A critical narrative analysis of gendered L2 selves: Examining the experiences of British learners of Korean before, during and after study abroad

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The candidate confirms that the work submitted is their own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

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Note on Korean romanisation

The romanisation of Korean vocabulary in this thesis follows the conventions used in the original academic references to maintain consistency with them. Therefore, the Korean romanisation in this thesis may adhere to the McCune-Reischauer Romanisation (MR) System, the Yale Romanisation of Korean or the Revised Romanisation (RR) System, depending on the source.

For Korean words not derived from academic references, those that are more widely recognised in the Revised Romanisation (RR) System, (e.g., Seoul) are presented in RR.

Abstract

This study provides a critical narrative analysis of gendered experiences of British learners of Korean along their Korean learning trajectories at university. It specifically examines their gendered L2 selves, which are intricately shaped by: their knowledge and perceptions of discursively constructed gender norms in Korea; dominant performances of masculinity and femininity in K-pop music, which the learners report as the initial attractor to the Korean language and culture; their lived experiences during study abroad in Korea; and finally, their gendered agency.

As the study abroad component in the learners' undergraduate degree programme provides a critical time frame, this study interviewed the participants at three distinct points: before, during and after study abroad. By using semi-structured interviews across these three phases, the study collected narratives in which the participants' nuanced gendered experiences related to their Korean learning are reflected.

To acknowledge the discursive nature of the participants' gendered narratives, this study employs critical narrative analysis, an analytic framework that examines personal narratives within wider social contexts where power discourses are enacted, (re)produced and contested. Critical narrative analysis reveals how the participants construct their knowledge of gender across British and Korean contexts and continuously negotiate their gendered selves according to their cultural contexts while practising gendered agency to varying degrees.

In sum, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how second language learning and socialisation intersect with socially constructed gender norms, and how such complexities are embedded in the development and performance of gendered L2 selves, which are constantly negotiated and re-fashioned as an integral part of learners' identity work in their second language.

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1. Introduction

This chapter introduces the research topic, which is a critical narrative analysis of gendered L2 selves, which examines the experiences of British learners of Korean before, during and after study abroad. Section 1.1. presents the rationale of the study, justifying it as a timely project. Section 1.2. defines key terminologies used in this thesis to ensure clarity. Following this, the research questions are introduced in Section 1.3. Lastly, Section 1.4. provides an overview of this thesis, offering brief descriptions of each subsequent chapter.

1.1. Rationale of the study

The motivation for this study arises from the recent surge in Korean language learners in the United Kingdom (henceforth UK), a trend closely connected to the global spread of Korean popular culture (Kiaer, 2020). This is in stark contrast to the general decline in foreign language learning in the UK, where languages other than English (henceforth LOTEs) have often been undervalued and under-supported (Lanvers, 2017; Lanvers, Doughty and Thompson 2018; Lanvers, Thompson and East, 2021; Muradás-Taylor and Taylor, 2023). The growing number of students enrolled in Korean programmes at UK higher education institution in the past decade reflects the trend (Prentice, 2022), marking Korean as a unique case in a broader landscape of declining interest in language learning in the UK.

The growing demand for Korean language learning in the UK reflects the growing popularity of Korean popular culture in recent years, particularly K-pop music (Hall and Otte, 2021), which has achieved widespread global appeal through fandom, digital platforms and social media (Yoon, 2011). Unlike traditional instrumental motivations for language learning, such as career advancement or economic mobility, many British learners of Korean are drawn to the language primarily due to their fascination with Korean popular culture. For these

learners, the consumption of the media, especially K-pop, acts both as a source of entertainment and a gateway to Korean language and culture. In this regard, their unique language learning motivation may be understood more as leisure-oriented (Kubota, 2011), which is tied to their enjoyment in consuming K-pop as a source of entertainment and cultural attraction.

In the increasing popularity of Korean popular culture and its global reception, gender in Korean media has emerged as a salient topic in academic research (Elfving-Hwang, 2011; 2020a; Jung, 2011; Khedun-Burgoine, 2023; Kim, 2022; Kuwahara, 2014; Laurie, 2016). Particularly, K-pop has emerged as highly gendered, promoting and (re)producing certain types of masculinity and femininity that reflect some gender ideals in contemporary Korea (see Section 2.4). Given that K-pop serves as an initial attractor to the Korean language and culture for many learners, such gendered elements in K-pop may not only serve as a form of entertainment for learners of Korean but also as cultural knowledge which informs their understanding of gender norms in Korean society. In this regard, British learners who consume K-pop may also consider some dominant types of gender representation in K-pop as a point of reference of how gender is normatively constructed and performed in the Korean cultural context.

These British learners of Korean, despite their growing numbers and unique motivation to learn the language, remain an under-researched group in the field of LOTEs learning and more broadly, second language acquisition (henceforth SLA). Among these learners, those who study Korean at university have greater opportunities to gain more direct cultural input through study abroad experiences in Korea, during which they develop deeper insights into Korean society and culture. Although study abroad offers a context where learners directly engage with second language (L2) culture, it is reported a less researched L2 learning context

and thus requires further exploration (Mahmoodi and Yousefi, 2022). To address these research gaps, this study examines the gendered experiences of British learners of Korean in relation to learning the language, following their study abroad trajectories.

SLA research has advanced our understanding of the multifaceted nature of language learning through interdisciplinary approaches, including cognitive, sociocultural and psycholinguistic perspectives. Especially, studies with a sociocultural focus have contributed to a richer understanding of the social processes underlying L2 learning, illuminating the complex relationship between language, identity and society. Despite their extensive contributions, however, insufficient attention has been paid to certain intersections of language learning, particularly gender in second language contexts. This gap is particularly noticeable when gender is understood as a social construction shaped by power discourse in society as well as one of core constructs of identity.

In language learning, learner identity is intricately connected with issues of power and social positioning (Norton, 2000). Contributing to this perspective, some previous studies examined how learners navigate competing ideologies in multilingual settings (Pavlenko and Blackledge, 2004) and demonstrated learners' shifting identities in the contexts of migration, foreign language learning and study abroad (Block, 2007). Studies in this nature highlight that language learning is not merely about developing linguistic competence but a complex process which encompasses identity work, involving the adoption of new social ideologies and behaviours that align with the normative practices of L2 society (Duff, 2007).

In line with this approach, this study situates itself within the framework of second language socialisation and explores how British learners of Korean recruited in this study perceive gender in Korea and negotiate their gendered selves in L2 during their Korean learning journey through critical narrative analysis (see Section 4.8.). Second language

socialisation involves the development of social identities and a sense of belonging in the L2 culture, which are shaped by broader social ideologies and power structures (Duff, 2007; Ward, 2022). As the learners study Korean, they do not only learn the language but also navigate normative practices in Korean culture and negotiate their L2 selves, a part of which includes their gender identity.

Focusing on the negotiation of gendered L2 selves (see Section 3.5.) in second language socialisation is particularly relevant to learners who live the realities of their L2 culture (e.g., study abroad). Gender, as socially constructed category (Butler, 1990), plays a critical role in how individual learners interact, communicate, and perform their identities in different cultural and linguistic contexts (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2003). In many societies, including Korea, gender ideologies significantly influence social interactions, language use, and cultural practices. Korean society has its own cultural gender norms and expectations that are not only reflected in popular culture such as K-pop but also in daily practices, which may shape learners' gendered experience while learning the language. For British learners of Korean in this study, engaging with gender norms in L2 can be an integral part in the construction of their gendered L2 selves as they may perform gender in constant navigation of their own self and agency in relation to what they experience as normative gender practices in L2 culture.

As the learners in this study progress in their Korean language journey especially through study abroad, they move beyond their initial perceptions of Korean society shaped by media consumption and engage with the lived realities of gender norms in Korea. Narratives can recount these gendered experiences in learners' own voices, revealing how they negotiate their gendered L2 selves in relation to how they perceive and interact with the socially constructed gender norms in their target language culture. To examine the gendered

narratives both at personal and societal level, critical narrative analysis is employed as the primary analytic framework (see Section 4.8).

In sum, this study responds to the timely opportunity to explore how British learners of Korean navigate the intersection of language, identity and gender ideology in their second language socialisation. It seeks to address a critical gap identified in the field of SLA by focusing on the role of gender in L2 learning, shedding light on how learners engage with and respond to the gender norms and ideologies in their target culture. By examining the gendered experience of these learners, the research aims to offer more insights into the complex interplay between language, identity and gender in the context of second language socialisation, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of the social and cultural dimensions of SLA.

1.2. Terminological decisions

1.2.1. Korean as the participants' 'L2'

In this study, the participants had prior experience of learning a foreign language before entering university. Strictly speaking, Korean may not be their 'second' language, as the participants had studied other languages in formal education settings. While this study is aware of the complexities of learning additional languages such as L3 in multilingualism research (Hammarberg, 2010), Korean is referred to as the participants' L2 throughout the thesis for the following reasons. Most importantly, all participants' major focus of learning was Korean at the time of the data collection, and none reported having proficiency in any language other than English, their native language. The decision also aligns with Ortega's (2014) flexible approach to the definition of L2 that any language learned after L1 may be specified as L2. In this sense, second or additional language can be used interchangeably, meaning any language that is learned later in the learner's life. This perspective subsequently

includes foreign languages to mean a second language in the field of second language acquisition, as the suspension of a strict distinction between the two may facilitate research (Ortega, 2014, p.6). Furthermore, the terminological choice to position Korean as L2 facilitates the conceptualisation of the 'gendered L2 selves' (see Section 3.5), an extension of the L2 self-concepts in the L2 Motivational Self-System (Dörnyei, 2005; 2009), which is central to this study's exploration of gendered identities in second language socialisation. By maintaining consistency with the terminology, this research aims to create a clearer conceptual link between the exiting theoretical framework and the newly proposed construct.

1.2.2. Gendered narrative as discourse

This study is dominantly guided by the gendered narratives of British learners of Korean in relation to their learning Korean. Narratives are socially constructed and situated (Bamberg, 2004a; 2004b) and provide an essential source for understanding not only the broad nature of stories but also how they relate to normative practices and institutional discourses (Ochs and Capps, 2011). In this vein, this thesis considers gendered narratives as discourse.

Foucault (1972) conceptualises discourse as a system of representation that governs the production of knowledge, thought, and social practices. In line with this Foucauldian view, discourse in this study refers to the ways that language and knowledge are constructed and how these constructions reflect and perpetuate power dynamics within society. In this sense, both discourse and narrative are closely linked to broader social practices which shape how individuals construct their sense of self and define their relationship to others, often reinforcing or challenging dominant social ideologies.

This approach to discourse is applied in critical discourse analysis, a methodological framework that examines discursive practices in various disciplines. In this thesis, critical narrative analysis (see Section 4.8), which merges critical discourse analysis with narrative

analysis, is employed as the primary analytic framework. Critical narrative analysis (Souto-Manning, 2012) is particularly suited to examining how the participants' gendered stories intersect with broader social gender discourses they experience in L2. This analytic framework foregrounds the discursive nature of narratives, highlighting both the personal elements within them and the gender ideologies, as a wider social discourse, that shape these narratives.

1.3. Research questions

This study aims to investigate the complexities between second language learning and the negotiation of gendered selves experienced by L2 learners of Korean on study abroad university programmes. Specifically, the research investigates how British learners of Korean recruited for this study engage with the gender norms of both their L1 and L2 cultures on the trajectory of second language socialisation. The following research questions are designed to guide the study:

> RQ1. How do British learners of the Korean language perceive dominant forms of gender in Korea?

The first question seeks to explore how learners interpret and internalise gender representations in Korean media and society, particularly focusing on dominant gender ideologies. Given the role of Korean popular culture, particularly K-pop, in their motivation to learn the language, the study examines how learners' initial perceptions of Korean gender norms may be shaped by media consumption and how these perceptions evolve over time, especially during and after study abroad.

> RQ2. What are the gendered narratives that emerge among the British learners of Korean before, during and after study abroad in Korea?

The second question aims to identify the nuanced gendered experiences and stories that learners recount as they engage with the Korean language and culture. Do the participants' narratives reflect alignment with Korean gender norms they perceive, or do they exhibit resistance to these norms? By examining the participants' gendered narratives and lived experiences, the study seeks to elucidate how learners develop their understanding of gender in Korean society, negotiate their gendered selves in L2, and potentially transform or maintain them throughout their language learning journey.

> RQ3. How do British learners of Korean negotiate their gendered L2 selves in relation to the discursive constructions of gender across two different cultural contexts?

The third question focuses on the negotiations of the participants' gendered L2 selves through which learners reconcile, resist, or conform to the gender norms and ideologies they encounter in both the British and Korean cultural contexts. The question explores whether and how the participants are constrained or empowered by the gender norms they have learned in both cultures, in what ways they exercise gendered agency in constructing their gendered L2 selves, and finally whether they reconfigure their gendered selves in response to the discursive construction of gender across L1 and L2 contexts.

These research questions are designed to comprehensively investigate the ways in which British learners of Korean navigate the intricacies of constructing gendered selves within the second language socialisation process. By focusing on both the learners' perceptions of Korean gender norms and their negotiation of gendered selves, the study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how gender is constructed, performed, and contested in a second language learning context. The inquiry also encompasses the role of media consumption, study abroad experiences, and knowledge of L2 in shaping these gendered experiences. By

addressing these research questions, this study aims to fill the gap in literature on gender performativity in second language socialisation, highlighting the nuanced gendered experiences of British learners of Korean who participated in the research.

1.4. Thesis overview

This thesis is structured into eight chapters, each of which contributes to a nuanced understanding of the negotiation of the gendered L2 selves among the British learners of Korean in their second language socialisation. The progression of the chapters builds on theoretical foundations and empirical research, which allow a comprehensive analysis of gender performativity within the context of L2 socialisation with the collected data.

Following this chapter, a literature review is provided into two parts in Chapter 2 and 3, which together establish the foundation for understanding the intersection of discursive construction of gender in K-pop and the role of gender in L2 motivation and identity construction. Chapter 2 discusses literature on the discursive construction of gender and how gender is normatively constructed in Korea and how some gender ideals are represented and performed in K-pop, a key cultural production that influences the participants' knowledge of gender in Korea. Additionally, the chapter explores the theory of intersectionality as it provides a lens to examine how gender operates in K-pop, and further, in contemporary Korea, considering social factors such as race and sexuality. Chapter 3 shifts its focus as it explores bodies of literature on second language socialisation and gender performativity within the process. It reviews existing research on British learners of LOTEs, especially Korean, providing more contexts for the group of learners who participated in the study. It then explains the concept of gender performativity in L2 learning contexts, demonstrating how learners may negotiate their gendered identities through language learning. The chapter

extends this discussion by introducing the 'gendered L2 selves' framework, which builds on the L2 self-concepts in the L2 motivational self-system (Dörnyei, 2005; 2009).

Chapter 4 presents and discusses methodological decisions for this study. It outlines the research design, which employs semi-structured interviews to investigate the participants' gendered experiences at three distinct points: before, during, and after study abroad in Korea (they are referred to as Pre-SA, DSA, and PostSA interviews respectively (see Section 4.2.). Following this, Chapter 4 introduces the interview questions used at each phase of the research as well as the research participants. It then addresses ethical considerations for this study, including the role of the researcher and reflexivity. The chapter continues with descriptions of the analytic frameworks employed in this research, including thematic analysis and critical narrative analysis, justifying their applications to analyse the interview data.

Chapter 5, 6, and 7 are analyses of the Pre-SA, DSA, and PostSA interviews respectively. Chapter 5 provides interpretations and presents findings of the pre-study abroad interview conducted as a focus group interview with six participants. It explores the participants' views on Western feminism, which they employ as both counter-hegemonic and a source of hegemonic femininity. It also discusses the participants' perceptions of soft masculinity as presented in K-pop, examining its reception especially through a heteronormative lens. The chapter then discusses the participants' initial imaginings of their possible gendered L2 selves, especially in relation to their negotiation of normative femininity in Korea and their ought-to and feared gendered L2 selves (see Section 3.5.).

Chapter 6 provides analyses of the during study abroad interviews, focusing on the lived experiences of two participants, Emily and Leah (pseudonyms), who were studying at their respective host institution in Korea. The analysis first focuses on the interview with Emily,

who reported on experiencing a more rigid gender dichotomy in Korea, different aesthetics for men, and the perceived stigma surrounding feminism. The second part of the analysis is on the interview with Leah, who engaged in substantial negotiations of her performative femininity in response to culturally distinct gendered norms and behaviours she experienced in Korea.

Chapter 7 is the final data analysis chapter which examines the post study abroad interviews with Emily, Leah, and Holly. Starting with Emily's narrative, the analysis interprets how she reflects on the LGBTQ+ acceptance she experienced across the UK and Korea, the performative shifts in gender expressions among her peers, and how she constructs her own ideal gendered L2 self. It is followed by analysis of the interviews with Leah, whose reflections focused on the shifts in her aesthetic preferences to express her femininity, her aversion to certain Korean speech styles associated with femininity, and how she orchestrated expressions of her feminine self in certain social situations. Finally, the chapter examines Holly's interviews, focusing on her reflections on how the Korean language and culture influenced her performance of femininity. Holly's narratives provide detailed and nuanced examples of how L2 learners engage in constant negotiations of their gendered L2 selves while they navigate gender norms in diverse social contexts in L2.

Chapter 8 synthesises the major findings of research, highlighting the contributions of this research. It emphasises the study's recognition of gender as a critical domain in second language socialisation, and how it supports the theory of gender performativity with empirical data, facilitated by critical narrative analysis, in addition to some pedagogical implications of this study. It then discusses the researcher's reflections on the research process, followed by limitations and recommendations for future research. The thesis concludes by summarising the overall original contributions, significance and implications of the study.

2. Literature Review 1: Discursive constructions of gender in K-pop

2.1. Introduction

This chapter first outlines how understandings of gender have evolved historically, while positioning this research in line with post-structuralist understandings of gender. Section 2.2. discusses how gender is constructed through discourse, highlighting gender as a social construction which is shaped by constant interaction with power dynamics in society. Following this, Section 2.3. explains how gender is normatively constructed in Korea, drawing on socio-historic contexts. As an extended discussion from this, Section 2.4 focuses on dominant performances of masculinity and femininity in K-pop, a space where certain gender ideals are enacted, practised and (re)produced. The last discussion in Section 2.5. focuses on how intersectionality is used to understand gender representations in K-pop.

2.2. Discursive constructions of gender

The past decades have witnessed a significant epistemological shift in understanding gender. As Foucault explains, episteme is 'the total set of relations that unite, at a given period, the discursive practices that give rise to epistemological figures, sciences, and possibly formalized systems' (Foucault, 1972, p.191). As he outlines, knowledge is not static but undergoes constant transformation in relation to the dominant discourse of a given time. 'Discourse', in this post-structuralist sense, refers to '*broad constitutive systems of meaning*' (Sunderland, 2004, p.6), which reflect how knowledge and social practices are structured (Fairclough, 1992). Discourse, therefore, operates within dominant social practices and shapes how individuals construct meaning, engage in social interactions, while they internalise or contest social ideologies (Fairclough, 2001). The growing awareness of discourse and power has contributed to recent understandings of gender. As Weedon (1987) explains, the Foucauldian perspective posits discourse as inherently tied to power relations,

shaping and being shaped by societal structures, including those related to gender and identity. In this post-structural thinking, essentialist and binary views of gender weaken as gender is more understood as a social construction with evolving discussion to situate it within broader discursive practices.

Gender essentialism, which constructs biological sex as determining gender, has historically dominated the conventional understandings of gender. This essentialist perspective views gender as binary, comprising only male and female categories which are constructed and understood as mutually exclusive and perpetuates rigid norms and expectations. To challenge such fixed notions of gender and explain the limited association biology has with displays of gender, post-structuralist scholarship continues to highlight the social and discursive nature of gender that is fluid and variable (Butler, 1990; 1993; Connell, 1987; 1995; 2020; Lorber, 1994; Lucal, 1999; Risman, 2004). For example, Butler (1990) maintains that gender is not an innate quality but '*a stylized repetition of acts*' (p.140), emphasising its performative aspect which is constituted by societal norms and power structures. This performative view of gender highlights Butler's idea that gender is not what one *is*, but what one *does* (Butler, 1993). In a similar light, Cameron (1992) argues that gender is a social construction which needs explanation. Highlighting gender as a discursive construction, she emphasised on the necessity of examining 'the specific practices that produce gender roles' (ibid, 1992, p.61).

Furthering the understanding of gender, the idea that gender is socially constructed accounts for discursive constructions of masculinities and femininities which are institutionalised, culturally negotiated and reproduced (Butler, 2004; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Fausto-Sterling, 2000; Halberstam, 1998; Paechter, 2003; Schippers, 2007). Although normative masculinities and femininities can be locally and culturally different to varying

degrees, it is widely understood that hegemonic constructions of gender expressions have dominantly been influenced by Anglo-European discourses.

Drawing on the gender hegemony in the Anglo-European culture, Connell (1995) was the first to conceptualise the hierarchy of masculinity by categorising masculinity into four different types. In the conceptualisation, Connell adopts the Gramscian concept of hegemony, that is exercised 'by the combination of force and consent which balance each other reciprocally, without force predominating excessively over consent' (Gramsci, 1971, p.80). Hegemony does not exert its power overtly. Rather, it is found in 'discourse, practices and relationship which are instantiated in institutional and organizational arrangements, collectively channelling individuals over conformity' (Hamilton et al., 2019, p.317).

At the top of Connell's model of hierarchy of masculinities stands hegemonic masculinity, which is characterised by whiteness, heterosexuality, power represented through emotional resistance and physical strength and other dominant traits which are normatively deemed to be superior. As an elaboration, hegemonic masculinity is further defined as 'masculinities that legitimate unequal relationship between men and women, masculinity and femininity and among masculinities' (Messerschmidt, 2018, p.120). Hegemonic masculinity is followed by subordinate, complicit and marginalised masculinity of which characteristics are not compatible with those of hegemonic masculinity due to non-normative sexuality, passive or incomplete embodiment of hegemonic masculinity, and non-whiteness (Connell, 2020, pp.77-81).

Connell's conceptualisation of masculinity offers a foundational framework for understanding how masculinities are discursively constructed. Despite its seminal contribution, however, it is not without limitations. Connell's (1995) hierarchy of masculinities provides a monolithic reading of masculinities and therefore oversimplifies

masculinities in that they cannot be divided strictly into four categories. In this model, sociocultural and contextual complexities which are embedded in performances of masculinities may be neglected (Beasley, 2008; Cole, 2007). In addition, it does not depart from the binary notion of gender as there was a complete separation of masculinities from femininities while also marginalising genderqueer or non-binary individuals (Elliot, 2010). Furthermore, as major attention is paid to conceptualise masculinities, femininities are not adequately explored or even treated reductively (Beasley, 2008; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005).

In discussing gender hierarchies, Connell (1987) argues that there is no equivalent hegemonic form of femininity as femininities, regardless of their forms, are subordinate to patriarchy. Instead, she suggested that there is 'emphasized femininity', which is 'defined around compliance with subordination and is oriented to accommodating the interests and desires of men' (Connell, 1987, p.187). Revisiting this argument, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) recognise the necessity of reconceptualisation of gender hierarchy and acknowledged that women's identities and femininities required more careful consideration in the reconstruction of the gender order. It has called for more gender scholarship to re-examine masculinities and femininities within multiple intersecting factors.

Despite some limitations, Connell's foundational study of masculinities and femininities has opened a domain for more scholarship to unpack power relationships between masculinities and femininities. To particularly address the under-theorised femininities and highlight the role of social hegemony in constructing gender, more studies followed to explore gender politics which reveal social complexities and intersecting factors such as ethnicity, race and class (Collins, 2004; Hamilton et al, 2019; Paechter, 2018; Pyke and Johnson, 2003; Schippers, 2007).

Reconfigurations of gender constructions have contributed to layered understanding of hegemonic and subordinate femininities. Even before Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) acknowledgement of underexplored femininities, some studies elucidated the power relationship between different forms of femininities. For example, Pyke and Johnson's (2003) case study on racialised femininities, both performed and resisted by Korean and Vietnamese American women, validates the concept of hegemonic femininity, which is defined by whiteness, self-confidence, independence and assertiveness. Their study illustrates how white hegemonic femininity gains superiority over racialised (Asian) femininities due to their discursive association with obedience, submission and family-oriented commitments.

In studying inequalities, Choo and Ferree (2010) stress the importance of considering intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) embedded in the matrix of domination. Attending this, Hamilton et al. (2019) build on the concept of hegemonic femininity and questioned the validity of emphasised femininity (Connell, 1987), negating Connell's argument that women would invest in emphasised femininity which confines them into a subordinate position. Instead, they argue that some women perform hegemonic femininity by engaging in a 'femininity premium', which refers to 'a set of individual benefit that accrue to those who can approximate feminine ideals that are white, affluent, heterosexual' (Hamilton et al., 2019, p.316). Women who have easier access to such a femininity premium are advantaged and thus practice dominance not just over other women but also some group of men, creating complex relationships between femininities as well as masculinities.

In growing recognition of hegemonic femininity, the concept has been articulated in relation to various intersecting factors, such as sexuality, class, race and local contexts. For example, Schippers (2007) argues that hegemonic femininity exists as embodiments of what is pre-determined as womanly and is constituted in heteronormativity. She explains that

hegemonic femininity sustains hegemonic masculinity, situating women in subordinate positions as well as establishing its hegemonic status upon other forms of femininities (ibid, p.94). Schippers further emphasised the significance of relativity and intersectional perspectives in understanding the hegemonic construction of masculinities and femininities as social class, race and ethnicity play substantial roles in the hierarchies (ibid, p.98). Extending the discussion of hegemonic femininity, Paechter (2018) proposes that Connell's concept of emphasised femininity as the counterpart of hegemonic masculinity is an outdated interpretation. She argues that there can be various forms of locally produced hegemonic femininities that are assertive, aspirational and independent. Paechter contends that such femininities exemplify hegemonic femininity, which should be recognised and conceptualised alongside hegemonic masculinity.

Thus far, the chapter discussed how gender is a product of social construction shaped by dominant discourses and power relations. The following sections provide a brief overview of how gender is normatively constructed in Korea and then what kind of performances of masculinities and femininities are dominantly promoted, performed and reproduced in Korean pop music, some of which are reflections of the discursive gender constructions in contemporary Korea.

2.3. Constructions of normative gender ideals in Korea

Gender norms in Korea have transformed over centuries due to different national and local ideologies which shaped the country's gender hegemony. However, it is widely understood that the establishment of Confucianism as the ruling ideology during the Chosŏn Dynasty (1392-1910), which was the last dynastic kingdom in the Korean peninsula, has had a significant influence on societal norms about gender and sexuality, even to this day (Deuchler, 1992). In a similar vein, Ma et al. (2020) maintain that Confucianism has a great

influence on the construction of hegemonic masculinity in East Asia. While acknowledging the universal influence of the Confucian ideology on the discursive construction of gender in the region, they argue that the formation of hegemonic masculinity is different in China, South Korea and Japan due to locally different contexts in each country.

In a Korean context, they explain that men are bound by the Confucian idea that they should possess the highest authority in the family by being the provider for the family, thereby expecting full respect from wife and children (Ma et al. 2020). This masculinist Confucian idea particularly merged with the country's economic agenda during its rapid industrialisation in the second half of the 20th century, deploying men in various leading roles in the society (ibid, p.2407). In addition to this, Korea's universal conscription system which started in 1949 contributed to the construction of Korean men's militarised masculinity, as the mandatory military service has shaped the notion of manhood as well as gender, more broadly (Kwon, 2000). Due to the importance of the national defence, especially after the division of the Korean peninsula after the Korean War (1950-1953), military service had been recognised and favoured as work experience both in the public and private sectors (Chung, 2023), which also contributed to the gender hierarchy in the modern labour market in Korea (Moon, 2005).

More recently, however, societal gender norms in Korea have shifted within the country's socio-economic and cultural changes and new types of hegemonic masculine ideals emerged accordingly (Ainslie, 2017; Holliday and Elfving-Hwang, 2012). In particular, the transition to the neoliberal economy in the 1990s has placed stronger emphasis on competition, self-management and responsibility (Abelmann, Park and Kim, 2009) and as a result, Korean men started to invest more in their competitiveness in the labour market, which also includes looking after their physical appearance as well as their caring attitude towards women (Song,

2016), who are no longer homemakers but co-workers or colleagues who are as highly educated and driven to be successful in neoliberal society (Jung and Moon, 2024a). While the industrial and militarised hegemonic masculinities are still very dominant among Korean men, the 'softer' type of masculinity which is more suited to their professional success in the neoliberal economy has recently proliferated. This softer type of masculinity is defined as a transcultural amalgamation of traditional Confucian scholar masculinity in Korea, pretty boy (*bishōnen*) masculinity in Japan and global metrosexual masculinity (Jung, 2011, p.39; see also Section 2.4. for a more detailed discussion).

As much as the Confucian ideology has had a significant influence on the construction of dominant masculinity in Korea over centuries, it has shaped fundamental ideas about feminine norms in Korea. During the Chosŏn era, Confucianism established normative femininity which confined women within its highly patriarchal structure and demanded strict moral conduct from women according to the Confucian virtue, such as obedience and chastity (Deuchler, 1992, pp. 280-281). To maintain such social order, education and cultural training for women were restricted to the cultivation of women's duties in domestic spheres (ibid).

Between the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, however, a group of women called *Sin Yŏsŏng* (New Women) made an appearance. S*in yŏsŏng* are interpreted to be the first Korean feminists (Kumar, 2022), and they were highly influenced by modern knowledge at the intersection of the influx of Western modernity, Korean nationalism against the Japanese colonialism in the early 20th century (Choi, 2012). These women criticised the traditional Confucian gender norms, addressing the constraints on women to advocate gender equality (Choi, 2009). In this new era, the first institutions dedicated to modern education for women were established dominantly by Western missionaries. The institutions were committed to fostering s*in yŏsŏng*, who were both

idealised for their progressive thinking and deemed as a potential threat to the nation's longstanding patriarchal ideology (ibid).

This change, along with the country's modernisation and industrialisation, has rebuilt women's social position as well as understandings of gender roles to some degree (Palley, 1990). However, in the deeply entrenched patriarchal system, professional roles that commensurate with women's education and training were limited (ibid, p.1444). Furthermore, broader social issues during the authoritarian regimes through the 1960s to 1980s had been prioritised over gender equality issues. In the meantime, men still dominated high-ranked managerial roles. From the 1990s onwards, however, younger generation of Korean women have started to express their voice more explicitly (Jung and Moon, 2024a). Especially with the country's neoliberal turn in its economy in the 1990's, many young Korean women have grown more driven to live up to the new norm of 'successful women' as a part of their self-improvement (ibid, p.3). While neoliberalism played a significant role in Korean women's participating and competing in the labour market, it is also understood to have added gendered pressure on women. These pressures include perfecting physical appearance to achieve socially defined feminine ideal to excel further in their career (Holliday and Elfving-Hwang, 2012) and the traditional familial expectations tied to the Confucian ideology embedded in society (Abelmann, 2003).

2.4. Dominant performances of masculinity and femininity in K-Pop

This section builds on the previous discussion of how gender is normatively constructed in Korea with a specific focus on dominant gender performances in K-pop, which promote certain idealised masculinities and femininities in contemporary Korea. As discussed in Section 1.2., many Korean learners worldwide, including British learners of Korean, have reported K-pop's appeal as their initial attraction to the Korean language and culture (Hall and

Otte, 2021; see also Section 3.2.). While these learners consume K-pop, they also engage with the gender ideologies embedded in K-pop, especially through its iterative productions of certain performances of masculinity and femininity. In this regard, gender representations in K-pop may provide these Korean learners with substantial knowledge of gender ideologies in contemporary Korea.

Gender discourse that shapes normative masculinities and femininities may vary contextually and locally. Therefore, it cannot be argued that dominant performances of masculinities and femininities in K-pop faithfully represent gender discourses in Korea. Nonetheless, as popular culture accommodates popular demand (Fiske, 1989), they extensively reflect the frequently idealised forms of masculinities and femininities so that the genre can sustain by (re)producing cultural norms and trends.

Early literature which examined gender in K-pop paid more attention to the performance of masculinity than femininity with regard to how they are distinguished from normative masculinity in the West. Studies suggest the most dominant form of masculinity in K-pop is 'soft masculinity' (Jung, 2011; Lee, Lee and Park, 2020), which is often performed by *kkonminam* (flower-like boys), young men who look after their physical appearance to look cosmetically pleasing and behave softly and sensitively. Due to soft masculinity's performing some traditionally 'effeminate' traits, it is often associated with homosexuality in the West (Elfving-Hwang, 2020a, p.221). Framing this specific type of masculinity as 'soft' also suggests that it is a marked form of masculinity which does not align with the Western hegemonic masculinity.

However, Elfving-Hwang (2020a) interprets soft masculinity as a Korean men's embodiment of both highly competitive neoliberal Korean society and modern interpretations of some Confucian traditions. In contemporary Korea, a large proportion of the population,

especially the younger generation, have received higher education and achieved various qualifications. Therefore, looking after one's physical appearance is widely considered as extra competitiveness on top of other achievements. In line with Jones' (2008) argument that makeover culture places an emphasis on aesthetic improvement, Elfving-Hwang (2011) locates Korea in such a culture and situates *kkonminam* masculinity as one trend, which validates the ceaseless endeavour to look good. In Korea, it is widely considered necessary to maintain an attractive physical appearance. With this social pressure, men's investment in beauty products and services is normalised (Elfving-Hwang, 2020a). Although looking good in terms of physical is a relative and subjective notion, the Confucian ideology dominantly governs the general idea of desirable traits of men, including the appearance in Korean context.

In Confucianism, men are encouraged to develop *wen* (文), which refers to intellectual and mental attainment and *wu* (武), physical attainment. While both virtues are important and mandatory for educated men to be equipped with, the *wen-wu* dyad was not balanced, as heavier emphasis was placed on perfecting *wen* as it was considered superior to *wu* (Louie, 2002). Qualities of *wen*, which include politeness and self-moderation governed by cultural attainment, exerted significant influence in shaping Korean masculinity and their modernised interpretations such as tenderness and self-care often function as underlying elements that construct soft and gentle disposition found in soft masculinity. Despite its frequent association with femininity due to its softness, the underlying elements that construct soft masculinity are highly hetero-patriarchal considering its socio-historic contexts (Elfving-Hwang, 2020a).

While soft masculine performances are dominant and recursive in the K-pop scene, the softness is combined with cosmopolitan elements and opens a new horizon for how soft masculinity is perceived globally. Anderson (2014) asserts that some male K-pop stars'

embodiment of culturally hybrid masculine images establishes valid representations of Asian men that can stand equal to normative masculinity in the West. Additionally, some other scholars paid attention to less conventional qualities of masculinity found in K-Pop. For example, Oh (2015) interprets traditionally feminine images performed by K-pop male singers along with their masculine images as performance of gender fluidity, which challenges the rigid gender binary. In a similar vein, Putri and Mintarsih (2020) explain that K-Pop boy bands do not only display soft masculine aesthetics but also exhibit genuinely soft characteristics such as showing and sharing emotions, through which their vulnerability is revealed. These evaluations of soft masculinity in K-pop suggest that the reception of soft masculinity is growing positive, despite the longstanding Western hegemonic masculinity which has overridden other forms of masculinities.

As much as soft masculinity in K-pop mirrors the idealised Korean manhood, dominant feminine performances in K-pop equally reveal how femininities are discursively constructed in Korea. While soft masculinity in K-pop has recently enjoyed growing scholarly attention which evaluates it in a positive light, femininities promoted in K-Pop have largely been criticised for their hyper-feminine performances and sexualisation of their bodies. Despite some acknowledgement of female empowerment promoted by some K-pop girl groups by showcasing confidence and self-determination, more attention has been paid to the limitation of seemingly feminist voices in their music performances which still reinforce patriarchy and legitimise male gaze (Epstein and Turnbull, 2014; Oh, 2014; Sun, Paje' and Lee, 2023). In K-pop groups' hyper femininity, performance of *aegyo,* which is defined as performed winsomeness (Puzar and Hong, 2018) is reported as highly visible as aesthetic cuteness (Han, 2016a). *Aegyo* is a complex social behaviour which should be understood contextually. However, it is broadly associated with passive femininity accompanied by high-pitched voice, baby talk, infantilised word choices and child-like behaviours (Puzar and Hong, 2018). In this

regard, *aegyo* as recurring feminine performance among K-pop girl groups is understood as modernised interpretations of the Confucian indoctrination (ibid).

In a similar vein, Kim (2018) criticises the false sense of female empowerment offered by K-pop female idols. He further argues that K-pop female idols perpetuate the conformist Confucian sexism imposed on women and embody the neoliberal patriarchy and capitalism in Korea. By noting K-pop girl group's highly synchronised performances through which hyper-sexualisation is visually heightened, Kim elucidates how such choreography becomes a site where 'the Confucian values of harmony, solidarity, and cooperation' are reproduced through female bodies (Kim, 2018, p.201). Furthermore, he explains that proliferation of K-pop girl groups mirrors the way how Korean women were conditioned and exploited as labour force under patriarchy to drive economic development in the active industrialisation period, as female idols are trained, disciplined and manufactured by male-dominated industry to serve its capital-oriented interests.

Despite the criticisms of dominant femininities in K-pop that internalise subordination of women by conforming to patriarchal needs, some recent literature paid attention to unconventional femininities in the music scene. The unconventionality is achieved by proactively adopting African American hip-hop style where black feminism is infused. The genre allows a space for performances of rebellious femininity for the K-pop female idols such as HyunA and CL (Garza, 2021; Raven, 2020). Rather than performing the normalised sexiness and innocence expected of K-Pop female singers, they exhibit more empowering female images through their bodily movement that suggests a subversion of hegemonic gender norms informed by American hip-hop, creating new female identities in the K-pop scene. Kim (2018) maintains that sexual empowerment through bodily representation shows only a limited level of female agency unless it negates patriarchal gender hierarchy. However,

the growing visibility of female singers whose gendered performances refuse to align with normative Confucian-derived femininity contributes to the widening spectrum of performances of femininities in K-Pop.

Drawing the discussion of K-pop masculinities and femininities to a close here, the chapter will now turn its focus to the theory of intersectionality, which establishes a ground for more layered and nuanced understandings of masculinities and femininities that do not necessarily hail from the globally dominant Western culture.

2.5. Using intersectionality to examine gender in K-Pop

Intersectionality refers to a framework that acknowledges intersecting factors which operate in systematic inequalities and oppression. The term finds its origin in Black feminist movements in the United States and was first used by Crenshaw, who defines intersectionality as 'a metaphor for understanding the ways that multiple forms of inequality or disadvantage sometimes compound themselves and create obstacles that often are not understood among conventional ways of thinking' (Crenshaw, 1989, p.149). Although Crenshaw receives credits for the explicit coining of the term and the widening application of intersectionality in various contexts since her foundational works (1989; 1991), Collins and Bilge (2016) explain that many preceding theorists of colour, especially black and Mexican American feminist activists before Crenshaw had established a groundwork for the theory to be articulated by unpacking a number of intersecting factors such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and class which mutually and collectively reinforce the institutionalised oppression (Anzaldúa, 1987; hooks, 1881; 1884; Lorde, 1984a; 1984b).

Crenshaw's intersectionality has been well received due in part to its sensibilities of social movement politics, commitment to social justice, and its sophistication that is highly compatible with postmodern and post-structuralist perspectives in academia (Collins and

Bilge, 2016, p.50). The theory has later been applied to wider contexts to explain social injustice emerging from various areas such as globalisation, (im)migration and polarisation as these social phenomena multiply subgroups between which matrix of dominations are continuously constructed and renegotiated. In this vein, K-pop's growing global reach and influence automatically gains intersectionality. As discussed previously, dominant gender performances in K-pop take different shapes to those hegemonic masculinities and femininities constructed in the West, whose ideology has achieved a universal hegemony. When K-pop departs its domestic market, therefore, masculinities and femininities performed in the genre are easily perceived and interpreted within the gender ideology especially set by the West.

Western gender ideology exerts its hegemony upon groups who they define as Other and reproduce prejudiced associations based on the group's race and gender. Uchida (1998) explains 'the difference signified in the term Oriental is not only geographical and cultural, but sexual' (Uchida, 1998, p. 161). She compares the power relationship between the West and the East (Said, 1978) to that between men and women. Uchida elaborates that power imbalance between the two regions is found in the East's association with female and the West with male; the East is perceived as foreign and inferior, thereby justifying the West's domination. Most gender-based stereotypes against East Asians originate from this association, where gender and race intersect to construct misconceptions, which are reproduced, internalised or sometimes challenged.

Jung (2013) captures the intersectionality of K-pop femininities based on racial imagination and erotic fantasies ingrained in racial stereotypes and Otherness. She paid attention to two K-pop girl groups' (Girls' Generation and Wonder Girls) debut performances in America and the audience reception, concluding that K-pop female idols 'negotiated and repackaged their

Asian female sexuality in attempts to play to the realities and fantasies of the US pop market' (Jung, 2013, p.108). Jung further criticises how racial stereotypes of Asian women are reproduced mutually as it was not only the American labels and producers but also the K-pop girl groups themselves internalised the racial and sexual stereotypes against Asian female that they are submissive, unintelligent and vulnerable. Critiquing the same performance by Girls' Generation, Kim (2018) commented that it was their exotic otherness or mystique Asian femininity that was appreciated in their American debut, not their artistic talents.

