The Koreaboo as a media tourist:

Soft power of the Korean government and Western Hallyu fans compared as a result of globalization and digitalization

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Abstract

In recent years, the popularity of *Hallyu*, the Korean Wave, has been on the rise in Western countries. Hallyu is a phenomenon that is sparked by Korean popular culture. It has been spreading to other countries than South Korea since the 1990s, mainly in the rest of Asia at first, but now also in Western countries, especially after Korean content began to be distributed on social media. Hallyu is, to a large extent, stimulated by the South Korean government as the government provided Hallyu-related industries like media, tourism, and technology with favorable circumstances for them to flourish, and the government did that through policymaking.

In Hallyu there have been controversies regarding sexual misconduct with, and high pressure on, idols resulting in suicides. It has been argued that these controversies are the result of Confucian ideology that is present in Korean society. It has also been argued that the Korean government has been implementing policies regarding Hallyu too nonchalantly, commodifying Korean culture, and that the government has not been focusing on what sociocultural effects this behavior can have, especially considering the soft power the Korean government could have because of Hallyu and the Confucian ideology that could be mediated via Hallyu.

Therefore, this thesis studies the tourist experience of Western Hallyu fans, also mentioned as *Koreaboos*, not in a derogatory sense, to find out what their experiences reveal about Korean soft power and brand nationalism. This thesis studies Koreaboos' experiences because it fills the gap between media, tourism, fan and political studies since there has not been enough focus in academia on Hallyu as a meaning-making device, and fans comparing their imaginations about Korea before and after traveling to Korea from the perspective of soft power. To study the experiences of Koreaboos, two main groups of participants were interviewed. Namely, Koreaboos that had an educational background regarding Korea and Koreaboos that did not. They were asked to reflect on their experiences becoming a fan first and then becoming a tourist in Korea.

The results showed that the Korean government proved to have soft power through commercialism of fan products in the West, where it was able to mediate Confucian ideals through Hallyu. In Korea, the exertion of soft power was continued by adopting the fans in a patriarchal social system. However, fans proved to have soft power as well, namely in their identity as a prosumer in the West and as a cosmopolitan in Korea. The results suggest the methods used in this thesis are important for showing that both the Korean government and Koreaboos have soft power, and that this is due to a shift of global power relations, which in turn is a result of globalization and digitalization.

Keywords

Brand nationalism, *Hallyu,* media tourism, soft power, transnational fandom

Contents

Introduction

South Korean pop band BTS has been breaking many records in recent years. In 2019, BTS broke three Guinness World Records at once with its music video of *Boy With Luv*. After its release, the video on YouTube broke the records of most-viewed YouTube video in 24 hours, most-viewed YouTube music video in 24 hours, and most-viewed YouTube music video in 24 hours by a K-pop group (Thorne, 2019). One year before, in 2018, BTS became the first Korean pop band to reach the number one spot on the Billboard 200 Chart with its album *Love Yourself: Tear* (BBC News, 2018). Since then, BTS has managed to get four albums in total to the number one spot, three of which within the time frame of one year (Caulfield, 2020). Before BTS, only two other bands achieved to top the Billboard 200 Chart with three albums in one year, namely The Beatles and The Monkees (Korea Times, 2019). Both The Beatles and The Monkees are bands from Anglophone countries that succeeded in an industry dominated by Anglophone music. Therefore, knowing that BTS is a band from South Korea with songs mainly sung in the Korean language, BTS' achievement is remarkable to say the least.

K-pop, short for Korean pop, is a music genre that hails from South Korea, hereafter mentioned as Korea. Just like American pop music, you can recognize K-pop by extremely good-looking idols, flashy music videos, and outstanding choreographies. However, several things make K-pop stand out from American pop. For example, it is not unusual for Korean boy bands or girl groups to have more than 4 members. Currently, boy band NCT has 23 members (*NCT | NCT Wiki | Fandom*, n.d.). In cases like this one, the bands usually consist of members of different nationalities. Other than Korean members, bands can have Japanese, Chinese, and, less frequently, Southeast Asian members. Members with the same nationality form subgroups that cater to fans in the countries the members in question are from. The way Korean pop bands are constructed, allows each member to shine, even when there are 23 members. Each member has a position within the group: The leader, the main vocalist, the main rapper, the main dancer, and the *maknae*, which defines the youngest member. It is up to the fans to decide which member is their favorite, their so-called *bias* (Chua & De Luna, 2020).

K-pop is one of several aspects that make up *Hallyu*, also known as the Korean Wave, hereafter used interchangeably. Hallyu is a phenomenon that was sparked by growing interest outside of Korea, in popular content from Korea, around the 1990s. Initially, Korean popular culture enjoyed popularity in neighboring Asian countries, but more recently the Korean Wave has penetrated Western countries. K-pop aside, K-drama, Korean food, clothing, and online games are the other most prominent aspects that compose Hallyu (Kim & Nam, 2016b). This thesis focuses on the fandoms of the two most popular outputs of Hallyu: K-pop and K-drama.

Partly, years of government policymaking resulted in the Korean Wave. The Korean government played a big role in Hallyu's success story. Namely, the Korean government supported the cultural, creative, and tourism industries financially, but also helped these industries grow by setting up frameworks where these industries could grow in. The government selected certain industries that could benefit from each other and put those in the same framework. For example, the digital content industry could use products from the technology industry to make content, and at the same time, the digital content industry could promote the products it used in content such as K-dramas (Kwon & Kim, 2014; Kim & Nam, 2016a; 2016b). Lastly, when the internet and social media became more prominent, the Korean government set up copyright laws to protect Korean content and its makers from foreign piracy (Jin, 2018). This was Korea's approach to neoliberalism. Korea was pressured by Western countries to open the borders of its national industries for a free market economy. Because of the 1997 Asian financial crisis, Korea's government had to alter plans for its economy and therefore it shifted the focus on the export of manufactured goods to the export of Korean culture, of which popularization already had started gaining traction. Thus, the government gave in to external pressure and started applying neoliberalism. But the government went against the grain and objected to traditional neoliberal ideology by remaining a major player in Korea's economy through the implementation of policies (Jin, 2016; Jin, 2018).

Korea's approach to neoliberalism was successful because the numbers of revenue from cultural export and inbound tourism were rising. However, despite the successes, the government's intervention also has its downsides. The main disadvantage of Korea's cultural policy is that it tends to be focused on short-term advantages. Critics argue that the agencies responsible for overseeing the implementation of policies regarding the cultural industries,

agree on implementing policies easily without contemplating the possible sociocultural effects thoroughly (Kim & Nam, 2016a; 2016b). It has also been argued that Korea has become too commercial with its cultural policy, and that culture has been utilized too much as a commodity (Hong, 2017). Besides, numbers plummeted after several controversies regarding the Hallyu industry happened. Many investors got rid of their shares in the biggest entertainment agencies; YG Entertainment, SM Entertainment, and JYP Entertainment, after multiple cases of #MeToo incidents came to the surface. Not only people in the entertainment industry were involved, but politicians as well (McCurry, 2019; Kang, Song & White, 2020). It is clear that Korea's government has gained massive soft power via Hallyu these past few years. Soft power is defined as the power to attract people with values (Nye, 2004). With the successful application of neoliberalism, Korea might have been able to exert power back onto the West through popular culture. However, as Korean culture becomes popularized globally, so do the aforementioned controversies. Critics argue that these events result from the patriarchal system Koreans grow up in, which in turn is believed to stem from the Confucian values they grow up with (Kang, Song & White, 2020). In my thesis, I hypothesize that one of the main tenets of Korea's soft power is the transmission of Confucian values, mostly through K-pop and K-dramas. Soft power enacts many different practices, is enacted by and acted upon a wide array of actors. There is official soft power, exerted by governmental authorities, but there is also non-official soft power, exerted by NGOs or individuals, in this case Western fans.

For the purpose of this thesis, it is necessary to first address the definition of 'fan' and fandom. In fan studies research, there has been a change in perspective on fans from the obsessive fan that does not have social contact, to the well-respected prosumer that not only consumes media content, but also produces media content and actively engages with other fans around the world (Bacon-Smith, 1992; Fiske, 1992; Jenkins, 1992; Reijnders, Zwaan, Duits & Waysdorf, 2016). This discursive turn came along with the rise of the internet when fans started to have access to media content from other national subcultures more easily and also had more opportunities to share the content. Because of this, media content (and soft power elements) that was not produced in the West, started circulating more in the West instead of just the other way around (Jenkins, 2004). Thus, the soft power discourse encompasses the West versus the East and the top versus the bottom. Researchers in fan studies then started studying why fans liked media content from other national subcultures

with concepts as brand nationalism (Iwabuchi, 2010), cosmopolitanism (Hannerz, 1990; Jenkins, 2004), transnational and transcultural fandom (Chin & Morimoto, 2013; Siuda, 2014), and transcultural homology (Hills, 2002). These concepts have been applied to studies focused on Hallyu, but in those studies, the focus was on fans that did not travel (Jung, 2011; Otmazgin & Lyan, 2014; Han, 2017). Therefore this research investigates Hallyu fans using the broader framework of media tourists. Namely, not only to understand Hallyu fans and fandom from a different perspective, but especially to discover to what extent the Korean soft power, through tourism, penetrates the perception of Western fans and to what extent, in return, the soft power of Western fans who travel to Korea, or have an interest in doing so, impacts the Korean government. This thesis argues that travel is crucial for fans coming to realize things about themselves, fandom and Korea that they could not have realized if they had never gone to Korea. This research focuses on the individual experiences of Western Hallyu fans before, during and after traveling to Korea in the hope of finding answers for parties on both sides of the spectrum. As a result, the following research question was composed:

> What does the tourist experience of Western Hallyu fans reveal about South Korea's soft power and brand nationalism?

In popular jargon, a 'Western Hallyu fan' is called *Koreaboo*, hereafter used interchangeably. The word is usually used in a derogatory sense and describes an overly obsessed fan of Korean popular culture. The current top definition of Koreaboo on the website Urban Dictionary is:

> Someone who is obsessed with Korean culture so much they denounce their own culture and call themselves Korean. They usually are kpop fanatics (not fans) or fans of League of Legends or other competitive games popular in South Korea. However there is a line; if someone just likes the music, language and culture they are not classed as a koreaboo (j.wang21, 2017, para. 1).

In this thesis, the word Koreaboo is not used in a derogatory sense, it is merely used to, in one word, refer to a more than average fan of Korean pop culture who is willing to show to the world that he or she is a fan through fan practices.

Apart from the subject matter, this research is relevant due to its multidisciplinary approach encompassing media tourism and fan studies. In media tourism research, fans have been the object of study, but often because researchers wanted to discover what motivated these fans to travel. Studying the phenomenon of tourists traveling to existing places that are related to places consumed in the media, researchers were especially focused on film-induced tourism (Tzanelli, 2004; Brooker, 2005; Beeton, 2016; Waysdorf & Reijnders, 2018). But the Hallyu phenomenon is special in the sense that Koreaboos do not only travel to Korea motivated by film-related formats of media. They also travel because of music (Oh, Ahn & Baek, 2015). And even when Koreaboos travel motivated by film-related formats of media, the focus has been too much on the fictional narratives, while it turns out that Koreaboos that travel film-induced, do not only travel because they were stimulated by stories. On the contrary, they were often stimulated by other aspects of films, such as familiarity due to empathy with movie stars or because they were attracted to Korean food displayed in films (Kim, Agrusa, Lee & Chon, 2007; Kim, Agrusa, Chon & Cho, 2008). Thus, Hallyu stands out because it is not just one medium at a time that merely influences people to see Korea as a tourist destination, Hallyu is its own entity that writes the narrative and shapes the image people have of Korea for them and it does that in many unique ways. On top of that, fans, as prosumers, contribute to the shaping of these narratives and images as well. Therefore, in media tourism research, the Hallyu phenomenon should be studied more from a holistic point of view.

