

Hallyu and Its Impact in the West

Kishishita Kaye Daria

Instructor, inlingua Andorra, Andorra

First author, kishidaria@gmail.com

Kim, Hyun-joo

Instructor, Chung-Ang University, Korea

Corresponding author, sydney@cau.ac.kr

Abstract

Objectives This paper focuses on Hallyu or the Korean Wave's beginnings - how it managed to penetrate the western popular culture scene, its exports and how they manage to thrive, as well as the western consumers' sentiments on Hallyu contents. The aim is to clarify if Hallyu exports consumed in the west have the ability to become accepted in Western culture and if cultural exports such as these could be used as legitimate soft power tools by the Korean government.

Methods This paper has considered the social significance, economic advantages, and political influence Hallyu has had on South Korea as a whole. The influence of Hallyu on several areas of the nation's economy and policy needed to be examined, therefore, this paper has cited academic articles tackling the political as well as humanities-social facet of the problem. The results of these analyses were used as basis to give conclusion to the question as to whether Hallyu exports are viable tools to exercise the nation's soft power.

Conclusions The Korean Wave phenomenon has shown to have a significant impact on the image of the country and in providing real economic benefits. The recent growth of K-pop and K-dramas demonstrates the potential of employing Hallyu exports to make a mark on the pop-culture landscape. As interest in hallyu increases steadily in the U.S. and Europe, the problem is maintaining the participation of overseas consumers.

Keywords Hallyu(K-wave), K-pop, K-drama, Soft power, West, Culture, Popular Culture

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1. Introduction

The South Korean cultural economy's export of popular culture is known as the 'Korean Wave' or 'Hallyu'. Although the term, currently, is strongly associated with Korean music or K-Pop, Hallyu is a collective phrase used to describe the wide spectrum of Korean popular culture, which includes mainly dramas, movies, beauty and fashion, online games, and cuisine.

Between the mid-1990s to mid-2000s, South Korean TV dramas and mainstream music saw significant growth in popularity especially in the neighboring countries of China and Japan. The first time the term Hallyu was used was in the early 1990's after South Korea entered into diplomatic relations with China. Then in 1997, the television drama "What is Love" came in second place among all imported video content in China after garnering 4.2% audience rate, meaning that 150 million viewers had watched it. The term "hallyu" was then first used to characterize the unparalleled passion of Chinese fans for Korean TV dramas and pop songs in the Beijing Youth Daily on November

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19, 1999 (Fung Ying Loo, Fung Chiat Loo, 2021).

The nation's mainstream media has highlighted a few movies and TV dramas from the late-1990s to mid-2000s that paved the way for Hallyu. Some of these are “Swiri” a 1999 Korean action film, and dramas like “Autumn in My Heart”, “My Sassy Girl” in 2001, “Dae Jang Geum” in 2003, and “Winter Sonata” in 2004. Together with the craze brought by Korean films and dramas, Korean music or Kpop, also started to break through the pop culture scene during this period. From the mid-2000’s to the early-2010s, the impact of the Korean Wave started to be felt more strongly across the Asian continent and this phenomenon was mainly led by 2nd generation K-Pop boy groups and girl groups, also known as idols, such as TVXQ, Big Bang, Girls Generation, Super Junior, and Kara among others (Ashley Kumar, 2022).

From then on, the influence of the Korean Wave has continuously expanded and transcended not only borders but continents. The presence of K-Culture is now felt not only in its origins in Asia, but also in almost all the other continents in the world.

2. How It Thrives in the West

For many years since the start of its growing reputation from the mid 1990’s to mid 2000’s, the main consumers of Hallyu exports were the neighboring North-East Asian countries such as Mainland China and Japan. Even though the influence expanded and started gaining more popularity in other Asian countries particularly in South-East Asia mainly Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines, as well as in India, the demographics demonstrated its vast majority to be concentrated in Asia (Lucy Williamson, 2011). So when exactly did Hallyu manage to wiggle its way in the western pop culture scene?

