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Clutching on to Gendered Tropes? Framing of Gender Roles and Power Dynamics by Young Indian Writers of BTS Fanfiction

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Abstract: As more young girls write stories online thanks to the increased amount of publishing platforms, their fiction becomes a means to explore if they are offsetting prescribed practices of patriarchy in their gender constructions. Often, young women interrogate gender and recontextualize their experiences by writing fanfictions. In the age of transmedia storytelling, various online fan communities are rich data sources, as transnational female fans prolifically write fiction featuring icons from music and movies belonging to another country. We examined how young Indian girls frame gender roles and power dynamics in their fanfictions of BTS, the South Korean boyband, on Wattpad. To know if conventional gender frames are upheld or challenged in fanfiction stories revolving around non-Indian celebrities, we performed a textual analysis on forty-four BTS fanfictions. We found that in these fanfictions, existing gendered tropes used to depict masculinity and femininity are mostly normalized, with minor alterations reflecting a power imbalance typical in Indian patriarchal households. A subversion of tropes was found in framing men as emotionally expressive, arguably drawing from the soft masculinity projected in the home country of BTS–South Korea. Grounding these findings in self-categorization theory implores us to situate the construction of gendered identities within the socio-cultural conventions of fanfiction writers.



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1. Introduction

The practice of consuming K-pop is a way for transnational fans to negotiate dominant social orders and identities (Han 2017; Yoon 2018). The transnational reception of Hallyu, of which K-pop is a part, is linked to women's empowerment (Jang et al. 2021), a reconceptualization of modernity and modern female identity (Syed and Kwon 2019; Kim et al. 2019), gender liberation and realization of "suppressed expression of resentment" (Oh 2017, p. 253) vis-à-vis female fans.

As K-pop fan communities increase in India, there is growing intersectionality between the construction of gender and the social order in their activities. Given the prevalence of gender-based stereotypes and the conservative outlook on gender roles in India, Indian K-pop fans, especially female fans, are often criticized and ridiculed (The Wonk 2020; Ganguly 2021; Sharma 2021) for their affinity toward East Asian men, specifically K-pop male idols, who exhibit features of "soft masculinity" (Jung 2010) composed of both masculine and feminine traits. Like most countries around the world, India is largely a patriarchal society where hegemonic masculinity is the norm and any deviation from the norm is seen as unfavourable, as it tends to disrupt the status quo.

With regards to addressing gender-based inequalities, India was recently placed at the 112th rank in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender-Gap Index 2019–2020, slipping from its earlier 108th position. This fact highlights India's poor performance in addressing the gender-based gaps in economic participation and opportunity, educational

attainment, health, and survival along with political empowerment (World Economic Forum 2020). Studies suggest that young Indian women experience greater restrictions on their independence than their male counterparts (Ram et al. 2014; Nanda et al. 2014; Evans et al. 2022). This pervaded gender inequality in Indian households and the preference of males over females results in more mental health problems in female youth than males (Ram et al. 2014). In an ICRW (International Center for Research on Women) study on masculinity in India, it is reported that women experience excessive to moderate relationship control from their male partners and there is an alarmingly high prevalence of intimate partner violence in India (Nanda et al. 2014), indicating that despite the steps taken towards gender sensitization, people in India still tend to uphold rigid patriarchal ideals. Furthermore, media representation of gender, especially in popular media such as Indian films and advertising, normalized the gender role beliefs of patriarchy.

To escape from patriarchal control and gender bias, young women worldwide and in India, adopted the practices of reading western romances (Parameswaran 2002; Radway 2006) and writing fiction, particularly fanfiction. Fanfiction refers to “stories produced by fans based on plot lines and characters from either a single source text or else a ‘canon’ of works” (Thomas 2011, p. 1). Fanfiction is observed as a discursive space for the interrogation of gender and sexuality. Fanfiction writers often “recontextualize their experiences, problems and questions as girls and young women and investigate them in the guise of a fictional story” (Leppänen 2008, p. 171). It is also found that “despite women often being the target of negative stereotypes, female authors are equally likely to write such stereotypes as men” (Fast et al. 2016, p. 112). As with fan activities of other media fandoms, K-pop fans also engage in fanfiction writing. Since transnational fans of K-pop are argued to be “non-conforming young people who resist the normative oppositions of a binary gender system” (M. Kim 2021, p. 240), it needs to be explored if such resistance is present in their fan-produced texts. The androgyny and gender fluidity of K-pop male idols offer transnational fans an opportunity to problematize heteropatriarchy through their fanfiction writings.

Hence, an analysis of fanfiction stories by Indian fans of K-pop (specifically BTS) that presents an oppositional view on gender can provide insight into how Indian youth produce tropes of normalization and opposition in their fictional narratives. In this study, fanfictions of BTS are specifically chosen for analysis because this seven-member band is the most popular K-pop group in India. Moreover, BTS uses “culturally shareable themes” (Chandi and Trehan 2022) and universal “discourse of marginality” in their music “to comfort and represent young generations across the world” (J. Kim 2021, p. 12). BTS is also considered a representative artist of generation Z (Ryu 2019), as their music helps heal youth anxieties (Lazore 2020).

