

‘Transatlantic connection’: K-pop and K-drama fandom in Spain and Latin America

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Abstract

The global circulation of Asian cultural products has been on a constant rise since the 1990s. However, the arrival to Spanish-speaking audiences is a more recent phenomenon, one that is linked to the consolidation of web-based tools for consumption, distribution and discussion of cultural artefacts. The different stages in which Hallyu, or the “Korean Wave”, reached different countries determined the intensity of scholarly interest in the phenomenon. If the research gap between Asia and Europe is wide, the later arrival to Spain and Latin America means that studies on the reception of Korean popular culture, including those dealing with fandom, are quasi-non-existent. This article is a first attempt at mapping the demographics of K-pop and K-drama fans in the Spanish-speaking world, through an analysis of an online survey. Drawing from the uses and gratifications approach in mass communication research, we discuss fans’ appropriation of K-pop; describe their shared iconography, and analyse the peculiarities of male fans by studying their self-narratives. We conclude with a discussion on the need for studies of fandom to transcend national boundaries as exemplified by the advent of a ‘transatlantic connection’ linking fans in Spain and in Latin America via South Korea.

Keywords: Hallyu, K-pop, K-drama, transatlantic, fandom, Spanish-speaking world

Introduction

The popularity of South Korean popular culture in Spanish-speaking countries is on the rise. In April 2013, some 13,000 fans attended a concert in Lima by South Korean group Super Junior. In November of the same year, another band, Big Bang, drew a crowd of 14,000 in Peru and then a similar number in neighbouring Chile (Briceno, 2013). Ratings of South Korean dramas in places like Ecuador and Chile are also increasing and some manage to attract more viewership during prime time than local *telenovelas* (Granic, 2013). In Colombia, for example, *Cheon-guk eui Gyedan/Stairway to Heaven (Escalera al cielo* in Spanish) was the most watched afternoon program in 2013. On YouTube, K-pop videos with lyrics translated into Spanish get millions of views. Furthermore, according to a recent study, in 2013, the number of online fan groups in the Americas totalled 464, up from 377 in 2012 (Korea Foundation, 2013). This should not come as a surprise since the global circulation of Asian cultural products has been going on for some years now. However, their arrival to Spain and most Latin American countries is a much more recent phenomenon that has not been sufficiently explored. The majority of studies examining

the Korean Wave have been limited to Asian contexts (see, for example, Chua and Iwabuchi, 2008; Cho, 2011). Also, no comprehensive academic survey about Korean popular culture in Latin America, or elsewhere, has been published to date. However, as Hallyu's momentum continues to grow, we believe that some attention needs to be devoted to understanding the characteristics of its spread across Spanish-speaking communities, as one example of the larger global phenomenon of Hallyu fandom.

Who are the people that are attracted by K-pop and K-drama in Spain and Latin America? What is it about Hallyu that attracts so many fans in parts of the world so distant from the traditional reach of Korea and its culture? Why do some Spanish-speaking fans prefer South Korean cultural products to Western ones, despite the fact that the latter tend to be more accessible and generally closer to their own values and norms? How do these local practices speak of the larger phenomenon? These are some of the questions that we aim to unravel. Moreover, we also pay particular attention to male fans and the motives governing their consumption of Korean cultural products. In a community with a predominance of female fans, and generally described in a homogenising way, we see a need to ponder on a subgroup whose personal experiences, despite being marginal in size, can also offer an extra layer of understanding of Hallyu globally.

The article starts with a brief overview of the origins of the Korean Wave before moving on to describing how it arrived to Spain and Latin America. We then turn to review how some precepts within media studies, fandom studies and cultural studies can help us better comprehend the adoption of K-pop and K-drama beyond South Korean borders. The core of the article is the reporting of results from an online survey distributed to over 500 Latin American and Spanish fans. The data shows that despite the foreignness of South Korean products, they serve the need of fans to escape from their immediate environments. We also suggest that the study of Hallyu fans needs to be approached from a transnational perspective, one that escapes the limitations of physical boundaries and encompasses the virtual, without forgetting the local.

South Korea goes global

Hallyu (한류 in Korean) is a term formulated to describe the international spread of popularity of Korean cultural products. This surge refers mostly to popular music (K-pop) and television drama series (K-drama) from the end of 1990s and onwards. Some of the first countries that contributed to the international spread of Hallyu were China, where the concept was first introduced (KCIS, 2011), Japan, and also some Southeast Asian nations. Domestically, South Korean dramas have long been considered one of the most popular programs on television. The annual list of the ten most watched shows usually contains five or six dramas (Shim, 2008). Investment to increase their quality became especially prominent when new commercial TV stations opened in Korea in the 1990s. The battle for audience brought a "drama war" characterized by an increased number of productions, theme diversification, fresher scripts, and improved overall entertainment quality. The phenomenon soon spread and, in 1997, the broadcast in China Central Television (CCTV) of *Sarang-i Mwo-gillae/What is love about (Aiqing*

shi shenme in Chinese) sparked one of the first massive K-drama fandom waves overseas (Leung, 2008). From then on, many Korean dramas have had high ratings in China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and especially Vietnam, where K-drama accounted for over 56% of all foreign programming in 1998 (KCTPI 2005). This upward trend is mirrored in the statistics of exports and imports of Korean television, which show that exports increased from 6 million US dollars in 1996 to 187 million dollars in 2010. In the same period imports were reduced from 63.9 to 10.4 million US dollars (Yang, 2012). Shim (2008) notes how some analysts have suggested that the Korean Wave initially took off not because of the developmental strategy of governments or broadcasters, but that, Korean television dramas improved due to internal competition and favourable conditions in international markets. In Taiwan, for example, as the popularity of Japanese TV dramas began to weaken in the late 1990s, Korean dramas were imported at significantly cheaper price to fill the gap.

