

Understanding Contraflow Pop-Culture Tourism: The Case of Transnational Fandom of South Korean Pop-Culture and the “Hallyu” Tourism

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Introduction

On August 31st 2020, the South Korean boy group BTS's song 'Dynamite' debuted at No. 1 on the Billboard Hot 100 songs. The song has recorded the biggest digital sales and the first all-South Korean group to top Hot 100 ever since the Billboard's 62-year history. 'ARMY', the group's fandom glowed with enthusiasm and created millions of reaction videos to the song on YouTube. The group's success was not only for their song, but also for tourism promotion. The Seoul City Government's tourism video featuring BTS topped 140 million views in the first 10 days of its release on social media (Kang, 2020).

This example reveals intriguing aspects of a recent phenomenon in popular culture that is contraflow triggered by transnational fandom and further influencing tourism promotion. Popular culture, hereafter pop-culture, is culture consumed by people on a daily basis, known as mass culture or entertainment as a counterpart to fine culture (Heilbrun, 1997; Strinati, 2004). It is often described as commercial in terms of mass production, as well as accessibility to many (Lindgren, 2005). Hence, the production of pop-culture is heavily dependent on the availability of capital and system, and accordingly the main stream of pop-culture has been USA and UK where advanced economy and the media industry are grounded (Han, 2017).

However, interestingly the recent phenomenon sees the contraflow of pop-culture (Min, Jin, & Han, 2018; Yoon, 2019). The exemplary case is the transnational fandom of South Korean pop-culture, so called "*Korean Wave*" or "*Hallyu*". The Korean case is especially interesting because it has been rapidly spread out countries around the world from East to West, and from developing to developed nations. Further the fandom has been a driving force of the tourism industry in South Korea. Understanding the recent contraflow of pop-culture in relation to its tourism impact would provide an opportunity for destination marketers, in particular, for less known destinations to develop effective promotion strategies, but there is a scant research currently available as it is relatively new. Therefore, this research aims to fulfil the current research gap by exploring the recent phenomenon of contraflow of pop-culture tourism.

Tourism induced by pop-culture, hereafter pop-culture tourism, has emerged among people in particular who are fanatic of pop-culture. They travel to destinations mainly driven by pop-culture or creative elements through the media such as movies, TV shows, soap operas, music, celebrities, games, and animations (Lee & Bai, 2016; Miller & Washington, 2007; Seaton & Yamamura, 2015). The development of technology and global media convergence have made people easily get familiar with pop-culture from other countries than ever regardless of

geographic boundaries, cultural differences, and linguistic barriers (Cho, 2005). Moreover, it has made people experience new or less familiar places indirectly through the media that they would not have a chance to know otherwise the places were featured in pop-culture. Hence, pop-culture has contributed to the increase of the awareness of destinations and further the contraflow of pop-culture can play an important role in inbound tourism.

Pop-culture tourism is considered a type of special interest tourism. Special interest tourism has been regarded niche tourism and a profitable market segment in government tourism strategies (Macleod, 2003). Unlike mass tourists, special interest tourists are more active and engaged as they visit destinations to pursue their particular interests such as culture, heritage, nature, health, sport, wine and festival (Hall, 1989; Hall & Zeppel, 1990; Tabata, 1989; Young & Crandall, 1984). Recognizing the importance of special interest tourism in the tourism industry, there has been a lot of research on special interest tourism and pop-culture tourism is one of them (Seaton, 2018). Pop-culture tourism has been investigated in the context of media-induced or contents tourism (*see* Beeton, 2001; Benjamin, Schineider, & Alderman, 2012; Hahm & Wang, 2011; Hudson & Ritchie, 2006; O'Connor, Flanagan, & Gilbert, 2008). Previous research on pop-culture tourism has often been broken down by media format so there is film-induced tourism, TV tourism, literature tourism and so on (Beeton, Yamamura, & Seaton 2013). However, it has been challenged when the same character and narratives are multi-used in the media mix (Yamamura, 2018). Acknowledging the limitation of the media-format based categorization, content tourism focuses not on the media format but primarily on the contents, which is the combination of creative elements featured in mediatized pop-culture (Seaton, Yamamura, Shimada, & Jang, 2017).

