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### Boy Bands and Female Sexuality: Girls are Horny Too

In 2014, my best friend and I attended my very first concert: One Direction's *Take Me Home World Tour*. Opening for the band was a lesser known, but just as stereotypical, boy band who I am proud to say I knew before they were cool: Five Seconds of Summer. Although I enjoyed the music and visuals of five handsome British boys singing about love, I was not as passionate about One Direction as my best friend, Lauren. Crying in the seat next to me during One Direction's encore, I wondered what made my fellow pre-teen so emotionally attached to a group of young boys she had never met. Seven years later, here I am reflecting on that experience through a new lens: that of female sexuality. More specifically, how the predominantly female fan-base contributes to the delegitimization of boy bands in society, culture, and the media. Though I was initially taken aback by her overtly rampant emotions, I now wonder how my friend's favorite boy band contributed to the development of her budding sexual desire and if her tears had anything to do with how she expressed herself sexually at a young age. Although typically viewed as disposable and superficial trash, boy bands have profoundly influenced pop culture, and in turn, society as a whole. Not only did boy bands undoubtedly contribute to American culture and music in the 1990s and early 2000s, but according to *Business Insider*, the number one best selling artist of all time, in fact, is a boy band. The Beatles, considered by some to be one of the first boy bands, sold over 183 million units during their career. More recently, bands like BTS and other eastern K-Pop groups have

permeated the global music industry. *Billboard* states that BTS, arguably k-pop's number one group, has recorded 18 Hot 100 songs and been on the top 100 chart for 231 weeks. Boy bands have continuously saturated the music industry for decades, and it is about time we start to take them seriously. Not only this, but the laborious schedule, constant media attention, unjust race relations, and mocking criticisms that members of boy bands must endure is reason enough to take a step back and reevaluate the deeper reasons as to why society does not take them seriously. Boy bands have a direct and indisputable relationship to female sexuality, and they have created an environment that allows women and girls to express their sexual desire in a free, safe, and liberating way. Though boy bands are popular, their fans have been invalidated for decades due to a combination of factors rooted in a misogyny particular to young women and girls. The mockery of boy band fans is largely the result of a broader tendency to disparage the interests of teen girls, especially those that elicit sexual feelings and, most importantly, that allow for public expression of those feelings. While boys are raised in a culture that encourages sexual thoughts, healthy masturbation, and depersonalized sex, girls endure a culture that constantly suppresses female sexuality. This makes boy bands an important site for sexual exploration amongst girls who must come of age in a society hostile to their sexual expression and autonomy.

Defining exactly what a boy band is can be tricky. If the definition simply includes a group of *boys* who are part of a *band*, it excludes a multitude of factors such as audience, media attitudes, and musicality. For instance, I think we all can agree that Van Halen is the downright antithesis of One Direction and the two groups should be placed in vastly different categories. Urban Dictionary defines boy bands in a rather negative way, which seems to mirror the attitudes that a majority of media outlets have regarding boy bands. Bozz Hawg circa 2004 asserts that he

“wouldn’t even call these ‘bands’ because they play no instruments and can barely sing” (Hawg). He continues to describe the “boy band formula” that every single group follows: “the good looking guy; the talented guy (the one who can actually sing); the shy, quiet guy, the ‘older brother’ type; and the bad boy” (Hawg). But boy bands are much more than the music they produce. Consider Maria Sherman’s definition of a boy band, for example. The author of *Larger than Life* says that “a boy band is a juggernaut pop culture application whose impact is monolithic. Historically, yes, boy bands are hotties who harmonize, but fandom is the only true universal” (Sherman 9). This definition is essential because it highlights not only the characteristics of boy bands, but their historically consistent audience: the fandom. In this case, the fandom is made up of mostly-adolescent teenage girls who use boy bands as an outlet to express and explore their budding sexuality. Without their female fan-base boy bands are non-existent.

One of the defining characteristics of the boy bands’ female fan base is their sexual expression and desire, which is something that hasn’t been particularly celebrated in the past. Throughout history, female sexual expression has been a touchy subject, and although we have gradually become more comfortable with normalizing the discussion and representation of female sexual expression, there is still a long way to go. Take the invention of the vibrator, for example. The myth that the vibrator was invented by a doctor in Victorian England to bring women to “hysterical paroxysm” in order to cure her “hysteria” is a blatant myth. The idea that a horny Victorian doctor was the one to give women sexual agency has spread like wildfire all over pop culture in productions like “Big Mouth” and “Hysteria” (Lieberman). Though it seems silly and relatively unimportant, this story is anything but harmless. The vibrator myth contributes to the narrative that “because women don’t understand their own sexuality they

should not be the ones in control of it. It makes women seem ignorant, passive, and duped by manipulative men” (Lieberman). By medicalizing the female orgasm, the impression for centuries was that female sexual desire was something that needed to be fixed, that it was unnatural for women to have sexual thoughts and feelings. However, according to Mary Jane Sherfey M.D.’s statement of this view, “the sex drive of the human female is naturally and innately stronger than that of the male, and it once posed a powerfully destabilizing threat to the possibility of social order” (Baumeister, Twenge, 2002, p. 166). With this in mind, it is no wonder that female sexual expression is



