

GENDER AND IDENTITY SUBVERSION IN OLI LONDON'S *PLASTIC IS FANTASTIC*

Subversi Gender dan Identitas dalam Lagu "Plastic Is Fantastic" Karya Oli London

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Abstract

The release of Oli London's Plastic Is Fantastic (2021), which talks about his fantasy of plastic surgery, has been extensively criticized. One of the reasons is that his music video was released during Pride Month, a month when the LGBTQ community advocates for their rights for gender equality, followed by other videos and tweets declaring his post-surgery transition to "non-binary" and "Korean." To dig deeper into this assertion, this study combines Fairclough's (2003) three-dimensional theory as the framework and Machin's (2010) semiotic analysis to examine the song lyrics, visuals, and sociocultural background, thereby contributing to the Multimodal Discourse Analysis studies. This study intends to investigate the construction of gender and identity in Plastic Is Fantastic, the underlying power systems present, and how the power systems subvert gender and Korean identity. Research shows that the lyrics and visuals are connected with Korean identity due to the usage of Korean in the songs and the performer's androgynous appearance and behavior throughout the video. These practices produced problems, especially when his plastic surgery-related social media activity was stirred up by mass media as he consistently equated and exploited his trans status with other minority groups, such as Koreans, LGBTQ, and transracial people. Thus, the subversion of gender and identity is present since identity production is commodified.

Keywords: *K-Pop, Plastic Surgery, Identity & Gender Subversion, Multimodal Discourse Analysis*

Abstrak

Perilisan Lagu "Plastic Is Fantastic" (2021) karya Oli London, yang berbicara tentang fantasinya tentang operasi plastik, telah mendapat banyak kritik. Salah satu alasannya adalah karena video musiknya dirilis selama Pride Month, bulan ketika komunitas LGBTQ mengadvokasi hak-hak mereka untuk kesetaraan gender, diikuti oleh video dan tweet Oli London yang menyatakan transisi pasca operasinya ke "non-biner" dan "Korean". Untuk menggali lebih dalam pernyataan ini, penelitian ini menggabungkan teori tiga dimensi Fairclough (2003) sebagai kerangka dan analisis semiotik Machin (2010) untuk menganalisis lirik lagu, visual, dan latar belakang sosial budayanya, sehingga berkontribusi pada studi Analisis Wacana Multimodal. Penelitian ini bermaksud untuk menyelidiki konstruksi gender dan identitas dalam lagu "Plastic Is Fantastic", sistem kekuasaan yang mendasari, dan bagaimana sistem kekuasaan menumbangkan gender dan identitas Korea. Penelitian menunjukkan bahwa lirik dan visual berhubungan dengan identitas Korea karena penggunaan bahasa Korea dalam lirik dan penampilan serta perilaku androgini pemain di sepanjang video. Praktik-praktik ini menimbulkan masalah, terutama ketika aktivitas media sosial terkait operasinya dihebohkan oleh media massa karena ia secara konsisten menyamakan dan mengeksploitasi status transnya

dengan kelompok minoritas lain, seperti orang Korea, LGBTQ, dan kelompok transrasial. Dengan demikian, subversi gender dan identitas hadir sejak produksi identitasnya dikomodifikasi.

Kata Kunci: *K-Pop, Operasi Plastik, Identitas & Subversi Gender, Analisis Wacana Multimodal*

INTRODUCTION

The popularity of K-Pop is known not only for its music but also for its physical beauty. Facial features such as double eyelids and a high nose, which many East Asians are not born with, are almost the hallmark of most K-pop idols. Members of Korean boy bands are also known to be "pretty" due to plastic surgery. Historically, plastic surgery existed in the early 2000s in South Korea after the country's economic crisis, which triggered people to vie for the jobs they wanted by submitting an attractive photo in their curriculum vitae to get the desired position (Stiles, 2017). Better appearance is an important asset in today's highly competitive world. As a result of this trend, South Korea has developed into an industrial country with ever-increasing technology, especially in the entertainment industry, namely K-Pop. Moreover, the emergence of the "Hallyu," or Korean wave, which refers to the increasing international popularity of Korean culture, has helped K-pop gain a sizable fan base overseas with a wide range of ages and backgrounds. Different backgrounds lead to differences in how the songs are perceived and interpreted. Not to mention, many followers are influenced to imitate their idols in appearance and behavior by imitating how they dance, sing, dress, and perform.

Considering the issue, the music video examined in this study is titled *Plastic Is Fantastic* by Oli London, a British man who has undergone more than 20 plastic surgeries to appear and become a non-binary Korean man (specifically, Jimin from BTS boy band). This phenomenon offers interesting insights regarding the representation of an ordinary Caucasian man who has now transformed into a soft and non-binary Korean superstar after plastic surgery. What makes it more fascinating is how the singer expresses himself in *Plastic Is Fantastic*, the song that talks about his plastic fantasy and encouragement to listeners to undergo plastic surgery, which draws much criticism from listeners worldwide, especially Korean people. Although in terms of achievement, this song has not performed well and received abundant hate comments, it is still significant to look at its social and cultural background. Plastic surgery is a big deal in gender and identity studies because it shows how easy it is for a Westerner to become a member of a minority group by having it done. Yet, they can get support from the media to subvert, exploit, and commodify these vulnerable groups amidst people's controversies. Moreover, the singer seemed to build intriguing discussions about the construction of gender and identity through his performance and fantasy of plastic using lyrics, visuals, and his socio-cultural background. It is believed that gender and identity construction is highly influenced by the media one consumes, such as Korean pop music and idols. Furthermore, according to Lee (2019), the popularity of K-pop boy bands can be ascribed to the construction of an artificial and heteronormative celebrity persona, which serves as an outlet for fans to

fantasize about hetero-couple relationships with the band members. Despite this, these celebrities are considered a unique source of Asian queerness that destabilizes Western gender and sexual norms through their persona, behavior, and media content.

