

서브 브랜드의 ‘크리에이티브 가능성’: NCT와 요지 야마모토의 브랜드 구조 비교

The ‘Creative Potential’ of Sub- Brands: A Comparison of NCT and Yohiji Yamamoto Brand

Structures

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브랜딩은 마케팅, 디자인, 커머스, 심리학, 콘텐츠라는 주술을 커뮤니케이션이라는 연금술로 조합하여 부단히 진화해 나가는 작업이다. 다양한 산업이 자기 분야의 정체성을 표출하는 방식을 끊임없이 혁신함에 따라 브랜드 전문가들도 브랜딩 기술을 거듭 발전시키고 있다. 이 예비 연구 에세이에서는 패션과 K-pop 분야의 브랜드 구축 및 서브 브랜드 창출을 다루고 있다. 연구자는 패션 산업과 K-pop 산업의 브랜드 가운데 시장 주도의 서브 브랜드를 서로 비교하고자 하며, 주요 연구 대상은 요지 야마모토의 패션 브랜드 계열과 K-pop 그룹 NCT이다. 요지 야마모토와 NCT는 메인 브랜드를 다양하게 편성하고 있지만, 연구자의 관점에서 볼 때 창의적 세계를 희석시키는 주 원인은 창의적 확장이라기보다 시장 요인이며, 이는 브랜드 재구성에 따른 부산물이다. 이 ‘부산물’에 대해 설명하자면, NCT와 요지 야마모토의 소비자나 팬들은 새 편성의 결과물을 기존 단일 브랜드의 창의적 확장과 재해석으로 인식한다. 또한 의도했던 아니든, 이 편성의 결과물이 다른 시장을 공략하고자 하는 더 큰 자본주의적 동기를 충족시킨다. 메인 브랜드의 희석이 전반적 인지도 향상과 이론상의 매출 상승으로 이어지는 역설적인 전략이다. 연구자는 이를 ‘분할 정복’ 전략의 일환으로 파악하며, 패션과 K-pop 영역에서는 창의적 ‘부산물’ 이미지가 보다 유리하게 작용한다.

Branding is a constantly evolving practice that mixes the dark arts of marketing, design, commerce, psychology, and content in an alchemical combination of communication. As various industries continue to innovate on how they express their institutional identity, brand professionals are continually evolving the craft of branding. This study is a provisional research essay on brand construction and sub-brand creation in the spaces of fashion and K-pop. The study attempts to outline comparisons to market-driven sub-units of brands between the fashion industry and the K-pop industry. The primary sources of examination are the Yohji Yamamoto fashion lines and the K-pop group NCT (Neo Culture Technology). Both have diverse configurations of the main brand, Yohji Yamamoto and NCT, but the study observation is that this dilution of a creative universe is primarily driven by market forces more than creative reach, which is a by-factor of this kind of recomposition of brands. To elaborate on this “by-product” both NCT and Yohji consumers or fans perceive these brand reconfigurations as expansions and adaptations of the singular brand’s creativity. Whether knowingly or not, these configurations serve the greater Capitalist motivation of capturing different markets. This is a kind of ironic strategy, where the dilution of a main source brand leads to greater overall recognition and theoretically more sales. This study considers this a type of “divide-and-conquer” strategy and in the categories of fashion and K-pop, the creative “by-product” image is more beneficial.

Lee Soo Man's Cultural Technological Dream

NCT is a boy group that debuted in 2016 from SM Entertainment. The group's name contains SM Entertainment Chairman Lee Soo Man's central cultural philosophy, "cultural technology (문화기술)". Lee has been touting this kind of creative manufacturing process for many years and he has written prolifically on the subject. Lee's version of "cultural technology" differs slightly from the policies of the Korean government, which has worked for many years to build culture and technological infrastructure to create both soft and hard power.

NCT stands for "Neo Culture Technology". The group currently has 26 members, but this is a deceiving number as rarely do all 26 members come together for a single performance or track. Rather, from the outset NCT was meant to have a freeform configuration, which allows for several key advantages.

First, the group can reconfigure into various subunits as different fan groups are targeted and the agenda of SM Entertainment changes. Conceptually, this allows for conceptual diversity as shown in how NCT U and NCT 127 have very different musical concepts and visual direction. Physically, this format also allows for various members to slide in and out of the group, and this "무한개방 (infinite)" concept is central to the worldview of NCT. The second, related concept of NCT is "무한확장 (infinite scaling)". This domination strategy is very well demonstrated in the country-focused subunits of WayV (China) and NCT-New Team (Japan).

Second, K-pop groups face a real

problem in terms of audience aging. Most group contracts last seven-years after debut. Over the course of a group's seven-year career, many idols begin to "age-out" from the public eye. This problem is worsened by the mandatory military service of males, a particular issue for boy groups which BTS is suffering as of this writing. So, the solution that NCT has come up with in their infinite freeform construction, is the endless creation of subunits. Through this method new members can create new subgroups that attach to the larger NCT brand and can easily and fluidly bring in new, younger audiences. The critical advantage of this fluid formation also handles member scandals quite well.

NCT is composed currently of NCT 127, NCT Dream, WayV, NCT New Team, and the units NCT U and NCT DoJaeJung. All the groups act both independently and in unison of the main NCT brand. As if fulfilling their own prophecy of expansive and adaptive fan growth, the NCT brand has up to four official operating fan groups (NCTzen, NCTzen 127, NCTzen DREAM, and WayZenNi). To this researcher, NCT is a unique innovation on the J-pop AKB48 format, which is a girl group of up to 120 members at its peak.

