

The k-pop idol in focus of Applied Linguistics: a discursive analysis of character construction in fanfiction /

O 'idol' de k-pop no foco da Linguística Aplicada: uma análise discursiva da construção de personagem em fanfiction'

*Jandara Assis de Oliveira Andrade **

Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Norte, Natal, Rio Grande do Norte, Brazil. PhD student in Language Studies in the research line Study of Discursive Practices of the Postgraduate Program in Language Studies (Ppgel - UFRN), master in Language Studies and specialist in Reading and Text Production from the same institution.

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8687-8698>

*Maria da Penha Casado Alves ***

Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Norte, Natal, Rio Grande do Norte, Brazil. Post-doctorate in Applied Linguistics at UNICAMP under the supervision of Prof. Dr. Roxane Rojo. She is an Associate Professor in the area of Portuguese Language in the Department of Letters. She teaches undergraduate and postgraduate courses in the Language Studies Program at UFRN and coordinates the Professional Master's Degree in Letters-ProfLetras nationally.

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1762-5210>

*Juan dos Santos Silva ****

Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Norte, Natal, Rio Grande do Norte, Brazil. PhD in Language Studies in the research line Study of Discursive Practices of the Postgraduate Program in Language Studies (PPGEL - UFRN) and master's degree from the same institution. He worked as a substitute professor at the Instituto Federal de Educação, Ciência e Tecnologia do Rio Grande do Norte (IFRN).

 <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9075-8071>

Received in: decembre 20th, 2024. **Aproved** in: decembre 22th, 2024.

How to mention this article:

ANDRADE, Jandara Assis de Oliveira; ALVES, Maria da Penha Casado; SILVA, Juan dos Santos The k-pop idol in focus of Applied Linguistics: a discursive analysis of character construction in fanfiction. *Revista Letras Raras*. Campina Grande, v. 13, n. 1, p. e6190, dec. 2024. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14579744>.

*  jandara.aassis@gmail.com

**  penhacasado@gmail.com

***  juanfflorencio@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the discursive construction of fanfiction character made by fan-author, considering that character is based on a real person, an idol from the South Korean pop music (K-pop) boyband BTS. This construction is shaped by how this fan-author perceives Asian men's masculinity. In this process, two aspects need to be observed, firstly the soft masculinity (Jung, 2010) performed by artist and the second is the characteristic vision of Asian man and the active/passive roles in same-sex relationships propagated by various Western social actors. To understand this process, it mobilizes the concepts of language, reflection and refraction (Bakhtin, 2015), ideological sign (Volochinóv, 2017), soft masculinity (Jung, 2010), performance (Buttler, 2017), masculinity (Kimmel, 2016), Queer theory (Louro, 2001, Miskolci, 2021), and passivity and activity (Foucault, 1984). In order to construct and analyze the data, it uses the Index Paradigm and Dialogical Comparison. The area in which it is located is Applied Linguistics as it understands that research is carried out on border between knowledge. Based on the analysis, it is possible to understand that Idol's actions, in the view of the South American fan, clash with a gender performance that corresponds to the heteronormative standard that he recognizes, meaning that, in construction of his text, the artist's characteristics are reflected and refracted in form of performance of a gay man or a Queer man who transgresses the standards of behavior expected for his gender role.

KEYWORDS: Discursive construction; Fanfiction; South korean pop music; Soft masculinity; Queer theory.

RESUMO

Este artigo analisa a construção discursiva de um personagem de fanfiction feita por um fã-autor, tendo em vista que o personagem é baseado em uma pessoa real, um Idol da boyband de música pop sul-coreana (K-pop) BTS. Essa construção é moldada pela forma como esse fã-autor percebe a masculinidade do homem asiático. Nesse processo, dois aspectos necessitam ser observados, primeiro a masculinidade suave (Jung, 2010) performada pelo artista e a segunda é a visão caracterizadora do homem asiático e dos papéis de ativo/passivo em relacionamentos homoafetivos propagada pelos diversos atores sociais ocidentais. Para compreender esse processo, mobiliza os conceitos de linguagem, reflexo e refração (Bakhtin, 2015), signo ideológico (Volochinóv, 2017), masculinidade suave (Jung, 2010), performance (Buttler, 2017), masculinidade (Kimmel, 2016), teoria Queer (Louro, 2001, Miskolci, 2021), e passividade e atividade (Foucault, 1984). A fim de construir e analisar os dados, utiliza o Paradigma Indiciário e o Cotejo dialógico. A área na qual está situado é a Linguística Aplicada por compreender que a pesquisa se realiza na fronteira entre conhecimentos. Com base na análise, é possível compreender que as ações do Idol, na visão do fã sul-americano, destoam de uma atuação de gênero que correspondam ao padrão heteronormativo que reconhece, fazendo com que, na construção de seu texto, as características do artista sejam refletidas e refratadas na forma da performance de um homem gay ou de um homem Queer que transgride os padrões de comportamento esperados para o seu papel de gênero.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Construção discursiva; Fanfiction; Música pop sul-coreana; Masculinidade suave; Teoria Queer.

1 Introduction

South Korean pop music (henceforth K-pop) is a genre that encompasses various aspects such as dance, singing, rap, rhythmic, and colorful performances in which artists sing and dance simultaneously. These artists must demonstrate versatility to stand out in the highly competitive K-pop market, given the large number of groups and soloists debuting each year. To become versatile, artists in this genre need to spend years studying to learn how to dance, sing, and present themselves to the public (Oh, 2013). These artists, male or female, wear tight and sensual clothing, bold makeup, and change hairstyles and hair colors according to the concept of the songs, albums, and MVs they release.

However, it is common for non-Asian fans to interpret these performances, as well as some other characteristics learned and used by idols to attract the audience, as indications of a supposed homosexuality, leading them to idealize relationships and scenarios that involve this perception (Jung, 2010). One example of this is the writing of fanfiction, in which fan-authors create characters as queer individuals, as they perceive the artistic performances and behaviors as representative of such groups. Based on this, the present paper analyzes the discursive construction of a fanfiction character created by a fan-author, where this character is based on a real person, an idol from the K-pop boy band BTS.

