JOURNAL OF ASIAN SOCIOLOGY
Volume 52 | Number 4 | December 2023, 299-328
DOI 10.21588/dns.2023.52.4.003 **Article**

What is Female Universalism in Hallyu? A Theoretical and Empirical Exploration with a Focus on Japanese Fans*

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This article presents an in-depth explanation of the most common denominator of Hallyu (Korean Wave) fans not only in Japan, the largest Hallyu market in the world, but in other parts of the world as well. We introduce a concept of "female universalism, which is associated with three factors of gendered, racial, and postcolonial melancholia, in order to explain the global boom of the new postcolonial pop genre known as Hallyu. Defined as a female-dominated pop culture through alternative media outlets as social media and streaming apps, such as YouTube, Spotify, and Netflix, we focus on the alternative message Hallyu presents to its fans as opposed to those found in mainstream pop culture created by the Anglo-American and Hollywood pop culture industries. The alternative message is the affective attraction, which is created by Hallyu artists and then conveyed to female Hallyu fans. It is a diverse message about individual dreams, female success, finding pure love with male partners, social justice, and many others. Nonetheless, we find these messages are united under the banner of female universalism that ultimately alleviates gendered melancholia and empowers them to join the creative aspect of their fandom, including cover dancing, studying Korean language and culture, and participating in ambitious social projects that would transform the world into a more female friendly place.

Keywords: *hallyu, female universalism, melancholia, sexism in pop industries, gender equality*

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*The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

Introduction

The success of Hallyu (the Korean pop culture wave) in Japan is probably the single most extraordinary cultural phenomenon in the postcolonial history of the two countries. Defined as a group of popular culture genres that include South Korean TV dramas, pop music or K-pop, films, food, and language, Hallyu has gained enormous popularity and support, first in Asia and subsequently all across the world (Marinescu 2014; Ganghariya and Kanozia 2020). Given that Japan had been the colonial ruler of Korea from 1910 to 1945, and many Japanese people still hate Koreans qua their former colonial subjects who do not seem to respect their Japanese masters as Taiwanese do, the fact that Japan is the largest consumer country of Hallyu is simply flabbergasting to many scholars of cultural studies on the one hand and East Asian specialists on the other (see inter alia, Oh 2009; Jang et al. 2012; Oh and Park 2012; Yang 2012; Lie 2015; Rhee and Otmazgin 2016; Takeda 2020).

However, few authors writing on the topic of popular culture, especially on Hallyu, have tackled the question of when and how postcolonial cultural genres may come to dominate the cultural scenes of former empires. The extant studies have instead focused on the concept of transnationalism, *mukokuseki* (no nationality), and hybridity to explain why postcolonial Asians still love Japanese pop culture that is now repackaged as non-Japanese, transnational, and hybridized with Western cultures (Iwabuchi 2006). Even in the studies that deal with the question of Hallyu's success in Japan, they deliberately shy away from the issue of the postcolonial aspect of Hallyu and instead highlight Hallyu's hybridity (i.e., similarities to Japanese pop) as its key success factor (Shim 2006; Iwabuchi 2017; Yoon and Schattle 2017). If this is the case, it remains a puzzle as to why Taiwanese pop culture, which would likely appear more Japanese and Japan-friendly to Japanese viewers than its Korean counterpart, has not come to dominate the Japanese pop culture market to the same extent as Hallyu. (For the critique of hybridity, see Werbner 2001; Kraidy 2002; Kuortti and Nyman 2007; Oh and Jang 2020.)

In addition to the issue of hybridity, previous studies of Asian or other postcolonial pop arts have usually neglected to determine the artistic attraction of postcolonial pop culture in the form of its extraordinary creativity, which is apparent in such genres as African American jazz music (Lopes 2019). In a similar vein, scholars of hip hop, K-pop, or Bollywood films have also slighted the importance of their creativity, which can be compared to European middlebrow arts or jazz. Similar to the hybridity

argument (i.e, teleological and functional), some scholars considered the proliferation of postcolonial pop culture as a consequence of its cosmopolitan fans residing mainly in G7 countries (Jenkins 2004).

What distinguishes postcolonial pop culture from mainstream culture (or the core culture in Wallerstein's world system) are: (1) types of media devices postcolonial artists use; and (2) the underlying affective content that they want to convey to their fans through the minority media. The first issue of media devices leads to the question of which media strategy would work the best for postcolonial pop culture, essentially the same query that previous studies pursued to find out how different media formats had brought about new music genres in core countries (Hirsch 1969; Rose and Wagner 1995; Funk 2007; Oh and Lee 2013). In this process of choosing the right media, however, postcolonial artists from Africa, Asia, and Latin America face discrimination by the mainstream media that seem to favor only core culture, which also in turn dominates major global media (Bernardi 2007; Benshoff and Griffin 2012; Chong 2016). Against this backdrop, postcolonial pop cultures (or subcultures) maintain parasitic relationships with the mainstream media, which almost forces them to choose alternative media outlets like YouTube (or any other web-based streaming services) or outdated media devices like radios (Echchaibi 2001; Lay and Thomas 2012; Oh and Park 2012; Bleichet al. 2015). From the beginning, therefore, postcolonial pop cultures are fated to be less visible than the core culture in the mainstream mass media.

To overcome this institutional hurdle associated with media choice by minority artists, the second issue of "affective content comes to the rescue. Successful postcolonial pop genres such as jazz, hip hop, or K-pop have apparently succeeded in creating alternative affective attractions to those of the mainstream pop culture in the form of new underlying messages that were still very popular among the fans despite the low visibility of postcolonial art in the mainstream media (Holt 2004; Jackson and Nesterova 2017; Oh and Kim 2022). For example, the messages of white supremacy and male chauvinism rampant in Hollywood movies up until the mid-1960s can be challenged by alternative messages of racial and gender equality by postcolonial—and thus, minority—media, such as independent filmmakers, FM radio stations, or alternative media outlets (Hirsch 1969; Hains 2014; Holtzman and Sharpe 2014). Similarly, the success of Hallyu (e.g., K-pop and K-dramas) can be attributed to its alternative message of gender equality disseminated through virtual media (e.g., YouTube, social media apps, etc.), contrasting the messages of mainstream media that espouse male domination

(Oh 2011). This line of thinking is in alignment with the recent notion of "social creativity through "civic imaginations in popular culture studies (Jenkins et al. 2020, p. 5).

