

K-pop's Poppin'

An Analysis of Korean Culture in Modern Korean Pop Music with High-Context Communication

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Abstract

As of 1992, Korea experienced a surge of cultural popularity outside to East Asia such as China, which later became known as Hallyu, the Korean wave. One of the driving factors of spreading Korean culture is Korean pop (K-pop). The first instance toward a shift to modern K-pop music is with Seo Taiji's first album, which brought a variety of new music variations into K-pop. Even though K-pop has altered drastically by Seo Taiji, the group still preserved many forms of Korean culture such as groupism. It was not until 2012, with Psy's *Gangnam Style*, did K-pop successfully diffuse into one of the largest music markets in the world: the Western music market. However, as a result, many aspects of K-pop began to alter to better fit the demographic interest of the West, such as an increased prevalence of English lyrics in the songs, and the loss of the Confucian idea of preservation of the body. This hybridization of both Korean cultural preservation and Western influence places a question of the extent to which globalization has affected Korean culture in K-pop. Using the drastic difference in communication styles of Korea and the West which directly reflect the culture in their respective country, my research aims to use the difference in communication styles as a gauge for how impactful globalization is on the Korean culture in K-pop, which raises the question: How has globalization impacted high-context communication in modern K-pop lyrics? Based on methods from both K-pop and Western pop related topics, a text-based analysis on the top chart K-pop songs was conducted. The results showed that hybridization of Western and Korean cultures did emerge after Psy's *Gangnam Style*, but later transitioned to more emphasis on Korean culture rather than complete Westernization in K-pop.

Keywords: Globalization, Hallyu, Hallyu 2.0, Gangnam Style, K-pop, High-Context Communication

Introduction

In 2018, according to the Global Music Report by the International Federation of the Phonographic Industry who track over 50 markets worldwide to record music market data, Korea is the sixth largest music market in the world. Such success is attributed toward Korea's mass globalization, which is the rapid movement of ideas, attitudes, meanings, values, and cultural products across national borders. One of the driving factors of Korea's high presence in the music industry is the introduction of a new music genre called Korean pop (K-pop), which grew due to Hallyu,. The term Hallyu, also known as the Korean Wave, was first coined by Chinese media in 1998 to describe Chinese youth's sudden craze for Korean popular-culture products (Wonseok Lee 1). The term signified Korea's globalization in not just China, but many other East and Southeast Asian countries, such as Singapore, Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines (Hogarth 135; Roy 291-292). However, it was not until 2012, with Psy's "Gangnam Style" becoming the first video to reach one billion views on YouTube, did K-pop successfully penetrate one of largest music markets in the world (Wonseok Lee 3; Cho 2). With the internet, K-pop's success expanded past Asia and into the West, becoming what is now considered to be the second form of Hallyu.

While many considered K-pop as merely a fad because of one video, the South Korean music market has continued to grow exponentially in the west. Every year, KCONs, K-pop fan conventions, are held, allowing K-pop enthusiasts in the U.S. a place to convene (Wonseok Lee 3). Beyond the Western market, K-pop successfully became a cultural phenomenon as shown in 2018, where BTS became the first K-pop group to speak at the United Nations. Through Hallyu, Korea has been able to spread its culture to many other countries on a global scale, even

penetrating into some of the largest music industries in the world. However, because of K-pop's deep penetration into the U.S. market, American culture, in turn, influenced K-pop in globalization's two-way exchange, altering K-pop from its traditional song style.

What is considered to be the first shift to what is now considered modern Korean pop music was Seo Taiji's first album debut in 1992. From the influence of foreign music, he led the transformation of K-pop, challenging many traditional Korean music conventions in his music, such as the "pervasive use of the pentatonic scale" and was the first to introduce Western rap into Korean music, along with hip-hop, heavy metal, dance, and nu-metal, to name a few, exposing Koreans to non-traditional styles of music (Wonseok Lee 12-14). However, despite such a drastic shift in the style of music, Taiji still preserved Korea's culture, keeping the song's ideas true to Korean society.

