

## Welcome to Korea Day: From Diasporic to *Hallyu* Fan-Nationalism

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With the increasing appeal of Korean popular culture known as the Korean Wave or *hallyu*, fans in Israel among Korean studies students have joined—and even replaced—ethnic Koreans in performing nationalism beyond South Korea’s borders, creating what I call *hallyu* fan-nationalism. As an unintended consequence of *hallyu*, such nationalism enables non-Korean *hallyu* fans to take on the empowering roles of cultural experts, educators, and even cultural ambassadors to promote Korea abroad. The symbolic shift from diasporic to *hallyu* nationalism brings to the fore nonnationalist, nonessentialist, and transcultural perspectives in fandom studies. In tracing the history of Korea Day from the 2000s to the 2010s, I found that *hallyu* fan-students are mobilized both by the macro mission to promote a positive image of Korea in their home societies and by the micro motivation to repair their own, often stigmatized, self-image.

*Keywords: transcultural fandom studies, hallyu, Korean Wave, Korean studies, Korea Day, diasporic nationalism*

While talking with Israeli students enrolled in Korean studies (mostly female fans of Korean popular culture) in an effort to understand their motivations behind organizing Korea Day and promoting Korean culture in Israel in general, I was surprised when some of them used the Hebrew word *hasbara*, which literally translates as “explanation.” As a synonym for propaganda, *hasbara* refers to the public diplomacy of Israel that aims to promote a positive image of Israel to the world and to counter its delegitimization. The idea for this article was born out of the conundrum of why, in the students’ opinion, South Korea (hereafter, Korea) needs *hasbara* and what kind of negative images Korea Day may help to eradicate.

### Introduction

In 2007, the Korean government designated October 5 as Korea Day for overseas Korean communities with the goal of “consolidating the ties between Koreans at home and abroad” (Ministry of

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Foreign Affairs, 2016, pp. 410–411). In addition to strengthening the ties with overseas Koreans by recognizing contributions from diasporic communities, the Korean government has aimed to improve Korea's international image by staging Korean festivals, policy seminars, and an awards ceremony for distinguished members. Yet long before the invention of Korea Day, national days around the globe had become occasions for homecoming and opportunities for different ethnic groups to celebrate, preserve, and promote their cultures. These celebratory days, which act as one-day living museums, have become displays of diasporic nationalism (Lie, 2001, 2008) in its essence—performing popular national identity by and for overseas ethnic groups by exhibiting traditional cultures through “authentic” arts, religions, foods, objects, scenes, and sounds. In addition to fostering inward diasporic nationalism, these events have, in some cases, become public “contact zones” between guests and host societies—as, for example, with Japanese cultural performances in colonial Korea (Henry, 2014, chap. 2).

With the growth in overseas students' mobility since the 2000s, national days have gone public beyond the borders of local diasporic communities and government-supported institutions to become a part of universities' internationalized landscapes. Through national day festivities, overseas students present their own cultures to the world with celebrations at campus fairs with separate booths for individual countries. As a poster created by the Daebak Club (2015) at the University of Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates suggests, Korea Day has become part of a “global day” designated for the celebration of nation-states.

Fueled by the increasing popularity of Korean popular culture (known as the Korean Wave or *hallyu*) since the 2000s, fans have joined and even replaced ethnic Koreans in performing nationalism beyond Korea's borders (Elfvig-Hwang, 2013; Hübinette, 2012; Lyan & Levkovitz, 2015b; Sung, 2014). By tracing the history of Korea Day in Israel from the 2000s to the 2010s and by interviewing its primary organizers—hallyu fans among Korean studies students—I examine non-Korean students' motivations for organizing Korea Day. Among the obvious reasons for planning and hosting Korea Day are to have fun, form group solidarity, display expertise on fandom and Korean studies, and encourage the institutional involvement of the Department of Asian Studies and the Korean embassy. But I also encountered what I call hallyu fan-nationalism, by which I mean (1) the identification process with Korean popular culture through the emotional investment that accompanies a person's interest in Korea, including the choice of a Korean studies degree, and (2) the promotion of a positive national image through performances of Korean popular culture in order to manage the stigma attached to fan-students because of their fandom and choice of Korean studies. Being stigmatized—“the situation of the individual who is disqualified from full social acceptance” (Goffman, 1963, p. 9)—fan-students face the daily experience of being viewed by others in their environment as exotic, strange, or even infantile.

