



# The Poetics of Masculinity: Gender, Vulnerability, and Cultural Identity in Philippine Popular Music

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**Abstract**— This paper investigates the negotiation of masculinity in the music of Hev Abi, currently the most-streamed local artist on Spotify Philippines in 2024, whose single *Babaero* was ranked the platform’s Top Song in the country. Focusing on his top ten most-streamed tracks—including *Babaero*, *Walang Alam*, *Alam Mo Ba Girl*, *Makasarili Malaming*, and *WELCOME2DTQ*—the study examines how Hev Abi balances lyrical and sonic markers of “angas” (street toughness and bravado) with gestures of intimacy, tenderness, and vulnerability. Through textual and musical analysis, framed by theories of hegemonic masculinity (Connell), hybrid masculinities (Bridges & Pascoe), and Asian soft masculinity (Jung), the paper argues that Hev Abi performs a hybrid masculinity that integrates vulnerability without undermining street credibility. His simultaneous embodiment of toughness and softness reflects broader shifts in Philippine hip-hop, where cultural scripts of masculinity are being redefined in ways that resonate with mainstream audiences. This case study contributes to Gender and Development discourse by demonstrating how popular music can both reproduce and expand gendered possibilities for male identity in the contemporary Philippine context.

**Keywords**— Hev Abi, Philippine hip-hop, masculinity, soft masculinity, hybrid masculinities, Spotify, Gender and Development.

## I. INTRODUCTION

### *Rationale*

Rap music has long been a contested site for gender expression, often accused of reinforcing misogyny and hypermasculinity. Weitzer and Kubrin (2009) observed that “rap music has a reputation for being misogynistic, but surprisingly little research has systematically investigated this dimension of the music.” Similarly, Arthur (2006) noted that hip-hop artists “frequently employ sexist and homophobic comments to feminize the other and, in turn, masculinize themselves,” linking authenticity and “keeping it real” to performances of “hardness” and hypermasculine identity. In this context, hegemonic masculinity, defined by Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) as “the arrangement of gender practices that represents the currently recognized solution to the issue of patriarchy’s legitimacy,” continues to shape expectations of what constitutes a “real man” in hip-hop culture. These frameworks show that the genre’s aesthetic of dominance and emotional detachment often marginalizes alternative masculinities.

However, recent scholarship recognizes that the performance of masculinity in hip-hop is no longer monolithic. Bridges and Pascoe (2014) describe “hybrid masculinities” as men’s strategic adoption of traits linked to marginalized masculinities and femininities, a process that symbolically distances them from hegemonic masculinity while still “masking the persistence of gendered inequality.” Jung (2009) likewise points to a rise in “soft masculinity” in East Asian pop culture, where male celebrities embody “feminine masculinity” that audiences



interpret through transnational media flows. These evolving masculinities parallel the changing character of hip-hop itself, which Xian (2024) described as a “worldwide phenomenon” that has shifted from addressing social injustices to exploring “materialism and sexuality.” Such theoretical shifts provide an interpretive lens for examining contemporary artists who balance bravado with vulnerability.

Within the Philippine context, rap has similarly evolved from social commentary to complex gendered storytelling. Magpayo (2023) found that Andrew E’s humor-laden rhymes often “reinforce misogyny and hegemonic masculinity,” showing how early Pinoy rap reproduced patriarchal scripts. Yet Cortes et al. (2024) argued that artists like Gloc-9 use rap as “a transformative force for national understanding,” reflecting class struggle and empathy. Amid this transformation, Hev Abi emerges as a figure redefining Filipino masculinity in mainstream hip-hop. Saulog (2025) described how he “lets his music be the medium through which his artistic vision finds resonance,” while Agustin (2024) highlighted that his “pure talent has struck a chord with millions.” Hev Abi’s fusion of “angas” and tenderness thus aligns with global and local movements toward hybrid and soft masculinities, positioning his music as an important site for negotiating the boundaries of male identity in contemporary Philippine culture.

