

Do K-Pop Consumption and Direct Contact with Koreans Affect American Audiences' Perception on South Korea and Its Products?

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Abstract

This study examines the impact of media consumption of K-pop and direct contact with South Koreans on American audiences' (N=260) attitudes toward South Korea as a country and its products, and behavioral intentions toward visiting South Korea and purchasing products from this country. Parasocial relationship was investigated as a mediator between K-pop media consumption and behavioral intentions. Structural Equation Modeling was used for data analysis and results indicated that direct contact quality significantly predicted all four dependent variables. K-pop consumption time predicted American female participants' behavioral intention towards visiting Korea. K-pop consumption frequency predicted participants' attitude towards Korean products for both males and females, and male participants' behavioral intention towards visiting Korea through the mediation of the parasocial relationship. Mediated contact frequency, but not mediated contact time, predicted participants' parasocial relationship with their favorite K-pop stars. Implications on distribution management of export-oriented media content, cross-cultural exchanges, and product placement in media contents were also discussed.

Keywords: K-pop influence in America, intergroup contact theory, mediated contact theory, cross-national parasocial relationship, Cross-national public relations

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South Korean popular culture, known as K-pop, has attracted audiences from all over the world, especially after 2004 (Shin, 2009). The wave of K-pop, or *Hanryu* (*Hallyu*), has not only swept across Asian but also blew over Europe and America (Seo, 2012). It has been argued that South Korea is intentionally exporting its popular culture as a soft power diplomatic approach to exert influence on international audience regarding their attitude and behaviors towards South Korea (Jang & Paik, 2012). However, one might question the effectiveness of this strategy. Is K-pop able to cast the influence on international audiences despite the cultural distance? Will international K-pop audiences transfer their fondness of K-pop and K-pop stars to South Korea the country itself and its products? How do direct interactions with Koreans and consumptions of Korean-related media content work together in terms of influencing international audiences' attitude and behaviors towards Korea? Will this strategy work on non-Asian K-pop audiences, who have a drastically different cultural background and huge language barriers?

Drawing on intergroup contact theory and parasocial relationship theory, this study examines the how American K-pop consumers' direct contact with Koreans and mediated contact with K-pop content influence their attitudes and behavioral intentions toward South Korea as a country and South Korean product. The study also investigates whether the influence of Korean-related media content on the American audience is mediated by the parasocial relationship with K-pop stars. The cross-national parasocial relationship, although received some scholarly attention (Baek & Kim, 2016; Ramasubramanian & Kornfield, 2012), remain as an under-researched subject. Therefore, this study aims to detangle the construction and influence of cross-national parasocial relationship between K-pop stars and their American audiences who are culturally more

distant to Korean media content than Asian audiences.

K-pop and Western Audiences

K-pop has been argued as one of the most successful cases among Asian countries (Shin, 2009). It is not only heavily promoted domestically in South Korea, but also is intentionally exported abroad (Lie, 2014). Countries in East- and Southeast Asia were first hit by this Korean Wave in the early 2000s. Despite the seemingly low cultural proximity between audience and K-pop stars, the second Korean wave has begun to sweep across Europe, the Middle East, and the Americas in recent years. K-pop has gained its popularity explosively through the internet, as the views for K-pop videos on YouTube from 235 countries reached 2.3 billion in 2011 (Seo, 2012).

The international popularity of K-pop culture has been argued to bring political benefits to Korea (Jang & Paik, 2012). As a soft power approach of South Korean cultural diplomacy, K-pop has helped South Korea exert positive international impact, gain diplomatic leverage, and attain a positive political position. Moreover, Korean Wave has been argued to help promote cross-cultural ties. Research has been conducted regarding K-pop's widespread popularity in Asian countries. Cho (2010) argued that K-pop has influenced Malaysia socio-culturally and economically. With growing consumption of K-pop media content, Malaysians held more favorable views toward South Korea, changed their way of thinking and lifestyle, and had higher interest its society and culture, including Korean language and Korean studies. Also, more Malaysians had a higher preference for Korean food, visited South Korea as tourists, and purchased Korean products. Some scholars also

expressed concern over the pervasiveness of K-pop culture. Siritiyusak and Hyunjoon (2007) examined Thai youths' consumption of K-pop media content and found that increasing consumption and mainstreaming of Korean popular media content might undermine the diversity of Asian popular culture and contribute to cultural "McDonaldization", or the standardization/Asianization of Asian popular cultures.

Few scholars, however, have looked at the influence of K-pop culture in Western countries. This study examines whether K-pop is able to exert the similar level of influence on American audiences' attitudes and behavioral intentions towards Korea as on East- and Southeast-Asian audiences.

