The Emotional Core of Hyperconsumption

Reciprocity and Self-realization Amongst Swedish Hallyu Enthusiasts

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Abstract

In just the last decade, the popularity of Korean cultural exports has skyrocketed, and fans are to be found everywhere from Seoul to Sweden. While the K-phenomenon is often conceptualized as a global force, engagement tends to be personal and emotionally charged. As such, involvement is closely interlinked with the process of self-realization. This paper visualizes consumption of Hallyu as the co-creation of "emodities" (emotional commodities), emphasizing its role in achieving emotional authenticity and well-being. It continues by arguing that fans perceive themselves to partake in a reciprocal gift exchange with K-pop idols, which comes to define how fanship is expressed whilst mediating a parasocial kinship. This is explored through a lens of the gift economy. Such a framework simultaneously reveals how fans create meaning around the "Koreanness" of the culturally branded content.

Keywords: Social Anthropology, Hallyu, Emodity, Gift Economy, Cultural Consumption

Note on Korean Language Romanization

Concerning itself with a localized understanding of Korean popular culture, this paper will inevitably make references to Korean names, places and socioculturally anchored practices. This will in turn require romanization from the traditional Hangul script. Staying true to anthropological tradition, this paper will aim to keep the emic romanizations of the host community (i.e. the Swedish K-pop community) intact. However, where these articulations differ from the official "Revised Romanization of Korean" system or recognized legacy forms, they will be accompanied by a standardized romanization in brackets for the sake of clarity. Likewise, Korean names will be written with the family name preceding the given name, considering such is the standard in both the K-pop community and their country of origin.

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Introduction

After decades of colonial subjugation, war and instability, South Korea (hereinafter simply Korea) quickly emerged as a developed country. Commonly referred to as “the Miracle on the Han River”, the economic growth sparked societal transformation and cultural revival on a scale rarely seen before or since (Howe 2020:17). Perhaps equally impressive, is how quickly Seoul managed to leverage its newly won position to establish itself as a global cultural capital, and a leader in music, television dramas, cosmetics and more. *Hallyu* - or the Korean Wave of pop culture exports - has consequently grown beyond a domestic force into a phenomenon. In 2022, content exports alone generated USD 13.2 billion, accounting for 0.79% of Korea’s total GDP (Akhmetzianova 2024). The latest estimates translate this remarkable figure into a following of 225 million fans worldwide (The Korea Foundation 2024).

Whereas the catchy tunes and colorful music videos seldom struck me as anything all that extraordinary during my time on the bustling streets of the Korean capital, their prevalence in the hearts and minds of Swedish young adults became all the more apparent upon my return. What about the Korean Wave made them purposefully break from a Western-dominated mediascape and instead dedicate considerable time and money to K-content? From my perspective, the transcultural hyperconsumerism which they displayed ought to be understood as the essence of a self-realization process.

Aim

This paper aims to provide insight as to how engagement with the Korean Wave affects an individual’s sense of self, their relationship to a larger community, as well as their imagined intimacy with the Korean artist(s) and culture. In so doing, it aspires to contribute to the as of yet short list of academic work focusing on the consumption of Korean popular culture particularly in Sweden (notable works including Hübinette 2012; 2018). Likewise, it hopes to work toward a better understanding of globalization of culturally branded material; reflecting upon notions like soft power and localization. Finally, it will explore the emotional drivers behind modern consumption society, with a long-term vision of contributing to a sustainable transition, without sacrificing the individual's means to express themselves.

Research Question

- *How do Swedish K-pop enthusiasts make use of Hallyu to facilitate an authentic expression of self?*
- *How does the Koreanness of Hallyu affect their self-realization processes?*

Disposition

The next chapter will start by attempting to define and operationalize Hallyu. This will be followed by a literature review of K-pop in academia, as well as a more thorough examination of the elected theoretical framework. Chapter 2 continues by outlining the project's design, including its methodological approach and relevant ethical considerations. Thereafter, Chapter 3 acts as a brief historical overview, aiming to contextualize Hallyu and familiarize foundational vocabulary.

Chapter 4-8 then make use of theory and empirical data to systematically break down how the informants understand their own involvement with Korean pop culture. Each chapter is organized around a specific theme, which serve to collectively answer the research questions. In particular, Chapter 4 aims to investigate what makes K-pop emotionally resonant, and how this is reflected in the construction of self. Chapter 5 follows suit by discussing how this emotional attachment results in a desire to don a fan identity. Furthermore, it details how notions of reciprocity and systematized hyperconsumption come to shape articulations of fanhood. Chapter 6 delves into the relationship between performer and fan; highlighting how the former affects the practices and self-image of the latter. This focus on affection will also come to reveal how fans respond to a perceived toxicity within community spaces. Lastly, Chapter 7 discusses how fans utilize distance to make the fan identity appear socially acceptable, while Chapter 8 examines the role of Hallyu's Korean origins. The paper concludes by presenting a summary of key findings, discussing their relevance, and providing a few suggestions for future research.

Chapter 1: Approach

Defining Hallyu

As previously mentioned, Hallyu is typically conceived as Korean pop culture exports which have garnered significant popularity abroad. While this definition is not necessarily contested, its broad scope has made it rather difficult to operationalize. Not simply music and TV, it can easily be extended into abstract notions of language and culture. In that regard, this paper will follow the well-documented tradition of viewing Hallyu as a "cultural package", rather than limiting itself to any set products (Cicchelli & Octobre 2021:3).

This package can be visualized as concentric circles; roughly corresponding to international fame and function. The innermost circle consists of K-pop and K-drama: the productions which first brought the K-phenomenon to life. The second layer comprises films, video games and other media which the first layer makes more accessible, while the third layer might be seen as the services and products tangentially related to the two inner layers. This includes food, cosmetics, language and more. Such cross-promotion and interdependence makes it very difficult to disconnect one aspect from another, and in extension to view it as anything less than one whole (ibid.). Although this model illustrates the impossibility of examining Hallyu in its totality, it clearly positions the center as the logical place to begin an investigation. On such a basis, this study will predominantly be occupied with K-pop. Yet, it will inevitably reach into the other layers where informants find it natural to do so.

From an anthropological perspective, there is also reason to discuss the relationship between Hallyu and Korean culture. As Cicchelli and Octobre have argued, Hallyu refers as much to the place of production as its reception abroad (2021:10). That is to say, it is not necessarily authentically Korean (if there even is such a thing). Nor does it encompass all the complex dynamics of life there. While culture as a concept for understanding a society can be restrictive and reductive, this paper will not claim to reflect the sentiment or spirit of Korea. Rather, culture is simply applied as the lens through which informants make sense of difference.

Literature Review

In order to achieve a holistic outlook regarding how Hallyu consumption shapes the enthusiast, this paper will synthesize an argument on the basis of anthropological and sociological research. Several key notions will similarly be incorporated from the fields of social psychology and media studies. Below follows a summation of relevant works:

Lie's *Popular Music, Cultural Amnesia, and Economic Innovation in South Korea* attributes the success of the K-phenomenon to its transcultural character and various political incentives stimulating growth. This positionality is itself a result of Korea's complicated historical ties with Japan and the US (2015:61, 69). On this basis, the sociologist has previously indicated that modern K-pop barely has anything left which resembles traditional Korea (Lie 2012:361). Historical accounts have also been formulated by Kim (2015:154) and Jun (2017:155), who detail the global adoption of Hallyu as three waves; focusing on television dramas, music, and lifestyle respectively.

Jung's *Korean Masculinities and Transcultural Consumption* exemplifies how such transcultural hybridity may be constructed. Key to her analysis of Korean masculinity is the concept of *mugukjeok,* or odorlessness. In short, she argues that Korean popular culture has been modernized in such a way that the traditional character - which might appear strange to a foreigner - has been deemphasized. As such, the *Other* becomes partially familiar, and ripe for a localized reinterpretation (2010:3). Regardless of how strong its tie to Korea actually is, Hallyu has nevertheless been branded as a quintessential Korean expression. On this basis, the findings of Cruz, Seo and Scaraboto indicate that fans rationalize consumption through a process of consumer reflexivity. That is to say, they may apply mechanisms such as distance or informing oneself to avoid criticism of cultural appropriation (2023:963).

As such, there exists a large amount of academia focusing on how Hallyu is interpreted locally. For instance, Song and Velding's examination of how Americans perceive Korean masculinity reveals that cultural distance is articulated as divergence from hegemonic ideals. However, their findings also allude to a growing sensitivity regarding other ways of life (2020:3-4). Along these lines, Min, Jin and Han's exploration of K-pop in Latin America indicates that difference might even be part of the appeal. By representing a vision of

modernity that is neither exclusively Western or Eastern, fans are allowed to negotiate their own desire for society (2019:12). Based on similar findings in Jakarta; Jeong, Lee and Lee further argue that Korean origin has acquired great symbolic value. Consequently, they position Hallyu as a tool for soft power (2017:2302). Lee et al.'s study of cultural hybridity in Malaysia and Indonesia goes as far as to suggest that its unique brand of difference might incentivize non-Koreans to enhance their perceived Koreanness (2020:20). On the other hand, Yoon argues that it allows diasporic Asians - such as her informants in Canada - to reexamine and exercise an "Asian" identity (2017:2362).

