

The Korean Wave (Hallyu) and Its Cultural Translation by Fans in Qatar

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This study employs in-depth qualitative interviews with Arab fans of Korean popular culture who live in Qatar to examine their cultural translation of Korean TV drama and K-pop music. It uses a transcultural approach to fandom studies, rather than foregrounding nationality as an analytic category. It focuses on fans' appropriations of these cultural texts in relation to their affinities, feelings, emotions, and accumulations of cultural capital used to negotiate their consumption of Korean popular culture. This article identifies emotions of frustration and fascination as central to these fans' transnational media engagement. It thereby shows that affinity is a central concern for research on transcultural receptions of non-Western cultures by non-Western audiences.

Keywords: popular culture, fandom, Arab, transcultural, affinities, identity

The Korean Wave, or *Hallyu*, refers to the flows of South Korean popular culture out of East Asia in the 1990s to the United States, Latin America, Europe, and the Middle East. It spread to the Arab world by 2005, when the Korean TV drama *Winter Sonata* hit the airwaves in Iraq (Y. Kim, 2007). However, the Korean Wave has received little attention by scholars of the region. It remains unclear how Arab fans make sense of Korean popular culture and why they are attracted to Korean drama and K-pop music despite little linguistic, historical, and ethnic proximity to Korea.

This article argues that in the process of culturally translating Korean popular culture texts, Arab fans develop multiple affinities while negotiating emotions of frustration and fascination with Arab and Korean popular culture texts. The study draws on Chin and Morimoto's (2013) concept of "affective affinity"; they argue that multiple attractions and proximities draw fans to transcultural objects despite linguistic, cultural, and geographical boundaries. Affective affinities provoke transcultural identifications that complicate conceptions of identity based on usual categories such as nationality, religion, culture, shared history, or geography. I use the term *transcultural* to imply more flexibilities, allowing for the possibility of other affinities (besides cultural)—such as language, genre, and personal experiences—to comprehend how and why fandom of Korean popular culture in Qatar arises regardless of national and cultural borders.

By answering the following questions, the article focuses on university-educated Arab women fans in Qatar to understand how they culturally translate Korean popular culture texts: How do fans explain their contact with Korean TV and music? What affinities do they develop while culturally translating this media

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into their daily activities? Cultural translation here refers to appropriation of Korean pop culture by its fans, who make sense of these texts by giving them meaning and incorporating them into their daily activities.

Transcultural scholarship has begun to move beyond explaining fan attraction to popular culture in terms of cultural proximity—specifically traits such as language, history, ethnicity, and religion, which are often conflated with nation-states. Emerging work instead explores the affinities and emotions that fans develop in the process of culturally translating Korean popular culture. New media technologies are encouraging the hybridization of media spaces in the Arab region; media consumption is increasingly based on personal preference. Moreover, the multinational context of Qatar requires a theoretical shift, from theorizing fans as simply transnational (that is, still referenced by nation) to taking a transcultural perspective that holistically analyzes fans' relationships and experiences with Korean popular culture texts.

Theoretical Framework

Korean Popular Culture in the Arab World

The relationship between South Korea and the Middle East developed from mutual economic interests. In the 1970s, South Korea began to purchase oil and gas produced by Middle Eastern nations to satisfy its increasing economic needs. The corresponding economic boom in oil-producing Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates also led to South Korea's greater involvement in major construction projects within the region. From 1991 onward, South Korea also became politically involved in the Middle East: It sent noncombat military forces to Iraq to help in civilian reconstruction projects after the first Gulf War, as well as peacekeeping forces to Southern Lebanon following the 2006 war there (Levkowitz, 2013).

Korean popular culture was first officially introduced to the Middle East via Korean TV drama in the early 2000s. The South Korean government's Overseas Information Service (OIS) gave the popular drama *Winter Sonata* to Egyptian television in 2004. Kim notes that the OIS paid for Arabic subtitles, and "the broadcast was part of the government's efforts to improve the image of South Korea in the Middle East, where there is little understanding and exposure towards Korean culture" (Y. Kim, 2007, p. 31). Proliferation of social media and other digital technologies in the 2010s facilitated a so-called Hallyu 2.0, which is dominated by widespread dissemination of K-pop music in the Middle East and other parts of the world (Jin, 2018).

Many Arab countries have shifted from state-dominated to diversified media environments over the past two decades. Private and semiprivate ownership of media corporations and television networks is growing. Enhanced communication technologies are providing audiences with a wider variety of offline and online programming. As a result, Arab audiences are increasingly finding themselves in control of their media consumption and are no longer solely beholden to their national television channels (Tawil-Souri, 2008). Kraidy and Khalil (2008) describes these changes in Arab media using the notion of "hypermedia space" based on personalized, interactive, and mobile communication devices and practices. For Kraidy and Khalil, this new hypermedia space weakens the bonds of collective social life among Arab children and young people; it contributes to the transformation of their cultural identities by permitting other sources for identity

negotiation and identity formation by Arab youth—along with the dominant influences of Arab nationalism and Islam.