2. Review of Literature

Fanfictions have been a rich source of academic investigation for decades, but it was Henry Jenkins’ ([1992] 2012) seminal text *Textual Poachers* that started a whole new sphere of ‘fan’ studies and located fanfiction in its domain. The study of fanfiction is largely concentrated in the disciplines of media and cultural studies, anthropology, and psychology, with a specific focus on fan motivations and behaviours (Thomas 2011).

Locating gender tropes in the study led to the perusal of previous studies on gender interrogation/construction/identity/stereotypes in fanfictions and recent studies on fanfictions based on real-life personas.

Fanfiction is a space predominantly ruled by female writers and readers (Jenkins [1992] 2012, 2006; Shaji 2019; Bacon-Smith 1986) and the practice of fan writing is “an almost exclusively feminine response to mass media texts” (Jenkins 2006, p. 43). Jenkins draws this inference from Bleich’s (1986) analysis that women while reading novel, tend to “enter the world of novel” (p. 239) and reconstruct the narrative in terms of “interpersonal motive, allegiances and conflicts” rather than “perspective of single character or author” (p. 261). Thus, fan writing, as a practice, is a result of feminine interpretative strategies (Jenkins 2006,

p. 44) that offer women and non-conformists an avenue of self-expression, a sense of agency and an opportunity to confront social issues vis-à-vis gender roles and sexuality (Jenkins 2006; Shaji 2019; Abraham 2021). The earliest forms of fanfiction were slash fanfiction and Mary-Sue fanfiction. Slash fanfiction deals with same-sex relationships, erotic or otherwise, while Mary-Sue fanfiction focuses on the story of an archetypal character, mostly the author's self-insertion into the narrative. The slash fan writing is considered a critique of masculinity as well as a radical text because it transcends the "dominant notions of acceptable heterosexual relationships" (Fathallah 2017, p. 29). In a study of Chinese slash fan writers, Fang (2021, p.1) found that "female slash writers retrieve a sense of agency and empowerment through exploring affective experiences." Amongst various subcategories, a specific type of fanfiction which is of interest here is real-person(s) fiction, commonly referred to as RPF according to fandom jargon. RPF is a subtype of fanfiction based on real-life celebrities and public figures, a type of 'postmodern fiction', it is concerned with "facets of identity and playfully manipulative of them" (Fathallah 2017, p. 3). Busse (2006a, 2006b) describes RPF as an instrument through which identities are constructed and manipulated. Busse (2006b, p. 49) argued that fan writers "shape and alter the star to their own specification, making him more interesting, intelligent, or vulnerable, and thus more desirable, identifiable and available." The fanfictions about K-pop idols, specifically BTS in the context of this study, are RPF stories. So far, the studies on K-pop fanfiction, reveal that K-pop fanfictions mostly comprise slash or femslash, i.e., stories of a same-sex relationship, ideally between any two fellow members of a K-pop band (Rachmijati 2019; Alejandro 2021; Bangun et al. 2020). Another category of K-pop fanfiction that can be found on the Internet these days is Y/N (Your Name) fanfiction. Y/N fanfiction differs from Mary-Sue fanfiction in that it allows readers to imagine and enter the story as a protagonist.

Alejandro (2021) examined fanfictions based on K-pop girl idols and found that fan-written stories signify a resistance towards heteronormativity, as the fans, through their fan writing, promote queer content and tackle topics that are otherwise considered taboo in Korean society. However, at the same time, power differentials, in terms of social structures and consensual physical intimacy, are also present in these stories. Hedrick (2020) analyzed RPF stories of the boy band One Direction by female fans with a distinct focus on the presence/absence of sexual consent in the stories. Hedrick (2020, p. 15) argued that "frequency of women's hesitance and unease for sexual interactions" in the stories suggested that "a woman's deference to a man is appropriate, even when she is hesitant." It indicates that female fans present female characters in a stereotypical way—a typical case of self-stereotyping. Popova (2018) examined three omegaverse¹ RPF stories and concluded that omegaverse fanfictions "clearly problematizes issues of power and consent, and offer ways of negotiating meaningful, consensual intimate relationships within wider abusive social structures" (p. 15), suggesting that although power differences are prevalent in fanfictions, so are the ways of negotiating those differences. Hagen (2015, p. 56) argued that even though most fanfictions maintain the "gendered power relations and cultural patterns", the "participatory and creative nature of music fanfiction allows readers and writers to interrogate these power structures by using musicians as figures for literary role playing and reinterpretation." Breaking away, Leppänen (2008, p. 176) found that Finnish women use the "discursive space of fanfiction" to question gender representations in "cult texts" and to "explore problems and questions related to their own identity."

Reinforcement or subversion of gender tropes by fanfiction writers can be examined through self-categorization theory (Turner et al. 1987). Several studies used self-categorization theory to explain the gender differences, gender stereotyping and self-stereotyping vis-à-vis one's social identity (Hogg and Turner 1987; Bornholt et al. 1994; Swan and Wyer 1997; Foster 1999; Cadinu and Galdi 2012). According to self-categorization theory, "stereotypes are not rigid and erroneous, but reflect perceptions of group relations from the perceiver's (possibly variable) vantage point" (Turner and Reynolds 2012, p. 405). Thus, self-categorization theory can be used as a functional construct to understand why fanfiction writers frame gender roles and power relations the way they do.

