'Man in Makeup': The New Gender Concept in James Charles' Instagram Posts

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Abstract

The rise of 'man in makeup' trend in online platforms has brought male makeup artists to break down the gender stereotype and discrimination in beauty industry. The 'man in makeup' gender concept is brought by James Charles, who is the most followed male makeup artist on Instagram, to reject the transgender label. By using digital ethnography, this research focuses on James Charles' Instagram account to examine the way James Charles presents his gender concept, 'man in makeup' through his cultural practices in digital platform. The research finds out that James Charles has failed in following the male role norms. However, this failure cannot put James Charles in a crisis of masculinity. This happens because James Charles has negotiated the male role norms and feminine notion of makeup with the self-feminizing. Thus, the feminine notion of makeup is not contradictory to his feminized male body, gesture, and identity. At the end, this research argues that 'man in makeup' gender concept has been accepted by the Instagram users.

Keywords: 'man in makeup', James Charles, Instagram, male role norms, crisis of masculinity

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Beauty trends in America and other parts of the world have faced a major movement in gender aspect. This new trend is the male makeup spread mainly through digital platforms such as Instagram. Through Instagram, the men not only show their makeup creativity but also develop self-representation and identity with makeup. To mention, one of the most influential male makeup artists is James Charles who is also one of the most followed male makeup artists on Instagram.

However, besides being followed by over 15 million Instagram users, James Charles is also followed by some controversies; one of which is being mislabeled as a transgender (Wong, 2016). Thus, to reject that label, James Charles proposes a new concept in gender, 'man in makeup'. On the other hand, male makeup trend and beautification to man's body have always been debated due to the contrary between makeup and masculinity. Beautification is associated with women and femininity because perfect beauty has been a double standard for women (Oumeish, 2001) and heavy makeup application is proven to escalate women's physical attraction (Tagai, Ohtaka, & Nittono, 2016). Meanwhile male role norms (Pleck, Sonenstein, & Ku, 1993) are the ideal standard for masculinity. This gender dualism has brought certain standard to both women and men. Thus, James Charles as 'a man' is also forced to follow the male role norms.

However, in its practice, not all men are able follow the male role norms. Some researchers have found some cases where men fail in meeting the male role norms and even negotiate with male body feminizing. In Taiwan, men use feminine aesthetics to show an unconventional fashion style (Shiau & Chen, 2009). In another case, Keichi Kumagai (2013) also found out that men in Japan have been influenced by domesticity which is formerly considered to be women's scope according to gender role norms (Kumagai, 2013). Even, in China, crisis of masculinity in effeminate men has been considered to be a national peril because

men become powerless (Zheng, 2015).

This article attempts to argue that 'man in makeup' gender concept in some way negotiates with the phenomenon of masculinity crisis. This research focuses on the crisis of masculinity phenomenon in a digital media platform, Instagram. By entering James Charles' digital world and observing his cultural practices on Instagram, this research compares James Charles' self-representation in his Instagram posts with male role norms (Pleck, Sonenstein, & Ku, 1993) and crisis of masculinity (Lemon, 1992.

Method

This research is a part of digital ethnography research (Pink et al., 2016) which examines a certain phenomenon in digital world and/or related to the digital use. As this research uses digital ethnography, this research focuses on James Charles, one of the most followed male makeup artists on Instagram, with his cultural practices. Doing digital ethnography also means entering James Charles' digital and social media activities, experience, and practices. Thus, the digital ethnography invites the researchers to examine how people live in the digital world instead of the static world (Pink et al., 2016).

As this research is based on digital study, this research took two kinds of data mainly taken from the digital sources. The data included primary data, which were collected from James Charles' Instagram posts (photos, videos, and captions) and the secondary data, which were collected from online magazines, James Charles' statements on YouTube, and journal articles related to gender issues. To obtain the data mentioned before, an observation and participation technique were conducted from 1 April, 2019 to 30 June, 2019.

