

CROSS-CURRENTS



EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

Hallyu across the Desert: K-pop Fandom in Israel and Palestine

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Abstract

This study examines the role that fan communities in Israel and Palestine play in the transcultural dissemination of Korean popular music, or “K-pop.” Based on in-depth interviews with fans, a survey of K-pop online communities, discourse analysis of online discussions, and participation in K-pop gatherings, this article examines the practice of K-pop, its localization and institutionalization, and its influence on the identities of fans. Special attention is given to the role of K-pop fans as cultural mediators who create necessary bridges between the music industry and local consumers and thus play a decisive role in globalizing cultures. Typically, literature on the globalization of popular culture either utilizes a top-down approach, depicting powerful media industries as making people across the world consume their products, or emphasizes a bottom-up resistance to the imposition of foreign cultures and values. This article suggests that popular culture consumption not only changes the lives of a few individuals but that these individuals may themselves play a decisive role in connecting globalized culture with local fandom.

Keywords: K-pop, Hallyu, Israel, Palestine, Middle East, fandom

Introduction

Since around 2010, Korean popular music, or “K-pop,” has reached the Middle East via clusters of dedicated fans interested in Korean popular culture, commonly known as “Hallyu.” Bolstered by the power of social media as a means to access and consume cultural content, Korean movies, TV dramas, and, more recently, K-pop have managed to carve a niche among a growing group of consumers, especially young females. As in other parts of the world, in the Middle East, Hallyu fans tend to develop a special interest in Korean culture, participate in online forums and fan gatherings, and communicate with other fans; a few choose to study Korean language, history, and culture in schools or on their own.

The global success of Hallyu has prompted a surge of academic writing in the fields of anthropology and cultural studies. The literature on Hallyu typically employs a “global” perspective to analyze the transnational dissemination of Korean popular culture, emphasizing the way Hallyu empowers fans. When a regional approach is taken, it usually focuses on the East Asian region as a reflection of globalization in a distinct geographical area (Chua and Iwabuchi 2008). Specifically regarding K-pop, studies have focused on the music industry’s role in commodifying and marketing high-quality pop music, or have emphasized the globalization of K-pop, in which new musical genres and well-designed music clips fill niche markets in parts of the world where a modicum of consumer culture has evolved (Choi 2011; Lee, forthcoming; Lie 2012; Shin 2012).

According to sociologist John Lie (2012), K-pop and other Hallyu-related cultural products work to satisfy global audiences, which constantly seek out new excitement to satisfy their increasingly refined entertainment demands:

What K-pop did was to fill a niche that was relatively open for clean, well-crafted performers. . . . K-pop exemplifies middle-class, urban, and suburban values that seek to be acceptable at once to college-aspiring youths and their parents: a world that suggests nothing of inner-city poverty and violence, corporal or sexual radicalism, or social deviance and cultural alienation. . . . The often repeated claims about K-pop singers’ politeness—their clean-cut features as well as their genteel demeanor—is something of a nearly universal appeal, whether to Muslim Indonesians or Catholic Peruvians. (Lie 2012, 355)

A second kind of conceptualization emphasizes the high quality of K-pop: good singing, accurate dancing, attractive looks, and first-rate performances. This view of K-pop, however, should be seen as part of the globalization of the world’s cultural industries and the advent of social media as a medium to access and share cultural content (Oh and Park 2012). The success of S. M. Entertainment, the most famous music production company in South Korea (hereafter, Korea), is a glaring testimony to the organizational capacity of a globalizing music industry. The Seoul-based company, worth USD 1.4 billion in the Korean stock market, recruits and trains young Korean artists to become idols worth millions of dollars both in Korea and abroad, with revenues coming not only from the music itself but also from commercials and related merchandise.

The study of K-pop fandom in the Middle East, a region that is neither Western nor Asian, offers a good opportunity to examine the way globalization in the music industry actually works: Who are the actors? What are the mechanisms? What sort of local opposition does imported pop music face? And what may be the short-term and long-term influences of imported music on the people who consume it? Concentrating on K-pop fandom in Israel and Palestine also helps us to understand the notion of cultural agency in globalization—fans not only consume imported music and the fashions associated with it but also serve as marketers, mediators, translators, and localizers of globalized culture. These “gatekeepers” (Rogers 2003) play a decisive role in paving new markets for imported cultures. It is a process by which a few open-minded individuals are ready to “take the risk” and be the first consumers of a new cultural genre. They later spread the word among circles of acquaintances, utilizing personal connections as well as the Internet and social media to exchange information and views, and to create a sense of “community.” Their activity eventually introduces new cultural products and genres to wider mainstream audiences.