Media-specific alternative messages that are critical ingredients of creativity toward the global success of postcolonial pop culture presuppose the existence of the three crucial sources of postmodern alternative messages: race, gender/sexuality, and postcoloniality (Gilroy 2005; Jenkins 2014; Eagleton 2016; Lopes 2019). For example, Lopes (2019, p. 17) has systematically linked the two dots of race/gender on the one hand and the creativity of the American heroic age of pop music and films on the other. The racial and gender motifs of creating and innovating modern jazz by such geniuses like Miles Davis were conscious acts of expression and negotiation of blackness, moving "from the everyday dynamics of racial etiquette and social distance that shaped his reception and appreciation as an iconic jazz musician to his creation and contestation over the meaning and practices of race music in the last half of the twentieth century.

Given that many previous studies on the media devices used by Hallyu exist (Oh and Park 2012; Jin and Yoon 2016: Jin 2018), in this article, we are interested in developing a theory of female universalism, which constitutes the majority of Hallyu content (i.e., the second query posed above). Female universalism, as an alternative message to the pop culture of the core, is filled with affective attraction that appeals to Hallyu fans, who are mostly female and are thus concerned with the issue of gender equality. While being as popular and global as hip hop, rap, and Bollywood movies, Hallyu has clearly appealed to women of all races as it is broadcast worldwide via YouTube, Spotify, and Netflix.

In the remainder of this article, we provide our answers to the questions of: (1) what is female universalism; (2) what are the sources of creativity in female universalism; and (3) what are the examples of female universalism utilized in the production of successful Hallyu works? In our explanation we provide a comparative analysis between male and female universalism in pop culture both in the world and in East Asia (Japan and Korea).

What is Female Universalism?

Female universalism in Hallyu or any pop culture form is not the conceptual antithesis of male universalism. Rather, in this article, it is a loosely coined heuristic term intended mainly for the global Hallyu phenomenon. The

theoretical background of how we deduced this concept of female universalism is simple. To be exact, the birth of universalism during the phase of modernization of the human world was embedded in the notion of male, not female, universalism, as a representative of the model modern lifestyle, a parallel concept to particularism (Weber 2019). However, our emphasis here is on the fact that what "male refers to in this context is only the racially categorized group of Caucasian males, which therefore clearly excludes black or other non-white males (Lister 1997).

Furthermore, in the context of white male universalism vis--vis all kinds of particularism (e.g., non-white male, racially neutral female, or colonial particularism), male universalism also refers to the hegemonic white male culture (i.e., Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, elite educated, and capitalist), excluding Jews, Catholics, the uneducated, or proletariats (Kaufmann 2018). According to the modernist definition of white male universalism, humans and their culture should be rational, intelligent (or deductive and scientific), gentle, well-mannered, philanthropic, and creative (Nelson 1998). Defined this way, Western universalism is a rather parochial term in that it excludes almost everything that is not considered white masculine in cultural categories. Iconic white men depicted in the male universal pop culture include Sherlock Holmes in the UK and Superman and Batman in the US (Cunningham 1994; Brooker 2013). In fact, it is not uncommon to acknowledge that much of the postmodern cultural studies has set out to "dismantle the power of the white, male author as a privileged source of meaning and value (Hebdige 1996, p. 178).

In popular culture as well, it is well known that myriad stories of white male universalism had already been developed into comics, TV dramas, and films (i.e., intermediality) over and again with new generations of heroes who bear and disseminate the unchanging message of (white male) universalism. These messages quintessentially procreate and expand the dominant global culture that assiduously defends the idea that white men are culturally, intellectually, and creatively better than any other races, no matter how bankrupt the concept is biologically. Among the countless white male heroes in modern history, Holmes, Superman, and Batman are picked as representatives only because of their longevity in Hollywood films and TV shows in core countries. These cultural icons have then been exported to every possible corner of the world with various versions and sequels for different generations of viewers and fans across the globe. In doing so, the list of white male iconic figures has only gotten longer over time, even though different groups of artists have challenged this dominant mass media

ideology with alternative messages and icons, including female and other minority heroes (Bernardi 2007; O'Rourke 2017).

The advancement of postmodernism and postcolonialism introduced a new boom in the so-called new political movement of identities, first among non-whites in the pop culture sphere, who later had occupied dominant market stances in core countries, especially in pop music and somewhat in films. In the case of films, a wider conflict between men and women has erupted in the early twenty-first century including #MeToo and other similar feminist-minded movements that intended to equalize men's and women's rights in the film industry (Luo and Zhang 2022). In the war between men and women in the popular culture industry, women of racial and ethnic minority backgrounds have been observed participating in tandem with white women in feminist movements because history had made clear that postcolonial non-whites were nevertheless sexist against their own women (Spivak 2015). The success of non-white women in the pop culture industry, however, remains tenuous, although blacks, Hispanics, Asians, and other racial groups have gradually occupied the pop culture market in the core countries over the years and have now grasped hegemonic power in some pop culture spheres (Molina-Guzmán 2016). Despite their increasing visibility, female idols in both film and music industries, for example, still remain as sexual symbols for male fans, whereas female fans of male idols are portrayed as passive feminine followers of domineering male heroes (Lewis 1992).

Against this backdrop, the female universalism that we propose as an alternative concept to white male universalism in the study of Hallyu is a much more encompassing concept than some of the radical versions of feminist movements and/or feminism. Female universalism in Hallyu presupposes a wide range of feminist and non-feminist women, from self-disciplined achievers for themselves and/or their families to conscious organizers of social change movements, and superwomen who fight and destroy male enemies as vengeance for prior atrocities inflicted on them or women in general by male antagonists. If white male universalism gave white men the power and right to equalize all human beings as universal beings who are "neutered of their racial, gender, and colonial specificities, as was the case in French universalism, female universalism in Hallyu bestows no such neutering power to women (Schor 2001, p. 62). Assumed to have diverse female identities, all of which are virtuous and ethical, often armed with an unchanging belief in social justice, female universalism in Hallyu is not simply about achieving an equal political and hegemonic power in society

with men, be that in government offices, business corporations, or the pop culture market, a tenet popularized by the French feminist movement of Parit (Schor 2001, p. 61; Scott 2005). Instead, female universalism in Hallyu allows all women in Korean society to achieve their diverse types of personal and social dreams, ranging from personal success and pure love with ideal male partners, to grand social transformations. Therefore, the alternative messages both K-drama and K-pop are delivering to their female fans remain diverse while commonly espousing the concept of moral and ethical women who are armed with the spirit of social—and therefore, gender—justice.

