

## Transnational Proximity of the Korean Wave in the Global Cultural Sphere

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This article analyzes several distinctive Hallyu contents to determine whether “transnational proximity” based on similar sociocultural experiences, including social inequality, youth culture, and fascinating choreography in the late-stage capitalist society, instead of traditional cultural proximity, works as a major frame in understanding the global popularity of the Korean Wave. Here I articulate whether transnational proximity works as a new theoretical framework for explaining the nascent flow of Korean popular culture in the global cultural sphere.

*Keywords: transnational proximity, cultural proximity, globalization, Korean Wave*

The Korean Wave has expanded its diffusion in the global cultural markets over the past two decades. During the initial stage of the Korean Wave (*Hallyu* in Korean) between the mid-1990s and the late 2000s, the major region for Korean cultural products was Asia. Mainly starting in the late 2000s, Hallyu—referring to the rapid growth of domestic cultural industries and the global appearance of Korean popular culture, digital technologies, and relevant digital cultures—has rapidly become popular in North America, Europe, and Latin America as well.

Because of the global popularity of Korean culture, media scholars, policy makers, and cultural creators are keen to learn the reasons why Hallyu has become one of the most significant non-Western-based cultural scenes. They have paid attention to the primary dimensions of the soaring popularity of Korean culture from various perspectives, such as media economics and management (Huh & Wu, 2017), political economy (Kim, 2017; Nam, 2013), cultural studies (Hong, 2020; Jung, 2013), and production studies (Jin, 2021). While these approaches are notably different, the concepts of proximity and affinity in conjunction with cultural flows have been continuously used and advanced by some of these approaches.

On the one hand, proximity has been a key theoretical frame for the analysis of cultural flows, and some theoreticians (Huang & Noh, 2009; Lu, Liu, & Cheng, 2019; Wen & Cha, 2015) who employ the idea of cultural proximity argue that Korean culture has become widespread because it provides similar cultural

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affinities, such as history, language, geographical backgrounds, and Confucianism, to Hallyu audiences mainly in Asia. The problem with this observation is that the Hallyu has spread not only across Asia but also to North America, Latin America, Europe, and Africa, where cultural backgrounds and histories are quite different from those of Korea. While some Hallyu fans in East Asia enjoy Korean culture due in part to cultural proximity, audiences in North America and Latin America as well as other non-East Asian locations do not share these cultural affinities.

On the other hand, because of the static and limited adaptabilities of cultural proximity, a few media scholars (Han, 2017; Yoon, 2017) questioned the validity of cultural affinity and attempted to use or develop new theoretical frameworks. Along with some variances, scholars attempted to apply transcultural fandom studies, focusing on affective affinity. What they emphasized is that global fans share some affinities that transcend national boundaries. However, a major hurdle for the affective affinity theory is that it does not fully explain why audiences, referring to a group of listeners or spectators, not fans, like Korean cultural content.

In line with "proximity" as a major theoretical framework, this article attempts to discuss the reasons global audiences enjoy Korean popular culture beyond cultural proximity and affective affinity. By identifying numerous major commonalities involved in Hallyu that resonate with global (fan-)audiences, in particular, the global youth, it examines why global audiences are eager to consume and enjoy this locally created cultural content in their own countries although they have no cultural linkages nor affective affinities. However, the notion of transnational proximity introduced in this article is not based on linguistic and geographical cultural affinities but on the "universal uniqueness" that global audiences share. In other words, transnational proximity is based on universal sociocultural experiences, including social inequality, youth culture, beautiful storytelling, and fascinating choreography in the late-stage capitalist society. I textually analyze a few distinctive Hallyu contents in K-pop and Korean films and dramas to determine whether transnational proximity works as a new frame in understanding the global popularity of the Korean Wave. Eventually, I articulate transnational proximity as a new theoretical framework for explaining the nascent flow of Korean popular culture in the global cultural sphere.

### **Theoretical Considerations in Global Cultural Flows**

Starting in the early 1990s, countries such as Mexico, Brazil, and India advanced their cultural contents and penetrated other countries, particularly neighboring countries, which challenged American dominance in the global cultural scene, known as cultural imperialism (Schiller, 1976). Since then, in cultural studies, cultural proximity has been used to explain the reasons local audiences prefer locally or regionally produced cultural content to globally produced cultural products. Proximity is a term generally used in the context of cross-cultural media flow, whereas the concept of cultural proximity argues that audiences enjoy cultural content that was produced in their own cultural environment over such content produced elsewhere because they are more proximate to it (Iwabuchi, 2001; Sola Pool, 1977). Local audience preferences lead the television industries and advertisers to produce more programs nationally and to select an increasing proportion of what is imported from within the same region, language group, and culture when such programs are available (Sola Pool, 1977; Straubhaar, 1991, p. 39). Sola Pool (1977) pointed out that, other things being equal, consumers pick local products because they have many advantages: "they are protected by barriers of language," and "local products are protected by barriers of culture" (p. 143). As for cultural elements,

domestic products portray characters eating the foods the people eat, wearing the clothes they wear, celebrating the events they celebrate, and gossiping about the celebrities they follow. Allusion is a large part of what art is about. Foreign works of art have jokes that are harder to get, stereotypes that do not ring a bell, situations that do not come from daily life. (Sola Pool, 1977, p. 143)

