

“Oppa”-tunity Knocks: PSY, “Gangnam Style” and the Press Reception of K-Pop in Britain

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Abstract

Based on an examination of over 500 British newspaper reports, this article contends that a range of culturally-biased interpretations have frequently been incorporated in PSY’s critical reception in Britain that have served to present him as a bizarre novelty act or central character of an internet meme as opposed to a globally famous pop star and long-established Korean pop star. Consequently, the contemporary Korean context of PSY’s phenomenally successful song and video has been largely overlooked. Rather than casting a new light on Korea, previously held negative assumptions about Korea have also often featured in these press reports. Yet despite this, the song itself has still managed to benefit Korea’s popular image overseas. Indicative of the song and video’s complex cultural representation and partisan reception, “Gangnam Style” has—paradoxically—been ripe for exploitation by the Korean Tourism Association (KTO). Because of the failure to engage with the “Korean context” of the song by sectors of the foreign press, the KTO has been largely free to revise the “Korean context” of “Gangnam Style” away from its initial criticism of the lifestyle it represents into a more profitable recommendation of it.

Keywords: PSY, “Gangnam Style,” K-pop, British press reception, Internet memes, Orientalism

Introduction

K-pop has been argued by some to have ignited a second Korean Wave,¹ after a perceived decline in the popularity of *Hallyu* Korean television drama that had driven the first Korean Wave.² A White Paper published by the Korean Creative Content Agency asserted that sales of K-pop in 2011 outside Korea had surged by 135 per cent year-on-year to \$196 million (which itself is quite a contrast to 2006 when overseas sales had only been worth \$16.7 million).³ While Asia is still the primary market for K-pop with Japan apparently accounting “for about 80 per cent of K-pop’s total revenues,”⁴ breaking into the western market has increasingly become possible for a number of K-pop acts. In 2009, the Wonder Girls featured in the Billboard Hot 100 chart in the US, and in 2012 their EP “Sexy, Free & Single” reached number six in the iTunes Top Ten Pop Albums chart. At the 2011 MTV European Music Awards, Big Bang won Best Worldwide Act in the Asia-Pacific category. A year later, Girls’ Generation became the first Korean act to perform on syndicated US TV when they appeared on *The Late Show with David Letterman*. The group is reportedly on the verge of releasing their first album in English on Interscope, the label of Lady Gaga. At the moment, Will.i.am is producing 2NE1’s debut US album, and U-Kiss have performed at concerts in France, Thailand, the US and Colombia and managed to secure top ten positions in France, Australia and Canada.⁵ K-Pop acts such as Rain and SM Town have also “been filling huge arenas across the US since 2006.”⁶ Yet in spite of the ostensibly more marketable looks, youth and vocal abilities of these various K-pop talents, PSY, with his song “Gangnam Style” and accompanying video, has eclipsed them all in terms of local and global success.

In 2012, PSY became South Korea’s highest-paid celebrity, “earning an estimated \$28m,”⁷ and won lucrative contracts to advertise goods including the popular alcoholic beverage Jinro soju,⁸ and Samsung’s range of kimchi refrigerators.⁹ As well as accumulating considerable personal wealth, PSY’s success has also seen his father’s company share prices triple,¹⁰ and he has generated “sales of almost 100bn won” for the entertainment company YG, “making him the most bankable of

the 20 or so K-pop acts on its books.”¹¹ So popular has he become in Korea that tickets to see him perform his follow-up to “Gangnam Style” were so sought after that they had to be assigned by ballot, “a method not required when the former presidential candidate, John McCain, spoke ... [in 2012] ... nor when Mother Teresa, the Dalai Lama or Michael Jackson did.”¹²

As well as making him a huge national star in Korea, the phenomenal success of “Gangnam Style” has turned PSY into an internationally recognized celebrity. The video for the song has become the most watched video ever on YouTube,¹³ after receiving more than 1.5 billion hits since its release on July 15th 2012,¹⁴ and it has been viewed “at least a million times in close to 75 countries respectively.”¹⁵ The song itself has also “topped the charts in more than 30 countries”¹⁶ Indeed, so globally identifiable has he become that in the US PSY appeared in an advertisement for pistachios during the Super Bowl,¹⁷ while in Russia efforts are being made to produce “Gangnam Style” vodka.¹⁸