New cultural tastes, knowledge, values, and lifestyles are increasingly accessible to Arab youth through this hypermedia space. It is now unsurprising to see a young Qatari, Egyptian, or Syrian woman wearing her traditional *hijab* (head cover) or *abaya* (body-covering black cloak) and watching a popular Korean TV drama during a class break over a live stream on a MacBook decorated with stickers of her favorite K-pop band. However, within this commercialized, hybridized, and individualized Arab media and hypermedia space, Korean popular culture has not emerged as a mainstream phenomenon. It is instead a subculture catering to small communities of dedicated fans and simultaneously integrated within global, regional, and local pop culture.

Fans of Korean popular culture in Qatar and other Arab countries initially gained exposure to Korean TV drama through major Arab-language, transnational, semiprivate satellite channels such as Dubai TV and MBC (Middle East Broadcast Corporation) 1, 2, and 4. But unlike Korean drama, K-pop music has not diffused to Arab audiences through transnational TV channels. In Qatar and the Middle East generally, local demand by fans drives dissemination and consumption of K-pop music (Omtazgin & Lyan, 2014).

The changing Arab media landscape has facilitated dynamic, personalized audience interactions with transnational media content, especially via social media. Analyzing this phenomenon requires understanding audience meaning-making processes and the transcultural identifications and affinities that Arab audiences may develop with border-crossing media content.

Transcultural Approaches to Korean Popular Culture Fandom

Two theoretical approaches dominate scholarship on the Korean Wave. One highlights Korean content production capabilities, marketing conditions, and cultural export strategies that represent the interests of the Korean media industry and government in promoting Korea's cultural industries as a key driver of economic growth (Y. Lee, 2005; Park, 2004; Ryoo, 2009). The other, as in this article, is concerned with fandom and the appeal of Korean popular culture (Han, 2017; S. Jung, 2012; S. Jung & Shim, 2014; H. Lee, 2014). These studies are dominated by the notion of cultural proximity to explain the popularity of Korean popular culture by audiences outside Korea.

Expanding on Cultural Proximity

Straubhaar (1991) introduced the concept of cultural proximity in his study of media influence, referring to "nationally or locally produced material that is closer to and more reinforcing of traditional identities, based on regional, ethnic, dialect/language, religious, and other elements" (p. 51). Some researchers (e.g., E. Y. Jung, 2009; H. Kim, 2002; E. Kim & Ryoo, 2007; Shim, 2006) relate the regional flow of the Korean Wave and its appeal for audiences in Japan, China, Hong Kong, and other Asian countries to shared cultural traits, Confucian values, and the geolinguistic interests of the importing nations.

Other scholars have posited that K-pop culture's global popularity instead results from hybridity inherent to the Korean Wave, which actually involves both local and foreign elements at multiple levels

(Iwabuchi, 2008; Park, 2004; Ryoo, 2009; Shim, 2006, 2011). From this perspective, scholars such as Park (2004) argue that Korean popular culture products, which blend traditional Asian and modern Western cultures, provide less cultural discount¹ to Asian audiences who want to enjoy Western popular culture but are reluctant to accept it outright for ideological and other reasons.

Cultural proximity, as adopted in transnational fandom studies thus far, depends heavily on the "national" and thus largely narrows the concept to linguistic and geographical investigation. As a theoretical framework, cultural proximity therefore falls short in explaining the popularity of popular culture texts in geographically and linguistically distant places (e.g., Qatar in this study). Moreover, although this analytical approach helps explain the Korean Wave's general appeal (especially K-pop music), it does not illuminate how audiences culturally translate and make meaningful the Korean popular culture texts they consume.

Chin and Morimoto (2013) advocate for a new theory of fandom studies by expanding the nation-bound concept of cultural proximity to the concept of "affective affinities." They comment,

This is not to say that the national is unimportant, but rather that it is but one of a constellation of possible points of affinity upon which transcultural fandom may be predicated. Nation-based differences or similarities may well appeal to people across borders; but so, too, might affective investments in characters, stories, and even fan subjectivities that exceed any national orientation. (p. 99)

This article adopts a multiple affinities concept to identify common themes in the cultural translation of Korean popular culture that resonate across the specific cultural backgrounds of individual interlocutors in this research. For instance, fans interviewed in this study belong to different Arab nationalities (Qatari, Egyptian, and Syrian) and do not all enjoy regionally produced Arabic television drama—which arguably embodies cultural proximity (especially in terms of language and values) better than Korean TV drama.

