

# THE NEW KOREAN WAVE IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND ITS ROLE IN THE STRATEGIC APPROACH TO MEDICAL TOURISM IN KOREA

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## **Abstract**

The “Korean Wave” (known as *Hallyu* in Korean) describes the phenomenon whereby aspects of Korean culture have become popular globally. By conducting a cross-cultural analysis, this study identifies the status and shifts of Hallyu in the Middle East, and analyzes the factors that have helped it spread successfully. This paper also seeks a strategic approach for evaluating the role of the new Korean Wave in the Middle East. The number of Middle Eastern patients and families visiting Korea for medical tourism has risen rapidly in the past few years. Medical tourism from the Middle East is expected to grow, improving Korea’s reputation in the region and generating financial gain. The results imply great potential for establishing a new Korean Wave beyond the present scope.

## **Keywords**

cross-cultural understanding, Hallyu, Korean drama, Korean Wave, medical tourism, Middle East

## **About the Author**

Suwan Kim’s research interests revolve around social and cross-cultural studies, including Arab, Islam image and perception studies, behavior psychology, and media and cultural business marketing in the Middle East.

## THE KOREAN WAVE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Since the late 1990s, the Korean Wave (or Hallyu) has attracted many foreigners to Korean culture and influenced unexpected fields as Hallyu industries have become more diversified and specialised, in turn increasing the exportation of Korean goods. Hallyu has overall enhanced Korea's public image abroad, deepening foreigners' familiarity with the country. It is anticipated that the exportation of Hallyu industries will expand in the future.

The term "Korean Wave" (known as Hallyu in Korean) describes the cultural phenomenon whereby various aspects of Korean pop culture such as music, television series, and movies have become globally popular. The public, especially the younger generations, admire Korean celebrities and imitate them. Hallyu has rapidly spread to East and Southeast Asian countries including China, Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Vietnam, as well as the Middle East, and has had a significant influence on their society, culture, and economics over the past decade. Hallyu also indicates characteristics of the Korean cultural industry and its influence. Among diverse success factors, economic and social network service development in Korea and the extension of exchange in international networks are analyzed as main success factors (Jang, Song and Nam).

Over the past ten years in the Middle East, Hallyu has been in the spotlight of global pop culture and has introduced new forms and patterns to creative industries. This study examines how Hallyu has transformed in the Middle East, and analyzes the phenomenon's success factors through cultural content analysis. The results imply great potential for business generated by this new Korean Wave beyond its previous scope in the form of a creative economy.

Korean public culture, a core part of Hallyu, is led by the public media and includes television series, pop music and movies. When Hallyu first began, it was disseminated through television and movies. The first program introduced in the Middle East was the cartoon *Cute Jjoggomi*, which was sold to Jordan in 1998. *Youth* was the first television drama sold in the region; it was released in Jordan in 2002. However, Korean cultural media content was not initially successful in the Middle East. It began to receive significant attention when television dramas such as *Jumong*, *The 1st Shop of Coffee Prince*, and *Winter Sonata* became popular in the Middle East. *Dae Jang Geum* was broadcast in 2008, and was a big hit in Islamic countries. This led to Hallyu television series being actively distributed, which helped spread Korean culture as well.

*Dae Jang Geum*, which has gained widespread popularity in the Middle East, represents the expansion of Korean culture. Since first airing in Korea in 2004, *Dae*

*Jang Geum* has been exported to 87 different countries over the past decade and has generated approximately USD 11 million overseas for a total gain of USD 94 million (Jungmin).

In Iran, *Dae Jang Geum* received a rating of around 90%, which was unprecedented in Iran's domestic market as well as among those working in broadcasting stations in local areas in Korea. Apart from the Middle East, *Dae Jang Geum* helped spread Hallyu to Africa, Eastern Europe, and Central and South America. It also helped expand K-pop-influenced aspects of Hallyu into movies, food, fashion, and increased the popularity of cosmetic products and medical travel to Korea.

The number of fans of Korean television series has grown across the Middle East (Iran, Egypt, UAE, Turkey, etc.) over the past few years. Approximately 500 hours from 16 different series produced by Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation (MBC) were sold at a media marketing show in Dubai in 2007. Television dramas produced by the Seoul Broadcasting System (SBS) and Korean Broadcasting System (KBS), such as *Winter Sonata*, have been introduced to the Middle East through Ghassan, a distributor in Saudi Arabia.

