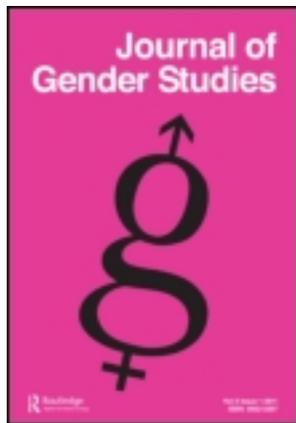


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Idol republic: the global emergence of girl industries and the commercialization of girl bodies

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Idol republic: the global emergence of girl industries and the commercialization of girl bodies

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This paper examines the strategic and systematic transformation of young femininity into cultural content as national resources in the contemporary girl industries in their global–local articulation. Three aspects of girl industries are discussed. Firstly, girl idols are de-humanized and become cultural content of girl industries and girl bodies are objectified as normative commodities under corporate government mentality. Next, girl bodies are re-sexualized and their sexuality is featured as the sexuality of ambiguity in split and doubling modes of visualization. Finally, the national governance of girl bodies is examined in terms of the building up of the *idol republic* and the emergence of *Lolita nationalism*. The three interrelated aspects of commercialization, re-sexualization and nationalization suggest that girl industries are intrinsic to the strengthening of the neoliberal governmentality of girl bodies on a global scale. This reality calls for a renewed global perspective of critical feminism in order to interrogate the emerging neoliberal body politics and to propose an alternative vision against its normative governmentality in the subjectification of girl bodies.

Keywords: cultural content; girl industry; globalization; idol republic; Lolita nationalism

Introduction

It may not be an exaggeration to say that our everyday life is saturated with myriad images of beautified and young feminine bodies (Lazar 2006). Girls are present in every part of society, from music shows and music videos to dramas and films; from advertisements and reality programs to international sports events and governmental campaigns. Hollywood idols such as Kirsten Dunst and Jessica Alba, who began their careers in their teens, have remained stars for more than 10 years. The powerful popularity of girls is not limited to the youth subcultural fandom. Their social, economic and cultural effect is enormous to the extent that the American business magazine *Forbes* has selected ‘Top Box-office teens’ in 2010, including big stars such as Emma Watson and Dakota Fanning (Pomerantz 2010).

A number of scholars have discussed the fact that femininity is economically, politically and culturally regulated within the late-capitalist ‘global articulation’ of neoliberalism and body politics (Aapola *et al.* 2005, McRobbie 2009). Even feminism, which has offered a critical view of patriarchal capitalism and an alternative project of progressive femininity in the last few decades, is facing the possibility of having been

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distortedly depoliticized through its commercial strategic appropriation by commodity feminism (Goldman *et al.* 1991). Indeed, post-feminism – derived from complicit articulation between feminism and consumerism – has arguably become the ‘sensibility’ of current times (Gill 2007). The individualistic notion of self-reflexivity, late-capitalist interest in body management, and the neoliberal project of self-reinvention converge into post-feminist consumerism. Thus, intimately combining values of activeness, freedom and youthfulness with feminist tradition and capitalist individualism, post-feminist discourse has become central to the neoliberal constitution of feminism culture in current times (Gill 2007).

Girl bodies are at the core of the neoliberal regime of knowledge, power and pleasure. Exploitation and systematic regulation of girl bodies are actively developed across various social apparatuses, from family, education, the workplace and media to religion and law (Brooks 1997). In particular, the spotlight on girl bodies in the late-capitalist mediascape is rooted in ‘the seductive convergence made [. . .] between libertarian discourses of radical sexual chic and the neoliberal governmentality’ (Bray 2009, pp. 175–176). The post-capitalist celebration of ‘girl power’ is ‘one of postfeminism’s most potent expressions’, in which ‘girl’ is ‘constructed within the entangling discourses of feminism, neoliberalism, and conventional femininity’ (Jackson and Westrupp 2010, p. 358). Girl power, the ‘empowerment’ of young femininity, indeed is an aspect of ‘contradictory femininity’, which should be implemented ‘through a (consuming) girlie femininity and sexuality’ (Jackson and Westrupp 2010, p. 358).