Nationalism can take various forms, and it is usually expected and encouraged to be performed by national representatives. As Yuki Honda (2007) points out, youth nationalism can be explained by “being tied to individual anxieties, insouciance or an inclination toward romantic feelings, hobbies and elements of play” (p. 284). For Benedict Anderson (1983), the author of a seminal book on nation-states as imagined communities, nationalism is a work of imagination. Anderson builds on Ernest Gellner's (1964) definition—“nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it *invents* nations where they do not exist” (p. 169, as cited in Anderson, 1983, p. 6; Anderson's emphasis). If, for

Gellner, invention means falsification or fabrication, Anderson conceptualizes nationalism in terms of the ways that nation-states are imagined and created. Building on Anderson's definition, I interpret fan-nationalism as a work of imagination envisioned by fans through performances of popular national culture to construct a positive image of the nation, fandom, and fans.

In exploring the nationalism performed by people of different nationalities, I find the paradoxical term *diasporic nationalism*—or, as Anderson terms it, “long-distance nationalism”—extremely helpful. Similar to diasporic nationalism, hallyu fan-nationalism questions the link between nation and territory, since “nationalism by definition minimizes the significance of diaspora” (Lie, 2008, p. 172). Contrasting the government's top-down creation of Korean (rather than Korea) Day with the bottom-up organization of Korea Day by non-Korean fans demonstrates the nuanced difference between Korean nationals abroad as seen by the Korean government and the nation-state reterritorialized beyond its geographical location by fans. As an unintended consequence of hallyu fandom, such nationalism enables non-Korean hallyu fans to act as promoters—even as “patriots”—of the Korean nation. The emergence of hallyu fan-nationalism through the reversal of roles of guests and hosts, or dwellers and tourists, poses new questions for fandom studies about the role of fans in negotiating their identity on the public stage.

This article begins with a review of academic research on the transcultural approach to fandom studies and the connection between made-in-Korea popular culture and the place of the “real” Korea in hallyu fandom. Next, I describe the research method, which was conducted through online and off-line participant observations and in-depth interviews with Israeli fan-students of Korean studies. I provide a brief history of Korea Day from the 2000s to the 2010s to illustrate the gradual reversal of roles of Korean students as hosts and hallyu fan-students as guests. The empirical section features the voices of hallyu fan-students from the backstage to understand their motivations for organizing Korea Day. To conclude, I return to the parallel between diasporic and hallyu fan-nationalism to underline its contribution to transcultural fandom studies.

### **Transcultural Approach to Hallyu Fandom**

Unlike the prevailing view of hallyu as an intra-Asian cultural flow (Moon & Park, 2011), I propose a view from the opposite direction—that is, from the perspective of international fans outside Asia to their imagination and creation of Korea Day. Yet the aim of this article is to go beyond the narrow question that lies at the heart of the transnational approach that dominates cross-border fandom studies—specifically, how and why a particular fandom is successful in a particular location. According to Bertha Chin and Lori Morimoto's (2013) critique, Koichi Iwabuchi's (2002) transnational approach, which ascribes the global popularity of Japanese popular culture to its national “odorlessness,” contributes little to the understanding of cross-border fans other than their being representatives of a specific nation, region, or nationality. To overcome the undue emphasis on nation-state as just one analytic frame for understanding fans and fandom, Chin and Morimoto propose a broader transcultural approach “that is concerned less with nations than with fans themselves” (p. 92). For instance, Benjamin Han (2017), who takes the transcultural approach, points to the “cultural fidelity” rooted in K-pop fandom and the practice inside Korea of donating “wreaths of rice” to favorite K-pop bands—a practice that was later adopted by Latin American fans beyond their national borders (p. 2259). In a similar vein, JungBong Choi (2014) discusses

the “metonymic transfer of loyalty” from a hallyu celebrity to his or her country of origin—Korea (p. 100). By shifting attention from hallyu fans’ nations and nationalities and the Koreanness of popular culture toward fans’ imaginations and identification with their fandom’s national origins, I follow Chin and Morimoto’s question of “how and why different border-crossing media capture the imaginations of fans” (p. 93).

The link between hallyu fandom and identification with Korea is far from obvious. Even though some fans, known as “Koreaboos,” are singled out for their fetish of liking, buying, and promoting all things Korean, most hallyu fans distinguish themselves from Koreaboos, whom they perceive as overenthusiastic, extreme, and obsessive (Yoon, 2019b, p. 184). And just as K-pop fans among diasporic Koreans might be ambivalent about their historical homeland (Yoon, 2019a), fans of manga and anime do not necessarily better understand Japanese society and culture (Iwabuchi, 2010, p. 89); Harry Potter fans do not have to become Anglophiles; and most Bollywood fans do not wish to obtain a college degree in Indian studies. It has largely been the Korean government that has strengthened this link since the 1960s by promoting a national cultural policy. With the success of hallyu, the government has framed it as a national cultural achievement and a tool for cultural diplomacy—or soft power—to create a positive public image of Korea abroad (Elfvig-Hwang, 2013; Jin & Yoon, 2017; Moon & Park, 2011).