Taking an example of Brazilian telenovelas in Latin America, Straubhaar (1991) advanced Sola Pool's argument and claimed that audiences make an active choice to view international or regional or national television programs, a choice that favors the latter two when they are available, based on a search for cultural relevance or proximity. What Straubhaar (1991) argued was that local audiences like local or at least regional products because they could experience similar feelings while consuming cultural products imported from neighboring countries as they share similar cultural, linguistic, and social backgrounds.

Cultural proximity theory highlighted a similar language as an important determinant of audience preferences as Mexican telenovelas penetrate Latin American countries where Spanish is used by most people. Brazilian telenovelas dubbed into Spanish are also more popular than American dramas although Portuguese and Spanish are different because of cultural resemblances in Latin America (La Pastina & Straubhaar, 2005; Straubhaar, 1991):

People have multilayered, complex cultural identities. Aspects of them are geographic or spatial: local, subnational regional, national, supranational regional, global. Other aspects are purely cultural or linguistic, as when migrants continue to have a strong layer of identity linked to their "home" country or culture. (La Pastina & Straubhaar, 2005, p. 274)

Along with language, other cultural elements are also at play, such as fashion, ethnic types, gestures, body language, definitions of humor, music traditions, religion, lifestyle, and personal experiences (La Pastina & Straubhaar, 2005, p. 274; Lu et al., 2019). Cultural proximity has mostly evolved since the early 1990s into what might be seen as national versions of the theory:

At the national level, it seems to have become commonplace that most (but not all) national publics prefer nationally-based television programming. . . . One could argue that the kind of national or local preference predicted by cultural proximity is latent but dynamic, depending on the evolving sense of collective identity in a given cultural space. (Straubhaar, 2021, p. 27)

In Asia, after researching the appeal of Japanese TV dramas in Taiwan, Iwabuchi (2001) pointed out that Taiwanese people enjoy Japanese popular culture as they share a sense of Asian modernity although these two countries do not have a common language. The immense range of compatibility—from linguistic, religious, and biological to ethical, culinary, and psychological—is "a tremendous infrastructure-shaping" cultural proximity (Choi, 2010). In short, the basic impulse of cultural proximity is "heavily influenced by the level of ethnic intimacy that includes linguistic affinity, shared memories, and historical experiences" (Choi, 2010, p. 118).

However, cultural proximity has shown several critical failings, and La Pastina and Straubhaar (2005) themselves reappraised the notion of cultural proximity to argue that although the term is heavily dependent on language and geography, it functions on many different levels. Iwabuchi (2001) also criticized the notion that cultural proximity sees “culture as a static and essentialized attribute” and tends to be based on “the assumption that the existence of some essential cultural similarities automatically urges the audience to be attracted to media texts of culturally proximate regions without considering historical contexts or internal differences within cultural formations” (p. 57). He argued that the analysis of cultural proximity hitherto tells little about why certain programs become popular and others do not although they are imported from the same country. The current media milieu surrounding contra-cultural flows, including Hallyu, in the global cultural markets, therefore, demands media scholars to reconsider the validity of existing theoretical frameworks, in particular that of cultural proximity.

### **Cultural Proximity in Hallyu Audiences**

Media scholars (Kanozia & Ganghariya, 2021; Lu et al., 2019; Oh & Chae, 2013; Shao, 2020; Yang, 2012) adopted cultural proximity theory to explain the flows of Korean popular culture in numerous Asian countries including China, Japan, and India. They mostly related “the regional flow of the Korean Wave and its appeal for audiences in Asian countries to shared cultural traits, Confucian values—emphasizing reverence for ancestors, human-centered practices, and harmony—and the geolinguistic interests of the importing nations” (Malik, 2019, p. 5736). When local products in their countries cannot satisfy the audiences’ desires, the distributors tend to import cultural content from countries with high geocultural proximity, including language and history (Suh, Cho, & Kwon, 2006). Cultural and family values, including respect for the elderly represented in Korean cultural content, are considered similar values that they can share and identify with.

