

## **An Analysis of the Korean Wave as Transnational Popular Culture: North American Youth Engage Through Social Media as TV Becomes Obsolete**

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This article explores the ways in which the new Korean Wave phenomenon is integrated into a social media–embedded cultural landscape in North America. By employing in-depth interviews with K-pop fans in Canada, it analyzes recent developments characterizing the Korean Wave in tandem with cultural industries in the age of social media. It discusses the increasing role of social media and changing media consumption habits among youth in Canada. It finally maps out why social media has contributed to the enhanced popularity of the transnational media culture produced in a non-Western region.

*Keywords: new Korean Wave, transnational culture, social mediascape, K-pop, BTS, cultural politics*

Introduced by The Chainsmokers, BTS made their U.S. television debut on the 2017 American Music Awards Sunday night (Nov. 19) in Los Angeles. They also made history as the first K-pop boy band to perform on a major American awards show.

Performing “DNA,” the group displayed their flashy sense of style and flawless choreography on the seductive banger. It obviously made a big impression on the audience—when the cameras cut to crowd reactions, several fans were crying. (Lynch, 2017, paras. 1–2)

BTS’s 2017 appearance at the American Music Awards marked the latest K-pop movement in North America. With the 2017 BTS Live Trilogy Episode III: The Wings Tour, BTS drew record crowds in several countries, including the United States, and the boy band created a K-pop sensation. BTS is not the only K-pop group that is popular in North America. In September 2017, for example, Taeyang—a popular solo artist and also a member of Big Bang—added another concert in Vancouver due to high demand. Meanwhile, EXO’s 2016 Vancouver concert was part of the second tour of the Korean boy band. The group’s tour in North America drew more than 42,380 K-pop fans, including 7,842 fans in Vancouver,

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making it one of the largest tours by a Korean act in recent history (SMTOWN, 2016). These events demonstrated that the two-decades-long popularity of Korean pop culture had arrived in North America.

The Korean Wave (*hallyu* in Korean), symbolizing the rapid growth of the Korean cultural industries and their exports of popular culture, started in 1997. However, only recently has hallyu emerged as a true transnational cultural phenomenon. The initial stage of the Korean Wave was mainly received in Asia (and, later, beyond Asia); it began with a few Korean TV dramas, such as *What Is Love All About?* (1997), *Winter Sonata* (2002), and *Dae Jang Geum* (2003). In the early 2000s, hallyu spread with the success of Korean films and a few K-pop musicians, such as H.O.T., Shinhwa, and BoA. However, the presence of these Korean cultural industries in the West was marginal.

The situation surrounding the growth of Korean popular culture has changed since the late 2000s, when Western fans suddenly started to enjoy K-pop, digital games, and television programs, including dramas and reality competition shows. K-pop was not popular in North America until Psy's "Gangnam Style" became a huge hit in the global music markets. Although several K-pop idol groups, including Wonder Girls, attempted to penetrate the North American market, their attempts were not successful. Since Psy's successful debut in North America, several idol groups, such as Girls' Generation, Twice, EXO, and BTS, have substantially increased their activities in several parts of the world. In the 2010s, many North American video game players have increasingly played Korean games online—in particular, massively multiplayer online role-playing games and mobile games.

Social media has played a key role in circulating the local popular culture in global markets as BTS's global popularity has been propelled by the support of its dedicated ARMY—Adorable Representative M.C. for Youth—a fan base that thrives on social media. In fact, transnational popular cultural products created in non-Western countries are benefiting from the rise of social media, because global fans have been enjoying locally produced popular culture on various social media. Instead of purchasing CDs and DVDs and instead of watching popular culture on television and in theaters, these global fans use social media, including YouTube and Facebook, to enjoy popular culture (Jin & Yoon, 2016). Tech-savvy young people have shifted their habits in consuming popular culture by heavily relying on social media, which indicates the emergence of social media as one of the most significant breakthroughs in both circulation and consumption of popular culture.

Compared with the earlier Korean Wave, this new phase of hallyu starting in the late 2000s and circulated by social media—referred to as the *new Korean Wave* or *Hallyu 2.0* (Jin, 2016; S. Lee & Nornes, 2015)—appears to be more intensive in its popularity. The new Korean Wave refers to the circulation via social media of Korean popular culture—including television programs, films, K-pop, digital games, and animation—that began in 2008 (S. Lee & Nornes, 2015; I. Oh & Park, 2012; J. Song & Jang, 2013). In particular, as Jin (2016) argues elsewhere, Hallyu 2.0, or the new Korean Wave, mainly relies on the rapid growth of social media, because global fans—not only Asian fans but Western fans in Europe and North America—are able to enjoy Korean popular culture, again, via social media. The social media-driven new Korean Wave has aptly adjusted to global fans' tastes in both production and consumption as Korean cultural producers have quickly developed their popular culture reflecting the era of social media. Before

the widespread use of social media, most Korean Wave fans enjoyed local popular culture through CDs and DVDs and even videotapes as their friends and relatives introduced Korean popular culture.

