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Urwa Mohammed Tariq

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**Say Hello to the Digital Hallyu Wave in the UAE**  
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URWA TARIQ

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# Say Hello to the Digital Hallyu Wave in the UAE: The Rising Digital South Korean Wave among Emirati Women and its Impact on their Cultural Identity

Urwa Tariq,<sup>1</sup> United Arab Emirates University, UAE

*Abstract: Young Emiratis today are increasingly obsessed with South Korean entertainment. From boy bands to TV soap operas, and reality shows to movies, there are endless choices available. Intrigued by the newly emerging K-wave particularly popular among young females, this article explores how Emirati women negotiate their cultural identities through their active involvement with K-pop culture in digital media. It studies their perception of the Emirati media industry and compares it to online K-media and Hollywood and Bollywood. This exploratory study examined how and why K-entertainment strikes a chord among Emirati females. It also recognized indicators of possible threats to cultural identity. A focus group was conducted at United Arab Emirates University among females contributing to the Hallyu phenomenon. The results suggested that Emirati youth expect diverse and unique content from local media industries; since they are not receiving this through mainstream Emirati media, they are seeking to fill the void by venturing into global cyberspace. In addition, recommendations are provided on ways to respond to the growing online K-wave and how local identity could be preserved through the entertainment industry.*

*Keywords: South Korean Wave, Hallyu, Emirati Identity, Society, Culture, Digital Media, Entertainment Industry*

## Introduction

South Korean entertainment is becoming increasingly popular in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). In 2018, the SMTown Live World Tour concert, attended by more than 20,000 young residents, took Dubai by storm. South Korean entertainment, including K-pop, TV dramas, reality shows, and movies, has struck a chord with UAE residents, particularly Emirati women (Dhal 2018). The South Korean K-pop presence in digital media has ignited curiosity among local scholars and governments regarding its impact on the younger Emirati generation and its cultural identity.

Hallyu fans in the UAE have developed a significant interest in South Korean culture, as demonstrated by participating in online forums through fan communities. This study emphasizes the crucial role played by Emirati fans as cultural mediators by focusing on K-wave fandom in the UAE. Considering the paucity of scholarly research on the newly emerging Hallyu phenomenon, this study explores how UAE young women negotiate their gender and cultural identity through their active involvement in the digital community of South Korean pop culture. Through exploratory research, this study aims to examine the influence of the South Korean entertainment industry, among others, in the UAE in the context of the Emirati identity.

## Defining Emirati Identity

Oral folktales, proverbs, and daily communication aid in passing down cultural identity from one generation to another. Cultural identity is important in any society because it reflects how individuals define themselves and their roles in the community. In this globalized world, the UAE has opened its arms to many cultures, languages, and people from both the East and the West (Almehairi 2015).

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<sup>1</sup> Corresponding Author: Urwa Tariq, PO Box 15551, College of Humanities and Social Sciences, Department of Media and Creative Industries, Al Ain, UAE. email: urwat@gmail.com/ 201690065@uaeu.ac.ae

Gleissner (2012) believes that the Emirati identity is difficult to express in words, but that one can see and feel it. For instance, TV campaigns present images of Bedouins, camels, date palms, and traditional coffee ceremonies merged with high-rise buildings, expensive cars, and other phenomena of a modern urban lifestyle. These symbolic elements are parts of the Emirati history and lifestyle. Another example is the architecture, including innovative buildings like the Burj Al Arab, which represents the Emirati tradition of sailing and pearl diving (AlKassim 2016), or the Dubai Frame, connecting the past and the present of that city (Wam 2017; Zakaria 2017). Social media and local channels praise the achievements, rituals, efforts, and performance of the rulers, who have fostered rapid modernization of the country while maintaining links with the old heritage. In social media, Sheikh Hamdan bin Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, the crown prince of Dubai, presents himself as an example of a cultural icon and a political figure through a brand and logo: “Fazza” or “F3.” His political image promotes the national identity by combining aspects of authentic traditional Bedouin culture with the profile of a modern youthful prince enjoying extreme sports (Gleissner 2012). The constant exposure to such environment constructs an association between the symbols that are used, making them into a local brand, and Emirati identity.

