

Shock and Surprise: Theorizing the Korean Wave Through Mediatized Emotions

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In the current article, I examine the continuing fascination with the outstanding success of Korean popular culture beyond national and regional borders, known as the Korean Wave or Hallyu, through the mediatized emotions of shock and surprise. More specifically, by studying emotions, I employ Erving Goffman's seminal work on stigma and its management to understand the ambivalent reception of this so-called global success. For this purpose, I follow the media coverage of Korean popular culture by one of the mainstream media stages, the *New York Times*, measuring the emotional tone of its 112 items between 2002 and 2021. By identifying and analyzing three major categories—(1) enchantment with a cultural "miracle"; (2) fascination with fans; and (3) disenchantment because of global success but local failure—I question the celebration of non-Western alternative cultural globalization from the margins as, by definition, an ambivalent and partial project.

Keywords: stigma, media, emotions, cultural globalization, Hallyu, Korean Wave

On February 9, 2020, I woke up to the shocking news that Bong Joon-Ho's (2019) *Parasite* had won four Oscars at one of the world's most prestigious, but also one of the world's most conservative, cinema competitions. I remember the various emotions I experienced that morning which, in addition to shock, included pride, happiness, and surprise. Having studied the acclaim of Korean popular culture beyond national and regional borders, known as the Korean Wave or Hallyu, for almost 10 years, I also felt hopeful that this culture—including the dizzying success of the boy band BTS and the girl group BLACKPINK, the high-quality Korean content on Netflix, and even one-time hits such as Psy's (2012) "Gangnam Style"—had finally made it onto the global stage.

Yet when I began to reflect on my emotions, I realized first that my shock and surprise about the success of "made-in-Korea" cultural products signal how far they remain from the global stage or how little space they take up at its margins. Second, the spotty and sometimes one-time success of a specific film,

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TV drama, K-pop band, or song only emphasizes its exceptionality and serves to further reinforce the rather ambivalent and stigmatized status of the rest of Korean popular culture. Finally, the success of *Parasite* and the most recent Netflix hit, *Squid Game* (Hwang, 2021), has come as a blow to the “soft power” fantasy in the ability of popular culture to improve a country’s national image abroad, as both have drawn an unflattering picture of social inequality and injustice in contemporary Korean society.

To understand the media celebration of Hallyu, in this article I attempt to theorize the continuing fascination with the Korean Wave’s success as a highly emotionalized mediascape in distributing, reflecting on, and producing “large and complex repertoires of images, narratives, and ethnoscaapes to viewers throughout the world” (Appadurai, 1996, p. 35). Hallyu scholars as well are engaged in this emotional work underlying the surprising emergence of non-Western popular culture, which continues to capture academic attention by reaching new heights and conquering new global stages such as the Oscars. Fueled by the long-standing hope for “recentering globalization” (Iwabuchi, 2002) with multidirectional cultural flows transcending national and regional borders, such optimism has instead revealed an ambivalent position and stigma that non-Western popular cultures continue to hold.

Despite the intense emotional investment among actors involved in the production, dissemination, and reception of Korean popular cultural products, the systematic and critical study of emotions and their impact is still lacking. The main goals of this article are, first, to move the studies of Korean popular culture away from shock and surprise at the Korean Wave’s success, which serve to reinforce the stigma surrounding its peripheral origins and positions; and second, to understand the role of these emotions in (re)creating the stigma related to a non-Western cultural miracle. The research questions that drive this article are: What can the stigma theory tell us about the fascination with the Korean Wave’s success, and what can mediatized emotions around this success tell us about stigma (re)production?

To answer these questions, I suggest a return to Erving Goffman’s (1974) classical study on stigma, its origins, and management to understand mediatized emotions in the continuing fascination about the Korean cultural “miracle” on the Han River. While Goffman, like the majority of stigma scholars, mostly addresses the high psychological price of being stigmatized, I suggest reversing the direction of emotions. Instead of dealing with the emotions of the stigmatized, I propose focusing instead on the emotional response of those who (re)produce stigma, thereby revealing the ambivalent relations between stigma holders and creators. This article seeks to promote discussion of the ways in which emotions and stigma interact with the popularity of the Korean Wave on the global stage, and the ways in which emotional work is interconnected with efforts at (re)producing stigma.

For this purpose, I collected, with the help of a research assistant, all 112 media items published between 2002 and 2021 related to the Korean Wave’s success from the leading online English-language media outlet, the *New York Times* (NYT). With 150 million monthly global readers and over 9 million paid subscribers from around the world (“Company,” n.d.), the newspaper has become a cultural tastemaker and another global stage for the celebration and evaluation of the Korean Wave’s success.

By analyzing the evaluating emotional tone of NYT media texts expressed through the emotional vocabulary, exaggerations, big numbers, jokes, and visual messages, I identified three analytical categories:

(1) enchantment with a cultural “miracle”; (2) fascination with fans; and (3) disenchantment because of global success, but local failure. Besides revealing the dark side of a cultural miracle, these categories demonstrate the emotionally colored mechanisms of what Goffman calls a “phantom acceptance” through the simultaneous crediting and discrediting of the Korean Wave’s success.

In what follows, I will draw on Goffman’s stigma theory, the role of emotions, and their relevance to Korean Wave literature. Next, I will explain my methodology of emotional tone analysis and present the analytical categories of major mediatized emotions. In the final section, I will address the role of emotions in the media encounters between the stigmatized and stigmatizers signaling the partial and ambivalent success of non-Western popular culture.