The thesis is structured as follows: first, a literature review, in which studies on Confucianism in Korea (Kim, 2003; Śleziak, 2013; Buja, 2017; Park, 2018; Kim, 2019) are reviewed to understand the connection between Confucianism and Hallyu. This will also serve as an introduction for a section on soft power. Indeed, Confucianism is linked to Korea's expression of soft power, which in turn is exacerbated by globalization processes (Nye, 2004; Watson, 2012; Tinaliga, 2018; Suntikul, 2019). Confucianism and soft power are necessary to understand fan studies and media tourism in a Hallyu context. Due to digitalization on top of globalization, a global shift in power relations might have happened with more pressure from the bottom and the East towards the top and the West, respectively.

The thesis reviews fan studies, focusing on cosmopolitanism (Hannerz, 1990; Jenkins, 2004), transnational and transcultural fandom (Chin & Morimoto, 2013; Siuda, 2014), and transcultural homology (Hills, 2002). In addition, from media tourism, the concept of imagination is touched upon (Reijnders, 2011; Salazar, 2012). In the methodology section, I explain the choice of adopting a qualitative approach (Flick, 2009; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Bryman, 2012). I used semi-structured interviews conducted with 8 Koreaboos in total. Two groups of Koreaboos, those with academic roots and those without academic roots, were selected and interviewed about their journey as a fan to becoming a tourist. The results section is divided into three parts. The first part deals with interviews about Hallyu fandom and fandom practices in Western countries. The second part deals with the narratives of the interviewees about their tourist experiences in Korea. Here, their experiences with the country, the culture, and the people are compared to the imaginations they had of Korea shaped by the media, and by other fans they interacted with, in their own countries. The third part deals with the experiences of the Koreaboos in retrospect. Here, the possible changes in views about Korean culture and fandom customs are layed out. Finally, a discussion section, in which the findings are interpreted.

Literature review

Confucianism in Korean society

In recent years, #MeToo cases have come to the surface in Hollywood, with multiple accusations against key figures like producer Harvey Weinstein. In Korea, cases like these have been spotted as well, not only including cases of sexual harassment, but also cases of suicide due to association with sexual harassment, or due to excessive pressure from the industry and the fans (Saeji, 2019; Kang, Song & White, 2020). These scandals expose gender and class biases that are rooted in Confucianism (Yuh, 2020). As mentioned earlier, Korea has gone through rapid modernization from the end of the Korean War (1950-1953). In the past 50 years, Korea turned from a war-torn country into a country where 5G internet is the standard today. The country moved away from the export of cheap manufactured goods to the export of high quality electronics, as well as the export of culture. But even with all this development, that also included the shift from Korea as an authoritarian state to a democratic state, the country has stayed conservative in terms of ideology and has not moved away from Confucian morals, values, and Confucian systems that have been in place ever since the Joseon period (1392–1897) (Śleziak, 2013).

Confucian ideology emphasizes the importance of hierarchical systems with roles that are clearly divided. And in the relationships between the occupants of different roles, communication is an important tool to share the virtue of respect. All systems are structured like families with the superior father that should be an example to his wife and children, and the inferior son that should show filial piety to his parents, especially to his father, through his actions and the choice of words when speaking to his superiors. Today, this system is apparent in *chaebols*, family-owned Korean conglomerates, where the boss is treated and addressed more like a father and the employees as his children (Śleziak, 2013).

Status in this system does not only depend on age, but also on gender, as Korea is still a patriarchy today. It is not just the son that has to be obedient to the father, but also the wife that has to be obedient to the husband. The main task of women had always been to look after the children, but during industrialization, Korean women were also made to do labor on top of their previous tasks (Kim, 2003). In the industrial workforce, women belonged to the bottom of the hierarchy. With the shift from manufactured goods to culture becoming one of

the main goods for export, women still play a big part in nation building, now as singers and actresses. Although it might look like the position of the female gender has moved up in the hierarchy at first glance, it can also be argued that this is not the case, because they have turned into sex symbols and are therefore still arguably used as commodities (Kim, 2019).

K-pop is believed to have nothing in common with traditional Confucian values, and is simply sold as part of contemporary Korean culture (Lie, 2012). However, it can also be argued that Confucianism is noticeable in the systems used in the K-pop industry (Kim, 2019). In the K-pop industry it is the men that are in control. Coming back to the notion of family in Confucianism, the K-pop trainee system is modeled in a way where the record label, owned by a male boss, acts like a father or older brother to the K-pop trainees. The trainees declare their loyalty to the record label to be able to fulfill their dreams. That means that the record label decides what the trainees say and what the trainees dress like. Even if a K-pop group is composed entirely of females, the songs are written by men, the dances are choreographed by men and the music videos are directed by men (Kim, 2019). And ultimately, the trainees conform, which is argued to be a very Confucian trait (Kim, 2003).

Not only K-pop reflects Confucianism, K-drama does so as well. As mentioned before, Confucianism was set in place during the Joseon period. The Joseon period, or feudal period in general, tends to be a popular setting used in historical K-dramas (Śleziak, 2013). The class divide is very clear in these dramas, where the king is on top and the peasants on the bottom. Often a forbidden love is depicted between a person from a higher class and a lower class that can never be acknowledged publicly, because they are not "destined" to be as a couple. This also happens in dramas that are set in the modern day period. As explained before, the family style hierarchy is also present in chaebols, the family-owned corporate businesses, and these corporations are often used as the setting for a modern day romance drama. Elena Buja has a study about the drama Another Miss Oh (Buja, 2017). In this drama, there are two women that happen to have the same name, Oh Hae-Young. One is addressed as the better Oh and the other as the lesser Oh even though they both have similar qualities and work at the same company, in the same position. The better Oh, however, is addressed as such, simply spoken because she comes from a wealthier family. Thus, through Hallyu, hierarchies with high contrasts between male and female, old and young, and rich and poor are made visible. It is therefore not without reason that young people today call Korea "Hell Joseon" (Park, 2018). The younger generations experience more and more inequality in

Korea's society today and this expression "refers to the previous stratified society of the Joseon era where a strict class system was in place and social mobility was nigh impossible" (Park, 2018, p. 21). The Confucian class system from the Joseon period still counts today although there are no official classes anymore.

Hallyu is a window to Korean society because of the parallels in systems, if not ideology, that show profound inequalities in treatment according to social status, gender and age. These disparities mirror Confucian ideals (Kim, 2003; Śleziak, 2013; Buja, 2017; Park, 2018; Kim, 2019). Because of this relation between Confucianism, Hallyu and the Korean society, the possible affiliation of the negative affairs with Confucianism gives this section a reason to try to raise awareness to the question what subconscious effect Hallyu has on its Western fans and to call for academia to challenge the perceived 'innocence' and naivete of Hallyu.

<u>Soft power and brand nationalism in Korea</u>

States that apply neoliberalism, usually enhance a free market economy with little state intervention. However, in Korea's case, the application of neoliberalism only became fruitful due to and not in spite of state intervention. Korea's government set up specific agencies to oversee the implementation of policies regarding the creative and tourism industries and made frameworks for these industries to grow in, with growth sparked by the industries benefiting from the qualities of their counterparts (Kwon & Kim, 2014; Kim & Nam, 2016a; 2016b). With globalization and digitalization, ownership of content was defended by Korea's government through copyright infringement laws (Jin, 2016; Jin, 2018). The soft power that Korea gained with its way of neoliberalism was immense. "Soft power", as Suntikul explains, "is at the foundation of cultural diplomacy, through which nations and other 'actors' on the international stage mobilize their cultural resources to build up positive opinions and associations with their culture and values" (Suntikul, 2019, p. 2).

Soft power is the power used to attract people based on values and it can be divided into two versions; state-led soft power and non-official soft power. State-led soft power is exerted by the government, which is very clear in the case of South Korea and its government's promotion of Hallyu to mediate Confucian values to foreign people and attract them to Korean culture with Confucian values. At the same time, soft power is exerted by NGOs and individuals as well. In the case of Hallyu, the power exerted by fans should not be

underestimated. Fans can use their fandom collectively to accomplish something to benefit their idols as a token of loyalty, and individually, international fans can appropriate Korean culture and use fandom to construct an identity for personal gains.

According to Nye, soft power is expressed in the attraction itself, resulting in acquiescence, and by the tools that are used to attract the other party (Nye, 2004). As previously mentioned, soft power is exerted by both governmental actors and non-official actors (Watson, 2012; Suntikul, 2019). Non-official actors include fans. In fandom, there is a lot of competitiveness among fans to show that they are the best and most loyal fans (Tinaliga, 2018). Fans have so much power collectively that the power can be used for good causes: "For instance, fans will band together for a charitable mission in honor of an idol's birthday, organize food trucks for the cast and staff of a television drama their idol is working on, and more" (Tinaliga, 2018, p. 5). But the power of fans can also have bad effects when fandoms turn toxic, for example when fans use their competitiveness to attack other fandoms with hate in order to show that their own idols are better than the idols of the other fans. These offensive fans also try to show that they are more loyal fans of their own idols than the other fans and the fandoms they belong to (Tinaliga, 2018). Competitiveness is considered to be a very Confucian trait (Śleziak, 2013). The fact that fans display their loyalty the way they do, already shows the subconscious impact Hallyu, and indirectly the Korean government, has on Western fans.

In fan studies, there is a lack of focus when it comes to politics and power relationships. In this day and age, more and more states have become aware that the media are important for promotion of culture if states want to keep up with other states in terms of soft power. Iwabuchi calls this phenomenon 'brand nationalism', defined as "uncritical, practical uses of media culture as resources for the enhancement of political and economic national interests, through the branding of national culture" (Iwabuchi, 2010, p. 90). He takes Japan as an example of a country that has not only used policies to spread its media content for the sake of enhancing the image of the country, but that has also used its media content to covertly exert soft power on other nations. Japan is a widely known example with its government's 'Cool Japan' policy, but a more current example is Korea and its government's implementation of policies in the creative and tourism industries because of Hallyu. The case of Korea is interesting because as mentioned before, Korea gained its current soft power giving in to neoliberalism, which was actually alien to the country. But with the processes of

industrialization, globalization, democratization and digitalization that went along with the application of neoliberalism, Korea now has power it never had before (Kim & Kwon, 2014; Kim & Nam, 2016a; 2016b). Especially considering Korea's geographical size and Korea's history with the big neighbouring countries China and Japan in terms of hard power, the journey to the political position Korea now holds in the world is remarkable. Soft power and brand nationalism are not yet incorporated critically, especially because outside academia there already is criticism concerning Korea's government's focus on commerciality and its use of Hallyu as a commodity (Hong, 2017). Critics explain that many policies implemented regarding Hallyu have not been considered well in terms of feasibility and sustainability (Kim & Nam, 2016a; 2016b; Hong, 2017), and in particular, those working on soft power in the Korean case, seldom recognize that soft power is not only state-led, but also exerted by non-official actors (Tinaliga, 2018; Suntikul, 2019).

