K-fashion and Technology-driven Globalization in the Philippine Setting

CARLO JEJOMAR PASCUAL PALAD SANCHEZ
Continuing Professional Teacher Education (CPTE)
Bulacan State University
coud_niwa70@yahoo.com.ph

Abstract

K-fashion is a manifestation of technology-driven globalization. Globalization, or the process of across-borders interaction and integration, has been fueled by modern advancements in Information and Communication Technology (ICT). Popular culture, of which K-pop would be a good example, is a manifestation of this process. It is likewise fueled by technology, by the internet, by online means of acquiring data. In this globalized age, ICT is an open source of information on the rise and fall of K-pop groups. The access—to these information—that they give also reflects their role in the actual rise and fall of these global groups. In the Philippine setting, technology-driven globalization manifests in popular culture only indirectly. This process of interaction and integration can be visibly seen in the more wearable and more tangible products of K-fashion. With the internet providing means to download free music and videos, Filipinos can instead use their resources to shop for clothes, in both physical stalls and online stores.
As a third-world country, the Philippines finds itself not far above the modified poverty-line called the wash-line. Despite this, however, they manage to innovate and find creative ways to participate—become active receivers—of the process that continuously connects the technological world.

*The world is like a washing machine: it goes round and round.*

For the past decade or so, globalization has been a very famous topic of discourse among people from various fields. It is the thing of today; it is what makes our current world turn.

This paper attempts to present K-fashion as a manifestation of “technology-driven globalization.” Specifically, it aims to define what technology-driven globalization is, what K-fashion is, and how the latter is a manifestation of the former in the Philippine setting.

**Technology-driven Globalization**

The concept of globalization is known to almost everyone by now, it having been explained in various forms of informal and academic media. Still, here is a definition from aptly-named website globalization101.org: “Globalization is a process of interaction and integration among the people, companies, and governments of different nations, a process driven by international trade and investment and aided by information technology” (Levin Institute, n.d.) The root of the term is the word “globe,” and interaction and integration in this regard is indeed on a global level. One finds further in the definition: “This process has effects on the environment, on culture, on
political systems, on economic development and prosperity, and on human physical well-being in societies around the world.”

As pointed out in the same webpage, globalization is not an entirely new thing. Its roots have existed thousands of years back, from the time our early ancestors started trading across rivers and seas. However, globalization in its present sense goes way beyond mere instances of perfume or fabric exchange. The world goes round and round: the process of interaction and integration among people has progressed from “mere” barter trades to complex technological networking. Bridges that connect countries have well advanced: carrier pigeons became jets, bamboo rafts became high-speed ferries, rivers became washing machines.

Globalization is not limited to the applications of modern information and communication technologies (ICT) in the global scale. It is, however, almost impossible to discount the fact that technology fueled globalization. Technology made the world spin faster than ever.

Advancements in information technology and communication media made the effects of globalization more visible and felt as it paved way to a much faster and freer exchange among global nations. “Snails” of the post office have curled up to shiny-ringed blue “E’s” of the monitor screen, making mail—and, consequently, almost any information that would have been previously difficult to gather—accessible with one computer click.

Several months of waiting for a parcel from overseas has been vastly reduced, to a few seconds no less. Information on government policies, economic developments and trade are travelling the world through the internet, through wireless
waves and wires in waves (since kilometers of communication lines are usually installed under bodies of water).

The role of technology is explicitly mentioned in globalization101.org, as globalization is said to be “aided by information technology.” Data on human societies, the environment, political systems—all of these aspects affected by this process, as in the definition above—are readily and easily available. More often than not they are available anytime and anywhere to anyone with an internet connection, to anyone who has an internet connection anytime and anywhere.

Even without the above, the term “technology-driven globalization” is almost self-explanatory. Globalization is process of interaction and integration among different nations. Interaction and integration are made possible by communication, or the two-way acquisition and processing of information. These two are made possible essentially by ICT.

Air mail used to be the fastest across-the-globe carrier. The mail jet, however, has been “replaced” by a much smaller yet more efficient paper jet, a digital folded plane called the cursor.

