One Direction Infection: Media Representations of Boy Bands and their Fans

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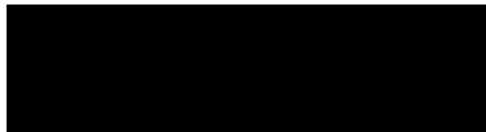

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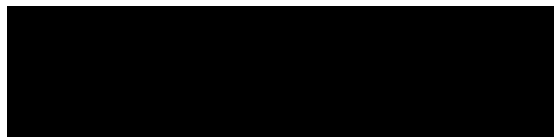

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ABSTRACT

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Boy bands have long been disparaged in music journalism settings, largely in part to their close association with hordes of screaming teenage and prepubescent girls. As rock journalism evolved in the 1960s and 1970s, so did two dismissive and misogynistic stereotypes about female fans: groupies and teenyboppers (Coates, 2003). While groupies were scorned in rock circles for their perceived hypersexuality, teenyboppers, who we can consider an umbrella term including boy band fanbases, were defined by a lack of sexuality and viewed as shallow, immature and prone to hysteria, and ridiculed as hall markers of bad taste, despite being driving forces in commercial markets (Ewens, 2020; Sherman, 2020). Similarly, boy bands have been disdained for their perceived femininity and viewed as inauthentic compared to "real" artists—namely, hypermasculine male rock artists. While the boy band genre has evolved and experienced different eras, depictions of both the bands and their fans have stagnated in media, relying on these old stereotypes (Duffett, 2012).

This paper aimed to investigate to what extent modern boy bands are portrayed differently from non-boy bands in music journalism through a quantitative content analysis coding articles for certain tropes and themes. Many of these categories were chosen based on music journalism's history of exhibiting misogynistic tendencies by devaluing and undermining the tastes of teenage girls (Coates, 2003; Ewens, 2020; Sherman, 2020; Wald, 2002). My study corroborated these scholars by providing quantitative data that music journalism continues to ridicule young female music fans. Additionally, I found that boy bands are diminished through themes/tropes that are gendered feminine in popular music discourse, most prominently age/youth, authenticity, innocence, and sexuality. However, the boy bands were not diminished through feminine tropes more closely aligned with female fans, like the use of emotional language. Although there are negative aspects to fandom, this paper also explores the many positive benefits of boy band fan cultures, from being bonding spaces to providing teen girls safe spaces to explore their sexualities (Baker, 2004; Ehrenreich et al., 1992).

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Lastly, to Harry Styles and the rest of One Direction, thank you. This project started out of a sense of protectiveness I felt for my younger self. Your music shaped me into who I am, and I will always advocate for young girls to feel free to scream, cry, and, most importantly, dance and sing to their favorite music in a world that would prefer they stayed quiet and still.

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Introduction

When I was in middle school, I fell in love with One Direction. I was not naive enough to think our love was destined for a grand romance, but with their catchy music and charming personalities, the five members felt like friends. I kept up with all their news, bought merchandise, attended a concert, actively participated in the One Direction fan community on social media and read Fanfiction. Yet I underplayed my obsession at home and at school out of fear of embarrassment — liking One Direction wasn't *cool*. I grew out of this self-consciousness as I got older and became unapologetic in my music taste, especially my love for pop. However, this change made me realize my own internalized misogyny in how I viewed music. At only 12 years old, some inner part of me thought One Direction belonged in the "guilty pleasure" category of my music library. This feeling stemmed from my opinion that One Direction fans were seen in a belittling and condescending light. We were too girly, too young, too obsessive. This dismissive view had to have been perpetuated within the mainstream discourse surrounding the band for it to have had such power over me. I might have been unaware of it at the time, but the almost shame-like feeling I experienced came from a combination of external factors, including how the media portrayed One Direction and the band's fans.

As I have gotten more involved in music journalism by founding my own online music publication, these concerns have stayed at the forefront of my mind. It is one thing to dislike a song or an album or an artist: we all have our own tastes. However, I believe it's important to critically examine the "why" behind those opinions and check yourself for any internal prejudices. Do you not like an artist because you don't like a specific XYZ quality about their music? Or do you not like an artist because of some aspect of their reputation—i.e., they're not authentic (whatever that means), they've sold out, their only fans are screaming hordes of young

girls who only like them for their looks. I've seen numerous examples of the latter. I believe that most music journalists do not intend to be misogynistic in their writing, and that most of the negatively toned writing on boy band fan culture results from implicit biases. Yet the way we write about artists matter. Music is a universal aspect of culture; to dismiss or to ridicule artists with young female fans perpetuates a cultural hierarchy that places one gender at the bottom. This constitutes a cultural gatekeeping that's inherently sexist and, in my opinion, dehumanizing.

With this project, I hope to discover the scope of this issue within music journalism through a quantitative content analysis focusing on how journalism stories describe modern, English-speaking boy bands, as compared to their non-boy band equivalents. I explore in what ways boy bands are devalued in music journalism. This study is the first of its kind to focus solely on boy bands. Therefore, I distilled the themes/tropes used for this study based on qualitative work that examines how boy bands have close ties to young, female fanbases, which has a history of being disparaged.

In my first chapter, I attempt to define the boy band and discuss the label's nebulous connotations. Then, I trace the genre's history to outline key patterns and characteristics, contextualize why boy bands first grew in popularity, and provide examples of how the genre and its fans have long been disparaged in music journalism.

My second chapter details some of the common tropes and perceptions used to diminish and devalue a boy band's artistic merit—for instance, their perceived inauthenticity. I explore how these tropes are often closely tied to femininity and are the same characteristics that specifically appeal to their young, female fans.

In my third chapter, I first examine the specifics of modern boy band fan culture and the impact of social media. Then, I explore how female fan culture within mainstream music has

long been portrayed in a derogatory light, growing out of Beatlemania, the teenybopper label and groupie culture into today.

My fourth chapter contains the quantitative content analysis of my thesis. With the help of an outside coder, I code 210 articles published in a five-year span in five professional U.K. and U.S. media publications for how stories portray boy bands versus non-boy band equivalents. First, I explain the sampling methodology, including the criteria for choosing the non-boy bands used in the study. Then, drawing from the evidence outlined in my first three chapters, I explain the different categories used for coding, providing examples of each. Because this study is the first of its kind, I intentionally cast a wider net of 12 themes/tropes to code for, with five of the tropes having separate counts for positive/negative mentions for a total of 17 different coding categories. The chapter concludes with the study results and discussion.

Finally, I consider the implications of my research and how I believe music journalism needs to improve to be more inclusive and accessible. While this project focuses on journalism, I believe it also broadly speaks to issues of misogyny and cultural gatekeeping: who decides what is of cultural value? And more importantly, whose voice is left out of that decision-making?

Chapter One: What Makes a Boy Band?

Defining the Boy Band

"Boy band" is a genre that seems deceptively self-explanatory: a band made up of all young men. Typically, the boy band also has groundings in rock and pop — it would be unlikely and feel out of character for a heavy metal band of four men in their early 20s to be labeled a boy band, even though the band fits the initial criteria (Sherman, 2020). Yet the term has a more complicated meaning because of its underlying associations, so there is some debate over what bands might even fit the label. Groups like Backstreet Boys, New Kids On The Block and One Direction are obvious ones to make the cut. All three of these prominent examples consist of five members who solely contribute vocals. This indicates a possible connection between boy bands and a lack of live instruments.

Yet members of earlier boy band prototypes, like the Monkees, did play instruments. Some music journalists also point to the Beatles as the original blueprint for a boy band, while others balk at giving the Fab Four the label (Billboard, 2018). However, this could also be due to the derogatory undertones that "boy band" has in the dominant music journalism, rather than the band simply not being perceived to have boy band qualities in their music. A modern example comes from another rock band from the United Kingdom, the 1975. Despite its typical guitarist, bassist, drummer and vocalist structure, it was frequently debated whether the band should be considered a boy band when it first gained traction (Cormack, 2016). Perhaps this is due to the band's synth and pop influences, but a more compelling case is that the band's fanbase is famously composed of screaming, obsessed teenage girls.

So while the music plays some part in characterizing boy bands, my own definition is more fluid and emphasizes the fanbase, which aligns with the Merriam-Webster definition of "a small ensemble of males in their teens or twenties who play pop songs geared especially to a

young female audience." This understanding of a boy band also accounts for why Beatles fans would reject the label; as explored in the following chapter, female teenage fans are notorious in rock circles as markers of bad taste (Coates, 2003). In the past few years, the 1975 have significantly increased in popularity and now have a more demographically varied fanbase, so they are portrayed in one concert review title as "managing to shake off the boy band label," which again implies negative value-laden associations for the term (Rushing, 2019). And despite boy bands changing styles and identities over the past 25 years since the term was first popularized, their representation in media has stagnated and relies on the same tropes (Duffett, 2012).

Boy Band History

To illustrate the fluid nature of what constitutes a boy band, it proves a worthy endeavor to provide background history of the genre. The following timeline is condensed and inexhaustive, focusing on key groups that illustrate larger trends within boy band history. Additionally, this timeline allows us to contextualize these patterns, like the genre's origins within barbershop quartets in Black communities or the rise of the teenager in the 1950s. This can help us further understand why some bands seemingly avoid the label, either by public perception or self-determination, despite having boy band qualities. Lastly, this timeline serves to introduce the modern boy bands later examined in the study portion of this paper. This section draws heavily from the boy band histories laid out by *Larger Than Life: A History of Boy Bands from NKOTB to BTS* by Maria Sherman (2020) and *Boy Bands and the Performance of Pop Masculinity* by Georgina Gregory (2019).

Mid-1800s: An early precursor to the boy band phenomenon, Franz Liszt was a Hungarian composer and pianist who rose to prominence in the 1830s. While Liszt was a solo

artist and, by all modern definitions, clearly not a boy band, he inspired a predominantly female fanbase passionate enough to earn its own nickname: Lisztomania. According to Alan Walker (1987), women fainted at the sight of him, and "Liszt once threw away an old cigar stump in the street under the watchful eyes of an infatuated lady-in-waiting, who reverently picked the offensive weed out of the gutter, had it encased in a locket and surrounded with the monogram 'F.L.' in diamonds and went about her courtly duties unaware of the sickly odor it gave forth" (p. 372). Parallels can be drawn between Liszt's fanbase and later boy bands, both in fan behavior and outside perceptions of the fans. For instance, Lisztomania shares an etymological similarity with Beatlemania: the suffix mania. In its Merriam-Webster entry, mania is defined "excessive or unreasonable enthusiasm" and noted for its close ties to mental disorders and history of denoting madness, or insanity. As evidenced by Lisztomania, female fans were disparaged for their self-expression and popular music tastes long before boy bands even materialized on the scene.

1930s: Amateur barbershop quartets of men gained popularity during this decade. While a cappella quartets date back earlier in African American worship traditions, the barbershop revival represented a secular proliferation of the harmony-focused vocals (Seabrook, 2015). The criteria for barbershop quartets was simple: four men dressed similarly singing a cappella harmonies. First started by young Black men, these groups performed within their communities: on street corners, homes, churches and barbershops, hence the name. As the style grew in popularity, it was inevitably commercialized and crossed over into the white mainstream, first in the form of minstrel shows and followed by white singing groups. Despite white perceptions of the boy band genre in Western canon, this era also allows us to contextualize its history within Black communities, following the larger trend of popular American music genres first getting

their start by appropriating Black music. As Harry Shaw (1990) summarizes, “Black popular culture is a hotbed of America’s popular culture, especially in the music, dance, and language” (p. 3). Barbershop quartets popularized a harmony-focused vocal singing tradition and paved the way for the push to rhythm and blues. Notable groups from this era include the Mills Brothers and the Ink Spots.

1940s: Doo-wop groups throughout the 1940s provided the next step in the equation and gave an early form of the sound generated by Berry Gordy’s label, Motown Records, throughout the 1960s. The name is nonsensical, referring to a onomatopoetic backing vocalization heard in doo-wop tracks (Sanjek, 2013). These doo-wop groups were formed by post-World War II Black youth who wanted to experiment with traditional harmony singing, and love songs provided the foundation for their discographies. Because the focus remained on the singing, with little to no backing instrumentation, records were cheap to produce and quick to turnaround. Doo-wop performers also tended to be young and inexperienced who were exploited by labels looking to make a quick buck, burned out after the initial excitement and often faded into obscurity within a few records (Gregory, 2019, p. 25). Members of groups like the Mello Moods were around 13 or 14 years old when they first started performing. Gregory continues: “Small independent labels capitalized on the boys’ youthful naivety by exercising a production-line aesthetic and disposing of anyone who presented problems or was no longer useful” (p. 25). This parasitic relationship between labels and artists continues throughout the development of the boy band. Early advents of doo-wop include the Orioles, the Ravens and the Crows, who all enjoyed brief popularity in the late ’40s and early ’50s, following in line with the one-hit wonder life cycle of many doo-wop groups (Sanjek, 2013).

1950s: Doo-wop groups continued into the 1950s, soon leading to the advent of rock and roll led by artists like Chuck Berry and Little Richard. Rock and roll/rhythm and blues group Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers adhered more closely to doo-wop and saw significant success with the 1956 release of "Why Do Fools Fall in Love," written by then 13-year-old Lymon and described by Sherman as "a song so perfectly lovelorn it manages to masquerade its horniness, making it proto-every boy band, ever" (p. 3). The song charted at No. 1 for the R&B charts and peaked in the pop Top Ten in 1956, selling one million copies (Hardy, 2001). It became a rock standard and went on to be covered by the Beach Boys, Boyz II Men, Diana Ross and countless others. Over 50 years after its release, it has nearly 40 million streams on Spotify, indicating a lasting legacy. Clearly, there was a lucrative market for what Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers offered. Yet the group and similar contemporaries, like Bill Haley and His Comets, were stylized with a clear front man supported by backing members rather than the coequal peers that, at least in theory, make up modern boy bands. Similarly, Berry and Richard sparked the rise of solo artist Elvis Presley, who performed historically black music to the acclaim of white youths. With hips swinging, Presley cultivated a fervent female fanbase of his own, which often earned comparisons to cults and other religious descriptors that made fans "appear as a fanatical and even laughable group of people" (Alderman, 2008, p. 50).

The '50s also represented a transitional period for American youth: the rise of the teenager. Post-World War II America celebrated new wealth, and accelerated birth rates in the post-Great Depression 1930s meant a higher concentration of adolescents (Doherty, 2010). According to Doherty, "1950s teenagers *were* strange creatures, set apart from previous generations of American young people in numbers, affluence, and self-consciousness" (p. 34). Parents reacted with wariness. Indicative of the time, the title page of a special teenager-themed

issue of *Cosmopolitan* published in November 1957 reads "Are Teenagers Taking Over?," reflecting the concerns. One article inside the issue called "Are You Afraid of Your Teenager?" encouraged parents to take back control: "Apparently, most of us are going to flinch and hand over the car keys—not just to the family car but to a whole package deal of power over home and community that youth neither knows what to do with nor really wants" (Ahlbum, 1957, p. 41). We will observe similar adult responses to young boy band fandoms.

