A look into Korean popular culture and its tourism benefits

The Republic of Korea has become a tourist destination for many in recent years both regionally and internationally. The ‘Korean wave or Hallyu” has been used by the Korean government to increase its tourism efforts. The promotion of Korean dramas, Korean pop-stars, and Korean athletes has led to an increased desire to travel to Korea and an increased attention to Korean culture. The concept of the Korean wave has increased the cultural exportation of the brand “Korea” and increased the influx of tourists to Korea. Whether it is in Vietnam, Thailand, Japan, or Singapore, K-culture stars are in high demand and as such the Korean government has attempted to promote the stars image as a positive achievement of Korean culture. This can be seen from such performers as girl's generation, Super Junior, Big Bang, 2N1, and Psy's popularity throughout those countries. The image of these performers has changed the social and cultural image of Korea – it is now viewed as a place of wealth and opportunity and as such, a place where many want to visit to experience the concept of “hallyu.” This paper will analyse the influence of Hallyu on Korea’s image and the government’s role in promoting the social impact of “hallyu” as a policy of cultural tourism.

Key words: Hallyu, culture, tourism, Korea

INTRODUCTION

“The booming South Korean presence on television and in the movies has led Asians to buy up South Korean goods and to travel to South Korea, traditionally not a popular tourist destination.” Onishi (2005). Whether it has been Psy and his “Gangnam Style” in America, Super Junior in France music, or the plethora of Korean dramas on television in the Middle East or South Asia – Korean popular culture has made enormous inroads in promoting Korea and Korean media industry overseas. In recent years, there has been a major export of Korean popular culture throughout Asia and in certain parts of the “western” world. This influx has seen Korean culture in areas of the world that decades ago had very little knowledge of Korean Culture or Korea as a country. This newfound knowledge or promotion has led to an increase in tourism and the Korean governments involvement in “brand Korea.” This paper looked into the growth of the Korean wave and how the government is now using this phenomenon to attempt to increase tourism within Korea and to increase the status of Korea.

Korean movies, drama, and music are enjoyed throughout the world and in many aspects are recreated by Hollywood movie and music industries. Only 30 years ago, the Korean movie industry was on its deathbed and yet today Hollywood is making “Americanised” Korean movies. In Europe, thousands upon thousands of teenage boys and girls are buying CD’s and tickets for Korean musicians to witness spectacular shows, upbeat music and to sing along with Korean lyrics. While America and Europe may be the final hurdle or destination for success, Asia has been at the beginning of the Korean wave and where most of its cultural success has been achieved. The Korean wave has over the past decade been heavily involved in the export of Korean culture and the influx of Asia tourists to visit movie and music sites with Korea (Jang and Paik, 2012).
From its early beginnings to present day, Korean music, television, movies, food, and sport stars, the Korean wave has seen an increase of interest in Korea and its popular culture. These popular cultural products are now exported not only to Asian countries but countries in the Middle East, Europe, and the Americas. The term 'Korean Wave' was originally coined by the Chinese press in the 1990s and has become synonymous with Korean culture and its increased popularity and cultural impact (Tuk, 2012). From this period onwards, South Korea, has been at the center of popular culture in Asia. Though not fully embraced at the beginning, today the Korean Wave has become an integral aspect of Korea’s global image and marketability. The demand for Korean Dramas and musicians has become so popular that fans have been demanding Korean products at an ever-increasing rate. Korean actors, actresses, and musicians are now breaking into American markets and winning awards at international festivals.

The demand for Korean popular culture has influenced several byproducts such as the popularity and demand for Korean language, the demand for car and electronic products, and to “look” like Korean men and women. The interest in Korean products, travelling to Korea, and the increase in interest in Korean Fashion has taken the government by slight surprise. Thus, Korea is now starting to be viewed as a cultural powerhouse similar to Japan and the US within Asia and beyond. The Korean government has now attempted to take expand on the Korean wave to enhance its image and attract more tourists to Korea. The government promotes “Hallyu” as forms of nation branding where Korean music, drama, food, and more recently sport are a form of cultural diplomacy. How much of an impact the government has gained is still in question but with the recent promotion of Psy as a cultural ambassador, it is clear to state that the Government will continue to utilise the Korean Wave as a cultural and diplomatic policy tool. Therefore, this study through a content analysis, examined the Korean wave and its impact on the image of Korea and how the Korean Government has utilised it to form policies to encourage tourism and improved image. With the increased challenges relating to tourism impressions, this paper highlights the important steps taken to create a strategy to highlight the positives within Korea.