**K-Pop and K-Fashion**

As mentioned, advancements in information and communication technology fueled globalization and made its effects more apparent. Among these, there might be nothing more apparent than its effect on culture, on popular culture specifically. Extremely easy access to data in this case is more frequently not limited to statistical or scientific information. Data in this sense is both information on the latest trends, and the latest trends themselves.
The latest on the popular culture trade, of which K-pop would be a very good example, is readily available with just a few clicks. Be it news articles, lyrics, or concert updates, all that needs to be done is to “search” and the internet will provide in seconds. Pop stars can be brought down the same way they shot to fame; performing groups get even more and more popular with every single view of their video. Through cursors and a song, people can interact with societies around the globe.

The world is like a washing machine: after warming up, it turns really, really fast.

In this world of across-borders ICT, networks are being built at a rate that arguably has never been as fast as any time before. From “Idol History: K-pop By The Numbers,” a June 6, 2012 article of Dana of seoulbeats.com, technology-driven globalization in general popular culture can be seen in the growth of Korean popular culture or K-pop.

According to the author, between the years 1999 and 2005, 50 new K-pop groups had their debut. The number increased to 30 new groups in the year 2010 alone. In 2011, however, a sea of 50 new groups--the total of a previous seven-year period--debuted in one single year (Dana, 2012).

In total, the number of new groups formed between 2009 and the year the article was written—a short span of four years—far exceeds the number of groups that have debuted during the 13-year period between the years 1996 and 2008. Most of these groups were made known in Korea, and especially in the world, through information and communication technology. Video and music streaming websites (such as Youtube), free blog portals (such as Multiply and Tumblr), and social media websites (such
as the then-popular Friendster, and the more recent Facebook and Twitter) are obvious manifestations of modern ICT.

These groups were known, commended, made famous, and brought to the top of the world charts and the peak of their global careers through technology. It is also in the same manner that they were bashed, associated with controversies, forgotten, and replaced with new song and dance groups that will be subjected to the same popular-culture cycle.

Dana’s (2012) article “Idol History: K-pop By The Numbers” accounts for the number of groups that debuted in specific time periods. A debut, however, does not automatically translate to seconds of fame, even more so to a sustainable career. Not all 50 new groups that debuted in the year 2011, for example, were able to survive the spinning world of popular performing arts. Groups shoot to fame as fast as other groups are abandoned. With modern technology, 100 new K-pop groups could debut in a single year, but the same number can also fail to become more than flat statistics.

The above information was accessed with a few taps in a keyboard, in a span of even fewer seconds. Data on the rise and fall of K-pop groups, and their actual rise and fall, can be acquired, influenced, or controlled with just a few clicks. Technology powers the globalization washing machine that spins popular culture.

Information on the existence of a single rising group alone facilitates the spread of popular culture across countries. The extent of this spread is even greater since on top of their identity, their albums, promotions, charities, scandals, breakthroughs and achievements travel throughout the globe.
With our current technologies, integration among nations in terms of tradable popular culture can occur faster than a washing cycle.

_The world is like a washing machine: in it is a bit of everything._

If we find time to look at every single piece of clothing that we dump in a washing machine, we will see how this current wave of globalized popular culture has reached the fibers that we use. Washing machines have replaced rivers not only in the laundry sense, but in a way, in its transportative essence as well.

In general, the clothes that we wear and the look we get from it resemble, no matter how vaguely, a popular “pop culture” character or idea. The colored pants, the skirts, the neon shirt: these are parcels of globalization that come in our personal colors and sizes.

Aside from the look, we see this modern river barter in the brands of the clothes themselves. Cotton On, Uniqlo, Giordano: these global brands will go round and round in the machine side by side with our favorite regional and indigenous brands, advertised by or with our favored popular culture personalities. We see manifestations of culture bridges in the H&M that tumbles with the Zara, in the Samsung phone being rinsed in the pockets of a 501.

These traded piles of clothes can be considered as direct merchandise and “products” of K-pop. As K-pop groups, and their music and videos, are being sold and bought by consumers, they could also be considered as products in their own regard. This allows for the occasional “product on a
product” merchandise in closets, for the Korean-style shirts silk-screened with a photo of K-pop superstars.

One would best explore the K-pop phenomenon, and subsequently articulate its extent in a certain country, by looking into album sales charts. K-pop groups, first and foremost, sell their music, their songs, their videos. Album sales, therefore, are the most relevant source of information on the said topic, but it is not the only source. Data on K-fashion can also be useful in exploring the extent globalization has been made manifest by Korean popular culture. In fact, in some instances, it could be a more suitable source.

