

Original Research

French Influencers and the Construction of Korea's Superiority:
Social Media Content Analysis and Follower ResponsesMathieu Berbiguier Department of Languages,
Cultures & Applied Linguistics,
Carnegie Mellon UniversityCorresponding to
Mathieu BerbiguierDepartment of Languages,
Cultures & Applied Linguistics,
Carnegie Mellon University,
4980 Margaret Morrison St,
Posner Hall 341, Pittsburgh,
PA 15213.Email: mathberbi@gmail.com

Acknowledgment

This article is the product of original research first presented at the AKSE (Association for Korean Studies in Europe) 2023 Meeting in Copenhagen. The author wants to thank everyone who was present during the presentation, and the reviewers for their constructive feedback and suggestions.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Received

7 May 2025

Revised

9 Sep 2025

Accepted

20 Nov 2025

ABSTRACT

This study examines how French content creators engage in France-bashing *kukppong*—systematic criticism of French systems while positioning Korea as superior—through their social media content about life in South Korea. Based on digital ethnographic analysis of content from 15 French influencers across YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, and Twitch, along with audience responses, the research reveals how France-bashing *kukppong* operates as a form of comparative nationalism that positions Korea as superior to France across three consistent domains: safety, convenience, and infrastructure. Through performed authenticity markers—extended residence, cultural integration, and insider access claims—influencers gain authority to make comparative cultural statements that inadvertently contribute to Korean nation branding without direct government coordination. Even critical “deception videos” that challenge idealized Korea representations operate within the same comparative framework, serving similar audience functions of vicarious cultural engagement. The analysis demonstrates how individual lifestyle content aggregates into collective nation branding efforts, extending existing theory by revealing mechanisms through which social media influencers participate in informal cultural diplomacy. This research contributes to understanding how digital platforms create new forms of comparative nationalism that shape cross-cultural migration aspirations among young Europeans.

KEYWORDS

France-bashing *Kukppong*, comparative nationalism, digital cultural diplomacy, social media influencers, Korean wave, authenticity performance

In recent years, K-pop has emerged as a significant global cultural phenomenon, captivating fans from diverse cultural backgrounds and establishing itself as a major force within the global entertainment industry. This cultural wave has generated an increasing aspiration among fans worldwide to travel to, or even permanently reside in, South Korea. Such desires are fueled by their fascination with the

vibrant K-pop scene and Korea's reputation as an innovative and comfortable living environment.

Based on a recent report published by the Korean Ministry of Justice, France ranks 21st among registered foreign nationals in Korea, categorized by country of origin. Notably, France leads all European nations in this ranking (Ministry of Justice, 2023). This surge in French migration to Korea raises questions about the motivations driving this phenomenon and the expectations French nationals hold when relocating to Korea.

The widespread utilization of social media platforms, particularly TikTok and YouTube, has facilitated the dissemination of content depicting life in Korea. However, this content often presents idealized portrayals of the country through systematic comparisons that position Korea as superior to content creators' home countries. French influencers who have established themselves in Korea contribute to this representation by consistently highlighting Korean advantages in areas such as safety, convenience, and infrastructure while simultaneously critiquing corresponding French systems. This comparative approach—what this study terms “France-bashing *kukppong*”—creates powerful narratives that shape audience expectations about life in Korea.

Building on established scholarship in the last two decades of Korean Wave studies and recent research on foreign influencers in Korea (Lee & Abidin, 2022), this study examines how French content creators construct comparative narratives between France and Korea, and how their audiences engage with these portrayals. This study employs a dual analytical approach: (a) systematic content analysis of influencer posts to identify narrative patterns, and (b) examination of audience responses to understand reception dynamics. This bidirectional analysis reveals how comparative nationalism emerges through the interaction between content creation and audience engagement.

In this context, influencer authenticity is constructed through specific performative markers: extended physical residence in Korea (beyond typical tourist visits), demonstration of cultural integration through language use and local knowledge, and claims to “insider” access to everyday Korean experiences. These markers grant influencers authority to make comparative cultural claims, but also create tensions between genuine experience sharing and content that generates algorithmic engagement.

This study investigates how French influencers construct and maintain these authentic personas while creating comparative narratives about life in Korea, and how their audiences respond to both idealized and critical portrayals. The research is guided by the following questions:

- (1) How do French influencers on social media construct comparative narratives between France and Korea in their content about daily life in Korea?
- (2) In what ways does France-bashing *kukppong* function as a form of Korean nation branding through influencer content?
- (3) How do French K-pop fans respond to both idealized and critical portrayals of life in Korea, and what does this reveal about audience expectations for authenticity?

This study contributes to the intersection of influencer studies and Korean Wave research by examining how social media content shapes migration aspirations and cultural perceptions. By focusing on the French context and analyzing both content creation and audience reception, it provides insights into how European audiences engage with Korean culture through digital intermediaries, while revealing the mechanisms through which individual lifestyle content participates in broader patterns of soft power projection and nation branding.

France-bashing *Kukppong*: Authenticity as Comparative Nation Branding

The theoretical framework for this study centers on the concept of France-bashing *kukppong* as a form of comparative nationalism performed through social media content. Building on Lee and Abidin's (2022) analysis of foreign influencers contributing to Korean nationalist discourse, this study examines how French content creators inadvertently participate in nation branding by consistently positioning Korea as superior to France across multiple lifestyle domains.