Since the last two decades, research on pop-culture tourism have investigated tourism motivations, types of tourist behaviors, tourist decision making processes, and found a conducive role of pop-culture in the tourism industry (Lee & Bai, 2016). However, the study lacks how to view the recent contraflow and transnational fandom of pop-culture burgeoning from social media from a perspective of destination marketing. As pop-cultural expressions contain powerful spatial representations which creates 'imaginary places' for pop-culture fans (Reijnders, 2011), the current contra-cultural flow would power through the fan's destination choice.

Thus, the primary purpose of this paper is to explore the emerging tourism niche referred to as contraflow pop-culture tourism, investigating the recent phenomenon of contraflow pop-culture and its influence on tourism. In particular, reviewing the case of transnational fandom of South Korean pop-culture and the fan's pilgrimage travel to South Korea, so called "*the Hallyu tourism*", this paper

guides the reader to how to understand the recent contraflow pop-culture fandom and its role in inbound tourism.

The Hallyu

In 2012 - 2013, Psy's video for *Gangnam Style* went viral and was the first YouTube video to reach over a billion views worldwide. In 2019, BTS's concert in Saudi Arabia temporarily lifted the Islamic law for women, allowing them to attend the concert without accompanying a male guardian. Most recently, BTS's new single, *Dynamite*, debuted at No. 1 on Billboard Hot 100 as the first all-Korean group to top Hot 100 in 2020. In addition, for the first time ever, non-English-language film, *Parasite*, won the best picture along with three other winning awards in Oscar 2020.

This example shows a recent phenomenon of the global flow of South Korean pop-culture, so called "*Korean Wave*" or "*Hallyu*". Hallyu refers to the popularity of South Korean TV programs, dramas, movies, music, and accordingly pop-stars (Suh, Hur, & Davis, 2016). The term "Hallyu" is a combination of "Hal" meaning South Korea and "lyu" indicating a great wave moving from one culture to more diverse cultural and civilization paradigms (Kim, 2015). It was first officially used by South Korean government in 2000 and other countries thereafter.

South Korean pop-culture first gained popularity in neighboring Asian countries from late 1990s, and then has become increasingly popular globally since late 2000s (Jin, 2014). The first era of Hallyu, called "*Hallyu 1.0*", started with the popularity of Korean television dramas such "*Stars in my heart*", and "*Winter Sonata*" in China and Japan, and then Korean Popular songs, *K-Pop*, emerged into young populations in Asia (Han & Lee, 2008). With Web 2.0 emerging to daily life, media convergence and social media with the smart phone helped Hallyu reach out to the entire world faster and easier regardless of geo-cultural boundaries and linguistic barriers (Kim, 2015). This is when Hallyu era entered into the second phase, called "*Hallyu 2.0*" starting around 2008 and present until now. Psy's *Gangnam Style* music video became a sensational content on YouTube, and K-pop groups such as BTS, EXO, Big Bang, and Blackpink established global fandoms even before the group's TV appearance in the US or respect countries. Hallyu fans meet new release and share information through non-traditional digital media, mostly social media such as YouTube and Instagram. 80 percent of the 24 billion views of music videos by the top 200 K-pop artists on YouTube came from outside of South Korea in 2016 (Kim, 2017). During Hallyu 2.0 phase, Hallyu has cultivated into more diverse fields such as online games, beauty products, fashion,

and life styles along with music and films (Seo & Kim, 2020). The examples of Hallyu contents are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Examples of Hallyu Contents

Category	Examples
Music	BTS, EXO, Big Bang, Super Junior, Girls' Generation, Kara, BoA, Wonder Girls, Balckpink
TV Dramas	Fireworks, Stars in my heart, Winter Sonata, Dae Jang Geum, Mr. Sunshine, Descendants of the Sun, Guardian: The lonely and great god. My love from the star
Films	Old Boy, Shiri, Lade Vengeance, Parasite
Netflix Contents	Kingdom, Crash landing on you, Prison Playbook
Games	Faker, Duke, Wolf
Beauty	Amore Pacific, Tony Molly, Nature Republic, Skin Food

Hallyu has brought favorable economic outcomes to South Korea. According to a Korea Creative Content Agency (KOCCA) report 2019, Hallyu continues to have a positive impact on economy with related exports such as TV contents, films, music, and gaming industry rising 22.4 percent in 2019 (KOCCA, 2020). It estimated that Hallyu exports accounted for US\$12.3 trillion in 2019 which has increased since the last decade. Moreover, its contribution to South Korean tourism industry has been unprecedented. After Hallyu started, the country has seen notable increase in the total inbound tourists.

