

## **Stagnant Fans and Retired Fans: The Other Side of Hallyu Fandom in the Philippines**

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### **Abstract**

The study aimed to answer the questions of how both hallyu itself has evolved, as well as the Filipino fans of hallyu, and why some of these fans lie low or drop out of the hallyu fandom. Results showed that a Filipino fan's interest on hallyu evolve over time. However, the interest and knowledge of Korea's traditional and modern, cultural, and linguistic aspects continue to benefit even the so-called stagnant and retired fans.

Keywords: Stagnant fans, retired fans

"Hallyu," also known as the "Korean Wave," is still big in the Philippines as of 2014. The hit charts in music channels such as Myx show that Korean popular music (K-pop) is still very popular among the Filipinos (and from April to May 2014, 2NE1's song "Come Back Home" has consistently been number 1 in the Myx International Top 20.) Also, local television channels continue to show Korean drama series, coined as "Koreanovelas" by the Filipinos (Que, 2010). These two are the most popular forms of hallyu, as music and television shows are the most accessible to the general public; other forms of hallyu include "films, animation, games," and expressions of fandom such as fan clubs for the celebrities (Cho, 2011).

In South Korea, this trend started in the early 1990s, and has both been influenced by and been influencing popular cultures in Northeast Asia, as well as the west (Ibid.). In the Philippines, hallyu has been popular since the early 2000s through the form of the Koreanovelas, because these drama series are unique from the Filipinos' point of view (i.e. filming locations, fashion, plot, etc.) (Que, 2010; Reyes, 2012.) However, the Korean craze shot up during 2009, when K-pop made its way to the country, especially after Sandara Park became part of idol group 2NE1

from being a teen celebrity in the Philippines (Que, 2010). During this era, many people instantly became fans of K-pop, but many more Filipinos did not understand why these people were converted easily. The hallyu community back then was just a noisy minority, and hallyu in the Philippines itself was semi-mainstream because of the Filipinos' general awareness of hallyu's existence; hallyu in the country was just waiting for its tipping point to flow to the mainstream Filipino society, and be accepted by the *hoi polloi* as a "social reality" in the Philippines (Ibid.).

Potential fans, who eventually became full-fledged fans, were drawn to hallyu because of its uniqueness and difference from the typical Filipino or Western popular culture products (Ibid.). Cho (2011) even calls hallyu as a "rejection" of the western culture, although hallyu itself has many western influences in hybrid with the Korean culture. Filipino fantasies encouraged and dealt by hallyu, such as traveling and discovering a foreign culture, having snow, hearing a new language, or having white skin, have also been main reasons why people were hooked on hallyu (Ibid.). More importantly, hallyu has become a daily need for the fans, because hallyu is the reason for these fans' social activities (Ibid). For some, hallyu has built new friendships, and for others, hallyu has added spice to old friendships.

Recently, hallyu has become a regular, everyday thing in the Philippines, regardless of opinions by both regular consumers (non-fans,) fans, and "haters." Philippine expressions of hallyu have been made, such as Philippine remakes of Korean novels, or the mildly controversial sub-genre of Philippine popular music called "P-pop" (Pinoy Pop) (Ibid.). Hallyu is now part of the Philippine mainstream, but despite the increasing number of Filipino fans of hallyu, there are also many who lie low and limit their fan activities to a minimal degree, or drop out of the fandom altogether. These are what this study coins as the "stagnant fans" and "retired fans" respectively. This study takes interest in these two groups of fans, because these two groups present a rare or new angle not only in hallyu studies, but also in fan studies. Most studies on fandom, whether from an emic or