To understand this process, we employed two methods to construct and analyze our corpus. The first is the Evidential Paradigm, proposed by Ginzburg (1989), in which the researcher positions themselves as a detective who collects seemingly irrelevant traces that, as a whole, create a pathway to understanding the object. The second is dialogical comparison, a method that allows for parallel verification between theory and the constructed corpus. The intersection of the collected clues and theoretical concepts facilitates understanding the entirety of the object. It is relevant in this process to consider aspects such as the time and space in which the object is situated, as well as the perception that our object, the utterance, responds to life, is part of a given reality, and is produced by a concrete subject (Bakhtin, 2016). These elements are, therefore, inseparable in the process of constructing knowledge about the object.

The type of research presented here requires a theoretical framework that transcends the limitations between fields of knowledge; for this reason, we position ourselves within Applied Linguistics (henceforth AL). According to Moita Lopes (2006, p. 14), AL has an in/transdisciplinary nature as it creates “intelligibility about social problems in which language plays a central role.” To understand social practices, AL conceives scientific inquiry as constructed at the boundaries between disciplines, thus allowing researchers to move between fields (Moita Lopes, 2006). From this perspective, this work, due to its purpose, requires contributions from fields beyond linguistics, as it investigates a discursive social practice in which discourses about subjects are materialized. For this reason, the central concepts for our discussion are: language, reflection, and refraction (Bakhtin, 2015), ideological sign (Volóchinov, 2017), soft masculinity (Jung, 2010), performance (Buttler, 2017), masculinity (Kimmel, 2016), Queer theory (Louro, 2001; Miskolci, 2021), as well as passivity and activity (Foucault, 1984).

The organizational trajectory of this work allowed us to divide it into five sections. In the first, we discuss what fanfiction is and how it is produced. In the second, we address what K-pop

is and its foundations. In the third, we present concepts of gender, sexuality, and Queer theory. In the fourth, we conduct our analysis based on the presented concepts. Finally, we present our final considerations.

2 Fanfiction in the Era of Convergence

At the turn of the 20th to the 21st century, the publication of works such as *Harry Potter* (1997-2007) by J.K. Rowling, along with the advancement of virtual tools – including more accessible internet and the emergence of forums and social networks – made it possible to broaden the scope and reach of fan communities (fandoms). This was facilitated by technological developments that allowed faster communication, making it easier for individuals with similar interests to connect and interact (Jenkins, 2009). Social networks, for instance, enabled the creation of pages and profiles dedicated to literary, cultural, and/or media artifacts, as well as artists – such as singers, actors, influencers, YouTubers, authors, etc. – which, being situated in public virtual spaces, can reach a larger audience.

The virtual environment also enables the creation of spaces dedicated to sharing fan group productions, which may include unique creations from one or more groups (Jenkins, 2009). In this context, platforms emerge for posting fanart (visual creations by fans, such as photo collages, drawings with different styles, illustrations, paintings, among others) or fanfiction (translated as “fan fiction,” which is the written creation by fans) (Andrade, 2021).

Fanfiction (also called fanfic or fic) is a narrative created based on the affectionate relationship that fans develop with an artistic, media, or literary product, or with artists and personalities exposed in the media. In crafting their texts, fans borrow elements from the plot and/or perceived gaps and/or characters from these products, as well as characteristics and/or experiences of celebrities, to build their narratives (Andrade, 2021). Fan-authors create their texts and share them chapter by chapter – if the narrative has multiple chapters, as fanfics can vary in length from the shortest, known as oneshots, to the longest, called longfics – so that others can access them (Andrade, 2021). As fanfiction circulates in a virtual environment, online tools facilitate dialogue between the fan-author and fan-reader after each chapter, as platforms provide comment sections where readers can express their thoughts, impressions, and suggestions to the creator, who may or may not consider them in their writing process (Andrade, 2021).

When discussing fanfiction, it is crucial to highlight that the primary motivation for this practice is the emotional connection fans establish with the source text or the real-life subjects (Andrade, 2021). However, when considering works like *Harry Potter* and *Twilight* (by Stephenie Meyer) – targeted at adolescents exploring their bodies and sexuality, and young adults who might still be coming to terms with their own bodies and desires – we notice the erasure or romanticization of issues closely related to this audience, as the focus of these narratives is on fantasy. Thus, despite fostering affection and, to some extent, identification with the characters, readers do not see their own struggles, debates, doubts, and battles reflected. This leads to a creative impulse (Bakhtin, 2015) that drives them to create narratives where characters are displaced from fantasy and face real-world situations, including discrimination, abuse, sexual experimentation, substance use, among other realities experienced by fan-authors (Andrade, 2021). This makes such texts rich in circulating discourses that address the adolescent and young adult universe.

In writing fanfiction, fan-authors not only allow their creativity to flourish but also infuse their texts with discourses that engage both with the source narrative and the reality they inhabit (Andrade, 2021). Consequently, these texts often showcase clashes between different discourses used in their construction, as they bring together conflicting and agreeing voices, perspectives, and worldviews. The narrator's voice, along with the story and characters, presents these diverging/converging viewpoints. The characters themselves are constructed to represent or highlight these discourses, with fan-authors employing various semiotic tools – such as dialogues, descriptions, music, videos, images, references to real-world events – to help readers form an image and grasp the intended discourses.

This is possible because fanfiction is a hypertext, meaning it is produced “in a digital, configurable, and fluid format [...] composed of elementary blocks linked by hyperlinks that can be explored in real-time on-screen” (Lévy, 1999, p. 27). This format enables the convergence of “all categories of signs (images, animations, sounds, etc.)” (Lévy, 1999, p. 27) in a single text, allowing fan-authors to utilize different semiotics and textual modalities, such as dialogues and/or social media posts, blending verbal, auditory, and/or visual texts. In addition to these semiotics, the casual language common among readers of these platforms also becomes part of the narrative, including slang, memes, emoticons, abbreviations, and acronyms. This construction that integrates various semiotics is possible due to the time and space in which such productions take place, as the virtual environment allows the inclusion of these modalities, and the era embraces the use of diverse languages and the exploration of themes that were once excluded from written productions.

After presenting the concept and characteristics of fanfiction, we turn our focus to South Korean pop culture and the notion of soft masculinity performed by idols from that country.