The new Korean Wave is distinguished from the earlier wave by its global reach, as exemplified by the increasing number of North American fans of hallyu content. K-pop leads the contemporary Korean Wave, especially with Western audiences, and dramas and movies enjoy staggering popularity in these regions (Ju & Lee, 2015). As Choe and Russell (2012) observed, hallyu had conquered Asia long before the proliferation of global social networks; however, "YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter make it easier for K-pop bands to reach a wider audience in the West, and those fans are turning to the same social networking tools to proclaim their devotion" (para. 7).

This article explores the ways in which the new Korean Wave phenomenon is integrated into a social media-embedded cultural landscape in North America. I conducted in-depth interviews with hallyu fans in Canada in 2016 to analyze the recent developments characterizing the new Korean Wave in tandem with the cultural industries in the age of social media. The article discusses the increasing role of social media and changing media consumption habits among youth in Canada. Comparing this research with earlier research conducted in North America in spring 2014 enables an investigation into the roles of social media in the recent new media-led Korean Wave phenomenon. The study maps out how social media has contributed to the enhanced popularity of the transnational media culture produced in a non-Western region.

More specifically, to investigate the ways in which North American youth engage with the circulation of Korean pop culture, I conducted qualitative interviews. Through a snowball sampling method, I recruited 25 participants (18 women and 7 men) who had been identified as Korean culture fans between May and December 2016. The participants had been enjoying Korean pop culture for three to five years, with the exception of five women, who had been enthusiastic about hallyu for eight and 12 years. This suggests that most participants encountered hallyu through the new Korean Wave. The participants were between 18 and 25 years of age and were undergraduate or graduate students, with two recent graduates. I used a semistructured interview format to allow them to express their opinions beyond the given questions. Each interview lasted for up to two hours, and the participants were asked about two main categories relevant to Hallyu 2.0: They were asked (1) how and why they enjoy Korean pop culture and (2) how they use social media to engage with Korean pop culture and the role of social media in the emergence of the new Korean Wave.

### **How to Interpret the Social Media-Saturated New Korean Wave**

With the rapid growth of social media as the most significant platform for the circulation of local popular culture, global fans are profoundly depending on social media for consuming hallyu. As O'Reilly (2005) emphasized, the current form of digital society known as the Web 2.0 era is evolving into user-oriented media, referring to a human-oriented technological paradigm. In the social media era, network effects from user contributions are the key to the growth of popular culture, and the Korean Wave is a good example. "Social media obviously have broadened up the media landscape, and in all likelihood

diminished the importance of traditional promotion channels such as print music magazines, radio, and music television” (Verboord & van Noord, 2016, p. 70).

Several important analyses exist on the role of social media in the circulation of popular culture, and several media scholars have analyzed social media as a new space for participatory culture (e.g., Jenkins, Greene, & Ford, 2013). Jenkins and colleagues’ notion of spreadable media offers an alternative conceptual framework in social media–embedded cultural consumption and participatory culture. They argue that, in the contemporary digital media landscape, there is “an emerging hybrid model of circulation, where a mix of top-down and bottom-up forces determine how material is shared across and among cultures in far more participatory (and messier) ways” (p. 1). With the example of Susan Boyle’s audition for *Britain’s Got Talent*, which was viewed more than 77 million times on YouTube in 2013, Jenkins et al. argue that:

The spread of Susan Boyle demonstrates how content not designed to circulate beyond a contained market or timed for rapid global distribution can gain much greater visibility than ever before, thanks to the active circulation of various grassroots agents, while television networks and production companies struggle to keep up with such unexpected, rapidly escalating demand. (p. 15)

Of course, the spreadable media framework is open to criticism. As Moor (2015) criticizes, Jenkins et al. (2013) did not focus on some of the disturbing consequences of spreadability because they overemphasized the endless citation of American popular entertainment success stories, which itself has no room for consideration of the less positive outcomes of spreadable media and participatory culture. They also seem to overlook the probable limitations of the media-driven participatory culture (Jin & Yoon, 2016). For instance, the spreadable media framework fails to explain how corporations’ ownership of social media platforms has been influential (Fuchs, 2014). Fuchs argues that Jenkins et al. reduce “the notion of participation to a cultural dimension, ignoring the broad notion of participatory democracy and its implications for the Internet” (p. 65).

In the Korean Wave context, several media scholars have started to analyze the increasing role of social media for the dissemination of Korean popular culture and have coined *hallyu* as a social media–embedded new transnational culture. In fact, some scholars have discussed how hallyu has emerged in relation to the technological mediation of Korean popular culture (Kim & Kang, 2013; Ko, Kim, No, & Simoes, 2014; Ono & Kwon, 2013; M. Song, 2015), and others have focused on the role of social media–driven cultural consumption through the lens of participatory culture (I. Oh & Park, 2012). For example, M. Song (2015) explored the global online distribution strategies for K-pop through a case analysis of “Gangnam Style” by examining Web 2.0 technologies as a major success factor. I. Oh and Park’s (2012) study of local pop culture on social media illustrates that the Korean cultural industries strategically adopt social media and entice users to participate in cultural events. Meanwhile, Yoon and Jin’s (2016) study of social media use among Korean Wave fans in Canada suggests that social media technologies are deeply articulated with users’ off-line social networks.

