

**The Role of Korean Products explained  
by its users in Bishkek**

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By: Aizhan Kasymova  
Supervisor: Aykokul Arziyeva

**American University of Central Asia**

**Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan**

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**Abstract**

High popularity of Korean pop culture has helped South Korea to earn more money on their intellectual property rights abroad last year than the year before (KIPRIS, 2014). South Korea, as one of the economic giants of the time, with a strong influence of Western culture and rapid technological progress had a distinct advantage over other countries (Roll, 2014). The previous researches of scholars such as Jerome Agrusa and Ubonrat Siriyuvasak showed that growth of numbers of Korean products consumers abroad is connected to the increase of popularity of Korean pop culture (2007). Consumption growth of Korean products in Bishkek is observable: there are a lot of different shops with Korean snacks and cosmetics, dozens of Korean cuisines, hundreds of small stores with DVDs of Korean TV series, and thousands of young people who are following Korean pop culture. The goal of my study was to investigate the role of Korean products in the lives of its active consumers. The data was collected by qualitative research method through in-depth interviewing, and the target group was young people from Bishkek who actively consume Korean products.

## Introduction

In the last century music evolved into a product of mass consumption. The most tangible effect of this event has been the rise of pop culture and the music industry, which operates billions of dollars. In the end of 90s and beginning of 2000s the world learned the existence of South Korean music, and few years ago Korean pop culture became one of the most popular trends among young people, and the quantity of followers growing year by year. Popular culture is not only about music, it is the entirety of ideas, perspectives, attitudes, memes, images, and other phenomena that are within the mainstream of a given culture (Ashby, 2010). According to the Bank of Korea, South Korean companies which were associated with Korean pop culture, earned 800 millions of US dollars of payments for copyrights abroad in 2012, it is 17.6 percent more than the year before; companies engaged in entertainment, TV and radio broadcasting and film production brought 120 million dollars last year; the mega-hit South Korean rapper Psy "Gangnam Style" brought in 10 million US dollars (Ruskor, 2012).

There are millions of web sites about Korean singers, actors and there are millions of people who want to look like Korean celebrities. The evidence of Korean pop culture popularity in Kyrgyzstan is the fact that each district of Bishkek has at least several Korean cafes and shops with the posters of South Korean celebrities, and the most popular Kyrgyz entertaining web sites, like namba.kg or ts.kg have thousands of pages with Korean TV series and music. There are a lot of groups of young Kyrgyz people that gather together to sing Korean songs and dance dances from Korean music videos. In 2013, there was a Korean pop culture contest among youth of Bishkek (AKIpress, 2013). There were more than 200 young people who wanted to take a part in it, and win the main prize, to get a chance to participate in the preparation trainings of famous Korean entertainment companies to become a super star

of South Korea (2013). The competitors had to make a performance on covers of South Korean popular songs, dances or instrumental music.

The topics of Korean pop culture and the increase of Korean products' popularity are becoming more and more popular for research among different scholars. The previous researches showed that growth of numbers of Korean products consumers abroad is literally connected to increase of popularity of Korean pop culture. American scholar Jerome Agrusa conducted a research about the influence of Korean TV series on consumer preferences of people who watch it; the main finding of their work was that "people divide characters from the Korean movies to bad and good and follow someone they liked in the film or in the series and try to copy that person (Yoon, Agrusa, 2007). The similar ideas about the influence of Korean pop culture to world market had two interesting scholars Ubonrat Siriyuvasak and Hyun Joon Shin. According to Siriyuvosak and Shin, people who like Asian pop (also Korean pop) are the consumers of Asian market, they explained it as the influence of Asian pop to the followers' consumer preference (2007).

The study showed that in case of youth in Bishkek, the main influencing factor were also Korean TV series and Korean pop. By using one product, in our case it is Korean TV series, the respondents are starting to use other products too, attach meanings to them, change their lifestyles and future plans because of them, and create new groups by making friends with similar interests.

My thesis is about specific social group, youth of Bishkek who actively consumes different Korean products for at least two years. The main focus of my research is to study the role of South Korean products among young people of Bishkek. The importance of this paper lies in the understanding of influence of popular culture to consumer preferences, and understanding the meaning of Korean products consumers' behavior, through the subjective perception of my respondents.

**Research question:**

- What meanings users of Korean products attach to their practices?

