



Ssen-Unni in K-Pop: The Makings of “Strong Sisters” in South Korea

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Abstract

From the highest points of Psy’s and BTS’s popularity, K-pop fans worldwide have continued to experience the Korean Wave through different media, contexts, and perspectives. In search of the intersections between the Hallyu phenomenon and femininity, this article investigates K-pop women singers’ media presentations and performances that are critical in understanding women’s positionality in contemporary South Korea. In this paper, we will focus particularly on the recent configuration of ssen-unni (strong sister) that evokes a feeling of empowerment in young women K-pop fans. Examining how the diverse and often contradictory messages of women’s liberation and freedom have been produced, disseminated, and consumed, using the strong femininity implied by the notion of ssen-unni before and after Hallyu, we argue that the contemporary representations of femininity by women artists in the K-pop world reveal not only limitations, but also potentials in the changing cultural topography of Korean society.

Keywords: K-pop, *ssen-unni*, Hallyu, Korean Wave, femininity, performance, Korean women singers

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Introduction

In 2018, the all-female K-pop group BLACKPINK released their music video titled “DDU-DU DDU-DU” in which all four members (Jennie, Jisoo, Rosé, and Lisa) performed their own individual segments and also as a group. This music video broke the prevalent innocent girl group image, replacing it with that of a more in-your-face performance. The first scene of the music video instantly sets the group’s rebellious tone through Jennie’s opening lyrics: “I may look sweet, but I don’t act like it/My slender figure hides twice the volume/I give it to them straight Don’t care what people think/Black to the Pink We’re pretty and savage.”¹ The dominantly black and dark blue hues of the visuals of the video reinforce the idea of a tough woman with a serious aspect, with the sets accentuating sharp angles and the main platform being made of solid gray stone akin to inverted steps. Performing within this jagged space are the four women. With “DDU-DU DDU-DU” BLACKPINK confirmed their popularity which they had enjoyed as the first all-female K-pop band to reach the 55th spot on the Billboard Hot 100 June 30 chart (Zellner 2018). With this important landmark in K-pop history, BLACKPINK foregrounds the strong female image as their trademark.² This image, termed “*ssen-unni*”³ (strong sister) in the entertainment industry, is now widely circulated in Korean popular culture at large.

Yet, before BLACKPINK’s accomplishment, solo female artists such as Lee Sangeun and Kim Wan-sun in the late 1980s, Uhm Jung-hwa in the 1990s, BoA and Lee Hyori in the 2000s, and Jessi from the 2010s to the present had already paved the way, marking an important change

1. BLACKPINK Official YouTube Channel “DDU-DU DDU-DU”

2. BLACKPINK’s huge success engendered a 2019 global tour “aiming to take the West by storm” (Ramirez 2019), an indication of female K-pop groups’ strong worldwide appeal, with such artists as Red Velvet performing in the United States, Canada, Mexico, Japan, and even North Korea (Benjamin 2018) and more recently, the group TWICE, whose album *Fancy You* debuted in fourth place on *Billboard*’s World Albums chart (Benjamin 2019).

3. This term should be transcribed into either “*ssen eonni*” (Ministry of Culture system) or “*ssen önni*” (McCune-Reischauer system) according to the scholarly conventions within Korean Studies. In popular media, however, “*ssen-unni*” is extensively used, and we adopt this transcription throughout this article.

in direction for all-female K-pop groups and solo artists by embodying the concept of *ssen-unni* that has recently gained popularity with K-pop fans. Messages of women’s empowerment have thus been produced by women performers in South Korea (hereafter Korea) from the beginning of Hallyu, but more prominently in the current wave of K-pop music.⁴ But *ssen-unni* in K-pop is in and of itself a performative embodiment of contradictory elements. It is our contention that women K-pop performers are showing a strong female image through their music videos and stage performances as a way of fighting the sexist and normalized idea of a weak femininity that inscribes women as docile and innocent. In the process of engendering this strong femininity, however, these performances actually insinuate the underlying message that power is derived from what society views as masculine, reaffirming patriarchal and hierarchical perceptions. This conflicted notion of *ssen-unni* utilizes images of women physically overpowering men or imitating hypermasculine mannerisms, wearing male-identified clothing, and using objects such as baseball bats and machine guns, all symbols of masculinity (Kline 1972, 280; Accad 1991, 245) with guns especially “associated with hierarchical social roles (father, protector) and with [...] values such as patriarchy” (Chauvin 2018, 45). If the only way to turn the tables on a male-dominated society is by appropriating toxic masculine symbols, the message is bound to be skin-deep and lose its *ssen-unni* appeal. Consequently, hypermasculinity and gender hierarchy in female K-pop music videos are likely to undermine the potential socio-cultural impact of *ssen-unni* on empowering a new generation of young women, thereby failing to address the chronic problem to which they attempt to demonstrate resistance, that of patriarchy in the real world.