This study contributes to Gender and Development discourse by showing how contemporary Filipino hip-hop artists engage with gendered power structures through their music. Urbano et al. (2021) emphasized that “the hip-hop business has spread throughout the world, including the Philippines, and is now controlled by men,” with male songs often being “more objectifying” while female artists’ works “encourage women’s empowerment.” Yet as Dankoor, Stephens, and Ter Bogt (2022) noted, rap performances are “entwined with Black American culture and manifestations of a certain kind of Black masculinity,” illustrating how global masculine ideals influence localized expressions. Within this framework, Hev Abi’s prominence as “the most streamed male artist in the Philippines’ Original Pilipino Music category” (Pareño, 2025) reflects not only the reach of Philippine hip-hop but also its potential to “redefine mainstream notions of masculinity” through authenticity and emotional complexity (Saulog, 2025). By foregrounding the coexistence of toughness and tenderness in his lyrics, this study situates Hev Abi within broader cultural negotiations of masculinity—demonstrating how popular music, as Xian (2024) observed, can “reproduce and reshape” gender narratives that continue to shape social realities.

### ***Statement of the Problem/Objectives of the Study***

This study seeks to examine how Filipino rapper Hev Abi negotiates masculinity in his music by balancing expressions of angas (bravado and street toughness) with gestures of tenderness and vulnerability. Specifically, it aims to analyze the lyrical and sonic elements of his ten most-streamed songs—such as Babaero, Walang Alam, Alam Mo Ba Girl, Makasarili Malambing, and WELCOME2DTQ—to determine how these portrayals reflect shifting gender norms in contemporary Philippine hip-hop. Grounded in the frameworks of hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), hybrid masculinities (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014), and soft masculinity (Jung, 2009), the study aims to:

Identify the lyrical themes and sonic markers of masculinity in Hev Abi’s top songs;

Analyze how these elements illustrate a negotiation between hegemonic toughness and emotional vulnerability;



Interpret how Hev Abi's musical persona exemplifies hybrid and soft masculinities within the cultural context of Philippine hip-hop; and

Discuss how these representations contribute to broader understandings of male identity and gender performance in the field of Gender and Development.

### ***Theoretical Framework***

Hegemonic masculinity, which is typified by characteristics like violence, stoicism, and assertiveness, is the most dominant and socially admired type of masculinity that men might strive for. In terms of gender relations, it acts as a normative standard, establishing a yardstick by which other masculinities are evaluated and frequently disregarded. Hegemonic masculinity, according to Connell (1995), is the arrangement of gender practices that represents the currently recognized solution to the issue of patriarchy's legitimacy, which ensures men's dominance and women's submission (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). This framework provides a critical foundation for understanding how male identity in hip-hop—particularly within the Philippine context—is shaped by norms that privilege dominance and control as the markers of manhood.

An idealized version of masculinity that embodies normative notions about male dominance and power is known as hegemonic masculinity. The propagation of ideas, customs, and behaviors that support the idea that homosexual and bisexual relationships are abnormal and that heterosexual relationships between men and women are normal and natural (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Such ideological structures reinforce heteronormative and patriarchal expectations that define "authentic" masculinity, a logic that has long permeated global and local hip-hop cultures.

