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Uniformity and Nonconformity

The Packaging of Korean Girl Groups

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Hallyu has set new criteria for the presentation of male and female pop idols across a significant part of the Northeast and Southeast Asian region. The Korean entertainment companies that create and promote K-pop acts pay careful attention to the positioning of their stars, both on the competitive music scene in the region vis-à-vis similar acts, and within their own formations.¹ Boy bands and girl groups have proven to be the most successful K-pop formula. It appears that in order to maximize their commercial potential, agencies eschew deviating from an established set of expectations that comprise synchronized dance routines, a mixture of contemporary R & B, rap and hip-hop with a heavy beat, good looks, and the latest fashion, as well as high-quality music videos and conservative lyrics that suit the predominantly teenage fan base. Many have either noted or criticized the homogeneity of K-pop acts' look and sound (Willingby 2006; Choe 2012; Seabrook 2012, 91), but the uniformity in presentation is no new phenomenon and was first introduced to Korea in the 1980s (Maliangkay 2014, 21). What is more, this standard helped generate US\$177 million worth of exports in 2011, and is a major factor in the expansion of K-pop's overseas fanbase today.² The various production agencies closely monitor their ever-diversifying markets and will do what they can to avoid jeopardizing their multi-million-dollar investments. It is partly due to the constant repositioning of existing acts and careful positioning of new ones that apart from a number of anti-Hallyu incidents and campaigns, there are few noticeable signs of K-pop fatigue as yet.

Like those in the West, Korean all-boy and all-girl acts are tailored mostly to teenage fans. Whereas all groups are ultimately distinct, the musical and stylistic differences can be fairly small. There appears to be considerable conformism among fans whose affection for a specific group often lies in the look of one or more of its members. Many comments on YouTube and SNSs relate to their physical beauty rather than their ability to dance or sing. In comparison to girl groups, boy bands generally display a greater degree of individualism. Their members tend to be styled more independently, and they have longer solo sections within songs and videos. The members of girl groups, on the other hand, often appear interchangeable. On many occasions they not only dress identically, but often sing in unison, performing the same dance routine, in seemingly egalitarian fashion.

The high degree of uniformity in both look and performance can, however, make the girls look like mere marionettes. One would expect agencies to do their best to avoid ostracizing fans, but all too blatant control of the acts can make their audiences feel manipulated and patronized. As a precaution, they have begun to incorporate elements that express resistance to the cultural hegemony through modest symbols of nonconformity. By adding a teaspoon of attitude or "street cred," the suggestion is created that the idols involved wish to break the mold and take some ownership of their act. The elements add a veil of fallibility and individualism to their picture-perfect looks and presentation and help avoid distancing those fans unable to emulate the ideals of beauty and affluence that the acts represent.³ Even though the elements of resistance appear to be novel, they do not constitute a significant departure from the well-tested formula of the Korean girl group. The only major differences between past girl groups and contemporary ones can be found in their audiences, and the ways in which the various products are enjoyed and shared. In this chapter I analyze how in recent years Korean all-girl acts have been packaged in order to target specific audiences and meet their expectations. I deliberate on how such formations manage to compete in conformist environments by paying particular attention to styling and performance and the inclusion of modest symbols of resistance.⁴

Why Uniformity?

Videos showing girl groups in uniform performing in perfect sync abound among contemporary K-pop videos, examples including Gangkiz's song

"MAMA" (2012), Crayon Pop's song "Bar Bar Bar" (2013) and AOA's (Ace of Angels) "Miniskirt" (2014). Acts involving girls in identical costumes singing in unison and dancing in perfect sync have, however, been around since the colonial period (1910–45). Along with popular Western examples, such as the Andrews Sisters, international Korean all-girl acts, such as the Chŏgori ("Jacket") Sisters in the 1930s and the Kim Sisters in the 1950s and 1960s, provided much inspiration for later Korean girl groups. Although the style of music and performance of the acts would differ considerably over the years, many of them would cater to predominantly male audiences, who tended to forgive the frequent lack of musical talent among the groups as long as they looked the part. Apart from a degree of eroticism, that part entailed a presentation that eschewed individualism and expressed solidarity toward the many men in uniform for whom they performed in identical costumes—including short skirts and hot pants—in Korea, Japan, China, and Vietnam (Maliangkay 2014).

