

Hallyu (Korean Wave) in North Korea: The Effect of South Korean Media Exposure on the Perceptions of North Koreans

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This study examines the association of exposure to South Korean media with North Koreans' attitudes on capitalism, individualism, South Korea, and their own regime (North Korean media and supreme leader). Although *Hallyu* (Korean Wave) content is present in North Korea, its effects remain understudied. Using survey data from 1,241 North Korean defectors (2011-2020), the study finds that exposure to South Korean media is positively associated with favorable views of capitalism, individualism, and South Korea, and with lower trust in North Korean media and leadership. Effects vary by region, underscoring the complex influence of this mediated cultural contact. By showing how media exposure shapes attitudes under conditions of severe information control, the study contributes to broader peace studies debates on communication, reconciliation, and social change.

Keywords Korean Wave, North Korea, South Korean media exposure, defector survey, peace studies, reconciliation

Introduction

Founded in 1947 shortly after liberation from Japanese colonial rule to educate the surviving children of deceased members of the anti-Japanese resistance, Red Flag Mangyongdae Revolutionary School is a leading secondary and elite boarding school that has produced many of North Korea's leading party cadres, soldiers, and government officials. Speaking in 2022 at the seventy-fifth anniversary of this premier educational institution in North Korea, which trains young people from the best social backgrounds to become elite workers in the party, military, and government, Kim Jong Un emphasized the need for young people to fight against non-socialist elements:

We must raise the level of struggle and cultivation so that non-party, non-

revolutionary, and non-socialist elements cannot penetrate even to the tip of a needle. (Kim 2022).

The fact that Kim was compelled to make these remarks to students who are subjected to the highest levels of loyalty training and ideological control underscores the pervasiveness of non-socialist culture among North Korea's youth today and the leadership's anxiety and sense of crisis about it.

Since 2020, the North Korean authorities have made great efforts to block the influence of outside culture and eradicate non-socialist lifestyles by enacting a series of social control laws, including the Anti-Reactionary Ideology and Culture Exclusion Law (2020), the Youth Education Guarantee Law (2021), and the Pyongyang Cultural Language Protection Law (2023). In particular, the Anti-Reactionary Ideology and Culture Exclusion Law, which has been widely reported in the South Korean news media, imposes severe penalties on those who possess or watch South Korean videos, punishable by up to ten years of labor indoctrination, and on those who distribute them, punishable by up to life imprisonment. The North Korean authorities' efforts to curb the spread of outside culture through such harsh punishments reflect the reality of North Korean society today.

It is no exaggeration to say that the so-called *Hallyu* (Korean Wave), which includes South Korean dramas, movies, and music, is sweeping through North Korea. According to a survey of North Korean defectors conducted by the Institute for Peace and Unification Studies (IPUS) at Seoul National University, more than 85 percent of the 1,241 North Korean defectors between 2011 and 2020 reported watching South Korean media in North Korea "at least once," and about 45 percent said they had watched it "frequently" in North Korea (Kim et al. 2022, 95). Even taking into account the regional and political orientation bias of the defector population, it seems undeniable that South Korean pop culture is no longer foreign to the majority of North Koreans today. So why are the North Korean authorities so sensitive to the spread of *Hallyu*?

Given Kim Jong Un's recent remarks at the Revolutionary School and the regime's strict policy of controlling the influence of South Korean popular culture, it is likely that the authorities perceive contact with South Korean media as a significant threat to shaping public consciousness and undermining state control. This study examines how contact with South Korean media is associated with perceptual changes among North Koreans. To date, most research has focused on documenting the status and reality of the *Hallyu* phenomenon in North Korea or, through in-depth interviews, has described its influence on North Koreans' perceptions. However, few studies have empirically assessed its impact using quantitative data. This study addresses that gap by analyzing survey data of 1,241 North Korean defectors between 2011 and 2020.

Theoretical Discussion

Contact Theory and Media

The contact hypothesis is a seminal theory in the field of cultural contact that posits that interactions between individuals from different cultural, racial, or social backgrounds can reduce prejudice and promote mutual understanding (Allport 1954). By definition, prejudice is hostility stemming from inaccurate generalizations about outgroups, leading to increased uncertainty in intergroup interactions, difficulty in reaching consensus, and a greater likelihood of rejecting attempts at cooperation. Conversely, deepening mutual understanding through sustained interactions with out-groups can reduce these negative attitudes. Allport emphasized that for intergroup contact to be effective in reducing stereotypes and prejudice, four conditions must be met: equal status among participants, shared goals, intergroup cooperation, and support from authorities, laws, or customs.

Since its introduction, the contact hypothesis has been validated in a variety of settings and contexts. Meta-analyses, in particular, show that intergroup interactions meeting Allport's conditions generally lead to improved mutual understanding and relations, with evidence of prejudice reduction even when not all conditions are fully met (Pettigrew 1998; Pettigrew and Tropp 2006; Pettigrew et al. 2011). While initially applied in contexts of significant interethnic conflict, such as within the ethnically diverse populations of the United States and Western Europe, the theory has since been applied to cases involving other social groups, including LGBTQ+ communities, the elderly, and women (Wagner, Hewstone, and Machleit 1989; Newman 2013; Kaufman and Harris 2015; Laurence and Bentley 2018). Some studies, however, suggest that “negative contact” may actually reinforce intergroup prejudice, highlighting the complex dynamics of contexts that contact theory may consider (Aberson and Gaffney 2009; Barlow et al. 2012; Graf, Paolini, and Rubin 2014; Laurence, Schmid, and Hewstone 2018).