Theoretical Background

Emotions in Stigma Theory

According to Goffman, emotions facilitate the ongoing reproduction of social order. Thus, the breaking of social norms often provokes strong positive and/or negative emotions, such as shock and surprise. Societies typically punish the disturbance in order by stigmatizing and sanctioning the actors who caused the emotional earthquake. Stigma—“the situation of the individual who is disqualified from full social acceptance” (Goffman, 1974, p. 9)—expressed by a discrediting perception held by an evaluative audience, is linked to the evaluating feelings on the part of both the stigmatizers and those stigmatized. The high psychological price for being stigmatized has drawn plenty of academic attention. Yet, the emotions felt and disseminated by the “normal” vis-à-vis the discreditable, continue to lack systematic study.

Paradoxically, both negative reactions and positive attention toward the stigmatized reveal the incapability of “normal” to accept “non-normal.” Goffman (1974), for instance, addresses the sense of uneasiness that both sides experience when stigmatizers express wonderment at the achievements of the stigmatized, basically saying “in some ways you’re just like a human being” (p. 15). Shock and surprise, as well as morbid curiosity and sympathy toward the stigmatized, belong to this ambivalent sense of pretense, producing both “phantom acceptance” and “phantom normalcy” (Goffman, 1974, p. 122).

In a similar way, media attention publicizes stigmatized “heroes” each time they become “a living model of fully-normal achievement, being heroes of adjustment for proving that an individual of this kind can be a good person” (Goffman, 1974, p. 25). While such attention transfers credit or discredit, its evaluating emotional tone also reproduces the boundary between two sides of the stigma coin, thus acting as a double-edged sword of stigmatization. Even though being representatives of (previously) stigmatized “heroes of assimilation” can become a source of media wonderment and admiration, for Goffman, the emotional tone of praise and amazement at the stigmatized person’s achievements serves as one more tool of a tacit disidentification between the holders and makers of stigma. In the next section, I will provide an overview of this paradox as expressed in the ambivalent reception of the Korean Wave’s success.

Stigma, Emotions, and Hallyu

In dividing stigma into three categories—namely, stigma attached to (1) abominations of body, (2) blemishes of individual character (including unnatural passions), and (3) tribal stigma related to stigmatized race, nation, or religion—Goffman (1974) underlines its contagious effect, through which stigma can be “transmitted through lineages and equally contaminate all members of a family” (p. 4). With its non-Western origins, Korean popular culture and its mostly Korean producers and non-Korean consumers suffer from stigmatization, making “K” not only the first letter of a specific nation but also a sign of otherness.

The very name of the Korean Wave, or Hallyu, stems from the shock and surprise that was created in the late 1990s by Chinese news outlets toward local youth who enjoyed “made-in-Korea” popular culture (Jin & Yoon, 2017). Immediately stigmatized as a negative, or at the very least a surprising phenomenon reflecting an inadequate, improper, and unnatural cultural taste, the similar mediatized emotions were further translated and dispersed into different contexts—for example, a lack of loyalty and patriotism in the case of the approval of Korean popular culture in Japan (Mori, 2008; Oh, 2011), or in North Korea, where South Korean cultural products, though prohibited, are consumed illegally (Chung, 2018).

In addition to evoking ambiguous emotions of shock and surprise that fuel nationalistic responses and stigmatization of “improper” and “unnatural” consumption of a non-Western culture, the media also characterize fans of Korean popular culture as weird and overemotional “tribes” (Min, Jin, & Han, 2019). Fans—a term derived from the word “fanatic”—of popular culture elsewhere are perceived as grotesque, overexaggerated, and over-dedicated consumers (Lyan & Otmazgin, 2018). Yet this stigma is tripled by the predominately female bias of fandom, the consumption of K-pop music and TV dramas that are placed low on the fandom hierarchy, and their non-Western origin (Lyan & Levkowitz, 2015a, 2015b). Thus, such a caricaturist depiction of fans and their fandom in mass media further reveals existing social norms and cultural expectations that fans supposedly violate.

As Lee, Lee, and Park’s recent (2020) study on American K-pop fans demonstrates, fans are often ridiculed for violating the hegemonic masculinity dictated by the American norms and standards as they are stigmatized because of the male K-pop idols’ soft masculinity. This study demonstrates the American media’s ambiguous reception toward the male K-pop idols’ perceived femininity, which both praises and ridicules it for breaking media expectations of “normal” masculinity. Similarly, Yoon’s (2019) study on White Canadian K-pop fans reveals that the highly visual racial difference between Western fans and their non-Western fandom fuel a stronger emotional reaction of ridicule from the outside environment.

With the recent rise of Korean popular culture beyond the Asian region, Hallyu scholars have expressed that optimism resulted in the shift in media reactions toward full acceptance of Hallyu as a global phenomenon, despite its national origins. For instance, Choi’s (2014) study on the frame and affective tone of Hallyu media reception of the success of “Gangnam Style” (Psy, 2012) in the United States and China found that unlike Chinese media outlets that expressed negative emotions of envy, jealousy, fear, and wariness, the U.S. media reports expressed a positive attitude of curiosity toward the rapid growth of Hallyu. Similarly, Gibson (2018), who reviewed Western media outlets addressing K-pop from 2009 to 2019, argues that “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” (p. 38).

