

Korean wave makes a splash worldwide

Last weekend's KCON event in Los Angeles illustrated the power of K-pop

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Oh! My Girl perform at KCON in Los Angeles © Getty

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We're five years on from what MTV referred to as the "Summer of Psy", when a boisterous Buddha-bellied K-pop rapper named Psy made partygoers worldwide pretend to swing a lasso while riding a pony and singing "oppa Gangnam style". Psy's 2012 entrance into the global consciousness was a milestone for Hallyu, which roughly translates as "Korean Wave", an all-encompassing term for South Korean cultural exports.

That same year was the inaugural KCON, a convention put on by South Korean conglomerate CJ, which celebrates and showcases Hallyu in all its forms: K-pop, K-drama TV shows and K-beauty products.

Back then it was a small event held in Irvine, California, an hour out of Los Angeles. Fast forward to today, and there have been KCONs in Paris, Mexico City, Abu Dhabi and New York, and there's one planned for Sydney in September, but the KCONs in Tokyo — where K-pop thrives — and LA are by far the biggest.

Last weekend at the Los Angeles Convention Center, KCON LA drew more than 85,000 fans, many of whom had travelled hundreds or even thousands of miles to see their favourite groups.



K-pop group SF9 on stage at KCON in Los Angeles © Greg Doherty/Getty Images

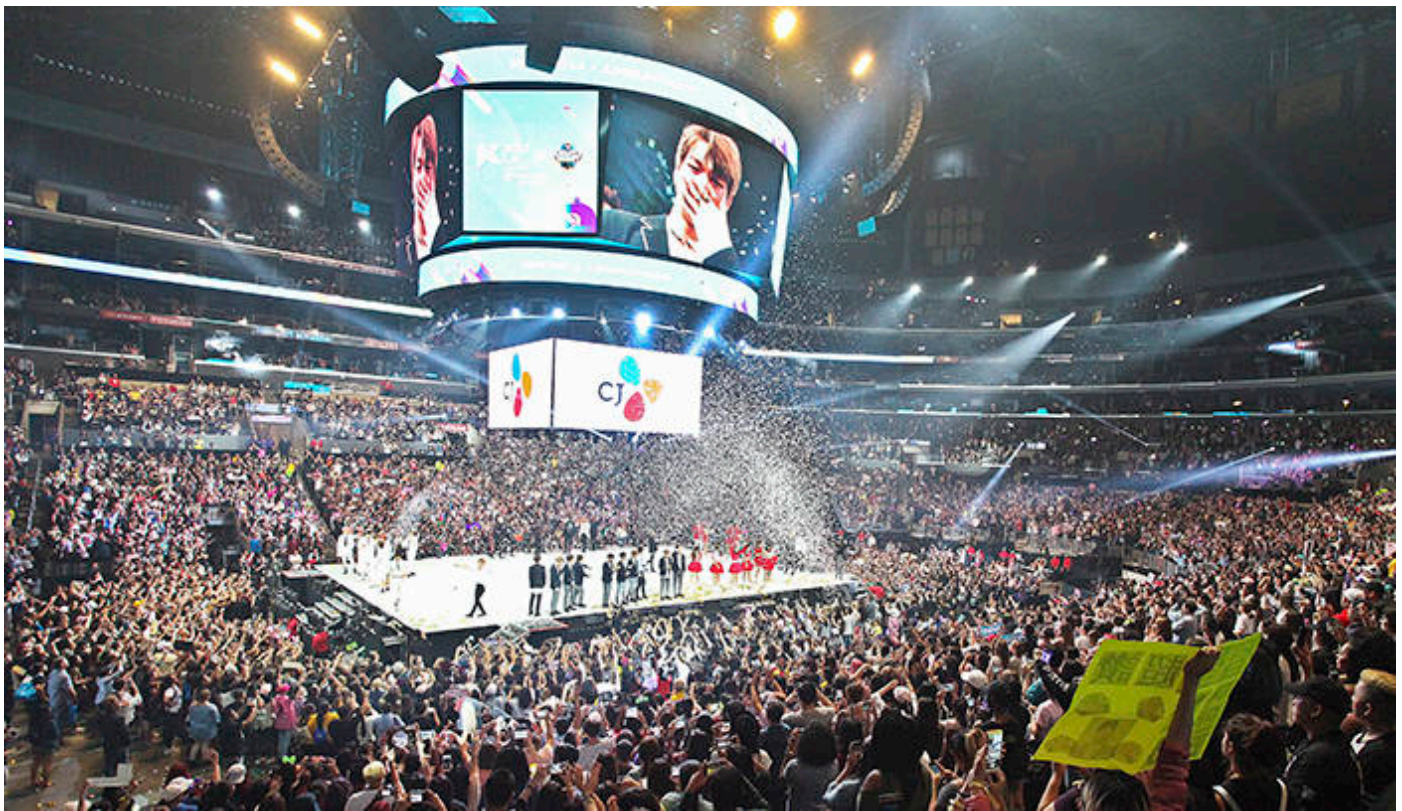
That KCON continues to grow points to the fact that Hallyu is less of an ebbing-and-flowing “wave” to the west, and more of a gradually expanding