Analytically, our study emphasizes the crucial role played by fans as cultural mediators and harbingers of globalized culture by focusing on K-pop fandom in two relatively peripheral communities. Drawing on an online survey, in-depth interviews with Israeli and Palestinian fans of K-pop, analysis of fan communities, and participation in K-pop–related gatherings, this article examines the mechanisms for K-pop dissemination, fandom, and institutionalization in Israel and Palestine. While most works analyzing K-pop fandom focus on the new personal and communal spaces brought about by the dense circulation of cultural commodities and fashions in different parts of the world (see Hübinette 2012; Oh 2009), we purposely emphasize fandom as a mechanism for implanting new cultural products in new markets and for carving new consumer markets. The lessons from the Middle East, we hope, may be relevant to other markets as well, since they focus on fandom as an agent of globalization.

In this study we have employed various research methods. First, we conducted a qualitative analysis of both online and offline data in order to explore the significance of “the multiple meanings and experiences that emerge around the Internet in a particular context” (Orgad 2009, 34). Second, we closely reviewed approximately forty news articles and media reports in Arabic, Hebrew, and English, as well as the content of major websites and entries on

online Facebook communities dedicated to Hallyu in Israel and the Middle East. Third, we conducted three individual and two group interviews in Hebrew with Jewish Hallyu fans (eight interviewees in total), and five individual and two group interviews in Arabic and English with Palestinian fans¹ (ten interviewees in total). The age of the interviewees ranged from thirteen to twenty-six, and only three of them (one Jew and two Arabs) were male. The interviews were semistructured, conducted face to face or via Skype, and lasted for about one hour each. Fans were asked the same set of questions, but were encouraged to talk freely about their fandom and thoughts related to Hallyu, K-pop, Korea, and wider issues related to society, culture, and politics. For example, they were asked how they began to engage with Korean culture, what images they had of Korea before and after this engagement, how the people in their immediate environment reacted to this engagement, what they found (un)attractive about Korea, and so on. Lastly, from 2009, we attended Hallyu-related events such as fan gatherings and parties, cultural events such as Korea Day, Quiz on Korea, and K-pop festivals, and followed the activities initiated by the Korean cultural centers in Jerusalem and Hebron.

Israel and Palestine as Case Studies

At first glance, Israel and Palestine may seem peculiar case studies to examine the globalization of pop music coming from the opposite side of the Asian continent. For many people across the world, Israel and Palestine are associated with political conflict and religious tension rather than with K-pop fandom. While there are a number of studies on the influence of the Israeli-Palestinian and Ashkenazi-Sephardi conflicts on popular music in Israel (Horowitz 2010; Regev and Seroussi 2004; Saada-Ophir 2006), academic scholarship in the social sciences has typically regarded the issue of popular culture in these places as relatively marginal, in contrast to the wide attention given to national conflicts and political instability in the Middle East region (Stein and Swedenburg 2005). Apart from a few papers on Korean TV dramas (including Noh 2010, 2013; Han and Lee 2008 on Egypt; Hemati 2013 on Iran; and Lyan and Levkowitz forthcoming on Israel), the issue of Hallyu fandom, especially K-pop fandom, in the Middle East has been generally overlooked. The small market size of Israel and Palestine might disqualify them from serving as a target for research on globalized culture—the number of

potential consumers in Israel and the Palestinian Authority are also relatively small given the size of their populations (8 million and 3.9 million, respectively).²

Nevertheless, in spite of the seemingly peripheral position of Israel and Palestine in the world's music market, focusing on the acceptance of K-pop in these two places helps us to understand the global spread of K-pop for a number of reasons. First, looking at communities of fans in these two sites allows us to examine how contemporary Korean culture is received outside the geographically and culturally proximate markets of East Asia and outside the major economic and consumer-driven markets of North America and Europe. The experience of the Korean Wave in Israel and Palestine may provide a framework for understanding Korea's influence in the non-Asian and non-Western context, and beyond the conventional framework of the center-periphery cultural flow. There is no significant geopolitical agenda that can distance Middle East viewers from Hallyu, which is different, for example, from the troubled context of Korean-Japanese relations (Iwabuchi 2008).

Second, Israel and Palestine are home to two separate ethnic communities—Jews and Arabs—who reside in proximity to each other and yet maintain different social characteristics. Palestinian society is generally regarded as more socially conservative, family oriented, and religious, while Jewish secular society is more liberal and cosmopolitan. You can find Korean TV drama fans living in a small village near Nablus, where girls are not allowed out of the village without being accompanied by an older male family member, a mere thirty-minute drive from fans in sexually open Tel Aviv, considered one of the gay capitals of the world. Investigating K-pop fandom in these two communities thus helps us isolate possible variables of religion and ethnicity that affect the acceptance of globalized culture.