3 The Korean Pop Culture Wave

Fan communities (fandoms) are groups of individuals organized around an artistic and/or media artifact with which they establish an emotional connection. As a result, they engage in various activities related to the artifact, including discussions, promotional actions, or the creation of their own products in different formats. To achieve this, fans often leverage technological tools available in the virtual environment, which help expand their reach and facilitate the sharing of experiences and creations.

According to Jenkins (2009), these groups are among the most adept at using technological tools. This is evident in the expansion of fan communities focused on Asian products, such as dramas and pop music groups (Korean, Chinese, and Thai). Through mass communication channels, social media, and virtual tools, these products have transcended geographical boundaries, penetrating Western markets and building a loyal fanbase eager to consume not only the groups' related products but also other cultural elements such as language, cuisine, clothing, and even some traditions.

Fan communities play a vital role in introducing these products to the consumer markets in the Americas, as they are largely responsible for translating and promoting artists and productions. Due to the appeal of Korean culture to fans of its productions, streaming services like Netflix and YouTube have included and/or produced dramas, films, and documentary series about Asian music groups. However, fandoms remain crucial to the expansion of this culture, having created websites, groups, and pages that provide extensive and often free access to various productions. The term "fansubs" refers to groups of fans who translate and add subtitles to audiovisual productions (Chen, 2018). The term combines the English words *fan* and *subtitle*, which, in Portuguese, means "fan subtitle." According to Lu Chen (2018), fansubs translate original languages (Korean, Chinese, Thai, or Japanese) or English into other languages, enabling access to productions, interviews, live broadcasts, artist social media posts, news reports, and more.

In the movement to expand Asian cultural and artistic artifacts, South Korea has arguably achieved the greatest reach, particularly since the late 1990s with the "Korean Wave," which has successfully exported its cultural products worldwide. Within this context, our focus turns to Korean

pop music, known as K-pop, which is heavily influenced by elements of the Western music market. This genre has become one of the primary exponents of the Korean Wave today, thanks in large part to YouTube, a platform that allows free distribution of videos created by various producers (Jin, 2012).

K-pop is characterized as a hybrid musical genre, blending rhythms, beats, and melodies from other genres like pop, hip-hop, rap, R&B, and electronic music (Leung, 2012). Another feature that makes K-pop appealing to international audiences is the construction of lyrics that mix Korean and English phrases, along with repetitive choruses paired with synchronized group dancing (Leung, 2012). According to Oh (2013), the genre's differentiation strategy for the global audience involves three key elements. The first, *numbers*, refers to the number of members in a group, which directly impacts how they move during performances, as the visual aspect is an inseparable component of the genre. Oh (2013) states:

K-pop music features singer-dancers on stage who maintain changing dancing formations that quickly change with strict or perfect synchronization. From the beginning to the end of a song, singer-dancers take turn in occupying the spotlighted center stage one by one, as if there were no lead vocal for the band. Everyone in the band maintains the same vocal and dancing talent in a synchronized movement (Oh, 2013, p. 401).

This synchronization makes the performances vibrant and visually captivating for the audience, especially when observing the second element, *physique*. This refers to the physical appearance of group members, who, during their trainee period, undergo various aesthetic and physical treatments to achieve the desired look (Oh, 2013). Additionally, they study dance, singing, acting, and language while attending regular education, as trainees are selected at a relatively young age (Oh, 2013). Trainees are molded to meet the demands of the K-pop audience, as the genre is commercial and oriented toward consumer market preferences.

In this context, before presenting the third element, it is essential to discuss the concept of *soft masculinity* (Jung, 2010) attributed to South Korean idols. Researcher Sun Jung (2010, p. 190) describes soft masculinity as "[...] the visual image [...] of male stars, which is highly associated with feminine aesthetics." According to Jung, this aesthetic results from transcultural hybridization processes and a strong capacity for transformation and evolution. Initially, the soft masculinity of Korean idols was shaped by the characteristics of characters from a type of Japanese manga aimed

at a female audience. The appeal of this model became evident, especially with the success of the Korean cinematic adaptation of the manga *Boys Over Flowers*, which created the image of the *flower boy* in Korea and subsequently in many parts of the world.

Jung (2010) explains that the image of the rugged Korean man was gradually replaced by soft masculinity, which blends masculine and feminine elements to generate a strong appeal among Asian and international audiences. The most striking characteristics of this model include attractive boys with clear, smooth, hairless skin, toned and slim bodies, tall stature, long legs, oval-shaped faces, large and round eyes, small noses, and sweet smiles (Jung, 2010; Miller, 2006). Their behavior should be gentle, demonstrating feminine softness. Regarding behavior, the practice of *aegyo* – representing endearing or cute attitudes – is notable.

Historically and ideologically, *aegyo* is an action associated with femininity and Korean women, but it has been incorporated into soft masculinity. This practice materializes primarily through language, intonation, specific terms like *oppa* (a Korean word used by younger women to refer to older men, meaning "older brother"), childish sounds, and a sweet speaking style. It also involves gestures, expressions, and ways of dressing considered "cute" (Manietta, 2015).

Another relevant aspect is the ability of K-pop idols, whether in girl groups or boy bands, to please their fans, often through fanservice. Fanservice consists of actions idols perform to delight their audience. These actions may occur in live shows, interviews, or photo shoots that align with the group's album concept. *Aegyo* can be considered a form of fanservice, as it is often requested by fans. Another widely recognized form of fanservice among Asian idols involves interactions between group members, which can take the form of affection – such as hugs, hand touches, or comforting words – or simulated same-sex relationships by forming pairs known as *ships*, which fans may perceive as real couples. This strategy is used by group management companies to attract female audiences.

To understand how this strategy is received by fans, it is necessary to grasp the standardization of masculinity. In this context, Michael Scott Kimmel (2016) discusses how masculinity is socio-historically and culturally constructed in opposition to other groups, undergoing modifications according to European and American political needs, with the latter having the greatest influence. Dominant nations tend to create normative frameworks over others to maintain their dominance and superiority. To this end, countries mobilize media, cinema, and television industries, which disseminate images of virile, strong men devoid of feminine or gay traits. This process molds public perceptions of Asian men through prejudice and stereotypes.