The West is no stranger to Chinese and Japanese culture as seen from how widespread Chinese and Japanese restaurants are on the other side of the world, not to mention the number of anime fans and manga aficionados in that region. You can strike up a conversation with any westerner and say “I am learning Chinese/Japanese”

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with no one batting an eye. Unfortunately, this is not the case for Korean culture fanatics. Being interested in anything Korean related did not seem as ordinary as being interested in anything Chinese or Japanese for many westerners. At least, not until a couple of years ago.

According to Kim Bok-Rae(2015), Korean culture, in retrospect, can be seen as a "moonlight" or "satellite culture" that absorbed both Chinese and Western/Japanese cultures during the premodern and modern periods respectively. However, Korea now transitions from a receiving station to an "original office of culture" in the postmodern era. The beginning of hallyu and its genuine meaning can be found here which, perhaps, could be one of the factors for its gain of popularity and distinction from its superpower neighbors.

Almost everyone who has access to the internet must have seen, or at least heard, of Parasite, BTS, and Squid Game. Many academics and media sources have emphasized how important the Korean government is to Hallyu's success. It is a popular notion that Hallyu's strong presence started to emerge in the west around the late 2016s owing largely to BTS's release of its Wings album followed by record-breaking tracks in another album called Love Yourself: Here in the same year. The rest is history from then on. BTS's success is arguably what paved the way for Hallyu to get its big break in the western hemisphere (Tamar Herman, 2018).

During the time BTS was attempting to enter the US music scene, other more acknowledged and more experienced hip-hop centric K-pop groups such as Big Bang had already been playing to more than 10,000 fans a night in America and Britain. So, what sets BTS apart from the others? According to Jakob Dorof (2018), who tried to figure out the secret code as to why BTS managed to win the attention of western fans, the biggest factor for their success is Big Hit Music and Hybe Corporation founder, Bang Si-Hyuk himself. The media outlet explained that the Big Hit founder had already been studying the western market for decades while working - and receiving accolades - as a pop song writer since the 90s. They pointed out that the founder's most significant decision was acknowledging the fact that K-pop fans in America has grown to be a sizable enough population to be given priority when producing and promoting material.

Bang Si-Hyuk had continuously pondered on what made fans enthusiastic and passionate about the band's music. Perhaps, according to Jakob Dorof (2018), Bang's breakthrough came through the form of the album "The Most Beautiful Moment in Life, Part 1".

Apart from the fact that the album features a contemporary sound, Big Hit describes it as a tribute to 'youth', a collection of the most beautiful times in a person's early adulthood when uncertainty coexists with beauty - a perfect follow-up to the band's previous albums called 'School Trilogy'. Some may call it prescience, but this move by the company to layout albums based on themes following the growth of the members both as artists and individuals is not only strategic but also romantic in a sense. BTS fans - also known as Army - have more reasons to follow their idols as they get the opportunity to understand what the members think and go through by listening to their songs. More importantly, as BTS continues to produce songs tackling issues about youth, mental health, and most probably about adulthood when the right time comes, the group and the company guarantees truthful and relatable content for just about anyone alive and aware of what is happening in the world. The group even produced a song called "Life Goes On" during the pandemic to send a message to everyone in the world that regardless of what is happening, they must not give up and try to live with the situation together.

Furthermore, what sets BTS apart even further is that they have opted to incorporate elements of traditional Korean culture into their musical arrangements rather than imitating Western music. By including elements of traditional Korean culture in their musical compositions, they have made the decision to highlight their own lived experiences. The music video for "Daechwita" by Agust D, Suga's alter persona, and BTS' 2018 Melon Music Awards performance for their song "Idol" are two of the most talked-about performances.