In recent years, top-down studies on soft power, nation branding, and hallyu have proliferated and include hopes of repairing Korean–Japanese relations and bringing peace to the Middle East through the consumption of K-pop and Korean TV drama. In this nationalistic view, hallyu fans are understood not only as representatives of their nation-states but also as individuals who are expected to promote Korea’s positive overseas image. Hallyu stars, for their part, are under nationalistic pressure from domestic audiences as well as from the Korean government to be exemplary Korean patriots in representing their country abroad (Fedorenko, 2017).

Despite this hypernationalistic discourse surrounding the Korean Wave phenomenon (Fedorenko, 2017; Lie, 2012, p. 346),<sup>2</sup> hallyu does not represent the Republic of Korea; rather, it represents the success of (partially) made-in-Korea popular culture, which is export-oriented and open to external influences, preferences, and interpretations. Moreover, previous studies have questioned hallyu’s “authentic” Korean origins. For instance, John Lie (2012), in his article titled “What is the K in K-pop?” states that there is nothing Korean about K-pop. While most researchers view K-dramas as products inscribed by Korean culture or society, international fans of Korean TV dramas describe their experiences as traveling to K-Dramaland, “a fictive world that represents a self-contained universe” (Schulze, 2013, p. 369).

Fans are well aware of the difference between K-Dramaland and Korea. Chilean fans, for instance, have criticized Korean TV dramas for their unrealistic portrayal of love and relationships (Min, Jin, & Han, 2019). One of the frequently asked questions by overseas fans—“Is this [something observed

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<sup>2</sup> In the context of the global popularity of Japanese popular culture, see Iwabuchi’s (2010) similar critique on a “soft” nationalism in Japan, “a narcissistic discourse,” and “celebratory nationalistic discourse” (pp. 89–90).

in Korean popular culture] the same in Korea?”—signifies that fans are conscious of the gap between the fictional world and faraway reality. According to Marion Schulze (2013), international fans rarely culturalize what they see in K-dramas in their online communities. When they do so, such culturalization undergoes a process of negotiation, singling out “experts” who can rule on what is Korean and what is not. Moreover, rather than promoting a positive image of Korea abroad, fans are often critical of Korea-related subjects by, for example, positioning themselves on the issue of feminism, which is lacking or suppressed in K-drama portrayals of Korean society. In K-pop, the recent Burning Sun club scandal has challenged the K-pop stars’ “soft masculinity” image as gentle, polite, and innocent, and that has served them well in becoming exemplary representatives of Korea abroad (Saeji, 2019).

While most hallyu studies address online fandom, which has led to the so-called hallyu 2.0 era (Jin, 2015; Lee & Nornes, 2015), the off-line observation of the link between the consumption of popular culture and the imagination of the “real Korea” can offer a more nuanced understanding of hallyu fans and fandom. Through an analysis of the Project-K festival in Frankfurt in 2012, Joanna Elfving-Hwang’s (2013) study provides an insightful example of what happens when top-down nationalistic expectations and bottom-up imaginations of Korea meet. German students had created a hybridized Korea according to their own perceptions, as opposed to Han-style—*hanguk*, *hanbok*, *hansik* (Visit Korea, 2019)—the popular national culture promoted by the Korean government. Through hybridity, the German students attempted to spotlight cultural similarities to connect local audiences to a “fun Korea” rather than to the cultural differences emphasized by Korean cultural policy makers. According to Elfving-Hwang, cultural events—even if supported and co-organized with the Korean government or diasporic communities—reveal the tensions behind the definition of Korea that, in the hands of non-Korean cultural brokers, can be far from intended or expected by ethnic Koreans. Moreover, she points out that the primary motivation of the German organizers was enjoyment, pleasure, and their own in-group affiliation rather than a nationalistic obligation that motivated the local diasporic community and the Korean consulate to showcase Korean culture. While the German students did mention their motivation to promote Korean culture and their Korean studies program, their perception of Korean culture was vaguely shaped by popular culture, their studies, and their limited personal exposure to Koreans and Korea.