Furthermore, the cultural proximity thesis conceptualizes culture and cultural identity as stable and bounded. It assumes that audiences identify cultural commonalities, which directs their interest toward media texts from culturally similar regions. Therefore, it cannot account for audiences' agency in making culture while interpreting what they watch. Thinking of cultural identity as position rather than essence is relevant here. Hall (1996) identifies that cultural identity is a production that is never complete, always in process. Hall therefore distinguishes two ways of thinking about identity: identity as similarity and continuity, and identity as difference and rupture. The former involves identity in essentialist form, whereas the latter involves identity in cultural form. This enables understanding how fans of Korean popular culture subjectively position their identities while culturally translating these texts.

In sum, this study moves from a conception of cultural identity as primarily "national" to perceiving identity as about using the resources of history, language, and culture in the process of becoming rather

¹ Cultural discount, as defined by Hoskins and Mirus (1988), refers to the value loss of a product when it is considered for modification—for example, the dubbing of K-drama in Arabic—in a new cultural context where people lack the cultural capital to understand or relate to it.

than being (Hall, 1996). Cultural identities are therefore multilayered and complex; national belonging is only one layer. Hence, audiences can develop multiple proximities or affinities (beyond the national) through their emotional engagement with popular culture materials they consume (Shim, 2006).

Fan Agency and Cultural Capital

Several studies concentrate on participatory roles that audiences play through social media in mutually recreating and redistributing original texts (S. Jung, 2012; S. Jung & Shim, 2014; H. Lee, 2014). For instance, Yoon (2017) shows that in North America, where K-pop culture texts are not available through mainstream media, K-pop fans consider social media a user-friendly arena that facilitates their participation in translating and circulating K-pop culture materials.

Few studies exist on Korean Wave fandom in the Middle East region and fan agency in consuming Korean popular culture. However, Otmazgin and Lyan's (2014) study of K-pop music fans in Israel and Palestine highlights the notion of "cultural agency" in globalization; they show that transnational fans not only consume imported music, but also serve as marketers, mediators, translators, and localizers of globalized culture. Noh's (2010) study of Egyptian female fans of K-pop music on Facebook illustrates that they are not mindless zealots, but agents navigating complex identities in a postcolonial world. Lyan, Zidani, and Shifman's study (2015) emphasizes audience agency through their interpretation of Korean musical artist Psy's "Gangnam Style." They assert that remakes of the famous music video by Israeli and Arab audiences amount to a form of intertextuality (i.e., the localization of the global); this intertextuality "constitutes a mode of political protest wherein creators ridicule certain politicians by claiming control over them through cutting and editing their speeches, bodies, or movements to the rhythm and pace chosen by them" (Lyan et al., 2015, p. 23). Similar to this research, this inquiry positions fans of Korean popular culture in Qatar as agents. As Jenkins (1992) notes in an early study of TV fans and participatory culture, "They are consumers who also produce, readers who also write, and spectators who also participate" (p. 208).

Nonetheless, this article's transcultural fandom approach to Korean popular culture moves beyond literal meanings related by its interlocutors. It also scrutinizes fans' multivalent relationship to media texts and their accumulation of cultural capital. The latter is a critical concept to understand fans' agency in culturally translating Korean popular culture. Originally outlined by Bourdieu (1984), cultural capital consists of identifiable factors held by a cultural agent, such as education, "training" in legitimate culture, and appreciation of cultural capital. However, Fiske (1992) added an important distinction to Bourdieu's definition. The former argues that while popular culture capital does not provide upward class mobility, "its dividends lie in the pleasure and esteem of one's peers in a community of taste rather than those of one's social betters" (Fiske, 1992, p. 34). This analytical distinction usefully frames how fans use their popular cultural capital to build on their cultural identity within their social network.

Method

In-depth qualitative methodology was used in this research. Primary data gathered for this study consisted of a total of 15 in-depth, multistage group interviews conducted with participants in a purpose-specific focus group of 21 female undergraduate students at Qatar University. These interviews were

completed in two stages. The initial interviews extended from December 9, 2015, to February 24, 2016. Follow-up interviews with the same participants were conducted from June 13, 2016, to January 15, 2017, to gain in-depth insight on issues discussed in the previous interviews. The interviews were open-ended, conducted in Arabic, and 2 hours in duration. This focus group research strategy was implemented to capture experiences concerned with meaning as well as practice. As such, the 21 participants were intentionally selected to be part of the research because they defined themselves as fans of Korean popular culture, specifically Korean TV drama and K-pop music; they positioned themselves as "information-rich" on the research topic. Snowball sampling augmented this strategy. The author became acquainted with a small group of these fans at Qatar University through a group of students in her global communication class. Students from other classes taught by the author subsequently introduced her to more fans of Korean popular media within the university.