Based on the empirical insights and existing literature, the research question was formulated:

Q: How are gender roles and power dynamics framed in Indian fanfictions of BTS²?

3. Theoretical Underpinning

In this study, the self-categorization theory is used as a theoretical lens to understand the framing of gender roles and power dynamics in Indian fanfictions of BTS. To deconstruct the power dynamics in fanfictions, it is imperative to analyze how gender roles are constructed and to examine the presence of gender stereotypes associated with patriarchy. After analyzing the fanfictions using a gender-stereotype coding frame and identifying themes vis-à-vis gender representation and power dynamics, self-categorization theory is used to contextualize the identified themes in the fanfictions.

4. Methodology

Exploratory research design using a qualitative approach is most appropriate for locating the issues of power and authority in media texts. As it required in-depth study, textual analysis of the fanfiction content was done along the lines of Hedrick's (2020) study of One Direction fanfictions. Textual analysis as the method of analysis helps in understanding how people "make sense of the world" (Mckee 2003, p. 1) and in specific context of this study, how fans construct and represent power, authority, and gender/sex roles via mode of writing fanfictions. "Traditional notion of a polarized gender identity" (Table 1) compiled by Macionis and Plummer (2008) was used as the coding frame for gender stereotypes to perform textual analysis on the identified fanfiction texts.

Table 1. Coding Frame for Gender Stereotypes (Source: Macionis and Plummer 2008).

Female Stereotypes	Male Stereotypes
Submissive	Dominant
Dependent	Independent
Unintelligent and Incapable	Intelligent and Competent
Emotional	Rational
Receptive	Assertive
Intuitive	Analytical
Weak	Strong
Timid	Brave
Content	Ambitious
Passive	Active
Cooperative	Competitive
Sensitive	Insensitive
Sex Object	Sexually Aggressive
Attractive because of physical appearance	Attractive because of achievement

4.1. Sampling

Because of the availability and richness of data, Wattpad, an online writing platform with over 3 million Indian users (IANS 2020) is selected as the research site. According to available Wattpad statistics, the demographic of Wattpad users is between 13–34 (Srivatsan 2020), and more than 75 percent of Wattpad users are female, 80 percent of whom are millennials or Gen Z (Rao 2018). Additionally, 45 percent of Indian Wattpad users are from non-metro cities (Srivatsan 2020).

The search option of Wattpad was used to identify K-pop fanfictions written by Indians. A total of 85 BTS fanfictions were found by entering multiple and diverse hashtags (for

example, #kpopindia, #btsindia, #bangtanindia, #exoindia, #btsindianarmy, etc.) in the Wattpad search bar. The fanfictions were further filtered based on content as few of the stories were just fan arts, memes, or compilation of other works by Wattpad users. After filtration, forty-four (44) BTS fanfictions were identified for the study and a textual analysis was performed on these 44 BTS fanfictions. To know the demographics of the Indian fan writers on Wattpad, the authors contacted the fan writers using the inbuilt messaging option of Wattpad. Of the returned responses, the age group of the fan writers was between 16–25 years.

4.2. Operational Definitions for Identified Themes

Max Weber's (1978) model of power and authority is used to operationally define terms like domination, power, and authority. Since patriarchy is a norm in Indian households for ages, Weber's notions of power, domination, and traditional authority are useful constructs to observe if the legitimacy of patriarchal rule is questioned or challenged in fictional spaces by Indian fanfiction writers.

Weber (1978) defined power as an ability to impose one's will over others and domination "as the probability that certain specific commands (or all commands) will be obeyed by a given group of persons" (Weber 1978, p. 212). Traditional authority is one of the three legitimate forms of domination proposed by Weber (1978). Patriarchy and patriarchal households are prime examples of traditional authority. Thomas (1985) examined Max and Marianne Weber's work in relation to gender differences and argued that "power of men in the original household is rooted, for Max Weber, in superior strength and in superior intellectual energy (Spannkraft)" and for Marianne Weber, "the super-ordination of the patriarch is rooted in violence" (Thomas 1985, p. 417).

The codes illustrated in Table 1 were employed for textual analysis of 44 BTS fanfictions.

5. Results

Most of the Indian fanfictions of BTS on Wattpad belonged to Mary Sue and Y/N fanfiction category, i.e., fan writers' self-insertion into the fictional narratives was widely present. Additionally, the fan written stories belong to the romance genre, focusing on the development of romantic relationships between the two protagonists. The fan writers clutched onto the conventional tropes when it came to gender roles in their stories even though the female characters were young and contemporary and the male characters were non-native, East Asian, members of a boyband.

5.1. Presence of Gendered Stereotypes in Fanfictions

It was observed that 93.1 percent of Indian BTS fanfictions had female lead characters who were submissive to a certain extent, emotional, timid, sensitive, co-operative, receptive, passive, and attractive in physical appearance. However, female stereotypical traits of being dependent, unintelligent, incapable, and weak were absent in these fanfictions (Figure 1).