There have been quite a lot of studies that cover the topic of K-Pop music videos concerning their identity and gender. Previous studies by Almqvist-Ingersoll (2019) found that K-Pop boy bands maintain traditional gender roles as their identity, employing soft masculinity in their performances. Similarly, the study by Yusanta (2019) found that the fluidity of masculine and feminine in K-Pop boy bands serves as a cultural product, particularly in the film, music, fashion, and beauty industries. Lastly, the study by Wahyuningtyas & Agustiana (2020) also found a shift in masculinity depicted in BTS fashion as it is seen not only in the physical appearance but also in the behavior of K-Pop idols, which means that the identity and gender are intertwined. However, the researcher finds that the discussion of the fantasy of plastic surgery done by a transracial and transgender man and the possibility of gender and identity subversion in a music video has not been discussed yet. The study intends to investigate the production of gender and identity through Oli London's performance and fantasy in the Plastic Is Fantastic music video, the underlying power systems present, and how the power systems subvert gender and Korean identity. By combining Fairclough's three-dimensional theory and Machin's semiotic analysis with Halliday's (1978) lyrics approach, this study contributes to multimodal critical discourse studies, which examine the textual and visual elements of discourse from a critical perspective. In this case, the subversion and commodification of identity and gender.

To thoroughly analyze this topic of identity and gender, gender performance is discussed and examined here. Dating to the 'postmodernist' tradition, sexual identity and gender are constantly produced and reconstructed through narratives and physical representations. Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble and Bodies that Matter* influenced other modern researchers' understanding of power and its relationship to linguistics and norm construction. Butler (1990) argues that gender is not a fixed binary but a construct that varies depending on how it is performed, even though there is a contradiction and instability between one's biological sex and gendered performances. Moreover, a performance that contributes to reinforcing the heteronormative binary conceptions of femininity and masculinity is called queer. The term queer refers to disseminating sexual identity that defies heteronormative forms.

The studies of masculinity are frequently intertwined with queer theory due to the scrutinization of masculinity in which the subjects are viewed as 'unmanly' by inheriting feminine or spreading features. This notion is similar to the debate of prior research concentrating on gender and K-Pop titled *Unmasking Queerness* by Oh & Oh. Cross-dressing in K-pop presents the audience with many queer identities contradicting and diffusing Korea's dominant gender structure. However, some claim that while the performance challenges Korean masculinity, the comedy eliminates homosexual possibilities (Oh & Oh, 2017). This statement refers to the performance's intrinsic duality, which can alter the perception of masculinity but not to the extent that it calls heteronormativity into doubt.

In contrast, in Judith Butler's *Gender is Burning*, the construction and representation of gender are examined through the 1991 documentary *Paris is Burning*. The film contextualizes drag ball culture in 1980s New York with its emphasis on performance, notably those participating in drag pageants known as balls. Thereby shedding light on gender binaries. Butler asserts that the film presents a space where "annihilating norms" that surround "gender and race are mimed, reworked, and resignified" through drag/cross-dressing (2011, pp. 124 - 125). In other words, what might be intended as a way to harm or violate the subject can be redirected and possibly parody dominant norms. It is because heterosexuality is always a performance and an attempt to resemble one's idealization. Although K-Pop code-dressing has been criticized for subverting gender norms, Jung (2009) claims in *The Shared Imagination of Bishonen* that the concept is not based on the same intention as Western drag but is carefully constructed to attract female audiences, thus creating the construction of gender for profit.

More specifically, Korean beauty ideals and performances are currently predominant because of their expression through what Western and other nations' ideals could be viewed as feminine. This phenomenon is not new, as it has been rooted in Korean tradition since the abrupt end of Japanese colonialism in South Korea. At that time, the country has gone through a series of political, economic, and cultural upheavals, making gender a discursive domain. Reinforcing traditional norms of what was considered appropriate against the aspirations of independence and individualism was achieved through gendered expectations and roles (Nelson and Cho, 2016). People were encouraged to join the heteronormative patriarchy in the 1970s and early 1990s and sacrifice for the greater good. In other words, the independence of South Korea from the Japanese occupation sparked the emergence of this feminine look among men as a form of liberalism.

To provide transnational experiences that can attract audiences from different cultures, increase economic growth and symbolize national power. The idols are designed to have their entire aura meticulously crafted (Cho and Stark, 2017; Fuhr, 2017). The image-production system uses strict control over their bodies, medical assistance, and fashion/makeup/hairstyles to create perfect visuals and behaviors that can be converted into a profitable experience and forge close ties with fandoms. As a result, gender performances have become an integral part of the show.

K-Pop boy bands are designed to be as masculine as possible while still incorporating elements of femininity, a concept referred to as "soft masculinity." This brand of masculinity is a synthesis of South Korea's traditional *seonbi* masculinity derived from Confucianism, Japan's *bishonen* (pretty boy) masculinity, and global metrosexual masculinity. This transculturation results in the development of *mugukjeok* (non-nationality), which enables it to wander freely beyond national borders (Jung, 2020).

According to Stuart Hall in his essay 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora,' cultural identity has two concepts. First, cultural identity is one shared culture, a collective one true self, hiding inside the many other superficial or artificially imposed 'selves,' which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in

common (1996, pp. 223). In other words, it represented the same historical experiences and shared cultural codes, which offer us as one people a stable, constant, and continuous frame of reference and meaning. This concept emphasizes identity as a fixed, rigid, and absolute thing which does not allow one to go out of their identity box.

