South Korean ideals of masculinity, in women's case androgynous gender expression has been more controversial. In this analysis, I will focus on non-normative expression of gender as portrayed in SeeYa's music video 가니 (*Gani*, eng. *Are you leaving?*) (2008).

The music video starts with a woman facing the camera, holding on to the shoulders of a seemingly-male character, whose back is turned to the camera. Slowly throughout the video, more of the masculine figure is shown through blurry and quick shots. Non-gendered body parts, such as eyes, are visible which makes the gender of the character indistinguishable. By the end of the video, the masculine character is revealed to be a woman, which transforms the portrayal of desire and affection in the music video queer.

The music video portrays masculinity and femininity through actions, poses, and colours. The feminine character wears a dress and is seated in a stereotypically feminine setting of a make-up table and fluffy cushioned couches, set in a warm lighting through slow and serene shots. In contrast, the masculine character is shown in quickly changing, abrupt shots, dressed in a suit with short hair and a dark lighting with a greenish hue. While both characters are wearing eye make-up, the make-up of the masculine character is heavier and darker.

An important element in the music video is a mirror, as both characters are filmed in front of a reflecting mirror. However, the feminine character is looking at herself in the mirror and the camera

[74] Baudinette & Santos, 2024: 162.

sees the character through the mirror, while the masculine character is turned away from the mirror. The gazes of the characters are different: the feminine gaze is objected to a mirror while the masculine gaze is directed away from the mirror and the camera. The feminine is seen only as a reflection in the mirror, an echo of herself and merely an image of reality, while the masculine faces the camera and is able to present itself without a mediating mirror. The masculine character is even actively turning away from the mirror, choosing to face away and not be objected to the reflected gaze.

Figure 11: Gani, 0:10. The feminine character holding on the shoulder of the masculine character.

The music video ends with a scene of the two characters' on the screen side-by-side, emphasising the differences of the characters. As seen throughout the video, the colours stay different, but now the camera angles are more easily comparable as well as the masculine character is again looking straight at the camera while the feminine character is looking away, her head tilted up while the masculine is looking down at the camera.

Figure 12: Gani, 01:43: The feminine and the masculine character portrayed side-by-side.

Figure 13: Gani: 01:12: The masculine character with dark make-up and short hair.

The playfulness with gender and gender expression in the *Gani* music video emphasises the ways that gender is performed: the assumed gender of the character on screen is not enough to make them a man or a woman but rather their appearance and actions negotiate their gender. The music video compares the masculinity and femininity of the characters and portrays the way the women on screen are taking on different roles based on their performed gender identity. What is notable is that in *Gani*, androgyny is portrayed through a woman. While, as discussed earlier, for male idols a certain degree of femininity is allowed and even applauded, similar genderplay is not deemed appropriate for female idols. Queerness includes the notion of playfulness in terms of gender and sexuality. There is also a sense of performativity when it comes to queer identities, such as when a lesbian identifies as a masc[75]: not only is she a woman attracted to other women, but also a sapphic[76] woman whose gender expression is masculine in terms of outward appearance.

Figure 14: Gani, 00:35. The masculine figure is facing away from the mirror.

Gender non-conformity and androgyny in South Korea goes against societal norms and is as such a visible and provocative form of queerness. South Korea is a "hypermasculine developmentalist

[75] Short for masculine lesbian, a lesbian that identifies with masculine traits and presents themselves through masculine aspects of, for example but not limited to, clothing, hair, and behaviour.
[76] Sapphic refers to a woman that is attracted to other women, including but not limited to bisexual women and lesbian women. The word originates from the Greek poet Sappho.

state" that values heteropatriarchal societal structures and economic growth.[77] As such, actively going against the heteropatriarchal norms is a way to assert one's identity. In South Korea, non-normative gender expression is a way to express one's sexual orientation in the case of gay men and lesbians.[78] Expressing one's gender in a way that goes against that which is societally expected and even demanded, is a way to challenge norms but also a way to signal others of your sexual identity. Shin notes that in South Korea, because masculine presenting women, 티부 (t'ibu, a masculine presenting lesbian[79]), are more likely to be recognised as lesbians, other sapphics who want to keep their sexual orientation a secret are more likely to avoid dating t'ibu due to self-preservation against prejudice and discrimination. The choice to date feminine presenting women is not made for the sake of having a preference for femininity over masculinity in a partner.[80] Rather, societal circumstances and fear of being judged steers some to choose a partner that is not visibly queer.