Cynthia Cyrus shows that in the United States in the 1960s the vast majority of girl groups were characterized by uniformity in appearance and performance. She argues that it served to make the acts more familiar to fans by emphasizing that the girls were not individual stars in their own right, but, rather, team members of equal importance to the group act (Cyrus 2003, 179):

The visual cohesion of the girl groups, the emphasis on group over individual, facilitated this kind of interchangeability, both within acts and between them. . . . Close analysis of the visual images which chronicle girl group success demonstrates the remarkable extent to which girl groups relied on a communal look. Their visual representations emphasised their sameness, their interchangeability. (Cyrus 2003, 183)

Cyrus argues that the interchangeability was intentional as it allowed fans to imagine being one of the girls. An album such as *We Are the Chantels* (1958) implied that fans could one day be part of the act, or an act exactly like it (Cyrus 2003, 184). This aspect is also an important factor in the appeal of K-pop girl groups today. A number of girl groups, such as T-ara, After School, and Nine Muses, have added, replaced, or lost members, sometimes in the space of several months. Although fans have on occasion expressed their strong dislike of such changes (Kim and Im 2012)—presumably for the harmful effect they can have on the team spirit among group members, so crucial to the fandom experience—changes in

the composition of groups rarely have an immediate effect on their overall sound.

The agencies recognize the importance of building loyalty among fans and allowing them to fantasize about being a group member. Apart from ensuring the synergy among members looks strong, they present them as being modest and approachable girls next-door who despite their various talents, have had to earn their place in the group. They therefore release videos of their stars practising their dance routines in front of a mirror without makeup or uniform. These "mirrored dance" videos encourage fans to try the dance routines and become more involved in the act, while indirectly highlighting the difficulty of the synchronized performances and the many hours of hard work put in by the stars.⁵ The raw footage is intended to nurture fandom and encourage fans to upload a similar video of their own and circulate it via social networking systems (SNSs), just like they do with official videos.

Today, SNSs are one of K-pop's most important marketing tools. As with other forms of popular music, K-pop is increasingly consumed through social media, where the still or moving image of an act, rather than a "blind" sound bite, invites people to explore it. Record, video, and game stores have become a rarity in Korea, and the small number of physical copies that are sold through conventional retail stores quickly sell out. The primary market for all forms of Korean popular entertainment is online. Since 2008, when Korea became the first country to see sales of digital music media overtake those of physical copies, the growth of digital consumption in Korea has grown steadily, due, in part, to its high-speed mobile network (IETP 2008, 8). A fast-growing number of Koreans use SNSs, such as KakaoStory, Facebook, and Cyworld, which allow easy sharing of entertainment media, including those available on YouTube. The importance of SNS to non-Korean fans of K-pop will be equally significant (Kim 2012, 3, 5).

The visual aspect of K-pop is a major part of its attraction. Inspiration for the styling and choreography of girl groups is drawn from a wide range of acts, including boy bands. In Korea, the first "real" boy bands—bands whose members have little creative input, such as by playing an instrument or by being involved in the composition of songs—emerged in the mid-1990s. Like girl groups, they offer synchronized dance routines, contemporary R & B songs with a heavy beat and rapped bridge sections, and good looks, but there is greater diversity between the members' performances overall. While their outfits may be based on the same or a similar fabric, there is usually some variation in how the patterns are tailored and

arranged, and members rarely share the same hairstyle.⁶ Seduction is just as important an aspect of their performance as it is for girl groups, and many male idols take off their shirt during live performances. Even so, their music videos remain conservative. They are sometimes romantic, but unlike those for girl groups they contain few erotic elements.

The videos for girl groups, on the other hand, can be very erotic. Presumably because the eroticizing of women is so common, however, they have not raised many censorship issues as yet. Whereas cleavage has remained largely unused in both live performances and videos, in the next few years the surgically enhanced chests of a growing number of female idols may well be called to duty. Until then, girl groups like Girls' Generation, Sistar, miss A, AOA, and T-ara offer plenty of leg, tight pants, and burns for men and women to gawk at. In videos for these groups, the gaze of the camera often targets the hips directly or segues up slowly from the bare heels to the rim of their hot pants or miniskirt. In these cases, the groups' relative uniform look adds power and impact to the choreography while diminishing the remnants of individualism. Despite the eroticism and sometimes diva-like elements in the performances of some girl groups, the similarity in presentation associates innocence and compliance. The idols are portrayed as cheeky girls who love the camaraderie and despite being liberated have no ambition to stand out or dominate. The displays of individualism are thus subtle and they often express a subservience that is intended to underline the members' femininity (see also Kim 2011, 340).