5.2. Male Stereotypes in Fanfictions

All 44 fanfictions had male lead characters that exhibited the stereotypical male traits of being dominant, independent, intelligent, competent, rational, assertive, analytical, strong, brave, ambitious, active, competitive, and attractive. Insensitivity as a stereotypical male trait was absent in these fanfictions, as the male lead characters were depicted to have extreme emotions in certain situations. The detailed analysis of the 44 Indian BTS fanfictions is discussed in the following section with some excerpts taken from fanfictions as examples (Figure 2).

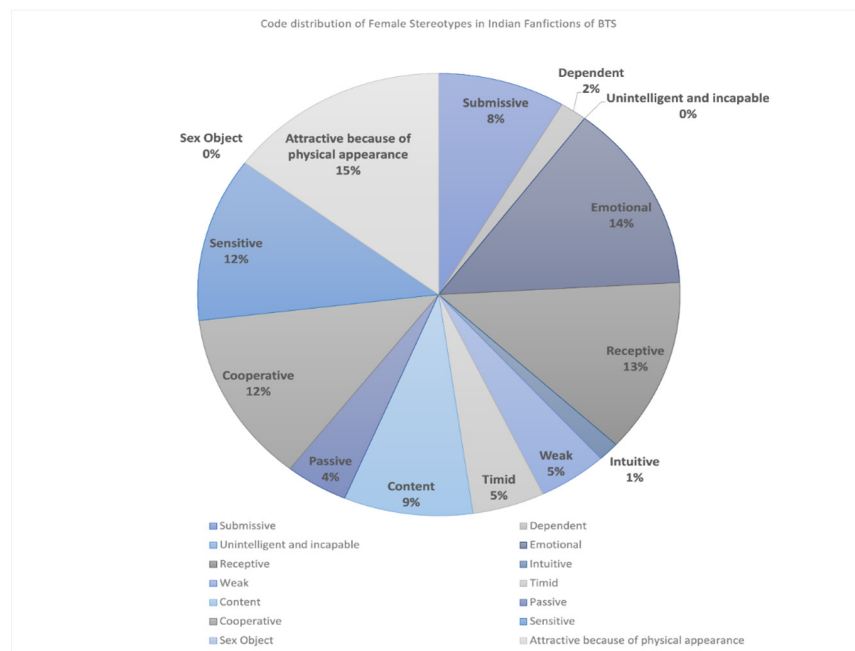


Figure 1. Codes identified under female stereotypes in Indian fanfictions of BTS.

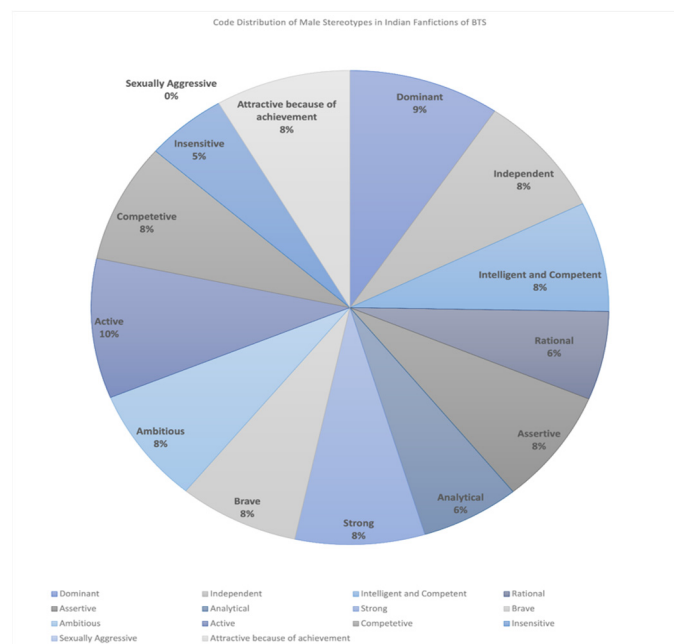


Figure 2. Codes identified under male stereotypes in Indian fanfictions of BTS.

5.3. Identified Themes

5.3.1. Challenging the Patriarch Dependency: Rise of the Independent Female

The social world in K-pop fanfiction by Indian female writers reflects a departure from their existing realities. The majority of fictions present an independent female, working and self-reliant, breaking the normative order (Figure 3). Recent reports about India highlight the defining feature of a patriarchal, patrifocal, and patrilineal society— women who have an economic dependency on men. World Bank data shows that Indian women account for only about 20 percent of the total labor force in India (World Bank 2020), this low labor rate participation for women is also due to rigid cultural norms and gender roles. India also has a high gender pay gap, where women earn about 65 percent of what their male counterparts

earn for the same work. Despite women narrowing the higher education gap rapidly, only 8.9 percent of firms have women at top management positions ([World Economic Forum 2020](#)). This financial dependency leads to the association of women with the stereotypical traits of being unintelligent, incapable, and dependent on men for financial support.