While in the late 1990s the Korean Wave rose somewhat ‘spontaneously’, a more calculated process has taken place in Latin America, where Korean institutions have used popular culture as a tool for promotion. In 2008, the Korea Creative Content Agency (KOCCA) was created to help the promotion of television content, video games and other cultural industries. KOCCA’s foundational goals were to turn Korea into a global cultural superpower (Chun, 2011). In Central and Latin America a more direct approach was taken by another agency, the Korea Foundation. Under its guidance, Korea’s top rated shows, such as *Gyeongju* (*Winter Sonata* (*Sonata de Invierno*) or *Dae Jang Geum*/*Jewel in the Palace* (*Una joya en el palacio*), have been dubbed into Spanish and distributed locally. This has translated into a massive disembarking of dramas on television channels across Central and South America. As Figure 1 shows, except for Spain and Argentina, all Latin American countries studied in this article have had K-drama broadcast on national or local television stations.

A careful look at the dates of broadcasting of K-drama in Latin America reveals different stages of arrival. They were initially sponsored by South Korean government agencies, but now, there is also an active participation of broadcasters. Each episode of *Cheon-guk eui Gyedan*/*Stairway to Heaven* is said to have been sold to Puerto Rico’s Public Broadcasting Company in 2006 for one US dollar. This compares much favourably in terms of prices to Mexican *telenovelas*, which can cost between 5,000 and 12,000 U.S. dollars per episode (López Tejeda, 2011). This kind of accessibility of *Cheon-guk eui Gyedan*/*Stairway to Heaven* certainly contributed to its popularity, especially in Ecuador and Colombia, where it achieved some of the highest ratings (Yonhap, 2013; RCN Television, 2013). More recently, Korean broadcasters, knowing about the high popularity of their productions, have signed agreements with local television channels and have taken a more proactive stance in the global distribution. For example, the sales of MBC, Korea’s major broadcaster, at an annual TV contents market held in the United States, totalled 103,450 US dollars, surpassing by far the previous year’s sales record of 70,000 US dollars (Lee, 2013).

[Figure 1]

Changes in the global television market and low selling costs were some of the main factors in the dissemination and growth in popularity of K-drama across Latin America. Can this also be said about K-pop and the music industry? A short answer would be: yes. In many aspects K-pop has followed similar processes as K-drama, meaning that a period of sharp internal competition was followed by a period of aggressive international campaign in which commercial profitability became one of the main imperatives of the industry. The process began in the early 1990s when the Korean record market shifted from producing diverse music genres aimed at various demographics, to primarily focusing their efforts on younger audiences (Howard, 2006). Chang Nam Kim (2012) explains the global success mostly in terms of changes in the structure of the industry. By the end of the decade, when the South Korean music market rapidly shrunk due to the overall economic situation, record labels concentrated even more on commercially proven genres and paid less attention to adult audiences as sales went down. From 2000 to 2003, the number of record retailers decreased by more than 90%. At the same time, the industry progressively shifted towards new forms and patterns of consumption, from mobile phones to the internet. This is also noted by Ingyu Oh and Gil-Sung Park (2012), as well as John Lie (2012), who adds a third factor: the professionalization and proliferation of talent agencies such as SM Entertainment, which contributed to the rise of idol groups.

Today, record companies are no longer mere distributors, but instead engage in active planning aimed at maximizing the profit. They organize large auditions, cast group members, teach them singing and dancing, pick their public personas and go through great lengths to advertise them (Ho, 2012). Bands appear frequently on television where they show their talents, along with each band members' personal and distinct image. In an all-male idol band, for example, each member can specialize in a different style, look or personality: cute, bad boy, rapper... Image is considered to be one of the most important qualities of a band member, while their creativity, music or talent are of secondary importance (Willoughby, 2006). Much of this process mimics what Japanese popular music industry went through a decade or so earlier (see, for example, Allison, 2008; Galbraith and Karlin, 2012). In fact, K-pop partly inherited the East Asian market previously dominated by Japanese productions by perfecting some of the 'old tricks' of J-pop: the training system, the flashy visuals, the lavish music videos, the complex dance choreographies... (Ng, 2002). Both phenomena have also another element in common, namely, their hybrid nature, to which we will return in later parts of this article.

The adoption of multiple different influences could partially explain the global appeal of K-pop, but another crucial factor is technology. For years, the Internet and particularly YouTube were fans' preferred platform to share and distribute content. In doing so, they were frequently violating copyrights. Now, the Korean music industry has managed to partially appropriate the space and turned YouTube into "a self-reflexive staple in the campaign process of marketing new and old K-pop artists and productions" (Ono and Kwon, 2013, p. 200). This is best exemplified by the global success of PSY, which became the single most watched video on the platform. Earlier, in 2011, an analysis of the international viewership of K-pop on YouTube

recorded more than 2 billion views. Of these, 125 million came from Spanish-speaking countries (Seo, 2012, p. 62), indicating that Latin America has, in many respects, become a hot zone for K-pop. Concerts by South Korean groups draw crowds in the thousands and, even a major broadcaster as Caracol TV in Colombia has started airing K-pop talent shows (Trivedi, 2013). Catchy and upbeat songs, well designed online marketization, visually attractive dance choreographies have all been used to explain the success of K-pop globally. Latin America should not be an exception. On top of these, it is arguable that South Korean music companies are keen on tapping into newer regions, as its market share seems to be narrowing in East and South East Asian markets. Throughout 2013, concerts have been cancelled in countries such as Thailand and Singapore for low ticket sales or budgetary constraints (J. Kim, 2013; Lent, 2013). The interest of K-pop producers to expand their markets overseas provides us only with a partial view of Hallyu and, moreover, offers little help in understanding the audiences, who have so positively reacted across the world. In the next section we look at the phenomenon from their perspective.

