



# Diasporic Korean Audiences of Hallyu in Vancouver, Canada

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## Abstract

*This study analyzes how diasporic audiences engage with the transnational flows of Korean media and popular culture (Hallyu). Drawing on in-depth interviews with young Korean Canadian audience members in Vancouver, this study examines the diasporic reception of Hallyu. While growing up, the young people in this study were exposed to Korean media and popular culture in their immigrant families. However, they gradually became selective and critical audiences of Hallyu, and negotiated their identities and socialities through consuming this transnational cultural trend. This study offers insights into how a transnational cultural form is incorporated into the lives of its young diasporic audiences who have grown up negotiating different cultures. The study also contributes to articulating a diasporic perspective in the existing studies of Hallyu.*

**Keywords:** Hallyu (Korean Wave), Korean diaspora, diasporic audience, youth, Vancouver, Canada, diaspora studies

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The recent phenomenon of Hallyu (i.e., transnational flows of Korean media and popular culture) has been analyzed as a vivid example of a globally circulated culture that originates in a non-Western country. There are ongoing debates about who consumes Hallyu and how. For a better understanding of the transnational consumption of Hallyu, it may be helpful to identify two different audience groups whom Jenkins, Ford, and Green (2013) refer to respectively as (a) *diasporic or immigrant audiences* and (b) *pop cosmopolitans*. The former refers to those who consume and transnationally disseminate media from their (ancestral) homeland, while the latter refers to those who consume cultural materials that are produced outside of their own geo-cultural boundaries. According to Jenkins, Ford, and Green (2013), globally and extensively diffused media content tends to attract both diasporic audiences and pop cosmopolitans. In this regard, Hallyu may be comparable with other non-Western origin cultural flows, such as Bollywood cinema, in that the former's fan bases expand far beyond diasporic audiences who share geo-cultural proximities. However, the increasing visibility of pop cosmopolitan fans does not mean that diasporic audiences become insignificant in light of the recent global rise of Korean popular culture. As linguistic and cultural translators, diasporic Korean youth have contributed to the rapid dissemination of Hallyu. They translate Hallyu *literally* by producing subtitles for a larger audience and re-localize Korean media *culturally* in a transnational context. Given the importance of diasporic Korean audiences of Hallyu—those who have not been sufficiently examined in the existing studies—this study analyzes how *diasporic audiences* engage with the transnational flows of Hallyu.<sup>1</sup>

It has been decades since diasporic Korean communities worldwide began developing their ethnic media outlets and consuming the media content of their ancestral homeland; the Korean diaspora in several regions, including North America, has engaged with a large amount of Korean ethnic

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1. While the term diaspora has widely referred to “the dispersal of a people from its original homeland” (Butler 2001, 189), the specific attributes of diasporas vary. Butler identified three basic features of diaspora: scattering as a “precondition for the formation of links between the various populations in diaspora,” “relationship to an actual or imagined homeland,” and “self-awareness of the group's identity” (Butler 2001, 192).

language media (S. Lee 2015). The consumption of ethnic and homeland media has also been observed in many other diasporic communities (e.g., Georgiou 2006) and is, thus, not unique to Korean communities. However, diasporic Korean audiences engage with the recent phase of Hallyu (K-pop in particular), extensively deploying social and digital media (Yoon and Jin 2016). Thus, while typically diasporic media consumption has been led by first-generation immigrants, who, due to their linguistic and cultural barriers prefer media forms from homeland or ethnic-language media (Georgiou 2006), the recent social media-driven flows of Hallyu have emerged as a popular form of youth culture among diasporic Koreans (Yoon 2019).

Focusing on the new phase of Hallyu and diasporic Korean youth as an important audience base for this transnational cultural flow, the study examines how young Canadians of Korean heritage who were born in or moved to Canada at an early age consume Hallyu media in their everyday contexts. For this study, 15 (12 female and 3 male) youth of Korean heritage, aged between 19 and 32, were interviewed in Vancouver in 2017 and 2018. The study participants, whose English pseudonyms will be used in this article, were categorically second generation—that is, either born in Canada or had moved to the country during early childhood—with the exception of five participants who relocated to Canada during their elementary school years (between ages 6–12). This latter group can, thus, be referred to as the 1.5 generation. The interviews were conducted in English with eight university students, six full-time workers, and one recent graduate-job seeker.

Given the nature of qualitative research and the small sample size, the participants' accounts may not be easily generalizable to young Canadians of Korean heritage.<sup>2</sup> However, this in-depth examination of diasporic Korean audiences of Hallyu, which has remained under-researched until recently, offers insights into how a transnational cultural form is incorporated into the lives of its dispersed young diasporic audiences who have grown

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2. While this study invited only those individuals who were interested in Korean media, there may also be a significant number of second-generation Koreans who rarely access Korean media. Such individuals are referred to as “bananas,” the term used among the current research participants to indicate that these Koreans have been “white-washed” (A. Kim 2018, 350).

up negotiating different cultures. Furthermore, this study contributes to articulating a diasporic perspective in the existing studies of Hallyu. This article begins with a review of existing studies of Hallyu and Korean diasporas, followed by a discussion of how the diasporic Korean youth grew up with Korean media in their immigrant families. Moreover, it addresses how these young people have become selective and critical audiences of Korean media. It also examines how Hallyu is incorporated into the diasporic youth's pan-ethnic sociality and/or sociality beyond pan-ethnic boundaries.