Likewise, a large amount of research concerns itself with the relationship between idols and K-pop fans. In particular, Elfving-Hwan ought to be mentioned for introducing the concept of *parasocial kin*; highlighting the familiar affection which the industry encourages (2018:190). This articulation builds upon the theory of parasocial relationships first introduced by social psychologists Horton and Wohl (1956:2). Attachments have additionally been approached by Ma et al., who suggest that live steaming spaces have become key in bridging the gap between audience and performer; allowing for co-creation of value. Furthermore, their analysis concludes that the idol can provide great comfort to the fan in times of difficulty (2022:8, 3). The notion that an imagined relationship can constitute a form of escapism is shared by Jenol and Pazil, whose study of fan behavior in Malaysia suggests that the fan identity itself may be a means to maintain well-being (2020:341-342).

Fanship has additionally been approached from a perspective of participatory culture. For instance, Malik and Haidar's investigation of K-pop spaces on Twitter[1] suggest that digital platforms have allowed for new ways of supporting the idol and building communities. As the fan identity might still be stigmatized, these bonds carry great emotional value (2023:7). Ismail and Khan's literature review of participation in K-pop spaces goes on to argue that online engagement shapes both the fan's sense of self and consumption habits (2023:239). Likewise, Sun's case study concerning Chinese fans of the boy-group GOT7 illustrates that fans may join together in specific forms of fan labor, as a means to give back to the group for entertaining them. Participation in these activities comes to shape group dynamics, and in extension one's place within the community (2020:389). Reflecting over similar results, Abd-Rahim positions these acts as the accumulation of social capital (2019:67).

[1] While Twitter has officially rebranded to X as of 2023, this paper will refer to the platform by its legacy name, due to its recognizability and continued use within the Swedish K-pop community.

However, scholars have also noted that the parasocial devotion and competitive online environments can encourage toxicity. For instance, Mercier's case study of net-based toxicity found that some engage in the belittling of others and their preferred idols in order to distinguish and reinforce the superiority of their own choice. This is likened to an act of religious worship, and illustrates how the success of one's idol is equated to the success of oneself (2022:199, 212). On similar grounds, Tinaliga argues that the mean-spirited nature of many exchanges can be conceived as competitive performativity. Yet, she also claims that an awareness of these practices can result in education of proper fan conduct (2018:5, 31). As Willimas and Ho's exploration of authentic fan identity in Singapore has shown, distance to deviant behavior can be key to winning the acceptance of other supporters (2016:92).

Hübinette's two reports constitute the majority of academia focused on K-pop in Sweden; BA and MA theses excluded. The earlier of the two is a preliminary write-up outlining the Korea-Sweden relationship, perception of Asian identity markers, and consumption practices of early K-pop fan communities in Sweden (2012:503-504). The latter profiles the typical Swedish fan; emphasizing the desire for alternative masculinities and non-white success stories (2018:43, 46).

Lastly, Cicchelli and Octobre's *Sociology of Hallyu Pop Culture* provides a comprehensive look at the capitalist structures supporting the Korean Wave. In essence, it argues that Hallyu can be conceived as aesthetic capitalism; or consumption for the sake of expressing and reaffirming how we perceive ourselves and the world around us. On this basis, emotionality becomes central in understanding the phenomenon. This macro-perspective is supported by the voices of fans in France (2021:41). Such a position is not dissimilar to that of Guerra and Sousa, who through their study of K-pop memorabilia in Portugal conclude that objects are imbued with an aura of their relationship with the idol. This allows them to convey personal meaning and display individuality (2021:10, 19).

Theoretical Framework

This paper will approach Hallyu by focusing on the gift economy of participatory culture. The larger framework was first introduced by media scholar Henry Jenkins, as a means to explain how the advent of modern communication technology and social media has influenced our media consumption. In particular, it argues that the masses are no longer simply receiving consumers, but actively circulating, archiving and giving new meaning to the content they are faced with. Some even produce derivative works (Jenkins 2008:8). In so doing, individuals acquire various affiliations and social memberships, discover new ways of creatively expressing themselves and engage in collective problem solving for the sake of a common goal (a.a.:9). In turn, this creates an environment with low barriers to engagement, informal in-group socialization practices, and relatively strong social cohesion (a.a.:5ff).

Homing in on the circulation aspect of participatory culture, Turk further visualizes the fandom space as a gift economy. In short, she argues that fandom manifests around the free exchange of fan-works and other fan labor (2014:1). Adapting a Maussian approach (2000:3), the media scholar further suggests that this constitutes gift giving, which in turn invokes reciprocity and a perceived need to give back. These gifts of skill and time may be rewarded in tangible forms, such as other fan-works, or in the more abstract notions of attention, recognition and status (Turk 2014:1-2). That is not to imply that this type of gift-giving is one-to-one between individuals. Rather, a person may present gifts to the community as a whole, where any subsection might choose to reciprocate the action. This makes the fandom gift economy fundamentally asymmetrical; where any fan typically receives much more than they give back. However, Turk argues that this inconsistency is integral to the upkeep of the system. It would simply be impossible to reciprocate the totality of circulated goods (a.a.:3).

Although neither of these works are directly concerned with Hallyu, application of their frameworks has precedence. Notably, participatory culture has been foundational for the likes of Cicchelli and Octobre (2021:25) as well as Ismail and Khan (2023:239); while gift economy in particular has been highlighted by scholars such as Sun (2020:391) and Yoon (2017:2360). However, studies of the latter highlight that a slight adaptation of the concept is needed. Firstly, the prominence of social media has allowed the artists themselves to partake in the exchange. As Yoon argues, idol-centric productions are typically made available for

free online, which allows fans to conceive them as gifts. By supporting their favorites, they are able to reciprocate their hard work (ibid.). Yet, these idols are not just "any community members". As the center of affection, the feeling that one ought to give back is less obscured and in fact frequently articulated. Sun's study goes as far as to suggest that admission to the traditional gift economy might be dependent on one's willingness to give back specifically to the idol. Such a debt can critically be repaid by spending money on them (2020:401-402). These notions contradict the traditional view that the gift economy is non-commercial and egalitarian (Hellekson 2009:114). Nevertheless, the adaptations appear to more accurately reflect the exchange as understood by the fans themselves, whilst largely fulfilling the same purpose as the existing definition. The framework will additionally prove useful in its ability to connect consumption to emotional investment and the formation of parasocial attachment.

However, the act of exchange is not the only way to form emotional attachments. As such, this paper will additionally adopt a perspective informed by Illouz's emodity theory. In essence she argues that "*consumer acts and emotional life have become closely and inseparably intertwined with each other, each one defining and enabling the other"* (Illouz 2017:7). On this basis she introduces the concept of *emodities:* emotional commodities. Shaped not only by a producer, these goods are imbued with emotional meaning by consumers in their endeavors to authentically express themselves, achieve intimacy or friendship, and work towards self-improvement (a.a.:6, 17). These claims build upon anthropological theory of materiality in the context of aesthetic capitalism; mass consumption for the sake of building a socially desirable persona or atmosphere (a.a.:11, 14). Emodities are in turn clearly shaped by the culturally anchored notions of happiness, belonging and self-realization (a.a.:16-17).

This theory has previously been adapted to the context of Hallyu by Cicchelli and Octobre. In short, they argue that both K-pop and the K-pop idol become emodities, produced and consumed with the intent of experiencing joy. This happiness stems from a desire for an authentic self-expression and a perceived affective relationship with the idol. On this basis, some fans conceive consumption as a means to achieve wellbeing (2021:21, 65).

Chapter 2: Project Design

Methodology

The empirical data which has become the backbone of this report was collected during February and March 2024. It mainly consists of ten semi-structured interviews, supported by a smaller observation at a Korean-language concert in Copenhagen, as well as a digital ethnographic exercise. The decision to primarily base the investigation around interviews was one of practicality. Namely, due to the strict time limit of the project, their direct, inquisitive nature would facilitate entry into a world of which I previously knew relatively little. Furthermore, the need for upfront, oral consent would alleviate any ethical concerns regarding participation. As for the semi-structured model in particular, it has long been an anthropological standard. In short, it is valued for its inherent flexibility and clear structure; simultaneously allowing for the exploration of whatever the participant finds the most urgent and facilitating a focused approach (Davies 2012:95). Each interview lasted between 48 minutes and 2 hours, roughly averaging 84 minutes per interview.