In addition, in a society where representation, diversity, and social awareness are promoted and appreciated especially in the USA and Europe, perhaps, the arrival of BTS just happened at the perfect time. BTS holds one of the biggest and most powerful fanbases in the world (Kat Moon, 2020). For many of the fans, not only of BTS but

also of other big groups such as Black Pink, being part of this legion makes them feel part of a genuine community and family. Fandoms are mobilized not only for the groups' music related activities but for philanthropic efforts as well. BTS' Army collaborated on the anti-violence Love Myself Campaign with UNICEF - encouraging fans to make individual donations on band members' birthdays but perhaps the biggest effort the group and their fanbase made was during the Black Lives Matter movement. BLM received a \$1 million donation from BTS, and ARMYs quickly exceeded that amount within a couple of days while Black Pink fans who call themselves "BLINKs" were also mobilized to promote the movement's hashtag #BlackLivesMatter instead of the group's new single #SourCandy released with Lady Gaga (Marian Liu, Youjin Shin & Shelly Tan, 2021). Organized activities like these, which have only been easily executed in the recent years due to widespread use of social media and streaming platforms definitely aided these K-pop groups to leave their marks not only on the western music scene but also on western socio-political landscape.

Partnered with the boom of streaming platforms, consumption of Hallyu exports has become more accessible to western audiences. Youtube, Spotify, and Netflix, have become Hallyu haven for enthusiasts and fans likewise. K-pop labels have developed creative strategies to market their content internationally. Giving up copyrights and releasing songs and albums for YouTube streaming at the same time they go on sale is one of their marketing methods. Based on the Washington Post's statistics ran on July 13 2021, nine of the ten music videos with the highest number of views during the first day belong to Blackpink and BTS(Marian Liu, Youjin Shin & Shelly Tan (2021, July 14). In 2021, Netflix had introduced 80 Korean movies and TV series in the last several years, much more than it had anticipated when it first launched its service in South Korea in 2016.

3. Harnessing Hallyu's soft power

South Korea has done a fantastic job leveraging its world-famous idols and addictive

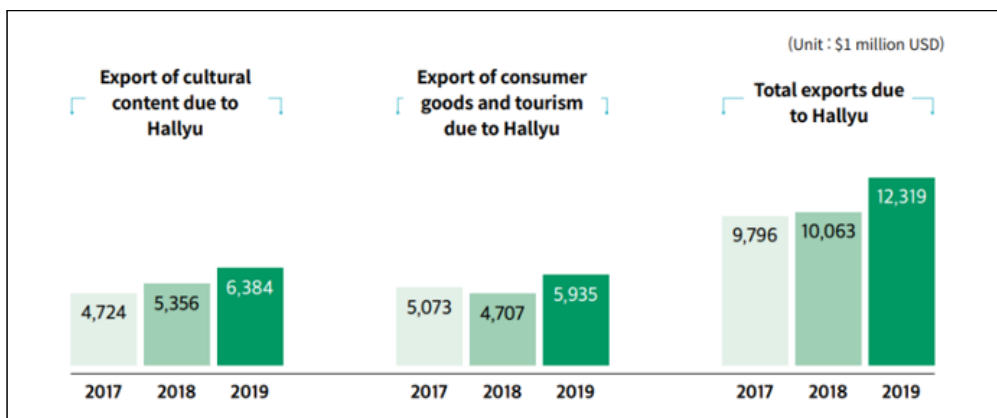
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dramas. It is one of the few nations in the world, if not the only one, that has made it a priority to lead the globe in the export of popular culture as a way to grow its "soft power". It speaks of the influence a nation possesses through its reputation as opposed to through physical force. Hard force can be either military or economic force.

Currently, there is a trajectory in the promotion of the Korean Wave which has brought upon multiple benefits to the nation and has contributed largely to its tourism, its image, and most importantly, its economy. Hallyu's influence on the Korean economy may be easily understood using the "BTS effect," a term used to describe the impact that Bangtan Sonyeondan (BTS, the top K-Pop band) has had. According to Forbes, BTS contributed more to South Korea's GDP as a whole than the GDPs of Togo, Fiji, and the Maldives combined. According to a 2018 study by the Hyundai Research Institute (HRI), the direct economic value of BTS was projected to be US \$3.54 billion and its indirect effects to be US \$1.26 billion annually (William Pesek, 2019).

These big numbers represent the impact of only one K-Pop boy group, however, we must remember that Hallyu includes various commodities that when added all together, amass a much larger contribution to the nation's economic growth.

