

How K-pop Broke the West: An Analysis of Western Media Coverage from 2009 to 2019

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Abstract

Over the last decade, Western publics have gradually caught on to the K-pop phenomenon; the Korean Wave has arrived on European and North American shores and shows no signs of receding. Heightened interest has corresponded with increased mainstream media coverage, both among news and entertainment outlets. This article analyzes mainstream media coverage of the Korean Wave from 2009 to 2019, including an examination of overall trends in K-pop framing over time. This analysis suggests that coverage of K-pop in Western media has proceeded through four distinct stages of development: 1) Introductory Stage, 2) Gangnam Style Stage, 3) Korean Wave Stage, and 4) Mainstreaming Stage. This article also examines how the changing portrayal of K-pop for general audiences has corresponded with a similar evolution in portrayals of South Korea and Korean society as a whole.

Keywords: *Hallyu*, Korean Wave, K-pop, South Korea, Psy, Gangnam Style, pop culture, media, soft power

Introduction

A 2009 Discovery documentary opens with scenes of Seoul, with all its neon nightlife, shopping and delicious food. The introduction is interspersed with images of legendary K-pop star Rain performing on stage. “Hip Korea” follows the singer’s journey to stardom in Korea and around the world. However, the video isn’t about a single singer, or even about the K-pop industry. As the narrator makes clear during the documentary’s introduction, Rain’s success parallels that of his country of birth, South Korea: “His grueling path of trials and tribulations mirrors that of his country...this is the story of a country in transition, a dynamic city that inspires, and one man who, through sheer blood, sweat and tears, has not only become the idol of a nation, but a superstar on the global stage.”¹

This documentary, portraying a hardworking star overcoming his struggles just as Korea has done, is one of the early examples of English-language media coverage of K-pop. Long before Psy came horse-dancing onto the global stage, coverage of Korean culture in Western media was infrequent and limited in scope. Gangnam Style changed this dynamic. Seven years after Psy's 2012 smash hit, superstar boy band BTS is shattering records, becoming a ubiquitous symbol of pop culture in the West.

How has Western media portrayed the K-pop industry and the stars that behind it? How have those portrayals changed as the popularity of Korean music has soared? And what does this coverage say about Korea, a country intent on maximizing the potential of the soft power of its music industry?

Through a qualitative analysis of Western news and entertainment content since 2009, this paper illustrates how the Western media has framed the industry, and how those evolving portrayals have affected how a mainstream (non-fan) audience views both K-pop in particular and Korea more broadly. This analysis identifies four stages of K-pop coverage from 2009 to 2019, each characterized by a slightly different portrayal. These stages correspond not only with different framing of K-pop as a musical industry, but of Korean culture and, by extension, Korean society as a whole. These four periods are: 1) Introductory Stage, 2) Gangnam Style Stage, 3) Korean Wave Stage, and 4) Mainstreaming Stage.

This article begins by sketching the contours of existing literature on media coverage and cultural diplomacy, as well as more specific work on the *Hallyu* [Korean Wave] phenomenon and Korean pop culture's popularity around the world. It then analyzes English-language news coverage and TV appearances related to K-pop, and argues that depictions of the industry have gone through four distinct stages over the last decade, each with their pros and cons. Next, the paper delves into the implications of this media evolution, focusing in particular on how a mainstream Western audience may view K-pop and Korean culture as they have learned about it through the Western media. The conclusion argues that as media coverage grew to take the K-pop industry more seriously, so did publics. Additionally, the broadened interest and deepened respect for the Korean music industry has led to parallel developments in overall positive views of Korea as a state, which may lend credence to the idea that pop culture diplomacy can indeed bring benefits in the foreign policy realm.

