# Imagining the Nation from the Outside

The Imagination of South Korea by Hallyu Content Consumers in Spain and Their Student Migration.

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Master's thesis

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Among the many effects of the Hallyu phenomenon (the international popularity boom of South Korean popular culture, especially of K-pop and K-dramas) its positive effects on the improvement of South Korea's national image abroad have been widely reported. Through in-depth interviews with seven Spanish Hallyu consumers pursuing migration in Seoul and Incheon, I explored their imagination of South Korea, its connection with Hallyu, and how it is impacted by the juxtaposition of imagination and personal experiences in South Korea during student mobility. Unexpectedly, participants showcased anxiety and fear towards their upcoming experiences as exchange studies in South Korea due to the presence of a negative imagination of the nation mediated mostly through social media influencers' content circulating online. Furthermore, participants imagined South Korea pessimistically due to K-drama and K-pop consumption. This showcases the need to reevaluate the advantages and limitations of transnational popular consumption in its outcomes nation's image formation.

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# 1  INTRODUCTION

South Korean popular culture has sparked academic interest in recent decades due to the rapid increase in popularity of Korean pop music (K-pop) and Korean soap operas (K-drama) around the world. The rise in the international popularity of South Korean popular culture was named by Chinese media as the "Korean Wave" or "Hallyu" (KOCIS, 2011). Scholars have generally highlighted the economic outcomes of the transnational consumption of Hallyu content, such as willingness to purchase South Korean products  (Huh and Wu, 2017; Zhang and Bi, 2019; Zhang et al. 2020) or tourism growth (Lee and How, 2023; Hargitai et al., 2023, Bae et al. 2017; Hirata, 2008, Ju and Lee, 2021), as well as political outcomes, like improvement of relations with other nations, and increased leverage on international politics (Lee, 2009; Kim, 2019, 2022, 2023; Chung, 2019; Um et al. 2014; ). Throughout this branch of Hallyu scholarship, these beneficial outcomes for South Korea's economic and political interests are attributed to nation branding and public diplomacy strategies leveraging the transnational consumption of popular culture, which succeed at generating an enhanced image about South Korea among international audiences.

Against this backdrop, I aim to further examine the assertion that Hallyu is a positive influence on its audiences' image of South Korea. This is a relevant endeavour as the scholarship of Hallyu has been extensively dedicated to evidence the benefits of Hallyu content consumption for pursuing South Korea's economic and political interests through national image improvement (Ju and Lee, 2021; Hirata, 2008; Bae et al, 2017; Lee and How, 2023; Huh, and Wu, 2017; Zhang and Bi, 2019; Zhang et al. 2020, Zhang and Bi, 2019; Chung, 2019; Lee, 2009; Kim, 2019, 2022) but it has fell short in qualitatively evidencing two key fields: how does Hallyu act as a mediator for the imagined South Korea; and how do Hallyu consumers imagine South Korea? The difficulty of being tested empirically is, indeed, a recognized limitation of nation branding and soft power theories (Nye, 2004; Ermann and Hermanik, 2017; Aronczyk, 2013). This is reflected on the discrepancies that the few research projects dedicated to dissecting this query showcase. For example, Iwabuchi (2015) on his study on Japan's soft power strategy through popular culture within Chinese audiences, concluded that enthusiasm towards Japanese popular culture did not necessarily translate to an enhanced perception of Japan.

I will explore this issue within the specific context of student migration to South Korea. This represents a fruitful field for this endeavor as international student mobility (ISM from now

on) is an associated area to Hallyu content consumption, but also broadly, to national image. Hallyu content consumption has become an important element increasing awareness of South Korea as a study destination, as well as a factor driving international students to choose South Korea over other nations (Stewart, 2020, Lee, 2013, Takeda, 2020, Bae et al. 2022, Lee 2017; Moon, 2014). Among these studies, and similarly to the dominant perspective that guides Hallyu scholarship, some link South Korea's national image improvement caused by Hallyu as the cause that triggers students to choose South Korea (Takeda, 2020; Bae et al 2022). In addition, according to international student mobility (ISM from now on) literature, the destination nation's image is an essential factor influencing prospective student migrant's choice-making process, and their experiences in their chosen destination (Coletto and Fullin, 2019; Cubillo et al. 2006; Kölbel, 2020; Ginnerskov-Dahlberg, 2021, Salazar, 2011, Ngoc, 2022). Like this, the field of ISM becomes an interesting, but under-researched field to test the mechanisms of transnational popular culture consumption when put to work for national image formation purposes.

International students are one of the most under-researched migrant groups (King and Raghuram, 2013), and among all the areas of potential impact of Hallyu, ISM is much less researched, as scholarship has focused on the areas stated at the beginning of this section: consumer behavior, tourism, and international politics. In the realm of South Korea imagined as a destination nation, Hallyu scholarship has focused mostly on tourism, reporting that Hallyu has positive effect on South Korea's national image a tourist destination location (Lee, 2020; Ju and Lee, 2021; Hirata, 2008; Bae et al, 2017; Lee and How, 2023). Among the few studies on Hallyu's impact on international student's imagined South Korea, some indicate that students face struggle and disappointment when arriving to South Korea due to an over-idealized imagination of the nation that causes a stark contrast with the harsh realities there (Takeda, 2020; Lee; 2020). Similarly, other studies have reported such experiences among other student migrants that idealize their study destinations (Ngoc, 2022; Ginnerskov-Dahlberg, 2021). These reports produce a paradox: is it counter-productive to invest in Hallyu as tool to improve national image, if when it intersects with mobility, it ends ups producing the opposite effect?

To test this, it is essential to shift the focus to the Hallyu content consumer's voices. Especially, to those Hallyu audiences that have enjoyed less academic attention, as scholarship has gravitated more prominently towards Japanese, Chinese and Southeast Asian audiences (Lin and Kwan, 2005; Takeda, 2020; Hirata, 2008; Chan and Xueli, 2011; Lee,

2017; Ju and Lee, 2021; Iwabuchi, 2015; Vu and Lee, 2013; Lee, 2013; Takeda, 2014; Ferguson and Thanyodom 2023). For this aim, I conducted in-depth interviews with 7 Spanish Hallyu content consumers who pursued student migration to South Korea, with the objective of making a detailed qualitative exploration of their imagined South Korea throughout migration, and the role of Hallyu in the formation of this imagination. Like this, this project will investigate the imagination of South Korea of Spanish Hallyu content consumers at the beginning and the end of their studies there. The findings will showcase the inconsistencies that an in-depth analysis of this population's image of South Korea showcase concerning previous assertions on the impact of Hallyu content consumption on imagining South Korea, and the role of Hallyu in the process of nation image-building.

South Korea has launched "Study Korea 300K Project", a program aimed at attracting 300.000 students to South Korea by 2027 (Ministry of Education of South Korea, 2023). Most importantly, South Korea has recorded a record-high number of students in 2023, 182000, which doubles that of 2010 (Korean Educational Development Institute, 2023). Furthermore, the number of Hallyu content consumers worldwide has reportedly increased from around 9 million in 2013 to 178 million in 2022 (Korea Foundation, 2023). As more students arrive in South Korea, many of them driven by Hallyu content consumption, it is important to understand the connection between Hallyu and imagining South Korea in the framework of ISM. Even more has South Korea continues to invest in Hallyu in pursuit of national interests: South Korea has decided to dedicate a record budget amount to the cultural industry for 2024 (Yonhap, 2024). Against this backdrop, the research questions that will guide this master's thesis project will be:

a) How do Spanish Hallyu content consumers imagine South Korea before and after a 4-month student exchange in South Korea?

b) How was this imagined South Korea mediated by Hallyu?

To do this, it is also important to provide a strong theoretical framework that provides a different perspective on national image within Hallyu scholarship. Anderson's (2006) concept of "imagined communities" will provide a strong and novel theoretical lens to explore the answer to these research questions. As this project essentially deals with the nation as it is imagined through a certain set of media, Anderson's work (2006) provides a cornerstone work on how nations are inherently constructed through mass media consumption. Additionally, the usage of the concept of the social mediascape of Hallyu introduced by Jin

and Yoon (2016) will serve as a useful vehicle to improve the previous understandings of how being a Hallyu content consumer impacts the construction of the imagination of South Korea. This will allow the emergence of unexpected Hallyu-related content that plays an important role in South Korea's national image formation abroad: social media influencer content about South Korea online.

By answering these research questions, I aim to expand the knowledge of the advantages and limitations of nation image improvement objectives through popular culture. This research project will also contribute by enlarging Hallyu literature within an under-researched audience group like Spain and provide further insight into the mediated construction of the nation's imagination in the context of student migration. Furthermore, I am to provide a wider perspective of the media environment in which Hallyu content consumers imagine South Korea and shed light on new forms of Hallyu related content circulating online.

## 2   THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: Imagined communities from the outside.

Anderson's (2006) *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* introduces a cornerstone theory on the birth and development of the modern idea of the nation. His work focuses on the construction of national identities within national borders, and since its publication, it has become a multidisciplinary framework in the fields of nationalism, identity, and community formation (Breuilly, 2016). Although Anderson focuses on identity formation within national borders, and not on the national image building outside such borders as is the case of imagining South Korea through Hallyu, Anderson's (2006) ideas are essential as he establishes how the nation is constructed and imagined through media, even if it is domestically. To what Anderson's (2006) theory is limited, Valaskivi (2016) will fill the gaps by building on Anderson's theory and focusing on the imagination of the nation as it is communicated to outsiders.

When I refer to the "outside" or "outsiders" I do so referring to the sets of people that fall outside of the imagined limits of the nation. Anderson (2006, p.16) defines the nation as "an imagined political community and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (Anderson, 2006, p.16). Nations are inherently *limited* as this kind of imagined communities —differently from the religious communities that linked humans before the emergence of nationalism in the 18<sup>th</sup> century — do not aim at encompassing all humankind, but at establishing imagined demarcations among peoples (Anderson, 2006, p.18). In this sense, Spanish Hallyu content consumers are outsiders from South Korea imagining Sout Korea from a physical and imagined distance.

Nonetheless, Anderson (2006) does not understand the inherently limited nature of nations as a harmful, othering characteristic as it has been considered by other scholars such as Said (1978). As noted above in Anderson's (2006, p.16) definition of the nation, he equates the nation to a *community*. Anderson (2006, p.18) does so to highlight how nations can have a positive role in connecting people, by constructing a feeling akin to kinship, or comradeship among its members. In this way, he stresses the emotional component or attachment of these imagined communities produce in people (Anderson, 2006, p.14). Similarly, when nations are imagined from the outside, feelings of attachment can be developed towards the distant nation (Valaskivi, 2016, p.24).

The nation is not only a limited community, most importantly, the nation is *imagined* (Anderson, 2006, p.16). Anderson (2006, p.17) uses this word instead of "invented" or "fabricated" to highlight how there are no true nations in contrast with false ones. In fact, the distinguishing factor among nations is not their truthfulness, or falsity, but the "style in which they are imagined" (Anderson, 2006, p.17). Therefore, the imaginative process is an inherent characteristic of the existence of the nation. A key example of the essential role of imagination for the establishment of nations is highlighted by how an individual will never be able to meet most of their fellow nationals, nor will they be able to know what they are doing at all times, and yet, they confidently imagine them as possessing certain shared characteristics (for example, culture, language, customs, ideas), and engaging in a set of "steady, anonymous, simultaneous" activities (Anderson, 2006, p.32).

The key question here is how this imagination is constructed, and how it came to be constructed in that way. Anderson (2006, p. 40) places a direct connection between the emergence of the press and national consciousness, as he explains how the imagined communities of nations emerged due to "[…] print capitalism, which made it possible for rapidly growing numbers of people to think about themselves, and to relate themselves to others, in profoundly new ways". Anderson (2006) refers to the emergence of the press as "print capitalism" as it gave rise to a new perception of communities, establishing an demarcated us and them that was delimited by domestic and foreign markets. In combination with this, "new ways" of thinking, and relating to each other were enhanced by the widespread daily distribution of newspapers ensuring that millions of individuals received the same information simultaneously. This simultaneous and widespread consumption of media also allowed for certain discourses about the nation to be communicated to its audiences, and in this way, the nation is consumed daily, almost imperceptibly (Castelló, 2016, p.62).

This understanding places the origins of the nation not on history, but on mass media information technologies, and national identity, not as an immutable myth that is born from the depths of time, but as a mediated, fluid, modern social construct, shaped by collective cultural and social dynamics (Castelló, 2016). Internationally, the imaginative process from the outside seems to be similar as introduced by Valaskivi (2016) when talking about the effects of mediated nation-building efforts abroad, or Said (1978), with his concept of imagined geographies, in which people socially construct the imagination of distant communities through a body of institutionalized, mediatized knowledge about the "Other".

It is relevant to highlight that Anderson (2006) mostly focused on newspaper journalism and novels as mediators for national imagination and made few remarks about the emergence of further mass media technologies such as the TV, or the Internet, and its relation to the concept of imagined communities. This limits its application to the Hallyu phenomena, as it is an Internet-based phenomenon (Jin and Yoon, 2016). Despite this fact, Anderson (2006)'s imagined communities' concept is a still "key reference in any research on the media and their role in national construction" (Castelló, 2016, p.59). In this realm, Castelló (2016, p.62) suggests that to bridge Anderson's (2006) theory to the contemporary media environment, one might talk about "Screen Capitalism" rather than "Print Capitalism", against the assumption that any communication system is part of the capitalist symbolic reproduction. Within the new, screen capitalism, a new banalized nationalism is communicated through the reproduction of powerful symbolic nationalist ideas through unnoticeable messages intertwined with mass media entertainment, like TV shows, or soap operas. Like this, for instance, the South Korean nation is consumed and imagined daily, both internally, and domestically, as TV shows, movies, etc. intertwine imperceptible discourses about the South Korean nation communicated by screenwriters, producers, and the South Korean government (Castelló, 2016; Valaskivi, 2016).

Appadurai, (1996, p.31) in his study on modernity against the framework of globalization, argues that "imagination is now central to all forms of agency, is itself a social fact, and is the key component of the new global order". Therefore, the imagination of the nation from the outside is also central to mobility, and student mobility (Coletto and Fullin, 2019; Kölbel, 2020; Ginnerskov-Dahlberg, 2021, Salazar, 2011, Ngoc, 2022). As, according to Anderson (2006) the nation is inherently imagined, it is imagined by outsiders from the distance, but it is also imagined when that distant is transcended and the outsider pursues mobility to that place. Within the field of the imagined nation throughout migration, Said's (1978) concept of imaginative geographies has been a prominent framework to study the construction of the imagination of distant places (Ngoc, 2023; Beech, 2014; Kölbel, 2020).

Indeed, Said (1978) and Anderson (2006) theories share many common characteristics, for example in their social constructionist approach to the imagination of a certain place, as well as its focus on media produced by third parties as an inherent part for the imagination. However, Anderson (2006)'s suits the media context of Hallyu better than Said (1978) for two reasons. Firstly, because Anderson (2006) focuses on the idea of nation, while Said (1978) takes a geographical approach, and focuses rather on locale, or place. The concept of

nation in the context of Hallyu is essential, as Hallyu content is inevitably intertwined with conscious nation-building practices by the South Korean government (Choi, 2015).

Secondly, Said (1978) understands the set of media that influences the outsider's imaginative geography as the body of institutionalized knowledge produced by authors within the social, historical and cultural context of such outsider. To make this clearer and using Said's (1978) postcolonial perspective: people in the West imagine the Orient through the body of institutionalized Western knowledge of about the Orient (Orientalism), which generates an Orientalized vision of the Orient, as the "other" opposed to the West, "us". However, in this project I am exploring the imagination a place (South Korea) by a group of outsiders (Spanish student migrants) who intensively consume media that is precisely produced in the distant, imagined place (Hallyu content). Therefore, the focus was not on the Orientalizing discourses about South Korea present in Spain and how they influence their imaginative geographies of South Korea, but on how being an enthusiastic consumer of non-mainstream forms of media within a certain sociocultural context influences that imagination.

A good framework to understand the imagination of distant nations from this particular perspective is found in Valaskivi (2016). Valaskivi (2016) dissects how nations influence the outsider's imagined nation through nation branding techniques, and the underlying ideas that legitimize this kind of policies. To what matters to this master's thesis project, Valaskivi's (2016) work is useful to have an understanding of what kind of national discourses nation's aim at communicating to outsiders, and to further extrapolate Anderson's (2006) theory to more contemporary media forms. According Valaskivi (2016) nation branding and other associated frameworks such as soft power theories have risen as a framework to understand how governments can use these popular culture medias, like TV shows, movies, among others, to control the circulating discourses about the nation abroad (Valaskivi, 2016).

Valaskivi (2016) following Anderson (2006) reaffirms the importance of the circulation of media for the construction of a nation's imaginaries and asserts that in the complexity of today's media environment, that combines traditional media outlets with the Internet, governments have become increasingly worried in controlling the circulating national discourses. Against this backdrop, the investment in national institutional campaigns to control and communicate certain discourses about the nation is legitimized by branders and governments by the "premises of competition between nations, the drive for progress, and the trajectory of modernity." (Valaskivi, 2016, p.148) Ultimately, it requires an understanding of

the nation as a corporation, as the investment in branding is not for the citizens but for the improvement of the nation and the industries (Valaskivi, 2016, p. 147). In turn, the ultimate objective of nation branders is to attach values of coolness to the nation: youthfulness, rebellion, cosmopolitanism, tolerance, modernity, uniqueness, through popular culture. This resonates with Castelló's (2016) "Screen capitalism".

> Nation branding relies on the idea that the creative industries and popular culture have the potential to create surplus value and soft power through their coolness. Coolness, for its part, connotes rebellion, authenticity, and youthfulness. The rebellion, however, needs to be of the kind that is related to consumption: the kind that always opens up new areas of capitalization. Valaskivi (2016, p.166)

In this sense, Valaskivi's (2016) aim is to showcase the inherent paradoxes present on nation branding as a new medium of imagining the nation. Firstly, how nation branding is supposed to create a distinction between nations as a way to compete on the global arena, while at the same time, all nations draw from the same small pool of nation branding consultants, apply similar practices, pictures, and logos, and enhance similar values. Secondly, how using popular culture for political and economic interests can become counter-productive, be noticed by audiences, and revert the positive potential of popular culture in constructing a cool imagination of the nation. Above all, nation branding is also dependant on the people's interpretation and acceptance of the nation branding discourses. Therefore, according to Valaskivi (2016, p.163): "For nation branders, branding seems like an impossible mission, yet at the same time, it has to be attempted because everyone else is doing it".

To conclude, through the examination Anderson (2006) and Valaskivi's (2016) theories, I have established that the nation is imagined tightly connected to mass media. I have also established that among the varied discourses circulating online about certain nations, those incepted by nation branders aim at creating a cool imagination of their branded nation (Valaskivi, 2016). After determining this, I will now discuss what previous academic works have said about the imagined South Korea of Hallyu content consumers, and the imagined South Korea of student migrants.

# 3   LITERATURE REVIEW.

## 3.1   Hallyu content consumers and their imagined South Korea: positive, ideal, or realistic?

In this section I will showcase the contradictions present in previous literature related to the image of South Korea of Hallyu content consumers, and to how Hallyu audiences interpret the narratives about South Korea contained in such content. Such discrepancies concentrate in two axes. First, the contested role of K-pop and K-dramas as mediators of the imagination of South Kore of their audiences. Second, the inconsistency on the data about the image of South Korea of Hallyu content consumers. Furthermore, due to a lack of extensive qualitative research on this matter, these discrepancies persist. Despite this, a big number of Hallyu-related research studies on other areas not directly related to the mediated construction of the imagination of South Korea assume that Hallyu generates a positive imagination of South Korea on its audiences (Walsh, 2014; Iadevito, 2014; Hargitai et al., 2023; Song, 2020; Kim, 2019; 2023).

The biggest empirical endeavor that supports the presence of a positive image of South Korea harnessed by Hallyu is quantitative, and governmentally funded (KOCIS, 2019; 2021; 2022; KOFICE, 2020, 2022, 2023). These studies indicate that South Korea is viewed positively both by global audiences, and Hallyu content consumers. For instance, in KOCIS' (2022, p.22) most recent survey report among 12.000 foreigners from nations spread among all continents, the positive assessment rate for the South Korean nation was of 79.3% globally, and of 71% in Spain. Moreover, these studies suggest that in both groups, Hallyu plays a significant role in shaping this positive image. Data indicated that the main access route  of information about South Korea among global audiences is "popular culture", by 77% (KOCIS, 2022, p.11); and secondly, as the first factor foreigners associated with the South Korean nation is "culture" on its first position (18,1%), followed by "pop music" on second position (17.1%), and "K-dramas" (6,8%) (KOCIS, (2022, p.10). This suggests that Hallyu content consumption is a globally crucial factor for image formation about South Korea rather than an isolated issue between devoted Hallyu enthusiasts.

KOFICE (2020, 2022, 2023), which focuses solely on Hallyu content consumers, with 25.000 informants surveyed from all around the world, aligns with KOCIS (2019; 2021; 2022) in several ways. For example, KOFICE (2023, p.39) showcased that among Hallyu content

consumers, the positive assessment rate of South Korea was of 70,07%. Moreover, KOFICE (2020, p.14) measured the shift in perceptions about South Korea before and after Hallyu content consumption and reported that 62.1% of the survey participant's image of South Korea had improved after Hallyu consumption. Furthermore, and similarly than before, KOFICE (2023 p. 38) Hallyu content consumers, associate South Korea with popular culture items: first with "K-pop" (23.3%) third with "Hallyu stars" (21.3%), and fourth with "K-dramas" (14.5%) and seventh with "movies" (10.4%). While this aligns with the above-presented findings, it also showcases a higher percentage of association of South Korea national image with popular culture related items among Hallyu content consumers. To this it is worthwhile adding a KOFICE-funded survey study by Um et al. (2014, p.102), which also reported that in Austria, Germany, Poland, Hungary, and France "K-pop fans have positive feeling and images of South Korea […]".

