University Students' Perceptions of Korean Wave and Its Impact on Their Views of Korea and Korean Culture

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Abstract

This study examines undergraduate student perceptions of Korean Wave and how these perceptions impacted their views of Korea and its culture. A mixed research design was adopted using qualitative and quantitative methods. The main components of the Korean Wave–dramas, movies, and pop–were analyzed. The data collected showed that the attractive elements of the Korean Wave were related to aesthetic and structural elements, messages, and differentiation. Overall, participants related well to Korean Wave products and felt that they could connect with the cultural content. The impact of Korean Wave products on students' perceptions of Korea and its culture was analyzed through correlation analysis, which revealed that perceptions of Korean wave content correlated with participants' interest in Korean culture.

Keywords: *Popular culture, Korean Wave, K-pop, K-drama, K-movie*

Introduction

The Korean mass media business has spread worldwide. In the beginning, it was called "Korean Wave" or "Hallyu." More recently, media and entertainment industry magazines use the term "Korean Fever" (Song, 2016). In the early stages of Hallyu, drama and K-pop were centralized, but recently it has expanded to include fields such as movies, games, dancing, food, and fashion.

Suggestions why the Korean Wave has attracted attention include social and cultural, economic, and technical perspectives. From the social and cultural viewpoint, the spread of Korean Wave is based on cultural proximity theory. Cultural proximity theory suggests that audiences tend to prefer media products that are closely related to their own culture (Straubhaar, 2014). Based on a desire for cultural relevance, audiences actively gravitate towards national or regional television programs when they are available. This perspective is supported by the notion from other cultural studies that the audience plays an active role in selecting and interpreting media outputs (Straubhaar, 1991).

The cultural values featured in Korean Wave are attractive to other cultures, such as its portrayal of family values and respect for the elderly. In addition, scholars who advocate for cultural hybridity claim that the blend of Asian traditional elements and Western modernity within the Korean Wave is the key to understanding its global spread. From an economic perspective, the drive for Korean Wave products to meet the needs of Korean consumers has led to improvement in quality, making them competitive not only in Korea, but also abroad. Finally, the technology used is progressive. For instance, as Social Network Service has become an important means of communication, Korean Wave content has utilized such platforms as promotional tools (Parc & Moon, 2013). In addition, advanced technology using computer graphics and augmented reality technology has made the Korean Wave significantly more attractive to consumers.

One effect of the Korean Wave is that the Korean Language (or "Hangul") has been adopted as a second foreign language besides English. The growth in the number of language schools indicates that the status of the Korean language has been getting stronger (Ministry of Korean Education, 2018). According to Wang (2016), 97% of directors and coordinators of curriculum programs acknowledged that the popularity of the Korean Wave was responsible for an increase in Korean language learners.

In addition, the Korean Wave has brought about various economic and cultural effects. According to a Korean International Trade Association (2011) survey, 80% of participants in Japan, China, Taiwan, and Vietnam suggested that the Korean Wave influenced Korean product purchases. The Korean Wave also

has facilitated an increase in the number of foreign tourists visiting Korea, from nearly 300,000 in 1998 to 11.8 million in 2014, mostly from Asia (Bae et al., 2017).

Most of the studies on the Korean Wave are focused on business, culture, tourism, national policy, and motives for wanting to learn the Korean language (Park et al., 2017). Very few studies have addressed how peripheral cultural products, such as Korean Wave products, have become accepted by global audiences. This paper attempts to shed some light on this issue by focusing on the reasons why participants consume Korean Wave products and how they relate to it. The study also explores how consumers' perceptions of Korea and its culture are affected by Korean Wave. Ultimately the entire investigation was based on the following three questions:

1. First, what are the factors that attract students to the Korean wave?
2. Second, how do students relate to the Korean wave?
3. Finally, what is the impact of the Korean wave on students' perceptions of Korea and its culture?

Literature Review
Media and Culture
Because of globalization, the world is spatially integrated into a wide range of interdependent networks. Capital, goods, information, and ideas are closely linked, regardless of distance or location. Popular cultural products and cultural consumption have become increasingly transnational and complex as boundaries have become less clear (D'Silva, 2001; Jung, 2009).