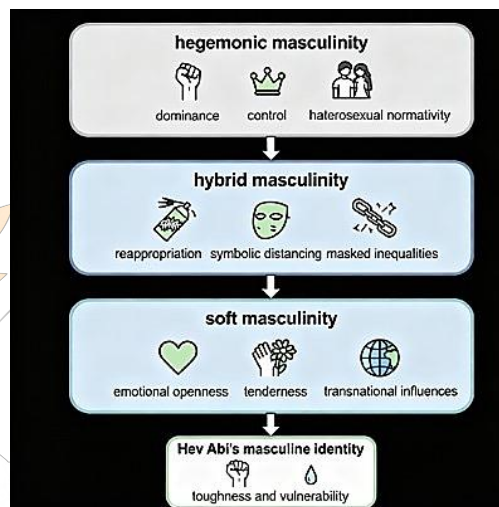
Men's chosen adoption of identities and acts linked to marginalized and subjugated masculinities and femininities is known as hybrid masculinity. We critically examine theory and research that aims to explain the modern changes in masculinity via the lens of recent theorization of hybrid masculinities. In order to mask the persistence of gendered inequality, we propose that research generally supports three different outcomes linked to recent shifts in the politics and performances of masculinity. First, hybrid masculinities distance men from hegemonic masculinity in a symbolic way; second, they place the masculinities that young, white, heterosexual men can have as somehow less significant than the masculinities of other marginalized and subordinated Others; and third, they reinforce existing social and symbolic boundaries in ways that frequently serve to hide power and inequality systems in previously unheard-of ways (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014). Through this framework, masculinity is understood as fluid and performative, allowing for reinterpretations that appear progressive yet still maintain traditional power hierarchies. This idea becomes crucial in analyzing how artists like Hev Abi embody "softness" and vulnerability while still maintaining credibility within a male-dominated hip-hop industry.

A common characteristic seen in pictures of many East Asian male celebrities is "soft masculinity." Through the creation and consumption of feminine masculinity in East Asian popular culture, this pan-East Asian soft masculinity has been created. The construction examines how online users have transculturally absorbed this newly created masculinity in terms of the effects of mediascapes, popular cultural flows, and cultural mixing (Jung, 2009). This notion of soft masculinity provides a useful lens for situating Hev Abi's public image and lyrical

persona, as his negotiation of tenderness and emotional openness reflects not only a hybrid masculinity but also a regional aesthetic shaped by transnational media influences.

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives—hegemonic, hybrid, and soft masculinities—frame this study’s analysis of Hev Abi’s music as a site where toughness and vulnerability coexist. Through these intersecting frameworks, the paper explores how his performance of masculinity both aligns with and subverts dominant gender codes, contributing to the redefinition of Filipino male identity in contemporary hip-hop.

### **Conceptual Framework**



The framework analyzes male identity in Filipino hip-hop through three intersecting theories: hegemonic, hybrid, and soft masculinities, as seen in Hev Abi. Hegemonic masculinity represents the dominant norm legitimizing male authority, while hybrid masculinity selectively adopts traits from marginalized identities, maintaining patriarchal hierarchies. Soft masculinity, influenced by East Asian aesthetics, emphasizes emotional expressiveness. Together, these masculinities illustrate how Hev Abi balances toughness and emotional depth, reflecting the evolving nature of Filipino masculinity in global hip-hop culture.

### **Review of Literature and Studies**

#### **Rap and Masculinity**

Rap music has a reputation for being misogynistic, but surprisingly little research has systematically investigated this dimension of the music (Weitzer & Kubrin, 2009). This recognition of misogyny provides a foundation for understanding how gender and power dynamics operate within hip-hop culture.

Hip hop, which began as a subculture in the South Bronx in the 1970s, became the ideal medium for expressing the resistance of urban black adolescents who were less fortunate. Leading womanist academics have addressed the issue of misogyny in hip-hop music, arguing that female hip-hop musicians view feminism and womanism on a street-level, advocating for themselves while also showing empathy for black men who are struggling against society at large (Kim, 2021). From its roots in resistance, hip-hop evolved into a performance of gender and identity that reinforced masculine ideals while restricting feminine participation.



Members of hip-hop culture embody masculinity in this gender-salient masculine enclave. The repression of feminine characteristics, the performance of being "hard," and the transition into African American Vernacular English are all ways that gender is performed. Such performances de facto restrict the number of women in hip-hop. Rather than attacking women or homosexuals, hip-hop artists frequently employ sexist and homophobic comments to feminize the other and, in turn, masculinize themselves. Last but not least, gangster rap is frequently ingested as a fantasy where young men can create strong masculine gender identities—gender identities that they struggle to adopt in social situations such as the workplace, school, or family. In essence, the fantasies can be divided into two groups: gangster fantasies and pimp fantasies (Arthur, 2006). These performances of masculinity emphasize how toughness and domination became central to hip-hop's image and authenticity.