Second, Hall (1996) argues that cultural identity is a matter of being and becoming. This means that identity is dynamic and changeable as it belongs to both the present and the past. Later, this can conflict with how one and other people position themselves in society as it is always constructed. Cross-cultural identity, power relations, and stereotypes are connected and will influence how we think about others and vice versa.

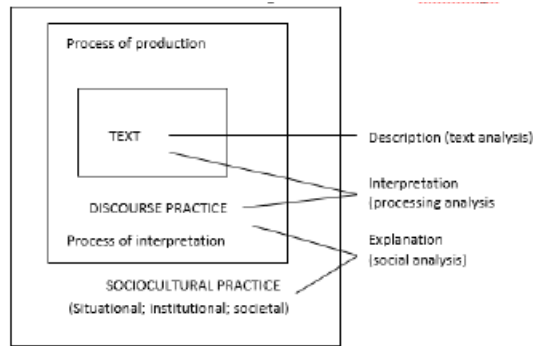
Lastly, the topic of gender performances, K-Pop gendered performance, and cultural identity, along with the given music video, would best be examined with the Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA). This method was developed by Kress and Van Leeuwen in *Reading Images* (1996), which views communication and representation as beyond the scope of literature as it has been widely used to analyze texts for their underlying meanings, be they verbal or nonverbal elements. It focuses on other communication modes, such as visualization, color, gesture, sound, and music. Previous studies have shown that the use of MDA has helped to reveal not only the implied meaning of the lyrics and visualization but also the ideologies and the power related to delivering social critiques in both advertisement and music videos, just like a study done by María Fernanda Castillo Acosta (2018) that revealed the underlying message of the portrayal of African Americans and the issue of gun violence in the United States through Childish Gambino's Music Video *This Is America*. Therefore, this study adapted those methods and combined Fairclough's three-dimensional theory and Machin's semiotic analysis with Halliday's (1978) lyrics approach so that the researcher can uncover the interpersonal meaning that the text is built upon by considering the text's more profound meaning and other communication modes.

METHOD

The data of this study are the lyrics of Oli London's song *Plastic Is Fantastic* and the official music video clip on YouTube published by OliLondonVEVO on June 1st, 2021. The method of this study is the qualitative method which analyzed the multimodalities in the given music video. The framework used in this study combines Fairclough's three-dimensional critical discourse analysis and Machin's lyrics and visual semiotic analysis to analyze the text and visualization of the music video, respectively. Next is to analyze the music video using the combined frameworks of Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis:

Figure 1

Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model



(Fairclough, 1995, pp. 98)

1. **Description (text):** the stage of analyzing at the textual level by describing the language used in the song lyrics. In doing this step, the researcher will use Machin's lyrics theory along with Halliday's (1978) approach that Machin adopted to analyze lyrics. Four elements will be assessed, which are discourse schema (the series of activities that underlies the text), participants (the characters that are represented and presented in the text), action and agency (the behavior and action that the characters do), and setting and circumstances (the place, time, and environment that are stated in the lyrics).
2. **Interpretation (discourse practice):** the stage in which the relationship between texts, visualizations, and interactions is analyzed. Machin's (2010) semiotic analysis of multimodal discourse analysis will be used in this step. It will be analyzed using a variety of connotations, including stances, gaze, social distance, objects, situations, salience, and modality.
3. **Explanation (sociocultural practice):** a step in which the relationship between interpretation and social context is analyzed. Since complete research is required, the study will conduct a full analysis in addition to the text and visual examinations of the discussed music video by evaluating his social media activity on Twitter and YouTube to acquire more information regarding the subversion of gender and Korean identity. Lastly, the researcher will draw a conclusion based on the results and discussion.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Description (Text)

The first step to analyze the text is analyzing the lyrics' discourse schema. Discourse schema is a series of activities depicted in songs containing underlying social values (Machin, 2010). Each line and action conveys a special message about the various values and identities that a particular culture embraces in its dealings. The following are the critical lyrics from the intro, verse 1, verse 2, pre-chorus, and chorus.

You got that → Strike a pose baby → Cover girl baby → Billboards baby → Cause plastic is fantastic → Chou neun Oli Eh Oh.

The arrows show the song's key lyrics flow from beginning to end. These key lyrics are used to identify the central narratives of the music. *Plastic Is Fantastic* illustrates how the singer is fond of fame and plastic surgery, starting with pointing out to the viewers that they got the look so that they shall strike a pose like a cover girl on billboards to the fantasy of plastic surgery. Furthermore, the following key lyric is *Chou neun Oli Eh Oh* (written in Korean Hangul romanization) or translated as *저는 올리예요*, which means "I'm Oli," indicating that he introduced himself to the viewers that he can speak the Korean language, thus, he might attract and gain respect from Korean people. Besides, it is necessary to recognize the social actors and their representation to make sense of the text's represented reality. There are seven types of participants: personalized, impersonalized, nominalized, collectivized, functionalized, aggregated, and objectivated. *Plastic Is Fantastic* provides some social actors, which are:

Oli, babe, baby, me, you, cover girl, and paparazzi

The list shows the personalized actor "Oli" in the song intro, which refers to Oli London as the singer of the song, and the "cover girl," which refers to a female model whose picture appears on the magazine covers. Moreover, the words "babe," "baby," and "me" are considered impersonalized actors because they do not have names and are represented by abstract nouns. Next, the word "you" is regarded as a collectivized actor because it refers to the general audience. Lastly, the "paparazzi" is considered functionalized actor because it represents their role or function, taking photographs of celebrities. Based on the list, it is seen that the impersonalized actors are the most repeated in the song lyrics.