Rather than joining the celebration of full globalization and even “revers[ing] cultural imperialism” (Kim, 2018), the purpose of this article is to contribute to critical studies on Hallyu through the prism of race, center-periphery, and otherness, which have already sounded an alert regarding such optimism behind the global acceptance of the non-Western Other, which further privileges Whiteness and its dominant position while tacitly reinforcing K-stigma (e.g., Lee et al., 2020; Oh, 2017a, 2017b). By theorizing the Korean Wave’s acceptance with Goffman’s stigma theory, I aim to further explore the under-researched role of mediatized emotions, both positive and negative, as underpinning stigma creation in the case of the fascination with the Hallyu success.

Methodology

The Analysis of Mediatized Emotions

An analysis of the emotional tone of media texts allows us to examine how public texts produced in the mainstream English-speaking media both reflect and construct public opinions and perceptions of a “foreign” culture. The use of evaluative emotional vocabulary and the intensity with which the media report the Korean Wave convey tacit and implicit meanings to understand Korea’s position both inside and outside its national borders might have practical implications for increasing cultural exchange and economic cooperation (Jung & Hwang, 2015; Yu, Lee, & Chung, 2012). For instance, Oh’s (2021) recent quantitative research on the emotional tone of Korean Wave coverage in the domestic media demonstrates, through a sentiment news analysis, that of 18,946 items, the majority were positive (60%) while 23% were negative and 17% were neutral.

Yet by using quantitative methods of automated analysis of large sets of data—for example, text mining and network analysis—this study and others measure the emotional tone uncritically as either positive, negative, or neutral, overlooking the ambivalence, complexity, and ambiguity of emotions beyond word frequency and large numbers. Rather than repeating the media message as it is, I suggest instead a close-to-text analysis of its in-depth meanings through a news-frame approach. “To frame,” argues Entman (1993), “is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text in such a way as to promote particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation” (p. 52). News, therefore, provides a framework for introducing, defining, interpreting, and evaluating a specific issue by sending messages, influencing perceptions, and even calling its audience to action (Goffman, 1974).

The selection and frequency of evaluating emotional vocabulary, as well as visual signs of intensive emotions such as big numbers, jokes, and illustrations, reveal the emotional tone of a chosen frame regarding the moral evaluation of the topic in question. By exploring the Korean Wave’s evaluation, the analysis of the emotional tone is especially useful in the asymmetric international context in which Western media texts position themselves vis-à-vis the non-Western Other.

Data Collection and Analysis

First, I identified, with the help of a research assistant, the 112 available items from NYT's digital archive covering the 2002–2021 period. Every item was identified through the NYT search engine with keywords such as K-pop, Korean culture, drama, film, and cosmetics. Individual items ranged from a half-page to eight pages, averaging about three pages each. Almost all items were analytical, providing an interpretation rather than a simple description of new events.

Following the initial reading of the media data, I classified the items into those that directly focused on Korean popular culture (90 items) and those that only referenced it while discussing other related topics (22 items). The majority (96) of the items focused on K-pop and its fans while the rest of the items dealt with international tensions (eight items), suicides (eight items), literature (five items), tourism (five items), musicals (five items), sex scandals (four items), cosmetics and plastic surgeries (five items), cinema (three items), fashion (three items), the Korean army (three items), and Korean TV drama (one item). Among K-pop-related items, 25 of 96 were dedicated to BTS (since 2017) and 10 to Psy's (2012) "Gangnam Style" (between 2012 and 2013), with two visible peaks similar to Gibson's (2018) division of the Western media attention to K-pop as before or after Psy's and BTS's success (see Figure 1).

In the next stage, I investigated the emotional tone focusing on how the media evaluated Korean popular culture's success, paying close attention to the frequency and intensity of emotionally colored vocabulary (e.g., the fan "looked awe-struck," "his eyes widened," "overjoyed," "ecstatic"; Barone, 2015, para. 17–18), exaggerations (e.g., Seoul as "world's most beauty-obsessed capital"; Stevenson, 2018, para. 3), big numbers (e.g., "BTS's Loyal Army of Fans Is the Secret Weapon Behind a \$4 Billion Valuation"; Dooley & Lee, 2020), jokes (e.g., "A Strong Forecast for Korean Pop's Rain"; Sontag, 2006), and visual messages (e.g., photographs of overexcited K-pop fans).

After identifying various evaluative emotions ranging from enchantment to disenchantment, I moved from a mapping of reactions to their categorization including (1) enchantment with a cultural "miracle"; (2) fascination with fans; and (3) disenchantment because of global success but local failure. Although some categories overlap, the analytical division allows us to fully understand the emotional responses beyond the either positive enchantment or negative disenchantment binary.

