



Korean Wave in South Asia

Transcultural Flow, Fandom
and Identity

Edited by
Ratan Kumar Roy
Biswajit Das

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FOREWORD

Over the past two decades, Korea has rapidly developed its cultural industries and exported their cultural products to many parts of the world. Due to the increasing role of Hallyu in transnational cultural practices and studies, many scholars, policymakers and cultural creators have organized several kinds of academic events and published various academic papers. While there have been several important academic activities, there were two different conferences on the Korean Wave held in Seoul, Korea, in particular, almost at the same time, a few years ago. As expected, many presenters and audience members discussed current affairs and future directions of the Korean Wave. They were also interested in whether Hallyu might continue to grow, and they exchanged their experiences based on their field research. Interestingly enough, participants' opinions on the current status of Hallyu differed.

The first conference—a national conference—was held at Seoul National University, and during a session, one researcher who had conducted research on the Korean Wave in Southeast Asia claimed that the Korean Wave was fading out mainly because Hallyu was not popular in Southeast Asia anymore. The researcher explained that several Asian countries, including Japan and China, developed their own cultural industries, and therefore, there had been intense competition in cultural flows in the Asian region. As Southeast Asia was one of the major regions for the export of Korean cultural content, this particular comment was not

expected, and many participants were confused. Back then, some governments in Asia especially attempted to prevent Korean cultural content from further penetrating their media outlets and events. Therefore, this comment was seemingly logical; however, the Korean Wave already deeply penetrated other parts of the world instead of experiencing a long-term setback.

The second conference—an international conference with the theme of ‘Hallyu in Southeast Asia’—was held at the National Hangul Museum of Korea, and researchers and policymakers from several Southeast Asian countries clearly indicated that the Korean Wave had been popular and even intensified its influences in their own countries. They commonly argued that people in Southeast Asia were highly interested in Korean popular culture, such as television dramas, film and K-pop, due to their unique storytelling that resonated with South Asians’ mentalities and cultural preferences. While attending these two conferences myself as a media scholar who had conducted research on the Korean Wave for more than 10 years, I had time to reflect on my own research, the current trends and future directions, and consequently, I firmly believed that the Korean Wave was not a fad and its popularity could continue regardless of some concerns and temporary setbacks in a few selected areas.

In recent years, the Korean Wave has indeed expanded its global penetration beyond Asia by diversifying, and therefore, transforming its tendencies and directions. Most of all, global fan bases have shifted. When Bong Joon-ho’s *Parasite* won four Oscars and BTS debuted on the Billboard Hot 100 in 2020, global Hallyu fans in both the Global South and the Global North were excited to witness the soaring popularity of Korean cultural content and digital technologies. Hallyu’s major exported and circulated cultural content has also changed, from a few select audio-visual programs like television dramas and films to webtoons, animation and digital games over the last decade. More importantly, due to the rapid growth of social media and digital platforms, global Hallyu fans easily enjoy K-pop and webtoons. Netflix has also changed the form of cultural flow, including the Korean Wave, as it invests in several non-Western cultural industries and circulates cultural content itself around the globe. Netflix is certainly riding the Korean Wave. With the rapid globalization process supported and initiated by digital platforms, including OTT (over-the-top) service platforms and smartphones, and social media like YouTube and Facebook, cultural flows for the Korean Wave have diversified and changed.

Considering the continuing growth of the Korean Wave, there are only a few academic works that reflect South Asia. Although several academicians published their research outcomes as journal articles and book chapters, no single book-length work dedicated to the recent surge of the Korean Wave in several countries in South Asia, including India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and the Maldives, appears. As is well known, South Asia has been significant for Korean cultural industries. Due to the region's huge population and emerging economy, Korea has attempted to develop its close relationships with these countries, and it wanted to utilize the Korean Wave as soft power to connect with them. With or without supporting government policies, fans in South Asia have shown their boundless interests in Korean popular culture and digital technologies, while cultural industries firms in these countries have even developed co-productions with their counterparts in Korea. This means that cultural flow in the Asian region, including South Asia, is no longer a one-way flow, from the West to the South, in particular from the U.S. to other societies, and Asian countries themselves have become major players as producers and consumers.

This book is a collection of papers by scholars, not in the Global North, but in the Global South, and several significant elements characterize it. On the one hand, the current book is timely as it documents and analyses current affairs related to the Korean Wave in South Asia. As the first, if not, one of the first book-length academic works, it aptly conducts research, collects ideas and connects them clearly and succinctly. As the chapter titles show, this book includes several important case studies focusing on Korean dramas, film and K-pop, in many different cities, provinces, and countries of South Asia, which greatly helps the readers understand the ways in which Hallyu has attracted many South Asians. By attempting to organize the chapters into three thematic subjects, including fandom, digitization and glocalization, the chapters' authors in this edited volume as a whole investigate several important dimensions, such as cultural politics, the emergence of sub-cultural forms and the formation of fandom in conjunction with youth culture.

On the other hand, this book systematically investigates local specificities and mentalities, which are some of the most significant merits that may appeal to many readers. Scholars in the Global South develop their roles as active and meaningful entities in the global cultural markets, and therefore, it clearly sheds light on current debates on several focal

points, not only cultural regionalization, but also transnational globalization. This fine attempt by editors and contributors shows the possibility to advance new theoretical approaches that scholars in the Global South want to share. In other words, researchers, led by two promising editors Ratan Kumar Roy and Biswajit Das ask media and cultural scholars who are interested in several different subjects, including cultural studies, political economy and fan studies, alongside international affairs, to expand their research scope and direction to create new theoretical grounds and approaches by observing the current cultural affairs happening in South Asia.

Overall, this book aptly witnesses and documents that the Korean Wave in South Asia keeps going strong, both practically and academically. It is one of the most welcome contributions to Hallyu studies, in particular, in relation to our current emphasis on the increasing role of the Global South. Scholars in other regions, including East Asia, South America, the Middle East and Eastern Europe will greatly appreciate this effort, and I hope that the publication of the book will eventually provide significant momentum for media and cultural studies scholars to develop their own works to discuss local, national and regional specificities of the Korean Wave, and in general, shifting cultural flows in the global sphere. The readers of the book, whether they are media scholars and cultural studies researchers or those who are interested in the Korean Wave in the global context more generally, will be able to think over regional integration and collaboration, as well as their implications.

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PREFACE

DISCIPLINARY TENSIONS AND REFLECTIONS IN APPROACHING CULTURE

Studying culture in the age of media globalization has become more challenging than ever. Socio-cultural anthropology as a discipline has hosted the major debates on culture in the nineteenth and early twentieth century and anthropologists have played an authoritative role in defining and conceptualizing it. With the introduction of cultural studies and added attention to the hybridity of culture, ambiguity becomes the only solace for conceptualizing culture. Looking at the complexities hence, Sherry Ortner, a cultural anthropologist once predicted that the fate of culture will depend on its uses (Ortner, 1999). However, the question remains for scholars interested in studying culture in the contemporary world on how we approach and understand culture when it has been overused within and beyond disciplinary domains, such as: 'popular culture', 'political culture', 'high culture', 'mass culture', 'everyday culture', 'consumer culture', 'corporate culture', etc.

There is no easy escape from this complex ground of deciphering what culture is and how to make sense of it? Contemporary Latin American cultural anthropologist Néstor García Canclini provides interesting clues to answer these questions. He tried situating culture within the corresponding dynamic between modernity, hybridization and a globalized world order where multicultural reality is sustained by the process of

intersection and transaction (García Canclini 1995). When we approach and plan to examine culture, it is helpful to think in the same line with García Canclini as he says it is best to insist that the object of study is not hybridity but the process of hybridization. We may rephrase and say, it is necessary to look at the processes, practices and niches of culture and do not take ‘culture’ as the object of study. Korean cultural wave, as we approach in this book has not glorified the *Hallyu* or Korean cultural elements such as K-pop, Korean movies or drama, rather attempted to understand the flow and networks, cultural fragments and social functions.

Many friends from mainstream sociology and social anthropology in South Asia were curious and to some extent suspicious of the idea of engaged research and publication on the Korean cultural wave. Some of them even equated it as a promotional activity of *Hallyu* in the respective nations in the region. In every interaction within the scholarly community, it was challenging to convince that we are not intellectual promoters of the Korean wave, neither looking at the Korean cultural elements as the object of our investigation. For us, the larger objective is to make sense of the changing social world and communicative process in relation to Korean culture and media practices in South Asia. Doubts about the impact and effectiveness of *Hallyu* in South Asia were also raised during my interaction with *Hallyu* experts in South Korea. Some of them are not convinced about the reach and popularity of *Hallyu* in countries like Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka or the Maldives while accepting the fact that there has been an industrial collaboration between the Indian and Korean film industries lately. However, the K-fans and their enthusiasm, creative cultural expressions and constant presence in the changing mediascapes of South Asia kept motivating us to undertake the systematic explorations of the Korean cultural wave in this region.

Some of the essays in the collection emerged from the international seminar on the Korean cultural wave in India (held in New Delhi, December 2019) which was aimed at commissioning and guiding some systematic investigations on cultural politics, social response, the emergence of subcultural forms and anxieties related to the Korean cultural wave. Contributions from scholars across the region and beyond the seminar made this effort more meaningful as we have substantive evidence of forming fandom and subcultural activities related to *Hallyu* in South

Asia. Taking transcultural flow as a conceptual vantage point, the volume highlights how the patterns and processes of identity construction transformed among the teenagers and youth in emulating the elements of Korean culture.

Contributors in this volume are, therefore, not coming from any single discipline wherein being avid followers or loyal consumers of Hallyu was not a precondition for them to participate in this intellectual endeavour. They are interested in various aspects of culture, everyday consumption, diverse media practices, affective politics and identity in the age of globalization. It makes a pertinent case for the context of South Asian media culture because the popularity of *Hallyu* poses a critical question towards the global cultural flow from the West to the rest of the world. Yasue Kuwahara unravels a two-fold ‘glocalization’ taking place since Korean popular culture has been universalized and adapted locally (2014: 7). Producing empirical knowledge on the (g)localization process, local meaning and practices in relation to this transcultural flow are significant for the qualitative development of disciplines interested in culture, media and communication.

This book may broaden understanding about culture and subcultural practices, digitalization, network and youth. It will also encourage scholars to undertake empirical research on transcultural communication, fandom and identity in the age of internet culture in South Asia. Anthropologists have approached fandom as a way of life, which stands for culture too. We must take further attempts to bring creative innovation in our disciplinary approaches for generating systematic knowledge on fandom, culture and communication in the region. As so many discussions have taken place on disciplines and disciplinary boundaries, we must create a healthy atmosphere for a meaningful implication of interdisciplinarity and learn to draw horizontal connections with other disciplines. As García Canclini (1995: 2) says, ‘We need nomad social sciences capable of circulating through the staircases that connect those floors—or better yet, social sciences that redesign the floor plans and horizontally connect the levels’.

Dhaka, Bangladesh

Ratan Kumar Roy

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CHAPTER 1

Transcultural Flow in the Age of Globalization: Digital Platforms, Fandom and Mediated Culture in South Asia

Ratan Kumar Roy and Biswajit Das

The past four decades have witnessed continuous theorizing of the ‘global’ and the ‘local’ with a view to assess the renewed configurations in the spheres of politics, economy and culture in the world (Hamelink 2002; Held et al. 2000; Hirst and Thompson 1999; Robertson 2001). Most of these discussions centre around a vertical axis following either a top-down model originating from the Global North to the Global South or the reverse. Scholars have been trying to assess the different strands of globalization unleashed by neoliberal policies and practices that have been embraced by various nation-states in the world. Transcultural flow appears as the communicative consequence of media globalization.

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Media and cultural communication in the age of globalization is intimately and inherently linked to the aspects of network and flow (Castells 2000; Hepp 2013; Thussu 2006). Andreas Hepp approaches transcultural communication as an action-oriented or practice-based concept for media and communication studies that helps in exploring the burgeoning global connectivity of media and culture. The framework of transcultural communication not only helps in moving beyond the cross-cultural studies and comparative media studies but also provides a renewed methodological orientation which is not limited by empirical nationalism (Couldry and Hepp 2012; Hepp 2015; Robins 2006). As the region South Asia no longer remains at the periphery of the globalized media culture with its dynamic growth, dramatic transformation and diverse set of cultural artefacts and mediated phenomena, its complex fields of media and communication culture seek rigorous scholarly attention (Banaji 2011; Udupa and McDowell 2017). Transcultural approach may benefit the scholarly inquiry to map the South Asian media cultures and understand the changing mediascapes of contemporary South Asia (Roy 2021). Suffices to say that the digital interventions and the Internet culture have added a significant dimension to the South Asian media cultures. Along with the transcultural approach, scholars have found the intermedial approach effective in situating South Asia in the global digital culture and remediation of public culture across South Asia in the age of the Internet (Punathambekar and Mohan 2019). The case of the Korean wave in South Asia has enabled us to delve deeper into the mediated culture from an approach of transcultural and intermedial communication approach while examining the digital platforms, fandom and subcultural practices.

The Korean wave is a unique phenomenon that has challenged the conventional notions of globalization and the terms of debates on the transcultural flow of music. It has aroused fascination with the melodies and the artists continue to open new transnational horizons for people in the South Asian region. The Korean wave is not only shaping images of the region but also driving cultural tourism across the region. The interpretations of intensified musical and cultural globalization in South Asian societies are also changing as knowledge institutions are themselves transformed by globalization. There is a perpetual aspiration of the local people of South Asia to catch up with the global and modern culture and economy. It makes a ground for the global and Western media elements to enter into the South Asian societies with great force. The question arises,

whether the entry of these media forms is well articulated by the logic of global cultural flow? It is pertinent to examine the interface between local and global and eventually the interactive dynamics of traditional and modern. Anthony Fung (2013) argues for the long-term appeal of global media elements among ‘the Asian consumers who aspire to “catch up” to global trends and modernity’ (Fung 2013: 4). Nevertheless, there are simultaneous forces and actions of the local meanings, market and mediation that keep challenging the global media culture. Often, the global popular cultures are localized and adapted with dynamic modification, hybridization and co-creation. Therefore, it is pertinent to examine how these local forms of media culture are formed and circulated in a particular context. Further, it is important to understand how the global and local forms are negotiated to be sustained and mediated through popular media. Finally, to comprehend the overall complexity, it is imperative to delve into the context-based media practices and illustrate the complex dynamics of everyday media culture in South Asia.

KOREAN CULTURAL WAVE IN SOUTH ASIA: QUEST FOR AN EMPIRICAL MAPPING

Hallyu or Korean wave was introduced by the Chinese media in the 1990s and it eventually gained popularity across the globe. Scholars have considered the Korean wave as a counter-current of cultural globalization taking a framework of regionalization and transcultural flow. An unprecedented craze for Korean popular music videos, TV drama, movies, food and fashion made the K-phenomenon a global phenomenon at the outset of the twenty-first century (Jung 2011; Kuwahara 2014). Since the inception, *Hallyu* has a twofold perspective: socio-cultural and politico-economic. Although it has evolved from the clash between these two, one needs to understand the significant crosscurrent between culture and economy on which the *Hallyu* wave proliferated. The Korean wave or *Hallyu* has been critically evaluated by scholars as an economic phenomenon emerging in a certain political context and responding to the aftermaths of the cold war, postcolonialism, cosmopolitanism and neoliberalism and finally resulting in various socio-cultural implications at the regional and global level (Jin 2019; Shim 2006; Walsh 2014; Yoon and Jin 2017). Many scholars read *Hallyu* as a strategic model for exercising soft-power, fostering diplomacy and commercial ventures of South Korea. However, in this book, we have engaged with the cultural aspects

of the mediated phenomenon of K-wave. Our interest, here, lies in understanding the interactive dynamics between media, culture and society. Formation of fandom, motivation of the youth, creation of subculture and co-creation of the cultural and mediated elements remain suggestive of the need to highlight the cultural aspects of K-Wave. Moreover, the questions of transcultural flow, cross-cultural media practices, localized media trends and mediatized fan culture in the digital age sought due attention in the studies of media and communication culture. An empirical basis is indispensable to produce any substantial knowledge on contemporary media practices, digital culture and participation of the youth in forming subcultural trends within the scope of social science. One can contribute to the promises of the interdisciplinary approach of social sciences by taking the new challenges of exploring the intersection of transcultural media practices, subculture and digital communities. In this volume, therefore, we have paid due attention to gather empirical materials as to how the *Hallyu* wave with its cultural and mediated forms entered the South Asian societies, inspired the digital generation and prompted the questions of identity, values, aspirations, adaptation, convergence and co-creation of media culture.

K-POP, FANDOM AND INTERMEDIALITY

K-pop has extended beyond the geo-cultural boundaries and has been regularly followed by a large number of global fans. It exemplifies a typical fan-based transnational flow of youth culture that transcends racial, cultural and/or linguistic proximities with the help of new media (Wood 2017). This is a typical genre of pop music widely known for its boy/girl bands ('idols') and their signature dance performances and music videos. This music genre has been increasingly recognized beyond Asia. Scholars highlight that the popularity of K-pop has grown exponentially among young fans across continents during the first decade of the twenty-first century (Choi 2014; Han 2017; Jin 2016; Oh 2017). The Internet culture globally and particularly the age of digital convergence have facilitated fan activism vividly (Jenkins 2006) that includes the feelings of belonging and power, enthusiasm to bring change either by raising a collective voice or participating in some fan activities both in the virtual and social worlds. Jung (2012) indicated some of the complex consequences too that include cybervigilantism, othering and discrimination from ethnic and gender aspects. The term *fancom* a shortened version of

‘fan company’ was coined and used by the critics of online fan groups of K-Pop (Gray 2003; Jung 2012). According to Jung (2012), the participatory activism online by K-pop fans have the potential to negatively impact the overall decision-making process of the users as well as consumers but one cannot undermine the role of fans in generating diverse voices, meaningful interactions and positive deliberations.

The flow of K-Pop and recognition in the mainstream media across the globe paved the way to grow the network fan bases who have found social media platforms handy (Brusila 2001; Han 2017). Scholars started paying attention to the discourses on transnational cultural flow, cross-border media and cultural practices beyond the West. As Morimoto (2017) has noted that fan studies lack insight and empirical data to generalize transnational flows of non-western cultural text. Iwabuchi (2010) provides a critical view on the transnational fan studies and states that the spread of fandom in the non-western nation-states are not to be romanticized while the lack of interest in exploring the complex process and practices of fans in relation to various new media and culture is alarming. Chin and Morimoto (2013) discussed the possibilities of developing the theory of transcultural fandom and highlighted the significance of locating fandom across the national borders. An approach of transcultural communication to study fandom situates the fans into the cross-cultural flow, mediated moments and subcultural practices while the national belonging and cultural loyalty may not dominate as key indicators. In Chin and Morimoto’s words,

This is not to say that the nation 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. (2013: 99)

Harrington and Bielby (2005) analysed media texts within local cultural frames to understand the fandom and showed how the transcultural media flow affects the pleasure and identity formation of the fans. A closer look at such localized fan activities, engagement with various cross-cultural media texts, production and distributing, the temporal and geographic gaps between various ends enriched the transcultural fan studies (Allison 2006; Han 2017; Napier 2007; Shim and Noh 2012). Taking the Latin

American context into consideration Benjamin Han (2017) argues that K-pop evolved as a subculture that transforms into transcultural fandom via digital mediation. He highlights the role of the Internet and new media along with the satellite broadcasting and traditional media practices. He notes,

In considering the popularity of K-pop in Latin America as a transcultural fandom, one must consider the conflating issues of diplomacy, economy, migration, and media exchange that have resulted in crystallizing K-pop as a digitally mediated intermedial and intertextual fandom in conjunction with other media genres and formats. More significantly, K-pop gets accommodated into mainstream culture via digital fan activism that further gets distributed through legitimate media distribution platforms. (2017: 2265)

As we see and experience the convergence of media culture in South Asia, it is imperative to discuss the aspects of intermediality in exploring the fandom. In our explorations into the K-pop fandom in South Asia, we do not read and analyse the exclusive media forms and communication norms of *Hallyu*, rather investigate multiple processes of mediation, interrelations between platforms, practices and public. Plurality, diversity in networking and the interactive dynamic between media platforms remain core concerns in the approach of intermediality (Fornäs 2002). Nikunen (2007) provides an extensive review of the intermedial practices of fandom and draws the necessary connection with media convergence. Intermediality remains as the building block of the theory of intertextuality that comes in handy in analysing the new media and Internet culture. According to Nikunen, there has been a dearth of empirical research or theoretical engagement in the domain of fandom studies from a viewpoint of intermediality. She points out the necessity to follow various connections and relations constructed within the fan cultures which will enable us to capture the emergence of interpretative communities. In her words,

The concept of intermediality enables us to examine among other things what kind of audience practices are connected with certain media and why these particular media are related. Fan studies provide interesting cases for the investigation of intermediality since the multiple uses of media are an essential part of fan cultures. (Nikunen 2007: 114)

A comprehensive and intensive engagement with fandom and fan culture takes one to the domain of audience practices and cultural practices of the mediated community. When Jenkins (2003a, 2003b, 2006) sees that the fans form the mediated core and thus there has been a *fanification* of audiences, others look at the formation of translocal community by the audiences and their mediated communication (Hepp 2015; Hepp et al. 2014). Hepp (2015) calls it ‘translocal communitization’ where affiliation, affective and subjective actions and collective self-identification are defining factors (Hepp 2015). In the context of globalized media culture, the translocal communitizations are maintained by ‘communication communities’ who are not necessarily using an exclusive platform or medium for communication. According to Hepp (2015: 209),

Translocal communitizations are of great interest from the point of view of transcultural communication. It is possible, for example, that local communitizations become transcultural through migration or the appropriation of ‘foreign media products’. But it is primarily in translocal mediatizing communities that processes of transculturation become evident.

With the practices and modalities of participation in relation to a particular media culture, in this context the Korean popular culture, a translocal mediatization has been activated by the K-fandom in South Asia. The creative expressions and affective roles helped them to make their presence felt within the horizontal cultural flow in the age of media globalization. Provocatively enough, the popularity of K-pop in South Asia and the growing *Hallyu* fandom across the region made us curious to explore the conceptual threshold of subculture, popular culture and music in this context.

SUBCULTURE, MUSIC AND GLOBALIZATION

Not surprisingly, there has been an enduring debate regarding the conceptual clarity of subculture in the disciplinary domains of sociology and social anthropology. In their attempt to rethink subculture, Gary Fine and Sherryl Kleinman (1979) proposed an interactionist framework to conceptualize subculture. According to them, it is not only the set of cultural behaviours, artefacts and values of a defined group but also the exchange of cultural elements, creative explorations and negotiation of the cultural forms, identification within and beyond the group and interaction

in the interlocking group networks. There has been ethnographic attempt to study youth and popular culture from the vantage point of subculture. An engaged ethnographic research was conducted by Steve Readhead (1997) who highlighted the development of distinctive youth subculture in the late 1970s and early 1980s that was later on supplemented by dance 'club culture'. He has also indicated the role of socio-political and economic conditions, existing social factors that play a significant role in shaping the youth subculture. Pop music has a defining role in formatting the fandom and prompting subcultural activities.

A dearth of scholarly knowledge is clearly evident in South Asia in the way the Internet and new media have motivated, multiplied and manipulated the consumers of popular music. The scholarship on new media and South Asian popular culture is often qualified by the diaspora communities and their subcultural practices (Mitra 1997, 2005; Murthy 2010). One such ethnographic study was conducted online to capture the formation and practices of diasporic Pakistani music subculture on the Internet by Dhirjar Murthy (2010). Taking the particular case of 'Taqwacore' a transnational Muslim punk music scene, Murthy (2010) examines the role of the Internet and various social media platforms in the growing South Asian musical subcultures. He highlighted the social and symbolic functions of ritual behaviour online by the fans and followers that make the social world meaningful and thereby validate the subculture. Indeed, music became the quality of an experience based on corporeality, sensuality and imagination. K-pop and its fandom in South Asia has contributed to the creative construction of a youth and music subculture that expresses especially a certain music taste and a common creation act around this music consumption. Explorations into this new form of music culture or K-pop subculture led to the discovery of new cultural geographies, new modalities of transnational tourism and media communication. For sociological analysis of emotion, embodiment, formation of collective and everyday culture, the value of musical experience and contexts is remarkable. DeNora (2008) identifies music as the material of social ordering and social imagination while highlighting the importance of capturing the social life of this sonic medium. In order to understand the socio-cultural life of the youth and their emotive impulses towards contemporary subcultural practices, social researchers must pay attention to the sonic culture and socio-musical analysis wherein K-pop is just one case in point. According to DeNora (2008: 158)

socio-musical analysis, at least in its current configurations, draws attention to the aesthetic dimension in social life and social ordering, the non-cognitive, emotional and sensate bases of action as produced in relation to, in this case, musical materials. By examining situated examples of music as it ‘gets into’ social experience it is possible to illuminate the real-time and spatially located formation of sociology’s generic concern with order and action—including the social and technological relations of that formation.

While research on culture and globalization in the South Asian region has proliferated since the 1990s, music studies continue to be dominated by what has long been known as methodological nationalism in sociology (Beck 2000; Martins 1974). Conversations about transnational musical connections in the region have historically been framed by monolithic and mythical narratives of nation-specific identities, emotional culture and nature, energized by music’s powerful connection with space and the visual. The wide international appeal of these artists demonstrates that the idea of Korean wave music is powerful in popular culture. It is so powerful that it transcends the deeply rooted national structures in the region. This is not fully recognized in the existing literature, however, cultural unity is still a key priority in the South Asian region that has not yet adopted an explicit self-reflexive agenda and has not distanced itself from essentialist ideas of South Asian identity. In a globalizing society where migrations, reborderings and complex media circulations constitute the nature of South Asian media cultures, scholars, too, need to look beyond self-narration.

Globalization is an important context for understanding the significance of popular music in South Asian societies today. The impact of global media flow and economic formations are strongly felt in popular music and its continuing differentiation along the international dimensions of modernity. In many societies, music’s significance has declined in traditional rituals and evolved in popular culture rituals and media practices. Music continues to enable and calibrate emotions, identities and cultural geographies within capitalism and processes such as urbanization, globalization and mediatization. The term ‘popular music’ is not without its problems. It is embedded in histories of entrenched cultural hierarchies and is such a broad label that it often becomes reductive, implying a false sense of totality. The term had an important role in the development of popular music studies as an international discursive community, empowering it to create a space for popular music in academia but also to

later become a technocratic arm of neoliberal higher education. Appadurai and Breckenridge (1995) highlighted the complexities of using adjective terms *popular* and *mass* with culture as the public culture is not well-defined in South Asia. The cosmopolitan consumption and modern media technology continue to shape the public culture that begun in the late twentieth century in the region.

This volume challenges the reduction of popular music studies and the humanities more generally to a mere professional practice by exploring music's potential to complicate ideology, voice difference and challenge normative views of social worlds far beyond the sphere of music itself. As a piece of humanist scholarship, the book has both the freedom and the obligation to look beyond the popular narratives of soft-power, cultural diplomacy, fandom and marketing. The absence of the word 'popular' in the title of this volume is the result of a conscious decision to welcome non-specialist readers and to counter the compartmentalization of popular music in academic discourse and in social life more generally. The volume thus reflects the current expertise and interests in the field while recognizing the asymmetries and gaps that became clear in the process. The situation begs for more expertise in communicating local and national cultures in translocal and international discourse and for a rethinking of the broader relationship between musical scholarship and society. A necessary element in this process is a reflexive collaboration with scholars outside the region and with local stakeholders within and outside the academia. The latter was common in the pioneering popular music research. That community engaged broadly with interests in the wider community in a way that has since become rare. A weak connection with musical life has severe implications for the knowledge production and legitimacy of musical scholarship.

Few concerns are vital for South Asian scholarship on media and communication culture in the age of globalization to either pay attention to the musical life of the youth or the creative construction of communities in the contemporary digital world. First, in the disciplinary tradition of humanities and social sciences we lack a comprehensive dialogue to generate effective tools and frameworks (methodological and conceptual) to capture the complexities of contemporary culture and society. Second, which is as a consequence of the previously mentioned lack, in the practical realm we lack confidence and motivation to study youth subculture, subcultural identity, transcultural flow and fandom networks in the globalized and mediated South Asia. It is difficult to claim to have a historical

trajectory of South Asian fandom of media. With the new media and Internet culture, the fandom networks are much active and expressive in contemporary societies. However, it is not difficult to assume the role of broadcasting culture, particularly radio and satellite television or cassette culture and VCR culture to contribute in forming fandom network in South Asian countries across the border. Lack of systematic and empirical endeavours to capture such cultural practices certainly created a void in the media and communication research to understand media fandom and fan culture in the region. There might not be an immediate remedy to this, however, a continuous effort to conduct empirical research, a substantial engagement in sonic and scopic analysis of the cultural life, enabling the transcultural communication approach would be beneficial for the scholarship. Furthermore, we can pay close attention to what Ien Ang (2008) advised the cultural studies analysts to push the disciplinary boundaries for capturing the cultural complexities effectively. She refers to the interesting example from Latin American cultural anthropologist Néstor García Canclini who indicated the challenge of transdisciplinary possibilities within social sciences to study the hybrid culture and notes 'The anthropologist arrives in the city by foot, the sociologist by car and via the main highway, the communications specialist by plane. Each registers what he or she can and constructs a distinct and, therefore, partial vision' (García 1995: 4). Ang (2008) advocated for using all the modes, means and mediums for reaching the target.

DIGITALIZATION, MEDIATED IDENTITY AND YOUTH

Digital media and technology have arguably changed the ways of life. James A. Dewar and Peng Hwa Ang illustrated the cultural consequences of the Internet and argued that it brought the truly 'any-to-many' or 'many-to-many' communication for the first time (Dewar and Ang 2007, 365–369). Since the print capitalism and eventual emergence of broadcasting media, there has been a culture of 'one-to-one' and 'one-to-many' communication. According to them, modern societies would go through various transformations with the advent of digital technology. Ravi Sundaram pointed out the dramatic changes in global governance due to the seamlessness of media use with the transition from old media to new media systems (Sundaram 2011: 183–202). The complexities in everyday life and culture multiplied with the arrival of the smartphone and public internet use. In Asia, the leading role of China, Korea and

Japan in accessing and utilizing digital technologies helped in unravelling the significance of policy adaptation and social cohesion. How society reacted and responded to the emergence of the Internet and new media culture? What are the socio-cultural consequences of digital drive in Asia? Fostering economic growth and broader social progress, the Internet culture flourished in China, Japan and South Korea since the 1990s. The social impacts were judged by these societies since the mid-1990s when the public access to the Internet was available and online activities of children and youth started worrying the parents. For example, the addiction of playing online games and spending excessive time in internet cafés worried the parents and policymakers of China in the late 1990s.

The pace of growth of modern technology, telecommunication and the progress of satellites was enormous in Asia. With the ever-expanding media globalization and high aspiration towards information and communication technology, Asian societies entered into a complex situation of mediation. The Asian mediascape offered a complex trope because, on the one hand, it had to accommodate the dominant values and traditions, on the other hand, it sought to embrace the modern content and global technologies. The consistent confrontation and negotiation between values and desires, local and global, classic and modern have shaped and accelerated media practices in Asia. Especially the democratic transformation and socio-economic growth in the Asian region have been facilitated by the digital media circulation (Thussu 2006: 10–22; Fung 2013: 114). East Asian countries such as Japan and Korea took leadership in developing the infrastructure for high-speed internet and flourishing a digital society. The beginning of new millennia has marked a significant explosion of digital media. For instance, in the case of Korea the special attention towards IT (information technology) industry helped the country to overcome the economic crises of the late 1990s (Hijorth 2008: 203–205). Internet and smartphone culture has been highly influential in facilitating the Korean democracy since 2000 (West 2002; Kim 2003). In the post-2005 period, the reach of digital media all over Asia with high pace and effect brought tremendous changes in the traditional societies and cultural practices. All the countries aimed at fostering a digital society by setting up the goals for implementing e-commerce, e-governance and secure an Information and Communication Technology (ICT)-based development. The endeavour of making ‘Digital Bangladesh’, ‘Digital India’ or ‘Digital China’ is the supreme priority at this historical juncture of Asia (Shoesmith and Genilo 2013; Bhuiyan 2013).

The socio-cultural dynamic of media use is worth researching in the context of Asia. With the forces of globalization and transcultural flow, there is a great turn in the realm of popular culture and media practices in Asian societies. As Nissim Otmazgin puts it, ‘globalization and economic development have reinforced East Asian cities’ and citizens’ connections to global markets, sources of capital and information, and transnational flows of popular culture’ (Otmazgin 2014). The realities are not so different in other parts of Asia as far as media globalization is concerned. The impact of globalized media culture and transcultural flow bring a flux in the everyday life of the people. It is not simply the flow and effect of Western media but the Japanese and Korean media commodities played a crucial role in shaping the modern media terrain of South and Southeast Asian countries. Since the late 1990s, there has been a considerable entrance of East Asian media elements into the neighbouring societies and to some extent to the South Asian societies.

Youth culture beholds a greater value in the consumer culture as the market economy often commodifies the culture targeting the youth. Since the logic of consumer culture is to attract a greater mass by advertising and ensuring a product in exchange for the lowest cost, many cultural products were re-produced to trigger the youth for cultural consumption. Therefore, music, fashion and other cultures selected from the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s are presented again in different forms so that today’s youth has an opportunity to experience all of these cultural and artistic trends of the recent past within the same time frame. To reinforce this strategy, large varieties of products must be generated and smaller consumer groups must be formed for each content item in the planning regarding subcultures. Today’s subcultures are formed with a structure to aid the individuals to find the content most appropriate to their desires and needs and, therefore, to satisfy them both aesthetically and in terms of other senses and to improve the relationship of cultures with life.

The formation and transformations of identity in relation to media practices are significant aspects in order to comprehend the media culture at the regional level. The growing popularity of K-Pop among teenagers, Korean movies and dramas among the youth of Bangladesh and other South Asian countries is one of the clues of regional media flow. The burgeoning influence of Korean films on the Indian film industry should not be considered an isolated case. These phenomena owe to the trend of regional media circulation in contemporary Asia. This volume intends to unearth the complex dynamics of creating new connections and carting

new identities by the individuals who live in a value-oriented and media-saturated society. The question of identity is crucial because media at once influences the shaping and reshaping of the identity of individuals and works as mediums of manifesting self-identity. Furthermore, by entering into the media world the individuals subscribe to a new identity position—a member of the mediated society.

CONCEPTUAL ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

This book is organized conceptually along three dimensions—*Identity, Fandom and Culture*. These three dimensions are explored in the context of mediated and musical experiences in the evolving transnational dynamics of South Asia.

This book represents an evolution in this disciplinary formation. Many of the chapters analyse the cultural and social dimensions of musical practices and discourses, drawing inspiration from cultural and social theory for contextualizing musicology, fandom studies and youth and media studies. They adopt a social science approach by analysing music within broader social processes, framing the analysis by theories of society, economy or geography, for instance.

In the first section, questions pertaining to identity formations and transitions with expanding media practices have been dealt with at length. Chapters under this section are centred around the theme of identity and politics. This section conceptualizes the growing popularity of K-phenomenon in contemporary South Asia along with the advancement of media technologies and prospering social networks emerging in new forms of identities. The chapters bring in instances of identity politics rooted in the aspiration of the current socio-cultural milieu surrounding the K-Wave. The authors put together their empirical cases to understand the trajectories and modalities of K-phenomenon. At the same time, the chapters examine how globalization and information flow influence the teens and the youth of a particular society.

Steven Kim in his chapter has elaborated the quest of *Hallyu 2.0* to achieve mainstream status transcending its Korean limits. While reading K-pop and K-dramas as media texts, Steven Kim investigates the growing popularity of *Hallyu 2.0* in the regions of strategic importance to Korea. Kim in his chapter presents the quest and growth of *Hallyu 2.0*. Ratan K. Roy delves deeper into the questions of identity formations and transformations while introspecting the logics of social media. Roy's

chapter attempts to unearth the complexities of identity formations and (re)formations in a mediated environment. While taking instances of Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, India and Maldives, Roy has attempted to unravel the politics of identity formation under the influence of burgeoning K-Wave in South Asia. Further, Athikho Kaisii has extrapolated the nuances of K-phenomenon and burgeoning media landscape to understand the development of youth and hybrid popular culture in North-East India.

The second section explores the emergence and growth of ‘Fandom’ and of novel youth subcultures in the age of the Internet. Digital media has changed the ways in which we used to think and act. In the Global South, a new set of unified voices are heard that highlight the significance of newly emerging fan cultures, fan clubs, fan networks, etc. These ‘fan groups’ are modern and not predominantly westernized; whether these ‘fandoms’ are an alternative to westernized modernization, this section shall unravel under the theme of *Fandom and Politics of Affection*.

Kashifa Arif has conducted an ethnographic investigation to understand fan identity and to present the emotions behind the expression ‘I am K-Fan’. While analysing the behaviour, actions and levels of satisfaction, Arif has tried to highlight the sense of empowerment an individual achieves while recognizing her/himself as a fan and follower of K-Wave. Pal and Saha have tried to capture the emotional and aural experiences of the K-pop audience in and around Kolkata. While intending to observe the transformation of ‘virtual space’ into an ‘affective space’. Pal and Saha are decoding the politics behind K-pop’s success and appeal in the region, juxtaposing Kolkata’s listening culture and musical taste of its young listeners. Chandi and Trehan have attempted to gain insights out of the shared experiences of Indian fans of BTS (a popular K-Pop Band) vis-à-vis the consumption of transcultural popular media. The authors have studied the online presence of BTS fandom in India—mediation, motivations and experiences in order to get a sense of K-Wave in India. Soman and Jaggi have studied Indian youth, their aspirations and consumer practices through the lens of popular Korean Dramas. Their study provides insights about youth-viewing experiences and discusses the modalities of the engagement of K-pop culture with the Indian culture.

Societies in South Asia got exposure to a vibrant cultural world that offered multiplicity in meanings. Simultaneously, it invoked new tensions in the societies that often lead to the confrontations between new and old, traditional and modern, self and other and native and alien.

The third section *Adaptation, Cultural Effects and Co-creation* deals with the localized forms of culture and various modalities of engaging with these alien forms. As such, new forms of challenges and adaptation strategies have emerged over time. Manifold socio-political and economic factors remain crucial in the backdrop of such transformations and adaptations. This section engages with localized forms and variations of adaptation, expression and modification within the cultural milieu. The chapters in this section contextualize the Korean cultural forms in the local settings and examine the underlying social response and modes of cultural adaptation.

Amalini Fernando while opting for evolutionary perspective examines the socio-cultural dynamics of the Korean wave in Sri Lanka, delving into the origin, spread and landmark moments of the wave, local reception and consumption, influence on the cultural status quo, characteristics and types of audiences and the future of this cultural phenomenon. Rinku Pegu's attempts to study the process of circulation of South Korean media products by focusing on the local networks and infrastructure. The effort is dedicated to tracing the process of dissemination and identifying the major players engaged in the production, reproduction, transmission and circulation of Korean media products in Mizoram. Prashant Pradhan while taking up the case of Darjeeling and Kalimpong attempts to read the K-POP memes on social media adopting a gendered gaze.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This volume has tried delving deeper into the interactive dynamic of media, culture and society by engaging with the digital media practices of South Asia. In a broader sense, it looks at subcultural practices, popular culture, youth and identity in relation to contemporary media culture in the region. Needless to say, the media culture has reinforced a vibrant transnational culture flow by enabling fandom networks. The entrance of *Hallyu* wave in South Asia and the enthusiasm of the fans need to be explored with more thorough viewpoints. Because, it is not merely a common character of transnational culture but also a cultural trend closely related to traditionally marked, nationally defined and socially bonded community.

The chapters offer analytical framings and authoritative accounts of important developments, they also open up new avenues of research and have a shared recognition of media's social agency and, therefore,

its power to shape the future. Such a perspective motivates further research and holds the potential to strengthen its contribution to conversations about musical and cultural life in globalization. The challenges to future research are not only matters of epistemology but also of social capital to respond to global change, identifying new agendas, mobilizing new networks and communicating their relevance. While linguistic and geographic frameworks are not neutral filters, it is important to focus on the analytical challenge in growing discourses that integrate the local and the translocal in terms of both culture and language, to overcome the dichotomy of local-language localism and English-language cosmopolitanism. A deep understanding of a culture still requires knowledge of its language but globalization expands the opportunity for many cultures to enter a process of self-recognition through broader international collaborations.

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PART I

K-Phenomenon in South Asia: Media,
Identity and Politics



Hallyu 2.0: Aiming for Mainstream Status in India and South Asia

Steven Kim

The global spread of Korean popular culture, commonly known as Hallyu in Korean which means the Korean Wave, has reached a new milestone in its quest to achieve mainstream status outside of Korea. At the forefront of Hallyu, which is a comprehensive term signifying the growing popularity of Korean pop culture such as pop music (K-pop), TV drama (K-drama), film, fashion and beauty, language, and food, are two of its most well-known and well-liked genres—K-pop and K-drama. In the last two decades, K-pop and K-drama have gone mainstream in East (or Northeast) and Southeast Asia (hereafter East Asia) and steadily increased their presence in regions as diverse as Central Asia, Middle East, North Africa, Latin America, and Eastern Europe. The most dramatic breakthrough in their popularity has occurred recently in countries and regions where initially they only had a limited presence like the US, Canada, Western Europe, and South Asia (Ju 2018; J-H Kim 2019; Song 2020).

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K-pop and K-drama have expanded their global reach by continually upgrading the quality of their content and capitalizing on the revolution in digital and mobile technology (Kim 2022). The synergy created by the highly innovative and captivating music and drama and the ease with which they can be accessed on internet-based platforms including social media and streaming services using digital devices has not only led K-pop and K-drama to broaden its global presence, but also made it the preferred source of everyday entertainment for people in different parts of the world (S. Lee 2015; Jin and Yi 2020). The growing importance of online platforms in catalyzing the spread of K-pop and K-drama around the world has led some scholars to designate Hallyu in the digital age that began in the late 2000s New Hallyu or Hallyu 2.0 (Jin 2016; Yoon and Jin 2017).

One of the regions where K-pop and K-drama has made significant inroad in the entertainment market is South Asia in which the probability of Hallyu achieving any kind of success has been discounted by many Korean observers. Although K-pop and K-drama first spread to East Asia in the late 1990s and then rapidly to other parts of Asia in the 2000s, it is only in the last several years that they have had any noticeable presence in South Asia with the exception of North Eastern Region of India and Nepal where the pervasive influence of Hallyu was felt much earlier. The question that has intrigued many observers is why Hallyu did not commence sooner in South Asia and India, in particular, when many other parts of Asia had already come under its sway. Although various reasons have been offered to account for this anomaly such as pronounced cultural differences and the presence of a thriving domestic entertainment industry, none has been fully satisfactory because, even if that was the case, it still fails to answer as to why the interest in K-pop and K-drama has rapidly grown in recent years. Did the pre-existing conditions that hindered the spread of Hallyu change significantly such that they no longer posed as an obstacle to the spread of K-pop and K-drama in India?

Given the important role played by digital technology in driving Hallyu 2.0 by providing consumers with ready access to Korean pop culture, a more plausible explanation for the lag in the popularity of K-pop and K-drama in South Asia in general and India, in particular, is that there were relatively fewer internet and smartphone users as a percentage of the total population who could access Korean cultural content easily and conveniently. But the growing number of people especially among the younger generation with access to the internet and smartphones in the

last several years has led to concomitant increase in the number of fans of Korean pop culture. Irrespective of the reasons, K-pop and K-drama have achieved a foothold in South Asia among the growing middle class and young people in their teens and early twenties (Generation Z and Millennials) living in urban areas, whose exposure to Korean cultural content through their familiarity with and access to digital technology has transformed many of them into committed fans of Korean pop culture (Bhatt 2020; Upreti 2020).

Although South Asia was late in embracing Hallyu compared to the rest of Asia, it offers fertile soil for K-pop and K-dramas to flourish due to its relatively young population and growing internet and smartphone penetration rates. The growing demand for Korean cultural products in South Asia would not only open up a vast new market for its producers, but also the positive image of and the goodwill generated toward Korea among the people in the region due to Hallyu would promote the interests of the Korean government and companies. Bringing South Asia into the fold of Hallyu would cement Korea's cultural sway throughout Asia, a region of growing geostrategic power and influence in the twenty-first century.

To understand the growing appeal and the recent breakthrough in the popularity of K-pop and K-drama in the regions where Hallyu has had only a modest presence—North America, Western Europe, Oceania, Sub-Saharan Africa, and South Asia—the study will examine why Korean pop culture has been successful in capturing the hearts and minds of diverse people around the world through a close reading of K-pop and K-dramas as media texts. Then, based on the analysis of their appeal, it will focus on why and how K-pop and K-drama have grown in popularity in India and their prospects for becoming part of the mainstream entertainment. Lastly, the study will examine why Korea has had a long interest in launching Hallyu in a country whose strategic and economic importance for Korea will only grow in the future.