Cultural Preservation in Modern K-pop

From Seo Taiji, many modern cultural values and ideas are still preserved in the modern K-pop music industry which mainly stems from Confucian thought (Kalton). One such Confucian idea is groupism, which, contrary to the western idea of freedom in individualism, emphasizes community and good relationships with others. In the context of K-pop, K-pop group singers predominate over K-pop solo singers/artists. Out of the top ten best-selling Korean albums in 2011, eight of the albums were recorded by groups, with the solo singers being accompanied by backup dancers. Furthermore, K-pop groups have a significantly higher number of members than popular Western groups and bands (Hogarth 145-146). As indicated, even in modern K-pop, groupism is still an important aspect of K-pop. However, despite Taiji's efforts to preserve Korean values, because of the influence of foreign marketing, the second wave of

Hallyu via Psy's Gangnam Style in 2012 resulted in even more accommodations for foreign listeners.

Cultural Effects of the Second Wave of Hallyu

With Hallyu starting in the late 1990s, and Seo Taiji as an influential figure, many K-pop groups began to learn foreign languages and cultures, such as K-pop boy band Izi¹, according to professor of the Department of Popular Culture in Bowling Green State University Wonseok Lee, to help spread their songs to other countries for a more successful debut (Wonseok Lee 4). However, after Gangnam Style in 2012, which released K-pop into the Western world, the function of foreign cultures and languages transitioned into the K-pop songs themselves. Lyrically, there has been increased integration of English lyrics in modern K-pop (Cho). Furthermore, many forms of Korean culture have been altered for foreign listeners. According to John Lie, Professor of Sociology at UC Berkeley, in the early 20th century, Confucian values existed in old Korean Music, specifically regarding the body. The singers both “preserved” their bodies, emphasizing their happiness for their parental gift, and avoided any display of flesh. Furthermore, the songs had moralizing lyrics, such as parental and familial love (341-342). However, modern K-pop rejects both ideas regarding the body in Confucianism.

During and after the Hallyu Wave, the use of plastic surgery became more present in the K-pop industry, which rejects the Confucian idea of preserving the body. (362). And, although Dr. Lie never proved that modern K-pop has “displayed flesh”, other researchers have been able to provide clear examples that modern K-pop has failed to uphold this. According to Dr. Hogarth, K-pop group Hyuna was banned from performing the dance to “Bubble Pop” in Korea

¹ One of the first generation bands that were a part of the beginning of Hallyu (Korea's globalization).

because it was considered to be too “sexual” and condemned by traditionalists as “lewd” (144). The use of English lyrics compared to the aforementioned learning of languages, followed by drastic cultural changes as shown with the cultural value of “body preservation,” shows much more drastic changes overall in appealing to a targeted demographic. Such a drastic change from traditional to modern K-pop music inquires the status of Korean culture after the second wave of Hallyu. Even though K-pop rejects some traditional Confucian values, like preserving the body and displaying the flesh, it still upholds some aspects of Korean culture such as groupism.

Modern K-pop as a Hybridization

From an analysis of different cultural values, it is clear that modern K-pop music does not contain solely Korean cultural values or solely Western tastes and preferences; instead, another possibility exists. Woongjae Ryoo, professor of Department of Media and Communication at Hanyang University, describes K-pop as more of a “hybridization” of both Western and Korean culture. This is furthered by Thao Emilie Do of the Turku University of Applied Sciences who says that Korea’s globalization combined both elements of both Western and Asian culture to create a new genre with its own features and qualities, including “solid vocals, powerful dancing, and attractive appearance” (36; 32). K-pop groups’ physical aspect is a key example of this new genre with both preservation of groupism and the rejection of the preservation of the body.