Intergroup Contact Theory

Intergroup Contact Theory examines the relationship between intergroup contact and cultural stereotypes, social categorization, and intergroup bias (Schiappa, Gregg, & Hewes, 2005). The Contact Hypothesis proposes that biased opinions toward a particular social group can be reduced by making direct contact with members of the prejudiced group (Allport, 1954). Researchers have studied the effects of intergroup contact on attitudinal changes toward immigrants (Pagotto, Voci, & Maculan, 2010; Voci & Hewstone, 2003; Ward & Masgoret, 2006), homosexuals (Collier, Bos, & Sandfort, 2012; Heinze, & Horn, 2009; Herek & Capitano, 1996), disabled persons (Armstrong, Morris, Abraham, Ukoumunne, & Tarrant, 2016; Cameron & Rutland, 2006; Carvalho-Freitas & Stathi, 2017; Krahé & Altwasser, 2006), the mental illness (Greenblatt, Pinto, Higgins, & Berg, 2016; Voci, Hadziosmanovic, Cakal, Veneziani, & Hewstone, 2017), and victims of AIDS (Herek & Capitano, 1997;

Schiff, McKay, Bell, Baptiste, Madison, & Paikoff, 2003). Apart from attitudinal changes, studies also revealed a link between intergroup contact and behavioral intentions (Turner, West, & Christie, 2013; Van Acker & Vanbeselaere, 2011). Pettigrew (2009) found a secondary transfer effect of intergroup contact, which indicated that the attitudinal and behavioral intentional change resulted from intergroup contact could be spread to noncontact groups. This study aims to further explore the secondary transfer effect by examining whether the influence intergroup contact with South Koreans can be transferred to South Korea's country image and its products.

The attitudinal alteration can be achieved through intergroup contact, which can further lead to behavior changes. Intergroup Contact Theory indicated that interactions between intergroup friends would lead to more positive evaluations of an outgroup than between strangers (Wright, Aron, McLaughlin-Volpe, & Ropp, 1997), and intergroup friendship could effectively reduce outgroup prejudice (Pettigrew, 1998), because intergroup friendships could generate "cross-group empathy, identification, and reappraisal of the ingroup" (Shim, Zhang, & Harwood, 2012, p. 171). Thus, we hypothesized:

H1: Number of Korean friends positively predicts American participants' attitude towards (a) Korea as a country and (b) Korean Products, and behavioral intention towards (c) visiting or revisiting Korea, and (d) purchasing Korean products.

Previous research has differentiated intergroup contact quality and frequency for both direct contact and mediated contact (e.g. Shim, et al., 2012). Direct contact refers to face to face intercultural contact between people of different cultural groups,

typically in work environment or everyday social environment. Mediated contact refers to media exposure to a foreign culture. Mediated contact was found to bear less anxiety than direct contact since the people in the latter circumstances might experience higher levels of uncertainty, misunderstanding, and fear of embarrassment (Ortiz & Harwood, 2007). Direct contact frequency refers to how often the intergroup meetings take place, while direct contact quality refers to how enjoyable those meetings were. Both intergroup contact frequency and quality were found to be associated with attitudinal changes toward immigrant coworkers (Voci & Hewstone, 2003). Thus, we hypothesized:

H2: Direct contact frequency with Koreans positively predicts American participants' attitude towards (a) Korea as a country and (b) Korean Products, and behavioral intention towards (c) visiting or revisiting Korea, and (d) purchasing Korean products.

H3: Direct contact quality with Koreans positively predicts American participants' attitude towards (a) Korea as a country and (b) Korean Products, and behavioral intention towards (c) visiting or revisiting Korea, and (d) purchasing Korean products.

Mediated Contact Theory

To reduce intergroup prejudice and cultural discriminations, intergroup contact might not always be a viable option due to difficulties like language barriers and geographical obstacles (Harwood, 2010). Researchers have proposed that the audience could build interpersonal relationships with media personas

through consuming media content (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Researchers have investigated the effects of mediated contact on consumers' attitudinal and behavioral changes. Shim, et al. (2012) examined the effects of direct and mediated intercultural contact on Koreans' attitudes toward Americans through the mediation of intergroup anxiety and found that the number of American friends positively correlated with affective attitudes toward the outgroup and behavioral attitudes toward the willingness to engage in activities with Americans. Contact quality with Americans and viewing time of U.S. dramas positively relate to participants' behavioral attitudes. Researchers also found that the mediated exposure helped improving people's attitudes toward minority groups such as homosexuals, Latinos, African Americans, and more (Armstrong, Neuendorf, & Brentar, 1992; Detenber, Ho, Neo, Malik, & Cenite, 2013; Mastro, Behm-Morawitz., & Ortiz, 2007). Mediated contact was also found effective in generating negative impressions to the social groups that were negatively portrayed by the media (Givens & Monahan, 2005).

In addition to attitudinal changes, previous studies results indicated the effects of mediated contact on behavioral changes. Social learning theory suggests that individuals learn how to behave based on the information retrieved from the media (Bandura, 2002; Ortiz & Harwood, 2007). Media portrayal could potentially bring people's behavioral intentional changes. Mediated contact time and frequency were examined separately. Mediated contact time refers to the number of hours spent on outgroup media content, and mediated contact frequency refers to how often the outgroup media programs are consumed. Both media consumption time (Shim, et al., 2012) and frequency (Winderman & Smith, 2018) have been found with the ability to influence consumers. Thus, based on previous investigations, we

hypothesized,

H4: Mediated contact time positively predicts American participants' attitude towards (a) Korea as a country and (b) Korean Products, and behavioral intention towards (c) visiting or revisiting Korea, and (d) purchasing Korean products.