An undoubtedly important part of “Gangnam Style”’s global success has been the accompanying “riding an invisible horse” dance that PSY performs in the video for the song. Various western show business stars such as Britney Spears, Hugh Jackman and Mel B have performed the dance on television,¹⁹ as have some sports stars—with Novan Djokovic doing the dance at the China Open,²⁰ and the West Indies cricket team providing their own rendition when winning the Twenty20 Cricket World Cup in 2012.²¹ Politicians too have attempted PSY’s “horse dance”: Barack Obama performed it in a “dance-off” with the rapper Usher at the White House,²² and the mayor of London Boris Johnson claims to have performed the dance with British Prime Minister David Cameron.²³ In the British press, both robots²⁴ and babies²⁵ were reported to be dancing along to the song. Even animals were apparently smitten by PSY’s dance moves: *The Daily Mail* reported how giant pandas at Jinbao Amusement Park in Weifang, Shandong, China were seen doing their own version after one “stood up on his hind legs and assumed a pose with an uncanny resemblance to PSY’s smash hit routine.”²⁶ The paper also reported how a leopard

showed “that he’s got fangnam style [sic] by ... doing the moves from popular music video Gangnam Style, by standing on his back legs and dancing.”²⁷

In addition to robots, animals and celebrities, the public too have become involved in the dance craze. “Gangnam Style” flash mobs have “filled Times Square in New York” and taken place at other locations too, including “the Hotel Indonesia in Jakarta, a food court in Sweden, a shopping mall in Paraguay and during the 40th anniversary of the declaration of Martial Law in the Philippines.”²⁸ Various spoofs of the video have also appeared on the Internet. “A wizard-themed version, Gandalf Style, has proved popular, as has a Western take, Gunman Style.”²⁹ British-made parodies have included “Eton-style,” featuring pupils from Britain’s most exclusive and well-to-do boarding school, who recreated the video in their school uniforms,³⁰ while, at the opposite end of the British social ladder, sewerage waste workers created a version asking people not to wash turkey fat down the sink.³¹ However, rather than this immense popularity and public imitation making PSY a global pop star, at least as reported in the British press, these PSY-inspired events have instead served to frame PSY and his video within the context of the bizarre and the “Other.” As Judith Mackrell of *The Guardian* puts it, “as a cultural phenomenon, Gangnam Style is clearly in a bonkers league of its own.”³²

To a certain extent such a response is comprehensible given the humorous nature of the video for “Gangnam Style.” Andrew Eaton-Lewis of the *Scotsman* gave the video immense credit for its calculatingly odd qualities:

The video is magnificently peculiar—the shopping trolley full of tennis balls, the swan boat gliding past, the balletic, slo-mo sequence on the train, the frenzied hip hop gestures on the toilet, the great unanswered question of exactly what those two old men under the flyover are exploding and why. Like Empire of the Sun’s “Walking on a Dream,” it’s the kind of pop video that feels like something you imagined in the midst of a feverish sleep. Nobody makes videos like that in real life, right?

Yet despite its virtues, Eaton-Lewis predicted that PSY would become a victim of his own successful video in the UK, thereafter being “principally famous as ‘the funny Korean horse guy.’”³³

Such a distinction, between the inclusive—being laughed *with* because of his comedic talent, and the exclusive—being laughed *at* because he is a funny-looking Asian, is an important one to make when considering PSY’s reception in the West. In the US, some concerns were voiced that Orientalist attitudes were driving the popularity of this “funny Korean horse guy.” For example, Amy He, editor in-chief of the New York-based website *Seoulbeats*, expressed unease that “a lot of people latch on to Gangnam Style because of preconceived stereotypes of Asians: PSY is the funny Asian guy who’s doing the funny dance in the funny song.”³⁴ *Fox News* presenter Bill O’Reilly suggested that He’s anxieties were well-founded when he described PSY as “a little fat guy from Yong Yang, or some place, and he’s jumping up and down.”³⁵