Unlike Elfving-Hwang, who draws a distinction between the nationalistic representation of Korea as supported by the diaspora and the Korean government, and the “hybrid,” “vague,” “slightly fantastical,” and “inauthentic” image of Korea created by the German students, I take a transcultural approach that goes beyond examining individuals according to distinctions of different nationalities and understanding of cultures and societies as homogenous entities. This article reexamines the motivations of non-Korean fan-students to promote Korea abroad by looking at Korea Day as one of the various routes of identification with hallyu fandom through the unexpected and even unintended connections among fans, nation-states, and nationalism.

### **Method**

Following Chin and Morimoto’s (2013) call for an aca-fan (academic and fan) orientation of fandom scholars who are more than familiar with—as well as less prejudiced toward—their subject of study, I strive to understand the motivations of the fans who have organized Korea Day from their point of

view. This project is the product of a longitudinal study, including participant observation, interviews, and analysis of archival materials. Since 2006, I have participated in events such as food fairs, Korea Days, and Korea quizzes organized either by the Korean community or in collaboration with the Korean embassy in Israel. As a diasporic Korean myself, I worked in 2007–2008 on the promotion of Korean culture in Israel at the Korean Cultural Center, which was established in 2006 by a Korean Christian family. With the rise of hallyu, I began, in 2011, together with my colleagues from humanities and social sciences, daily off-line and online observations of fan communities by following about a dozen Facebook groups and participating in fan gatherings for Korea Days, K-pop parties, Korean quizzes, K-pop world festivals, and more. I also established my own Facebook page related to Korean culture, which enables direct communication with its followers, most of whom are hallyu fans (the page had 3,650 followers as of July 2019).

Since the 2010s, the Hebrew University, with its growing number of hallyu fan-students in the Korea studies program, has become another “contact zone” for Korean and Israeli students to participate in language exchange and to meet during Korea Day and other cultural events. Beginning in 2012, I took an active role in seven Korea Days, contributing in various areas from managing logistics to giving lectures about Korea. This led me and my colleagues to focus more on fan activism—specifically, fans who pursue the promotion of hallyu and Korea in their countries as a mission (Lyan & Levkovitz, 2015a, 2015b; Lyan, Zidani, & Shifman, 2015; Otmazgin & Lyan, 2014, 2018). Finally, from 2017 to 2018, during another aca-fan experience, I taught a course on Korean popular culture and had the opportunity to interact directly with fan-students on the subject of their fandom.

For the current study, my research assistant conducted interviews in 2017 with 14 women and two men of about 35 students in the Korean studies program. Ranging in age from 21 to 26, 14 of the 16 participants defined themselves as fans of K-pop, Korean TV drama, and/or gaming. Their choice of degree was a result of their fandom. Twelve of the students combined Korean studies with a social studies degree, and four combined it with a humanities degree (see Table 1). The interviews were semistructured, with three main guiding questions on exposure to Korea and/or its popular culture, the choice of the Korean studies program, and the reaction of family and friends to both their fandom and degree choice. The interviewees were asked about Korea Day indirectly to contextualize the wider connection between hallyu and Korea. The questions were selected in collaboration with my research assistant, an aca-fan and hallyu student herself. To make the interviews more structured, I first interviewed the research assistant, and we used that interview as a template for the interviews of other students. Since I taught a course on Korean popular culture with some of these students, the research assistant shielded the identities of the interviewees by representing each one with a different capital letter.

Through a close content analysis of the interviews as well as my own experience, I first contextualize this study by providing background on the history of Korea Day in Israel from the 2000s to the 2010s. The goal is to demonstrate the shift from inward to outward diasporic nationalism that enabled the emergence of hallyu fan-nationalism. Second, I feature the voices of fan-students who were prime organizers of the national days to understand their motivations in performing Korea Day. By paying close attention to repeated words, metaphors, stories, and emotions, I identified two major themes: the stigma

attached to both hallyu fandom and the students' choice of the Korean studies degree and attempts to manage that stigma through participation in Korea Day.

**Table 1. Demographics of Korean Studies Students.**

	Age	Gender	Fan or nonfan	Additional degree	Year of study
A	23	F	Fan (K-pop)	International relations	2
B	23	F	Fan (TV drama and K-pop)	Social work	3
C	21	F	Fan (TV drama and K-pop)	Geography	1
D	26	F	Fan (TV drama and K-pop)	Media studies	3
E	23	F	Fan (TV drama)	Law	2
F	24	F	Fan (TV drama and K-pop)	English literature	3
G	25	M	Fan (gaming)	International relations	2
H	21	F	Fan (TV drama and K-pop)	Business administration	1
J	21	F	Nonfan	International relations	1
K	22	F	Fan (K-pop)	International relations	2
L	22	F	Fan (K-pop)	History	2
M	24	F	Nonfan	International relations	2
N	24	M	Fan (gaming)	History	2
O	22	F	Fan (K-pop)	Business administration	2
P	21	F	Fan (TV drama and K-pop)	Sociology and anthropology	1
R	21	F	Fan (K-pop)	English literature	1