Researchers have extended the applicability of this theory to explore the effects of media as a form of cultural contact. Media can amplify the effects of contact by reaching large audiences with greater ease than direct face-to-face interactions (Harwood and Joyce 2012). Two main theoretical approaches have been used to understand the role of media in intergroup contact. The first—parasocial interaction theory—argues that media representations of outgroups can positively influence viewers' perceptions of those groups. This parasocial interaction with media characters acts as an indirect form of intergroup contact in which audiences engage with characters as they would in real-life interactions, potentially reducing prejudice (Schiappa, Gregg, and Hewes 2005; Cohen 2001; Horton and Wohl 1956). The second approach—vicarious contact theory—emphasizes the impact of witnessing positive interactions in media content

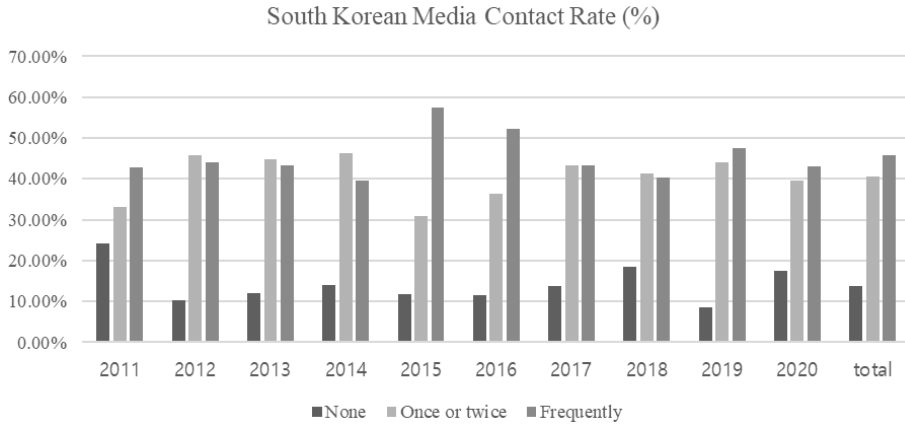
between in-group and out-group members. Based on the principle of observational learning from social cognitive theory, vicarious contact theory argues that people can learn how to respond to situations by observing others, even in the absence of direct experience (Bandura, Grusec, and Menlove 1966). Thus, positive portrayals of intergroup interactions in the media can lead to more positive attitudes toward outgroups among viewers (Ortiz and Harwood 2007; Vezzali et al. 2014).

Given the role of media in facilitating intergroup contact, exposure to South Korean media can change North Koreans' perspectives on the outside world. In North Korea, where direct contact with the outside world is limited, media exposure is an important—if not the only—means of cultural contact with the outgroup and has the potential to significantly influence the perceptions and attitudes of recipients.

Hallyu in North Korea

The penetration of South Korean media (collectively known as Hallyu) into North Korean society is a well-documented phenomenon, supported by both defectors' testimonies and research. Rapid marketization and advances in information and communication technologies have dramatically expanded North Koreans' access to outside information and changed the way it is received, stored, shared, and disseminated. Despite the North Korean government's strict control and suppression efforts, the consumption and distribution of South Korean media content among North Koreans continued through the 2000s into the present. Interestingly, even members of the security and censorship bodies tasked with cracking down on such content have been known to consume it themselves, sometimes using their enforcement duties as opportunities for bribery. Recent actions by North Korean authorities suggest acknowledgement that the influence of non-socialist cultures permeates their society as a whole, extending beyond specific sectors or classes. This is now described as a "systemic phenomenon that manifests itself in all areas of social life" (Kang 2023, 212-3). Data from the North Korean Defectors' Consciousness Survey, conducted by the IPUS from 2011 to 2020, further illustrate this trend. As shown in Figure 1, over 85% of North Koreans report having been exposed to South Korean media at least once, underscoring the widespread influence of Hallyu within North Korea.

So why are North Koreans so enthusiastic about South Korean movies and dramas? The testimonies of recently defected North Koreans offer some interesting explanations. Between October 15, 2022, and March 9, 2023, the IPUS conducted an in-depth interview survey of North Korean defectors who had defected within the preceding five years. Many testified about the widespread Hallyu phenomenon in North Korea and their personal experiences with it. As their testimonies suggest, the first reason for their enthusiasm is curiosity about the outside world. For North Koreans living in a society with a high

Figure 1. North Korean Defectors' Exposure to South Korean Media

Sources: Authors' compilation based on Kim et al. (2022).

degree of state control over information, Hallyu content is almost their only access to the outside world. When they first encounter a South Korean movie or drama through peer interaction or other opportunities, they become intensely curious about a developed capitalist society that most North Koreans have never experienced. As one male respondent reported,

The first time I watched a South Korean drama, I cannot tell you how much I analyzed every scene in detail. This is funny to people here in South Korea, but when I saw a scene in a South Korean drama where there was a grocery store, I stopped the scene and zoomed in on every single thing, including the variety of products and the prices they were selling for. I thought, "If they can sell so many different things at that price, their economy must be really developed!" (ID 2023-001, male, defected in 2020)

Having been taught by North Korean authorities to view South Korean society negatively, as "a colony of US imperialism" and "rotten, sick capitalism," the images North Koreans see in Hallyu content are far from what they have been taught. North Korean defectors' testimonies, like the one below, confirm that the harsh crackdown by North Korean authorities actually stimulates their desire and curiosity for Hallyu media content:

I was very anxious to watch (South Korean dramas and movies), but when I watched them in secret, I felt like it was more fun. Like when you're told not to smoke, you want to smoke more, but you do not get that feeling here (in South Korea). (ID 2023-002, male, defected in 2021)

The second reason is the quality of the content itself. In North Korea, movies

and dramas are used as tools for learning state ideology and instilling loyalty to the supreme leader. North Korea's so-called "seed theory" requires all artistic works to have an ideological core that "accurately reflects the Party's policies and provides the right answers to the socio-political challenges of the times in strict accordance with the Party's line and policies (Ministry of Unification 2021)." As a result, most North Korean films and dramas contain political ideologies, leaving North Koreans more interested and intrigued by media from the South that embraces natural human emotions and everyday life without embedded political messages. The massive proliferation and distribution of Hallyu content have played an important role in the decline of North Korea's drama and film industry. Many North Korean defectors insist that once they saw a high-quality South Korean drama or movie, they could no longer watch anything made in North Korea:

The South Korean dramas were much more interesting because everything was so fantastic and so different from ours, but the North Korean movies and dramas were so clichéd, no romance, and all about praising Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il, so I did not find them interesting at all. (ID 2023-003, female, defected in 2017)

It was a lot better. North Korean movies are not just about everyday things, and then all of a sudden, out of context, stories about General Kim Jong Il would just pop up. Every time I watched the movie, I kept thinking, "Why is there a story about him?" But the South Korean movies were fun and fresh, and there was a little romance, which was nice. (ID 2023-002, male, defected in 2021)

The third is social pressure. The proliferation of South Korean pop culture has led to a preference for the South and admiration of its lifestyle, especially among the younger generation. Imitating its fashion, speech, and behavior has become perceived as "cool" among the younger generation. In other words, the consumption of the South Korean culture has become a form of social pressure in North Korean society today. Even among friends, the respondents explain, entering a conversation is difficult without watching a South Korean movie or drama, and those who mimic South Korean style are considered the most fashionable. The common use of the term of endearment *Oppa* (Honey) between men and women, as well as the recent trend of exchanging gifts and eating cake on birthdays, are examples of the influence of South Korean pop culture on North Korean youth. One respondent described the influence of South Korean dramas on romantic expectations:

Boys who often watch South Korean dramas are popular with girls their age and are skilled in romance. North Korean women have not experienced romantic expressions in a relationship because North Korean men are usually crude and rough. So North Korean women really like men who have a soft-spoken, gentle demeanor [like in

dramas]. (ID 2023-002, male, defected in 2021)

However, the Hallyu phenomenon does not always bring about positive perceptions of the South. Some defectors also talk about its limitations and dysfunctions. The cultural heterogeneity, violence, and sensationalism of South Korean media can create a distorted image of the South for recipients who have difficulty accessing a wide range of outside information. In particular, the wide gap between rich and poor, nepotism, corruption, gambling, gangs, and various criminal activities often depicted in media content can lead North Koreans to perceive South Korean society as a society of materialism, violence, and inhumanity. In some cases, these distorted images are mitigated by the duration and frequency of exposure to the media. As the amount of information accumulates, so does the amount of viewing, and the image of South Korea changes again. Recalling how his perception of the South changed once he had access to a greater variety of media, a male respondent stated,

When I was younger, I watched a lot of brutal gangster movies from the South, so I used to say to my friends, “That’s a scary society that cannot be controlled with good words.” But nowadays, comedies, melodramas, and other genres are coming to the North, so when I saw those things, my perception [of the South] changed again very quickly. (ID 2023-004, male, defected in 2021)

In the early 2010s, as the Hallyu phenomenon in North Korean society slowly became known to the outside world through defectors, some researchers began to study it in earnest. Research on Hallyu in North Korea can be broadly categorized as follows: (1) studies that focus on the current status and reality; (2) studies that focus on the effects of exposure; and (3) studies that critically review existing studies on the Hallyu phenomenon in North Korea.

The studies that focus on the current status and reality are mainly concerned with the ways in which South Korean media content is disseminated in North Korean society. These studies are generally based on in-depth interviews with defectors since the early 2010s, discussing the extent and manner in which South Korean pop culture is circulated, the main types of content consumed, and future prospects for cultural change within North Korean society (Kang and Park 2011; Park 2011; Jeon and Park 2013; Kang 2014; Jeon 2014).

The second category of studies focus on the effects of Hallyu. These studies examine the effects of exposure to Hallyu on perceptions of South Korea, reunification, democracy and capitalism, attitudes toward the North Korean regime, and ideas about human rights (Lee 2014; An and Choi 2018; Jung 2016; Kang 2021). Based on interviews and some surveys, they demonstrate the impact of Hallyu on changing North Koreans’ various values and attitudes, including their perceptions of the South. The third category of studies outlines and critically

reviews previous studies regarding Hallyu in North Korea. Studies in this vein generally point out that existing studies are similar in content and conclusions, weak in theorizing or conceptualization, and lack a systematic and reliable data-based approach (Jeong 2011; Lim, Kang, and Kim 2014; Cho 2023).

As discussed above, existing research on Hallyu in North Korea has largely focused on its status and effects since the 2010s. However, as some researchers have rightly pointed out, many of these studies are limited by the fact that they are mostly aimed at describing the current situation and by repetitively covering similar topics, such as the distribution structure of Hallyu media and listing popular content. As a result, the actual impact of Hallyu exposure on North Koreans' perceptions has been scarcely analyzed. While a handful of studies address the effects of Hallyu, they cover limited topics, such as South Korea and reunification, and do not comprehensively address the various cognitive effects of exposure to South Korean media. In addition, most existing studies are based on in-depth interviews with a small number of North Korean defectors. Few attempts have been made to analyze the effects of South Korean media contact more systematically and rigorously using quantitative data.¹

To overcome the limitations of existing studies, this research analyzes the effects of South Korean media exposure on North Koreans' perceptions of South Korea and the North Korean regime based on empirical data from 1,241 North Korean defectors.

Hypotheses and Research Design

Research Hypotheses

This study uses data from the North Korean Defectors' Consciousness Survey conducted by IPUS.² This survey data was collected between 2011 and 2020 from a total of 1,241 North Koreans who defected the preceding year, which has the advantage of excluding the influence of confounding factors that can arise from a long stay in either a third country or South Korea after defection. The impact of exposure to South Korean media on North Koreans' perceptions and attitudes can be broadly divided into either perceptions related to the South Korean regime or perceptions related to the North Korean regime. In other words, the more North Koreans are exposed to South Korean movies, dramas, and songs, the more they internalize positive perceptions of the South and negative perceptions of the North.

Hypothesis 1: North Koreans who are more frequently exposed to South Korean media content will have more positive perceptions of the values of the South Korean regime than those with little or no exposure.

