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Queer Visual Representation and the Global Gay Image in Music Videos:

A Comparative Study of Queerness and Visual Culture in K-Pop and Western Pop Music Videos

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Abstract

The intersection between Queer culture, music, and visual culture constitutes a vital research gap in Queer representation and practices of viewing. Visual culture is the study of ideology through visual complexes, which communicate ideology and power through visual mediums for viewers to interpret and perceive. Music videos are integral devices for visually communicating the significance of a song and, oftentimes, the articulation of an artist's identity. Therefore, Queer representation in music videos infers a visually communicative process wherein Queerness is represented, the meaning of Queerness is built, and the ideas of Queer ness are disseminated of meaning is constructed by signs and symbols.

Korean pop music – K-pop – encompasses a cultural phenomenon, music genre, and industry that is contingent on visual storytelling and unique, manufactured aesthetics to propagate Korean music culture globally. Queerness is K-pop is predominantly facilitated by visual culture than linguistically or by the artists' identities. Through two Queer practices, Queerbaiting and Queercoding, Queer representations in K-pop music videos provide rich ground to explore the cultural implications for representation that visually and ideologically contrasts the Global Gay Image, a phenomenon delineating Queer identities into a homogenous, Western standard.

This study analyzes "Monster" (2020) by K-pop girl group Red Velvet – IRENE & SEULGI, "break up with your girlfriend, i'm bored" (2019) by American pop singer Ariana Grande, "Neverland" (2018) by K-pop male idol Holland, and "Angel Baby" by Australian pop singer Troye Sivan. This study draws upon academic frameworks from various authors across visual culture, cultural studies, feminist media studies, and Queer studies, including Nicholas Mirzoeff, Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, Michel Foucault, Laura Mulvey, Joseph Massad,

Chuyun Oh and David C. Oh, Joseph Brennan, and Joan Newlon Radner. Ultimately, this study aims to bridge the intersection of Queer representation, K-pop, and visual culture unique conditions with a comparatively analysis of men-loving-men (MLM) and women-loving-women (WLW) in K-pop music videos to Western pop music videos using semiotics to dissect the implications for Queer representation in K-pop.

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Introduction

The entanglement of visual culture and music to Queer culture is an intersection which subjectifies the sensibilities of Queerness to practices of viewing. Queerness and what it means to be "Queer" are evolving terms in contemporary scholarship and refers to the spectrum of LGBTQ+ identities, such as, but not limited to, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender. Visual culture is the study of viewing complexes, particularly the system of perceiving and representing power through visuals. The basis of visual culture is the suggestion that ideology is communicative through visual mediums upon viewers, and viewers, too, hold the power to interpret and perceive such ideologies communicated to them.

Music videos, in turn, become a visual medium for conveying meaning in songs through visuals. As a visual site and cultural phenomenon, music videos have always been a staple of representation, the building of meaning, and the dissemination of meaning. The contemporary evolution of Queerness and Queer culture regard music videos as a quintessential vehicle for expression and celebration. However, Queer spectatorship for music videos is not exclusive to music videos that are explicitly Queer; Queerbaiting and Queercoding, two phenomena of Queerness, can occur in non-Queer spaces to convey nuances of a Queer possibility. Western scholarship acknowledges Queer spectatorship in visual culture to the Global Gay Image, which demarcates Queer identities into a homogenous standard fitting a liberal, Western axiom for representing Queerness; this is where I introduce Queer music videos in K-pop as the catalyst to deconstructing the Global Gay Image.

Korean pop music, known as K-pop, supersedes being a music genre and instead, acts as an industry and a Korean cultural phenomenon with global influence. As an industry, K-pop singers – "idols" – and bands – "(idol) groups" – publish music videos with a particular narrative

in tandem with the lyrics/musical content of their songs. The narratives presented in K-pop music videos combined with the song's content create the idol's "(comeback) concept," which refers to the overall theme of their latest albums or their assigned theme from "debut," a milestone for when a "trainee" (K-pop idol in-training) is formally introduced to the public. As a cultural phenomenon, K-pop is contingent on visual storytelling, with the design of music videos acting as a medium for both the musical content and the K-pop industry's high regard for manufactured aesthetics. Visual storytelling is a unique marker of K-pop, with music videos translating K-pop's uniquely multi-media visual culture across the globe.

The significance of this study is to bridge the research gaps within existing scholarship on the intersectionality between Queer representation, K-pop, and visual culture. I argue that there are unique conditions for Queer representation in K-pop music videos which differ visually and ideologically from the Global Gay Image; Queer representation in K-pop reflects structures of normativity and kinship embedded in South Korea's LGBTQ+ historical and ongoing cultural discourse. As such, Queer representations in K-pop music videos are primarily produced as implicit/ambiguous or as a performative, aesthetic culture. Queer representation in K-pop is thereby backdropped by South Korea's reluctance to conform to the Global Gay Image explicitly.

This study conducts a comparative analysis between K-pop and Western pop music videos in two categories of Queer viewings, women-loving-women (WLW) and men-loving-men (MLM). The WLW music videos in this study include "Monster" (2020) by K-pop girl group Red Velvet – IRENE & SEULGI and "break up with your girlfriend, i'm bored" ("buwygib") (2019) by American pop singer Ariana Grande; the MLM music videos in this study include "Neverland" (2018) by K-pop solo artist Holland and "Angel Baby" (2021) by Australian pop

singer Troye Sivan. This study uses the academic frameworks of visual culture, cultural studies, Queer studies, and feminist media studies from the likes of authors such as Nicholas Mirzoeff (2011) for visuality, Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright (2017), Michel Foucault (1975), Laura Mulvey (1975) for spectatorship and the gaze, Joseph Massad (2002) and Chuyun Oh and David C. Oh (2017) for the Global Gay Image, Joseph Brennan (2016) for Queerbaiting, and Joan N. Radner for Queercoding. This study uses semiotics analysis on two examples drawn from each music video to accomplish a comprehensive comparative analysis. Ultimately, this study aims to dissect the implications for Queer representation in K-pop by framing representation under the conventions of the Global Gay Image in hopes of creating future research and discourse on this special intersection of visual culture, Queerness, and K-pop.

Literature Review

The majority of relevant literature on the exact intersection between Queer representation in K-pop music videos, the Queer sensibilities of South Korea, and visual culture is sparse. However, the body of research done for each facet of this thesis paints a more prominent, cohesive picture of not only the sensibilities of each facet but the greater imploration of further research on the intersection overall. Visual culture is, most notably, the area of study in this thesis with the most significant number of scholarship, with notable scholars such as Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright (2017), Nicholas Mirzoeff (2011) on visuality, countervisuality, and the right to look, Michel Foucault (1975) on spectatorship, and Laura Mulvey (1975) on the gaze. The aforementioned scholars helped create a foundational understanding of visual culture as a complex system of perceiving and representing power through visuals, whether art, photography, or film. Visual culture, in turn, is a study of how ideology is represented through the emphasis on studying the communication of power dynamics from the visual medium to the viewer and vice-versa.

In line with the scholarship on visual culture are the available works on Queer representation centring on the notion of Queer representation consumable by viewership and, thus, visual perception, with the relevant scholarship on Queercoding by Joan N. Radner (1993) and Pauline Greenhill (2015) and Queerbaiting by Joseph Brennan (2016), Michael McDermott (2021), and Nicole Woods & Doug Hardman (2022). The theory with the sparsest body of scholarship is the Global Gay Image, which is elaborated by Chuyun Oh and David C. Oh (2017) as an all-encompassing model for the comprehension of Queer representation through a Western model. As with the works on Queerbaiting and Queercoding, the liminalities of Queer spaces in academia posit Queerness through a liberal Western lens. However, Queer representation

operates differently in comparing Western visual media to Korean visual media. While the body

of research done to analyze Korean visual culture through Queer studies imply a monolithic

framework for scholars, it is integral to integrate Queer studies scholarship in the context of K-

pop and South Korea to further elaborate on the sensibilities of Queer representation in Korean

Queer spaces. A majority of the scholarship detailing Queer spaces in South Korea is rooted in

policy studies and cultural studies from a sphere of Western understanding. Nonetheless, the

scholarship on Queer spaces in Korea laid out in visual media and K-pop salvages a cohesive

timeline for a non-Korean audience's understanding.

Queer Studies

Queer representation refers to the visibility, inclusion, and portrayal of Queer identities.

The interdisciplinary study of Queerness includes the critical examination of the representation

of Queerness across different media and figures to emphasize its importance in validating Queer

identities and educating both Queer and non-Queer audiences (Woods & Hardman, 2022, p.

584). My research will colloquially use the term *Queer* in reference to the sensibilities of Queer

culture as well as its more etymological connotations, primarily referring to the same-sex

markers of WLW and MLM relationships without disparaging the spectrum of Queer identities –

such as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, non-binary. Therefore, Queer is used in this study to

encapsulate the Queer relations within each music video, which includes "the relations

among sexual behaviours, erotic identities, constructions of gender, forms of knowledge, regimes

of enunciation." (Halperin qtd. by Fathallah, 2015, p. 492).

Queer representation centers around both the resistance and reinforcement of

heteronormativity by bodies "marked" as Queer (Chuyun & Oh, 2017, p.

10). *Heteronormativity* is defined by Frederik Dhaenens (2016) as a hegemonic phenomenon

which reiterates the hetero-centric ideology of how Queerness should be practiced and represented (pp. 533-6). Dhaenens emphasizes how heteronormative structures in Queer visual representation can be disseminated or negotiated within popular music in the context of Queer music videos (2016). Media representations of Queerness are inherently subverting or reinforcing heteronormative expectations and the performance of marked bodies, which Chuyun Oh and David Oh (2017) describe as a sense of theatricality in Queer performances as the marked bodies become devices of physical action and visual representation (Chuyun & Oh, 2017, p. 13); this process of theatricality and the consideration of Queer identities in performance and representation is called "Queering," which infers an "un-problematization" of Queer identities. The bodies of Queer identities become modes for visually representing Queerness in media by expressing "an articulation [of a] space of possibility" (Chuyun & Oh, 2017, p. 14), ripe for viewers' interpretation and politicization of Queer representations.

The rising prevalence of visibility, portrayal, and inclusion of Queer identities in media, however, are not always digestible in a vacuum of Western scholarship (Chuyun & Oh, 2017; Dhaenens, 2016). Queer identities are homogenized to a single, global standard for the norms and standards for representing Queerness through the Global Gay Image (Chuyun & Oh, 2017; Massad, 2002). Additionally, the articulation of Queer identities includes depictions of Queerness across, but not limited to, race, ethnicity, age, socio-economic status, religion, geographical location, income, education, and ability (Ciszek & Lim, 2021, p. 404). The intersectionality of Queerness to other markers of identities, however, is obscured when media representations adhere to the Global Gay Image in a way of practiced authenticity, which Erica Ciszek and Hayoung Sally Lim (2021) describe as the manner of mediated communication of Queer identities to create depictions in mainstream media that are appeasable to "heterosexual

consumers' perceptions, relegating the perspectives of sexual and gender minorities to the margins." (Ciszek & Lim, 2021, p. 396).