Indicating the Change in Korean Culture with High-Context Communication

Even though previous research has verified that globalization has successfully transformed modern K-pop into a hybridization of Korean and Western values, the problem lies in understanding the extent to which globalization has impacted Korean culture. A way of determining the extent of globalization’s effects is by analyzing the expression of the songs via

communication style. In Asian culture, high-context communication is used prominently in speech, where the message is given indirectly and delivered implicitly with very little information because the parts left out can be assumed in context. For example, in one of Taiji's songs about Korean unification, he sings, "let's open our hearts..." He doesn't explicitly promote unification, but instead leaves it up to the reader to understand what he is trying to convey. In contrast, as communication professor Rebecca Merkin states, Western cultures such as the US use Low-Context Communication which conveys their message more explicitly and directly. This difference in communication styles between Eastern and Western cultures can be attributed to variations in their cultural backgrounds and values. The origin of why Koreans engage in high-context communication is the "deeply rooted" Confucian values of saving face, compared to the low-context communication used by Americans which focus more on self-face² (Merkin). Since the form of speech of each country is reflective of their designated cultural background, it can serve as an indication for the cultural changes that occur in modern K-pop music.

Research Question

The mix of traditional Confucian values with Western styles in K-pop along with the integration of English lyrics in modern K-pop shows that both the visual and lyrical aspect of K-pop has been influenced by Western cultures. However, it is unclear to the extent to which Korean cultural values and ideas have been influenced by Western globalization after Psy's Gangnam Style. So it would be interesting to examine if there are any changes in the high-context communication present in K-pop to determine if the hybridization of K-pop leans more towards a Westernized product or keeps its cultural identity as a Korean product. Since

² Self-face refers to one's own sense of self-image, dignity or prestige in social contexts.

there exists no academic paper that specifically analyzes the change in high-context communication, it begs the question: How has globalization impacted high-context communication in modern K-pop lyrics?

By examining the alterations in Korean communication through K-pop, it will provide a better understanding of globalization's influence on the cultural values in K-pop as a whole. And, in a broader sense, it will provide a better understanding of the influence globalization can give a better understanding of the alterations of other globalized products. Based off of previous literature, particularly from Woongjae Ryoo, it is most likely that after the second wave of Hallyu prompted by Gangnam Style, K-pop songs will shift from songs with high-context communication to songs that exhibit more low-context communication, conveying the singers' feelings directly, overall shifting away from traditional values and more towards Western values. This way, K-pop will be able to target Western audiences, which probably led to its success in the music market in the first place.

Methods

To analyze globalization's influence on high-context communication, I must address what songs should be sampled, as well as how the songs will be analyzed. To do so, I delved into other researchers' methods of analyzing songs.

Methods Overview

Similar to Dubbeldam at Utrecht University's research on the English words in K-pop, I plan to use a text-based analysis. By examining each individual song lyric and its contents, it would be easier to identify and code songs with either high or low-context communication.

Even though Dubbeldam's research focused also on the lyrics of K-pop, his data analysis did not go hand-in-hand with the heavy analysis required of the communication style in Korean text because the majority of English lyrics used in K-pop songs are mostly catchphrases, whereas the main message is contained in the Korean portion of the song. In addition, since analyzing the song's content is somewhat unprecedented in K-pop research, most likely because K-pop has existed for only two decades, it would be logical to examine research on songs outside of K-pop. Evan of Brigham Young University's text-based content analysis of Country Music Lyrics, which focused on an analysis of the different themes relating to sexuality, including relations such as alcohol and tobacco, helped provide a better-suited method with a more nuance-based approach. Thus, after examining the methods used by Dubbeldam and Evans, the means of analyzing the lyrics of a song's high-context communication is best done with text-based content analysis. However, analyzing the song lyrics would not be possible without the songs itself.