Among these, to explain the relationship between cultural proximity and the entry of Korean cultural products into Southeast Asia, Suh and colleagues (2006) compared the cultural characteristics of Korea and Southeast Asian countries and their potential to accept Korean cultural products. Cultural characteristics used in their analysis included political ideology, the size and characteristics of the economy and the stage of economic development, religious and traditional values, languages, and culture. What they emphasized is that the history and current state of interactions between Korea and Southeast Asian countries might influence the entry of Korean cultural products into the region. Similarly, through the analysis of the popularity of the Korean movie *My Sassy Girl* (Shin & Kwak, 2001) in China, Huang and Noh (2009) emphasized that “following the same fashion, the flow and viewing choice of films may share the same properties as television programs to a great extent” (p. 196). Cultural proximity certainly added a lot of charm to Korean movies in their Chinese reception. Many Chinese believed that the Korean culture represented in *My Sassy Girl* is similar to that of China in various ways:

Many Chinese also noticed that Korean films and TV dramas are strongly family oriented or emphasize family values, which is consistent with the dominant values in China. This is a common feature across Asian countries where collectivism is valued over individualism. (Huang & Noh, 2009, p. 202)

Wen and Cha (2015) also pointed out that K-pop's cultural proximity factors had a significant effect on the evaluation of K-pop's image by global audiences.

What is interesting is that people around the globe expressed similar reasons when they were asked why they liked Korean culture: Cultural proximity or affinity, regardless of linguistic and geographical differences. In China, many Chinese noticed that Korean cultural content is family oriented or emphasizes family values, which is consistent with the central values in China and a common feature across Asian countries (Huang & Noh, 2009). In Qatar, many fans like Korean culture because of family values, which they perceive as shared between Arab cultures and the mediated Korean culture (Malik, 2019). For many audiences in these countries, cultural and family values, including respect for the elderly and the young, are principles portrayed by K-dramas and are valued within their cultural contexts as well.

However, global fans' fascination with the Korean language as part of cultural proximity should be carefully interpreted. Many global fans originally did not understand or speak Korean when they started to enjoy Korean popular culture; therefore, cultural proximity based on similar languages cannot be applied in explaining the global popularity of Korean culture. As popular media routinely report, "While understanding Korean is not a requirement to enjoy K-pop, it can enrich the K-pop fandom experience, bringing fans closer to their idols and each other" (Bell, 2020, para. 4). Foreign audiences learn Korean after they start enjoying Korean cultural content, contradicting practices articulated by the cultural proximity theory. For them, understanding Korean is relatively less important than other dimensions as the reasons why they like Korean culture.

In Hallyu studies, cultural proximity as a theoretical framework is applicable in some contexts, yet effective as a whole. After empirically analyzing people's reception of Korean television programs in China and Japan, Yoo, Jo, and Jung (2014) argued that audiences in China did not reflect a significant level of cultural proximity with Korea despite China and Korea sharing traditional Confucian values and geographical closeness, but audiences in Japan like Korean programs partially because of Confucian beliefs. This outcome suggests that the notion of cultural proximity "is not fixed but is, rather, flexible and dependent on factors of the sociopolitical environment" (Yoo, Jo, & Jung, 2014, p. 95). With the case study of the Korean drama *My Love from the Star* (Jang, 2013–2014) in China, Shao (2020) also argues, "cultural proximity is not only related to the audiences' cultural background, but also determined by the social class and lived experiences" (p. 79).

In addition, the global penetration of Korean cultural content does not show that Korean cultural products are received similarly among countries. For example, in Latin America, some audiences like K-pop very much, but they do not seem to love Korean dramas because of significant cultural differences (Min, Jin, & Han, 2019). Although Latin American countries like Chile and Mexico are located in the same region, each country has its own different preferences.

Along with the recent growth of Hallyu in several regions, both Western and non-Western, cultural proximity as a primary theoretical approach has faded away because nation-centric cultural proximity theory cannot explain the global popularity of Korean cultural content regardless of different languages, historical backgrounds, and cultural differences. Since the late 2000s, again, Korean popular culture has continued to

become globally popular although Hallyu audiences in various countries have no specific cultural or linguistic similarities with Korea.

### **Affective Affinities in Global Hallyu Fans**

A few media scholars (Chin & Morimoto, 2013; Hills, 2002; Pande, 2016) developed alternative approaches to cultural proximity in interpreting the growth of Korean popular culture in the global cultural scene, and some focused on affective affinities. Among these, Chin and Morimoto (2013) advocated for a new theory that moves beyond a nation-centric framework to examine the nuances and complexities of transcultural fandom arising from affective affinity, which draws “fans” rather than “audiences” to transcultural objects despite linguistic, cultural, and geographical boundaries, further provoking transcultural identification. Transcultural fandom studies expanded the nation-bound concept of cultural proximity to the notion of affective affinities. Chin and Morimoto (2013) commented:

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

Transcultural identity foregrounds the possibility that fandom may at times supersede national and/or geographical boundaries, and of particular interest to the theory of transcultural fandom is the idea of affective affinity (Hills, 2002), where “fans become fans of border-crossing texts or objects not necessarily because of where they are produced but because they recognize a subjective moment of affinity regardless of origin” (Chin & Morimoto, 2013, p. 9).