As discussed earlier, the effect of media contact is a form of para-social

contact, so given the widespread phenomenon of Hallyu in North Korea today, South Korean media contact may lead North Koreans to develop favorable attitudes toward values associated with the South. The impact of media contact on recipients' attitudes and beliefs is far-reaching. In addition to attitudes toward intergroup relations, there is also sympathy for and internalization of various ideologies and belief systems portrayed in the media. For example, Americans who are frequently exposed to media content depicting the "American Dream" tend to hold positive attitudes and beliefs about class mobility, despite growing social inequality and disappearing ladders of class mobility in the real world (Kim 2023). Such influence of media exposure on recipients' political beliefs and attitudes is documented in numerous studies (Hornuf, Rieger, and Hartmann 2023; Green et al. 2023). It is possible that North Koreans who are frequently exposed to South Korean media similarly internalize various social messages and values embedded in media content.

Hypothesis 2: North Koreans who are more frequently exposed to South Korean media content will have more negative perceptions of the values of the North Korean regime than those with little or no exposure.

In addition to positive changes in perceptions of the South Korean regime, trust and evaluation of the North Korean regime may also change in response to South Korean media exposure. If North Koreans come to accept what they see in media content as fact, they may no longer trust the information fed to them by the regime, thereby reinforcing their negative perceptions of the oppressive North Korean political system. Relative deprivation theory argues that people become anti-regime when they experience dissonance between their material expectations and a system that fails to meet them (Gurr 1970). For example, research suggests that exposure to West German television programs in East Germany led East Germans to make regime comparisons and develop feelings of relative deprivation as they saw a free and prosperous West German society, which contributed to their dissatisfaction with the socialist system (Dale 2005, 82-97). Experimental studies, particularly among Chinese students studying in the United States, find that exposure to both censored and free media coverage of the Chinese government significantly reduces Chinese students' trust in the Chinese government and their evaluations of its performance (Tai 2016). This effect of exposure to information from the outside world may also apply to North Koreans. This study tests whether exposure to outside media also affects North Koreans' trust in North Korean media and evaluations of their supreme leader.

Research Design

This study uses five dependent variables to measure the effects of exposure to South Korean media. The dependent variables are as follows: (1) attitudes toward capitalism; (2) attitudes toward individualism; (3) perceptions of South Korea;

(4) trust in North Korean media; and (5) evaluations of North Korea's supreme leader.

The first dependent variable related to the South Korean regime—attitude toward capitalism—corresponds to the question, “When you lived in North Korea, were you more supportive of a socialist economy (planned economy) or a capitalist economy (market economy, individual ownership)?” Responses were coded 0 for either “much more supportive of a socialist economy” or “somewhat more supportive of a socialist economy” and coded 1 for either “much more supportive of a capitalist economy” or “somewhat more supportive of a capitalist economy.”

Attitude toward individualism corresponds to the question, “When you lived in North Korea, what did you consider to be a higher priority in your daily life?” Responses were coded as 0 for either “the group is much more important” or “the group is somewhat more important” and 1 for either “myself (or my family) is much more important” or “myself (or my family) is somewhat more important.” Perceptions of the South relate to the question, “When you lived in North Korea, what did you think the South was to the North?” The responses were coded 0 for any of the following: “a hostile country that threatens our security,” “a country to be suspicious of,” or “a country to compete with in good faith.” Responses were coded 1 for any of the following: “a country to cooperate with,” “a country to help,” or “a country to support.”

Next, the dependent variables relating to the North Korean regime consist of trust in North Korea's media and evaluations of the supreme leader. First, trust in the North Korean media was measured by the question, “When you lived in North Korea, how true did you think the reports in *Rodong Sinmun* or Korean Central News Agency were?” Responses were coded as follows: 1=mostly not true, 2=only partly true, 3=mostly true. Evaluations of the supreme leader were measured by a question asking respondents how well they thought Kim Jong Un was doing in his job as head of state. Those responses were similarly coded: 1=very bad, 2=moderately bad, 3=moderately good, 4=very good.

The independent variable is the experience of exposure to South Korean media while living in North Korea. The respondents' experience of contact with South Korean media was measured by the question “While living in North Korea, had you ever been exposed to South Korean broadcasts, movies, dramas, songs (music), etc.?” Those responses were coded as: never=1, once or twice=2, often=3. In terms of control variables, variables that may affect respondents' attitudes and perceptions were considered. First, gender (male=0, female=1) and education level (no education=1, primary school=2, high school=3, vocational school=4, university or higher=5) were set as control variables. In addition, membership in the Workers' Party of Korea (0=non-party member, 1=party member) was added as a proxy for the respondents' social status in North Korea, and unofficial income (0 won=0, less than or equal to 1,000 won=1, less than or equal to 5, 000 won=2,

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Variables

Variable name			Frequency (%)	Mean	Standard deviation	Min.	Max.
Dependent variables							
Perceptions of the South Korean regime	Capitalism	Much more supportive of a socialist economy; somewhat more supportive of a socialist economy	191 (17.87%)	0.82	0.38	0	1
		Much more supportive of a capitalist economy; somewhat more supportive of a capitalist economy	878 (82.13%)				
	Individualism	The group is much more important; the group is somewhat more important	186 (15.01%)	0.85	0.36	0	1
		Myself (or my family) is somewhat more important; myself (or my family) is much more important	1053 (84.99%)				
	South Korea	Hostile, suspicious, and competitive counterpart	409 (33.42%)	0.67	0.47	0	1
		Cooperative and supportive counterpart	815 (66.58%)				
Perceptions of the North Korean regime	Trust in North Koran media	Mostly not true	167 (30.76%)	2.01	0.79	1	3
		Only partly true	206 (37.94%)				
		Mostly true	170 (31.31%)				
	Evaluation of the supreme leader	Very bad	131 (29.57%)	2.19	0.97	1	4
		Moderately badly	138 (31.15%)				
		Moderately good	132 (29.80%)				
		Very good	42 (9.48%)				
Independent variables							
South Korean media exposure		Never	171 (13.80%)	2.32	0.70	1	3
		Once or twice	502 (40.52%)				
		Often	566 (45.68%)				