etic perspective, are generally preoccupied with why people are attracted to objects of fandom, in order to give the general public a better understanding as to why people are obsessively drawn to these things. Most of these studies unconsciously assume that people who become fans are stuck with the fandom (i.e. otaku fandom, horror movie fandom, other genre-based fandoms, etc.) with special cases such as terminal fandoms like long-time television series that end after a few years or so. (In these cases, fans of these series may evolve to being fans of the actors from the series themselves, or continue to being fans of the certain drama series by re-watching the entire series repeatedly time after time, or do other fan-like actions in response to their nostalgia of the series.) In the case of this study, understanding why fans lie low or drop out of a fandom sheds light on how both hallyu and the Filipino fans have evolved over time. The hallyu fandom is also an interesting case to study, since hallyu surpasses its label as a mere "genre" or specification, but rather, hallyu itself is an inter-webbing of different aspects of showbiz (and showbiz alone is a complex web by itself), consumerism, tourism, popular culture, (Korean) traditional culture, and human activity (Cho, 2011; Que, 2010; Reyes, 2012). This implies that lying low or retiring from one aspect of hallyu fandom (i.e. media-centric fandom like K-pop,) will affect perceptions on other aspects of hallyu and South Korea.

### **Research Questions, Framework, Methodology**

The aim of the study is to answer the questions of how both hallyu itself has evolved, as well as the Filipino fans of hallyu, and why some of these fans lie low or drop out of the hallyu fandom. A former study on hallyu (Que, 2010) used Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch's (1974) "Uses and Gratifications Theory" infused with Cornell Sandvoss' (2005) concepts of fandom. The uses and gratifications theory states that consumers of media are specific with which types of media they consume, depending on what need they must satisfy (i.e. reading a newspaper to fulfill the need of being updated with current events) (Katz, Blumler, Gurevitch, 1974). One significant aspect of this is the consumption of media in order to satisfy the need

for social interaction and enculturation (Katz, Blumler, Gurevitch, 1974), where the people who accompany or relate to a person in consuming a particular media text are as important, or even more important than the media text itself. As for Sandvoss (2005), he showed that fan actions and receptions differ by gender. True enough, in the study of hallyu movements in the Philippines, female fans were shown to be more attached to, and more emotional towards hallyu, saying that hallyu has served as their inspiration, their love, their stress-relievers, or their happiness; male fans on the other hand were more detached, and still treat hallyu media texts only as forms of entertainment (Que, 2010.)

Since female fans have a closer and a more personal affiliation with hallyu, this study concentrates more on female fans who have become stagnant, or who have retired. To be more specific, "stagnant fans" of hallyu are people who still remain fans, but have greatly reduced their fan activities and updates, usually limiting these to their idol biases, compared to before when they would be highly-updated about everything that has to do with the hallyu world beyond their idol biases; these updates may not even be regular anymore, and because they are "stagnant," they do not re-expand their fan biases, or if they do, the minor revival of being a fan would usually be limited or short-lived. Attending concerts and conventions may still be done apart from personal consumption of hallyu media texts, but the enthusiasm is not that high anymore. The group of "retired fans" is easier to understand, and as stated in the previous section, refers to people who have completely dropped out from the fandom. They differ from "anti-fans," informally known as "haters," in such a way that retired fans of hallyu were once fans of hallyu, but now are generally apathetic. They do not necessarily hate hallyu, unlike anti-fans who are passionate on defaming hallyu, however, it is possible for retired fans to end up becoming haters or anti-fans, mainly influencing their former co-fans to retire from the fandom as well; this will depend on why the retired fans dropped out in the first place, and why fans drop out will be discussed in the next section.

Interview sheets were sent to people who claim to be stagnant or retired fans via snowball method. These people were a bit difficult to find because hallyu still has a big following in the Philippines, and those who seemed to be stagnant or retired were still in denial that they have become stagnant or retired fans; potential respondents who were in denial were not used in the study, as these people's mindsets vis-a-vis their position on the fandom may skew the data. The respondents were also middle to upper-middle class, since previous researches have claimed that most fans come from these socio-economic brackets (Que, 2010; Cho, 2011); these people had more purchasing power, had more opportunities to pursue the fandom more deeply, such as travelling or frequently attending concerts.

