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The Korean Wave in Practice

Fieldwork reports from Berlin

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Korea Focus – Briefing is a series of short articles relevant to Korea. This issue is written by Gwendolyn Domning, research associate and lecturer in Korean Studies at the Freie Universität Berlin, Amanda Belina Willmann, a student of Korean Studies at Freie Universität Berlin preparing her bachelor thesis, Corinna Elkmann, B.A. in Modern East Asia Studies with a focus on sociology and Korea at the Universität Duisburg-Essen, currently preparing her M.A. in Korean Studien at Freie Universität Berlin and Olivia Jolanta Szalaty also preparing for B.A. in Korean Studies at Freie Universität Berlin.

Introduction

The Korean Wave, or Hallyu, refers to the international spread of Korean popular culture content and products since the early 1990s. Since approximately the 2010s, this Wave has also reached Europe. The impact of this cultural phenomenon in local settings, however, remains understudied, requiring research that actively engages with it in context. What practices emerge from the reception of Korean popular culture? What culture do consumers build around their liking for K-pop and other Korean Wave-associated content?

During the seminar “The Korean Wave in Practice: Methods of Cultural Inquiry,” Korean Studies students explored the phenomenon through interviews and participatory fieldwork methods. This article presents the outcomes of their individual projects conducted in November 2025 in Berlin. The first contribution by Corinna Elkmann examines whether locations in Berlin visited by Korean celebrities and publicized on their social media become pilgrimage sites. The second contribution by Olivia Jolanta Szalaty provides a thick description of K-idols’ birthday celebrations among fans in Berlin. The last contribution by Amanda Belina Willmann explores the dynamics of contemporary fan spaces during concert movie screenings in Berlin.

K-celebrity locations in Berlin

In the context of Film-induced tourism, increasing attention has been paid to the role of celebrities in mediating spaces and destination familiarity. This is easily observed in K-drama tourism in South Korea, for example. However, it remains unclear whether a celebrity’s personal social media can incite a similar phenomenon, as its audience reach is more restricted and production is less professional. Are social media ‘moments’ creating fan tourism, or do they lack impact? To answer the question, field observations were conducted on two distinct murals in Berlin, selected for their association with prominent K-pop figures and their status as social media landmarks.

The first site examined was the "Seeds of Light" mural at Potsdamer Platz, created by the artist Carolina Amaya. Fieldwork was conducted after the mural gained attention on Seventeen's Hoshi's Instagram post during his stay in Germany. Despite the online interest, there was no physical evidence of fan engagement, such as graffiti or other marks at the site during the visit. The surrounding area, which is mainly comprised of restaurants, also showed no signs of fan interaction. A review of online activity identified fewer than 100 posts related to this art piece

in connection with Hoshi, with no official hashtags or dedicated fan pages, indicating limited direct fan activity at the site.

The second site was a mural at the East Side Gallery, selected by J-Hope of BTS for an Instagram story during his 2025 visit to Berlin for a concert. The fieldwork revealed minimal visible fan activity. The observed visitors primarily contemplated the mural without attempting to recreate the image from J-Hope's story. Furthermore, the mural was under strict control, thus fans could not freely leave traces such as graffiti or personal items behind. The inspection of physical barriers, including poles in front of the artwork, showed no signs of fan interaction. After fieldwork, a follow-up online research was conducted. However, it turned out to be rather difficult to collect relevant data. Neither of the two artists created a hashtag that animated fans to build an online collection of their recreations. Yet, due to Hoshi's post being permanent, it is likely that it animated fans more to recreate his picture and also post it online. In the case of J-Hope's post, it was more difficult to find relevant recreations since he only had his picture as a temporary story available. In both cases it was also difficult to find fan-recreations by place markers since the places chosen by the artists only have rather broad place markers, like "East Side Gallery", that do not pinpoint the specific murals. Further limitations for finding fan-recreations online might be: the commitment of fans posting the picture permanently as a post instead of a temporary story on the day they visited the places or around the time the artists were at those places and be therefore relevant for the fan in that moment; in order to finding recreations, the accounts have to be set as public; and lastly, fans might have posted recreations but did not use any hashtag of place markers in general which makes the pictures not appear in searches.

In conclusion, observations suggest low physical fan engagement at both sites, possibly due to restrictive controls and the absence of specific social media prompts for interaction. The social media moments thus did not create a pilgrimage site for fan tourism during the observation period. This contrasts with the case of singer Billie Eilish, who posted a photo of herself visiting a staircase at Warschauer Brücke in Berlin in 2019. The spot became famous and even received a plaque, officially designating it as a fan space.

In the case of Billie Eilish, fans visited the location and left messages for the artist; 'Billie's Spot' was not a mural, allowing fans to interact more freely with the space, as if drawing on a blank canvas. In contrast, Hoshi and J-hope's spots were not blank canvases, limiting the potential for fans to engage in indirect communication. This could highlight the importance of reciprocal exchange in the meaning-making of celebrity spaces. Further research should explore this aspect and compare it with other cases that serve as blank canvases for fan-celebrity communication.