Discussions over authenticity and "keeping it real" frequently arise, with some musicians commended for their genuineness and others chastised for selling out. The idea of "authenticity" is a key foundation for comprehending black masculinity in hip hop. Similar to how Africanness denotes black authenticity, "Realness" is a critical marker for black youngsters who embrace a Hip Hop style. The youthful black guy is frequently used to symbolize the authenticity of hip hop, which usually entails promoting hypermasculinity-related stereotypes. Rappers usually incorporate violence and misogyny into their rhymes in order to preserve this "authentic" image (Kloosterman, 2024). As such, the connection between authenticity and masculinity reinforces the persistence of hypermasculine imagery and language in rap culture.

When combined with the discovery that women are significantly underrepresented in hip hop music, there are notable disparities in the quantity of goods and companies referenced according to the gender of the musicians. Compared to female vocalists, a significantly greater number of brands were mentioned in songs sung by male performers. Based on the gender of the singers, researchers also discovered variations in the kinds of products referenced in hip hop songs. Male vocalists referred to companies and goods in the automobile, alcoholic beverage, in contrast, female artists mentioned more brands and products in the travel and entertainment categories, as well as the fashion and entertainment categories (Mohammed-baksh & Callison, 2015). These gendered disparities reveal how the genre's commercial dimensions are also shaped by masculine norms and marketable symbols of power.

It is thought that popular American commercial rap (re)produces cultural narratives of masculinity. However, little is known about how young men's perceptions of masculinity relate to their consumption of rap's idealized masculinity. Rap music, the musical embodiment of hip hop culture, has become a vital component of youth culture around the world. The performances within the internationally prominent subgenre of (U.S.) commercial rap are entwined with Black American culture and manifestations of a certain kind of Black masculinity, despite the fact that rap musicians are diverse in terms of gender, nationality, and ethnicity. In the 1970s, African diasporic communities in underprivileged areas of New York City produced rap music, which evolved inside a largely male business (Dankoor, Stephens, & Ter Bogt, 2022). Thus, hip-hop's global spread has carried with it the performance of a distinctly racialized and gendered form of masculinity.

The hip hop/rap genre is more often responsible for the ongoing production of sexist sexual scripts that perpetuate stereotyped misogynistic expectations by both men and women. Furthermore, both sexes are continuing these sexual scripts, which eventually imply a lack of gender equality, because both male and female hip hop/rap artists express misogynistic ideas. However, compared to female pop artists or both sexes of hip hop/rap artists, male pop artists and videos expressed fewer misogynistic undertones (Benton, 2015). This cyclical reproduction of misogynistic scripts highlights the persistence of unequal gender ideologies within hip-hop narratives.

Hip-hop has developed into a worldwide phenomenon with a wide variety of lyrical themes, having begun as a forum for addressing concerns of poverty, violence, and racial inequity in the United States. Although social commentary and empowerment may have been the genre's initial inspirations, it has now broadened to cover a variety of subjects, such as materialism and sexuality (Xian, 2024). In this transformation, hip-hop's evolving focus from resistance to materialism and emotional expression sets the stage for examining artists like Hev Abi, who negotiate between toughness and tenderness in redefining masculinity.

### ***OPM Rap and Hev Abi***

Rap's popularity in mainstream media can be ascribed to its allure due to its genuine language and storylines. Rap has always been seen as real life in lyrical form by hip-hop music communities because its lyrics are rooted in communicative techniques that are culturally specific. However, as a result of its eventual commercialization, it has been subjected to the pressures of popular culture, which tend to uphold established power systems. The rhyming style of Andrew E, a Filipino hip-hop artist. Implied sexual allusions and humorous lines woven throughout the lyrics define (Andrew Ford Valentino Espiritu). For the women in the songs' storylines, sexual autonomy, social standing, physical beauty, and objectification are major sources of (dis)empowerment, and the lyrics reinforce misogyny and hegemonic masculinity (Magpayo, 2023). This demonstrates how early Filipino rap established gendered dynamics that mirrored the global hip-hop tendency toward male dominance and objectification.