While parents and other adults grew reactionary toward various youth subcultures, businesses saw an economic opportunity. Teens from well-off families had household influence, if not disposable funds of their own. As Doherty observes:

> *Newsweek* labeled it "the dreamy teenage market," and *Sales Management* christened the thirteen-to-nineteen age bracket "the seven golden years." In 1959, *Life* reported what was by then old news: "The American teenagers have emerged as a big-time consumer in the U.S. economy … Counting only what is spent to satisfy their special teenage demands, the youngsters and their parents will shell out about $10 billion this year, a billion more than the total sales of GM." (p. 41)

Commercial music trends pointed toward what young ears enjoyed. This, combined with the development of doo-wop and rock and roll, led to what we can consider the first true boy bands in the 1960s.

1960s: John Lennon, Paul McCartney, George Harrison and Stuart Sutcliffe form the Beatles in 1960 (Ringo Starr replaced Sutcliffe two years later). Considered by many to be the first boy band, the band was revolutionary not only in sound and sheer level of popularity, but in how they viewed femininity (Douglas, 1994). The four members sported matching suits and androgynous bowl cuts, blended 1950s rock with girl group harmonies and sang joyful, romantic

songs more concerned with holding your hand than sex. Suffice to say, the world took notice. The movement first started in late 1963, following possibly exaggerated reports that fans had mobbed the band after a concert at the London Palladium (Ehrenreich et al., 1992, p. 85). By the time the band made its first stateside appearance in 1964, including a record-breaking appearance on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, "the fans knew what to do…at least 4,000 girls (some estimates run as high as 10,000) greeted them at Kennedy Airport, and hundreds more lay siege to the Plaza Hotel, keeping the stars virtual prisoners" (Ehrenreich et al., 1992, p. 86). The global reaction of young girls and women was dubbed "Beatlemania," which Sherman (2020) defines as "a term that has been weaponized by the media to pathologize young women for going wild, screaming that decibel-shattering scream, and having a blast — imagine if anyone called male sports fans an 'epidemic'" (p. 4). A compilation of reviews from 1964 illustrate how the American press first treated the band as a passing fad only popular because of how the members looked (Schneider, 2014). In the United Kingdom, *New Statesman*'s Paul Johnson (1964) penned a deeply misogynistic attack on Beatles fans and condemned the band, which the publication now notes is the "most complained-about piece in the *Statesman*'s history:"

> While the music is performed, the cameras linger savagely over the faces of the audience. What a bottomless chasm of vacuity they reveal! The huge faces, bloated with cheap confectionery and smeared with chain-store makeup, the open, sagging mouths and glazed eyes, the broken stiletto heels: here is a generation enslaved by a commercial machine. (para. 6)

Lukewarm critical reception to the band's first albums can also be attributed to how rock journalism did not begin emerging until 1967, notably the year that *Rolling Stone* published its first issue (Rodriguez, 2012). This new form of music criticism developed throughout the rest of

the ’60s, coinciding with the Beatles’ changing sound and the new wave of rock bands, such as the Rolling Stones.

Yet for all the boy band hallmarks, a high level of debate surrounding the Beatles’ boy band status has persisted for decades (Lynch & Unterberger, 2018). For instance, one of the first Google search results for the question “Are the Beatles a boy band?” reveals a Wordpress blog titled: “The Beatles Were Never a Boy Band, They Were Always A Great Rock, Pop Rock & Rock n Roll Band From The Start: Debunking The Sadly Very Common Inaccurate, Ignorant, Ludicrous Myth That The Beatles Were Ever A Boy Band” (https://thebeatleswereneveraboybandtheywerealwaysagreatrockpoprockrockn.wordpress.com/, n.d.). The Beatles do have a good many traits associated with non-boy bands. The members came together organically as school mates, wrote their own music and played their own instruments. As explored in the previous section though, none of these factors necessarily constitute a group is not a boy band. The most convincing case is rather how the Fab Five’s sound progressed from doo-wop-leaning pop beginnings to rock. Indeed, “when the group’s career progressed, they moved towards and helped to consolidate the emergent rock genre, cementing doo-wop’s decline,” and thus aligned themselves with the “rebellious masculine identity” of rock over the “earnest” masculinity of pop (Gregory, 2019, p. 26). Even so, the group *did* get its start as a boy band and stayed a boy band, at least through 1964 and the release of their meta film *A Hard Day’s Night*, if not up to 1966 when they ceased touring.

Inspired by the success of *A Hard Day’s Night*, filmmakers Bob Rafelson and Bert Schneider developed a television program about four young men in a pop band (Stahl, 2002). Subsequently, the Monkees came into existence in 1966 with members Davy Jones, Micky Dolenz, Mike Nesmith and Peter Tork — the first fully manufactured boy band. The eponymous

situational comedy aired for two years on NBC, earning two Emmys and prompting nine albums, with the first four topping the *Billboard* 200 (Sandoval, 2012). A huge commercial success, the band sold more records than the Beatles and the Rolling Stones in 1967 (Sandoval, 2012). The Monkees persisted for three years after the show cancellation before officially breaking up in 1971. Despite the band's undeniable success, music journalists treated the band with utter distaste. As Ramaeker (2001) puts it, "the nascent rock press and much of the counterculture community that it served made much sport of reviling the band as 'prefabricated' and 'plastic'" (p. 75).

In 1959, a year before the Beatles formed, Berry Gordy started Motown Records in Detroit, nicknamed "Hitsville U.S.A." because of the label's propensity for producing hit after hit (Smith, 2009). Bands under the label blended historically Black sounds—soul, doo-wop, disco, R&B—with pop to great success, crossing over into both white and Black markets at a time when music charts were heavily segregated (Barrow, Leone, & Skylar, 2020; Browne, 1998; Sykes, 2016). Male vocal groups, namely the Four Tops and the Temptations, helped the label rise to prominence in its first decade, alongside female groups like the Marvelettes and the Supremes. Both groups reached impressive heights. For instance, the Four Tops had back-to-back *Billboard* Hot 100 hits with "I Can't Help Myself (Sugar Pie, Honey Bunch)" in 1965 followed by "Reach Out I'll Be There" in 1966. Neither group is typically labeled a boy band, but the components are there: harmonized vocals, elaborate choreography, pop-friendly hooks, matching outfits (Richmond, 2009). Additionally, Motown is well-known for its assembly line approach to hit-making that valued efficiency and replication. This included an Artist Development department responsible for training young, inexperienced artists who were often from low-income, city backgrounds, to be sophisticated performers with polished stage routines

palatable for mainstream audiences (Sykes, 2016; Warwick, 2013). This approach provides an early model for the boy band bootcamp-esque trainings seen in from the 1980s onward. In 1968, Gordy signed family band the Jackson 5 to the label, cementing Motown's boy band influence into the 1970s.

1970s: The Jackson 5 dominated the early 1970s, fresh off the success of 1969's "I Want You Back," which became the fastest-selling record in the Motown's history (Larkin, 2009a). The band became the subjects of a two-season cartoon, and hosted a television special with an accompanying live album. After 1973, the group's sales stagnated as they pursued a new funk sound. Desiring more creative control and a higher royalty percentage, four of the five brothers chose not to renew their contract with Motown when it expired in 1975, instead signing with Epic Records for subsequent releases.

The Beatles disbanded in 1970, followed by the Monkees in 1971. Imitations followed. Over in Scotland, the Bay City Rollers earned an epithet of their own: Rollermania. First formed in 1967 as a Beatles cover band, the group boasted teen-friendly bubblegum pop and experienced worldwide popularity during the mid-70s, including a watershed year in 1975 marked by two consecutive UK number one hits (Larkin, 2009b). By the end of the decade though, "there was a backlash as the press determined to expose the truth behind the band's virginal, teetotal image," and a series of personal crises caused the band to stop regularly touring by 1981 (Larkin, 2009b).

In 1977, producer Edgardo Diaz assembled the first iteration of Menudo in Puerto Rico, which grew to become one of the island's biggest names. Menudo was unique in structure: with a few exceptions for the most adored, members aged out of the group once they turned 16 to be replaced by newcomers (Sherman, 2020, pp. 35-36). Mimicking the artificial gloss of the Monkees, the band stayed forever young and forever fresh. As noted in a 1984 feature in *The*

Washington Post, members were even discouraged from doing push-ups to avoid premature development (Guillermoprieto, 1984). While attempts to crossover into anglophone markets never proved too successful, the group had a 30-year run before ending in 2009 and helped launch the careers of solo artists like Ricky Martin and Draco Rosa.

Boston group New Edition formed in 1978 by elementary school-aged Bobby Brown, Michael Bivins and Ricky Bell, soon joined by Ralph "Rizz" Tresvant and Ronnie DeVoe after two other friends left. The boys' first manager and DeVoe's uncle, Brooke Payne signed on after seeing them perform at a local talent show and gave them their name, referring to the boys as a new edition of the Jackson 5 (Sherman, 2020, pp. 37-38).

1980s: In November 1981, New Edition encountered local producer Maurice Starr after coming in second place at a talent show his label, Streetcar Records, was hosting. Interested in working with a Black bubblegum pop group, Starr signed the band. They released their debut LP *Candy Girl* in 1983, which instantly placed the boys on their charts: No. 17 on the *Billboard* Hot 100 and No. 1 on the *Billboard* Hot Black Singles, a rebranded name that came from the chart's former soul and R&B categories (Lafrance et al., 2018). After their first national tour only yielded a $1.87 check, they cut Starr loose, but more exploitative and fraudulent business deals would continue to hinder the band (Blount Danois, 2017; Seabrook, 2015). Believing they had signed with MCA Records, New Edition released their 1984 self-titled sophomore album, another slice of pure pop which went double platinum within the year. They soon discovered they had actually signed a production deal, not a record deal, with an outside company called Jump & Shoot Productions (Sherman, 2020, p. 39). Jump & Shoot acted as a middle man and was in full control of the band's work, labor, and royalties — an arrangement that former New Edition tour manager Jeff Dyson referred to as "legalized slavery" (*Behind the Music*, 2005,

cited in Sherman, 2020, p. 39). In order to get out of the contract, the band took on enormous amounts of debt that necessitated an exhaustive album and touring schedule, which deepened existing dissatisfaction as the members wanted to explore new sounds and break out of their family-friendly branding. These interpersonal conflicts led to an indefinite hiatus in 1990, until a brief reunion in 1996.

Having parted ways with New Edition, Starr wanted to replicate the band's success — this time, with a white group that could crossover into the mainstream (Watrous, 1990, para. 22). Enter New Kids on the Block. While New Edition had come together organically before Starr's involvement, he assembled NKOTB through an audition process after first recruiting Donnie Wahlberg, whose brother, the future actor Mark Wahlberg, also briefly participated (Duke, 2008). Soon, Danny Wood, Jonathan and Jordan Knight, and then 12-year-old Joey McIntyre completed the quintet. NKOTB's members were perfect for the act Starr had in mind. They had grown up listening to Black music and favored rap (Sherman, 2020, p. 42; Watrous, 1990, para. 19). Most of the band had attended Black public schools in Roxbury, the birthplace of New Edition, because of Boston's 1965 Racial Imbalance Act, which caused any majority-white or majority-Black schools to desegregate through busing (Noy, 2012, pp. 18-19).

The band got to work with a vigorous rehearsal schedule, dance lessons, and gigs anywhere they could get them, including "retirement homes, schools, community centers, roller rinks" (Sherman, 2020, p. 44). Columbia Records (then known as CBS) signed the white band to its Black division in 1986 and an eponymous debut soon followed. The band was mis-marketed though, with hopes of making it onto Black radio stations before white radio stations (Watrous, 1990, para. 30). The boys did not catch a break until a single from their second LP, 1988's *Hangin' Tough*, accidentally got played on a Florida radio station's modern pop program and

skyrocketed once MTV took notice (Noy, 2012, pp. 75-76). 1989 was the band's banner year. By December, *Hangin' Tough* had gone eight-times platinum and produced five top 10 hits on the *Billboard* Hot 100 (Duke, 2008). The band's home state Massachusetts even declared April 24, 1989, "New Kids on the Block Day" (Cappadona, 2014). The band filled a teenage girl-friendly void in a masculine '80s popular music scene where metal groups like Megadeth and Whitesnake dominated, and pop came in the form of female idols like Paula Abdul and Madonna (Sherman, 2020, p. 46; Warner, 1992, p. 529). NKOTB capitalized on the success, with their faces bedazzling everything from clothing to bedding to school supplies to puzzles to candy dispensers (Watrous, 1990, para. 38).

1990s: NKOTB's prowess continued into 1990 with the release of *Step by Step*, and they were named the highest-paid entertainers in the country by the following year ("Little Known Facts about the Forbes 40," 1997). A fan club formed by the members' moms had over 200,000 members in 1991, one of the largest in the world (Warner, 1992, p. 529). Yet while the band did not officially call it quits until 1994, the preceding years followed a familiar pattern: frustrations with a lack of creative control, burn out from tours and recording, lack of privacy, intrapersonal tensions and harsh words from the press, especially as '90s grunge began to take hold (Sherman, 2020, p. 47). Donnie Wahlberg was arrested in 1991, reportedly setting fire to a hotel room, though he claimed he had only sprayed a fire extinguisher (Anderson, 1991). The charges were dropped after he agreed to make public safety announcements on fire safety and drugs (Anderson, 1991). Jonathan quit in 1994, soon followed by the rest of the band.

Orlando, Florida entrepreneur Lou Pearlman saw money-making potential in the boy band business after chartering flights for NKOTB a few times on one of his planes in the late '80s. In 1992, he put out an ad in the *Orlando Sentinel* reading: "Teen male vocalist. Producer

seeks male singers that move well, between 16-19 years of age. Wanted for New Kids-type singing/dance group. Send photo or bio of any kind" (Stephen, 2014, para. 3). He soon dubbed AJ McLean, Howie Dorough, Nick Carter, Brian Littrell and Kevin Richardson the Backstreet Boys, and the group debuted at SeaWorld's Grad Nite with new matching haircuts in April 1993. Following the Motown model, Pearlman put them through a boy band bootcamp that involved six-to-eight hour daily rehearsals, before they toured a national circuit of middle and high schools (Sherman, 2020, p. 57). By 1994, they signed a record deal with Jive Records, now RCA/Sony. The band first gained traction in Europe after recording in Sweden and captured an American audience with their second album, 1997's *Backstreet's Back*. However, despite the band's international recognition, they still were not making money. Pearlman and his company Trans Continental Records, which was uncovered as a Ponzi scheme in 2006, controlled most of the band's assets, and he had listed himself as a sixth member of the group (Burrough, 2007). Around the time of his 2007 arrest for embezzlement, allegations that Pearlman had inappropriate sexual misconduct with young male musicians, including Carter of BSB, also emerged (Burrough, 2007). Between 1993-1997, Pearlman earned $10 million off BSB, while the band earned $300,000, a miniscule fraction, comparatively (Dunn, 1999, para. 8). BSB bought him out for $29.5 million and released their first album to go No. 1 on the *Billboard* Hot 100, 1999's *Millennium*.