In modern life, it can be argued that mass media has a close relationship with culture (Showkat , 2017)**.** The Korean Wave is a special form of popular culture introduced as a form of commercial nationalism through the media (Lee, 2011). It creates diverse socio-cultural contacts across national and institutional boundaries (Jung, 2009). However, different populations decode and respond to cultural products in various ways (Lee, 2011). D'Silva (2001) identified three codes used by audiences— dominant, negotiated, and opposite codes.

Hallyu (or Korean Wave)
The term "Korean Wave" or "Hallyu" refers to the international spread of Korean pop culture, Hallyu meaning "to flow" (Lee, 2013). It represents the flow of popular culture, but also a wave of transition from a mere political and economic ideology after the Cold War to other paradigms of culture and civilization (Kim, 2015). Hallyu means the flow and spread of Korean popular culture including K-drama and films (1.0), K-pop music (2.0), K-culture (3.0), and K-style fashion and food (4.0).

Korean TV broadcasts, movies, and music began being exported in the early 1990s, but they did not attract a lot of attention until 1997 following the broadcast the Korean drama "What is Love all about?" by China Central Television (Jung, 2009). Since 2000, the Korean Wave phenomenon has spread; Korean Wave 1.0 led to K-pop 2.0 (composed of hip-hop, pop, rock, R & B and electronic music—Touhami & Al-Haq, 2017), causing stimulation of interest in Korean culture.

The development of Internet technology has brought a turning point to Hallyu giving rise to the "Neo-Korean Wave" (Korean Culture and Information Service, 2011). The digitized music and music videos of K-pop have created conditions for reaching the masses. The popularity of global K-pop has been particularly predominant in Asia, but has also spread to the rest of the world (Cruz et al., 2019).

Korean Wave Success Factors
The secret of the Korean Wave's popularity can be found in cultural hybrids. It has been argued that hybridity is the key to understanding the proliferation of media globalization (Kraidy, 2002) on account of the freedom of cultural production and consumption in the free trade era. Dani and Bruno (2015) described cultural hybrids in terms of the modification and merging of cultural elements of the "Orient" and "West" to create appealing new products. Korean pop culture combines the tempting image of modernized Westernness with an appropriate amount of Asian sentimentality, attracting a wide spectrum of spectators (Shim, 2006). Korea has grafted advanced Western cultures onto its own and created its own unique culture (Jang & Paik, 2012).

Technological advances have also aided in the global growth of Korean popular culture with the increased acceleration of globalization (Dani & Bruno, 2015). Social Network Service has now become an important means of communication throughout the world, and is used to promote Korean content (Parc & Moon, 2013). Fans of the new Korea Wave are rapidly expanding from the middle-aged to teenagers and twenty-somethings who are familiar with the digital environment. The popular group "Beyond The Scene" is considered a successful example of social media utilization (Jin, 2018). K-pop music videos incorporate 3D visual cubic and 4D sensuous experiences using colorful and sophisticated techniques (Cho & Sim, 2013). The technologies have enabled sophisticated and skilled editing of dramas, movies, and K-pop, contributing to the success of the Korean Wave.

The Impact of Korean Wave

The success of K-drama/movies and K-pop has led to an interest in Korean culture, food, fashion, and language. According to Fukunaga (2006), people with a strong interest in foreign pop culture are likely to develop critical attitudes, cultural knowledge, and foreign language skills. In Thailand, Korean language has become popular, and students are interested in Korean culture (Song, 2016). With regards to Thailand, the Korean Wave has facilitated the integration of Korean cosmetics, clothing and cuisine into Thai society, particularly amongst the youth. This has been partly driven by the desire of Thai K-pop fans to imitate the physical appearance of their favorite Korean celebrities (Prasopsorn & Panmanee, 2019).

According to Statista (n.d.), inbound visitors to Korea increased from 5.32 million in 2000 to 13.34 million in 2017. Due to the Korean Wave, Korea has become a tourist hotspot for foreign tourists on account of visits to drama and movie locations, and to enjoy K-pop concerts.