Abdulla (2014) states that in the Emirati identity, “the social setting might have changed, but we’re still the same” and “we are the ones who know what it means to be Emirati and the ones who set the rules of the game.” Emirati sociologist Gobash (2008) differs from the above by describing the Emirati identity as being deeply rooted in Islamic civilization. Emirati families, he says, have a major role in conveying some of the most important principles on which Islamic society relies, such as truth, sincerity, and ethics. Gobash asserts that Emirati identity in a broad framework is about “who are we?” Similarly, Decoster et al. (2017) confirm that the Emirati identity is about having a traditional and conservative lifestyle demonstrated by cultural signals like style of dress, the Arabic language, style of hospitality, traditional customs, and respect for elders and the country’s leaders. Mohammed (2008) states that the national identity rests on basic feelings like love for the UAE, its way of life, and its establishments, and responsibility for its well-being and safety.

## Literature Review

### *The Emirati Entertainment Industry*

The dynamics and trends of the media industry sometimes provide valuable insight into viewers’ behavior. It has helped the government and businesses determine the most effective means of communicating with citizens. However, authorities today question the foreign values being adopted by young viewers from the available foreign media.

Perceptions of cultural fragility have led UAE authorities to attempt to preserve local identity (Al-Khouri 2012; Hopkyns 2013; Salama 2013). For instance, the UAE’s media authorities have taken initiative to host new cultural shows (CPHFC 2017; Show 2014), Emirati reality shows (Ayache 2014), and Emirati patriotic singers and poets (Grundey 2017; Khalaf 2015) in the TV industry. Establishing and continuously supporting the Emirati film industry was a crucial step, as it promoted UAE’s cultural identity, norms, values, and social issues. The Dubai International Film Festival became the first incubator for promoting regional motion pictures. A small group of filmmakers, who began their own Emirates Film Competition in 2001, were the primary audience for Emirati movies made before 2004 (Yunis 2014). Emphasis on films expanded in 2008, when government-owned Abu Dhabi Media Company opened Image Nation. This resulted in the creation of a creative lab known as twofour54. Shortly after, the Gulf Film Festival and the Emirates Film Competition, which highlighted 300 Emirati short films in Dubai and Abu Dhabi, were established. Since then, the government has provided substantial support, mentorship, and encouragement to local filmmakers (Hambuch 2016).

The UAE's film community formed a national identity of its own. Emirati narrative filmmakers created films that both local and the international audience could accept. For instance, some Emirati short movies, documentaries, or dramas represented national identity by depicting real-life examples of Emirati lifestyle, beliefs, values, social issues, traditions, and other aspects (Al Bustani 2015; Quick 2016). Other Emiratis focused on issues of multiculturalism through movies such as "City of Life," "Sea Shadows," and "Going to Heaven," which emphasize the effect of a multicultural society and modern lifestyle on Emirati identity (Hambuch 2016; Newbould 2016; Rogers 2017). For instance, Fatima Musharbek, an Emirati director, created an unconventional documentary called "Rabbit Hole." This documentary highlighted today's Emirati youth struggling with identity crises due to a digitally globalized world pulling them away from their Emirati heritage (Moussly 2011).

### *The Set of Challenges*

Emirati-made movies are increasingly presented in regional multiplexes and international festivals, gradually exposing the UAE's identity in an international arena. However, certain challenges accompany the production of this type of content. First, having Emiratis on-screen is still a novelty, whether in films or in TV dramas. Second, being a relatively new industry in the UAE market, it lacks well-developed stories in a variety of genres, including comedy, horror, or drama (Bardsley 2009; Saffarini 2006). Most of the stories presented are short movies or documentaries related to social issues that may affect society, making it more suitable for international audiences than for local audiences. Third, local channels rarely broadcast Emirati movies; they are generally accessible during film festivals as special screenings, thus limiting their exposure to the masses. Fourth, many Emirati filmmakers have limited training in terms of direction, production, script writing, and acting. Few choose to pursue this field because of social and cultural issues (AlZayani 2017). Fifth, lack of funds, restricted help from the government (Bardsley 2009; Hill 2013; Newbould 2017; Youssef and Piane 2013), and limited production and technical expertise also make it difficult to pursue a career in this field. Finally, imported foreign media, which has existed for more than thirty years in the UAE, provides the Emirati audience with other genres of entertainment. The varied choices and exposure to foreign content are making Emiratis, especially those of the younger generations, less interested in locally produced entertainment.