Literature Review

Scholars of Korean pop culture and *Hallyu* have focused extensively on the spread of Korean cultural products abroad. They have examined the Korean government's role in subsidizing the industry's expansion into new markets² and the government's use of K-pop as a public diplomacy tool to promote positive feelings toward Korea around the world.³ Joseph Nye, the eminent Harvard scholar who first coined the term "soft power" to refer to a country's ability to attract foreign publics, expressed admiration for Korea's ability to wield its pop culture for economic and political gain.⁴

Within the *Hallyu* literature, a certain strand has also delved into the reactions of local publics to the growing popularity of Korean pop culture. However, these studies have largely focused on countries and regions where *Hallyu* has been present for quite some time, including Japan, China, Southeast Asia, and, to a lesser extent, Latin America and the Middle East. These studies have examined what made *Hallyu* stars household names in China, Japan and Taiwan,⁵ Laos,⁶ India,⁷ Turkey,⁸ Mexico⁹ and other countries.

Thematically, scholars have examined which attributes of Korean cultural products have resonated so deeply with such diverse audiences. One theory focuses on the innocuous and inoffensive nature of Korean television content, with its innocent love stories devoid of any overt sexual innuendo or raunchy content. This has allowed Korean soap operas to flourish in socially conservative societies like Iran, where explicit content is not allowed on public airwaves.¹⁰ Another study focused on the universality of the storylines found in these soap operas. In particular, Asian audiences can see their families in portrayals of the scheming aunt, the troublemaking brother, or the star-crossed lovers barred from meeting because of social inequalities.¹¹

More recently, significant literature has focused on the behavior of fan communities, including deeper, ethnographic studies of K-pop fans in Algeria,¹² Israel,¹³ Japan¹⁴ and other countries. A new study on the fans of mega boy band BTS—known as ARMY—delved into the digital organization and networking that has allowed fans to get more actively involved in sharing content and promoting their favorite band in their respective communities.¹⁵

Finally, some research has examined backlash movements that have emerged in certain countries and among governments concerned about the dominance of Korean content. A study of Southeast Asian consumers

found concerns about Korean cultural imperialism due to the ubiquity of Korean products in the market.¹⁶ A study of anti-*Hallyu* movements in China showed that the nationalistic sentiment made some feel threatened by the success of Korean content as opposed to indigenous pop culture products.¹⁷

Nevertheless, despite some fascinating research on *Hallyu*'s growth and on fan behavior, there are several important gaps in this literature that this article will attempt to examine. First, because K-pop has only taken off in the West recently, there hasn't been significant academic writing on reactions of Western, particularly American, publics to the growing popularity of Korean music around the world. To the extent that *Hallyu* researchers have examined the United States and European countries, it has largely been to puzzle through why the West *has not* picked up on the worldwide phenomenon, or to focus on the small but dedicated fanbases that have popped up in those countries within the last five to ten years.

This article deliberately avoids examining the fans of Korean culture. While it is certainly possible that some fans first learned about K-pop through the mainstream outlets analyzed here, they are not the main subject of interest for this piece. People who are already fans of Korean culture, regardless of how they were hooked into the fandom, will clearly have a much broader and deeper sense of the industry and of various artists within it; they likely will have formed their own opinions about the music, the industry, and about Korea more generally.

Instead, by examining only mainstream news and entertainment outlets, this research explores how the K-pop industry has been portrayed to a broad, largely disinterested public. If knowledge of K-pop is acquired from tangential information reported in *The New York Times* or The Ellen Show, what picture does that create of the industry? And what does that picture indicate about Korea, the industry's namesake?

Four Stages

This research is based on searches for news and entertainment content using the term "K-pop" over the last decade. The results were collected using a series of Google News and Google Video searches using the Boolean search term "K-pop," restricted by year. This approach facilitated the location and identification of the top results from mainstream media outlets that were published in each year since 2009 that included the term "K-pop." To be clear, these searches are not exhaustive—it is entirely possible that some news articles, particularly from smaller publications,

did not appear in the search results because of Google's algorithm, which prioritizes larger and more trafficked websites. It is also possible that some articles that were published at the time have been edited or removed since, thus failing to appear in the results. However, the number of articles and videos collected, especially in more recent years, gives confidence that this approach sufficiently captured overall trends in K-pop coverage in the West.