<u>Cosmopolitanism and transnational fandoms</u>

When fan studies came around, the word 'fan' had a negative connotation to it, stemming as a contraction of the word 'fanatic' (Reijnders, Zwaan, Duits & Waysdorf, 2016). Fans were superficially seen just as people obsessed with their object or person of interest. However, that changed in the early nineties with research by some pioneers in fan studies: *Enterprising women: television fandom and the creation of popular myth* (Bacon-Smith, 1992), *The cultural economy of fandom* (Fiske, 1992) and *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (Jenkins, 1992). Jenkins' *Textual Poachers*, in particular, claimed that "fans pro-actively construct and produce an alternative culture" (Reijnders, Zwaan, Duits & Waysdorf, 2016, p. 2). He defined this concept as 'appropriation' (Jenkins, 1992). According to this concept, fans were not just consumers, but prosumers (both producer and consumer) that actively engaged with their fandom and therefore were an asset to media industries (Jenkins, 1992). This idea challenged the notion that fans were obsessed and had nothing else to do. Researchers today do not only regard fans as consumers, or even prosumers, but as "active participants in social and political movements because they are united by a common factor: their (consumption of) popular culture" (Chin & Morimoto, 2013, p. 98).

This discursive turn came in concomitance with the growing importance of the internet (Reijnders, Zwaan, Duits & Waysdorf, 2016). When the internet became more accessible, fans took their fandom online and erected communities where they could share

their interests with other fans around the globe. The impact that fans had in spreading and promoting media content was noticed by the media industries and it was not taken for granted (Reijnders et al., 2016). However, since fans have become so influential, they also clash with the media industries. The media industries fear missing out on possible revenue if fan art is commercialized widescale (Jenkins, 2000). Fans, on the other hand, do not like the fact that media industries put trademark laws on all content (Reijnders et al., 2016). Thus, the power relationships between fans and media industries have shifted as well. On the one hand, there is the top-down power of media ownership, production and distribution by the media conglomerates, which is called 'corporate convergence' (Jenkins, 2004). On the other hand, there now is the bottom-up power of media ownership, production, distribution and reception by fans, which is called 'grassroots convergence' (Jenkins, 2004). Together they make up what is defined as 'global convergence', which is "the multidirectional flow of cultural goods around the world" (Jenkins, 2004, p. 116-117).

As seen in the previous paragraph, because of the internet, the distribution of media content has become much easier. Therefore, fandoms over the world have achieved the aforementioned 'global convergence', becoming more intertwined, crossing borders of nations and cultures (Jenkins, 2004). Because of global convergence, there is room for cosmopolitanism in fandom. According to Hannerz, "cosmopolitanism is first of all an orientation. A willingness to engage with the Other" (Hannerz, 1990, p. 239). Cosmopolitan fans might be genuinely interested in other cultures and want to experience them for the purpose of cultivation, but there is also a big chance that cosmopolitans make use of other cultures to construct their own identities or to separate themselves from their native cultures (Hannerz, 1990). In the process of "Othering" (Said, 1978), individuals or groups of people "attribute negative characteristics to other individuals or groups of people that set them apart as representing that which is opposite to them" (Rohleder, 2014, p. 1306). Making use of generalizations and stereotypes about other cultures could arguably be seen as a form of power exertion. For example, some cosmopolitans let themselves be subsumed into other cultures, but Hannerz emphasizes that cosmopolitans are never captivated and are always in charge of their own identity (Hannerz, 1990). This also relates to the very idea of appropriation. Fandom is, in a sense, a form of resistance, "a way of going against the grain and creating space for one's own identity within the constraints and power relations of everyday life" (Reijnders et al., 2016, p. 2). The notion of power relations is very apparent

here. But in fan studies there is also the question whether or not national identity plays a role in fans being attracted to alien cultures and if national identity also plays a role in the reception of alien cultures (Hills, 2002). These questions bring us to the topic of transnational or transcultural fandom.

In fact, in the debate whether national identity is a deciding factor for attraction within fandom, there is a neutral concept defined as 'transcultural homology' that describes the phenomenon of fans enabling themselves to construct a common identity by picking out representations of foreign subcultures that they can wear as badges of honor, putting more emphasis on fan identity than on national identity (Hills, 2002, p. 13). Hills thinks that national identity is not the most important aspect for a fan to be a fan of another national subculture, but that it still plays a role. However, there are researchers that argue that national identity is not an important factor for being attracted to a subculture from another country (Newitz, 1994; Allison, 2000; Napier, 2001). On the opposite hand, there are those that argue that being interested in subcultures from other countries does in fact mean that there is a connection between the fan's own culture and the other culture (Kinsella, 1998; Iwabuchi, 2010; Siuda, 2014). Moreover, some of the latter also claim that the sociohistorical context in which media content is consumed, is important to understand how the content is received (Iwabuchi, 2010; Siuda, 2014). To illustrate this with a study about *Harry Potter* fandom, the results of this study show that Russian fans and American fans of *Harry Potter* could not get along with each other because, unlike American fans, Russian fans translated Western fan fiction of *Harry Potter* to their native language without giving credits to the writers (Prassolova, 2007a; 2007b; Siuda, 2014). Russian fans did this because they thought that art was property that belonged to everyone, which might be associated with Russia's history with communism (Prassolova, 2007a; 2007b). It can therefore be argued that there is no such thing as a homogeneous transnational or transcultural fandom, not only because there is no true cultural transcendence, but also because there is a lot of inequality when it comes to access to media content (Siuda, 2014). Media industries make use of multiple media platforms to dispatch content, but not everybody can consume all content in all formats because some people have less access to the internet due to their level of income. And because of that, fans from the periphery cannot familiarize themselves with all content nor with fans from other countries (Siuda, 2014). There is still a lot of inequality in the participation of consumption and production of digital culture around the world. However, this is not so much the case in

Korea and in Western countries, especially in Korea where 5G internet has become the standard.

In fan studies, the aforementioned theories have been applied to the Hallyu phenomenon: transcultural fandom (Jung, 2011; Otmazgin & Lyan, 2014; Han, 2017), nationalism (Lyan, 2019) and transnational fandom (Choi & Maliangkay, 2014; Madrid-Morales & Lovric, 2015; Yoon, 2019), but all these studies were conducted in regards to fans that did not travel during the study. And it is especially interesting to study Hallyu through the eyes of a media tourist, starting from the influence of media first, then becoming a fan, and finally becoming a tourist.

Media tourism

Media tourism is defined as travel and tourism visits to places associated with fictional narratives coming from several media formats, such as books, movies and TV (Reijnders, 2011). Academic research into this phenomenon could be traced back to studies focusing on mainly literary tourism (Watson, 2006) and film-induced tourism (Beeton, 2016). The latter of these is focused on the popular media formats TV, DVDs, movies and videos, and is in turn a continuation on the works of movie-induced tourism (Riley, 1994); television tourism (Evans, 1997); film tourism (Hudson & Ritchie, 2006a; 2006b); cinematic tourism (Tzanelli, 2007) and screen tourism (Connell & Meyer, 2009).

Researchers have studied media tourism from many different perspectives. First, media tourism has been studied from a holistic perspective with the theory 'imaginative heritage' (Reijnders, 2020), focusing on the different stakeholders involved in media tourism together creating place identity. Second, the focus of media tourism studies have also been on the relationships between the stakeholders involved in media tourism, such as the previously mentioned Sue Beeton. In her book *Film-Induced Tourism* (Beeton, 2016), she points out the economical importance of what she refers to as film-induced tourism, with film being a major influence in stimulating tourists to travel to places associated with film, the local governments from those places then appropriating the newly created interest as a marketing tool to attract tourists and, lastly, local communities being affected by the newly induced inbound tourism (Beeton, 2016). Third, researchers have studied media tourism focusing on a specific stakeholder, namely the tourists and their experiences, for example: Chinese and Taiwanese tourists experiencing Paris after having watched Hollywood movies (Dung &

Reijnders, 2018). But also in the form of case studies focusing on fans of a specific narrative, such as: *Blade Runner* fans experiencing Los Angeles (Brooker, 2005) and *Harry Potter* fans experiencing the Wizarding World of Harry Potter theme park in Orlando (Waysdorf & Reijnders, 2018). These experiences can be studied from the perspective of individual travelers, but also from the perspective of travelers that join a group tour, for example: *Dracula* fans that join a tour in Transylvania (Reijnders, 2011), *The Lord of the Rings* fans that take a tour in New Zealand (Carl, Kindon & Smith, 2007; Roesch, 2009) and *Coronation Street* fans that take a tour on the set in Granada Studios Tour (Couldry, 1998).

From a holistic perspective, the change in the attitude of governments, tourist organizations, and local communities towards culture has been noticed when Beeton realized that media were major influencers in stimulating tourists to travel to places associated with fictional narratives (Beeton, 2016). Apart from the motivation to travel, it has been noticed that media impact the way tourists define destinations in terms of physical attributes (Iwashita, 2006), and the way tourists define the character of destinations and the people that belong to them (Reijnders, 2016; Dung & Reijnders, 2018). Governments, tourist organizations, and local organizations reinforce tourists' imaginations through destination marketing (Beeton, 2016). With destination marketing comes the question of what the identity of a place was and if the newly constructed identity induced by media can be seen as authentic (Tzanelli, 2004). Not only the media industries, tourism industries, governments, and local communities are responsible for creating place identity, but tourists contribute to place identity as well (Reijnders, 2020). When tourists decide to travel to and arrive at a place associated with the fictional narrative they love, they negotiate their view on the destination constantly by comparing the image they had of the place to what they experience being on-site (Reijnders, 2011; Dung & Reijnders, 2018). When it comes to concepts, the use of the concept of 'imagination' "seems to be a general symptom of media tourism", as many media tourists travel motivated by fictional narratives to make their imaginations tangible, but at their destination, the media tourists still seem to want to discard reality and keep fantasizing over their beloved narratives, and the places associated with them (Reijnders, 2011, p. 100-101).

Regarding Hallyu tourism in media tourism research, there are a lot of research studies with the focus on film-induced tourism (Kim & Richardson, 2003; Kim, Agrusa, Lee & Chon, 2007; Kim, Agrusa, Chon & Cho, 2008; Lee, Scott, & Kim, 2008; Young, A. F. &

Young, R., 2008; Kim, Long & Robinson, 2009; Chang-Hua & Hsiu-Yu, 2015), but there is a lack of research on Hallyu tourism that is specifically music-induced or at least not majorly focused on the induction by film. And what is especially interesting about Hallyu, is that it is a phenomenon that is neither bound to film or music, or a certain type of content or media platform. With the rise of social media, and especially YouTube, there are new platforms on which content can be consumed, and new forms of content that can be consumed. On YouTube you can listen to K-pop, but it is the fact that YouTube is an audiovisual platform on which K-pop fans can socialize in the comments that makes social media and Hallyu stand out from subjects of previous media tourism studies. K-pop music videos on social media turned out to be a major influence in shaping a positive destination image for foreign fans who decided to travel to Korea (Oh, Ahn & Baek, 2015). Thus, Hallyu might be seen as its own entity and should therefore be studied as such.