### *Imported Content*

The entertainment sectors, especially film and music divisions, are subtle yet powerful tools for the dissemination of a nation's self-image domestically and internationally (Yunis 2014). Figure 1 depicts the Arab Media Outlook (2015) report (AbuFadhil 2017) indicating that Hollywood and Bollywood have succeeded in achieving cultural image dissemination in the UAE. Cinemas did not become popular in the UAE until the mid-1990s; even then, they mainly screened Indian and Western movies in Dubai and Abu Dhabi multiplexes (Hambuch 2016). Emirati citizens obtained access to Indian and English songs through cassettes and radio. Prior to the launch of governmental TV stations in the late 1980s, the UAE had no history of any visual entertainment (Yunis 2014). To date, television programming in the UAE offers few original programs with limited local production, such as news, talk shows, and the occasional Ramadan soap operas. All of this leads to increased reliance on international programs (Gleissner 2012).

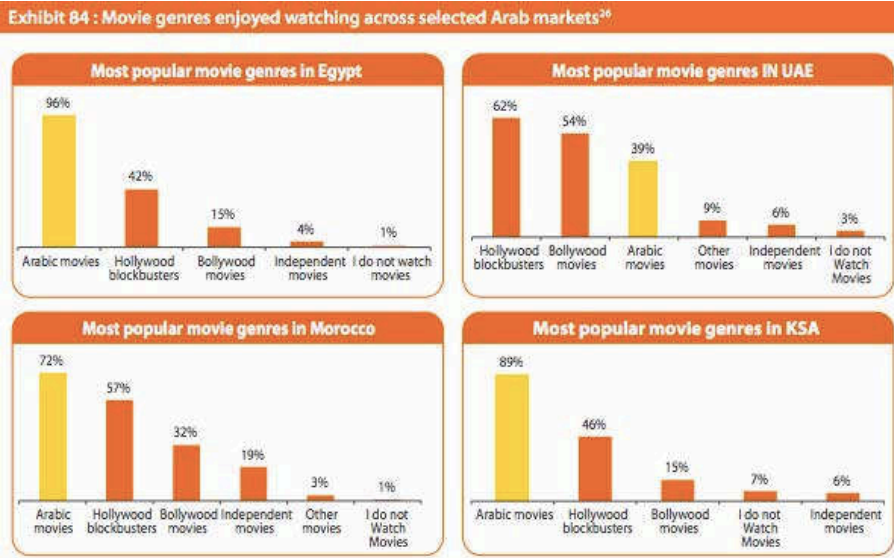


Figure 1: Most Popular Movie Genres in the Middle East from Arab Media Outlook 2011-2015  
 Source: Abu Fadhil, 2017

Arab Media Outlook investigated Arab markets, including Egypt, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, to analyze demand for locally produced Arabic films. As shown in Figure 1, the UAE, with a highly diverse population, was the only Arab country whose first preference was Hollywood (62%) followed by Bollywood movies. This contrasts with other regions that opted for Arabic movies (Club 2015). The impact of Hollywood and Bollywood is so strong in the UAE that in 2016, Dubai created a Hollywood and Bollywood theme park (Saxena 2016).

Similarly, the UAE is one of the largest overseas markets for Western and Indian entertainment. However, Middle Eastern viewers prefer Indian media over Western media due to the movie plots, which are rooted in kinship relations and similar family structures. Cultural similarity is also one of the primary reasons for preference among Middle Eastern viewers (Omar 2015). The imported content and Emiratis somehow share similar traditions, values, and habits. However, Indian entertainment is not the only medium that bears cultural similarities. The recent rise of South Korean media in the UAE has demonstrated that Korean and Arab cultures share norms and traditions; this is the driving force of its growth among Emirati youth. The next section aims to uncover specific factors related to its rise.