In focusing on media and cultural industries specifically, I suggest the term ‘girl industries’ for this exploitation and regulation. It refers to cultural industries and to the popular daily practice of cultural contents that are produced and distributed of and for girls, as well as consumed by them. Girl industries in the current mediascape are global and local in nature and diverse in genres as media technologies and social, cultural and political norms and rules are intertwined in the formulation, cultivation, promotion and regulation of ‘girl culture’ and ‘girl market’ (Driscoll 2002). In focusing on the Korea-originated Asian-to-global popular culture, or Korean Wave (Shim 2006, Shin 2009), and girl idols in particular, the aim of this essay is to investigate how girl industries are constructed and operated in global, regional and local interactions and contestations.

A number of researchers have discussed young femininities from feminist and post-feminist perspectives, and their approaches may be categorized in two positions. On the one hand, theoretical studies have been concerned with phallogocentric capitalist social and symbolic structures and their discursive effects on the construction of femininities (Mulvey 1975, Doane 1981, Butler 1993). These macro approaches are hardly interested in the dynamic mechanism through which media industries govern girl bodies. As a result, the significant roles which media industries play are overlooked in the systematic creation, commodification, distribution and consumption of a particular mode of girliness in neoliberal consumer society. On the other hand, a considerable number of analytic researchers have provided an empirical perspective of the media production of young femininities. These micro approaches deal with separate images and texts that are selected from a certain genre or medium, such as advertisements in magazines (Murnen *et al.* 2003, Shoene 2006, Gill 2008). Such analyses are useful in providing detailed explanations for the visualization of femininities in the contemporary media culture, but they are also problematic in that they disregard the media as a regulatory system and its normative effect on individual cultural practice. Consequently, the trans-genre and multi-platform use of cultural content in the maximization of its flexible and transverse usability has not been fully acknowledged in micro approaches. In addition, these previous studies are

Western oriented, and the global articulation of girl industries with local historical, social and cultural particularities have not been sufficiently examined. Because of this shortcoming, what is needed is a critical understanding of the ‘underlying (and re-colonising) aim of the promotion of global girlhood by the global media, the commercial domain (the fashion–beauty complex) and through specifically neo-liberal forms of governmentality’ (McRobbie 2009, p. 59).

What does this saturation of young female bodies mean, particularly in the context of neoliberal compliance with post-feminism and considering the increasing commercialization of young femininities? What are the social practices through which certain types of girl images are designed, promoted, produced and consumed in the present mediascape? In the current media industries, what are the specificities of the representation of girl images in neoliberal ‘cultures of production’ (du Gay 1997) and consumption? How do we account for the politico-cultural implications of girl industries in the age of globalization? In attempting to answer these questions, this article critically examines the ‘syndrome of girl idols’ (Lee 2009) in the context of Asian and global interactions by analyzing in particular the social semiotics (Kress 2009) of the representation and consumption of girl bodies and young femininities in contemporary girl industries.

The essay is divided into three interrelated sections. The first discusses the establishment of girl industries as a major part of Korea’s contemporary cultural economy and popular culture, and provides a critical account of how girl bodies are manufactured as cultural content and converted into economic values. The second part of the article is concerned with the visual analysis of girl bodies as the product of neoliberal branding and commodification, as well as with the interpretation of the social psychologies intertwined with the popular daily consumption of girl bodies. The final section turns to the appropriation of girl bodies in the self-claimed *idol republic*’s cultural globalization. Before developing these empirical analyses, it is useful to examine current discussions of girl power and femininity within the fields of girl studies and post-feminism which underline the specific issues with which this article deals.

Re-thinking girl power in a global context

Our society, although seemingly sexually liberated and gender equal, is persistently warned that young femininity is regulated in the novel form of governing the body. In this respect, McRobbie (2009, pp. 54 and 59) draws attention to ‘luminosity’, or luminous space, which ‘softens, dramatises and disguises the regulative dynamics’ at work in ‘global femininity’. To McRobbie (2009, pp. 58–59), fashion beauty complex, working girl, phallic girl, and global and commercial femininity are components of the global luminosity which, in fact, ‘operates to sustain and revitalise heterosexual matrix, composed of norms of racial hierarchy and class division on a gendered dimension’. Frost (2005) also observes the normalization of girl bodies in the global communications and visual media. In this context of body industries, ‘appearance’ is considered a ‘form of cultural (or corporeal) capital’ and the capitalist imperative to be ‘attractive’ is internalized among girls in their practice of self-surveillance and ‘doing appearance’ (Frost 2005, p. 82). In the apparently celebratory manifestation of powerful femininity, the figures of girl power are then the consequence, not of changes in gender relations, but of changes in a ‘mode of governmentality’ which regulates ‘what it is to be a sexual subject’ and provides a ‘technology of sexiness’ (Gill 2008, p. 53).