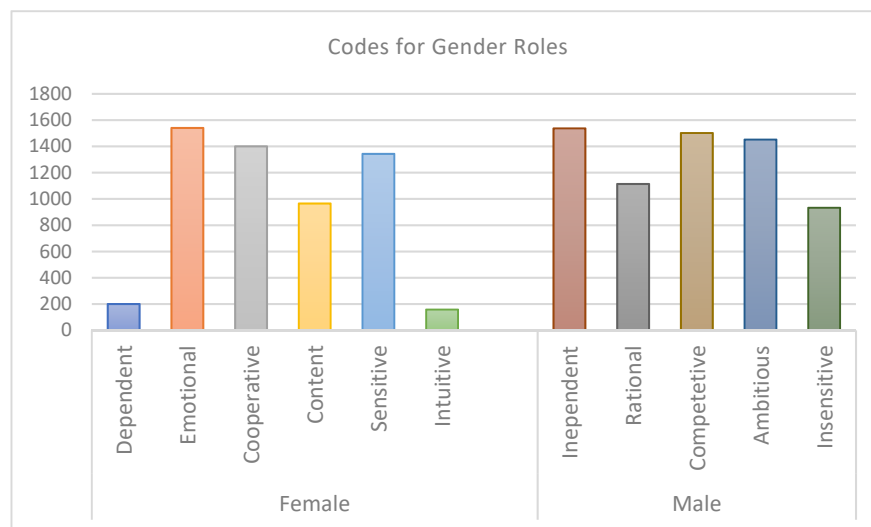


Figure 3. Codes identified under gender roles in Indian fanfictions of BTS.

Contrarily, the female protagonists in these fanfictions are mostly depicted as financially independent and educated women. These female characters can broadly be divided into two categories: working women and high school/university students. The women either worked or studied in South Korea. The profession of the female protagonists ranged from medical interns to managing directors, underlining the high intellect and capability they possess. Through these characters, the fanfiction writers are questioning the stereotypical feminine traits linked to gender by challenging the reality of women being patriarch-dependent, at least financially. These women are an archetype of what [Rajan \(1993, p. 124\)](#) termed as “new Indian women”. Constructed largely through media representation, the new Indian woman is a “modern” educated woman, belongs to the urban middle class, and does nothing to “jeopardize the notion of tradition”; her freedom is considered “safe” and will ultimately be “tamed” by “marriage and domesticity” ([Rajan 1993, p. 125](#)). As explained in the succeeding section, regardless of education, modernity, and financial independence, women in these fanfictions still hold on to the normative gender roles.

5.3.2. (Re)Normalizing the Dominating Male and Submissive Female

The gender relations portrayed, however, were quite skewed, and the Indian trope of a dominant male was vivid. Although women in these fanfictions were portrayed as competent and independent, they exhibited a submissive nature to the dominating males in their lives, specifically—father and spouse/partner ([Figure 3](#)). These two contrasting representations—-independent but submissive—are discussed hereafter: The female characters are painted as women who are not reliant on men for monetary assistance, but who still yield to the dictating behaviour of men. Women who can make their own life choices, yet surrender to men’s commanding wishes and decisions, be they the patriarch of their family or their intimate partners. The following excerpt from a fanfiction accentuates the submissive and passive attitude of women towards men making decisions about their lives:

Dad: . . . Y/n I want to say something important and I hope you will understand that this decision is best for you.

I nod as he continued.

Dad: You are going to marry *Kim Taehyung* the one and only son of Mr. and Mrs. Kim.

Me: Ok I wi-WAIT WHAT!!!!

I was taken back from Dad's sudden decision, that too about my marriage.

Me: Dad what do you mean by marrying him??!! Are you for real dad!!

Dad: Y/n it is not my sudden decision or something I have thought about it and I think it is the best for you.

Mom: Yes Dear think about itand it is also the best for our companies.

Me: Ok Mom and Dad I will agree with both of you if you guys have choose him for me it must be the best for me. I'll take a leave.

I was so shocked by my Dad's announcement, but I still agreed with it because I know that my parents will not choose someone who is not the best. ([hey_stob_it_fictions 2020](#))

The subservience of women to their father/partner in these fanfictions echoes a pre-feminist belief. The daughter's silent acquiescence reinforces the stereotypical image of women being considered submissive, passive, timid, and weak. In doing so, the fanfiction writers also (re)normalize the dominating male trope commonly used in Indian media intrinsic to patriarchy. The dominant characteristic of men is strengthened in these fanfictions by emphasizing their proprietorial behaviour and reducing women to material objects or possession. The following two excerpts from fanfictions underscore this observation:

(I)

Y/n: JK what are you doing? Stop it. Everyone is looking at us.

JK: I don't care. You are mine. No one can take you away from me. You will get punishment babe. ([_the_mysterious_army n.d.](#))

(II)

"You know what? I really felt jealous, when any boy goes near you, when other boys smile at you, I am literally jealous of every boy that look at your shadow." He blabbered out and I just listened to his words, because he wasn't speaking anything shit, he was just expressing is feelings. I smiled at him.

"You are only mine and mine. You belong to me and only me. No one has the right to look at you, touch you." He said. ([Txxhyungg_ 2021](#))

The female protagonists revel in this declaration of ownership and expect this kind of possessive and assertive behavior from their male partners, as depicted in the following excerpt:

"You know?! When I played the prank, I expected you to say, "You're only mine! And kiss me roughly. NO. You gave up easily." Y/n was telling about her dreamy words and what she have expected from Taehyung, while he was looking at him with his mouth open in shock. ([Txxhyungg_ 2021](#))

The representation of women in these fanfictions is akin to modern romance novels that follow a standard formula. Regardless of the presence of elements of modernity, romance novels tend to shift back to traditional beliefs. Following the findings her analysis of "postmillennial" Mills and Boons romance novels, [Arvanitaki \(2019, p. 26\)](#) argues that the "authors of such novels employ tactics that appear to reinforce and justify traditional romantic ideals; they place the heroines in an original pre-feminist situation, then liberate and portray them as feminist characters that are incomplete until they meet and unite with the hero (post-feminism)". The self-sufficient women in these fanfictions attain self-realization by rejecting the feminist beliefs "because self-sufficiency is an inferior state to heterosexual relationship" ([Arvanitaki 2019, p. 26](#)).