### ***Rise of the South Korean Wave in the UAE***

In this era of globalization, acceptance of foreign cultures has become easier than accepting native culture (Sachdeva 2014). This principle perfectly describes the trending culture in the UAE, known as the “South Korean wave” (*Hallyu* in Korean). This term signifies a particular “style” or “current flow” (Bokrae 2015); it refers to a surge in the international visibility of South Korean culture, which began in East Asia during the early 1990s and is now spreading to West Asia, to the Middle East, and some parts of Europe and the United States (Ravina 2009). The wave consists of TV (K-movies, dramas, TV shows) and music (K-pop), both of which are the focus of this study. The deepening bilateral ties between the UAE and South Korea have strengthened relations between the two countries through military, diplomacy, and trade (Huang 2011). In 2017, Rizvi interviewed Emirati professor Al-Jenaibi regarding her research on Emiratis’ preference in entertainment. She indicated that young Emiratis, especially women displayed great interest, and that they preferred South Korean entertainment to other forms of

entertainment. She stated that, “Korea is slowly transforming from a traditional society to modernity, and perhaps trying to reconcile the two. In UAE, the traditional and modern coexist and people are trying to converge both worlds,” (Rizvi 2017; Swan 2019).

Compared to Indian entertainment, which is predictable, and Western entertainment, which uses sensual tactics to attract viewers, Korean entertainment is usually dream-centric; thus, the protagonist’s role is unpredictable. Aspects of life such as friendship and other healthy relationships are portrayed, and their viewers are taught morals and lessons (Dhal 2018; Sachdeva 2014). The “yon-sama syndrome” in Japan and “Hahanyizu” fandom in China demonstrate that women in these regions are at the center of the South Korean Wave (Noh 2010). Similarly, young Emirati women prefer to watch international dubbed entertainment, as they seek to learn about new cultures and watch shows that address universal social issues (Al-Jenaibi 2017; Dhal 2018). Al-Saffaar (2012) also attests that women account for a higher overall viewership than men, as they indicate a great degree of satisfaction from viewing dubbed drama, movies, and music (Kim 2012). The enthusiasm, social satisfaction, and emotions and leisure help them escape their realities and relate to characters through their own experiences (Bennett 2012; Chua and Iwabuchi 2008; Dhal 2018; Ziani and Alrajehi 2014).

Media researchers like Kim (2017) analyzed the South Korean wave phenomenon through cultural content analysis. The research revealed that emotions expressed through Korean TV series easily attract Middle Eastern fans. Figure 2 reveals the reasons Korean content resonates with UAE viewers. For instance, some Korean Confucian values are similar to Islamic cultural ideas which helps align them with Middle Eastern viewers’ beliefs. These viewers prefer shows with moral lessons and bonding. K-dramas mostly deal with topics related to family members, differences in social classes, and love triangles. By portraying situations that comport with Islamic beliefs, such as an emphasis on family, K-dramas have raised awareness of shared values among Arab viewers. Middle Eastern audiences are also drawn to beautiful images, sensitive approaches, romanticism, and storylines where good triumphs over evil (Kim 2017; Swan 2019).

<b>Socio-cultural analysis of the Middle East</b>	<b>Preference analysis of Korean television series</b>
Lack of media content →	←Exciting variety of content
Importance of Middle Eastern → traditions and cultural values	←Respect for Korean and traditional Confucian values
Aspects of American culture → that clash with Islamic values Sex, violence, betrayal	←Love and family-oriented themes Respect for elders, bonding with family members, love, humanistic values
Pursuit of happiness → in Islam	←Stories with happy endings where the characters achieve success

Figure 2: Cultural Content Analysis Study from the New South Korean Wave in the ME  
Source: Kim 2017

Another key factor introduced by Hare (2017) that differed from Kim’s study is that Korean media utilizes strong marketing tactics. The audience tends to acquaint themselves with and remember Korean actors because of a Korean triplet trend, which consists of singing, dancing, and acting. This emerging trend helps media personalities and Korean content achieve success in the international market. Moreover, many Korean actors have polyglot competence (Chinese, Japanese, Korean, English, and Thai), enabling a broader reach among Asian audiences. This method of marketing rapidly exposes and familiarizes respondents with the South Korean entertainment industry.