Because this research concentrates on Western audiences, the analysis focuses on content that appeared in English-language, Western media outlets. Western media outlets are those aimed at audiences in Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand. The vast majority of content came from organizations based in the U.S. and the United Kingdom. This focus is deliberate. Although there have been fan communities in the Western world for quite some time, broad knowledge of, and interest in, Korean music was absent in countries like the U.S. and the UK long after it had become mainstream in other parts of the world.

As noted in the literature review, general publics in the Middle East, Latin America and across the Asia Pacific region were at least familiar with Korean pop music (and, even more broadly, Korean dramas), even if they were not explicitly participating in K-pop fandom. While exploring the admittedly fascinating state of K-pop's popularity in those regions is interesting, this research examines the time period when Korean artists finally cracked the Western market. Through the four stages detailed below, one can see the evolution of K-pop's image in the Western psyche, as it transitioned from a niche interest to a viral hit to a mainstream topic of conversation.

One additional note—this analysis excludes music-focused or trade publications such as *Billboard* and *Pitchfork*. Many of these publications began detailed, serious coverage of K-pop long before the mainstream media picked up on this phenomenon. Additionally, there are other reasons to exclude trade journals. First, because industry publications cater to an audience that is interested in the ins and outs of the music industry, the coverage in these publications doesn't necessarily reflect the information available to the average member of the public. Second, because these publications include news coverage and reviews by specialized music journalists, the quality and depth of coverage of the K-pop industry presumably exceeds that of more general mainstream publications.

Based on an analysis of the type and tenor of news and entertainment mentions of K-pop in Western media in each year from 2009 to 2019, there

are four distinct stages of K-pop coverage during the past decade. Table 1 depicts these stages:

Table 1: Four Stages of K-Pop in Western Media, 2009 to 2019

Stage	Period	Description	Examples
Introductory	2009 - 2011	Sporadic coverage, exploratory or general stories, some emphasizing vapidness of the industry	“Korean pop music out to conquer the world” (Reuters) “Korean Pop Machine, Running on Innocence and Hair Gel” (<i>The New York Times</i>)
Gangnam Style	2012 - 2013	Acknowledgement of K-pop based on viral hit Gangnam Style, but generally viewed as a quirky, exotic, and confusing phenomenon	“Britney Spears & Psy Do the 'Gangnam Style' Dance on 'Ellen': Watch” (The Ellen Show) “Bizarre 'Gangnam Style' K-pop music video blows up worldwide” (<i>Vancouver Observer</i>)
Korean Wave	2014 - 2017	Much wider coverage, more focus on both good and bad parts of the industry, some more nuance and attempt to find interesting angles on the industry, but also more stereotype-based coverage.	“K-pop: a beginner's guide” (<i>The Guardian</i>) “Sistar, Hyuna Featured in Korea-Themed 'Family Guy' Episode” (PopCrush)
Mainstreaming	2018 - Present	More serious and widespread coverage, mainstream acknowledgement and understanding of at least some groups/the industry more broadly.	“How BTS's Embrace of Korean Tradition Helped Them Blow Up” (<i>Vulture</i>) “The Sex Scandals Shaking K-Pop And A Reckoning Over How South Korea Regards Women” (NPR)

Source: Developed by the author from multiple sources.

The following sections will examine each of these four stages in depth, including subjects of focus, overall tone, and stereotypes or tropes repeated about the industry and its stars.

Introductory Stage

Covering the period from 2009 to 2011, the Introductory Stage was characterized by infrequent coverage of K-pop. The entire year of 2009, for example, saw only two articles in mainstream publications: a list-based article in *People* about the Wonder Girls¹⁸ and a piece in *TIME* about K-pop's popularity in Japan.¹⁹ The next year saw just five articles. Because of the dearth of coverage during this period, it is hard to see significant trends; each article seems to take a slightly different angle. Compare the 2009 documentary highlighting Rain's accomplishments described in the introduction with one of the five mainstream news articles from 2010, a piece from *TIME* on how K-pop was being blasted across the DMZ as part of a propaganda campaign against North Korea.²⁰ Rather than indicating certain trends, the early years of K-pop coverage in the West would be better described as disconnected and sporadic.