The Korean Wave has raised the value of Korean brand products. The economic impact of the Korean Wave showed a continuous increase from 2011 to 2014 (Song, 2015). In particular, the medical (cosmetics) tourism, cosmetics, and beauty industries have been directly influenced by the phenomenon. Korean stars are leading the trend of consumers as their fashion and styling products are being sold in Asia where the Korean Wave is influential (Bae et al., 2017).

Embodiment, Identity, and Global Engagement

K-pop fans form part of "a dynamic community that imagines itself as transcending national boundaries" (Swan, 2018). Whilst the global Korean Wave community are dispersed geographically, it is tightly connected by a sense of affinity, devotion, and belonging. This construction of closeness within the transnational Korean wave community is facilitated through the intimacy of online spaces allowing fans to connect, share, and express. Far from being passive pop-culture consumers, individuals are active participants in the Korean Wave, leading fans to engage with popular culture in creative and even transformative ways (Swan, 2018). Safe spaces of transnational connection are formed, in which expression and identity formation can take place. The fan community itself and the shared passion and devotion it encompasses constitutes the safe space in which in-group interactions are fostered. It is within such spaces that fans have the freedom to explore alternative means of understanding and expression that lie beyond the confines of Eurocentric, patriarchal ideologies in which the physical and emotional articulation of feelings is devalued (Swan, 2018). Through his exploration of YouTube reaction videos, Swan revealed the important role of place, body, and emotion in K-pop fan engagement, and the ways in which K-pop videos facilitated identity construction, indicating the embodied and emotional engagement of K-pop fans (Swan, 2018).

The issue of identity resonance between the viewer and the media content was explored by Seto and Martin (2019). Their study focused on the media practices of Southeast Asian transmigrants in Australia. Participants sought out Sinophone media forms that enabled them to connect with the homeland and to reengage with familiar sounds and sights. They experienced the local media as exclusionary and alienating. The study exemplifies the ways media products contribute to the materializing of the life worlds of consumers and their sense of place and migrant identity.

The worldwide success of Korean popular culture is on account of its products being "transculturally intelligible" (Cruz et al., 2019), and it has disrupted Western dominance of cultural globalization. The

consumer translator role constitutes a pivotal enabling force in this movement, as fans play an active part in interpreting and expressing K-pop content in locally meaningful ways. Translation is the process that enables text from one semiotic context to be rendered intelligible in another. This level of fan participation is particularly important for peripheral cultural products such as K-pop, which face additional barriers to internationalization when compared to more centralized Western products. Cruz et al. (2019) have highlighted that the translation practices of K-pop fans enables non-Korean consumers to connect unfamiliar elements with their own life worlds. Translation provides the means to access and embody K-pop as a cultural form; it also facilitates the negotiation of identity dimensions and boundaries.

Methodology
Research Design
A mixed research methodology was used combining qualitative and quantitative design. Qualitative open-ended questions were used to establish participants' relationship to the Korean Wave and its attractive elements. The impact of the Korean Wave on participants' behavior was analyzed through quantitative questionnaire items.

Research Setting
This research study was carried out at the Muak Lek Campus of Asia-Pacific International University, Thailand, during the 2018/2019 school year. At that campus there were 756 students from 32 countries. More than 90% of the students were from Asian countries.

Sampling Procedure
Purposive sampling was adopted, using a non-probability method for participant selection (Palinkas et al., 2015). Data were gathered using an online survey of undergraduate students (N = 718), excluding Koreans, over a three-week period (April to May 2019). Ninety-two responses were received.

Survey Instrument and Data Collection
The questionnaire was conducted using a Google survey program. The questionnaire was produced in English for international students (60.2% of students) and in Thai (39.8 % of students). Multiple-choice and open-ended qualitative questions were included. Questions pertaining to K-movies and dramas were kept separate from those related to K-pop. A 4-point Likert scale was used: *strongly disagree* (1), *disagree* (2), *agree* (3), and *strongly agree* (4). Demographic information was included in the first section of the questionnaire.

Five experts evaluated the questionnaire: the Content Validity Index value was .91, exceeding the minimal level of .80, indicating its validity. Some items were modified to make them more appropriate. The research study also received ethical approval.

