The Hallyu Influence. K-POP on Foreign Lands

Alexandra Elissa Necula
Sogang University, Seoul, South Korea

Abstract: The Korean Wave, also known as Hallyu, represents a strong cultural manifest coming from South Korea. The movement recently began to slowly, but certainly penetrate global markets in various ways. The most popular manner is K-Pop, Korean music, which has become a manifest itself; especially since foreign individuals seem to not always relate it to Hallyu; actually, the tendency is to separate the two concepts. Still, as previous research on the topic shows, overseas popularity of Hallyu and K-Pop is not as high as desired, and has many weaknesses. Regarding foreign markets, especially non-Asian ones, previous research seems lacking. For this reason, the current study was conducted, in order to provide a starting point for future research about targeted overseas markets. As the results show, there are many aspects that require attention and improvements. The aim of this paper is to explain where those weaknesses occur, and, if combined with other aspects, how things can be improved in order to better promote K-Pop and Hallyu in general.

Key words: Hallyu, Korean Wave, K-Pop, Korean music, culture exchange, overseas markets

1. Introduction

The Korean Wave is probably one of the most important cultural manifests related to South Korea. It has managed to make the country famous in various aspects in international lands. The Korean Wave itself is a complicated concept that includes several cultural issues; according to Kim (2007) “the term ‘Korean wave’ as used in today’s Korean society, generally refers to the exports of local cultural products to overseas markets”\textsuperscript{1}. Regarding what exactly is included in the concept, Chang and Park (2012) provide a more specific definition, stating that “the Korean wave or Hallyu refers to Korean music, drama, film, and even fashion and cuisine that have swept the world since the late 1990s”\textsuperscript{2}. As Chang and Park have already mentioned, the manifest found its way outside national borders starting with the late 1990s, which makes it not only a recent issue, but also explains the continuously growing attention that it receives in present days. Still, as Kim mentions, Hallyu is somehow restricted to Asian markets, representing “the popularity of Korean popular culture in the Asian region, led by countries like China, Taiwan and Japan”\textsuperscript{3}. For this reason, the current paper plans on studying some aspects related to the perception of the Korean Wave (Hallyu) in the case of foreign individuals. But, Hallyu itself includes a wide range of Korean cultural products, the most famous being music (K-pop), and drama (K-drama). So, an attempt to analyze all of these issues or even several requires an elaborate research plan, for which reason it is better to treat each aspect individually. Thus, this research will be dealing with Korean music (K-Pop), and the way it is perceived internationally, with an aim of better understanding how non-Asian publics are receiving not only the musical part, but the whole manifest in general. K-Pop, as defined by the Korean Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism in 2011, represents “Korean pop music sung and performed by Korean artists and received positively by international fans”\textsuperscript{4}. Also, in order to not leave any room for confusions, a clear distinction between the concepts of ‘Hallyu’ and ‘K-pop’ has been made while conducting the study. As the possibility that the two may be known individually, but without any relation to the other has been taken into consideration, the concepts have be treated differently as research questions, in order to determine if and how respondents relate them. The study will be analyzing foreign consumers’ attitudes towards K-Pop and the Korean wave. The purpose is to provide information on foreign markets, so that the manifest can be improved if necessary.

Also, as Chang and Park well observed, “the major reason that Hallyu has been popularized even in places farther away from Korea, like Europe and Latin America, is that creators and users can easily share their creations and feedback in the virtual space of the Internet […] the Internet plays a significant role in connecting fans and Hallyu”\textsuperscript{5}. This makes Internet the main ‘tool’ for reaching potential foreign consumers, not only for immediate promotion of Hallyu, but also for study in the matter, in order to contribute to better strategies for long-term objectives of the movement. Thus, researchers should keep in mind the existence and importance of the Internet as a connecting channel between producers and publics, and use it to its full potential when conducting analyses related to the Korean Wave and everything that it implies, from music and film, to fashion and traditions.
2. Literature review

Due to the lack of previous research on this exact topic, the starting point for this paper is represented by other means of studying the relation between K-pop and the Hallyu.

