From Hybridity of Cultural Production to Hyperreality of Post-feminism in K-pop: A Theoretical Reconsideration for Critical Approaches to Cultural Assemblages in Neoliberal Culture Industry

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Abstract

This paper evaluates a current discourse of cultural hybridity that is deployed to examine the global success of local popular culture from South Korea. Indicating the discourse is descriptive without retaining an explanatory merit, I propose an alternative perspective based on Jean Baudrillard's notion of simulation and hyperreality, while focusing on the political economy of cultural hybridization. Examining how the Korean popular music (K-pop) industry mixes various audio-visual elements, I argue cultural hybridity in K-pop is not so much an autonomous, self-reflective cultural endeavor as an industrial means to maximize profits while perpetuating the status quo of gender relations. Re-inserting K-pop within the industry's structural configurations, I analyze how and why a hyper-real personality of female idols who sport contradictory characteristics, innocence and explicit sexuality, becomes a new ideal femininity. Indicating neoliberal and post-feminist ramifications in K-pop's hybridity, I redress the myopic, descriptive nature of the current scholarship.

Keywords: Korean Popular Music (K-pop), Cultural Hybridity, Hyper-reality, Post-feminism, Neoliberal Culture Industry.

Introduction

This paper aims to help better understand K-pop's neoliberal and post-feminist ramifications, examining female idols' hybridized stage personalities and sexualities. With its international success since the mid 2000s, especially the global fame of Psy, Girls' Generation, and BTS, an increasing number of scholarly endeavors have attempted to analyze the various dynamics behind the phenomenon. However, as Patrick Galbraith and Jason Karlin lament "scholars do analyze idols, but often without theoretical motivation or engagement" in their ever-increasing implications and importance,[2] nothing is more troublesome than the existing literature on cultural hybridity. Adopting Homi Bhabha's theorization on the post-colonial experiences of elite migrants who navigate the in-betweenness of their national and cultural identities, scholars commend K-pop's dexterity in mixing American pop culture genres with what is considered to be Koreanness. By a re-constitutive process that nullifies essentialist cultural authenticity, hybridity allows audiences to relate their sentiment to K-pop's glossy features: furthermore, it successfully practices a counter-flow of cultural production from the peripheral country to metropolitan centers. In this regard, JungBong Choi and Roald Maliangkay claim that the decades-long issue of cultural domination by the West has been ameliorated, if not overcome by K-pop's "presentational mode and content" and global popularity.[3] This counter-flow of cultural production, or what they call "the role reversal in the global creative industry,"[4] has been celebrated since Doobo Shim's work.[5] More recently, despite a bold statement to address hybridity's empirical dimensions in K-pop fans' experiences, Kyong Yoon reifies a mere sign of cultural mixture as a "creative reinterpretation" of dominant Western cultural genres, and focuses on a consumption side of the cultural commodity just like the previous literature before his.[6] Describing what fans think about K-pop and celebrating their consumerist agency, he is not able to correctly comprehend their limited perspectives on K-pop hybridity, which is context-specific to their locality, identity, class, race, gender and so on. Furthermore, Yoon misconstrues what causes the fans' inability to recognize unique Korean attributes in the "hybridized" cultural texts as their disinterest in the locality or origination of the cultural commodity.[7] Rather than this individual fan's different degree of cultural competency or criticism, I examine how K-pop's business imperatives and interests shape the music genre as "odorless" cultural commodity in the market. In other words, as opposed to the current celebratory, descriptive or functionalist scholarship, I re-consider broader political economic dimensions of cultural production processes where concrete economic, historical, industrial, and social factors contribute to generating cultural hybridity. By doing so, I aim to overcome the current literature that fetishizes locality in cultural production.

Compared to the growing number of female idols and their increasing influence, the current scholarship is not capable of explicating what is behind the K-pop industry's strategic rationale to create and promote their certain personality, subjectivity, and/or sexuality. While there are works that examine femininity in K-pop,[8] Suan Lee's lament on a paucity of studies that critically examine how sexualized female bodies are promoted and consumed still holds true.[9] Since K-pop is produced in a mode of commodity manufacturing, anything about the idols is pre-determined, conditioned, and maintained to address industry's profiteering imperatives: If the idols' certain personality is systematically manufactured and/or promoted by hybridization, one has to ask how and why it emerges and becomes popular. However, as Soo-Ah Kim indicates,[10] the critical, discursive examination on the female idols' sexualization and hybridized personification lost its validity during debates on the nature and autonomy of the fandom: Subsequently, the literature tends to merely celebrate its economic contributions.[11]

However, I re-situate the topic back to its political economic backgrounds and motivations. As an exportation item in the post-IMF neoliberal service industry, the idols have strategically been incepted, crafted, and modified to cater to the fleeting tastes of targeted audiences domestically or internationally. Re-packaged to appeal to most susceptible, profitable audiences, the idols are cultural commodities that are promoted and proliferated by state-private partnership to exploit culture as a mere commercial profiteering strategy.[12] In this respect, it is important to acknowledge the idols are manufactured by a rigorous industrial practice of culture technology that deploys certain aesthetic, musical, and performative components to attract specific audiences who have different cultural, historical, economic, and social backgrounds.[13]

With the industry's control over virtually all aspects of the idols' lives, cultural hybridity they sport has to be analyzed in the industry's broader business strategies. Considering a disposability/replace-ability or interchangeability of idols as the industry's key management practice and an alleged lack of the idols' creative inputs, critical examination on the political economy of the K-pop business provides a better explanatory account for K-pop's cultural hybridity. However, as Soo-Ah Kim indicates, there has been a severe lack of attempts to analyze the agency's roles in idol manufacturing procedures.[14] As a commercial strategy of commodity portfolio or differentiation, the industry has rendered various feminine images from a traditionally submissive, demure lady to hyper-sexualized female provocateur: however, by its tight control over representational possibilities, the industry treats a female image as affective spectacle for "catering to male fantasies of innocence yet willing throngs of young females, a conscious manipulation of the male gaze, or narcissistic self-exploitation directed at same-sex

peers that dismisses patriarchy only to careen onto the similarly problematic dictates of consumerist late capitalism."[15] Examining factors in the production, circulation, and consumption of K-pop female idols for their "prominence as a site for the transmission of, and contestation over, gender roles,"[16] I provide an alternative way to understand femininity in K-pop not only on a microscopic, textual level, but also from structural, political economic perspectives. With this multi-perspectival approach, I provide a better answer to a question that asks whose interest is promoted in the cultural/industrial practices of K-pop's hybridity. While a hybridity of various masculinities contributes to K-pop male idols' successes,[17] this paper is limited to those of female idols for their unprecedented ubiquity, success, and plasticity of images.