Data Analysis
Each item of quantitative data was assigned a unique identification number. In the case of the numeric converted data, the mean values were obtained from Excel, and the Statistics Package for Social Sciences program was utilized for correlation analysis.

The open-ended questions were subjected to thematic analysis. Key issues were identified, and certain key words and phrases highlighted. A number of themes were then established within the data, indicated by similar words and statements. Each theme was looked at individually to decipher theme dynamics. Finally, data were analyzed and explained using examples that clearly conveyed each theme.

Results and Discussion
Demographic Representation
In terms of gender, 63% were female and 37% male. The majority (39.1%) were freshman, 25% were sophomore, 14.1% were junior, and 21.7% were seniors. Some were younger than 19 (17.4%), 55.4%

were in the 20 to 22 age group, 19.6% were between 23 and 25, and 7.6% were older. Participants originated from 11 different countries; Thais 58.7% and Malaysians 13% were the largest groups with the remainder from Asia, except for sole representatives from Sweden and Zambia.

Participants (89.1%) expressed some interest in the Korean Wave, while 10.9% of participants were not interested. Participants were most commonly introduced to the Korean Wave through media sources (52.2%), friends (40.2%), family members (5.4%), and others (2.2%). Participants reported that they had been interested in the Korean Wave for more than five years (38%), 27.2% for less than one year, 18.5% for three to five years, and 16.3% for one to three years. In general, participants seemed to have a high consumption of K-drama (47.8%), K-pop (34.8%), and K-movies (17.4%).

Perceptions of Korean Wave—Structured Questions

For the analysis of participants' perceptions of K-dramas/movies and K-pop, a total of 20 statements were presented to them. Table 1 shows students' perceptions of Korean dramas/movies.

Table 1 *Perceptions of Korean Dramas and Movies (N = 92)*

No.	Items	Mean Value
1	I am able to identify with the characters of Korean dramas/movies.	2.68
2	The stories of the characters are similar to my own life.	1.98
3	I can connect emotionally with the characters in Korean dramas/movies.	2.68
4	I can identify well with the plot of Korean dramas/movies.	2.67
5	I can relate well to the culture portrayed in Korean dramas/movies.	2.53
6	I can relate well to the morals and values portrayed in Korean dramas/movies.	2.67
7	There are similarities between my culture and the culture portrayed in Korean dramas/movies.	2.30
8	It is difficult for me to relate Korean movies/dramas to what happens in my own life.	2.54
9	The culture portrayed in Korean dramas and movies is different from my own.	2.20
10	The culture portrayed in Korean movies/dramas conflicts with my own culture.	2.76

According to Table 1, participants generally identified with K-dramas/movies (#4), agreed that they could identify with the stories and the characters (#1), and could connect emotionally with the characters. Understanding of morals and values in K-dramas/movies (#6) showed their understanding of Korean culture described in them (#5) as well. This is perhaps because most participants (97.8%) were Asian and therefore had some similar cultural values (#7). This agrees with cultural proximity theory, which indicates that people favor media products with similarities to their own cultures (cf. Jung (2009). However, participants disagreed that the lives depicted by the characters in K dramas or movies were similar to their own (#2), indicating a difference between the reality of K-dramas/movies and the reality of participants' own lives (#8). Participants agreed that there were differences (#9) or conflict (#10) between their own cultures and the culture portrayed in the Korean dramas/movies. Overall, participants agreed that they could relate to Korean dramas/movies (mean score 2.50). These results strengthen the idea that the Korean Wave is a cultural hybrid that creates attractive new products for audiences in different cultural environments, as claimed by Dani and Bruno (2015) and Shim (2006). The data give evidence of cultural translation amongst participants, allowing them to give local interpretations to K-dramas and movies despite cultural differences (Cruz et al., 2019).

According to sociologist John Lie (2012), K-pop reaches out to the masses with its fusion of infectious beats, proficient dance, and American-led pop music. The powerful use of English lyrics and the melody attracts the listeners. As presented in Table 2, participants indicated that they were able to identify K-pop lyrics (#1) and connect to the music emotionally (#2). Participants could identify with the K-pop

singers (#5) who touched their emotions (#3), and participants were able to connect emotionally with the melody and rhythm of the songs (#4).