In conclusion, fanservice contributes to reinforcing soft masculinity while simultaneously sparking fans' sexual imagination regarding idols, enhancing engagement with the group and their "couples" and increasing consumption of related productions and products. The third element, *dance-singing coordination*, pertains to idols' ability to sing and dance during a performance. As trainees, they learn to move synchronously in groups without losing the music's rhythm or choreography steps, practicing various dance styles and vocal techniques. In K-pop, groups are internally divided into the *vocal line* (members with greater vocal ability) and the *rap line* (the group's rappers). Although they have distinct roles in executing a song, all members also dance.

After presenting insights into Korean fan communities and the characteristics of K-pop groups and the soft masculinity (Jung, 2010) displayed by their members, the next section explores concepts from Queer Theory necessary for analyzing the studied object.

4 Queer Theory

Before addressing social gender and Queer Theory, it is important to highlight some considerations about language, as it is through language that the discourses shaping and valuing society are constructed. To this end, we begin with Bakhtin's notion that language is simultaneously constituted by and constitutive of individuals and society, as it is an essential part of social interaction. Through and with language, we understand and interpret the world around us and express our thoughts and positions. In this sense, language echoes the voices, values, ideologies, and worldviews of those who have used it at some point in history. Therefore, it cannot be seen as neutral, since its users are concrete individuals – that is, real people situated in a specific time and space – who, in their daily use, bring their axiological concreteness into their utterances (Volóchinov, 2017).

In this context, we build upon the concept of the ideological sign, as our notions of gender and sexuality are ideological, social, and historical constructs that impose meanings and labels on individuals while generalizing behavioral and regulatory norms to be followed. Everything that is part of humanity's surrounding reality can become a sign (Volóchinov, 2017). This process occurs because of the meaning imbued in an object, product, being, or other elements of material reality. Thus, when socially assigned value, they transcend mere material reality and become part of another reality filled with ideological symbols (Volóchinov, 2017). The term *queer*, for instance,

upon becoming an identity marker for different individuals, acquired another ideological value, transforming from a derogatory term into a symbol of resistance for those who identify as Queer.

In our society, terms such as woman, man, feminine, and masculine are signs laden with social and ideological values that anchor individuals based on their biological characteristics. These values begin to be imposed on humans even in the womb, when the sex is discovered through choices made by parents, relatives, and the market, as the range of colors, clothing styles, toys, and accessories are directed by the male-female binary (Louro, 2000). Consequently, upon entering the world, the newborn is imbued with values, norms, and regulations related to its biological sex, declared at the time of sex-identification examinations and reinforced at birth. Gender is imposed on the individual from the moment their existence is recognized, and to sustain this imposition, social apparatuses work to standardize discourses, ensuring the maintenance and stabilization of the feminine-masculine binary.

A similar phenomenon occurs with heterosexuality, established as the standard for sexuality. It is assigned a set of norms aimed at its stabilization within society and at preventing the acceptance of other sexualities. To this end, behaviors are approved or rejected, and bodies are conditioned to conform to this standardization (Louro, 2000). Throughout life, individuals learn how to sit, behave in public and private spaces, dress, eat, and conduct themselves in ways that align with societal expectations for their gender and sexuality. Thus, all social spheres – sciences, religions, judicial systems, common sense, and the media – are utilized to maintain, confirm, and mold the sexual behaviors of individuals.

In this regard, Judith Butler (2017, p. 242, emphasis in the original) states that gender is “a stylized repetition of acts,” as it is produced through processes of stylization and standardization of bodies and behaviors. For the philosopher (2017, p. 241, emphasis in the original), “gender is a performance,” a series of strategically imposed acts designed to keep systems of compulsory control over bodies alive. The acts learned as feminine or masculine construct these notions and the idea of gender. Thus, femininity encompasses behaviors such as wearing makeup, tight or revealing clothing, and a greater “freedom” to show affection and attention, alongside domestic responsibilities. Masculinity, on the other hand, accepts the use of strength, “freedom” to frequent bars and parties, and exploring sexual desires, provided these are heterosexually oriented.

These notions are so deeply embedded in society that questioning them is often unacceptable. In *The History of Sexuality 1: The Will to Knowledge*, Michel Foucault (2020) discusses the regulation of conversations about sex and sexuality. For the philosopher, dialogue

on these topics was silenced and confined to increasingly private spaces, such as parents' bedrooms. Mechanisms of regulation, along with taboos, were created with prohibitive and punitive character to exclude such dialogues from public discourse. Counter to this silencing, there has been a proliferation of ways to explore and discuss these matters. In our time, as Foucault discusses, forms of regulation, control, stigmatization, and standardization of discourses about bodies and desires have multiplied. New institutions and spaces now complement long-established structures, such as religion, law, medicine, and others, which have found prominence in the virtual environment. Social networks, in particular, have become arenas where centripetal (dispersive) and centrifugal (restraining) forces (Bakhtin, 2015) clash over what can or cannot be discussed and accepted as "right" or "wrong."

On one side are those advocating for anchoring and "naturalizing" gender and sexuality to the body, perceiving it as "unequivocal," "self-evident," and "without ambiguity or inconstancy" (Louro, 2000, p. 8). This biological apparatus creates a standardization framework that facilitates the control and oppression of these bodies. To this end, we are constantly bombarded by crystallized discourses across all social spheres to mold bodies into patterns ensuring social acceptance. On the other side are those who challenge these systems and fixed notions, often viewed as deviants. These individuals, failing to fit normalization standards, are marginalized and subjected to negative valuations aimed at expelling them from societal inclusion.

In this context, same-sex relationships are often defined by a polarizing dualism, which, based on notions of passivity and activity, assigns characteristics and roles to individuals. Foucault (1984) explores this concept in discussing affection among same-sex individuals in ancient Greece. Relationships were based on the social power positions of the participants, often involving an older man and a youth. According to the philosopher (1984), two roles were defined, active and passive:

On one side were those who performed the sexual activity (who must ensure its moderation and appropriateness); on the other, those who were the partners-objects, the figures upon and with whom it was exercised. The former were men, more precisely adult and free men; the latter, understandably, included women, but they figured as one element in a broader category sometimes referenced to designate the possible objects of pleasure: 'women, boys, slaves' (Foucault, 1984, p. 46, our translation).