Methods and Data Selection

50 songs were used for sampling and were taken from a ranking chart of the top ten K-pop songs for every year from 2010 - 2014 and retrieved from *Melon*, a popular online streaming website with over 28 million subscribers. It is important the songs are top-ranking, as the most popular songs are the songs that have successfully globalized abroad, and were subject to change via globalization. Furthermore, because this research focused on the effects of globalization into the West after Gangnam Style was released in 2012, the songs used were from the years 2010 - 2014 to measure both the high-context communication present in pre-Western globalization and post-Western globalization. Thus, the songs were separated into two parts: the first part examining the songs before Western globalization, which occurred from 2010-2012,

and the second part examining the songs after Western globalization, which occurred from 2012-2014. After organizing the songs into the two sections, the next step is to analyze each individual song using a coding sheet (see Appendix). By using a coding sheet, it provides a method towards categorizing both qualitative and quantitative data for analysis.

Coding Scheme

To create the coding sheet, I adapted Evans's content analysis on country music lyrics to fit the context of my research question. When analyzing the songs, a website called ColorCodedLyrics, with over thousands of translated songs in K-pop and J-pop, provided translations of Korean into English text for easier access and analysis. The website gives Romanization³ of the song along with the Korean lyrics, which further helped in distinguishing between the Korean and English lyrics in the song.

Song Identification: For identifying the song, the coding sheet contains the variables for the Song Name, Artist, Year (2010-2014), and Ranking (1-10). The year of the song also helped in analyzing the change of the songs over time that contained high and/or low context-communication.

Song Structure (Verse, Chorus, Bridge): Since the research is based on analyzing K-pop songs, it was important to understand the structure of the songs. After analysis, though many of the songs were different in structure, they all consisted of verses, choruses, and a bridge. Thus, the next portion of my coding sheet categorized the song structure with the verse, chorus, and bridge. The verse contains the “story” or background of the song, the chorus drives the main message to the audience through repetition throughout the song, and the bridge is used to either

³ Romanization refers to representing the Korean language in the Latin script. For example, the romanization for 안녕, which means hi in English, is *annyeong*.

drive the main point(s) of the song, or break away from it. Because each song portion plays a different function in the song, it was important to analyze each song structure separately, and then compare them with one another for a holistic understanding of the song.

Music Video: A music video analysis was also included if the song contained a music video. This is because high-context communication's implicit meaning include non-verbal forms of speech such as gestures, motions, or even the background, that many either strengthen a meaning or convey a new meaning in the song.

Basic/Hidden Meaning of the Song: Then, by analyzing each structure of the song, identifying both low and high-context communication in any portion of the song can be drawn out. For example, if the song repeated "I love you" throughout the chorus, it would be categorized as low-context communication, because the message of the song is explicitly stated, and help in understanding what the basic meaning of the song is. And, if the song contains high-context communication, a hidden meaning of the song will be present. For example, Hyuna's "Bubble pop" compared a boy's lies as bubbles, and how popping the bubbles referred to being able to understand his deception. Understanding the underlying meaning of the song through the high-context communication apparent in the songs helped in identifying the hidden meaning of the songs. Thus, it is important to analyze each structure and identify the low and high-context communication present for a more holistic understanding of both the basic and hidden meaning of the song.

Theme: Identifying the theme was also added in the coding sheet. However, throughout the fifty songs, the trend of the theme revolving around love began from the earliest song and

continued even after Gangnam style. Since there were no significant changes in the theme of the song, it wasn't used for the analysis of the song's communication style.

Communication Style: After identifying the basic meaning of the song and the hidden meaning of the song if applicable, the next step is to analyze the trend in high-context communication of the songs. From the Coding Sheet, the data range used was from 1-3, 1 as having low-context communication, 2 as having a mixture of low and high-context communication, and 3 as having high-context communication in the songs. Then, based on the frequency of the change in the songs containing high-context communication, it may provide another viewpoint of Western globalization's effect on the song's expression, answering the question prompted.

Determining Validity

It was important that the K-pop songs sampled expanded to a variety of different groups, as in some instances many newly released albums have multiple songs that exist in the top ten charts. Therefore, if there exists a song within the same album in a previous song during that year, the next popular song by a different group/singer will be selected instead. By doing so, it increases the diversity of the songs used each year, overall providing more objective data used towards analyzing the changes in the communication style of that year, rather than obtaining results of the changes that exist between K-pop artists. Furthermore, because the research method used is text-based content analysis, the coding sheet used has no ethical concerns towards other living things. However, there is a concern specifically in the method to obtain data for high-context communication. To obtain data as accurate and unbiased as possible, the method

of analyzing each portion of the song along with the music video provides a more holistic analysis for the communication style of the songs.