K-POP AS A NEW ART FORM

From its humble beginnings in 1992 when the trio Seo Taiji and Boys erupted onto the music scene and captured the imagination of Korean youths with a new kind of music combining socially-conscious Korean lyrics with American rap, rock, techno, and R&B sounds (Waitt 2014), K-pop has evolved to become a global phenomenon due to its unique style

of music and performance (Lie 2012), use of internet-based platforms to disseminate content to a worldwide audience, and legion of committed fans who have coalesced into powerful and cohesive communities with a strong global presence both online and offline. Over the past several years with the advent of third-generation artists (Koreaboo 2020), K-pop has seen significant growth in most of the major music markets in Asia, North and South America, Europe, and Oceania, as well as emerging markets in Africa (Koreaboo 2019).

The growing popularity of K-pop driven by third-generation artists can be seen in the data collected by Twitter (in partnership with K-pop Radar), an important platform where K-pop fans can get the latest information from K-pop stars and connect with other fans in real-time. By examining K-pop-related tweets from 2010 to 2020, the data shows significant growth of K-pop over the last decade. The volume of tweets begins to rise steadily with the growing popularity of 3rd generation groups led by BTS (an acronym for the Korean expression *Bangtan Sonyeondan* meaning Bullet Proof Boy Scouts), EXO, and GOT7 from 2015 and then grows exponentially from 2017 to 2020 (Y. Kim 2020).

In 2020, there were record-setting 6.7 billion K-pop-related tweets globally. The top 20 markets tweeting about K-pop, which reveal the global nature of the K-pop community, ranked by the number of unique users in descending order were: Japan, the US, Indonesia, South Korea, the Philippines, Brazil, Thailand, Malaysia, Mexico, India (also 10th place in total volume of K-pop tweets), United Kingdom, Turkey, Argentina, France, Spain, Canada, Saudi Arabia, Vietnam, Russia, and Chile (Y. Kim 2021). Likewise, the rapid growth in the popularity of K-pop is also reflected in the data made available by the digital music service provider, Spotify. The K-pop's share of listening on Spotify increased over 1800 per cent from January 2014 to January 2020 (Spotify 2020). From January 2019 to January 2020, the countries streaming the most K-pop in descending order were the US, Indonesia, Philippines, Japan, and Brazil. Over the past several years with the advent of third-generation artists, K-pop has become an unstoppable global trend.

The global success of K-pop is, in part, due to the creation of a new art form, which has been continually refined to make it more emotionally expressive and powerful by successive generations of K-pop acts over the past two decades (Vincent 2019). This relentless quest to upgrade the quality of K-pop through experimentation and innovation has now borne fruit. The third-generation of globally popular male groups such as BTS,

EXO, GOT7, MONSTA X, SEVENTEEN, and NCT 127 and female groups such as BLACKPINK, TWICE, and Red Velvet has taken the art form to a new level, which has led to an unprecedented recognition and popularity in regions where K-pop has had limited presence such as North America (Sherman 2020; Ahn 2017), Europe, Oceania, and South Asia.

The evolution of K-pop as an art form, embodied in the performances of the third-generation artists, has not only expanded the repertoire of creative elements to include song, choreography, and visual style, but also combined them in innovative ways to greatly enhance the emotional impact of the performance (H. J. Kim 2019). It is the synergy created by artfully combining the creative elements, each which have been developed to its fullest, to achieve the intended emotional effect that defines the uniqueness of the latest incarnation of this art form. In K-pop, first, the songs themselves have been crafted to enhance the appeal of and draw the listener into the music. The songs, consisting of different Western genres and styles, have addictive melodies, recurring catchy hooks (combination of an appealing melody, rhythm, and lyrics), and lyrics, which contain a simple, catchy English phrase enabling the listener to sing along with the melody.

Secondly, the expressive music is combined with highly synchronized choreography featuring dance routines that are often intricate and incorporate different dance styles. The choreography amplifies the emotions that the performers are trying to convey through the song. The synergy created by the singing and dancing in sync carried out with an impeccable precision and flair by the artists exert an irresistible pull on the audience by eliciting a powerful emotional and physical response to the performance. Because the K-pop artists are peerless in their ability to execute the difficult feat of singing and dancing simultaneously with consummate skill and confidence—borne of years of intense training in a highly competitive environment—this feature has become the unique signature of K-pop in the eyes of its fans and the general public (Oh and Lee 2014).

Thirdly, the visuals of the performers are used to complement the song and the choreography. The color and the design of the costumes, jewellery and accessories, makeup of both the male and female artists, hairstyle and color, and even color of the eyes, which can be manipulated through the use of color contacts, are meticulously planned and coordinated to maximize the intended effect of the performance. Nothing is left to chance as the performers themselves are used as a blank canvas to

create a distinctive and memorable look and style that will resonate with the audience long after the performance is over.

But it is in the music videos of the third-generation artists that the art form has reached new heights. The music video blends thought-provoking and often over-the-top props and sets, evocative images, allusions, and symbols, eye-catching graphics, and atmospheric and colorful lighting with the song, choreography, and visuals to further enhance the expressive power of the performance (Chandler 2016). In a short span of several minutes, the viewer is immersed in a powerful, intense sensory experience as one becomes mesmerized by the kaleidoscope of ever-changing sounds, visuals, movements, and images. The music video, by skilfully integrating the various creative elements for artistic effect, is the ultimate vehicle for creating a powerful emotional impact both aurally and visually, emotionally and physically. The ever-evolving art form, which is the ultimate source of K-pop's appeal, has led to the growing popularity among the world's youths of Korea's unique contribution to global pop music.

The K-pop as a new art form, however, would not have spread as far and as fast globally had it not been for Korean music producers making a strategic decision in the 2000s not only to produce music for the overseas market, but also to capitalize on the digital technology such as internet-based platforms to make its music easily and conveniently accessible to consumers worldwide (Messerlin and W. Shin 2017; S. Shin 2019; Parc and S. Kim 2020). Their decision to produce and market K-pop as a global product was actuated by their need to find new sources of revenue amid falling sales of physical albums due to distribution of music via digital formats and lack of copyright control, which led to widespread piracy. Since the domestic market was relatively small and highly competitive, the Korean music producers felt that the only viable business option was to develop K-pop into a product with global mass appeal through the use of online platforms, which were becoming available at the time (Seo 2012).

To effect their strategy of globalizing K-pop, they began to teach their artists foreign languages, partially recruit group members from overseas, support the production of albums in English, Chinese, and Japanese, and establish networks with foreign songwriters and choreographers. In addition, they changed their production method in order to maximize the effectiveness of YouTube, which has become the primary platform of choice, in promoting and distributing their products. The

producers replaced conventional multi-track albums with digital singles and enhanced the visual elements of K-pop by producing, for example, innovative music videos (MV) with high production values. These MV were then uploaded on the platform not only free of charge for the listening and visual pleasure of the fans, but also to generate publicity for the artists by encouraging them to post and share self-made videos of cover dances and MV reactions without worrying about copyright infringement (S. Shin 2017; Yung 2020). The buzz created by the social engagement of the fans helped to attract new fans and expand the circulation of their products into new markets. In 2009, as the two of the leading K-pop entertainment companies—SM Entertainment and YG—shifted production and distribution of content through digital technologies, they formed partnership with YouTube and opened accounts on the platform. Due to K-pop's growing popularity worldwide, YouTube established a separate music channel for the first time devoted to single country's music rather than based on music genres. The efforts of the Korean producers to create a global market for K-pop by enhancing its appeal and using digital-based distribution, thus were vital in extending the global reach of K-pop.

Another key reason for the global success of K-pop is the critical role the fandoms have played in promoting K-pop acts in their respective countries and globally. Though the Korean producers may not have understood the full implications of the use of social media platforms such as YouTube to distribute K-pop at the time, its interactive nature has encouraged K-pop fans to come together online to share their thoughts and feelings regarding their favorite artists and, thus, conceive themselves as forming distinct groups based on their shared identities. That is, the platforms played a vital role in getting the fans to recognize that their shared devotion and love for their respective artists are what unite them into groups and define who they are as communities—their communal identities—which they find so meaningful in their lives (Jin and Yoon 2016). The platforms, moreover, by enabling K-pop groups not only to release their music, but also to stay connected with their fans have contributed to the formation of communities by strengthening the collective identification of the fans with their respective K-pop groups or, popularly known, as idols. These fandoms have been instrumental not only in supporting their idols by buying their albums, tickets to their concerts, and group-related merchandise, but also promoting them on social network sites by writing posts, tweeting, viewing their

music videos and uploading user-created content, and making hashtags trend worldwide. The passionate fans, thus, have played a crucial role in the recent breakthrough of the third-generation groups in attaining global recognition and popularity through their financial support and massive social media engagement (Melendez 2019).

Their use of social media as a tool for promoting K-pop artists has been particularly effective in contributing to the growing public awareness and popularity of their idols and K-pop in general in their respective countries and worldwide. Because K-pop fans stand out from other fandoms in the degree to which they believe their support is vital to the success of their favorite artists on the world stage due to their underdog status, it is not surprising that the K-pop fandoms far outpace those of famous western musicians in their level of social media engagement on their behalf. According to the Next Big Sound, a music data analytic company, when comparing the engagement performance—“how many times fans are engaging with the artist’s account (via Tweeter mentions, Instagram likes, etc.) compared to the number of followers that the artist has”—of hundreds of thousands of artists including Taylor Swift, Beyoncé, and Justin Bieber with a similar number of followers, normally there is a linear relationship between the number of followers and mentions (Blake 2018). Artists with similar reach also have comparable engagement performance.

But the comparison also reveals that some artists vastly outperform others in terms of engagement performance with a similar number of followers. Of the 20 international artists who have unusually high engagement performance, not only over half are K-pop acts, but also the top two artists with the highest engagement performance by far are none other than the two most popular third-generation K-pop acts in the world—BTS and EXO—who have large dedicated fandoms—ARMY (an acronym for Adoring Representative M.C. for Youth) and EXO-L (an acronym for EXO-Love)—numbering in the tens of millions of followers worldwide, respectively. In the case of EXO, the actual engagement performance exceeded 14,000 times the expected rate and similarly in the case of BTS with over 5 times the fanbase compared to EXO, the actual rate exceeded nearly 4,000 times the expected rate on Twitter. In short, the average amount of social media activity per fan of the K-pop groups is vastly higher than that of other Western artists. The fandoms, thus, have played a critical role in raising the international profile of K-pop groups.

There is no better example to illustrate the importance of K-pop communities in insuring the success of their respective idols and, thereby,

furthering the global expansion of K-pop than the fans of BTS. As the most popular and well-known third-generation K-pop group in the world, BTS has extended K-pop's global reach with the crucial help of their passionate fanbase, ARMY (MTV News 2018; Moon 2020). Since their debut in 2013, the group has been at the cutting edge of K-pop with their innovative music, socially conscious lyrics, arresting choreography, striking visuals, and mesmerizing music videos. With each new album, they have expanded their artistic vision with meaningful messages, which has struck a deep chord among their growing legion of diverse fans from around the world (Wickman 2018; SBS PopAsia HQ 2018; SBS News 2018). More than any other K-pop artist, the group has used social media not only to communicate but also honestly reveal the highs and lows of their personal lives, which have deeply resonated with their fans. Inspired by their music and personal example, which they find comforting, uplifting, and empowering, their fans worldwide have created a cohesive and powerful community based on their common identity as ARMY—that is, as members of a collective who are united by their love for BTS and their fandom (Davis 2020). Because of their single-minded determination to gain greater recognition and accolades for their idol not only in their respective countries but around the world, they have played a key role in helping BTS cross the threshold of US and global superstardom (Nguyen 2020; Rolli 2020).

Indeed, BTS' ascent to the pinnacle of pop world would not have been possible without the fervent support of its large and well-organized fanbase, the US ARMY (Spense 2020). Among the many BTS fandoms in the countries and regions around the world, US ARMY is one of the world's largest and most active fan communities. The US has the most ARMY mentions on social media with 17 per cent of the social traffic followed by South Korea with 13 per cent, Indonesia with 12 per cent, and the Philippines with 8 per cent; as well as, the most BTS YouTube views (59.2 m) during the previous year till March 2020 by country. It is also highly effective in mobilizing its members on social media and intensely motivated in helping the band gain greater public recognition and acceptance like ARMY elsewhere.

With its strength in numbers and dedication, US ARMY has played a vital role in the breakthrough of BTS in the world's largest and most influential music market through their well-planned and well-coordinated campaign to gain recognition and accolades for the group from 2017 onward (D. Chang 2017). To promote the band, they have lobbied to

have BTS appear as guest on popular television shows to perform their hit songs. They have voted for their idols to win awards at prestigious American music award shows such as the Billboard Music Awards, American Music Awards, and MTV Music Awards. But, more importantly, US ARMY has focused its energy in placing BTS songs and albums at the top of the main Billboard charts by purchasing their albums, downloading and streaming their songs and music videos, lobbying radio stations to get airplay for their singles, and requesting stores like Target and Walmart to carry BTS albums and merchandise. For topping the Billboard charts, which are widely regarded as a barometer for musical success, would be the most effective means of gaining wider recognition and popularity for BTS in the US and globally.

By 2019, their sustained efforts resulted in BTS stunning the US music industry with a string of historic achievements—including four consecutive albums topping the Billboard 200 albums chart (the first three in less than a year matching the record set by the Beatles) and three songs in the top ten of the Hot 100 singles chart—which is unprecedented for a foreign musical act, much less a Korean band, singing mostly in their native language. But their crowning achievement came when their idol earned the much-belated recognition and accolade as a global superstar with their song *Dynamite* debuting at number one on what is considered the pinnacle of pop music, the Billboard Hot 100 singles chart (one of only 44 songs to have achieved this difficult feat), on August 31, 2020 (Molanphy 2020). This song also charted number one in Spotify's Global Top 50 chart, topped the iTunes charts in 104 countries and regions, and set a new YouTube record for the most views (101.1 m) in 24 hours of which 8 million views were from India (Mamta 2020). With *Dynamite* topping the singles chart for three weeks, the group finally received validation in the US market as an important artist on par with the most well-known and -respected artists in America.

The significance of topping the Hot 100 chart was that the American public became aware of BTS and K-pop in general. US radio stations, which had been reluctant to play their previous hit songs on the radio because of their Korean lyrics, began to play this song regularly on rotation for the first time as this was the group's first all-English song. The radio airplay was important not only because it, along with digital sales and streaming, is an important metric in determining the ranking of the song in the Hot 100, but the song was also heard more widely by ordinary people who would not have been exposed to their music otherwise

(D. Chang 2020). Along with their appearances on major American television and music award shows and growing media coverage, topping the singles chart has given the group well-deserved credibility and recognition in the US market, a long-held goal of the Korean music industry. With the release of their song *Dynamite*, BTS has taken an important step in moving beyond its core audience and becoming part of the US music mainstream and, as a result, they are poised to become a greater force in the global music scene.

Due to the dedicated campaign by ARMY over the last several years, which enabled BTS to become a global superstar and singlehandedly put K-pop on the world map by achieving series of important milestones in their career including a total of six number one albums and five number one songs in the Billboard main charts as of 2021, the case of ARMY illustrates the importance of the role of the fandoms in fueling the popularity of K-pop in countries and regions where its penetration had been limited. Along with the upcoming fourth generation of K-pop groups such as TXT, Stray Kids, ATEEZ, AB6IX, CIX, ITZY, and LOONA with large international fanbases early in their careers, the ever-evolving appeal of K-pop will lead to increasingly more fandoms whose passion and dedication in promoting their idols will contribute to the global spread of K-pop. The enormous popularity of K-pop worldwide, thus, is the result of the confluence of its appeal as an art form and effective use of the digital platforms to disseminate content and foster fan communities, as well as the efficacy of the fandoms in promoting their idols, all of which will maintain the momentum of Hallyu 2.0 well into the future (Romano 2018).

ENTERTAINMENT VALUE OF K-DRAMAS

Along with K-pop, K-dramas have evolved over the last two decades to become a global phenomenon due to their high entertainment value and the advent of digital streaming technology (Bacon 2019; Maybin 2018). Although K-pop has become the face of Hallyu, it was Korean TV dramas that initially launched the Korean Wave in the late 1990s. K-dramas first became popular in Northeast Asia and then rapidly spread to Southeast and Central Asia. From 2007 to 2012, K-dramas had reached Latin America (Cuba, Puerto Rico, Panama, El Salvador, Costa Rica, Peru, Ecuador, Bolivia, Chile, and Paraguay), the Middle East and North Africa (Turkey, Iran, UAE, and Egypt), and Eastern Europe (Hungary

and Romania). It then began to find niche markets in North America, Western Europe, Sub-Saharan Africa, Oceania, and South Asia (Korean Culture and Information Service 2011). One of the most successful dramas early on to enjoy global popularity was *Dae Jang Geum* (aka *Jewel in the Palace*), a stirring historical drama set in the Joseon dynasty about a peasant girl who overcomes numerous obstacles and challenges in her life to rise from a lowly apprentice cook in the royal kitchen to an official physician to the king. Originally aired in South Korea in 2003 with high viewership ratings, it was later syndicated to 91 countries worldwide where it enjoyed phenomenal TV ratings in some countries. In Iran and Sri Lanka, for example, the viewership surpassed 90 per cent. Despite ups and downs in the market, other K-dramas have followed in gaining wide popularity in Asia and, to a lesser extent, in markets beyond Asia such as *Winter Sonata* (2003), *Full House* (2004), *Coffee Prince* (2007), *Boys Over Flowers* (2009), *Secret Garden* (2010), *Moon Embracing the Sun* (2012), *My Love From the Star* (2013–14), *Descendants of the Sun* (2016), *Guardian: The Lonely and Great God* (2016–17), *Memories of the Alhambra* (2018), and *Hotel Del Luna* (2019).

But the first sign that the growing popularity of K-dramas had reached a new level of global recognition and acceptance was revealed in the data compiled by FlixPatrol, a streaming analytics company, on the most-watched shows in the world and the top ten most-watched shows by country on Netflix in 2020. As the world's largest streaming service, Netflix is accessible in 190 countries with 193 million paid subscribers worldwide including 73 million in the US (as of April 2020). The data confirmed the overwhelming popularity of the dramas in East Asia and to a lesser extent in other Asian markets, which was to be expected. But what was surprising was the popularity of some of the K-dramas outside of Asia. Nine Korean dramas and one reality show made it to the list of the hundred most-watched shows globally (Valley 2020a). The top three K-dramas came in 10th (*The King: Eternal Monarch*), 31th (*It's Okay to Not Be Okay*), and 36th (*Hospital Playlist*) place. *The King: Eternal Monarch*, a love story with sci-fi-fantasy-thriller twist, was highly popular in Asia where it was ranked number 1 in 7 East Asian countries, number 2 in India, number 1 in two countries in the Middle East, and number 1 in Nigeria at least once in the period between April 19 and July 30. It was also featured in the top ten most-watched dramas in seven Latin American countries and the Caribbean region, as well as three East European countries. In addition, according to the data of

the two episodes of *It's Okay to Not Be Okay*, which combined elements of romance, psychological thriller, and comedy to narrate a heart-warming story about three people finding love and happiness by helping each other to deal with their trouble past, on July 26 and 27, it placed in the top ten most-watched shows (excluding East Asia where it came in first place in 8 countries) in numerous countries around the world including Russia, India, Australia, New Zealand, Nigeria, Canada, and six countries each in Central and South America. On August 6, it was ranked eighth in Netflix's global ranking. Two K-dramas also made it to the top 10 most-watched shows on Netflix during the Coronavirus shutdown in the US: *Crash landing on You* in sixth and *Kingdom* in ninth place (Ockoala 2020). The most dramatic breakthrough in the global popularity of K-dramas, however, came in the latter part of 2021 and January 2022 when three highly intense and novel K-dramas in rapid succession became Netflix's most-watched series in the world—*Squid Game*, *Hellbound*, and *All of Us Are Dead*. *Squid Game*, in particular, took the top position on the streaming service in 94 countries where the service features a top ten list and was the most-watched show in Netflix's history. Their unprecedented success showed that K-dramas are among the most competitive products in capturing the global imagination. Therefore, the global popularity of K-dramas on Netflix, thus, is proof of its potential to become a fixture in the mainstream entertainment of diverse countries around the world.

An important factor behind the growing popularity of K-dramas has been the steady increase in its entertainment value and the continuous refinement of its format (Liberio-Cruz 2018). The dramas have increased their appeal with stories that captivate and intrigue viewers by artfully combining different genres in new and creative ways and couching universal human themes in Korean cultural sensibility. It is not unusual to see a drama such as *My Love from the Star*, for example, which combines different genres such as action, science fiction, suspense thriller, romantic comedy, and historical to create a storyline which the viewers find engrossing. Although the stories are woven with universal themes, which viewers can readily empathize with regardless of their cultural backgrounds, of love, friendship, and family, overcoming life's tragedies and challenges, achieving one's dreams against all odds, conflict and reconciliation, and good triumphing over evil, they are imbued with Korean sensibility which make them fresh and interesting. International fans, thus, can vicariously enjoy the pleasure of experiencing the most basic

of human emotions—love—in a way that differs from its portrayal and expression in their own cultures. The creativity shown by Korean writers who continue to innovate by blending genres and coming up with inventive and compelling storylines is a key reason why K-dramas keep winning over new fans globally.

Also, the steady improvement in the production value of K-dramas has increased its appeal. The dramas have high production value, in which, the technical elements are artfully combined to complement the storytelling. At their best, they resemble fine movies because of the high quality of their cinematography and the use of beautiful and striking scenic locations as a backdrop to heighten the emotions that are being portrayed by the actors in important scenes of the drama. Original, emotion-laden soundtracks (normally packaged in 2 CDs) by famous Korean vocalists, moreover, are played in the background to reveal the emotions of the actors, which are being expressed through subtle facial expressions and gestures, and, thus, making those emotions more powerfully felt by the viewers. Lastly, Korea has a highly developed cultural infrastructure with a deep pool of charismatic and attractive actors and excellent writers, directors, and producers who bring the dramas vividly to life by fusing all the creative elements in such a way that they provide the viewers with a compelling and rewarding experience.

Lastly, the successive refinement of the format of the K-dramas has contributed to its popularity. The way the dramas are structured keeps the viewers interested and engaged from beginning to end. Unlike TV dramas found in other countries, the K-dramas usually consist of 16–20 episodes, each lasting approximately one to less than one and half hours. Thus, the storytelling tends to be fast-paced and each episode ends on a cliff-hanger, which leaves the viewers guessing about how the plot twist is going to be resolved. To find out, they have to wait for the next episode and this process is repeated with subsequent episodes. The drama's structure, thus, adds to the viewer's enjoyment by building up anticipation, excitement, and suspense as the story reaches toward a climax and then a dramatic resolution, which usually is a happy ending.

The growing popularity of K-dramas in countries and regions where they had limited presence, however, would not have been possible without the digital streaming technology that is radically transforming the way consumers access media content (Orsini 2018). Originally K-dramas' Asia-wide popularity was driven by satellite and cable television. But since the late 2000s, the-proliferation of subscription-based streaming services

like Netflix, Hulu, Amazon Prime, Rakuten Viki, YouTube TV, Viu, and Kocowa offering high-quality K-dramas for their customers to stream from the comfort of their homes on their computers, connected and smart TVs, tablets, and smartphones have expanded the captive audience for K-dramas. The availability of K-dramas for streaming has increased their viewership by attracting new viewers who normally would not have watched them if they had not been so easily accessible on the internet-based platforms (S. Lee 2020). The streaming services, thus, have enabled K-dramas to extend their reach by appealing to people with limited or no previous exposure to Korean TV dramas. The streaming services, moreover, are not only showing K-dramas, but some like Netflix have begun to invest heavily in producing original content by partnering with Korean production companies to expand their libraries of K-dramas. The huge budgets allotted to the production companies by Netflix, for example, have had a beneficial effect of further improving their quality.

Just as the combination of K-pop and social media enabled the popularity of K-pop to take off globally, the convergence of K-dramas and streaming services has proved to be a potent combination in extending the popularity of K-dramas from beyond its original stronghold in Asia to the rest of the world (H-K. Kim 2020). But, though specific K-dramas have recently achieved astonishing success globally on the world's largest streaming service, Netflix, their overall popularity among the general viewers outside of Asia remains a work-in-progress. Despite the challenges, the prospects for reaching a broader audience worldwide for K-dramas are excellent. More and more high-quality K-dramas will be available for streaming worldwide as the US-based streaming platforms compete to increase their market share especially in the untapped Asian market for streaming services. They will increasingly be joined by large Korean media and IT companies, as well as regional streaming providers based in Asia, who want to expand their streaming services of K-dramas to protect their domestic market from the incursion by the larger international players, and to increase their profits by distributing the dramas directly on their own platforms (S-H. Lee 2020). Consequently, as the supply of high-quality K-dramas grows to meet the rising global demand, K-dramas will expand their global reach by making deeper inroads in markets with limited exposure to K-dramas.

Hallyu 2.0 marks a new turning point in the global popularity of its two most important genres—K-pop and -dramas. Both have evolved over the last two decades into highly competitive products with immense mass

appeal. In tandem with the improvement in the quality of K-pop and K-dramas, the advancements in digital and mobile technology have made it easier to promote, disseminate, and consume these products (Shin 2017). The synergy created by the convergence of the Korean cultural content and digital technology has fueled the growing popularity of K-pop and K-dramas globally. This, in turn, has spurred consumer interest in Korean fashion and beauty, cosmetics, food, language, traditional culture, and tourism, as well as promoted Korea's national branding—the comprehensive image of Korea internationally including political, economic, and cultural dimensions. The launch of Hallyu 2.0 signifies the emergence of Korea as the first non-Western country to become a global player in the creation and marketing of popular cultural products, which is an astonishing achievement as it has been accomplished in such a relatively short time as compared to the US and other Western countries (Smith and Chace 2012; Jung 2015; Frater 2020).

RISE OF HALLYU IN INDIA AND SOUTH ASIA

Although K-pop and K-dramas became popular in the South Asian countries and, in particular, in India at a much later date as compared to other regions in Asia, in the last several years their popularity has become quite noticeable especially among young people in their teens and twenties whose access to digital technology has exposed them to Korean pop culture (Deb 2019). This exposure has led them to become fans of K-pop and K-dramas for the same reasons that their cohorts have in other countries around the world. This phenomenon seems to strongly suggest that one of the reasons for Hallyu's belated popularity in South Asia is due to the region lagging behind, for example, East Asian countries in the penetration of internet and smartphones among its population (Epstein 2016). Despite a significant increase in the total number of Indian internet users since 2014, the overall penetration rate was 41 per cent as of 2019 (L. Jha 2020a). Likewise, although the smartphone penetration rate has risen to 31.8 per cent in 2020, India still lags behind other East Asian countries (Newzoo 2020). As the access to the internet and smartphones among the young people relative to the general population has increased, however, so has their exposure to Korean pop culture which, in turn, has led them to become fans of K-pop and -dramas (Korean Cultural Center 2020a, c).

But it is not only the young people who have ready access to Korean cultural content, subscribers of streaming services in South Asia can watch K-dramas on their smart or connected TVs, tablets, and smartphones as well. Just as in the case of young people becoming fans of K-pop because it is easily accessible on social media, people's exposure to K-dramas facilitated by the streaming services seemed to have turned them into fans of the dramas (T. George 2020; ZENGER.NEWS 2020). Although the penetration of K-pop and K-dramas among the general population has not reached the level of East Asian countries, both genres are ramping up their market presence in South Asian countries and India, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, in particular, which bode well for bringing South Asia into the fold of Hallyu 2.0.

To examine the prospects of Korean popular culture becoming part of the mainstream entertainment in India and other South Asian countries, it may be instructive to analyze the far-reaching impact of Hallyu in North East India. For, while the popularity of K-pop and dramas was late in reaching India as a whole, there is one region comprising eight North Eastern states including Mizoram, Manipur, and Nagaland where Korean pop culture has long held sway. This region, which is populated by people who are ethnically and culturally different from the rest of India, has been exposed to Korean pop culture for over two decades. During this time, K-pop and K-dramas have become a prime source of entertainment for the people of this region. Korean dramas and films, for example, are hugely popular not only among the young but also the elderly. Although their ethnic and cultural affinity to East Asian countries has been commonly cited as one of the reasons why they were more receptive to K-pop and K-dramas, a more likely reason may have been their increasing ability to access ever more appealing Korean pop culture over a longer time span compared to the rest of India (Kshetrimayum and Chanu 2008; Kaisii 2017).

The people of this region began to enjoy Korean pop culture in the pre-digital era first through cheap bootlegged DVDs of Korean music, dramas, and films, which they preferred over Chinese and Japanese DVDs (PTI 2020), that became easily available when the border trade was opened between India and Myanmar in 1994. The popularity of K-pop and K-dramas received a boost in the 2000s when people began to watch Korean KBS and Arirang TV channels on cable in Nagaland, where Arirang TV became the most-watched TV channel, and Manipur following a ban on Hindi films, music, and satellite channels

by a separatist militant group in the region in 2000. With the advent of digital technology, their access to burgeoning Korean cultural content via internet-based platforms helped to further cement the popularity of K-pop and K-dramas among the second-generation fans (Marchang 2015). Therefore, more than any other factor, the growing ability to access highly competitive Korean cultural products with immense mass appeal, facilitated by new media technologies, was probably the most important reason for Korean pop culture becoming a source of mainstream entertainment for the people in this region. Although the ban on Hindi TV channels has been relaxed and Hindi films are circulated, people's preference for Korean cultural content has remained steadfast (*India Today* 2017). The rise in popularity of K-pop and K-dramas due to growing access to Korean cultural content in the North Eastern Region has interesting implications for how Hallyu 2.0 will unfold in the rest of India. Irrespective of the ethnic and cultural differences between the people of the North Eastern Region and the rest of India, the dynamics underlying the increasing popularity K-pop and K-dramas are the same in both. The people become enamored of Korean pop culture when they possess the technology to access highly-appealing K-pop and K-dramas. The only difference is that, although it has taken over two decades for K-pop and K-dramas to achieve mainstream status in the North Eastern Region due to its relatively earlier exposure to Korean pop culture in the analog era, the growth in the popularity of K-pop and K-dramas is taking place in the rest of India in a more compressed time frame due to the alluring content of the more recent K-pop and K-dramas and the revolution in digital and mobile technology.

As the leading engine driving Hallyu 2.0, K-pop's growing popularity and the concomitant rise of fandoms over the last several years in India closely follow the pattern seen in other countries where K-pop has expanded its reach. Its popularity has been driven by the growing ease with which young people can access K-pop content on the internet using their digital devices, and the appeal of the third-generation K-pop artists who have captivated their fans with their arresting music, performances, and visuals (Jin 2018). With increasing exposure to K-pop facilitated by digital technology, the number of dedicated fans of third-generation artists such as BTS and EXO, who have been swept away by their meaningful lyrics, dazzling choreography, catchy songs, mesmerizing music videos, attractive appearances and fashion style, talent and dedication to their art, and the sincerity of their love and gratitude for their fans, has

grown exponentially (Chew 2018). Like their counterparts all over the world, the young people in India (Abraham 2018; Vice Asia 2019) and South Asia (Ables 2018; Arif 2016; Bhattarai 2019; Bhutia 2020; Kabir 2020; Khan 2018; Maskay 2020; Rai 2012; Zehra 2020) have found the inimitable musical style and performance of K-pop's third-generation groups, who have taken the art form to a whole new level, compelling and irresistible.

Another important factor fueling the popularity of K-pop has been the role of the fandoms in promoting the third-generation K-pop artists whom the fans believe have had a profound impact on their lives (Mandal 2017). Their influence is especially noticeable among the Indian fans of the global superstar, BTS (Raju 2018), who are responsible for India ranking in third place with 74.3 million views of BTS videos on YouTube during the previous year as of February 2021 by country (Statista 2021). (Only Japan and Indonesia ranked higher with 148 and 82.8 million views, respectively, and the US was fourth with 66.5 million and the Philippines was fifth with 64.6 million views.) The Indian ARMY shares the conviction that the group through their music and personal example has not only given them strength, hope, and happiness, but also their message of self-acceptance, self-love, and self-empowerment has given meaning and purpose to their lives (BTS N.E India 2019; Korean Cultural Center 2020b, d, e, f). The fans of BTS in South Asia have coined a new name combining Desi and ARMY—Desimy—to show how they, though hailing from different South Asian countries, are united by their love, respect, and admiration for their idol whom they fervently regarded as their role model and to whom they feel a deep sense of gratitude and indebtedness. This has catalyzed them as a community to actively support and promote BTS in order that their idols can gain well-deserved recognition and success (Gogoi 2018b).

In order to achieve the fandoms' aim of promoting their idols both online and offline, the dedicated fans have created trending hashtags on Twitter, organized to stream new music, lobbied to have K-pop aired on music programs on TV, engaged in charitable activities on behalf of their idols such as collecting funds by Indian ARMY to help victims of massive floods in the North Eastern state Assam, and voted for their idols to win first places in popular Korean music chart shows and awards in major music award shows in Korea and the US (Gogoi 2018a, 2019; Bhanuj 2017). They have also purchased groups' albums and merchandise, as well as streamed their music on Spotify and iTunes. The Indian fans of

K-pop, thus, are just as committed and active in supporting their idols as fans elsewhere in the world.

The growing popularity of K-pop, due to its accessibility on the internet-based platforms, unique appeal, and dedicated fandoms, has made India an important market for K-pop over the last several years. According to the data collected by Twitter (in partnership with K-pop Radar) covering the period from 2010 to 2020, the volume of K-pop related tweets began to rise rapidly in India from 2014–2015 onward. The data, moreover, from July 2019 to June 2020 showed India was 11th among the top 20 markets as measured by K-pop related tweets by both total volume and unique voices. In the latest Twitter data for 2020, India moved up a notch to come in 10th place among the top 20 markets ranked by both total volume and unique voices (Y. Kim 2021). India again moved further up in the rankings in 2021 by coming in 9th place among the Top 20 countries tweeting about K-pop and 9th place among the countries with the greatest number of K-pop fans according to unique authors (Y. Kim 2022). The data from 2019–2020 also showed the most mentioned K-pop acts in India was BTS followed by EXO, TWICE, TXT, and GOT7. In addition, according to a survey of 6000 people in 17 countries (excluding South Korea) most exposed to K-pop to find out how many hours an average fan listens to K-pop per month by Statista in 2020, India placed 6th with an average fan listening to 16 hours of K-pop per month (Nyle 2020; Valley 2020b). The emergence of India as the 9th largest market for K-pop in 2021, as measured by Twitter activity, is a clear sign that K-pop's popularity is at an all-time high, and is gaining on the East Asian countries (Japan, Indonesia, Philippines, Malaysia, and Thailand) ranked among the top ten markets for K-pop, all of whom had much longer exposure to K-pop than India. If the current trend continues and there is no reason why it should not, India will become one of the top K-pop markets in the world within the next several years.

The K-dramas have also noticeably grown in popularity due to its high entertainment value and easy accessibility on the streaming services such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, Rakuten Viki, Viu, OZEE, MX Player, Dish TV, Dramania, WETV, EROS, Hotstar, and Korea TV in India (Bhushan 2018; A. Jha 2020; Sanjay 2020; Awaasthi 2021). Just like K-drama fans elsewhere in the world, Indian, as well as other South Asian, fans have been smitten by the original and creative stories with themes that are relatable and resonate with the viewers (Bhattacharya 2019; L. George 2019). The fans are also attracted to the sense of realism and the

strong emotional appeal of the K-dramas. They, moreover, are drawn to the attractive actors who are skilled at conveying the subtlest feelings to the raw emotions of their characters. Many, moreover, like the dramas which keep the viewers engrossed in the story by limiting the length of the drama to usually 16 episodes. Therefore, the very qualities which have made K-dramas popular worldwide have also found favor among Indian and other South Asian fans. Unlike K-pop whose popularity is largely limited to young people, the ease of access to K-dramas through the streaming services has led to greater awareness and appreciation of K-dramas among the general public (Chabba 2021). In 2020, three K-dramas were popular on India Netflix, which currently has over 2 million subscribers (Modak 2020). One was the second season of the thrilling zombie tale *Kingdom* set in the historical Joseon Dynasty, which was in the Top 10 series row when it was released in March. The other two were *Crash Landing on You*, depicting an improbable romance between a North Korean officer and a South Korean heiress who finds herself in North Korea due to a freak accident, and *It's Okay to Not Be Okay*. Both were featured in the India Top 10 overall and series rows (L. Jha 2020b). Lastly, dramas including *Extracurricular*, *My Holo Love*, *Hospital Playlist*, and *Something in the Rain* have also appeared in the top 10 trending now lists in India Netflix (Banan 2020).

But K-dramas achieved a dramatic breakthrough in their popularity among the general public not only in India, but also in other South Asian countries in 2021 and 2022. The most widely watched show in Netflix's history, the highly original *Squid Game* became the first Korean drama series to rank number one in India, as well as in all South Asian countries where Netflix is offered. This was shortly followed by another Korean TV show with a novel storyline *Hellbound*, which also ranked number one in the world and number 2 in India on Netflix. Another Korean drama *All of Us are Dead*, a horror thriller, repeated the spectacular success of *Squid Game*, by ranking number one in the world and in India and other South Asian countries on Netflix in January 2022. The spectacular success of these K-dramas validates the potential of Korean pop culture becoming part of the mainstream entertainment in India and the rest of South Asia.

The growing popularity of K-pop and K-dramas in the last several years, however, should not have come as a surprise because the conditions for its success had sufficiently matured in India and the rest of South Asia. With the growing number of internet and smartphone users especially among young people, it has become easier to access Korean cultural

content on the internet-based platforms. Their subsequent exposure to the unique appeal of K-pop and K-dramas have transformed many of them into their most committed fans. But with the availability of streaming services in India and other South Asian countries, a greater swath of the general population has been attracted to the high-quality K-dramas as well. Therefore, with the internet and smartphone penetration rates continuing their upward trajectory and the quality of K-pop and K-dramas continuing to evolve to make them more appealing to a wider audience, the competitiveness of Korean pop culture will make it an attractive alternative to American and British cultural content which long have been favored in the region. Because the appeal of Korean pop culture is based on its own merits largely unaffected by domestic or cultural considerations, there is nothing peculiar or inherent about any aspect of Indian society and culture or that of any South Asian country that presents an insurmountable obstacle for Korean pop culture becoming an everyday source of popular entertainment as in the case of North East India and East Asia.

KOREAN INTERESTS IN PROMOTING HALLYU 2.0 IN INDIA AND SOUTH ASIA

With the growing recognition of the benefits accruing to the Korean government and companies from Hallyu 2.0, both have been at the forefront in promoting Hallyu in South Asia in general and India in particular. For the government, Hallyu is an important asset in promoting a favorable image of and generating goodwill toward Korea among the Indian public in order to make them supportive of greater cooperation and closer ties between the two countries (S. Kim 2016; Paik 2012; Roll 2020; Chae et al. 2019). As India continues on its trajectory to become a great power with growing regional and international influence, improving relations with India will help Korea to achieve its political and strategic interests.

Likewise, Korean companies also see Hallyu as an important resource because the positive image of and attitudes toward Korea among the general population will increase the effectiveness of their marketing to get Indian consumers to buy a wide array of highly competitive products such as cars, appliances, smartphones, cosmetics, and food (P. Chang and Lee 2017). With the rising popularity of K-pop and K-dramas, the companies can use K-pop idols and movie stars to great effect in advertising their products. In East Asia, Korean, as well as local, companies, have

seen their sales increase significantly by heavily advertising their products using popular Korean idols and actors. Therefore, as India becomes an important market for export-oriented Korean companies because of its relatively young population and growing middle class, which also apply to the region as a whole, they stand to financially benefit from promoting Korean pop culture in India and other emerging South Asian economies (Dhawan 2017).

Given the common interest of the Korean government and companies in promoting Hallyu, the government and world-renowned companies such as LG, Samsung, and Hyundai have cooperated to organize and sponsor K-pop contests in India, which have enjoyed phenomenal growth since 2012. The first K-pop contest held in India had 37 participants and 300 spectators in attendance but, due to rising interest in K-pop among young people, it has grown in both scale and popularity. In 2019, there was a total of 3475 participants and 1952 teams from 15 Indian cities competing for top prizes in the vocal and dancing categories (Vice Asia 2019). The winners of the previous competitions in 2016 and 2017, along with other winners from K-pop contests held in their respective countries from around the world, participated in the Changwon K-POP World Festival in Korea and won the Excellent Vocal and Best Performance awards, respectively. The Korean government has also organized K-pop contests in Nepal, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. This initiative shows the importance of K-pop and K-dramas achieving mainstream status in India and South Asia for the Korean government and businesses.

CONCLUSION

Hallyu is at an inflection point. The confluence of over two decades of continuous upgrading of K-pop and K-dramas and the revolution in digital and mobile technology has created an irresistible momentum in expanding the global reach of Korean pop culture. Its impact has been most noticeable in the countries and regions where the penetration of Hallyu had been limited. Beyond the core fans of Korean pop culture in these markets, the general population has had relatively little exposure to K-pop and K-dramas. But, due to the increasing availability of high-quality Korean cultural content which can be accessed easily and conveniently by the general public through digital technology, K-pop and K-dramas are making significant inroads in these markets. In the case of K-pop, moreover, the role of fandoms in zealously promoting their idols

has been crucial in gaining recognition and appreciation for the K-pop artists among the general public. The symbiotic relationship between the K-pop artists and their fans, which is upending the global music scene, has proved to be an unstoppable combination with no apparent limits to what it can achieve in the global spread of K-pop.

But the rate of penetration of Korean pop culture in these markets will vary depending on the circumstances. With conditions ripe for a breakthrough, the US has been at the center of one of the most dramatic changes in the public's perception of K-pop. BTS' landmark achievement in reaching the pinnacle of pop music, which would not have been possible without the single-minded dedication of their fanbase, ARMY, has led to their public validation as a superstar on par with the most famous and respected artists in the US and the world. But even in countries where the conditions are far from mature in comparison to the US and other developed markets, Hallyu is visibly gaining momentum by extending its reach beyond the core audiences of K-pop and K-dramas. Its penetration into the general population, which is still in an embryonic stage in India and other countries in South Asia, will accelerate as their development leads to maturing of the conditions for a dramatic breakthrough in the future. Bringing India and the region into the fold of Hallyu, which has long been a daunting goal for the Korean government, corporations, and entertainment companies, will cement Korea's cultural influence in the Asian Century .

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Fandom, Mediated Culture and Reimagining Identity: Exploring the *Hallyu* Wave in South Asia

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INTRODUCTION

South Asia entered a complex condition of mediation with the ever-expanding globalization of media and the aspiration towards newer forms of information and communication technology. In the last three decades, the growth of modern technology, telecommunication, broadcasting culture, satellite connection and internet-based digital communication has contributed enormously to shaping the mediascapes of the region. Such media development changed the way people used to think and act tremendously. If the actions and imaginations of the subjects are fundamental constituents of identity, it is imperative to examine, how the subjects have adapted to the changing media practices and what kinds of new modalities have evolved with regards to identity formation.

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South Asian mediascapes appear like complex domains for exploring public life and practices with their paradoxes, multiplicity and vibrancy (Banaji 2011; Mines and Lamb 2010). Among various other reasons and contextual particularities behind such complexity, the contestation of identity persists as a core issue. There has been an unending struggle between the aspiration to embrace modern life with its globalized counterparts (media and technology) and the pledge to accommodate the dominant traditions and values. The constant confrontation and negotiation between old values and new aspirations, the local and global, the classic and modern, shaped and accelerated media practices in this region and brought the ‘identity’ question to the fore.

This chapter examines the case of the flourishing *Hallyu* wave fandom in South Asia to understand the (re)formation of identity, and to engage with debates around identities influenced by mass media. The two-fold objectives of this chapter are to capture the changing trends of media consumption behaviour of the youth in South Asia, and to engage with the question of identity formation in the age of digital media circulation. The K-wave or Korean wave, popularly known as *Hallyu* wave, traces its history to the mid-1990s when Korean pop music and TV dramas gained popularity among viewers in China (Shim 2013; Yoon and Jin 2017). The *Hallyu* wave added a significant dimension to the transnational cultural flow in the Asian region that was facilitated by the media and satellite boom of the 1990s (Lee 2008). The age of internet and popular participation in the global digital world through social networking sites enabled the era of *Hallyu* 2.0 where on the one hand the Korean wave emerged as a global phenomenon, and on the other hand, fandoms started flourishing worldwide (Lee and Nornes 2018). The case of *Hallyu* fandom offers multiple vantage points to examine the mediated identity in the digital age. The impressive numbers in which South Asian youth who are participating in this emerging cultural trend makes this worthy of academic investigation. *Hallyu*’s entry into South Asian culture is welcomed and often defended by the fandom as harmless in opposition to the Western ‘cultural aggression’. Having an addiction to and affection for K-media elements, the fans’ claim is to be participatory in the globalized media world while expressing their due regard for traditional and national culture.