**Conceptualization**

In order to clarify and make the research understandable, a basic conceptual definition of the key terms of the paper – the pop culture, the youth, the product, and the media – has to be made. Firstly by youth I refer to definition given by UNESCO which states that “the term “youth” is best understood as a period of transition from the dependence of childhood to adulthood’s independence and awareness of our interdependence as members of a community; “youth” is often indicated as a person between the age where he or she may leave compulsory education, and the age at which he or she finds his or her first employment; ‘youth’ are those persons between the ages of 15 and 24 years” (The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2014). Another main concept in my thesis is product. By product I refer to the definition given by Merriam Webster who states that “the “product” is a good or service that most closely meets the requirements of a particular market and yields enough profit to justify its continued existence” (Herlyn, 2012). So, by the “products” in the research meant clothes, cosmetics, food, technology, movies, TV series, music, entertainment. It is important to define media as well, because I use this term in terms of products. “The media is all the organizations, such as television, radio, and newspapers, which provide news and information for the public or the people who do this work” (Longman, 2011). Another important term that is used in the research study is pop culture. The term was defined by different scholars, however, the definitions by Ron Price and Bill Lamb I found most appropriate. “Pop culture or popular culture is the entirety of ideas, perspectives, attitudes, memes, images, and other phenomena that are preferred by an informal consensus within the mainstream of a given culture, especially Western culture of

the early to mid 20th century and the emerging global mainstream of the late 20th and early 21st century; heavily influenced by mass media, this collection of ideas permeates the everyday lives of the society” (Price, 2010). “Although terms "popular culture" and "pop culture" are sometimes used interchangeably, and their meanings partially overlap, the term "pop", which dates from the late 1950s, belongs to a particular society and historical period. Pop refers more specifically to something containing qualities of mass appeal, while "popular" refers to what has gained popularity, regardless of its style” (Lamb, 2003). In the research the term popular culture is used in terms of Korean popular culture (a.k.a., K-pop).

### **Literature review and Theoretical overview**

Douglas Mc Gray, a senior fellow at the New America Foundation, and the adviser of the International Reporting Project at Johns Hopkins University, wrote about Japan’s global cultural influence. The research was conducted in Japan, and published in Washington in 2002. According to him, people who like Japanese soup operas, animes, mangas and Japanese music are became the victims of cultural influences. Douglas Mc Gray found out that Japanese pop culture lovers prefer to buy products only if they were made in Japan, learn Japanese language, want to travel to Japan and they associate their works with Japan, only because they like Japanese pop culture. Also, a lot of people started to dress up and to do make up like Japanese celebrities. The reason for such behavior according to Mc Gray was the wrong perception of Japanese pop culture lovers of Japanese culture, and desire to be closer for Japanese people. Roughly speaking, this kind of situation is happening right now in our country, but only it is South Korean pop culture influence.

The research of Mc Gray is very valuable for my research; the cases that he explained are very similar to the cases of what happening in Bishkek. “The popularization of Japanese pop, Taiwanese pop and more recently, Korean pop is welcomed by the Cultural Industry as a



sign of expanding borders and as a major step towards expanding its Asian market. Growing consumption and mainstreaming of Asian pop might become problematic due to the notion of cultural ‘McDonaldization’/standardization, in the future (Siriyuvasak U., Shin H, 2007)’.

People who like Asian pop culture (also Korean pop culture) are the consumers of Asian market in other words the popularity of Asian pop culture influence to the followers’ consumer preference.

Russian sociologist and the leading specialist in sociology of youth, Elena Omelchenko has her own vision on phenomenon of youth consumer behavior. She was studying youth and subcultures for many years, and conducted researches about different changes in generation X, Y and Z. In first decades of 2000, there started to be published thousands of articles about new generation, and the most bright event as she said was the football lovers’ fight in June 2002. According to her, football fans did that because they identified themselves as lovers of certain football team, and that identity made them to act like that. She was trying to prove her hypothesis through the theory of performative identity by American philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler. Butler was studying gender identities for more than twenty years, and she was claiming that there is no gender, and people creating some sets of behavior for a certain gender in order to show that they belong to a certain group (Butler, 2011). Performative identity could be imaginary or real, it is a rejection of stylistic obligations that prescribed to the status, game practices, popularity of public group activities (2011).

The behavior of Korean pop culture lovers and their consumer practices can also be explained by this theory. They buy Korean cosmetics, clothes, technology and other products not only because the quality of the products is good, but also because they identify themselves as people who belong to Korea lovers, and consciously or unconsciously they try to prove it. Their fashion style, and behavior is a part of their performative identity. The

theory of performative identity is applicable to the research study, however in the case of youth and consumption of Korean products it should be used very carefully.

