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Is 'the Missy' a New Femininity?

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Introduction

In the early 1990s, a new term emerged to refer to young married women in Korea. The term is '*Missy*', which means a young married woman who dresses like and presents herself as an unmarried woman. Married women have begun to identify themselves with the term instead of the traditional title, '*Adjumma*'¹ because they do not want to take on the traditionally associated images and lifestyle implied by this title, especially ageing and dowdiness. The novel term *Missy* originated from a small advertising campaign to promote a department store in the early 1990s. It rapidly became widespread in different components of the Korean media and has been redefined to refer to young and attractive married women who want to look like unmarried women and share their lifestyle and attitudes. This has caused huge controversy amongst social commentators and feminist scholars, who argue about how to understand this explosive concept.

In order to examine whether *Missy* can be understood as a form of new femininity, I will first describe the origins and prevalence of the concept '*Missy*' in the media and how the rapid spread of this figure became a subject of controversy amongst social scientists, including feminist scholars in South Korea. Moreover, I will analyse my own empirical interview data² to discuss precisely how women aged between 20 and 40 really construct their femininities using the concept of the *Missy* derived from the media and adapted to their own experiences and preferences.

Emergence of the *Missy*

In 1994, a small-scale advertising campaign for one of the major department stores in Seoul made a great cultural impact in South Korea. In the advertisement, copywriters invented a novel term, *Missy*. It is a combined term, which means 'married women who look unmarried'. In the advertisement, the main slogan was 'I am a *Missy*, the *Missy* is different'. It has been widely

used and rapidly came to represent an alternative lifestyle for women. Even the copywriter was surprised at the speed with which this term took on a social meaning and the way in which it has come to evoke a specific image of women and femininity (Lee, 2002, p. 149).

This new figure was not only the product of a marketing campaign but was also related to the general conditions underpinning the emergence of a new concept of femininity, influenced by globalized images of femininity and by changing economic conditions. In South Korea, the concept of married femininity changed as the number of working women increased with industrialization during the 1970s and 1980s. During this period, there was a general tendency for women to have more opportunity to undertake higher education and pursue their own career. The *Missy* refers to young married women who were born in the 1960s, and grew up in the 1970s under the military dictatorship. Because of industrialization and huge labour migration from rural areas to big cities like Seoul, most of them lived in urban settings and grew up in nuclear families. This generation received from 10.37 years (women) to 11.78 years (men) of education on average (Kang, 1996, p. 594). When this generation became young adults in the 1980s, many of them supported and became involved in the democratic movement against the military regime. From this experience, the whole generation tended to be somehow more socially sensitive and active than any other generation in the South Korean history (Moon, 2005, pp. 102–3).

The initial response from society to the advertising campaign which invented the term *Missy* was very enthusiastic. Consumers, in particular young housewives, embraced the concept and identified themselves with the term. The prevailing image of the *Missy* was immediately absorbed by the mass media, as much as it had been promoted and influenced by media in the first place. The widespread popularity of the new image in media representation in the 1990s accelerated in film and television drama. The genres of Western melodrama and romantic films were being recycled and translated into the South Korean cultural context, with the *Missy* as one key translated image from Western images of femininity.

For example, the figure of the *Missy* became more popular and a subject of controversy when a television drama, *The Lover (Aein)*, director: Changsoon Lee, MBC, 1996), was broadcast in September 1996. It was about an extra-marital love story of two successful professionals in their mid-thirties. The drama had an enormous impact on society. The audience rating reached 36.3 per cent in October 1996 (Kim, 1996). Thousands of husbands made enquiries at the telephone office to check their wives' call list to see if they were having affairs (Lee, 2003). The actress who had the role of the heroine in the drama, Sin-Hye Hwang, became another icon of the *Missy*. In addition, the motto of the drama, 'beautiful immorality' became a very popular phrase at the time.