5.3.3. Conventionally Reconciled: Acceptance of Intimate Partner Violence and Other Forms of Domestic Abuse

Statistics reveal that one in five women in India has experienced some form of domestic abuse in their lives, especially after marriage (Kishor and Gupta 2004). The reality of pervasive domestic violence in Indian households is reflected in these fanfictions:

“Like, in the presence of your husband, how can you have fun with some other MAN!”, I raised my voice on her.

“What the hell have gotten into you? There’s nothing like this.” She said. Tears can be seen. But I am not going to fall for this trap.

“Don’t say anything. I have seen it.” I said.

“Why are you being like this? Have I ever asked you to love me? Have you ever treated me as your wife? But, I still love you as my husband. And you treat me like your toy. Now, you are saying me to stay away from my friends. And finally, have I ever complaint about your love for Minah? Minah will never comeback but you still love her, you ignore me because of her, have I ever complained?? And yeah! Minah will never return to . . . ” She said. It’s enough.

“JUST SHUT UP!” I said and SLAPPED her. (Txxhyungg_ 2020)

The above excerpt presents a scenario of a married couple in an argument that ends when the husband couldn’t take anymore and uses his “physical strength” to dominate his wife by slapping, thus ending the argument—a typical show of male prowess. The scene is followed with the husband’s apology and wife’s forgiveness:

“Y/n, I am really sorry for that day”. He said with guilt filled in his voice. “I didn’t mean to do that. It just happened automatically. I really respect you a lot and sorry for what I have done to you. You are really a good wife, after all this you didn’t leave me. I am really sorry. Sorry for not being a good husband and treating you badly.” He said. He was really shamed for all this. Sincerity can be seen in his eyes.

“It’s okay Taehyung. Atleast you understand your mistake” I said and he flashed his beautiful boxy smile, which I can’t help but smiled widely. (Txxhyungg_ 2020)

In this case, the husband claims that his physical abuse was an “automatic” response to a stimulus, suggesting traits inherent to hegemonic masculinity.

A similar plot was noted in another fanfiction where the male protagonist, fueled with jealousy, uses his physical force and kidnaps the female protagonist, to scare and “punish” her:

Y/n: I thought someone kidnapped me. I was scared.

Y/n hit JK on his chest hardly.

JK: Ouch. That hurt.s

Y/n: You are really an idiot, seriously, who does this kind of thing with their girlfriend?

JK pinned her to the side of pillar.

JK: You were the one who made me do this.

JK said being jealous. (_the_mysterious_army n.d.)

The scenario is followed with the male character’s apology and female character describing this behavior as ‘normal’:

JK: Babe: I am so sorry for today’s behavior. I just lost it whenever you are with other boy.

Y/n: It’s Ok Kook, it’s normal. (_the_mysterious_army n.d.)

In these fanfictions, the fan writers replace the Korean masculinity of BTS with the hegemonic masculinity prevalent in India. The masculinity of Korean men is mediated through Korean popular media and the type of masculinity that is visible to transnational

audiences is articulated as “soft” or *kkonminam*³ masculinity (Jung 2010). The soft masculinity of *kkonminam* is “antithetical to hard, physical and hypersexual masculinity” (Lee 2020, p. 111). As BTS is a global representative example of *kkonminam* masculinity (Monocello 2022), their replaced masculinity in Indian fanfictions indicates that for Indian fan writers, the reality of heteropatriarchal masculinity supersedes the mediated soft masculinity of Korean men.

Women’s passive acceptance of domestic abuse, physical or psychological, further subordinates them in the rigid patriarchal society. The women in these fanfictions silently accept such abuse and justify the offensive behavior by describing it as normal, indicating that males are expected to showcase their physical prowess from time to time. This representation is not far from reality. According to national data, there is a high degree of acceptance of domestic violence among women. About 57 percent of married women justify domestic abuse against women by men if she does not perform the accepted “gender roles” (Kishor and Gupta 2004). Several reports underscored the fact that “violent behaviour is strongly influenced by cultural and social norms” (World Health Organization 2009). An ICRW study reveals that “women who experienced discrimination in their childhood were three to six times more likely to experience IPV (Intimate Partner Violence)” and that “women who experienced and observed discrimination and violence growing up are more likely to justify it and may therefore not resist circumstances that trigger intimate partner violence for them” (Nanda et al. 2014).

The possibility that romanticizing abuse could be an inherent and subconscious move by fanfiction writers is worth exploring. However, such representation of subordinated women is problematic as it facilitates the perpetuation of patriarchy and encourages hegemonic masculinity by normalizing the violent conduct of men.