The Hallyu Tourism

Promoting South Korea as an international tourism destination had long been a challenge for destination marketers due to the nation's geopolitical position that often hindered the development of inbound tourism. South Korea is located in East Asia, on the southern half of the Korean Peninsula surrounded by China, Japan and Russia. Since the only country with a land border to South Korea is North Korea which has closed its boarder to most countries since the last seven decades, access to South Korea is limited to by air or sea. In addition, tensions in the Korean Peninsula that are often related to the interest of the great powers among USA, Japan, China and Russia have often raised safety concerns for visitors in South Korea. However, recent tourism statistics have shown an incredible growth of inbound tourism in South Korea despite the inherent limitations. Since the last decade, there has been about 9.3 percent annual growth on average in number of visitors in South Korea, and the inbound tourism receipts have been doubled from US\$10.2 trillion in 2010 to US\$21.5 trillion in 2019 (Table 2).

Table 2. Visitor Arrivals and Inbound Tourism Receipts

Year	Visitor Arrivals		Inbound Tourism Receipts	
	Numbers	Growth %	US\$ 1,000	Growth %
2010	8,797,658	12.5	10,225,400	5.0
2011	9,794,796	11.3	12,233,900	19.6
2012	11,140,028	13.7	13,201,100	7.9
2013	12,175,550	9.3	14,288,400	8.2
2014	14,201,516	16.6	17,335,900	21.3
2015*	13,231,651	-6.8	14,675,800	-15.3
2016	17,241,823	30.3	16,753,900	14.2
2017*	13,335,758	-22.7	13,263,900	-20.8
2018	15,346,879	15.1	18,461,800	39.2
2019	17,502,756	14.0	21,506,300	16.5

(Source: Korea Tourism Organization [KTO], 2020)

Note: * In 2015, Global tourism market was shrunk by the MERS epidemic; In 2017, China restricted travels to South Korea in protest at Seoul allowing a US missile defense system.

Hallyu has been acclaimed as a key driver of the remarkable growth of inbound tourism. Trendy South Korean entertainers and new life styles featured in TV shows, dramas, movies, and music videos through various media channels globally have made people interested about South Korea and their preconceptions about the country changed (Creighton, 2009; Kim, Agrusa, Chon, & Cho, 2008). Influenced by Hallyu, the new consumer generation called “*Korean tribes*” follows and emulates Korean lifestyles in many different areas such as beauty, fashion, food, and even Korean language (Cho, 2005). In addition, the Korean tribes make a trip to South Korea to visit places featured in their favorite dramas, in search for their idols’ tracks, and further to experience more Korean things. In 2019, Hallyu-related tourism such as K-pop, K-stars, K-beauty and Korean food made up 55.3 percent of all inbound tourism, of which a total spending and the resulting ripple effect on economic production estimated at US\$1.1 trillion and US\$2.1 trillion respectively (KTO, 2020b).

Social media has significantly influenced on Hallyu tourist destination decision making. About 30 percent of inbound tourists in South Korea made their decision based on postings about trip reviews on social media or blogs (KTO, 2019). Recognizing the important role of social media in destination promotion, the tourism board has been strategically using social media and emerging media platforms as a marketing tool. For example, Visit Seoul, a tourism board for city of Seoul, released a promotional video featuring BTS immediately after the group’s success on Billboard and the video recorded at 140 million views and 150,000 comments in the first 10 days of its release on social media (Kang, 2020). Visit Korea, the national tourism board, released a promotional video titled “*Explore*

Korea, ” made in collaboration with Netflix, a USA based global online streaming platform, using a compilation of clips of South Korea shown in films and dramas. The clip shows the history, food and tourist attractions of South Korea, along with local lifestyles. Netflix has added “*Explore Korea*” as a search category to make the original contents featured in the clip accessible to its users (Lim, 2020). In addition, Visit Korea has been tapping journalists, bloggers, and Instagrammers to promote the country. For example, identifying there are many international students coming to South Korea influenced by Hallyu, Visit Korea selected some students as social media reporters and supports them to travel around the country and post the information on their accounts in their language (Garcia, 2017). The Hallyu tourism promotion through social media and a new media platform targeting young tourists has been successful as nearly half of the tourists (49.1%) visiting South Korea watched videos promoting Korean tourism on YouTube or other medium and the awareness and preference of South Korea as tourism destination have continuously increased since 2014, reaching to 59 percent and 62 percent in 2019 respectively (KTO, 2020a).