## **Results and Discussions**

Among the ten people interviewed, 8 claim to be stagnant fans, and 2 claim to be retired fans. They were asked when they became fans, and when they realized they were losing interest in hallyu. Although the sample is rather small, it can be observed that the life span of being a hallyu fan, based on the respondents' answers, is mostly around 4 to 6 years. These were the people who mostly and officially declared themselves to be fans of hallyu during the K-pop height in 2009, or slightly earlier during the height of Korean novelas (circa 2006-2007.)

The respondents were asked to give a general overview of their fandom before more specific questions about their status as a stagnant or retired fan, in order to have a close and detailed comparison of their fan movements before and now. Just like in the early study on hallyu in the Philippines (Que, 2010,) these female fans did highlight their emotional affiliation with hallyu, with "happiness" as the most frequent word. One respondent even claimed that her idol bias, Super Junior, "helped [her] get through difficult times in life," and that listening to Super Junior's songs made her feel that she could "overcome any challenge." This attachment may be the reason why many potential respondents were in denial that they were slowly going out of the fandom. Hallyu was a necessity for them in such a way

that much of their social lives revolved around hallyu, and it was a personal obsession for some to make it a point to be updated about the hallyu world every day, or consume any hallyu media text daily. Besides these, one positive effect of being addicted to hallyu is that these people were attracted to, and able to understand the Korean traditional culture, especially its Confucian aspects (Cho, 2011) (with particular attention to the five relationships of Confucianism), and the Korean language.

### *Factors that Lead to the Fans' Stagnancy or Retirement*

The fan nostalgia is contrasted by their current sentiments and experiences towards hallyu. The 10 respondents brought up several issues, some overlapping, and some distinct from others. Several factors contribute as to why fans gradually lose interest in hallyu. First, there are personal reasons. Most fans laid low during their early twenties (around 20-21,) and some reasoned out that they had to focus on their careers, or further studies. Apart from not having enough time for hallyu, this also implies that the Filipino fans, at least, see hallyu as a youthful trend that should be let go when more serious and "mature" matters should be taken care of in life. Hallyu's market in the Philippines does focus on the younger age group (Que, 2010,) but does not prescribe a specific age bracket. Second, social factors. Hallyu fans begin to lose interest when the people around them lose interest in hallyu too. This may be related to the first factor, and is also understandable since fan movements, as far as hallyu is concerned, is highly-social and active in nature, even for "closet fans" who may express their fandom in secret (i.e. making fan fiction, or participating in online fora discussions,) still need to interact with other fans and consumers (Que, 2010). The gradual loss of people to socialize with the fandom results to the loss of the "need" for the media text that Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1974) have exemplified in their article/theory.

The third and the most complicated factor is the evolution and recent trends of the hallyu world (as of 2014.) After its international height in 2009, the hallyu world has since released more idol groups, but has either repeated celebrity

imaging/packaging, concepts, and trends from veteran-but-still-famous groups, or shared the same concepts and packaging as with other new groups. One fan even mentioned that many newer groups, especially male idol groups, have sported "dark" concepts (i.e. wearing all black accompanied by chants and howls, etc.) which some older fans find "scary" and "(oc)cult-like" due to religio-cultural influences and norms in the Philippines; previous trends were "jollier" and "lighter," such as SHINee's colorful fashion trend, or SNSD's cute-adorable-but-still-sexy concept, and allowed these fans to feel happy and light after watching their videos. These fans also claim that members within a group and among groups are just copies of each other, unlike before, and these groups also sound similar to each other too, making it difficult to recognize each member. Aside from these, the newer groups debuted one after the other, with less time gap in between, and as with previous trends, it is normal to have idol groups consisting of more than 10 or 15 members (Que, 2010). The older fans are overwhelmed, and because they have a hard time keeping up with these new groups, they could no longer sustain their status as fans; a loyal fan of hallyu, specifically K-pop, not only listens the groups' music, but also watches all the talk shows and dramas that their idols appear in, as a way to get to know their idols personally. Because the older fans have less time to do these, and with more groups flooding out of nowhere, these older fans just decide to stick with their original biases instead. This, however, poses another issue: older groups now produce and promote less records and products, some have disbanded or had activities more concentrated on the individual members, and as for Korean male members of idol groups, many of them have opted to do their compulsory military service. While there are newer groups to look out for, the older fans claim that they stick to their original biases, because the newer groups are way out of their age group, and they liked the idea of having their idols as their "oppa" or "eonni" (Korean words meaning elder brother and elder sister, used only by female speakers;) these fans did not like the idea of being called "nuna," (older sister by a male speaker) by their (male) idols, and ultimately, a seeming nightmare for them would be when there will be a day that a Korean idol group that they will like would