In the Philippine setting, the consumer aspect of K-pop is more apparent in clothing industries. Music albums in general are pretty expensive. Additionally, the value of music albums lies in the satisfaction a customer gets from playing it through a computer or music player. As music is virtually “downloadable” from the internet at no cost, it would be understandable if K-pop fans would rather spend their money on Korean clothes.

K-fashion is more wearable, and consequently more tangible and visible than music albums. Indeed, some of these downloads are essentially forms of piracy, but non-illegal avenues where fans can download free music and videos do allow them to allot their purchasing resources to the more “practical” goods of K-fashion.

**Globalization in the Philippines**

The cursor has influenced the direction of the world. True to what a digital arrow does, it has “pointed” nations to new currents, to entirely new rivers to traverse. Modern ICT allowed
for the concretization of globalization that is visible even in the soapiest parts of the house.

Although possibly unaware, we encounter this concretization in almost everything, even the clothes we wear. Still, this is all thanks to the advancement we have achieved in mediums of global exchange. As previously introduced, information on the latest trends, profiles of potential buyers and sellers, contact between parties, and actual delivery can be made with a click of a mouse. Even the integration among people, companies, and governments that accompany all of these are made possible through global technologies. It is globalization ferried into our closets.

As previously mentioned, international brands Cotton On, Uniqlo, Giordano, Zara, and H&M were welcomed into the Philippine shores with much anticipation. Filipino K-pop fans, therefore, would be much more thrilled to welcome Korean brands that bring Korean fashion right at their local mall’s doorsteps.

Jica Lapeña of gmanetwork.com reports the “arrival” of Korean Fashion in the country (2013). The article narrated the opening of the first branch of Basic House last December 2012. The said shop is located at The Shops in Greenhills. A May 31, 2013 article from inquirer.net then featured the Korean fashion brand’s second store at SM Megamall in Mandaluyong.

Aside from Basic House, the Philippines also became a new home to global brand Mall of Korea. The headline of an article by Jamie Sanchez (2016) of spot.ph reads: “Now Open: Mall of Korea, a fashionista's shopping paradise.” The said shopping center opened July 14 of that same year, at Metro Walk in Pasig.
In addition to the above, globalization can also be seen—and arguably better seen—in the buffering symbol that turns round and round.

Korean popular culture—which thrived and has conquered the world through ICT—is concretized by the same technological media. Online shopping has been a thing of the global age, and Filipino boats have some of the most avid rowers in this digital floating market. An article by David Dizon (2015) of abs-cbnnews.com shares a WeAreSocial report stating that “Pinoys are top in Internet, social media use.” From these, one would not be surprised to find out that the Filipinos’ passion for shopping translated to a love of its online counterpart.

Online shopping is self-explanatory: it is shopping on the line, through the internet, through ICT. Technology-driven Korean pop culture, and K-fashion, has made its way not only toward physical stalls but even in virtual stalls. In a July 4, 2016 article by Louren, powerpinoys.com ranked the “Top 5 Online Shopping Sites in Philippines.” Ranked from fifth to first, in the list are Widget City, WeeMall, Goods.ph, Zalora Philippines, and Lazada Philippines (Louren, 2016). The top two online shopping sites are used as references for this paper, also because the other three sites mostly cater to shoppers of gadgets and non-clothing merchandise.

In Lazada Philippines, typing the keyword “Korean” in the search box will generate 27,540 results. From these, 18,079 items fall under the “Women” category while 8,498 are under the “Men” category. In the “Girls” tab, meanwhile, are 756 items while 208 search items appear in the “Boys” section.
The popularity of K-pop and Korean fashion is more apparent in Zalora Philippines. One finds in its home page a section dedicated for “K-Fashion.” It has become a stand-alone category, side by side with “Clothing,” “Shoes,” and “Beauty.” Clicking the “K-Fashion” tab will show two categories: “Women’s Korean Fashion” and “Top Brands.”


Under the “Men’s Korean Fashion” category are 82 Items. These include products under the “Premium Brands” tab, which is divided to brands “Ceemarket,” “ILC,” “Nohant,” “91,2” and “Rocket x Lunch.” Clicking “Premium K-Fashion” in the men’s category will show items from “Customellow,” “Rawrow,” and “Ceemarket.” Typing the keyword “Korean” in the general Zalora Philippines search box, meanwhile, will generate 2706 items.

