

# What is K-Fashion?

## Understanding Thematic Components of the Idea of K-Fashion

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### Abstract

With the rising global popularity of Hallyu or the Korean wave, various K-cultures, one of them being K-Fashion, are fascinating the world. This research aimed to examine what are some perceptions that form and complete the idea of K-Fashion. By analyzing the open-coded data from the in-depth group interviews based on the grounded theory with 46 participants from 16 countries excluding Korea, by breaking down the raw data of the interview transcripts, 10 superordinate themes and 38 subordinate themes were found under the 2 categories. The first category consisting of 3 superordinate themes was named ‘dynamic and diverse’, reflecting the dynamically evolving and diverse nature of K-Fashion, and the second category with 7 superordinate themes was identified as ‘double-sided and ambiguous’. The study outlines the thematic components that forms the idea of K-Fashion, which has been a neglected research subject despite its importance in the fast-evolving and growing world of Hallyu.

**Keywords:** K-Fashion, Korean fashion, Korean wave, perception of K-Fashion, perspectives on K-Fashion

### 1. Introduction

About 20 years have passed since the discussion on the cultural phenomenon of Hallyu or the Korean wave started (Hong, 2013) and it has now become a worldwide sensation. With the high penetration rate and the rapid development of technology that led to the evolution and reformation of the media forms, Korean culture is spreading faster than ever to its audiences around the world. Meanwhile, with the fans’ intensified interest in what Hallyu stars wear, the world has begun to pay a particular attention to K-Fashion. As Korea has begun to be recognized as a trendy and fashionable country (Kim, 2012a; Kim, 2017), the term K-Fashion has been coined by combining the words ‘K’ for Korea and ‘Fashion’ for its lexical meaning of “style and trend for clothing and hairstyles that are popular at the time” (Ahn & Geum, 2016). The government and related organizations have been actively using the term K-Fashion as a part of their K-culture vitalization projects, but the clear substance of the term remains unclear. Although ‘K-Fashion’ is often used interchangeably with ‘Korean fashion’, the two terminologies certainly connote different meanings; while ‘Korean fashion’ simply refers to the fashion style and clothes made in or made by Korean designers, brands, and manufacturers, the term ‘K-Fashion’ means more than just Korean style of fashion. Rather, K-Fashion refers to the whole concept that non-Korean natives come up with when thinking of Korean fashion as part of the Korean Wave. Although one’s idea of K-Fashion may be subjective and could vary, they are all what creates the concept of K-Fashion from the Hallyu audiences’ perspectives; how Korean fashion style is defined from non-Koreans’ views and how the Korean fashion industry revolves around.

The growing popularity of Korean culture worldwide serves as an opportunity to promote K-Fashion, and at this point, an important question arises regarding how K-Fashion is being perceived and understood. As Hallyu is quite an ethnocentric concept, the previous studies on K-Fashion were mostly published by Korean researchers, focusing on analyzing the Korean style of fashion design (Kim, 2015; Oh & Lee, 2010; Bae & Oh, 2009; Choi & Lee, 2014; Han & Choi, 2019), K-Fashion vitalization plans and strategies (Kim et al., 2017; Kim, 2017; Ahn & Kim, 2018; Seoul Women’s University, 2007), and the evolution phases of K-Fashion (Kim et al., 2017b; Ahn & Geum, 2016; Suh, 2008). Yet the subject of K-Fashion has not been shed light on enough by the foreign researchers, and no qualitative study exists on how K-Fashion is perceived by the Hallyu admirers. Thus, to contribute to the understanding of what K-Fashion is and what measures need to be taken to revitalize K-Fashion

industry, it is necessary to explore the subject thoroughly from listening to the voices of the actual enjoyer of the Hallyu contents. In addition, it would be a meaningful re-examine of what K-Fashion is, in commemoration of 20 years after the term Korean wave was coined.

## **2. Literature Review**

### *2.1 Formation and Globalization of Fashion Culture*

One of the biggest socio-cultural changes that occurred after the Industrial Revolution that affected human life would be the great development of technology. Today, digital media affects the world and brings revolutionary changes in many aspects of human life. This includes fashion that has always been with humans. Historically, fashion has reflected socio-cultural changes, and changes in fashion are also directly related to the Industrial Revolution (Morton, 1943/1964). Prior to the Industrial Revolution, the fashion industry system centered on the royal family and aristocrats, and the production and distribution of clothing were strictly restricted, leaving the poor and the lower class alienated from the fashion system (Joo & Ha, 2016). However, today, in the digital age, the means of collecting and sharing information, and the consumption method of fashion culture and systems have changed accordingly from the past form.