This study followed a qualitative methodological approach and has employed multiple methods to collect data. This research used primary data collated from Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka and the Maldives, given

the massive presence of *Hallyu* fans and their digital media practices in these countries. Interviews, observation of fan interactions online and social network analysis were the methods adopted for data collection and analysis (Kozinets 2010). Furthermore, digital media contents available online and extensively circulated through social media platforms were also referred to. In order to engage and learn about online communities and observe the activities of fan groups, a Facebook page titled ‘Media Research South Asia’ was created.

IDENTITY IN THE SATELLITE AND DIGITAL AGE

The complexities regarding categories of the self and the other, the self and subjectivity become more important in a media-saturated society. The questions of identity formation and expression, associated with media practices, are crucial in a context where media is the focus of everyday life. According to Kim (2008: 11) ‘identity is in the process of being redefined and reconstructed through the everyday reflexivity, and the media are central to the ongoing identity project’. In contemporary media studies, the construction of reflexive identity has been identified as a vital phenomenon of media convergence (Jenkins 2006). Fluidity, temporality, contradictions and transformations are some of the basics of mediated identity construction. As Kim puts it, ‘The media globalization in Asia needs to be recognized as a proliferating, indispensable, yet highly complex and contradictory resources for the construction of identity within the lived experience of everyday life’ (Kim 2008: 12).

While modernity has offered fluid identities along with its infinite possibilities of negotiation, mobility and flexibility, globalization brought insecurities, uncertainties and a sense of loss, making people hold onto and display rigid identity positions (Bauman 2004; Castells 2010a; Giddens 1991). The sense of identity, tradition, community and belonging have become intensified and prominent in the dynamic era of global–local (Morley and Robins 1995). According to Morley and Robins (1995), there has been a significant development in the formation of identities in a present that is marked by the correspondence between modernity and postmodernity, globalization and localization. Citing Ley (1989) they argue, there has been a creative and conversant mechanism of identity formation in contemporary mediated societies, because ‘if modernity created an abstract and universal sense of self, then postmodernity will be about a sense of identity rooted in the particularity of place’ (Morley

and Robins 1995: 116). The debate regarding the status and correspondence between modernity and postmodernity, between the global and the local is a never-ending one. In an effort to remain focused on the main objectives of this chapter, we will try to examine the nature of the local-to-local dynamic in play currently (Pathak 2012). Debates on whether the mediascape of South Asia is passing through modernity, late modernity or postmodernity appears to be unproductive for an inquiry to understand how the media corresponds with identity formation.

In the case of Europe, broadcasting played a significant role in forming the national identity and national culture, as the symbolic materials and senses of identity were supplied by broadcasting (Morley and Robins 1995). There is still a dearth of empirically embedded knowledge to comprehend the role of media in the formation of social, cultural and political identity. In the context of India, the use of televisual as a tool to redefine identity has been examined by scholars with due concentration. Two major works by Purnima Mankekar (1999) and Arvind Rajagopal (2001) broadly looked at the employment of television media by Hindu nationalists to disseminate their political agenda by redefining India's identity as a Hindu nation. Specifically, Mankekar's (1999) ethnographic study of the viewers of *Ramayana* (TV serial based on the Hindu epic of the same name) in New Delhi suggests that media enabled people to redefine and refurbish collective and national identity. Zakir Hossain Raju's (2008) study of everyday consumption of Bollywood in Bangladesh unravels the complexities regarding identity construction and formation of a new middle-class identity in globalized South Asia.

Apart from this, there are case studies that show the formation and transformation of identities in the wake of modern media. For example, Frissen et al. (2013) borrowed the term *Homo Ludens* to denote the identity marker of the digital media users in the contemporary global world.¹ They scrutinized the playful practices of media users and argued that they all possess a collective desire for pleasure that helps in constituting an identity position. Pamela Nilan (2008) examined how the Muslim media is used as a cultural resource by young people in South East Asia to foster their identity. Her study revealed that the identity of young people in Indonesia and Malaysia is antithetical to Western individualism. The

¹ Taking cues from diverse philosophical and anthropological understanding of human being they show that playing (*homo ludens*) is a significant aspect along with reasoning (*homo sapiens*).

media users were comfortable introducing themselves in collective terms as ‘we’ while talking about their media practices. It is imperative to note that the subjective underpinning of the media participants (particularly the fans) is accelerated by the formation of networks and feelings of belonging.

Within this broad spectrum of identity and media, the role of youth and their digital practices remains crucial. As examined in this study, there has been a general as well as genuine concern from the parents to the policymakers regarding the new generations’ engagement with the new media technologies. In the wake of globalization and the trans-cultural flow, a wide range of media content became easily accessible which influenced the children and youth in South Asian societies. From 2005 onwards, the introduction of the Japanese cartoon series Doraemon in India, and then Bangladesh, influenced media circulation in a crucial way. The Hindi dubbed Doraemon became one of the most popular kids’ icons in these countries. Eventually, the parents started expressing their discomfort towards their children’s addiction to Doraemon and Pokemon. When the societal response is taken into consideration, it is apparent that there has been a persistent presence of criticism surrounding Hindi dubbed foreign cartoon serials in the public domain. In Bangladesh, the concern was raised in the parliament and eventually the government banned the cartoon that was being broadcasted in Hindi. The responsible ministers expressed their desire to shield the younger generation from the ‘negative influence’ of global and trans-national media (Tushi 2014).² Such concerns are underlying hints of a complex milieu of mediated identity formation. Recent studies at understanding the online behaviours of youth have identified them as ‘net generation’, ‘digital generation’, ‘generation X’ (Buckingham 2008; Herring 2008; Tapscott 1998). Being technologically empowered, this generation portrays themselves as creative, analytic, inquisitive and expressive (Buckingham 2008). The manner in which this younger generation of internet users express their emotions, ideas and affection for a certain thing manifests in engaging in different online activities. Fan groups created on digital platforms remain one of the most prominent examples of such behaviour. In the following section, we will examine the role of fandom as an identity

² Also see, <https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2013/02/14/govt-slaps-ban-on-hindi-dubbed-doraemon-telecast> (last accessed on 3 November 2018).

position generated via digital media by referring to Korean cultural fans in South Asia.

FANDOM IDENTITY: A CASE OF *HALLYU* WAVE

Fan pages and creative groups online constitute a vital media practice and indicate the possibility of transcultural flow. The growth of fandoms online and their activities on the digital domain to share common interests, getting involved into broader social networks who are fascinated by a particular cultural genre provides a clue to understanding contemporary digital media culture. Emerging fandom of Korean Cultural wave in South Asia indicates a vibrant transcultural mediation and identity formation online. We will begin this section with a brief familiarization of the formation and activities of those social media-based fan groups that enable us to understand the growth of the *Hallyu* wave in South Asia.

'Gangnam Style', K-Pop and South Asian Youths

South Korean musician Psy's K-Pop single 'Gangnam Style' was released in July 2012. Within a month it caught the attention of the young viewers in Bangladesh. They were not only listening to the music but also started performing in public. Some students from the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET) performed, recorded and posted it on YouTube in October 2012, by the time the original music video was acknowledged in Guinness World Record (2012). It was not simply reproducing and imitating a globally popular music genre of K-Pop by consumers from a South Asian country. Rather, it was a creative innovation and context-based alteration of a popular trend by Bangladeshi youth. Two of the members from the same group made another music video in Bengali language sponsored by a private radio station. The music video mimicked the Gangnam Style and refashioned as 'Korbani Style' (Eid-UI-Adha is locally popular as Korbani Eid, hence the renaming of the music video was Korbani style) to feature the *Eid-UI-Adha*, annual Islamic festival of sacrifice where Muslims sacrifice an animal in respect of Ibrahim's generosity to sacrifice his son in obedience to the almighty.

Similar events of remaking 'Gangnam Style' and recasting Psy's dance steps were carried out widely by the youth in India. In different colleges and universities, students began to organize flash mobs while dancing to the song. From different parts of India, young people made parodies

and posted on YouTube. Such parody videos were titled *Grandma Style*, *Oppa Indian Style* where Indian grandmothers, Indian youth mimicked Psy and his group. Realizing the craze, the Indian film industry started incorporating the essence of ‘Gangnam Style’ and featured it in upcoming movies. For instance, in 2013 Indian action-drama film *Rangrezz* featured the ‘Gangnam Style’ song for promotional purposes. It was branded as Jackk’s ‘Gangnam Style’ wherein the hero of the film Jacky Bhangnani led the remake. The production company Pooja Entertainment invited the viewers to subscribe to the ‘desi version’ instead of Psy’s version,

Can’t get this song out of your head! Well, then you should watch its desi version too. The Gangnam style is North Korea’s street dance form³ and we have incorporated our very own Mumbaiya dance version onto this infamous track. So people, it’s time to skip the international version and get grooving to the beats of *Rangrezz* Gangnam style!⁴

Following this, there have been many initiatives in the mainstream film and entertainment sector that were explicitly or implicitly getting inspired by K-pop. It is imperative to draw a connection between the local-to-local dimension that one can see in the process of entering ‘Gangnam Style’ in the popular culture of India, Sri Lanka or Bangladesh. Another aspect that can be drawn from the popularity of ‘Gangnam Style’ is the formation of followers, that is, a fan group getting identified, intensified and formalized. ‘Gangnam Style’ can be taken as one of the initial points of connection to the *Hallyu* wave for its South Asian fandom.

Formation and Activities of Hallyu Fandom

Lejong runs a Facebook group since 2016 named *Sri Lankan K-Pop Fans*. She has been exposed to the Korean media since 2007 and informs that teenagers particularly girls in their early twenties from different parts of Sri Lanka are now joining the K-wave. Super Junior, TVXQ, EXO, B.A.P, Big Bang, Kara, 4 min, Baby V.O.X were some of the popular K-Pop bands with fan bases in South Asia, before the BTS hype. Black Pink, Twice,

³ In their promotion, the production company provides factually incorrect information as Gangnam style is not a dance form and ‘Gangnam’ refers to an affluent district in the capital city of Seoul. See, Guinness World Record News (2012).

⁴ <http://berangrezz.blogspot.com/> (last accessed on 22 August 2018).

N.Flying, GOT7, Red Velvet, Astro are also getting popular among South Asian teenagers. Lavyanvi Rajakaruna, a Sri Lankan fan informed that since 2010 the fans are very active on social networking sites and sharing information about K-wave. Access to the internet and the popularity of YouTube were highly influential in generating viewership of K-Drama and Films.

Some of the fans who started developing their fascination for the K-cultural wave during their student years have continued maintaining the same even today. A considerable number of the members of such fan groups have crossed their teenage years and entered into family and professional life but have continued being active in the fan groups. The fans of K-Drama not only consume the contents but also express their opinions and connect with a national network of fans. Mohammad Afzal, who became familiar with *Hallyu* during his university days and is now a working professional, is also an avid viewer of K-Drama from Bangladesh, who likes sharing his feelings about K-series and drama. He writes extensive reviews of K-dramas on social media and invites others to watch them.

Social media platforms are becoming a vibrant domain to exchange the latest information about K-Drama, K-Films and K-Pop. According to the viewers, the K-Dramas are complete productions, in terms of storyline, making, aesthetic representation and emotional depth. Shaila Begum a housewife from Chittagong, Bangladesh told me that she has been watching K-Drama since her college life in 2007. Even now, she is highly addicted to K-Drama and keeps track of all the upcoming series. In her view, the stories of K-drama are so close to the heart, so touching and fresh that it never makes you feel bored. She went on to say, 'it's not the same family crisis or silly love affairs which dominate our drama serials. Even most of the people in Bangladesh especially women are crazy about Indian serials which are influencing them badly and creating more problems in the family. While Korean dramas do not have any negative impact, they are refreshing for our minds and soul. We should do something to make these popular among Bangladeshi viewers'.⁵ S. Rabbee, a young media professional from Bangladesh, feels Korean dramas and films have made his life easier and help him to escape from everyday anxiety. He

⁵ Interviewed in September 2018.



Image 3.1 Logo of a Bangladeshi Facebook based fan group (Credit: Researcher)

states, ‘It opens a new fantasy world for our depressed workaholic generation and gives us motivation to live in a way that we forget our real life’.⁶ He is one of the admins of the largest Bangladeshi K-fandom on Social Media—Korean Craze Bangladesh (Image 3.1). He along with the other members of that group Parash, Mamun, Sadia and Nazmul keep sharing rare links for Korean Movies and Drama. They are fascinated by the plots of Korean films based on mystery and thriller, numerable twist and ecstatic romance. According to them, these themes are not covered in either Bollywood or Hollywood and Bangladeshi Film and Drama industry is lagging far behind.

⁶ Interviewed on 16 August 2018 and 12 September 2018.

The K-drama and film fans from India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and the Maldives do not believe that *Hallyu* wave can be harmful to their national tradition and culture. Some of them also think that this is an alternative to the Western dominance and to the non-Indians' escape from the Bollywood craze. Building social networks and maintaining online communities is a distinct character of the *Hallyu* wave in South Asia. The wave is not limited to the social media domain but also enables various socio-cultural activism offline. The emotional attachment keeps the activism going even if they are busy in their professional life or live away from the home countries. Layanvi Rajakaruna, a Sri Lankan K-pop fan living abroad has been running the Facebook group *K-Pop to Sri Lanka*. The admins of this particular Facebook group organize K-festivals and other social events. The devotion for the K-drama and K-pop led the fans to carry out different creative events in their own cultural contexts. For instance, Mariyam Fakhira known as Phaa Hiy, a young artist from Maldives exhibited her paintings related to BTS in April 2018 in Male supported by Maldivian Artist Gallery. Titled as 'Purple is the New Rainbow', it was the first exhibition of its kind that portrayed the artistic expression of BTS music in Maldives and was praised by the thriving fandom of *Hallyu*. Rishfa (16) and Ramsha (19) are two such K-pop fans from Male, Maldives who came to know and praise Korean pop music during 2012–2013 via YouTube. They run a Facebook page titled *KPOP—Maldives Fan Page*. According to Rishfa, she feels enchanted by the music and welcomed as a part of the K-Pop fan community. All fans create the feelings of 'family' and K-Pop idols care for their fans. In her words 'you can really relate to the lyrics and the entire vibe of the songs and idols is very positive and cool'.⁷ They created a Facebook page and shared it with some activism to make people know that there are K-pop fans in their country. As claimed by Rishfa, since they put Maldivian culture and tradition before K-pop, it is possible to avoid any tension regarding national versus alien. Nevertheless, some parents and cultural activists are apprehensive of teenagers getting addicted and emotionally attached to Korean pop culture (Image 3.2).

The fan following of K-media are declaring their presence by forming online communities on Facebook and Twitter. To name some of them:

⁷ Interviewed in November 2018.



Image 3.2 Logo of KPOP: Maldives Fanpage (Credit: Rishfa)

BTS Maldivian Army, BTS Maldives, KPOP—Maldives Fanpage, K-Pop News, etc.

The availability of Sinhala dubbed Korean dramas on YouTube channels could be another way to estimate the popularity of K-media in Sri Lanka. The K-pop world festival in Sri Lanka is also getting popular. In 2018, Meraki, a Sri Lankan dance troupe, became the global audition winner of the 2018 Changwon K-Pop World Festival. In India and Bangladesh, online communities of K-pop and K-drama fans are quite vibrant and extremely active. Some of the popular Bangladeshi fan pages active on Facebook are: Korean Craze Bangladesh, BD K-Family—The first Bangladeshi K-pop and Korean Culture Community, BTS Fanclub Bangladesh, K.Escoop, K-Corner BD. Some of the Indian-based fan pages are: Destination K-Pop India, Korean Drama Lovers in India, K-pop Fans India, Bangtan INDIA, Namastae BTS.

Attraction towards K-Pop started growing more in 2013 with the debut of BTS (Bangtan Sonyeondan) a South Korean boy band. The

dominant appearance of BTS on social media was highly attractive to teenagers and young followers and soon they began to form online communities. Maintaining such groups on Twitter and Facebook to share opinions, express passion and exchange information were not common phenomena for fandoms of other global media. There has been a passionate move by the K-Pop followers in India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka to open digital platforms. One such Facebook groups *Bangtan India* claimed to be the first Indian fanbase of BTS and has been active since July 2013. Initially, it was named as *Bangtanoy's India –BTS ARMY* and *Indian BTS ARMY*. Since 2016 it has been renamed as *Bangtan India* and has a vibrant presence on Twitter. The devotion and love for K-pop singers particularly for BTS is explicitly displayed on social media. Social media platforms are allowing BTS fandoms of India and Pakistan to easily coexist on the digital domain to share their passion for K-Pop even though the political tension between the two countries is always crucial.

Tia Appie, one of the admins of a K-Pop fan group Namastae BTS has been interested in making a popular meme of BTS to divulge her love for BTS. She runs the ‘desi’ version of the BTS fan page where contemporary socio-political issues of India get reflected on the Facebook page. According to her, it is a humble attempt to show the world that India is another home for BTS.⁸ The name Namastae has been used for the fan page to give an impression of local/desi which is a common welcoming gesture in India. From 2014 onwards, in all the major states and cities in India, the BTS ARMY announced their existence and formed a vibrant community. ARMY is the fanbase of BTS all over the world and it stands for Adorable Representative Master of Ceremonies (MC) for Youth. The ARMYs do not only engage in social media activism but they are also active in socio-cultural initiatives in the real world. The ARMY from Kolkata, Sikkim, Nagpur, Mumbai and Bangalore also continuously share their activities. According to Arpana, a 21-year-old college student from Kolkata, ARMY is the most committed fanbase of BTS which will keep working to bring peace and positive vibes. She goes on to say, ‘we want to spread this information to the world and to BTS that Indian ARMY loves them. It is not simply to show our love, but we also want to

⁸ Interviewed in August 2018.

do positive things in our society. We took initiatives for tree plantation, helping street children and eradicating other social problems'.⁹

The devotion and passion for K-pop are thriving similarly in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. Tasmia, a Bangladeshi school-going student, claims herself a diehard fan of BTS. She states, 'the lyrics, choreography, appearance, dance and music, everything is fantastic. It is not simply entertaining but extra-ordinary in terms of the message it provides'.¹⁰ The fans from all these countries emphasized the lyrics and the message of BTS music. They believe it is highly motivational towards positive thoughts, meaningful life and a peaceful world. There might be other factors responsible for the overarching passion for BTS. Some of the respondents hinted at the visibility and expressive aspects of BTS music by comparing it to other contemporary trends. They find BTS distinct from the sexually explicit and sometimes erotic representation of the female body present in most music videos. They refer to Honey Singh, who dominates the recent hip-hop and pop music trend in India, especially Bollywood. According to them, his videos are humiliating and abusive towards women. The 'item song'¹¹ craze in Bollywood, vulgar representation of the female body and abusive lyrics made them shift their interest to K-pop. A majority of the BTS fans are teenage girls and young women. It might push one to easily presume that the attraction for the opposite sex that may come from conscious or subconscious human psychology is the reason for the popularity among women. Those who are not BTS fans but largely followers of K-pop express this observation pointing to the fascination of girls towards the 'cuteness' of BTS idols. It is maybe not a simple equation of desire and attraction to the opposite sex because of the 'cute' and 'non-macho' look of BTS guys which make them appear adorable to the teenage girls. Due to this aspect sometimes the BTS fans encounter homophobic remarks which they claim do not bother them. They believe that power and strength are not to be expressed through muscles and moustaches but a comprehensive and intimate representation of music that can bring changes in life and stimulate the power of inspiration.

⁹ Interviewed in September 2018.

¹⁰ Interviewed in September 2018.

¹¹ In Bollywood, item songs are incorporated in-between the film to entertain the viewers with sexually provocative dance sequence and upbeat music.

The attraction to K-Pop in South Asia involves many socio-political aspects including identity formation, gender dynamics, transcultural flow and political culture. Digital media politics is one of the most significant categories that can be explored in the wake of K-Pop fandom in the region. In Sri Lanka, the parody music video of ‘Gangnam Style’ went viral in 2013 where the then-president Mahinda Rajapaksa’s face was grafted virtually on Psy. The politically provocative video got mixed reactions and around 2 million views where people did not only take it as a fun item but also expressed their digital power to criticize the Rajapaksa government for alleged corruption and other controversial initiatives.¹² However, it doesn’t always involve provocative and explicit commentary on mainstream politics or trolling political figures. There are memes, cartoons and parody videos by K-pop lovers that are indicative of the social and cultural flaws and nuisances. The mockery of such issues in the way of posting creative memes is evident of the critical power of the *Hallyu* fandom, as well as the digital media users of South Asia.

REIMAGINING IDENTITY: ASPIRATION, EXPRESSION AND NETWORKING

The respondents of this research from various socio-geographic locations of South Asia expressed an aspiration that at once belongs to the traditional culture but also envisages modern identity. On the one hand, the advent of digital media and circulation of globalized media made them conscious about the status of their social values, cultural identity and national tradition. Hence, they believe in fostering cultural traditions in the modern era of globalized media. On the other hand, they aspire to be a part of a new identity position that helps them move beyond the geographically defined space and locally defined time. The persona-building on social media platforms via creating an account, forming networks and maintaining routine activities online indicates the urge to (re)discover and (re)form identities. As Seargeant and Tagg (2014) argued, social media culture helps us understand the process of identity and community building in a more dynamic way and tells us that identities are discursively constructed and dialogically performed. By looking

¹² Please see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u019G5BZQ-E> (last accessed 3 October 2018).

at the everyday social media practices of the *Hallyu* fandom in South Asia, we can easily understand that the process of networking and identity building go hand-in-hand in the digital sphere. Fans require content for deliberation, various texts and images help them to participate in the discursive ground of social media and perform in the dialogical process. They aspire to be a part of an ongoing hype either by supporting or opposing it. Studies show that presentation of self is crucial to be a part of any network, and there is a constant negotiation and strategic manoeuvre to make sure a clear identity position is expressed (Boyd 2010; Marwick and Boyd 2011).

The transnational cultural flow and internet-based fandoms help us comprehend the significance of online networks. *Hallyu* fans of India keep a lively communication with the fan groups of neighbouring countries. The growing fan base of K-pop and K-drama in South Asia indicates a networked possibility where K-lovers could express their existence and show their affection. In another way, the online networks help them assert their identity as K-lovers. According to the fans, it is important to show that they know about recent trends of K-media elements. This assertion is directed towards the global world as well as the local networks. Social media platforms enabled the fandom to fulfil their primary two-fold objectives: (a) to present the self and appear online as a *Hallyu* fan and (b) to foster a larger network for the *Hallyu* fans locally and globally. Forming such networks also helps them create possibilities for activism of various kinds, ranging from organizing K-cultural events in their own locations to taking collective initiatives for diverse social issues.

To many of the fans, the formation of fandoms on the digital domain followed the logic of generating a 'network society' that to Manuel Castells is a historical outcome of the social practices in the age of the internet (Castells 2010b). People are motivated to utilize the possibilities of new technology and digital communication to seek knowledge, power and wealth and hence constitute a network society. In his view, networks are underlying structures of human lives and the internet-based network society gives rise to a new social structure 'resulting from the interaction between the new technological paradigm and social organization at large'. (Castells 2005: 3) The new social structure of network society is closely related to the urge of living in a society where information and knowledge are given importance. Such a society keeps supplying ingredients to foster, flourish, sustain and regenerate the identity positions. With its localized form and logic of participation, the *Hallyu* Fandom of South

Asia forms a network society that aspires to be a part of the knowledge world and seeks the power of information in its own ways. The social media platforms enable them to form that network through which they can set their preferences and share common interests.

CONCLUSIONS

As discussed in this chapter, participation is an important aspect of the digital media culture in contemporary South Asia. Henry Jenkins (2006, 2009) provides quite an explicit view on how culture becomes more participatory with the advent of internet-led social networking. He provides a framework to understand the fan culture and participation that is imperative in exploring the flourishing *Hallyu* fandom of South Asia. In a participatory culture, ‘fans and other consumers are invited to actively participate in the creation and circulation of new contents’ (Jenkins 2006: 331). Such creation and dissemination of new content and forms of cultural materials are inherently proximate to the desire of subjects. This is maybe a desire of knowledge representation and knowledge gathering and also a desire of being in the ongoing trend. The digital media culture enables individuals to express themselves in a larger network where they need to have commitment, efficiency and reasoning (Davis et. al. 1993). The desire that was aroused by ‘needs and sentiments’ of learning and participating in a knowledge world, gets ‘satisfied by the fulfilment of wish’ when the fans or social media users perform their everyday life on the digital sphere to implement their particular ‘aim’ (Spiro 1997: 74–89). Jenkins in particular has been a strong advocate for the power and significance of fandom and fan activities.

Fandom has been considered as a social identity and as a network. The collective force of youth and new media technology brought the identity question to the fore, as on the one hand, the fluidity of identities is considered as a prime character of the digitally mediated world, and on the other hand, probing into the interlinked dynamic between media, youth and identity became crucial in the wake of the new generation’s engagement with the new media (Buckingham 2008; Castells 2010a; Clippinger 2007; Haraway 1991; Zemmels 2012). Buckingham (2008) paid special attention to youth and adolescence as a critical and sensitive age for identity formation and this remains pertinent in the case of *Hallyu* fandom understudy. He brought attention to the psychological developments, socialization process, identification within the groups

and communities, self-reflexive aspect and critical issues regarding power and politics of identity formation. Scholars studying fandom identity and fan culture have also warned about the industry take-over and commercialization of the fandom. Particularly, Coppa (2014) pointed out the risk of fans turning mere followers by a perpetual practice of likes and subscribes, fandoms getting technologically determinant and surrendering their potential to the industry for revenue generating. Such tendencies prevail in the context of our present case of *Hallyu* Fandom from South Asian region. When the contemporary mediated practice such as forming fandom, enables us to fathom the (re)formation of identity, it also helps us to reimagine the identity as a dubious and precarious aspect of human life. Identity inherently carries the qualities and actions of claiming, associating, appearing, articulating, expressing and getting identified. All of the above qualifying factors are potentially risky in the globalized and mediated world when the logics of the local and the global work collectively to label, classify and categorize for various kinds of noble and evil reasons.

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Youth and Popular Culture: Korean Wave in North-East India

Athikho Kaisii

INTRODUCTION

In considering the Korean wave as a form of popular culture, this chapter intends to analyse its growing popularity among the youth in North-East India (henceforth North-East) without discounting the fact that its popularity is increasing amid the general public also. The North-East is not a homogenous region but comprises eight states that include Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Tripura and Sikkim. In India, for the first time, Korean drama *Emperor of the Sea* was telecasted on DD-I (National Channel) in 2006 (Hancinema 2006). By this time the Korean wave had penetrated in some North-eastern states such as Manipur and Mizoram. Not to forget the differences between and within the North-east states, the contrast of the culture of the region with the mainland India is paramount in which culturally and racially the people in North-East are closer to Southeast Asian.

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The Korean wave or *Hallyu* that started in Beijing, the capital city of China, in the mid-1990s as South Korean cinemas, soap operas and pop music became popular (Shim 2006: 28; Ravina 2009: 4; Lee 2011: 86), has become a wide-reaching phenomenon in a short span of time. The wave is a hybrid of popular culture since it is neither based purely on indigenous Korean traditions nor is it a replica of Hollywood or western popular culture but a blend of both. It can be defined as ‘anything that is linked with Korean culture, be it movies, dramas, music, soap operas, styles, online food habits and video games, which is popularly referred to as *Hallyu*, the other term for Korean wave’ (Kaisii 2017: 11). Modern but not necessarily westernized is what the Southeast Asian ‘world’ is looking for. The Korean wave is presumably moulding an alternative form of modernization which is not in essence westernization but a hybrid form that combines both western and traditional elements. It is an assembling of what can be considered a Southeast Asian version of modernization in a heavily westernized world. As a hybrid culture, the trend looks attractive and fashionable. It is tempting to the youth since it matches their sense of pleasure and entertainment. Such a cultural hybrid is not seen as another form of cultural invasion of existing folk cultural traditions of the Southeast Asian world and at the same time, it finds takers in the Western world since it can fit well within the realm of their taste. Incidentally, the wave is fast becoming a global phenomenon at a time when media image is shifting from scarcity to abundance and the global divide of north and south is shrinking in the age of time and space compression (Harvey 1989). When the world is fast moving from society to civil society, from social relation to a network society (Castells 1996) and connectivity and connectedness are identified and associated with youth and youthfulness, the wave could not have come at a better time. The emergence of the wave can also be viewed as another form of globalization where the world is shifting from flow of information to information flow and the globalizing trend is happening in various landscapes (Appadurai 1990). The wave can be seen as the culmination of harnessing the growing connectivity, the artistically fashionable, renegotiating youth and youthfulness, redefining masculinity, high professionalism and a culture of commitment to vocation. The emergence of a global village (McLuhan 1964) and better connectivity is a boom for the Korean wave while making alive an

understanding that youth is a social construction and not a mere biological stage of life. Likewise, the wave invokes a debate that muscular power is a necessary ingredient in the world of acting and how dress and fashion are equally important.

CONCEPTUAL UNDERPINNING OF POPULAR CULTURE

To familiarize ourselves with the concept, it would be pertinent to have a broad conceptual understanding of the notion of popular culture. The study of popular culture has gained momentum across disciplines in a media-saturated and media-driven world. Among others, an important factor that led to the study of popular culture is because there is a growing assumption that it plays a crucial role in mobilizing political action (Mukerji and Schudson 1986: 47) and has the potential to engineer diplomatic ties from merely an aspect of entertainment and pleasure from the socio-cultural life. Moving towards sports diplomacy, cultural diplomacy and art diplomacy, while shifting the focus from hard power to soft power (Nye 1990) in the fast-growing interdependent world is where the wave as popular culture is getting wider attention. Indeed, the Korean wave has received the strategic support and endorsement of the Government of the Republic of Korea and is effectively promoting it as a diplomatic tool in a mediated world where diplomacy is fast becoming media-centric.

Popular culture is related to something that contrasts or is opposite of traditional culture, folk culture, working-class culture, conventional culture, normative culture or the culture prevailing and continuing for ages. A culture that emerged as a challenge to ‘indigenous culture’ or ‘local culture’ in the wake of social change and modernization can be broadly categorized as popular culture. Popular culture is not an upshot of overnight development but a process of culmination and response to events and happenings spread over ages in the course of human civilization. It is more of an offshoot of social change. It is an indication that culture is not static but dynamic and keeps changing along with time. To define the concept of popular culture broadly, it is seen ‘in contrast to other conceptual categories: folk culture, mass culture, high culture, dominant culture, working culture’ (Storey 2018: 1). Popular culture is a corollary of certain changes in human society, so its study comes within the broad perspective of effect studies which is in a way a reductionist approach. When one looks at the origin and conceptualization of the

word ‘popular’, it sounds very encouraging as it may mean ‘well-liked’ or ‘well favoured’ by many people, it is also ‘synonymous for good’ and can mean ‘work deliberately setting out to win favour’ (Williams 1983: 237). The concept of popular culture is something opposed to what has been considered as dominant and prevalent culture while struggling to overcome and rule over the same. So, a plain definition of popular culture would refer to a culture widely favoured and well-liked by many people. But mere quantification is of not much significance without qualifying it with qualitative dimensions. In this regard, Storey (2018: 6) is of the view that popular culture can be seen as the culture that is left after what has been deducted as high culture. Popular culture is oriented towards the masses in contrast to a high culture which is individualistic and elitist in nature. In a market-driven media-saturated world and a highly commoditized age, we can also define popular culture as the mass culture which is nothing but ‘commercial culture’ or ‘capitalist culture’. Popular culture is also sometimes called American culture or Americanization. It is an outcome of the declined and eroded British culture due to the homogenizing influence of American culture which is considered a ‘culture of melting pot’ (Storey 2018: 8). Examining it through the concept of Gramsci’s ‘hegemony’, it is revealed that popular culture is neither imposed from above nor emanates from below but involves the push-and-pull factors of both resistance and incorporation (Storey 2018: 10).

Sometimes, popular culture is also seen as mass culture, especially in a context where a distinction between high and low culture is made. Besides various other differentiating factors of high culture and low culture, what has been explicit can be considered as high culture compared to covert that comes within the purview of low culture. From the perspective of text and context, popular culture would refer to readable objects, written or visual materials that have traditions of interpretations and criticisms (Mukerji and Schudson 1986: 47) as compared to oral, verbal and memory which exists more in a linear expression in everyday life.

There is no denying the fact that popular culture is associated with the process of industrialization that shifted the focus from an agrarian society to an industrial-oriented society. The growth of popular culture was accelerated with the invention of the printing press even as nationalism and sense of commonness got concretized as noted by Anderson (2006). Theoretically, the debate and discourse on popular culture is a contributing factor of the emergence of traditionalists and modernists

(Gilbert 1983: 145). Thus, to define popular culture precisely and to think of one universally acceptable definition is not an easy task. In terms of its origin, one may consider the beginning of popular culture to be the stage of industrialization but to limit the understanding of popular culture within the scope of industrial revolution would be an impoverished view (Parker 2011: 149–150).

Though some like to equate popular culture with mass culture, the definition of mass culture is technologically deterministic and popular culture is not necessarily so. There is a general understanding that hegemonic domination and popular culture go hand-in-hand. While keeping in mind the difficulty to define, Fiske is of the view that ‘popular culture is such an elusive concept’, a product ‘motivated primarily by pleasure’ (Fiske 1989: 45–47). Pleasure and entertainment constitute an important element in the definition and understanding of popular culture. In this chapter, within this broad understanding of popular culture, we will look at the Korean wave as a form of it.

DIGITAL REVOLUTION, CONNECTIVITY AND KOREAN WAVE

From scarcity to abundance, the compression of time and space due to globalization and internet connectivity, shifting from co-presence to presence and increasing population of digital natives (Prensky 2001) have together been instrumental in making the Korean wave a wide-reaching affair. The emergence of the Korean wave has strengthened and deepened the consumerist culture while reducing the audience to more of consumers where the latter are increasingly becoming passive customers.

Shifting the image of media from scarcity to abundance not only shrinks the world and leads to the globalization of the world but also makes connectedness a reality, albeit virtual. Consequently, the onset of the information revolution and changing from one medium/platform to another, such as from oral to electronic and from electronic to digital/online and from co-presence to presence (Thompson 1996) is facilitating the Korean wave to gain access across territories.

Within the bound frames of speculation and conjecture on the growing information revolution, the ‘death of the distance’ is one common acceptable conclusion as propounded by Frances Cairncross (1998). Cairncross presented this proposition based on analysing the major technological innovations and their influence on the ongoing convergence of heterogeneous systems and how they may have impacted the global economy

(1998: 1042). According to her, the importance of distance and the aspects associated with it, such as territory, geographical borders and time zones, will lose its significance since the world is becoming increasingly connected with communication systems. The world is now better connected and integrated than ever before due to the revolution of communication systems and globalization which is the product of high capitalism. The Korean wave has fitted perfectly within this trend of capitalism in the growing connectedness and network society. In a way, the world is fast moving towards the emergence of 'the global village. The shrinking world. Anything, anywhere, anytime' (Couclelis 1996: 387), in which the Korean wave is a prominent player among others. The growth of consumer culture has not only broadened the horizons of capitalism but it has grown to turn the audience into consumers while making them fully dependent on one-click culture.

As noted, social change is a law of nature since no society can remain isolated or static. The materialization of the Korean wave reflects a continuum of change and not merely a popular culture. Change is also definitely multifaceted with both positive and negative aspects. In the absence of a potential to blend the existing culture (traditional) with the incoming culture (westernization), the North-East region has created a socio-cultural imbalance where the situation is potentially receptive to any forms of popular culture including the Korean wave. Although the effects of such a condition vary across various sections of the population, the youth are the most affected social group since they are the most dynamic category in society. It may be noted that the social category of youth is not just a biological stage but a constructed category. They are the reservoir of society due to the high potential they encapsulate but they can also cause havoc on account of their dynamism.

Above all, in the age of fast information and communication revolution where the internet is available almost at a throwaway price, thanks to competitive service providers, anyone can access Korean dramas/series through smartphones to entertain themselves and be a part of the larger 'imagined communities' (Anderson 2006) of the wave. The digital revolution has made the situation conducive to adapt to and receive popular cultures in any form as per one's tastes. The information revolution has not only led to the shrinking space but also opened the door to wider opportunities for media consumption. In the age of media-saturated world, far from generating quality content, the users are steadily reduced to mere consumers while providing the platform a multiplicity of options.

Before the emergence of the digital revolution and online culture, when the media was overshadowed with an image of scarcity, the popular culture of Hindi series/dramas and Bollywood were well received in the North-East. For instance, *Ramayana* (telecast on DD National from 1987–1988), *Mahabharat* (telecast on DD National from October 1988–June 1990), *Shaktiman* (telecast on DD National from September 1997–March 2005), *Shaka Laka Boom Boom* (telecast on DD National from October 2000–October 2004) and *Chitrahaar* (telecast on DD National in the 1980s and 1990s that featured song clips from Bollywood movies) among others were popular among the people when DTH or other forms of online technologies were not available. As part of the mission for national development, the government of India telecast of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharat* and the 1982 Asian Games were held some years back (Majumdar and Mehta 2009). It was also the time when colour television was first introduced in India.

Similarly, in the wake of NEP (new economy policy) when electronic media was decentralized for the first time Hindi-based series/dramas such as *Kashawati-I* (telecast on Star Plus from October 2001–February 2008), *KumKum* (telecast on Zee TV from July 2002–March 2009), etc. were equally popular and well-watched even as digital service continued to remain scanty and restricted to a privileged few. In a largely rural-based region coupled with economic backwardness owning a TV set was a status symbol in those days and the youngsters would often gather and watch TV together in the homes of those who owned it. The aforementioned series/dramas were quite popular among the youth of the region during their initial release and indeed some viewers learned and picked up basic communication skills in Hindi during the course of watching the same. Following the digital revolution and universalization of digital services at an affordable price with a widening the horizon of media consumption, the options grew for consumers so much so that one could easily opt for any media content based on one's taste. Since almost every young person possesses a smartphone, accessing Korean series/dramas is just a click away. In the age of the digital revolution watching Korean series/dramas is becoming a fashion since they cater to the pleasure and taste of the youth. Gone are the days when they would gather in the houses of families who had the privilege of owning a TV set to watch something together through DVD and CD Rom.

In terms of flow and expression, Korean dramas/series have caught the attention of the North-East youth because the language was a matter

of concern in the case of the Hindi drama/series. Of course, the youth from North-East is also not familiar with the Korean language but cultural affinity by virtue of belonging to the same racial stock coupled with identical social tastes has allowed Korean dramas/series to become popular. Besides, in Korean dramas/series for them to have universal application and as part of the marketing strategy, incorporating English subtitles was important. It has resolved the issue of language for those unfamiliar with Korean but familiar with English. Furthermore, Korean actors and actresses are considered well-dressed and they look smart which captivates the interest of the youth (Kaisii 2017).

Other than a few who have picked up some rudimentary conversational skills in Hindi from watching the serials, in terms of dress, lifestyle, fashion, food habits, the portrayal of everyday life and overall customs and traditions were contravene to that of the consumers, that is, Hindi popular culture does not augur well with the taste of the North-East consumers. On certain special occasions and festivities, some may wear a *saree* or a *kurta*, the regular costumes and attires worn in Hindi popular culture and seen on television but these have not become a part of everyday attire for the youth in the region. A *Saree* or a *kurta* are not seen as convenient for everyday wear, unlike the Western dresses that the Korean actors wear. The Korean actors are styled to look different from the Western sense of style. This fashion sense, lifestyle, food and overall ambience of the drama setting has fascinated the youth more than other popular cultures. Though longer in duration as compared to Hindi dramas/series, Korean ones are well-liked on account of the aforementioned features that match the taste of the youth. Among others, Korean dramas/series are usually perceived as modern and up-to-date, fashionable, cultured and youth-centric (Chae et al. 2019). Besides, certain distinct characteristics of Korean popular culture that tempted the youth are that the storylines are emotional and sentimental in nature, they are highly romantic and love-centric, the men are thorough gentlemen yet ready to do everything for their ladylove with a gentleness that redefines the notion of masculinity. They are also perceived as attractive, sexy and intimate yet not as 'vulgar' as Hollywood culture (Kaisii 2017).

FAVOURABLE SOCIO-CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT

The rapid social change in the region, particularly in North-Eastern tribal societies, not to mention that there is almost an absence of the modernization of tradition, the lifestyles and ways of life of the North-East tribal people are fast moving towards a Westernized rather than a Hinduized pattern. Somehow, the process of modernization and social change in North-Eastern tribal societies, other than a few tribes in Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim, Hinduization is almost zilch. Hinduization is a form of change but it doesn't imply modernization of tradition. Such changes lead to the emergence of qualities, styles, tastes and principles that are essential and fundamental in social life moving towards westernization. At times, modernization and westernization are used interchangeably since there is more of westernization than the modernization of tradition when one examines the practices and ways of life among the tribal in the North-East. In essence, this is because in the tribal region there is little or no other cultural and religious influence other than Christianity. Sikkim was settled by herders from Khams in eastern Tibet and later they along with dispersed nobles from Bhutan rapidly gained control over the indigenous Lepchas thus Buddhism become popular (English 1985: 66–67). In Arunachal Pradesh, Hinduism or Hindu missionaries gained political patronage from the state, arriving with a massive military base after the 1962 Chinese intrusion. They came along with Hinduized culture, temples, gods and goddesses and various Hindu organizations such as Ramakrishna Mission, Vivekananda Mission, Sharada Mission that have been influential (Chaudhuri 2013: 273). The Shan culture continues to keep Buddhism alive in Arunachal Pradesh (Nathalang 2009). The introduction of modern formal education is also largely an offshoot of conversion to Christianity which is done in Western style. The prevailing socio-cultural environment is thus favourable for the Korean wave to easily infiltrate without resistance.

As it happens, Westernization (modernization) together with its westernizing agents such as Christianity and education has affected almost every aspect of the tribal social and cultural life. At the end of modernization (or better say Westernization), the socio-cultural life of the people is becoming Westernized as their old ways of life are fast eroding and becoming almost a thing of the past. The time-honoured mode of life that constitutes a set of social and cultural behaviours is becoming more of a symbolic identification since in everyday life they are no longer practised.

The process of Westernization with its multi-dimensional functions, thus, besides introducing new socio-religious ideas, has emerged as an important platform affecting almost every issue concerning nurturing the youth, family, education, marriage and functioning of the village and society as a whole. The fast erosion of the traditional patterns of life and the relative absence of the influence of other socio-cultural modes of life led to a reliance on the functionality of Westernized patterns as an alternative. Against this backdrop, popular culture in the form of the Korean wave can carve its way and attract the youth since it is to their liking.

One can observe that with the dying traditional practices and ways of life, many of the social principles and lessons associated with it are fast disappearing or have assumed a more restricted form. The general perception is that on the one hand the society wants to preserve its traditions, and yet, on the other hand, the pressure of socio-religious change is proving too strong to counter. The experience of social reality and its actuality has brought the youth into a situation of confusion thus making them easy prey to any form of popular culture including the Korean wave. Interestingly, the tactical incorporation of Christian principles and ways of life within Korean movies/dramas is a bonus for the youth to entertain and identify themselves with it since they are familiar with it in their personal lives.

Concurrently, for both Korean and North-East tribal people, Christianity is not their socio-religious traditional life but has become an integral part of their societal change and modernization. Likewise, both societies are struggling to indigenize the new socio-religious life although the level of adaptation may vary (Kim 2000; Downs 1980). As the youth are socialized into this conflicting trend, they are in turn somewhat baffled by and susceptible to ever-growing forms of popular culture. The bafflement is the result of the inadequate blend of westernized Christian-centric culture and existing indigenous traditional culture. This observation doesn't ignore the fact that whatever forms of popular culture it may be, there is a tendency for the youth to follow. They are vying more and more towards attempting to define their behaviour which is largely driven by popular culture (Kaisii 2014). Such a situation is buttressing the youth to consider the Korean wave as an alternative and as a better choice. In such a fluid situation when traditional life is fast eroding, being receptive to popular culture such as the Korean wave consciously or unconsciously is nothing unusual. When the youth are caught in between where they are neither living in the pristine tradition of the past nor are

they fully absorbed within the Western culture though they are heavily Westernized, the setting of the Korean wave fits perfectly within their interest. Indeed, the popular culture as a reaction and offshoot of social change, youth receptive to the Korean wave is just the reflection of the society at large.

FASHIONABLE, TRENDY AND COMMUNICATIVE

Owing to its modern, fashionable and strong communicative value, the Korean wave is looked at as motivational and inspirational. No matter what it is, if it is considered trendy and fashionable it mesmerizes the youth. When the Korean wave showed these features well the youth found it difficult to resist (Chae et al. 2019). Since in the North-East there is more westernization than modernization, the trend pioneered and popularized by Korean popular culture has captured the attention of the youth. As for dress and clothes, the traditional dress is no longer in use since there is a vast change in how people dress. Amidst such sweeping changes there is no sign of imitating Hinduized and/or mainland India's fashion. Switching to westernize style has been easier although a far cry from becoming a Western lady or gentleman.