Affective affinity theory recognizes the importance of belonging to fan groups of foreign popular culture. Unlike cultural proximity theory, fans form affective affinities that transcend national boundaries, as fandom provides a sense of community regardless of nationality. A handful of fan studies have been undertaken primarily from a transnational perspective, centering fans of any specific nationality as consumers of foreign cultural content and positioning this consumption and distribution as mediated through digital spaces (Pande, 2016). However, transcultural fandom research does not emphasize nationality but affective affinity based on the examination of other contexts—such as age, gender, sexuality, and popular and fannish culture—as well as the investigation of the flows of meaning and affect that stem from such contexts (Chin & Morimoto 2013; Lynch, 2022).

By using cultural affinity as a theoretical framework, media scholars (Elfving-Hwang, 2018; Han, 2017) discussed that cultural affinity helped the growth of Hallyu in Asian and Latin American countries. In the case of Qatar, Malik (2019) argues, “Korean popular culture becomes meaningful and relevant to fans in Qatar primarily through their development of affective affinities and fascination with Korean TV drama and K-pop music, transcending perceptions of cultural proximity” (p. 5748).

Applying the notion of affective affinity in the case of K-pop in Latin America, Han (2017) also argues that the transcultural identification of Latin American fans is not a matter of cultural or national differences but a means to cement their subcultural identity. For Han, transcultural fandom is “more concerned with cross-cultural communication and identification, which further expands into cultural values and virtues, despite transcultural fandom’s peripheral global status as a subculture” (Han, 2017, p. 2251). He especially argues that “it is an anomaly that K-pop has penetrated the Latin American market and enjoyed success among young Latin Americans despite their lack of a shared common language and geographical proximity” (Han, 2017, p. 2252). Meanwhile, Elfving-Hwang (2018) considers the affective parasocial relationships fans construct with idols. She argues that parasocial interactions between fans and idols account for the lasting forms of fan loyalty to idols:

The [fan] groups meet offline in concerts and meets, and via online fan sites, chat rooms and various forms of social news network. Moreover fanzines and fanfic (narratives where K-pop idols’ constructed stage personas are given “real” lives, which the fanfic authors control) are utilized by fans to literally take part in the idol group’s or individual idol’s journey by imagining new potential narratives for their character. (Elfving-Hwang, 2018, p. 196)

Transcultural fandom allows for the interrogation of contexts and identities beyond categories of the nation and embraces the subjective experiences and constructions of fans’ affinity with and affective investment in popular culture (Chin & Morimoto, 2013). In the case of BTS, McLaren and Jin (2020) especially argue that the BTS phenomenon should be understood through the investigation of the formation of transcultural fan identities. Yoon (2017) also investigates “how two aspects of cultural affinity—racial and affective affinities—are integrated into young people’s consumption of K-pop” (p. 2353). By focusing on Asian Canadian fans, he argues that cultural affinities between cultures and fans emerge in the context of diasporic youth culture, “where young people’s link to Asia is not necessarily geographically proximal (because they do not live in Asia), but rather is inherited or imagined” (Yoon, 2017, p. 2353).

While affective affinity as part of transcultural fandom studies plays a role in understanding the global popularity of the Korean Wave in many parts of the globe, there are a handful of limitations. To begin with, it does not explain what affection implies, which is not the same in different cultural forms and fans. It is not talking about the tools to measure the level and/or degree of affection. Fans’ affection varies, and therefore, it is not indifferent to argue that affective affinity may explain the growth of fandom partially, but not entirely.

Another problem is that it mainly focuses on online fandom activities, which may form a borderless fandom based on gender, age, and ethnicity. However, many fan audiences do not participate in online fan activities while they enjoy Korean popular culture in different countries. Affective affinity in tandem with transcultural fandom limits its adaptability in fandom studies, not in general audience studies. As Hallyu goes beyond not only national boundaries but also the levels of viewers, from enthusiastic fans to general audiences, affective affinity applicability can be questioned. Starting in the late 2010s, Hallyu has rapidly become popular, not only among die-hard fans but also general audiences, or at least fan audiences who

are considered as fans but are not active in fandom events. The major characteristic of affective affinity theory does not explain the reasons why many global audiences enjoy Korean culture.

Along with the rapid growth of digital platforms, global audiences enjoy Korean cultural content on over-the-top (OTT) service platforms, including Netflix. They are general audiences or fan audiences, and it is critical to understand their reasons for selecting Korean cultural content. As OTT platforms have rapidly become major distribution and exhibition outlets, global audiences can easily access Korean cultural content. While fandom can partially explain the prominence of certain Hallyu products in the mainstream, it is not the only force driving the current Hallyu boom on OTT platforms. What we need to understand is that “the cultural relevance and proximity are now flexibly reconstructed by the engaged global audiences in the digitized symbolic forms of expressions to build virtual proximate cultural spaces” (Oh & Chae, 2013, pp. 82–83). Audiences connect with Korean popular culture by diverse means, most prominently OTT platforms, characterizing the current shift to a transmediascape.

