K-Pop: Going Global, Keeping Korean, Becoming Hybrid

Today, the cutting edge of the Korean Wave – alternatively called Hallyu, from its Korean original – is constituted by the Korean popular music industry, better known by the abbreviation K-Pop, which is represented by young and versatile performers with a truly global outreach. Some of the bigger names involved, such as the boy groups BTS or EXO, and girl groups Twice or Red Velvet, have become globalized cultural forces of their own right, commanding fans and followers not only in Asia but across the globe\(^1\). However, despite the obviously global consumption, and global impact and influence of its artists and products, K-Pop still gets billed as an exclusively Korean national phenomenon. This situation does and has invited questions on just how “Korean” K-Pop has been given all the factors that go into it that are more global than they are Korean. As K-Pop – and through it the Korean Wave – pick up speed and build up influence, it is quite important to improve our understanding K-pop as a Korean-born phenomenon – and as a cultural-industrial product, both in its production and consumption – with an intimate connection to the Korean nation and its identity, as well as to the global community.

Guided by this effort to better locate and understand the position of K-Pop within the national-global cultural nexus, I will be asking how can K-pop, being produced and consumed in an increasingly global context yet branded as a Korean product, be understood as a reflection of the interaction between global and local forces in the production, interpretation, and export of Korean culture and identity in the world. My position on this question is that K-Pop is a cultural hybrid, in both its patterns of production and consumption – responding to both local Korean identity and cultural sensibilities, and to globally defined shared values and aesthetical standards

\(^{1}\) This is at the time of this paper’s date of writing, May-June 2020. For the sake of brevity, any further examples and discussion in the work will be confined to girl groups and female artists.
– in which, that which is Korean and that which is global are largely combined to create a shared space whose contents and inhabitants then spur greater hybridization. In arguing this point, this study will also aim to bring together the existing research, which has found itself separated in analyzing patterns of consumption and production within local, regional, and global contexts; has focused on specific aspects of K-Pop such as the use of English lyrics; and has discussed the implication of Koreanness from points of cultural or political relevance. As such, the approach of this paper will be largely holistic to the analysis of K-Pop at large, bringing together insights from a large array of approaches to the study of K-Pop, which I characterize as a form of art and a form of industry.

Given the rapid development of K-Pop – both as a cultural industry and a field of study – and the rapid changes of the space in which it operates, it is important to do an analysis on the indigenousness and globalization of K-Pop using up-to-date information and insight. This would allow us to both chronicle the changes and developments of the Korean Wave and to evaluate its impact – both on Korea and onto the world – in a much sounder manner, thus increasing our ability to understand the larger cultural and identity connotation of the Korean Wave as a global phenomenon. Furthermore, such a study will allow us to understand the Korean experience on how to negotiate the area in which global and local forces intermingle in the creation and marketing of national images and identities – looking at both production and consumption – and then adapt this knowledge and approach to other such phenomena. Finally, an analysis of the interactions between the Korean local sphere and the global sphere – where K-Pop cuts across boundaries – will allow for us to understand how in the case of Korea the forces of localization and globalization have played onto one another.
This study will be divided into two broad sections. In the first section, I will be seeking and analyzing the sources of K-Pop’s hybridity, using a tripartite division that can be located within any industry to further lend detail to by discussion. In order, I will first discuss the process of K-Pop’s creation, followed by a discussion of the music that is produced and the artists that perform it, and completed by a discussion of how K-Pop is consumed globally, linking all into how they contribute to the hybrid nature of K-Pop. In the second section, I will focus on perceptions and outside influences to K-Pop that work to keep it and give it an appearance of being an exclusively Korean appearance, and test them against a case for K-Pop’s hybridity.