It wasn't until 2011 that coverage really started to take off. While not the subject of this article, it's worth noting that several music-focused publications started covering K-pop regularly in 2011, including *Pop Crush* and MTV.²¹ Other outlets featured K-pop-related stories for the first time in 2011 included NPR, BBC, *Independent*, *The Atlantic*, and Reuters..

The tone of coverage was often curious, but skeptical about Korean acts. Many articles asked variants of "What is K-pop?" and "How K-pop Conquered the World."²² This era also set the stage for many of the tropes that appear in K-pop coverage even today: that the industry is full of manufactured, robot-like stars who sing shallow music to throngs of screaming fangirls. A 2011 *The New York Times* article reviewing a concert in New York exemplifies this trope. Under the headline "Korean Pop Machine, Running on Innocence and Hair Gel," the reviewer goes on to describe the process of making a K-pop star:

"Think of the work required to make just one Justin Bieber. The production, the management, the vocal training, the choreography, the swagger coaching — all that effort to create one teen-pop star in a country that's still starving for them. South Korea has no such drought,

thanks to several companies that specialize in manufacturing a steady stream of teenage idols, in groups of various configurations.”²³

A 2012 *New Yorker* article, while published slightly after the Introductory Stage, is worth mentioning here as well for its literal take on this trope of manufactured artists: its profile of girl group Girls Generation was titled “Factory Girls.”²⁴ Descriptions of fans also started to coalesce during this period. An *Independent* article, for example, described “frenzied” and “excitable” teenage British fans of Korean boy bands, emitting screams of “eardrum-shredding shrillness.”²⁵

There are some bright spots in this coverage. Some articles, including a well-researched column on the soft power potential the industry could bring for Korea.²⁶ as well as profiles of specific singers like Taeyang²⁷ and Tiger JK,²⁸ brought more depth to the rare coverage during this period. Despite the cliché-laden wording described above, the fact that the industry’s biggest acts began appearing in mainstream media such as *The New York Times* and *TIME*, and in coverage from broadcasters like the BBC, is significant. This coverage meant that K-pop may have begun entering the lexicon of the general public in the West during this period in a way it had not before. With its minimal and stereotypical coverage, this stage should largely be seen as building a baseline for K-pop and Korean culture in the West upon which future content could build as fan communities continued to grow.

Gangnam Style Stage

If asked to name a K-pop song in 2011, most Americans would be hard pressed to provide an answer. Ask those same people in 2012, and they would all likely give you the same answer: Gangnam Style. The song has become a groan-worthy cliché for K-pop fans who, after revealing their love for Korean music, are immediately asked “Oh, so you like Psy?” Nevertheless, the impact of this one song and the interest it generated for K-pop in the West cannot be overestimated. This impact was so large, in fact, that it gets its own era of K-pop coverage: the Gangnam Style Stage. This stage, lasting from when the song first hit airwaves in mid-2012 through 2013, is characterized by fascination with the zany Psy and his absurd music video, but also a growing interest in the music industry that birthed this incredible hit song.

To be clear, Psy is only K-pop in the broadest sense of the term. Having come up through the ranks as a solo artist famous for irreverent lyrics and satire, he's a far cry from the group-focused, highly polished idol singers typically associated with the industry. Nevertheless, Psy's ascension to the top of global consciousness brought with it a curiosity about K-pop that had not yet emerged in the West, especially in the U.S.

The coverage of Psy and the broader K-pop industry during this period was quite positive, with excited headlines proclaiming that Korean pop has "gone global,"²⁹ "blown up worldwide"³⁰ and is "rocking the world."³¹ The viral hit brought the words "Korea" and "K-pop" into the lexicon of people who may never have thought about the industry, or the country that birthed it.³² From news coverage in local papers³³ to a plethora of YouTube dance covers³⁴ to an appearance on *The Ellen Show*,³⁵ almost everyone had at least heard of K-pop by the end of 2012, even if they associated it with a single, quirky music video.