Besides, previous studies in film-induced media tourism, focused especially on fictional narratives, stories, as the motivator for traveling, as fans wanted to make their imagination of the places associated with their favorite fictional narratives, tangible. But K-pop fans, attracted to music in the first place, do not travel to Korea because of this specific reason. Although there is a visual aspect to K-pop, the music videos as previously discussed, K-pop fans are not attracted to fictional narratives displayed on screen, unlike K-drama fans. And even though many studies (Kim, Agrusa, Lee & Chon, 2007; Young, A. F. & Young, R., 2008; Kim, Long & Robinson, 2009) found out that Korean television dramas did motivate K-drama fans to travel to Korea, these studies did not state anything about stories being the motivator. On the other hand, Japanese tourists liked Korean TV soap dramas because of empathy with star actors or actresses rather than other variables such as beautiful images (Kim, Agrusa, Lee & Chon, 2007). Fictional narratives were not mentioned as a variable. In other studies, familiarity, empathy (Kim & Richardson, 2003), along with celebrity involvement (Lee, Scott, & Kim, 2008; Chang-Hua & Hsiu-Yu, 2015), turned out to be important motivating factors too, as well as Korean food (Kim, Agrusa, Chon & Cho, 2008).

Finally, in previous research, a general theme was that destination image was shaped by the media industries in the form of narratives first, which was then reinforced by tourism industries in the form of destination marketing (Beeton, 2016). Researchers have been studying how the media have changed people's perception of places that previously did not

use to have an identity shaped by a certain fictional narrative, and how this phenomenon changed tourism at places associated with fictional narratives through the eyes of the local community and tourists (Beeton, 2016; Reijnders, 2020). But in Korea on the other hand, popular culture was appropriated by the Korean government in the form of policies first (Choong-Ki, Var & Blaine, 1996; Kwon & Kim, 2014; Kim & Nam, 2016a; 2016b), Hallyu then became popular outside of Korea, which resulted in the stimulation of foreign fans' positive destination image via popular media content.

Therefore, knowing that the Hallyu phenomenon, and consequently tourism, came from top-down instead of bottom-up, Hallyu tourism is an interesting subject for research within media tourism in regards to imagination, because this subject requires a different research approach. According to Salazar, imaginaries are "used as meaning-making and world-shaping devices. The imaginary is both a function of producing meanings and the product of this function" (Salazar, 2012, p. 864). Hallyu is a system of imaging and meaning-making that is built upon a combination of media formats that motivate fans to travel to Korea.

Methodology

Data collection

This thesis utilizes a qualitative methodology, namely, semi-structured interviews, in which 8 Western Hallyu fans were interviewed. Overall, a qualitative approach was chosen, because narratives are better explained and understood through words rather than through numbers (Bryman, 2012; Flick, 2018). By interviewing fans, a wide array of subjects were directly and indirectly tapped into, namely fandom, tourism, imagination and soft power.

To understand the impact of the soft power strategies enacted by Korea's government, an inductive research approach was chosen by studying the narratives that Koreaboos tell about Korea and individuating patterns of meaning. I guided the interviewees through their story of becoming acquainted with Korean popular culture and finally taking the trip to Korea. I asked Koreaboos why and how they became a fan of Korean popular culture, and what their practices as a fan were prior to traveling to Korea. Then asking interviewees about their travel experiences, I was able to learn how interaction between Western fans of Korean popular culture on the one hand, and Korean fans on the other hand, resulted in showing the differences in fan practices by Western fans and Korean fans, and what the encounter between Koreaboos and Koreans, even outside the context of fandom, revealed about the country, the culture and the people.

The in-depth interviews all lasted approximately an hour long and were semi-structured. The reason for this was that I wanted to guide the interviewees in telling their story, but to still be flexible enough to let the interviewees go into detail about topics I had not thought of (Bryman, 2012). The study of Dung and Reijnders was taken as an example for categorizing the interview guide in three stages: before travel, during travel and after travel, with the constant negotiation of reimagining narratives (Dung & Reijnders, 2018). The purpose was to know about Koreaboo fandom first, then about Korea through the eyes of a Koreaboo as a tourist, and finally, to gain an insight on the recollection of Koreaboos about their fandom and Korea, having experienced fandom in a different setting and having experienced Korea off-screen.

Data sampling

In total, 8 people were interviewed. First, two pilot interviews were held with Koreaboos who had not traveled to Korea, but who did plan to go one day. The interviewees were a Dutch woman, 22-years-old, and an American woman, 27-years-old. These interviews offered me a solid background on the desires and expectations of potential tourists to the country, whose opinion was still not influenced from an actual visit. I then switched to Koreaboos that had indeed traveled to Korea. These people could also discuss their expectations, while at the same time reflect on their experiences in Korea, and compare them to the experiences of being a fan in the West, revealing not only what Koreaboos imagine Korea to be like, but what Korea actually was like to the Koreaboos when they were there, and in hindsight, how the image of Korea differed from the image they had shaped in the past.

Consequently, I selected two types of fans. On the one hand, fans that studied Koreastudies at Leiden University, because I myself had studied Chinastudies at Leiden University before, which was one of three studies that targeted East Asia. The other two were Japanstudies and Koreastudies. And I knew that most Koreastudies students started studying Koreastudies after having fallen in love with Korean popular culture. As they were studying Koreastudies, these fans knew the Korean language and had learned about deeply-rooted social phenomenons. On top of that, most Koreastudies students had been to Korea before, usually as part of a student exchange program, to improve their proficiency in Korean. Therefore they had stayed in Korea longer than the average tourist, and they had gotten into touch with their local peers via their studies. The interviewees consisted of one male and two female students, all aged 24. The male was Belgian and the females were Dutch.

On the other hand, I selected fans that learned the Korean language by themselves and went to Korea on vacation doing more fan-related activities. The reason why I chose this type of fan, was that these fans did not know the language very well and had less opportunities to interact with Koreans other than the ones they met in the streets. I wanted to assess if there were any consistent differences in experiences between Koreastudies students and fans that did not study Koreastudies. The interviewees consisted of three females, a 26-year-old Dutch woman, and two Belgian women aged 24 and 29. I found these interviewees through a Facebook post that I posted in the group "Dutch KPOP Fans". All participants were found through snowball sampling (via personal acquaintances and the internet).

With the exception of one interview, all interviews were all conducted online, either on Skype or Facebook Messenger. The downside of interviewing online, was the fact that the internet connection and therefore the signal transmission was not always as strong, which resulted in bad audio quality and sometimes even in moments where the screen and the audio were frozen. This slowed the process of transcribing as most of the automatic transcriptions had to be reviewed thoroughly. To transcribe, the automatic transcription tool of Descript was used.

Data analysis

First of all, as mentioned in the previous part, the interviews were transcribed with the tool named Descript. The interviews were transcribed verbatim. To analyze the data, a combination of thematic analysis (Clarke, Braun & Hayfield, 2015) and narrative analysis was used (Bryman, 2012; McAlpine, 2016), and the focus was placed on the stories of the interviewees.

The reason for using a combined method to analyse the data was that the respondents were very descriptive talking about their experiences. The interviewees were naturally telling stories, and making sense of their experiences. To keep the information close to the source I decided to use a hermeneutic approach using many quotes, categorizing the quotes in themes and putting them in a logical narrative order (Flick, 2018). With this in mind, Jansson's study of post-tourism was used as a source of inspiration writing down the results and discussion, because the use of quotes in this study highlight Jansson's argumentation well and each of the quotes set the tone for a logical continuation of the discussion (Jansson, 2018). Another reason for putting quotes in the foreground was dependability and conformability (Bryman, 2012). The audio records were kept in case somebody would like to check if the transcriptions were transcribed accordingly. And with the display of many quotes, critics could use the exact same results to conduct their own analysis if they do not agree with my method of assessing the quotes. I believe that using straightforward methods makes me more trustworthy as a researcher and the research more reliable as a contribution to science.

Findings

1. Transnational fandom in the West

1.1 Digital consumption

> Back in 2012 with Gangnam Style, of course, it became such a big hit that I watched the video on YouTube and instantly on the left side there were recommendations for other K-pop music videos. [...] But the weird thing is that I was very intrigued, but I was overwhelmed with how many K-pop videos I was finding on YouTube, and I was like: "Oh my God, there's so much!" And at that time I was in a completely other fandom, the Western pop bands and rock bands. And I was like: "Oh, I'm not going into this because this is going to go all the way crazy." But then like a few years later in 2015, I grew a bit bored with Western music, and I felt like: "Okay, let's go on YouTube and let's check some things about Korea." [...] And I remember one time I was watching this Korean girl, explaining things about her culture and she was referring to a K-pop video about Big Bang, one of the big bands of Korea. [...] and it started rolling from there. It was crazy. [...] it took a while to find my favorite bands, but that was the main reason how I got into it. It was mostly YouTube. There's so much information there, so much to find there (Therese, 29, Belgian).

With this monologue, Therese provides us with a lot but very useful information at once about how she was introduced to Korean popular culture. In Therese's case, she found out about K-pop by herself on the internet, on YouTube specifically, but some of the other interviewees were introduced to Korean popular culture through an acquaintance. What all interviewees had in common though, was the fact that once they were interested, they all searched for more content on the internet and especially on social media platforms like YouTube. This is in line with Oh, Ahn and Baek's research that pointed out the importance of social media platforms as motivators for shaping destination image and Jenkins' notion about non-Western media content that due to digitalization and globalization now has the chance to be circulated in the West (Jenkins, 2004; Oh et al., 2015). Namely, Grace, who is both into Japanese and Korean popular culture, points out that Japanese media content is still hard to

find on the internet, while Korean media content, on the other hand, is easy to search for and easy to be discovered due to its availability on YouTube. YouTube is according to her a very big platform in the United States, the country she is from:

> YouTube is a huge platform that Americans use, if you want to watch a Korean drama, a lot of it is uploaded onto YouTube to watch […] A lot of the Korean stuff is available on major sites that people are on everyday (Grace, 27, American).

Having discovered Korean popular culture, most interviewees were not enamored right away, especially the K-pop fans. They found the imagery of the first music video they saw captivating, but at the same time it was too much to take in considering the fact that these people were thrown into Hallyu out of the blue, with so much content to find. However, this overwhelming experience was the key for the interviewees to fully immerse themselves into Korean pop culture once they stumbled upon a song that they did like or once they had the time to actually search for the songs and idols that attracted them. In the first quote, Therese explained why she was intrigued once she saw K-pop, namely, the song she happened to listen to was catchy, and in the sidebar on YouTube there was so much related content ready to be consumed. However, she could not commit to K-pop at the time, because she used to invest all her time into other bands, Western bands. Most K-pop fans, prior to becoming a K-pop fan, had other interests they were committed to, but it was also the similar affinity between the hobbies they already had and K-pop that eventually drew them to K-pop. For example, Lisa's hobby was dancing and that is what she had in common with K-pop:

> I'm a dancer […] so that was always something that interested me in Korean pop music because they have very mixed focus on dance. […] I think [K-pop] group dances and stuff are a lot more intricate and complicated than let's say NSYNC or Backstreet Boys. […] When I was a younger kid, I was bullied a lot. So I think having a group of people that support you regardless, just because of the music you like. I think that kind of drew me in as well (Lisa, 24, Dutch).