The concept of *kukppong*, referring to excessive nationalist pride in Korean online discourse, takes on a unique form when practiced by foreign influencers. Rather than direct praise of Korea, French influencers engage in France-bashing *kukppong*—systematically critiquing French systems, infrastructure, and social conditions while presenting Korean alternatives as superior. This comparative approach serves multiple functions: it validates the influencer's choice to relocate, provides vicarious satisfaction (*daeri manjok*) to audiences who consume idealized versions of Korean life (Chae, 2018), and contributes to Korea's soft power projection without direct government involvement.

In this context, authenticity functions as what Banet-Weiser (2012) terms a “branding strategy,” but with specific markers that grant influencers authority to make comparative cultural claims. This approach to authenticity resonates particularly strongly with K-pop fans, who have been primed to value authenticity narratives through their engagement with Korean popular culture—as highlighted by the popularity of BTS's narrative of authenticity as underdogs (Song, 2019). K-pop fans' existing appreciation for performed authenticity in their favorite artists translates into similar expectations for content creators who represent themselves as cultural intermediaries.

For French Korea-based influencers, authenticity

is constructed through: (1) extended physical presence in Korea beyond typical tourist visits, (2) demonstration of cultural integration through language use and local knowledge, and (3) claims to “insider” access to everyday Korean experiences. This performed authenticity becomes the foundation for their credibility when making comparative statements about French versus Korean lifestyle, particularly among audiences already invested in Korean cultural narratives.

Hund (2023) explores how the influencer industry constructs authenticity as a marketable commodity, revealing tensions between genuine self-expression and strategic self-branding. In the context of Korea-based content creators, these tensions manifest in the balance between sharing authentic experiences and producing content that generates algorithmic engagement. This positioning enables the systematic positive comparison that characterizes France-bashing *kukppong* while providing rhetorical protection against charges of cultural misrepresentation.

This comparative nationalism operates differently from traditional fan tourism or cultural pilgrimage (Oh, 2018), where audiences travel to consume cultural products at their source. Instead, French influencers serve as cultural intermediaries who bring “insider” Korean experiences to audiences who may never visit Korea themselves. Through digital consumption of daily lifestyle content, audiences experience what Lee (2020) terms “transnational emotional intimacy”—a mediated form of cultural engagement that shapes migration aspirations and cultural perceptions.

Previous studies focusing on authenticity and influencers creating content about foreign countries have primarily examined tourism decision-making rather than permanent relocation (Han & Chen, 2021; Motahar et al., 2021). When examining how influencer content influences audience behavior, research has typically focused on consumption patterns rather than migration decisions (Ki et al., 2022). This

study extends this literature by examining how comparative lifestyle narratives shape not only cultural perceptions but also concrete migration aspirations among young French K-pop fans.

The France-bashing *kukppong* framework allows us to understand how seemingly individual lifestyle content participates in broader patterns of soft power projection and cultural diplomacy, revealing the mechanisms through which social media influencers contribute to nation branding efforts even without explicit coordination or government sponsorship.

Methodology: A Digital Ethnography of French Influencers Content, and Follower Responses

This study employed digital ethnographic observation of French influencer content about living in Korea, combined with analysis of audience responses to this content. The research design focused on examining both content creation patterns and audience engagement to understand how France-bashing *kukppong* operates as a bidirectional communication process between influencers and their followers.

Data collection occurred between January 2022 and September 2023, focusing on content that explicitly addressed daily life experiences in Korea rather than tourist-oriented material. The dataset comprised content from 15 unique French content creators who met specific selection criteria, along with audience responses to this content.

Content Creator Selection Criteria were as follows:

1. Self-identification as French through bio information or explicit statements in content
2. Primary content creation in French language
3. Regular production of content about living in or experiencing Korea (minimum monthly posting frequency)
4. Minimum follower count of 1,000 on at least

one platform to ensure established audience engagement

5. Evidence of extended residence in Korea beyond typical tourist visits (demonstrated through content spanning multiple seasons/months)
6. Use of “living in Korea” or equivalent French terminology in content descriptions or hashtags

Content creators were identified through systematic searches using French-language hashtags (*#vireencoree*, *#expatfrance*, *#françaiscoree*) and through snowball sampling from creators’ collaborations and mentions. The January 2022 start date corresponds to Korea’s post-COVID reopening to international travelers, while the September 2023 endpoint ensures sufficient temporal distance for pattern analysis. Cross-platform content was matched by creator usernames and verified through bio information.

The analysis included 127 pieces of content distributed across platforms:

- YouTube videos: 45 pieces (ranging from 5-60 minutes, focusing on lifestyle vlogs and daily routine content)
- TikTok clips: 38 pieces (15-60 seconds each, emphasizing comparative lifestyle moments)
- Instagram Reels and posts: 32 pieces (including both short-form video content and image posts with detailed captions)
- Twitch IRL streaming sessions: 12 sessions (2-4 hours each, featuring real-time audience interaction)

Additionally, 120 audience response posts were collected from Twitter/X, representing direct reactions to the above content or broader discussions about French influencers in Korea. These responses were identified through direct mentions of the 15 selected content creators, French-language discussions about Korean lifestyle content and migration experiences, and

reply threads under controversial comparative content posts.

