Media Reflection of the Hallyu Wave

Jessica Lee

University of Southern California

Professor Evan Hughes and TA Katherine Munis

CTCS 150 and March 25, 2021

The demand for Korean entertainment industry rises as K-content -- Korean dramas, webtoons (comics/manhwa), reality/variety shows, and K-pop music -- gains the attention of global fans. While classical Korean variety/reality shows such as *Running Man* (2010-present) paved the way for the second Hallyu Wave, Kdramas, webtoons, web-dramas and Kpop has become the trend for international audiences and the possibility of the third Hallyu wave. However, despite the fact that Korean variety shows serve as a creative platform to educate, entertain, and even observe the lives of celebrities over a long period of time, it is quintessential to follow and understand the new wave of Kpop, webtoons, and web-drama in order to attract a larger market but also to better empathize with the younger generations.

After the negative aftermaths of colonialism and the Korean war, the government sought to boost their economy by investing in educational institutions and promoting entertaining cultural exports (Kim, 2019, pg. 157). The first wave of Hallyu focused on creating content in the film and television industry for domestic audiences. Soon after, the second wave peaked with the introduction of Kpop as a musical genre. Artists such as PSY (“Gangnam Style”), BIGBANG, and Super Junior “became the Hollywood of the East,” performing sold-out concerts at large stadiums such as “Shanghai World Expo,” due to its affordable yet high-quality performances initially targeted for young audiences across Asia (Farrar, 2010). Because of its profitable market, “export[ing] nearly 3 billion [dollars] in entertainment,” entrepreneurs, producers, and investors established “independent studios creating content,” which ultimately promoted competition in the Kpop industry and established talented groups such as BTS and Blackpink (Farrar, 2010). Additionally, because Kpop portrays idols of all genders, ages, and sizes wearing makeup and “androgynous styles” it challenges the “dominant perspective of male idol masculinity” in terms of “culture and race” (Lee, 2019). Watching numerous contents of male idols cosplaying, wearing smoky makeup, and engaging in feminine behaviors since an early age, naturally I prefer the “softer masculinity that K-pop boy bands” portray which some may label as “being gay or feminine” (Dahir, 2018; Martin, 2018; Lee, 2019). However, because I prefer the “softer masculinities” that does not mean that I despise the traditional tropes of masculine men, but if I were to direct my own content, I would initially picture a more feminine male with K-pop beauty standards and “androgynous” features based on idols like BTS.

Through Kpop queer Asian Americans are able to “reconstruct representations” by “protecting themselves from negative influences” (Kuo, 2020). As LGBTQ+ fans face an identity crisis, Kpop serves as a comfortable, no judgement place where fans of all races, genders, and identities connect emotionally through upbeat music and an idol. Because of the toxicity in the real world, Kpop and its similar contents with idols in Kdramas, variety shows, and web-dramas, allows for struggling youths to briefly escape reality and relax with content that is uplifting and beautiful. Thus, I aspire to create emotionally relaxing content for youths who need reaffirmation on their identities or simply need a break from their toxic reality.

Derived from the innovation of smartphones and accessible technology, “snack culture,” a concept that describes “the habit of consuming information and cultural resources” for self-entertainment than educational/engaging purposes are characterized by fans who have the tendency to indulge in limited contents that are brief yet euphoric (Jin, 2018). This includes webtoons -- “a *manhwa*-styled webcomic” -- and web-dramas, “serialized dramas” based on webtoons, which are closely related to Kdramas (Jin, 2018 and Kwon, 2014, pg.762). As a frequent webtoon reader and K-content fan, I find myself lost in the fake realms of fantasy, craving unrealistic, cute, and romantic interactions between two beautiful protagonists who overcome a social conflict based on their financial status, gender, appearance, and etc. Because webtoons are often imaginative and open-ended based on the author’s vision, the readers experience visually seeing diverse characters and relationships between all genders.