The process of Queering enables viewers to politicize the imagery and aesthetics of Queer representation, as Queer representation can push back on Queering's essence of subverting heteronormative power structures. Producers of Queer representations in media can represent Queerness by "appearing but failing to provide allegiance to issues of Queer visibility" with the practice of Queerbaiting (Woods & Hardman, 2022, p. 583). Initially theorized as a practice involved in Queer activism through fan discourse and literature, Queerbaiting both incorporates and rejects the principles of Queering to politicize interpretations of Queer depictions. The marketing of a Queer possibility in media, whether in music videos, TV shows, films, and even in the identities of media figures, can appease the Global Gay Image and the heterosexual audience's standards (Cizek & Lim, 2021) while invalidating the Queer consumers' unique experiences identifying as Queer (Woods & Hardman, 2022). Joseph Brennan (2016) suggests that the practice of Queerbaiting causes viewers to perform Queering on media representations depicting "possible homosexuality" as a plausible way to "poach" the Queer subtext back from Queerbaited media representation into Queer discourse (Brennan, 2016, p. 190). Queerbaiting is recontextualized by recent scholars as a practice that, while feeding off audience reception of potential homosexuality, is also highly politicized to consider media ethics, the authenticity of representation, and the sensibilities of Queer identities (McDermott, 2021).

In turn, another practice of Queer representation interplays with Queerbaiting to form Queer subtext in media through visual symbols, stereotypes, and codes. Queercoding also allows Queer audiences to practice Queering their media as Joan N. Radner (1993) argues that Queer representation in media presumes two groups in an audience: monocultural receivers, implicated

as the heterosexual group who receive one message, and Queer readers, who assume a double message (qtd. by Greenhill, 2015, pp. 111-2). Frequently, Queer readers are more than likely to decode representations that may not even be intended to be Queer and may presume such depictions are actively Queerbaiting. The incorporation of feminist and Queercoding studies by Radner (1993) increases the profundity of Queer representation and underlines the complex interplay of Queer identities with media. Pauline Greenhill (2015) uses Radner's work on Queercoding to expand on the notion of an active audience decoding the messages coded by producers of Queer representative media, whereas the passive audience may not. The significant difference between Queerbaiting and Queercoding is that the latter explores how codes of Queerness can build secondary messages, which could be considered as Queerbaiting and as being not mutually exclusive. However, Queercoding is contingent on the audience's ability to decode the message set by representation.

Queer Sensibilities in South Korea

A chronological genealogy of Queer rights and recognition in South Korea alongside the geopolitical liminalities of the nation from the West outlines studies on Queer spaces in South Korea. Furthermore, such geopolitical and cultural liminalities are observable in K-pop.

The Queer movement in South Korea emerged in the mid-1990s and manifested in contemporary Korean society as a counter-public from the heteronormative, patriarchal public sphere (U. Kim, 2017, p. 618). The emergence of the Queer movement occurred when "cultural diversity and freedom of expression became an important demand of the times, leaving behind the 1980s, an era of dictator regime and cultural homogeneity." (J. Kim & Hong, 2007, p. 626). Non-mainstream media and spaces grew from this era as a way of subverting the negative representations of Queerness in mainstream Korean media, namely lesbian and homosexual

representations. The term *Queer* in the 1990s also became a monolithic term for identities deemed as deviant by the Korean public sphere, overlapping sapphism and homosexuality with gender, socio-economic class, and locality (J. Kim & Hong, 2007). Furthermore, during the 1990s, media representations of Queerness in South Korea depicted the idea of Queer as an "exotic phenomenon in a distant place or an aesthetic category," which alienates the Queer communities in Korea further from the liberal, Western Queer movement (Y. Kim, 2023, pp. 48-9). Studies highlighting the Queer movement in South Korea during its early rise are situated outside of the globalization of Western Queer politics and culture, which U. Kim (2017) and Y. Kim (2023) argue is a matter that makes Queer spaces in South Korea unique.

Overtime, Queer culture and Queer politics in Korea formed a unique relationship with the public sphere to utilize the counter-public as a space of discourse and validation to subvert heteronormativity and represent Queerness without perturbing the popular culture (U. Kim, 2017). While the contemporary Queer movement in South Korea "rejects being co-opted by the heterosexual society [and] constructs new ideas of social powers in relation with sexuality and seeks alternative visions for change in relations" (U. Kim, 2017, p. 619), there is a clear division of the mainstream, heteronormative sphere and the Queer counter-public. One identified complication within the activism for Queer rights and representation is the complicated relationship between Queerness and the patriarchy in South Korea, wherein the dominant popular culture of Korean society holds a conservative attitude toward Queer representation, resulting in institutional oppression and societal alienation of Queer communities – including, but not limited to, homosexual and non-homosexual, Queer individuals who are affected by the Korean patriarchy (J. Kim & Hong, 2007).

For most of the beginning of the Queer movement in the 1990s, Queer communities – the counter-sphere – in South Korea operated underground and have clashed with the public sphere, with the Seoul Queer Films and Videos Festival (SQFVF) undergoing cancellations, institutional threats, and general public scrutiny (U. Kim, 2017). Ultimately, the SQFVF movement underlines Korea's Queer rights activism as having a profoundly intricate history of politicizing visual arts and media spaces to become Queer spaces. Another contemporary example of a movement within visual arts and media spaces becoming Queer spaces is the Yeonsung Gukgeuk Project, a visual archive of Korea's Queer history containing performance artworks, stage plays, and media installations prior to the Queer movement in the 1990s, which represents Korea's Queer past as "envisioning Queerness not as a sexual or gender identification, but a new sense of togetherness emerging from interdependency and shared vulnerabilities." (Y. Kim, 2023, p. 49). This representation of Queer politics and sensibilities in Korea is vastly different from Western scholarship's definition of Queerness, emphasizing the historic and ongoing struggle for recognition, solidarity, and survival within a united community rather than societal validation, notwithstanding the overarching societal kinship and normativity (Y. Kim, 2023). However, varying localities in Korean Queer spaces have nuanced ways of expressing Queerness, such as Queer spaces in the capital Seoul have more representations and adoptions of Westernized Queer identity, activism, and social exposure (Phillips & Yi, 2020). At the same time, peripheral cities and areas of Seoul are more subdued, pursuing "accommodating politics and closeted lifestyles" (Phillips & Yi, 2020, p. 1949). Ultimately, the differences and intersectional nature of the Queer spaces in Korea underline how Queer resistance, and thereby representation, against heteronormative societal norms and expectations exist in a contained counter-sphere to the popular culture/public sphere of Korea.

Visual Culture

Visual culture is the study of the complex system of perceiving and representing power through visuals, such as art, photography, or film, thus interrogating how ideology is represented through the communication of power dynamics from the visual medium to the viewer and vice-versa. This section is the area with the most scholarship and different branches of study. However, it will primarily review the works of Nicholas Mirzoeff (2011) and Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright's (2017) evaluation of the works of Michel Foucault (1975) and Laura Mulvey (1975).

The underlying aspect of visual studies scholarship is the politicization of visual media. Mirzoeff (2011) posited "the right to look" as a practice of assessing autonomy, collectivity, and political subjectivity (p. 1). Visuality and countervisuality follow suit in Mirzoeff's work as concepts that center around the dissection and negation of power and authority in imagery. Mirzoeff ties each concept to historical practices, such as surveillance, a practice of looking, to slavery plantation, and linking authority to visuality. Countervisuality and the right to look are methods of negotiating the ideologies that permeate visual media in a discursive manner. Mirzoeff posits visual culture, power, and authority as mutually fueling one another, with practices of looking as an encompassing method of dissecting or decolonizing ideological structures with sight. Sight, while arguably the main sense used in practices of visual culture, is not the only sense and form of understanding involved in visual culture. Instead, Mirzoeff (2011) suggests visuality and the practices of looking as "not composed simply of visual perceptions in the physical sense, but [is] formed by a set of relations combining information, imagination, and insight into a rendition of physical and psychic space." (p. 3). Visuality, countervisuality, and the

right to look all interconnect to form a foundational basis for visual culture in defining and pinpointing power and authority in visual culture through imagery, aesthetics, and symbols. Additionally, visual culture emphasizes the relationship between the viewer and the object of viewing. In essence, the relationship between the spectator and the object implicates a more profound and intricate dynamic, where institutions and ideologies are simultaneously 'looking back' at the spectator.

The gaze and spectatorship are theories that focus on addressing the ideologies presented by visual texts rather than how a spectator may receive said ideologies (Sturken & Cartwright, 2017). The gaze and spectatorship, drawn from theories by Mulvey (1975) and Foucault (1975), relegates the power dynamics in visual culture to the relationship between the viewer/spectator and the object, using film theory and psychology. Mulvey's work on the gaze included feminist theory and integrated psychology into the study of viewership, wherein studying how visual objects address us and how we address visual objects considers how visual objects "speak" or "invite" certain responses from certain categories of viewers (Sturken & Cartwright, 2017, p. 105). For Mulvey, this is the *male gaze* and how film depictions of women are structured around appeasing the male psychosexual fantasy. Moreover, the gaze and address are relational and structural, where messages in visual objects are created (structural) to invoke responses (relational), considering the conscious and subconscious levels of the viewing experience (Sturken & Cartwright, 2017, p. 105). Although Foucault's work is typically related to the fields of surveillance in visual culture, the gaze, according to Foucault, is not an isolated practice of viewing and relates to a field of gaze; considering how representation and simulation of ideologies are integral in spectatorship, the gaze is rendered as a relational experience between the spectator and the visual object.

Theoretical Frameworks

This study uses theoretical frameworks from visual culture, cultural studies, Queer studies, and feminist media studies. For visual culture, this study draws upon the works of Nicholas Mirzoeff (2011) for visuality, countervisuality, and the right to look, and the contributions of Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright (2017) drawn from previous scholars like Michel Foucault (1975) and Laura Mulvey (1975) for the gaze and spectatorship. Theories from cultural studies, Queer studies, and feminist media studies stem from the works of various authors: Chuyun Oh and David C. Oh (2017) and Joseph Massad (2002) for the Global Gay Image; Joseph Brennan (2016), Judith Fathallah (2015), and Nicole Woods and Doug Hardman (2022) for Queerbaiting; and Pauline Greenhill (2015) and Stuart Hall (1973) for Queercoding.

Visual Culture

Visuality

Formulated by Thomas Carlyle in 1840 and originating from an intricate history of Western historiography (Mirzoeff, 2011, preface), visuality is a paramount concept in visual media studies. Nicholas Mirzoeff associates visuality with the visualization of history and authority. Thus, visuality is a confirmation of social and political power that is the "norm" through visualization, as "the ability to assemble a visualization manifests the authority of the visualizer." (Mirzoeff, 2011, p. 2). Mirzoeff conceives visuality as an interrogation of how power and authority are realized and actualized from visual representations and practices of looking. According to Mirzoeff, visuality and the practices of looking are not simply visual perceptions in the metaphysical sense but are formed by a "set of relations combining information, imagination, and insight into a rendition of physical and psychic space." (p. 3). In turn, visual culture expands beyond representations perceived as visible to a perceptible, discursive space, including our

physical senses and psychic understandings of power and shared meanings across different cultures and historical contexts (Sturken & Cartwright, 2017).