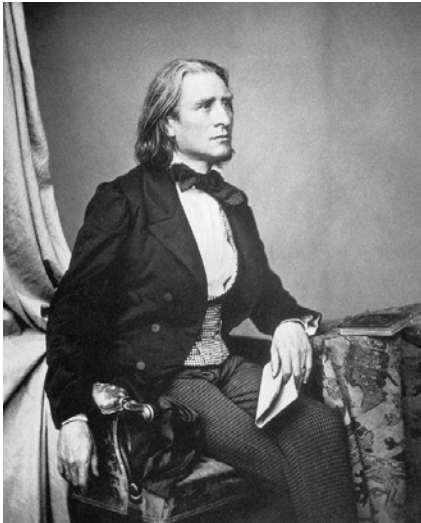
condemned. In many cases, sex is synonymous with power, and if women are to be equal with men, their sexual desires and expressions must be treated the same. This, in theory, has led to the lack of sexual education regarding female desire and sexual expression which, in turn, leads to a general lack of understanding when it comes to female sexuality overall. When our culture is not used to seeing women and girls express their budding sexual desire, there is an element of fear and confusion, which leads to inevitable suppression and stigmatization.

The suppression of female sexuality has, on a surface level, subtly subsided in recent decades with the introduction of the birth control pill, female musicians literally singing about their vaginas, and sites like *Only Fans*. You may even think that women are entirely sexually liberated now that Cardi B. has rapped about her wet ass pussy. However, even when female sexuality is presented as a positive thing, there is always significant controversy surrounding the

mediums in which it is celebrated. For instance, the catholic church is still outspoken on their stance to reject contraception, with the justification that “it’s a deliberate violation of the design God built into the human race, often referred to as ‘natural law’. The natural-law purpose of sex is procreation” (“Birth Control”). Julie Bindel of *The Spectator* criticized *Only Fans*, calling it a “sanitised version of prostitution” and a platform for men “to treat women as little more than their own personalized sex toy” (Bindel). Cardi B. has been condemned by popular conservative commentator Ben Shapiro saying that her song “WAP” is “anti-culture”, “garbage designed to tear things down”, and “vulgar” (Shapiro). The music industry in particular is permeated with ways to tear down female sexual expression, especially when it comes to young female audiences and in this case, the female audiences of boy bands.

Before discussing the intersection between boy bands and female sexuality, a general understanding of where boy bands came from in the first place is crucial. Although the term “boy band” was only coined in the 1990s, there was a long history of culturally similar phenomena that led up to that point. In the Mid-1800s, celebrity composer Franz Liszt was so popular, especially among young women, that he incited “Lisztomania” among his audience. In short, “Lisztomania” refers to the disease women suffer from when they’re indescribably, dangerously obsessed with the composer Franz Liszt (Sherman XII). It was not until the mid-1900s, though, when male groups of singers came about. Acapella groups in the 1930s and Doo-Wop groups in the 1940s and 50s started the trend of groups of men singing, harmonizing, and performing for predominately female audiences (Sherman XIII). Over time, notable groups such as the Osmonds in 1958, the Beatles in the 1960s, and the Jackson 5 in 1965 began to gain traction (Sherman XIII) and by 1985, the idea of the stereotypical 90’s “boy band” was gaining popularity. With groups such as Menudo, New Edition, New Kids on the Block, and Boys II Men, boy band

mania was in hot pursuit (Sherman XIV). By the 1990s, the music industry was beginning to be engineered by promoters whose goal was not to develop great music, but to exploit young fans for money (Gianoulis). In turn, the boy band era was heavily cultivated by businessmen behind the scenes when groups such as the Backstreet Boys, \*NSYNC, B2K, and the Jonas Brothers



dominated in the 1990s and early 2000s (Gianoulis). The groups that thrived in the golden era of boy bands usually followed roles prescribed to them in order to be successful. For instance, in almost every boy band in the last century, there is a good chance that each member fits into one of the following roles: the heartthrob, the bad boy, the teddy bear, Mr. responsible, the older brother, the shy guy, and the sexy one (Sherman 13-16). However, by the early 21st century, these groups, along with their specific functions, began to

fade with the rise of pop-rap (Gianoulis). Some of the only unchanging variables about boy bands is the fact that they are a group, they are all male, they sing, and their mostly-female and mostly tween/teen fan base has been offered a safe space to discover, express, and explore their sexuality.