Meanwhile, affective affinity, which emphasizes a few different elements, such as ethnicity, race, gender, and age, instead of national boundaries, does not meaningfully consider a broader concept of cultural flows. As Yoon (2017) points out, transcultural fandom in tandem with affective affinity examines how local culture, including K-pop, is translated by its global fans from below, which is very effective at the level of K-pop fandom; however, affective affinity does not examine the political economy of cultural flows at the level of cultural context. The contextualization of Korean cultural text in a much broader society will be needed to extend our understanding of the global popularity of local content.

Overall, although geocultural proximity/affective affinity was repeatedly identified as an imperative driver behind the flows of Korean popular culture in the early 21st century, both cultural proximity and affective affinity have not been considered as absolutely significant contributing dimensions to the global reception of Korean cultural content. While a certain level of cultural affinity between the transcultural text of Korean culture and its global audiences may be an integral component of transcultural fan practices (Chin & Morimoto, 2013), cultural proximity and cultural affinity cannot fully explain the reasons why fan audiences in North America, Latin America, and Europe enjoy Korean culture. Hallyu is not limited to fans only anymore, and therefore, it is critical to advance different approaches, including transnational proximity, which can be applied to general audiences, at least (fan-)audiences to identify the major reasons why global audiences who have different linguistic and cultural backgrounds and different affections enjoy Korean popular culture in the global cultural sphere.

### **Emergence of Transnational Proximity in Global “Fan Audiences”**

In the early 21st century, transnational proximity was not based on linguistic and geographical cultural affinities but the “universal uniqueness” that people, in particular, the global youth identify with.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The term “transnational proximity” appeared in religious studies (Jödicke, 2017) and migration studies (de Wenden, 2012), which were not relevant to media studies. Yörük and Vatikiotis (2013) discussed the concept of transnational proximity in the case of Turkish soap opera; however, it mainly implied proximities—based on histories, languages, and similar cultural backgrounds—among audiences that could occur within



Here “a notion of ‘universality’ is not something that is everywhere or that ‘something is generally applicable’” (Monceri, 2019, p. 81). I do not talk about “the particularization of universalism,” which is “the process by which local cultural creators adapt universalistic values and practices, which are mostly developed in a few Western countries, to the conditions” of the local cultural programs (Adams, 2008, p. 631). The term universalism does not need to be borrowed or adapted from Western societies because it should not be identified in the Western regions. The traditional dichotomy of the global and the local in this regard is useless, which means that a handful sociocultural matters like social (in-)justice, people’s struggle, and socioeconomic uncertainty are some of the major features in our contemporary capitalism, which can be identified around the world. These dimensions are specific characteristics that can be commonly shared by the global youth or some audience who experience similar sociocultural issues. The elements consisting of new forms of proximity should be transnational issues that are embedded in our contemporary capitalist society.

Transnational proximity as a new theoretical and conceptual frame may elucidate the enduring acceptance of Hallyu around the globe. What I focus on is that many global audiences, either individually or collectively like Korean culture because of highly acceptable and sympathetic messages dealing with universal issues, such as class divide, people’s struggle, and uncertainty. From K-pop to film to television programs, global (fan-)audiences, enjoy Korean cultural content that portrays these universal messages, not only portraying these problems but also providing some remedies and hope people can share. They find these crucial, but universally specific, elements of stories and storytelling in the plot, characters, and narrative point of view in many Korean cultural contents, which help them enjoy such locally produced items that are accompanied with top-quality performances.

To begin with, in the realm of K-pop, fan-audiences, including BTS fans, do not care about linguistic barriers as K-pop has been hybridized, both linguistically and culturally, and therefore, K-pop fans understand lyrics through many English words in them. As discussed, language has been one of the major elements for cultural proximity theory; however, the Korean Wave proves that linguistic differences should not be a major hurdle for many global (fan-)audiences. When BTS—a globally popular Korean group—made history with the first-ever Billboard Hot 100 No. 1 song sung primarily in the Korean language—*Life Goes On* (BTS, 2020)—in November 2020, it clearly confirmed that a language barrier was not a concern anymore.

BTS fans value the group’s authenticity and unique messages that global youth resonate with. In their analysis of constructions of authenticity within K-pop, McLaren and Jin (2020) identified the role of participation in the creative or production process as a key marker of artistic authenticities, such as creativity, hard-working attitude, honesty, and most of all hope in their messages. Many fans of BTS emphasized the band’s hard work to overcome their early career struggles to achieve their dream of success as an admirable trait. BTS’s struggle to achieve their dream, therefore, appealed to not only fans but also audiences around the globe, as the idea of individual hard work to overcome challenges and achieve success is a key narrative in many Western and non-Western regions of the world (Gladwell,

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imagined communities rather than nation-states in the globalization era; therefore, these previous notions are not relevant to what I develop in this article.

2008). Global youth especially admire this universal ethos in this contemporary era when uncertainty and despair are rampant, as they want to share their struggles with others and find good examples to identify with.