With regard to the interview setting, five were performed at cafes or restaurants. These places were typically recommended by the informants themselves to ensure they would feel comfortable speaking freely. Two interviewees indicated a preference for a more secluded area, to which I gladly concurred. Finally, three interviews were carried out digitally, taking the preferences or geographical distance of the informants into account. While the occasional technical disturbance did interrupt the flow of conversation slightly, there was ultimately very little variance which I would attribute to the different settings, as opposed to the individual personalities of the informants. Each participant was also given the opinion to chat in English rather than Swedish. Yet, the three interviews carried out in English ultimately vary little in tone or content from their Swedish counterparts[2]. With the consent of all involved parties, every conversation was recorded in its entirety to ensure accuracy.

The ten informants were found through snowball sampling; utilizing old acquaintances and the respective networks of friends and colleagues as a starting point. While clearly more prone to various biases than random- or stratified sampling, the time limit and lack of

[2]All informants will be quoted in English. Translations are my own unless otherwise stated.

available databases made it a necessary tradeoff. That stated, a reliance on their own networks generally ensured that participants did partake of some sort of community based around Hallyu, validating their collaboration. The fact that I was previously acquainted with a small number of the participants is another factor which must be considered. However, I more often found it a boon than a disadvantage. In particular, these informants were more likely to share stories of engagement which outsiders might characterize as embarrassing or strange. All the same, I did my best to maintain a reflective approach - and as Davies suggests - question and problematize all statuses between myself and the informants (a.a.:3, 101).

As for the sample itself, all participants were between the ages of 21 and 24. Seven identified as female and three as male. All but two lived in the southernmost region of Sweden. While some talked openly about having ancestry outside of Sweden, none had any familiar connections with Korea specifically, or called the Korean language their mother tongue. With only one exception, all participants first came into contact with Korean pop culture between 2012-2016. All have been involved in the K-pop space for more than five years.

In some regards, this paints the picture of a very homogenous sample. Yet, the fandom ought to be understood as a mosaic of subcultures. For example, there exists distinct groupings around a great number of artists and sub-genres. From this perspective, there is substantial diversity among the informants. These unique preferences are of utmost importance as they allow for insight into the wider community, as opposed to that of any one sub-group.

On the topic of positionality, several informants suggested that the K-pop fandom is a gendered space, where the typical fan is a young woman who has to defend her right to like what she likes from bigoted men. Along this line, it was clear that many of them had experienced a negative stigma in one way or another. Despite our similarities in age and sociocultural background, it was ultimately up to me to navigate these implications. While I have no reason to suspect that anyone felt uncomfortable in my presence, and believe that my genuine interest in Korean culture placed me in a good position to investigate the subculture, I nevertheless recognize that there might be data points which require more time or the presence of a female researcher to fully uncover.

These interviews were supported by a covert participant observation during the concert of Korean rock-band “The Rose”. A hotspot for Hallyu enthusiasts; I treated their performance as an opportunity to witness the practices informants had spent months describing to me. Consequently, I spent a grand total of five hours in line, around the merchandise stand and in the crowd during the performance. My focus was on how fans interacted with each other, the artists, and how their material belongings mediated these relationships. Although it is worth pointing out that the show technically was not in Sweden, Copenhagen’s proximity as the closest capital city to my fieldsite, meant that it would be the natural destination for local fans. As luck would have it, one of my informants also attended the show, allowing for collaborative reflection about what we had experienced.

In the same vein, it quickly became apparent that a large part of Hallyu-centered engagement takes place across traditional borderspace. It is by most accounts a global community, and the majority of my participants perceived themselves to be inhabiting a “Western” fandom space, contrasted with a Korean (and occasionally Chinese and Japanese) one. Consequently, next to all online platforms utilize the English language. One participant was perplexed about the mere notion of an exclusively Swedish fandom space. While others indicated that Swedish groupings certainly do exist on smaller scales, the conundrum illustrates that the delimitation of this paper in many ways is arbitrary. Yet, for the purposes of this study, I share the beliefs presented in Candea’s defense of the arbitrary field (2007:180). That is to say, such limitation and focus may be imperative to grasp the interconnectedness and complexity of ordinary life, and allows for the collection of knowledge which otherwise may have gone lost. It also bears repeating that a greater scope would be infeasible due to time and budget constraints.

Finally, any description of the K-pop space which leaves out its online component would be incomplete. The internet is how Korean media reaches the world, where most engagement takes place, and where many communities are formed. However, seeing as no informants partook in any Swedish online-spaces and most people would be unidentifiable as Swedish on global platforms, I found it to be impossible to perform digital ethnography in a traditional sense. Therefore, I recentered my approach with the goal of simply emerging myself to the greatest possible extent. Consequently, I decided to interact with K-pop the same way my informants reportedly did; by relying on an algorithm. In essence, I decided to start following 30 Korean idols across my personal YouTube, TikTok and Twitter accounts, like a few posts and trust that the recommended videos and posts would drag me to where I needed to go. To

my surprise, it really was that simple. I consequently proceeded by spending roughly 30 minutes per day on each of these platforms throughout February, making note of any unique vocabulary or behavioral patterns. As it stands, this research in and of itself constitutes a very small part of the final paper due to a lack of relevance. However, it resulted in an awareness of words and practices which the informants engaged with regularly. This allowed me to ask more competent questions and achieve a greater qualitative depth.

Ethical Considerations

Adhering to the principle of "do no harm", each element of the study has been carefully and continuously weighed with regards to potential risks and benefits. On a base level, this implies collecting informed consent before every interview session. Each interview was also prefaced with a discussion regarding potential risks of engagement, highlighting their right to withdraw participation at any moment. Similarly, conversations were only recorded with approval of the other party. As is standard, confidentiality has been ensured by anonymizing all personal data. Because snowball sampling was employed and participants may be able to identify each other, this paper makes no effort to profile individual participants; even under pseudonyms. In recognition of my ethical obligations toward the host community, it is also worth noting that the report will be made available to any informant who requests it. The implementation of these safeguards follows the advice of Ervin (2005:31, 33, 37).

While the ethical considerations concerning the interviews were relatively straightforward, the covert observation requires further deliberation. As I did not state my intentions and purpose, the approach relies on deception. Moreover, it was impossible to deny participation. This is serious and should be treated accordingly. However, as Davies highlights, there are circumstances where such a compromise might still be acceptable. This notably includes studies in public spaces (Davies 2012:57). As roughly half the observation took place waiting in line in a parking lot, it would certainly qualify. While the concert venue itself is not public property; it is nevertheless a place where hundreds of phones are in the air recording and taking pictures at any given moment. In other words, it is a place where people are aware that they are being seen and captured on film. In this context, my anonymous note-taking is much less invasive than what the social situation allows for. As such, I can conceive no harm. Even so, confidentiality was made a top priority to ensure all ethical obligations are fulfilled.

Much of the same criticism *could* be leveraged towards the digital fieldwork. However, all posts, comments and videos which I accessed were publicly available - and thus directed at a wider audience. Furthermore, it is worth reiterating that this engagement served as contextual analysis and a way to emerge myself with the topic rather than concrete data points. In this light, my participation was no different from that of a typical fan. Consequently, I firmly believe that it does not violate any ethical codes of conduct.

Chapter 3: The Korean Wave - A Brief Summary

Korean popular culture would first find an international audience in the late 1990s, when a number of television dramas were exported across East Asia. This development became possible as the Cold War came to an end, and several cultural protectionist policies slowly were reversed (Lie 2015:115). While it did not take long for Chinese media to coin the phrase *Hanliu* (Korean reading: Hallyu) to refer to its growing popularity, it was not until the TV-show *Winter Sonata* (2002) that a Korean-made production would turn into a regional phenomenon (Jung 2010:2). Taking advantage of the tailwind, the Kim Dae-jung regime responded by providing various incentives and benefits to entertainment companies which would promote Korean culture abroad. This laid the groundwork for a cultural reinvention (Lie 2015:118).

As the first wave reached shore, a second could be seen on the horizon. Coinciding with the early days of YouTube and digital music distribution, Korean music labels would come to utilize modern communication platforms to find an audience far beyond East Asia; in parts of South Asia, North America and Europe (Kim 2015:158). Their success is typically described in terms of transcultural hybridity. In particular, Korean music came to incorporate both the bold Pop- and Hiphop-infused sound of America and the cute charms of Japanese idol-culture[3], which is theorized to have attracted a wide range of sensibilities (Lie 2010:61, 66, 97). Furthermore, it is worth noting that these artists were not simple singers, but jack-of-all-traits entertainment personas. Such talent is not found, but produced. From this perspective, sustained success became achievable thanks to a trainee system, where candidates train for years with the hope of being allowed to debut (a.a.:98-99).