Third, images and information about Korea did not come directly to Israel and Palestine but were typically mediated through other global or regional centers. For Israeli fans, information and images about Hallyu initially stemmed from online communities in the United States or through American or Japanese media industries. Many fans initially became interested in K-pop by watching American or Japanese channels—TV broadcasts and Internet forums in English and Hebrew—rather than through direct communication with Korea. For Palestinians, information about Hallyu usually came from fan communities in the wider Arab world and from Arabic websites (Noh 2010, 2013). This fact is important for understanding the role played by

regional and global mediation centers of popular culture and the disjunctive way globalization in the cultural industries advances.

Lastly, Israel and Palestine, as political and cultural entities, had no part in the historical-cultural construction of discourses that shaped relations between the West and the so-called Orient.³ The Orientalist image of Korea and the wider East Asian region came to Israel only later, on the wave of American popular culture, especially Hollywood movies, and was subsequently reproduced by the Israeli media. For Palestinians, who as part of the Arab world were themselves the object of an Orientalist attitude, the evolving image of Korea is rather the product of recent developments, especially with its economic success story represented by the proliferation of Samsung cellular phones and Hyundai automobiles (Levkowitz 2012). This situation may complicate the typical power relation associated with the cultural constructions of “East” and “West.” While the Middle East does not lack exposure to the “East” versus “West” discourse, and consumers come with some preconceived notions about the materials they are exposed to, the relative marginal role of the Middle East in constructing Oriental images of Korea provides a way to circumvent some of the methodological difficulties of examining cultural flows across different parts of the world.

K-pop Fandom in Israel and Palestine

K-pop is not a mainstream phenomenon in the Middle East but rather a subculture, which caters to small communities of dedicated fans, integrated within the confluences of global, regional, and local pop music. The Israeli audience leans strongly toward Anglo-Saxon culture (Lemish and Bloch 2004). In music, Israeli and American pop music are the most popular, followed by European pop music. Among Palestinians, pop music from the wider Arabic world, especially Lebanon, which in recent years has emerged as a regional hub for pop music, is the most popular. American pop music is also popular to a certain degree among young Palestinians, as is Israeli “Mizrahi” music—old-fashioned, ethnically Arab pop melodies (Regev and Seroussi 2004).

The existence of K-pop in both Israel and Palestine is overwhelmingly fan driven. Unlike the East and Southeast Asian markets, where K-pop is actively encouraged through a network of promoters and agents (Choi 2011; Shin 2012, 2013) and supported by the Korean government

(Jin 2011; Otmazgin 2011; Shim 2006), in the Middle East the local demand of fans is the driving force behind the dissemination and consumption of K-pop. In this part of the world, the spread of K-pop is thus more “spontaneous,” in the sense that it is based on the will of the consumers and their ability to access cultural content through social media. To borrow from media scholar Henry Jenkins’s notion of “participatory culture” (2006), fans in Israel and Palestine actively participate in the creation and circulation of new content by using social media and expanding their fan-driven community.

The harbingers of K-pop in both Israel and Palestine were Korean TV dramas, which have been broadcast in the region since the late 2000s. This shift from K-drama to K-music is not unique to the Middle East: it has occurred in different parts of the world and is referred to as “Hallyu 2.0” after the increasing influence of social media (Jung 2011; Lee forthcoming). In 2006, the Korean TV drama *My Lovely Sam-Soon* (*Nae Ireumeun Kim Sam-soon*, 2005) was the first to be aired on the Israeli cable soap-opera TV channel, Viva. The show’s tremendous popularity paved the way for the next thirty Korean TV dramas to be broadcast on the same channel (Lyan and Levkowitz, forthcoming). This was followed by an increased interest in things Korean—movies (Utin 2012), fashion, food (Ma 2010), and K-pop. The Israeli media, for its part, has been intrigued by this new phenomenon. In 2008, *Yediot Aharonot*, the most widely circulated daily Israeli newspaper, described the popularity of Korean TV dramas in Israel as a “revolution” in cultural taste. In 2013, another popular Israeli newspaper, *Calcalist*, published a three-page cover story on how K-pop has “conquered” Israeli youth. At present, according to our estimates, there are more than fifteen hundred Israeli K-pop fans, and around three hundred of them can be categorized as “active” participants in online communities, who are involved in meetings and other K-pop-related activities. The Palestinian K-pop scene has followed a similar path—fans’ interest in Korean TV dramas was followed by listening to K-pop. In Palestine, as in other countries in the Middle East, many Hallyu fans were initially exposed to TV dramas through major Arabic TV channels such as Korea TV, MBC 1, 2, 3, 4, and Dubai TV, which sometimes broadcast Korean TV dramas. This exposure to Korean dramas on Arabic TV channels later encouraged fans to search for more information on Korea via the Internet. Considered conservative enough for a Middle Eastern audience (that is, sexually moderate and

supportive of family values), Korean TV dramas are perceived as appropriate for a Muslim audience (Hemati 2013; Noh 2010, 2013).