Participants thought that K-pop singers were role models, that their songs promoted agreeable moral values, and that they could relate the messages of K-pop songs to their own lives. This perception is connected with the K-pop singers' politeness, attractive appearance, tender attitude, and the messages of the songs that appealed to the audience (Lie, 2012). On the other hand, as shown in items 9 and 10, participants agreed that it was difficult to relate the lyrics to their own lives or to connect emotionally with the melody of K-pop due to imperfect translation (Cruz et al., 2019). However, overall participants agreed that they could relate to K-pop (mean score 2.41).

Table 2 *Perceptions of K-pop (N = 92)*

No.	Items	Mean Value
1	I am able to identify with the lyrics of K-pop.	2.14
2	I can connect emotionally with the lyrics of K-pop.	2.35
3	The voice of the singer touches my emotions.	2.66
4	I can connect emotionally with the melody and rhythm of K-pop.	2.54
5	I can identify with the K-pop singers.	2.39
6	I see K-pop singers as good role models.	2.27
7	I agree with the morals and values promoted in K-pop songs.	2.33
8	I can relate the messages of K-pop songs to what happens in my own life.	2.28
9	It is difficult for me to relate the lyrics of K-pop to what happens in my own life.	2.55
10	It is difficult for me to connect emotionally with the melody of K-pop.	2.57

Curiosity about other cultures can be manifested in behaviors. Mariani (2008) and Lita and Yoon (2012) indicated that consumers exposed to various media can show positive attitudes and a desire to familiarize themselves with the culture. Table 3 shows how the mental condition of the participants exposed to the Korean Wave was reflected in their behavior and attitudes.

Table 3 *The Impact of the Korean Wave (N = 92)*

No.	Items	Mean Value
1	Korean Wave has influenced my image of Korea.	2.70
2	Because of Korean Wave, I now desire to travel to Korea.	2.60
3	Korean Wave has made me interested in eating Korean food.	2.89
4	Korean Wave has made me more interested in Korean fashion and beauty.	2.77
5	Korean Wave has made me want to experience traditional Korean culture.	2.73
6	Because of Korean Wave, I became a consumer of Korean products.	2.46
7	Because of Korean Wave, I am interested in making Korean friends.	2.55
8	Korean Wave has made me interested in the Korean language.	2.63
9	I want to learn Korean so that I can better understand Korean dramas, movies and K-pop.	2.59
10	Because of Korean Wave, I am learning Korean.	2.20

Participants generally agreed that the Korean Wave had an impact on their image of Korea (#1). This agrees with Lee's (2011) data, which indicated that the Korean Wave was raising the national image. Generally, participants expressed a desire to go to Korea (#2) and agreed that the Korean Wave had made them interested in Korean food (#3) and fashion/beauty (#4). This is consistent with Lita and Yoon's (2012) study that consumers of culture find information about the lives of actors, follow their lifestyles, and collect related goods.

Participants also expressed their interest in actions. They have become consumers of Korean products (#6) and had a desire to experience Korean traditional culture (#5). They also wanted to make Korean friends, and showed curiosity about the Korean language. Participants were motivated somewhat (#10) to learn Korean because they wanted to understand K-dramas/movies or K-pop better. The overall mean score of 2.61 suggests that participants' positive preference for the Korean Wave can lead to consumer behaviors, as well as cultural awareness of and desire for aspects of Korean culture such as food, language, and the desire to visit the host country.

Correlations were sought between responses shown in Table 1 and impacts identified in Table 3. Uniformly strong correlations ($p < .01$) were found between Perceptions 1, 3, 4, and 6 with all Impacts 1 to 10. Perception 5 showed strong correlations for Impacts 2 to 10 inclusive, and Perception 7 for Impacts 2 and 4 to 10. In addition, Perception 10 was correlated strongly with Impact 10 and Perception 9 with Impacts 3 and 5. Weak correlations ($p < .05$) were found between Perception 6 and Impact 6 and Perception 7 and Impact 4. Therefore, it was confirmed that students' perceptions of K-dramas/movies influence their behavior and attitudes toward the Korean Wave.