Results

After conducting a text-based content analysis on the 50 Korean pop songs from 2010-2014, the results are displayed in the table below.

Year	Low-context Songs	Mix of High and Low-Context Songs	High-Context Songs
2010	9	1	0
2011	7	1	2
2012	6	1	3
2013	1	9	0
2014	1	5	4

From the table, it is clear that after 2012 the *low-context communication songs* decreased drastically, from an average of seven songs to one song in the top charts that are extremely explicit in how they convey their meaning. The lyrics convey the meaning of the song in an extremely direct or explicit way. For example, in 2NE1's "I love you", she emphasizes her crush for a man, saying explicit phrases like "I keep thinking about you." In the chorus, the words "I love you" are repeated twice. In the bridge, the lyrics are similar in the verse, where she emphasizes her love for him. Overall, the song is clearly explicit and low-context.

As displayed in the second column, the songs with a *mix of high/low context communication* increased drastically from an average of one song to seven songs. Some portions

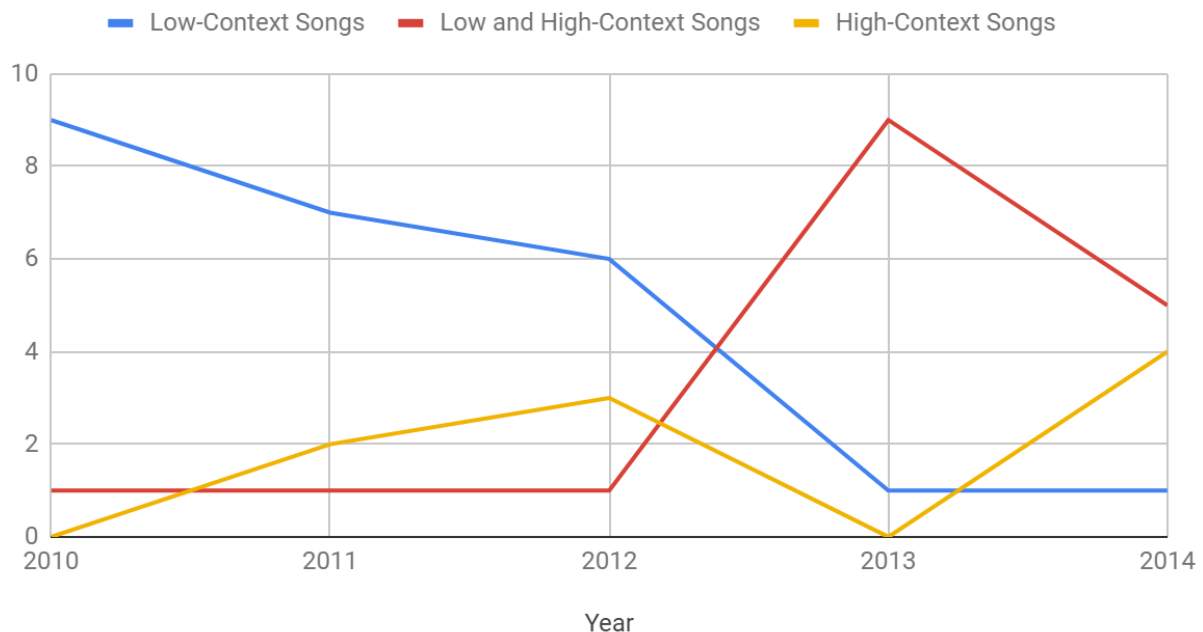
of the lyrics are explicit/direct, but other portions of the lyrics are conveyed implicitly, requiring assumptions and context to fully understand the meaning of the song. For example, in Taeyang's "Eyes, Nose, Lips", the beginning verse most likely occurs during a breakup, but not explicitly stated, where he gestures a woman to not be "sorry", telling her to "please...go". In the second verse, he wishes his memories to be happy, however, transitions to pain and sadness of her leaving. The verses, though has periods of low-context communication where he explicitly states his emotions, the listeners must create assumptions that he is singing about a girl leaving him, creating the high-context portion of the song. The chorus describes the girl with visual imagery, then compares his destroyed love as a "destruction of fire." The bridge reveals the explicit side of the song, repeating the words "I love you", which helps to aid in revealing the overall meaning of the song. Although at some parts the song is explicit, there are instances that required context to understand the meaning of the song, specifically who the singer was talking to, making the song a mix of both high and low-context communication.