Researchers have realized the profound impact the Hallyu effect has on Arab regions. In turn, they have recommended that budding Arab researchers pursue Hallyu topics in niche markets (Young et al. 2017). Several papers have been written in Egypt (Han and Lee 2008; Noh 2010), Palestine, and Israel (Otmazgin and Lyan 2013) regarding Hallyu fandom; however, no case study analyses have been performed on the Hallyu phenomenon among young Emiratis and its impact on their cultural identity in the UAE. The small market size of the UAE may have discouraged its use as a research target for globalized culture by scholars in the past; however, its importance has grown as UAE citizens' power to influence other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries has expanded.

Thus, this study aims to analyze the South Korean wave in the UAE, identify the reasons behind its rising popularity among Emirati women, and understand its effect on Emirati culture. A focus group interview was performed through a discussion format, and this allowed people to express their points of view in a group setting and provide indicators of media impact. The research focused on two specific aspects:

**1. Defining cultural identity and understanding local entertainment:**

RQ1: What is the current perception of young Emirati women on cultural identity?

RQ2: How do locally produced entertainment media contribute to maintaining this cultural identity, if at all?

**2. Understanding the rise of Korean entertainment in the UAE:**

RQ3: Why do Emirati females have rising interest in South Korean media and what are the key factors that differentiate K-entertainment from other imported ones?

RQ4: Does the South Korean wave influence Emirati identity in any way?

## **Research Methodology**

The study utilized a focus group consisting of eleven Emirati women from various colleges at UAE University. Though they were avid viewers of South Korean entertainment, they also followed other sources of content including Hollywood, Bollywood, and the Emirati entertainment. Qualitative research of an exploratory nature was adopted, and interview questions were semi-structured. Eleven open-ended questions were asked, centering on the four research questions. Responses were documented by two interviewers, a moderator who conducted the focus group interview, and an observer who took notes verbatim. Two interviewers were included to facilitate comparison between findings and enhance reliability (Harrell and Bradley 2009). The interview lasted about ninety minutes, and for confidentiality purposes, numbers were used to identify participants during the discussion. The participants (aged 17–22 years) were viewers of Korean entertainment for more than three years and avid followers of all types of Korean shows. Respondents were asked to rank themselves using a 10-point Likert scale ranging from 1 to 10 (10 being the highest) in terms of loyalty to Korean media. Around 70 percent of the participants ranked themselves an 8 or above.

## **Research Findings**

### ***Defining Cultural Identity and Understanding Local Entertainment***

The questions in this category aimed to explain the way respondents perceive Emirati identity and whether locally produced entertainment media helps maintain this perception. Most of the respondents were perplexed with the terms “Emirati Identity” or “Cultural Identity.” However, they were familiar with terms such as “loyalty,” “UAE customs,” and “traditional culture”

through schools and universities. Regarding ways in which the UAE's culture could be distinguished from other cultures, the most common answers took the form of tangible visibility, such as "Abaya and Kandora" (traditional dress), "Dallah" (coffee jar), "Emirati Accent," "Bukhhor" (perfume), "Flag and National Anthem," "Falcon," and "Heritage sites"; such answers were similar to Glessner's (2012) classification.

Regarding their exposure to locally produced entertainment, nine of eleven respondents were familiar with local programs but confessed that they preferred not to watch them. Their knowledge of Emirati cinema was also limited. They mostly watched specific broadcasted shows, such as locally animated Shaabiat Al Cartoon or Freej, with family members or during the month of Ramadan. Almost all members rejected the idea of watching dramas and movies. They felt that dramas/movies produced were "exaggerated," "gloomy," and "far from reality." In addition, respondents held that cultural identity was absent or portrayed incorrectly in the Emirati entertainment industry. The storyline, though directed by Emiratis, was not focused completely on Emirati culture itself; in cases where it was, a fictitious portrayal was depicted. By contrast, respondents had a good awareness of the UAE's music industry, Emirati presenters and hosts.

There is a way of publicizing Emirati movies, and their launching is pretty underworld. They don't use their media, they don't use their followers well, basically, their adverts are pretty bad, and same time quality of movie, story, actor is low quality, especially for us who watch all sorts of foreign entertainment, we have this natural tendency to compare them. (Participant 4)

### *Understanding the Rise of K-entertainment in the UAE*

The second set of questions aimed to understand respondents' rising interest in South Korean media and analyze its distinctiveness from other imported entertainment industries in the UAE. These questions also aimed to comprehend whether Korean media has influenced Emirati cultural identity.