If white male universalism during the modern era espoused as its main values racial whiteness, masculinity, rationality, scientific mindsets, and so on, what does female universalism in Hallyu offer as an alternative? Based on K-dramas and K-pop, two main pillars of Hallyu that are globally popular, successful, and most profitable as middlebrow art genres, we can discern the following common attributes. First, a fluid version of femininity that allows women qua main agents of feminist ideals, which range from personal success to grand social transformations, to explore a variety of gender roles and identities depending on situations, goals, and desires is present in most heroines of K-dramas and girl band artists of K-pop. Second, these women have suffered from racism, sexism, or postcolonial discrimination as migrants and are highly susceptible to mental distress in the form of depression and suicidal drives, which we call melancholia (or, clinically defined, bipolar depression). Third, despite their mental insecurity, they maintain high levels of ethical standards and a strong spirit of social justice, accompanied by creativity, social empathy, and commitment to their ideals, which include social change. Finally, these women see their creativity and achievements as solutions to their bipolar depression. These commonalities as one body of an alternative message to white male universalism are crucial factors that explain why most global Hallyu fans are women and why K-drama fans are also K-pop fans, or vice versa. As we will explain below, K-dramas and K-pop are not separate genres but a complementary set of cultural products and symbols.

One final comment that needs to be added to Table 1 above is that women's commitment to success in Hallyu includes motivations that were formerly considered masculine, such as becoming a lawyer, a medical doctor, a detective, a scientist, a corporate CEO, a K-drama actor, or even a K-pop singer. Being a K-pop idol in itself is proof that she has realized her life dream in Korean society, which had rapidly transformed from a traditional, industrial society where children wanted to become military generals, politicians,

Table 1
Male vs. Female Universalism

	White Male Universalism	Female Universalism in Hallyu
Agents	White males	Korean females
The Other	Non-white males, females, Catholics, Jews	All males
Messages	Rationality, scientific principles, manners, philanthropy, justice for white men, etc.	Morality, commitment to success, diversity of female dreams, gender justice, social justice, social transformations for women, etc.
Icons	Sherlock Holmes, James Bond, Kingsman, Superman, Batman, Indiana Jones	Daejanggeum, Kim Sam Soon, Do Bong Soon, Woo Young Woo, BlackPink

professors, or medical doctors, to a postindustrial one where they want to become K-pop idols first and foremost (Oh and Lee 2013). In this sense, women's desires and dreams in the Hallyu world of female universalism are far more diverse and plural than in the world of white male universalism.

Male Universalism vs. Female Universalism in Pop Culture

To succinctly recap, Hallyu has the following characteristics: (1) K-pop and K-drama are the two most successful genres of Hallyu; (2) K-pop and K-dramas share the same fan base despite being two widely different genres, even as many K-pop singers are also K-drama actors; (3) Hallyu is not a regional affair, as it is one of the most successful pop culture genres in the world at the moment; (4) Hallyu's success is dependent on many factors, although its alternative message to the dominant white male universalism, which we label female universalism, could be its most important distinctive feature; and most importantly, therefore, (5) Hallyu fans are mostly women of all ages, regardless of their racial, ethnic, national, and economic differences (Table 2).

Among these five important differentiators of Hallyu from other competing pop culture genres from postcolonial regions, the most important aspect of Hallyu that defines its nature is female universalism that has formed

Table 2
Hallyu Fandom Census (Estimates, 2022)

	Country	Age	Gender
ARMY (n=562,280)	100+	Under 18 (30.30%)	Male (1.35%)
ARMY Japan (n=510,000)		18-29 (53.63%)	Female (96.23%)
		30-39 (9.31%)	Not to disclose (0.64%)
		40-49 (4.49%)	Others (1.78%)
		50-59 (1.83%)	
		Over 60 (0.15%)	
KOR gov't sample	111		Male (0.58%)
(n=12,663)			Female (94.2%)

a highly female fandom. As Table 2 clearly shows, the absolute majority of Hallyu fans are women of all ages, races, ethnicities, nationalities, and economic classes—i.e., a critical condition of female universalism that takes gender as its most important attribute for fandom composition. If we take this one step further, it is also possible for us to conceptualize gender equity among K-drama and K-pop actors and artists. Figures 1 and 2 summarize the gender composition of Hallyu artists in K-dramas and K-pop based on the most successful shows and hit tracks.

Figures 1 and 2 below clearly demarcate Hallyu from US drama series and American pop music in terms of the gender divide among actors and artists. While American pop culture is still dominated by male artists in both dramas (82%) and pop music (69.4%), partially due to the ongoing legacy of male universalism, Hallyu shows a drastically improved tendency of feminine participation in dramas either as solo heroes or co-stars (81%) and pop music as girl groups (48.7%). After all, it should not be surprising to see this achievement in Korean postcolonial pop culture where both men and women almost equally share leading roles in the top 100 dramas and top 300 most popular hit songs in the last two decades or so. This is the single most important piece of evidence that supports our female universalism thesis presented here.

How did Korea's Hallyu achieve this gender equity in the pop culture business? Its success first has to do with the evolution of white male

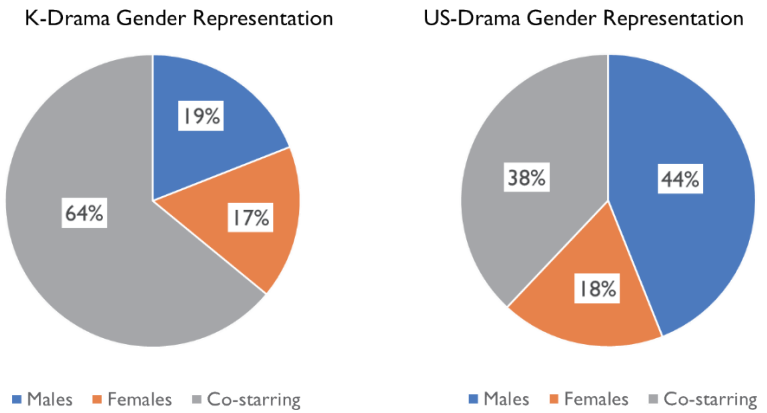

Fig. 1.— Top 100 K-Drama vs. US Drama Gender Representations (2000-2021)