The discursive attribute of agency and authority in visuality creates three modalities within which visuality operates. Michel Foucault describes the first modality as "the nomination of the visible" (Mirzoeff, 2011, p. 3), which is the classification process rooted in the colonial history of plantation slavery and consisting of naming, categorizing, and defining. The second modality of visuality separates classified groups using social organization. The third modality renders the separated classified groups as the norm, "right and, hence, aesthetic." (Mirzoeff, 2011, p. 3). To Mirzoeff, visuality is a complex that dictates that everything visible must have a specific connotation, perpetuating an aesthetic regime rooted in histories of power and authority. Visuality renders coloniality, "the transhistoric expansion of colonial domination and the perpetuation of its effects in contemporary times" (Mirzoeff, 2011, p. 5), as natural by supplementing hegemonic power structures to uphold an aesthetic regime. Visuality affirms what decolonial critic Frantz Fanon calls the "aesthetic of respect for the status quo" (qtd. by Mirzoeff, 2011, p. 3): the visual affirmation of oppressive institutional structures as correct and pleasing.

Countervisuality and The Right to Look

Mirzoeff posits countervisuality and the right to look as the foils to visuality and its implications of authority. Mirzoeff emphasizes the significance of autonomy in countervisuality and the right to look, compared to the absolute authority of visuality in constructing an aesthetic status quo. The right to look is the reclamation of authority from visuality, whereas countervisuality confronts the prevailing oppressive structures from visuality. Using the works of philosopher Jacques Rancière, Mirzoeff argues that the right to look and countervisuality negate visuality by three facets – education, democracy, and the aesthetics of the body over the

aesthetics of power– where each facet is an interplay between emancipation and the right to be seen. While visuality emphasizes the labour of visualization and the products of what is perceived as correct, countervisuality and the right to look underline the persistence of decolonizing authority and unlearning hegemonic power structures as being "correct." Mirzoeff affirms that countervisuality affirms the right to look by reconfiguring visuality through dissensus, "a dispute over what is visible as an element of a situation, over which visible elements belong to what is common, over the capacity of subjects to designate this common and argue for it." (Mirzoeff, 2011, p. 24). Ultimately, countervisuality and the right to look are antagonistic to visuality and its processes of authority, as Mirzoeff explains reclamation of autonomy from authority as challenging the laws sustaining visuality, which justifies a colonial sense of "right." (Mirzoeff, 2011, p. 25). Thus, countervisuality enables the right to look, allowing viewers to refuse visuality to implicate its "interpretation of the sensible to power, first as law and then as the aesthetic." (Mirzoeff, 2011, p. 25).

The Gaze and Spectatorship

A crucial aspect of visual culture is addressing the viewing processes rather than just what can be viewed. As visuality infers, there is a psychic modality to viewing, from which viewers understand what ideologies look like and interpret them; academic frameworks for spectatorship and the gaze critique the dynamics of viewing and receiving messages from visual texts. Spectatorship, according to Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright (2017), is the "condition of looking" (p. 103) accomplished by the spectator, who is "the subject position of the individual who looks." (p. 103). Spectatorship and the gaze are closely associated as relational, with both theories rooted in film theory and relegating the power dynamics in visual culture to the relationship between the viewer/spectator and the object. The gaze is the intricate relationship of

looking between the viewer and the subject, "in which the subject is caught up in dynamics of desire through trajectories of looking and being looked at among objects and other people." (Sturken & Cartwright, 2017, p. 435). The gaze itself includes an expansive body of scholarship, namely Laura Mulvey's male gaze, which describes how the patriarchal erotic fantasy of a male spectator is projected onto women in film, whose bodies are "coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness." (Mulvey, 1975, p. 837). Mulvey's male gaze is contestable for lacking consideration for the female spectator or the intersectionality of race, gender, and sexuality, but remains foundational to feminist film and gaze scholarship. Some authors who have contested Mulvey's rudimentary outlining of the gaze include Mary Ann Doane (1982) with female spectatorship theory and bell hooks (1992) with the oppositional gaze.

Nevertheless, theories of spectatorship and gaze share a centring on "address" rather than "reception," inferring that spectatorship and the gaze confront how visual texts elicit messages and meanings through how particular subject positions are "created by a visual text and its field of looking, which are occupied by specific individuals." (Sturken & Cartwright, 2017, p. 105). Theories of spectatorship and the gaze maintain that there is a relational field of spectatorship wherein gazing is sustained, and the spectator can interpellate the dynamics of meaning and power from the coding within visual texts.

Cultural Studies, Queer studies, and Feminist Media Studies

Global Gay Image

The Global Gay Image was coined by Chuyun Oh and David C. Oh (2017), describing the Eurocentric conflation of Queerness across global LGBTQ+ communities and implying that non-Western Queer individuals are expected to conform to Western models and resulting in a

non-intersectional stereotype of a "global gay" image (p. 10–11). The Global Gay Image negates

how articulations of Queerness are not a contemporary phenomenon outside of the West,

conflating global communities' unique histories and intersecting discourses of Queerness to the

typical and frequently stereotypical understandings of Queerness in the West (Chuyun & Oh,

2017, p. 10). In other scholarly works, the term for Global Gay Image is interchangeable, such as

being coined by Joseph Massad (2002) as "The Gay International," which denotes both a

scholarly concept and two literal organizations, the International Lesbian and Gay Association

(ILGA) and the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (IGLHRC) (Massad,

2002, p. 361). According to Massad, the discourse on the International Gay dismisses local

Queer subjectivities in favour of an "international," white Western axiom for what is deemed as

being Queer and how Queerness is practiced. Massad writes that the International Gay – the

concept and the organizations – seeks to "de-Orient" any subversions of Queerness to the white

Western axiom of Queerness, which claims that "oriental desires" are "oppressive" and need to

be "enlightened." (Massad, 2002, p. 364). While positioned as supposedly being emancipatory

for Queer individuals from their dangerous homelands to become openly Queer as individuals

are in the West, the International Gay "produces homosexuals, as well as gays and lesbians,

where they do not exist, and represses same-sex desires and practices that refuse to be

assimilated into its [Western] sexual epistemology." (Massad, 2002, p. 363). In other words,

Massad argues that the International Gay erases local gay subjectivities and categorizes Oriental

desires as almost non-Queer.

Ultimately, any iteration of the Global Gay Image retains its posited meaning by Chuyun

and Oh, wherein Queer identities become homogenized to a single, global standard. The Global

Gay Image thus operates in how individuals and groups practice Queerness and how Queerness

is represented and communicated. With the works of Massad and Chuyun and Oh, the Global

Gay Image creates the binary of viewing Queerness as being affirmative or being dissident to

view Queer identities and their representations as explicitly or implicitly Queer based on a

homogenous ideation of Queerness by a Western epistemology. The Global Gay Image invites

critique of the binary mentioned above of representation in deconstructing the dominance of

Western Queer identities as homogenous and inviting non-Western Queer voices into LGBT

discourse.

Queerbaiting

The practice of Queerbaiting originates from fan studies and popular culture (McDermott,

2021; Brennan, 2016; Woods & Hardman, 2022), stemming from Queer activism "to hold

producers accountable for their role in potentially misrepresentative queer media." (Brennan qtd.

by Woods and Hardman, 2022, p. 584). However, recent scholarship has solidified its meaning

from simple fan speculation of Queer possibility in media representations. Queerbaiting

demonstrates two same-sex characters who are implicated to be developing a romantic

relationship, with hints of a Queer possibility generating speculation from spectators. Examples

of Queerbaiting in popular media exemplifies what Judith Fathallah (2015) deems as the "denial

and mockery" which reinstates "a heteronormative narrative that poses no danger of offending

main-stream viewers at the expense of queer eyes." (p. 491). Queerbaiting is best understood

as a complex phenomenon appropriating Queer culture and predatory to Queer audiences to

feign appearing and providing "allegiance to issues of queer visibility, [and] then failing to

provide this in any tangible way." (Brennan qtd by. Woods & Hardman, 2022, p. 585).

According to Brennan (2022), the definition of Queerbaiting "arguably provides a suitable multi-

dimensional definition that incorporates the role of perception in the consumer." (Brennan qtd. by Woods & Hardman, 2022, p. 585).

McDermott (2021) emphasizes the historical and cultural contexts surrounding the representation of Queerness in contributing to Queerbaiting, claiming that "Fans involved in queerbaiting debates conceptualize and utilize representational politics by drawing on a history of queer images on screen and evaluating contemporary media contexts of queer representation, taking into account both cultural and economic restrictions and incentives." (p. 846). A few examples of historical and cultural contexts which factor into the conditions of Queerbaiting include harmful stereotypes of gay men from the AIDS crisis, as the newfound visibility of gay men during this period represented gay men as deviant to society, being "criminal and pathological" (McDermott, 2021, p. 846). Consideration of the historical and cultural contexts for Queerness is essential when defining Queerbaiting, demonstrating a link between the conditions of Queerbaiting and stereotypes and conventions of Queerness through a heteronormative framing.

Queercoding

Queercoding originates from coding theory and operates in tandem with Queerbaiting. Queercoding derives from Joan N. Radner's theorizations of feminist coding in media representations and, in turn, draws from Stuart Hall's theory of encoding and decoding. According to Hall (1973), encoding and decoding is a phenomenon derived from studies of communications and discourse on television. Hall's theory of encoding and decoding centers on the circulation of ideology through signs and symbols in television, with an emphasis on the precedence of signs and symbols, suggesting that the asymmetrical communicative process between viewers and television programs can create distortions and misunderstandings (Hall,

1973, p. 4). Subsequently, Radner and Lanser (1993) define coding as a practice that "occurs in the context of complex audiences in which some members may be competent and willing to decode the message, but others are not." (qtd. by Greenhill, 2015 pp. 111-2).

With consideration to Queercoding, media representations of Queerness presume two groups in an audience, monocultural receivers and double-cultured Queer readers (Greenhill, 2015, pp. 111-2). The monocultural receivers are presumed to be the heterosexual group, who receive a single message that is frequently the surface-level interpretation of media texts. The monocultural receivers are less inclined to decode more implicit messages as they assume their "interpretation of messages is the only one possible." (Radner & Lanser qtd. by Greenhill, 2015, pp. 111-2). The Queer readers, in turn, are presumed by Radner and Lanser to be the group that is more likely to interpret a double message from media texts. Queercoding and coding theory interplay with semiotics, the study of signs, codes and symbols, but it is critical to note that Queercoding does not absolutely denote Queerness. Radner and Lanser instead argue for a nuanced perspective of Queer representations to take into consideration the codes which construct interpretations for viewership and the different contexts within each viewing group.

Methodology

This study will analyze four music videos from four different recording artists from the late 2010s and early 2020s comparatively. In the MLM category, Holland's "Neverland" (2019) will be comparatively analyzed with Troye Sivan's "Angel Baby" (2021). In the WLW category, IRENE & SEULGI's "Monster" (2020) will be comparatively analyzed with Ariana Grande's "break up with your girlfriend, i'm bored" ("buwygib") (2019). The selected music videos act as visual media texts for a comparative analysis of K-pop and Western music videos through semiotics. A comparative analysis enables the critical examination of each music video through the lens of representation, namely how MLM and WLW representations differ from the East to the West and how they operate with or against the Global Gay Image.