stream. In the US, K-pop makes regular splashes when groups such as BTS or solo artists such as G-Dragon play to sold-out crowds of screaming fans. BTS won a Billboard Music Award last year; cartoon sitcom *Family Guy* parodied K-pop artist Hyuna's hit song "Bubble Pop" last year; and Korean rapper CL is rumoured to be joining the Black Eyed Peas sometime in the near future.

The genre has persisted mainly because K-pop record labels are assiduous in catering to fans. As an example, the group Wanna One, who took the stage in Los Angeles on Sunday, were selected one-by-one on the South Korean reality TV show *Produce 101* by the "National Producer", aka the audience at home (like the *American Idol* talent show, but for 11 members). Or take the group Seventeen, who played on Saturday night at KCON. Seventeen comprises 13 members, each with a distinctive personality, and each beloved by a subset of fans. Your favourite group member is called your "bias", and each group gives rise to a complex array of fan activity: fan meet-ups, erotic fan-fiction, K-pop cosplay, and covers of the music video choreography for each song.

On Saturday, when Seventeen took the stage to perform five hits — "Don't Wanna Cry", "Habit", "Swimming Fool", "Very Nice" and "Rock" — the fans screamed themselves hoarse whenever their bias sang or appeared on the Staples Center's jumbotron screen. And each of the acts that played KCON, from new girl-group Cosmic Girls, to dancehall-inspired boy-girl group K.A.R.D., to huge boy bands such as VIXX, GOT7 and NCT 127, brought an individual sound and visual experience. Overall, though, this is a relentlessly sugary brand of pop: you need a sweet tooth for this music.

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Some fans had travelled thousands of miles to the Los Angeles KCON

till, it appeals to an increasingly diverse fan base. A large percentage of the fandom in the US is black, or of Middle Eastern or south-east Asian descent. Such inclusivity is part of the draw for people like Ashley Griffin, better known as “[multifacetedacg](#)”, a YouTube personality known for her passionate real-time reactions to K-pop videos. “It’s a part of the fabric of who you are,” she says. “It’s an extension of your culture. It’s obviously ethnically not ours, but the appreciation makes it that much more important to you. When it starts to reverberate in everything you do, that’s when it’s not a fad any more.”

Griffin served as moderator on several KCON panels that illustrated how K-pop’s audience has a diverse age profile as well. While the squeaky clean acts (some groups have been rumoured to have chastity clauses in their contracts) are ultimately marketed to South Korean kids, K-pop has found a place in the hearts of older fans and even academia. Panels accordingly focused not only on the more *aegyo* (Korean for “cute”) aspects of Hallyu but also on subjects such as “Black American Music and K-pop” — there’s a fraught history of

appropriation by K-pop artists — and “Cross-Cultural Clashes in Hallyu”. Topics ranged from the occasional instances of blackface in K-pop to the LGBT communities who follow K-pop, and South Korea’s own struggles with discrimination against gay people.

K-pop’s inclusive aspect is not lost on the young fans. Vicky, a 13-year-old K-pop choreography aficionado from Northern California who was attending her first KCON, said being around so many other fans makes her feel at home. “This generation of K-pop is more international,” she said. “Acts like 2NE1 and The Wonder Girls brought it to the US, and this generation, like BTS and Seventeen, is pushing that.”

The broad reach of Hallyu is intentional: the South Korean entertainment industry is investing heavily in the music and TV shows, so it’s imperative that they reach audiences beyond South Korea in order to survive. Further growth looks likely, if KCON’s expansion is anything to go by. Five years after the Summer of Psy, when a national culture became a global subculture, the Korean Wave shows no sign of receding.