



The Relevance of “Soft Power” and Hallyu’s Success in Romania

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Abstract

The cultural and educational export of Hallyu in Romania offered an example in the success of teaching and learning Korean Studies in Romania. The on-line Korean Studies courses (2012-2017) which had been delivered to the Romanian students had enabled them to learn about different societies, acquiring the understandings about universal values and enhancing their knowledges about South Korea. As regards the dissemination of South Korea’s popular culture, the researches made between 2011 and-2017 showed that Romanian fans and general audiences of South Korea’s cultural products perceived and decoded Hallyu as a cultural “mix” between the “local” (that is, South Korean) elements and the appeal at a set of “global” (universal) values. More precisely, in the case of Romanian audiences for Hallyu products (TV series and/or K-Pop music) there was a validation of theories regarding the cultural hybrid motivations involved in media consumption and theories emphasizing globalism and of these cultural products, making them desirable and wanted world-wide. The main conclusion of the article is that the audience of Hallyu in Romania is not a homogenous one but diverse and polyvalent. The success of Hallyu in this country is the result of the creative use of “Soft power” as a part of South Korea’s public diplomacy in Europe.

Keywords: South Korea, Hallyu, Romania, audience, fans.

1. Introduction

Historically speaking, in the winter of 2009-2010 the Romanian mass media noticed the existence of a new “targeted” public: the audience of the *Sageuk* (historical) dramas broadcasted at the national public television. Between 2010 and 2014 there were published around eighteen articles in the Romanian printed press (newspapers and magazines) about this new television “trend”: the Korean TV series and their audience and on the 31st of March 2011 one of the Romanian leading TV music-channel (UTV) aired the first K-Pop video: BOA (Kpropro, 2011). This event was announced both on the internet sites devoted to TV Korean series and on the K-Pop Romanian fans sites and it is the first sign of the new “Soft power” strategy of South Korea in Romania.

Speaking about “Soft power” Nye (1991: 11) had differentiated between two types of power: power which can be generated by coercion (“hard power”) or attraction (“soft power”). A multifaceted concept, “Soft power” was frequently used in social and political sciences in an attempt to explain the complexities of the contemporary world and it was frequently replaced by

“cultural influence” in cultural studies. When scientists approached the field of popular culture using the concept of “Soft power” they assess the export of popular culture as the main vehicle through which the world comes to know about and is attracted by a country (Nye, 2004: 16).

In the last decades one striking example of using “Soft power” in creative and dynamic ways was offered by the Republic of Korea. South Korea had seized the diplomatic opportunity of this concept and had developed a cultural new phenomenon with its help – that is, Hallyu.

According to the studies devoted to Hallyu phenomenon (Tada-Amnuaychai, 2006), the expansion of Korean folk culture included two distinctive stages: the pre-2000 period (“The First Korean Wave”) and the post-2000 period (“The Second Korean Wave”). If in the first phase, Korea exported especially movies and television series to various countries, the unforeseen success of Korean folk culture is based on the combination between “the cultural mix” and the use of the newly emerging economic opportunities – particularly the access to digital technologies, mainly the internet (Hae-Joang, 2005).

What are the South Korean products’ ingredients of success? At a first glance, we could say that in spite of all the disadvantages Korea might face in terms of the language barrier and “cultural visibility” (especially when compared to North-American cultural products), its media products managed to turn the use of polyvalent cultural elements and the attentively articulated content into advantages. The cultural value of these products is multidimensional; therefore, it does not strictly reside at the language level known by the public or by just a part of it (Cunningham & Sinclair, 2001). In terms of content, the appeal to general common values allows cultural assimilation among audiences, thus reducing the danger of cultural opposition or rejection. Moreover, standardization and specialization are necessary for such products to be able to reach global audiences (Cunningham & Sinclair, 2001).