Semiology (Semiotics Theory)

Semiology, or semiotics theory, will dissect the visual rhetoric of each music video by analyzing how images create meanings through conventions and codes. Semiotics theory, in this study, will be used to explore how each music video is designed, with its narrative elements also operating aesthetically and discursively. According to Rose (2016), semiology is "not simply descriptive, as compositional interpretation appears to be; nor does it rely on quantitative estimations of significance." (p. 106). Instead, semiotics draws from the works of Charles Sanders Peirce, Ferdinand de Saussure, and Roland Barthes to study the visual representations of signs and symbols and their connections with broader, ideological meanings. The semiotics model of Saussure will be used for this study, wherein each visual text will be scoped for its sign, the concept or idea that is analyzed; signifier, the tangible components of the sign; and signified, the conceptual meaning gathered from the sign and signifier.

The semiological analysis will be done shot-by-shot to explore each music video's visual elements, noting elements such as themes, motifs, mise-en-scène, framing, and staging. The semiotic analysis will be conducted on two specific scenes or sequences in each music video, supported by screenshots as the figures and timestamps for reference.

Research Design

Sampling and Sampling Criteria

The four media samples in this study were chosen based on nonprobability purposive sampling. According to Saumure and Given (2008), nonprobability purposive sampling occurs when a study chooses its sampling based on pre-established criteria: "a process where participants are selected because they meet criteria that have been predetermined by the researcher as relevant to addressing the research question." (p. 563). Each music video was chosen based on the research question, "How do two K-pop music videos employ Queerbaiting and Queercoding to represent Queerness compared to two Western music videos?"

As such, each music video was chosen based on the following predetermined criteria:

     I.   It must contain depictions of same-sex romance in either a men-loving-men (MLM) or a women-loving-women (WLW) narrative.

    II.   The chosen Western music videos must have visual or narrative content similar to the chosen K-pop music videos.

    III.   It must contain examples of Queerbaiting and/or Queercoding.

"Neverland" and "Angel Baby" are categorized as MLM music videos, while "Monster" and "buwygib" are categorized as WLW music videos. Each K-pop music video was chosen from researching K-pop fan forums for Queer music videos and Queer K-pop artists, as Holland is the first openly gay male K-pop idol. On the other hand, the Western music videos were

chosen after the K-pop music videos. The scope of Queer music videos in contemporary Western pop culture and K-pop is expansive, so the chosen samples for this study were limited to a sample of two within each research category (MLM or WLW).

Procedure of Analysis

Close viewings of each music video were used to conduct the analysis portion of this study. The viewings of each music video are conducted on YouTube via the artist's official page. The first viewing of each music video will make general notes of the implicit and explicit elements of the video to facilitate a more efficient process using semiology. The second viewing will break each music video down frame-by-frame for an in-depth viewing experience. The third viewing will extract two specific scenes from each music video for analysis by screenshotting. Any further viewings going forth will be for consistent analysis. The lyrics of each song are not considered during the analysis procedure as this study focuses on the visual components of each song.

Limitations

Categorizing the media samples as being either MLM or WLW limits the scope of research to a binary analysis of Queerness focusing on men-men or women-women relationships and sexual orientations instead of the full spectrum of the LGBTQIA+. Sexualities from across the Queer spectrum, such as bisexual, genderqueer, transgender, non-binary, and asexual, were excluded from this study to allow for a more comprehensive analysis of the chosen media samples. Additionally, the scope of existing research done on Queer music videos, whether Western music videos or K-pop music videos, predominantly analyze and critique how gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender identities are represented.

Furthermore, this study does not form assumptions about each recording artist's sexualities or alignment to Queerness or Queer culture outside of what is represented by the chosen media samples and official information from the artists themselves concerning their sexualities and beliefs. For example, while Holland and Troye Sivan are both openly gay singers, Bae Joo-Hyun (Irene) and Kang Seul-gi (Seulgi) from IRENE & SEULGI and Ariana Grande[1] have never made explicit press statements on their sexualities. The speculation of an individual's sexuality is not substantial for this study. Therefore, this study focuses on the representation rather than audience perception and the artist's intentions with the Queer messaging.

Another limitation is the sampling method, particularly concerning the researcher's bias and the lack of transferability of research data (Saumure & Given, 2008). This study acknowledges that bias when choosing the media samples, as one of the conditions for a media sample's selection is whether each Western music video corresponds narratively or visually with its K-pop counterpart to facilitate the comparative analysis portion. As for the lack of transferability, this study aims to overall address the gaps in research in K-pop music videos within the frameworks of visual culture and Queer studies. Due to the limited nature of this academic intersection, there is a potential lack of transferability between studies for its research findings. However, this study's findings do not necessarily need to transfer to different music genres than K-pop or different visual media formats.

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[1] Grande has spoken to the press about her sexuality following the Queerbaiting controversy of "break up with your girlfriend, i'm bored." Grande neither confirms nor deny any allegations about her sexuality to the press. For the purpose of this study, speculation of Grande's sexuality will not be relevant to the Queer representation in "break up with your girlfriend, i'm bored."

Analysis

The differences in Queer representation in K-Pop music videos compared to Western music videos become undone as Queerbaiting and Queercoding are universal devices used across different media spheres. Moreover, it is the implication of the Global Gay Image which highlights cultural and geographical subjectivities for consideration in a Queer reading. Queerbaiting, the practice of suggesting homoerotic subtext for a depiction to be perceived as having the possibility of Queerness while maintaining heteronormative qualities (McDermott, 2021; Brennan, 2018; Cizek & Lim, 2021), operates in tandem with Queercoding, which creates Queer subtext for an audience to decode (Radner, 1993 qtd. by Greenhill, 2015). Each music video in this study engages with Queercoding to depict the nuances of Queer representation, but the application of semiotics can unveil the possibility of Queerbaiting. Furthermore, semiotics supports Queercoding as the former studies signs/codes, thus validating the Queercoding process of building primary messages to non-Queer spectators and secondary messages to Queer spectators (Greenhill, 2015).

The analysis portion will first discuss the WLW and MLM categories separately, with a comparative discussion of each section's results at the end. The WLW category will analyze "Monster" by K-pop girl group Red Velvet – IRENE & SEULGI (2020) and "break up with your girlfriend, i'm bored" (2019) by American pop singer Ariana Grande. The MLM category will analyze "Neverland" (2018) by K-pop soloist Holland and "Angel Baby" (2021). by Australian pop singer Troye Sivan. Each category contains brief artist introductions and brief summaries of each music video. The analytical component of each music video – henceforth abbreviated as MV for the semiological analyses – closely examines two extracted scenes and applies semiotics to analyze visual representations of Queerness to visual culture and the Global Gay Image.

WLW Music Videos: "Monster" and "buwygib"

K-Pop WLW Music Video: IRENE & SEULGI, "Monster" (2020)

IRENE & SEULGI[2] is a subunit of SM Entertainment's K-pop girl group Red Velvet, consisting of the eponymous Irene (Bae Joo-hyun) and Seulgi (Kang Seul-gi). The name Red Velvet is a reference to the girl group's dual concept of "Red" – the cute concept with a girly, bubble-gum pop sound – and "Velvet" – the dark and mature concept with an experimental and R&B sound (Geddo, 2022). Red Velvet debuted in 2014 with four members with the single "Happiness." Red Velvet subsequently becomes a five-member group, with Irene as their leader, lead dancer, sub-vocalist, visual, and center, and Seulgi as their main dancer and lead vocalist ("Red Velvet Members Profile"). In K-pop groups, each member is expected to fulfill multiple roles, which help shape the group's concept and the dynamics between the members and their fans. In the context of Irene and Seulgi's roles in their main group of Red Velvet, Irene is the unequivocal face of the group, while Seulgi's designation as the main dancer spotlights her outstanding dancing experience and expertise within Red Velvet. IRENE & SEULGI debuted six years after Red Velvet as a sub-unit on July 6, 2020, with the extended play *Monster*, containing the titular track "Monster" and six other singles ("Red Velvet – IRENE & SEULGI Members Profile").

The MV for "Monster" premiered on YouTube on July 6, 2020, and has 138.2 million views as of April 2024. The MV overall contains an edgy concept embodying Red Velvet's experimental and dark "Velvet" concept and utilizes dynamic camera work and intense choreography for the members and their backup dancers, all paired with a dark and moody mise-

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[2] In the analysis chapter, the capitalization of "IRENE & SEULGI" refers to the K-pop girl group's name. When specifically referring to the members, they are called Irene and Seulgi.

en-scene to create a dramatic visual atmosphere in tandem to the contents of the song. The overall narrative of the MV is highly allegorical and subjective, spanning multiple settings and centring on different versions of Irene and Seulgi. It is crucial to note the lack of male subjects in "Monster," which only depicts women. And finally, during the MV's climax, they confront each other, with the MV concluding with a dance break and ending with Irene and Seulgi embracing their inner monstrosity.

"Monster" uses cinematography to set the dramatic tone for the rest of the MV, with the experimental framing and composition becoming visual aids to IRENE & SEULGI's dark and fantastical storytelling. As the MV progresses, the costume changes, choreography, and different settings are used to enhance the visual storytelling aspect of "Monster," inviting interpellation, the Queer gaze, and Queer spectatorship upon its subjective representation. For the semiological analysis of "Monster," this section will draw upon two specific sequences in the MV: The bedroom sequence (see Figs. 1, 2) and the corridor sequence (see Figs. 3, 4).

The Bedroom Sequence (Fig. 1, 0:54; Fig. 2, 0:57)

Figure 1 – Irene and Seulgi in their bedroom.

The sign in Fig. 1 is a medium-long, slight Dutch angle shot of Irene (left) and Seulgi (right) in their bedroom. The signifiers are as follows: the room is staged as feminine and analogous to the degree of uncanniness, with nearly every item in the room – the beds, the paintings, the desk – coming in a pair. Irene and Seulgi are styled with the same hairstyle of soft waves and in the same white, puffy dress. It is crucial to note how the bedroom sequence is the only portion of the MV stylizing Irene and Seulgi in a light and soft palette, contrasting the darker themes and styling to reflect them as seen in the rest of the MV. The slight Dutch angle creates a subtle disorientation to Fig. 1, denoting an uncertainty of this sequence's outcome. In this shot, Irene and Seulgi are seated at their desks on their respective sides, with Seulgi giving a longing gaze at an unsuspecting Irene. With the signifiers, the signified indicates a subtle tone of homoerotic desire – rather than the less subtle homoeroticism with the chase of seduction pervasive in most of the MV, such as in the corridor sequence (Figs. 3 and 4). The longing gaze from Seulgi to Irene, concerning the softer physical elements in this scene, visually represents a Queer sensibility denoting Queer potential.

Figure 2 – Irene and Seulgi window caress close-up.

The sign in Fig. 2 is a close-up of Irene (left) and Seulgi (right) by the window in their bedroom. The signifiers are as follows: Irene and Seulgi are in front of their bedroom window, remaining on their respective sides of the room. The line between Irene and Seulgi becomes indistinguishable – metaphorically, as they are styled as twins, and literally, as Seulgi brings Irene's face closer past the visible lines on their window – as the bedroom sequence becomes progressively intimate and romantic. Seulgi is caressing Irene, her hand brushing away Irene's hair and holding the side of her face. Irene's left hand is on Seulgi's shoulder, and the two share a prolonged, intimate gaze. With the bedroom sequence culminating in Irene and Seulgi making physical contact, crossing the barrier between their respective sides of the room, the signifiers allude to the signified connotation of Sapphic desire and Queerbaiting. The bedroom sequence's culmination of a gentle caress of Irene's face by Seulgi demonstrates that this intimate caress stems from a homoerotic desire from both women, amplified by the bedroom sequence's intimate atmosphere.