Celebrating and connecting with the K-pop community

As Jenkins has already highlighted, fans are active creators rather than passive consumers. Fan entrepreneurship has started to draw the attention of some researchers, with new projects examining fan events from an economic perspective and linking the production, gifting, and selling of fan products during these events to a so-called gray economy. Beyond the economic aspect of fan events, the emotional, cultural, and community-building elements of such phenomena cannot be overlooked and warrant further investigation. The following explores these aspects through participatory fieldwork and shares observations from two ‘cup sleeve events’, which are fan-organized birthday celebrations usually held in coffee shops. One event coincided with a solo concert by Shinee’s Onew, and the other celebrated the birthdays of two ATEEZ members, Wooyoung and Hongjoong. The main question guiding this fieldwork was, ‘How are cup sleeve events organized, and what do they mean to those involved?’

The first cupsleeve event took place in close proximity to the concert venue where Onew performed his solo show on the same day. The café offered special, concert-themed drinks, and with each purchase, the event manager provided a “freebie,” in this case a sticker featuring Onew. The space was visually saturated with Onew imagery: photos covered the walls, a mirror was decorated for fan selfies, and interactive stations, such as a message board and a sticker-based voting activity for fans’ favorite Onew era.

The audience was notably diverse in terms of age (approximately 16 to 50) and nationality. Most attendees arrived in pairs or small groups, yet they appeared to form connections quickly, bonding over their shared admiration for Onew. Many engaged in photocard trading or spontaneous conversations about the artist. After interviewing five fans and observing additional interactions, it became clear that nearly all participants planned to attend the concert afterward, reinforcing the event’s role as part of the broader concert-going experience.

Patterns emerged in how different age groups discovered the event: younger fans primarily learned about it through Instagram and K-pop group chats on WhatsApp, while older fans relied more on Facebook, Telegram, or WhatsApp communities. When asked about their favorite aspects of the event, attendees most often highlighted receiving freebies, writing messages, and spending time with other fans. Several participants emphasized that the sense of belonging within the K-Pop fan community was particularly meaningful, with one fan noting they had never experienced such a strong communal atmosphere in non-K-Pop spaces.

The second cupsleeve event, held in celebration of ATEEZ members Wooyoung and Hongjoong, took place in a café decorated with images of the two idols and additional pictures of the full group. The café offered two special birthday drinks, yet unlike the Onew event, no supplementary activities (such as message-writing stations or freebies) were organized by the event manager. The atmosphere was noticeably less busy, and the audience slightly less diverse, consisting mostly of young German fans between approximately 16 and 25. As with the previous event, most attendees arrived in small groups but ended up gathering at communal tables, forming new connections through shared interests in ATEEZ.

A key difference from the Onew event was the prominent presence of a merchandise table operated by the organizer, selling both K-pop-related goods (plushies, photocard holders, photocards) and unrelated handmade items (press-on nails, earrings, necklaces). After interviewing ten fans and conversing informally with others, it became evident that many attendees were multi-fandom K-pop fans, also following other K-pop boy groups such as Stray Kids and Enhypen. Most had been ATEEZ fans for at least a year. They primarily learned about the event through Instagram or WhatsApp group chats, and many had previously attended other cup sleeve celebrations.

Participants described bonding with other fans as the highlight of the event. They noted that more interactive activities, such as lotteries or message boards, typically help facilitate communication and make the atmosphere even more welcoming, and their absence here was felt. When asked how they usually celebrate their favorite idols' birthdays, fans commonly mentioned attending cup sleeve events with friends and posting congratulatory messages or memories on Instagram or Twitter. Some also shared more personalized rituals, such as buying a cake to photograph and upload when celebrating a favorite idol.

Different age groups demonstrated differing priorities: younger fans expressed stronger emotional connections to the idols themselves, while fans aged roughly 23 and older emphasized the social dimension of K-pop, attending such events primarily to spend time with friends and meet fellow fans. Observations at the ATEEZ event also indicated a heightened focus on "trendy" fan practices such as owning, trading, and selling merchandise, behaviors that at times seemed to overshadow the event's thematic purpose.

Together, these observations show how K-pop fans celebrate idols' birthdays and how these gatherings function less as moments of direct idol-oriented devotion and more as opportunities for community-building. Fans use cup sleeve events to express identity, participate in shared rituals, and cultivate relationships within the fandom. While the events revolve around idols, the fieldwork suggests that, for many participants, the primary meaning lies in connecting with the fan community.

