

THE HALLYU AND THE PANDEMIC: DIFFUSION OF THE SOUTH KOREAN POPULAR CULTURE IN THE CONTEXT OF COVID-19 AND ITS IMPACT

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ABSTRACT

During the pandemic, when reality was dismal and life was restricted behind four walls, many young people found hope in the vibrancy and vigour of Korean popular culture. Amid the lockdown, the Hallyu (Korean wave) swept the world, with K-Dramas and K-Pop attracting much attention from young adults and even the elderly. The Korean Wave refers to South Korea's cultural economy exporting entertainment, music, TV shows, movies, food, beauty fads, and culture in general. This paper attempts to read Hallyu as a pop culture phenomenon that gained attraction during COVID-19 to match the dispersal quality of globalization and the pandemic. The paper explores the influence of the Korean wave on the public in the context of the pandemic. It also aims to analyze the underpinnings and suitability of the ecological values conveyed by Hallyu in the current age of environmental crisis.

Keywords: Hallyu, Pandemic, Popular Culture, Globalization, Environment, Impact.

1. INTRODUCTION

The first case of COVID-19 was reported in November 2019 in Wuhan, China, and the World Health Organization declared it a pandemic in March 2020. In a matter of months, a local crisis quickly became a worldwide disaster, indicating the breadth of globalization. COVID-19 was one of the historical moments that made people "increasingly aware that they are receding," a property distinctive of globalization, as the process itself engages in receding "constraints of geography and social and cultural arrangements" (Waters, 2001, p.3). Modern globalization strategies have shrunk the entire world into a 'global village,' a popular term coined by the theorist Marshall McLuhan, resulting in increased cross-cultural interactions and configurations (Georgiadou, 2002). The sociologist and theorist Ronald Robertson has referred to this kind of compression effect as "intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole" (Robertson, 1992, p.8). However, this idea of a 'whole world consciousness' has been criticized. Some consider it a modern version of western imperialism in homogenizing commodities and cultures. Marx and Engels have always criticized the homogenization aspect as it negotiates national differences under a ruling bourgeoisie; it "creates a world

after its own image" (Roe, 2012). It is interesting to note that not only the West but Asian nations such as South Korea also have taken part in distributing goods and culture across the globe. The Korean Wave, known as Hallyu, is the outcome of three-decade-long planning and experimentation by the South Korean government to check the national economic crisis during the twentieth century.

The term "pandemic" is defined as a 'disease that spreads over a whole country or the whole world' ("pandemic," n.d.). Pandemics arise from epidemics, which are outbreaks of disease confined to one part of the world, such as a single country. The disease spread rapidly, and infected members of the population unknowingly incubate the disease and spread it to others (Rogers, 2022). The Hallyu shares some characteristics with the pandemic in its dispersal quality. Since the 1990s, South Korean popular culture has grown in popularity around the world. The Korean Wave began as regional development in Asia and has now expanded into a worldwide craze, propelled by the internet and social media, as well as the explosion of K-pop music videos on YouTube (Ganghariya and Kanozia 2020). In this perspective, Hallyu can be referred to as a 'pop culture pandemic,' disregarding the pejorative connotations of the term 'pandemic' and focusing solely on the characteristics shared by Hallyu and the pandemic. South Korean entertainment also successfully catered to the COVID-19 pandemic mood with zombie apocalypse narratives that seized popular media all over the world, with dramas like *All of Us Are Dead* (2022) and *Kingdom* (2019-2020) topping the charts for popular shows ("Top 10", n.d.).

