

The Korean Wave in America: Assessing the Status of K-pop and K-drama between Global and Local

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Abstract

Although scholarly attention has focused increasingly on the global recognition of the Korean Wave, little has been explored regarding the popularity and appeal of this phenomenon in the United States. This article seeks to fill this gap by analyzing the extent to which *hallyu* has been recognized and accepted by American audiences by focusing on K-pop and K-drama. Exploring how *hallyu* is being received in America offers meaningful insights into how a country with predominant cultural influence on the global stage responds to another country's transnational popular culture. This study demonstrates that K-pop and K-drama are gradually gaining popularity and visibility in America via diverse channels. BTS in particular has significantly penetrated the U.S. market by interacting with fans on social media, meeting psychological needs of individuals, and filling in for the lack of boy bands in the current American music scene. While both K-pop and K-drama exhibit some limitations in infiltrating American society, the contemporary status of *hallyu* in America disputes the idea of American cultural dominance by illustrating a complex and intriguing process of globalization embedded in constant interactions between global and local forces, a process that entails adaptation, acceptance, and tension between different cultures.

Keywords: Korean Wave, hybridity, cultural tension, cultural homogenization, heterogenization, K-pop, K-drama, BTS

Introduction

The Korean Wave, which has taken Korean popular culture beyond its national boundaries, is no longer a new phenomenon. *Hallyu* products including pop music (K-pop), TV dramas (K-drama), and entertainment products have become dear to millions across the globe. Drawing on the concepts of globalization, scholars note that Korean media products are now being circulated and consumed by a wider population in the global market.¹ The advancement of information technology, as represented by the revolution of the Internet, enables Korean culture to be accessed and enjoyed by global audiences. YouTube, for example, is accredited with the unanticipated success of PSY's mega-hit song, "Gangnam Style," and the recent phenomenal success of pop band BTS.

Although scholarly attention has focused increasingly on the worldwide recognition of the Korean Wave beyond Northeast Asia, little has been explored regarding the popularity and appeal of this phenomenon in the United States. This article seeks to fill this gap by analyzing the extent to which *hallyu* has been recognized and accepted by American audiences by focusing on K-pop and K-drama. The rise of the reputation of Korean culture across national boundaries creates a unique space for the promotion of Asian cultural practices against the longstanding presumption that the West would dominate cultural globalization. Often interrogated in cultural studies, American cultural supremacy highlights how enhanced global interconnectedness prompts increasing cultural standardization and uniformity along with consumerism.² This concept of cultural supremacy refers to the undisputed global dominance of American culture through its ability to absorb and homogenize other cultures.³

In order to examine the way that Korean popular culture operates and interacts with American culture, this article draws on what Appadurai refers to as "the tension between cultural homogenization and cultural heterogenization."⁴ Appadurai expresses his discomfit about the cultural homogenization or Americanization arguments by noting that such a view fails to consider the complex process of local indigenization imbued in the disjunctive interplay of economy, culture, and politics.⁵ Exploring how *hallyu* is being received in America would

offer meaningful insights into how a country whose cultural influence on the global stage is largely understood as a cultural norm responds to another country's transnational popular culture. This analysis would also uncover the tension between two cultures that manifests itself in a disjunctive interplay of diverse forces. This will allow us to gain a better understanding of the extent to which the Korean Wave has gone global and become indigenized, and, ultimately, to grasp more fully the status of the Korean Wave with respect to globalization as a whole.

Integration of the Korean Wave in U.S. Pop Culture

In January 2014, the cast of the reality TV show *The Bachelor* traveled to Seoul, South Korea where they experienced Korean food, music, and culture.⁶ Seven of the cast members were invited to the headquarters of YG Entertainment, one of the top record labels in South Korea, where they learned a dance routine from the famous girl band 2NE1. By featuring the band on *The Bachelor*, it not only led K-pop fans to watch the show, but it also introduced K-pop to millions of Americans who may not have previously known about it. In fact, Nielsen TV ratings report that over 8.61 million people watched the episode during its first broadcast on January 27, 2014.⁷ Later in 2014, 2NE1 was also featured on another American reality TV show, *America's Next Top Model: Cycle 21* (*ANTM*), alongside Korean boy band BTOB.⁸ Unlike *The Bachelor*, which only filmed one episode in Seoul, *ANTM* filmed almost half of the season in South Korea. With more than one million viewers watching the show live each week, many Americans had the opportunity to see and learn about Korean culture and music.⁹