The research started with an observation towards James Charles' whole posts uploaded from 30 August, 2015 to 30 June, 2019 to find out the development of James Charles' posts per-year in the four last years. At the same time, this research also observed the participation technique by following James Charles' account and posts, liking and giving comments to the posts, and sending direct messages through Instagram. However, the participation technique

could not result to the necessary data due to the limit in making a direct communication with James Charles. Thus, this research held the second observation from 1 April, 2019 to 30, June, 2019 to obtain more eligible field note data. Then, in the analysis, these data were correlated to the older posts and posts development taken from the first observation.

After collecting all data, this research moved on to the data analysis. This research first dealt with big data (from the first observation) so that this research used the content analysis. To do the content analysis, this research first categorized James Charles' whole posts into eight groups (makeup creativity, selfies, self-portraits, relationship, drag queen themed-photos, products, non-specific pictures, and other). This categorization was then calculated through data tabulation and transferred to table and percentage form. The content analysis showed James Charles' posts development.

Besides the content analysis, this research also interpreted the field note data (taken from the participation and second observation technique) to show James Charles' understanding about his gender concept and male role norms. Further, the failure to attend the male role norms (Pleck, Sonenstein, & Ku, 1993) was related to the phenomenon of crisis of masculinity. This research also examined how the Instagram users and American society's gave response to James Charles' 'man in makeup' gender concept had influenced the crisis of masculinity idea. To note, this research limits the crisis of masculinity definition into two aspects including the dull definition of being a man and the redistribution of gender power (Lemon, 1992).

Result

James Charles is the most followed male makeup artist with over 15 million followers on Instagram. He had followers of 174 people (6 September, 2019). James Charles has uploaded 788 posts in total from the first time he uploaded his post on 30 August, 2015 to 30 June, 2019 (the last day of observation). Then, this research categorizes those posts into eight categories including makeup creativity (for tutorials), selfies, self-portraits, relationship, drag queen

themed-photos, products, non-specific pictures, and other. From those categories, this research

is able to find the percentage and the development of each category per year. The table below

shows James Charles' post categories with their number of posts.

No	Type of the Posts	2015-2016	2016-2017	2017-2018	2018-2019	Total
1	Makeup creativity (for tutorials)	163	55	49	38	305
2	Selfies	8	56	54	14	132
3	Self-portraits	1	15	62	44	122
4	Relationships	9	27	25	12	73
5	Drag queen themed-photos	1	7	7	8	23
6	Products	4	10	6	5	25
7	Non-specific pictures	25	3			28
8	Others	26	23	12	9	70
	Total	237	196	215	130	778

By doing a content analysis and data tabulation, this research finds out that the number

of James Charles' makeup creativity posts always decreased each year from 2015 to 2019. At

the beginning of his Instagram career, James Charles uploaded creativity posts the most; it

reached 163 posts or 68% from the whole posts. However, in 2016 the category decreased

drastically to 55 posts or 29%. In contrast, in 2016, the selfie category raised drastically from

3% (8 posts) to 29% (56 posts).

This contradiction happened because in 2016, James Charles got a drastic shift from a

common makeup artist – who shared his creativity – to a beauty influencer and public figure –

who also shared his personal life and identity. Moreover, in the last three years, James Charles'

selfie and self-portrait posts have been dominating the whole post. This shows that James

Charles in the last three years tends to show his self-representation more than his makeup

creativity as a part of his professionalism and dedication in the beauty industry. Thus, the

personal posts guid this research to explore James Charles' new gender concept, 'a man in

makeup' in his Instagram self-representation.

James Charles, a beauty influencer, who shows his performance mainly with makeup,

has been recognized as a transgender by his own father. However, to dodge the label, James

Charles proposes a new concept of his gender, 'a man in makeup' (Wong, 2016) which affirms

his identity as a man. This situation has brought two questions to this research; how James

Charles defines his gender concept as a 'man' and whether James Charles can meet the male

role norms which engage the status of being a man or not. To give a firm standard to be 'the real

man' (traditional ideal image), this research considers three factors of male role norms including

status, toughness and anti-femininity (Pleck, Sonenstein, & Ku, 1993).