As a local, intensified adaptation of the Japanese popular music industry's idol system,[18] K-pop has pushed boundaries of commodifying the cultural and the immaterial in the markets. Since S.E.S.'s debut in 1997, K-pop female idols are "[m]odelled after the typical Japanese female idol groups and carefully formed to be marketable internationally."[19] While "identical to the typical *aidoru* band practice in Japan" albeit a greater intensity in its training regimen and commercial application of idols,[20] the K-pop industry has taken advantage of the existing, and/or diversified spectrum of audience groups, created, expanded and maintained by Japanese predecessors; However, it has to secure a competitive edge by product diversification and quality improvement as a latecomer strategy. As an apex of Korea's neoliberal economy that depends on foreign markets, K-pop has retained Japan's previous industrial experiences and expertise, and in turn targeted to tastes of international audiences by modifying and/or updating commercially proven audio-visual repertoires of J-pop.

While I do appreciate growing scholarly endeavors to explicate audiences' active engagement in the media as a means of practicing their agency for a cause,[21] this paper deals with the celebrity phenomenon itself. Any meaning of cultural artifact is generated within a complex interaction between a text's material properties and production backgrounds, and an audience's specific location in cultural, economic, political, and social milieus. However, the current K-pop literature is limited to how the content is circulated and consumed in microscopic or celebratory manners, leaving the production aspect uncovered. As opposed to the current, functionalist scholarship on the fans' engagements, I analyze the idols as a media text that carries various significations so as to contextualize the audiences' cultural consumption practices more acutely. Also, while there is a growing attention to how fans construct their own meanings, it does not pay due attention to what implicit or latent messages are embedded or prevalent to the extent that audiences still consume no matter how they are active in negotiating

with it. In other words, I reconsider a fundamental asymmetry of agency and resource between the industry and the individual in cultural (re) production.

For fans' active participation, Suk-Young Kim indicates they are integral to the idol manufacturing processes in "the malleable interchangeability of positions between various agents of K-pop and the communal sensibility."[22] In "two-way love affair by deploying various media platforms, where affection travels in multiple directions," she maintains K-pop is able to encourage audiences to feel liveliness and entitled in their contribution to the music genre's success.[23] However, with its narcissistic, consumerist messages in flashing audio-visual modalities, K-pop merely opens up an audience's transformative chance to appropriate its messages. For example, while there was an occasion where students of Ewha Women's University used Girls' Generation's song, "Into the New World" in their efforts to protest the administration's neoliberal plan to sell diplomas, their movement was confined to individualist consumer activism to protect their prerogative the membership in the school ensures perceived or real cultural, economic, political and social status.[24] In this respect, Suk-Young Kim ignores individual audiences' structural situatedness in neoliberal culture industry that gives them a sense of empowerment, participation, and agency as a part of its business strategies.[25] While she is right that K-pop's participatory power comes from a unique Korean concept, "*heung* [that] refers to the innate energy in every human being that is reserved for the spontaneous joy of playing that shines through despite counterforces," it is strategically re-packaged/re-staged and promoted by the industry's commercial imperatives, which is far from a result of communal, convivial, and egalitarian cultural experiences or experiments.[26] In other words, S. Kim's notion of K-pop's "*heung* as an affective mediator between the self and the other" is a perfect, local application of neoliberal service economy that conjures up consumers' emotional, affective, and physical involvement in the commodity consumption.[27] Thus, in order to correctly understand the historical and local factors of K-pop's success, I examine an institutional condition of K-pop production in the transnational capitalism.

In other words, though there is a scholarly attention to a subversive potential of fans' subcultural, participatory practices,[28] their investment or involvement in K-pop production is a glimpse of how neoliberal economy works. Despite K-pop fans' active role, it is tandem with the industry's business strategy to maximize the audience's affective attachment to the idols, and they are eventually consumers who do not retain a decision-making prerogative or earn profit by doing so. Rather, the more audience's cultural participation that entails various user-generated contents and other surplus values, the more the industry leaps profits from commercializing these free labors. In order not to fall into a common problem of

the fandom literature, which is "almost complicit with the culture industry and the ideology of consumerism,"[29] I critically investigate what the audience is given by the K-pop industry. To that end, as Robert Oppenheim and Heather Hindman state that there is a fetishizing tendency to *Hallyu*'s "imagined capacity for independent agency dependent on forgetting of aspects of social origins and articulations,"[30] I accentuate a broader political economic context of the culture industry, and thereby, recount its social implications in intensely neoliberalizing society.

A co-existence of contradictory femininities between a pure, innocent girl and a sexual provocateur is one of the idiosyncratic features of K-pop female idols. As a K-pop version of Mary the virgin whore, the industry worships a "bagel girl," a term that combines English words of "*ba*by" and "*gl*amorous," who boasts an un-realistic combination of a baby-like face and a sexualized, glamorous body. Retaining both pre- and post-pubescent characteristics, they are simultaneously infantilized and sexually provocative as a reified object that retains Korea's traditional feminine decency along with Americanized hyper-sexualization. With help of the media-medical industry complex and as a sociocultural site of surveillance and control, the idols not only perpetuate phallocentric gender ideals, but more importantly interpellate female audiences to emulate them.[31] More specifically, as an object of female cosmetic desire and male sexual fantasy,[32] they have become a popular pedagogue that is "much more instructive than the official doctrines of the nation-state … [by formulating] the lived experiences of ordinary people."[33] My attempt to analyze what led to a proliferation of schizophrenic female subjectivity will better explicate complex social implications of K-pop female idols.

As a popular and lucrative site that commands the center of individuals' attentions, neoliberal culture industry provides female audiences with an ostensibly progressive representation, which is however "tied to conditions of social conservatism, consumerism and hostility to feminism in any of its old or new forms."[34] With this "double entanglement" of post-feminism that accentuates individual choice, freedom, glamour and success,[35] feminist ideas and projects have been coopted and effective in serving the establishment's economic, ideological, and social interests. By her notion of instrumentality, Joan Scott indicates how post-feminist ideals confuse individuals through celebratory spectacles of female sexuality, social entitlement, and economic advancement.[36] Likewise, in their critical reading of leading K-pop female idols' music videos, Stephen Epstein and James Turnbull comment that a growing number of K-pop's female empowerment/independence themes do not bring "young women to a heightened sense of their own possibilities in the world … but rather that Korea's pop culture commodification of sexuality has reached the point that for middle-aged men to focus their gaze on underage performers becomes cause for

rejoicing rather than embarrassment."[37] Declaring the issues of "sex and gender, dependence and independence, and dominance and subordination are largely irrelevant" to how she behaves,[38] the idols brush off structural barriers and problems as a neoliberal fantasy of a post-sexist capitalism.