Lisa mentions that she was bullied in the past and that she craved a sense of belonging. By appropriating Hallyu in the form of K-pop dance, she could combine her interests in dance

and her quest for friends, which she eventually succeeded in doing. Jenkins (1992) mentions that being a fan means that you appropriate a culture to construct your own identity. Lisa gained friends because she and her newly gained friends had a common interest in K-pop. And because Lisa had a background in dancing and could teach K-pop dance routines to her friends, she was complimented on her dance skills. Because of this, Lisa received validation and gained self-confidence. Moreover, with fandoms crossing national borders because of globalization and digitalization, the question if fans are into foreign subcultures because they can connect their fandom to their own national identity, or on the contrary, because they are not able to connect it, arose (Hills, 2002). Looking at Lisa's quote, the question whether Koreaboos are fans of Korean popular culture just to fulfill their own goals or also because they are actually interested in Korean culture can be asked. Because, apart from her quest for validation, which has nothing to do with the appreciation of Korean culture, Lisa draws the comparison between K-pop groups and Western boy bands, saying that K-pop groups have more complicated routines. In this comparison, she puts the focus on the dance routines that differ, but in a way she is also othering K-pop groups based on their national identity. In the following quote, Savannah explains that she was attracted to K-drama because it was so different from Western dramas:

> [...] the historical dramas feel very original because they show this world, which is Korea, but in the olden days, and you can never experience that somewhere else. Definitely because there is a foreignness to it. It's a different world that's maybe like a fairytale, like all those Disney things. It's like a new world you crave to explore. And I don't have that interest with Western dramas necessarily because it's too familiar (Savannah, 24, Dutch).

This sentiment of Othering and exoticism is echoed by Amanda, who explains she was attracted to K-drama because it had a more 'real vibe' than Western dramas:

> I don't know why, but somehow I always felt like the Western dramas were more exaggerated as in the acting didn't feel real, and in the other languages, probably also because I didn't really understand the way they pronounce things, it has a more real

vibe to me, so it felt more realistic even though it was obviously not realistic (Amanda, 26, Dutch).

These quotes simply show that these interviewees acknowledge that K-dramas are not necessarily historically accurate, and that the authentic look and feel of K-dramas is enough for the fans to be drawn to K-dramas. Amanda, in particular, notes that her ignorance of the Korean language is what, to her, makes the acting seem realistic as opposed to Western dramas, simply because she can understand the languages spoken in Western dramas. However, all interviewees, just like Therese in her quote, also showed affection to other aspects of Korean culture:

The reason I got to know a lot of stuff about Korea is obviously because of K-pop, but, I looked some more into it, like, what is the country, what does it look like? What are the people like? [...] So I looked into it and I was like: "Oh, this is actually really interesting." And it's so different from the Western stuff, like the nature and the buildings and the clothes. Like the traditional clothes, it's so different (Katie, 22, Dutch).

We see how in this case, which is common amongst many of the interviewees, K-pop served as a bridge connecting K-pop to other aspects of Korean culture. Yet Katie and many of the other interviewees still used the Self-Other dichotomy to describe their experiences, indicating a strong sense of appropriative behavior.

1.2 Material consumption

The catchy melodies, sharp choreographies and attractive idols were the factors that attracted K-pop fans at first sight. For some that was enough to listen to K-pop, but those that became more fanatic than the average fan, became curious about the meaning of the songs since they could not understand what the singers sang. When the fans then found the English lyrics on the internet, they were astonished about the messages some artists would send out via their lyrics. Because of that, the fans would start searching more information about their idols:

When I like someone's music, I want to know more about them. […] And he [Suga, a K-pop idol] also dealt with anxiety and he was depressed and he's really open about that. And I've gone through the same things. I've had a really bad anxiety disorder and I've been depressed and stuff. So on that level, I can really relate to him (Katie, 22, Dutch).

Katie explained that Suga of BTS was her bias, her favorite band member, because she noticed that he went through similar struggles as she did, once she had started searching more about the band BTS and its songs. Just like K-drama fans shaped positive images about Korea because of empathy with characters in Kim and Richardson's (2003) research, the interviewed K-pop fans felt a bond with their idols because of empathy. When K-pop fans started participating in the fandom community, they would meet people online, but also offline at concerts and conventions. Those people that fans eventually would regard as actual friends, were people that they could talk with about subjects other than K-pop, sometimes subjects as serious as depression. And occasionally it happened to be the case that the interviewees could talk about these subjects because being a fan of K-pop was actually the initiator:

When I met my friends for the first time, we didn't immediately speak about it, but as you get to know each other better and... I got the same question, like: 'Oh, why is Suga your bias? Because I'm just curious.' And I told them about it. And one of them was like: 'Hey, I'm actually dealing with the same stuff and I'm feeling kind of lost or lonely in this. So, what do you think I should do? Should I see someone, should I get help or... I don't really know' (Katie, 22, Dutch).

Once Katie started being active in the fandom community, she found friends that happened to regard Suga as their bias too, they too went through similar struggles as Suga did. So, not only was Katie able to relate to Suga, she was also able to relate to other fans through Suga. Once fans discover Hallyu, they appropriate it for their own agenda, namely gaining a sense of belonging and friends, but at the same time Hallyu possesses them, because K-idols are promoted in a personalized way to the extent that fans can relate to their idols' stories. Both the ups and the downs that the idols go through are shared with the fans, and the fans make

the successes and failures of the idols their own (Tinaliga, 2018). The use of this influence makes idols, and in turn record labels, and ultimately the Korean government, powerful.

Because K-pop fans feel personally connected to their idols, they want to be just like them. They want to wear what their idols wear, eat what their idols eat, and they want to go to the places where their idols have been to. The fans conform to the influence of Hallyu. Consuming and collecting material goods is a way to support the K-pop artists first and foremost, then it is also a form of social interaction. There are multiple versions of an album: albums with different covers on the front, albums that contain extra songs, albums with the same songs but released in foreign languages such as Chinese and Japanese, and the list goes on. Every album has a photograph of one of the band members. To collect all of them, or to get the specific member a fan wants, the fan has to buy as many albums as possible or exchange photographs with another fan. For some, collecting is just a hobby, but those who are more fanatic than the average fan often become part of the fandom community in order to exchange photographs and to get to make new friends this way:

[...] my friends and I, we have different biases in Stray Kids. So when we have each other's bias in the albums, they're like: "[...] do you want this one so we can trade?" Also, my friend lives next to, like really close to, a store in Brussels that sells K-pop albums [...] and sometimes she buys mine, so she's like: "Okay, I bought your copies as well, so you can just come by and pick them up and then we can go eat something" (Celine, 24, Belgian).

Although social interaction among fans is usually positive, it also has a negative side to it, which is competition among fans due to consumption. As previously mentioned, the positive side of collecting was the fact that fans could exchange objects that they did not want anymore and get objects that they wanted in return. By exchanging objects similar interests could be discussed, which eventually led to friendships. However, collecting was in some cases also a way to boast. First, showing off one's collection could entail one has spent lots of money to support his or her idol, meaning that the person in question could deem him- or herself a good fan and a better fan in comparison to other fans. Second, showing off one's collection could be a call for attention, making the other party envious at the same time. Competition however, was not openly expressed among fans:

[...] sometimes it was kind of stressful to keep up with all the music. [...] it might've even turned out as almost a contest of who is the biggest fan. [...] it was not overtly that people were trying to one up each other or anything. But I do think that if you're not buying this or if you don't collect that, [...] it might personally feel to you as if you are not as big of a fan as some other people who do buy this stuff. [...] Because you're not monetarily supporting those artists (Lisa, 24, Dutch).

Thus, material consumption has shown to be an important fan practice in Hallyu fandom. Competitiveness is a very Confucian characteristic as since the Joseon period, when Confucianism was inherent to the social system, lots of focus was laid on academics because only through academic education one could transcend to a higher social position, and peasants would do anything to gain access to the national exams (Śleziak, 2013). Competitiveness in Korea today could be found in academics as well, because graduates with a good educational background still enjoy a lot of prestige, but competitiveness could also be found in, for example, the K-pop industry where trainees would do anything to secure a spot in a band, even if it means they have to conform to the record label as we have seen earlier. And in the West, competitiveness can thus be found in material consumption, with fans striving to be the best fan by spending the most money on merchandise in order to support their biases and to differentiate themselves from other fans in terms of social status, as Lisa explains in the previous quote. In fact, the Hallyu system, record labels and K-pop acts push the idea that the more you consume, the better fan you are. Because of this, Western fans start adopting Korean behavior and adhering to the Korean system. Instilling competitiveness and conformity into the minds of Western Hallyu fans could therefore be seen as the main product from the commercialization of Hallyu by the Korean government, if soft power is deemed as the most important asset of Hallyu promotion by the Korean government apart from monetary gains.

2. The tourist experience in Korea as a transnational fan

2.1 The Self and the Other

Usually, interviewees had their first interaction with Korean locals on the way from the airport to the city of Seoul because locals helped them, seeing that the tourists had troubles with public transport. The tourists were not familiar with the public transport system yet and struggled to buy a ticket, did not know where to go to, and on top of that, had trouble carrying their luggage:

> The first day we had kind of a problem because [...] we took the metro to our Airbnb. [...] but we could not get in or out for some reason so we were really struggling with our luggage. And there was this old man and he came up to us and he was like: "Oh, you need to go through the gate?" [...] "Wait, wait." And he went to the police officers that are in the station and [...] They let us through and then when we turned around to thank him, he was already gone. So that's kind of the first thing we learned back then, that people in Korea do nice things because it's more in their nature and in their culture. Here in Western Europe, you would not see that. Everybody would just walk past you, pretend that they didn't see that you're struggling. I am guilty of that as well because you don't want to miss time and you don't want to be held up on something like that. In Korea they mostly help you and that's really, really pleasant. That's something I really miss here (Celine, 24, Belgian).

Celine compared this experience to her life in Europe and stated that in Europe something like this would not happen that easily. She admitted that she was guilty of this as well since she did not like to 'miss time' or 'to be held up'. Doing nice things for other people was regarded as something part of Korean culture or innate to Koreans. Here we see the Self-Other dichotomy again with Koreaboos distancing themselves from Koreans, though without ill intentions, fetishizing the other, wishing that these acts of kindness were present in Western societies as well. Koreans were stereotyped as generally nice, reserved and loyal. Therese (29, Belgian) explained that she was wearing fan merchandise in Korea and that some Koreans that passed by, noticed that. It was clear to her that the Koreans that spotted

her were fans of the same band and that they wanted to communicate that to her, but Therese stated that the Koreans were too insecure about their English and that communication was the main reason she found it hard to socialize with Koreans. At the same time, she mentioned that once she found a Korean she could get along with, the Korean friend would be very loyal and this way she generalized Koreans:

> I think the main thing that still bothers me is just the communication between Western and Korean people. It's hard to make proper friends with Koreans because of the language. That's still a bit the thing which I'm a bit sad about, they're shy, I'm a bit shy, so yeah, it's hard to make friends. But I think, and it also has proven, with my one Korean friend that once you are friends with a Korean person, then they're very loyal and they're very friendly and very supportive (Therese, 29, Belgian).