The study's interlocutors ranged from 19 to 23 years old. The research participants were female Arab college-educated students of different nationalities: 10 Qataris, eight Egyptians, and three Syrians. This resulted in an overall sample consisting of roughly the same number of citizens as noncitizens in the context of Qatar, helping to minimize nation-specific bias. Qatar University hosts a nationally and culturally diverse student body, largely reflecting the cosmopolitan nature of the State of Qatar and its extensive population of expatriates, including Arabs, Asians, Europeans, Africans, and North Americans. The university is also a gender-segregated campus, which precluded a mixed focus group of men and women for this research. Hence, this article considers multiple experiences of women fans of Korean popular culture in Qatar, though it is not representative of all such fans living in the nation.

The author's position in this research is also critical to acknowledge. On one hand, the researcher is an outsider (i.e., not a fan) seeking to understand how Arab fans explain their affinities with Korean TV and music. On the other, the scholar is also an insider: an Arab/African woman who shares with fans some cultural values and some knowledge of popular culture in the Arab world.

Research analysis began with complete transcription of each interview into English text as the basis for further interpretation. The interview data were then sorted into broad themes based on content and analyzed with respect to each research question, as reported next. Some direct quotes from the interviews with the research participants are included in the following results to highlight in their own words the multiple, overlapping affinities and meanings of K-popular culture texts developed by fans in their consumption of Korean TV and music.

Findings and Discussion

Research findings are organized according to the article's main research questions: How do fans explain their contacts with Korean TV and music? What affinities do they develop while culturally translating this media into their daily activities? For the second question—the bulk of the analysis—results are subdivided according to two complementary themes: cultural proximity and affective affinities. The section concludes with an interpretation of fan communities and transnational identity production based on these data.

Fan Contacts With Korean Popular Culture

This study's fans first personally contacted Korean popular culture through routes in some respects similar to the ways Arab youth consume hypermedia. Some fans reported accessing Korean media through personal communication with friends. For instance, an Egyptian fan mentioned,

One day, my friend showed me a picture of one of the K-pop music stars, and I got interested and started to search more and more about the K-pop music bands and Korean TV drama stars. I have been a fan of K-pop music and Korean TV drama since 2008 and can speak Korean fluently.

Another Egyptian interlocutor added,

The first time for me to know about Korean pop culture was in 2008 when I watched a K-pop music video that a friend of mine shared with me. I fell in love with it, and I have been a fan since then.

A Qatari interviewee instead related,

Korean TV drama was my gateway to K-popular culture. It took me one Korean soap opera to watch and get hooked on Korean popular culture. I started to follow my favored Korean stars and watch their performances in other soap operas, talk shows, and I watch K-pop music videos all through the Internet.

Another Qatari fan confirmed a similar experience:

I was flipping through the TV channels in my hotel room during vacation in Thailand in 2006 when I stumbled upon a historic K-drama and I fell in love with it and kept anticipating the next episode and the next one. . . . And since that time, I have been a big fan of K-popular culture.

These prevailing sentiments of individual routes of exposure to, and then engagement with, Korean popular culture indicate that fandom in Qatar is largely self-driven.

Cultural Translation of Korean Drama and K-pop Music by Fans

Dialogues among Korean popular culture fans provided varied perspectives of their cultural translation processes. Fans developed multiple affinities with Korean TV drama and K-pop music through self-reflexivity using their agency, personal experience, and popular cultural capital. These affinities are compared from cultural proximity and affective affinities frameworks. They are only partially explained by the former's nation- and culture-centric perspectives. Instead, data collected in this study more closely reflect multiple, overlapping affinities that may include, but also transcend, these categorizations.

Cultural Proximity

Fans appropriate the cultural objects of other cultures "through the means they have at their disposal within their own popular culture context" (Chin & Morimoto, 2013, p. 103). This study's data show that fans express cultural proximity to K-pop through their appropriation of Korean cultural and family values, including gender relations; they perceive these values as shared between their Arab cultures and the mediated Korean culture. As one fan summarized, "Cultural and family values such as respect for the elderly and the youngsters, are values projected by many Korean drama stories and are valued within our Arab culture contexts."

Other Qatari and Syrian responses highlight similarities in gender relations between Korean and Arab societies as projected by Korean drama. Another fan commented that "the image of the father as the authority and the dominant figure in the family" and "the strictness of fathers, such as not allowing their daughters to stay late at night outside the house, are similar to the father-daughter relationship in our societies, and that made Korean drama familiar, not foreign, to us." These fans expanded the concept of cultural proximity to include gender relations, reminiscent of La Pastina and Straubhaar's (2005) argument that "women across cultures identify with family drama or melodrama that points out commonalities of family struggles" (p. 274).