To some degree, Korean TV dramas are more popular among Palestinians, while K-pop culture, considered more sexually provocative, is more accepted among secular Israelis. According to A. (23), a Palestinian female Muslim interviewee, Palestinians like Korean TV dramas because they resonate with codes and narratives rooted in their society, such as the patriarchal family, a controlling father, and conservative ideas about life, which provide the context for young people's attempts to achieve their dreams. According to her, "they represent a sort of sweet escape or a dream for many young people."

Who Are the K-pop Fans?

Israeli and Palestinian K-pop fans share a number of characteristics with K-pop fans in other parts of the world (see Alvarez 2012 on Latin America; Hübinette 2012 on Sweden; Jung 2011 on Indonesia; Siriyuvasak and Shin 2007 on Thailand). K-pop fans in Israel and Palestine are mostly young females, usually between the ages of fourteen and twenty-two, with Palestinian K-pop fans usually a few years older than Israeli fans. This makes some sense, since people's musical tastes are usually shaped when they are young and generally more open to listening to new musical genres. For this reason, pop music industries tend to target the younger generation, which is considered more receptive to pop music.

A second characteristic is that many K-pop fans tend to tap into other Hallyu-associated products and fields, especially TV dramas. About two-thirds of the fans we interviewed (eleven out of eighteen), both Israeli and Palestinian, told us that they started to listen to K-pop after becoming fascinated with Korean TV dramas and listening to the drama's background songs.

Third, an integral part of K-pop fandom includes participating in Internet forums dedicated to Hallyu, in Hebrew (for Israeli Jews) and Arabic (for Palestinians), and sometimes in English and Korean as well. Through virtual fandom, fans share K-pop-related information, pictures, video clips, and gossip; they get to know other fans and become friends; and they create their own online community bound by the same cultural preferences—for K-pop and, more generally, Hallyu. Facebook and YouTube play a constructive role in this fandom, providing popular means of communication. This online fandom reflects the fact that young people tend to

better master technological devices and participate in social media.⁴ It also reflects the fact that K-pop content is almost completely unavailable offline—there are no local shops selling K-pop commodities, and no K-pop band has yet performed in Israel or Palestine.

Fourth, some K-pop fans also listen to J-pop, or Japanese pop music, which together with other Japanese popular cultural texts has been present in Israel since the end of the 1980s (Daliot-Bul 2007; Goldshtein-Gideoni 2003; Lemish and Bloch 2004). This points to a pattern, which may be referred to as “inclusive cultural consumption,” in which being a fan of a certain popular culture genre or field does not preclude being a fan of another popular culture.

Fifth, dedicated K-pop fans tend to see themselves as cultural missionaries and actively introduce K-pop to their friends and relatives. Some of the interviewees told us that they became interested in K-pop after a friend shared it with them or that they themselves had gotten some of their friends interested in K-pop. This suggests that K-pop fandom is not only about the passive consumption of music but also about getting other people to like it. The picture that emerges is of a small community of dedicated fans that constantly attempts to expand and bring more people together under the umbrella of fandom.

A final point is that the overall majority of fans we interviewed have never visited Korea. In the case of Israel and Palestine, this is due to geographical distance, high travel costs, and the fact that many fans are still teenagers. They all, however, stated they would like to visit the country one day. Nevertheless, not being in Korea did not seem to weaken their interest in K-pop. Curiously, the K-pop fans we interviewed tended to construct their own imagined “Korea” as a place of endless beauty, fashion, and kindness (Lyan 2013). In the interviews, Korea was repeatedly described as a dream-like place—bright, colorful, and fun. According to one depiction by a female Palestinian student (23), Korea is a “happy, colorful, and cozy environment”—even though she herself knows she is just imagining it to be like that.

K-pop Institutionalization

The institutionalization of K-pop fandom in both Israel and Palestine is relatively new and still in its embryonic stage. Here, too, the Internet and social media play a decisive role in shaping the community, not only in enabling access to music videos and sharing related

information, but also as an organizational framework that enables community members to keep in touch with one another and recruit new members.

In Israel, the biggest and most active group is a Facebook group called “South Korean Lovers,” which started in summer 2011 and at present has more than seventeen hundred members.⁵ Another big fan community is ASIA4HB (“Asia for Hebrew”), whose more than five thousand members voluntarily translate Korean TV dramas and music videos.⁶ The interest in K-pop can also be seen by looking at the popularity of a few Korean music artists and bands. Almost every famous Korean band has its own Facebook page in Hebrew, created by Israeli fans. We counted 103 such pages (44 female and 59 male bands). According to interviews and these Facebook pages, the most popular K-pop bands in Israel are the male bands Super Junior and SHINee. Other popular bands and music artists include 2NE1, Big Bang, DBSK (TVXQ), F.T. ISLAND, G-Dragon, MBLAQ, RAIN, SNSD (Girls’ Generation), and T-ara.

