

Hallyu Ballyhoo and Harisu :Marketing and Representing Gender Variance in
South Korea

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When competition ensues among companies for the delivery of ever new and more sensational ways of packaging their products, commercial interests frequently play a part in promoting social inclusion, however inadvertently or however much as merely a by-product of the pursuit of profit. This is especially evident in the case of those companies that are now “packaging” their products with social development themes that they hope socially aware middle-class consumer will find appealing.

There is no doubt that the profitability of novelty has reaped benefits for one South Korean artist and performer, Harisu, and certainly the commercial interests she represents. Harisu has promoted cosmetics and other beauty and feminine hygiene products, generally as a consequence of her success as a popular performer and recording artist. Of especial interest in this examination of social and commercial convergence is that Harisu is a transgendered woman, indeed one who has been ironically and enigmatically dubbed by the popular press as “more beautiful *than* a woman”.

In this paper, we argue that the success of gender variant individuals such as Harisu has had the generally positive effect of raising public awareness of transgendered people, enabling this severely marginalized minority to gain greater social acceptance. However we caveat these general remarks with the recognition that the gender variant community is deeply divided as to how the transgendered or gender variant should be identified and represented. Consequently, someone like Harisu is

presently regarded with some ambivalence and even hostility from certain ideological positions held within the wider gender variant community.

With that acknowledged, more broadly we argue that, as a pop culture phenomenon commercially (rather than ideologically) “packaged” to affirm gender variance, the phenomena of Harisu in the Korean New Wave, or Hallyu, provides an interesting example of a convergence and divergence between commercial and social interests within the cultural flows of North Asia.