

## A New Form of Masculinity and the Rise of “Soft Masculinity” in Contemporary Social Networking Sites

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**Abstract:** The formation of masculinity is a new independent subject in the second half of the 20th century. Through the interpretation of the classics of the psychoanalytic school, the rise and decline of gender role theory, and the development of Kang's masculinity theory, masculinity theory has experienced a collective, integrated, and independent stage. Nowadays, masculinity research may receive widespread attention and become a worldwide research topic.

### 1. Introduction

YouTube, an international video-sharing platform, founded by Jawed Karim, Steve Chen and Chad Hurley in 2005, has gathered more than 1.3 billion active users across the globe. YouTube claims that there are more than 500 hours of video uploaded to the site every minute. YouTube is not a particular site for/of young people solely as it welcomes audiences of all ages. Young people seem to be the main contributors there because of their advanced media literacy. The tagline of YouTube is “Broadcast Yourself” (as shown in the appendix), which seems to suggest that everyone is encouraged to be a director and upload their homemade video clips onto the platform. YouTube does not require its users to be professionals or film experts as they can record themselves and upload their videos merely with a smartphone. This low barrier of entry into the field inspires a lot of young people to be content creators and share their videos. This virtual site is more than an entertaining platform, but as YouTube describes, aims to build up a community for people to voice out their opinions. It seems that for many young people, YouTube is a space for them to express their creativity and a way to build up their identity. This paper will investigate how soft masculinity becomes a trend for young male users and how young male content creators treat it as a new form of gaining recognition. More importantly, this paper will discuss how these “flower boy” content creators try to break down those gender stereotypes and expectations. This virtual site seems to promote a fresh and fluid perspective in viewing gender to young people.

The Korean wave inspires a community of young people to exhibit their soft masculinity on YouTube and further helps them to find a sense of belonging. As Jin (2016) states, soft masculinity, as synonymous with the flower boy phenomenon, is a new form of male expression. Jin (2016) explains that the appearance of flower boys is usually as delicate and pretty as flowers, and they all emphasize their gentleness and effeminacy. Jung (2011) illustrates that Korean men used to be depicted as aggressive, rude and violent. However, the rapid growth of soft masculinity completely subverts this stereotypical image. Hallyu, known as the Korean wave, becomes a benchmark for young people to follow in this decade. Jung (2011) explains that Korean male idols are no longer packaged with a bold and masculine style. Instead, entertainment companies tend to create a soft, gentle and effeminate flower boy image. To be exact, flower boys refer to “pretty feminine males in entertainment media and remove the macho characters on-screen” (p.58). It seems that the Korean wave opens up a new perspective for young people to view gender. Soft masculinity and flower boys are no longer just a market strategy but provides a new angle for young people to validate themselves and further helps them to build up their identity and confidence. Soft masculinity is not solely represented by Korean pop celebrities, but many young men try to learn and copy their styles. Many

young teenagers feel a connection to these effeminate male K-pop groups as they realize that highlighting softness and gentleness can also be a choice for men. Therefore, these young adolescents are motivated to express themselves with a flower boy image on YouTube. YouTube opens and forms a new community for these young people, and they obtain a sense of identity and recognition by creating and posting videos to the public.

Since YouTube is a massive site, this research paper will solely highlight a few subsites. The subsites this paper has chosen are all young content creators in their early twenties. They are Korean based American-Filipino, Edward Avila (accumulated 1.5 million subscribers), California based Malaysian-Korean, Ivan Lam (accumulated 450000 subscribers) and a fashion and makeup artist, RickyKAZAF (accumulated 300000 subscribers). Resnick (2006) points out that the internet is more than a searching tool nowadays because it is a virtual space that allows young people to create and voice out in their own innovative way. The author also points out that the internet inspires young people to think out of the box as there are no restrictions and limitations. These three content creators share similar content as they usually post makeup and fashion related videos. They received widespread attention by posting Korean male idols-inspired makeup videos on YouTube. It shows that soft masculinity is indeed a trend among young people and there is a high demand for these videos. As shown in the appendix, these content creators use their creativity and skills to imitate numerous Korean pop stars such as EXO and SHINee. These boy groups are famous for their soft masculinity and flower boy images. Take Edward for example; he usually dyes his hair into a light shade, wears heavy makeup, speaks softly and puts on tight-fitting outfits. Edward can be considered as digital native (Heather, 2009) as they are the generation that grew up with technology and they acquire a certain level of media literacy skills. Therefore, Edward not only treats YouTube as a site for entertainment but goes a step further by uploading videos to this platform. In most of his videos, spectators can see that he only uses his camera and there are no special effects. Rather than being a celebrity, Edward acts as a friend who shares his makeup and fashion tips to his online followers. This high accessibility encourages many young content creators to enter into the industry and use their innovation in making their videos.

At the same time, even though Edward, Ivan and Ricky get their fame and reputation online, they always receive harsh criticism and negative comments. Taking a closer look at Edward's comment section, it is common to see people call him "sissy", "gay" and "abnormal". Instead of being angry and depressed, Edward is quite calm and never pays too much attention to those comments. On the other hand, Edward keeps posting videos on YouTube as he tells his viewers that he feels like there is nothing wrong for men to do makeup. Moreover, Edward expresses that makeup is a positive channel to express and show his personality. Edward voices out that he feels empowered and confident after sharing those videos online. More importantly, he constructs identity through affirmation and recognition from YouTube when he sees people comment on his videos. It seems that the Korean wave encourages young soft masculine teenagers to break down the gender ideology and inspire them to promote the concept of gender diversity online to people. Instead of being the excluded and discriminated group, YouTube serves as a platform to empower young effeminate boys as it provides a free space for them to be themselves. The mainstream media, as Barker (2008) illustrates, still reinforces and promotes the idea of gender stereotypes. That is because mainstream media still portray men as brave, tough, independent and thus should never be associated with femininity. YouTube seems to compensate this loophole from mainstream media as it provides a free space for young people to explore their interests and passions without inhibition. Users do not need to follow the gender norms and expectations strictly. Content creators not only can perform their gender more fluidly, at the same time, they can also gain emotional support from other users.