The first factor of the male role norms is status. The status here refers to achievements

that a man pursues (Pleck, Sonenstein, & Ku, 1993). That James Charles has been the most

followed male makeup artist is a big achievement. Moreover, on his Instagram account, James

Charles also shows the audience his capability, creativity, and other achievements (as a male

makeup artist). One of the achievements is that he has been invited to some big events such as

the Met Gala. James Charles uploaded the post of him attending the Met Gala on 7 May, 2019.

Being invited to the Met Gala was an achievement for James Charles. He stated in the caption,

"my first met gala. thank you so much @youtube for inviting me and @alexamnderwangny for

dressing me <3 being invited to such an important event like the ball is such an honor and a step

forward in the right direction for the influencer representation in the media and I am so excited

to be a catalyst. video coming tomorrow!" The caption shows how James Charles considers his

status as an influencer in the media.

Besides the Met Gala, James Charles has also been the first male spokesman for

CoverGirl. On 12 October, 2018, James Charles uploaded his photo for CoverGirl. He wrote in

the caption, "2 years ago we broke history & changed the makeup community forever… <3

happy #nationalcomingoutday to all my LGBTQ+ sisters out there <3." The caption shows that

James Charles is a beauty influencer who starts a change in beauty industry, especially the

men's career in beauty industry. Besides those two achievements, James Charles also has an

apparel named 'sister apparel' which sells outfits especially with themes supporting LGBTQ+

community. James Charles also does collaboration with Morphe in producing makeup palette. Another most visible achievement is that James Charles has made collaboration with Hollywood celebrities such as Kylie Jenner, Demi Lovato, and Kim Kardashian, etc (Fuentes, 2018).

However, if James Charles' achievements are compared with the third factor of male role norms, anti-femininity, this comparison brings a contradiction to what a man should really achieve. The anti-femininity factor prevents men from touching feminine stuffs and activities (Thompson & Pleck, 1986). In this case, James Charles works with makeup which is strongly associated with femininity. Makeup which has been proven to exaggerate physical attraction is a way to get perfect beauty. Perfect beauty perspective itself is a double standard for women (Oumeish, 2001).

This shows that James Charles' achievements and activities are considered to be feminine. In fact, most of James Charles' posts show his performance with the application of makeup. Moreover, the drag queen photos which show James Charles' activities in acting out as a drag queen who wears bold makeup and extravagant women's dress or outfits also prove that James Charles is not anti-femininity. One of the drag queen posts was uploaded on 3 June, 2019. Moreover, through content analysis, this research has also found out that James Charles' drag queen posts always increase each year in which it is contrary with other post categories which decrease time to time.

Besides activities, anti-femininity factor also deals with occupation (Thompson & Pleck, 1986). A real man ought to work in an occupation which requires more physical ability and strength such as driver, engineer, etc. Compared to this gendered-based occupation stereotype, James Charles is considered to have a womanly occupation. This is because makeup is associated with beauty and femininity (Oumeish, 2001).

James Charles is not only non-anti-femininity but also feminizing himself despite following the male role norms to verify his status as a man. James Charles in some of his posts calls himself with feminine pronoun. In a post uploaded on 27 May, 2019, he wrote in the

caption, "She's painted… literally. I spend today just sitting and playing with makeup and taking photos! I have so much fun creating this watercolor graffiti look inspired by @doms.skiii<3." The word 'she' refers to James Charles himself in which the pronoun does not represent James Charles as a man, but rather a women. Besides, James Charles also calls himself 'sister'. James Charles posted a photo with Kylie Jenner on 23 May, 2019, and wrote, "sisters" in the caption as if affirming that Kylie Jenner and James were female siblings. He has also wrote a caption, "sister smiling," in a post uploaded on 29 May, 2019. If he is a man he ought to write 'brother,' 'sister and brother', or 'siblings' instead of 'sister'.