Similarly, correlations were sought between responses shown in Table 2 and impacts identified in Table 3. Uniformly strong correlations were shown between K-pop items 3, 6, 7 and 8 and all Impact items 1 to 10. K-pop items 2 and 5 showed strong correlation with items 2 to 10 inclusive and weaker ($p < .05$) correlations for Impact item 1. And item 1 showed a strong correlation with Impacts 2, 4, 6 to 10 and weaker correlation ($p < .05$) for Impacts 1 and 5. K-pop 4 also showed a weak correlation with Impact item 10. Therefore, students' perceptions of K-pop had a higher correlation with variables related to attitudes towards Korea than with perceptions of K-drama/movies.

Attractive Elements of Korean Wave
Aesthetic Elements
The most attractive element of the Korean Wave identified was the physical appeal and fashion of K-drama/movie actors/actresses and K-pop singers. Parc and Moon (2013) argued that the Korean Wave's competitiveness came from young actors/actresses who are tall and beautiful in appearance. Participants made the following comments about their attraction to Korean Wave products:

Attractive actors/actresses and their acting skills (Respondent #11, F, Filipino)

Girls groups are very pretty (33, M, Chinese)

I like their fashion. Which is why I watch their video songs. (42, M, Malaysian)

Statements by participants indicated they were attracted by physical appeal, and they showed a favorable impression towards the fashion styles of Korean Wave stars. In particular, the mention of fashion appeared more in relation to K-pop than to K-dramas/movies. This shows that K-pop stars are spreading Korean fashion trends in various regions including Asia (Korean Culture and Information Service, 2011). The performance skills of actors were also important to some viewers (Parc & Moon, 2013) as was expressed by one participant in the study.

Music and Dance
K-pop fans deemed fast beats, sweet melodies and group performances as attractive, while those commenting on K-drama/movies pointed to the background music. This relates to the quantitative results, in which participants showed an emotional connection to the melody and rhythm of K-pop (mean score 2.54). Participants expressed the following about music and dance:

K-pop songs can be easily related to, as with the case of Bangtan Sonyeondan (BTS). (14, M, Indian)

Good performances in dancing and singing (40, M, Cambodian)

The dance where they move at the same time and the good meaning of the songs (46, F, Thai)

The songs of the drama are fun and interesting (85, F, Thai)

Most of the K-pop groups consist of teenage boys and girls, each with their own personality. World class choreographers train them to move in synchrony as if one person is dancing. These physical expressions transcend national borders and appeal to young people around the world (Korean Culture and Information Service, 2011). In the case of dramas, the musical element is not as strong as in K-pop, but as the 85th respondent mentioned, background music increases the fun and interest levels. These comments indicate that music and dance have delivered universal emotions and ideas that everyone can easily interpret.

Storylines

Stories are one of the most important elements of the success of K-dramas/movies. The composition of various genres, including the melodies, captivates the audience. Participants were interested in fantasy and action, including romantic stories, and they agreed that they were able to identify with the stories of K-dramas/movies (mean score 2.67). In the case of dramas, each series is quite brief, so viewers can maximize immersion. Below participants' explained why they enjoy K-dramas and movies:

Because it is short, interesting, they directly go to the main point and not go around in a circle with the story… the time spent for one episode is moderate. (7, F, Indonesian)

Nice story, interesting, showcase of modern and traditional Korean Culture (12, F, Filipino)

Most of the plots can persuade me. (26, F, Myanmar)

The reason why K-dramas/movies can appeal to various generations and social groups across national borders is that they combine resonance, beauty and poetic beauty with descriptions of Korean traditions, "pure love," nostalgia, longing, and character portrayals (Parc & Moon, 2013). The stories can be very persuasive to Korean Wave audiences, as two of the participants suggested.

