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## Softboys and Mixed Race Asian Masculinity Online: The TikToks of Jiyayjt

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### ABSTRACT

This paper examines the TikToks of mixed race Japanese Australian content producer Jiyayjt. Jiyayjt provides insights into growing up as a mixed race boy in Australian and Japanese society, and in an interracial family. His interest in Japanese and broadly Asian popular culture appears a significant part of his diasporic subjectivity, and he offers interesting racial commentary on the figure of the 'weeb' as a counterpoint to mixed race Asian identity. This essay argues that Jiyayjt's masculine performance is shaped by increasingly influential Asian popular cultural representations of soft masculinities, sometimes called softboys, flowerboys, bishonen (beautiful boys), with links to the manga genre of Boys Love. TikTok, like other new media platforms, has been described as a heterotopic space where the values and norms of multiple global contexts flow into individuals' screens. Transnational conceptions of boyhood or boyishness within contemporary masculinities are evident in TikTok fandoms engaged in Asian popular culture, such as Jiyayjt's. This article argues that the increasingly powerful influence of Asian popular culture and values offers new possibilities in the construction of mixed race Asian Australian masculinities. These possibilities include the reimagining of masculinities through feminist questioning of hegemonic gendered norms.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

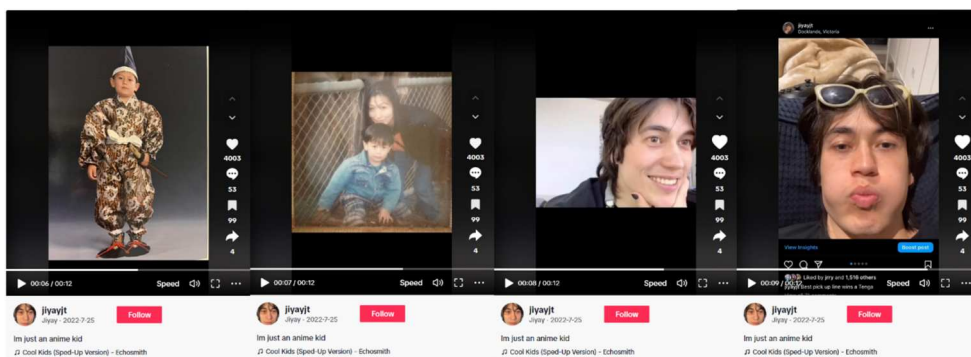
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### KEYWORDS

Mixed race; Asian Australian; Boys; Softboys; Boys studies; Masculinities; Transnational studies; Asian popular culture; TikTok; Social media

The below TikTok by the mixed race Japanese Australian TikToker, Jiyayjt, juxtaposes images of his boyhood self against images of his adult self, played to Echosmith's song 'Cool Kids'. The content creator's self-identification as 'an anime kid' signals an interest that might be read as childish or boyish, as, at least in the West, comics and cartoons are often associated with children. As the title of the clip implies, the continuity between Jiyayjt's childhood and adult interest in *anime*, suggests that he is still a kid or boy to some degree. Further to this, he parallels the cuteness of boyhood photos with images of him as an adult looking cute or acting cute, as evidenced by his performance of the anime girl trope of puffed cheeks or ふくれっ面 (*fukuretttsura*). This TikTok therefore suggests a certain temporal and conceptual continuity between boyhood identity and adult masculinity that will be a primary focus of this essay (Figure 1).

Jiyayjt's content appears to start at March 2020 – effectively the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. His content appears set largely at home, as is characteristic of this



**Figure 1.** Stills from 'Im just an anime kid' (Jiyayjt: reproduced with permission).

time due to global lockdowns, and it is mostly focused on himself. He appears to have been living in Japan teaching English for some of the period of his content creation. His channel has a range of different kinds of content, including: Japanese language tutorials (mostly ironic); re-enactments of lived experience in Japan and Australia; re-enactments of conversations with his Japanese mother; reflections on growing up or being mixed race; reflections on race and racism; differences and similarities between Japanese and Australian culture and identities; *anime* related content; gaming related content.

This essay is born of analysis of all Jiyayjt's TikToks from the channel's inception to the time of writing, September 2023. The videos are too numerous and wide ranging in content to adequately represent and examine in an article of this length. This essay will draw out a series of threads and themes in Jiyayjt's videos that speak to the significance of boyhood for mixed race Asian Australian masculinities. These themes may not be a dominant aspect of the creator's content but are a significant part of his self-presentation.

This essay pairs textual analysis of a selection of TikToks with contextual analysis of relevant cultural dynamics. At times this translates to analysis of image and text, and often the inference, irony, and citation evident in the videos. The interdisciplinary approach reflects my cultural studies grounding. As Ien Ang writes, cultural studies instigated a 'cultural turn' that subverts existing disciplinary and methodological boundaries: 'It is cultural studies' habit to shuttle between disciplines – its flexibility and openness – that makes it a productive and useful intellectual resource' (Ang 2023).

As many commentators have pointed out, TikTok represents a unique media platform for the self-expression especially of Gen Z youth (Boffone 2022; Cover 2023; Wynne, Wright, and Alvermann 2021). There are various functionalities, some of which will be explored in this essay, that afford new 'opportunities for different kinds of [f] storytelling that may give us new perspectives on selfhood and how to live' (Cover 2023, 3). TikTok has become a significant context for the construction of modern culture, and Boffone (2022, 5) calls it 'public pedagogy', saying: 'it teaches us how to act, what to listen to, what to buy, how to speak, how to interact with one another, and more. We learn how to be ourselves on TikTok'.

Such pedagogy includes ideas about race. King-O'Riain (2022, 7), for example, highlights a trend towards mixed race aesthetics and identity being performed on TikTok – creating 'a mixed-race digital community of sorts'. Not only does viewing content

create connectivity between people across sometimes quite large distances, the commenting functions and the ability to respond to others through duetting videos, has enabled the kind of community and reflexivity on identity that King-O'Riain draws attention to.

Other scholars highlight the unique possibilities for gendered expression on TikTok, saying 'TikTok users' content is emblematic of a broader shift in mainstream media toward gender non-conformity' (Foster and Baker 2022, 1). Of course, such claims can be made about a raft of new media platforms connected to social media.

TikTok – like other 'new' media in the West such as Facebook, Instagram, and Youtube – compresses geographical distance by offering apparently authentic and often quite intimate content of others from all around the world. In these spaces, 'both local and global forces interact with each other to form particular ways of thinking about space and selfhood' (Cover 2023, 104). Rob Cover (2023, 107) thinks about this mixture of forces in our feeds as a kind of 'heterotopia' where 'globalisation present us with new, ever-changing frameworks not only for navigating and performing identity in ever-more complex ways but for reflecting on how our identities are performed across local, regional and global spaces'.

Glocal (global and local) social norms around gender and race are particularly significant when examining Jiyayjt's content. As we will see, his interests and identity performance cohere, at times, around transnational Asian popular culture in circulation both in Asia and the West. Diverse audiences of people consuming and reproducing this culture online have created modes of identity that have important ramifications for mixed race Asian Australians living between 'Asia' and 'the West'.

I note here that as the content creator who is the focus of this essay is clearly an adult, this essay is not primarily about boys under any age normatively conceived as marking adulthood. As Grace Sharkey (2022, 42) argues: 'The category of 'boy' is about more than age. It is an historic set of ideas about (im)maturity and experience that is constantly being redrawn'. Some of the videos examined here are about early st/ages of boyhood. Much of this essay, however, will explore how qualities associated with boyhood and boyishness affect contemporary, transnational understandings of masculinity.

This analysis is couched in affirmative feminist boys studies. Driscoll, Grealy, and Sharkey (2022, 1) argue that 'there is much to gain from affirmative feminist approaches to boys: from problematizing the categories of boy and boyhood; examining the multiplicity of boyhoods through historical, comparative, and intersectional lenses; and examining boys' social and emotional lives *as boys*, rather than for the adults they will become'. By exploring intersectional and transnational influences on representations of boyhood in Jiyayjt's TikToks, this essay contributes to this work of highlighting the 'multiplicity and mutability' of boyhood (Driscoll and Grealy 2022, 17).