Since *The Lover* first raised the issue of the extramarital affair, many films and dramas have flourished. The difference between *The Lover* and the post-*Lover* films and dramas is perhaps that the sexual relations and discourses are more openly implicated and described in later projects. The director of *The Lover* made the extramarital affair a romantic fantasy but did not depict sexual relations. However, the post-*Lover* films and dramas put the sexual relationship at the centre. Furthermore, the *Missy* is always located in the central stage of the extramarital affair and, as such, liberal sexual attitudes have become the main property of the *Missy*. Lee So-Hee pointed out that the story of the extramarital affair has experimented with the possibility of recognizing a new morality governing middle-aged wives' subjective sexuality and individuality. The social discourse around these kinds of films and drama show that female sexuality in modern Korea conflicts with the Confucian ideas of fidelity and chastity (Lee, 2002, pp. 157–8). In this context of media representation, it is easy to suggest that the concept of the *Missy* has replaced the old concept of the wives, or *Adjumma*, as the one with which married women identify themselves.

Other films have further built upon this tendency to increasingly provide spaces for women's desires and characters and scenarios within which they can identify themselves as the *Missy* and arguably as reflecting certain aspects of globalized images of femininity. In the previous media representations, women having an extramarital affair (or love affair) used to end up being tragically killed or committing suicide. Moreover, the woman who is seeking fulfilment of her sexual desire was described as a kind of hybrid monster. As So-Young Kim, the feminist film critic describes, in the post-*Aein* period, the image of women has radically shifted and the mass media attempt to represent women's voices (Kim, 1998). The common theme of those films and dramas is that they are beginning to show female sexual desires, more confidence and self-awareness.

The *Missy* representations in these films and TV dramas contribute to the popularity of *Missy* as an alternative lifestyle for women. The connotations of these film and drama images are that heroines are self-confident, career oriented and desirable lovers. Young women have taken up these images and used them in the process of constructing their own alternative identities, coming to refer to themselves as *Missy*, reworking and replacing the image of *Adjumma*. Given the increasing significance of this image, it is, therefore, perhaps opportune to examine the process of its emergence, as I attempt to do below.

Controversy over the *Missy*: media masquerade or real subject?

The *Missy* as a pseudo-reality of commercialism

Since her emergence as a powerful new figure, the *Missy* has been a subject of debate amongst social scientists and feminists in South Korea

reflecting varying opinions regarding the many pros and cons of the real – or otherwise – entity of the specific group of women – the *Missies*. Many comment that the concept of the *Missy* is an illusory entity only driven by the dominant force of consumerism since it was invented and promoted solely for the purpose of commercial advertising. Hence, critics of the *Missy* claim that it is a fabricated concept, which creates more powerful images of ‘superwomen’: progressive and modern characters, rejecting old and traditional conservative ideas, and influenced both by a changing Korean social context and by global media images and consumerism. This critical position can be found in the argument of a leading feminist in South Korea, Young-Ja Lee (2000). In her analysis of the phenomenon of the *Missy*, she argues that the *Missy* is an illusory and pseudo reality, which was encouraged by the mass media. Women are exposed repeatedly to the concept through advertisements and mass media representations. According to her analysis, ‘at the moment of the advertised image turning into real character, nobody can make sense of whether the *Missy* is a commercial by-product or voluntarily constituted genuine entity’ (Lee, 2000, p. 60).

This type of criticism is reminiscent of similar arguments around the construction of new femininity in Western contexts, resonating particularly with the ‘yummy mummy’. It is argued that new femininity emphasizes self-surveillance, monitoring and discipline. Moreover, criticism of new femininity not only focuses on individualism, choice and empowerment, but also emphasizes consumerism and the commodification of difference (Gill and Arthurs, 2006; McRobbie, 2006). This important contribution from the West reveals how and where feminism is attempting to understand consumption and new femininity within the processes of global capitalism and is similar to how the *Missy* has been understood as new femininity in the South Korean context of globalization. In particular, understandings and criticisms of the concept of the *Missy* by feminists have centred on this aspect of consumerism and commodification of difference, rather than an actual assessment of the restrictions facing married women in South Korea. However, this critical view of the *Missy* is perhaps only based on two-dimensional feminist ideas, in which young women as mass consumers are seen simply as the dopes or victims of consumerism with functional needs and no desires of their own. Such views ignore the process of the active transformation of women. From this perspective, the *Missy* is not thought to be seeking and constructing her identity actively. Indeed, if one followed this type of critical analysis, the women’s subject position would probably disappear. Instead, the subject formation seems only to be regarded as an object oppressed by commercialism and the patriarchal system and this contributes to the phenomenon that women’s subject formation in global capitalism is often overlooked.