The biggest K-pop fan organization in Israel is called iKpop. The organization was established in 2009, when Linoy Negev (17) started a Facebook group in order “to find somebody to talk to.” She befriended some members of the online group and together they began to think about how to make K-pop more popular with the Israeli audience. The organization started modestly, with just twenty-five members. In 2010, Linoy organized the first face-to-face meeting of the group with ten participants, but by the following year, more than a hundred people had joined (Bat-Arie 2013). In March 2011, five friends founded a new website—“iKpop—the official organization promoting K-pop in Israel.”⁷ Working on a volunteer basis, they began translating K-pop news into Hebrew and organizing meetings with other fans during school holidays. They also created a site named WiKiPOP—the first Hebrew encyclopedia on K-pop bands—to provide up-to-date information on K-pop artists, bands, famous songs, and other related information.⁸ In 2012, they decided to open an online shop of K-pop products called Hallyu’s.⁹ With the money they earned that year, they organized three K-pop parties in Tel Aviv, which they called MainStream—a tongue-in-cheek name, as K-pop will never be mainstream in Israel.

In Palestine, K-pop fandom is less institutionalized, with K-pop generally consumed privately or by small groups. Communal events more often take the form of ad hoc gatherings. There are a few small local gatherings of Hallyu fans, especially among young females, in

villages and cities. L. (24) describes one such gathering: “My cousins and I are six girls. When there’s a new song we practice the dance moves and we make a video for ourselves. At every wedding, we create our own dance. A lot of girls have asked us to perform at their wedding parties. I make a costume like we are a band.”

Israeli and Palestinian fans of Hallyu also tend to gather at centers for Korean culture sponsored by the Korean government and local Korean associations, or at universities. In Hebron, the center run by the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) serves as a kind of hub for fans and is similar to the Korea Cultural Center in Jerusalem, which is managed by the Korean community and offers Korean language classes and related activities. For example, the Israeli center supports “Korea Day,” an annual event that has been organized by the Korean community for over a decade, and the KOICA center organized the first “Korean Palestinian Day” in 2012.

Palestinian K-pop fans see themselves as part of K-pop fandom in the wider Arab world. While there is only one major Palestinians-only online K-pop community, the “Kpop Palestine” Facebook page, which has almost 1,500 members¹⁰ and deals mostly with news translation to Arabic, there are a few big online communities in the Persian Gulf countries, with thousands of young Arabic-speaking members from across the Middle East.¹¹ These communities include the Facebook page “Korea Drama Arabic,” with more than 30,000 fans;¹² the “Kpop Arab” Facebook page, with more than 15,500 likes;¹³ the “News of Korean Artists is the Biggest Page on Facebook” page, with more than 48,000 likes;¹⁴ and the blog *Crazy K-pop Fans*, with more than 34,000 visitors.¹⁵ The most popular K-pop blog written in Arabic is *SM Family World*, which has more than 33 million visitors, and by November 2013 had more than 12,000 followers from the Palestinian Territories, 7,331 from Israel, and over two million from Saudi Arabia.¹⁶

Analysis of K-pop Fandom

Using data gathered in our in-depth interviews with fans, in this section of the article, we look at the reasons that young Israelis and Palestinians like K-pop, the nature of their fandom, and the reaction of their surroundings to K-pop. We hope our research offers insights related to transcultural community building and the relations between the consumption of globalized culture and social capital.

Why Do You Like K-pop?

When we asked fans why they liked K-pop and what was special about it, a few reasons were cited repeatedly by both the Israelis and Palestinians. Some of the interviewees said that K-pop initially seemed “strange” and “different,” which consequently encouraged them to listen to it more and become interested. Others described K-pop melodies as “pure,” “naïve,” “respectful,” and “ideal.” The fact that K-pop is regarded as “strange” did not deter fans, but in fact had the opposite effect—it seemed to attract them. As one female Palestinian fan (24) described it: “I became special because I like Korean music; people would say I was unique.” Put differently, the peripheral position of K-pop, in relation to the more popular American, Israeli, and Arabic pop music, has an allure that makes fans feel special. For this reason, some of the K-pop fans we interviewed were suspicious of and ambivalent about the global success of Psy’s “Gangnam Style,” which reached mainstream audiences without first passing through the K-pop fandom route.

According to Vicka Dinkin (17), a female Israeli K-pop fan who runs a K-pop program on a public radio station, “‘Gangnam’ is not really K-pop. I don’t like that there are so many parodies that don’t understand its meaning” (Bat-Arie 2013). Another Israeli fan (19) goes further: “I prefer that it [K-pop] won’t arrive in Israel, [and] that it’ll continue to be weird in the eyes of others, and only real fans will continue to enjoy these amazing Koreans.” Similarly, the false rumors about Psy’s expected performance in Israel in July 2013 met with ambivalent reactions from the K-pop community. Many fans admitted that they are not fans of Psy but were still somehow glad that at last one Korean performer has succeeded in the Israeli market.