While these quantitative efforts support the presence of an positive image of South Korea abroad, and the importance of Hallyu content consumption to shape this image, they don't offer in-depth insight on the composition of this positive image, and on how does Hallyu exactly work as a mediator of this image. Therefore, qualitative research is necessary to offer stronger foundations to what was concluded by the above-presented studies. However, literature on this realm is scarce and presents several gaps. Firstly, literature mostly focuses on solely certain aspects of the consumer's imagination, for example, on the perspectives of intimate relationships in South Korea and South Korean man among female K-drama consumers, rather than on a more comprehensive perspective (Chan and Xueli, 2011; Takeda, 2014; Lee, 2020; Vu and Lee, 2013). Secondly, among the scarce that have a more all-round perspective, they remain focused on evidencing how Hallyu creates an idealized vision of South Korea without detailing the composition of this imagination, like Lyan and Levkowitz (2015). Thirdly, they have strict focus on either K-pop, or K-dramas. For example, Sippala (2020), which represents a rare example of a qualitative study that approaches the imagination of South Korea from a rather integral perspective, focuses only on K-pop content consumption, and Chan and Xueli, (2011), Takeda, (2014) Lee, (2020) and Lyan and Levkowitz (2015) focused solely on K-dramas. Nonetheless, these studies offer a valuable glimpse of the nuances and contradictions that a qualitative perspective adds to the premise that Hallyu generates a positive image of South Korea, as I will showcase now.

On the one hand, some studies report the presence of an idealized vision of South Korea due to the absorption of the idealized narratives contained in K-pop and K-drama. Lyan and

Levkowitz (2015) conducted an online qualitative on the interpretation of K-dramas among Israeli Hallyu enthusiasts and concluded on the presence of an idealized vision of South Korea among Hallyu fans. According to Lyan and Levkowitz (2015), audiences gather the narratives of South Korea in K-drama and build a vision about South Korea as their dream nation, referred as "Hallyu-Land". This conclusion also asserts that K-drama consumers accept what they see on the screen as the realities in South Korea, in Lyan and Levkowitz, (2015, p.15) words: "Despite the difference between TV drama and reality, for the majority of fans, it is a 'real' Korea".

In like manner, Lee (2020), on her study among K-drama consumers from diverse nationalities, pinpointed how these consumers translated what they saw on the screen to their imagination to how "real" South Korean man are. Consequently, Lee (2020) also places a direct connection between the narratives contained in K-drama about South Korean and their imagination that place. In turn, this creates an image of South Korean man which is "*overly-ideal*" due to K-drama consumption" (Lee, 2020, p.74). An example of how this ideal vision of South Korea man is, and its connection to K-dramas can be seen in Lee (2020, p.73) "Not only did my informants judge Korean men based on their drama hero-esque appearances, but personality-wise, they were expected to be chivalrous, gentle, cute, handsome, and expressive of their affection just like the drama heroes". This vision is also supported by Takeda (2014) when talking about the effect of the popularity of K-dramas in Japan, and the effect on Japanese Korean marriages, Takeda (2020) on the experiences of Japanese international students in South Korea, and Vu and Lee (2013) with a similar effort among Vietnamese woman marital intentions with South Korean man. Both studies concluded that the idealized narratives about South Korean man contained in K-dramas caused female Japanese and Vietnamese viewers to view South Koren, and South Korean man, in a romanticized, idealized manner.

On the other hand, other studies bring contradictions to the conclusions gathered by these studies. Chan and Xueli (2011, p. 295) states that female Singaporean K-drama consumers through their consumption patterns evidence the "capacity of viewers to both identify themselves with soap opera characters, while maintaining some critical distance through their knowledge of the conventions of the genre". Instead of absorbing the narratives of South Korean man as the realities of South Korea, these consumers used this kind of content as a therapeutic escape to an imaginary "dream-world" while acknowledging that this "fairy-tale-like man" don't exist in real life. They identified the narratives about South Korea contained

in such content "mass-produced fantasies" and rationalized that "Korean TV dramas were not realistic in portraying the real Korean society" (Chan and Xueli, 2011, p.296). Furthermore, they recognized what they imagined as negative aspects of South Korean society in K-drama content, such as the presence of a patriarchal, unequal society for woman. Indeed, the presence of negative imaginaries of South Korea have also been reported by Sippala (2020, p.66) as she records how K-pop fans imagine South Korea with a contrast between a set of negatively perceived values of the older generation's, like Confucianism, or hierarchical relations; and positively perceived values of the younger generations, like cosmopolitanism or modernity.

On a similar fashion, Kim and Park (2016), on their study with Hallyu consumers from England and France, differ by concluding that the connection between Hallyu content consumption and positive national image is not that relevant. Simultaneously, Kim and Park (2016) recognize that Hallyu content consumption brings an increased awareness of South Korea: the bigger the level of involvement with the Korean Wave, the more awareness about South Korea. Interestingly, for this reason, Kim and Park (2016) encourages the South Korean government to "use the new media Hallyu content consumers use, like YouTube, to reach consumers of the new Korean Wave and improve the image promotion strategy of the government". This recommendation very relevant as both studies on the destination image of international students as it will be showcased next, and the national image of Hallyu content consumers do grant much importance to content on YouTube, and other social media outside of peer-to-peer communication as a mediator of these imaginaries. I will further examine the literature on the importance of this kind of media within Hallyu content consumers in section 3.2.

Within the field of contradictions on the effects of popular culture in the creation of an image of the popular culture-sending country, it is worthwhile mentioning Iwabuchi (2015) and his study on the reception of Japan among Chinese consumers of Japanese popular culture. Iwabuchi (2015) concludes that the transnational enjoyment of popular culture does not necessarily translate to a positive inclination towards the nation, especially among nations have historical and political tension. In this sense, there has also been contradictory data regarding the effect of Hallyu in Japanese's people image of South Korea. For example, KOFICE (2020, p.14) highlights that in spite of overall high rates of positive improvement of image about South Korea after Hallyu content consumption, only 22% of Japanese

respondents reported a positive change in their image of South Korea as a nation after Hallyu content consumption.

This highlights the need to examine the matter on a case-by-case basis, as I will do with Spanish Hallyu enthusiasts. Additionally, the contradictions in the role of K-pop and K-drama as mediators of the imagined South Korea by respondents, and the image they construct, along with the absence of a qualitative and comprehensive perspective regarding how Hallyu consumers imagine South Korea beyond just focusing on K-pop and K-dramas (against a much more complex Hallyu-related media environment, as developed in section 3.2) demonstrate the importance of gather further data in this area, as it is the aim of this master's thesis project.

## 3.2 A clash of imaginaries with realities? International student mobility and the mediated imagination of the destination nation.

The question of the imagination of South Korea, and the role of Hallyu on its construction, becomes entangled with the field of ISM as Hallyu content consumption is considered to attract student migrants to South Korea (Stewart, 2020; Lee, 2013; Takeda, 2020; Bae et al. 2022) and national image is considered a relevant pull factor for international students (Coletto and Fullin, 2019; Cubillo *et al.* 2006; Kölbel, 2020; Ginnerskov-Dahlberg, 2021). Despite this tight connection, within literature studying the image of South Korea of Hallyu content consumers, there are generally not much references made to how this positive imagination interacts this mobility, even though it is widely reported that a positive image of South Korea generally becomes attached with the wish to travel there (Kim, 2019, 2023; Choi 2015; Lyan and Levkowitz, 2015; Lee and How, 2023; Bae *et al.* 2017; Hirata, 2008, Ju and Lee, 2021). Arguably, then, the imagination of South Korea of Hallyu content consumers is also tied in very relevant ways with mobility studies and the imagination of the nation as a destination place.

Indeed, the destination place's imagination is a widely studied issue within migration, and international student mobility studies. Generally, it highlights the migration-related aspects of the imagination of the nation, such as the imaginaries of their possible livelihoods, experiences and opportunities as a migrant attached to the nation (Coletto and Fullin, 2019; Cubillo et al. 2006; Kölbel, 2020; Ginnerskov-Dahlberg, 2021, Salazar, 2011, Ngoc, 2022). However, the boundaries between the imagination of the nation and the imagination of the destination place are blurred, as so are the boundaries between mobility and immobility

(Salazar, 2020; Beech, 2014). For example, Beech (2014) on her study of the imaginaries of the destination place, she does so by interviewing higher education studies who are not mobile yet, but still so she considers its relevant information of ISM literature as they are potential student migrants. In this sense, in this research project I will use the imagination of the nation, and the imagination of the destination place as rather interchangeable terms because Hallyu content consumers are potential tourists, or international students. Also, because of this reason enriching the discussion with migration literature that has been rarely used in the field can add very relevant information not considered before. Furthermore, I will complete this information with Moon (2014) and Bae et al. (2022) as they represent example out of the limited that studies the imagination of South Korea of international students, and its relationship with Hallyu, among non-East Asian student migrants.

The imagination of a destination place is established "through the recognition of possibilities, of alternative constructions of future lives in other places" Salazar (2011, p.9). In line with Anderson (2006), to construct the imagination of the destination place, popular culture, mostly movies, or TV shows, are mentioned as an essential factor (Salazar, 2011; 2018 Ginnerskov-Dahlberg, 2021; Beech, 2014, Kölbel, 2020; Ngoc, 2022). While stressing the importance of those media outlets as mediators of the destination image, within ISM literature social media is also regarded as an equally important influence in mediating the imagination of the destination's nation image (Mallett and Hagen-Zanker, 2018; Dekker and Ngbersen, 2014; Haythornthwaite, 2002; Coletto and Fullin, 2019, Ginnerskov-Dahlberg, 2021; Beech, 2014; Kölbel, 2020). Even more, Ginnerskov-Dahlberg (2021) stresses how social networks are the most powerful source within the wider media environment. This adds a new layer to what is conventionally considered among Hallyu literature, which focuses almost exclusively on K-pop and K-drama as mediators of South Korea's national image among Hallyu content consumers.

In relation with the role of media as the imagination's mediator, Kölbel (2020, p.100) concluded on her study among Nepali higher education studies that stresses how "individuals engage with dominant imaginaries in various ways, ranging from acceptance and involvement to resistance and disbelief". This statement is key in the specific context of this research, as it adds nuances to the extensive body of literature that considers Hallyu content consumers as accepting the narratives about South Korea contained on K-drama (Takeda, 2020; Lee, 2020; Lyan, and Levkowitz, 2015; Takeda, 2014; Vu and Lee, 2013; Walsh, 2014) and aligns with dissenting voices such as Chan and Xueli (2011), Kim and Park (2016), or Iwabuchi (2015).

Against this background, it is important to highlight how peer to peer information is been regarded as the information that people trust more when forming their destination place imaginaries (Mallett and Hagen-Zanker, 2018; Dekker and Ngbersen, 2014; Haythornthwaite, 2002; Dekker, 2013; Coletto and Fullin, 2019, Ginnerskov-Dahlberg, 2021).  In this sense, ISM studies linked the importance of social media for destination place's imagination formation with the sharing of photos, and information between family, friends, peers and through weaker ties within the migrant's network.

Within mobility studies, it is assumed that there needs to be a positive perception of the destination nation, and a positive imagination of their possible livelihoods there in contrast with other nations, and their own, to pursue mobility (Salazar, 2011; Mallett and Hagen-Zanker, 2018; Dekker and Ngbersen, 2014; Haythornthwaite, 2002; Coletto and Fullin, 2019, Ginnerskov-Dahlberg, 2021). Therefore, research on the imagination of the destination place of student migrants generally depict the presence of a positive imaginary of the destination country either before or at the beginning of their migration. In some cases, they depict this imagination as idealized, due to the mainstream presence of overly-rosy narratives of certain destinations in the study population's media environment. For example, Ginnerskov-Dahlberg (2021, p.9) in their study within Easter European student migrants to Denmark, concluded that "their imaginaries of Denmark predominantly formed at a geographical distance in relation to their social networks and the media (i.e., movies, documentaries, and the Internet), through which they were 'handed over' (often very promising) images of the country […]".

If Hallyu is considered as an important pull-factor for international student migration, these studies could provide stronger foundations to support that its consumption generates a positive imagination of South Korea. Furthermore, studies like Ginnerskov-Dahlberg (2021) resonate with the body of Hallyu literature that reports the presence of an idealized imagination of South Korea (Lyan, and Levkowitz, 2015; Lee, 2020; Takeda, 2020). Indeed, Moon (2014) and Bae et al. (2022) coincide with this perspective by stressing a direct and relevant connection between Hallyu content consumption, and likeability of South Korea as a country among international students in South Korea. Moon (2014, p.8) states that "the higher the level of favourability of Hallyu content, the more helpful it is to build a positive image of Korea". Bae et al. (2022) builds onto this statement by suggesting that the respondents felt a "sense of cultural affinity towards Korea based on Hallyu content consumption".

Approaching the nation's imagination of outsiders from a mobility perspective adds a new dimension in comparison with the previous section, 3.1. The earlier studies consider a mediated formation of South Korea's imagination from the distance, however, in sight of mobility, that distance will eventually be trespassed, and the imagination will be faced with personal experiences there. There is yet scarce literature studying Hallyu content consumer's imagined South Korea and how it clashes with the realities of the place[1], much less focused on international students. A relevant example that will be dissected in this section is, Lee (2020) in her study of Hallyu tourist's experiences in South Korea in contrast with their ideal initial imagination of South Korean man, as exchanges student's experiences have been compared with that of tourists (Freestone and Geldens, 2011; Kosmaczewska and Jameson, 2021).

Likewise, ISM literature is not conclusive in this realm as few studies on the imagination of international student's migration places make an in-depth analysis on this direction. Nonetheless, it is important to denote that among public diplomacy literature, student migrants are considered as positive actors for the host nation's international reputation abroad, which suggests that a positive impression of the host nation after student migration remains (Lowe; 2015; Nye, 2004). Within the context of Hallyu, Bae et al. (2022) adds valuable insight on this realm through their qualitative interview study with international students who had resided in South Korea for 6 months, as they coincided by reporting a positive feeling towards South Korea throughout the whole student migration period. Furthermore, they conclude, aligned with public diplomacy theories, that international students play two key roles for South Korea: they serve as mediators between South Korea and their home countries, and wish to establish a long-term relationship with South Korea. Hong et al. (2020) arrives to similar conclusions through a study of Chinese students in South Korea.

Other studies bring a more nuanced perspective and showcases discrepancies on the field. Ngoc's (2022) study of the first experience of Vietnamese international PhD students in their

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[1] It is important to mention that in the field of the juxtaposition of the imagined South Korea through Hallyu, and the contrast with the realities of South Korea, there is a wide body of research in the context of North Koreans that flee to South Korea, and struggle, among many other things, due to the contrast of reality with their positive imaginations of South Korea harnessed through Hallyu consumption. However, this has not been considered due to the drastically different background of North Korean refugees, and Spanish exchange students. Among many examples of this kind of literature, one can mention Lee, M. and Oh, W. H's (2013) article "Korean Popular Culture in the Course of Defecting from North Korea to South Korea" in the Journal of Broadcasting and Telecommunications research, Oh, W. H. (2015) "Young North Korean Refugees' Consumption of South Korean Popular Culture and Social Construction of Reality" in the Journal of Media Economics & Culture", or Kim. Y's (2019) book *South Korean popular culture and North Korea*.

destination country. Ngoc (2022, p.12) concluded that their imaginaries were "confirmed, disconfirmed, and restructured" after a few weeks in their destination countries, and sometimes these created feelings of disappointment. Similarly, Beech (2014, p.175) through her interviews with international studies around universities in UK, reported a that their initial imagination of the destination place "often sit uncomfortably with the reality of the places considered", which caused the feelings of disappointment also reported by Ngoc (2022). In a much similar fashion Lee (2020) reports that reports that Hallyu content consumers, when visiting South Korea had negative experiences due to their way-too-ideal imagination of South Korean man harnessed by K-drama content consumption. Due to this, "the Hallyu tourists constantly struggled to make sense of the difference between the glorified images they possessed of Korean men from the reality of their dating experiences in Korea" (Lee, 2020, p.74).

These negative feelings and experiences generate concerns about the role of student migrants as public diplomacy actors of the host nation. Furthermore, if at Bae et al. (2022) considers, they represent mediators between South Korea and their home country, this mediation might spread discourses that are not necessarily positive if faced with disappointment after migration. This is very relevant if we consider the importance of peer-to-peer information in the formation of destination's place image reported in ISM literature (Mallett and Hagen-Zanker, 2018; Haythornthwaite, 2002; Dekker and Ngbersen, 2014; Coletto and Fullin, 2019, Ginnerskov-Dahlberg, 2021). Furthermore, in the era of the boom of social media-sharing apps, like Instagram, YouTube, or TikTok, what if these migrants upload their experiences, also the negative ones online, were everyone around the world can see it? More insight on this will be developed on sections 4.1.1 and 6.1.1

Before moving, on I wanted to highlight a limitation that ISM literature on the imagination of the destination place poses when studying this phenomenon through the lens of Hallyu content consumption. Within these studies, the discourses considered as mediators of the student migrants imaginaries of the destination place are the mainstream discourses present in their particular social and cultural context. In contrast, Hallyu enthusiasts in Europe (as Spaniards are) consumers non-mainstream media, as it will be discussed in depth in section 3.1.2. Even more, such consumption of this non-mainstream media has been produced precisely by the destination nation's cultural industry, and government of the destination nation's popular culture. That's why it is important to dissect the particularities of national image formation within Hallyu content consumers, as I did on the previous section, and to

continue to stress the phenomena of Hallyu within this context of international student migration.

# 4   BACKGROUND CHAPTER. Understanding the Hallyu phenomena, and the study population.

This thesis unfolds under the assumption that Hallyu has become a phenomenon that transcends transnational popular culture consumption to become a key influence in diverse areas of people's everyday lives. Choi's (2015, p.35) exemplifies this through the concept of the "border porosity of Hallyu", as he highlights how the boundary of Hallyu shifts and flows: shifting: "listening to K-pop → watching Korean drama → joining fan clubs for Korean popular cultures in general → trying Korean food → learning Korean language → purchasing Korean cosmetics/electronic goods → studying abroad in Korea → making Korean friends → picking up cultural idioms and local, traditional customs → launching personal blogs on Korea → working for Korea-related institutions of various sorts".

As explained in the introduction, the scholarly on Hallyu has been dedicated to proving this border porosity of Hallyu content consumption in areas, like tourism, international politics, purchase of consumer goods, willingness to learn Korean language, and most importantly for this project, the decision to study abroad in South Korea. Indeed, it is the border porosity of Hally causes the existence of the entanglement between ISM and Hallyu content consumption, which reflected in the study populations of this research which are Hallyu content consumers but also student migrants. Against this backdrop, central to this masters' thesis is the South Korean nation as it is imagined by this group of people. Therefore, before dissecting how the nation is imagined and mediated by the cultural phenomena of Hallyu, we need to contextualize who this group of people are and what is the Hallyu-related media they consume. In this spirit, section 4.1 will dissect the complex phenomenon of Hallyu as a multi-layered transcultural media phenomenon and provide new perspectives to the understanding of Hallyu content as a mediating force for national imaginaries. Then, section 3.2 will contextualize the study population of this research.

## 4.1   Hallyu as a mediator for the imagined South Korea – towards a broader understanding of Hallyu content.

The essence of Hallyu are popular cultural products, among which K-pop and K-dramas are the most discussed items within Hallyu literature, as they have been main drivers of the South Korean popular culture phenomena abroad (KOFICE, 2020; 2021; 2022).  Despite this fact, the Hallyu phenomena includes other forms pop culture items like fashion, video games,

movies, webtoons, books, mukbang, fashion, or beauty products among many other (Park, 2021; KOFICE, 2020; 2021; 2022; Song, 2020). Additionally, an essential part of Hallyu is a complex multi-layered body of content that is not produced directly by the South Korean cultural industry, but by Hallyu fans and other actors, whose Hallyu-related content is published on the Internet, on social media apps like Instagram, Twitter or YouTube, among others (Hargitai et al. 2023; Lee and Abidin, 2023; Jin and Yoon, 2016; Choi, 2015; Song, 2020; Um et al. 2014).

Within fandom studies, this often referred as "participatory culture", a set of practices enabled by the emergence of new information technologies that allow audiences to transcend their spectator role to become participants of a certain pop phenomena (Jenkins, 2006). Indeed, Hallyu is more diverse than a set of content directly produced by the South Korean entertainment companies, which is consumed in its original form by its audiences. Choi (2015, p.44) refers to this as the biformity of Hallyu: the duplex conception of Hallyu, in which two interrelated aspects that are critical for Hallyu's existance: 1) "the polycentric process of creative cultural participation" driven by the individual passion of fans 2) the role of Hallyu as a national policy initiative for Korea's national interest jointly run by the Korean government, and South Korean corporations.

In the case of the polycentric process of cultural participation, even if the root of Hallyu is the content produced by its cultural industry, it falls into a constant cycle of reshaping and republishing by fans online. An example of this can be found on Ferguson and Thandoyom (2023) illustrating how groups of Thai Hallyu fans reinterpret, reconfigure, and republish K-pop songs and music videos to showcase their own, personal rural realities in Thailand. In the realm of Hallyu as an institutional campaign, the lines between strictly cultural content and branded content become blurred. As an example, we can name the song *Seoul*[2] which is a popular collaboration among two important K-pop groups, Super Junior, and Girls' Generation, and is simultaneously, part of governmental branding campaign to encourage tourism in Seoul (Dinnie, 2010).