In this chapter, the study of cultural practice requires studying ‘macrological alliances’ and the ‘micrologies’ of women’s subject positions in order

to understand that their position can be actively transformed, rather than being merely an object of oppression by consumer forces. The practice as *Missy* can perhaps best be seen as a meeting point where multiple factors constitutes the subject-cultural practice and their inherent temporalities. Of course, the *Missy* was originally formulated and encouraged by the support of consumerism and mass media. In addition, it is perhaps valid to state that the image of the career oriented and 'unmarried-look-a-like' housewives was initially just an illusion. However, if we entirely accept South Korean feminists' criticisms (Cho, 2002; Lee, 2000) and the Western feminists' criticism (Gill and Arthurs; McRobbie, 2006) of women's position within global capitalism, then there would be no possibility of the actor committing to, or participating in, her own transformation of identity. In practice, the images of the *Missy* portrayed by commercialism and mass media may open up women's imagination to the possibilities of building a new identity that expresses their desires and self-realization. According to Kaplan (1995), 'it would be difficult to find subjects not interpellated in the world making activity of consumption...[we need] studies of corporate practices, site of consumption and subject formation...without account for agency, resistance, subjectivity...without constructing narratives of oppositional binaries' (p. 61). Similarly, I would argue that the practices of *Missy* are perhaps constituted culturally and mediated by women's own active social relations. As I will attempt to show, it seems clear that the women are well aware of the situations in which they are positioned and are choosing their identity based on self-realization as well as cooperating with consumerism.

Therefore, it seems that thus far feminist analysis of the *Missy* phenomenon has overlooked the possibility of women's subject formation in constructing their identities. With the deficiencies of these main competing critiques of the *Missy* discussed above, it would be helpful therefore at this point to return to my empirical data and the revelations of young women themselves to discover if a more convincing explanation can be found in their own voices.

Is *Missy* a new femininity?

In the series of interviews with 101 women aged between 20 and 40, I raised the issue of the *Missy* in several lines of questioning relating to who the *Missy* is, what the definition of *Missy* is, and how informants identify themselves with *Missy*. Most married women who I interviewed clearly expressed their desire to be *Missy*. One of the informants remarked, 'I would love to be a *Missy* and I would love to be seen as a *Missy*.'

As seen, the central definition of *Missy* refers to married women who want to look like unmarried women (*Agassi*). Although their marital status is that of married women who expect to perform all the duties conducted inside and outside of their house, in a sense, they still want to be considered as

unmarried women. In other words, the *Missy* transcends the marital status boundary from married to unmarried women, as an attractive, sexy and youthful identity.

At a glance, the *Missy* can be a technique of visual knowledge identified in dress and body codes. The visual technique is perhaps the best way of a woman masquerading as unmarried. As such, the *Missy* can be regarded visually as an 'unmarried woman' by adopting or assuming her style. On this point, the visual technique of the *Missies'* appearance seems to demonstrate how such masquerading brings into play contingent, complex and negative identification to *Adjumma*, as revealed in the informant's revelation below.

If the *Missy* is an identity that contains the desire to masquerade as unmarried women (*Agassi*), why is marital disguising a significant desire for young women in the contemporary South Korean context? It may be because, young women reject the traditional image of the 'wise mother and good wife', represented by the *Adjumma*. *Adjumma* was the universalized concept used to refer to married women as the signifier. However, the concept, *Adjumma*, has been associated with a long list of expected codes of conduct for women, which are only accomplished by sacrificing herself in favour of her family. Thus, the image has become unattractive for a generation that wants to embrace women's desires and the pursuit of self-realization. In the contemporary context which incorporates influences from a changing consumer society and from a globalized media context, the image of married women that they now wish to portray encompasses their desire to prolong self-realization and development, as they did before marriage. The newly created concept of the *Missy* for women in the late 20s and 30s age group is similar to that of the *Agassi* who may have more freedom and power to control their own lives.