H5: Mediated contact frequency positively predicts American participants' attitude towards (a) Korea as a country and (b) Korean Products, and behavioral intention towards (c) visiting or revisiting Korea, and (d) purchasing Korean products.

Parasocial Relationship Theory

Parasocial relationship refers to a one-sided (or semi-two-sided in the world of interactive online mediated communication) relationship between media characters and their audiences (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Cohen, 2014). Audiences who are in parasocial relationships with certain media characters will consider them as their "friends" as if they were in their real-life social circle, thus potentially being under the influence of those characters cognitively, effectively, and behaviorally (e.g. Grant, Guthrie, & Ball-Rokeach, 1991; Labrecque, 2014).

In interpersonal relationships, people need to spend time with their friends in order to maintain the friendship (Altman & Taylor, 1973). Similarly, the audience needs to spend time on media content to maintain their parasocial relationship with media characters. Researchers have found the empirical support that the intensity of the parasocial relationship was related to the level of involvement the audience developed with media

characters (Klimmt, Hartmann, & Schramm, 2006). Audiences need to engage in maintenance behaviors to preserve their relationship with and maintain their perceived connection to media characters by consuming more media content (Canary & Stafford, 1992, 1994; Dainton & Stafford, 1993; Duck 1988; Ramasubramanian & Kornfield, 2012; Stafford, 2011).

Audiences with parasocial relationships with media characters are under the potential influence of the mediated contact in terms of their opinions, attitudes, and actions. Scholars have tested the associations between the audience's parasocial relationship with media characters and their attitudinal changes towards, for example, homosexuals (Schiappa, et al., 2006), young adolescents' self-perception on body image (Eyal & Te'eni-Harari, 2013), and self-efficacy on diet and exercise (Phua, 2014). Previous research also revealed an association between parasocial relationship and behavioral intentional changes. Fu, Ye, and Xiang (2016) found that the audiences' parasocial involvement with a Chinese reality show was positively related to both their attitude towards and behavioral intentions to visit the tourism destination where the reality show was shot. Association was also found between participants' parasocial relationship with celebrities with good reputations and their purchase intentions of products endorsed by the liked celebrities (Kim, Ko, & Kim, 2015).

Not much research was conducted to examine the construction and influence of cross-national parasocial relationship between media characters and audiences of different national origins. However, it's found that cultural distance between audience and media content could arouse audiences' perceived novelty, which can heighten their enjoyment of the foreign media content (Beak & Kim, 2016).

Although the previous study has found that audience is

prone to consume media content that is more cultural proximate than distant to themselves, especially in terms of the language of media content (Ksiazek & Webster, 2008), K-pop has successfully occupied a sizable market share in Western countries. Lie (2014) argued that the reasons behind this cross-national cultural output might lie in the strategic branding of K-pop, which was created as a culturally less pronounced, cosmopolitan, and export-oriented popular cultural to attract international audiences. Taiwanese audiences' parasocial relationship with characters in Korean drama was found positively related to their attitudes towards the Korean tourism location where the drama was made (Su, Huang, Brodowsky, & Kim, 2011). The relationship was significant only for the audiences with a high perception of cultural proximity between Taiwan and Korea. Thus, the following hypothesis was proposed.

H6a: Parasocial relationship with K-pop stars mediated the relationship between mediated contact time and attitudes towards Korea and Korean products and behavioral intentions towards visiting Korea and purchasing Korean products.

H6b: Parasocial relationship with K-pop stars mediated the relationship between mediated contact frequency and attitudes towards Korea and Korean products and behavioral intentions towards visiting Korea and purchasing Korean products.

Since attitude was found an important mediator between parasocial relationship and behavioral intentional changes (e.g. Jeong & Park, 2013), the following hypothesis was proposed to investigate the relationship between attitude and behavioral intentions:

H7a: Attitudes toward Korea as a country positively predicts participants' behavioral intention toward visiting or revisiting Korea.

H7b: Attitudes toward Korean products positively predicts participants' behavioral intention toward purchasing Korean products.

The international influence of K-pop is not limited to exporting Korean culture and products through music and other forms of media programs, a number of scholars have argued that K-pop, by heavily portraying sexually attractive female and male idols, can promote traditional gender stereotype to its audience (Epstein & Turnbull, 2014; Lin & Rudolf, 2017). Since gender is an important element in the examination of K-pop, this study will examine whether the gender of American K-pop audience exerts any influence on their attitude towards Korea and Korean products and their behavioral intention to visit Korea and purchase Korean products.

RQ1: What's the gender difference in American K-pop audience's attitude towards Korea and Korean products and their behavioral intention to visit Korea and purchase Korean products.

The Hypothesized Model

An integrated hypothesized model is proposed in this study among the following constructs (See Figure 1). Constructs on direct contact with Koreans (number of Korean friends, direct contact quality, and direct contact frequency) and constructs on

mediated contact with Korean popular culture (mediated contact time and frequency) are hypothesized to positively predict both attitude towards Korea as a country/Korean products and behavioral intentions towards visiting or revisiting Korea/purchasing Korean products. Parasocial relationship with favorite K-pop star(s) is hypothesized to mediate the influence of mediated contact on attitudinal and behavioral intentional changes. Attitudes are hypothesized to facilitate behavioral intentional changes.