Butler's (1988) *Doing Gender* article can be a solid theory to explain the way people perceive gender in the existing society. Butler (1988) points out that people ideologically believe that they should perform their gender according to their biological sex. It is an ideological construction that men should display masculinity and women have to display their femininity. Moreover, Butler (1988) suggests that those people who can perform their gender well and correctly will be rewarded and recognized by society. However, Butler (1988) argues that this way of thinking is an ideological

construction. There are social norms and expectations to constrain and limit people to act in specific ways, and they usually learn all these “hidden gender rules” since young. In other words, it means that gender acts are indeed shaped by our upbringing, environment, cultures and life experiences rather than a natural behaviour. People are used to performing their genders within the binary system and they do it in a highly “natural” way that they do not even realize they are performing. Butler (1988) illustrates that those people who are unable to fit into gender norms will receive punishment. For instance, if a man is effeminate and a woman is too manly they will be labelled as “abnormal”. Thus, they will be further marginalized and excluded by society. Butler’s *Doing Gender* theory seems to explain the reason why effeminate men are usually ignored and invisible in society as it is the best way to avoid moral punishment. YouTube, as a virtual site, seems to gradually break down all these gender stereotypes and ideologies and offer young effeminate men a platform to represent themselves in the way that they prefer. This is because on YouTube, the ability to connect with like-minded individuals is instant. Despite increased visibility and risk of criticism, these young men can still find social and moral rapport through the values of inclusivity that YouTube represents.

Not only do content creators gain identity through posting video clips on YouTube, but it is interesting to see that these videos also empower other spectators. White and Wyn (2013) highlight that there are numerous obstacles for adolescents to form their identity. White and Wyn (2013) further express that peer acceptance is one of the most critical factors that hinder their identity development. In other words, it means that teenagers need friends' recognition and support while growing up. YouTube is exactly the place where young people can gain support as it is an interactive platform which encourages content creators to talk to their subscribers. Also, the comment section below every video serves to gather conversations among people with similar interests and minds. For instance, a lot of Edward's subscribers leave comments and send their appreciation to him for stepping out into the public and making soft masculinity visible. Sometimes a subscriber will share their stories as victims of bullying to Edward and Edward will try to comfort them. To those users, the videos are not merely a form of entertainment but a shelter for them to voice out their problems and express care for one another. These effeminate young men who may feel excluded in society can thus find mental support and confidence upon seeing that these content creators are brave enough to represent their soft masculinity online. As Cheng, Dale and Liu state (2007), YouTube users feel that they are connected as they feel that they are sharing with friends. These content creators build up a community for young users and further help them to gain an identity as they spread the message of gender diversity and raise public awareness. Johnson (2008) suggests that adolescents are considered as high-stake groups to encounter mental illness. They will feel depressed and disoriented during puberty, and this will further impact their identity construction. In this way, YouTube forms a community for all these fragmented teenagers and gives them mental support and a sense of belonging. They are no longer perceived as excluded and marginalized groups in society anymore. YouTube allows them to know that there is someone who will support and recognize them online, which bolsters identity development in the long run.

## **2. Conclusion**

To sum up, YouTube is a virtual site that encourages and inspires young people to use their creativity. More importantly, it offers young people with higher freedom in promoting gender fluidity. Content creators, rather than exhibiting their manly sides, can choose to highlight their soft masculinity to the public. It is a relatively new medium for them to express a nuanced rejection of the gender binary, and their identities are built up by gaining recognition and support from other spectators. These content creators also provide an alternative perspective in looking at genders to other young users. Through the to-and-fro interactions between users in the comment section, they find counsel and a sense of acceptance from each other. Essentially YouTube as a youth-oriented digital platform compensates what mainstream media fails to do, which is to promote gender diversity and fluidity. This platform is more inclusive as no one is left out or marginalized. Each user can

access the site easily and anywhere they wish, and they represent their values and personalities without forcing themselves to fit into the gender norms.



Fig.1 Youtube is a Free and Highly Accessible Space Where People Can

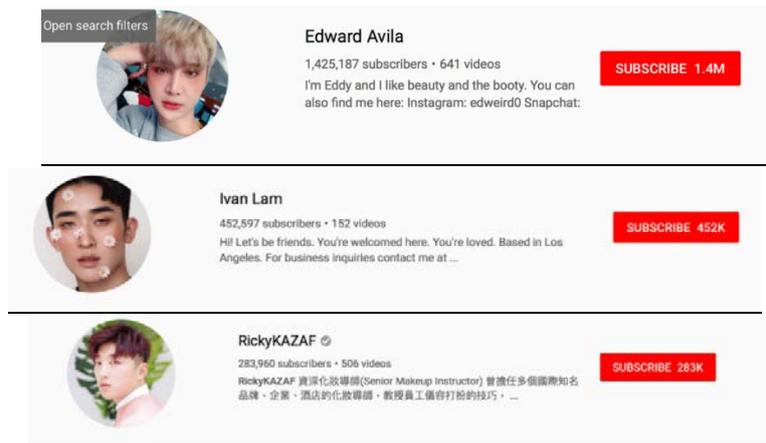


Fig.2 These Content Creators Choose to Highlight Their



Fig.3 These Content Creators Get Their Fame for



Fig.4 Edward Thinks Doing Makeup is a Way of Expressing

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