Pearlman, aware of the profit potential of competing boy bands, next orchestrated the creation of *NSYNC, named for the last letter of each member's first name: Lance "Lanste**n**" Bass, Chri**s** Kirkpatrick, Joseph "Joe**y**" Fantano, Justi**n** Timberlake and Joshua "J**C**" Chasez. (Early on, Bass replaced Jason Galasso, earning a new nickname so the group could keep the acronym name.) Under Pearlman's control, NSYNC's rise closely paralleled that of Backstreet

Boys. They rigorously trained, recorded their first album in Sweden, blew up in Europe and then the U.S., after a key Disney performance that aired live on television in July 1998 (Sherman, 2020, p. 95). And, also like BSB, Pearlman had trapped them in an exploitative situation: after three years and 10 million records sold, each member received a check for $10,000 (Forde, 2019). However, NSYNC's first record deal was made in Europe and a contractual loophole allowed them to break free after settlements (Forde, 2019). Aptly named, sophomore album *No Strings Attached* released in March 2000 and sold an astronomical 2.4 million copies in the first week, including 1.2 million copies on the first day and doubling the record set by BSB with *Millennium* a year prior. NSYNC's record lasted for 15 years before being broken (Cox, 2015).

The mid to late '90s were a golden age for boy bands. *Billboard* magazine declared 1998 "the year of the boy band" (Mazzarella, 2008, p. 284). Backstreet Boys and NSYNC kickstarted a veritable wave of American boy bands eager to capitalize on the demand, to varying degrees of success: 98 Degrees, B2K, C-Note, Dream Street, Hanson, LFO, O-Town (Sherman, 2020, pp. 71-79). Modeled after NKOTB, English group Take That inspired a wave in the U.K., bolstered by the American groups: Boyzone, East 17, 5ive, Westlife (Sherman, 2020, pp. 80-85). In South Korea, Seo Taiji and Boys pioneered the country's own brand of pop music, paving the way for future K-pop boy bands (Mendez, 2017).

2000s: Compared to the boy band explosion of the 1990s, the first half of the 2000s had a dry spell. After the release of their third album, NSYNC announced an indefinite hiatus, as did Backstreet Boys. Both groups came back in 2004: BSB pursued a new adult direction and has stuck around since then, while NSYNC ended things with a greatest hits album after Justin Timberlake announced his departure.

Things picked back up with the Jonas Brothers, a pop-punk, instrument-playing trio. Brothers Kevin, Joe and Nick Jonas first started the band in 2005. By then, 12-year-old Nick already had a record deal with Columbia Records and had a limited release of a self-titled Christian pop-rock album (Chmielewski, 2008). While label president Steve Greenberg did not like the album, he liked Nick's voice, and after hearing a song made by all three brothers, decided to sign them as a group (Wood, 2007). Columbia dropped the band in 2007 after a lackluster performance by their 2006 debut album, *It's About Time*, but little time passed before they signed with Disney label Hollywood Records. The Disney co-sign gave them key publicity and marketing opportunities, like Radio Disney airtime and recording the theme song for a Disney show, and their second self-titled album, released that August, took off (Chmielewski, 2008; Dimeo, 2008). The Jo Bros' pop-punk sensibilities adhered to the tastes of the moment, as emo groups like All Time Low and Panic! At The Disco also gained mainstream traction (Tolentino, 2017). Yet the boys set themselves apart with a family-friendly, teen-oriented appeal, complete with a pastor for a father and purity rings on their fingers (Marine, 2019). Their third album *A Little Bit Longer* peaked at number one on the *Billboard* 200 and, surprisingly for a '00s boy band (or a boy band of any era), received critical praise. The album placed 40th on *Rolling Stone*'s "Best 50 Albums of 2008" list, and the brothers earned a Best New Artist Grammy nomination the following year. During this time, the Jonas Brothers also started acting and starred as the leads in the wildly popular *Camp Rock* movie franchise, then led a TV show of their own.

Disney competitor Nickelodeon sought to replicate the Jo Bros with made-for-television band Big Time Rush in 2009. The group had decent success musically, with their first album peaking at number three on the *Billboard* 200, and a four year run of their eponymous show.

Over in the U.K. during the same year, British-Irish dance-pop group the Wanted were put together through an extensive nine-month audition process, soon to be marketed as One Direction's rival (Sherman, 2020, p. 135).

2010s: To put it into fan lingo: Five boys; one band; one dream; One Direction (Admireoned, n.d.). In 2010, five teenage hopefuls auditioned for British producer Simon Cowell's U.K. reality singing show, *The X-Factor*: Niall Horan, Zayn Malik, Liam Payne, Harry Styles and Louis Tomlinson. While the judges liked all five as solo acts, they did not feel strongly enough to send any of them onto the next round until judges Simon Cowell and Nicole Scherzinger decided to combine them into one band. The group did not win the show, instead placing third, but by that point, it did not matter; if anything, third place only gave them a new "underdog" appeal. Propelled by social media, the band already had international popularity, and Cowell signed them to his label Syco Records (Sherman, 2020, p. 139). The next five years saw the band release five back-to-back albums, obliterating music industry records and earning hundreds of accolades ("List of awards and nominations received by One Direction," 2020). Following the 2014 release of fourth album *Four*, One Direction became the first band in history to have its first four albums debut at number one on the U.S. *Billboard* 200; the Monkees also had their first four albums peak at number one, but not within the first week of sales (Rhodan, 2014). In 2015, they topped the record for the most top 10 *Billboard* Hot 100 debuts—a record previously set by the Beatles (Trust, 2015). In 2015, *Forbes* ranked the band as the fourth highest earning celebrities, noting that the band's 74 tour dates over the past year earned the band more than twice as much as the Rolling Stones (O'Malley Greenburg, 2015). Yet the exhaustive album and touring cycle practically ensured the group would burn out quickly. A 2012 profile in *The Guardian*, relatively early in the group's career, opens with Styles receiving a B-12 shot to keep

his energy levels up for the grueling schedule (Llewellyn Smith, 2012). Malik left the group in March 2015, and after the November release of the group's fifth album, *Made in the A.M.*, the band announced an indefinite hiatus. Since then, all five members have pursued solo careers, with Styles taking the Timberlake role and enjoying crossover success with non-1D fans, despite not being the first member to leave (Rolli, 2020a).

One Direction dominated the boy band landscape for the first half of the decade. The expected reasons had led to the Jonas Brothers disbanding in 2013—burn out, solo ambitions, desire for creative control away from the Disney machine. In 2019, the group reunited with a bang when single "Sucker" became their first track to ever reach the number one spot on the *Billboard* Hot 100. The Wanted had breakout international success with single "Glad You Came," but the group never really materialized beyond the U.K. or the one hit.

1D also directly contributed to the success of Australian boy band 5 Seconds of Summer, who play instruments and skew closer to the Jonas Brothers' pop-punk than One Direction's '80s-style boy band harmonies. Formed in late 2011 by school friends Luke Hemmings, Michael Clifford and Calum Hood, soon joined by Ashton Irwin, the group first gained social media traction through sharing covers on YouTube (Sherman, 2020, pp. 156-157). Rather than playing the bands as competitors, like Backstreet Boys and NSYNC, Cowell and 1D instead supported and financially invested in 5SOS (Halperin, 2014). They opened for One Direction's 2013 *Take Me Home* tour and 2014 *Where We Are* tour, gaining key face time with Directioners. The tactic worked, and the group's first two albums released in 2014 and 2015 both debuted at number one on the *Billboard* 200. 5SOS is still together today, although they've slowed down from the relentless album-per-year cycle.

The latter half of the ’10s has seen the proliferation of new modes of boy bands. While non-English boy bands have existed for decades, none of these groups broke out worldwide until BTS. The K-pop boy band followed the success formula set by Korean entertainment agencies, which have a unique, highly manufactured process for building boy bands and girl groups that emulates the Motown model and training system of ’80s-’90s boy bands (Kim and Park, 2018). Prospective members extensively audition and undergo an intensive, trainee program for multiple years before having group dynamics tested (Sherman, 2020, p. 165). Members of bands often live together and have ironclad, multi-year artist contracts. Even if someone goes through the trainee process, there is no guarantee that they will ever debut (Sherman, 2020, p. 165). BTS first began formation in 2010 before debuting in 2013 under Big Hit Entertainment with seven members. Since receiving worldwide recognition around 2018, the group is well on its way to surpassing One Direction’s success (Fuentes, 2020; Kim and Park, 2018). It is worth noting that K-pop girl groups are also highly successful, although none come close to BTS’ height. DIY pop-rap collective Brockhampton has also challenged boy bands perceptions both in genre and the demographics of its members, some of whom are people of color or queer, by pointedly self-describing themselves as a boy band (Marine, 2017).

Chapter Two: Evaluating Boy Band Masculinity

This chapter explores how boy bands are constructed to have non-threatening masculinities that skew toward androgynous/feminine in order to appeal to their target audience of young teenage girls and their parents. I focus on how these masculinities are constructed via youth, dance performance, and innocence. Then, I consider how boy bands are inherently thought of as feminine beyond these intentional constructions by evaluating the role of authenticity.

Boy Band Masculinity

Since their inception, boy bands have melded together the feminine with the masculine. Part of what made the Beatles' ascent so groundbreaking was how the band catered to a female audience, embracing femininity rather than the more masculine modes of rock at the time. As Douglas (1994) explains:

> First of all, the Beatles were good — really good — and they took their female audience seriously … For girls, it was that they so perfectly fused the 'masculine' and 'feminine' strains of rock 'n' roll in their music, their appearance, and their style of performing." (p. 116)

The band sang romantic — but not carnal — sentiments ("I Want To Hold Your Hand") and engaged in 'girl talk,' further strengthened by the group's propensity for covering girl-groups like the Marvelettes (Kapurch, 2016). Their close harmonizing, imitative of doo-wop and girl groups, contrasted with the rough, throaty blues-rock vocals of contemporary artists like the Rolling Stones and the Animals, "leading to a distinction in pop- versus rock-oriented groups toward the end of the 1960s" (Gregory, 2019, p. 11). As Gregory also notes, the Beatles' "subsequent rejection of romantic pop illustrates how music coded as feminine is all too readily jettisoned in the pursuit of authentic masculinity" (Gregory, 2019, p. 26). Even the band

members' longer hair, uncommon for the time, emphasized their unconventional approach to masculinity.

These aspects continued into subsequent boy band eras. Several scholars have highlighted how boy bands have manufactured, innocent masculinities designed to appeal to young girls and their families (Hansen, 2018; Jamieson, 2007). An essential part of how these masculinities are constructed is right there in the name: "boy." Sustained images of youthfulness make boy bands seem harmless and "convey promises of a suspended utopia in which the playfulness of childhood is carried over into adult life" (Hansen, 2018, p. 196). Part of the boy band appeal to a young girl is that the members' youth makes them seem more accessible, intimate and relatable. Vulnerability also plays a part, with fans expressing desires to take care of younger, baby-faced members (Gregory, 2019, p. 53). There also is a nostalgic appeal to protective parents, who may find that "mild-mannered youthful masculinity harks back to earlier times where good manners mattered and where chastity had cultural currency" (Gregory, 2019, p. 7).

This boy-next-door image necessitates that members publicly refrain from excessive behavior, including drinking, drugs, partying, affairs, etc. They may experiment with calculated, socially acceptable acts of rebellion to curate a bad boy, pseudo-rock star appeal, but these tend to lack any real signification other than youthful mischief, therefore maintaining an overall parent-approved reputation (Hansen, 2018; Jamieson, 2007). Incidents like a 2014 video circulating of One Direction members Louis Tomlinson and Zayn Malik smoking a joint are scandalous not because the content is extreme but because it was diametrically opposed to the band's clean, family-friendly image. Looks skew toward the prepubescent — and therefore the feminine — too, with members sporting clean-shaven faces and lean builds rather than muscular. Jamieson (2007) notes how Backstreet Boys' management especially highlighted Nick Carter,

the youngest and most androgynous-appearing member, in music videos. He summarizes how Carter's subsequent popularity, and the queer undertones of his presentation, influenced what young girls deemed attractive:

> This relatively new type of male sex symbol is sensitive (not afraid to express emotions), soft-skinned, usually blonde, thin (if not emaciated), youthful (which implies a lack of body and facial hair, boundless energy, as well as a certain coy naïveté), fashionable and possesses an above-average ability to dance; he is, in a word, androgynous, embodying in roughly equal proportions traits which are traditionally perceived as masculine and feminine. (p. 245)

Jamieson's summation also points us to another tenet of the constructed boy band masculinity that was also previously explored in Chapter One: performance and dance. Following the popularization of the '90s boy band styling, boy bands are expected to dance to be successful in the genre (Collins and Harding, 2019). Shock is expressed at groups like One Direction who *don't* dance (Collins and Harding, 2019). In Western culture, dance has grown to have feminine connotations since the end of the nineteenth century (Burt, 1995). A key part of these connotations stems from the flawed prejudice that male dancers are effeminate and therefore must be gay (Burt, 1995).

Boy Band Sexuality

In many ways, we can understand boy band sexuality as an extension of boy band masculinity, yet there are a few new ideas to underscore. Frith and McRobbie (1990) differentiate between domineering "cock rock," rock music that emphasizes male sexuality, and vulnerable "teenybop," which is targeted at young girls that represents nonthreatening forms of sexuality — i.e., teen pop idols, including boy bands. In cock rock, the aggressive construction

of masculinity manifests as a sexual iconography that is threatening to girls who have been educated to understand sex as something intimate and loving. In contrast, boy band sexuality is "transformed into a spiritual yearning carrying only hints of sexual interaction. What is needed is not so much someone to screw as a sensitive and sympathetic soulmate, someone to support and nourish the incompetent male adolescent as he grows up" (p. 320). However, while boy bands have a reputation for being innocent and lovelorn, a predisposition to talk about their sexuality persists.