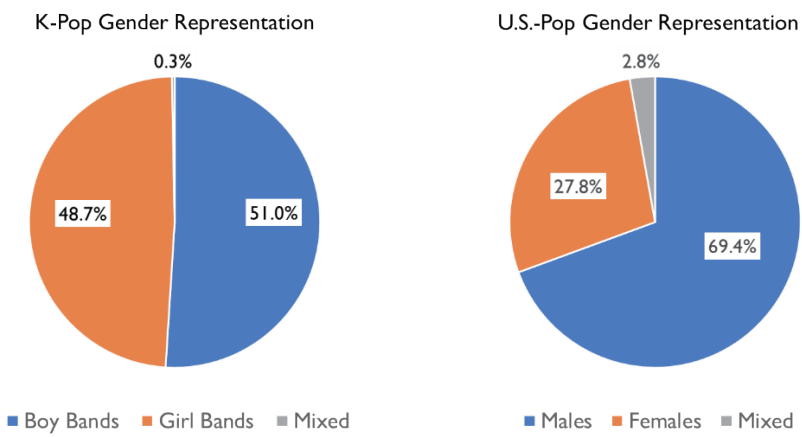

Fig. 2.—Top 300 K-pop and US Pop Music Gender Representations (2000-2021)

universalism in core countries. The evolution of universalism in pop culture takes both temporal and spatial dimensions. In the process, we find mutations and localizations that turn out to be more successful than the original form of universalism. In the case of Sherlock Holmes, for example, the archetypal Sherlock in the original novel was intermedialized first into a BBC TV hero and later into a film character. Furthermore, the first Sherlock played by Alan Wheatley in the 1951 TV series was later replaced by many others, including

Jeremy Brett in the 1984 series (i.e., temporal evolutions). On the spatial side, the original British hero was later localized into Russian, Italian, American, and Japanese TV series, films, or animation films, further modernizing and popularizing the original British work. The rupture in this evolutionary process of white male universalism in pop culture occurred when the Japanese tried to import and localize Sherlock. In an attempt to defy the whiteness of male universalism in the original Sherlock Holmes series, Japanese TV producers inserted a Japanese man as a new Asian Sherlock, played continuously by a singer-actor Yutaka Mizutani. Mizutani's TV series was named, *Aibou* ("partners), and it is one of the most successful and longest-running Japanese detective dramas in modern history.

However, Korea failed to replicate Japan's success in localizing Holmes and institutionalizing Asian male universalism, preceded by similar attempts by Hong Kong actors like Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan. Despite several attempts by Korea to emulate Japan's success and create its own version of Sherlock Holmes, nothing has really worked on a long-term basis, despite the gargantuan success of *Chief Inspector* (*Susabanjang* in Korean), a long-running TV series that aired from 1971 to 1984, which featured Choi Bul-Am as an attractive detective. Due to their repeated failures to replace Choi with younger actors later on for Hallyu fans globally, Korea suffered from a bad reputation of not being able to create any influential mysteries, thrillers, or simply detective stories, unlike its former colonial master, Japan, which boasted international fame as a country of detective stories (Saito 2007).

Amid the welter, what Korea has discovered as a solution to this problem of not being able to replicate Western or Japanese male universalism was the novel idea of making a female Sherlock Holmes under the grand narrative of female universalism, but in a completely different mold from that of Angela Lansbury's *Murder She Wrote*. In the most famous female detective drama for global Hallyu fans, *Signal*, the female hero of the show, Kim Hye-soo, towered over her male colleagues with astounding demonstrations of physical force, ferocity, and grit in tandem with rationality, empathy, and scientific reasoning—attributes that had previously been typically reserved for white and Japanese men. After several successful TV drama series that featured female cops, inspectors, and detectives, Hallyu dramas, unlike their Western or Japanese predecessors, have successfully created and perfected a new genre of Asian female mysteries, such as *Queen of Mystery*, which now has run three seasons; *Ms. Ma, Nemesis*, an adaptation of the BBC version of Agatha Christie's *Ms. Marple*; *The King: Eternal Monarch*, which features a female cop as one of the two main characters of the series; and many others.

As Figure 2 indicates, K-pop has become conspicuously feminized. Traditionally, the Korean pop music business was as male-dominated as much of Western and Japanese pop music still is. Why has K-pop then succeeded in reaching gender parity in its most popular bands and singers? In the early stage of K-pop development, it was predominantly boy bands that major K-pop talent firms had developed and managed. However, this male prevalence backfired when young male singers had to serve in the military at their peak of popularity. H.O.T., Super Junior, TVXQ, and other boy bands could not avoid military duties even though their international fame and album sales had skyrocketed. To ensure that they would continue to accumulate profits, K-pop talent management firms had to nurture ensembles whose heyday would never be disrupted by military service obligations. Girl groups satisfied this condition, although managers were initially unsure if the same female fans of their boy bands would still buy concert tickets and albums of the replacement girl bands. Kara and Girls Generation (also known as SNSD) confirmed that these female K-pop fans would still love girl groups, so long as it was K-pop. In fact, during their peak popularity, Girls Generation had more YouTube clicks than any of SM Entertainment's boy bands and their songs were ranked on Billboard charts, while *The Late Show with David Letterman* invited them for a live performance and interviews (Kim 2017). Other girl bands followed suit, and 50 percent of the total K-pop acts on the list of the 300 most popular songs in 20 years of K-pop history are girl groups. This is a very important moment in the postcolonial pop music business, as female universalism tends to defy the gender of singers and actors, making equal gender representation in pop culture business unproblematic.

Bipolar Depression (Melancholia) and Female Universalism

We have already argued that female universalism incorporates a diverse range of women and their gender identities, represented in both Hallyu pop culture and fandom activities. This diversity also depends on local variations, socioeconomic conditions in a given society, and transnational migratory experiences one goes through in the global system. However, is there any fundamentally common element of female universalism, thus making it a universal experience for all females? All things being equal, we posit that melancholia (or bipolar depression in modern psychiatry) and its relationship with female creativity both in art performances and consumption is a primary

candidate for the commonality. The fundamental cause of this melancholia is first gendered, whereas other additional causes of racial and postcolonial types of melancholia can also be found.

Feminist philosophy, which develops its gender theory based on the psychological concept of melancholia, provides a cogent argument for our topic of gender divide in postcolonial pop culture consumption, fandom participation, and finally creativity in the form of empowerment (Butler 1990, 1995; Hood-Williams and Harrison 1998; Bell 1999; Eng 2000). According to these authors, all forms of melancholia emanate from a gendered form (viz., taboos against incest and homosexuality), without which women cannot construct morally sound gendered identities that defy incestuous relations with their fathers on the one hand, and homosexual intimacy with their mothers or sisters on the other (Butler 1990, pp. 58-60; Eng 2000, p. 1,276). In other words, this refusal by women to grieve despite the loss of one's mother, sisters, and female friends as "the Other of mutual intimacy becomes a mechanism of melancholia through which a woman can construct a new identity as a heterosexual persona (Butler 1990, p. 58; Eng 2000, p. 1,277).