By examining how feminist discourses, including through female and queer consumer gazes, influence performances of boyishness like Jiyayjt's, I explore how 'all boyhood today is lived in relation to the influence of feminist projects' (Driscoll, Grealy, and Sharkey 2022, 2). Affirmative feminist studies of boys avoid a tendency in feminist literatures to see boys and boyhood as a problem for feminism or as purely 'sites for the reproduction of, or intervention in, patriarchal power' (Driscoll, Grealy, and Sharkey 2022, 3). I do not argue that Jiyayjt's channel or videos are feminist in nature, nor do I argue for the ways his videos and subjectivity should be feminist. Such an approach assumes a pre-

defined or 'to-be-completed subjectivity ... evaluated in terms of its correct progress' (Driscoll and Greal 2022, 19). This in turn defines the boy for what he will become rather than what he is in the present. By giving sensitive attention to 'masculinities-in-formation as active projects moving along multiple pathways' (Connell 2020, 15), I explore how boyishness might serve to disrupt hegemonic norms of masculinity. These shifts in gendered values offer productive possibilities for re-imagining masculinity through feminist engagement with boyhood.

This essay will start by exploring this TikTok channel's representation of the racialised dimensions of mixed race Asian Australian masculinity. This leads into an examination of the transnational gendered social forces and performances evident in Jiyajjt's videos, especially those relating to 'softboys' or 'soft masculinities'.

### Mixed Race Asian Australian Identity

Jiyajjt's channel is one of the very few where a mixed race Asian Australian male consistently reflects on being mixed race. Reflexivity about non-Aboriginal mixed race identity is still relatively emergent in Australian public discourse,<sup>1</sup> whereas in the US, politics surrounding mixed race identities have proliferated for several decades.

Of course, with the proliferation of global social media, there is increasing awareness of such racial politics in the Australian cultural context. The popular Facebook group *Subtle Asian Traits*, originally started by Australian high school students, became a global meme repository for commenting on growing up Asian, especially in the West. The digital coalescence of global (especially US) racial politics and, originally at least, Australian moderation, made it a unique space for diasporic community and identity making (Abidin and Zeng 2020). The fact that this group was created by high school students and often focuses on *growing up* Asian in the West also shows how reflections on childhood experiences and family dynamics are quite central to content shared amongst diasporic young people.

Jiyajjt's content includes such aspects of his boyhood and draws on a series of common tropes or clichés used to represent Asian diasporic experience. For example, the 'where are you from' question, or being ridiculed as a child for bringing ethnic food to school, or feeling like a foreigner in both of your parents' home countries. This kind of commentary is almost a genre in itself and signifies the kind of content that would be familiar and relatable to much of the global Asian diaspora.

In one video Jiyajjt does reflect on the mixed race community he has discovered online through TikTok. He says he grew up around a lot of racism and without people that looked like him, but since making the videos, 'so many people who are mixed and, you know, people of colour, and just different kinds of people have reached out to me and just talked to me'. He goes on to say, 'it feels really good knowing there's people out there who can like relate to your cultural identity, I suppose'.

Jiyajjt's content offers more than stereotypes and clichés, highlighting the quirky and often comical aspects of growing up mixed race Japanese Australian – some mixed Japanese use the term *hafu*.

His use of language, for instance, is interesting as he will often move between English and Japanese sometimes with and at other times without the use of subtitles – thus constructing a viewership of individuals who can understand both languages, or at least who

have interest in both languages. This kind of code switching is typical of mixed cultural upbringings (Greer 2007). In other videos he will make light of differences in Australian and Japanese attitudes, play acting Australian and Japanese personas and switching between them as he switches languages. Bilingual individuals can feel as if they change persona when switching languages (Rampton 2014), and we can see embodied play between such personas in these videos. At other times he will speak Japanese with a heavy Australian accent, mixing up the personas and folding them into each other – another way of representing mixed cultural and racial experience.

*Anime* is clearly a significant part of Jiyayjt's cultural engagement with Japan, and it is also no doubt a childhood or boyhood interest as well – *anime* is often associated with youth cultures (Chandler-Olcott 2008; Fukunaga 2006; Lau and Lo 2019).<sup>2</sup> He will often play act Japanese anime personas, imitating the affected Japanese with which they can speak. For example, he has a series of videos where he uses the rather formal phrase ヤレヤレ (*yare yare*) which translates roughly to 'good grief'. But in a later explainer video he 'crush[es] every weeb's dreams' and reveals that people in Japan don't say 'yare yare' in everyday conversation.

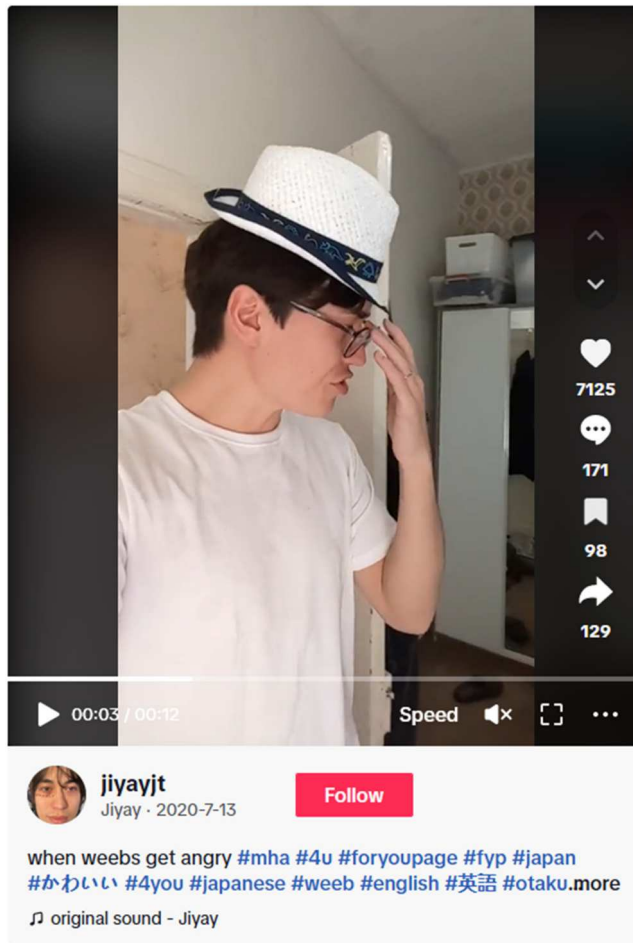
Using *anime* phraseology and tropes in his videos highlights how Japanese popular cultural appreciation can be a significant window into Japanese culture for many around the world. The transnational reach of Japanese soft power is without a doubt one of the most powerful in the world (Iwabuchi 2002). This connects Jiyayjt to a wide audience of what he would call 'weebs': a derogatory term for non-Japanese people obsessed with Japanese culture (especially *manga* and *anime*). But more than this, it shows how Japanese popular culture can be a significant space of identity construction for diasporic peoples (Lee, Lee, and Park 2020).

With his explainer about 'yare yare', he positions himself as an insider to Japanese culture and language, and he juxtaposes himself against the recurring figure of the 'weeb'. In fact, the 'weeb' is a big part of the Japanese/Western cultural interface and a significant counterpoint to Jiyayjt's identity in his videos. He displays quite a lot of reflexivity about the racial politics of the 'weeb' and this speaks to a larger commentary about race and identity.

In one TikTok, Jiyayjt impersonates a bespectacled and fedora wearing 'weeb' who chastises Jiyayjt by saying in a nasally, stereotypically 'nerdy' voice, 'actually Avatar's not an *anime* ... do you even understand the concept of *anime*?' (Figure 2)

The primary critique here is the way white 'weebs' feel entitled to claim ownership and authority over Japanese culture – even to those with Japanese heritage. This is reflective of an Orientalist attitude towards Japan where Western outsiders construct fixed characteristics of Japanese culture in a system of knowledge that contains and controls. As Edward Said (1978, 6) says, Orientalism is about 'making statements about [the Orient], authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism [is] a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient'.