These accounts provide useful frameworks for critical discussion of girl power; however, they also display certain shortcomings. Girl industries have certain

particularities that are hardly addressed in Western feminist thinking, and Korean girl idols can be a case in point. Firstly, as for the representation of girl power, the subjectification of girls is not merely apparent in the form of sexualization. Rather, more diverse strategies are actively applied to spectacularization of young femininity and girl bodies, with each specific strategy targeting a particular social segment. Thus, instead of the straightforwardly sexual girl, multiple different enactments of girliness are desirable which can be expressed as ‘lovely, cute and often powerful’, thereby ‘drawing focus on all Asians’ (TV report 2010). Such various and eclectic repertoires of girl images and diversified performances of young female identity are advantageous to creating an enormous scale of fandom across different ethnicity, gender and generation groups in global popular music scenes (Toth 2008).

As for the social practice of girl idols, Korean production of girl idol groups is literally collective: normally between five and ten girls are united in one group and collectively produced, exhibited and distributed. These girl idol groups are systematically cultivated and managed in uniform, affirmative yet docile styles by professional entertainment agencies. It is well known that to become a girl idol group, girls prepare by training in dancing, singing, stage manners, drama and foreign languages a couple of years before the official debut (Lee 2009). The girl idol groups are, in other words, themselves cultural content that is designed and cultivated in a corporate management system. The mission and process of self-making as idols, regulated in the norms of competition, strategic training and management, self-reinvention, flexibility and multi-playing, embodies neoliberal idealization (Couldry 2010). Thus, for girl idols, the concept of neoliberal governance of girl bodies does not simply mean representation at the level of image, but also social operation through governance of the girls as a social subject. The questioning of the ontology of girl idols therefore needs to be extended from the ideologies that are *reflected* on the images of girls as a vehicle, to the power relations that are *exercised* in the production and consumption of girl bodies as cultural content in social reality. This point is related to a shift from image in the dimension of representation, to cultural content in the dimension of cultural practice.

Finally, girl industries are articulated with historical, political and social forces in global, regional and local contexts. The Korean government has spurred the development of the global media industry and of global cultural content. In the national dream of the globalization of media industries and popular culture, the girl industries are seen to be externalized beyond the national borderline towards other Asian and Western countries. Popular discourses celebrating girl idols’ power are diffused in numerous media sites, such as ‘Girls conquer Japan’ and ‘Girl groups will revive New Korean Wave’. Girl power is celebrated not only for its ‘instrumentalization of feminism as a source of innovation and dynamism for consumer culture’ but also, and perhaps more expansively, as a ‘source of innovation and dynamism’ for national culture (McRobbie 2008, p. 548). ‘Commercial values’ of young femininity are, then, harmoniously adopted within the neo-cultural imperialist convergence between patriarchal nationalism, nationalistic ambition for global competition, and corporate interests in the maximization of economic profit from the governance of young femininity.

In short, girl idols are represented through multiple images associated with the economy of desire generated from various social groups and positions, and governed in the geopolitics of cultural globalization. The following pages offer a critical examination of the production and communication of those images, thus developing the issue of girl idols and young femininity beyond the Western heterosexual matrix of representation and within the context of the neoliberal governance of girl industries.