While the meaning of cultural hybridity is always in flux with multiple inter-pretations, I consider cultural hybridity as a symbolic manifestation of local agency's active, dialectic interaction with hegemonic power of transnational forces during complex cultural production procedures. Regarding local sensitivity and autonomy as the central, ethical tenet of cultural assemblage, I examine whether K-pop exercises a cultural command of locality in its "mutant result of fusion and intermixture,"[39] that is reflective of Korean people's everyday lives. Furthermore, as a "meta-construction of social order" for a creative self-reflexivity,[40] hybridity is not just a cultural fusion of different artifacts, but more importantly a concrete result of a strategic, *political* action that emits a complex set of values, norms, and meanings. In other words, as a cultural reorganization of power, hybridity is a conscious embodiment of people' self-conscious, continuous cultural rejuvenation. With an "*explanatory* power to the concept: studying processes of hybridization by locating these in structural relations of causality,"[41] I discuss K-pop hybridity's cultural, economic, political, and social implications and effects. Thus, under-standing how K-pop female idols invite audiences to place themselves in "imagi-native cultural narratives and, as such, they help both to construct and provide insights into that wider experience,"[42] I re-contextualize the phenomenal success of female idols back into their actual role as a popular pedagogue of post-feminism, or the governmentality of neoliberal feminism in contemporary Korea.

To that end, I re-consider K-pop's cultural mixing practices from Jean Baudrillard's notion of hyper-reality. Except for Suan Lee's work albeit major explanatory limitations,[43] there is no literature that analyzes the political economy of K-pop idols' images from Baudrillard's perspective of sign value. By extending Baudrillard's political economy of the sign and a material power of simulacra, which both fulfill the industry's control over signification and representation procedures, I propose how K-pop's hybridity serves to re-produce and perpetuate the status quo through its cornucopia of opportunistic visuality. Indicating how image is created by a certain desire or fantasy and generates a variety of socio-cultural events based on simulation, I examine how the industry promotes a certain type of desirable femininities as a hybridity of images and signals. In turn, they simultaneously become an object and a subject of simulation for the split personality, which can "train the broadest mass of people in order to create a pattern of undreamed-of dimensions" in conformative social behaviors.[44] Thus, with this alternative approach, I not only re-assess the industry's strategic

reappropriation of various cultural elements as a commercial venture but also argue its broader governmental practices that condition audiences' subjectivities by promoting an imagined gender ideal, or one more real than actual, that is, a hyper-real femininity.

Local Cultural Production: Between Hegemony and Reflexivity in K-pop

While Korea became a major non-Western country that commands exports of diverse cultural products since the 2000s,[45] whether or not K-pop showcases local sentiments and critical reflexivity is an important question that warrants critical examination. As Néstor García Canclini acutely argues that hybridity "can be helpful in the *discovery* stage [of a new culture], as a way of generating hypotheses or counterhypotheses that challenge established knowledges,"[46] with K-pop's ever-increasing global popularity, a mere existence of hybridity is no longer meaningful. Rather, K-pop must carry cultural self-reflexivity in its effort to express Korean people's experienced feelings and grounded knowledges, if the prefix "K" means anything.

I suggest that the recent development of K-pop is a result of hybridization with the experiences of the country's turbulent industrial capitalist nation-building. Korea's popular culture has evolved through an active adaptation or reapplication of popular cultural products from Japan and the U.S. as a "palimpsest of multiple layers of Japanese colonialism and neo-imperial domination, especially by U.S. hegemony."[47] Under the Japanese colonial occupation, Korea's modern popular music as mass entertainment was born with Lee Nan-young's "Tears of Mokpo" in 1935. Undergoing the Korean War, poverty, industrialization, and democratization, Korean people have admired the US as a mythical utopia that becomes part and parcel of their collective imagination and desire for a better world.[48] The post Korean War popular music in Korea was oriented to American GIs as the chief consumer who "avidly embraced formal and informal offerings of rest and relaxation, from sexual services to musical entertainment."[49] While local musicians/performers tried their best to live up to "American expectations," Korean popular music, no matter how much it is hybridized, retains a fundamental asymmetric reliance on the American reference. For example, Motown's girl groups, as a cultural icon of American affluence, were replicated like the Kim Sisters, and popular among American servicemen in Korea in the 50s and 60s. However, while they could be a local version of the Motown girl groups, one should carefully examine whether or not they professed local cultural reflexivity while maintaining cultural autonomy against the dominant cultural and economic hegemony.

Since U.S. popular culture has commanded global hegemony, emulating American pop values and systems provides a better chance of success with less market risk. Leaders in the K-pop industry can be regarded as an example of the "dominated group's internalization" of transnational capitalism's business mantra.[50] Practicing the hegemony of consumerism, commodification of culture, and sexualization of femininity,[51] the K-pop industry complicates the evasive characteristic of cultural hybridization. This challenges the growing recognition of peripheral countries' competence to produce and market their indigenous culture globally.[52] Thus, K-pop delineates how hegemony employs an ideological double play in local culture production. Even if it allows "counter-hegemonic" practices on a local level, it establishes local culture industry as a cultural hegemon, while perpetuating predatory labor conditions and fetishizing local cultural production.

K-pop is an exemplar of the neoliberal service economy that reflects how business demands have shifted from sweatshop manual workforce to affective, immaterial labor. As gender/sexuality is always already imbricated in society's political and economic conditions,[53] the female idols' schizophrenic personality reflects the industry elite's strategic appropriation and application of the neoliberal imperative. Just like how J-pop industry, a prototype of K-pop, constructs its idols by incorporating archetypical gender ideals and sexual fantasies of the contemporary Japanese audiences,[54] K-pop idols are conditioned through an extensive period of intensive training to resonate with what the audiences are willing to pay attention. Once they establish the stardom, they command a trend-setting power to the audience with how to behave, buy, and think. However, since idols are literally manufactured by the industry's airtight regiment of various codes of conducts, it is actually the industry's leaders who set what the audience is to receive. Like its predecessors that exploited under- or un-paid female workers decades ago, the K-pop industry takes advantage of a hegemonic model that produces quickly profitable, homogenized, disposable commodities from a highly concentrated, hierarchical production system. Rather than autonomous artists, K-pop idols are commercial products that a management company recruits, trains, promotes and markets based on a pre-determined concept or theme. For that reason, they lack of any creative autonomy or authenticity to the extent that they "execute what has been conceived for them; they wear what they are told to wear; they sing what they are told to sing; and they move and behave as they are told."[55] To corroborate John Lie's argument on a commodification of K-pop as an exportation item,[56] I substantiate his claim by analyzing how Kpop idols are marketed as immaterial commodities that human emotions and intimacies are their main currency.