As displayed in the third column, the songs with *high-context communication* slightly increased but noticed a large sharp decrease in 2013. This is most likely due to the implementation of low-context in the songs combined with high-context in the songs, hence why the number of songs with a mix of high/low-context communication is significantly large. These songs require context to completely understand the meaning of the song. For example, in Psy's "Gangnam Style", it appears that the main meaning of the song by itself is a guy that wants a girl that is nice and kind but can also party hard. However, the song is actually a satire, where Psy is poking fun at the rich and wealthy people at the Gangnam neighborhood. Specifically, he is making fun of the people who pretend to be from Gangnam. To fully understand the song, it

requires an understanding of both Psy himself, as he is from the Gangnam area, and the music video of silly dancing to fully understand the satire of the wealthy people in Gangnam.

Though many parts of the song remain the same throughout the five years, such as the centralization around the theme of loving a significant other, and how the song's verses tell a story and provide context for the meaning of the song, from analyzing 10 songs each year from 2010-2014, the songs see a shift to more usage of High-context communication after 2012, which is when Psy released his high-context song, "Gangnam Style."

Communication Style in Songs



From the graph above, it is clear that after 2012, the songs shifted to more of a hybridization of high and low-context communication. However, it later shifts to a more concentrated use of high-context communication throughout the songs.

Qualitative Changes in Modern K-pop with Western Influence

Songs began shifting from a chorus that directly indicated the meaning, to a chorus with more ambiguous meaning. Furthermore, many songs begin to link the meaning with natural imagery, such as “Wild Flower” by Park Hyo Shin or “A Midsummer Night's Sweetness” by San E X 레이나라 (Raina). This shift in metaphors and implicit meaning demonstrates the shift towards high-context communication in the songs after 2012, demonstrating that Korean music, when globalizing to the West, did not change their communication style of the song to target their audience towards Westerners, but instead, had the opposite effect, and instead shifted towards high-context communication after Western globalization.

Discussion

My hypothesis expected a shift from high to low-context communication in the songs to appeal towards the more Western demographic of a significantly lower context than the communication style of Korea. However, the results of my research effectively opposed my hypothesis, as there was instead a shift from lower to higher-context K-pop songs, indicating that the songs did not change their communication style solely to appeal to the Western communication style, but instead towards the Western tastes and demographics.

Data Analysis Trends

With the changes that have occurred in K-pop to accommodate the Western demographic, such as the increased use of English lyrics in K-pop, the communication style in Korean pop music has also drastically changed as a result of globalization (Dubbeldam). This research identified and used 50 songs within the range of 2010-2014 to analyze the change in how the song is conveyed after the popularized song “Gangnam Style” by Psy. However, unexpectedly,

the song analysis reveals a trend the opposite of what I predicted my hypothesis--the song shifted instead from low-context communication to high-context communication, rather than vice versa.