### **Hallyu Diaspora Studies**

Despite the flourishing audience studies regarding the reception of Hallyu in Asia and elsewhere, diasporic populations involved in the production, circulation, and consumption of this new cultural flow have remained a gray area.<sup>3</sup> The researchers of audience studies may have been intrigued primarily by pop cosmopolitan audiences rather than diasporic audiences. While Hallyu extends beyond the ethnic audiences' consumption of their homeland media, its increasing penetration into non-Korean populations cannot be fully examined without exploring the role of Korean diasporic communities in facilitating the global rise of Hallyu. While a limited number of studies have closely examined the diasporic dimension of Hallyu, some of these studies offer preliminary insights into the diasporic dimension of the recent overseas diffusion of Korean media and popular culture. Studies of the role of diasporas in the recent rise of Hallyu, which can be tentatively referred to "Hallyu diaspora studies," primarily address two aspects of the role and meanings of the Korean diaspora in the global rise of Korean popular culture. By and large, Hallyu studies in relation to the Korean diaspora address how the Korean diaspora affects Hallyu's production and circulation and/or how the phenomenon affects Korean diasporic identity.

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3. Recent meta-analyses have revealed the absence of diasporic Korean audiences in the existing studies of Hallyu (Hong et al. 2019; Yoon and Kang 2017).

First, one group of studies has explored how overseas Korean communities have influenced the rise of Hallyu. They have examined diasporic Korean youth as the producers, creators, promoters, and/or disseminators of Hallyu in North America (Fuhr 2016; Jung 2014; H. Lee 2011; Jung-Sun Park 2004; Shin 2012). A few empirical studies have examined how ethnic Koreans in North America and Asia have contributed to Hallyu's growing overseas market and audience base (Fuhr 2016; H. Lee 2011). Fuhr (2016) examined the K-pop industry's strategy to capitalize on Korean diasporic artists, such as Jay Park (the rapper and singer, also known by his Korean name Jaebeom Park). According to Fuhr's study, the K-pop industry has welcomed Korean-American idols because they are assumed to combine experience of American culture with Korean cultural sensibility, and thus are considered capable of straddling Korean and American cultures. However, Fuhr (2016) argues that despite the increasing roles of diasporic Koreans in Hallyu, they are subject to othering and discrimination by Korean audiences, unless they conform to the dominant national imaginary of Korea. In comparison, Hyang-jin Lee (2011) argues that Zainichi (i.e., those of Korean heritage resident in Japan) contribute to the dissemination of Korean media and popular culture in Japan as dedicated audience members and disseminators who translate and introduce a different culture. According to Hyang-jin Lee (2011), it is not only Zainichi audiences but also Korean-Japanese personnel in the Japanese entertainment industry who have contributed to the rise of Hallyu in Japan; K-pop concerts have been hosted in Zainichi-owned clubs in the Shin-Okubo Koreatown in Tokyo, which facilitated the Hallyu phenomenon from below. Diasporic Koreans' contribution to the rise of Hallyu is not limited to personnel; it extends to diasporic spaces and communities, such as Koreatowns overseas, and ethnic-language media outlets. Jinwon Kim (2018) shows how Koreatown in New York City operates as a means of transnational connection for Korean Americans and non-Koreans by offering various experiences and cultural resources related to Hallyu. In this way, Koreatowns contribute to attracting more tourists and residents to Korean media and popular culture. Sangjoon Lee (2015) illustrates that Koreatowns and Korean-American media outlets have played a role in expanding Korean media content markets; in particular, a

few streaming services that were established by Korean Americans, such as DramaFever (2009–2018), have facilitated the global dissemination of Korean TV dramas.

Second, another group of scholars has examined Hallyu's cultural effects on Korean diasporic communities. Several recent empirical studies have addressed how the new wave of Korean popular culture has affected Korean diasporic communities, especially its younger generations (D. Kim 2018; S. Kim 2018; D. Oh 2013; Yoon 2019).<sup>4</sup> They have examined younger-generation immigrants' access to, and use of, transnational Korean media. They argue that Hallyu especially in the recent phase is not necessarily a nostalgic resource for diasporic Koreans; rather, it can have multiple connotations among young people of Korean heritage. For example, David Oh's (2013) study showed how second-generation Koreans in the United States (US) negotiated their multiple belongings in the consumption of Korean media content. In David Oh's study, the second-generation Korean youth, who are "fully acculturated but not fully included" (D. Oh 2013, 230), consumed both mainstream US media and Korean media; however, they tended toward the consumption of Korean media during their adolescence, thereby creating "spaces to counter dominant cultural values, standards of attractiveness, tastes, and belonging" (D. Oh 2013, 247). Similarly, Yoon's (2019) study, conducted in Canada, showed how young Korean Canadians consume K-pop as an ethnic resource with which they can culturally identify, on the one hand, and as an alternative popular cultural resource that differs from the mainstream culture, on the other. By comparison, Sujin Kim's (2018) study of Korean-American students' media practices suggested that Hallyu engaged with the hybridization of diverse cultural resources, such as ethnic, global, and local culture, and thus, facilitates multiple linguistic and cultural identities of diasporic youth. Overall, these studies of the consumption of Hallyu among diasporic Korean youth in

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4. Even before the global rise of Hallyu, Korean immigrants consumed their homeland media that were produced and circulated in analog format. First-generation Korean immigrants' use of ethnic-language media and homeland media in the pre-digital era were studied in relation to their difficulty assimilating into the host society and their nostalgic connection with the homeland (e.g., C. Lee 2004; Lee and Cho 1990; Moon and Ha 2005).

