

What evidence is there to suggest hybridisation of media and cultural products?

Evidence of Cultural Hybridisation in Korean Cultural Products using the example of Vincenzo

Introduction and Literature Review:

Increased connectivity in today's world has created new lines of communication and media, allowing people to interact with cultures and ideologies that differ from their own. Studying the impact of this new cultural connectivity in the modern landscape of a globalized world has been central to media scholarship for a long time. Various theories have been used to describe this relationship between globalisation and culture: they theorize that the increase in exposure to international media has led to more hybridity in domestic cultural products.

Some scholars, such as Stuart Hall, (as quoted by (Curran & Park, 2003)) claim that dominant mass culture, "remains centered in the West... and it always speaks English." The idea is that despite the growth of media and cultural industries in other parts of the world, Western culture, specifically American culture, remains at the heart of most global cultural products. Those cultural products that may emerge from the 'Global South' are heavily influenced by the dominant streams of global mass media. Others scholars, such as John Tomlinson and Malcolm Waters are more inclined towards the idea of 'cultural globalisation.'

Now, to understand cultural globalisation, it is important to understand the former school of thought. Herbert Schiller defined it as cultural imperialism or the "sum of the process by which a society is brought into the modern world system and how the dominating stratum is attracted, pressure, forced and sometimes bribed into shaping social institutions to correspond to, or even promote, the values and structures of the dominating center of the system" (Schiller, 1976).

While speaking of cultural imperialism, Schiller, and other scholars, take an America centric approach – it is implied that American media products and organisations are at the heart of the imperialism process. However, this theory has since lost its luster, with various critics expressing the belief that the theory does not consider the complexities of modern cultural relations. Instead, ‘globalisation’ replaces ‘imperialism’ (Tomlinson, 1991), making it possible to view the gradual exchange of culture through the rise of a country’s influence in the economics of the world.

Tomlinson describes globalisation as “the rapidly developing and ever-densening network of interconnections and interdependencies that characterize modern social life” (Tomlinson, 1999). Malcolm Waters’ ‘guiding theorem’ for understanding globalisation can be traced through three arenas of social life: economy, polity, and culture. Each of these can be understood through exchanges – economy as material exchanges, polity as political exchanges and culture as social exchanges. “We can expect the economy and the polity to be globalized to the extent that they are culturized, that is, to the extent that the exchanges that take place within them are accomplished symbolically” (Waters, 1995).

A global culture, then, is one that is open to new ideas, values, and information, which are transmitted “through mobile individuals, symbolic tokens, and electronic simulations” (Waters, 1995). Cultural globalisation, must be viewed separately from the economic, technological, and political, although they play important roles in the spread of culture.

Thus, cultural globalisation, can be understood as a process of the exchange of ideological and social beliefs using media, migration, and culture. It allows for the promotion of diversity within states. The media plays a central role in this exchange, allowing the integration of different cultures into others. It allows for the development of ‘hybrid cultures’ by promoting deterritorialization or the displacement of culture, people, or practices from their places of origin. Naturally, it “creates new markets for film companies, art impresarios and

travel agencies, who thrive on the need of the deterritorialized population for contact with its homeland” (Appadurai, 1990). “Cross-cultural contact” is a prerequisite for hybridity (Kraidy, 2005, p. 5), thus, making it central to the understanding of an increasingly globalizing culture.

Homi Bhabha, in *The Location of Culture*, describes the ‘Third Space of Enunciation,’ an ambivalent space challenging our sense of the historical identity of culture, where all modern cultural identity occurs (Bhabha, 1994). It is this ambivalent space that allows cultural differences and hybridity to thrive. Cultural globalisation can occur within this space for it allows the exploration of culture beyond historically predetermined puritanical ideas. Here, Bhabha allows discourse on the contra-flow of cultural hybridity from the Global south – by allowing ambivalence, the subaltern can explore more than just what has been assigned to it historically (Kraidy, 2002).

Thus, as stated by Mike Featherstone (1990, p. 6), the globalisation process can be viewed as a process that produces both “cultural homogeneity” and “cultural disorder” by allowing the exchange of cultural products, and transnational cultures by the proliferation of media products through the exchange.