In the Middle East, Hallyu brought Korean products into the limelight. In Iran, more than 80% of all imported cars were earlier Toyota automobiles from Japan; however, in 2007, Hyundai vehicles held the top market share of newly released cars due to Hallyu's influence. Given how Korean products are currently topping sales in terms of home appliances in Iran, overshadowing Japan, it is clear that Hallyu has created a tremendous economic ripple effect. Regarding Southeast Asia's geographic proximity, it is not surprising that Hallyu has become popular there as well. However, it is no coincidence that Hallyu has had a great influence on the aforementioned countries. There are many psychological factors and causes that combine to excite the Middle Easterners about Hallyu in relation to social, cultural, economic and emotional aspects.

### **THE SUCCESS FACTORS FOR THE GROWING POPULARITY OF KOREAN WAVE IN THE MIDDLE EAST**

Cross-cultural analysis was conducted to examine the success factors for the growing popularity of Korean television series in the Middle East. The results are as follows.

Compared to Europe or the Americas, there is a lack of sufficient broadcasting content in the Middle East. Channels tend to rely heavily on foreign programs.

However, since the content generally violates the values of Islam and traditional Middle Eastern cultures due to its excessive sexual imagery or homosexuality, the content does not pass the screening process. Despite the lack of original broadcasting content, the influence of Western, notably American, public culture is relatively low in Islamic countries, which often harbour a strong anti-American stance in comparison to their stance on Korea.

Viewers in Southeast Asia saw the potential of Hallyu and started preferring well-crafted Korean dramas the content of which were in line with Islamic ideas. Family-friendly values are the main reason for the success of Korean television series (Jung). Muslim and Middle Eastern viewers prefer Korean dramas that are not provocative and involve fewer social issues (Chunryul) mainly dealing with historical series that are less controversial; it is relatively easy for such shows to pass the screening process. According to Lyan and Levkowitz,

Since the introduction of Hallyu to Israel, the number of Israelis interested in Korean culture has grown from tens to thousands and Korean TV drama become a gateway to a broader interest in Korean culture. Although direct experience with Korea and Koreans is limited by physical distance, fans (re)create 'Korean-ness' solely on the basis of cultural products. (11)

As shown in Table 1, Middle Eastern fans easily identify with the emotions expressed in Korean television series and are attracted to typical Korean love stories, which have a mellow, humanistic atmosphere as compared to American dramas portraying violence, betrayal, and sex. Korean Confucian values are similar to traditional Islamic ideas, which resonate with Middle Eastern viewers who prefer shows with moral lessons for children, such as respect for adults and bonding with family members. Fans are also drawn to the happy-endings that provide a sense of hope after overcoming adversity.

**Table 1: Analysis of Cultural Backgrounds and Preferences for Korean Television Series in the Middle East**

Socio-cultural analysis of the Middle East	Preference analysis of Korean television series
Lack of media content →	←Exciting variety of content
Importance of Middle Eastern → traditions and cultural values	←Respect for Korean and traditional Confucian values
Aspects of American culture → that clash with Islamic values Sex, violence, betrayal	←Love and family-oriented themes Respect for elders, bonding with family members, love, humanistic values
Pursuit of happiness → in Islam	←Stories with happy endings where the characters achieve success

Korean dramas simultaneously display aspects of Western societies and family-oriented traits that represent traditional Confucian values. Korean dramas aired in the Middle East mostly deal with issues relating to family members, differences in social class, and love triangles. By showing situations that comport with Islamic beliefs, such as an emphasis on family, Korean dramas have raised awareness of shared values among Middle Eastern viewers. Youth in the region increasingly prefer to express their personal problems and desires through the lens of a Korean drama. Middle Eastern audiences are also drawn to beautiful images, sensitive approaches, romanticism, and storylines where good triumphs over evil.

Hallyu has seen fruitful results due to its high-quality content as well as a combination of other factors. Table 2 shows a summary of the analysis. When Korean dramas were first exported, foreign cultural content that could be aired in conservative Islamic countries that emphasised Islamic values as well as viewers' personal sensibilities were limited. From this perspective, Korean television series have filled the gap, providing an alternative to Western shows. Hallyu has led to an increased exportation of Korean films, food, and electronic products, which have become mainstream. The Internet, a modern-day silk road, has also helped disseminate information.