North America have found that the young people appropriate diasporic media from their ancestral homeland as a means of reaffirming their ethnic identities and/or exploring alternative cultural resources distinguished from Western media.

The existing studies of the Hallyu diaspora address how diasporic Korean communities affected the production and circulation of Hallyu, on the one hand, and how Hallyu has affected young diasporic Koreans' identity work, on the other. The existing literature implies that while the recent wave of Korean popular culture overseas is highly driven by social media, the Korean diaspora may play an integral role in the transnational flow of Hallyu. The diaspora can function as cultural producers and consumers in the global circulation of Hallyu. While diasporic production and consumption are both important areas to examine in Hallyu diaspora studies, the present article focuses on the process of reception and consumption with particular reference to young Korean-Canadian audiences.

### **Growing Up Korean Canadian in Vancouver**

Koreans in Canada constitute a relatively young diasporic community. Korean immigration to Canada was not significantly noticeable until the 1990s. As of 2017, it is estimated that 240,942 Koreans live in Canada (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2017).<sup>5</sup> Koreans in Canada, whose immigration has been motivated primarily by business opportunities and/or children's education, constitute a comparatively newer diasporic community; their numbers have more than doubled between 1996 and 2006 due to the arrival of new immigrants from Korea (Jungwee Park 2012). Compared with the

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5. The size of the Korean diaspora in Canada can be compared with its counterpart in the US, where over two million ethnic Koreans reside (2,492,252 as of 2017) (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2017). The substantially different size of the Korean communities in these two countries relates to the different histories of Korean immigration to the US and Canada. For the US, Korean immigration began in 1903, while sizable Korean immigration to Canada began only in the 1970s (Kim, S. Noh, and M. Noh 2012).

general Canadian population, the ethnic Korean population is a “relatively young, strongly family-based, and highly educated” group (Jungwee Park 2012, 34). According to the 2016 Census data, the majority of Koreans in Canada reside in Vancouver (27%) and Toronto (35%) (Statistics Canada 2019). Vancouver has been favored due to its proximity to Korea, mild climate, and already established Korean ethnic communities. As of 2016, 52,980 people of Korean origin resided in the metropolitan Vancouver area (Statistics Canada 2019). Vancouver’s Korean community is newer and younger, compared with other major cities where a visible number of ethnic Koreans reside. Vancouver’s Koreatown, which comprises Korean groceries, restaurants, and other services, is located in the city’s outskirts and was established in the early 2000s (Baker and DeVries 2010). Along with the growth of the Korean community, Vancouver has witnessed a rapid increase in its Asian population, especially its Chinese population, over the past two decades; thus, the city has been known for being the most Asian city outside of Asia. As of 2016, it is estimated that 48 percent of Vancouver’s residents are of Asian heritage (Statistics Canada 2019).

Vancouver has been an important Canadian center for Hallyu and K-pop. Responding to the growing K-pop audience base in the city, K-pop stars like Red Velvet, Sunmi, Tiffany Young, NCT, and Jay Park, performed in Vancouver in 2019. Canadian national and local media have recently described Vancouver as a rising fan base of K-pop (Nair 2017). In the early 2010s, a store specializing in K-pop merchandise opened in a central shopping area in Burnaby, Vancouver, which has become a popular destination among young fans. While Vancouver is known for its multiethnic population and has been identified as one of Canada’s major Hallyu bases, the young diasporic Koreans in this study revealed their mixed feelings about the city. The sizable Asian population did not necessarily offer the young Korean Canadians a sense of belonging; rather, from time to time, they felt marginalized. Some interviewees recalled the pressure of assimilation (i.e., fitting into the dominant cultural norms) because of the discrimination they experienced during their childhood and adolescence. For example, Lindsay, a 24-year-old student who immigrated to Canada at the age of six and grew up in a White-dominant suburban neighborhood, recalled her exposure to



racist comments at school and how hard she tried to fit in.

At my elementary school, the kids asked me, “Why is your lunch so stinky?” and this led to [the assumption] “Because she’s Asian.” So, to fit in and to not hear those comments, I would take it upon myself to change, starting with not packing quote unquote “stinky foods”...At eight or nine, you get comments like, “Oh! Why are your eyes so small?”...At that time, I didn’t quite understand that it was racism. It was more like, “Oh they’re making fun of me.” So, to change that, I would take it upon myself to first dye my hair so that I did not look completely Asian.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, during her early childhood, Lindsay attempted to engage in *ethnic disidentification*, distancing oneself from one’s ethnic group in an effort to avoid being stigmatized (Kibria 2002).

In comparison with Lindsay, Emily, a 25-year-old who was born and grew up in a middle-class neighborhood in Vancouver, did not recall any particular experiences of racial discrimination. However, later in her interview, she admitted that during her childhood and adolescence, she always felt “insecure” due to her racial and ethnic background.