### **Background: A Brief History of Korea Day in Israel**

#### **2000s: Korea Day and Diasporic Nationalism**

The first Korea Day was organized by the Korean student community in 1998 in Jerusalem, with the declared mission of bringing the two nations closer and promoting their mutual recognition. In addition to the national mission to promote Korea's positive image in the world, Korean Protestants consider themselves "Lovers of Zion" and strive to express their devotion by volunteering at cultural events and making donations (Kim-Yoon, 2015). The Hebrew University was chosen as the venue because the majority of Korean students studied there, and its Department of Asian Studies had been, since the early 1990s, the only place in Israel teaching the Korean language. The department supported the Korea Day celebration by providing space and logistical assistance.

Despite the declared mission, most attendees before the late 2000s were Korean families celebrating their own national culture. In other words, Korea Day strengthened the Korean community from the inside by expressing inward diasporic nationalism rather than by promoting Korean culture to outside audiences. During the 2004 Korea Day, which was held at Tel Aviv University, I looked around the almost-empty cinema screening hall and saw mostly Korean faces. The few Israelis who showed up looked as if they had either randomly stumbled on the festivities or were acquaintances of the Korean students.

In 2005, professional Christian musicians, singers, dancers, and tae kwon do masters from Korea gave a three-day performance in Jerusalem for an Israeli audience. Some of the Korean students felt marginalized, which may be why no one organized Korea Day in 2006 or 2007. In addition, one of Korea Day's principal organizers left Israel, and the head of the Korean association changed, disrupting the seven-year "tradition." To fill the void, in 2008, the Korean Cultural Center in Israel brought in professional artists sponsored by Korea's governmental cultural office. The event was called the First Korean Cultural Day to differentiate it from the Korea Days previously organized by the Korean community. Since 2009, the center has brought Korean artists to the international festival in Jerusalem called Hutzot HaYozer, where various countries have booths and sell goods. Established by the Jerusalem municipality in 1975, the festival hosted about 100,000 people over 10 days in 2018. Attendees, like tourists, visit country booths to learn about different cultures and places.

In sum, Korea Day began with the Korean student community with an inward orientation. Later, the Korean Cultural Center institutionalized the event within the Hutzot HaYozer festival, expressing outward diasporic nationalism to promote Korean culture to a broader Israeli audience. For the manager of the Korean Cultural Center, participation in the festival fulfills his own mission. When I asked him in 2006 why he decided to open the center, he told me that the Korean people, especially Korean Christians, know a great deal about Israel, but not vice versa. People on the streets always ask him if he is Japanese or Chinese, but never if he is Korean. To make Korea and Koreans more recognizable, the manager annually recruits volunteers not only from the Korean community but also from the hallyu fan-students of Korean-language classes in the center for their better mastery of the Hebrew language. Thus, in 2009, hallyu fan-students for the first time joined the making of a "Korea" performance on a public stage.

### **2010s: Korea Day and the Rise of Hallyu**

Since the introduction of hallyu to Israel in 2006 by way of the Korean TV drama *Nae Ireumeun Gim Samsun* (My lovely Samsun; 2005), the number of Israelis interested in Korean culture has grown from dozens to thousands. The geographical distance between the countries and the absence of diplomatic relations until the 1990s explain the most salient characteristic of hallyu fans in Israel, the majority of whom have never been to Korea and were introduced to the country through Korean TV dramas and K-pop. Like fans in other parts of the world, most hallyu fans in Israel are young women in their late teens and early 20s and are active participants in online consumption and management of online fandom communities. While not being markedly different from fans in other locations, Israeli fans belong to a non-Western country that might experience "minority solidarity" with a popular culture originating in another non-Western country with a history of "cultural obscurity" and peripheral status in the global cultural sphere (Choi & Maliangkay, 2014, pp. 12–14). Moreover, coming from outside Asia—the leading region of hallyu distribution—non-Asian fans may suffer from stronger stigmatization due to their nonmainstream fandom (Lyan & Levkowitz, 2015a; Min et al., 2019; Otmazgin & Lyan, 2014; Yoon, 2019b).