One nation that places a high importance on music is the Philippines. The feelings that propel political and social consciousness in the Philippines are reflected in the music composed by Filipino composers. Filipino songwriters produce songs that reflect the struggles of every Filipino, giving voice to all citizens who are victims of society and highlighting the power of music as a transformative force for national understanding. Music can be used to critique society and politics. It's a way to deal with societal injustice. This study identified the ways in which Filipinos struggled with social class and the challenges faced by working people in five chosen lyrical poems by Aristotle Pollisco (Gloc-9). Gloc-9 utilizes song to illustrate the difficulties faced by Filipinos, emphasizing criminality, delinquency, social and political issues, and the need for parents to save and scrimp in order to send their kids to school and provide them a good future (Cortes et al., 2024). Hence, Philippine rap has also served as a cultural mirror—expressing both social realities and moral reflection—beyond its gendered tensions.

The hip-hop business has spread throughout the world, including the Philippines, and is now controlled by men. While songs performed by male performers tend to be more objectifying, those written by female artists encourage women's empowerment. This further links music to the status and role of women in contemporary society (Urbano

et al., 2021). These gendered distinctions show that Filipino hip-hop remains a space of negotiation where masculinity continues to dominate, yet opportunities for redefinition persist.

The OPM scene is evolving because to Filipino hip-hop. However, no player is doing it as well as Hev Abi. It's possible to argue that Abi's effortless charm and genuineness are what make him stand out, even though the genre has quickly become a dominant force on our nation's charts and culture. Reaching many top spots on the nation's music charts is no small accomplishment, but the well-known rapper and his music seem to have no trouble succeeding. Instead of concentrating on intricate marketing techniques, he lets his music be the medium through which his artistic vision finds resonance with his listeners, even in the most surprising manner (Saulog, 2025). In this context, Hev Abi represents a generational shift in Filipino hip-hop, blending authenticity with emotional sincerity.

It is obvious when art is created for its own sake. A song composed from the heart has a far greater impact than one that is only passed along because authenticity translates. And for teenage rapper Hev Abi, his pure talent has struck a chord with the millions of people who have come to know him through each song. Hev Abi is a rising star in the Filipino hip-hop industry. As of this writing, the rapper has over two million monthly Spotify listeners. His successful releases include "Para Sa Streets," "Lil Kasalanan Shortie," and "WELCOME2DTQ." (Agustin, 2024). His musical approach fuses raw storytelling with a softer emotional register that connects deeply with contemporary audiences.

Fans will be anticipating what will happen next when you're Hev Abi, the most streamed male artist in the Philippines' Original Pilipino Music category and one of the fastest-rising hip-hop sensations with sold-out concerts across North America (Pareño, 2025). This mainstream success positions Hev Abi as a figure capable of shaping new cultural meanings of masculinity within Philippine music.

Hev Abi dominated the Top 10 of the list with five entries: "Lil Kasalanan Shortie," "Makasarili Malaming," "Walang Alam," "Babaero," and "Alam Mo Ba," according to the year-end compilation of the top-charting Philippine songs of 2024 (Saenz, 2025). These chart-topping songs—each negotiating themes of bravado and vulnerability—illustrate how Hev Abi's artistry embodies a hybrid masculinity that resonates with both street identity and emotional openness.

## **II. METHODOLOGY**

### ***Research Design***

This research utilizes a qualitative descriptive methodology, incorporating textual and musical analysis as its main techniques. It aims to explore how masculinity is formed, negotiated, and expressed in the chosen songs of Filipino rapper Hev Abi. The approach is interpretive, seeking to reveal the intricate portrayals of gender embedded in the artist's lyrics, sonic style, and public image. Utilizing theoretical frameworks such as hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995), hybrid masculinities (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014), and Asian soft masculinity (Jung, 2010), the assessment places Hev Abi's music within the wider conversation surrounding Philippine hip-hop and its changing gender narratives. This qualitative method facilitates a detailed examination of textual elements (lyrics, linguistic



style, metaphors) and contextual listening (tone, delivery, production, and emotional impact), offering interpretative richness rather than statistical generalization.