There is one more characteristic that also falls in line with the unchanging variables that define a boy band, and it is one that must be addressed. The boy bands that will be discussed are not often people of color. With the exception of Korean pop groups, characteristics that automatically make us think of boy bands are almost always white, even though there is a relatively even amount of both black and white boy bands throughout history. Blythe Spindler-Richardson of *An Injustice Mag* reports that “in many public internet polls on most popular boy bands of all time, black groups do not even crack the top three despite their prevalence and

importance in the music industry, and about half of the critically acclaimed African American acts do not even appear on the lists” (Spindler-Richardson). Both the Jackson 5 and New Edition had a prolific impact on the cultures of their respective decades, but because of their race, have not received the same notability as other boy bands. Often, black boy bands were excluded from the formulated friend groups of the early 2000s that included pop stars like Britney Spears, NSYNC\*, the Backstreet Boys, Aaron Carter, and many others. Rather, “black boy bands were automatically placed on the inner circles of senior-level musicians” (Spindler-Richardson) which meant that white groups were expected to be innocent and new to the industry, excused from petty mistakes, while black groups were judged as experienced adults. Black boy bands were often marketed as adults who sang about mature topics and dressed in revealing clothing, often dancing and singing in a more sexual manner. If the boy band industry was a place for girls, especially white girls, to feel safe, then the way the media and culture portrayed these artists made the white women feel as though black artists were somehow “less safe”. The expectation for black boy bands to sing about mature subject matter and compete with “senior-level professionals in the music industry” (Spindler-Richardson) led to the whitewashing of the boy band environment. Although the boy band industry is a safe space for girls to express their

sexual desire when culture is telling them to suppress it, it must be considered that this does not include black boy bands for reasons outside of their control.

Though there is injustice regarding society's definition of an "acceptable" boy band, it is still undisputable that the boy band environment has been a place for sexual exploration amongst women and girls for decades. However, the fact that boy bands elicit sexual responses from young women makes them a vulnerable target for sexism in the music industry. Jude Rogers, a former teen fan of New Kids on the Block, described her experience attending a concert decades after her obsession. Rogers describes the experience through the lens of someone whose sexual development was assisted by boy bands, as she recalls how "by joining together, we were remembering that strange time in our lives when we started to experience sexual desire"

(Rogers). She continues that "we were all remembering the power of our sexuality, how much it could burn, and how strong its roots were" (Rogers). It's interesting, then, how such a positive and safe form of sexual expression has been demonized so heavily by the media. Even



more interesting is the difference between how society views female fans versus male fans in general. Female fans of The Beatles were famously described as "'the dull, the idle, the failures', until The Beatles became a band that everyone loves" (Grady). However, when men scream, cry, and engage in acts of physical violence over a sports game, it is seen as normal, expected even.



The reason for this has to do with the fact that women's sexuality is a foreign concept to our patriarchal culture. Abstinence-only curriculum, which 37 states are mandated to include and 26 states are required to emphasize (Kaiser Family Foundation), often discredits female sexuality all together. One curriculum called *Choosing the Best* "portrays these stereotypes as biological fact, asserting: 'guys think so much more about sex because of testosterone'" (Kay, Jackson, 20). Other curriculums that are abstinence-based teach that men 'depersonalize sex' and women "have a greater need to offset sexual intimacy with affirmation and a sense that 'this is love'" (Kay, Jackson, 21). If 37 states are teaching adolescents this narrative about female sexuality, it's not surprising that there's so much animosity towards an environment where women,



historically, have expressed their sexual desire.