However, unlike men who harbor unrelinquished grief at the loss of their fathers, brothers, and male partners as the Other, a loss that later receives enormous support from the male dominated society in which they live, heterosexual women must identify themselves by their minority and/or suppressed status in the same society. This inflicts dual pains on women: the pain of denying their homosexual and incestuous affinity to begin with, followed by that of accepting their minority status in society after fully embracing their heterosexual gender role (Eng 2000, p. 1,278). In this sense, the loss of feminine homosexual identity, a form of gendered melancholia, sometimes results in manic depression among women, which then becomes a political and social problem (Cavelle 1999; Butler et al. 2000; Sánchez-Pardo 2003). Manic depression among housewives that results from their long-term confinement in roles of domestic labor and child rearing is an example of one such phenomenon. Feminist movements are another.

This definition of gendered melancholia is based on Freud's statement that the identification process (i.e., becoming a heterosexual persona) associated with melancholia may be the sole condition under which the id can give up its objects (Butler 1990, p. 81). Unlike Freud's concept of melancholia, however, which does not lead to a sociological notion of gender that pertains to social inequality and thus later feminist movements, Butler (1990, p. 82) persuasively points out the importance of unequal social

relationships between hetero- and homosexual identifiers as follows:

> It would appear that the taboo against homosexuality must *precede* the heterosexual incest taboo; the taboo against homosexuality in effect creates the heterosexual "dispositions by which the Oedipal conflict becomes possible. The young boy and young girl who enter into the Oedipal drama with incestuous heterosexual aims have already been subjected to prohibitions which "dispose them in distinct sexual directions. Hence, the dispositions that Freud assumes to be primary or constitutive facts of sexual life are effects of a law which, internalized, produces and regulates discrete gender identity and heterosexuality.

This unequal conceptualization of *gendering* from the beginning of human life produces devastating sociological consequences. Despite their unrelinquished grief at the loss of their fathers and brothers as potential homosexual and incestuous sexual partners, boys later receive vast support from the male-dominant society in which they live for the internalized suffering from this loss (i.e., male-gendered melancholia). However, the reality that heterosexual women must face is to identify themselves with their minority and/or suppressed status in the same society. To heterosexual men, therefore, women qua the second sex are rewards for them, whereas to heterosexual women, men qua their partners are not, because their male spouses will dominate and suffocate them in a sociologically sexist home that belongs to a larger sexist social setting.

However, in countries where reverse gender performances, including drag culture, are widely accepted, gendered melancholia can easily lead to creative performances such as costume play, drag, and creation of pop culture content that celebrates homosexual people. In this process, the cultural participants and creators do not have to convert themselves into homosexual beings, as they are parodying the "parodied gender of their bodies. Butler (1993, p. 179) therefore notes that:

> What [drag] does suggest is that gender performance allegorizes a loss it cannot grieve, allegorizes the incorporative fantasy of melancholia whereby an object is phantasmatically taken in or on as a way of refusing to let it go.

In countries like South Korea, where drag culture is strictly frowned upon and highly retributory, women who suffer from gendered melancholia and the ensuing manic depression find suicide the only alternative to

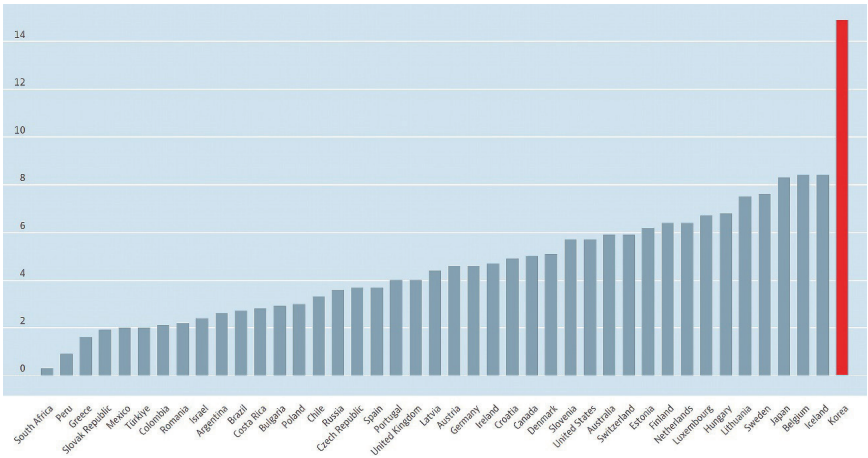

Fig. 3.—Female Suicide Ratios per 100,000 People (OECD)

Sources: OECD (https://data.oecd.org/healthstat/suicide-rates.htm)

creativity (Figure 3). The rank of No. 1 that South Korea occupies on the leader board of female suicide among all OECD countries is extremely concerning; its current figure is almost double that of the third- (Belgium) and the fourth-place (Japan) countries.

To avoid a risk of suicide, melancholic men have traditionally used creativity and production as a gender performance (i.e., parodying the parodied gender of their bodies) when seeking a way out. This is what many call a Renaissance view of melancholia for male creativity (i.e., Renaissance men), typified by the following quotes from Aristotle, Michelangelo, and Burton (Flatley 2008, pp. 1-2; Schiesari 2018, pp. 3-8):

> Aristotelian *Problemata*: Why do all men of extraordinary ability in the field of philosophy or politics or literature or the arts prove to be melancholics?
>
> Michelangelo: *La mia allegrezza la maninconia.* (My pleasure is melancholia.)
>
> Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*: They get their knowledge by books, I mine by melancholizing.

The comfort and pride that male creators and producers relished throughout Renaissance and early modern times, which was reincarnated into Marx's self-realization through *homo faber*, was not bestowed to female creators of any sort. Instead, female melancholia during the same period was

reduced to hysteria or the suffocation of the womb, insinuating a death-like rapture or demonic possession to many medieval thinkers due to lack of sex (Hollywood 2016, p. 56). It is only in modern literature where melancholia is clearly translated into female creativity, as the following quote about Virginia Woolf explicates (Bahun 2013, p. 157):

> Here the artist is faced with an almost impossible task: she needs to devise ways to represent historical occlusions and barriers and yet forge an aesthetic whole that would meaningfully speak to whatever link is still binding people. To respond to the contradictions of this situation without falsifying the historical givens, one could examine the very frailty of artistic restitution, Woolf suggests. Such interrogation might ultimately engender a new mode of representation, one that would capture the simultaneity of loss (melancholia) and its therapy in language (mournful expression).