Regrettably such unenlightened attitudes appear also to exist among some segments of the UK populace. For example, when the Korean Park Ji-sung played football for the English Premier League club Manchester United, popular songs chanted by the club’s fans included lines such as “Park, Park wherever you may be, you eat dogs in your home country,” “We’ve got Hong Kong Phooey on the wing” and “He shoots, he scores, he eats Labradors.”³⁶ The lyrics implied a common perception amongst segments of the club’s supporters that Korea was as at best peculiar and at worst inferior. Such a patronizing and indeed xenophobic attitude towards Korea evident in some sectors of British society clearly also motivated the London mayor Boris Johnson’s appraisal of “Gangnam Style”:

Let’s be frank, I think most of us had only a very hazy notion of Korea before PSY appeared before us. We had heard of a land of kimchi and roast dog, where giant chaebols produced excellent cars and machine tools. We had no idea about a district called Gangnam, where the women drive a Mercedes-

Benz and take group exercise by waving their bums on the banks of the river ... PSY the rapper has alerted us to an extraordinary fact: that the Koreans are so darned clever that not only can they make cheap and efficient cars. They can also make number one smash hits.³⁷

In addition to the negative stereotypes held by some in the West regarding Korea and encapsulated here in Johnson's brief account of "Gangnam Style," Arwa Mahdawi in the *Guardian* suggests that negative perceptions of Asian masculinity have also played their part in the popularity of PSY outside of Asia:

The last time the west laughed so uproariously at a Korean singer was when an animated Kim Jong-il bewailed how "roney" he was in the film *Team America*, and how nobody took him "seriously." The puppet had a point: popular western media doesn't tend to take east Asian men seriously—even when they're brutal dictators. The stereotype of a portly, non-threatening Charlie Chan-type who speaks "comical" English is still very much alive, apparent in everything from hungry Kim Jong-un memes to Abercrombie and Fitch T-shirts. And it's hard to escape the uncomfortable feeling that this stereotype is contributing something to the laughter around Gangnam Style.³⁸

Partly substantiating Mahdawi's contention has been the notable tendency in the British press coverage of "Gangnam Style" to focus on PSY's build. Press descriptions of his physique have featured a catalogue of euphemisms and dysphemisms for being "slightly overweight"³⁹ ranging from relatively gentle and positive descriptions of him as "stocky,"⁴⁰ "portly,"⁴¹ and "cuddly"⁴² to harsher more pejorative epithets accusing him of being "podgy,"⁴³ "chubby"⁴⁴ and a "fat man."⁴⁵

The focus on PSY's physical stature has contributed to his lack of consideration in the British press as a "genuine" pop star, with PSY

himself partly motivating the journalistic focus on his weight by repeatedly foregrounding how his unsightly and comical appearance has been key to the success of his song. For example, he has been quoted as saying “I’m not that good looking. That’s why “Gangnam Style” works. If someone handsome uses that phrase, it’s just awkward, but if someone like me uses it, it’s funny.”⁴⁶ Similarly: “To have Gangnam Style, if the dancing’s not good it doesn’t matter. I don’t look that good when doing the Gangnam Style.”⁴⁷ And again: “My goal in this music video was to look uncool until the end. I achieved it.”⁴⁸ While PSY is clearly portraying himself as a good sport in these statements, evidently aware that comedy has been crucial to the video’s success, such self-deprecation has also enabled PSY’s star image to become co-opted into bolstering certain extant negative views of Asians held by the likes of O’Reilly and Johnson.⁴⁹