Regardless of their different perspectives, these previous works claim that the emergence of new media technology, including social media, speeds up the cultural diffusion of media products and that the role of user-generated content platforms, such as YouTube and mobile social media, support a decentralized file-sharing system for culture to spread through interpersonal contacts. They empirically prove the increasing role of media convergence in the transnational flow of Korean pop culture.

More recently, several works have provided new perspectives with holistic interpretations of social media-driven transnational popular culture (Jin, 2016; S. Lee & Nornes, 2015). Jin (2016) argues not only that the new Korean Wave relies on social media but that social media is equipped in Korean-produced digital technologies and cultures, which means that social media-driven hallyu is the result of the interplay of several major players, such as the government, cultural producers, and consumers who appropriate social media to make the Korean Wave phenomenon possible globally. Jin and Yoon (2016) especially explore how the hallyu phenomenon is integrated into a social media-driven cultural landscape, referring to it as the social mediascape. The social mediascape of hallyu reveals the interplay of technological affordances of social media platforms and fans' sociality with one another, resulting in the rapid spread of hallyu as a set of impure cultural forms. The current study critically engages with the social mediascape of hallyu in the circulation of Korean popular culture among North American youth—in particular, in Canada—to shed light on current debates about the role of social media in the flow of Korean pop culture.

### **The Intensification of the Social Mediascape of Hallyu 2.0**

In the 2010s, there is no doubt that the most noteworthy dimension in the new Korean Wave is the rapid growth of social media as a platform to distribute and consume popular culture. In studies conducted in 2014 and 2016, participants generally accessed social media to enjoy Korean popular culture—in particular, K-pop, television programs (e.g., reality competition shows), and films. The way in which social media evolved in regard to fan practices was well observed in the accounts of several participants whose engagement with hallyu began in the social media era. The fans in both studies were immersed in the social mediascape through which the hallyu content was increasingly available and spreadable; however, the degree of the immersion significantly increased in the second study, because all participants were heavily relying on social media. Although interviewees in the two studies expressed the significance of social media, their responses differed in some important ways.

In the first study conducted in 2014, participants moderately stated that the growth of hallyu was a direct result of social media; however, in the second study, during 2016, they correlated this phenomenon firmly and strongly. As Jung (2015) aptly describes the case of K-pop, "The current wave formation of hallyu is an intriguing example of how both the industry and the consumers successfully transform themselves into equally important players in the global game of social networking" (p. 85).

However, the responses of the North American fans in the two studies disclose that the social mediascape of Hallyu 2.0 encompasses different elements. The first study revealed that the main characteristic is a technology dimension involving certain affordances that frame users' actions. In media research,

Affordances are functional and relational aspects which frame, while not determining, the possibilities for agentic action in relation to an object. In this way, technologies can be understood as artefacts which may be both shaped by and shaping of the practices humans use in interaction with, around and through them. (Hutchby, 2001, p. 444)

Additionally, the first study revealed a sociality dimension addressing the participatory cultural atmosphere that is facilitated by fans and a textuality dimension revealing the conjunction between the impurity and spreadability of media content (Jin & Yoon, 2016).

In the second study, although technology's affordance is not much different, two new dimensions emerged: the construction of the new Korean Wave as a global brand and the freedom in popular culture. The various dimensions of the two studies are compared and discussed in the following sections.

### **Technological Affordances of the Social Mediascape in the TV-less Era**

Cultural practices among North American fans of hallyu were embedded in the new media environment in which social media plays a major role in their cultural consumption. Most interviewees did not necessarily use a single form of traditional media, such as television or film, to access local popular culture. Social media—both social network sites (e.g., Facebook and Twitter) and user-generated content platforms (e.g., YouTube)—have replaced the role of the traditional media, which previously had been a main dissemination platform of local popular culture. Many young people do not watch television (Marketing Charts, 2017) and instead rely on the Internet and smartphones to enjoy music videos and television programs.<sup>2</sup>

North American youth in these studies did not watch television to enjoy local popular culture. Despite the fact that some cable channels air local cultural programs, including Korean popular culture, television was not their main platform for viewing. Most of the participants, if they lived in a dormitory or lived alone, did not have a television set, so watching popular culture on television generally has not been an option for the younger generations.