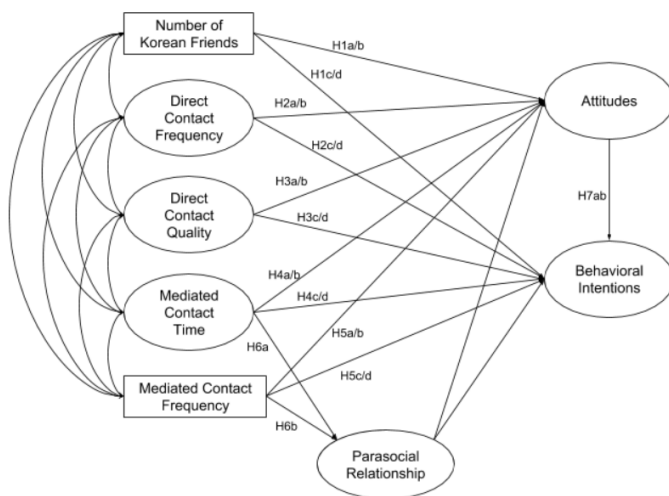


Figure 1. Hypothesized Structural Model:

Method

Participants.

To reach American audiences of Korean media content nationally, an online survey was deemed most effective.

Participants were recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk, an organization offering online survey distribution service internationally. Participants were given 30 cents as compensation for participating in a self-administered online survey. Screening questions were set to make sure participants of the study are consumers of Korean popular media content. Participants who have never consume Korean media content will be directed to close the survey. Cases with a completing time less than 5 minutes to finish the questionnaires were taken out of the analysis to ensure a higher quality of the data. A total of 276 American participants were recruited. Excluding cases with severe missing data, the final sample size of the study is 260.

Among the 260, 132 (50.8%) were males, 124 (47.7%) were females, 4 (1.6%) participants chose not to disclose their gender. The age range was from 18 to 70. The majority were young people: 196 (75.6%) participants were aged from 21 to 35 years. In terms of race and ethnicity, 150 (57.7%) of the participants were Caucasians, 40 (15.4%) were Asian Americans, 31 (11.9%) were African Americans, 16 (6.3%) were Hispanics, and 23 (8.9%) chose "Others" or "I prefer not to disclose". As for educational background, 142 (54.6%) of the participants had undergraduate degrees, 63 (24.2%) had master's degrees, 37 (14.2%) had high school diplomas, and 8 (3.1%) had doctoral degrees. For income, 50 (19.2%) of the participants had monthly income between 1,000 USD to 1,500 USD, 49 (18.8%) had over 3,000 USD, 43 (16.5%) had between 2,000 USD to 3,000 USD, 42 (16.2%) had between 1,500 USD to 2,000 USD, 37 (14.2%) had between 500 USD to 1,000 USD, and 28 (10.8%) had monthly income lower than 500 USD. Descriptive data and correlations are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Correlations Between Measures (N=260):

| Measure | 1. | 2. | 3. | 4. | 5. | 6. | 7. | 8. | 9. | 10. |
|---|-------|--------|------|--------|-------|------|-------|-------|-------|-----|
| 1. Direct Contact Frequency | - | | | | | | | | | |
| 2. Direct Contact Quality | .41** | - | | | | | | | | |
| 3. Number of Korean Friends | .45** | .26** | - | | | | | | | |
| 4. Mediated Contact Time | .11 | -.22** | .07 | - | | | | | | |
| 5. Mediated Contact Frequency | .11 | .28** | .05 | .25** | - | | | | | |
| 6. Parasocial Relationship | .08 | .10 | .02 | .11 | .41** | - | | | | |
| 7. Attitudes toward Korea as a Country | .06 | .36** | .07 | -.06 | .17** | .05 | - | | | |
| 8. Attitudes toward Korean Products | .03 | .26** | .01 | -.16* | .18** | .08 | .42** | - | | |
| 9. Behavioral Intention towards Visiting Korea | .12 | .49** | .14* | -.01 | .25** | .15* | .39** | .29** | - | |
| 10. Behavioral Intention towards Purchasing Korean Products | .08 | .32** | .05 | -.19** | .17** | .08 | .27** | .63** | .26** | - |

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Measures.

Direct contact frequency. Participants who had consumed K-Pop media content were asked to report their frequency of interaction with one closest Korean friend on three 5-point scales (1 = *less than once a year* and 5 = *daily*, $M = 1.56$, $SD = 1.63$, $\alpha = .96$). A binary filter question was asked for participants to indicate whether they had direct contact with Koreans. Direct contact frequency value for participants without direct contact was recoded into zero. The items were adapted from Shim, et al. (2012): "Think of one Korean person you have the closest relationship with and answer the following questions: How often do you talk to and engage in informal conversation with the person?", "How often do you study or work together with this person?", and "How often do you do things socially with this person, such as eating out, or going to movies?".