While the dominant reading of K-pop femininities is that racial stereotypes of Asian women are reinforced through girl groups' embodiment of hyper-femininity, Oh (2014) provides a dual analysis of a K-pop girl group's music video (Girls' Generation's 'The Boys'), illustrating how their feminine performances can be differently received domestically and internationally. While their suggestive bodily movement re-masculinises domestic male audience who are emasculated according to the Western hegemonic masculinity, Oh claims that the girl groups' physical appearances are not racialised enough from the Western perspectives, which grants them 'racial passing'. The singers do not embody the racialised exotic Otherness by exhibiting elegant bodily movement, haughty facial expressions, fat free bodies, and unconventional East Asian physical attributes such as white skin and big round eyes. In this regard, Girls' Generation's performance of femininity does not align with the perpetuated stereotypes of Oriental women in the West, and therefore, their performances of femininities become a subversive act on the global stage (Oh, 2014, p.68).

As much as the femininities in K-pop are understood through the gender frame in the Western ideology, masculinities in K-pop often become subject of racial prejudice. Although intersectionality as a framework finds its root in feminist theory, the global reception of K-pop masculinities can also be interpreted with intersectional perspectives in that East Asian

masculinity is typically racialised and viewed as effeminate. As discussed in the previous section, the popularised term ‘soft masculinity’ indicates that the soft characteristics found in contemporary Korean men’s masculinity, especially those promoted in K-pop, suggest that it deviates from the normative Western hegemonic masculinity.

According to Connell’s hierarchy of masculinity (1995), K-pop boy bands’ soft masculinity can be placed liminally between marginalised masculinity and subordinate masculinity; K-pop singers’ non-whiteness marginalises them from the mainstream hegemonic masculinity and their soft behaviours, which are easily (mis)interpreted as effeminate, often lead some Western audience to conclude they are gay men, whose masculinity is subordinated because of the oppositional masculine qualities to those of hegemonic masculinity. Scholars who examine or advocate soft masculinity in K-pop boy bands acknowledge their metrosexual or sometimes androgynous aesthetics and performances (Anderson, 2014; Jung, 2011; Oh, 2015). However, Oh warns of the careless link between the boy bands’ seemingly soft physical appearance and homosexuality, which is commonly practised in the West (Oh, 2015, p.64).

Effeminisation of East Asian masculinity circulates with K-pop boy bands’ soft masculinity, which is particularly visible through their aesthetics, including androgynous clothing, make-up and choreography through which their agile, sleek and sexualised male bodies are visually promoted (Lee, Lee and Park, 2020). Since these practices have discursively been associated with female bodies, K-pop male singers face racial bigotry and prejudice against them for performing unconventional masculinity through their racialised bodies. For example, Snapes (2021) reports a case of Bangtan Boys, more famously known as BTS, endured racism, which made them feel powerless and negatively affected their self-esteem. Despite their huge success and international fame, they have had to face insults for

their ethnicity and demonstrating versatile and fluid masculine images, which function as a source for the discrimination they experienced. Over the years of their career, pejorative remarks against the band which are both racist and sexist have been documented from various parts of them world, including a radio show in Germany, a comedy show in Chile, and a talk show in Mexico (Goldman, 2021; Rolli, 2020; Wong, 2018).

Recent literature on the public reception of gender performances in K-pop demonstrate that race and gender hegemony are intricately intersected in their global reception, despite K-pop's popularity. In this vein, understanding intersectionality becomes highly relevant in analysing the ingrained stereotypes against racialised masculinity and femininity performed K-pop.

2.6. Summary

This chapter discussed gender as a social construction shaped by discourses of power. Drawing on gender theories which developed from Connell's (1995) conceptualisation of masculinities, it also explained the relationships between different form of masculinities and femininities, some of which are understood to have gained hegemonic status, especially within the Western norms. Subsequently, the chapter discussed how gender ideals are normatively constructed in Korea, focusing on Confucianism, which has been the dominant ideology in Korean society over centuries. The following discussion of dominant performances of masculinity and femininity in K-pop illustrated what type of idealised masculinity and femininity in contemporary Korea are perpetuated in the genre with relevant socio-cultural contexts. The last section elaborated how intersectionality can be used to better understand frequently performed masculinity and femininity in K-pop in a global context. Drawing this chapter to a close here, the thesis turns to the role of gender in L2 motivation and identity construction which forms the second part of literature review.

3. Literature review 2: The role of gender in L2 motivation and identity construction

3.1. Introduction

The second part of literature review explores how L2 motivations and identity can incorporate gender as a social construct, which has so far been under-explored in the field of second language acquisition. Section 3.2. introduces British learners of Korean as an under-researched learner group whose unique motivations for learning Korean remain largely unexplored. Section 3.3. illustrates how discursive constructions of gender have emerged as a prominent theme in second language socialisation, demonstrating its close connection to language learners' identities in their L2. Section 3.4. focuses on the L2 motivational self-system (L2MSS: Dörnyei, 2005; 2009), discussing its core concepts and subsequent revisions that address its limitations. Finally, Section 3.5. proposes the concept of gendered L2 selves, as an expansion of the L2MSS, to recognise gender as a key identity-based motivator in second language learning and socialisation.

3.2. Anglophone learners of Korean: a case in the United Kingdom

The dominance of English as a lingua franca has resulted in an imbalance in SLA research, where the focus has disproportionately been on learners of English rather than those studying languages other than English (LOTEs). As Boo, Dörnyei, and Ryan (2015) report, over 70% of studies on L2 motivation research have focused on learning English as L2, reflecting its hegemonic status and utilitarian demand as the global language. The imbalance leads to the relative neglection of Anglophone learners of LOTEs, and their L2 motivations, which do not always align with widely used theories of L2 motivation (e.g., L2MSS), and thereby need further attention (Lanvers, 2016). The skewed focus in L2 motivation research has been criticised by scholars who shifted the attention to L1 English learners studying additional

languages, especially in light of increased global mobility (Gearing and Roger, 2017; Mitchell, Tracey-Ventura and McManus, 2017).

Despite the emerging studies, an indifferent sentiment to language learning remains prominent in Anglophone countries, where the hegemonic status of English as a lingua franca has contributed to a pervasive sense of monolingualism (Ellis, 2008). Lanvers, Thompson and East (2021) explain that the social and economic capital (Bourdieu, 1984) embedded in the English language as the most global and powerful language affords L1 English speakers 'a monolingual myopia' (Smolicz, 1995). The decline of interest in language learning and the dominance of English have consistently been reported as a common issue in mainstream Anglophone countries (Lanvers, 2014; Liddicoat and Scarino, 2010; Lo Bianco, 2014; Piller, 2016; Wiley, 2007), often described as a 'crisis' in language learning (Lanvers, 2024; Lanvers, Thompson and East, 2021; Muradás-Taylor and Taylor, 2023).

Among Anglophone countries, the UK presents a unique case regarding its monolingual mindset, considering its geographical proximity to multilingual Europe (Oakes, 2013). The normalisation of monolingualism in the UK context is often intertwined with various socio-economic and political factors that have led to a decline in foreign language learning. For example, studies report elitism as one of the crises of language learning in the UK; students from more privileged backgrounds are more likely to study foreign languages or have easier access to foreign language education (Coleman, 2011; Lanvers, 2014; Muradás-Taylor and Taylor, 2023). Additionally, political discourse of xenophobia (Coleman, 2009), including Euroscepticism, which culminated in Brexit (Lanvers, Doughty and Thompson 2018) are also linked with language education policy in the UK. Amid this continuing crisis of language learning in the UK, the recent growth in demand for the Korean language, especially represented by the growing enrolment in the Korean language or Korean studies programme

at UK universities is worth noting (Prentice, 2022; Yeon, 2021). This trend is particularly remarkable given the significant linguistic and cultural distance between the English and Korean languages (Kiaer, 2023, p.3).

This trend is not limited to the UK; globally, there has been rising interest in learning Korean, driven largely by the consumption of Korean popular culture, a substantial part of the Korean Wave (Eom and Braithwaite, 2023; Han, Dewaele and Kiaer, 2024; Keith, 2018; Kiaer, 2023; Lee, 2018). Other Anglophone countries have witnessed the same trend despite sharing the UK's monolingual mindset. For instance, Lusin et al. (2023) note the 'astonishing' 38.3 % increase in the enrolment in Korean at colleges and universities in the US between 2016 and 2021, in stark contrast to declining enrolments in other languages. Similarly, Fraschini and Caruso (2019) demonstrate how Korean is growing in the Australian context, even as enrolments in other languages are experiencing a decline.

Motivations for studying Korean in Anglophone contexts may differ to those in non-Anglophone countries. For instance, while South-East Asian learners of Korean are more motivated by the socioeconomic benefits of learning Korean, alongside their interest in the Korean popular culture (Fraschini and Caruso, 2019; Han, 2021), Anglophone learners of Korean are more influenced by affective factors (e.g. enjoyment of language learning; a desire to connect with Korean culture and media on a personal level) developed through consuming Korean media such as K-pop (see Fraschini and Caruso, 2019; Keith, 2018 for the Australian case; Lee, 2018 for the American case). In the British context, media coverage of Korean popular culture, especially K-pop, has grown significantly since 2016. For example, in 2022, the volume of BBC coverage of K-pop was more than double that of CNN, and quadruple that of KBS (Korean Broadcasting System) (Moon, 2024). In addition, Korean popular culture, particularly K-pop, was explicitly identified as the driving force behind the

boom of Korean degrees in the UK, with many students beginning to learn the language as a hobby (Hall and Otte, 2021). Furthermore, the UK was the first country to host an international academic conference featuring BTS, one of the most successful K-pop bands: *the BTS Interdisciplinary Conference* was first launched at Kingston University in 2020. This illustrates the recognition of K-pop's cultural influence in the UK. The conference since invited scholars researching K-pop at universities in US, South Korea, and Malaysia in consecutive years.

Despite this recognition of K-pop as a gateway to learning Korean in the UK, especially among younger generation, British learners of Korean remain as an under-researched group in LOTEs studies. Their L2 selves and motivations remain unexplored, even though their profile could contribute to the evolving understanding of Anglophone learners of LOTEs. In alignment with existing studies of Anglophone learners of Korean, this study seeks to contribute to emerging profiles of Anglophone LOTEs learners, focusing on the role of gender in L2 to recognise gender as a highly salient theme in K-pop (see Section 2.3.), where certain gender performances play a central role in shaping the appeal of Korean popular culture and learning the language. This approach also recognises gender as a critical component in the construction of identity, making it an essential lens for exploring L2 selves. Furthermore, the particular focus on the British learners of Korean has the potential to contribute to diversifying the LOTEs learner profiles, shedding more light on a niche area of a rarely studied language learner group in the UK. The next section examines how gender has emerged as an important theme in SLA studies.

3.3. The role of gender in second language socialisation

Over the past few decades, there has been increasing attention to the role of identity and social context in second language acquisition studies (Norton, 1995; 1997; 2000; Norton and

McKinney, 2011; Norton and Pavlenko, 2004; Kramsch, 2009; Pavlenko, 2001; Pennycook, 2001). It is a meaningful trend as the field has historically been dominated by research focused on language proficiency (Pennycook, 2004). Departing from the traditional 'competence-heavy domain' (Pennycook, 2004, p.7), a growing body of work has approached language learning as a fundamentally social process, leading to the development of second language socialisation as a thriving research area. This shift represents what Watson-Gegeo (2004) describes as a paradigm shift, as second language acquisition and socialisation studies have become enriched with critical, interdisciplinary perspectives. Building on this foundation, second language socialisation has the potential to embrace gender as discursively constructed identity and its performative nature (Butler, 1990; see also Section 2.2.) to highlight how gendered experiences are commonly captured and examined in L2 socialisation research.

Second language socialisation research originates from the broader field of language socialisation, which emerged from the discipline of linguistic anthropology (Kramsch, 2002). Early foundational studies (Ochs and Schieffelin, 1979, 1984; Schieffelin and Ochs, 1986) focus on how children are socialised into their native language and culture through interaction with more experienced members of their community. These studies demonstrate that language acquisition is not solely about learning linguistic structures but also closely connected to the process of gaining membership and legitimacy within a wider social group (Duff, 2007). While the initial studies primarily focused on first language socialisation, research has since expanded to encompass second language learners, especially over the past three decades (Ortega, 2014), demonstrating how second language learners negotiate their multifaceted identities in new sociolinguistic contexts (Pavlenko and Lantolf, 2000).

As scholars began to explore how language socialisation processes apply to L2 learners in various sociocultural contexts, studies in second language socialisation have included a broader range of learner profiles, such as adult learners, immigrants, and international students in diverse cultural contexts. This is due to the 'secondary' nature implied in the L2 socialisation as the learners, most often adolescents and adults, are transplanted into a non-normative environment, having already socialised in their L1 community (Steffensen and Kramsch, 2017, p.21). This expansion in focus has drawn attention to the more complex and dynamic ways that learners negotiate their identities in their navigation of new linguistic, discursive, and cultural traditions in their target language (Duff, 2007, p.310).

Early studies in the second language socialisation focus primarily on (im)migrants or adult L2 learners, particularly those learning English as an additional language. For example, Norton's (2000, 2013) work on immigrant women in Canada, highlights how language learning is closely tied to issues of power, identity, and social inclusion. Her research demonstrate that proficiency alone does not guarantee successful integration into a new community without access to social networks and opportunities for meaningful participation. Similarly, Pavlenko (2001) explores how women from various cultural backgrounds, such as Japan, Panama, and Germany, experienced gender socialisation in the United States. These women's narratives reveal how their understanding of womanhood is transformed through their lived experiences in the U.S. while studying English as L2. These seminal studies highlight how gender plays a significant role in second language socialisation.

Gender has also emerged particularly salient in study abroad contexts, where learners often negotiate their identities while navigating the difference of genderedness they perceive between their home and target language cultures. Studies illustrate gendered experiences as one of the most mentioned factors which contributes to the work of identity, as learners are

directly exposed to different social gender norms in their respective target language societies and interact with locals who have internalised these norms. Some of the early study abroad research focus on female students' negative experiences of ethnic or racial bias tied to their gender, as well as cultural and emotional tensions resulting from such encounters. For instance, Polanyi (1995) examines the experiences of American women in Russia, Twombly (1995) explores similar issues in Costa Rica, and Talburt and Stewart (1999) focus on Spain. Similarly, Siegal (1996) investigates how American women studying Japanese negotiate gendered expectations while living in Japan. These women experience that normative femininity in Japanese society clashes with their own identity as a more outspoken Western woman, as the normative femininity in Japan is deemed as submissive and traditional. This clash resonates with Hofstede's view of culture that it is 'a collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others' (Hofstede, 2011, p.3). These studies demonstrate gender as an integral part of second language learning, as learners inevitably engage with the gender norms in their target language culture, whether to adopt or challenge them.

Later studies have continued to underscore the significance of gender in second language socialisation while also highlighting how gender intersects with other identity-based dimensions. For example, Kinginger (2004) illustrates how gender and class intertwine in the transformative identity of a lower-class American female student who spent time in Quebec and France to learn French. In addition, Kinginger and Farrell Whitworth (2005) report on the diverse study abroad experiences narrated by three different learners of French, whose national identities influenced their second language socialisation. The study demonstrates that the individual learners' varying interpretations of and interactions with French femininities and masculinities have an impact on their French language development. As the field has expanded to reflect more diverse identities, cases of less conventional leaners have been

documented. For instance, Brown (2014) demonstrates how age and less conventional gender identity shaped second language socialisation in the case of a mid-age lesbian woman from the US who studied Korean in Seoul. The study illustrates how she exercised her agency while negotiating her identity during the study abroad experience.

These gender identity-related negotiations captured in the above studies align with Kramsch's (1998) notion of culture as a site of struggle, where language learners engage in discursive practices which both enable and restrict their understanding of the language and other symbolic systems in the target language society. In navigating cultural complexities and less familiar discursive practices in a new culture, the role of symbolic competence is emphasised (Kramsch, 2006). She explains that the application of the word 'symbolic' stetches to a more subjective interpretations of discursive practices, such as the construction of perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, aspirations and values – concepts that go beyond the representations of people and objects in the world in a simpler sense (Kramsch, 2009). This notion of symbolic competence becomes particularly salient in understanding and performing gender in second language socialisation process. As existing studies suggest, language learners, especially when in an immersion situation, are invested in negotiating their identities in their evolving understanding of the discursive practices in their L2. In this sense, learners' negotiation of gender identity can be understood as a continuing exercise of symbolic competence, through which they interpret, challenge, and reconstruct meanings associated with gender in their target language culture.

This understanding of gender as a component of symbolic competence in second language socialisation suggests the need for a more nuanced approach to understand L2 motivation. Language learners' engagement with the discursive practices of their target language culture indicates they are motivated to understand and participate in the L2 society. To examine L2

learning motivation, the L2 motivational self-system (L2MSS: Dörnyei, 2005; 2009) has been widely applied since it was theorised. While the framework has provided valuable insights into language learning motivation proving its high applicability, its limitations have also been addressed which led to the framework's development over the past decade. The following section discusses the construction of the L2MSS, as well as the revisions of the framework that addressed its limitations.

3.4. The L2 motivational self-system and its reconceptualisations

The L2 motivational self-system (Dörnyei, 2005; 2009) draws on the concept of possible selves (Markus and Nurius, 1986) and self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987). Possible selves refer to self-conceptions in future states one may develop in relation to their aspirations, fears, or external expectations imposed on them (Markus and Nurius, 1986). These possible selves are categorised into three main types: (1) 'ideal selves that we would like to become'; (2) 'selves that we could become'; (3) 'selves we are afraid of becoming' (ibid, p.954). In self-discrepancy theory, Higgins (1987) proposed that ideal self and the ought self are core components of individual's self-concept. Reflecting these theories of self within his framework, Dörnyei (2005; 2009) introduces the ideal L2 self and ought-to L2 self as central factors of motivation for language learning, alongside L2 learning experience. In the L2MSS, each L2 self represents distinct motivational orientations.

The ideal L2 self indicates learners' aspiration to be a fluent L2 user to fulfil their integrative and internalised instrumental motives. It concerns with learners' desire to be successful, reflecting their goals and personal growth. On the other hand, the ought-to L2 self consists of attributes which learners believe they ought to possess to avoid negative outcomes and meet externally imposed expectation as an L2 user. In this regard, the ought-to L2 self is tied to learners' wishes to fulfil obligations, avoid losses, often reveal their self-protection

(Dörnyei, 2005; 2009). Dörnyei's conceptualisation of the ideal and the ought-to L2 self, however, constitutes a reduction of Own-Other differentiation suggested by Higgins (1987), which provides four Self *guides (*Own/Ideal, Own/Ought, Other/Ideal and Other/Ought). While the *Own* dimension is linked with individual differences, the *Other* dimension is connected to wider societal influences (ibid). As Lanvers (2016) points out, such reduction in the L2 self-model suggests a reflection of the marginalisation of the *Other* standpoint by Markus and Nurius (1986) in their categorisation of the *possible* Selves, which prioritises the *Own* standpoint.

The L2MSS assumes the discrepancies between the learners' evaluation of their current self and their future self-guides (ideal and ought-to L2 self) function as a motivator to reduce the perceived gap to achieve a desired end-state (Dörnyei, 2009, p.18). This framework has been extensively applied to examine how language learners envision their future selves and has significantly contributed to the proliferation of motivation research in SLA across diverse global contexts (Dörnyei and Ryan, 2015). In a similar vein, Boo, Dörnyei, and Ryan's (2015) survey of over 400 publications between the years 2005 and 2014 reaffirms the L2MSS as the dominant theoretical framework for studying L2 motivation. Mahmoodi and Yousefi's (2022) survey of second language motivation research between 2010 to 2019 also reveals that the L2MSS was employed in the vast majority of publications on SLA motivations during this period, due to the framework's 'simplicity and adaptability to different contexts' (Csizér, 2019, p. 87)

Despite its wide application, L2 motivation studies employing the L2MSS have dominantly explored linear relationships of the self-components in the framework (Nitta and Baba, 2014), most often taking quantitative approach (Mahmoodi and Yousefi, 2022). This aspect has been greatly complemented by Ushioda's (2009) humanistic whole-person approach, which

highlights the importance of adopting a person-in-context relational view to understand motivation, self and identity. By advocating the 'person-in-context relational view', she maintains that motivation research should consider language learners 'as real persons, rather than theoretical abstractions' (ibid, p.220). Ushioda points out how personal, social and historic contexts had been treated as independent variable in motivation research, and argued for the person-in-context approach to 'capture the mutually constitutive relationship between persons and the contexts in which they act' (ibid, p. 218).

Building on this perspective, Mercer's (2011) longitudinal case study demonstrates significant impact of affective factors on learners' temporal self-concepts. Mercer particularly attends to learner's immediate, relational, and social contexts, with an emphasis on the environmental factors that may shape learners' self-concepts. Similarly, Henry (2014) highlights the dynamic nature of possible selves, arguing that they are situationally determined and exhibit highly variable phenomenological qualities. He suggested that possible selves should be continuously revised and transformed to reflect learners' evolving experiences. The growing interests in learners and their situations integrated affective dimension to better understand the L2 selves. For example, Teimouri (2016) addresses the under-explored emotional aspects in the original framework. Acknowledging emotions as a key factor in language learning (MacIntyre, MacKinnon and Clément, 2009; MacIntyre and Gregersen, 2012), Teimouri (2006) investigates the emotional experiences of language learners, such as anxiety, joy and shame, and their correlations with learners' future selves.

Recent scholarship has also introduced new self-concepts within the L2MSS, emerging from both Global English and LOTEs learning contexts. For instance, Peker (2016; 2020) reconceptualises the framework by adding the feared L2 self as a third L2 self-component in the L2MSS. Her study on adult English language learners in the US confirmed the relevance

of the feared L2 self, which reflects learners' dread of a future self, such as being bullied or marginalised due to their lack of L2 proficiency, ethnicity and race. In Peker's introduction of the feared L2 self to the L2MSS, she explains that Dörnyei's L2MSS (2005; 2009) did not include the fears L2 learners may experience in their future self states. In the development of the L2MSS framework which includes the possible selves theory (Markus and Nurius, 1986) and self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987), Dörnyei employs the self-discrepancy theory more as a basis, asserting it to be broader and more coherent (Peker, 2020). In this perspective, the feared self, which is one of three components in the possible selves (Markus and Nurius, 1986) was not considered, in the L2MSS's heavier reliance on the self-discrepancy theory that only includes ideal and ought-to self. However, Peker demonstrates empirical examples of feared or dreaded L2 selves (Peker, 2016; 2020; Yu, Browns and Stephens, 2018). As the concept of avoidance, embedded within the ought-to L2 self, does not fully account for such fears L2 learners experience, Peker (2020) revives the feared self from Markus and Nurius's (1986) theory and proposes the feared L2 self as the third L2 self-component.

Other reconceptualisations have focused on learners of LOTEs and their unique motivations which are more personal and less instrumental. For example, Lanvers (2016) proposes the concept of rebellious self to explain the language learning motivation of Anglophone learners with high international posture (Amorati, 2022; Lanvers, 2012; Oakes, 2013; Thompson and Vásquez, 2015). These learners challenge the monoglot attitudes prevalent in their own culture and reject stereotypes of Anglophones as poor language learners. In the Swedish context, Henry (2017) introduces the ideal multilingual self as opposed to contently bilingual self, which reflects indifference to learning an additional language. In Northern European contexts, learners may feel content with their proficiency in their native language and English as a global language, which results in lack of motivation to learn other languages. On the

other hand, the ideal multilingual self produces positive motivation to learn an additional language.

These reconceptualisations and extensions of the L2MSS over the past decade have enriched the framework as shown in Figure 3.1., which visualises its development from Dörnyei's (2005; 2009) original framework. The expanded self-concepts have opened avenues for more creative and interdisciplinary approaches. However, this expanded framework does not successfully accommodate identity-based motivation tied to language learners' engagement with the discursive practices of their target language society. To address this, the next section aims to further expand the L2MSS to incorporate learners' gender identity and explore how their conceptualisations of gendered L2 selves are shaped by social gender norms in L2 culture and their gendered agency.

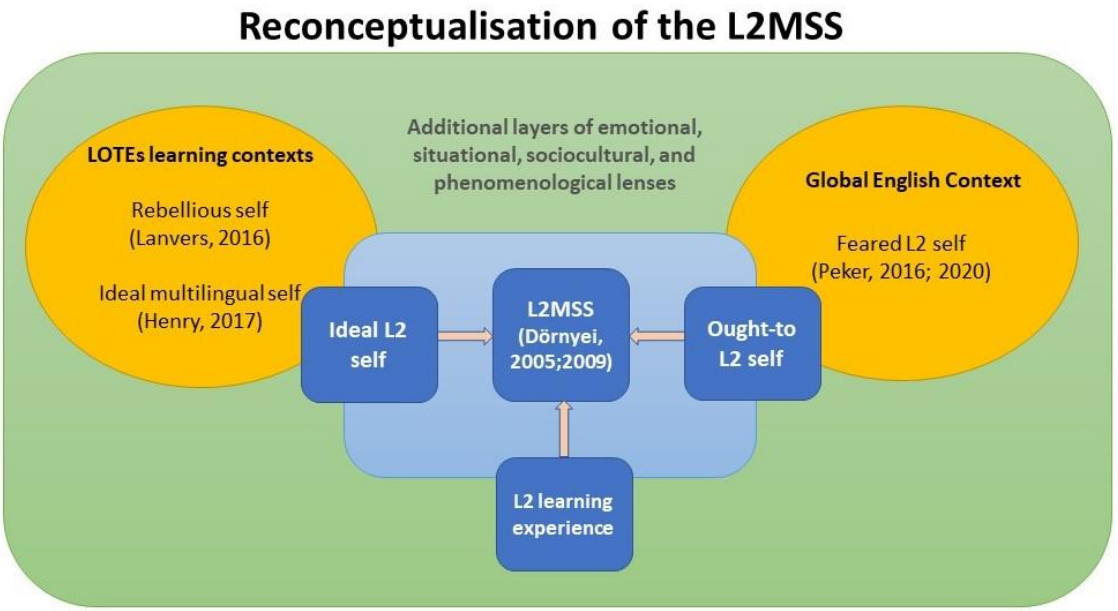

Figure 3.1. The reconconceptualised L2MSS over the past decade adopted from the L2MSS (Dörnyei, 2005; 2009)

3.5. The construction of 'gendered' L2 selves

To rethink the notion of language, Pennycook (2004) proposes an anti-foundational perspective, which departs from the foundational notion of language which considers it as a pre-determined system that is governed by rules and structure. The anti-foundational view of language applies the notion of performativity (Butler, 1990) to explore 'how languages, identities and futures are refashioned' (Pennycook, 2004, p.1). In doing so, he argues that 'language use is an act of identity that calls that language into being' (ibid, p.1), consolidating this idea with his view of language as products of sociocultural activities in local discursive practices (Pennycook, 2010). The poststructuralist approach departs from the conventional views that equate language learning solely with gaining proficiency, highlighting its deep interconnection with identity construction. This perspective sheds light on the need for a broader and more holistic understanding of L2 learning, one that incorporates identity-based L2 motivation which aligns with Ushioda's (2009) humanistic and person-in-context relational approach.

Identity is defined as 'how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future' (Norton, 2000, p.5). This places the focus of identity research on 'how the language learners negotiate their sense of self in relation to various contexts and the emphasis is on the social structure of the self, a person's relationships with others and their construction of their identity in various settings, possibly also in imagined settings' (Mercer, 2011, p.18). As gender is one of key component of identity (Holmes and Meyerhoff, 2008), it frequently has emerged as an important theme in some SLA studies which illustrate language learners' navigations of their L2 as gendered individuals (see Section 3.3.). These findings point to the importance of exploring 'gendered' L2 selves, as one dimension of L2 selves.

In a post-structuralist view, L2 identities and subjectivities are understood as discursive constructions (Higgins, 2011; see also Section 2.1.). In this regard, the gendered L2 selves may be 'often imposed on learners, due to dominant discourses, othering, or hegemonic processes' (ibid, p. 10). However, this does not imply that gendered L2 selves are merely passive recipients of discursively constructed gender ideology in the L2 society. Rather, 'learners can and do choose to resist these ascribed positionalities, developing subject positions based on their projected vision of who they are' (ibid, p.10).

This disposition is referred to as gendered agency in L2. According to Sung (2021), language learners possess the 'ability to make decisions and take actions based on their assessment of the constraints imposed by gender ideologies operating in a particular context and the opportunities afforded by the gendered norms associated with a particular context' (Sung, 2021, pp.92-93). Thus, while gender ideologies function as external factors that condition gendered L2 selves, learners' gendered agency act as an internal factor, enabling them to navigate, negotiate, and even challenge these ideologies.

Dörnyei and Csizér (2002) acknowledge that gender had rarely been systematically investigated in motivation research. While some empirical studies of gender and L2 motivation have identified gender as one significant variable in L2 motivation (Henry, 2009; You, Dörnyei and Csizér, 2016), many of these studies rely on quantitative approach and often reinforce the essentialist gender dichotomy. To elaborate, the concept of gender is strictly binary in these studies, highlighting and comparing the differences in L2 selves and motivation between male and female learners through quantified data. Research in this nature does not thoroughly explain how learners envision themselves as a gendered individual or how they are (de)motivated to perform their gender in relation to their understanding of discursively constructed gender norms in the L2. To address this gap and highlight the impact

of gender ideology and gendered agency in construction of language learners' L2 selves, this study expands the L2 self-components in the L2MSS (Dörnyei, 2005; 2009, Peker, 2020) by proposing the concept of 'gendered' L2 selves, which consist of (1) the ideal gendered L2 self; (2) the ought-to gendered L2 self; and (3) the feared gendered L2 self, as suggested in the table below.

Ideal gendered L2 Self	The ideal gendered L2 self represents the learner's aspirations for their gendered identity in the target language. Shaped by the learners' personal values and their evolving understanding of the target culture, the ideal gendered L2 self embodies the learner's vision of how they wish to be perceived and how they desire to interact as a gendered individual within the target language community.
Ought-to gendered L2 self	The ought-to gendered L2 self reflects the learner's perception of the gendered expectations imposed by the target language community. This self encompasses the learner's understanding of the rules and norms governing 'appropriate' gendered behaviour and practices in the L2 culture, which they feel ought to conform to in order to gain acceptance and avoid negative social consequences.
Feared gendered L2 self	The feared L2 gendered self represents the learners' fears and insecurities related to their gender identity, sexuality orientation and how they are perceived in the target language society. These fears may arise from negative stereotypes about their gender within the target language community, past experiences of discrimination or potential misunderstanding related to their gender identity, or a lack of confidence in their ability to perform gender 'correctly' according to the perceived norms of the target culture.

Table 3.1. The construction of the gendered L2 selves adapted from the reconceptualised L2 self-concepts

In constant interaction with the discursive construction of gender in L2 culture and the learner's gendered agency, the three types of gendered L2 selves are not static or mutually exclusive. Instead, they may interact dynamically as learners navigate the complexities of second language socialisation. For instance, learners may experience internal conflict between their ideal gendered L2 self and the perceived expectations of the ought-to L2 self, which could lead to feelings of ambiguity, or a sense of inauthenticity. Similarly, the feared gendered L2 self may act as a barrier to L2 socialisation, manifesting in behaviours such as avoidance, decreased motivation, or reluctance to fully engage with the target language and culture. As the gendered L2 selves emerge in relation to the discursive construction gender in L2 culture, this study proposes the organic mapping of the gendered L2 selves is suggested as Figure 3.2.:

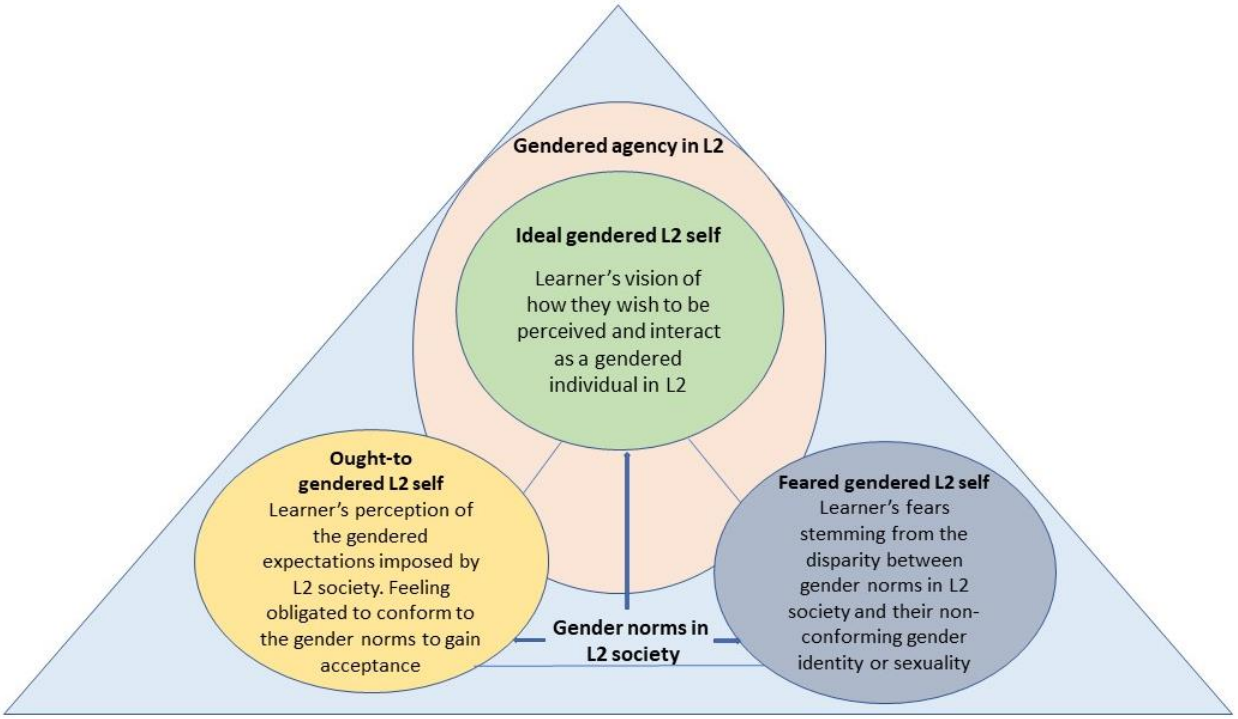

Figure 3.2. The organic map of the gendered L2 selves

Using this conceptualisation of gendered L2 selves, Chapters 5, 6, and 7 aim to contribute to a deeper understanding of gender as one identity-based motivator in second language socialisation. In studying the cases of British learners of Korean and their study abroad

trajectories, this new model allows more nuanced and comprehensive understandings of gender as language learners embark on their L2 learning journey, where they engage in constant negotiations of gendered identities and practise their gendered agency.

3.6. Summary

This chapter introduced British learners of Korean as an under-explored group of learners of LOTEs, highlighting how studying their unique motivations to learn Korean can contribute to a broader understanding of LOTEs learner profiles. Against the backdrop of the ongoing language learning crisis in the UK, the rising demand for Korean as a foreign language stands out as an extraordinary case. This trend is significantly driven by the influence of the Korean cultural products, particularly K-pop, which has been suggested as a strong motivator to study Korean in the UK. Given the prominence of gender as a recurring theme in K-pop and its wider cultural narratives (see Chapter 2), this chapter argued for the integration of gender into discussions of L2 motivation.

Gender, as a key component of social identity, has consistently emerged as a salient theme in some SLA research, particularly in studies on second language socialisation. Its discursive construction in target language cultures shape not only learners' understanding of the L2 but also their identity negotiation within those contexts. This chapter positioned gender as an identity-based motivator in L2 learning which interacts with the social construction of gender in target language society. As social constructions of gender been under-researched in SLA studies, this justifies the need to extend existing L2 motivational frameworks. Building on previous revisions of Dörnyei's L2MSS, Section 3.5 proposed the concept of gendered L2 selves, which consists of the ideal gendered L2 self, the ought-to gendered L2 self, and the feared gendered L2 self. The introduction of the gendered L2 selves, as a key original

contribution of this study, offers a nuanced perspective that integrates gender as a central dimension to understand L2 socialisation.

This reconceptualisation acknowledges gender as a discursively constructed, dynamic phenomenon and allows the examination of learners' L2 learning and experiences in relation to social gender norms within their L2 contexts. The new framework also incorporates learners' agency, capturing how they navigate, resist, or embrace gendered norms in the L2 culture. By integrating these dimensions, the gendered L2 selves framework provides a distinct lens to explore the intersection of motivation, identity, and gender in SLA. This framework is extensively applied in Chapters 5, 6, and 7, to offer critical contribution to understanding gendered experiences of British learners of Korean, demonstrating how their ideal, ought-to and feared L2 selves are constructed and negotiated. Before turning to the application of the gendered L2 selves framework in these subsequent chapters, Chapter 4 outlines methodological decisions underpinning this study.

4. Methodology

4.1. Introduction

This chapter explains the methodological procedures of the research. Section 4.2. provides an overview of the research design and how it responds to the research questions introduced in Chapter 1 (see Section 1.3.). Section 4.3. introduces the research participants, specifying how many participated at each stage of the interview with their gender identity and sexual orientation. Section 4.4. details the contexts of three interview phases and the interview questions used in each phase. Next, Section 4.5. discusses the ethical considerations for this study, centring on the role of the researcher and the researcher's reflexivity. The subsequent sections explain the analytic framework chosen for the study. Section 4.6. explains how the initial analysis was facilitated by thematic analysis, and how some recurring themes were employed to expand the L2 self-concepts in the L2MSS with a gendered lens (see Section 3.5). Finally, Sections 4.7. and 4.8 explicate how critical discourse analysis and narrative inquiry merge together as 'critical narrative analysis', which is the major analytic framework employed in the interpretation of the interview data.

4.2. Research Design

As outlined in Section 1.3, this study aims to answer the following research questions:

RQ1. How do British learners of the Korean language perceive dominant forms of gender in Korea?

RQ2. What are the gendered narratives that emerge among the British learners of Korean before, during and after study abroad in Korea?

RQ3. How do British learners of Korean negotiate their gendered L2 selves in relation to the discursive constructions of gender across two different cultural contexts?

To answer these research questions, this study employed a qualitative research design, with data collected through semi-structured interviews. Qualitative methods are particularly useful to explore complex and subjective phenomena such as perceptions, identity negotiations, and cultural discourses (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018). By prioritising depth and validity in the analysis, qualitative research enables the researcher to uncover layered and nuanced understandings of participants' lived experiences.

This study's focus is on how British learners of Korean perceive gender norms in their L2 society and how they construct and negotiate their gendered L2 selves within the context of second language socialisation across study abroad trajectories. Gendered identity negotiation in second language socialisation is a complex process which unfolds at the intersection of learners' individual agency and social ideologies (Norton, 2013). To interpret this complexity, therefore, data with depth, richness, and context-specific insights are required, which qualitative methods are well-suited to provide (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005).

In qualitative research, interviews are frequently employed in studies that require interpretation and explanation (Lee, Mitchell and Sablynski, 1999). Interviews typically capture participants' views, emotions or lived experiences in their own words. In addition, the participants' unique gendered experiences, which are essential in this study, could be understood in a more detailed and contextualised way through qualitative interviews (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015).

Qualitative interviews can be broadly categorised into three different types, which are structured, semi-structured and unstructured interview. The study used semi-structured

interview, which is widely used in qualitative research as it maintains a good balance between structured and unstructured interviews (Brinkmann, 2013). Semi-structured interviews use open-ended questions prepared by the interviewer in advance and the questions are designed to guide the interview while also allowing participants to raise issues that has not been anticipated by researcher during the interview (Braun and Clarke, 2013). Such contributions may lead to richer production of more personal and nuanced data. This flexibility of semi-structured interviews ensures that the participants' voices are captured well. Furthermore, the researcher can maintain the focus of the interview by following the pre-set interview questions, ensuring that the interview remains aligned with the research objectives. Lastly, using semi-structured interviews can allow more voice to interview participants as it is not only the researcher leading an interview but the researcher and interview participants co-produce meaning and knowledge (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009).

Using semi-structured interviews facilitated in-depth exploration of the participants' subjective interpretations of gender norms in Korean society and their lived experiences (Rubin and Rubin, 2005). As this study aims to explore how British learners of Korean perceive the dominant gender norms in Korea and their construction of gendered L2 selves, it was essential to employ a method which elicits rich, detailed and nuanced data reflecting individual participants' unique perspectives. Semi-structured interviews allowed participants to articulate their gendered perceptions and lived experiences in their own words, while offering the flexibility and openness necessary to uncover unanticipated insights (Seidman, 2013). This aligns with the study's goal of understanding the participants' gendered L2 selves through their narratives, which is shaped by constant negotiation between the social gender norms and their gendered agency across British and Korean contexts.