Reality shows are not the only American TV programs to feature aspects of the Korean Wave on their programs. In February 2016, Conan O'Brien traveled to Seoul to film several segments for his late night TV program *Conan*.¹⁰ The segments show Conan learning about South Korea through language and cultural activities. He is shown learning Korean from a native, visiting a night market, sampling Korean foods, playing StarCraft in a *PC Bang* (the Korean term for "computer game room"), and even transforming into a K-pop star for a music video shoot.

Additionally, Conan filmed a segment that showed him on the set of the popular Korean Drama “One More Happy Ending” (*Hanbun Deo Happyending*) in which he guest-starred.

As unique as it sounds, this is not the first time that Korean culture has been represented on late night talk shows in America. As early as 2007, K-pop began to make its way onto late night television programs. *The Colbert Report*, a popular satirical nightly news program, first began featuring segments about K-pop star Rain (*Bi*) when it was discovered that Rain had surpassed Stephen Colbert for the number one spot on Time magazine’s poll-generated list of the one-hundred most influential people of 2007.¹¹ Jokingly, Colbert made several segments discussing his long time battle with his “old nemesis,” Rain. He made a satirical K-pop video in addition to inviting Rain to appear on his show for a “dance-off.”

Aside from television appearances, many Korean artists have begun collaborating with American musicians, which may help them gain popularity in the United States. Korean artists PSY and Girls’ Generation have both released collaborations with the American rapper, Snoop Dogg. G-Dragon, the leader of BIGBANG, and CL, the leader of 2NE1, have collaborated with the American electronic-dance music (EDM) producer, Skrillex. More recently, the idol group BTS released an English version of their single “Mic Drop,” in which they collaborated with the American electro-house musician, Steve Aoki, and American rapper Desiigner. BTS has also collaborated with the EDM-pop group The Chainsmokers. American musicians are starting to notice the talent of Korean artists and realizing the potential of collaborating with them; this widening recognition also stems from social media, where many American fans frequently share K-pop music videos.

YouTube is one of the American-based social media websites where K-pop has achieved tremendous success. The first video to ever reach one billion views on YouTube was the music video for “Gangnam Style” by PSY, which held the record for having the most views for five years after its release.¹² PSY, however, is not the only Korean artist who has won an enormous audience on YouTube. As shown below in Table 1, many K-pop artists have become YouTube sensations. It is not uncommon for a popular K-pop group to release a music video and reach over 50 million

views within a matter of months. Approximately fifteen of the most popular Korean musical artists have had one or more of their videos reach 100 million views on YouTube, and at least six Korean artists have reached over 200 million views. Excluding PSY, the K-pop artist with the most views for a single YouTube video is BIGBANG; as of January 2018, their music video for “Fantastic Baby” has gained more than 337 million views.¹³

Table 1: Number of Music Views on YouTube for Selected K-pop Artists

	25 million +	50 million +	100 million +	150 million +	Over 200 million
2NE1	17	6	1	1	-
4minute	6	1	1	-	-
Apink	4	1	-	-	-
BIGBANG	27	18	9	3	2
BTS	25	15	11	7	3
EXID	6	2	-	-	-
EXO	20	11	5	4	-
f(x)	7	1	1	-	-
G-Dragon	10	8	2	1	-
Girl's Day	4	-	-	-	-
Girls' Generation	24	13	5	3	1
GOT7	8	8	2	1	-
HyunA	6	4	2	-	-
miss A	6	1	-	-	-
PSY	16	12	6	5	5
SHINee	6	3	-	-	-
SISTAR	10	6	-	-	-
Super Junior	11	6	1	-	-
Taeyang	9	5	2	1	-
TWICE	11	6	6	4	3
BLACKPINK	10	7	4	4	1
Red Velvet	6	5	-	-	-