If “family-friendly” values were considered the main reason for the success of South Korean television series exported abroad, the interest for South Korea’s popular music seems to be due to its increasingly transnational and hybrid aspects (Jung, 2009). At the same time, the strategic cultural hybridization on which K-Pop is based is due first and foremost to the need to meet the complex desires of various consumer groups, which maximizes capitalist profit (Jung, 2011). As Kim (2008: 105) showed in her analysis of media consumption in Asia, the most conventional mechanism that facilitates the pleasure of consumption is the “fan group,” which (Kim, 2008: 105):

“... organizes avid consumers with shared affections for a particular performance artist, drama series or genre of programs into a ‘community’.”

An important concept which can be used in the analysis of Hallyu’s impact in Romania is “social identity”, especially the theories that explore the relationship between an individual’s personal identities and their group identities, and the ways in which this relationship is evident in everyday talk (Abrams & Hogg, 1988; Holmes, 1997). In general, the individual identity is conceived as a unique complex of interacting aspects of different group and personal identities (Abrams & Hogg, 1988; Holmes, 1997). In any interaction, while all facets of an individual’s social identity are potentially relevant resources, individuals tend to present or focus on particular aspects of their social identity, sometimes emphasizing gender, sometimes ethnicity, sometimes power, authority or professional status, and sometimes organizational or institutional identity.

“Identity” is an extremely complex construct and the study of this issue has “attained a remarkable centrality within the human and social sciences” (Du Gay, Evans & Redman, 2000). According to Zimmerman (1998), there are three main types of identity that can be discerned in a person: transportable, situational and discourse identity. The first type could be seen as the essence of a human being, which a person carries, or “transports” along with him/her and which is present in any context. The second type is the identity that emerges depending on a specific

situation and that change in different contexts. Finally, there is the discourse identity, which is constructed locally in every single stretch of talk or text that a person produces. Bauman (2000: 1) describes this final type of identity construction as follows:

“...in this perspective identity is an emergent construction, the situated outcome of a rhetorical and interpretive process in which interactants make situationally motivated selections from socially constituted repertoires of identificational and affiliation resources and craft these semiotic resources into identity claims for presentation to others.”

Many sociologists and psychologists still assume that identities are solid structures, built in a more complex way, from a variety of “building blocks” (Cohen, 1997). However, writers such as Bhabha challenge this assumption and state that the articulation of the difference between “spaces” is where we need to focus our attention (Bhabha, 1994). In the same vein, Bourdieu (2016) talks of the “biographical illusion” that describes life as a coherent path according to culturally available interpretive patterns and images.

In the case of the fans of the popular culture’s product the exteriority of the relations individuals have with their “object of fandom” is in a continuous dynamic. “Fan-groups” and “fandoms” are, as such, key-elements of the Hallyu spread worldwide (Bergen, 2011), Korean Culture and Information Service (2011: 46) has stressed:

“Accordingly, in recent years, most Korean Wave fans, too, have come into contact with and/or consumed K-pop or Korean dramas for the first time through the Internet. People flocked from all over Europe to see performances by Korean idol groups that had never released an album or held a performance in Europe, and Korean K-pop groups were able to sweep the Japanese charts simultaneously with their debuts because consumers were already aware of their music through their videos on YouTube.”

Scholars in cultural and audience studies have long examined the interrelations between audience participation and mass media in fan and fandom studies (Baym, 2000). The relationship between the fan and their object of fandom is considered to be rooted in emotional consumption (Sandvoss, 2005). Objects of fandom are defined as “the fans’ extension of self in which no meaningful distinction between the fan and the object of fandom is maintained” (Sandvoss, 2005). In his analysis of fans and fandoms in the East Asia region, Iwabuchi (2010: 87) pointed out that:

“A fundamental feature of the fan might be defined as a passionate devotion to a particular media text or icon. [...] Thus ‘fan’ could be understood as an imaginative prosumer (producer-consumer) and appropriator (appropriator-reader) who does not just passively consume media texts but actively and creatively participates in their cultural signification processes.”

The Internet’s major role in the success of K-Pop as “an avenue for organization of transnational consumption of pop culture” (Kim, 2008) is a widely accepted fact, many K-Pop fan groups from other countries being in fact “mirror-images” of the Korean-based ones (Kim, 2008).