While this coverage was largely optimistic, there were some negative comments. Perhaps because of its overwhelming ubiquity, there was pushback against the viral hit, with articles claiming "There are many good reasons to loathe 'Gangnam Style,'" and bemoaning what its popularity says about shallow internet culture.³⁶

In addition, even supposedly positive appearances brought with them problematic stereotypes that likely colored the view of K-pop among readers or viewers. Particularly when discussing Gangnam Style and Psy, articles often described him as unattractive,³⁷ chubby,³⁸ and quirky,³⁹ exoticizing and ultimately dismissing supposedly shallow Asian pop culture,⁴⁰ as well as feeding into problematic stereotypes of hilarious but ultimately emasculated Asian men.⁴¹ Ironically, despite its bright and frenetic music video, Gangnam Style is hardly vapid. It is, in fact, a savvy parody of the excesses of Korean society, cunningly wrapped in a catchy radio-friendly bow. Nevertheless, with few exceptions,⁴² the message underlying the smash hit rarely if ever appeared as part of a serious discussion in the extensive media coverage of the Gangnam Style phenomenon.

Despite these drawbacks, there was a silver lining for coverage of the industry. This sudden interest in Gangnam Style was accompanied by broader inquiries into the K-pop industry, leading to the next stage of coverage. Journalists were clearly interested to know more about the industry behind the increasingly popular K-pop stars. Mainstream media icons *The Washington Post* and *The Wall Street Journal* published "Visual

music: How ‘Gangnam Style’ exploited K-pop’s secret strength and overcame its biggest weakness”⁴³ and “Behind K-pop’s Pop: The Work of Fans,”⁴⁴ exemplifying the shift in coverage.

Korean Wave Stage

The third stage in Western media coverage of K-pop spanned the period 2014 to 2017; it is only now beginning to transition to the final, Mainstreaming Stage. This time period witnessed a rapid spread in the types of media outlets that devoted space to covering K-pop, which corresponded with a significant increase in the overall exposure of the industry in the West.

Although articles on the general state of the industry or analyses the overall growth of K-pop’s popularity overseas continued to be published during this period,⁴⁵ many outlets became far more specific in their coverage. The *Los Angeles Times* wrote about the headliners at KCON, a massive annual convention for *Hallyu* fans,⁴⁶ *USA Today* raved about Epik High’s performance at the Coachella music festival,⁴⁷ and *The Wall Street Journal* profiled surrealist K-pop producer Hitchhiker.⁴⁸ Entertainment media also got in on the hype: Conan O’Brien filmed a K-pop music video featuring Korean-American actor Steven Yeun and K-pop producer/singer/executive J.Y. Park;⁴⁹ girl group Sistar and solo artist Hyuna made brief cameos in the irreverent comedy show *Family Guy*;⁵⁰ and Nickelodeon launched a K-pop-inspired show about high schoolers forming a pop group.⁵¹

This growing interest in the K-pop industry also meant outlets began exploring a more diverse range of news angles for their coverage. Some outlets picked up on the Korean Government’s support for the industry, including pieces on NPR’s Code Switch podcast,⁵² and in *The Wall Street Journal*.⁵³ Others focused on the political implications of the industry’s growth and K-pop’s role in inter-Korean relations.⁵⁴ A widely reported diplomatic spat over a Taiwanese K-pop star creating a row with China after waving a Taiwanese flag at a performance in South Korea underscored the international interest in K-pop.⁵⁵ Even right-wing outlet Brietbart got in on the craze with a story about an incident in Malaysia where a girl hugged members of a Korean boy band on stage despite the country’s strict laws on inter-gender contact.⁵⁶