Source: Compiled from various music videos on YouTube as of Dec. 3, 2017

In addition to gaining popularity on YouTube and social media, Korean artists have also topped the Billboard charts. In 2017, a female idol group, TWICE, became the eighth Korean artist to reach number one on the Billboard World Digital Songs chart, alongside predecessors PSY, BIGBANG, BLACKPINK, 2NE1, BTS, EXO, and G-Dragon with Taeyang.¹⁴ In addition, many K-pop artists have also earned the number one spot on Billboard’s World Albums chart, which is a weekly chart comprised of the highest selling albums around the world. K-pop artists who have scored number one on this chart in 2016 include BTS, EXO-

CBX, BIGBANG, GOT7, B.A.P., and MOBB.¹⁵ Korean artists ranked number one on the World Albums chart for ten of the fifty-two weeks in 2016, meaning that Korean artists led in world album sales nearly twenty percent of the year. Aside from the number one spot, it is common to see several Korean musical acts listed in the top ten of the weekly chart.

K-pop artists are also starting to gain recognition globally for their economic success. In 2016, BIGBANG was featured by *Forbes* magazine for their achievement in making over \$44 million in the past year, an amount that totaled \$10.5 million more than America's top male pop band, Maroon 5.¹⁶ New global success inspired many idol groups such as 2PM, BTS, SHINee, BIGBANG, and EXO to hold North American tours between 2012 and 2017. Increased popularity with global fans has allowed K-pop artists to see an increase in profits from concerts, advertisement contracts, and group merchandise sales. In April 2017, at a single concert in Inglewood, California, EXO made over \$1.4 million in sales.¹⁷ Furthermore, starting in 2012, U.S. K-pop fans began attending KCON, a K-pop convention held each summer in New York City and Los Angeles. KCON gives American K-pop fans the opportunity to watch a lineup of the most popular Korean idol groups, as well as attend workshops and other events related to Korean culture. In 2017, KCON LA and KCON NYC had approximately 85,000 and 43,000 attendees, respectively.¹⁸ This brings a grand total of 128,000 tickets sold for U.S. KCON's in 2017, which is approximately 18,000 more than in 2016. This showcases the North American audiences' growing acceptance and recognition of K-pop artists.

K-pop at the Intersection of American and Korean Cultures

The contemporary popularity of K-pop in America can be traced back to its own historical foundation deriving from mid-twentieth century. The heavy U.S. military presence from the end of the Japanese occupation until after the Korean War significantly influenced the development of Korean pop culture. Due to the impoverishment caused by the Korean War during the early 1950s, many Korean people could not afford cultural products, thus the vast majority of music produced at this time

was catered towards the American military.¹⁹ During this period, the American military held immeasurable prestige and substantial financial resources. Therefore, most South Korean musicians were eager to cater to the military's musical preferences. Koreans soon became familiar with big band, rock, swing, and jazz music, which were originally meant to entertain American soldiers, but later became popular to Korean audiences.²⁰ Entertaining American troops became such an important part of the Korean economy in the late 1950s that the total amount of money earned via entertaining the military was higher than the total earned from all of Korea's exports combined.²¹

Under the Park Chung Hee regime in the 1960s, mass-produced popular culture was thought to be hurting national culture; this caused the government to implement tight regulations on cultural contents.²² American cultural influence was severely curtailed by the government's policy in the 1970s. Nonetheless, young Koreans were exposed to American culture, including the introduction of funk music via the U.S. Armed Forces Korean Network (AFKN). Democratization movements in the 1980s and the subsequently elected civilian government in the early 1990s revived and openly promoted American musical styles in Korean popular music.²³ In the early 1990s, Seo Taiji and Boys became the first K-pop group by skillfully incorporating American hip-hop music into modern Korean music.²⁴ The group enjoyed soaring popularity, becoming the forerunner in structuring the K-pop market.