Communication with Koreans was therefore important for the way the interviewees made sense of the Korean culture. All interviewees had learned the Korean language to a certain extent before. Learning about the deep messages hidden behind the lyrics of some K-pop songs was the incentive for most K-pop fans to learn at least a little bit of Korean. K-drama fans were no different in that sense. Of the interviewees, most Koreastudies students, next to being interested in other parts of Korean culture, applied for Koreastudies to learn the language first and foremost. Because of differences in proficiency of the Korean language, there were differences in experiencing interaction with locals between the interviewees that studied Koreastudies and the interviewees that did not study Koreastudies, the latter hereafter indicated as 'regular' Koreaboos. Koreastudies students usually had more in-depth conversations with local people than regular Koreaboos. With their proficiency of the Korean language and having learned about Korean society in class, Koreastudies students were aware of deep-rooted social phenomenons and had more opportunities to notice these from up close as they had more opportunities to interact with Korean people than regular Koreaboos, because Koreastudies students studied in Korea and usually stayed for a longer period than all regular Koreaboos. This is not to say that regular Koreaboos did not have profound experiences. Their lack of proficiency in the Korean language actually allowed the regular Koreaboos to be in situations that were interesting on their own, just like the situations in the past two quotes of Celine and Therese.

In the following two sections the experiences of the interviewees are discussed. In the first section, the experiences of mostly regular Koreaboos are discussed, with the focus on interacting with Koreans in situations related to fandom. In the second section, the experiences of Koreaboos that are very proficient in Korean, mostly Koreastudies students, are discussed, with the focus on interaction with Koreans in situations not related to fandom.

2.2 Korean customs

Despite being able to speak a couple of words of Korean, regular Koreaboos mostly relied on English, which not everybody in Korea appeared to speak well or at all. Because of that, interactions mostly stayed superficial. According to Celine (24, Belgian), when she went to a concert in Korea, she was grouped with other foreign fans. Although she did not exactly know the reason why, she had the feeling that it was because of the barrier in terms of language and culture and that it would therefore be more convenient for both the event organizers and the visitors to be grouped according to nationality. When Celine was in the stands, the cultural difference in the way Western fans and Korean fans approached fandom, became apparent:

> For them, respecting someone is just sitting down, clapping and swinging their lights stick like this and doing a fan chant. For us, the way we show respect to our artists here, the louder you scream, the more you respect the band and you like the band, but it's just different sort of culture because we are just used to screaming and like calling out their names and doing stuff like that (Celine, 24, Belgian).

This quote is in line with Kim, Mayasari and Oh's presumption (2013) that Western K-pop fans behave the same way as Chinese and Indonesian fans. Just like Chinese and Indonesian fans, Western K-pop fans seem to be more outgoing and willing to interact with fans from other nations than their Korean counterparts. At concerts, Korean fans try to show that they are the best fans by being as quiet as possible to give their idols the opportunity to shine the brightest. Western fans try to praise their idols by screaming the loudest in order to motivate their idols this way. This does not mean that Koreans are as modest with the consumption aspect of fandom. According to Celine, Western and Korean fans are not only different in the methods of supporting their idols at concerts, but also in terms of consumption, stating that

"it's sort of a religion for those people…" (Celine, 24, Belgian). Although Koreaboos are pretty fanatic, they listen to multiple bands and buy merchandise from all those different bands. Korean fans, on the other hand, only listen to one band and only consume material goods from that one band. To continue with Celine's analogy, consuming content or material goods from other bands or stars the fans have initially committed to, is like blasphemy.

Celine's experiences, however, do not account for all Western fans, because David, a Koreastudies student who is highly proficient in Korean had different experiences:

. . . when I went to a fan sign event, where you can get your album signed basically, I went to one girl group and one boy group. [...] most girl groups have male fans and most boy groups have female fans. But when I went to the boy group one, at first, I was a bit afraid because I was literally the only guy there, [...] But all of them were really nice. Maybe it helped because I spoke in Korean so that I was more casual for them, but that was compared to what I thought it was a nice experience (David, 24, Belgian).

So, in terms of fandom we can see that Koreaboos and Korean fans differ on several aspects. The interviewees that were not able to speak Korean proved to be in situations that were able to portray these differences due to the language barrier. Being able to speak a common language, especially Korean, has proven to be important for Koreans to open up. What this entails, is further discussed in the next section.

2.3 Korean social systems

As part of their program, Koreastudies students have multiple opportunities to go to Korea and for a longer period than the average tourist. When the interviewed Koreastudies students went to Korea on exchange, they were there with the purpose of improving their proficiency in Korean. To achieve that goal, they often had a language exchange partner or they joined a student club, and because of that, it was easier for Koreastudies students than for regular Koreaboos to socialize with locals, especially peers. And because Koreastudies students were quite proficient in Korean by the time they went there, the local Korean students would notice their proficiency and willingness to improve their language skills. Therefore socializing would be more convenient due to good communication and a genuine interest in Korea apart

from just Hallyu. Although David (24, Belgian), the only male interviewee, hung out with female students sometimes, he claimed that he mostly hung out with male students because in Korea there is a taboo against friendships with people from the opposite gender:

> I would say most of the people that I was close with, they were guys instead of girls, because for some girls it kind of feels like for them that they are on a date. You know, some girls, they don't believe in that 'guys can be friends with girls' kind of thing (David, 24, Belgian).

In Korea there is a sense of gender roles. David noticed that in Korea men and women usually do not hang out with each other individually unless they are dating each other. Genders are only mixed when they hang out in big groups. There is also a pressure of having to be in a relationship. When David was residing in a share house, the Korean housemates asked him if he had a girlfriend and they found it weird when he answered that he did not. Savannah (24, Dutch) mentioned that the female Korean peers that she spoke with, were already ahead of their time, from a Western perspective, knowing what type of husband they would want to marry, by what age they wanted to marry and by what age they wanted to have their first child. Gender roles are not only visible in the expectations put on men and women, and the ways men and women are pressured to behave, gender roles are also visible in the way men and women act towards each other. Savannah saw the Korean patriarchal hierarchy in act when she wanted to join a student club:

> . . . going there, I experienced that, for instance, while joining student clubs, women can hardly join sports clubs. You cannot play basketball with the guys. You cannot play soccer with the guys. And if you want to join, for instance, they're like: 'Okay, you can play manager.' So basically you can be sort of the secretary who tells everyone where to be at what time, which is generally not the reason why you would have to join a sports club (Savannah, 24, Dutch).

The divide between men and women in Korea's society is the first polarity apparent in David's and Savannah's quotes. This can be made up from the gender roles that men and

women have, but also from the hierarchy between men and women. The fact that hierarchy is important in Korea's society in general can also be made up from K-dramas:

> I now understand more how important the politeness there is . . . It's like really a different world. It's like in Holland we speak with *u* and *je*. And here, if you accidentally say *je*, not a lot of people will be offended. If you do that in Korea, there might be a lot of people will be like: "How dare she?" (Amanda, 26, Dutch).

In the first chapter of the results, Amanda quoted that K-dramas felt more authentic than Western dramas to her because she was not aware of what the actors said, but only how they said their lines. That is when she started learning Korean. Only when she arrived in Korea, she recognized the importance of word choice. Moreover, many K-dramas have a historical theme and are set in the period of feudal Korea. Historical K-dramas show how Korea was in the past. Not only in terms of how it looked, but also how society was constructed: a monarchy, and with that; hierarchy, in feudal Korea. And in scenarios, Confucian values are portrayed: respect to the elderly and loyalty to the king. These values and hierarchy are still important in Korea's society today and it shows in K-dramas in contemporary scenarios: loyalty to the boss at work, hierarchy between men and women, and the respect for people that are older than you. For example: a poor young girl falls in love with her rich older boss. Yet, K-dramas still show a glorified image of Korea and many of the things just mentioned can only be noticed when experiencing them in person in Korea, just like how Savannah discovered the polarity between men and women when she wanted to join a student club and how Amanda discovered the polarity between young and old when she put her knowledge of Korean language to use in Korea.

Amanda discovered the polarity between young and old not only in the way people addressed each other and treated each other, but also in the way the elderly regarded and treated foreigners. Usually the younger generation was more open minded and receptive towards foreigners. Most interviewees were surprised how in Seoul, a metropolis where tourists come every day and where people of other nationalities live as well, some elderly were not receptive to foreigners. Amanda mentioned an incident she had with elderly people where she was blatantly stared at from head to toe and that occurred in a 'less touristy place',

but which was still located in Seoul (Amanda, 26, Dutch). But this occurs even more outside of Seoul, there is also a polarity between Seoul and the rest; the urban and rural areas:

> I think I imagined Korea to be, not more open, but maybe that they might have seen more foreigners in their life before. And a lot of Korean people, especially as soon as you go out of Seoul, the capital city, people will stare at you a lot more. Sometimes they point at you or talk about you, but it's never in a negative way of course. They are just curious because they have not seen a person that's not Korean before (Lisa, 24, Dutch).

The last polarity was found in the divide between the rich and the poor. In Korea every male citizen has to serve in the army for two years, it is not a period in their lives most men look forward to because of the circumstances they have to live in, but it is seen as patriotic to do it. As Savannah mentions, some men are able to buy their way out because they are wealthy:

> I do have another friend, I think it's safe to say this, but he is wealthy enough to not do the military enlistment. If you do that, you're walking on thin ice in South Korea because everyone has to do it. It's patriotic. It's the law. But if you're rich enough, you can get out of it. And hearing those kinds of experiences from people, you learn a lot about them because they had to deal with such hardship, to be honest. And I think it also attributes to their views on life. They're not that positive about their future, and that's because they have to do things that they don't have freedom to choose in a certain way. But I think hearing that, you can sort of create a bond because you're talking about hardships (Savannah, 24, Dutch).

This section has shown that there are the polarities men-women, young-old, urban-rural and rich-poor in Korean society. These polarities are experienced by the interviewees themselves in situations they found themselves in when participating in Korea's society, but also by talking to locals who opened up more when they were able to speak in Korean. Language has proven to be a very important aspect for Koreaboos to bond with Koreans and to penetrate the surface of fandom to reach a profound level of knowledge about Korean culture and society.

3. In hindsight

Coming of age in fandom

After coming back home from traveling, all interviewees kept consuming K-pop and K-dramas. However, they consumed less content and material objects, and the way they consumed was different from before. This was not a direct result from traveling to Korea, because some interviewees had already changed their lifestyles before traveling to Korea. But traveling to Korea did change their view on Korea, because the interviewees admitted that they had become aware of the idealized image of Korea they had before their journey.

After all, it turned out to be correct that Koreaboos appropriated Korean popular culture not per se because of its Koreanness, but because they had the goals of forming an identity, feeling a sense of belonging and finding friends:

> I think it's mostly because I just kind of accomplished everything that I wanted to accomplish inside those fandoms. I already went to concerts and I went to a music show, recordings, I did everything that I wanted to do. I did a lot of dancing and got a lot of opportunities and I learned about a lot of people, and I got a lot of his friends out of it. Because I already felt so accomplished I don't think I needed anything more. So I just kind of listen to it casually just for the music (Lisa, 24, Dutch).