The Hallyu can be considered pandemic-like for its enormity of dissemination as well. "Koreanization is the process of adopting specific traits or behaviors rooted in Korean culture and society. Obviously, this transformation can occur through the pervasive influence of Korean popular culture, including makeup, music and films" (Tizzard, 2023). Even the term 'wave' is associated with both the pandemic and the Hallyu to denote the qualities of repetition, diffusion, and change. The politics of global culture, as discussed by Arjun Appadurai (1990), helps compare the process of Koreanisation with the dissemination quality of the pandemic. Appadurai, in his essay "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy", delineates the new global cultural economy as "a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order" (3) based on five dimensions of flows or 'scapes,' namely Ethnoscapes, Technoscapes, Finanscapes, Ideoscapes, and Mediascapes. These scapes help analyze the significance of the Korean spread. Ethnoscape refers to human movement, and in the case of South Korea, it has happened through labor-based migration, tourism, and various other factors. South Korea enacted immigration policies such as the Employment Permit System in 2004 to overcome labor shortages. The immigrant population has "increased around fourteen-fold, from less than 180,000 in 1995 to over 2.5 million in 2019" (Chung, 2021). Korean electronics companies like Samsung and automobile corporations such as Hyundai and KIA lead the technoscape or technological flow. The South Korean economy, which has developed from being poor to being the tenth-largest in the world, stands as a testimony to the finanscape or financial transfers. Ideoscape and mediascape are closely related and image-centered. The former refers to the ideologies of a state. South Korea's history of American colonization and financial turmoil has influenced its capitalist framework, evident in its interventions in private sector business. For instance, the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism formed Hallyu Support and Cooperation Division on June 9, 2020, to support the spread of the Hallyu by employing "three main strategies-diversifying Hallyu content, fostering other industries through Hallyu content, and creating a sustainable environment for the growth of Hallyu" (Song, "Government's Hallyu," 2020).

Mediascape provides "large and complex repertoires of images," blurring "the lines between the realistic and the fictional landscapes." It creates "proto-narratives of possible lives, fantasies which could become prolegomena to the desire for acquisition and movement" (6). Korean media, comprising TV dramas, films, and K-pop, has been influential worldwide. Korea's movie and TV industries generated around USD 18.45 billion in 2018 ("Korean Film Industry," 2019), and the South Korean music industry achieved an all-time high sales revenue of over 6.8 trillion South Korean won (South Korean currency) in 2019, as well as an export value of over 756 million U.S. dollars ("South Korea's music industry," 2022). During the COVID-19 pandemic, many young people who had the privilege to stay indoors and access the internet found Korean content as an ideal mode of escape from the bleak reality. The pandemic wreaked havoc on the psychological and social well-being of the populace. Due to their exposure to unpleasant news, helplessness, and fatalities, young people and healthcare workers were at risk of developing post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, depression, and other distress symptoms (Jin, 2021; Drianda et al., 2021). Many people discovered K-pop, and K shows during the pandemic, thanks to the Korean boy band BTS' release of their English song *Dynamite* and sensational shows like *Crash Landing on You* and *Squid Game* on Netflix and other online platforms.

2. HALLYU, THE PANDEMIC AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Numerous studies on the factors influencing Hallyu's appeal have recently been published. Most point to Korean entertainment as a source of comfort during the pandemic; they see it as a tool for people to combat loneliness, identify with, and socially interact while remaining home. Many discovered that being a fan of Korean pop culture, whether casual or original, could restore human connection during the pandemic (Drianda et al., 2021, p. 442). Nevertheless, films, television, and popular music have a more significant influence than meets the eye. Popular culture greatly influences our knowledge of the environment and our daily lifestyle choices. Therefore, it is worthwhile to analyse how do K-dramas, K-pop, or K-beauty fads influence the ecological attitude of the populace because Koreanization "takes place at a deeper and more fundamental level after extended exposure to South Korean society; often characterized by subtle, subconscious changes in people's habits and mannerisms" (Tizzard, 2023). Also, it is quite fitting to examine how far the values and sensitivities championed by the Hallyu wave have been compatible with the contemporary ecological catastrophes, such as the pandemic and climate change.

According to a survey conducted in eighteen different countries (including India) by the Ministry of Culture, Sport, and Tourism of Korea, "regarding questions on what type of content they started consuming more after the pandemic broke out, 48 percent of the respondents picked Korean variety shows, while 47.9 percent and 45.8 percent selected Korean dramas and games, respectively." Besides, "people who are more exposed to Korean cultural content tend to purchase and experience Korean products and services more" (Song, 2021). Product Placement (also called Embedded Marketing/ Embedded Advertising), both overt and covert, is found in almost all popular Korean dramas. Product placement is a novel and appealing way to raise consumerism, to influence consumer preference and purchase intent, even though customers are frequently unaware of the commercial persuasion effort (Srivastava, 2016). Some of the hit shows watched and loved by many during the lockdown, like *Crash Landing on You*, *True Beauty*, *The King: Eternal Monarch*, and the all-time favorite *Goblin: The Lonely and Great God*, have all been criticized for their outrageous product placements. Arguably, these shows are guilty of encouraging materialism and building a narrative in which the viewers may want to consume specific products and brands (which they may not truly need). This consumerism is, however, integral to the parasocial relationship most Hallyu fans have with their idols; to be closer to their favorite characters or to fit into a specific lifestyle. When the COVID-19 quarantine caused limited actual sociability, "People appear to have relied more than ever on social media and binge-watching streamed shows to offer them a sense of connection with others. The impact of such social surrogacy during quarantine is just one of numerous parasocial interaction themes that have emerged in the aftermath of the pandemic" (Jarzyna 2020, p.2).