It is in the bedroom sequence that Queer spectators are made conscious of the underlying coding of Sapphic desire in "Monster" through its visual representation of Queerness. However, when considering the Global Gay Image, the homoeroticism represented in the bedroom sequence also draws from heteronormative societal ideals of kinship in South Korea (Y. Kim, 2023). The familiarity of Irene and Seulgi and the lack of explicitly romantic or sexual interactions in the bedroom sequence engages with a heteronormative representation of Queerness in South Korean media, which presents to be implicit through Queerbaiting and represented as kinship over an openly Queer representation (Y. Kim, 2023; J. Kim & Hong, 2007). With Queercoding, the bedroom sequence delivers two messages to a Queer spectator and a non-Queer spectator: to the former, the bedroom sequence teases homoeroticism through its

slow-burn build-up to the window caress; to the latter, the bedroom sequence merely represents kinship and familiarity between Irene and Seulgi, as there is no explicitly romantic or sexual pay-off at the end, such as a kiss, nor does the rest of the MV delivers an authentically Queer ending from which the Global Gay Image is familiar with.

The Corridor Sequence (Fig. 3, 0:12; Fig. 4, 0:36)

Figure 3 – Dutch angle of Seulgi crawling towards Irene.

The corridor sequence occurs at the very opening of the MV. The sign in Fig. 3 is a Dutch angle showing Seulgi crawling towards Irene from Irene's perspective. The signifiers are as follows: Irene and Seulgi are inside a long, deep blue corridor with a red ramp. Seulgi slowly crawls towards Irene, her movement and mannerisms animalistic with her intense gaze upon Irene and the mannerisms of her hand resembling a claw. The dynamic of predator/prey is undeniable, with Seulgi crawling to pounce upon a defenceless Irene. Unlike the bedroom sequence, the styling of Irene and Seulgi in the corridor sequence retains the song's darker themes, with all-black ensembles, darker makeup, and sleek hair. The lighting in Fig. 3 also paints Seulgi as an intimidating figure, spotlighting her figure imposing upon Irene. The Dutch

angle is notable in creating a sense of discomfort and distortion of the spectator's senses, further

exacerbated by the chronological sequencing of Fig. 3 at the start of the MV, leading to

speculation of what will narratively occur. The Dutch angle is steeper in Fig. 3 compared to Fig.

1, and when paired with the mise-en-scene, it denotes the song's themes of monstrosity. The

signifiers imply a sense of danger and deviance from the desire between Irene and Seulgi. As

mentioned, Fig. 3 occurs at a different temporality than the bedroom sequence. Still, any

intimacy and kinship observed in the bedroom sequence (Figs. 1-2) is not present in the corridor

sequence or any subsequent parts of the MV; this signified meaning of deviance and desire is

carried into Fig. 4.

Figure 4 – Irene confronts Seulgi in the corridor.

The sign in Fig. 4. is a medium close-up of Irene confronting Seulgi in the corridor. As

mentioned in Fig. 3., Seulgi is the figure preying on Irene. Nevertheless, in Fig. 4., Irene subverts

this established paradigm of predator/prey by confronting Seulgi instead. The signifiers are as

follows: Irene has one arm around Seulgi, cornering Seulgi into the corridor wall, with their

faces and bodies close together. With Irene cornering Seulgi, "Monster" demonstrates the motif

of crossing a barrier, as seen in Fig. 2. The barrier between Irene and Seulgi is physically represented by the tangible line wherein the red ramp and the blue walls meet behind their figures. Irene and Seulgi share an intense gaze, with their lips slightly pulled and their eyes hardened towards one another. The lightning now focuses on both Irene and Seulgi, rather than spotlighting Seulgi alone in Fig. 2. With those signifiers in mind, the signified meaning in this scene carries the same connotations of deviance and desire from Fig. 2. The corridor sequence visually represents the sense of homoeroticism between WLW relationships familiar with the Global Gay Image; there is a sense of desire that stems from something "wrong," with Seulgi preying on Irene and Irene confronting Seulgi, referencing Massad's (2002) argument of the Global Gay Image painting non-Western Queer desires as intrinsically deviant by nature (p. 373). For Irene and Seulgi, the thematic nature of the song and the visual storytelling devices of the MV construct a WLW relationship that is forbidden and monstrous. With the Global Gay Image in mind, the signified meaning of the corridor sequence represents Sapphic desire coded as repressed, with the connotation of Sapphic desire between two female K-pop idols being forbidden and merely, a performance, which "can present queerness in between homosexuality and heterosexuality without specifically being marked as queer or homosexual." (Chuyun & Oh, 2017, p. 10).

Western WLW Music Video: Ariana Grande, "break up with your girlfriend, i'm bored" (2019)

Ariana Grande-Butera is an American pop singer, songwriter, and actress. As a Grammy Award-winning, multi-platinum-selling artist known for her impressive four-octave range vocal range and experimentation with pop and R&B (Encyclopaedia Britannica), Grande needs little introduction as a certified, 21st-century pop icon. Grande began her career on the Broadway musical *13* in 2008 and as a child actress on the Nickelodeon shows *Victorious* (2010–2023) and

its spin-off, *Sam and Cat* (2013–4) (Encyclopaedia Britannica). Grande released her first solo single, "Put Your Hearts Up," in 2011 and followed up with her commercially and critically successful debut album, *Yours Truly,* in 2013 (Encyclopaedia Britannica) and five more studio albums between 2014 and 2024, with her most recent release being *Eternal Sunshine* in 2024.

"buwygib" is the third single from Grande's fifth studio album, *Thank U, Next* (2019). The single is pop, R&B, and trap-infused, with the lyrical narrative depicting Grande's attempt at convincing her love interest to break up with their girlfriend (Genius, 2019). The MV for the song premiered on YouTube on February 7th, 2019, and has 562.5 million views as of April 2024. The MV employs montages, editing techniques, and moody, atmospheric staging and lighting to set the song's seductive tone. The overall narrative of the MV depicts sensual storyline about a complex love triangle depicting Grande (see Fig. 5 below; left) seducing "The Boyfriend," played by American actor Charles Melton (see Fig. 5 below; center), to convince him to break up with "The Girlfriend" (see Fig. 5 below; right), played by American actress Ariel Yasmine, who appears as Grande's doppelganger sporting Grande's signature brunette ponytail.

Figure 5 – Grande, Melton, and Yasmine meeting at the party.

The MV begins with an establishing shot of Grande entering the party and cross-cuts of Grande and the party guests. Grande spots the couple, Melton and Yasmine, entering the room and eagerly introduces herself to them after Yasmine invites her to dance with them, thus initiating the love triangle. Throughout the MV, Grande flirts back and forth between the other two members of the love triangle, dancing with both parties while subtly evaluating the other two parties' resolve: The Boyfriend's (Melton) willingness in falling to her seduction and The Girlfriend's (Yasmine) resolve to intervene, allow Grande to seduce the boyfriend, or join them. Grande's entanglement with the couple culminates in the pool scene at the end of the MV, where the girlfriend intervenes and nearly kisses Grande before the MV cuts to black.

Compared to the K-pop visual text in the WLW category, the visual storytelling in the "buwygib" MV explicitly represents attributes involved with the practices of Queerbaiting and Queercoding; instead of using devices of visual storytelling to create a subjective narrative and interpretative representation as "Monster" (2020) has, "buwygib" opts for conventional visual storytelling devices aligning with the Global Gay Image's homogenous image of Sapphic love and desire to depict its poignant narrative. For the semiological analysis of "buwygib," the following subsection will analyze two scenes in the MV: The dance floor scene (see Fig. 6) and the final (near) kiss scene (see Fig. 7).

The Dance Floor Scene (Fig. 6, 2:52)

Figure 6 – Close-up of Grande and Yasmine on the dance floor.

The dance floor scene initially occurs at the start of the MV but is interloped in a cross-cut sequence nearing the finale of the MV, wherein Fig. 6 occurs. The sign in Fig. 6 is the close-up of Grande (left) and Yasmine (right) on the dance floor. The signifiers are as follows: Melton, the boyfriend, is seen at the left corner of the frame, his face obscured but his body facing Grande and Yasmine, indicating that he is observing them. The scene is dimly lit but centers on Grande and Yasmine as the primary focus of the dance floor scene. Grande and Yasmine are locked in an intimate embrace while dancing together, holding an intense gaze with their foreheads pressed together and arms wrapped around each other. Considering the signifiers, the signified meaning conveys a highly homoerotic undertone and a change in the love triangle dynamic, shifting its focus away from Grande and Melton to Grande and Yasmine, thus betraying the song's very title and theme to "break up with your girlfriend." Fig. 6 demonstrates the aspect of heteronormative fetishism within Queerbaiting, wherein the Queercoding of this scene presents signs that sensationalize Queerness.

The potential of Grande and Yasmine sharing WLW desire is framed in the love triangle "to accommodate the male gaze rather than provide[d] any real legitimacy." (Parahoo, 2020, p. 13). With the signifiers, the dance floor scene in "buwygib" implicates a visual representation of a WLW relationship through the male gaze. In other words, Fig. 6 is framed with the consideration of a heterosexual male spectator in mind. The male gaze is perpetuated by the camera and by the character of the boyfriend, who is the receiver of pleasure in two ways: Firstly, Melton is receiving the affections of both Grande and Yasmine, and secondly, Melton, like the presumed male audience, is spectating the Queer desires of Grande and Yasmine. The addition of a presumably heterosexual man in a love triangle with two women who share a Sapphic desire is a trope which exemplifies Queerbaiting framed with the male gaze for a heterosexual male spectator.

The Final (Near) Kiss Scene (Fig. 7, 3:18)

Figure 7 – Final (near) kiss between Grande and Yasmine.

The final (near) kiss scene occurs at the finale of the MV, in a pool with all members of the love triangle. Melton and Yasmine embrace in the pool, with Melton simultaneously sharing

gazes with Grande (3:02–3:05). Grande then goes towards Melton and Yasmine, with the latter turning Grande away from Melton. Grande and Yasmine lean in for a kiss, and the MV abruptly ends before the spectator can see the kiss happen. The sign in Fig. 7 is the close-up of the near-kiss between Grande (left) and Yasmine (right). The signifiers are as follows: Grande and Yasmine have become indistinguishable in the finale, sporting Grande's signature long brown ponytail and similar black bathing suits. The camera has a soft, blurred focus on their near-kiss, thus increasing how indistinguishable Grande and Yasmine have become throughout "buwygib." After Yasmine steals Grande's attention, Grande leans in for a kiss with her eyes closed and a content expression while the shadow of Grande's face obscures Yasmine's face. With the signifiers in mind, the signified meaning from Fig. 7 further amplifies the Queerbaiting implications from Fig. 6.