In addition to PSY being perceived as physically unfit for pop star status, the artistic qualities of “Gangnam Style” have also been deemed uninspiring. Numerous discussions in the British press display genuine bemusement as to why it ever attained such popularity. Tom Chivers in the *Daily Telegraph*, for example, stated that “I think we can all agree, without too much argument, that Gangnam Style is not the best or the catchiest tune ever, nor the funniest video, nor really anything.”⁵⁰ Ross McGuinness in *Metro* derisively pointed out that “the lyrics are not exactly Lennon and McCartney, or even Hall and Oates,”⁵¹ while Arwa Mahdawi in the *Guardian* suggested that “essentially, it is just an over-the-top video where a fat man does a comical dance and sings repetitive lyrics that don’t make sense to most of us.”⁵² Both the song and the video were generally dismissed in the press as having little artistic merit and, rather than being discussed as a pop song with an accompanying music video, “Gangnam Style” tended to be discussed in relation to either contemporaneously popular videos from the Internet or former “novelty” hits from the British charts.

In relation to PSY’s popularity on the Internet, the *Guardian* explained how “a chubby 34-year-old armed with a catchy tune ... [and] ... an endearing, if hopelessly daft, dance ... [had become] ... an overnight viral sensation,”⁵³ while the *Daily Telegraph* some time later

pointed out that the “Gangnam Style” video had “comfortably overtaken other viral hits on YouTube, such as ‘Charlie Bit My Finger.’”⁵⁴ Competing against “Charlie Bit My Finger” rather than Rihanna or Jay-Z situated “Gangnam Style” generically closer to the world of internet memes than pop songs in several reports. Likened to an actual virus, Patrick Kingsley of the *Guardian* described it as “the cringe-proof meme, the zombie meme, the meme that knows no shame ... it is like a virus that is immune to antibiotics.” Its magnification on the Internet was used by Chivers to illustrate:

[how] sometimes really unimpressive things become incredibly popular ... Hundreds of thousands of silly potential memes are floating around the Internet at any one time. But every so often one gets a little, quasi-random kick—a tweet by a celebrity, a spot on a BuzzFeed article—and if enough quasi-random kicks happen quickly enough, it takes off. ... it is a shame that the most-watched thing in human history is so utterly vapid.⁵⁵

When not perceived as a meme, numerous other commentators identified “Gangnam Style” as a novelty record. Rather than being seen as the beginnings of an upsurge in K-pop’s global popularity (which is how certain sectors in Korea have viewed it), “Gangnam Style” was instead recognized as a notable one-off. Neil McCorm in the *Daily Telegraph* described it as “an old-fashioned novelty hit, a catchy party anthem with a ridiculous dance move, rendered all the more amusing by the fact that, for most (non-Korean) consumers, it features indecipherable lyrics and a funny foreigner, the Macarena for the EDM (Electronic Dance Music) generation.”⁵⁶ Alexis Pertridis in the *Guardian* further argued that “it’s arguably the biggest novelty single in history, both in terms of sales and cultural impact.”⁵⁷

Likened to other one-hit wonders (that also tended to be accompanied by easily imitable dances) such as Los del Rio’s “Macarena,”⁵⁸ The Tweets’ “The Birdie Song” and Black Lace’s “Agadoo,”⁵⁹ “Gangnam Style” was commonly discussed in relation to “cheesy” records that featured in the British charts in the past rather

than in relation to contemporary K-pop. Peter Robinson of the *Guardian* perhaps best summed up the UK national press reaction to “Gangnam Style” by describing it as a “collision” of a novelty hit and Internet meme which, given the low cultural status of both, largely explains the low cultural standing afforded “Gangnam Style” in numerous British press articles.⁶⁰