In a study of music videos from the mid-2000s Kim Hoon-Soon argued that the images projected were either that of "a sweet and innocent girl (angelic) that stirs a sense of protection and is non-threatening to men" or that of a "provocative and sensual femme fatale (seductress) that threatens men with sex appeal as a weapon" (2005, 206). Many videos nevertheless incorporate the two images, while those that project only the second image are small in number. In the videos, which often comprise dance routines, all too powerful dance moves are generally avoided as they would jeopardize the notion of femininity and the suggestion of innocence, which remains oddly untainted by the fact that the girls' legs, arms, and/or abdominal areas are often left uncovered. Many idols wear white or black lingerie—such as in AOA's "Miniskirt" or Girls' Generation's 2009 video for "Chocolate Love," which shows a few of the girls peeking into a room where the full group is performing in negligees—but rather than projecting the girls as promiscuous it is steered toward an eroticized naïveté. Despite the large amounts of skin shown it is suggested that the women are unaware of the possible impact their revealing clothing may have on the male gaze. Another example

is Starship Entertainment's video for the Sistar (Sisut'ia) song "Ma Boy" (2011). While the two girls sing that boys need to treat girls better, Bora is shown sitting on a bed in hot pants and a singlet looking somewhat glum next to a fully dressed, troubled-looking young man, sitting on a chair, who we may presume is her love interest. Her fellow band member, Hyolyn, meanwhile, is shown standing in a kitchen wearing an identical outfit and high heels while a young man faces her leaning against the opposite wall of the kitchen with a look on his face that tells the viewer he's been told off. Since the dance sequences later in the video are fairly sexually provocative, with the two singers repeatedly curling their bodies in a wave-like motion standing sideways in order to show off their curves, the previous scenes appear intended to show that the young women remain chaste in their romantic lives.

The groups' management agencies which create the images that the acts project, whether they are submissive or empowered, or a combination thereof, do so in an attempt to exploit the girls' sexuality.⁷ It warrants a thorough questioning of the notion of "girl power," which Kim Hoon-Soon appears to allude to. The concept is often adopted when girl groups gain popularity, and discussions consider the social pressure on women to conform to the standards of desirability and the genuine empowerment that may come from it (Cyrus 2003, 190).⁸ Among the issues that complicate the notion of power is the male ownership of most girl groups, their exploitation of the girls' sexuality, and the fact that the all-girl acts represent the power of the group over that of the individual. Since music videos affect young women's views on gender and sexual relationships, entertainment companies wield considerable power over young women's self-confidence in the face of social pressures to conform (Kim 2011, 334).⁹

The image of girl groups is not, however, intended for the male gaze only. Considering female fans between the ages of ten and twenty make up the majority of the fans of both the boy bands and girl groups,¹⁰ the diversity in the styling of some female acts may be intended not only to help fans identify their idols and—more importantly—identify *with* them, but also to show the possibilities of different forms of styling in a diverse range of settings (Willoughby 2006, 103). K-pop videos are like four-minute catwalk skits that have a strong impact on notions of both male and female beauty and are foremost visual forms of entertainment. The videos showcase not only clothing combinations and hairstyles, but also dance styles and ways of interacting with others. Considering the girl groups' common offer of variations on a single fashion style, the reason behind the female consumption of the videos of girl groups will therefore lie not so much in

any homoerotic fantasy—although this ought not be ruled out, especially when considering the boyish look or uncharacteristically tomboyish attitude of some of the girls mentioned later in this chapter—but, rather, in the fact that women enjoy “eye shopping” more than men. The positive impact of K-pop on Korea’s fashion industry is significant. In November 2010, the Towers Records store in Tokyo’s fashion district Shibuya had a set up of mannequins wearing the uniforms of the girl group 4Minute and boy band Smash that took over most of its main floor space.

A good example of the function of a video as a fashion show is the video for f(x)’s song “Pinocchio Danger” (P’ink’io, 2011) (figure 4). In a rhythmic stop-motion sequence between 1:40 and 1:50 into the video, the five members are lined up next to each other in white boxes, with each of them wearing a different outfit every few seconds. Another example of this musical display of styling options is S.M. Entertainment’s video for the 2009 hit song “Gee” by Girls’ Generation. This video, the various versions of which together had been viewed on YouTube more than 125 million times at the time of writing, starts with a young man arranging the members as lifeless mannequins in a shop window wearing very similar colourful jeans and sleeveless shirt-based combinations.