**Making and Consuming K-Pop**

The hybridity of K-Pop begins with the process of its production, which is largely dominated by entertainment companies, the most prominent of which – SM, YG, and JYP Entertainment companies – are collectively called the “Big Three”\(^2\) are the leaders – and models of the industry (Leung 27; Lie 357; Russell 20). It is possible to see from the behavior of the Big Three, the broader patterns of K-Pop’s production, contents, and consumption which ultimately affect its hybridity. Although they are native business giants of the entertainment industry, the Big Three rely on a pool of talent that brings together both native sources of musical creativity and external production networks which connect to other prominent centers of culture in the United States and in Europe (Oh 395-396; Leung 19). As such, these companies command vast networks of music production that are ultimately global in nature, connecting the cultural centers and actors found in South Korea with those found in the cultural capitals of the world. These companies especially outsource the work of composing music to foreign composers

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\(^2\) It is worth noting that at the time that this paper was written, a discussion has been ongoing about whether the Big Three remains as is, or it has changed to become a Big Four, with YG falling out of the picture. However, the terminology – or rather perception – of a Big Four has yet to become an accepted reality, and is the reason why I am sticking to the Big Three.
using “external expertise and competence” to complement internal creative dynamics – so as to be able to quickly follow global musical trends and create more “hybrid and global” sounds (Oh 399; Kong 72-73; Jin & Ryuu 120). As can be seen, these companies employ both local South Korean and global talents in the making of their cultural products, in an integrated manner that mixes a diverse range of cultural contexts, influences, and ideas rather than have them work separately and in isolation.

On the surface, such business practices seem to be no different than that of any other major business that employs an international staff – one could think along the lines of Apple as an example – in the design, production, and consumption of its products, which are labelled as being the products of a specific place. Sure enough, following this model, as the name K-Pop suggests the music that is produced by these companies are sold globally, with the label of native products of Korea. Ultimately, the Big Three are Korean owned and operated businesses, whose immediate and crucial production chains are located in Korea – and more specifically in Seoul – and their primary space of existence as businesses and sources of musical creativity are rooted in Korea. Thus, the primary nature of K-Pop – and its producers – is Korean. However, given how the cultural products inherently carry on traces from their makers and producers, K-Pop cannot be claimed as an entirely Korean product, as it includes creative influences of foreign origin feeding into it at the source and influencing its subsequent form and content. The fact that the music which ultimately becomes K-Pop is physically produced in and published from entertainment company offices and studios in Seoul should not be blinding us to the larger reality, that inherent in K-Pop’s production are cultural influences and creators who come from a variety of backgrounds. As such, the very foundations of K-Pop have an extra-Korean\(^\text{3}\) character to it, \(^\text{3}\) I use the prefix “extra-” here in the sense of being more than something, not in the sense of being more of something.
yet, we should not deny that these foreign artists involved in the creation of K-Pop bring their work up to the standard of what is considered “K-Pop”. However, recognition of such an endeavor to “keep the line” should not be thought of as the casting off of outside cultural influences but as their harmonization with the Korean musical output.

The sources of hybridization at this stage are not limited to the creative influence that foreign producers and artists – employed by the Korean entertainment companies themselves – have during the process of producing music which ultimately becomes K-Pop. Another important source that injects K-Pop with foreign and international cultural currents, while being much more indigenous – especially when compared to the impact that outright foreigners, to South Korea that is – are the Koreans who consume K-Pop and are employed by the entertainment companies. On the one hand, young Koreans – as the key consumer demographic and increasingly as members of the culturally creative stratum – influence the hybridization of K-Pop with global musical trends, as they become much more sophisticated consumers and better versed in Western musical cultures, which reflects in the music produced by the local companies (Leung 13; Yang 186-187, 192). As the South Korea of today enjoys the fruits of being one of the most – if not the most – digitally active and interconnected countries of the world, its people are also coming into greater contact with foreign cultures, developing likings and tastes that go beyond what the indigenous cultural industry has to offer.

The youth are no exception to this development; but their case is important here because their better appreciation of outside cultures and their music ultimately shapes their tastes and expectations from the Korean cultural industry and from K-Pop. Given that the consumer market for K-Pop is primarily geared towards the very youth that follows foreign cultural currents and desire to consume what they find to be popular and to their liking, the entertainment companies
must therefore tailor the music they produce accordingly. In effect, the Korean culture industry is forced to follow, adopt from, and hybridize with foreign cultural trends and currents, so as to be able to appeal to their core consumer demographic. As such, a genre of music that emerges from the US or from Europe that finds its way into the current tastes of the Korean youth, will inevitable be merged into and harmonized with K-Pop, with K-Pop becoming further hybridized – and further globalized – with each such successive merger and harmonization process.