Fans also transformed and reappropriated Korean popular culture texts, adapting them to the practical context of everyday life. In other words, the meanings of Korean TV drama and K-pop music were also resignified in their cultural translation processes to fit the local, religiously conservative Arab context. One Qatari interviewee mentioned, "Korean drama is the only type of soap opera we can watch together as a family because they are decent, clean, and also nonviolent." Another Qatari fan added the following:

Korean TV drama is the type of drama that allows young and old siblings to communally watch because it is decent. For instance, my sister is six years younger than me. So, each one of us has her own preferences in soap operas and we never had anything in common to watch, until my sister invited me to her Korean drama world. Since then we built a tradition to get together to watch.

This attention to concepts of decency is supported by researchers such as Ying (2008) and Emam (2008), who each argue that the absence of explicit sex in media has helped spread the Korean Wave in the Middle East—where displays of physical sexuality can draw censorship and protest. This perspective implies that an ethical cultural proximity contributes to the Korean Wave in Muslim countries such as Iran and Egypt. In explaining the appeal of K-pop music, some of this study's Egyptian and Qatari fans developed similar meanings from Korean drama regardless of their nationality, such as, "K-pop music lyrics contain nonviolent and decent words." Another elaborated,

Decency is one shared cultural value between Korean and Arab cultures. One example would be, when female Korean pop stars would perform on stage, they would most of the time wear clothing that is not revealing because they are aware that their fan-base includes fans as young as 10 years old or even younger. So, they know that they should

appear as good role models for younger audiences. Sometimes Korean stars change the lyrics of their songs and make them clean to be accepted by younger audiences.

However, several Egyptian and Syrian fans explicitly rejected the notion of cultural proximity as an element for their affinity with Korean drama with regard to shared values. For instance, an Egyptian interlocutor contradicted that perspective:

Korean TV drama scenes always show alcohol use, which we know is against our Islamic religious values, but we still watch Korean drama. For some of us, fans of Korean popular culture, it is not the "shared" cultural values with the Korean culture that attracted us to Korean TV drama. Actually, what attracted us was the aesthetic of those dramas and the variety of stories and the entertainment we received from watching them.

These fans developed proximity to Korean popular culture regardless of the cultural and religious differences between them and the characters portrayed in Korean media. These findings show that fans also developed emotional attachments to the genres of Korean TV drama that did not simply reflect perceived or assumed cultural proximity to Korean popular culture texts.

Hence, multiple affinities—as an alternative concept to cultural proximity, concerned less with nations than with fans themselves—form a better interpretive framework for fans' emotional engagement with Korean popular culture texts. Multiple affinities will be discussed within three broad categories: genre affinity, language affinity, and personal experiences (affinities).

Multiple Affinities

Genre Affinity

Research shows that audiences are able to relate to nonnative drama and characters when they appeal culturally and ethnically to audiences. Lu, Liu, and Cheng (2019) argue that cultural and ethnic similarities between Korea and China—such as appearance, dress, lifestyle, and tradition—helped Chinese viewers relate to the characters in K-drama: Viewers see characters as people they know about in everyday life. In her study on Turkish drama in Qatar, Berg (2017) finds that Turkish drama audiences in Qatar also describe the importance of being able to relate in a realistic way. They understand Turkish TV characters on a personal level because of cultural proximity.

However, given the lack of ethnic similarities between Arab fans and Korean drama characters, fans often expressed their affinities with Korean TV in terms of genres (stories, specifically) rather than with characters in Korean dramas. In explaining the mismatch between Korean actors' physical features and the dubbed TV shows in the *Khaleeji* dialect (the colloquial Arabic of Gulf [Khaleeji] countries such as Kuwait, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, and Oman), one Qatari fan recalled,

When Korean dramas were dubbed in Khaleeji Arabian Gulf accent, that was not well-received by most of us fans of Korean drama at all. When I watched Korean soap operas

dubbed in the Khaleeji dialect, I just kept laughing. I used to watch the reruns of these soap operas just to laugh and make fun of the dubbed voices that do not match the physical features and appearances of Korean actors and actresses. It was also funny to hear the Arabic names that were given to the Korean actors in these series.

This frustration with Arabic popular culture drama is actually a common theme in the cultural translation of Korean popular culture by Arab fans in Qatar. Fans' frustration with and criticism of Arabic drama genres go hand in hand with Berg's (2017) findings regarding the success of Turkish drama in Qatar, in which she confirmed that it is not always the case that the viewer's first preference will be material produced in his or her own language and reflecting local or national culture. Cultural and linguistic elements appear secondary if national and regional media fail to gratify audiences' desires.

