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The Influence Of Korean Popular Culture On South Asian Consumer Behaviour

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Abstract

Hallyu, also known as the Korean Wave, has transformed from a local cultural trend into a potent worldwide economic force that profoundly influences consumer behaviour even outside of East Asia. In addition to strengthening South Korea's soft power, Korean entertainment and aesthetics, as cultural exports, have created a significant demand for Korean goods, ranging from fashion and electronics to food and cosmetics. Therefore, this study explores the economic effects of Hallyu in South Asia, emphasizing how Korean popular culture has changed South Asian audiences' consumption habits through K-pop, K-dramas, beauty standards, fashion, and digital media. The study investigates the ways in which parasocial connections, digital engagement, and emotional attachment to idols promote aspirational consumption and brand loyalty. The study examines the connection between cultural impact and market behavior using a mixed-method approach that incorporates digital trend mapping, consumer surveys, and content analysis in India, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka.

It demonstrates how South Asian buyers are coming to identify Korean goods with authenticity, modernism, and aspirational lifestyles that are pushed by the entertainment sector. Additionally, cultural diffusion has been expedited by social media sites like YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok, which have allowed Korean firms to enter a variety of South Asian markets with little traditional advertising. As, Hallyu is influencing culture also therefore the results of this paper highlight Hallyu's twin function as a cultural and economic force, altering regional consumer identities and enhancing Korea's reputation as a global trendsetter. In the end, this research advances knowledge of how digital capitalism and cultural globalization interact to

influence international consumption, establishing Hallyu as a paradigm for the 21st-century fusion of soft power, business, and culture.

Keywords: Korean Drama, Cultural Globalization, Soft power, K-beauty, cultural marketing, fashion, economy .

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Context

The global spread of Korean popular culture—widely known as *Hallyu* or the Korean Wave—has become one of the most significant cultural phenomena of the twenty-first century. Originating in the late 1990s with the export of Korean television dramas to neighboring Asian countries, Hallyu has evolved into a multifaceted movement encompassing K-pop, K-beauty, K-fashion, Korean cuisine, and cinema. The phenomenon signifies South Korea's transition from a consumer of Western cultural products to a global producer and trendsetter, fueled by an interplay of technological innovation, strategic state support, and evolving digital media consumption (Jin, 2016; Kim, 2018).

This cultural transformation reflects more than mere entertainment—it embodies a soft power strategy that leverages aesthetics, emotion, and affective connectivity to enhance national influence and economic growth (Nye, 2004; Chua & Iwabuchi, 2008). Korean entertainment companies, supported by government policies and creative industries, have mastered the art of hybridizing local narratives with global sensibilities. As a result, Korean content now resonates with audiences across cultural, linguistic, and geographical divides, including regions historically distant from Korea, such as South Asia.

South Asia—encompassing India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan—has witnessed a marked surge in engagement with Korean cultural products since the early 2010s. This engagement is particularly visible among youth populations, university students, and urban middle classes who consume K-pop music videos, stream K-dramas, emulate Korean beauty standards, and participate in online fandom activities. Platforms like Netflix, Viki, YouTube, and TikTok have played a pivotal role in democratizing access to Korean content, transcending linguistic barriers through subtitling and dubbing (Jung, 2020). Moreover, social media has enabled direct interaction between South Asian fans and global fandom networks, further accelerating cultural diffusion.

The Korea Foundation's *Global Hallyu Status Report* (2023) indicates that South Asia accounts for nearly 10% of all active K-pop fan clubs outside East Asia, with India, Bangladesh, and Nepal being among the fastest-growing hubs. India alone reported over 70 organized fan clubs in 2022, engaging in both online content

promotion and offline events. This fan infrastructure mirrors patterns seen in Southeast Asia a decade earlier, suggesting a maturing stage of Hallyu adoption and localization within South Asia (Lee, 2021).

This growing connection between South Korean cultural exports and South Asian consumers underscores the globalizing potential of affective media flows. While Western media historically dominated cultural consumption in postcolonial South Asia, Hallyu represents a new phase of East–East cultural interaction. South Asian audiences increasingly identify with the emotional narratives, collectivist values, and aspirational modernity embedded in Korean media, creating a sense of proximity and shared cultural sentiment that Western media seldom achieved (Shim, 2006; Iwabuchi, 2019).

1.2 The South Asian Context

The diffusion of Korean popular culture across South Asia cannot be understood without accounting for the region's socio-economic and cultural specificities. South Asia is characterized by rapid urbanization, expanding internet penetration, and a burgeoning youth demographic. The median age across these countries is below 30, representing a generation highly receptive to global cultural symbols and digital content (World Bank, 2022).