The Creative Orbit of Yohji Yamamoto

Keeping to the analysis of the NCT brand as a market-driven construction, the fashion industry has many parallel examples. For examination, this researcher has focused on the Japanese designer brand Yohji Yamamoto. The namesake designer launched his career with the brand Y's in 1977 in Tokyo. The brand was designed to "reengineer" menswear. This brand was subsequently followed by a woman's

wear main line Yohji Yamamoto. Through the branding one can see a consistency in the naming. Similar to NCT, they retain the essence of the umbrella brand, but re-introduce a new take on it. The next sub brand would be Yohji Yamamoto Pour Homme, and this next iteration would be a key development in the logic of Yamamoto sub brands. This sub brand takes the main elements of the higher end Y's menswear brand and creates more accessible lines for a wider market. Thus, through a sub brand Yamamoto is able to create a "generous" offering of his creative talents for a wider audience.

Yohji Yamamoto would go on to adeptly respond to changes in the fashion market with various sub brands. Of note is S'YTE, a genderless online-only "entry-level" brand. We see Yamamoto responding both to culture and market changes in the industry. GroundY and Regulation Yohji Yamamoto see the brand take on a younger customer base in both exuberant street style and restraint (former and later).

Yamamoto's other great innovation is the Y-3 label, which is a collaborative effort with Adidas. Here we see a genius for brand naming which unites the Yohji Yamamoto name with the "3 stripes" of Adidas. Yohji asserts his relevance by directly naming Y-3 with a "Y" and only hinting at Adidas with the symbolic number of the brand. Y-3, really brought Yohji Yamamoto to a wider audience, expanding out of its fashionista conscious recognition.

Of course, the early sub brands of Yohji Yamamoto were attempts to expand the creativity of Yamamoto. They allowed the brand to produce a greater range of fashion for different target customers without having to carry them all at once. But the more recent developments are quite

transparent in their customer and market driven motivations. Yamamoto is a savvy brand creator who knows the value of his "Y".

The Worldview of NCT

Similar to Yohji Yamamoto NCT has unique constructions of its sub units other than the reconfiguration and additions of different members. First, let us clarify what NCT symbolizes. A core tenant of NCT is that through "dreams" we find empathy and through "music" we become one.

The group has communicated from the very beginning through their debut video and through the 'NCTmentary' series. They have gone on to emphasize similarly ethereal concepts such as "resonance" through their different musical and video releases.

Moving down into the sub-units, some of their market-driven motivations are revealed. The two most obvious units are WayV and NCT New Team. WayV is essentially the Chinese iteration of NCT and has no Korean members. The six members Kun (쿤 Chinese), Ten (텐 Thai), OneOne (원원 Chinese), Xiaojun (샤오 Chinese), Hendly (헨드리 Macao), and Yang Yang (양양 Taiwanese) debuted in 2019 and were the fourth group to emerge from NCT with a concerted target of the Chinese market.

NCT New Team is a six-member team that will debut in 2024. They were formed through the NCT Universe: LA START program. The six debut members for this fourth and supposedly last NCT formation are Sion (시온 Japan), Riku (리쿠 Japan), Yoyoshi (유우시 Japan), Daeyung (대영 Korea), Ryo (료 Japan), and Sakuya (사쿠야 Japan). There are few details on their exact

identity, but they appear to have a similar strategy in their formation as WayV but will focus on the Japanese market.

The other two iterations of NCT are NCT 127 and NCT Dream. NCT 127 is a 10-member group and the '127' stands for Seoul and Gyeonggi-do province.

They proudly proclaim Seoul as the heart of Korea and K-pop. This seems to indicate that they approach a "major market" identity and borrows from the cosmopolitan identity of Seoul and surrounding Gyeonggi-do province cities.

NCT Dream is a 7-member ensemble that directly targets a younger audience.

Borrowing from the dream motif of NCT, NCT Dream directly proclaims that they represent the hopes and dreams of teenagers and bring this positivity upwards to adults. NCT Dream was initially committed to this teen composition where they proposed to "graduate" members when they age over 20, essentially leaving their teens and entering adulthood.

However, they seem to have abandoned this format and chose to keep their debut members, who are now all over the age of 20.

Conversations on markets and creativity

This researcher is curious to imagine a conversation between SM Entertainment chair Lee Soo Man and designer Yohji Yamamoto. The K-pop music industry has started to understand the brand dynamics that can be observed in Yohji Yamamoto's diverse brand configurations. There are also many other examples of sub brands and "diffusion" brands in fashion, including Masion Margiela and Comme Des Garcons, but Yohji Yamamoto seems to be the master of sub branding.

These parallels are curious and are a testament to brand allegiance in the new MZ generation. As shown in the recent rebranding efforts of fashion houses like Celine, Burberry and Ferragamo, the monolithic brand mark has less and less relevance. Rather, the fashion world, which is constantly plagued by changing trends in culture and market forces, has adapted by offering variety. The key to such dilution is to keep the central essence of the core brand. Both NCT and Yohji Yamamoto clearly understand this, but time will tell how affective such constant dilution will be as attentions of audiences and consumers shift.

The key observation this researcher would like to conclude with is the delicate balance between the financial and economical motives of sub brand sublimation and the narrative of creative diversity that is orchestrated by both Yohji Yamamoto and NCT. Both brands are adept at creating an aura or creative diversity and generosity to justify their strategic dilution of the main brand. Through their communications and divisions, they are able to convince the consumer that these sub brands bring more to the overall creative vision of the mother brand, rather than weaken the image. This is a very masterful act because many brands suffer from dilution when subdividing into different brand units.

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