In almost all formal public events and occasions (other than the occasions where one is reminded to wear traditional dress/attire) people prefer to wear Westernized forms of dress. Traditional clothes and attires are worn only on particular occasions such as (a) during folksong and folk dance competitions as part of the annual student and youth conferences or (b) when receiving and welcoming the guests during festivities and important occasions such as village or community annual day celebrations or (c) while presenting a welcome melody in front of important guests or (d) during grand stone-pulling¹ to erect a monolith in honour and memory of the host of the feast of merit among others.

So, when Korean popular culture flaunts stylish and well-fitted dresses and suits that match the physique and skin tone of the actors and actresses, the style and fashion become the central attraction for the young viewers. Besides the young, fit and attractive-looking actors, their refined

¹ In the past, as part of 'to erect a monolith in honour and memory of those givers of *feast of merit*' a grand stone-pulling ceremony was held by clan members, villagers or groups of villages. Now the same tradition is practiced to commemorate special occasions such as village day, Church dedication, Jubilee celebration, etc.

and well-designed attire have a strong motivational and communicative value of being smart and presentable easily draws the attention of the youth. Based on the well-groomed dress, almost perfection in acting with a strong sense of professionalism while struggling hard to put up the best show coupled with Mongolian and youthful looks have made the youth start identifying particular artists as one's hero and heroine. Though marginal some start imitating the stylish dress and fashionable outfits of the artists of their choice. There is a general feeling that the artists of Korean popular culture have a rich dressing sense and are very particular and specific about the way they adorn themselves besides youthful looks that have enchanted them.

Coincidentally, since the youth have developed the taste for Western clothes and they dress in that way most of the time, the coming of a blended or modified version of the westernized style that was already familiar to them has been an added advantage for them in their search for a new dressing style. The indigenization of the western dress has not occurred following the social change given that their traditional dress is not suitable for casual and everyday wear (Hansen 2004). When the Christian missionaries had ventured into the tribal areas for evangelization, the people there were found in dresses considered odd by the missionaries. The process of conversion brought about a massive change in the style of dressing. Since then, the tribal people have never looked back to return to their traditional ways of dressing (Downs 1992). The changes in the dress that were introduced following conversion were mostly western and that style became everyday wear. Thus, clothes that appear similar to Western wear have captured the fascination of the youth to the extent that they are rarely taken by any other kind of dress.

YOUTH, YOUTHFULNESS AND MOTIVATIONAL

Korean wave as a form of popular culture invigorates and renegotiates the idea and the notion of youth and the very characteristics of youthfulness. The trend of growing connectivity and connectedness is considered and read as youth and youthfulness and in this scenario, the Korean wave is fast emerging as a platform for youth across cultures to come together. In the stages of human life, youth is considered to be the most enjoyable and cherished stage and there is a yearning for youthfulness in everybody's life. The fact of gracefully getting old is a realization that comes with aging.

The social category of youth is not merely an upshot of biological processes but largely the construction of social development and human progress. In the strict sense of the term, only privileged and affluent young people can experience the true and sweet aroma of youth to the fullest. The social category of youth is so distinct that every sensible person has a strong tendency to try to look young and likes to carry the brand of being a part of the youth or possessing youthfulness. It is rare to find a person joyfully accepting the observation they look old. People usually don't like to reveal their biological age until asked to do so and till someone has reached a particular age. Even though the usual gossip and murmurings that s/he looks older than his/her age among fellow friends are common, yet such comments are not to be discussed in public because to air such observations is considered uncultured. On the other hand, to remark and suggest that someone is young and youthful is taken positively and considered worthwhile. Hence, it is easy to infer that according to everyday socially acceptable values, commenting that someone looks young and/or youthful is normal and well-approved.

It is natural that youth and youthfulness is something everybody aspires to and is at times even referred as young if only superficially, to keep from hurting someone's sentiments. In this light, when the Korean wave, which epitomized the culture of youthfulness and popularized the bliss of the youth, the youth was automatically drawn towards the wave. In setting a style of its own, Korean popular culture has managed to embody the notion of youth and symbolizes youthfulness so perfectly that it is extremely tempting for the audiences to follow. Though the popular culture may not have had any concrete tangible influence, the widespread acceptance and reception of the wave are easily visible among the youth. In the process of trying to create a oneness of youthfulness, identifying with or rather consuming popular culture like the Korean wave is considered as a means to build the sense of youthfulness and connectivity with the rest of the youth. Korean popular culture has once again revitalized the notion of youth and youthfulness through its fashionable attire, stylish communication, trendy outfits, polite and attractive language, romantic storylines and provocative and appealing body language, among other reasons.

DECONSTRUCTION OF MASCULINITY TO WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

The Korean wave constructs a new definition of masculinity and masculine power different from that of the tough, well-built and controlling persona that is common. It has provided the momentum for social movements that demand devolution of men's power and fight for the empowerment of women. This is seen as reinforcing new social movements while setting the larger stage of gender equality, empowerment and modernity. It aims to deconstruct the understanding of masculinity from well-built, sturdy and dominating men (Brannon and David 1976) to soft, caring and understanding men.

In the fast-changing and media-saturated world where media has emerged as a game-changer, social activists, human rights activists, feminists and new social movement theorists are working towards realizing gender equality and the Korean wave has been seen as progressive and important to create a just world. To contextualize this issue, North-Eastern tribal society is relatively free from rigid structural and hierarchical orders when it comes to gender. However, women do not have the right to inherit property and it is also rare for them to become members of the village/clan council. Thus, the Korean wave popularizing the idea of gender equality and reconstructing the notion of masculinity was incongruent with the cultural traditions and practices of the North-East society.

Observation of gender roles in tribal society reveals that males and females, including children, contribute jointly to the family's well-being and sustenance since survival is seen as the responsibility of everyone. Therefore, both genders play an almost equal role to make the family and society functional and perhaps effective. Other than incest taboos where clan members, close relatives and family members are forbidden to enter into sexual relationships, their society is otherwise largely open and liberal. Following this social change there is a growing stress on gender equality and balancing the roles of both genders even as society is getting modernized and perhaps becoming more civilized. The opinions and views that women should be given the right to inherit property is getting louder, at least for non-ancestral property in view of the fact that ancestral property carries the tag of clan identity. The tribal people are not just a village-centric society but also a clan-oriented society. Along with this trend, on

the personal front, the Korean movies and dramas have depicted a relationship that is compatible, understanding and caring, different from that of a controlling and dominating relationship. It is not only a driving force to change existing social life where there is a relative absence of gender discrimination but also contains a demand for greater gender equality. As one would expect, the youth's interest in Korean popular culture has led them to look for loving and caring relationships, bound with mutual respect and honour rather than through male chauvinism. This is then seen as a fight for gender equality.

Moreover, the growth of opportunities and better educational avenues is opening the field of education and career and they are no longer a fiefdom of men only. Both the sexes are getting opportunities and this has changed the attitude and outlook of the people. Initially, when formal modern education was introduced, women were not allowed to go to school because it was argued that education would adversely affect their reputation. However, the perceptions of people have changed significantly and today the literacy rates of women in the region are amongst the highest in India. Thus, advocating and propagating for gender equality and women empowerment while redefining the understanding of masculinity in Korean movies and dramas is compatible with the logic of new social movements that demand gender parity.

Korean popular culture is attempting to deconstruct the conventional notions of masculinity and practices, such as people teasing, insulting and mocking men if they appear too 'feminine', or if they behave and walk 'like a girl' and so forth. The conventional understanding of masculinity has been questioned by the Korean dramas, given that Korean popular culture has advocated for a feminine approach characterized by the soft, gentle, understanding and protective nature of the male leads. Hugging and kissing each other, holding each other's hands, sharing shawls, wearing stylish and well-ironed clothes, etc. are some of the behaviours and lifestyles that are not usually associated with manly behaviour. However, Korean popular culture has introduced a sort of role reversal trend leading to a change in the nature and character of what is considered as typical to men and women.

POSSIBLE IMPACT OF KOREAN POPULAR CULTURE

It is difficult to ascertain whether the Korean wave as popular culture is creating any concrete impact or producing a specific trend in the lifestyle and behaviour of the youth. Except for developing a keen interest in and a craving towards consuming Korean movies and dramas, it is hard to say that the wave has had visible bearings in their lives since they were already accustomed to a westernized lifestyle as a result of modernization.

Although a certain amount of imitation regarding the fashion trends is noticeable, it is hard to say that such a trend represents a drastic shift. Indeed, anything related to traditional ways of dressing is hardly reflected in the attire of most of the youth today, hence the advent of the Korean wave cannot be said to have influenced this. The erosion of traditional culture or folk culture in the wake of westernization (Christianization) has transformed the traditional style of dress into a symbol of ethnic identity. Consequently, it is hard to notice if the Korean wave has created a cultural shock. At the same time, there is a growing feeling that popular culture and mass culture is becoming synonymous with each other as a result of changing attitudes since people are becoming receptive to any change in a highly technologically deterministic world.

CONCLUSION

In addition to what has been analyzed and discussed, the movements against Hindi and Hindi-based popular culture started by militant groups in the valley of Manipur² has urged the youth to get closely acquainted with Korean popular culture. Following the demand and struggle for a free Manipur with the restoration of the pre-merger³ political status of Manipur, the Hindi language and popular culture are being viewed as an agent of hegemonic control and domination. With the prohibition and banning of screening of Hindi cinemas/films in Imphal valley, many

² Proscription of Bollywood enforced in 2000 by the Revolutionary People's Front, which is the political wing of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in the North-eastern state of Manipur, who struggle to liberate Manipur and to resist the occupation force of India.

³ Manipur was a princely state and ruled by itself until the Burmese occupation from 1819 and 1826. And from 1826 onwards with the signing of the Treaty of Yandoo, it worked under British suzerainty. In 1949, the princely state of Manipur was merged with the union of India.

cinema halls had closed down and pirated CDs of Korean dramas/series slowly dominated the market and the Korean wave became popular in the state and gradually gripped the rest of the region. The cultural affinity and cultural closeness of the North-Eastern people with the Korean culture have increased as they belong to the same Mongolian race. Though the region is geographically and politically integrated with mainland India, from the perspective of cultural integration, it remains largely the 'other' since cultural practices of North-East are either looked down upon or considered as 'lesser Indian culture'. The people of the North-East have been granted political citizenship but they are still struggling to attain full cultural citizenship and often this issue becomes the cause of strain between the state and the people.

To sum up, the discussion and observations reveal that the Korean wave as popular culture is attracting the youth not just because it is fashionable, communicative and motivational but also because the prevailing social environment is favourable for the wave. Since the process of social change and modernization, the westernized form of dressing and lifestyle are becoming part of everyday life and the hybrid culture that the Korean wave is popularizing certainly lends impetus to this westernized mode of life.

Interestingly, the wave is trying to construct a new definition of masculinity in a way to strengthen and concretize the ethos and practices of the North-East tribal society since its traditional mode of life is largely governed by broad democratic principles. Although not perfectly egalitarian in terms of gender roles, a relatively more egalitarian structure exists since rigid categorization based on wealth, sex and colour is comparatively weak.

In general, popular culture such as the Korean wave can infiltrate with little or no resistance because to identify and develop an emotional attachment with it is easy given that the wave is not considered as a threat to the prevailing culture. Correspondingly, the way the youth are following the Korean popular culture is not an isolated issue but a response to a general process of change occurring in society. The process of social change manifests a transitional situation expressing the youth's desire for an alternative, but the society at large is unable to draw a concrete structure to direct them towards it. Indeed, the present transitional condition is a moment of disenchantment and confusion since society as a whole had failed to answer what the youth are looking for.

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PART II

Fandom and Politics of Affection



Looking at Fan Identity: The Bangladeshi K-Pop Fan

Kashfia Arif

INTRODUCTION

In the realm of K-Pop, your fandom is as integral to your identity as your name is. That's just how the rules work. So, it's completely normal when I say, 'My name is Kashfia and I am a Cassiopeia' to fellow K-Poppers (a term used to refer to people who identify themselves as K-Pop fans) upon first meeting them. Furthermore, any *Hallyu* wave fan will immediately understand what I'm referring to, thanks to the omniscient fandom network. This is the power of being a fan, the power of belonging to a global 'fandom', living in a digital media age and the power of being part of a transnational *Hallyu* fan culture.

Of course, fans cannot exist in a vacuum and fans only exist as a direct reaction to an art form, hobby, sport, etc. and the K-Pop fan or K-Poper is an aficionado of the music churned out by the South Korean music industry which seemingly dominated the world overnight, as alluded by PSY's 'Gangnam Style'. While the explosion of K-Pop globally has meant

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an increased interest in all things Korean, from music to film and television to food to beauty to manhwa (Korean comics), this interest has existed in lower levels and varying amounts throughout the world (mostly concentrated in Asia) for the past three decades. According to Keith Howard, it was in the later years of the 1990s and the early 2000s, that K-Pop first found popularity in South and Southeast Asian markets with boy groups like H.O.T, Shinhwa, TVXQ and solo artists like BoA and Bi-Rain (2006). However, we are safe in saying that K-Pop really erupted after 2012 with PSY, when the international mainstream audience became aware of what K-Pop was and then post-2015 with BTS and EXO when it was actually adopted into the mainstream music markets globally.¹

Although K-Pop acts did try to expand into the Western markets pre-2012 (for example, JYP's Wonder Girls did debut in the US in 2009) they weren't as successful and a lot of it has to do with social media marketing afforded by the internet. A major number of promotions for entertainment shows or groups is now done through the internet and social media. *Hallyu* fans, whether domestic or overseas, can interact easily with each other and with their idols through social media. For international fans especially, the consumption of K-Pop is done through digital means with social media becoming the main source of information about their favourite K-Pop artists. As Jaeho Kang explains, 'since 2002, social media have gradually emerged as a powerful alternative and challenge to the existing mass media in South Korea' (2012: 4). Today, not only are agencies uploading artist-related content on their websites and YouTube channels but TV stations such as KBS, SBS, Mnet, etc., are also uploading content on YouTube such as live telecasts of music programmes. After all, 'the idol business is a fandom business in the end' and companies need to cater to the global demand (Lee 2015: 116).

While research into the *Hallyu* wave has existed for drama and films, it is only in recent years, that this research has extended to talking about K-Pop and in particular, the fan culture that surrounds it. The focus of this chapter is to assess the power exercised by K-Poppers, as they participate in expressing their fan identity while negotiating K-Pop fan culture. In this chapter, I analyze the form, structure and operational aspects of a K-Pop fandom or fanbase in Bangladesh and then deconstruct that to look

¹ 'K-Pop Takes Over, From "Gangnam Style" To Global Domination', 11 October 2018. Retrieved from <https://newsroom.spotify.com/2018-10-11/k-pop-takes-over-from-gangnam-style-to-global-domination/> (last accessed 11 May 2021).

at the performance of fandom and fandom expression. While as a nation Bangladesh falls under the radar compared to its neighbours, it currently houses over 20,000 active K-Pop fans (based on Facebook fan community numbers) and possibly even more undocumented fans of the South Korean entertainment and culture industry as a whole. These numbers have steadily increased through the past decade as the country has become more digitalized and social media savvy, making Bangladesh a hotbed for K-Pop fan culture and good research fodder.

For the purposes of this research, a mixed-method approach was used to gather the data necessary to analyze the scenario. The primary data was gathered through a survey, interviews² and ethnographic research. First, a survey³ was conducted yielding 104 responses over a two-week period (Arif 2020). The questions were primarily geared to gauge involvement with that parameter acting as a basis for analyzing whether fans were satisfied enough to participate in fan activities and also see how attached they are to their idols to do so.⁴ At the same time, six one-on-one interviews were taken for in-depth conversations regarding the K-Pop scene in Bangladesh. Finally, I gathered the ethnographic data from various meets and events while attending them as a resident K-Poper myself.⁵ To fully explore the phenomenon, I have used several different ways to show how fans ‘feel’ is an important aspect in the formation of fan identity.

FANDOMS AT WORK: PARTICIPATORY CULTURE, IMAGINED COMMUNITIES AND HETEROTOPIAS

Before proceeding further, it’s important to define ‘fandom’ as it is being used in this research. ‘Fandom’ is a compound word blended from the words ‘fanatic’ and ‘dom’, where the ‘dom’ implies a nation or a domain (Lee 2013). Thus, fandom means the nation or domain in which fanatics

² All interviews are audio recorded and were conducted in English.

³ The survey was conducted using Google Forms. The form can be accessed at: https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1-VKDuvzWiuTfIzvhYrDCSj16Twhx6UmmNg_PzREYCEE/edit.

⁴ Survey responses can be accessed at: https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/19kkq_41HAh8P22qlATr9L8w29UrbDagMtwVyP1UYhR4/edit#gid=2019319961.

⁵ Fan events attended to gather data were K-Meets hosted by BD-K Family in 2016 and 2017 as well as fan community meets hosted by Get Your K-On.

congregate around popular cultural forms (Kim 2017). Despite the negative connotations that the word ‘fanatic’ immediately raises, fandoms are not considered negative in and of themselves. They simply act as space, physical or virtual where fans with similar interests can gather to share thoughts and ideas without fear of repercussions. Does that mean that fandoms are spotless and have no negative traits? Not at all. Fandoms can become toxic (Tinaliga 2018) and, therefore, shunned by the very fans who participate in it depending on how the fandom operates. But we’ll get to that further down. Before that, it’s important to discuss the form and structure of a fandom and how fan identity is shaped through it.

When discussing fan culture and fan identity, we cannot exclude participatory culture which lies at the heart of being a K-Poper. Participatory behaviour is part of the DNA of a K-Poper. Without it, there is no expression of fan identity, and therefore no performance of fandom. Today, thanks to social media marketing, K-Pop has vast numbers of audiences beyond South Korea and a bigger participatory culture. As Henry Jenkins (2006) explores in *Fans, Bloggers and Gamers*, the existence of participatory audiences increases the depth of the fan community. In fact, as Jenkins elucidates, participatory audiences are the basis for a rich fan culture, where fans take an active part in the way the fandom is shaped. K-Pop’s popularity can be attributed to its rich fan culture where fans not only passionately support their artists but also actively participate in the fandom with the creation of user-generated content such as fanfictions (stories written by fans about their favourite artists), fan news sites, blogs, memes, forums for intellectual discussions, charities on behalf of the artists, etc., drawing further attention to it.⁶ This active participation in the fandom is what helps shape the image of a fandom in the greater fan community (addressed further). It also helps with the formation of fan identity and community bonding regardless of physical or spatial boundaries.

This brings me to discuss the conception of K-Pop fan culture as a community that transcends boundaries. Benedict Anderson’s (2006) idea

⁶ Content created by fans includes but are not limited to writing fanfictions on fanfic websites, creating artwork, fan-run websites and blogs such as ‘koreaboo.com’, memes on Twitter and other social media, donating rice wreaths for charity, purchasing billboard ads to celebrate anniversaries, user-created content on entertainment news-sites such as ‘allkpop.com’, participating in forums such as Reddit and Soompi, creating fanchants and participating in official fan-cafes, etc.

of the imagined community was originally used to explain concepts of nationalism and governance, although it has afterwards been applied in a wider context. The parts of Anderson's theory that I draw from talk about the characteristics of imagined communities and how the behavioural patterns of the members of imagined communities are. These can be applied to the K-Pop fandoms also.

Anderson talks about how the members of a community, no matter how small, 'will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion' (2006: 49). This image gives rise to camaraderie and kinship. In the case of fandoms, fans from all over the world make up one fandom, however, most fans never end up meeting other members. Nonetheless, they still have an image in their minds about how their fellow fans are and it helps them find a commonality. The characteristic of limitation that is given to an imagined community is interesting for the internet is usually perceived as limitless and for a fan culture that thrives in the digital environment, this would seem to be the norm. However, each fandom inside the larger comprehensive K-Pop fandom 'has finite, if elastic, boundaries', beyond which lie other fandoms (2006: 50).

Another characteristic of an imagined community is that of sovereignty because it holds the power to make its own decisions and make its own choices. If we think about it in terms of fandom, each fandom is allowed to make their own choices on how they want to operate and behave. The final characteristic of an imagined community is that it is 'always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship' regardless of any 'actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail' (2006: 50). This characteristic is interesting for it ties in with the relationship shared between the fans and their idols. It is of course no secret that fans are milked out of their money by the agencies and companies, for the creation and marketing of K-Pop is business after all. And it is an expensive business, for example, a regular album costs around \$20–\$25⁷ without shipping, with merchandise such as lightsticks⁸ (concert staple), t-shirts and other memorabilia costing anywhere between \$15–\$50. Fans even refer to themselves as 'ATM machines' for management companies in self-derision (Lee 2015: 117). Despite these

⁷ For example, BLACKPINK's highly anticipated first album titled 'The Album' is approximately \$18 without shipping.

⁸ For example, EXO's lightstick costs \$32.

costs, fans still feel amity with their idols and any blame is placed on the agencies which are not considered as a part of the fandom. It is under these characteristics that a fandom operates and makes K-Pop fan culture an imagined community.

While there have been detractors to it, such as Partha Chatterjee (1996), wondering if nationalism needs to be purely a political concept and the prevalence of nationalism in ‘imagining’ a community, Anderson’s theory is good in establishing a base for the operational model of a fandom. Once you remove the political component from Anderson’s theory, the structural framework of an imagined community is the perfect fit for a K-Pop fandom. Added to that, fandom is heterotopic in nature. Michel Foucault (1984) described heterotopias as parallel spaces of existence that were at once physical and virtual and represented non-hegemonic states of being. Heterotopias are not perfect like utopias or imperfect and chaotic like dystopias, rather they represent a space where things are different, a space of otherness. Foucault uses the analogy of a mirror to explain:

The mirror functions as a heterotopia in this respect: it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there.

(Foucault 1984: 4)

Heterotopias are spaces that carry more meaning and have more layers than what appears to the eye. Without a doubt, the internet is one such space and within it, it gives rise to more heterotopias. Social media can be used as a form of exemplary heterotopia when the theory is applied to how fan culture (whether transnational or national) operates. One heterotopic principle states that ‘there is probably not a single culture in the world that fails to constitute heterotopias. That is a constant of every human group’ (1984: 5). Given that stipulation, fan culture too must constitute a heterotopia and in the case of transnational fans whose main interaction with others in the space is mostly virtual, this is doubly true since there is an absence of a real space even if it exists. The third principle explains how a heterotopia is ‘capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible’, while the fourth states,

Heterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable. In general, the heterotopic site is not freely accessible like a public place. Either the entry is compulsory, [...] or else the individual has to submit to rites and purifications. To get in one must have a certain permission and make certain gestures. (1984: 6)

These two principles describe K-Pop fandom down to a tee. Firstly, without being a fan of the music you cannot gain access to the cultural exposure shared by the fans. For example, there are Twitter fanbases that are dedicated to different groups. Each of them is a heterotopia. Without being a fan, one will not understand any of the discussion going on in the space. Second, social media acts as the perfect tool to bring together several other spaces since there is no need for a physical space due to the limitlessness of the internet. An example can be provided using the Facebook groups operated by K-Poppers. By joining a Facebook group such as BD K-Family,⁹ or Get Your 'K' On,¹⁰ fans are already entering a virtual site of existence that is different from reality and when they participate in discussions posted on various issues aimed at specific fandoms such as VIPs, EXO-L, Blackjacks, etc., they enter yet another heterotopia that is closed off to other fandoms except their own. Furthermore, it is the creation of these heterotopias that allow fans to participate wholeheartedly in fandom activities, in a space that is defined for them no matter the time or place. This quality definitely increases the transcendental and transnational appeal of K-Pop since they can cross boundaries while sitting in their own homes.

The naming of K-Pop fandoms is also significant. Each fandom has its own name that suits the image of the artists they represent. For example, TVXQ fans are called Cassiopeia, BigBang fans are called VIPs, Super Junior fans are ELFs (short for 'Everlasting Friends'), BTS (short for Bangtansonyeondan or 'Bulletproof Boy Scouts' in Korean) fans are called ARMY, BLACKPINK fans are BLINKS, etc. Labelling as such gives the fandom the feel of a sovereign state and the fact that each fandom is different from another makes the K-Pop fandom overall look like the world. Each specific fandom has the attributes of a nation, much like

⁹ BD-K-Family is the first fan community based out of Bangladesh.

¹⁰ Get Your 'K' On is a multiplatform fan community based out of Bangladesh.

Foucault's third principle of heterotopias where heterotopias exist inside a heterotopia.

While not politically motivated, every fandom acts like a sovereign nation and much like a real community that has elections and campaigns and debates between supporters that can break into riots, similar tropes can be observed in fandoms. Given this particular state of affairs, fanwars (arguments and destructive behaviour between fandoms) occur occasionally, particularly during awards season.¹¹ That's where the problem of negativity and the toxicity in fandom comes in from. As Tinaliga posits, 'toxic fandom war is competitive performativity turned up a notch with a tinge of misdirected loyalty' (2018: 5), with fans arguing and debating over simple issues like whether or not an artist received plastic surgery,¹² or serious issues such as whether groups are cheating in votes or song-chart manipulations,¹³ etc., (Kang 2020). Full-blown fanwars, like in the first generation H.O.T.-Sechskies era,¹⁴ are usually avoided (Koreaboo 2018; KpopJoA 2017), but should it ever explode, fandoms perform self-policing and have admins much like governments in nation-states who try to mediate them.

There are just a few things to address before I move to the exploration of fan identity and its expression. The first is a clarification relating to terminology that I mentally grappled with when I first started work on this research: Should fans outside of South Korea be referred to as 'international' or 'transnational'? The former is more restrictive than the latter, whereas it is obvious that fans do not adhere to physical, linguistic, age or

¹¹ Voting for music awards is a heating topic between fans who always vote in order to make their favourite idols win. One famous incident happened between EXO-Ls and VIPs for Mnet's 'M! Countdown' in 2015.

¹² News articles regarding Korean netizens reacting to girl group 2NE1's 2015 MAMA performance and member Park Bom receiving plastic surgery were published in 2015. One article was published on Allkpop: <https://www.allkpop.com/article/2015/12/korean-netizens-react-to-2ne1s-surprise-performance-at-2015-mama>.

¹³ Chart manipulation to increase number of sales and views is a sensitive topic for fans as every fandom wants to believe in their group's popularity without external (and illegal) help. One such incident of chart manipulation accusations happened in 2013 when top agencies asked prosecutors to investigate 'sajaegi' (chart manipulation).

¹⁴ The legendary fanwar between H.O.T and Sechskies during their peak rivalry in the late 1990s was referenced in the K-drama 'Reply 1997' aired on TvN (Korean TV channel), as well as by H.O.T member Tony An in JTBC's programme 'Please Take Care of My Refrigerator'.

cultural boundaries in their following of K-Pop, and I state this in a very positive way. To elucidate, I have met a 58-year-old Cassiopeia (TVXQ fan) as well as a 13-year-old EXO-L (EXO fan) in the K-Pop community. I have personally seen classic metal fans follow girl groups for their dance and visuals even while they understand nothing of the language itself. I have seen fans transverse their ‘fandom borders’. There has been a substantial influx of international fans since 2015 and they do not share the same cultural context with South Korea and this often informs their approach to K-Pop (Yoon 2020). What I’m trying to get at here is that much like how cultures bleed, fandoms also bleed and you would find more fans internationally who support multi-fandoms than you would find in South Korea. The best way to put it would be that the K-Pop fandom is transnational thanks to the presence of international fans. This gives us more scope to understand the easy flow of cultural exchange happening through K-Pop.

The second issue concerns understanding the ‘Cultural Spirit of Bangladesh’ and ‘Bengali Culture’, and the demarcations between the two and what is most definitely considered ‘foreign culture’. Simply put, the two terms are not interchangeable which makes this subject of what actually constitutes the ‘Cultural Spirit of Bangladesh’ a tricky area. Bangladesh is hybrid in the sense that while its language and traditions stem from the geographic Bengal, its religious and cultural influences stem from its Muslim past and present. This is why when we say Bengali spirit, we end up referring to the traditions and cultural inclinations tempered by Bengali history. Subsequently, when we say ‘Cultural Spirit of Bangladesh’, we are most definitely referring to cultural influences that have been inspired by both the Muslim heritage and traditional practices of the land. Any influence that doesn’t stem from these two categories is henceforth considered ‘foreign culture’ and, therefore, open to rejection as unauthentic and problematic by purist protective sentiments.¹⁵

Rabindrasangeet¹⁶ serves as a fitting analogy. Ask any Bengali and they will tell you that Rabindrasangeet is representative of Bengal (both Bangladesh, and West Bengal, which is a part of India). However, the ground-level scenario is different: popular contemporary music of

¹⁵ Most scholars talking about Bangladeshi cultural spirit discuss the phenomenon in Bengali. The ideas presented here have been gathered through ethnographic means, personal life-long experiences and discussion with cultural scholars.

¹⁶ Musical compositions by Rabindranath Tagore.

Bangladesh is influenced more by Western music, rap, folk, fusion, Bollywood, etc., over Rabindrasangeet. Clearly, this older musical form doesn't resonate with the new generation (Millennials and Gen-Z), but we are not letting musicians 'remake' Rabindrasangeet because of puritans who want to preserve the music as it is. But this is an argument for another day.

Given that cultural proximity is often an underlying attribute for transcultural flows, it is definitely noteworthy that K-Pop manages to transcend these parameters. Bangladesh possesses both a colonial past because of the British and also has India as a cultural hegemon; subsequently, the musical influences in Bangladesh are mostly either Western or Bollywood driven. One might wonder about the popularity of K-Pop given these circumstances. While 20,000 might not seem like a relatively large number, it can be considered a decent 'quantity' when we talk about the urban educated youth. K-Pop is not music that is enjoyed by the rural population (it's difficult to track the reach of K-Pop in rural areas given technological limitations), I would suggest it is most definitely an urban phenomenon driven by the reach of the world wide web into the open arms of receptive fans.

FORMATION OF A SOCIAL IDENTITY: THE BANGLADESHI K-POP FAN

To deconstruct the essence of a 'K-Pop fan', domestic or international, we must understand that it is very much the adoption of social identity. As Matt Hills (2005) states in *Fan Cultures*, "the 'fan' claims a social identity which the 'follower' does not" and this is shown 'along a spectrum of increased involvement' (viii-ix). One can simply listen to K-Pop without claiming fanhood. This was inferred from an interview with Puja Sarkar,¹⁷ a 'non-fan' who listened to the music. Her reason for not calling herself a fan was simply because she did not agree with the way the South Korean music industry worked and promoted their artists. Puja's perception of her own identity and worldviews did not align with those promoted by the industry, even if she could relate to some artists. Therefore, Puja didn't wish to be called a fan; she was simply a follower. This logic works in reverse for a K-Poper. This brings me to the importance in claiming a social identity, in claiming to be a fan.

¹⁷ The interviewee's real name has been used with consent.

Henri Tajfel's (1984) Social Identity Theory posits that we wish to belong to groups that are similar to our perceptions of ourselves. This comes out of 'the individual's knowledge that he belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him of the group membership' (Tajfel 1972: 31). These groups give a sense of belonging to the social world. They become an important source of pride and self-esteem. Given this, it is obvious that K-Popers worldwide find a trait of relatability in their idols (K-pop singers are often referred to as 'idols') before calling themselves fans. This relatability and need to find similarities also carry on in the behaviour of fans inhabiting fandoms. Being a part of a fandom is both an inclusive and exclusive affair. Like the in-group and out-group dynamics Tajfel talked about, fandoms and the fans who inhabit them act in the same manner towards fans in the same fandom as them (for example, Thai EXO-L towards Bangladeshi EXO-L) and fans in different fandoms (EXO-L vs ARMY). In other words, following the in-group dynamic, an EXO-L will treat another EXO-L the same way regardless of which country they come from. In the same manner, following the out-group dynamic, a fan in one fandom (EXO-L) doesn't have the same attitude towards another fan in a different fandom (ARMY). However, the added layer to this in-group and out-group dynamics is the K-Pop fan vs 'the rest of the world' attitude; regardless of fandom, all fans share one social identity: that of a K-Pop fan.

Other than the benefits afforded to domestic fans or fans from countries with easy accessibility (Japan, China and USA), the Bangladeshi K-Pop fan is no different from any other international fan. They support, breathe and live K-Pop the same way other fans do and they take pride in this part of their social identity. This status of a K-Poper, this group membership is not something foreign or artificial which is attached to the person superficially, it is a real, true and vital part of the person. A survey (as mentioned previously) was conducted to see how much Bangladeshi youth participated in K-Pop fan culture and from there, how much it constituted as part of their social identity. The concept of in-group and out-group found in Social Identity Theory was important in gauging this. Through the survey, three questions were asked specifically to estimate how much being a fan mattered to them individually: how Bangladeshi fans view themselves as a part of the global K-Pop fandom, the difficulty of being a K-Poper in Bangladesh and whether they have faced any form of bullying for being a K-Poper. The idea was to understand if fans would

still continue to claim their stake in the fandom despite difficulties or bullying.

Guided by its colonial past and Muslim history, the cultural atmosphere in Bangladesh is very set on the binary of masculine and feminine. Men are expected to dress and act in overtly masculine ways. K-Pop, however, has given rise to the popularity and acceptance of soft masculinity among fans. This acceptance does not carry over to the general public. While it may sound crude, K-Popers are often dogged by the question, ‘what do you see in those gay guys?’ by non-fans. Commenting on the general atmosphere and the difficulty of being a fan, one respondent stated,

Since a HUGEEEE [sic] portion of the general people Bangladesh are xenophobic, homophobic and downright racist. Just cause the Asian people often don’t have beards and look cute and not enough ‘MaNLY’ (according to those general BD people), those BD people would generalize K-pop, J-pop and C-pop idols as Transgender/Gays/Lesbians. That brings not only an irrational hate towards a certain race and the people of that race, but it also spreads hate for the people who are actually of different gender (other than male and female) or of different sexuality other than heterosexuals. And not only that, those general people of our country would constantly harass the people who loves K-pop, both in real life and social network. They would make offensive and xenophobic memes about K-pop for no reasons whatsoever.¹⁸

This form of bullying and cultural aggression has become commonplace in being a K-Poper. But, if other foreign musical influences still find acceptance, why does K-Pop face such vehement reactions? This mostly comes down to postcolonial attachments and cultural hegemony. K-Pop most definitely doesn’t fall into any of those categories and is a wholly ‘new’ phenomenon. When K-Popers face bullying and isolation by other youth, it is because they are partaking in cultural activities that feel foreign and alien and which are previously unexplored by the Bangladeshi mindset. Nonetheless, this attitude is one which fans have become quite adept at handling because ‘to claim the identity of a “fan” remains, in some sense, to claim an “improper” identity, a cultural identity based on one’s commitment to something as seemingly unimportant and “trivial”’ (Hills 2005: x). In true fashion, answering the question of whether it

¹⁸ Refer to Footnote 4 to view all respondents’ answers.

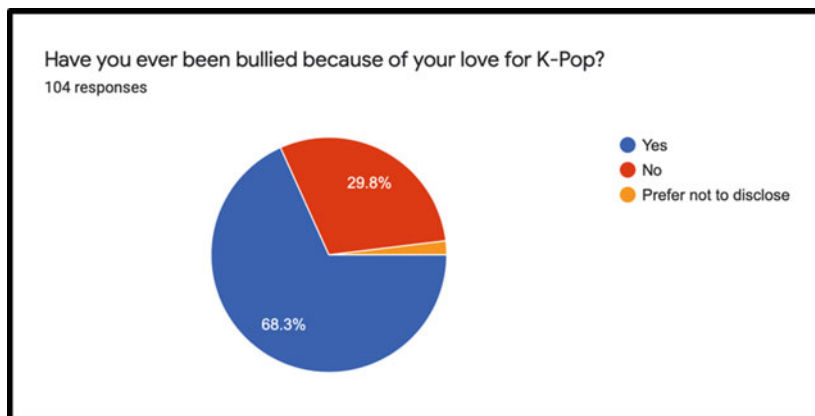


Fig. 5.1 Pie-chart showing bullying faced by K-Popers in Bangladesh (*Source* Author)

was difficult being a Bangladeshi K-Poper, one respondent easily stated, ‘(y)ears of being a K-pop fan in Bangladesh got me used to listening to insults about K-pop.’¹⁹ Of the 104 survey respondents, 68.3 per cent said they had faced some sort of bullying because of their love for K-Pop (Fig. 5.1). Despite this, they have still gone on to enjoy the music and be part of the fan community.

K-Pop fans need to defend themselves all the time for their choices, so it’s important to know what it is about being part of a fandom that makes them adopt it as a part of their social identity. A question was framed directly asking them, ‘Why do you like being a fan?’ the answers ranged from how it made their hearts easy to how the music brought them happiness in dark times to how being a fan made them feel loved. What makes fans want to belong to a social group is a sense of camaraderie and belonging, a sense of acceptance of who they are as people without artifice, a sense of understanding regarding their self-respect and self-worth.

On that note, idols definitely understand the importance and worth of fans and so you will find that they write songs dedicated to their fandoms. This is an important thing from my understanding since it fosters the

¹⁹ Ibid.

bonds of the fandom. A song created for the fandom is not only a token of gratitude expressed by the group to its fandom, it also becomes a fan anthem and something that symbolizes the fandom as well. TVXQ's 'Proud' (part of their Japanese song repertoire²⁰) was a testament to the love and support BigEast (Japanese Cassiopeia or Japanese fans of TVXQ) provided for their journey to the top. Bigbang's 'Last Dance' was a song to thank VIPs for their support in celebration of their 10-year anniversary. BAP released a song in the fandom's name itself called 'B.A.B.Y' (Jun 2014),²¹ while EXO released the song 'Lucky' to say how lucky they felt to have EXO-Ls by their side,²² expressing deep bonding between the group and its fandom (Esmeel 2017).

Indeed, several fans commented on the bonds of fandom being a reason why they liked being a fan in the first place. Answers ranged from 'I love the way how all the fans around the world make a family', to 'you get a family, friends where everyone has the same interest as you' to 'Its [sic] wonderful to have a family except for the one you work in (work-place) or were born in (actual family)'.²³ While others commented on how being a fan motivated them: 'They inspire me to be a better version of myself!'; 'Because Being a Kpop Fan made me a better person and I found a passion in it'; 'makes me love myself and makes me find who I really am'.²⁴

This question also revealed an interesting aspect: it seems that K-Pop helps fans deal with a lot of negativity and stress. There were several answers that went as follows: 'Because it's an [sic] mental escape from my life problem and it makes me happy'; 'It keeps me away from my stress & inspires me in so many ways in life'; 'Acts as an escape from reality'; 'Cause being a fan helps me take my minds [sic] of the negative things I face in daily life'; 'I feel very happy whenever I watch/listen to them. I think it reduces my pain, my depression.'²⁵ Looking at the age range of the fans in

²⁰ 'Proud' is one of the tracks from TVXQ's second Japanese studio album titled, 'Five in the Black'.

²¹ 'B.A.B.Y' was a special song B.A.P created and performed at a fanmeeting for their fans in 2014.

²² 'Lucky' is one of the songs from the repackaged debut album of EXO titled 'Growl' released in 2013.

²³ Refer to Footnote 4 to view all respondents' answers.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

Bangladesh, one can see the majority of them are still in school or in their teens. While it is a topic of immense importance, mental health is not an openly or easily addressed issue in Bangladesh. Only in recent years do we find more attention being given to the subject but through the survey, I seem to have stumbled onto an entirely different aspect of K-Pop in how it aids Bangladeshi K-Popers to handle their mental health. This aspect of relatability also speaks about the popularity of the groups in Bangladesh. While the popularity battle between EXO and BTS will rage on forever, it seems it's a decided issue among Bangladeshi fans: BTS is a clear choice (Moitree 2019). When questioned what made BTS so special, a majority of fans answered that it was because of the lyrics and the message their music delivered, which are motivational and talk about social issues. This interesting trait seems to be a global consensus regarding BTS songs; the inspirational themes appeal to fans worldwide. One fan explained, 'Their songs talks [sic] about the problem or struggle [sic] faced by younger generation. We can relate to them very easily.'²⁶

Where fans dwell, a fanbase (or several) will sprout, so fertile and inviting are the passions of a fan. This is exactly what happened with the Bangladeshi K-Pop fan community. As the number of individual fans grew, and they searched for others sharing the same fan identity, they sought out the heterotopic comfort that the internet and social media provided, giving birth to several groups on Facebook, Facebook being the most used social media platform in Bangladesh. There are quite a number of Facebook groups originating from Bangladesh, and in this chapter, I explored the 'BD-K-Family', which has the support of the South Korean Embassy in Bangladesh and 'Get Your "K" On', a smallish multi-fandom group. There are others, like 'K-Pop Fandom Bangladesh', which covers all K-Popers; 'K_Covers', a group for cover performances; and fandom specific ones, such as 'BTS ARMY of Bangladesh', 'EXO-L Bangladesh', 'Blinks Bangladesh', etc. However, since the purpose of this chapter isn't to provide an exhaustive list of Bangladeshi Facebook fan groups, I shall only be shedding light on how fans create communities and navigate their heterotopias.

²⁶ Ibid.

BD K-FAMILY

BD K-Family is Bangladesh's first K-Pop fanbase. It was created in 2010 by two sisters Tashnuva Zahan²⁷ and Tina Zahan.²⁸ It also happens to be the biggest Bangladeshi K-Pop fan group on Facebook and it has done something that isn't easy: it has brought together the hidden and underground K-Popers in Bangladesh and given them a platform to be themselves. A place where they can be a fan without shame or abuse. This group also works in tandem with the cultural wing of the South Korean Embassy in Bangladesh to arrange the yearly KBS World K-Pop Festival. KBS World K-Pop Festival is a global festival held in various countries for K-Pop fans to participate by performing covers of their favourite artists' works. Winners from each country are then taken to South Korea to participate in the final festival and meet popular idols.

BD K-Family also arranges a 'K-Meet' which works as a physical 'meet and hang' for fans. I was fortunate enough to attend the meets in 2016 and 2017. Going to the event, I wasn't sure what to expect. I had been to KBEE 2013 in London and that is a massive yearly expo attended by artists. I had the opportunity to see the Korean girl group 2NE1 there and there are numerous stalls filled with Korean products and food. The K-Meet seemed very lacklustre in comparison since it did not feature 'live' K-Pop idols. What it does feature are some life-size artist cut-outs, along with merchandise stalls, the streaming of music videos, performances and some expected mismanagement. However, it was quite successful in surprising me in one aspect: fan turnout. Every time, a new music video started, it was met with a cacophonous high-pitched cheering, followed by fans chanting out the lyrics. Some fans created circles to re-enact the choreographed dance moves that went with the tracks. The sight made me realize that no matter what the country, the actions of the fans are the same. It did not matter that they were singing in a language that they do not know or understand, what mattered was the spirit in which they were singing it in. And Bangladeshi K-Popers are high on spirit.

In a one-on-one interview with Tina Zahan,²⁹ I asked about the K-Meet and why they held it separately from the KBS World Festival event and she clarified that it gave fans a space to come and immerse themselves

²⁷ Name retrieved from BD-K-Family Facebook page.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ The interviewee's real name has been used with consent.

in their fandom without fear of repercussions, such as being ostracized or bullied for their choices. Unlike the KBS World Festival event, the K-Meet was created solely for fan interaction within the larger community.

GET YOUR ‘K’ ON

Another group on Facebook for Bangladeshi fans is called ‘Get Your “K” On’ (henceforth GYKO). Tagged as a ‘multi-fandom’ group, GYKO has a very interesting rule: they have banned fanwars and dissing in the group. This is interesting because fanwars can be looked upon as the bane of the K-Pop fan community. They can erupt at any time over any issue. But having this rule in place pre-empts troll fans who just like arguments and it promotes healthy discussions over differences in opinions. They have several mechanisms in place for that: one of which is the ‘#gykoconfession’ which allows fans to speak their minds without backlash. From time to time, GYKO arranges small meetups for its members, where they also have entertainment segments such as dance and song covers performed by fans. After attending the BD K-Family event, being my introverted self, I was kind of apprehensive to go to another Bangladeshi fan event, but the meetups GYKO holds are more intimate and thereby warmer and friendlier. The members usually meet up in cafes or restaurants and sit around in clusters until performance time comes up. Then it just dissolves into cheers and tuneless fan-chanting. On a comparative note, between the two groups and their meets, it is obvious that the bonding between the fans who are active in GYKO has taken place on a much deeper level than those in the BD K-Family, which makes sense given how large BD K-Family is.

One of the most memorable segments of the meetup is definitely the performance time when fans performed their favourite covers. It is eye-opening how talented these fans are and the level of dedication they have towards this community. Performing K-Pop choreography is no small feat and neither is getting the diction and pronunciation of a foreign language right during the performance; however, these fans practice till they perfect them to the best of their ability. And their dedication to the fandoms elicits positive responses from the rest of the community as well. Shazmeen Huq,³⁰ who is the administrator of the group, is proud of

³⁰ Ibid.

the meets' cozy vibe and standard, 'we were the first to have "Random Play Dance" and life-size cut-outs!' She talked about how the idea was to have social hangouts for fans, which would allow them to be creative and quirky without fear of backlash.