Based on Foucault's assertion, we can see an equivalence between "women, boys, and slaves," as they assumed a passive role in relationships. In Greek society, adult free men held

power and could not be placed in a passive position. Activity, in this sense, represented the ability to provide for the other, the passive one (Lins Júnior, 2013). This active ideal encompassed traits like strength, agility, courage, and rationality. To be active implied the ability to dominate the partner, elevate oneself to a higher and active position, and control the relationship. Conversely, passivity was tied to delicacy (in body and actions), beauty, emotion, submission, tenderness, softness, and charm, characteristics reflected in clothing, behavior, and societal actions.

It is noteworthy that while efforts to restrict sexualities, bodies, and genders persist, counter-movements challenge social control mechanisms. *Queer* was initially a pejorative English term used to demean homosexual men and women, meaning abnormal, strange, abject, or weird. However, pro-homosexuality movements adopted and redefined the term, using it “precisely to characterize their oppositional and contesting perspective” (Louro, 2001, p. 546). As Richard Miskolci (2021, p. 26) asserts, the Queer movement “seeks to make visible the injustices and violence inherent in the dissemination and demand for cultural norms and conventions, injustices and violence involved both in creating the 'normals' and the 'abnormals.'” Therefore, it questions and rejects norms that stabilize notions of gender and sexuality, enforcing the exclusion of differences.

Guacira Louro (2001, p. 546) explains that Queer “clearly represents the difference that refuses to be assimilated or tolerated and, therefore, its form of action is much more transgressive and disruptive,” as it acknowledges the plurality of ways to live and understand sexuality and gender. Furthermore, contrary to societal norms, gender and sexual behaviors do not remain confined to attributes assigned to one or the other. These attributes can belong to both genders, allowing individuals’ performances to transition between them “regardless of our biological sex” (Miskolci, 2021, p. 32).

After discussing issues related to the construction of gender, sexuality, and Queer theory, in the next section, we analyze a fanfiction narrative and how the fan-author constructs the male character in light of Queer theory.

5 The Fanfiction Character in Light of Queer Theory

Duality is a fanfiction posted on the Spirit Fanfics and Stories platform, written by *mirmini*. The fanfic is not based on a pre-existing narrative but rather on the K-pop group BTS. The narrative consists of only one chapter, posted on February 2, 2021, and contains adult content, which implies

depictions of alcohol or drug consumption, violence, or sexual scenes. The central focus of the narrative is BTS member Park Jimin.

The title of the fanfic was the first element to catch our attention due to its meanings. According to the Priberam Dictionary (2023), "duality" is a feminine noun that means "the quality or property of being double." The *Dicio – Online Portuguese Dictionary* (2023) adds that it signifies "the characteristic of being dual, double, corresponding to two" and "the quality of containing, in its essence, two substances, two principles, two natures." The second definition provided by *Dicio* is closer to the sense attributed to this term by K-pop fans. Duality refers to an idol's ability to adapt to different situations, visibly altering their posture, expressions, behavior, and gaze. This understanding runs through the entire fanfiction and is essential for understanding the construction of the central character.

To begin, it is important to introduce the real person who inspired the character. Park Jimin is a South Korean singer, songwriter, and dancer, a member of the boyband BTS. Before joining BTS, he participated in several dance groups, winning awards in his hometown of Busan. He studied contemporary dance at the Busan Arts High School. In 2013, he auditioned for Big Hit Entertainment and became part of BTS. Regarding his physical characteristics, Jimin (the Western spelling of his name) is 1.74 meters tall, making him, alongside another member, the shortest in the group. His body is slim but muscular due to years of dance training, with a defined waist, toned legs, and prominent buttocks. His skin is yellow-toned, his natural hair color is dark brown, and, like most idols, his hair is frequently dyed in other colors and remains straight. His eyes are small and dark brown, and unlike the typical standard of Korean idols, he does not have double eyelids. His nose is somewhat wide, triangular, and flat. His cheeks are naturally prominent, to the point that he was considered chubby for some time. His lips are full, small, and pinkish. His *eye smile*—a feature where his eyes appear to smile along with his lips—is one of his most attractive attributes.

Beyond his physical characteristics, Jimin is considered by other members to be the most affectionate and emotional. His affectionate nature is displayed in many moments, as he frequently hugs, touches, jokes, gives gifts, and speaks words of encouragement to other members. His emotional side is also evident, as he is the member who cries at the end of shows or during emotionally intense moments. He is also the member who is always making others smile. Among the members, he is the one who excels most at performing *aegyo*, using his physical traits, voice, and gestures to captivate fans and groupmates in a cute manner. It is also important to mention Jimin's voice and stage performance. Jimin is a Lyric Tenor, which means his singing is clear, light,

bright, and of medium range. He has a versatile vocal range, reaching both low and high notes, and performing falsettos. Dance is another defining characteristic of Jimin. While most idols perform street or urban dance styles, Jimin specializes in contemporary dance, a softer and more theatrical style.

Some attributes of the real Jimin are used by the fan-author to compose the character, such as his height, hair color, cheeks, voice tone, and some traits he performs, like cuteness and kindness. The real Jimin, despite performing soft masculinity (Fig. 1) common among idols, changes his behavior when on stage, often showcasing soft masculinity or displaying more sensual and masculine traits (as illustrated in Fig. 2). This transition between behavioral performances is a tool typically used to please fans and is referred to as duality. Park Jimin's duality as an idol is well-known among fans due to the fundamental change in his posture and expressions.

Figura 1 – Park Jimin *aegyo*



Fonte: Pinterest. Disponível em: <https://br.pinterest.com/pin/1065453224314890099/>.

Figura 2 – Park Jimin palco



Fonte: Pinterest. Fonte: <https://br.pinterest.com/pin/762234305671438544/>.