More specifically, in the first study, conducted in 2014, some participants started to enjoy Korean popular culture through television and/or theaters. However, in the second study conducted in 2016, as they began to enjoy Korean popular culture in the 2000s, when social media was in full swing, all participants started to enjoy local popular culture through social media. For example, Interviewee 3, an 18-year-old woman who had been a Korean Wave fan for six years, stated that she never thought of

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<sup>2</sup> TV viewing figures from Nielsen provide 6.5 years' worth of quarterly data on Americans' traditional TV viewing habits (Marketing Charts, 2017). It is well established at this point that youth as a whole are watching less traditional TV. In particular, teens (ages 12 to 17) watched on average 11 hours and 47 minutes of traditional TV per week in the first quarter of 2017, a rather large 17.6% drop year over year and a 45.5% contraction since 2012. Older millennials (ages 25 to 34) watched 18 hours and 23 minutes per week during the second quarter of 2017, a 12.2% decrease year over year but a more expansive 32.5% drop over five years.

watching K-pop and television dramas on television channels. She believed that "it would be very difficult if traditional media were used in catching up new songs and television programs." Another participant (Interviewee 7, age 23, male) stated:

Traditional media are for older generations, like my mother and aunts, who have more free time and prefer traditional ways. In contrast to this, social media is for younger people who are always on the move and do not have much time.

In other words, whereas older generations are used to traditional media, people in their teens and 20s are accustomed to social media, which mostly emerged in the 2000s, including Facebook (in 2004) and YouTube (in 2005), so it was easy for the participants to enjoy popular culture through these social media platforms.

The unpopularity of the traditional media among hallyu fans may reflect a general tendency of young North American audiences who have been turning to the Web instead of to traditional media for information and entertainment. For young North Americans, technology, including social media, is essential. They are the first generation to come of age with cable TV, the Internet, and cell phones, so technology is essentially part of every young person's DNA. They believe that technology use (24%) made them unique, followed by music/pop culture (11%) and being liberal/tolerant (7%; Nielsen, 2014). This implies that for young North Americans, the convergence of technology and popular culture has become a new trend.

For some participants, the technological affordances of social media seemed to frame the ways in which they enjoyed new Korean Wave content. During the first study, the participants considered social media as a user-friendly and user-oriented arena. The rapid circulation of music videos, dramas, and information about K-pop and dramas on the social mediascape seemed to transform the nature of cultural consumption. For them, consuming pop culture did not mean the possession of materials; rather, it implied participatory processes, such as searching, accessing, enjoying, and reworking (Jin & Yoon, 2016). Technological affordances are very influential in the circulation of local popular culture. Psy's "Gangnam Style" phenomenon (in 2012) exemplified that one cannot deny the significance of a technology dimension in Hallyu 2.0. As Ono and Kwon (2013) aptly put it, "YouTube is a key factor in the K-pop fever" (p. 209). Thanks to YouTube, K-pop grows globally, and its transnational fan bases, including in North America, increase.

This trend has continued and intensified as observed in the second study as social media has changed global fans' consumption habits. In the pre-social media era, when people enjoyed popular culture on television, at theaters, and in concert halls, they used to wait for the media to be aired in North America; however, waiting is no longer necessary for social media-saturated young people. One participant (age 22, female) stated:

Social media makes it a lot easier to find and watch Korean shows, especially now it makes me and my friends feel much more updated than before. I do not need to wait for weeks or months for a show/drama to end in Korea and get brought to air by network

channels in Canada. Now new episodes are translated and subbed within a few hours and could be enjoyed freely through social media.

Another participant (age 18, female) said, "Social media makes the Korean Wave more accessible to audiences. I keep up to date with my favorite shows and music easily with my smartphone."

Social media has changed how people approach and consume cultural products. Social media is a global trend, and it is the fastest and most convenient way to access K-pop and dramas. Interviewee 5 (age 23, female) in the 2016 study noted, "Social media helps the Korean Wave grow exponentially. A music video can reach a million views within a couple days, and the fans help promoting these products just by sharing them on their pages or replaying them on YouTube." Interviewee 10 (age 20, female) stated:

I started to know Korean popular culture because a friend of mine introduced several music videos. Social media brings together like-minded individuals to enjoy Korean popular culture. Following similar blogs on Tumblr or socializing with people who watch the same dramas on Twitter are significant fan activities, which are unique features embedded in social media.

Another participant (Interviewee 13, age 22, male) said that he mainly watches K-pop on YouTube, but he believes that participating in discussion boards on Reddit is another important activity.

Social media is indeed an effective source for Korean television dramas, films, and, in particular, K-pop, because most K-pop music videos and reality show clips are available on YouTube. Large cultural industries corporations used to produce and exhibit most cultural content, including popular music, television programs, and films. However, in the social media era, many global youth have swiftly changed their consumption habits and enjoy cultural content via social media instead of traditional media; therefore, social media plays a key role in global youth's cultural consumption.