call them "ajumma" (auntie). This implies that hallyu, especially K-pop, is indeed generational, because the newer groups were made to appeal to younger generations, specifically teenagers, who become hallyu's new set of fans, just as the older groups appealed to the stagnant and retired fans when they were teens; the old fans are still there to support the veteran groups, although it is not to say that older fans cannot support younger groups, or younger and newer fans supporting veteran groups. Also, this point shows the Filipinas' rather Confucian-inspired ideal for someone to respect and idolize: someone who is preferably older than, or at least the same age as the fans; other than the idol's looks, the idol's experience in the industry and in life also matter, and serve as inspirations to fans. In a personal fan-centered perspective, this also implies that they do not wish to be older than their idols, because they seem to equate beauty with youth; if they are older than the fans, then they will not be able to feel young, and so it may seem to them that their beauty is fading.

The fourth factor is an effect of the third: there are more and newer (mostly younger) fans who belong to a new generation different from the stagnant and retired fans. The new fans cannot relate to the veteran fans, and vice-versa. One respondent claims that new fans are now "rowdier" in general, and another respondent claims that the new fans have a habit of "fighting" with older fans, saying that their idols, most of the time the new groups, are better than the veteran groups.

While the newer and/or younger fans are happy and contented with their hallyu fandom, the older fans from this study's fan generation have either fulfilled their Korean fantasy, or have shattered their Korean fantasy, a fifth factor in lying low in hallyu fandom. Some fans have gone to Korea, or have seen their idols personally (both of these the most common fantasies or goals,) leading them to ponder if there is more to the fandom after personally experiencing Korea and their idols, and/or fulfilling whatever hallyu-related dream/goal they may have. For other fans, they become frustrated after not being able to fulfill some of these goals and fantasies. In this case, the most common



frustration is not being able to learn the Korean language, and so they still cannot understand the songs or series even after years of consuming media texts spoken and written in the Korean language. Another common frustration is that the numerous Koreans that are encountered by these fans are far, whether in appearance or personality, from the fans' perceived notions of Koreans presented in hallyu media texts. The fans realize these things, and so they lie low, or retire altogether.

Finally, a significant factor is the status of hallyu in the Philippines. As mentioned earlier, hallyu is now an accepted part of the Filipino mainstream media and society. Because of this, the fans feel that hallyu, in the Philippine context, is not "special" anymore, since everyone knows about it. When before, only a minority knew about hallyu and enjoyed their special bubble with other hallyu fans, this time, it is hard to distinguish fans from normal consumers. Also, the fans felt that the thrill of hunting for hallyu CDs or other hallyu merchandise is long gone, because most of them can be easily found in most accessible spaces in the Philippines (i.e. malls, bazaars, local markets, etc.) These fans, mostly from the middle to upper classes, also claim that hallyu in the Philippines is too commercialized, and some even use the word "cheap," or "jejemon" (a local subculture associated with being "cheap" and "pretentious") not mainly because the knowledge of hallyu has spread to the lower "cheap" social classes, but because hallyu products even beyond CDs (i.e. t-shirts, caps, etc.) have been illegally copied, and sold for lower prices in street/flea markets. These situations allow non-fans (not referring to anti-fans) to lump hallyu fans and the people from the lower social classes together, because they think that the hallyu fans' merchandise have also come from the local street or flea markets. However, what mainly makes the fans feel "off" about this is not so much that the people from the lower classes have started to consume hallyu, but those who have purchased these pirated hallyu merchandise are not fully aware of the significance of the products they buy, such as symbols or words associated with certain groups, and that these pirated products per se greatly devalue the original hallyu products possessed or about to be bought by the fans. Many from the lower class even