With the rising popularity of hallyu, the number of students enrolled in Korean studies has dramatically increased worldwide (Saeji, 2018). According to the Modern Language Association, 14,000 students are currently learning Korean in the United States, compared with only 163 in 1998 (Pickles, 2018). Some studies on hallyu fandom have emphasized the "learning-related or educational aspect of



hallyu consumption" (Kim & Ahn, 2012; Min et al., 2019; Oh, 2011, p. 224) that motivates fans to learn the Korean language and to learn more about Korea in general. Hallyu has become a gateway to a broader interest in Korean language, history, and society, and in many countries, hallyu has become the main driver of students enrolling in Korean classes.

In Israel, Korean-language courses were first offered at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in the 1990s, and as a result of the increase in the number of students wishing to learn about Korea, a comprehensive major program was launched in 2013. With the establishment of the program and the growth of the dedicated audience, ethnic Korean students retreated from center stage to a Han-style "corner." The subsequent Korea Days (and even Korea Weeks) have been organized by the students—hallyu fans for the most part—supported by the Korean studies program and the Korean embassy in Israel. Every year, a few Korean students volunteer to present "authentic" traditional performances, but they do so as invited guests rather than hosts. For fan-students, on the other hand, the organizing of an annual Korea Day has become almost a duty, and they begin planning the event at the start of the academic year.

This brief history of Korea Day reveals the gradual loss of ownership by ethnic Korean students of "performing Korea" in Israel. There are political, religious, or educational interests behind the transitioning of ethnic Koreans from hosts to guests, such as internal conflicts in the Korean community about who will represent Korea abroad—professional or amateur artists, the Korean community, or the Korean embassy. In addition, the temporal status of overseas students on a limited stay has made it easier to forget the earlier Korea Day tradition that was first conceived in 1998. The rise of hallyu and the growing number of fan-students, as well as the growing support of the Department of Asian Studies and the Korean embassy in Israel in organizing national days inside the university, has also contributed to the change in ownership of Korea Day. Hallyu fan-students, originally visitors to Korea Day, have become "locals" responsible for performing nationalism.

## **Findings From Backstage**

### ***I. Double Stigma: From K-pop to Korean Studies***

To explore the motivations behind the making of Korea Day, it is important to understand the inner motives and social consequences of fan-students' Korean studies choice as, at least in part, an affection-based decision. The role of emotions and affective affinities is largely overlooked in fandom studies (Chin & Morimoto, 2013) as well as in the education research on study choice, which is often understood in terms of rational decision making. Most fan-students describe their study choice in a dialectical way as both an emotional and a rational choice. On the one hand, they see it as a fun and nonpractical degree—a "bonus" and even a "refuge" from the difficulties of their other practical and "serious" degree, usually in the social sciences. Yet some added that they see in Korean studies the potential for future employment as translators or business negotiators, while others hope to change the stereotype of hallyu fans as strange or infantile by choosing a Korean studies degree.

For fan-students, the link between hallyu and Korea is an obvious one, and many talk about their fandom and studies in terms of love and passion, sometimes even referring to Korean popular culture and Korea interchangeably. According to E., the consumption of popular culture leads to a gradual learning process that ranges from unfamiliarity with the Korean origins of hallyu to curiosity, and “for some it ends with a Google search and even self-learning of Korean language, while for others it starts with Korean studies.”<sup>3</sup> These fan-students constitute a minority among several thousand hallyu fans in Israel. As D. argues, “Korean popular culture has become such a significant part of their life, so they wanted to understand it more.” Such identification with Korean popular culture reveals an emotional commitment to fandom, an effort to own it through education as another form of “hyper-consumption” (Stevens, 2010, p. 208).

As for the reactions of family and friends to fandom and to the choice of Korean studies, I was surprised at the range of responses, from stigmatization to admiration. Korean studies students were commonly asked: “What are you going to do with it [a Korean studies degree]?” “When are you going to grow up?” and “Are you again with your Chinese/Asians?” While the first two questions stigmatize hallyu fandom as childish, the third one Orientalizes Korean popular culture in a derogatory way as Chinese or Asian Other. Yet many students also talked about being admired for their “brave choice” to engage in nonpractical studies for the sake of knowledge rather than career, making them feel “special.” As R. explains, “It is the social norm to study something that will bring you money. If one chooses something that breaks this norm, it’s perceived as the subject of admiration, something that others will not dare to do.” Moreover, some reported that the negative reactions they had encountered because of their fandom have changed with their choice of study. For example, for H., “The perception of academic studies changes it [hallyu fandom] from [a] silly and unserious hobby to something which seems to be really serious and important.” D. also thinks that she can remove the stigma attached to hallyu fandom since, thanks to her choice of Korean studies, “Students are not perceived as childish. Korea is generally perceived as something serious, because if you can learn about it at the university, it’s probably something that counts.”