Fetishistic interest in the Orient is elaborated in another TikTok where Jiyayjt play acts trying to join an *anime* club, entry into which is policed by a 'weeb'. Jiyayjt is told, 'this is a very exclusive club. Only the finest weebs can join this club'. But after Jiyayjt reveals he is Japanese, the 'weeb' makes a sexually suggestive squeal reminiscent of *hentai*, a sexually explicit genre of *anime*, and says 'welcome to the club'.



**Figure 2.** Still from ‘when weebs get angry’ (Jiyajt: reproduced with permission).

Navigating white, Orientalist interest in Japan is a significant part of being connected to subcultural communities of young people interested in Japanese culture. Forging diasporic or mixed race Japanese Australian identity in these spaces can be fraught when having to compete with non-Japanese who claim ownership over Japanese culture in various ways. Sometimes these people challenge the authenticity of the identities and knowledge of diasporic Japanese Australians, as we see in the earlier TikTok.

Jiyajt’s critiques of whiteness extend to thinking about family dynamics too. Some of this content reproduces common clichés about the difference between strict Asian tiger parents vs laissez faire white parents, or the vastly superior cooking abilities of Japanese mothers vs white Australian fathers. But in a series of videos re-enacting or imagining conversations with his Japanese mother, Jiyajt makes interesting reflections on racialised dynamics in interracial families.

For instance, in one video he asks his mother ‘why do gross YT [white] guys go to Japan?’ to which she replies ‘it’s because they can’t get a girlfriend in their own country’, ‘really?’, ‘Yes, that’s how you were born’. This video draws attention to a

racialised hierarchy between white men and Asian women and also calls out the fetishistic interest in Japanese women of some so called ‘gross’ white men – as this is their alleged primary motivation for living in Japan. But more than this it reflects on mixed race individuals potentially being a product of both this racial hierarchy and fetishism. Racialised desire and hierarchy are taboo topics amongst many interracial families. Jiyayjt breaks through sensitivity around these issues by making a humorous and self-deprecating joke. In the process, he spotlights something that should be talked about more openly.

But Jiyayjt’s reflections on race are not confined to critiques of whiteness. He re-enacts interactions he has with Japanese people in his time living in Japan too, and these include Japanese people’s stereotypical and racialised attitudes towards Australia. For instance, he plays out the fetishistic sexualisation of white women by Japanese men, or even ironic depictions of Japanese men sexualising him at a public bath. He flips around the dynamics of the ‘where are you from’ question in videos where Japanese people ask him if he is a foreigner. In the video about taking ethnic food to school, he includes his experience of bringing Western food to Japanese school too. Thus, he offers a varied representation of being mixed race in both Japanese and Australian contexts which provides transnational commentary on mixed experience.

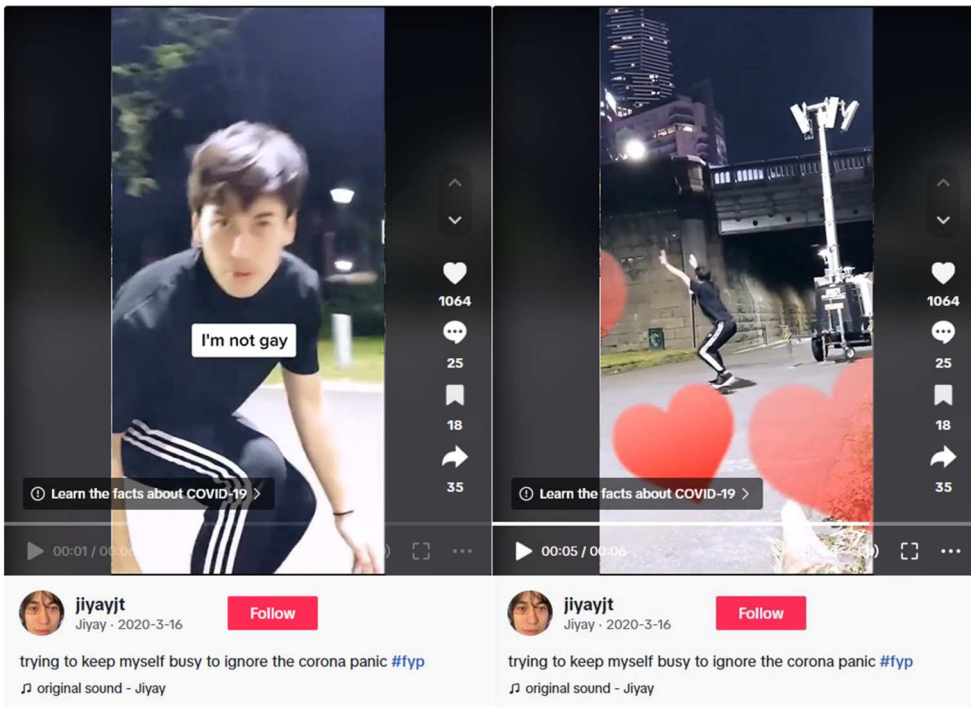
Navigating social and personal attitudes towards race is a significant part of mixed race identity construction. These videos where Jiyayjt is positioned as the son of this mother and draws attention to formative family dynamics are important for thinking about mixed race Asian boyhood. The series of videos about growing up mixed race in Australia and Japan, or his own interest in *anime* as a genre associated with youth cultures, are all part of commentary about diasporic childhoods and, in his case, boyhoods. While his work may not be representative of all mixed race male identities, it contains an archive of reflections on how race, whiteness, and gender can shape mixed race boyhoods.

### Softboys and Masculine Performance

By analysing the gendered performance evident in Jiyayjt’s videos, this article draws on feminist commentary about soft masculinities. Some of these scholars are informed by ‘a feminist psychology of masculinity’ (Manago 2013, 479), and others assess the extent to which such masculinities might be considered ‘a good man’ and allies in the feminist struggle (Muldoon 2023, 283). Asian feminist scholarship has long considered the feminist and post-feminist dynamics of popular cultural representations of soft masculinities targeted at female consumers. They draw attention to the ‘women-friendly’ male personas and the extraordinary power of the female consumer gaze in shaping such masculinities (Hong and Jin 2021; Tan, Liu, and Kong 2022).

The very first TikTok listed on the channel provides interesting framing for thinking about the gendered and sexual politics of the videos. It features Jiyayjt passing the camera on a skateboard, channelling what we might call a ‘skater boy aesthetic’, when he bends down to say ‘I’m not gay’ after which he skates on and does an affected squat displaying his rear end – followed by an eruption of love hearts, presumably from a filter (Figure 3).

This denial of homosexuality shares a lot of with the #nohomo discourse that we can see from straight men online. C.J. Pascoe’s recent work in this area is useful for thinking through this disavowal which updates her well known work on fag discourse. ‘No homo’ is



**Figure 3.** Stills from ‘trying to keep myself busy to ignore the corona panic’ (Jiyayjt: reproduced with permission).

a phrase pronounced after an overt admission or display of affection between straight men. Pascoe and Diefendorf (2019, 134) write that it ‘protects the speaker against accusations of homosexuality; it delineates boundaries between masculine and unmasculine behaviour, topics, and sentiments; and it enables the expression of pleasurable emotions about varied topics and, perhaps most importantly, between friends’. There are undoubtedly homophobic aspects to ways in which this phrase can be used, but as Pascoe and Diefendorf (2019) points out, it is also a transgression in expectations of normative masculinity.