Visible traits of a t'ibu, such as short hair, can be a way to recognise lesbians, not only by other queer people but by non-queer people as well. Because of increased visibility of homosexuality in the society and in media in the early 2000s, institutional discrimination of queerness increased in South Korea. In schools female students that expressed themselves in more masculine ways, such as by having short hair, were noted as possible lesbians by the staff who would then try to discourage the students from living such a lifestyle through "Iban[81] Inspections" and by punishing homosexual behaviour of girls, such as holding hands and hugging.[82] Due to the discrimination and prejudice queer women face in South Korean society, Shin argues that many choose to visibly blend in with straight society in order to obtain financial stability and security.[83] In South Korea, conforming to gender norms and blending in with the heteronormative society is a way to protect oneself.[84] Visible queerness, such as in the case of masculine lesbians, became a way for authority figures to weave out queerness. Simultaneously, it is a way to actively and visibly identify as queer in a heteronormative society.

In *Gani,* the masculine character condones to the descriptions of a t'ibu, a masculine lesbian, and could be recognised as such by (queer) viewers. The portrayal of a feminine and a masculine woman together in an embrace in a music video has been an intentional choice notable in its queer-

[77] Cho, 2020: 268.
[78] Shin, 2020: 302.
[79] Commonly referred to as a "masc" or "butch" in English.
[80] Shin, 2020: 303.
[81] A slang for "homosexual". KCSRC, 2003.
[82] Shin, 2020: 306.
[83] Shin, 2020: 313.
[84] Shin, 2020: 309.

coded imagery. Systematic oppression of queerness among young girls in schools is a signifier that the physical characteristics of a masculine sapphic woman were known outside of the queer community. The stylistic expression of female idols in masculine fashion and in short haircuts is a form of visual queerness in K-pop. These idols are recognisable to a queer viewer as portraying a queer style, specifically one associated with a masculine lesbian in South Korea, whether that was the original intention of the visuals or not. Similarly, female idols dressed in male clothing, such as suits, is a classically queer rendering of gender androgyny through fashion: a female body in a male costume. There is queerness in the playfulness with gender when it comes to non-gender-conforming fashion: the female idols are intentionally breaking expectations of gender expression.

Non-normative gender expression in K-pop is not limited to idols but practiced by fans as well. In the early 2000s, female fans of boygroups started cosplaying as the members that Shin describes as a drag show due to the performative and cross-dressing elements of the events. As these young women began to dress more masculine, some of them started dating other performers and participants of the sub-culture, and identify as ibans. Shin argues that through the consumption of pop culture, some young women formed their own queer culture within the fandom space and popularised as well as normalised masculine performativity in these spaces.[85]

Spaces can be transformed from heterosexual spaces to queer spaces through the act of performing queer identities, such as when presumed heterosexual mundane spaces, like neighbourhoods, are visibly queered through exposed queerness of its residents.[86] For cosplaying fans, the act of dressing up against one's gender and acting as a male idol, translated into a reality of continued non-conformity manifesting in their gender expression out of the costume. Popular culture and the fantasy of a fandom was turned into a lived reality. Female fans turned a heteronormative narrative on its head by cosplaying as male idols, and in turn, changed a male-centred fantasy into a sapphic reality.

[85] Shin, 2020: 296, Baudinette, 2023: 253.
[86] Kang, 2020: 3, 30.

3.2 First openly trans K-pop group: Lady

As the first openly trans K-pop group in the history of K-pop,[87] Lady is a groundbreaking part of (queer) history of K-pop. As overt identification or portrayal of queerness was not a norm nor usual in the late 2010s in K-pop, Lady as an openly queer, an openly trans, group is an important and influential part of South Korean queer history. While the music videos analysed here are not themselves queer in their thematic, the openly queer identity of the members makes these videos a valuable part of queer K-pop analysis, both for the 2nd generation as well as in the history of the genre at large. Lady was not commercially successful and released only one album, of which they released two music videos for the single *Attention* (2005), both of which are analysed in the following.

What is apparent in both versions of the music videos for *Attention* is the focus on the femininity and sexual characteristics of the members. While one member, Yuna, is not as sexualised in the depiction of her character as the other three members, all members are paired with male dancers and the over-all atmosphere of the music videos is sensual and flirtatious. The members are sexualised through their outfits, as Sahara's bra is shown and Binu's outfit shows her midriff, as well as through the choreography and setting of the music videos, as the members are shown grinding on men and almost kissing them, the camera focusing on the hips of the members as they thrust as part of the choreography.

Figure 15: Attention Ver.1, 00:12: Sahara's outfit reveals her bra.

[87] And the only one as of the writing of this thesis in January 2026.