Lyrics (K-pop)

K-pop songs convey messages to the audience through lyrics. Despite the language barrier, participants indicated that they found the lyrics attractive. This was reflected in this study, where participants were able to identify with K-pop lyrics (mean score 2.14) and connect with them emotionally (mean score 2.35). Participants said the following about K-pop lyrics:

If I listen to it a few times, then the next time I will be able to sing along. (1, F, Malaysian)

Not that I understand Korean, these day they provide the subtitle so I understand what they are singing (17, F, Malaysian)

Easy words in the lyrics makes me know that it is heart breaking song. If I continue listening until I can sing, I will understand the song more. (73, F, Thai)

One characteristic of K-pop is the mixed Korean and English lyrics, and the fact that they have a repeated chorus. Some popular music critics say that this structure is effective in getting audiences to subconsciously follow the songs, even if they cannot fully understand the content (Korean Culture and Information Service, 2011). The creativity has succeeded in attracting consumers' attention. K-pop listeners can easily sing along if they listen to a song several times, as indicated by one participant.

Message

Participant responses revealed that the rich stories of K-dramas/movies can be decoded according to a viewer's individual situation and values. Comments by participants indicated that the lyrics had a deep meaning and provided lessons on how to solve family problems, and assisted them to find knowledge and lessons to apply to their lives.

They inspire the youth to work hard to achieve their dream (6, F, Malaysian)

I have faced similar situations that characters have faced on screen. (14, M, Indian)

Education of morals was helpful me to solve problems in my family situation. (25, F, Cambodian)

The lyrics from most Korean song have a really deep meaning. (31, F, Malaysian)

The above comments are in line with the finding that K-pop messages are related to participants' lives (Table 2, #8), and perhaps explain why they could connect emotionally with the characters (Table 1, #1). Most K-pop singers are young and striving to fulfill their dreams, so they are able to reflect this sentiment to many of their Korean Wave fans. This shows that the media plays an important role in shaping a person's sense of reality (Showkat, 2017). As shown in Seto and Martin's (2019) study, the engagement of these participants goes beyond passive entertainment so that these media products are being experienced and connected with in affective and practical ways.

Differentiation

One reason why the Korean Wave has maintained worldwide popularity is its uniqueness. Participants considered the music unique, interesting and appealing, creative, and of high quality:

Their music is unique (3, M, Thai)

They make the music video interesting and appealing… there is actually meaning behind the music videos they make (5, F, Indonesian)

They have their own creative way to present their culture. (12, F, Malaysian)

The Korean dramas are made high quality (47, F, Thai)

The differentiation of the Korean Wave can be described as a form of cultural hybridity that makes new products attractive to audiences in different cultural environments (Dani & Bruno, 2015; Shim, 2006; Jang & Paik, 2012). This encompasses cultural interactions connecting countries and communities (Jin & Yoon, 2017). It is on the grounds of this transcendence of national boundaries that the Korean wave poses a challenge to the centrality of Western media products (Cruz et al., 2019). K-pop music videos show colorful and elaborate technology that provide 3D visual cubic and 4D sensory experiences (Cho & Sim, 2013). These technologies have enabled elaborate and skilled editing of dramas, movies and K-pop, making them an important success factor of the Korean Wave.

How Participants Relate to the Korean Wave
Identity

For members of the East-Asian community, the Korean Wave plays an important role in reminding them of their national identities. The participants indicated that they had something in common with the Korean Wave content with regards to lifestyle, religion, and values. Participants felt that Korean culture and their own cultures were similar (Table 1, #7), and that they could relate well to Korean culture (Table 1, #5). The perceptions were reinforced by comments received in relation to marriage and respect for elders and parents, showing that the media plays an important role in disseminating cultural norms and values in daily life (Showkat, 2017).

The fact that Korean popular culture confirms the identity of Asians supports the theory of cultural proximity. On the other hand, scholars suggest that the Korean Wave is the result of a combination of Eastern and Western cultures (Kraidy, 2002). The participants expressed opinions about the greater freedom, openness, and mobility of Korean society. Perceptions differed on whether a conservative or Westernized view was being conveyed:

The difference in culture is that they are more open than us in the term of relationship. (5, F, Indonesian)

Their way of life is freer and more mobile. (15, M, Indonesian)

Koreans seem to be westernized a bit. (42, M, Malaysian)

Thai openly accept transgender. Korean has perspective of stereotype. Their perspective are sometimes hard to explain and sometime their perspectives are very strong. (73, F, Thai)

Here we see participants' interpretations of Korean popular culture in light of their own. In this regard some participants considered Korean wave to be 'open', 'free' and 'Westernized'. However, the Thai participant suggests that Koreans have a conservative outlook. In this sense, the Korean Wave is, in fact, a mixture of traditional Korean values and Western ideas and lifestyles (Shim, 2006), so there are variations in the interpretations of Korean popular culture.