Although articles on “the dark side of K-pop” were a common recurring theme throughout all stages, they became particularly popular during the Korean Wave stage. Perhaps because of the industry’s

overwhelming growth, coupled with the deliberately clean image producers sought to portray, a variety of news outlets seemed determined to uncover the dark secret behind K-pop's glamour. Dozens of articles from outlets like Vice,⁵⁷ the Australian broadcaster SBS,⁵⁸ BBC,⁵⁹ NPR,⁶⁰ and others used this exact wording in articles about the industry during this time. Many articles focused on a hyper-competitive industry that overworks young Koreans hoping to make it big.⁶¹ After the tragic suicide of singer Kim Jonghyun in 2017, a spate of articles focused on the high-pressure industry that failed to support him.⁶²

The sudden demand for news and content related to the K-pop industry led to an increase in factual errors as well. One common error that appeared in various areas of coverage during this period was misidentification of groups and artists. Journalists and editors unfamiliar with the industry would sometimes simply choose a generic K-pop photo to go with a story, regardless if that particular group was relevant to the news at hand. For example, an NBC story about the death of Ladies Code singer EunB used a thumbnail of Girls Generation's Seohyun and Tiffany.⁶³ Others assumed all boy bands are BTS due to the group's popularity.⁶⁴ Some news outlets reporting on the aforementioned death of singer Kim Jonghyun mistakenly used pictures of other, similarly-named singers, or included photos of BTS in their reports rather than SHINee, the group Jonghyun's actual belonged to.⁶⁵ Despite the missteps and stereotypes that occasionally appeared in K-pop news coverage during this time, though the Korean Wave Stage witnessed an explosion of interest in the industry, ushering in the more integrated and well-rounded coverage now present in Western media.

Mainstreaming Stage

Beginning in 2018, but really taking hold now in 2019, K-pop really became part of the mainstream conversation in the West. American and British news outlets and TV shows that reach a broad demographic audience have brought K-pop into the consciousness of people who would never normally encounter information about musicians from other countries. In contrast to the previous stage, in which mainstream coverages was occasionally marked with problems and errors, the Mainstreaming Stage is characterized by an increase in serious, in-depth coverage.

Examples of this more serious coverage include deep-dives into how BTS has used traditional Korean imagery and sounds in their record-breaking albums,⁶⁶ analyses of how K-pop's boy bands are breaking

gender norms⁶⁷ and profiles of K-pop's first openly gay singer.⁶⁸ But this deeper coverage has not always led to positive images of K-pop and its stars. As with previous stages, the Mainstreaming State has seen an increase in reporting on the negative aspects of the industry. Of particular note, the mainstream media has widely reported on the sexual assault scandal involving several major K-pop stars, many of whom are facing criminal charges.⁶⁹ Other negative stories also got broad coverage, including two singers who were fired from their management company after admitting dating each other,⁷⁰ and incidents of obsessive behavior by fans.⁷¹

The Mainstreaming Stage also saw a sharp increase in TV appearances by K-pop groups, which likely exposed an even broader audience to the industry. Good Morning America has hosted BTS, BlackPink and NCT 127. The Late Late Show with James Corden has hosted BTS and BlackPink. BTS has also appeared on The Ellen Show, The Graham Norton Show, Saturday Night Live, as well as performing at the American Music Awards and presenting an award at the Grammys.

This broad coverage does not mean that coverage has fully evolved past tropes, however. For example, BTS fans recently called out a segment on the BBC, ostensibly about the group becoming the first Korean artists to hit #1 on the UK albums chart and breaking YouTube records with their new music video. This quickly devolved into a discussion among the anchors about the poor quality of the song, leading one of the reporters to ask, "Wasn't it Gangland Style that started the whole K-pop thing?" He was referring, of course, to Gangnam Style⁷² which, to be clear, did not "start the whole K-pop thing" despite the amount of space devoted to it in this analysis and many others.