In 2007, Dr. Jerome Agrusa, a professor of Travel Industry Management in the College of Business Administration at Hawaii Pacific University, and Cho Yoon, a researcher from Korean Development Institute's School Of Public Policy And Management, conducted a research about the influence of Korean TV series on consumer preferences of people who watch it. The research was based on previous studies of Desai Kaushik and Basuroy Suman in 2005 - "Interactive Influence of Genre Familiarity, Star Power, and Critics' Reviews in the Cultural Goods Industry: The Case of Motion Pictures, Psychology and Marketing", where they were trying to find relations of media and market. The research of Agrusa and Yoon explores what factors affect U.S. audiences' preferences toward Asian TV series, how U.S. audiences perceive products that are shown on Asian TV series, and how such attitudes affect actual behavior, willingness to travel to a country shown in the TV series (2007). The data was collected from different surveys in the U.S. and various statistical analyses.

The main finding of their work was that "people divide characters from the Korean movies to bad and good and follow someone they liked in the film or in the series and try to copy that person (Yoon, Agrusa, 2007)". A person who adores the character from Korean movies or TV series will wear the same style of clothes as the character, eat the same food, buy the same mobile phone and have the same brand of car. Agrusa and Yoon explained such behavior through George Gerbner's theory of cultivation. "Cultivation theory is a social theory which examines the long-term effects of television; the primary proposition of cultivation theory states that the more time people spend "living" in the television world, the more likely they are to believe social reality portrayed on television" (Chandler, 1995).

According to Yoon and Agrusa people who watch Korean movies and TV series are trying to live their lives like the characters that they watch on TV.

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The similar ideas about the influence of Korean pop culture to world market had two interesting scholars Ubonrat Siriyuvasak and Hyun Joon Shin. Ubonrat Siriyuvasak is a Thai scholar and activist, currently she is associate professor and deputy dean of research and International affairs in the faculty of communication arts at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok, she has numerous articles in media reform in South East Asia, and conducted several researches with UNESCO. Hyun Joon Shin is a research professor in the Institute for East Asian Studies in Sunkonghoe University, who focuses in transformation of Korean music industry in the globalization age, he wrote several articles on youth identity, popular culture, cultural industries and cultural policy. In their research, they were exploring influence of Korean pop music to Asian market. In the study they compared the popularization of Japanese pop, Taiwanese pop and Korean pop, they found it as a expanding of Asian market; however they claim that growing consumption and mainstreaming of Asian pop might become problematic due to the notion of cultural standardization in the future (2007).

According to Siriyuvasak and Shin, people who like Asian pop (also Korean pop) are the consumers of Asian market, they explained it as the influence of Asian pop to the followers' consumer preference. Like Agrusa and Yoon, Siriyuvasak and Shin found out that for the followers of Korean pop culture the first choice products are the products that were produced in South Korea. It was found out that the reason of choosing Korean products is not only good quality of the products but also the desire to be like the celebrities that they see in the Korean media.

### **Theoretical Framework**

In order to investigate the role of Korean products among youth, the Cultivation theory of George Gerbner and Performative identity theory of Judith Butler were used. The cultivation theory was firstly presented in the work of Gerbner "Living with television: The

dynamics of the cultivation process" (1986), and further used and explained in his study "Cultivation analysis: An overview" (1998). "Cultivation theory is a social theory which examines the long-term effects of television, the primary proposition of cultivation theory states that the more time people spend "living" in the television world, the more likely they are to believe social reality portrayed on television; cultivation leaves people with a misperception of what is true in our world" (Gerbner, 1986). People who watch TV quite often see the world from the prism of the world that they saw on TV. Gerbner claimed that viewers unconsciously adopt the lifestyles of the people they saw on TV and practice their experiences. For the viewers their favorite characters from TV are becoming the role models for life, and if the character gives a characteristic for a certain behavior or a certain product the viewers will automatically think that it is right.

American philosopher and one of the most popular theorist among feminists, Judith Butler, who is most well-known for her books "Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity and Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex" (2003), developed a theory of performative identity. Butler claimed that there is no "gender" itself, and people creating some sets of behavior for a certain "gender" in order to show that they belong to a certain group (Butler, 2011). Performative identity could be imaginary or real, it is a rejection of stylistic obligations that prescribed to the status, game practices, popularity of public group activities. She said that man has a certain behavior because he was labeled as a "man"; gender roles which were settled down through the history became the indicators of the gender groups. "The classic example is the "I pronounce you man and wife" of the marriage ceremony, in making that statement, a person of authority changes the status of a couple within an intersubjective community; those words actively change the existence of that couple by establishing a new marital reality: the words "do" what they say." (2011) The

theory of performative identity could be used not only in terms of gender but also in terms of creating any groups.