When I was a lot younger, I did have a few issues about how I looked compared to the other people I went to school with, because I grew up in a pretty White neighborhood. Later on, there were more Korean and Asian people, but most of the time, there were Caucasian people. So, I always kind of felt insecure about certain Korean traits of mine, such as my eyes or skin tone.<sup>7</sup>

The young people’s experiences of racism or insecurity due to their racial and ethnic backgrounds led them to try to “fit in.” Thus, their sense of identity was, to some extent, subject to White people’s ascription—being aware of their own attributes in comparison with the dominant Whiteness (Zhou and Lee 2004). However, from their late teens or early twenties, they

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6. Lindsay (pseudonym), interview by author, Vancouver, April 1, 2018.

7. Emily (pseudonym), interview by author, Vancouver, July 31, 2017.

appear to have felt more comfortable with their Korean-Canadian identity. For example, Jim, a second-generation man aged 22, commented on his multi-cultural identity.

There were times when I wished I were White, but there were also times when I loved being able to speak Korean and English at the same time. So, it's like a little mix...like half and half... When I watch TV shows, there's a side of me that likes American humor, and there's a side of me that loves Korean humor in television.<sup>8</sup>

In this manner, Jim and several other interviewees appeared to be aware of their “second-generation advantages” (Kasinitz et al. 2008)—that is, the benefits of having multilingual and cultural literacy.

The young Korean Canadians in the study recalled that they noticed their differences as ethnic minorities or non-Whites and that, at least for a period, they attempted to fit into the White-dominant peer culture. This was partly because, until recently, they had minimal exposure to Korean or Asian personalities in mainstream media. Based on the interviewees' recollections, the mainstream media rarely featured Korea and Koreans. Andrea, a 21-year-old student noted:

Growing up, I barely saw Korean people in the Canadian news or Canadian media, and it was really rare for Koreans to even be mentioned, unless there was something about North Korea. Growing up, I heard “Oh, Koreans are good at StarCraft,” “Koreans are good at math,” “Are you North Korean?” stuff like that.<sup>9</sup>

Although the young Korean Canadians had been devoid of Korean cultural representation in the mainstream media or in everyday life throughout their childhood as ethnic minorities and the children of immigrant families, the rise of Hallyu over the past several years (especially since the early to mid-2010s) enabled them to think more positively about their second-

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8. Jim (pseudonym), interview by author, Vancouver, May 18, 2018.

9. Andrea (pseudonym), interview by author, Vancouver, April 18, 2018.

generation advantages, especially their link to Korean heritage. The recent introduction of Hallyu in Canada gave the young people rare opportunities to encounter positive media coverage of Korea. Along with the increasing diffusion of K-pop among some young Canadians, the interviewees felt more comfortable openly expressing their cultural tastes and identity. Keira, a 22-year-old recent graduate who was born in Canada, stated: “I don’t ever talk about Korean media with any of my real-life friends...But K-pop has been something that I can talk to people about. So, that’s why recently I’m more into K-pop than Korean variety shows. It’s influenced me a lot.”<sup>10</sup> As Keira noted, the recent recognition of K-pop in Canadian media and among youth opens a new door for young Korean Canadians. Thus, most interviewees sharply contrasted the old-fashioned Korean media with the more recent mode in the period of Hallyu, and the latter can be shared and accessed more openly.

Overall, the young Korean Canadians in this study had experienced periods of *identity crisis*, during which they were confused about their identities with regard to family and school. They indicated that their childhood and adolescence entailed a process of negotiating between being Korean in the home and Canadian outside/at school. For some, this period of identity crisis continued until they went to university. For Stella, a 24-year-old designer, who grew up in a suburb of Vancouver from the age of two, different peer groups complicated her sense of identity: “You’re super whitewashed,’ said Koreans, and if I hung out with White people all day, they said, ‘You’re super Korean; you are super Asian.’ And so I was confused about my identity.”<sup>11</sup> However, at the time of the interviews, most of the young adult interviewees had accepted that their cultural heritage provided them with second-generation advantages rather than stigmas; thus, they no longer relied extensively on White people’s ascriptions when considering their own identity. Their upbringing and methods of negotiating being Korean in Canada seemed to influence whether they considered themselves more Korean or more Canadian.

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10. Keira (pseudonym), interview by author, Vancouver, April 16, 2018.

11. Stella (pseudonym), interview by author, Vancouver, March 29, 2018.

## Growing Up with Korean Media

Most young people in the study had been exposed to Korean media, having grown up in Korean immigrant families. For example, Kelly, a 26-year-old nurse of the 1.5 generation, recalled watching Korean TV with her family when growing up: “We would rent out Korean dramas on DVD, and my mom and I would sit together and watch the whole series. I remember that it was fun times.”<sup>12</sup> With the exception of a few cases in which parents did not allow their children to watch Korean TV regularly, most young people in the study noted that they grew up with Korean media in the home during their childhood. According to several participants, their parents relied entirely on Korean media (in combination with locally produced Korean language media) for information and entertainment. For example, 19-year-old Grace, who immigrated to Canada at the age of six, recalled that her family had never watched any Canadian news outlets, and she had never heard about any major Canadian news providers, such as CBC, CTV, and *The Globe and Mail*, until she went to high school.<sup>13</sup> Rosie, a 21-year-old second-generation student, noted that first-generation Koreans were ignorant of Canadian mainstream culture and current affairs:

Most first-generation [Korean] people I know here don't actually watch Canadian and American TV. My dad always starts his morning watching Korean news. But I've never seen him watching Canadian news. They don't know much [about what's going on here] because they're so focused on what's going on in Korea.<sup>14</sup>

The frequency and intensity of exposure to Korean media among the young people in the study varied, depending on each family's pattern of media consumption. This tendency resonates with previous studies of migrant youth's use of homeland media (e.g., Green and Kabir 2012; Elias and Lemish 2011). More than half of the interview participants had been

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12. Kelly (pseudonym), interview by author, Vancouver, April 30, 2018.