Yet, from a Western feminist perspective, one could think of the current *ssen-unni* phenomenon in light of third-wave feminism.⁵ Defying the

4. The term “Hallyu” was coined in 1999 by the Korean Ministry of Culture and Tourism in an effort to improve Korean-Chinese public relations through the use of Korean popular music. The Ministry produced a music CD titled *Hallyu—Song from Korea* (Hánliú 韓流 in Chinese), and the term “Hallyu” became widely popular as “Chinese newspapers represented the success of Korean singers in China as *hallyu*” (Jin and Yoon 2017, 2244).

5. The periodization of waves of feminism is derived from the American feminist movement.

categorical and essentialist views in the way that women and men reveal their feminist ideologies, third-wave feminists envision multiplicity and ambiguity, claiming that diverse aspects of female expression should be embraced in their theorizing endeavors (Walker 1995). Moreover, Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards (2004, 60–61) note how “prizing, acknowledging, or valuing the ‘feminine’—be it the domestic sphere, being a mom, or a talent for adornment—is within the scope of feminist history and future” and how “using makeup isn’t a sign of our sway to the marketplace and the male gaze; it can be sexy, campy, ironic, or simply decorating ourselves without the loaded issues.” Indeed, the performances of *ssen-unni* could be understood as a possible dialogue with these feminist thoughts of espousing the heterogeneous ways in which femininity can be embodied in Korea.

All in all, the prevalence of this concept in the K-pop world is indicative of a great complexity in the way in which young generations of Korean women navigate the conventional mold of womanhood that perpetuates characteristics of silence, demureness, submissiveness, and dependency. It is highly conceivable that *ssen-unni* might serve as an effective force for bringing various women’s issues to light such as prevalent marital and relationship abuse and sexual violence (Chung and Ok 2014, 81–92) among others. In this sense, the image of *ssen-unni* can potentially participate in changing the landscape of what it means to be a woman in contemporary Korea. If this is the direction in which the concept is evolving, its seemingly contradictory messages on gender dynamics need to be thoroughly examined.

First-wave feminists predominantly focused on female suffrage, whereas the goal of second-wave feminists was to achieve social change for equal rights in terms of jobs, education, and reproductive rights (Dicke 2008, 103). Third-wave feminism, which began to appear in the United States in the mid-1980s, embraced “pluralistic thinking within feminism...[working] to undermine narrow visions of feminism and their consequent confinements, through in large part the significantly more prominent voice of women of color and global feminism” (Kinser 2004, 130, 133). It is important to note that this periodization is arbitrary not fully addressing concerns in between the waves and leaving out the many different voices of women of color in and out of the U.S. Above all, this periodization is hardly applicable to contextualize the experiences of women and the emergence of feminism in the history of Korea.

Korean “Strong Sisters”: Contextualizing Ssen-Unni in Changing Korean Society

The term “*unni*” literally translates as “older sister,” a female family member or person who must be respected within the Korean kinship hierarchy and societal age structure. In the context of Korean feminist practices, the use of the word *unni* has become an exercise to actualize feminist ideology. For example, members of the feminist activist group, UNNInetwork, founded in 2004, use the appellation *unni* among themselves not only as a way of expressing their mutual familiarity and ease, but also to show their sisterhood. According to UNNInetwork, such usage reveals their priority of pursuing solidarity, support, and empathy among women. The members of another feminist group known as *Jeongchihaneun eommadeul* (Political Mamas), which was founded in 2017 with the specific aim of redressing social inequalities and systemic discrimination through the political engagement of Korean mothers, also use the term *unni* to refer to one another as a way of challenging the patriarchal and hierarchical relationship and treating all group members equally. The members of this feminist activist group consider that the use of the term has affected their democratic way of communicating their opinions and decision-making process (Baek et al. 2019). In this vein, *unni* is more than a technical reference on an interpersonal communication level; it functions as a cultural signifier conveying specific meanings of womanhood and sisterhood that are geared toward social change.