In this regard, K-pop as Korea's apex of neoliberal service economy has subsumed the cultural to the sum of the economic imperative of late capitalism,

by poaching any part of global popular culture as far as it assumes marketability. K-pop idols are designed as a "means of maximizing and ensuring consumption" to maintain consumerism as the lynchpin of the hegemonic economic system.[57] Then, since it does not prioritize reflexive creativity but gobbles up anything flashy and profitable, hybridity in K-pop has to be examined in its specific socio-cultural instrumentality, that is what it projects and promotes for whose interests.

Schizophrenic Personality of K-pop Female Idols: Between Innocence and Sexualization

I maintain female idols' bodies are manufactured and enhanced by a hybridization between the neoliberal discourse of *homo economicus* and the postfeminist treatise on empowerment. Imbricated between patriarchal gender hierarchy and neoliberal commodification of female sexuality, K-pop female idols' schizophrenic personality thus exhibits the social condition of female lives under the two distinct worldviews simultaneously: Being an innocent, cute, and submissive patriarchal woman, and an active, hyper-sexualized practitioner of neoliberalism. Since every representation is a re-construction of political fantasy that arises from actual and potential social relations,[58] and femininity is configured in the "deployment of standardized visual images,"[59] the idols' split-personality can be understood as a symbolic manifestation of women's location, meaning, and existential conditions in society. This marketing strategy for commodified differences further constrains the possibility for alternative female thoughts and behaviors. At one limit, failing to achieve individual development, a woman behaves obedient, submissive, and subjectless like a little girl, and on the other, she acts like a temptress and preaches neoliberal sexualization. This dual, contradictory demand has intensified patriarchy's "totally other-oriented emotional economy" to satisfy male affective and sexual needs.[60] In its double, hybridized constraints, or "schizoid double-pull" of femininity,[61] the women of K-pop are required to be traditionally Confucian and contemporarily neoliberal: virginal and sexual.

Suzy debuted as a member of the group MissA, marketed for aggressive sexuality, at the age of 15 in 2010. Conceptualized as an "alpha girl" who is financially independent and sexually confident, MissA exhibits an audiovisual rhetoric of post-feminism. By a "performance of confident sexual agency" as post-feminist ideal of desirable femininity,[62] MissA collectively sexualizes their bodies, and embodies a K-pop version of the "male sexual fantasy of the dominatrix."[63] Deviating from the traditional fragile, passive femininity, the group sports a marketing strategy of updating a patriarchal fantasy to exploit various female sexualities.

On top of Miss A's group identity, Suzy is famous for her wholesome image with an appealing appearance, and becomes the Queen of commercial film, active in endorsements for various commodities like cosmetics, clothes, and beverages. As opposed to Chuyun Oh's observation that K-pop female idols are torn between the industry's strategy of promoting female promiscuity or chastity,[64] she deftly combines them, and becomes K-pop's new ideal femininity. While the majority of Kpop female idols market a dual character with pure, innocent and cute femininity along with explicit sexuality, Suzy is the most successful presentation of this hybridized personality. Timothy Laurie indicates K-pop idols do not "pretend to express authentic social experiences, but they do provide special creative opening for fan communities.[65] However, I argue Suzy embodies the post-feminist world-view by offering a transgressive gender ideal that eventually circumscribes audience's transformative feminist take-on the gender status quo.

Donned in all black or black/white clothes with light makeup, emitting a sense of rebellion and nonconformity to an expectation of traditional femininity, MissA assumes aggressive attitude towards their male counterparts, dancing in a school setting in the 2010 debut music video "Bad Girl, Good Girl." The choice of color indicates their desire for feisty independence, power, authority, or dominance. While female affects used to be channeled to address male emotional demand, they do not show any facial expressions, showing an indifference to the male gaze. Rather, claiming how they look does not represent what they are, the idols declare their own (sexual) subjectivity. Dancing in a provocative manner in a ballet studio where "good girls" normally practice the feminine arabesque, MissA appropriates the conventionally womanly behaviors and proclaim they are "bad girls" who do not conform to gender norms. Making direct eye contact, they look stern and strong while emitting a sense of rebellion through sexualized, powerful dance routines.

However, a cautious multimodal discourse analysis reveals layers of different meanings behind their audiovisual seduction. They promote a *dubious* practice of female empowerment: they promote an unexplained aggression to a fellow male student, which falls back into a traditional notion of masculinity. The well-synchronized choreography in a line format indicates a patriarchal rationality of control and manipulation. While there are some individualized dance moves, all the group members eventually come to conform to a pre-determined, collective theme of corporeal arrangement and exhibition. When an individual member is spotlighted, she is highly sexualized with provocative outfits and explicit dance moves. While their abrupt, dramatized dance moves could symbolize their desire for liberation, these moves give way to sexually charged actions, such as groping their own bodies, dropping down, rolling on the floor, and thrusting and gyrating

their bottoms, and in turn perpetuating male-oriented female sexual conduct. Certain body parts, especially over-emphasis on their bottoms and bosoms that shake, swing and gyrate, are emphasized and fetishize the idols' sexualized physicality. In this respect, their unconventional choreography is not to liberate their sexuality, but updates and re-affirms the male-oriented female sexuality. Individually or collectively, they re-produce the patriarchal status quo through sexualization and group *conformity*.[66]

In 2013 "Hush" music video, MissA stages much more carnal visual and lyrical messages, unapologetically manifesting that they are "bad girls." The song is all about a "secret party," filled with sexual activities. Opening with a flooded room insinuating that the idols are fully mature to the extent that they are "wet," the video visually lavishes sexual allusions and references. In risqué sartorial materials such as body chains, tight leather pants and high heels, they wear drastic make-up with an eye-catching, red lipstick on their game-faces. With many occasions of touching themselves, bouncing, pumping, and crouching in graphic poses, the choreography is filled with explicit sexual messages. The idols claim a direct, demanding sexuality: "Kiss kiss kiss baby. Hush hush hush baby. Hot hot make it hot, and melt me. Give it to me, give it to me oh." Their bodily and lyrical messages further complicate and perpetuate the hegemonic sexuality that reifies females as sex objects that can only be fulfilled by male sexual desire and initiatives: "Hurry hurry boy. I want you." The idols' aggressive sexuality feeds the male sexual ego, and the lyrics manifest the female passivity in a guise of aggressive sexuality: "I can't stand it, I can't take it, my heart palpitates, I can't keep straight." It is in this very ambiguity that the video further perpetuates hegemonic patriarchy while giving a false sense of female subjectivity and empowerment. While it is obvious that MissA presents a rather aggressive femininity in their lyrical, physical, and visual measures that challenge conventionally quiet, obedient, passive and chaste femininity, they are still within a safe boundary of the patriarchal discourse of femininity and sexuality. With a post-feminist audiovisual theme, that is "fulfilling men's sexual desires now [have] to be thought of as authentically self-chosen and, what's more as empowering,"[67] the music video sensually updates the traditional gender roles that ultimate initiative still belongs to male addressees. In turn, this highly sexualized, self-expressive female lifestyle is "naturally and economically compatible with a consumer society which offers a plethora of products" to constantly make over female bodies as a means of neoliberal self-development and realization.[68]