American musical genres from the 20th century continue to be incorporated into modern Korean music. As shown in Table 2, many K-pop artists are still utilizing aspects of big band, rock, swing and jazz music, which were popular during and after the Korean War. Funk and disco, which originated from the U.S. during the 1960s and 1970s, are also incorporated into modern K-pop songs. Acclaimed girl groups like Girls' Generation, Girl's Day, and Mamamoo tend to incorporate jazz, big band, or swing into their songs in order to stand out in the hip-hop dominated Korean music market. While the majority of modern K-pop artists tend to focus on producing songs that fit into the pop, hip-hop, and R&B genres, some popular Korean artists, such as IU, are well known for using aspects of jazz, swing, funk, and disco in nearly every

song that they produce. Many of IU's promoted singles, such as "Good day" and "You & I," have a distinct mid-twentieth century American feel to their musical styling.

Table 2: Instances of Jazz, Swing, Big Band, Rock, Funk and Disco in K-pop Songs

K-pop Song	Jazz, Swing & Big Band	Rock	Funk	Disco
2NE1 - "I Love You"			✓	✓
2NE1 - "Ugly"		✓		
4minute - "Hate"	✓			
Ailee - "U&I"	✓			
BIGBANG - "Loser"		✓		
BIGBANG - "Sober"		✓		
BIGBANG - "We Like 2 Party"		✓		
BLACKPINK - "Playing With Fire"			✓	
BTS - "Dope"	✓			
BTS - "Spring Day"		✓		
CNBLUE - "I'm Sorry"		✓		
EXID - "L.I.E."				✓
EXID - "Up & Down"	✓			
EXO - "Dancing King"			✓	
EXO - Lucky One				✓
f(x) - "Electric Shock"			✓	✓
FTISLAND - "I wish"		✓		
Girls Day - "Darling"	✓			
Girls' Generation - "Lion Heart"	✓		✓	
Girls' Generation's TTS - "Holler"	✓		✓	
Girls' Generation's TTS - "Twinkle"	✓		✓	
IU - "Good day"	✓			✓
KARA - "Step"				✓
LADIES'CODE - "So Wonderful"	✓			✓
Mamamoo - "You're the best"	✓		✓	
miss A - "Only You"	✓	✓	✓	
Red Velvet - "Dumb dumb"	✓		✓	
Red Velvet - "Rookie"			✓	
SHINee - "Sherlock"	✓			
SISTAR - "Shake It"			✓	✓
SISTAR - "Touch My Body"	✓		✓	
Super Junior - "Devil"	✓			
Super Junior - "Mamacita"	✓			
TVXQ! - "Something"	✓			

Compiled by listening to various K-pop songs, March 2017

Incorporating American musical elements into K-pop songs illustrates the case of hybridization, entailing "a wide variety of vernacular and

multiple modernities.”²⁵ This helps K-pop find a smooth transition to acceptance by the American audience. The hybridization of K-pop genres listed in Table 2 can be interpreted along with Table 1, which demonstrates K-pop’s success on YouTube. Almost all of the artists that appear in Table 1 are listed in Table 2 as well, demonstrating the intimate association between K-pop’s popularity and hybridized American musical elements. While drawing on Western genres, K-pop incorporates “impulsive rhythms, strong visual images, and group dances.”²⁶ For example, Girls’ Generation, Girl’s Day, and SISTAR strategically incorporate exquisitely choreographed group dances that offer a unique appeal to many global fans.

The Idol as a Universal Friend: The Case of BTS

One Korean boy group that has been particularly successful in integrating into American pop culture is the band BTS, short for Bangtan Boys. In 2017, BTS gained a significant amount of recognition by U.S. media, with news sources such as CNN, NPR, and Huffington Post featuring articles on the group’s growing popularity with American fans. In November 2017, BTS received astounding support from American fans and celebrities when they became the first K-pop band to perform at the American Music Awards (AMAs).²⁷ Despite the fact that the song they performed was almost entirely in Korean, the audience was still engaged and entertained by BTS’ complex choreographies and charm, and they even received a standing ovation. In addition to their performance at the AMAs, they also guest-starred on *The Ellen Degeneres Show*, *Jimmy Kimmel*, and *the Late Late Show with James Corden*, which has given the group a significant amount of exposure on American television.