Korean Dramas and Cultural Hybridisation

The foundations for the modern Korean media industry were laid by the opening of KBS-TV (Korean Broadcasting System TV) in 1961. By the 1980s, one more state operated channel was available and dramas had become more popular as a result of more and more households buying television sets. This also led to diversification in the content of Korean dramas and by the 1990s, the more youth-oriented dramas of today became popular. With South Korea choosing to become a democracy and liberalizing its markets in 1987, it became possible to import foreign media, as censorship was eased and more television stations came up.

As a result, the Korean film and television industry was largely eclipsed by American cultural imports in the early 1990s – domestic products only controlled 15.9% of the market.

Most films, music and television series were imported. “However, with what seemed to be the coming of age of Korean popular culture, the situation dramatically reversed by the late 1990s” (Joo, 2011). It started with the music industry beginning to reclaim their market share and the Korean film industry opting to ‘hybridise the domestic’ film production, “combining local themes and Hollywood style production values” (Joo, 2011).

“The Korean cultural industries have benefited from imitating the Hollywood system and developing a distinctive hybrid cultural content and business model” (Kim, 2007). Thus, hybridisation helped in strengthening the domestic industry and allowing it to grow enough to export its own products outside the country.

Let us take the example of the 2021 Netflix-TvN drama *Vincenzo*, to contextualise the extent of cultural hybridisation in South Korean cultural products. The drama follows Vincenzo Cassano, a Korean-Italian adoptee who works as a consigliere for the Cassano mafia family. Because of conflicts brewing between warring mafia groups, Vincenzo returns to Korea, where, he gets caught up in a fight against Babel.

Vincenzo, starring Song Joong-Ki and Jeon Yeo-Bin as the protagonists, aired on the network channel TvN, and was created and distributed in collaboration with Netflix. This is where the first aspect of hybridisation, in terms of the media production center, occurs. Despite being a domestic cultural product, the drama was distributed by one of the biggest Western media conglomerates, Netflix. This allowed for hybridity in the domestic consumption of the drama – *Vincenzo* is available on demand via the American streaming giant, unlike other dramas produced solely by network television.

Now, *Vincenzo* becomes a product of culture hybridisation through its participation in the electronic simulations and distributions developed within the realms of a different culture. It participates in the hybridisation process, by encouraging audiences, both domestic and international, to participate in those simulations as well.

Another aspect of the evidence of cultural hybridisation is the mixing of cross-cultural ideological themes that might not be intrinsic to the culture. The main point of conflict in Vincenzo, the “Babel Tower,” is an example. The tower is a reference to the biblical Tower of Babel, as mentioned in Genesis 11:1-9. The name of the tower and the overarching theme of the storylines are also representations of the influence of Western religion in Korean society. While the roots of Confucianism are still present, Christian ideology can be seen playing a role in various parts of life. For example, modern Korean weddings feature highly westernized traditions such as wearing white gowns and tuxedos during the wedding, the throwing of the bouquet and a reception after the wedding (Ginny, 2010).

Vincenzo is a show rife with modern western clothing styles. All characters are depicted in western clothing, a testament to the long process of its adoption. Today Korean fashion, much like the protagonists in the show, features westernized forms of clothing. Fashion trends feature tennis skirts, puffed sleeves, modernized Hanboks and button-up dresses (An-Chion, 202) rather than traditional clothing.

The period after the Second World War, with the presence of American soldiers, gave Korean society the experience of their own form of Bhabha’s third space – they were allowed to experiment with the “modern” clothing without too much opposition from the traditional. As a result, “it took barely 20 years for almost all Korean women to adopt western-style dress although they had worn hanbok for hundreds of years” (Park, et al., 2016). Now, the Hanbok is rarely worn, and even then, it has undergone a modernization process.