In "Good Girl, Bad Girl," Suzy wears a tutu-like skirt, and seems to be less sexualized than other members. However, since she has elongated legs, the skirt does not cover her body well, but instead attracts more attention to her body

whenever it waves and exposes the thigh. Especially, when combined with her milky, porcelain skin, the black dress accentuates Suzy's physical attractiveness. This visual contradiction gets more salient when her ponytail hair with bangs is incorporated in the sexualized visuals, especially with explicit sexual moves, such as holding buttocks and swinging them sideways, and thrusting pelves on the floor. This is how her slippery image gets solidified when her wholesome physical attributes accentuate sexual connotations and attractions. Later, in a similar manner, Suzy harks back to a sense of purity and innocence in a hyper-sexualized theme of "Hush." Especially in the subway car scene of the video for "Hush," Suzy holds a giant lollipop candy in a white long-sleeve turtleneck sweater, which gives another layer of reified innocence and childhood purity, and this fetishism is revealing when Suzy sits upright and stiff with no facial expression like a china doll. As Aljosa Puzar claims female idols are dollified to satisfy and further elicit male sexual fantasy,[69] Suzy has been praised as a personification of a doll that embodies both child-like innocence and sexually provocation. While Suzy bites to break the candy tuned in a lyric, "I can't hold it in any more," she becomes fully sexualized, inviting the male sexual fantasy of violating virginity, maximizing "fantasy-fueling projections of both virginal demeanor and [male audience's] eager collective anticipation of defloration."[70] At this point, she admits her subjectivity is confined to the patriarchal sexual economy that her self-realization or satisfaction is still dependent on a validating male. In "Good Girl, Bad Girl," Suzy is the most sexualized in a sophisticated and teasing way; however, she is the most innocent and wholesome in "Hush" with the exact same reason that is her elusive sexuality. At any rate, Suzy is one of the K-pop industry's most successful spectacles, which hoards audience's attention, by eliciting both the male sexual fantasy and a female desire for empowerment.

Cultural Hybridity: Strategy of Transnational Capitalism

As opposed to Homi Bhabha's idyllic concept of hybridity that comes from the in-betweenness of elite emigrants' cultural identities,[71] I maintain it has to be a cultural manifestation of the local agency's dialectic interaction with hegemonic power configurations. Cultural hybridity then can only be accomplished by "mitigating social tensions, expressing the polyvalence of human creativity, and providing a context of empowerment in individuals and communities are *agents in their own destiny*."[72] In other words, since today's hybridity is rendered in the context of transnational popular culture with a help of digital media, one has to critically examine whether it reflects or diverts the dominant hegemony in a local environment of cultural production activities. Since cultural practices "develop

and emerge as types of implicit (i.e., nonpropositional or nonverbal) knowledge created in response to lived experiences in a particular social location," not paying due attention to the institutional structures of cultural production results in "epistemic violence."[73] Thus, contrary to the mere existence of hybridity, a manifestation of critical agency in hybridization is the most important qualification.[74]

However, I indicate an embryo of theoretical complicity in consumerist capitalism from Bhabha's hybridity that romanticizes the mere semiotic practice of cultural consumption. Like Janice Radway celebrates the symbolic pleasure of resistance from reading romance novels,[75] Bhabha exults in the subversive potential of the subaltern's cultural practices against the imperial domination of cultural, economic, and political powers.[76] Later, Bhabha indicates hybridity is helpful to promote an "aesthetics of cultural difference and the politics of minorities,"[77] however, he is not able to acknowledge an asymmetric power relations shaped by an intricate, multiple layers of constraints during cultural production processes. Even though he acknowledges that cultural difference has been "reconfigured as spontaneous discrimination or systematic inequality," Bhabha rejects an examination of cultural hybridity in its diagnostic relationship to the local context of cultural production, by saying that it is "neither historically synchronic nor ethically and politically equivalent."[78]

Facing various criticisms, Bhabha admits that hybridity has been coopted by transnational capitalism, which turned what he envisioned the subaltern's subversive cultural politics into the dominant cultural hegemony.[79] As an epistemic improvement, he applies Gramsci's dialectics of agency that is always already conjunctured by the social constraints and a subaltern aspiration of social change. In turn, he accentuates that empowerment is what cultural hybridity aims for by "achievement of agency and authority."[80] However, rather than paying due attention to an objective, structural condition of cultural production, constrained by power relations, Bhabha once again returns to his myopic perspective that "hybridity derives its agency by activating liminal and ambivalent positions *in-between* forms of identification."[81] Even if Bhabha's act of "enunciation [which] is *at the same time* an act of renunciation: a passionate ambivalence, a subaltern rejection of sovereignty" may be viable as an idyllic, bourgeois individual practice,[82] it is impotent to achieve critical agency in the current, neoliberal society. What is worse, his perspective of achieving the "hybrid voice" as a concrete result of a subaltern's enunciation and renunciation is rather detrimental to minorities since he believes hybridity "can only accrue authority by questioning its *a priori* security, its first-person privilege."[83] A subaltern group that needs to claim cultural agency as a precondition of political agency does not have much privilege, if not at all. If this is the case in Bhabha's argument, his hybridity

is a sure way for the hegemonic group to control the subaltern since the latter voluntarily gives any of its privilege or power to the former. This is exactly what has happened since cultural hybridity became in vogue in the early 80s as it was coopted to the service of hegemonic transnational capitalism.