To preface my first set of hypotheses, I must first divide the coding measures used in this study into two separate categories, which serve to objectify a subject: themes and tropes. In following the work of other scholars, I differentiate between themes, meaning the dominant subjects of discourse, like an artist's age, versus tropes, which are literary or rhetorical devices that stand in for larger ideas, such as the words "genuine" and "original," which relate to positive ideas of authenticity (Whipple, Coleman, & Hix, 2019; McLeod, 2002). The boy band characteristics I explore in this chapter helped me to hypothesize the themes and tropes for the study portion. While some of these are not inherently negative, they are all related to ideas of femininity and work in tandem with further associating boy bands with their fans, who have been historically ridiculed and dismissed. Evidence on boy band masculinity leads me to predict the following, in which the 1 and 2 labels denote themes and tropes, respectively.

H1a: Stories about boy bands will describe them significantly more often than non-boy bands in terms of their *age and youth.*

H1b: Stories about boy bands will describe them significantly more often than non-boy bands in terms of their *performance*.

H2a: Stories about boy bands will use significantly more *feminine tropes* and more *masculine tropes* than stories about non-boy bands.

H2b: Stories about boy bands will use significantly more *sexualized* and more *innocence tropes* than stories about non-boy bands.

Boy Band Authenticity

A common refrain of boy band detractors is that boy bands do not make "real" music. We can understand this peculiar concept of "real" music in terms of authenticity, understood as the opposite of falseness. "Authenticity is whatever is *not false* or *not an imitation*. Presumably, this makes *real* whatever does not fit those profane categories" (Strand, 2012). Yet authenticity is not so neatly defined as a clearly observable, objective dichotomy. As Strand continues, "authenticity still appears to hover between fact and value, description and evaluation." Part of what makes authenticity difficult to define in terms of music criticism is how it gets used as a substitute for related but different ideas, leading to different discourses in music criticism (Lindberg and Weisethaunet, 2010). Authenticity can be viewed perhaps as individuality, authorship, honesty, identity, integrity, etc. Notions of authenticity can also change meaning over time (Lindberg and Weisethaunet, 2010).

Several scholars note that the dichotomy between authentic/inauthentic, and the subsequent dichotomy between creativity/commercialization, is gendered (Hansen, 2018; Moos, 2013; Wald, 2002). Much of this stems from the surrounding ideas that pop, especially the upbeat bubblegum pop favored by boy bands, is gendered and as feminine. Wald emphasizes the existence of "a gendered hierarchy of "high" and "low" popular culture that specifically devalues the music consumed by teenage girls" (para. 2). As Moos notes, "The interconnections between music, masculinity, and "(in)authenticity" become particularly apparent when boy bands are

being stigmatized as not being "grown" or "real" bands" (p. 3). In other words, because of the construction of a safe, non-threatening masculinity, boy bands are viewed as inauthentic. Authenticity discourse within popular music criticism also typically treats authenticity as a *value judgment* where fans attribute added value to the music they perceive as authentic (Strand, 2012). In this sense, we can understand how correlating inauthentic music with pop transposes to attaching negative value to femininity. Lastly, it is important to consider why the primary boy band talents, vocals and dance choreography, are seen as requiring less skill or expertise than playing an instrument. As explored in the previous section, dance is considered feminine. Similarly, within the gendered discourse of music authenticity, "singing tends to be viewed as a lesser form of musicianship than playing a guitar, keyboard or drums" (Gregory, 2019, p. 14). Male pop artists who sing without instrument playing therefore occupy a feminine — i.e., less authentic — position in music.

Opposition to commercialization is a key tenet of authenticity — fears over a group "selling out" are paramount for some fans. Originally, selling out was a compliment, referring to literally selling out a live show, but the term became a dreaded condemnation during the 1960s (Nicolay, 2017). It is a thin line for bands to walk: they must garner enough success to start drawing fans, but not enough where they get accused of prioritizing charts over artistry. As critic and musician Franz Nicolay (2017) summarizes, "musicians for the next few decades found themselves in the paradoxical role of having to self-consciously manage perceptions of their authenticity." British rock band The Who poked fun and pushed back at the concept by titling its third studio album *The Who Sell Out* and interspersing the record with fake jingles and endorsements.

The quest for authenticity is not limited to fans. After blowing up to superstar status, seminal rock band the Rolling Stones decided to throw a free concert in 1969 at Altamont Speedway in an effort to maintain an authentic image — a decision that ultimately resulted in four deaths. Music journalist Joel Selvin succinctly summed up the central rock-and-a-hard-place crisis the Stones faced: “They needed to rise above such common commercial concerns or risk losing important face in the underground. Of course they were doing it for the money, but they couldn’t be *seen* as doing it for the money” (Selvin, 2016, p. 50).

Authenticity is closely tied together with the rockism versus poptimism debate that began in the early 2000s. English musician Pete Wylie first coined “rockism” in 1981 as a tongue-in-cheek riff playing on the “Rock Against Racism” campaign (Morley, 2006). The term evolved to refer to an automatic tendency to view rock as a superior music form, typically used pejoratively against music critics who impose rock values when analyzing non-rock genres. Music journalist Kelefa Sanneh (2004) offers one definition: “A rockist is someone who reduces rock 'n' roll to a caricature, then uses that caricature as a weapon. Rockism means idolizing the authentic old legend (or underground hero) while mocking the latest pop star” (para. 4). Rockism views rock as the aspirational norm, rather than a single genre amongst many, which each merit individualized forms of evaluation. While rock albums have the luxury to be hailed as “classics,” a catchy pop album can only ever be a “guilty pleasure.” Following Sanneh’s lead, Kramer argues that rockist music criticism emphasizes certain “aesthetic and ideological criteria” related to authenticity: “sincerity, anticommercialism, rawness, and the rock shibboleth of ‘keeping it real’” (2012, p. 590).

Rock dominated the 1980s landscape, but as hip-hop grew in popularity and increasing genre diversification occurred, it gradually lost that status. In his infamous 2004 essay “The Rap

Against Rockism" published in *The New York Times*, Sanneh condemns how rockist viewpoints have persisted in established music criticism and limit how critics listen to music. Additionally, he points out how the rockist viewpoint upholds the straight, white male ideal of early music journalism and seems to similarly comment on *who* should be making music. For instance, the "disco sucks!" backlash of the 1970s, which led to anti-disco rallies and bonfires of disco records, occurred simultaneously with the critical praise of white punks. Considering the genre's strong origins within Black and gay communities, disco defenders point out how the demonization of the genre contributed to upholding a musical hierarchy that places white artists on top.

Sanneh's piece and similar outputs gave way to poptimism, or popism, a new analysis framework defined in opposition to rockism: the poptimist believes pop music is worthy of professional critique and deserves the same level of respect as rock music. In response to Sanneh's essay, music journalist Jody Rosen discussed the rise of poptimism for *Slate* in 2006, writing: "Pop (and, especially, hip-hop) producers are as important as rock auteurs, Beyoncé is as worthy of serious consideration as Bruce Springsteen, and ascribing shame to pop pleasure is itself a shameful act" (para. 4) The music landscape has greatly changed since the early 2000s, as the music industry adapted to the internet and streaming models. An outcropping of blogs democratized music journalism, diminishing the role of the music critic as the ultimate tastemaker. In many ways, poptimism became a more acceptable framework with which to approach music journalism. For instance, reputable digital music publication *Pitchfork*, which first grew its following by focusing on independent music, now covers a wider range of genres and artists (Itzkoff, 2015; Wickman, 2015). After not reviewing the first five albums of pop star

Taylor Swift, the site started covering her music in 2017 following the release of her sixth studio album *Reputation* (Lowe, 2019; Wickman, 2015).

Ten years after Sanneh's essay, music journalist Saul Austerlitz wrote a rebuttal of poptimism, also in *The New York Times*, titled "The Pernicious Rise of Poptimism." Under Austerlitz's view, poptimists had fallen to the same traps as the rockists; the framework shields pop artists from valid criticisms, while instantly dismissing the tastes of non-pop fans as pretentious. He writes: "The reaction has swamped the initial problem and created a wildly distorted version of the music world in 2014, as reflected in the way it's covered" (para. 7). This view holds some merits. Rockism versus poptimism creates a false dichotomy; many music fans simply like what they like. However, in the same essay, Austerlitz still condescends to young pop fans: "But should gainfully employed adults whose job is to listen to music thoughtfully really agree so regularly with the taste of 13-year-olds?" (para. 11). The rockism versus poptimism debate has largely faded from music discourse in the past decade, likely due to further genre diversification, yet the obsession with authenticity remains.

It is necessary to complicate our portrait of boy band authenticity by acknowledging that many boy bands are undeniably corporate entities. Simon Cowell changed boy band history when he invited five solo singers auditioning for *The X-Factor* to combine forces into one act. The Wanted was formed through a nine month long audition process. The Monkees were explicitly fabricated in imitation of the Beatles following the success of the band's film, *A Hard Day's Night*. As explored previously, the Monkees were the first manufactured boy band. Yet presenting an authentic image was still of the utmost importance to the band's creators. While all the members did have music and performance experience, the audition process underscored a desire for "real," relatable guys who were not seasoned actors (Stahl, 2002). Perhaps inevitably,

these "real" guys soon felt constrained by a lack of creative control and strained to gain artistic freedom. Additionally, boy bands are often viewed as interchangeable fads because of their formulaic structure that consists of type-casting each member into a different role, such as the heartthrob, the bad boy, the cute one, the responsible one, and the shy one. (Caramanica, 2012; Seabrook, 2015; Sherman, 2020).

One Direction provides a modern example of clashes between management and a manufactured boy band seeking more artistic control. Following his departure from the group in 2015, Zayn Malik signed a new record deal and shared the news with fans in a tweet: "I guess I never explained why I left , it was for this moment to be given the opportunity to show you who i really am! #realmusic #RCA" (Toomey, 2015). Hashtag "real music" can sound harsh at first — — implying that One Direction's music is, by contrast, not real. Yet Malik expanded on his desire for self-expression in his first interview after the split, saying, "There was just a general conception that the management already had of what they want for the band, and I just wasn't convinced with what we were selling. I wasn't 100 percent behind the music" (Cooper, 2015, para. 21). Malik details how his attempts to experiment with R&B sounds were shut down by the label. Additionally, he felt he lacked control outside the music as well, explaining how his role as "the quiet one" or "the mysterious one" felt like a false narrative was being imposed on him in order to sell a product (Cooper, 2015).

However, in both cases, we must differentiate between the band members' personal desires for self-expression and the imposed authenticity discourse. It is likely simultaneously true that Malik wanted to explore new sounds he was passionate about and that he wanted to construct a new pop identity in opposition to boy band stereotypes because he had internalized

them. More so, boy bands are commercialized, but this should not determine whether they make "real" music.

Based on this discussion, I offer the following hypothesis for how boy bands are written about in terms of authenticity:

H2c: Stories about boy bands will use significantly less *positive authentic tropes* and significantly more *negative authentic tropes* than stories about non-boy bands.

H2d: Stories about boy bands will use significantly less *positive expertise tropes* and significantly more *negative expertise tropes* than stories about non-boy bands.

Chapter Three: Fan Culture

What is a Fan?

Fans have become an ubiquitous concept in popular culture: someone might be a fan of a certain television show or a celebrity or even something as mundane as a cereal brand. On a surface level, the term can have a wide scope, with “fan” simply referring to someone having a strong interest in a person or thing. In the music community, someone is likely to be a fan of seemingly innumerous artists, based on their familiarity and enjoyment of a handful of songs.

But fan communities, also referred to as fandoms, go beyond the music fans whose interest is merely casual. A key part of the distinction includes not just identifying as a fan of an artist, but having that status as a fan contribute significantly to notions of identity. Members of fan communities are more passionate and involved — these are the fans who know every song in an artist’s discography. They also participate in more fan activities beyond listening. Fan activities include things like going to concerts and buying merchandise, but a monetary element is not necessarily required. Talking to other fans, reading fan magazines and even just listening to the music itself also qualify as fan activities.

Many of these fan activities can also be done at home. For young female fans, there is a notable prevalence of “bedroom culture,” meaning that it’s common for them to listen to music, hang posters, discuss artists, etc. in domestic spaces like their bedrooms and the bedrooms of the friends, rather than a public sphere (McRobbie, 1990). Historically, bedroom culture has increased the accessibility of music communities for younger female fans that typically had less freedom when growing up than their male counterparts. But because bedroom culture is by nature more secluded, the trend also has connections to how female fans have long been systematically dismissed and reduced, both by other fans and by dominant music discourses. Those who engage in public behaviors, such as being a frequent concertgoer, and private but

consumption-based behaviors, such as collecting records, become the dominant image of a fan — and these behaviors are typically more associated with male fans (Hill, 2014). Young women participating in bedroom culture don't have the same visibility and thus get left out of the conversation or are viewed as not a "real" fan.

Online Fandom

In some ways, online fandom is a natural extension of bedroom culture, and similarly, it is a female-dominated space (Meggers, 2012). Although online fandom is inherently more public in nature, fans still participate from their homes. Additionally, online fan communities are accessible regardless of geographic barriers that may prevent fans from participating in physical fan activities, like attending concerts and fan meet-ups. Fans can communicate with each other via forums, and other activities like reading magazine articles about an artist also translate to an online format. The proliferation of fandom into online spaces also involves new modes of communication: internet language (McCulloch, 2019). For example, fans might use lingo like OMG to mean "oh my gosh" or LOL to mean "laugh out loud."

Another key aspect of online fandom is the writing and consuming of fanfiction, where fans create their own stories about their favorite artists. Because of its inherently individual and creative nature, the possibilities of different fanfiction storylines are limitless. Some writers prefer to write real-world scenarios, while others reimagine their favorite artists in alternate universe settings where they aren't their famous selves and are instead regular college students, for example. Fanfiction writers of popular works can also form reputations within fan communities. Websites like Wattpad and Tumblr make it easy for readers to find, follow and support their favorite writers. And fanfiction can gain big followings. For instance, there's the infamous case of popular book and movie franchise *Fifty Shades of Grey* first getting its start as

Twilight fanfiction (Cuccinello, 2017). More recently, a fanfiction centered on One Direction member Harry Styles also led to a book deal and movie adaptation named *After*, which made nearly $70 million worldwide off a $15 million budget (Bien-Kahn, 2019).

While romantic plotlines aren't a defining quality of fanfiction, stories with sexual aspects make up a big part of fanfiction's external reputation. Fanfiction often involves fans inserting themselves into a story as a romantic interest for an artist or pairing up band members that they wish were in a romantic relationship. Exploring sexuality through fanfiction has overwhelmingly positive effects for young female fans. They have expressed becoming more comfortable with their own sexualities and more accepting of others' sexualities through their experiences consuming fanfiction (Meggers, 2012).