The meaning of *Missy* is articulated in the meanings the informants attach to the practices involved. When most informants talk about the *Missy*, their descriptions sketch the abstract visual images of the *Missy* (fashion, appearance, style and age) which perhaps reflect, and are reflected by, consumer and media images, then move to describing the image of *Adjumma*, and finally returning to the *Missy* to define it as a counterpart to, and rebellious of, the concept of *Adjumma*.

Indeed, the *Missy* has been presented as embodying confidence and, as noted earlier, as putting their energy into self-cultivation/their appearance/improvement of their own life. The following interview shows clearly what young Korean women think about the *Missy*:

HE: 'I think I am a *Missy* because I am investing a lot of energy for my inner and external development to have my own satisfaction. For *Missy*, her weight of life is more centred on herself rather than husband or children.'

Q: 'What is difference between the *Adjumma* and *Missy*?'

HE: 'I think the *Adjumma* is someone who is loose and careless about her life, only thinking about her husband and child. Unlike *Adjumma*, the *Missy* is keeping up tensions in everyday life.'

Q: 'What does it mean, tension?'

HE: 'Well... tension, I think, is the motivation to develop my life.'

(Full-time housewife, age 34)

As can be seen, the informant points out what the *Missy* means from her point of view, which includes one of the main definitions that the *Missy* is more focused on her own development rather than family affairs or rearing children. However, despite the prevalence of the image in the media, it seems not possible to define it without comparison with the concept of *Adjumma*. From the extract, it is noticeable that there is a precise difference between the *Missy* and *Adjumma*, namely tensions in everyday life. The informant thinks that the *Adjumma* is careless and not interested in taking care of herself, whereas the *Missy* is always maintaining her consciousness in terms of motivating her life. Thus, if the *Missy* can be seen as opposed or in opposition to the *Adjumma* discourse, it is in the process of making visible the fractured identities of old femininities.

By contrast, the informant in the following interview is usually identified as a *Missy* but sometimes she identifies herself with *Adjumma* when she behaves 'wrongly':

S: 'I never had been called *Adjumma* till that moment; people usually called me a *Missy* even when I had my second son, Joonyoung. One day, I was stuck in a terrible traffic jam on my way back home. So I tried to change my direction, and drove my car into a private car park although I was aware that I should not. At that moment, one guy shouted at me "*Adjumma!* You should not park your car here". I was thinking at the moment, yes, that's right, I am *Adjumma.*'

(Full-time housewife, age 37)

The appearance of this informant may be that of a *Missy*, as she identifies herself, but her identity can shift between *Adjumma* and *Missy* in different instances. The informant allowed the man to call her *Adjumma* when she noticed that she broke a rule in the parking lot. Therefore, in her construction, the *Adjumma* image seems to be closely related to negative behaviour not just a negative appearance, while the *Missy* image is associated with the positive and active side of her everyday life. This can read in the same way as other historical examples of 'passing' – as the forming of identity marked by permeable boundaries; i.e. the anxiety of being 'misread' or 'correctly read'. The informant above does not want to be an *Adjumma*. However, although the images can be seen as oppositional, in real practice, both identities are intermingled and coexist, showing that the two concepts

are situation-dependent. As an unresolved identity of competing femininities, the *Missy* refers to imagined identities compounded with uncertainty, insecurity and anxiety. Thus, the *Missy* identities are competing by which it can be seen that new femininities have not yet arrived and have not been fully realized but rather are represented in a competing and conflicting image. When most informants talk about the *Missy*, their descriptions sketch the abstract visual images of the *Missy*, move to describing the images of *Adjumma*, and finally return to the *Missy* to define it as a counterpart of *Adjumma*.