Figure 16: Attention Ver.1, 00:59. The camera focuses on the hips of the member.

The camera's focus on the bodies of the members is what sets apart the music videos of *Attention* from the music videos of other girl groups. While in many K-pop music videos of the time, sensuality is present and the camera work portrays the female idols as sexually objectifiable characters, the sexual focus of the music videos for *Attention* is uniquely explicit. The camera often focuses on Sahara's breasts and cleavage, including a shot where her breasts are on focus but her face is not. In another scene, the camera follows the body line of another member as a man runs his hand down her side and waist, focusing solely on the objectified body of the member for male pleasure. A common theme for both versions of the music video is the objectification of the girl group members as objects of men's desire as the men gaze at them while the members perform for the men. The femininity and sexuality of the members makes them desirable for the men in the music videos.

Figure 17: Attention Ver.1, 02:21: The camera focuses on the body of the member, caressed by a man.

Figure 18: Attention Ver. 1, 01:36: The member's face is not on focus but her cleavage is.

The portrayal of the femininity and sexuality of the members of a girl group composed of solely trans members in the *Attention* music videos feels like an overcompensation of the physical attributes of the members in order to gloss over the queer identities of the members. In order to be seen as any other girl group, not as a queer/trans group, the feminine bodies of the members are emphasised beyond objectification that is usually present in the music videos of other girl groups of the time period. As such, it almost appears as if the queer identity of the performers is attempted to

be bypassed through the heteronormative imagery and desire depicted through the women characters that are presented for a male gaze in the music videos. Without prior knowledge of the queerness of the members, the music videos are notable in their lack of queer imagery and thematics.

Despite a lack of focus on queer themes, a fleeting but a notable instance of queer existence is portrayed in the second version of *Attention*, where the members are performing at a club setting. Yuna is shown crying in the bathroom, looking at herself in the mirror above a sink, between bathrooms signs above doors indicating a men's toilet and a women's toilet. This scene portrays a conflict for the character reagrding their gender identity: where do they belong in a binary gender division? A trans body is the locus of personal a moment of frustration, which emphasises the internal struggle that the conflict creates in the character. However, the setting makes the struggle not only a personal one but a societal one as well: the character is forced to choose between a male and a female space in a public setting of a club, which causes her trouble.

In a later scene, Yuna is shown smiling as she walks away, her back to the mirror, coming out of the bathroom from the side of the women's toilet. In contrast to the previous scene of her distress, in this scene she is confident in her decision and walks out of the toilet, headstrong and proud. She has made her decision and is happy with it. Although there are troubling moments in her life, she is ultimately content and confident in her decision and joins the rest of the part with her head high, not covering alone in the toilets, hiding herself away. For its representation of a gender struggle, the scene can be interpreted as an event of queer joy, of queer empowerment, as the character resolves her conflict regarding her gender identity and belonging.

Figure 19: Attention Ver.2, 01:34. Yuna stands between gendered bathroom signs.

Figure 20: Attention Ver.2, 03:33: Yuna is smiling and walking away from the women's toilet.

3.3 Legal queer rights and protection

Societal attitudes towards queerness and lack of legal protection have an impact on whether a person is open about their queerness. While in Europe and North America it is often deemed a significant part of the coming out process to come out to one's parents, in East Asia, including in South Korea it is often not deemed as important to come out to parents. Due to different societal circumstances, it is not fair to judge South Korean queerness based on norms as theorised in queer studies based on models of European and North American queer experiences.

In South Korea, the necessity to keep one's sexual orientation hidden from family can be seen as an important way to protect the family from shame brought upon by an openly queer family member. An individual's identity is not bound only to them, but to the extended family as well. Henry notes that the feeling of "guilt by association", or 연좌제(*yonjwaje*), can help explain the responsibility families feel to seed out homosexuality among themselves. Homosexuality is stigmatised and seen often as sinful, improper, and against traditional values, in which case it is the responsibility of the family to cleanse their own kin from such vices, as actions and identities do not reflect merely on the individual but also on the wider family as well. However, in recent years more young people have started to come out to their parents and decided to be out publicly, compared to past generations.[88] As such, Henry notes that supportive family members and parents in South Korean pride events represent support of the stigmatised and thus a controversial attitude among the wider society.[89]

A Western-centric analysis of South Korean society and the lives of queer individuals is in many cases reductionist and simplified, even neo-colonial in explaining a phenomenon and behaviour without taking into account local particularities and cosmologies. Henry states that while on the outside the life of queer individuals in South Korea might seem that they have chosen to lead a life of secrecy and disingenuity, a deeper look into their lives shows a rich underground culture of freedom of identity and expression.[90] Instead of deeming South Korean queer lives as secretive if an individual chooses not to come out to one's family, South Korean queer lives should be observed in the context of the wider society in which a blossoming queer existence is possible even if one is not open about their queer identity at all instances.