The representation of Queerness in Fig. 7 reinstates a heteronormative representation of WLW romance that "poses no danger of offending mainstream viewers at the expense of queer eyes." (Fathallah, 2015, p. 491). According to Lisa M. Diamond, representations of WLW Queerbaiting, like Grande and Yasmine, are related to heteroflexibility, a phenomenon which depicts "presumably heterosexual women hinting at or experimenting with same-sex sexuality" that is "designed to specifically attract and titillate young male viewers" (Diamond, 2005, p. 104-5). While the real-life sexualities of each artist in this study are not relevant, heteroflexibility and Queerbaiting in "buwygib" are intrinsically connected due to the manners which frame Grande and Yasmine's relationship and desire to "implicitly convey that the most desirable and acceptable form of female–female sexuality is that which pleases and plays to the heterosexual male gaze, titillating male viewers while reassuring them that the participants remain sexually available in the conventional heterosexual market-place." (Diamond, 2005, p. 105).

MLM Music Videos: "Neverland" and "Angel Baby"

K-Pop MLM Music Video: Holland, "Neverland" (2018)

Holland (Go Tae-seob) is widely regarded as the "first openly gay K-pop idol" (Collins, 2020; Herman, 2018). With his stage name referencing the Netherlands, the first country to legalize same-sex marriage in 2001, Holland debuted independently in 2018 with the single "Neverland" without being represented by a K-pop agency. Instead, Holland released "Neverland" through his self-signed agency, HOLLAND Entertainment, and subsequently released his self-titled album *Holland* in 2019. Since his debut, Holland released his sophomore album *Number Boy* in 2023 and has garnered a sizable social media following and a robust and international presence within his fanbase.

Holland utilizes his image and openness about his sexuality to fulfill a niche in K-pop which allows Holland to facilitate discourse of his experiences with his gay identity to his fans and the K-pop industry through his music. According to an interview with *British Vogue*, Holland states his reasoning for debuting as a K-pop idol is to celebrate Queerness, create a community of Queer and ally fans, and raise awareness about Queer experiences in South Korea and in the K-pop industry:

> "I also wanted to share my story by making meaningful music for people to listen to. I got inspiration from the broader culture and mindset of the generation, and also from looking back on my own life, the experiences I went through." (Holland qtd. by Collins, 2020, para. 9).

"Neverland" is the debut single of Holland and the lead single of his debut self-titled album, *Holland.* The song and MV for "Neverland" became an unequivocal Queer anthem in K-pop due to several reasons: Firstly, Holland is the first among his idol peers to be openly gay, meaning that Holland himself has confirmed his sexuality through various credible sources in the press (such as *Vogue* and *Billboard*) and via social media; secondly, "Neverland" received a 19+

rating in South Korea due to featuring the first on-screen kiss between two men in a K-pop music video; and lastly, the themes of "Neverland," as represented visually through the MV and narratively through the lyrics of the song, convey a pro-Queer message.

"Neverland" premiered on YouTube on January 21st, 2018, and has 15 million views as of April 2024. The MV depicts a breakup story, with Holland reminiscing about beautiful moments with a past lover. Unlike most K-pop music videos, "Neverland" does not include choreography, backup dancers, or any additional characters other than Holland and his love interest. Overall, "Neverland" occurs introspectively and depicts an intimate representation of a gay Korean couple, with Holland portraying himself and model Jo Youngshin portraying his love interest. The MV cuts between Holland alone and Holland with Youngshin, beginning with Holland alone and ending with a memory of Holland with Youngshin. The scenes of Holland alone are framed and staged with a melancholic undertone to represent the MV's theme of yearning, and the scenes of Holland with Youngshin are framed and staged with brightness to convey Holland's fond memories of Youngshin. The scenes of Holland alone are mirrored by memories of Holland and Youngshin in the same scene, framed as taking place in a happier past.

Figure 8 – Holland leaning on Youngshin.

The MV for "Neverland" begins with a scenic shot of Holland skateboarding down an empty road, showing various locations pertinent to Holland's memories of Youngshin. The memories of Youngshin – the change in colour schemes and staging – begin at 0:45 (see Fig. 8 above), with Holland (left) resting his head against Youngshin's (right) shoulder. The climax of the MV – the first gay kiss in a K-pop music video – occurs at 2:55, following much homoerotic build-up with small, intimate interactions from Holland's memories. The MV ends with a memory of Holland and Youngshin at the beach as the credits roll on-screen.

Despite the bittersweet tone of "Neverland," its cultural significance concerning the Queer sensibilities of South Korea and K-pop and its explicit visual representation of Queerness paint an image of an intimate MLM relationship. With the absence of Queerbaiting in "Neverland," Queercoding instead constructs the signs of a Korean MLM relationship that is most familiar with the neoliberal, Western framing of gay men by the Global Gay Image. However, when compared to Western pop music, "Neverland" still retains a Queer sensibility seen in Korean media depictions of Queer romance. For the semiological analysis of "Neverland," the following subsection will analyze one sequence and one scene: The beach sequence (see Figs. 9 and 10) and the kiss sequence (see Fig. 11).

The Beach Sequence (Fig. 9, 1:58; Fig. 10, 2:35)

Figure 9 – Holland and Youngshin holding hands at the beach.

The first sign in the beach sequence is Fig. 9, wherein Holland and Youngshin hold hands in a close-up shot. Due to the MV's motif of using a bright colour scheme to denote Holland's memories of Youngshin, Fig. 9 can be ascertained as a memory interloped with the present temporality of Holland mourning his relationship with Youngshin. The signifiers are as follows: Holland, to the left of the frame in the white shirt, is tightly gripping Youngshin's hand, who is in a blue pinstripe shirt to the right of the frame. Holland and Youngshin's hands are framed with shallow focus, blurring the beach in the background and isolating the spectator's attention towards their hands. The signified meaning in Fig. 9 denotes an intimate and loving dynamic between Holland and Youngshin; this representation of Queerness is especially significant in K-pop and South Korea as Fig. 9 implies the absence of fetishism or societal shame projected upon Korean Queer representation by the Global Gay Image. As previously mentioned, there is an absence of Queerbaiting practiced by Holland. The significance of overtly intimate gestures between an MLM couple contains celebratory undertones, which Dhaenens (2016) describes as carrying the ability to negotiate or reiterate heteronormative representations: "(It is) not the mere

visibility of gay or lesbian identities but the expression of same-sex intimacy can be a disruptive act that challenges the hegemony of heteronormativity." (Dhaenens, 2016, p. 533). According to Dhaemens, heteronormative structuring of Queer representation within Western pop music practices Queering the representations of gay or lesbian identities in music videos. When considering the Global Gay Image, Fig. 9, and subsequently Fig. 10, implicate a disruption of normative structures and codes which depict Queer love in K-pop.

Figure 10 – Youngshin's longing gaze at Holland.

The sign in Fig. 10 is a medium close-up of Holland and Youngshin at the beach. Like Fig. 9, Fig. 10 occurs narratively in Holland's memories of his relationship with Youngshin. Fig. 10 plays in the MV as a rack-focus shot, with the focus shifting from Holland to Youngshin. The signifiers are as follows: Holland, to the left of the screen, is gazing into the horizon. The camera, however, focuses on Youngshin, who is behind Holland and stares at him longingly. The signified meaning of Fig. 10 infers a sense of homoerotic longing and Queer-coded with the MV's nostalgia motif. However, what is essential to note in this scene, and the beach sequence as a whole, is that it is told through Youngshin's memories.

With the narrative of loss in "Neverland," the signifiers within the beach sequence (Figs. 9 and 10) infer that the beach is a metaphoric "Neverland," a fantastical dreamworld containing the happy memories of Holland and Youngshin's relationship. By focusing on Youngshin, Fig. 10 infers that this sentiment of a "Neverland" is reciprocated between both men in the relationship. The signified meaning connotes a mutually intimate relationship wherein Holland is not the sole participant in an MLM relationship who is demonstrated to have authentic feelings of love. The mutual reciprocity of romantic feelings being displayed implicates a representation of MLM love that is celebratory within the lens of South Korea's Queer sensibilities and the Global Gay Image.

With the South Korean Queer sensibility of male K-pop idols blurring the lines of gender performance, "soft" K-pop male idols such as Holland, as explained by Waszkiewicz and Oleszcek (2020), exemplify the notion of manufactured versatile masculinity (p. 122). Masculinity is heterogenous and hybridized in the context of K-pop, as male K-pop idols embody an aesthetic essence that is "multi-layered, culturally mixed, simultaneously contradictory, and most of all strategically manufactured" (Jung qtd. by Waszkiewicz & Oleszcek, 2020, p. 122). However, with the Global Gay Image, depictions of soft K-pop male idols are often analyzed for the Queerness of their gender performance rather the representation of Queer love. Holland, the first openly gay male K-pop idol, thereby constructs his Queerness through a homonormative framing of his sexual identity, which does not follow the neoliberal paradigm of the Global Gay Image that contests the "dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption." (Duggan, 2002, p. 179).

The Kiss Sequence (Fig. 11, 3:04)

Figure 11 – Holland and Youngshin Kissing.

The kiss scene is the climax of "Neverland," occurring 2:55 minutes into the narrative after much build-up of more minor, intimate Queer interactions between Holland and Youngshin. The kiss scene explicitly disputes any possible assumptions of Queerbaiting being practiced by Holland. The sign in Fig. 11 is the close-up of Holland and Youngshin kissing in bed. The signifiers are as follows: Holland and Youngshin are cuddling in bed, sharing intense gazes while holding each other close. Holland caresses Youngshin's face and is the first to lean in for the kiss, holding Youngshin by the collar of his shirt. The mise-en-scene and framing of Fig. 11 create an intimate atmosphere, with the camera focused solely on Holland and Youngshin.

The signifiers in Fig. 11 denote an explicitly Queer representation of gay love, with the build-up of homoeroticism and Queer identity expression by Holland reaching its crescendo in an intimate, prolonged take of a passionate kiss shared by Holland and Youngshin. Additionally, the cultural significance of this scene is monumental to Korean Queer culture as it is the first (and only, as of April 2024) kiss scene between a gay couple in a K-pop music video. "Neverland" is not the first K-pop MV which has a kissing scene, but it is the first that fully,

explicitly depicts a same-sex kiss without Queerbaiting. For example, K-pop male idol group BTS's MV for "Blood, Sweat & Tears" (2016) depicts a kiss between member RM and a male angel statue, which then cuts to member Taehyung depicted as a fallen angel. "Neverland" does not bait its Queer spectators with Queer possibility and no pay-off; it unambiguously demonstrates Queer love.

Queercoding reveals a culturally specific connotation created by "Neverland" with its representation of a Korean MLM couple that is explicitly out and celebratory, contrary to representations of Queerness being taboo, deviant, repressed, or a misrepresentation of kinship and non-romantic relations in mainstream Korean media (Y. Kim, 2023) and by the Global Gay Image. The cultural significance of "Neverland" exacerbates Holland's representation of Queerness and Queer love climaxing in a kiss pushes the boundaries of what is "acceptable" as Queerness in K-pop contextualized by the broader societal liminalities for Queer expression in K-pop idols (Waszkiewicz & Oleszczuk, 2020).