The table below shows the economic benefits from 2017-2019 reaped directly by Hallyu-driven products and its indirect impacts, including those on other areas such as tourism or an uptick in sales of goods endorsed by Hallyu singers (Ji-yeon Kim, 2020).

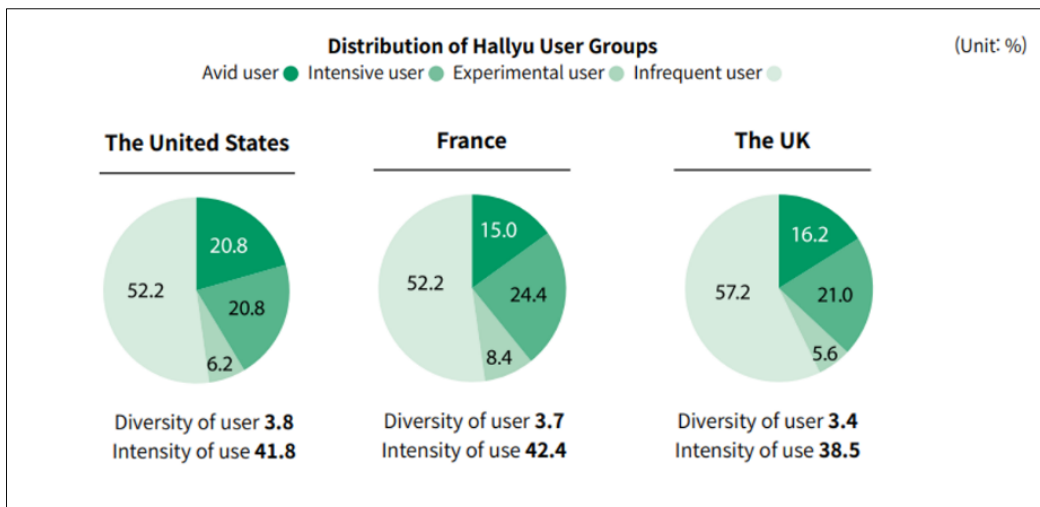


Experts Driven by Hallyu (Ji-yeon Kim, 2020)

4. Can Hallyu Stand Its Ground in the West

KOFICE reported on their 2020 Global Hallyu Trend that interest rate in Hallyu content were stagnant from 2016 to 2019. In terms of intention to spend, respondents indicated an increase from the prior years of 7.3%p in 2017 and 4.0%p in 2018. The response rate in 2019 remained unchanged from that in 2018, indicating stagnation.

In terms of unfavorable impressions of Hallyu, Europe showed a dramatic decrease by 6.4%p between 2017 and 2018 but increased somewhat by 0.5%p to 22.1% in 2019. In the Americas, the negative perceptions of Hallyu increased slightly between 2017 and 2018 but decreased significantly by 9.3%p in 2019, dipping from 24.3% in 2018 to 15%. Meanwhile, based on the distribution of Hallyu users, the avid user ratio in the US was 20.8%, while the infrequent user ratio more than doubled at 52.2%, indicating that Hallyu is still not very well-consumed in this country.



Experts Driven by Hallyu (Ji-yeon Kim, 2020)

European nations have the lowest levels of Hallyu usage diversity and intensity. The UK has the lowest usage diversity (3.4) and lowest use intensity (38.5) among the 17 nations studied. France's figures were equally low (3.7, 42.4).

Based on these reports by KOFICE, the future of Hallyu content being consumed

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in the west does not seem promising. Along issue the comes with learning Korean language, establishing South Korea as a strong soft-power nation through Hallyu would appear quite improbable.

Although the nation has already contributed greatly to the global pop-culture scene, it is crucial to point out that having popular bands and TV shows filmed in your country does not constitute soft power in and of itself. There is a difference between soft power and nation branding. Paul Temporal(2022) explained that the impact of a nation's image on the economy is a major focus of nation branding. He pointed out that an effective national brand fosters foreign direct investment and export expansion, as well as the recruitment of talent and tourism. On the other side, soft power is the capacity for influence and persuasion, primarily in the global sphere.