In the drama too, Song Joong-Ki’s Vincenzo is seen donning brands such as Caruso, and Kingsman, while Jeon Yeo-Bin’s Hong Cha-Young is seen in Lynn pantsuits and coats, along with Swarovski jewellery.¹

Something similar can be seen in the case of Korean musical products. Of the 67 songs in the Vincenzo album, 24 are classical, with only four (classical) songs composed by Korean

artists. This western influence in music is not limited to the drama original sound tracks, but also pop music (K-pop). K-pop musicians take inspiration from classical, western hip-hop, rock, and pop compositions, especially those by African American musicians (Kim, 2012), to create new sounds. An example of the hybrid use of international and domestic influences in music is Rapper and BTS member Suga's 2020 song Daechwita. The track "incorporates traditional Korean military instrumentals along with pansori into modern hip-hop sounds," (Suga, 2020).

A character in the drama, the Korean owner of an Italian restaurant in Seoul, changes his name and appearance and pretends to have studied at an Italian university to give himself credibility as a chef of the cuisine. Deeply entrenched within Korean society is the importance of foreign education. According to a study conducted by Congressman Soon-Yoon Choi in 2007,

"...among 12,912 of Korean Ph.D. holders who earned doctoral degrees from foreign countries from 2002 to 2007, 52.8% (6,819) were from US universities.⁴ This data also shows that 58% have the US doctoral degrees among tenure track Professors who were employed at Korean universities from 2000 to 2007. Choi points out that Korean society values school ties as an integral element in obtaining a job, and Korean society particularly values US school ties more than others" (Park, 2009).

This is an example of how hybridisation can occur from within the culture itself – as a result of a large percentage of Korean scholarship having studied abroad, future generations feel inclined to do the same, especially to emulate their success.

The Italian restaurant in the drama also plays another role – it is a depiction of the popularity of Western food in the country. Although Korean food remains the staple, Western food is seen as a choice for dates, fine-dining, and snacking. It is also served with regional

twists (like extra spices, regional vegetables, etc.) (Anon., 2017). The hybridisation of the restaurant is representative of the hybridised view of Western culture within the domestic culture itself – it is run by a Korean man to suit the tastes of other Koreans. So, although the Italian (in a stereotypic depiction) does not enjoy it, the food is ultimately not made for him.

A further example is the *Starbucks Hanok* in Daegu. The *Starbucks Hanok* is stylized as a traditional Korean house inspired by the historic buildings in Daegu city (Dong, 2022). The building is representative of the importance of coffee culture, another cultural import from the West, in South Korea. Coffee was first introduced to King Gojong of Korea in 1896 by the Russian consulate. The colonial era saw Japanese style coffee shops and the position of coffee was cemented by US soldiers who brought instant coffee in their rations (Won, 2017). But Korean coffee culture today is specific to the country: a hybridity obtained through globalisation, indoctrinated into the modern cultural identity.

In Vincenzo, this can be observed through the product placements of Maxim Instant (Korean brand) and Kopiko (Indonesian brand), a testament to the cultural importance of instant coffee.² The show also features product placements of other non-Korean brands such as Rado, Cadillac, Nescafe, Swarovski and Haribo (Anon., 2021) – another example of deep entrenchment of cultural hybridisation.

However, cultural hybridisation in Korea is no longer just a one-way street. The Korean wave, more popularly known as the Hallyu wave, is a formidable force of cultural products aimed at increasing the integration of Korean culture. Each cultural product, while influenced by cultural hybridisation, is itself designed to benefit from the phenomenon of cultural globalisation.

Scholarship from across the world has researched Hallyu to understand its aims, growth, and impact on cultures across the world. As Joo Jeong-Suk states, “Reminiscent of its ‘compressed modernity,’ which squeezed social changes into a few years, Korea has

successfully reinvented itself within the past several years from an obscure cultural backwater to a new center of cultural production in Asia,” (Joo, 2011).

The rise of the popularity of Korean culture can be attributed to cultural globalisation through proximity – “a sense of the shrinking of distances through the dramatic reduction in time taken, either physically (for instance, via air travel) or representationally (via the transmission of electronically mediated information and images), to cross them” (Tomlinson, 1999).