The emergence of girl industries in Korea

The emergence of girl industries has cultural, social, historical and technological motivations (Kress 2009). From a historical perspective, it is not a sudden development that girls' images have become the object of visual consumption in citizens' daily lives. The popularization of the personal digital camera, or *Selca* (Self-camera), in the last few decades has created a thriving culture of self-image production among the young generation. This *Selca* culture has become typically female, and young women in their teens and twenties have been fascinated with taking pictures of themselves and uploading them onto social networking sites and Internet portals categorized as Top-Face sites (Hjorth 2009). The Internet has become a kind of 'safe' space (Harris 2005), bringing together numerous young girls and their enthusiasm and effort for voluntarily creating, distributing and consuming self-images. The ordinary girls' subcultural practice of producing and distributing self-images is quickly appropriated by media and entertainment companies keen on picking up potential stars. While illegal Internet sites persistently watch for a chance to hook young girls for sex trafficking, Top-Face sites are utilized by the media and entertainment companies as a cyber pool to deploy imaging strategies of sexiness (Jacobs 2010) and to recruit young, beautiful girls. In the context of Raymond Williams' (1978) notion of 'culture' meaning ways of living, Koreans' desire to leave behind the Confucian tradition (Kim 2003) and military dictatorship in favor of modernization and democratization has been constitutive of the 'feeling of structure' among Koreans. For Koreans, the 'emergent culture' (Williams 1978) of freely producing and consuming girls' self-images is identified with the realization of libertarian democratization. Such historical changes in the social and technological mode of governing young femininity have, at least partly, created a 'constitutive relationality' in which the 'ontology' of girl bodies itself 'becomes' the idealized fantasy of the present times, that is, to be free, independent and hedonistic (Coleman 2008).

As the second motivation for the proliferation of girl industries, the systematic development of cultural industries is critical to the expansion and transformation of girl subcultures into girl industries. It was the establishment of the 'multi-purpose star management' system in the 1990s (Shin 2009) that brought the dramatic growth of 'idol-pop' to Korea in recent years (Lee 2009). The tradition of Korean youth subculture has been reformulated in the new management and investment system considerably adopted from Japanese cultural industry, and this mixture has enabled the formation of Korean idol-pop (Cha 2009). With the novel definition of 'singers and bands that are commercially designed and created by music management companies', idol groups, or more precisely the major star management companies that create and control them, have radically transformed the structure of Korean music industries in both cultural and economic aspects (S. Kim 2010).

The leading three companies in Korean idol-pop are SM, YG and JYP. They have developed young idol groups independently since the mid-1990s, and it was in 2006 that each company began to competitively occupy a major portion of the Korean music market. Interestingly, each entertainment company has built up a line-up of idols – often called 'troops' – expressing the particular style of the management company. SM, the herald of idol industries, has Suman Lee, a singer in the 1980s, as the head of company. SM actively appropriates Japanese idol culture for Korean audiences and aims its idols at the global market. SM controls *Girls' Generation* (girls), *Super Junior* (boys) and *SHINee* (boys). The head producer of JYP, based on his experience with musicians in the US, cultivates *Wonder Girls* (girls), *2AM* (boys) and *2PM* (boys). The head of YG, Hyunk-SoekYang, is

a former member of the legendary idol group *SeoTaeji and Guys* from the early 1990s and is famous for having adopted and merged American and Korean hip-hop cultures to create Korean hip-hop idol groups such as *Big Bang* (boys) and *2NE1* (girls).

A notable point is that each Korean idol group has established its own characteristics in branding and marketing, thereby effectively targeting particular groups of gender, generation and cultural taste. This is where the contemporary girl idols significantly differ from the groups of the late-1990s and early-2000s, such as *Pinkle* and *Baby V.O.X*, all of which uniformly featured a girlie image mainly appealing to girl subculture groups. The success or failure of any one idol group in the market depends on how existing (familiar and even banal) elements are mixed, including sexual, musical and subcultural codes, and formulated to create an innovative and attractive image of each idol. Each member of a group then features a particular style or category, such as beautiful, pretty, exotic, strong or naughty. For instance, while *Wonder Girls* represents erotic femininity aimed at male adult fans, *Girls' Generation* exemplifies the typical 'artificial beauty' popular in Japanese girl idols, featuring girls dressed in school or army uniforms and stereotypically cute girls, and inspiring an enormous male fan base across different generations. Another approach is taken by *2NE1*, where the girls are featured in the American style of hip-hop and punk, and, using their song lyrics, call for their girl fans to become strong and independent from men; they have a great fandom among girls in their own age group, that is, in their teens and twenties (Cha 2009).