Within this framework, the key issue of Hallyu in relation to its role as a mediator for its consumer's imagined South Korea is what kind of narratives about South Korea are being

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[2] SM Entertainment [@sment] (2009 December 11). [YouTube Video]. *슈퍼주니어 & 소녀시대_SEOUL(서울)_뮤직비디오(MusicVideo)*. Retrieved on 22/02/2024 from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=up6n1WrB7aE

consumed by Hallyu enthusiasts, how do they react to them, and who are the actors that build these discourses. Due to the inherent relation of Hallyu with South Korea's public diplomacy and nation branding campaigns, it has been considered that the discourses about South Korea consumed by Hallyu content consumers communicate an enhanced, exaggerated, or romanticized image of South Korea as it is in the economic and political interest of the South Korean corporations and the South Korean government (Walsh, 2014; Chung, 2019). This understanding awards to the part of Hallyu which is related to nation branding campaigns a big importance in the construction of the national imagination of South Korea of its consumers. The reported audience's reaction to these narratives has been dissected in section 3.1.

However, the dataset if this research project suggests that there might be a new group of actors relevant in Hallyu as a mediator of South Korea's image, that have not been considered before: social media influencers who are producers of South Korean-related content, who adhere to the online popularity of the Hallyu phenomena, and the attention momentum for South Korea caused by it (Lee and Cho, 2021). Social media influencers (SMI from now on) are a recent online phenomenon of micro-celebrities (celebrities famous among a certain niche of people) that generally become popular online by sharing aspects of their private lives and gaining the trust of their followers (Enke and Borchers, 2019; Yu et al., 2022). They generally professionalize their social media activities through the monetary rewards granted by social media platforms due to high view volume, or by partnering-up with companies to advertise their products (Enke and Borchers, 2019). They represent a recent social media phenomenon emerging in marketing and strategic communication research (Borchers, 2019).

The appearance of this actors within Hallyu raises questions about who they are, what are the discourses about South Korea they communicate, and what is the reception of Hallyu content consumers. Furthermore, it adds new layers to Choi's (2015) understanding of the actors that are involved with Hallyu — which are narrowed to fans, the South Korean government, and corporations — as it is not clear whether these kind of South Korea-related social media influencers strictly fall within the label of fans, as it will be discussed in the following section. In this way, a new set of new, individual actors might be emerging that are changing the rules of Hallyu as a mediator of its consumer's imagination. Due to this, a broader understanding of Hallyu content can be helpful so as to enhance the understanding of this new rules. Especially, as this a type of content related to South Korea, and to Hallyu that has not been widely

reported before, and that it is difficult to pinpoint yet due to the novelty of this phenomena in Hallyu literature.

In Jenkin's words "what might traditionally be understood as media producers and consumers are transformed into participants who are expected to interact with each other according to a new set of rules which none of us fully understands"[3]. Indeed, as the interview data of this thesis project will showcase, Hallyu content, the discourses about South Korea contained in it, its producer/consumer dynamics, and the reaction of its audiences with might work under unexpected rules that are increasingly difficult to understand. Against this background, I will understand Hallyu as a mediator for national imaginaries rather as a *particular media environment* than a strictly defined type of content, as it could be, for example, delimiting it to content produced directly by the South Korean cultural industry, or only K-pop, or K-dramas as other on the imagined South Korea have done. The particular media environment is called the "social mediascape of Hallyu" as coined by Jin and Yoon (2016). The concept of the social mediascape of Hallyu is inspired by Appadurai's (1996) mediascapes. To Appadurai (1996), mediascape refers to the global flow of images, information, and news through mass media, which play a crucial role in shaping people's perceptions of the world, ideas, beliefs, and values. Jin and Yoon (2016, p.1279) update the concept in the context of Hallyu and add the world social to refer to the close connection of Hallyu with the digital space through social media. Drawing on Jin and Yoon (2016), and Appadurai (1996), and contextualizing the Hallyu phenomena, in this research project Hallyu as a mediating force of the imagined South Korea as established by Anderson (2006) will refer to: the complex layering of images, and information, in the online world that represents the environment, and the media context, in which the Hallyu audience consumes Hallyu, that contains an overlapping and fluid set of circulating content produced by the South Korean entertainment industry, the South Korean government, fans, and other individual actors.

The aspects that were introduced here data-driven, meaning that they were not expected in the initial planning stages of this master's thesis project as social media influencers are largely uncharted in Hallyu literature. Approaching Hallyu like this enhances the exploratory aims of this thesis project, to allow unforeseen forms of Hallyu-related to be explored within the blurred lines of production-consumption of the media-environment of the digital age (Jenkins,

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[3] Jenkins, H. (2006) "Welcome to Convergence Culture"
https://henryjenkins.org/blog/2006/06/welcome_to_convergence_culture.html [accessed 27/02/2024]

2006). Therefore, following the explorative aims of this project, this approach is aimed at providing new, probatory, flexible ways of understanding Hallyu content, which can provide an interesting preliminary foundation to further research on this realm; but are also bound to future evidence provided by stronger empirical data.

### 4.1.1  The increasing influence of social media influencers in South Korea's national image construction abroad.

The "social" dimension of the social mediascape of Hallyu it is given to the inherently social media driven consumption of Hallyu. Indeed, the consumption of Hallyu through the digital space was essential for Hallyu's global expansion and is central for the overall Hallyu experience as it represents the main access channel for the media content produced by South Korean entertainment companies, and the space for the development of fan participatory culture, which is essential for Hallyu (KOFICE 2020; 2022; 2023; Ferguson and Thandoyom, 2023).  The online world has been key from the consumer's side, but also but also for South Korean entertainment enterprises, which could leverage the benefits of mass media information technologies without having to deal with the export barriers of traditional media outlets (Walsh, 2014).

However, the social media influence is many times reduced to services YouTube or shows and music-streaming services like Netflix or Spotify (KOFICE, 2023, p. 61). This might be true for global audiences but leave outs of their analysis other apps like Twitter, or Instagram, which have been reported as a key space for Hallyu consumers in Europe, the market inside which Spanish Hallyu fans are found, as they represent the main space in which fandom activities, and contact with other consumers, is developed (Hargitai et al., 2023). Against this background, it is important to highlight, that although the consumption of Hallyu is social-media driven, and includes participatory efforts, it does not necessarily challenge the hegemony of the "corporate-led, profit-seeking nature of social media" as Hallyu fans also showcase passive practices due to a high dependency of the "algorithmic processes of social media" (Jin and Yoon 2016, p.1288). Therefore, the social mediascape of Hallyu is both an arena for active participation, but also for passive consumption.

What is known about SMI in relation with South Korea, and national image formation comes from the increasing interest of the South Korean government in leveraging them for nation branding purposes. Chung et al (2020) asserts that "The fact that people increasingly rely on online channels as their primary information sources makes examining the shape of online

discourses regarding Korea crucial for planning nation-branding programs". This becomes even more relevant as we know that Hallyu content consumers are deeply entangled with the online world. Indeed, within Hallyu scholarship, there has been some calls for the South Korean government to use social media for nation branding, especially among those studies which contradict the positive influence of Hallyu at creating a positive image of South Korea, like Kim and Park (2016). It is from the emerging studies on this realm that can get the most relevant information about the phenomena of South Korea-related SMI introduced above.

The South Korean government is increasingly investing in their institutional campaign through social media. For instance, Lee (2016) studied the early efforts of South Korean to brand the nation through posts in Facebook and Google accounts. A more recent example can be, for example, would be the Seoul Tourism Organization's Instagram account @visitseoul_official[4], which has 299k followers and shares compelling images of Seoul's streets, explains South Korean traditions, and offers tips to tourist wishing to visit the city.

Among these efforts, SMI are becoming increasingly attractive. For example, Lorgeux and Divakaran, (2023) discussed the positive outcomes of increasing tourism by enhancing the image of South Korea as a touristic destination through a partnership between the South Korean government, France, and French SMI. Furthermore, Lee and Abidin (2022) introduced the usage of SMI and its nexus with the Korean government through their discussion of the rise of SMI-created YouTube videos under the hashtag of "외국인" [foreigner] that disseminate content about South Korea online. Lee and Abidin (2022) unveil that these discourses are, many times, affiliated with government institutions and private companies that seek to reproduce a discourse that communicates the excellence of South Korea.

The growing interest of the South Korean government in SMI, and in controlling the discourses about South Korea that circulate online is showcased through the "K-influencer Academy", an ongoing yearly project since 2020 (Kim, 2023b). This project aims to encourage the voluntary participation of content creators from all around the world to get free "professional consulting on growing YouTube channel and promotional market, support fund for content production, access to filming equipment and studios, participation in online and offline festivals, opportunities to be in TV and YouTube content" (Kim, 2023b). The

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[4] Seoul Tourism Organization [@visitseoul_official] (n.d.) [Instagram profile] Instagram. Retrieved on 01/03/2024, from https://www.instagram.com/visitseoul_official

government benefits from this program by increasing the amount, and sophistication of South Korea-related content online, and by having control over the discourses about South Korea that circulate online (Lee and Abidin, 2022). In fact, Lee and Abidin (2022) reported dissatisfaction among the participants of this project due to the tight control that the K-influencer Academy organizers exerted over the content updated online, as well as the lack of compensation for their content creation efforts.

This highlights the blurred lines between branded, and non-branded content within the social mediascape of Hallyu, and in social media content about South Korea. A good example of this is the Instagram account @seoul.southkorea[5] with 1.3 million followers[6], privately owned by a hotel-provider service network Athotels, that leverages the popularity of Hallyu to promote tourism to South Korea, and promotes their own brand, by disseminating South Korea and Hallyu related content on Instagram. This account's content is varied: it shares tips on how to understand South Korean culture, showcases aesthetically pleasing pictures and interesting facts about South Korea, and reposts other SMI accounts of their livelihoods in South Korea. It also shares viral trends related to South Korea, like showcasing the products of convenience stores, or humorous videos about K-drama's cliches, and K-pop related clips. Overall, it portrays an appealing, enhanced vision of South Korea. A good example of this is the video uploaded in collaboration with the Instagram travel influencer @audgiegee, titled "Things I love about my Korean office job, Part 4"[7] where she shows her viewers how a day at her office job in South Korea is, highlighting how company offers a free massage session at the office once per week. Whether this Instagram account partners or not with South Korean agencies, or South Korean entertainment companies, is unknown.

The key issue here in relation with the imagined South Korea of Hallyu content consumers is that it not all the content about South Korea online is communicated through an enhanced lens. Lee and Abidin (2022) point out that there is growing online resistance online to this kind of highly curated content about South Korea referred by him as "gukkbong". This is word comes from the YouTube hashtag 국뽕 (gukbbong)[8] which is formed with the words

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[5] Adhotels [@seoul.southkorea]. (n.d.) [Instagram profile]. Instagram. Retrieved on 01/03/2024, from https://www.instagram.com/seoul.southkorea/

[6] As of 01/03/2024

[7] Adhotels [@seoul.southkorea]. (2023 May 7) [Instagram video, reposted from @audigiegee]. Instagram. Retrieved on 01/03/2024, from https://www.instagram.com/p/C3ucr0lhbj9/

[8] In this thesis project, I will be considering the National Institute of Korean Language of the Republic of Korea's Revised Romanization of Korean rules for romanization.

from 국가 (gukga) [nation-state] and 뽕 (bbong) [slang for methamphetamine, usually meaning addiction or addictive content], which refers humorously to the nation-branded content about South Korea online. As a reaction to this discourse, Lee and Abidin (2022) unveil the emergence of a pool YouTube content creators that have created their own spaces to share what they label as "more sincere content", which blends Hallyu-related content with their "sincere" opinions about South Korean society.

This content has also echoed in other social media platforms, like TikTok and Instagram. One example could be the Spanish SMI in TikTok @aidavert[9], who lives in Seoul and shares her experiences there, Hallyu-related, as well as not-Hallyu related. With a follower's base of almost five hundred thousand people[10], @aidavert shares her day-to-day life in South Korea, as well as curiosities about the country, which are her most viewed series of videos. For example, her TikTok video "Curiosities about South Korea, part 4" has 8,4 million views[11]. In her profile we can also find examples of the resisting discourse towards "gukbbong" videos online discussed by Lee and Abidin (2022), through a series of videos connected by a common theme: revealing the real, honest South Korea to its viewers, like the TikTok video "A reality check about life in South Korea"[12], or "What you are not told about working in South Korea", that have more than 600.000. views each[13], or "Dismantling myths about South Korea" with 1.5 million of views[14]. Please note that the videos titles are originally in Spanish language, and the titles have been translated by me.

Here, it would be key to know what kind of myths about South Korea, communicated by whom, she aims to dismantle. In connection to Lee and Abidin (2022) it is likely that she refers to the enhanced South Korea by nation branding, and arguably, also by K-pop and K-dramas, as she reveals herself as a Hallyu consumer by showing her viewers how she goes to K-pop concerts in Seoul, using K-pop songs on her videos[15], and by referencing K-drama

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[9] Aïda [@aidavert] (n.d.) [Tiktok profile] Tiktok. Retrieved on 28/02/2022, from https://www.tiktok.com/@aidavert.

[10] As of 28/02/2024, @aidavert had 499.300 thousand followers.

[11] Aïda [@aidavert] (2023 July 14). [Tiktok video] Tiktok. Retrieved on 28/02/2022, from https://www.tiktok.com/@aidavert/video/7255695026053745946

[12] Aïda [@aidavert] (2023 May 31). [Tiktok video]. *Un golpe de realidad de la vida en Corea del Sur*. Retrieved on 28/02/2024, fromhttps://vm.tiktok.com/ZGeUN6Jng/

[13] Aïda [@aidavert] (2023 December 27). [Tiktok video]. *Lo que no te cuentan de trabajar en Corea del Sur* Tiktok. Retrieved on 28/02/2022, from https://vm.tiktok.com/ZGeUNLBGN/

[14] Aïda [@aidavert] (2023 October 30). [Tiktok video] *Desmantelando mitos sobre Corea*. Retrieved on 29/02/2024, from https://vm.tiktok.com/ZGeUNRhRv/

[15] Aïda [@aidavert ] (2023 August 31) [Tiktok video] *Ven conmigo al concierto de NCT Nation* [Come with me to the NCT Nation concert]. Retrieved on 28/02/2024; or the following video which uses the K-pop group's

content[16], which also likely attracts Hallyu enthusiasts to her profile. This would align, in part, with Lee and Cho's (2021) exploration of that sees an emerging group of content-creators in YouTube who are foreign expatriates in South Korea that gain a popularity online by harvesting the popularity of K-pop and K-dramas, and act as transnational cultural intermediaries between South Korea and the West for those fans who are curious about the country that produces the popular culture content they are enthusiastic about. According to Lee and Cho (2021) this kind of content highlights the cultural differences of South Korea as opposed to the West, perpetrating othering, and Orientalist attitudes between the East and the West.

It is beyond the scope of this research to generalize about the discourses embedded in this kind of SMI content about South Korea, and as this is a largely unexplored field, the above-mentioned examples were merely aimed at bringing clarity to the reader about this phenomenon. Further, quantitative, and qualitative research about this is necessary to answer questions like the prevalence of different SMI-updated discourses on social media, which kind of audiences it reaches to, as well as more detailed qualitative accounts of the discourses this carries about South Korea. The findings section will make a qualitative contribution to these questions through the perspective of the 7 Spanish Hallyu content consumers that were interviewed, against the background of mobility to South Korea. As it will be discussed, the findings align with the existence of online discourses reacting to "gukbbong" content, and SMI talking about South Korea online seem to aligns in part to what Lee and Cho (2021) discussed, and has expanded from YouTube to other social media apps.

## 4.2   Understanding the Study Population.

### 4.2.1  The counter-flow consumption of Hallyu in Spain.

Throughout this section I will contextualize the landscape of Hallyu content consumption in Spain to understand what its particularities, and importance within the wider context of global Hallyu audiences despite the timid academic attention granted to it. There are few studies on the Spanish audience of Hallyu, among which there are Yoon et al. (2020) and their qualitative study on Spanish K-pop fandom, a PhD thesis on Spanish K-pop fans by

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LESSERAFIM song *Easy,* Aïda [@aidavert]  (2024 February 25) [Tiktok video] *Hairstyle Tutorial*. Retrieved on 28/02/2024, from https://vm.tiktok.com/ZGeUN6yyy/

[16]Aïda [@aidavert ] (2023 May 30) [Tiktok video] *La rica mala de todos los K-dramas* [The rich, evil girl of all K-drama] Retrieved on 28/02/2024, from https://vm.tiktok.com/ZGeUNjSWp/

Rodríguez Castillo (2020), a survey study on Spanish K-pop fans by Madrid-Morales and Luvric (2015), and finally a study on Hallyu fandom in Spain by Deltell and Folgar (2020). There are other studies in which Spain has been briefly mentioned together within the wider community of Spanish-speaking Hallyu content consumers like Vargas and Park, (2014).

Yoon et al. (2020) suggests that Hallyu's popularity in Spain started to increase in the mid to late-2010s, and that before that there were solely a small number of Hallyu-related activities organized by grassroot fan groups. The arrival of Hallyu in Spain during the early to mid-2010s aligns with broader literature on Hallyu, which generally divides its global spread into two distinct stages: a first wave of expansion, from the late 90s to the mid-00s, mostly within Asia, and a second from the mid-00s to present time (Song, 2020). Following this, Hallyu arrived in Spain throughout its second wave of expansion, which was characterized by K-pop as the main driver of other South Korean popular culture items, and by the importance of social media for the consumption of Hallyu, and the development of fan practices (Song, 2020). Nonetheless, while it is difficult to record the beginnings, and development of the Hallyu phenomena in Spain, it is also prudent not to underestimate the presence of Hallyu in Spain before the late 2010s, as the first-ever K-pop concert in Spain was held as early as 2011, when the K-pop group JYJ held a concert in Barcelona (Graell, 2011; sobblah, 2011); and early mainstream media attention to the Hallyu phenomenon already existed in the early 2010s (Ortega, 2011; Seisdedos, 2013). This is not counting, of course, the brief attention momentum that South Korea aroused due to the success of PSY's Gangnam Style (Torres, 2012; Agencia EFE, 2012).

Since its arrival, the visibility of Hallyu and by extension, South Korea have significantly risen, which can be seen by the increasing coverage of the phenomena in mainstream newspapers (Cabanelas, 2023; García, 2023, Llanos 2019). This increase in visibility arguably also matches with an increase of Hallyu content consumers in Spain, as Llanos (2019) also reported that between 2014 and 2018, rise in K-pop song reproduction in Spotify accounted for an increase of 718%. Other recent events also showcase the rise in popularity of Hallyu in Spain, such as the celebration of the "K-pop Lux" festival in Madrid, which gathered a crowd of around 30.000 people to watch popular K-pop groups, like Shinee, Ateez, StayC or IVE (Agencia EFE, 2023; Redacción Uwu, 2023). Before this festival, K-pop concerts were being regularly held in Spain, like the group Blackpink, which held concerts in Barcelona in 2019 (Morán, 2019), and in 2022 (Coca, 2022)

Deltell and Folgar (2020) and Yoon *et al*. (2020) resonate with each other in establishing the demographic composition of the Hallyu fandom in Spain: it is mostly female and young, between 14 and 30 years old, which is also the reported case within broader Hallyu audiences (Korea Foundation, 2022). One can have general idea of the relevance of the number of Spanish Hallyu content consumers against other audiences by checking statistics on the audience of K-pop music groups divided by nations in YouTube Charts[17]. As of October 15th, 2023, looking at the viewers divided by country of popular K-pop music groups BTS, Twice, and Stray Kids, Spain was among the 30 top audience groups in the previous 12 months. Checking YouTube Charts also allows us to see that this phenomenon is not new in Spain, of older groups, like Girls' Generation, also counted Spain as the top 30 audience groups in the previous 12 months. This data is relevant as YouTube is one of the most important platforms for K-pop consumption, and K-pop is one of the key drivers of Hallyu (Song, 2020; KOFICE, 2020; 2022; 2023).

Despite its increasing popularity, in Spain, Hallyu consumption must be understood as a dissident activity. Yoon et al. (2020) refers to this as the "counter-flow" consumption of Hallyu in Spain. While relevant, the Hallyu phenomena is still a non-mainstream phenomenon in Spain (Yoon et al., 2020; Deltell and Folgar, 2020). Therefore, the counter-flow consumption of Hallyu means that Hallyu content cannot be found in traditional outlets of media consumption like cable TV, or the radio, and must be consumed through alternative channels, mostly found on the online world (Yoon et al., 2020, and Deltell and Folgar, 2020). This increases the importance of the digital space for Spanish, and European fans to consume Hallyu and to pursue their fan practices there, as other channels are not available (Hargitai et al. 2023).

Furthermore, the "counter flow" nature of Hallyu consumption in Spain, can be seen on the society's reaction to the consumption of Hallyu. Yoon et al., (2020) reported how Spanish Hallyu fans face disparage from Spanish society due to their enthusiasm for Korean popular culture. One of the ways in which this rejection is showcased is through the pejorative reference to K-pop idols and K-drama actors as "chinos" [Chinese] in Spain (Yoon et al. 2020) a phenomenon that has been reported also in other Spanish Speaking nations, like Chile (Min, 2020). This kind of attitudes make Hallyu consumers in those regions, and in Spain

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[17] Retrieved on 15/10/2023 from *https://charts.youtube.com*. At the time of retrieval, the national composition of the artist's YouTube channel audiences was open to the public. However, as of 07/03/2024 is not anymore.

them feel as underdogs (Yoon et al. 2020, Deltell and Folgar, 2020). The counter-flow consumption of Hallyu in this sense, represents how Spanish Hallyu content consumers consume K-pop and K-dramas countering the attitudes of Spanish society, in a sense, as an act of rebellion to mainstream popular culture in Spain (Yoon et al. 2020, Deltell and Folgar, 2020).