The new trend of webtoon culture opens opportunities for Kpop idols to act in web-dramas. Predominantly known for recurring romantic comedy themes of first love, youth’s innocence, and storylines of the bad, rich boy falling in love with the naive, poor girl, web-dramas attract young fans by casting their favorite Kpop idols in a fantasy situation. For example, the web-drama *True Beauty* (2020) with popular and beautiful idols such as Cha Eunwoo and Hwang In-Yeop borrows dialogues and storylines from the original webtoon “The Secret of Angel” a.k.a “True Beauty” by Yaongyi. It closely resembles the webtoon by addressing similar issues of “bullying, self-acceptance, homosexuality and racism,” in which are typical issues of adolescence who struggle to find their status quo (Azeez, 2020). Because web-dramas portray social issues in a lighter tone typically in a school setting, it shows that I prefer watching and potentially creating content that takes serious issues with a heartwarming twist for younger audiences. Growing up fangirling Kpop groups and watching web-dramas that highlights aesthetically pleasing and harmonious idols, rare mature content, and themes of purity, as a consumer, I evaluate films and webtoons highly based on the complexity of the author’s efforts in their character development as well as the interaction between the two main leads.

Despite its unpopular reception, Korean variety shows are unscripted masterpieces characterized by the interactions between the cast through hardships, games, puzzles and childish play. They are highlighted with cheesy sound effects, “accompanied by endless on-screen captions,” minimal editing, and concludes with the loser(s) of the game being “punished in a juvenile, humiliating way” (Kim and Li, 2019). One of my favorite variety shows is *Running Man*. The cast literally get paid to complete certain missions depending on the theme of the episode, humorously roast and bicker with each other, and interact with guests that join for that episode which could include Kpop idols, actors, and even foreign celebrities such as Tom Cruise, Ryan Reynolds and Jackie Chan. Because variety shows are generally unscripted and honest, the audience is entertained by a comical family sitcom over multiple seasons (which can last for years). Because I see the potential in Korean variety shows, I hope to bring the aspect of cheesy, Korean variety shows to American reality shows which are full of drama, scripts, and perversive content. While one may wonder where the fun is watching grown adults play childish games, Korean variety shows redefine “transmedia” and entertainment by “storytelling in the form of reality-based television programming.” Thus, because of its authenticity, it “deconstructs barriers between” the viewer and the “spectacle, consumer, and producer,” fundamentally “heightens the audience’s emotion immersion” and response (Andrejevic, 2004, pg.89; Kim, 2019). Because of the unscripted and comedic nature of Korean variety shows, intertwining marketable attributes of Kdramas and webtoons with the rawness of Korean variety shows, I hope to direct or collaborate in my own unique Korean variety show focusing on portraying social issues in an approachable, educational, yet entertaining manner.

References

Azeez, M. (2020, October 11). A webtoon culture gives rise to a new wave of korean dramas. Retrieved March 25, 2021, from https://minnethazeez.medium.com/a-webtoon-culture-gives-rise-to-a-new-wave-of-korean-dramas-11efb23e0d07

Farrar, L. (2010, December 31). 'Korean wave' of pop CULTURE sweeps across Asia. Retrieved March 25, 2021, from http://edition.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/asiapcf/12/31/korea.entertainment/index.html?iref=NS1

Jin, D. Y. (2018, July 7). Snack Culture's Dream of Big-Screen Culture: Korean Webtoons' Transmedia Storytelling. Retrieved March 24, 2021, from https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/10004

Kim, J. O. (2018, July 7). East Asian perspective in Transmedia STORYTELLING: The storyteller who crosses boundaries in KOREAN Reality Television: Transmedia storytelling in new journey to the west. Retrieved March 25, 2021, from https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/10005/2649

Kim, K. H., & Li, T. (2019, September 21). Kyung Hyun Kim. Retrieved March 25, 2021, from http://journal.telospress.com/content/2018/184/163.short

Kim, S. D. (2019). The Korean Wave. Retrieved March 25, 2021, from https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=-rqKDwAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PA155&dq=korean%2Bwave&ots=eErbHBClpJ&sig=ONe4DrMdVUx1vLwf17RnugUyr0k#v=onepage&q=korean%20wave&f=false

Kuo, L. (2020, November 9). Performance, fantasy, or Narrative: LGBTQ+ Asian American identity Through Kpop media and fandom. Retrieved March 25, 2021, from https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00918369.2020.1815428

Lee, J., Lee, R., & Park, J. (2019, September 22). Unpacking K-pop in America: The Subversive potential of MALE K-pop Idols' SOFT MASCULINITY. Retrieved March 25, 2021, from https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/13514