Hallyu tourists are more motivated than other types of tourists in the pursuit of social interaction, belongingness and self-actualization through special activities (Lee & Bai, 2016), Hence, Hallyu tourism programs focus on active and experiential components. For example, “*the Hallyu Experience Program*” by Visit Seoul provides tourists the opportunity to be actively engaged in the activities through the Hallyu star makeup class, the Hallyu K-food cooking class, the K-musical tour, the MBC world broadcasting theme park tour, the e-sports stadium tour, the Kimchi-tour, and the SM town - one of the famous Korean entertainment company - museum tour. In addition, Visit Seoul weekly updates “*the Hallyu Star Schedule*” on its website through which tourists can meet with their favorite Hallyu stars. The K-Style Hub operated by Visit Korea in downtown Seoul offers not just tourism information, but a place where tourists can experience special activities such as “*the Hallyu Experience Zone*” where Hallyu fans can take souvenir photos at a hologram booth with their favorite artists, “*the VR Experience Zone*” where visitors can experience about 40 major tourist attractions through virtual reality, and “*the Korean Cuisine Culture Center*” where visitors can cook their very own Korean food. Recently, Airbnb, a USA based vacation rental online marketplace company, launched “*New K-pop and K-beauty Experiences*” in 2019 where tourists can book unique experiences to explore K-pop scenes alongside local musicians and professional dance instructors and also take the latest K-beauty tips from local beauty experts. As the Hallyu tourism program fulfils tourist needs, Hallyu tourists are more likely to revisit and suggest South Korea as a travel destination than other tourists by 4 percent point (Lim, 2020).

The Hallyu tourism continues to evolve. Korean government has been seeking to diversify the inbound tourism market as well as contents to create a sustainable environment. One of initiatives is to attract more Muslim tourists. Recognizing the surge of Hallyu in Middle East, a governmental led campaign, “*Muslim-friendly Korea*”, was launched in 2017. Since then more Halal restaurants, prayer rooms and Muslim-friendly events have been established and available for visitors from Islamic countries. In addition, the Hallyu tourism has expanded its contents beyond the media and entertainment-focused. Recently, e-sports venues have emerged as tourist attractions with famous Korean players as well as international competitions held at themed arenas. Further, medical tourism and educational travels have emerged as niche markets in the Hallyu tourism.

How to Understand the Hallyu Tourism?

The Hallyu tourism is an exemplary case of tourism promotion by using pop-culture properties as a vehicle for the growth of inbound tourism. Hallyu is most distinguishable from other local-based pop-culture (*e.g.*, Brazilian, Mexican, and Indian pop-culture) that flows intraregional, but not intercultural and global. Hallyu has been triggered by transnational fandom burgeoning from a digital space, and contributed to create positive destination image generating more inbound tourists. Further, South Korean government has promoted the Hallyu Tourism as a driving force of economy.

Contraflow and Transnational Fandom through Digital Mediation.

The global cultural flow had been identified as a one-way flow, from West to East and developed to undeveloped countries, for example, from USA or UK to other countries (Schiller, 1971). However, since the early 1990s, several non-Western countries, such as Brazil, Mexico, and India, have developed their own pop-culture and exported it to other countries, which signaled the possibility of contraflow of pop-culture (Thussu, 2006). Although Japanese pop-culture such as manga and console games were spread globally, Japan is arguably regarded “*West*” due to its advanced economy and technology (Hall, 1996).