As this exchange demonstrates, news outlets, radio shows and TV programs have been scrambling to provide content to tap into the growing interest in K-pop in the West, often without devoting the time to understand or research the industry. Although one could argue that failing to include photos of the correct Korean artists is a form of racism, there have been, in fact, more extreme examples. Take, for example, comments made by a radio DJ in the UK, who called BTS' Korean-language singing "noise."⁷³ A radio personality in Mexico⁷⁴ and a TV anchor in Greece⁷⁵ both got in hot water for calling members of Korean boy bands "gay" for wearing makeup and saying they were ugly. Other, more subtly Orientalist comments included a *New Yorker* article that said BTS was popular because they bow often.⁷⁶

However, one other hallmark of this stage was the active participation of worldwide fans in calling out and demanding apologies for this type of inappropriate behavior. Fan communities, always organized to some extent around supporting their favorite groups, began participating more vocally, organizing campaigns to support positive coverage, and calling out problematic stereotypes and misleading reporting. In one recent incident, fans called attention to racist tweets posted by a New York real estate agent; his employer ended up firing him.⁷⁷ This has its downsides, of course. Sometimes fans equate negative but accurate reporting with inaccurate, shallow, or outright racist coverage. Nevertheless, it is emblematic of this stage of K-pop coverage that fan participation and feedback became a major factor in how the industry is discussed in the West, particularly on social media.

The amount of conversation that K-pop coverage sparks online, even when that conversation is made up of negative feedback, is one of the reasons news outlets, TV shows, and celebrities want to get in on the action. Fans dubbed this type of coverage “clout-seeking;” i.e., using extremely popular groups only for their social media clout rather than writing about the industry with any actual expertise or sincerity. Celebrities like Kylie Jenner have used K-pop songs in their social media posts to sell products.⁷⁸ Controversial YouTuber PewDiePie suddenly professed his love for BTS to his 17.4 million Twitter followers,⁷⁹ possibly in a bid to get fans to subscribe to his channel to reclaim his throne as the most-subscribed user on YouTube.⁸⁰

It should be acknowledged that media outlets carrying this coverage are, at the end of the day, companies; there is nothing intrinsically wrong with covering a popular topic for the sake of getting more shares and clicks. The problem arises when, because of the rapid expansion in interest without a corresponding expansion in expertise among many journalists and broadcasters, this broad but shallow coverage often includes factual inaccuracies, problematic clichés, and even straight-out racism.

Not all of this behavior is negative, however. Fans loved the well-integrated shout-out to boy band NCT Dream in a 2018 episode of the American crime drama NCIS.⁸¹ Jimmy Fallon has the loyalty of BTS’ ARMY fanclub thanks to his well-executed interview of the group in 2018 and his ongoing and apparent dedication to the group over time.⁸²

While portrayals of K-pop in the Western media during this period varied, the Mainstreaming Stage was characterized by a significant increase in the general public’s awareness of the industry and some

knowledge of the most popular performers and groups. The breadth of coverage continued to grow rapidly and is likely to continue. This expanded coverage will likely bring additional positive, nuanced coverage (or even negative, nuanced coverage) that started to become more common during this stage.

Portrayal of Korean Culture and Society

As evidenced by the amount of time and funding the South Korean Government has invested in supporting *Hallyu*'s popularity overseas, K-pop, and the way it is portrayed in foreign media, is about more than just the industry itself. K-pop and other Korean pop culture products are explicitly considered part of Korea's "brand."⁸³ Promoting a positive view of Korean pop culture is considered an effective way to promote a good image of Korea as a whole.⁸⁴

How, then, has the evolving portrayal of K-pop in Western media outlets related to views of Korean culture and society more broadly? While this research has alluded to some of the pros and cons of each stage of coverage in the previous sections, this analysis now focuses on the broader image of Korea created in these different narratives.

The first two stages of K-pop coverage, the Introductory and Gangnam Style stages, typically created a similar image of Korea. In general, South Korea is mentioned as a way to orient the reader. At times, the articles made it clear that Korean cool extended beyond music. This was especially true of those articles that focused on K-pop's popularity in Asia. For example, a 2010 article in *The Economist* enthusiastically titled "Hallyu, yeah!" profiled a Cambodian fan who loved everything Korea had to offer and planned to study abroad in the country.⁸⁵ A similarly-themed BBC article from 2011 included the country in the headline, "South Korea's K-pop craze lures fans and makes profits," before interviewing a Japanese woman who traveled to Seoul just to buy up K-pop CDs and related merchandise.⁸⁶ By showing the lengths that these fans go to follow Korean trends and travel to Korea, readers of *The Economist* and BBC were exposed to the country's attractive power.