In fact, the whole process of struggling to define new identities starts with the crisis of the old images of married women as a result of global transformations and new images of femininity. The old images of married women cannot fulfil what women desire and accomplish. The existing concept and images of married women with *Adjumma* have been too uniform and fixed to offer a solution to the crisis. At this point, the action they take is mimicking the unmarried women who are categorized as *Agassi* and masquerading as unmarried. Indeed, in this instance, what women appear to want is to be gazed at by the other in an 'intentional misrecognition' between married and unmarried women.

The in-and-out-ness of the *Missy*

One intriguing point I found emerging in my interviews is that although informants retain the name of the *Missy* to express their identities, the actual identity formation is not exactly what many social scientists have described nor precisely that portrayed by the media. Rather, they are constructing the formation itself by approximating the given package of the *Missy* and withdrawing from it. This in-and-out-ness of the *Missy* identity shows the complexity with which the informants are struggling and contesting with married femininities in contemporary society. Furthermore, it should be noted that this in-and-out-ness seems to be totally based on locally contingent contexts. There is no simple informants' reading of *Missy* representation in the media and the informants tactically use the resources including given packages of the *Missy* and *Adjumma* images in order to constitute their identities.

For example, the following interview observes that informants endorse, hesitate and refuse some facets of the *Missy*. Some informants reject aspects of the *Missy* and contextualize her within their own perspective.

IK: 'I don't think I am a *Missy*.'

Q: 'Why do you think you are not?'

IK: 'I am not following that trendy way.'

Q: 'You don't follow...?'

IK: 'I am not interested in decorating my appearance.'

- Q: 'Do you think the *Missy* is all about appearance?'
- IK: 'Yes, probably, about appearance. I don't like to stay home looking humble without any make-up. I really want to wear make-up when I am home and go to the supermarket. I never wear humble clothes.'
- Q: 'You mean you think you are the *Missy*, don't you?'
- IK: 'I think that when I am working... maybe having a lover.' [laughing]
- Q: 'Do you think it is better to be the *Missy*?'
- DY: 'Yes, I think I should decorate myself very well when I go out.'
- Q: 'What do you think?'
- SB: 'I never decorate myself. Those who are trendy are progressive like that although I am so far from interested in being the *Missy*.'
- (Full-time housewives, ages 27–33)

The focus-group above shows interesting reactions to the concept of *Missy* from each informant: the informant IK clearly shows her ambivalent attitude towards the concept, although she is consciously mocking it. She is cautious and hesitating to commit to the *Missy* concept fully because she is aware of its superficial character. However, her ambivalence towards the image is also revealed: she is stepping in and out of the boundary of the *Missy* by remarking that she does not like to be seen as following the trendy way but actually she expresses her desire to have an attractive appearance. By contrast, informant DY reinscribes the *Missy* as being about appearance. Furthermore, the informant SB does not identify herself at all as *Missy*. The informants' discussion as to whether or not they identify with the *Missy* is competing. They do not want to accept the given image of *Missy* in terms of being purely about appearance. The informants seem aware of criticisms of the *Missy* as a consumer dope. From the interview, it is interesting to see that the *Missy* does not seem to provide a clear negotiation point for the formation of identities. In fact, the characteristic of appearance is probably not providing a negotiation point. This may be partly because people are consciously aware of the origin of the concept, which was, has been, and still is closely associated with consumerism. However, as informant IK and SB revealed cautiously, they still have desires to resurface their self-identities and desires, which are still latent and are only reluctantly exposed, if at all, in the interview. In that sense, the *Missy* does not represent a safe and settled boundary. Rather, it is what they want to be, without having any safe harbour.

Without a safe harbour, the discourse of the *Missy* reaches an ambivalent position. The informants interact within the *Missy* discourse. According to the informants, the contents of the *Missy* are 'self-cultivating' and 'keeping tight'. The *Missy* has a self-centred lifestyle, rather than a victim of self-sacrifice, and she invests in her own development. The following extract shows how the informants can put on and take off the *Missy*, each

reinventing the concept from their own point of view, and contextualizing it from their own position.