The adjective “*ssen*” means “strong,” “tough,” and “powerful,” but this illustrative expression has been gendered within the contemporary Korean socio-cultural milieu. For instance, if a man is described as “*ssen*,” his personality or action is positively interpreted as powerful, fearless, and fierce. By contrast, when used for a woman, this adjective often takes on a pejorative connotation that she is blatant and brash. Thus, while *ssen-unni* literally means *strong sister*, in a social context it implies a brazen woman who embodies rebellious characteristics, thus remaining outside of the feminine norms. Im Jeong-yeon (2012, 213–240) points out that in Korean women’s literature, consuming alcohol and tobacco symbolizes an act of

resistance against a patriarchal and sexist power structure. In some cases, women *perform* as outlaws when drinking and smoking in public spaces, exposing their *ssen* quality by doing what men are allowed to do but women are not. The underlying message of the *ssen* actions by these women is an outright opposition to the traditional patriarchal ideology and a projection of themselves as independent, assured, unapologetic, and rebellious. The adjective, therefore, refers to their determined stance for their own desire and voice.

The *ssen-unni* expression is a designation in the present K-pop world for a charismatic female star who can be trusted and looked up to, someone who will serve as a role model with her particular fearlessness. This image of a strong sister stands in direct contrast to that of *oppa*. This term literally means elder brother, but it also indicates boyfriend or older male friend. The use of *oppa* in Korean popular culture nowadays conjures up the image of a young man whose younger sisters need entertainment or help, and who makes them feel whole as a person. But the popular media construction of the image of the *ssen-unni* results in the replacement of the male *oppa* figure as a subject of desire. It is quite intriguing to observe that while the male figure evaporates, the *ssen-unni* replaces the position of the *oppa*, and in so doing, she becomes the object of admiration as the epitome of female strength and stability for younger sisters. This subversion of the traditional power dynamics in gender and the hijacking of the female gaze to redirect it from male to female K-pop performers renders *ssen-unni* the object of desire in and for their younger fans. Unlike the male gaze, which connects to a fantasized sexual desire (Mulvey 1989, 19), the female gaze searches for the strong sister in a *girl crush* non-sexual way. Although a girl crush can be associated with lesbian feelings, the expression girl crush is also defined as platonic emotions of fondness and admiration that a woman has for another woman or as a “passionate friendship” (Blakemore 2017). According to Caitlin Kelley (2018), the notion of girl crush specifically in K-pop “functions more as a descriptor of both visuals and message, to varying degrees” and that one can tell a girl crush song through certain signifiers such as sports sweaters, fishnet stockings, less colorful palettes, and a fierceness in women sometimes “masculinized” in dress, haircut, and an attitude that steps

“outside the expectations of hyperfemininity,” amounting to more “abstract ideas of relatability, aspiration and female empowerment.”

The shift of the female gaze from male to female performers is rather ironical and conflicted in the way that many singers in their *ssen-unni* performance disclose their rebelliousness by incorporating sexualized female stylistics: mini-skirts, high-heeled shoes, perfect hair and makeup, highly sensuous dance movements, and overtly sexual lyrics. In music video narratives, these elements usually purport to tease a male target, creating very attractive images of women specifically for the male gaze in the audience. In our view, however, *ssen-unni* performances somewhat detach this male gaze from its “erotic basis for pleasure in looking at another person as object” (Mulvey 1989, 17). Consequently, it seems that a complicit compromise occurs in the meaning of the *ssen-unni* image. On the one hand, it distances the male gaze by performing outside of the cherished patriarchal feminine norms. On the other, it highlights a sexualized connotation to re-invite the male gaze. This duality generates a schizophrenic view on what it means to be an independent, strong, and empowered woman. The complexity of gaze hijacking unveils *ssen-unni*’s inherent contradiction that the image of the strong sister embodies women artists’ fear of losing male fans while simultaneously attracting female fans to the message of women’s empowerment.

A Genealogy of *Ssen-Unni*: Before and After the Rise of the Korean Wave

In the summer of 1988, the Seoul Olympics took place and put Korea in the world spotlight. International television crews were filming both the Olympic Games and the everyday lives of Korean citizens. The phrase “Miracle on the Han River” was heard and described in many foreign TV newscasts. As Brian Bridges (2008, 1939) states: “[t]he 1988 Olympic Games in Seoul were a coming out party for South Korea—a culmination of its efforts to be recognized as an accomplished economic power and a serious international actor.” A decade later, in 1997, the IMF financial crisis had a

powerful impact on the entire nation, and Korea's music industry was not spared. After the Seoul Olympics and the IMF crisis, and as one of the main components of Hallyu, K-pop became "inextricably intertwined with the very fabric of South Korean economy, society, and culture [... as well as] an explicit export-oriented culture industry" (Lie 2012, 352, 357). More specifically, due to a severe decline in CD sales and a highly restricted national market, in addition to the digitization of music, mainly starting in the late 1990s, the only viable path for the entertainment industry was the export market where a new breed of music entrepreneurs used the technological breakthroughs of digitized music and video to cost-efficiently promote their groups outside of Korea (Lie 2012, 353–354). From most accounts, the boy band H.O.T., with its debut in 1996, is considered the first group on the K-pop music scene, followed by the first K-pop girl group Baby V.O.X in 1997 (Lie 2012, 351–352).