Table 1. (continued)

Variable name		Frequency (%)	Mean	Standard deviation	Min.	Max.
Control variables						
Gender	Male	496 (39.97%)	0.60	0.49	0	1
	Female	745 (60.03%)				
Age		1239 (100%)	37.82	12.89	18	81
Education	No education	8 (0.65%)	3.38	0.74	1	5
	Elementary school	23 (1.86%)				
	High school	845 (68.48%)				
	Vocational school	210 (17.02%)				
	University or higher	148 (11.99%)				
Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) membership	Non-party member	1040 (84.69%)	0.15	0.36	0	1
	Party member	188 (15.31%)				
Monthly income (unofficial)	0 won	253 (21.46)	4.14	2.45	0	7
	Less than or equal to 1,000 won	20 (1.70%)				
	Less than or equal to 5,000 won	19 (1.61%)				
	Less than or equal to 10,000 won	12 (1.02%)				
	Less than or equal to 100,000 won	139 (11.79%)				
	Less than or equal to 500,000 won	373 (31.64%)				
	Less than or equal to 1,000,000 won	170 (14.42%)				
	More than or equal to 1,000,000 won	193 (16.37%)				
Experience with business	No	378 (30.58%)	0.69	0.46	0	1
	Yes	858 (69.42%)				

Table 1. (continued)

Variable name		Frequency (%)	Mean	Standard deviation	Min.	Max.
Experience traveling to other regions	Rarely	421 (34.01%)	1.92	0.77	1	3
	Occasionally	491 (39.66%)				
	Frequently	326 (26.33%)				

Source: Author.

less than or equal to 10,000 won=3, less than or equal to 100,000 won=4, less than or equal to 500,000 won=5, less than or equal to 1,000,000 won=6, more than or equal to 1,000,000 won=7) was added to measure their economic status. Given the reality of the North Korean economy, where the formal sector is virtually paralyzed, it was deemed appropriate to create an informal income variable.

In addition, several alternative explanations are possible when analyzing the relationship between exposure to South Korean media and perceptions. For example, business experience may influence recipients' attitudes and values. The main channels through which South Korean media content circulates in the North are marketplaces and sharing among relatives and friends, so experiences of conducting business and traveling outside their home region may have a certain correlation with South Korean media contact (Kang 2014; Lee 2014; Jung 2016). It could be, therefore, that people with more business experience are more likely to have favorable attitudes toward capitalism because they have been exposed to more South Korean media through their business activities. Travel experience may have a similar effect—people who have traveled more frequently to other parts of North Korea may have been exposed to more South Korean media content and, as a result, may more readily recognize the corruption and contradictions of North Korean society. In this regard, travel experience can be a better explanatory variable for negative perceptions of the North Korean regime. If these alternative explanations are true, then adding the business experience or visitation experience variables would significantly weaken the effect of the independent variable (South Korean media exposure) or cause it to lose statistical significance. To test these alternative explanations, the variables of business experience and out-of-region travel experience were added to the control variables. Table 1 summarizes the descriptive statistics of the variables used in this study.

For statistical analysis, logistic regression models were used when the dependent variable was a binary variable (perceptions of the South Korean regime), and ordered logistic regression models were used when the dependent

variable was an ordered variable (perceptions of the North Korean regime). Given that this study sampled a total of 1,241 respondents across annual surveys from 2011 to 2020, there may be unobserved bias between respondents in each survey year. If there is some similarity within respondent groups across years, it is important to control for this as it could systematically bias the results of the analysis. In addition, if respondents are from a particular region, there may be some similarity within the same regional group across years. To control for these group specificities, I use a fixed effects model that includes year and region as dummy variables.

Results and Analysis

Results of Empirical Analysis

To analyze the impact of South Korean media exposure, statistical analyses were conducted using a model with dependent variables related to the South Korean regime (perceptions of capitalism, individualism, and South Korea) and a model with dependent variables related to the North Korean regime (trust in North Korean media and evaluations of the supreme leader). First, Table 2 shows the effect of South Korean media exposure on a set of dependent variables related to the South Korean system. In each model, the left-hand side shows the pure effect of the independent variable (South Korean media exposure) without the control variables, and the right-hand side shows whether the independent variable remains statistically significant when all control variables are taken into account.

The results suggest that exposure to South Korean media is positively correlated with perceptions of capitalism, individualism, and South Korea, all of which are statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). This means that the results in Table 2 support Hypothesis 1, which states that North Koreans who are more frequently exposed to South Korean media content will have more positive perceptions of the values of the South Korean regime than those with little or no exposure. To explain the effect of exposure to South Korean media more practically, the odds ratio indicates that for every unit of exposure to South Korean media, the probability of having a positive perception of capitalism increases by about 2.55 times (155%). In terms of perceptions of individualism, the odds of having a positive perception of individualism increased by about 1.4 times (40%) for every unit of exposure to South Korean media. Similarly, the odds of having a positive perception of South Korea increased by about 1.6 times (60%) for every unit increase in South Korean media contact. Thus, it can be said that North Koreans who are exposed to more South Korean media content are more likely to have favorable perceptions of overall values regarding the South Korean regime, with the effect of South Korean media contact being strongest on perceptions of capitalism.

Table 2. South Korean Media Exposure and Perceptions of the South Korean Regime

	Capitalism		Individualism		South Korea	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
South Korean media exposure	0.811*** (0.049)	0.938*** (0.087)	0.406*** (0.076)	0.386*** (0.111)	0.298*** (0.036)	0.472*** (0.049)
Gender		0.255 (0.251)		0.283+ (0.149)		0.395* (0.167)
Age		0.026** (0.009)		-0.000 (0.005)		0.022*** (0.006)
Educational level		0.074 (0.117)		0.003 (0.061)		0.161+ (0.089)
Party membership		0.102 (0.232)		-0.087 (0.262)		-0.195 (0.185)
Income level (unofficial)		0.082* (0.035)		0.077 (0.058)		0.037*** (0.009)
Business experience		0.302 (0.377)		0.306* (0.121)		-0.381*** (0.091)
Experience traveling to other regions		0.066 (0.207)		0.004 (0.046)		-0.055+ (0.033)
Regional fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observation	1063	999	1229	1147	1222	1142

Source: Author.