Controlled Rebellion within Uniformity

Music videos are not merely style indicators, but they also provide information on the singers’ lifestyle and allow fans to imagine how their idol would express his or her affection in a relationship. Adopting an act’s specific style signifies a set of sociopolitical preferences, and as Zillmann and Bhatia have shown (1989, 263–88), that set—as expressed directly, as in their study, or as associated with the style adopted by the individual—affects the degree of his or her attractiveness to others. Equally, Simon Frith has argued that music is worn as a badge informing others of the wearer’s values and opinions and that this may result in the formation of subcultures (North and Hargreaves 1999, 76). The argument that leading styles in Korean popular culture represent subcultures seems, however, untenable. Kim Yeran posits that earlier acts such as Fin.K.L. and Baby V.O.X. were intended for female subcultures, but if Dick Hebdige’s concept of subculture as “a form of resistance in which experienced contradictions and objections to the ruling ideology are obliquely represented in style” is applied, it is doubtful that the term applies (Hebdige 1979, 133; Lee 2007, 65; Kim 2011, 338). Perhaps it should be used only with reference to

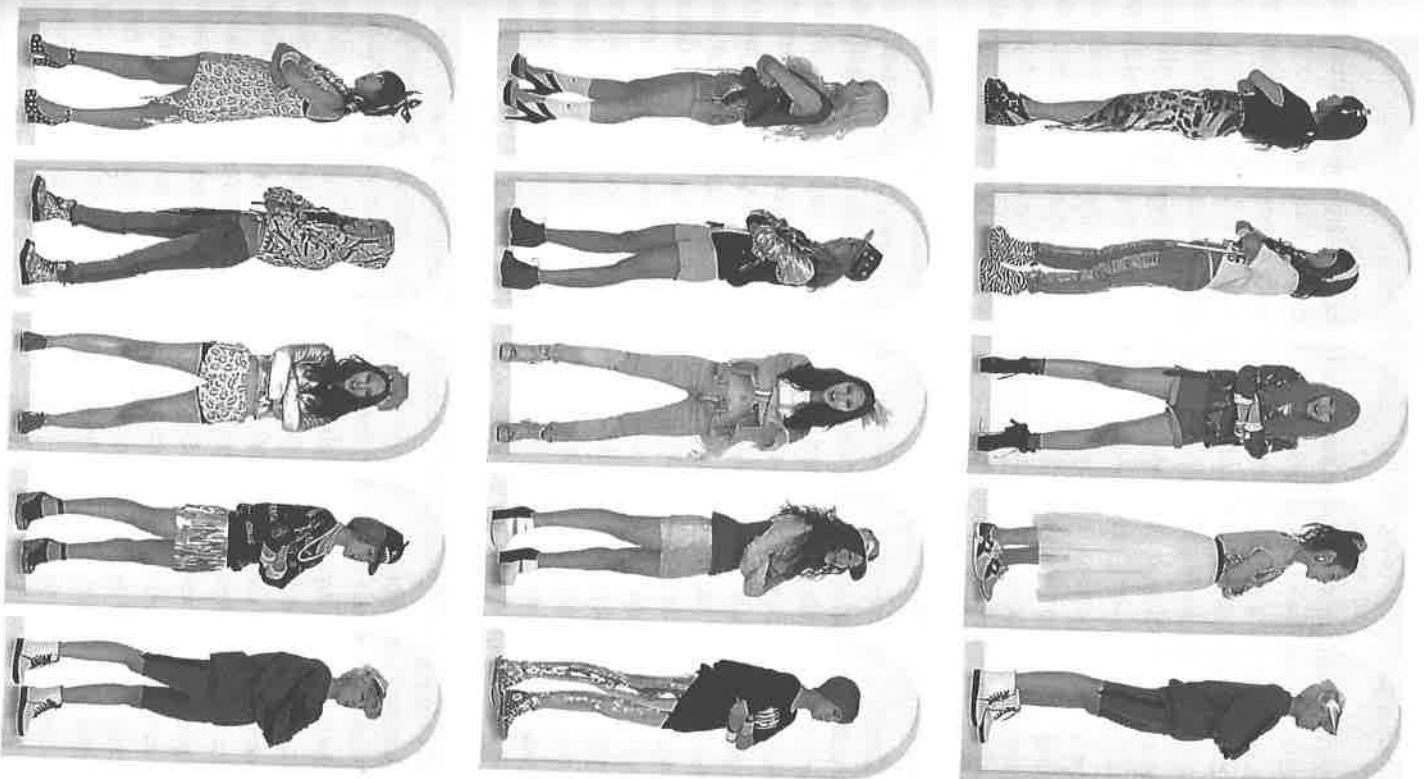


Fig. 4. A sequence from f(x)’s song “Pinocchio Danger” shows various styling options. (From <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kKS12IGFYEA>.)

music acts that resist conformity as well as any form of ownership by a major economic or sociopolitical entity, and not, in other words, to any mainstream music act that along with its local fan base falls perfectly in the mainstream with its nonconformist style.¹¹

Although there is a punk subculture in Korea that may well offer forms of genuine resistance to the dominant social norm (see Epstein 2000, 1–34), it seems that there are few others. Indeed, one may occasionally run into a small group of students sporting rockabilly-type hairstyles and outfits, but they only do so on special occasions and they will return home in their usual clothes. Kim Yeran contends that in spite of their girl-power image, idols always have to conform to the industry's set of norms (2011, 338). Indeed, if the idols, who are generally expected to conduct themselves both publicly and privately according to specific standards outlined in their contracts, were to reject the mainstream norms, they would risk ostracizing the many young teenage girls that make up their main fan base. They ought to flirt with resistance, therefore, not insist on it. The girls may fantasize as divas, but they cannot disturb the group synergy by way of too much individualism. Judy Park argues that the importance of maintaining the image of humble and approachable stars has been paramount in the success of Korean pop acts in Japan (2011, 23–34). Whereas in music videos the look and behavior of girls sometimes seem confrontational and flirt with resistance to the social norm, the stars do indeed remain courteous and unassuming in public life. It is this trait that allows fans to feel a connection with their idols, and it is this aspect that distinguishes Korean idols from most Western ones.