First, there have been systematic changes in the fashion industry (Joo & Ha, 2016): the birth of fast fashion brands, the rapid growth of smartphone users and the expansion of the mobile market, and the interrelationship built between producers and consumers. Second, through the Internet, the gap between fashion producers and consumers narrowed, and consumers became the main body in the production process (Joo & Ha, 2016). Third, fashion brands are communicating through digital media, especially online and digital media have been more actively used in marketing and communication due to the global pandemic since 2020 (Baek & Bae, 2021). Finally, today, the leaders of the fashion system are changing according to media changes, with ordinary citizens becoming “cultural capitalists” (McQuarrie & Phillips, 2013; Kim, 2019) through social media platforms giving birth to non-traditional fashion influencers. Overall, it can be said that digitalization has allowed the fashion culture to become more globalized and connected the fashion consumers and producers in the world closer than ever.

### *2.2 Hallyu and K-Culture*

Generally, the development stage of the Korean Wave is divided into three categories: “Hallyu 1.0,” “Hallyu 2.0,” and “Hallyu 3.0” (Kim, 2021) with elements such as the core genres, reaching audiences, media distribution channels, and content platforms taken into consideration. There have been various governmental policies to promote Hallyu from the early 1990s to up until now, and consequently, the fourth stage has been named “New Hallyu” or “K-Culture” under the New Hallyu Promotion Policy in 2020 by the South Korean Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism. During the stages of Hallyu 1.0, 2.0, and 3.0 from the late 1990s to the late 2010s, the target audience of Korean culture has shifted from few manias in Asian countries to the global citizens of all ages (Korean Foundation for International Cultural Exchange [KOFICE], 2021), and the core genre has broadened from K-Drama and K-Pop to various other cultural contents. Now, the faster transmission speed thanks to 5G network service led to an increase in sales and attracting customers from all over the world.

K-Pop, followed by K-Food, and K-Drama were the images that foreigners associated the most with Korea (KOFICE, 2021) and they have been studied in association with Korean wave by many scholars. Among them, K-Pop and K-Drama are closely related to K-Fashion, as K-Fashion is often perceived as what the Hallyu stars are wearing by Hallyu fans. Especially, K-Pop is exerting great power in the fashion world, as the K-Pop stars are the center of attention in the fashion industry nowadays, making them the ambassadors of the world-famous luxury fashion houses. The fashion styles displayed by K-Pop stars have been examined by many scholars as well, which includes fashion images and styling of K-Pop stars (Park, 2012; Kim, 2012; Na & Jang, 2012), fashion images of K-Pop girl groups (Kim, 2010; Chung & Yoo, 2013), fashion presentation of K-Pop stars (Ryu & Han, 2001), images of Korean boy groups (Hong & Kim, 2012), and aesthetic characteristics of K-Pop fashion (Song et al., 2014). Meanwhile, as a result of its diversified subjects, K-Drama is receiving greater love from global fans, and it is perceived as a good visual resource that reflects how Korean people dress in real lives.

### *2.3 Korean Fashion in the Global Market*

The Korean government has been trying to support the domestic fashion industry with various measures. One of them is the scheme to globalize the traditional Korean custom, Hanbok, under the Han style promotion comprehension plan from 2007 to 2011 by re-branding and re-designing it (Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism, 2007). Also, programs have been organized and run at an institutional level, including Concept Korea, Seoul’s 10 Soul, ‘K-Fashion’ Project, and ‘Fashion Korea’ Project (Kim, 2017). Each project is designed to give

support and advice to Korean fashion brands and designers to grow as global fashion brands and to successfully enter global markets. Especially due to the accelerated digitalization since COVID-19, the Korean fashion industry is aiming to showcase digital runways and showrooms to international buyers, and the organizations such as Korea Creative Content Agency [KOCCA] are helping them in successfully doing so.