Fans expressed their affective investments in Korean drama stories they perceive as funny, romantic, and "real"—especially when juxtaposed with Arabic dramas. One fan summarized this attitude:

We love Korean TV drama, and we consume it every day because it has something that appeals to everyone cross-culturally. The stories of Korean drama are wide-ranging. Stories range from romance to school life to comedy, such as *Boys Over Flower*, *Playful Kiss*, and *Coffee Prince*. The stories are segmented to satisfy the needs of different age groups. This actually makes Korean TV drama more real and appealing to us than Arabic TV drama.

Other fans admitted that values emphasized by stories in Korean drama (such as trust among family members) are not prevalent in Arabic drama. For instance, a Qatari fan mentioned, "Khaleeji drama is full of themes of twisted relationships and mistrust among family members that usually make Khaleeji drama unrealistic and at times irrelevant." Another Qatari fan expressed her frustration:

Arab soap operas, especially the Khaleeji soap operas, don't reflect the reality of the Arab societies. Almost all the themes of these soap operas centered on tragedy, family disputes, and violence. They just make me sad. While on the contrary, Korean drama are fun to watch to the point that my mood changes from sad to happy when I flip the channel from Arabic soap opera to Korean soap opera.

In further explaining their affinities with the Korean TV drama genre, fans also highlighted its perceived "sophistication." Some mentioned that they love Korean TV because it is modern and sophisticated, especially in contrast to Arabic-language TV. Fans of different cultural backgrounds agreed, as voiced by one fan: "Arabic soap operas, when compared to Korean soap operas, lack sophisticated production qualities. Korean drama, on the contrary, provides us [fans] with high-quality content with and compelling modern style." Other interviewees expressed their affinity for and fascination with stories and modern style in performances of K-pop music. One explained,

K-pop music videos are not like Arab music videos where the performer sings while he is chasing a girl around seeking her attention. In K-pop music videos, we enjoy sophisticated modern-style music, professional dancing, and an actual meaningful story. Sometimes,

the performers provide audiences with a short 5- to 6-minute story before the actual song itself begins, which makes the music video even more interesting to watch.

This view is supported by similar findings from studies of non-Korean Asian fans of Korean popular culture; these studies find that their audiences prefer Korean drama to their own cultural products because of the "sophisticated and modern" style employed (Cho, 2005; S. Y. Lee, 2005 (cited in Y. Kim, 2007)).

Almost all the fans in this study also acknowledged that the earlier transcultural spread of a perceived similar Asian genre—Japanese anime and manga—has contributed to the diffusion of Korean popular culture in the Arab world. An Egyptian fan summarized,

We are attracted to Korean TV drama because some of the stories in Korean TV drama are personalization of Japanese animation that we have already been familiar with since we were little kids. For instance, K-drama *Boys Over Flower* has similar melodrama content to a Japanese anime series that I watched a long time ago but forgot its name.

In this case, as Y. Cho (2011) has commented elsewhere, it is not always true that global fans of Korean popular culture residing outside the geographic boundaries of Asia are unfamiliar with Asian sensibilities.

Language Affinity

Fans' fascination with and attraction to the Korean language is another integral aspect of their incorporating Korean popular culture into daily activities. Most of the fans interviewed in this study had learned to speak Korean fluently without leaving Qatar and had also given themselves Korean names. This appropriation of Korean language demonstrates the subjective positioning of fans' cultural identities and the complexity of their identity expressions. Some fans learned the Korean language because they wanted to understand, in a literal way, Korean popular culture through drama and musical lyrics. Others expressed their affinity with Korean language in emotional terms. An Egyptian interlocutor enthused,

I adore Korean language. My journey with learning the Korean language is a long one. I first started to learn the Korean language from listening to K-pop lyrics from K-pop music bands, repeating simple phrases of lyrics over and over again, which makes it easy for fans to pick up Korean words. Then I learned more Korean words and sentences from K-drama that I watch online. I continued to learn Korean language from CDs that provide Korean language instructions to learners, and then from language books.

Several learned Korean because they love the language itself and love Korean culture, exemplified in statements such as, "the Korean language is beautiful and Korean culture is fascinating." Another Qatari fan expressed an even deeper sentiment for Korean language and cultural identity expression:

I speak Korean, or at least I use Korean words, almost every day, and I know the meaning of Korean words in English and in Arabic. I use Korean language in different settings. I especially tend to use Korean words when I enter into a fight because I can express myself

better when using Korean language. Actually, the Korean language is very expressive . . . I “think” in Korean . . . I feel that my mindset is Korean.