[3] Although Japanese music has yet to gain global appeal on par with its Korean equivalent, the country has found considerable success in the fields of manga comics, animation and video games. This has helped popularize the soft, cute aesthetic commonly known as *kawaii.*

Building upon this momentum, a third wave would rise in the mid-2010s, to achieve near worldwide reach. Following the record-breaking *Gangnam Style* (2012) and the unparalleled growth of boy-group BTS, Korean music would eventually begin to encroach upon the mainstream, even in Western markets. This would also mark when Hallyu first reached Sweden in full force (Hübinette 2018:34). Yet, what defines the third wave is not simply the desire to sell a song everywhere, but to promote a way of life. The massive growth of Korean cosmetics, food, software and more are indicative of this trend (Jun 2017:157). Some scholars also refer to a fourth wave of K-ubiquity, or fully entering a global mainstream. However, such notions are as of now little more than a vision (ibid.).

Chapter 4: Emotional Consumption

In line with the findings of prior studies in Sweden, K-pop does not appear to be something that is purposefully sought out (Hübinette 2018: 38). Rather, the vast majority of the informants discovered it by accident; through recommendations from friends or the YouTube algorithm. While many initially found it odd or even slightly off-putting, the appeal is universally described as the joy it inspires. This is formulated both in terms of escape from ordinary life, and an experience of sensory bliss. Such notions support the claims of Cicchelli and Octobre, which position K-pop idols and their productions as emodities; co-created by producer and consumer in a promise of happiness. In extension, they argue that emotionality becomes the core of the Korean Wave (2021:65). When asked to try to pinpoint what inspires this emotional response, replies were more varied. However, they can largely be understood under the categories of difference, aesthetic prowess, and warmth.

Difference

In *Modernity at Large*, Appadurai suggests that our increasingly globalized mediascape tends to produce imaginations of "desirable elsewheres" (1996:35). The results of this study echo his sentiment. As one person put it: "*We're attracted to whatever is far away. We're searching for something new, something fresh. [...] And with K-pop it's like we're being invited to their culture!*" (Translated). In plain words, informants often position its appeal precisely as difference.

It might be tempting to place such notions into a framework of neo-orientalism or neo-exoticism. Indeed, such was the approach of Jung (2010:122). However, as the definitions of above labels have been rearticulated numerous times, this paper will abstain from utilizing them. More pressingly, it would argue that the engagement of the informants transcended the scope of these fallacies in several key areas.

Firstly, informants would clearly and consistently label Hallyu content as *Korean*, and with great specificity point out what made it so. For instance, one interviewee spent considerable time explaining the difference between Japanese and Korean cinematography, and how the two have influenced each other in recent years. Others similarly distinguished between Korean, Japanese, and Chinese fashion, idol-culture and sound. In this regard, it would be reductionist to claim that they engaged with an undistinguished “Other”.

Secondly, Korean culture was never portrayed in any way which might be interpreted as primitive, savage, or lesser than their culture of origin. If anything, their image of Korea was closer to that of a modern metropolis than a mystical and traditional stereotype. As such, it is not seen as incompatible with our way of life, but as something we can learn from. That is not to say that they possessed a fetichized image of Korea either. Just as they described how Sweden ought to learn from Korea, they would in detail discuss the restrictions of Korean society. As one participant argued: “*Western and Korean culture both have barriers that make us see some expressions as more free*”. Consequently, the findings align with those of Min, Jin and Han who argue that K-pop fans find appeal in difference which is not exotified (2019:7).

Their fascination might more aptly be explained as coming into contact with what Appadurai would have called alternative regimes of value; different normative frameworks which encourage alternative understandings of value and appropriateness (1988:15). As Cicchelli and Octobre have argued, this exposure results in a cultural toolkit which allows fans to position their home culture in contrast with Korea, and evaluate the two in relation to each other. Through this process, they become more aware of an alternative vision of modernity, and may formulate new tastes and desires. This incorporation of new ideals allows for an individualization, which they suggest is helpful in the transition from adolescence to adulthood (Cicchelli & Octobre 2021:230, 267-268). In particular, informants tended to emphasize how the consumption of K-pop introduced them to Korean articulations of beauty.

More often than not, this encouraged experimentation which allowed them to feel more comfortable in their own skin. Consequently, the consumption of difference allows fans to construct an emotionally resonant self. This asserted value turns Hallyu into an emodity closely interlinked with their self-realization projects.

Two of these individualization practices deserve special attention; namely the ones involving ethnicity and gender. The Korean beauty standard - which emphasizes pale, smooth "glass skin" - was certainly seen as restrictive by some of the informants. On the other hand, a woman who possessed East Asian features herself, highlighted how affirming it felt seeing people who looked like her be recognized as strong and beautiful. Her experience exemplifies how people who cannot see themselves in dominant beauty ideals, instead might assign tremendous value to Hallyu on the basis of similarity. This further emphasizes how difference should not exclusively be understood as something brand new, but rather as expressions diverging from the hegemonic articulation. On this basis, Yoon suggests that the widespread popularity of K-pop might foster a more inclusive normative framework which could help destigmatize an Asian identity (Yoon 2017:2357).

In a similar manner, several informants highlighted the importance of an alternative masculine ideal. Two of the male informants went as far as to suggest that the hegemonic masculinity of the West is strict in ways which hinder self-improvement. They lamented the fact that simply "*taking care of yourself and your skin*" could be seen as feminine or strange. By showcasing a more resonant ideal and making cosmetics directed at men more easily accessible, K-pop provided them with the confidence needed to adopt some as of yet stigmatized practices. As in the prior example, this has turned Hallyu into a source of strength which facilitates an authentic articulation of self. Song and Velding have further argued that these practices could come to redefine and widen the Western masculine ideal (2020:517).

The desire for an alternative masculinity can also be felt amongst the dominantly female audience. Not simply limited to bodily features and style, their articulations typically extend into mannerisms as well. For example, the informants tended to emphasize the calm and polite nature of male idols. These are traits they argued are very difficult to find in Sweden. Likewise, several women spoke fondly of the slow, desexualized and non-violent romances which K-pop and K-drama typically present. On this basis, Cicchelli and Octobre argue that the success of Hallyu may be seen as "*a triumph for the female gaze*" (2021:132, 242).

Aesthetic Prowess

The appeal of K-pop was similarly described in terms of aesthetic prowess. This phrasing seeks to encompass the informants' appreciation of both a multitude of artforms and their tendency to be executed expertly. As opposed to the prior section which dealt with expressions which might be novel in a Swedish context, aesthetic prowess emphasizes universality. That is to say, good music is good music *despite* being somewhat different.

On this topic, Cicchelli and Octobre suggest that global pop culture always has been artistically inclusive (a.a.:6). Mastery of mutually recognized artforms has a long history of attracting international audiences, making K-pop idols no different from, say, American artists in Korea. As one informant argued: *"It always looks perfect. So even if you're not there for [K-pop], you will soon come to look for it*". Such claims suggest that perfect aesthetic execution has reduced the barrier of entry. More concretely, a majority of the informants rejected the mere notion of a language barrier. Instead, they consistently claimed that a great performance transcends language. Others added that subtitles are easy enough to find, should you want them. This supports Yoon's theory that music videos and performances have been emphasized to the degree that they are, precisely because their visual nature makes them easier to engage with even without literal translations (2017:2355).

Yet, statements like the one above necessitate further discussion of what "perfection" itself entails. On a theoretical level, Sharman argues that something can be perceived to be aesthetically pleasing first after it has been attributed value by the observer (1997:177ff). In other words, an ideal is necessarily shaped by a social environment. He goes on to claim that beauty tends to be derived from social or spiritual utility. For example, that which allows for discussion, validation, individualization, or other socializing functions will typically be viewed in a positive light (a.a.:179, 189). In the context of Hallyu, the appreciation of the idol's looks, performances, and productions can consequently be understood as recognition of their social viability. Experience has informed the participants that the idol's expressions epitomize desirability. This is something with which they want to identify.

From this perspective, the vast array of artforms becomes recontextualized as potential emotional anchors. Where some informants fell in love with a unique sound, others came to resonate with aspects like fashion or storytelling. For instance, one informant remarked that "*They're always trying new styles and concepts. And that gave me the strength to show the world who I am. I felt free and I felt seen"* (Translated). Another informant had spent considerable time uncovering the mysteries of the "Loonaverse"; the world-building project around the girl-group Loona. Through this experience, they proudly asserted that they had acquired rudimentary knowledge of both religious imagery and quantum physics. Both cases exemplify how aesthetic recognition encouraged further exploration of respective interests. As an emodity, this imbues K-pop with a sense of self-improvement. Likewise, the interconnectedness of it all can encourage new interests and articulations of self. Such is the case with several informants who taught themselves how to dance.