Initially, I thought the songs would consist mainly of high-context communication-styled songs, mainly because Korea's high-context communication directly reflects its Confucian values. However, introducing K-pop to the West via Psy's *Gangnam style* was not the first Hallyu, but the second Hallyu, meaning that globalization has already occurred. Because the K-pop industry was currently only popular in other East Asian countries before 2012, they most likely created low-context songs as an attempt to grasp the Western audience's attention, because expanding into one of the largest music industries would provide significant profit. This is further understood because Psy's *Gangnam Style*, though successfully becoming the coattail to Western globalization, was never intended for such audiences at a global scale. With the Korean pop industry's "formula-driven mind-set" on the strategies to expand towards the Western audience, Psy's popularity was, to say the least, extremely unexpected, as his songs were instead catered towards the locals, with references to "Korean leisure culture" (Sangjoon Lee 230). The unexpected global success of a song with high-context communication that catered towards a Korean audience is what led to the large succession of songs that contain implicit and hidden meanings to ride off of Psy's popularity. As a result, many songs after Psy's *Gangnam Style* in 2012 use high-context communication in the form of naturalistic imagery and metaphors. For instance, using "flowers" as a symbol for one's life and using "flames" as a symbol for one's love, respectively.

Limitations

Though Korean is significantly higher-context than the West, that does not mean that each individual is inherently that style of context. This idea of low/high-context communication in each respective country is coined in the 1977 book *Beyond Culture* by anthropologist Edward T. Hall. Since the idea that an American may speak in high-context and that a Korean may speak in low-context puts in question the validity of labeling a country in the first place. This is because other factors, for instance, gender, social status, and race, all contribute to each individual's communication style. Nevertheless, because K-pop's globalization affects both Korea and the West as a whole, the research conducted still provides a new outlook to the effects globalization has on a cultural product, which, in this instance, is K-pop.

Regarding song selection, the sample size is limited by the top ten songs within each year for a general understanding of the communication style between 2010 -2014. Though choosing the top ten songs provides a concrete number to understanding K-pop popularity in the West, analyzing a larger sample of songs could allow for potentially different results in the overall overarching communication style of each year. In addition, expanding the years before 2010 and past 2014 would help in examining the possible shifting and/or growing trends of high and low-context communication present. Furthermore, in the method portion of this research, the qualitative analysis of the song structures, through systematic and reproducible, still involved a lot of subjective observation. If the text-based analysis is reproduced, there may be differences in the communication styles of songs.

Implications and Future Research

Although there has been researching on Hallyu and Western Globalization's effects on K-pop music, this research is the first to discover the extent of cultural changes by using the

communication style of the songs as an indicator. From the data after 2012, it proves Woongjae Ryoo and Thao Emilie Do's hypothesis of K-pop as a hybridization of Western and Korean values, where the majority of the songs contained a mix of high-context communication and low-context communication. However, the increase of extremely high-context songs indicated a larger identity with Korean culture and values than Western culture from globalization.

Future research could replicate the same methods of this research on the first Hallyu in 1992 to analyze the reason behind the significant number of low-context communication songs pre-2012. Or instead, the same methods could be used to analyze songs past 2014 to examine if the communication style of K-pop songs still increasingly uses high-context communication.

In a broader sense, this paper shows the difficulty of a cultural product to completely alter when exposed to foreign consumers, as shown in the case where K-pop's globalization brings success to the K-pop industry, while at the same, also being able to preserve Korean culture that makes K-pop music, "Korean" pop music. K-pop's cultural status after globalization into the West sparks the question of the impact globalization has on other music markets, such as Luis Fonsi's *Despacito*, which has reached billions of views on Youtube, similar to what occurred with Psy's *Gangnam Style*.

Appendix
K-pop Song Coding Sheet

Variable	Data Range	Data
Song Name	Korean text (English text)	
Artist (name)	text	
Year(#####)	201#	
Ranking(#)	1-10	
Verse	text	
Chorus	text	
Bridge	text	
Music Video	text or N/A	
Meaning of the Song	text	
Hidden Meaning of the Song	text or N/A	
Theme Words	text	
Communication Type	1-3	
Notes	text	

This table represents the coding sheet used to analyze each K-pop song used in this research paper. The Data Range column states what should be entered for the “Data” section for each variable.

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