Fans also articulated their attraction to and fascination with Korean language through their opinions about the dubbing of Korean drama by Arabic transnational TV channels. Some Egyptian fans preferred the dubbing of Korean drama by Arabic transnational channels in standardized Arabic because it is generic and doesn’t target a specific ethnic group, as would dubbing Korean programs in Arabic dialects. Yet others—here, some Qataris, an Egyptian, and a Syrian—suggested that it is better for Arabic TV channels to broadcast Korean drama with Korean audio and Arabic subtitles. One fan reasoned,

Everything is better in its original form. For fans like us who understand Korean language and watch these soaps online, we can easily pick on the mistranslated phrases on the Arabic TV channels. And others who don’t speak Korean can easily find online sites in which fans provide good and “authentic” translation of Korean TV drama better than the “bad” dubbing provided by Arabic TV channels.

Fans’ views of Korean program dubbing by Arabic transnational TV channels also illustrate a different perspective on the notion of cultural discount discussed earlier. In this study, fans used their cultural capital of Korean language and their knowledge of “authentic” fan-translated Korean material to counter the “bad” dubbing of Korean drama by TV channels available within their cultural settings.

Other Personal Experiences

Personal experiences also pushed and pulled fans toward deeper emotional engagements with Korean popular culture. One interviewee noted, “My admiration for Korean popular culture and everything Korean pushed me to contact the Korean Embassy to attend some language classes organized by the embassy.” She was not alone. The Korean Embassy in Qatar holds many cultural activities to promote Korean culture to Qatar residents. In an interview with Qatar’s *The Peninsula* newspaper, Ambassador of the Republic of Korea Chung Keejong noticed that “the interest shown by people in Qatar in South Korean culture and language has been increasing steadily here, with many Qatari ladies getting interested in traditional Korean culture” (“Getting to Know Korea,” 2013).

Interlocutors’ cultural translation processes were also influenced by their firsthand experiences with Korean people during vacation visits to Korea. In particular, these visits shaped the perception of some fans on the “real” Korean ways of doing things. Three Qatari fans interviewed in this research had visited Korea. One fan held that

Korean drama portrays some realistic Korean ways of doing things. I’ll give an example: When I visited Seoul during the summer, I found out that the respect for mealtime by Koreans is a real thing. It is not a fantasy projected in their television drama series. I actually saw people put down their meal boxes wherever they are, and start eating at the exact time for that meal.

Another, Qatari fan stated,

I admired Koreans more when I met with them face-to-face, not through the screens. Koreans are kind on screen and off screen. They are actually very welcoming people. While I was shopping with my family or just browsing the city, I remember I was stopped many times by Koreans who asked me about the henna decoration I had on my hands or asked me about the hijab I put to cover my head. Koreans expressed their curiosity in a very kind and a very genuine way. I actually felt like a celebrity admired by them not as an "alien" to be stared at.

In using their personal testimonies to foreground the "realistic" way in which Koreans embody the cultural values portrayed in exported Korean media, fans constructed a more stable imagined meaning of "Koreanness" than the ambiguous and fluid meaning of "Arabness" found in unrealistic portrayals of Arab values in Arab TV dramas.

Fan Communities and Transcultural Identity Production

While the accumulation of popular cultural capital is a source of collective identity (i.e., "people like us"), it also source of distinction (Bourdieu, 1984). Some fans held that the more knowledge about Korean pop idols, language, and lifestyle a fan acquires, the greater the distinction a fan will feel in relation to others. For other fans, the accumulation of Korean popular culture capital and language works as form of distinction that separates them from other nonfan groups. A Qatari fan illustrated the point:

As a member of a fan community of Korean popular culture, I speak Korean and I mingle with other fans who either speak Korean language or speak a hybrid language mixing Korean and Arabic words. . . . I must say that Korean language provides me with the sense of uniqueness. Because Korean language is completely different from Arabic, it helped in distinguishing me from others who solely speak Arabic.

Transcultural identity also develops within fan communities, foregrounding the possibility that fandom may at times supersede national, regional, and/or geographical boundaries (Chin & Morimoto, 2013). Some of the fans in this study recognized the importance of belonging to offline and online fan groups of Korean popular culture. These groups transcended national boundaries. Fan groups provide a sense of community, and their distinct shared practices and symbols culturally distinguish Korean popular culture fans from other social/cultural groups. Fans identified the aforementioned Korean language acquisition as another cultural practice differentiating them from other Arabic-speaking groups.