### **Methodology**

The data for this research is gathered through qualitative research method, which refers to studying in their natural settings, “attempting to make sense of interpreting the phenomenon in terms of meaning people bring to them.” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) This method helps to enhance detailed understanding of certain topics and issues. I conducted in-depth interviews with the most active consumers of South Korean products among youth of Bishkek. In-depth interview is the best method for data collection, because the goal of this method is to help a researcher understand the interviewee’s opinion, position, meaning on certain issues. “It is a type of interview which researchers use to elicit information in order to achieve a holistic understanding of the interviewee’s point of view or situation; it can also be used to explore interesting areas for further investigation. This type of interview involves asking informants open-ended questions, and probing wherever necessary to obtain data deemed useful by the researcher.” (Patton, 1987, p.113) The purpose of conducting in-depth interviews is to understand the meanings consumers of South Korean products attach to the products and to grasp their subjective opinion about the significance and purpose of the process of consumption. My sample size is 5 in-depth interviews with the lovers of Korean pop culture who are originally from Kyrgyzstan, and use South Korean products. The age group was between 15 – 24 years old. The sampling method for data collecting was snowball sampling. “A snowball sample is a non-probability sampling technique that is appropriate to use in research when the members of population are difficult to locate.” (Babbie, 2001) The snowball sampling was the most suitable for my study, because I was looking for my respondents in the Facebook, and among my friends.

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In order to make data more reliable, I designed five stories, where each one of them has a meaning, and the collected information is divided to emerging patterns which were gathered through generalization of the data.

### **Research Ethics**

My respondents were given oral informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed. The respondents names are not mentioned anywhere and I assigned them different numbers such as R1: respondent 1, R2: respondent 2, R3: respondent 3 and so on, which you will see in the analysis part. Every respondent was provided with basic information about research topic and purpose. It was in my duty as a researcher to not influence or disturb the situation in any way that may have affected the behavior and answers of my respondents. Also, in order to avoid some unethical issues, the respondents were informed that the interview will be recorded.

### **Findings and Discussion**

Korean TV series as one of the products of South Korean market is widely used in our country, and all of my respondents started their consumption of other Korean products by using it first. As Cultivation theory states, the viewers divide characters on good and bad, and try to follow their behavior and lifestyle (Gerbner, 1998). Another thing is that the viewers are not only following the characters but also adopting the feelings and meanings which character attach to their practices (1998). Five out of five of my respondent claimed that their consumer practices started with the influence of their friends, and all of them are identifying themselves as lovers of Korean pop culture.

In order to analyze the data, five emerging patterns were highlighted, where each one of them has different meanings, but is practicing by each of my respondents, so let us proceed to analysis.

### **Searching for Meaning**

The data showed that for consumers of Korean products, Korean products are not only the things with good quality, but also the consumers attach special meanings to them. According to the respondents, Korean music and TV series show life values, make people understand human feelings, and for my respondents watching Korean TV series and listening to Korean music is meaningful. According to subjective opinion, Korean TV series teach people how to appreciate family and relationships.

*R1: "...for Korean people the most important is family values, respect for elders and even after watching so many TV series these values transmitted to me and I am following it unconsciously."*

*R2: "Korean music and series are showing better side of life and behavior of people, Koreans are role models for everyone. If my boyfriend only knew what Korean singers want to say in their songs and what values soap operas want to show, he would never criticize me."*

*R3: "Kpop is so different from other music genres. The lyrics are meaningful and unlike American hip-hop they avoid dirty words and don't just sing about sex, drugs and satisfaction. Their lyrics are mostly focused on human feelings and they make listeners somehow feel their music and be happier. The songs are catchy and usually have some dance for it."*

For my respondents Korean products are something that helps them to live and be happier. According to subjective opinion Korean dramas are very positive, they make people

forget about their problems and motivate to experience the same feelings as characters experiencing.

*R3: "Korean music helps me a lot by making me feel better when I'm in bad mood. I can feel all sincerity of singers, and it makes Korean songs much valuable than songs of other singers."*

*R4: "Same with dramas, when I watch them, I forget about the outside world and its problems. For example right now you are struggling with your senior thesis paper, but if you would have free time, and watch new drama, you would feel better, because Korean dramas are very positive, and every drama has a couple which experiencing the love and now is spring, so you would probably feel better after watching it."*

*R3: "I wanted to say that Korean series are not just a product of Korean media, it is more like a cure for your happy life"*

The respondents have a strong idea that if the product is Korean than it should be something innocent; they found that Korean media does not have vulgarity and cruelty like the media of other countries. According to subjective opinion, by watching Korean movies you will learn bad things, like using drugs or consuming alcohol.