Discourse in the media regarding the sexual expression of teenage girls is just one example of how female interests are disparaged in society today. In an infamous article by

Jonathon Heaf of *GQ*, he characterizes One Direction fans as "rabid, knicker wetting banshees who will tear off [their] own ears in hysterical fervour when presented with the objects of [their] fascinations" (Heaf). He continues to explain how the teen fan's vaginal wetness was like "a dark-pink oil slick that howls and moans and undulates" (Heaf). He conveys that these female fans do not care about the cultural significance, the history, or other music in general, but just "their immediate vociferous reverence" (Heaf). Though this description of adolescent girls is unsettling, it's not surprising considering the view of female sexual desire itself that has been

ingrained into our culture for centuries. The idea that girls might possibly be excited or turned on by their favorite boy band is such a disgusting and unnatural concept to the author because female sexuality is seen as unnatural. When girls are taught that *men* are biologically more sexual than women, that *men* need to be sexually controlled by women, that *men* have power over a woman's sexual agency, it's no wonder that a bit of puberty-ridden sexually excited girls triggered such a rampant response from a grown man when *men*, not *women*, are expected to be sexual and desirous beings.

The desire that women often feel for boy bands has to do with the fact that the members are viewed as *desired* rather than *desiring*. In our culture, women are most often seen as objects of attraction for men. Take, for example, fast food advertisements. Hooters is literally a restaurant made solely for men who want to fulfill their desires by watching a barely-legal girl walk around in a tank top and a push-up bra. Carl's Jr. is famous for sexualizing cheeseburgers by posing them next to girls in bikinis, and using the buns to cover a woman's modesty. The culture of boy bands changes this stereotype, however. Matthew Stahl writes in his journal article titled "Boy Bands, Drag Kings, and the Performance of (Queer) Masculinities" that "it is not their kitschy, catchy, popular music but also the specific kind of masculinity displayed by boy bands that makes these bands 'struggle to conform to different criteria of authenticity and legitimzacy'" (Stahl). The specific type of masculinity that Stahl describes is that of feminized masculinity. For instance, members of the band often sing in high-pitched, whiny, pleading voices and write emotional, sappy lyrics talking about their love for women. Their defined, lean bodies go against the muscular, large bodies that are often synonymous with masculinity. The feminization of the masculinity of boy bands puts them in a position where their female (and queer) audiences desire them as opposed to them being desired; something that is not particularly

present in popular culture today. In society, culture, and the media, when the object of lust is a man, it is often dismissed as something silly and inauthentic. A naked or provocative woman often generates a range of reactions, while naked or provocative men are usually represented for laughs or embarrassment. If a woman is reading a romance novel that includes graphic descriptions of sex and other provocative scenarios, she is dismissed as “silly” or “escaping from reality”. However,



when a man watches porn for sexual pleasure, he is doing what he needs to do when he is horny. Similarly, strip clubs marketed towards men are often seen as very serious, with a plethora of solo guests that sometimes spend hundreds of dollars to watch girls dance. However, strip clubs marketed towards women are seen as a place where guests laugh, scream, and have a fun night out with the girls. When women desire men who are marketing themselves as desirable, why does it seem so abnormal? The reason is because if women were to express their desire, they would be mocked, laughed at, and criticized throughout the media just like the female fans of boy bands who are known to express their desire towards members who market themselves as desirable. In other words, it is no wonder that women are so reluctant to express their sexual desire towards desirable men in a society that does not respect, acknowledge, or understand female sexuality.

Criticism, however, has not stopped women from expressing their sexuality to the public. The age of the internet provides us with a window to view female sexual expression when it

comes to desirable men. Before fanfiction, the sexual desires of female fans towards their objects of affection were simply hypothetical, but with the introduction of the internet came the confirmation that boy bands did, in fact, make girls horny. Stories about “Larry Stylinson” and falling for the playboys of BTS have permeated websites like *Wattpad* and *Archive of our Own* for years. The term “fanfiction” was coined in the late 19030s and was defined as “ordinary fantasy published in fan magazines” (Miller), but the way we see fanfiction nowadays encompasses a whole new meaning. Fanfiction as we know it today originated in the age of Star Trek when female fans wrote about the sexual relationship between Mr. Spock and Captain Kirk (Miller). The fantasies and stories surrounding Spock and Kirk later led to the sexually explicit fanfiction that we refer to now as “slash fiction”. Slash fiction often includes two same-sex characters who are written to be heterosexual, but are put in situations where they are intimate in a homosexual nature. Fanfiction and slash fiction, without surprise, are heavily criticized forms of media. Fanlore.org describes how “...in the 1970s, there were vociferous objections by well known fans to the idea of Kirk and Spock together romantically or sexually (known at the time as ‘the premise’). One fan recalls [eminent Star Trek fan] Bjo Trimble describing K/S/ slashers as a ‘bunch of twisted sickos.’” (Slash Controversies). More recently, George RR Martin, writer of the award-winning series *Game of Thrones*, calls fanfiction “a cash cow” and “lazy”. Fanfiction and fandom, in mainstream media, are often seen as “a group of oversexed teenage girls writing porny and borderline illiterate fanfiction, which is wrong for moral, aesthetic, and legal reasons” (Grady). Although the criticism towards fan fiction and slash fiction is meant to mock and authenticate it, fanfiction is actually a very legitimate medium for storytelling. For instance, the award winning series *Fifty Shades of Grey* was originally developed as *Twilight* fanfiction, and has been recognized by MTV and People’s Choice.