The interviews were conducted at three distinct points during the participants' Korean learning journey: pre-study abroad (Pre-SA), during study abroad (DSA) and post-study abroad (PSA). Language degree programmes in the UK typically include a study abroad year in the country where the students' target language is spoken. This pivotal year not only enhances the students' language proficiency but also deepens their cultural understanding and broadens their knowledge of social norms in the target language culture. It was useful to follow this timeline as it captures the participants' evolving narratives of gendered experiences in relation to the gender norms they perceived in Korean culture. Conducting interviews at these distinct points also ensured that the research follows the participants' journey of learning Korean, allowing the study to trace the trajectories of the participants' perceptions of Korean gender norms and the corresponding negotiations of their gendered L2 selves over time. This research design aligns with the view that SLA studies with a sociolinguistic focus, especially those examining study abroad, should explore language learning as a temporal and context-sensitive process (Duff, 2019; Kinginger, 2013a). While more extensive details of each interview phase are provided in Section 4.4., a short account of each interview phase is summarised as below:

1. Pre-study abroad phase:

   The first phase involved a focus group interview with six participants, conducted before their study abroad experience. This phase aimed to capture participants' initial perceptions of Korean gender norms and their expectations of how studying the language and culture might influence their gendered identities. Focus groups are particularly effective for generating a diversity of perspectives and fostering interaction among participants, which can lead to a richer data (Morgan, 1996). This interactive nature of focus group interviews provided a setting where participants freely communicated and built on each other's ideas.

2. During study abroad phase

   The second phase consisted of individual interviews with two participants who were in Korea during their study abroad year. Although the focus group interview format used in the previous stage contributed to the production of rich enough data, it was noted that a few more active participants can dominate the interview session. To capture more nuanced and personal voices, the format of the interview changed to one-to-one interview from this phase onwards.

   The during study abroad interviews provided real-time insights into participants' lived experiences of their gendered selves in Korean society. Capturing the participants' experiences during this critical period was vital to understanding the immediate impact of Korean gender norms they experience on their negotiation of gendered L2 selves.

3. Post study abroad phase

   This third phase included two rounds of post study abroad interviews with three participants who had returned to the UK. These interviews were designed to elicit reflective accounts of participants' experiences in Korea and any meaningful changes the participants noticed regarding their gendered selves. Conducting two rounds of post study abroad interviews allowed for a deeper exploration of how the participants responded to the gender norms in Korea and in the UK following their return. These emergent phases resulted in some degree of iterativeness and messiness, which simultaneously enriched the entire dataset.

This three-phased interview design enabled comprehensive data collection while recognising each phase as significant points in the participants' Korean learning journey. Furthermore, insights gained from each phase informed the subsequent interviews, enabling the researcher to devise and adapt interview questions and methods according to the participants' contexts.

For example, findings from the Pre-SA interview helped the researcher prepare for the DSA interviews, refining the interview questions. Similarly, data from the DSA interviews facilitated the preparation of the PSA interviews, allowing an organically developing and reflective research process.

4.3. Research participants

The participants in this study were undergraduate students majoring in Korean at a British university, where the researcher taught the language. They commenced their degree programme in September 2019 and first met the researcher in January 2021 as their tutor. The initial call for interview participation was sent to the entire cohort in May 2021. Each interview phase involved a different number of participants, as detailed later in this section. Participation in the interviews was entirely voluntary, and invitations were sent to the participants' university email addresses.

At the time of the first focus group interview, participants' ages ranged from 19 to 34, broadly categorising them as adult learners. To secure anonymity, the age of each participant is not provided in the profile as the identity of one participant would easily be disclosed due to being the only mature student over 30. The participants were all British nationals and spoke English as their first language.

The participants had different motivations and purposes in their pursuit of the Korean degree such as pursuing a career in education, international business or continue studying to gain higher degrees. However, they had a common ground in that they were active consumers of Korean media products, including K-pop, which to a varying degree, they reported to have assisted and motivated their Korean language learning before and throughout their Korean studies at the university. The pre-study abroad focus group interview was conducted when the participants had finished their second year of their degree programme, which was a few

months before the commencement of their study abroad year. According to the university's programme specification, students completing Level 5 (Year 2) of the degree are expected to demonstrate effective communication skills in Korean and a critical understanding of Korean culture and society. Additionally, university policy requires that students to pass all second-year modules without any failing marks to qualify for the study abroad programme. By the time of the first interview, therefore, the participants had developed relatively competent knowledge of the Korean language and culture over the two years of formal studies at the university.

Information of the participants in the three interview phases are summarised in the Tables 4.1., 4.2. and 4.3. respectively. They include participants' names (pseudonyms), gender pronouns and sexual orientations. Prior to the interviews, the participants were invited to share their preferred pronouns, gender identity and sexual orientation upon consent as the information can contribute to data analysis process in relation to negotiation of gendered selves in second language socialisation. The participants freely self-identified their gender and sexual orientation and were not required to provide additional personal details related to their gender identity and sexuality.

The number of participants varied across the three interview phases. When recruiting for the pre-study abroad interview, it was not made mandatory for participants to commit to subsequent interviews. This decision was made because the pre-study abroad interview started as a pilot study and mandatory participation in subsequent interviews could have imposed a higher commitment or obligation. Six participants volunteered for the pre-study abroad focus group interview, and they were encouraged to take part in future interviews. The participants' interview participation and contribution were acknowledged with a gift card after the interview, which was approved and supported by the research office at the

researcher's institution. The participants' involvement in later phases remained entirely voluntary.

When the cohort was in Korea during the 2021-2022 academic year, invitation for during study abroad interview was sent to their university email accounts in April 2022. In addition, one of the participants from the first interview kindly volunteered to remind everyone about the interview opportunity in their WhatsApp group chat. This led to recruiting two participants for the during study abroad interview, which was a far reduced number of participants compared to the previous interview. This was partially because some of the participants in the pre-study abroad interview suspended their studies for a year due to unforeseen rules introduced to student visa application due to covid-19 restrictions in summer 2021.

After the cohort returned to the UK, a post-study abroad interview invitation was sent in October 2022. At this point, one more participant who had taken part in the pre-study abroad interview expressed interest in participating again along with the two participants in the during study abroad interview. A second invitation for post-study abroad interviews was sent in March 2023, and the three participants from earlier interviews agreed to participate in the second round. Their engagement added depth and continuity of the dataset.

Throughout all of the interview phases, none of the participants were actively chased to continue to take part in the interviews or made to feel obliged to participate in any subsequent interviews. This was grounded in ethical considerations of the researcher, which are elaborated in Section 4.5. Outside the research context, the researcher was a tutor for the participants. The tutor-tutee relationship might establish unequal power dynamics which could make the interview participation imposing, even though it was stated in the consent form that their participation would not affect their academic achievement in their degree

programme. Despite this, however, three participants - Emily, Leah and Holly - demonstrated a consistent enthusiasm for the project, driven by their strong interest in the research topic. Their sustained involvement made a valuable longitudinal contribution to the dataset.

Table 4.1. Participants for the pre study abroad interview

Name of Participant (Pseudonyms)	Gender Pronouns	Sexual Orientation
Anna	she/her	heterosexual
Lizzie	she/her	heterosexual
Leah	she/her	heterosexual
Holly	she/they	bisexual
Kate	they/them	aroace/pansexual
Zoe	they/them	bisexual

Interview conducted in July 2021

Table 4.2. Participants for the during study abroad interviews

Name of Participant	Gender Pronouns	Sexual Orientation
Emily	she/her	heterosexual
Leah	she/her	heterosexual

Interviews conducted in May 2022

Table 4.3. Participants for the post study abroad interviews I and II

Name of Participant	Gender Pronouns	Sexual Orientation
Emily	she/her	heterosexual
Leah	she/her	heterosexual
Holly	she/they	bisexual

Interviews conducted in November 2022 and March 2023

4.4. Interview contexts and questions

Phase 1. Pre study abroad interview

The pre study abroad interview was conducted in July 2021 with six participants who had just completed their second year of the degree programme. The focus group interview was initially designed as a pilot study to simulate and refine the interview process. In addition to this, the first interview as a pilot study was useful in shaping ideas regarding how participants perceive gendered performances in K-Pop while consuming it as well as how they envision their gendered selves in the target culture. Furthermore, the interview questions were designed to elicit a broad range of thoughts on masculinities and femininities both within K-Pop and beyond, including comparisons to Western gender ideologies. This allowed for deeper discussions about the ideologies underlying gender constructions in both cultural contexts.

Although originally conceptualised as a pilot, the interview was included as the first phase of the study due to the richness of the data. The participants produced substantive narratives regarding their perceptions on discursive constructions of masculinities and femininities in K-Pop and how these are connected to their future selves in Korea in relation to their own gender. At the time of the pre-study abroad interview, none of the participants had been to Korea. Therefore, their knowledge of Korean gender norms, especially in contemporary Korea, had largely been shaped by two years of formal studies at the university and their voluntary exposure to Korean cultural products, particularly K-Pop.

Prior to the interview, the participants were asked to watch four K-Pop music videos, which were used as prompts to facilitate discussion. As active consumers of K-pop, the participants were well-informed about gender representations in the genre. However, providing specific music videos as prompts was useful in that they were selected in relation to

the topic of dominant performances of masculinities and femininities in K-Pop. The music videos were BTS' *Boy in Luv* (2014), *Boy with Luv* (2018), Girls' Generations' *Gee* (2009), and Hwasa's *Maria* (2020) (see Appendix 1, 2, 3 and 4 for screenshots of each music video).

The four videos were selected for several reasons. First, the singers involved are well-known K-Pop figures among K-Pop fans globally and their popularity has even attracted academic attention from across disciplines (Epstein and Turnbull, 2014; Kim, 2021a; Oh, 2014; Proctor, 2021; 2025). In addition, the music videos contain distinctive gendered performance, ranging from normative and counter-normative masculinities and femininities. For example, in BTS' *Boy in Luv* portrays a masculinity characterised by strength and dominance, which are representative features of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995). On the other hand, in their *Boy with Luv* music video, there is a significant shift in the way they perform their gender. Performance of soft masculinity (Jung, 2011) is highly visible through the boy band's fashion, make-up and choreography.

Regarding the performances of femininity in the chosen music videos, Girls' Generations' music video *Gee* exemplifies innocence and cuteness performed through *aegyo* (see Section 2.4.), frequently found in heterosexual interactions in Korean contexts. In contrast, Hwasa's *Maria* features hyper-feminine performances that challenge traditional expectations. Hwasa is widely recognised for advocating female agency and body positivity, subverting the restrictive gender norms often imposed women in the K-pop industry. These performances stand in contrast to the portrayals of cute and innocent type of femininity in Girls' Generations' *Gee*, reflecting Hwasa's sensual and provocative style.

The diversity of gender performances found across these four music videos ensured that the interview allowed the participants to discuss a wide range of gendered aspects in K-pop, not only focusing on the most dominant form of masculinity or femininity. However, the music

videos were primarily given to catalyse discussion, and the participants were invited to freely discuss their thoughts based on their knowledge of K-Pop or gender ideology in Korea. The questions for the focus group interview are as follows:

1. How do you see gender in Korean media?
2. Do you think there are elements that highlight certain gendered acts or images in K-Pop?
3. Is any of gender representations you find in K-Pop relevant to you?
4. What are your views on soft masculinity represented in K-Pop boy bands?
5. How different is masculinity in K-Pop from normative masculinity in the West?
6. Do you think soft masculinity in K-Pop has a potential to become a new norm or is it more likely to stay one of many forms of masculinity performed by the Oriental other?
7. Do you think femininity in K-Pop is performed differently when compared to the femininity in the Western media?
8. All of you are preparing yourselves for study abroad in Korea. Do you think it is important that you incorporate certain expectations on gender in Korean society to better integrate yourself in the target culture?

Phase 2. During study abroad interviews

In April 2022, an interview invitation was sent to the cohort who were on study abroad in Korea, with a plan to conduct the during study interviews in the following month. This timing allowed participants to reflect on two semesters of study at their respective partner universities in Korea. Two participants, Emily and Leah, expressed an interest and were interviewed individually via Microsoft Teams in May 2022. The during study abroad interview questions aimed to explore the participants' gendered experiences in Korea and

how these experiences influenced their negotiation of gender expressions and shaped their gendered L2 selves in the target culture.

At this phase, it was expected that the participants would produce more nuanced narratives about gender related to their insights into socially constructed gender in Korea as well as their negotiation of gendered L2 selves in the context of second language socialisation. These accounts can highlight their encounters with normatively constructed masculinities and femininities in Korea, and how they exercised gendered agency (Duff, 2007; Sung, 2021) to adopt or challenge what they perceived as dominant social gender norms. Additionally, during study abroad interview aimed to explore the participants' narratives that reveal meaningful negotiations of their gendered L2 selves depending on their contexts. For example, Emily and Leah spent their study abroad year at different institutions. Emily studied at a women's university in Seoul whereas Leah studied at a co-ed university in a nearby city approximately an hour away from Seoul. As Ushioda (2009) emphasised the importance of considering varying contexts to understand learners' self and identity (see Section 3.4), this locally different environment was also considered as an external factor which may shape each learner's gendered L2 selves.

Because Emily was a new participant for the study, it was also expected that her gendered narratives might bring different perspectives and contribute to the empirical examples of the dynamic nature of gendered L2 selves during study abroad, an intense period of various changes in one's immediate environment. Furthermore, considering that Leah continued her participation from the previous pre study abroad interview, closer attention could be paid to any gaps or overlaps between the pre-study abroad and during study abroad interviews. The during study abroad interview questions are as follows:

1. When you are in Korea, how do you feel about expressing your gender identity?

2. In Korea and in the UK, how do you feel people react to your enthusiasm for K-Pop?
3. What have you noticed or what have you observed about masculinity and femininity in the UK and Korea?
4. How do you feel that you express your gender identity in relation to cultural context?
5. Were there any moments in Korea that made you reflect on your gender identity?

In the during the study abroad interview, the participants were expected to be able to recount their stories and articulate any perspectives from their own lived experiences. Therefore, the interviews from Phase 2 did not use any prompts such as music videos and questions were designed to elicit more responses that reflect the participants' unique gendered experiences and views on gender in Korea as they were living in the target language society.

Phase 3-1. Post study abroad interviews I

The post study abroad interviews were conducted after the cohort returned to the UK from their study abroad. After spending a year at partner universities in Korea, they returned to the UK before September 2022 for their final year to finish the degree. Just as the previous interview invitations, emails were sent to the same cohort in October 2022 to encourage participation and three students participated in the first round of post study abroad interview in November 2022. Emily and Leah continued their participation in this phase and Holly, a returning participant from the pre-study abroad interview, expressed an interest and was invited to the post study interviews. The post study abroad interviews recruited three participants as a result.

Savicki and Price (2015) emphasised the role of reflection in study abroad experiences, as reflective practices help learners construct meaning from their own experiences rather than simply ruminate on them. In this regard, the first post study abroad interview questions were designed to draw more reflective thinking from the participants on their gendered experiences

during their time in Korea and any changes regarding their performing or perceiving gender in both cultures and languages. Additionally, they were asked to talk about in which language they feel more comfortable in terms of expressing their gender and why. The questions were used to investigate whether there is any language specific element which shapes the participants' gendered behaviours in either language or whether they exert any influence on the participants' gendered practices or interactions. These questions elicited more narratives about the participants' linguistic L2 selves related to their gendered experiences than the previous phases.

Finally, they were invited to discuss masculinities and femininities they had observed from K-Pop and in real life in Korea they experienced in retrospect. K-pop was identified one of the strongest attractors to learn Korean for many British Korean learners while the genre promotes and reinforces some dominant gender norms in Korea (see Sections 3.2. and 2.4.). Considering these, the question was to investigate whether the participants perceive the dominant gender representations promoted in K-Pop as faithful reflections gender norms they experienced in everyday life in Korea. The participants' evaluations and reflections on any changes in the way they perceive gender norms, especially prompted by their Korean language studies and a year abroad may reveal substantial cues about their gendered L2 selves. Therefore, the interview attempted to capture any meaningful trajectories of the participants' negotiation of their gender expressions across two different cultures and languages. The interview questions are as follows:

1. Can you reflect on any changes regarding the way you express gender over the past couple of years?
2. Do you ever feel more comfortable to be yourself in terms of expressing your gender identity in Korean or English?

3. Are there any moments which make you think about your gender when you speak Korean?
4. Are there any moments which make you think about your gender when you speak English?
5. Is there any overlap between the masculinities and femininities in K-Pop and in real life you experienced?

Phase 3-2. Post study abroad interviews II

In March 2023, one more round of post study abroad interviews were conducted to enrich the dataset. While major purposes for these interviews remained consistent with the first post-study abroad interviews, these additional interviews were arranged to allow the participants to reflect more on their experiences after spending some time back in the UK. Taking a retrospective approach can yield more insight and allow the participants to re-evaluate any past or on-going gendered experiences in relation to studying Korean. The interview questions let the participants recount any meaningful trajectories in the way they express their gender in relation to learning Korean over the past years as well as their knowledge of cultural gender norms which may have shaped these experiences of performing gender in Korean and English. The interview questions are as follows:

1. How do you see your own gender expression and identity in relation to learning Korean (particularly in Korea?)
2. What awareness do you have of cultural gender norms?
3. In what ways do you think you express your own gender identity since you started studying Korean?
4. Are there any stories or instances relating to gender that are particularly interesting or marked for you?

Now the section transitions into what ethical considerations were made by the researcher and how the researcher practised reflexivity throughout the study.

4.5. Ethical considerations: Role of the researcher

Research ethics is important in any research as it involves protecting the rights of participants whose actions and experiences become subject matter (Finnis, 1983). Creswell and Creswell (2018) identified ethical practice as one of nine key features of a 'good' qualitative study. Ethical research, they argued, extends beyond 'seeking and obtaining the permission of institutional review committees or boards as all anticipated and emergent ethical issues are considered and addressed by the researcher' (Creswell and Creswell, 2018, p.48).

In qualitative research which employs semi-structured interviews extensively, the role of researcher becomes critical due to the flexible and subjective nature of the method. For this reason, researcher reflexibility should be fully incorporated during the entire research process to ensure that the research is ethical. Reflexivity is more complicated than reflecting on oneself and one's practice (Seale, 2018, p.45). It requires critical reflection on four different areas which involves 'an attempt to identify power and power relations; a theoretical take on power in research; making ethical judgements; accountability for knowledge produced' (Holland and Ramazanoglu, 2002, p.119).

Power dynamics can be present in any research, as researchers are traditionally understood to control the research and hold authority over the participants, making the relationship a hierarchical one (Braun and Clarke, 2013). Considering this, carefully managing the potential power imbalance becomes 'central to ethical practice' (Seale, 2018, p. 50). As explained in Section 4.3., the researcher and the participants had a tutor-tutee relationship outside the research context, which could have transferred to the research itself. To minimise any aspect

of the tutor-tutee relationship and ensure that the participants do not conceive a power imbalance, it was emphasised that the interview participation would not affect their academic achievement both in the consent letter and email invitations.

To further mitigate the traditional power relation between the researcher and participants, various soft skills were practised during the interview process. Soft skills include interpersonal and communication skills such as active listening and empathy. These skills contribute to rapport building and create a safe space for participants when sharing their experiences and perspectives (Creswell and Miller, 2000). This leads to enhanced data quality as more authentic and comprehensive data can be elicited based on the trust and respect built between the researcher and the participants (Maxwell, 2013). Further to this, all participants were encouraged to contact the researcher if they have any concerns or questions regarding the research and informed that the researcher would always be happy to discuss and share any findings with them as a form of feedback.

The ethical considerations outlined above were integrated into the ethics application, which was approved by the university's ethics committee in July 2021. Upon gaining the approval, a consent letter (see Appendix 5) was subsequently prepared to be sent to recruited participants along with interview questions. The consent letter included the following information: a brief profile of the researcher; the purpose of the study; potential contribution of the study to academia and research participants; details on how data would be collected (audio-recording) and securely archived; assurance of participant anonymity in the transcribed data; participants' right to withdraw at any stage of the research.

The participants had known the researcher more as their Korean tutor than a doctoral researcher before the announcement of the call for interview participation. Therefore, it was necessary to provide clear information about the research and its purpose so that they can

decide whether they are interested in the research topic and willing to contribute. In addition to this, it was stated that the research does not only aim to make academic contribution with new findings but also to benefit the participants. This is because the participants may be able to gain more insights into Korean culture and society as to how gender is normatively constructed in contemporary Korea, and how some of them are portrayed in K-pop as they articulate their perspectives and gendered experiences during the interview process. Furthermore, the participants were informed that they may also be able to develop critical thinking, comparing what they know as gender norms in Korea and the UK.

Coming from the same cohort, the participants demonstrated a good level of emotional comfort within themselves during the pre-study abroad focus group interview. They were open to share gender identities, sexual orientations as well as gendered experiences and views related to studying Korean between each other and with the researcher. Nonetheless, it was essential to guarantee confidentiality with their names anonymised when the data is used for the research as any findings would be shared with wider academic audiences and even beyond. The participants' names were anonymised both in the transcription and subsequent analysis. Additionally, throughout the entire research period, none of the participants withdrew from the study. This allowed the researcher to utilise all collected data across the three phases.

After each interview, the audio recordings were securely stored in a OneDrive folder which was accessible only by the researcher. All the recordings were transcribed by the researcher without resorting to any third-party transcription service or software. Despite the lengthy process, it ensured ethical handling of the data and prevented breaches of confidentiality. Apart from this ethical aspect, the transcribing process allowed the researcher to become deeply familiar with the data, which was critical for the subsequent analysis stages. The

recordings were revisited and listened to multiple times to ensure that the interviews were transcribed with high accuracy. While transcribing the data, certain parts of interviews where discussions have gone irrelevant were omitted upon the researcher's discretion.

As much as the ethical considerations, reflexivity is another critical component in qualitative research (Etherington, 2004; Gibbs, 2007). In broad terms, reflexivity can be understood as 'paying close attention to researcher subjectivity and ongoing self-awareness throughout the research process' (Sauntson, 2023, p.172). In the same vein, Pillow (2003) explained reflexivity as maintaining a focus on the subjective position of the researcher informed by their personal history, identity and even feelings. These create what Blommaert (2005) considered as the researcher's cultural and interpretive capacities, and researchers should be conscious of what contributions are made by these capacities (Roulston, 2010).

Reflexivity is not only a temporal process during the moment of research; it is embedded in the ongoing research process and may also be stretched into post-research stage (Mauthner and Doucet, 2003; Riach, 2009). To ensure such reflexive practices explicit (Bucholtz, 2001), the research included continuous reflection on positionality. Positionality is defined 'as how one's identity and social location influence and impact on how people understand and engage with the world' (Greenwood and Edson Ferrie, 2025, p.3). In this sense, the researcher's positionality as a teacher, a reflective coder, and most importantly, a heterosexual female researcher from Korea in the UK academia had significant impact on the collection of interview data and analysis (see also Section 8.3.).

In addition, as a part of the reflexive practice, participants were invited to informal conversations with the researcher in May 2024. Two participants, Lizzie and Holly, expressed an interest, and individual meetings were arranged on Microsoft Teams in June 2024. During these meetings, the researcher shared interpretations of interview data and explained how

their contributions helped explore the gendered selves in second language socialisation. The researcher also disclosed how personal positionality shaped the analysis. Both Lizzie and Holly expressed appreciation for this reflexive approach, which allowed them to understand how their voices informed the research findings. Although these conversations were informal, they reinforced the collaborative and ethical nature of the study as well as highlighting the researcher's accountability for the knowledge produced.

4.6. Thematic analysis for initial interpretation of the data

Critical narrative analysis, as elaborated in the subsequent sections, serves as the primary analytic framework for this study. However, thematic analysis contributed to the initial analysis of the data and development of the concepts of gendered L2 selves (see Section 3.5). This section discusses how the early stages of analysis benefitted from codes and themes that emerged from the interviews, while explaining its limitations, which are greatly addressed by the later implementation of critical narrative analysis.

Thematic analysis is considered to be a highly accessible and flexible approach for handling qualitative data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Examining observable content as a first step, the approach allows researchers to detect the most salient patterns in the data before drawing more critical interpretations (Joffe, 2011). In this regard, thematic analysis is particularly useful as a preliminary method for gaining a general understanding of the data. In addition, Holloway and Todres (2003) advocated thematic analysis for exploring lived experiences in interviews or narratives as it assists understanding the meanings of the experiences both at a general and unique level. Furthermore, thematic analysis can also generate unanticipated insights during the process of analysing themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

As a first step in engaging with the data, thematic analysis was applied to draw initial insights. Braun and Clarke's (2021) model for reflexive thematic analysis provided a

structured roadmap. Their model consists of six phases, which start with the familiarisation of the dataset (phase 1). It is followed by coding the entire dataset systematically and thoroughly (phase 2). Once the coding is finished, initial themes, which capture broader and shared meaning can be generated (phase 3). After candidate themes have been identified, all the relevant coded data are collated to each candidate theme. Developing and reviewing candidate themes move the analysis forward (phase 4). At this phase, certain candidate themes are collapsed into a fewer or a single theme, new themes may emerge as one or more themes undergo splitting, some candidate themes may be retained or discarded. In this reviewing process, core ideas, scope of the themes, the relationship between the themes and finally the wider context of the research needs to be considered. The next phase takes the analysis to refining, defining and naming themes (phase 5). In this process, the researcher demarcates each theme clearly and ensures that themes demonstrate core concepts. The final stage is writing up (phase 6), where the researcher presents the analysis that answers the research questions coherently and persuasively (Braun and Clarke, 2021, pp.35-36).

Following the suggested phases, the analysis started with familiarisation of the dataset. Multiple notes were made while listening to the recorded audios and reading the transcribed interviews. This process allowed for identification of potential codes and themes. To organise and develop more insight into the data more effectively, the transcribed interview data were transferred to NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software (QDAS). In qualitative research, QDAS tools are commonly used in the analysis stage as they facilitate systematic management of substantial amount of data with various functions. NVivo is one of frequently used QDASs, as it supports coding and categorising data, which is a fundamental stage in thematic analysis. In addition, NVivo offers additional functions such as generating visual representation of analysed data. As the programme facilitates examining possible relationships among generated codes and themes (Gibbs, 2002), it is frequently employed in

qualitative data analysis. For systematic management and understanding of the data, NVivo was simultaneously used in the initial stage of the data analysis.

In parallel with manual coding and taking multiple notes of the data (see Appendix 6), NVivo was simultaneously employed in the earlier analysis of the interviews. Initial codes were created inductively as seen in Figure 4.1. While the generated codes facilitated more systematic understanding of the data, thematic analysis alone proved insufficient to provide an in-depth analysis of the interviews that critically engages with gendered elements in the participants' narratives. While flexible and accessible, thematic analysis had a few limitations when applied to narrative data. Firstly, in qualitative coding, many descriptions in the dataset may belong to various themes simultaneously, resulting in overlapping coding (Jiang and Dewaele, 2019). This was particularly relevant in this study, as substantial pieces of the interview data could be categorised into multiple themes. For example, the participants' account of certain gender norm in Korea could be coded as 'normative femininity in Korea', 'ought-to gendered L2 self', and a few more other codes.

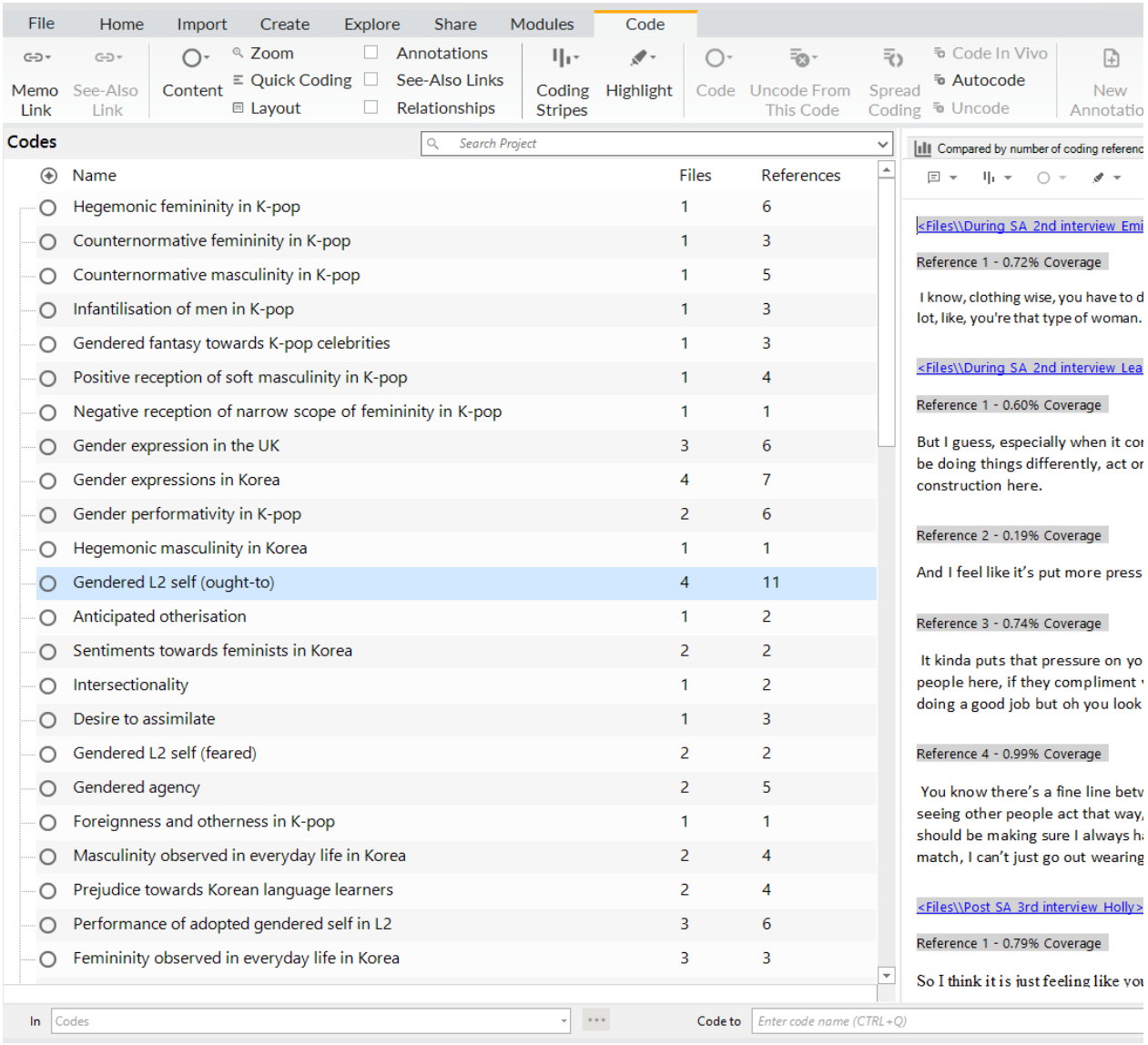

Figure 4.1. Example of thematic analysis conducted on NVivo

Secondly, thematic analysis alone did not fully capture the nuances of individuality, agency and subjectivity of the participants. As Riessman (2007) rightly pointed out, when narratives are categorised into smaller units such as codes and themes, some pieces of meaningful information may be distilled or edited out of context. Highlighting the importance of particularities and context, she further emphasised that there should be heavier attention on the details if the data has narrative nature, focusing on 'how and why a particular event is storied, what a narrator accomplishes by developing the story *that* way' (Riessman, 2007, pp.

12-13). To allow the participants' nuanced gendered narratives to come to the fore, thematic analysis remained as a supporting method in the entire analysis process. In line with this approach, in-depth case studies that illustrate such narratives are presented in the analysis, rather than framing the three phases as a longitudinal study.

The flexibility of thematic analysis allowed this methodological decision possible. Thematic analysis commonly blends with other analytic approaches, becoming 'hybrid' approaches (Braun and Clarke, 2021, p.254). Such combination of methodological elements produces novel approaches, which can advance and improve existing methodological approaches when they are applied with a purpose and demonstrate compatibility of different philosophical background (Bradbury-Jones et al., 2017, p.11). When revisiting the entire dataset multiple times, careful attention was paid to recurring codes within the context of gendered performance in second language socialisation. This process led to two significant themes for this study.

First, 'gendered L2 selves' were one of the most salient themes across the interviews. While the initial coding used the term as an adaption of Dörnyei's (2005; 2009) self-concepts in the L2MSS, gendered dimensions of language learners' L2 selves have not been previously conceptualised in relation to social gender ideology. The coding process identified this gap and thus contributed to the conceptualisation of 'gendered L2 selves' (see Section 3.5.).

Second, it became clearer that the participants' gendered narratives should be situated in wider social contexts as those narratives are interconnected with societal power discourses surrounding gender in the L2 culture. This highlighted the importance of exploring these narratives not only at a personal level but also within broader societal and cultural level. Consequently, critical narrative analysis was adopted as the primary analytic framework to

examine how the participants negotiated their gendered L2 selves in relation to discursively constructed gender norms in the L2 society.

Given this interconnectedness between the negotiation of gendered L2 selves and discursively constructed gender in L2 culture, it was critical that the participants' narratives are explored not only at a personal level, but also at a wider societal level. Therefore, critical narrative analysis, which is discussed in greater detail in the subsequent sections, was used to more substantively analyse the narratives produced by participants during the interviews, with thematic analysis being used as a starting point for highlighted key themes.

4.7. Using narrative inquiry in study abroad research

Emphasising the close connection between narrative and identity, De Fina (2015) explains how narrative functions as the primary vehicle for identity expression. Not only do narratives provide essential contexts where identities are constructed (Schiffrin, 2006), they also inform how individuals reconstruct their experiences in their interactions with others and the world (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000).

To study narratives, Labov and Waletzky (1967) provided a foundational model, articulating six core elements that linearly appear in narratives. In this model, narratives unfold following a linear sequence of abstract, orientation, complicating action, resolution, evaluation and coda. (see Figure 4.2.). Early narrative studies influenced by the Labovian model paid attention to seminal life stories or landmark events which follow the proposed structure (Labov and Waletzky, 1967). This model aligns with the biographical oriented approach to narratives (McAdams, 1988; McIntyre 1984) which presumes that identity work is coherent. In this regard, narratives serve the promotion of positive sense of self, and they reflect coherent and unified self-representations (Smorti, 2011).

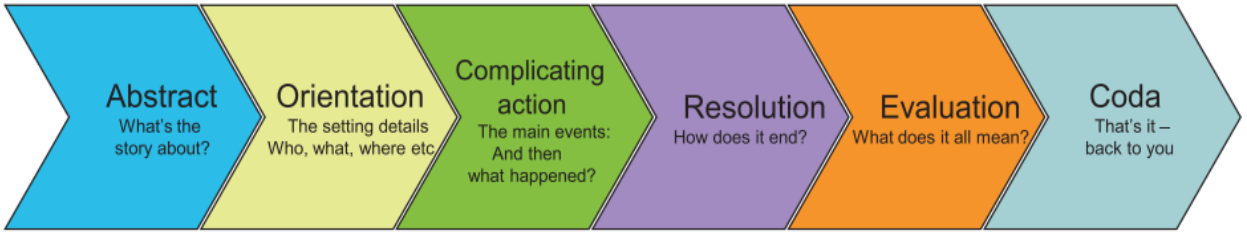

Figure 4.2. A brief adaptation of Labov's (1967) sociolinguistic model of personal narratives (Easton, 2016, p.4)

In contrast, interactionally oriented approach challenges this perspective, broadly dividing narrative studies with the biographical oriented approach (De Fina and Georgakopoulou, 2012). Highlighting the context-specificity, performativity and communication practices (ibid), the interactionally oriented approach primarily focuses on how identities are constructed, considering identity construction as a process, not a product (De Fina, 2015). This approach pays specific attention to social dimensions in the self-construction as well as individuals' management of discursive strategies in their interactions with the others (ibid, pp. 352-353). In this respect, interactionally oriented view acknowledges fragmented and dynamic nature of identity. Furthermore, narratives in this orientation do not necessarily demonstrate positive sense of self nor follow the structured process as suggested by Labov (1967).

This perspective resonates with the post-structural approach to understand narratives by attending to small stories (Bamberg, 2006; Georgakopoulou, 2007). Bamberg (2006) interpreted that the narratives produced in the highly structured Labovian narrative model as big stories, due to their autobiographical nature which focuses on landmark stories. Additionally, he criticised that Labovian style narratives are researcher-prompted and their narrow target audience who apprehend the form and rhetorics found in the conventional narrative structure (ibid. p. 381). Furthermore, big stories are limited to reconstruction of past

events. Their indifference to stories told in relation the present and the future often limits the exploration of identity as an evolving construct.

In contrast to the rigidity of big stories in Labov's model, small stories are representations of quotidian elements. They are not only restricted to past events but include present and future-oriented hypothesis and even allusions (Georgakopoulou, 2006). According to Bamberg (2006), small stories are stories told in everyday interactions. Highlighting the ordinariness, he added that these small stories do not have to be 'interesting or tellable' and due to such seeming insignificance, they also may be 'quickly forgotten' (ibid, p. 63). Bamberg and Georgakopoulou (2008) further emphasised that small stories can be anything and nothing; they can include very recent incidents, on-going events, small pieces of spontaneous information, and even informal interactions between interactants which carry no meaning for outsiders. Encompassing this everyday phenomena, small stories stand in the opposite of big stories, which require 'elaborate elicitation techniques' from the researcher and 'highly specific rhetoric techniques' from the narrator's side, making the story somewhat 'artificial' (Bamberg, 2006, p.71). In this regard, small stories are not only freer in terms of its structure and content but also provide freer space for people to construct their self and identity through narratives. The participants' narratives in this study produced abundant small stories about gendered experience both from studying Korean as well as study abroad.

The flexibility of small stories makes them particularly suitable for studying learners' identities in the everyday contexts they navigate and reconstruct. Benwell and Stokoe's (2006) illustrations of identity construction in varying contexts confirmed this, as identities emerge from narratives in institutional settings to daily routines, and from physical to virtual spaces. As narratives open doors to study self and identity, language learning research has also benefitted from narrative account of learners (Duff, 2008). Particularly, narratives have

largely been employed in studies that explore social contexts of individual language learners, allowing researchers to ‘address broader issues surrounding an individual’s language learning’ (Miyahara, 2015, p. 37). Attending to learners’ narratives implies that the focus is placed on the individual learners as ‘multifaceted social beings’ rather than ‘site of language development’ (ibid, p. 37).

In alignment with the interactional oriented approach to study narratives, the interviews in this study were designed to provide participants with space to create small stories as they narrate their gendered experiences during their Korean learning journey. These experiences tend to occur spontaneously and unpredictably as they engage with Korean culture and language. In addition, each participant may encounter gender norms in the target language culture in varying temporal and spatial contexts, and these norms may be contested or internalised. Paying attention to small stories emerging from these experiences allows the researcher to focus on the process of how their gendered L2 selves are negotiated and constructed, rather than the treating them as a fixed product or outcomes of second language socialisation.

Narratives effectively seize the ‘nature and meaning of experiences that are difficult to observe directly and are best understood from perspective of those who experience it’ (Barkhuizen, Benson and Chik, 2014, p.8). Complementing this, Miyahara (2015) suggested that researchers should be sensitive to inner complexities accounted in narratives. Complexities are commonly observed in self and identity constructions in language learning due to intersections of cultures. In small stories studies, such complexities are particularly evident as analyses illustrate how identities are fragmented, contradictory and hold multiple positions simultaneously (Bamberg, 2004a; 2004b; 2004c; Georgakopoulou, 2004, 2005, 2006).

Paying attention to the developments of participants' small stories also facilitates the understanding of learners' identities in a post-structuralist perspective, as the stories typically reveal that identities are not monolithic but constantly reconstructed during the trajectory of the participants' language learning journey (Wenger, 1998). As existing study abroad research illustrated (see Section 3.3.), language learners create and reformulate their sense of selves and identities in constant negotiation with their evolving understanding of the target culture and various external relationships. In the same vein, examining participants' narratives through interviews can expect to capture such fluidity in their gendered L2 selves. The narratives may reveal both continuity and contradictions, which reflect various learner identities and positions intertwined in them. Small stories offer a means to access to this complicated negotiating process, while serving as empirical evidence of the post-structural nature of gendered L2 selves.

In analysing narratives, researchers move beyond their passive listenership as they pay careful attention to the nexus between the stories and the identities of the storytellers (Bamberg, 2006). This requires attending to the discursive nature of narratives and situating them within broader social and cultural contexts. In this vein, Georgakopoulou (2006) called for theoretical coherence for analysing narratives in relation to its wider societal context while creating opportunities for interdisciplinary approach to explore narratives. Responding to this call, Section 4.8 elaborates on how this study integrates narrative analysis with critical discourse analysis, culminating in critical narrative analysis as the primary analytical framework.