From this point onward, we present the fanfiction character and the discursive path employed by the author in their construction. Jimin is portrayed as a gay man with a cute appearance, a gentle and supportive personality. He has difficulty forming romantic relationships due to his shyness and the way his appearance conveys docility and fragility. The plot of the narrative revolves around Jimin's struggles to find a partner because of his physical traits. At the beginning of the story, he is described as follows:

"Park Jimin was always a quiet and overly shy person; he never had many friends, but the ones he had were enough. His black, straight hair practically covered his eyes as it had grown long, but he liked it that way. His cheeks were chubby, as was the rest of his body, and always rosy—not out of embarrassment but because that was their natural tone. In summary, Jimin was a cute man, almost too cute for his age. His voice had a slightly higher pitch, and his height was average, though he was almost always shorter than the people in his social circle. Everyone thought Park was adorable and kind [...]. [...]

Being cute was something that bothered him for a long time. Besides his sweet demeanor, his body was soft and cuddly. He would get upset because nobody took him seriously or acknowledged his frustration about the situation, but getting angry only made him even more adorable. It was a real nightmare." (Mirmini, 2021, emphasis ours)

In constructing the character, the fan-author employs expressions and adjectives that help in this process. In the excerpts above, the emphasized terms are used to help the reader envision Jimin's appearance and personality. Therefore, it is important to understand the meanings attributed to these adjectives to uncover the mechanisms employed by the fan-author in crafting the character. *Fofo* (cute) is an adjective that, informally, means "pretty, sweet, or evoking tenderness or affection. = LOVABLE, CHERISHED" (Priberam Dictionary, 2023). *Gentil* (kind) is another adjective, defined as "elegant, slim, graceful. Delicate, lovable, charming" (Priberam Dictionary, 2023). *Meigo* (gentle/sweet) has three meanings: "Manifesting care or affection; imbued with gentleness. = AFFECTIONATE, LOVING, TENDER. Possessing kindness. = KIND. Pleasing or causing a pleasant sensation (e.g., a gentle breeze). = AGREEABLE, SOFT" (Priberam Dictionary, 2023). Finally, *adorável* (adorable) means "worthy of adoration. Enchanting" (Priberam Dictionary, 2023).

To construct the character, the fan-author strategically employs adjectives that align with the Euro-American perception of Asian men, who, according to Hugo Okabayashi (2019) and Ishida & Braga (2019), are often characterized as emasculated, less masculine, infantilized, and delicate. Brazilian readers, immersed in these discourses, recognize the evaluative sense of the adjectives used by the author and associate these traits with someone occupying the passive role in a relationship, as delicacy, tenderness, softness, and charm are attributed to this position. This aligns with the analysis of Foucault (1984) and reinforced by Lins Júnior (2013), which shows that in homoerotic relationships, individuals are valued according to the same social norms established for heterosexual relationships. In line with Kimmel (2016), effeminate gay men, much like the way Asian men are perceived in Western society, are viewed as passive subjects, as their performance mirrors qualities traditionally attributed to women, such as fragility, submissiveness, lack of virility, and emasculation—qualities that distance them from heterosexual ideals of activity. Thus, the passive traits imbued in the character align him more with femininity and distance him from the ideal of masculinity.

However, there is a reason why the fanfic is titled *Duality*. The choice of title relates to the fact that Jimin's daily behavior does not align with his preferences in sexual roles. That is, despite his actions being perceived by others as passive, during intimate moments, he prefers to take on the active role in the relationship. This preference, contrasted with his appearance, creates problems with his partners, who cannot reconcile the idea of being in a submissive position to someone they perceive as inferior due to passive traits. Here, it is crucial to acknowledge the

centrality of the penis in attributing positions of power in a romantic relationship within the Euro-American perception. This occurs because masculinity implies activity, domination, and the capacity to provide for and protect one's partner (Lins Júnior, 2013). Thus, by assuming the passive role within this ideology, the man ceases to be active in his desire and becomes the object of another's desire. This means he is stripped of his masculinity, which implies activity, dominance, and strength; without these attributes, he ceases to be a provider and becomes provided for. Jimin's difficulty in finding partners stems from the fact that his physical characteristics, manner of dress, and behavior align with passivity, the opposite pole of what is expected for the active subject in a relationship. The contradiction between Jimin's characterization and his sexual preference creates discomfort among his partners, who either cannot accept being placed in a position of "inferiority" or never come to know this aspect, as Jimin's appearance is not attractive to them.

To understand this construction, we draw on Bakhtin's concept of reflection and refraction. According to Bakhtin (2015), in discursive interaction, discourses are interpreted based on the axiological charge of their participants. Using physical concepts, the philosopher (2015) explains that a discourse can generate multiple interpretations, as each participant is a heterogeneous subject, constituted by unique worldviews—a process called refraction—or can, to some degree of fidelity, be understood as a mirror of a given reality, called reflection. In accordance with this thought, we can affirm that the fan-author of *Duality* constructs their character based on the discourses disseminated in South American society about masculinity, which are rooted in ideals propagated by agents of the social milieu, such as media, cinema, television, religion, politics, and education. These ideals establish that Asian men are feminine, non-virile, fragile, and submissive. Additionally, the soft masculinity performed by idols is perceived as indicative of homosexuality within South American standards, reinforcing the fan's interpretation. Based on their knowledge base, the fan-author constructs their narrative by refracting and reflecting aspects of their axiological reality concerning Euro-American and Asian masculinity standards, as evidenced in the characterization of their character.

It had always been very difficult for him to form romantic relationships because people generally looked for someone sexy who took the initiative, at least that is what is expected of a man in his position. But Jimin liked cute things, and the few times he tried to be seen as masculine in his daily life, he failed.
[...]

The men he had relationships with also turned out to be a problem; they always preferred someone stronger or thinner, with attitude and sex appeal. But Park could not offer that, and his sweet demeanor and appearance destroyed any semblance of a masculine aura. Moreover, he was always afraid to reveal his desires to his partners; no one would expect someone so cute and kind to like what he truly enjoyed. Basically, he had a frustrating love life.

It was always the same thing: when he found someone who liked him sexually, that person wanted to be more serious in daily life, and when he found someone who appreciated his cute and sweet personality, they seemed entirely unwilling to accommodate his preferences. It was terrible—not that he had thousands of people at his feet to choose from, but the few who showed interest always left him dissatisfied in some way. (Mirmini, 2021, emphasis ours)

In the highlighted excerpts, the terms chosen by the fan-author reflect how society idealizes the active subject in a relationship. Adjectives such as "strong," "thin," "sexy," and the adjectival clause "who took the initiative" are used to emphasize what is expected by partners. The importance of activity in a relationship is evidenced through the use of these terms, as the ability to "take initiative," alongside the other attributes, is a characteristic associated with masculinity and linked to the ideal of an active man responsible for approaching, seducing, and conquering his partner. However, there is an apparent contradiction between the expected performance of a gay man in this position and the performance presented by Jimin, who is defined as cute, sweet, and shy but, contrary to expectations, acts as the active partner. At times, when he is attracted to someone, his interest is either not mutual, or the person expects him to change his demeanor to align with a role consistent with his position.