As a proto-Hallyu K-pop model, a trio called Seo Taiji and Boys created a new sound with the release of their 1992 song, "Nan arayo" (I Know), that not only innovatively blended rap and hip-hop musical tones with Korean pop music but also incorporated rap and hip-hop movements as a main dance component (Lie 2012, 349). K-pop emerged from this innovative sound and enhanced its hybridity by incorporating certain American popular music elements such as rhythm and blues, electronic music, and rap (G. Kim 2017, 2373), and according to Timothy Laurie (2016, 217), "1980s Hi-NRG and its cousins J-Pop dance culture, 1990s Cantonese pop idols (Cantopop), and mainland Chinese performers (Mandopop), as well as fashion elements reworked from mid-1960s Motown and Japanese V-Kei ('visual style')." K-pop thus forms a contact zone by utilizing not only music and dance but also cultural imaginings from other countries and re-contextualizing their significances.

Going back to the 1980s, the world witnessed an increasing global pressure for gender equality after the United Nations declared a "decade of women" (Nam 2000, 96). In the earlier part of that decade, several international symposiums on women took place in Korea, addressing international feminist thoughts, issues, and actions to Korean women (Nam 2000, 96). Buoyed by the global phenomenon of feminism and an

increasing anger toward the establishment regarding violence and sexual assaults against women by the police, as well as workers’ exploitation by manufacturing and heavy industry companies, “women’s involvement in the prodemocracy movement [...] affected the goals and the strategies of progressive women’s-movement groups formed in the 1980s [which] contributed to the processes of breaking down military rule in the late 1980s” (Nam 2000, 94).

These social changes in Korea were reflected in the music industry that morphed from the military dictatorship under which popular music was censored in form and content, particularly Japanese pop music and American music’s “corrupting effects” (Lie 2012, 347), to a democratic government (with still a censorship process though more liberalized) and financially supporting the K-pop industry in its exporting endeavors (Oh and Lee 2014, 74). In the wake of the spirit of change, freedom of expression, and economic affluence in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Korea encountered a greater spectrum of performing femininity. It was in this changing socio-cultural climate that strong women performers such as Kim Wan-sun, Lee Sang-eun, Lee Sun-hee, and Uhm Jung-hwa appeared on the music scene. Each one of these performers had their own style, with Kim Wan-sun gaining the nickname the “Korean Madonna,” Lee Sang-eun sporting a boyish and androgynous style, Lee Sun-hee with a commanding operatic voice but with a non-provocative “chaste girl-next-door” image (Howard 2002, 84), and Uhm Jung-hwa embracing a hyperfeminine sexuality through her choreography, daring costumes, and powerful lyrics about taking revenge as a woman wronged in love. All of these solo performers’ characteristics exuded the air of *ssen-unni*, which blended into several K-pop women singers’ performances in the next decades.

If a liberalization in Korean society allowed changes in the representations of women in K-pop to some extent, one needs to also consider the money-making nature of the industry that creates artists as products that need to appeal to consumers in the neo-liberal post-1997 era. K-pop agencies such as SM Entertainment are artistic corporations sorting out the best candidates via an arduous training period in which “only 20–30 out of 1,000 trainees ever appear professionally” (Lie 2012,

357). To maximize profit, agencies commonly create group bands instead of solo performers that are less expensive to train with each member farmed out for individual appearances in TV dramas or fan meetings, all to the benefit of the group and its agency (Lie 2012, 357–358). Yet, the performing talent still toils under the firm control of the K-pop industry’s structure that remains predominantly male-dominated. In this context, it is also important to mention that although some male executives work closely with group members supporting women artists in their creative input, the songs, videos, and public images of these performers are still mainly being produced from a male perspective (Lonnie 2019).