Direct contact quality. The quality of participants' direct contact was measured on a three-item 5-point Likert scales (1 = *strongly disagree* and 5 = *strongly agree*, $M = 3.70$, $SD = .94$, $\alpha = .99$). Not all participants had direct contact with Koreans. Missing data were imputed in SPSS AMOS by using stochastic regression imputation. Three statements were adapted from Ortiz and Harwood's (2007) measure of intergroup contact quality: "Think of one Korean person you have the closest relationship with and answer the following question: I value the time that I spent with this person.", "I enjoy being around this person.", and "We are close friends."

Number of Korean friends. Participants were asked to indicate the number of Korean friends they have ($M = 1.61$, $SD = 2.80$). For participants without direct contact with Koreans, the value for this variable was recoded into zero. This current measure was adapted from Shim, et al. (2012) by adding a text-entry box for participants to enter the exact number of their Korean friends after choosing *6 or more*. Numbers higher than six were manually recoded in the variable.

Mediated contact time. Participants were asked to provide the number of hours they spent during a typical week on five Korean media content: "listen to Korean music", "watch Korean dramas", "watch Korean music videos", "watch Korean entertainment shows", and "consume other Korean media content" ($M = 12.44$, $SD = 14.39$, $\alpha = .91$).

Mediated contact frequency. This construct is a composite measure of a 4-item 7-point scale (1 = *never*, 2 = *once a year*, 3 = *once a month*, 4 = *once a week*, 5 = *2-3 times a week*, 6 = *4-6 times a week*, and 7 = *daily*, $M = 3.91$, $SD = 1.36$, $\alpha = .82$). The four items are: "listen to Korean music", "watch Korean dramas", "watch Korean music videos", and "watch Korean entertainment shows".

Parasocial relationship. Participants who are in a parasocial relationship tend to have emotional responses to media characters (Klimmt et al., 2006). Thus, in this study, parasocial relationship assessed participants' emotional attachment with their favorite K-pop star on a 5-item 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* and 5 = *strongly agree*, $M = 3.05$, $SD = .98$, $\alpha = .87$). The five statements are adapted from Ramasubramanian and Kornfield's study (2012): "Think of your favorite K-POP artist/group and answer the following questions - If he/she/they make mistake, I worry for him/her/they.", "If he/she/they are sad, I feel sad too.", "If something good happens to them, I feel happy for him/her/they as well.", "If something bad happens, I feel bad for him/her/they as well.", and "I dislike people who intend to criticize him/her/they".

Attitudes. Participants reported their attitudes toward "Korea as a country" ($M = 4.07$ and $SD = .81$) and "Korean products" ($M = 4.10$ and $SD = .89$) on four 5-point scales (1 = *very bad* and 5 = *very good*). The items were adapted from Yoo, Jo, and Jung's study (2014) covering attitude towards country image and commercial products of Korea.

Behavioral intentions. Participants were asked about their interests in "visiting or returning to Korea" ($M = 3.91$, $SD = 1.14$) and "purchasing Korean products" ($M = 4.03$, $SD = 1.01$) as adapted from Yoo, Jo, and Jung's study (2014) on 5-point scales (1 = *definitely not* and 5 = *definitely yes*).

Results

To answer RQ1, before conducting path analysis, t-tests were conducted to see whether gender was significantly associated with attitudinal and behavioral intentional dependent variables.

T-tests results indicated that gender was significantly associated with the attitude towards Korea as a country and behavioral intention towards visiting Korea, but not other dependent variables.

Table 2. Independent Group T-test between Gender and Attitudes and Behavioral Intentions.

| | Female (<i>N</i> = 132) | | Male (<i>N</i> = 124) | | t-test |
|---|--------------------------|------|------------------------|------|---------|
| | M | SD | M | SD | |
| Attitude towards Korea as a Country | 3.94 | .87 | 4.20 | .73 | 2.67** |
| Behavioral Intention towards Visiting Korea | 3.62 | 1.32 | 4.17 | .88 | 3.87*** |
| Attitude towards Korean Products | 4.02 | .92 | 4.15 | .86 | n.s. |
| Behavioral Intention towards Purchasing Korean Products | 4.11 | .92 | 3.93 | 1.09 | n.s. |

** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$, *N* = 256, *n.s.* = not significant.

Thus, three path analyses were conducted: predicting attitude towards Korea as a country and behavioral intention toward visiting Korea for male participants (Model 1) and female participants (Model 2), and predicting attitude towards Korean products and behavioral intention towards purchasing Korean products (Model 3).

Model 1: Predicting Attitude towards Korea as a Country and Behavioral Intention towards Visiting Korea for Male Participants.

The hypothesized model was tested by path analysis on SPSS AMOS 22 (see Figure 2). Non-significant paths were sequentially removed from the model. The model for male participants showed that number of Korean friends ($\beta = .04$, *n.s.*), direct

contact frequency ($\beta = -.14$, *n.s.*), mediated contact time ($\beta = .01$, *n.s.*), mediated contact frequency ($\beta = .14$, *n.s.*), and parasocial relationship ($\beta = -.07$, *n.s.*) were not significantly associated with attitude towards Korea as a country; number of Korean friends ($\beta = .08$, *n.s.*), mediated contact time ($\beta = -.03$, *n.s.*), mediated contact frequency ($\beta = .02$, *n.s.*), and attitude towards Korea as a country ($\beta = .12$, *n.s.*) were not significantly associated with behavioral intention towards visiting Korea; and mediated contact time ($\beta = .10$, *n.s.*) was not significantly associated with parasocial relationship, χ^2 (149, $n = 136$) = 258.16, $p < .001$, RMSEA = 0.074, TLI = 0.92, CFI = 0.94. After removing insignificant paths, the final model demonstrated acceptable fit (see Figure 2).