Firstly, since the manifest has been growing rapidly in recent years, it is interesting to observe how the original meaning behind it has transformed into a business, especially in the case of K-Pop, since this is the most popular part of the Korean Wave overseas. Supporting this idea, Park and Lee (2014) give a ‘business’ definition of the term while stating that “K-pop music is considered to be planned products through a very comprehensive systematic production by major entertainment companies”. As a result, the Korean Government has started involving itself in the development and promotion of the manifest in overseas markets; the purposes are of economic nature, making Hallyu into an instrument whereby

international intelligibility of the lyrics to Korean people is high however international intelligibility is low—xvi. All in all, as Yang concludes, applying the Korean structure to English language, even in short, one-word situations, can lead to serious comprehension issues mostly for foreigners, but, sometimes, even for locals.

Originally, Hallyu’s main purpose was that of making South Korea known to the whole world by “focusing on enhancing cultural exchanges with other countries” (Kwon and Chai, 2005). Problems started to occur ever since the products of the movement have been given what Kwon and Chai call “stereotyped stories” and “uniformed contents”; this resulted in issues with foreign publics, as they began giving more value to “the characteristics and marks of the format” simply because they cannot actually understand the language; this applies to K-Pop more than anything, because we are talking about music, where the content is the most important: foreigners do not comprehend the lyrics, so it is normal that they form their opinions about everything based on the format, the only aspect they can observe, analyze, and relate to. Neglecting the content in favor of a format that is meant to raise the popularity of Korean products and culture overseas may backfire in the end and affect the movement in a negative manner.

It is clear that Hallyu is now representative for South Korea, but the reasons behind its creation and the constant pursuit of overseas popularity may actually reveal more about what this movement means to the Korean people in general. In relation to this aspect, Cho (2012) considers that “just as industrialization, democratization and the popular culture of South Korea came about in the light and shadow of rapid growth, global sympathy toward the Korean wave came about in the same context. The
20th century was an era of horrific violence and unlimited change. Because we Koreans went through the miserable history of colonialism and division, we are now task to make this startling cultural wave into a sustainable cultural movement. Thus, despite its obvious economic value and the opportunity for culture exchange, the Korean Wave may have a deeper meaning for Korean people, who seem to be trying to let the world know what they have gone through in history and survived, only to become the important economic and cultural power they are today. The same author considers that the tendencies to globalization Korean styles can be beneficial for promoting overseas, that “there is plenty of evidence that the Korean wave has only taken its first steps and that its potential for future development is massive” ; still, the author considers that intellectuals play a main role in the proper development and promotion of the movement, and that they should be the ones leading the way in the spread of the Korean Wave.

Previous literature that was interested in this topic has also studied means of better promoting Hallyu and, more specifically, K-Pop, since it seems to be the easiest to promote overseas. In that sense, Jung (2013) has proposed the usage of 4D technologies in K-Pop performances, and has asked the opinions of entertainment professionals in regard to this aspect. As the results showed, experts believe that, though 4D technology could be helpful in the promotion of K-Pop overseas, “4D performance stage can cause adverse effect if it too much focuses on technology, rather than contents” , and that “artists individual change and development is more important” . Instead, rather than relying on technological development for raising popularity levels in foreign markets, interviewed entertainment professionals stated that “unless they find ways to enhance variety and quality, K-POP cannot but be stultified”.

Previous research on the topic is helpful in understanding how specific issues may influence the popularity of K-Pop in overseas markets, but are not enough to give a perspective on what needs to be changed. Thus, as the problems of enhancing popularity seem to be related to several aspects, it may be more useful to actually ask potential foreign consumers about what they think in regard to Hallyu and K-Pop, and what music preferences they have. That way, we might get a better understanding of their expectations, what they like, what they dislike, and use that information to improve the movement promoting strategies for overseas (more importantly, non-Asian) markets.