Jiyayjt’s announcement, ‘I’m not gay’ is clearly done in jest. I wouldn’t interpret his ironic pose afterwards as homophobic mockery as it should be understood alongside the rest of his self-representation which is quite sympathetic to queer desire. He often straddles an ambiguous boundary between straight and queer performance and this is an aspect of the ‘softboy’ masculinities that I will examine momentarily. It’s telling that despite his pronouncement he has a small number of apparently male admirers in the comments of the video, including one that calls him ‘a gay icon’.

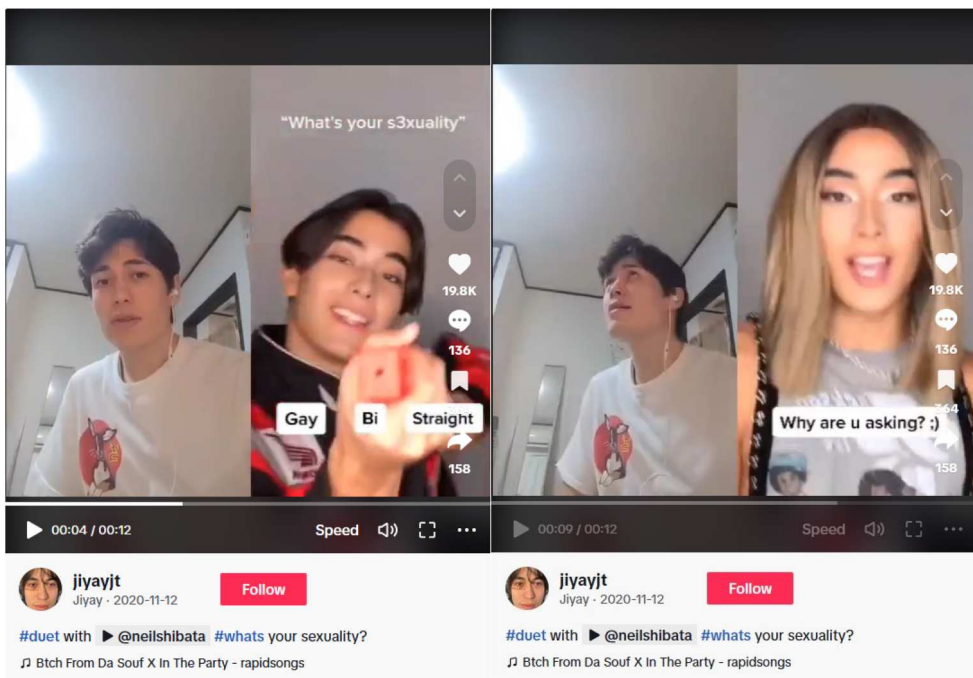
Jiyayjt shows interest in other men at various times on his channel. Sometimes, this interest appears ironic and at other times genuine. This paper will not speculate about the content maker’s sexuality because as Cover (2023, 157) clearly articulates, ‘whatever identity is, its truth or reality is unknowable’. Rather, it is Jiyayjt’s persona or performance of masculinity that is of interest.

In fact, Jiyayjt is intentionally vague about his sexuality. One clip which is a duet with Japanese Canadian mixed race TikToker neilshibata is a split screen featuring Jiyayjt

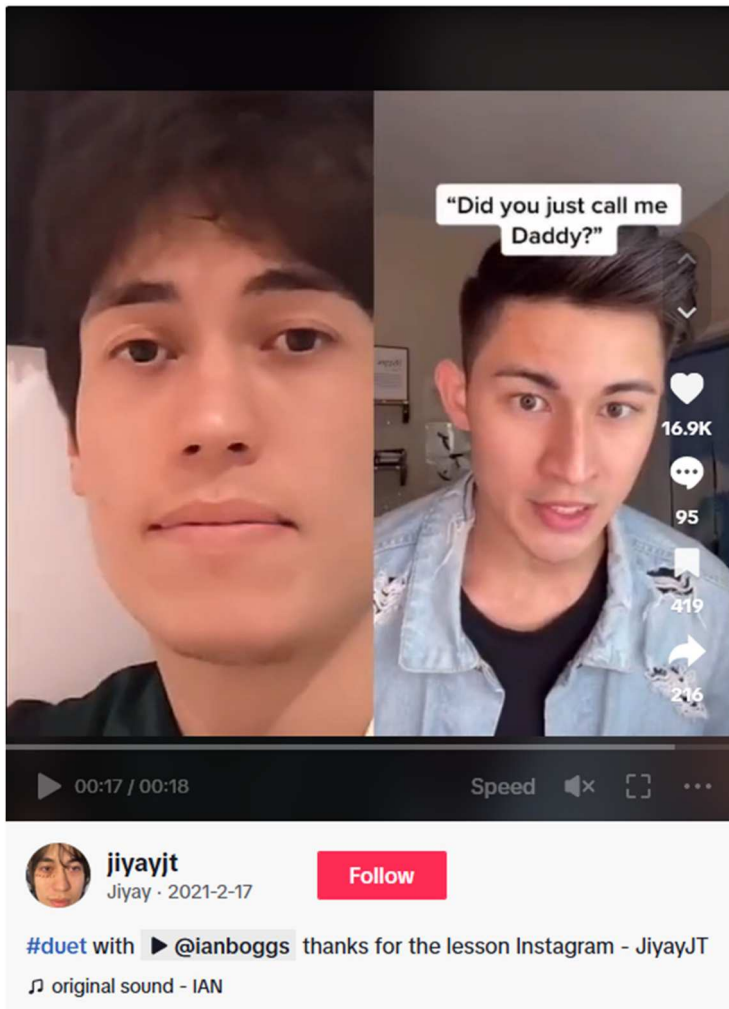
reacting to a video of neilshibata's. It asks, 'what s3xuality are you?' giving the options of gay, bi, or straight which a male presenting neilshibata shoots away in time to gunshots in the featured music – after which they reappear dressed in a feminine appearance. To this, Jiyayjt makes the 'hentai girl squeal' mentioned earlier that is almost a signature of his channel, then says 'but in all honesty, Neil is fucking hot'. Neil is demonstrably more engaged with queer audiences and performance and regularly bends gendered boundaries in their videos. Jiyayjt's admission that 'Neil is fucking hot' signals apparent queer desire and an endorsement of queer identities online – all the while not confirming which of the listed identities he might identify with (Figure 4).

There is also a recurring interest in the figure of the 'Daddy' on Jiyayjt's videos. The 'Daddy' is invoked in variously ironic ways. In one video he says the word 'Daddy' in different languages with the assistance of google translate. In all the languages but Japanese he pronounces the word in a relatively flat manner that imitates the intonation of the app. But when pronouncing it in Japanese he does it in the exaggerated 'hentai girl voice'. In another duet video, he responds to another attractive Asian male TikToker, ianboggs, who instructs his viewers on how to say 'Daddy' in Japanese – ending in Jiyayjt calling ianboggs Daddy in the process (Figure 5).

These videos have Jiyayjt play acting a twink-adjacent masculinity, or at least a feminised position, relative to the dominant ideal of the Daddy. Some queer studies literature draws attention to 'Daddy-boy' dynamics in gay male relationships (Vytniorgu 2021, 44), where twinks are variously described as boyish, slim, young, attractive, feminine, and a bottom (Vytniorgu 2021; Vytniorgu 2023). Given the correlations to boyishness



**Figure 4.** Stills from '#duet with @neilshibata #what's your sexuality?' (Jiyayjt: reproduced with permission).



**Figure 5.** Still from '#duet with @ianboggs thanks for the lesson Instagram – JiyayJT' (Jiyayjt: reproduced with permission).

mentioned at the beginning of this article, it could be said that Jiyayjt embodies aspects of a twink-like persona at certain times in his videos, perhaps for comic effect and perhaps also to attract a viewership interested in this kind of self-representation.