As a tangent, many also emphasized the journey towards perfection. More often than not, this condition is understood to be the result of continuous hard work, and contrasted with pure luck or inherent talent. While the trainee system arguably makes the idol's effort more visible, the dualism is in many ways arbitrary. Surely, all artists work hard to reach fame. Yet, as Cicchelli and Octobre have recognized, this positioning turns the idol into an important figure - not only for cultivating aesthetic interest - but for promoting a lifestyle. It tells us that anyone could become as they are. This may encourage further imitation. (2021:57)

Warmth

Lastly, emodities are co-produced as K-pop is imbued with a sense of warmth and belonging. These qualities are primarily a result of the perceived support from the idol, but may also stem from acceptance in a wider community of like-minded fans. As the mechanisms which maintain these bonds are rather complex, they will be discussed more extensively in the following two chapters. For the purpose of this discussion, it is simply important to note that this warmth may provide great comfort in times of difficulty.

> Back in high school, I had panic attacks because of work, school and friends. In those moments, I could just lay down and say [the idol's] name over and over again. It gave me comfort just knowing that there was someone out there who created this music and this calm for us fans (Translated).

As the statement above illustrates, warmth is often positioned as a “saving grace”. Some spoke of broken families, others of a lack of romantic attention, while a select few claimed they know people who have been “saved by K-pop”. In other words, it seems like Hallyu is being consumed to improve (or at the very least maintain) a relative well-being. Along this line, Illouz argues that because modern society has placed such great emphasis on the emotional state and well-being of the individual; the justification for emotionally inclined consumption becomes self-evident (2017:149-150). As such, the findings support Cicchelli and Octobre's suggestion that K-pop as health-incentivized consumption speaks to our very humanity. It becomes moral and natural to consume it, as a means to help oneself (2021:65).

As Jenol and Pazil have recognized; this makes the relationship to the idol far from insignificant, despite being one-sided (2020:354). The idol-persona might be mass-produced, but nevertheless evokes genuine emotion. Indeed, it has often become a real source of strength. As such, these findings mirror extensive literature; emphasizing K-pop’s ability to act as an escape and therapeutic release (Cicchelli & Octobre 2021:271). However, it is also worth noting that not everyone creates emodities on the basis of well-being, or any of the other aspects discussed. As one informant jokingly remarked, “*We’re not* ***all*** *mentally ill*.”

Chapter 5: Fan Identity

Provided its emotional resonance and importance for the self-project, enthusiasts may find it appropriate to don the identity of a fan. As Guerra and Sousa suggest, this moniker can be gained through engagement in a traditional gift economy (2021:9). However, as will become apparent, the Swedish fans consistently implied that the idols partake in this exchange as well. This is closer in line with Yoon’s understanding of the phenomenon (2017:2360). Consequently, this paper will argue that the more or less reciprocal exchange with the idol plays a great part in defining fandom identification; sanctioning certain expressions while stigmatizing others.

The Gift

When thinking about the near-endless amount of idol-centered content, most participants expressed a great deal of gratitude. This sentiment is perhaps unsurprising, seeing as the idols have provided them with happiness, improved well-being and/or introduced novel aesthetic expressions. To some, it appeared almost *too* generous. As Mauss would have expected, this appears to have instilled a notion that they ought to reciprocate the favor (2000:3).

> I was so fascinated by those hardworking idols. I was listening to the music, and you know, you don't have to pay anything. But since I really like the music, I felt that I should help them. You know like, kind of…? Give back? So I was like, okay, I will buy an album.

In this regard, informants placed great focus on the activities surrounding an idol's *comeback*; i.e their next music release. Having been gifted happiness, they want to reciprocate happiness. This appears to have been quantified in terms of placement on Korean music charts and weekly music award shows such as KBS's *Music Bank*, SBS's *Inkigayo* and Mnet's *M Countdown*. These shows typically decide a winner based on a combination of views on YouTube, the number of streams on a variety of music platforms, physical and digital album sales as well as fan-votes on dedicated apps. The ultimate prestige is found by breaking into global charts, or achieving a *Perfect All-Kill*. The latter implies reaching no. 1 on all major Korean charts at once. This results in codified practices of hyperconsumption.

> I do love K-pop, but I didn't stream the same song for 6 hours per day just because it was *that* good. You want it to chart so that [the group] will be happy. Because they made us so happy. They've given us so much, and that's why we do our best to give back (Translated).

In particular, fans are highly encouraged by the community to *stream* and buy albums in bulk. As the names suggest, these practices consist of repeatedly streaming the released track hours on end, and buying exceedingly large quantities of albums respectively. One informant also made mention of centering her schedule around the release of new music, and would wake up in the middle of the night to ensure that she could vote more on a per day basis. Sun argues that this very real investment of time and money allows fans to construct the idol's

accomplishments as their own. Thus, the idol's continued success may become important for their own self-actualization. (2020:403). She goes on to name these practices unskilled fan labor, and argues that they have the additional effect of drawing boundaries between fans and non-fans, while establishing a social hierarchy between enthusiasts (a.a.:389, 398, 402).

Fan Labor

While there almost certainly would still exist community spaces even without the scoring system, the massive emphasis on numbers necessitates an efficient mobilization of fans. With this purpose, enthusiasts might choose to support their favorite idol - commonly referred to as their *bias* - by making sure other potential supporters stay engaged. This breeds a participatory culture.

As such, fans tend to take on active roles in circulating idol-focused content. For example, one informant was previously the head of a K-pop community space on the app Amino. Others ran their own *fan-pages*; Twitter or Instagram accounts dedicated to posting updates about the idol's public appearances. This is often done in the name of making content more accessible, such as reuploading videos taken by Korean fans to an international audience. Similarly, some produced *fan-cams* or *fan-edits*, highlighting funny or cute moments from the idol's recent releases. They may also host events aimed at keeping other fans engaged; a practice Sun refers to as managerial fan labor (a.a.:397). As with streaming and bulk-buying, these acts separate real fans from pretenders. One informant explained:

> It's to show that you're a real fan. You really support them and know everything about them.

However, it is worth pointing out that some of the informants partook in these activities primarily as a means to enjoy K-pop as a hobby and to interact with like-minded fans. This is also to be expected in a gift economy, and is more in line with the findings of Malik and Haidar (2023:7). All the same, the shared identity marker encourages fans to respect mutually recognized norms. Consequently, they are still affected by specific articulations of fanship. Along this line of thinking, Ismail and Khan suggest that various social pressures can coerce fandom membership, in reality making certain expressions less than voluntary (2023:242).

Lastly, Sun speaks of specialized fan labor. These practices may include releasing original pictures and videos online or translating Korean-language productions. People dedicated to the former are colloquially known as *homma* (2020:395). However, while generally possessing high status in the fan community, these homma are necessarily located within geographical proximity of the idols. As such, the informants suggested that they are mainly Korean fans; something which creates an uneven dependance and power balance in the community. This could partially explain a perceived friction between the groups. For instance, several informants suggested that Korean fans may express anger if their idols travel overseas to meet international fans too often, as it hinders their access and thus ability to film and promote them. This exclusionary attitude can in turn make Western fans see red.

Material Identification

Another byproduct of the gift exchange is the accumulation of material goods. While not the sole reason to buy merchandise, reciprocity certainly becomes a strong incentive to begin a collection. As in Ismail and Khan's study, a majority of participants emphasized the purchase as an act of loyalty; some having acquired several hundred albums in order to support their favorite groups (2023:241-242). However, even after purchase these commodities might serve as expressions of identity.

Prominently, informants suggested that albums are kept as display pieces. The same can be said for the photobooks, posters, and photocards (collectable selfies in the dimensions of Pokémon- or baseball cards) which tend to be included alongside the CD. As such, ownership and showcase becomes a way of making your individuality known. That is to say, it further facilitates a specific articulation and communication of self. Such notions fall neatly in line with Miller's framework of material culture, which argues that things can make people just as people make things (2010:141). Other fans indicated that the goods can be utilized to reaffirm one's connection to the idol:

> I love using it even though I have Spotify. I love taking the album; taking the CD and putting it in the machine. It's like a ritual, and a process of love. [...] You remember all the members, where they were. Maybe they overcame some difficulties or other things. That gives you some strength too.

The above passage presents a direct example of how an emodity is formed on the basis of affection. Simply put, by mediating an imagined relationship of great importance, the merchandise becomes the source of positive emotions. According to Guerra and Sousa, memorabilia can also become a way to maintain these bonds (2021:1). This appears to be common practice. For instance, many fans regularly carried photocards of their bias in their phone cases or bags. As one informant argued, this allows you to "*carry your boyfriend with you everywhere*" and take your safe space with you through everyday life.

It is also worth noting that the albums are involved in gamified systems of chance. Because the included photocards are randomized from a larger pool, several informants likened the act of purchase to "gambling" and "addiction". On this basis, entire fan communities have been founded around the desires to complete a set or obtain all pictures of their bias. However, this quickly becomes complicated when special photocards are released through time- and place sensitive events. To slightly ease the burden, fans may take on the role of *group order managers* (GOMs) and organize *group orders* (GOs). This implies finding several prospective buyers online and organizing a single bulk-order to save on expensive shipping costs from Korea for mutual benefit. This exemplifies how the material aspect of the gift exchange comes to encourage specific community structures and companionships.