### 3. Research proposal

Thus, as proper inquiries with targeted foreign publics seem to be inexistent, the current study was conducted with the purpose of bringing other contributions to the already existing information on the topic, and, hopefully, help in better understanding where improvements need to be made. As mentioned in the beginning of this paper, the Internet is the main channel that connects producers to their foreign publics.

Considering these two aspects, a survey seemed to be the most efficient as a research method. Thus, a convenience sample was chosen, and a short questionnaire was given to foreign online users of a well-known social media platform. It is important to mention the fact that, because the Korean Wave as an international movement has been promoted more and also better received in Asian markets, the current study focuses more on non-Asian publics that do not have a direct contact with Hallyu and/or K-Pop; thus, though Asian participants were not completely excluded, Korean respondents were avoided, and, also, K-Pop-niched individuals were not taken into consideration when shaping the participant sample.

For the objectives settled, a series of five research questions revolving around specific issues of the topic were developed, as following:

- **RQ1.** Is Hallyu (Korean Wave) known in foreign markets?
- **RQ2.** Is K-pop (Korean music) known in foreign markets?
- **RQ3.** What gender (male/female) is dominantly popular in relation to Korean music?
- **RQ4.** What promoting concepts are preferred?
- **RQ5.** What type of music is preferred (Korean/non-Korean) by foreign consumers?

### 4. Method

As mentioned, in order to avoid influencing factors, the respondents were chosen to be of non-Korean origins and to not have any deep knowledge and/or attachment to K-pop (K-pop groups and K-pop-oriented individuals were avoided). The questionnaire was formed of ten simple, multiple-choice questions; the aim was to make the survey as easy as possible in order to persuade more individuals to participate. A number of 215 people were asked to participate in the survey, out of which 99 responded to the request. Respondents were between 18 and 45 years old (∼72% were between 26-35 years), out of which approximately 64% were female. The majority were of Caucasian provenance (∼59%), followed by...
respondents of Asian provenance (~32%); the information is represented in Figures 1, 2, and 3.

The survey was sent on the 1st of June 2015, and answers were accepted until the 26th of June 2015. The 99 responses have been received in the period 1 – 12th of June. The research was conducted online, on a famous social media platform, and the participants were chosen in a convenient manner, among the researcher’s friend list members, with the specification that individuals of Korean origins and K-Pop ‘literate’ people were intentionally avoided, in order to exclude the occurrence of an influencing factor on the results.

5. Results

If analyzed from a general perspective, only in regards to the topic of each question, respondents have the tendency to listen to music on a regular basis, 75.8% (Figure 4), and their preferences in that sense are diverse, though a slight majority seems to be in favor of Pop music, 28.3% (Figure 5). Also, most respondents go towards American or European music, 39.4%, respectively 32.3%, as it is shown in Figure 6, with only a few having preferences for music of another provenance. These results express foreigners’ low interest in Asian music and, as we can understand from this, in K-Pop and the Korean Wave as a whole.

When asked if they know about the existence of Hallyu and what it meant, a slight majority (with an approximate 10% difference) answered negatively in both situations, as shown in Figures 7 and 8. Still, when asked the same questions, but about K-Pop, the respondents gave positive answers with relatively big differences between the two possible answers (Figure 9 and 10). This shows that foreign targets of Hallyu may not necessarily relate K-Pop to it, which brings up the issue of Korean music becoming an individual movement, rather than part of the Korean Wave.

In regards to their specific preferences when it comes to K-Pop artists, in first place came mixed groups (male + female), closely followed by male solo artists, and male groups (Figure 11). Though the majority of respondents were female, which might explain the preference for male artists, it is interesting to observe that male respondents too tend towards male artists, since the other options for this specific question have been chosen only a few times, and cannot possibly sum up to equal the number of male participants. Thus, it becomes clear that foreign consumers prefer either mixed groups or male artists, meaning that something in the ‘female side’ of K-Pop is not right and might need some improvements.
Most of the respondents stated that they listen to music often, with a difference in the case of the Black/African-American heritage. Most of the respondents stated that they listen to music on a regular basis (often/everyday), both 18-25 and 26-35 age groups preferred Pop music (while the 36-45 group expressed preferences for other styles), and the dominant music origin for two of the groups was American, while the 26-35 respondents opted mostly for European music; as a reminder, over 70% of the whole number of respondents were part of the 26-35 age group.