Social media also plays a significant role in online fandom. Fans dedicate social media accounts on sites like Tumblr, Instagram and Twitter to their favorite artists where they share news updates, promote an artist's work and engage in fan discourse. The updates can include everything from the last place an artist was seen and relationship rumors to mainstream press coverage. These accounts also provide a space for other fans to find like-minded individuals. Many fans speak positively of the bonds and friendships they form over a shared passion and find their online fan communities to be sources of joy (Barber, 2010).

However, it's not uncommon for fandom drama to take place, both within the same fandom and between two separate fandoms. For instance, fans of the same boy band might disagree with one another about shipping pairs — i.e., which two members they wish to see romantically involved — or whether fans should even partake in shipping. One Direction provides a relevant example. In the early 2010s, some fans vehemently believed that band members Harry Styles and Louis Tomlinson were secretly dating because of the pair's closeness

and camaraderie in interviews. But others believed the so-called “Larry Stylinson” shippers’ vocal obsession eventually led to a rift in the boys’ friendship, which Tomlinson publicly stated was the case (Devoe, 2017). Fans will also bond together in defense of an artist. In 2012, a Twitter feud erupted between One Direction and The Wanted, another boy band on the rise in the United Kingdom (Toomey, 2012). Fans quickly mobilized on social media in support of their preferred act and asserted their fandom’s superiority.

This hyperactive social media fandom can also be considered a form of stan culture, a concept that first arose in the early 2000s and took its name from an Eminem song that detailed a young fan’s unhealthy obsession with Emimem’s alter ego. ‘Stan’ grew in popularity as both a noun and verb throughout the 2000s and 2010s and especially gained ground in social media circles. Merriam-Webster added stan in April 2019, defining it as “an extremely or excessively enthusiastic and devoted fan.” The dictionary entry also notes that the word is often disparaging, but self-identifying stans often wear the label as a badge of honor.

Similarly, the fandoms of pop artists tend to have nicknames that are either self-given or given by the artist themselves. For instance, Taylor Swift fans are commonly referred to as “Swifties,” and Nicki Minaj fans are called “Barbz.” Twitter stan culture involves frequently promoting an artist and their work — and outspokenly speaking against anyone who disagrees. Some groups of stans have particularly notorious reputations for inciting vicious messages the moment there’s a whiff of public criticism against their artist, like when legions of Barbz attacked a blogger with death threats after she expressed a desire for Nicki Minaj to try a new direction in her music (Coscarelli, 2018). Additionally, social media enables forms of stalking, which is prominent in One Direction fan culture. Fans share real time information tracking an artist’s location or determining where they might be headed, so that fellow fans can go to the

physical location in hopes of getting a selfie, an autograph, or even just a glimpse of their idol (Ewens, 2020). Such behavior can constitute real concerns for artist privacy and a need for boundaries. However, fan scholars like Ewens and Proctor (2016) emphasize the need to not view fans as a monolith. Some fans draw distinctions between more public settings where artists are more likely to expect fan interactions, like outside a radio station where the artist is doing an interview, and private settings, and only wait outside the former (Ewens, 2020). Extreme behavior, despite often getting the most attention, is termed extreme for a reason and does not depict the experience of the whole, which is highly individualized. Despite toxic aspects of stan culture, the phenomenon again emphasizes the importance of self-identifying as a fan and surrounding oneself with others who do the same.

Female Fan Representation and Sexuality

In music communities, female fans have long been disparaged and sidelined. There's a historical tendency to define a female fan based on sexuality — or lack thereof. Two stereotypes have persisted since their usage began in the 1960s: the teenybopper and the groupie. In fact, for decades following their inception, teenyboppers and groupies provided practically the only ways of understanding female fans' place in rock music (Coates, 2003).

Compared to groupies, teenyboppers have closer ties to traditional boy band fandoms. After all, when the term first came into play, the boy band the Monkees were the prominent example of a band with teenybopper fans. At first, teenybopper was just a way to refer to the fans of youth-oriented entertainment, but the label grew to become increasingly disparaging and increasingly associated with adolescent femininity (Coates, 2003). A teenybopper might be seven years old. She might be 19. But this wide age range of different fans was united by their so-called bad taste that emphasized superficial attributes: namely, the band members being

conventionally attractive. Bands that teenyboppers flocked to were considered overly commercialized drivel, and the teenybopper was simply too immature to understand the difference (Coates, 2003). Consider again the Monkees, who first rose to fame because of an accompanying television program that depicted the band. Among contemporary rock critics, the Monkees received constant criticism of their inauthenticity, if they received any attention at all, as explored in previous chapters (Gregory, 2020; Ramaeker, 2001; Stahl, 2002). Teenyboppers were used as a signifier for the opposite of authenticity and thus provided a contrast to compare true rock music against.

And teenyboppers are solely female. While idol-worship is common for intense music fans of all genders — think of a young male rock fan covering his room with posters of Black Sabbath — teenybopper is used indiscriminately for female fans. The term grew beyond having mere demographic associations into having strong associations with stereotypical feminine traits, especially having overblown emotions (Coates, 2003). Teenyboppers are "repeatedly pathologized and derided by the media" because of their emotional reactions to artists, resulting in them being depicted as crazy, hysterical, freakish, and infantile (Asquith, 2016, pp. 79-81). Hysteria contains particularly nasty connotations for teenyboppers. The word originally stems from the Greek word for uterus and has a long historical record of being used to dismiss women as having a "womb-linked illness" as explanation for everything from anxiety to irritability to a desire for sex — i.e., expressing strong emotions (Ewens, 2020, p. 12). Additionally, their sexual desires were primarily viewed as virginal and innocent. Teenyboppers lusted after clean, carefully marketed teen idols. For the time of "sex, drugs and rock and roll," the puppy love of teenyboppers was again seen as outside the scope of true rock culture.

If teenyboppers are characterized by the absence of sexuality, groupies are characterized by their excess of sexuality. In fact, sexuality is typically seen as the defining trait of a groupie despite the term first just referring to any intense fan who followed an artist around. Groupie culture did exist in the 1960s and 70s when the term first originated, and some fans did hope to sleep with members of the bands they enjoyed (Cline, 1992). But for many female fans who expressed sexual attraction to an artist, the attraction was simply an escapist fantasy that they had no real desire to act upon (Cline, 1992). But the term was warped by the dominant rock discourse, including publications like Rolling Stone, to encompass nearly any female fan of a rock band with dominantly male fanbases (Coates, 2003). So, if a young woman enjoyed rock music, it wasn't because she appreciated the artistry but rather because of an underlying sexual desire. Therefore, her fan status was worthless and inauthentic.

To understand how pervasive this belief system became, one can also look at how female rock musicians themselves were conflated with groupies (Coates, 2003). Instead of being seen as worthy artists in their own right, they were reduced to sex objects. What is frustrating here is how sexuality did have a central role in the developing 1960s and '70s rock music culture. Male rock stars were lauded for sleeping with groupies — it was essentially an expected aspect of the rock star persona — while the groupies themselves were ostracized (Coates, 2003). Simultaneously, female fans and artists were both viewed as sex objects for male consumption and vilified for expressing any sexual desires of their own. So when it comes to considering the quintessential "sex, drugs and rock and roll" moniker of the time, "sex" can be understood as referring to male sexuality and masculinity. Female sexuality — and therefore the accompanying experiences of female fans — are left out of the equation.

While the groupie became notorious for their hypersexuality and the teenybopper is equated to virginal desires, the two tropes are further linked because of their immaturity when compared to the true rock and roll fan. At its core, this immaturity comes from a perceived lack of taste and appreciation; neither the teenybopper nor the groupie are *really* in it for the music like a real fan (Coates, 2003). Both stereotypes involve seeking out a band because of how attractive they are and expressing a desire to be in a personal relationship with the band member (even if the desire is explicitly a fantasy). The groupie follows a band around not because she's a passionate fan but simply because she wants to sleep with them. She is inauthentic. The teenybopper thinks the band members are cute and is mindless enough to consume whatever entertainment is marketed at her. She has bad taste.

Both historical stereotypes of how a young female music fan behaves can still be seen in how boy band fans are portrayed. Immaturity, artificiality and lack of taste are equated with femininity (Coates, 2003; Moos, 2013; Wald, 2002). Perhaps the largest effect of the disparaging of teenyboppers and groupies by rock scholars and journalists is how, conversely, masculinity has become naturalized in mainstream rock music discourse (Coates, 2003). By systematically othering female fans as not "real" fans, the dominant rock culture distinguishes itself as the opposite (Coates, 2003). Masculinity becomes authenticity.

When it comes to boy band fandom, how the bands themselves are viewed comes into play with how the fans are perceived. Part of the necessary appeal of a successful boy band is the ability to make it big, so it's natural that their fan bases are similarly understood as participating in mainstream culture rather than a counter culture. But for the fans, there also exists a tension between conformity and revolution. Typically, boy band fans are viewed as conforming to mainstream norms — to what the entertainment industry is marketing them, to what is popular

with their friends, to what is played on the radio, etc (Ehrenreich, 1992). But while boy bands themselves represent mainstream culture, the underlying sexuality of their fan bases indicates a desire for freedom and even fandom as an act of personal revolution. Psychologists and parents were initially confounded and distressed by the Beatles-induced "hysteria" that young girls experienced en masse in the 1960s (Ehrenreich, 1992). Beatlemania has become legendary in music history and provides the blueprint for how teenage girl boy band fans are continued to be viewed today: running, screaming, crying, even fainting at the smallest glimpse of a band member.

Yet while contemporary psychologists more or less dismissed Beatlemania as teenage conformity, a retroactive and feminist perspective points to the overt sexual nature of Beatlemania (Ehrenreich, 1992). Frith and McRobbie (1990) posit that pop aimed at a female audience denies or represses female sexuality, explaining "cock rock allows for direct physical and psychological expressions of sexuality; pop in contrast is about romance, about female crushes and emotional affairs. Pop songs aimed at the female audience deny or repress sexuality" (p. 324). However, for young girls growing up with the repressive femininity of the early 1960s, Beatlemania provided an outlet and a safe space to explore their sexuality (Ehrenreich, 1992). And while the sheer reach of Beatlemania diluted its credibility as a counter cultural movement, the behavior displayed by fans rejected the prevailing pleasant, passive white suburban femininity (Ehrenreich, 1992). This also complicates the tendency to dismiss and marginalize boy band fans as teenyboppers that only crave puppy love, which is innocent and light-hearted. At any rate, it is certainly not defined by screaming and fainting.

While things have changed since the early onset of Beatlemania, it is undeniably still more taboo for young women to explore their sexuality compared to young men. But it is a

recurring pattern that while the sexuality of young female fans is used as a means to dismiss and reduce their fan experiences. However, while teenyboppers and groupies are both equated negatively with sexuality in terms of artificiality and bad taste, this oversimplifies what fans actually experience.

From the beneficial effects of online fanfiction to the behavioral rejections of passivity, boy band sexuality is more complicated than merely fans wanting to sleep with band members. Instead, boy band fandom provides outlets for teenage girls to safely explore their sexuality against systematically perpetuated and repressive notions of femininity. However, for the dominant rock music culture to recognize these positive aspects of boy band sexuality would undermine the culture's emphasis on masculine sexuality.

Based on this discussion, I predict that music journalists will describe boy bands in accordance with stereotypes on why fans are drawn to the bands:

H1c: Stories about boy bands will describe them significantly more often than non-boy bands in terms of their *appearance/attractiveness*.

H1d: Stories about boy bands will describe them significantly more often than non-boy bands in terms of their *personal relationships*.

Additionally, I predict that the close ties between boy bands and their fans will lead to the bands being described with tropes related to young female fans:

H2e: Stories about boy bands will use significantly more *positive emotional tropes* and more *negative emotional tropes* than stories about non-boy bands.

H2f: Stories about boy bands will use significantly more *internet language* than stories about non-boy bands.

Finally, when it comes to the fans themselves, I predict that because boy bands are closely perceived in relation to their fans, despite the prominently negative history of boy band fans being dismissed:

H2g: Stories about boy bands will use significantly more *positive fan tropes* and more *negative fan tropes* than stories about non-boy bands.

Chapter Four: Methodology, Results and Discussion

Methodology

This quantitative content analysis used a sample of journalistic articles about boy bands and non-boy bands published between January 1, 2010 and December 31, 2015. Out of the total 210 articles, 105 articles concerned five boy bands: One Direction (1), The Jonas Brothers (2), The Wanted (3), Big Time Rush (4) and 5 Seconds of Summer (5). The second 105 articles focused on seven non-boy bands: Vampire Weekend (6), Arctic Monkeys (7), Two Door Cinema Club (8), Imagine Dragons (9), Phoenix (10), Bombay Bicycle Club (11) and MGMT (12). The following section will explore the criteria for choosing these non-boy bands. The articles were drawn from five publications: the *New York Times*, *Billboard* and *Rolling Stone* in the U.S., and the *Guardian* and the *Times* in the U.K.

Sampling

I selected the following five boy bands as the most relevant English-speaking boy bands for the study timeframe, as previously explored in Chapter One: *One Direction*, *The Jonas Brothers*, *The Wanted*, *Big Time Rush,* and *5 Seconds of Summer*. In 2010, One Direction ranged from ages 16 to 19; Big Time Rush from ages 20 to 21; the Jonas Brothers from ages 18 to 23; the Wanted from ages 17 to 22; and 5 Seconds of Summer from ages 14 to 16 (although the band did not form until late 2011). The average age for the boy band members in 2010 was 18.67 years old. I did not include boy band supergroup NKOTBSB because I wanted to focus on up-and-coming boy bands rather than legacy acts, who may be described differently because of nostalgia and additional history. Non-Western boy bands, namely BTS, were not considered to make the study manageable because this would necessitate deeper exploration of racial intersections.

The criteria for the non-boy bands was that for the duration of the study timeframe, the band must have had all-male members, performed rock/pop, had a relatively young front man and have at least five articles in at least two different publications. Lastly, the band must have gained popularity either in the mid-late ’00s or the start of the study timeframe. These criteria were selected in order to have the boy bands and non-boy bands be as similar as possible to minimize the possible impact larger differences might have had on the results. For instance, if a band had a woman bass player, then the band might get portrayed differently on account of gender. A country band might be described differently than a boy band on the basis of genre differences rather than the boy band label; as previously discussed, boy bands tend to perform music within the realm of pop and rock. I chose bands that were recently popular rather than legacy rock acts because all the boy bands gained popularity either a few years before the timeframe or during the timeframe. Additionally, if a rock group had grown popular drastically earlier than 2010, then the band might be described differently simply because it has so much more history.