Once the interviewees accomplished their goals, especially the goal of having at least a handful of good friends, they chose to occupy a more passive role within the fandom community, only consuming content and merchandise from their ultimate favorite artists instead of all their favorite artists. Because of that, interviewees were not up to date anymore with new bands and therefore they also could neither relate to younger fans anymore. As the interviewees were becoming adults, they did not only fall out of their fandom because they had accomplished their goals and because they could not connect with new fans anymore, they also changed their minds on consumption because they had more responsibilities, more interests and less time. Therefore they had to reconsider what and where to spend time and money on:

Back in 2014, I was really really only into K-pop. So I used to do K-pop every day when I woke up until I went to sleep. I watched variety shows, I listened to music, I watched music videos, everything like that. But now I work and I go out with my friends and I go for a drink. Those things also cost money. And I just needed to find the right balance between K-pop that I now listen to more casually and more in my free time than the obsession it used to be. So I think that's part of growing up in general (Celine, 24, Belgian).

When some of the interviewees were younger, they had more time on their hands and since they did not have many friends, they isolated themselves and spent all their free time consuming Korean popular culture. They could also spend all their time on being a fan because there was an infinite amount of content to consume. When K-pop idols release a new song, it always comes with a music video, of that music video there are different versions as well: lyric videos, a dance version, and even a dance practice version. Moreover, K-pop idols are invited to variety shows, where they are able to show more of their personalities, and they upload vlogs of themselves onto social media so fans can have a look into their personal lives. That way fans feel more connected to their idols, which again results in consumption of more material goods in order to support the bands.

Once the interviewees became more mature, they realized how much the K-pop industry was influencing them to consume content, but even more so, to consume material goods:

It's a whole industry and it's very smart, how they do it with, for example, different album versions and: "Oh, I need to buy all album versions." And eventually you spend almost 80 euros to collect all the album versions. Some younger fans can be really influenced with what they see on social media, some people show their accounts, show their collections, and they're like: "Oh my God, you're so rich. How can you all buy this?" But we're not rich. We're spending our money. We worked for this (Therese, 29, Belgian).

Therese thought it was not ethical how younger fans that are obsessed with Korean popular culture, including herself in the past, would spend both all their time and money on their

fandom, triggered by the K-pop industry to consume. The pressure to consume did not only come from above, it also came from other fans. The first chapter of the results tried to explain the importance of material consumption as a fan practice and that consumption can turn toxic among fans because of competitiveness. In the past quote, Therese showed how material consumption could imply status because possessing a big collection means one must have spent a significant amount of money to obtain it. This can lead to jealousy among other fans. The pressure to consume in the Koreaboo fandom can be so toxic that fans decide to step out of the fandom:

> You need to support the new album, you need to collect photo cards. You need to, you need to, you need to. It's a vicious circle and at some point last year, I really made the decision to not consume so much anymore And I actually went a bit more into Western rock music again a bit more, and that was really a good idea because it put me a lot more into perspective. Like: 'Oh, this is how it works again in Western music culture.' And: 'Oh, that's how it works in Asian pop culture' (Therese, 29, Belgian).

As we have seen, once fans have accomplished their personal goals, their fanaticism slows down and they grow out of their fandom. After traveling to Korea multiple times, Therese stepped out of the fandom because she saw how much pressure both the media industries and other fans were putting on her. And directly after, she started appropriating the subcultures she was previously a fan of, again. This shows that fans can be fans without having to be appealed because of similar sociohistorical backgrounds. However, national identity is still an important factor in transnational fandom.

Discussing their travel experiences in Korea, the interviewees showed that national identity is important for the way they, as Western people, perceive Koreans and Korea by using the Self-Other dichotomy to explain their experiences. The interviewees proved to have had an idealized image of Koreans and Korea, and admitted that their experiences in Korea changed that. For example, they found out that not everybody listened to K-pop. When it comes to Korean music, Koreans often listen to ballads, rather than actual pop songs, but hip hop and rock, for example, are appreciated genres as well. As for foreign music, Anglophone songs are more commonly liked than expected. Koreaboos found out that K-pop is definitely important for Korean culture, but it is only a part of Korean culture and that Anglophone

music is as much part of daily consumption in Korea as in Belgium, according to interviewees from the country lastly named. K-drama fans found out that in Korea not everybody was handsome or pretty, in K-dramas even the background people were good looking, but when the fans saw Koreans in situ, that was not the case. These findings were not things that bothered the interviewees, these were just eye-openers. But by traveling to Korea and participating in Korean society, the interviewees saw that there were negative things that they had not expected beforehand or that they had not expected to be as serious as they imagined:

> I don't want to live in Korea. I love Korea, I love to go there and travel there, but I've noticed a lot of things in Korean culture that would not suit my personality. There's a lot of pressure on young people to find jobs [...] There's a lot of mental health issues and [...] I would struggle as well with all the pressure and overworking, and it wouldn't work for me. Also, living in a big city as Seoul, it's nice to visit, but I don't see myself living there because it's very overwhelming. They're always out and about [...] And I'm really a homebody. So I like to be at home, I like to be cozy and like to cook. Also, I think there's not only a lot of pressure for jobs and being successful, but it's also beauty standards as well. You need to be thin, basically. You need to have your makeup sorted, you always need to be a bit fashionable, while here in Europe, everything is more relaxed and that's why I really like living in Europe, because people don't really care, especially in Belgium [...] But there, it's all very based on how you look. When I go to Korea, I also, subconsciously, always put on makeup [...] you see all these Koreans and they're trying to look the best and you're just trying to do an effort as well as a foreigner somehow (Therese, 29, Belgian).

In the quote above, we see that Therese thinks that there is a lot of pressure on young people when it comes to work and on women because there is a lot of focus on body image, women need to maintain a slim body type and they need to look presentable at all times. This thesis has taken examples like these to the bigger picture and called them polarities. From the interviews four polarities can be drawn: men-women, young-old, urban-rural and rich-poor. And it was exactly these polarities that made the interviewed Koreaboos that once had the idea to live in Korea long-term, decide to not migrate to Korea anymore. Instead, they still

wanted to go back, but on vacation only. They had now experienced other aspects of Korean culture when they were in Korea, which they were keen on exploring further, especially now they had already fulfilled their dreams having participated in fandom-related activities. And since the interviewees did not actively participate in their fandom anymore, especially monetarily, they could now spend the money that they saved by not buying merchandise, on flight tickets and actually going to Korea more often, as well as spending that money on cultural activities when in Korea.

Discussion

Tourist experiences of Koreaboos

What the interviews reveal, is that on the one hand, the Koreaboos' imaginaries and expectations are built upon media narratives, that are reinforced by destination marketing (Beeton, 2016), and that influences their tourist experience. On the other hand, in some cases, the meaning-making and world-shaping power of the imaginary (Salazar, 2012), mostly built on the consumption of Hallyu products, clashed with the reality of being in a country with much stricter regulations about social life and social norms. Some Koreaboos truly want to understand Korean culture, but they are confined to the process of Othering in order to make sense of their observations (Salazar, 2012). As argued by Salazar, Western tourist imaginaries about developing countries are shaped by stereotypes about the Other as a result of Orientalism, colonialism and imperialism, and the stereotypes are reinforced by the media (Salazar, 2012). In recent years the Korean government surely has been able to join and transform this discourse, but as apparent from my results, these efforts do not yet match up to centuries of Orientalism, colonialism and imperialism as Katie quoted that she became interested in Korea due to K-pop first and foremost, but specifically mentioned that Korea was so interesting to her because its nature, architecture and clothing was so different from their Western counterparts.

However, as seen in Therese's (29, Belgian) quote when she reflected on her experiences in Korea, she found herself dressing to the nines and doing her makeup because she felt pressured to fit in as local Koreans would all look clean and tidy when in public. Yet, she claimed in Belgium she would never dress up if she felt pressured to do so. It could be argued that, in this situation, the findings do not conform to the idea that media tourists still choose to keep fantasizing after having arrived at their destination (Reijnders, 2011). The tourists were simply not able to because they were embedded in a Confucian system that exerted constant social pressure on them. In the West, transcultural homology can exist, because prior to traveling to Korea, individual fans were able to pick and choose values from foreign subcultures, which happened to be Hallyu in this case, to construct an identity collectively (Hills, 2002). Divided by nationality, Koreaboos all around the world were united by interest. But in Korea, the fans were the odd ones out. The fans were not able to fully

appropriate, because unlike in the West, it was only the Korean culture that they were exposed to. Once Koreaboos enter Korea, they have to adhere to a specific role in society according to their demographics. This is apparent in the social structures people are in and the language that they use to communicate with people that occupy other roles in society. In hindsight, the interviewees found out that the Confucian systems and values that they had discovered, had been communicated to them all along, albeit implicitly, through Hallyu and that they were only able to realize this because they had explicitly been exposed to them being in Korea. National identity turned out to be important here, because in Korea, when attending a concert, some of the interviewees were shocked seeing the different behavior of Korean fans and their interpretation of what it means to be a fan. It aligns with Prassolova's finding about American and Russian *Harry Potter* fans not being able to get along with each other due to different customs in fandom, that, according to Siuda, is a result from their different sociohistorical backgrounds (Prassolova, 2007a; 2007b; Siuda, 2014). Therefore, in Korea, transcultural homology does not exist for Koreaboos.

The Koreaboos became aware of a very polarized society with big gaps between old and young, rich and poor, urban and rural, and male and female, where they as young people would occupy a disadvantaged position and would receive a lot of pressure in terms of work and love if they would have been born in Korea or would migrate to Korea. This resulted in the fans that once had a dream of living in Korea long-term, deciding not to pursue that dream anymore. These experiences made the Koreaboos re-evaluate what it means to be a fan. It is claimed that being a fan means to rebel against the establishment (Reijnders et al., 2016). In Western society, Koreaboos would not necessarily appropriate Korean culture to resist power over them, but rather to find a sense of belonging, whereas in Korea, Koreaboos would in fact rebel, namely against the Korean government, after having realized the strict social norms they had to adhere to. Having sensed the pressure of competitiveness and conformity in Korean society (Śleziak, 2013), the realization about this pressure was the incentive for the fans to break apart from Hallyu commercialism. They would be very keen to come back as a tourist only, which brings back the notion of appropriation and Othering, as the fans seem to view Korea merely as a place to escape to, away from their routines. It aligns with Hannerz' notion about cosmopolitans that cosmopolitans let themselves be subsumed into foreign cultures, but that they will always have the power to withdraw (Hannerz, 1990). However, all interviewees showed affection to other aspects of Korean culture as well,

aligning with Jenkins' notion about cosmopolitans who walk "a thin line between dilettantism and connoisseurship, between orientalist fantasies and a desire to honestly connect and understand an alien culture, between assertion of mastery and surrender to cultural difference" (Jenkins, 2004, p. 127). Because, even though the interviewees would not want to reside in Korea anymore, they were keen on going back to do more cultural tourist activities and experience other sides of Korean culture than just Hallyu. What this trip taught them was to separate fandom and Korean culture from each other and it made them realize that, apart from Hallyu, there was still so much that they did not know about Korea, which sparked the urge for them to want to return in order to continue growing their knowledge about Korea.