At the same time with Hallyu’s spread world-wide, scientists (Chua, 2012; Lee, 2008; Shim, 2006) had developed several theses in order to explain these phenomena. Thus, “the cultural proximity thesis” is based on the idea that culture flows more easily between culturally similar countries than between culturally different ones (Chua, 2012). According to “the cultural discount thesis” due to the hybrid nature of Hallyu’s cultural products, the impact these types of products had on external markets and audiences is based on their distinctive nature as compared with the local cultural products (Lee, 2008; Shim, 2006). “The cultural hybridity thesis” considers South Korea popular cultures and its products as “cultural hybrids” and it assumes that those

cultural products are unique due to their mixed – or “hybrid” – nature: they are mainly Western in form but mostly traditional (or national) in contents (Shim, 2006; Lee, 2008).

In the existing literature (Ryoo, 2008; Jenkins, 2006) Hallyu is more and more seen as an alternative to the cultural globalization dominated by the USA or/and by the Western world (Ryoo, 2008), a new type of globalization which includes in its cultural products both Western and Eastern elements (Jenkins, 2006).

Due to the fact that there is little knowledge and a low level of public awareness about the impact of South Korea’s Soft Power in Eastern Europe the present article with attempt a descriptive analysis about the Hallyu spread in Romania and the opportunities for development in this country.

2. Methodology

The present article used a set of data collected through the making of several sociological projects made between 2011 and 2017 in Romania.

The first set of data is made of the results of an evaluation of the online courses presented within “KF Global E-school in Eurasia” made between 2012 and 2016. In the autumn of 2012 University of Bucharest had joined the project “KF Global E-school in Eurasia”, directed by Central European University from Hungary and financed by The Korea Foundation (KF Global E-school in Eurasia, 2017). Focusing on all social sciences, the project had been developed to create and sustain a critical mass of students needed to the success of experience sharing and high-level class delivery. Universities from Russia, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Georgia, Turkey, Romania, Finland, Slovakia, Hungary, Austria, Italy, Germany, France and the UK were also members of the project’s network (KF Global E-school in Eurasia, 2017). At the end of each online course delivered within the program students were asked to fill a questionnaire regarding the content of the course, ways in which the topic was presented, technical issues related to on-line platforms. No socio-demographic data regarding the respondents was recorded in all successive “waves” of questionnaires’ application. The data were collected on a sample of 80 Romanian students, 62 women and 18 men, all aged 20-30 years, from different faculties of the University of Bucharest – Sociology, History, Political Sciences, Foreign Languages, Letters and Law.

The second set of data was collected in a project made in 2011 on Romanian K-Pop fans. The methodology used in this project was a quantitative one (Denzin, 2006), namely a survey which was made on a sample of 72 Romanian fans of K-Pop music. The structure of sample is the following: 5% men and 95% women; 9.85% aged under 15 years old, 79.02% aged 15-20 years and 20.13% aged over 21 years; 10% of the subjects living in villages and 90% of them in urban areas (small, medium and big cities).

Finally, a third set of data was gathered in a project made in 2013-2014 with the help of the AKS Grant (AKS-2013-R71) – “Searching the Sameness and Otherness through Hallyu – A comparative analysis of South Korean popular products’ impact in Balkans and Central Europe”. We have used also a quantitative methodology (Denzin, 2006) in this case – a survey – and the Romanian national sample enclosed in the analysis comprised 120 respondents. All the interviewees were women and 83% were aged 13-19 years old. All the respondents lived in urban areas (small, medium and big cities).

The results were analyzed with the help of SPSS program and only descriptive statistics – simple frequencies – are discussed.

3. Results

In the last three decades, periodic cultural and educational exchanges between Romania and South Korea are taking place through the “Cultural Collaboration Agreement between the Government of Romania and the Government of the Republic of Korea” signed in 1991 (Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018). Those exchanges involve the organization of movie festivals, artistic performances and art exhibitions, book donations etc. Annually, scholarships are awarded for students both at Romanian and South Korean Universities. A department of Romanian language and civilization is functioning at Hankuk University in Seoul and Hankuk University is twinned with the University of Bucharest, “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iași and Babeș-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca (Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018).