Because *age/youth* is one of the themes I coded for, the front man for each non-boy band needed to be under 35 years old at the start of the study timeframe. I determined 35 was a reasonable starting age so that the bands skewed younger without placing unnecessary constraints on what bands could be included, as “boy” is not an essential component for non-boy bands. In 2010, the front men ranged in age from 20 to 34, with Jack Steadman of Bombay Bicycle Club being the youngest and Thomas Mars of Phoenix being the oldest. Additionally, the average age for all the non-boy band members in 2010 (not just front men) was 26.5 years old.

Following suit with the boy band sample, the non-boy band sample was not divided into equal strata per band, but I determined each band needed to have at least five articles in at least

two separate publications to demonstrate its relevance for the time period. To ensure a band met this criteria, I chose bands that had gone through two press cycles during the study timeframe in order to ensure they received enough coverage. I defined a press cycle as the period following an album release, often when the band tours the album. I chose this method rather than having two album release dates to account for 2009 releases that were still getting coverage the following year. For instance, Phoenix's album *Wolfgang Amadeus Phoenix* came out in May 2009 but because the band was touring the album and up for awards in 2010, this counted as a press cycle as the band still received considerable coverage for the album during the study timeframe.

The non-boy bands were:

Vampire Weekend, an American indie rock band formed in 2006 by Ezra Koenig, Chris Baio, Chris Tomson, and Rostam Batmanglij while the four were enrolled in Columbia University. The group first gained acclaim with the 2008 release of its self-titled debut album, which was noted for incorporating world music influences with indie rock. The group's third album *Modern Vampires of the City* (2014) became its second consecutive album to debut at number one on the *Billboard* 200, following 2010's *Contra*, and won the Grammy Award for Best Alternative Music Album. The album also ranked number one in multiple end-of-year "Best of" lists, including that of *Pitchfork* and *Rolling Stone*. In 2010, the band members ranged in age from 26 to 27.

Arctic Monkeys, an English rock band formed in 2002 in Sheffield by Alex Turner, Jamie Cook, Matt Helders, and Andy Nicholson, replaced in 2006 by Nick O'Malley. The group released its debut album, *Whatever People Say I Am, That's What I'm Not* in 2006, which became the fastest selling debut album in British music history and earned the group a Mercury Prize. The band gained U.S. success quickly after. The band's fifth studio album *AM* (2013)

peaked at number one on the *UK Albums Chart*, following in the footsteps of *Suck It and See* (2011), and debuted at number six on the *Billboard* 200. Additionally, *AM* appeared on many music publications' end-of-year best albums lists, including that of *Consequence of Sound, NME* and *Rolling Stone*. The band took a hiatus from August 2014 to 2016. In 2010, the members ranged in age from 24 to 25.

Two Door Cinema Club, a Northern Irish indie pop band formed in 2007 by Alex Trimble, Kevin Baird, and Sam Halliday. The band's debut album *Tourist History* received positive reviews and had moderate success in the U.K, peaking at number 24 on the *UK Albums Chart* and winning the 2010 Choice Music Prize for Irish Album of the Year. Follow-up effort *Beacon* (2012) continued the band's upward trajectory, debuting at number two on the *UK Albums Chart* and number 17 on the *Billboard* 200. In 2010, the three members were 21.

Imagine Dragons, an American pop and rock band formed in 2008 in Las Vegas by Dan Reynolds; after a few iterations, the band's lineup was firmed up in 2011 with members Wayne Sermon, Ben McKee, and Daniel Platzman. The band had a breakout year in 2012 with the release of its debut album *Night Visions*. The album peaked at number two on the *Billboard* 200, the highest position for a rock debut since 2006, and earned the group multiple accolades, including two Grammy Award nominations. Follow up album *Smoke + Mirrors* (2015) had less favorable reviews but still debuted at number one on the *Billboard* 200. In 2010, the members ranged in age from 23 to 26.

Phoenix, a French indie pop and rock band formed in 1997 by Thomas Mars, Deck d'Arcy, Laurent Brancowitz, and Christian Mazzalai. While the band had a moderate underground fanbase following the release of 2000 debut album *United*, it did not hit mainstream success until the release of its highly acclaimed fourth studio album *Wolfgang Amadeus Phoenix*

in 2009. The album appeared on many publications end-of-year best album lists, including that of *Pitchfork, Rolling Stone* and *Spin*, and received the 2010 Grammy Award for Best Alternative Music Album. The band's following album *Bankrupt!* (2013) debuted at number four on the *Billboard* 200. Phoenix sings in English, not French. In 2010, the members ranged in age from 34 to 36 (Weiner, 2010).

Bombay Bicycle Club, an English indie rock band formed in 2005, with its lineup solidifying in 2006 with members Jack Steadman, Jamie MacColl, Suren de Saram, and Ed Nash. At the time of the band's formation, all the members were in secondary school education; it was not until 2008 that they committed full-time to music, having just turned 18. The band experienced moderate success in the U.K. and gained a modest underground following in the U.S. with the releases of *Flaws* (2010) and *A Different Kind of Fix* (2011). In 2014, fourth studio album *So Long, See You Tomorrow* became the band's first album to debut at number one on the *UK Albums Chart*, as well as its first album to enter the *Billboard* 200, where it peaked at 101. In 2010, the members were all 20 years old (Bray, 2014).

MGMT, an American pop and rock band formed in 2002 by Andrew VanWyngarden and Ben Goldwasser. After signing with Columbia and RED Ink in 2006, the band released its debut album *Oracular Spectacular* in 2007 to positive reviews; the album was *NME's* number one album of 2008 and later received recognition in the 2012 edition of *Rolling Stone*'s "500 Greatest Albums of All Time" list. The band's second album *Congratulations* (2010) debuted at number two on the U.S. *Billboard* 200, followed by a self-titled third album in 2013 that peaked at number 14 and received mixed reviews. In 2010, both core members were 27 years old.

Because a number of the bands are based in the U.K. and Western Europe, I chose two U.K. mainstream news outlets, one U.S. mainstream news outlet, and two U.S. music

publications. Additional music-specific outlets, like *Pitchfork* and *Stereogum*, were considered, but these did not cover boy bands sufficiently during the time period, if at all. The publications were:

TheGuardian.com, an online U.K. news outlet of international recognition. It is owned by the Guardian Media group and contains nearly all of the content from the company's two print newspapers, the *Guardian* and the *Observer,* as well as additional, web-exclusive work. The publication was ranked the second most popular online newspaper in the U.K. in 2014, with over 5 million readers per week (Hollander, 2013).

The Times, the online presence of the British daily national paper first founded in 1785. Like the *Guardian,* the *Times* is considered "quality" press, a British designation for papers distinguished by seriousness (Preston, 2012). Along with the *Daily Telegraph*, both publications are often considered the "big three" of British newspapers ("The Times," 2020). Since introducing a paywall in 2010, online readership has decreased, yet the paper remains influential ("Times and Sunday Times readership falls after paywall," 2010).

The New York Times, long considered the newspaper of record in the U.S. and an internationally respected daily. The paper has a robust and reputable arts section that covers a wide range of genres. As of May 2020, the paper has a total of six million digital and print subscribers (Tracy, 2020).

Billboard magazine, founded in 1884. Considered by some as "the undisputed king of music-chart magazines" (Radel, 1994), *Billboard* is perhaps best known for its music charts updated weekly of the most popular songs and albums in different genres, determined by sales and streaming data. Some of the most notable charts include the Hot 100 and *Billboard* 200, tracking the most popular singles and albums, respectively.

Rolling Stone magazine, founded in 1967. The magazine was first known for its coverage of rock music and its success is often considered one of the leading factors in the U.S. developing a mainstream rock criticism (Rodriguez, 2012). *Rolling Stone* now covers a broader range of topics but arguably is still best known for its music and entertainment coverage, with reputable end-of-year "Best of" lists and "500 Greatest" lists.

The articles were obtained by searching each band and publication pairing in the Nexis Uni database and including every article that met the criteria. For example, I searched the database for One Direction articles with results filtered to just the *Times*, then the *Guardian*, then the *New York Times*, and so on until I had done the process for each band considering each publication. Because some band names, like One Direction and the Wanted, are quite generic, I played around with different search terms for each band by adding the names of prominent members to ensure I gathered as many articles as possible. Because *Rolling Stone* is not included in the Nexis Uni database, *Rolling Stone* articles were obtained by searching via EBSCOhost Academic Search Complete and searching manually through the magazine's digital site. To be added to the sample, an article needed to have more than words so that there was enough material to code. Articles that were fewer than 250 words consisted primarily of short news updates, like a record moving up in the charts, and did not focus on the bands enough to warrant coding. The article also needed to narrowly focus on the band or a band member; a few articles were discarded that focused on the band's label or a lawsuit. I sought to accurately reflect the coverage of the time, rather than dedicate an equal number of articles to each band; this was partially driven by necessity as I found that some of the boy bands were underrepresented in these publications despite their commercial and popular success. The sample size was determined by the results for the boy band article searches. Originally, the target sample size for

boy band articles was 125 articles. However, because some boy bands were underrepresented, this was cut down to 105 articles to keep the study scope manageable rather than considering additional publications. I then repeated the search process for the non-boy bands, choosing new bands to consider as necessary until I had an equivalent 105 non-boy band articles.

Measures

The story was the unit of measure. The length of the story was coded as a word count to ensure that the article had met the criteria to be included and as a basic descriptor. Additionally, the gender of the reporter was coded (1 female, 2 male). While none of my hypotheses focus on reporter gender, I wanted to provide contextual information about the articles written. Journalism is a male-dominated industry (Arroyo Nieto & Valor, 2019), so I was interested to see if this would hold true for who was writing about the boy bands because they are associated with women. No musicians or authors who identify as transgender or nonbinary appeared; three articles had no byline and were not considered for the category analysis.

Themes and tropes were counted for the number of times each appeared. Each theme or trope was coded every time it was mentioned, which was defined as a word, phrase or complete sentence. All categories were mutually exclusive. For instance, “dazzling smile” would only be counted one time for *appearance/attractiveness*, while “screaming, obsessive girls” would be counted twice for *fans/negative* because “screaming” and “obsessive” are separately definable ideas in the context of the codebook.

Themes: *Age or youth* was coded if the story gave a number for a band member’s age, or a descriptor such as young, immature, youthful, teen, childlike, boys, etc. For example, the members of One Direction were described as “lolloping around like foals loosed in the men's

department of H&M" in an article that also describes member Harry Styles as "the 17-year-old alpha puppy" (Empire, 2012, paras. 4-5).

Appearance/attractiveness was coded if the story referenced a band member's physical attributes such as body, hair, weight, facial features, tattoos and what a band member was wearing. This category was also coded if the story used positive descriptors of physical attractiveness including cute, heartthrob, hot, dreamy, man candy, smoldering, attractive, yummy, etc. Appearance and attractiveness were combined into one category to avoid overlap. Examples include: Harry Styles is "a phenomenon of tousled hair," Zayn Malik is "all matinee idol looks, charged with smouldering," Liam Payne "has eyebrows that would have suggested turbulent feeling" and Louis Tomlinson is "Doberman-sleek and enigmatic" (Empire, 2012, paras. 5-6).

Performance was coded if the story had references to dancing, choreography or other performance features. For example, in a concert review, Harry Styles "pulls mic-stand jinks and rockular poses," and Liam Payne "plays his microphone like a guitar" and "dances like he means it" (Empire, 2015, paras. 7-8).

Personal relationships were coded if the story referenced a band member's significant other, sibling, parents, children or referenced dating, break ups, affairs, divorces, etc. This category was not counted but coded as either present or not present based on relationship type: n/a (0), family (1), romantic (2), both (3), other (4). For example, a One Direction profile describes Harry Styles as "the one who's managed to remain most level, even as he romances his way around the major metropolitan areas (LA's Kendell Jenner, London's Cara Delevingne, Nashville's Taylor Swift) and buddies up with Anna Wintour at fashion shows" (Lamont, 2014, para. 33).

Tropes: *Authenticity* was coded if the story described a band's music as an accurate representation of the members, produced for personal self-expression rather than financial gain or fame. The number of positive authenticity mentions was coded separately from the number of negative authenticity mentions. Positive mentions of authenticity include terms such as integrity, honesty, sincerity, genuineness, originality, individuality, etc., and negative mentions of authenticity (i.e., inauthenticity) include terms such as conformity, one-dimensional, commercialized, unoriginal, bland, generic, etc. A positive reference to authenticity may also relate to the band having control of its own image, writing its own material, being taken seriously by audiences, or exploring new sounds. For instance, Joe Jonas is praised for his "independent point of view," indicating authenticity ideas of individuality and self-expression (Ryzik, 2011, para. 2). A negative reference to authenticity may also relate to the band being controlled by its label, having an emphasis on commerciality, or sticking to a formula. A negative example points to One Direction being controlled by Cowell and the band's label: "Payne and Malik, along with Harry Styles, Louis Tomlinson and Niall Horan, have spent half a decade having all their financial, sexual and egotistical needs looked after several times over" (Jonze, 2015, para. 7).

Expertise was coded if the story described the band members as being knowledgeable about music and the music scene, or as experienced musicians. The number of positive mentions and the number of negative mentions were coded separately. A negative expertise mention is coded if the story positions the band as inexperienced, amateurish or unknowledgeable. In a profile for the *Guardian,* Llewyn Smith (2012) expresses shock that One Direction, a British-Irish band, knows The Beatles and portrays the group as inexperienced: "I'd thought they might not even know who the Beatles were or are" (para. 23). In a positive example, Malik earns credibility for his vocal range: "His solos, especially on the ballad 'You & I,' could be dazzling,

his voice moving with grace through impressive aerial designs, and he contributed body and dimension to the group's choruses" (Nelson, 2015, para. 4).

Emotional language was coded if the story described the music or artist as emotional or in emotional terms. The number of positive emotions like happy, good mood, upbeat, cheerful, etc. was coded separately from the number of negative emotions like sad, angry, moody, sour, etc. For instance, the members of One Direction "furiously denied any hint of exhaustion" (Jonze, 2015, para. 3), and Joe Jonas "happily obliged a request from a drag queen to lift up his shirt" (Hawgood, 2014, para. 30).

Fans and fandom was coded if the story referenced fans or fan behavior with either a positive or negative connotation—i.e., neutral references to fans were not coded, but rather the language used to describe fans and fan behavior, thus differentiating this category as a trope, not a theme. The number of positive fan mentions was coded separately from the number of negative fan mentions. Negative fan mentions include using fan stereotypes such as groupies and teenyboppers, trivializing or ridiculing fans, describing fans as having bad or immature taste, perceiving fans to like a band for sex appeal or unserious reasons, describing fans as obsessive, hysterical, frivolous, silly, or unable to control their emotions, etc. A One Direction concert review opens: "Every time a roadie moves behind the curtain, a carnivorous squeal reverberates around the auditorium (…) Outside, high winds have laid waste all across the south, but this indoor gale is a force of nature in its own right. It is the hive-mind battle-cry of teenage girls scenting boy-flesh" (Empire, 2012, para. 1). Positive fan mentions include describing fans as having good taste, perceiving fans to like a band for serious reasons, describing fans as supportive or loyal, referencing fandom as a bonding activity or rite of passage, etc. According to

writer Caroline Sullivan, “falling for a boy band is a rite of passage” and a “bonding experience for girls” who “come together as a community” (2015b, paras. 2-4).