As Fuhr (2016) points out, in the first stage of hallyu, when it was spread mainly in Asia, television was one of the most significant media: "In the realm of pop music, MTV Asia, since its inception in 1994, has been prominently facilitating a regional Asian imaginary, and K-pop has come to play a growing role in this context" (p. 8). With the success of Korean idols in Asia in the early 2000s, Korea seemed to be the next pioneer of popular culture in Asia. However, in the North American cultural realm, the hallyu boom came late, and television, including MTV, has not played a key role in the dissemination of Korean popular culture due to young people's heavy reliance on social media. The technological affordances of social media, therefore, can be made possible in the midst of the demise of the old forms of traditional technologies (e.g., television) in the realm of popular culture.

### **The Impure Textuality of Hallyu as a Brand**

Korean popular culture appears to have expanded in Western cultural markets due to its brand. Until the mid-2000s, the Korean Wave phenomenon was primarily known as an inter-Asian cultural flow,

because it was not popular in other parts of the world. However, since 2010, the Korean Wave has substantially gained fame as a brand, which is the reason that it is enjoyed by global fans. Brands can attain pop iconic status, although iconic brands, as other aspects of popular culture, may rise and fall. In other words, "the products and forms of expression and identity that are frequently encountered or widely accepted, commonly liked or approved, and characteristic of a particular society at a given time" (Delaney, 2016, para. 3).

In the 2014 study, above all, Korean pop cultural texts tended to be identified by their hybrid and impure attributes. Hallyu 2.0 seems to be spreadable due to both its textual and structural impurity. This impurity, according to Jenkins et al. (2013), points to the "unexpected mixing and mingling of cultural materials" (p. 263), which appeal to multiple audiences beyond national boundaries. In the early stage of hallyu, purity—in terms of not mixing global and local culture so the local producers could maintain local peculiarity—was one of the main features responsible for the popularity of Korean popular culture in Asia. Several Korean television dramas and films reflected traditional Confucian values and romantic love stories.

As Lee and Ju (2010) point out, purity was often considered a significant feature of K-dramas, such as *Winter Sonata*, and traditional family values and pure love were representative themes in the Korean dramas until the early 2000s. In the realm of popular culture, melodrama is also a cornerstone of Korea's broadcasting industry, and "many viewers consider melodramatic modes of storytelling to be inherently native" (Paquet, 2011, p. 19). However, in the 2010s, Korean pop cultural texts have tended to be identified by their hybridity, referring to the mixing of two different cultures—in particular, the mixing of Western and non-Western and impure attributes. Most participants in the 2014 study enjoyed Korean pop culture not because of its alleged Korean or Asian sensibilities, but because of its mixed textual aspects (Jin & Yoon, 2016).

In the second study, the perceived brand in the recent Korean Wave phenomenon can be identified by its accumulated characteristics. Interviewee 17 (age 20, female) stated, "Korean music seems to be a brand name when it is mentioned. They have certain characteristics that differentiate them from Western producers. The way they produce TV shows makes them a lot more real than those of Canada and America's." The participants did not deny that the Korean popular culture has been hybridized, and, therefore, sometimes they could not differentiate it from American culture. However, they also commonly claimed that the Korean popular culture has developed "its unique features to be stuck in our head" (Interviewee 18, age 20, male). A 23-year-old participant (Interviewee 19, female), in particular, stated:

K-pop has a spirit and it is very lively. The music is also lovely with awesome dance moves and the good-looking singers. K-pop has meaningful lyrics that are usually about love. Most of all, K-pop steers clear of drugs or sex as well as violence, which are popular topics in American music. Although Korean popular culture takes from American cultures and combines them to make their own culture, they are still unique.

Interviewee 20 (age 22, male) stated:

The plots of Korean dramas and variety shows are mostly for entertaining purposes, as in American counterparts. However, they are easy to understand and follow. They also develop clear characters, such as good guy and bad guy, and many of them are about romance. Variety shows have idols playing games and talking about conventional topics, which seems to be suitable for housewives.

Indeed, Korean reality variety shows are very different from American shows, which makes Korean variety shows unique. Many American reality television shows reflect a competitive nature. As Reiss and Wiltz (2001) point out, "contestants were vying with one another for a cash prize and were engaged in building alliances and betraying allies." *Survivor*, one of the most successful reality shows in the United States, primarily focuses on competitions among participants in a cruel way because they betray their friends and team up with former enemies to win the games. Koreans do not like this kind of aggressiveness (Jin, 2016, p. 58). Interviewee 20 also stated:

People like K-pop because it is dynamic, energetic, catchy, and happy, which symbolize a Korean music brand. Other countries' music has these qualities as well, but Korea tends to have a steady outflow of music that makes people feel good and want to dance. In particular, K-pop has the ballads. They are very emotional, and the lyrics are articulated. The singers perform them with genuine feelings, and human emotion is just something people connect with.