This tendency to play with queer suggestiveness is a significant feature of the cultural phenomenon of the 'softboy'. The 'softboy' is a counterpoint to the 'fuckboy' ('typically a man with many sexual partners and little respect for women; similar to a player' (Muldoon 2023, 279)). The softboy presents a softer masculinity compared to harder, toxic, hegemonic masculine identities that have come increasingly under fire in the wake of the #metoo movement. As Gannon (2019) puts it, following 'the revelations of the #MeToo movement, it's no wonder the idea of 'traditional masculinity' is being slowly crushed by its own toxicity'. Likewise, for Strapagiel (2019), 'part of the point [of the softboy] seems to be to separate manhood from toxic masculinity, and things like aggression, violence, misogyny, and an anti-gay attitude'.

Softboys are ‘tall, skinny genderbending, dark-haired boys’ that Muldoon contextualises as such:

Alongside Timothée Chalamet and Harry Styles, those male celebrities now associated with the tag include Asa Butterfield, Alex Lawther, Zayn Malik, Evan Peters, Ross Lynch, Jaden Smith, Noah Centineo, Lucas Hedges, Frank Ocean, Steve Lacy, Cole Sprouse, Tom Holland, Ansel Elgort and Joe Keery, and in a peculiar sort of hagiography of the softboy, actors of a slightly older generation (including Paul Rudd, Michael Cera, Joseph Gordon-Levitt and Jesse Eisenberg) are being invoked retrospectively as examples of softboys *avant la lettre*. (2023, 280)

Accusations of queerbaiting levelled at straight male softboy actors who play gay characters in films reflect a tendency towards sexual ambiguity in softboy figures that attracts both female and gay male fans (Muldoon 2023). Indeed, Jiyayjt’s homoerotic collaborations with twink-like influencers may be an attempt to draw in such audiences.

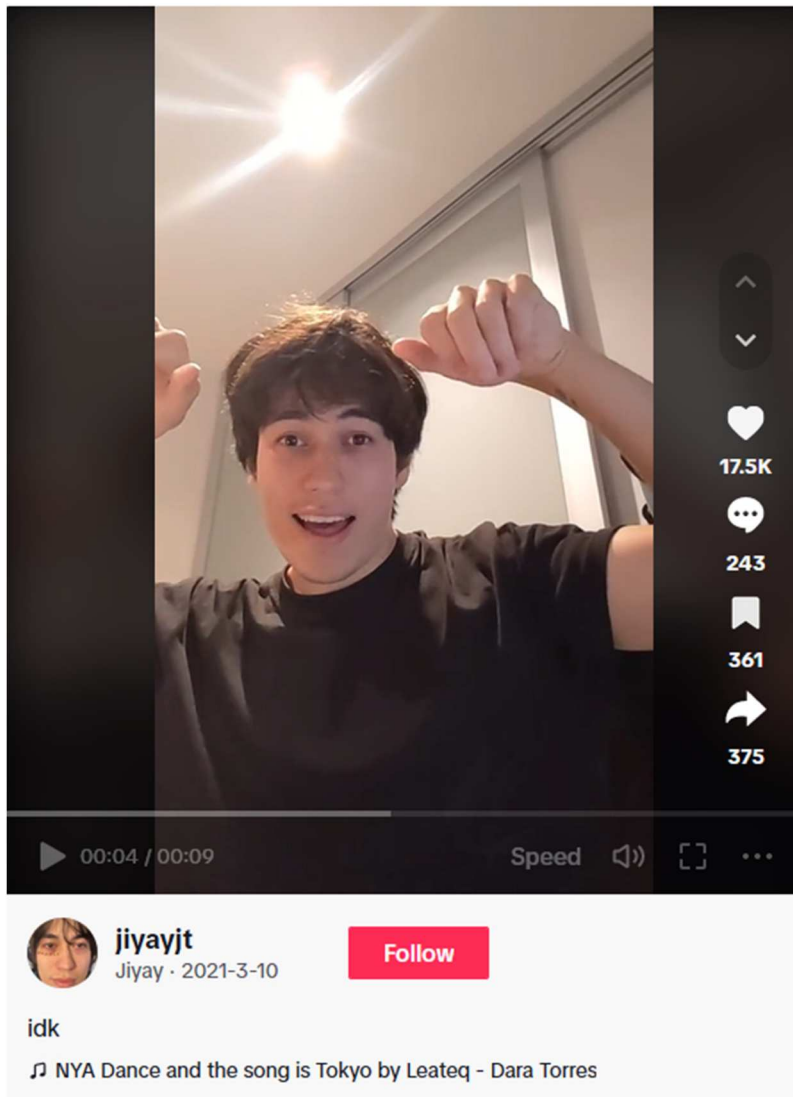
The softboy is ‘quirky, cringy, artsy or sweet’, he is ‘a cisgender guy coded in stereotypically female characteristics’ (Muldoon 2023, 280). We can see these attributes in Jiyayjt’s occasional feminised performances. For example, in one video, Jiyayjt play acts a Japanese cat girl, a trope in Japanese anime. He has his hands up like cat ears and when the music makes the Japanese onomatopoeic sound of a cat ‘nyan’ he gestures as if he has paws. This cutesy, feminised performance generated a lot of adoration in the comments, evidencing the interest in softer boyish or feminised masculinities. This performance is still ironic, however, as at the end of the video he times two middle finger gestures to the end of the musical phrase. This disavowal of the cutesy persona aligns with Manago’s (2013, 482) critique of certain sexy male online personas, ‘[i]rony allows men to disavow associations with all things feminine, thus a hegemonic status quo is maintained even as men adopt practices associated with femininity’. This may be happening to an extent in the video mentioned, however, we can’t say that Jiyayjt disavows ‘all things feminine’ – I would also argue he balances masculine and feminine dynamics for the viewer’s pleasure (Figure 6).

In another video, Jiyayt announces, ‘I’m going to become femme on my stream tomorrow’, and he offers a ‘sneak peak’ still of himself in a wig and with long eyelashes. Again, he signals disavowals of various kinds but his use of the term ‘femme’ shows awareness of queer lexicons and politics, distancing his femme performance from drag as mockery and aligning it more with genuine embodiment and queer performativity (Figure 7).

In another video, a soft, cute image is furthered with more obvious links to boyhood when Jiyayjt drinks milk from a pacifier (Figure 8).

If the softboy is ‘caring, cultured and emotionally intelligent’ (Muldoon 2023, 279), we can see this ‘caring and cultured’ side come through in cooking videos. Some depict him cooking Japanese food like Japanese curry or *karaage*. His *karaage* video triggers several adoring comments such as, ‘HE COOKS????’, ‘I want u ...’ and ‘husband material ...’.

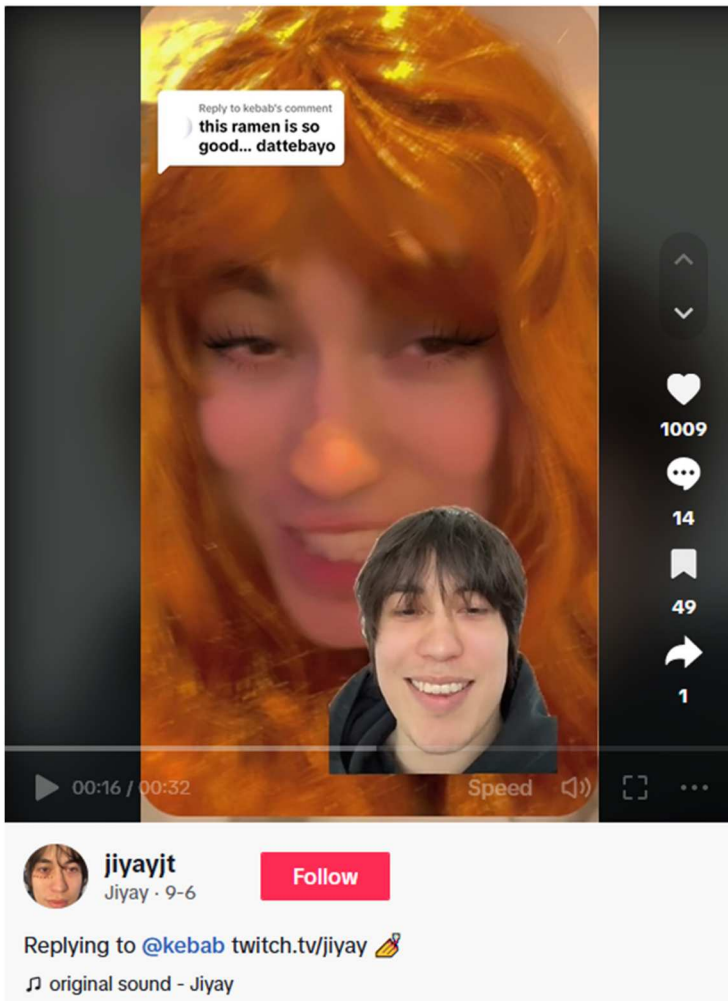
At other times, Jiyayjt shows his vulnerability by openly talking about difficult emotions. In a video entitled ‘Advice plz (sorry it’s not a normal video)’ Jiyayjt reveals that when he was growing up ‘there was no time to be sad ... due to my environment, if you’re sad you get left behind’. He goes on, ‘but now I’m an adult and when I get sad I don’t know how to feel or process it’. He reaches out to his viewers, seeking advice about how to deal with his emotions. Videos such as this reveal a sensitive and