Note 1: Numbers presented are regression coefficients and standard errors in parentheses. (+ $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$)

Note 2: The number of respondents may vary due to non-response for each question or because some questions were new for a particular survey year.

In addition to the independent variables, it is also worth noting the influence of the control variables. The gender variable is only significant for perceptions of South Korea, meaning that women are more likely to have positive perceptions of South Korea. In the case of age, my analysis suggests that as people get older, they have more favorable attitudes toward capitalism and South Korea. These results seem to contradict the common belief that younger generations are more open-minded and pro-capitalist, and therefore more favorable toward the South.

Another thing to note is the income level variable. While higher income levels are associated with more positive attitudes toward capitalism and South Korea, there is no significant effect on attitudes toward individualism.

Interestingly, the business experience variable does not have a significant effect on capitalism, but it does have a significant effect on individualism and South Korea. However, the direction of the effect is reversed: business experience seems to have a positive effect on individualism, but a negative effect on South Korea. In addition, education level, party membership, and experience traveling to other regions are not significantly associated with the dependent variables related to the South Korean regime at a statistically significant level ($p < 0.05$).

On the other hand, exposure to South Korean media is possibly linked to changes in perceptions regarding both the South Korean regime and their own regime. This is because North Koreans who frequently acquire information about the outside world through South Korean media may develop a desire for a free and prosperous free world, while at the same time recognizing the contradictions and problems of the North Korean system. Perceptions of the North Korean regime are measured by two dependent variables: trust in North Korean media and positive evaluation of the supreme leader. Table 3 shows the relationship between experience with South Korean media and perceptions of values related to the North Korean regime. As in the previous statistical models, the left side of each model shows the pure effect of the independent variable, and the right side shows the effect after accounting for control variables. The analysis reveals that North Koreans who have had exposure to South Korean media are more likely to have negative overall perceptions of the North Korean regime. That is, exposure to South Korean media is negatively associated with both trust in North Korean media and positive evaluation of the supreme leader at statistically significant levels ($p < 0.001$). More specifically, using the odds ratio, each unit increase in South Korean media exposure is associated with a 36% decrease in the likelihood of trusting North Korean media and a 38% decrease in the likelihood of evaluating the supreme leader positively. Therefore, Hypothesis 2, which states that North Koreans who are more frequently exposed to South Korean media content will have more negative perceptions of the values of the North Korean regime than those with little or no exposure, is supported by the statistical results. Some of the control variables are also statistically significant, with gender and experience traveling to other regions within North Korea having a positive effect on evaluations of the supreme leader. In other words, respondents are more likely to view the supreme leader favorably if they are female or have more experience traveling to other parts of North Korea. On the other hand, age, education, and business experience had a negative impact on the evaluation of the supreme leader—the higher the age and education level, and the greater the business experience, the more likely respondents are to rate the supreme leader negatively. As for the income variable, trust in North Korean media decreased as income level increased.

Additionally, this study analyzes the interaction effect of Hallyu media exposure with the Pyongyang region variable to determine whether the effect

Table 3. South Korean Media Exposure and Perceptions of the North Korean Regime

	Trust in North Korean media		Evaluation of the supreme leader	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
South Korean media exposure	-0.454*** (0.077)	-0.448*** (0.096)	-0.393*** (0.087)	-0.478*** (0.087)
Gender		0.050 (0.201)		0.335*** (0.085)
Age		-0.009+ (0.005)		-0.033*** (0.004)
Educational level		-0.076 (0.124)		-0.255* (0.114)
Party membership		0.512+ (0.288)		0.166 (0.190)
Income level (unofficial)		-0.072** (0.025)		0.020 (0.018)
Business experience		-0.009 (0.120)		-0.473*** (0.050)
Experience traveling to other regions		-0.116 (0.081)		0.144*** (0.040)
cut1	-1.803*** (0.190)	-2.963*** (0.794)	-0.601 (0.407)	-2.867** (0.923)
cut2	-0.122 (0.214)	-1.248+ (0.712)	0.778+ (0.463)	-1.432 (0.970)
cut3			2.667*** (0.468)	0.534 (1.053)
Regional fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observation	542	521	442	421

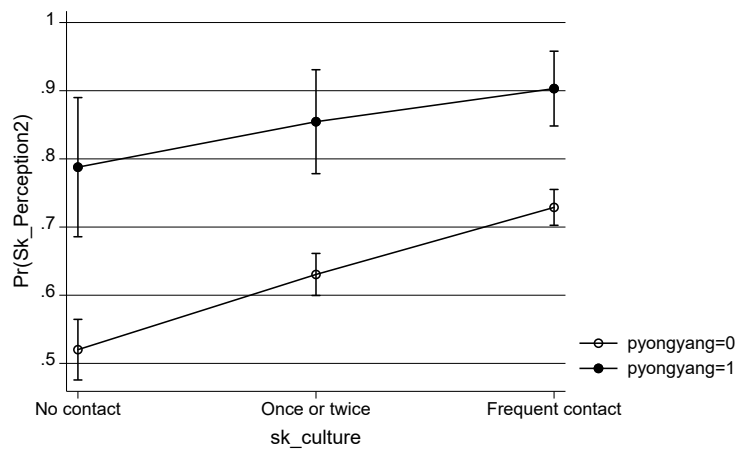
Source: Author.

Note 1: Numbers presented are regression coefficients and standard errors in parentheses. (+ p<0.1, * p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001)

Note 2: “Trust in North Korean media” is a new survey question from 2016, and “Evaluation of the supreme leader” is a new survey question from 2017.