Apart from 18-25 respondents who had heard of Hallyu and also knew what it meant, others had negative answers regarding this specific issue. Still, this did not apply to the case of K-Pop, where all age groups had heard about it and also knew what it was about. When asked about artists, all three age groups expressed preferences for other styles, and the 36-45 year olds chose male groups, female groups, and mixed groups in an equal percentage. As for promoting concepts, both 18-25 and 26-35’s opted for the cute style, but, as age became higher (36-45 years), responses went towards other promotional concepts not mentioned in the main option list.

As we can observe, not only is K-Pop more popular than Hallyu, but we can also assume that foreign individuals may not even relate the two concepts. Also, as a general conclusion, though people may opt for Pop music, the origins of those preferences are non-Asian, meaning that the movement has a long way to go if it wants to raise its popularity to a global level.

**AGE-based analysis**

Though several age groups were targeted at first, as Figure 2 above clearly shows, the respondents belonged to only three of them, 18-25 years (23.2%), 26-35 years (71.7%), respectively, 36-45 years (5.1%). This aspect makes the research applicable mostly to younger generations. The majority of respondents stated that they listen to music on a regular basis (often/everyday), both 18-25 and 26-35 age groups preferred Pop music (while the 36-45 group expressed preferences for other styles), and the dominant music origin for two of the groups was American, while the 26-35 respondents opted mostly for European music; as a reminder, over 70% of the whole number of respondents were part of the 26-35 age group.

Figure 11. Artist preferences

In matter of promoting concept (style) for K-Pop artists, respondents mostly chose the cute concept; still, not far behind and without too much of a difference in percentage, this was followed by sexy, serious, and subtle/hidden message-based concepts (Figure 12). Seeing the diversity in choices, and taking into consideration the already existing diversity in promoted concepts, we may assume that the industry is going in the right direction in this case; though improvements can still be made, it might not be too hard to accomplish them.

Figure 12. Concept (style) preferences

On the other hand, if grouped by age, gender, and ethnicity, the results give a clearer perspective on foreign consumers’ preferences in regards to K-Pop. This type of analysis is useful for recognizing specific issues, and understanding what changes can be made and where they are needed, in order to improve the movement’s receptivity in overseas markets and raise its popularity.

**ETHNICITY-based analysis**

In this case, the differences in participants’ characteristics are huge, with 58.6% being White/Caucasian, and 32.3% being Asian. The other 4%, 3%, and 2% of the respondents were Hispanic/Latino, from other ethnicities that were not included in the main option list, and, respectively, of Black/African-American heritage. Most of the respondents stated that they listen to music often, with a difference in the case of the Black/African-American...
Americans, who all said that they listen only sometimes. As preferred genres, the options chosen include rock, hip-hop, pop, dance, r’n’b, and other unlisted genres. Both Caucasian and Asian groups opted for American music, Hispanic and other ethnicities tended towards European music, while African-Americans all went for African music.

The interesting differences appear in regards to Hallyu and what it means, where, apart from the Caucasian group, the others all answered positively. But, the same does not apply for K-Pop, in relation to which all groups gave affirmative answers; this proves, once again, that Hallyu and K-Pop are not perceived as connected to each other in most cases. As favorite artists, all groups opted for male groups, solo male artists, or mixed groups, by this expressing a general dislike towards female K-Pop artists. Preferred concepts varied from cute, sexy, serious, and subtle/hidden message, to parody and other styles not included in the main list.

The research can be considered somehow biased if taking into account the huge differences in participant numbers when it comes to ethnic diversity. Still, it can provide valuable information on Caucasian and Asian consumers, while giving a starting point for future research about other ethnicities.

6. Limitations and future research

The current study, though it provides valuable information about foreign individuals’ impressions, knowledge, and preferences for K-Pop, it is still limited in many ways and, thus, requires future development.