Besides showing feminine traits and using words and drag queen performance, James Charles also wears feminine fashion style. In some of his posts, James Charles wears outfits showing some of his intimate body parts. James Charles' outfit choice has relation with the third factors of male role norms which is toughness. Toughness itself is related to mental, physical, and emotional strength and self-reliance (Thompson & Pleck, 1986). The physical strength of ideal men is reflected by their muscular body – the traditional male ideal image (Lefkowich & Oliffe, 2017) (Sa´nchez, Greenberg, Liu, & Vilain, 2009). However, here, James Charles cannot meet the standard and ideal image of a man. This ideal image of men has been debated because it is a myth that not all men can bring it to reality.

Looking at the reality, this research would rather compare James Charles' outfit choice to men's attempt to make their physical appearance look bigger. However, this research also notes that when the look is associated with fashion and clothing, men do not think that the look is important. They prefer practicality rather than the look because fashion for them is associated with women and femininity. Yet, still, men use clothing to manipulate their body shape to look taller, bigger, and more muscular (Frith & Gleeson, 2004).Compared to those ideal images of men, James Charles – as a man – cannot show the ideal image of men who ought to have muscular body or at least attempt to manipulate ideal body image with clothing. On his Instagram account, James Charles uploaded a picture on 7 May, 2019, when he attended the Met

Gala showing his outfits which expose his chest. Looking at the picture, James Charles did not

wear clothes which could shape his body muscular. It is contradictory with men's stereotype in

self-representation, especially selfie, in which men usually show their muscular body (Doring,

Reif, & Poeschl, 2016).

Picture 1. James Charles attending the Met Gala

Source: Instagram

Moreover, men prevent themselves from looking thin than fat (Frith & Gleeson, 2004),

but James Charles lets his body look thin. James Charles, since the 30 August, 2015, does not

try to gain weight; his body remains the same, thin. Moreover, some of James Charles' posts

show him over-exposing his own thin body, even buttocks. The example is the Coachella post

which reaps controversies since it shows James Charles wearing sexy outfits exposing most of

his body parts despite manipulating his body to look muscular and lean. In one of the posts,

uploaded on 13 April, 2019, James Charles wore black tight outfits looking more like a bikini

with fishnet stockings. The black outfits are in fact a manipulation to look thinner. He is

showing off the back parts of is body, emphasizing the buttocks.

Picture 2. James Charles attending Coachella

Source: Instagram

Again, in other Coachella posts uploaded on 14 April, 2019 and 17 April, 2019, James

Charles was wearing tight outfits displaying his intimate parts of body, especially the buttocks.

These outfits do not make his body look bigger but give a sexy and feminine impression.

Moreover, showing off buttocks has been associated with women's trend which follows

celebrities' style such as Kim Kardashian and her sister, Kylie Jenner. Even Cosmopolitan

magazine has made a nomination for 50 most bubblelicious buttocks on Instagram (Harrins,

2019). The nomination was for female Instagram users. Thus, James Charles' self-

representation with his outfits showing off his buttocks does not make James Charles look stronger but rather feminine. Again, this is a form of self-feminizing in James Charles' self-representation on Instagram.

In relation with the crisis of masculinity, James Charles' self-representation on Instagram shows unstable gender traits. The unstable self-representation in 'man in makeup' gender concept has caused confusion and ambiguity. Defining 'man in makeup' with traditional masculinity and male role norms also utters a contrast result in which 'man in makeup' has been associated with womanly activities and stereotypes. 'Man in makeup' also results in confusion in presenting what being a man is. This situation utters another question whether the failure in fulfilling the male role norms causes the crisis of masculinity in James Charles' performance or not.