K-pop idols are almost always seen endorsing products and brands, and even if they do not knowingly promote one, K-pop fans are notorious for purchasing anything and everything their idol is seen using, from toothbrushes to fabric softeners and apparel and jewelry from premium labels. Hallyu celebrity merchandise includes a diverse range of items ranging from postcards to phone covers, mugs, toys, and other dubious products, primarily plastics (Herman, 2021). Most fans succumb to such frenetic consumption because buying merchandise is one of the many ways to associate and relate with their idols (Charlyn et al., 2024). This consumption culture also testifies to South Korean power in territorialization. In *Cultural Globalisation: A User's Guide* (2010), Macgregor Wise articulates how territorialization engages in the construction of identity, and his concept of territory transcends physicality to indicate spatial influence. He says, "Identity is part of one's own self-formation, but also the consequence of what groups and others impose on one" (13). How the world adores Korean celebrity merchandise and beauty standards would be examples of this spatial influence. Many viral videos in various languages promote Korean skincare routines and cosmetics locally. A certain kind of body cultivation is propagated through materialistic products, which makes global capitalism problematic as the environmental consequences of this rampant consumption culture are disregarded. Since a person's social life and interactions can influence how aware they are, environmental education cannot be restricted to formal educational settings. In this sense, the media is an essential tool for environmental education.

Hallyu follows current trends and what most young people worldwide can relate to. The themes involved are often relevant to them. Relationships, mental health, politics, ethics; Hallyu has been successful in communicating positive messages about such relevant issues, and there is no question that it can also promote ecological values and better environmental practices. In the context of the Hallyu, there have been some visible, collaborative, and solitary yet noteworthy environmental activities. Many groups and artists are involved in environmental advocacy platforms and campaigns. The girl group Blackpink released a video on ecological issues and served as cultural ambassadors at COP26

(BLACKPINK, n.d.), while global icons BTS endorsed Hyundai's eco-friendly initiatives (Hyundai, 2022). Some groups have attempted to incorporate climate change advocacy into their MV (Music Video) scenes. K-pop fans also plant tens of thousands of trees, work for wildlife conservation, and contribute significantly to disaster relief efforts, all in the name of their idols. Recently, various projects and initiatives have received much attention, such as the 'Kstars4Climate' (Hyun-Ju, 2021) effort to rescue the Earth and a new fan-driven website called 'KPop 4 Planet' (KPOP4PLANET, n.d.). Such efforts can leverage K-pop's crowd-sourced activism to urge businesses and governments to take climate action.

3. CONCLUSION

Korean popular culture gained much attention as a global pop culture phenomenon and became a “pop culture pandemic” during the COVID-19 lockdown, even though Korean content had already garnered popularity. The concept of 'scapes' in Globalisation Studies is crucial in analyzing the politics of Korean popular culture, its magnitude, and its reverberations. Given the current pandemic and environmental crisis, we must invariably consider the appeal and popularity of Hallyu against the backdrop of these issues. For many people, popular culture is their principal means of comprehending, affirming, and changing their surroundings. As ecological issues worsen and gain global prominence, popular culture becomes more intertwined with people's environmental attitudes and actions. It is crucial to consider how even the most ordinary activities and daily decisions affect the environment, like the media and entertainment followed by people. They can expose and modify our impressions of nature and the climate crisis. While Korean entertainment industry, including dramas, films, and K-pop, has undoubtedly provided comfort and escapism for many during the pandemic, it is important to consider the potential negative impact of such media on societal values and behaviors, particularly in relation to the environment. The Hallyu should make its endeavors and content more environmentally sensitive. Furthermore, rather than encouraging ostentatious consumerism, it should contribute to propagating ecological principles, sustainability, and solutions appropriate for the current eco-social predicament.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

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