In short, a willingness to give back often results in fan labor and material accumulation. These practices facilitate specific modes of self-expression. Accepting Abd-Rahim's notion that "*the degree of one's fandom is directly related to the cost of investment*", engagement may be understood as the accumulation of a social capital (2019:67, 74). First introduced by Bourdieu; this framework argues that group membership is dependent on proper credentials. The better the credentials, the higher the status, and the more one stands to benefit from said membership. (Bourdieu 2018:286) Because these acts communicate one's dutiful contribution, they come to exemplify such credentials and consequently provide status. All at once, this allows real supporters - commonly known as *stans* - to be distinguished from fake fans who refuse to give back. As such, the gift economy provides clear guidance with regards to how a proper fan identity ought to be performed.

Chapter 6: Parasocial Kin

Directly intertwined with the processes of emotional production and consumption, several informants remarked how it was *as if* the idols were personal friends, family or even (potential) romantic partners. What they allude to is not just warmth and comfort as previously discussed, but affection. The distinction here is that it envisions a reciprocal aspect to the relationship. As this nevertheless remains unobtainable, one-sided, and an extension of wishful fantasy, the relationship fits neatly into what social psychologists Horton and Wohl call parasocial relationships (1956:2). This has previously been noted by Elfving-Hwang, who consequently labeled the idols as parasocial kin; making no distinction between intimate and familiar parasocial configurations (2018:190).

> You just watch so much of them that you become attached. That's just how it works, you know? For Western fans especially. They don't speak the language, they don't really know the culture, but they want to feel a part of it. Especially when they've consumed so much of it. That's why you idolize them.

According to the informants themselves, this attachment is inherent to the industry, and directly linked to the encouraged mass consumption of official, personality-driven content. This includes music, but also behind the scenes videos, live streams, variety shows, music competitions and a range of collaborations and guest appearances. They similarly highlighted the idol's attractive appearance and goofy personality as endearing traits. This kinship will prove key for motivating and positioning many other practices which constitute fanship.

Realizing the Bond

As an emodity radiating happiness, it is perhaps no shock that many fans dream of realizing the bond with their idol. Ismail and Khan suggest that this is something the industry is acutely aware of, and that it purposefully endorses certain ways of being which allow fans to get closer to their fantasy. Unsurprisingly, they usually revolve around certain forms of continuous consumption (Ismail & Khan 2023:240). All the same, informants indicated that the most successful fan is the one who actually manages to interact with their parasocial kin, and put the parasocial label into question. This follows a range of similar results (Abd-Rahim 2019:67; Ma et al. 2022:3; Guerra & Sousa 2021:6; Ismail & Khan 2023:242).

This raises the question of how fans and idols interact. The most straightforward answer appears to be the attendance of concerts. Several informants have been traveling across Europe and even all the way to Korea to see their favorite groups perform. To increase the chances of being noticed and thus having their connection reaffirmed, some even opted to camp outside the arena from the night before. This type of long-distance travel has been mentioned in Swedish academia as early as 2012 (Hübinette 2012:517).

In the concert settings, fans might also make use of material goods to communicate support directly to their bias. This is perhaps most prominent with *lightsticks;* branded lights which are waved to the beat of the music whilst participating in coordinated cheers called *fan-chants*. As possession allows for a more concrete display of support, the tangibility of these goods was brought up as something which reduces the perceived distance to the idol. One informant went as far as to suggest that ownership of merchandise ensures the bond is not all in her head. Though not directly related to K-pop, the notion that tangibility can be important for the purpose of communicating complex emotion falls in line with Illouz's conclusion regarding the usage of greeting cards (2012:124).

Secondly, each album purchase is typically accompanied by something akin to a lottery ticket. With enough luck (or tickets), a few winners are allowed to participate in *fan-calls*. This is typically realized as a 2-5 minutes long video call with the idol they support. Consequently, these calls also interface with the GO-community of bulk-orders. While everyone who participates gets their photocards, only the GOM - as the person who actually makes the purchase - is provided lottery tickets. Having bought a large amount of items, they are substantially more likely to win. Some informants suggested that this practice has allowed trusted managers to win fan-calls on a more or less regular basis. According to someone who had acted as a GOM herself, this desire to talk to the idol is the primary reason to host GOs, as opposed to altruistic community service. Occasionally, lottery tickets can also be provided for *fan-meets*, *fan-signs* and *hi-touch* events. Typically in-person experiences, participation allows you to talk, get albums signed, or touch ("high-five") the idol respectively.

While fan-calls are typically casual in nature, a number of informants mentioned how people may ask the idols to do *aegyo*. Aegyo can be seen as putting on a cute, childlike performance and is often accompanied by exaggerated gestures and facial expressions. Informants suggested that this is seen as an embarrassing act even in the context of K-pop, but seemed to argue that such is the appeal. By sharing an embarrassing moment, you feel more intimately connected together. This idea shares striking similarities with Herzfeld's theoretical approach to cultural intimacy; albeit in the context of modern subculture. In short, he argues that a common cultural identity is maintained through the recognition of elements which may result in external embarrassment, seeing as they allow for common sociability (2014:8). Aegyo might also be flirtatious in nature, which speaks to a romantically inclined parasocial bond.

Furthermore, modern technology has made it so that digital exchanges between idols and fans are not entirely one-sided. As Ma et al. have previously discussed, live streams allow for some interactivity and thus the co-creation of meaning. Consequently, they play a central role in the upkeep of the emotional bond (2022:3-4). Along this line, informants have also utilized the Korean platforms *Weverse*, *Bubble* and the now defunct *V-live* to stay in touch with idols. In essence, these are messaging apps revolving around the idols, where they may provide heartfelt messages to fans or even the illusion that you are chatting one-on-one. Informants were fully aware that the chance of getting noticed is next to zero. Even so, they argued that it is fulfilling to simply voice your support. As communication on these platforms utilizes Korean, some have attempted to learn the language as a means to strengthen their connection.

While on the topic of digital interactions, the idol tends to affectionately refer to their fans by *fandom names*. For instance, the supporters of boy-group BTS are collectively known as ARMY. In return, the fandom refers to their idols with any number of nicknames - typically referencing inside jokes. As one informant suggested: *"the more names and expressions you use, the more familiar they seem. Like how you give your friends nicknames."* For example, the idol Kim Chaewon of girl-group LE SSERAFIM, is still often referred to as "Pupu"; referencing a fluffy, poodle-like hairstyle she had in 2018 (hourly chaewon ✧ 2023). In this way, even the vocabulary comes to emphasize connection and common history.

In the same manner, the Western K-pop community appears to have localized a number of Korean kinship phrases. For instance, a female fan might refer to an older male idol as *oppa*. Literally meaning something akin to "older brother", the word can also be used between

(younger female-older male) friends and romantic partners in a Korean context. Whereas fans arguably emphasize the romantic connotations more than the others, it nevertheless allows for a common language of affection, regardless of how fans perceive their parasocial kinship. On the other hand, female fans might affectionately refer to (older) female idols as *unnie* [eonni]. Male fans may use *noona* [nuna] for older women and *hyung* [hyeong] for older men.

Obsession & Devotion

Unsurprisingly, the strong emotional bonds can also turn obsessive. As a source of joy and well-being, it is not so strange to think that ordinary life may seem gray without it. Speaking in third person, a lot of informants seemed to know someone who has spent obscene sums to get noticed, or felt depressed when they were unable to meet their idol. Some recognized their past selves in these patterns. As one informant put it:

> [Some fans] are spending a lot of their free time and lives to meet these people. It's similar to people who have a religion; who spend all their time praying to a God. […] Sometimes it’s worse than religion.

This is a vocabulary which has also been employed by both Min, Jin and Han and Mercier respectively, arguing that K-pop and Christianity share a core of idolization for the purpose of fulfillment (2019:8; 2022:200). Such a comparison is not made to suggest that religion is obsessive. Rather, it aims to illustrate how important the idol-persona itself can become for self-realization. However, intense devotion can and has resulted in extreme practices.

Aligning closely with the findings of Elfving-Hwang, several informants argued that obsessed fans can be overly protective, and on principle reject any criticism leveled towards their idols as if they truly were kin (2018:196, 199). A select few might even mobilize to verbally abuse the “aggressors” as a response. Furthermore, the informants made mention of *antis* or *anti-stans*. These people go as far as to attack other fans seemingly unprovoked; often while spreading the good word of their own bias. Mercier makes sense of such practices by arguing that they serve to reinforce the superiority and righteousness of the own idol, whilst distancing the fan from “lesser” alternatives (2022:199).