Furthermore, it can also be seen here that because the cultural scene changes quickly – with trends emerging and falling seemingly overnight – with the entertainment companies scrambling to respond to it, the employment of foreign artists and producers, and the maintenance of global cultural production networks are further justified, lest K-Pop falls out of touch with the latest global trends. This, in turn, reinforces the foreign cultural impact on K-Pop and further its cultural hybridization. Going beyond this response to consumer desires and values, as the globally oriented Korean youth enters the workforce and the human capital of the entertainment companies as producers, composers, lyricists, and as other such related arts professionals, they have a direct impact on the creation of K-Pop. As a result, the outside cultural influences that has become a part of the artistic tastes and styles of the Korean youth, now gain immediate bearing on the production and artistic development of K-Pop, introducing into it a variety of foreign cultural elements. As such, the Korean youth become an important driver of K-Pop’s hybridization and globalization.

On the other hand, the entertainment companies employ both foreign educated Koreans and members of the global Korean diaspora, who constitute a pool of human capital that has industry specific “information and expertise”, as well as artistic talents and training in “music composition, dance choreography, stage design, and many other aspects important to creating a
viable popular-music industry” (Lie 353, 357; Leung 12). This is a demographic group, who have been heavily influenced by – and in fact, have been culturally socialized in and educationally trained for the production of – non-Korean and especially Western forms of arts, culture, and music. These cultural professionals and artist have firsthand knowledge of not only the latest cultural and especially musical trends across the globe, but have become a part of these trends as contributing creators and producers themselves. Furthermore, especially in the case of the diaspora, one can argue that what has taken place is not a simply the adoption of non-Korean cultural forms and styles but actual identification with them. As can be seen, the inclusion of foreign educated and diaspora Koreans in the creative processes and the global production networks of K-Pop ultimately and intimately have a bearing on how K-Pop becomes hybridized and globalized, as the knowledge, tastes, and style of these Koreans – which has significant non-Korean influences – mixes into the foundations of K-Pop. As such, it becomes possible to find tunes, dance moves, and lyrical styles – to name a few – that are inspired by or can be found in non-Korean cultures and music adopted into and harmonized with K-Pop, which becomes another pathway for K-Pop to further hybridize and globalize.

The second major process for the hybridity of K-Pop to manifest itself is in the products it puts forward and the performers – or rather artists – who become K-Pop’s global faces and ambassadors. In terms of products, which is the music that is produced, one important aspect of K-Pop that points to the non-Korean influences contained within it is the degree of integration K-Pop has with Western pop music. It can be seen that both the musical and physical aspects – as opposed to the lyrical – of K-Pop are largely based upon “contemporary Western pop” that has entailed a shift “from the traditional pentatonic to Western – and now global – diatonic” musical scale with a focus on “hip and leg actions” in its dances (Hogart 144; Lie 346, 360; Russell 23).
Furthermore, especially since the 1990s, ballads and Western genres have been noted to flourish in the mainstream of Korean music, which today reflects on K-Pop (Jin & Ryoo 117). As such, it can be seen that K-Pop has been built upon fundamentally non-Korean musical foundations, which have shaped its form in a manner different from what the traditional – or indigenous, so to speak – musical culture would mandate. The adoption of the diatonic scale and the appropriate form of songs from the West, have allowed for K-Pop – as it is today – to emerge as a hybrid and global cultural force and thus have become indispensable to both its success and its existence. The adoption and harmonization of such foreign musical scales and genres have fundamentally altered the nature of K-Pop and have been integral forces that have helped launch it to global attention, maintain its popularity, and bring about its hybridity. Furthermore, the adoption of the accompanying dancing styles, which focus largely on lower body and abdominal movement – rather than on intricate upper body, and arm and hand movements – have furthered, and perhaps even consolidated, the hybridization of K-Pop, by ensuring a holistic – rather than a piecemeal – shift from the traditional musical arts to Western musical arts.