As coverage expanded, stories focusing on Korea as the backdrop of K-pop became more common. Articles in CNBC⁸⁷ and CNN⁸⁸ discussed Korea as a pop culture trendsetter. Journalist Euny Hong wrote a book titled "The Birth of Korean Cool,"⁸⁹ and a memorable 2014 CNN article asked, "Is South Korea the Coolest Place on Earth?"⁹⁰ Despite some stereotypes in the overall coverage of K-pop—including recurring tropes

about manufactured, robot-like idols—a consensus nevertheless emerged: Korea is very, very cool.

As mentioned, one of downsides of an explosion of interest in the industry is the attendant coverage of negative incidents. More media outlets have started to cover news events and scandals that may lead to negative views of Korean culture and society. The ongoing sex scandal is an example of this phenomenon. While much of the coverage is focused on the particular crimes these men are alleged to have committed, journalists have also explored the broader treatment of women in Korean society and the link between these accusations and the global MeToo movement. This type of coverage, while important, clearly comes with a far more critical view of Korea and Korean society that may not have occurred if K-pop had not become so popular.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that while the overall tenor of K-pop coverage has been quite positive, there has been some backlash. When Korean stars have gotten the spotlight, nationalistic and racist comments have sometimes followed. In 2013, Girls Generation won YouTube's video of the year award, sparking joy from fans and racist comments from others. "HOW DID THOSE IRRELEVANT ASIAN GIRLS WIN? WTF WHO ARE THEY?" one commenter exclaimed. "Ugh can you believe it One Direction lost to some weird Chinese girl," said another.⁹¹ Similar comments occurred four years later after BTS won an award at the Billboard Music Awards.⁹² As depictions of Korean artists continue to gain more breadth and depth and their presence in Western media becomes more normalized, those types of comments may become less common.

Overall, despite some dark spots, Western media coverage has portrayed a largely positive view of the Korean music industry; it has made Korea quite literally the coolest place on earth in the minds of many Western audiences. For the South Korean government, this can be a major opportunity to attract a broad range of people to learn more about their country, buy its products, and travel for school or vacation.

Conclusion

Broadened mainstream news and entertainment coverage of K-pop by Western media has led to increased reporting on South Korea's music industry and the culture and society that produced it. The Introductory Stage, which was marked by infrequent coverage of K-pop, included some problematic stereotypes of the industry as manufactured and fake. Because of the limited coverage at this time, falsehoods and negative stereotypes

were seldom refuted. Gangnam Style ushered in a separate, eponymous stage that dominated interest in, and coverage of, the Korean Wave. For years afterwards, Psy was the reference point for any conversation about Korean pop culture. The impact of Gangnam Style on K-pop's exposure in the West cannot be overstated. Nonetheless, other groups have been able to build on the coverage of Psy, ushering in the Korean Wave Stage that was characterized by a deeper and sustained interest in the industry across the world.

The current Mainstreaming Stage has witnessed increased coverage of the culture and society behind the industry. South Korea has been explicitly labeled as cool and trendsetting thanks to its pop culture. Broadened, balanced coverage has also led to negative portrayals of the country. Regardless, K-pop's growth has clearly been a boon to South Korea's brand and has given the country a major boost on the world stage.

With coverage of and interest in K-pop seemingly at a peak, what remains to be seen is what the fifth stage in K-pop coverage will look like. Pop culture is notoriously sensitive to fads and whims, leading observers to wonder if K-pop will eventually fade away. The sustained and steady growth of media attention over the last decade described in this analysis, coupled with the fact that the industry itself moves extremely quickly as it continues to put out a variety of content, suggests that Korean music may be here to stay.

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