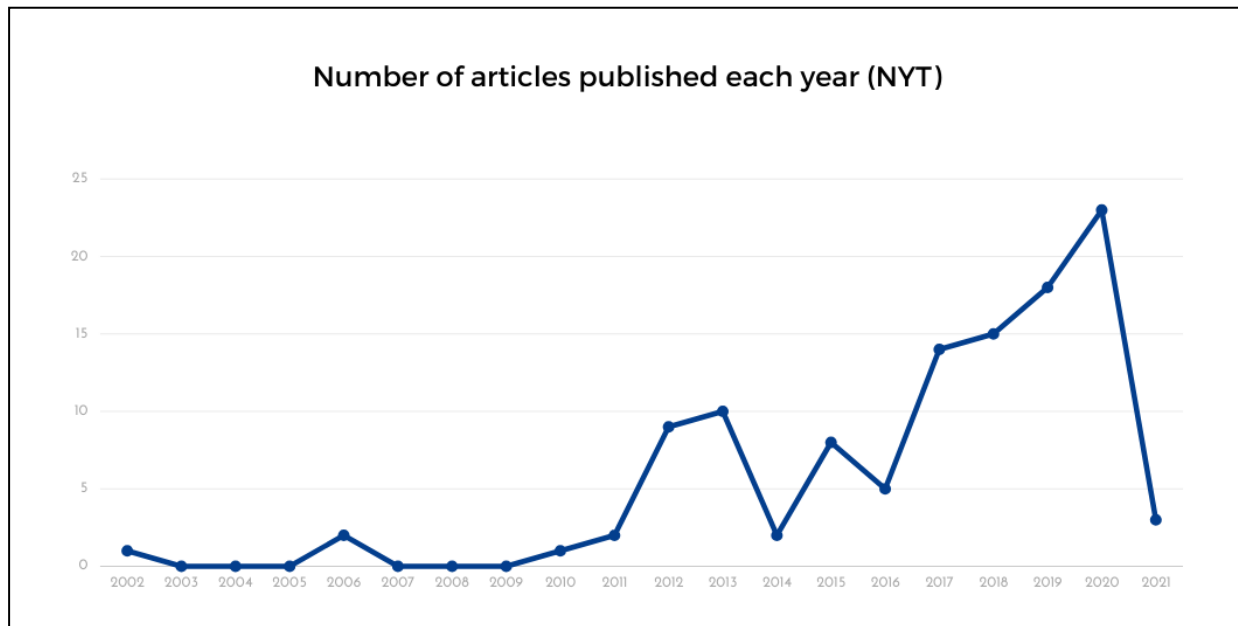


Figure 1. Number of NYT articles published each year on Hallyu (2002–2021).

Findings

Cultural "Miracle" on the Han River

Similar to the media admiration toward the Korean economic miracle, most of the items since the success of "Gangnam Style" in 2012 were fascinated with Korea's shift from automobiles to music exports: "First came the wave of manufacturing, with Samsung and LG; then the K-pop stars, whose ubiquity reached its regrettable height with Psy" (Meltzer, 2014, para. 1). Manifested through different emotionalized responses, these media texts guide the reader through various mixed emotions of shock and surprise toward the talented Other. The following subchapter will focus on enchantment toward and exaggeration of (1) big numbers and peaks, (2) the cultural evolution from a Korean peripheral past to a successful present and future, and (3) the translation of Korean popular culture to American popular culture.

Shocking Numbers

By mentioning, emphasizing, ranking, and comparing impressive numbers, the media texts both visually and textually color the emotional tone surrounding the success of the Korean popular culture as shocking and surprising. The persuasive power of numbers as technical, neutral, and objective is well known and often taken for granted. Yet the numerical expression of "shock and surprise" from the miraculous upside-down ranking positions of Korean popular products signals a departure from social norms as such numbers testify to unusual and unexpected events.

Besides the surprise factor, the frequent and celebratory use of big numbers provides an emotional background of triumphant victory in some kind of competitive race and even a culture war. For instance, in addition to drawing comparisons of the Korean Wave's success to winning cultural, sports-like competitions, some items employed war metaphors of cultural occupation, "secret weapons," "loyal army of fans" (Dooley & Lee, 2020), "ambush," and even "beauty invasion of the United States" in the case of the K-pop-inspired Korean cosmetics industry (Meltzer, 2014, para. 3). The abovementioned "reverse cultural imperialism" (Kim, 2018) to provide "a high-quality regional alternative to American cultural dominance" (Sontag, 2006, para. 5) colors the text again by triumphant evaluation of an incredible victory of David over Goliath.

Cultural Evolution

While attracting the audience with shocking and victorious numbers to frame the Korean Wave's success, the media texts tend to rationalize it by paralleling the Korean economic miracle to the cultural one. Similar to the development discourse, the theme of cultural evolution has come with the contrasting juxtaposition of Korea's peripheral past as a poor economy and painful memories of dictatorship against its impressive present, which still carries peripheral "baggage":

The last time the Olympics came to South Korea, in 1988, Korean pop music was awash in soft-focus ballads, a gentle and demure version of the sounds that were taking hold elsewhere in the world. This year, the country is hosting the Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang, and is greeting it with a vastly evolved approach to pop music and culture. . . . Along with K-drama and various other youth-driven pop culture offsprings, it's **become essential to South Korea's global image.** (Caramanica, 2018, para. 1; boldface added by the author)

Fascinated by the swift transformation of Korea's global image, the media used the social evolution and development logic to explain the success of Korean cultural products by catching up with cultural industries of other nations, such as "Japanese music from the '80s" (Kirk, 2002, para. 17), or "an industry and aesthetic all but abandoned by the American pop machine" (Caramanica, 2015b, para. 10). Such parallels, while rationalizing Hallyu success, also evaluate "made-in-Korea" products through a tacit hierarchy between the original model and its imitation. In other words, the difference between "abandoned" cultural fashions and their remake devaluates Hallyu success and strengthens the hierarchy between it and other successful cultural industries.

Following the parallel drawn between economic and cultural miracles, the popularity of the "loud" Korean Wave beyond national and regional borders seems to be a linear upshot of economic success, thus rationalizing and diminishing the initial shock and surprise as a simple imitation of superior cultural industries elsewhere. Such emotional devaluation behind the initial emotional earthquake returns the audience to the established cultural norms as opposed to abnormal ones.

