

Epistemic Stunts

By Dr. Michael Hurt, Korea National University of Arts

I'll make no pretense about the fact that half the reason I worded the title this way was just to use the word *epistemic*. *Epistemology* is a fun word, though often taken to be an effete and fancy one. But it's actually a pretty awesome word that is uniquely useful to help us talk about some pretty important things.



As a Korea-based academic, I'm constantly thinking about why I'm here. After 23 years as a visual sociologist writing with light, along with words, I've come to realize there's no other place that can hold (or drive) my interest.

See, before I was an academic, I was a nerd. Thinking has always been fun. And thinking through theory even more so. It's

why esoteric pursuits such as role-playing games and original Star Trek have always held dorky attention. These things weren't primarily visually spectacular. They weren't tactile. And they didn't addict the consumer with immediate and palpable dopamine hits from the thing itself. The thrill comes from inside, an internal mind-state – not external stimuli. Indeed, Dungeons-n-Dragons moves on a board weren't themselves the draw, just like the special effects in the 1960s run of Star Trek weren't anything to rave about.

What keeps me in Korea, and in the burgeoning field of Korean studies, is the exciting process of trying to turn Korea into theory. Inevitably, this is what one has to do in a field called "Korean studies." So when I'm asked yet *again* by a barely-there reporter to tell them why *Gangnam Style* or *Squid Game* or *Parasite* or BTS or Blackpink or anything Korean is important, I'm inevitably stuck with having to explain what the essence of the thing is. "What is special about Korean stuff?" becomes the core concern, but when you really break it down, the entire conversation ends up begging the question of just *what* is Korean, and *what* is the essence that makes *all the K-things* hot. Basically, what exactly are we talking about when we talk about *hallyu* as a global wave of interest in things Korean?

We're basically asking the hardest question of them all, which is "How do we track influence?" And "Who is really an influencer?" If you look at Instagram – the linchpin of the popular notion of influencer – one is just gauging and tracking a number within that particular platform. But we know there are myriad moving parts to becoming a successful Instagrammer, which includes working the algorithm with the right combination of hashtags, prime time windows within which to post, the strategic wording of captions, and other such digital minutiae. So, isn't a follower count just as much a measure of being able to play the game of the platform as it is a measure of actual social influence? Cuz if we're talking about the ability to bend millions of minds

to one's will, every popular politician is an influencer, as is every fashion icon, quite apart from how many followers one has on YouTube. Madonna was a huge social influencer before a social media platform was even a glint in Zuckerberg's eye.

I was a street photographer when I stumbled onto the fact of Korean style. Here, I don't mean just sartorially speaking, in terms of clothes. When I teach my classes and try to get students thinking about how one even begins to think about defining an aesthetic style and how they may be able to track it, I turn to the standard James Ackerman definition from *A Theory of Style* in the realm of art, in which it is defined as "certain characteristics which are more or less stable, in the sense that they appear in other products of the same artist(s), era or locale, and flexible, in the sense that they change according to a definable pattern when observed in instances chosen from sufficiently extensive spans of time of geographical distance."



▲ **Photo 1.** Vietnamese model @moneyyy_nguyn embodies and channels her interpretation of "Korean style."

Now this gets hard when looking at the fact of millions of people across the globe looking at different works from Korea across various fields of art such as music, film, or fashion, along with the many sub-genres within even those fields, all unified by people who basically love most of those things precisely because they are, quite simply, Korean. Why model Money Nguyen (Photo 1) might like to embody Korean fashion or watch K-dramas or perhaps even go to Blackpink concerts is a thing to figure out. Because it's a thing that's happening. And if you ask anyone highly interested in all the Korean things, they tend to see Korean things as existing within a fairly unified field of Korean things, done in a Korean style. This is what I'm trying to make sense of.

The only way to really clearly discern social reality is by gathering empirical data on the ground, from people. And this is where the ethnographic method becomes useful. And in the social sciences, ethnography is hot. It's also become the

primary means to gather “business intelligence” for marketers and administrators. And since Korea is now the hot place, my last several corporate clients for whom I performed cultural consulting were Instagram, Google, Facebook, and Johnson and Johnson, all of whom wanted to know what Koreans were doing – on the ground – in the foldable phone, laptop, workplace, and beauty markets, respectively. Because what Koreans are doing today is considered by many to be what the rest of the world will likely be doing in five years.

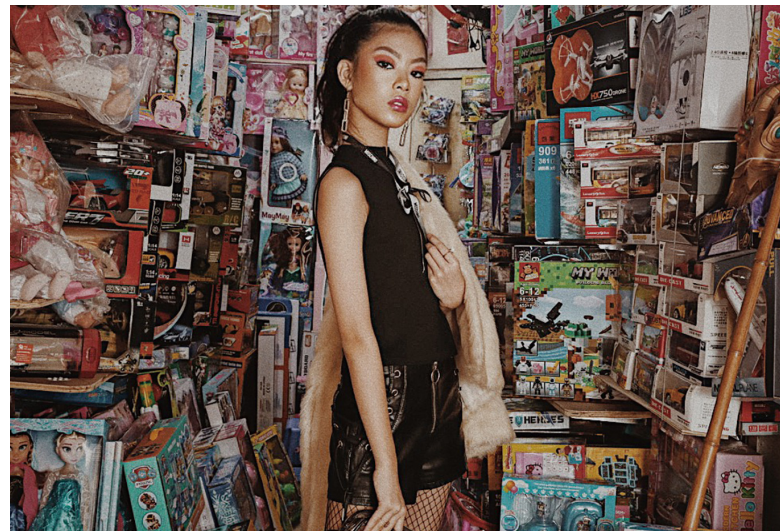
And the only way to truly figure out what people are doing on the ground is to scaffold certain, preset social interactions directly, in ways that yield social data. A social researcher might prepare a list of specific queries that a subject would be presented with and provide answers in a conversation, which is commonly called an “interview.” In the field of visual anthropology, interview subjects were given (or had sometimes even taken) photos of themselves and asked to respond to how they felt about them in a technique called “photo elicitation.”