In some cases, participants felt that the differences between Korean culture and their own culture caused conflicts. Some participants who perceived this cultural heterogeneity had negative feelings about the Korean Wave, with some concern being expressed that the style and behavior of the singers was unhealthy for adolescents, and that the lyrics were inappropriate. Kaisii (2017) and Touhami and Al-Haq (2017) suggest that the enthusiasm around such media products may be considered a threat to local cultural identities.

Realism and Escapism

Participants linked the drama characters' stories and song lyrics to their lives; thus, they said that they were realistic. They also indicated that they learned about the knowledge, values, life and culture of Korea, which enriched their experiences. This shows that audiences are deciphering and accepting the media in a variety of ways (D'Silva, 2001). The following responses reflect this:

I personally think that I'm not only into k-pop and stuff but I'm most interested in the Korean culture. Hope to visit Korea one day! (1, F, Malaysian)
Korean dramas gives us more insight to different aspects of life, such as: family, psychology, medical, military and etc. (19, F, Indonesian)
It has a good moral to teach people which can help people to think critically in a creative way and apply it in the reality of life. (25, F, Cambodian)

These participants indicated that they had expanded their knowledge and experience through the Korean Wave, and had a practical approach towards Korean Wave products. This seems to be related to the mean score recorded for the overall impact of the Korean Wave (Table 3), which shows that a positive preference for it can lead to a greater awareness of and desire for aspects of Korean culture. This may represent some level of cultural romanticization on the part of participants. In particular, the statements pertaining to the shaping of perceptions and morals demonstrate the potential for the examination and negotiation of local cultures through peripheral media spaces. While some participants accepted the stories of K-dramas/movies as realistic, other participants separated them from reality and saw them as a form of escapism:

Because it shows the unrealistic fantasy world which we all wants to live in, and that is the sole reason I'm interested in it. (42, M, Malaysian)

Watching Korean dramas makes me feel relax from studying, which makes me tired (49, M, Thai)

Participant 42 perceived that the world shown in K-dramas/movies is based on fantasy which resonated with his own ideals. Participant 49 attempted to relieve stress and tension of studying through K-drama.

Conclusions

Regarding the attractive elements of the Korean Wave, participants mentioned aesthetic factors, message, and differentiation. Most of these matched with popular Korean Wave factors mentioned in previous studies. Aesthetic factors include physical appeal, music and dance of K-drama/movie actors/actresses and K-pop singers. Structural elements included the storylines of K-dramas/movies and

the lyrics of K-pop. These structures were linked to messages that appealed to audiences. Participant perceptions of K-dramas/movies and K-pop were related to the Korean culture's moral values, which made the Korean Wave accessible and acceptable. Another attraction of Korean Wave was differentiation; participants appreciated its quality while accepting it as novel and new.

Participants felt both a sense of homogeneity and of diversity towards the Korean Wave compared to their own cultures. Their opinions supported the assertions of cultural proximity theory. However, there were variations in participants' interpretations of the Korean Wave content, and they also acknowledged points of divergence, such as the integration of Western lifestyle. Some felt that there were conflicts between their own cultures and Korean culture. Through participation in Korean Wave, participants were able to process and escape from reality.

Participants' perception of Korean Wave content led to an understanding and interest in aspects of Korean culture. In particular, they appreciated the physical attraction of Korean Wave stars and found the storylines of K-dramas/movies attractive. This was also seen in the case of K-pop. Whilst this can be viewed as a positive progression, this heightened interest could indicate the romanticizing of Korean culture through Korean Wave products. This may lead to superficial idealization and fetishism around all things Korean and distorted notions of Korean life. In worse cases, this may also result in the dehumanizing of Koreans, as the unique personalities of individuals are reduced to stereotypes and certain aesthetic features.

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