American Translation

Similar to their rationalization of the Korean success as cultural evolution, the media items engaged in a hierarchical—humorist and nostalgic—translation of K-pop idols into the American pop vocabulary and context to prove its “indebtedness to American pop, hip-hop and R&B” (Caramanica, 2015b, para. 8). Also: “In Rain, **Asians might see the spirit of Usher or Timberlake or even Michael Jackson**, but he makes the music theirs” (Sontag, 2006, para. 7; boldface added by the author). And,

2NE1 is a girl group **in the Destiny’s Child or Spice Girls mold**, but it also incorporates plenty of rapping and some reggae for good measure, as well as production that’s indebted to arena-size dance music. Like most contemporary K-pop, the group **borrowed from plenty of American and European styles** but manages not to carry any fingerprints—the *mélange* is K-pop’s signature aesthetic. (Caramanica, 2012, para. 6; boldface added by the author)

Such cultural translations bring us back to the metaphor of economic evolution being reproduced in the realm of K-pop idols as a “*mélange*,” while “borrowing” from original pop stars, musical traditions, and industries. While the abovementioned examples recognize the ownership of K in K-pop, through the use of “but” (e.g., “but he makes the music theirs,” “but manages not to carry any fingerprints”) by way of hierarchical translation, they also remind us of the primary origins of pop before K.

To overcome the initial shock and surprise and to rationalize the similar, but different, culture, the media seemed to struggle to define K-pop, translating it as an essentially derivative mixture with nostalgic underpinnings:

That K-pop—the pop music scene that dominates South Korea and, increasingly, the rest of the world—has not yet had a chart-topping, **cross-cultural “Despacito” moment** in this country is vexing. The affinities are natural—the music is **thick with references to American pop, hip-hop and R&B**. And it’s both **decadently** visual and relentlessly energetic, in a way that **needs no translation**. (Caramanica, 2017, para. 1; boldface added by the author)

Call it **derivative, a throwback to Western programs of two or three decades ago**, but it all falls under the rubric of “K-pop,” for Korean pop, and it’s sweeping China and penetrating Japan, the ethnocentric home of the **“J-pop” to which critics say “K-pop” owes its inspiration**. (Kirk, 2002, para. 1; boldface added by the author)

Often colored by a disdainful emotional tone (e.g., “decadent,” “derivative”) and accompanied by jokes and puns (e.g., the stage name of the K-pop idol Rain in “A Strong Forecast for Korean Pop’s Rain”; Sontag, 2006), and, in general, a sense of ridicule, such items employed a Homi Bhabha (1994) mimicry, a similarity within difference, which builds hierarchy by differentiating between the model and its familiar imitation that “needs no translation” (Caramanica, 2017, para. 1).

The coexistence or replacement of initial shock and surprise with the devaluating emotional tone is especially evident in the items from the 2000s that predate K-pop's success. For instance, a 2006 item ridicules Rain's attempts to "become the first Asian pop star to succeed in America" and "a high-quality regional alternative to American cultural dominance" while still achieving "basic fluency in English, to release an English-language album and to smite the hearts of American young women" (Sontag, 2006, para. 9). According to the item, Rain, "the personification of Hallyu" as "his interpretations [of American pop music] provide, at the least, an Asian face and filter" (Sontag, 2006, paras. 5–6), is translated in a hierarchical way to American pop stars, becoming a "same, same, but different" Other when viewed through a postcolonial lens.

The majority of translations in American pop vocabulary and context remain ambiguous and ambivalent toward K-pop success, achieved by these mimicking parallels that are entertaining, strange, and even offensive: "**Much is lost** when culture is consumed at a distance. When hip-hop, often a product of a specific social circumstance, is reduced to gestures and aesthetics, **exaggeration** is almost a given, and the potential for **offense is high** (Caramanica, 2015a, para. 13; boldface added by the author)." The choice of intense emotional vocabulary, such as "much is lost," "reduced," "exaggeration," and "offense is high," provides here a negative moral evaluation and interpretation to downplay the victorious shock and surprise punishing for initial emotional earthquake and breaking cultural norms.

In sum, to rationalize K-pop's success, the NYT reminds us of Korea's peripheral past and/or contrasts it with American popular culture, reproducing the imitation stigma (Lyan & Frenkel, 2022) by switching between surprising and ridiculing emotional tones. In other words, it provides at least a partial answer to John Lie's (2012) question, "What is the K in K-pop?"—a poor imitation of superior cultural industries. While addressing the emotions of shock and surprise behind the cultural miracle, it also pushes "made-in-Korea" popular culture back to the margins of the global cultural scene as a mere mixture and reproduction of invented-elsewhere cultural products. The devaluating emotional tone that otherizes, exoticizes, and marginalizes the success of Korean popular culture as a cultural miracle also depicts it as catching up with a previous version of the American model while enlarging the noticeable "K"-price tag in K-stigma.

Fascination With Fans

To downplay the initial shock and surprise with the Korean Wave's success despite its non-Western origins, the media items express fascination mixed with ridicule with its fans as the "secret weapon" (Dooley & Lee, 2020), defining K-pop, for example, "as a prelude to the jumping and gyrating that brings hordes of young fans, notably teenage girls, to their feet in screaming adoration" (Kirk, 2002, para. 4). The verbal and visual depiction of fans as overemotional "hordes," "tribes," or an "army" in the case of BTS is supposed to amuse readers while stigmatizing fans and their "unnatural passions" through (1) their symbolic blindness and (2) subtle comparison with the Asian-American diaspora.