[88] Cho, 2020: 265; Shin, 2020: 310, 311.
[89] Henry, 2020a: 3.
[90] Cho, 2020: 265; Henry, 2020a: 4.

3.4 Shamanism and trans history of South Korea

As discussed earlier, queerness in South Korea has been deemed a foreign import, a problem only among the non-native residents of Korea. Such statements erase and ignore the rich history of queerness that can be traced back centuries in (South) Korea.[91] The roots of contemporary queerness are seen in the representations of queerness from earlier in history, including trans history in South Korea, of which Lady are a continuation of.

Transgenderism, among other forms of non-normative gender expression, has been a part of Korean shamanist rituals and traditions for centuries.[92] This emphasises the long roots of queerness in Korean tradition of shamanism, where queerness is not the exception but rather the norm. Shamanism's deep roots in Korea and its long tradition of queer gender expression directly contradicts with claims that queerness is a recent foreign import to South Korea.

In Korea queerness has been expressed through politics already during the colonial period in the beginning of the 20th century. A researcher of shamanism in Korea, Hwang Merose argues that in the 1920s non-normative expressions of sexuality and gender of shamans could have been an act of resistance against "colonial assimilation and national erasure". However, both colonialist and nationalist forces were suspicious and hateful towards shamans for their diversion from normative conducts of sexuality and gender.[93] While objecting colonial rule, the nationalist forces did not recognise the shamans as fellow patriots but instead oppressed them for their queerness that was deemed incorrect. Similarly to traditions of transness and genders beyond a cisnormative binary among Shamans, a Deferral Archival installation, Yeosung Gukgeuk Project, by jung eun young depicts a history of South Korea through embodiment of queerness in theatre.[94]

What is notable is that shamanism's association with women in leading positions and as independent experts that could become wealthy on their own through their practice made shamanism a target of suppression in a patriarchal society.[95] Not only were shamans women, but shamanism has been traditionally practiced and participated in by women.[96] Shamans, fortune tellers, and kisaeng (female entertainers), were deemed morally corrupt and ethically incapable.[97]

[91] Hwang, 2020: 68.
[92] Hwang, 2020.
[93] Hwang, 2020: 56-57.
[94] Kim, 2023.
[95] Hwang, 2020.
[96] Hwang, 2020: 73.
[97] Hwang, 2020: 58.

Shamanism, with its tight connection to transness, is thus also tied to a larger issue of equal gender rights in Korea.

The same theme is present in Lady's music videos as the trans characters are portrayed in an objectified way. In order to be deemed as women like other girl group idols, the members of Lady are positioned as objects of male desire and as such diminished in their humanity. In order to be portrayed as girl group idols, the members have to be subjected to the scrutiny and standards of sexualised female bodies.

4. Skinship

4.1 Skinship among girl group members

Skinship is an overarching theme that is present in a multitude of K-pop music videos in various different contexts. Skinship refers to the act of physical touch among friends and lovers as a way of expressing closeness, familiarity, comfort, and affection.[98] It is associated with flirting and expressing romantic feelings, but is not limited to romantic or sexual connotations. Often, skinship is shown among friends to demonstrate affection towards one another. Skinship includes but is not limited to hugging, hand-holding, patting, caressing and kissing on the cheek. Not all touching is skinship but all skinship is a form of touching. As skinship is commonplace practice among friends of same-sex in Korea, I argue that homosocial touching in 2nd generation K-pop music videos is a safe way to show queer affection as an opaque form of queerness.

I will focus on the portrayal of skinship and flirtation among members of girl groups. While the skinship in music videos of boy groups is less often portrayed as outright flirtatious and sensual in the early 2nd generation of K-pop, skinship among members of girl groups is often not only sensual but even sexual. Flirting among members is seen in multiple music videos, such as The Club (2006) by CSHJ The Grace featuring Rain, as the members dance seductively with each other. In this analysis I will focus on LPG's music video *팔베개* (*palbegae,* eng. arm pillow) (2006).

In the music video of *palbegae* heteronormative setting and heterosexual desire are present from the get-go. A man and a woman are sensually caressing each other, later pressed against each other, and the girl group members are set as the objects of a male character's desires as the man lies on a bed with a girl group member and is later undressed by the members. However, sensual touches are not limited to heterosexual encounters but instead the actions of desire between the man and the women in the video are replicated by the girl members amongst themselves. The members of the group caress each other while posing seductively for the camera, an action that can be read as a heteronormative fantasy aimed for the male gaze, can also be interpreted as a portrayal of queer desire.