K-pop and K-drama fans

Hallyu has been explored by some scholars as a phenomenon on its own terms (Chua and Iwabuchi, 2008; Kim, 2012), others have tried to explain it within the context of East Asian cultural flows (Black, Epstein, and Tokita, 2010; Chua, 2012), while some have looked beyond and set the Korean Wave in a larger context (Kim and Kim, 2011; Y. Kim, 2013). A recurrent concept in all of these works is that of cultural hybridity, which is used to challenge some of the tenets of cultural imperialism (Iwabuchi, 2002; Shim, 2006; Ryoo, 2009). No longer are cultural flows unidirectional: they now have multiple origins and destinations that allow multiple localities, but at the same time require global analyses. K-pop and K-drama have often been described as culturally hybrid in that they successfully appropriate, modify and merge cultural elements of the 'East' and 'West' to create new products that have an appeal for audiences in different cultural settings (Noh, 2011; Jin, 2013).

In the case of Korean pop music, since the 1950s various musical influences, from Japan to the United States, have shaped a distinct genre (Howard, 2006). Similarly, K-drama has come to represent an aspiring modernity associated with the 'West', but one that retains elements of 'traditional' South Korean culture (the 'East'). As contradictory as it might be, these shows have been both said to lack cultural specificity, because of their hybrid nature, and to be abundant in foreignness, because of the locality of the plots and stories. This paradox is explainable in that the texts can be decoded in multiple ways. Some audiences in Latin America might enjoy the exotic difference; some might be attracted by their hybrid nature, while others might be alienated by the effects of 'cultural discount', which occurs when a specific program rooted in a certain culture has a reduced appeal in another due to viewers' difficulty in identifying with its style, values and beliefs (Hoskins and Mirus, 1988). Ien Ang further conceptualized this in her study of

American soap *Dallas*, as the two levels of a cultural product: the denotative and the connotative. The earlier refers to the manifest content, which includes the settings, the characters and their actions, while the latter is about “the associative meanings which can be attributed to elements of the text” (1985, p. 41).

Ang’s study of *Dallas* comes from an understanding that audiences are active in their use of the media. This is also one of the core assumptions of the uses and gratifications approach in mass communication research (Blumler and Katz, 1974). It examines why people interact with the media, and places particular stress on the choice made by audiences depending on the needs that they are aiming to satisfy. It also assumes that the mass media compete with other sources that may satisfy a particular need or desire. In this sense, it provides a helpful framework to explain why consumers of Hallyu actively turn to South Korean products in spite of all other available options. In this article we are not aiming at advancing research of the uses and gratifications approach *per se*, but nonetheless use some of its concepts. We borrow the taxonomy by Katz, Haas and Gurevitch of needs that people try to see gratified by their media use. They condense existing literature about needs into five categories: cognitive needs, which are related “to strengthening information, knowledge, and understanding;” affective needs, associated with “strengthening aesthetic, pleasurable and emotional experience;” integrative needs, which refer to “strengthening credibility, confidence, stability, and status;” social needs, related to “strengthening contact with family, friends and the world,” and “needs related to escape or tension release” (1973, pp. 1966–7).

From the available literature, it is difficult to infer what would be the primary needs that Hallyu products can gratify. Different cases could be argued based on different theoretical approaches. If we were to take, for example, the perspective of fandom studies, social needs could be hinted as a possible answer. As Shuker (2013) points out, the terms fan and fandom have traditionally carried negative connotations and their behaviour is frequently described as a form of pathology. This is even more acute for fan bases of non-mainstream cultural expressions, as is the case of K-pop and K-drama outside of Asia. These fans tend to be geographically dispersed and, sometimes, socially marginalized, so they turn to online communities to share their fandom. It is also online that they often create systems of social support. The locality of subcultures has shifted from the physical to the virtual. This implies that the nation state is becoming less relevant as a unit of analysis for audience studies and supports the idea that it is worth exploring issues of identity building, fandom and subculture within larger constructs such as linguistic communities, age groups or gender.