Another important manifestation of K-Pop hybridity – in its products – is the use of English, which is a hybridizing force, especially so because in a form of art that is so dependent upon lyrics and their understandability – discounting purely instrumental music – the use of foreign languages breaks the cultural “purity” of the works being produced. The mixed use of Korean and English lyrics allows for K-Pop to be more than a “Korean” form of music and become something that is a globally accessible hybrid. It can be seen that the use of English in K-Pop has become quite widespread, to be found in the names of individual artists and groups, album and song titles, and even the lyrical contents of the songs (Jin & Ryoo 114, 122). Although it must be noted, some of the ways in which English is used is rather nonsensical, in
that they are either nothing beyond simple romanization of Korean – though some are ostensibly abbreviations – or are syllabic repetitions which get billed as “being in” English. As such, a degree of skepticism is healthy against such “use” of English being used as evidence of how widespread the actual use of English is. The place the meaningful use of English occupies in K-Pop should not be confused with nonsensical use or romanization of sounds and syllables already available in Korean, lest the relationship between the two be construed as a takeover English.

English has been used in K-Pop for a variety of reasons, with one of the foremost being the fact that English is a key point for K-Pop to sell and become successful, and to become much more accessible to global audiences by helping create catchier and more repeatable melodies (Hogart 144; Jin & Ryoo 119, 120; Kong 85-86; Leung 45). As I have noted before, as an influence for hybridization in the production phase of K-Pop, consumption – which is aimed at taking place as broadly and globally as possible – is an important driver of K-Pop. In this pursuit, the use of English – whose position as the global language today is more or less undisputed – becomes a tool to break up the otherwise singularly Korean lyrical nature of K-Pop, which works to make it much more global than it would be otherwise. The mixing of English and Korean lyrics contributes both to the breakdown of a cultural monopoly over the creation of K-Pop and to the opening up of its consumption by making it much more accessible – especially – to those that do not know Korean but do know English. Furthermore, such linguistic mixing imbues K-Pop with a hybrid lyrical structure, which is neither entirely Korean nor English – although it should be noted, it is overwhelmingly the former – but ultimately a hybrid form.

However, it should be noted that the use of English has not been being entirely “homogenous” and, in fact, English has been used within the confines of Korean linguistic structures, leading to problems in meaning and understanding (Lee 429; Necula 296). However,
This should not be thought of as the misuse of either language but rather their combined use in a new form that becomes a “macaronic” language of its own, one which could be identified with the portmanteau name “Korenglish”. This is a new hybrid language, that freely uses English words, phrases, and idioms as part of the Korean lexicon and syntax that envelops it, which ultimately produces meaning for those that have become users of the Korenglish, through their production, performance, or consumption of K-Pop. As such, it can be seen that K-Pop is not just a hybrid cultural space built upon music but it is also a cultural space that creates its own hybrid language, through its combined use of Korean and English in making music and reaching out to audiences.

Another use of English mixing in K-Pop has been to create “provocative and direct melodies” and English has been used as a signal and code for more explicit themes to find their way into music (Jin & Ryoo 118; Lee 437-438). Furthermore, the use of English has been a way to create a space of resistance by the artists within the platform provided to them by K-Pop (Lee 443). In these terms, the use of English in K-Pop becomes an important tool of allowing artist to break social barriers and traditional expectations out of themselves and their work, and come into contact with more controversial or socially taboo subjects and issues. Thus, the use of English becomes both a way to gain a space in which artistic freedom can be realized and a way for the artist to rise above the crowd, inserting their own voice and interests into their work and engage with those subjects that would be unconventional or taboo otherwise. In this way, hybridization of K-Pop results in the creation of two sufficiently separated yet interconnected spheres of meanings, divided by the predominantly used language, although both are ultimately part of the same musical narrative and carry no meaning separately. The meaning carried by the Korean and English lyrics are thus complementary and symbiotic, as it would be expected of such a hybrid
existence, and they allow for K-Pop to negotiate a far greater field of ideas, meaning, and emotions through lyrics.