Actors who appear to be anonymous serve to disseminate the message to various listeners. According to Kurse (1993), animosity functions to give the listeners a sense of imagined shared identity (Machin, 2010). In addition, the use of the word "babe" and "baby" are frequently repeated in the song lyrics, indicating that the song is made for general listeners. In contrast, "Oli," "cover girls," and "paparazzi" seem to have authority as they refer to a specific person and people.

Furthermore, the next step is action and agency, which are employed to identify how the social actors are portrayed through their actions. There are six processes for analyzing actors, according to Halliday (1973, pp. 134), namely

Material

The material process examines the process of doing something. There are two types of material processes, which are happening and doing. The 'happening' material process is characterized by the absence of a goal, while the presence of a goal characterizes the 'doing' material process. The lyric has two instances:

Strike a pose, baby / Make love to the camera. The words “strike” and “make” are processes of doing something, yet they do not have a goal. Thus, they are considered the ‘happening’ material process.

Behavioral

The behavioral process examines psychological and physical behaviors such as staring, breathing, dreaming, and looking. However, because it can be difficult to distinguish between behavioral and material processes, Halliday (1994) asserts that there are some behavioral process boundaries. They are the near-mental processes of consciousness as forms of behavior (look, watch, and worry), the near-verbal processes as behavior (chatter, grumble, and talk), the physiological processes (cry, laugh, and smile), and the near-material bodily postures and pastimes (sing, dance, and sit down). There is only one example of the behavioral process, and the phrase is **Look at me, baby**. This phrase is considered a near-metal behavioral process because the behavior is represented through the process of consciousness.

Mental

The mental process examines any act of sensing. This process is divided into three categories which are cognition (thinking, remembering, reminding, and knowing), affection (liking, enjoying, fearing, and loving), and perception (feeling, seeing, smelling, touching, and hearing). Three phrases are considered mental processes, such as *You can **touch** me everywhere / You can **see** me everywhere / **See** my picture everywhere*. The words “touch” and “see” above are the acts of sensing by using our sensory receptors, such as skin and eyes.

Verbal

The verbal process analyzes actions related to oral, such as saying, talking, telling, chatting, etc. This process is absent since no single verbal process can be found.

Relational

The relational process investigates one action that is related to another, such as having plastic surgery. The primary process type associates a participant with their identity and description. As a result, it can be classified based on whether it is used to identify or assign a quality to something. *Cause plastic is fantastic / You **got** that look / You **got** that love* are examples of the relational process. They are relational because the word “got” refers to having attributes due to plastic surgery. In addition, the line “*Cause plastic is fantastic*” is the most repetitive phrase in the lyrics emphasizing the overall visualization and performance employed in the music video. Furthermore, one stanza that is written in Latin romanization is believed to be in the Korean language because of the phonology of the lyrics that he utters. In that part, Oli tries to imitate and sound Korean, but there are no sources online, and even native Korean speakers can tell what he is saying. All that recognizable line is the first sentence, “*Chou neun Oli Eh Oh,*” which means “I am Oli.” However, even though the rest of the Korean lyrics are unclear, the context of the song and his performance that tells

about plastic surgery, a standard procedure in South Korea, make it clear that his use of the language reflects this relationship.

Existential

The existential process describes something that exists or happens in the text. There is one existential process in the song: *Plastic Is Fantastic*. This phrase is considered existential because of the absence of action in the text. The idea of emphasizing the existence of plastic implies the presence of a phenomenon within, and the remaining lyrics flesh out the specifics of what happens with plastic, in this case, plastic surgery.

Next up are the settings and circumstances. These elements refer to the song's time, place, and environment, which help reveal the world communicated in the music, in this case, Oli's fantasy world of plastic.

[Verse 1]
Strike a pose baby.
Drives you crazy
*You can touch me **everywhere.***

In this stanza, Oli invites and gives authorization to the listeners to touch him in every part of his body. By doing so, he lets himself be objectified and fetishized by others since he looks vulnerable and powerless.

[Pre Chorus]
Billboards baby
Runway crazy
*Paparazzi **everywhere***
Make love to the camera
Cause everything looks good on you

This stanza shows that paparazzi are everywhere due to people having had plastic surgery. They have already got their desired look. Here, Oli equated plastic surgery with fame, mainly being a model or actor/actress, citing "billboards," "runway," and "make love to the camera" as instances. This section implicitly says that being pretty is a privilege and that people can be accepted well in society if everything looks good on them.

[Chorus]
Cause Plastic Is Fantastic
In the World of Make-Believe
You can do anything you want
You can do everything you need
Cause plastic is fantastic
You got that look, you got that look

*Cause plastic is fantastic
You got that look, you got that look*

According to (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022a), the term “make-believe” means “believing or imagining things that appear to be attractive or exciting, but are not real.” The definition matches the first line, which states that plastic is fantastic because it enables people to feign or pretend to be someone else simply by undergoing plastic surgery. Here, he plays with the listeners' imaginations, implying that they can do anything because they have an "attractive" look even though it is artificial. The song's settings and circumstances tell listeners that Oli's fantasy of plastic can bring him fame and let the listeners freely touch his body.





Interpretation (Discourse Practice)

Machin's (2010) Semiotic Analysis suggested several semiotic connotators that need to be considered when analyzing an image, such as pose, gaze, social distance, objects, settings, salience, and modality. The interpersonal meanings of presenting action could further be described as pose, social distance, and modality. Pose relates to the movement of a person. Social distance relates to the interpersonal meanings communicated by interacting persons' body distance and angle. Modality is about the willingness or unwillingness and tentativeness or assuredness with which an act is performed.