This article proposes four research questions based on the evidence that K-pop and K-drama are spreading fast in Spanish-speaking countries and that there has been little attention devoted to the question. We start by asking a descriptive question: what are the main demographic indicators of K-pop and K-drama fans in Latin America and Spain? (RQ₁). We then make use of the concept of ‘needs’ from the uses and gratifications approach to ask: what needs do fans of Korean popular culture in Spanish-speaking countries seek to gratify when consuming Hallyu cultural

products? (RQ₂). From the previous discussion on cultural hybridity, we see a need to further study if the appropriation of South Korean popular culture by Spanish-speaking audience differs from that described elsewhere. In light of these, we formulate RQ₃: how are K-pop and K-drama decoded and interpreted by consumers in Latin America and Spain? Finally, we take the case of male K-pop and K-drama aficionados and ask: how do male consumers of Hallyu make sense of their belonging to a fan community dominated by women? (RQ₄)

Method

The data presented in this article comes from a web-based online survey in Spanish carried out over the course of 6 weeks in late 2013. A total of 542 complete responses and 186 incomplete responses were collected. This article only presents the analysis of complete questionnaires. We chose to analyse the Spanish-speaking Hallyu community because of the rapid growth in popularity and because it also allows a broad cross-country analysis. It is not hypothesized that Spanish-speaking fandom is systematically different from other fan communities, but we understand that the countries surveyed might share some similar characteristics. The survey was distributed on social networking sites (Facebook and Twitter), web-based forums and BBS (Bulletin Based System) dedicated specifically to the discussion of Korean popular culture, and also personal blogs about South Korea. To guarantee geographical representativeness, we first selected relevant pages, fan communities and blogs and then distributed the survey to pages representing all 20 countries and territories where Spanish is an official language. We also approached some pages and blogs that target the Spanish-speaking Hallyu fan base as a whole. The notice about the survey was posted in 291 pages and blogs.

We opted to make use of an online survey, despite the fact that is regarded as a research method of lesser value because it often implies the use of non-probability sampling practices, as is the case of this study. However, we agree with Wright (2005) and others (Gunter, Nicholas, Huntington, and Williams, 2002; Andrews, Nonnecke, and Preece, 2003), when they note that online surveys can also provide researchers with notable advantages. The first has to do with the possibility to access very specific populations that would otherwise be difficult to locate. Even though K-pop and K-drama are not exclusively consumed through the Internet but also through mainstream and underground channels, online access appears to be dominant, making it logical to use an online survey to try to describe and understand fan communities. We acknowledge that external validity might be compromised by our choice of a combination of non-probability sampling methods (convenient sampling and snowball sampling). However, we consider that both the exploratory nature of this study and the particular characteristics of Hallyu fandom make the choice of an online survey valid. A second advantage of online surveys often mentioned (Duffy, Smith, Terhanian, and Bremer, 2005; Wright, 2005) is the possibility to reduce time and costs for researchers. This factor was also highly relevant as both budget and available time were limited.

The survey consisted of 40 questions. Because of its length, a lucky-draw of K-pop and K-drama merchandise was organized as an incentive to respondents over the age of 18. We divided the questionnaire into five parts. In part 1, respondents were asked general questions about their relationship to South Korea, Korean language and culture, and about their cultural consumption habits and leisure activities. In part 2 and part 3, we respectively asked questions about how and why they watched K-drama and listened to K-pop. Those respondents who reported only having watched Korean television drama over the previous month in part 1 were asked to answer part 2 ($n = 27$), those who reported only having listened to K-pop were asked to answer part 3 ($n = 81$), and those who said to have done both were asked to answer parts 2 and 3 ($n = 434$). Demographic information, including age, nationality, education and income level, gender and race, was collected in part 4. In part 5 male respondents ($n = 29$) were asked to share self-narratives about their relationship with Hallyu.

For parts 2 and 3, respondents were asked to self-report K-drama and K-pop consumption habits: frequency, means of access, trigger of consumption and genre preference. We also asked respondents to report what activities related to K-pop and K-drama they had been involved in over the last year. A list of eleven activities for K-drama and twelve for K-pop was presented in the questionnaire. By doing this we tried to quantify the degree of engagement of consumers in order to group them. To assess the perceived needs of fans in their use of K-drama and K-pop, we showed respondents twenty statements describing different needs. We asked each prompt to be evaluated using a five-level Likert-type scale, ranging from ‘totally disagree’ to ‘totally agree’. Some examples of the prompts include, ‘I watch K-drama because I want to learn Korean (cognitive), ‘I listen to K-pop because I feel an attraction towards the singers’ (affective) and ‘I watch K-drama because it allows me to forget things that happen around me’ (escape). A similar system of statements to be evaluated from 1 to 5 was used to measure how respondents gave meaning to the television shows they watched and the music they listened to.

Results and discussion

The presentation of results is organized into four sections, one for each research question. In the first one we offer a demographic overview of respondents (RQ₁); in the second section we focus on K-drama and K-pop to describe consumption patterns and fans’ needs (RQ₂); in section three we discuss issues of cultural hybridity and decoding of Hallyu (RQ₃), and finally we explore the self-narratives of male respondents (RQ₄).

Demographics

The demographic portrait of K-pop and K-drama fans in Spanish-speaking countries that comes out of our survey confirms that the vast majority of fans are female (94.5%) and that male account for a small fraction (5.4%). The average age is 21.41 (21.42 for female and 21.48 for male), the youngest respondent being 11 and the oldest 56. The largest group is that of 18 to 25

years olds (54.8%), followed by those under 18 (27.7%) and then the 26 to 35 years old group (14%). The young age of most of respondents seems to determine other demographic variables. A large majority are single (93%), are currently studying (70.7%), live with their family (90.6%) and have a monthly income of 300 euros or less (66.2%). In terms of racial composition, fans surveyed report being predominantly Hispanic (74.4%) or Caucasian (14.4%), and only residual figures were recorded for Asian (1.5%), Black (1.7%) and other groups (7.7%). This internal demographic homogeneity occurs despite the fact that there is considerable geographic dispersion, with 23 countries accounted for when participants were asked about their nationality, as shown on Figure 2. Mexico is the most populated country in Latin America and also accounts for the highest number of people surveyed (17.3%, n = 94). Argentina and Venezuela come second (11.6%, n = 63).