In other words, global fan audiences like BTS's authentic appeal and the messages that they have shared through their music. BTS members perform as decent live singers and they are incredible dancers; however, what strikes fan audiences is the message of the music (Hong, 2020; Moon, 2020). The music themes and social critiques that BTS explores are what resonates with fan audiences. The "Love Yourself" series and related UNICEF campaigns have been BTS's exploration of the ideas of self-love. "Answer: Love Myself" (BTS, 2018) marked the closure of the "Love Myself" series, and the song's lyrics articulated the members' relatable struggles and eventual acceptance in learning to love themselves:

The candid expressions of happiness and the personal disclosures of mental illness provide some insight into the personal contexts that fans are bringing to their enjoyment of BTS, as the members and their fans share experiences as they are growing up during a period of soaring global inequality. (McLaren & Jin, 2020, p. 121)

Global youth find their identity in K-pop, including BTS's music, through transnational proximity. Although BTS fans develop an affinity to BTS, many fan audiences construct transnational proximity, which becomes one of the major reasons to like BTS and K-pop in general.

In the field of Korean cinema, *Parasite* (Bong, 2019), one of the most famous Korean movies in the late 2010s, earned global popularity based on its emphasis on transnational proximity. *Parasite* made history as the first foreign-language film to win many awards at various film festivals, including the 2020 Academy Award for Best Picture (Figure 1). Interestingly, director Bong Joon-ho talked about a linguistic barrier in relation to subtitles when he accepted the Award for Foreign Language Film at the 2020 Golden Globes. He said, "Once you overcome the one-inch tall barrier of subtitles, you will be introduced to so many more amazing films" (Adams, 2020, para. 7), which means that language is not a key barrier to enjoying foreign films. This does not signify that "the one-inch barrier of subtitles has finally gone the way of the Berlin Wall, ushering in an era that reflects Bong's inclusive statement 'one language-one cinema'" (Adams, 2020, para. 7). More importantly,

the notion of a universal story, which the Academy loves to elevate, is that it can emanate from any country. The perfect thing about *Parasite* is that it takes the crisis of late-stage capitalism, which is a global phenomenon, and puts it in a microcosm of Korean society that amplifies the terrible consequences to thrilling and horrifying effects. (Adams, 2020, para. 8)



**Figure 1. Park So-dam and Choi Woo-sik in Parasite (Bong, 2019).  
Source: Wilkinson (2019).**

*Parasite* (Bong, 2019) is a total juggling act that first feels like a satire—a comedy of manners that bounces a group of lovable con artists off a very wealthy family of awkward eccentrics, as Tallerico (2019) points out. Bong intuitively asks audiences to contemplate whether the poor can simply just step into the world of the rich. In the movie, Kim Ki-woo (Choi Woo-sik) and his family live on the edge of poverty: They fold pizza boxes for a delivery company to make some cash, steal WiFi from the coffee shop nearby, and leave the windows open when the neighborhood is being fumigated to deal with their own infestation. They live in a semibasement room, which itself symbolizes the family's sociocultural class in one of the countries' most urban cities, Seoul. Kim Ki-woo's life changes when a friend offers to recommend him as an English tutor for a student as he has to go out of the country for a while. Ki-woo changes his name to Kevin and he gets his whole family into this house, his sister as an art tutor (Park So-dam), his dad as a driver (Song Kang-ho), and his mother as a housekeeper (Jang Hye-jin). Kim's family in this movie is a reminder of socioeconomic inequality and the cruelty of inequity in ways people could not possibly predict (see Tallerico, 2019).

Wilkinson (2019) also points out that "its jarring left turns are what make it so pointedly critical of the vast inequalities in its world and, perhaps more importantly, the inability of the haves to recognize how their lives affect the have-nots" (para. 4). Global audiences, as well as national audiences, arguably enjoyed *Parasite* (Bong, 2019) mainly because of its messages portraying ordinary people's struggles in finding jobs and earning decent regular incomes. *Parasite* proves that local cultural content equipped with transnational proximity deconstructs limited and static cultural proximity in the global cultural sphere.

Last but not least, television programs also indicate the importance of transnational proximity as *Kingdom I* (Kim, 2019–2020) and *Kingdom II* (Park, 2020) on Netflix exemplify. The *Kingdom* series is the first

television series program that Netflix funded and produced through local cultural creators. It is based on the webtoon series *The Kingdom of the Gods* (E. H. Kim, 2015). It combines the Joseon era and the modern-day concept of zombies. It was inspired by the *Annals of the Joseon Dynasty*, which recorded Korean state affairs from 1413 to 1865. The *Annals* describes tens of thousands of people who died of a mysterious illness and the writer reinvented the plague as a zombie virus. Because of its popularity in many countries, as of March 30, 2020, *Kingdom* ranked ninth as Netflix's most-watched TV shows in the global markets (Katz, 2020; Figure 2).