While gendered melancholia is a common element of female universalism with diverse patterns of individual and group social behaviors, including cultural creativity and consumption, two additional factors, both of which are not necessarily shared by all women, can worsen the bipolar depression caused by gendered melancholia: racial and postcolonial melancholia, which had occurred since the dawn of modernity with new global commercial activities of slave trading and colonization (Gilroy 2005; Eng and Han 2019).

Briefly, racial melancholia occurs in men and women who are not born as members of the desired racial group in their society. The fact that one cannot openly lament the racial category she was born with constitutes the beginning of her melancholic experiences (Eng and Han 2009). Unlike gendered melancholia, though, racial melancholia can be shared with white people who happen to empathize with racial minorities and their civic movements, as widely documented during the US civil rights movement in the 1960s and the South African anti-apartheid movement in the 1990s (Cheng 2000; Suchet 2007).

Finally, postcolonial melancholia refers to the suppressed sorrow imperialists feel when they lose their colonies back to the people indigenous to the region (Gilroy 2005). The notion of postcolonial melancholia was popularized by Gliroy (2004; 2005), who argued that white British people suffer from its symptoms because they cannot openly mourn the loss of their former colonies. This melancholia then psychologically prohibits white British people from completely embracing people from their former colonies as members of their own society. Thus, these migrants from former colonies

are subjected to postcolonial melancholia as well, since they have to be treated by the white majority as outsiders or others (Gilroy 2004, p. 2; 2005, p. 100). Victims of racism, who are minorities living in the global cities of former imperialist countries, therefore feel enhanced racial melancholia that leads to a collective urge of seeking cultural and emotional comfort from their strong ties with their homelands (Appadurai 1990). However, Appadurai's failure is not to notice the recent tendency that postcolonial, minority women turn to Hallyu's female universalism when they find cultural content from their homeland are also filled with sexist, racist, and postcolonial biases.

While feminist philosophy, psychoanalysis, and cultural studies have sufficiently shown the theoretical and empirical foundation for the correlation between gendered melancholia and female universalism, it is modern psychiatry and neural sciences that corroborated and confirmed the correlation between bipolar depression and artistic creativity (Andreasen and Glick 1988; Richards et al. 1988; Jamieson 1993; Kandel 2012). Jamieson (1993) for example emphasized an interesting relationship between manic-depressive disorder and creativity, first pointed out by the German psychiatrist Emil Kraepelin in 1921. Kraepelin was the psychiatrist who first distinguished manic depression from schizophrenia and argued that manic-depressive illness brings about changes in the thought processes that "set free powers which otherwise are constrained by all kinds of inhibition. Artistic activity may experience a certain furtherance (Jamieson 1993, p. 55).

Jamieson (1993) also found that artists have traditionally shown a lucidly higher rate of bipolar and unipolar illnesses than non-artists, including such celebrated painters like Vincent van Gogh and Edvard Munch (Kandel 2012, p. 404). Her contribution to the study of artistic creativity is the finding that living writers are four times as likely to have manic depression and three times as likely to have depression as people who are not creative. This finding is reaffirmed by Akiskal and Akiskal (1988), who found that nearly two-thirds of European writers, painters, and sculptors have manic depression and more than half of them had suffered a major depressive incident (Akiskal and Akiskal 1988; Kandel 2012). The underlying shared premise among these psychiatrists who had spent time studying the creativity of artists is that people with manic-depressive illness "experience an exhilarating feeling of energy and a capability for formulating ideas that dramatically enhance artistic creativity (Kandel 2012, p. 404). According to Jamison (1993), the interaction of tension and transition between changing mood states, as well as the sustenance and discipline that manic-depressive patients draw from periods of health, are critically important. These tensions and transitions

ultimately give creative power to the artist. These hypotheses surrounding the linkage between depression and creativity have further been corroborated by other researchers with empirical evidence that supports the clinical conviction that a genetic vulnerability to manic-depressive illness might be accompanied by a predisposition to creativity (Richards et al. 1988; Kandel 2012). Richards' interpretation of her findings is that genes associated with a greater risk of manic-depressive disorder may also confer a greater likelihood of creativity. This is not to imply that the illness creates the predisposition to creativity, but rather that people who have this illness also have capabilities like extreme exuberance—enthusiasm and energy—that are expressed in creativity (Kandel 2012).

Having explained what female universalism is in Hallyu and why they are related to Hallyu creativity among Korean Wave artists and their female fans, our last task is to document and analyze the messages of female universalism in Hallyu found in the works of Hallyu artists (e.g., TV dramas and K-pop music) and in the fan messages posted and exchanged by Hallyu fans worldwide.

Constructing Alternative Messages of Female Universalism in Hallyu

Why K-pop and K-drama succeeded in achieving equality in terms of gender representation in the top 100 dramas as stars and co-stars and top 300 songs as boy and girl idol groups has rarely been studied thoroughly, although fandom femininity has received the spotlight of cultural studies pundits. Convicted by the relationship between gender and fandom, Jenkins (2012, p. 2) proposed five new dimensions of media fandom, especially among female TV fans who had demonstrated proactive behaviors in television-watching: (1) its relationship to a particular mode of reception (e.g., textual proximity, rereading and the translation of program materials into resources for conversation and gossip); (2) its role in encouraging viewer activism (e.g., program selection, canon formation, evaluation, interpretation and relationship to gender-specific reading styles); (3) its function as an interpretive community (e.g., the ways that fan interpretive conventions provide a basis for activism against the producer's actions); (4) its particular traditions of cultural production (e.g., fan writing, video-making, describing the texts produced, building generic traditions and instituting the aesthetic criteria by which they are judged); and (5) its status as an alternative social community (i.e., one

formed by relations of consumption and categories of taste). In Hallyu and other pop culture genres, we can also add a sixth type of feminine fan behavior: Hallyu "pilgrimages that involve actual tours to Hallyu sites in Korea and elsewhere and real time experiences of all things Korean either in Korea or in their countries' Koreatowns (Hirata 2008; Kim et al. 2013; Lyan and Levkowitz 2015; Oh and Jang 2020).