*R4: "For me Korean style means something innocent, cute, clear and bright. No vulgarity, pathos, and cruelty. This is something positive and bright."*

**R4:** *"Korean TV series attract me because they are innocent and "white". There is no cruelty and violence. Series teach us only good things, you won't see people smoking or using drugs for example, but instead you see the treasures such as love, friendship, and family. Also, some series motivate us; they show us the stories about how to achieve our goals and to be happy. Because of this positive energy and motivation I like Korean series and movies."*



The most interesting finding was that for Korean products consumers South Korea is a country where everything is perfect. According to the interviews, the love in Korea is different, the life in Korea is different, and boys in Korea are different too.

*R2: "...you know, in Korea love is a little bit different than love in our countries. For Koreans it is more dramatically, they always suffer from love and still their feelings are so pure. Oh my God, of course it is maybe only in movies, but I don't know why I want to believe that Korean boys are just like that [laughing]"*

*R4: "Actually, the characters from movies are not real, and I doubt that such people especially gentlemen exist, but I have always wanted to meet Jeremy from You're Beautiful. His optimistic view and bright character attracted me so much. He is very funny, sweet, kind and handsome. You know what, the funny thing is that Korean boys are really like this, do you remember [name of the boy], he studied on ICP, I was shocked when I saw him, I thought I met Jeremy [laughs]"*

For some of my respondents Koreans are the role models of how to live, and behave.

*R5: "For me Korean style is describing the behavior. We can call it lifestyle, you watch Korean movies, listen to their music, being very cute and nice, love Korean food and basically everything related to Korea and Asia, and you feel yourself Korean"*

*R5: "Also I love their appearance since they are showing beautiful life and it is interesting for me as for economist to explore their life style and its' correlation to economic situation."*

### **Living in Virtual Reality**

"Virtual reality is an artificial environment that is created with software and presented to the user in such a way that the user suspends belief and accepts it as a real environment. On a computer, virtual reality is primarily experienced through two of the five senses: sight and

sound.” (Davis, 1998) We should not forget that virtual reality is also reality, however in the study by virtual reality meant the amount of time the respondents spent by using Korean products.

The respondents consume Korean products everyday and trying to find new ways to buy it.

*R1: “Korean actors and singers look very attractive; I was just in love with their fashion style. Actually because of them my style has changed a little bit, I started to search for Korean brand clothes and Korean cosmetics in different Korean shops till my friend did not tell me that I can buy exactly the same clothes as Korean idols have on the internet shops.”*

Also, the respondents are following the celebrities’ lives, and trying to copy their lifestyles.

*R3: “...I became their fan because of their meaningful song lyrics and dance. My favorite song of BTS is “Born singer” where they talk about what they have gone through to become an idol. In South Korea, idol means a very popular celebrity who people follow. Honestly, I would be very lucky if some Korean agencies would notice me and make me their trainee. It is just a big dream to experience the same life as Korean idols.”*

Another thing is that the respondents are enjoying their new lives, and they keep spending a huge amount of time by following characters’ or celebrities’ lives. According to the words of R2 and R3, it is noticeable that even the idea that they are looking like their favorite characters is pleasant.

*R2: “...from the actors I really like Park Shin Hye, because everybody around keep saying me that I look just like her [laughing].”*

*R2: “...I feel like I’m a part of this current story. Korean music is so touching, and cool, their lyrics are just amazing”*

*R3: “...sure, I’m trying to dress like her, and I am crazy about her lipstick. Koreans always bring up new cosmetics that are very good.”*

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The reason of spending most of their time on Korean TV series is the fact that they feel closer to the life in South Korea. By everyday watching TV series, the respondents got used to the environment that they saw on TV.

*R4: "I prefer Korean cafes out of others because when you watch dramas, they always eat a lot of nice food and I really wanted to try it. I like variety of food for every meal they have. It is really different from what we use to have here. I feel like I am in Korea surrounded by Korean people"*

*R3: "Sometimes I feel like in previous life I was Korean [laughing]"*

As the cultivation theory states "the viewers are adopting the feelings of the characters they watching" (1998), the respondents just proved Gerbner's words.