4.8. Critical narrative analysis: situating narratives within critical discourse analysis

To analyse the interview data in this study, critical narrative analysis emerged as a powerful analytic framework as it effectively combines narrative analysis (described in the

previous section) with critical discourse analysis (henceforth CDA). CDA is an analytic framework which explores the interrelationship between language, power and ideology. As CDA incorporates a post-structural lens to shed light on the power discourse, it differs from the traditional discourse analysis which primarily focuses on the structural or functional aspect of language. There are three mainstream approaches to CDA; while there is an overarching emphasis on the 'social' aspect in discourse, Fairclough's (2001; 2010) model highlights discourse as a social practice whereas Van Dijk (2008) underscores the cognitive dimensions of discourse and Wodak's (2001) approach has a heavier focus on the socio-historical and political aspects of discourse. The analytic framework in this study aligns with Fairclough's approach in its view of discourse and narrative as sites where socially constructed gender norms are enacted and practised.

In defining 'discourse', Fairclough (2001) highlighted discourse as a socially constructed linguistic practice. Rejecting Saussure's structural view of language that it exists in a unitary and homogeneous sense, Fairclough argued that language should be understood as socially determined (ibid, p.18), emphasising the dialectical relationship between discourse and society. This means that discourse and social structures are mutually connected; while discourse is determined by social structures, it simultaneously influences social structures either to achieve social continuity or stimulate social change.

According to Fairclough, social conditions that are reflected in discourse are specified as '*social conditions of production*', and '*social conditions of interpretation*' (ibid, p.20), which becomes context of how discursive practices interact and produces written and spoken text. He further explained that this view of language as social practice requires three-dimensional analysis of the relationship between texts and their social conditions as well as how they are processed in-between, as seen in Figure 4.3.

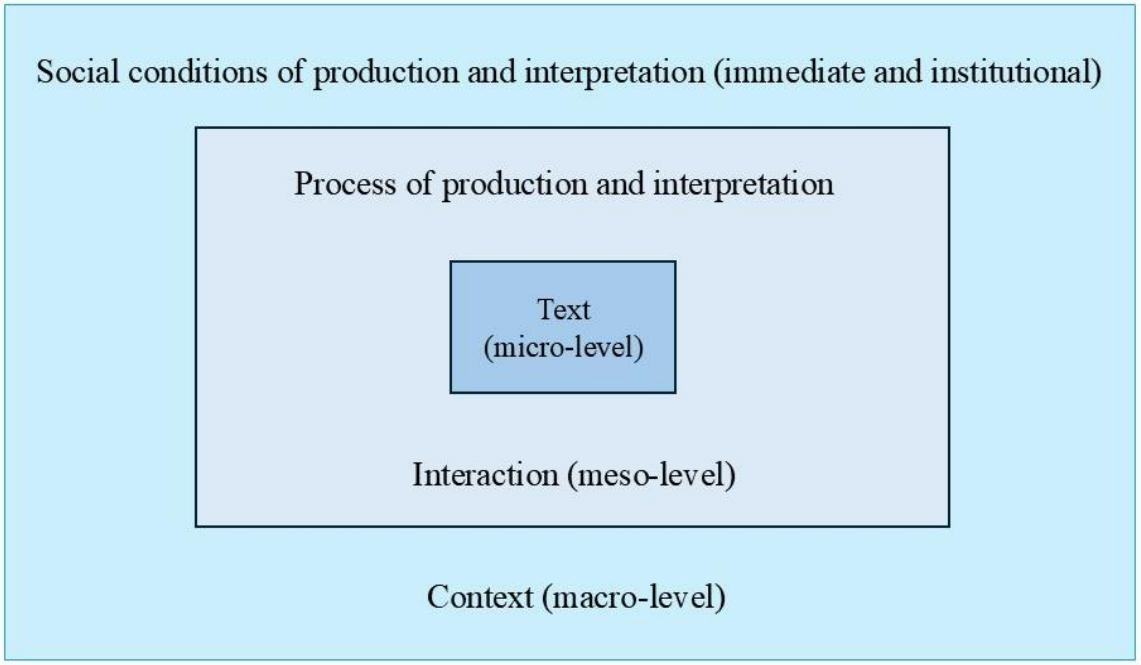

Figure 4.3. Fairclough's model of discourse as text, interaction and context

As demonstrated in Figure 4.3., Fairclough considered discourse as a complex of three elements. First, social practices, which both include immediate and institutional social structures constitute the wider context of discourse where discoursal practices (text production, distribution and consumption) take place. At varying degrees, discoursal practices contribute to the reproduction of socially constructed norms, sustaining the power discourse. These practices then interact with text, both in spoken and written form, which is produced at the micro-level (Fairclough, 2010, p.59). In this model, it is essential to not only analyse each dimension but also how they are inter-related.

CDA's primary focus is to disclose power relations embedded in discourse so that it addresses social inequalities and injustice. Therefore, it involves questioning what kind of ideologies are underlying and enacted in certain discourse, how they are represented and operationalised both in language and identities, sustaining the power discourse (ibid, p.8). In this regard, CDA has been widely applied as a useful framework in various social research,

including those whose focus is gender, as power relations are inherent in the social construction of gender. Gendered discourse, for example, typically (re)produce gender hegemony, inscribing certain gendered expectations and roles to specific groups or individuals to position them in certain ways.

The data from the three-phase interviews is enriched with the participants' gendered narratives which reflect discourse related to gender representations in K-Pop (predominantly in phase 1) and discursive construction of gender in contemporary Korea, which the participants experienced from their Korean language learning, including the study abroad year. In addition, the participants' negotiations of their gendered L2 selves are also projected in their narratives. These narratives can be better understood by examining discourse of gender the participants have experienced in their home culture and L2 culture, as narrative identities are discursively enacted (Rugen, 2013).

Gendered narratives do not occur themselves but in interplays with dominant gender ideologies embedded in a society. Furthermore, they are constantly produced by and reinforced upon its members. Considering that gender is a social construction, it is expected that language learners' understanding of gender in L2 society as well as their performative gender in L2 may also be conditioned by the power gender discourse in L2, in relation to the individual learner's set of identities. Thus, critical analysis of social gender discourse is essential to understand the participants' gendered experiences in depth.

The 'narrative' nature of the interview data, however, requires a small shift from using CDA as the analytic framework. Although this study acknowledges the relation between discourse and society, it is equally critical to consider how the participants' newly negotiated gendered identities in L2 are constructed in the stories they tell during the interviews. This was particularly evident in this study, resonating with the argument that narratives may

constitute identities more directly than discourses in general (Benwell and Stokoe, 2016, p.138).

To value the narratives in the interview data while acknowledging the influence of social gender discourse embedded in them, this study employs critical narrative analysis (CNA) which combines narrative analysis within critical discourse analysis (Souto-Manning, 2012). CNA aims to provide a more complete analysis by attending to individual's nuanced experiences in society through their language as well as examining power and discourse in society. According to Souto-Manning (2012), narrative analysis and CDA mutually benefit each other. For example, CDA explicitly addresses institutionalised power embedded in language, which may be largely unnoticed or overlooked in narrative analysis. Narratives, on the other hand, become an empirical site where certain institutionalised discourse is enacted and recycled, and thus can be claimed as power discourse. In this vein, CNA effectively elucidates how people create their sense of selves in constant interaction with the wider society (Forgas, 2002).

As much as the interdependency shared between discourse and society, individual identities and narratives are also intricately related to society. According to Schiffrin (1996), narratives offer a 'backdrop of cultural expectations about a typical course of action; our identities as social beings emerge as we construct our individual experiences as a way to position ourselves in relation to social and cultural expectations' (Schiffrin, 1996, p. 170). In this regard, personal narratives that highlight such socially constructed identities provide ample stories where certain power discourses can be critically examined. In analysing the narratives in this nature, it is also useful to pay attention how the storylines are determined by the positions taken by the individual, as they reflect the person's 'assigned, ascribed, claimed, or

taken-on rights and duties' which reflect discourses of power which are either available for them or imposed on them (Harré and van Langenhove, 1999).

Learning a second language and going on a study abroad accompanies an immersion in a different sociocultural discourse. As the participants in this study experience different gendered expectations in their target language society, they may engage in the 'negotiation of difference', which takes place in contexts of unequal power relations (Kinginger, 2013b, p.342). On the other hand, they may practise gender agency in L2 (see Section 3.5.) depending on their positionality in the way they interact with some different social gender norms in L2.

In this respect, the participants' narratives regarding their perceptions of gender in L2 as well as their negotiations of gendered L2 selves should not be isolated from broader social structures in Korean language and society; rather, they interact with the socially constructed gender norms which greatly shape their gendered experiences in learning Korean. Considering this, CNA provides a balanced lens, allowing the analysis to critically engage with the gendered identities and agency reflected in the participants' narratives as well as the social gender ideology in Korea and relevant discourses which exert influence in the participants' construction of their gendered L2 selves.

4.9. Summary

This chapter detailed the methodological decisions made in this research. To explore the gendered experiences of British learners of Korean in depth, a qualitative approach was employed, using semi-structured interview across the three-phased interviews: Pre-SA, DSA and PSA, which were designed to follow the participants' language learning trajectory at their university. Each phase of the interviews facilitated the subsequent interview preparation, as the researcher gained deeper insights from the participants. This process particularly

highlights the contribution of the participants, who co-constructed knowledge with the researcher.

The number of participants varied across the three phases of the interviews. However, the sustained participation of some participants contributed to the richness and continuity of the data. To ensure ethical practices, the researcher went beyond merely gaining ethics approval from her institution. Reflexivity was practised throughout the research process, ensuring a continual awareness of the researcher's positionality and its potential influence on the study.

Additionally, the chapter explained how thematic analysis and critical narrative analysis were employed as supporting and primary analytic frameworks, respectively. Thematic analysis proved particularly useful during the initial stage of data analysis, contributing to the development of the concept of 'gendered L2 selves' (see Section 3.5.). Finally, critical narrative analysis, which merges narrative analysis and critical discourse analysis, emerged as the most appropriate analytic framework for examining the gendered narratives in the interview data. This framework enables the researcher to address the participants' discursively constructed gendered experiences in their L2, both at the individual and societal level. It allows for a more critical engagement with the data, which can shed light on the relationship between social gender discourse in the L2 and the participants' nuanced individual perspectives and experiences.

5. Data analysis I: Pre-SA interview

5.1. Introduction

This chapter presents a critical narrative analysis of the first interview this study had with interview participants. As described in Chapter 4, the first interview is a focus group interview conducted in July 2021, a month before some of the participants went to Korea for their study abroad (see Section 4.4.). After revisiting the transcribed interview data multiple times, the preliminary thematic analysis revealed the emergence of three salient themes: duality of Western feminism; varying receptions of soft masculinity; and imaginings of gendered L2 selves before study abroad. These themes emerged as the participants discussed how they perceived dominant types of gender performances in K-pop, some of which they linked to certain gender issues in Korean society. Participants' narratives around each of these themes were then analysed in greater detail using critical narrative analysis.

Firstly, the data suggests that feminism has a substantial influence on the participants as an easily accessible counter-hegemonic ideology which they find as empowering. Conversely, however, the participants' easier access to feminism leads to the construction of their hegemonic femininity over non-white femininity. Secondly, there is an evident interplay of intersecting factors, such as culture, gender, sexuality and race in the reception of soft masculinity among the participants. Finally, the participants' narratives reveal their ought-to and feared gendered L2 selves, which are constructed in relation to their knowledge of gender norms in Korea as well as their gender identities and sexualities.

The presentation of the interview responses does not necessarily follow the order of the interview questions (see Section 4.4.), as the primary purpose of the interview questions is to facilitate discussion among the participants so that the interview collects richer and more nuanced data from them. Being the 'pre' study abroad interview, the participants' discussion

was more about their knowledge and perceptions of gender in K-pop and Korean society, rather than their own lived gendered experiences, which report more cases of gendered L2 selves.

To focus on the salient themes emerged from the participants' narratives which highlight their perception and knowledge of gender in K-pop and Korea, and their gendered L2 selves in the pre-SA interview, only the relevant and meaningful responses are selected and re-organised in the data analysis.

5.2. Duality of Western feminism: counter-hegemony and a source of hegemonic femininity

This section argues that feminism, which offers a counter-hegemony to patriarchy, provides the participants with an intersectional and liminal space where they construct Western hegemonic femininity through their positioning as feminists in the Western world. Harré (2010) maintains that 'the concepts and practices of selfhood' are achieved through the way one positions themselves. He further explains that one's selfhood is 'shaped by the positions available to that person in the collectivities in which that being lives' (ibid, p.51). In the participants' discussions of gender in K-pop, it was observed that they position themselves as 'Western' or 'British' feminists both explicitly and implicitly, as feminism has been easily accessible for them growing up in the UK. This section analyses the duality of feminism among the participants; while it functions as a source of empowerment for them, it also creates an angle to examine non-Western femininities.

5.2.1. Feminism in the West: an easily accessible counter-hegemony

In Western societies, the 'girl power' rhetoric became dominant in popular discourse and culture in the 1990s, which fostered a sense of agency among women (Riordan, 2001). The

visibility of high achieving and successful women has grown, most notably in education (Harris, 2004; Ringrose, 2007). This social change in the West has continually empowered women to express their femininity confidently as a representation of modernisation of gender (Budgeon, 2013). Despite feminism's counter-hegemonic nature, feminist manifestos have gained popularity and visibility especially within Western media to the point where it has gained some degree of normativity (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer, 2017). The participants have been born and raised in the UK in the post 1990s. Therefore, feminism has become an influential counter-hegemonic discourse in shaping the participants' contemporary understanding of gender and power, as well as their positive reception of feminist ideas. In the following excerpt, Leah directly articulates her perception of *'Western'* femininity, which is inspired by feminist agenda and allows women (including herself) to actively challenge existing system:

> Leah: Western femininity now is… because feminism now for us is something we can discuss. It's empowering. The (K-pop) girl groups' songs, they are empowering but in a different way, they are not 'oh, let's fight the system'. They are like, 'let's enjoy the life and reach our goal'. It's not like telling you to smash the glass ceiling. It's more just like 'do the best you can with what you have'.

Here, Leah articulates a comparison between Western feminism and feminism she observes in K-Pop. While acknowledging some empowering elements in K-pop girl groups' songs, Leah captures its limitation as feminist voice in K-pop is more restricted to personal level which are *'enjoying life'* and *'achieving goals'* within given constraints. On the other hand, she implies that feminist voices she has experienced in the UK is more progressive and powerful in that it *'fights the system'* and *'smashes the glass ceiling'*. These metaphors refer to challenging the gender hegemony constructed under the male dominance and demonstrate the counter-hegemonic nature of feminism she has experienced while growing up in the UK.

Leah is not straightforward in saying that the femininity expressed in K-pop is less empowering than Western femininity. However, it is indicated that just *'doing the best you can with what you have'* is perceived as passive and self-restrictive form of practicing feminism. This perspective is reinforced by Anna, who acknowledges the counter-hegemonic nature of feminism:

> Anna: It (femininity in K-pop) is more like positive whereas here (the UK) it's like, not negative but going into some negative things.

Anna approves the contrast made by Leah by characterising feminism in the UK as engaging with *'negative things'*, implying that it is focused on tackling social injustices regarding gender-based inequality. Just as Leah, Anna identifies herself as someone who has grown up with Western feminism in the UK. Both participants' uses of pronouns (*us, we* and *they*) and locative adverb (*here*) demonstrate that they are making a distinction between femininities according to the culture they originate from, while implicitly identifying themselves as British women who grew up with influences of feminism. By drawing this distinction, the participants position Western feminism as a counter-hegemonic force against the more traditional and less confrontational femininity, as in K-pop girl groups' expressions of femininity.

As Leah and Anna articulate, feminism in Western societies is a more accessible ideology, and it has been highly popularised (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer, 2017). It engages people in social activities and discussions to tackle gender inequality, which is often practised as digital feminism such as posting relevant information on social media (Banet-Weiser, 2018a). Lizzie's narrative demonstrates such a case, bringing her current understanding and experience of (anti)feminism in Korea into a wider discussion:

> Lizzie: There is a lot of anger about feminism in Korea. It is insane. I posted something

> on the app Hello Talk. It was a statistic about how Korea has the biggest gender pay gap or the worst discrepancy in some gender aspect. I posted it as a fact, and I was like, oh I didn't know that it's crazy and I had several men insulting me in Korean saying like, 'stupid British feminist', you know, using feminist like an insult.

Lizzie's narrated use of social media indicates that it is a normal practice for her to share and discuss information which tackles gender inequality, regardless of which society it originates from. As she reports, Korean women were reported to earn 68.8% on average, making the country's gender pay gap biggest among the 38 member countries of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) according to data published in 2022 (Lee, 2024). Lizzie's posting the statistics is interpreted as a digital participation in the social issues of her L2 society while showing her interest in issues related to gender equality. However, she reports experiencing misogynist insults (*'stupid British feminist'*) from some Korean men, who distorted her posting as not only insulting to Korea but also feminist.

Lizzie's case resonates with Kim's (2023) study reporting gender-based hate online speech as a serious and growing problem in Korea. In exploring the issue, Kim examines younger men's backlash against feminism as the first barrier to tackle the gender-based hate speech (ibid, p.114). While Lizzie's experience does not represent all Korean men's view of feminists, the misogynist insult she received manifests the recent anti-feminist sentiments among younger Korean men in their 20s and 30s, which emerged from multiple socio-economic and political reasons (Jung, 2023; Jung, 2024; Jung and Moon, 2024a; see also Section 6.2.3.). In response to Lizzie's experience, Leah discusses her understanding of feminists in Korea:

> Leah: Because feminists in Korea are not feminists. They don't want equality; they

> want men to die. This is the problem. In the past year, more men, young men, opted to right wing than ever before because of the feminist agenda in Korea right now. The feminists are feminists, but this is the problem – they are the radical feminists.

Despite some exaggeration and strong assumptions, Leah presents her up to date awareness of how feminism is misinterpreted and often equated with misandry in Korea (Hines and Song, 2021). As Yun (2022) examines, feminism in Korea has been at its momentous period since 2015. She explains that younger generations of Korean women have started to express their anger against sexism and misogyny more explicitly since then, as a backlash against the growing discourse of reverse discrimination against men in favour of women's rights and the circulation of misogynist hate speech online led by *Ilbe*, a right-wing manosphere (ibid, pp.258-259). As Leah explains, this gendered tension has amplified and led many young Korean men to embrace right-wing politics in recent years. However, Leah's narrative suggests her internalisation of the male-centred discourse of feminism in Korea. The motivations of the majority of younger men's rightward shift in Korea are primarily rooted in their 'worship of the idea of meritocracy and misogyny' (Park, 2021), although those men blame *'the feminist agenda'* to explain their political orientation.

Leah's repeated emphasis that *'feminists in Korea are not feminists'*, which she examines as *'the problem'* implies two things. First, in line with her opening response in this section where Leah positions herself as a British woman who can rationally and rightfully discuss feminism, she reinforces this positioning by problematising the radical Korean feminists. Second, her narrative indicates that feminism in the UK, or more broadly in the West, is more accessible and practised, whereas it is deemed as highly controversial and easily faces condemnation in Korea, as Lizzie reports:

Lizzie: I think this is the logic I hear about. I think most Korean women, even if they don't identify themselves with the word 'feminist', would probably think, 'yeah, we deserve the same right as men', but the only people who would get angry about it are radical feminists. And they are the ones that get reported in the news and they do all the protesting, and they are the people that push the change which is why people hate them. But I literally just posted a fact that you could read anywhere that's reported in Korean news and the newspaper, but I was attacked for just simply stating that…

Leah: Because it's not your fight to talk about.

Lizzie and Leah's discussion of (anti)feminism in Korea demonstrates not only their interest in issues of gender and feminism in Korea while revealing their positioning as British women in the West who can openly discuss related issues. In the interview, such positioning particularly emerged in the participants' critique of dominant type of femininity performed in K-pop, and more broadly, gender inequality in Korea. The participants' easier access to feminism as an ideology, however, bears duality in the sense that it becomes a source of hegemonic femininity, a type of femininity that the participants construct as more independent and progressive compared to other non-Western femininities, such as dominant type of femininity performed in K-pop, which they perceive as more bound by traditional feminine norms.

5.2.2. Western feminism: a source of hegemonic femininity over non-Western femininity

As discussed in Section 2.2., the concept of hegemonic femininity has undergone several reconfigurations as a backlash of Connell's (1987) argument that there is no femininity with a hegemonic status, as all femininities are in subordinate positions to masculinities in patriarchal gender order. This perspective has been re-worked or challenged by other gender

scholars who acknowledged hegemonic femininity (Hamilton et al, 2019; Paechter, 2018; Pyke and Johnson, 2003; Schippers, 2007). The analysis admits whiteness, heterosexuality and affluence as constructs of hegemonic femininity. Yet, it expands the definition and specifically focuses on the participants' easier access to feminism as core underlying element which constitute hegemonic femininity across the participants against K-pop (and more broadly, East Asian) femininity.

Compared to other groups of women in non-Western societies, the participants have better access to feminism, which for them has become a 'habitus' (Bourdieu, 1997; 1984; 1990). The habitus refers to 'systems of durable, transposable dispositions' (Bourdieu, 1990, p.53) that generate and organise structured practices which are collectively considered as objective. Therefore, the habitus functions as 'a system of schemes of production of practices and a system of perception and appreciation of practices' (ibid, pp. 52-54). While the participants' engagement with Western feminism is counter-hegemonic, resisting hegemonic masculinity, their easier practice of feminism as habitus simultaneously places them into a hegemonic position over other forms of femininities; they distance themselves from the dominant feminine performances in K-pop, characterised by traditionally feminine traits, such as cuteness and innocence:

> Anna: I think it (gender in K-pop) is very feminised, in like girl groups, they are very girly, cutesy, and very perceived to be innocent. But you do have other, there are a couple of groups like Mamamoo, and like Hwasa. In Korea, they are very more sexy and more independent but it's not that common to more, like the cutesy style.

Anna describes K-pop girl groups as adhering to a *'very girly, cutesy and innocent'* type of femininity, contrasting this with the *'sexy and independent'* femininity, which are less common in K-pop. From Anna's comments on the two different types of femininities

observed in K-pop, it can be inferred that she assesses sexy and independent type of femininity more positively than the cutesy and innocent type of femininity. While both are expressions of hyper-femininity, cute and innocent type of feminine practices are easily associated with immaturity, whereas representations of sexiness and independence are perceived as confident and empowering. Anna mentions Mamamoo, one of the K-pop girl groups, and especially Hwasa, one member from the group to acknowledge that there are singers whose feminine performances are sexy and independent, which aligns more with the feminine ideals promoted in the Western media. However, Anna's observation that such representations are not common implies that cute and innocent type of femininities are socially constructed as more ideal in Korea and therefore continually reproduced in K-pop industry. It suggests that gender ideologies are different culturally and locally dominant femininities are shaped by varying cultural norms.

In East Asian contexts, people strategically engage in cute and innocent practices in some social interactions especially between heterosexual men and women, and traditionally it has been more commonly practised by women (Crosby, 2023; Jang, 2020; Puzar and Hong, 2018, Starr, 2015; Yueh, 2013). In Korean context, such practices are known as *aegyo*, a complex articulation of linguistic and non-verbal strategies which perform 'child-like charm and infantilised cuteness' (Puzar and Hong, 2018, p.333). Women who perform cuteness and innocence elicit attention and care from the others, usually men who have heterosexual interests. Such performances may be used to the performer's advantage or to fulfil certain purposes. However, due to immaturity suggested in cuteness and innocence, such gendered performances can confine women to subordination to men as it allows men to be in a more powerful position. On the other hand, sexy and independent type of femininity, that is implicitly favoured in Anna's narrative, symbolises female agency and assertiveness in the

'girl power' rhetoric, which has been widely circulating in North America and Europe (Banet-Weiser, 2018b, p.152).

When critiquing normative femininity in K-pop, the participants' perspective often reveals how their understanding of feminism as well as their feminist ideas shaped in the Western context influences their view on the dominant type of femininity in K-pop, while positioning Western societies as more progressive and liberating for women:

> Holly: I wanted to point out that girl groups, specifically with the femininity in K-Pop, compared to like the men who, especially with the whole soft masculinity thing, they have like much broader scope of masculinity to express themselves out, especially compared to men in Western countries. But then I find it squeezes women, and they can only fit into a really small box to be perceived as women. It's kind of like flip of what people have in Western countries, obviously because here (in the UK), it is more accepted for women to be like tomboyish, whereas over there (in Korea), it's like, oh, she has to be skinny and have long hair, whereas like men, they all wear crop-tops and make-up and stuff and it is fine.

Holly highlights the greater flexibility in gender expressions for women in the West compared to the narrow scope of expression of femininities allowed for girl groups in K-pop. Holly considers the latter as *'a really small box'*, where women are squeezed into, which makes a significant contrast to the broader and more flexible expression of masculinities in K-pop. In addition, she compares the restrictive nature of normative femininity in K-pop with more broader representations of femininities allowed for women in the Western societies. Holly's response encapsulates how feminism functions as a counter-hegemony that challenges rigid gender norms and allows women to be freer in their gender expressions in the West. However, it simultaneously positions women from Western societies in a relatively superior place where they evaluate non-Western femininities to be oppressed and limited in

traditional sphere of femininity. Anna joins Holly in this view by referencing a case of K-pop star, Sulli, who faced severe backlash by deviating from the socially expected feminine norms in Korea:

> Anna: It is like Sulli, from FX, she obviously took her own life, and supposedly, and that was because she started getting so much hate for changing herself, like wearing red lipstick and just bringing out a different side of her. People were like, no like, you can't do that, you can't be this person, because she was going against what people wanted to see of her. So, I get what you (Holly) mean like being put in that box, and it is more difficult for girl idols to be just comfortable and want to go out and be natural and not this.

Sulli's suicide illustrates the consequences of resisting normative femininity in K-pop. Sulli was known to be one of very few K-pop female singers who openly talked about feminism, mental illness and body positivity (Kim and Tan, 2009). It has been reported that she endured cyberbullying for being outspoken, which became a major trigger for her depression. Sulli's case documents how difficult it is for young female singers in K-pop to freely express themselves as they are expected to be obedient to feminine norms and sensitive to public reception. Coming from a society where more diverse gender expressions are allowed for women, Anna narrates Sulli's suicide to have been caused by discursively constructed gender expectations in Korea, where there is less acceptance and support for women who do not conform to societal gender norms.

5.3. Varying receptions of soft masculinity

Since Jung's (2011) investigation into the constructions of Korean masculinities in media and their transcultural consumption, the concept of soft masculinity has been widely accepted as a term and used to refer to men's gendered performances in K-pop (see Section 2.4.).

Despite the growing appreciation of softer representations of men due to K-pop's recent success, it is worth investigating why they are marked as ‘soft’ and how the performative masculinity perceived as soft are interpreted in wider gender politics and discourse as the reception of such a masculine representation is largely shaped by them. This section pays attention to how soft masculinity is received among the participants through their narratives.

5.3.1. Soft masculinity interpreted through heteronormativity

The general sentiment among the participants towards soft masculinity was positive as everyone’s immediate response was that they like it when they were asked to share their views on it. In articulating their preference, some participants expressed how soft masculinity satisfies their heteronormative desires, as expressed in Leah’s response:

> Leah: I don’t like ‘the cutesy like you’re making me uncomfortable’. But at the end of the day, if I had to pick a boy and one of them is cute and smells nice, looks like he’s soft and cuddly. I’m gonna go with that. There are two rocks, one is soft and smooth and shiny, and other ones are stabby. You know – because that’s it – when you think about it, they market themselves as teenage boys. But everybody knows that teenage boys are not nice. They are stinky, smelly and rude. They are the fantasy for girls. Men always think the fantasy for women is like, I’m gonna come rescue you on my horse and take you to my castle, but women just want boys to think about them. Oh, I bought you flowers, here I clean the kitchen without being asked, I will walk you down the street and I will stand on the side of the road. It is the little things and that’s what I think soft masculinity does - it picks up on the things that women just appreciate. And you don’t have to be like, ‘oh, look at me, I am this sexy and I am gonna rock your world’. No.

Leah provides multiple descriptions to make distinctions between the qualities of soft masculinity and hyper-masculinity. She views soft men as *'smelling nice, cuddly, smooth and shiny'* whereas men who practice traditional and normative masculinities are more likely to be *'stabby, stinky, smelly and rude'*. The likeable and caring qualities of soft masculinity are then linked to *'buying flowers, cleaning the kitchen without being asked, walking women down the street and standing on the side of the road'*. While these behaviours demonstrate consideration for women and taken as highly attractive in heteronormative relationships, there is an underlying assumption that these practices are typically considered as less masculine and thus most men do not voluntarily make such gestures. This perspective is shared with Anna, who views soft masculinity from a heteronormative point of view:

> Anna: Yeah, people think that women want bad boys but actually in reality, it is not. When it comes down to it, it's like… maybe one day, occasionally, they could be in leather jacket and I would be fine with that but generally, cute would be nice.

Just as Leah, Anna discusses the misconception that women prefer *'bad boys'* whose masculinities represent power and dominance and therefore align with hegemonic masculinity. Speaking from a heteronormative perspective, she suggests that a blend of softness and occasional manliness is more desirable than dominating masculinity. The participants' preference of soft masculinity is further explained in how it switches the traditional gender roles. In normative gender dynamics, men have typically played the role of providers. However, men who exhibit softness allow women to take the role of the provider of attention, care and safety as implied in Leah's pet metaphors in the response below:

> Leah: The couple's outfit I saw the other day… I saw two people yesterday, they had the same pants on, they both wore flipflops, and they had the same hat on. I just

> thought like, that's the cutest thing ever. Because that shows that you are so together that you don't even care what other people think about the fact you are wearing same clothes. And so, that's what the soft masculinity does. Where it's like, hey, you know when you see where there is a camera on, they pretend to talk to each other, things like that, you know, okay I got you this jumper, we can match. Like, there's always things that make girls' hearts flutter and that's what it is. You just want that little, 'aww', like, 'ahh'. People like puppies and kittens. If there's a puppy in human form, then yeah.

Comparing soft men to puppies and kittens implies a reverse of traditional gender power dynamics in that they are young (and therefore vulnerable) animals in need of care from adult animals and/or humans. Such an interaction is not achievable under hegemonic masculinity. On the other hand, soft masculinity disrupts the traditional gender norms while saving heteronormative desires for women.

5.3.2. Soft masculinity as 'less harming' masculinity

Two participants in Section 5.3.1., elaborated their preference for soft masculinity indicating that it performs masculinity in counter-masculine manners that it shifts traditional gender power dynamics while still fulfilling women's heterosexual desires. The participants' responses reveal that soft masculinity creates a space where women can feel empowered by playing the role of the provider, which is normatively considered as men's responsibility. This section pays brief attention to the appeal of soft masculinity observed from a perspective free from heterosexual romantic interests. Kate identifies as asexual/pansexual non-binary participant and prefers soft masculinity for its departure from the dominating nature of hyper masculinity:

> Kate: I feel like in the music videos like the two BTS ones you asked us to watch, there are two extremes like hyper masculinity and soft masculinity. I feel like I prefer soft masculinity because it does less harm. The kind of actions you saw in *Boy with Luv* music video, with the soft masculinity, you know the boys were just so happy and bouncy, and Halsey in the music video, you could see whether she was respected or not.

Kate's feeling that *'soft masculinity does less harm'* suggests that soft masculinity is perceived to be less threatening. It creates a contrast to hegemonic masculinity, which asserts dominance over other forms of masculinities and femininities. The *'less harming'* character of soft masculinity highlighted in Kate's narration indicates that hypermasculine behaviours involve harming elements. Typically, hypermasculine men adhere to the norms of hegemonic masculinity. Their aggressive, controlling and risk-taking characteristics are not only intimidating to others but also can be detrimental for themselves bound by the predetermined beliefs regarding what real men should be. By contrast, men who practise soft masculinity allow a safe space with its gentler disposition; they respect others and may be less repressed by the discursive gender norms which men are expected to conform to.

5.3.3. Soft masculinity as 'the Other'

This section discusses the 'otherisation' of soft masculinity from the perspective of Western gender norms. Overall, the participants expressed their preference for soft masculinity by highlighting how it is distinguished from Western hegemonic masculinity. Regardless of the positive reception, the participants' responses reveal that soft masculinity, being a non-Western expression of masculinity, is often viewed through a lens of othering and racial stereotyping. The discussion opens with Kate's observation of soft masculinity in K-pop being perceived as different to 'metrosexual' men in the West:

> Kate: I feel like it's absolutely very different with the soft masculinity thing. In the West, we have the metrosexual but even that it's… when you look at people that fall within that, it still feels so different from the soft masculinity you see in K-pop because it is just like well-groomed men, but then they are still masculine. But soft masculinity, it's cute, it's pink and fluffy kind of thing. So even those sides of masculinity are very different.

The term 'metrosexual' was first coined by Simpson (1994), who used it to refer to men whose narcissism is expressed through their consuming fashion and styling products and public visibility. One of the characteristics of metrosexual men, despite their ties with traditionally feminine sides (Brennan, 2007, cited in Hall, 2015, p.34), is heterosexuality (Hall, 2015). The interpretation is visible in Kate's evaluation of metrosexual men; despite metrosexual men's exhibition of feminine traits, they are still perceived as masculine. The contrast made by Kate suggests that femininity embedded in soft masculinity strikes as differently to the femininity found in metrosexual masculinity. They view the '*cute, pink and fluffy*' performances by soft men in K-pop less masculine or unmasculine. Although Kate does not provide further elaboration on their view, other participants contributed to the discussion by articulating how the dominant performance of masculinity in K-pop is different to normative masculinity in the West:

> Anna: The K-pop boy groups are not afraid to be feminine. They wear all the make-up, and recently there are more people that wear crop-tops and stuff like that, which we don't really see in Western culture, men like celebrities to wear crops

In examining the dominant form of masculinity in K-pop, Anna interprets them within a heteronormative and gender binary system. Anna's observation that '*the boy groups are not afraid to be feminine'* suggests that feminine performances by men is a digression from

gender norms, and therefore something to be afraid of trying due to social condemnation. Anna perceives wearing make-up and crop-tops to be counter-normative practices for men; they are considered to be enacted through female bodies according to traditional gender norms. This normative perspective easily produces prejudice associated with homophobia and racism, as Lizzie points out:

> Lizzie: I'd be interested to know if Korean people have the same view with the Western people do of the idols that they are all gay. That's the view like, not necessarily that they actually think they are gay, but they use it as an insult. Or just to say like, they must be gay because they use all the make-up, and they are dancing and singing and that's usually for theatre kids.

Lizzie's response provides an empirical example of how non-Western and/or homosexual men become subjects of marginalisation due to their race and social gender hegemony. Compared to the dominant white hegemonic masculinity, East Asian masculinity has long been constructed as inferior, effeminate and therefore less desirable (Han, 2015; Louie, 2012). This perspective originates from the Western imagination of the East, the Orientalist point of view which attributes masculine superiority to the West over the feminised and exoticised East (Said, 1978). Within this gendered construction of the region, East Asian men, their masculinities and bodies are easily feminised and otherised in the Western discourse (Han, 2006). This discursive practice often integrates with the prejudice against homosexual men which wrongly assume that all homosexual men engage in normatively feminine practices such as make-up. Furthermore, as Lizzie suggests, the feminisation of East Asian men often leads to infantilisation. In most societies, women and children are collectively perceived to be weaker than adult men. Such discourse attributes weakness to the feminised and infantilised East Asian men and it reinforces the otherisation of their masculinities. Anna makes the same claim as Lizzie from her own experience:

> Anna: Especially with Western men like, sometimes if I put like K-Pop video, people are like, ‘oh, they’re definitely gay boys because of all the dance and the make-up, blah blah’. And I’m like ‘no, it’s just the culture, that’s just the K-pop in itself’.

Anna’s responses suggest that she recognises soft masculinity as one form of masculinity from another culture where social gender norms may not overlap with those in the West. She does not examine soft masculinity with a Western bias but interprets it more as a locally preferred and performative element widely promoted in K-pop. As more younger people consume Korean media products in the West in the recent years, the Korean beauty trends reflected in K-pop have been making changes in the cosmetics market in the West and it is reported that the trend is even encouraging more men to invest in beauty and personal care (Russon, 2018). When the participants were asked to discuss whether they think soft masculinity can be a new norm with such social changes, varying voices were shared among the participants:

> Lizzie: Yeah, I think it can be a norm because it is way more suited to how Asian men are. It is easier for them to be not being muscly men. Because it is difficult for them to be physically like that. It is more easily accessible as a look and as a thing. It is easier to portray for… those people, so maybe it is gonna become more like a normal and less kinda like a sub-genre.

Lizzie has been sharing insightful views on gender expressions in K-pop in the interview. Yet, this particular response requires more careful attention. At the surface level, Lizzie’s opinion seems approving of soft masculinity, acknowledging its potential to become a new masculine norm. However, Lizzie’s argument reflects inadvertent racial essentialism, which is a deterministic belief that each race possesses biologically inherent and fixed properties.

Racial essentialism has a history of being utilised as a tool to justify white racial superiority and non-white inferiority (Zack, 2014). Lizzie does not make it explicit that she considers having muscles as one of qualities of desirable masculinity. However, the assumptions of Asian men's biological and physical characteristics can be accused of being reductive. Furthermore, her argument implies that non-Asian men are less suited to perform soft masculine images, which makes soft masculinity less accessible for them. As much as racial essentialism has long been ingrained in many Western societies, it is difficult to become free of it. Such a reality is reflected in Anna's following response to the same question:

> Anna: I don't think it's gonna happen overnight, but it will definitely start to integrate into both cultures, I hope. If K-Pop gets more influence over here, like here in the Western world, and if Asian culture is little bit more known to Western countries, definitely. I would hope so.

Anna acknowledges the difficulty for soft masculinity to enjoy wider recognition in Western societies. Nevertheless, she expresses a positive outlook, hoping for more cultural exchange between two cultures. Anna believes this may facilitate a deeper understanding of how social gender norms are constructed in each other's societies. By contrast to Anna's view, a more sceptical perspective was articulated by two other participants:

> Holly: I suspect that. I don't think it would happen for a very long time, just because they (people in general) are so much against it with racism and misogyny regarding it. In fact, I think to actually - for it to become a part of the norm, we have to first get rid of racism and sexism and stuff, rather than, how popular it might get in terms of K-pop and everything, because it is always gonna be seen still as this whole Other thing people think weird […].

Holly problematises how racism and misogyny embedded in sexism become an intersecting point where soft masculinity is otherised. As discussed throughout this section, East Asian men have persistently experienced racialised feminisation from the Orientalist discourse from the West. As Holly critically points out, the discursive emasculation of East Asian men places a significant barrier for soft masculinity to be accepted without prejudice. She strongly underscores that the discriminative Western-centred ideologies should be addressed before any meaningful changes occur. Lizzie further elaborates the double bind of misogyny and racism in the marginalisation of soft masculinity:

> Lizzie: Because there's a foreign out of it. A lot of people sadly have a problem with different… (incomplete sentence). There has always been such a problem with being Asian, like it's seen and as being… being seen weaker. Especially with the women with docile, placid, and very quiet female who is just feminine in the worst sense of the word, as in like she's just pretty and just there to look at and doesn't say anything. But there's also the problem with men they are almost viewed in the same way, which is part of the misogyny behind all of that.

Lizzie's response supports Holly's argument above. As Lizzie explains, the Western portrayal of Asian women as submissive and passive subjects is equally reflected in the view of Asian men. Within this racial stereotyping, the softness often conveyed in East Asian men's gender expression cannot but be perpetually perceived as a marked form of masculinity, for not being the white masculine 'norm'.

5.4. Imagining the gendered L2 selves before study abroad

While possible selves (Markus and Nurius, 1986) are built upon individual's past experiences and their current state of selves, they are more future oriented as possible selves are projections of individuals' conception of their selves in future states. In this sense,

Dörnyei (2005) considers possible selves to be ‘future self-guides' as learners are guided by them and move from the present towards the future. As introduced in Chapter 3, the gendered L2 selves highlight how learners construct, negotiate and perform their gendered self in relation to different gender ideologies and norms in a target language society. This section particularly pays attention to the participants’ gendered L2 selves before study abroad. Due to the time frame, the participants’ gendered L2 selves at this stage are more hypothetical than reflective of their lived gendered experience, and therefore more future-oriented. The participants’ narratives suggest that their knowledge of normative femininity in Korea dominantly construct either ought-to or feared L2 selves.

5.4.1. Negotiating the ought-to gendered L2 self

The ought-to gendered L2 self refers to learners’ conscious performance of certain gender norm in the target language society as they feel the necessity to comply with the norms to avoid social ostracisation (see Section 3.5.). The ought-to gendered L2 self presents high awareness and consciousness of social gender norms. In addition, it is compliant with the norms as the L2 learner wants to minimise any negative outcomes of displaying a gendered expression which might seem deviant from the social gender norms in the target society. The participants’ knowledge of the social gender norms in Korea has been informed by various sources. One of the sources is their consumption of K-pop, where the most idealised masculinities and femininities are continually reproduced in their commercialisation. The section starts with Kate’s narratives of concern about having to *‘try and fit*’ themselves into the normative femininity in Korea and how some gender fluid element in K-pop alleviates their concern:

> Kate: Like all of the presentations of women with the cutesy things, I was feeling like I will have to try and fit within their box to not to stand out too much, because

> I'm already gonna stand out. I don't know if I would want to. I feel like having seen some representations of gender that go outside those two norms, within K-pop that I feel more connected to anyone like Taemin and Jimin, they both have like different performances that really connect the gender outside, kind of, two rigid masculinity and femininity.