[Figure 2]

In terms of cultural consumption habits, in 95% of the cases (n = 515) respondents report to have consumed K-pop regularly in the previous month. The value is lower for K-drama (85.1%, n = 461) and slightly smaller for those who say to have consumed both (80.1%, n = 434). The preference for Asian cultural artefacts – particularly visual culture – over those coming from other countries is confirmed when looking at other responses. Those surveyed say to have watched Korean cinema (44.3%) or other Asian dramas (29.7%) over the course of the previous month, both of which are higher values than those reported for American (25.8%), Spanish (6.3%) and Latin American (14.9%) television shows, including soap operas. For musical products, a distinct predilection for Asian performers is less acute, as 36.2% report having listened to Western music, as opposed to 26.4% who had listened to J-pop and 3.5% who had listened to Cantopop or Mandopop over the previous month. Not only do respondents seem fond of Korean contemporary popular culture, but also they show interest in learning the language and visiting the country. One third of those surveyed say to be studying Korean (30.8%) and 65.1% chose Korean as the first language they would study if they could pick one. Only a very small fraction say to have visited South Korea (3.3%) but a large majority say they would like to visit (71.8%).

K-drama and K-pop consumption

In general terms, those surveyed appear to be heavy consumers of K-drama. Over 40% claim to watch six or more episodes of K-drama every week and the percentage is just slightly higher for those who report watching between two and five. Users tend to watch K-drama alone (74.8%) and, if they are to watch it with somebody else, this is more likely to be a family member (29.1%) than friends (20.6%). The most common way used to watch K-drama amongst those surveyed is to stream videos online (87%), which appears to be more popular than video downloads (31.9%). Another possible point of access is television (28.4%), which has a slightly higher value than rented or purchased DVD's (23%). Those who reported watching K-drama on television were more likely to do so accompanied by family members ($\chi^2 = 11.51$, n = 131, $p \leq .001$), than those

who watch it online. Despite the fact that watching K-drama seems to occur mostly online, the reason that more respondents reported as the trigger for their current interest is having first watched an episode on television (46.2%). Other reasons given were: previous interest in K-pop (40.6%), a friend's recommendation (36.9%) and because of an interest about Korea (33%). The survey allowed multiple answers in these last three questions. For those who gave only one reason ($n = 205$), the prime trigger was also having watched K-drama on TV. The preferred genres are equally romance and comedy (76.8%). As for K-pop, the dominant majority of respondents consider it to be their favourite music genre (85.4%). They mostly access it using YouTube or similar services (96.9%). In fact, when asked how they first became interested in K-pop, 68% responded that this happened after watching a video online. As presumed, YouTube and the visual nature of idol bands seem to play an important role in the dissemination of Hallyu fandom. In addition, since the majority of fans have less than 100 euros at their disposal each month, it is only logical that free music download and general avoidance of online stores are prevalent among 81% of respondents.

In RQ₂ we asked about the needs for which K-drama and K-pop fans seek gratification. In a scale from 1 (totally disagree) to 5 (totally agree), the prompt that respondents were more comfortable with was "I watch K-drama because it entertains me and helps me relax" ($M = 4.80$), followed by "I watch K-drama because I want to learn about Asian cultures, and particularly Korean culture" ($M = 4.54$). We consider the latter to be an example of a cognitive need, while the former as an example of a need to escape. When comparing aggregates of the five categories of needs that we measured, the highest values are for cognitive ($M = 8.94$), escape ($M = 8.76$) and affective ($M = 8.49$). A comparison of age groups reveals one major difference: respondents of 35 and above do not consider K-drama as a potential gratifier of social or integrative needs. When comparing mean scores for aggregate values between those over 35 ($M = 4.14$) and all other groups ($M = 6.70$), significant differences were found. A similar question was posed to K-pop consumers. The two dominant needs were escape ($M = 9.12$) and affective ($M = 9.00$). Gender and age were not associated with differences between groups. Results are presented in Figure 3.

[Figure 3]

Those surveyed do not limit their relationship with K-drama and K-pop to watching and listening. We presented respondents with two lists of activities and asked them to select all those in which they had been involved in the previous 12 months. The activities were ranked from a low level of engagement (listening to music from a drama series or looking for information online about K-pop) to a high level (editing a video or taking part in the fansubbing process). For K-drama, while 91.3% reported having searched online about a show and 89.2% having listened to a soundtrack, only 8.7% said to have helped create fansubs, 4.1% uploaded an episode online and 3.3% created their own video. For K-pop consumers, engagement levels seemed to be higher. Those who had searched information online accounted for 92.8% of the respondents, 83.3% discussed K-pop with friends, 33.8% danced choreographies with a group and 30.7% shared

songs online. We then grouped these activities by using a simplified version of Abercrombie's audience continuum, which goes from consumer to producer, with three categories in between enthusiast, cultist and fan (Abercrombie, 1998). From the data it could be claimed that 46.4% K-pop respondents can be labelled as fans, defined as those who, within the context of relatively high media use become attached to certain stars or programmes; 27.8% as petty-producers, to whom enthusiasm is becoming an almost professionalized full-time activity; 21% as enthusiasts, that is, those who tend to interact with those that share their tastes, and 4.9% as consumers, whose interaction with the media can be described in a relatively generalized and unfocused fashion. For K-drama, figures are 10% consumers, 44% enthusiasts, 38.4% fans and 7.6% producers.