use hallyu merchandise, like t-shirts with pictures of hallyu idols, without being hallyu fans at all, affecting fan identity in the fandom, and removing the meaning and significance of possessing or wearing something that signifies an affiliation to whichever idol bias. (Think of a person who wears a soccer jersey, but has no knowledge of the team on the jersey, and may not care about soccer at all; this greatly irritates soccer fans, and will not hesitate to label that person as "pretentious.") Through this example, it should be accepted that fandom, generally, is inseparable from labeling and the "otherness" both by the fans from non-fans, and vice versa.

Apart from all these, Philippine mainstream media has also copied many aspects of hallyu, from hair, fashion, sometimes execution of videos, making fans think that the things that made hallyu foreign, mysterious, and interesting, are now tarnished. Filipino hallyu fans do not necessarily label Philippine mainstream media as cheap, but the fans just wished that the Philippine mainstream media would construct an identity of its own, rather than heavily borrow/copy from another distinct media-centric imagery (i.e. hallyu) (Que, 2010). Although hallyu itself has been influenced by foreign, including western, influences (Cho, 2011), hallyu was successful in giving itself its own unique character.

### *Fan Movements and Sentiments by Stagnant and Retired Fans*

It is expected that stagnant fans and retired fans have lessened their consumption of hallyu products, but they only differ in degree. Some stagnant fans act like avid fans, but are distinct from normal fans, because stagnant fans are usually limited to their original biases, while some, like the retired fans, have completely stopped consuming hallyu media texts. Some stagnant fans claimed that it was hard to let go of their original biases, because their original biases have shaped part of their current selves, and some may even continue to show exclusive support to their biases by purchasing original hallyu merchandise produced by their biases. Most of the time, they just listen to music or watch music videos, but less frequently watch

live performances whether through the internet or through television. As for Korean dramas, stagnant fans who still consume them are now satisfied with the dubbed versions shown on Philippine local television channels, and are not in a rush to finish the series, unlike before when they would prefer and have the need to download or purchase, in order to watch the series spoken in Korean, with English subtitles. Also, other fans have lessened or lost interest in these Korean novels because through time, the plots that were once deemed as different from the usual, foreign, or interesting (Que, 2010; Reyes, 2012,) now seem repetitive and common; some commented that the plots were too unrealistic, adding frustration to the Korean fantasy, and other life expectations. Stagnant fans also re-consume hallyu media texts from before, in order to satisfy nostalgia - a recurring "need" that is easily satisfied.

Both stagnant and retired fans also claim that while hallyu can still entertain people, they felt that even if hallyu has reached a great milestone worldwide, the hallyu showbiz industry should focus more on improving their artists' images and appearance (in such a way that they will not look like each other,) and innovating new techniques and styles for their songs, videos, or series. They observed that hallyu has become too formulaic, and that the several formula (depending on which media text and area/field) were too obvious for be ignored. The fans also thought that perhaps, lessening the constant debut of new groups and celebrities, but instead, working carefully on image (both physical image and theme/concept,) promotions, and exposures of celebrities (i.e. quality over quantity,) because it would be easier to follow and get to know the idols more, just like before. They also thought that hallyu could perhaps pour more meaning to songs or drama plots, in order to add content and value to the media texts, and perhaps, in order to bring in more fans, and maybe even revive the fandom for stagnant and/or retired fans.

One fan claimed that hallyu is "not growing anymore," because there is nothing new anymore in hallyu that can surprise people. This study, however, does not completely agree

with this. Hallyu has been expanding and growing continuously since its inception and popularity, although in a different way in each era. Hallyu has also consistently attracted newer people as its main purpose, because a part of hallyu's goals is to introduce and educate Korea to the world; hallyu cannot do that if it indeed has stopped growing and expanding. In another light, older fans are now familiar with both traditional and popular Korea, so these veteran fans can have more free will in exploring hallyu, and Korea on their own; hallyu has focused itself on the newer fans, because the newer fans need more "guiding" with the acculturation to "Koreanness." Through this, hallyu's function as South Korea's soft power (Cho, 2011) is far from obsolete.