Turning towards a discussion of hybridity in the person of the K-Pop performers – referred to as “idols” which I will also use here – the way a certain hybridity permeates K-Pop through them can be boiled down into three broad categories of values, aesthetics, recruitment, and global appeal. Beginning with values, K-Pop can be seen fulfilling the consumer desire for Western music, whilst leaving out all of the “excesses” that would be usually found in Western music and by actively fostering Asian values such a group harmony, politeness, and humility and a wholesome image (Lie 356; Kong 86, 87; Leung 48; Yang 194). Thus, immediately, a sense of musical convergence and value – or moral – divergence between K-Pop and Western musical genres can be seen emerging, where K-Pop seems to accept Western musical trends but rejects its values. However, this “value divergence” is only a way of framing, and it should not be blinding to the fact that in the first place, Western musical styles and aesthetics are being mixed with Korean – or as some might point out, Asian – values, thus creating a hybrid structure. A certain rejection of values is taking place, but this is not happening for its own sake and is rather taking place within the confines of the larger hybridization of K-Pop, as a cultural space. Thus, K-Pop can be seen becoming a cultural hybrid, not only because it combines Korean and global – largely Western – creative cultural and musical talents, forms, languages, and trends, but also because it brings together these largely Western informed cultural forces in contact with indigenous Korean values. Furthermore, such a “divergence” is more a question of degrees rather than polar opposites which takes place within the overall aesthetical and value hybridity of K-Pop, as I shall discuss in relation to the hybridity of idol aesthetics.
Turning towards aesthetics, K-Pop has come to espouse a specific notion of beauty which overlaps with the Western standards and ideals of beauty, and stands quite distinctly apart from the ideals of “traditional Korean body and beauty” (Leung 57; Kong 11; Lie 360). These aesthetical standards and attributes include being thin, tall, photogenic, and unblemished, with “doll-like” features, “big double-lidded eyes, straight rose [sic], and white skin” and “high cheekbones… and long legs” (Oh 402; Lie 356, 360; Leung 57; Kong 11, 85). As can be seen, this is quite a high bar that has been set as the beauty standards of the K-Pop industry. Some of the items, such as being tall, thin, and photogenic are arguably much more universal, whilst others, especially having big double-lidded eyes and white skin are obviously Western inspired aesthetical standards bought into by the K-Pop. As such, K-Pop’s beauty standards are a combination of more generally and indigenously available attributes and more specific Western beauty attributes, ultimately creating an ideal that is a hybrid out of an international set of beauty attributes. A K-Pop idol is not beautiful by a single set of Korean or Western standards, but is beautiful rather by a combined hybrid standard of beauty that is specific – and fundamental – to K-Pop.

Aesthetical hybridity does not only stem from the adoption and harmonization of indigenous and Western beauty standards, and the hybrid standards which emerge becoming specifically K-Pop’s own. The complementary relationship between aesthetical standards and Korean values are also another space in which the hybrid nature of K-Pop manifests itself. On the one hand, K-Pop uses Western feminine aesthetics and mixes them with “Korean cultural femininity” (Necula 296). As such, female idols become the creators and performers of music set along the lines and standards of Western musical arts but within the confines of Korean values of femininity. They become the embodiment of K-Pop’s own hybrid standard of beauty, whilst
performing the cultural roles – within the confines of the traditional values – as expected of them as Korean women. Yet, as long as they remain idols, they are neither fully Korean nor fully Western but they are rather the members of an in-between category – of a hybrid existence – whose performance, as defined within the confines of K-Pop, includes both Korean and foreign elements.

On the other hand, going back to my previous remark on how the divergence in values is only a question of degrees, is the realization in K-Pop that sex is a selling point, which has been accompanied by an increase over the years of more skin being shown and the rise of the “young, innocent yet sexually charged” female stereotype (Hogart 144; Leung 56). As can be seen, the values upon which the female idols’ artistic performance and social existence have been based upon – although retaining overwhelming elements of traditional Korean values and sensibilities – have been fundamentally reshaped by Western aesthetics and values which have become a part of K-Pop. As such, the “divergence” between the adoption of Western musical trends and the promotion of Korean values has turned into a question of degrees, because sexualization of K-Pop idols has become an entrenched development. The values that make K-Pop themselves are part of a hybrid structure, as K-Pop has come to adopt Western values and uses them within the confines of both aesthetical concerns and the value superstructure that is predominantly Korean in nature. Ultimately, idols are the manifestation of the artistic and value hybridity of K-Pop, as they come to embody a wholesome and modest yet sexual and provocative mode of existence (Leung 68; Kong 11). Idols themselves are reflections of how these influences are reconciled and embodied in K-Pop, which occurs through the performance of idols as examples of the K-Pop standard of beauty, performers of Western inspired music, and as the bearers of Korean values.
In essence, they come to embody, at times contradictory and at times complementary forces which exist together within the confines of K-Pop and are the sources of its hybridity.