In the strategic and systematic procedures of selection, cultivation and exhibition of girl idols, which are created and controlled by the major entertainment companies' oligopoly, the girls are converted into cultural contents. Cultural content, in contrast to the images evoked in texts (such as magazines, advertising, music videos), creates a series of derivative commodities and economic values. Furthermore, it is trans-versatile flexibility that makes a certain cultural content utilized across various genres and media platforms. As Jenkins points out, in the current global convergence, fans do not merely want the interpretive appreciation but, rather, a whole world in which they can immerse themselves and perform and recreate the codes and practices their idols embody (Jenkins 2006). In this respect, Korean girl idols seem to be successful, as the relational structure between idol groups, entertainment agencies and fandom is often compared with the family model in homology. This is further developed in the way that entertainment agencies correspond to the father figure who manages idol groups as children, while fan groups take on a maternal role, caring for the idols as they would for their children (Jung and Lee 2009). This process of idol-making as cultural content embodies neoliberal strategies which valorize self-invention, self-training, branding and promotion, and which are operated in calculated regulatory systems under corporate management control. Therefore, despite their *image* of empowering girls, girl idols as a unit of cultural content are subjected to the neoliberal regime of normalization which defines and dictates the looks and nature of girl power in girl industries.

Accordingly, it is not merely in a metaphorical sense that the girls' bodies are commercially objectified; it is also in the actual and material sense that they are designed, shaped and exhibited under the control of entertainment companies. The values of girl idols are taken into account when calculating the economic productivity and scale of their management companies. It is not surprising that the major entertainment management companies have experienced a steep growth in profit during the last few years. For example, a stock specialist noted that SM's financial success was 'a perfect earning surprise' when, compared to 2009, the company made about five times more in the first-quarter profit of 2010, making its president, Suman Lee, the richest entertainer in Korea in

2010. As Kim has noted, this significant growth of SM Entertainment is undoubtedly thanks to the 'girl power' belonging to the company (J. Kim 2010).

Re-sexualization of girls: the beautification of ambiguity

Since the emergence of the 'girrrl movement' in the 1990s (Aapola *et al.* 2005), girl power has dramatically expanded and diversified through the global convergence of media, fashion and cultural industries. The girl industries in their contemporary form are characterized by an eclectic combination of heterogeneous and contradictory elements of girl culture and the 'girl market' (Driscoll 2002, p. 265). The girl industries actively accelerated the stylization of girls' everyday lives by intertwining various heterogeneous areas, from dieting, clothing, schooling and health, to leisure, plastic surgery and abortion (Byun 2010). Education in particular has come to function as the representative site of the commercial exploration and exhibition of girls' bodies. Traditionally, high school is a highly repressive disciplinary institution in South Korea, the only goal being entry into good universities. This repressive and competitive education system requires the sacrifice of the youthful spirit and the imposition of strict discipline in the regulation of girl bodies. The imagined desirable girl image is neat, docile and tidy (Lee and Kim 2006).

Superseding this traditional image, however, the commercial force that has been driving girl industries is now seen to have formed the new normalcy (Frost 2005) of the individualistic, sexualized girl. School uniform companies are one of the most illustrative examples of this shift, this conjunctive of education and commerce. Girl idols have been adopted as advertising models for a school uniform branded 'Elite Tuning Style' (see 'Elite school uniform advertisement'). Dressed in school uniforms, their slim bodies seduce young female students into buying the brand which promises them equally attractive bodies in slogans such as 'We guarantee every part of your body, except face' and 'Don't worry, be slim'. At the same time, school uniforms are adopted by girl idols as stage clothes. The girl fantasy of the subtly revealed sexual body clothed in a school uniform originates in 'Sailor Moon', a Japanese manga and anime series of the 1990s (Driscoll 2002). Their miniskirts and white knee-high socks, along with their pretty faces and infantile gestures, give an impression of eroticized innocence (Bray 2009, p. 177). In comparison to their Japanese counterparts, the visual image of Korean girl idols yet appears saliently mature and sensual in spite of their branding as 'girls'. In contrast to the term's signification of childlike, innocent and pure qualities, the biological age of Korean girl idol members is mostly in the 20s. This discord between social discourse and body image suggests a complexity in the construction of girliness in girl idols.