Reception and cultural decoding

For an analysis of how fans decode and interpret K-drama and K-pop we presented them with a list of statements and asked them to rate their agreement on a scale from 1 (totally disagree) to 5 (totally agree). The results are presented in Figure 4. One of the characteristics attributed to the global success of Korean popular culture is its hybrid nature. We found, however, that the element of hybridity does not resonate well with those surveyed. We presented them with two similar statements about the relationship of K-pop to Western music: "K-pop is similar to European and American music" and "K-pop is a copycat of American and European music". For the first one, the mean score was 2.31 and for the second one, 1.6. If we combine these with the score given to the statement "I equally like K-pop and American music" ($M = 2.71$), we could interpret that fans surveyed here appear to have a somewhat strong bias against Western music. On the contrary, as it could be presumed, they have a very high standing of idols and their productions: agreement is high with statements about physical attractiveness of K-pop singers ($M = 4.49$), about the concern these artists have about their fans ($M = 4.43$) and the catchiness of songs ($M = 4.54$). These perceptions – and to a certain extent, admiration – extend beyond K-pop artists. High agreement values were recorded for statements asserting that Koreans have high moral standards ($M = 4.30$), are particularly polite ($M = 4.41$), have a high educational level ($M = 4.55$) and are well dressed ($M = 4.41$).

The measurements about how K-drama is decoded disclose a blurrier picture. Both at the denotative and connotative levels, following Ang's concepts, audiences report some remoteness in the shows they are watching. They generally disagree with the statement "I think Korean culture is similar to mine" ($M = 2.15$) and, to a lesser extent, with the sentence "I think Koreans are similar to me" ($M = 2.55$). Nonetheless, the foreignness of the shows, in other words, the fact that South Korea is seen as not culturally proximate, does not constitute an impediment to them watching. At the connotative level, we found that those surveyed perceive the stories and the relationships in them as somewhat distant. They partially agree that family relationships ($M = 3.38$) and love relationships ($M = 3.51$) are not similar to their own, and they partially disagree with the statement that "In my life I have experienced similar things to those I see on the show."

($M = 2.76$). The paradox is that despite all of these, the majority of respondents (60.5%) agreed that they would like to see their life mirror that of the last drama they had watched.

[Figure 4]

Males and Hallyu fandom

As we have shown, the majority of K-pop and K-drama consumers are women. That is the reason why most works tend to concentrate on female identities. Males are either completely absent from the discourse or touched upon only marginally. However, fandom cannot be fully understood without understanding the full spectrum of the audience demography. Regardless of the relatively small share, male audiences come with their own distinctive set of characteristics, which separate them from their female counterparts, and lumping them together comes at the expense of making inaccurate suppositions. In other words, understanding male population within a field largely dominated by female fandom can bring a more nuanced understanding of fans in general and shed more light onto a frequently overlooked aspect of Hallyu fandom. In our survey, we asked male respondents to provide self-narratives regarding their relationship to K-pop and K-drama, and to share information about their social interactions. The number of respondents is small ($n = 29$), but we nonetheless consider their responses to be illustrative examples of transnational – probably global – trends, which should be taken into account. For example, despite a high geographical dispersion of respondents (12 countries), there are still notable similarities between them: they are mostly single; they are younger than 25 and have a monthly available income of 100 euros or less. Further similarities come to light as our focus shifts from statistical to textual analysis. This section, that is, the analysis of self-narratives, is divided into three parts: perceptions about South Korean culture, social acceptance of Hallyu, and issues of gender and sexuality.

We begin with the examination of perceptions about South Korean culture. In their narratives, male respondents tend to idealize Korean culture and declare its ethical dominance. It is important to note here that despite their strong attitudes, none of the respondents has ever visited South Korea. Nonetheless, their praise often highlights Korean morality and, especially, a perceived general respect for elders. One respondent from Spain describes his love for South Korea by elaborating on what first triggered his interest:

From 2001, I started to look into Asian countries and South Korea was the one that inspired me the most. The landscapes, the history and morality of people all got me addicted. Me, myself being Christian... here, the respect and the morality are being lost. It is a pity. I don't know... It is a country that increasingly attracts me. I feel I am half Korean.

In addition, many stress Korea's rich tradition, history, and good manners. One respondent illustrates this by saying how it strikes him that 'they (Koreans) are so polite towards elderly people,' while another respondent praises Korean society by saying that it is 'superior to ours.'

In terms of social acceptance of Hallyu, fans we examined seem to have divided views. A majority feels that the rest of society looks down upon them, that they are judged for emulating Korean styles and criticized by their environment. However, most of the respondents show confidence in their own preferences and do not seem to be overly concerned about a perceived social awkwardness.

As far as the issues of gender and sexuality go, male respondents seem to be concerned with the fact that their liking for K-pop or K-drama are sometimes mistaken with their sexual preferences. Namely, they report that individuals from their immediate environment often stigmatize and label them as 'gay' because they enjoy K-pop. One of them writes: 'they are always criticizing me for listening to Chinese music. Koreans tend to have very feminine looks and my brother, who is very homophobic, is always telling me: "there you are, watching your Chinese gays."' Another respondent describes a similar experience by saying that 'they think that Koreans are gay and presume that I am gay too.' The issue of homosexuality also came up in discussing Hallyu fashion. One of the participants from Chile describes how Koreans have much higher beauty standards and compares that to his own culture: 'in Chile, if you worry too much about your skin, your physical appearance or your clothing, they call you gay.' He goes on to conclude that Chile has a long way to go but that it will eventually adapt and come closer to the standards of South Korea.