Content was analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. All content was viewed/read multiple times, with initial notes focusing on comparative statements, authenticity claims, and audience engagement patterns. Open coding identified recurring themes across platforms. Initial codes were grouped into broader thematic categories, which were then refined through iterative review. The analysis specifically examined:

1. Comparative statements between France and Korea across different lifestyle domains
2. Construction and performance of authenticity through specific linguistic and visual markers
3. Presentation of daily life experiences as evidence for broader cultural claims
4. Audience engagement patterns, including both supportive and critical responses
5. Evolution of content themes over time, particularly the emergence of "deception videos"

Final themes were defined around the central concept of France-bashing *kukppong*, with particular attention to how individual content pieces contributed to broader patterns of comparative nationalism.

In terms of ethical standards, all analyzed content was publicly available from content creators who operate as public figures with substantial followings. These influencers actively seek public engagement and have established themselves as cultural commentators through their content creation practices. Given the public nature of all data sources and the focus on publicly available content from established public figures, an institutional ethics review was not required under standard digital research guidelines. However, the research adhered to ethical principles of digital ethnography by

focusing on public discourse rather than private communications and by protecting individual privacy. For audience responses, usernames were pseudonymized when quoting reactions, with the exception of verified public accounts. Direct quotes from social media posts were limited to publicly available content where users engaged in public discourse about cultural topics.

Korea-Based Influencers: Ambassadors Against their Will?

On May 1st, 2023, an account named "koreac.fr" shared a carousel of pictures on Instagram under the title "L'impact des Influenceurs Français sur l'Image de la Corée" (The impact of French Influencers on the Image of Korea). This post coincided with the visit of Léna Situations, one of the most prominent social media influencers in France, boasting 3 million subscribers on YouTube and 5 million on Instagram (as of May 2025). Léna Mahfouf (government name), originally a fashion student, frequently collaborates with renowned fashion brands such as Louis Vuitton, Vogue, and Prada, creating sponsored content. In early May 2023, she was invited by Louis Vuitton to a special Pre-Fall fashion show held on the Jamsu bridge (*Jamsugyo*, 잠수교) in Seoul.

The Instagram carousel featured eight images showcasing content from prominent French influencers in Korea, including Just Riadh (2.1 million subscribers on YouTube) and Kevin Tran (formerly known as "Le Rire Jaune," 5.6 million subscribers on YouTube). Each image displayed screenshots of influencer posts featuring Korean street food, modern architecture, and lifestyle content, overlaid with critical text pointing out recurring patterns: systematic emphasis on Korean technological advancement, repeated comparisons favoring Korean convenience culture over French alternatives, and romantic portrayals of Korean urban life without acknowledgment of social challenges. The post author argued that

these influencers, often sponsored by brands covering their travel expenses, possessed a limited understanding of Korean society yet wielded significant influence over French perceptions of Korea.

The carousel's conclusion emphasized French influencers' responsibility as inadvertent cultural ambassadors, urging them to prevent the dissemination of stereotypes and one-sided representations. This critique directly challenged the authenticity claims that underpin influencer authority—questioning whether brand partnerships and brief visits could provide genuine cultural insight.

The post generated significant backlash. Although the author specifically targeted visiting influencers rather than residents, content creators living in Korea felt compelled to distance themselves from these criticisms. This defensive response illuminates the stakes involved in maintaining authenticity credentials within the competitive landscape of Korea-focused content creation.

Mangozzle, a content creator who previously focused on skincare content while living in Korea but now operates as a lifestyle content creator based in Canada, exemplifies this defensive positioning:

"All of this is interesting, but as far as I am concerned, it is not our job, as content creators, to talk about the society and political issues of the country. Those who are already living there (such as Pape-san)¹ do it perfectly, and I think there is a need to tame down the phrasing about 'being ambassadors' and 'taking their responsibilities' since we, most of us, are just tourists, or (Korean) culture enthusiasts. We enjoy making people dream and entertaining them; that's how we make money. We do not lie by only emphasizing the good aspects, we are just not more entitled to be a spokesperson that have the duty to talk about the most problematic issues on the

entire planet Earth than anyone else."

Comment left by user Mangozzle under Koreac.fr's Instagram post, on May 1st, 2023

Mangozzle's response reveals the central tension in influencer authenticity: the simultaneous claim to cultural authority and disavowal of cultural responsibility. She draws a hierarchical distinction between "just tourists" and those "already living there," positioning herself within the latter category while rejecting the accountability that such positioning might entail. Her explicit acknowledgment that content creators "make people dream" aligns with Chae's (2018, p. 247) concept of "vicarious satisfaction" (*daeri manjok*), where audiences derive pleasure from consuming idealized representations of experiences they cannot directly access.

This tension between entertainment and responsibility becomes particularly significant in the context of France-bashing *kukppong*. By disclaiming ambassadorial roles while simultaneously making comparative cultural claims, influencers like Mangozzle maintain the authority to shape cultural perceptions while avoiding accountability for the consequences of those representations.

Mariecpalot, another content creator focusing on Asian popular culture, also based in France but familiar with Korea as a Korean Adoptee, further illustrates these dynamics:

"I don't think it is relevant that influencers talk about *Hell Joseon* while having a cup of tea in *Insadong*.² South Korea has wonderful assets; it's a fact. It's the audience's duty to educate themselves and keep in mind that every nation has its flaws. I think that if influencers start doing propaganda, it's going to sound very unwarranted. Let's just let them appreciate what is appreciable, and for the rest, there are plenty of authors and journalists who discuss those socio-economic, political issues." "And I

¹ Another content creator based in Seoul who will be mentioned again later in the article.