While Korean fashion brands are gaining global recognition, Korean fashion brands sold at global retailers are also increasing. As it is recognized for its fast production of trend-sensitive and creative designs (Park, 2017), domestic fashion brands are receiving love calls from overseas buyers and some famous select shops. For example, young designer brands such as 'Ader Error' and 'Andersson Bell' are worn by global K-pop stars such as BTS, and they are already on global online fashion retailers to reach global customers more easily. To be in line with the global market's transition to e-commerce, K-Fashion companies are strengthening non-face-to-face online order methods as a means of the transaction (Lee, 2020) and running the Direct-To-Consumer [DTC] online stores to communicate with customers from foreign countries effectively. As such, with the bigger opportunities given by the active usage of media platforms worldwide, Korean fashion brands are growing to become more global.

### 3. Methodology

To carry out the study, a semi-structured focus group interview method was used. Since the concept of Hallyu is about Korean culture in the global market setting, it was pointless to have Korean nationalities as interviewees; thus, only those who are from countries other than Korea were recruited from online via Reddit.com, and offline through recruitments posted on campus. Also, instead of doing surveys, conducting focus group interviews with participants from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds may lead to the deduction of more interesting and rich answers by having participants share their answers that reflect their personal experience. Before getting into the interview process, the interviewees were asked to provide their personal information such as name, gender, contacts, and year of birth, their cultural backgrounds including ethnicity, country of birth, country of residence, period of residence in Korea, and the degree of familiarity with Korean culture by asking them to rate their familiarity with Korean wave and K-Fashion from 1 to 4. Also, for a smoother interview process and a clearer delivery of their opinion, they were asked to select a language they are more comfortable with verbally, between Korean and English. It was clearly notified to the participants that the interview will either be in English or Korean, and not necessarily to the native level, but fluency in one of them would be a must for participating in the research.

As a result, 46 participants from 16 different countries, within the age range of 19 to 34 were gathered. The participant group comprised of 15 Chinese, 14 Indonesian, 4 Americans, 2 Vietnamese, and 1 each from the Philippines, Ecuador, Spain, Australia, Kazakhstan, Belgium, Russia, India, Iran, Portugal, and Egypt. The participants were divided into 13 groups, respecting the nationality, the language they can speak, and the time zone. All interviews were conducted via Zoom application and were video recorded with the prior consent of the participants for data analysis. 10 questions were asked about their source of information, verbal and visual descriptions, and consumption of K-Fashion, and it took about an hour and a half to complete each group interview. After the interviews, the video-recordings were transcribed and read repeatedly.

For the data analysis, each interview was transcribed in its original language, meaning that the transcription language depended on which language the group selected for the interview preceding, either in English or Korean. Then, the interviews transcribed in their original language were open-coded based on the grounded theory. The concepts of grounded theory are an integrated form, which "provide a thorough theoretical explanation of social phenomena under study (Corbin & Strauss, 1990)". A phenomenon is an ever-evolving concept; thus, the principle of 'change' and the response to the changing conditions are important elements in grounded theory. Since this study focused on the phenomena of K-Fashion within the bigger concept of Korean Wave, and how the perception of K-Fashion is also formed, conducting interviews, and analyzing the results by finding meaningful units, and grouping and categorizing them into bigger themes. Then, the researcher went through a process of grouping the meaning units into subordinate and superordinate themes, and into final categories (Table 1). The interviews that were conducted in Korean were coded in Korean language instead of translating them into English before the coding process; the statements were translated only for the research paper writing in the final stage.

Table 1. Example of the grouping and categorizing process

Participant	Statement	Subordinate Theme	Superordinate Theme	Category
Participant CM from Spain	<i>“(K-Fashion) is becoming a settable worldwide trend because it’s kind of carrying(catering) to those people that do not really agree with any of those of these extremes of this spectrum.”</i>	Globality and universality of K-Fashion due to the cultural fusion	Comprehensive usage of different colors & styles	Dynamic & diverse

#### 4. Results

By breaking down the raw data of the interview transcripts, 10 superordinate themes and 38 subordinate themes were found under the 2 categories. The first category consisting of 3 superordinate themes was named ‘dynamic and diverse’, reflecting the dynamically evolving and diverse nature of K-Fashion, and the second category with 7 superordinate themes was identified as ‘double-sided and ambiguous’.