In Hallyu the first and the largest female fandom group that started the above six proactive consumption behaviors were Japanese women. Japan is by far the largest K-drama and K-pop market in the world, while its total music market size is the second. Japan has close to 50 million registered ARMY members (fans of BTS), which is again the largest in the world (see Table 2 above). Fandom activities in Japan are pioneering, including among other things Hallyu pilgrimages. Through these pilgrimages Japanese female fans indulge in Korean street food and drinks, such as Chamiseul soju and tteok-bokki. A notable idiosyncrasy of the Japanese fandom is their unusually strong desire to learn Korean culture, history, and most importantly the language (Oh 2011). Therefore, it is worthwhile to explore which message of female universalism these Japanese fans have received and which responsive messages they have been articulating among themselves since the onset of the importation of Hallyu in Japan. For fans in other countries, readers can refer to our previous works, which carried out similar analyses using such germane concepts as melancholia (gendered, racial, and postcolonial), ressentiment, forward and retrospective learning, and female universalism. We have found similar results among the Chinese, Indonesian, Palestinian, European, and South American fans to those in Japan (see inter alia, Oh 2009; Kim et al. 2013; Oh 2017; Oh and Kim 2022; Oh et al. 2023).

At first, postcolonial melancholia may explain the Hallyu boom in Japan (i.e., nostalgia about the former colony and secretive affective feelings toward colonial women and men), although this interpretation immediately hits a wall when it comes to the explanation of why Hallyu fans are predominantly women, unlike fans of jazz, hip hop, or Bollywood films. If we adopt the view of gendered melancholia as a source of creativity and participation in the form of the above six consumption behaviors, we can immediately see the forest, not just the trees. Indeed, several pieces of evidence suggest that the Japanese female fans of Hallyu seek to relieve their gendered melancholia, far more than their postcolonial or racial melancholia, via Hallyu consumption and fandom activities. We first carry out a content analysis of top 100 K-dramas and top 300 K-pop songs to see if they hint at female universalism with intent on providing fans with healing messages. We then analyze some

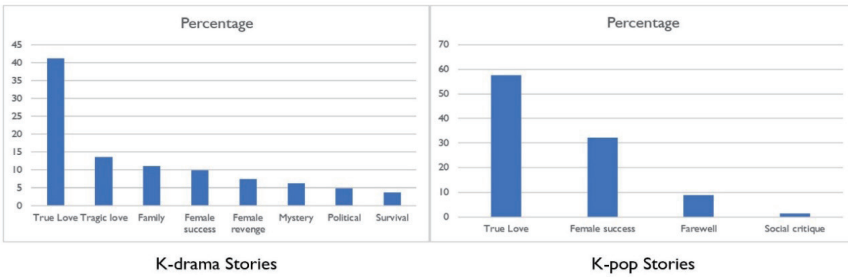

Fig. 4.—Messages of K-dramas and K-pop

of the qualitative fan interview data, followed by an in-depth analysis of big data we gathered from Japanese fan postings on Instagram.

The content analysis of top 100 K-dramas and top 300 K-pop songs between 2000 and 2021 reveals a clear tendency of creating and disseminating messages of female universalism that soothe melancholia. In both K-dramas and K-pop the largest number of messages are about pure and/or true love, which is one of the main reasons Japanese female fans love Korean pop culture content, as we explain below in detail. By pure and true love, we mean the East Asian female fantasy of finding the "right man" who respects women and tries to heal their emotional wounds from the sexist society in which they live, a society that often pushes women toward suicidal urges (Kinsella 2000). What is also noticeable in both genres is the female success story, which is the fourth- and the second-most popular message in K-dramas and K-pop, respectively. If we combine female success with female revenge stories in K-drama, messages of female universalism (i.e., true love, female success, and female revenge) dominate the entire genre. An implication of this mixture of female success, female revenge, and finding a true male lover is the ideal female fantasy that constitutes East Asian feminism, which is again far different from its Western counterpart. After all, Korean women, who are adored by female Hallyu fans across the world, pursue a mild version of feminism that espouses gender harmony, equality, and pure love, as long as the masculine half of society allows them to pursue female dreams of socioeconomic success that is rewarded by meeting an ideal male lover.

Similar to the above quantitative data, the interview data also suggests both the existence of gendered melancholia and the healing process during the consumption of Hallyu. First, the Japanese women who have experienced gendered melancholia from their marriage either to Western or to Japanese men report healing through Hallyu (Oh 2011).

In college I belonged to a feminist group. I dealt with lots of feminist issues when I became a photojournalist after graduation. I took photos of natural birth giving, children in slums, and labor issues. I had done lots of location work in the Philippines and took photos of the foreign brides coming to Japanese rural areas. I wanted to encounter different worlds than that of Japan. Later I married a Spanish man who was also a photojournalist. We fell in love and moved to Spain. But I had to return to Japan after four years, as our marriage broke up. [...] For the first two years, I left all my belongings that I had shipped from Spain in my parents' house and stayed in an empty rented room. I just enjoyed the emptiness. [...] I first watched *Fuyu no Sonata* [*Winter Sonata*] at my parents' home one day. When I saw that drama, I immediately realized that this was what I needed. I was really fed up with my real man [the former husband], although I felt that I couldn't live without love. [...] Watching *Fuyu no Sonata*, I recalled all the happy moments with my lovers since elementary school days. I didn't have a TV set in my empty rented room, but I borrowed all the DVDs of the drama from my friend and watched them all in two days [at my parents' home]. [...] Ever since, I have watched over 100 Korean dramas during the past two years. I now have a TV set, a satellite dish, and DVDs that fill up my room. I could reminisce about my life through these dramas, and I realize that my life was a history of love. I am now fully recovered [from trauma] and find myself in love or in a loving mood.

Although this fan of Korean dramas was not really a feminist in the sense that she still needed a male sexual partner despite her divorce from a once-ideal Western man, she experiences fantasized love affairs with her former Japanese lovers in the reminiscence that was rekindled by the Korean drama and its male main character. According to other fans, the male lead, nicknamed "Yonsama" among the Japanese fans in their mature ages, had the following characteristics that rejuvenated their youth fantasies (Oh 2011).

Yonsama has a very kind face with a deep understanding of the pain and tragedy of his lover. He recognizes his faults and begs forgiveness from Yujin [the heroine], whereas Sang Hyuk [hero's rival] wouldn't admit his guilt. Also, Yujin's face seems the purest one I have ever seen, and I was very surprised by the fact that Korea has such beauty.

The important message these mature Japanese female fans received from this Korean drama and its hero was therefore the existence of an ideal man who understands "the pain and tragedy" of what women go through in their relationship with the Other. Furthermore, these female fans in Japan also discover their homosexual admiration by finding the Korean main actress in

the same drama as having "the purest" beauty. Another female fan confessed that the drama fully captured female psychology (Oh 2011).

Since two women writers provided scripts for *Fuyu no Sonata*, they could depict women's psychology with profound sensitivity and detail. They captured the minds of female viewers' mind. [...] The falling leaves like scattering snow, the Polaris necklace, and many others. No woman can deny the romantic attraction of these symbols in the drama. [Yonsama] always thinks of Yujin first and helps her whenever she is in trouble. Yonsama's deep rooted love for Yujin is detected throughout the drama.