Gendered descriptors were coded if the music or artist was described using inherently masculine terms like strong, powerful, masculine, protective, dominant, tough, etc., or inherently feminine terms including vulnerable, delicate, gentle, sweet, chatty, perky, intimate, etc. The number of feminine descriptors was coded separately from the number of masculine descriptors. For instance, Nick Jonas’ voice is feminized as “sweet but not lithe, loud but not powerful” (Caramanica, 2015, para. 8). In a separate article, his music is described as “injected with body-positive bravado” (Hawgood, 2014, para. 13).

Internet language was coded if the story had instances of textspeak, internet linguistics, filler words and other imitations of how young girls speak such as OMG, LOL, using “like” as a filler word, etc. Following Malik’s departure from the group, an article about One Direction in the *Times* opens, “Who are One Direction? Like, seriously? [rolls eyes]” (Nixey, 2015, para. 1).

Sexuality or innocence was coded if the music or artist was described with sexual imagery and/or suggestive language including terms like sexy, risqué, exhibitionistic, homoerotic, racy, etc., or described with a lack of sexuality including terms like wholesome, innocent, pure, modest, naïve, chaste, etc. The number of sexuality mentions was coded separately from the number of innocence mentions. An album review of 1D’s sophomore album *Take Me Home* reveals an example for both: “If a lot of *Take Me Home* is concerned with pitching harmless romance at its pubescent audience in a style that's time-honoured to the point of being hackneyed, other parts of it comprise more of an all-out, crotch-level blitzkrieg than you might expect” (Petridis, 2012, para. 5).

Intercoder Reliability

Two female coders, myself and one independent coder, were trained for approximately two-and-a-half weeks in sessions lasting about two hours each. After approximately 10 hours of training, agreement was achieved on 12% of the stories. Due to study time constraints, these stories were included in the final sample.

Krippendorf's alpha: Age/youth .862, Appearance/attractiveness .975, Performance .999, Personal relationships 1.0, Authenticity/positive .844, Authenticity/negative .841, Expertise/positive .983, Expertise/negative 1.0, Emotional language/positive .837, Emotional language/negative .971, Fans/positive .869, Fans/negative .880, Feminine descriptors .892, Masculine descriptors 1.0, Internet language 1.0, Sexuality .863, Innocence .895.

Results

Of 210 stories, 28.1% came from the *Guardian*, 21.9% from the *Times*, 11.9% from the *New York Times,* 22.4% from *Billboard*, and 15.7% from *Rolling Stone.* The following table shows the breakdown of artist coverage for the 105 boy band articles and the 105 non-boy band articles, excepting one additional article (0.95%) that was about One Direction and the Wanted.

Boy Band	% of Articles in Sample	Non-Boy Band	% of Articles in Sample
One Direction	73.3	Vampire Weekend	30.5
Jonas Brothers	12.4	Arctic Monkeys	21.9
The Wanted	0.95	Two Door Cinema Club	6.67
Big Time Rush	0.95	Imagine Dragons	10.5
5 Seconds of Summer	11.4	Phoenix	9.5
		Bombay Bicycle Club	6.67
		MGMT	14.3

The word count of the stories about boy bands and non-boybands is not significantly different (*F* = .44, *df* = 208, *p* = .658). The stories ranged from 262 words to 4,741 words with a mean of 755 words (SD = 570.24).

Regarding reporter gender, 72.5% of the stories were written by men, and this difference is significant (X^2 = 41.78, *df* = 1, $p < .001$; no cells had expected frequencies less than 5). Significantly more stories about non-boy bands were written by men (X^2 = 4.27, *df* = 1, $p < .05$). 82 stories about non-boy bands were written by men, whereas 68 boy band stories were written by men. 22 stories about non-boy bands were written by women, and 35 stories about boy bands were written by women.

To determine if boybands were written about differently than non-boybands in terms of the characteristics outlined in the literature review, a multivariate analysis of variance, which corrects for tests of multiple dependent variables, showed there were indeed significant differences in nine out of nineteen characteristics (Wilks' Lambda = .617, *f* = 5.209, *df* = 19, $p < .001$).

One of the four themes showed significant differences. Stories were significantly more likely to describe boy bands in terms of their age and youth than non-boy bands: *F* = 13.23, *df* = 1, $p < .001$; Means: Boy band = 1.96 (SD = 2.43), Non-boy band = .93 (SD = 1.55)). On average, boy bands were described in terms of their age and youth about twice as often than non-boy bands. H1a was supported.

H1b was not supported; boy bands and non-boy bands were described about the same in terms of performance (*F* = .01, *df* = 1, *p* = .94; Means: Boy band = .42 (SD = 1.01), Non-boy band = .43 (SD = .82)).

H1c was not supported; boy bands and non-boy bands were described about the same in terms of their appearance and attractiveness (F = 3.10, df = 1, p = .08; Means: Boy band = 2.31 (SD = 2.31), Non-boy band = 1.59 (SD = 2.80)).

H1d was not supported; boy bands and non-boy bands were described about the same in terms of their personal relationships (F = 3.0, df = 1, p = .09; Means: Boy band = .63 (SD = 1.0), Non-boy band = .41 (SD = .84)).

H2a was not supported; boy bands and non-boy bands were described about the same in terms of both feminine and masculine gendered descriptors. Feminine: (F = .37, df = 1, p = .55; Means: Boy band = .17 (SD = .17), Non-boy band = .13 (SD = .13). Masculine: (F = .30, df = 1, p = .59; Means: Boy band = .05 (SD = .26), Non-boy band = .07 (SD = .25).

H2b was supported: Stories about boy bands were significantly more likely to describe boy bands with sexualized tropes than non-boy bands (F = 5.02, df = 1, p < .05; Means: Boy band = .44 (SD = 1.47), Non-boy band = .10 (SD = .41)), and significantly more likely to describe boy bands with innocence tropes than non-boy bands (F = 19.80, df = 1, p < .001; Means: Boy band = .38 (SD = .80), Non-boy band = .02 (SD = .14)). Boy bands were sexualized about 4 times more often than stories about non-boy bands, and described with innocence tropes about 20 times more often.

Both aspects of H2c were supported. Stories about boy bands were significantly more likely to use more positive authentic tropes (F = 7.64, df = 1, p < .01; Means: Boy band = .50 (SD = 1.0), Non-boy band = .97 (SD = 1.41)) and more negative authentic tropes (F = 8.23, df = 1, p < .01; Means: Boy band = 1.02 (SD = 1.73), Non-boy band = .44 (SD = 1.14)). Stories about boy bands used about twice as many negative authentic tropes than stories about non-boy bands, while the inverse was true for positive authentic tropes.

H2d was supported: Stories about boy bands used significantly more positive expertise tropes (*F* = 4.12*, df* = 1, *p* < .05; Means: Boy band = .33 (SD = .85), Non-boy band = .60 (SD = 1.04)) and significantly more negative expertise tropes (*F* = 2.74, *df* = 1, *p* < .05; Means: Boy band = .12 (SD = .47), Non-boy band = .04 (SD = .24)) than stories about non-boy bands. Non-boy bands were described positively in terms of their expertise about twice as often as boy bands, while boy bands were described negatively in terms of their expertise about three times as often.

H2e was not supported. Stories about boy bands did not use significantly more negative emotional tropes than stories about non-boy bands (*F* = 2.44, *df* = 1, *p* = .12; Means: Boy band = .15 (SD = .48), Non-boy band = .28 (SD = .66)). Additionally, stories about non-boy bands used significantly more positive emotional tropes than boy bands, the opposite of what was hypothesized (*F* = 10.61, *df* = 1, *p* < .001; Means: Boy band = .19 (SD = .50), Non-boy band = .56 (SD = 1.06)). Stories about non-boy bands were almost three times as likely to use positive emotional tropes than stories about boy bands, with a mean of about .5 positive emotional tropes used per non-boy band story.

H2f was not supported; boy bands and non-boy bands were described about the same in terms of internet language (*F* = .42, *df* = 1, *p* = .52; Means: Boy band = .14 (SD = .86), Non-boy band = .21 (SD = .62)).

One aspect of H2g was supported. While stories about boy bands did not use significantly more positive fan tropes than stories about non-boy bands (*F* = 1.18, *df* = 1, *p* = .28; Means: Boy band = .30 (SD = .91), Non-boy band = .19 (SD = .57), they did use significantly more negative fan tropes (*F* = 42.38, *df* = 1, *p* < .001; Means: Boy band = 1.79 (SD = 2.61), Non-boy band = .11 (SD = .40)). Stories about boy bands used about 16 times more negative fan tropes than

stories about non-boy bands, with a mean of nearly 2 negative fan tropes used per boy band story.

Discussion

This study found that across multiple dimensions, boy bands are taken less seriously than their non-boy band equivalents in U.S. and U.K. music journalism. Using a content analysis that is generalizable across five major music news sources in the U.K. and U.S., I found that boy bands are diminished in terms of their age, authenticity, fans, expertise, innocence and sexuality. However, of the 17 total categories, eight were not found to have significant differences between boy bands and non-boy bands. Additionally, non-boy bands were significantly more likely to be described in terms of positive emotional tropes, opposite of my hypothesis. While I cannot draw conclusions on whether the significant categories are solely because of boy band's predominantly young, female fanbases, the results quite starkly demonstrate that the fans themselves are marginalized through negative tropes.

There are some categories that we would expect to be used regularly for both boy bands and non-boy bands, especially the themes, which are common journalistic practices. For instance, when answering a reader question about why journalists often describe a subject's physical characteristics, *ProPublica Illinois* reporters Logan Jaffe and Steve Mills explained that "characters are frequently boiled down to fundamentals that help us identify them and put them in context," including information like a subject's age and appearance (para. 3).

I grouped a number of hypotheses in Chapter Two based on the idea that boy bands are ridiculed because they are inherently feminized. This grouping included: age/youth, authenticity (+/-), expertise (+/-), gendered descriptors (feminine/masculine), innocence tropes, performance, and sexualized tropes. Of these 10 categories, I found significant results in seven of them, with

the exception of both feminine/masculine gendered descriptors, and performance. I will first focus on the categories that had no significant results to guide our thinking in why the others might have been significant.

When it comes to performance, it is possible there was no significant difference found because the boy bands of the time period do not adhere as closely to the ’90s boy bands known for elaborate choreography. The Jonas Brothers and 5 Seconds of Summer both play instruments. One Direction is repeatedly noted throughout the sample for *not* being talented dancers. For instance, in a concert review for the *Guardian*, writer Elle Hunt (2015) emphasizes the group’s lack of “slick choreography” and concludes, “It wouldn’t happen at a Beyoncé or Katy Perry show, where no moment is unaccounted for, no movement imprecise. But an enormous part of 1D’s appeal is their apparent accessibility, their lack of polish, their puppy-like enthusiasm” (paras. 16-18). Notably, the boy band known for performing the heaviest amount of choreography, Big Time Rush, is also the group virtually ignored by the five publications with only one article in the sample.

Chapter Two explores how boy bands have a long history of manufacturing non-threatening masculinities with close ties to femininity. Despite this, I did not find that boy bands are emasculated directly through feminine descriptors, nor did I find that non-boy bands were portrayed as more traditionally masculine. So, while my results indicate that boy bands are feminized and thus diminished, it is not so literal as describing them as “girly.” It requires a moment to consider why we associate both innocence and hypersexuality with women. The gendered discourse of authenticity and commercialization, as well as the related expertise category, comes even less naturally. This leads me to believe that unconscious associations are a possible reason for these significant results, rather than outright malice or misogyny. Some of

these journalistic choices could stem from implicit biases, defined as "automatic, relatively unconscious mental association" or "unconscious beliefs" (Beeghly & Madva, 2020, p. 5). In this case, these implicit biases might manifest as intuitively associating "real" music with music that caters to male audiences, rather than female.

As for the other significant result in this grouping, age/youth, *boy* is also right there in the name boy band. On one hand, this might seem like a more literal category like gendered descriptors, considering how the members of all five boy bands were in their late teens or early twenties during the study timeframe. However, the non-boy bands were still predominantly in their 20s, so while they skewed older, there were no astronomical differences in age. Additionally, we must also consider how overemphasizing youth emasculates the artists. Stories went beyond reporting just numerical ages. For example, Nick Jonas is described as a "Disney dreamboy" (Sullivan, 2015a), and One Direction are "five youngsters" (Dunne, 2012).

In Chapter Three, multiple categories stemmed from my reasoning that stereotypes associated with young female fans could translate to how the bands themselves are depicted. This grouping of hypotheses included appearance/attractiveness, emotional tropes (+/-), internet language, and personal relationships. When formulating my appearance/attractiveness and personal relationships hypotheses, I had focused on the teenybopper stereotype that fans only like a boy band for shallow reasons, like the members' looks, and are romantically interested in boy band members, and thus are obsessed with their personal lives and who they are dating. For emotional tropes and internet language, I considered other teenybopper stereotypes, like being prone to hysteria and overblown emotions, and the proliferation of online fandom for modern boy bands. None of these five categories had significant results in favor of my hypotheses. In

fact, non-boy bands were found to be significantly *more* likely to be described with positive emotional tropes, opposite of my hypothesis.

This evidence leads me to believe that while boy bands are inherently feminized in other ways, such as authenticity tropes, traits that are primarily associated with their female fans are not necessarily also associated with the boy bands. There is a degree of separation between how the artists versus the fans are depicted — essentially, while fans are stereotyped as overly emotional, that stereotype is not reflected in the coverage of the band itself. Additionally, for personal relationships, many of the non-boy band members in the sample had celebrity relationships just as the boy band members. Front man Alex Turner of Arctic Monkeys dated famous British fashion model, designer, and writer Alexa Chung from 2007 to 2011. Thomas Mars of Phoenix married director Sofia Coppola in 2011. Andrew VanWyngarden of MGMT dated models Camille Rowe and Andreea Diaconu not long after the band's ascent. Attractiveness/appearance might have more complicated reasoning, as explained below, yet it still falls within this grouping.