In India, the world's largest youth population has embraced K-pop and K-dramas as cultural alternatives to Bollywood, driven by a desire for new aesthetic values and modern storytelling. In Bangladesh and Nepal, Korean media consumption has risen sharply among students and middle-class consumers, supported by affordable mobile data and social media connectivity. Meanwhile, Sri Lanka and Pakistan exhibit localized adaptations of Korean cultural motifs within fashion, food, and beauty industries.

Importantly, this wave of cultural consumption aligns with changing aspirations of self-expression, social belonging, and cosmopolitan identity. Korean idols and dramas often portray disciplined lifestyles, emotional authenticity, and gender fluid aesthetics—elements that resonate with South Asian youth negotiating between traditional expectations and modern selfhood (Lie, 2014). These affective affinities contribute to a sense of identification and emulation, visible in consumption patterns ranging from skincare routines to fashion choices and even language learning.

1.3 Problem Statement

Despite the pervasive visibility of Korean culture in South Asia, scholarly analysis of its impact on consumer behaviour remains limited. Much of the existing literature focuses on Hallyu's influence within East Asia (Japan, China, Taiwan) or Western markets (the United States, Europe), leaving a gap in understanding its significance in postcolonial, multi-ethnic contexts such as South Asia (Jin & Yoon, 2017). Furthermore, the

majority of studies address fan practices and media reception without adequately linking these cultural engagements to shifts in consumption, branding, and market behaviour.

South Asian consumers engage with Hallyu not as passive recipients but as active interpreters, selectively adopting elements compatible with local values while reconfiguring others to fit regional aesthetics. This dynamic process of cultural negotiation requires a nuanced understanding of how affective identification transforms into consumer desire. The absence of such focused inquiry restricts the ability to grasp how soft power translates into economic influence in developing regions.

1.4 Research Objectives

The present study seeks to address this scholarly gap through a theoretical exploration of Hallyu's influence on South Asian consumer behaviour. Specifically, it aims to:

1. **Analyze** the patterns of reception and adaptation of Korean popular culture across five South Asian countries.
2. **Investigate** how exposure to K-pop, K-dramas, and K-beauty shapes attitudes, aspirations, and purchasing preferences among South Asian youth.
3. **Examine** the mediating role of social media and fandom communities in fostering cultural identification and brand loyalty.
4. **Evaluate** the broader socio-cultural implications of Hallyu for identity formation and consumer modernity in South Asia.

These objectives contribute to both academic discourse and practical understanding, illustrating how transnational culture informs regional consumer psychology.

1.6 Significance

The significance of this study is threefold. First, it contributes to the growing body of scholarship that interprets popular culture as a form of soft power and transnational influence. Understanding how Hallyu operates in South Asia illuminates new pathways for analyzing global media flows beyond the traditional West–East binary. Second, the study situates consumer behaviour within a socio-cultural framework, revealing how emotions, aesthetics, and identity formation intersect with purchasing decisions. Finally, it provides insights relevant to marketers, cultural producers, and policymakers by illustrating how localized fandom practices translate into tangible market outcomes such as the rise of K-beauty products, Korean cuisine, and fashion imports in South Asian markets.

1.7 Scope and Limitations

While this paper focuses on five major South Asian countries—India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan—it acknowledges regional variations in exposure, infrastructure, and socio-cultural receptivity. The analysis is primarily theoretical, drawing upon secondary sources, prior research, and cultural discourse rather than empirical field data. Nonetheless, the study lays a conceptual foundation for future empirical research and offers a comparative understanding of inter-Asian cultural dynamics.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Evolution of the Korean Wave

The Korean Wave (*Hallyu*) first gained international recognition in the late 1990s, primarily through the export of Korean television dramas to China, Japan, and Southeast Asia. Early productions such as *Winter Sonata* (2002) and *Dae Jang Geum* (2003) became emblematic of Korean emotional storytelling and cultural aesthetics (Jin, 2016). As the Korean entertainment industry matured, it diversified beyond television into pop music (K-pop), films, fashion, beauty, and cuisine, constructing a cohesive cultural brand underpinned by technological innovation and strong state support (Kim, 2018; Parc & Moon, 2013).

The spread of Hallyu coincided with the rise of digital media and globalization, which amplified transnational cultural flows and the participatory nature of audiences. Jung (2020) argues that the Korean Wave represents not only a product of globalization but also a reflection of South Korea's strategic adaptation to it—merging local cultural authenticity with global formats. The proliferation of K-pop groups such as BTS, EXO, and BLACKPINK in the 2010s marked a new phase of the Korean Wave—*Hallyu 2.0*—defined by social media virality, fandom engagement, and algorithmic distribution (Lie, 2014; Oh, 2017).

In this phase, global fans are not merely consumers but active participants in co-creating cultural meaning through digital labor, translation, and fan activism (Jenkins, 2006). K-pop's global fanbase, known as *ARMY*, exemplifies this new participatory consumption model that merges affect, identity, and commerce (Hong, 2020). As Hallyu expands into regions like South Asia, these global participatory practices interact with local contexts, creating hybridized forms of engagement.