**Table 2: Analysis of Hallyu's Success Factors in the Middle East**

	Key factors	Content
1	Cultural similarities between Korea and the Middle East	Respect for the family, social order, traditional values
2	Cultural differences between Korea and the Middle East	Socio-cultural environment: People rely on the Internet since they cannot freely express themselves in a conservative Islamic society.
3	Lack of media content the in Middle East	Many shows and music are broadcast from foreign countries
4	Korean government's support of cultural industries and media content	The Korean government strives to develop cultural industry policies and outstanding cultural content
5	Development of ICT*	Rapid development of ICT, including the Internet

\*ICT: Information Communication Technology

Besides influencing public culture, Hallyu has improved Korea's national image in the Middle East. This phenomenon has removed geographic and cultural distances between Korea and the Middle East, and has inspired citizens from Middle Eastern countries to visit Korea. According to research conducted in 2012 on Middle Eastern fans' interest in Hallyu, 52% of respondents listened to K-pop on the Internet at least once a day, and YouTube was the most popular website for this purpose. Most striking was that 87% of those who visited K-pop websites planned to visit Korea (Kang).

The exportation of Korean dramas to the Middle East has accelerated due to the penetration of the Internet and cable broadcasting in the region. Middle Eastern countries have mostly adopted satellite broadcasting over ground wave broadcasting, and the distribution rate of satellite TVs has reached almost 90% (Lee). Shows aired via satellite have a high distribution rate and enjoy relatively relaxed regulations for airing. The development of information communication technology (ICT) via satellite broadcasting and the Internet is regarded as one of the main reasons for Hallyu's success.

Since Middle Eastern women are generally conservative in expressing their feelings, they contented themselves with the uninhibited expressions of love and dance in Korean dramas and K-pop. Freund and Weinhold analyzed how the growth of the Internet promoted trade in services; Moonsung highlighted its importance in expanding social networks and business; and Shim underscored the Internet as key in spreading Hallyu and increasing exportation of Korean products.

The South Korean government has backed cultural industries by providing financial support and encouraged content producers to cultivate overseas markets. In 2004, the government provided USD 400,000 to independent producers and the Korea Home Shopping Cable Channel to participate in international content markets (Shim). Having grasped the significance of such a marketplace, Korea's Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism (MCST) has annually hosted Broadcast Worldwide (BCWW), a global conference on content marketing, since 2001. MCST is nonetheless convinced of Hallyu's monetary contribution to Korea's "export-led economic development," a catchphrase that the economic ministries use to justify their budgetary increase (Oh and Lee 105). The government has strived to develop cultural industry policies and outstanding cultural content. This has been favourably evaluated and has been the main reason for Hallyu's success.

## THE KOREAN WAVE ATTRACTING ADDITIONAL INDUSTRIES

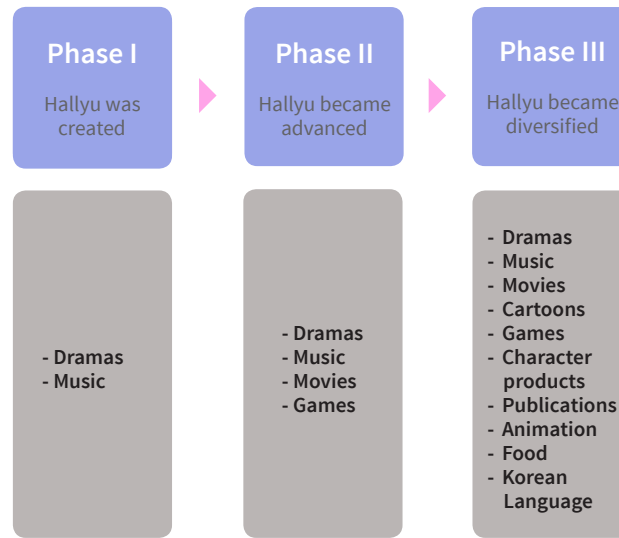
According to the 2011 data provided by the Korea Customs Service, major global regions have been divided into “Korean Wave” and “non-Korean Wave” groups, comparing the increased rate of the exportation of consumables after 2005 in each country. The Korean Wave countries receive a much higher rate of exportation than non-Korean Wave nations. The number of consumables sent to Iraq grew by 7,716%, in Iran by 234%, and in Saudi Arabia by 110%. This widespread preference for Korean consumables has been as an important factor for their exportation.

Countries strongly influenced by Hallyu such as China, Japan, and Southeast Asian states have been steadily importing more Korean products. The Middle East as well as Central and South America are regions where Hallyu is relatively new. After Korean television series were first introduced to the Middle East in 2005, the exportation of domestic consumables to the area began to rise, increasing from USD 2.9 billion in 2000 to USD 10.2 billion in 2010.