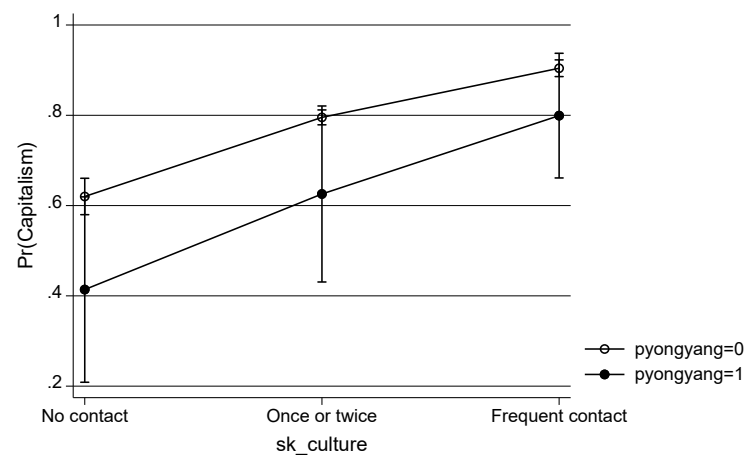
of Hallyu media contact may vary by region. Pyongyang is the capital of North Korea and is home to a select population with high ideological loyalty to the regime. First, I examine the marginal effects of contact with Hallyu culture on perceptions of South Korea, capitalism, and individualism among Pyongyang residents. The combined effect of living in Pyongyang and having contact with Hallyu culture has a significant effect on perceptions of the South. Pyongyang

Figure 2. Marginal Effects of Hallyu Contact with Pyongyang Residents on Perceptions of South Korea



Source: Author.

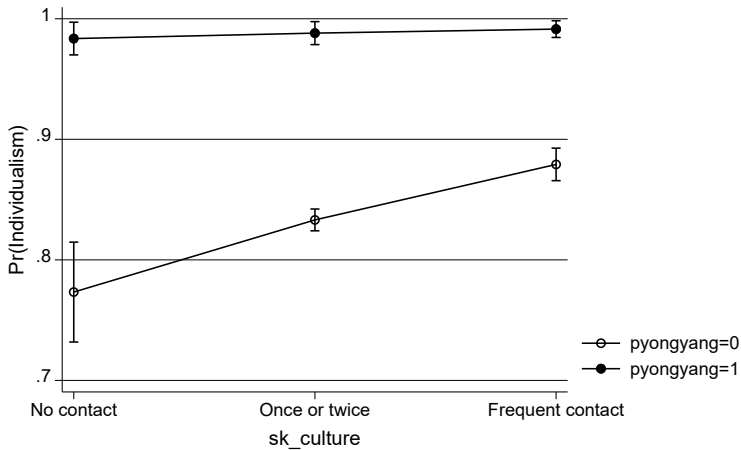
Figure 3. Marginal Effects of Hallyu Contact with Pyongyang Residents on Perceptions of Capitalism



Source: Author.

residents' perceptions of South Korea become more positive as they are exposed to Hallyu culture, but the increase is relatively small compared to non-Pyongyang residents. Regarding capitalism, Pyongyang residents are generally less positive about capitalism than non-Pyongyang residents, but their perceptions of capitalism become more positive as they are exposed to Hallyu culture. When Pyongyang residents are exposed to Hallyu culture, they are more likely to be

Figure 4. Marginal Effects of Hallyu Contact with Pyongyang Residents on Perceptions of Individualism



Source: Author.

individualistic than non-Pyongyang residents, but the increase is relatively smaller. These marginal effects suggest that the effect of Hallyu contact may vary considerably across regions. Figures 2-4 show the above results.

Robustness Checks

A possible criticism of the above empirical analysis is the endogeneity problem—that is, while the exposure to South Korean media may influence North Koreans' positive perceptions of the South Korean regime, it is also possible that North Koreans who have such preferences in the first place are more likely to be exposed to South Korean media. To address this endogeneity issue and to check the robustness of the findings, I examine whether the effect of exposure is still present in a group with negative perceptions of the South, rather than in a group with positive perceptions of the South to begin with.

Even conservatively speaking, if the effects of exposure are still present in groups with negative perceptions of the South (i.e., perceptions of the South as hostile, suspicious, or competitive), this would be evidence that the effects of exposure do not vary significantly depending on the initial values of the recipients. Table 4 shows the effects of exposure to South Korean media on attitudes toward capitalism, identification with individualism, trust in North Korean media, and evaluations of the supreme leader for only those with negative perceptions of the South. The results show that there is a significant effect of South Korean media exposure on perceptions of capitalism, trust in North Korean media, and evaluation of the supreme leader ($p < 0.001$), which are similar to the previous empirical analysis, except for perceptions of individualism.

Table 4. Effects of South Korean Media Exposure on Groups with Negative Perceptions of the South

	Capitalism	Individualism	Trust in North Korean media	Evaluation of the supreme leader
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
South Korean media exposure	1.128*** (0.078)	0.285 (0.213)	-0.593*** (0.128)	-0.765*** (0.226)
Gender	0.242 (0.257)	0.274 (0.176)	0.425* (0.173)	0.639*** (0.158)
Age	0.037*** (0.006)	0.014 (0.022)	-0.019* (0.008)	-0.053*** (0.010)
Educational level	-0.016 (0.106)	0.005 (0.228)	-0.036 (0.141)	-0.372 (0.245)
Party membership	0.290 (0.196)	-0.756*** (0.177)	0.349 (0.343)	0.566* (0.271)
Income level (unofficial)	0.116+ (0.059)	0.067 (0.067)	-0.083 (0.056)	0.041 (0.049)
Business experience	0.472 (0.335)	0.274+ (0.150)	-0.497* (0.212)	-1.081*** (0.173)
Experience traveling to other regions	0.142 (0.443)	0.190+ (0.106)	0.039 (0.074)	0.112 (0.085)
cut1			-3.995*** (0.963)	-5.976** (1.897)
cut2			-2.305* (0.968)	-4.388* (1.883)
cut3				-2.320 (1.953)
Regional fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓
N	332	361	193	157

Source: Author.