Literature Review

What is the Korean Wave / Hallyu?

The Korean Wave is generally understood as Korean cultural products such as television, movies, music, food, and sport (Tuk, 2012). One of the main components of the initial wave was television drama. The first instance of the Korean wave was in China through television dramas and then Japan through music. The Korean drama What is Love was first shown on Chinese State television in 1997 and the Chinese became infatuated with the storylines and the lifestyles (Korean Culture and Information Services, 2013). Additionally, the Chinese could relate to these localised dramas more so than western or American dramas and thus future Korean dramas became highly successful. Historically popular in China, these dramas are now increasingly popular throughout the world for many different reasons according to Jang and Paik (2012). Some of these reasons are relaxing and cheerful, emotional and romantic, and tradition. In the early 2000’s Japan began to import Korean dramas and these led to an extraordinary and unparalleled interest from the Japanese on Korean culture and its icons (Korean Culture and Information Service, 2013). In part the success of these dramas in Asia was according to Shim (2006) the fact that Korean dramas were cheaper to import and music was much better organised and as such steadily gained airtime in Asia countries such as Singapore, Hong Kong, and Japan. Korean dramas consistently played to new emotions for the Japanese people and had a profound effect on their perception of Koreans.

The Korean Wave grew from Korean dramas to include music or Kpop. Thanks to the many girl and boy bands such as BoA, the Wonder Girls, Kara, Girls Generation, Super Junior, and Big Bang, the Korean wave exploded across Asia. According to the Korean culture and information service, the 1990’s saw a huge increase of success for Korean artists in Japan, China, and Taiwan. During this period, many Korean artists took their concerts outside of Korea and with the increased exposure and management coordination and became blockbusters. This was particularly true in Japan, where Korean artists continually played to sold-out concerts. The female artist BoA, was the first foreign success story in the Japanese music scene. Her albums reached number one in the music charts and she is still highly regarded and respected in Japan. One of the main reasons why she became so successful was her marketing strategy. Kpop artists were particularly smart about their marketability because they would release songs in the local language as an attempt to break into the market before releasing their full albums (Korea Creative Content Agency USA, 2006). K-pop has become a mainstay in Asian countries and has begun to make an entrance into the western music markets. Many Korean artists such as Psy, Rain, Super Junior are working with western musicians as a way to promote K-pop and to increase its marketability in those areas. As such, these artists have become cultural icons and have become major factors in the consumption of Korean cultural products and Korean image. According to the Straits Times (Anonymous 2002a and 2002b), many individuals look towards Seoul as the center of fashion, style and beauty. In fact, a general perusal of newspapers and magazines throughout Asia highlights the growing significance of Korea and its individuals on the fashion trends within the region. The early 2000’s saw “hallyu” go global with dramas being broadcast in the Middle East, Australia, and the American continent. As
mentioned earlier, many of these dramas were successful because they played to the emotions of these regions through family values, respect and honor of the family. This increased the perception of a strong middle class in Korea. Additionally, with the growth of K-pop, many overseas saw Korea through the image of beautiful boys and girls and wanted to act and dress like these idols.

The impact of these artists has been increased due to in recent years – social media, but historically due to the global music and film market. The Internet has played a huge role in the continued growth of “hallyu.” Korean dramas and music are some of the most highly watched or followed programmes on social media. Distance no longer became a barrier for “hallyu” as citizens of any country could now log on to websites and view their favourite movies or musicians. From what had started out as a television drama in China in the early 1990s has transformed into a global phenomenon within two decades.

Popularity and globalisation

The early 1990’s saw the explosion of the Korean Wave and this popularity was due to several reasons. One of the main reasons was the increase of airtime initially for television dramas and then K-pop. In relation to K-drams, one of the main reasons of its popularity was down to the beauty of the individuals in the television dramas and music. In Korean television programmes and in K-pop the majority, if not all are attractive people. An examination of television programmes shows that the female characters are all very attractive and seductive (either as strong and independent or passive and infantile), while, the male characters are sensitive, emotional, and sexy. These characteristics attract people who strive for both external and internal fulfillment.