When asked to recall their first encounter with South Korean entertainment that led to their rising interest in it, participants' responses fell into three categories. The first set of answers revealed that most Emirati women were previously Otaku fans (Japanese Anime Cosplay and manga fandom), which enabled a seamless transition to Korean entertainment. Audiences have switched their attention from Japanese pop culture to Korean entertainment because Koreans bring their characters and stories to life, which allows viewers to personally relate to them (Bennett, 2012). Koreans produce shows that represent the youths' urban lives, love affairs, and consumerist appetites.

I was an Otaku before and still am. What made me interested in them was the idea of Korean making series that have an anime-style to them. What keeps me going is that K- dramas are almost like anime, but in real life, and their reality shows are very creative. (Participant 7)

Another source of exposure was through TV channel MBC 4. MBC 4 launched its first dubbed Korean series in 2013, called "Heart Strings" and "Boys over Flowers." However, respondents disliked the broadcasting as MBC4 chopped episodes, censored several scenes, and removed opening soundtracks, which are usually the highlights of Korean series. The most common issue stressed by participants was Arabic dubbing, as they recalled that the quality, accent and dialect delivery of dubbing was poor and did not suit the characters.

However, viewers liked the story concepts and actors, which motivated them to re-watch original version through websites. They stated that Korean entertainment was available online

with English subtitles and good-quality streaming and downloading options. Though Internet portals are unofficial, they facilitate the sharing of information on where and how to view Korean dramas, shows, and movies online. They recommend good series, encourage repetitive viewing, and expand their inventories (Noh 2010). Additionally, striking Korean movie posters, colorful trailers, and attractive boy/girl group bands such as EXO, BTS, BLACKPINK caught the attention of respondents while web browsing, which led to a rising interest in Korean content. Furthermore, participants stated that they have contributed to spreading the Korean wave among their Emirati friends through persuasion. The majority agreed that such persuasion was successful among their friends because Korean entertainment includes a wide variety of genres.

A comparison with Western TV shows was also discussed during the interview. Participants felt that Korean dramas were cleaner in terms of language and content. They highlighted their definition of romance with words like “simple,” “loyal,” and “cute and shy,” characteristics that were missing in Western content (UAEU News, 2018). Moreover, Korean dramas have a moderately slow pace in terms of emotions, allowing viewers to comprehend feelings and empathize with characters (Hare 2017; Kim 2017). Participants also stressed that most Korean episodes ended quickly and were readily available online, thus reducing their wait time. The Western series, however, lasted several seasons and required online subscriptions.

Regarding Indian entertainment, respondents were knowledgeable, and many indicated that Indian media was their family members’ first choice. Conversely, respondents felt that Indian series were inferior to Korean series in terms of storyline, cinematography, direction, characters, predictability, and performance (Dhal, 2018). The suspense created in Korean series is “hard to predict” compared to Indian series; this exemplifies the Hypodermic needle theory (Merskin 2019), leaving the audience weary and cynical because of its predictability and lengthy episodes.

Accordingly, when asked why Korean media attracted more Emirati females than males (Saffar, 2012), participants emphasized the attractive physical appearance of the Korean characters. They used words like “cute/adorable” and “fresh” to describe both Korean women and men (UAEU News 2018). The second factor was personality. They described men as “visually appealing and noble” and women as “polite and lovable.” Participants also found Korean language to be enticingly soft. Conversations were carried out slowly and required time and effort to understand; this did not appeal to Emirati men. Another important aspect is that Emirati females stay home more than Emirati males, which enables greater exposure to foreign programs and allows females to discover new cultures (UAEU News 2018). This was similar to Kim’s study (2012), which stated that marginalized women often gained pleasure by virtually travelling to new, foreign destinations through media consumption. Participants confessed that even if Emirati men did like Korean entertainment, they would not acknowledge it due to “egotism,” “orthodox beliefs,” and “fear of stigmatization.”