PERFORMANCE OF FANDOM: INVOLVEMENT, ATTACHMENT, SATISFACTION

Once you have donned the mantle of a K-Poper, the expression of fan identity comes in a variety of ways. A complex performative identity, in order to be a fan, you need to perform and carry out certain activities that prove your involvement, attachment and satisfaction of belonging in that social group enough to stake a claim on identifying with it. Participatory culture is integral to a rich active fandom. Hills sums this up quite nicely:

[Fandom] is also always performative; by which I mean that it is an identity which is (dis-)claimed, and which performs cultural work. Claiming the status of a 'fan' may, in certain contexts, provide a cultural space for types of knowledge and attachment.... Even in cultural sites where the claiming of a fan identity may seem to be unproblematically secure—within fan cultures, at a fan convention, say, or on a fan newsgroup—a sense of cultural defensiveness remains, along with a felt need to justify fan attachments. (2005: x)

The expression of fan identity, therefore, can often be found in the involvement of fans in their fandoms, usually undertaken in the name of the idols to feel closer to them. K-Poper fandom performance activities are simple really and, in some ways, quite universal: you show up to support your groups by buying merchandise, attending concerts, and promoting their music. Consumption thus becomes the measure of the fans' dedication and the primary vehicle of expressing their identity (Lee 2015: 117).

The Bangladeshi K-Poper doesn't have the 'privilege' of a concert unless they attend one abroad. As one fan explained, 'other foreigner fans has [sic] the chance to meet their bias,³¹ go to their concerts and

³¹ The term 'bias' refers to a fan's preferred group member; their favourite group member.

fansign events but for Bangladeshi fans like me It will remain a dream.³² Even then, they have petitioned to bring groups to Bangladesh and own some sort of memorabilia or albums belonging to the groups they follow. Despite the costs associated with international shipping, fans are dedicated in purchasing albums in order to support their groups even going so far as to place pre-orders for them through Facebook pages. The online realm truly permits the transnational K-Poper to perform their fandom to the fullest. Social media applications like Twitter are a hub of most K-pop fan activity and fans get accounts to converse with other fans from different cultures and areas. The easiest way to perform fandom is to participate in the various projects that the fans have going on for their idols or in the name of their idols. From having birthday projects, to Twitter trending projects to charity work, fans create and undertake projects under their favourite artists' names (refer to footnotes). Thus, fans ensure to have the correct social media tools to stay connected to both their idols and other fans in their fandoms. This increases the heterotopic aspect of fandoms as well as allowing fans to enjoy the flexibility of an imagined community.

The beauty of the K-Pop fandom lies in its versatility: involvement is not limited to a single activity type. An extremely popular form of involvement K-Popers undertake to show passion and attachment are song covers. Its popularity has not only made fan-groups famous for their covers but an entire festival endorsed by the South Korean Ministry of Cultural Affairs was created to celebrate it: the KBS K-Pop World Festival which was started in 2011 as a response to the immense love shown by fans.

Shefa Tabassum,³³ a Bangladeshi K-Poper and winner of the 2018 festival, got the 'once-in-a-lifetime' opportunity to go and perform live in Changwon, South Korea and the chance to meet idols. Shefa remembers her two weeks there well; she says, 'for two weeks, participants actually get to live the life of idol trainees as they prepare for their stages' (one-on-one interview, April 2020). Though she says her two-week taste of idol life was enough, Shefa also says the experience made her want to do something for the K-Popers in Bangladesh who love to dance and can only do so at the events. Having the platform and 'influence' now, she

³² Refer to Footnote 4 to view all respondents' answers.

³³ The interviewee's real name has been used with consent.

opened a Facebook group (K_Covers) which encourages fans to perform covers and upload them for critique and exposure.

In order to prove their loyalty to their fandoms, Bangladeshi K-Popers try and perform the entire plethora of fan activities to the best of their abilities. All these activities are recognized as exhibiting the ‘firepower’ of the particular fandom and the fandoms compete with one another to prove their love (Lee 2015: 117). Table 5.1 displays the activities fans participate in regularly. Other activities also include carrying out charity

Table 5.1 Responses on participation and involvement in fandom by Bangladeshi K-Popers

<i>Questions regarding participation and involvement in fandom</i>	<i>Respondents (Total 104)</i>	<i>Percentage (%)</i>
1. Do you use social media to promote your fandom and idols?		
Yes	83	80
No	21	20
2. Do you watch live streams of K-Pop music shows?		
Yes	74	71
No	30	29
3. Do you participate in the voting of year-end awards?		
Yes	56	54
No	15	14
Sometimes	33	32
4. Do you hang with your K-Pop fandom outside social media?		
Yes	70	67
No	34	33
5. Did you petition to bring any K-Pop group to Bangladesh?		
Yes	55	53
No	43	41
6. Have you ever done a K-Pop performance cover (song or dance)?		
Yes	53	51
No	51	49
7. Have you participated in any flash mobs?		
Yes	17	16
No	48	46
No, but I'm up for it	39	38
8. Do you read any fan-fiction about K-Pop?		
Yes	58	56
No	37	36
Prefer not to disclose	7	7

Source Author

work in their groups' names, streaming their music constantly to raise view counts, and even placing billboard advertisements for anniversary projects (Bangladeshi ARMY did one for BTS) (Herman 2017; Jahan 2018)!

While such participatory behaviour helps strengthen fandom bonds, in expressing their fan identity, fans sometimes cross invisible lines. We have to understand that fandoms are 'never a neutral "expression"' and portrays a 'sense of contesting cultural norms'. Based on the discussion so far, it's obvious that fans are always in some form of 'defcon' mode with a constant 'need to justify fan attachments' (Hills 2005: x). What this does is gives rise to something I touched upon at the beginning of this chapter: negativity and toxicity within a fandom. In the survey, I asked, 'Is there any aspect of your fandom you would like to change?' Two words that featured prominently were 'toxicity' and 'fanwars'.

To understand the pervasiveness of this, I touched upon the topic in the interviews as well as in the survey. Shazmeen from GKYO and Tina from BD K-Family talked about the steps they took to regulate and decrease fanwars and toxicity in the groups they run. For them, the actions of one fan being toxic or making derogatory comments to spark a fanwar is something they need to monitor closely to maintain order. This works differently for individual long-term fans. During my one-on-one interview with Tahrira Ihsan,³⁴ a K-Poper since 2011, I learnt that she stopped being active and left her fandom ARMY because of the toxicity: 'they are always on edge and can't even take a joke. They get triggered easily and because of that, people who mock the fandom just get more ammunition.'³⁵ While Tahrira still listens to the music BTS puts out, she doesn't feel comfortable being an active ARMY.

This seems to be the case with a lot of older fans as Thio Wangkhem³⁶ enlightens me. Being one of the first few 'documented' K-Pop fans in Bangladesh, Thio has seen the shifts in the Bangladeshi K-Pop scene since 2009. The toxicity caused by fanwars incited by the 'righteous' anger of younger fans is a key cause:

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ One-on-one interview was conducted with Tahrira Ihsan on 8 April 2020.

³⁶ The interviewee's real name has been used with consent.

Before we use to enjoy talking about our groups and promoting them. Nowadays, Bangladeshi fans are quite young. And they are obsessed with their biases! Whenever something happens, they think they should jump right in to defend their *oppas*. They think no other idols can compare to their biases, which is the mentality that gives rise to fanwars.³⁷

Fanwars, it seems, are an inevitable part of the fandom package. And as detrimental as it seems to the fan identity, it is also the thing that can tie the fandom together. As fandoms grow older and mature, they settle down and the in-group/out-group, ‘us and them’ mentality diminishes. As Thio informs me, this seems to be the trend that’s slowly taking place with Bangladeshi K-Popers. Given how bad the fanwars were in 2017, as both EXO and BTS settle into their spots in the K-Pop industry, their fandoms have now figured out how to co-exist (mostly) peacefully. Strict policing by fandom admins contribute to this as they regulate their groups to ensure the toxicity is kept at a minimum if not negligible level.

THE WAY FORWARD: FROM A GROUP TO A COMMUNITY

As Bangladeshi K-Popers find a modicum of maturity in their performance of fandom, it signifies one thing: the passage of time and the growth of the fandom with it. The timeline that Tina Zahan gave me during our interview made one thing clear: K-Pop has been taking root in Bangladesh for over a decade now. BD K-Family itself is ten years old and Tina and her sister had been fans for longer than that. However, there has neither been full-blown research into this subculture, nor has anyone really explored its full potential. While working with the South Korean Embassy in Bangladesh has definitely brought perks, it has also been tough in the initial years as Tina remembers a time when the BD K-Family group had to repeatedly assure the embassy that their efforts in supporting this ‘fan group’ would pay off. It is only in the last five years, and with the staging of the KBS K-Pop World Festival, that some of the spotlight has been focussed in this region. Shefa Tabassum’s win at the 2018 KBS K-Pop World Festival did wonders for bolstering the morale of BD K-Popers and helped Bangladesh have a better standing with the South Korean Ministry of Cultural Affairs.

³⁷ One-on-one interview was conducted with Thio Wangkhem on 11 April 2020.

The immense popularity of K-Pop-related events in Bangladesh is another plus point for BD K-Popers. K-Meets or other Korean-based events see between three to four thousand attendees throughout the day. That is not a small number by any means, and it is not a one-off occurrence. In talking to Tina, it became evident that BD K-Family is not a fanbase or a fan group symbolizing the greater K-Pop fandom, nor does it set itself up to be one: 'We're a community. The only one in Bangladesh.'³⁸ While the group shows around 7000 members on Facebook with over 20,000 likes, Tina says that they actually have 20,000 members, both active and non-active. Understanding the impact of such numbers, they are taking steps to regulate the community as such. They issue membership cards which allow a variety of perks as well as work as identification in some cases. In the decade that BD K-Family has been active, it has amassed both followers and respect. Working closely with the South Korean Embassy's cultural wing is a source of joy and pride for them. Tina explains the whole evolution of BD K-Family and what it has come to symbolize now: 'When we started, my sister and I, it was just to find other people who had similar interests as us. Now it's become a space where thousands of people get to express themselves without ridicule. We have created that community, that safe place, for them. And we only hope to grow further.'

Taking cue from Tina, I will end by stressing the importance of creating that haven for fans. My own experiences as a K-Poper bear witness to it. I got introduced to K-Pop at the end of 2010. At the time, my friend dragged me, almost forcefully, to listen to TVXQ. But by March 2011, I was hooked. I am a lifelong Cassiopeia but even when I started to expand my fandom horizons, my fandom interactions were exclusively international; I knew only three other Cassiopeia in Bangladesh.

In 2013, after having racked up around 35,000 tweets because of my fandom, I started questioning myself on my transnational fan identity. I started questioning my behaviour as a fan, my interactions with other fans, what made me a fan, why being a part of fandom was so important to me and why it made me feel happy and safe. All the little questions that make up this research. And while I didn't find my tribe in Bangladesh then, the transcultural heterotopia provided by K-Pop fandoms filled that void. The same kind of heterotopia that now exists so openly in Bangladesh. Bengali

³⁸ One-on-one interview was conducted with Tina Zahan on 12 April 2020.

music or musical tastes cannot claim cultural proximity to K-Pop. But it is an increasingly growing concept and, therefore, just like we consume any globally popular commodity, K-Pop too is now being consumed in this manner.

Ten years ago, in 2010, this argument would probably not stand but today it does. Despite the cultural aggression propagated by purists, the change in the cultural landscape is evident in the consumption of popular goods. I never dreamed that Bangladesh would boast of such rich K-Pop fan culture. So deep was my mistrust on this matter that I asked the fans why they thought K-Pop is gaining popularity in Bangladesh. Some fans simply didn't know and attributed it to the spreading global popularity, while others waxed a little bit more philosophical about it by stating it's a 'paradigm shift in the way the new generation is viewing KPOP'.³⁹ I personally liked the answer which stated that 'it's because people are gradually becoming open minded and have finally started accepting different cultures, overcoming language barriers',⁴⁰ mostly because it's what I hope is happening. When I became a fan, it was night in Bangladesh but thanks to the discerning efforts of the K-Pop community, dawn has already broken and K-Popers are dancing in the sunlight.

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³⁹ Refer to Footnote 4 to view all respondents' answers.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

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K-pop and the Politics of Appeal: Understanding the Emotional and Aural Experiences of Fans in and Around Kolkata

Anakshi Pal and Sourav Saha

THE POPULAR MUSIC CULTURE OF KOLKATA AND THE *INTIMATE CONSUMPTION* OF K-POP: AN INTRODUCTION

Korean popular music (K-pop) is an integral element of *Hallyu* or the ‘Korean wave’ that is being considered the biggest cultural phenomenon in Asia since the early 1990s (Roll 2018).¹ *Hallyu* denotes the phenomenal worldwide popularity of the elements of South Korea’s cultural economy² and it is regarded as an attempt at creating a brand image

¹ See also, Documentary Warehouse (2016).

² See Hübinette (2012), Kim (2007), Roll (2018) and Romano (2018).

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for the nation through exporting and developing its ‘soft power’³ or ‘co-optive power’ through which it can manipulate the needs of other countries to boost its interests without using force (Nye Jr. 1990: 166).

The emergence of K-pop as a musical genre can be traced back to a group called ‘Seo Taiji and Boys’, whose song ‘I Know’ topped South Korea’s singles chart for a record-smashing 17 weeks, making it the longest number one streak in the history of the country (Romano 2018). This was the first time that modern American style pop music had been fused with South Korean culture (Lie 2015). John Lie argues that ‘K-pop constitutes a break not just with the traditional Korean music of the past but also with earlier Korean popular music...’ (2015: 4). Gradually, with the emergence of the music studios during 1995–1998, popular music in South Korea was deliberately created and designed to represent what they believed the teens wanted the modern pop groups to show (Romano 2018). Post-reformation of the country’s democratic government in 1987 and the relaxation of censorship, K-pop’s reach widened and it was marketed through the meticulously orchestrated efforts of the South Korean entertainment industry and the ‘chaebols’ or ‘highly diversified conglomerates’, who manufactured it as a consistent experience. Its distinctive features include intricately choreographed dance performances, the presence of polished aesthetics, and the ‘in-house’ method of studio production, where these K-pop songs or music videos are produced in a factory-like set-up (ibid.; Lie 2015).

By 2017, the export of K-pop boosted the South Korean music industry to an estimated worth of \$5 billion, as per the Korea Creative Content Agency’s Report (Sinha 2019). This indicates the country’s success in establishing a global brand for itself through its entertainment industry that made it possible for the outside world to envisage the cultural image of South Korea after the Korean War.⁴ However, scholars like Iwabuchi (2002) argue that this popularity is not indicative of the superiority or uniqueness of Korean culture, rather its cultural products merely satiate the contemporary audience by showcasing what the viewership demands. He suggests that transnational cultural power should not be translated as the acceptance of the superiority of a particular culture over another, instead, as the capacity of a culture to ‘appeal to the senses,

³ See, BBC Radio 1 (2018). Also see Hübinette (2012) and Roll (2018).

⁴ See Martin (2018) and Romano (2018).

emotions, and thoughts of the self and others' (Lull 1995: 71, quoted in Iwabuchi 2002; 133) through the symbolic images and meanings that it produces. So, the success of *Hallyu* can be attributed more to a complicit transnational and collaborative effort on the part of South Korea's Asian neighbours to accept its cultural products, rather than an actual indication of the cultural superiority of the country being acknowledged by them, as is usually implied by the inherent nationalist undertone embedded within the term (Kim 2007).

In this chapter, we critically reflect upon the emotions tantalized through aural experiences among the K-pop fans in and around Kolkata (Calcutta till 2001) to understand the politics behind K-pop's unique appeal. It is also an attempt to comprehend the dynamics behind K-pop's success in entrenching itself into the craters provided by Kolkata and its surrounding regions, despite the existence of an already vibrant culture of listening to pop-music among the youth, which came about as a result of the city's enmeshed trajectory woven by its musical culture in tandem with its socio-political history.

Even as late as 2015, K-pop had failed to strike the right chords in India, but within three years, its fanbase in the country had multiplied (Sinha 2019). India is now the sixth-largest consumer of K-pop, declared by the Korean Cultural Centre (KCC) India.⁵ The genre's popularity can be gauged through Doordarshan's (DD)⁶ recent move to air a K-pop song on 23rd July 2020 called 'Be the Future' that featured popular K-pop bands like Dreamcatcher, AleXa and IN2IT, whose theme revolves around the difficulties experienced by people due to the pandemic and the ways of adapting to it (Pallavi 2020). DD has also served as the official broadcast partner for the annual K-pop auditions organized by KCC India⁷ which was conducted online in 18 cities (*Outlook India/IANS* 2020) and received an overwhelming response despite the limitations and challenges imposed by the pandemic. In the words of Mr Kim Kum-Pyoung (Director of KCC, India) and Shashi Shekhar Vempati (President

⁵ See Doordarshan National (2020).

⁶ Doordarshan (DD) was established on 15th September 1959 and it is the 'television vertical' of Prasar Bharati, India's Public Service Broadcaster (see <https://prasarbharati.gov.in/DD/index.php>; last accessed 4 October 2020).

⁷ See Korean Cultural Center India (New Delhi) (2020, September 9). [PRESS RELEASE] Final Round of K-Pop India Contest 2020 (Korean Minister and BTS sending a congratulatory message to Indian fans).

of Doordarshan and CEO of Prasar Bharati), ‘K-pop is writing a new chapter in the history of popular music today in India’.⁸

The K-pop revolution in India gains its vitality from the roots of a deepening intimacy that the audience, especially the youth, seek. In other words, its increasing popularity is because of its ability to *intimately* ‘connect’ with India’s youth (*The Hindu* 2016). This notion of ‘intimacy’ is central to the understanding of the K-pop phenomenon, whereby the cultivation of intimacy operates at the level of redefined sensorial depths that remained unexplored previously. The technological revolution and the subsequent emergence of ‘high definition’ technology globally during the twenty-first century came with the promise of *intimate experiences* enabled through high-definition gadgets and devices that aim to stimulate sensory perceptions, bringing the body and its senses to the fore. Audiences’ audio-visual experiences and sensory stimuli in the new milieu of media production and reproduction are intensified by generating an illusory ‘hyper-real’ that projects the mediated experience as something more real than the actual reality (Baudrillard 1994). This ‘hyperreal’ is in essence an anchorless reality that Jean Baudrillard (1994: 3) defines as—‘...a real without origin or reality’. But what this hyperreality creates for any audience is also a sense of directness and intimacy that strikes at the level of the senses; albeit manufactured, but conveying that ‘intimate’ feeling and sense of connectedness that it expects from the audio-visual object of consumption. This in turn led to the rediscovery of a new feeling of proximity that has intrinsically contributed to the mesmerizing appeal of K-pop songs. K-pop for its part creates a fertile terrain of possibilities targeted at the youth, who seek music out as a means through which they can reflect on their emotional experiences and expect to access the element of intimacy, while subsequently recreating and renegotiating their ‘true’ self. This idea of the ‘true self’ is generated by and feeds the much-hyped notion of ‘authenticity’. As John Lie (2015: 141) writes,

Modern authenticity, tied to notions of sincerity, of staying true to oneself, is understood as the outward expression of an inwardly experienced correspondence between the true self and the self in the world—a unity between the two that is uncompromising with respect to the movement of time and to external contingencies.

⁸ See Doordarshan National (2020).

Therefore, the intimate consumption of K-pop that is made possible by digital modes of sound reproduction and simultaneously, a heightened sensory stimulation, introduces an element of the personal that is crucial for locating and understanding K-pop's niche in Kolkata and its surrounding regions, especially when viewed against the backdrop of the city's historicity of how the youth came to personally identify with pop music.

K-pop's success in Kolkata, especially among the city's youth, indicates that the genre encapsulates all those elements that the Kolkata youth seem to resonate with. The history of the listening culture in Bengal has brought about aural shifts where the young listenership is concerned, culminating in an inclination among the youth for music that echoes with elements of the 'personal'. This tendency traces its roots more strongly back to the post-Naxalite period of the early 1970s when the youth in former Calcutta came to dissociate music from the political (Dorin 2012). This transformation in their orientation towards music in general, represented a lull, following the Naxalite period of the late 1960s that saw violent student unrests and repression of the youth at the hands of the police (ibid.). The shift was also because of the emergence of an urban educated middle class and youth, with its distinct subculture and, although 'popular music' had already entered into the Calcutta scene in the 1960s, it was now that music came to be specifically regarded as '...a means of self-expression and entertainment...' (ibid.: 199). It was the result of a significant change owing to the economic instability in the post-Naxalite era when the youth became less visible in public spaces during the 1970s and 1980s as listeners of music. This decline also meant that they had fewer opportunities for seeking entertainment through music in public spaces and for expressing themselves (ibid.). The economic liberalization in 1991 that brought in its wake globalization and also MTV into the musical landscape, drastically altered this scenario. It was marked by the emergence of the *Jibanmukhi* (literally meaning 'oriented towards life') Movement and a new generation of musicians who sought to '...deal with the daily life and strife in Calcutta in their songs: social issues, poverty, frustration and anger experienced by youth' (ibid.: 198). The *Jibanmukhi* wave drew significantly from the musical traditions around the world, especially Western popular music and folk music and also from the folk traditions in Bengal, bringing about innovations in Bengali popular music and paving the way for the *Bangla* rock bands to emerge during the mid-1990s. Most importantly, it introduced an

emphatic shift among the young listeners of Bengal, who resonated with these songs that echoed their daily life, mundane emotions and quotidian struggles.

Thus, tracing the historical transitions within the various musical forms and genres in Bengal,⁹ beginning with the modern Bengali songs (*adhunik Bangla gaan*) that goes back to Rabindranath Tagore's oeuvre, through to the 1970s, 1980s and up until the late 1990s, we find that the notion of the 'self' is central in these. With each new genre and a musical form that emerged as a response to an existing social-political crisis, etching a recurrent historical pattern, the audience sought to locate itself as an invisible 'self' within them, thereby anticipating the problem of crisis. Hence, the history of listenership in this region reveals a tendency to anticipate the notion of crisis operating both at the individual and collective levels. In other words, a niche was created for a specific kind of music that addresses the private and the personal, so that music became a metaphor for the youth, through which they could express their intimate feelings and emotions. Kolkata in general has nurtured a ripe culture of listening to diverse genres of music, especially to pop music at least since the 1950s. The city has witnessed a rich amalgamation of influences from Western and world music that boosted its local pop genres and enriched its existing liberal musical atmosphere, as Stephane Dorin (2012: 197–198) writes,

...Calcutta is indeed a 'laboratory' of the globalization of popular music. The process and challenges of globalization occur with cultural acuity that is probably greater here than elsewhere. A possible reason for this specificity is undoubtedly the length and depth of the contact with Western culture. We have also to take into account the actual dimensions of protest, due to the turbulent political history of Bengal, which underlie in Calcutta the various emergences in the popular music world since the early 1990s.

Therefore, there existed a fertile ground for K-pop to find an audience among the city's youth, who seek to readily identify with songs that resonate with their quotidian issues and challenges because the themes in these K-pop songs revolve around issues that confront the modern youth in their everyday lives. K-pop offers a therapeutic tool to its young

⁹ These include folk music, pop, country music, jazz, RnB, rock music, Electronic Dance Music (EDM) and many more.

listeners for dealing with such crises and emotional challenges, thereby assuring them with the presence of a certain intimacy. The notion of intimacy in this sense can be unfolded in myriad ways, such as the constant making, unmaking and remaking of the self that simultaneously occurs during the process of listening to these songs. We will revisit this idea later in this chapter.

K-POP FANDOM IN SOCIAL MEDIA: THE CREATION OF ‘AFFECTIVE SPACES’

A couple of unanticipated, preliminary observations were made in the process of selecting the sample, which lent us insight for a deeper understanding of the emotional experiences of the K-pop fans participating in this study. It must be mentioned that our initial doubt regarding the possibility of finding K-pop fans proved to be misplaced. Instead, we received an overwhelming response, thereby confirming K-pop’s unprecedented popularity in the region. Convenient sampling and snowball sampling techniques were used to select a sample of respondents, most of whom resided in Kolkata with a couple of them located in North Bengal. They were either employed or students, between the ages of 14 and 29 years. Women constituted a majority of the sample and only two participants were male, with an average age of 20.5 years. Efforts at finding more male participants were unsuccessful given the brevity of time. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted, and anonymity and confidentiality were assured to each of the speakers.

During this process, preliminary observations suggested that these fans shared the feeling of a lag in their ability and scope to express their emotions as K-pop fans with other people around them. Thus, when provided with an opportunity to talk about it, the participants readily shared their emotional experiences as fans and listeners of the genre with ample enthusiasm. We also noticed a tendency among the respondents to share and showcase their knowledge as ‘experts’ of the K-pop lingo. It was rather insightful for us to be introduced to words such as *sasaeng* and *koreaboo* that were used to label different groups of K-pop fans. We were informed that while *sasaeng* referred to obsessive fans who invaded the privacy of their favourite K-pop stars (Urban Dictionary 2014), *koreaboo* referred to someone who is not Korean by birth but is overly obsessed with the Korean culture to an extent that they want to cultivate strong resemblance with a Korean (Urban Dictionary 2017). In the words of

MR, a 14-year-old K-pop fan from Kolkata, ‘...*koreaboo*s are like next level crazy people’. She elaborated on this statement by sharing an anecdote about one of her school friends, who was ‘very close to being a *koreaboo*’—‘Once, in a map test, she just marked South Korea in the test and nothing else’.¹⁰ This overt enthusiasm among the fans to exhibit their knowledge about the lingo associated with Korean popular culture, more specifically K-pop, can be understood as an attempt to establish their ‘authenticity’ as fans and entrench themselves within the larger K-pop fandom through the cultivation of such ‘capital’ in the Bourdieusian sense of the term (Abd-Rahim 2019).

It is important to briefly draw attention to the massive ‘online’ presence of the K-pop fandom in this region on social media platforms, such as WhatsApp, Facebook and Instagram. Reflecting on the usage and subsequent significance of ‘Social Network Services (SNS)’ in enabling communication and active participation among the *Hallyu* fandom, Jang and Song (2017) note that the use of new media constitutes a key characteristic of Korean wave fandoms that utilize it as a medium for expressing themselves. We argue, that K-pop fans create and produce spaces of social camaraderie over social media forums on the Internet, thereby transforming these ‘virtual’ spaces into extended social spaces. Knowledge about K-pop is disseminated and shared over these spaces and also readily reproduced. Spaces of social camaraderie, such as these, constitute the formation of alternative networks for these K-pop fans to express their emotional responses as listeners of the genre. Here, social media becomes crucial for the study of the K-pop fandom because their emotional excesses spill over through and on such sites, transforming these into ‘affective spaces’. By this, we imply that not only are these fans watching or listening to K-pop via social media sites, they are also expressing their emotional approval and support through their active and visible efforts by ‘posting’ these songs online or by ‘liking’ and ‘commenting’ on them. The active presence of the fandom in the region on WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram and even on YouTube, translates into them being ‘members’ of ‘groups’ or ‘communities’. For instance, MR told us that she used to be a member of a WhatsApp ‘group’ called ‘K-pop vs. Non-K-pop Fans’, while 26-year-old DP was a part of an Instagram ‘group’ where she and her friends, most of whom are originally from

¹⁰ Interview conducted with MR on 21st October 2019.

Kolkata, shared videos and clips of K-pop songs and K-dramas. In her words, 'It gives a community feeling'.¹¹

The active creation and reproduction of 'spaces' of social camaraderie is an impossible possibility outside the ambit of such social media forums. Even if similar associations were to form over non-virtual forums, these would have failed to reproduce many of the characteristics that these social media 'groups' or 'communities' have. Multiple instances were narrated by the respondents where such 'groups' or 'communities' comprised of members from all over the world. DG, a 19-year-old K-pop fan originally from Darjeeling, told us that she had many international friends from Malaysia, Bhutan, Korea, Luxembourg and the Philippines, whom she had gotten to know through Twitter and Instagram and now they had a 'small group on WhatsApp' called 'Jonjae Armeries' (*jonjae*, she informed was the Korean word for 'genius'). When asked how she felt personally on being able to share her love for K-pop and talk about it with others who were a part of this group, she said,

I feel really good about it because there are people who don't like K-pop and wouldn't want to listen to anything related to it. My best friends don't like K-pop. So, it is very hard for me to talk about K-pop but then since I have some international friends, it's always easy and comfortable for me to share my thoughts and opinions about K-pop to [sic] them. Even though we're seas apart, when we talk to each other it feels like we're sharing things side to side [sic].¹²

We infer that there is an emotional void that DG and other fans sought to fill through participation in such virtual groups, owing to the absence of a social circle where they can share their experiences and feelings as part of the fandom. Collectively formed spaces of camaraderie, such as these, were embedded into their everyday social lives and in reality thereby channelizing their emotions that are triggered from viewing and listening to K-pop. Therefore, these 'spaces' are deeply emotive and personal and are simultaneously interactional and experiential, despite being virtual. These are also constantly being inscribed with emotions, leading the fandom's

¹¹ Interview conducted with DP on 25th October 2019.

¹² Interview conducted with DG on 20th and 25th October 2019.

efforts at community-building and cultivating a ‘we-feeling’. In effect, these emerged as organic, living social ‘spaces’ and extensions of the physical spaces of the K-fans.¹³

THE POLITICS OF K-POP’S APPEAL: NEGOTIATING IDENTITIES AND SUBJECTIVITIES

In our attempt to understand what exactly constitutes K-pop’s appeal for the youth who are avid listeners of music in diverse languages and genres, we explored the emotional and aural dimensions that emerged from their narratives. As mentioned earlier, hybrid modes of audio intensification that have sustained regional popular music and commercial media production and reproduction, enabled individual listeners to explore ‘new pleasures within the body’ (Jütte 2005: 325). It was anticipated that this significantly adds to K-pop’s experience and appeal for its listeners, both, the ‘fans’ and the ‘non-fans’. It was revealed that the fans were heavily influenced by certain distinctive features of the genre that appealed to them emotionally and aurally—(a) its meticulously synchronized choreography complemented with a visually and aurally ‘catchy’ (quickly attracting attention) style of presentation; (b) the themes and lyrical messages that K-pop songs espoused; (c) the alternative gender ideals and discourses endorsed in several K-pop songs/music videos of both individual performers and bands; and most importantly, (d) the heavily popularized narratives of ‘hard-work’ and effort of the K-pop artists who maintain strict bodily regimentation practices, being specially trained to perfection for this profession from a very young age.

Firstly, continuing from the above, K-pop’s intricate choreography and highly synchronized performances, coupled with a glossy style of presentation have a popular appeal for its fandom in the region. Respondents found it visually attractive and sensually appealing. MR for instance said that the song (‘As If It’s Your Last’ by the South Korean girl group ‘BLACKPINK’) was ‘catchy’ and the music video was ‘bubbly’ while explaining what got her ‘hooked’ or attracted her attention when she watched a K-pop music video for the first time. She describes what she meant by ‘catchy’ as follows,

¹³ Hine (2015) was a significant resource that informed our understanding of and brief analyses on virtual platforms and the ways in which the K-pop fans transform these into affective spaces.

The rhythm was great...Their performance on stage is great. Their dance choreography is cool...They have a smooth choreography, and everything is in sync. And every idol is quite a good dancer...they are great performers and very energetic...¹⁴

We found similar echoes in a 20-year-old male student, KTB's narrative when he explained what he found unique about this genre,

...Their dance style, the fashion, the quirky hair colors. It was something different than the Western artists...K-pop is unique for its dance and songs. These itself set it apart from the Western songs or even the Indian ones. The videos tell a story, their choreography is also very tough. The songs are catchy. These all together set K-pop apart...I'm inspired by their choreography as I'm a dancer...¹⁵

The word 'catchy' was used frequently by the respondents while explaining what appealed to them initially, with immediate stress on the synchronized choreography. This reveals a tendency among these fans to seek order in and through K-pop, and the pleasure lies in the ability to seek order at an experiential level, which eventually facilitates the making of the 'self'. Most of the interlocutors were regular listeners of music, spanning across genres, in English, Bengali, Hindi (used synonymously with 'Bollywood' music) and Nepali. The majority of them had been inducted into watching and listening to K-pop by friends or young relatives and watched or (mostly) listened to K-pop daily or every alternate day. Thus, K-pop's style of synchronized choreography and rhythmic music emerged consistently as features that initially appealed to almost all the respondents we interviewed, generating feelings of visual awe and aural fascination.

Secondly, most respondents asserted that K-pop's thematic content and lyrics held a personal appeal for them. These music videos thematically reflected the quotidian issues, problems and struggles of the youth, such as self-love and self-acceptance, low self-esteem, issues related to love, frustration, anxiety and depression qua mental health, etc. As discussed previously, the listenership of this region, especially that of the youth has undergone a transformation in tandem with the historical shifts in the

¹⁴ Interview conducted with MR on 19th October 2019.

¹⁵ Interview conducted with KTB on 24th October 2019.

listening culture in Kolkata and its neighbouring regions, within West Bengal. Therefore, the young fans tend to resonate more with music that revolves around daily-life issues, and their struggles and triumphs. While such issues might be common, these are addressed rarely and often get accentuated due to a felt-lack of structured peer-support networks in their everyday social communities. Since K-pop thematically tackles such concerns, it is viewed to be a therapeutic tool by the fans and a source of catharsis. DG expresses this clearly while explaining what she thought was unique about K-pop,

...their song and the music video describe a particular theme...which portrays a particular message...that is relatable to the youth. Not to forget their beautiful lyrics. Their lyrics are very meaningful that touch the audiences' heart. When it comes to lyrics, I'd rather listen to Korean songs than English...Their [K-pop male band BTS's music videos] themes are always so inspiring...And they talk about the problems faced by the youth and the teens. For example, anxiety and depression, low self-esteem. With their songs they taught us how to love ourselves, to know our worth and to love oneself with no condition.¹⁶

K-pop's ability to tap into this sphere of the intimate and personal, either through its thematic content or through the espousal of similar positive values by the K-pop artists that are heavily propagandized, created a sense of emotional connectedness among the fans who struggle to cope with self-generated, *because* often socially-generated standards that they strove to meet as individuals. Listening to K-pop strengthened their coping strategies and many admitted that they wished that they had discovered it sooner. In this context music was being actively used by the fans in dealing with personal, everyday crises, thereby transforming it into technology for managing everyday life (DeNora 1999).

Simultaneously, listening also emerged as a way of 'caring for one self', used in the Foucauldian sense (1986), where the fans relied heavily on K-pop to constantly re-work and refashion their bodies, their identities and the self. KTB expresses this explicitly,

¹⁶ Interview conducted with DG on 20th October 2019.

Personally, K-pop has had a huge influence on me...The fashion and dress(ing) sense has also inspired me...The attitude of my peers have made me the ‘oppa’¹⁷ of the college—they know me as the guy who listens and dances to K-pop. My dress(ing) sense has changed, I prefer wearing clothes which are similar to what the Korean artists usually wear when they have casual outings.¹⁸

Therefore, music is translated by fans like KTB into a ‘technological’ means of ‘caring for oneself’ or the ‘technological care of the self’, if one will, since it is created and mediated only through new-age technologies that enable its intimate consumption, as discussed previously.

On a similar note, emphasis on rhythmic beats suggested that it constituted another key element of attraction for its fans. K-pop’s use of Electronic Dance Music (EDM) for the creation of tunes conducive to a mood for dancing, coupled with rhythmic beats is instrumental for comprehending its emotional appeal for its fans. Respondents reported that the songs contribute to the upliftment of mood and enhancement of confidence, often helping them to deal with their lacking self-esteem—as MR described while explaining how she felt emotionally while watching or listening to K-pop,

(It is) Rhythmic. And BTS’s music is all (about) loving yourself and self-confidence and I love it. BTS has helped people all around the world...Because many of their songs are about self-love and all. That helped several teens...Some teens say that BTS music makes them feel happy and loved.¹⁹

Thus, we see that intensification technologies constitute the technique of reconstituting the self. K-pop songs that are orchestrated with hybrid audio engineering techniques are highly dense because of their use of beats that create a repetitive, rhythmic cycle. The tonal-rhythmic sequence of beats is cognitively and affectively anticipated by a potential listener, thereby triggering emotional effects. This happens because the listener tends to internalize the sequential pattern through its pace and rhythmic

¹⁷ The word ‘oppa’ here, refers to an older male brother-figure (see *Urban Dictionary* (2018). Oppa [by Bubbs the trubbs]. <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Oppa> (last accessed 10 October 2020)).

¹⁸ Interview conducted with KTB on 24th October 2019.

¹⁹ Interview conducted with MR on 19th and 21st October 2019.

velocity, simultaneously replicating the sequence within the body. As soon as the body identifies the presence of a sequential pattern in music, it anticipates the confirmation and re-occurrence of the beats within a given time frame. This act of internalization operates at the level of sensory correspondence, so that the listener enters into a loop of anticipation, thereby generating feelings of longing, familiarity and intimacy that the fans build upon for the making, unmaking and remaking of the self. The emotional and aural effects of rhythmic beats will be revisited when we explore the embodied responses to it by a non-fan listener of K-pop.

Thirdly, K-pop's endorsement of alternative gender ideals and perspectives, coupled with the defiance of heteronormative sexuality through much of its content, or because of its artists' espousal of the same through their attires, appearances and personal viewpoints immensely appealed to the female fans. Many of them said that K-pop had challenged their ideas about 'ideal' masculinity and disturbed its easy association with normative heterosexuality (cf. Anderson and Shim 2015). For instance, DP, a female K-pop fan from Kolkata describing its effect on her, said,

K-pop has broadened my idea of masculinity as it is defined...Masculinity was defined by squared jaw and beard and huge muscles, before K-pop. We have this pseudo idea of masculinity which was extremely fragile. K-pop introduced the concept that masculinity is beyond that. Make-up, soft looks, lean, all these do not undermine masculinity in any way.²⁰

Many female fans admitted that K-pop prompted them to question socially accepted, often imposed body images and beauty ideals. As in much of South Asia including India, young women and men often experience a lot of social pressure to adhere to gender norms and abide by social sanctions concerning their sexualities and public expressions of it. In juxtaposition to it, K-pop accommodates a cosmopolitan way of thinking and being. It etches alternative discourses on gender and sexuality, providing a relatable avenue to the youth for accepting their idiosyncrasies with regard to their gender and sexuality. However, K-pop also does not become typecast as it showcases both conformist and deviant portrayals of genders and sexualities, thereby giving off the idea

²⁰ Interview conducted with DP on 22nd and 25th October 2019.

that gender is a constantly negotiated category that is ‘done’ by an individual and thus, there are multiple ‘masculinities’ and ‘femininities’ (West and Zimmerman 1987) with pluriform discourses about them.

This brings us to the fourth and final aspect of our discussion of the politics behind K-pop’s appeal for its fans. The notion of ‘hard work’ and ‘effort’, highlighted even further through supportive narratives, often coming from the K-pop ‘idols’, was repeatedly stressed by the respondents as ‘inspiring’ and ‘motivating’. They told us that it instilled emotions such as ‘happiness’ and ‘pride’ in them and some had even overcome significant personal crises and emotional challenges through the inspiration they had gained from watching and listening to K-pop. As DG expressed evocatively,

...To be honest, I don’t like my complexion and it has always been an issue for me. So, it was always hard for me to click pictures of me. This is one of the reasons why my confidence dropped. I rarely participated in anything in school, but their songs help me overcome my insecurities...I’ve accepted myself the way I am and now I’m happier and more confident.²¹

Therefore, it was found that K-pop propelled many of these fans to reflexively revisit their insecurities and identities that were then negotiated and reconstituted to be able to cope better emotionally and socially.

Reflections through this study on the aural and emotional appeal of K-pop for its fans reveal its strategic understanding of the economics of emotionality and personal appeal, especially for the young fans in this region. It successfully encashes on the diversity of perspectives among the youth and generates the sentiments of familiarity and intimacy for its listeners, so that each imbues and inscribes K-pop with their own emotions and personal achievements. These fans were also critical of the K-pop industry because of its imposed restrictions on the artists’ private lives and its impact on their mental health. Even so, the critical stance was expressed as a sentiment of personal responsibility of failure, where it was apparent that these fans identified with K-pop to such an extent that its negative aspect was assumed to be reflected as their own.

In the following sub-section, we explore certain contradictions that emerged through the narratives of the non-fans *yet* listeners of K-pop

²¹ Interview conducted with DG on 20th October 2019.

in Kolkata. Delving deeper into such juxtapositions lent us an edge in comprehending the complexities underlying the genre's peculiar appeal for its audience in the region.

Non-fans and the Aesthetics of Listening: Some Contradictions

The K-pop audience in Kolkata can be categorized into *fans* and *non-fans*. As seen previously, the audience taken as a whole were both appreciative and critical of K-pop, but the non-fans showed clear distaste towards the genre in sharp contrast to the fans. In this context, we reflect and draw upon the narrative of RDR, a 21-year-old male undergraduate student, belonging to a Bengali middle-income family of four. The family shares a single hall space where the stereo speakers are installed and is accessed by all the family members to play their respective choice of music. RDR has been exposed to the world of K-pop through his 16-year-old sister SDR, who is a high-school student. She was introduced to the genre through her friends in school. Initially, it was purely a matter of curiosity but later on, she gradually converted into an ardent fan of K-pop. Sharing his experience as a listener of K-pop, RDR said,

I am not a fan of K-pop. My sister is. She can listen to their songs for an entire day without being exhausted. I get to know about these artists from her. I don't like K-pop music...but since it is regularly being played on our speakers we don't have any option. Even if I am not in the mood I have to listen to it. I have a lot of friends who are musicians. I don't think what K-pop artists do can be called music. My friends are also of the same opinion...What kind of music is this? It is very easy to produce sound effects by controlling a few buttons on the computer...People require years of training to learn and play a musical instrument...These are automated sounds...Here you just ask another person to create something on the computer and then you have your music ready. This is not original music.²²

Much like RDR, K-pop's non-fan listeners in Kolkata heavily criticized it because of the acute presence of automation techniques and reduced human labour in its process of music creation. For this section of the audience, K-pop represented music that is mostly computer-programmed and designed through digital sound engineering technologies, exhibiting

²² Interview conducted with RDR on 21st September 2020.

no traces of trained musicians playing musical instruments. The absence of human labour in the creation of music that involved mastering an instrument through strict bodily-regimentation routines, according to them, is replaced with mere reliance on electronic modes of music production and a dependence on the expertise of sound engineers who orchestrate such music. While electronic modes of music production are gaining popularity owing to its cost-effectiveness, it is seen as lacking in skill and knowledge that is acquired over the years by trained musicians. In fact, it was not simply a matter of skilled-labour, but also that of the continuum between the musician's body and the musical instrument which is established through practice and bodily-regimentation routines by the musician, so the instrument becomes an extended part of his own 'self'. This is essential for the achievement of the desired musicality and hence, knowing the instrument can simultaneously be understood as a process of knowing the self. In an age when art is manufactured as a commodity for consumption, much like K-pop, the gradual attunement with a musical instrument is not considered an essential element for music production. The familiarity that is required is about the built-in and preloaded sounds in a given device that demands sound engineers to only be trained to the extent to which they can learn the process of transmitting information through digital signals.

In the context of Kolkata, the study found that the audience was appreciative of music that was created through the investment of 'sonic labour' or labour used for the creation of a sound on a musical instrument so that the music thus produced becomes an extension of the invested labour and the ultimate artistic creation is an amalgamation of it. They associated sonic labour with the idea of 'authenticity'. 'Sonic labour' here, is an analytic that our interlocutors have developed in evaluating the authenticity of the music that they listened to, in this context K-pop. It is precisely here that an element of aesthetics is introduced that is used by the non-fans for evaluating the artistic merit of K-pop as a musical piece. The absence of this aesthetics was strongly emphasized by the non-fan listeners in Kolkata, who therefore came to regard K-pop music as 'inauthentic'. John Lie (2015: 142) echoed a similar viewpoint when he wrote,

...the elements of authenticity, autonomy, and originality are the essence of the Romantic ideology of the artist, an ideology diametrically opposed to

the logic of K-pop. K-pop is a particular mode of popular-music production, consciously and commercially conceived and expertly and effectively executed. It is predicated on the belief that comprehensive and prolonged training can be combined with a highly professionalized division of labor to generate popular-music success. That is, K-pop embraces its status as a culture industry.