##### 4.1 Dynamic and Diverse

###### 4.1.1 K-Fashion Spreading Through Media

Through the leading technology and the fast information transmission in the media systems, K-Fashion has been identified to have a dynamic environment. The fast internet speed that enables broader digital connections, fashion trends and new styles come and go faster (Suen, 2020). Korea’s remarkable technological development and high mobile penetration have created an active mobile environment and made the media industry more prosperous, and in the meanwhile, Korea is rising as a global fashion leader. As part of that cultural trend, Korean fashion style is spreading through the media, especially through the Internet. The overseas fans of Hallyu from the earlier stage have first encountered K-Fashion from watching music broadcasts and dramas mainly through television, whereas now, the K-Pop and K-Drama fans are not only observing K-Fashion on various social media platforms that are easily accessible, such as Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter, but also their understanding of K-Fashion is becoming deeper thanks to the social media.

“The first time I’ve recognized K-Fashion is about 10 years ago, around 2010 when I got to know Super junior and TVXQ by watching music shows on TV. But I think nowadays in Vietnam, the generation Z has started following Korean fashion style even more.” (Participant HT from Vietnam).

“I think my understanding of K-Fashion has become deeper through the SNS (social media).” (Participant YY from China).

###### 4.1.2 Advanced Textiles and Apparel Industry System

The advanced textile and clothing industry system centered around Dongdaemun district is another factor that makes K-Fashion dynamic and diverse. Dongdaemun Market, famous for its rapidly developing fashion industry, used to be a must-visit shopping mecca for visitors from all over the world before the COVID break-out. The history of the market and the textile industry comes from the mid-1960s when the Korean government has attempted rapid industrialization to rebuild the war-torn country, which was the driving force behind the “economic miracle”. During the economic growth during the 1960s, the industry heavily relied on mobilizing labor-force industries (Kim & Park, 2003) such as textiles and clothing, and in the middle of the changes, there was Dongdaemun. Having the advanced clothing and textiles industry, Korean clothing is famous for its high quality and sophisticated design in line with the latest trends. Also, not only the designs are trendy, but also the skillful pattern making and precise and delicate details make clothes to have great fits.

“(I’ve realized that) in Korea, various new trends, revolving around the Dongdaemun, come and go so fast in many ways.” (Participant JY from China).

“Golden details and flattering cuts are king. [...] There are many like different little details that like we really like curated here.” (Participant CM from Spain).

Korean fashion is diverse as there are different types of markets. On one hand, there are street markets and online shopping malls that offer stylish yet cheaper options, although it may be risk-taking in terms of the size and material quality. Also, there are department stores and larger shopping malls that have designer brands with pricey items but offer higher quality products. Since various shopping options are given for consumers, they can easily shop according to individual tastes and financial conditions and stay fashionable.

“In Seoul, [...] I feel like it’s just so easy to just buy things here and there. It’s not super expensive so it’s easy

for people to build up their wardrobes.” (Participant NZ from the U.S.).

“Local shops they are the best. Free sizes and very very convenient to buy. Very economical to buy, cheap. [...] It’s not that you cannot get these cheap clothes from other places but the quality is not the same. [...] You can always rely on the quality.” (Participant KS from India).

#### 4.1.3 Comprehensive Usage of Different Colors & Styles

Due to the advanced media environment, Korea has become a place where dynamic network systems and vibrant digital environments coexist. Although Korea is known as an ethnically homogeneous country, Korea is becoming more globalized with high digital connectivity that allows people to interact with the world and accept other cultures. This also led K-Fashion to be more diversified, making it more enriched in variety. The comprehensive use of various fashion styles and the universality often acts as a driving force behind the adoption of K-Fashion. The participants associated K-Fashion with various styles and complimented the variety that can suit the tastes of global citizens.

“Instantly it reminds me about how wide and diverse the Korean fashion industry are. Like they offer various pieces of style, so that we don’t have to worry about not going to find the style that will match with ourselves, because Korean fashion markets serve everything that will suit everyone’s taste.” (Participant NS from Indonesia).

“Amazingly Korean style is now fusion of [...] the Western style and the Asian style there. That is how I think it makes it different [...] because of their fusion their mix of the westernized culture.” (Participant KS from India).

The various styles in the K-Fashion fashion styles mentioned by the participants, were mainly comfortable-casual styles, simple and clean style, neat and sophisticated looks, and cute and feminine looks. Also, they stated that in K-Fashion, styles are well-mix-matched, look put-together, and effortless.