*R2: "...the characters are strong personalities, who are young but still fighting with everyone for their love. Also, I really enjoyed them watching when they were in LA. That was awesome, I remembered myself being there."*

*R2: "I really worry for each character and feel like I want to help them. Or sometimes butterflies in my stomach, because they are so cute."*

Moreover the cultivation of Korean TV series effected to the behavior of my respondents. The characters are the role models for them, and the respondents are easily learn not only how to behave on public but also how to solve the life problems and conflicts that they face in their lives.

*R3: "Most of the stories are focused on human relationships, how to deal with other people well, so I can easily relate once a conflict arises."*

*R3: "In my opinion, Korean cosmetics are a really good discovery. I have tried some and I really liked it, because I think it really does help. When I see actors and singers on TV they look great and they take care of their appearance very much, so that cosmetics industry is one of the most rapidly developing industries in Korea."*

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As previously was mentioned, the respondents spend a huge amount of time by consuming Korean products, and here we can see that it is not only on TV series or music, but also the respondents buy technology made by South Korean products because of the applications where they can feel that their environment is another than it is.

*R3: "I have a mobile phone, laptop and tablet by Samsung. They are always innovative and honestly again I bought it because of Korean dramas and Kpop. They offer so many cool apps for fans. For example online chatting with celebrities, or the application with all songs and pictures of idols, and I love a game where you can go for a date with a celebrity and later become his girlfriend [laughing], unfortunately it is just an application."*

According to a subjective perception of R3, the lovers of Korean pop culture perceive their past lives where they are not the consumers of Korean products yet, as "reality", and their present lives, where they are consuming Korean products and dreaming about living in Korea, as "Korean reality", as R3 stated that life in South Korea or "life over there" is much better than the lives that they have here.

*R3: "In my opinion, it's because of Korean dramas and Kpop the life became better and we feel that our real lives are far from us, once we are living in Korean reality. Most of Kpopers think that life over there is much better without knowing the reality..."*

### **New Inspirations**

The heroes of the Korean movies change the image of an ideal man in Kyrgyz girls' minds. The Korean boys are usually handsome, gentle and romantic. They take care of girls like in beautiful stories and make feel them like princesses. The directors of Korean movies create a perfect image of their actors which in fact misses the reality.

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R1: *“...I love my boyfriend, but if he would be Korean, especially if he is handsome [laughing] In my imagination Korean boys are so gentle, and their love is very innocent. I love how they behave with girls, they are very romantic, even in the movies how they count days from the first meeting with their love, it is so cute [laughing]”*

R2: *“...because they really fell in love with some characters and look for ideals like them.”*

Young people follow the Korean dream due to many facts such as Korean food, tourism, culture and traditions. The country created a good image which pushes many young people to change their lifestyles and go to Korea. For example the R4 started to learn the Korean language because of her plans to make a Master degree in the particular country.

R3: *“...I’m not aware much of Korean food, but the one reason why I like Korean food because it’s spicy. I feel good and somewhat close to my “Korean dream” [laughing]”*

When I heard the expression “Korean dream” I asked the R3 to clarify it and got the further information:

R3: *“I want to visit Korea one day. Actually I’m thinking to go there for an exchange year.”*

R4: *“2 years ago I started learning Korean language because in near future I want to visit South Korea and to make master’s degree there. The reason why I chose Korea as my destination is not the only my interest in Korean wave, but also the country as well. I am interested in traditions and customs of South Korea, in its history and the development and growth of this country. Also, Korean people are very hardworking people, and they tend to study a lot.”*

R5: *“I feel like I want to travel to Korea. Seriously! And meet people, walk down the streets, have fun with them and observe if the life shown in dramas is real one.”*

The ideas of the Korean dramas make young people to study better, push them striving for the self-development and make their life more interesting. The things like dancing, products of healthcare and clothes make girls feel and look better. The respondent 1 lost 10

kilos because of dancing, the Respondent 4 told that the Korean lifestyle made better her life in all spheres.

*R4: "Thanks to Korean dramas I started being interested in reading books, also now I study better than before. Books are the thing that really can make me happy and can cheer me up."*

*R1: "...because of K-pop I found my passion, I love dancing so much, and I dance everyday [laughing]. I lost around 10 kilos because of dancing, so K-pop is not only music and movies, it is a lifestyle"*

*R4: "The main accent is face skin, because Korean women tend to look younger. They take care of their health, eat healthy, and use proper products. Their makeup is moderate and fresh, and clothes are not vulgar and stylish. But I also think that Korean style is not only about clothes and makeup, but this is the life style. Whether you take care of yourself or not, how you eat, behave and etc."*

The Korean movies also establish the right values in young people minds. The scenes promote respect, tolerance and the right mechanism of relationships. The R1 told that she had learned how to appreciate the elders, friends and family. The R4 told that some movies motivate her to keep going despite of life difficulties.