Competing Loyalties

As soon as a comeback does not chart, a group's momentum could be lost, and disbandment feel inevitable. Such a scenario would be catastrophic for many, given their emotional attachment. As one informant summarized it, "*if the numbers aren't right they'll disappear off the face of the Earth. So it will always be numbers first*." This sense of responsibility for the group's success, contextualizes why the community has come to emphasize reciprocity in the way that it has. However, this articulation frequently causes problems, as time and money are inherently limited. In particular, resources spent on one group can be perceived as resources *not* spent on another. As Ismail and Khan as well as Tinaliga have put it, this encourages a competitive performativity (2023:244; 2018:5).

That is to say, since only one group can chart at the number one spot at a time, fans of different groups turn into competitors. By simply supporting someone else, they inadvertently make it harder for you to repay your own debt. This can cause great frustration and occasionally lead to *fan-wars*; highly mobilized toxic exchanges between groups of fans. Failure to achieve the top spot can also cause toxicity within the otherwise warm in-group:

> This is the part of being a fan that was a little exhausting. You wanted to stream a song, but it just didn't work. It didn't chart. And people would get so angry at each other on Twitter. And they would accuse each other of being fake fans for not doing enough (Translated).

On this basis, the competitive nature of K-pop has also colored what constitutes proper engagement within the own fandom. This is perhaps most apparent with regard to the community's perception of *solo-stans* and *multi-stans*. The multi-stan is someone who *stans* (closely follows the activities of) several groups, whereas the solo-stan exclusively stans a single member of a group. Both practices - but especially the latter - are looked down upon, because they do not adequately repay your debt to the group as a unit. As such, someone who is understood to be either of the two is often insulted online. In extension, the community has a strict socializing effect by allowing and prohibiting certain parasocial configurations.

However, these measures have seemingly also had the opposite effect. Many of the informants reported that they are less invested in the K-pop ecosystem today than they were years ago, precisely because of the competitiveness and strict community rules. As such, they have taken a step back. In particular, several of them have limited interaction with strangers to small, close-knit spaces, as to avoid the toxic discourse.

Chapter 7: Protecting One's Self-project

In spite of the immense joy Hallyu can bring, the informants reported that the identity of a fan is still stigmatized. As such, there are several occasions where one might want to distance themselves from the label. For instance, one informant expressed that "*I feel a little ashamed sometimes… I guess it's because I know that a lot of people have a negative image of K-pop fans. I don't want them to think I'm crazy like that*" (Translated). As such, participation is negotiated such that the self-project avoids criticism and association with stereotypes.

Avoiding Stereotypes

Regardless of the amount of time and money they had invested, all informants consistently expressed that they were *casual* fans. This is interesting for several reasons. Notably, it rejects any form of community status and downplays the emotional connection to the idol. In extension, it attempts to disassociate their identity-project from any higher form of fanship. However, this is not without reason. The participants are very aware of negative stereotypes in the community, and do their best to avoid a social stigma.

Prominently, downplaying affection dissuades other fans from seeing you as a *sasaeng;* an obsessive stalker-fan. It should warrant little discussion of how the label of casual is preferable to deviant or criminal. This is in line with the findings of Williams and Ho, who go on to suggest that a certain distance from the sasaeng is needed to be perceived as authentic within the community (2016:92). The distance is also a way to appear more respectable to outsiders, who do not fully grasp the emotional depth of involvement. For instance, several informants mentioned that they have had family members, friends or significant others who have strongly opposed their hobby. Consequently, this mode of presenting yourself becomes a way to prevent unnecessary criticism and judgment in the construction of selfhood.

The *koreaboo* is another frequent negative stereotype. This character has become obsessed with Korea to the point that they reject their own culture. The informants lamented their existence, and how the deviants would fetishize and appropriate the idols as well as their country of origin. Consistently described as "cringey[4]" and problematic, nobody would dare being associated with them. On this basis, Tinaliga argues that the stereotype is employed by the community to teach members the appropriate way to participate (2018:31). Cruz, Seo and Scaraboto concur that this distance and recognition of a potential problem becomes a way to morally navigate self-realization in relation to ethnically marked consumer goods (2024:969).

Authentic Narratives

Although the co-production of emodities allows informants to channel emotions they know to be authentic, they are still engaged in frequent negotiation with regards to how "real" K-pop truly can be. Fully aware of the capitalist nature of the industry, there is much discussion about an inherent façade. The trainee system, plastic surgery and extensive media training has created doubts regarding how much of the idol's looks and personality is anything more than a show. In extension, is it proper to allow yourself to get so invested?

This tension boils down to the fact that our idea of what is authentic depends on the social approval from our peers; and in extension a framework of cultural norms (Illouz 2017:202). The Western ideal that music should be original and personal - perhaps built on the image of the tortured artist - consequently makes it difficult for the highly produced Korean equivalent to gain the moniker. As such, many fans have developed coping strategies to justify continued involvement. These may either denounce artificiality or embrace it.

> And after you discover a group, you discover what label they're under and what restrictions they have. […] So you want to support the group but not the label.

People who come to denounce artificiality often try to separate the idol from their label, antagonizing the latter for its repression of the former. In this manner, the highly visible production companies become excellent scapegoats for superficial anti-consumer practices. The idol - who would be more authentic if they could - remains in the clear. That is not to

[4] Colloquial term used to describe that which is embarrassing or awkward to the point that it causes discomfort.

imply that the companies always have the interest of their talent or fans at heart. On the contrary, informants painted a convincing picture of how predatory they can be. In a similar manner, some argued that it simply would not be possible to fake *everything*. Considering how much time the idol has spent in the limelight, they would surely have messed up at some point if the act felt too unnatural. This perception could perhaps be considered a form of confirmation bias. All the same, both strategies negate any potential criticism directed towards the perceived lack of real meaning.

In line with the findings of Lie as well as Jenol and Pazil, the alternative approach relies on a recognition of falsehood, and willingness to suspend disbelief (2015:144; 2020:341). This recontextualizes the investment as performative; perhaps more akin to watching a movie, albeit with a stronger participatory focus. In acknowledgement that it constitutes a fantasy, these fans tended to embrace a number of company restrictions. Maintaining the façade becomes imperative.

> A lot of it boils down to painting a picture of a person you want to see, and enjoying the picture you have painted (Translated).

As illustrated by the passage above, these fans also tended to emphasize the importance of one's own narrative. The unproblematic "perfect image" becomes a canvas for the interpretation of each imagination. This is where the popular practices of writing *fan-fiction* and *shipping* (entertaining the idea of romantic entanglements) find their appeal. However, that is not to say that this group dismissed the authenticity of their affinity entirely. Hope always seemed to remain. As one informant cheekily put it: "*delusion is the solution*".

Chapter 8: K for Korea

On a theoretical level, the success of Halllyu has at least in part been attributed to its odorlessness. This concept was first coined by Koichi Iwabuchi and applied to K-pop as *mugukjeok* by Jung. She suggests that although Hallyu is clearly branded and understood to be Korean, national characteristics have been deemphasized to make the product more palatable abroad. This is possible due to clever production practices, but aided by the fact that the music industry in Post-war Korea already possessed a distinct transcultural hybrid character. Likewise, Hallyu is made less specific through local translation practices (Jung 2010:3-4). On this basis, critics go as far as to suggest that there is barely anything authentically Korean left (Lie 2021:361).

Yet, as one informant remarked, "*K-pop is Korean - that's in the title. And I think it has this Korean touch. [...] it wouldn't work without it*". This seems to suggest that its Korean origin is central in how it is appreciated. As such, there is much value in understanding how its Koreanness is perceived locally, and how it plays into specific articulations of selfhood.

Localizing the Phenomenon

It should be no surprise that the Swedish interpretation of Hallyu differs from its Korean counterpart. What Cicchelli and Octobre argue invokes nationalistic pride at its location of production (2021:126), has become emotionally resonant on the basis of being different and fresh here. Similar stories of translation and hybridization have been told time and time again across academic records (Lie 2015:112; Jung 2010:3). Lie goes as far as to suggest that careful and deliberate localization has been one of the fundamental keys to the success of Hallyu abroad (2015:128).

On this basis, one might suspect that Swedish Hallyu enthusiasts would welcome measures to make the Korean Wave more accessible. However, informants generally ranged from lukewarm to completely uninterested in the industry's ongoing measures to debut groups especially for Western markets. I argue that this is the case because localization efforts have yet to appeal to what constitutes the emotional core of their consumption. Whereas the idol persona - as a source of warmth - remains in place, the measures otherwise tend to

overemphasize sameness. For instance, several informants reported that it feels like K-pop is losing its unique sound by trying to appease the mainstream. They suggested that the absence of the Korean language becomes jarring, and that the English versions lack the same lyrical depth. Others argued that English-language K-pop tends to employ incorrect grammar and odd vocabulary, which takes away from an otherwise perfect performance. In short, this makes it much harder to resonate emotionally with Hallyu on the basis of difference or aesthetic prowess, which in turn devalues it in the processes of self-actualization. This falls in line with Hübinette's hypothesis that a "whitening" of Hallyu might lessen its appeal (2012:523).