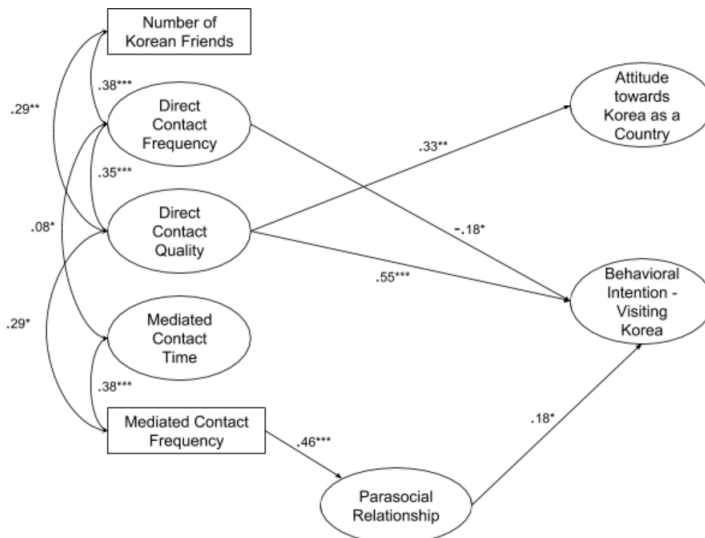


Figure 2. Path Analysis Predicting Attitude towards Korea as a Country and Behavioral Intention towards Visiting Korea for Male Participants (Standardized Solution).

Model Fit: χ^2 (163, $n = 136$) = 277.14, $\chi^2/df = 1.70$, $p < .001$, RMSEA = 0.072, TLI = 0.93, CFI = 0.94. Values Reported Are Standardized, and Only Significant Paths Are Reported. * $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

For male participants, direct contact frequency was found a significant but negative predictor of behavioral intention towards visiting or revisiting Korea. Direct contact quality positively predicted both attitude towards Korea as a country and behavioral intention towards visiting or revisiting Korea. Mediated contact frequency positively predicted behavioral intention towards visiting or revisiting Korea through the mediation of the parasocial relationship. For correlation among exogenous variables for male participants, direct contact measures were found correlated with each other, mediated contact frequency and time were correlated, direct contact frequency was found correlated with mediated contact time, and direct contact quality was found correlated with mediated contact frequency.

Model 2: Predicting Attitude towards Korea as a Country and Behavioral Intention towards Visiting Korea for Female Participants.

The hypothesized model was tested by path analysis on SPSS AMOS 22 (see Figure 3). Non-significant paths were sequentially removed from the model. The model for female participants showed that number of Korean friends ($\beta = -.09, n.s.$), direct contact frequency ($\beta = -.08, n.s.$), mediated contact time ($\beta = .18, n.s.$), mediated contact frequency ($\beta = -.01, n.s.$), and parasocial relationship ($\beta = .01, n.s.$) not significantly associated with attitude towards Korea as a country; number of Korean friends ($\beta = -.03, n.s.$), direct contact frequency ($\beta = -.05, n.s.$), mediated contact frequency ($\beta = .03, n.s.$), and parasocial relationship ($\beta = .09, n.s.$) not significantly associated with behavioral intention towards visiting Korea; and mediated contact time ($\beta = -.09, n.s.$) was not significantly associated with parasocial relationship, χ^2

(149, $n = 128$) = 248.44, $p = < .001$, RMSEA = 0.072, TLI = 0.93, CFI = 0.94. After removing insignificant paths, the final model demonstrated acceptable fit (see Figure 3).

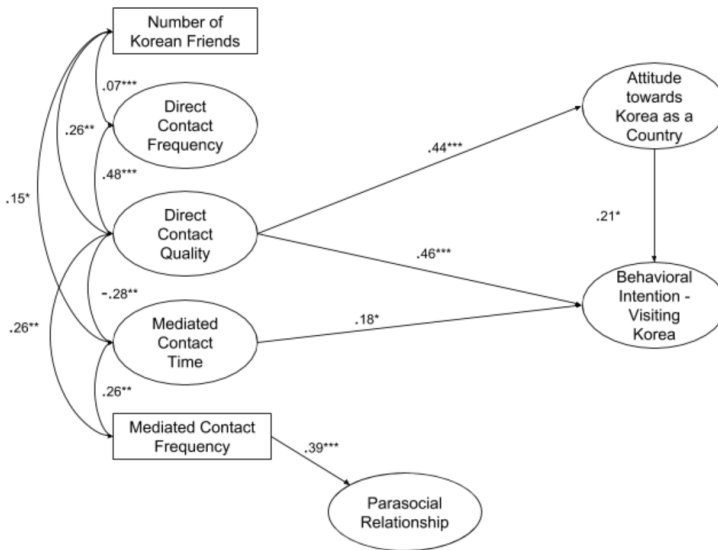


Figure 3. Path Analysis Predicting Attitude towards Korea as a Country and Behavioral Intention towards Visiting Korea for Female Participants (Standardized Solution).