Fans' Blindness

Originally, Greeks referred to stigma as visual signs that were cut or burned into the body to signify difference and inferiority, in contrast to "normal," while today stigma signifies a person as "unworthy,

incomplete, and inferior" (Goffman, 1974, p. 128). Similarly, by identifying the visual imperfections of easily spotted fans, the media gaze seeks justification for treating them as inferior to "normal" consumers. For instance, a 2017 NYT item posted a photo of a partially seen fan holding six fan masks of K-pop idols, titled in a ridiculing tone "Merchandise Booths Offered Fans Cheap Ways to Show Their Loyalty" (see Figure 2). This photo, in both a textual and visual way, symbolically attaches the fan to the tribal K-stigma and its non-Western origins.



Figure 2. "Merchandise booths offered fans cheap ways to show their loyalty." Photo by Krista Schlueter (Caramanica, 2017).

The theme of attraction to and almost blind imitation of "made-in-Korea" products and looks is further echoed in fans' exaggerated portraits. For instance, one item draws a caricature of a fan:

Ms. McDonald, **who is white, had her hair dyed blond and styled in a manner popular among K-pop stars (think Justin Bieber circa 2009)**. A soft white powder coated her face. She, like many other fans at KCON, was dressed **to mirror the artists she loved**. (Barone, 2015, para. 2; boldface added by the author)

Besides the imitation stigma recreated by translating K-pop stars to the previous versions of "Justin Bieber circa 2009," the item creates a highly visual racial contrast between a fan "who is white" and her dyed hair, what Goffman calls "stigma symbols" worn as a "mark of pride" (p. 46), identification with the source of stigma, and/or rebellion and collective denial of social order (p. 145). Yet by drawing public attention, such visual symbols also fuel stigmatization. Here, the contrast drawn between the fan's whiteness and "unnatural" hair color and "unnatural" fandom further serves to stigmatize fans as a projected "mirror" of K-stigma.

Moreover, the sense of mimicry in the fan's stated purpose "to mirror the artists she loved" as a pretense, masquerade, carnival, or cosplay is echoed in the following example, once again enhancing the difference between a model and its playful imitation:

Which doesn't seem so far-fetched when you see the **gaggles** of girlfriends who line up demurely to see the hourly, and sometimes half-hourly, shows. Many of them **could pass for the fifth member of South Korea's latest girl group sensation, 2NE1** ("to anyone" or "twenty-one"). Dressed in cartoon T-shirts, pink, sparkles, lace, metallic leggings with girly shorts and anything by Jeremy Scott, they scream in ecstasy at the arrival of each K-pop heartthrob headed for a tour of the front row. (Voight, 2010, para. 8; boldface added by the author)

While carnival provides the stigmatized "with a world in which their stigma is [of] relatively little issue" (Goffman, 1974, p. 81), it also turns "a life situation into a clownish role" (p. 110). As this example demonstrates, the media's cynical emotional tone toward the entertaining spectacle is a sign of social norms being broken.

Besides characterizing fans as funny, several items switched their initial "shock and surprise" to the danger that derives from fans. For instance, a 2018 item described fans as highly irresponsible and overemotional consumers, stoking readers' resentment:

As if air travel did not have enough nuisances, some K-pop fans have invented a new one: They board planes just to get a closer look at their favorite stars and then disembark, canceling their flights just before the gate closes. **Screaming fans jostling each other to take a peek at South Korean K-pop stars** have become a regular scene at airports across Asia. But recently, some have become **bolder**, booking first-class seats that get them near enough to snap pictures and ask for autographs in VIP lounges or aboard the planes themselves. They then leave the flight and cancel their ticket. (Choe, 2018a, para. 2; boldface added by the author)

The fascination with fans as strange or even dangerous, considering their political power and fan activism (Jung, 2012), especially in the recent #Blacklivesmatter and anti-Trump campaigns, further stigmatizes and even discredits fans as norm breakers.

For instance, the media gaze underlined fans' fanatical blindness and infantility when they were unable to see the dark side of the cultural miracle:

Once popular mainly just in Asian countries, K-pop girl groups and boy bands, like BTS, now command huge global followings. The genre has captured the imagination of fans around the world with its fusion of synthesized songs, video art, fashionable outfits and synchronized dance routines that mix teasing sexuality with doe-eyed innocence. But entertainment industry experts have long **warned about the dark side of the scandal-ridden K-pop industry, which has remained largely hidden behind its glamour.** (Choe & Lee, 2019, para. 6; boldface added by the author)

The unflattering media perception of symbolically blind fans as the antithesis of the “normal” and “rational” consumer reveals some cracks in the cultural miracle narrative, signaling disenchantment and disappointment with the “K” that they proudly wear.

The use of religious metaphors in defining fans as fanatical further influences the stigmatization of fans and the object of their “blind” admiration. For example, to reconnect between fan and fanatic, the following item employs the religious metaphor of pilgrimage to describe fans from across Asia coming to a K-pop concert:

Some of these South Korean “idol groups,” including Girls’ Generation, Super Junior and Big Bang, produce music videos that generate millions of views on YouTube. Fans from across Asia and elsewhere **make pilgrimages to South Korea** to attend their album releases, concerts and awards ceremonies, or just to stroll around the Gangnam district, renowned for its pricey bars, chic boutiques and plastic-surgery clinics. (Choe, 2013, para. 10; boldface added by the author)

The symbolic “blindness” of fans, combined with other imperfections such as infantilism, clownishness, and hooliganism, discredits them by depicting their non-normality and even the social danger they represent, further widening symbolic boundaries between fans and “normative” consumers.