In the last twenty-eight years Korean study programs were settled at two leading Romanian State-owned universities – University of Bucharest and University of Cluj (Department of Korean Studies 2018; Department of Asiatic Languages and Literatures 2018) – and a program of Korean language was also established at the privately-owned “Romanian American University” in Bucharest. The courses offered at those Universities attempted to establish a balance between the practical knowledge of Korean language and the theoretical knowledge of civilization, history, religion, philosophy, art, film, and folk culture (Department of Korean Studies, 2018; Department of Asiatic Languages and Literatures, 2018). Korean language courses aim to accumulate basic knowledge of grammar structures and vocabulary of Korean language and are based on the practice of knowledge in concrete situations while the Korean culture and literature courses are interactive. The optional courses are held in the third year for BA students and they are organized according to students’ requirements: either as theoretical courses (e.g., folk culture, contemporary Korean film and art or Korean spirituality and philosophical thought) or as practical courses of translations from and to Korean language, which are thematically organized (Department of Korean Studies, 2018; Department of Asiatic Languages and Literatures, 2018).

The results of the evaluation of the “KF Global E-school” online courses showed that 84.4% of the students “strongly agree” and “agree” that the course had enhanced their understanding about Korea.

When asked about the degree of satisfaction with the course they attended, 37.5% of the Romanian students strongly agreed with the sentence “Overall the course was satisfactory and I would recommend this course to other students”, while 28.1% of them “agreed” on that and only 12.5% “disagreed” with this sentence.

At the same time, the percentage of the students who assessed that the quality of on-line instruction was similar to classroom-based instruction was very high – 73.1% of the total sample of our respondents.

More than half of the sample (53.1%) “strongly agree” with the sentence “The course helped strengthen my understanding about Korea”.

At the second level of analysis, we started from the fact that in Romania the visible impact of “The New Korean Wave” is the one generated by the broadcasting of Korean historical TV series. An important “boost” for the increase of the Korean television series’ audience came from the high-profile Romanian intellectuals’ public support for this type of cultural products. Thus, in an editorial published in 19 August 2009 by the national newspaper “Adevarul” (“The Truth”) Andrei Pleșu (philosopher, professor at the University of Bucharest) extolled the quality of those TV-series (Pleșu, 2009):

“Last week, by chance, I discovered, on the first channel of the national television, a South-Kororean series: ‘The Jewel of the Palace’. In only few moments I had the impression to be invited on a different planet: a planet of discretion, of good taste, of

rigor and of ineffable enchantment. Everything was very clear, without being explicit at the same time. Actors are masters in expressing their feelings in an implicit manner. [...] Expressivity is the opposite of the ostentation in this case. The story is educative but is never didactical in style.”

As our data showed, similar assessments could be found among Romanians attracted by South Korea popular culture. Thus, when we asked Romanians what were the main words, they could use to characterize South Korea the answers were “amazing” (18.8%), “beautiful”, “interesting” and “wonderful” (each with 12.5% of the total Romanian sample) (see Table 1).

Table 1. Characterization of South Korean culture in a single word by Romanian audience of Hallyu

	Percent (%)
Amazing	18.8
Awesome	6.3
Beautiful	12.5
Breathless	6.3
Colorful	6.3
Interesting	12.5
Rich	6.3
Special	6.3
Sweet	6.3
Unique	6.3
Wonderful	12.5

At the same time, as the same set of data from 2013-2014 showed, watching TV dramas (43%), listening to Korean music (in general) and K-Pop (in particular) were the main “gates” for the majority of the interviewed Romanians to be attracted by South Korean popular culture (see Table 2).