“Hallyu first spread to China and Japan, later to Southeast Asia,” (Martin Roll, 2021), countries that are both in cultural and physical proximity to the nation. Hallyu provided an Asian, more relatable alternative to American cultural products. The result? In a study conducted by Flixpatrol, Asian content (specifically Korean content) surpassed European content in worldwide Netflix preferences in 2021 (Moore, 2022).

Let us deconstruct the reasons for this using *Vincenzo*. The drama reached the #4 spot on the Netflix top 10 worldwide – besides the cohesiveness of its plot, the production quality, and the stellar acting performances, what made *Vincenzo* so popular across the globe was a direct result of deliberate cultural hybridisation. The drama uses it to its advantage; each episode plays out like a Hollywood movie, or as Joan MacDonald of Forbes puts it, “*Vincenzo* might well be a 90s gangster movie, except that the consigliere is Korean and returns home to take care of business for a client” (MacDonald, 2021).

It uses stereotypical depictions of cultures, both others and its own, to make the drama more accessible for foreign audiences. *Vincenzo* is rife with Italian stereotypes – the mafioso is well-dressed, polite, hates Italian food not made in Italy, and is very referential in form to *The Godfather*. He also speaks Italian, gesticulates, and was raised in the Catholic faith. In making use of the stereotyping and strategic self-orientalism, *Vincenzo* manages to successfully ride the tide of cultural globalisation.

The drama has been dubbed in at least 5 languages including Brazilian Portuguese and Hindi, with additional subtitles in 5 languages besides English and Korean (Vincenzo, 2021).

Perhaps another marker for the Hallyu wave's successful hybridisation of culture is the popularity of Korean film stories in India. Although Bollywood is a formidable cultural force itself, the Hallyu wave has successfully integrated itself in Bollywood. Many Bollywood films through the years have been inspired by, and have remixed and remade popular Korean cinema outputs. These include *Ek Villain* (2014) - *I Saw the Devil* (2010), *Dhamaka* (2021) – *The Terror Live* (2013), *Zinda* (2006) – *Oldboy* (2003), and *Awarapan* (2007) – *A Bittersweet Life* (2005).

Conclusion:

The above discussion highlights the importance of cultural hybridity in both the creation and the dissemination of Korean Cultural Products or the Hallyu Wave. Here, cultural hybridisation has been established not just as a process that occurs from the 'Global North' to the 'Global South;' today, cultural products from the so-called 'Global South' facilitate contra-flows in global media, introducing hybridities in the 'Global North' that have historically been associated with the opposite. That is how both *Suits* (2018) and *The Good Doctor* (2017) come to exist.³

Notes:

1. The main characters are shown in traditional outfits just once (Cha-Young wears a black Hanbok for her father's funeral as well).
2. Café culture didn't really take off again in Korea until the opening of the first Starbucks in 1999.

3. The Korean drama *Suits* (2018) is based on the 2011 American tv show of the same name, and American show *The Good Doctor* (2017) is based on the 2013 Korean drama of the same name.

List of References:

An-Chion, K., 202. 5 *Stunning Korean Fashion Trends*. [Online]
Available at: <https://www.lofficielmonaco.com/fashion/5-stunning-korean-fashion-trends>
[Accessed December 2022].

Anon., 2017. 4 *ways Western culture has influenced South Korea*. [Online]
Available at: <https://www.selectiveasia.com/blog/south-korea/4-ways-western-culture-has-influenced-south-korea>
[Accessed December 2022].

Anon., 2021. *Vincenzo (Korean/Netflix) TV Show Product Placement (Page 1 of 1)*. [Online]
Available at: <https://productplacementblog.com/tag/vincenzo/>

Appadurai, A., 1990. Disjuncture and Difference in Global Cultural Economy. In: M. Featherstone, ed. *Global Culture: Nationalism, Globalisation and Modernity*. London: Sage Publications, pp. 295-310.

Bhabha, H. K., 1994. *The Location of Culture*. 1 ed. London: Routledge.

Curran, J. & Park, M.-J., 2003. Beyond Globalisation Theory. In: J. Curran & M. Park, eds. *De-Westernising Media Studies*. London: Routledge, pp. 3-19.