In 2006, the Korean drama *Dae Jang Geum* aired on TV in Iraq and soon became the most watched show in the country. Since 2006, the exportation of domestic consumables in the country has doubled each year. The exportation of home appliances, such as video tape recorders and air conditioners, has risen tenfold. Cell phones, cars, and beverages are currently in the limelight. *Dae Jang Geum* aired in Iran in 2007, and *Jumong* was released there in 2008; on average, the importation of domestic consumables has grown by 45% each year and surpassed USD 1 billion. The export of TV dramas has also more than doubled, and the exports of cars, home appliances, cosmetic products, and beverages keep increasing.

In Saudi Arabia, Korean dramas were a big hit, resulting in the importation of consumables increasing by 9% during the 2009 financial crisis and by 25.4% in 2010. The export volume of Korean products to Saudi Arabia now totals USD 1.9 billion. In 2008, Yediot Aharonot, the most widely circulated daily Israeli newspaper, described the popularity of Korean TV dramas in Israel as a “revolution” in cultural taste. In 2013, another popular Israeli newspaper, Calcalist, published a three-page story on how K-pop has “conquered” Israeli youth (Otmazgin and Lyan 74).

Hallyu’s popularity accelerated after 2010. Hallyu was initially limited to TV dramas or movies, but has since expanded to different genres such as K-pop, character products, tourism, and video games. Korean idol celebrities have become new cultural icons; they have generated additional profits from movie soundtracks, books, character products, commercials showing celebrities, and various events/performances. Due to increased public awareness of Korean products and companies, Hallyu has led to more people buying Korean goods (Dator and Seo).



**Figure 1: Developmental Phases of Hallyu (KOTRA)**

Korea Foundation for International Culture Exchange (KOFICE) has classified Hallyu's developmental stages into three phases as shown in Figure 1. In 2011, Korea Trade-Investment Promotion Agency (KOTRA) classified Hallyu industries into broadcast media, music, animation, movies, and character products. KOTRA found that character products, 45% of the entire industry, comprised the largest share of exported products among all Hallyu fields, worth USD 276.32 million. That same year, the gaming industry, which includes games, cartoons, and publications, was worth USD 1.25 billion and comprised 50% of all Hallyu products; it increased by 30% from 2010 (MCST).

In 2011, KOTRA conducted research to examine the possible differences in exportation amounts based on Hallyu's developmental phases. The results revealed that differences existed in terms of increase in exportation based on each stage (Moonsung). These findings confirmed that Hallyu has expanded foreign countries' familiarity with Korea and improved the public image of Korean goods, thus positively influencing exportation. Hallyu also has been a significant means of increasing investment opportunities for Korea in the Southeast Asian region, such consumers have also presented with a range of new products from Korea, representing new forms of creative and social engagement (Ainslie, Lipura and Lim). KOTRA confirmed that this led to the development of the new Korean Wave, which built a creative economy. Thus, the new Hallyu represents a significant ripple effect. KOTRA also found that exportation grew the most in the Americas and the Middle East.



## **MEDICAL TOURISM - A STRATEGIC APPROACH FOR THE ROLE OF THE NEW KOREAN WAVE IN THE MIDDLE EAST**

Following Hallyu's transformation, significant changes have occurred in terms of Korean goods and marketing, which led to subdivision, specialisation and diversification of commodities, and professionalised marketing of Hallyu merchandise. Additional items such as cosmetic products, and health and beauty products endorsed by K-pop celebrities are standout items in this emerging market. The Korean health and beauty market is booming, with lots of tourists coming to Korea for cosmetic and beauty treatments. Because of the Korean Wave, exports of Korean cosmetic products increased by 38.7% compared to the previous year. According to the Korea Customs Service, in the first half of 2010, the export of Korean cosmetic products totalled USD 240 million spread among 119 countries.

South Korea's government has been actively promoting medical tourism since 2007. With the government's promotion of medical tourism, they recorded a jump in foreign patients from 8,000 in 2000 to a staggering 80,000 in 2010. Korea is aiming to be the next major player in medical tourism. Medical tourism has become a significant source of revenue for South Korea. In 2011, the medical tourism industry earned a record of USD 116 million. The government anticipates that the number of medical travellers to Korea will only grow, having set a goal of one million foreign medical tourists by 2020. It is widely recognized that increasing numbers of medical tourists coming to Korea are citing the Korean Wave as the number one reason for their visit. The South Korean government recognizes the debt that the medical tourism boom owes to Hallyu. According to E. Y. Jung (70), deputy director of Health Ministry's policy department, "Medical tourism will be a new growth driver for our economy and the popularity of K Pop idols is helping us a lot."