Aside from their TV exposure, BTS may also be one of the most successful groups in terms of scoring on Billboard charts. They were listed in the top ten of the World Albums chart for twenty-three consecutive weeks between October 29, 2016 and April 1, 2017; as of December 1, 2017, they have been on the World Albums chart 99 times since their debut in 2013, with four albums reaching number one, and seven albums reaching the top ten.²⁸ Additionally, they have ranked

highly on the Billboard Top 200 and Hot 100 charts, which are typically limited to American artists; in October 2017, they peaked at number seven on the Billboard Top 200, making them the highest charting Korean group in the history of the chart.²⁹ Due to their substantial fan base online, BTS also ranked number one on the Billboard Social 50 chart every week between July 29, 2017 and January 13, 2018.³⁰ Since the Social 50 chart measures the number of times that a group is mentioned on social media, it is likely that BTS will continue to top the chart due to their extensive fan base. Their success on this chart also led to BTS winning the award for “Top Social Artist” during the Billboard Music Awards in May 2017.³¹

One factor that has helped BTS become successful in creating an American fan base is their extensive interaction with fans on social media. In November 2017, the *Guinness Book of World Records* announced that BTS holds the record for the most fan engagement on Twitter.³² The band members regularly post pictures, updates on their music and events, as well as share songs and videos that they like. BTS is also active on YouTube, where they frequently upload videos of their dance practices, greetings for holidays, and personal messages to fans. On their group social media accounts BTS has over 11.7 million followers on Twitter, 5.6 million followers on YouTube, and over 5.8 million followers on Facebook.³³ These statistics only encompass BTS’ official group/agency run pages, but it should also be noted that there are thousands of fan pages dedicated to sharing news about the band.

Another factor that has helped BTS garner support is their uniquely heartfelt recognition of their fans. In Korea, it is common for idol groups to refer to their fan base by a group name; BTS warmly addresses their fans as “ARMY,” and they always dedicate their performances, awards, and other successes to ARMY. At the 2017 MBC music festival, BTS performed the choreography to their song “Go Go” with the addition of large heart-shaped cut-outs which they held out to the audience throughout the performance to show love to their fans.³⁴ This performance is a good example of how the members always express warmth and appreciation to ARMY in the midst of their success. In an interview with Bang Shi-Hyuk, the CEO of BTS’ record company, BigHit

Entertainment, Bang revealed that his original concept for BTS was to create idols that fans could relate to like a friendly brother or a boy in the neighborhood.³⁵ Bang wanted BTS fans to see the group members as a shoulder to lean on, and he believes that their international success stems from BTS' ability to relay universal messages to their fans through their lyrics and social media posts. Consequently, this concept has helped BTS gain worldwide popularity with young fans who feel that BTS' music and videos relay messages of hope and understanding that can encourage them throughout the hardships experienced while growing up.

According to uses and gratifications theory, users look for media in order to satisfy social or psychological needs.³⁶ Social media sites have the capability of creating virtual communities, which can explain how a social need is being met by BTS' online content, which is a driving force of BTS' integration into the American fan base.³⁷ When a social media user discovers posts or videos introducing them to BTS, they may find appeal in BTS' large, international fan base and become intrigued by the feeling of participating in a virtual community. Interaction between BTS fans online can fulfill the fans' need for social interaction and camaraderie. Popular music also allows fans to have an "imaginative, emotional connection" with the artist, so fans may feel that BTS' songs are meeting deeper psychological needs.³⁸

It should also be noted that the physical attractiveness of BTS members offers additional appeal to American fans. Physically attractive people are often perceived to be "more sociable, dominant, sexually warm, mentally healthy, and socially skilled."³⁹ Three of BTS' members ranked on TC Candler's independent critics list of the 100 most handsome faces of 2017; Park Jimin ranked as the 64th most handsome, Jeon Jungkook as the 13th, and Kim Taehyung (often referred to by his stage name, V) was rated the number one most handsome face of 2017.⁴⁰ Attractive celebrities are seen as more likeable, so it is important to take this into consideration as a factor in BTS' success.⁴¹ Additionally, American fans have been drawn to boy bands since the introduction of the Beatles in the 1960s; while American boy bands were still commonly produced during the 1990s and early 2000s (New Kids on the Block,

Backstreet Boys, N'SYNC), there is currently a lack of popular boy bands in America.⁴² Although it cannot be determined whether BTS will continue to find success in penetrating the American market, it is possible that they could continue to gain momentum by filling the boy band void for many American fans.