Though this series is also heavily mocked, which comes at no surprise, it is recognized as one of the most popular movies in the past decade (along with another movie called *After* which was based on Harry Styles fanfiction). Although fanfiction and slashfiction may seem like a foreign concept to many mainstream audiences, among communities of women, queer folks, and minorities, it is seen as a place to express themselves in a culture that constantly tries to repress their sexuality. In fact, *Archive of Our Own*, a popular fanfiction site, “found that more of its users identified as genderqueer (6 percent) than as male (4 percent).” (Grady). With the context of sexual repression amongst females, it is blatantly obvious that one of the largest contributing factors to the criticism of fanfiction is the fact that women, girls, and the queer identifying are the ones writing it. A website that has 90% female writers that discuss often sexual topics is a vulnerable target for criticism in the patriarchal society we live in today. If the criticism of

fanfiction isn't rooted in sexism, then why don't we heavily criticize men for literally screaming, crying, and engaging in acts of physical violence over a sports game? Similarly, why don't we view men watching porn as silly like we do women who write erotica? If the tables were turned, fanfiction would not only be seen as mainstream, but respected, honorable, and fun.

This online medium of expression is such a controversial topic to many people because it is the manifestation of the sexuality that women and girls feel for their favorite musician, character, or athlete. If women are writing and fantasizing about

sexual scenarios, they're probably doing something else too: masterbating. Female masterbation is an extremely taboo subject, and is often seen as more disgraceful than actually performing



sexual acts with a partner. I remember being 15 and at my high school church camp where, at one point in the week, the administrators of the camp split up the boys and girls to talk about subjects that were specific to each gender. The boys, I later learned, talked about the sin of porn and masturbation, while myself and the other girls made friendship bracelets and wrote positive affirmations on mirrors for one another. Although the camp directors' intention was to discourage masturbation and porn for the boys, the difference between how they viewed female and male sexuality stayed with me for years. Even though the boys were being told their sexual desires were sinful, the fact that the church faculty didn't bring up masturbation to the girls clearly communicated that they assumed girls didn't watch porn and didn't masturbate, whereas the boys were assumed to do both so much that they needed to be cautioned against it. This implication led myself and many other girls to feel ashamed, isolated, and un-womanly for having sexual feelings. My experience with sexual education is not an isolated incident. In a school newspaper article written by high school senior Lauren Hakimi in 2018, she describes how "our teachers had taught us that the penis is the 'primary sex organ' and the vagina is a 'muscular passageway leading to the outside of the body, also known as the birth canal, because it is the passageway the baby uses to leave the mother's body during the birth process'" (Hakimi). By referring to the vagina as simply a means to reproduce, education is teaching young girls that female pleasure is abnormal and irrelevant to sex in general. Sexual desire has always been viewed as unnatural to women, and those who are outwardly more sexual are often also branded as 'sluts' and 'whores'. When women and girls are outwardly posting about their sexual desire on the internet, people get scared because it is such a foreign topic to America's sexual education system. The fact that women are writing about their sexual feelings when a majority of adolescents are taught that the only thing sexual about females is their means of reproduction

leads to people being uncomfortable and afraid of this subject. This, in turn, directly relates to the heavy criticisms that we see in fanfiction and fandom culture today.

Although female sexuality is more visible in pop culture today, within the boy band community, sexual suppression is still at play. From the fear and criticisms of fandoms to the vulgar descriptions of adolescent fan's vaginas, to the difference in attitudes concerning female and male sexuality, there are multiple instances where women are not sexually liberated. The expression of sexual desires in a safe environment is healthy, and therefore should be celebrated. If we were to treat female sexual desire and expression the same way we do male, society would be more encouraging, accepting, and aware of the importance that boy bands have on the life of a teenage girl. If we were to implement non-abstinence related curriculum into sex-education, women would not have to feel shame in the ways that their sexual manifest. In a time when women are shamed for expressing themselves sexually, the boy band environment is an essential place for them to safely grow and explore their sexuality. It is imperative that we look deeper into the reasons why boy bands are disparaged in society in order to create a safe, equal, and welcoming environment for sexual exploration amongst young women and girls.

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