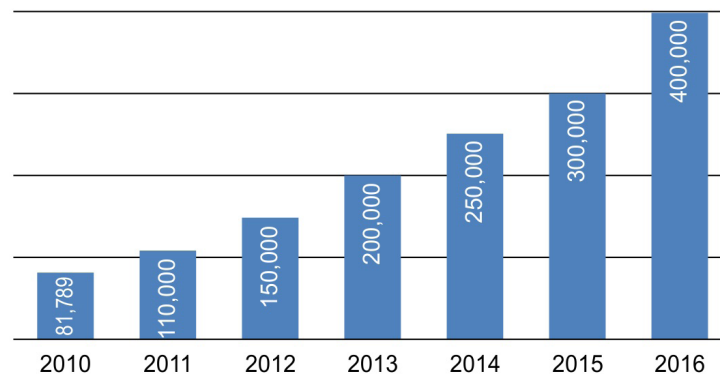
This study identified how the rise of Korean Wave is influencing medical tourism to Korea from Asian and Middle Eastern nations, which has drawn much attention of late. Foreigners familiar with Hallyu are aware of Korea's cosmetic products, cosmetic medicine, and cutting-edge medical technology, facilities, and doctors. They also realise that the cost of medical expenses in Korea is low compared to that of the United States or other countries.

China is classified as the top country in the analysis of Hallyu's advanced phases (Phase III). Hallyu has significantly influenced China and the number of Chinese tourists visiting Korea for medical tourism has been rapidly rising over the past few years. From the cross-cultural analysis on foreigners' preferences for Korean dramas, a desire to possess the actors' physical beauty and advertisements

featuring Korean celebrities have inspired foreigners to choose Korea to receive medical treatment.

According to the MOHW, the number of foreigners visiting for medical tourism was 8,000 in 2000 and 80,000 in 2010 (ten times higher than in 2000). In 2013, 210,000 non-Korean patients from 191 countries received medical treatment. This is an increase of 32.5% from 159,464 visitors in 2012. In 2006, South Korea generated USD 59 million in medical travel income. This amount has increased steadily due to advancements in medical technology and the efforts of the regional government to attract overseas patients. Revenue grew gradually from USD 69.8 million in 2007 to USD 89.5 million in 2010. The figures for 2011 and 2012 were USD 131 million and USD 149 million, respectively. The South Korean government is setting aside as much as USD 4 million a year to help promote the medical tourism industry. It expects one million medical tourists a year by 2020, with Chinese travellers representing the largest segment (Medical Tourism and Healthcare Statistics).

The Middle East is the fastest growing outbound tourism market in the world. The Saudi health attaché and the Dubai government have been working with Korea's Medical Tourism Association (MTA), the KTO, and affiliated hospitals and clinics to connect Muslim patients with procedures and treatments; there were 1,650 Muslim patients in 2013 (an increase of 237% from 2012). The number of patients rose due to the overall efforts of Korean healthcare facilities to accommodate them. According to a 2015 survey conducted by MOHW, 200,000 people visited Korea for medical tourism in 2013, and 400,000 visited in 2016 as shown in Figure 2.



**Figure 2: Number of foreigners visiting Korea for medical tourism, reproduced with permission from Korea's Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2016**

Medical tourism in Korea is still in its initial phase. However, Korea is already regarded as the most popular destination for medical tourism, even more than Singapore, Thailand, and India, which were previously the most preferred places for medical tourism. The convenience of flying to Korea from the Middle East, Europe, and other parts of Asia is an added advantage. Besides generating future profits, it is anticipated that medical tourists from the Middle East will play a leading role in the new Korean Wave, improving Korea's reputation.

Historically, Korea had not been a popular destination for Middle Easterners due to the geographic distance as well as the lack of cultural exchange and understanding. Instead, Korea has usually been a business destination for most Middle Eastern visitors. Since 2010, Korea has become an emerging destination for Middle Eastern visitors. Hallyu has attracted increasingly diverse groups beyond business people. The rapid growth of tourists from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates comprises new groups: youth and women. This is because the Korean Wave attracts not only patients, but also their families. For Middle Eastern patients, especially those from Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, medical tourism in Korea has emerged as an alternative, niche market compared to their earlier choice of countries (such as Germany, the UK, the US, Singapore, Thailand, and Malaysia). The growing popularity of the Korean Wave in the Middle East paves the way for a flow-on effect in the Korean medical tourism industry.

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