Q: 'Do you think you are *Missy*? Or are you identifiable with *Missy*? Do you think people recognize you as a *Missy*? With regard to your previous discussion, you don't seem to want to be called *Missy*.'

DW: 'I would love to be called the *Missy*. Sometimes, I am suspicious about the concept of *Missy*. I can imagine *Missy*'s house would be messy and untidy. She is focusing on herself only, while she is not doing proper domestic work. The domestic work may not be her priority. She could escape from all domestic obligations. She is only taking care of her appearance and her improvement. Selfish woman!'

(Full-time housewife, age 39)

The informant above clearly also has ambivalent feelings about *Missy*. She likes to be called *Missy*, but she shows her anxiety and prioritizes the domestic work as her obligation. She therefore seems to be struggling and oscillating between a self-sacrificing character as old identity and a selfish woman as new identity. For her, the *Missy* image is described as only taking care of herself and neglecting her domestic work. What the informant imagines being the *Missy* image may be too selfish for her to identify with. In her remarks, the boundaries between her personal and family boundaries are separated and the separation seems to cause some struggle and hesitations. In this sense, she is still stepping in and out of boundaries.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the emergence of the figure of the *Missy* in Korean media. Whilst emerging from an advertising campaign the *Missy* has captured the imagination of Korean society and become a site of contested identification for many women in their 30s. Such women do not unthinkingly adapt this identity as passive dopes, but rather take it up, negotiate it and resist it.

Thus, the *Missy* is here the fantasy of ability – or a technique to become without adopting or taking on signifiers of the subordinated other – *Missy* therefore becomes a mechanism for reconstituting or reproducing the other as the 'not-*Adjumma*' from within, rather than beyond, the structure of the *Adjumma*. If *Missy* is coming out in antagonism to *Adjumma*, we can then possibly regard the emergence of the concept *Missy* as not an entirely alternative concept to pre-existing terms that refer to feminine identities in South Korea, although many women attempt to identify themselves with the *Missy* category. However, on the other hand, the image of *Missy* is not firmly harboured to any existing categories like *Adjumma* or *Agassi*, meaning

that it is not possible to find any secure ground to explain the new identity formation such as economic class or political preference. *Missy* could, therefore, be a product of consumerism, of transformation of *Adjumma* or a representation of new femininity. None of these is clear. However, what is clear is that for informants *Missy* is an imagined, unsettled and unfixed term, one that is under construction and not one which is simply imposed as a ready-made package by the media and consumerism.

Therefore, I suggest that within the multitude and shifting images described here the informants' desire was not in the first place merely the product of Western mass media, but in fact emerged from their own negotiation with their positions in their own context. Finally, this in-and-out-ness of the *Missy* identity shows the complexity of how the informants are struggling and contesting with married femininities in South Korea. This can most clearly be seen in the way the interview data reveal that informants endorse, hesitate and refuse some factors of the *Missy*. Furthermore, as shown, the open discourse of their newly expressed desires is accompanied by their negotiation of marital life. This desire is still undecided, is perhaps never going to be decided, and is based on their imagination. It can be said that it is a 'space of dream' or 'paradoxical space' – never settled or defined. In other words, the *Missy* could be best understood as a conjuncture of conflicting desire and new femininity, continually in the process of transformation.

Notes

1. The conventional category used to refer to housewives in South Korea is *Adjumma*. Literally, *Adjumma* means a distant female relative, usually older and married. It is, however, used in a more general fashion as a convenient title for any older female, usually past her thirties and presumed to be married with children. Nevertheless, this general meaning referring to married and old women has changed significantly in recent years. In particular, through the industrialization process since the 1960s, the meaning of the term gradually shifted from being a positive and general term to one that is negative and derogatory. The term, *Adjumma*, now often connotes "audacious", "unconsidered", "unashamed" and "ignorant" femininities. Even their appearances can be seen to be typified as such, often represented with short, permed hair, tattooed eyebrows and clown-like make-up.
2. This empirical research was conducted in South Korea between 1999 and 2000. During my fieldwork, I interviewed 101 women in 21 group interviews and individual interviews.

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