The first analysis is salience. Salience is a term that refers to the process by which particular elements in visual compositions are made to stand out to attract the audience's attention. Here, Machin considered several principal ways that salience can be achieved. For instance, cultural symbols, size, color, tone, size, focus, foregrounding, and overlapping are all features that may demonstrate salience (Machin, 2007, pp. 88). The salience of the music video is the cultural symbol and color.

Table 1.
Features Of Salience In Plastic Is Fantastic Music Video

Features	Visual Description
Cultural symbols	The most prominent cultural symbolism is the use of accessories, such as earrings, colorful gummy bear necklaces, rings, and nail polish. These accessories are made apparent by the bright, colorful colors to make his appearance look younger and cute. Also, they served as a cultural symbol associated with the K-Pop idols that frequently portray the feminine side in their performances.

	
Color	<p>In terms of color, red and blue are deemed very salient colors. There are some scenes of the salient outfit worn by the singer in the music video. The outfit color appears to stand out compared to the background pastel colors. The red color is associated with power, strength, masculinity, love, and passion. However, blue shows serenity and calm and is often associated with feminine color (Lundberg, 2021).</p>  <p>Timestamp:2.22 - 2.24, 2.50 - 2.56</p>  <p>Timestamp:1.02 - 1.04, 2.02 - 2.04, 2.24 - 2.26</p>  <p>The song cover and 0.39 - 0.56</p>

Focus	The camera always focuses on Oli London's appearance as the only character in the music video. The director uses two prominent shots, namely the medium close-ups, which frame the subject from the head down to the torso, and the full shots, which capture the subject from up to bottom. They are used to show the subject's facial expression and focus on its appearance and movement, respectively.
Foregrounding	Throughout the video, Oli is foregrounded over other objects, such as the wall backgrounds, pink shelves, and a car.

From the description of salience above, the researcher finds that Oli London is aware of his appearance, just like what the K-Pop idols are doing. With the use of vivid colors on his jewelry, clothing, and scenes, and the fact that he is the only focus of the camera in the music video, it can be inferred that he is a narcissist who is aware of his fashion consumption.

The second element is the objects. In *Plastic Is Fantastic*, objects such as colorful clothing, white sneakers, make-up, girl accessories, and pink hair represent sensuality and emotion (Cirlot 54). These are all connotators of a particular kind of culture, trend, and femininity. This is the power of gender fluidity where the singer flaunts his ideals of masculine femininity just like the K-Pop idols in this music video. This image portrays Oli as cute, young, and vulnerable. Moreover, there are not only objects that are used by him but also object used for decorative purposes, such as the colorful curtain made from crêpe paper which is presented in the beginning and at the end of the video, multiple different fantasy scenes, including a graffiti of a girl's face, a bright ice cream-shaped room, and a tiny metallic room. All of those scenes add a sense of femininity.

The third is the pose. According to the observation, Oli's pose appears to have a metrosexual look. Metrosexual looks, or *aegyo* in Korean, are characterized by childlike, innocent, and cute, which reinforces one of the critical points he addresses: plastic is fantastic; it can upgrade one's appearance to look more beautiful.

Figure 2.
K-Pop Flower Pose



(Oli London - *Plastic Is Fantastic*, 2021)

The poses above show that the singer takes up space most of the time. Throughout the video, the researcher found that the singer acted as the primary and only character, giving a sense that he was depicted as being intimate. The pose is known as the flower pose among K-Poppers, a typical pose demonstrated by K-Pop idols to show off their cute and animated sides because the face will look slimmer, resembling a flower in full bloom. This flower pose appears seven times throughout the video. They appear in the “*plastic is fantastic*” and “*you got that look*” lines indicating that he wants to show off his facial features after undergoing plastic surgery as he has had eye surgery, face and brow lift, chest reduction, and nose jobs done on his face. Moreover, he implies that one can obtain the desired look through plastic surgery, just like him, who claimed that he has successfully achieved the look of Jimin from BTS. Therefore, it can be seen that plastic surgery has managed to boost his confidence to perform like K-Pop idols with their effeminate poses. This phenomenon parallels the previous study by Safithri, Nurul, et al. (2020, pp. 773) that argues that idolizing K-Pop idols helps overcome mental health problems and makes them more confident.

Figure 3.
Sitting Pose



(Oli London - Plastic Is Fantastic, 2021)

His remarkably flexible and seductive seated dancing moves and his self-indulgent facial expression generate a sense of vulnerability and sensuality. Here, London tries to imitate the soft masculinity traits in which a male's body is objectified because of the vulnerability that they are showing. This androgynous pose is already familiar among K-Pop boy bands due to the Confucian ideology, which is still firmly held by Korean people since the Joseon Dynasty. This ideology asserts that if a man can show his tenderness and sensitivity, he is a cultured individual (Jung, 2011). Conversely, it is not in line with western culture as one's performance will determine one's gender orientation, as supported by Butler (1990) in the Gender Performative Theory, saying that masculine and feminine roles are not biologically fixed but socially constructed. Identity, specific gender, is constructed through performance. Therefore, since he is a westerner who is not raised in this culture, the video hints at his gender orientation, which is not a straight man.

The following essential aspect is the gaze, which has many social and communicative functions that can change the meaning. Gaze can be in the form of looking out, downwards, or upwards. Since gaze has social and communicative functions, this aspect is related to the four primary things when speaking: offer information, offer services or goods, demand information, or demand goods and services (Halliday, 1985).