**Figure 6.** Still from 'idk' (Jiyayjt: reproduced with permission).

emotionally reflective individual. This particular video also highlights direct correlations between childhood or boyhood experience and adult emotions and identity. Hong and Jin (2021, 120) speculate that certain soft masculinities can 'stimulate in women the protection desire with their fragility'. Working with this argument, we might say that the above video triggers a maternal (or even paternal) instinct in the viewer, positioning Jiyayjt again in a boyish way.

Jiyayjt's gendered performance on his channel highlights various qualities that can be associated with 'softboy' masculinity. These are qualities associated with certain kinds of boyishness and behaviours that exist in contrast to hegemonic masculinity – including femininity. However, we can see that the cultural significance of 'boy' in 'softboy' refers

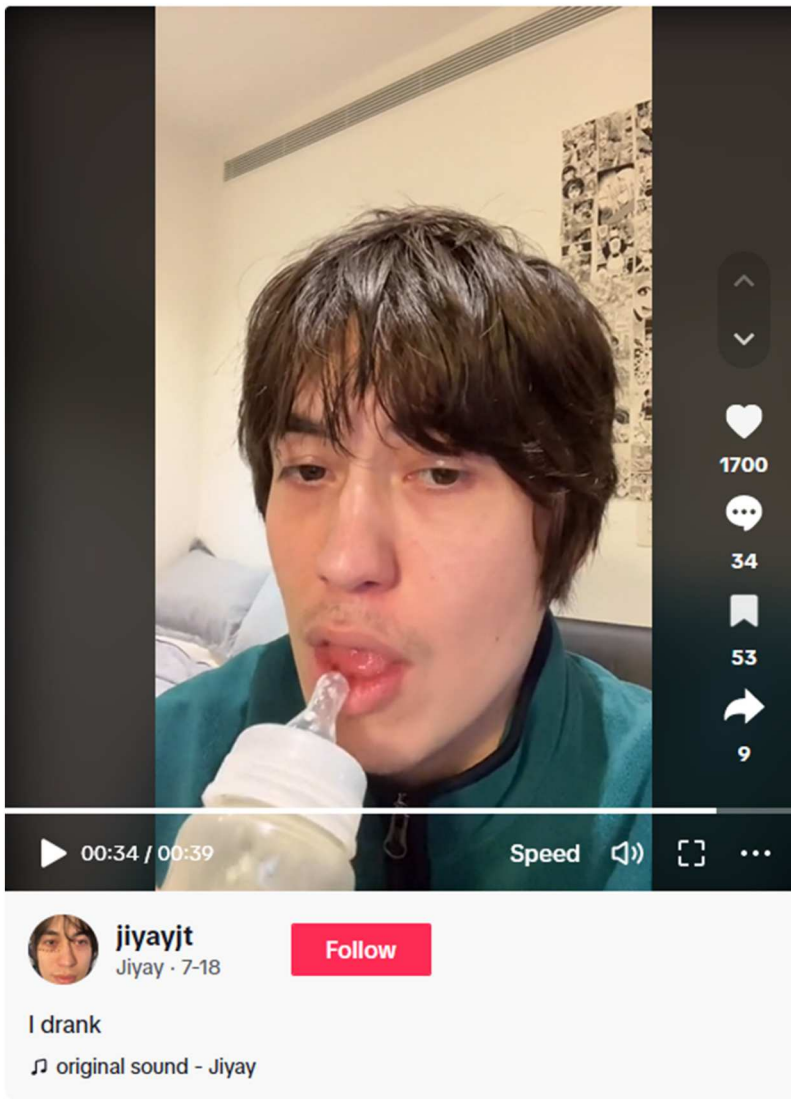


**Figure 7.** Still from 'Replying to @kebab twitch.tv/jiyay' ( Jiyayjt: reproduced with permission ).

not simply to boyishness associated with a certain early age in male development. Rather, it is a counterpoint to 'man', where 'man' stands in for hegemonic masculinity. For Strapagiel (2019), the softboy is 'a rejection of the traditional toxic masculinity by the younger generation'. The 'boy' in 'softboy', is a way of being and behaving that offers a space for masculinity that is 'not-quite-man'. A space before 'man' or a refusal of 'man' that offers alternative ways of being masculine adjacent to the 'boy'.

### Asian Softboys

The notion of the 'softboy', even in the West, has strong correlations with the pretty boys, flower boys, *bishonen* (beautiful boys) and *Boys Love* (BL) figures coming out of some Asian popular culture. In fact, several commentators cite the influence of K-pop as an important factor in the rise of the softboy in the US and UK (Strapagiel 2019; Frantz 2020; Holmes 2021; Robertson 2021; Quartz 2021; Muldoon 2023). It's important to



**Figure 8.** Still from 'I drank' (Jiyayjt: reproduced with permission).

recognise how all the eroticised male figures in Jiyayjt's videos are Asian and these representations are strongly aligned with Asian popular cultural interests, thus suggesting an Asianised dimension to the 'softboy' discourse in his content.

The recent popularity of Asian 'softboys' exists in a complex relationship to powerful Western discourses that emasculate Asian men and represent them as undesirable. As Kam Louie writes,

[a]lthough often portrayed as sexual threats to white women, Asian men were also emasculated by stereotypes of passivity and weakness. The image of the Chinese laundryman and domestic worker or Japanese flower gardener, willing to do 'women's work' that no self-respecting white man would perform, served to feminize the portrayal of Oriental men. (2003, 2)

This framing is influenced by Orientalist discourses mentioned previously that feminise the Orient in relation to a masculinised West. It is worth noting, however, that this has not been the only way of perceiving Asian men and, at various points in time, Asian male desirability has been a cultural reality even in the West. For example, Japanese men were popular amongst some Australian women in Japan's pre-WWII modernisation period (Matthews and Nagata 2014). However, we can probably consider the Orientalist discourse a dominant one in the Western cultural imagination.

Feminised Asian men clearly play into this Orientalist stereotype, but the fact that this representation is increasingly considered desirable signals an interesting cultural shift that reflects the influence of Asian cultural values, not just Orientalist ones. Louie writes,

the idea of a beautiful man, or pretty boy, existed in both China and Japan in traditional times – for example, Beijing Opera and Kabuki theatre both have young effeminate males singing and acting female parts. Such young men are often objects of homoerotic desire by 'connoisseurs' of the moneyed classes. And as indicated above, the beautiful man – or looking at flowers as code for desiring beautiful young men – was very common in Ming-Qing China. (2017, 10)

Louie's (2003) influential work on Asian masculinities highlights Confucian ideas about the balance between *wen* and *wu* masculinities: the difference between martial and cultural accomplishments, physical and mental attainment, and so on that correlate with masculinised and feminised aspects of the male self.