This kind of critical, analytic listening where the listener tends to continuously distinguish between the human and non-human (sonic) substance in music is not passive. Rather, it enables the possibility for the listener-subject to emerge, in this context, as a ‘non-fan’. RDR’s explanation of why K-pop fails to appeal to him emotionally as a listener presents a key for understanding all those notes that it fails to strike for the large corpus of its audience in and around Kolkata, who are its listeners, but *not* fans,

I don’t like the sound of their music. It gives me a headache. When I listen to their songs I feel sick. The constant beats...*dhik-chik dhik-chik...dhik-chik dhik-chik* become intolerable at times. *I get the sense that these songs are filled with a lot of energy. It sounds happy. But do we feel happy all the time? Is happiness the only emotion in the world?* You don’t like to dance all the time. Do you? It sounds to me like a party song. If you go to a club or a party probably you would like to listen to this kind of music but when I am sitting in my room, I would like to listen to something different. *I am unable to relate to such a mood all the time. I don’t see other emotions being portrayed in most of the K-pop songs.* Hence, I can’t relate to them. At times I request her (sister) to play some soothing music instead so that we can enjoy a nice atmosphere in our house [emphases added].²³

In this context, we invoke Stefan Helmreich’s (2015) theory of ‘transduction’ which suggests that human beings act as transducing bodies by the act of mediating meanings through various modes of sensory engagement. The beats in the K-pop songs that produce sensations of longing, familiarity and intimacy for the fans are transduced into sensations of ache for RDR—initiating first in the head and gradually spreading further across the entire tactile terrain of the body. To him as a listener, it is not an upliftment of mood that is being sought, nor does his body anticipate the internalization of rhythm, unlike the K-pop fans. In fact, he does not anticipate any rhythmic stimulation at all, and hence, his body

²³ Interview conducted with RDR on 21st September 2020.

does not elicit a potential response of acceptance upon being sensorily exposed to K-pop songs. This involves active and agentive participation of the embodied listener that is equally responsible for the production of aches as a feeling of resistance. It can be argued that such aching sensations embody the ‘radical self’ that refuses to resonate with K-pop and its musical appeal. In its resistance against K-pop’s rhythmic beats, the body produces sensations of ache in anticipating an act of non-anticipation, so that the lack of sensory stimulation is translated into the tone of resistance through which the listener-subject responds. Thus, these sensations of ache become transduced sensations of resistance for the non-fan listener.

Interestingly, the concept of ‘hard work’ and its meaning concerning K-pop differs sharply in the imaginations of its non-fans and fans. While the absence of sonic labour in the creation of music in this genre conveys a feeling of ‘inauthenticity’ for the non-fans, as discussed previously, the fans regard it as a key element of K-pop’s appeal, as also previously noted. K-pop for them is an audio-visual treat and they do not perceive the musical element of it in isolation from its visual component such as its meticulously synchronized choreography. This perception is so complete and engraved in the psyche of the K-pop fans that they do not distinguish the aural quotient of the songs from its visual quotient of the music videos and, therefore, unlike the non-fans, they also do not emerge as a separate listener-subject. In other words, the fans are the consumers of K-pop and not merely its listeners. The training, skill and discipline that the K-pop artists undergo, constitute ‘hard work’ for them, setting the genre apart from everything regional, local or global. The category of ‘sonic labour’ is therefore not distinct for them but rather diffused within the physicality of labour that is invested by the artists for the production of K-pop videos. The fans found it ‘inspiring’, and owing to their capability to identify with the world of K-pop exhaustively, as noted previously, it generated intimate emotions such as ‘happiness’ and ‘pride’ for them, similar in tone to the sense of personal failure while they pointed out the industry’s negative aspects. KTB’s narrative about K-pop’s emotional appeal for him gives a clear indication of this—‘It makes me feel proud of the K-pop artists as they have to struggle a lot. And what they have is pure talent. K-pop makes me happy as we get to listen to the product of all their *hardwork* [emphasis added]’.²⁴

²⁴ Interview conducted with KTB on 24th October 2019.

Hence, what the non-fans regarded as an *aesthetic void*, constituted K-pop's fundamental appeal for its fans in the region, as RS said,

People might find it funny but *K-pop has inspired me to work hard....* At the end of the day, it feels nice to know that there are some K-pop idols out there, working extremely hard to connect with their fans. To know that they are putting in the effort for themselves as well as for the fans makes me happy.... [emphasis added]²⁵

K-pop's use of high-quality audio-visuals creates two sharply distinct ways of perceiving it among its listeners. On one hand, the non-fans disfavour the genre for its use of sound effects in reproducing the vocal timbre and the digitally morphed texture of the artists' voices because they see it as disrupting the 'originality'. On the other hand, it is precisely this digitized production/reproduction of K-pop and its heightened sensory appeal which generates sensations of longing and familiarity for the fans, making the intimate consumption of K-pop possible. Hence, although digital modes of sound production/reproduction eliminate the visibility of all kinds of media involved in these processes for the listeners of music, thereby making the media more transparent and invisible (Eisenlohr 2011), these also tend to gloss over and eliminate any traces of human labour that is bound to be fraught with imperfections. This is precisely what constitutes K-pop's uniqueness and unparalleled 'authentic' appeal for its fans and simultaneously that which makes it 'inauthentic', mechanized and automated for its non-fans. Therefore, the fans and the non-fans differ with regard to their distinct modes of listening—whereas the tonal immediacy that is brought about by the invisibility of the media of production/reproduction in the creation of K-pop songs emerges as an appealing factor for the fans, this same immediacy or 'self-erasure' (ibid.: 267) tends to appear to the non-fans as the over-visibility of the media of production/reproduction or as 'hypermediacy' (Bolter and Grusin 1999, cited in Eisenlohr 2011: 267). In the era of digitization, as Bolter and Grusin (1999: 6) argue, one anticipates and implies the other—'Immediacy depends on hypermediacy'.²⁶

Kolkata and West Bengal then emerge and operate as a potential ground for critically reflecting upon the aesthetical dynamics of K-pop as

²⁵ Interview conducted with RS on 19th October 2019.

²⁶ Also quoted in Patrick Eisenlohr (2011: 267).

a genre, where subjects emerged through the acceptance and resistance of fandom. K-pop has opened avenues to envision and reflect upon how the formation of the self operates as an outcome of mutually sustained auditory and visual engagement. It resounds how listening operates as a critical sensory process, through which K-pop as a musical genre is made sense of in the region. For the K-pop fans, the anticipated stimulation and the effects of the inherent sonic energy that amplify their senses, are considered to be crucial cues for reshaping the ‘unconfident’ self. These help in transducing the ‘unconfident’ self into a ‘confident’ one. Juxtaposed experientially against these fans, the non-fan listeners, through their disanticipation of sonic stimulation, facilitated the birth of a radical self that echoes the tone of resistance.

CONCLUSION: K-POP AND THE CRISIS OF THE PERSONAL (?)

This chapter unfurled the complex dynamics underpinning K-pop’s emotional and aural appeal for its audience in the region. Its success in finding a niche and dedicated fandom among the youth of Kolkata and its surrounding regions bears a certain debt to the historical transformations in the city’s listening culture, especially among its youth, who seek an element of the personal and the intimate in and through music. The imagination of what constitutes the ‘personal’ and ‘intimate’ differ sharply among its fans and non-fans, who make up its corpus of listeners. K-pop’s thematic acumen lends it an edge among its fans, owing to its recognition of quotidian issues that confront the modern youth. Its popularity is also boosted by such features as high-quality audio-visual content that is constituted by synchronized choreography and the presence of rhythmic beats that generate sensations of familiarity and longing for its fans, thereby adding to that ‘personal’ effect. But this gets simultaneously translated into transduced sensations of ache and therefore resistance, for its non-fans. The latter fails to locate precisely this ‘personal’ in K-pop because of the absence of sonic labour and the unmistakable overpresence of automated, digital technologies of sound orchestration in it. On contrary, the digital techniques behind the production and reproduction of K-pop and the heightened sensory stimulation that this allows for its listeners create the possibility of its intimate consumption. Regardless of such heterogeneities of perception about K-pop’s emotional-aural appeal, its unprecedented success in Kolkata unequivocally implies a crisis

of the personal perhaps ubiquitously felt by the youth. In this sense, the ‘personal’ is encapsulated within the social camaraderie that our interlocutors sought through their participation in virtual spaces dedicated to the K-pop fandom, or through re-negotiations of the ‘self’, to be able to accept and accommodate the ‘self’ in its pluriformity by claiming each of its facets as one’s own, as quintessentially personal; or even through their complete identification with the musical genre, so much so that K-pop’s qua the industry’s merits and demerits are personalized by these fans. In conclusion, K-pop’s ability to tap this desire for the personal is precisely what spells its success in the region, transforming it into much more than just another genre of music for its fans which is no less than a way of life.

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Mediation, Motivations and Experiences of BTS Fandom in India

Jasdeep Kaur Chandi and Kulveen Trehan

INTRODUCTION

Rapid digitization on a global scale has created new opportunities for people to escape the shadow of media content dominated by the West. The flow of media content is no longer from ‘the West to the Rest’. It is this digital age that aided the Korean wave in penetrating the varied geographical boundaries. Globalization coupled with liberalization has undoubtedly played a significant role in the spread of the Korean wave but the digital revolution is the prime reason for its current reach and popularity. Digitalization assisted in increasing the global consumption of Korean cultural products as well as in the formation of diverse subcultures. One such subculture that emerged recently, spreading across the globe as well as in India is the *BTS fandom* also known as *ARMY: Adorable Representative MC for Youth*. This chapter is an endeavour to

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gain insight into the shared experiences of Indian BTS fans vis-à-vis the consumption of transcultural popular media.

BTS is a South Korean boy band of seven members who produce K-pop music. Yoon (2018) described K-pop—an acronym for Korean Popular Music—as a ‘recent breed of cultural commodity developed in relation to the influence of Western popular culture’. According to several media reports (Glasby 2020; Herman 2019; Asmelash and Andrew 2019), BTS is one of the most recognized K-pop artists’ troupes across the globe. K-pop artists usually have an official fan club managed by the respective entertainment agencies they are affiliated with. Mostly, the geographical locations of these fan clubs are limited to South Korea but with increasing global recognition of some K-pop artists, an effort to create global fan clubs is being made. Being a member of an official fan club provides fans with certain benefits like pre-booking of concerts, discounted merchandise, the opportunity to buy membership-only goods, etc. The official fan clubs are important research sites to gain insight into the symbiotic relationship between the fans and their fan objects.¹ During our study, we found that currently there is no Indian BTS fan account officially affiliated to BTS’ managing agency, HYBE (previously called BigHit Entertainment). However, several regional and national fan clubs existed on social media platforms. BANGTAN INDIA is the oldest and the most followed fan account with over 161K Twitter and 208K Instagram followers. Like previous studies on *Hallyu* and K-pop reception, we followed a qualitative paradigm for our study (Yoon 2018; Han 2017). Researchers who explored K-pop fandom usually conducted semi-structured interviews with fans. We, on the other hand, adopted focus group discussion as our core data collection tool, to examine the interaction between the fans, within the Indian BTS fandom along with their motivations and experiences. The two focus groups consisted of four to five self-identified BTS fans.

In this chapter, we attempt to explore how the Korean wave is being received through the lens of BTS fandom in India. The chapter focuses upon the online presence of BTS fandom in India and the motivating factors for fans’ selective preference of BTS over other parallel cultural elements. The critical components of the arguments are built around the findings gained from two online focus group discussions conducted with

¹ In fandom and fan studies, a fan object refers to any show, series, character, etc. which is the fans’ object of affection (Loehr et al. 2020).

self-identified Indian BTS fans in the latter half of 2019. We tried to locate and elucidate fan experiences within the coherent conceptual frameworks of media effects and fan studies. Before moving onto the needs and motivations of Indian fans, a brief background on the emergence of *Hallyu*, BTS and BTS fandom in India is put succinctly.

HALLYU, BTS AND FANDOM IN INDIA

Look East or Act East Policy is a major contributor towards introducing Korean dramas in the northeast states of India. Although the youth of Manipur (Reimeingam 2014) and Nagaland (Ota 2011) are consistently consuming Korean media products since the early 2000s, the other parts of India are also getting familiar with the K-phenomenon albeit slowly but quite visibly. South Korean television network Arirang is responsible for transmitting *Hallyu* in the northeastern parts of India. Another reason for the Korean wave transmission in northeastern states is their interaction and relation with the neighbouring countries like China and Myanmar with which the people of these states share ethnic and cultural similarities. Myanmar imported *Hallyu* products with English subtitles from China which in turn found its way to northeast India where the youth, proficient in English and disenchanted with cultural products from North India, instantly patronized them (Mohan 2017). Doordarshan, a public service broadcaster, also attempted to popularize and localize two Korean dramas namely *Dae Jang Geum* and *Emperor of the Sea* in India by dubbing the content in the local language. Mohan (2017) argued that India's relation with Korea dates back to the fourth century by citing the romanticized story of Heo Hwang Ok. Mohan extended the meaning of *Hallyu* to 'include a broad spectrum of Korean cultural forms, including echoes of ancient Korean history in India, the popularity of Korean language, the appeal of Korean literature, and the influence of cultural products'. However, in the present scenario, the most visible influence of K-phenomenon in India can be experienced through the growing fame of BTS amongst Indian youth.

The massive popularity of BTS in India is reflected in the amount of its news coverage by major Indian news and entertainment websites (George 2019; Gogoi 2017; Matthews 2019). Among the countries with the most views of BTS' latest single *Dynamite* within twenty-four hours of its release was India with reportedly the third-highest contribution of about 8.6 million views out of the total of 101.1

million views (Chakraborty 2020b; Pinkvilla 2020). India also has the second-highest Spotify² streams of *Dynamite* on the first day of its release (Chakraborty 2020a, 2020b). BTS' first documentary—'Burn The Stage'—collected about 34,000 viewers from 84 INOX cinemas in 45 cities of India (KBS News 2019). 'Bring the Soul'—the second BTS documentary was released in multiple cities of India in August 2019. BTS' 2017 mini-album *Love Yourself: Her*, topped iTunes Top Album Charts in India (Jennywill 2017). According to Spotify, BTS is the second most-streamed international as well as the most-streamed K-pop act in India (Chakraborty 2019). Spotify also released a television commercial featuring Anil Kapoor, a Bollywood celebrity, dancing to the beats of BTS track—*Boy with Luv* (Spotify 2019). These significant details hint towards a rising fanbase of BTS in India, popularly known as Indian BTS A.R.M.Y or *Desimys*. Indian fanbase set the agenda to enable multiple screenings of *Burn the Stage* in India (Sharma 2018; Chakraborty 2018). Reputedly, BTS' Indian fans are also involved in various social projects. They raised over five lakhs rupees for the Assam flood relief fund (Mukherjee 2020; Chakraborty 2020a). To celebrate the birthdays of three BTS members, Indian fans started the 'Stronger than Cancer' donation drive and raised over two lakh rupees for Cuddles Foundation, an Indian NGO providing nutrition to underprivileged children fighting cancer (Sharma 2020; Onmanorama 2020).

Amongst the contemporary K-pop artists, BTS is the globally most recognized act with more than 34 M Twitter followers. The global popularity of BTS is a key factor contributing to the Korean wave diffusion in India. The global media markets' opening in the 1990s may have facilitated the export of Korean popular culture, specifically K-dramas during the first Korean wave but the second wave is looking at the transformations achieved through the increasing consumption and popularity of K-pop across the globe. The role of K-pop in promoting the Korean wave is significant and is apparent from the academic investigations conducted in the field of *Hallyu* Studies. Yoon (2017) examined the cultural translation of K-pop amongst Canada-based fans of East Asian, Southeast Asian and South Asian origin. Han (2017) explored the K-pop fandom in Latin America and observed K-pop fandom as transcultural rather than transnational. The Latin-American fans 'negotiate social identities in the form of

² Spotify is international music streaming app.

class struggles’ by consuming K-pop to ‘resist the hegemonic class hierarchies’ in Latin America. Yoon (2018) emphasized that ‘popular cultural texts can give young people who struggle with a lack of resources and authority as a cultural means through which dominant social orders are negotiated’. Cho (2017) observed that the cultural significance of K-pop strengthens the community-building function of popular culture rather than the function of commodity production. Recently, a few studies have been conducted in the specific context of BTS and its fans. McLaren and Jin (2020) discussed the Canadian fans’ affective identities formed through their ‘identification with the experiences and critical messages expressed by BTS through their music’. Lazore (2020), by applying the concept of bibliotherapy, examined the storytelling aspect of BTS’ music, which may help in healing the ‘anxieties of youth’. Ryu (2019) compared the two generations—Baby Boomers and Generation Z—in the context of their consumption of popular music with a specific focus on Beatles and BTS, respectively. Ryu (2019) emphasized that Generation Z is a generation of realists, filled with anxiety and struggle. Since BTS creates music reflecting social emotions, Generation Z can identify with BTS on a personal level. BTS is a representative artist of Generation Z. The conceptual bedrock of our analysis is based on the aforementioned, previous observations.

MEDIATION OF BTS FANDOM IN INDIA

Initiation of BTS Amongst Their Indian Fans

The fans who were interviewed shared their experiences of how they first came across BTS. The diversity of fans’ narratives suggests that they gained an introduction to BTS by any of the following three modes:

1. Recommended by a friend or relative who was a K-pop fan,
2. Already a K-drama fan and wanted to explore other Korean media products,
3. YouTube recommendations.

The recommendations on YouTube are based on the viewing habits of the user. It indicates that fans were already interested in watching content that is non-native and akin to K-content. The prior familiarity with and

exposure to similar kinds of media texts is a significant factor in the initiation of BTS amongst young Indian fans. The psychological phenomenon of the mere-exposure effect or the familiarity principle can explain this growing affinity of fans towards BTS. According to the mere-exposure effect, people tend to develop a liking or preference for things based on their familiarity with them. When a person is exposed to a novel stimulus repeatedly, she or he starts developing an affinity towards the stimulus (Zajonc 1968). Thus we can look upon the initiation of BTS amongst their fans as a result of the mere-exposure effect.

Role of Digital Technology in the Growing Popularity of BTS in India

Globalization policies and subsequent technological developments paved the way for the transnational and transcultural flows of media content across the world. Digitalization provided an opportunity for global exposure to local media productions. The ubiquity of social media platforms played a major role in gaining the attention of an audience that was otherwise obscured. BTS strategically used digital media applications, specifically Twitter and YouTube, to make themselves globally visible and procure fans worldwide. Even though BTS have been using social media to interact with fans since their debut in 2013, they achieved global recognition three years later after entering the billboard charts and thereafter winning the billboard ‘Top Social Artist’ award. Other K-pop artists have also been utilizing social media platforms for their publicity but their visibility and popularity in India are low as compared to BTS. The difference lies in the way the content created by BTS resonates with the Indian audience. Despite their rigorous engagement on social media platforms for seeking information about BTS, fans’ views regarding social media as a sole reason for BTS’ global success were manifold. One of the fans considered social media as an absolute factor for BTS’ popularity, the other credited their music as the prime reason behind their success. The responses from the fans indicate that social media is more of a facilitator than a cause of BTS’ growing fame in India. However, fans’ recurring mention of social media applications like Instagram, Twitter, Vlive, Weverse, etc. stressed their heavy dependency on these platforms to seek BTS-related information. If it were not for access to digital equipment, Indian youth might have never known about this South Korean boy band. Indian fans of this boy band are diversely spread across the nation which could be noted from the presence of several regional fan

clubs that is the most effective way for them to reach out to each other through social media. These fans have rarely met in person except for a few regionally organized fan meets. The mediation of BTS fandom in India predominantly occurs digitally. It further indicates that the Indian BTS fandom is composed of youth who are digitally equipped.

When Lee and Kuwahara (2014) examined the reasons for the popularity of ‘Gangnam Style’ amongst global audiences, they found that Gangnam Style became popular outside Korea as a result of globalization and the development of social media platforms. They argued that ‘a locally targeted content can be adapted globally’ and to promote a cultural product it need not be targeted globally or ‘hold a universal value’. However, the global popularity of BTS stems from the very same ‘universal value’ that Lee and Kuwahara deemed unnecessary. We validate our argument in the following sections.

MOTIVATIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF INDIAN BTS FANS

Motivational Appeal of BTS and Their Music

McLaren and Jin (2020) in their study of Canadian fans of BTS emphasized that fans formed ‘identities with and around BTS based on affinities of lived experiences of hardship, mental health, and political, economic and social uncertainty’. We observed a similar finding in our study in the context of Indian fans. We base our argument that BTS and their content holds a ‘universal value’ amongst their fans, on some of the very important responses that we received during focussed group interviews. When asked about how they would personally define BTS, each fan had a diverse response but all the responses had a common element of personal gratification via consumption of BTS and their related content. The range of responses includes defining BTS as ‘lifelines’, ‘friends’, ‘savior’, ‘joy’, etc. One of the common responses was that the fans came across BTS during a ‘low’ or ‘dark’ period of their life and how it helped in their self-growth. Fans did not elaborate this, however, their comments like ‘without them, I wouldn’t have existed’, ‘they make me feel happy and they make me feel validated’, ‘I found them when I was going through serious stuff with my life’ suggest that these fans were probably suffering from emotional stress, repression and self-doubt and BTS helped them overcome these issues. These comments also suggest a need for self-esteem and self-actualization within the fans. BTS embodies a motivational appeal that

is sought by their fans to satisfy these psychological and self-fulfillment needs. Self-growth is an intrinsic motivation that was also apparent from the responses of two fans. ‘In the short amount of time that I’ve been their fan, I’ve grown so much and learned so much about myself. And that growth has been in so many aspects of my life’ as well as ‘they have taught me more than almost anyone else’.

This can be better understood through the frameworks of uses and gratifications theory (Katz et al. 1974) and Maslow’s hierarchy of needs model (Maslow 1943). The approach of uses and gratification suggests that people use media to seek gratification for their individual needs. The motivational theory of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs relates motivation to a hierarchical order of needs. It is the dissatisfaction of unfulfilled needs which makes human beings motivated. Fans use BTS to expedite the process of satisfying their self-esteem and self-actualization needs. Because of the youth-centric universal messages on mental health and self-love in their music, BTS was able to connect with the young audiences worldwide despite the use of native language in their lyrics. Translations of the lyrics are readily available online for fans, hence language is not necessarily a barrier to understand the messages encoded in the songs.

There are several parallel cultural elements available to these young audiences courtesy of digital technology like Bollywood film songs, regional music, J-pop, Q-pop, etc. Their selective preference for BTS can be explained through the theoretical lens of object relations theory (Winnicott 1974) and the notion of ontological security (Giddens 1991). Morimoto (2018), to propose a heuristic device to understand transcultural fandoms, elaborated that media is posited as a ‘secondary transitional object’ which interests the fans, offers ontological security and fans find a projection of the self in that object within a ‘personalized third space’ (Hills 2002). BTS here acts as an object for fans in which fans observe self-projection and through which they obtain ontological security.

Fans’ statements such as, ‘They (BTS) are not my crutches, rather they are my support, what I use to make a better version of myself. And that’s exactly what they want to be for us’ and ‘We love BTS without expecting things from them and I believe it’s the same from them to us’ highlight fans’ intimacy with BTS. The shared interest in BTS and the high degree of commonality in their needs of self-esteem, self-actualization, self-growth, self-love and self-expression are responsible for bringing these Indian fans together to constitute an Indian BTS fandom.

Indian Fans' Level of Involvement with BTS and Within the Fandom

During the discussion, fans frequently remarked on the themes embedded in BTS music videos. When asked to share their interpretations of some music videos, fans showcased a great degree of enthusiasm. Some themes, vis-à-vis K-pop genre, were identified in previous studies where Lee (2012) found the most frequent theme in K-pop songs is love. Jin and Ryoo (2014) characterized K-pop as a hybrid of different cultural elements. Doré and Pugsley (2019) generalized that K-pop music videos adopt established genre conventions to facilitate the 'global commercialization of K-pop artists. We identified three key themes in BTS music videos by applying the method of thematic analysis, which are cultural hybridity, use of established music genre conventions and love. Besides these evident themes, fans created multiple meanings out of their readings of BTS music videos. Where Lee (2012) presumed that K-pop texts are more invested in an escape from social reality, fans stressed the reality embedded in BTS music videos and songs:

'BTS mv's are more grounded in reality and talks about real themes and real ideas.'

Fans exemplified this by sharing their interpretations of five BTS music videos—Blood, Sweat and Tears, DNA, Fake Love, IDOL and Boy with Luv. Fans' readings of these music videos gave a nuanced understanding of their level of engagement with BTS and their music. Fans created meanings out of unanimated objects and props used in the music videos, for example, one fan expressed regarding Blood, Sweat and Tears,

It even has a biblical element in it, with a man falling into temptation and then getting broken, similar parallels to the Adam and Eve story, similar parallels to Lucifer, who was an angel, falling due to his temptation to power, and him acting on that temptation. The organ music that is shown, can be symbolic of that.

About Fake Love, another fan remarked,

You become a different person for the one you love. The motif of masks in most Fake Love performances indicates that.

Fans repeatedly mentioned the use of intertextual elements in these videos by constantly referring to the book *Demian* by Hesse, Greek God Dionysus, Adam, Eve, Lucifer, etc. These readings are mostly facilitated through other sources along with personal knowledge of fans. Fans' pursuit of shared knowledge vis-à-vis BTS and their content via multiple platforms and fan-generated sources indicate the process of 'collective intelligence' (Jenkins 2006) taking place in their communities. These observations suggest that fans spend a great amount of time on BTS-related content. One fan confessed to investing as much as 75 per cent of her time on BTS. Another observation we recorded in both the focus group discussions was that the fans were focused on sharing their affinity and intimacy with BTS. Although fans acknowledged and were considerate of each others' responses and opinions, we observed a lack of communication between the fans. Aware of how she experiences BTS music differs from others and how that makes her self-conscious about her position in this fandom, one fan remarked:

Looking at the lyrics of a song and trying to get into the skin of it is not something I do very often, even before BTS (and I've become conscious about that since becoming a part of this fandom), but I guess that's just my individuality.

The elaborated interpretations by fans indicate a high involvement in reading the music videos. The reading emphasizes contextuality (Fiske 1989) and these fans' readings are contextual. They adopt a negotiated process while reading music videos. They bring their own experience to bear upon the music videos in the process of interpreting them. Their readings are negotiated readings. Stuart Hall (1991), in his highly influential encoding or decoding model, argued that media texts possess polysemic meanings which offer audiences different ways to decode the message. He propounded three ways in which a text can be decoded like that dominant reading as intended by media producers, oppositional decoding which is the antithesis of dominant reading or negotiated reading which lies somewhere between the two. We consider these fans' readings as negotiated readings because the themes that emerged out from their interpretations might not be visibly apparent to a casual audience. BTS neither confirms nor denies fans' interpretations of their videos which in turn keeps the fan captivated with their content. Their music videos give hints and fans make theories out of those hints with the aid of

fan-generated blogs and vlogs. This fan practice of enthusiastically seeking information from fan-generated sources encouraged us to examine the participatory culture of Indian BTS fans. Participatory Culture in fandom is characterized by ‘low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement’ (Jenkins 1992). It is based on the idea that fans are not just passive consumers of popular texts but also active producers of fan-generated content. We noticed that fans showcased a passionate engagement with BTS but their involvement within the fandom and fan communities varies. Where some fans are active organizers and participants of fan events, others mostly adhere to streaming and watching BTS-related content via different platforms.

CONCLUSION

We explored the Indian fandom of BTS and examined the fans’ responses for a clear understanding of fans’ motivations for joining this fandom. It was found that apart from their shared interest and fascination with BTS, it is the shared gratifications of their psychological needs that they seek to bring them together as a fandom. The idea of ‘self’ and gratification of psychological needs was prominently present in fans’ responses. Indian fans use BTS and their content to satisfy their psychological and self-fulfillment needs of self-esteem, self-actualization and self-growth. They find self-projection in BTS, feel connected with their music and obtain ontological security. It was evident that as a result of the mere-exposure effect, Indian fans were digitally initiated towards BTS. It was also observed that their level of engagement with BTS is higher than their involvement within the fandom.

Han’s (2017) experience with Latin American K-pop fans asserted that fans’ affinity for K-pop is ‘not rooted in its exoticism and cultural novelty’ but in its use to resist the hegemonic social orders. Similarly, Indian fans’ affinity for BTS is deeply rooted in the contextualization and reflection of social reality in their music productions. It is not the novelty of the genre which has attracted the Indian fans towards BTS but for the familiarity of real themes and ideas embedded in their music. This could be understood in terms of ‘cultural shareability’ which refers to ‘common value, images, archetypes, and themes across cultures that permit programs to flow across cultural boundaries’ (Singhal and Udornpim 1997; Pastina and Straubhaar 2005). The prospect of cultural hybridity in media productions is not a novel experience for the Indian audience as they are

consistently exposed to diverse cultures in their native land. Thus to assume that K-pop is holistically exotic for Indian audiences would be erroneous.

Digitalization not only blurred the demarcating lines between cultural consumption but also provided interactive spaces for people with shared interests. Digital technology is responsible for the genesis of several subcultures around the world. Such is the case of Indian BTS fandom. Digital platforms provided a way for Indian BTS fans to interact with fellow fans and to create their niche subculture within a culture dominated by the traditional, hierarchical and rigid social order. Fan negotiated readings of BTS and their music suggest resistance to the hegemony of native media productions. BTS is undeniably a part of the Korean wave to boost South Korea's economy but for fans, they embody more than Korea's soft power. To further investigate the impact and spread of the Korean wave in India, it is important to examine different subcultures that may have emerged in India via the consumption of K-cultural and media products. We believe that India is still in its infancy or as Ju (2014) used the term 'introductory phase' of the Korean wave that provides numerous opportunities to scholars for academic explorations. India may have initially been considered as a barren land for *Hallyu* but with youth's growing interest in exploring different cultural elements, it might prove to be fertile after all.

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Korean Dramas and Indian Youngsters: Viewership, Aspirations and Consumerism

Amritha Soman and Ruchi Kher Jaggi

TRANSCULTURAL FLOW AND *HALLYU* IN ASIA

For international fans, their initial encounter with Korean dramas served as a gateway into a new and different world (Schulze 2013). While the experience was ‘exotic’ for some international fans, for early Japanese fans, who were familiar with South Korea as a region that was colonized by Japan for over three decades, the experience caused a perception-shift. The colonial history of the two countries had led Japanese fans to presume South Korea to be less developed as compared to their country. But when *Winter Sonata* became a huge success in Japan in 2002, they were exposed to a modern country with a modern consumer culture (Creighton 2009).

Korean dramas follow global trends when it comes to their performance and presentation but they reflect the traditional values of Asians that lead to this specific group of viewers feeling at ease with the content (Hogarth 2013). The success of Korean dramas in Japan has been

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attributed to how the dramas maintained a balance between modernism and traditionalism (Metaveeviniij 2008). The reason behind Korean dramas being popular in South-East Asian countries is largely due to the high relatability quotient of the dramas. A study conducted in Indonesia revealed that the cost incurred for making Korean dramas was only one-fourth of Japanese programmes and a tenth of Hong Kong dramas (Soliha and Briandana 2016), making this particular cultural export an affordable option for broadcasting networks in these regions as well.

Fans of Korean dramas tend to showcase an increased affinity towards Korean culture. A study in Lahore, Pakistan (Arshad et al. 2017) found a correlation between the viewing of Korean dramas and an affinity towards Korean brands among female college students. It was found that the more the female students viewed Korean dramas, their exposure to Korean brands increased and consequently, there was a rise in their craving for these brands. Female fans in the Middle East too portrayed heightened interest in a wide range of Korean things like people, culture and the language (Noh 2010).

Nepali viewers see in the dramas a lifestyle that they aspire for. The shows that are popular in the region portray relatively wealthy households which is too farfetched for the Nepali middle-class population but temptingly achievable for some others. Additionally, they relate to the outlook of Korean drama stars in terms of fashion, a similarity that translates into a dream of living like them (Hindman and Oppenheim 2014).

The success of Korean dramas in Asia saw a rise in a particular pattern of consumer behaviour emerging from fan aspirations of adopting the Korean lifestyle. Female fans showcased serious investment in adopting the Korean culture through their aspiration to learn the Korean language. More importantly, they displayed a tendency to use intentionally hybridized terms by making them their own (Noh 2010).

In an effort to look like the stars from the Korean dramas, fans started buying and using beauty products used by the stars and thus the sale of Korean beauty products started rising. The growing popularity of Korean actors has led Asian consumers to look for cosmetics that would provide them with a similar kind of glowing skin as their idols. The Korean cosmetic company Amore Pacific saw a rise of 36 per cent in their overseas sales in 2010 whereas their sale in Korea grew by less than 10 per cent (Bowman 2011). Korean dramas that were aired in Manipur quickly became popular in the 2000s, not just among the youth but also among the older generation due to the cultural values they

portrayed (Reimeingam 2014). Youth from the North-East Indian states of Manipur, Mizoram and Nagaland adopted the fashion and make-up styles of the actors whom they saw in these films and dramas. Posters of famous Korean actors and actresses were used as wall posters and screensavers on mobiles and computers (Reimeingam 2014). The viewing experiences of some fans have even induced a particular kind of tourism. Japanese fans visited the real locations where the Korean Drama *Winter Sonata* was filmed. This led to the rise and creation of a new tourist experience where tourists would re-enact the scenes from the drama and take photographs of the same (Kim 2010).

The *Hallyu* wave extends beyond regional boundaries, reaching people of varied nationalities and influencing consumer behaviour. Asian brand managers are riding this wave, by creating ‘a transnational, imagined Asian world’ so that brands can be perceived to be belonging to a larger entity than just one country or region (Cayla and Eckhardt 2008). In Japan, local entrepreneurs saw the opportunity to earn profit from fans through the sale of small ticket items such as scarves that looked like those seen in the dramas and made the goods available (Creighton 2009).

Their common fandom has brought together fans, many of them who are geographically dispersed and from socially marginalized communities, through online communities to share their collective experiences (Noh 2010). The fandom also thrives in its physical form, through international fan meetings (Schulze 2013).

THE INDIAN CONTEXT

India’s romance with Korean dramas began in the early 2000s when Hindi films and serials were banned in Manipur. The subsequent vacuum was filled by the onslaught of Korean films being shared through DVDs and dramas being aired on Korean TV channels such as Arirang and KBS (Reimeingam 2014). *The Classic* (2003) was one of the most popular Korean films in Manipur, while the drama *Full House* (2004) gained popularity in Mizoram and Nagaland, *A Moment to Remember* (2004) as well as *The Classic* (2003) were popular. People began to easily pick up on Korean words and incorporated them into their regular text messages (Kaisii 2017).

The proliferation of Korean cultural products in other parts of India was much slower. In 2006, DDI aired the Korean Dramas—*Emperor of the Sea* and *A Jewel in the Palace*. The majority of India took notice

of Korean pop culture only in 2012 when the song *Gangnam Style* by the Korean pop sensation Psy became world-famous. In May 2014, the Tamil channel Puthuyugam aired many popular Korean dramas such as *Boys Over Flowers* and *The Heirs* and *Playful Kiss* dubbed in Tamil (Naidu 2015). Following this, in 2017, the Hindi entertainment channel Zindagi dubbed and aired the world-famous Korean Drama *Descendants of the Sun*. Despite the huge success of Korean dramas in India, research in this field that is specific to India talks about the Korean wave in its entirety or isolates the impact of Korean dramas to only certain pockets of India.

With the growing popularity of Korean dramas, there is a growing need for holistic research in this field, especially research that can closely examine the factors contributing to the success of Korean dramas in India and the implications that this trend has had on Indian consumers. This study has attempted to decipher the relationship between the fandom of Korean dramas and consumerism in the Indian context. Though specific to India, the study is situated in the larger scholarly context of fandom and consumerism studies concerning concepts including consumption and its relationship with collective identities and social solidarities and social identity theory (Giddens 1991), consumption and self-identity (Warde 1994) and participatory cultures (Jenkins et al. 2012).

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

This study investigates the reasons for the popularity of Korean dramas in India and further attempts to decode how this popularity affects purchasing decisions if any. Using a semi-structured questionnaire 15 participants drawn from different regions of India were interviewed to understand what brought them closer to Korean dramas and how they negotiated the different layers of hybridity and transculturation (See Table 8.1).

Ashish Rajadhyaksha in his book *Indian Cinema in the Time of Celluloid: From Bollywood to the Emergency* (2009) draws a comparison between the Korean wave and the Bollywood phenomenon to suggest that the hype around both these forms are constructed by a range of ancillary industries such as music, fashion, advertising, theatre, food and so on. The interviewees, therefore, were also questioned on several related dimensions including their participation in fan groups, exposure to Korean cuisine as well as their desires and experiences to procure Korean merchandise and products. The interviews were analysed at both

Table 8.1
Demographic profile of
the respondents

<i>Name</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Location/Zone</i>
Vatsala	25	F	Kashmir/North
Rhea	23	F	Uttar Pradesh/North
Abhishek	28	M	West Bengal/East
Shraddha	23	F	Madhya Pradesh/Central
Manjari	23	F	Tamil Nadu/South
Priyanka	24	F	Karnataka/South
Biaknungi	23	F	Mizoram/North-east
Noopur	26	F	Maharashtra/West
Drithi	23	F	West Bengal/East
Deepti	27	F	Maharashtra/West
Sharadha	25	F	Tamil Nadu/South
Ritika	22	F	Madhya Pradesh/Central
Sindhuja	24	F	Kerala/South
<i>Hemani</i>	23	F	Maharashtra/West
<i>Divya</i>	25	F	Madhya Pradesh/Central

Source Authors

intertextual and intratextual levels to understand how Indian fans of Korean Drama perceived their own identities through their consumption practices.

The methodological framework is inspired by Dal Yong's (2018) study which explored how the *Hallyu* phenomenon was integrated into the social mediascape in North America by conducting in-depth interviews with fans of K-pop. The results of this study pointed at two critical concepts—technological affordances of social media that facilitated the expansion of Korean content and participatory cultures of *Hallyu* fandom that led to the 'mixing and mingling of cultural materials' (Jenkins 2012) that appeal to multiple audiences beyond national boundaries (Dal Yong 2018).

Using Purposive Sampling, 15 participants, who were urban audiences between the ages of 23 and 28 were individually interviewed for this study. The sample comprised 14 female participants and one male participant. With their due consent, only their first names have been used in the study. The questionnaire consisted of 14 questions covering the following major themes: demographic, behavioural, opinion, feeling, knowledge and sensory. Each interview lasted for an average of thirty minutes. The questions probed the interviewees on the popularity of Korean dramas and several related dimensions including their participation in fan groups,

exposure to Korean cuisine as well as their desires and experiences to procure Korean merchandise and products including Korean tourism.

GRATIFYING VIEWING EXPERIENCES: BINGE-WATCHING, CULTURAL CONNECT, DIVERSE STORYLINES AND PLURALITY OF GENRES

One of the most popular reasons for the attraction to Korean dramas was cited to be the duration of the shows. The format of Korean dramas is such that there are usually less than twenty episodes which last for one season alone. While this format has now gained prominence in American and British shows as well, it is not a stark feature of the content that emerges from these countries. Sharing her thoughts on the duration of Korean dramas, one of the participants, Noopur, said,

I am very fond of the fact that the entire storyline is over in sixteen to twenty episodes. I do not have to sit around waiting for another season to come and wonder if it is ever going to come on Netflix. I do not have to wait very long for them. And my time is booked. I have a distraction ready. I know this drama is going to come on Monday. If it is going to release at 9 in the morning in Korea, I know that by about 1 pm I will find it with English subtitles online. So, I am set for the night. If I am lucky, if there is a particularly long period, every day I will have an episode to watch, which is perfectly fine.

In addition to the short duration of Korean dramas, four participants described how the cliffhangers presented at the end of each episode drove them to continue watching the dramas. The dramas were described as being easy to watch. These two aspects together contributed to how easy the participants found it to binge-watch the shows.

When asked about the emotions that the participants go through while watching Korean dramas, all the participants stated that it depended on the particular drama that they were watching at the time. But a common emotion that most of the participants experienced throughout their viewing was a great sense of happiness and joy. For some participants, the happiness resulted from the fact that they perceived the show to be very different when compared to the other American or Indian shows they were watching at the time due to which they felt that Korean dramas provided a break from watching other kinds of shows. This led to

discussing another reason for happiness, which was that the dramas made some of the participants feel relaxed. For a few other participants, the emotions that they went through were sadness and thrill, based on the genre of Korean drama they were watching. Although most of the participants described a rush of emotions, one of the participants, Abhishek, offered a contrary point of view, stating that he did not feel an extreme of any emotion, and stated,

The dramas do not show an extreme level of anything. Even when it comes to showing action sequences, I think it is a little subtle and it caters to all kinds of audiences, especially the younger audience. It is toned down. There is not much blood in the action sequences that I have seen. There is no extreme bloodshed, so you do not feel an extreme level of any emotion. Even the romance is light-hearted.

Korean dramas, as they originate from another Asian country, imbibe many of the cultural values that Indian shows tend to portray as well. Giddens' conceptualization of collective identities and social solidarity explains this association. Two participants expressed the cultural similarities between South Korea and India, which were portrayed by both Korean dramas and Indian television series. Elaborating on this idea, Manjari expressed her views on why Korean dramas were gaining popularity in India,

There are a lot of similarities between the Indian culture and the Korean culture. When it comes to our societal values and family values, there are a lot of similarities but there are differences as well. But when you compare it with Western shows, you realize that they are too different from this. Korean dramas feel familiar but show a different side to it all. It is very similar to what we watch in India but it is different enough so you want to watch more. It's not something you have already seen.

Various participants directly or indirectly expressed the need for different content arising from saturation, post the viewing of a lot of Western and Indian shows. In terms of what kind of content Korean Dramas had, some participants stated that Korean dramas usually had fairy-tale-like stories where the characters were relatable but the storyline pushed the characters into extraordinary circumstances. This allowed for the vicarious experiencing of incredible situations. Some participants, including Manjari, stated that Korean dramas brought many genres together,

Compared to Western shows, where it is usually either just comedy or just maybe a high school set-up, or just a sad story, Korean dramas bring a lot of concepts and aspects together. So you get everything in one show.

Some of the participants said that Korean dramas consisted of shows of various genres, insisting that there were dramas that catered to audiences who had a variety of tastes. The participants also felt that in recent times, the Korean content industry had been improving the quality of the dramas and was exploring different concepts. Ritika expressed,

Right now, what I like Korean dramas for is that the characters are evolving. At first, it was only love stories. There was an era when Korean dramas were only filled with love stories. But now, they are experimenting with the scientific genre as well. Now, they are expanding and experimenting with content and with the heroes as well. Nowadays, you can see many newcomers coming up as heroes.

FANDOM AND SPECIALIZED CONSUMPTION: EXPERIENCING KOREA THROUGH DRAMA-INSPIRED CONSUMPTION PRACTICES

Most of the participants expressed a strong affinity towards participating in activities that could broaden their experience of watching the drama. They aspired for the Korean lifestyle and took actions inspired by the dramas. All participants either expressed a strong interest in considering South Korean cuisine or had already experienced it. Around 12 of the 15 participants were influenced by Korean dramas to experience Korean food. Participants expressed how eating Korean food was an experience that they liked to share with friends or people who reflected the same enthusiasm for Korean food and culture. Shraddha, a participant who was part of a prominent Korean drama and Korean pop music association in Bengaluru, described how having Korean food was a shared experience,

The amount of food Korean actors eat in the show made me want to try it myself. And I wanted to try it with others who would enjoy it too. Anybody, even if they are not a foodie, will feel like trying Korean food out, especially kimchi. In any of the Korean dramas you see, if there is food involved, it makes you salivate. Since I'm into the Korean wave, in Bangalore we usually have a lot of meet-ups concerning any program, be it K-pop or K-drama. So, whenever we meet up, we always arrange for Korean food so that people can

try Korean food, be it veg or non-veg. So that has also been a time when I have tried a lot of Korean food.

For at least two participants, a major obstacle in having Korean food was the limited availability of vegetarian dishes. Korean food consists largely of meat and seafood, due to which participants were apprehensive about visiting a Korean restaurant. One non-vegetarian participant, Noopur, expressed how having many vegetarian friends delayed her own experience of having Korean food,

The first time I went to have Korean food was when I went with a new friend in Bombay. I've known about this Korean restaurant for the longest time but I never had any company to go there along with me. All of my friends in Bombay are vegetarians and I did not want to do that to myself. I will not try an entire cuisine that is based on non-vegetarian and seafood with vegetarian people because that just feels wrong.

Apart from having Korean food, Korean cultural products have also driven participants to adopt the fashion in terms of apparel and accessories as displayed in Korean dramas. Some participants have described how discussing Korean fashion is an integral part of discussing Korean dramas with their friends. Participants expressed that even if the exact designs that resembled Korean fashion pieces were not available, the style of clothing they chose had been impacted to some extent by their viewing of Korean dramas. Some participants actively looked for clothes that were similar to the Korean styles they were familiar with. Priyanka, a participant who had been watching Korean dramas for two years, said,

The style of clothes I buy has changed a little. I buy more cute things now. I think more about how well they go together. Before, I didn't worry much about them, or how organized they were. Before, I only thought about how comfortable they were. Now I think about how they are seen.