In the highly competitive K-pop music scene, aside from an agency’s option to diversify its assets, showcasing a “difference” is a strategy to entice viewers who have become accustomed to repetitive images and performances by women artists. However, innovations that find profitability are quickly copied for financial gain. Certain women performers tend to mechanically reproduce the *ssen-unni* image as an embodiment of difference but not contribute to formulating a different kind of discourse of femininity, resulting in performances conveying weaker and limited messages about what it means to be a strong woman. *Ssen-unni* is an embodied performance reflecting the changes in the bifurcated depictions of female identities in which Michael Fuhr (2017, 289) states, “the innocent-yet-cute ‘girl-next-door’ and the sexually enticing imageries figure prominently at the respective ends.” Defining *ssen-unni* in K-pop is a challenge as it could denote a female performer’s all-encompassing concept such as previously mentioned BLACKPINK’s, or making a visual statement such as embracing the “corset-free movement” rejecting lookism, as Mamamoo did by performing in sweatshirts, baggy pants, and white sneakers (Park 2019). *Ssen-unni* could also be a means of affirmation, for example a temporal stand for queer identity, as in AOA’s broadcast performance that included men in drag dancers, a first on TV in Korea where homosexuality is still not fully accepted (SLY 2019). All of these performances embody the notion of *ssen-unni* due to their courage to break with patriarchal values in style and content, forging a way to an acceptance and solidarity in diversity. With more Hallyu female groups and solo performers embracing the image of

a strong woman, a discussion of the mechanisms in which *ssen-unni* is engendered and repeated can elucidate the complexity as well as limitations of this critical concept.

The Contemporary Makings of *Ssen-Unni*: Combative Dichotomization, Materialistic Hypermasculinization, and Ambiguous Resistance

With regard to the repetitive constructions of *ssen-unni* in female K-pop artists' works between the 2000s and 2010s, three distinct features can be identified and conceptualized via three works by women solo performers: BoA, CL, and Lee Hyori. First, *ssen-unni* is shown in contrast to men. The male-versus-female concept is one-dimensional, failing to take into account the systemic issues about the complex relationship between men and women. The second prominent element in the representation of women in K-pop can be found in the hypermasculinization of images, objects, and actions that seem to achieve a strong performance utilizing the concept of *ssen-unni*, but that only expose a misconception of power by appearing masculine. Lastly, it presents the idea of women as political beings resisting, but resistance is left disconnected from contingent issues; hence, a missed opportunity for women's solidarity.

Combative Dichotomization

Nickie Charles (1996, 13) states that "gender relations are relations of power [and] that feminists are concerned with asymmetrical power relations [...] However, the way in which power is conceptualised varies." Within this sphere of power relations, as the Korean Wave progressed, most women K-pop groups in the 1990s shed their initial images that conveyed a sense of innocence and cuteness such as Fin.K.L with "To My Boyfriend" and "Everlasting Love" and S.E.S. with "I'm Your Girl" and "Oh My Love," songs that recounted fairy-tale stories of girlfriends in need of affirmation from their *oppas*. In contrast to her precursors who found a formula for popular appeal in their initial image-making as a pure and sweet girlfriend type, a

thirteen-year-old BoA debuted in Korea in the summer of 2000 with her title song “ID; Peace B,” a youth manifesto for the millennial generation to create change. In 2004, at the age of seventeen, BoA changed her image, from the young cute look to a sultrier and mature one with matching dance movements (‘My Name’). In her 2007 “Sweet Impact” music video released in Japan, BoA flirted with a gender-bender image during a dance sequence in which she dressed in men’s clothes.⁶ Her image further intensified with her 2008 American single “Eat You Up,” in which she appeared in a black hoodie, dancing to pulsating hip-hop moves in a story about auditioning in which the audition space and the judging panel are blown away—literally—by her performance (Fuhr 2016). Indeed, for BoA, just as for other women K-pop performers, maturing in and shedding their initial images was only the beginning of the road toward addressing and attacking asymmetrical power relations.

BoA’s music video, “Girls on Top,” released in 2005, draws special attention to her strong *ssen-unni* look and attitude during her dance sequence with a group of male backup dancers who are all dressed in black. Switching between two spaces, an empty sleek room with a view on a pool of water and a vertical glass cube structure, she seems to be dancing less with the backup dancers than against them in the first space. Within the glass structure, she is clearly moving slowly to the top as she leaves her male counterparts confined below trying to escape. By the end of the video, BoA has reached the top of the glass structure, symbolically breaking through the glass ceiling (Loden 2013) and leaving the men trapped below. In the other space, her dance involves kickboxing with each male dancer. As they fall to the ground, she stands victorious in the middle above them. In “Girls on Top,” BoA is in effect reversing the hierarchy (putting women on and at the

6. A note worth mentioning regarding this gender-bender performance is the long history of women taking up male clothing for various aims and outcomes. For instance, in 1950s Korea, female *gukgeuk* utilized male impersonation and cross-dressing performances transgressing boundaries regarding gender and sexuality (Kim 2009, 247-280). In a more contemporary context, male cross-dressing in K-pop is used as a “symbolic mask that allows the performance of queer identities, while at the same time shielding its performers from being perceived as queer” (Oh and Oh 2017, 11).

top) by means of the metaphors of entrapment and fighting.