It is important to highlight that the societal rejection towards Hallyu content consumers is not isolated in Spain, or Chile as it has also been reported in Israel (Lyan, and Levkowitz 2015b), and the Czech Republic (Mazaná, 2014). In relation with this, KOFICE (2023, p.143) reports their concerns over the emergence online of the term "Koreaboo", created to "disparage fans who are excessively interested in South Korean pop culture in North America". KOFICE (2023, p.143) considers the appearance of this term as a confirmation of the discriminatory views of American society towards Asia, and Korea, and as a signal for the South Korean government to respond to this racial problem with their nation branding strategies.

Indeed, the historical and cultural context of racism towards Asians present in Western nations is something that affects the spread of Hallyu abroad, the consumption of Hallyu content, and the experiences of Hallyu content consumers. There are plenty of studies that connect Hallyu content consumption with Orientalism, exoticism, and the consumption of the distant "other" (Min, 2020; Song, 2020; Lin, 2023; Yoon and Lee, 2023; Lyan, and Levkowitz 2015b). However, it is important to highlight that the qualitative studies of Yoon, Min, and Jin (2020) in the case of Spain, and Lee (2020) in a study with Western Hallyu fans, consider that although Hallyu consumers Orientalist attitudes in their consumption of Hallyu, it also not be understood solely through an Orientalist lens. While it is beyond the scope of this research project to determine the degree of influence of racist and Orientalist attitudes in the informant's imagination of South Korea, it is important to mention it to understand the socio-cultural context inside which Spanish people consume Hallyu content.

### 4.2.2 International students, exchange students, or tourists?

There is lack of a unified definition of what an international student is, as it is subjected to the different, and changing understandings of this migrant status by nations and international organisms (Guruz, 2011; Shkoler and Rabenu, 2020). Shkoler and Rabenu, (2020, p.19) define international students as "an individual whose primary goal is the acquisition of (some form of) higher education in a state in which he or she has no permanent residential status and no local citizenship, regardless of the studying method". Favell et al. (2007) consider this set

of people as young and highly skilled migrants, who are part of cosmopolitan elites that freely move across borders. Nonetheless, more recent studies like Luthra and Platt (2016) argue that the background of international students is becoming increasingly diverse due to globalization.

Among international students, there is a complex variety of statuses, depending on the enrolment criteria, type academic programme, or the length of the stay (Guruz, 2011; Shkoler and Rabenu, 2020). In this research project the participant's enrolment status was of exchange students. This kind of enrolment is characterized by a short-term residence period that does normally not exceed a year, assistance of the sending and host university with paperwork and accommodation, as well as support funding throughout the exchange programme, which differs from other international students that, for example, pursue a full degree abroad which entails much longer period of residence and different kind of preparations, and struggles there (Kosmaczewska and Jameson, 2023).

Due to the short stay of these students in there, and the motivations of exchange students to go abroad, Freestone and Geldens (2008) and Kosmaczewska and Jameson, (2023) have pointed out the similarities exchange student's experiences with that of tourists. In this sense, Freestone and Geldens (2008) suggest that the experiences of exchange studies share characteristics with that of long-term travellers, as not solely an educational experience, but also as an experience that offers escape from routine, space for personal reflection and rediscovery. Kosmaczewska, and Jameson, (2023, p.152) survey study showcased that "50,6% of these students planned to spend more time on traveling and tourist activities than on study-related ones".

However, rather than equating tourism with exchange studies, Kosmaczewska, and Jameson, (2023) and Freestone and Geldens (2008) aim at broadening the understanding of exchange student's motivations from a strict educational approach, and highlighting that the motivations, and experiences of exchange students are much more multilayered and complex. This is also a trend found on broader ISM studies that aim at stressing that international's students' motivations are much broader than solely acquiring education (Kölbel, 2020; Cubillo et al., 2006; Beech, 2014; Coletto and Fullin, 2019). All this highlights the fluid barriers in between tourism, international studies, and exchange studies, against the common background of mobility.

Despite the particularities of exchange students within the broader context of ISM, exchange students have received less focused academic attention (Freetone and Geldens, 2008, Kosmaczewska, and Jameson, 2023). Furthermore, ISM studies generally don't specify the enrolment status of their participants and use the umbrella term international students without detailing whether they were exchange, or other kind of students (Bae et al. 2022; Cubillo et al., 2006; Ginnerskov-Dahlberg, 2021), or mix exchange students with other kind of students (Takeda, 2020). Due to this, and the many shared characteristics between international students as a whole, and exchange students, throughout this research I have relied on the broader body of ISM studies and extrapolated it to exchange studies, while bearing in mind the limitations this poses due to the particularities of a short-term student migration.

# 5   METHODS

This thesis project is founded upon a set of semi-structured interviews with 7 Spanish Hallyu content consumers who were enrolled as exchange students in South Korea between the end of August-beginning of September and December of 2022, which were transcribed and analyzed through qualitative thematic analysis. This chapter will gather the methodological implications this set of choices implies, and its limitations. In addition, factual data about the participants will be introduced.

## 5.1   The recruitment process.

Participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling. Gideons (2012, p. 67) defines purposive sampling as suitable when the researcher knows the specific characteristics of the target population and then seeks out specific individuals who have those characteristics to include in the sample. The recruitment criteria for the participants were: 1) being Hallyu content consumers 2) holding Spanish nationality, 3) being enrolled as a student in South Korean universities during the autumn semester of 2022, and 4) not having visited Korea before August 2022. Thus, the essential characteristics of the population studied in this research were predefined, which made this sampling method the most suitable choice.

Purposive sampling was combined with snowball sampling at the end of the recruitment process. Although snowballing is a more useful method to recruit participants from difficult-to-access populations (Gideons, 2012), snowballing was used at the end of the recruitment process due to time constraints consideration, as it was imperative to interview the participants as soon as possible. This combination of sampling recruitment methods will not allow me to make statistical generalizations, but this will not affect the relevance of my findings as the nature of my research is qualitative.

To start the recruitment process, I joined a social media group of Spanish exchange students in South Korea for the autumn semester of 2022 and took part in several informal, in-person gatherings planned inside such a group at the end of August 2022. Through these gatherings, the first 4 participants were recruited through purposive sampling. Afterward, the already-recruited informants introduced me to other prospective participants. Like this, 3 informants were recruited through snowball sampling.

The total sample size accounted for seven informants, six female and one male, all in their 20s. In addition, six of them studied in Seoul-based universities and one, in Incheon. Throughout the recruitment process, the objective was to achieve a minimum of five informants and a maximum of 10. Once the number of prospective informants had reached five participants, I established a time limit of one week to recruit more people, as saving time was imperative: participants needed to be interviewed as soon as possible, as the first round of interviews needed to record their perceptions of Korea before being exposed to the realities there.

## 5.2   Sample profile.

As presented in Table 1[18], the ages of the participants ranged between 21 and 25 years old. Among them, six identified as female, and one of them as a male. The table also showcases their residence area during their time as exchange students in South Korea. Except for Raquel, who was an exchange student in Incheon, all participants attended Seoul-based universities.

Table 1. Informant's gender, age, preferred Hallyu content consumption product, and place of residence in South Korea (end of August-beginning of September 2022).

| Maite | Female, 21 years old, Seoul<br>K-pop and K-dramas, since 2016. |
|---|---|
| Ester | Female, 24 years old, Seoul.<br>K-dramas, since 2016. |
| Hugo | Male, 21 years old, Seoul.<br>K-pop and K-dramas, since 2018. |
| Irene | Female. 25 years old, Seoul.<br>K-pop and K-dramas, since 2010. |
| Eva | Female, 22 years old, Seoul.<br>K-pop, since 2016. |
| Natalia | Female, 21 years old, Seoul.<br>K-pop and K-dramas, since 2020. |
| Raquel | Female, 21 years old, Incheon.<br>K-pop and K-dramas, between 2016. |

As it will be a central topic for the forthcoming analysis, Table 1 also briefly introduces the participant's Hallyu content consumption patterns. In terms of the content consumed, five of them consumed both K-pop and K-dramas. Ester reported having more interest in K-dramas, and Eva had only consumed K-pop-related content until she arrived in South Korea. Finally,

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[18] The names present on the table, and throughout the upcoming chapter's text are pseudonyms.

all participants had been consuming Hallyu content for more than two years. Most of the participants (four of them) started consuming Hallyu content in 2016. Hugo started in 2018, Irene had been consuming such content since 2010, and Natalia reported having developed an interest in Hallyu content during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

Despite my best efforts, the sample has both a gender, age, and location bias, as six out of seven informants were Seoul-based, female, and in their 20s. While this limit the findings of this project in the sense that they primarily collect the Seoul-based Spanish young female's imagination of South Korea; at the same time this is also a reflection of the profile of Hallyu content consumers in Spain. Deltell and Folgar (2020), in their study on the Hallyu in Spain, found out that the most common Hallyu content consumer in Spain was female and young. Further research needs to shed light on the imagination of South Korea across gender and age, as well as the different changes in its imagination across South Korea's non-Seoul-based universities.

## 5.3   The role of the researcher.

Reflexivity is a methodological concern widely considered in qualitative research, which entails the self-reflection and acknowledgment of the researcher's positionality and how that may affect both the research process and findings (Berger, 2015; Ergunl and Erdemi, 2010). Due to my position as a Spanish Hallyu content consumer pursuing migration in South Korea, my positionality as a researcher, in this case, can be labelled as such of an "insider" (Berger, 2015). Berger (2015) discusses the advantages of such a position like "easier entrée, a head starts in knowing about the topic and understanding nuanced reactions of participants"; but also, its challenges, which he calls "the risk of blurring boundaries", of imposing our values or biases on the research project, especially on the interviewing process.

Most importantly, Ergunl and Erdemi (2010) encourage researchers to take their insider-outsider positions as an opportunity rather than a challenge. Indeed, throughout this research project, I understood my positionality as an advantage rather than a challenge and made the best effort throughout the research project to maximize its benefits, while also acknowledging its limitations. The implications and techniques of this methodological perspective will be unveiled in the following section that will describe the interviewing process, as I will dissect how I benefited from the familiarity shared with the informants throughout the interview process, and how I tackled the bias this might have created.

It is important to disclose that although I did not have a personal relation with the informants during the first set of interviews, I further interacted with some of the participants during my stay in South Korea, which might have influenced the answers they gave me in the second round of interviews.  However, my perception is that I got more complete, unconstrained answers the closer the bond I had with the interviewee. In Spain, Hallyu content consumers are a minority, consumers of alternative media flow, and it has been reported that they suffer from discrimination due to this (Yoon et al. 2020). Therefore, the closer the bond, the more enhanced by "insiderness" was, the more unconstrained answers I got.

Although I prepared myself as an interviewee as much as possible before the interviews started, my lack of experience at interviewing affected the process. As the interviewing process for this research was also a learning process for me on itself, the data collected through it was affected by that. For instance, during the early interviews, I realized that informants were worried to give me a "by-the-book" answer, instead of their own, subjective perception. In this sense, sometimes, they would be hesitant to answer as they felt that they did not have enough theoretical knowledge to talk about a certain topic. To avoid this, I added a disclaimer at the beginning of the interview: I told them that there was no right or wrong answer and that I welcomed their opinions no matter whether it was correct or not. After this, all the participants seemed much more comfortable and decisive when answering my questions. These kinds of novice mistakes affected the interviewing process in the sense that I got better responses the more interviews I did.

## 5.4   The interviewing process.

Interviews are face-to-face questioning aimed at achieving as much information as possible regarding a topic that cannot be observed otherwise (Gideon, 2012, p 110). As the objective of the research question is to learn more about the informant's personal perceptions of South Korea, in-depth interviews were the most suitable data collection method. Following this purpose, the interviews were organized in two rounds: one at the beginning of the academic semester, between the 30th of August and 10th of September of 2022, and another one at the end, between the 5th of December and 15th of December of 2022.  This structure allowed the collection of the participant's perceptions about South Korea before and after a 4-month residency period there. The first set of interviews aimed at gathering the informant's perceptions about South Korea before they had a continued exposure to South Korea, and the second round, at recording shifts in the imagination after a 4-month student mobility period.

Additionally, the first interview round had exploratory purposes due to the novelty of this kind of research in this particular population group.

The informant's responses were audio-recorded and transcribed thereafter. The interviews were conducted and transcribed in Spanish, the native language of both the participants and I. Six of the interviews were conducted in-person in Seoul, and one of them online, through the platform Zoom. Before any of the participants were interviewed or agreed to be interviewed, all of them received and signed an explanatory form that contained a detailed but easily understandable account of the nature and purpose of the research, what the interviewing process would entail, associated risks, and privacy considerations, as well as a throughout stress that that they could withdraw from the process as well as not answer any questions at any time, for any reason, and without any explanation it can be seen in the Information Sheet included on the Appendix 5. To obtain the informants' informed consent to participate in this research project, this information sheet was sent at least two weeks before the agreed interview date. Then, their informed consent was recorded formally through the Informed Consent Formed included in Appendix 4. that was sent after the informants had had time to read the information sheet, days before the interview date. Furthermore, I verbally reiterated some aspects of the Information Sheet right before the interview, especially to ensure that they knew that they could refrain from answering, stop the interview, or stop participating, at any time.

The in-person interviews were conducted in a café of the choice of the informant, or the interviewee when requested by the informant. The interviews lasted between 50 minutes and 1 hour in the first round, and in the second round, around 40 to 50 minutes. Initially, all the interviews were intended to be face-to-face, but Raquel, the Incheon-based participant had to be interviewed online. Even though face-to-face was the preferred method of interviewing, it encourages rapport and eliminates technical barriers, the inclusion of this participant was prioritized to also record the experiences of a student migrant outside of Seoul. Indeed, several technical difficulties were experienced with the online interview, which affected the informant's answers, as her interviews were comparatively shorter than the in-person ones.

The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured way. Lune and Berg (2017, p. 67) refers to semi-structured interviews, as an interview type that falls in the middle of a spectrum that goes from standardized (or structured) to unstandardized (non-structured) interviews. Structured interviews involve the presence of a pre-fixed questionnaire incepted before the

interview session that the interviewer shall follow strictly throughout the interview process, while non-structure interviews give freedom and flexibility to the interviewer to come up with questions as the interview develops, without the presence of pre-fixed questionnaires (Lune and Berg, 2017). Within this spectrum, highly structured interviews allow the researcher to gather organized information, which is convenient for stricter comparative purposes, however, the formal nature of the interview might constrain the answers of the informant (Gideon, 2012, p 111). Highly unstructured interviews enhance the informality of the interview and provide the opportunity to get more unconstrained answers from the informant, but obstacles the possibility to pursue comparative endeavours among interviewees, or interview rounds (Gideon, 2012, p.112).

Among these interview types, a semi-structured interview type, that combines the flexibility of unstructured interviews, with the presence of a structured, but adaptable outline that has to be followed across interviewees and interview rounds, was chosen due to two main reasons. The first one is related to the explorative purposes of this research project, and the organization of the interviews in two rounds. Because of this, the chosen interviewing model needed to have room for flexibility, to enhance the appearance of unforeseen topics, while still maintaining a certain level of structure that would allow making comparisons across interviews and interview rounds. Secondly, semi-structured interviews were chosen to keep the informality of the questioning process, while keeping the above-mentioned structure for comparisons among interview rounds. The research question of this project requires information about the subjective perceptions and experiences of students, so it was a priority that they felt as comfortable as possible so they would be more willing to freely share their opinions, however, comparing the informant's perceptions at the beginning, and the end of the studies, was also important. Allowing flexibility for exploration, and informality to obtain unconstrained answers, while maintaining a structure for comparative purposes, are precisely strengths of using semi-structured interviews (Lune and Berg, 2017, Gideons, 2012).

Indeed, this interview type choice enabled me to fully benefit from the potential of being an insider to the community of Spanish Hallyu content consumers who pursue student migration in South Korea. By keeping a flexible structure, and the informality this creates, the objective was to make the interview feel like a conversation between two peers, who are student migrants and Hallyu enthusiasts and share similar experiences, and hobbies. Consequently, the questionnaire was also built to maximize the benefits of this kind of interview, and my positionality as a researcher. Firstly, the questions were written and delivered in Spanish,

both my native tongue and that of the interviewees. Secondly, the language of the questionnaire used throughout the interviewing process was relaxed and informal, to enhance the familiarity between me and the interviewee, and so that informants could comfortably express themselves, also with idioms, and slang. Thirdly, the first section of the interview was composed of a set of warm-up questions, or throwaway questions, intended for the interviewee to relax (Lune and Berg, 2017, p. 75), and to establish the informal tone of the interview.

Semi-structure interviews, nonetheless, need to have a certain level of structure, although adaptable and flexible. In the case of this research project, this was reflected in the presence of an outline of questions the informant's perceptions on South Korea that I aimed to follow throughout all interviews, and interview rounds. This set of questions was repeated both in the first and second rounds of interviews. However, instead of following it strictly, the order of questioning and the phrasing of the questions attended to the flow of the conversation and the responses of the informant. In addition, if the informant had brought up the topic before I asked, I did not ask the question twice. In appendixes 1 and 2, there is a sketch of how this set of questions looked like. As you can see there, in my best effort to avoid imposing my views on the flow of the conversation and the informant's answers (Lune and Berg, 2015), these questions related to the informant's imagined South Korea merely introduced general topics in the spirit of achieving the highest level of neutrality possible in the questions. For example, "How do you imagine South Korean woman?" "How do imagine students in South Korea" or, "How do you think working in South Korea is like?".

The first, and second questionnaires, nonetheless, had differences because based on the answers provided by the informants on the first round of interviews, I added new questions to the second round to focus on interesting, unforeseen aspects that I had detected in the first round of interviews, especially to their social-media consumption patterns related to Hallyu and SMI. Furthermore, the first questionnaire contained extensive questions about their Hallyu (mostly K-pop and K-drama) consumption patterns that were not repeated on the second round of interviews as the data had already been gathered. However, I ensured that these questions were repeated among informants in a similar fashion than explained in the previous paragraph: adapting the order of the questioning, and the phrasing of it to the flow of the conversation.

The informants were generally very happy to answer my questions extensively, to the point that many times they went off-topic. Gideon (2012, p.112) warns researchers that one of the risks of lowly structured interviews is that the informants might talk about things that are not relevant to your research question. Although this will make the transcribing process more demanding, I was not very strict on sticking to the topic due to the exploratory nature of the first round of interviews, as I wanted to benefit from the flexibility of a non-structured questionnaire as much as possible. Besides, one of the biggest advantages of non-structured interviews is that researchers might detect topics that they had not previously envisaged, but surface through informal conversations (Lune and Berg, 2017; Gideon, 2012). Indeed, during the first round of interviews, I found many unexpected topics and themes, which I looked at more in-depth throughout the second round of interviews.

Lune and Berg (2012, p. 81) talks about evasion tactics which are a "word, phrase, or gesture that expresses to another participant that no further discussion of a specific issue is desired". During the interviewing process, I learned not only to maneuver around these tactics but also to be able to gather information from what the informants were more hesitant to talk about. For example, my informants were often hesitant to directly reveal that they were fans of either K-pop, K-dramas, or any other form of South Korean popular culture. To overcome this, I avoided using this term and asked instead about consumption patterns, which groups they enjoy listening to, or what their favorite songs are, and questions they seemed eager to answer. However, I also learned from evasion itself: literature on fandom studies suggests that people tend to reject the label of fan due to its negative associations (Pearson, 2007).

This is supported by the reported societal rejection experienced by Spanish Hallyu content consumers (Yoon et al. 2020; Deltell and Folgar, 2020). Attending to this literature, this is a factor I bore in mind during the interview and analysis process. In order to avoid the evasion techniques this caused as much as possible, the term "fan" or "fandom" was avoided throughout the interview and used my personal experience as a Hallyu enthusiast myself to direct the conversation and phrase the questions in a way that would make the informants more comfortable to talk about Hallyu-related information they would not with an outsider. To further ensure the avoidance of evasion techniques, and to get more unconstrained answers, attending to my own experience, as well as the reported emerging negative connotations of Hallyu consumers as "obsessive Korea fans" emerging online (KOFICE, 2023, p. 143), direct questions about the sources of their informant's imaginaries were mostly avoided so they would not feel interrogated, or their judgment questioned because of being

Hallyu enthusiasts. Moreover, our shared, simultaneous experiences as exchange students in South Korea also functioned as a vehicle for building a better rapport with my informants and enhanced my intuition to know how to fruitfully engage in a conversation with my informants about exchange student's experiences, and imagination of the destination nation.

## 5.5   Analytical methods: thematic content analysis.

The responses of these participants were processed through the lens of qualitative thematic analysis, which aims at identifying analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data (Braun and Clarke, 2017, p.3). Firstly, this method was chosen due to its qualitative nature, which aims at generating in-depth knowledge grounded in human experience (Sandelowski, 2004), an objective aligned with the purposes of the research question. Collaterally, qualitative methods were also chosen due to the necessity of increasing the literature on the imaginaries of Korea of Hallyu content consumers through new empirical and analytical procedures that provide in-depth knowledge rather than quantitative knowledge.

Thematic analysis was chosen due to its flexible, but systematic focus on identifying themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al. 2017). Rather than other qualitative approaches, like content analysis, thematic analysis was chosen due to its less strict coding procedures and its focus on in-depth knowledge rather than the frequency of appearance of certain words or statements (Braun and Clarke, 2006), more suitable for the reduced sample size of this project and its qualitative aims. Furthermore, thematic qualitative analysis can generate unanticipated insights and can highlight similarities and differences across the dataset (Braun and Clarke, 2006), characteristics that align with the exploratory and comparative purposes of this project. Additionally, it is also a good method for novice researchers, like me (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al. 2017).

Following the guidelines for thematic analysis of Braun and Braun and Clarke (2006) and the coding considerations of Saldana (2008), the analysis was undertaken as follows. The theme-building process that will be described afterward was repeated twice: one for the first round of interviews, and another for the second round of interviews.  The first part of the analysis was undertaken during the transcription endeavor. According to Bran and Clarke (2006, p.87), immersion in the data, which involves repeated reading of the data in an active way, is the first key step of a good thematic qualitative analysis and can be undertaken during the transcription of verbal data. The transcription of the audio recordings was undertaken in the best effort to maintain the highest level of verbal, and non-verbal accuracy. Throughout the

transcription, notes regarding initial ideas about prospective patterns and interesting topics were also taken.