Soyoon: Their presentations are more fluid.

Kate: Yeah, a lot more liquid.

Compared to the UK where awareness of LGBTQ+ population is growing and maturing, Korean society is reported to have much weaker recognition of sexual and gender minorities (Han, 2022; Yi and Phillips, 2015). In Korea, the heteronormative binary gender norm is so strongly ingrained that 'persons with non-conforming sexual orientation or gender identity who seek to live outside the prevailing gender system are deemed unfit' (Na, Han and Koo, 2014, p. 357). Kate identifies themselves as non-binary and disclosed their non-conventional sexual orientation (see Table 4.1.) and their ought-to gendered L2 self as being triggered by the prevailing cuteness performed by K-pop girl groups. Due to their biological sex, Kate feels that they would have to conform to the social norm for women to act cute. However, Kate's personal disapproval of practising cuteness is reflected hesitantly in saying '*I don't know if I would want to*'. It suggests that Kate's ought-to gendered L2 self may be negotiated or challenged by their gendered agency.

While K-pop girl groups' hyper-feminine performances become a source of pressure and worries for Kate, some K-pop boy bands' performances of gender fluidity provide a sense of relief and connection for them. Kate specifically refers to Taemin from the group SHINee and Jimin from the group BTS, who are known for their androgynous performances. As well-known figures in K-pop, their gender fluidity creates a safe space for people whose gender

identities and sexual orientations are not compatible with the strict gender binary system and heteronormativity.

Dominantly performed hyper femininity in K-pop, specifically girl groups' cute performances, including *aegyo*, continually prove to be the major source of the ought-to gendered L2 self among the participants. The participants perceive being cute to be the ideal form of femininity and there is a social expectation for women to behave cutely in Korea. In the response below, Anna discusses some concerns regarding her gender expressions and how they may be received in Korea:

> Anna: The only thing I kind of feel like I need to be, not need to be, but sometimes, being like cute would help. But also, I feel like as being a foreigner in Korea, I'm gonna stand out anyways. I'm always gonna be seen as a foreigner, no matter what I do. So, I don't think I'd actively change myself at all. But I'd be more, like, cautious of maybe what I wear, or what I am doing or where I'm going. Especially when I was thinking about if I study abroad, maybe I should try and lose some weight that was definitely in my mind, because so many Korean girls you see, especially in K-pop, you just see they are all so tiny. So maybe I should try to get fit and get healthy and get smaller before I go over, so I won't stand out even more so than I already will. But you do have like Hwasa and Jessi, that you see are bigger and more like normal and standard size you would be here. So it makes me feel more comfortable to be like 'you know what, I'll just be myself'. I'm gonna stand out anyway so there is no point of changing. But that was like an initial thought, okay, a lot of girls in K-pop are skinny…

Anna's ought-to gendered L2 self stems from the discrepancy between dominant femininity in K-pop and her current feminine self. Her assumption of *'being cute would help'* and the pressure on the physical appearance such as *'losing weight'* and *'becoming smaller (in terms*

of body size)' indicate that dominant feminine images in K-pop may function as guides to how women think they ought to behave and look in Korea. However, the ought-to L2 gendered self is challenged by Anna's gendered agency. The gendered agency is practised within the safe space that Anna self-created with her foreign identity in Korea. According to Anna, being foreign allows her some freedom in terms of her gendered behaviours and appearance. Anna acknowledges that being foreign in Korea would save her from the expectation that she needs to conform to the social gender norms. Anna's saying '*I don't think I'd actively change myself at all*' implies that her ought-to gendered L2 self may not going to be pursued actively, due to Anna's using her own gendered agency in presenting her gendered L2 self.

5.4.2. Normative femininity in Korea and the feared gendered L2 self

One of the interview questions led the participants to discuss how K-pop girl groups are pushed to eat to stay slim and the amount of effort invested in looking impeccable, which reflects idealised femininity in K-pop industry. The participants interpret these practices as reflections of the restricting nature of normative femininity in Korea. In this discussion, Lizzie raises a concern relating to the detrimental nature of the narrow beauty standard:

> Lizzie: They (fans or audience) use them (K-pop idols) as their projection of everybody else's insecurity. They don't wanna fix those things for themselves. They know that they are not really skinny, they are not tall and don't have beautiful flowy hair they don't have long legs. So they hate on anybody who they look up to who have those things and who does not anymore. Anything they hate about themselves gets projected onto those people that's why there is so much anger when, say they have put on five pounds… they go 'oh, disgusting!'. Because they would look at themselves in the mirror if they have gained five pounds and go like uh, disgusting! So, it just gets translated and transferred. And when you

> were talking about getting a job, I was at first like, oh I don't think I'd have any fear or expectation or anything like how I would look or how I would act or anything, but then I was like, actually, for getting a job, I would think about what I wore a lot more than here, you would think about wearing something smart. I feel like I would put extra thought into it in Korea.

Lizzie criticises those who are obsessed with the narrow beauty standards and their projection of insecurities onto K-pop celebrities who deviate from the idealised standards. However, she expresses concerns about the importance of appearance in Korean job applications and potential judgments. Lizzie's response reveals her feared gendered L2 self; although Lizzie is highly critical of the unrealistic beauty standards, her future gendered L2 self is impacted by the social gender norms. Anna's follow up confirms the social pressure put on people's appearance in Korean society.

> Anna: I think Korea is based on a lot on appearance. On resumes, they have you have your picture on as well…
>
> Lizzie: Yeah, and that could be a factor in getting a job.

As Anna and Lizzie point out, appearance can be a discriminatory factor in the Korean job market. In Korea, it had been a common practice to provide a professional picture in CVs. A bill was proposed in 2015 to ban potential discrimination in recruiting process, including mandatory photo submission in Korea (Jung, 2015). The bill was passed in the following year but demanding a photo (taken for a professional purpose) is still practised by some employers in hiring processes. To be more successful in the competitive job market, some job applicants spend money for professional make-up before they have their photos taken and the photos are heavily photoshopped to look a certain way. The knowledge of this practice in Korean job market, as an example of the social pressure to look normatively desirable, appears to shape

Lizzie's feared gendered L2 self. It reflects Lizzie's concern which is more related to her physical appearance than professional experience or skill sets. The fear of not conforming to the normative femininity in Korea is also reflected in Kate's future-oriented gendered L2 self:

> Kate: I heard about an incident where, there was a woman who had a short hair and she got attacked by a man because he thought she was a feminist. I used to have short hair. I don't want another thing to make me stand out and to risk that kind of thing. If I were to get a job in Korea and if I had short hair, I would be anxious about like what judgement they are going to make…

Kate's feared L2 gendered self stems from a potential threat and judgement for having their hair short. The misogynist crime mentioned by Kate highlights the strict feminine norms as well as anti-feminist sentiments in Korea. Short hair on women can be interpreted as a digression from traditional feminine appearance and by extension, a political statement against the patriarchal gender order, which labels them as feminists. As discussed in Section 5.2.1., many feminists in Korea have been wrongly accused to be man-haters in recent years as feminism is (mis)understood to be connected to misandry (Choe, 2022). Therefore, women with short hair reportedly experience cyber-attack and harassment from men who claim to be anti-feminists (Jung and Moon, 2024b). Kate's anxiety comes from their knowledge of current reception of feminism in Korea and the social connotation of women's short hair. The anxiety combines with the concern of standing out for being foreign and not adhering to hyper feminine standards in Korea. For Kate, discursive understanding of gender in L2 culture proves to construct their feared gendered L2 self significantly.

Body images and clothing often become tools of expressing one's masculinity and femininity. In the response below, Leah criticises (white female) expats who are not careful about the cultural context where their attire and body images deviate from normative

femininity. Then she discusses how her body type which she considers as different from the idealised female body in Korea concerns her:

> Leah: I hate it when some expats who are like 'why is this *ajossi* (a mid-aged man in Korea) looking at me?' And she's wearing a really tight dress with shoulders and boobs out and tattoos. And she's like 'why are they looking at me?' Do you not know anything about the concept of being there? Even like girls of my size (Leah considers her size to be bigger than the average), they would be wearing really short skirts. You are totally allowed to, but you need to remember you look very different to the actual shape. So, you're very curvy, which in itself always has the sad connotation of being seen as a sexual thing. It is almost like you are kind of doing more than they are even if they are in the same attire. So, for me, I'm always gonna wear jeans and T-shirt because I'm lazy and if I'm going out, sure, I'd wear different things. But the past two years have taught me T-shirts are the safest bet for just lying around and doing whatever. You can go over there expecting like I'll go there, and I'll talk to them and change their minds, but you can't do that.

Leah's feared gendered L2 is also linked to normative femininity in Korea, which emphasises hyper-femininity, slimness and sometimes reserved modesty. She does not elaborate it, but *'the actual shape'* implies slim and fit body type, an idealised feminine image reinforced by the gender norm in Korea and thus constantly reproduced in K-pop. Leah's self-assessment of her body type, which she considers curvier than the average Korean women and different from the Korean norm, concerns her of being sexualised and otherised. This fear influences Leah's decision to choose more conservative and practical clothing to minimise judgement. At the same time, Leah exhibits some internalisation of Korean gender norms when she imagines her future gendered L2 self. Rather than challenging normative

femininity with her different body type, she prefers to efface the bodily shapes which do not align with the idealised feminine norm in Korea.

5.5. Summary of findings

The critical narrative analysis of the pre-SA interview explored how the participants interpret dominant types of femininities and masculinities performed in K-pop, from which they developed some cultural knowledge about gender norms and ideology in Korea. From the participants' knowledge and interpretation of gender in K-pop, various intersecting topics transpired which are related to the practices of feminism, receptions of soft masculinity and the construction of gendered L2 selves before study abroad.

The participants' discussion of dominant femininities in K-pop revealed that they examine the feminine performances from a feminist perspective. For the participants, feminism is an easily practicable counter-hegemonic ideology as it is openly discussed and promoted in Western societies. The participants grew up being empowered by feminism, with ideals of confident and independent women. Their narratives suggest they identify themselves with the independent type of femininity promoted by feminism in Western societies. For this, the cute and innocent feminine performances that are dominant in K-pop contrast to the participants' ideal femininity inspired by feminism. They are viewed as restricted to social gender norms and not as empowering. In such interpretations, the participants position themselves as British women who can freely discuss and practise feminism. Ironically, this positioning constructed Western hegemonic femininity over the normative femininity in Korea, especially in K-pop, as they perceive it less confrontational, empowering and progressive.

In interpreting masculinities in K-pop, there was an interplay of several intersecting factors to examine soft masculinity, which is the dominant form of masculinity in K-pop. Overall, the participants expressed that they preferred soft masculinity. In contrast to the domineering

hyper-masculinity, soft masculinity is described to exhibit more likeable qualities. Additionally, soft masculinity shifts the traditional gender power dynamics as it creates a space for women to take some roles which are normatively considered as men's, in which sense empowers women. Furthermore, soft masculinity is understood to do less harm. Despite the positive receptions, the participants' discussion reveals that soft masculinity is easily otherised, being a non-white masculinity. More precisely, because it is dominantly performed by East Asian men, it undergoes feminisation and marginalisation from the white hegemonic masculinity.

The participants were able to imagine their future gendered L2 selves drawing on the knowledge of discursive gender norms in Korea, which was largely informed by their K-pop consumption. Among the different types of gendered L2 selves, the ought-to gendered L2 selves and the feared gendered L2 selves found to be the most dominant across the participants. Some participants feel pressure that they ought to align with the dominant feminine ideals in Korea that expect women to be cute and slim. However, they recognise the discrepancy between those ideals and their current gendered selves. The feeling of pressure triggers the ought-to gendered L2 selves, which are regulated by the participants' gendered agency and foreignness by varying degrees. Some other participants exhibited feared gendered L2 selves caused by not conforming to the normative femininity in Korea. Their gendered L2 selves feared rejection in the job market, potential violence for having short hair or being sexualised and otherised for not being the normative body type.

In sum, the pre-SA interview demonstrated the participants' perception of gender in Korea, especially drawing on their knowledge of K-pop, which stretched to other relevant gender issues in Korea. The participants' narratives provided ample evidence of how gender is perceived in relation to the discursively constructed social and cultural identities of the

learners, which are crucial in the construction of the gendered L2 selves. The next chapter provides a more focused and nuanced analysis of the gendered L2 selves of the participants during the study abroad.

6. Data analysis II: DSA interviews

6.1. Introduction

Chapter 6 presents two sets of critical narrative analyses of during study abroad interviews with Emily and Leah. Both participants expressed an interest to the interview invitation sent in April 2022. As continued participation was not a requirement for the participants in the pre-study abroad interview and some students in the study's target cohort suspended their studies before the study abroad year, only two participants were recruited for the during study abroad interview (see Section 4.3.). Online interviews on Microsoft Teams were arranged in May 2022, a few months before they finished their year abroad at their respective partner institutions. The individual interviews include more nuanced data where the participants' own lived experiences are narrated. The narratives produced during the interviews show that Emily and Leah had different gendered experiences due to the unique social interactions and situations they had during their year abroad. Different themes arose due to this, and therefore, the following sections focus individually on Emily and Leah. Section 6.2. discusses Emily's during study abroad interview and discussions of Leah's during study abroad interview follows in Section 6.3.

6.2. Emily's study abroad experience

Emily did not take part in the pre-study abroad interview as it did not suit her schedule. However, she responded to the interview invitation expressing a genuine interest in the research topic and consistently participated in the later interviews from this research phase. This section focuses on Emily's narrations of her gendered experiences during her study abroad in Korea, where she gained some insights into Korean society and reflected on gender related issues. The preliminary thematic analysis revealed that the most prominent themes in Emily's during study abroad interview are: recognition of a strict gender dichotomy in

Korean society; make-up as a beauty practice for both genders; and tabooed feminism in Korea. Each theme will now be analysed and discussed in greater detail using critical narrative analysis.

6.2.1. Emily's experiences of a more rigid gender dichotomy in Korea

As discussed in Section 2.3., many K-pop singers are known for their performances of gender fluidity and androgynous fashion, which are more frequently found among boy groups (Oh, 2015; Oh and Oh; 2017; Sinnott, 2012). They are interpreted as empowering gender representations especially for younger generations who identify as LGBTQ+ in some communities across nations (Baudinette and Scholes, 2024; Guevarra, 2014; Kim, 2022; Kwon, 2023; Shin, 2008). However, the fluid gender representations often found in K-pop do not always serve as an indicator of how accepting or aware the Korean society is of sexual and gender minorities, and gender expressions are normatively expected to reflect the traditional gender dichotomy in Korea, as Emily reported as experiencing:

> Emily: For me, I think there hasn't been any problems because in Korea, you know, they believe in just two genders, as what I heard. But I have visited like a small community in Korea. It was like a drag bar or something like that, and there were lots of different people from different countries, expressing all of their genders like they/them and as many as there. They said that this was such a safe community to express themselves because they feel so judged from the outside. Even recently, I heard that there was a gay K-Pop idol that got beaten up because of their sexuality and probably stuff like that. As far as being female, male, uh, like she/her, he/him. This is not a problem than something you identify as they/them or non-binary.

Emily mentions that Korean society predominantly believes in just two genders, indicating that her experience of Korean society has more binary view of gender compared to her

experiences in the UK. During the interview, Emily narrated to the researcher that she had a heteronormative upbringing. However, she has grown to embrace people of non-normative gender and sexuality, particularly more so since she started university. In the UK context, Sauntson's (2018) study demonstrates how binary constructions of gender predominate in British (secondary) education settings, supporting the argument that heteronormative assumptions are normalised in daily interactions (Motschenbacher, 2010; 2011). This study rightfully sheds light on heteronormativity as a dominating gender ideology, especially in educational contexts. To address such discursive understandings of gender and sexuality, however, it is reported that more efforts towards inclusivity have been being made at tertiary education in the UK so that more LGBTQ+ students feel included and supported despite remaining challenges (Smith, Robinson and Khan 2022).

Having spent the first two years at her home university in the UK before going to Korea, Emily narrates having developed a deeper sense of awareness of inclusivity. As later analysis will further illuminate, Emily advocates diversity and voices a strong solidarity with LGBTQ+ friends and communities. Having an awareness in this matter, Emily captured the marginalisation of gender and sexual minorities in Korea during her visit to this '*small community*' which she describes as a drag bar. While the community provides '*safe spaces*' for many different people she met there, it simultaneously implies potential discrimination and judgement they may experience in wider communities in Korea where the binary understanding of gender and heteronormativity prevail. In the same vein, Emily's mentioning of the violence towards the K-pop singer due to his sexuality becomes an example of an extreme case of discrimination stemming from the normative understanding of gender she experienced in Korea.

Being a cis-gender woman, Emily did not report experiencing issues due to her gender conformity in Korea. Emily's case demonstrates a contrast to Julie's case demonstrated in

Brown's (2014) case study. In Brown's study, Julie, a female student from America, is described as a non-traditional learner; she identified as a mature student over 50, feminist and lesbian. Among these characteristics, Julie's lesbian identity, which she explicitly expressed through wearing androgynous clothes and short hair, particularly became a source of emotional discomfort during her short-term study abroad in Seoul. In her navigation of the rigid understanding of gender she experienced in Korea, Julie reported to have adjusted her gendered expressions to deal with the perceived hostility to her sexual orientation (Brown, 2014). In comparison, Emily did not have to experience struggle as much in relation to her gender and sexuality during her stay in Korea. Nonetheless, Emily expresses a desire to be in a more liberal place where people's expressions of gender are not bound by the normative gender expectations and that no one is afraid to express their identity in relation to their gender and sexuality.

> Emily: For me, because I am a female, she/her, I think I haven't had much thought of it, as in, who am I? That type of thought? But I have just thought about what it is to be a woman. Compared to how I am in England to what I am in Korea. I feel like, oh, I can't wait to go home and be more free. But I think because my other friends here, because my experiences haven't been as bad because it's more accepted to be, like a straight female here. Some of the friends I met at the small community, they are non-binary, or their sexuality is gay. They've had a lot of hardships. And I think there has to be a time when this country becomes more open and be more accepting. Because sometimes they feel like, 'oh, I feel too uncomfortable to go out because I'm gonna get judged there. I can't wear what I wanna wear. I just want to be me'. So hopefully someday, which I think now it could be getting better a bit with, the newer generations of accepting people for who they are and all genders. But right now, I think Korea needs to, maybe try working on it. Rather than... like learn

> maybe from the UK, like the UK's not perfect in at all, but people who live in the UK or have lived there, they are more accepting towards all genders.

Emily explains that her gender conformity had saved her being questioned about her gender in the study abroad context. In this sense, the interview offered her an opportunity to reflect on the matter. By articulating her position for the interview, she engaged in making sense of herself in relation to her gender, especially in a study abroad context. As her narrative reveals, Emily implicitly positions herself as a progressive English woman who values inclusivity, from which her ideal gendered L2 self is constructed in later interviews (see Section 7.2.).

In terms of expressing gender, Emily reports that she feels more comfortable in England which she perceives as more inclusive towards gender and sexual minorities; there is far less social judgement or strong expectation of what people should look or behave like according to their gender assigned at birth. Emily's interactions with the queer friends she met from the small community reveal how sexual and gender minorities in Korea may face difficulty to freely express themselves outside of such a community due to rigid social gender norms. Emily's narratives of the interactions with her queer friends reveal their feared gendered self, reflecting concerns of getting judged and frustration towards social gender norms. From Emily's case, it is possible to posit that normatively constructed heterosexuality allows heterosexual and gender-conforming learners to avoid confronting or developing feared gendered L2 self, especially if their target language society is perceived to have a more rigid understanding of gender and sexuality compared to the learners' own culture.

Although Emily did not experience gender related issues herself, she exhibits empathy and concerns for her friends and acquaintances who experience hardship in Korea due to the binary understanding of gender and heteronormativity. Emily acknowledges that her home culture does not provide a perfect model for inclusivity. Nonetheless, she believes that the

UK is more progressive and accepting of sexual and gender minorities than Korea. Emily's experience supports the argument that not everyone experiences positive outcomes during their study abroad (Kubota, 2016), and for Emily, the host culture's conservative understanding of gender and sexuality caused a conflict in her regardless of her gender conformity. The traditional view of gender and sexuality she experienced in Korea made her '*want to go home and be freer'* when she was given a space to reflect.

6.2.2. Masculine practices in Korea: male aesthetics as the most prominent gendered difference

This section addresses the second theme identified in the preliminary thematic analysis of Emily's interview and explores how Emily presents a cosmopolitan understanding in her interpretation of Korean men's use of cosmetics. Wearing make-up is normatively considered a feminine practice in most cultures. For this, men's cosmetic use is stereotypically associated with homosexuality (Coad, 2008, p.73). However, in modern societies where consumer culture is strong, a growing number of men have been engaged in enhancing their physical appearance and gender roles become more blurred in this practice (Watkins, 2017). Although the trend of male grooming exists in the UK, Emily's experience of Korean men's investment in self-care and grooming illustrates how contemporary Korean men are more invested in looking after their appearance by using beauty products, and that it is not an indicator of their femininity or homosexuality but a reflection of culturally different gendered practice:

> Emily: I think the biggest thing in the UK versus Korea, let's say like that, was in Korea, skin care and make up is a whole gender thing. In the UK, typically, for people who identify as male, they want to be the very masculine man. They never wash their face or something like that, whereas here, I think even with masculinity, they want to take care of themselves. They want to show the best side of them. I think it's because in Korea, they are more open. Like

> the brands of make-ups are now doing just for males, and it's more advertised, whereas in the UK, you never really see make-up that's advertised for males. And then, there is that judgement of people like, judging Korean men like, they are just so feminine compared to us. But I think, you can't really say that because it's different with every country. It's because of the trends, again. For the clothes that they wear. Clothes that females and males wear in England and clothes they wear here. Of course, like English people might think, oh in Korea, their guy clothes are so feminine. But it's just the fashion trend. It's for each country. They just… it's a different way that trends are going. And then Korean people might have the stereotype of like, 'oh, women in the UK dress so manly' because we have like street wear style than like pretty dress or something like that, but I'd say, yeah, I think that's the biggest thing.

Emily's description about heterosexual British men who follow the traditional masculine norms may be an exaggerative reduction of the trend of men's grooming in the UK, as British men have been reported to be invested in self-care through cosmetic use, with more visibility of metrosexual male celebrities who exert significant influence in maintaining the trend (Hall, 2015; Watkins, 2017). Nonetheless, Emily's observation highlights the contrast between the contemporary masculine practices in the UK and Korea especially regarding the popularity of men's cosmetics and self-care practices to enhance their look. As Emily states, advertisements of cosmetics targeted towards men are ubiquitous in Korea and it is inevitable to not be constantly exposed to such marketing, especially in urban areas.

In Korea, men's cosmetics have become as complex as women's cosmetics in terms of their range (Lee, 2017, cited in Jung, 2023a). There are multiple ranges of skincare product, and it is common for men to use cosmetics which are widely considered to be women's, such as BB (blemish balm) cream, to moisturise and correct their skin. Male K-pop idols and actors are frequently found in the advertisement of beauty products for men (Jung, 2023a). As Emily

observes, such presentations of men may easily be '*judged to be feminine'* in the Western eyes, and thus Korean men who engage in such self-care practices are not considered as masculine enough or heterosexual according to the Western norm. In the same vein, Elfving-Hwang (2020a) argues that traditionally feminine practices related to aesthetics performed by Korean men may be understood as homosexual aesthetics in the West. In addition, Brown's (2014) study reports that Korean men were perceived to dress and behave more femininely compared to American men and this resonates with Emily's impression.

Some historical and socio-economic interpretations explain the motivations of Korean men's use of make-up and how it is more normalised compared to other societies. Holliday and Elfving-Hwang (2012) argues that Neo-Confucianism, the longstanding ruling ideology in Korea, requires men to take care of their bodies as well as their minds. The ideology may have influenced men to be predisposed to aesthetic practices (Elfving-Hwang, 2012, p.76). Survival in competitive neoliberal economy is pointed out as a socio-economic factor which drives more men to look after their physical appearance with make-up (Jung, 2023a). Jung explains that the neoliberal economic restructuring after the financial crisis in 1997 in Korea resulted in normalising precarious work and unsteady employment. The hiring market has become overly competitive and meritocratic values became even more dominant. To be equipped with more competitiveness, increasing emphasis has been placed on ceaseless self-development, including physical appearance (Jung, 2023a, pp.273-274).

Emily does not articulate her own view of men wanting to take care of themselves in Korea. However, having lived in Korea during study abroad and through her formal and informal studies, Emily presents a higher level of cultural awareness as to how gendered practices can vary among different cultures, which is represented in her argument that (Western) people should not just assume Korean men are feminine due to their use of make-up. It reveals that Emily has established a cosmopolitan understanding regarding how gendered practices and

norms vary from culture to culture, and how Western-centred understanding of gender may lead to cultural ignorance when interpreting some gendered practices in non-Western contexts.

Regardless of Emily's cosmopolitan approach in the interpretation of Korean men's use of make-up, her narrative reveals some contradictions, which is one of key elements in the analysis of small stories/narratives (see Section 4.7.). In Emily's comparison between the UK and Korea in terms of inclusivity in Section 6.2.1., the UK is described as a more liberal place where there is more acceptance of diverse gender expressions. However, in the narrative above, Emily assumes that English people might *'judge'* Korean men's using cosmetics as *'feminine'* is based on their normative understanding of wearing make-up as a feminine practice. This contradiction demonstrates how study abroad experiences can be complicated and dynamic, while saving Emily from a cultural bias towards Korean men's using cosmetics. She acknowledges that the make-up and fashion trends she noticed in Korean people are just *'a different way that trends are going'*. In this stance, Emily makes a distinction between other English people and herself, demonstrating her cultural knowledge. The cosmopolitan distinction Emily creates for herself functions as a component in her own ideal gendered L2 self, which demonstrates Emily's acknowledging and embracing cultural difference reflected in gender expression.

6.2.3. Experiences of misinterpreted feminism in Korea while attending a '*feminist'* university

Emily was the only participant who studied at a women's university in Korea among all participants in the research. Unlike the UK, Korea has women's universities, six of which are in Seoul. Emily spent a year at one of the women's universities in Seoul, whose name is pseudonymised as Bora University in this analysis. Emily's unique gendered experiences

from studying at Bora capture the often-misinterpreted feminism in contemporary Korea (Sohn, 2015; Jung and Moon, 2024b), which is even observed through recent anti-feminist sentiments in the country (Jung, 2023b):

> Emily: Well, in Korea, they have a very strong mindset of your gender identity in a cultural context because… Actually, because I'm at a women's university, there is a very strong stigma that we are all very strong feminists. And people shouldn't associate with us because of that. Even like that's what they first asked me when they said, 'what university do you attend'? I went, 'I'm an exchange student Bora'. And they go like, 'oh, you must be a feminist'.
>
> Soyoon: Oh, really. Do you get that even as an exchange student?
>
> Emily: Yeah. I heard from my one of my professors that was a male, he was like, 'even I get judged for being a professor at a women's university', like, 'Oh, why are you teaching there. It's a feminist university?'
>
> Soyoon: As if being a feminist was a bad thing?
>
> Emily: Yes, that's what they have. The mindset. I've heard it's getting worse these days. And there's something with, like people with the gender identity and the cultural context with the new president. I heard that it's just gonna go crazy because he doesn't believe in women's rights, whereas there should be more equal rights than going back in history, right?

Studies in second language socialisation have highlighted the importance of context in shaping L2 identities (Block, 2007; Kinginger, 2013a; 2013b). In this regard, Emily's year abroad at the women's university in Korea provides a unique example of how a specific context shaped gendered experiences during her study abroad. Emily's allocation to a women's university is a less common case as most students are allocated at co-ed universities to spend their year abroad as co-ed universities are bigger in numbers. This specific local

context for Emily created nuanced interactions with some locals through which she experienced feminism as a stigma.

Emily's interactions with people outside her university reflect how feminism is negatively constructed in today's Korean society, and that it is often equated with radical feminism and misandry. Even as an exchange student, she experiences prejudice towards the students and staff at her university, which also transfers to her. Emily's narratives illustrate her lived experience of anti-feminism in Korea, which has emerged as a socio-political issue in recent years, as feminism is often misinterpreted as misandry (Hines and Song, 2021) or female supremacy (Jung, 2023b), mostly by some group of younger men in their 20s and 30s.

In this particular narrative, Emily constructs her ideal gendered L2 self in a nuanced way by voicing for feminism (*'there should be more equal rights than going back in history, right?'*), implying that she believes that she should be able to express her gender freely and equally, not bound by any social stigma or dominant gender discourse. Despite her experience of groundless association with (radical) feminism to attend Bora, Emily's concern is focused on the irrational association made by the others, not on the fear of being wrongly accused to be a feminist and negatively judged.

Emily's narrative on feminism, which also informs her uniquely constructed gendered L2 self, is not only personal; it is highly discursive as it reflects anti-feminism as one of on-going gender discourses in Korea. Korea's recent anti-feminist sentiments particularly emerged as a trend in the country's 2022 presidential election, as younger voters significantly diverged along gender issues (Jung, 2024). Studies suggest that anti-feminist sentiment was strong enough to be exploited for a political gain for the conservative populist party and the President who won the election (Arnold, 2024; Khil, 2022).

The negative construction of feminism in Korea, which has resulted in the anti-feminist sentiments especially among younger men, is understood as a continuation of the country's gender wars in the digital space, triggered by the tension between two major radical feminist groups, *Megalia* and *Womad* that responded to *Ilbe*, a far-right, misogynistic manosphere (Kim, 2021b). Jung (2024) explains some Korean men's exploitation of misogyny in socio-economic contexts. To response to the financial crisis in 1998, Korea quickly transitioned to neoliberal capitalism. This has normalised hyper-competition and precarious employment, which imposed challenges on men to fulfil their traditional role of providers. In their expressing frustration, women became the scapegoat, and misogynistic discourses have proliferated (Jung, 2024, p.2).

As a backlash, *Megalia* and *Womad* used a mirroring strategy against the online misogyny; they coined derogatory terms against men, which Jeong (2020) calls 'troll feminism'. According to Kim (2021b), their radical feminist action was partly successful. The groups' voice was strong enough to be heard by the society. However, their 'vulgar and violent language proved polarising and divisive' (ibid, p.3). Their strong voice blurred the definitions of misandry and feminism, misleading the public to think feminists are man-haters. Such online gender conflicts accelerated anti-feminist sentiments, producing discourses where feminism is tabooed (Kim, 2017).

Anti-feminism has been reported as widely visible in Korean people's social media use. Kim (2017) reports on people's reluctance to use the word 'feminist' even among those who consider themselves as progressive in politics. Furthermore, Twitter (now X) users have been observed to use the hedge 'although I'm not a feminist' when discussing gender equality issues to avoid stigmatisation as a feminist (ibid, p. 811). In such anti-feminist sentiments, women's universities in Korea have often experienced misunderstanding from the public that they are a group of radical feminists, as narrated by Emily. Her lived experiences of tabooed

feminism in Korea continue to illustrate how her university is associated with such misinterpreted feminism among wider public:

> Emily: But even people believe that… It's like a feminist university. It's like a cult, that we are cult leaders, or we've joined a big cult, right? I'm like, 'that's a bit weird'. But whereas it's just the reality that people go there because they feel safer and it's just a good university.

Emily's narrative reveals how many misconceptions there are against Bora from the outside, which are reflected in the *'cult'* comparison, highlighting some people's irrational belief that students at Bora are feminists who are primed to hate men. Bora University is particularly known to be the alma mater of the first female doctors and leaders in various sectors in Korea, with its longest dedication for women's higher education in the country (Pilwha, 1996). As Emily describes from her own experience, Bora is a good institution where female students feel safer, which is why they chose to study there. Despite the reality, however, Emily's experiences report how the recent misinterpretation of feminism in Korea is even employed in degrading the institution with anti-feminist and misogynist judgements and stereotypes. In her defence of her university and to voice against the misconceptions, Emily imagines a reverse situation:

> Emily: If it was a man asking me that question, 'oh, you must be a feminist (to be a student at Bora)'. Like, if there was a university for men (only), then how would you feel if I asked, 'oh, so you hate women'. They would be like 'no'. Then why ask that question. You don't know anything about here. But other people, I've met some Korean student friends that are here. They never say, 'I attend this university because I'm a feminist'. They go, 'yeah, I believe in rights for women, but I want the best for my education. It's a good university

> to go to'. So, I hope they have that mindset instead of, 'oh, you guys are crazy (feminists)'.

Emily's narrative reveals that she is not easily affected by misleading gendered discourse even in a situation where it is constructed as the locally dominant discourse. Rather, she expresses a hope that the stereotypes against her university in Korea based on anti-feminism are corrected. Overall, Emily's experiences of tabooed feminism in Korea demonstrates how study abroad becomes a site where language learners gain first-hand experience of on-going social issues in their L2 society. For Emily, studying at a women's university created unique gendered experiences around how feminism is (mis)understood in Korea, and how it is widely perceived by Korean people through everyday interactions outside her university. In the middle of these experiences, Emily has maintained her belief – equal rights for women, which can be interpreted as one of core underlying values that constructs Emily's ideal gendered self.

6.3. Leah's study abroad experience

Leah is one of the participants who joined the pre-SA interview. Highly interested in the research topic, she was the only participant who participated fully in all phases of the research. In the pre-SA interview, she was one of the most active and verbose participants who enjoyed discussing the interview questions. Leah's active participation continued in the during study abroad interview, openly sharing various gendered experiences through which her gendered L2 selves were reconstructed. The preliminary thematic analysis revealed that the most prominent themes from Leah's interview are: negotiation of femininities; interpretations of culturally distinct gendered behaviours and interactions; and situation-specific femininity in dating contexts in Korea. Each theme will now be analysed and discussed in more detail using critical narrative analysis.

6.3.1. Negotiation of femininities: between conscious and voluntary acculturation

Leah's narration of her study abroad experience in her interview provides an example of how dominant gender discourse places certain expectations on women's bodily images; she reports negotiating the way presents her bodily image in Korea through newly adopted fashion choices so that her femininity can be closer to what she perceives as the Korean norm:

> Leah: I think I feel quite confident about it. I feel here, it's quite – obviously, it's very split. It's very male and female. You don't see many people being orientated to any other way. I think for me it's more about physical body image than gender identity, because a lot of girls would dress certain ways that you would like to emulate. But as a different body type and as a different ethnicity, it just doesn't feel as comfortable to do it. Because you are gonna get stared at no matter what but sometimes you don't want to make it more of an issue to be stared at.

As Leah observes, gender roles in Korea are reported to be more clearly defined than other developed societies in the world (Rudolf and Kang, 2014; Yoon, 2023). Identifying as a heterosexual cis-gender woman, Leah expresses confidence in her gender identity and expression as they do not deviate from the rigid gender norm at the surface level, resonating with Emily's case. However, Leah's response illustrates such conformity does not ensure an immediate blending in. Rather, Leah's narratives reveal that she undergoes constant negotiations of her feminine expressions with a desire to fit in, and the work of adaptation is largely practised through her *'physical body image'*, which Leah finds to be a significant factor that informs and determine one's gender in Korea.

Leah's responses illustrate the understanding of gender in Korea she experienced is dominantly grounded in heteronormativity. In addition, they also indicate how gender is predominantly understood through a performative sense in Korea; bodies become a site

through which people perform their gender by dressing in ways that align with social gender expectation. In Leah's narrative in particular, discursive constructions of gender are reported as being enacted and reinforced through bodily images.

As a continuation of the body image, Leah notes that the dominant form of femininity in Korea is characterised by specific fashion choices, which she finds desirable as she would like to *'emulate'* them. Leah's wanting to '*emulate'* the style demonstrates a very complicated case of the interplay between three domains of gendered L2 selves, revealing that the ideal, ought-to and feared gendered L2 selves are not mutually exclusive but may be intertwined as learners engage with their L2 culture (see Section 3.5.).

Leah's wish to mimic the style implies her approval of the dominant feminine aesthetics, and she presents willingness to assimilate by adopting it herself. This reveals a combination of ideal and ought-to gendered L2 self; while Leah idealises the local women's fashion, its discursive nature simultaneously creates a sense of obligation for Leah. However, Leah's feared gendered L2 self soon dominates, as her different body type and ethnicity trigger a sense of discomfort if she emulated the style.

In other words, Leah's wishes to be able to present her femininity in a way that aligns with Korean feminine norms both reveals her ideal and ought-to gendered L2 self. However, the perceived constraints stemmed from her different body type and ethnicity constructed her feared gendered L2 self. Leah continues to narrate the concerns by explaining the feeling compelled to *'cover up'* her body to avoid drawing additional attention for not being the normative body type in Korea:

> Leah: Girls here obviously would wear very short skirts and tops and things, but I feel the need to cover up more because I feel like there's more of me than them because they are so small. I still, I try to adhere to the fashions here more, I

> guess. I buy most of my clothes now from Korean owned businesses. There's a store called Romi Story and it's for normal sizes and plus size and a lot of foreigners think their style is granny style and they think it's really uncool. But to me, you all call it retro, but I think it's a romantic thing. I think I feel more comfortable adhering to this style than trying the sexy K-Pop style, because I can't emulate that, but I can be the floral, nice cardigan, you know the soft way of feminine? When it's expressing identity, I guess I'm more of that way rather than the kind of widely seen Korean style that we see in the West. It's more of the softer styles I prefer to be and perceived as.

As with many other societies, a slim figure is generally desired for both genders in Korea. However, there is stronger emphasis on physical appearance in Korea as there is a social pressure on people to invest on their physical appearance and women feel more obliged to conform to the desired feminine type (Smith, 2023). Leah's feeling of having to *'cover up'* reflects such social pressure which induces her feared gendered L2 self, which resonates with Bartky's (1990) criticism on the tyrant nature of imposed slenderness on women as they are 'forbidden to become large or massive; they must take up as little space as possible' (Bartky, 1990, p. 73).

Leah observes that many Korean women around her are bound by normative body ideals constructed through the dominant gender discourse, part of which is reflected in their wearing small items of clothing. Acknowledging the discrepancy between her current physical appearance and the desired body for female in Korea, Leah negotiates the way she expresses her feminine self in a new cultural context. To manage the tension between the desire to fit in and the discomfort with fully adopting the dominant Korean style, she decides to adopt a softer feminine aesthetics. She actively and consciously engages in finding a type of feminine expression that is both suited to her and more accepted in Korea. This negotiation of

femininities can be understood as a form of identity work (Beech, 2007), through which individuals continuously (re)construct their performative self in response to social expectations.

Leah's identity work accompanies conscious and voluntary acculturation. In second culture acquisition, acculturation occurs as new egos or identities are created as learners are oriented to a new culture, which re-shapes their worldview, self-identity, systems of self-expressions and modes of communication (Brown, 2007). By actively choosing to engage with Korean fashion and presenting herself in a way that aligns more with local norms, Leah demonstrates a willingness to participate in the normative practices in her L2 culture. However, her acculturation is not a complete abandonment of her own identity, as Leah selectively incorporates elements of Korean style which she finds compatible with her feminine appearance.

Although Leah practices a considerable degree of agency in her negotiation of performative gendered expressions in L2, it is evident that local gender ideologies intervene in the process of negotiation, playing a significant role in Leah's performances of her femininity. It demonstrates a complex interplay between gendered agency and structural constraints (McNay, 2000). The structural constraints can be understood as what Foucault considered as modern power (Foucault, 1979). Modern power is not authoritarian, conspiratorial, nor orchestrated. However, it 'produces and normalises bodies to serve prevailing relations of dominance and subordination' (Bordo, 2003, p.190). In this view, Leah's body becomes a focal point where cultural expectations and norms are negotiated, illustrating how societal power structures and discourse are inscribed onto her body. Leah's negotiating her performative femininity also resonates with Bartky's criticism that female bodies are made more recognisably feminine in disciplinary practices of reproducing femininity (Bartky,

1990). In this process, Leah has demonstrated highly multifaceted and intersecting gendered L2 selves.

6.3.2. Observations of culturally distinct gendered behaviours and interactions

This section pays attention to Leah's observations of some gendered behaviours in Korea, how men and women interact, and how she interpreted some of the gendered behaviours and interactions. Leah produces multiple small stories about her nuanced interpretations and experiences and she particularly emphasises how *aegyo* does not resonate with her. The analysis starts with the common behaviours of Korean men Leah observed and some of them were compared to those of British men:

> Leah: Masculinity here... guys are, there are usually more of them together here. They are quite... I'd like to use the term the touchy feely and they don't have embarrassment about hugging each other, mocking around and wrestling each other. I've seen guys in stores literally arm around their friends' shoulders but it's not weird because that's how they connect. Girls here would also do the same thing like holding hands. They (heterosexual couples) always like, wear similar things. Also because couples' clothing is quite common here, which something in terms of masculinity and femininity in Britain, I don't think would ever catch on because it's quite a strange broadcast of your relationship. Here (in Korea) it can be really subtle like the same trainers, backpacks and things, or they are literally wearing same hoodies, jeans or sliders and it's the full outfit which is exactly the same. Whereas in Britain, I think, even if girls like that idea, because the thing people match are very casual, and they are very unisex items and it's not exactly as romantic I guess from British standpoint. And guys in Britain, I don't think they would wear the same thing as their girlfriends. I guess guys here are, softer is the best way to put it but not in like

> in a feminine way, not to the point of them being quote unquote gay. It's more just that, I guess they are just more ease with themselves.