The Hyperreal: Recreating the K-concert experience

Baudrillard argued that in a world saturated with representations, simulacra can become more real than the real, a condition he termed the hyperreal, long before AI-generated imagery and deepfakes entered everyday life. As technological infrastructures have evolved, concerts can now be livestreamed or screened in cinemas, enabling global fans to experience performances through mediated formats. Among others, the K-pop industry has embraced these possibilities, increasing cinema screenings and live concert viewing. Nevertheless, concert culture differs starkly from the norms of cinema-going, especially as understood in the 2020s, where special

attention is paid to the environment's quietness¹ for the sake of immersion. Elements central to the live K-pop experience, such as lightsticks, fan chants, and coordinated fan projects, are therefore maladapted to the usual theater experience and require fans to negotiate, transform, and adapt practices within the cinematic setting. The following examines how fans reproduce, reinterpret, and renegotiate their expected concert experiences within the spatial and behavioral constraints of the theater.

The fieldwork was conducted during the first screening of J-Hope, member of the Korean boy group Bang Tan Seo Nyeon Dan (BTS), and his Tour 'Hope On The Stage' – THE MOVIE, held during the evening at a popular cinema located in East Berlin. The cinema auditorium was moderately full, which could have been due to the late release of premiere tickets. The audience mainly consisted of young adult women who arrived in small groups of two or more, although some larger groups were also present. Many attendees dressed comfortably but were still easily identifiable as fans by their hoodies, jackets, or bags adorned with the artist's photocards. Before and after the screening, two attendees walked through the theater distributing handmade BTS and J-Hope bracelets and self-made photocards to everyone present, ensuring that each viewer received one. One of these attendees also included a QR code linking to their social media accounts, demonstrating how fan gift culture intersects with self-promotion and networking in such spaces.

Inside the theater, the atmosphere quickly shifted from that of a conventional cinema to one closely resembling a concert environment. Viewers cheered after every performance shown in the film, reacted enthusiastically when J-Hope appeared shirtless, and became especially loud when Jin and Jungkook, two other members of BTS who appeared as special guests during the concert, were shown together with him. Fans sang along and performed fanchants, particularly during the commercially successful songs Killin' It Girl, Mona Lisa, MIC Drop, and Spring Day. Short conversations among attendees revealed prior concert experiences. One person, for example, mentioned having seen J-Hope four times. The emotional tone of the audience transitioned from excitement to happiness and, finally, nostalgia, suggesting that the screening functioned as a collective reliving of concert memories. The sentiment of longing to see the artists on stage again was expressed, as the group BTS has not performed together since 2022. It also points to the J-Hope concert viewing being tied to the overall consumption of BTS.

Overall, the fieldwork observations demonstrate that K-pop is not consumed as a passive media product but as a collective, participatory, and emotionally charged experience. Fans recreate elements of live concerts, cheering, singing along, performing fanchants, dressing in merchandise, displaying photocards, and exchanging freebies, within the boundaries of the cinema. Through these practices, fans collectively break with the norms set for movie screenings, reimagining the space in the likeness of the concert experience. The theater becomes a

¹ It is now customary to silence one's cellphone during a screening, and many theaters produce custom announcement short films to inform viewers of the etiquette to follow.

temporary space for the fan community, where media consumption is social, interactive, and tied to shared identity and memory.

Thus, K-pop consumption in the cinema extends beyond mere enjoyment of filmed content. It involves ritualized fan practices, community-building, emotional engagement, and the reproduction of a global imaginary of K-pop concert fandom culture. Future fieldwork could focus on comparing different fandoms and screenings to analyse similarities and differences in the negotiation of cinema concert norms and adaptation.

Conclusions:

The wide range of observations across different spaces linked to the K-experience in Berlin underscores the essentiality of recognizing the Korean Wave as, at its core, a reception process. Such a process cannot be understood without grounding it in field observations.

Corinna Elkemann's fieldwork, for instance, suggests that the conditions necessary to inspire fan tourism may be more complex than initially assumed. It raises important questions about what motivates fans to visit celebrity-related locations and indicates that one key factor may be the possibility of participating and communicating through leaving physical traces of their presence. The project also points to the likelihood that K-celebrities receive relatively little institutional support in formalizing or maintaining their "spots" in Germany.

Olivia Jolanta Szalaty's work examines cup sleeve events in detail and adds nuance to predominantly economic interpretations of the phenomenon. The entrepreneurial dimension of fan practices appears to vary in relevance across events, and economic considerations can at times diminish fans' enjoyment, particularly because fans tend to value activities that emphasize communication and community-building. This raises broader questions about how fans negotiate the tension between the economic production of fan goods and their desire to cultivate inclusive, socially meaningful fan spaces.

Amanda Belina Willmann's contribution highlights the screen as a medium of memory, enabling fans to relive earlier concert experiences and connect with the community both inside and outside the cinema. Watching concerts becomes a way to re-enter concert culture—whether by drawing on previous firsthand experiences or by imagining what participation in the "real" event would feel like. In this sense, the screen functions as a substitute for the live experience, fulfilling similar purposes by fostering connections between fans and idols, and among fans within their local communities.

Berlin offers further opportunities to examine how the Korean Wave is received within the German context. This article begins from the premise that the impact of this cultural phenomenon on local settings remains understudied and therefore calls for more empirical research. The three contributions presented here represent an initial step toward unpacking the relationships among culture, meaning, and the K-experience within the local environment.