“When you are on the campus, it’s mostly people trying to dress up very comfortably [...] but that comfort is very fashionable [...], it’s a very effortless look.” (Participant KS from India).

“I see people wearing the minimum number of pieces of clothing that are clean without any excessive (things) [...] It’s kind of minimalistic, simple, clean look.” (Participant YN from Kazakhstan)

“I thought of this keyword – a work of art. When I think of K-Fashion, it feels sophisticated and a bit elegant. There is a simple arrangement of colors, and even for the accessories, a simple pair of pearl earrings are used yet it feels luxurious.” (Participant SW from China)

“It (K-Fashion) always has younger feelings to it, [...] it really embraces both a younger style and also very feminine lines, which have been really interesting.” (Participant LV from Portugal)

“K-Fashion has a way of how to mix and match everything to make it look better and trendy.” (Participant RAA from Indonesia)

### 4.2 *Double-Sided and Ambiguous*

#### 4.2.1 Conservative & Courteous

The double-sidedness and ambiguity of K-Fashion comes from the coexistence of the conservative and collectivist aspects, and the individualism in how people dress. Under the Confucian ideas, lifestyle and moral standards have been greatly influenced. As mentioned by many of the participants, the strict dress codes in Korea is particularly related to the conservative culture to be formally dressed at work. In addition, the dress code is often perceived as stricter for women. The participants recognized that there are certain outfits one should wear for specific circumstances, which is what makes K-Fashion more distinctive.

“Since Korea is heavily impacted by Confucian ideas, people don’t expose their bodies too much. Also, they don’t really wear things tight to their bodies.” (Participant BY from China).

“Every time I wear something which is bright, [...] you could see all eyes on you. [...] people don’t wear bright colors here.” (Participant KS from India)

“For men, the dress code is freer. [...] For women, when they wear suits, they don’t wear t-shirts underneath. But in men’s cases, I’ve seen a lot of men only wearing a black t-shirt underneath even with suits.” (Participant JY from China).

“In Korea, there are different outfits for different occasions. [...] I got that feeling that you need to have a proper outfit ready for a specific circumstance here in Korea.” (Participant JY from China)

#### 4.2.2 Collectivism & Group Conformity

Under a collectivist culture, group compliance and group harmony are highly valued in Korea. Historically, Korea built a strong economy based on collectivist norms and the authoritative form of group organization and management (Kim & Park, 2003, p. 38), and those virtues are still recognized by society today. Collectivism explains why Koreans are sensitive and dress similarly as they try to keep up with the latest trends to follow the majority, and the participants perceived K-Fashion as uniform in style but thought of it as a unique aspect of K-Fashion.

“Like I said before here in Korea the color, the style, are all uniform. When you go somewhere, you can see all the people used the same style.” (Participant GH from Indonesia).

“I feel like I would see trends throughout [...] everyone would be wearing them, and I felt like that was something that was very unique to Korea.” (Participant KT from U.S.).

#### 4.2.3 Changes in Social Atmosphere

In Korea, globalization has changed the social atmosphere to accept new fashion styles. As the younger generation is becoming more individualistic rather than collectivistic, people are becoming less caring about what others think, thus tend to wear more colorful, more exposed, bolder, and more unique clothes that were implicitly tabooed. In other words, the K-Fashion style is no longer limited to being conservative and uniform in style, but it is becoming broader in its range. The participants described the places where people wear such new styles the most were Hongdae, Itaewon, and Gangnam, the districts concentrated with young people in Seoul. The recent rise in popularity of hip-hop culture has also affected K-Fashion. In Korea, where most of the population owns smartphones, music streaming platforms are growing rapidly, and hip-hop reality shows such as *Show Me the Money*, *Unpretty Rap Star*, and *Street Woman Fighter* have popularized hip-hop subcultures to the public and the youth in Korea.

“Nowadays, I see that Korean are more accepting the revealing clothes such as that are showing cleavage, off-shoulder, and backless dress.” (Participant NS from Indonesia).

“Like Itaewon or Hongdae [...] there are youngsters in Korea that are wearing colors which are not very monochromatic.” (Participant, KS from India)

I’ve thought of hip-hop style since before from Bigbang, but after the broadcasting of ‘Show me the Money’, it has become more common and ordinary. (Participant LH from China)

#### 4.2.4 The ‘Whole-Look’

According to the interviewees, all elements of an outfit mattered in recognizing K-Fashion. In addition to the outfits, the small accessories used, the attitude, the posture, and the personality of the wearer all melts together to complete the looks. This indicates that in K-Fashion, not only fashionable items but also the whole attitudes are important elements.