² A tourist area in Seoul.

would add that if they really want to think about those issues, using the right sources and arguments, they should feel free to do it, but never *obligated* to do so.”

Comments left by user Mariecpalot under Koreac.fr's Instagram post, on May 1st, 2023

In her comment, Mariecpalot highlights the potential perception of being overly critical about a nation as a form of propaganda. By mentioning specific elements such as the phrase “Hell Joseon,” it becomes evident that the content creator is aware of existing issues in contemporary Korean society. Hell Joseon is a satirical term that emerged in Korea around 2015 among younger generations. It embodies ongoing issues of unemployment and poor working conditions due to hierarchy, gender disparity, and significant wage gaps (Nahm, 2018). However, her response inadvertently demonstrates the selective engagement that characterizes France-bashing *kukppong*: acknowledging Korean social problems while maintaining that influencers should focus only on “appreciable” aspects creates the very imbalance she claims to critique.

Both responses illustrate how content creators navigate the authenticity paradox: they must claim sufficient cultural knowledge to justify their comparative statements while disclaiming enough responsibility to avoid criticism for selective representation. This positioning enables the systematic positive comparison that characterizes France-bashing *kukppong* while providing rhetorical protection against charges of propaganda or cultural misrepresentation.

France-bashing *kukppong*: Systematic Comparative Nationalism Through Lifestyle Content

The systematic nature of France-bashing *kukppong* becomes evident through its consistent thematic structure across French influencer content about Korea. This comparative nationalism operates through three primary

domains that position Korea as categorically superior to France, creating what audiences recognize as a predictable formula.

On September 27, 2022, *Itsablaye*, a content creator, posted a TikTok/Reels skit with the description “I swear, we got it: Korea is better! 🇰🇷 #reels #humour #sketch #pov.” (itsablaye, 2022) This satirical skit explicitly mocked this pattern. In the one-minute parody, *Itsablaye* impersonates a French influencer conducting a “taste test” of water from South Korea. In the introduction, he says: “Hi everyone! As you know, I am in South Korea, and it’s so nice, lol yeah I know... you’re missing out!” While the caption on the screen states; “No one: French people in South Korea.” Ablaye continues his skit and keeps emphasizing that he is tasting water “from Korea” in a tumbler that is also “from Korea” and that those are not available in France because “France is lame.” He playfully states that Korean water is delicious while jokingly claiming that French water makes you throw up, while repeatedly repeating “Korea Korea Korea Korea.” Through deliberate exaggeration, the skit illustrates how French influencers systematically position Korean alternatives as superior while dismissing French equivalents. This meta-commentary reveals audience awareness of the formulaic nature of comparative content, yet such content continues to generate engagement precisely because it provides predictable validation of Korea’s superiority. Analysis of content from the 15 French influencers reveals three consistent comparative themes that structure France-bashing *kukppong*.

Safety in South Korea in Comparison to France

The first theme revolves around the concept of safety. French influencers systematically emphasize Korea’s safety advantages, particularly for nighttime activities and public spaces. This narrative directly contrasts Korean social trust with French urban insecurity, especially in Paris where phone theft and street harassment

are frequently mentioned concerns. Content featuring unmanned convenience stores (*muinp'yönüijöm*, 무인편의점) consistently frames these as evidence of Korean honesty that would be “impossible in France.” Late-night safety content routinely includes explicit comparisons: “you could never do this in Paris” while showing creators walking through Seoul neighborhoods after midnight, or “I can leave my phone on the table here, but in France...” followed by descriptions of theft risk.

South Korea: The Land of 24/7

The second recurring theme revolves around the idea that everything in Korea is open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Influencers highlight the ease of meeting any needs at any time of the day, particularly in contrast to France where many stores close at 8 pm and are not open on Sundays. The content archive contains numerous examples of content showcasing 24/7 coffee shops, convenience stores, study rooms, and more, emphasizing the convenience and accessibility of services available round the clock in Korea (such as laurentcaccia, 2023a). *Laurentcaccia's* content exemplifies this pattern, featuring late-night coffee shop visits with commentary like “In France, everything closes at 8 PM, but here...” followed by demonstrations of Korean convenience culture. This theme is often combined with safety themes to create compound comparisons: Korean spaces are both safer AND more accessible than French alternatives.

Misleading Terminology to Refer to Life in South Korea

The third theme involves systematic comparison of living conditions, though this proved most controversial due to misleading terminology. French influencers consistently present Korean urban planning and housing as superior, but often through problematic comparisons that reveal the constructed nature of their comparative framework. On February 17, 2023, Instagram

user *Laurentcaccia* shared a video titled “La vie dans une cité en Corée” (The life in an Estate in Korea) (laurentcaccia, 2023b). The short clip garnered significant attention, accumulating more than 700k views as of October 2025. The video showcases a lavish playground in an *apat'eu danji* (apartment complex), and the creator expresses surprise at the cleanliness of the common area and the high-quality furniture and infrastructure, describing it as being from “another world.”

However, the use of the term “cité” by the content creator sparked controversy among the audience. In France, the term “cité” typically refers to problem-ridden housing estates characterized by deteriorating infrastructure, social problems and security issues. French has alternative terms for apartments (“appartements,” “résidences”) that would be more accurate for Korean housing complexes. The deliberate choice of “cité” created a false equivalency that made Korean housing appear dramatically superior by comparison to France's most problematic residential areas rather than typical French urban housing. Audience responses revealed awareness of this manipulation: “Why did he say ‘cité’ when it's clearly luxury apartments? He's making it seem like Korea solved problems France has in completely different housing types.” This controversy illuminates how France-bashing *kukppong* requires strategic misrepresentation to maintain its comparative framework.