That is not to imply that the informants believe their understanding of Hallyu to be authentically Korean either. In reality, friction with Korean fans (who are often simply referred to as *netizens*) was described as another common element of online interaction. Notably, informants suggested that there exists a large subset of netizens who oppose idols getting into relationships. These people may burn merchandise, send trucks with messages of disapproval around Seoul, or even leave the fandom entirely if dating rumors turn out to be true. To the Swedish fans, these responses appeared completely absurd. Some had even partaken in community efforts to counter the hate by waves of support. This tells us that informants are aware that a localization process is taking place, and indeed actively involved in negotiating and occasionally distancing themselves from a "Korean" worldview. One informant went as far as to suggest that an inherent Koreanness might be problematic:

> A lot of Western fans perceive the Korean fans to be very different from us. I think our cultures can clash a lot. And that's not something we want here (Translated).

This suggests that Koreanness has become something which ought to be understood on several levels. As a linguistic and cultural backdrop, it can provide intrigue and encourage the co-creation of emodities. Representing a diversity of expression, informants are keen to incorporate it into their identities and lives in Sweden. However, that is not all the word entails. Through continued engagement they have also encountered a less enticing side of Korean society. If we conceive Hallyu as odorless, this would be the odor. Much more difficult to understand, this is a part of the cultural package they are happy to reject.

Soft Power

Similarly, one might be interested in how Hallyu influences the willingness to engage with things or practices on the basis of being Korean. This is typically explored through a lens of soft power; one country's ability to influence another by means of an appealing image as opposed to force (Nye 1990:166-167). In this regard, informants have consistently articulated that Hallyu was their first meaningful contact with Korea, and thus came to influence their image of it a great deal. This is consistent with Lie's understanding that K-pop has come to exemplify Korea as a whole (2015:95).

> K-pop made Korea a place you want to visit. It became something you care about! (Translated).

However, this initial interest quickly grew into something much greater. Throughout this report there have been several mentions of how the K-pop ecosystem encourages culturally anchored participation. For instance, a desire to get closer to the idol might encourage fans to learn Korean or visit Korea. Cicchelli and Octobre refer to this extension of interest from the hobby to society as a whole, as *loyalty transmission* (Cicchelli & Octobre 2021:230). This mechanism became the most apparent when questioning long-time fans about why they considered Korea a bucket-list destination. For many, K-pop has transformed from the driving factor behind the desire to go abroad, to only one appealing aspect alongside food, vistas, and various other cultural experiences. In this manner, Hallyu serves well as a vehicle to promote its country of origin abroad. The fact that three of the informants have reoriented their careers paths with the goal of making Korea a permanent home should speak volume about its persuasive nature.

Likewise, the findings support Ismail and Khan's claims that having a positive attitude towards a country encourages further consumption of their goods (2023:242). For example, informants suggested that simply being of Korean origins is a sign of quality within the field of cosmetics and skincare. Others specifically shopped for Korean fashion online, because experience has convinced them of its reliance. This appears to have become a relatively common sentiment; at least common enough that they now have to watch out for non-Korean brands which pretend to be Korean to increase perceived value. This is not unlike Lee et al.'s

description of the Indonesian music industry, where some artists choose to undergo training in Seoul, specifically to enhance a perceived Koreanness (2020:20). That is not to mention that major Swedish fashion brands have launched an increasingly robust catalog the informants recognize as derivative of Korean street wear.

Both anecdotes tell the same story; one of increasing Korean soft power. This is substantial in relation to the content of this paper, precisely because our emotional and material worlds are so closely intertwined. Self-realization is not a process carried out in a vacuum, but rather the result of continuous negotiation. As Jeong, Lee and Lee point out, this contextualizes Hallyu as symbolic power, able to interfere and intensify certain identities, while discouraging others (2017:2302). Considering that the cultural industry continues to enjoy the "full support" of the Korean government, which views its success as "a matter of national interest", such influence is not to be underestimated (Payet 2018 15:25).

Concluding Remarks

By approaching K-pop and the larger context of the Korean Wave as emodities, this paper has attempted to illustrate why Swedish fans have become so eager to make use of Korean popular culture in their continuous processes of self-realization. It argues that three qualities are key to achieve emotional resonance and incorporation into daily life. Firstly, K-pop is construed as a difference. For most fans, this is not a matter of an orientalist gaze, but rather a willingness to explore and an attraction towards a different regime of value. This is especially true with regards to other articulations of beauty in relation to ethnicity and gender. Secondly, it is seen as containing great aesthetic prowess. K-pop consists of perfectly executed acts performed by flawless idols. This encourages artistic exploration and facilitates individual distinction. Lastly, the warmth of the idol persona and community makes Hallyu an excellent escapism when ordinary life becomes difficult. Collectively, these attributes facilitate an exploration of individuality, while providing a source of happiness and well-being. In a time when emotional authenticity has become an imperative, this contextualizes Hallyu as significant and personal.

These engagements have similarly resulted in a desire to "become a fan" and express a fan identity. This is realized through a participatory culture. By being available near-constantly and producing large amounts of personality-driven content, the idol is notably perceived as a part of these exchanges. This gives them access to the gift-economy, and recontextualizes official releases as gifts which the community ought to reciprocate. In a desire to repay happiness with happiness, fans are encouraged to make the idol's music chart and/or win music award shows. In turn, communities are mobilized to partake in hyperconsumption through the practices of streaming and bulk-buying. In other words, fanship comes to involve various forms of fan labor. These might be performed for the expressed purpose of meeting other fans, but are often also carried out as a way to facilitate engagement with the idol-persona and expand the community further. Likewise, reciprocity results in the acquisition of material goods, which facilitate the communication of a specific identity. Participation in these practices can thus be understood as the accumulation of social capital, and serves to draw clear boundaries between fans and non-fans.

The perceived warmth of the idol-persona has allowed many fans to visualize the performer as parasocial kin. On these grounds, fanship also tends to evolve into a desire to remove the parasocial label and engage directly. Aware of this, the major labels have engineered ways of being which further fuel hyperconsumption. For instance, fans travel around the globe to attend concerts, purchase albums to win fan-calls and regularly engage on Korean social media platforms. However, such an emotionally resonant bond can also turn into obsession. This is perhaps most evident as performative competitivity and toxicity, when one idol is made to compete with another for the top spot. Such pressure has prompted a significant group of fans to limit communication of fanship and denounce the community.

Despite its importance for self-realization, there are also times when one might want to distance the self-project from the labels associated with Hallyu consumption completely. For instance, the stigmatized images of the sasaeng and koreaboo are to be avoided at any cost. Similarly, K-pop's perceived superficialness might put the investment of time and money into question. This encourages fans to position their involvement within a frame of what is socially recognized to be authentic.

Throughout this analysis, it has become apparent that the Koreanness of K-pop does play a significant role in the self-realization processes of fans. As an alternative regime of value, and a source of aesthetically interesting expressions, fans emphasize it as a means to construct a resonant self-image and gain confidence. Consequently, they oppose localization efforts which might jeopardize the cultural anchor. That is not to suggest that every aspect of Koreanness is desirable. Indeed, fans are both aware of its odor, and are happy to reject it where it does not fit into their existing worldviews. However, through loyalty transmission the interest in K-pop is typically extended to Korean society as a whole. This gives Koreanness symbolic value through its ability to displace competing ideals, and provides Korea with a soft power tool which is not to be underestimated.

Consequently, this paper falls neatly in line with the majority of prior research on the topic. In particular, it contributes to a clearer picture of how Swedish Hallyu enthusiasts make sense of the culturally branded goods, and reaffirms that many of the trends and mechanisms observed amongst K-pop fans across continental Europe, the Americas, and South Asia hold ground within a Scandinavian context. The study might similarly be positioned as a microcosm of modern consumption society, revealing how emotionality is constructed and translated into purchase intentions. Such contributions are well-positioned to advance our understanding of the respective phenomena, and can hopefully facilitate sustainable realignment.

However, that is not to suggest that this paper is exhaustive. It bears reiterating that Hallyu is a broad cultural package. As such, all of the practices touched upon ought to be studied in as many contexts as possible. Something as simple as interviewing informants with varying interests may very well reveal new paths of investigation. Likewise, there is certainly room for further exploration of how communities interact across national borders and through cyberspace. The scope of this paper is inherently limited, and should be understood as such. Finally, one might envision further research to compare the consumption of Korean popular culture with other culturally branded exports. Such designs would not only provide a clearer picture of how Koreanness is understood, but contribute a more holistic view of cultural consumption as a whole.

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