As mentioned above, this research considers the idea of the crisis of masculinity into two terms. The first term is the confusion in defining what being a man is. This research has found out that James Charles cannot show a stable self-representation as a man based on the gender role-norms which then causes confusion to his own gender identity. The second term considers crisis of masculinity as a shift in gender role and redistribution of gender power (Lemon, 1992). In James Charles' case, this research also draws a perception that James Charles' role as a man is not limited to gender stereotype, especially related to his performance in makeup. To be in a crisis, a man should lose his power because of the redistribution of power. Thus, this makes man being in a hard situation. However, this does not happen to James Charles today.

Although James Charles cannot meet the gender role norms because his body is feminized with the application of makeup, James Charles is not stuck in the crisis of masculinity. James Charles as a 'man in makeup' is able to negotiate with the gender stereotype of makeup. This has been proven by the way James Charles negotiates 'man in makeup' with his Instagram posts. The content analysis showed that at first James Charles has introduced himself as a male makeup artist who has uploaded his makeup creativity. With this unique

makeup creativity, James Charles has been recognized by the society since then. In 2016, he was invited to be the first male spokesmodel for CoverGirl. In the same year, James Charles has been in the shift of both his career and self-presentation.

The shift of self-representation posts and James Charles' ascending career show how James Charles is recognized not only for his creativity, but also for his identity as a man and performance with makeup which formerly is in the controversy with the gender stereotype. 2016 has been James Charles' turning point. Moreover, today, James Charles with his personal identity and performance has been accepted by the Instagram users. By looking at his Instagram followers which have reached over 15 million followers, this research can imply that James Charles has gotten more attention than other male or even female makeup artists.

Besides having 15 million followers on Instagram, James Charles has also done collaborations with some top Hollywood celebrities such as Kylie Jenner, Demi Lovato, Igy Azalea, etc. This also shows that James Charles is popular not only among the common Instagram users but also among celebrities. Even, James Charles was also invited to celebrity-class events, such as the Met Gala. With those achievements, James Charles has been successful in negotiating with 'man in makeup' gender concept not only with makeup creativity, but also with his self-representation and performance.

Besides negotiating 'man in makeup' with his makeup creativity, James Charles also tries to make makeup normative for men with his performance. In other words, this research argues that James Charles not only defends his 'man' identity but also displays feminine performance in his gender concept. First, James Charles' body shape cannot indicate masculinity based on the second male role norm factor: strength. James Charles with his thin body matches more to women's ideal image. He even overexposes his body parts which are not muscular. At the same time, as a man, James Charles does not grow his beard to show masculinity like Manny MUA.

This case is similar with modern masculinity in Taiwanese sissy boys who import the

Western dressing codes. They can be accepted and even admired. The feminization of masculinity can reduce masculine value connotations brought by the older generation to the older one (Shiau & Chen, 2009). James Charles feminizing masculinity is not only shown by his body shape, but also gestures. James Charles' pose in his self-portraits emphasizes his body parts. He also chooses the womanly pose which shows more expressive and excessive gestures, facial expression, and overexposed body parts. The acts of feminizing body, fashion style, and gestures can neutralize the perspective in seeing 'man in makeup' gender concept. James Charles is a man, but he is more feminine so that his feminine traits presented on Instagram are not contradictory with the gender notion of makeup. Thus, 'man in makeup' gender concept presented by James Charles can be accepted by Instagram users.

Conclusion

This research finds out that James Charles cannot meet the male role norms. James Charles' self-representation shows his attitude toward masculinity which tends to be more feminine for being 'a man'. Thus, James Charles has no divine standard and definition to become a man in his gender concept, 'man in makeup'. Moreover, James Charles cannot meet the male role norms especially the strenght and anti-femininity factors. However, James Charles' failure in meeting the gender role norms is not enough to bring James Charles into the crisis of masculinity. That the crisis of masculinity includes the retribution of power is not proven in 'man in makeup' case. James Charles as a male makeup artist can dominate the beauty industry. Moreover, James Charles with his gender concept represented in his cultural practices on Instagram can also be accepted by the Instagram users. The Instagram users and society's response toward James Charles' performance cannot indicate the crisis in masculinity.

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