There are all kinds of ways (some of them clunky or even awkward) to set up social interactions that can yield revealing social data. John Quinones’ TV show *What Would You Do?* is actually one of the greatest examples of what Quetzil Castañeda calls “the invisible theater of ethnography” in which, using performative principles such as acting and staging, specific situations are set up to let us see what Americans really think about touchy subjects, such as racism, homophobia, and other subjects people often do not talk about with any degree of candor. As we see an actor on screen deny service in a coffee shop to a woman in a hijab, watching others not in on the act sincerely, viscerally react to the situation often elicits surprising responses in his millions of viewers. We are often surprised at how many people agree with the bigot, as well as how many people put themselves into possible danger to stand up to the bully. It is often a bracing exposé of how apparently XXX-ist our society is, in a way that mere interviews-as-social-scaffolding are not, since people lie a lot, and often even lie to themselves, as we found out in the exit interviews conducted

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in the 2016 American presidential elections. Indeed, the revered anthropologist Margaret Mead once warned us, “What people say, what people do, and what they say they do are entirely different things.” This is why Quinoñes’ data is so rich and valuable, and why his show is so compelling. Because few (or indeed, no one, these days) would ever say, even to themselves, that when push came to shove, they’d become that racist guy. Or join in the group harassing someone for their religious beliefs. But when placed inside an “invisible theater of ethnography” in which actions are embodied, real, and recordable, sometimes we shock even ourselves. The show is actually what legendary sociologist Harold Garfinkle called a “breaching experiment” that clearly illustrates the presence of social norms by breaking one. Quinoñes’ show is actually radical sociological methodology with a gargantuan budget.

For the last several years, I’ve been engaged in what I’ve come to call “photo-sartorial elicitation,” in which I scaffold



▲ Photo 2. A young Vietnamese model styles and channels her imaginings of Korean style in February 2020.

a predetermined set of social interactions (a photoshoot of a model, with pictures to be shared across social media, as well as post-shoot interviews) and which reveals copious forms and qualities of rich social data. The model in Photo 2 is a referral from another model in Vietnam who was asked to style a “Korean look” that I would shoot and to which I would add my own, Korea-informed, aesthetic spin. I would be one constant in the formula, while the model’s styling, posing and general comportment, and the immediate visual environs would be rapidly changing variables.

One of the many ideas gleaned from the photo-sartorial elicitation + post-interviews process was the idea that Korean beauty is considered paramount in Asia and that Korean culture itself is considered by many Vietnamese to be the pinnacle of cosmopolitanism and sophistication in this part of the world.

And on a more meta-level, when I brought top high-fashion brand Greedilous to Hanoi in November 2018 (see Photo 3), it was quite easy to land a shoot with one of Vietnam’s top Instagram influencers Salim, who stands now at around 1 million followers strong. Korean brands, specifically, and the Korea style, more generally, almost quite literally opens doors in Vietnam.

In the process of staging these more radical “acts of ethnographic theater” and much more mundane means of eliciting social data such as interviews and simple interactions, I was able to discern a pattern of how Vietnamese people tend to think about Korean things and people, while discerning other things I would have likely otherwise missed altogether.

Ethnography’s problem – and power – lies in its subjectivity and specificity. It is as much art as science. For example, in order to properly pull off a John Quinoñes-style social norm “breaching experiment,” it requires actors with skill. In that sense, it’s hard for just anyone to pull off. But such is true even for cut-and-dry interviews, which also require some people skills. And the data yielded in an episode of *What Would You Do?* isn’t mathematically “objective.” There isn’t something like a correlation coefficient produced as a discrete value to stand as a measure of whether Islamophobia is tolerated or even a part of American culture. Indeed, though it is “as much art as science,” it’s an elegant and powerful way to know things about social moods and forces. It is also a clear reminder of how much one can’t really reify actual social influence as a mere number. Because life is more complex than that.

Having fun developing my own methodologies with which we can know things is what I love to continue doing here in Korea,



▲ **Photo 3.** Vietnamese model @nmtrag sports a Greedilious dress on the streets of Hanoi in 2018.

the hottest place in academia right now and the place from where the future of things is being charted. And I take great pleasure and pride in the fact that my hunches were completely right 20 years ago, when I began having the hunch that Korea was onto something big. It's why I stay, and what I continue to have fun trying to theoretically prove through cunning epistemological stunts. Such stunting gives me many papers to write and keeps getting me invited to conferences. I've learned the value of being able to assess and explain the value of Korean popular

culture outside of Korea. It literally pays. Perhaps if this can be conveyed to more young Koreans in general and Korean

cultural producers more specifically, it could provide more inspiration and justification to step outside of certain boxes and lead to more useful deployments of art within science.

And as for ESL application, talking about how we know things can be the generator of lots of related sub-questions about what real-world influence Korean culture actually has around the world, as opposed to the flat, toothless discussions of "soft power" that tend to be had in uninspired conversation class sessions. Where does the soft-power rubber hit the road? And how exactly does soft power benefit the nation, especially as we think about what the nature of social-cultural "influence" even is? What are the particular levers of Korean cultural influence, and what do they look like? These are the harder – and therefore more interesting – \$250 per hour, topline report questions that, if one can answer, really pay the bills.

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