Note 1: Numbers presented are regression coefficients and standard errors in parentheses. (+ p<0.1, * p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001)

Note 2: Respondents with negative perceptions of the South are those who answered “the South as hostile, wary, or competitive” to the question “When you were living in the North, what did you think the South was to the North?”

Conclusion

Why do the North Korean authorities go to such lengths to curb the spread of so-called “reactionary” South Korean culture? The results of this study suggest that they may have good reasons. Previous studies of Hallyu in North Korea have documented that South Korean pop culture has become a social phenomenon in North Korea and has had a significant impact on changing North Korean consciousness. However, how exposure to South Korean media specifically changes the consciousness of North Koreans has yet to be fully tested empirically.

In the absence of direct surveys of North Koreans living in the country, this study analyzes survey data from between 2011 and 2020 of 1,241 North Koreans who defected directly from North Korea the preceding year. Despite the limitations of selection bias in defector data, analysis results provide interesting implications. North Koreans who are frequently exposed to South Korean media have more positive perceptions and attitudes toward the South, capitalism, and individualism. This suggests that the liberal atmosphere of South Korean society, the prosperity of capitalism, the emphasis on individual happiness, and the fulfillment portrayed in Hallyu content have had a significant impact on North Koreans.

Many North Korean defectors say their first exposure to South Korean media was just for fun or because their friends introduced them to it. When they first encountered the movies and dramas, most of them say they did not believe the portrayal of South Korean society and thought the characters’ lives were staged and manipulated. However, the more they watched the content, the more they became immersed in it, and at some point, they crossed a certain threshold and came to accept it as the “truth.” The process of changing consciousness by watching South Korean media seems to be a matter of the quantity of information accumulated and the presence of a crucial trigger that confirms it. First, it is necessary to accumulate enough experience and information about South Korea by repeatedly watching South Korean media. When a certain amount of information is accumulated and a decisive event occurs, a shift in consciousness occurs. Such decisive events, or critical triggers, include stories relayed through phone calls with family members who defected, content regarding South Korea that is broadcast by North Korean media, information gleaned while traveling through China, and information heard from people who served overseas (Kang 2014, 50). Of course, not all changes in attitudes follow such a formalized process. In some cases, attitudes and perceptions toward the South may change in the absence of any definitive trigger, but as the amount of information accumulated through South Korean media steadily increases. Some North Korean defectors emphasize the genre of media content, stating that although they initially thought that movies and dramas were fabricated, watching documentary programs

featuring ordinary people, such as *6 O'clock at My Hometown*, changed their views of South Korea (ibid., 51).³ In other words, by watching programs featuring ordinary rural people instead of the colorful backgrounds and fancy lives of the main characters in dramas, they came to truly believe in the freedom and development of South Korea through the mechanized rural areas, the living standards of ordinary people, and the free and cheerful attitudes of South Koreans.

On the other hand, it is noteworthy that the experience of contact with South Korean media is also associated with more negative perceptions of the North Korean regime. As North Koreans accumulate information about the outside world and come to trust it, their thoughts naturally turn to the reality of North Korea. They begin to think deeply about why South Koreans have such a good life and they do not, why South Koreans have such rich and free lives while they live such repressed and controlled lives. When North Koreans become aware of the relative reality of their country, where they are unpaid for their hard work and forbidden to watch foreign movies and dramas, they eventually become dissatisfied and critical of the North Korean political and social system. This study's findings that the more North Koreans are more exposed to South Korean media, the less they believe the propaganda and distorted information provided by North Korean media and the more negative they view the country's supreme leader, illustrating the quiet but powerful force of Hallyu.

Since the study did not survey residents currently living in North Korea, the findings cannot be generalized to the entire population. The findings, however, can be understood as reflective of the perceptions of recent defectors. Given that the data used in this study is from North Koreans who have been out of North Korea for less than a year and that the sample size of 1,241 North Koreans over a ten-year period is relatively large for a defector survey, I believe the findings nonetheless provide a meaningful assessment of the effects of Hallyu in North Korea.

The results of this study suggest several important and interesting issues that could be explored in future research. First, it is necessary to identify the differential effects of the type and content of South Korean media. Within media content, there are many different genres, including dramas, movies, documentaries, fiction, and so on. Among them, the specific genres and content that effect changes of consciousness among North Koreans should be identified. The second issue for future research is the threshold of consciousness change. As mentioned earlier, the process of changing the consciousness of North Koreans through exposure is gradual and cumulative, so it is necessary to further elucidate the specific conditions under which the change of consciousness occurs. Future studies could also consider instrumental variable approaches to further address potential endogeneity.

Taken together, the results of this study underscore the policy relevance of

mediated cultural contact—they suggest that South Korea's public diplomacy and international broadcasting strategies can play a meaningful role in shaping perceptions across the Korean Peninsula, thereby contributing not only to information flows but also to longer-term peacebuilding. In this sense, the findings contribute to peace studies by illustrating how cultural and informational flows can function as mechanisms of conflict transformation and reconciliation.

Notes

1. Jung's (2016) study is an exception that quantitatively analyzes the effects of Hallyu media contact, but it is limited in that it only examines the effects of Hallyu media contact on perceptions of reunification (the need for reunification, the timing of reunification, the benefits of reunification, and the manner of reunification).
2. The North Korean Defectors' Consciousness Survey, conducted by IPUS, utilizes interviews with defectors residing in South Korea. Through these interviews, the survey indirectly investigates North Korean residents' perceptions of unification, conditions in North Korea, South Korean society and its North Korea policy, relations with neighboring countries, and defectors' adaptation to South Korea.
3. *6 O'clock at My Hometown* is a broadcast program on KBS 1TV that airs weekdays at 6 p.m. and provides information about rural areas in South Korea. Since its first broadcast in 1991, the program has been loved by the general public for over thirty years.

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