

## **Gangnam Style Takes the World by Storm**

The song “Gangnam style” by Korean pop (K-Pop) star Psy has surpassed all previous Internet milestones and is now the most-watched video ever on YouTube. As of December 25th, the video was watched more than one billion times. From politicians to human rights activists to military officials, it has been parodied around the world by nearly every conceivable group. According to Wikipedia, in South Korea, Italy, Indonesia, and France, flash mobs of 12,000 to 20,000 people danced the song’s signature moves.

Fueled by social media, this phenomenon represents the height of cultural globalization. While ten years ago many feared the American take-over of world culture, it is now clear that technology has leveled the playing field. If the product is appealing enough, any musician from around the world can rise to fame and capture the world audience. This analysis explores why Gangnam Style is so popular and how the video went viral.

### **Why is Gangnam Style so Popular?**

In Gangnam Style, Psy makes fun of consumer culture and lavish lifestyles found in Seoul’s Gangnam neighborhood, known as the “Beverly Hills of Seoul” (Pawlowski, 2012). While the lyrics are mostly in Korean, the message is clearly conveyed using visuals. As noted by Arwa Mahdawi in *The Guardian* (2012): “[The video] parodies not just cultural mores specific to South Korea, but cultural excesses easily recognisable to western viewers. Gangnam Style’s lyrics may be in Korean, but its visuals are in clear American.” The visual nature of the song, the easily mimicked dance moves, and the upbeat tone make the song irresistible.

Mahdawi notes though that the song touches upon universal stereotypes of Asians: The stereotype of a portly, non-threatening Charlie Chan-type who speaks “comical” English is still very much alive, apparent in everything from hungry Kim Jong-un memes to Abercrombie and Fitch T-shirts. And it’s hard to escape the uncomfortable feeling that this stereotype is contributing something to the laughter around Gangnam Style.

Others agree. Deanna Pan notes in the *MotherJones* blog: Thanks to PSY’s decidedly non-pop star looks, in a very non-threatening package. Psy doesn’t even have to sing in English or be understood because it’s not the social critique offered by the lyrics that matters to the audience, but the marriage of the funny music video, goofy dance, and a rather catchy tune, of which two of the elements are comical and, again, non-threatening. PSY is the “Asian man who makes it” because he fits neatly into our pop cultural milieu wherein Asian men are either kung-fu fighters, Confucius-quoting clairvoyants, or the biggest geeks in high school (Pan, 2012).

While many agree the song’s popularity is largely due to its universal message, funny visuals, catchy chorus and use of stereotypes, these factors alone do not account for the song’s one billion views on YouTube.

### **How Gangnam Style went Viral**

South Korea’s music industry was poised to produce a global hit. As noted by NPR (2012), “‘Gangnam Style’ is what happens when a developing country becomes developed. An infrastructure to make and export culture can develop just like an infrastructure to make and export anything else.” The South Korean music scene has been preparing for this. Korean music moguls find young talent and send them across Asia, building a fan base. Songs are debuted on television, rather than on the radio, which makes their musicians more attuned to the importance of telling a story using visuals. Furthermore, the country is wired and Korean music moguls have a strong presence on YouTube, which attracts users from around the world. The fan base was ripe for the plucking.

YG Entertainment, the label behind Gangnam, began by pushing the content to their YouTube channels, which had 2.5 million users before the video was released. YG cast famous Koreans in various roles in the video,

which helped the song debut at the number one spot in the Korean Pop Chart in July 2012. The song gained popularity in South Korea through Twitter and Facebook, but did not gain international notoriety until Billboard published an article and celebrities started tweeting about it. From there, meetings with well-known music producers and all of the parodies helped the video gain momentum (Edwards, 2012).

Gangnam Style was made to be copied. Psy waived the copyright to the song (Mahdawi, 2012). By doing so, he allowed the song to be co-opted by any group who wanted to use it for their own cause. Thousands took up the challenge and made the song their own.

London sewer men urged people not to wash turkey fat down the sink during Christmas with “Sewerman Style” (Sewermen go Gangnam Style with Christmas message, 2012) Dissident Chinese artist Ai Weiwei posted his own version to protest against injustices in China and to promote the need for greater government transparency and the rule of law (Chinese dissident artist Ai Weiwei ‘Gangnam Style’ parody, 2012). North Korean officials made a version of the video mocking the South Korean President (Lee, 2012). While Tibetans made a parody video making fun of China’s new president Xi Jinping (Mack, 2012).

The parodies are so popular that blogs, tabloid and newspapers around the world are promoting their favorites. For example, [Billboard](#), [the Sun](#) (a British tabloid), and the [Canadian Broadcast Company](#) released their top ten favorite Gangnam parody videos. The buzz around this video in the latter half of 2012 has been unbelievable and continues to fuel the video’s popularity.

## Conclusion

While YouTube has created music sensations before, none have ever reached the levels of Psy’s Gangnam Style. One of the most amazing parts of this phenomenon is that a song that is sung mostly in Korean has captured the world imagination. Perhaps it is because this song is not produced by Americans and that it involves an unlikely protagonist that it has been warmly received around the world. It is viewed as harmless and fun. Many are trying to bank on that honest reception to spread their own messages. UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon called the song “a force for world peace” (Raynor, 2012). Hopefully this will become a reality.

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