Susan Douglas argues that despite the inherent contradictions that girl groups generally represent, they have long managed to appeal to girls by taking on their plights:

While girl group music celebrated love, marriage, female masochism, and passivity, it also urged girls to make the first move, to rebel against their parents and middle-class conventions, and to dump boys who didn't treat them right. Most of all, girl group music—precisely because these were groups, not just individual singers—insisted that it was critically important for girls to band together, talking about men, singing about men, trying to figure them out. (Douglas 1994, 97; see also Stos 2012, 119)

Epstein and Turnbull (2014) have found that in recent years many of the girl groups' music videos show the idols taking revenge on misbehaving

boyfriends. Among the videos they mention are Wonder Girls' debut song "Irony" (2007), 2NE1's "I Don't Care" (2009) and "Go Away" (2010), and 4Minute's "Heart to Heart" (2011). Despite the seemingly empowering actions of the idols in these videos, the videos for the Wonder Girls and 4Minute songs do little to change the groups' overall image since their performance and presentation remain girlish and seductive overall. The underlying message of the video for miss A's song "Good-bye Baby" (2011) appears to be similar: attitude is just sexy. The singers are shown taking revenge on an arrogant young male producer. After performing (in sexy, tight black outfits with high heels) around a glass cabin that shows him slowly drowning in fast-rising water, they blow up the stage. When the camera zooms in on the man lying hurt and soaked on the floor, he slowly smiles as if to show his approval of the girls' feistiness.

Videos by 2NE1 go quite a bit further. In the video for their song "I Am the Best" (Naega cheil chal naga, 2011), the very Lady Gaga-like glam-style and performance are interrupted from 2:25 by a scene in which the styling of the girls is street-punk, albeit with lots of makeup and fake eyelashes, polished chrome spikes and perfectly groomed punk hairdos. In the scene, the girls sit on black stairs looking both aggressive and bored; to prove they're serious about their contempt for the industry the two girls holding baseball bats smash a few vitrines displaying their platinum albums. In another video from that year for their song "Ugly," the girls are shown trespassing into a fenced-off neighborhood to which "ugly girls [are] not allowed."

