

Ain't No Party!

Spirited! Striking! Successful! Stylish! Sexy! Strong! Seven!¹ These were the seven traits that artist manager extraordinaire Simon Fuller was searching for in his next big sensation, following his success as the former manager of the Spice Girls. Hence the fabrication of S Club 7. The group is remembered by most Millennials as the British teenage pop group from the noughties that produced hit songs such as “Bring It All Back” and “Don’t Stop Movin’”. In forming the group, Fuller wasn’t necessarily interested in whether Bradley, Jo, Jon, Hannah, Rachel, Tina or Paul could sing. He was interested in working with individuals who embodied those seven qualities, each beginning with ‘S’.² As such, his intentions were not to establish a successful pop group, but rather, and in his own words, a “multi-faceted entertainment brand”.³ This twisting of intent is corroborated by a later statement by Fuller, that “pop music is about celebrity and not just about music... Pop stars should be icons”.⁴ It adds a manufactured quality to S Club 7: How much control did the group have over their public image? The notion that pop stars “should be icons”, is revealing of the managerial imperative of capital success. Images produced in this context reflect the desires of a global audience.

S Club 7 were marketed towards children and teenagers and thus we’re presented with two aesthetics in their visual media. Predominantly, S Club 7 are pictured with giant grins, y2k-aesthetic fashion (read here: low-rise pants, crop tops, singlets, baggy jeans and dad-style button-downs) and close camaraderie. The members are positioned intimately with each other, and the colours are saturated with a typically sunny background. Their other aesthetic embrace dusk/night-time settings that allude to S Club 7’s exciting nightlife. They smoulder into the camera with carefully arranged bodies that present a forefront of edge and sex. These images give a doll-like quality to the celebrities as they become instruments for a managerial class of profit-driven executives to make, control and toy with. Artificial images come to represent the disparity between their public personas and private lives. Where is the line that separates these realities and is there any authenticity in the fabricated image?

In contemporary society, celebrities are intrinsically desirable. Their manufactured image is informed by preconceived notions of success, founded in mainstream standards of attractiveness and taste. Generally speaking, in the early noughties, success as a celebrity was determined by their attractiveness, fundamentally connected to being thin, young, and pretty (and mostly White). It was a given that a successful celebrity was also mediagenic. In addition, any image of a pop group had to

embrace a shallow understanding of 'diversity'. A pop group would appeal to a larger audience if some members were culturally ambiguous (Rachel and Tina). Bradley also offered this potential as a Black man. By presenting an image that celebrated diversity, management were able to appeal to a wider audience. As most of the members of S Club 7 were White-passing, they wouldn't really oppose these pre-existing beauty standards, even better for business!

S Club 7's image was cultivated by management specifically in order to present them as desirable. This was maintained in their numerous TV Shows: *Miami 7*, *L.A. 7*, *Hollywood 7*, and *Viva S Club*, where each member played (a fictionalised version of) themselves and every episode consisted of the group getting into shenanigans, which were subsequently solved through the power of friendship. The main themes in these shows were driven by the ideas and aesthetic principles of sun, fun and friends. These themes are echoed in their songs and music videos – their music is classified as bubblegum pop, a genre of pop music marketed towards children and teenagers, with a catchy and upbeat sound.⁵ S Club 7 were almost always portrayed as having fun in these videos, which suggested a life for children to covet. Almost all their songs were similar in theme and sound. They infer a time and place that one would rather be.

It is implicitly suggested that these adventures in the show were true to the experiences of S Club 7 members. As such, it infers an authenticity and sincerity to their public personas, implying that their adventures and lives were also somewhat attainable for their fans. This 'realness' to their image was manufactured to uphold a positive public reputation. So, when we consider the use of authenticity within image-economies, its presence raises questions about the legitimacy of the image itself. How authentic is this authenticity? At what point does it transform into artifice? Is there a point at which these facades become so insubstantial as to become soulless?

Rainer Maria Rilke's essay, "Dolls", offers an interesting insight and perspective into the childhood toy of the doll. He describes the doll as corpse-like through his observation that without the child's imagination and hand, the doll will forever remain unresponsive. Rilke asks whether the doll was ever present in its existence or if its liveness is only ever a response to external force. The doll is thus likened to a cadaver and subsequently regarded as soulless.⁶ The relationship between child and doll can then be likened to the fan and celebrity, whereby the celebrity takes on the role as the doll. In this, the unresponsiveness of the doll becomes the superficial persona of the celebrity. With this comparison, I question whether in fact celebrities eventually succumb to a soullessness in their authentic lives, behind the manufactured image. When do their authentic selves and the public image they project become so disparate that both public and private identities become intangible?

This dynamic is more prevalent in younger celebrities, who have less control and say over how they are portrayed than adults. Therefore, it becomes more likely for their public and private selves to be extremely different, and easier for management to exploit them, resulting in their brandification. We see this with S Club 7 and their extensive merchandise. Their dolls, accessories and clothing were marketed to entice children with the potential to 'join' S Club, with the doll box explicitly stating that they could "become part of the Club with these S Club dolls".⁷ In this way, S Club 7 were nothing more than a product and hence had a degree of soullessness in their construction. S Club was founded with the objective of commercial success. Every element of their image was constructed to aid this. With a focus on maintaining desirability, the group existed as a brand with implied authenticity. How then to explain the fact that millions of young people around the world have been genuinely moved by their music, eliciting real emotions within listeners? All I can do is conclude by saying...

Spirited! Striking! Successful! Stylish! Five!

Vale Paul.

– Melissa Nguyen

¹ The tagline of the S Club 7 "Sing N' Style" dolls.

² Robinson, Michael G., and Timothy K. Winkle. "The Innocents Abroad: S Club 7's America." *Popular Music and Society* 27, no. 3 (2004): 291–305. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03007760410001733143>.

³ Robinson & Winkle, 2004.

⁴ Robinson & Winkle, 2004.

⁵ "Bubblegum Pop Music: Notable Artists and Characteristics - 2023." MasterClass. Accessed August 5, 2023. <https://www.masterclass.com/articles/bubblegum-pop-music-guide>.

⁶ Rilke, Rainer Maria. 'The Unfortunate Fate of Childhood Dolls'. Translated by Idris Parry. *The Paris Review* (blog), 25 May 2018. <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2018/05/25/the-unfortunate-fate-of-childhood-dolls/>.

⁷ This is observed on the boxes of the S Club 7 "Sing N' Style" doll collection.