The girl idols' voluptuous, mature and excessive femininity is deliberately revealed in their body composition. Their long hairstyles, decorated with ribbons and flowers, and their clothes create the childlike appearance of pretty girls. Their stage dress is normally cute and youthful with punk-style short pants, t-shirts and miniskirts, or school or military and navy uniforms, all of which are typical garments of asexual infantilization or bisexual transvestism. In contrast with their ironic de-sexualization in dress code, the legs of the girls appear saliently corporeal, dressed in hot pants with bare legs and high heels or audacious knee-high boots, which are stereotypical of fetishized femininity. The girl idols' dancing routines, too, express excessive sexuality. The stress on girl idols' performances is highlighted through their sweet smiles, loose and flexible gestures, and uniformly patterned movements. Their dancing style is collective, static, repetitive and thoroughly choreographed (rather than spontaneous), thereby revealing their sexual bodies emphatically in passive postures. The girl idols' simplistic dance routines are contrasted

with the boy idols' choreographies, which are based on the articulation of the beautiful and self-contained masculinity and consist of highly precise, dynamic and individualistic dancing techniques. Consequently, the girls' sexuality is founded in ambiguity, in the very rupture and clash between the contradictory elements of their image, between body/name, image/discourse and denotation/connotation. The girls' excessively sexualized body image tears up the pretentiously safe discursive surface of the girl, which should be innocent and pure in its literal meaning. The girls' ambiguous sexuality is placed between pretty child/seductive adult, and split between conflicting binaries of purity/sensation, innocence/maturity and neatness/vulgarity. Thus, in the 'new gender regime', as McRobbie phrases it (2009, p. 21), girls 'are defined in terms of an intersection of qualities' which are conventionally considered contradictory to each other. The combination of 'the natural and authentic, with a properly feminine love of self-adornment, and the playfully seductive with the innocent' is to define the girl sexuality of ambiguity, refiguring to be 'youthful, latent and waiting to be unleashed' (McRobbie 2009, p. 89).

This ambiguous sexuality reveals complex and conflicting psychologies on the part of spectators. Members of different generations can easily converge into the 'girl syndrome' (Lee 2009) out of various desires and fascinations with girl idols. Girl fans in their teens and twenties dream of self-identification with girl idols, as expressed through 'mundane practices' of 'performance and imagination' of the idols' music, dance and fashion styles (Longhurst *et al.* 2007, p. 137). Moreover, what is extraordinary in girl idols' fandom is that a large number of male fans in their 30s and 40s have constructed the unprecedented scale and mode of fandom called *Samchon-fans*, or uncle-fans. As *Samchon* in Korean refers to one's parent's brother, this name implies the middle-aged men's care for their young nieces. Once this familial setting is built up, a relationship between male viewers or self-claimed *Samchon-fans* and the girls is restructured in the complicit relationship between uncle and little nieces. Accordingly, the male's gaze at young female bodies is legitimized and normalized as the voluntary support and pure love of uncles for their nieces. Under the identity of uncle, they can deny the sexual aspect of what they see and insist on appreciating merely the pure surface of the pretty children. This double male psychology of interwoven denial and justification is pervasive in the constitution of the girl idols' fandom (S. Kim 2010). Thus, with the pretentious reformulation of the male gaze into an uncle's familial support, the male consumption of girl bodies becomes relieved of the predictable blame for pedophilic abnormality.

The industry's complicit repositioning of girls in patriarchal family structures, the patriarchal objectification of girl bodies in society, allows male adults to safely and intimately indulge in the girl bodies. The girls' image of ambiguous sexuality is more effective as a means of legitimizing the self-contradictory male gaze than images of either explicit innocence or of excessive sexualization. A complicit conspiracy takes place here in the way that the girl industries justify and encourage the consumption of girl images on the part of male viewers while at the same time teaching the young girls to sexualize themselves (Lumby 1998). As Goldman *et al.* (1991, p. 334) highlight in their discussion of 'commodity feminism', it is the technique of 'choreograph[ing] a non-contradictory unification of feminism and femininity' that generates a market-oriented and aesthetically depoliticized feminism. Furthermore, the replication of the economy of desire for girl sexuality in this family model is considered as expansion to the international market. The values of girl idols as cultural content are further actively promoted as national cultural resources. Thus, we are now faced with the spectacularism of the girl bodies worldwide.