However, there are certain differences between die-hard Korean Wave fans and general fans in understanding hallyu as a brand. As Interviewee 2 (age 22, male) emphasized, in today's globalization trend, boundaries are blurred, and the flow of culture between the West and the East is much faster, more flexible, and accessible. Therefore, for the die-hard fans, developing a Westernized style does not seem to be a problem. Interviewee 2 noted:

The production and dissemination of Korean popular culture is truly globalized. Thus K-pop was able to spread globally while still localizing enough to maintain its loyal fan base in Korea as well as other proximate states in East Asia. This has resulted in Korean pop music forging its own identity that is not based solely off of one culture in particular, but a hybrid mash-up of various cultures, thus producing a brand new entity in its own right.

Interviewee 5 (age 23, female) said:

The Korean Wave phenomenon is certainly a Western-influenced local culture. However, the world is becoming global, and it is becoming increasingly important to be global in order to reach a wider audience. For me, Korean popular culture is colorful and bright with rich traditions. While adding modern and Western factors, the Korean Wave is like the new identity of Korean culture.

The die-hard fans do not care much about Westernized and/or hybridized Korean culture; they care for the quality of the cultural products. Interviewee 4 (age 19, female) noted, "Variety shows like *Running Man*

are very entertaining and fun, but different from American variety shows, which often have too many conflicts and gossips.” She acknowledges that most dramas have 16 to 20 episodes, so global fans can easily follow them: “Most dramas also have splendid storylines. From the writers to actors and directors, they put a lot of effort to produce meaningful works, and I feel that spirit, which can be seen in only Korean dramas.” The fans understand that Korean popular culture constantly changes; however, because the Korean style continues to develop in both structure and content, the new Korean Wave as a brand of Korean popular culture makes them comfortable, which allows them to enjoy local popular culture.

Interviewee 3 (age 18, female), however, noted that Korean popular culture is not very authentic because cultural producers must cater to foreign tastes. Another participant (Interviewee 6, age 22, female) stated, “The Korean popular culture is definitely more Western-like now. Earlier it had a lot more Korean characteristics. However, the music trends are more aligned with American trends.” Interviewee 15 (age 19, female) stated:

I used to think that Korean music was all about trots and folk music. However, the recent K-pop gave me the idea that Korean music was similar to Western music, with all the dance melody, sometimes borrowed beats from American songs. Therefore, the traits of authentic culture are lost.

An 18-year-old participant (Interviewee 8, female) emphasized that social media exaggerate the quality of popular culture, because cultural producers produce them after repeating the same dance and song in K-pop, and, therefore, social media provide some biases to fans. As Interviewee 15 (age 19, female) stated, “People are now more open to new things and cultures, so I do not mind Americanized popular culture. However, K-pop has many English verses and slang words, sometimes even soft-core cursing,” which is not the original format of Korean pop music.

The new Korean Wave appeals to the participants in large part because of the impurity. Hallyu is perceived as Western-inspired local pop culture, but it is still different from American culture. In other words, for many global fans of hallyu, the new Korean Wave is neither purely Korean nor purely Western. In a way, hallyu is decoded by its global fans as “a cultural composite, whose mashed-up and remixed identity is marked by a series of border crossings, moments when two cultures touch each other across geopolitical distances” (Jenkins et al., 2013, pp. 262–263). Hallyu’s cultural impurity makes it a particularly powerful example of the way local popular culture is developed and circulated in this current phase of globalization (Jenkins et al., 2013). Impurity in recent Korean pop culture appears to make the texts more approachable and spreadable (Jin, 2016).

Of course, cultural impurity is a complex notion, because different cultural forms are influenced by different countries; therefore, the nature of impurity is not uniform. For example, K-pop has deeply engaged with American pop music and Western musicians as they participate as composers in the local music industry. In contrast, Korean dramas have practiced various textual impurities as several countries, such as the United States, Japan, and China, become influential. Several Korean reality shows, such as *Super Star K*, *Star Audition: The Great Birth*, and *Dancing with the Stars*, have developed television formats learned from the United States. Meanwhile, several Korean broadcasters have advanced their

programs based on Japanese programs: The 1997 SBS drama *Dedicated Daddy Challenge* plagiarized the Japanese drama *Happy Family Plan*, which aired on TBS, and a 1999 MBC drama titled *Youth* allegedly copied the Japanese television program *Love Generation*. Lee Dong-Hoo (2004) pointed out that the Korean broadcasters with limited financial resources mainly sought to mimic Japanese television content. In the 2010s, because several Chinese entertainment corporations have invested in the Korean broadcasting industry, some recent Korean dramas have had no choice but to accommodate their demands.

Interestingly, the second study reveals that this kind of impurity through hybridization has firmly become a brand of the new Korean Wave. The audience enjoys this specific type of local popular culture, because they now expect to see this kind of systematized local culture. With some reservation, the participants express no particular opposition or antagonism to hybrid Korean culture. Instead, they seek to enjoy it because they know this is what they want to enjoy. In the social mediascape of Hallyu 2.0, the traditional national characteristics of Korean popular culture may be diluted by mixing them with Western components; however, this does not necessarily negatively impact the growth of local culture, because the new Korean Wave has constructed itself as a global brand.