With her video, BoA is further attempting to assert a strong identity by addressing the unequal power relations between women and men. Nonetheless, as Charles (1996, 21) puts it, “claiming an identity, particularly an oppositional one [...] is experienced as empowering [...] in so far as it can challenge existing power relations.” In “Girls on Top,” BoA is displayed in utter opposition to men by creating and winning a gender war, but this dichotomy restricts issues of gender relations and so ignores ongoing gender discrimination and inequalities.⁷ Indeed, ever since Simone de Beauvoir (2011, 79) expounded in *The Second Sex* her idea of woman “consigned to the category of Other” in relation to man as the primary sex, the notion of female gender has been viewed in opposition to the male gender. This narrative of gender wars may give women a sense of achievement in their victorious fight against male counterparts, but its dualistic thinking is harmful to the vision of a future in which the equality of women and men allows for a struggle against sexism, racism, and heterosexism amongst many other forms of domination. Additionally, according to Michael Kimmel (1996), throughout history a number of male figures advocating women’s rights have joined women’s struggles for gender equality. The combating gender narrative renders those male figures invisible and inscribes them as an enemy to woman. In our view, existing power relations in BoA’s *ssen-unni* performance are seemingly challenged as the combative dichotomization results, in effect, in mere *male-bashing*.

Materialistic Hypermasculinization

2009 saw the debut of the group 2NE1, composed of four women: CL, Dara, Park Bom, and Minzy. Their 2011 hit music video, “I Am the Best” (*Naega jeil jal naga*), according to Kelley (2018), has an “abrasive” stylistic choice in props and costumes such as baseball bats, leather jackets with studs and

7. On the 2016 World Economic Forum’s Gender Gap Index (GGI), Korea ranked number 116 out of 144 nations in terms of gender wage gap (a dismal ten-year-low), to name just one inequality (World Economic Forum 2016).

spikes, and “gravity-defying haircuts.” The video is full of assertive and fearless attitude with unashamedly boastful lyrics about the four women being fabulous and no one else being as good. In regard to their *ssen-unni* performance, the members of 2NE1 even recognize their faithful women fans in the lyrics that Park sings: “Girls are following me.” Yet, no matter how proud the group claims to be of their coterie of female fans, their representations of *ssen-unni* characters are problematic in terms of the way of performing their strength. From the first frame of the music video, the image shows one of the group members clad in boxing shorts, wearing a boxing robe with hood, and holding a large iconic boxing championship belt. Further on, another member arrives in a futuristic black car, and a third member dances in between two moving locomotive pistons. More than halfway through the video, all four singers take on the persona of clan members with baseball bats, chains, and thick black gloves and smash glass window cases. The last segment of the video is set in front of a large black pyramid surrounded by several blindfolded women in black uniforms who beat on hybrid traditional Korean drums. At the very end, the four 2NE1 members take up machine guns and shoot at the pyramid. These images, and certainly the violent behavior toward the end of the video, suggest hypermasculine symbols. Indeed, the segment with the uniformed women around the pyramid with their precision drum-beating choreography brings unquestionably to mind the idea of a militarized masculinity.

If not so overtly militaristic, CL adopts a repetitive style of hypermasculinity with her 2013 initial solo music debut, “The Baddest Female” (*Nappeun gizibae* [*Nappeun gijibae*]), a mixture of hip-hop and electronica viewed by over one million people in less than 24 hours on the 2NE1 YouTube channel (Benjamin 2013). The first part of the video is filled with images of herself as a successful, rich, and famous woman that are crosscut with shots of her in hip-hop clothing wearing a gold plate across her left knuckles with the word “UNNIE” (*unni*) and over her right knuckles another gold plate with the word “GIZIBE.” The second section of the video switches to her as part of a clan, and the last segment briefly shows her in a militaristic outfit holding a black flag atop a jagged mountaintop before the scene transitions to one of tropical scenery. Moving through this lush vegetation, CL discovers

a shantytown, complete with a hair salon, populated almost exclusively by women who happily hip-hop dance and play with her as she joins the hidden paradise.

The lyrics themselves give the sense that this is more of manifesto than song, with the English words she declares with megaphone effect on the mountain summit with a flag flapping in the wind attesting:

This is for all my bad girls around the world
 Not bad meaning bad, but bad meaning good, you know?
 Let's light it up and let it burn like we don't care
 Let 'em know how it feels damn good to be bad.
 (2NE1 Official YouTube Channel 2013)

This declamation of self-assuredness produces a feeling of catharsis and a sense of empowerment for young women, giving them the right to be “bad” in the sense of rejecting patriarchal discriminatory labels and affirming their right to define themselves. Through this declaration and throughout the song, CL is speaking directly to her fans and, more precisely, to her female fans as she calls out to them with her refrain (“Where all my bad gals at?”) while positioning herself as their big sister (“Girls call me unni”).