Furthermore, as not every minority is progressive, hybridized local cultural text does not automatically represent critical reflexivity. When cultural alterity is a manifest result of cultural hybridization, it is structured by various degrees of dominant discourses in the local hierarchies of the global system where an asymmetric relation of power and resources cannot be overcome by mere cultural mix.[84] Thus, there must be something ethically and practically trans-formative that re-kindles socio-political imagination in one's everyday life for a more egalitarian, democratic society. However, decision-makers in the K-pop industry serve as a local hegemon who internalizes the industrial and managerial logics of neoliberal culture industry, and in turn asymmetric relations in the local culture production become increasingly complex and nuanced. The industry's exploitative treatment of the idols, especially with "slave contracts" is a case in point. Put differently, leaders in the K-pop industry should be considered as a re-territorialized, semi-global center of transnational cultural production, who strive to control local cultural capital that begets financial and social power by maximizing the benefits of making strategic alliances with metropolitan centers for cultural enterprises.

Devoid of attention to critical power configuration in local culture production, the current K-pop (more generally Korean popular culture) scholarship celebrates a mere existence of hybridized cultural texts as a successful commodity. Or, neglecting historical realities of inequalities in resources and development, hybridity in K-pop literature fetishizes a mere locality of cultural production. Claiming that there are multidirectional cultural productions from conventional peripheries, Woongjae Ryoo boldly maintains that the phenomenon is a "clear indication of new global, and regional, and transformation in the cultural arena" as a sign of overcoming the American cultural hegemony.[85] Furthermore, while neglecting the politico-economics of K-pop production that has been dispropor-tionately conditioned by American cultural and technical criteria, Ryoo inadver-tently attributes K-pop's success to the industry's implementation of American standard of media liberalization. In this respect, Ryoo's dramatization of local production should be regarded as what Arjun Appadurai criticizes as "production fetishism," an illusion of local cultural power in transnational capitalism, disguising the fundamental asymmetric global power structure.[86] For Doobo Shim, K-pop's hybridity was epitomized by the emergence of Seo Taiji and Boys, who mixed various Western music genres and invented a unique Korean flavor.[87]

Appropriating American genre formulae, the band successfully exemplified how to exert local agency's active, creative capacity to express local sentiments, issues, and traditions and in turn engendered a broad practical transformation in Korea's soundscape. Despite his respect for Seo Taiji and Boys' artistic innovation, Shim finds industrial transformation most important. At this time period Korea's music market expanded in scale, boosting album sales, fortifying record company roles and heralding the birth of Korea's talent agencies and manufacturers of the current K-pop idols. Thus, K-pop is a new business model that procures a faster, higher profit margin than the traditional manufacturing industry as a "distinct spatiotemporal configuration" of Korea's neoliberal economy.[88]

For Hee-Eun Lee, hybridity has played a key role in diversifying a spectrum of genres and conventions in Korean popular music since the 1990s.[89] In a dialectic appropriation of the dominant US hip-hop culture, she believes a local adaption of the music genre has contributed to not only strengthening the local values but also expanding categories of identities by pluralizing racial and ethnic differences in Korea. However, sticking to a vague notion of "Korean-ness," she makes a hasty generalization that an emergence of different racial icons and props in popular music videos indicates a transformative "process of pluralizing others within us," despite admitting it as a marketing strategy of consumerist capitalism.[90] Though pointing out music videos "have opened up greater opportunities for local expression in production and consumption," she does not substantiate how exactly K-pop music videos re-articulate local sentiments by appropriating "signs, images, texts, and sounds that bear exo-local aesthetics and significations."[91] While trying a political economic analysis on the K-pop industry where local capitalists dominate the market, Lee does not examine how they actually design and produce K-pop songs and music videos, which are mostly outsourced to more advanced countries like, Japan, Denmark, Norway, and the US to stay competitive in the market. In this regard, Lee also falls under the fallacy of fetishizing locality in cultural production in K-pop.[92]

For Néstor García Canclini, while a scope and a speed of cultural hybridization have accelerated in a globalized society, a local cultural production is increasingly "conditioned by a coercive *heteronomous hybridization*" that few numbers of people in the headquarters of neoliberal culture industry dominate initiatives, purposes, and applications of new symbolic and semantic creations.[93] In turn, though there are ostensibly different cultural artifacts by ceaseless intercultural bricolage, they become inevitably homogenized by a market imperative of profit-making, which does not provide local practitioners with an opportunity for self-expressive, self-regulated creative production. While the center appropriates various cultural elements of the peripheries without having to be a part

of them, peripheral nations such as Korea have to incorporate the hegemonic system of cultural, economic, and social production in "the global local articulations of the world system."[94] For this reason, far from a creative embodiment of self-reflexivity, K-pop is an audio-visual commodity of consumerism, a hegemonic industry/economy system that a seductive visuality with an ephemeral innovation and obsolescence, which is a high competition for the survival of the most sexualized, overwhelms anything artistic or ideational. It is a K-pop version of an immediacy of frenzied consumption that dramatizes a fleeting nature of what one wants to buy, which is fabricated to increase sales and profit. In this commercial logic of K-pop industry, an ethical dimension and a political potential of cultural hybridity are subjugated to the neoliberal imperative of profit-making. Thus, according to Jan Nederveen Pieterse's continuum of hybridities, K-pop retains an "assimilationist hybridity that leans over toward the centre, adopts the canon and mimics the hegemony,"[95] which its terms of cultural mixture is largely oriented to maximizing commercial profit rather than reconfiguring a traditional relationship of power and hegemony through cultural self-reflection.

As examined, the current K-pop scholarship is complicitous with the K-pop industry's commercial implementation of hybridization, and exemplar of transnational capitalism's strategic rhetoric to capitalize on cultural fusion.

Hyper-reality: Neoliberal Cultural Commodity and Its Post-feminist Ramifications

In this section, I propose a better heuristic tool to understand K-pop's cultural hybridity in its relationship with neoliberal imperatives of consumerism. For an explanatory approach to cultural assemblage practices, I analyze its socio-cultural implications in Korea's growing neoliberalization, characterized by an intensifying power of media spectacles, consumerism, and affective, service industries. Emulating the experiences and strategies of the J-pop industry, K-pop idols have been manufactured just as the Japanese counterparts are "produced and packaged to maximize consumption."[96] In the face of intensifying competitions under neoliberal economy, a reification of young, female bodies has been particularly rampant. Since there is no longer a distinctive demarcation between economic production and the realms of the cultural and the ideological,[97] K-pop's cultural hybridity has to be understood as a mode of signification as a practice of neoliberal governmentality. With a social hierarchy of objects, a consumption of sign values distinguishes one from another, which in turn positions an individual into a predetermined social position.