Leah's response highlights how she observes Korean men exhibiting a softer and more physically affectionate form of masculinity compared to British men. According to Leah's observations, Korean men often express social affinity between men by physical actions such as hugging each other or playful wrestling. Furthermore, with their romantic partners, men would wear matching outfits, which Leah considers unusual in the UK. Although she thinks couples wearing the same clothes is a '*strange broadcast of their relationship'*, she interprets men's willingly wearing couple's outfit as a sign of their softer masculinity and feeling of ease with themselves. This reflects Leah's favourable attitude towards soft masculinity, which she also expressed in the Pre-SA interview (see Section 5.3.1.). Leah's observations of Korean men's softer behaviours from her own lived experiences are overall positive even though some of them contrasts to what she would consider as usual in heterosexual men in the UK. On the other hand, Leah exhibits a strong rejection to adopt some locally dominant feminine practices which are commonly observed among Korean women:

> Leah: You'd still see girls who are more masculine or independent but even when they appear physically to be tomboys, they still act the girly girl way around guys. The one thing I hate is you go into a store and the girls put on this nasal voice and when you ask them, they would talk to you in a normal manner and as soon as you leave, they switch back into their nasal '*thank you, see you again'* (uttering in Korean with a high nasality). I don't understand what it is that makes them like this. It is almost like trying to be too cute. And guys do this as well. They change their voice around different people. In Britain, people generally don't do that, but here they will change their voice accordingly and you can always tell when girls, when boys are here, they are acting like they don't care but then they use their nasal voice... Okay, just say you like them,

> it's fine. But I think that's a big giveaway here. Maybe their femininity has to be more pronounced, I think. Because, I was saying this the other day how like in English, we have baby talk whereas it is the *aegyo* style (in Korea). But when I see girls doing *aegyo*, it makes me cringe. When I see guys doing it, I get embarrassed but in a good way. I think it's cute but it's because it's wrong and it's because most guys are buff and strong so it's cute and disarming. But when girls do it – maybe because they use it more like a tool. The girl from my university back home, with her boyfriend would do things like that (uttering some cutesy Korean phrase). I'm like, you are not Korean, you shouldn't even be doing it, and it even makes it worse because it's bad enough for Koreans doing it. I don't need to hear foreigners doing it. I can't hide my facial expression. So, there's been several times people see me and just laughing, because I find it... revolting is probably the word. I can't just cope with it. It's off-putting.

Due to Leah's self-identified gender and sexuality, her gendered L2 self is most likely negotiated by observing locally dominant heterosexual women's practices and participating in such practices. While Leah reports making significant efforts to adjust her feminine L2 self through fashion choices to align more with the local gender norms (see Section 6.2.1.), she expresses a strong rejection against cute speech style laden with *aegyo,* which is perceived as common among Korean women. Leah's example of female workers in customer service using nasal voice may be an example of performing 'stylized persona' prescribed by their employer (Cameron, 2000, p. 108) and therefore not a genuine representation of the workers' self. However, it demonstrates *aegyo* as a frequently performed gendered practice in Korea observable in everyday life, making it a culturally specific case especially in relation to the UK.

Performing *aegyo* can be both verbal and non-verbal in Korea, and Leah particularly focuses on verbally performed *aegyo,* which is delivered with high nasality (Crosby, 2023). The major purpose of using *aegyo* is to 'set up a naive, childlike, and cute persona to be taken care of by listeners or readers who are in an intimate relationship' (Jang, 2020, p.17). Because of the highly infantilised elements, the performer of *aegyo* can be interpreted as less powerful or dependent on the receiver of *aegyo,* who is presumed to be more mature and in a more powerful position. *Aegyo* in social interaction in Korean has a performative function and because Leah has seen *aegyo* being exploited as a tool, dominantly by girls in her own social circle, she developed a negative reaction to it.

Leah's rejection of *aegyo* has a resemblance to Siegal's (1996) study of Western women studying in Japan who found Japanese woman's normative language use excessively polite and submissive. They refused to adopt the dominantly observed Japanese femininity and retained their Western style female identities, which collided with what they experienced as normative femininity in Japan. These women's discursive L2 identity negotiations were illustrated in their rejection to imitate certain prosodic features ('little squeaky voice') found in Japanese women's speech and use some linguistic markers which they found 'too humble' (Siegal, 1996, p. 354).

Similarly, Leah's rejection of *aegyo* implies that she finds it childish and manipulating. Her discomfort with using *aegyo* stems from her femininity she developed in the UK, where Leah repeatedly says that she had always been expected to be an independent woman throughout the interviews. Leah's reaction to *aegyo* also reveals some contradiction in her willingness to adopt normative gendered practices in L2 culture. While she was highly engaged in negotiating her performative femininity through fashion (see Section 6.2.1.), she did not demonstrate the same level of engagement with adopting *aegyo* in speaking Korean, limiting its legitimate use to Koreans only. Leah's disapproval of her British friend's speaking with

aegyo confirms this contradiction. This case illustrates that not all perceived gendered norms in L2 function as the source of gendered L2 self, and learners decide which dominant gendered behaviour resonates with them in their practice of gendered agency. For Leah, she continues to interpret *aegyo* as a manipulative act, which explains her aversion to it:

> Leah: I'd see a lot of girls here expecting their boyfriend to do certain things which you would never expect in the UK; hold my handbag, I want ice-cream, I want coffee, I want you know, a teddy bear. Guys will do this without a question even though these girls talk to them very rudely. I don't really understand this dynamic of... because it wouldn't really happen in the UK. You can't act cute and have guys like 'oh, yes darling, I will do it for you'. But here for some reasons it works. It is something that baffles me in terms of masculinity and femininity. Guys would act really strong, but as soon as a girl acts a certain way, they become a puddle of water.

Leah's narrative keeps highlighting how *aegyo* may be exploited to create power dynamics between people in a heterosexual relationship. In her criticism of using *aegyo* in a relationship, she implicitly yet firmly positions herself as a 'British' woman by arguing that such a relationship dynamic *'wouldn't really happen in the UK'*. With this positioning, Leah distances herself from speaking with *aegyo* while reinforcing her own perspective on the manipulative aspect of *aegyo*. In contrast to how certain fashion choices for women in Korea prompted Leah to negotiate the way she performs her femininity (see Section 6.3.1.), Leah firmly rejects the idea of adopting *aegyo* as a British woman.

6.3.3. Navigating Korean dating norms and situation-specific femininity in L2

This section pays particular attention to dynamics of heterosexual romantic relationships which Leah narrated as experiencing in Korea. Leah's narrative reveals that heterosexual romantic relationships provided significant gendered experiences for her, through which she

constantly (re)negotiated her situation-specific L2 femininity, largely based on the ought-to gendered L2 self.

Study abroad is not only confined to immersive 'language' learning and studies report that students during study abroad actively engage in making new relationships, including romantic ones (Mitchell, Tracy-Ventura and McManus, 2017). In this study, some of the participants openly shared that they were (and still are) dating during and after their year abroad. Among them, Leah was the most engaged in making social connections with local men, potentially for romance. Leah shared her dating stories on different occasions, through which she navigated dating norms in Korea from a newcomer's perspective. While Leah's dating experiences are nuanced and thus cannot be generalised to be the dating norms in Korea, her stories provide ample instances of how her situated-specific gendered L2 self is constructed and how it becomes a site of identity struggle (Norton, 2013).

Soyoon: How do you feel that you express your gender identity in relation to cultural context?

Leah: For the most part, I feel like I act the same way. But I guess, especially when it comes to dating, in my head mentally, I'm feeling like 'should I be doing things differently, act or dress in a certain way in order to fit in the gender construction here?'. Because you know, when you go out on dates here, people dress their best. So, I had that for quite a while and then I constantly went on dates wearing dresses or in nice outfits. Because I felt like if I turn up, and I'm not dressed appropriately or I'm not dressed like a girl, maybe you won't see me in that respect. And then I started dating someone who didn't do that at all, he was always in sportswear, and I could relax a little. Then I felt like he treated me more like a friend than a partner and sometimes I thought is it because I'm not acting the way that I'm technically should be, in terms of the female role here?

Drawing on her observations and own experiences, Leah talks about the pressure imposed on heterosexual women who are looking for a potential partner, which for her is more intense than in the UK due to socially defined gender roles. While generalisation should be avoided, Leah's observation about Korean people aligns with studies that report Korean people's high investment in fashion and physical appearance, especially among women.

Lee and Workman (2014a) reports Korea as one of the East Asian countries which attracts global luxury fashion brands. It is argued that people in collectivist cultures, such as Korea, are more concerned about public self-consciousness compared to those who live in individualist cultures (Lee and Burns, 1993, cited in Lee and Workman, 2014a). In a similar study, they maintain that 'Korean women are higher in public self-consciousness than Korean men' (Lee and Workman, 2014b, p.123), drawing on previous research that Korean women are more likely to be aware of external evaluation of their physical appearance than Korean men, leading them to make improvements to their physical appearance by using cosmetics and regulating their diet to manage their physical appearance (Jung and Lee, 2006). Similarly, Yang's study (2023) confirms Korea as a substantial consumer market for fashion industry, as the country ranked fifth in the world's luxury goods market in terms of their sales in 2022, especially reporting its younger generation as the big consumers in purchasing the luxury goods.

Leah's observations, especially of women of her age striving to 'perfect' their looks with nice clothing especially on romantic occasions seem valid reflections of these social behaviours. For this, Leah feels that her femininity in dating situations is affected by the socially constructed gender norms in Korea, which cause her some anxiety and insecurity. Although she found temporary relief by dating someone who seemed freer from these social norms, Leah soon felt that the relationship was devoid of romantic elements. Leah's feared gendered L2 self originates in the discrepancy between her current feminine self and the

idealised femininity in Korea expressed through physical appearance. The discrepancy creates a sense of fear for Leah that she may not be successfully playing the normative female role, particularly in dating situations. In the management of this feared gendered L2 self, her ought-to gendered L2 self intervenes, and causes her to make an adjustment in the ways she performs femininity:

> Leah: Obviously the beauty standards are quite high, and if someone's dating a foreigner, you know that they are not expecting them to be the Korean beauty standard. But you still want to emulate it, I feel. You know, I've bought enough make-up here to know the way it is, and since I got here, I always get my nails done, which is not something I ever did in Britain. And I feel like it's put more pressure on me to feel put together. [...] I think that's like a big thing. For me, especially, when I go on dates or even when I'm out alone, I'd rather blend in. I'd rather go with the hyper-femininity than just wearing jeans and t-shirt. Because it then just makes me feel more like I belong, I guess. Because you're already out of place, so you try not to make it worse than it is.

Leah recognises that she may be exempt from the strict beauty standard in Korea thanks to her foreign identity. Regardless of her foreignness, however, normative femininity in Korea activates Leah's ought-to gendered L2 self, and she engages with the female beauty trends by investing in make-up products to *'emulate'* the current make-up trends in Korea as well as in nail care, which in Britain she had never done. These activities are described as '*pressure'* rather than pleasure, which hints that such gendered practices place social stress on Leah.

In the Pre-SA interview, Leah responded that she would rely on gender neutral clothing such as T-shirts and jeans during her year abroad (see Section 5.4.2.), expressing worries regarding her different body type that deviates from what she perceived as the Korean

feminine norm. Leah's reworking of her gendered self in Korea demonstrates a significant depart from her initial imaginings of her future gendered self in L2.

Leah's newly adopted gendered practices, such as experimenting with different make-up products and getting her nails done, demonstrate how locally constructed gender discourses exert their influence on people, especially when learners directly experience them. In Leah's further stories, she explains that more traditionally feminine practices she adopted in dating occasions in Korea resulted in mixed feelings regarding her femininity due to different dating norms she experienced between Korea and the UK:

> Leah: I don't know how girls here can be okay with never paying for anything. I was dating someone and for my birthday, he rented a room, got a cake, took me to a cinema, to a museum, took me to dinner. And on his birthday, he paid for dinner, he paid for room, he paid for lunch the next day and the only thing I managed to allow him to buy for him was a pint of ice-cream. 8,000 won (about 5 pounds). And he'd obviously spent at least 150,000 (about 100 pounds) on that weekend for his birthday. It's his birthday and I spent 8,000 won. That kind of makes me feel a bit, insecure. I just don't like it, and I think it's because we are always taught to be independent women whereas here, it's very much the opposite. It's like girls would only respect guy as much as they pay for them and do stuff for them. I guess with students, it's slightly different because you both don't have money and it works out equally. But when you are dating people in their 30s or 40s, it's very much apparent as a girl, you're not meant to do anything. You just have to be there and be pretty, laugh at their jokes and be happy with what they are doing, which is fine. I'm still enjoying the date, but it leaves me the lingering feel like I shouldn't be like this and it's the 21st century. I'm an independent woman, I don't like this. That's my kind of gender thing, you know, I'm trying to be less, I guess, independent in that

> way because I think if you refuse too many times, guys take it as a slight against them. Like, why are you refusing, why won't you let me pay.

For Leah, dating experiences in Korea became a significant social factor through which she struggled with her feminine identities in two different cultures. It is difficult to generalise dating norms in the UK and Korea. However, Leah's overall dating experiences in Korea report that Korean men took more initiatives from planning the dates and paying for the dates compared to men she had met in the UK.

Korea is one of many societies where men have had more economic stability, and traditionally, men have paid more in heterosexual romantic relationships, including dating. In the past few decades, however, more women have started to make more contribution to the cost of dating in Korea with a growing aspiration for egalitarianism (Glayzer and Nelson, 2024; Youn, 2018). Dating experiences and dynamics can vary significantly depending on who one dates. However, it is still considered a norm for men to perform a leading role in (especially in a first few) dates in Korea (Youn, 2018).

Regardless of the norm, Leah reports that she was not expected to pay for the dates most of the times in Korea, which made her feel insecure and less independent than she was in the UK. While it may reflect Leah's status as an exchange student; as she is new to the country and may have relatively less stable source of income as a student, her dating partners would willingly pay more on the dates. Despite feeling insecure, Leah admits that she enjoys dating. However, Leah's acknowledgement of her *'trying to be less'* reveals that she complies with the ought-to gendered L2 self in dating contexts in Korea, even though it makes her feel less independent. Leah continues to articulate her emotional struggle induced by gendered interactions from dating experience, especially from a date where she was expected to make an equal contribution:

Leah: Until the point when I dated someone who were literally like, oh you buy this because I bought this and that, but it would always something be really expensive. You go to the convenience store and it's never just *soju* (Korean liquor), beer and snack. It was beer, *soju* and snack, also a packet of cigarettes, and oh it's two plus one (buy two and get one free in Korea), oh 40,000 won (around 30 pounds). I was like, I only have a part time job, you know. But I still appreciated that more because I felt like he saw me as not just like something hanging off his arm, like to take out and to do things with. Are you doing this just because I'm a girl or because you like me? It's a very fine line of understanding that kind of role that you're playing when you are dating. I think that's probably the one thing that I could say in terms of feeling my gender identity is different here is just the way in which you are treated.

Leah implies that this particular date, which for her was a counterexample to the normative Korean date, she felt that she was treated as an equal to her date by being expected to contribute to the dating expenses. In contrast to her previous date where she felt *'insecure'* for not being allowed to pay, Leah appreciated the opportunity to make an equal contribution for the date. Leah further explains her feelings towards her gender identity in Korea as being shaped by social expectations and interactions - *'the way in which she is treated'*. This highlights the discursive nature of the construction of gendered L2 selves. Leah's experiences of dating constantly reveal her ought-to gendered L2 self in her attempt to *'fit into the female role'*:

Leah: As a girl, it's always going to be kind of lesser. Not in a bad way, not like you're a woman staying in the house. Just more, you are treated as more like, delicate, which then it's hard to accept when you lived alone for ten years and you used to be this person to be seen as like... 'oh, you are a dainty flower, you sit there when I go pay the bill; why are you trying to clean up the table, that's

> their job'. I don't like feeling useless. I don't know. I guess that's the big thing I try to reflect on here. How to fit into the female role here but without feeling that you are just becoming so passive about everything. It's quite hard.

Leah's experiences of Korean dating norms are nuanced and therefore may not fully represent or summarise the complex dating dynamics in Korea. Reflecting her unique experiences, her dating stories have a situated and partial nature (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005, p.605). Regardless of its situatedness and partialness, Leah's dating experiences created instances where she was constantly placed into situation-specific femininity, which is '*passive'* and *'delicate'* to the point that she felt she was treated like a '*dainty flower',* performing the socially expected female role in romantic situations. It is a highly context dependent femininity Leah was adjusting to while navigating dating norms in Korea. However, these nuanced experiences illustrate Leah's struggles with her feminine identities as she juggled between her independent femininity in L1 and passive and delicate femininity which she thought was normatively expected in dating situations with local Korean men.

6.4. Summary of findings

Emily and Leah's narratives about their lived experiences in Korea provided multiple empirical cases of self and identity related tensions caused by normative gender constructions in contemporary Korea. Some of their experiences illustrate the current understandings of gender and sexuality, sensitive gender related issues and idealised femininity in Korea whereas some experiences were more nuanced, reflecting each participant's unique environment and social circle they frequently interacted with.

At the surface level, both Emily and Leah exhibited a good level of comfort with their gender identity in Korea as their gender and sexuality are not experienced as deviating from the social local gender norms. However, their gendered stories in the interviews immediately

revealed that there were less comfortable occasions for them. For Emily, Korea's rigid gender norms and its low awareness of sexual and gender minority groups made her feel less free in terms of expressing her gender in Korea. By contrast to the binary understanding of gender, Emily found that many Korean men are invested in looking after their physical appearance, and it is commonly done by using make-up. She observed that those men's use of make-up is not an indicator of their sexuality in Korea, but more of a socially constructed and encouraged practice. Finally, by spending a year at a women's university, Emily experienced how feminism is considered as a stigma in Korea through her interactions with people at her university and outside. Due to anti-feminist sentiments and stereotypes against her host university, she reported being misunderstood as a radical feminist, which according to her, reflects how feminism is widely being misinterpreted among wider public in Korea.

For Leah, there were multiple gendered experiences during her year abroad through which she constantly negotiated her femininity due to the gap between her femininity in L1 and normative femininity in L2. Leah demonstrated high willingness to assimilate to normative femininity in Korea, especially through her physical appearance. She focused on her bodily image and fashion to modulate her feminine images to be closer to the Korean feminine norm in the way she also felt agreeable. Although Leah made her own choices in the reworking of her new feminine look, the motivation to transform her performative femininity originated from the cultural anxiety created by the dominant gender discourse in L2, which functioned as the source of her ought-to and feared gendered L2 self. However, Leah did not always conform to the social gender norm in Korea; while observing the locals' gendered behaviours and interacting with them, she learned that both men and women in Korea exhibit a soft and cute speech style, and *aegyo* is one dominant example of performed cuteness, normatively expected more from women. Rather than adopting *aegyo*, Leah strongly rejected performing it because she did not feel comfortable with the childlike behaviours and overwhelming

nasality accompanied in *aegyo.* Leah practiced strong gendered agency to reject *aegyo*, highlighting how such behaviours are not acceptable in the UK, where she developed independent femininity. Lastly, Leah's narratives about her dating experiences demonstrated tension between her independent femininity in L1 and situation-specific femininity in L2. She always felt the pressure to dress nicely and have a good physical appearance in order to be considered as a potential heterosexual romantic partner. The social pressure from dating constructed Leah's situational ought-to gendered L2 self. While navigating dating norms in Korea, she was often treated in a way that reflected societal norms, where men were expected to pay and she was not. Such dating dynamics created more identity struggle for Leah as it left Leah feeling insecure, passive and less independent.

Overall, Leah exhibited more explicit examples of negotiations of her gendered L2 selves than Emily by actively participating in her new environment and often internalising pressure to conform to Korean beauty norms and standards. On the surface, Leah's engagement with the gendered practices in the L2 culture may seem heavily focused on performative aspects, reflecting some of the youth culture in Korea. Nonetheless, her constant reflections on the gendered interactions and practices in Korea indicate her sustained observation and negotiation of her gendered L2 selves during her study abroad experience. Both Emily and Leah's study abroad experiences illustrate that gendered experiences are significantly influenced by dominant gender ideologies and discursive constructions of gender and sexuality in the target language society. Lastly, both participants' stories demonstrate that their gendered selves in L1, gendered agency and gender norms in L2 contribute to the construction and negotiation of their uniquely constructed gendered L2 selves.

7. Data analysis III: Post SA interviews

7.1. Introduction

Chapter 7 presents three sets of critical narrative analysis from post study abroad interviews with Emily, Leah and Holly. These participants spent the 2021-22 academic year in Korea and returned to the UK to continue their degrees in September 2022. In the following month of October, the interview invitation was sent to the cohort and Emily, Leah and Holly expressed interest in participating (see Section 4.3.). To enrich the data, the three participants were contacted again in February 2023. While there are some overlapping elements in their narratives, Emily, Leah and Holly's interviews reveal how each participant constructs nuanced gendered selves, intertwining their recent gendered experiences from the study abroad period and their return. The following sections, 7.2., 7.3., and 7.4., respectively discuss Emily, Leah and Holly's post study abroad interviews highlighting their gendered L2 selves constructed in discursive contexts across Korea and the UK.

7.2. Emily's post SA interview

The analysis starts with Emily's narratives. The preliminary thematic analysis revealed that the most prominent themes in Emily's post study abroad interview are: Emily's navigation of progressiveness across British and Korean societies through LGBTQ+ inclusivity; her observations of her peers' performative shifts in gender expression, which she interprets as influenced by K-pop and life in Korea; and her ideal gendered L2 self, which values authenticity, confidence and stability. Each theme will now be analysed and discussed in greater detail using critical narrative analysis.

7.2.1. Navigating progressiveness through LGBTQ+ acceptance across the UK and Korea

In the post study abroad interview, Emily's comparative observations of LGBTQ+ acceptance in the UK and Korea emerged saliently through the initial thematic analysis, as an extension of her experiences shared in the during study abroad interview. Emily's perception of the UK as a more progressive place where diverse gender identities are celebrated solidifies upon her return from the study abroad. This perceived difference influences Emily's comfort levels in discussing gender-related topics in both languages and she raises concerns about the potential challenges faced by LGBTQ+ individuals in Korea:

> Soyoon: Do you ever feel more comfortable to be yourself in terms of expressing your gender identity in Korean or English?
>
> Emily: I'd say both. I'm very accepting of who I am. I'm not a person that's had the troubles of... with my gender, sexuality or language even, compared to other people who are LGBTQ. Because, for me that's not a problem at all with both in English and Korean. However, definitely, in Korea, I've seen a lot of hate speech towards LGBTQ. So, I'm not sure how they feel exactly because that's not me, but I can try and understand...

In the DSA interview, Emily reported that her gender conformity did not cause personal issues (see Section 6.2.1.). The same voice is maintained in her post study abroad narrative; Emily's identity as a cisgender woman affords her a good level of confidence and privilege in expressing her gender both in British and Korean contexts, as she expresses '*for me, that's not a problem at all'*. It simultaneously demonstrates Emily's acknowledgement of the potential difficulties faced by LGBTQ+ individuals. The awareness stems from her personal experiences of witnessing her LGBTQ+ friends in Korea struggling to express their gender identities in a less accepting social environment, apart from their own safe spaces. While Emily's gender conformity allows her to feel comfortable in both languages at a personal level in Korea, the openness she perceives in the UK grants a freer environment to discuss

gender at an interpersonal level, especially where her friends who identify as LGBTQ+ are included:

> Soyoon: Right, so you feel comfortable both in Korean and English. But do you think there's any subtle difference or is it just about the same in terms of level of comfort?
>
> Emily: I wouldn't say as much as in Korean because I'm very comfortable here with the way of expressing... my gender is female she/her but for other people, it might be a challenge, but I think we are just so accepting of the fact, and more advanced in learning about different ways we celebrate our genders than in Korea... Definitely, I feel very comfortable to talk in here. [...] In England, I definitely have more friends who are LGBTQ openly, and it feels more comfortable and accepting to talk about it. If I had friends that were LGBTQ in Korea, it's more of a downlow thing in a public setting, I would say. Whereas here in a public setting, it's very open. You can talk whatever you want.

The acceptance Emily reports experiencing towards LGBTQ+ communities in the UK and Korea demonstrates a significant gap; the rigid gender norms in Korea she witnessed contrasts to the receptive attitude towards LGBTQ+ individuals in the UK. She reports that her LGBTQ friends in Korea were not able to express their gender identity authentically in public, as it is considered as '*a downlow thing'*. This observation resonates with Young's (2009) interpretation of discursive practice that it 'constructs and reflects social realities through actions that invoke identity, ideology, belief and power' (Young, 2009, p.1). Due to the gender essentialism discursively ingrained in Korean society (Han, 2022), Emily witnessed her LGBTQ+ friends being subject to the social discourse in which gender non-conformity is tabooed. By contrast, Emily perceives that her LGBTQ+ friends in England enjoy more freedom to express their gender more authentically.

Emily's self-reflections and comparative observations demonstrate how discursive gender norms function as a factor that shapes the ideal, ought-to or feared gendered L2 self. For Emily, her gender conformity helps shape the ideal gendered L2 self, as there is minimal conflict between her gender identity and social gender norms in the UK as well as Korea. However, normative gender constructions are likely to create ought-to or feared gendered L2 selves, either functioning as a guidance of expected gendered behaviours or source of anxiety, especially for those whose gender identity conflicts with the local social norms. Emily's observation of her LGBTQ+ friends in Korea reflects this:

> Emily: I think language-wise, I feel obviously just more confident in the way I talk, being over there. However, I feel like it's more not about language as much. But gender-wise, I feel more... I want Korea to be more accepting like, because I used to, every week, visit like an LGBTQ place because my friends worked there. And it's just... seeing them talk to each other because they know that they are accepted between each other. I feel they are more expressive about themselves and about the way they talk and show themselves whereas if they were in the daily life, it is more reserved and oh, I have to be masculine or, I have to be more feminine in the way they show themselves. So, if Korea can be more accepting, I think it would be more a happier place for them. And yeah, I think that's it.

As Emily narrates, her LGBTQ+ friends in Korea were not able to present themselves in a consistent manner. While they were free to express themselves, showing more authentic identities within their own communities, they felt pressure that they either have to present themselves as more masculine or feminine depending on their biological sex. Emily's narrative emphasises the importance of fostering an inclusive environment which allows individuals to authentically express their gendered selves without fear of discrimination or

prejudice. Emily's personal wish for Korea to be more progressive in this field reflects such a belief.

7.2.2. Emily's observations of her peers' performative shifts in gender expressions

This section examines and discusses Emily's observations of how some of her peers shifted their gendered performances especially through dress choices and speech style in Korea and how they are maintained even after study abroad. Emily's account reveals her peers' significant transition towards what she perceives as *feminine* and *precious* modes of gender expressions, which are widely promoted in K-pop:

> Emily: I actually think from what I've seen, is that people that have been to Korea, on the study abroad or something. They love K-pop, they act more like them. They come back as different, not the same gender obviously. Well, maybe, but they act a certain way, more feminine, or... yeah, I'd say more feminine, like precious if that's the word?
>
> Soyoon: Regardless of their gender?
>
> Emily: Yes, either they wanted to be more Korean gender, than the UK? It seems like they all changed personality either they found themselves more in Korea, and they enjoy embracing their gender in that subtle way than the UK way.

The sections of narrative above depict Emily's observations of how some learners' gendered performances can be malleable in a language immersion situation. Her observation implies that these people have internalised the dominant gender performances in K-pop during the time they were in Korea. The soft type of gender expressions function as a core construct of these learners' ideal gendered L2 selves, and they retain the K-pop influenced performative femininity upon their return. Emily explains that the changes have been noted regardless of the gender of the people she knows, and that they are described as having engaged in more

shifts in gender performativity in Korea, eventually expressing their gender more '*subtly'* than they would in the UK. Emily's observations of her peers' gender performances in the Korean context continue with comparisons of their past and present modes of speaking and dressing:

> Emily: There's a lot of instances, like even the way they talk, dress, act... I think before they went to Korea, they were more just chill, and didn't really care too much even about the way they look. Whereas since going there and coming back, it is all, 'oh, I have to dress nicely, and I have to act a certain way'. I wonder how that happened. Maybe they wanna be more like live in Korea and live by the way they express their gender. Or they just wanna be that way, I'm not too sure.

The shifts perceived by Emily are predominantly performed through fashion choices. However, significant changes in behaviours accompany such transitions; according to Emily, while these people used to be more carefree and *'chill'*, they have come back with a different attitude towards how they self-present through clothes and actions. Emily avoids making a definite assumption as to what has triggered the perceived changes. However, she interprets them as an acquired behaviour during the year abroad, which reflects their desire to live in Korea or their personal preferences of the *Korean* way of expressing gender. This distinction reveals Emily's perception of culturally constructed gender, and she posits that performative aspects of gender are stronger and more explicitly delivered in Korea. Due to Emily's earlier comment on her peers' way of talking, an additional question was asked for further elaboration:

> Soyoon: Apart from the dressing up and fashion in general, do you think the way they speak the language has also become more feminine?

> Emily: Perhaps, yes. They are very more restricted, I feel. Maybe because they lived there for a year and learned the way the Koreans express themselves. I think they are still in the mindset like... 'oh, I can't say that'. I feel like the way they express themselves outside is more Koreanised gender wise than on the inside. Yeah, I think that's the biggest...(change).

The *'more restrictedness'* Emily observed in her peers' speaking may have originated from modesty and self-moderation which are constructed as virtues in Korean society. The embodiment of such discursive behaviours in their speech style hints the learners' positioning of their identity. It reveals the interactive characteristic of those learners' identity, which reflects their past and on-going experiences and connectedness with the social world (Norton, 2014). Those learners' engagement with K-pop and study abroad experience are sustained as motivation to maintain a sense of belonging to Korea. While this is achieved through '*Koreanised'* performative shifts, Emily questions whether such changes are authentic representations of the peers' internal sense of gendered self. The reconstructions of her peers' gendered expressions contrast with Emily's own ideal gendered L2 self, which she perceives as less influenced by any cultural consumption or social expectations. The next section discusses Emily's ideal gendered L2 self, marked by her confidence and stability.

7.2.3. Emily's ideal gendered L2 self: authenticity expressed with confidence and stability

In contrast to some of her peers who exhibit a significant shift in their gender expressions after a year in Korea, Emily positions herself as having a stable sense of self that remains unchanged despite her study abroad experience and K-pop consumption:

> Emily: For me, I think I've come back as the same person and even if I watched K-Pop and stuff like that, I don't think that's influenced my gender at all. Because I think, I'm quite confident with who I am.

While the post-structuralist perspective often highlights the fluid and context dependent nature of identity, Emily's construction of her gendered L2 self provides a unique counter example. She presents herself as stable and unchanged by saying '*I think I've come back as the same person'*. It demonstrates her secure gendered L2 self which transcends cultural immersion. By articulating her self-perceived gender stability, she draws a distinction between her confident gendered self and others who practise their gender differently according to the cultural contexts. Emily's consistent gender expression across two cultural contexts indicates symbolic competence (Kramsch, 2009, 2010; see also Section 3.3.) practised with a solid idea of the ideal gendered L2 self. In negotiation of the complex symbolism embedded in language and discursive events from the target culture, learners engage in symbolic competence to reference them appropriately (Back, 2016). Emily demonstrates this competence by recognising the potential for fictive representation and remains true to her own sense of self. Feeling resistant to the inauthenticity and superficiality perceived in the shift of her peers' performativity, Emily emphasises her confidence as the core element in her steadfastness in expressing gender in English and Korean:

> Emily: I actually don't think I express it any differently than I do in English. I think I'm confident to just express in the way I want to. I don't think it really matters. As a person whose second language is Korean, if I'm talking to a Korean person, I think they won't mind as much as how I express myself in one tone, or in a feminine way. I had no problems with it so far in my life, but if it ever comes into an instance like they say I'm not expressing myself the way I should as a woman... I wouldn't change the way I talk.

Emily acknowledges that her communication style may be perceived as less conventionally feminine in Korea. However, she exhibits an adamant belief that she would not adjust the mode of her gendered expressions so that they align more with certain social gender norms. Rather

than seeking validation through conformity, Emily practices her gendered agency so that her gendered self in L1 transfers into the gendered L2 self authentically and consistently:

> Emily: In my view, I don't change the way I express myself. If I think of the way I talk in Korean, nothing's changed. Just the... *panmal* (non-honourific speech), the informal. I don't act in a certain way. The way I talk now is the way I'd express myself in Korean. I try to, at least. Maybe for other people, it might be different because everyone has a different story, but I think if you are comfortable and confident enough, you shouldn't change the way you express yourself.

Emily consolidates her confidence in her gendered L2 self that emphasises its stability. While she acknowledges reconstruction of the gendered self is possible depending on individual's unique experiences, she stresses the importance of feeling confident with one's own self and maintaining it. The only change she accommodates when speaking in Korean is using appropriate registers, due to the importance of politeness in the Korean language expressed in the choice of *contaymal* ('honourific speech') and *panmal* ('non-honourific speech') (Brown, 2011, p.23). Emily's saying '*you shouldn't change the way you express yourself*' reflects her nuanced ideal gendered L2 self, which prioritises confidence and stability over flexibility. Next, the chapter switches its focus to Leah, whose gendered L2 self demonstrates more complex and dynamic negotiations.

7.3. Leah's post SA interview

This section explores Leah's gendered L2 self as reflected in the post study abroad interview, which reveals significant re-negotiations of her gendered self and the accompanying complexity. According to the preliminary thematic analysis, the most prominent themes in Leah's post study interview are: Leah's shift in aesthetic preferences by embracing some Korean-specific softer feminine style; her aversion to speaking with *aegyo* in

Korean; and reflections on her reaction to attentive gestures from Korean men and how she navigated socially prescribed femininity. These themes will now be analysed and discussed in greater detail using critical narrative analysis.

7.3.1. Leah's embracing of the Korean 'soft glamour': a shift in aesthetic preferences

Among the interview participants, Leah demonstrated the biggest willingness to adopt dominant feminine norms in Korea. This continues upon her return to the UK, and she keeps embracing some Korean beauty trends, such as make-up and fashion. In the following excerpt, Leah explicitly acknowledges a shift in her understanding and performance of femininity after her time in Korea:

> Leah: Because, even like, I guess, with the way I do my make-up now. When I was in Korea, I used to always use the same kind of make-up. But I'd put, not a lot of, but I would put on really dramatic make-up. Whereas now, I use really tiny, Innisfree (Korean cosmetic brand) mascara so it looks very natural where I prefer to look healthy and glowing rather than... Now here, everyone does this... kind of like, they carve their face with things and try to change the way they look. Whereas I'd rather just have rosy cheeks, eyebrows and some lashes and I don't need a lot. So I think that is something kind of changed as well where my need for making myself up has kind of decreased. But then I think it's because, in Korea, following their media, girls are always on fresh-based. It's more about your actual skin than your make-up. So, I think that's a big thing. It's kind of changed the way I perceive myself in terms of... if my face looks clean and shiny half the time, like today I don't have any make-up on. And even yesterday, I did mascara and blush, that was it. If I go out, maybe I will do the glitter eye... But it's very subtle compared to how I used to do, fat cat eye, wing and you know, bold colours and bright lips. Now it's always like balms and tints and oils... I think what I had is like, my ideal of feminine

> maybe, has softened over time. I was always one of those people who idealised old school Hollywood, like the Marylin Munroe types which was to me, 'that is so glamour'. But now I'd rather be soft, warm and just gentle rather than this kind of ultra glamourous sexy thing. So, I think that's had an impact on me.

Leah's narrative reveals how performative components are combined with communicative styles to 'constitute the presentation of a persona, a self' (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2003, pp.305-306). She describes her previous make-up style as *dramatic* characterised by '*bold colours and bright lips'*, which aligns with a more traditionally glamorous aesthetic for women often promoted in the Western media. However, Leah adopted a performative shift, which 'emerged in social practice and involved an ongoing history of stylistic moves' (ibid, p.306). Leah's year abroad and her consumption of Korean media have shaped a transition towards a *'soft'* feminine look, prioritising healthy and glowing skin over heavy make-up. To achieve this, Leah reports putting on rosy hues on her cheeks and does minimal eye and lip make-up, so that her face looks natural. Leah compares this to the make-up trend she commonly sees in the UK, which she describes as artificial and unnatural, such as '*carving faces'*. The shift in aesthetic preferences suggests a potential internalisation of the dominant trend in Korean make-up for women in recent years, which emphasises radiant skin and a naturally beautiful look (Holliday and Elfving-Hwang, 2012). Leah's ideal gendered L2 self is reflected in the changes of her preferences, which are products of Leah's cultural knowledge of what kind of femininity is preferred and reproduced in her immediate social environment. Simultaneously, it illustrates Leah's approval of the dominant feminine practices and trends in Korea, which she interprets as a modest presentation of elegance for women.

Leah further explains the motivation in using make-up and fashion as a means of negotiating her feminine identity and expression:

> Leah: People talk a lot about their weight in Korea. To me, I've always been bigger so it doesn't really bother me about my weight because it is one thing that I can't change immediately. But your make-up and your clothing is something you can change. It's easier to then, kind of conform in that way. It's just to me, it reminded of the time when I was out with Korean friends. People would talk to me and realise afterwards that I was not Korean. It made me feel better because I felt like I was a part of that group but then you also think, is that weird that I was so conforming to the way that people dress here and style themselves and stuff. Then it feels kinda odd. Because even coming back, I have so many clothes now that I wore every day there but wearing them here, it feels odd?

Leah's complex relationship between her ought-to and ideal gendered L2 selves are demonstrated here. The common talk about '*weight'* in Korea implies that people are more bound by the social expectations imposed on individuals' body; the idea of desired body is more standardised in Korea and weight is one of the components which defines good look. From the pre-SA interview, Leah consistently expressed that her body does not match the idealised body type in Korea, which was a reflection of her discursively constructed ought-to gendered L2 self. To minimise the self-perceived discrepancy, Leah strategically uses Korean style make-up so that she can express her femininity closer to the feminine norm in Korea.

Additionally, Leah also reports changes in her fashion choices; she conformed to how women in her age would normatively dress in Korea rather than retaining her old style. The motivations in Leah's adjustment illustrate the interface of the ought-to and ideal gendered self. The locally constructed femininity creates an idea of what is fashionable in women's make-up and fashion for Leah, an external factor that pushes Leah to modify her feminine performances. Simultaneously, Leah approves such discursive trends in a positive manner that they constitute her ideal gendered self in Korea. Leah's assimilation was successful to the

point where she was mistakenly perceived as a local due to her look, from which Leah felt ambiguity; the sense of belonging created a positive feeling but simultaneously a loss of authenticity in the performed conformity to local gender norms.

Furthermore, Leah's feeling '*odd'* towards her clothes she used to wear in Korea on a daily basis further demonstrates her transitional ought-to gendered self, which is prone to change according to her immediate cultural context. It can be inferred that the clothes Leah wore in Korea align more with the soft type of femininity Leah tried to achieve through her physical appearance. However, it *'feels odd'* for Leah to wear them in the UK due to the contextual change; she is aware of the normative femininity in the UK which she thinks is different to that of Korea. This example demonstrates how performative gender, which Leah was doing through certain types of clothes in this case, may be dominantly shaped by local gender ideals while informing the ought-to gendered self.

While Leah implies that she refrains from wearing the clothes she bought in Korea in the UK, she shares an observation of some peers who maintain fashion tastes they developed while in Korea:

> Leah: I've noticed the girls who have returned as well, they now all dress in this weird and in kinda like ultra-girly, short, short skirts and tiny jackets and they all dress like they are in *Gangnam* (a district in Seoul), like businesswomen. I don't get what's happened to them, they are all wearing high heels to university. You didn't do that before we went, and you are doing it when we are back. They never look comfortable. They look like they are kind of playing this character now. It's like that they've just learnt them from their friends and their group. That's how they have all dressed. Sometimes, because even we will say, 'are you not cold?' And they are like, 'no, I feel fine, I feel great' and three hours later you see them shivering. They are so attached to this aesthetic

> they have created for themselves like... you know, overcoat and cardigans. And little cute fluffy top, checkered mini-skirt and loafers. I'm just like, 'okay, you know'? It's a very strange thing I think to come back to. Some people have been very heavily influenced. So, I think I already have some of that idea and aesthetic but now it's just like it's made easier for me to go, 'yeah, this is what I like, and this is what I don't'.