Table 2. The beginning of the interest in South Korea culture for Romanian audience of Hallyu

	Percent (%)
Joining different events, making donations and visits	6.3
Listening to K-Pop	12.5
Listening to Korean music	18.8
Watching Korean TV series	43.8

In the questionnaire used for the general Romanian public of Hallyu a prospective question related to the ways in which South Korea could play the role of a “model” for their own country was introduced. The answers at this question showed that “respect for the older people/elders” (12.6%), “love of the country”, “importance of respect”, “respect for the work well done”, “the search of the progress” (6.3% each) were assessed by the interviewees as the South Korean “key-features” which could be successful borrowed and used in Romania.

Due to the fact that Romania is now a member of the European Union in 2013-2014 we have used also another prospective question related to the ways in which South Korea could play the role of a model of “Europe” as a whole. “The respect for older people/elders” and “the respect for the work well done” (12.6%) were the two main key-features Assessed by Romanians as worthy and desirable to be borrowed and used in the European societies.

Table 3. Things which can be learnt by European countries from South Korea

	Percent (%)
All / Everything	31.3
The hard-work	6.3
The love for the country	6.3
Patience	6.3
The mutual respect among people	6.3
The respect for older people/elders	12.6
The respect for the work well done	12.6

At the third level of analysis, our survey from 2011 showed that K-Pop fan groups in Romania were a rather “new” phenomenon: 40.85% of the respondents enclosed in the sample declared that they listen to Korean music only for the one or two years, 17.68% listened to it less than a year and only 4.88% declared that they had listen to this type of music for more than six years.

Playing games on the PC (79%), watching TV programs (76%), going to a club/association (54%) and shopping (51%) were the activities that had been as important as listening to Korean music in the case of Romanian fans of Hallyu.

The Romanian fans of Hallyu built their own “social identities” within the process of consuming this specific type of cultural products. Thus, their emotions related to listening at Korean music were specific, extremely peculiar. They mentioned “the ability of this type of music to change the inner state” (18.34%), “to communicate a feeling of happiness” (15.03%) and “to awake some pleasant memories” (13.38%) as central personal elements related to this type of consumption.

The peculiar “social identity” of that fan was further granted by the feeling a “different way of living”. Thus, according to Hallyu’s Romanian fans their self-defining status as “fans” for a specific type of cultural products was one of deep involvement in a different way of life: over a half of the total sample (51%) totally agree with the sentence “To be a K-Pop fan means to me that I found the music and the way of life that suits to me” and 30% simply agree with this affirmation.

On the other hand, the peculiarities of “social identities” identified in the case of Romanian fans found their expression in a deep emotional character of listening to Korean music: “the release from stress” (18.32%) and “the help in expressing the personal feeling and emotions” (16.54%) were the two main reasons invoked for listening to this type of music.

4. Discussion

In general, it is accepted that (Choi, 2010):

“The fashion, humanism, and social trend reflected in Korean television dramas convey a unique appeal of Eastern culture that never fades away.”

On the basis of our analysis, we can say that the impact and size of Hallyu in Romania had developed at some specific levels. To be more precise, the Hallyu impact could be identified in the shape of the educational and academic activities related to Korean Studies, the audience of K-Dramas broadcasted at the public station and private TV stations, the public statements of distinguished intellectuals and the lives of K-culture groups of Romanian fans.

For the students enrolled and attending the courses on Korean Studies the new knowledges acquired proved not only the changes in the educational model brought by e-learning systems but also the possibilities offered by learning new values and information related to South Korea. As the results of the implementation of the project “KF Global E-school in Eurasia” at the

University of Bucharest had pointed out on-line courses on Korean Studies enabled learning a new way of acquiring knowledge, which is highly adaptable to different kinds of student profiles. Thus, it proved some opportunities for further development of Korean Studies in Romania and the development of Hallyu on this path.