#### **From the Social Mediascape to Cultural Politics**

The circulation of the Korean Wave in the social mediascape has changed from the emphasis of participatory culture in the first study to the normative value, emphasizing the importance of freedom in popular culture, which is more political. In both studies, the participants stated that the circulation of local popular culture driven by social mediascape enhances, and is enhanced by, participatory cultural practices. They indicated that one of the main reasons that they rely on social media platforms was to participate in discussion boards and/or to share their opinions with other fans on social media. The participants commented on the ways in which social media contributed to networking and sharing with peer fans. Social media can constitute a meaningful cultural economy of fandom only when it involves users' engagement and participation. However, participants' activities differ between the first and second studies.

During the first study, the mainstream media was unable to provide North American fans with prompt cultural and linguistic translations of Korean content, so fans continued to translate and circulate hallyu materials, especially via participatory online social networking, such as YouTube and Viki.

This social mediascape driven by fans' participation in the circulation of local popular culture signals a movement toward a more participatory model of culture, one which sees the public not as simply consumers of preconstructed messages but as people who are shaping, sharing, reframing, and remixing media content in ways which might not have been previously imagined. And they are doing so not as isolated individuals but within larger communities and [social media] networks, which allow them to spread content well beyond their immediate geographic proximity. (Jenkins et al., 2013, p. 2)

Of course, global fans' sharing practices vary, from simply uploading and downloading cultural materials to sharing information and opinions. With the case of fans' reactions to K-pop on YouTube, David Oh (2017) points out that the YouTubers likely seek the meanings to empower their marginalized fan identities. In other words, they actively work to interpret the meaning of the music video apart from the song with stated intentions of later matching it to the lyrics when English translations become available. Because of their inability to understand the language, the visual readings of the texts are important to global fans' interest in K-pop (Ono & Kwon, 2013).

However, participants in the second study did not talk about participation much. Instead, some expressed that they preferred social media-saturated Korean popular culture to traditional media-driven consumption because of political reasons. Admitting the significance of instantaneous accessibility provided by social media, several global fans also believe that social media plays a key role in providing uncensored and uncontrolled cultural content—in particular, because Korean popular culture was formerly heavily controlled by the government.

The Korean government indeed executed various forms of censorship. The military regimes until the early 1990s attempted to regulate any sort of negative expressions about the authoritarian regimes while enforcing their anticommunist agendas that had the greatest impact on cultural production (Yecies & Shim, 2016). These administrations sought to eliminate cultural products that "might violate good taste or customs, that might hurt the interests and dignity of the country, or that were thought to praise North Korea and the communist state" (Park, 2002, p. 123). In the broadcasting industry, songs with more than one-third of the lyrics written in English were banned by the semistate Korean Public Performance Ethics Committee ("Controversy on the Ban," 1997). As censorship officially ended in the early 2000s, Korean record companies are free to publish any songs.

As Cantor (1995) argued, American pop culture mainly champions freedom and celebrates the virtues of independence and self-reliance. However, several cultural forms have also investigated the conflicts between freedom and other core values, such as social order and political stability. Younger generations certainly understand the conflicts between order through censorship and other regulations and freedom, and they look to find their comfort zones on social media-driven consumptions of Korean popular culture.

Most participants clearly stated that they liked social media-driven consumption of local popular culture because they believed that social media is not strictly controlled by any third parties, including the government. Therefore, they felt more liberty than they did with traditional media, which are highly controlled by the government. Interviewee 2 (age 22, male) claimed:

Sometimes it is for me to avoid censorship through social media platforms, like Facebook and YouTube, because some contents that seemed sensitive in Asia would be available to North America and is still perfectly acceptable with the culture in North America.

Interviewee 6 (age 22, female) stated:

It is hard to find Korean shows on traditional media in Canada, and I just read newspaper articles about EXO's concert in Vancouver. It was not televised, but I could get some news through Facebook and watched some on social media. To international fans, social media is the easiest and is somewhat less controlled and/or filtered.

In the same vein, Interviewee 5 (age 23, female) stated, "Traditional media are highly controlled by third parties, such as the government and corporations. However, social media is not strictly controlled and is more liberal and filled with more content than traditional media." The participants seemed to feel freedom from both the government and corporations (e.g., both cultural producers and advertisers). As a 20-year-old fan (Interviewee 10, female) noted, social media has enhanced people's experience of Korean popular culture. While fans need to wait longer for a music CD and film DVD, they now watch music videos and television shows on YouTube right after traditional media air them.

However, unlike traditional media, where the government through legal measures and corporations through advertising control the nature of cultural content, fans believe that social media is a censor-free platform. They understand that social media as a new platform for popular culture provides a space in which local culture can be seen with no control. This trend may not necessarily fit the conventional definition of participatory culture (Jenkins et al., 2013).