“Like the whole look - it’s not just the incredible jacket - it’s the hair, it’s the makeup, it’s the attitude, it’s the stance, so to me that’s really like K-Fashion. [...] It’s not like here’s a jacket, that is K-Fashion - it’s about a whole look and a whole kind of presentation.” (Participant NZ from the U.S.).

#### 4.2.5 Nationality of the Brand Losing Its Significance & Globalized K-Fashion Brands

When it comes to K-Fashion, it doesn’t really matter where the brand is from to consumers. Rather, the participants simply recognized the items worn by the wearer as K-Fashion, regardless of the brand nationality. Also, there were some misunderstandings of foreign brands as K-Fashion brands, showing the neglected importance of the brands and their nationality when recognizing what is K-Fashion and what is not. In addition, according to the participants, it was hard to distinguish which brand is an actual domestic Korean brand and which one is not, because the boundary between the Korean and non-Korean fashion style has been blurred due to globalization. This was displayed throughout the interview, as many of the K-Fashion brands brought up as their favorite Korean fashion brands were the new designer brands with global styles and designs.

“For us, ‘Korean style’ is a depiction of Korean fashion style but often, the brands themselves are from the overseas fashion brands that have dissolved in K-Fashion in Korean-way with the Korean sensitivity.” (Participant LH from China).

“I actually don’t really know what K-Fashion brand is and what is not. [...] I don’t know of domestic Korean brands, that are fully made in Korea. [...] Foreign brands, when they launch in Korea, they become Koreanized [...] that’s why I can’t really tell which one is actually a K-Fashion brand.” (Participant JW from China)

#### 4.2.6 Influence of the Cultural Background of the Recipient

Interview results showed how K-Fashion is perceived differently according to the cultural background of the interviewees. Some Muslim participants perceived K-Fashion to be revealing and overwhelming, while some thought K-Fashion is hijab-friendly. For others, K-Fashion was depicted as the middle of the two extreme styles, which makes it widely suitable and acceptable. In this sense, it was revealed that one's cultural backgrounds have influenced the perceptions of K-Fashion. The idea of what is socially acceptable and suitable to wear and what is not has also contributed to the formation of one's perception of K-Fashion. K-Fashion was recognized as limiting freedom of expression for participants from countries that tend to be less strict in the way people dress. The participants from the Americas in particular, where people tend to wear bolder fashion style, perceived the K-Fashion style as their opposite.

"If you wear a hijab, it will be either you wear a tight thing, that 'I'd really like to show my body', or very loose things. And here when I combined hijab and Korean fashion, I found a middle kind of fashion sense, where I don't really have to wear very loose clothes, but I don't have to wear very tight clothes." (Participant KB from Indonesia).

"In Latin America, [...] people are more on the sexy side of clothing. [...] Here I see that people wear a lot of oversized things, and that's very very different from what we wear." (Participant MP from Ecuador)

"I feel like a lot of American style is playing up certain features you have, certain curves you have, accentuating certain features." (Participant KT from U.S.)

#### 4.2.7 Subjectivity and Flexibility in Experience and Perception

How people perceive K-Fashion was greatly influenced by personal experiences, which could be subjective rather than objective. The formation of one's ideas on K-Fashion is also flexible and can change at any time depending on their experience at the moment. For the participants who encountered the Korean Wave at the early stage, their first impression remained and influenced their current perception. For those living in Korea or having Korean colleagues, Koreans observed around them were important sources of information for K-Fashion, and their idea of K-Fashion were formed from them. Their K-Fashion-related experience such as learning the Korean language and participating in the events associated with K-Fashion affected their perception as well.

"I just finished watching kingdom so like right now, I'm all into the old Korean hats and stuffs. So when I think of K-Fashion, that's the first thing that comes to me but if you ask me this in a month and (if) I'm watching another drama I would probably have a different answer." (Participant NZ from the U.S.).

"I think I get the most influence from the people around me, and by observing how they dress since I've moved to Korea." (Participant HY from China).