K-pop became the spearhead for the next level of the Korean Wave. Shim (2006) stated that prior to the 1990’s most music was dominated by American pop. The Korean music industry then created a hybrid genre where they would utilise Korean and American music styles and dance. The Korean Wave was a hybrid culture according to Kim and Ryoo (2007) where there is a promotion of Asia and modernity without potential stereotyping within the Hollywood or Western entertainment industry. Whether it was television or movies or music, the Korean Wave infused Asian modernity, Western traits, and Eastern traits and created a trans-hybrid cultural product. Howard (2002) stated “...more and more musicians appropriated foreign music styles.” This appropriation gave a change in style to the younger Korean generation and opened the market to regional exportation. Kim and Ryoo (2007) discussed how K-pop stars were breaking into the Asian region and the American market. Artists such as Rain, Girls generation, and Wonder girls were on regularly in Asia and had begun to break into the American market. Indeed, Rain had been one of the most successful Asian music artists playing to sold out crowds and being named as one of Time Magazines 100 top influential stars in 2011.

The initial popularisation of the Korean culture was aimed at Japan, China, and South Asia and was considered an emphatic success (Jang and Paik, 2012). The next step was to go global. The Korea Creative Content Agency USA (2006) highlighted that globalisation was initially created through traditional media but it was the new media that really globalised the Korean wave. The exposure from social media made the popularity and globalisation of the Korean wave easily accessible for those outside of Asia. Social media such as Facebook to twitter, and YouTube means that K-Drama or K-pop is now at the fingertips of the world’s youth (Cho, 2012). The Internet has turned what was once a regional cultural force into a global opportunity for Korea to export Korean cultural examples. Specifically, Korean artists have utilised the internet to showcase their talents at relatively little cost compared to traditional methods. The most recent example of this phenomenon was Psy and his song “Gangnam Style.” This video first went viral on social media before most traditional media sources were aware of it. Once the video on YouTube had become such an extraordinary success and the most watched video ever on YouTube, the traditional media finally took notice. Once traditional media, both in Korea and outside, noticed the rising popularity they “jumped on the bandwagon,” and Psy became one of the most popular entertainment figure of 2012. Eventually, Psy and his song became so popular that he performed the song for Presidents and at mega sport events watched by billions.

There are now large number of websites dedicated to K-drama and K-pop. K-Drama websites allow foreign residents to watch these dramas with subtitles effectively nullifying the language barrier and potentially encouraging people to learn Korea. K-pop has the largest number of websites and highlights the concept of the “new Korean Wave” with music at the forefront. Many of these websites delve into a mixture of culture and music and again expose foreign residents to Korean culture through music. Social media has led to major impacts for the Korean entertainment industry and tourism, and in turn, an opportunity for Governmental branding of “Korea.”

METHODOLOGY

Research was conducted using a qualitative, content analysis method. This method allowed the author to examine documents pertaining to governmental organisations, newspaper and journal articles to fully comprehend the overall impact of the Korean wave and governmental strategies used to promote Korea through the Korean wave. Through content analysis, the author analysed the mission and objectives of the Korean governmental organisations to determine their overall strategies and what was both positive and negative in relation to the Korean Wave. Additionally, the author
analysed relevant journal and newspaper articles to review the impact, popular strategies, and potential issues in relation to the implementation of the Korean wave. The discussion section includes pertinent articles that highlight the results of governmental strategies.

**DISCUSSION**

**Korean Wave Impact**

The globalisation of the Korean wave has led to impressive impacts for the entertainment industry, tourism industry, and Korea’s image. The entertainment industry has seen increased profits for its management and increased exposure for its musicians and actors. These individuals are role models and icons for the younger generation in Asia and in many other parts of the world. Their popularity has led to increased sponsorship and marketability for them. Additionally, Kim and Ryoo (2007) mentioned that the Korea entertainment industry now exports more films and television programmes than in previous decades and its actors and directors are becoming more famous every year. K-pop stars are on advertising billboards in South East Asia and in Thailand, K-pop is extremely visible throughout everyday life. Tuk (2012) stated that since the Korea Wave there has been an increase of television drama exports from 6 million in 1993 to more than 180 Million in 2010. Such high profile exports have led to an increased interest in Korea itself as well as its industries. Additionally, according to an article in the New York Times, early Hallyu success helped to promote Korean industries and cultural exports increased from barely anything to over $600 Million (Onishi, 2005). More recently, in 2011, the Ministry of Culture, sports, and Tourism (MCST) announced that exports of both cultural and materials has increased steadily towards the multibillion dollar level in countries in the Middle East, Central and South America and Central Asia, all significantly, areas that have imported ‘hallyu.’ The rate of exports in South Asia has also risen in such countries as Vietnam and Thailand. Specially, concerning Vietnam, the exports has risen by over 100%, which given the history between Korea and Vietnam this shows the impact of hallyu.