Figure 4.
Eye Movements



(Oli London - Plastic Is Fantastic, 2021)

London employed four distinct types of gaze in eye movements: winking, glaring, rolling up, and looking up to the left and right sides. Before singing the lyrics, London gave two winks in the song's intro. While winking is frowned upon in some cultures, it is a fairly common practice by many. This non-verbal communication gesture can potentially convey a great deal of "hidden" meaning

in a gentle and offensive manner. For instance, winking may imply a sense of humor, friendliness, and affection, yet this can also signify sexual interest depending on the situation and accompanying body language (Bharati, 2018). The researcher believes that in the case of London's music video, his winks may be intended to invite and engage viewers to "join" the conversation as he winks at the intro of the video and in the lines *"You can do everything you need,"* and *"Your eyes don't faze me,"* thus in a way persuade them to join what he is trying to convey. Second, London glares repeatedly at the line *"You got that look."* His glares in this context can be interpreted as his wanting to emphasize that the viewers will obtain a desirable look just like him if they undergo plastic surgery. Third, when the song switches from English to the Korean language, he rolls his eyes and looks up to the left and right sides while singing the Korean part smoothly. Eye-rolling, based on psychology, can be meant to ridicule, make fun of, or demean the other person in the conversation, in this case, the viewers (Underwood, 2004). This can be interpreted as he demeans those who make fun of him because of his transracial status by showing that he can speak the Korean language fluently. These eye movements are therefore used to convey information about Oli's self-image and fantasies regarding plastic surgery.

The fifth element is social distance. This element relates to the camera's angle, including the type of shots and camera movements. These aspects might indicate personal or impersonal situations, respectively. Throughout the video, the director uses the dolly and tilt camera technique, in which the camera is put on a moving dolly or tracks that smoothly move the camera forward or away from the subject, and sometimes it swivels the camera vertically. The director employs close-ups, medium, and wide shots using these two camera techniques. For instance, at the beginning of the video, the director offers a close-up shot to shoot London's face, while the rest offers wide and medium shots. Wide shots highlight the overall look of London's body and his attractive outfits, while the medium shots present a closer look at his face and upper body.

Lastly, modality relates to the credibility of visuals to reflect the world or accurate representation. Modality can be higher or lower depending on how much an image departs from how one would have seen the view or had been there (Machin, 2010). Color saturation, distinction and modulation, contextualization, representation, depth, illumination, and brightness contribute to credibility. The scenes in the music video have a combination of bright and pastel colors with joyful motifs, which make the audience go through multiple fantasy scenes. This hints at London's goal to achieve the K-Pop males' standard by being effeminate boys. In other words, the visuality of the music video, which presents the fantasy world, adds to lower the modality because it is not seen as realistic as the real world.

Explanation (Sociocultural Practice)

In this section, the researcher has summarized the results gathered from the music video and combined them with the socio-cultural background of the song and singer. The result will be presented separately, emphasizing the three distinct sub-corpora.

The Deviant Nature of Oli London's Construction of Gender and Identity: Gendered performance

Previously, in the introduction section, some scholars perceived K-Pop's gendered performance of male idols' androgynous presentations as only construction to attract female audiences to gain profit, not as representing queerness that subverts the gender norms. Likewise, Oli's performance in his music video, including his gestures, appearance, and salience, indicated soft masculinity, just like the ideals of K-Pop boy bands. As a result, his performance in the music video is viewed as normal according to the ideology of Korean male masculinity, yet still subverts westerners' understanding of gender identity.

Following a detailed analysis of Oli's social media activity within a month of the music video's premiere (June 1st, 2021), some surprising and contentious insights into the construction of his gendered performance were discovered. The *Plastic Is Fantastic* was uploaded in early June, followed by his coming-out tweets and YouTube video two weeks later; the researcher discovered that the attempts to promote his song that talks about the fantasy of plastic and coming out as a trans were executed at the perfect time because June is a Pride Month when the LGBTQ community advocates for their rights for gender equality and confesses to those who have transitioned. Oli's "Being KOREAN" video expands on his previous tweets in which he referred to South Korea as his "homeland" (*Being KOREAN*, 2021). The video begins by bringing up the most recent post-surgery update, followed by coming out as both "non-binary" and "Korean" at the same time, and using both they/them pronoun, which is entirely valid, and the Korean/Jimin pronoun, which is a made-up pronoun that is invalid. He hopes the video will encourage and assist Koreans who feel unrepresented and ostracized by society to dare to reveal their sexuality. Although his efforts were made at the right time with the best of intentions to encourage trans people, his actions drew criticism from the Korean people and LGBTQ community, particularly non-binary people, because he compares his experience of identifying as a different race to how trans people identify, which is harmful to both the trans and Asian communities. Furthermore, in the trans community, the usage of his pronoun Korea/Jimin is regarded to be ridiculing and humiliating since it just makes them look like a joke. Trans people and their communities are already vulnerable, and their survival is threatened. They are also misunderstood and discriminated against in society.

The fantasy of plastic and his identity construction

The fantasy of plastic is not only driving Oli to change his look significantly like Jimin but also to change his race and gender.

The fantasy of plastic is seen in the song lyrics. According to the analysis above, the phrase "*Plastic is fantastic*" and "*You got that look/love*" are the two most repeated phrases in the song. In addition, words such as "*cover girl baby*," "*billboard baby*," "*runaway crazy*," "*strike a pose baby*," and "*paparazzi everywhere*" also contribute to the fantasy of plastic, which can help to boost one's

confidence and bring fame to them as it can fix and change one's look since *"everything looks good on you."* Moreover, this fantasy also adds to his identity construction. For instance, one stanza is written in the Korean language, and he sang it confidently as he was fluent in speaking Korean. This indicates that Oli wants to incorporate his identity with Korea and does not want to be perceived as a full foreigner. Besides, his accompanying gestures and gaze while singing the *"plastic is fantastic"* and *"you got the look"* parts remain consistent, mostly showing off his new face that he claims looks like Jimin BTS. These repetitive phrases and constant gestures show how he is fond of plastic to get the look and love of others. Lastly, the fact that he is the only actor in the music video shows that he wants to be the center of attention for the audience, which people should be inspired by.