In a similar vein, on July 28, 2022, TikTok user *Joowti* uploaded a clip with the caption “At this price, would you live there?” In this short 48-second video, he shows a very succinct tour of a *Goshiwon* room. He describes the room as a “two-square meters student housing,” and finishes his video by saying that for 230€ (about \$245) a month, it was “not that bad.” The video gained significant traction on X/Twitter and prompted backlash from users who pointed out the existence of double standards when it comes to Korea. In response to the TikTok clip, a Twitter user expresses frustration, stating, “I'm so tired of

influencers over-praising Korea. Just imagine the same room in France, he would never have reacted this way. Just because it is in ‘Korea,’ it’s considered ‘not that bad.’”

This user astutely highlights the issue with this type of content, which creates a “sugar-coated image” of Korea. By consistently engaging in France-bashing to emphasize the positive aspects of Korea, not only does it contribute to an essentialist portrayal of life in the country, but it also reinforces power dynamics wherein the influencer positions themselves as superior by claiming the authority to determine what is good or not about a particular country.

Influencers Contributing to Kukppong

These three themes consistently appear together across French influencer content, creating a standardized narrative of Korean superiority. Even in content ostensibly about tourism or cultural experiences, safety, convenience, and infrastructure comparisons emerge as supplementary themes. This pattern aligns with Lee and Abidin’s (2022, p. 551) analysis of *kukppong* as “excessively positive nationalist discourse,” but reveals how foreign influencers contribute to this discourse through systematic criticism of their home countries rather than direct praise of Korea.

The consistency of this pattern suggests that France-bashing *kukppong* operates as an informal nation branding strategy that emerges from individual content creators’ need to justify their relocation decisions while generating audience engagement. By positioning Korea as a solution to specifically French problems—urban insecurity, limited service hours, poor housing conditions—French influencers inadvertently participate in Korean soft power projection without direct government coordination. This contrasts with Lee and Abidin’s (2022) statement that audiences are only attracted by glamorous places that Korea could provide as a tourist attraction (p. 547). Even when content creators do not work with specific

organizations for this type of content, it ultimately drives attention. As a result, influencers who tend to make this type of content—and thus have a less critical view of Korean society—are chosen to participate in government-sponsored content.

This highlights a discrepancy between previous studies on influencers, which emphasize the audience’s desire for “authenticity” and realness, and the expectation of showcasing only the positive aspects of a country and experiencing it through the vlogger’s eyes. It is paradoxical to witness the rise of “authenticity” as the most valued quality attributed to influencers, while simultaneously asserting that it is not their role to address societal issues. This systematic comparative approach creates what audiences recognize as authentic cultural commentary while actually constituting a highly selective representation that serves both influencer interests (justifying their choices) and audience desires (consuming idealized alternatives to French social problems). The predictability of this pattern, as *Itsablaye*’s parody demonstrates, does not diminish its effectiveness in shaping cultural perceptions and migration aspirations among French K-pop fans.

Showing the Real Face of Korea: Extra-sensationalism vs. Narratives of Deception

One might assume that exposure to these idealized images of Korea would suffice to motivate young French individuals to embark on the significant journey to South Korea, with one common option being the Working Holiday program, which allows for a year-long stay while engaging in various part-time jobs. However, my observations revealed a deeper inclination among the French audience—one that yearned for more than just aesthetically pleasing depictions of Korea. They sought authenticity and a genuine understanding of what it entails to live in Korea and experience everyday life. It is important to note that this preference for authenticity is

not unique to the French audience but rather represents a broader tendency in the assessment of influencer content, where less polished and more authentic content is highly valued. The systematic nature of France-bashing *kukppong* creates expectations that inevitably clash with lived experiences, generating a counter-narrative that reveals the constructed nature of comparative nationalism. This tension manifests in two distinct but related phenomena: sensationalized attempts to show Korea's "authentic" difficulties, and explicit "deception videos" that directly challenge the idealized representations.

IRL Content as a Symbol of Extra-Sensationalism

During this survey of content created by French influencers on social media, a new genre of content known as "Twitch IRL" (In Real Life) emerged as significant. Twitch is a platform established in June 2011 by Justin Kan and Emmett Shear and was later acquired by Amazon in 2014. Initially, Twitch primarily featured streamers broadcasting themselves playing various online games. However, over time, the content on the platform became more diverse, including casual conversations and the aforementioned IRL streams (Sheng & Kairam, 2020). In these live streaming sessions, content creators typically wander alone with their camera or phone, while simultaneously monitoring real-time comments and interactions from their audience. This interaction between the streamer and their viewers contributes to the concept of "perceived interconnectedness," providing a sense of live and immediate engagement (Abidin, 2015). The viewer discovers a new country or landscape through the eyes of the streamer.

For this analysis, the case of *Pape-san*, a content creator who established his YouTube channel in 2017 to document his experiences as an exchange

student in Korea and share them with his family, serves as an example. In 2019, he decided to continue his journey in Korea and kept creating content about his life there. Over the years, he has built a strong and dedicated audience. One Twitter user mentions:

"I really like Pape-san, he's a good one, but his last videos feel like Stalinist propaganda about Korea... it's tiring. Just because they have 24/7 convenience stores. Things like 'you will never see this in Korea' ... I think we understood now. I know it's a nice country, but we should also talk about the bad aspects, especially as a YouTuber who is vlogging."