Many Korean beauty product brands have been making inroads into the Indian cosmetic market. A reason for this could be the age-old yearning for fair skin that numerous brands and the media have purported time and again. Furthermore, the notion that Korean women represent the ideal standards of Asian beauty, has encouraged a strong market in skin lighteners that are formulated by Korean brands (Glenn 2008). One

participant, Hemani, who had been considering using Korean beauty products said,

When I see actors and actresses in dramas, I wonder how they could be so gorgeous. Then I thought that maybe it has something to do with Korean beauty products because Koreans are well known for their skincare routine. They have a famed ten-step routine for skincare. Also, they use the kind of products that you know are very friendly for your skin. That's why I have considered buying Korean products.

Many participants described a glow that could be seen on the faces of the actors and actresses of the dramas and a strong desire to achieve a similar glow on their faces. This, when considered along with the numerous product placements of such products in dramas, intensifies the desire to specifically acquire those brands. Noopur alluded to the intricate manner in which actresses are shown applying beauty products in dramas,

I like Those Little Tints, and How They Put It Only on the Inner Bits of Their Lips and They just Smudge It Out. It Looks so Pretty.

While many of the participants had never purchased any Korean drama merchandise, many of them had considered purchasing them. But each participant faced obstacles in completing the shopping process. Manjari stated,

I've not purchased any Korean drama merchandise until now. But I have considered it because in a lot of dramas they have a few things that they exchange with each other which have become popular selling items. So, in Boys Over Flowers, there is a necklace that the lead actor gives to the heroine. It is a star and a moon necklace. I have thought about buying that but I have not bought it yet. I feel that it is not easily available. Also, I need to find a trusted seller of the product, and I haven't researched for that just yet.

This points out a larger perception of accessibility and availability of Korean drama merchandise in India. This can be understood better by analysing the answers of some participants who openly stated that they do own K-Pop merchandise but not Korean drama merchandise despite being equally huge fans of both wings of the *Hallyu* wave.

POP-CULTURE TOURISM: EXPERIENCING *HALLYU* ON LOCATION

Lee (2012) studied the impact of fandom on tourism by investigating the fans' travel attitudes and behaviours with regard to motivation, satisfaction, attachment and loyalty in the context of the destinations that become attractive through the consumption of popular culture and media texts.

Quoting Miller and Washington (2007), Lee (2012) explains that 'pop-culture tourism involves travel to destinations featured in film, literature, music and television, those related to a particular celebrity, or any other location that could be associated with pop-culture or media themes'. The participants' aspiration to visit the locations shown in the dramas also emerged as a popular theme in our study. Two participants stated that they had made plans to visit South Korea based on the cities that were portrayed in certain dramas. One of the participants, Divya, actually visited Seoul and Busan in South Korea in April 2019 along with two of her Indian friends to explore and experience Korean culture. She said,

While the depiction of Koreans in dramas may seem to be over the top, the difference between on-screen and real-life people seemed to be minute. The large quantities of meals were fascinating, given that most of the Korean population desires to be on the lower side of the weigh scale. The people also had a mysterious charm to their appearance (a very authentic portrayal of the same is done in K-dramas). The city of Seoul was as animated as expected, and the city of Busan was a rather relaxed experience. The young generation of Korea is focused, a fast-paced, body-conscious and ardent follower of good-fashion (not fast-fashion). They like to keep it simple, sophisticated and aegyo (Korean for cute and affectionate display). Overall, it's safe for me to say that all of us are more similar than different. Entertainment has opened a plethora of opportunities for young audiences to explore international cultures. And the Korean wave doesn't seem to reach an end of the journey as of now.

Divya's articulation of her experiences in South Korea is deeply indicative of the interrelationship between the blurring boundaries between fandom and consumption practices. This also points out to a more intimate form in which fans not only perform fandom but also build meaningful and long-lasting associations with popular culture. Stevens (2010) argues

that socially, consuming is both a bonding and an individuating experience. Quoting Jenkins' (1992) explanation of participatory cultures, this particular participant's experience very clearly demarcates the difference between the 'activities of the fans from other forms of spectatorship'. It also situates the discussion of fans' participation in consumption practices in a very organic context.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study is a discursive construction of young Indian viewers' engagement with Korean pop cultures like Korean Dramas in particular and how they negotiate their positions as transcultural audiences who vacillate between their identities as audiences and consumers. The crisp duration, plotlines, diversity of genres and relatability of content make the K-dramas very popular. The interview responses also point towards the presence of a reflective process of shared values and collective identity as fans of *Hallyu*.

The study has used the following frameworks for its theoretical underpinning and contextualization—media and social construction of reality (Adoni and Mane 1984); the prompting power of modelling to privilege the discourse of fashion and taste industries (Gergen 1985); and the audience-as-outcome model (Webster 1998) to explore and explain post-viewing purchase decisions. It also borrows extensively from Trentman's conceptualization of consumer identities that have become suffused with many questions of participation including a drive to acquire goods (2004).

Based on the in-depth interviews, the reasons for the popularity of Korean dramas have largely been contributed to the duration of the dramas as well as the relatability factor of the content. One study describes how watching Korean dramas is a reflective process of the shared values that still exist for Japanese audiences (Lee and Ju 2010). Indian audiences also consider the cultural similarities and differences that exist between India and South Korea when viewing Korean dramas. It is these similarities that create relatability and the differences that stimulate interest to learn more about a culture that still seems familiar to the audiences. The 'remote' zone of relevance, as described by Adoni and Mane (1984), in understanding the social reality of audiences is shaped based on the viewing of these dramas. The understanding of what South Korea is like, is, therefore, built upon these viewings and interactions with other fans of Korean dramas.

Modelling of products holds a lot of prompting power, especially in the fashion and taste industries (Gergen 1985). In order to understand what led the participants to consider buying Korean products, the power of the modelling of Korean beauty products and food in the dramas must be considered. Most participants have described an affinity towards trying Korean products which have risen from how the products have been showcased in the dramas. This shows the role of the actors in the dramas in the modelling process. While modelling plays a crucial role, the need to experience Korean culture through these products seems to play a more significant role in completing the buying process. The study suggested how Korean cultural products had driven the research participants to adopt the fashion styles of apparel and accessories as shown in Korean dramas. Some participants described how discussing Korean fashion was an integral part of discussing Korean dramas with their friends; how numerous product placements of beauty and cosmetic products in Korean dramas intensified the desire to acquire those brands. Korean dramas showcase such modelling of various consumer products, from clothes to beauty products to food, and it was important to study the implications of such modelling on the purchase decisions of viewers. Additionally, the participants' aspiration to visit the locations shown in the dramas was also discussed in the interviews.

These interviews with the participants also help to understand how Indian fans of Korean dramas constantly renegotiate and reconstruct their own social identities as fans through many ways including consumption; where consumption of certain products and practices becomes central to the structuring of their self-identities and social identities as fans of Korean Drama. This is in alignment with Giddens' (1984) explanation of social identity theory which states that identity is not a given but something that is constantly reflected upon, constructed, reconstructed, negotiated and renegotiated to create a 'narrative of self' through forming many relationships. Consumption practices, according to Giddens, structure personal identity-building practices. Seregina and Schouten (2016) state that individuals engage in the negotiation of their identities through fandom and fandom practices create a framework for identity construction. Stevens (2010), in fact, defines fandom as hyper-consumption of a strongly branded product.

The discourse generated by the interviews gives an overview of perceptions of Korean Drama both as a popular culture genre and its potential to extend popular culture experiences through consumption. The study

engages with a discussion on how Korean Dramas construct the idea of Korea for their audiences and thus shape their acculturation ideologies. In the process, the audiences either aspire to perform or perform certain consumption practices to create some versions of direct experience for themselves.

The interviews have created the first level of a framework to study how audiences negotiate different layers of hybridity and transculturation in the context of Korean Dramas in India. The study has some limitations as it focuses only on urban audiences between the ages of 23 and 28 and largely focuses on the perspective of female research participants. For a more holistic understanding of the impact that the Korean wave and Korean dramas, in particular, have had on consumerism, future studies must take into account opinions from content creators and industry experts.

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PART III

Adaptation, Cultural Effects and Co-creation



From Korean Oppas to Bibimbap: The Socio-Cultural Dynamics of the Korean Wave in Sri Lanka

Amalini Fernando

INTRODUCTION

After the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1977, Sri Lanka and South Korea have bolstered their bilateral political and economic relations. The Korean wave has added a new cultural dimension to this dynamic relationship. After a decade of ups and downs, the Korean wave is impacting the cultural and media landscape of Sri Lanka. It is revolutionizing the understanding of how a foreign culture is assimilated in a linguistically, culturally and socially diverse society.

Previous studies (Dhawan 2017; Kaisii 2017; Akter 2019) have provided an overview of the Korean wave in South Asian countries but its spread in Sri Lanka is yet to be explored in detail. Apart from a

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handful of papers on Korean soap operas (Jinasena 2014) and the soft power of Korean culture (Betha 2013; Fernando 2018; Madurasinghe 2020), the Korean wave phenomenon in Sri Lanka has generally been overlooked. Such studies have not been conducted owing to the fact that the impact of the Korean wave is not ubiquitous in Sri Lankan society and the number of consumers and potential consumers are relatively small that has disqualified it as a subject worth delving into.

Nevertheless, the impact of the Korean wave, however small, is visible in the changing entertainment patterns within Sri Lanka. This merits discussion for several reasons. First, how contemporary Korean culture is received throughout the Asian markets that are culturally disparate to South Korea? Studies exploring the spread of the Korean wave have reported that contemporary Korean culture initially spread into countries that follow Confucius' traditions and later to other countries of diverse cultural backgrounds (Suh et al. 2006). Sri Lanka and South Korea do not share any significant historical or cultural ties, except for Buddhist religious links that predate modern bilateral relations. For Sri Lanka, South Korea is exotic, distant and different. Therefore, the dissemination of the Korean wave in Sri Lanka cannot be credited to close cultural and historical affinity despite the broader Asianess of both countries.

The study of the Korean wave in Sri Lanka—a country that is Asian yet is neither geographically nor culturally close to South Korea—thus offers a good opportunity to examine how popular culture is received and transmitted beyond geographic and cultural boundaries. How, when and why did the Korean wave hit Sri Lanka? Who are the major actors that contributed to its spread? What competition does it pose for the cultural status quo in the country? And what may be its short-term and long-term impact? Answers to these questions would further shed light on the globalization of popular media and transcultural flow in South Asia.

Second, since Sri Lanka does not share strong cultural and historical relations with South Korea, images and information about South Korea are unfamiliar to the ordinary Sri Lankan citizen. Sri Lankans harbour a generally negative attitude towards South Korea owing to stereotypical images associated with the Korean War and subsequent cycles of poverty, political instability and poor quality of life. In Sinhala, '*Koriyawa wage*' literally translates to 'it is like Korea', which is considered to be a derogatory term referring to slums, underprivileged and overcrowded areas. However, this outdated image is retained in the psyche of the older generations only but the young people today carry a positive image of the

vibrant South Korea grâce à the Korean wave. According to Fernando (2018), the constant consumption of Korean popular cultural products has positively impacted the image Sri Lankans have towards South Korea, and at the same time, it has improved their knowledge and perception about the country. It has also encouraged Sri Lankans to travel to South Korea, learn the language and build social networking ties with South Koreans. This serves as testimony to how popular culture assimilation leads to attitudinal and behavioural changes.

Lastly, because Sri Lanka sits next to India, the net exporter of movies, drama and music entertainment has made Indian culture an intrinsic factor in Sri Lankan life. Despite the complex political relations between the two, both these countries share a strong connection due to common cultural and historical heritage dating back to over 2,500 years. Hence, it is not a surprise that Bollywood movies have a far-reaching influence in Sri Lanka. Owing to the cultural affinity of the two neighbours, Indian popular culture is received unconsciously and spontaneously. At the same time, Sri Lankan movie-goers are no strangers to American cinema. Since the adoption of the open market policy in 1977 and globalization, the Sri Lankan market has been flooded with American cultural products. American cinema, music and popular culture are well received and are a mainstream form of entertainment in Sri Lanka.¹

Any exported cultural product carries embedded cultural values of the parent country. Cultural imports go through socio-cultural filtering in the recipient country after adjusting to the new culture. The success of the imported cultural product depends on the cultural competitiveness in the recipient country and how well the new product can harmonize with the local culture. Given the cultural dominance of India and America, it is interesting to see how the Korean wave prevails against the cultural competition it faces in Sri Lanka. To compete with the regional and global cultural powerhouses, the Korean wave in Sri Lanka needs to be a powerful global commercial force that is flexible, absorptive, crowd-pleasing and culturally relevant.

¹ Under the Film Importation Policy of the National Film Corporation of Sri Lanka, only 170 films can be imported to Sri Lanka within one calendar year. These include 70 Tamil, 65 English, 25 Hindi and 10 films of other languages that may be imported. This alone shows the patterns of cinema consumption in Sri Lanka (National Film Corporation of Sri Lanka, n.d.).

This chapter provides an understanding of the socio-cultural dynamics of the Korean wave in Sri Lanka, investigating its origin, spread and future trends. It pays special attention to the other cultures present in the domestic entertainment market and how the Korean wave has successfully challenged the status quo. It also attempts to distinguish the characteristics of the fans interacting with the newfound Korean subculture. To examine the acculturation and the acceptance of Korean culture in Sri Lanka, two factors will be paid special attention to: cultural competitiveness and degree of interaction.

THE ORIGIN AND SPREAD OF THE KOREAN WAVE IN SRI LANKA

The Jewel in Sri Lanka

The first formal telecast of a Korean drama in Sri Lanka was in 2010 when the Korean TV show, *Full House*, was broadcast on the Independent Television Network (ITN), a major state television broadcaster in Sri Lanka. The drama, the first-ever experience of a Korean TV show for Sri Lankans, was subtitled in Sinhala and enjoyed moderate success. *Full House* was followed by *Autumn in My Heart* in 2010, another contemporary drama broadcast on the same television network. The two series were provided by the Embassy of the Republic of Korea in Sri Lanka with the hope that the dramas would provide Sri Lankan viewers a glimpse of the Korean culture and lifestyle of the Korean youth and foster mutual cultural understanding between the two countries (Yahaluwa 2009).

However, the watershed of the Korean wave in Sri Lanka came in 2012 with the broadcast of the famous historical drama *Jewel in the Palace* (Dae Jang Geum) on the Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation (Rupavahini) network. Dubbed in Sinhala and titled *Sujatha Diyani* meaning ‘pure or legitimate daughter’, the show’s 54 episodes aired consecutively, five nights a week and became an instant success. The show is popularly known in Sri Lanka as *Changumi*; after the main character *Jang Geum* which was adapted into Sinhala as *Changumi*. The show was later dubbed in the Tamil language and telecasted on Nethra TV for the benefit of the Tamil audience in Sri Lanka.

The drama, *Jewel in the Palace* was gifted to Rupavahini from Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation (MBC) under the patronage of the Embassy of the Republic of Korea in Sri Lanka. It earned a record-breaking income

of Sri Lanka Rs. 16.8 million during the period of October–December 2012 (Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation 2013). The drama, *Jewel in the Palace* was aired in the 6:30–7:30 pm airtime belt. This airtime belt previously lacked market value but since then has become a prime time slot in the local television industry (Ransirala 2016). The show was widely praised for the quality of its dubbing and the heartfelt theme song translated into Sinhala.

Since its debut in South Korea in 2003, *Jewel in the Palace* has been a primary proponent of the Korean wave in other parts of the world. Thus, it is no surprise that it would become a household name in Sri Lanka. While its audience was wide-ranged, it was particularly popular among female viewers. A Sri Lankan national newspaper described the popularity of *Jewel in the Palace* as a ‘new craze’ among both children and adults (*Daily Mirror* 2013). As the show’s popularity surged, it became a cultural icon. Photos of the *Jewel in the Palace* cast were seen in weekly women’s papers and were sold in bookshops. The show was discussed in talk shows, newspapers and among people on a day-to-day level. Young girls dressed up and role played *Changumi* during their playtimes. ‘Changumi style’ hairpins rose in demand. The series was turned into a Sinhala novel. Photos of the show were used to promote commercial products. Many instances of copyright infringement were also reported (Sarasavi n.d.; Thajudeen 2013; Sooriyagoda 2013).

The show was a national phenomenon and did not go unnoticed by the upper echelons of the country. Speaking during a visit to a girls’ school, the then-president Mahinda Rajapakse announced that he too watched *Jewel in the Palace* and encouraged students to follow the example set in the story. Commenting on its popularity he said that *Jewel in the Palace* is ‘watched not only by you daughters but also by your mothers and grandmothers. When I used to go visiting to houses [*sic*] I have seen this teledrama being watched... with interest’ (*Gossip Lanka News* 2013). Having heard of the show’s success in Sri Lanka, *Jewel in the Palace* actress Lee Young-ae (Jang Geum) donated USD 100,000 to initiate the ‘*Sujatha Diyani Scholarship Fund*’ for female students of low-income families in 2014 (Cabinet Office Sri Lanka 2014). In 2017, she contributed USD 50,000 to support flood relief efforts in Sri Lanka (Ministry of Foreign Relations—Sri Lanka 2017). Lee Young-ae’s generous gesture fostered a warm reception in *Jewel in the Palace* fans towards South Korea.

Bethea (2013) writes that one of the major factors that contributed to the success of *Jewel in the Palace* in Sri Lanka was its positive portrayal of female characters. According to Bethea, the lead female characters in *Jewel in the Palace* are strong and independent and untypical of characters seen in local TV shows. Telecasting *Jewel in the Palace* ‘allowed for a change—or at the very least a break—in representational politics’ and thereby shattered ‘the mold set by nationally produced teledramas’. For Bethea, Sri Lankan TV channels have long conformed to gender stereotyping in TV shows in favour of what they deem culturally appropriate. Local TV shows typically present passive, compliant, and subordinate female characters as the norm. However, *Jewel in the Palace*, in contrast, deviates from the representation of what has traditionally been considered culturally appropriate and instead ‘presents an agentic character and directly addresses gender inequality’ (Bethea 2013). Consequently, the show provided strong role models for its female audience in Sri Lanka, becoming an outlier from typically telecasted dramas and attracting a large, predominantly female audience.

The Japanese drama *Oshin* also contributed to the favourable attitude towards *Jewel in the Palace*. (The contribution of Japanese drama to the success of the Korean wave will be explored later in this chapter). *Jewel in the Palace* gained viewers relatively easily because viewers considered Korean TV shows to be of the same genre and quality as Japanese drama. In 2012, immediately before *Jewel in the Palace* was telecasted, the Rupavahini reran the beloved *Oshin* series. The viewership included both older and younger generations. The 2012 rerun earned Rs. 11.9 million in revenue from May–October 2012, second only to *Jewel in the Palace* (Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation 2013). In this strategic move of airing *Jewel in the Palace* immediately after *Oshin* reruns secured the same group of a wide-ranging, high number of viewers accumulated through *Oshin*.

This revolution, initiated by Rupavahini, was the beginning of the Korean wave in Sri Lanka. Following the tremendous success of the *Jewel in the Palace*, the Rupavahini continued airing more historical Korean dramas such as *Jewel in the Crown*, *The Great Merchant*, *The King’s Doctor* and *Wind of the Palace*. Understanding the commercial value of telecasting popular Korean TV shows, other local TV networks followed suit. The year, 2015 saw the peak in competition with almost all major tv networks broadcasting Korean TV shows (See Table 9.1 for a complete

Table 9.1 List of Korean TV shows broadcast in Sri Lanka

	<i>English Name</i>	<i>Sinhala Name</i>	<i>Year Telecasted in Sri Lanka</i>	<i>TV Network</i>
1	Full House	<i>Full House</i>	2010	ITN
2	Autumn in My Heart	<i>Mahada Sara Sanda</i>	2010	ITN
3	Jewel in the Palace	<i>Sujatha Diyani</i>	2012	Rupavahini
4	Dong Yi	<i>Abheetha Diyani</i>	2013	Rupavahini
5	The Great Merchant	<i>Diriya Diyani</i>	2013	Rupavahini
6	Horse Doctor	<i>Isiwara Wedaduru</i>	2013	Rupavahini
7	Lee San, Wind of the Palace	<i>Tahapath Maharaja</i>	2014	Rupavahini
8	Boys over Flowers	<i>Boys over Flowers</i>	2014	TV Derana
9	Sungkyunkwan Scandal	<i>Asaliya Mala</i>	2014	ITN
10	The Heirs	<i>The Heirs</i>	2014	TV Derana
11	My Girl	<i>Thatu Ahimi Samanalee</i>	2014	Swarnavahini
12	Moon Embracing the Sun	<i>Hiru Sandu Aadarei</i>	2015	Rupavahini
13	Queen Seondeok	<i>Janabithakami Rajiniya</i>	2015	Rupavahini
14	West Palace	<i>Batabira Maaligawa</i>	2015	Rupavahini
15	Goddess of Fire	<i>Sirimati Sittbaravi</i>	2015	Rupavahini
16	Princess Man	<i>Sibina Kumara</i>	2015	TV Derana
17	My Love from another Star	<i>Ananthayen Aa Tharu Kumara</i>	2015	Sirasa TV
18	I Can Hear Your Voice	<i>Hima Thubina</i>	2015	Sirasa TV
19	Chilwu the Mighty	<i>Chilwu</i>	2015	ITN
20	City Hunter	<i>City Hunter</i>	2015	ITN
21	Secret Garden	<i>Me Adambarakari</i>	2016	TV One
22	Melody of love	<i>Melody of Love</i>	2016	TV Derana
23	Empress Ki	<i>Sooriya Diyani</i>	2016	Rupavahini
24	My Lovely Sam-Soon	<i>Hithata Horen</i>	2018	Rupavahini
25	Pinocchio	<i>Ikkai Maai</i>	2019	Sirasa TV
26	Descendants of the Sun	<i>Himanthara</i>	2020	Sirasa TV
27	Legend of the Blue Sea	<i>Sasara Kinnarawi</i>	2020	Rupavahini

(continued)

Table 9.1 (continued)

	<i>English Name</i>	<i>Sinhala Name</i>	<i>Year Telecasted in Sri Lanka</i>	<i>TV Network</i>
28	The Last Empress	<i>Agra</i>	2020	Sirasa TV

Source Author

list of Korean TV shows broadcast in Sri Lanka). Thus, the first waves of the Korean cultural revolution reached Sri Lanka through TV shows broadcasted on local channels, either dubbed or subtitled, accessible to all.

Changing Winds

A turning point in this trend came in 2017 when the Sri Lankan government sharply increased the levy charged on dubbed foreign movies, dramas and commercials (*The Gazette* 2017). Although the government has been charging a levy on teledrama, films and commercials imported to Sri Lanka since 2006, the 2017 tax hike severely affected the importation of foreign entertainment products.² The rise in taxes came in response to requests made by local drama and movie producers' organizations. These organizations asserted that foreign teledramas and commercial programmes broadcasted in the country were 'contrary to local traditions' (*Daily FT* 2017). Although these allegations were mostly levelled against Indian mega TV dramas, the consequences heavily affected the importation of Korean TV shows. Subsequent years saw a decrease in the telecast of Korean TV shows.

Nonetheless, Sri Lankans' love for Korean TV shows did not subside. Deprived of access to Korean dramas offline, Sri Lankan viewers turned to other means. DVDs became a popular means as cheap, pirated copies could be obtained for less than a US dollar. But the slew of new digital streaming services caused a shift to a new and powerful route—the Internet. Today, online video streaming websites such as *Kissasian*,

² After the tax increase in 2017, the fee of Rs. 90,000 previously charged for 30-min slots of programmes dubbed in Sinhala or Tamil was increased to Rs. 150,000 for the first four slots, Rs. 250,000 for the next four slots and Rs. 350,000 per balance slot (*The Gazette* 2017).

Dramacool and Dramafever which grant free and easy access to Korean TV shows have become the lifeline of Korean fandom in Sri Lanka. Additionally, streaming services such as Netflix and Iflix also stream several Korean dramas with English subtitles, some as early as 24 h after their original Korean broadcast. Korean TV channel SBS can be accessed through PEOTV—an IPTV service operated locally. Dubbed TV shows telecasted on local TV channels are also available on YouTube.

In the dubbing process, translators consider linguistic as well as socio-cultural factors of both the source language (Korean) and the target language (Sinhala and Tamil) to provide a better experience to the audience (Karunarathna 2015). However, since dubbing a foreign programme costs higher than adding subtitles and requires professional voice actors, dubbing is still limited to professional institutions such as TV networks. Fans instead turn to local websites that allow them to download Sinhala subtitles to Korean movies and TV shows. Websites such as *baiscope.lk*, *cinern.lk* and *subz.lk* contain subtitles for dozens of Korean programmes. These are not generated by teams of professional translators, but are ‘fansubbed’.³

The trajectory of the Korean wave outlined by Bok-rae (2015) is demonstrably true for Sri Lanka. Bok-rae identified 4 phases in the propagation of the Korean wave; In *Hallyu* 1.0 K-drama was propagated. In *Hallyu* 2.0, K-pop music gained popularity. In *Hallyu* 3.0 and *Hallyu* 4.0, K-culture and K-style came under the spotlight respectively. In Sri Lanka, fans were first introduced to Korean culture through TV shows and later moved to Korean popular music. But today the reverse is also true. Currently, more and more fans today are first introduced to Korean culture through Korean pop music and later venture to other avenues of the Korean wave. The staggering admiration Korean popular music enjoys in Sri Lanka is testimony to the impact of the Korean wave in the country. A 2018 online study by Lu investigating Korean pop music popularity in Sri Lanka recorded 85 per cent of respondents listening to Korean pop music multiple times a day. Fans have even made petitions to the Korean Embassy in Colombo requesting to bring down Korean music bands to Sri Lanka (Change.org. n.d.). According to the survey, fans are willing to pay as high as Rs. 20,000 (\$108) for a concert ticket (Lu 2018).

³ The process of adding subtitles to foreign films or television programs by fans, most often without the legal permission of the owners of the intellectual property.

Not surprisingly, the Korean wave in Sri Lanka has now expanded to K-culture; food, fashion, travel and lifestyle. Korean restaurants in Colombo are attracting hordes of fans curious to try *kimchi*, *samgyetang* and *bibimbap*. Similarly, as consumers positively perceived Korean products, they became eager to learn and know about Korean culture. The Colombo Public Library established the ‘Korea Corner’—a mini-cultural centre in 2014 under the patronage of the Embassy of the Republic of Korea (Embassy of the Republic of Korea 2014). With assistance from the Embassy, Korean language classes are conducted at King Sejong Institute Colombo and the Centre for Korean Studies at the University of Kelaniya. The Embassy also organizes annual cultural festivals such as the Korean Film Festival in Sri Lanka, National Preliminary Rounds for K-Pop World Festival and Quiz on Korea, and the Korean Ambassador’s Cup Taekwondo Championships.

It is not uncommon to see fans worshipping Korean idols. Many fans use images of Korean pop stars and other cultural icons as profile pictures in their social media accounts. Enamoured by the physical attractiveness of the Korean actors and actresses and their glamorous fashion, makeup, and hairstyles, fans follow these idols on social media platforms and stay updated on current happenings in their lives. As an extension of idolizing, fanfiction is now becoming a new hobby among fans. Fans both read and contribute to the growing world of Korean fanfiction.

In a nutshell, the foundation for the Korean wave was laid through the broadcast of Korean TV shows, dubbed or subtitled in Sinhala, by major TV networks. Korean culture received wide exposure through the airing of *Jewel in the Palace* in 2012, which became a household name. The momentum of the Korean wave encouraged fans to begin exploring other Korean cultural products. But this drive took a massive plunge in 2017 with the imposition of heavy taxes on imported entertainment products. As a result, the Korean wave receded and remained accessible only to a limited group of consumers.

THE FEATURES OF THE KOREAN WAVE IN SRI LANKA

Reasons for Popularity

The reasons for the popularity of the Korean wave in Sri Lanka are fourfold. The most significant reason is that it has provided an alternative to Hollywood and Bollywood entertainment cultures. As discussed

earlier, the Sri Lanka entertainment industry shares deep ties with its Indian counterpart. In the early 1990s, movies screened in Sri Lanka were mostly imported Tamil and Hindi films. From the 1940s onwards, the Sinhala cinema industry began to take shape, still heavily relying on Indian cinema. According to Tampoe-Hautin (2017), Indian cinema in Sri Lanka ‘succeeded in joining up colonial, political and geographical entities, and enhancing social, economic and cultural flows across borders’. Tampoe-Hautin dubs Indian cinema as a ‘cultural Adam’s Bridge’ that blurred conventional frontiers, overriding caste, class, religion and language between the two countries.

Today, Indian popular cinema and television are consumed in all parts of Sri Lanka—in rural, urban and semi-urban sectors. Both Hindi cinema and Tamil cinema are in demand, actors and actresses are well-known celebrities, movie songs are popular and they occupy primetime television hours in Sri Lanka. In recent decades, serialized Indian mega TV shows have gained popularity as a new form of entertainment. However, Bollywood cinema has often come under fire for its melodramatic and formulaic storylines accompanied by extravagant music, song, dance sequences, fight scenes, humour and long duration (Gokulsing and Dissanayake as cited in Jinadasa 2016). Korean culture emerged as a new cultural experience that does not conform to the stereotypical characteristics of Bollywood.

Second, though the Sri Lankan society has come to embrace western culture and values for the most part, like most Asian societies it is still uncomfortable with violence, sex and nudity frequently depicted in western cultural productions. Older generations often harbour anti-American sentiments and have little or no positive response to American culture. In contrast, younger generations accept American culture and prefer consuming it. For both audiences, Korean drama provides a ‘convenient and culturally safe alternative’ (Kim 2011). Park (2006) and Ryoo (2009) have argued that the success of the Korean wave can be attributed to the ability of Korean culture and the media industry to translate Western culture to fit Asian tastes (as cited in Reimeingam 2014). Because Korean dramas skillfully merge ‘Asian sentiments and Westernized modernity’ (Kwon 2017), it allows Asian audiences to easily relate to Korean culture while also experiencing the modern Westernized lifestyle. Shaped by Buddhist precepts, the Sri Lankan society values traditions immensely. Cultural products are endorsed only if they depict traditional values such as Asian family-friendly lifestyles, respect to elders,

the sanctity of marriage and modesty, etc. Although viewers are eager to explore Western culture, its explicit nature prevents them from publicly recognizing it. They readily welcomed Korean cultural products with its 'enticing image of westernized modernity' (Noh 2010) as an alternative to Hollywood.

Third, although Sri Lankans were unfamiliar with South Korean popular culture until a decade ago, Japanese TV shows had already made their debut in Sri Lanka. The telecasting of *Oshin*, the famous Japanese serialized television drama in 1989, was a major milestone in Sri Lankan television history. It was the first-ever foreign-language drama to be dubbed into Sinhala and Rupavahini which aired *Oshin* (and later *Jewel in the Palace*) was the first local television channel to dub foreign dramas in Sri Lanka. *Oshin* was instantly taken to heart with the greatest passion in Sri Lanka and was the highest-rated programme except for evening news (Sneider 1989). A Sri Lankan television executive has reportedly written to Japan Broadcasting Corporation (NHK) that Sri Lankans were 'too eager to see the rest of the story of *Oshin* who has [by then] become a household character in [Sri Lanka]' (Sneider 1989). The success of *Oshin* paved the way for more Japanese serials to be telecast; most notably *Suzuran* in 2008 and *Carnation* in 2014. This dissemination of Japanese popular culture products introduced Sri Lankans to a new culture, consumption options and images.

How the exposure to Japanese popular culture positively impacted the Korean wave merits discussion. It begs the question of whether a fan of one genre of popular culture would be encouraged to be a fan of a similar culture. For the average Sri Lankan viewer, South Korea and Japan are culturally homogenous, since the two countries are geographically proximate and share historical ties. Being unfamiliar with South Korean popular culture, Sri Lankan viewers initially clumped Korean culture with Japanese culture which they perceived as culturally akin to that of Japan. Consequently, the positive experience Sri Lankans enjoyed with Japanese dramas created a welcoming environment for its Korean counterpart. Thus, at its introduction to Sri Lanka, Korean culture was not only cushioned against a potentially hostile cultural receiver but was welcomed with open arms.

Lastly, apart from the 'Asianess' of Korean cultural products, Sri Lankan fans also appreciate the quality of Korean productions. The skillful storytelling, gripping plotlines, relatable themes and insight into the modern Korean lifestyle in Korean dramas are a refreshing break

from Hindi or Tamil dramas. In Korean popular music, the excellent singing, precise dancing moves, attractiveness of singers and first-rate performances are aesthetically pleasing and quickly won popularity among viewers.

Characteristics of the Fandom

Korean popular culture fans in Sri Lanka share a number of characteristics with fans in other parts of the world (see Otmazgin and Lyan 2013 on Israel and Palestine; Hübinette 2012 on Sweden). First, Korean TV shows and music are popular mostly among the young, urban, female population of ages between 10 and 40 belonging to middle-income households. Lu's online study in 2018 showed that out of 1230 surveyed Korean pop music fans in Sri Lanka, 49 per cent were between the ages of 16–20 while 33 per cent fell between ages 21–25. Around 39 per cent of fans were engaged in higher education, 35 per cent were schooling and 19 per cent were employed. Based on Lu, it can be inferred that Korean pop music has attracted mostly teenagers and youth, while the older generation remains strangers to Korean pop music. Further, a majority of 57 per cent of fans were based in Colombo while no responders were recorded from rural districts in Sri Lanka such as Amapara, Batticaloa, Killinochchi, Monaragala and Vavuniya (Lu 2018). The concentrated audience shows that the Korean wave has not yet reached a wide audience across different regions and social levels. Further, an overwhelming 94 per cent of the surveyed fans were female. This feminized nature of the Korean wave in Sri Lanka is not surprising, considering research on the gender dimension of the Korean wave has shown that women are actively engaging and disseminating Korean pop culture in many countries (Noh 2010). In Sri Lanka too, the female audience is the driving force of the Korean wave, disseminating Korean popular culture among more young, female populations.

Second, fandoms are an integral part of the growth of the Korean wave in Sri Lanka. These fandoms are primarily virtual and are mostly based on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube platforms. Fan communities are independently created and run, with daily content updates. Numerous Internet fora dedicated to music and drama, both in English and Sinhala function as platforms for fans to share news, images and videos about idols. Fans post questions, reviews and suggestions for music and TV shows. Other content includes updates about Korean idols and

their lifestyles; facts about Korean cuisine; places to visit in Korea; Korean products; and explanations about Korean culture, traditions and festivals commonly seen in shows. They also serve as a place for fans to meet and greet other fans and bond over similar preferences. Fans join both local and international groups. This development has concentrated the Korean wave among tech-savvy youth.

Fandoms are, however, not limited to the internet. Although there have not been any large-scale offline gatherings, smaller gatherings have been organized from time-to-time. One successful meetup was in 2019 organized by the Embassy of the Republic of Korea in Colombo (Korean Embassy in Sri Lanka 2019). Yet, this cannot be compared to the success of other popular art forms such as comic books or comic book culture in Sri Lanka. For example, the Lanka Comic-con is one of the fastest-growing annual cultural festivals in Sri Lanka which in 2018 drew over 7,000 visitors (Innasithamby 2019). Since 2015, Lanka Comic-con has attracted fans of comic books, movies, costumes, music and art related to popular culture, cosplayers, video gamers and merchandise vendors. The founders of the event '*The Geek Club of Sri Lanka*' maintain a Facebook group of over 22,000 Sri Lankan comic book enthusiasts. Although Japanese manga and anime are featured in these events, Korean popular culture has not penetrated the terrain. Korean fandoms in Sri Lanka are less mobilized and lack the capacity to organize large-scale public events independently.

Third, fascination with Korean culture has led fans to explore other cultural products such as food and language. A study conducted by Lu (2018) showed that 54 per cent of surveyed fans have purchased some type of official merchandise including Korean pop music albums, concert DVDs, official posters, photo books and T-shirts. Korean franchises established in Colombo such as KiMo (launched in 2017) and Ximivogue (launched in 2018) have come to be known for K-beauty, K-fashion, and K-sports products. Products such as Korean face masks and hair accessories are ever popular.

Last, Korean pop music fans actively disseminate Korean culture in their environments. They act as dedicated 'cultural missionaries' bringing more people to the fandom. Each new fan recruits more fans into the umbrella, expanding the circle of penetration. This process is an integral feature of the spread of Korean culture. Here, the role of the Internet and social media in shaping the community cannot be discounted. The

Internet provides fans access to videos and music while social media enables communities to communicate and recruit new members.

There is also a portion of the population that consciously refuses to consume Korean popular culture. Many individuals (both male and female) are reluctant to acknowledge the appearances of masculine artists that are not ‘typically’ masculine and deviate from the male image endorsed by Western culture (see Prashant Pradhan in this volume for a gendered perspective on the Korean wave). At the same time, the immense popularity of American popular culture to which fans are exposed from childhood is unmatched by the emerging Korean culture. Linguistic differences and cultural distance are also reasons for indifference towards Korean culture. This causes individuals to show disinterest in anything related to Korean culture or refuse to engage with Korean popular culture altogether.

THE FUTURE OF THE KOREAN WAVE IN SRI LANKA

While it is apparent that the Korean wave does exist and has a great potential to change certain dynamics of the cultural consumption patterns in Sri Lanka, there are also numerous challenges it must overcome. The main challenges to the long-term survival of the Korean wave in Sri Lanka are dichotomous. They are (a) cultural competition and (b) degree of interaction.

First, let us consider the cultural competition. To date, cultural flow towards Sri Lanka has been dominated by India and Western countries. The flow from India is inevitable given the significant cultural and historic relations. Western cultural inflow was initially a result of imperialism, later neo-colonialism and globalization. These two cultures have assimilated and become deeply embedded in the local culture. The difference between Indian and Western popular culture and Korean popular culture lies in the fact that South Korean culture was the first to be *consciously* recognized in Sri Lanka. Though Japanese culture enjoyed a degree of popularity in Sri Lanka before the Korean wave, it lacked the force and magnitude with which Korean popular culture has gripped the market. Bok-rae (2015) asserts that the Korean wave is not another form of cultural imperialism. He states that ‘*Hallyu* is different from cultural imperialism, not hegemonic, cultural imperialism but a ‘World Wave’ which harmoniously embraces all kinds of cultures in a global village’. The Korean wave is overwhelmingly fan-driven. Because demand from

local fans is the driving force behind the dissemination and consumption of Korean culture, the spread of the Korean wave is more organic and spontaneous. But while Korean popular culture has managed to rapidly penetrate and spread, it does not yet have a stable, long-standing grip of cultural domination in Sri Lanka. Rather, without real measures, it lacks the risk of being limited to a niche community of fans.

To go up against two giant cultural exporters, Korean culture has to appeal to the Sri Lankan masses and completely reroute the way they receive and consume entertainment. This entails not only providing entertainment to its audiences but also changing audiences' consumption patterns. Korean productions must be localized and adapted to incite interest and cultivate appreciation to survive. The momentum that was gained through the network of promoters and agents and constant support from the local entertainment industry is necessary for the Korean wave to reach a wider range of consumers in Sri Lanka.

Second, interaction with the Korean wave has today shifted almost exclusively to the digital world. The scholarship about the role of the Internet in the Korean wave all claims that Social networking sites, YouTube and streaming websites are part of the new dimension that enables the Korean wave to survive and flourish. This carries implications for Sri Lanka in two ways. First, consumers who are not technologically savvy, such as older generations are left out of the Korean wave. This explains why Korean culture is more popular among the youth, as older generations do not actively seek out cultural products on the Internet. Older consumers mostly rely on traditional means such as television, radio or newspapers for information and entertainment—sources that do not contain Korean popular culture. Similarly, if consumers do not have access to the Internet, there too is a chasm in the flow of information. Often due to expensive internet charges or lack of Internet access in rural areas, individuals are excluded from participating in the Korean wave. If Korean cultural products are exclusively available online or on digital means, then limited access to these products inhibits the growth of the Korean wave.

The next problem with receiving popular culture through the internet is the digital language divide. To consume Korean culture, consumers must either be proficient in the Korean language or English, the language of the internet. The average Sri Lankan fan with little or no knowledge of the Korean language, who wishes to consume Korean TV shows, must rely upon on-screen translations in English. In Sri Lanka, English literacy is just 22 per cent among the population above 15 years of age

(Abayasekara 2018). Other than the few dozen movies and TV shows dubbed or subtitled in Sinhala, there are no Korean cultural products accessible in Sinhala. A handful of TV shows have been dubbed or subtitled in Tamil and telecasted by TV networks. But virtually no Tamil subtitles are available online. Language constraints are resulting in a potential lack of access to information.

If Korean cultural products are to attract a wider range of general audiences in Sri Lanka, a bottom-up process of delivering the products in local languages and improving access to products must take place. Private individuals or companies should take initiative to become linguistic gatekeepers that provide Sinhala and Tamil subtitles. Though fansubbing already occurs in Sri Lanka, the quality of these translations remains low. With enough initiative, professional translations can be introduced in both Sinhala and Tamil languages.

CONCLUSION

This chapter examined the socio-cultural dynamics of the Korean wave in Sri Lanka with special attention to the origin, spread and future of the wave. Academic scholarship on the Korean wave has typically analyzed how Korean popular culture is received outside geographically and culturally proximate countries. But the case of Sri Lanka offers an opportunity to study the dissemination and consumption of the Korean wave in a country that is heavily influenced by colonial and historical roots and broadly falls under the umbrella of Asianess. It is a case study of how new culture is acculturated in a country.

The analysis of this subcultural phenomenon helps one to understand the cultural and media landscape of Sri Lanka. The economic liberalization in Sri Lanka in 1977 led to an influx of foreign entertainment products. Over time, Indian, American, British and Japanese products adapted to suit local consumption patterns. But this cultural domination has been challenged by the Korean wave. It has provided a new entertainment option for its audience, changed the audiences' consumption patterns and changed cultural import practices.

The Sri Lankan fandom shares similarities with fandoms across the globe. Fans actively participate in the creation and circulation of new content by using social media and expanding their fan-driven community. Today, with the Korean wave moving to digitalized platforms, youth

social media activity has constructed a new global cultural dissemination model. Interestingly, however, while there are fans who actively disseminate Korean culture within their circles to recruit more followers, there are also non-consumers who consciously refuse to consume Korean popular culture.

The Korean wave in Sri Lanka saw a decade of ups and downs. The phenomenon will be a short-lived success unless measures are taken to overhaul how it currently operates. Ways to assimilate into local culture can be learned by observing the dominant cultures previously imported to Sri Lanka. With more bilateral, government-led initiatives and social participation, the Korean wave can actualize its potential to be an alternative entertainment source in the country. While the Korean wave may still not be fully-fledged in Sri Lanka, the ripple it has caused in the Sri Lankan cultural and media waters is already disrupting the local entertainment culture.

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Spinning the ‘K’ Yarn: The Thriving Media Cottage Entrepreneurship of Mizoram

Rinku Pegu

INTRODUCTION

This study is about the circulation of South Korean Media products and their popularity in the Indian state of Mizoram that lies on its North-Eastern border. Extant literature on South Korean media products in the Indian sub-continent has dwelled largely on the impact and reception in the North-eastern region. Consisting of eight states, this region is marked by long international borders shared with four countries. This study attempts to move away from impact analysis and investigate the process of circulation of South Korean media products by focussing on the local networks and infrastructure on which it thrives. Particularly, the attempt is to trace the process of dissemination, identify the major players engaged in the production, reproduction, transmission and circulation of Korean media products in Mizoram.

The second axis that the chapter seeks to probe is the modus operandi on which these major players interact to sustain and operate. To locate and

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trace out the infrastructural ecology, the impact of technology, particularly digital technology on this phenomenon that has set in motion a network that thrives on foreign media products made pliant for local consumption. How is the South Korean content made malleable for Mizo consumption? Culturally speaking where does one situate such cross-border transactional practice? An effort has been made to scrutinize how local Mizo people are negotiating the idea of ‘Globalization’ through such media flows. While Korean media products are largely popular in Northeast India, this paper traces the distinctiveness that is unique to Mizoram compared to neighbouring states like Manipur and Nagaland.

To conduct this research both qualitative and quantitative methodologies were adopted. In the qualitative approach, in-depth interviews were conducted with key players involved in the dissemination and distribution process. For the latter, a consumer survey was conducted to seek out how people in Mizoram far away from the metropolis of New Delhi were engaging with a facet of globalization. In addition, the consumer survey helped to gauge the presence or absence of audience agency vis-à-vis K-media content.

BACKGROUND

In the late 1990s, Martha Stewart the lifestyle diva of American television often pitched for a ‘working office’ out of a cupboard. Right into the twenty-first century, this has become a reality in the Indian state of Mizoram where the popularity of Korean media products, primarily films and teleserial, has spawned homegrown entrepreneurs. Armed with a computer and connected to the internet, mostly young men in their twenties and thirties have taken up the mantle to bring Korean media content to people of Mizoram translated and dubbed in Mizo language. Welcome to the world of Mizo viewership, where prime-time television viewing is reserved for what is renowned as the K-wave.