For starters, due to the convenience sample chosen to participate in the survey, the results are limited mostly to the range of 26 to 35 years old, and are not representative for other age groups. Also, ethnicities were not properly divided, the majority of participants being either of Caucasian or Asian provenance. Though the results are interesting, the general number of responses obtained, and the subjects’ characteristics as well are not enough to make certain statements, but rather are meant to give some first impressions on the subject and ‘instigate’ to the development of further studies on the same topic. As a result, future research with a better defined participation is advised.

For other researches in the same direction, a content analysis of news related to Korean music and addressed to foreign publics may also be appropriate. Along with this, research on foreign fandoms would be helpful to better understand how the specific area is received in foreign markets, and how it should be promoted in the future. These research proposals could provide important data in relation to the spread of the Korean Wave (Hallyu), if it reaches the general public, or if it has no significant relevance in that sense, targeting only specific, already formed audiences. Also, as results indicate, the gap between Hallyu and K-Pop as concepts is still big; for this reason, future research should focus on finding ways to connect the two and make them known as related to each other; this is so that K-Pop doesn’t end up ‘consuming’ the general manifest, and, by it, affecting the cultural exchange objective of Hallyu – one should take into consideration the fact that music is not enough to express all aspects of a culture, and, also, given the financial benefits that it brings, it may often go as far as to neglect cultural importance in favor of economic objectives.

7. Discussion

The most interesting aspect discovered was the difference between Hallyu knowledge in comparison to K-Pop; though a bit more than half of the respondents did not know about the existence of the Korean Wave and what it meant, an astonishing majority had heard of K-pop and knew what it was about. This indicates, indeed, the fact that K-pop and Hallyu are not necessarily perceived in relation to each other. Also, the preferences for male artists and mixed groups raise questions about the quality of K-Pop female artists as perceived by foreign publics. Another issue comes in regard to the origins of foreign individuals’ music preferences; despite the fact that they are open to various genres and pop is generally preferred (this representing very good news for K-Pop, since it seems to ‘fit the demands’), it is worrisome to observe that people prefer American or European music, even in the case of Asian respondents; this means that K-Pop has yet to efficiently penetrate foreign markets, Asian or non-Asian.

A positive result of the research is people’s openness to diversity in the case of K-Pop concepts, which, even at the present moment, seems to be the best developed area of K-Pop, giving options for all types of preferences and personalities. Still, this alone is not enough to raise the popularity of K-Pop overseas.

As a final conclusion, it can be assumed that changes and improvements are needed in certain areas for K-Pop to be made more popular; also, it is important to work on making a visible connection between K-Pop and Hallyu, or else the manifest risks to be dominated and, eventually, ‘consumed’ by its musical side.

As previous research suggests, there are many aspects to be taken into consideration when working on the development of Hallyu internationally. Since K-Pop seems to be the most popular out of all ‘parts’ included in the Korean Wave, one can assume that improvements should be done starting from that point. Also, since the objective is to address foreign
consumers, it might be wise to begin with asking about their preferences, see where these collide with the already established characteristics of K-Pop, and, according to this, start making changes where needed. The aspects underlined by previous research on the topic bring valuable understanding on how improvements can be managed; still, if neglecting foreign publics’ opinions, the possibility of failing while redesigning promotional strategies is very high. Thus, researches as this one, by providing information on individuals’ preferences, have the purpose of exposing existing weaknesses, and are of vital importance for the well-development of K-Pop and Hallyu.

8. Acknowledgements

This paper has been done under the guidance of professors Yong-Jin Won and Yong-Soo Kim, Mass Communication Department of Sogang University, Seoul, South Korea. The author would like to express their deepest gratitude to professors Yong-Jin Won and Yong-Soo Kim for the support given during the paper’s process of creation.

9. References


---

[7] Ibid., p. 91
[9] Ibid., p. 41
[11] Ibid., p. 147
[12] Ibid., p. 152
[13] Ibid.
[15] Ibid.
[17] Ibid., p. 38
[19] Ibid.