Looking into how recruitment into K-Pop spurs on greater hybridization, an important factor is that auditions and recruitment take place beyond Korea and across the globe, bringing in non-Korean and mixed ethnicity talent and artists – with a focus on the younger and more attractive applicants (Jin & Yoon 10; Leung 8, 20; Russell 23, 24). As the idols who are the embodiment of everything that is K-Pop – in addition to the non-Koreans involved in the production of K-Pop – begin to come from much more diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds, what takes place is a breakdown of the ethnic “homogeneity” of K-Pop. Simultaneously, the image and content of K-Pop that is immediately consumed by the fans becomes one that is much more global in its scope – as well as appeal – and is a hybridized image that includes Koreans, Japanese, Taiwanese, Thai, Chinese, as well as Americans. This is furthered by the existence of idols that are “mixed ethnicity” or “third culture”, such as Korean Americans and Korean Filipinos among others, which further increases the diversity to be found in K-Pop. As the place such non-Korean idols occupy increases and they come to embody the aesthetics, values, and music that is K-Pop, the ethnically homogenous view of K-Pop that sees it as a nationally exclusive event faces a growing challenge. The end result is a perception of K-Pop as an open cultural space and industry, that is globally inclusive and a hybrid not only in terms of its creative forces and processes but also in the physical form of its products and the person of its idols.

Finally, in terms of global appeal, the most important factor that contributes a degree of hybridity to K-Pop is the fact that idols must become global stars, which entails arduous language education, both in English and in Asian languages so as to allow for them to connect
with an ever wider set of audiences (Oh 401, 402; Jin & Ryoo 119, 120). By the virtue of the work that they must do, and the music they must perform and sell, the artists face the necessity of becoming global – and at the very least, regional – citizens, who can not only interact with fans but also respond to and engage with their cultural and social realities, as if they were an indigenous part of it. As the idols become members of larger linguistic and cultural communities across the globe, they allow for K-Pop to adapt itself into these spaces and move beyond the exclusively Korean linguistic and cultural community – it becomes extra-Korean. It is this process of becoming extra-Korean, which takes place as K-Pop becomes indigenized across the globe through its idols’ activities, which furthers the hybridity of K-Pop as the cultural phenomenon becomes a bigger event under the same roof rather than splitting into autonomous local branches. Furthermore, the increasing inclusion of non-Korean idols in K-Pop is another way for such global interconnectivity to be achieved, as idols bring in their talents as speakers of and inherent participants of their native language and culture into the cultural space that is K-Pop.

The third – and final – major process where the hybridity of K-Pop can be observed is in its patterns and ways of consumption. More specifically, it is culture of consumer engagement, which emerges from the integral nature of digital platforms and social media to K-Pop, that lends to the hybridity of K-Pop. Looking into social media, the global rise of K-Pop – which has at times been called Hallyu 2.0 – has owed much to the increased global capacities and use of digital technologies and social media platforms, such as YouTube, Instagram, and V Live, which aids in promotion and distribution of K-Pop (Kim 157; Jin & Yoon 2; Hogart 144; Jin & Ryoo 121; Kong 89). These platforms allow for K-Pop to become an immediately and instantly accessible phenomenon, available everywhere that an internet connection can be found, and enjoyable by an audience that spans the globe. They allow for a wide variety of audio-visual
content – which goes beyond the publishing of music videos online – to be created and delivered to the fans by the entertainment companies or by the idols themselves, which – by virtue of taking place on social media – opens up new opportunities and avenues of consumption, engagement, and enjoyment.