The Korean tourism industry has seen a huge influx since the beginning of the Korean Wave. From as early as 2002 after the World Cup, Korea noticed an increase in positive imagery thanks to a well-organised and successful tournament. Therefore, the government wanted to continue to encourage the perception of Korea as a political, economic, and social powerhouse in Asia and increased its use of hallyu as a promotion tool (Kim, 2010; Lee, 2003). Park (2004) specifically highlighted that this promotion has historically been a success as there was a 50% increase of Taiwanese tourists in 2004 when compared to 2003. Kim and Ryoo (2007) reiterated the steady climb in tourist’s thanks in part to Hallyu and this increase in tourists has led to increased purchase of Korean cultural goods. Shim (2011) highlighted that many tourists visited the locations where the dramas were filmed. The number according to Shim was well over 130,00 and they came from China and Southeast Asia. Many of these tourists see hallyu as a blend of Western and Asia cultures and easier to adopt than Western only according to Choi (2001). This adoption of a blended culture or hybridisation has led to an increased popularity of not just Korea but for the hallyu participants. According to Nakagawa (2010), a plethora of ‘fan clubs’ has sprung up around the world and this clubs are at the heart of the increase in tourism. Indeed, it is not rare to see Korean fashion on the streets of Southeast Asia, China, and Japan. So popular are many of the singers and actors, that, hallyu fans have reverted to visiting Korea to get plastic surgery to look like their idols (Shim, 2011). In total, over 11 Million people visited Korea with many from the China/North Asia region (Shim, 2011).

The Korean wave has created a softer image of Korea and as such Korea has seen tremendous growth since its modern day birth after the Korean War. Yet, many throughout the world had no idea of Korea. With the Korean wave, there has been increased interest in Korea, increased interest and understanding of Korean culture, increased study of the language, increased consumption of Korean goods and the formation and solidification of a positive image of Korea (Shim, 2011). A perfect example of this was the K-pop recent concert in Paris where tickets sold out within 15 minutes. Organisers stated that there would only be one show but such was the demand for another show and the fact that French K-pop fans protested, the organisers relented and held another show. This show sold out in 10 minutes (Anjaiah, 2011). Additionally, this positive image has been transferred to the Korean Electronic industry. The use of Korean actors or musicians as spokespeople for the company product has seen demand for those products increase and according to Shim (2006) Koreans have now realised the importance of culture in the promotion of everyday products. As recent as 2010, the government has stated that they plan to utilise the Korean Wave to promote tourism linked commercials overseas and thus promote Korea as a national brand (Yang, 2010).

**Government policy and use**

Historically, the government has been involved with the media and entertainment industry as a form of domestic propaganda rather than economic or international promotion. Form the late 1990’s according to Shim (2006), the Korean government created a plan to enhance the standing of the Korean entertainment industry. Universities were tasked with producing the next generation of directors, producers, and actors. Film studios were actively promoted by the government and money was
spent on creating agencies that primarily focused on promoting tourism based on Korean culture (and K-Drama locations). Today while the government owns many of the media outlets, there are numerous private organisations and the philosophy is no longer domestically orientated but rather international focused and promoted. The overall success of Korean industry in global markets has given the Korean government confidence to promote its culture as the next marketable product. Thus, the success of the recent Korean Wave underlined to the Korean Government the potential growth and marketability through cultural promotion. According to Han and Lee (2008) and Ravina (2009), Korean government viewed the Korean wave not just as a cultural export but also as a marketing and business phenomenon. With the help new technology and social media, Korean culture as a commodity is now available in the far distant corners of the world and has attracted foreign media to Korea. Thus, the government has promoted Korea as the “Hollywood” of the east” (KCIS, 2013). The Korean government has further taken a major role in the promotion and penetration of cultural products in the overseas market through the Ministry of Culture, sports, and Tourism (MCST). Additionally, the Korean government has increased the budget and increased their overseas foothold through specialists who promote hallyu and the interest in Korean culture (Cho, 2012).

The Korean government has taken several steps to continue the influence of the Korean Wave. A major step was the creation of hallyu agencies under the umbrella of the MCST. These departments focused on promoting hallyu through different avenues such food events, sport events, or celebrity events, but especially through music concerts (Staines, 2012). Staines also described how the MCST are reportedly spending over 13 billion on musical festivals in the coming few years. The government has levied these organisations to travel to other countries such as India, Thailand, Indonesia, America, Brasil and parts of the Middle East to promote the Korean wave. Governmental agencies such as the Korean Tourism Board and the Korean Culture and Content Agency utilise “hallyu” as a consumer cultural product and are a mainstay for tourism on many of their media outlets, especially on-line media. One of the major steps was to open Korean cultural centers in many foreign countries; according to Coll (2011), the government opened centers in Australia, Spain, and the Philippines. These cultural centers also are used to promote the Korean Language and according to Chung (2013) the popularity of “hallyu” has led to an increase in interest of the Korean language. In fact, the number of language centers overseas has now increased and the numbers have risen dramatically from 80,000 to 160,000 in the space of a few years. The government has taken a keen interest in this area and is helping fund these language centers overseas.