13. Grace (pseudonym), interview by author, Vancouver, September 9, 2017.

14. Rosie (pseudonym), interview by author, Vancouver, March 26, 2018.

consciously attracted to Korean popular culture at some point in their adolescence, although they had been exposed to Korean media since their early childhood. They recalled particular moments in which they realized a new mode of Korean popular culture—that is, moments of beginning to enjoy K-pop, K-dramas, and/or Korean celebrities on their own, using their own laptops and smartphones on their own time (rather than during family viewing times). For example, Andrea, the aforementioned 21-year-old student, recollected the first moment she became truly intrigued by a K-pop music video:

I was probably eight or nine. I saw Wonder Girls singing their song “Tell Me” on TV at a Korean restaurant [in Vancouver]. I was watching, and I was like, “Oh my goodness! This is so cute! I like these girls! They’re dancing and singing at the same time.” That’s my first vivid memory of what got me to keep up [with K-pop].<sup>15</sup>

For Lindsay, one moment of family watching triggered her interest, and she later became the most regular Korean media user in her family:

One day I saw my parents watching *X Man* [i.e., a Korean game/variety show that aired between 2003 and 2007]. It was really funny, and it was very enjoyable. So, I started watching it with them, and then it got to a point where I would be Googling, and then I would watch all the Korean talk shows or variety shows like *Love Letter* and *Yasimmanman*. I was in Grade 5 or 6.<sup>16</sup>

Like Andrea and Lindsay, the young people in the study tended to discover particular genres of Korean media—namely, K-pop and variety shows—in their childhood or adolescence.

For Kelly, the aforementioned interviewee who left Korea at the age of 12, her ownership of personalized communication technologies was the moment she chose particular Korean media content for *her* (not her

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15. Andrea (pseudonym), interview by author, Vancouver, April 18, 2018.

16. Lindsay (pseudonym), interview by author, Vancouver, April 1, 2018.

family's) viewing pleasure.

I grew up with Korean TV, but I began to take more ownership of what I watched when I got my own laptop in high school. Before that, I was just watching the same things every week, like the Korean dramas and news my parents watched. And then, when I got my laptop, I had more access to the latest variety shows that my parents didn't know about.<sup>17</sup>

These digital media environments offer the young Korean Canadians an individualized access to Korean media content along with many other forms of media, such as American and Canadian media. Thus, the young people's consumption of transnational Korean media is no longer a family ritual, but rather driven by their own individual interests. Digital platform-customized content of Korean media—especially K-pop—may increasingly allow young Korean Canadians to voluntarily yet selectively access the popular culture of their ancestral homeland. Digital media environments seem to offer these young people a moment of being (re)connected with their homeland in the present tense. For example, Grace, the aforementioned student who left Korea at the age of six, often watched Korean TV via streaming services and YouTube. She noted: "Watching Korean TV online is a way to stay in touch with my Korean heritage. Just to keep learning the language and keep watching TV shows so that I feel Korean, even though I may not think the same way as a Korean. By watching TV, I can understand what Koreans are into nowadays."<sup>18</sup> For these youth, their connection with their cultural heritage did not necessarily mean learning about the homeland in the past tense. Rather, it meant that they were able to keep up with "what Koreans are into nowadays."

For the young people in this study, Hallyu seemed to mean the imagination of their (ancestral) homeland in the present or future tense, rather than in a nostalgic manner. They distinguished their interest in Korean culture from that of their parents, who are first-generation Korean

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17. Kelly (pseudonym), interview by author, Vancouver, April 30, 2018.

18. Grace (pseudonym), interview by author, Vancouver, September 9, 2017.

immigrants. First-generation immigrants were often depicted by the interviewees as those who stayed away or were excluded from mainstream Canadian lifestyle and media. In contrast, the young people considered themselves as being able to access different media forms across Korean and Canadian media outlets by capitalizing on their second-generation advantages. The interviewees tended to contrast themselves with their first-generation immigrant parents in regard to their access to Korean media. The first generation was described as those who relied heavily on “thick ethnicity” (Cornell and Hartmann 2007) and thus unlikely to be integrated into mainstream society. For the young people in this study, Korean media appeared to be a window through which they were reminded of their ethnic and cultural heritage and, more importantly, through which that heritage was revised (D. Kim 2018; Elias and Lemish 2011).

### **Becoming Selective and Critical Audiences**

Hallyu offers an up-to-date resource by which the diasporic youth revise and rearticulate their ethnic heritage. They did not necessarily consider Korean media as a homogeneous entity representing their country of origin, but rather engaged with the media selectively. Some interviewees consumed Hallyu, while being critical of particular aspects of the cultural trend.