He sees the popularisation of soft masculinities in Asia as reflective of an essentially trans-Asian cross pollination of gendered ideas relating to men:

there are good reasons for looking at the East Asian region, especially China, Japan and Korea, as suitably similar in cultural make-up for analysis. These nations have a Confucian heritage, and they have had strong bonds with each other for centuries, sometimes as tributary states or colonies. In the twenty-first century, with the ease of travel and the rise of the internet, they have become even more enmeshed. (Louie 2017, 9)

The feminised depictions of men in Japanese *manga*, including the BL genre is attributed with influencing celebrity and idol cultures in Japan and across Asia. The fan cultures surrounding *manga* clearly overlap with idol and television drama fandoms, and these fandoms are largely dominated by women often with significant spending power. This has led to discussions of post-feminist 'power-femininity' in Asia due to the significant cultural and consumer influence of the female gaze on male subjectivities (Chen 2016).

Louie points out the crossover of Chinese and Japanese gendered values when he talks about "flower-like men' (*huayang nanzi*). It is a term that originated from the title of an extremely popular Japanese manga series *Hana-yori Dango*, often translated into English as 'Boys Over Flowers' by the young woman writer/artist Yoko Kamio, which was serialized from 1992 to 2004' (Louie 2017, 10). S. Jung (2010) attributes the popularity of K-pop male idols to their embodiment of *bishonen* (beautiful boy) aesthetics in manga and anime – defining K-pop idols' masculinity as '*chogukjeok* (transnational) pan-East Asian soft masculinity' (quoted in Lee, Lee, and Park 2020, 5904).

However, these gendered values and representations are not confined to Asia. As mentioned earlier, TikTok allows for the heterotopic mixture of cultural norms from a range global localities. Western interest in Asian popular culture is increasingly influencing Western cultural norms, possibly evidenced by the advent of softboys in the West.

Hong and Jin (2021, 123) argue that Asian soft masculinities offer an appealing alternative to the 'toxic', 'dominant white male masculinity represented by President Trump'. Some proclaim that male K-pop idols are redefining masculinity and conventional male beauty standards by diverting from the normative qualities expected of men in the West (Wood 2018; Yam 2019; Yim 2018). According to Oh (2017), American fans' heterosexual interest in K-pop idols has a subversive potential, as it can enable fans to imagine masculinities beyond the rigidity of American masculinity.

This places diasporic Asian masculinities – like mixed race Asian masculinities – in an interesting position. Up until recently, such masculinities have often been described by critics in abjected terms: emasculated, feminised, undesirable, and at the bottom of the racial hierarchy of masculinities. Now, with the increasing power of Asian popular culture, masculinities like Jiyayjt's have the potential to be desirable even to a Western gaze.

In one video, Jiyayjt reflects on the increasing popularisation of Japanese trends on TikTok, the video is called 'Japanese is trendy? LOL where was this when I was in high-school, rip'. As Lee, Lee, and Park (2020, 5903) observe, '[t]he increasing popularity of K-pop and the 'Asian coolness' associated with the popular culture enable Asian diasporic K-pop fans to negotiate their racially and culturally marginalized subject positions in multicultural, but still predominantly white cultural landscape'. Jiyayjt is perhaps more an anime fan than a K-pop one, but his videos display awareness about a range of Asian popular culture interests (including K-pop) and trans-Asian popular cultural connections create crossover between the different fandoms. The negotiation of racial and cultural subjectivity that Lee et al identify includes the gendered and sexual self-presentation of Asian diasporic men with a politics that I argue employs Asianised elements of softboy masculinity – something increasingly perceived as desirable.

Jiyayjt's interest in the kind of masculine representations outlined above is evident in one video where he answers a fan's questions about how he learnt Japanese. He explains, perhaps ironically, that he 'watched tons of *anime*, lots of *hentai*, *Boys Love* is pretty good, *yaoi* ... when I was in my prime I used to write a lot of fanfic in *hiragana* [one of the Japanese alphabets] to practice. It was about me and Gojo and Levi ... you know just chilling'. Here, Jiyayjt's admits or at least pretends to have an interest in homoerotic – and often sexually explicit – *manga* called *Boys Love* or *yaoi*. His naming of fan fiction alludes to sexualised 'shipping' practices amongst popular culture fans where they imagine characters in non-canonical queer relationships with each other (Reijnders et al. 2017).

Jiyayjt's awareness of these subcultural practices places him inside *anime* fandoms that he often describes as populated by 'weebs'. His interest in homoerotic fiction also reproduces the kind of softboy masculinity sympathetic to homosexuality, but in this case homosexuality specifically connected to Japanese culture. This genre of fiction depicts homosexual men as beautiful and boyish as evident in the name *Boys Love*. This trope of homoeroticism between 'boys' is something developed further in Jiyayjt's videos.

In a collaboration video with raziEFF, he holds a 'mystery box' and asks various suggestive questions of raziEFF such as, 'mystery box or kiss?' The first question has a *Boy Love* image overlaid on the video at the same time (Figure 9).

In his duet with another Japanese male TikToker, degenerate.japboi, his collaborator watches the video of him play acting as a cat girl when Jiyayjt's suddenly appears and



**Figure 9.** Still from ‘he missed out’ (Jiyayjt: reproduced with permission).

they share an eroticised moment looking into each other’s eyes before breaking into laughter (Figure 10).

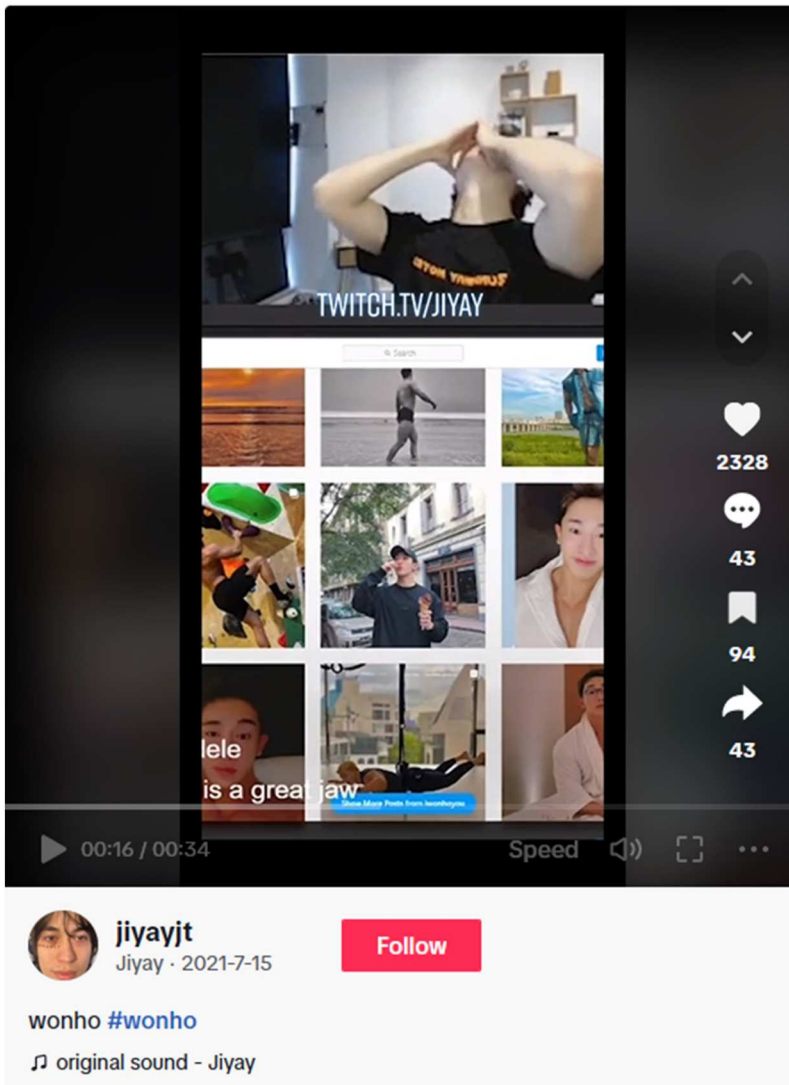
One comment on the video with 64 likes at the time of writing by a user called ‘Pervert’ says, ‘I don’t know but the yaoi vibe is strong here’ and others comment ‘ship’ – again, referencing the ‘queer’ subcultures explored above that Jiyayjt’s users clearly engage with.