K-drama's Popularity in America

Another example of the Korean Wave's success in America is well demonstrated by the popularity of K-drama with first and second generation Asian Americans. Developing a sense of Asian cultural identity can be difficult in America. According to the 2010 census, only 14.7 million Americans identified as Asian, or approximately 5 percent of all Americans.⁴³ Koreans represent an even smaller percentage of the American population, with only approximately 1.7 million Koreans living in the United States as of 2010. Many Korean American millennials report growing up watching K-dramas with their family members.⁴⁴ Parents encourage their children to watch K-dramas as a way to improve their Korean language skills. K-dramas offer a unique family bonding activity, even for Asian Americans from other countries, such as China, Japan, Vietnam, or the Philippines. Watching K-dramas also allows Asian Americans to closely identify with the actors; this is a cultural activity that is difficult to experience with American media, which maintains continuously low representation of Asians and Asian Americans.⁴⁵

K-drama has also found a niche market with Americans from diverse ethnic backgrounds. *DramaFever.com*, one of the most popular websites for watching K-drama, reports that 40 percent of their viewers are White, 30 percent are Latino, 15 percent are Black, and 15 percent are Asian.⁴⁶ With thousands of TV shows and movies available, *DramaFever* users stream more than 800 million minutes of content each month, and in April 2014, more than 3.4 million users visited the site, which is approximately a 440 percent increase from the same month in 2013.⁴⁷ The trend continued into 2014, with another 268 percent increase in viewers from the previous year.⁴⁸

One of the primary factors that draw American viewers to K-dramas

is that they do not prioritize the sensual sex and violent scenes that are so prevalent in American TV shows.⁴⁹ Furthermore, the popularity of K-drama has become so widespread that it has caught the eye of some major American media corporations; in 2014, ABC considered making an American version of the popular K-drama *My Love from the Star* (*Byeoreseo On Geudae*).⁵⁰ Although the American version of the show never came to fruition, the fact that a major media company developed an interest in the drama speaks volumes for the appeal of *hallyu* in America.

The Limitations of the Korean Wave in America

Although the Korean Wave has had substantial success in the international community and has expanded its reach in the United States as examined earlier, the fan base for K-pop artists is still a relatively niche market in North America. While there are thousands of K-pop fans in America, when put into perspective next to the American population of over 320 million people, a few thousand fans are not sufficient to make the conclusion that Korean artists have been fully integrated into mainstream American popular culture. Record sales, for instance, act as an informative metric to illustrate popularity in American music. A Billboard article from 2014 that discussed the success of 2NE1's latest album *Crush* states that the Korean female pop band had sold approximately 5,000 albums during the week it debuted.⁵¹ However, when compared with more successful releases, such as Taylor Swift's fifth album, *1989*, which sold over 1.287 million copies in the week of its debut, or the latest Adele album, *25*, which sold over 3.38 million copies, 2NE1's success in America is by comparison quite modest.⁵²

Although Korean artists have made intentional marketing ploys in attempts to infiltrate mainstream American media, many have repeatedly failed or had difficult times penetrating the American media market. Take into consideration the debut of Girls' Generation's first American released album, *The Boys*. Girls' Generation, also referred to as SNSD, is one of the most prominent girl groups in South Korea. Despite their preeminent fame in Asia, SNSD's album released in America only sold approximately 1,000 albums during the week of its release in

January 2012.⁵³ Although the album was released on Interscope Records in Los Angeles, only one song on the album was in English, aside from the remixes of that song featured at the end of the album. SNSD received support from infamous American rapper, Snoop Dogg, who was featured on one of the remixes of the album's title track, "The Boys," but the album remained relatively unknown to most Americans, even after the group performed on *The Late Show with David Letterman* and *Live with Kelly* in 2012.