*R1: "They show how young people should respect elders, Korean people respect each other, even how they greet each other, I also learned a lot from Korean dramas, they show how we should appreciate our parents, our true friends..."*

*R4: "It also depends on type of movie. When I watch romantic movies I admire the innocent love, and learn lots of new things. They show lots of treasures, such as family relationship, friendship, love and etc. Some series motivate me not to give up achieving my goal."*

### **Finding similarities**

One of the factors which unite the Kyrgyz girls with the Korean lifestyle is the “Asian skin”. The Korean products of healthcare are ideal for our girls according to the answers of the respondents. The Respondent 4 had shared her positive experience about the use of the skin cream.

*R2: “Because as I have heard, they fit us, Asians best, for example their BB and CC creams are good for our tone and type of skin, rather than the European cosmetics type, also I use shampoos, and they are really good for Asian hair too.”*

*R4: “Many people adore my skin, because I use bb cream, and I like these compliments. It is not bright, and vulgar, but childish and innocent. I like Korean cosmetics because it was made for Asians, and it fits to our skin.”*

The next factor which unites the young girls with the Korean lifestyle is the food.

According to the both respondents it is delicious and they practice cooking at home.

*R2: “I like any food! [laughing] Food is awesome! But sincerely, it is very delicious, even at home we always eat kimchi and make gimpab”*

*R2: “my Grandmother can cook kimchi, and I ate it since I was a little child, but at that time we didn’t know that it is kimchi [laughing]. I learned how to cook it from my Grandmother.”*

The main fact which unites Kyrgyz and Koreans is the classification of ethnic group – ASIANS. The similar appearance, common social and cultural experiences create the synergy.

*R3: “Koreans have good marketing and they are also Asians, that’s why they are closer to us.”*

*R5: “Yes, I do see increase. First of all, relations between Korea and Kyrgyzstan are getting stronger in political and economic aspects. The fact that our two cultures are similar somehow, and our people mostly look like East Asians I think also influences. Also we can see how many more people migrating to Kyrgyzstan from Korea, and Kyrgyz people to Korea, for*

*past few years. So it is not influence of Korean wave only, but for sure it has impacted it also.”*

### **Finding a New Belongingness**

Five out of five of my respondents mentioned their friends or relatives are the people who introduce them into Korean pop culture and for now all of them have a group of friends along with whom they are consuming Korean products and following the news of Korean market. The thoughts of my respondents and their consumer practices can also be explained by the theory of performative identity (Butler, 2011). They buy Korean cosmetics, clothes, technology and other products not only because of the quality of the products or its' attractiveness, but also because they identify themselves as people who belong to Korea lovers, and consciously or unconsciously they try to prove it. Their fashion style, and behavior is a part of their performative identity.

*R5: “It started about 4 years ago when my cousin introduced me Korean pop stars and I liked their music. I believe as I was 18 only and liked their appearance more rather than music itself. My love for Korean dramas and movies started later as it was summer time, vacation and I had nothing to do then to watch dramas non-stop.”*

*R1: “My sister, who lived in Malaysia that time, played me music video of one k-pop group and after that I just started to explore Youtube and Google and found Korean Hallyu Wave very fascinating and interesting.”*

Also, for some of my respondents Korean pop culture became a reason that made their family relationships stronger. The respondents enjoy watching TV series with their friends, and family.



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*R4: “My mother is also fond of Korean style, and that is why she looks much younger- she said. She watched Korean movies first, than I started to be interested; actually because of Korean movies all my family becomes closer to each other because we have one common interest. My friends like my style and my interest, some of them also became fond of Korean wave.”*

*R2: “As I have said, because of my girlfriends, who were fans for a long time, and because everyone around me was talking about it, I got to know from them.”*

One of the factors that influenced on consumer preferences of my responds is the fact that their friends practicing it and the respondents choose certain Korean products because of the suggestions of their friends. My respondents enjoy being a part of the group of people who shares the same interests as them, and sometimes the reason of belonging to a group is stronger than the interest to Korean products itself.