In another reference to Asian masculine ideals coming out of Asian popular culture, one clip taken from a twitch live stream depicts Jiyayjt looking up K-pop star Wonho’s Instagram account on the advice of one of his followers. He expresses admiration for Wonho’s ‘face’ and ‘body’, saying ‘I just want to bury my face in his cheeks’ (Figure 11).



**Figure 10.** Still from ‘degenerate.japboi is pretty cute NGL’ (Jiyayjt: reproduced with permission).

The homoerotic dimension of Asian soft boys can be traced through Japanese *manga* to trans-Asian pop idol cultures, as K-pop idols will often play up homoeroticism for fans (Kim and Lopez 2023). This extends to increasing homoerotic depictions in trans-Asian television dramas too (Jirattikorn 2023). These cultural phenomena that include boyish, homoerotic representations of masculinity offer scripts or structures of queer desire for their fans. They also create cultures of homoerotic appreciation that normalise queer expressions of desire, even for men who may not identify as gay. Interestingly, though, this structure of desire appears to be mostly confined to homoeroticism between Asian men – something certainly perpetuated by most of Jiyayjt’s homoerotic collaborative content being with other Asian men.



**Figure 11.** Still from ‘wonho’ (Jiyayjt: reproduced with permission).

It may be that admiration for twink-like men is less threatening to one’s masculinity as it could position the admirer as a top or dominant male. Perhaps Jiyayjt reproduces a white-leaning, Orientalist desire for Asian men as well. However, here, Jiyayjt’s also plays the bottom, as it were, through the innuendo-laden desire to bury his face in Wonho’s cheeks. Furthermore, the absence of white men or desire for white men is a significant departure from gay male cultures that have traditionally normalised Asian men sexualising white men (Caluya 2008) – where white men are perceived to be at the top of the sexual hierarchy, and tops to Asian bottoms. Just as female fans may be turning away from the white hegemonic masculinities of Western representation, male interest in Asian men appears to be increasingly normalised perhaps thanks in part to the growing influence of trans-Asian popular culture.

The Asian dimensions of Jiyayjt's gendered representation also relate to his use of language. A video entitled 'I'm a Japanese girl' features Jiyayjt speaking entirely in Japanese at the request of one of his followers. He explains that he learnt Japanese mostly by imitating his mother, so he often gets told that his 'words and tone are quite feminine'. This is an interesting possible feature of diasporic mixed masculinity. I myself have been told I sound like my mother at times when speaking Japanese. Given that the majority of Asian-white heterosexual partnerships contain an Asian woman and white man (Auelua-Toomey and Roberts 2023), it's conceivable that this phenomenon is not an isolated occurrence. It reveals culturally specific gendered performativity passed down through the Asian mother to the mixed race boy, affecting his gendered identity. It also highlights again how adult mixed race masculinity – in this case expressed through Japanese language – can directly reflect mixed race boyhood.

Furthermore, the overlap between the effects of being a boy learning Japanese through his mother whilst also apparently being 'a Japanese girl' shows that gendered qualities associated with boyhood and femininity can fold into each other. As Muldoon argues that softboys can have stereotypically 'female characteristics', it would seem that gendered behaviours not aligned with hegemonic masculinity are sometimes grouped together in the gendered imagination, allowing for overlap between boyish and feminine signifiers within the figure of the boy.

Jiyayjt's videos reflect Asianised versions of softboy masculinity, particularly their tendency towards feminised performance and homoeroticism. His content highlights a broader shift towards boyish performances of masculinity shaped by Asian cultural values, female and queer consumer gazes, and transnational subcultural audiences. Such embodiments of boyhood reveal changing norms in modern masculinity and a move away from traditional Western hegemonic gender identity.

## Conclusion

This article has explored the gendered and racial self-representation of the mixed race Japanese Australian TikToker, Jiyayjt. It reveals his interesting racial commentary on mixed race boyhood and masculinity. It also highlights the ways he performs what I call, following others, softboy masculinity that is influenced by Asian popular cultural representations of pretty boy, flower boy, beautiful boy, and *Boys Love* masculinities.

I argue that these Asian masculine values increasingly influence Australian gendered norms – especially within fandoms of Asian popular culture and through the transnational, heterotopic cultural influence of new media platforms such as TikTok. The Asianisation of softboy masculinities, or masculinities broadly speaking in the West, offer new possibilities for the masculine identity of diasporic Asian men, including mixed race Asian men like Jiyayjt. Jiyayjt reflects on how boyhood mixed race experiences shape his adult identity, but his channel also reveals how he is influenced by certain Asian popular cultural gendered values that preference boyishness in the representation of ideal masculinity.

Boyish masculinities are not necessarily feminist. Feminist commentators have rightly pointed out that sometimes these performances are just that, and that men can exploit this interest in boyish or feminine masculinities in disingenuous ways and for their own

gain (Tan, Liu, and Kong 2022). Softboy performers are not necessarily feminist in their personal lives either.

However, feminist interest in softboys highlights an important shift in popular and mainstream values relating to masculinity. These softboy masculinities are shaped by the post-#metoo environment, by feminist commentary on masculinity, and by the power and influence of mostly female but also queer consumerism. This analysis therefore furthers affirmative feminist boys studies' interest in 'where feminism has impacted boys' lives ... [and] thinking of boys as subjects of and participants in feminist knowledge' (Driscoll and Grealy 2022, 18). While Jiyayjt is certainly not anti-feminist, I don't go so far as to argue that his videos are feminist or that his softboy persona is feminist either. As noted earlier, I've avoided defining Jiyayjt in relation to what he is becoming or what he could be, and I've steered clear of passing judgement about his correct progress towards an ideal feminist male subjectivity. It is his negotiation of the multiple intersectional and transnational influences on his masculinity that reveals the interesting potential of the gendered and racialised nature of boyhood.

The confluence of feminist and (some) Asian gendered values creates a unique space for the identity construction of many mixed race, diasporic Asian men. Intimacy and familiarity with feminine and queer performativity in softboy masculinities might allow for or reflect the unlearning of hegemonic masculine norms. This in turn reflects the affirmative feminist boys studies interest in where boys 'engage with and where they avoid ideas about ideal masculinity' (Driscoll and Grealy 2022, 18).

Thinking about boys less in terms of their *becoming* (man) but with sensitivity to their *being* as boys (Kean and Steains 2022), allows us to consider the unique potential of boyhood to feminist analysis. Oh (2015) describes Asian softboy masculinities as 'liminal masculinity', balancing conventional and unconventional gendered norms. We might also think of the liminality of boyhood or boyishness as a time and/or conceptual space before hegemonic manhood, a not-yet-manhood, or at least an alternative to manhood. This is a time and/or space where femininity and boyishness sometimes fold into each other and where new and as yet difficult to define identities emerge. It might be a time/space for questioning masculine values and reinventing them.

It is with a focus on 'masculinities-in-formation' that this article has attempted an affirmative feminist analysis of boyish gendered performance in Jiyayjt's TikToks. In the process, I have problematised categories of boyhood; highlighted multiplicity within boyhood experiences through emphasis on intersectional and transnational influences; shown how boyhoods are shaped by feminist projects; and revealed the unique potential of boyishness in reimagining masculine ideals.

## Notes

1. Use of the term 'mixed race' is uncommon in Aboriginal communities in Australia because of the racist colonial history of the term.
2. Although anime is not exclusively consumed by young people, it is significantly associated with youth cultures.

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## Notes on contributor

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