Twitter User. August 1st, 2022.

Despite *Pape-san* occasionally addressing controversial topics about Korea in his content, the majority of his content, including on other platforms, tends to align with the recurring theme previously identified of France-bashing *kkukppong*. Recently, he appeared to have shifted towards more Twitch IRL streaming, as evidenced by the creation of his secondary YouTube channel, "Pape San Replay," where he uploads replays of his streams.³

In a live streaming session initially conducted on April 16, 2023, and uploaded on April 23, 2023, *Pape-san* takes his audience on a journey through the streets of Jongro-3-ga and Itaewon, two neighborhoods located in Seoul (PapeSanReplay, 2023). Throughout the four-hour stream, the content is carefully crafted to evoke a sense of *daeri manjok* for the viewers. Lou (2022, p. 6) highlights the popularity of vlogs as the most-watched content by younger generations (millennials and Generation Z) on YouTube and suggests a conceptualization of trans-parasocial relationships that incorporates a more reciprocal dimension to the development of

³ Usually, if a Twitch subscriber wants to watch a replay of a stream, they need to "subscribe" to a streamer's channel, and thus, pay a monthly subscription directly to the platform. By making a YouTube channel, *Pape-san* asserts his wish to focus on this type of content.

a content creator's audience. *Pape-san*, by utilizing the concept of *daeri manjok* and actively engaging with his chat, effectively embodies this dynamic.

Initially wandering alone, *Pape-san* randomly encounters a couple after being live for forty minutes. He joins them for drinks, engages in spontaneous conversations with intoxicated *halabojis* (elderly individuals), and subsequently ends up in a taxi directly to Itaewon, the second neighborhood displayed in the live-streaming session. There, he continues his journey and engages in conversations with other people. Throughout the entire streaming session, *Pape-san* meticulously monitors the chat and diligently responds to his viewers inquiries. The range of questions is broad, starting from ranking the best cities to live in Korea to evaluating the English proficiency of Korean people. *Pape-san* emphasizes his excitement in rediscovering the pre-COVID atmosphere in Korea, without neglecting to showcase people enjoying Korean BBQ in the streets or the couples strolling through the streets.

A particularly striking moment in the live stream occurs around the 25-minute mark when *Pape-san* suddenly remembers that he is walking in the “poorest neighborhood in Seoul.” He ventures into a less crowded street and states his intention to show viewers habitations resembling those depicted in the movie *Parasite*. He even goes further by briefly showing the interiors of different dwellings if their doors happen to be open. Throughout, he repeatedly references the “extreme poverty” of the neighborhood while casually responding to a viewer’s question about whether it was “worth it to go to Korea?” Content creators like *Pape-san* constantly strive to come up with new ideas and engage their audience, which becomes even more challenging during live streaming sessions where viewers need continuous stimulation to remain interested. In his attempt to showcase the less glamorous aspects of life in Korea, there is a genuine desire to present a more authentic side of Seoul and be

transparent with his audience. However, he resorts to a sensationalist narrative, particularly when he tactlessly compares the housing complex in Jongro-3-ga to the “basement from *Parasite*.”

Deception Videos as a Challenge to France-bashing Kukppong

More direct challenges to France-bashing *kukppong* emerge through what can be termed “deception videos”—content explicitly addressing disappointment with life in Korea. These videos, with titles like “I regret coming to Korea” or “Why I don’t like living in Korea,” represent a systematic counter-narrative to idealized representations.

On August 6th, 2022, TikTok user *Clothilde Alienor* uploaded a stitch [response] video to the prompt “What’s a scam that’s become so normalized that we don’t even realize it’s a scam anymore?” She answers the prompt nonchalantly while doing her hair, explaining that for her, South Korea is a scam because the country sells a perfect image and perfect people through K-dramas, but that the reality is far from ideal. Significantly, *Alienor’s* critique focuses on the disconnect between K-drama representations and lived experience, revealing tensions between K-pop/K-drama fandom and actual cultural integration. The playlist attached to this TikTok—full of “anecdotes” about dating Korean men—suggests that romantic expectations shaped by Korean media particularly failed to match reality. This highlights how cultural products (K-dramas, K-pop) create specific expectations about interpersonal relationships and social dynamics that prove difficult to fulfill in actual Korean social contexts.

The audience response to such content reveals the complexity of French engagement with Korea representations. Comments divide between those affirming the critique (“humorously blaming the South Korean government for selling a false image”) and those defending Korea while criticizing *Alienor’s* expectations. This division suggests that “deception videos” serve as sites

for negotiating the relationship between media consumption and migration experiences. It is striking to observe how the audience perceives content creators' depictions of life in Korea in a similar way as government-funded promotional content.

In a podcast interview, another content creator named *Louis-san* coincidentally mentioned the challenges of discussing less “glamorous” topics on his YouTube channel, where he makes content about his life in Japan.⁴ He explained that he had to be strategic in his approach, knowing that a video entitled “the real racism in Japan” will attract more viewers than a more explicit title such as “the caste system in Japan” (Nani, 2023). This highlights how content creators must consider the virality of their content and navigate the YouTube algorithm to grow their audience.