For example, Grace commented on certain aspects she noticed in Korean variety shows: “Sometimes, there are things I don’t like about Korean society. A lot of stress and a lot of open judgment and a lot of pressure to look good. Stuff like that. In Korean TV, I especially hate it when a lot of women are picked on for their looks. I find that unacceptable.”<sup>19</sup> However, Grace regularly watched several Korean variety shows as she related to certain values projected in the shows:

I do think there are good aspects of Korean society as well, such as focusing on family first, and even though there are a lot of struggles in

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19. Grace (pseudonym), interview by author, Vancouver, September 9, 2017.

school, I know that you can make good friends out of them ... There are a lot of really fun games you can do together on Korean TV shows. ... I also like that these people [TV celebrities in Korean talk shows] talk about their families and how they were raised.<sup>20</sup>

For Grace, who left Korea at age six, and thus had only vague memories of her homeland, Korean variety shows and talk shows seemed to provide a sense of family and togetherness, which she could seldom find on the Canadian or American TV programs she often watched.

The diasporic youth of this study consumed certain content of transnational Korean media primarily due to its unique appeal and quality, as well as its relevance. The young people's diasporic consumption of Hallyu was not simply a symbolic homecoming, but rather implied an effort to explore what they find lacking in mainstream Canadian and American media. The selective consumption of Hallyu among the young Korean Canadians seems to relate to their second-generation advantages—that is, their multilingual and multicultural exposure and literacy, which enable them to access different forms of media. Indeed, most respondents accessed American, Canadian, and Korean media omnivorously and selectively.

The young people's selective pattern of media consumption was observed not only among different media forms—that is, “global,” “host,” and “homeland” media, based on Elias and Lemish's (2011) categorization—but also among different genres within the Korean media repertoire. For example, Rosie, the aforementioned student who was born and raised in Vancouver, enjoyed Korean films. For her, Hallyu did not seem to be a source of exciting cultural content associated with Korea but, rather, referred to only certain quality content. Thus, while she continued to consume Korean films, her interest in K-dramas decreased as she became older.

Growing up, I used to watch a lot of Korean dramas. My sisters watched them a lot, and so I kind of slid into it. But now, we don't spend as much time together, and I find [that I watch] a lot more English television. This

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20. Grace (pseudonym), interview by author, Vancouver, September 9, 2017.



has probably been since Grade 11. I just got bored with Korean TV. A lot of Korean dramas are kind of just all the same storyline, and it becomes very predictable. It got kind of tedious going along with it.<sup>21</sup>

The diasporic Koreans in the present study overall consumed more American media than Canadian media. They tended to omnivorously consume American media *and* Korean media, along with some forms of Canadian media.<sup>22</sup> This resonates with Elias and Lemish's (2011) study of Russian immigrant youth in Israel, in which immigrant parents exposed their children to the homeland media for heritage learning, but the second-generation youth were more attracted to Western media—not necessarily the host society's media. However, compared with Elias and Lemish's (2011) study, the young diasporic Koreans did not consider Korean media as being behind its Western counterpart in terms of quality and style. Instead, they regarded certain Hallyu genres—K-pop in particular—as being “more creative than Western music”, while describing several Korean variety shows as being “relevant” to their daily contexts and/or more emotionally engaging.

In addition to K-pop and Korean variety shows, Korean YouTube channels were consumed regularly by several young people in the study. By watching and responding to videos that were generated primarily by young YouTubers, some of whom had become “micro-celebrities,” some young people in the study learned lifestyle tips and shared a sense of what it was like living as young people of Korean heritage. Graced noted:

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21. Rosie (pseudonym), interview by author, Vancouver, March 26, 2018.

22. Relative to their Canadian counterparts, American TV shows tended to be more popular among the interviewees. The popularity of American media in Canada is not only observed among young people of Korean heritage in the study, but also noticeable among the general population. As data on TV ratings in Canada reveal, Canadian audiences consume far more American TV content than domestic. For example, in 2015, 9 of the 10 most-watched regularly scheduled television programs in Canada were American-produced; similarly, Canada's 10 most-watched entertainment television events were all American save one (Tenuta 2015). Despite the Canadian content quota and the public service broadcasting system (CBC), American media content has consistently dominated the Canadian market.

Girls Village is one of the YouTube channels I watch. They have a series called *bigeullyeo*. They are three women who obviously look great. But then, their personalities are not that much different from mine. Like, they're all very... like hyper and very fun to be around...It tells me not to discriminate... [not to] put all Koreans in one bubble in general. I get to see the people related to me on YouTube that way.<sup>23</sup>

This example may imply that while YouTube, as well as other dominant Western-based digital media platforms, has been criticized for its reproduction of a Western perspective, diasporic young people's creation and sharing of user-generated content may offer a potential form of grassroots media practice (Leurs 2015).

Overall, as discussed in this section, the diasporic young people of this study consumed Hallyu as a way to selectively and critically engage with their cultural heritage, on the one hand, and to seek entertainment and cultural meanings relevant to their values and lifestyles, on the other. These diasporic Korean youth seem to navigate these digital media environments, which comprise different media forms and content, such as *dominant* American media, *national* Canadian media, and *diasporic* Korean media, while using their linguistic and cultural literacies as the second generation to consume particular media content relevant and intriguing to them.