Soon after one of the singers has hurled a television through a shop window and another kicked over a trash bin, the girls spray-paint a few cars before turning the spray onto each other.¹² In videos like this the singers may appear boisterous and rebellious, but the likelihood that the teenage girl fans of 2NE1, whose styling and performance have always been about girl power, belong to a subculture with values and opinions that challenge those of the mainstream remains very small.¹³ Even when one considers that a song like "Ugly" deals with the pressure on girls to conform to Korea's beauty standard, one must acknowledge that this is one of Korea's biggest all-girl acts and that it is itself under considerable pressure to conform. It has clearly been marketed as a music act for those who tire of the perfect and cutesy uniformity of so many other mainstream acts, be it because they don't like the music, the styling, or the message, or because they are unable to emulate their look. What the band represents in Korea, where social conformism and heteronormativity remain strong and would



Fig. 5. A second illuminated billboard spells out the song's message. (From <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NGe0hHvAGkc>.)

certainly not allow vandalism by women for the sole purpose of expressing discontent over social norms, is therefore not so much a genuine alternative, but an alternative mainstream. Mainstream girl groups promoting rebelliousness for the purpose of commercialism is not, however, new. Referring to the all-girl acts popular in the United States in the 1960s, Douglas (1994, 98) says,

[They] mattered because they helped cultivate inside us a desire to rebel. The main purpose of pop music is to make us feel a kind of euphoria that convinces us that we can transcend the shackles of conventional life and rise above the hordes of others who do get trapped. It is the euphoria of commercialism.

The need for diversity is nevertheless a genuine one. With more and more similar-looking girl groups coming on the scene each year, there is a danger that the acts become too easily associated with one-size-fits-all products that are created and launched as opposed to formed out of creative talent. In an interview in January 2013, YG Entertainment's CEO Yang Hyun-suk acknowledged that "too many similar groups" had saturated the market and reduced demand (Yi 2013). There is nevertheless some irony in the fact that while it is generally understood that the indus-

try needs to be competitive, fans are under the same pressure as their idols to conform to various social norms. Nonconformity allows the suggestion of creative input and avoids the image of complacency, but the euphoria Douglas speaks of must be nurtured carefully. Rather than allowing all group members to express degrees of nonconformity and risk ostracizing the mainstream fan base, management companies have in a number of cases carefully tailored a single group member's styling and performance to express a controlled measure of resistance. Well-known examples of members whose physical appearance and performance represents resistance include $f(x)$'s rather tomboyish Amber Liu, 4Minutes' Jeon Ji-yoon, and 2NE1's CL (Lee Chae-rin), who usually presents herself as having a tough attitude and recites her lines with a cynical smile and posing in that typical hip-hop-like fashion that tells the viewer that respect is earned and not a given.¹⁴

In February 2012, Thomas Entertainment and CJ E&M released the debut single "Never Say Goodbye" for their jointly produced girl group Tomboy Girls. Despite the title, however, there does not appear to be anything nonconformist about the group. The song is undeniably a romantic ballad, sung by a pretty singer with long wavy hair, who in the accompanying video carries a pink suitcase toward a caravan. In the comments section on YouTube where one version of this video was uploaded, a visitor wrote, "amber, u needs smack these chicks cuz they sure as hell aint tomboys!"¹⁵ In April 2013, SimTong Entertainment's tomboy girl group GI (Global Icon) debuted with the song "Beatles." In the video for the song, which opens with a skull opening its mouth, the girls are shown performing with boy band-like attitude against a dark background. The girls all have an unmistakably tomboyish look, much like $f(x)$'s Amber, and they wear different clothing combinations. Although the band's label initially planned to form a boy band (Jackson 2013), it eventually sought to fill a niche with a boyish girl band instead. It commented that it was going to be different "from the cute and sexy girl groups that come out almost once every week."¹⁶

Although GI set out to bring some change to the all too standard format of girl groups, an arguably more serious attempt to do so had preceded it in the form of the Taiwanese girl group MISTER. The girls in this group also sport very androgynous looks. In the video for their song "Super Lover" (2011) the synchronized styling and performance is more masculine and sporty, but the girls nevertheless remain dressed in the same uniform, albeit with slight variations. Throughout the video, female models appear in strapless dresses and high heels with long hair to offset the

androgynous singers who appear to show their affection for the ladies when short sequences of them singing the chorus “and I’ll always be your super lover” are edited in between close-ups of the ladies. The group, which on its official page (<http://mister.pixnet.net/blog>) claims to pursue a “gender neutral” (zhongxing) image “with a teenage girl heart inside” (zaishaonuxin) has not been very successful so far, which may be because of the quality of the act or its marketing, or because the act has become widely regarded as a lesbian one.¹⁷ After all, new girl groups may flirt with or incorporate elements of nonconformity, but they venture onto thin ice when challenging society’s heteronormative foundations.