**Figure 2. Kingdom on Netflix.**  
**Source: The Korea Herald (2020).**

*Kingdom's* global popularity and, to a lesser degree, that of *Train to Busan* (Lee & Yeon, 2016)—a famous Korean zombie movie—can be juxtaposed with various zombie content, including *The Walking Dead* (Darabont et al., 2010–present), a famous zombie series in the United States, suggesting that people in many countries enjoy this genre content because of the various social anxieties it explores. As Vidergar (2013) points out, the fascination with the end of the world represented in these zombie movies can be traced to the advent of nuclear warfare during World War II, portraying mass destruction that became a reality. Our contemporary world “moves within a zeitgeist of risk, anxiety and a hyperawareness of potential threats to the future of modern society and even humankind as a whole” (Vidergar, 2013, p. 1), so much so that people no longer necessarily imagine the type of positive future that was more prevalent in the past (Geiser, 2013). While scholars have linked the intrigue of zombies to a manifestation of consumerism, Vidergar (2013) says that cultural manifestations of horror are a testimony to peoples’ willingness to not only survive but also improve the world in the face of seemingly impossible circumstances. It cannot be a coincidence that “zombies are in vogue during a period when banks are failing, when climate change is playing havoc with weather patterns, and when both terrorist bombers and global corporations seem to be beyond the reach of any country’s jurisdiction” (Barber,

2014, para. 8). Zombie-focused popular culture has boomed in the post–September 11 era partially because of people’s fear of unexpected disasters that destroy humans and partially because it resonates with common people who feel powerless and marginalized as individuals. They are also the victims of socioeconomic disasters, from physical attacks such as war and terrorism to global warming to all sorts of viruses. Cultural creators portray people’s anxiety that defies the loss of oneself by refusing to be dehumanized, which is why this kind of zombie culture is increasing (see Kee, 2017).

Another good example is *Sweet Home* (Lee, Moon, & Park, 2020), which is based on a popular webtoon of the same name. This was globally popular when it aired on Netflix in December 2020. This is more or less the same as many of the postapocalyptic shows. *Sweet Home* follows a group of strangers with disparate personalities and struggles as they band together to survive a zombie outbreak. At the press conference for the program, Si-young Lee, the main female actress, said she did not struggle to play her character because the director gave her thorough direction and her character had a specific backstory. As director Eung-bok Lee stated, “There are a lot of monsters in the story, but what I really wanted to focus on was humans” (Wira, 2021, para. 15). Si-young Lee also said,

I want to convey a message that anyone can power through a disastrous situation, that they have strength and power. For women, they have the power to protect the ones they love. For children, they bring up their inner strength to protect their younger siblings. (Wira, 2021, para. 12)

As such, *Sweet Home* explores humanity over monstrosity, which appeals to global audiences.

People are living in uncertain times, as COVID-19 starting in 2019 exemplified, and therefore, many people have a lot of anxiety about the future, even after being vaccinated. “Zombies embody the great contemporary fear—and, for some people, the great contemporary fantasy—that we will soon be surrounded by ravenous strangers, with only a shotgun to defend ourselves” (Barber, 2014, para. 10). The popularity of *Kingdom* (Kim, 2019–2020) and *Sweet Home* (Lee et al., 2020) suggests the shows resonated with global audiences’ feelings, which are part of transnational proximities. As such, some representative Korean cultural products have achieved global popularity with their unique elements embedded in Korea but emphasizing universal qualities.

Meanwhile, transnational proximity as a practice is significant because it can emphasize local identity, which is itself becoming part of global values, in cultural production. Unlike hybridity (Kim, 2017; Oh, 2017), which underscores the mixing of various cultures into new cultural forms (Kraidy, 2002; Pieterse, 2009), transnational proximity still maintains local characteristics. Of course, hybridization cannot be merely the mixing, blending, and synthesizing of different elements that ultimately form a culturally faceless whole. As Kraidy (2002) argues, “a merely descriptive use of hybridity also poses the risk of undermining the political potential that hybridity might or might not have” (p. 318). Bhabha (1994) also identifies the blurring of cultural boundaries as a space where goods are appropriated and inscribed with locals’ everyday experiences and meanings. What needs to be determined is whether cultural hybridization negotiates the intersection of the local and the global forces (Jin, 2016), and in this sense, many hybrid Korean cultural contents downplay their Korean identity to appeal to global audiences. However, as fully discussed in this

section, the most successful Korean cultural products focus on Koreanness, with universalism that resonates with people globally, in particular the youth, as they can identify with these in the 21st capitalist society. In this regard, globally popular Korean culture relies on both local authenticity and global familiarity as cultural content representing Koreanness actually appeals to global (fan-)audiences who actually experience similar sociocultural environments. Transnational proximity advances local popular culture while deconstructing Western theories as locally produced popular culture has become globally successful. Although hybridity through the use of the structure of cultural content could be a good production strategy to appeal to many global audiences, Korean cultural creators produce cultural content that portrays transnational proximity while dexterously advancing Koreanness in storytelling and performance.