The creation of the idol republic and the emergence of Lolita nationalism

At Korea's 2010 national election, the most famous girl idol group, *Girls' Generation* was recruited for the campaign to promote citizens' participation in the vote. *Girls' Generation* released a single, album and music video of the campaign song titled 'LaLaLa'. *Girls' Generation* also appeared on TV campaigns in which each girl member was visualized as a Tinkerbell-like mini-sized icon, while the citizen voters were represented by male citizens. Girl idols are equally utilized for important international events; for instance, *Girls' Generation* were appointed as Customs Promotion Ambassadors in preparation for the G20 Summit Conference in 2010 in Seoul. The girl idols are, at least in appearance, presented as agents who have the power of motivating, seducing or interpellating citizens to become involved in the project of global nation building.

Moreover, transnational popularity and fandom of girl idols are also associated with the nation's anticipation of the revival of national culture, called the New Korean Wave. The Korean Wave refers to the boom in Korean popular culture since the new millennium (Chua and Iwabuchi 2008), which brought a significant change in the trans-border practice of stardom and fandom in the politico-cultural terrains of Asia (Tsai 2007). The Korean Wave focused on a succession of dramas and films and select stars; however, a sense of decline has become apparent in past years. Recently, girl idol groups have become considered to be the revival of the Korean Wave and are expected to bring a renaissance of Korean cultural power on a global scale. Thus, an enormous amount of financing and time is invested in the successful creation of a new market and in meticulously designed strategies for the promotion of Korean girl groups in their challenge to become attractive to the global market. It is common for idol groups to perform the same song in multiple languages, mostly in Korean and Japanese in order to target the Japanese market. Some idol groups stay abroad for several months in the initial stages of exploiting the new foreign market.

In addition to the tremendous financial and material investments, discursive effort is required in order to authorize a certain global market for the girl idols. Nationalistic ambition for the development of global cultural content in the twenty-first century's media environment (*Joong-Ang Daily* 2010), as Korean President LeeMyung Bak manifested on Broadcasting Day 2010, is spontaneously projected onto the girl idols' bodies. Numerous news stories are continuously delivered from Japan, diligently reporting Korean girls' success in the foreign music charts and cultural market. To bring more authority to the industrial optimism regarding Korean girl idols' success overseas, particularly in Japan, the Korean media persistently defines Korean girl idols' superiority to their Japanese counterparts. Consequently, Japanese artists and critics are often invited by the Korean media to evaluate and compare Korean and Japanese girl idols. Shusuke Kaneko, a well-known Japanese film director, is quoted as saying that '*Girls' Generation* is more dynamic and wonderful than the total sum of the two Japanese groups of *Candies* and *Pink Ladies*' (Japanese girl groups from the 1970s) (Kukinews 2010). Receiving an evaluation in media coverage of Korean girl idols from the perspective of foreign authorities weighs more credibly and inspires more confidence, increasing Korean excitement and pride in girl idols. The nationalistic celebration of Korean girl idols is trans-regionalized sometimes beyond Asia and towards the US and Europe. A report simultaneously appeared in numerous Korean news media stating that at SM Town Live'10 World Tour at the Staples Center in LA (5 September 2010), a tour concert of idol groups belonging to SM Entertainment, Jack Nicholson, famous Hollywood star and perhaps fan of *Girls' Generation*, bought tickets and visited the concert with his friends and a number of multi-ethnic fans (Lee 2010).

Youth idols play multiple roles in the popular media, ranging from pop dancing stars, beautiful actors and appealing advertising models to frank and friendly guests on talk shows and propagators in political campaigns across the national borderline and into the global market. In this respect, the girls are shifting in their social position from sexual objects of patriarchal desire into agents of patriotic nationalism, capable of bringing the nation a victory in the global cultural war. All of these images are intertwined in the building of, according to media and popular colloquial, the *idol republic*. Girl power is not the mere *image* reflexive of male fantasy in a patriarchal structure of representation but, more significantly, girl power is the actual *force* that has the effect of bonding various individuals and groups across different genders and generations, projecting a nation's dream of cultural pride in the construction of an imagined community known as the *idol republic*.