I found it most surprising that there was not a significant difference for appearance/attractiveness. As previously explored, female fans are frequently dismissed for only liking a band for the members' looks, rather than the music. Over 10 articles about boy bands used "heartthrob" as a descriptor, compared to just one non-boy band article. In summarizing his star prowess, *Rolling Stone* describes Harry Styles as "a stud with four nipples, perfect mop-top hair and that James Dean daydream look in his eyes" (Sheffield, 2014, para. 1). However, it is possible that this category was too broadly defined. To ensure the categories were mutually exclusive, I combined appearance, meaning physical characteristics like clothing, facial features, and body type, with positive descriptors of attractiveness, like hot and cute. Granted, non-boy

bands were described in terms of attractiveness too. For example, a *Rolling Stone* profile summarizes the core members of MGMT as follows:

> Goldwasser plays the square, hiding his asymmetrically handsome face behind chunky glasses. VanWyngarden is the slender, sickly Byronic hero with icy-white skin, rosy lips and chalkboard-green with pupils so consistent in color, they look almost two-dimensional. (Grigoriadis, 2010, para. 6)

Yet many of the counts for appearance/attractiveness for non-boy bands seemed to trend toward appearance over attractiveness. For instance, well over half of the articles about Vampire Weekend (notably the non-boy band who received the most coverage in the sample) discussed the band's preppy clothes and styling, while only a handful commented on the band members' attractiveness with phrases like "good-looking" (Stokes, 2010) and "patrician-looking" (Eells, 2010). Regardless of their age or genre, male bands appear to written about in terms of appearance and attractiveness across the board.

Lastly, I had one final hypothesis grouping to focus on how solely the fans were depicted. Overwhelmingly, I found that boy band fans were diminished and marginalized in comparison to non-boy band fans. This is perhaps the least surprising result. As demonstrated throughout this paper, female music fans have long been disparaged. Indeed, even dating back to the 1800s, women getting excited over a musician they love could only be described in terms of mania and mental illness. Common patterns emerged throughout the boy band articles: mentions of obsession and hysteria, dehumanizing descriptions of screaming, hyper-focus on the most extreme fan behaviors, accusations of "hormones running high" (Bannerman, 2013, para. 1). Fans screaming at a One Direction show were not described as exhibiting perfectly normal concert behavior, but rather "a carnivorous squeal … the hive-mind battle-cry of teenage girls

scenting boy-flesh" (Empire, 2012, para. 1). Other animalistic comparisons cropped up. One review of the One Direction concert film *Where We Are* opens with an anecdote about the reporter's 5-year-old daughter:

> You can perhaps imagine the ear-piercing squeals of delight when I told her mummy had tickets for us to go see their latest movie … if you can't imagine, think of something like the sound of a hysterical bat being electrocuted while attempting polyphonic singing through a vocoder. (Felperin, 2014, para. 2)

One concert review of a One Direction show in Australia draws comparisons with a cult: "Hysteria has followed them since they arrived in the country, and this concert served as a mass outpouring of delirium. The crowd, almost entirely comprised of teenage girls, was absolutely wired, fanatical" (Brandle, 2012, para. 8).

However, I also predicted that boy band fans would be described significantly more with positive tropes, which was not the case in the results. I reasoned this hypothesis on the basis that despite all the negative boy band fan stereotypes, boy bands are still often thought of in terms of their fans, making them a focal point in boy band discourse. So, I expected that because stories about boy bands would likely discuss fans more often than stories about non-boy bands, this would result in more positive tropes simply as a numbers game. Having found a significant result for negative fan tropes, but not positive ones, speaks to the imbalanced portrayal of young female music fans. In line with Proctor (2016), this suggests that there is a continued problem with music journalism portraying female fans as a monolith of extreme behavior without the necessary nuance of positive aspects of fan culture.

This study also shared two themes and two tropes with previous research examining objectification of women musicians in U.S. music journalism: personal relationships, age/youth,

sexualized language and emotional language. Whipple et al. (2019) also found significant differences for two other themes, appearance and clothing, which I grouped into one category. While my hypotheses were driven by boy bands' connections to femininity via their fans, this study dealt more literally with women musicians. Whipple et al. found that women musicians were described significantly more often in terms of emotional language. This provides further evidence corroborating my discussion above that while young female fans (who can also be considered women in music) are marginalized through emotional portrayals, male artists are not, even if they are feminized. However, another broad comparison between results indicates that boy bands and women musicians are both described significantly more often in terms of sexualized language. Additionally, age/youth was the one category in which Whipple et al. found no significant difference, while conversely, I found that boy bands were significantly more likely to be objectified via their age/youth. While the differences between our studies prevent me from quantitatively concluding whether women musicians are portrayed worse than boy bands, this is a starting point that indicates both groups are marginalized, although not necessarily in the same ways.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

Conclusion

There has been much outcry within the past decade over the supposed death of music journalism (Hearsum, 2013; Peirson-Hagger, 2020). With the development of online media and advertising during the early 2000s, a digital revolution led to a myriad of symptoms of an industry in crisis: advertising revenue loss, declining print circulation, employment cutbacks (Brock, 2013). The internet has also led to more existential concerns for what purpose music journalism even serves. With what feels like infinite music options at your fingertips for free, there is a “current erosion of the cultural gatekeeping role of a music journalist” (Hearsum, 2013, p. 109). Music critics no longer have the same authority as they did when the profession had its heyday decades ago (Hearsum, 2013). Yet journalism is not truly a dying industry but rather a rapidly changing one (Brock, 2013). As I see it, music journalism currently has a unique opportunity to evolve into something better and gain renewed purpose by growing more inclusive and intentional. Several music critics and academics support the notion that music writing is an art in its own right (Hearsum, 2013). Defending the role of the music critic, Everett True wrote:

> Great critics set themselves apart by the power and fluency and persuasion of their words, the way they can amplify the original sensation of listening to music a thousandfold, the way a carefully chosen sequence of words can prick the pompous, lift the unknown” (2008, p. 40).

Understanding the profession as a potential space for art in and of itself proposes one way to help cultivate new readerships.

Referring to tired tropes about teenage girls being crazy simply for expressing themselves is not art. I do not believe that most of the dismissive and marginalizing language used toward

boy bands and their fans found in this study is intentionally malicious or outright misogynistic. Rather, as explored in the previous section, I find it more likely that implicit bias plays a role in shaping how music journalists consider boy bands. It is important to again emphasize that none of this study's categories are necessarily harmful in and of themselves. This study examines when a category was found in excess, to the point of diminishing boy bands' accomplishments and fans. For example, I am not too concerned with whether one individual writer describes a stadium of teen girls at a One Direction concert as "hysterical." It might not be the word I would use myself because of the negative connotations, but I attended a 1D concert at age 15 where I screamed until I lost my voice. Tears were involved. I realize that "hysterical" is not a wholly inaccurate description. However, it becomes a problem when journalists repeatedly reference ideas like hysteria as an automatic go-to concept for boy band fans without considering underlying meaning or giving balanced portrayals. In order to improve, journalists must be conscious and work to undo these biases instead of writing on autopilot and taking the easy way out.

And while the role of the critic has diminished in some ways, critics still hold power with their words. In 2012, relatively early in One Direction's career, the *Guardian* profiled the band's rise in America, drawing parallels with Beatlemania. Fans are labeled hysterical three times throughout and described as "sending themselves into paroxysms at the thought of the merest glimpse of these boys" (Llewellyn Smith, 2012, para. 1). The comments were no better. Many expressed shock that the band was even receiving coverage in an established, reputable newspaper. Others spewed misogynistic vitriol:

> OK ..I know this is going to upset a few but what is it about girls that they go crazy over these teen bands.....even the girl bands are supported predominently [sic] by females.

> It`s obviously nothing to do with the music. These bands could release an album of synchronised [sic] farting and it would still sell. Is the female of the species so shallow that looks and image are all that matter? (Stfcbob, 2012)

Implicitly upholding misogynistic stereotypes signals to audiences that it is acceptable to do the same. In her book *Fangirls: Scenes From Modern Music Cultures* (2020), music writer Hannah Ewens describes a similar case about a Channel 4 documentary made in the U.K. in 2013 called *Crazy About One Direction* that provides a real time anecdote about how such portrayals directly harm fans. As she describes, the documentary frames 1D fans and their "ungovernable emotional excess" as crazy young women, a view then echoed by many male reviewers of the documentary (pp. 16-18). Outraged and upset, fans decried the documentary with online fervor, including sending death threats and bomb threats to Channel 4. While not understating such behavior, Ewens writes: "It's an exchange as old as time itself; impose qualities on someone and raise an eyebrow when they respond in anger or exhibit the same characteristics you've endowed them with" (p. 19). Fans explicitly expressed hurt at being depicted as freaks, reflecting Proctor's idea that the documentary "promotes an exploitative narrative" where "Directioners are embroiled within a representational display of otherness that rehabilitates the boundaries of "normalcy"" (2016, p. 68). The documentary's filmmaker, Daisy Asquith, went on to write a defense of the fan reaction, noting that network pressure to include the most extreme fans (2016).

Even the artists have started catching on. While a tenet of being a good boy band has long been expressing gratitude for fans, a recent shift sees artists acting as more explicit advocates for teenage girls. Back in 2012, One Direction expressed interest in having more male fans, with member Niall Horan diplomatically commenting that "it's 90% girls, but we want to expand our fanbase. We want all people to like us" (Corner, 2012, para. 4). In 2014, 5SOS adamantly

distanced themselves from the boy band label not long after supporting 1D on tour. In an interview with the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Luke Hemmings explained:

> That implies that we don't play and we don't write our songs. It makes us seem a bit fake (…) Starting in a garage and writing our own songs and playing them in pubs to 10 people; I don't think [being called a boy band] does us justice as a band" (Vincent, 2014, para. 3-4).

However, members of both groups have more recently affirmed and defended their young fans against negative teenybopper stereotypes. In his 2017 *Rolling Stone* cover story, former 1D member Harry Styles argues on behalf of his teenage girl fans:

> Who's to say that young girls who like pop music — short for popular, right? — have worse musical taste than a 30-year-old hipster guy? That's not up to you to say. Music is something that's always changing. There's no goal posts. Young girls like the Beatles. You gonna tell me they're not serious? How can you say young girls don't get it? They're our future. Our future doctors, lawyers, mothers, presidents, they kind of keep the world going. Teenage girl fans — they don't lie. If they like you, they're there. They don't act 'too cool.' They like you, and they tell you. (Crowe, 2017, para. 21)

Similarly, 5SOS member Ashton Irwin said in a 2019 interview with *Pop Buzz*:

> It's often manipulated in the media that teen fan bases are spoken about as a negative thing sometimes or something, when I think they've actually provided the world with some of the best artists ever because they are sustainable in a way that gives you an opportunity to be adventurous with your music and also challenge ideologies of people that didn't like you before, which is awesome. (Whyte, 2019, para. 13)

Granted, such sentiments seem self-serving to a degree — why alienate your fanbase? — but they indicate a deeper truth: adolescent and teenage girls *are* powerful tastemakers. They spend considerable time, money, and energy taking the artists they champion to the top. Without them, boy bands might not even exist.

Limitations and Future Research

Part of my reasoning behind hypothesizing that stories about boy bands would have both more negative and more positive fan mentions, despite a history of overwhelmingly negative stereotypes, was that people often associate boy bands with their fanbases. This led me to predict that those close ties would also factor into positive mentions, simply because I expected boy band fans to be discussed more than non-boy band fans in totality. However, I failed to include neutral fan mentions as a coding category, which would have allowed for a more robust exploration of this topic. It would be a worthwhile endeavor to add a category for neutral fan mentions to explore whether boy bands are overall described more in terms of their fanbases than non-boy bands, as I suspect is the case.

Additionally, in order to avoid overlap, I condensed appearance and attractiveness into one category. My hypothesis that stories about boy bands would describe them significantly more often than non-boy bands in terms of their appearance/attractiveness was not supported. However, because the category included physical characteristics, such as clothing, future studies may want to narrow this category down into solely perceived descriptors of attractiveness.

There is a clear deficit of academic, peer-reviewed sources specifically focused on boy bands, and not other pop genres. With this study, the first of its kind, I hope to help fill this gap. As this paper repeatedly demonstrates, boy bands exhibit high commercial success and have considerable cultural impact, yet there is not a corresponding amount of scholarly study to the

genre. It is possible that scholars are similarly marginalizing boy bands. While there certainly is some literature specific to boy bands, as well as plenty of studies about other popular music concepts that can be applied to boy bands, it is important to note this is a developing topic that only recently has garnered more serious interest. Multiple key texts for this study were published only within the last two-three years. As Railton (2001) summarizes, "One of the ironies of popular music studies is that the music that is the most popular, in terms of contemporary chart success, is rarely discussed by academics writing in the field" (p. 321). This sentiment was true nearly 20 years ago when it was published, and it continues to hold true for boy band studies today, as echoed by Sherman (2020).

This study focuses exclusively on modern boy bands, and articles written, at most, one decade ago. While scholars like Duffett (2012) indicate that boy band representation in media has stagnated since the term's popularization in the 1980s, there are no quantitative content analyses of '80s-'00s boy bands to provide concrete comparisons to see if my results support this notion. Future studies should consider this juncture to explore whether there have been significant improvements in how boy bands are discussed that coincide with recent developments in the music industry and music journalism, like the rise of poptimist frameworks. However, I doubt this is the case and would suspect improvements have been marginal at most. Similarly, while I consider in the discussion whether boy bands are portrayed like women musicians, I can only offer consideration in general terms, not direct numeric comparison, for a few categories. Future studies should further consider the similarities and differences between the treatment of women musicians and male musicians with predominantly women fans.

Additionally, this study focuses exclusively on English-speaking, Western boy bands and their portrayal in U.S. and U.K. media. I believe that the international rise of K-pop boy bands

over the last decade have made these groups just as worthy of discussion as the ones I examine here. However, they were excluded to make this study more manageable, especially considering the intersections of race and media treatment. As multiple music writers have pointed out, American and British media still exhibit racism toward K-pop groups, either overtly or by diminishing their accomplishments despite their undeniable worldwide success (Liu, 2019; Rolli, 2020b).

It is my hope that music journalism can evolve to become more inclusive and shed itself of existing pretensions. What teenage girls like does not need to be what everyone likes, but their tastes are worthy of careful consideration and respect. Music critic and author Jessica Hopper (cited in Ewens, 2020) summed it up with a tweet: “Suggestion: replace the word ‘fan girl’ with ‘expert’ and see what happens.”

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Biography

Annie Lyons was born and raised in Round Rock, Texas. She enrolled in the University of Texas at Austin in 2016, majoring in Journalism and Plan II with a minor in French. During her time at UT, she co-founded the student music publication Afterglow ATX with her close friend Selome Hailu, serving as co-editor-in-chief for nearly two years. She participated in other student media outlets, including Spark Magazine, 91.7 KVRX, and ORANGE Magazine, and had the opportunity to study in Aix-en-Provence, France for a semester. After graduation, she plans to pursue a career as a music and culture writer.