G. feels that he “markets” Korean studies as something attractive and special. He notes, “People always start from disregarding Korea and its popular culture, but after I boast [about] my knowledge and tell them things they don’t know about [the] importance of Asia in the international arena, they are starting to take [Korea] a little more seriously.” For G., a Korean studies degree

even gives legitimacy to being enamored of such a different popular culture, because people tend to disparage or laugh at those who choose different things. [But] people in academy [like me] can boast that they have a degree [in Korean studies] and try to come out smarter on this subject.

Some fan-students also felt marginalized within the Asian studies department, since their peers understand the choice of Chinese and Japanese studies as more legitimate—and, in the case of China,

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<sup>3</sup> This and the following citations were translated by the author from Hebrew. Refer to Table 1 for demographic details for all interviewees cited.

more practical—but tend to dismiss Korean studies as “strange” or “inferior.” Moreover, according to the interviewees, the Korean studies program has been labeled by other students of the Asian studies department as less serious and tailored to the interests of hallyu fans. Like the manager of the Korean Cultural Center in Israel pressing for Korea’s recognition and demarcation from Japan and China, a similar dynamic and national hierarchy exists within Asian studies. For example, J., one of the nonfans in this study, was attracted to Korean studies because of the inferior representation of Korea as “at the background of Japan, at the background of China—always at the side and less important, always submissive, controlled or a ‘side effect.’” O. draws a link between the lack of awareness about Korea in Israeli society (relative to China and Japan) and the negative reaction she encounters as a fan of popular culture and as a student enrolled in Korean studies. In other words, while both hallyu fandom and the Korean studies degree carry a stigma, some fans see in their degree choice an opportunity to push back against such a negative perception.

## ***II. Stigma Management in Making Korea Day***

One of the obvious motivations for organizing Korea Day is the above-mentioned duty-like tradition that began in 2012. New students enrolled in Korean studies are invited by their second- and third-year counterparts to participate in the event, and some students encounter the event even before beginning their studies. Similar to Elfving-Hwang’s findings, students mentioned enjoyment, group solidarity, and peer pressure as main motivators for participating, as opposed to secondary goals such as promoting Korea or attracting new students to Korean studies. Yet rather than singling out explicit enjoyment and portraying students as having a vague—and therefore “inauthentic”—understanding of what Korea is, in this article I examine emotion-driven motivations such as stigma management to local promotion of Korea.

For example, the metaphor of refuge emerged several times in the sense of hiding from outside stigmatization within the closed community of fan-students. D. understands the organizing of Korea Day as a “refuge.” She explains that during such events, “People will not judge me, [since] everyone likes these ‘strange’ things exactly like I do and I can share them without receiving offensive reactions.” When she became a hallyu fan, she thought that she was alone, but fandom communities—and later joining the Korean studies program—allowed her to overcome this feeling. O. also understands Korea Day and other cultural events as revealing that she is not alone; during the event, she explains, she feels that “hundreds share with me a common hobby.” Korea Day, therefore, unlike other public events, provides a safe space for fans’ social empowerment.

For B., volunteering on Korea Day makes her happy because she contributes to the promotion of things she loves. Like many other fan-students, she wants to change the fact that “there is [a] lack of basic awareness [about South Korea]. . . . Many people [in Israel] have heard only about North Korea or about ‘Gangnam Style,’ and many don’t know that there are two completely different Koreas.” D. also thinks that, since “Korea is simply unrecognized and there is a lack of awareness [about it], people don’t know about its popular culture and react to it negatively.” Korea Day, therefore, provides an opportunity for fan-students to deal with the stigma attached to Korea, to hallyu fandom, and to themselves as fans of Korean popular culture.

The sense of mission to eradicate cultural ignorance of Korea is more evident in A.'s criticism of both hallyu fans and the wider Israeli society. She feels obliged to pass on her knowledge about Korea beyond hallyu, since hallyu fans "don't understand anything, they don't have any background in history, nothing, and there is not enough information [in Hebrew]." She even uses the Hebrew word *hasbara*, explaining Korea Day in the Israeli context by evoking nationalistic sentiments. For A., *hasbara* can be used to promote Korea abroad, for "upgrading," so "people will make a switch from hallyu to studies about Korean politics and history." H. also feels that she does *hasbara* about Korea: "People ask me all the time questions about Korea and I feel obliged to know all [the] answers." Korea Day, therefore, provides a means for fan-students to take on an empowering role as experts and educators about Korea.