Furthermore, expressions such as 'Girl groups shaking Japan' flowered across the Korean major media on the date on which *Girls' Generation* had their first showcase at Arikake Colosseum in Tokyo. Phrases such as 'occupying the number 1 position', 'conquering the nation' and 'winning and success' are some of the most-used phrases betraying cultural imperialism in the media discourse. Even the successful tour concerts by SM Entertainment's idol groups in Paris and London in June 2011 and the emerging European youth fandom and foreign media attention to K-Pop (Korean popular music) was proudly coined by major Korean broadcasters and newspapers as the 'Korean invasion' of Europe (Lee 2011). It is also worth noting that the articulation of the national governmentality of girl bodies is further connected with neo-cultural imperialism in alliance with neoliberal values of challenge and winning. Refigured in the patriotic voice to challenge the global competition, even the patriarchal discourses which objectify and commercialize girl bodies are dauntlessly enunciated and accepted.

All these passionate obsessions with the girl idols, diffused in *idol republic*, converge in the construction of what we may call *Lolita nationalism*. Here, *Lolita* refers not only to the creature of male pedophilic fantasy and her unconscious sexuality but also to the metaphor of a sexy girl who serves the market needs of the current mediascape (Durham 2009). Taking this concept one step further, I would suggest that *Lolita nationalism* has become justified and proliferated in the nation's neo-cultural imperialist governmentality of girl bodies in response to the global competition. *Lolita nationalism* in *idol republic* is homologous with *Samchon-fandom* in the familial setting of Koreans' social psychology regarding girl idols. As the relationship between *Samchon-fans* and girl idols can be comfortably settled in the patriarchal family structure, the international consumption of girl idols can be legitimately adopted within a national promotion of the *idol republic* of Korea. Otherwise, global fandom from young women aged in their teens and twenties is harmoniously articulated as 'global sisterhood' (Lazar 2006) in the context of global consumerism.

Conclusion

This article has examined the strategic and systematic transformation of young femininity into the nation's re-sexualized cultural content in the global context of girl industries. Three aspects of girl industries have been discussed. Firstly, girl idols are de-humanized as cultural content of girl industries, and girl bodies are objectified as normative commodities under corporate governmentality. Next, girl bodies are re-sexualized and their sexuality represented as ambiguous. This split and doubling mode of visualization of the girls, oscillating between de-sexualization/sexualization, differs from the linear image of

femininity and is more effective in inviting various social groups as fans. Finally, national governance of girl bodies has been examined in terms of the building of the *idol republic* and the emergence of *Lolita nationalism*. Girl bodies are defined as national property in celebratory tones for the conquering of the global cultural market and exhibition of national power.

The three interrelated aspects of commercialization, re-sexualization and nationalization suggest that girl industries are intrinsic to the strengthening of the neoliberal governmentality of girl bodies on a global scale. Firstly, apparently free and empowering girl images are generated and engineered through discourses of neoliberal nationalism and global commercialism. Despite some post-feminist celebration of representations of empowering femininity in the media (McRobbie 2009), the girls in the new regime of gender are 'controlled' (Deleuze 1997) not only by systematic or regulatory power but also by productive and seductive power. It is also worth noting that in a global context, various strategies of girl representation different to Western ones are prolific. This is due to social, cultural and historical diversities; to cultivate various ambiguous and conflicting repertoires of girl images is more adoptable for and advantageous to the creation of segmented markets in terms of generation, gender and ethnicity. Therefore, considering girl sexuality merely in a Western framework is not comprehensive enough an approach to account for the diversity and complexity of the gender politics at work in the capitalist exploitation of the youths' immaterial and affective labor in the transnational mediascape (Williamson 2011). Last but not least, paradoxical to the glamorous image of girl power, the neoliberal drive in the management and organization of media culture has aggressively accelerated worldwide and, more significantly, it has increasingly augmented through its re-appropriation of patriarchal gender structures (Kapur 2009, Yoon 2009). This reality calls for a renewed global feminist perspective in order to interrogate emerging neoliberal capitalism and to propose alternative visions to its normative power in the subjectification of girl bodies.

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