After familiarization with the dataset, the second phase involves the initial coding endeavor of the data. Codes are "the most basic segment, or element, of the raw that of information that can be assessed in a meaningful way regarding the phenomenon" (Boyatzis, in Braun and Clarke, 2006). Due to the inductive, exploratory aims of this research project this coding stage was data-driven, pursued without any theory-driven, pre-established codes in mind. For this purpose, the transcripts were examined one by one, and different statements made by the respondents were gathered in a separate file and assigned a code. Then, I identified themes among the initial codes. For this purpose, the codes were gathered on a separate file and were reorganized and revised several times to identify to produce a "thematic map" (Braun and Clarke, p. 91, 2006) that included the initial themes and sub-themes. This thematic map was composed by the codes organized in Word files: if there was a common pattern among codes, it was gathered under the same table, with a tentative theme title. As suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) no code was discharged at this stage, and miscellaneous codes without an apparent common pattern were also gathered together for future reconsideration. Furthermore, those themes related to the imagined South Korea were also organized into topical categories based on the informants' responses. For example, codes related to "labor world in South Korea" or "gender inequality in South Korea" were listed to each other to facilitate the overarching theme-identifying process.

Within this stage an extra analytical layer was added, which is kind of information source was mentioned, if any, by the informants regarding each of their perceptions of South Korea. In order to do this, first, an abbreviation was attributed to each of the informants' pseudonyms and assigned to their corresponding, refined code (Maite – M, Irene – I, Hugo – H, Eva – Ev, Ester – E, Natalia – N, Raquel – R). The informant's abbreviation was added by the code if it had been present in their responses. Secondly, based on the informant's responses, a list of all the mentioned sources of the informant's imagined South Korea was created. These sources were mentioned, mostly brought up by the informants, as an explanation of why they had that perception about South Korea. Very rarely, I asked myself where they had learned about that specific perception about South Korea. The sources mentioned were: 1) K-pop (blue) 2) K-dramas (green) 3) SMI's content (yellow) 4) Korean movies (purple) 8) Books (orange) 9) Friends (pink) 10) University studies (gray). Each source was assigned a colour code, and if mentioned, it was added to the corresponding statement's pseudonym code.

An example of this analytical layer, and the overall coding effort will be presented down below in Table 2. In Table 2. you can see how I established the common pattern that South Korea is imagined as a fashionable nation, and this this is mediated mostly by K-pop. For the sake of clarity in face of the format presentation of the thesis, the color coding will be substituted with the source's written name in italics. All the themes were identified in a similar manner.

Table 2. Identification process of the candidate theme "Korea is fashionable."

| Code | Candidate theme |
|---|---|
| Korea has innovative fashion (I, M [*K-pop*], N, E, H, Ev [*K-pop*], E)<br><br>Korea has diverse fashion (M[*K-pop*])<br><br>Korea has extravagant fashion (I [K-pop], H)<br><br>Korean people are vert well-dressed (I [*K-pop*] H, E, N)<br><br>Korea people are is fashionable, (I[*SMI content*], H, E[*K-pop*])<br><br>Korea has many young, well-dressed, fashionable people (I[*K-pop*]). | KOREA IS FASHIONABLE |

After the identification of the candidate themes, a process of theme refinement is necessary to eliminate themes that do not have enough data to sustain them, themes that need to be separated, and themes that need to be merged (Braun and Clarke, p.91). In this thesis project, the refinement stage was pursued on two levels: by revising the initial codes and extracts, followed by a revision of the entire dataset for the purpose of re-coding. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidelines, the overarching aim of this revision was to make sure that the themes are coherent within themselves and with the entire dataset. A new thematic map was produced at the end of the stage, that included the newly formed themes, with the codes reflecting the informant's perceptions, and if necessary, the colour-coded source, gathered in tables on a Word file, similarly than in Table 2. Following this I pursued one last transcript, and code revision in seek of clarity regarding the essence of each previously identified theme, and the find the narrative that connects each to hem. Furthermore, I considered the need to

add sub-themes to explain better broader and more complex themes. According to Braun and Clarke (2006) at the end of this last process, the researcher is finally able to clearly define the findings' themes.

The outcomes that resulted from this analytical effort will be discussed in the following section. For this purpose, quotes from the transcription of the informant's responses will be included in English, translated by the author of this thesis project from the original language of the interviews, Spanish. As the extracts lack the full context of the conversation, clarifications will be added under brackets in between the text of the quotation. In the best effort to tackle the loss of information during the translation process from Spanish to English, other clarifications regarding the translation of the text to English might be included too, under brackets. Furthermore, terms that were untranslatable to English will be included in Spanish in cursive font, and a clarification of the term will be included under brackets thereafter.

# 6  FINDINGS

In the following section, the full unveiling of the findings will be discussed to provide the answer to this project's research questions. Research question a) "how do Spanish Hallyu content consumers imagine South Korea before and after a 4-month student exchange in South Korea?" sought to test whether Hallyu content consumers possessed the reported positive imagination of South Korea and whether this positive imagination caused struggles after discovering the realities of the place. The findings will showcase how in the case of these Spanish Hallyu content consumers, the informant's imagination of South Korea was not uniformly positive or idealized. Instead, negative imaginaries about South Korea coexisted in their imagination alongside a perception of South Korea as a "cool" country. Among the negative imaginaries, the most salient pattern was a negative imagination of South Korea as an intolerant nation with foreigners, a content mediated through SMI content consumption. Moreover, this multi-faceted outlook on South Korea existed at the beginning of their exchange semester and persisted until the end of their stay in the country, indicating that there was no overall strong juxtaposition between their imagination and the realities. As an exception, the greatest juxtaposition between the imagined South Korea and the realities there was found within a set of imaginaries mediated through SMI content consumption.

Research question b) "how was this imagined South Korea mediated by Hallyu?" sought to dissect more in-depth how being a Hallyu content consumer impacted the construction of this imagination. Within the social mediascape of Hallyu informants considered SMI content as the most influential mediating factor of truthful information about South Korea; while K-pop and K-drama content was considered a source of romanticized, distorted information about South Korea. Despite this, both K-pop, K-drama, as well as SMI content were the most influential mediators for the construction of these Spanish content consumers imagined South Korea. In relevant aspects of their imagined livelihoods as foreigners in South Korea, SMI was the most influential factor instead of other kinds of Hallyu-related content.

The in-depth discussion of these findings as follows in the next sections will be guided through the unexpected findings that the interview's analysis showcased, which are the important inference of SMI content as a mediator of the student's imagined South Korea, the extensive presence of negative imaginations of South Korea despite Hallyu content consumption, the absence of a big contrast between their imagined South Korea, and the experienced one and the informants expressed distrust over K-pop and K-dramas as

information sources about South Korea . First, I will discuss how these informants interacted with the social mediascape of Hallyu, the content that circulates there, and its relationship with the negative imagination of South Korea. Secondly, I will discuss the imagined South Korea that resulted from this, and how it is impacted by a period of exchange studies in South Korea.

## 6.1 Distrust in Hallyu, and trust in social media influencers' content: the romanticized vs. the real South Korea.

To the informants, the enjoyment of K-pop and K-dramas did not necessarily mean that what they saw on the screen matched their imagination of South Korea. Even more interestingly, the informants showcased resistance towards believing the discourses about South Korea portrayed in K-pop and in K-dramas, despite reporting big enthusiasm for Hallyu content. This was a pattern present in all the informant's responses, and we can see an example in the following interview extract:

> ESTER (30.08.2022): I personally love K-dramas. But…well… You see, this kind of thing are… well they are a lie! That does not happen in real life. But I like them [the K-dramas], and they always have me hooked.

In this realm, the informants stressed how there was a difference between a "romanticized South Korea" and a "real South Korea", the first found in K-dramas and K-pop content, and the latter in what they considered a set of "more reliable information sources". Consequently, content produced by the South Korean cultural industry is perceived as an unreliable source of information about South Korea, as it is received as a body of scripted content aiming at selling an embellished image of South Korea to the viewer. Similarly, other informants frequently used the word "romanticized" or "idealized" or "exaggerated" South Korea, when referring to K-pop, or K-drama content. For example, when inquired about her perceptions of South Korea in August, Natalia replied as follows:

> NATALIA (07.09.2022): I divide it in two. The "romanticized Korea", like K-dramas, or K-pop music videos. But there is also a Korea, which is more real, which you can find, for example in Korean movies like *Parasite*, *Minari*…well *Minari* is not Korean but…There I could see a part of Korea without a filter, which is more…real if you can say it like that. *Memories of a Murderer*, *Train to Busan*, all these kinds of movies.

However, if K-pop and K-drama content is what defines the romanticized South Korea, what are these set of sources, that define the "real Korea"? As Natalia expresses above, for her, the real South Korea can be found in movies, a type of content scarcely mentioned both by Natalia and the rest of the students as a source of information about South Korea, but that can also be considered part of the wider Hallyu phenomenon (Park, 2021). Other sources mentioned by the informants as more reliable sources than K-dramas or K-pop were social media CONTENT, university studies, Korean movies, documentaries, and books. However, despite this varied pool of sources of the "real South Korea", there was only one source that all students without exception mentioned very frequently throughout the interview: social media content.  In fact, 5 out of 7 students, including Natalia, reported social media content as their greatest source of information to shape their imagination of South Korea. Within all the social media applications mentioned as sources of their imagination of South Korea, Instagram was the most mentioned the most mentioned social media app. We can see an example on Maite's response:

> MAITE (06.09.2022): My main source of information about Korea was Instagram. I also watch a lot of K-dramas however, I am always of the opinion that you cannot really trust what others are telling you. You cannot really trust the image that others want to give you…for example, a Korean friend who was an exchange student at my university [in Spain] told me: "Before going to Spain I watched the TV show *Élite*[19] and I thought everyone was having sex and consuming drugs all the time in Spain" And I told her that obviously, that was not true. The same goes for K-dramas.

In Maite's response above we can see how the reliability of social media content is connected with K-pop and K-drama consumption, as the trust of one kind of content is expressed against the distrust of the other one. This is also very well illustrated on Irene's response when asked about her main source of information about South Korea:

> IRENE (10.09.2022): It would be Instagram. I mean, because K-dramas and such… as with any other show, one cannot fully trust it. I mean... K-dramas are fiction, and therefore, I could not really trust them. I mean, I watch a lot of K-dramas, but I cannot consider them as a real source of information…. because it is being told by Koreans themselves.

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[19] Spanish Netflix TV show that was released in 2018. The plot follows a murder mystery at a high school in Madrid.

There was only two students Raquel (09.09.2022) and Hugo (13.09.2022), who did not refer to social media as their most important information source about South Korea, as they reported university teachings and Hugo, documentaries, as their main source of information of "real Korea". Nonetheless, throughout the interviews they both presented a similar pattern to the rest of the respondents in terms of the influence SMI content on their imagination of South Korea, which indicates that they might have underestimated, or sometimes wanted to conceal, the importance of social media content for shaping their imagination of South Korea. We can see this in Raquel's response:

> RAQUEL (09.09.2022): Of course, I already knew that it was not going to be like a K-drama. That is why I did further research by myself. […] My main source of information about South Korea was what I had been taught in university. Then, as I wanted to know more about South Korean society, I watched a lot of vlogs[20], mostly on YouTube, of people who tell their experiences in South Korea.

This becomes more plausible as this sort of attitudes were also present in other respondents. Often, they talked about their imagination about South Korea through expressions like "I have been told that…" "I heard someone say that…" "People say that…" "Many foreigners say that…", etc. This could indicate that a peer, a South Korean friend, or a person who knows about South Korea has personally told them this information. However, when asked more details about who told them this information, in all cases, they reported that they had seen it on social media.

> NATALIA (11.12.2022): [referring to her perceptions described before] Well, I… had been told about these things, and now I was able to see it with my own eyes. Yeah, I had been told about this, however, I was not sure what to think about this before coming here [to Korea].

> ME (11.12.2022): I see! Did you know people who had been to South Korea before coming here?

> NATALIA (11.12.2022): No, no, not at all! Well… I learned about it through YouTube channels and influencers. I did not know any Korean people before coming here.

As stated on the methodology section, the I aimed at not overusing inquiries about the sources of the imaginaries, so the informants did not feel like their statements were being doubted or

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[20] Vlog is a shortening of the term "video blog" a popular Internet term to describe videos that SMI upload showing their daily lives to their veiwerss.

questioned, and therefore, this part of the analysis is limited as the I did not ask the informants about the sources of their opinions every time, they used this expression. However, this pattern provides strong grounds to think that the influence of social media content, as we will see in the previous section, had even greater importance than what I was able to record through the interviews. A factor that will be fully dissected in the next section is what kind of social media content are the informants referring, which is SMI content about South Korea on Instagram, mostly, but also TikTok, or YouTube.

At this point, it is important to bear in mind the following factor: as established in section 3.2.2: Spaniards face societal rejection due to their consumption of South Korean popular culture (Yoon et al.2020, Deltell and Folgar, 2020). This could indicate that the informant's statement of distrust in K-pop and K-drama content as a source of information about South Korea is an attempt detach themselves from the "Koreaboo" label, as described by KOFICE (2023, p. 143). Indeed, throughout the interview's students rejected their identity as Hallyu fans and described themselves as "K-pop listeners" or "enjoyers" or "K-drama" watchers rather than K-pop, or K-drama fans.

> NATALIA (11.12.2022): Well, when you say that you listen to K-pop, or BTS, they laugh at you because they say: who are these suckers? If you would listen to music from the US, this wouldn't happen. Or they say "chin, chon, chin" [racial slur to pejoratively imitate Chinese speaking]. It's crazy that when I said that I was going to South Korea there were a lot of reactions like… why do you want to go there… why the hell would you fancy going there?

This might have led them to exaggerate their distrust of K-pop and K-dramas, and indeed, informants did not completely disregard this kind of content as a mediator for their imagined Sout Korea, as it will be dissected in upcoming sections.

What is important in this realm, no matter how unconsciously might have K-pop, K-dramas, or SMI content affected their perceptions about South Korea, are these two interrelated themes found in the informant's responses : 1) in the first round of interviews informants interacted with the SMI content about South Korea as a more reliable source of "real" information about South Korea in a comparative way with Hallyu content 2) both in the first and second round of interviews content social media content about South Korea was a key factor in shaping certain imaginaries about South Korea.  However, what kind of social media

content were they talking about? Also, why did they not trust K-pop and K-dramas, and how did that affect their imagined South Korea?

### 6.1.1 A qualitative approach to the configuration of the social mediascape of Hallyu.

This unexpected finding which presented above, was tentatively gathered during the first round of interviews, before the second round had already been conducted. Aiming to gather more information about the respondents' social-media consumption patterns related to Hallyu, their expressed distrust towards K-pop and K-dramas, and the mediated construction of their imagination about South Korea, the second interview questionnaire was rethought to discover what the informants meant when talking about social media apps as a source of information about South Korea. Understanding factors like what kind of content the participants like to watch, how often they do it, and which apps they prefer will shed light on the overall impact of being a Hallyu content consumer on the respondent's imagination about South Korea, and what kind of content circulates on social mediascape of Hallyu. The following subsection will discuss the findings of this endeavor.

Table 3. presents the data collected regarding the participants' social media consumption behavior related to content about South Korea. To analyze their online media-sharing app usage patterns, the mobile phone was the only device considered, as respondents reported watching social media content mainly on their phones. Other devices like laptops, when accounted for leisure purposes, were mainly used to watch TV shows and movies on streaming platforms. Notably, this information was gathered during December 2023, which was when students were still in South Korea, and they all reported that they had been using social media less than they normally do in their daily lives in Spain.

Table 3. is based on the student's disclosure of their mobile phone usage time, which also indicates the most used apps on average. To deliver this information, 5 of the participants used a mobile phone app that records this information daily, while 2 of them (whose names are marked in Table 2 with italics) did not have that app on their phones and replied with their estimations. This might have affected their responses as, compared to the rest of the participants, their reported social media consumption time was significantly lower. Additionally, I asked them to estimate how much of the content consumed in social media posts is South Korea-related.

Students who did not have/did not want to disclose their mobile usage measuring app on their phones reported spending around 2 hours and 30 minutes on the phone per day. Those who had the app spent an average of 7 hours (6 hours and 53 minutes) on the phone per day. Taking out messaging apps like WhatsApp[21], the most used apps were Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok. Participants perceived that the daily content about South Korea consumed on those apps ranged from 30% at the lowest, to 40% or 50%, and Irene reported the highest percentage: 90%. This suggests that a great portion of the time that they spend on their phones is dedicated to consuming content related to South Korea.

Table 3. Mobile phone usage time and perceived percentage of content about South Korea consumed there (December 2022).

| | |
|---|---|
| **Irene** | Daily average: 7 hours and 37 minutes<br>Most used apps: 1) YouTube 2) Instagram 3) WhatsApp<br>Perceived percentage of content about South Korea in media-sharing apps: 90% |
| **Maite** | Daily average: 7 hours and 46 minutes<br>Most used apps: 1) Instagram 2) Webtoon 3) YouTube<br>Perceived percentage of content about South Korea in media-sharing apps: 50% |
| **Raquel** | Daily average: 9 hours and 18 minutes<br>Most used apps: 1) Instagram 2) YouTube 3) WhatsApp<br>Perceived percentage of content about South Korea in media-sharing apps: 30% |
| *Natalia* | Daily average of mobile usage: 2 hours and 30 minutes<br>Most used apps: Instagram, Twitter, YouTube<br>Perceived percentage of content about South Korea in media-sharing apps: 30% |
| **Ester** | Daily average of mobile usage: 5 hours 12 minutes<br>Most used apps: 1) Tik Tok 2) Instagram 3) Messages<br>Perceived percentage of content about South Korea in media-sharing apps: 50% |
| *Eva* | Perceived daily usage of social media: 2 or 3 hours.<br>Most used apps: TikTok, Instagram. YouTube<br>Perceived percentage of content about South Korea in media-sharing apps: 50% |
| **Hugo** | Daily average mobile phone consumption: 6 hours and 15 minutes.<br>The three most used apps: 1) TikTok 2) WhatsApp 3) Instagram<br>Perceived percentage of content about South Korea in media-sharing apps 30% |

The informants reported that the content they consumed in social media related to South Korea, was of three main kinds:  1) content updated by official accounts of the South Korean entertainment companies, by SMI and/or fans related to K-pop and K-dramas, which account to clips of their favourite stars, interviews, news, memes, funny clips, opinions, and reviews, dance covers, tutorials, music videos … 2) content uploaded by SMI related to South Korea:

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[21] WhatsApp was not considered for the analysis, as the apps that are relevant to the research question are media-sharing apps where content regarding South Korea is spread, rather than messaging apps.

curiosities about South Korea, tips about visiting South Korea, the livelihoods of foreigners and Koreans living in South Korea… According to the responses of the participants, the content creators who uploaded this content were either non-Koreans who have resided or currently reside in South Korea or Koreans who live or have lived in South Korea. These people caught the attention of the informants by spreading their first-hand information or personal experiences about living in South Korea, and advice based on those experiences. As we will see in the following section SMI content was one of the most cited sources that shaped the perceptions of the informants about South Korea.

As we can see, the boundaries between nation branding, fans' participatory culture, the interest of private companies, and SMI are blurred in the social mediascape of Hallyu, and consequently in the informant's minds as well. They spend most of their day on social media, and a big portion of that time is consuming a complex layering of content related to Hally and South Korea, simultaneously. Furthermore, most of their time engaging with Hallyu content and South Korea is not directly related to consuming a K-drama, a song, or a movie, but consuming the constant flow of media, ideas, and news that mixes Hallyu with South Korea in social media. This, in turn, greatly affected the imagination of South Korea in the following areas: their imagination of their possible livelihoods as foreigners in South Korea, and their imagination of South Korea's economy, society, culture, and people.

However, why did the students consider this source as a more reliable one than Hallyu? The findings suggest that the informants established this sense of trust with the content uploaded by influencers on social media, as they perceived them as peers through the process of parasocial identification. Parasocial identification, or interaction, is founded upon the assumption that media viewers use similar cognitive processes to establish relations of friendship and bonding with real-life persons and with media characters (Perse and Rubin, 1988). Due to the lack of other sources of trusted peer information about South Korea, it seems that the informant's perceived the information from SMIs akin to that of shared peer to peer. This might explain why their initial instinct to report these imaginaries, was as if someone, or a friend, had told them, as established in the previous section.

Literature on the decision-making process of student migrants reports that the information shared by peers is one of the most essential (Coletto and Fullin, 2019; Mallet and Hagen-Zanker, 2018; Dekker and Ngbersen, 2014). For example, according to Mallet and Hagen-Zanker, (2018, p170) "it seems that information becomes trustworthy for the migrant when it

is transmitted by known social connections with whom the individual already shares a relationship of  (at least some) trust". Therefore, their migration to South Korea might have also had a role on increasing the reliance on this kind of content. Indeed, some of them, due to the decision of migrate to Sout Korea, reported a conscious decision to search more reliable information about South Korea online, and bumped upon this content online. A good example is Maite's account:

> MAITE (06.09.2022): I mean I mainly started to watch that content when…when I started searching for information because I knew I was going on an exchange to South Korea, so those videos started to pop up on my feed. There is an algorithm out there that starts to constantly push those videos, all the time.