Conversely, it seems that some of the fans are attracted to Hallyu precisely because it is far less sexualized than similar products from the 'West'. One respondent complains that K-pop is demeaned because 'nowadays people only want sex and more sex. They don't leave time for romance.' Two other respondents voice a similar longing for the platonic love depicted in South Korean dramas. Their nostalgia corresponds, to some extent, to the sentiments voiced by middle-aged female fans of *Gyeongseongjo/Winter Sonata* in Japan (Mori, 2008). Preference for 'good old days' when love was more pure and capitalism less prevalent is something that these two otherwise dissimilar audience groups seem to have in common.

Conclusions

To date, literature about the Korean Wave has mostly focused on East Asian contexts. This is quite sensible since most of the consumers and producers are located in this part of the world. However, due to advances in communications technologies and because of the rapid development of the South Korean entertainment industry, particularly online, Hallyu has been making large global strides as well. In addition, Latin America, and to lesser extent Spain, are directly targeted by Korean cultural agencies, which have been trying to establish a new niche in this part of the world. Despite this speedy expansion, the amount of available data about consumers is still scarce and incomplete. This article attempted to provide answers to questions relating to K-pop and K-drama fandom in Spanish-speaking countries: who are the fans, how

they engage in the consumption of Korean cultural products and why they turn to K-pop and K-drama of all the available cultural resources. Our data confirms the perception that South Korean cultural artefacts are capturing an increasingly large share of the market and that their audience consists predominantly of single women in their early twenties.

Fans in our study show a general tendency to use South Korean popular culture to gratify a need to escape from their immediate environment. The exotic appeal of K-drama plots and the exuberant energy of beautiful members of idol bands are all parts of the appealing fantasy that these audiences enjoy. We also explained how in appropriating Hallyu, respondents project their expectations despite the fact that they accept that plots and the social relationships depicted are culturally distant. Online, fans create imagined communities (Anderson, 1991) and systems of social support independent from physical interaction. In this virtual environment, national borders become less relevant. Within the specific context of Spanish-speaking countries, a 'transatlantic connection' is created, bringing closer together geographically distant fans. It is arguable that similar larger connections occur in other regional settings and thus, this should be further studied. Finally, we raised some of the peculiarities of male Hallyu fandom and highlighted some of the concerns raised by the respondents.

We acknowledge that from the findings of this article no conclusive generalizations to the entire fan base can be inferred. The fact that the survey was carried out online left a large number of possible respondents out. The case of Cuba, with low Internet penetration rate but allegedly high interest in South Korean dramas (AFP-JIJI Press, 2013), could be an example. Notwithstanding, we believe that this article contributes in two ways. First, it offers a first approximation to online fandom of Hallyu in a regional context where users are on the rise. Second, it offers evidence from which to build questions for further research. The global study of Hallyu is still too often detached from audiences. There is, however, a need to better understand the motivations and expectations of K-pop and K-drama fans in order to be able to make sense of how cultural products interact with the local, the virtual and the global.

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Figure 1: K-drama broadcasting in Latin America and Spain.

	Broadcast on national or local TV	<i>Winter Sonata</i> 겨울연가 (2002)	<i>Jewel in the Palace</i> 대장금 (2003)	<i>Stairway to Heaven</i> 천국의 계단 (2003)	<i>Boys Over Flowers</i> 꽃보다 남자 (2009)	<i>My Fair Lady</i> 아가씨를 부탁해 (2009)
Argentina	No*	***	***	***	***	***
Bolivia	Yes	2010 (Unitel)	2010 (RTP)	2009 (Unitel)	2012 (Palenque TV)	***
Chile	Yes	2006	***	2006 (TVN)	2012 (Mega)	***
Colombia	Yes	**	2009 (Canal Capital)	2012 (RCN)	***	***
Costa Rica	Yes	2006 (Teletica 7)	2009 (Canal 13)	(Canal 7)	***	2013 (Canal 9)
Cuba	Yes (local)	***	***	***	***	2013 (Canal Habana)
Dominican Rep.	Yes	2004 (CERTV)	***	2008 (CERTV)	***	2012 (CERTV)
Ecuador	Yes	2006 (Hoy TV)	2009 (Ecuador TV)	2009 (Ecuavisa)	2011 (Ecuador TV)	2011 (Ecuavisa)
El Salvador	Yes	2006 (Canal 12)	2009 (Canal 12)	2006 (Canal 10)	***	2012 (Canal 2)
Guatemala	Yes	2007 (Guatevisión)	2009 (Guatevisión)	***	***	2012 (Guatevisión)
Honduras	Yes	2009 (Teleunsa)	2009 (Teleunsa)	2010 (MegaTV)	**	2012 (Televisión Centro)
Mexico	Yes (local)	2005 (Canal 34)	2009 (Canal 34)	2005 (Canal 34)	***	2013 (Canal 34)
Nicaragua	Yes	***	2010 (Canal 11)	***	***	2012 (Vos TV)
Panama	Yes	2007 (SERTV)	***	2013 (SERTV)	2011 (SERTV)	2011 (SERTV)
Paraguay	Yes	2006 (Canal 2)	2009 (Red Guarani)	***	***	2012 (Red Guarani)
Peru	Yes	2007 (Canal 7)	2008 (Canal 7)	2006 (Canal 7)	2011 (Panamericana)	2011 (Panamericana)
Puerto Rico	Yes	**	2010 (WIPR-TV)	2006 (WIPR-TV)	2011 (WIPR-TV)	***
Spain	No	***	***	***	***	***
Uruguay	Yes	***	***	2010 (Canal 10)	***	***
Venezuela	Yes	2006 (La Tele)	2009 (La Tele)	2013 (Venevisión)	2011	***

Source: Personal interviews, Korea Foundation ([http:// http://en.kf.or.kr/](http://en.kf.or.kr/)) and authors' own findings.