Conclusion

In Korea, the girl group formula has long been a popular format. Because of the eye candy that contemporary acts offer, and their great exposure, a growing number of adults are finding entertainment in girl groups. It is likely that adult men are drawn more to the videos than the music itself, but this is not clear, especially since teenage girls make up the vast majority of K-pop fans. The inclusion of elements of attitude or resistance are perhaps not intended for adult men per se, but they may enjoy deviously interpreting the girls’ actions as playful, sexual provocation. Considering most girl groups have a very large number of teenage girl fans, one might expect greater constraint in the depiction of sexualized femininity than one can currently find. The groups’ performances place great emphasis on the members’ bodies and movements. They are statements that advertise the idol collective as an ideal of female beauty and young women’s potential. Although the picture-perfect girl groups would appear to add to the pressure on young women to conform to what is an increasingly unnatural beauty ideal, they also allow girls to dream of being part of the act. They embed in young girls’ minds the notion that they, too, can be both the objects and subjects of the fantasy, regardless of whether that affords them any genuine empowerment. SNSs allow fans to form the camaraderie that constitutes such a crucial aspect of the girl group formula. They let them share ideas and experiences in regards to specific girl groups, as well as information that draws them closer to the acts.

Conformism and nonconformism are two important factors driving Korea’s pop music industry. The entertainment industries must position and reposition their acts carefully, in order to avoid the image of complacency and mimicry, on the one hand, and too much individualism and

attitude on the other. Whereas the strong conservatism and conformity have given rise to specific expectations in terms of performance, the industry still relies on innovation and the element of surprise. By avoiding attitude and conforming to social norms, idols show that they are respectful, approachable individuals that merely enjoy pushing the boundaries of normative behavior a little. Since their primary audience consists of teenagers, they cannot push hard. Korea’s younger generations are under considerable pressure to meet set expectations that are specific to their gender, including success in education and at securing a desirable job or partner. A number of girl groups therefore express no more than a cosmetic degree of resistance; they do not advocate a true departure from those expectations. Since many picture-perfect acts have numbed the palates of many consumers, the industry has begun to create acts that can once again intrigue and captivate them. YG Entertainment’s Yang Hyun-suk commented that in contrast to the early years of the Wave, his company is now looking for people who are not necessarily good-looking but have something special about them (Yi 2013).

When girl groups incorporate elements of attitude, they appear to have greater ownership of their own act. It is possible that those elements will resonate in particular with the growing number of somewhat older fans of K-pop who find the image of a subservient femininity less interesting. The girl groups’ expressions of resistance can be empowering to teenage girls, their primary fan base. But unless both the acts and their fans resist the hegemony of the groups’ management or the culture it represents, even if only in style or performance, they cannot be regarded as representing an alternative, or even a subculture. What is more, the various elements of the acts are difficult to separate entirely, and it would be wrong to automatically label any band that does not follow the standard format of the Korean girl group as nonconformist, even if it symbolizes resistance against the objectification of women let alone heteronormativity (see Stos 2012, 122).

The examples and factors presented in this chapter may suggest an outright denial of group members’ individual talent or creative input, but this is unintentional. Many of the girls are not only talented, but they must work very hard and be extremely dedicated, endure public scrutiny, and sacrifice their private lives. It is highly unlikely that in spite of the fact that young talents are eager to sign contracts with the major entertainment agencies, they have no issues with the many professional and social demands their work and status demands. This is, after all, a music scene that is driven in particular by music videos, television shows, advertising and

SNSs, as opposed to merely a network of live stages. As a result its idols are not judged only on the basis of their individual talent, but on how well they perform as singers, dancers, models, actors, and celebrities. I expect that as K-pop further develops, a greater number of female idols will seek ownership of their work and by doing so actually resist the hegemony, much like the boy band [Y] has done in recent years.¹⁸ Although this may not result in a dramatic change in the formula of the girl group, it may lead to a greater exposure of the collectives' individual singers, thereby drawing the focus away from the chorus line of legs to the personalities of the individual members. But such a change would not last, whatever the gender of the people in charge: why mess with a winning formula?