South Korea has uniquely added one more case to the contraflow of pop-culture as the Korean pop-culture has been rapidly grown in global markets (Jin & Yoon, 2016). The Hallyu phenomenon shows a new pattern of pop-cultural flow that is triggered by global fandom stemmed from a new digital space. As shown in the BTS case, non-traditional media such as YouTube and other social media platforms mediate an interaction between producers and fans. Now pop-culture is shown off first through social media before its appearance on the traditional media

such as TV, spread out quickly and consumed globally (Han, 2017). With the digital media, anyone including producers, entertainers, fans and passerby can get easily involved in the proliferation of contents and fan activism at minimal cost in many different ways such as posting a comment, creating a reaction video, a personal broadcasting, and a call to action for voting and flash mobs and this made Hallyu contents become more viral (Lee, Jung, Nathan, & Chung, 2020)

An important aspect of the fandom is the shared collective experience with like-minded individuals (Lexhagen, 2019), called “*tribe*”. The digital platform creates an affinity space where pop-culture fans can experience “*affective affinity*”. The affective affinity draws fans to build transcultural identification despite geographical boundaries, cultural differences, and linguistic barriers, where the formation of cross-cultural and collective transnational fandom can be facilitated (Chin & Morimoto, 2013). Through this virtual space, fan subculture has evolved from a mere passive recipient of its offering to an active contents creator (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Hence, the Hallyu tourism can be seen as the fan’s subcultural consumerism and its consumption is inherently collective, following tribal dynamics that are mediated through the digital media (Gyimóthy, Lundberg, Lexhagen, Lindström, & Larson, 2015).

Pop-Culture as a Vehicle for Change Destination Image.

When forming destination image, people use three major agents: organic, induced, and autonomous (Gartner, 1993; Gunn, 1972). Organic image formation agents are from noncommercial information sources such as word-of-mouth and actual visitation whereas induced agents are influenced by marketing practices such as promotional materials from destination marketers. Autonomous agents include information gathered from media coverage such as news and pop-culture. Previous literature has identified organic and induced agents as effective ways to create favorable destination image whereas autonomous agents had a negative influence on destination image formation since news media mainly focused on political issues, violence, terrorist activities, and natural disasters (MacKay & Fesenmaier, 1997). However, when it comes to pop-culture, results are contradicted. Previous research on film-induced tourism suggests that film can create awareness of and familiarity of a destination (Hahm & Wang, 2011; Hudson & Ritchie, 2006) and influence on the strength of destination brand (O’Connor et al., 2008) whereas it may have the potential to create negative impacts on tourism of a destination in case of overtourism (Busby & Klug, 2001). In addition, Lee and Bai (2016) investigated how pop-culture influences special interest tourist’s destination image formation and results revealed that pop-culture as an autonomous agent played an important role in creating favorable destination image and generating actual visitation.

The Hallyu case well exemplifies the conducive role of pop-culture as an autonomous agent in developing favorable destination image. In particular, the Hallyu functions as an effective vehicle for change negative destination image to favorable. Before the birth of Hallyu, foreigners either from neighboring countries in Asia or Western countries, reportedly had a negative impression on South Korea due to Korean War and political instability, or were unaware of South Korea at all (Ryoo, 2009). However, the proliferation of Hallyu contents and extensive media coverage through various digital media have made people indirectly experience and get familiar with South Korea, and further, generated “*Korean tribe*” (Cho, 2005). Newly released TV programs, dramas, movies and music videos spontaneously introduce and promote places, which become a future destination for Hallyu fans (Lee & Bai, 2016). Recognizing the important role of pop-culture in forming destination image, destination marketers have supported the production of Hallyu contents by sponsoring film, drama, and music video places and hosting Hallyu festivals, and strategically appointed Hallyu-stars as tourism ambassadors.

Pop-Culture Tourism as a Driving Force of Creative Economy.

South Korean tourism economy has grown rapidly since 2008 when Hallyu began to receive global fandom from Far East to West. Visitors spent more than three times as much money from US\$ 6 trillion in 2007 to US\$21.5 trillion in 2019 (KTO, 2020a). In addition, the Hallyu tourism also has had synergy with other industries such as cultural heritage sites, festivals, international meetings, exhibitions, sports, health care, education and others (Chung, Lee, Lee, & Koo, 2015). As the tourism economy continues to grow and its influence is significant, the Korean government announces the Hallyu tourism as a major driving force of “*creative economy*”.