A turning point in the music video is when the members blindfold the man and handcuff him into a fence, making him vulnerable and turning the power dynamic by making him the object of control and observation. As the man is blindfolded, two members are caressing each other by standing pressed together and stroking each other's arms, a desire that is shown only as they are free from

[98] Ho, 2025: 134.

the man's obtrusive gaze. This show of desire and attention is not for the eyes of the man, but only acted upon once the man's gaze has been forcefully and intentionally denied.

The girl group members in the music video turn the power dynamic of heteropatriarchal norm on its head as they use their sexuality to seduce the man in order to threaten him. The man no longer holds the gaze, but rather the women are threatening exposure as they hold a camera at him, poised like a gun, soon with both a camera and a gun aimed at the man. No longer is the woman a passive object of perception but has become active in her gaze towards the man.[99]The man has become the object of the gaze.

Figure 21: Arm pillow, 01:38: The members are caressing each other's arms and legs.

[99] Mulvey, 2001: 351.

Figure 22: Arm pillow, 02:23: A member is pointing a camera to a man, imitating holding a gun.

The replication and comparison of desire returns as a theme at the end of the video. Heterosexual desire between a man and a woman is portrayed as the two lie on a bed, insinuating a sexual encounter. This scene soon changes into a scene of a woman caressing the face of another woman, again portraying heterosexual and queer desire side-by-side. The two scenes portray sexual desire and intimacy between two people, encouraging the viewer to compare between the two desires of heterosexuality in accordance to heteronormative societal roles and that of queer desire between women, a desire independent of a man and as such an active challenge to a patriarchal societal order.

Figure 23: Arm pillow, 02:47: Members are caressing each other against a fence.

Figure 24: Arm pillow, 03:18. Two members are caressing each other against a fence.

Indeed, joy, compassion, and solidarity centred on the relationships among members of girl groups is often portrayed in the music videos of the time. In CSHJ The Grace's music video *The Club*, the members of the girl group are laughing and scheming around a table, drinking and having fun without men in free-spirits. These scenes are in contrast to the portrayal of restricted and ingenuine behaviour when they are in the presence of men. While together, the women are flirting and dancing seductively with each other, similarly as seen in the *palbegae* music video.

Figure 25: The Club, 01:37: Members flirting and dancing with each other.

Figure 26: The Club: 03:02: Members laughing together around a table.

4.2 Business Gay

Visible and intentional queerness in K-pop is linked to the rise in popularity of BL-media in the 1990s and the early 2000s. Shipping, or coupling (*keoppeuling*), is an integral part of K-pop fandoms as a form of celebrating and consuming idol culture.[100] Shipping refers to the imagined relationship between two members of a group, usually of the same gender, practiced by fans

[100] Baudinette, 2023: 249.

regardless of the queerness of the coupled pairing.[101] The practice of shipping emerged as part of fandom culture in the 1990s in South Korea, especially among heterosexual female fans. Baudinette compares shipping of K-pop same-sex idols to the interest that young Korean women had in Japanese BL manga (*yaoi*), which itself is argued to be a way to unsettle gender and sexual norms, and gay American media, such as the sitcom Will & Grace.[102]

Baudinette explains that the interest of young South Korean women in "male homoeroticism emerged in the 1990s partly as a result of the gradual removal of the nationalist protectionism that had typified the postwar South Korean media landscape until the late 1980s".[103] The interest of young women in queer romance of fictional or real people is related to societal changes, both political and legislative. The rise of interest in Korean popular music as well as the interest of young Korean women in male homoeroticism both emerged as trends in popular culture in the 1990s, following the shift in political and regulatory landscape of South Korea as expression of popular culture became freer from censorship and took influence from foreign media.

Baudinette notes that idol shipping culture emerged from the ideology of 세계화 (*segyehwa,* eng. globalisation) and the economic reformation policies in a newly democratic political landscape of (*gaebanghwa,* eng. open-door policy).[104] Similarly, Roald Malingkay refers to the "hypercommodification and hyperrationalization" of K-pop in the evolution of the industry as talent-creation machinery that includes training, management, and promotion of artists as well the scouting of possible talent.[105] The English word "fan" (팬, *paen*) has been used in South Korea since 1925, when it referred specifically to interest and enthusiasm surrounding foreign subjects.[106] Through wider societal freedom of expression and loosened restrictions in the media, fans could practice their freedom of speech in new ways, including shipping and homoerotic fiction. Fan culture in South Korea also has been affected by foreign influences.

In South Korea, K-pop and BL emerged in popular culture for the first time at the same time in the early 1990s[107], while fans of male-male romances in South Korea can be traced back to the late 1980s.[108] The simultaneous emergence of first generation K-pop boy groups and fan-translated BL manga in South Korea led to the emergence of the two fandoms as young female fans, inspired by

[101] Baudinette, 2023: 249, 250.
[102] Baudientte, 2023: 251; Welker, 2022: 7.
[103] Baudinette, 2023: 251-252.
[104] Baudinette, 2023: 252; Shin, 2023: 29.
[105] Malingkay, 2023: 11; Shin, 2023: 28, 32.
[106] Malingkay, 2023: 15.
[107] BL media started as a phenomenon in the 1970s, but arrived to South Korea in the 1990s. Welker, 2022: 1, 7.
[108] Kwon, 2022: 80-81.

the homoerotic stories in manga, started imagining similar relationships between their favourite idols, an expression of both "fannish devotion and their sexual desire".[109] Enhancement in technology had a significant impact on the popularity of BL. Wide-range high-speed internet access enabled more exposure and access to queer media that was not present in traditional media, which led to BL fandom culture becoming visible in South Korea in the mid-2000s.[110] Similarly to the spread of BL, the popularity of K-pop was also enhanced through access to the Internet and the emergence of social media.[111] Baudinette argues that the spread of Japanese BL and the fandom it brough with it "queered young women's viewing habits, introducing a queer gaze that celebrated radical sexual expression and continues to challenge conservative gender ideologies of the society" in South Korea.[112] Fans began to imagine a queerness in the lives of the idols they were fans of, which was impacted by the spread of *yaoi* literature to South Korea. The fans themselves queered K-pop through their own desires and fantasies, creating another reality that was not necessarily reflected in their everyday lived realities.

Shipping can also be seen as a feminist act for South Korean women, as argued by BL scholars such as Wei and Baudinette, since it is a way for young women to express their own sexual desire in a patriarchal society in which they are most often placed as the objects of desire for heterosexual men.[113] Queering K-pop through shipping is a way to step outside of the heteropatriarchal society and create a new utopia of queer feminist reality. Similar aspects have also been noted regarding *danmei*, Chinese male-male romance novels.[114] The romance of utopias and existence of hope are inherently queer paradigms due to their aim for change, a new reality beyond the current one.[115] Although it needs to be noted that while some find consumption and production of BL a feminist act, others see its focus on male characters and their desires as an inherently anti-feminist.[116]

As fans became fascinated and enticed by imagining romance and sexual tension between members of a K-pop group, entertainment companies began to use queer subtext intentionally as part of the marketing of the groups. For example, SM Entertainment has organised fan fiction writing contest for TVXQ,[117] actively encouraging fan-fantasies of queer relationships between the members. The

[109] Baudinette, 2023: 252.; Kim, 2022: 92, 94.
[110] Kwon, 2022: 82, 83; Kim, 2022: 95.
[111] Cho, 2023: 27; Cho & Lee, 2025: 28.
[112] Baudinette, 2023: 252; Kwon, 2022: 80-81.
[113] Baudinette, 2023: 253; Wei, 2022: 61.
[114] Xu & Yang, 2022: 19, 27-28. Danmei has been banned in China in 2017 when the Chinese government banned "presentation or representation of abnormal sexual relationships or conduct, such as…homosexuality…." in the "General Rules" of the China Netcasting Services Association (CNSA). (Lin, 2022: 31-32; Wei, 2022: 64).
[115] Whittier Treat, 2020: 109.
[116] Kim, 2022: 98; Welker, 2022: 11.
[117] Baudinette, 2023: 253.

entertainment companies use shipping in marketing and production of content for fans and encourage idols to provide "fan service" of skinship in front of fans, going as far as creating "bromance films", that depict intimate but non-sexual relations of attractive idol actors for the viewing pleasure of young female fans engaged in shipping culture without deviating too far from the wider conservative audience.[118] Queerness was marketed for the straight female audience for the sake of financial profit, while still maintaining distance to the lived reality of queer people. Entertainment companies queerbaited[119] their idols to an audience wishing for homoerotic entertainment, profiting from homosexual tension but not providing genuine representation to queer fans.

As shipping of members was encouraged by entertainment companies and queer desires and fantasies were used as a marketing tool, the music video *palbegae* needs to be analysed in this context as well. Queerness in K-pop culture is not a result of an alternative reading of K-pop media, such as music videos, but rather at times an intentional marketing ploy in order to gain fan engagement and enthusiasm. What is important to note is the limit to which queer-play goes in early 2nd generation K-pop music videos as there exists a line that is not crossed. While playfulness and flirting among members on screen is usual, even with sexual connotations to the scenes, the acts never go beyond hinting at desire. A safe distance is kept to overt representation of queer relationships, in order to garner simultaneously to fans, of both the group and of homoromantic fantasies, and to more conservative audiences.

Fans often feel that while fandoms may provide a safe space for queerness, K-pop itself lacks queer visibility and representation.[120] In these cases, shipping is a way to queer a heteronormative media space. BL media in general, even when aimed at a straight female audience, has queered sexuality norms for its fans and provided a safe media space, even a "resource for hope" for queer people.[121] Shipping, as well as activity in BL fandoms, can even become a political act that challenges the conservative and homophobic values of K-pop companies and the society in which K-pop is produced, acting as a catalyst for social change.[122] Being a part of BL fandom can be seen as a challenge to heteronormative and inequal societal gender structures as through BL female creators

[118] Baudinette, 2023: 253, 261.
[119] Queerbaiting refers to the intentional subtextual undertones of homosexuality in a media product aimed at queer fans that lacks real representation and is such often felt as a deceiving form of exploitation of queerness and queer desires. Rasheed & Sarin, 2024: 245; Trzcisnka, 2024: 229.
[120] Baudinette, 2023: 261.
[121] Baudinette, 2022: 47, 49; Welker, 2022: 2.
[122] Baudinette, 261, 262; George, 2024; Jacobs, 2022: 71; Lin, 2022: 34, 35, 39-40; Wang, 2022: 108; Welker, 2022: 11, 12.

and readers are able to create sexual fantasies through the actions of fictional male characters, which can be an empowering act and turn the objectifying patriarchal gaze on its head by creating media through a female gaze.[123]

4.3 Sapphics

A notable difference between the skinship among female idols compared to that of male idols is the sensuality and sexual tension that is often portrayed in the skinship among female idols as they are caressing each others' arms and laying on each others' laps. Similar intimate closeness is not portrayed between male characters in music videos of the time, as discussed above. Physical touch among men is often portrayed through violence, not through soft touches. As such, it seems that sapphic desire is less taboo than homosexuality between men.

Lesbianism and sapphic relationships made headlines in (South) Korean media in the 20th century. While same-sex love was tolerated among school girls in colonial Korea, lesbianism among adult women was forbidden and the expected trajectory was for women to give up same-sex love and fall into heterosexual, reproductive desires after girlhood.[124] The inability for same-sex love to continue into adulthood made headlines in Korea in the early 20th century in the form of double suicides of the lovers that were denied a future together.[125] Homosexual partnership of women was seen as a societal threat to the patriarchal social order of the whole nation as well as to local communities, comparable to the "pro-Communist infiltrators" lurking in the society.[126] Lack of societal acceptance lead to the deaths of sapphic women as they faced discrimination and oppression due to their queerness in South Korea.

However, love between women was not rare. An interviewee of Ha Shin-ae states that most women would have experience of same-sex love from their student years, which emphasises how common same-sex love among young women and girls was.[127] South Korean journalists covered multiple sapphic wedding ceremonies between 1950s and 1980s, in addition to a widely covered union of a lesbian couple in 2013.[128] In sensationalist coverage of sapphic marriages in the late 20th century, the female couples were referred to heteronormatively as a "husband" and a "wife" based on the feminine or masculine dress of the couple. However, sapphic couples themselves referred to their

[123] Xu & Yang, 2022: 27-28; Wei, 2022: 61.
[124] Chen, 2020: 132.
[125] Chen, 2020.
[126] Henry, 2020b: 214, 215.
[127] Ha, 2020: 147.
[128] Henry, 2020a: 5.

roles in the relationship as *paji-ssi*[129] (Ms. Pants) and *ch'ima-ssi* (Ms. Skirt).[130] While sapphic relationships were given media coverage, they relationships were undermined and de-queered by assigning heterosexual roles to the women in the marriage. The sapphic women themselves also emphasised gender roles through gender expression by referring to gendered clothing, pants and a skirt.

In colonial Korea societally sapphic love was deemed as a transitionary period that would lead into a heterosexual life as a wife of a man.[131] But for the women in same-sex relationships, the life they lived lived was an aim for modernity in a colonial setting as well as an attempt to avoid patriarchal societal expectations, both acts of anti-colonialism against the empire.[132] The prevalence of sapphic love in Korea emphasises the presence of queer desires despite societal prejudice and oppression towards it. Sapphic love was a way to escape an oppressive life under patriarchal rule.

The view of sapphic relationships as a transitionary period into heterosexuality and as a phenomenon of girlhood that girls will grow out of might be a way to explain the less stigmatised expression of sapphic desire in the music videos compared to homosexual desire among men. Women's desire was ultimately linked to a man and a reproductive relationship which made a sapphic relationship insincere and even juvenile in comparison. Women's sexuality was linked to heterosexual desire and, in a patriarchal society, to a man's desires, in which case sexuality among women in the absence of a man is not sexuality at all. In a patriarchal society that centralises around male sexuality, the desire between two men is over-sexualised compared to sapphic desires.

[129] While Henry translates the *-ssi* (-씨) honorific as Ms., it is notable that *-ssi* honorific is genderless, in which case paji-ssi and ch'ima-ssi do not connotate the gender of the individuals like the English translation but rather their deemed gendered role in the relationship.
[130] Henry, 2020a: 5; 2020b: 212.
[131] Ha, 2020: 147.
[132] Ha, 2020: 150, 153.

5. Conclusion

In this thesis I have analysed the queer themes of five K-pop music videos released between 2005-2008, belonging to the 2nd generation of K-pop. The visual analysis and queer reading of the music videos revealed a rich imagery of queerness that is produced through story-telling, camera-work, behaviour of the characters and colour changes. While most of the music videos analysed in this essay include heterosexual plots and character dynamics, the queerness emerges from a nuanced portrayal of characters and their desires.

Diving into the history of queer repression in (South) Korea, it becomes clear that contemporary lack of queer rights in South Korea is tightly linked to the colonial and authoritarian history of the country. In Korea, queerness has been systematically eradicated and denied under different governments since the beginning of the 20th century. The treatment of queerness in South Korean media in the 21st century cannot be detached from its history as a repressed identity and desire, in society at large as well as in media depictions.

What the analysis in this thesis revealed was also the links between anti-queer sentiments and women's rights. The roots of the contemporary lack of queer rights as well as lack of equal rights for women in South Korea are traced to the historical patriarchal order of the society that was built on ethnonational and heteropatriarchal values after the Korean War in 1950-1953. Militaristic nation-building repressed the rights of queer people as well as of all women. Through historical links, contemporary societal issues of misogyny and anti-queer sentiments are related issues.

What is clear is that (South) Korea has a rich and long history of queerness, despite attempts of its erasure and eradication. Queerness has been claimed to be a foreign import of Western (neo)colonialism, but I have noted in this thesis that such claims ignore historical facts of queerness in Korea that can be traced back centuries. The active refusal of long roots of Korean queerness does not erase the presence of queerness of which 20th century forms of queerness can be seen as a continuation of.

However, it is important to analyse Korean queer history in its own geopolitical and cultural context, which I have done through the application of Queer Asia methodology that emphasises decolonised queer reading that does not rely on Euro-American definitions of queerness. Instead, the cultural, historical, and social context of South Korea makes queer visibility different in South Korea compared to many other places. An analysis of queerness as it is expected to be presented based on depictions in other contexts erases locality of South Korean queerness. South Korean queerness needs to be analysed with its particularities in mind, emphasising its unique aspects

instead of trying to mould it into a global model of queerness based on Euro-American queer theory.

While the queerness in the K-pop music videos analysed in this thesis can be stated to be opaque, veiled in heteronormativity, following in the work of BL scholars, I discussed the way fans queer K-pop. Fandoms have a possibility to queer popular culture, an act that can lead to political activism of the fans themselves. The prominence of queer themes and topics in popular culture have the possibility to queer the viewing habits of fans and other viewers alike, which in turn can normalise queerness in media. A cultural change of normalised queerness has the possibility to turn into social and political change.

The difference in media depictions of queerness in South Korea and the lack of legal rights are attributed to a long history of queer repression that has kept media depictions largely void of overt representation of queerness. Then again, fan engagement and fans' interest in homoeroticism makes queerness in K-pop a marketable aspect that has been monetised by entertainment companies. Even if queerness in K-pop is a financial aspect played out for profit, the fans have a potential to queer the experience. Queer visibility, even for financial gain of entertainment companies, is visibility, and visibility has potential. Potentiality is hope. As theorised by Muñoz, hope itself is inherently queer, and the biggest obstacle to hope is failure.[133] To end my thesis in the vein of Whittier Treat, by quoting Halberstam: "failing is something queers do…exceptionally well".[134]

[133] Baudinette, 2022: 51; Muñoz, 2019: 207.
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