Another recurring impression of K-pop was that it is of “high quality,” “fun,” and “good to dance to.” The melodies are especially catchy—one can memorize a K-pop tune after hearing it only once or twice. Interviewees repeatedly emphasized the performance side of K-pop, which is sometimes as important as the music itself and was variously described as glamorous, colorful, and joyful—all appealing traits to a young audience. To use Koichi Iwabuchi’s term of “culture odorless” (2002), referring to cultural commodities that are able to travel across different cultures, quality performance (aesthetics, music, and dance) is an important element in K-pop fandom—certainly more important to fans than song lyrics. Most of the fans just listen to the music or

dance to it without understanding the lyrics. As one Israeli interviewee (24) said, she does not need to check the translations of songs to enjoy the music and videos.

Palestinian fans expressed a similar appreciation and emphasized that the performance element of K-pop is better than that of Arabic songs. According to R., a male student (18),

The dance moves are very exotic and interesting. Also, it's eye candy—the fashion, style, and beautiful singers. There is variety and renewal in the concept and ideas of each music video or album. Unlike Arabic music, I didn't feel connected to it from the beginning so as soon as I got to know K-pop I got hooked on it, since it filled what was missing. Arabic music is boring and is all the same; they don't have dances, there's something missing in the production of Arabic MVs [music videos] and songs.

Social Capital and Empowerment

K-pop fans tend to form a kind of community that serves as a way to get to know people and make friends. One does not usually find this community among fans of mainstream American, Arabic, or Israeli pop music. In online discussions and in meetings, members of K-pop fan communities talk not only about K-pop but also about non-fandom issues such as family, society, and even politics. Many fans have photos of Korean celebrities as their profile pictures, write their names in Korean, and even modify their own fashion style and behavior to fit the conventions of what is regarded as “Korean.” According to S., a Palestinian female fan (21), her clothes, hair, and even body movements have changed and become more “Korean.”

At the same time, it seems that K-pop fans, similar to fans of Korean TV drama, place themselves in a special position vis-à-vis their friends. On the one hand, K-pop fans are not considered mainstream and might therefore be subject to ridicule. In this respect, their fandom may position them as “outsiders”—a position few teenagers want to be in. In one interview, H., an Israeli female K-pop fan (24), described the K-fan community as “socially handicapped,” referring to the perception that they do not always get along in other social circles. In this sense, the K-pop community has almost a therapeutic effect, like a support group. On the other hand, fans seem to like that K-pop is “strange” and “attractive,” which makes them feel “special” and “unique,” and in this sense they actually accumulate social capital. As another female Israeli fan,

a high school student, explained: “People from outside don’t understand us, don’t understand this love [of K-pop]. Meeting other fans gives me relief; it’s a very strong bond” (Bat Arie 2013).

According to Bourdieu and Wacquant, social capital is “the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 119). That K-pop fans accumulate social capital became even more apparent in our interviews with Palestinians. For them, being part of a Hallyu fan community is both a way to know people from other places and to share a neutral fandom, which is concerned neither with their Palestinian identity nor with the power relations between Palestinians and Israelis or the Arabic and Western world. At the same time, it connects fans from the wider Arab world. In this sense, being part of a community that shares intimacy and emotional depth is synonymous with social capital (Castiglione 2008, 556).

One episode exemplifies the emotional bond shared among Palestinian fans and the reverence bestowed on those who are knowledgeable about Hallyu. A., a female Palestinian fan (23) living in East Jerusalem, told us that she once visited a group of young Palestinian women in a small village near Nablus whom she had come to know through the Internet. When she arrived, she was treated like a celebrity due to her active role in the online Hallyu community and her extensive knowledge of K-pop. Growing up in a highly conservative environment, where girls are not usually allowed to leave the village on their own, the girls found in Hallyu a way to look at the outside world. As one of them, M. (18), stated: “Before, I had nothing entertaining in my life; now K-pop and the variety of shows and dramas fill my free time, and it makes me happy.”

A similar kind of escape from harsh reality is found in the words of L. (24), who lives in Gaza. According to her:

In the war days [during the 2012 clashes] we didn’t sleep at all, because we live next to the tunnels, and every minute there were three rockets launched day or night and the sound of ambulances working and scared crying children. I would retreat from between them and go to my favorite world. I would put on anything—drama or music—and raise the volume to the max so I wouldn’t hear anything or feel anything anymore; you could say I was escaping from fear and reality.