Unlike the macro mission to promote Korea abroad, J., one of the two nonfans interviewed for this study, sees an inner motive on the part of female hallyu fans as having "the burden of proof" to achieve self-recognition. In her opinion, "Female fans are always tested for their admiration, and that's why K-pop fans feel that they have to know everything so well to not fail this exam." Therefore, the choice of Korean studies provides female fans with an opportunity to expand their knowledge beyond being "just fans" and enables them to answer questions about Korea. In other words, it is not only Korea that needs *hasbara* but also fan-students who "feel obliged to know all [the] answers" to make *hasbara* of themselves.

In sum, the identification with hallyu fandom is enacted through the choice of Korean studies, attaching a double stigma to fan-students because of hallyu fandom and Korean studies. Korea Day, as well as other public events that make Korea more popular and recognizable, has become one of the performance stages for fan-students to manage this stigma. Driven by the emotions of shame, love, passion, loneliness, and pride in their fandom, fan-students strive to achieve outside and inside recognition by struggling for positive representation of Korea, Korean studies, and Korean popular culture on a macro level while managing self-stigma on the group/community and individual levels.

### **Discussion and Conclusion: Between Diasporic and Hallyu Fan-Nationalism**

The change in ownership of Korea Day from diasporic Koreans to fan-students does not mean that the latter group has been driven by nationalistic motives. Yet this article demonstrates that the *hasbara* of Korean national culture means for them more than simply having fun, striving for group solidarity, or fulfilling a duty. The process of identification with hallyu fandom through Korean studies and, further, through the making of Korea Day, is what brings nationalism-as-stigma-management to the fore. By promoting the nation, fan-students have an opportunity to manage their own double stigma of being both hallyu fans and students of Korean studies. Their emotion-driven inner motivations are what drive some fans to promote a positive image of nation and, as a consequence, of themselves.

As this study notes, there are more connections between diasporic nationalism and fan-nationalism than we can consider here that can contribute to an understanding of fans. For instance, the parallel between organizing Korea Day by fan-students and outward diasporic nationalism reveals that, similar to non-Korean fans, some diasporic second- (third-, fourth-, and more) generation Koreans have never been to or have limited exposure to their homelands. As one of the fan-students in the tourism booth on Korea Day in 2017

told me, "It's funny that I'm here since I've never been to Korea." This disconnect from the territory challenges the link with nation-state and even weakens the claims of both diasporic Koreans' and foreign fans' perception and representation of Korea abroad as less than authentic. While not falling into the binary trap of nationalism-as-essence that can be either authentically performed or falsely fabricated, the aim of this article is to contribute to fandom studies by understanding fans and their inner motivations through performing nationalism. The comparison with diasporic nationalism enables us to home in on fan-students' emotion-driven motivations in taking on the empowering role of cultural experts, educators, and even cultural ambassadors.

The making of Korea Day represents stigma management of fan-students mobilized both by the macro mission to promote a positive image of Korea in their home societies and by the micro motivation to repair their own, often stigmatized, self-image as fans of Korean popular culture and students of Korean studies. For fan-students, participation in Korea Day has become a measure of their fandomness, driven by an emotional attachment to both Korea and hallyu and a sense of national as well as fandom shame and pride. Korea Day, for diasporic Koreans, signifies the desire for homecoming, but for hallyu students, it has become a symbolic journey toward the national origins of hallyu fandom. Cultural consumption provides not only a route for diasporic communities to maintain relations with their homelands but also a way for hallyu fans to imagine their fandom as an additional "home" to cultivate. Across the world, fans organize cultural events because these activities are fun and may generate profit, but, more importantly, because the events are essential for them in building new transcultural pathways that connect them with their fandom (Otmazgin, 2014; Otmazgin & Lyan, 2018).

In the course of Korea Day, at least symbolically and temporally, Korea is compressed in time and space and relocated in its essence of popular national culture. Fan-students have become the protagonists of Korea Day, upending the relations between hosts and guests. As Henry Jenkins (1992) noted, "Fans are consumers who also produce, readers who also write, and spectators who also participate" (p. 208). Following Jenkins' (2004) definition of the transcultural fan as a pop cosmopolitan—"someone whose embrace of global popular media represents an escape route out of the parochialism of her local community" (p. 114)—I understand fan-nationalism as a flight toward imagined communities of fandom and its national homelands, freeing fans from their locally attached stigma. While the existing focus on nationalism is too narrow and "marginalizes the significance of transnational, regional, and global forces" (Lie, 2008, p. 173), hallyu fan-nationalism brings to the fore nonnationalist, nonessentialist, and transcultural perspectives to fandom studies.

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