

The Boy Band Dichotomy of Gender and Sexuality

Planting its roots in the 1960s and '70s with extremely popular male groups like the Beatles and the Monkees, the pop music creation of the "boy band" has taken the world by storm and has found its position in the technology, marketing, and styles of the 21st century with groups, such as the Backstreet Boys, *NSYNC, the Jonas Brothers, One Direction, and BTS. The boy band image appears to be based on heteronormative marketing strategies to target a young female audience, keeping screaming girls at the front of the stage of a group of male performers (Moos, 2013). Despite their enormous popularity in the mainstream, these bands face backlash from critics and so-called "anti-fans" stemming from the stereotypes of the members' lack of musicianship and inauthenticity. The criticism shows a direct relationship to the social order or gender and sexuality and the oppression of women, homosexuals, and anything considered to be "feminine." By creating this dichotomy between preserving traditional masculinity and also utilizing their effeminate tendencies, 21st century boy bands offer an opportunity to explore "alternative masculinities" and a more progressive, inclusive community for their listeners.

Each boy band has elements that make them unique, but they are all structured in a similar fashion with certain characteristics. Young and seemingly innocent boys who are placed together, sing and dance to mostly songs of romantic love to appeal to a young audience. Contention arises from the comparison of these groups, and the pop music genre as a whole, to other musical genres, specifically rock music. Boy band members are criticized for having a lack of real musicianship because they normally do not play instruments in their performances. The assumption is that they do not know how to play instruments and that their talents in singing and

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dancing are not of the same value. The boy band is also normally highly marketed and commercialized, with a team of people making decisions on their music, image, appearances, etc. “Anti-fans” believe that this makes them inauthentic and at a disadvantage to rock musicians whose “legitimacy is validated” by their association with instruments, song-writing, and creative decision making (Hansen, 2018). They are considered to not be “real” musicians or even men. This brings about the question of why boy bands are considered irrelevant or less than because they do not follow the preexisting choices of rock musicians and why their masculinity is dependent on it.

Performance, gender, and sexuality have always had a direct relationship, whether performance is used as a means of expression or a political statement or faces the judgement of a binary gendered society. Therefore, the language and images used to describe boy bands have a relationship to gender. Kai Arne Hansen writes, “Notably, the dichotomies authentic/inauthentic and creative/commercial are also gendered” (2018). Inauthentic music becomes analogous to inauthentic masculinity, and “inauthenticity and commerce are commonly held as feminized - and feminizing - in popular music discourse” (Hansen). Singing and dancing are also regarded feminine performance acts, while expertise on an electric guitar is masculine. This difference of “pop masculinity” is an example of society using gender and social class to place performers, audience, and critics in a hierarchy of power, “where the feminine has always been subordinated to the masculine” (Gregory, 2019). Anti-fans often turn to homophobic criticisms, calling the bands “gay” or “girly,” because of these stylistic tendencies that are regarded as feminine.

Boy bands also maintain a clean and innocent image, normally to appeal to their young audience as well as the fans’ parents. They do not publicly engage in drugs, alcohol, or sex, and

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most of their music speaks of old fashioned romance or what may be considered “puppy love.” Even using the word “boy” insinuates sexual inactivity or naivety and the joys of a “sustained adolescence,” as they have not yet moved into adult life (Hansen, 2018). This strategy keeps the band at the forefront of mainstream media and earns the team money, but it also inadvertently creates a new image of masculinity that is not often found elsewhere. Boy bands’ music allows the members to be publicly vulnerable in their feelings and emotions and express feelings of romantic love and care that in other music genres and general industries are normally suppressed in men (Gregory, 2019).

These groups also appeal to a homosexual and nonbinary audience due to the gender neutrality of its members at times. The Backstreet Boys are a prime example of this, exploiting their youngest member Nick Carter’s androgenous appearance (Jamieson, 2007). It is also commonplace for women to impersonate boy band members as part of a drag king performance, to the point where they are difficult to differentiate between the reality and the performer. Many boy band songs can be interpreted to fit a homosexual relationship, and fantasy relationships between band members have become increasingly popular, especially in recent years. One Direction members were often “shipped” together and pushed to have relationships with one another by fans in written fan fictions, social media pages, and even in public media. Whether their hold on gay fans is intentional or not, boy bands give these young people the chance to explore their sexuality or gender identity and can see themselves represented in a safe and innocent form of media. Boy bands also normalize male friendships and platonic intimacy, or what has been called homosocial relationships. The gestures, expressions, and interactions of boy band members show their fondness to each other (Camarador, 2015). Although these actions can

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be interpreted as homosexual by fans, they also show fans this type of relationship is okay and normal without being “gay.”

Because these images are not accepted in the rest of mainstream media, many boy band members struggle with transitioning out of their previous persona when they get older and wish to continue their careers. Two members of the former boy band One Direction, Zayn Malik and Harry Styles, have taken two different directions in regards to their solo music careers. Both have detached from their boy band past, but Zayn did so by emphasizing his “artistic autonomy” and aligning himself with a provocative and explicit aesthetic (Hansen, 2018). When creating his solo persona, Zayn began discussing that his music would be of his own creative decisions, something he was unable to have a say in when in One Direction. He also showed himself in the studio producing on his social media, a more masculine form of musical labor. Hansen writes, “Not only does Zayn's post boy band masculinity hinge on a claim to the status of "real" musician, but his participation in exalted forms of musical labor in turn contributes to positioning him as a "real" man, or—in other words —ensures that he fulfills conventionalized expectations of maleness in popular music (particularly as they relate to assertions of creativity and artistic skill).” His song “Pillowtalk” uses very different musical and lyrical styles than his boy band past, transitioning to more of a masculine R&B or rock genre. The song uses adult and explicit subject matter of sex, while the music shows nudity and sexual themes. By doing this, Zayn destroys his previous innocent and naive image and makes his stereotypical transition into adulthood of sex and personal autonomy.

Harry Styles, on the other hand, has leaned into gender and sexual neutrality and has made it his own in his solo career. Audiences consider him to be “bending gender stereotypes

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with his colored nails, his elegant jewelry, and the playful silhouettes of his many suits” (Amouzadeh, 2020). He has stated, “What women wear. What men wear. For me it’s not a question of that.” He has also said that the gender of his romantic or sexual partners should not matter and has made subtle references to his sexuality in his music. He also has maintained a pop or indie music style, which may be considered more feminine than rock or other genres. Styles has achieved an audience of young women and gay men but in a very different manner than Zayn, utilizing the feminine qualities instead of masculine. He understands that the so-called “rules” of self expression are changing, and he is able to be part of the change. He has emphasized that his actions are not a political statement or even a means of queerbaiting but an interest in being comfortable with himself. Nevertheless, through this Styles has become a role model for young people wanting a means of expressing and loving themselves.

At its current moment, boy bands are delving even further with gender and sexual expression with the popularity of K-Pop groups. These new bands are exploring different fashion choices, makeup, and male comfortability with themselves and with each other. These moves toward inclusivity and acceptance have evolved throughout the decades and could not have been possible without the work of these boy bands of the 21st century. Their position in the media and with fans will continue to evolve, and it is unclear at this time what the future will be; however, boy bands will still be a source of joy and self expression for young fans, which they so desperately need.

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