Among Palestinians, K-pop fandom may also have the effect of empowerment, since it allows cultural borrowing without being attached to some of the negative aspects associated with imported Western culture. According to A. (23), the difference between American music and K-pop is essentially the musicians' onstage versus offstage behavior—for American stars it is the same, but Korean female idols behave very differently. On stage they are highly sexualized (just like American stars), but in real life they are “good girls.” They “might behave provocatively but are not actually like that,” and this dual behavior on and off stage is something the fans can identify with. A. further explained that in Palestinian society girls have to behave according to the conventional social norms of Arab and Muslim society, whereas in Israeli society the Arab female is negatively associated with terrorism and conflict. Similarly to the K-pop female singer's onstage performance, the Palestinian's Hallyu fandom allows her to behave in a more open-minded way, even to enjoy Korean lessons with Jewish fans. Moreover, it gives her a feeling of going to a better place: in her dreams she goes to Korea and Koreans accept her as she is.

Attitudes of Family and Friends

The attitudes of family and friends toward Hallyu fandom range from ambivalence to rejection, and here too it is possible to find some differences between the Arabic and Jewish populations. Among Palestinian fans, parents seem to generally be unsupportive of Hallyu fandom because it is a culture they know little about, and they are afraid it might distract young people into studying things that are regarded as “nonbeneficial for life.” It is not only the explicit sexual content associated with K-pop and with foreign cultures in general that bothers them, but also the fear that being a Hallyu fan might divert their children too far away from what is regarded as manifestations of success in Palestinian society nowadays: securing a stable employment and starting a family.

R. (21), born in a Palestinian village in northern Israel, told us that her parents objected to her pursuing Korean studies at university, as they considered it as “nonproductive for life,” but she does it anyway and is now close to being rejected by her family. She was not allowed to visit Korea or study there despite her wishes, and she sometimes dreams of escaping to Korea without her parents' consent. But when Korean studies is considered to have practical benefits, the family

becomes more supportive. Two siblings (13, 15) who volunteer and study at the Korean Cultural Center in Hebron emphasized that their father is proud of them and that they see a prosperous future for themselves in Korea.

In the Israeli case, attitudes toward Hallyu fans include unresponsiveness and ridicule, regarding fandom as a temporary phenomenon, but sometimes there is also support. Some family members and friends even start liking Korean TV dramas and music themselves. According to the interviewees, family members and friends who are not familiar with K-pop think it is “weird,” “funny,” “ridiculous,” “gay-like,” “crazy,” and “child-like.” Many refer to Korean singers in an offensive tone as “Chinese” or collectively “Asian,” since many do not (want to) know the difference. One of the members of the Facebook group “South Korea Lovers” (17) complained about her friends: “It’s so annoying. I write something on my [Facebook] wall about Koreans and all my friends think somebody has hacked my account. [They mock me:] ‘I can’t believe that you really like these Chinese!!’ Come on, what’s the problem? Is it forbidden to like something different? If I wrote something about Americans, would that mean somebody hacked my account?”

Something as “strange” and foreign as K-pop may seem unique and special to fans but is regarded as too exotic and perhaps untrustworthy by mainstream Israelis, who know little about the culture coming from the other side of the Asian continent. As musicologists Regev and Seroussi (2004) emphasize, while there are occasional references in Israeli pop music to “world music” and some reciprocity with Arabic music, Israeli music is heavily influenced by the West, which continues to shape the mainstream.

Conclusion: Fandom as Agent of Globalization

Conventional literature emphasizes that popular culture fandom is a form of subculture in which individuals create alternative spaces for themselves away from the mainstream and devote a significant portion of their time and energy to a certain interest or activity. Fan-driven communities tend to utilize personal connections and media technologies to form social networks of people who share an interest in a certain cultural phenomenon (Coppa 2006). Belonging to such a community helps shape the identity of its members and provides them with social capital. This eventually produces more complex and disjunctive cultural and social realities (Castiglione

2008). While we acknowledge the importance of theoretical formulations pertaining to the impact of fandom on the identity of fans, in this study we have tried to emphasize a relatively overlooked aspect related to the role that fandom plays in pioneering a path for new cultures. As seen in the cases of Israel and Palestine, fandom is a central feature in the process of transnational penetration, distribution, reproduction, and consumption of cultural commodities and genres. From an organizational point of view, fandom is essential to the process of incorporating and localizing new cultures, constructing circles of allegiance, and forming organizations made up of people bound by fandom. Put differently, even in the era of globalization, in which ideas, images, and cultures are supposed to circulate freely and easily, fans still play an important role as cultural brokers.

These Israeli and Palestinian fan communities are composed of members from two different ethnic and national backgrounds who share an interest in K-pop and more generally in Hallyu. The existence of these two communities, which are geographically very close yet maintain considerable differences in their societies, points to the limited impact of ethnic, religious, and cultural differences on the consumption of contemporary globalized culture—in this case, K-pop. This correlates with John Lie’s argument in the introduction to this special issue of *Cross-Currents* that, as an entertainment medium, K-pop has the ability to cater to a variety of audiences worldwide. As we saw in our case study, due to the role of fans, globalized contemporary culture has been able to transcend political, ethnic, and social barriers and reach consumers of different ethnicities even in the “periphery.”