While K-pop has increasingly employed linguistic hybridization, mixing in English in its song titles and lyrics, K-pop lyrics still remain predominantly in the Korean language.⁵⁴ Although most South Korean students study English from elementary school until college, many K-pop idols are still unable to use English to communicate effectively with global fans.⁵⁵ Many K-pop groups depend on their foreign members or interpreters to relay messages to fans during concerts or TV shows. This can be seen on Korean reality TV shows such as *After School Club*, a live Korean music-talk show geared towards international K-pop fans. This show is unique because the hosts speak in English and musical guests are encouraged to use English as much as possible. On a 2017 episode featuring the girl band Red Velvet, the girl group heavily depended on the hosts and their Canadian member, Wendy, to translate and express their thoughts in English.⁵⁶ Analogously, the group also depended on Wendy to speak in English to the crowd when they were invited to perform at the SXSW music festival in Austin, Texas in 2017. Although it is to be expected that Korean musicians perform songs that are predominantly in the Korean language, it should be taken into consideration that the limited conversation skills in English of many Korean idols may impede them from being able to connect with American fans on a more personal level.

K-drama in Cultural Tensions

Cultural values have the ability to shape how a society thinks, feels, dresses and behaves.⁵⁷ These values are adopted and perpetuated throughout society in numerous ways, including through politics,

social interactions, education, institutions, and media. Thus, the vast cultural differences between South Korea and the United States presents a possible limitation to the success of the Korean Wave in the United States. Having a different set of cultural values may make it difficult for the majority of Americans to appreciate Korean media or cultural products. Viewers tend to interact with media through their local cultural framework, which can create biases in production and viewership.⁵⁸ Television programs often contain aspects of cultural bias that may inhibit foreign media from catching on in American society.⁵⁹

One of the largest differences between America and Korea is that America is an extremely individualistic society, whereas Korea prioritizes a collectivist culture. There is a stark contrast in how Koreans interact with their family and society versus how Americans interact with these groups. As a collectivist society, Korea places a strong emphasis on group responsibility.⁶⁰ While K-dramas' emphasis on family relations, involving traditional values, gender hierarchy and subsequent conflicts and emotional struggles, aids in its popularity in Asia, Latin America and the Middle East, such an emphasis could present an obstacle in trying to promote K-drama in the American cultural framework.⁶¹ Individualism has been deeply ingrained into American society for centuries. Many Americans feel a strong desire for independence, individual freedom, and personal success. While most American television shows focus on a storyline depicting the life of an individual, K-dramas tend to depict a story that illustrates the main character's impact on their family and society. Feeling the pressure to support family members is a common theme in many K-dramas, whereas American dramas often feature characters that are estranged from their family members and reject societal norms. The fact that most K-dramas emphasize collectivist ideals could serve as a factor that prevents them from deeply penetrating American audiences.

Another limitation to the popularity of K-dramas in America is the disparity in cultural folklore from which many dramas are developed. Every country has unique folklore embedded into their popular culture and group psyche. Although not all K-dramas are developed based on folklore, many of the dramas that are immensely popular in Asia may

not translate well to the desires and expectations of Western society. For example, the 2012 drama *My Girlfriend is a Nine-Tailed Fox* (*Nae Yeojachinguneun Gumiho*) is based on the Korean folktale of a nine-tailed fox (*gumiho*). While the *gumiho* folktale is widely known in Asia, it remains relatively unknown to the majority of Americans. Thus, viewers in America may not comprehend the significance of the tale or feel drawn to the plot of the drama. A more recent example of a K-drama based on Korean folklore is the hit 2016-17 drama *Goblin: The Lonely and Great God* (*Sseulsseulhago Chalranhashin-Dokkaebi*), also referred to as *Guardian*.⁶² While goblins (*dokkaebi*) are a “beloved symbolic icon of Korean culture” and are continually represented in Korean media, they are rarely seen in American media.⁶³ Therefore, the storyline of the drama, which consists of the *Dokkaebi* performing various supernatural acts, may seem insipid or absurd to American viewers who are largely unaware of these mythical goblins. As a result, the fact that some K-dramas incorporate cultural folklore into their plotlines may inhibit many Americans from understanding their appeal.