### ***Sampling Method***

A purposive sampling method was used to identify and select the materials for analysis. The corpus consists of Hev Abi's ten most-streamed tracks on Spotify Philippines as of 2024, including Babaero, Walang Alam, Alam Mo Ba Girl, Makasarili Malaming, and WELCOME2DTQ. These tracks were selected because they best represent Hev Abi's mainstream appeal, thematic diversity, and lyrical consistency in portraying masculinity.

In addition, music videos and social media content (e.g., YouTube visuals and public interviews) were consulted as supplementary texts to understand how masculinity is visually and performatively framed across platforms.

### ***Data Collection***

The data were collected from publicly available sources:

- **Primary texts:** Lyrics were obtained from verified streaming platforms (Spotify, Apple Music) and lyric databases such as Genius.com.
- **Secondary texts:** Music videos, live performances, and interviews were gathered from official YouTube channels and media outlets (e.g., Esquire Philippines, Billboard Philippines).
- **Contextual materials:** Scholarly references on masculinity studies, Philippine hip-hop culture, and Southeast Asian media masculinities (Connell, Bridges & Pascoe, Jung) provided the interpretive framework.

All selected data were archived and organized into thematic categories for textual and musical coding.

### ***Data Analysis***

The study used thematic textual analysis and musicological interpretation to analyze the data.

#### ***1. Textual Analysis:***

- Each song was closely read to identify recurring themes, metaphors, and linguistic markers of masculinity, including expressions of angas (toughness), romantic vulnerability, and emotional ambivalence.
- Lyrics were coded according to the frameworks of hegemonic masculinity (Connell), hybrid masculinities (Bridges & Pascoe), and soft masculinity (Jung), to determine how Hev Abi's persona both conforms to and subverts dominant gender norms.

#### ***2. Musical Analysis:***

The sonic qualities of each track—beat tempo, vocal delivery, tone, and production style—were examined for how they complement or complicate lyrical representations of masculinity.

#### ***3. Interpretive Synthesis:***

- Findings from the textual and musical layers were synthesized to explain how Hev Abi performs a hybrid masculinity that merges toughness and tenderness.



- The analysis was contextualized within the broader Philippine hip-hop scene, reflecting cultural negotiations of gender identity and modern Filipino masculinity.

### III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### *Affirming and Disputing Masculine Reputation in “Babaero”*

In “Babaero,” Hev Abi confronts a public label that associates him with promiscuity:

“Oh babaero babaero babaero daw ako / ‘Di naman totoo yeah hindi naman totoo.”

This denial operates within the framework of hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), which prescribes sexual virility as a key component of masculine identity in hip-hop. The lyrical stance—defensive yet composed—shows the artist managing his reputation through strategic distancing from stereotypes while not rejecting the masculine image itself. This corresponds with Bridges and Pascoe’s (2014) concept of hybrid masculinities, wherein men selectively appropriate or resist hegemonic elements to present a controlled masculine self.

The sonic delivery—laid-back and confident—reinforces the lyrical claim of self-assuredness. This reflects Arthur’s (2006) observation that rap performance often links authenticity to displays of “hardness” and control. At the same time, by verbalizing a denial of the “babaero” label rather than embracing it, Hev Abi introduces a degree of emotional reflexivity, signaling what Jung (2009) identifies as soft masculine performance—a gesture that retains male power but allows for emotional nuance.

This stands in contrast with the early hypermasculine bravado typical in Andrew E’s songs, where humor often masked objectification (Magpayo, 2023). Hev Abi does not erase the sexualized image, but reframes it as misunderstood rather than essential, marking a shift in masculine performance within OPM rap.

#### *Vulnerability and Romantic Sincerity in “Walang Alam”*

“Walang Alam” foregrounds uncertainty, emotional exposure, and romantic sincerity:

“Sana huwag mong masamain ‘pagkat ‘di ko alam pa’no dadalhin ‘yong gan’to.”