The world is like a washing machine; it turns, but sometimes not as fast as others.

The fresh scent of globalization, like almost everything, is not felt by everyone. There is this side where things are not as “globalized.”
In a TED conference presentation, Hans Rosling (2010) presents in his talk “The Magic Washing Machine” the differences in costs of living per day of people. It is no new knowledge that there are groups of people living above, way-above, and below the poverty line. What is notable from his talk, however, is his new take on the topic.

For Rosling, the absence or presence of a washing machine in “less-globalized” households can show us the extent of integration that “the rest of the nations” are experiencing. Indeed, there are still a lot of people who “waste” their time washing clothes by hand, whose “experience of the world” does not go beyond the mass-produced and mass-consumed detergent that roughens their hands.

Introducing the terms “air line” and “wash line” that go with “poverty line,” Rosling (2010) discussed the idea of washing machines, light bulbs and poor people moving up the highly globalized economic ladder. There are people—these people—who reside on the other side of the washing machine. It is the side that, amidst all the ‘up and down’ cycle of each turn, never gets to ascend from the bottom of the round round world.

More than researching for statistics, it is important to take note that these people, regardless if they wash their clothes with their hands or with machines, come across the same inter-societal bridges as people above the “wash line.” Be it on less-advanced media, or through other means that they can barely afford to voluntarily gain access of, globalized popular culture interacts with them.

The Philippine context, being a third-world country, is not far above the “wash line.” What seems unusual, however, is how the
fandom of Filipinos is comparable to that of highly-industrialized countries. A few taps in ticket-selling websites will show that concert prices of international acts—including K-pop groups—are usually a lot higher in the Philippines than in the rest of Asia.

The Philippines is not far above the wash line, yet it can afford the generally pricey K-fashion goods. This could signify two things: that Filipinos allot most of their usually limited resources for popular culture products, or they make the most out of what they have.

The submission to counterfeit clothes—those with fake brands or imitated prints of the latest in popular culture—is not an unusual thing in Philippine markets. Similar to how most K-pop fans download their music from free websites, they get their K-fashion fix beyond “authentic” clothing stalls and shopping sites that directly import Korean products.

The Filipinos are versed with the non-traditional media that will allow them to consume goods for a much lower price—or even for free. More so, they may even be part of the production of these mass-produced goods, a trend that has numerously been associated with small-time entrepreneurship and the increased access to machines and raw materials. The same ICT that allows for free music and video downloads makes it easy for almost any computer-literate person to layout t-shirt designs. It is also the same globalization-driving technology that will allow him or her to manufacture, and eventually sell, these products—counterfeit or not.

*The world is like a washing machine: It could stop turning, but it will eventually begin another wash cycle.*
Globalization is driven by international trade and investment. Through the kind of information and communication technology that we have, it has been rendering generally positive effects on culture, on economic development and prosperity, and on human physical well-being in a number of societies. The Philippines, though not “yet” a highly-industrialized country, has been highly efficient in harnessing the benefits of ICT.

Technology-driven globalization—of which popular culture is a very powerful manifestation—would ever-continuously turn and bridge and integrate nations, and would eventually fully integrate the world into the world. Today, communication media are aplenty: people have boats, people have the internet, people have powerful ideas and trends. In a globalized world, nations continuously interact in a give-and-take fashion that goes round and round.

K-fashion is a manifestation of technology-driven globalization. This process of interaction and integration has brought forth a positive and felt effect on human well-being around the world. The technology that drove it to its current speed, and that continuously powers it, allowed Filipinos to consume K-pop and patronize K-fashion within their own ways and means. Technology has allowed Filipinos to dominantly “receive” popular culture of the globalizing world. It also shows promise to allow the Philippines—and its technologically articulate people—to be, eventually, on the dominantly “giving” end of globalization.
References


Carlo Jejomar Pascual Palad Sanchez has been fascinated with various media of communication, both of the informative and the expressive. The rise of Korean popular culture, for example, is an excellent manifestation of both art and inter-border globalization.

His interest in Korean culture began when he presented his paper “Once Upon a Time: Koreanovelas and the Galleon Trade of the Digital Age” in the 2014 AIKS Korean Studies Conference. He finished his Bachelor of Arts, Major in Philosophy degree in the Ateneo de Manila University last December 2016.