Western MLM Music Video: Troye Sivan, "Angel Baby" (2021)

Troye Sivan Mellet is a Grammy-nominated Australian pop singer, songwriter, and actor. Sivan first gained notoriety as a child actor with the film *X-Men Origins: Wolverine* and the musical *Oliver!* (IMDb, Troye Sivan). Sivan later gained more recognition as an Internet personality on YouTube for his singing and video-blogging content. On August 7th, 2013, Sivan posted an eight-minute-long video to his channel titled "Coming Out," in which Sivan officially came out as gay to his fanbase. As of April 2024, "Coming Out" has 47.1 million views. Sivan then released his first single, "Happy Little Pill," on his YouTube channel on August 12th, 2014, and subsequently released his first official extended play album, *TRYXE,* on August 15th, 2014, through EMI Music Australia ("The Vogue Artist Biographies"). Since the release of his first

official extended play, Sivan followed up with two additional extended plays, *Wild* (2015) and *In a Dream* (2023), and three albums, *Blue Neighbourhood* (2015), *Bloom* (2018), and *Something to Give Each Other* (2023). Sivan's discography and branding integrate his exploration of his Queer identity and musical artistry with nuanced themes depicting the artist's unique Queer experiences throughout his youth.

"Angel Baby" is a solo single released on September 9th, 2021, onto streaming platforms. Sivan poignantly announced the release of "Angel Baby" on his Instagram in August of 2021 with the caption, "Surprise gushy juicy doting adoring power bottom gay ballad." (Conner, para. 2, 2021). In the press release for the single, Sivan describes "Angel Baby" as his "crack at an adoring, doting, love struck, mega pop, gay, power ballad," (Richards, para. 2., 2021). As outlined by Sivan's description and press release, "Angel Baby" is a pop ballad with explicitly Queer themes. The MV for "Angel Baby" premiered on October 13th, 2021, on Sivan's official YouTube channel and has 19.5 million views as of April 2024.

The MV for "Angel Baby" depicts various Queer identities without a cohesive, temporal storyline. Instead, the visual storytelling of "Angel Baby" focuses on celebrating Queer love across a spectrum of identities, with Sivan taking on multiple Queer lovers in the MV. The MV utilizes various filmmaking techniques, such as vignettes and grain filters (see Fig. 12), to create a vintage cinematic experience.

Figure 12 – Sivan with his biker lover.

The MV begins with Sivan alone in a narrow corridor, shot in black and white. He is later joined by his androgynous love interest in various scenes of passionate embraces and kissing. Sivan is then seen on the back of a motorcycle with his second love interest, both topless and Sivan wearing a thong. The rest of the MV occurs with recurring shots between the following scenes: Sivan lying in bed with all of his love interests, scenes without Sivan depicting various Queer couples, Sivan kissing his third love interest while lying on a grass field by the road, and finally, Sivan embracing his fourth lover on the beach with fireworks. The MV ends with Sivan alone in the corridor, walking away from the camera as the MV cuts to black.

Compared to the K-pop visual text in the MLM category, "Angel Baby" elicits a message adhering to the Global Gay Image, depicting a celebration of Queer identities through a homogenized Western lens with the trope of being unapologetically Queer (Chuyun & Oh, 2017,

p. 10). As a note, the mention of this trope is not to disparage openly Queer identities. Still, it is implicated through "Angel Baby" that the neoliberal progressiveness of celebrating Queerness is a marker of the Global Gay Image. With "Angel Baby," there are no traces of Queerbaiting. However, Queercoding reveals the signs which construct tropes of open Queerness in Western pop music videos. For the semiological analysis of "Angel Baby," the following subsection will analyze one sequence and one scene: The grayscale corridor sequence (see Fig. 12 and Fig. 13) and the bed of Queer love scene (see Fig. 14).

The Grayscale Corridor Sequence (Fig. 13, 0:41; Fig. 14, 2:10)

Figure 13 – Sivan and his corridor lover embracing.

The sign in Fig. 13 is the close-up of Sivan (left) and his corridor lover (right) embracing. The signifiers are as follows: The shot is filmed in grayscale, devoid of any of the MV's vintage filmmaking techniques. The shot is clear and focused on Sivan and his lover's waists, framing

their embrace in close proximity. With their bodies pressed together, Sivan's hands rest on his lover's lower waist, while his lover's hands rest on Sivan's ribcage. Sivan and his lover are styled similarly in black tops and black jeans. However, both Sivan and his lover are styled to adopt both masculine and feminine traits: Sivan is styled in a feminine backless top with a low neckline, and his lover is styled to connote masculinity. As mentioned, Sivan's corridor lover appears more androgynous, with longer hair and masculine styling, while Sivan appears more effeminate. Yet the signifiers negate any MLM discourse of who is the "top" and who is the "bottom," with their similar styling negotiating this common heteronormative trope. The signified meaning in Fig. 13 denotes an intimate and romantic atmosphere that is explicitly Queer. With an absence of Queerbaiting, due to this scene later escalating in Fig. 14, the Queercoding in Fig. 13 constructs a homonormative implication with Sivan and his lover. It is imperative to note that homonormativity is not a direct juxtaposition to heteronormativity, nor is it nonexistent within the Global Gay Image's paradigm. Fig. 13 unabashedly represents Queer love in negotiation of the Global Gay Image's homogenous, heteronormative standard of gay men to construct a representation of Queerness that is palatable for Queer and non-Queer spectators. To achieve such palatability, Sivan visually expresses Queerness within the confines of the Global Gay Image's standard for gay men.

Figure 14 – Sivan and his corridor lover kissing.

Fig. 14 occurs later in the MV, appearing in a montage of Troye and his different lovers.

The sign in Fig. 14 is the medium close-up of Sivan and his corridor lover kissing. The signifiers

are as follows: Fig. 14 employs a clear focus on Sivan and his lover, with the highlighting behind

them down the corridor, contrasting their figures against the grayscale of the sequence.

Furthermore, lighting is used in Fig. 14 to create a soft halo effect on Sivan and his lover. Sivan

has his arms wrapped around his lover's neck, pressing him against the wall and holding him in a

close embrace. Sivan and his lover passionately kiss, only parting lips and coming for air. The

signifiers in Fig. 14 convey the same message as Fig. 13, wherein the grayscale corridor

sequence frames Sivan and his lover in a homonormative representation of Queer love. The

signified meaning from Fig. 13 carries into Fig. 14 to denote an intimate and sensual atmosphere

with an explicit display of Queer love. As with Fig. 13, Fig. 14 negates any implication of

Queerbaiting due to having a pay-off for building up the homoerotic tension in the MV's corridor sequence. The Queer-coded representation of homonormative love in Fig. 14 negotiates heteronormative representations of Queerness as "Angel Baby" demonstrates how the representation of a Queer experience that is intimate and sexual can politicize Queer representation. (Duggan, 2002; Dhaenens, 2016).

The Bed of Queer Love Scene (Fig. 15, 1:21)

Figure 15 – Sivan in bed with Queer lovers.

The sign in Fig. 15 is the bird's eye view, medium-long shot of Sivan lying atop a large bed with all of the Queer individuals featured in the MV. The signifiers are as follows: Sivan is at the center of the pile, with nine lovers lying beside him. Not everyone in this scene is one of Sivan's lovers, as the shirtless couple to his left are depicted in their own intimate scenes. Everyone in the frame is styled differently to convey the diverse spectrum of gender, sexual, and

racial identities present in this scene. Sivan is wearing an all-white outfit, while his corridor lover (right) is wearing a similar all-black ensemble. Lying on his corridor lover's lap is another of Sivan's love interests from a later scene, where he has one hand on Sivan's lap and reaches for his. Every lover in this scene caresses and embraces each other in particular manners, with Sivan cradled by one lover (left) and holding two others (right). The warm-toned lighting cast over the bed of lovers and the soft framing in Fig. 15 creates an intimate atmosphere. Additionally, the bed and pillows are stripped, amplifying this scene's intimacy, vulnerability, and authenticity. With the signifiers in mind, the signified message denotes an intimate and authentic representation of Queerness. While Sivan has male lovers in "Angel Baby," the MV does not center on Sivan alone and instead represents other Queer identities and displays of Queer love with every lover in the MV united in Fig. 15. The Queercoding in Fig. 15 implicates the Global Gay Image's homogenized, neoliberal connotations with Queer representation. The hyperbolic nature of Queer representation in "Angel Baby," particularly in Fig. 15, connects homonormativity to arguments about performance and Queerness in the Global Gay Image, wherein Western artists like Sivan dons the "dominant 'mask' of queerness," which "conflates diverse voices of queer communities around the world with the typical understanding of the gay subject in the West." (Chuyun & Oh, 2017, p. 10).

Discussion of Findings

This section of the analysis chapter will comparatively analyze the semiological findings from each music video by their viewing categories. Overall, Queerbaiting and Queercoding contribute to upholding ideologies about Queerness through the Global Gay Image in visual culture. These ideologies, however, differ spatially between K-pop and Western pop music, and it is crucial to remember how spectators have the right to look, thereby having the power of Queering visuality and the dissemination of ideology. The comparative analysis below dissects each music video's findings with a critical approach, considering the varying implications which could contribute to what creates Queer visual representation in each music video.

Comparative Analysis of WLW Music Videos

In the WLW category, "Monster" and "buwygib" evidently practice Queerbaiting with the Queer representation in their music videos. Different visual cues help create the connotation of a Queer possibility without an authentically Queer pay-off. For instance, Queerbaiting occurs in "Monster" with the gentle caress of Irene's face by Seulgi in Fig. 2, with the actions leading up to the caress representing homoerotic desire further amplified by Fig. 2's intimate aesthetic staging and framing of Irene and Seulgi. In "buwygib," Queerbaiting is most evidently represented in the finale of the MV with the near-kiss shared between Grande and the female love interest, Yasmine in Fig. 7, with Grande and Yasmine leaning in for a kiss before the MV abruptly ends. Practices to represent Queerness in these two WLW music videos create signs of Queerness without any genuine pay-off, as Woods and Hardman align Queerbaiting with misleading Queer individuals into believing they will "receive adequate representation when they are not, leading to feelings of frustration and dehumanisation." (Woods & Hardman, 2022, p. 590).

In "Monster," Queerness can be a performance specifically in the context of K-pop idols. According to Jamie J. Zhao, K-pop girl groups affirm performances of "feminist and queer-friendly expressions or 'sister bonding.'" (Zhao, 2021, p. 1036) as a way of Queerbaiting without directly addressing Queer identities within the girl groups. Zhao argues that Queerbaiting Kinship and heteronormative structures also permeate how Queerness is performed and thereby, represented, in K-pop and Korean media. K-pop Queer performances are oftentimes subdued, with overtly Queer representations linked to Westernized beliefs and practices (Phillips & Yi, 2020). Furthermore, Queer communities in South Korea exist in the periphery of hegemonic South Korean society (U. Kim, 2017; J. Kim & Hong, 2007). According to Renata Iwicka, accepting Queerness in South Korean media occurs is only fully embraced in practices of fan speculation, "fanfiction writing and 'pairing.'" (Iwicka qtd. by Zhao, 2021, p. 1034). K-pop idols will propagate the implications of Queerbaiting so long as it does not exceed the heteronormative framings of Queer identities in South Korea.