Here, the male persona openly admits emotional hesitation—an uncommon move in traditional hegemonic masculine performance, which tends to value control and detachment (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). The affective language—longing, confession, and desire for reassurance—exemplifies what Bridges and Pascoe (2014) describe as softening of masculine affect through hybrid practices.

The gentle vocal tone and melodic production amplify this vulnerability. This is consistent with Jung’s (2009) analysis of East Asian soft masculinity, wherein emotional availability is not framed as weakness but as part of a desirable male persona. Unlike the hypermasculine posturing documented by Weitzer and Kubrin (2009), Hev Abi’s lyrical positioning reveals a masculinity capable of emotional exposure without undermining his perceived authenticity.



This approach aligns with broader shifts in global and Philippine hip-hop noted by Xian (2024) and Urbano et al. (2021), where male artists increasingly engage with affective themes while maintaining cultural credibility.

### ***Balancing Bravado and Affection in “Alam Mo Ba Girl”***

In “Alam Mo Ba Girl,” the lyrical persona oscillates between streetwise language and intimate address:

“Ayaw na kitang pakawalan / Lahat ng mga hinahanap ko sa ‘yo natagpuan.”  
“Ayaw mo ba sa ‘kin porke wala ‘kong skrt / O ayaw mo sa ‘kin kasi ikaw mas older.”

The tension between bravado (“wala ‘kong skrt”) and tender confession (“mahal kita at ‘di lang basta maharot”) reflects the dual masculine positioning that Bridges and Pascoe (2014) define as hybrid masculinity. Hev Abi asserts agency while simultaneously revealing insecurity, positioning himself both as a confident pursuer and emotionally vulnerable partner.

The use of conversational, almost pleading tone situates the male voice in a relational dynamic rather than a position of dominance. This reflects Jung’s (2009) notion of soft masculinity, wherein emotional expressiveness becomes a key aspect of male desirability. While early rap often reinforced male sexual control (Arthur, 2006; Weitzer & Kubrin, 2009), Hev Abi foregrounds attachment and tenderness.

This emotional register resonates with contemporary audiences, as noted by Saulog (2025), who highlights the artist’s “effortless charm and genuineness” as central to his appeal.

### ***Emotional Contradiction in “Makasarili Malambing”***

“Makasarili Malambing” presents masculinity in its contradictory form:

“Hindi malaman, sino’ng mauuna—hin ba ang aking sarili o ang iba?”  
“Makasarili” (self-centered) vs. “malambing” (tender).

This juxtaposition embodies the hybrid masculine performance articulated by Bridges and Pascoe (2014). The artist expresses an awareness of his own ambivalence—caught between self-interest and affective responsibility. The song’s intimate melodic arrangement complements this lyrical duality, emphasizing the push-and-pull between emotional withholding and emotional giving.

This form of performance diverges from the hegemonic, unilateral masculinity characteristic of early Filipino hip-hop (Magpayo, 2023) and gestures toward a relational masculinity that foregrounds complexity. Jung’s (2009) notion of soft masculinity helps contextualize this as a strategic integration of tenderness into a masculine persona, making the performance emotionally resonant without threatening street credibility.

### ***Street Credibility and Masculine Belonging in “WELCOME2DTQ”***

“WELCOME2DTQ” foregrounds street identity and collective masculine performance:

“Downtown kinaladkad ang QC kami may ari nito / Eleven-o-three Hev Abi.”  
“Todo na kalaban ‘di pa ‘ko malaglag / ‘Di nila malaman-laman ng aming trap.”

Here, Hev Abi aligns himself with traditional hip-hop signifiers of *angas*—power, ownership of space, toughness, and dominance. This reflects the hegemonic masculine ideals in rap noted by Arthur (2006), Kloosterman (2024), and Dankoor et al. (2022), where credibility is tied to the ability to assert control over space and narrative.