While there are a number of similarities in the practice of K-pop fandom in both the Israeli and Palestinian communities and in the role each community plays in spreading Korean culture, one striking difference between the two communities is especially visible. In the Israeli case, the K-pop fan community is a small community, which distinguishes itself from mainstream popular culture and even enjoys its special position as “unique” and “strange.” In the Palestinian case, K-pop fandom is seen as a way to be part of the outside world, especially the wider Arab community, in contrast to staying only within the local Palestinian community. The K-pop-related online forums are mostly pan-Arabic, not uniquely Palestinian. In other words, our analysis shows that while Israeli and Palestinian societies are geographically proximate and culturally different, their reception and consumption of K-pop is similar as both audiences share

a sense of connectedness to larger communities and find a certain amount of escape from their reality. But the analysis also points out that Palestinians seem to be looking for connections with other transnational communities, while the Israeli fans are just proud to be different.

Limited communication exists between the Israeli and Palestinian fan communities, in spite of their geographic proximity. The Israeli and Palestinian K-pop communities seem to accept the existing political and social divides and do not attempt to break through them, for example, by creating shared online K-pop communities. This divide is, however, bridgeable, and we heard about a few important exceptions that may lay some ground for optimism. A. (23), a Palestinian fan from East Jerusalem, told us that the first time she became friends with an Israeli was during a Korean language class she took at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. When the two women talked after class, they discovered that they lived minutes away from each other, but they would never have had the chance to meet as they lived in separate neighborhoods occupied by Palestinians and Israelis, respectively. Another example is R. (21), who lives in a Palestinian village in northern Israel but now studies with Israeli students in the Korean studies program at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

We hope that the analysis presented in this paper regarding Israeli and Palestinian K-pop fan communities will be a valuable contribution to the available literature on the globalization of popular culture. Typically, this literature has either utilized a top-down approach, depicting powerful media industries as making people across the world consume their products, or emphasized a bottom-up resistance to the imposition of foreign cultures and values. We have attempted to show that popular culture consumption not only changes the lives of a few individuals but that these individuals themselves may play a decisive role in connecting globalized culture with local fandom.

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Notes

- 1 By “Palestinian fans,” we refer both to those who reside within the State of Israel and those under the Palestinian Authority.
- 2 It should be noted that approximately 20 percent of the eight million inhabitants of the State of Israel are Arabic-speaking Palestinians.
- 3 Edward Said defined *Orientalism* as “the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (Said 1978, 3).
- 4 Israel’s Internet use is one of the highest in the world—70 percent of the population over the age of twelve uses the Internet. Of these users, more than half log onto social networks at least once a week, and 73 percent between fifteen and seventeen years old log on at least once a day. Children and youth are the main users of social networks—92 percent under the age of eighteen use them daily (Dror and Gershon 2012). In January 2013, Facebook, Google, and YouTube became the most visited sites in Israel (Israel Internet Association 2013).
- 5 “South Korean Lovers” Facebook page (in Hebrew), <https://www.facebook.com/groups/115331458554591/>, accessed on November 23, 2013.
- 6 This estimate was given by the administrator of ASIA4HB. See “Asia4HB” Facebook page (in Hebrew), <http://www.facebook.com/ASIA4HB>, accessed on November 23, 2013.
- 7 See “Who We Are” (in Hebrew), *iKpop*, http://ikpopteam.wix.com/ikpop#!who_we_are/c1enr, accessed on November 23, 2013.
- 8 See “IKPOP’s Wiki” (in Hebrew), *WikiPOP*, http://he.wikipop.wikia.com/wiki/IKPOP%E2%80%99s_Wiki, accessed on November 23, 2013.
- 9 “Hallyu’s (Israel)” Facebook page (in Hebrew), <https://www.facebook.com/Hallyus>, accessed on November 23, 2013.
- 10 “Kpop Palestine” Facebook page (in Arabic), <https://www.facebook.com/KpopPalestine>, accessed on November 23, 2013.
- 11 Because Palestinian Arabic is one of the Levantine Arabic dialects, Palestinians can understand other dialects in neighboring countries, such as Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon.
- 12 “Korea Drama Arabic” Facebook page (in Arabic), <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Korea-drama-arabic/282615075145732>, accessed on November 23, 2013.
- 13 “Kpop Arab” Facebook page (in Arabic), <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Kpop-arab/149817358490174>, accessed on November 23, 2013.
- 14 “News of Korean Artists is the Biggest Page on Facebook” Facebook page (in Arabic), <https://www.facebook.com/korea.arab.fanspop>, accessed on November 23, 2013.
- 15 *Crazy K-pop Fans* blog (in Arabic), <http://craazykpopfans.wordpress.com/>, accessed on November 23, 2013.

- 16 See “Flag Counter,” *SM Family World* blog (in Arabic), <http://forkoreanfans.wordpress.com/>, accessed on November 23, 2013.

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