However, other students did not link the consumption of this content to their decision to study in South Korea. Other participants reported a sense of evolution between "just liking K-pop and K-dramas" to "knowing about real Korea", that began when they started consuming videos of people who live in South Korea and "dismantle the idealized image of South Korea", as stated by Hugo:

> HUGO (13.09.2022): The first glimpses [of South Korea] … I got them from the K-dramas. However, this shows idealize South Korea way too much…therefore, as time went by, it is true that most of the things I learned about South Korean society were from videos online. Videos of people that have been here in Korea…Also some documentaries or even some movies, but mainly from those videos of people who live here. These people said, well, there are a lot of myths going around…but this is what actually happens here, [South Korea] is worse than people imagine. I mean, I watched videos of people who dismantle the idealized image of South Korea.

This kind of report aligns with the kind of discourses reported by Lee and Abidin (2022) aiming at showcasing a "more honest" vision of South Korea on YouTube. I would like to highlight in Hugo's words, as he said, "These people said [people who upload videos about their lives in South Korea online], well, there are a lot of myths going around [about South Korea]". This could indicate that the distrust in Hallyu content might have been triggered through the consumption of these discourses on SMI content. Here it is interesting to highlight expressions used by Hugo like "[South Korea] it is worse than people imagine". Who are these people who imagined, as he implies, a better South Korea than it really is? I believe is that Hugo is talking about other Hallyu fans, which could indicate that this content is precisely targeted at Hallyu consumers. Indeed, Lee and Abidin (2023) also demonstrated

how South Korea-related SMI leverage the popularity of Hallyu to attract audience to their videos.

Other informants did not report a conscious decision to start watching this content, and rather they expressed it suddenly "appeared" on their social media feeds. We can see this on Eva's reply when she was inquired about what social media influencers that talk about South Korea she liked to watch:

> EVA (05.09.2022): Well…I don't remember exactly the influencer's names…when I was in Spain watching TikTok…I guess because of what I had been searching on TikTok the algorithm pushed those videos into my feed.

In Eva's case, this could arguably be related with the information cocoons, which are formed because of the increasing ability of individuals to customize their media consumption, especially on the internet and social media (Sunstein, 2006). In the realm of social media, "an information cocoon occurs due to a user's active choices and an algorithm's passive choice. It is what the platforms choose to expose to the user based on expressed interests, tastes, and preferences" (Yu et al. 2022).  These phenomena had already been discussed in the realm of Hallyu by Jin and Yoon, (2016), that argued that the consumption of Hallyu was highly dependent on the algorithmic processes of social media, and sometimes more passive than accounted by Hallyu scholarship focusing on fan's participatory culture. All this could indicate that algorithms pushed up SMI content related to South Korea because of their previous Hallyu consumption, as also reported by Lee and Abidin (2022).

As seen above, the algorithmic processes of social media combined with their already existing interest in Hallyu content consumption seems to have played an important role on their consumption of SMI content related to South Korea. The gap lays on whether it was solely triggered by Hallyu content consumption, or by this factor combined with the decision to pursue student migrations This also creates another gap: is the influence of SMI content in the construction of the imagination of South Korea an isolated phenomena within Hallyu content consumers, or are other student migrants also reached by this content? Further research shall shed light on this matter.

## 6.2 The imagination of South Korea of Spanish Hallyu content consumers throughout student migration.

After having discussed the context in which the imagination of South Korea was mediated, and how this content is perceived by the informants, throughout this section I will discuss what kind of image South Korea this content mediates, and how a 4-month exchange studies experience affected this imagination. In general terms, their imagination of South Korea was paradoxical, both positive and negative at the same time, both at the beginning and the end of their exchange studies. A 4-month exchange studies experience in South Korea did not produce a big contrast between the imagined South Korea and reality, except un in one case: in the imagined relationship between South Koreans and foreigners.

The negative imagination of South Korea unfolded in a two-fold manner, distinguished by two key factors. First, how the respondents perceived these negative aspects of South Korea might affect them (in the first round of interviews) or had affected them (in the second round of interviews); and secondly, by the reconfiguration of these imaginations after the exchange studies period. Against this background, on the one hand, students had a pessimistic vision of South Korea as a stressful, demanding, depressive, conservative, and sexist nation. This was perceived by the respondents as an external reality, as their status as exchange students in South Korea would allow them to not have to deal with them. Then, their exchange studies experience there confirmed this imagination: although they did not experience these aspects first-handily, they witnessed it in other people's lives.

On the other hand, South Korea is imagined as a nation that does not welcome foreigners. To the respondents, this represented an unavoidable reality as they perceived that their physical appearance unescapably distinguishes them as foreigners in South Korea. Before their student migration, this caused feelings of fear and anxiety in sight of possible bad treatment of South Koreans against them. In turn, this was the aspect that had the greatest change after student migration: students reported not having experienced this at all, and described South Korean people in general, as kind and welcoming towards foreigners. Additionally, within the field of the informant's imagination as foreigners in South Korea, there was an additional common theme, only among the female respondents, that was also perceived as an unavoidable reality in the first round of interviews, and which experienced a change (although smaller than in the previous section) after student migration: a negative imagination towards the possible interactions between South Korean men and foreign woman.

On a more positive side, South Korea was perceived as a fashionable, unique, modern nation, with an endearing culture, both traditional and pop culture. South Korea was also imagined as a like-minded nation to Spain, understood inside the sphere of Western influence. In like manner as with most of the negatively imagined aspects of South Korea, these positive imaginaries mostly remained unaltered after student migration. The informants also expressed a positive surprise regarding their experienced Sout Korea, and expressed the wish to establish a long-lasting relationship with South Korea and South Korean culture.

Regarding Hallyu as a mediating force of this imaginaries, the most salient common theme was that SMI content was the key mediating force for the students' imagination of South Korea as an intolerant nation towards foreigners. Notably, this common perception about South Korea was the also most salient, and most mentioned by the informants throughout both rounds of interviews among their varied imaginations about South Korea. SMI content was also an essential mediating force for the negative imaginaries of South Korean men in interaction with foreign woman. K-pop and K-drama were also frequently mentioned as mediators of both positive, and negative imaginaries about South Korea.

### 6.2.1 South Korea imagined through SMI content – "What did I get myself into?".

*6.2.1.1 South Koreans will reject me because I am a foreigner.*

In the first round of interviews, every informant imagined their possible livelihood as foreign student migrants in South Korea in an adverse manner, fearing rejection, and poor treatment from South Koreans. In connection to this kind of imagination, the informants expressed fear in sight of their prospective student migration to South Korea. The formation of these imaginaries was directly connected with the consumption of SMI content within the social mediascape of Hallyu. Those patterns are present in Maite's response.

> MAITE (06.09.2022): I thought that maybe [In Korea] people would push me, or that I was going to be treated as a second-class citizen. Those were my preconceived assumptions, especially because of what people on Instagram were saying. […] I thought…what did I get myself into? I mean…I still wanted to go to Korea, but I was thinking… what did I get myself into?"

As we can see in Maite's statement, this kind of imaginaries caused her to feel fear towards moving to South Korea. Indeed, this was also a common pattern among students, who expressed sentiments of anxiety and fear over their future interactions with South Koreans based on what they had seen in social media, mostly in SMI content.

NATALIA (07.09.2022): There was a moment before I moved to Korea when I got a little bit scared. I saw a YouTube video that talked about…it's a silly video…but still… it talked about how in Korea there are certain clubs that do not allow foreigners inside. Then, in the comments most of the people were saying that South Korea is a xenophobic country. All the comments! I got scared. I thought: is Korea really like that? […] I was not sure whether to trust those comments, but then I saw other videos of students on social media sharing similar experiences [in South Korea] and...

Overall, this rejection towards foreigners was perceived to be present in all strata of South Korean society. However, the respondents stressed one group of people that, in their imagination, was more likely to feel rejection towards foreigners more intensely, or to exert such rejection in a more exaggerated manner: the South Korean elderly. In this regard, some of them made stronger statements, such as imagining the South Korean elderly as racist. It is important to denote that, as the interviews were undertaken when the participants had been in for some days in South Korea, some informants like already stated that they had changed their minds. For example, Maite stated that:

MAITE (06.09.2022): I imagined them [the Korean elderly] as "extreme hate towards foreigners". That was my image, you know? A great deal of hate. And what I found here is… I mean note every single person is an angel. However, among the few interactions I have had with them so far, they have been good, super good.

Indeed, after the process of migration, these emotions changed and imaginations about South Korea changed dramatically. In the second round of interviews respondents reported a feeling into a feeling of gratefulness about the treatment bestowed to them by South Koreans, against the initial imagination they had about it:

RAQUEL (02.12.2022): In general, [Korean people] were very kind to me. I thought that because of being a foreigner, I would be treated badly. Or that because of being a foreigner they were going to think, oh my god, such an annoying person. However, they helped me more because they knew I was a foreigner. They were really nice to me!

Therefore, after the exchange studies period. South Korean people, and the elderly were perceived under much more positive light. For example, informants shared multiple experiences in which they had received helped, treats, or kind treatment from the South Korean people, and elderly. Poor treatment to them was perceived as an exception, in Natalia's (11.12.2022) words, as something "you can find everywhere in the world, and not

only in South Korea", and not anymore as a sign of an inherent racism in South Korea. Additionally, there was also a sense of pity because of having worried so much about this before their studies there:

> MAITE (08.12.2022): Those things they said about people: "Ajeossis" and "ajummas" [22] [Korean elderly] will treat you terribly because you are foreigners. Well, not at all! You see? I am not saying there is not rude people in here, but there are rude people in every place in the world. And well, "ajummas" will push you, but they push me, and so they push everyone else. They are not pushing me because I am a foreigner. On the contrary, I had situations with older people, which were precisely the people against which I had been warned because I was a foreigner, and they are very conservative, they will treat you badly; and not all! They were lovely to me!

Interestingly, the contrast between the discourses of certain SMI about South Korea online, and their own positive personal experiences there, led some informants to feel deceived by them. For example, as we will see in the extract down below, Maite (06.09.2022) expressed discontent when asked if she still consumed South Korea-related content produced by SMI. Similarly, Irene (04.12.2022) showcased anger towards SMI who talk about South Korea online, stating that "I think that they are quite stupid, I do not like any of them I think that their target audience is an audience that has no fucking idea about South Korea, so they tell a lot of lies". Alternatively, Natalia (11.12.2022), despite not expressing a strong discontent towards SMI content related to South Korea like Maite and Irene (04.12.2022), reported having lost interest of consuming it expressing that, "[…] as I was able to experience it myself, so I do not need others to tell me about it".

> MAITE (08.12.2022): No, no. I do not consume it, not at all [SMI content about South Korea]. I mean, from time to time I still get it recommended in my feed. But I don't even bother clicking it. Because… what are they going to tell me? If I find someone saying that their experience [in South Korea] was a piece of shit… which it might have happened to them, okay? But will I get mad when I hear it? Yes. […] There was an Instagram girl who said, "During night outs in Hongdae you will be groped everywhere" Well, no. That did not happen in my experience…You, see? Those are the things that drive me mad.

Before moving on, it is important to highlight an additional pattern. Students imagined South Korea as a conservative nation, a trait that causes the racist attitudes of its inhabitants, but it is

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[22] Here, Maite is using, as it has been popularized on the Internet among groups of K-pop and K-drama fans, the Korean word "아저씨" (ajeossi); and "아줌마" (ajumma) mixing it with the Spanish language by and adding the "s" at the end to imply the plural form.

also mentioned related to other aspects, such as gender inequality, as it will be developed in section 5.2.2. It is not that clear whether it relates to SMI content as much as the above-escribed imaginaries were, but does have a connection as we can see in Raquel's response:

> RAQUEL (09.09.2022): I have informed myself before coming here, I read a lot of things before coming here… these things that they are hard-working, studious and… quite conservative. Everywhere, everyone is telling you that: No, they are super, super conservative! I mean, you read a book, you watch a Vlog, and they say that.

### 6.2.1.2 Do not trust South Korean men.

Added to the rejection from South Korean society, female informants also reported a concern while imagining their possible livelihoods in South Korea as female foreigners. They reported wariness towards interacting with South Korean man, and a negative imagination about their attitudes with foreign woman in romantic relationships. Additionally, in like manner with the imaginations described in the previous section, these kinds of perceptions were mediated through SMI content uploaded on social media. According to these informants, this content seems to be composed by the experiences of female migrants in South Korea dating South Korean man and partying in South Korea.

For instance, Maite (06.09.2022), Eva (05.09.2022), Irene (10.09.2022), and Ester (30.08.2022) expressed fear of experiencing uncomfortable situations when interacting with South Korean men while having a night out during their exchange studies. An example of this kind of pattern is found in Maite's response when asked about her imagination of South Korean man. Furthermore, she expresses how her imagination has been mediated by SMI content updated on Instagram by female influencers that have experienced dating life in South Korea:

> MAITE (06.09.2022): I thought that, because of being a woman, and a foreigner, they will consider me as barely more than… a slut. I have heard many times that thing of…, you know, that thing of "do you want to eat ramen?". And also… all those things that Instagram girls talk about regarding their experiences with Korean men, that these experiences were really bad until they learned their lesson. So, my perception was… be careful. That was my image. Do not trust them.

Maite is referring to the South Korean expression of "라면 먹고 갈래?" [Shall we go and eat ramen?]. In the interview extract, Maite uses it as a euphemism for "do you want to have sex?", as an expression she might hear during nights out in South Korea. Against the

framework of the rise in counter "gukbbong" discourses (Lee and Abidin, 2022), there are many posts warning foreign women going to South Korea to "not be fooled" by this kind of expression, as it is a hidden invitation to have sex[23]. However, "라면 먹고 갈래?" is a rather humorous expression, a common K-drama trope, rather than a serious catchphrase (Sikarskie, et al. 2022, p.91). As Maite's perception was based on SMI content, this kind of example could showcase the cultural misunderstandings that the counter- "gukbbong" discourse can create within the social mediascape of Hallyu.

Another example can be found in a common perception shared by Irene (10.09.2022), Maite (06.09.2022), and Eva (05.09.2022) who reported wariness about embarking on romantic relationships with South Korean man due to the perception that they see foreign women solely as sexual objects.  We can see an example in Eva's response, when asked about her imagination of South Korean men:

> EVA (05.09.2022): I have the feeling, and I think that it is quite right, that you won't find the love of your life here [in Korea], but a one-night stand, probably yes. I do not know how the nightlife will turn up to be here at the end but… Yes, I think they just want sex.

This kind of imagination of South Korean men adds a new layer to previous studies undertaken with female Hallyu audiences regarding their perception of South Korean men. Lee (2020), in her qualitative study of Hallyu female fans that pursue tourism to South Korea, argues that Hallyu fans consume its content through the lens of "transnational intimacy", which triggers them to physically experience those sensations of love and immerse themselves intimately in the South Korean man. In turn, this idealized vision of South Korean man, caused feelings of disappointment within the respondents.  On the contrary, these female Spanish Hallyu content consumers were initially wary of their possible interactions with South Korean men, and furthermore, their imagination of their possible love life in South Korea was not romantic or ideal. We can see another example of this through the following interview extract as Irene talks about her imagination of South Korean man. Notice how Irene

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[23] Some examples in social media are: Jina the Georgeous (2022 July 12). [YouTube Video]. *DON'T BE FOOLED WHEN U GET ASKED FOR Ramen! 라면 먹고 갈래?*, retrieved on 29/02/2024 from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dGX0Velfye8, or yha1000eth (2022 September 9). [Tiktok Video]. *Cuál es el significado oculto de la expresión ¿quieres comer ramen?* [What it's the hidden meaning hidden behind the expression: do you want to eat ramen?], retrieved on 29/02/2024 from https://www.tiktok.com/@yha1000eth

also indirectly refers to the perception of South Korean man only seeing foreign women as sexual partners.

> IRENE (10.09.2022): When they have a girlfriend, they are very cheesy, very corny with their girlfriends. Like, very sweet with their girlfriends. But you shouldn't trust them. Because they have cheated on many foreigners…they [the foreign woman] didn't know about that, and the guys had them only for…you know? I do not have a good image because I have heard foreign girls talk extremely badly about them. Therefore, as of now, I do not have a good impression…

The second round of interviews was less conclusive in the realm of whether these imaginations were confirmed or not. Differently from the imaginations dissected in the previous section which were also mediated by SMI content, it was not that clear whether the respondents had changed their minds about this matter or not. The most salient common pattern was the presence of less expressions of concern or worry about the possibility experiencing uncomfortable situations during night outs in South Korea. A good example of kind of pattern can be found on Ester's response:

> ESTER (20.12.2022): I did not have any bad experience related to those things they say [about South Korean man]. I mean, they are quite insisting in bars. Very annoying! But apart from that, it was okay. I guess that bars are an exception, a different world. I imagine that other, normal people, do not do that.

What is clear is that at the beginning of their studies in South Korea, most of the female informants did not uphold South Korean man to "the golden standards of intimate relationships because of their depiction as caring and expressive romantics in the Hallyu dramas" as is in Lee (2020, p.55). On the contrary, and despite having consumed K-drama content which carries these kinds of discourses about South Korean man, they imagined them as non-trustworthy when it comes to establishing romantic relationships with foreign women and sexualizing foreign woman.

### 6.2.2 "South Korea has two sides, and we, as students, have only experienced the positive one".

Informants presented a critical, pessimistic view of South Korea both at the beginning and the end of their studies there. Differently than in the previous section, this set of imaginaries about South Korea, did not cause fear on the informants as it was perceived as an external reality. While this imagination was expressed when talking about very varied aspects of South

Korea, stressed more intensely in the context of the daily lives of workers and students in South Korea. Against this pessimistic imagination of South Korea, respondents also highlighted the presence of unequal conditions for woman against the background of a conservative society. While this imagination remained at the end of their studies in South Korea, respondents reported not having directly experienced this harsh side of South Korea due to their status as exchange students there. In this way, respondents perceived this kind of imagination as external to them, only experienced by South Korean people or people who have lived in South Korea for a longer time. In Raquel's (02.12.2022) words "South Korea has two sides, and we, as students, have only experienced the positive one".

To begin, a good way to understand the informants' pessimistic imagination of South Korea is through the expressions they frequently used to describe it: like "high societal pressure", "depressive", "conservative" and "patriarchal/sexist". Although the usage of these kinds of expressions remained in the second round of interviews, references to conservatism and the patriarchy decreased. Instead, new descriptors emerged in the second round, characterizing South Korea as "fast-paced" or "purchase-driven" society. In addition to these prevalent terms, participants also employed other negative adjectives throughout the two interview rounds. Notably, Hugo (13.09.2022) described South Korean society as "aggressive," and "hostile" while Eva (02.12.202) labeled it as "gray" to depict a sense of monotony and sadness.

These descriptors were used in general terms to describe South Korea, or South Korean society. These descriptors were used in interaction with each other when talking about more specific contexts of their imagined South Korea, most importantly, in relation with the educational environment and work life. For example, in the field of the references to the "high societal pressure" imagined as present in South Korea, they expressed it as the pressure towards achieving a "proper life" which meant excelling at your studies, at your work, starting a family as soon as possible and having an appealing physical appearance. In turn, these demanding societal expectations turn working and student life stressful, demanding, and competitive-driven, and consequently, people in South Korea are imagined as facing severe mental health issues. We can observe this connection in Maite's statement, when talking about her image of the South Korean educational environment:

> MAITE (06.09.2022): Quite horrible. You see the statistics and you can see that Korea is one of the few First World countries that have the highest suicide cases in the world, together with Japan. Astonishing! That says a lot about the social

pressure in Korea, to get a good job, to get a certain social level… That is why my image was quite bad. In K-dramas…and K-pop, there are songs that touch upon this topic.

Additionally, South Korea is imagined as having a conservative, patriarchal society, with unequal job opportunities for women, and restrictive views about gender roles. For instance, Maite (06.09.2022) and Hugo (13.09.2022) described South Korea patriarchal, while Eva (05.09.2022), Natalia (07.09.2022), and Ester (30.08.2022) as sexist. All the respondents also qualified South Korea as "conservative" (as discussed earlier in the field of racism in South Korea), but also in relation to its views of the role of women in South Korean society. For example, Ester (30.08.2022) described a greater societal pressure on women to get married and have a family. Maite (06.09.2022), similarly referred to this pressure of having a "proper life" for a woman to have children and becoming a housewife. Both Natalia (07.09.2022) and Hugo (13.09.2022) referred to this pressure as an imposition to "be perfect" in terms of physical appearance, and lifestyle-wise in similar lines to Maite and Ester.

> ESTER (30.08.2022): Now that we are living in the era of the feminist movement, in South Korea, people, especially the older generations, are a bit more… I mean the majority of women that you see on K-dramas normally don't work, they remain all life as housewives.

These imaginations of gender inequality issues in South Korea were not meaningfully connected with their expressions of wariness towards South Korean man in romantic relationships, or during night outs dissected in section 5.2.1.2. This issue highlights how the negative imaginations of South Korea are differentiated by the degree in which the respondents imagine they will be or were affected by them.

Within this pessimistic imagination of the South Korea, the educational environment was imagined as stressful, demanding, unfair, time-consuming, and depression-inducing environment, as we could see in Maite's interview extract introduced above. Informants highlighted these themes specially in the experiences of children, and high school students in South Korea, in which bullying was frequently mentioned, as established by Irene:

> IRENE (10.09.2022): I had the image the children study way too much. Obviously, I already knew about that, and I have a Korean teacher who proved it, who told us she did not have a childhood. Everything was about study, study, study. That was horrible. Then, once you go to university, is not that bad. I have seen a lot of K-dramas like *Sky Castle* or *Green Mother's* club, and the mothers are obsessed with their children going to university. From the age of five they go

to study academies until they are older. I mean, this is probably true. But I don't know really how it will be… But I had this idea in my mind.