The government has also promoted the Korean Broadcasting Commission (KBC) to promote films and television overseas and to visit international film festivals. This according to Tuk (2012) has resulted in Korean dramas being played in South America, Central Asia, and Africa. One example of using the Korean Wave as a tourist attraction was the use of movie sets and television sets as tourist destinations (Tuk, 2012). Kim (2011) also stated that the KBC went to several Southeast Asia countries and these trips had a positive effect of exports and tourism. The MCST and the Korean National Tourism Organisation (KNTO) regularly publish news articles about “hallyu” through their digital media sites and produce in-depth reports on the popularity of K-drama and K-pop. These reports and the articles are positively promoting the brand Korea and promote visiting Korea through Korean Wave tourism. The KNTO also developed travel programmes and travel tours to help encourage more tourists to visit Korea and visit the places of the modern “hallyu” idols.

The Korean Wave is a revenue and branding tool for the Korean government and agencies. The Korean government while not actively taking all the credit for the Korean wave are now heavily involved in maintaining the status quo and continuing the growth of the Korean wave. Prominent actors and actress are used by governmental agencies to promote Korea as a tourist destination and this use of Korean actors and musicians has allowed Korean businesses to break into regional markets. Korean businesses are now using the Korean wave as an avenue to promote their profits. According to the Korean Culture and Content Agency (2006) the Korean wave or “hallyu” has improved Korean business access and profits both regionally and internationally. Samsung, LG, and KIA/Hyundai have all used K-pop idols as figureheads in their product promotions. Indeed, the government has viewed the Korean Wave as a stepping-stone from increasing the popularity of K-drama and K-pop to the purchase of cultural products, purchase of other products, and eventually, a positive impression of Korea. The overall benefit to the continued promotion and growth of the Korean wave or “hallyu” is not just the culture promotion but also the economic promotion of Korea. Kim (2011) highlighted four stages of the Korean wave as 1) popularise Korean culture; 2) increase of purchases of Korean cultural products; 3) purchase of other Korean products; 4) positive impression of Korea. From these stages, one can clearly glean the function of the government in the Korean wave – start with cultural promotion and end with economic promotion.

Conclusion
The expansion of “hallyu” has taken place at a very fast rate. You can now see and hear Korean drama or music in nearly every continent in the world. The initial phenomenon garnered the interest of the Korean government and they played a role in the continued expansion and growth of “hallyu.” The government’s role in creating agencies and
offices in different countries in an attempt to promote Korean culture has added to the Korean dramas and music success and has changed the philosophy of “hallyu.” The first initial steps of the Korean wave were to promote Korea and its culture – the end steps being increased international economic growth for Korean industries and the positive image of Korea. The success of the Korean wave is based on several factors but the prime one is that dramas and music seen worldwide are adaptable to different viewer perceptions. From the conservative family views that attract many western viewers to the non-sexual love stories that attract the Middle East, and the wealthy lifestyles that attract viewers from South Asia. Korean Dramas have something for everyone and according to many researchers is a success because they are apolitical and are adaptable for the majority of cultures.

The governments involvement is not to change the content but to enhance the visibility of it, thus, they bring out news reports, positive stories about Koreans overseas and their success. This means that many of the general population believe that Korea is well known throughout the world and the nation has a positive national brand. The recent success of Psy and his single “Gangnam Style” and his new role as a governmental spokesman for Korea has highlighted that “hallyu” is not slowing down and the government is at the heart of its growth. The Korean wave has led to an increase in tourists visiting Korea for shopping and pleasure. Tours from China, Thailand, Vietnam, and Japan regularly come to Korea to visit K-Drama television and movie sites and to view first hand Korean culture. Hallyu has been a resounding success and has done more to promote Korea than any political or diplomatic policies. If you ask most people today who is South Korea's most famous son or daughter – the majority would mention a K-pop artist or K-Drama actor rather than Ban Ki Moon the Secretary-General of the United Nations. This shows the power of the Korean Wave whether you agree with it or not!

Conflict of interests

The author declare that he has no conflict of interests.

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