Speaking about the general audience and fans of South Korea popular culture our results validated the thesis of the existing studies (Kim, 2008; Bergen, 2011) which pointed out that those cultural products were perceived and decoded as a cultural “mix” between the “local” (that is, Korean) elements and the appeal at a set of “global” (universal) values that transcend cultural and geographical barriers. At those levels of analysis, we have witnessed both the practical validation of Liebes and Katz theories (Katz & Liebes, 1985; Katz & Liebes, 1986; Liebes & Katz, 1995) regarding the cultural motivations involved in media consumption and the validation of the theories emphasizing globalism and the hybridity of these cultural products (Chan & Ma, 1996; Hae-Joang, 2005; Dator & Seo, 2004).

5. Conclusions

In Romania, the Korean community is limited only to around 1,000 people, permanently settled or temporarily arrived for economic purposes (Pană, 2017). The diplomatic relations between Romania and Republic of Korea were established in 1990 (Embassy of Romania in the Republic of Korea, 2018). From an economical point of view (Kang, 2012):

“EU is Korea’s largest trading partner, after China and Japan, and Korea is the EU’s eighth largest trading partner. In 2011, Korea’s trade with the EU had surpassed 100 billion USD.”

The Republic of Korea invested substantially in Romania after 1990. At the end of 2009, the total volume of commercial exchanges of Romania with the Republic of Korea was of 677,151 million dollars, of which Romanian export: 198.911 million dollars, import of 478.24 million dollars (Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018). This defines Romania’s status as emerging market, and the Republic of Korea as an economy in expansion, looking for new markets. The privileged sectors of cooperation are: energy, ITC industry, electronic components and semiconductors, constructions, civil engineering, car building industry, automobiles industry, naval constructions, defense industry, agriculture, tourism; culture and education (Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018).

The Republic of South Korea occupies the second place as a destination of Romanian exports and the third as a source of imports from Asia-Pacific region. In 2012, 158 Korean commercial companies have activities in Romania, representing 0.09% from the total number of commercial companies with foreign participation to the capital present in Romania (Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018). Since 2008, the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Romania – Republic of Korea had settled headquarter in Bucharest (Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018).

In the case of Romania Hallyu’s success is rather a new phenomenon which started after 2000 and our descriptive analysis pointed out both the factors which enabled this process and the opportunities for its future development.

In the same vein as the existing literature (Ryoo, 2009) our study showed the ability of South Korean and culture industry to “effective bridge or buffer [functioning] between the West and Asia” (Ryoo, 2009).

The existing literature stresses the fact that “the cultural value” of Hallyu’s products is multidimensional so that it does not strictly reside at the language level known by the public or by just part of it (Cunningham & Sinclair 2001). Standardization and specialization are necessary for

such products in order to be able to reach global audiences (Cunningham & Sinclair, 2001). In analyzing the impact of South Korea's soft power strategies in Romania one must admit that, if the modern cultural identity is a matter of "becoming" as well as of "being" (Hall 1996: 225), then the success of South Korean cultural products exported in Romania is based mainly on their diverse character and their "glocalism". Much more, one cannot speak about a unique audience for Hallyu in Romania, but about different types of sub-groups attracted by South Korea popular culture through the use of different "Soft power" means.

From the theories about the impact of Hallyu worldwide we can say that "the cultural discount thesis" and "the thesis of cultural hybridity" had been validated by the analysis. Thus, due to the hybrid nature of Hallyu's cultural products, the impact these types of products had on external markets and audiences is based on their distinctive nature as compared with the local cultural products (Lee, 2008; Shim, 2006). At the same time, the hybrid nature of Hallyu's cultural products granted their unique character. As Romanian members of the general public and fans of Korean popular culture stressed, those products are unique due to their mixed – or "hybrid" – nature: they are mainly Western in form but mostly traditional (or national) in contents (Shim, 2006; Lee, 2008).

The use of the polyvalent Korean culture to Hallyu's advantage (Cunningham & Sinclair, 2001) could be re-phrased, in Romanian case, as ability of South Korean public diplomacy to attract various publics for South Korean popular culture's products: students, academic experts, professors, intellectuals, general members of the public, fans.

We can conclude that, in our opinion, this analysis could open the way towards new questions related to the appearance of a new "cultural and social identity" in the case of postmodern publics for various cultural products – such is the case of Hallyu (Jung, 2009).

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