A similar story can be told about their imagination of the labour world. Informants emphasized the presence of bad work conditions, such as long working hours, blurred lines between personal and professional life, and the exaggerated importance of hierarchies. Against an extremely competitive-driven labor market, and the social pressure to have a good job, there is no room for leisure, or personal life, which generates stress, and mental health issues. We can see this in Hugo's statement, which at the same showcases the interconnectedness of these themes among different aspects of South Korean society:

> HUGO (13.09.2022): [South Korean people] I think that South Korean people work a lot but do not earn much… Workers in South Korea do not have time to socialize, because they have to work way too much. And even after working so much, they do not have money to pay rent. I mean, it is similar to the reality that students live, but translated to the work life, right? It is a very hostile environment.

The informants did not have a first-hand experience of this "harsh" South Korea as their status as exchange students allowed them to be outsiders of this perceived pessimistic, flawed side of South Korean. For example, in the case of the education system, it was imagined as a good quality education for exchange students, but an unreasonable system for people who live in South Korea. Indeed, students they perceived the possibility of studying in South Korea as a key opportunity to gain quality and prestigious education, while holding a critical imagination of the experiences of students in South Korea. Furthermore, their experience as student migrants in South Korea was positive in all cases. However, no matter how good their experiences as students in South Korea had been, at the end of their studies they continued expressing concern over the harsh conditions of the South Korean education system. Hugo (11.12.2022), Eva (02.12.2022), Natalia (11.12.2022), and Raquel (02.12.2022) described with concern about how they had seen their university colleagues study way too much, or study at late hours at night, as a confirmation of their previous imagination, while their own personal experience as exchange students in South Korea had been positive. Within the topic of the labour world, the informants felt outsiders of the experience of the undesirable working conditions in South Korea.  While they were able to avoid this imagined reality, they considered that if they were to work or live in South Korea for a long time, it would become an unavoidable reality, which drove them to not have the desire to reside in South Korea for a

long period of time. A good example of this is found in Eva's response on the second round of interviews:

> EVA (02.12.2022):  I'd like to stay longer in South Korea, and I will be back for sure. I could even work here for a short time, yes. However, would I ever start a family and establish myself in South Korea? Nope! I do not want my children to experience South Korean society. Not only because they would not be fully Korean, but because they would struggle so much when they would be teenagers in South Korea… there is a lot of bullying… a lot of…everything. One thinks that it cannot be as bad as in K-dramas, and… it is. Then, I mean… regarding South Korea, I will have such a precious memory of it, I will talk highly about South Korea, but I gotta be realistic.

Similarly, in terms of gender inequality, in the second round of interviews, they described multiple situations in which they had seen gender inequality in South Korea, describing how women had to live "chained down" to society's rules, in Hugo's words (11.12.2022), or situations in which they had experienced the presence of what they perceived as strict gender roles in South Korea, such as in the way women acted, or dressed.

In this way, informants contrasted their previously constructed critical views about South Korean society with their personal positive experiences in South Korea and concluded that they only experienced the "brightest side of South Korean society", in Ester's (20.12.2022) words. Therefore, their pessimistic imagination of South Korea remained. For example, Raquel explains that:

> RAQUEL (02.12.2022): Probably Koreans have a much different perspective of South Korean than I do. I mean, everyone here is always depressed, they are working all the time, etcetera. Then it's like… it's like a duplex reality. And we… we come here as exchange students, we won't stay much here, we only see the more positive side.

A general pattern present in many of the responses, and also on the interview extracts included in this section, is the strong mediating force of K-pop and K-dramas, and in a lesser extent, SMI content, in these imaginaries, both in the first and second round of interviews. For example, when Maite was talking about her negative imaginations of South Korea, she stated that "[…] That is why my image was quite bad. In K-dramas…and K-pop, there are songs that touch upon this topic." Irene (10.09.2022) referred to the K-dramas *Sky Castle* or *Green Mother's Club* when talking about her negative imaginations of the education system.in South

Korea, and Ester (30.08.2022) uses the female characters seen in K-drama as the vehicle to talk about her imagined gender inequality in South Korea.

Then, the second round of interviews did not see a decrease in the mediating influence of the social mediascape of Hallyu. Of course, the firsthand experiences there were important, as it has been discussed previously on this section, but it did not eliminate the importance of the mediating force of the content circulating in the social mediascape of Hallyu. Instead, the informants used their initial mediated imaginaries as a channel to make sense of their firsthand experiences there. Informants compared "what I have seen with my own eyes," as expressed by Natalia (11.12.2022), with what they had previously seen in K-pop, K-dramas, and SMI content. We can see another example of this in Hugo's response when he was talking about his critical view of the labor world in South Korea, as I asked him to elaborate a bit more on how he had constructed this impression.

> HUGO (11.12.2022): Well basically because of what my [Korean] friends have been telling me and what I have been able to test myself. These things, like: "What your boss tells you to do, you absolutely cannot refute it." You cannot argue because they are the maximum authority. Or these things, like, if the boss tells you: "You must keep working until this hour," then you must work at that hour. Or I don't know… if your boss tells you: "This thing must be done like this," it must be done like this… Oh, and related to this are those things that I told you I saw in Instagram…

Other examples already included in this section are Eva (02.12.2022) who, as she was talking about her pessimistic imagination of South Korea in the second-round interviews, stated that, "One thinks that it cannot be as bad as in K-dramas, and… it is". Like this, the pessimistically imagined South Korea mediated mostly by K-drama and K-pop, within the social mediascape of Hallyu is maintained throughout migration as a reality that only affects South Koreans and people living in South Korea for a long-term.

### 6.2.3  South Korea: a cool nation, a positive surprise, and a long-lasting bond.

Although the previously introduced findings showcase that, in the case of Hallyu content consumers, the circulation of media in the social mediascape of Hallyu had originated a set of negative imaginaries about South Korea, the informants' responses also underscored a simultaneous, positive imagination of the nation. Moreover, the coexistence of both positive and negative imaginations of South Korea was present at the beginning and end of the informant's exchange studies and was a general pattern among all the informants. An example

can be found in the following statement by Natalia, in which South Korea is simultaneously imagined positively as an advanced, modern nation, with an appealing culture, but also negatively, as a nation with a fast-paced, stressful lifestyle, negative imaginaries about South Korea that were mentioned in the previous section:

> NATALIA (07.09.2022): In my mind I imagined a society that works a lot, they do everything super-fast, they "go round with a rocket up their ass" [Spanish expression to represent someone that does things way too fast, that doesn't know how to slow down, "ir con un cohete metido en el culo"]. And also, they are very focused on technology… […] A very modern country, with very positive things like their cutting-edge technology but at the same time, people are constantly working, and looking at screens they do not have time for anything else. However, they have such a good gastronomy, and such a rich history, and also a language I would love to learn.

In this case, the positive imagination of South Korea unveiled within two axes: a positive imagination of South Korea as a modern, wealthy, and technologically advanced nation, and a positive imagination of South Korea as, following Valaskivi's (2016) values attached to the cool nation: fashionable, with an exciting culture, and unique. While their positive imagination of South Korea as a cool nation remained at the end of their exchange studies, expressions related to South Korea's modernity decreased in the second round of interviews. Additionally, despite the permanence of pessimistic imaginations about South Korea after the exchange period, students expressed positive surprise regarding South Korea in contrast with their initial imaginations. Furthermore, they expressed a vivid goodwill and connection towards South Korea that they wished to maintain in the future. Concerning the role of the social mediascape of Hallyu, and equivalently with the case of the negative imaginaries, these positive imaginations were mediated mostly through K-pop K-drama, and SMI content, and their experiences in South Korea mostly served as a confirmation engine to their previous imaginations mediated by this content.

Beginning with the themes related to the imagination of South Korea as a modern nation, when asked about their imagination of South Korea, all respondents used the word "modern" in the first round of interviews. Respondents associated this aspect of South Korean society with three associated themes. Firstly, modernity in South Korea was associated with technology, stressing how South Korea possesses "cutting edge technology" or that are "focused on technology" as stated before by Natalia. Secondly, South Korea is seen as a modern nation through its imagined urbanization, associating South Korea with tall buildings,

skyscrapers, or beautiful cities. We can see an example of these kind of imaginations on this in Irene's response:

> IRENE (10.09.2022): My image [of Korea] is that it is super modern. Super modern. I knew there were more traditional areas but…everything is super clean, super modern, like when you see a K-drama and you see extremely tall buildings, or beautiful streets. I also imagined a lot of younger people on the street dressed, like… modern, I mean, extravagant. With a kind of K-pop style.

Also as exemplified by Irene's statement, these imaginaries were mediated in the first round of interviews by K-drama and K-pop content, but also by SMI content, as other informants, like Raquel (06.09.2022) who reported having seen this side in South Korea on Instagram. In the second round of interviews, although they did not express having changed their minds regarding modernity in South Korea, there were much less references to these themes. Instead, positive accounts were much more cantered in three aspects that will be developed later on: in the cultural realm, in the welcoming kindness of South Korean people, and within the positive surprise expressed towards South Korea.

In Irene's (10.09.2022) statement we can also see how the expressions of modernity are associated with cultural aspects, like innovative fashion, are mediated through K-pop and K-dramas. This serves like a good conductor to talk about the second general pattern regarding the positive imaginations of South Korea, which concur in imagination of a cool South Korea, tightly connected to a feeling of cultural affinity with South Korea. Throughout the two interview rounds, informants stressed their positive attachments what they referred to as a unique, authentic, rebellious South Korea. They saw it as diverse and youthful country, with avant-garde and diverse fashion, pioneering in the usage of make-up products for man, and non-masculine clothing for man. There were many statements regarding how Koreans were fashionable and well-dressed There was a sense of coolness, of "positive rebellion" (Valaskivi, 2016), embedded in all these statements.

> MAITE (06.09.2022): There is something that people say [about South Korea] that I did not agree with before coming to South Korea, which this thing that people say that "South Korea is a monocultural country." And I said to myself: is this really the truth? Because what I see is a lot of diversity. In the way people are, in the way people dress, in the fashion… fashion is for me, like a subculture. I saw K-pop groups and I said, look, none of them looks like the other, in their personality, in their looks.

This South Korean "trendiness" was also connected to the South Korean lifestyle, perceived as a set of exciting, unique activities that you can only experience in South Korea, like shopping for South Korean products, experiencing South Korean café culture, going to convenience stores, trying out karaoke, etc. They imagined South Korea as having a cosmopolitan, unique, and trendy cultural life, and these opinions many times garnered through SMI's content which showcases tourism possibilities in South Korea, mostly in Seoul. The trendiness and uniqueness of South Korea are also expressed through interest in other areas such as its history, or gastronomy, as well as by an interest in learning the Korean language. We can see an example in Maite's interview extract:

> MAITE (06.09.2022): What caught my attention before coming to Korea was the culture. The culture, I mean…I love historical K-dramas. It is so different from Spanish medieval and Renaissance culture that I said…I love it. The clothes, the hanboks… I want to learn more.

Similarly to Maite, respondents emphasized than imagined uniqueness of South Korea across many different contexts. Ester (30.08.2022), for example, expressed how "South Korean people dress so differently than in Europe" or that "South Korean culture is so different from Europe". Concurrently, they frequently referred to an Orientalized, exotic perception of South Korea as possessing a unique, appealing balance between "modernity" and "tradition". While considering South Korea as unique and different to Europe, or Spain, they also regarded South Korea as a "Westernized" Asian nation, with a good balance of the "West" and the "East", exotic enough to be appealing, but familiar enough to venture into living there for 4 months. In Eva's response we can see an example of this balance:

> EVA (05.09.2022): Yes, I included South Korea inside the Western mentality. Then, I mean, yeah, they are very different than me, but not that different. It is a structured society, and people won't suddenly go off their heads. I liked that about South Korea.

As we have been seeing, at the beginning of their exchange studies there, these positive imaginaries had been mediated through the consumption of K-pop and K-dramas, and by SMI content consumption. Then, after their exchange semester, and similarly to what happened with the negative imaginations dissected in the previous section, their personal experiences in South Korea represented a vehicle to make sense of reality within the content of their previously mediated imagined South Korea, either as a confirmation, or reconfiguration of their imagined South Korea. Related to this, it is worthwhile mentioning that despite the

permanence of the pessimistic imagination of South Korea, all students expressed positive surprise about their experience in South Korea against their initial imagination of South Korea. This pattern was found in all interviewees, but we can see an example in Irene's response:

> IRENE (04.12.2022): I would like to tell you that… my opinion has changed a lot. My opinion has changed a lot because I told you rubbish about South Korea before and now…[laughs] I am so happy. Absolutely happy.

When asked to elaborate, students referred to their experienced South Korea in relation with the aspects inside the "cool", positively imagined South Korea described above. They shared with me their cultural experiences in South Korea, and how they had discovered new aspects that they wished to continue engaging with, such as foods they didn't know about, new aspects about South Korean culture and language, or other tourist-related activities that you can do in South Korea. This increased emotional attachment, and willingness to further engage with South Korean culture. They expressed the wish to establish a long-lasting relationship with South Korea by continuing to learn about it, learning the language, and engaging with Hallyu content and Korean food as well. Following Irene's previous statement, I asked to elaborate, and she replied:

> IRENE (04.12.2022): I think it was because of going out every day, to discover Seoul. To discover the neighborhoods that I like, the cafes, its design… all that. Everything that I knew before, everything that I had seen before in social media… now I saw it here.

This is also an example that, in the same way than in section 5.2.2, the mediated imagination of the nation is still present after migration, as Irene talks about her positive opinions of what she had seen in South Korea by aligning it to what she had seen on social media. This was also a common pattern within the positive imagination of South Korea.

Finally, although their opinion about the flawed aspects of South Korean reality remained, due to their experiences as student there, they felt a personal connection with the country. They also expressed goodwill towards South Korea, the wish to talk positively about South Korea to their friends despite their critical views. The also desired to go back South Korea as students or tourists, and to continue engaging with South Korean culture after their exchange, through for example, learning the language, as Maite expresses:

MAITE (08.12.2022): The day I must leave South Korea I will cry. And I will also cry the day I come back […] Life as a student in South Korea is incredible. I would like to study… Do you know about these scholarships to learn Korean? I am drawn to that. I mean, I did not speak Korean before coming here, and during my time here, I learned to read Korean, I am now able to read the street posters! I would really like to come back and learn Korean.

## 6.3    Discussion.

The findings section showcased that these informants had extensive negative imaginaries about South Korea, and that in face of migration, the few clashes there were between the imaginaries and experiences there, were positive surprises. Among the negative imaginations, South Korea was seen as a stressful, conservative, and depressive society, that imposes demanding expectations on its inhabitants, in which woman and man do not have equal conditions. Furthermore, it was imagined as a society that rejects foreigners, sometimes even referred as racist, and South Korean man were imagined as unreliable for romantic relationships. These imaginaries — in different degrees depending on the different perceptions about South Korea — were mediated by Hallyu-related content: K-pop, K-dramas, and SMI content about South Korea online. The presence of these visions about South Korea presents discrepancies with studies that reported a generalized enhanced imagination of South Korea within Hallyu consumers (KOFICE, 2020; 2022; 2023; Iadevito, 2014). Even more starkly, it contrasts with reports that establish the presence of idealization of South Korea due to Hallyu content consumption (Lyan and Levkowitz, 2015, Lee, 2020; Takeda, 2020; Takeda, 2014). The presence of these contradictions stresses the necessity to re-examine the premise widely considered among Hallyu scholarship that establishes a direct connection between Hallyu content consumption, nation branding, soft power strategies, and positive imagining of South Korea (Iadevito, 2014; Kim, 2019, 2022, 2023; Hargitai et al., 2023; Lee, 2009; Walsh, 2014; Song, 2020). It also provides more empirical data aligning with the studies that dissented from this (Kim and Park, 2016; Iwabuchi, 2015).

In the area of the negative imagination of South Korea, it is important to highlight the negative imagination of South Korean man by as the branch of Hallyu literature that has studied the connection between positively imagining South Korea and is found among studies focused on female Hallyu consumers and their imagination of South Korean man. The Spanish female Hallyu content consumers stressed their untrustworthiness towards South Korean men in romantic relationships, and precaution in case of experiencing uncomfortable

situations during night outs of South Korea, mediated through SMI content. This contrasts with the depiction of an idealistic, romanticized vision of South Korean men, caused by the consumption of K-dramas in which male characters are depicted as caring, romantic, affectionate, and expressive (Lee, 2020, Takeda, 2014; Takeda 2020, Vu and Lee, 2013). Furthermore, the Spanish Hallyu content consumers were not keen to establish romantic relationships with South Korean man due to the perception that they see foreign woman in a sexualized way. In contrast, Lee's (2020) and Takeda (2020) reported that their participants were looking forward to exploring an ideal, romantic dating life in South Korea due to their vision of South Korean men, and romantic relationships in South Korea harnessed due to K-drama and /or K-pop consumption.

The information gathered about the mediating role of Hallyu of all these imaginaries also adds more nuances to previous Hallyu literature. Firstly, these Spanish Hallyu enthusiasts did not showcase an accepting attitude to the narratives present in K-pop and K-drama as the realities in South Korea, as it was suggested by studies like Takeda (2020), Lee (2020), Lyan and Levkowitz, (2015), or Vu and Lee (2013). Instead, the informants showcased a widespread distrust of K-pop and K-dramas as reliable depictions of South Korea as nation. This aligns with Chan and Xueli (2011) on her study of female Singaporean K-drama viewers, concluding that while these Hallyu consumers were enthusiastic about K-drama, they established boundaries between the fictional stories and narratives present there and their imagination of South Korea.

Secondly, the findings showcased that when studying the shifts in the national image caused by Hallyu content consumption, focusing solely on K-pop and K-drama might be leaving out an important, and Hallyu-related, mediating force for South Korea's image: SMI content about South Korea online. The data showcased how this kind of content represented not only a relevant portion of the informant's consumption of South Korea-related media as important as K-pop and K-dramas but was also a key influence mediating the imagined South Korea of these informants. Most importantly, at the beginning the student migration, it was perceived as more trustworthy source than the content produced by the South Korean cultural industry. However, literature on the connections between Hallyu and imagining South Korea has been mostly cantered on K-drama, but also on K-pop as mediators to imagine South Korea and does not mention this kind of content (Sippala, 2020; Takeda, 2020; Takeda, 2014; Vu and Lee; 2013; Lyan and Levkowitz, 2015; Chan and Xueli, 2011; Lee, 2020). Similarly, other literature endorsing the beneficial effects of Hallyu content consumption's also did not

consider this kind of content, focusing on media produced directly by the South Korean cultural industry in collaboration with the South Korean government (Walsh, 2014; Lee, 2009; Kim, 2019, 2022, 2023, Huh, and Wu, 2017; Zhang and Bi, 2019; Zhang et al. 2020; Lee and How, 2023; Hargitai et al., 2023, Bae et al. 2017; Hirata, 2008, Ju and Lee, 2021, Chung, 2019; Um et al., 2014).

The presence South Korea-related SMI content online, while not being widely covered by Hallyu-focused literature, has been incipiently considered by Lee and Cho (2021) and Lee and Abidin (2022). In this area, this master's thesis' findings also served as a preliminary qualitative exploration of the nature of these influencer's content, and how Hallyu content consumers react to it. The negative imaginations mediated by this kind of content, align with Lee and Abidin's (2022) depiction of a rising of a counter- "gukbbong" online discourse that aims at countering the exaggerated version of South Korea depicted by branded content through the communication of a more sincere opinion about South Korea. Additionally, it aligns with Lee and Cho (2021) by showcasing how these SMI influencers act as cultural intermediaries between South Korea and the West.  To those areas left unexplored by these studies, the findings added more information by showcasing how what Lee and Cho (2021) and Lee and Abidin (2022) had reported in YouTube, is also present in other social media apps like Instagram and TikTok. Most importantly, it added a key missing piece of information, which it's the reception of this content by Hallyu content consumers. Interestingly, the students initially trusted this content against an expressed distrust to the idealized depictions of South Korea in K-pop and K-dramas.

Finally, the findings also enrich the field of the imagined South Korea not only from the distance, but also combined with direct experiences there. As the participants did not idealize South Korea, there was not feeling of a dramatic clash between their expectations and the realities there. Instead, they either expressed a feeling of positive surprise about their experiences as exchange students in South Korea, or their experiences there served as a confirmation of their previous negative imaginaries. The only dramatic clash between the imagined South Korea and the experiences there was among the field of the attitudes of South Korean people to foreigners. However, the clash was positive, rather than negative: students imagined South Korean people, most importantly, the South Korean elderly as intolerant, sometimes racist towards foreigners, due to SMI influencers' content consumed online about South Korea. In contrast, their positive interactions with South Korean people throughout their exchange studies shifted these perceptions, and at the end of their studies the saw South

Korean people — in terms of their attitude towards foreigners — under a much more positive light. Some of them also expressed contrast between their negative imagination of South Korean man, as potentially dangerous during night outs due to content consumed in social media, and their experiences there during their exchange studies. Furthermore, this led students to feel anxious and scared before their upcoming migration, and some of them, felt deceived by SMI content after their experiences there.

Firstly, these above-described findings entail interesting dynamics with previous literature on the field of the clash of realities and imagination among migrants. Within the few studies on this realm within the Hallyu context, which are Lee (2020) with K-drama tourists, and Takeda (2020) with Japanese students in South Korea who are Hallyu enthusiasts. Lee (2020) and Takeda (2020) findings portray an opposite situation: instead of positive surprise, and stark contrast between negative imaginations and positive experiences, they reported disenchantment, struggle, and contrast between idealized imaginations and negative (in comparison with their imagination) experiences in South Korea. Then, on the broader ISM field, Ginnerskov-Dahlberg (2021) and Beech (2014) reported a similar situation within other groups of student migrants. For example, in Ginnerskov-Dahlberg (2021) the Eastern European participants, due to the consumption of mainstream discourses that idealize life in Scandinavian nations, idealized their imagination of Denmark as a student destination. The different situation found within these Spanish student migrants might be given due to the specific context, which combines non-mainstream forms of media consumption with ISM. Further research on this realm in the field of ISM could shed more light on these findings.