*R2: “I don’t use any of them so much, because sometimes, I think I am not a huge fan, but when there is a good TV serial or music clip that my friends really suggest me to watch or listen to, I do that. And when I mostly have time.”*

*R2: “From the products I prefer TV series, music and movies mostly. But now, I started to use cosmetics too sometimes, because I, again, heard from friends about the advantage of them.”*

The consumption of one of the products influence on consumption of other products, especially if the consumer experience has started with Korean music or movies. Here we can see the whole story of R4, how her experience has started, and what factor influenced on her choice.

*R4: “Ok, 5 years ago, my friend suggested me to watch one Korean movie called “AN Jell: You’re Beautiful”. She was excited and retold me the whole movie, so I became interested in it and I decided to watch it. The episodes were passing one after another so I did not realize that I spent the whole night. [laughing] That was something new for me: the movies were*

*innocent and white, the appearances of actors were unusual, and the whole story was attractive. After that movie I started to listen to k-pop music, especially groups from that movie, FT Island and CN Blue, and my “Korean wave” way started. The music was light and dynamic, the video clips were very colorful and positive, and the singers were beautiful and gorgeous [laughing]”*

For one of my respondents, interest in Korean pop culture turned out for being out of the group, but according to her, she was not sad because she had K-pop, and because of her interest she found new friends who share the same interests.

*R3: “I often make new friends because of Kpop, I find out that they are also attracted to it. My family stays neutral.”*

Another respondent has conflicts with her boyfriend because of her interest in K-pop, however she still likes K-pop and follows the celebrities.

*R1: “Not all of my friends are Korean culture lovers, and it is very sad, because I cannot share my feelings and happiness with them and talk about new songs and new videos. Also, my boyfriend hates Korean boys because I like them so much, he always asks me “how can you listen to them if you do not understand the language?”, “girls look like dolls, boys look like girls, how can you like it?” and so on”*

Some of my respondents made their friends to be interested in everything Korean, and by doing this, they created a group where they can share their feelings and thoughts about Korean products.

*R5: “Well my parents do not really care, because I was always fan of some groups. And friends- I made them KPOP fan as well. Firstly they didn’t like it but by making them to listen to music, watch movies they just fell in love with it gradually.”*

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According to the subjective answers of my respondents we can conclude that the reason for consuming Korean products is enjoying being a part of the group. If they are stopping their relationships with their friends, the interest in Korean products is stopping too.

R5: "Mostly I watch TV programs with English subtitles. My music taste has changed, so k-pop is not that interesting anymore. I think it is also influenced by the fact that I used to be pretty much a fan of KPOP along with my friends. And now we are all grown up and have other interests."

### **Conclusion**

This research was intended to study the role of Korean products among youth in Bishkek.

It was conducted through five in-depth interviews through which the meanings that users of Korean products attach were investigated. The Cultivation theory by George Gerbner and Performative identity theory by Judith Butler were applied as a basic theoretical framework in answering the research questions and analyzing basic concepts. The study has shown that both of the theories are applicable to explain the role of Korean products in its consumers' lives.

The research showed that the media has strong influences on the modeling of human behavior. For young and active consumers of Korean products, the fact of consuming is not just a process but something that has deeper meaning touching their identity and social life.

Five sub-chapters of the study are telling the different sides of influencing factors researched according to subjective perceptions of the respondents. Korean products made a huge impact on the respondents' lives, and created a value and meaning of their existence.

The research would make a good contribution to international marketing and youth cultures study. I am sure that I will continue working on this topic and in the future, maybe this year or later I will make the research much bigger, and study the topic from different

sides. Of course, any study has its limitations and this is not an exception. My research findings are limited to only studying five consumers of Korean products, and it cannot be generalized to all groups or to all consumers of Korean products. Nevertheless this case provides valuable insight into the study of consumer preferences and the attached meaning to the products of the respondents. Therefore this work can serve as a pilot study for further researchers on international marketing and youth culture study. In addition it is worth mentioning that as I was one of those active Korean products' consumers, and maybe it was easy for me to get access to the field and built trust with my respondents, it helped me interact with them and gather data. But the problem I faced was overcoming my own biases and noticing things that I took for granted before, with the help of my supervisor. As my topic is a general overview of the field, I believe studying the different aspect in more details would be valuable too.

### **Suggestions for further Research**

I researched the role of Korean products among youth in Bishkek, and the study was concentrated to the meanings that consumers attach to the products, therefore 5 in-depth interviews were appropriate. However for further researches I would suggest to make quantitative large scale research because of a huge amount of Korean products consumers in Bishkek. Also, another suggestion is to create a map with realization stores, and update it on yearly bases. This would be the indicator of the Korean sales representatives' dynamics.

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