In terms of consumer engagement, K-Pop can be seen as a cultural space, which has been created with consumer participation in mind, where the fans act on their needs and desires to consume and produce content for themselves and other fans to consume, which has allowed for the rise of a “cultural economy of fandom” which pushes participatory enjoyment further (Kong 38, 97; Leung 69, 73; Jin & Yoon 7, 8; Russell 21). Fans produce translations for video and written content, create remixes of the music, post photoshopped images both for aesthetic and comedic value⁴, create video homages and comedic montages, and replicate dances, among other things, which allows them to occupy a middle ground as both consumers and as producers of K-Pop related content. Their creative qualities and the content they create are an integral part of K-Pop, which allows for foreign elements to make its way into K-Pop and rework its products, whereby the authenticity and purity of product becomes blurred (Jin & Yoon 9). Thus, the products of K-Pop – which here is “products” in the broadest sense, not only the music itself – cease being the works of Korean companies produced on Korean soil but become the fruits of an international collaborative creative process. Furthermore, as the fans become creators of K-Pop in their own rights, they also insert into it their own personal and cultural elements of their own, which moves K-Pop beyond its original scope and enlarges the cultural space in which it operates, by hybridizing it further. Fans-turned-creators have allowed for a multitude of cultural influences, languages, and creative ideas to merge into K-Pop, further breaking down a perceived

⁴ Seeing edited photos of idols with different hair styles and bald heads is a vivid example of this takes place.
Korean monopoly on the creation and content, as well as underlying aesthetics and values, of K-Pop, and have facilitated further hybridization on all of these points.

Ultimately, these two aspects of consuming K-Pop have been interdependent, as the participatory culture of K-Pop has found ground to exist and flourish because digital technologies and social media have allowed for such producer-consumer interactions (Kong 18). The development and spread of K-Pop has made much use of the concurrent development and spread of the social media and the internet, and today entertainment companies and individual idols publish a variety of musical and visual content, ranging from dance videos to live broadcasts to photos of pets. On the part of the fans, who do the consuming, this concurrent development has allowed for them to download, edit, remix, comment on, and creatively engage with the content being given to them. This is in turn becomes a cycle, where the more companies and artists publish content, the more they are consumed and reimagined by fans, taking on new life, while fan demands to be engaged spur on the publishing of more content. All of this has created a symbiotic relationship between social media consumerism and K-Pop, in which one reinforces the other, whereby also opening and maintaining the path towards hybridizing forces to take root in K-Pop’s contents.

Perceptions and Influences on Koreanness

Turning towards a discussion of the perceptions and influences in K-Pop, which seek to or seem to solidify the perception of being ethnically and culturally exclusive and Korean, K-Pop’s marketing, its relations with the state, and the tide of nationalism that flows over it can be identified as three important strands. Beginning with the way in which K-Pop is marketed globally, it can easily be seen that despite constant diversification and hybridization, K-Pop is always billed as being singularly Korean (Leung 22). On a fundamental level, such marketing
and perceptions are not entirely misplaced, because Korea and Korean are integral to the creation and making of K-Pop. What makes K-Pop unique are the dual facts that its lyrics are overwhelmingly Korean and its homeland is Korea. However, the non-Korean influences that go into the making of K-Pop and lend to it a degree of hybridity, are too numerous and – at times – too influential to be ignored, ranging from the musical foundations to the producers and performers of K-Pop. The “K” in K-Pop today stands more as a brand name, that points to the physical location and the main language from which K-Pop emerges to become a part of the global culture, in the form of a hybrid cultural space and product.

Looking into the ties that K-Pop has with the South Korean state, it can be seen that the government has bandwagoned to the rise of Hallyu – and eventually K-Pop – as a globally successful cultural industry, seeking to reap the perceived economic benefits of what became a “key” industry (Joo 498; Nam 220, 221; Shim 28, 30; Lee 179). Moreover, the state has been influential in creating a favorable financial climate, and actively backing and promoting the growth of the cultural industry and K-Pop (Kong 12; Lie 359; Shim 28). However, whilst the government paved the way for K-Pop creation and proliferation, entertainment companies and fans controlled the production, contents, and consumption of K-Pop. As such, K-Pop has not been conceived of as some scheme or product of the Korean government to further its soft power across the globe – despite taking on such properties later on, as its success, popularity, and value were proven – and has been an independent cultural product. This has allowed K-Pop to hybridize rather than remain culturally homogenous and exclusive, as it did not face pressures to be strictly Korean but was encouraged to – and did – go global in tune, talent, and market.