As a result, a new genre of videos has emerged, which I labelled in my analysis as “deception videos.” Using the keywords “regretter” (to regret) and “corée” (Korea) in the YouTube search bar reveals numerous videos from content creators who decided to go to Korea and live there. These videos often have titles such as “I regret coming here” or “Why I don't like living in Korea,” leveraging the virality of the YouTube algorithm while contributing to the discourse on the “Korean Dream” by exposing challenging aspects of life in Korea from a French perspective (Assiarabian, 2021; Jowti, 2023). In these videos, typically presented as face-cam chit-chat videos or regular vlogs, YouTubers actually living in Korea adopt another strategy than the “France-bashing” YouTubers, by exposing the different reasons why their actual life in Korea does not match their initial expectations about the country.

This suggests that both idealized and critical representations of Korea serve similar functions for French audiences: they provide vicarious

engagement with cultural alternatives while avoiding the complexities of actual cross-cultural integration. Whether consuming content about Korea's superiority or its disappointments, audiences experience mediated cultural comparison that shapes their understanding of both Korean and French society. The existence of both France-bashing *kukppong* and its systematic critique through “deception videos” reveals the constructed nature of cultural representation on social media. Neither positive nor negative portrayals provide comprehensive cultural understanding; instead, both serve the entertainment and engagement needs that drive social media algorithms while inadvertently participating in broader patterns of cultural comparison and nation branding.

Discussion & Conclusion

This study reveals how France-bashing *kukppong* operates as a form of comparative nationalism that emerges from individual content creation practices yet contributes to broader patterns of nation branding and soft power projection. The analysis demonstrates that French influencers in Korea systematically construct Korea's superiority through strategic criticism of French social systems, infrastructure, and cultural practices, creating a consistent narrative framework that positions Korea as a solution to specifically French problems.

The central mechanism driving this phenomenon concerns how comparative nationalism functions through performed authenticity. French influencers derive authority to make cultural comparisons through specific authenticity markers—extended residence, cultural integration, and insider access claims—while balancing genuine experience sharing with

⁴ Even if Pape-San and Louis-San have similar channel names, they are not related. However, they have made some collaborations together such as “Which Country is Better: Korea or Japan?” This collaboration created a big controversial debate among Japan and Korea-related content creators.

algorithmic engagement needs. This tension reveals how seemingly authentic cultural commentary constitutes strategic self-branding that serves both individual and national interests, supporting Banet-Weiser's (2012) analysis of authenticity as a commodified branding strategy.

The systematic nature of France-bashing *kukppong* across three primary domains—safety, convenience, and infrastructure—demonstrates how individual lifestyle choices become vehicles for inadvertent nation branding. Unlike direct cultural promotion in government-sponsored campaigns (Lee & Abidin, 2022), French influencers contribute to Korean soft power through systematic criticism of their home country rather than explicit praise of Korea. This indirect approach proves particularly effective because it appears to emerge from authentic personal experience rather than coordinated promotional efforts.

The popularity of comparative content—evidenced by both idealized portrayals and critical “deception videos”—reveals that social media’s engagement-driven structure favors comparative frameworks regardless of evaluative direction. Both positive and negative representations enable vicarious cultural engagement while positioning Korea and France as cultural alternatives rather than complex societies with internal diversity. This suggests that the appeal of comparative content stems from its ability to provide clear cultural alternatives for digital consumption, allowing audiences to experience mediated solutions to perceived French social problems without undertaking actual migration.

Theoretical and Methodological Contributions

This research makes several key contributions to the intersection of Korean Wave studies and digital media research. Theoretically, it extends existing nation branding literature by demonstrating how informal cultural diplomacy operates through lifestyle content rather than explicit promotional campaigns. The France-

bashing *kukppong* framework reveals mechanisms through which social media influencers participate in soft power projection without direct coordination, suggesting that informal cultural diplomacy may be more significant in shaping international perceptions than previously recognized.

Methodologically, the study demonstrates the value of treating social media content as primary source material worthy of systematic analysis. The digital ethnographic approach employed here reveals patterns that emerge across individual content creators, showing how platform dynamics and audience expectations shape collective cultural representation in ways that serve broader geopolitical interests even without explicit coordination.

Empirically, the research reveals how K-pop fandom culture’s emphasis on authenticity narratives creates expectations for lifestyle content creators who serve as cultural intermediaries. This finding provides new insights into how popular culture consumption shapes migration aspirations among young Europeans through digital content that enables vicarious satisfaction while avoiding the complexities of actual cross-cultural integration.

Implications and Future Directions

These findings have broader implications for understanding how digital platforms shape cultural perceptions and migration aspirations. The systematic nature of comparative content creates predictable expectations about life in Korea that inevitably clash with lived experience complexity, generating cycles of idealization and disillusionment that nonetheless sustain audience engagement with Korean cultural products. This dynamic may apply beyond the Korea-France case, suggesting broader patterns in how social media influences cross-cultural migration and cultural consumption among young adults globally.

Future research should examine whether

France-bashing *kukppong* patterns manifest in other European contexts with different relationships to Korean popular culture. Comparative studies across multiple nations could reveal whether systematic cultural comparison through lifestyle content represents a broader pattern in how social media influences cross-cultural migration decisions. Additionally, longitudinal studies tracking how creators' comparative narratives evolve as their cultural integration deepens could reveal the temporal dynamics of this phenomenon. Research examining how Korean entertainment companies and government organizations respond to and potentially leverage these organic influencers narratives would further illuminate the relationship between informal and formal cultural diplomacy.