Leah's judgement of her peer's fashion reveals some contradictions as well as agency in Leah's gendered L2 self. Leah's discomfort with some hyper-feminine fashion choices by her peers suggests that Leah's constructs her ideal gendered L2 self based on what she perceives as culturally and contextually relevant to adopt. Leah conceives that it is inauthentic for her peers to imitate businesswomen in *Gangnam* and their '*playing'* of such a character is not a genuine representation. The criticism implies that Leah draws a line at what she perceives as an agreeable adjustment and exaggerated adoption. This distinction demonstrates Leah's gendered agency, which defines her own relationship with Korean fashion trends and make-up.

7.3.2. Leah's aversion to *aegyo*-laden speech style in Korean

Leah has consistently expressed aversion to the cute speech style using *aegyo*, which is prevalent among Korean women throughout the interviews. While she embraces certain aspects of Korean femininity through make-up and fashion, Leah's resistance to cute performances through certain language use highlights a contradiction in her gendered L2 self:

> Leah: I don't really think I have a problem with... I mean, either way I don't really change the way I talk about myself. I do think it can be hard with the Korean only because a lot of female Korean speech can be quite cutesy. I think it's just because of the way it is in Britain that's kind of seen as childish and I find that kind of thing hard. And especially being older, I find it harder. I think when

> you are 21, 22, you still find it cute to make these kinds of sounds. Even when girls in class sometimes put on, obviously, when you are doing the Korean language, you are basically performing the language. I feel like a lot of girls raise their tone higher because they wanted to come across as they hear it on TV or things like that. Whereas for me, I try not to do it, obviously it happens naturally. But I can feel myself cringing inside when I'm speaking in Korean sometimes because of the way it comes across, because it makes me feel very, like I'm pretending to be Korean, so I don't really like that.

Performing cuteness through *aegyo*, is one of the dominant markers of femininity in Korea (Puzar and Hong, 2018). It is often associated with youthfulness and submissiveness and therefore more frequently performed by women than men. While speaking with *aegyo* is commonly accepted and practised in Korea so long as it is contextually appropriate, it is mostly considered as immature in British culture, as Leah articulates. She further explains that her being older than her peers makes it more difficult to incorporate cuteness in her speech, due to potential incongruity created between her self-perceived matureness and childlike speech style. Leah is critical of women's extensive use of *aegyo* as she considers it as a mere imitation of what they see in the media, and therefore not a genuine representation of them. Although Leah acknowledges occasional use of *aegyo* which for her comes inadvertently while speaking Korean, she reports making a conscious effort to minimise it due to her discomfort in coming across as cute or *'pretending to be Korean'*. As Leah elaborates her disapproval of performed cuteness, she associates cute speech style with hyper-femininity:

> Leah: I do find it hard to do it in Korean just because it makes me feel like I'm pretending to be more feminine than I am, because in English I have the one tone. Obviously, you think you sound deeper in your head because of the echoing and stuff like that but when you hear yourself back, you're like 'oh, do

> I really sound that high?'. In Korea, just because they force the voice to go higher and that just kind of unnerves me. I can't get my head around that. [...] I think the main thing with gender expression is that Korean women, when they speak obviously, it's always the aim for higher register and more is going to expected that you're gonna be cute and do the kind of *aegyo* style Korean that... I don't think it feels like you are forced to do it, but unconsciously you kind of develop it because it's what you see other girls doing and then all the media kind of displays women like that.

Leah continues to express the elements in *aegyo* style speech which she is not comfortable to perform. High voice pitch is one of the traditional feminine attributes (Ohara, 2001), and Leah personally finds it more noticeable among Korean women. Leah reports finding such high voice pitch unnerving to the point that she becomes conscious and reflective about her own voice pitch.

In her own analysis of women's using higher voice pitch in Korean, Leah identifies three factors which she thinks contribute to Korean women's feminine speech. First, the frequent use of *'higher register'* in Korean makes women's speech sound more polite and therefore more feminine. Second, normative gender expectations expect women to behave and speak cutely, using *aegyo*. Third, women's internalisation of *aegyo* and the media's reproduction of cute representation of women encourage women to unconsciously perform *aegyo*. Leah explains her aversion to cute speech mainly comes from her upbringing. Being a middle child with sisters only, she reports having always pursued a tomboy style, wanting people to see her as independent and strong:

> Leah: I feel like that's a big thing that when you're learning Korean you are kind of conscious of how you're coming across when you are saying certain things and for me I don't ever like being cute. I've always been like tomboy style as a

> child, and I want people to think... I don't want people really to think that like 'oh she's sweet or she's like gentle'. I want people to be like 'wow, she's so tough and strong' because I only had sisters and I think that's my thing of 'no, I want to be this strong, independent one'. So, when I speak Korean, I never want to use all these endings that make it cutesy or little words that people will drop into conversation. Because even when we try to speak Korean here to Koreans, a lot of them react as if you were a baby trying to speak Korean because you're trying to use it the way that you've learned it. But no matter how you try, sometimes it just kind of sounds not forced but more that it's like your first time using it and so everyone has this reaction of like, 'oh, you're so cute', which is not what you want to hear for speaking the language. But I think for me, I really want to stay away from that because I would witness a lot of foreigners using the kind of -[ŋ] endings, like *oppa-ng*. Why, why are you doing that like even just using the terms and things like that.

Second language users may experience belittling from locals due to their lack of proficiency (Pellegrino-Aveni, 2005), as Leah experienced from Korean people who perceived her speaking Korean as *'cute'*. Leah reports that she does not appreciate being labelled as cute as it undermines her desired image of competence and independence. In her attempt to minimise such judgements, Leah reports avoiding using certain linguistic features in Korean which are employed to create *cute* effect to maximise *aegyo*. Performance of *aegyo* accompanies various non-verbal and linguistic features, including frequent elongation and nasalisation (Brown, 2013). The nasality in *aegyo* is not only identified 'as a voice quality feature but also as a segmental feature which can be applied to any open syllables, typically at the end of an intonational phrase, in the form of added [ŋ]' (Moon, 2013, cited in Crosby, 2023, p.59). This linguistic modification is observed in Leah's description of *aegyo* where the final consonant -[ŋ] is attached to *oppa*, adding nasal quality to the word as well as elongating the final

syllable. While Leah reports that many foreign speakers of Korean engage in this practice of performing cuteness, she distances herself from it:

> Leah: Things like that have been very twisted like the *oppa* thing has now taken on this weird, creepy, daddy vibe that it never used to have. Because when I use *oppa*, I always put the person's name in front because I'm kind of like 'yeah, you're my friend, but you're older, so I will call you *Minsu (the friend's name) oppa*, not just *'oppa'*. I wouldn't just come up because I'm trying to get his attention or something if I'm using that phrase but for a lot of foreigners because they are so easy to learn and use and they know it gets that sort of reaction, they will use it more because they think it makes them sound cuter or maybe more knowing of the culture. But all it comes across is kind of... overused to the point where the word becomes meaningless. So I would rather never use them than try and use them in a way that makes me feel comfortable. I don't like using things like that because I just feel inwardly cringe.

The use of *oppa*, whose first meaning is older brother (of a woman), extends to friendship and romantic relationships in Korean (see Section 7.4.2.1.). When *oppa* refers to an older male friend or partner, the meaning gains complexity as *oppa* has more power in the relationship due to the traditional gender roles and age, as markers of hierarchy in Korean culture. In Korea, it is considered as impolite to address older people by their names; instead, they expect to be addressed by their title. To avoid the role of compliant younger female while maintaining a sense of respect, Leah reports employing a strategy of using the friend's name before the title *oppa*, when the friend is an older male. This example demonstrates Leah's tactic of packaging her gendered agency within the frame of cultural knowledge. It contrasts to other foreigners' overuse of *oppa* to gain attention, recognition or appear cute, which Leah interprets as inauthentic and as a misuse of performative femininity.

7.3.3. Reflecting attentiveness and orchestrating femininity in Korea

This section navigates Leah's reflections on managing attentive gestures in Korea as a Western woman, and how she mediates the cultural expectations of femininity embedded in such encounters. Since gendered encounters with local men experienced by female learners often report cases of racialised sexual harassment in study abroad literature (Block, 2007), Leah's reflection stands out as a unique case, where the widely known Korean soft masculinity is documented. The attentiveness Leah experienced in Korea is primarily rooted in traditional gendered assumptions, as she describes:

> Leah: When you get there, it's just shocking I think because you realise that your whole identity outwardly, you think like 'oh, am I doing too much?'. Because here I suppose, British females are very much independent, we are allowed. We can do anything we want, we can dress how we want, you can tell me anything. And you go to Korea, it's more like, 'please don't notice me, please don't try to talk to me'. I just want to be left alone because even when I would go to stores and things you realise as a female, they already expect you to, not weaker but 'shall I just do that for you?' They wouldn't do that to my male friends, but they would do it for me like 'do you want me just to put this all in your bag for you?' I'm like 'oh no, I can do that', but it's more of an expectation of 'but you're a girl' like that. 'You sure you can do this?' or 'oh, this is too heavy for you, let me carry that for you'. But obviously here, men pass you by on the street when you carry something heavy, but in Korea, you are almost seen as more dainty and precious without intending it to be, but it's just an assumption that girls shouldn't have to do these things.

Leah narrates how Korean people's offering assistance for her made a sharp contrast to what she perceives as common gendered interactions in the UK. While Leah appreciates the

courteous gestures, she also experiences them as a marker of a subtly restrictive femininity, which clashes with her self-perceived independence and agency. Leah notices that her male friends do not receive the same level of attention and care, and therefore, she feels unintended belittling in the gesture and interprets it as a sign of gendered benevolence, which reflects gender inequalities in the form of care or protection. The attentive offers highlight the cultural assumptions that often prescribe femininity as fragile and dependent, which made Leah feel that she was perceived as '*dainty and precious*' and therefore, ironically, lacking in power. Leah feels ambiguous towards this irony, due to the confusion created between the independent and autonomous self she idealises and the newly imposed feminine self:

> Leah: Like when you see boys carrying their girlfriends' handbags. It's just a handbag. Why are you carrying it for her. She can carry that. Those kind of things. People here would never think twice like 'oh, your handbag is too heavy'. They'd be more like, 'oh, can you carry it in your bag'. Whereas in Korea, 'let me carry that, I'll open the door for you, you get in the car first, I'll deal with this, and I'll come back'. It's like you are up on some kind of pedestal. I think it's sometimes a hard thing as a Westerner to cope with, because you say you want to be independent, but you also don't want to rock the boat and be like 'I'm a foreigner. I can do anything you can do. Don't tell me what to do, old man. I can do this just fine'. You don't wanna incite that thing. So, most of the time when people try to help you. It's like 'oh, thank you, thanks so much, that's great' and you try to be polite for polite's sake. And you run away, and you just do it yourself so they can't see you do it. I mean, I don't like it because I'm a middle child, I'm the strong one, I will lift everything. It can be nice to have someone open the door for you or well let me help you with that. That is actually quite a nice thing to accept but not all the time because it makes you feel redundant as a person because it's like, I'm not a baby.

Leah's experiences of attentive encounters demonstrate heteronormative chivalry, which reinforces the stereotypical role of men as protectors, which in turn, positions women as passive and dependent, having less power than men. She feels that such heteronormative chivalry is normalised in Korea so that she is positioned '*on a pedestal*' as a woman. Her discomfort largely comes from positioning herself as a Westerner who has grown up in a society where she thinks women are more independent and self-reliant. Despite this, Leah orchestrates her expressions of femininity rather than explicitly resisting the attentiveness. Her compliance seems superficial as she discreetly reclaims her agency by practising her own independence in an undisrupted space. In negotiating such social interactions, however, Leah's self-perception, developed from her family dynamics and personal history, continues to clash with the feeling of '*redundancy*'. Leah's management of this gendered tension demonstrates a nuanced case of subtly protecting her ideal gendered L2 self as an independent woman, while minimising any cultural conflicts or misunderstandings. Next, the focus moves to Holly's post study abroad interview, where Holly's reflections on her gendered behaviours, interactions and language uses are documented.

7.4. Holly's post SA interview

Holly engaged in the most diverse interpersonal dynamics among the three participants during the study abroad period. Her interactions with local Korean friends, non-Korean peers who were on their study abroad programmes, her ex-Korean boyfriend and his family, and friends from the LGBTQ+ society illustrate how Holly constantly navigated, negotiated and performed her gender according to the context. The preliminary thematic analysis of Holly's post study abroad interview revealed the most salient themes as follows: Holly's feeling more feminine due to being careful when speaking Korean as a foreigner and experiences of discursive otherness in Korea; gendered elements in the Korean language; and performing

femininity in Korean, which suggests Holly's situational ought-to gendered L2 self. Each theme will now be analysed and discussed in greater detail using critical narrative analysis.

7.4.1. Holly's reflections on feeling more feminine during the year abroad

Reflecting on her time in Korea, Holly articulates a sense of heightened femininity, primarily attributed to her language use and social interactions:

> Holly: Looking back on it now, it did feel very, very feminine. With the language that I use, it was very like... how do I explain it.... what is the word I'm thinking of. I don't want to say 'passive' but very kind of, 'I don't wanna be too direct with it' or I feel like I'm speaking too much or taking up too much space. I was really insecure about potentially saying something someone could be offended by, which I feel like, stereotypically, women do think about a lot more anyway. So, I don't know, maybe that's the way I socialise anyway. Especially in Korea I had to think so much more about it because it's a language that I was still trying to fully grasp.

Holly's description of feeling more feminine in Korea aligns with traditional Korean social gender norms that associate femininity with passivity, indirectness, and modesty. However, as Holly implies in her acknowledgement, these feminine traits are blurred with her status as a L2 learner in her perception of the stronger femininity, as she was still trying to *grasp* the Korean language and beyond, such as societal cues. Holly was one of the proactive and high-achieving students from her cohort, but she was still learning the Korean language and had not achieved native-like fluency, which seems to be the major source of her insecurity and being less assertive.

This case resonates with Pellegrino-Aveni's (2005) findings that language learners who are in immersion environment, such as study abroad, may struggle with self-affirmation. She

highlights how learners often experience diminished confidence, feeling judged as less intelligent, lacking personality or humour, or childlike (Pellegrino-Aveni, 2005, p.9). Pellegrino further explains that it stems from the discrepancy between the learners' L1 mastery and their developing L2 proficiency, which may impact their social interactions and self-perception.

The characteristics of Holly's ought-to gendered L2 self which is constructed as more indirect, careful, and cautious contribute to her perception that she was more feminine in Korea. Holly reports that she had to '*think so much more'* about how she may come across. Although she acknowledges that it is stereotypical thinking to link such cautious behaviours with more womanly acts, she still interprets her gendered self in Korean to be more feminine, which she links to her indirect style of language use and insecurities coming from not speaking the language as fluently enough.

Another contributing factor of Holly's feeling more feminine is her awareness of women's clothing norms in Korea, learned from her own experiences and from observing others. Studies on gendered experiences during study abroad reveal a prevalence of female language learners' narratives (Block, 2007). These experiences often involve intimidation, harassment, sexualisation, or racialisation from local men, primarily stemming from the learners' perceived 'otherness' due to their physical difference such as hair and skin colour (Polanyi, 1995; Talbert and Stewart, 1999; Twombly, 1995). Such encounters, both from direct and indirect interactions, amplify a gendered dimension to female learners' experiences abroad. Holly's account of an unsolicited compliment from a stranger on her attire echoes the previous findings:

> Holly: I think, definitely, you are allowed to be more free in the UK than in Korea. The clothes you wear for example... You can't show too much skin in Korea. The first summer I was in Korea, I made a big mistake in what I was wearing.

Soyoon: Okay, I'm curious now.

Holly: I think it was the first time I've been to *Myeongdong* (a commercial area in Central Seoul) and I was on my own. And there was this guy probably around his 40s or 50s told me that I looked really nice. He just walked to me and said I looked beautiful in English. I was just like, 'oh... thank you'. I should have probably covered my shoulders up. I didn't have my cleavage out or anything, but I had my back and shoulders out and it was really hot. Definitely to at least stop that from happening, I had to conform to more modest clothing. It's not necessarily something I wanted to do. It was just the weather was just so hot.

As discussed in the pre-SA interview (see Section 5.4.2), clothing is one cultural element which triggered feared gendered L2 selves, as the participants considered women's clothing norms in Korea to be more conservative than they are in the UK, and that they should opt for more modest clothing. They demonstrated awareness that figure hugging, revealing or tight clothes may draw unwanted attention even more with their foreign physical appearance (see Section 5.4). Holly's encounter with the unknown man in the shopping district in Seoul reflects this, which is why she felt that women are allowed to wear different styles of clothes more freely in the UK in comparison. Holly emphasises that the clothes she wore on that day were lighter due to the hot weather, implying that she did not choose to wear the clothes to be rebellious or less considerate of the culture. Holly's saying '*you can't show too much skin in Korea'* and '*I should have probably covered my shoulders up'* reveals her ought-to gendered L2 self, where the social gender norms operate as self-policing on the individual.

As Holly continues to explain why she felt it was less free in Korea with clothing option, her observation of her Brazilian roommate further emphasises the impact of social expectations on her gendered self-perception and behaviour. According to Holly, her

roommate experienced the pressure to buy new clothes as the clothes she owned were deemed more revealing than the Korean standard:

> Holly: [...] and I remember my roommate was from Brazil that was most of the things that she wore were like sleeveless and she was really insecure about it, and she felt the need that she had go out and buy so many more clothes. Quite unfair on her.
>
> Soyoon: Did she say anything about how and the way she dresses would affect the perception of the others or how people would see her as, if she shared anything at all?
>
> Holly: I imagine, she felt like it probably wouldn't help if she didn't dress like that because she's already a person of colour in Korea, and she was also plus size as well. So, I felt like that could definitely as well adding that on top of that, further like the negative perception that people would probably have on her.

Kinginger (2013b) explains that study abroad experiences are influenced by intersecting factors such as gender and race, and the case of Holly's Brazilian roommate supports this argument. From Holly's observation, it is evident that her roommate developed ought-to gendered L2 self, driven by the social expectations in Korea regarding how women are supposed to dress. As a woman of colour and plus size, it is likely that she was made more aware of her gender, race and body type in a new society where she was marked as foreign, with some physical features that deviate from the social norm. The insecurity reflects intersectionality, which becomes the source of Holly's roommate's ought-to gendered L2 self, which may have encouraged her to align with the idealised femininity in Korea by feeling the need to buy new clothes through which she could perform normative femininity.

7.4.2. Gendered elements in the Korean language

7.4.2.1. Gendered dynamics in Korean kinship terms: beyond familial bonds

Gendered elements are present in many languages. While some are grammatical and arbitrary, others reflect social constructions of gender and more broadly, power dynamics in the use of the specific gendered terms in certain contexts. In the case of Korean, gendered elements are highly visible when kinship terms are used beyond familial contexts, as they often mark age and social standings as well as gender. In this section, Holly reports on her reflections on the extended use of the Korean kinship terms and how some lexicon used between different genders highlights gender hierarchies in relationships:

> Holly: With my Korean friends and my old partner. I would use gendered term with them.
>
> Soyoon: Such as...?
>
> Holly: Such as, one of my best friends I met there. She was one year older than me, so I would always call her *enni*. I couldn't really use *nwuna* because that would be weird. But there was no other, there was no middle... so even with instances like that were kind of restricting in a way. It was kind of weird because in terms of when I would have terms like that used towards me... I had like, there was this Japanese girl that I met who was younger than me and she called me *enni* at one point. I was completely fine with it because in my head, I could detach it from being gender related and I kind of perceived it as 'oh, she is just close to me, and she just likes me'. But it kind of like has this whole thing of, how much do people relate it to gender and that's really difficult. Especially when it's considering, um, when you are in a relationship and how much of it is based on gender and closeness and also power. I feel definitely in a relationship, I would feel more feminine. But not when I was with my friends, if that makes sense in a way?

Holly distinguishes between using kinship terms with female friends and her male romantic partner in terms of the intensity of gendered experience embedded in using each word. Before the analysis of Holly's feelings towards specific kinship terms, Brown's (2013) study provides sociocultural understandings of the extended use of Korean kinship terms and their implications. In the Korean language, older people are often addressed by their titles rather than names as age is a significant factor that defines hierarchy in relationships, which is important in deciding which register should be used. Addressing older people by their titles also applies to the terms used between family members. For example, between sisters, while an older sister would call her younger sister by her name, the younger sister does not call her older sister by her name. Instead, she calls older sister by her title *'enni'*, a kinship term that means older sister.

In this analysis, the focus is on the kinship terms used to address older siblings which are: *oppa,* meaning older brother of a woman*; nwuna*, older sister of a man*; hyeng*, older brother of a man; and *enni*, older sister of a woman. These terms are not only used between siblings exclusively; they are also used widely between 'fictive' siblings (Brown, 2013, p.4), as a denotation of affective relationship. The 'fictive' siblings are usually friends, but they may also include romantic partners or even wider group of people with whom the speaker feels close enough to address them as their brothers or sisters with their own discretion.

Among these kinship terms used outside the familial context, *oppa* and *nwuna*, are particularly reserved for heterosexual relationships, and thus more complex than *enni* and *hyeng*, which indicate same sex relationship. In the former pair, *oppa* and *nwuna*, a heavier weight of cultural expectations is indexed; the younger 'sibling' is expected to respect the older 'sibling' and be compliant, while the older 'sibling' is expected to provide care and protection in return (ibid, p.4). The difference between *oppa/nwuna* and *enni/hyeng* becomes evident in Holly's experiences. Holly reported feeling comfort in using *enni* with her female

friends and her interpretation of it as a sign of closeness is reflected in her saying '*she is just close to me, and she just likes me'*. It aligns with Brown's (2013) assertion that same-sex kinship terms can signify sibling-like bonds among friends, emphasising affection. On the contrary, however, Holly elaborates how using *oppa* in a romantic relationship evokes a different sentiment:

> Soyoon: So those kinship derived terms would make you feel more feminine, with your partner for example, whereas it does less of that with your friends.
>
> Holly: Yeah, definitely, yeah. I think especially in instances where when I was with younger friends of mine, I didn't feel that because it would be them using it to me, but if it was me using it, especially towards my old partner. It felt very like, I was being put in this box of like, 'oh yeah, I am this younger woman in this relationship, and I obviously have less power in it', so on and so forth...

As Holly articulates, using kinship terms between friends (especially if the friend is younger and/or same sex) does not induce gendered experience as much because there is not much gendered power dynamics. However, using the kinship term *oppa* to address the older male partner in a heterosexual relationship amplifies gendered experience, as the word elicits a stronger yet traditional sense of femininity for Holly. Holly's Korean boyfriend during the year abroad was older, which makes it normative for Holly to address him *oppa*. In such a romantic context, however, using *oppa* to the older male partner is imbued with societal expectations of male dominance and female submissiveness. As captured in Holly's feeling of '*being put in a box'*, the younger woman in a relationship may feel less powerful. Her *oppa* is older, therefore higher in the social hierarchy, and he is expected to be more mature, wiser and a provider especially in financial terms, whereas the younger partner may experience a sense of diminished agency in such power dynamics. Holly's experience with using *oppa* highlights

how gendered elements in the language can function as a performative tool, discursively reinforcing traditional gender roles.

7.2.4.2. Navigating non-binary identities in a gender-binary language and culture

When discussing in which language Holly feels more comfortable in terms of expressing gender, Holly highlights the availability of gendered pronouns in English and Korean and how this may impact the ability of non-binary people to accurately express their identities:

> Soyoon: Do you ever feel more comfortable to be yourself in terms of expressing your gender identity in Korean or in English?
>
> Holly: I still think more in English, I think because, in terms of gender expression and identity, in Korea, the acceptance is still a little bit behind of the times. [...] I think partly, a lot of it is to do with the aspects of the language because of the pronouns and in terms of address, they can be gendered sometimes and sometimes there isn't a gender-neutral equivalent (in Korean). Then it can get difficult. Especially sometimes with myself and then I do have other foreign friends in Korea who identify them as non-binary, and they use they/them pronouns. And I feel like they kind of have to choose, if they are in that situation, which one they would rather be addressed by. I haven't asked them about it, but I imagine that it can cause a bit of dysphoria for them. I don't know about that because it's not something I personally have a problem with.

Holly's observation that Korea is less accepting of gender diversity overlaps with Emily's narrated experiences of rigid gender binary in Korea (see Sections 6.2.1. and 7.2.1.). While there is a growing awareness of sexual and gender minorities in Korea, the level of acceptance and openness remains relatively low (Han, 2016b; 2022; Henry, 2020; Kang, 2020; Kwon Kim and Cho, 2011), as reflected in both participants' experiences. In Korean, as in many languages, pronouns and other referential terms often encode gender. While literal translations of non-

binary pronouns *they/them* exist in Korean, they are not in use to specifically refer to a non-binary individual as the concept of non-binary gender has not been well established (Jeong and Yu, 2021, Kim et al., 2023). This linguistic constraint reflects the awareness of less conventional gender in Korea. It can force non-binary individuals to choose between binary gendered options, which can lead to feelings of '*dysphoria*', as Holly assumes, since the chosen identity does not reflect non-binary individuals' authentic gender identities and therefore, they are not adequately represented (Richards et al., 2016).

The absence of the pronouns for non-binary individuals and potential incoherence in gender identity representation through language use is observed in Holly's following narrative. Holly reflected on her engagement with the LGBTQ+ society at her university, interacting with the society members from diverse backgrounds, including race and nationality. Holly shared that she went to the Pride event in Seoul with the friends from the society, where she was introduced to more LGBTQ+ people. While interacting with one of new friends she made at Pride, Holly noticed their inconsistent use of (pro)nouns across English and Korean:

> Holly: One of non-binary friends who I ended up becoming friends afterwards. I follow them on Instagram, and they had, in their bios, their pronouns are *they/them*, but in Korean they only use *oppa/hyeng* (when being addressed by others who are younger). I think this is really interesting and I would love to know their opinion about it, but it's not really something I can go straight up and ask someone. I think gender identity is just different for everyone. But then again, I think my difference between the people that I met at the Pride then, those non-binary people and then me, is the fact that I am okay with using she/her pronouns and they are not.

Holly's engagement with the LGBTQ+ society may have allowed her to be more aware of sexual and gender minority's experiences in Korean society. Furthermore, Holly identifies as

non-binary, and reports using *she/they* pronouns as she feels more feminine overall. Holly notes that she does not have personal issues with being assumed and addressed as *she/her*, but she feels that her non-binary friends who prefer to use *they/them* pronouns may face difficulty in expressing their identity in Korean. As documented in her friend's case, they opted for the male identity in Korean by choosing to be addressed as *oppa/hyeng* by their younger friends. Holly found this case to be interesting, knowing the friend was not comfortable with *he/him* pronouns. The adaptation could have been inevitable, as identities are not 'autonomous or independent but always acquire social meaning in relation to other available identity position and other social actors' (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005, p.598). Using *oppa/hyeng* or *enni/nwuna* based on people's biological sex may cause a sense of dissonance in expressing or articulating non-binary people's identity in Korean. The limited linguistic availability of social gender identity can also trigger ought-to gendered self, in this case, which could have been the motivation for Holly's friend to choose male kinship terms in Korean.

7.4.3. Performing femininity in Korean: situational ought-to gendered L2 self

This section analyses two instances where Holly's narrated performance of femininity in Korean is more situation specific. The first instance is when Holly first met her Korean boyfriend's family and the second illustrates how Holly navigates the use of swear words in Korean. Both instances demonstrate how Holly's ought-to gendered L2 self is shaped more strongly by normative social interactions and expectations.

7.4.3.1. Holly's muting of the self: conforming to the traditional expectations

In discussing gendered moments when speaking Korean, Holly's description of her interactions with her then-boyfriend's family stands out as an example of her situation specific ought-to gendered self. In line with Eckert and McConnell-Ginet's (2003) account of the interconnection between discursive gender construction and people's negotiation of their

performative gender, Holly's narrative reveals how the learner's perception of cultural gender norm leads to a conscious negotiation of their gendered performance:

> Soyoon: Are there any moments which make you think about your gender when you speak Korean?
>
> Holly: I think I'm always kind of thinking about it, but I think it's maybe just in the context of who I am speaking to and how I want them to view me. So, when I was in Korea, I ended up getting a boyfriend and I am still dating him right now. (Holly shared that she broke up with the boyfriend in the final interview, hence the 'old' partner in 7.4.2.1.). You know, I remember when I met members of his family, it was just like I had to act quite feminine because they are quite traditional. There was a lot of pressure because that was not really who I am and then, so it was quite nerve wracking.

Meeting a partner's family members for the first time can be a daunting experience, especially if they come from a different cultural background. Holly's feeling of needing to '*act quite feminine'* stems from her knowledge and perception of the patriarchal family values and what gendered expectations the family may hold towards their son's girlfriend. Holly shared that the boyfriend's mother was a stay-at-home mother since marriage who was dedicated to looking after the family, who she contrasted with her own mother, who was a working professional. This information about the boyfriend's family, along with her knowledge of traditional gender norms in Korean culture, created pressure for Holly that she had to act according to the expectation. Holly further articulated the pressure as below:

> Soyoon: I can imagine. So, you've just said that there was a bit of pressure when you met them. Can you think of any instance of, when you were interacting with them, you might have felt 'oh this wouldn't be me' outside of this particular context?

Holly: I think I didn't wanna be too talkative. Because especially in the last years or so, I have improved my confidence and got talkative. But I felt like I really shouldn't talk too much and dominate any conversations so...

Soyoon: Do you think that is because 'not being too talkative' aligns with this desired idea of 'oh, this is my son's girlfriend, and she shouldn't be dominating...'

Holly: I think so, yeah. I mean, I had an experience, actually. One of my boyfriend's brothers, his ex-girlfriend is American. And I ended up becoming friends with her and she told me their whole ins and outs of how they were. She said she also felt that way being around them and stuff. So, I think it is just feeling like you have to conform to this traditional stereotype that the older members of the society kind of feel like you have to.

Eckert and McConnell-Ginet highlight the interactive aspects in gender practices arguing that they are 'not only about establishing identities but also about managing social relations' (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2003, p.305). Holly's interaction with her Korean boyfriend's parents supports this, as Holly adapted her feminine performances to build a social relationship. For this instance, Holly muted her talkative self and let the situation-specific ought-to gendered self dominate her gendered behaviours in the situation. This feeling of pressure was also validated by her boyfriend's brother's ex-girlfriend, who is American. The shared experience of feeling compelled to conform to traditional Korean gender roles demonstrate how the ought-to gendered self can be pursued more strongly, even at the expense of one's more authentic self, in certain situations which involves more complex social interactions.

7.4.3.2. Swearing and the performance of 'cuteness' in Korean

Traditionally, swearing has a stronger association with men due to the interplay between social expectations and power relations (Gauthier, 2017). Because swearing may be linked with acts of power and self-affirmation, men are normatively considered to swear more while

women eschew it (ibid). While such a belief dominated in earlier sociolinguistics studies, reinforcing the dichotomous idea in gender and swearing (Coates, 1993; Crawford, 1995; Lakoff, 1973; Romain, 1999), social constructivists made a departure from this binary assumption, articulating how swearing should be interpreted in relation to the social context where it is deployed, and what kind of identity is produced or pursued in such practices (Snapleton, 2003). In line of this idea, Holly's reflections on using swear words in English and Korean offer further insights into how gender may be performed with a certain intention:

> Holly: I don't know if it is associated with gender per se, but I would say I do swear in English a bit more. But then again, maybe that's the whole expectations of gender in Korea and I should be more polite to people.
>
> Soyoon: Right. Would you swear in Korean?
>
> Holly: Sometimes I do as a joke! It depends on who I am with. But even sometimes I've done it as a joke, I've had... So, I have another friend, and she is like one year older than me. And she looked at me and like, 'Oh, Holly, you can't say that. That is really bad'. And I was like, 'it's a joke' and she was like, 'still, you can't say it'. But then I just think she didn't expect it to come from me. And also, because I'm younger than her, she thought I'm kind of innocent and stuff like that. [...] I think in English, it's more like, it's definitely 'you know it is a joke' and it's not trying to be cute, you are just trying to be funny whereas when I do it in Korean there is an element of 'I'm trying to be cute' in a way.

Holly's reports of feeling more feminine when using Korean is also reflected in her unique use of swearing, to which she adds Korean-specific cuteness. She draws a distinction between swearing in English and Korean in terms of its intended effect. While there is a shared element of *'joke'* behind Holly's use of swear words in both languages, Holly reports incorporating cuteness when she swears in Korean. It demonstrates performed femininity embedded in

language use, which Holly engages in a social context with friends where such performance is allowed to a larger degree. Holly's interpretation of her friend's reaction to her swearing reflects the conventional belief that women should refrain from using swear words. At the same time, due to her friend's status as an *enni* for being older, Holly assumes that the friend perceived her as someone younger and innocent, and therefore the impoliteness and vulgarness embedded in Holly's swearing creates incongruity for her friend's idea of how Holly should ideally behave as a woman. Despite this, Holly's *'trying to be cute'* in her use of swearing in Korean reflects her ought-to gendered self, that is suited to normative femininity, especially in that cuteness is strongly indexed with femininity in Korea (Jang, 2020; Puzar and Hong, 2018).

7.5. Summary of findings

The three post study abroad interviews with Emily, Leah, and Holly demonstrated the participants' nuanced constructions of gendered L2 selves, reflecting and reinterpreting their lived gendered experiences and perceptions. The interviews with each participant demonstrated substantive subjectivity in the construction of their ideal, ought-to and feared gendered L2 selves, as well as the individual participants' interactions with discursive constructions of gender that shift across local, cultural and contextual dimensions.

Emily's narrative consistently emphasised the perceived disparity in LGBTQ+ acceptance between the UK and Korea, positioning inclusivity as fundamental to authentic gender expression. Emily described authenticity to be the core element of the ideal gendered L2 self. Emily's stable gender expressions and confidence contrast with the changes she observed in her peers, whose newly adopted gender expressions are characterised by K-pop influenced fashion choices and restricted speech styles. Emily's narratives consistently highlighted her secure and authentic sense of gendered self.

Leah's gendered L2 self exhibited greater complexity. She reported on having embraced certain Korean aesthetic trends and reconstructed the way she expresses herself by abandoning her old style. However, she demonstrated strong resistance to the cute speech style prevalent among many young Korean women. Leah's disapproval of some of her peers' adopting this style further illustrated her aversion to *aegyo,* creating a contradiction in the construction of her ideal gendered self; only specific feminine practice transferred into Leah's ideal gendered self. Leah's narratives exemplified various instances of gendered agency, as she tactfully negotiated uncomfortable gendered interactions through subtle practices. It was reflected in her use of an older male friend's name before *oppa* and discreetly maintaining her independent femininity while ostensibly accepting attentive gestures in Korea.

Holly's accounts of diverse interpersonal encounters demonstrated her management of gender expressions in relation to perceived social position and interactions. Holly's perception of heightened femininity in Korea demonstrated how discursive gender norms shape gendered experiences and contribute to the construction of her ought-to gendered L2 self. Gendered elements in the Korean language, particularly, kinship terms like *oppa*, played a significant role in Holly's gendered experiences, highlighting power dynamics in a heterosexual romantic relationship. Holly's reflections on the absence of language for non-binary identities in Korean acknowledged the potential difficulties for non-binary people due to the restricted options to express their gender identity. Lastly, Holly's situational performance of femininity, ranging from a perceived patriarchal ideal around her ex-boyfriend's family to experimenting with performative cuteness through swearing in relaxed social situations, demonstrated the power of gender discourses on the negotiations of gendered L2 selves. These negotiations included nuanced interplay between language, ideology, and gender performance.

In conclusion, these findings demonstrate the complex nature of the construction of gendered L2 selves. They reflect gendered agency and how individual learners practice it differently in relation to the discursive construction of gender, sociocultural contexts, and linguistic practices and strategies.

8. Conclusion

This chapter summarises the thesis and evaluates the findings from the preceding data analysis in Chapters 5, 6, and 7 to provide a comprehensive understanding of how the participants in this study construct their gendered selves along the trajectory of their Korean language learning. It revisits the research questions raised in Chapter 1 by summarising major findings from the analysis of the participants' interview data over the three data analysis chapters. Through discussing and evaluating the findings, this chapter highlights the main original contributions made by this research. Then I provide some discussions of my own positionality and reflexivity, followed by an acknowledgement of some limitations of this research and suggestions for potential avenues for future research.

8.1. Summary of findings

Throughout the data collection and analysis process, this study has attempted to answer the key research questions introduced in Section 1.3. To reiterate, the research aimed to respond to the following questions: (1) how do British learners of Korean language perceive dominant forms of gender in Korea; (2) what are the gendered narratives that emerge among the British learners of Korean before, during and after study abroad in Korea?; (3) how do British learners of Korean negotiate their gendered L2 selves in relation to the discursive constructions of gender across two different cultural contexts?

To answer these questions, the concept of gendered L2 selves (see Section 3.5.) was extensively used to examine the participants' narratives from the interviews conducted before, during and after study abroad, while critical narrative analysis has facilitated the understandings of how the participants' gendered L2 selves are constructed and negotiated in relation to gender ideologies in the Korean L2 context. The findings in each data analysis chapter illustrated the participants' engagement with both normative and counter-normative

gender discourses as they navigate their own gendered selves within the cultural contexts of Korea and the UK.

Chapter 5 examined the participants' pre-study abroad expectations and perceptions of gender norms in Korea, both of which were reported to have been driven by their consumption of K-pop. The participants discussed the dominant forms of femininity and masculinity performed in K-pop, which provided them with initial insights into Korean gender ideologies. The analysis unpacked the duality in how the participants engaged with Western feminism and its influence on their perceptions of femininity in Korea. On the one hand, feminism in Western contexts was seen as an accessible counter-hegemonic force, empowering the participants to identify with ideals of independent and confident femininity. On the other hand, this same feminist lens created a hierarchy in which Western femininity was positioned as more progressive and liberating compared to the cute and innocent femininity dominantly performed among K-pop girl bands. This duality suggested that the participants constructed a form of hegemonic Western femininity over a non-Western form of femininity, which they perceived as more socially constrained.

Regarding masculinities, the participants expressed a preference for soft masculinity – a form of masculinity characterised by gentleness and self-care demonstrated with aesthetic consciousness, which are prominent features performed by most K-pop boy bands. Soft masculinity was viewed as less harmful especially compared to hyper masculinity associated with hegemonic masculinity in Western contexts. However, some participants still perceived soft masculinity as being feminised and marginalised due to its association with non-White, specifically East Asian, men. This intersection of race and masculinity highlighted the complexities in how the participants navigated gender ideologies across cultural contexts.

Finally, the participants began to imagine their possible gendered L2 selves based on their understandings of Korean gender norms. The ought-to gendered L2 selves and feared gendered L2 selves were particularly salient. The former reflected the pressure to conform to normative Korean femininity, while the latter reflected anxieties about some participants' perceived non-conformity, such as fears of being rejected in the job market or potential discrimination for not fitting into local gender expectations.

Chapter 6 analysed the participants' gendered experiences during their study abroad in Korea, focusing on the lived experiences of Emily and Leah. The analysis demonstrated how both participants encountered and managed some tensions between their own gender identities and the normative gender constructions they experienced in Korea.

For Emily, the rigid gender binary in Korea and the limited acceptance of gender and sexual minorities were narrated as being particularly challenging. The rigid dichotomy of gender did not cause much trouble for Emily at a personal level. However, she reported witnessing some frustration and struggles experienced by her LGBTQ+ friends and how it felt as a contrast to the UK, a society she perceived as more progressive about understanding LGBTQ+ identities. By contrast to this dichotomy, however, Emily observed that Korean men's engagement in traditionally feminine practices, such as wearing make-up, was not necessarily tied to their sexuality but was a part of a broader social trend, especially among younger generation. Lastly, Emily discussed the stigma associated with feminism in Korea, where it is often misinterpreted as radical or misandrist in Korea's recent anti-feminist sentiments. As Emily's host institution was a women's university, this experience was particularly salient for her due to the frequent misunderstanding of feminism Emily encountered outside her university and being subsequently labelled as a radical feminist simply for attending the women's university where she spent her study abroad.

Leah's experiences illustrated more complex negotiations of femininity. While she reflected on making conscious efforts to assimilate to Korean beauty standards, such as modifying her appearance to align more with the locally constructed feminine ideals, she also reported resisting certain normative feminine practices. Resisting *aegyo* was the most prominent in Leah's case, as she found it incompatible with her perceived independent femininity developed in the UK. Leah's narrative highlighted the cultural anxiety she felt, which contributed to the construction of her ought-to gendered L2 self. This was particularly evident in Leah's new social relationships with local men where heteronormativity was underlying; she felt pressure to conform to Korean feminine norms, particularly in romantic contexts. Her experiences navigating Korean dating norms further revealed the tensions between her gender identity in L1 and the expectations placed on her in L2 contexts.

Chapter 7 provided insights into the participants' reflections on their gendered experiences after the study abroad year, with interviews conducted with Emily, Leah, and Holly. The post study abroad interviews revealed more nuanced and reflective constructions of gendered L2 selves, where the participants reinterpreted their experiences and perceptions of gender norms in both Korea and the UK.