In late capitalist economy, images and spectacles as a reconfiguration of the object's social meanings seduce individuals to adopt manufactured needs, fantasies, and behaviors. For this reason, in idol-saturated contemporary Korean popular culture, the K-pop idol "as an object of desire is a fantasy or ideal construct, a 'mirror' reflection, which resonates with deep affection or emotional meaning."[98] As a fundamental source of expressive and interpretative communities,[99] media spectacles provide essential tools for social identification, outweighing traditional human bonds and experiences. For Jean Baudrillard, while representation works by the "equivalence of the sign and the real," simulation is the generation of the real based on models of the real, defying a referential function of a sign.[100] In turn, it ushers in a broader sociocultural transformation "from the society of the commodity to the society of the spectacle to the society of the simulacrum, paralleled by increasing commodification and massification" of the imagery.[101] In this hyper-reality, the real is artificially re-produced as "real," by being retouched and refurbished in a "hallucinatory resemblance" of itself.[102] While a model precedes the real, simulation conditions the real, and a boundary between hyper-reality and individuals' everyday lives disappear: "simulations come to constitute reality ... [and] the reality of simulation becomes the criterion of the real itself."[103] With this dramatic dominance of the visual, simulations structure individuals' emotion, experience, and value system, erasing a boundary between the imaginary and the real.

Pushing further this argument, signs and images become a powerful control mechanism of one's life. In this transformation of a strategic idea into reality by simulation, the social in hyper-reality, or "hyperreal sociality" aims to transform individuals in the image of the model so that they can be models themselves.[104] With the K-pop industry's increasing marketing ploys that encourage audiences to participate in various procedures of manufacturing idols, such as idols dance cover competition and audition programs, their "fantasy [of living like an idol] overlaps with reality" of pursuing the stardom, especially when one invests time and efforts in those chances.[105] By the "orbital recurrence of models" in hyper-reality,[106] there is "no more center or periphery [but] pure flexion or circular inflexion," to the extent that a seeming difference is an effect of simulation (29).[107] From this perspective, with a meticulous deployment of different signs and commodities, hyper-reality of K-pop female idols is their own simulacrum of an idealized, fantasized femininity that is deployed to maximize the industry's interest: the K-pop industry's promotion of various femininities is to test and find what the audience is willing to "identity their idols and—more importantly—identify *with* them."[108]

As a caveat, while his deterministic view, like an implosion or an evaporation of the social, does not exactly operate in real world, Baudrillard's notion is helpful to understand how the idols, who embody an imagined fantasy of the audience,

are hyper-reality that is fabricated from their images and visuality that transform into reality without a real reference. Furthermore, as they become pervasive and influential, there is a continuous emergence of new realities that are initiated or motivated by the idols. In other words, while a simulation becomes real by various technological interventions such as plastic surgery, an imagined potential or a desired outcome becomes a new reality for a community of fans. As "laboring bodies who are not fully employed or compensated," fans are both objects and subjects of idol fantasies, who are doing "what they love and labor for love."[109] By seductive visuality and sexualized bodily movements as a conjunction of desire, value, capital, and power, K-pop idols, as an effective medium and a powerful message simultaneously, are the main premise of power that is effective in the audience's mimetic desire, and in turn an active agent of governmentality that shapes individuals' public and private lives. In turn, idols are deployed to mobilize audiences to become fans who are willing to support their idols with whatever disposable capital they have, which in turn they industry endeavors to channel and capitalize on their affective investments.[110] In this regard, unless critically aware of political economy of K-pop, the audience may lose their cognitive capacity to distinguish what is real from what is imaginary,[111] and be turned into masses through the overwhelming power of the visual.[112]

As a fantasy simulated by mythical images of female empowerment, glamour, freedom, independence, rebellion, and success, consumption is a social dynamics to keep the post-feminist myths alive. The idols' corporeal and emotional signs take on meanings, and cultivate audience with various desires for consumer products they are promoting. By the mere consumption of images, individuals are to "*conjure away the real with the signs of the real*" with a false sense of liberation that they do not have in the realm of the social and the political.[113] Woven into a heteroglossia of commodities and services from fashion accessories to plastic surgery, the idols are simultaneously an image and a product that is, what they promote and the object they are promoting. In this respect, it is worth quoting Galbraith and Karlin on their political economic analysis of J-pop idol's image, which rings truth in Korean situation:

> [I]dols not only promote the sale of goods and services, but actually are produced by the goods and services that they sell. Rather than idols selling products, we have a system of commodities that is selling idols. By focusing on the idol alone, one loses sight of the network of relations that go into producing the idol … The idol, then, is but a node in the network of the capitalist system of commodities that links producers to consumers.[114]

Like a process that hyper-reality becomes reality, while consuming a glossy heteroglossia of fantastic images, individuals become conformative since they

want to live up to an "abstract model, to a combinational pattern of fashion, and therefore relinquish any real difference."[115] By market fetishism of differentiation, the K-pop industry manufactures an array of different feminine concepts so that a wider range of audience can try and adopt a favorite personality and life-style through consumption. In this respect, K-pop female idols' nonconformist images and styles are a marketing ploy that eventually perpetuates conformity in audience's behavior by consumption.[116]

Conceiving the idols as an example of unconstrained possibility of empowerment, individuals try to emulate or live up to the simulated media figure whose mediated image is more real. Since "the consumer is positioned as a fan" and vice versa in neoliberal culture industry,[117] K-pop idols are popular agents of post-feminism, who is an integral part of consumerism. The consumerism heralded by the idols strives to sell anything that serves the interests of the establishment, such as the audiences' choices on dietary habits, fashion, life style, surgical enhancement of the bodies, work ethics, sexual behaviors to name a few.[118] In this respect, fandom becomes a hyper-real condition of individuals' desires and fantasies,[119] which is fulfilled by the combination of commodities the idols promote: A "circulation, purchase, sale, appropriation of differentiated goods and signs/objects today constitute our language, our code, the code by which the entire society *communicates* and converses."[120] Practically, the female idols are particularly effective in perpetuating neoliberal commercial culture since capitalism exploits an "*extension of the feminine model to the whole field of consumption*" and they are more susceptible to socio-cultural needs of conformity.[121] As "girl power" has been an effective marketing and branding tool,[122] without a self-reflective articulation, it is a mere hyper-real strategy in an "instrumentalization of feminism as a source of innovation and dynamism for consumer culture."[123] Thus, K-pop idols as hyper-reality replace harsh reality with a superabundance of fantasy images that magically satisfy their desire for economic, political and social mobility, and in turn, hide everyday strife, prejudice, discrimination, exploitation and other problems through distraction.