Creative economy, proposed by John Howkins (2001), focuses on economic systems which are based on originality and creativity rather than traditional resources of land, labor and capital. The concept had been first taken in the areas of art and design and has drawn much attention from the areas of technology and business since the last decade as it offers considerable potential to growth and development of new and creative products and services (Duisenberg, 2011).

The Hallyu tourism well represents the concept of creative economy. The Hallyu tourism is based on creative elements through mediatized pop-culture and the fan’s cultural appropriation generates economic benefits. It shifts the conventional tourism model (*e.g.*, mass tourism) which is known to be high-volume but low-yield to the new model (*e.g.*, special interest tourism) which is low-volume but high-yield (UNCTAD, 2010). In addition, the Hallyu case shows creative ecology through co-creation where people connect and collaborate so that the interplay of creativity and activity is possible (Benjamin, Knollenberg, & Chen,

2019; Howkins, 2010). As social media and new digital platforms have facilitated connectivity and collaboration between producers and consumers, Hallyu fans are actively engaged in the proliferation of Hallyu contents by creating user-generated contents.

Conclusion and Outlook

As pop-cultural expression contains spatial information which creates ‘imaginary places’ for people (Reijnders, 2011), previous research has investigated the influence of pop-culture, dominantly about films, on the tourism industry (Beeton et al., 2013). However, what it lacks is how to understand the recent pop-culture tourism, in particular, influenced by contraflow of pop-culture. With new digital media, people can easily access to pop-culture from other countries and indirectly experience new places featured that they would not know otherwise. The contraflow of pop-culture can provide an opportunity to destination marketers, in particular, for unknown or less familiar destinations to develop effective promotion strategies for inbound tourism. Recognizing the needs for research, this paper investigated the recent phenomenon of contraflow of pop-culture tourism in relation to its influence on tourism. Reviewing the case of transnational fandom of Korean pop-culture and the Hallyu tourism, this paper identified digital mediation as a key driver of contraflow pop-culture and transnational fandom, pop-culture as a vehicle for change destination image, and pop-culture tourism as a driving force of creative economy.

The de-centralizing pop-cultural flow and transnational fandom are expected to be continued as technologies make geographical, cultural, and linguistic barriers obsolete regardless of gender, age, and ethnicity. In addition, the affordability of technology in social media and fans’ interplay with others would more power through the formation of fan’s subculture (Jin & Yoon, 2016). Hence, pop-culture tourism continues to play an important role in the tourism economy as well as relevant industries. As seen in the Hallyu tourism case, the contraflow of pop-culture tourism can provide an opportunity for a destination to grow its tourism economy, but pop-culture tourism can be also considered a vulnerable market in terms of the fan’s age, change of fandom, and pop-culture trends. Hence, destination marketers should take developing a sustainable environment into consideration.

The recent contraflow and global fandom for pop-culture have been mainly driven by younger generations through social media. For example, currently, most of the Hallyu fans are teenagers or in their early twenty’s. The future value and economic ripple effects are highly dependent on whether the fans will remain after

they have achieved a new level of economic power. In order to keep and attract more pop-culture tourists, a sustainable industry environment should be grounded and diversification on markets and contents is inevitable. In addition, destination marketers should be aware of and keep the nation's or city's identity. In the Hallyu case, BTS sang their song in Korean and had global fandom, but this does not mean that the fans love them because they are Koreans. Although it cannot be denied that the fan's pilgrimage travels are influenced by pop-culture, it is important for a destination to keep the originality of its unique culture to become a global brand. Further, destination promoters and players in the tourism industry should be aware that the fandom can fade away or even their "love" can turn "hate". For example, recently, Hallyu has been challenged by the emergence of the anti-Hallyu movement in China to protect its own pop-culture industry.

The contraflow of pop-culture and its global fandom through digital media is a new phenomenon. As for destination marketers, it is essential to build sustainable pop-culture tourism industry ecology. Academia can contribute to it by examining ways to develop a sustainable pop-culture tourism portfolio. In addition, investigating factors that trigger the dynamics of fandom will guide destination marketer to build sustainable relationship management strategies. Further, future research on identifying most influential contents and areas of pop-culture, and types of channels in tourist destination decision making will help destination promoters to develop effective marketing strategies.

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