* K-drama is often available on cable through regional channels such as TV Pasiones.

** Exact broadcasting date and channel of broadcast could not be confirmed, but sources indicated that show was broadcast in either a regional or national station.

*** No broadcast recorded on national or local television channels.

Figure 2: Nationality of respondents.

Nationality	Respondents	
	Percentage	N
Argentina	11.6	n = 63
Bolivia	1.8	n = 10
Chile	6.6	n = 36
Colombia	10.3	n = 56
Costa Rica	3.3	n = 18
Cuba	0.4	n = 2
Dominican Republic	0.9	n = 5
Ecuador	3.5	n = 19
El Salvador	0.6	n = 3
Guatemala	1.7	n = 9
Honduras	0.9	n = 5
Mexico	17.3	n = 94
Nicaragua	3.3	n = 18
Panama	2.2	n = 12
Paraguay	3.5	n = 19
Peru	9.0	n = 49
Puerto Rico	0.9	n = 5
Spain	8.3	n = 45
Uruguay	1.5	n = 8
Venezuela	11.6	n = 63
Other	0.6	n = 3

Figure 3: Mean scores for agreement level with statements regarding different needs related to K-pop and K-drama consumption.

	M*	SD
Statements about K-pop (n = 515)		
Cognitive - I want to learn Korean.	4.31	1.01
Cognitive - I generally like to follow contemporary music.	3.80	1.35
Affective - The songs touch me.	4.55	0.73
Affective - I feel attracted to singers.	4.46	0.86
Integrative - It makes me different than my friends.	3.29	1.48
Integrative - It gets me full of energy.	4.67	0.66
Social - It makes me feel part of a community.	3.69	1.31
Social - I can help me make new friends.	3.79	1.26
Escape - It entertains me and helps me to relax.	4.82	0.49
Escape - It allows me to escape from what surrounds me.	4.31	1.05
Statements about K-drama (n = 461)**		
Cognitive - I want to learn Korean.	4.40	0.94
Cognitive - I want to learn about Korean culture.	4.54	0.74
Affective - I like fashion in K-drama.	4.19	1.02
Affective - I connect emotionally with them.	4.31	0.94
Integrative - It gives me confidence in my daily life.	3.32	1.27
Integrative - It makes me different than my friends.	3.36	1.41
Social - It helps me connect with family and friends.	2.97	1.24
Social - It helps me make new friends.	3.89	1.18
Escape - It helps me forget about things in life.	3.96	1.28
Escape - It entertains me and helps me relax.	4.80	0.56

*Based on the following scale: 1 totally disagree; 2 partially disagree; 3 neutral; 4 partially agree; 5 totally agree.

Figure 4. Mean scores for agreement level with statements about Hallyu, South Korea, K-pop and K-drama.

	M*	SD
Statements about Korea and Hallyu (n = 542)		
South Korean actors/actresses express emotions better than those of other nationalities.	4.07	1.01
South Korean actors/actresses are more attractive than those of other nationalities.	4.06	0.97
South Korean singers are also good dancers.	4.67	0.72
South Korean singers and dancers are as talented as those in my home country.	3.37	1.43
Korean people can easily express their emotions and feelings.	3.44	1.17
Korean people have high moral standards.	4.30	0.93
Korean people are particularly polite.	4.41	0.87
Korean people have a high education level.	4.55	0.78
Korean people have a good fashion taste.	4.41	0.89
South Korea is culturally homogenous country.	3.79	1.03
South Korea is more developed than my home country.	4.63	0.82
Statements about K-drama (n = 461)**		
Characters in K-drama are realistic.	3.85	1.09
Plot in K-drama shows is realistic.	3.63	1.16
In my life I have experienced similar things to those I see on the show.	2.76	1.32
In my life I would like to experience things similar to those I see on the show.	3.64	1.25
I think Korean culture is similar to mine.	2.15	1.14
I think Koreans are similar to me.	2.55	1.24
I don't feel attracted to Korean people.	1.61	1.13
Family relations in the show are not similar to mine.	3.38	1.34
Love relationships in the show are not similar to mine.	3.51	1.33
Statements about K-pop (n = 515)		
K-pop is similar to European and American music.	2.31	1.24
Choreographies and music videos are less sexual than in America.	3.99	1.21
I equally like K-pop and American music.	2.71	1.34
K-pop is a copycat of American and European music.	1.60	0.94
K-pop artists care about their fans.	4.43	0.82
K-pop artists are more attractive than those in my country.	4.49	0.87
K-pop songs are the catchiest.	4.54	0.76
I like K-pop better than J-pop.	4.43	0.94
I general, my friends do not like K-pop.	3.67	1.13

*Based on the following scale: 1 totally disagree; 2 partially disagree; 3 neutral; 4 partially agree; 5 totally agree.

** Respondents were asked to answer on the basis of the latest show they had watched.