The arrival of South Korean cultural and visual texts in Mizoram can be read as part of *Hallyu*, a term coined to signify the popularity of Korean media products in places and countries outside Korea (Kim 2007). Aiding this access worldwide, particularly in Asia has been the Korean Government’s perusal of soft power by actively supporting the Korean Media industry. This development was spurred partially by UNESCO’s Cultural Convention of 2007 which affirmed the right of nation-states to implement policies to protect their cultural expression against the backdrop of

growing concern about cultural hegemony wielded by Western nations, mainly America through global media flows. In this sense, the K-wave's popularity in Asia can be read as a global media exchange away from the hegemony of western domination and thereby as a South-to-South flow.

THE MEDIA SCENARIO IN A BORDER REGION

According to the 2011 Census of India, Mizoram's population was estimated a little over 10 lakhs people with a literacy rate of over 90 per cent. It must be noted that Mizoram has traditionally been a media dry area due to the absence of local organic media production entities, especially teleserial. Until 2017, locally produced media products consisted primarily of three things, music videos, reality shows based on various competitions and football programmes. The latter is recorded live and transmitted. The very same year witnessed a media record in the state. A professional media house called 'Believing is Seeing Project', a media start-up formed in 2013 by Raymond a graduate in Mass Communication landed a contract for creating the first teleserial in Mizo language.

Tracing the exhibition pattern and viewing habits of audio-visual media in Mizoram, before the advent of satellite television, people were dependent entirely on Video Cassette Recorder (VCR) culture. The content material consisted of Hindi and English films, of which a large chunk consisted of pirated English comedies. This form of telecast through VCR screens became so popular that the state government was compelled to regulate it through the enactment of the Mizoram Exhibition of Films on Television Screen through the Video Cassette Player Act, 1990. This ensured a modicum of discipline in terms of grant of licence to screen, seating arrangements, etc. (Lalmuansangkimi 2015).

While DTH service is available in Mizoram, local people across all strata subscribe primarily to cable TV services. The cable television market in Mizoram is dominated by two major service providers namely, LPS Vision Cable Network and Zonet Cable Network. Established in 1992 and 1994 respectively, between them, they have divvied up the entertainment market in Mizoram. However, it was Skylinks that has since folded, that had initiated cable television services in 1991 by transmitting the programmes of satellite television channels.

This phenomenon of K-wave in North-East India was taking place at a conjuncture that has witnessed a slight shift from the American media dominance due to the rise of other influences in the Asian context.

It needs mentioning that India along with Iran formed an exceptional duo in the entertainment realm, for not featuring any American film in the top 10 films of 2009 of their respective countries (European Audio/Visual Observatory 2011). Therefore, both these countries have cultivated a legacy described by media scholars as ‘resisting American cultural hegemony and its consequent homogenizing impact’ (Chadha and Kavoori 2015). In the context of this study, while India qualifies as a ‘super producer’ in the league of countries producing over 400 films per year, South Korea has been described as a ‘major producer’ in the category producing films in the range of 101–400 per year (Report of the European Audio/Visual Observatory 2011).

Notably, during this juncture of K-wave’s popularity, emerging countries like India have been expanding their economies and consequently arming their population with disposable income. Availability of internet and communication technology has been another critical dimension (Chadha and Kavoori 2015). Interestingly, around 6 lakh out of the total 10 lakh population in Mizoram, accounting for 60 per cent, are connected to mobile phones. To cite an example, in 2011, the state recorded a spike of 6.5 percentage growth in mobile connectivity over 2010 (Economic Survey 2011). This is indicative of the communication infrastructure reaching the remotest corners of the state.

THE VISUAL TEXTS FROM KOREA

Some of the popular K-films and serials that have featured regularly are *Train to Busan*, *Boys over Flowers*, *Full House*, *Green Rose* and *Stairway from Heaven*. Most of these cultural texts belong to the genre of romance, rom-com and high drama. According to media practitioners, Kimi’s ‘trend-wise most of these teleserials and telefilms are populated by wealthy and successful business people getting entangled in romantic liaisons with people from poorer families. This element is further sought to be dramatized through the injection of a love triangle.

Apart from this recurring theme of class divide that serves as an emotional anchor for the viewers, there are research studies that have attributed the popularity to perceived common cultural traditions. One such example alludes to the fondness of agriculturally based creative activities like song and dance both in Korea as evidenced in the visual texts and by the people of Mizoram through their traditional Bamboo dance (Kaisii 2017). An interesting aspect of the K-wave content highlighted

by research studies is that the cultural texts themselves are an outcome of hybridization combining elements of western-style presentation and traditional Korean characteristics (Jang and Paik 2012).

THE ECOLOGY OF DUBBED MEDIA CONTENT

Korean Tawanglet

The producers of dubbed Korean Media products in Mizoram are called Korean Tawanglet. This phenomenon of first translating Korean media content into Mizo and dubbing them before circulation for local consumption began in 2009 (Lawbi 2017). In this enterprise, four key elements that consist of the editor, the translator, the sound recordist and lastly the voice artists.

Befitting a cottage enterprise, in terms of infrastructure one needs a mainframe, mike recorder, a mixture table and the editing table. The entire process involved in the production of the dubbed Korean content is done from home, in a single room equipped with an open cupboard with several shelves, each housing the computer, mike recorder and the mixture table. This is how it works. The Korean media content is downloaded from the internet, following which the editor translates the Korean words spoken in the content into Mizo language. The translation is then handed over to the voice artist for learning the lines and enough time to infuse them with appropriate emotions while dubbing. The process of dubbing itself is arduous as it involves several takes to get the tonality correct and precisely at the accurate moment for superimposition. The voice artists must match word for word and tone for the tone of the characters whose voice they must emulate within the Korean media content.

The voice artists are required to have a working knowledge of English to lend their voice in Mizo to the Korean content. According to Marilyn, who embraced this profession as a natural progression, given her background in hosting and compeering public events, the most difficult part is to evoke emotions while dubbing. Among the range of emotions that one must imbibe and convey, the act of crying is considered most trying.

On average it takes about eight to ten months for a voice artist to learn the ropes of lip-syncing during dubbing the original Korean media content. In the beginning, as a novice, a voice artist earns ₹200 for half an hour of the dubbing process which increases to ₹350 within two years. Surprisingly, although the verbal content involves dialogue between

different people, dubbing is rarely done simultaneously. Reflective of a cottage scenario, due to lack of state-of-the-art technology in recording, the voice artists are made to dub as in individual exercise in Mizo as a solo act. No two voice artists are recorded simultaneously in a conversational format as the available technology is not conducive.

After the dubbing is carried out by the sound recordist, through a mike it is then taken to a mixing table where the former superimposes the dubbed audio content onto the original Korean content in a synchronized manner. From then on, the editor takes over slicing the Korean content and making it ready for local consumption.

What helps in the process of translation is that the original Korean contents come with English subtitles. Following the completion of translation, the editor must remove the English subtitles to secure for the audience an experience of watching the media content as an original production in Mizo. Typical for a half-hour episode, it takes triple the time to complete the task of dubbing. Following this, the onus is on the editor to pair the voice match with the onscreen character through the software. This is considered the most critical and delicate activity for the editor. To synchronize the dubbed Mizo voiceover to the original Korean Content even as the characters are speaking.

DUAL MODELS OF COTTAGE ENTERPRISE

A working definition of Cottage enterprise situates the family as the pivot both in terms of skills as well as the site of labour. The dubbing enterprise flourishing in Mizoram of Korean media content, primarily audio-visual entertainment texts subscribe to this concept. Driven largely by the men it would, however, be incomplete without female participation. They come in the form of voice artists and contribute in terms of engaging with the language and mood of the dubbed content.

This homegrown cottage enterprise in terms of production process follows two models. One is to engage the entire family and extended relatives in the different tasks of identifying, locating, downloading Korean films and serials from the internet. Assign the task of translation to those well versed in English while giving the task of voiceover in Mizo to those who can emulate and evoke the mood and tonality of Korean content. According to the cottage entrepreneur Jerry engaged in such work since 2011, voiceover plays a critical role in communication followed by synchronizing the recorded voiceover with the various casts not just

in terms of making the Korean programme relatable but also in lending authenticity. Indeed, this aspect of cottage entrepreneurship has given rise to dubbing specialists in Mizoram. For being the most specialized of skills in this chain of reproduction, dubbing is most often the domain of experts rather than family members.

The other model is when a homegrown entrepreneur employs professionals for the task of identifying, downloading, translating Korean visual texts into Mizo and lending the voiceovers. These professionals are paid for piecemeal work. In such a scenario, the editing work is usually executed by the entrepreneur. To give an idea of the actual work input, a two-hour film takes a couple of days to complete the grafting of dubbed voiceover onto the original Korean text post the translation into Mizo. Interestingly certain strategies are adopted to make the dubbed content more localized. A common initiative is to populate references to places with local familiar names.

Fuelling this cottage enterprise is the Internet infrastructure that serves as a lifeline for these cottage entrepreneurs. The Korean media products are downloaded from various websites available on the internet by the entrepreneur. The Internet itself provides the software crucial for editing and inscribing the translated voiceover onto the programmes. In addition, all those engaged in the process, particularly the voice artists learn and brush up their English language skills through tutorials via the internet.

In this process of circulation of dubbed content, the network of demand, reproduction, distribution and exhibition are well oiled. Interestingly distribution is done solely through local cable networks, unique to Mizoram in terms of dissemination. Unlike other neighbouring states like Nagaland and Manipur where the circulation of dubbed Korean CDs is prevalent (Kaisii 2017) in Mizoram, the locals prefer to watch such content through the cable networks. The popularity of Korean media products is highlighted by the fact that prime-time television viewing is allocated for such content. In the consumer survey carried out, nearly 40 per cent of the respondents out of a total of 25 stated that they became aware of Korean content through television while an equal number learned about the same through word of mouth.

This instance of cottage enterprise in Mizoram pioneered through the internet keeps the demand for Korean media products robust through a combination with online media as we shall witness in the following section. This practice neatly fits into what is described as an integration of telecommunication networks, computer, audio-video techniques to

create, store, access, transmit information (Bolanle et al. 2013). The very fact that Korean media products are available on the internet with English subtitles is indicative of the ambition of the Korean media houses aided by the state to expand its reach worldwide by subscribing to the idea of ‘soft power’. A concept that taps into ‘culture as a resource’ by encouraging the circulation of cultural products to reconstitute the field of culture as an active space for new projects of political investments (Yudice 2003).

RAISON DE’TRE FOR DUBBED CONTENT

This drive for spinning the K yarn through homegrown entrepreneurship would not have been possible without the cooperation of local cable operators in Mizoram namely Zonet and LPS Vision Cables Network. While DTH service is available in Mizoram, local people across all strata subscribe primarily to cable TV service. The cable market in Mizoram is divided between these two service providers, which have dedicated channels showcasing dubbed Korean media content. For Zonet it’s called Zamzao and for LPS it’s LPS 7.

These operators air the dubbed Korean media products in a systematic organized manner whose broad contours are as follows:

1. By allocating dedicated prime-time slots within the allotted channel
2. coming out with a programme schedule in advance (fortnight to a month)
3. Notification in case of any change in the broadcast schedule.

The dubbed Korean products in Mizo are copied onto the CD without any hiccups and given to the respective cable operators by the cottage entrepreneurs for airing these contents. The relationship between the local cable operators who telecast the dubbed Korean content and the cottage entrepreneurs who provide the dubbed Korean content is built on the trust quotient. Sources within this networked collaboration assert that no formal contract is signed between the two parties. The ties function through the principles of ‘verbal commitment’ and ‘mutual trust’. In other words, an unwritten code exists between the cottage entrepreneurs of dubbed Korean content and the cable operators.

LPS 7 a dedicated channel for dubbed Korean media content from LPS Vision Cables Network has been running from 2010 onwards with

serials like *First Born*, *Beautiful Gonshim*, *My Lover*, *Madam Butterfly* and films like *Wonderful Moma*. So far over 16 dubbed, Korean serials have been aired through this channel. Zonnet too until recently ran a dedicated channel of Korean media content called Zamzao showcasing serials, films and documentaries. Right now, they have done away with Zamzao by featuring Korean media content in two other channels Dingdi and Nihawi along with dubbed Turkish and Indonesian media content.

Regarding Korean media content, both these cable media operators have different ways of sourcing them. Zonnet primarily outsources the dubbed Korean media products while LPS has an internal unit that deals directly with Korean media products, in addition to sourcing from the cottage entrepreneurs. The latter has a team of in-house employees that are tasked with the process of identifying Korean media products, downloading them and assigning the task of translation and voiceover to professional experts. However, this internal team of LPS retains the critical task of editing and having the final say.

CALIBRATED TOOLS: SPONSORSHIP AND FEEDBACK

The running of these dedicated channels is predicated on local sponsorship that makes it a profitable programming venture for the cable providers. In the realm of sponsorship, commercial advertisements tend to dominate while local government adverts concerning the health of preventable conditions like HIV AIDS and Tuberculosis are displayed too. This apart, ads featuring in these dedicated channels also include awareness about consumer rights. The private commercials pertain to big shopping malls of Aizawl and the beauty industry like beauty parlours, spas, shops selling Korean cosmetics. Others consist of commercials on behalf of food distributors like Maggie and Wai Wai. Interestingly, few of the beauty products showcased frequently on these channels are skin whitening and scraping of pimples not just for females but also for men.

The cable operators have a unique way of securing sponsorship for these dedicated channels. Three months before airing a particular serial or film, the channel comes out with an advertisement soliciting people and organizations for sponsoring the shows. Response to such advertisement is relatively strong among shops selling beauty products, designer clothes and hair salons. A half-hour dubbed Korean content is broken up into three parts with the commercial breaks of three-four minutes every ten minutes. Alternately during half an hour episode, the advertisements are

shown in the middle of the serial with each sponsor getting one minute. The current sponsorship rate is in the range of ₹18,000–20,000 for a serial per month. Usually, around four to five sponsors are required for running a single serial per month to keep the profit margins going. The prime time for dubbed TV serials is from 7:30 p.m. to 9:30 p.m. from Monday to Friday. On weekends the episodes which aired during the week are repeated and slots allotted for them during weekends are afternoon.

As an additional source of revenue, these cable networks double up as creative agencies for the various local sponsors featured in the dedicated channels by tapping into their in-house talents, expertise and equipment. The money earned from the sponsorship feeds into the salaries for the various positions like editor, sound recordist, voice artists and translators required for the dubbing process. In this scheme of operations, even the cottage entrepreneurs after meeting the expenses of professionals like voice artists and recordists are left with profit margins out of the payment received from the cable operators based on individual dubbed content. The cottage entrepreneurs are paid on a piecemeal system.

One of the obvious questions that arise at this juncture is how do these cable operators secure the pulse of people vis-a-vis the Korean media content? Interest is generated and sustained through an elaborate feedback mechanism operationalized by the cable networks to secure people's opinions. Audience participation is solicited through the conventional route of phone-ins and social media platforms such as Facebook with a dedicated page. This operation is conducted by a dedicated team that responds to queries as well as requests. For example, LPS 7 which sports a Facebook page has its audience actively engaging. From the consumer survey conducted as part of this study from among 25 respondents in Mizoram, nearly half at 12 had engaged in the activity of giving feedback. Within this, an equal number had participated in both methods of Phone-ins and Facebook page engagements. Zoi Chakchuak, a media provider in LPS Vision Network avers that positive feedback tends to dominate the social media site whereas responses through phone-ins have an equal share of likes and suggestions on how to improve the programming. There have been instances where members of the audience take to chiding the networks if their grievances are not acknowledged and addressed accordingly.

NEGOTIATING THE GLOBAL

To complement this focus on the building of network and infrastructure involved in making the dubbed Korean media content available for consumption, a consumer survey was conducted simultaneously to gauge and seek out how Mizos were engaging with the idea of globalization through this process of consuming cross-border media flows. Increasingly, flows of data across borders in the form of mediatized text, visuals and information has come to define globalization in the present century over earlier flows of physical goods and finance.

The methodology applied was random sampling, covering both urban and rural areas. The study was confined to Aizawl, the capital town of Mizoram and neighbouring villages of Thancil and Ramrikawn with 25 respondents of varied ages from 14 to 68 years. Of the 25 respondents, there were six males and the rest females. The majority of the respondents, at 72 per cent were in favour of watching K-wave content. The respondents included students, professionals like teachers, service providers and self-employed like shopkeepers and seamstress.

To pursue this line of inquiry and to put a perspective on the data gathered the trans-local approach is adhered to here. This framework helps to steer clear of binarism of global versus local, where the latter is often pitied against the former as a victim. It helps to craft a response through which all three referential categories of local, national and global are mutually constitutive elements (Grossberg 1993). Interestingly, this facet is borne out clearly in the relatable quotient cited by the respondents for the dubbed K-wave content.

Scoring a strong endorsement from the respondents was the portrayal of what was construed as shared values between South Koreans and Mizo people. In shared values, respect for elders and women cast in pivotal roles for the smooth running of familial space sorting out friction in the dubbed Korean content was cited by most respondents. Two other traits that figured high as relatable quotients for Korean media content were treatment of the content and reference to the physical resemblance of the Korean cast. Coming to treatment, the absence of vulgarity, in both appearance and behavioural attitude endeared the Korean serials and films to the respondents as clean family entertainment. However, one-third of the respondents did not hesitate to mention similarity in the physical appearance of the screen actors as a reason for watching the K-wave content.

Interestingly, in terms of reception, the K-wave was not devoid of notable dissonance. There were a few exceptions to this concurrence from among the respondents, who expressed reservations about the portrayal of women primarily as home-makers. In their perspective, such depiction clashed with the prevailing attitudes where Mizo-women have been encouraged to educate themselves for actively pursuing a career rather than being confined to the familial space. Reflective of the consumer studies, there is evidence pointing to the presence of such divergence vis-a-vis Korean media content in Mizoram. Indeed, such cleavage is not confined to gender lines but along the urban and rural divide too. A critical study on the depiction of women in K-media content and its reception in Northeast India has highlighted how women viewers, particularly in the capital town of Aizawl find the subservient and subordinate role of women vis-à-vis men as highly problematic (Lawbi 2017). More pertinently, this study has tracked how a larger proportion of respondents dwelling in towns registered an objection to such subservient depiction of women than those respondents from a rural setting.

SPINOFFS FROM THE ‘K’ WAVE

‘Seeing Is Believing’

Visual dynamics are deeply embedded in this enterprise of circulating dubbed Korean media products. While it has been held that the physical resemblance of Korean actors populating the K serials and films act as a huge draw for attracting the interest of Mizo people, it is not confined to the sensory appeal but is carried forward into real-life activities. Borrowing from Appadurai’s contention of globalized cultural forms shaping the production of reality (Appadurai 1996). This section sets out to focus on how this dimension is reflected and exhibited in the context of Mizoram.

‘K’ wave influence has spilled into the realm of the dressing style and food habits of the Mizo people visibly. A visit to the commercial hub of the town reveals several restaurants serving Korean dishes like Kimchi and Kimbab. Indeed, it is not uncommon to find the youth using chopsticks while dining in restaurants that serve up Korean dishes.

This decade-long circulation of Korean media content has spawned a lot of interest in the Korean style of dressing and looks. This in turn has facilitated the mushrooming of fabric designers specializing in Korean style. As a continuing narrative, several hair saloons have flourished in the capital city Aizawl popularizing the Korean hairstyle. This fad in Korean looks and style has flooded the market with Korean-made beauty products whose sponsorship to a large extent keeps the dedicated channels of Korean media products well oiled. Notably, Korean fashion sensibility is not confined to the young and fashion aficionados, it has seeped into sombre occasions, like Sunday church dressing among the adult population. The shared cultural values also stem from a belief in a common faith. Like South Korea which has largely adopted Christianity, Mizoram too has a majority Christian population. Indeed, the K serials and films are replete with Christian motifs like Baptism and church weddings that work to resonate with the Mizos (Kaisii 2017).

A section of the Mizo society thinks that the popularity of Korean content has led to the feminization of men as the latter have taken to developing soft looks through hairstyling, colour preference and muted designs. Substantiating this, an interview with a media person running a creative agency asserted that such soft looks would not have been tolerated a decade ago. He further averred that such 'cultivation' would have been the butt of bullying activities. A related development has been the rise of social media 'influencers' who have gained momentum through a huge fan following by engaging in active micro-blogging and creating narratives through Instagram. These influencers are adept in uploading photographs that depict them going through daily activities like shopping, etc.

Local media reports suggest the gaining popularity of Korean and other Asian superheroes in dressing competitions called 'Cosplay' held frequently in the capital Aizawl. K-pop, the triad of famous Korean cultural export too has taken roots in Mizoram. In the case of online meetings offline, the popularity of K-pop and its ensemble has encouraged several Mizo youths' groups to participate in dance competitions in Seoul and even win awards. In 2018, a dance troop named Frozen Crew participated in a competition organized in South Korea and won a prize inspired largely by K-pop.

REGULATION IN DUBBED ENTERPRISE: ROLE OR ABSENCE?

One of the moot questions that must be dealt with while writing this chapter is to ask how does this uninhibited purchase of 'K' wave by a willing audience in Mizoram sit with circulation and other related regulation? Screening copyrighted material to an audience through transmission beyond a close circle of family and friends constitutes an infringement of the Copy Right Act, 1957. To transmit, one either must be the copyright holder of the media material or secure a licence to do so from the holder itself. In other words, before telecasting any sourced media content the telecast rights must be first secured.

So far, the going has been good as these reproductions and circulation of dubbed Korean media content has not raised the hackles of the concerned authorities either domestic or Korean. At a time when the phrase 'start-up India' has gained an urgent currency, the thriving media cottage entrepreneurship of Aizawl gets traction as an organic indigenous activity fulfilling a much-needed demand for 'relatable' media content. Indeed, entrepreneurship is a term rarely associated with the region that Mizoram comes under that is India's Northeast.

Prevalent media ecology both domestic and pan-Asia to a large extent has acted as an enabling factor for this cross-border media flows and indigenized form of adaptation for consumption. In the larger national context, when it comes to transnational media flows, the scene has transformed from the 1990s 'invasion from the sky' rhetoric calling for gatekeeping during the introduction of satellite television to one of collaboration and facilitation beginning early in the new millennium between foreign media companies and domestic media producers (Chadha and Kavoori 2015).

Another shift that should be factored in the popularity of the K-wave is the context of what has been defined as international media flows from the global South to South (Thussu 2006). In this framework, nation-states have adopted a deliberate policy of aiding their domestic media industry in its production capabilities as a measure of garnering impact and influence abroad through the export of its media products (Flew 2013). This explains why both the Korean authorities and media production conglomerates are reluctant to initiate any legal proceedings leaving it a grey area.

CONCLUSION

A salient feature and outcome of this beaming of Korean entertainment media products through cable is that it has been injecting a heterogeneous reality into the television landscape of Mizoram. Unlike other states, Mizoram has developed its unique practice of circulating foreign media texts, in this case, K-wave in a collective way through a cable rather than individual DVD sales. Setting in place a network of cottage entrepreneurship in the capital town Aizawl, churning out ready to beam material for the much eager cable networks hungry for entertainment content.

The many ways in which the audience has related to the Korean media products reveal how Mizos have negotiated this exposure to foreign visual texts and made it their own through the prism of the lived reality of values and cultural affinities. Touching across all ages, strata and gender, the K-wave as a phenomenon has not been the exclusive preserve of any group in the state. This thriving cottage entrepreneurship is a testimony to the skills and energy of young people who have learned to navigate the by lanes of digital technologies and make most of the opportunities offered through it in borderless space.

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Reading K-Pop Memes on Social Media Through a Gendered Perspective: The Case of Darjeeling and Kalimpong

Prashant Pradhan

INTRODUCTION

Korean-pop has engulfed the imagination of teenagers and millennials all over the world and it is making its presence felt in India too. The fan base for popular Korean music bands is proliferating at a steady pace and various fan groups have opened up. There are numerous fan groups across all social media platforms created by young adults in India dedicated specifically to K-pop. A significant rise of the fan base of K-pop can be located in North East India and regions of North Bengal since the early 2000s. Darjeeling and Kalimpong are hill stations that are situated in the Indian state of West Bengal and K-pop particularly enjoys a big fan base here. The majority of people in this region primarily listen to Hindi film music and since the most popular language spoken here

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is Nepali, Nepali pop music also enjoys immense popularity here. But with the advent of the internet and MTV, different genres of international music have become equally popular. The respondents listened to various genres of music out of which Taylor Swift, Drake, Adele, One Direction, and Eminem were the most popular international artists listed. K-pop is slowly making its presence felt here, Korean culture has been popular in this region since the 2000s with the proliferation of Korean series and films such as *Boys over Flowers*, *My Sassy Girl*, *A Millionaire's First Love* and *Classic*, etc. These films and series captured the imagination of young boys and girls throughout this region which is reflected in their attire and fashion choices and to top this suddenly learning to speak Korean became a rage amongst this demographic. With the advent of the internet, this region has wider access to global culture, social media has given access and anonymity to express their opinions without the fear of retribution. Social media has enabled users to share sexist and homophobic jokes on a global platform while maintaining absolute anonymity (Siddiqi et al. 2018).

Sexism, homophobia, transphobia, prejudices and discrimination are very much a part of the society we live and grow up in but with the advent of social media, homophobia has proliferated especially amongst young adults who are desperate for validation and peer social acceptance. Brodie (1996) describes a meme to be a virus, 'a virus of the mind is something out in the world that infects people with memes. Those memes, in turn, influence the infected people's behaviour so that they help perpetuate and spread the virus'. Memes more often than not are in the pretext of humorous connotations of casual sexism, homophobia, and hegemonic masculinity. According to Siddiqi et al. (2018), memes are not always harmless since sometimes these 'essentially encourage and promote tolerance towards casual sexism by making it seem less harmful, derogatory or offensive'.

Shifman (2014) defines memes as a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form or stance which were created with awareness of each other, and were circulated, imitated and transformed via the internet by many users. Internet users today create and share memes with varying intent and purpose, they generally have an element of humour and get reproduced by millions of users and it reveals various personal interpretations of the memes. The multi-nodal structure of the internet 'enables the easy proliferation of copied and mirrored content' (Kumar 2015). Memes are firmly a part of global internet culture

and no pop-culture phenomenon is complete without launching a flurry of memes about it. Siddiqi et al. (2018), argue that online memes are generally humorous and satirical in nature with a textual and pictorial body. Social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, etc. are used by adolescents' world over to express views and opinions. Memes are now the new arena of bottom-up expression that can blend pop-culture, politics and participation in unexpected ways. This chapter aims to explore the multiplicity of factors that contribute to the rise in memes that are sexist, homophobic and negative towards K-pop.

MASCULINITY IN THIS REGION

The region of Darjeeling and Kalimpong like most of India has a multi-cultural population with people from varied religions and cultures settling here. The most predominant of the groups are the Gurkhas. The Gurkhas are believed to be those who came to India from Nepal, according to Sinha and Subba (2003), it is unclear as to when exactly this happened. Moreover, the Kiratis consisting of Limbu, Lepcha, Rai Mangar, etc. who constitute a significant portion of the Gurkhas, were the original settlers of the neighbouring state of Sikkim. The Gurkhas constitute about two-thirds of the population of this region (Sinha and Subba 2003). The Anglo-Nepalese War (1814–1816) established the Gurkhas as a 'martial race' (Montgomery 1998). This aspect has endured through all these years and in this society's strength, competence, independence and rationality are considered to be synonymous with being masculine, while fragility, passivity and emotionalism are considered to be feminine (Mishra 2013). This standard of masculinity is referred to by Connell (1987) as hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity serves as a normative function in a particular culture and lays down rules and regulations about the most optimum way of being a man. It requires all other men to position themselves in relation to it and it ideologically legitimizes the global subordination of women to men (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). The cultural ideology of this region places men and masculinity to be synonymous with their martial qualities, masculinity, loyalty and defiance. They are the opposite of being enervated and effeminate. A cultural ideology is defined by Herek (1990) to be a system of beliefs, values and customs that form the basis for a group member's shared perception of social reality. David and Brannon (1976) underline emotional stoicism, no sissy stuff, being a big wheel, being sturdy as an oak, willingness to accept and

inflict violence on other men and participation in sports, the military and other fraternal organizations as six aspects of masculinity that has been embedded in our consciousness by the society, we live in.

SOFT MASCULINITY OF K-POP

Ayuningtyas (2017) refers to K-pop as a genre that relies heavily on the visual. Paramount importance is given to how the idols present themselves. Their fashion is meticulously crafted and this is seen through the big-budget music videos with the immaculate choreographies. K-pop is significantly influenced by western popular music. According to Jung, South Korean masculinity is reconstructed to give rise to soft, global and postmodern masculinities respectively. Sung Jung (2011), defines soft masculinity as a hybrid product constructed through the amalgamation of South Korea's traditional seonbi masculinity, Japan's bishonen (pretty boy) and global metrosexual masculinity. This soft masculinity is removed from the hegemonic masculinity of most cultures that expect men to be tough, unkempt and not interested in their own appearances. Ayuningtyas (2017) elaborates 'Masculinity in K-pop is in contrast with Korean traditional masculinity that is defined by patriarchal authoritarian masculinity, hard masculinity is rooted in compulsory military service for men'. This leads to the fact that the masculinity that is presented to the audience by the K-pop idols is an amalgamation of different masculinities that caters to what their loyal audience wants from them. Jung (2011) argues that South Koreaness as well as South Korean masculinity itself is driven by the 'transcultural' hybridization process between Korean traditional masculinities and global masculinities. This also adds weight to the thought that gender is a performance. The present study on K-pop-based meme circulation in Darjeeling and Kalimpong found a co-relation between hegemonic hard masculinity and negative attitude towards K-pop.

Butler (1999) argues that we must forgo this categorization of what traits are masculine and feminine in order to develop and grow as a society. She concurs that labels of 'male', 'female', straight, gay, etc. are defining factors towards prejudice in our society. Concurring with Butler and her concept of the performative, this study shows that the concepts of heteronormativity, gender binaries and gender roles have been central to the rise of homophobia and sexism amongst adolescents in schools and colleges. By analyzing memes about K-pop that have a gendered and heterosexist context to them, this study brings to the fore societal and

cultural norms about gender and masculinity that are plaguing adolescents in this region. Heterosexism as defined by Herek is an ideological system that denies, denigrates and stigmatizes any non-heterosexual form of behaviour, identity, relationship or community. While nothing K-pop and the K-pop idols hint at non-heterosexual norms but they represent masculinity that exists outside of the dominant or hegemonic masculinity of this region.

Butler (1999) argues that gender identity is not natural but it is a result of social conventions or an act that becomes true. We must rethink how most basic categories of human identity are organized. She is sceptical about sex, gender and identity and the whole notion of labelling yourself and others as gay or straight and also male and female. She questions where these categories originate from and how it affects society. Assuming some identity as normal will result in 'non-normal' people having less fulfilling lives. Since it is considered normal for men to behave as masculine and women in a feminine way, anybody who acts or identifies differently is labelled as abnormal. Butler questions where these categories arise from? She says that there is no natural basis to gender and that there is no connection between gender and sex and it is social conventions about dress and behaviour that give the appearance of a natural basis. This comes from action, when people act in expected ways, that what makes gender real. She says that gender is performance-oriented; it's like a choreographed routine that you practice since the time you are born.

Effeminacy or soft masculinity is one of the major reasons that respondents listed as the reason for their negative attitude towards K-pop idols. Lock and Kleis (1998) list agreement with traditional gender roles, religiousness or membership of fundamental religious organizations, conservative political views and no personal contact with homosexuals as well as peer acceptance of homophobic attitudes as the main reasons behind hostile attitudes and violence towards homosexuals. Fishben (1996) argues that adolescence has been considered critical in the development and assertion of prejudice. Group socialization theories suggest that social identities, group membership and interpersonal interactions influence the formation of prejudiced attitudes. This study found a correlation between the young adult's prejudiced attitudes towards K-pop stars and peer group socialization, some respondents admit to posting homophobic memes and making fun of K-pop because they believe that would get them the approval of their peers.

Catherine MacKinnon (1989) defines gender as inequality, a social and political concept, a social status based on who is permitted to do what and to whom. Gender and the norms which are embedded socially and culturally because of it are determining factors towards heteronormativity and homophobia. Hence anyone or anything that subverts the gender norms and roles are criticized or made fun of. Korean-pop and K-pop idols subvert traditional gender roles and gender performance through their fashion, their corporeal image and their performances and music videos. Kendall and Martino (2012), argue that such binary concepts and concrete definitions which are rigidly reinforced in society eventually result in gender inequality. They say the society at large attaches more value and importance to males and masculinity becomes something that must be aspirational and revered. The present study finds that only the traditional hard masculinity is given importance, any other expression of maleness, especially the soft masculinity performed by the K-pop idols is criticized with vitriol.

CONCEPTUAL AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

Since the primary objective of the study was to explore and analyze memes or K-pop through a gendered lens, these memes are taken to be non-verbal. A qualitative form of content analysis was applied for data analysis. The initial phase employed a mix of aspects of non-verbal communication introduced by Michael Argyle (1983) and Nick Lacey (1998). These aspects were:

1. Facial expression
2. Gestures and bodily movements
3. Bodily postures and bodily contact
4. Clothes and appearances
5. The setting
6. The anchorage
7. Juxtaposition.

In order to ensure a thorough understanding of this phenomenon semi-structured interviews were conducted of adolescents aged 14–19. These interviews were semi-structured and consisted of ten open-ended questions which were used to stimulate in-depth responses.

The study relied on Queer Theory and concepts of Heterosexism and hegemonic masculinity. Butler argues that we must forgo the categorization of what traits and qualities are masculine and feminine in order to grow and develop as a society. Concurring with Butler and her concept of the performative, this study shows that heteronormativity, heterosexism and gender binaries have been central to the rise of homophobia amongst adolescents. The study also references the concept of hegemonic masculinity which is according to Connell (1987) ‘is always constructed in relation to various subordinated masculinities as well as in relation to women’.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Four themes that emerged from the analysis of the memes and the interviews conducted with the adolescents.

1. Repeated comparison to women
2. Hegemonic Masculinity
3. Homophobia and transphobia
4. Comparison to social evils.

REPEATED COMPARISON TO WOMEN

A lot of the memes taken for this study resort to comparing the male K-pop idols to the female idols, often emphasizing that the only difference between them is the length of their hair. These memes are at once sexist as well as homophobic. These connote that the most vicious way of insulting the K-pop idols is by comparing them to their female counterparts. This dichotomy is consistent with the Dis-Identification hypothesis devised by Diamond (2013) which states that the most important and significant aspect of being a man is not being a woman. This study finds a strong co-relation between negative feelings about women and negative feelings about effeminate men in a male-dominated patriarchal society. The soft masculinity that the male idols ascribe to requires them to have a lean body and delicate physical features. The male idols also wear clothing that is often very tightly fitted which highlights their lean and skinny bodies, many times the male idols are also seen wearing makeup to highlight their features. The K-pop idols are often seen in close proximity to one

another in the images used in the memes, they are seen hugging, holding hands and holding each other in some of the images used in the memes. Physical intimacy between the same genders especially amongst men is considered by the respondents and the meme makers as not masculine. One consistent reason as to why the respondents have a negative attitude towards K-pop has been that according to them the idols are female wannabes or are not manly enough, their masculinity is considered to be too effeminate.

The respondents listed strength, a muscular body, and a deep voice and good height, quiet personality, responsible, dependent, successful as some of the qualities that make a man aspirational to other men and attractive to women. Young adolescents endorse masculinity norms related to physical toughness, autonomy, financial independence, protecting and providing for families and emotional stoicism Beauty, a slim body, dedication towards family, being approachable, kind, respectful were some of the qualities the respondents listed that makes a woman desirable. The respondents listed, a high-pitched voice, wearing cosmetics and tight-fitted clothes, men being affectionate towards the same sex as qualities they found the most repudiated in other men. An example of this is a meme where an image of the idols from BTS is in juxtaposition with an image of the members of Girl's Generation, an all-female girl band. The image of BTS shows the idols posing for a picture where they are all dressed identically in clothes that look fitted and fashion-forward. They are holding on to each other with V placing his chin on Jimins' shoulder and RM placing his left hand on J Hope's arms. The image of Girl's Generation is more of the same where they are holding onto each other and posing for the camera. The anchorage that accompanies this meme says the only difference between the idols from BTS and Girl's Generation is the length of their hair. Herek points out that through the ideology of gender, children, as they grow up, embed the cultural ideologies of gender and also while forming their own gender identity. They grow up believing that the norms of masculinity and femininity are natural rather than a social construction.

HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY

Hegemonic masculinity refers to characteristics that different cultures assign to men which places men in a position of subordination over women and other men. One of the arguments that the respondents put

forward for their negative attitude and rejection of K-pop was that the idols were not ‘manly’ or macho enough. One particular meme juxtaposes an image of a soldier in a war zone with that of Kim Taehyung, one of the idols from the K-pop boy band BTS. The anchorage accompanying this meme is ‘Men then’ above the image of the soldier and ‘Men now and they aren’t even men now’. Being a soldier in the army is perhaps symbolic to being brave, virile and tough and it is in stark opposition to the soft masculinity exhibited by Kim Taehyung. ‘Military and sports have always been a staple source of the symbolic image system of violent masculinity’ Kareithi (2013). Cultural codes for masculinity do not allow for men to take care of how they look, there is only one particular way of being a man in terms of hegemonic masculinity. Everything and everyone else who does not subscribe to this way of masculinity deserves to be subjugated and denigrated according to the memes. The respondents had a specific concept of masculinity in their minds; they said that men should be tough and muscular. They were critical of the way in which the K-pop stars dressed; they said that the clothes and fashion that the idols wore were more suitable for females. One of the respondents said, ‘I do not listen to their music but K-pop idols wear very tight, colourful and shiny clothes that make them look like girls’. Another example of this is a meme where an image of actors from the Japanese action movie *Crows Zero* is compared to an image of the idols from BTS. The image from *Crows Zero* is accompanied by an anchorage which states ‘Boys from SUMI’ while the anchorage for the image of BTS states ‘Boys from other schools’. The movie *Crows Zero* gained immense popularity in this region when it was released, and it is still a reference point for hard masculinity for adolescents even now. SUMI or Scottish University Mission Institute is one of the oldest and most popular schools in Kalimpong. It is an all-boys school well known for producing the best athletes and footballers in this region. The meme reinforces the hard masculinity popular in this region by mocking the soft masculinity performed by the idols from BTS. Herek (1990), points out that through the ideology of gender, children as they grow up embed the cultural ideologies of gender while forming their own gender identity. They grow up believing that the norms of masculinity and femininity are natural rather than a social construction.

HOMOPHOBIA AND TRANSPHOBIA

The main aim of these memes according to the respondents is to insult and make fun of K-pop and to irk the K-pop who they are friends with or follow on social media. One of the many ways they do this is by comparing and declaring the K-pop idols to be homosexuals. Labelling an expression of masculinity that is not congruent with society's norms as gay is the addressers' attempt at humiliating the other. This is congruent with Herek's (1990) view that homosexuality is hardly associated with 'flesh and blood humans' but is usually thought of as a symbol for 'sin', 'sickness', 'predator'. The word 'gay', the number six and the Nepali word for six 'chakka' are derogatory terms used by adolescents and adults alike in this region to taunt effeminate boys, gay men and transgender women. Six is also a common schoolyard insult reserved for boys who are effeminate or used on boys who are argumentative and talkative. Many of the memes surveyed used the word gay or other synonyms for it as an anchorage. One meme, in particular, shows a sequence of animation in which a fireman deliberately doesn't rescue a K-pop fan because they are gay. Another meme shows a classroom where a boy is seen solving an equation on the blackboard. When he looks to his classmates for help, a fellow student is shown lifting a paper where the words 'K-pop fans' is written. The student solving the equation immediately understands that this is a synonym for the number six. These memes say more about homophobia than it does about K-pop, it attacks the soft masculinity exhibited by K-pop idols. Of the 25 respondents, an overwhelming majority of 21 confessed to use the word 'gay' casually to insult or belittle classmates and friends.

Herek lists three functions for anti-gay prejudice. The first is the value expressive function that allows people to express their personality to the world. The second is social expressive function; this helps especially adolescents and teenagers in gaining acceptance from their peers. Four of the respondents agreed that they had no problem with K-pop or homosexuality. They were not fans of K-pop and didn't listen to K-pop music but whenever the topic of homosexuality or now K-pop came about they would either laugh with their friends or agree with them since they feared that if they didn't laugh at these they would instead be laughed at and picked upon on. This phenomenon is consistent with the phenomenon of the spiral of silence developed by Noelle Neumann (1974, 1979). This

phenomenon states that when a person recognizes a particular state especially on social issues like homosexuality and homophobia as the dominant one, he or she becomes reluctant to express their actual opinion about the issue due to the fear of retaliation or subjugation by the majority.

The analysis finds that a lot of these memes use transphobic language in the garb of humour to get their point across. Images of K-pop idols are constantly placed in juxtaposition to that of trans women. The anchorage that accompanies these memes equates the soft masculinity performed by K-pop idols with how transgender women present themselves. The subtext being that since K-pop idols chose to perform soft masculinity hence they can be equated with trans women. This adds to the pre-existing discourse about transgender in Indian Society, who are looked upon as a group to be feared, ridiculed and ostracized. Transphobia is rampant in society and especially amongst adolescents, who fear being in close quarters with trans women but also don't shy away from ridiculing them. It also adds to the discourse on heteronormativity that forces the conventional standard of masculinity on everyone else and punishes or subjugates others who don't follow it.

COMPARING TO OTHER SOCIAL EVILS AND SOCIAL CAUSES

Various other social evils like terrorists, thieves and robbers are compared to K-pop idols to induce a reaction from the audience. These memes are at first glance just a way to get a reaction from K-pop fans and social media users in general but they also still carry sexist and homophobic connotations. Two of the respondents admitted to sharing and creating these types of memes, they say that these get the most amounts of likes from their friends and also these memes get circulated easily. This shows us how these memes have also become a means through which peer socialization occurs. Kiesner et al. (2003), point out that for adolescents, shared attitudes towards a stigmatized group may be one of the driving forces for developing a bond with each other. Kandel (1978), introduced the homophily hypothesis, according to which adolescents are more likely to associate themselves and develop friendships with others who have similar attitudes and beliefs, it is likely that adolescents get influenced by these group behaviours and norms and internalize that over time. The adolescents are asked to conform to the norms of gender behaviour and the ones who do not conform find themselves being ridiculed and

ostracized. ‘Shared attitudes towards stigmatized groups might be more important to individuals when developing friendships, resulting in similarity among group members’ (Paul Poteat 2007). One particular meme considers the eradication of K-pop to be a more pressing issue than world poverty and world hunger. Here K-pop is considered to be synonymous with homosexuality and so according to it, homosexuality is, in turn, the most pressing issue that needs to be eradicated from society. This meme elucidates the homophobia and heterosexism that are rampant in this society and culture. Kendall and Martino (2012) label this as the ‘operatic overtones of the dominant’ which is relevant here since celebrities like the K-pop idols are held to the same standard that is prevalent in the dominant culture. It is expected of them to subscribe to the dominant heteronormative structure of aesthesized masculinity and since they don’t conform to dominant norms of masculinity, they are hence made fun of through these memes. These memes show that there is no tolerance for any form of masculinity or gender expression that isn’t hegemonic. Anyone who supports or performs this ‘othered’ masculinity should be attacked.

Two of the respondents, both females identified themselves as being big fans of K-pop and particularly BTS, they were members of the BTS army. They were both in school and they loved BTS because ‘BTS makes you feel loved, their songs talk about issues the young generation goes through’. Plus, their songs are peppy and make you dance but they also have deep meaning to their lyrics. She elaborates that the reason for the global popularity of K-pop is that the K-pop idols ‘are really hard working and kind’. The other respondent said that she loves BTS because of their energetic choreography and colourful costumes. When asked about their peers’ negative attitude towards K-pop, they said only the ones who have never engaged with K-POP idols and their music could hate them. She feels that these memes are created and shared by people because anything that is to be with K-pop and especially BTS draws a lot of attention of the BTS Army and hence gets lots of comments which in turn helps the meme circulate more efficiently.

CONCLUSION

While K-pop is gaining fans the world over and dominating global music charts, there has also been a surge in criticism towards it. There has been an increase in online pages and groups exclusively dedicated to spreading

hate and negativity towards K-pop. Ideologies about masculinity, femininity and gender roles were the main reasons behind the negative attitudes towards K-pop. The norms of masculinity and the coded currency of gender roles are entrenched in adolescents and these result in aversion towards any expression of masculinity that does not conform to the socio-cultural dictums of gender roles. Heterosexism is inherent in cultural institutions such as language and the law, through which it expresses and perpetuates a set of hierarchical relations Herek (2004), heteronormative structures of the power relations seep into the consciousness of the adolescents. The K-pop idols and anyone who doesn't conform to these norms is penalized and memes have become a cultural currency through which this can be explained. The cultural and societal codes of this region allow only the traditional hyper-masculinity to flourish, alternate expressions of masculinity are shut down. The ever-expanding popularity of K-pop and groups like BTS brings to the forefront other expressions of masculinity that subvert hegemonic gender roles and gender expressions and hence are often ridiculed.

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