Last but not least, transnational proximity has clearly connected to our understanding of the political economy, implying macro-level cultural production. On the one hand, in late-stage capitalist society, people have witnessed numerous significant sociocultural ordeals, which intensify cultural, social, and economic divides. They are culturally textualized in content, but these dimensions are structural matters as well. Korean cultural content resonates with people because well-made Korean popular culture represents these delicate but universal issues while also representing hope, comfort, and social justice. People believe that many Korean cultural contents advance universal values that are badly needed for global youth. Global youth do not only share similar struggles but also encourage each other to continue to build necessary hope for a better world, and transnational proximity embedded in Korean popular culture works as a primary reason for the spread of locally produced cultural contents in the global sphere. In contrast to cultural proximity and affective affinity, which mostly focus on cultural and microlevel elements, transnational proximity delves into socioeconomic structures as well as cultural dimensions. This implies that transnational proximity underscores the power struggles between the haves and the have-nots, which is a major characteristic of contemporary capitalist society.

On the other hand, one more crucial aspect of the success of Korean cultural content in tandem with transnational proximity greatly relies on blockbuster-level marketing and advertising practices. It is certain that the *Kingdom series* (Kim, 2019, 2020) and *Parasite* (Bong, 2019), as well as BTS prove the significance of content itself; however, production companies, including Netflix, have invested ample amounts of money to promote these cultural contents, consisting of one of the major transnational activities (Baek, 2019). Transnational proximity as both theory and practice indicates the significant role of macro-level practices as well as cultural-level supremacy.

Overall, transnational proximity should be understood as a dynamic process composed of multiple elements embedded in the global youth. What I am arguing is that a handful of social-cultural elements, such as social class, injustice, and lived experiences, have become significant dimensions in determining the degree of proximity in our highly transnationalized world. In September 2021, *Squid Game* (Hwang, 2021), Netflix's original Korean drama, became the top program on Netflix. By portraying contemporary capitalist society, which is packed with socioeconomic disparities, class divides, and injustices, and dexterously using a handful of children's games in the Korean context, this latest Korean content has continued to create cultural products that target transnational audiences with locally identified but universally present values. Although not all Hallyu contents represent this form of cultural trend, it is certain that local cultural products dealing with transnational proximity will be getting bigger and bigger than ever before.

### Conclusion

This article discussed the evolution of theoretical frameworks in the Hallyu context. When Hallyu was mainly popularized in Asia, media scholars focused on cultural flows within geographically and culturally adjacent nations, which means that they emphasized cultural proximity for the success of cultural exchange among countries regarded to possess similar cultural traits. According to this framework, local audiences have a preference for cultural content from countries with which they share cultural ties (Setijadi, 2005). Gaining cultural popularity in certain countries does not occur in a vacuum, and the motivations of individuals are “mobilized by structures of feelings deeply rooted in the histories, memories, and values” (Oh & Chae, 2013, p. 96). However, the acceptance of culture from non-Western countries around the globe cannot be explained with a static or monolithic theoretical framework because of the shifting media ecology surrounding cultural flows. For example, owing to the growth of social media and OTT service platforms, the old form of fandom studies that focused on physical spaces and objects (Jenkins, 1992) cannot explain the changing nature of cultural flows.

As Hallyu spreads beyond Asia, media scholars have advanced affective affinity as one of the most reliable theoretical frameworks to explain the consumption of Korean popular culture. However, the affective affinity theory limits itself to fandom studies instead of looking at general audiences. Many of them also do not participate in transcultural fandom activities. Some fans participate in fandom activities and engage with their favorite groups and stars (Lynch, 2022); however, the majority of audiences do not practice fan activities while still enjoying Korean culture. Nation-centric cultural proximity and fan-driven affective affinity, therefore, have their limits in explaining the surge of Korean cultural content on the global scene.

By textually analyzing three examples of major Hallyu content as well as global audiences’ preferences, this article discussed the emergence of transnational proximity as a new theoretical approach. Media texts, which are some of the most significant dimensions in cultural flows, commonly show a new trend, which is transnational proximity as a meaningful theoretical/conceptual framework. This is based on similar sociocultural difficulties and sympathy, with which global audiences, and in particular the youth, identify. Transnational proximity explains why global fan audiences enjoy Korean cultural content. Transnational proximity is not directly rooted in the West-driven globalization as socioeconomic values embedded in Hallyu content are not necessarily borrowed from the West. They are common characteristics that can be found in contemporary capitalist society, portrayed in local culture, but are consumed by global audiences.

In conclusion, Hallyu is rather complex in cultural flows, and transnational proximity has explicated some of the major reasons for the global popularity of Korean cultural content in very recent years. Many people around the globe live in uncertainty, and they want to find some escape from reality. Under these circumstances, some Korean cultural contents work as relevant cultural products that people want to experience because of their specific yet universal messages embedded in contemporary capitalist society. Global audiences desperately pursue cultural content that represents not only personal difficulties but also social inequalities while they expect to see hope from despair, which makes the Hallyu content globally acceptable.

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