Overall, global fans of Korean popular culture not only develop the social mediascape of local popular culture, but emphasize the significance of liberty in popular culture. This implies that global fans do not want to be controlled by the government through censorship, and they want to avoid corporate intervention through advertising, as in traditional media. As Fuchs (2014) correctly observes, "Participation means that humans have the right and reality to be part of decisions and to govern and control the structures that affect them" (p. 57). For global fans, social media-saturated consumption of local popular culture is the most desirable cultural activity because they put themselves, not the government nor corporations, as controllers of cultural activities.

### **Conclusion**

This article explores the ways in which social media has disseminated Korean popular culture in North America. The rise of both the visibility and popularity of Korean pop culture, including in the North American cultural market, has been widely witnessed. Using in-depth interviews conducted in spring 2016 and comparing the results with an earlier study conducted in spring 2014, this study investigates the role of social media in global cultural consumption. It especially analyzes whether the new Korean Wave, characterizing the flow of local popular culture in Western markets, has been constructed with social media platforms.

This study suggests that social media-embedded cultural consumption of Korean popular culture rapidly spread hallyu in Western countries. The North American fans' adoption of the new Korean Wave disclosed three major dimensions for the spread of local popular culture: technological affordances in TV-less cultural activities, a branding of the impurity of local popular culture, and freedom of popular culture, which can be broadly defined as cultural politics. The global popularity of the new Korean Wave can be

understood as a result of the emergence of social media for both the construction of uncontrolled production and consumption and the impure mixture of cultural texts.

First, it is widely known that Korean popular culture became globally popular around the release of Psy's "Gangnam Style," and global fans have enjoyed several forms of local popular culture, such as K-pop, television dramas and variety shows, films, and digital games. Unlike the early stage of hallyu in Asia in the pre-social media era, when traditional media, including television, played a key role in disseminating Korea's popular culture, the recent boom of Korean popular culture in Western markets has been expedited by global fans who are especially social media-savvy young audiences in their teens and 20s.

As Jenkins (2004) has argued, new media technologies have broadened the scope of content delivery channels and have offered media audiences the ability to receive content in various ways to suit their own entertainment preferences. The transnational circulation of Korean popular culture among North American fans through social media and smartphones is consistent with what Jenkins observed, although he mostly emphasized the Internet and cable as new media. Watching television had been necessarily experienced by all family members, since the television set was placed in the living room, at the center of the home (Silverstone, Hirsch, & Morley, 1992). However, TV watching is no longer a family experience but takes place anytime and anywhere on various devices. Therefore, the contemporary new media—social media platforms—offers new opportunities for global fans as they have replaced the Internet and cable channels.

Second, the participants in the second study commonly identified the new Korean Wave as a cultural brand. Participants in the first study identified the new Korean Wave as a set of impure cultural forms; however, many also criticized Westernized hybrid culture because hybrid culture seemingly lost Korean cultural identity. In the second study, most participants commented that the Korean Wave is now one of the most significant cultural brands equipped with hybridity and impurity. Instead of criticizing the Westernized Korean popular culture, they accepted this form of new Korean Wave as a uniquely identified local culture, which is enjoyable and spreadable. For them, the Korean Wave has already been part of their daily activities and cultures, and they enjoy local popular culture because of Westernized products while still providing local uniqueness in television dramas, variety shows, and K-pop. As Asquith (2014) articulated, "A brand is a [conceptual] container that holds ideas, values, experiences, and expectations," and branding is certainly "a significant ideological and cultural force" (p. 29) that shapes cultural identities. For the global fans of Korean popular culture, the impurity embedded in Hallyu 2.0 has become a brand that they can identify with.

Third, the social mediascape of Hallyu 2.0 also proves that global fans' cultural activities are not simply limited to enjoying local popular culture on social media. Many participants clearly stated that they shared their opinions and feelings with friends after enjoying Korean popular culture. In this regard, they actualized participatory culture in the Korean Wave context. However, many young fans are also clearly aware of the significant role of politics in the circulation of local popular culture. They emphasized that uncontrolled and uncensored social media is one of the primary reasons that they prefer social media to traditional media. Of course, corporations always try to appropriate social media users' activities because they invest a lot of money in advertising, which makes the distinction between traditional media and social

media. This means that the new Korean Wave, which has benefited from the growth of social media, may face a serious barrier because people may not access advertising-laden social media.

In sum, it is crucial to comprehend that the spreadability in Hallyu 2.0 driven by social media does not necessarily mean the disappearance of tensions between global and local forces. Because several participants (e.g., Interviewees 3 and 4) expressed concern about authenticity, Korean cultural producers must understand the significance of local taste in the globalized popular culture, even while targeting global audiences. While admitting that the Korean Wave is like the new identity of Korean popular culture, what they must consider is developing not only textual impurity but globalized local tastes. It is also important to consider that the social mediascape of the new Korean Wave is conditioned by the cultural contexts in which they are situated, and which characterize the Korean Wave as a unique brand of social mediated popular cultural flows.

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