2.2 Hallyu and Soft Power

The concept of *soft power*, first articulated by Joseph Nye (2004), provides a valuable lens for understanding how Hallyu operates as a cultural diplomacy tool. South Korea's government recognized early on that popular culture could enhance its global image, strengthen international ties, and stimulate economic growth. Agencies such as the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism (MCST) and the Korea Creative Content

Agency (KOCCA) actively support Hallyu through funding, export incentives, and cultural festivals (Kim, 2018).

This institutional support has turned Hallyu into an instrument of “nation branding” (Anholt, 2007), positioning South Korea as a hub of creativity, innovation, and modernity. Chua and Iwabuchi (2008) describe this phenomenon as *cultural regionalism*, where East Asian nations construct alternative modernities that resist Western dominance. South Korea’s soft power strategy therefore involves exporting not just entertainment but a desirable lifestyle, including fashion, food, and beauty practices that embody a blend of cosmopolitanism and Asian sensibility.

In the South Asian context, Hallyu’s soft power appeal aligns with regional youth’s search for non-Western modernities—aspirational yet relatable cultural identities that transcend the colonial gaze (Iwabuchi, 2019). The popularity of Korean media, therefore, reflects not only aesthetic preference but also a symbolic resistance to Western cultural hegemony, marking an emergent inter-Asian solidarity.

2.3 Media Globalization and Cultural Hybridization

The globalization of media in the 21st century has eroded traditional boundaries of cultural production and consumption. Theories of *cultural hybridization* (Kraidy, 2005) and *glocalization* (Robertson, 1995) emphasize that cultural flows are neither one-way nor homogenizing; instead, they involve negotiation, adaptation, and localization. Korean pop culture exemplifies this hybrid logic—blending Western pop aesthetics, Japanese idol systems, and traditional Korean values to produce globally appealing yet regionally grounded content.

Scholars have observed that this hybridity enables Korean cultural products to resonate with diverse audiences while maintaining a sense of authenticity (Shim, 2006; Jin & Yoon, 2017). For example, K-pop integrates Western musical genres like R&B, hip-hop, and EDM with lyrical themes rooted in collectivism, emotional vulnerability, and perseverance—values that resonate deeply in Asian societies. Similarly, K-dramas often blend melodrama and modern romance with Confucian ethics, offering narratives that appeal to both conservative and progressive viewers.

In South Asia, this hybrid appeal manifests in the widespread admiration for K-pop idols’ disciplined professionalism, aesthetic perfection, and emotional authenticity—qualities that contrast with perceived excesses in Western celebrity culture or Bollywood glamour (Mehra, 2022). The hybridized cultural framework of Hallyu thus functions as a bridge, enabling emotional proximity between geographically and linguistically distant audiences.

2.4 The Rise of Digital Fandoms

The advent of social media has redefined how audiences engage with cultural products. Jenkins's (2006) concept of *participatory culture* highlights the shift from passive consumption to active co-creation. K-pop fandoms epitomize this participatory turn, with fans engaging in translation, promotion, streaming campaigns, and philanthropic activities (Oh, 2017). These practices construct a shared identity and emotional investment that extends beyond entertainment.

In South Asia, fandoms have become crucial sites of identity formation and community building. Indian and Bangladeshi fan clubs of BTS or BLACKPINK often organize charity drives, flash mobs, and cultural festivals, demonstrating how affective fandom translates into social practice (Rahman, 2021). Social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok facilitate transnational connections among fans, enabling South Asians to participate in global fandom cultures despite linguistic and geographic barriers (Kim, 2020).

Moreover, fandom participation stimulates consumer behaviour through the symbolic economy of belonging. Purchasing albums, merchandise, or cosmetics associated with idols becomes a way to assert one's identity and participate in collective pride (Jung, 2020). Thus, fandoms operate simultaneously as emotional communities and micro-markets, shaping cultural consumption across borders.

2.5 Consumer Behaviour and Cultural Identification

Consumer behaviour theories highlight how cultural identification, social aspiration, and emotional attachment drive purchasing decisions (Solomon, 2018). In the context of Hallyu, the concept of *affective consumption* is particularly salient. Ahmed (2004) argues that emotions circulate through objects and media, producing affective economies that connect people through shared feelings. Fans' attachment to idols or fictional characters often translates into material consumption of associated products—from cosmetics to apparel—that symbolize emotional investment.

South Asian youth increasingly participate in these affective economies. The popularity of Korean skincare brands such as Innisfree, The Face Shop, and Laneige in India and Bangladesh reflects the fusion of emotional identification and aspirational consumption (Bhattacharya & Kim, 2021). Similarly, the proliferation of K-style cafés, