Skinship
Tension in Korean Popular Culture

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Abstract:

While conservative patriarchal ideals remain a dominant force in South Korean society, same-sex "skinship" has found a paradoxical footing on the line of socially unacceptable homoeroticism and Korean cultural heritage. However, it is precisely this contradiction that may provide insight into the discursive production and articulation of a modern "authentic" Korean self through a term I coin as 'liminal national identity'. Using literary studies, qualitative research, and case studies, this research aims to explore the phenomena of "skinship", especially in terms of sexuality, the evolution of how it is understood and exists in Korean society and media, and the means by which it reflects 'liminal national identity'. In doing so, this research elucidates the deprivation of an "authentic" Korean identity through cultural amnesia caused by colonialist conflicts and how it has transformed the way the Korean consciousness interprets, negotiates and contends with its own identity in a modern world. Such critical examination of the interplay between sexuality, colonialism, and power sheds light on the lasting impact that imperialist rhetoric has had on shifting social paradigms in South Korea and provides insight on how South Korea reconstructs identity and reclaims agency through the use of 'liminal nationalism' in a Eurocentric world.

The *hallyu* wave, as a form of soft power, has been pivotal in facilitating South Korea's rise as a formidable player on the global stage by proliferating Korean popular culture across international audiences. The Oxford English Dictionary (2023) describes this cultural phenomenon, also known as the Korean wave, as the "increase in international interest in South Korea and its popular culture [since the 1990s], especially as represented by the global success of South Korean music, film, television, fashion, and food." Manifestations of this phenomenon include linguistic terms that have infiltrated the English lexicon such as 'skinship' which, according to the Oxford English Dictionary (2023), refers to "touching or close physical contact between parent and child or (esp. in later use) between lovers or friends, used to express affection or strengthen an emotional bond." This is particularly demonstrated by K-pop (Korean popular music) idols– one of the most prolific and influential aspects of contemporary Korean pop culture– and more specifically, male idols. Such intimacy amongst these male idols may appear to be fundamentally incompatible with the conservative and patriarchal South Korean societal values due to its subliminal homoeroticism. Yet, such perceived homoerotic interactions between these idols are romanticized by both domestic and international fans who produce fan content such as 'edits' that are disseminated on social media platforms like TikTok. Despite such fan cultures that are potentially resistant to dominant social ideologies and norms in South Korea, there is little fanfare or outrage against such behaviours and it has, in fact, seen encouragement by the popular culture industry instead.

I posit that this perceived tension is posed by the advent of Western cultural ideals which reshaped perceptions of gender, sex and sexuality in South Korean society. While this has facilitated beliefs that skinship is transgressive and radical, in reality, skinship has pre-existed colonial influences as a cultural tradition. Thus, using the lens of queer and postcolonial theory, I aim to conduct ethnographic research using literary studies, content analysis popular media, and anecdotal evidence due to the relative lack of scholarship on this topic in English and Korean. I will begin by laying down the framework of intersectionality through which we will be examining skinship. I will then do an in-depth analysis of skinship as a term and concept, exploring its evolving implicit social connotations throughout South Korea's modern history. In particular, I will focus on pre-Japanese colonialism, the colonial period until the Korean War, and post-colonialism following the war. Finally, I will analyze the complexities of skinship and its success as it applies to contemporary popular culture in the sociocultural context of K-pop. In doing so, I aim to elucidate how skinship reflects the means by which South Korea as a cultural entity must negotiate with reconstructing and articulating its own "authentic" culture under Western influences, especially in the powerful vehicle of popular culture, which is mediated by what I refer to as the liminality of Korean culture.

Framework of Intersectionality between Queer Theory and Postcolonial Theory

It is first imperative to define gender and masculinity under the lens of queer theory. Judith Butler's (1988) theory of gender performativity defines gender as the "stylized repetition of acts" built upon physicality scripted by hegemonic social conventions and ideals (p. 519). Therefore, gender is a social construct created by performances in which, rather than "being" a fixed gender as a role, one "does" gender, which is recognized by corporeal markers. From this, we can model masculinity as not monolithic but instead, variable and fluid, responding to its spatial and temporal context which then manifests in various physical and behavioural notations that are prescribed as "masculine." Gender does not make the person; it is the person who constructs gender and hence, gender can be articulated in a multitude of ways through one's behaviours that constitute their gender.

While Butler's proposition of gender performativity delineates different manifestations of gender and masculinity within different societies, it is important to note that these manifestations are not mutually inclusive between different

societies. In fact, differences in sex/gender systems have traditionally been used as justifications for imperialist rhetoric in the form of gender hierarchies. In the context of the East, Edward Said (1994) describes Orientalism, whereby the Occident (Western society) positions the Orient (Eastern societies) as a foreign, fetishized and exotic "other." By asserting Western ideology as being "progressive and modern" in contrast to "backward and barbaric" Eastern ideology, "a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony" conducive to Eurocentric dominance is proliferated, thus warranting colonial genocide of opposing societal thought, which extends to constructions of gender (p. 13). Thus, through an intersectional paradigm of sex, gender and race, the conflation of masculinity with power gave rise to emasculation as a tactic to deprive Eastern societies of agency, which I will explicate further in the Korean context.

Definitions, Origin and Pre-Colonial Perceptions of "Skinship"

As aforementioned, skinship or 스킨십 is a portmanteau of skin and kinship, entailing touching or close physical contact. It originated in 1966 as a pseudo-anglicism coined by Japanese scholar Hisako Kokubu in the context of child-rearing (スキンシップ), initially denoting physical intimacy between parents and children. This term was later recontextualized in Korea to refer to "the affectionate touching that often occurs between members of the same sex without necessarily being construed as sexual" (Cho, 2020, pg. 270). What is most significant about this definition is the clarification of skinship as an act that is platonic rather than sexual.

As Cho (2020) explains, "much of this behavior was understood not as homosexuality but as a natural form of intimacy between "younger and older brothers" or juniors and seniors at work or in school" (p. 270). Thus, such acts were not initially perceived or coded as queer but rather, were seen as a form of kinship in line with the prevalence of collectivism in line with Neo-Confucian ideals. The importance of this camaraderie and fraternity is also demonstrated by the term of endearment 'hyung' (형), a term that literally translates to "older brother," but is also used in non-blood relationships to indicate closeness between two men. Oftentimes, the relationship between a hyung and his friend involves skinship and from this, we can understand that skinship is distinctively platonic in nature. It was then in "the twenty-first century that skinship began to gain more widespread use and international recognition, in part due to its appearance in Korean popular culture and media" (Ahn & Kiaer, 2024, p.74). This is exemplified by K-pop idols who engaged in physical intimacy such as hugging (cherryrozes, 2023), sitting on laps (bustyskrt, 2023), and even (but less commonly) kissing (iLikeWooyoung, 2023). Such behaviours in South Korean society also extend into everyday life, as corroborated by personal anecdotes of friends and mentors who recalled casual physical contact between men.

While in Western contexts, the above actions may demarcate queerness or homosexuality, it is imperative to distinguish Korea's unique models of gender and sexuality pre-colonialism which predominantly revolved around the principles of Neo-Confucianism. "Confucian biopolitics has... prioritized the collectivity of the family (and nation)" (Cho & Song, 2020, p. 266), thus equating virtue with adherence to the patrilineal family. In this manner, homosexuality is viewed as disruptive to the social order and kinship system which, therefore, saw the entrenchment of hegemonic heteronormativity. This was especially strictly enforced within the gender class of men due to the androcentric nature of the family system. Ironically, while oppressing queerness, the precedence of familialism and compliance to the model of heterosexuality concealed and, to an extent, created concessions for queerness. As public physical displays of affection between the opposite sexes were frowned upon by Confucian standards, this engendered increased same-sex touch. Thus, as explained by Cho, "homosexuality is not something that can be easily pinned down in South

Korea because there is a widespread belief that men can be intimate with each other, especially while intoxicated" (Cho & Song, 2020, p. 270). Ultimately, as skinship operated within the rigid gender roles of Neo-Confucian patriarchal society, it was not coded or even deemed as possibly being indicative of homosexuality.

The Transformation of the System due to Colonialism

Korean history has been riddled with conflict, war and occupation by foreign forces, resulting in what John Lie (2015) refers to as 'cultural amnesia': the forgetting and disconnect of peoples to their cultures as induced by rifts. There are two significant rifts in the modern period that I will be focussing on, the first being Japanese colonial rule (1910-45). The Japanese occupation resulted in the cultural genocide of Korea; Korean sentiment was oppressed in an attempt to assimilate the Korean population into imperialist Japan. Language, arts, and so on were (often violently) replaced with that of the Japanese ruling state and any opposition was brutally eliminated. This effectively decimated traditional Korean culture as the nation was deprived of agency and, therefore, an "authentic" identity. Though aspects of the Korean culture were able to persist following liberation from the thirty-five-year Japanese colonial rule, this first rift fundamentally transformed the means by which Korea as a nation articulated its own identity.

The second major rift was the US occupation (1945-48) and the Korean War (1950-53) which further fractured the unified Korean identity; the separation of North and South Korea— the North allying with Russia and South with the US— saw the divergence of political and social ideologies. Simultaneously, this period saw the earnest adoption of Western ideology and policy. As previously explained, Orientalist rhetoric labelled Korea as inferior, weak, and "feminine," in diametric opposition to the strong and "masculine" West. This was further propelled by Korea's history of colonization

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and occupation, hence purporting Korean society as primitive compared to the modern and progressive West. Thus, in order to gain respect on the global stage and rid itself of its "savage" and "shameful" past, "[the] postcolonial state engaged in a project of compressed modernization that mimicked the masculine process of colonization by denigrating anything that smacked of the 'feminine'" (Cho & Song, 2020, p. 268). This entailed the militarization of Korea as a means of reinvigorating nationalism and reclamation of "masculine" power. Conversely, this process of "modernization" in which Korea Westernized in order to conform to global colonial systems of power saw the further distancing and othering of Korea from its past self, destabilizing Korean culture as a unique entity.

Another major aspect of Western culture that South Korea adopted was religion in the form of Christianity; as indicated by the Pew Research Centre, Christianity grew rapidly starting from the 1950s (Connor, 2014). While the entry of Christianity pre-exists the modern period (having roots in the Joseon Period), the religious movement was largely suppressed in favour of Neo-Confucian ideals. However, this opening to Western religious influences was a factor that galvanized changes in ideology such as gender and sexuality. Christian values placed gender on a strict binary, assigning corporeal markers and behavioural notions as either masculine or feminine; transgression of this paradigm could be judged as queer and, therefore, unacceptable by social norms (Greenberg & Bystryn, 1982).

Previously, under Korea's traditional sex/gender system, homosexuality was a non-identity that remained relatively unrecognized as a social class in itself. However, Christian intolerance towards "deviant" behaviours combined with Neo-Confucian family ideals, which was further augmented by President Park Chung Hee's "authoritarian ideology of the family-state" that restricted official information about non-normative sexualities (Cho & Song, 2020, pp. 268-269). This dramatically amplified public scrutiny towards potentially homosexual behaviours such as overt acts of intimacy

between members of the same sex, as can also be observed in Western society. Korean views towards homosexuality then become more overtly hostile, a trend which persists to this day, as seen in a study by the Pew Research Center (2023), which showed that 56% of Koreans opposed same-sex marriage in 2023. Sentiments such as homosexuality being viewed as a mental disease and higher levels of queer persecution in South Korea have been personally observed through conversations while residing in Seoul, which could be attributed to the tactics of masculinization as a means of reclaiming power as a nation.

In more recent years, "postcolonial nations worldwide [such as South Korea] have been the site of vigorous new LGBT movements that both mimic and challenge Euro-American models of identity, sexuality, and citizenship," dubbed "queer globalization" (Cho & Song, 2020, p. 263). Linguistically, English queer terms such as gay were transliterated into the Korean language (게이), reflecting the adoption of the Western sex/gender system and, with that, its subsequent social implications such as emancipation from its negative connotations. This was made possible by "the Internet, cinema, and other technologies [which] have... been seen as critical in unmooring these categories from their static and sedentary locations in the "West" and transplanting them to 'Asia'" (Cho & Song, 2020, p. 264). These labels qualified queerness by creating and reconfiguring the very definitions and boxes that compose queerness and in doing so, would have presumably transformed the associations of skinship from that of platonic to more sexual intimacy. Yet, skinship has remained somewhat intact as a cultural heritage of the Korean people. It is precisely this dichotomy between pre and postcolonial Korea that has generated discourse surrounding the tension and dissonance of skinship in popular culture such as K-pop, which I will explicate in the next section.

The "Performance" of Skinship in K-pop

Skinship has become one of the most iconic and essential aspects of K-pop, specifically in the aspect of fan service. However, it would first be wise to examine the phenomenon of K-pop as a general concept. The K-pop idol refers to a type of celebrity working in K-pop, either as a solo act or, more often, as a group (Elfving-Hwang, 2018). This distinctive factor of working in a group is significant as it allows for skinship through interactions between members within the group itself. Oftentimes, idols (seemingly) foster deep relationships with each other, further tying in with familial and therefore brotherly aspects lent by Confucianism that are displayed by acts of skinship. Another element that distinguishes idols from other types of celebrities is their marketing as a holistic product as opposed to simply for their music; dance, visuals, fashion and even interpersonal interactions are all consumed by fans in content released by companies, thereby packaging the celebrity not just as a singer but an 'idol'. This can largely be attributed to the IMF Crisis of 1997 which fueled neoliberal capitalism. During this time, the socioeconomic status of women drastically rose as they began taking more space in the workforce. Thus, "due to the deconstruction of traditional division of labor, men have been losing hegemonic masculinity" which necessitated a shift in marketing towards catering to female fans and consumerism in the popular culture industry (Jang et al., 2019, p. 683).

This was accomplished by using two major strategies: reversing the gaze and projection and identification. In the first, idols become objects consumed by the female gaze, thus subverting yet not directly challenging the patriarchy. In this manner, the female fan is empowered and liberated from the objectification of their bodies, emancipating them from power dynamics and denaturalizing femininity. In the second, female fans posit themselves into the role that the male idol plays which allows for fantasy. This in turn fosters a deeper feeling of closeness due to the perceived gentleness and warmth of the male idol who subverts hegemonic masculine norms, thus giving a sense of agency to the female fan who is identifying with a male figure (Oh & Oh, 2017). The latter of the two has proved pivotal in the fan activity of "shipping," "the practice of

imagining members of a K-pop group in romantic and sexual relationships," often same-sex (Baudinette, 2023, p. 249). The rise of shipping can be traced to Korean policies of *segyehwa* (globalization) which saw Japanese influences from BL (boys' love, an Achillean genre of media) translated into K-pop pairings. As explained by Baudinette (2023), "idol shipping was a kind of 'play' designed to enjoy their fandom... in 'exciting and sexy ways,'" giving fans the space to articulate and explore their own sexual attraction to their idols under a system that stigmatizes it (p. 260). Thus, by inserting themselves as one of the "othered" K-pop idols engaging in skinship, the female fan is able to fantasize themselves as being in a romantic relationship. This identification of the male K-Pop idol as the "other" also parallels the female fans' own experience of being "othered" – subordinate and unequal to men in their social contexts– and enhances feelings of kinship. These various factors allow female fans to construct their own gender identities in relation to male idols, thus contributing to the success of K-Pop.

The parasocial relationships between fan and idol are capitalized on by the industry who not only tolerates but even encourages acts of skinship and such intimacy. Thomas Baudinette (2023) succinctly explains:

> "In strategically deploying shipping in their marketing and production practices, Korea's popular culture industries have expanded and diversified their markets by absorbing what was once an underground subculture into the mainstream. It has become routine for K-pop idols to perform "fan service," often involving "skinship" and other acts of "performed intimacy" that passionate fans subsequently draw on in the production of fan fiction and fan art." (p. 253)

From this, we can see an interesting social dissonance in the tacit understanding of interpretations of skinship as being "queer" yet simultaneously being exempt from the repercussions of the label of being "queer." While some may credit this purely to profit-based motivation, it is important to take note of the use of the term "performed intimacy" by Baudinette. If we recall, the notion of performativity was previously mentioned by Butler in their theory on gender performativity. It is this understanding of K-pop idols as *entertainment* who are *performing* skinship that permits it to subvert dominant ideology. Chuyun Oh parallels queer performance in K-Pop to *talnori*, a traditional mask dance, which is seemingly able to challenge hegemonic patriarchal ideas through cross-dressing as it was considered "entertainment" and not deemed as a valid means to address social issues. In a similar vein, queer performance – such as the purposeful use of skinship to encourage shipping – in K-Pop "is a symbolic mask that allows the performance of queer identities, while at the same time shielding its performers from being perceived as queer" (Oh & Oh, 2017, p. 11). Queerness in K-Pop can exist to denaturalize gender, blur queer lines and weaken gender codes only because it relegates the act of queering as playing a performance– "a temporary transgression in which masculinity, especially, heteronormativity is not directly challenged" (Oh & Oh, 2017, p. 17) – that further entrenches heteronormativity. Queer performance will never be coded as queer due to Korean compulsive heterosexuality, shielding idols from such negative associations. Therefore, the idols of K-pop could be understood as a gender that exists solely in the realm of entertainment and fantasy and separate from the social constraints of the real world. This implicit recognition of the subversive elements of popular culture has been a key area of discourse in understanding its relationship with hegemonic institutions of power.

Mediation of Reconstructing Identity by Liminality

Finally, I would like to draw attention to a running theme throughout this paper: the absence of an "authentic" national identity as a result of rifts in Korean history, the dissonance of skinship as being simultaneously exempt yet interpreted as homoerotic due to it being an act of performativity, the detachment of K-pop as a realm of fantasy from reality. Each

of these discussions brings forth the term that I coin as 'liminal national identity' of Korea. Liminality often refers to a quality of ambiguity or disorientation, a space of "limbo" that exists between states and yet does not exist at all. This poses irony as liminality can be understood as a destabilization of the self as opposed to national identity, which denotes a stable and established institution of self. However, it is precisely the intrinsically liminal nature of the Korean culture and identity that has allowed for subversion yet submission to hegemonic institutions of power. In this way, liminality is a site to produce narratives that circulate, negotiate, and subvert identities, whether they be gender, national, or "authentic" identities.

In this paper, we have spoken specifically on the discursive articulation of identity through produced narrative in the interplay between the producer (K-pop) and the consumer (female fans) surrounding the issue of skinship. However, gender and sexuality serve as a microcosm of greater social identity and in more broad terms, liminality can be equated to power. This power, though operating within dominant institutions and social constraints, allows for the construction of identity and resistance against dominant ideologies. And while K-pop and, by extension, popular culture as a whole, may be deemed as separate from reality, it simultaneously has very real-world implications that are recognized by its audience, whether it be the local fan or institutions like the industry and government. For example, China has banned K-pop within the country due to fears of emasculation and consequently, deprivation of power of the Chinese male populace (Chen, 2023). As such, it is imperative to understand liminality not simply as a vehicle but in and of itself as a state that South Korean society exists in. Consequently, the actions that operate within liminality and are interpreted as "performances" are inherently tied to and impact South Korea, thereby aiding the process in which South Korean society reconstructs its own "authentic" identity.

Conclusion and Evaluation

As demonstrated by this study, skinship is not necessarily representative of a purely radical queer movement but, rather, has existed as a deeply entrenched cultural heritage in Korean culture. Under the traditional Korean gender/sex system, skinship has been practiced not as a means of expressing homosexuality but instead, paradoxically, entrenched heteronormativity. However, colonial influences and globalization have shifted the definitions under which Korean society understands queerness, consequently shifting the coding of skinship in a way that has posed tension against the dominant patriarchy. Despite this, skinship has seen major visibility in popular media, especially in the realm of K-pop as a form of interpersonal interaction between idols to cater to the fantasies of female fans. This success can be attributed to a complex system that can be essentialized as liminality, a feature that is entrenched in the very cultural DNA of South Korea. Thus, I proposed that liminality can be equated to power, allowing the South Korean society to reconstruct its own sense of "authentic" identity in spite of hegemonic institutions of power.

As the scope of this paper focused on skinship in popular culture, it would be of interest to further explore skinship in respect to that as practiced by "normal" everyday people. Much of my work on this demographic lacks significant scholarly research due to a lack of literature in this area. As such, it may prove useful to gather more data and explore perceptions of skinship amongst the general populace. Additionally, it would also be of interest to observe the effects of liminality in North Korean culture; has the North Korean regime exploited this absence of "authentic" culture to institute its own structures that will allow it to remain in power? Such research could provide an interesting parallel to South Korea in order to better grasp the magnitude of the influence of 'liminal national identity'. Finally, another further line of inquiry would be whether the proposed power of liminality will eventually be able to break the paradigm of hegemonic masculinity and greater institutions of power or if it will remain subordinate to it. While it has been a site for local articulation of identity, it remains to be seen whether it can translate to a more significant movement

in collective social ideologies. Can Korean cultural values and practices, which have been proliferated through the internet and fandom culture, challenge the very colonial system it has remained subordinate to on a global scale? Can they successfully defy institutions of power, such as compulsive heterosexuality, or will they be confined to simply operating within them?

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