### **Pan-Ethnic Audience Engagement**

While the interviewees recalled their earlier Korean media consumption as a more or less family-oriented activity, their engagement with the recent mode of Korean media in the era of Hallyu seemed to move beyond the family. These young people's consumption of Korean media gradually involved their peers of different ethno-cultural backgrounds. Some young people in the study shared their interest in K-pop and/or other Korean media genres with their peers, especially in the recent phase of Hallyu. Their cultural

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23. Grace (pseudonym), interview by author, Vancouver, September 9, 2017.

practices resonate with what Fiske (1992) refers to as media fans' *enunciative productivity*, through which fans talk about their favorite media texts and, thus, develop their membership of particular cultural communities. In the present study, enunciative practices tended to occur on the following three occasions.

First, the young people in the study shared their interest in transnational Korean media with other Korean Canadians. Especially for those interviewees who grew up in Korean-populated areas in the metro Vancouver area, Korean TV and K-pop gradually became topics of everyday conversation among their peers of Korean heritage. Brenda, a 21-year-old student born and raised in Canada, recalled: "At high school there were a lot of Korean people and, because I was also Korean, they would ask me, 'Do you know Secret Garden? [a Korean TV drama that aired in 2010]' Because it was high school, and I wanted to fit in. So I watched it at home."<sup>24</sup> Brenda's recollection of the early 2010s seems to reflect the increasing Korean immigration to Vancouver in the early 2000s, on the one hand, and the increasing presence of Korean media and popular culture among young Vancouverites since the 2010s, on the other (Jungwee Park 2012; Yoon and Jin 2016). Thus, interestingly, Brenda had to watch and know about particular Korean TV dramas to "fit in" with her Korean peer groups, a situation comparable with that of several other interviewees who grew up in White-dominant neighborhoods and were hesitant to openly talk about Korean media among their peers.

Second, Hallyu content was shared among young people of Asian heritages. Several university students in the study often shared information and feelings about K-pop songs and idols with other Asian Canadians and, sometimes, with their non-Asian peers. By consuming Hallyu together, the young people appear to develop a sense of pan-Asian identity. Pan-ethnicity among Asian ethnic minority youth has been examined in previous studies on young people of Asian heritage in North America (e.g., Kibria 2002; S. Park 2013). Extensive enunciative practices among Asian-Canadian youth in the present study seemed to occur during their university years. Stella,

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24. Brenda (pseudonym), interview by author, Vancouver, April 20, 2018.

who grew up in a White-dominant suburban neighborhood, recalled: “When I went to university, it was like, ‘Finally! Yeah!’ I realized that I was okay [laughs]. Because there were so many Asian students. As soon as I went to university, I had a car. So, I was able to meet more people like me and just be able to realize that both cultures could exist together.”<sup>25</sup> Similar to the findings of Kibria’s (2002) study of young Chinese and Korean Americans, the young Korean Canadians in the present study developed their pan-Asian sense of identity when they encountered a large number of Asian students at university and became partly independent from their parents. Pan-ethnicity among young diasporic Asians may be a way to cope with racialization, on the one hand, and to affirm and share their experiences of growing up as the children of Asian immigrants, on the other (Zhou and Lee 2004). Ju and Lee’s (2015) empirical study has revealed that young Asian Americans explore their pan-Asian ethnic identity and a sense of comfort by consuming Korean media.

Socializing with Asian-Canadian friends, which included activities such as talking about K-pop and idols, was a casual pastime for a few interviewees while at university. Andrea, the aforementioned 21-year-old university student who became a fan of K-pop, joined a university K-pop dance-cover club whose members were, for the most part, Asian Canadians. For Andrea, dancing with her friends was a means of self-expression:

The K-pop club is a good opportunity for me to dance without being judged, especially because everyone likes it there. I know that K-pop isn’t as widely accepted here as I hoped, even though it’s so diverse. People are still very stuck to Western culture and Western media. I would say that the K-pop club is just like a very safe spot for me to express my life.<sup>26</sup>

Third, diasporic Korean youth engage with enunciative practices with their non-Asian peers, to a limited extent. Diasporic audiences potentially play a role as *proselytizers* by transnationally spreading the media of their ancestral

25. Stella (pseudonym), interview by author, Vancouver, March 29, 2018.

26. Andrea (pseudonym), interview by author, Vancouver, April 18, 2018.

homeland (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013). In so doing, non-diasporic audiences, referred to as “post cosmopolitans” by Jenkins, Ford, and Green (2013), are introduced to a new culture distant from their own. In the present study, two interviewees recalled several enunciative practices with their White friends who became interested in Korean media. Lindsay, the aforementioned student who grew up in a White-dominant neighborhood and desperately tried to fit in with the dominant norm during her childhood, later became interested in K-pop, as well as other Korean media genres. When she began to listen to K-pop songs in high school (in the late 2000s and the early 2010s), her cultural taste triggered her White friends’ interest. “In high school, I got interested in K-pop. And then, my White friends would be interested in K-pop a lot more than me. They would go to the concerts that I wouldn’t even go [laughs].”<sup>27</sup> However, Lindsay’s case is rather exceptional, as there was not much interaction between Korean and White audiences in most interviewees’ recollection. This lack of enunciative practices beyond pan-ethnic peer networks may be driven by “racial barriers,” perceived by most interviewees in the study. For example, Kelly, the aforementioned 26-year-old woman, stated, “It doesn’t matter if you were born here or not, you kind of end up of forming a community with the people with the same race. There is an automatically created barrier from different races even though we’re all Canadian.”<sup>28</sup> According to the interview participants, this racial barrier operated in the flows of Hallyu in Canada.