"(At the Jakarta Fashion Week) I saw a brand from Korea. I forgot the name of the brand, but since then I began to develop an interest and awareness in Korean fashion brands." (Participant NS from Indonesia)

Participants with curvier body lines perceived K-Fashion to be more suitable for skinnier people, but the participants with smaller body frames stated that the K-Fashion style is too large or too loose. Moreover, a western participant with babyface preferred K-Fashion, which indicates that personal appearance affects perception of K-Fashion. Having a specific preference for styles and colors also influenced people's recognitions of K-Fashion.

"I think Korean clothes have nice colors, and the materials and designs are also nice. I prefer simple style, so [...] the clothes from China tend to be too-much." (Participant YY from China).

"One of the reasons why I got into K-Fashion is because a lot of people in Korea, [...] kind of looked like me (have babyface), [...] (so it) suits my features a lot more or a little bit more." (Participant LV from Portugal).

Some participants expressed their desire to learn Korean or visit Korea, and some talked about how Hanbok has made them become interested in K-Fashion. This shows one's personal preference of Korean culture played an important role in the formation of the perception of K-Fashion. Also, some thought of Korea as a global fashion leader and considered K-Fashion to lead the general fashion trend worldwide.

"I think one of the reasons for me like even trying to do something with Korea or learning Korean language was mostly looking all those that the fashion trends and how it is done." (Participant KS from India).

"I feel like K-Fashion is like elevated almost, because any other type of fashion can accomplish something like this but it's never done as well." (Participant SY from the U.S.).

"To describe K-Fashion, I think in one word, I would say it's a game changer." (Participant KS from India).

“I think that Korean fashion is really influencing the general trend of clothing [...] for example the things that are in trend here in Korea this year would be trending overseas like next year.” (Participant CM from Spain).

## 5. Conclusion

This study explores how K-Fashion is perceived by global citizens. Although there was previous research on the development strategies for K-Fashion, they mostly focused on evaluating and reviewing governmental and institutional measures. To successfully globalize K-Fashion and help Korean fashion brands and designers enter the global market, it is crucial to fully understand how K-Fashion is being perceived. Thus, this research is significant as K-Fashion was examined by conducting in-depth interviews with people from different countries, who are the actual consumers and audiences of K-Fashion, using quite a large sample consisting of 46 participants from 16 different countries. Also, it is meaningful in that it scrutinized how the overseas audiences are perceiving K-Fashion, which may provide guidance for the K-Fashion industry to go global by understanding how their global consumers think of K-Fashion.

The result of the study shows that people perceive K-Fashion to be dynamic and diverse, and double-sided and ambiguous. The ‘dynamic and diverse’ characteristics could be explained based on the upper categories composed of external environmental characteristics and intrinsic style characteristics. According to the results derived from the interview, K-Fashion is spreading via various media sources, and Korea’s advanced textile clothing industry is affecting the formation of their perception. In addition, various colors and styles were identified to co-exist within K-Fashion. The second category, ‘double-sided and ambiguous’, reflects how K-Fashion cannot be clearly defined with a single meaning and how it contains uncertainty. According to the participants, the important matter when it comes to recognizing K-Fashion was not only the clothes themselves but also the overall appearance reflecting the personality and attitude of the wearer. The conservativeness, collectivism, and homogeneity were well revealed in the way Koreans dress as well. It appeared that the national identity in K-Fashion is getting lost due to globalization, and in line with that, K-Fashion brands are becoming more globalized. In addition, it was revealed that the perceptions of K-Fashion could change at any time depending on what they are currently experiencing and interested in.

With K-culture in general being the talk of the town all around the world, K-Fashion is also receiving a spotlight, elevating the importance of dissecting the newly emerged concept of K-Fashion. This study serves as the guideline for understanding how the idea of K-Fashion is formed among the recipients of Korean culture, and it is expected to act as an academic groundwork for future researchers and Korean fashion businesses in developing K-Fashion to advance in the global market. This study has its limitation in that there is a lack of diversity within the recruited interviewees, as most of the participants were Chinese and Indonesians. Also, the fact that two groups were all composed of Indonesian participants leaves much to be desired. Therefore, it is expected for future researchers to collect data using samples from as diverse backgrounds as possible, and it would be interesting to conduct interviews by grouping the participants according to their demographic characteristics, which may lead to more abundant and interesting results that were not discovered in this study.

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