When factoring in the spectators of K-pop, the fans, Zhao states that Queerbaiting "endorses fans' queer readings of the group on a global scale, both queerbaiting and queer readings have a dual function – namely, to contribute to a global LGBTQ visibility and a heteronormative policing of the idols' (hetero)sexuality." (Zhao, 2021, p. 1034). Queer spectatorship and gaze functions in K-pop as part of the machinations which make K-pop unique against the Global Gay Image, wherein K-pop idols and especially female K-pop idols will perform Queerness as a way of fan engagement and without alignment to Western ideologies. With the harmful implications of Queerbaiting aside, Sapphic desire is implicitly Queer-coded in "Monster" as either kinship bonding between Irene and Seulgi (the bedroom sequence, Figs. 1

and 2) or as a performance of same-sex desire that is intrinsically forbidden and monstrous by South Korea's perception of Queerness (the corridor sequence, Figs. 3 and 4).

On the other hand, Grande's representation of WLW desire uses visual storytelling to frame WLW desire through the male gaze, a phenomenon which is not present in "Monster." Grande's representation of Sapphic desire can be interpreted as bisexual representation framed for a heterosexual male spectator. Grande's representation of Queerness in a love triangle with another woman and one man, with the plot of the music video and song's theme of embracing one's sexual desires and "break up with your girlfriend," depicts Queerness using "negative stereotypes that promote biphobia," with "bisexual characters that are 'promiscuous and down to engaging sex 100% of the time.'" (McDermott, 2021, p. 846). The Queercoding of visual cues for Queerbaiting in "buwygib" (Figs. 6 and 7) represent Grande's Sapphic desires for Yasmine as deviant, reflecting the stereotype of bisexual promiscuity under the context of Grande stealing Yasmine's boyfriend and then, stealing Yasmine from Melton.

One interpretation from how the love triangle dynamic culminates with Grande and Yasmine hooking up is the implication of empowerment and choice feminism prevalent in Neoliberal feminist and Queer discourses attached to the Global Gay Image. However, the fetishism attached to the dynamic between Grande, Melton, and Yasmine is undeniable and infers a sensationalizing of WLW desire. With the Global Gay Image, the Queer representation facilitated by Grande demonstrates a proliferated, titillating depiction of Queerness reflecting the suggestion that, "in the contemporary social climate, promotion and maintenance of female heterosexuality is best accomplished when packaged – and sold – as freedom and sexual choice." (Diamond, 2005, p. 109). Fetishism in WLW representation is prevalent in Western pop music, with Diamond referencing examples such as the Britney Spears and Madonna kiss. Nevertheless,

its prevalence concerning the Global Gay Image is only achieved due to its execution as "palatable to a generation of women that reflexively spurn notions of sexual repression and embrace self-determination." (Diamond, 2005, p. 109).

Compared to the K-pop example in this study, "buwygib" retains the Global Gay Image and disseminates its neoliberal ideologies, which Rosheeka Parahoo argues as trivializing and depoliticizing Queer representation for a non-Queer audience instead of countering the Global Gay Image's heteronormative structures (Parahoo, 2020, p. 68). In the case of "buwygib," the Global Gay Image is instilled in Grande's objectifying performance of Queerness as a sexually desirable and fleeting experience (Parahoo, 2020, p. 72.). In the case of "Monster," Queer representation is facilitated by South Korea's Queer sensibilities and K-pop's aesthetics of performance. "Monster" and "buwygib" undeniably practice Queerbaiting, but there are distinctive implications to how Queerbaiting is practiced by each example and for what kind of audience it is practiced for. Neither "Monster" or "buwygib" counter heteronormativity with their representations, but "Monster" does not fully align with the Global Gay Image's conception of WLW identities, while "buwygib" capitalizes off the Global Gay Image's structures to visualize a palatable representation of WLW identities.

Comparative Analysis of MLM Music Videos

In the MLM category, "Neverland" and "Angel Baby" do not practice Queerbaiting as both examples are imbued with the artists' personal experiences with Queerness. While it is not a requirement for an artist to be Queer in this study to represent Queerness, the sexual identities of Holland and Sivan present a compelling case of how a Queer K-pop artist can represent their Queer identity in the confines of South Korea's Queer sensibilities and the Global Gay Image compared to a Western artist whose identity the Global Gay Image conflates. Sivan's

representation of Queerness not only includes himself as a gay man, but other identities on the Queer spectrum in "Angel Baby" (see Fig. 15), whereas the introspective narrative in "Neverland" subjects Holland's identity to the forefront of Queer K-pop discourse. The celebratory undertones in both music videos, however, implicates how the Global Gay Image operates incongruently with its own paradigm by outlining an image of Queerness that is homogenously placed upon non-Western individuals while enforcing structures of heteronormativity in Queerness.

The cultural significance of "Neverland" underlines a type of representation that is complex. In the beach sequence (Figs. 9 and 10), there is an absence of visual codes which connote fetishism, or the societal shame projected upon Korean Queer representation by the Global Gay Image. Despite the bittersweet theme of mourning a breakup in "Neverland," Holland's intimate displays of Queer love via his on-screen kiss with his male love interest (Fig. 11) emphasizes this point and demonstrates the negotiation of heteronormativity in "Neverland." While performances of effeminate masculinity are aestheticized by K-pop, Holland's identity as an openly gay male K-pop idol underscores the hegemony of South Korean cultural perceptions of Queerness as taboo or morally wrong, with Queerness aligned with other minority groups that are ostracized in Korean society (Waszkiewicz & Oleszczuk, 2020; Y. Kim, 2023). Holland's open representation of Queerness in "Neverland" indicates a negotiation of the normative structures and codes which depict Queer love in K-pop, especially considering how the music video contains no Queerbaiting and an authentic pay-off in the kiss scene (Fig. 11).

One interpretation contrary to the findings above is that "Neverland" aligns with the Global Gay Image by adapting common Western narratives of gay pride, such as the narrative seen in "Angel Baby." This interpretation needs to include careful consideration of Queerness in

K-pop operating under a "patriarchal, heteronormative gender system" (Chuyun & Oh, 2017, p. 15). While defying the heteronormative structures of gender and sexual identities in South Korean standards, "Neverland" represents Holland's Queerness through a homonormative codes opposing the neoliberal paradigm of the Global Gay Image of sustaining homogenous representations of Queerness in hopes of demobilizing and depoliticizing Queer culture (Duggan, 2002).

On the other hand, Queer representation in "Angel Baby" connotes a negotiation of the Global Gay Image's homogenous and heteronormative standard of gay men in a manner which remains commercial and palatable enough for Queer and non-Queer audiences. While proudly representing Queerness in a Queer anthem, Sivan also uses visual codes that construct Queer representation within the confines of the Global Gay Image. Homonormativity, while a phenomenon that is political by its nature (Dhaenens, 2016), is visually represented to celebrate gay pride for commerciality in "Angel Baby." Sivan's hyperbolic and open Queerness is referential in the Global Gay Image's practice of standardizing Queer representation, which Massad argues displaces Queer subjectivities to a standard of what is deemed "Queer enough." (Massad, 2002); so, despite the political nature of Sivan's gay pride to mainstream pop music, the homonormative narrative in "Angel Baby" follows what Massad argues is the "white Western axiom for what is deemed as being Queer and how Queerness is practiced." (Massad, 2002, p. 364).

Another interpretation of "Angel Baby" reads homonormativity as underpinning a Queer desire to achieve equality through assimilation, which is done by homonormative representations. David Halperin suggests that "the assimilationist desire lays bare the power and cultural superiority of heterosexual culture…underscore[ing] the importance of queer politics as

a more efficient means of acknowledging a gay culture that is not grafted onto heteronormativity and of engaging in a continuous challenging of the institutions that preserve the heteronormative ideology." (Halperin qtd. by Dhaenens, 2016, p. 542). Despite deconstructing heteronormative tropes of Queer love, such as its negotiation "top" and "bottom" discourse in Figs. 13 and 14, and Queerness as a whole by representing a spectrum of Queer identities in Fig. 15, Queer representation in "Angel Baby" works within heteronormativity of the Global Gay Image without perturbing the Global Gay Image's paradigm of homogeneity.

Compared to "Neverland," "Angel Baby" retains the Global Gay Image and disseminates its neoliberal ideologies, while aiding in its structuring of a homogenous Queer standard upon non-Western subjects. Queer representation in "Neverland" not only negotiates South Korea's heteronormative paradigms which infiltrate K-pop, but is oppositional from the Global Gay Image. While an on-screen kiss between two men may not be revolutionary in the West, "Neverland" politicizes the normative structures of gender and sexuality in South Korea (i.e., the "soft" K-pop male idol trope). The Global Gay Image is thus, negotiated, as the Queercoding in "Neverland," and the context of Holland being the auteur of his music video, suggests the appropriation of the Global Gay Image's trope of gay pride to subvert Korean Queer sensibilities. On the other hand, Sivan is part of the Global Gay Image; this statement is not to disparage Sivan's sexual identity or contributions to the Queer community, but with Sivan being one of the most famous gay male pop singers globally, his construction of representation becomes standardized for non-Western localities.

Conclusion

This study drew connections from visual culture and Queer theory to examine how the entanglement of visual culture and music to Queer culture subjectifies the sensibilities of Queerness to practices of viewing. Here, my stance remains on how there are unique conditions for Queer representation in K-pop music videos which differ visually and ideologically from the Global Gay Image. As demonstrated by Red Velvet – IRENE & SEULGI's "Monster" (2020) and Holland's "Neverland" (2018), Queer representation in K-pop reflects structures of normativity and kinship embedded in South Korea's LGBTQ+ historical and ongoing cultural discourse. "Monster" deploys Queerbaiting in its ambiguous representation of Queerness while maintaining the subjectivities of Queer performance by K-pop girl groups. "Neverland" does not contain Queerbaiting, but its Queercoding infers a subversion to the Global Gay Image and reflects my positioning on South Korea's reluctance to conform to the Global Gay Image.

Some further areas of inquiry can be linked to the various tropes within each music video, as centering research on tropes can further diversify this study's findings. For instance, the tropes of bisexuality in "buwygib" and lesbian monstrosity in "Monster". Critically Queering our popular visual media will create leeway for more diverse scholarship and shift the visual hegemony away from theories which ignore intersectionality. Other areas of inquiry include the erasure of Queer identities by the Global Gay Image's visual regime and audience perception of Queer representations in music videos, which this study did not investigate as my research is primarily focused on the mechanisms which structure Queer representation.

Conclusively, the comparative analysis done in this study highlights the importance of Queering popular media and critically reading global Queer representations from the frameworks of Western scholarship. This study finds that visuality is alive and well in the Global Gay Image,

inflicting a confirmation of social and political power that is the "norm" through visualization. Visuality in the Global Gay Image perpetuates a Western hegemony upon complex cultural discourses and Queer histories into a homogenous standard for Queerness. This study takes Nicholas Mirzoeff's argument of everything visible perpetuating an aesthetic regime rooted in histories of power and authority and applies it to K-pop music videos. Ultimately, Queer representation in K-pop music videos differ from Western examples of Queer representation because of South Korea's cultural implications for Queerness. Therefore, Queer representations in K-pop visually and ideologically contrasts the Global Gay Image.

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