The sexuality of Jimin, the singer (in real life), is not publicly known, as the sexuality or relationship status of K-pop artists, in general, is not disclosed within Korean society, which does not interpret idols' actions as demonstrations of homosexuality due to an understanding of the workings of the K-pop industry. For South Korean fans, the artist's actions are perceived as part of the masculinity standard performed by idols within this industry. Conversely, the South American fan, influenced by a dual and stereotypical view of gender roles, tends to create an image of someone delicate, fragile, and effeminate—traits historically attributed to femininity. For this reason, in most fanfics, he is constructed as an effeminate and passive gay man. It is interesting to note that the attributes that constitute soft masculinity—such as dance, the use of cosmetics and tight

or revealing clothing, *aegyo* practice, and *fanservice*—combined with the way Asian men have been represented in media, cinema, and television allow fans to create the image of a false homosexuality of the idol.

In regard to the fanfic, it is clear that the character Jimin reflects and refracts a gender performance that incorporates elements of the singer's behavior through the South American fan-author's perspective. This perspective is shaped by a stereotypical and racist lens that reinforces the perception of the artist's homosexuality. The construction of the character carries markers of this vision in how he is characterized and perceived by those around him. To build this image, the fan-author mobilizes a linguistic repertoire of adjectives imbued with meanings and evaluative positions that evoke delicacy, docility, submissiveness, sweetness, and the set of characteristics attributed to femininity and the socially determined roles in a homoerotic relationship.

However, the highlighted excerpts demonstrate that the character's construction occurs dynamically, sometimes aligning with the labeling ideals of masculinity and the classificatory dichotomy of active and/or passive roles—when observing Jimin's choice of clothing—while at other times demonstrating that these roles cannot be established based on behavioral standards, dress, or speech patterns. This occurs when the character reveals that, contrary to his appearance, he prefers to take on the active role during sexual activity. The gender performance portrayed by the character aligns with Queer Theory's understanding, as he cannot be confined to stereotypical gender norms of masculinity and femininity. Furthermore, he does not fit the archetype of passivity and/or activity, having incorporated aspects of both in his construction. This is evident in the strangeness generated and the difficulty he faces in being accepted and finding partners willing to engage in a relationship with him.

Final considerations

This study aimed to analyze how the fan-author constructs a character based on a real person, supported by the way the Korean artist performs soft masculinity. This is an important strategy employed by the K-pop industry to attract fans from all over the world to consume the various products associated with these groups. The practice of *aegyo* and *fanservice*, as pointed out by Jung (2010), Miller (2006), and Manietta (2015), fosters the idea, particularly for South American fans, that the actions and interactions among group members are indicative of a false

homosexuality of the artists. This perception materializes in the construction of the fictional character.

Through the analysis, we observed the discursive strategy used by the fan-author to construct the character, which is shaped based on what Western societies establish regarding the gender performance of Asian men, women, gay men, and heterosexual Western men, as discussed by Ishida and Braga (2019) and Okabayashi (2019). However, South Korean society does not recognize these elements as indicators of false homosexuality, as they are seen as part of the artistic performance, such as the use of makeup and tight or short clothing, seductive dances, the practice of *aegyo*, or performing *fanservice* with other group members, without questioning the idols' sexuality (Jung, 2010). From the perspective of the South American fan, however, these actions lead them to perceive in the artist a gender performance that deviates from the heteronormative standard they recognize. Consequently, in constructing their text, the artist's traits are reflected and refracted in a performance of either a gay man or a Queer man, transgressing the expected behavioral standards for their gender role.

Finally, this investigation was made possible by adopting Applied Linguistics as a field of knowledge, which allows for an in/transdisciplinary perspective on research (Moita Lopes, 2006). The findings demonstrate how dialogue with different authors and fields enables a responsive scientific inquiry into how a fanfiction character is constructed. This construction is socio-historically marked and permeated by evaluative utterances that enunciate and materialize social issues. Moreover, it reveals how the social discourses mobilized by the fan-author are imbued with views on gender, the body, masculinity, and more. These views, as we have pointed out, are not devoid of value or purpose and are thus permeated by voices and issues from multiple cultures in a clash that solidifies hybrid perspectives. This perception was only made possible through dialogue with authors who discuss the body, gender, and sexuality—such as Louro (2001), Miskolci (2021), Butler (2017), Foucault (1984)—masculinity—Kimmel (2016) and Jung (2010)—and linguistic phenomena—Bakhtin (2015, 2016) and Volóchinov (2017)—who guided us toward identifying and selecting the cues to be observed and analyzed in the fanfiction text.

CRediT

Acknowledgement: Not applicable

Financing: The paper is the result of doctoral research funded by the Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior (CAPES)

Conflicts of interest: The authors certify that they have no commercial or associative interest that represents a conflict of interest in relation to the manuscript.

Ethical Approval: Not applicable

Contributor Roles:

ANDRADE, Jandara Assis de Oliveira.

Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Project administration, Resources, Validation, Visualization, Writing - original draft, Writing - review and editing.

CASADO ALVES, Maria da Penha

Formal analysis, Project administration, Validation, Writing - review and editing.

SILVA, Juan dos Santos

Conceptualization, Data curation, Project administration, Resources, Supervision, Validation, Writing - review and editing.

Referências

ANDRADE, J. A. D. O. *Embates de uma mulher profana: uma análise dialógica da construção de Bella Swan na fic Bloody Lips*. Dissertação (mestrado em Estudos de Práticas Discursivas) – Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Norte. Natal, 2021. p. 189 f. Disponível em: https://repositorio.ufrn.br/bitstream/123456789/52279/1/Embatesmulherprofana_Andrade_2020.pdf. Acesso em: 17 Jan. 2022.