Guy Debord's society of spectacle captures how K-pop idols contribute to consumerism by becoming a hyper-reality of their images and spectacles.[124] They are cultural linchpins that teach individuals how to utilize commodities as a means of self-transformation into someone better like the idols, and mobilize them to be a steady force of consumption. The rise of consumerism, especially teenagers' increased disposable income, has been an integral part of K-pop's success, since the germination period of K-pop idols in the early 1990s. To be more specific, the idols' performances are "like four-minutes catwalk skits that have a strong impact on notions of both male and female beauty and are foremost visual forms

of" consumption, leaving significant impacts on consumer economy.[125] Thus, hybridity in K-pop female idols stems from the industry's simulation that intends to maximize commercial profit by assembling various commodities to offer the audience aspirational lives, experiences, and self-images for an imagined, transformative experience. An overwhelming visuality along with a positive emotionality helps audience become immersed in a simulated fantasy world of K-pop, and by the industries promotions, keep this imaginary experience maintained. An ever-changing visual and emotional theme of K-pop female idols, which allows them and the audiences to enjoy image-switching or personal transformation, is a powerful marketing tool to create an ever-increasing demand for insatiable consumers in the market that sells a plethora of commodities for different images, personalities, styles, and experiences. K-pop's relentless fantasy enforces a feedback loop upon its audiences in the eternal return of always-wanting-more.

For example, as a simulacrum generated by the culture industry, there was a new term, "*Missy*," that a commercial campaign of a department store invented to summon women as consuming subjects, and became a national sensation in the early 1990s. "Missy" means a young married woman who looks like an unmarried lady with conspicuous consumption that leads to confident behaviors. As an "illusory and pseudo reality" created by flash advertisements and other media campaigns,[126] the term was deployed to interpellate young women as an army of mass consumers who in turn kept Korea's consumerist economy running. More recently, the media perpetuate a discourse of "gold miss" to indicate women who have a high-paying professional career with a constant attention to their self-improvement. In this post-feminist womanhood, they are self-reliant enough to develop and elaborate a posh life-style, which can only be accomplished by a conspicuous spending, leaving structural gender inequalities behind.[127]

Thus, K-pop idols are a commodity to be consumed for marketing commodities, which, as hyper-reality, subsequently become reality in the fantasy world of K-pop and in an ever-intensifying consumerist society. In turn, with their simulation power, the idols legitimatize commercial agendas of the neoliberal industry by establishing a new, fleeting set of fragmented, discontinuous trends, values, and norms in one's everyday life: K-pop idols are "the enforcers of the regime of capitalism through their signification of the ideology of consumption. The mimetic desire to appropriate the image of the celebrity operates in the sphere of economic processes for the controlled insertion of bodies into the routinized repetition of the consumption of goods."[128] Since female bodies and sexualities are commodified, young female audiences are targeted to assume a socio-cultural identity as consumers and commodities by various market entities.[129] Rather than liberation from century-long patriarchy, the idols' sexualities become commodities and

control the transformative power of the eros, by being offered for mere fantasy and consumption. Therefore, since late capitalism runs on an economy of signs,[130] K-pop idols should be understood from the politics of hyper-real visuality that imbues audiences with a stylized fantasy, audio-visual illusion of the appealing, beautiful, and fashionable. Female rebellion is also promoted as a marketing purpose to diversify the industry's product inventory and expand a category of commodities the image can intrigue and captivate teenage audiences who are fed up with the normal lives. By doing so, the idols "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."[131] In other words, divorced from a real referent to society, they simulate woman-as-image for visual consumption of an imagined femininity as fantasy rather than image-of-woman. By an incessant practice of cultural hybridity, K-pop idols exert an influential role in maintaining and perpetuating gender-specific neoliberal conformative "behaviors, circuits of operationalization that frame thought and action glocally."[132]

Concluding Remarks: Hybridity in the Context of Neoliberalism

K-pop female idols are simultaneously empowered and disempowered. As much as they are enabled by their stardom, they are still subject to the gender ideals, updated and constrained by neoliberal imperatives. The schizophrenic personality is a salient example that materializes how their subjectivity is hybridized to satisfy the patriarchal gender values and expectations and to market an ephemeral taste of consumers in hyper-capitalism. By doing so, it perpetuates the patriarchal value system which demands women be kind, gentle, decent, and delicate as well as sexually available. With neoliberal market imperatives as a strange bed-fellow, the old patriarchal formula conspires to a marketization/commodification of femininity. As to the ethical dimension of cultural assemblage in the idols, far from disrupting or providing a moment of shock to change the dominant system of patriarchal capitalism, the schizophrenic female personality intensifies a scope and a degree of exploitation. "Hybridity and difference sell; the market remains intact."[133] As discussed in the case of Suzy's schizophrenic personality/ sexuality, for its manufacturedness, updates a classic notion of Adorno's pseudo-individuality, rendered by consumer culture's allowance to freedom of expression, which ultimately helps maintain the status quo.

In this seemingly promising perspective on female success in the K-pop industry, women voluntarily contribute to renewing and perpetuating the centuries-long gender oppression, by abandoning any sense of unfairness or

oppression in social relations but equipping themselves with an extra amount of conformative agency and efforts. In this model of voluntary internalization of exploitative social relations, women, especially K-pop wannabes, trainees, and idols, become and exercise an ideal neoliberal subjectivity, *homo economicus*, who capitalizes on their efforts in already exploitative capitalist society. Differently put, with a powerful interplay of these two dominant ideologies, the idols' split-personality is K-pop industry's post-feminist exemplar who endorses "terms of their subordination and are willing, even enthusiastic, partners in that subordination."[134] As a concrete manifestation of different effects on bodies, behaviors, and social relations, they "enthusiastically perform patriarchal stereotypes of sexual servility on the name of [female] empowerment."[135]

Thus, Suzy's schizophrenic personality is a post-feminist hyper-reality that aims to monetize an imaginary feeling of female empowerment, which updates a gender-based asymmetric development of capitalism. As much as female bodies and sexuality were mobilized to attract foreign capital for national development since the Korean War,[136] they are still being manipulated fashionably to legitimate masculinist, neoliberal development. The more the idols' cute and innocent behavior are highlighted, the more their commodified sexuality is salient: the further the female bodies are displayed as a neoliberal commodity, the further they need to validate the traditional gender norms and expectations to maintain the dominant social *status quo*. In sum, as Teresa de Lauretis indicates a female subject is formulated by a "multiplicity of discourses, positions and meanings which are often in conflict with one another,"[137] the split personality of K-pop female idols is a carnal imprint of a cacophonous hybridization between the traditional mode of gender oppression and the current neoliberal hegemony.

Notes

1. Gooyong Kim (Ph.D. UCLA, Cultural/Media Studies) is an Assistant Professor of Communication Arts at Cheyney University of Pennsylvania, USA, and serves one of Regional President positions in the U.S. for the World Association for Hallyu Studies.
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