5.3.4. Breaking the Stereotype of Stoic Men Are Strong Men

Famous Bollywood dialogue *mard ko dard nahi hota* (translated: *men do not feel pain*) is a trope that has long since reinforced the male stereotypes and supported hegemonic masculinity in India, which is toxic to both women and men alike. The male stereotypes associated with patriarchy constitute men being insensitive, sexually aggressive, and more rational than emotional.

Although the fanfiction writers have depicted male characters as aggressive, abusive, and dominant, they have also portrayed men being comfortable in expressing their emotions like pain, guilt, and sadness, which are mostly considered feminine traits in a patriarchal society:

(I)

Tears rushed from his eyes. This type of crying wasn’t the kind everyone could see- the wailing on street corners, the tearing of clothes. The worst kind happened when his soul wept and no matter what he did, there was no way to comfort it. For people like him, his soul contained more scar tissue than life. It was butchering him to see her like this. He remembered her as vibrant, dynamic, full of life but because of his own forebodings, her face was grave. (BTSdope123 2019)

(II)

“I can’t do this anymore! I am tired and I am done!” A deep distraught voice says. I seem like an unwanted entity standing her which is why I don’t turn around. But the shiny metal parts of the coffee machine display the reflection of V standing outside a room and Jimin consoling him. Jimin proceeds to pull V into his arms as Jungkook steps out from the room and stands by them. (RiverTuan 2020)

The rigid values of the patriarchal system do not allow men to be emotional except when expressing emotions such as anger and pride. By allowing their male characters to be expressive in emotive situations, fan writers break this gender stereotype of associating emotional expressiveness as a feminine trait to some extent.

5.4. Power Dynamics in Indian BTS Fanfictions

Although female characters are portrayed as strong and independent, they are shown to be passive and submissive towards the dominating behavior of male characters. The fanfiction authors legitimize the traditional authority of patriarchy by showcasing female characters' passive acceptance of abuse and normalizing the tyrannical behavior of male characters at times. These findings indicate a power imbalance between the male-female relationship, with the male having more power over the female, which has always been the traditional trope used in media texts produced in patriarchal society like India (Figure 4).

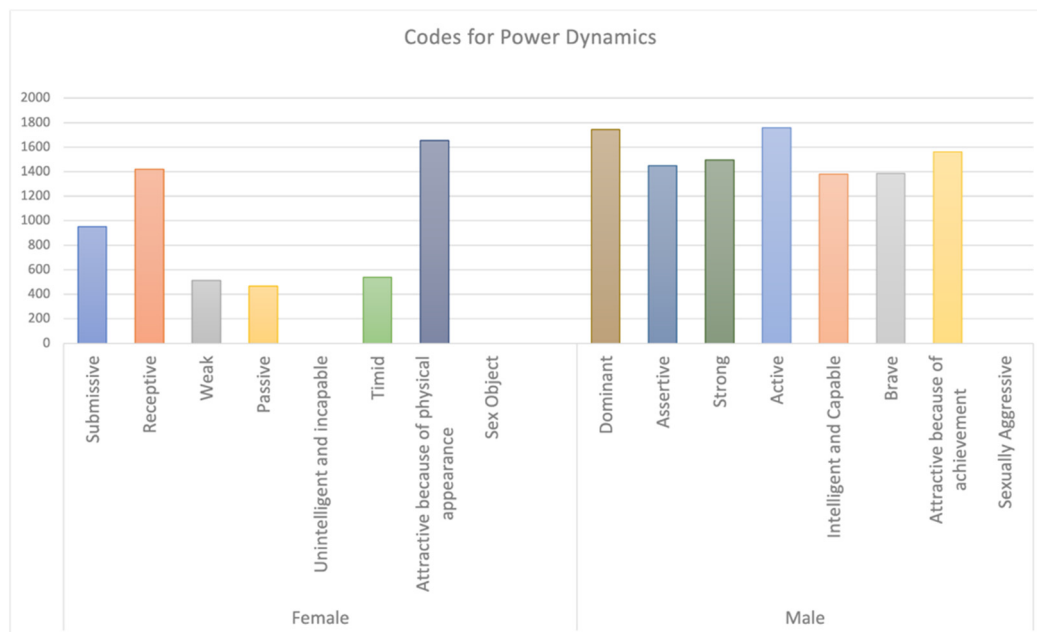


Figure 4. Codes identified under power dynamics in Indian fanfictions of BTS.

Referring to Weber's work, [Thomas \(1985\)](#) states,

"Relations within the household are found in force. Other sources are present too: habituation, memories of childhood dependency, experience, the recognition that there is no protection to be had outside the power sphere of the household and that submission is the price of that protection. All these factors combine to produce a domination that is typically of men over women and of the old over young". ([Thomas 1985](#), p. 410)

This has been the case with Indian households for ages; these fanfictions reflect the typical power dynamics of Indian households. Unlike studies that suggested fanfiction writers interrogate gender and power through fictional stories, this research shows that Indian fan writers clutch these sexist tropes, rather than breaking away from them and resisting them.

6. Discussion

Gender Stereotypes in Indian Fanfictions of BTS and Self-Categorization Theory

It is noted that Indian fanfiction writers use the physical persona of BTS to construct fictional tales, but the gender equations in those tales remain stereotyped. The freedom offered by a publishing platform like Wattpad is sidetracked by the practice of continuously writing and reinforcing gender stereotypes and hanging on to the notions of male dominance and female submission. However, the reasons why Indian fanfiction writers cannot break free from writing such tropes need to be explained.