While the lyrics and visuals of the video show how he is fond of plastic, Oli's attempt to have lots of plastic surgeries cannot be perceived as usual because it is not appropriate and recommended from the aspect of health and society. For the health aspect, his attempt can lead to certain underlying psychological disorders like Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD), a psychiatric disorder defined by an obsessive obsession with non-existent or minor flaws in one's appearance that results in significant anguish and life disruption (Alavi et al., 2011). This disorder can increase an individual's desire to have cosmetic surgery to address their perceived deficiency and reduce symptoms, believing that their lives will dramatically improve if they just get rid of their 'flaws.' Thus, this triggers an identity crisis as the individual will be making celebrities into their role models. This phenomenon then leads to the Celebrity Worship Attitude that has three levels of severity: entertainment-social, intense-personal, and borderline-pathological.

Celebrity Worship Attitude has several potential emotional and psychological difficulties, ranging from mild to severe levels that can cause a person to have the possibility to undergo cosmetic surgery, such as botox treatment, soft tissue fillers, breast augmentation, breast lift, laser skin resurfacing, and rhinoplasty (Sansone, R. A., & Sansone, L. A, 2014). Is claimed by many K-Poppers that idolizing K-Pop idols help overcome mental health problems and make them more confident (Safithri, Nurul et al. (2020). Likewise, Oli London was bullied by his peers and cheated on by his partners while growing up because of his looks, big nose, and he had lots of acne. He was anxious and depressed at that time, yet now he has managed to overcome it through K-Pop and plastic surgery. Unfortunately, rather than curing his mental illness, his actions and behavior were viewed as delusional and bizarre, especially when he married a cardboard cutout of Jimin in Las Vegas in 2020, which was aired on the US television station, Daily Mail TV.

Aside from the health aspect, the social element also will be the next concern of Oli's identity construction. For instance, within a month of the music video's release, he has taken a step further by claiming that he has a Korean identity in his DNA, which makes him happy regardless of whether people accept it. What is more, he posted an image of the Korean flag. Nevertheless, the flag was 'vandalized' with the original color changed vastly by the rainbow colors

representing LGBTQ – another extremely offensive given its national, cultural, and historical symbolism.

Figure 5.
Oli London's New Official Flag of Non-Binary Koreans Vs. The Official Flag of South Korea



(Oli London on New Official Flag for Being a Non-Binary Person Who Identifies as Korean, 2021)

Using this flag, he wanted to make a safe place for non-binary people in South Korea. Thus, their presence is officially recognized and considered by society. However, this attitude is incredibly offensive as it trivializes Korean people and the LGBTQ community. Korea is a nationality, and changing a flag that represents a whole existing country and breaking the meaning of the flag is an act of insulting the constituency and tarnishing the image of South Korea and the LGBTQ community. To the trans community, who are already vulnerable, aligning himself with the community by trolling them adds fuel to the fire as it disregards real trans experiences.

Nonetheless, his construction of identity does not stop there. According to the coming out video that he published, he claimed that he is now a 'transracial' person because he has gained the Korean looks through plastic surgeries, while

etymologically, the term 'transracial' refers to the parents who adopt a child from a different race; therefore, it is not a suitable term to refer to the individuals who pass from one race to another. The construction of identity, in this case, race, cannot be compared with gender transitioning because race is inherited in one's blood and cannot be changed solely by one's appearance. In this sense, Oli does not and will not fully understand the experiences, struggles, and even trauma that Koreans and transracial kids have endured. As a result, this creates another problem because the idea of transitioning to a different race discredits people of color and trans and gender-diverse people's experiences of gender affirmation. It also undermines the importance of cultural connection for many communities.

Commodification as The Underlying Power System

The power of mainstream media has brought Oli London, with his controversy, to be known worldwide, particularly among Koreans. Until May 2022, he gained 57K subscribers on his YouTube channel, 579K followers on Instagram, 47.2K on Twitter, and nearly 900K followers on TikTok. These numbers are enormous; thus, it has the potential to influence many people to do or think the same as he did. For at least four years, he has been using his social media to promote his songs and show his aspiring gender orientation and his new 'Korean' identity by making coming-out and reaction videos of BTS and teaching Korean language videos to the audience. However, the grammar and punctuation are way far from correct. Nonetheless, he appears on US TV shows Dr. Phil, Daily Mail TV, TMZ, E! Botched Season 6, the BBC series 'Being British East Asian,' the British documentary series 'Hooked on the Look,' and numerous talk shows. He also got endorsed by two plastic surgery companies in South Korea, namely @medictel_global and @view_plastic_surgery, which are known for sponsoring free plastic surgery for influencers. These privileges imply that he might be paid a lot for all his controversies, making him still survive and exist until now.

The support from the mass media and two plastic surgery companies gives him more room to make other societal controversies and sustains him in the entertainment industry. In his capacity as a so-called influencer, trying to get attention is the central part of his job. Yet some people refer to him as a clout-chaser who associates themselves with famous people by creating controversies to garner attention and recognition. The disagreements cause an improvement in audience engagement, hence generating profits for the parties concerned. Nonetheless, slowly but surely, his construction of identity that is perceived as deviant behavior among westerners gradually can be perceived as usual and create stereotypes for LGBTQ, such as "rebellious" and "attention seeker," and for Korean males as an "effeminate boy." This phenomenon is similar to what Hall (1995) says, that the media has the power to create a fixed meaning in society by representing the dark side of one community and then showing it over and over again until it lacks diversity and rep. Thus, the social perception becomes narrowed, and the stereotype is created.