Furthermore, fans also use signs and symbols from Korean popular culture itself to distinguish "old" and "new" fans of the K-pop music bands. Consider the dynamics of popular culture expressions used by fans and their interpretation within fans' communities. For instance, all fans in this study agreed that "fans of K-pop music bands such as *Shinwa* or *DBSK* are 'old' [original], but fans of K-pop music bands such as *Shinee* and *BTS* are 'new.'" A Qatari K-pop music fan elaborated,

When you are a member of a K-pop fan group, you can identify those who are like you and others who are not. For instance, we can immediately categorize a K-pop music fan as “new” or “original” from the sticker that fan puts on a paper file he or she is holding.

These distinctions can facilitate new fan relationships and connections to K-pop culture. A Qatari fan mused,

I met my now best friend accidentally at the Japanese culture fan club in the university. She was holding a key chain with a picture of my favorite K-pop music band. From that day we became close friends. Fans who love certain K-pop music bands just click together.

Fans developed affective affinities within and outside their fan communities. They expressed fascination with Korean popular culture by distributing products such as stickers, records, and souvenirs that are part of their accumulation of popular cultural capital objects and materials over time. As Fiske (1992) notes, these objects effectively form “cultural fora for the exchange and circulation of knowledge and the building of a cultural community” (p. 44) among themselves—as well as outside their fan community while working as “missionaries,” inviting others to enjoy this phenomenon. Likewise, as H. Lee (2014) also found, in this study fans’ attractions were rarely limited to a particular medium or even genre, instead often arching across Korean popular culture.

Arab fans developed transcultural, affective affinities through their Korean popular culture consumption rather than simplistic interpretations of media texts. For instance, one Qatari fan intimated, “I have a room in my house full of K-pop icons and merchandise that I have collected over time. This room is my sanctuary where I find refuge when I have a sad day.” She formed a positive emotional attraction to Korean popular culture facilitated by artifacts of her fandom. Such complex affinities are facilitated by the continuous, processual nature of cultural identity formation, as Hall (1996) argues. It involves understanding and being understood, an interplay between meaning and interpretation. Jansson (1999) recognizes that an “individual’s sense of belonging to a cultural community demands a situation in which he[/she] is able to understand the intersubjectively established sign system, as well as making himself[/herself] understood as a member of the community” (p. 11). Some fans effectively valued their fascination with Korean popular culture as a powerful mechanism to shift their mood or state of mind. Their fandom became transcultural, a deeply personal affinity for media as well as its cultural referents and signifiers that had little to do with national origins or cultural proximity.

Globalized, transcultural flows of mediated products of Korean popular culture engender new referents of cultural identity among Arab fans in Qatar. Fans connected with Korean popular culture by diverse means, most prominently through social media characterizing the current shift to a hypermedia mediascape in the Arab world. Fans’ cultural translation activities moved beyond cultural proximity, instead revealing genre, language, and other personal affinities. Cultural translation of Korean TV drama and K-pop music thereby becomes a significant mechanism for young Arab women to develop personal identifications with transnational and transcultural communities.

Conclusion

This article is a principal study of the unheard voices of Arab fans of Korean popular culture in Qatar. Its findings reinforce that the frustration with Arabic culture expressed by fans of Korean popular culture becomes a site through which fans assert their affective affinities to Korean popular culture.

Fans' cultural translation of Korean media reflects the complex ways humans create meaning from media texts, as well as their multiple affinities with it. Korean popular culture becomes meaningful and relevant to fans in Qatar primarily through their development of affective affinities and fascination with Korean TV drama and K-pop music, transcending perceptions of cultural proximity. Some fans experienced affinity through relating similar cultural values depicted in Korean TV drama with Arab family and cultural values and gender relations. Other fans explicitly excluded this notion of similar values in Korean and Arab cultures as a factor in their attraction. Instead, they explained their translation of Korean popular culture through affective affinities of genre, language, and other personal experiences. Genre affinities included lack of cultural proximity, universal appeals, perceived sophistication, and prior familiarity with Asian sensibilities or cultural texts.

The accumulation of popular culture capital and Korean language capital by Arab fans has become a mechanism and form of self-expression, self-identification, and distinction. In building fan communities, fans have foregrounded their fan identity as a vehicle for transcultural bonding. In the process, fans backgrounded their national differences to experience Korean popular culture together. Furthermore, the appropriation of Korean popular culture symbols by fans worked as one form of a desired distinction between fans ("us") and nonfans ("them"). Thus, the consumption of Korean popular culture by fans in Qatar is a self-driven as well as a self-actualization process.

The findings of the article reflect the experiences of a group of a university-educated fans; further research could expand the research population to include varying age groups and additional nationalities. The multiple affinities concept applied in this study also could be further appraised through inquiries to understand how fans culturally translate other transnational media texts they consume (such as Turkish, Indian, Japanese, American, etc.) and what additional discursive practices occur in different transnational fandom spaces.

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