As discussed in this section, some young diasporic Koreans engage with young people of Korean and/or other Asian heritages, and explore their pan-ethnic identities. The recent wave of Hallyu appears to be popular at least among young people of Asian cultural backgrounds, and offers room for them to negotiate their cultural identities rather than necessarily reproducing nostalgic, essentialized images of the homeland. Especially in regard to K-pop and its global circulation, Korean media content has rapidly adapted to the social media environment and has attracted an increasing number of non-Korean audience members beyond the boundaries of

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27. Lindsay (pseudonym), interview by author, Vancouver, April 1, 2018.

28. Kelly (pseudonym), interview by author, Vancouver, April 30, 2018.

Korean diasporic audiences. However, social media-driven diffusion of Hallyu may not be entirely free of racial barriers existing between audiences of Hallyu.

## Conclusion

To examine diasporic audiences' engagement with Hallyu, this study has focused on young people of Korean heritage in Vancouver, Canada. While growing up, they were exposed to Korean media and popular culture in their immigrant families. Despite this early exposure, they rather selectively and critically consumed recent forms of Korean media and popular culture, such as K-pop, Korean variety shows, and YouTube channels. Unlike their parents, who, as first-generation immigrants, transported their habitual patterns of Korean media consumption over to Canada, the young second-generation immigrants examined here accessed a new mode of Korean media, which emerged in the recent era of Hallyu.

Korean media and popular culture played an integral role in the young diasporic Koreans' negotiation and exploration of their cultural identity. Growing up with a sense of in-betweenness, they felt the pressure of cultural assimilation during childhood and early adolescence. However, they became released from the assimilation pressure in their transition to adulthood, and the recent mode of Hallyu, as a digitally driven, hybrid cultural practice (Jin 2016), seemed to allow them to express and negotiate their ethnic identities. By exercising their second-generation advantages, the young people in this study consumed particular genres and content of Hallyu while omnivorously accessing different media, such as *dominant* American media, *national* Canadian media, and *diasporic* Korean media. Compared with the previous diasporic audiences, newer second-generation immigrants who are equipped with digital media and bilingual literacy might be in a better position to maintain and/or overcome cultural differences (Kasinitz et al. 2008). Prior to the global rise of Hallyu, Korean media in diasporic Korean communities tended to be consumed as nostalgic content through which the left-behind homeland could be remembered (C. Lee 2004). By contrast, the

recent mode of Korean media, combined with digital media environments, seems to provide young diasporic audiences with cultural resources for various functions, such as critical awareness of ethnic identity and pan-ethnic sociality.

When simply consumed as a form of ethnic popular culture (whether by diasporic audiences or pop cosmopolitans), Hallyu might be no more than the transnational commodification of diasporic culture, which reproduces the exoticization and essentialization of other cultures (Kalra, Kaur, and Hutnyk 2005). For example, both diasporic audiences (especially first-generation immigrants) and pop cosmopolitans might not be entirely free of the reproduction of an essentialized notion of Korean culture in the recent rise of Hallyu. Due to their longing for long-distance nationalism, some diasporic audience members, such as first-generation immigrants, might consume Hallyu exclusively as an ethnic cultural form. In comparison, some pop cosmopolitans (especially Western audiences of non-Asian backgrounds) might consume Hallyu as a set of exotic, essentialized commodities; for example, White audiences' consumption of K-pop may involve the exotic consumption of non-Western culture (D. Oh 2017). However, recent empirical studies have revealed that Hallyu can be appropriated as a cultural resource with which dominant socio-cultural norms are questioned, especially among young people—whether of Korean or non-Korean backgrounds—in transnational contexts (Han 2017; C. Oh 2015; Yoon 2019). Indeed, the young diasporic Koreans in the present study showed that Hallyu may not simply serve as affirmation of their ethnic roots; they selectively and critically consumed Korean media and popular culture.

The present study calls for further studies on diasporic Korean audiences of Hallyu to facilitate the research field, tentatively referred to as “Hallyu diaspora studies.” First, while the present study focuses on diasporic audiences and their *consumption* of Hallyu, more attention is needed on Korean diasporas' roles in the *production* process of Hallyu. By doing so, Hallyu diaspora studies can effectively address *reciprocal* relationships between Korean diasporas and Hallyu—that is, diasporic individuals not only as recipients and consumers, but also as creators and contributors. Second, this study's empirical data can be compared with other Korean

diasporas in different geo-cultural contexts. As Epstein (2014) points out, the Korean cultural industry has discriminated between different Korean diasporic groups; Korean diasporas in North America have been favorably represented in relation to cosmopolitanism and globalization, whereas ethnic Koreans in other regions, such as China, are often marginalized. By consuming Hallyu, diverse diasporic Korean populations—especially younger generations—may increasingly reimagine their ancestral homeland through digital and social media and may virtually encounter other diasporic Koreans, as well as various other audiences of Hallyu around the world. Further empirical studies are required to examine how different diasporic audiences, who may engage with Hallyu from their own geo-cultural perspectives, generate particular nodes of the emerging flows of Korean media and popular culture.

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