Soft power and brand nationalism in tourist experiences of Koreaboos

The Korean government proved to have soft power in the West through commercialism of fan products and culture. Promoting Hallyu content on social media increases the chance of Western people finding out about Hallyu (Oh et al., 2015). Once Korean content creators have the attention of possible Western fans, celebrity loyalty is what really makes fans commit to Hallyu fandom (Tinaliga, 2018), because it closes the gap from strange to familiar. Then, through digital and material consumption, the Korean government is able to instill the Confucian values of competitiveness and conformity into Koreaboos' minds. As we have seen in the literature review, fans today are defined as prosumers (Reijnders et al., 2016). Among fans, those that are more active in production, are often those who are more engaged participating in fandom communities as well (Reijnders et al., 2016). Reijnders, Zwaan, Duits and Waysdorf (2016) focus mainly on the fandom practice of writing fan fiction. However, material consumption as a form of fan practice is not mentioned and that turned out to be an important aspect of participating in the Koreaboo fandom as well. Material consumption is a form of social interaction as albums come with photos of idols and the exchange of these photos starts or strengthens friendships. Besides, fans would not only spend as much time and money as possible to show that they were devoted to their idols, it was also a way to distinguish themselves from others through competitiveness. Tinaliga (2018) mentioned the importance of competitiveness in fandom stating that it can cause great things if competitiveness brings fans together to execute an idea collectively and that it can turn toxic when it is used to outperform other fans in order to show that the fans that cause a stir, are more loyal to their idols. But Tinaliga failed to stress the fact that competitiveness among

fans can be seen as an individual expression of boasting about financial status or a way to seek attention. The trip to Korea only reinforced the fact that the Korean government had been instilling Confucian values into Koreaboos' minds, because the pressure of competitiveness and conformity became visible via the patriarchal hierarchy the Koreaboos were adopted by. And because in Korea, Korean culture was the only culture the Koreaboos were exposed to, they were not able to appropriate anymore, which strengthened the power of the Korean government over them.

However, this does not mean that the fans only acquiesced to Korean soft power. On the contrary, Koreaboos turned out to have soft power too. In the West, Koreaboos showed to be able to exert soft power in fandom through appropriation as prosumers. In fact, Koreaboos were interested in Hallyu because it was related to their previous hobbies and not necessarily because Hallyu was from Korea (Newitz, 1994; Allison, 2000; Napier, 2001). On top of that, the fans used their fandom to find a sense of belonging. And when they started doing research about Korea, apart from Hallyu, a dichotomy of the Self and the Other became apparent in their meaning-making (Salazar, 2012). With that, Koreaboos turned out to have soft power too in their identity as a cosmopolitan (Hannerz, 1990). Because, having just arrived in Korea, the interviewees made sense of their experiences with the process of Othering. This is a result of centuries of Orientalism, imperialism and colonialism, which the Koreaboos inevitably were influenced by having grown up in the West. And although the Korean government proved to have power over Koreaboos over a longer period of time with Confucian social structures (Śleziak, 2013), than the Koreaboos had in their first days in the country with the process of Othering (Salazar, 2012), it is national identity, or the context in which foreign subcultures are consumed (Prassolova, 2007a; 2007b; Siuda, 2014), that made the fans aware of Korean soft power, and it enabled them to problematize and confront Confucianism once they realized it was exerting a degree of power over them. Finally, once the Koreaboos had power over their fandom again, they appropriated Korea as a tourist destination, possibly seeing it only as a place to escape to, away from their mundanity and sorrows (Hannerz, 1990). Therefore, apart from the soft power gained by Koreaboos through appropriation in the Western fandom community (Jenkins, 1992), national identity and the context in which people consume foreign cultures, turned out to be the distinguishing factor in Korea that set transnational fans apart from each other and it is what gained fans their soft power as well. Thus, Hills' transcultural homology (2002) is possible for becoming a fan in

the West, but participating in Korean society, it is impossible because national differences (Prassolova, 2007a; 2007b; Siuda, 2014) turned out to definitely exist and to create a barrier that was too thick to break through for complete cultural transcendence.

All in all, the findings seem to point to the fact that globalization and digitalization indeed played important roles in the global shift of power relations. On the one hand, we have Korean content that is undeniably penetrating the West through videos and social media, with PSY's song Gangnam Style as the most prominent example from around the beginning of this revolutionary period. The soft power gained from this Korean content can be ascribed to the Korean government since, as discussed in the literature review, the Korean government was responsible for applying neoliberalism after the Korean war, opening the borders of the country to participate in the free market economy, and providing content creators with favorable circumstances to create and distribute content (Kim & Kwon, 2014; Kim & Nam, 2016a; 2016b). On the other hand, we have fans, Koreaboos in this case, that are on the receiving end of Korean popular culture and Korean soft power. But Koreaboos are able to exert soft power as well. Namely, as prosumers, who partly appropriate Korean popular culture for their own agenda, gaining a sense of belonging that is (Reijnders et al., 2016), but also as cosmopolitans, who are still confined to the process of Othering but do appreciate Korean culture and want to understand it as well (Jenkins, 2004). It means that although critics have valid points when they question the long-term sociological effects of Hallyu commodification by the Korean government, Hallyu and the government's policymaking have proved to be sustainable from a financial perspective, because at the same time older fans stop consuming Hallyu on a constant basis, because they have become mature, or when they have been to Korea and have experienced the Confucian social system, younger fans take the older fans' place in Hallyu's consumption system. Moreover, the interviewees still wished to go back to Korea as a tourist, which proved Korea in their perspective to not have changed as a tourist destination at least, and which therefore proved Korea's destination marketing to have been effective.

Recommendations and limitations

The East is now able to match the West, and fans at the bottom of the spectrum are now able to match the content creators on top. And because of that, both the Korean government and Koreaboos now have the soft power as just discussed. The Korean government was not able

to completely convert Koreaboos due to the national identity, or the sociohistorical context, they had grown up in and from which they consumed Korean popular culture. But with digitalization and globalization, will the world ever become so much of a melting pot that fandom becomes transcultural, to a point that the Korean government is in fact able to influence Western people with Confucian values so much so that Western people are not able to break apart with the help of their national identity, or context they consume in? This question could offer a good starting point for future research.

Using K-pop band BTS and its fandom as the object of study, the recommended research question could possibly be answered. Because, unlike most other K-pop bands, BTS did not have access to traditional media in the beginning and had to resort to social media as a result. Its label is HYBE Corporation, formerly Big Hit Entertainment, which did not use to be one of the three major labels in Korea. The top three used to consist of SM Entertainment, JYP Entertainment and YG Entertainment. Bands that would debut under one of those three labels would almost instantly become successful as they could grant their employees many opportunities. HYBE on the other hand, did not use to have access to a lot of resources and therefore BTS put its content directly on the world wide web, in the hope of attracting viewers and listeners. Of course this thesis has argued that Hallyu as a whole has become so widespread due to social media, but BTS is the prime example of a K-pop band that has become successful due to its popularity on social media. Interviewee Grace states the following:

> [...] being as BTS, who were popular internationally before they were actually more and more popular in Korea, I think that strengthened the bond with Korean fans and international fans to work together. Because BTS kind of made it like: "Oh, fans are family and stuff like that. We help each other out." So it's like they never wanted to see each other as separate fandoms. "Oh, you're the Korean fandom, or you're the international." No. They saw it as one. So in a way, everyone just kind of like helped each other and worked together, which is why we got a lot of the content in English subbed. All these years it was the Korean fans that were translating all their content in English (Grace, 27, American).

Because BTS became successful internationally first and domestically only after that, BTS' fandom is built up differently and the way the fans behave towards each other is different as well. There surely is competition among BTS fans and compassion in other fandoms, but BTS is known for propagating love and positivity. BTS has even given a speech at the UN General Assembly twice, in 2018 (Unicef, 2018) and in 2020 (Unicef, 2020). After noticing BTS' success, BTS had been named Honorary Tourism Ambassador of Seoul by the Seoul Tourism Organization (Haddad, 2019). More recently, the Korean government has passed a bill that allows certain K-pop stars to postpone military service until the age of thirty, including the members of BTS (BBC News, 2020). There are high chances the law was implemented because of the success of BTS. In the past, successful bands would often disband after one of the members had reached the age to do the compulsory military service, and their popularity would decrease. But knowing the massive amount of revenue BTS brings to Korea each year, passing the bill could be a way for the Korean government to implicitly tell it is not ready for BTS' success to stagnate. Therefore, it is interesting to use BTS as the object of study since it is not the traditional K-pop band that has flourished under Korean neoliberal circumstances and since the band had only been embraced by the Korean government after having become successful. Coming back to the recommended research question, if there is a way for the Korean government to ultimately cater to Western fans, it should be through BTS.

The limitations of this thesis are the facts that there has only been one male interviewee in this thesis, because he was the only one that was found, and that due to the COVID-19 pandemic all interviews, except for one, have been conducted online, which affected the quality of conversations thoroughly because of poor internet connection and a lack of personal connection. Therefore, it is recommended for the research that follows to find more male interviewees as it makes the study more reliable when it comes to the male perspective of Hallyu fandom and to conduct the interviews face to face as the chance of capturing and understanding nuances could be higher.

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Appendixes

Information interviewees (pseudonyms used)

- Amanda: 26-years-old, Dutch, Female

- Celine: 24-years-old, Belgian, Female

- David: 24-years-old, Belgian, Male

- Grace: 27-years-old, American, Female

- Katie: 22-years-old, Dutch, Female

- Lisa: 24-years-old, Dutch, Female

- Savannah: 24-years-old, Dutch, Female

- Therese: 29-years-old, Belgian, Female

Interview guide

- What is your name?

- What is your age?

- Where are you from?

_____

- When and how did you first get into touch with Korean popular culture?

- What was your first impression? Why did you like it or why not? If it took time to get interested, when was the point you became a fan and why then?

- What genres do you watch/listen/read? Why are you into these genres?

- In your fandom, do you think there is a sense of community? How? Did you meet friends through fandom? How do you share your passion? Do you talk online, do you meet up and go to events together?

- Do you apply something of your fandom in daily life? What? How?

_____

- Do you only like Korean popular culture or do you like other aspects of the country too? If so or if not, why and what?

- Do you speak Korean? Why or why not?

- Have you ever been to Korea? Why or why not?

- If you have been, can you describe to me what Korea is like?

- If you have not been, what do you think Korea is like?
- If you have been, what places did you visit and what activities did you do? Why? What were the highlights and what was disappointing?
- If you have not been, what places and activities are top priority on your list and why?
- If you have been, what was your interaction with local people like? Could you share your passions with them?
- If you have not been, how do you think people there would be and how do you think interaction with locals will be?
- If you have been, has your trip changed your perspective on the country, the culture and the people? In what way?
- If you have not been, what do you think the trip will do? Will it strengthen your love for the country or could it weaken your love for the country? Why?
- If you have been, do you still consume content of your fandom? Why?
- If you have not been, would you still be able to listen/read/watch content from that country if the country does not turn out to be what you imagined of it?
- If you have been, do you think you can see the popular culture separate enough to enjoy it for what it is without liking the country, the people and the greater culture or do you think the popular culture is so intertwined that you cannot see it apart from the country, the people and the greater culture?
- If you have not been, do you think you really like that country or do you like the idea of it because you were a fan of popular culture? Why?