In terms of nationalism, the spectacular global rise of K-Pop as caused a number of perceptual changes in Korea. First, Korea has come to be perceived as an “original office of
culture” or a cultural center of Asia, as it produces and sells Hallyu and K-Pop on a global scale and – arguably – as a high-quality product of popular culture (Kim 155; Joo 490; Nam 209). However, such vague talk of “being a center out of Asia” blurs the reality of how K-Pop – as the mainstream product of Hallyu today – is heavily influenced by Western artistic and aesthetic trends and hides the hybridity of K-Pop behind the shroud of “Asianness”. As such, if we are to do justice on the impact of Hallyu and K-Pop on the position of South Korea as a center of culture, it should be conceived of as a center of “global” culture – as opposed to a specific “Asian” culture – which would reflect the hybridity inherent in the major drivers of such a rise.

Second, K-Pop has been described as the Asian challenger to the pop music of the West and a refutation to the “hegemonic globalization” of the Western pop music genre (Oh 390; Joo 496). Such rhetoric, once again, ignores the fundamental Western influences of K-Pop and its drive and desire to go global, which has facilitated the adoption and harmonization of foreign cultural elements, which has turned it into a hybrid cultural space. Of course, it should be acknowledged that K-Pop has shown that the production of truly global pop culture does not have to be – and is no longer going to be – dominated by the Western centers of culture. However, it does not show that the Western pop music genre is being in any way refuted or opposed, since K-Pop is built solidly upon the very foundations of Western pop music.

Third and lastly, it can be found that the idols are expected to act as national representatives of South Korea and are accordingly politicized, especially in the East Asian context where nation-states define the limits of what is acceptable (Leung 22; Tsai 219). It is not an unfamiliar sight to see idols in traditional Korean dress, such as the hanbok, or show a degree of involvement and engagement with national issues, which can include celebrating national days or making donations at times of crisis. However, with the number of non-Korean idols
rising, the need to have idols perform as Korean national representatives is increasingly at odds with what is realistically possible, especially with the number of Japanese idols in K-Pop. Furthermore, as K-Pop goes on to integrate itself with different cultural spheres and hybridizes, it loses the initial Korean coloration and it becomes harder to sustain the practice of expecting idols to represent the nation. In addition, the need for K-Pop to have access to more markets – as it seeks to enlarge its global outreach – makes it highly unsavory to politicize idols in ways that could be potentially controversial. As such, this is a practice, that is neither entirely applicable today nor realistically expectable in the future as K-Pop’s hybridization progresses.

**In Conclusion**

As can be seen, K-Pop is a cultural hybrid, which carries within itself those aspects that respond to both the indigenous culture and values of Korea, and the aesthetical and musical standards of the global pop music audience. K-Pop is an industry, a genre of music, and a cultural space, that is produced and consumed on a global scale, hybridizing that which is Korean and Western in a way that is unique in the world, which reaches beyond the confines of South Korea both in its physical manifestations, and ideational and creative roots. It is created by both those that are dedicated artists and producers, working for entertainment companies, and by those that consume it, allowing it to take on new life as a cultural space – which was hybrid at the outset and is continuously hybridized with each further act of participation in it. Ultimately, as a hybrid cultural product and space, K-Pop is a major contribution by South Korea to the global culture, as it reaches out to, unites, and is shaped by listeners across the world, that give it the values, success, and hybridity that defines what it is.
**Works Cited**


Russell, Mark James. *K-pop now!: The Korean music revolution*. Tuttle Publishing, 2014. (This has a number of artist info – which today is also available online as well – which might come in handy later on if necessary)


Tsai, Eva. “Existing in the Age of Innocence: Pop Stars, Publics, and Politics in Asia”. Chua and Iwabuchi, pp. 217-242