NOTES

1. The changes the careful positioning of K-pop acts has brought about are arguably most noticeable among male idols: despite sporting chiseled physiques, many of them have begun to use color foundation creams and lip gloss. They pluck their eyebrows, wear longish, labor-intensive hairstyles, and generally present themselves both verbally and nonverbally in a soft and gracious, arguably vain fashion that in Korea two decades ago would have been uncommon and probably considered unacceptable.
2. Overall sales of Korean music grew faster than those of other entertainment-related products, from approximately US\$2.4 billion in 2008 to US\$3.5 billion in 2011. Between 2010 and 2011, export sales of K-pop increased by 112.9 percent to US\$177 million (Hanguk Kontencht Chinhungwon 2012, 13).
3. On Korean Internet message boards one regularly comes across the recently coined terms *kkonminam*, *chinsung*, and *ditchang*, which commonly relate to the styling, physical fitness, and facial perfection of male idols respectively. Whereas the latter term is also applied to female stars, overall, the pressure on female performers to conform to a high-unnatural beauty standard remains high and shows no sign of waning as that on their male counterparts increases.
4. This work was supported by the Academy of Korean Studies (KSPS) Grant funded by the Korean Government (MOE) (AKS-2011-BAA-2106).
5. The intention behind the practice videos is somewhat similar to that of gaming software companies releasing "cheat codes" that allow users easy access to higher levels or additional features otherwise hidden. Although they would appear to do more harm than good to sales of the game, the codes generate additional revenue through the sale of various gaming news media and the advertising this generates, and, most importantly, they allow gamers to experience a greater sense of ownership and, thus, affinity.
6. In S.M. Entertainment's 2005 video for TVXQ's song "Tonight," for example, four of the five band members are wearing dark-colored jumpers left unzipped over white dress shirts with brightly colored neckties. Although there is great consistency in the styling, none of the members' outfits is identical. The idols all remain unique and identifiable. In the company's 2012 video for SHINee's song "Sherlock," the casual styling is so diverse, in fact, that the singers are like dancing mannequins showing off a designer's

line of street wear. In the various short cutaway scenes, different, more formal clothes are worn, but the combinations nevertheless offer an equal measure of divergence.

7. One recent phenomenon is the use of the term *samchon* (uncle) fan for male fans of girl groups in their thirties and forties. Whereas I do not deny that the use of the term *samchon* allows these men to solve what would otherwise be a socially unacceptable issue because of the sometimes near-pedophilic nature of their affection, I doubt that the majority of these men who adopt the term do so without a sense of irony, nor do I understand why the attraction of young male idols with elder female fans shouldn't raise many eyebrows (see Kim 2011, 340; Kim 2010, 79–119).

8. For various approaches towards the notion, see Kim 2011, 334, 336.

9. For a study of the impact music videos can have on African American high school students' attitudes towards gender roles, see Wärd, Hansbrough, and Walker 2005, 143–66.

10. See also Na 2011, 143. On February 2, 2013, the author attended a United Cube concert at Seoul's Jamsil Indoor Stadium, which featured, besides the boy bands BTOB and BEAST, the female acts G.N.A, 4Minute, 2Yoon, and Hyuna. Teenage girls made up approximately 90 percent of the audience.

11. Aoyagi argues that pop idols serve as "lifestyle role models" (Aoyagi 2005, 3).

12. The music video is very similar to the last four minutes of the original version of the video for Michael Jackson's song "Black or White" (1991).

13. In 2011, 65 percent of the fans on 2NE1's website were female, while 58 percent of the fans on Girls' Generation's website were male (Na 2011, 143).

14. Among boy bands, Super Junior's somewhat obese Shindong, SHINee's Taemin, and NUEST's Ren could be considered to resist the norm. The latter have for some time sported long, blonde hair and as a result a rather effeminate look, unlike their fellow band members.

15. See comment by "untliger1" at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9recWdoVf0Q>.

16. From <http://www.allkpop.com/2013/03/new-tomboy-girl-group-gi-global-icn-releases-member-images>, accessed on January 6, 2013.

17. On July 27, 2012, the band's official fan forum (<http://go.to/lovelymisster>) had 1,436 registered members. By January 2014, the forum had been closed.

18. See Seung-Ah Lee's chapter on [Y] in this volume.

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