Model Fit: $\chi^2 (162, n = 128) = 261.07$, $\chi^2 / df = 1.61$, $p = < .001$, RMSEA = 0.069, TLI = 0.93, CFI = 0.94. Values Reported Are Standardized, and Only Significant Paths Are Reported. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

For female participants, direct contact quality significantly predicted attitude towards Korea as a country. Direct contact quality, mediated contact time, and attitude towards Korea as a country significantly and positively predicted behavioral intention towards visiting or revisiting Korea. For correlation among exogenous variables for female participants, direct contact measures were found correlated with each other, mediated

contact frequency and time were correlated, mediated contact time was found correlated negatively with direct contact quality and positively with the number of Korea friends, and mediated contact frequency was found positively correlated with direct contact quality.

Model 3: Predicting Attitude towards Korean Products and Behavioral Intention towards Purchasing Korean Products.

The hypothesized model was tested by path analysis on SPSS AMOS 22 (see Figure 4). Non-significant paths were sequentially removed from the model, expect for the path between mediated contact time and attitude towards Korean products, which was left to constrain the path between mediated contact frequency and attitude towards Korean products. The model showed that number of Korean friends ($\beta = -.09, n.s.$), direct contact frequency ($\beta = -.08, n.s.$), mediated contact time ($\beta = .18, n.s.$), and parasocial relationship ($\beta = .01, n.s.$) not significantly associated with attitude towards Korean products; number of Korean friends ($\beta = -.03, n.s.$), direct contact frequency ($\beta = -.05, n.s.$), mediated contact time ($\beta = -.05, n.s.$), mediated contact frequency ($\beta = .03, n.s.$), and parasocial relationship ($\beta = .09, n.s.$) not significantly associated with behavioral intention towards purchasing Korean products; and mediated contact time ($\beta = -.09, n.s.$) was not significantly associated with parasocial relationship, $\chi^2 (149, n = 128) = 248.44$, $p < .001$, RMSEA = 0.072, TLI = 0.93, CFI = 0.94. After removing insignificant paths, the final model demonstrated acceptable fit (see Figure 4).

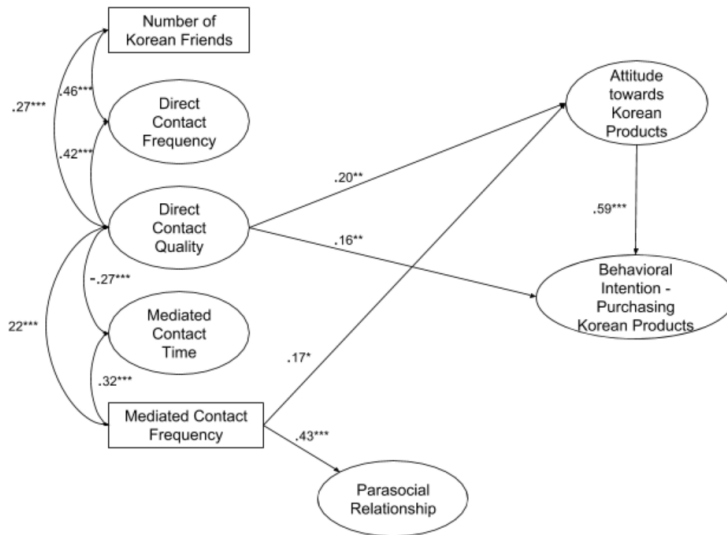


Figure 4. Path Analysis Predicting Attitude towards Korean Products and Behavioral Intention towards Purchasing Korean Products (Standardized Solution).

Model Fit: $\chi^2(162, n = 260) = 322.17$, $\chi^2/df = 1.99$, $p < .001$, RMSEA = 0.062, TLI = 0.95, CFI = 0.95. Values Reported Are Standardized, and Only Significant Paths Are Reported. * $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Direct contact quality was found as a significant predictor for both attitudes towards Korean products and behavioral intention towards purchasing Korean products. Mediated contact frequency significantly predicted attitude towards Korea products and parasocial relationship with favorite K-pop star. Attitude towards Korea products significantly predicted behavioral intention towards purchasing Korean products. For correlation among exogenous variables, direct contact measures were found correlated with each other, mediated contact frequency and time were correlated, and direct contact quality was found negatively correlated with mediated contact time and

positively correlated with mediated contact frequency.

Discussion

This study examines the influence of K-pop media content and direct contact with Koreans on American audiences' attitude and behavioral intentions toward South Korea and its products. Adding to Intergroup Contact Theory literature, this study investigated the attitudinal and behavioral intentional impact of Americans' number of outgroup friends, direct contact frequency, direct contact quality with Koreans. This study also shed light on the construction of the cross-national parasocial relationship between media characters and audiences from Western and Eastern origins and how the cross-national parasocial relationship mediates the influence of K-pop consumption frequency on attitudinal and behavioral intentional changes of the American audience. The gender difference was found in predicting Americans' attitude towards Korea as a country and behavioral intention towards visiting (model 1 and model 2), but not in predicting attitude and behavioral intention toward Korean products (model 3).