BAKHTIN, Mikhail M. *Os gêneros do romance*. Tradução Paulo Bezerra. São Paulo: Editora 34, 2016.

BAKHTIN, Mikhail M. *Teoria do Romance I: a estilística*. Tradução Paulo Bezerra. São Paulo: Editora 34, 2015.

BUTLER, Judith. *Problemas de gênero: feminismo e subversão da identidade*. Tradução Renato Aguiar. 15. ed. Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 2017. (Sujeito e História).

CHEN, Lu. *Chinese Fans of Japanese and Korean Pop Culture*. Nova Iorque: Routledge, 2018.

DUALIDADE. In: *Dicionário Priberam da Língua Portuguesa*. [S.l.]: Priberam, 2024. Disponível em: <https://dicionario.priberam.org/dualidade>. Acesso em: 21 jun. 2024.

DUALIDADE. In: *Dicio – Dicionário online de Português*. [S.l.]: 7Graus, 2024. Disponível em: <https://www.dicio.com.br/dualidade/>. Acesso em: 21 jun. 2024.

FOUCAULT, Michael. *História da Sexualidade 1: a vontade de saber*. Tradução Maria Thereza da Costa Albuquerque e J. A. Guilhon Albuquerque. 10. ed. Rio de Janeiro/São Paulo: Paz e Terra, 2020. (Coleção Biblioteca de Filosofia).

FOUCAULT, Michael. *A História da Sexualidade 2: o uso dos prazeres*. Tradução de tradução Maria Thereza da Costa Albuquerque. Rio de Janeiro: Edições Graal, 1984.

GINZBURG, C. Mitos, emblemas, sinais: morfologia e história. Tradução Frederico Carotti. São Paulo: companhia das letras, 1989.

ISHIDA, Tamilyn Tiemi Massuda; BRAGA, Eduardo Cardoso. Fetichização da mulher leste asiática e de suas dispersões transnacionais: o papel do design em sua conscientização e resistência. *Iniciação – Revista de Iniciação Científica, Tecnológica e Artística*, São Paulo, v. 8, n. 4, p. 53-68, jun., 2019.

JENKINS, Henry. *Cultura da convergência*. Tradução Susana L. de Alexandria. 2. ed. São Paulo: Aleph, 2009.

JIN, Dal Yong. Hallyu 2.0: The New Korean Wave in the Creative Industry. *International Institute Journal*, University of Michigan. v. 2, n. 1, p. 3-7, 2012. Disponível em: <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/i/ij/11645653.0002.102/--hallyu-20-the-new-korean-wave-in-the-creative-industry?rgn=main;view=fulltext>. Acesso em: 12 jun. 2024.

JUNG, Sun. Chogukjeok pan-East Asian soft masculinity: Reading Boys over Flowers, Coffee Prince and Shinhwa fan fiction. In: BLACK, Daniel; EPSTEIN, Stephen; TOKITA, Alison (Org.). *Complicated Currents: Media Flows, Soft Power and East Asia*. Melbourne: Monash University ePress, 2010. p. 189–210.

KIMMEL, Michael Scott. Masculinidade como homofobia: Medo, vergonha e silêncio na construção de identidade de gênero. Tradução de Sandra Mina Takakura. *Equatorial – Revista do Programa de Pós-Graduação em Antropologia Social*, v. 3, n. 4, p. 97–124, 2016. Disponível em: <https://periodicos.ufrn.br/equatorial/article/view/14910>. Acesso em: 14 ago. 2023.

LÉVY, Pierry. *Cibercultura*. Tradução Carlos Irineu da Costa. São Paulo: 34, 1999.

LEUNG, S. Catching the K-Pop Wave: Globality in the Production, Distribution, and Consumption of South Korean Popular. *Senior Capstone Projects*, 2012. Disponível em: http://digitalwindow.vassar.edu/senior_capstone/149. Acesso em: 14 mar. 2023.

LINS JÚNIOR, José Raymundo. Representações da homoafetividade no conto “Brokeback Mountain”: (contra)dicções relevantes. *Revista Língua & Literatura*, 15, 2013, p. 73-100 Disponível em: <https://revistas.fw.uri.br/index.php/revistalinguaeliteratura/article/view/757>. Acesso em: 12 set. 2023.

LOURO, Guacira Lopes. *Teoria Queer: uma política pós-identitária para a educação*. Revista de Estudos Feministas, Dossiê Gênero e Educação, Florianópolis, Santa Catarina, v. 9, n. 2, 2001, p. 541-553.

LOURO, Guacira Lopes. Pedagogias da sexualidade. In: LOURO, Guacira Lopes (Org.). *O corpo educado: pedagogias da sexualidade*. 2. ed. Belo Horizonte: Autentica, 2000. p. 7-35.

MANIETTA, Joseph. Transnational masculinities: the distributive performativity of gender in korean boy bands. 2015. 83 f. Thesis (Master of Arts) – Department of Linguistics, University of Colorado, Missouri, 2015.

MISKOLCI, Richard. *Teoria Queer: um aprendizado pelas diferenças*. 3. ed. rev. e ampl. 3. Reimp. Belo Horizonte: Autêntica: UFOP, 2021. (Série Cadernos da Diversidade; 6).

MILLER, Laura. *Beauty Up: Exploring Contemporary Japanese Body Aesthetics*. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2006.

MOITA LOPES, Luiz Paulo da. Introdução: Uma Lingüística Aplicada mestiça e ideológica – interrogando o campo como lingüista aplicado. In: MOITA LOPES, Luiz Paulo da. *Por uma lingüística aplicada indisciplinar*. 2. ed. São Paulo: Parábola editorial, 2006., p. 13-44.

OH, Ingyu. The Globalization of K-pop: Korea's Place in the Global Music Industry. *Korea Observer*, v. 44, n. 3, set. 2013, p. 389-409.

SAKURAI, Célia. *Os Japoneses*. São Paulo: Editora Contexto, 2007.

VOLÓCHINOV, Valentin. *Marxismo e Filosofia da linguagem: problemas fundamentais do método sociológico na ciência da linguagem*. Tradução Sheila Grillo e Ekaterina Vólkova Américo. São Paulo: Editora 34, 2017.