Self-categorization theory offers one possible explanation for such practice of gender-stereotyping and self-stereotyping. This theory helps to understand the beliefs, actions and

feelings of people “as a psychological group” (Turner and Reynolds 2012, p. 400), that is, a person’s act, feeling or thoughts is influenced by her/his/their membership of a social group. According to this theory, identity operates at “different levels on inclusiveness” (Hornsey 2008, p. 208). Central to self-concept, there are three levels of self-categorization proposed by Turner et al. (1987)

1. Interpersonal level, where personal identity is defined by comparing oneself with others at individual level
2. Intergroup level, where social identity is defined by comparing oneself as a group member to other groups
3. Superordinate level, where human identity is defined by comparing oneself as a human being to other species (Turner and Reynolds 2012; Hornsey 2008).

Since people have access to multiple social identities at a time, which identity they use in any contextual setting is determined by the metacontrast principle, according to which, “a collection of individuals tend to be categorized as a group to the degree inter alia that the perceived differences between them are less than the perceived differences between them and other people (outgroups) in the comparative context”. (Turner and Reynolds 2012, p. 404)

Broadly, it can be generalized that these fanfictions have two social groups—the first group comprising South Korean men (BTS) and the second group comprising female protagonists of Indian origin. The Indian fanfiction writers transformed the soft masculinity of BTS into hegemonic masculinity inherent to Indian patriarchy and reinforced the practice of self-stereotyping by rewriting the male–female gender tropes. Through this process of “depersonalization” (where people define “themselves and others as members of the same category, they would self-stereotype in relation to that category” (Turner and Reynolds 2012, p. 402)), Indian fanfiction writers highly identify Indian patriarchal society as their ingroup and “internalize the norms” of this group (Hornsey 2008, p. 210). As a result, the status quo vis-à-vis gender differences and power relations in Indian society in these fanfictions is maintained and reinforced.

7. Conclusions

Since fanfictions act as a discursive space for the social construction of gender, the textual analysis of Indian fanfictions of BTS provided a deeper insight into how gender is being reconstructed and how power dynamics are being framed amongst these fans. Jung (2010) described K-pop males in the context of a “hybrid masculinity” composed of both masculine and feminine traits. Male K-pop performers are usually ridiculed by non-fans because of their feminine features, but the same feminine characteristics make them more genuine and sincere, which Jung (2010) referred to as significant aspects of “soft masculinity.” However, the representation of male K-pop performers, BTS, in Indian fanfictions contradict this argument. BTS group members are transformed into dominant males exhibiting typical qualities inherent to hegemonic masculinity. Although the fanfiction writers break the male stereotype in context of expressing their emotions, the construction of the male gender is still based on a male archetype of patriarchy. The fanfiction writers (re)normalize the dominant and controlling behavior of men by romanticizing it and reducing female characters to conventional female stereotypes. Framing the power imbalance between the lead characters’ relationship in such a way, the fanfiction writers legitimize the domination of men over women, which Weber (1978) conceptualized as traditional authority. These findings are explained through the lens of the social psychological theory of self-categorization. Contrary to prevalent slash fanfictions of K-pop idols over the Internet, the absence of slash in Indian fanfictions suggests that Indian fan writers are stuck in gender binaries and still hold on to the narratives of heterosexual relationships. Since the BTS fanfictions by Indian fan writers were either Mary Sue or Y/N fanfiction, the analysis reaffirms that “interpretative repertoires of heteronormativity are more influential when

fans cast themselves as agentive story characters compared to when they play with fictional characters” (Karlsson and Olin-Scheller 2015, p. 183).

The textual analysis of BTS fanfictions by Indian fans indicates a possibility that gender roles and gender order are internalized in the subconscious of young minds, irrespective of continuous interventions. Haines et al. (2016) argued that “because gender stereotypes are apparently so deeply embedded in our society, those in position to evaluate women and men, as well as women and men themselves, need to be constantly vigilant to the possible influence of stereotypes on their judgements, choices and actions.” Thus, the frames used by Indian fanfiction writers in their stories become critical in the gender discourse of youth in a digital world where local reality seems to guide the tropes and frame gender, power, and abuse in conventional ways. Despite the affordances of a new media platform like Wattpad and K-pop’s negation of prescribed gender identity, the writers continue to hang on to tropes that define gender and its manifestations in a typified manner.

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Notes

- ¹ Omegaverse is a genre of fanfiction in which the “characters have a ‘secondary gender’ which may be Alpha, Beta or Omega” (Popova 2018, p. 7). For a detailed description of this genre, please refer Popova (2018).
- ² BTS is a seven member K-pop boyband and is the most popular K-pop group in India. The names of the BTS members are as follows: Kim Namjoon (aka RM), Kim Seokjin (aka Jin), Min Yoongi (aka Suga), Jung Hoseok (aka J-Hope), Park Jimin (aka Jimin), Kim Taehyung (aka V) and Jeon Jungkook (aka Jungkook/JK).
- ³ Kkonminam means flower boys.

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