5. Conclusion

There is no doubt that Hallyu is still the main association people globally make when thinking of South Korea. The rise of K-pop and K-dramas in the recent years show the potential of using Hallyu exports in establishing presence in the pop-culture scene, resulting to an increase in interest in South Korea, as a nation itself. Moreover, this phenomenon has also demonstrated tangible benefits to the country in terms of economic value.

Thus, the first biggest challenge for the South Korean government is ensuring the continuous engagement of foreign consumers as the decline of interest in hallyu exports in the U.S. and Europe appears to be in a steady decline. Meanwhile, Asia still maintains to be its main supporter in all sectors. As the main reason for the negative perception of Hallyu in the U.S. and Europe is Hallyu being uniform and boring poses a challenge to not only K-pop labels but to production companies as well, who have strict standards and format in their production processes, which in a sense gave the distinct characteristic of K-pop songs and K-dramas being produced in the country. Perhaps the big question is finding a balance between embracing fresher and more relatable

contents while maintaining the Korean touch. We can look at the movie Parasite, for example. The movie tackled realistic societal issues that many people all over the world felt touched by while showing many strong Korean references throughout the film. The same concept can be seen in Squid Game, wherein characters in the series compete for money in hopes of escaping poverty or debts, a problem many people worldwide can relate to, while playing for their lives in traditional Korean children games. We cannot forget BTS, of course, who openly discusses issues about mental health, self-acceptance, injustice, and bullying, through songs in Korean language attributing heavy Korean references as seen in “Baepsae” - a rallying cry for young people who work hard and overcome the challenges posed by the older generations who came before them, as well as “Spine Breaker” - a song about kids who will 'break their parents' backs' demanding expensive items to stay on trend.

Finally, as western audiences mostly consume Hallyu exports through online/mobile platforms, South Korea must pay attention to the cultural shift caused by internet media in order to maintain its lead in the consumption and utilization of digital Hallyu contents. Along this, a stronger promotion of the Korean language must be established in the U.S. and Europe as learning Korean is the only way these foreign consumers will fully embrace and understand the rich culture of the country. Hallyu exports mainly K-pop and K-dramas only scratch the surface of what kind of nation Korea is.

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서양에서의 한류의 영향력에 관한 연구

키시시타 케이 다리아

인링구아 안도라 전임 강사

김현주

중앙대학교 다빈치교양대학 강사

한국어 요약

연구 목적 본고는 한류 콘텐츠에 대한 서구 소비자들의 정서뿐만 아니라 서구 사회에서의 한류의 시작, 즉 한류가 서구 대중문화에 어떻게 들어와서 전파 되었는가와 어떻게 인기를 누리고 있는지에 초점을 맞추고 있다. 서구에서 소비되고 있는 한류가 서구 문화에서 받아들여질 만한 것인지, 이와 같은 문화 수출이 한국 정부에 의해 적절한 소프트 파워 도구로 사용될 수 있는지 등을 명확히 하는 것이 본 연구의 목적이다.

연구 방법 본 연구에서는 한류가 한국 전체에 미친 사회적 의의, 경제적 이점, 정치적 영향력 등을 고려하였다. 한류의 영향이 한국 경제와 정책의 여러 분야에 미치는 영향을 확인하기 위해서 본 연구에서는 인문사회 관련 논문뿐만 아니라 정치적인 측면을 다루는 학술 논문을 분석하였다. 이러한 분석 결과는 한류 수출이 한국의 소프트 파워를 행사할 수 있는 실행 가능한 도구인지에 대한 질문에 결론을 내리는 근거로 활용되었다.

결론 한류 현상은 한국의 이미지와 한국 사회에 실질적인 경제적 이익을 제공하는 데 큰 영향을 미치는 것으로 나타났다. 최근 K-pop과 K-drama의 성장은 대중문화 지형에 한 획을 긋고 있는 한류 수출을 활용할 수 있다는 가능성을 보여준다. 미국과 유럽에서 한류에 대한 관심이 꾸준히 증가함에 따라 해외 소비자들의 참여를 유지하도록 하는 것이 문제이다.

핵심어 한류, 케이팝, 케이드라마, 소프트 파워, 서구, 문화, 대중문화

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