However, the fact that PSY was not commonly viewed in the UK as a K-pop artist but as a novelty act did have some benefits. It made him accessible to writers and readers unfamiliar with the Korean music scene without the need for lengthy contextualization in relation to Korean popular culture, largely because he was often referred to as distinct from it. It also helped to distance PSY from the negative perceptions of K-pop already put forward in the Britain press. Jay Rayner in the *Observer* recognized that “while PSY is Korean and his music is most definitely pop he is not mainstream K-Pop”⁶¹ and Andrew Salmon in the *Sunday Times* explained that PSY was “not your typical Korean pop star.”⁶² Sarah Bull of the *Daily Mail* asserted that in many respects he stood “in stark contrast to the squeaky clean singers that dominate K-pop,”⁶³ while the *Sunday Herald* went so far as to suggest that “Gangnam Style” was a “satire of K-Pop.”⁶⁴ As opposed to its popularity and dissemination in the US and Australia, prior to PSY’s success, K-pop had not been making significant inroads in the UK and, from the press reaction in the newspapers examined, it did not appear to be a particularly welcome potential cultural import. In the few articles where “Gangnam Style” was discussed in relation to K-pop, a tone of subtle derision was detectable towards it and its “auto-tuned, implausibly attractive girl and boy bands.”⁶⁵ Jay Rayner of the *Observer*, for example, described K-pop as “a highly innocuous product calibrated to offend as few people as possible” and as stemming from “a highly conservative society.”⁶⁶ Mark Hudson of the *Daily Telegraph* defined K-pop as “the country’s all conquering bubblegum genre ... where girlish boys and plastic divas compete in a seamlessly regimented sci-fi, fetish fantasia of spikes, boots and plucked eye brows.”⁶⁷

PSY was not generally reported as being “manufactured” or “squeaky clean” in the K-pop mould. In fact quite the opposite was the case, with plenty of coverage being given to his “bad boy” past. It was noted, for example, that he was once arrested for smoking marijuana;⁶⁸ that he “flunked his way through high school”;⁶⁹ and that “his first hip hop album, *PSY—From the PSYcho World* (2001), led to a fine for “inappropriate content” and that his second album was barred to buyers under 19.”⁷⁰ PSY’s perceived distance from the sanitized mainstream K-pop image is an important aspect of his stardom and one that he appears happy to cultivate—and given his age and self-identified physical disqualifications he perhaps has little choice other than to cast himself as distinct from the teen idols of K-pop. Yet explicitly differentiating himself from Korea’s ultra-sanitized primary music export also entails performing a delicate balancing act with apparent indigenous cultural—and economic—expectations. In 2012, for example, he was awarded the Okgwan Order of Cultural Merit for “outstanding meritorious services” to the arts by South Korea’s culture ministry.⁷¹ In response he was cited as saying: “That’s a huge responsibility. I don’t want it ... now I have to be good.”⁷² In an interview televised by the BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation), he explained:

Before Gangnam Style they [South Korea] liked me but I was not that good behaviour artist or good attitude [sic], literally I was bad ass ... They are saying I am making history for my country right now, so all of a sudden I just became the guy who’s representing one country and that’s really heavy pressure. I don’t want to live like that. I am not that responsible person. I hate the word responsibility.⁷³

However, whether he wants to or not, it seems that PSY has been latterly burdened with a great deal of responsibility for promoting Korea abroad and has little choice but to take much of this ambassadorial burden on board. In an interview with the *Sun*, he described how “everyone’s watching me like I’m a gold medallist ...

back home everyone’s cheering me. It means I’m representing my country right now—it’s huge. Everywhere I go, people tell me to be good for Korea ... But I’m still drinking.”⁷⁴ PSY’s final defiant refusal to conform fully to Korean expectations by saying he still likes to drink suggests that he will not entirely toe the governmental line as a servant solely to Korean arts of “cultural merit” and Korean hegemony (a position underlined in April 2013 by his performance in Seoul of “Single Ladies” for which he dressed as Beyoncé). He retains a rebellious stance. At the same time, though, his stated determination “to break the American market with songs in ... [the Korean] ... language”⁷⁵ also reveals that maintaining the “Korean-ness” of his performance style remains crucial to his popularity at home lest he alienate his Korean fans. Enabling them to take pride in his export of Korean-ness to the world is clearly a big part of the popularity he enjoys (despite the fact that he is exporting a very different brand of Korean-ness to that offered by Girls’ Generation or Big Bang). As such, it is a skilfully maintained balancing act, both of image and ideology.