Secondly, they add nuances to previous literature on the ISM field related to the mediated construction of the imagined destination nation, and its relationship with social media. SMI content on apps like Instagram, YouTube and TikTok were very relevant source of information for the imagined destination nation of these students. However, the scholarship on the imagination of the destination country of student migrants, much like literature on Hallyu, did not cover SMI content as a mediator of these imaginaries. Instead, social media apps are rather conceived as facilitators for student migration, as a tool for prospective student migrants to network with friends and family that live abroad to hear about their experiences in their prospective destination countries (Mallett and Hagen-Zanker, 2018 Dekker and Ngbersen, 2014; Haythornthwaite, 2002; Coletto and Fullin, 2019; Ginnerskov-Dahlberg (2021). The data of this master's thesis project enriches the discussion by establishing the existence of an added type of social media content that is trusted by the informants as if it was

shared by their peer within their personal network, but that it is communicated by people they do not personally know, which are SMI. This might be related with previous reports that prospective student migrants trust peer to peer information the most when building their study destination imaginaries (Mallett and Hagen-Zanker, 2018 Dekker and Ngbersen, 2014; Haythornthwaite, 2002; Ginnerskov-Dahlberg (2021), only diverting by establishing that this kind of trust is also established with SMI.

Overall, the results highlight the essential influence of media in the formation of the imagination of the nation in the process of migration, and ISM (Dimitriadis, 2022; Salazar, 2011; 2018 Ginnerskov-Dahlberg, 2021; Beech, 2014, Kölbel, 2020), as well as the formation of the imagination of the nation (Anderson, 2006; Valaskivi, 2016). It also aligns with the importance of K-pop and K-dramas as mediators of the imagined South Korea, as they were also found as important sources of information about South Korea as established before (Sippala, 2020; Takeda, 2020; Takeda, 2014; Vu and Lee; 2013; Lyan and Levkowitz, 2015; Walsh, 2014; Zhang and Bi, 2019; Zhang et al. 2020; Lee and How, 2023; Hargitai et al., 2023, Bae et al. 2017; Hirata, 2008, Ju and Lee, 2021, Chung, 2019; Um et al., 2014) only differing in establishing that they can cause both positive and negative imaginations, in combination with other kinds of content.

Furthermore, this data does not wholly negate the effectiveness of nation branding and soft power techniques. Students also imagined South Korea as a cool nation with certain values that according to Valaskivi (2016), nation branders aim to attach to the nation: the respondents imagined South Korea as a unique, modern, youthful nation. This kind of imaginations were reflected on this Spanish student migrants by imagining South Korea as a technologically advanced nation, with trendy fashion and cultural life, and unique cultural expressions. However, it also stresses previous assertions that nation branders cannot aim at fully controlling the discourses and impact of this discourses on its audiences (Ermann and Hermanik, 2017; Nye, 2004; Valaskivi, 2016), as the respondents also presented imaginations of South Korea opposite to the values nation branders and other policymakers wish to communicate: the respondents imagined South Korea as intolerant, sexist, and conservative.

To conclude, I would like to highlight once more that the findings portrayed in contrast with previous literature among different fields is not done so as to categorically contradict it, but to highlighting the nuances that can be found out when studying broad phenomenon in a qualitative, case-by case perspective, and comparing studies done in different contexts with

the one chosen for this research. Moreover, due to the scarce literature on this realm, the aims were explorative, and therefore, the findings are also of that nature. Because of this further research needs to undertake more comprehensive empirical work so as to be able to generalize these results. Notwithstanding, these findings also serve as a worthwhile starting point for upcoming academic work in this realm. They have also indicated the existence of many unexpected issues within the ISM and Hallyu scholarship in relation with the imagined nation.

# 7   CONCLUSION

This research project aimed to re-examine widely used premises in Hallyu scholarship regarding the of presence of a generalized connection between Hallyu content consumption and the generation of positive image of South Korea as a nation. To accomplish this, I explored the imagination of South Korea among Spanish Hallyu content consumers who pursue a short-term student mobility to South Korea. This is a novel, and worthwhile field in which to test how Hallyu influences national image construction, as one of the associated outcomes of Hallyu is attracting international students to South Korea through the creation of a positive imagination of that nation. The dataset of this research project is based on common themes found on the Spanish Hallyu content consumers. and student migrants' answers, analyzed through thematic qualitative analysis.

Against this backdrop, research question "a) How do Spanish Hallyu content consumers imagine South Korea before and after a 4-month student exchange in South Korea?" was answered through the examination of these informant's perceptions about South Korea at the beginning, and end of their exchange studies there. South Korea was imagined as an intolerant, conservative, nation with stressful lifestyle, demanding societal expectations, extensive gender inequality problems, in which South Korean man are untrustworthy for romantic relationships, an imagination that remained throughout all the exchange studies. Simultaneously, South Korea was also imagined as an authentic, unique, technologically advanced nation, with an exciting and trendy culture. While these imaginations did not experience any significant changes throughout their exchange studies, there was one relevant area that did shift dramatically: the imagination of South Korea as an intolerant nation towards foreigners.

Research question b) "How was this imagined South Korea mediated by Hallyu?" was answered by analyzing the informant's reported media sources of their varied perceptions about South Korea; combined with an analysis of the Hallyu, and South Korea-related media most prominently consumed by these informants. Among the varied media discourses that are inherent to their imagined South Korea as theorized by Anderson (2006), those circulating in the social mediascape of Hallyu were the most relevant for these Hallyu content consumers. The Hallyu cultural phenomena acted as a mediator for imagining the nation through K-pop, and K-dramas, but also through SMI content that prominently circulates the social mediascape of Hallyu (Jin and Yoon, 2016). Apart from SMI content related to South Korea, K-drama and

K-pop also acted as a mediator of these Spanish people's imagination of South Korea. Informants quoted scenes in K-drama, or K-pop songs, or SMI content as the source for their negative, and positive imaginaries of South Korea. Then, all this Hallyu-related media content was the backbone that shaped their imagined South Korea both at the beginning and end of the studies in South Korea: their Hallyu-mediated imagined South Korea served as the lens to imagine South Korea from the distance, but also to make sense of their personal experiences there.

The discussion of the role of Hallyu as a mediator of South Korea's imaginaries was led through the unexpected high inference of SMI content in these Hallyu enthusiast's imagined South Korea. Through an analysis of the South Korea-related social media consumption patterns of the informants, I found out that SMI influencers, mostly foreigners living in South Korea, or South Koreans themselves, are increasingly uploading content online talking about their own experiences and opinions about South Korea. Furthermore, I found out that a high percentage of these seven Spanish Hallyu enthusiasts total social media consumption time (which was around 7 hours daily) is dedicated to consuming South Korea-related content, which includes both fan-produced content about K-pop, and K-dramas, but also this kind of South Korea-related SMI influencers. In addition, they showcased distrust over K-pop and K-drama content as reliable depiction of South Korea, but trusted SMI content as a source of reliable information about South Korea.

I suggested that the informant's consumption and trust in this South Korea related SMI content is tightly connected to the Hallyu phenomena in several ways. On the one hand, it seems that due to their enthusiasm in K-pop and K-drama consumption, the social media algorithms push for this kind of content on the informant's social media feeds. On the other hand, due to informant's distrust on the image of South Korea communicated in K-pop and K-dramas they reported leaning on SMI as trusted peers to learn about South Korea. The societal rejection towards Hallyu fans present in Spanish society (Yoon et al., 2020; Deltell and Folgar, 2020) might have also enhanced this. Potentially, their decision to pursue migration combined with the previous factors might have played an additional role in the appearance, trust, and consumption of this kind of content. Most importantly, this SMI content is related to Hallyu as they harness the popularity of K-pop, K-dramas, and South Korea online to attract Hallyu consumers (Lee and Cho, 2021).

Overall, all this demonstrates that these Spanish Hallyu content consumers do not imagine South Korea in an idealized or enhanced manner nor at the beginning or the end of their studies there. They also did not necessarily absorb what they saw on K-pop and K-dramas as the realities of an ideal South Korea, and they did not rely exclusively on K-pop and K-dramas to imagine South Korea. This stresses the need to reexamine in a case-by-case perspective premises widely use in Hally, that establish a direct connection between Hallyu content consumption and positively imagining South Korea and narrow the sources of this imagination to K-pop and K-dramas (KOFICE 2020; 2022; 2023; Um et al., 2014; Takeda, 2020; Lee, 2020; Lyan and Levkowitz, 2015; Iadevito, 2014). Additionally, on a broader perspective, assertions on the usage of popular culture for nation branding and soft power purposes also needs further discussion to include the nuances that this empirical work put to the table (Walsh, 2014; Kim, 2019; 2022; 2023; Lee, 2009; Lin, 2021; Hargitai et al. 2023; Chung, 2019). Most importantly, it highlights the importance of SMI content attached to non-mainstream popular culture fan phenomena in culturally distant contexts when it comes to imagine the popular culture-sending nation.

By underscoring the appearance and importance of SMI content related to South Korea, and the informant's distrust on K-pop and K-dramas I do not aim to negate the mediating influence of popular culture as a window to imagine the nation. Instead, I want to stress how due to the importance given by these respondents to social media, it might be relevant to broaden perspectives considering other kinds of content as well when talking about popular culture and nation's image. In the case of Hallyu, further research in this area could benefit from considering the presence of SMI content related to South Korea online instead of talking about K-pop and K-dramas in isolation. Especially, as it seems that the imagination that it mediates can be extensively negative.

I also do not aspire to wholly deny the effectiveness of nation branding or soft power strategies that use popular culture. On the contrary, these Spanish Hallyu content consumers did present patterns related to the values that branders aim to attach to the nation, according to Valaskivi (2016). Instead, I would like to argue that it might not be that essential for South Korea to generate a homogeneously cool, enhanced, or idealized national image abroad. I argue this because these Spanish Hallyu content consumers, who consume non-mainstream forms of media that is rejected and mocked within Spanish society, expressed profound enthusiasm, interest, and connection with South Korean culture despite also having extensive critical, negative, and pessimistic views of South Korea as a nation. Furthermore, as students

did not feel disappointed after visiting South Korea, nation branding and soft power techniques might be counter-productive differently than how it was foreseen in the introduction based on previous literature on the matter. Instead, this counter-productivity might be more related to the excessive encouragement of the communication of a palatable version of South Korea through its popular culture (Walsh, 2014) and by nation branding in social media (Lee and Abidin, 2022). I suggest this due to the high inference of the counter-"gukbbong" discourses — discourses resisting the presence of branded content about South Korea online (Lee and Abidin, 2022) — found on the respondent's imagined South Korea, and the informants' reported distrust in K-pop and K-drama as containing scripted, falsified narratives about South Korea.

Finally, these findings provide an interesting exploration of field of the imagination of the destination place of international students, against the backdrop of a transnational popular culture phenomena. It adds fascinating nuances as it has been rarely reported before: that students express positive surprise when the imagination and the realities clash, or that migrants initially express extensive negative imaginations of their chosen destination (Coletto and Fullin, 2019; Cubillo et al. 2006; Kölbel, 2020; Ginnerskov-Dahlberg, 2021, Beech, 2014; Salazar, 2011, Ngoc, 2022). Whether this is due to the particularities of the Hallyu cultural phenomena, or Spain, or whether this can be generalized to other transnational popular culture phenomena would be worthwhile researching to enrich the knowledge of an essential factor for ISM: destination nation's image.

Furthermore, the high inference of SMI-related content on the imagination of South Korea as a destination nation also enriches the discussion on ISM studies. The trust showcased by these students in SMI content —more salient at the beginning of the exchange studies—raises important questions related to the role of social media, and SMI in destination nation's image construction. As SMI content mediated extensive negative imaginations of South Korea this is a pressing policy area, for South Korea as well as other nations in their strategies to attract international students. Nonetheless, to build appropriate policies it is key to pursue further research in several areas that were outside the scope of this research project, like understanding whether only Hallyu content consumers or other student migrants are reached by this content and trust it as well. Especially, it is essential to know whether Hallyu content consumers encountered this content prior to their decision to study in South Korea or afterward. The negative influence of SMI content on certain aspects of these Spanish student

migrants' imagined destination nation can be worrisome for South Korea's policy objectives related to student migration.

Ultimately, this thesis project reflects how the nation is imagined, as posed by Anderson (2006). These Spanish student migrants, who consume Hallyu, will never meet the millions of inhabitants of South Korea, and yet, imagine them as a set of connected individuals, through a sense of simultaneous activity, and shared characteristics, before and after having moved there. The particularities of these individuals are that their imagined South Korean nation was mediated by Hallyu-related content amidst the variety of media that could influence their imagination of South Korea. In this way, it stresses the intertwined nature of the imagined nation and media (Anderson, 2006; Valaskivi) with special stress on popular culture and social media content. Furthermore, it supports the extrapolation of Anderson's (2006) concept of print capitalism that drove the birth of the imagined nation through mass-distributed newspapers and novels (Anderson, 2006), to screen capitalism in the era of new kinds of mass media communication through TV, streaming services, and social media (Castelló, 2016).

While the findings and conclusions of this master's thesis project provide nuances, highlight contradictions, and provide preliminary grounds for further research on Hallyu, ISM, and popular culture usage for nation image improvement campaigns, they are also limited as they cannot be categorically generalized outside of the personal experience of this seven Spanish Hallyu content consumers. Using these conclusions as the initial grounds for future research, similar qualitative, and quantitative endeavors are necessary in wider cultural contexts, within and outside of Europe to dissect the full unveiling of the powerful influence of Hallyu for imagining South Korea from the outside, and to understand the experiences of the more than 178 million Hallyu content consumers out there (Korea Foundation, 2022).

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# Appendices

## Appendix 1 Questionnaire outline of the first round of interviews.

1.Warm up questions

2. Hallyu content consumption questions.

¿Qué contenido te gusta consumir en relación a Corea? / What kind of content related to Korea you like to consume?

¿Qué contenido te gusta más? / Which one do you like the most?

¿Cuál es el que más consumes? / Which one do you consume the most?

¿Desde cuándo lo llevas consumiendo? / Since when have you been consuming it?


3. Imagination of South Korea

¿Qué imagen de Corea tenías antes de venir aquí? / What image about South Korea did you have before coming here?

¿Qué te llamaba la atención de Corea antes de venir aquí? / What was alluring to you about South Korea before coming here?

¿Qué cosas te echaban para atrás sobre Corea antes de venir aquí? / What stuff turned you off about South Korea before coming here?

¿Qué imagen tenías sobre las personas coreanas antes de venir aquí? / What image did you have about South Korean people before coming here?

¿Sobre los hombres coreanos? / What about Korean man?

¿Sobre las mujeres coreanas? / What about Korean woman?

¿Sobre los ancianos? / What about the elderly?

¿Qué imagen tenías del sistema educativo antes de venir aquí? / What image did you have about the South Korean education system before coming here?

¿Qué imagen tenías del mundo laboral en Corea antes de venir? / What image did you have about the South Korean labour world before coming here?

**Appendix 2. Questionnaire outline of the second round of interviews.**

1. Warmup Questions

2. South Korea-related content consumption questions, and social media consumption questions.

¿Dónde ves usualmente contenido relacionado con Corea? / Where do you usually watch South Korea-related content?

¿Dónde ves usualmente contenido relacionado con (K-pop, K-dramas…)? / Where do you usually watch content related to (K-pop, K-dramas…)?

¿Cuántas horas pasas viendo contenido en redes sociales? / How much time do you dedícate watching social media content?

¿De ese tiempo, qué porcentaje crees que dedicas a ver contenido sobre Corea? / What percentage of time do you think you dedícate to consuming South Korea-related content in social media apps?

¿Qué clase de contenido relacionado sobre Corea consumes en redes sociales? / What kind of Korea-related content do you consume on social media?

¿Qué clase de contenido relacionado con K-pop, o K-dramas, dedicas en redes sociales? / What kind of content related to K-pop or K-dramas do you consume in social media?

¿Puedes nombrar a algún influencer que hable sobre Corea que te guste? / Can you name a South Korea-related influencer that you like?

¿Cuáles son las aplicaciones de redes sociales que más utilizas? / Which social media-sharing apps do you use the most?

3. Imagination of South Korea

¿Qué imagen de Corea tienes ahora? / What image about South Korea do you have now?

¿Qué te llama la atención sobre Corea? / What is alluring to you about South Korea?

¿Qué cosas te echan para atrás? / What stuff turs you off about South Korean?

¿Qué imagen tienes sobre las personas coreanas? / What image do you have about South Korean people?

¿Sobre los hombres coreanos? / What about Korean man?

¿Sobre las mujeres coreanas? / What about Korean woman?

¿Sobre los ancianos? / What about the elderly?

¿Qué imagen tienes del sistema educativo? / What image do you have about the education system?

¿Qué imagen tienes del mundo laboral en Corea? / What image do you have about the South Korean labour world?

¿Qué imagen tienes sobre la relación que tienen los coreanos con las personas extranjeras? / What image do you have about the relationship of Korean people with foreigners?

4. Experience in South Korea.

¿Qué tal te ha ido estos meses? / How has it been?

¿Con qué impresión te vas de Corea? / What image do you have about South Korea now that you are leaving son?

¿Te gustaría volver? / Would you like to go back?

¿Te gustaría volver a trabajar? / Would you like to work here?

¿Cómo te sentiste? / How did you feel?

**Appendix 4. Informed Consent Form**

Researcher's name

Researcher's phone

Researcher's e-mail

*WORKING TITLE: " A qualitative study of Spanish Hallyu fans in South Korean universities."*

I have read and understood the Information Sheet you have given me and I agree to participate in the project: YES/NO

I understand that my participation is entirely voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason. YES/NO

I agree to this interview being audio-recorded. YES/NO

I agree to this interview being video recorded. YES/NO

I agree to be identified in the following way within research outputs: pseudonym. YES/NO

_____        _____        _____

Name of Participant    Date    Signature

_____        _____        _____

Name of person taking consent        Date    Signature

**Appendix 5. Personal Information Sheet.**

Researcher's name

Researcher's phone number

Researcher's e-mail

<div align="center">Participant Information Sheet</div>

Researcher:

My name is María Monllor Callau. I am from Spain, where I got a BA in International Relations in the Rey Juan Carlos University. Now, I am a MA Student at the Centre of East Asian Studies in the University of Turku, Finland.

*Project Title: "A qualitative study of Spanish Hallyu fans in South Korean universities"*

General Outline of the Project:

Description and Methodology: This research aims to understand the experiences of Spanish exchange students in Korea, against the background of the international spread of the Korean Wave, which is encouraging young people around the world to come and study in South Korea. This will be done through a qualitative analysis of individual interviews with Spanish exchange students in Korea between September 2022 and December 2022: one interview at the beginning of the semester and a final interview at the end of the semester.

Participants: The data for this research will be collected through an audio recording of the interviews conducted with you, and the rest of the Spanish exchange students interviewed (between 5 to 10 students)

Use of Data: Results of the research will be published in due time after completion of the thesis in University of Turku's UTUPub Database (https://www.utupub.fi) where the thesis or its abstract can be found under the author's name.

Participant Involvement:

*Voluntary Participation & Withdrawal*: I would like to invite you to participate in this research as an interviewee. You do not have to be involved in this research unless you do not want to and you can withdraw from the interview process at any moment, without telling me why. Unless you tell me

otherwise, I will not use what you told me, and I will delete the recordings of the interviews. You can ask for additional information at any time. You can also refuse to answer questions during the interview without telling me why.

*What does participation in the research entail?:*  You will be asked to answer a set of questions in two interviews conducted in Spanish. If you agree with it, the contribution will be captured, first, through an audio recording, and later transcribed. Then, I will read the interviews several times and choose what bits of the interviews are relevant to the aims of my thesis. After this, I might include direct and indirect quotes from the interview in the text that will be published. I won't include any personal data in those quotes.

The content of the questions of the interviews will be about your and consumption of Korean popular culture, your expectations about your exchange semester, personal experiences during your exchange in Seoul, your image of Korea and Korean people before and after the exchange.

*Location and Duration*: You are invited to participate in two interviews, done at the beginning at the end of Autumn Semester 2022 in South Korea. Each interview will last around 1 hour, one in early September, and another one, in early December. The total interview time will be around 2 hours.

*Risks*:  There is a risk of third-party identification, which means, that someone might identify you by what you have said and what was included in the research, despite my best efforts of maintaining your anonymity. The content of my questions is designed to not include sensitive topics, however, you might feel uncomfortable with the content of some questions, for any reason. In that case, please remember that you can always refuse to answer them or withdraw from the interview at any time without telling me why.

*Benefits:* I expect that this research will improve the understanding of the experiences of Spanish students in Korea who are Hallyu fans, and I hope that this will enhance policy development in this area and increase the spotlight on Spanish consumption of Hallyu popular products and Spanish exchange students.

## Confidentiality:

I will use my best efforts to keep your information confidential both during the interview process and publication of the research. I won't tell anybody what you told me or who you are. In the published research, I will only include your age, that you are a Spanish national and that you studied in Seoul between September and December of 2022. I will not include any other personal information and I will be the only person with access to the audio recordings and the transcribed texts of the interviews. In the published material, you will be referred by an impersonal attribution: "Student A". However, if

you tell me certain things for example, that someone might be hurt, I might need to tell someone else, so try not to tell me things like that.

Storing, archiving, further use and possible access to the research data:

•       *Where*:  The data will be stored in my computer. I am the only person who is able to access the computer. The whole research process will be conducted in my computer.

•       *How long*: I will store the data until December 2024.

•       *Further use of data following the required storage period*:  The data will be deleted after December 2024.

Queries and Concerns:

•       Contact Details for More Information:  If you have more questions, please contact me through the contact information that you can find at the beginning of this form. You can also contact the supervisor of this research, through phone () or e-mail ( ). In addition, you can contact the Center of East Asian Studies, ceas@utu.fi.