

## PSY's "Gangnam Style": A Social Critique of Korean Consumption Patterns and the Media's Perpetuation of Nationalism

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### *Excerpt*

Though Korea has adopted a capitalistic economy only relatively recently, its economic advancement has been met by a surge in consumption. In a Reuters report, journalist Choonsik Yoo disclosed that observers are worried about the possibilities of a second debt crisis, much like the severe credit default Korea suffered in 2003; as of 2010, the average citizen held 4.6 credit cards, and the typical Korean household had a debt totaling 155 percent of its disposable income (Yoo). This pervasive role excessive spending plays in the Korean lifestyle results in a society that substantially values money and wealth. As analyst Eun-Jung Cho puts it in her study "What Drives Korean Consumers?", tradition may have warned against materialism, dictating that money should be regarded as "fleeting and irrelevant," but money in Korea today is nonetheless a marker of status and a means of receiving social recognition (96).

Gangnam, one of the busiest districts in Seoul, lies in the heart of the Korean economy and thus unsurprisingly embodies the epitome of a culture that stresses spending and wealth. Gangnam is home to Chungdahm Street, the Korean counterpart of New York's Fifth Avenue, boasting dozens of European designer brand shops laid side-by-side; it is also home to COEX Mall, which, according to *Business Insider* journalist Megan Willett, is "the largest underground shopping center in all of Asia." Though the district comprises only a fraction of Seoul city, a recent government study reported that Gangnam's monetary value is 10% of Korea's total land value and ten times that of the entire city of Busan, a harbor near the East Sea (You). Apartments in Gangnam—which are often glass high-rises fully equipped with security cameras, guards and sports complexes—cost approximately \$716,000, which would take 18 years for an

average Korean family to earn (Associated Press qtd. in Willet). Clearly, Gangnam is none other than Korea's own commercial powerhouse.

Yet, the "Gangnam Style" PSY portrays in his song and music video defines the opposite of the cosmopolitan, sophisticated lifestyle that is supposedly pervasive in Korea's most affluent district. Fisher argues that this discrepancy establishes "Gangnam Style" as a satire of Korean consumer materialism; such an explanation, nevertheless, lacks depth. What really fuels the "Gangnam Style" satire of Korean society is PSY's manipulation of the "syntax of objects," a concept Baudrillard discusses in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (35). Here, Baudrillard contends objects have meaning in that they reveal information about their owners' social standings; these meanings often vary depending on the object's "syntax" or arrangement, the "type of organization of the context in which it is found" (Baudrillard 35). Throughout the music video, PSY rearranges the syntax of objects, placing those of high social value—or to further use Baudrillard's terms, high "sign exchange value," as opposed to an object's "use value" or practicality—in contexts that represent the contrary (29).

### Works Cited

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*Author Commentary*

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In this essay, I aim to argue that the Korean media’s response to the international success of PSY’s “Gangnam Style” exemplifies how it perpetuates nationalistic sentiments about the spread of popular culture by neglecting significant social messages Korean pop music may have. The following excerpt specifically deals with analyzing “Gangnam Style” as a satirical commentary on Korea’s materialistic consumption patterns, a point that must be established before claiming the Korean media deliberately disregards this message to overplay the song’s popularity beyond the Korean peninsula.

This paper was written only months after the song had been released, and therefore was particularly challenging to write because there were few—if not none—academic sources directly relevant to the topic. Looking back, however, I believe this challenged me to “think outside the box” and synthesize material from a variety of disciplines, which then by default led to the development of an original motive and thesis. It also forced me to provide ample orienting of my sources, making sure there was a clear, apparent link between each source and the overall argument of the paper. This excerpt, which ties in sociology, economics and theory, particularly speaks to these efforts. The first two paragraphs cite studies to establish Korea’s vibrant consumer culture, paying special attention to the pervasiveness of Korean materialism in Gangnam, the district PSY refers to in his song. The third paragraph seeks to bring in French philosopher Jean Baudrillard’s ideas about an object’s social value to explain how PSY’s juxtaposition of objects with different social values mocks the superficial nature of Korean consumption. It not only serves as a transition into a close-reading of PSY’s music video and song in tandem with Baudrillard’s theory, but also reiterates motive as it states: “What really fuels ‘Gangnam Style’’s staire of Korean society is PSY’s manipulation of the ‘syntax of objects,’ a concept Baudrillard discusses in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*.”

Enjoy!