Sectors of the Korean tourist industry certainly appear to believe PSY has been doing a good job in respect to popularizing Korea globally. Rameh Salameh, the PR manager for the Korea Tourism Organization, stated: “between July to October 2012 we have seen a 10 per cent increase in overseas arrivals and have surpassed the 10 million global arrivals figure for the first time ever as of November, 21 2012. We are certain that PSY and the K-Pop genre have impacted on these figures and will continue to do so into 2013.”⁷⁶ The Gangnam district itself has also profited greatly from PSY-driven tourism. A promotional video playing on the “Gangnam Style” video was released by the Seoul Tourism Organisation (STO), highlighting “the appeal of the upmarket Gangnam neighbourhood.”⁷⁷ Replicating the drama tours offered following the success of *Hallyu* television dramas throughout Asia,⁷⁸ the Korea Tourism Organization have set up a “Gangnam tour” for fans wanting to visit the suburb.⁷⁹ Reportedly, PSY himself has made a video series promoting tourism to South Korea:

The series titled “PSY’s Wiki Korea,” inspired by the online encyclopedia Wikipedia, has the South Korean rap artist highlighting some of the country’s major attractions, from *samgyeopsal*, a Korean pork belly barbecue, and the Jeju Olle trail, a walking path on Jeju Island off the country’s southwest coast, to Myeongdong, South Korea’s famed “shopping Mecca.”⁸⁰

Rather than the “beautiful and handsome people”⁸¹ of K-pop driving cultural tourism to Korea, much as the beautiful and handsome people of *Hallyu* drama did in the naughties, it has been PSY’s video at the forefront. Despite offering few real views of Gangnam in his video for “Gangnam Style” apart from flyovers, elevators, underground car parks, toilets and bus interiors that may or may not have been situated there, PSY has nevertheless generated great interest in Gangnam itself, even in Britain. the *Guardian* described the area to British readers as “the Mayfair of Seoul.”⁸² the *Sunday Herald* went with “Chelsea mixed with Hoxton”⁸³ while the *Daily Mail* labelled it “Seoul’s Beverly Hills.”⁸⁴

Notably, however, in capitalizing upon the global success of “Gangnam Style,” the Korea Tourism Organization have conveniently ignored the song’s strong criticisms of Gangnam and “the posers and wannabes that put on . . . airs and say they are “Gangnam Style.”⁸⁵ Jill Reilly of the *Daily Mail*, for example, reported to non-Korean speaking British readers that the song was “a commentary on the rampant materialism and emphasis on appearance of today’s South Korea”⁸⁶ with Arwa Mahdawi of the *Guardian* explaining that the “wannabes” specifically targeted included “soybean-paste girls who eat cheaply in private so that they can afford to drink mocha frappe lattes in public.”⁸⁷ In ignoring the song’s disapproval of Gangnam style and exploiting it instead (aided surely by the fact that many fans outside Korea had little idea what PSY was singing about) as a seal of approval for Gangnam as a centre for stylish living, we witness a more expedient case of image before ideology from Korean tourism organizations such as the STO and KTO.

Within Britain, as far as the national press were concerned, “Gangnam Style” failed as an entrée to Korean culture because it was quarantined as a meme and/or a novelty record. Whether “Gangnam Style” was only an Internet meme that happened to take off or was—at least for British eyes and ears—a novelty one-off that will quickly fade in the memory, only time will tell. Perhaps the numerous reports discussed in this article will prove to be mistaken, and it will yet prove to be a precursor to global K-pop, as hoped for by sectors of Korean society. In any case, the publicity generated for Gangnam and the subsequent tourism drive to encourage visitors to come there and drink mocha frappe lattes just like the “wannabes” will at the very least be a lasting socio-economic legacy of PSY’s global hit. If style being preferred over substance was the central critique of the song, then the song’s hegemonic repackaging for use in promoting the Gangnam it criticizes possibly underlines that PSY’s “novelty song” was not so frivolously without meaning after all. Where art fails, it would seem commerce can succeed. Perhaps at the end of the day, as far as Gangnam is concerned, style is everything after all.

Notes

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