The Korean title of the song uses the word “*gizibe*,” [*gijibae*] a colloquial term to describe girls and young women. Adding the adjective “bad” to *gizibe*, however, implies a disparagement in which the English title “The Baddest Female” becomes comparable to the meaning “bitch.” This reclamation of a derogatory term for woman finds a connection to what feminist author Jo Freeman (under the name Joreen) wrote in the seminal article “The BITCH Manifesto” defining a “bitch” as a self-determined proud, strong, and militant woman (Freeman 1970). This redefinition of bitch is found in a current cultural and literary production in Korea: the four-cut webtoon entitled *Ssyangnyeon-ui mihak* (A Bitch’s Aesthetics) by Min Seo-Young.⁸ In this cartoon, *ssyangnyeon* (bitch) is redefined as

8. Distributed through the web-based cartoon platform Justoon, *Ssyangnyeon-ui mihak* discloses candid expressions of women’s experiences of encountering numerous discriminatory and absurd situations by mere fact of being a woman in Korea. This cartoon became a monumental

a woman who prioritizes her desire over other's thoughts and voices her opinions about her lifestyle choices without being subservient or apologetic (Min 2018). CL utilizes the word *gizibe* in the similar way, bestowing upon herself this iconic title in her *ssen-unni* performance.

Furthermore, 2NE1 and CL performances manage to express their empowerment but through the adoption of a male-imbedded lens and consequently their choices of imagery perpetuate the idea of a pervasive male-supremacy in society. In both music videos, objects are infused with hypermasculinity, an exaggerated pattern of manners and actions within cultural norms commonly viewed in men. Baseball bats, chains, thick fighting gloves, machine guns, gold plated metal knuckles, clubs, gold chains and even one shot of CL with her mouth open, revealing sharp gold teeth evoking a militant fighter. All of these objects embody the elements that define hypermasculinity but here appropriated by the women artists. Moreover, both videos are not only saturated with objects but the focus of the objects is the women artists themselves, who either wear them, hold them, or wield them, so that they become an extension of their bodies.

These hypermasculinized performances embodied through decorative objects, however, do not enhance a discourse on the radical enhancement of women's feelings of liberation strongly enough to dismantle the culture of misogyny and gendered norms. Another issue with the depictions is that their implication sends confusing signals to female teenager fans, who constitute the majority of fans for both women and men K-pop singers, that power is attainable through the consumption of these excessive hypermasculine objects. By so doing, the women artists infuse their *ssen-unni* performances with visual imitations of exaggerated performances of maleness that do not in any way disrupt a patriarchal capitalism that entraps women in a society of consumerism and sexism but pass down the restricted view of empowerment to the next generation of women.

feminist work, recording an accumulative four million views and subsequently published as a book in 2018 and a sequel in 2019, with additional plans for its adaption as web-based drama.

Ambiguous Resistance

Whereas 2NE1 with “I Am the Best” and CL in “The Baddest Female” use materialistic hypermasculinity as a way to present strength, self-assurance, and self-reliance, the solo performer Lee Hyori expresses the power of *ssen-unni* performance through narratives of resistance. Michel Foucault (1978, 95) states: “where there is power, there is resistance.” Applying Foucault’s statement to Lee’s music video, it is eye-opening to see that women are shown as forces of resistance through protest. Authority is represented by either the state, family, teachers, or police, but apart from a direct target of her anger and actions against that corrupted authority, Lee’s dissension does not in the end imagine solidarity among women through highly politicized acts.

Lee Hyori, a member of the pioneering K-pop girl group Fin.K.L from 1998 to 2005, began a solo career in 2003 (with ‘10 Minutes’) and immediately found success with her album *Stylish...E*. Over the years, Lee has expanded her career from singer to record producer, actress, television host, and animal rights activist. Released in 2013, her “Bad Girls” music video is shot in a cartoonish fashion complete with comic book-style pop-up text bubbles. The story follows the life of a fictional Lee Hyori from her birth, during which her mother dies in a campy hospital birthing scene punctuated by a 1960s-style “Monster Mash” Halloween music, through her experience of having a stepmother, then schooling up to high school. At every stage in her life, Lee is mistreated by family members, classmates, teachers, job interviewers, and eventually the police, and reacts to all these through rebellious and vengeful behavior but shown in a cartoonish way: when she blows up her mean classmates with a stick of dynamite, they only wind up with blackened faces and smoking hair. At the end of the video, Lee takes part in protests, provokes a policewoman into a car chase, and gets arrested. The last scene features her during her mugshot photo making an insulting gesture at the camera.