K-Fans and the Asian Diaspora

Similar to the cultural evolution rationalization used to explain fans and their fandom, several NYT items included interviews with successful Korean Americans who work between the two countries, such as Min Jin Lee, the celebrated author of *Pachinko* (2017), a novel centered on the Korean diaspora’s hardships in Japan (Soble, 2017), or Charlotte Cho, the co-founder of Soko Glam, a famous Korean cosmetics firm in the United States whose business both contributes to and profits from the success of Korean popular culture (Shapiro, 2019). For instance, in the context of the Korean beauty trend, one fan echoed the mirror effect, saying that she “feels closer to K-pop stars by using the same beauty products” (Barone, 2015, para. 7). By embodying her fandom through a cosmetics ritual, she also consumes the related K-products that fuel the Korean Wave’s adjunct industries.

While clearly distinguished from fans, diasporic Koreans are also subtly portrayed as similar to them. On the one hand, they are depicted as a success story, Goffman’s “heroes of assimilation,” a “model diaspora” (Abelmann & Lie, 1995), who, unlike “exaggerated” fans–consumers, have achieved at least

partial acceptance in the United States. On the other hand, in being depicted as the representatives of another stigmatized category connected to Korean origins, they share a tacit similarity, another projected mirror to look into and even to be inspired by.

For instance, in an opinion piece entitled "At First, I Was a K-pop Skeptic. Not Anymore," Kevin Liao (2018), a Stanford University student, stated that the success of Korean popular culture might also provide the Asian diaspora with a source of pride, solidarity, and a model of assimilation and diversity:

So maybe I, too, a Korean-Chinese American, could be ugly or sexy, nerdy or cool, quiet or loud like the K-pop stars I saw in music videos. Maybe I, too, could be seen as a person, not a punch line. (Liao, 2018, para. 10)

The inclusion in the item of a picture of a probably Asian man looking at his projection on the TV screen (see Figure 3) brings us back to the mirror effect fans try to achieve through embodiment and other carnivalesque practices of fandom. In other words, K-pop might provide members of the Asian diaspora with an alternative mirror to gaze into and define themselves differently from the hierarchical American looking glass. As Yoon and Jin (2016) argue in their study of Asian diasporic K-pop fans in Canada, K-pop and its association with "Asian coolness" empowers and enables them to negotiate their marginal position. Yet the choice of intense emotional vocabulary and binary contrasts (e.g., "skeptic"/"not anymore," "ugly or sexy, nerdy or cool, quiet or loud") calls for minority solidarity with K-pop and its fans, signaling partial rather than full acceptance of the Asian-American diaspora, which needs such a frame of reference.



Figure 3. "At First I Was K-pop Skeptic. Not Anymore." Graphics by George Wylesol (Liao, 2018).

Global Success, Local Failures

With the growing acknowledgment of the success of Korean popular culture, especially of BTS, since the 2010s, NYT items have tended to politicize the cultural miracle-ness by exposing its gray and dark sides. To create a sense of disenchantment, these items have brought forth, in a critical and serious emotional tone, incidences of suicides, scandals, illegal actions, and international tensions, thereby pushing the success of Korean popular culture back to the margins of the global stage. For example, fans' (including anti-fans') culture was blamed for a wave of suicides among K-pop stars, resulting in a call for "soul-searching" (Fortin, 2019, para. 6).

Further, sex crimes in the K-pop industry received significant media attention due to the "Burning Sun" scandal between 2018 and 2019. Named after the nightclub managed by the mega-famous K-pop idol, Seungri of the band Big-Bang, it ignited the K-pop scene. Besides the K-pop industry, K-pop fans were criticized as well for their moral blindness: "[S]ome women were still surprised by the allegations because they contradicted the idealized image of pop idols" (May & Lee, 2019, para. 11). Fueled by the global #MeToo movement, NYT items also stepped up to criticize both the K-pop industry and the Korean government of "a deeply patriarchal culture" (Stevenson, 2018, para. 3), since "in 2018, only roughly a third of the 6,800 reported cases were taken to trial, according to statistics from the Supreme Prosecutors'

Office of the Republic of Korea. And fewer than one in ten trials led to prison sentences that year" (May & Lee, 2019, para. 8).

The items also engaged in open criticism of Korean cultural industries, alluding once again to the moral blindness of its fans. Besides mentioning contract breaches, the items blamed plastic surgeries for making performers "well-made machines," echoing the overall sense of disenchantment:

K-pop critics contend that South Korea is producing **cookie cutter performances: perfectly synchronized dances, catchy songs and outfits and chiseled but forgettable features, often the product of the plastic-surgery clinics in the Gangnam district**. Psy, they argue, is an anomaly. Hong Dae-kwang, who ranked No. 4 at the "Superstar K" tournament last year, shared those reservations. "They all sing, dance and perform well, **like well-made machines**," he said. (Choe, 2013, para. 19; boldface added by the author)

Korea's problematic image was also brought in to remind readers of localized conflicts, such as political tensions and cultural wars with China (Qin, 2017), "lingering bias in Japan against zainichi" (Soble, 2017, para. 23), or the North Korean fear of and clash with South Korean popular culture (Choe, 2018b). Further, the mandatory enrollment of K-pop idols in the Korean army attracted media attention as a dark reminder of the continuous conflict with the North (Rich, 2016).