However, unlike the romantic and vulnerable tone of the earlier tracks, “WELCOME2DTQ” relies on communal language (“kami,” “downtown”), emphasizing collective masculine belonging rather than purely individual conquest. This communal framing softens the aggressive tone, allowing a balance between dominance and solidarity—a strategic masculine positioning consistent with hybrid performances.

The integration of street language and affective warmth in the delivery suggests that even the most “tough” tracks are not entirely devoid of the softer affective undercurrents that mark Hev Abi’s broader lyrical identity.

### ***Synthesis: Hybrid and Soft Masculinities in Hev Abi’s Musical Persona***

Across the five analyzed tracks, Hev Abi performs masculinity as a fluid negotiation between hegemonic toughness and soft emotionality:

- “Babaero” asserts masculine reputation but reframes it through self-awareness.
- “Walang Alam” and “Alam Mo Ba Girl” foreground vulnerability, attachment, and relational desire.
- “Makasari Malambing” highlights internal contradictions within masculine self-construction.
- “WELCOME2DTQ” reaffirms communal strength and street identity.

These performances exemplify Bridges and Pascoe’s (2014) hybrid masculinities, where men selectively incorporate marginalized traits to soften hegemonic masculinity without entirely subverting it. At the same time, the romantic and emotionally expressive dimensions reflect Jung’s (2009) soft masculinity, aligning with transnational trends in male celebrity performance.

Connell and Messerschmidt’s (2005) framework remains central: Hev Abi’s *angas* operates within a hegemonic structure, but his lyrics and affective tone push at its boundaries. In contrast with early Pinoy rap (Magpayo, 2023), his music articulates a more nuanced masculine subjectivity—tough yet emotionally transparent.

His mainstream success (Saulog, 2025; Pareño, 2025) demonstrates how this hybrid masculinity resonates with contemporary Filipino audiences. As Urbano et al. (2021) observe, male artists historically dominate the Philippine hip-hop scene—but Hev Abi’s success also reveals how masculine performance is evolving within this space.

## **IV. CONCLUSION**

This study examined how Hev Abi negotiates masculinity in his top streamed songs—“Babaero,” “Walang Alam,” “Alam Mo Ba Girl,” “Makasari Malambing,” and “WELCOME2DTQ”—through the interplay of *angas* (toughness) and tenderness. The textual and musical analysis revealed that his lyrical persona operates between hegemonic and soft masculine performances, allowing toughness and emotional expressiveness to coexist.



In “Babaero” and “WELCOME2DTQ”, Hev Abi performs hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) through bravado, control, and claims of credibility tied to street identity. This aligns with Arthur’s (2006) and Weitzer and Kubrin’s (2009) observations of how rap traditionally reproduces hypermasculine ideals tied to dominance and authenticity. However, these performances are not absolute; the denial of the “babaero” label also signals strategic distancing from rigid stereotypes.

Meanwhile, “Walang Alam,” “Alam Mo Ba Girl,” and “Makasarili Malaming” foreground emotional vulnerability, romantic desire, and internal contradiction, reflecting the softening of masculine affect described by Bridges and Pascoe (2014). This soft masculinity (Jung, 2009) is expressed through affective language, melodic sonic texture, and intimate lyrical delivery—showing that masculinity in contemporary Philippine hip-hop is not fixed, but negotiated.

The findings confirm that hybrid masculinities characterize Hev Abi’s musical persona. His performances selectively incorporate tenderness and emotional openness into an otherwise hegemonic masculine framework. This reflects broader shifts in the global and local hip-hop landscape where male artists, while still working within patriarchal structures, find space to express vulnerability (Xian, 2024; Dankoor et al., 2022). Within the Philippine context, this represents a departure from earlier rap narratives that reinforced objectification and male dominance (Magpayo, 2023; Urbano et al., 2021).

Hev Abi’s ability to balance street credibility with affective intimacy contributes to redefining what constitutes masculine identity in OPM hip-hop. As Saulog (2025) and Pareño (2025) note, his widespread appeal is grounded in authenticity and emotional resonance, showing that mainstream audiences respond positively to this hybrid form of masculinity.

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