Emily's post-study abroad narratives highlighted authenticity as the core element of her ideal gendered L2 self. She contrasted her stable and confident gender expressions with the performative shifts she observed in her peers, whose gender expressions had been heavily influenced by K-pop aesthetics and more broadly, by dominant gender norms in Korea. For Emily, inclusivity and LGBTQ+ acceptance remained crucial to her sense of authentic gender expression, regardless of her gender identity which she understands as normative and conventional. This was due to the importance of authenticity in expressing gender, which Emily valued in the construction of her ideal gendered self and therefore believed should be applied universally.

Leah's reflections revealed her continued negotiation of the gendered self, particularly in relation to keeping up with Korean aesthetic trends. She constantly engaged in reconstructing the way of expressing femininity, through which she ended up abandoning her previous feminine aesthetics, which had been influenced by the Western media and Hollywood celebrities. Instead, Leah embraced more innocent looking Korean make-up and fashion trends to reconstruct her feminine aesthetics. While Leah actively adopted certain elements of dominant aesthetic trends for women in Korea, she maintained a strong aversion to *aegyo*, which she continued to reject as she perceived it as conflicting with her sense of self. Leah's narratives further illustrated instances of gendered agency in L2. While she selectively adopted certain feminine norms in Korea or behaved as conforming to local gender norms in various cases, she tactfully orchestrated some situations where she encountered excessive chivalrous assistance from some Korean men. Although Leah appreciated such gestures in some ways, she reflected on her wishes to keep her independent femininity intact.

Holly's interviews added a new dimension to the analysis by exploring the influence of the Korean language on the gendered experiences. Holly's reflections on the gendered dynamics of the extended uses of Korean kinship terms, such as *oppa*, highlighted the ways in which language can reinforce gendered power relations. Additionally, Holly's experiences navigating a culture and language with limited recognition of non-binary identities highlighted the challenges posed by rigid gender binaries in both language and society. Finally, Holly's situational performances of differently tuned femininities demonstrated complexities of the construction of the ought-to gendered L2 selves in response to various social contexts. Her interactions with the ex-boyfriend's family and performative 'cuteness', especially through swearing in Korean around friends illustrated that the ought-to gendered L2 selves are negotiated and performed in the intricate interaction between language and social gender ideology.

In summary, the findings from the data analysis across the three chapters have demonstrated the complex nature of the construction of gendered L2 selves while answering the three research questions. The salient gendered themes from the participants' narratives in each chapter and their experiences related to the themes have illustrated how individual learners' perceptions of dominant forms of gender in Korea differ or overlap depending on their cultural upbringing, gendered agency, gender identity and sexuality, immediate environment, and social interactions. These factors are closely intertwined in the participants' lived experiences where certain narratives are created. In negotiating gendered L2 selves, the analysis has illustrated that how individual learner practices gendered agency differently in relation to the discursive construction of gender and sociocultural contexts, sometimes through certain social strategies or linguistic practices.

8.2. Original contributions of the research

8.2.1. Recognition of the importance of gender identity in second language socialisation

The most significant contribution of this study is the introduction of 'gendered L2 selves' (Section 3.5.) which highlights the gendered dimension within second language socialisation. By employing the concept of gendered L2 selves with critical narrative analysis, this study has emphasised how gender is enacted and performed in relation to socially constructed gender norms in L2 society.

Previous studies on second language socialisation have emphasised cultural, linguistic, and sociocultural factors and their significance in L2 learning, (Duff, 2007; Kinginger, 2004; Lantolf, 2000; Norton, 2003). However, research which explores gendered experiences of language learners in L2 contexts, which are essential in gender socialisation process in L2, has remained under-developed, needing more scholarly attention. To address this gap, this research has foregrounded the role of gender identity negotiation and gendered social norms

in L2 contexts, which are critical aspects in second language socialisation. The concept of ‘gendered L2 selves’ builds upon the L2 self-concepts in the L2 Motivational Self-System (Dörnyei, 2005; 2009) by incorporating a gendered lens, which has been a marginalised perspective in SLA research. This complements the framework in line with Ushioda’s (2009) constructivist approach to understand L2 learners by paying more attention to their individual identities as well as their social contexts.

The gendered L2 selves, as an expanded conceptual framework, have served as a qualitative tool to examine how gender ideologies and norms in L2 society shape learners’ gendered experiences and subsequently exert influence in the construction of their gendered L2 selves. This study has particularly focused on how British learners of Korean navigate social gender norms in Korean contexts and perform their gender identities throughout their language learning trajectories as they progress through their degree programme. By studying a rarely researched group of LOTEs learners with a unique language learning motivation, this study has not only expanded the L2 self-concepts but also contributed to the LOTEs research by letting a specific group of Anglophone learners who study Korean recount their gendered experiences. These experiences have illustrated how discursively constructed gender in L2 contexts creates cultural tensions in individual learners, and those tensions are reflected in their ideal, ought-to, and feared L2 gendered selves. By exploring how the gendered L2 selves are negotiated, this study has demonstrated the complexities embedded in the constructions of the gendered L2 selves and bridged the gap between gender studies and second language socialisation. To summarise, the recognition of the gendered domain in second language socialisation has expanded both theoretical and empirical understandings of identity development in L2 contexts and offered a broader framework for future research in both gender studies and SLA.

8.2.2. Empirical support of gender performativity theory in SLA research

Rooted from poststructuralist and deconstructive ideas, the concept of gender performativity (Butler, 1990) is primarily a theoretical framework. Despite its abstractness, it has been widely accepted and applied not only in gender studies but across various disciplines (Caudwell, 2006; Cover, 2012; Gill, 2015; McCormack, 2012; Schilt and Connell, 2007; Taylor and Rupp, 2005). Considering its interdisciplinary application as an influential theory, empirical investigations that suggest gender as a social and performative identity within the field of SLA remained relatively limited.

This research has provided substantial empirical evidence that supports the theory of gender performativity by analysing the lived experiences of British learners of Korean. The participants' narratives revealed how they perform their gender identity through specific sociocultural practices related to Korean norms, such as adopting certain fashion styles, make-up trends, and navigating linguistic practices, such as speaking with *aegyo*. These elements reflect the performative acts through which individuals embody discursively constructed gender in L2 contexts. The study has also highlighted how participants adopt these gendered performances to align with cultural expectations in Korean society.

By offering real-life examples of gender performativity in the L2 context, this study has reinforced the theoretical claims of Butler (1990), providing a strong empirical grounding to the theory. The findings suggest that gender performativity is not only relevant in one's first language but also in second language socialisation, where learners navigate and negotiate their gender identity in line with their imagined or experienced cultural expectations of the L2 society. This research thus makes a unique contribution by linking gender performativity with SLA, an area that has been relatively less explored.

8.2.3. Employing critical narrative analysis in second language socialisation research

The application of critical narrative analysis (Souto-Manning, 2012) is another contribution this study has made in terms of methodology, as it has rarely been applied in second language socialisation research. CNA has been employed in varying disciplines such as sociology, psychology, and public health (Dillard, 2020; Emerson and Frosch, 2004; Stacey et al., 2016), but has not been explicitly employed to examine identity, particularly regarding gendered identities in SLA research. Although narrative inquiry has been used to explore identities of language learners, teachers, and migrants (Barkhuizen, 2016; Bucholtz and Hall, 2005; De Fina, 2003; De Fina, Schiffrin, and Bamberg, 2006; De Fina and Tseng, 2017; Pavlenko, 2007), the critical approach in critical discourse analysis, which directly address the wider social discourse has not been explicitly highlighted as an analytic framework.

The use of CNA in this study has proved its effectiveness as an analytical tool for examining how learners' narratives of their gendered selves are shaped by broader societal discourses of gender. By focusing on the participants' stories before, during, and after their study abroad experiences, this research has consistently demonstrated how their gendered selves are constructed, negotiated, and sometimes resisted in relation to gender norms in Korean contexts. Furthermore, using CNA has allowed for a critical interrogation of the power dynamics and social structures that influence how learners perform and experience gender in Korean.

Consequently, employing CNA has enriched the methodological toolkit available for SLA researchers. While traditional narrative inquiry has been valuable to explore the complex and fluid nature of identities among language learners, CNA brings a critical lens that foregrounds socially constructed ideology and power dynamics, making it particularly suitable to research how they are embedded in performing gender. By explicitly introducing CNA to the study of gendered L2 selves, this research has not only contributed to the methodological development

of SLA but also opened new avenues to examine the intersections of language learning and gender ideologies in more complex and nuanced ways.

8.2.4. Pedagogical implications for KFL education

With the growing number of Korean language learners worldwide (King Sejong Institute, 2024), teaching Korean as a foreign language (KFL) is gaining significant momentum. In this context, this study offers valuable pedagogical implications for Korean language educators, university staff in Korea, Korean as foreign language textbook developers and educators in the UK.

For Korean language educators, this study can remind them of the diverse gender identities and multicultural backgrounds of the Korean language learners. In light of this, they can foster more inclusive teaching practices and a supportive learning environment. Additionally, university staff in Korea can ensure institutional policies and resources support students of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations. For example, providing counselling and support groups can enhance international students' cultural adjustment and overall learning experience.

Furthermore, this study encourages Korean language textbook developers to move beyond traditional gender binaries and heteronormative content (Park and Yoon, 2020). Such transitions can contribute to the creation of equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) friendly materials. These resources can empower more Korean language learners and promote a more inclusive and liberal approach in Korean language education.

Lastly, the study offers pedagogical insights to educators in the UK who engage with students in study abroad programmes. Before study abroad, educators can motivate their students to reflect on their identity expressions in their target language and culture. Similarly,

they may encourage the students to further develop their cultural awareness and sensitivity, particularly reflecting on their gendered experiences during and after study abroad.

8.3. Reflections as a researcher

8.3.1. Positionality as a Korean woman researcher

As discussed in Section 4.5., maintaining self-awareness of the researcher's subjectivity is essential in qualitative research approaches (Sauntson, 2023). As a native Korean, heterosexual and cis-gender woman, I am aware that my own cultural and gender identity influenced my approach to this research. My cultural background, fluency in Korean, and deep understanding of Korean societal norms positioned me as someone who could not only access the language but also interpret subtleties of cultural and linguistic nuances that may have been lost or misunderstood by a non-Korean researcher.

My identity as a cis-gender, heterosexual Korean woman also placed me in a position to engage with the gendered aspect of the participants' responses. While I share my gender identity and sexuality with those of most participants, my non-Western background allowed me to critically reflect on the ways when some responses from the participants were filtered through a Western hegemonic lens. This was particularly salient when some of them, albeit unknowingly, reinforced racialised and gendered stereotypes, such as the perception of East Asian masculinity as 'feminine'. My positionality provided me with a unique lens to recognise such elements in the data and engage with them more critically, enabling insights that may have not emerged from researchers with different backgrounds.

Additionally, my professional experience as a Korean language tutor in higher education, a role I have held throughout the four years of my doctoral studies, made this research particularly relevant to me. I have gained first hand experiences engaging with British learners of Korean who have helped me expand my understanding of their view of the Korean

language and culture. This experience did not only make the research relevant to my academic and professional trajectory but also positioned me as a suitable researcher for this study.

8.3.2. Practice of reflexivity in the research process

Reflexivity was a critical part of the research, especially during the data analysis process, to critically unpack the participants' narratives. Throughout the study, therefore, I remained conscious of how my own social, cultural, academic, and professional background could influence my interpretation of the interviews. Having spent my life in Korea before moving to the UK for postgraduate studies, I occupy a liminal space between the two cultures: I am both an insider to Korean culture and a relatively recent outsider to British culture. This dual perspective allowed me to navigate the cultural distance between myself and the participants with greater sensitivity, but it also required me to remain vigilant about any potential biases that my background could introduce.

Growing up in Korea, where gender is predominantly understood in a binary way (Han, 2022; also see Section 2.3), as some of the participants also reported throughout the interviews, I had been socialised into a culture that often lacks sensitivity to gender diversity in comparison to the growing level of sensitivity in many Western contexts. My cultural upbringing, along with my own identification as cis-gender and heterosexual meant that I had to consciously develop greater awareness and sensitivity to issues of gender and sexual diversity for critical engagement; I had to confront and reflect on how my upbringing and gendered experiences shaped in a binary gender system might influence my perspective to align with certain assumptions, such as heteronormativity, in interpreting the data. Throughout the research process, therefore, I tried to ensure that I did not inadvertently impose any 'normative' assumptions regarding gender.

8.4. Limitations and recommendations for future research

8.4.1. Diversity of the participants

One of the primary limitations of this study comes from the context of the research. The majority of the participants were cisgender, heterosexual women. This demographic homogeneity is reflective of the student profile in Korean language programmes, which, like many other language-related disciplines, tend to have a higher proportion of female students (Korompot, 2017; Unger, 2019; Wightman, 2020). While this imbalance mirrors the actual enrolment in the programme, it limits the scope of the study in terms of representing a wider range of gendered experiences.

The inclusion of participants from a broader spectrum of gender identities and sexual orientations could have yielded a more nuanced understanding of how gender and sexuality intersect with language learning and language socialisation. For example, different gendered experiences and discourse might emerge when participants who identify as non-binary, transgender, or LGBTQ+ are included. Future research may aim to recruit a more diverse sample, representing a broader spectrum of gender identities and sexual orientations. Additionally, incorporating participants from various racial and ethnic backgrounds would introduce more intersectional perspectives, which could enrich the analysis. Recruitment of participants from diverse background would allow for a richer exploration of how learners' gendered selves are negotiated and constructed in relation to discursive construction of gender, potentially revealing diverse narratives of navigating the gendered selves in the L2 context.

Finally, expanding the participant pool beyond a single institution and cohort could offer a more comprehensive understanding of how learners with different academic backgrounds, age groups, and levels of Korean proficiency experience and negotiate their gendered

identities. This broader diversity would contribute to a more holistic understanding of the relationship of the development of gendered L2 selves.

8.4.2. Applications of different methodologies

While the use of semi-structured interviews and critical narrative analysis in this study produced rich and nuanced data, offering insights into the construction of the gendered L2 selves, future studies could consider employing additional qualitative methodologies. For example, ethnography may allow researchers to observe how learners actively negotiate and perform their gendered selves over an extended period and in various social contexts, if they can be embedded in the social situations along with their participants.

Ethnography, with its emphasis on immersion in the participants' environments, may enable researchers to capture the complexities of interactions, behaviours, and discourses as they occur in natural settings (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). This method could emphasise how gendered selves are more actively negotiated and reconstructed in informal spaces such as social gathering, language exchange, or within personal relationships, where more spontaneous and varied gendered interactions occur.

Considering this, it is important to note that ethnography by itself may not fully capture the range of gendered experiences, as certain gendered interactions, especially those which shed light on the discursive nature of gender, may unfold more organically outside the formal and structured situations which are typically accessible to researchers. In this sense, gendered behaviours and identity negotiations in informal or private spaces might not always be visible or captured by the researcher.

To address this limitation, the use of participant journals could complement ethnographic observations so that the researcher could access to learners' personal reflections on their gendered experiences. Encouraging participants to keep reflective journals would allow them

to document and articulate their gendered experiences in language learning as they occur in real time, whether in or outside formal language learning environments. This method also enables participants to develop insights as they participate in the L2 contexts, becoming ethnographers themselves (Roberts, 2000). Reflective journals may also provide participants with the space to reflect on moments of gendered tension, identity negotiation or feeling frustrated or empowered that they may be less comfortable to discuss in interviews or that may not arise during ethnographic observations. It may require research participants to be highly committed to the study as much as the researcher, but they may also benefit from participating as they can practise agency and feel empowered by taking an initiative and being deeply engaged in their own learning process.

8.4.3. Potential expansion of the gendered L2 selves

The gendered L2 selves framework has the potential for future qualitative expansion. The self-concepts in the L2MSS have been expanded to highlight more nuanced L2 selves, such as rebellious self and ideal multilingual self (Lanvers, 2016; Henry, 2017; also see Section 3.4.). These expansions illustrate the flexibility of the self-concepts in the original framework (Dörnyei, 2005; 2009). In a similar vein, the gendered L2 selves may be extended to include subcategories such as complicit gendered L2 self or defiant gendered L2 self. These additions could demonstrate whether learners internalise or challenge the dominant social gender ideologies they encounter in L2 contexts. Such an expansion may allow future researchers to capture the diversity of learners' responses to gendered norms and expectations in their language learning journeys, offering even more nuanced understandings of how learners reinforce and/or subvert gender discourse in L2.

The L2MSS has evolved over time to accommodate new perspectives and innovations (Boo, Dörnyei and Ryan, 2015; Mahmoodi and Yousefi, 2022). Similarly, the concept of

gendered L2 selves can be expanded to incorporate recent theoretical developments or interdisciplinary approaches. This direction can encourage future researchers to explore how learners' gendered selves intersect with other identity categories such as race or class in the context of L2 learning, highlighting the intersectional elements in the construction of the gendered L2 selves. This flexibility ensures that the gendered L2 selves evolve more creatively and critically, responsive to emerging academic and social discourses.

8.5. Conclusion

In sum, this study has explored how British learners of Korean perceive and engage with social gender norms in Korea and how they construct their gendered L2 selves, following the learners' university language learning trajectory. The study has contributed to the recognition of gender as an integral social dimension in language learning. Using critical narrative analysis, the research has provided empirical support for gender performativity theory in SLA, illustrating how social gender ideologies are enacted in individual learners' understandings of gender as well as their performances of gender in L2. By shedding light on these processes, this study not only has deepened the understanding of the interplay between gender and second language socialisation but also provided a valuable framework for future inquiries into the multifaceted gendered experiences of L2 learners in diverse sociocultural contexts.

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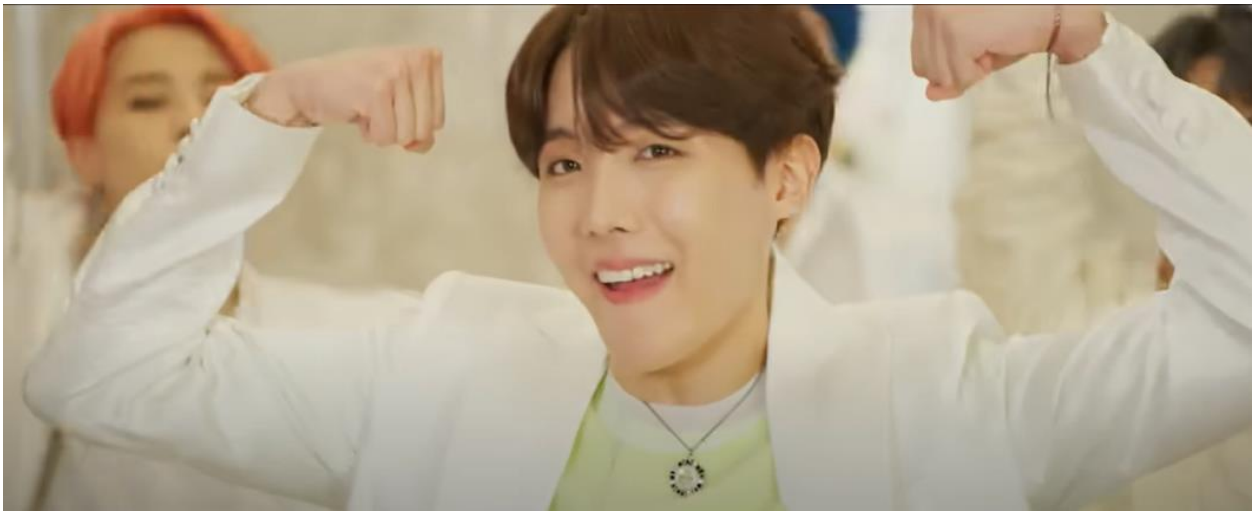
Appendices

Appendix 1. Screenshots from BTS' *Boy in Luv* (2014) music video

The screenshots from BTS' *Boy in Luv* (2014) music video demonstrate the band's performative masculinity which overlaps with some of the representative characters of hegemonic masculinity, such as dominance and physical strength (Connell, 1995).

Appendix 2. Screenshots from BTS' *Boy with Luv* (2018) music video

The screenshots from BTS' *Boy with Luv* (2018) music video demonstrate the band's performance of soft masculinity (Jung, 2011), which is highlighted particularly through their aesthetics and choreography.




Persona


Persona

Appendix 3. Screenshots from Girls Generations' *Gee* (2009) music video

The screenshots from Girls Generations' *Gee* (2009) music video where the band's hyper feminine performances are heightened with *aegyo* (Puzar and Hong, 2018).

Appendix 4. Screenshots from Hwasa's *Maria* (2020) music video

The screenshots from Hwasa's *Maria* (2020) music video illustrate how the singer performs less conventional type of femininity in K-pop. In the video, Hwasa performs her femininity in a provocative and sensual manner.

Appendix 5. Consent letter (Call for participants)

Est. 1841 | YORK ST JOHN UNIVERSITY

Gender Constructions in Korean Pop Music and their Implication for the Negotiation of L2 Selves among Korean Language Learners

Hello,

I would like to take this opportunity to inform you about a research project I am currently carrying out, and to invite you to participate in the interview(s) for my research.

Who am I?

My name is Soyoon Park. I am a PhD student and a graduate research fellow at York St John University. My doctoral research investigates the gender representation in Korean media discourse and its implication on the learners who study Korean as a foreign language. As a part of my project, I am keen to conduct interviews and discuss how gender roles and images are presented through Korean pop music with learners of the Korean language and find any meaningful links between gender representations in Korean media and how they may influence the negotiation of second language selves among Korean language learners.

Why am I doing this study?

With the growing popularity of the Korean pop culture and its global circulation, it is becoming more common that learners of the Korean language gain their cultural and linguistic knowledge from Korean music, drama, and films. Some of the most frequently discussed features about Korean pop culture when it travels beyond the domestic market often include gender-related topics, such as soft masculinity presented by many K-pop boy groups, hyper-femininity of K-Pop girl groups and how they are different to normative masculinity and femininity constructed in the Western world. It allows a further study whether the gender representations have any implications on the learners' perception of the Korean society, in terms of how they situate themselves in the target society with their own gender identity. This study aims to contribute to the understanding of second language acquisition with a focus on sociocultural behaviour and perception related to gender.

How am I trying to find the answers?

To find some answers, I would like to invite the Korean major students studying at a UK university to share their ideas and opinions about how gender is performed through Korean media and ask if it affects their language learning and performance in any way. An invitation to an in-person discussion will be sent to the email accounts of students who registered interest, and I would like to approach more students who are happy to discuss the topic with me further, to share and reflect their experience abroad (in South Korea).

Who will benefit from the project?

First and most importantly, I hope this study will be beneficial for students who participate in the discussions so they can observe the Korean society with a given topic and develop more insightful understanding of the target culture. In addition, I would like to contribute to the academic field 'Korean as a foreign language' by studying and analysing the collected data.

What will happen if you decide to be involved in the project?

This is an invitation to interviews where discussions will be audio-recorded. It is up to you whether you want to take part in the project or not. Your participation will not have any implication on the academic achievement in your degree programme. When I analyse the interviews, I will not use anyone's real name. If any names of people are mentioned during the discussion and interviews, I will change these so that no-one can be identified. I will ensure secure storage of the interviews by keeping them on password-protected computer files, and any hard copies will be kept in locked filing cabinets which only I will be able to access. No-one except myself will have access to your interview transcripts and sound files. However, some selected excerpts from the transcripts might be shared with the researcher's supervisors. The audio data and the transcription will be deleted after five years of their use.

If you agree to participate in the project, but later change your mind, you can withdraw from the project at any time and do not have to provide a reason for withdrawing. If you would like to participate in the project, all you need to do is sign the slip at the end of this letter.

This research was approved by the School Research Committee at York St John University. If you would like to report any complaints about this research, you can contact Dr. Scott Cole, Chair, Ethics Committee, School of Education, Language and Psychology (s.cole1@yorksj.ac.uk).

Additionally, should you have any concern regarding data or data breaches, please contact Dr. Amanda Wilcox, the University's Data Protection Officer (a.wilcox@yorksj.ac.uk).

If you would like to discuss this project further with me or have any questions, then please email me: s.park@yorksj.ac.uk.

Soyoon Park
PhD Student in Applied Linguistics
York St John University

☐ I have read and understood the information for the project.

☐ I agree to participate in the research project 'Gender Constructions in Korean Pop Music and their Implications for the Negotiation of L2 Selves among Korean Language Learners'.

☐ I agree to be audio-recorded during the interviews.

☐ I understand that the audio files will be deleted after five years of their use.

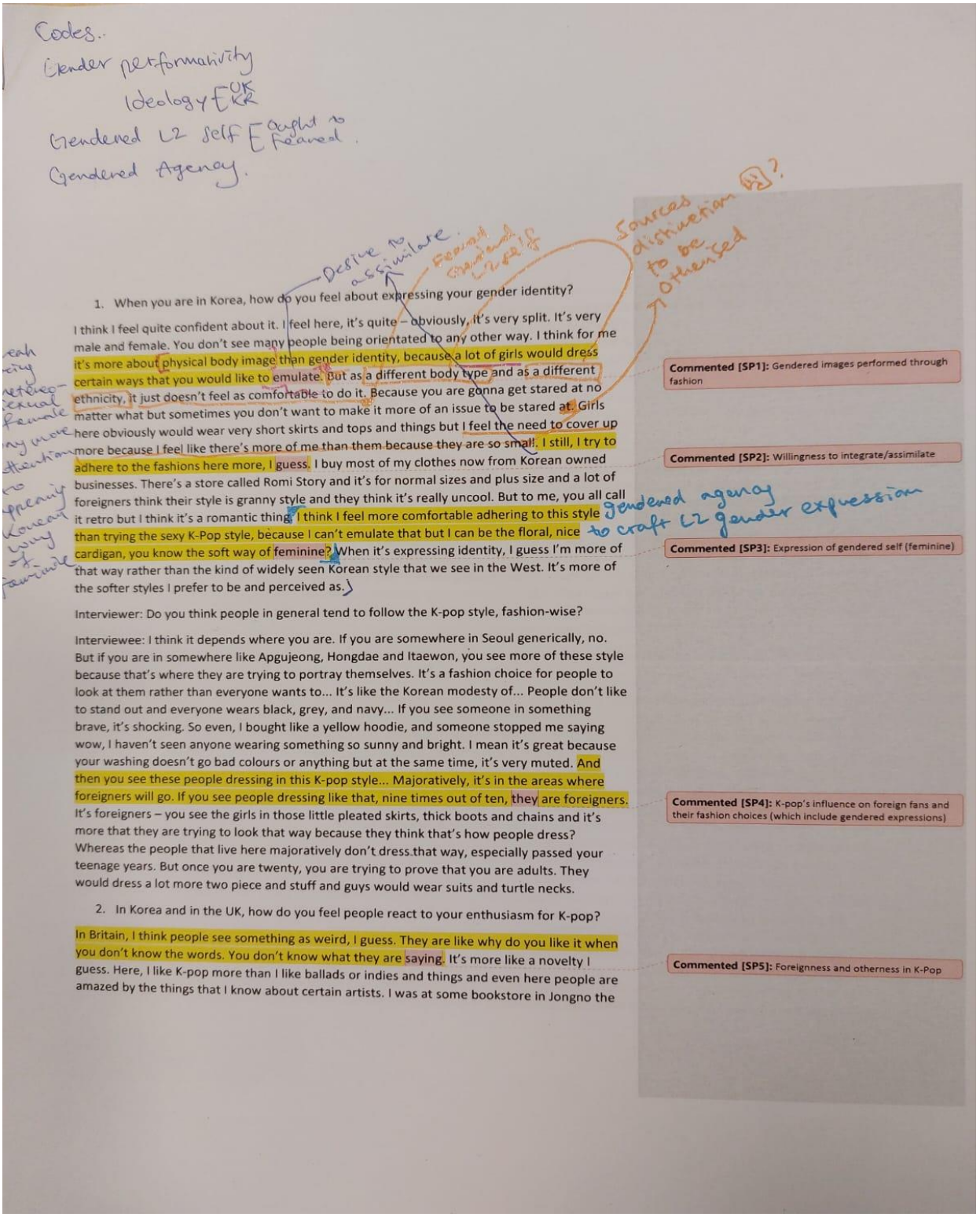
☐ I have read and understand my rights as a research participant, as explained in the letter above.

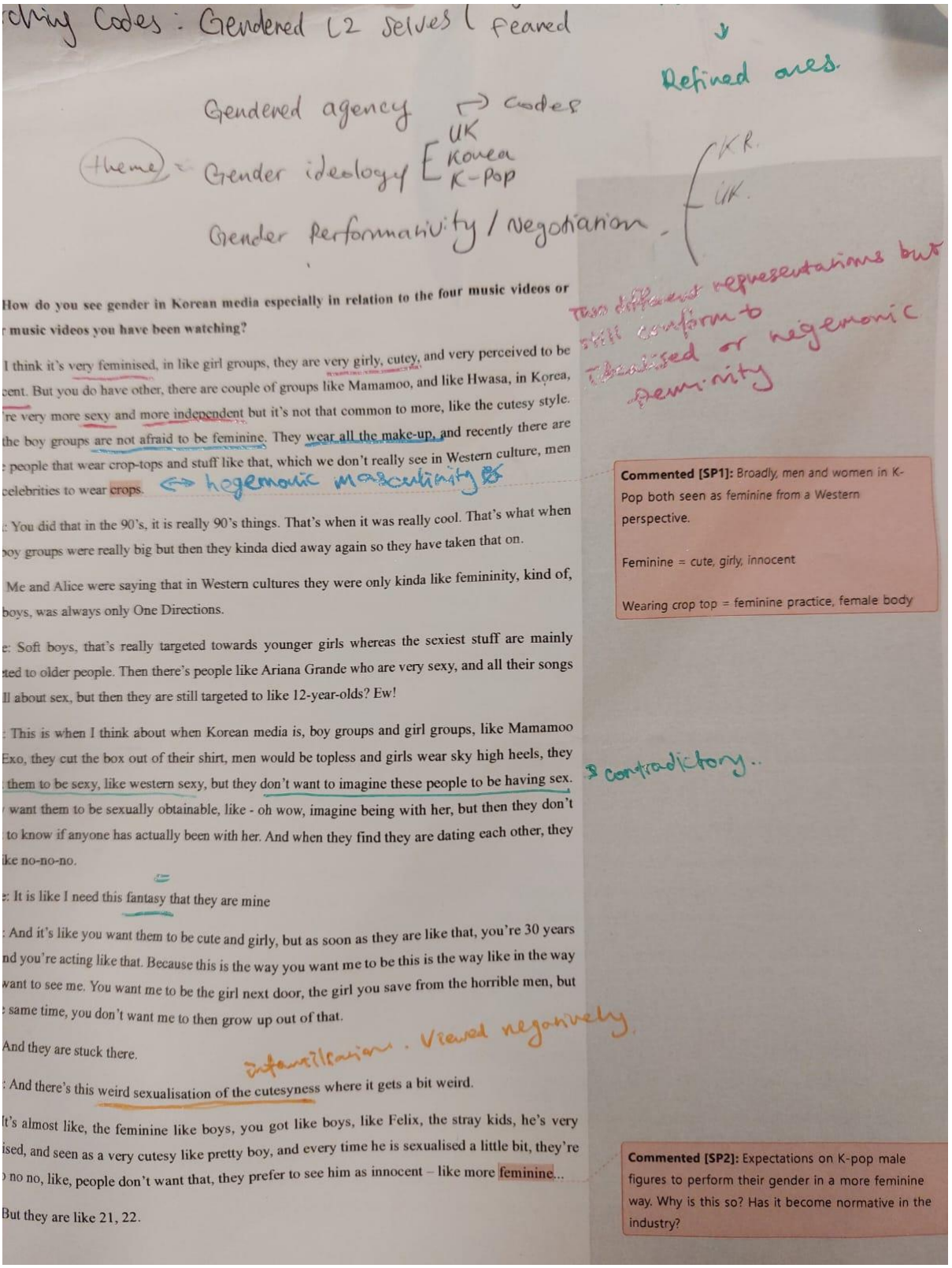
☐ I understand that the research is conducted by Soyoon Park at York St John University.

Name (please print): .....

Signed: ..... Date: .....

Appendix 6. Examples of manual coding





ching Codes: Gendered L2 selves (Feared

Refined aves.

Gendered agency ⇒ codes

(theme) = Gender ideology [UK / Korea / K-Pop

Gender performativity / negotiation - (K-K. / UK.

How do you see gender in Korean media especially in relation to the four music videos or music videos you have been watching?

I think it's very feminised, in like girl groups, they are very girly, cutey, and very perceived to be cent. But you do have other, there are couple of groups like Mamamoo, and like Hwasa, in Korea, 're very more sexy and more independent but it's not that common to more, like the cutesy style. the boy groups are not afraid to be feminine. They wear all the make-up, and recently there are people that wear crop-tops and stuff like that, which we don't really see in Western culture, men celebrities to wear crops. ⇔ hegemonic masculinity

: You did that in the 90's, it is really 90's things. That's when it was really cool. That's what when oy groups were really big but then they kinda died away again so they have taken that on.

Me and Alice were saying that in Western cultures they were only kinda like femininity, kind of, boys, was always only One Directions.

e: Soft boys, that's really targeted towards younger girls whereas the sexiest stuff are mainly ted to older people. Then there's people like Ariana Grande who are very sexy, and all their songs ll about sex, but then they are still targeted to like 12-year-olds? Ew!

: This is when I think about when Korean media is, boy groups and girl groups, like Mamamoo Exo, they cut the box out of their shirt, men would be topless and girls wear sky high heels, they them to be sexy, like western sexy, but they don't want to imagine these people to be having sex. want them to be sexually obtainable, like - oh wow, imagine being with her, but then they don't to know if anyone has actually been with her. And when they find they are dating each other, they ke no-no-no.

e: It is like I need this fantasy that they are mine

: And it's like you want them to be cute and girly, but as soon as they are like that, you're 30 years nd you're acting like that. Because this is the way you want me to be this is the way like in the way want to see me. You want me to be the girl next door, the girl you save from the horrible men, but same time, you don't want me to then grow up out of that.

And they are stuck there.

infantilisation. Viewed negatively.

: And there's this weird sexualisation of the cutesyness where it gets a bit weird.

t's almost like, the feminine like boys, you got like boys, like Felix, the stray kids, he's very ised, and seen as a very cutesy like pretty boy, and every time he is sexualised a little bit, they're no no, like, people don't want that, they prefer to see him as innocent – like more feminine...

But they are like 21, 22.

These different representations but still conform to feminised or hegemonic femininity

Commented [SP1]: Broadly, men and women in K-Pop both seen as feminine from a Western perspective.

Feminine = cute, girly, innocent

Wearing crop top = feminine practice, female body

contradictory..

Commented [SP2]: Expectations on K-pop male figures to perform their gender in a more feminine way. Why is this so? Has it become normative in the industry?

and a half, he ghosted me. So then it makes you feel like, this person can literally take you everywhere, you have lunch together, you go and do something and have dinner together and you stay together, you breakfast together the next morning. You go do another thing, but they can still disappear or cheat on you or something. How can you do so much for people and then none of it is true. And I think part of it it's because, Korean guys, they are kind of taught that they are meant to be in a certain way with women. They would never let you pay for anything. Whereas in Britain, it's like, okay, we will go to the cinema, and we eat something and half the time it's dutch pay. You know, I think that's a very different masculine thing here, it's like the pride of being that person. Even when technically, they may not mean it or have strong emotions for you or either way. They still play this role of being a provider or a carer even when ultimately, they don't care. It's more like they are doing it for people to see that they are doing it, which I think is odd. You know, real world experience. (30mins- transcribe or not?)

Negotiation of gender expressio is also situational & context dependent.

4. How do you feel that you express your gender identity in relation to cultural context?

For the most part, I feel like I act the same way. But I guess, especially when it comes to dating. In my head mentally, I'm feeling like should I be doing things differently, act or dress in a certain way in order to fit in the gender construction here. Because you know, when you go out on dates here, people dress their best. So I had that for quite a while and then I constantly went on dates wearing dresses or in nice outfits. Because I felt like if I turn up, and I'm not dressed appropriately or I'm not dressed like a girl, maybe you won't see me in that respect. And then I started dating someone who didn't do that at all, he always was in sportswear, and I could relax a little. Then I felt like he treated me more like a friend than a partner and sometimes I thought is it because I'm not acting the way that I'm technically should be, in terms of the female role here? Because when you see girls out and about, I mean, the thing is here the fashion here is either super girly or very unisex. It's just hoodies or clothing that looks like you've borrowed it from your dad because it's three sizes bigger. So there's the two ways of having it and when I'm dating, I'm always more on the feminine because I want them to see me as a girl but I guess it's because by being foreign, it makes me feel... Obviously the beauty standards are quite high, and if someone's dating a foreigner, you know that they are not expecting them to be the Korean beauty standard. But you still want to emulate it, I feel. You know, I've bought enough make-up here to know the way it is, and since I got here, I always get my nails done, which is not something I ever did in Britain. And I feel like it's put more pressure on me to feel put together. The only times I feel like I don't put an effort in is when maybe I have an early morning class and I can't be bothered or if I go to the gym because technically, I'm not there to be seen by anyone and I'd rather people didn't see me in any way rather than see me in a good light or a bad light. But I think that's like a big thing. For me, especially, when I go dates or even when I'm out alone, I'd rather blend in. I'd rather go with the hyper-femininity than just wearing jeans and t-shirt. Because it then just makes me feel more like I belong, I guess. Because you're already out of place, so you try not to make it worse than it is.

Commented [SP11]: Social norms become a pres (also self-put to some degree) to perform an adjust gendered self

Commented [SP12]: Feared L2 gendered self? Fe not being validated

Commented [SP13]: Ought-to gendered self in Willingness to conform to the local beauty standar

Commented [SP14]: Adjust gender expression t a sense of belonging?

license, but his boxing instructor said to him, but if you ever get the license and you go out and you get in a fight, technically then your hands are weapons, and you could get jailed. So he had to wrestle with this conscience of... knowing that he's the kind of guy who can fly off the handle. He was so frightened of that chance that could get him into a trouble because here, all of a sudden. When I go to the gym here, guys here work intensely. It's not really for women, it is really for themselves. They just want to be perfect standard of male. Guys in the UK go to gym to talk to women or pick up women. It's not like that. The guys here are more focused on working out or hanging out with their friends in the gym. The gym is mixed and they would come with their girlfriend and it's like a date. I think they are very comfortable with who they are. You'd still see girls who are more masculine or independent but even when they appear physically to be tomboys, they still act the girly girl way around guys. The one thing I hate is you go into a store and the girls put on this nasal voice and when you ask them, they would talk to you in a normal manner and as soon as you leave, they switch back into their nasal. (in Korean – thank you, see you again) I don't understand what it is that makes them like this. It is almost like trying to be too cute. And guys do this as well. They change their voice around different people. In Britain, people generally don't do that but here they will change their voice accordingly and you can always tell when girls, when boys are here, they are acting like they don't care but then they use their nasal voice... Okay, just say you like them, it's fine. But I think that's a big giveaway here. Maybe their femininity has to be more pronounced, I think. Because, I was saying this the other day how like in English, we have baby talk whereas it is the *aegyo* style. But when I see girls doing *aegyo*, it makes me cringe. When I see guys doing it, I get embarrassed but in a good way. I think it's cute but it's because it's wrong and it's because most guys are buff and strong so it's cute and disarming. But when girls do it – maybe because they use it more like a tool. The girl from my university back home, with her boyfriend would do things like that (cutesy Korean phrase). I'm like, you are not Korean, you shouldn't even be doing it and it even makes it worse because it's bad enough for Koreans doing it. I don't need hear foreigners doing it. I can't hide my facial expression. So there's been several times people see me and just laughing, because I find it... Revolting is probably the word. I can't just cope with it. It's off-putting. I'd see a lot of girls here expecting their boyfriend to do certain things which you would never expect in the UK – hold their hand bag, I want icecream, I want coffee, I want you know, a teddybear. Guys will do this without a question even though these girls talk to them very rudely. I don't really understand this dynamic of... because it wouldn't really happen in the UK. You can't act cute and have guys like oh yes darling, I will do it for you. But here for some reasons it works. It is something that baffles me in terms of masculinity and femininity. Guys would act really strong but as soon as a girl acts a certain way, they become a puddle of water. In Britain you see females and males interacting with each other, you don't have to claim each other whereas here, people are always – certain way. Guys would like lead girls with their hands on their shoulder, which just then feels weird. If a guy did that in the UK, you'd be like, why are you controlling her. Whereas in here, it is seen as more, they'd be like taking control in a good way. Most of the things I notice always come to the interaction between men and women. I think it is because, even in class, it's usually girls hanging out with

traditionally
What is considered as feminine is more ingrained in KR

Commented [SP8]: Both genders tend to be more feminine in Korea than what is considered to be as norm in Britain

Leah's gendered agency in L2 in negotiating her gendered L2 self - to refuse other as it doesn't agree with her feminine self.

Commented [SP9]: Example of adopting local feminine norm/ideal

Appendix 7. Accessibility of interview transcripts

To maintain confidentiality, full transcripts are not provided in the appendices. However, selected excerpts from the transcripts can be made available upon request.