The discovery of an ideal man and his warm relationship with a pure beauty in Korea by the Japanese female fans has not only awakened them to their status as a gender facing discrimination in Japan but empowered them to learn and change their lives even after the death of their Japanese husbands (Oh 2011).

I married my late husband at the age of 21, and family was the first and everything in my life. My life as an individual person didn't exist in the family. I didn't particularly hate my fate and didn't raise any questions about my life. I was just happy. I was a woman without any desire. I usually stayed home and went out only with my husband. So, when he died, I almost stopped going out. [...] When he died, I cut all communication with the outside world for more than a year and half because it was too sorrowful and unbearable. Accidentally, I watched the 13th episode of *Fuyu no Sonata* on the NHK channel that aired the series for the third time. I knew about Hallyu, but again I had no interest in the outside world. I was watching it while lying on the sofa and noticed that I was endlessly sobbing. Since then, I've fallen in love with that Hallyu drama. I recorded all the episodes of *Fuyu no Sonata* and watched them 20 different times. Now, my life has completely changed. [...] I am now learning Korean at the Women's Center, because I now have this urge to learn a foreign language. I participate in many outside activities now. Although my daughters worry about me going out at night by subways, they are indeed happy seeing how my new life has changed since then. I have more curiosities than other people because my life was a homemaker's one. When I went to Rain's [another Hallyu star] concert, I ate an American hamburger for the first time in my life. Now that I wanted to communicate with other Hallyu fans, I bought a PC and learned how to use it. I remember having no desire when I was young. I lived without questioning anything, but I find my present life much happier than before.

Unlike this lucky case, many married female Hallyu fans in Japan, however, experience unwanted difficulties in their Hallyu consumption, as

husbands (and symbolically the entire male-dominated society) intervene to disrupt their wives' rebellious behaviors. An anonymous woman reconstructed her personal agony in the following way (*Asahi Shimbun* September 12, 2020):

I am a part-time housewife in my 50s. When the children were still in elementary school, I got into the *Winter Sonata* boom and was addicted to Korean dramas. I even borrowed a DVD from a friend and watched it for hours in the daytime when no one was home. My husband was working nearby and often came home suddenly. Then, in front of the children, he exploded and lamented: "Mom is watching Korean dramas all day long! This made me very disgusted. I started watching K-dramas again recently, especially when I was home alone. I was caught by my husband again, who said, You really like the Korean dramas, and my unpleasant memories revived. Since then, my nerves have become irritable. Every time I hear a noise somewhere in my house, I turn off the TV.

Japanese Hallyu fans are now expanding into a third generation, from grandmothers, mothers, to now granddaughters. Children of K-pop grandmothers and mothers become Hallyu fans, so to speak, constructing a new generation of the Japanese Hallyu fandom. Unlike their grandmothers and mothers, who watched K-dramas on Japanese TV or a Korean satellite channel, the third-generation Hallyu fans in Japan watch K-pop and Korean programs on the new social media, including YouTube and Netflix. Since they have followed their mothers to Korea on Hallyu tours many times, they are familiar with Korean things. To them, the postcolonial politics of hatred against Korea is irrelevant, as some of them openly post Instagram messages like "I want to be a Korean." Wanting to be a Korean (woman) means that they are eager to learn Korean, learn Korean culture, eat Korean food, wear Korean clothes, and even live in Korea. The following Instagram keyword bubble charts reveal that young Japanese Hallyu fans, who are mostly women, also cherish and enjoy as much as their mothers and grandmothers the fan activities of watching Korean dramas, learning Korean, making a pilgrimage to Korea, dressing up and/or making up like Koreans, getting connected to other Hallyu fans, and even living in Korea. It is discernable from the data that they are interested in Korean dramas, which apparently motivate them to visit Korea for Korean language learning through study abroad programs available at Korean universities for Japanese exchange students who want to build their global Hallyu fan networks in Korea (see Figure 5). Since they are too young to have nostalgia about their foregone lovers, unlike their mothers or grandmothers, these third-generation Hallyu fans are very active in

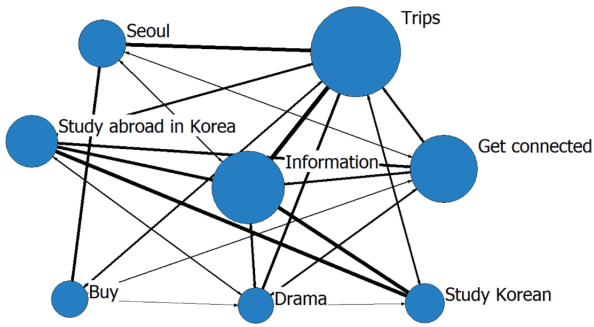

Fig. 5.—Popular Keywords among Japanese Hallyu Fans

intercultural learning as a way of liberating and nurturing them as new Asian women.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to explain female universalism in Hallyu as an alternative cultural message to male universalism rampant in the Western and Asian mass media. We tried to examine the puzzling fact that more than 90 percent of all global Hallyu fans are women, even though K-dramas and K-pop feature both male and female idols, explaining it with the concept of female universalism. In doing so, we first devised an overall theoretical framework where it was implied that the main reason women of all races, ethnicities, and standards of living want to participate in Hallyu fandom and its activism was due to their gendered melancholia resulting from the widespread sexism and male domination in society.

We also explained how female universalism has played out in Hallyu, creating one of the most gender-equal pop culture industries in the world. This was a byproduct of female universalism that deliberately targeted female audiences. In our explanation, we endeavored to explicate how psychiatry can be used in establishing and substantiating the link between bipolar depression (melancholia) with artistic creativity found both in Hallyu artists and fans. This defeats some of the misconceptions that Hallyu has no creativity of its own because it is a mere passive hybridity between Asian and Western pop cultures (Lie 2015).

Finally, we analyzed the messages Hallyu generated for its fans and how the latter responded to them with their own messages. Based on qualitative

data of interviews and confessions, we found evidence of awakening, discovering the meaning of their female existence with or without their male partners, and being healed of gendered melancholia by consuming Hallyu. In the analysis of quantitative big data of Instagram posts and exchanges among fans and idols, we found that the Japanese Hallyu fans were concentrating on what Jenkins calls proactive fan behaviors, including Hallyu pilgrimages, intercultural learning, and even living in Korea.

(*Submitted*: September 23, 2023; *Revised*: December 8, 2023; *Accepted*: December 20, 2023)

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