Unlike the abovementioned fascination and playful flirtation with or ridicule of the Hallyu success and its fans, disenchantment clearly emphasizes its "K" as a work in progress toward full international success, in accordance with global standards of humans', women's, and workers' rights, in addition to expectations for tension- and conflict-free leisure. Such an unflattering representation of Korea's image serves to refocus the initial shock and surprise toward its dark side to reimagine the peripheral position of Korean popular culture on the global stage and to strengthen "K" in the Korean Wave as a sign of stigma.

Concluding Discussion: Back to What's K in the Korean Wave?

In early October 2021, the media around the world celebrated the addition of 26 Korean words to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, as well as the global success of *Squid Game* (Hwang, 2021), as another Hallyu victory, officially defining the addition of the 11th letter in the alphabet "K" as a shortcut to "Korean" (Salazar, 2021). With the continuous success of the Korean Wave, scholars have raised concerns about its right to Korean-ness. Initiated by the sociologist John Lie (2012), who in his article "What Is the K in K-pop?" states that there is nothing Korean about K-pop, this question highlights the important issues concerning (1) the cultural authenticity of already hybrid products (Fuhr, 2015; Shim, 2006); (2) "hypernationalistic" discourse surrounding the Korean Wave phenomenon as the cultural ambassador to promote Korea abroad (Fedorenko, 2017; Lie, 2012, p. 346); and (3) imagination of Korea by fans via fan nationalism (Jin, 2021; Lyan, 2019).

The findings on ambivalent and even contradictory emotions of (dis)enchantment that signal partial acceptance of the Korean Wave's success join the previous attempts to answer this question by

focusing on K as a stigma. The NYT, as a global media stage and a cultural tastemaker, acts not only as the mediator between popular culture and its surprisingly non-Western origin but also as an evaluator between the stigmatized and the “normal,” tacitly recreating the social boundaries between the two toward phantom acceptance.

First, by emphasizing the theme of cultural evolution and miracle, the mass media borrow from the economic miracle vocabulary of evolutionary development to downplay the emotional earthquake. Instead, by enumerating and translating the Korean Wave’s success into the American cultural language, it returns us to the perpetual catching-up attempts of Korea to the West and the imitation stigma of being almost the same, but not quite.

Second, by stigmatizing Hallyu fans, the media gaze highlights fanatic-like blindness, infatuation, and hooliganism to justify treating them unfavorably by laughing at, ridiculing, or even fearing them. The tribal stigma within the “K” is further projected onto its fans, under the guise of pretense, masquerade, and clownish carnival. Moreover, fans serve as an alternative mirror to another “K”-influenced, marginalized, and partially accepted group of Korean Americans—heroes of assimilation and a model minority.

Finally, by foregrounding disenchantment with the dark side of Korea and its cultural miracle, the media further discredit the success of Korean popular culture as a “work-in-progress.” In particular, the politicization of the Korean cultural industries as being stuck in international tensions and conflicts proves Korea’s inability to grow global wings to carry it away from local trouble. The media’s disappointment with the Korean Wave and its national origins, reimagines “K” as similar, to some extent, to the “A” in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s (1850) novel *The Scarlet Letter*, the sign of stigma and norm violation.

In sum, (dis)enchantment, despite the background of BTS’s exceptional success, again demonstrates that the pathways providing access to the global stages are firmly guarded, and any intruders are turned back (Chang, 2002). Rather than understanding the media’s shock and surprise as a gradual acceptance to the mainstream stage, I see it as a phantom acceptance, which by making BTS and other one-time hits an exception to the rule, underlines the rule itself, proving the partial acceptance of the rest of Korean popular culture.

On a theoretical level, this article has attempted to study the role of mediatized emotions as both the identifiers of norm breakers and guardians of social and cultural norms that prevent full acceptance of stigmatized phenomena. Framing the emotional tone by downplaying or replacing initial shock and surprise with ridicule and moral judgment, mass media educate about and strengthen existing cultural norms and expectations. Given the strong tendency of emotions to facilitate the ongoing reproduction of social order, the ambivalent media reaction toward the success of Korean popular culture reveals its resistance to social change of cultural tastes.

On an empirical level, instead of asking why non-Koreans would enjoy “Korean” culture—already a peripheral issue since we rarely question the popularity of American culture beyond America’s national borders—this article has suggested problematizing this question in the first place. Strong emotions involved in fantasies and hopes about de-Westernization—non-Western culture and knowledge finally flying

unobstructed into the West, or even invading and conquering the West by previously marginalized countries—might instead perpetuate K-stigma. Unlike the media, which capitalize and emotionalize the national letter “K,” we might instead lowercase or consciously erase it to grasp its meaning in the context of stigma (re)production. Unlike “K” in K-pop or “Korean” in the Korean Wave, American popular culture, does not need its “A” as it is perceived as a universal and global culture transcending national borders and markers.

The media, greedy for public attention, are always in some way about shock and surprise, simultaneously crediting and discrediting potential norm breakers. Paradoxically, only when the media cease to write about the success of the Korean Wave as shocking and surprising news will Korean popular culture have the opportunity to achieve full acceptance and global acknowledgment with lowercase or no K at all. Future studies would do well to address the question of stigma management and the potential to resist and eventually change existing social norms and cultural expectations beyond the capitalized K.

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