Dong, I., 2022. *Starbucks launches in a traditional house in South Korea*. [Online]
Available at: <https://insideretail.asia/2022/10/24/starbucks-launches-in-a-traditional-house-in-south-korea/>
[Accessed December 2022].

Featherstone, M., 1990. Global Culture: An Introduction. In: M. Featherstone, ed. *Global Culture: Nationalism, Globalisation and Modernity*. London: Sage Publications, pp. 1-14.

Giddens, A., 1990. *The Consequences of Modernity*. 1 ed. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Ginny, 2010. *Modern Korean Weddings*. [Online]
Available at: <https://blogs.transparent.com/korean/modern-korean-weddings/#:~:text=Modern%20Korean%20weddings%20are%20much,are%20female%2C%20wear%20a%20%ED%95%9C%EB%B3%B5>.

[Accessed December 2022].

Jinnat, R., 2021. *The Fall of a Different Tower of Babel: A Review of 'Vincenzo'*. [Online]
Available at: <https://thesciencesurvey.com/arts-entertainment/2021/06/22/the-fall-of-a-different-tower-of-babel-a-review-of-vincenzo/>

[Accessed 24 December 2022].

Joo, J.-S., 2011. Transnationalisation of Korean Popular Culture and the Rise of "Pop Nationalism" in Korea. *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 44(3), pp. 489-504.

Kim, C. N., 2012. *K-pop: Roots and Blossoming of Korean Popular Music*. Seoul: Hollym Publishers.

Kim, J. Y., 2007. *Rethinking Media flow under Globalisation: Rising Korean Wave and Korean TV and Film Policy Since 1980s*. [Online]
Available at: https://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/1153/1/WRAP_THESIS_Kim_2007.pdf

Kraidy, M. M., 2002. Hybridity in Cultural Globalization. *Communication Theory*, 12(3), pp. 316-319.

Kraidy, M. M., 2005. *Hybridity or the Cultural Logic of Globalisation*. 1 ed. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

MacDonald, J., 2021. *Song Joong-Ki Is Flawlessly Stylish As A Consigliere In 'Vincenzo.'*. [Online]

Available at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/joanmacdonald/2021/02/20/song-joong-ki-is-flawlessly-stylish-as-a-consigliere-in-vincenzo/?sh=5cd4d290165e>

Martin Roll, 2021. *Korean Wave (Hallyu - The Rise of Korea's Cultural Economy and Pop Culture*. [Online]

Available at: <https://martinroll.com/resources/articles/asia/korean-wave-hallyu-the-rise-of-koreas-cultural-economy-pop-culture/>

Moore, K., 2022. *Asian Content Surpasses European Popularity in Netflix Top 10s*. [Online]

Available at: <https://www.whats-on-netflix.com/news/asian-content-now-more-popular-than-european-according-to-netflix-top-10s/>

Park, S. W., 2009. The Present and Future of Americanization in South Korea. *Journal of Futures Studies*, 14(1), pp. 51-66.

Park, S., Warner, P. C. & Fitzgerald, T. K., 2016. The Process of Westernization: Adoption of Western-Style Dress by Korean Women, 1945-1962. *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*, 11(3), pp. 39-47.

Schiller, H. I., 1976. *Communication and Cultural Dominance*. 1 ed. New York: International Arts and Sciences Press, Inc..

Suga, B., 2020. *BTS's Suga Reflects on Triumphant Return of Agust D on 'D-2' Mixtape* [Interview] (22 My 2020).

Tomlinson, J., 1991. *Cultural Imperialism*. 1 ed. London: Pinter Publishers.

Tomlinson, J., 1999. *Globalisation and Culture*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Vincenzo. 2021. [Film] Directed by Kim Hee-Won. s.l.: Logos Film.

Waters, M., 1995. *Globalisation*. 1 ed. London: Routeledge.

Williams, K., 2003. *Understanding Media Theory*. 1 ed. London: Hodder Education.

Won, H. J., 2017. [Weekender] *A history of coffee in Korea*. [Online]
Available at:

<https://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20170203000493#:~:text=King%20Gojong%20>

allegedly%20became%20the,War%2C%20the%20industry%20took%20off.

[Accessed December 2022].