The idea of resistance of *ssen-unni* performance here connects Lee’s rebelliousness with the group of protesters at the end. In that sequence, Lee is up in front of a wire fence while protesters hold up placards reading, “Don’t

Touch Me,” “Even If You Wear [sic] So Sexy You Can’t Touch Me,” “Don’t Hate Me,” and other signs that signify important messages regarding sexual harassment in particular that are difficult to make out due to fast movements and quick editing. The fact that the camera does not focus on any particular sign reveals Lee’s indifference to protest as an act of social justice or civil disobedience and the collective voices of the politicized activities of the protesters demanding social justice for women produces only a vague resistance. Whereas Lee is foregrounded in these shots, the public and their act of resistance merely become a backdrop.

As a positivity of performance exists within the staging of dissent, making protests ambiguous in “Bad Girls” defeats the purpose. Historically, protest as dissent has been an effective tool for the public to demand socio-political and cultural changes. From the suffragette movement in early twenty-century America to protests in the 1960s and 1970s for equal rights, to the January 2017 worldwide Women’s March, women’s protests have served to express their discontent over marginalization. In Korea as well, protests have been part of the fabric of Korean society, and in particular women workers’ formation of resistance in the 1970s was significantly vocal and visible (Kim 2011, 411–430). More recently, protests have been staged by women regarding sexual abuse in the entertainment industry, at school, and in public places, especially against sexism and spy-camera digital sexual violence. Indeed, resistance “alerts us to the feminist insistence on the importance of collective as well as individual action in order to transform social relations that systematically disempower women” (Charles 1996, 14–15). In this context, with “Bad Girls,” K-pop is enfranchising the potential resistance that has been embodied through the *ssen-unni* performance, but it falls short of disseminating the idea of women’s actualization for social transformation and remains a sketchy, kitschy gesture.

Conclusion

If female empowerment can only be demonstrated via the polarization of male versus female, in materialistic hypermasculine ways through

consumption, or as inconclusive rebelliousness, then the meaning of empowerment certainly becomes abstruse. In the next stage of Hallyu, new K-pop narratives and innovative approaches to bring women’s experiences of liberation and freedom from compulsory structures regarding gender and sexuality forefront might be seen, strengthening the “power” of K-pop.

The word “feminism” is no longer estranged from our everyday lives. From the popularity of the bestselling feminist novel *82-nyeonsaeng Kim Jiyoung* (Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982) by Cho Nam-Joo, published in 2016,⁹ to movements like #MeToo in Yonghwa Girls’ High School and at a number of Korean universities in 2018, Korean girls and women have become more vocal and visible in public in the face of blatant sexism, misogyny, and sexual violence such as that witnessed in the 2019 sordid Burning Sun scandal that shattered “K-pop’s innocent image” (Brown 2019). No longer feeling isolated, women can band through social media and public protests to find voice and solidarity with one another while using technological and activist networks as platforms for change.

Within this contemporary wave of feminism, *ssen-unni* performances in the Korean Wave possess the potential to engender even bigger waves, communicating the variety of women’s voices in more powerful and positive ways. For instance, the group Mamamoo, which debuted in 2014, has recently displayed their commitment by playfully disrupting gender norms in their work and publicly supporting the Seoul Korea Queer Culture Parade in 2017, showing how *ssen-unni* can be reincarnated incorporating the female as an empowered performer and fearless agent for equality.

Will the performance of *ssen-unni* become imbedded in the hearts and minds of young Korean women and girls to contribute to a growing feminist movement that is seen as a threat to traditional values dominated by patriarchy, or will *ssen-unni* be relegated to a fad of the Hallyu brand for mere national and international commercialism? In either case, the

9. Presently, the film adaptation of this novel is covered by Korean media as an unexpected box-office hit. This is a surprising feat given the large negative campaign against it on social media. The popularity of the film is a compelling testimony to growing societal awareness and acceptance of women’s issues as no longer the agenda of a small group of *radical* feminists.

power of K-pop has shown that innovative concepts can be transmitted to the public at large, and we hope that *ssen-unni* performances in K-pop will keep embracing the meaningful empowerment of women to actualize their liberation in Korea and beyond, thereby also contributing to the healthy growth of Hallyu. We choose to imagine *ssen-unni* as daring, strong, fearless, and entirely relatable to issues afflicting Korean women and men who admire an ever-changing K-pop.

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