Without hallyu dominating these fans' lives anymore, they have shifted back to western media (i.e. songs, shows, comics, etc.), embodying cultures and norms that are familiar to most Filipinos, and a language, English, that is well-understood by the middle to upper-class Filipinos. Although this point may be good for another study, it should be mentioned that the Filipino people are more inclined to the west than the rest of Asia, not only because of the Philippines' geographical setting as detached from most parts of Asia, but because of American colonial influences, a primarily English-language educational system, an American-influenced/English-language-influenced mass media even in local television, and the internationally popular "American dream" that has been around since the Cold War era or even before, just to name a few crucial factors. In contrast to this, some stagnant fans are still solid fans of their original hallyu biases, but again, they do not see themselves going back to the hype and height of fandom like before.

### *Hallyu in Their Lives*

The respondents were asked how hallyu has affected their lives, despite not being active in the fandom anymore. This is significant because the data collated showed the long-term effects of hallyu beyond fandom, exhibiting the extent of hallyu as a soft power between South Korea and the Philippines.

Stagnant and retired fans claim that hallyu has allowed them to be more tolerant of other cultures, not just Korean. They learned to appreciate the beauty of media texts not in their native language(s), with one fan even realizing "that music is universal and that you don't need to understand the lyrics in order to appreciate a song." Media aside, they have also developed a palate for Korean cuisine (some consider Korean cuisine to be their favorite!) This can be considered as a big change, because the Filipinos' palate is not used to eating spicy dishes, a taste found in many Korean dishes and appetizers. Through hallyu, these fans have also allowed themselves to be active in the hallyu "contact zone" (Cho, 2011) even until now; they are still able to use hallyu as a way to reconnect with old friends, both from the Philippines and abroad, whom they have met because of hallyu; one fan claims that some of these friends are not the type of people she usually mingles with, but she was thankful to have met them because of hallyu. Also, it should not be missed that fashion, beauty tips, and hairstyles, have continued to influence not only stagnant fans and retired fans of hallyu in the Philippines, but even extending to non-fans as well.

Hallyu has also given a degree of empowerment to these fans, because they have picked up words and expressions from repeatedly consuming hallyu media texts during their heydays as fans. This basic knowledge of the Korean language has given these fans the power to erase a small part of the communication barrier with Koreans (usually Koreans in Korea), many of whom are not confident with their English or have forgotten their English, because Koreans, living in a rather homogenous society, rarely use English in their everyday lives beyond their English classes in schools, universities, or in "hakwons" (language institutes.)

Commercially, stagnant fans and retired fans confess that buying Korean products has become a habit for them, because they still trust Korean products until now, especially cosmetics. Apart from this, continued interest in travelling to (South) Korea has also been a long-term effect for these fans.

## Conclusion

Hallyu is still big in the Philippines, and is now accepted as part of the mainstream society. Despite this, some Filipino fans have grown out of the hallyu fandom because of many factors and frustrations, from personal, social, to inevitable changes by hallyu itself. The stagnant and retired fans of hallyu have certain opinions and suggestions on how to improve hallyu, but it is not to say that this study's point is to bash or defame hallyu and its current undeniable global success. Rather, the point of the study is to further understand the fan movements of Filipino hallyu fans, as well as the current impacts of hallyu in the Philippine society, and the long-term effects of being influenced by hallyu.

It can be observed that while hallyu in a Filipino hallyu fan's life may not be permanent, and even when they will shift their attention to other fandoms, the interest and knowledge of Korea's traditional and modern, cultural, and linguistic aspects continue to benefit both the stagnant and retired fans. It should also be noted that despite all the critiques (and criticisms) they have on what hallyu is today, these people have a generally positive perspective on South Korea, which still probably is the most important achievement of hallyu as a soft power tool.

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