The France-bashing *kukppong* phenomenon ultimately demonstrates how individual authenticity performances on social media can serve broader geopolitical interests without explicit coordination. As digital platforms continue to shape how young people imagine their futures across national boundaries, understanding these mechanisms becomes crucial for comprehending new forms of cultural diplomacy and nationalism in an increasingly connected world.

REFERENCES

- Abidin, C. (2015). Communicative ♥ intimacies: Influencers and perceived interconnectedness. *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media & Technology*, 8, 1–16.
<https://doi.org/10.7264/N3MW2FFG>
- Assiarabian. (2021, November 8). Est-ce que je regrette d'avoir déménagé en Corée? [Do I regret moving to Korea?] [YouTube video]. YouTube.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=40hXXhBxbEs>
- Banet-Weiser, S. (2012). *Authentic TM: Politics and ambivalence in a brand culture*. New York: University Press.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101.
<https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp0630a>
- Chae, J. (2018). Explaining females' envy toward social media influencers. *Media Psychology*, 21(2), 246–262.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15213269.2017.1328312>
- ClothildeAlienor [@ClothildeAlienor]. (2023, August 6). #collage avec @madlines attention mes propos sont à modérer;) #corée [TikTok video]. TikTok.
<https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZTREnsQC/>
- Han, J., & Chen, H. (2021). Millennial social media users' intention to travel: The moderating role of social media influencer following behavior. *International Hospitality Review*, 36(2), 340–357.
<https://doi.org/10.1108/IHR-11-2020-0069>
- Hund, E. (2023). *The influencer industry: The quest for authenticity on social media*. Princeton: University Press.
- itsablaye [@itsablaye]. (2022, September 27). J'vous jure qu'on a compris que la Corée c'était mieux! [I swear, we understood that Korea was better!] [Instagram reel]. Instagram.
<https://www.instagram.com/reel/CjBQ9D8oN3p/>
- joowti [@joowti]. (2022, July 28). À ce prix là 🇰🇷 vous prenez ou pas? KR [At this price, would you live there?] [TikTok video]. TikTok.
<https://www.tiktok.com/@joowti/video/7125363600004254981>
- Jowti. (2023, March 20). Je regrette d'être venu en Corée du Sud [I regret coming to Korea] [YouTube video]. YouTube.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6bqQmUUCDzs>
- Ki, C. W., Park, S., & Kim, Y. K. (2022). Investigating the mechanism through which consumers are 'inspired by' social media

- influencers and ‘inspired to’ adopt influencers’ exemplars as social defaults. *Journal of Business Research*, 144, 264–277.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2022.01.071>
 koreac.fr [@koreac.fr]. (2023, May 1). L’impact des Influenceurs Français sur l’Image de la Corée [The impact of French Influencers on the Image of Korea] [Instagram post]. Instagram.
<https://www.instagram.com/p/CrtP7bmoUwL/>
 laurentcaccia [@laurentcaccia]. (2023a, March 11). Un Café 24/24 en Corée [A 24/24 Coffee Shop in Korea] [Instagram reel]. Instagram.
<https://www.instagram.com/reel/CprY7wUDDku/>
 laurentcaccia [@laurentcaccia]. (2023b, February 17). La vie dans une cite en Corée [The life in a Korean Estate] [Instagram reel]. Instagram.
<https://www.instagram.com/reel/CowqFCDLKD/>
 Lee, J., & Abidin, C. (2022). Oegugin influencers and pop nationalism through government campaigns: Regulating foreign-nationals in the South Korean YouTube ecology. *Policy & Internet*, 14(3), 541–557.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/poi3.319>
 Lee, M. J. (2020). Touring the land of romance: Transnational Korean television drama consumption from online desires to offline intimacy. *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change*, 18(1), 67–80.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14766825.2020.1707467>
 Lou, C. (2022). Social media influencers and followers: Theorization of a trans-parasocial relation and explication of its implications for influencer advertising. *Journal of Advertising*, 51(1), 4–21.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00913367.2021.1880345>
 Ministry of Justice. (2023). *Current state of registered foreigners (March 2023) (Tüngnogoegugin chiyökpöyöl hyönhwang (2023-nyön 3-wölmal kijun))*, 등록외국인 지역별 현황 (2023년 3월말 기준)). Immigration Service – Department of Migration.
 Motahar, P. S., Tavakoli, R., & Mura, P. (2021). Social media influencers’ visual framing of Iran on YouTube. *Tourism Recreation Research*, 49(2), 270–282.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02508281.2021.2014252>
 Nahm, K. Y. (2018). Hell Joseon and the politics of mourning in the Shin Hae-Chul of Hidden Singer. *Situations*, 11(1), 19–38.
 Nani, Z. (2023, May 10). Louis-San, le Taulier du YouTube Français [Louis-San, a Pioneer of French YouTube] [Podcast episode]. Spotify.
<https://open.spotify.com/episode/0vbXJ7eg8mrSjdieieas5>
 Oh, Y. (2018). *Pop city: Korean popular culture and the selling of place*. Cornell University Press.
 PapeSanReplay. (2023, April 23). IRL Seoul Le Maire est de Retour [YouTube video]. YouTube.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QOrU5J8fDBk>
 Sheng, J. T., & Kairam, S. R. (2020). From virtual strangers to IRL friends: Relationship development in livestreaming communities on Twitch. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, 4(CSCW2), 1–34.
 Song, M. S. (2019). *Hanguk hip hop: Global rap in South Korea*. Palgrave Macmillan.