Throughout three models, direct contact quality with South Koreans significantly impacted American participants' attitude and behavioral intentions toward both South Korea and its products, while direct contact frequency and the number of Korean friends exerted no or slightly negative influence. In line with the previous study (Shim, et al., 2012), the level of enjoyment of the contact between groups of different cultural backgrounds was found having more influence in bringing attitudinal and potentially behavioral changes compared with the frequency of contact and number of outgroup friends. The

positive experience of contacts with South Koreans was found positively predicting attitude and behavioral intention toward South Korea the country and South Korean products. This finding also indicated a secondary transfer effect of direct contact with an outgroup to the attitude and behavioral intention towards and country origin of the contacted outgroup and products of this country. Pettigrew (2009) found that contact with certain outgroup can reduce prejudice towards other noncontacted outgroups. This study provides another perspective in transferring direction of the effects of intergroup contact. Contrary to the prediction, direct contact frequency was found negatively influencing American male participants' behavioral intention towards visiting South Korea. This can be explained by intergroup anxiety arise from the unpleasant experience of cross-cultural contacts due to issues like language barriers, cultural conflicts, and anticipation of rejection and discrimination (Stephan & Stephan, 1985).

Model 1 and model 2 indicated that American participants' consumption of K-pop media content, i.e. mediated contact, can influence their behavioral intention towards visiting South Korea, supporting Jang and Paik's (2012) soft power diplomatic hypotheses of the Korean wave (also called *Hallyu*) that K-pop celebrities could be South Korea's unofficial diplomatic ambassador to attract foreign visitors to the country. In addition, a gender difference was found. The length of *time* spent on consuming K-pop media content significantly impacted American female participants' intention to visit South Korea, while the *frequency* of consuming K-pop media content significantly but indirectly impacted American male participants through the mediation of parasocial relationship with characters in K-pop. Previous studies in tourism found that gender influenced touristic concerns (Hawes, 1988; Wearing & Wearing,

1996). Females perceived more tourism-related risks and males perceive more cross-cultural barriers in traveling (Lepp & Gibson, 2003). The higher perceived tourism-related risks of traveling to a foreign country for females can be released by longer time submergence in Korean-related media content (Reisinger & Mavondo, 2005), which explains the result that the length of K-pop media content exposure positively associated with the behavioral intention of visiting South Korea for American female participants. The higher perceived cross-cultural barriers like language issues in international traveling for males can be lowered by frequent consumption of Korean media content, which explained the positive association between mediated contact frequency and intentions to visit Korea for male participants.

Model 3 indicated that American participants' behavioral intention towards purchasing South Korea products can be influenced by the quality of their direct contact with Koreans and the frequency of mediated consumption of K-pop media content indirectly through positive attitude towards Korean products. This result is in line with Huang's (2011) study on how Japanese trendy dramas helped promote transnational recognition and purchase intention for Japanese products in Taiwan. The Korean entertainment industry can use similar strategies to cultivate overseas markets and promote the image of made-in-Korean consumer goods (Shim, 2006). In addition, attitude towards Korean products was found as an important factor in this model. Direct contact quality was found exerting a small but statistically significant direct effect on purchasing intention of Korean products, but larger indirect effect through the mediation of attitude towards Korean products. Similarly, mediated contact frequency was not directly associated with purchase intention, but the association was found indirectly through attitude.

Positive attitude towards Korean products was found an important prerequisite of change in purchase intention. Americans' purchase intention of Korean products can be influenced by both the level of enjoyment of their contact with Koreans in their daily lives and how frequently they see Korean media content, if positive attitude towards Korean products resulted in these contacts.

For the examination of cross-national parasocial relationship between American audiences and their favorite K-pop star(s) as a mediator of the relationship between K-pop consumption and attitudes and behavioral intentions, parasocial relationship was found as a significant mediator between the influence of K-pop consumption frequency, but not K-pop consumption time, and behavioral intention towards visiting Korean for male participants. In addition, throughout three models, contact frequency was found as a significant predictor, instead of mediated contact time, of parasocial relationship. This finding is consistent with previous research on the media use attributions of parasocial relationship in domestic settings that the amount of local news viewing not influencing parasocial relationships (Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985), and frequency of exposure to media messages related to celebrities positively associated with fans' parasocial relationship (Ledbetter & Redd, 2016). The finding indicated that while cross-national parasocial relationship could be built between audience and media characters of different national origins, the audience needed to frequently consume media content that featured these characters.

Limitations

This study examined the influence of direct contact and mediated

contact on American audiences' attitudes and behavioral intentions toward Korea. It is acknowledged that intergroup anxiety, cultural proximity, preexisting prejudice, and degree of openness can also exert an impact on attitude and behaviors toward an outgroup. Future studies are advised to measure more control variables to further explain the process of cross-national cultural exchange, intergroup contact, and attitudes and behaviors towards a foreign country and foreign products.

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