The subversion of gender and identity

Gender and identity are subverted in his *Plastic Is Fantastic* music video and social media activity. First and foremost, while the femininity or *aegyo* poses

he employs in the music video may not be regarded as subverting the gender norm in Korea, the subversion of gender occurs in his social media activity when he announces and equates his experience of passing to Korean with the experience presentation of trans people, which completely ignoring the feelings of the community. Second, the song and the plastic operations he undergoes highlight the subversion of identity. The music conveys the idea that plastic may transform one's appearance, specifically to seem like him, which he claimed that he has successfully looked like a Korean person. Besides, the excessive plastic work on him only makes him look like a troll because his Western facial bone structure does not match his Korean facial features, thus making his face look weird and abnormal, especially in his eyes. According to Martin (2020), Oli has undergone more than 20 plastic surgeries with an estimated \$250,000 spent on his face for over eight years to look more Korean, especially with Jimin BTS. The list includes rhinoplasty to make a small yet pointy nose, zygoma reduction to alter his face contour to a Korean facial contour, East Asian blepharoplasty to make significant, round, almond-shaped eyes, eyebrow lift, and other regular skin treatments such as filler, botox, and skin whitening injection. These excessive procedures are done solely to make it trendy and aesthetic without respecting the feelings of Asians who have experienced discrimination and racism because of their facial features (Chen, 2022).

That being said, plastic surgeons have a significant role and responsibility in enhancing the physical appearance of their patients while adhering to health regulations. However, many have switched their orientation to the business sector. As a result, some choose to disregard the health aspect and still request consumer demands who have limited awareness of the safety measures, like what happened to Oli London.

CONCLUSION

In short, Oli London Plastic Is Fantastic music video offers exciting and challenging topics regarding the subversion and commodification of gender and Korean identity. Firstly, the findings show that the construction of Oli's identity and gender are seen in the song lyrics and visuals, in which he tries to incorporate the Korean language, appearance, and performance into his music video. Textually, the song is written in English and Korean language. However, the Korean part cannot be interpreted even by the native Koreans, while visually, Oli was attempting to integrate himself into Korean culture and identity by wearing a variety of playful and eye-catching outfits and accessories, acting androgynously based on the salience, poses, objects, and gaze that he employed throughout the video, similar to what male K-Pop idols do. Although the androgynous or aegyo portrayal in his music video is considered normal and does not deviate from gender norms in South Korea, the use of incorrect Korean language in the lyrics invalidates Koreans and thereby subverts the Korean identity. In addition to the songs and visuals, the singer's socio-cultural background is also studied by analyzing his social media activity to understand the subject comprehensively. Second, since his desire for plastic stems from his identity problem and body dysmorphic disorder, he undertook multiple plastic operations to eliminate his 'flaws' and gain the appearance of Jimin BTS. This

phenomenon can be defined as extreme celebrity worship. Although these excessive surgeries do not bother others, this parody is hurtful and offensive to Koreans because it is fetishistic, reinforces stereotypes, and generalizes the whole Korean culture based on the industrial K-pop genre. Besides, for Oli London's side, this parody is considered intentional according to his behavior and the Korean lyrics in the song. For instance, the overuse of autotune ruins the entire piece, the tacky and repetitive lyrics, especially when he sings broken Korean vocals, and the bizarre dance in which he only randomly flails his arms to mimic Kpop idols. Those instances do not represent the MV visuals, which try to incorporate Korean elements. In other words, these disparities reveal his lack of professionalism in songwriting and song production as he makes it a mere parody intended to garner attention. Not to mention, a video of his coming out as a 'transracial' non-binary Korean and the tweets about the declaration of the official flag of a non-binary South Korean people by vandalizing the original South Korean flag is causing a stir among a variety of groups, including Koreans, LGBTQ, transracial people, and people in the United Kingdom. That being said, his fantasy and procedure of plastic surgery are subverting gender and identity through the presence of his social media activities. It has hurt and invalidated many communities, including Koreans, trans communities, and transracial people.

The study has found that the underlying system that presents this phenomenon is that his identity and gender orientation due to plastic surgery have become commodities for media and plastic surgery companies. The mass media has the power to create a fixed meaning in society. In contrast, plastic surgery has the ability to expand its business to larger audiences with various procedures that they offer. It means that his existence can remain sustained in the entertainment field because that is part of those in power's agenda to commercialize minorities to create many controversies and stereotypes that eventually might put them in a more negative light.

This study has limitations because the researcher is only researching Oli London's Plastic Is Fantastic music video and his social media activity within one year, from June 2021 to May 2022. Consequently, other Oli London-related social media activities beyond that period have not yet been observed. The study focuses only on a Western male figure who profoundly loves the K-Pop boy band. In contrast, this phenomenon may occur in individuals from various backgrounds. This limitation can serve as a future reference for those who wish to conduct additional research on Oli London, focusing on how he maintains his new identity as a transracial and transgender individual. In addition, it can be used as a reference to study other plastic surgery passing trends of western or black people to Asian individuals, such as passing to a K-Pop idol or a Japanese anime character. Lastly, this research contributes to the discipline of multimodal discourse analysis (MDA), specifically race and gender studies on how a song and visuals connected with plastic surgery might subvert an individual's identity.

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