Conclusion

The increasing appeal of K-pop and K-drama in the American media and society confirms the global reach of the Korean Wave in the United States. Drawing on the legacy of the American presence in South Korea, K-pop continues to utilize American aspects of big band, funk, disco, rock, swing and jazz music. This makes contemporary K-pop familiar and appealing to American audiences. K-drama’s emerging popularity in America is partly generated and sustained by Asian Americans’ interest and consumptions. Through this audience base, they promote a sense of Asian cultural identity and form awareness of the East Asian community.⁶⁴ In addition, audiences from diverse ethnic backgrounds, including Caucasians, African-Americans, and Hispanics, are becoming dedicated fans of K-drama.

Compared to the accomplishments of Western musicians in America, however, K-pop artists have had a hard time penetrating mainstream American media and winning equally sustained interest among

American audiences, mainly due to the language barrier. K-drama also exhibits similar limitations, mainly due to distinctively developed cultural codes and norms between American and Asian societies. This suggests that some areas need to be addressed or overcome for *hallyu* to expand and deepen its reach in America. For example, K-drama can develop storylines that can appeal to a wider range of audiences. The success reported in this article indeed presents the possibility that Korean popular culture has the capability to win minds of non-Asian audiences. At the same time, the fact that Korean media contents have made strong connections with Asian Americans allows *hallyu* to serve as a mediator that could enrich American culture's diversity.

Hallyu mediascapes widen the horizons of Korean media consumers, inspiring new possibilities of where they can move, whom they can interact with, and what they can do in the global community.⁶⁵ In fact, the growing popularity of Korean media has caused an increase in the number of Americans who want to study the Korean language. Between 2009 and 2013, there was a 45.1 percent increase in the number of students enrolled in Korean language courses in American universities; the enrollment increased another 13.7 percent from 2013 to 2016.⁶⁶ Due to the growing demand, K-12 schools are also seeing an increase in the number of Korean language programs available. As of 2017, there were 43 high schools teaching Korean across the U.S., an approximate 11.63 percent increase from the previous year.⁶⁷ The increase in the number of Americans who can speak Korean promotes cultural diversity and fosters a better understanding of Korean American communities within the U.S. This, in turn, could help bridge the gap caused by a language barrier that keeps many Korean immigrants in larger cities siloed in Korean enclaves, such as the Koreatowns in Los Angeles and New York City.

The findings of this article dispute the idea of American culture's global dominance. Cultural processes are more complex than often understood. Cultural interactions entail the negotiation of global and local forces that serve to question familiar and longstanding assumptions about identity.⁶⁸ A further example of this negotiation process can be seen in nineteenth and twentieth century American history; a large influx of Jewish settlers from Europe immigrated to the United States

in search of better social and economic conditions. While they generally experienced acceptance and found numerous business opportunities in the U.S., such as creating department stores, including Barneys New York, Bloomingdales, Saks Fifth Avenue, Neiman Marcus, and Kauffman's,⁶⁹ many Jewish immigrants had trouble negotiating their cultural identity in American society.⁷⁰ Some wanted to combine their Jewish values with American values; however, others believed that to truly assimilate into American culture they would have to abandon their Jewish values completely. Similarly, the contemporary status of K-pop and K-drama in America demonstrates a complex and intriguing process of globalization embedded in constant interactions between global and local forces, a process that entails adaptation, acceptance, and tensions between different cultures.

The case of BTS offers an intriguing model for the function of personal connections at the intersection of the global and the local. Popular culture within America is neither homogeneous nor bounded. While the American cultural value of individualism, for example, stands as a barrier for K-drama to win wider acceptance, it could serve as a source of BTS' appeal to American audience by providing a room for individual psychological needs to be fulfilled. As Appadurai notes, global cultural forces flow "in and through the growing disjunctures."⁷¹ Although unpredictable, openness and boundedness co-exist in the process of America's reception to Korean popular culture, hybridization, and its indigenization situated in the local norms, values, and traditions. Despite the fact that *hallyu* has limitations expanding into American mainstream media to the same degree as Western artists and products, it still contributes to a diversifying popular culture market within America. Given the short period in which *hallyu* has been present in America, it would be beneficial for future researchers to assess whether it will continue to be constrained by its limitations or if it will result in breakthroughs for new and different cultural processes and outcomes.

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