The majority of concept in K-entertainment is femininity, even boys look a little feminine and that doesn’t appeal to Emirati boys as they like masculinity, but for girls, because we have this perception even in femininity, we find masculinity, which requires lot deeper in analyzing and we will find something charming (sic). (Participant 5)

Consequently, participants had mixed reactions when asked how adults reacted to K-showbiz. The majority described uneasiness in viewing K-showbiz in front of elders. It was highlighted that the older generations, who prefer watching Arabic entertainment, did not accept foreign media. Furthermore, some elders discriminated against Asian celebrities because they judged Korean characters by their appearance, especially Korean males, and this made the media culturally objectionable. Some participants felt that watching K-dramas with their parents

restricted them from expressing their “fangirl” emotions. Hence, respondents concluded that Korean entertainment was for younger generations, so they favored viewing it alone or with the same age group.

My parents think every Asian is a Chinese or Filipino. I don’t know why, but families who don’t actually watch Korean or Japanese or others are very sexist. They are like, “Why do you watch guys who look like girls?” “Who is that girl?” ...They wouldn’t even call them a guy or a man. (Participant 1)

## Discussion

The Emiratis in this study belong to the UAE geographically, yet they engage virtually with South Korean culture. Thus, one crucial question remains: where do they ultimately belong?

The findings of this study were similar to Noh (2010) in terms of understanding the psychological aspect of the respondents. The South Korean wave is thriving in the UAE because it fills the void left by the Emirati media industry. Emirati fans passionately love South Korea and its people and connect with South Korean culture through their gendered, trans-cultural fandom. Echoing the notion of cultural proximity, Emirati and Korean cultures share common ground. In both cultures, poetry, romance, social relationships, and friendships are highly valued, especially by women (Dhal 2018). Therefore, young Emirati females’ desire to remain in touch with their culture is gratified, regardless of whether the media is foreign. Emirati fans are not mindless zealots for Korean culture; instead, they are cultural agents struggling with complex identities (Noh 2010; Swan 2019). South Korean culture evokes escapism to an idealistic world where they can relate psychologically and culturally. This indicates that Emirati females’ cognition of Hallyu is conscious rather than passive (Swan 2019).

Another unanticipated element of the study included the rising cyberspace community, specifically Twitter and Instagram. The K-wave has given Emirati women confidence and a strong sense of group identity rarely seen before (Dhal 2018). This is demonstrated by H.H. Sheikh Hamdan Bin Mohammed, known as “Fazza,” who has one of the largest local fanbases comprising mostly women. The Emirati women perceive him as a national hero—an idol—due to his effective presence and communication via social media. This example demonstrates how Hallyu utilizes various resources to achieve prosperity and that it is possible to establish this in Emirati traditional media. Another reason the online community is growing is that K-pop fans are following their idol groups on social media. Participants voiced that such groups have given them a sense of belonging to a community with similar passions. The Emirati fans serve as protective shields for Korean celebrities who represent themselves as humble, emotionally available, and vulnerable. This loyalty is rarely seen for Emirati, Indian, or Western celebrities. For instance, A.R.M.Y (Adorable Representative Masters of Ceremony of Youth) is a fan-base for the South Korean boy band BTS. They are followed by Emiratis in the UAE on Twitter, Instagram, and V-app. Respondents stated that this band strengthens their connections between fans, celebrities, and the overall community. The sense of belonging, bonding, and collectivism may have already existed as a part of the Emirati identity; however, the credit unintentionally goes to the K-wave.

Additionally, the rise of the K-wave was not through traditional media; rather, it was solely spread through cyberspace and word of mouth. Youth today prefer to have freedom and control of media as opposed to having media control them; this is an important aspect to consider. Digital media increasingly plays an important role among UAE youth, but the Emirati media industry still lags behind in terms of digital access and flexibility; thus, its significance is jeopardized.

## Conclusion

There are no related articles in the UAE discussing the negative impact of the South Korean effect on Emiratis; therefore, this study facilitated comprehension of those traits through participant testimonials. The aim of this case study was to lay a foundation in focus group research in order to understand a slice of the UAE culture from the participant's point of view and to further examine the cultural proximity of the two cultures.

By analyzing the discussion boards frequented by the participants, this study explored the burgeoning Emirati fandom for Korean popular culture. More specifically, the effect on cultural identity through group discussion was critically examined. Overall, the current study's results suggest that Emirati youth expect diverse and unique content from local media industries. Mainstream Emirati media does not seem to satisfy youths' desire for modern, yet realistic, content. The local media's inability to supply quality programs has led Emirati fans to venture into global cyberspace to fill that void.

When participants were asked about any implications of the South Korean wave in their cultural identity, their immediate response was negative. Korean culture is an imported industry that has similarities to Western culture. If Western culture and media have a negative impact on the Emirati identity, there is a possibility that the South Korean media could also be a threat to their identity. Several concerns have been expressed by researchers from Japan, Bhutan, Mongolia, Singapore, India, Indonesia, Mongolia, and China regarding the Hallyu effect (Chakraborty 2017; Chang et al. 2012; Jung 2014; Kaisii 2017; Kim 2017; Wen 2015). According to scholars, the K-wave has an overall negative influence on millennials as it hinders their focus on reality; this was indirectly highlighted by the study participants. Unbeknownst to them, the K-wave phenomenon influenced their daily life. For instance, females were highly focused on physical beauty and appearance, as they were not content with their current presentation.

Moreover, their preference for South K-entertainment over Emirati entertainment was high. They developed a natural tendency to compare local programs with Korean content, making it highly competitive for local producers in terms of expectations. In addition, their preference of viewing Korean shows in solitude rather than with family makes it difficult for Emirati adults to interact with the younger generations. Females also stressed that exposure to K-pop celebrities and idols changed their expectations and standards for their future spouse. They fantasize about having a Korean-type male partner in terms of looks, personality, and character. The respondents also stated that they spend several hours per day watching and following K-entertainment. In addition, their desire to learn the Korean language to better understand the celebrities is a cautionary sign that UAE authorities cannot afford to overlook.

## Recommendations and Limitations of the Study

South Korean entertainment companies are taking into consideration the cultural characteristics of the UAE, whether from a business perspective or to build a stronger relationship with the UAE. The UAE media bodies, which include young directors, must learn to cooperate with the Korean entertainment industry. This will help them produce media content of a similar caliber with distinct characteristics suitable for the local culture. In terms of TV shows, as participants suggested, local media can try to imitate reality shows that could benefit UAE society as a whole and contribute to creating a unique identity. For instance, respondents suggested a storyline with a social message that represents the real UAE. They desire TV shows that respect UAE culture, involve professional actors, and are led by directors who avoid redundancy in plots and scripts. If these suggestions are heeded, it will aid in the growth and expansion of the local media content.

Overall, the study's findings are significant, but it does have its limitations. The research was restricted to one focus group consisting of eleven members. Therefore, it is not possible to make valid inferences and generalizations. In addition, the demographics of the focus group participants do not necessarily represent the youth in the UAE. Thus, this qualitative analysis does not attempt to generalize its findings. Second, it was limited to one qualitative method. Triangulation analysis would have facilitated in the delivery of rich data and an understanding of the growing K-wave phenomenon and its impact on cultural identity. Moreover, with a focus on the feminized dimension of the Korean Wave, this project ignored the male perspective of Hallyu. Future studies can employ the above approaches to explore other aspects of the Hallyu effect in the UAE.

## Research Contributions

This study underlined the main factors that have led to the rise of the South K-Wave and its impact on the Emirati identity from a psychological perspective. Bolstered by the power of social media as a means to access and consume cultural content, it suggested that popular culture consumption not only changes the perceptions of some individuals but that these individuals play a decisive role in connecting globalized culture with local fandom. In summary, social media strategies used by Korean entertainment agencies could be a benchmark for UAE entertainment agencies who hope to maximize business potential with digital media. It provides local media specialists with ideas on how to produce high caliber Emirati media content that includes distinct characteristics suitable for the local culture. As such, this research can provide important insight for media analysts, the UAE government, and academic institutions. Moreover, the study can encourage future research within the GCC region regarding the cultural proximity of two cultures and its impact on society.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Urwa Tariq:** PhD Candidate and Research Assistant, Department of Media and Creative Industries, College of Humanities and Social Sciences, Al Ain, United Arab Emirates

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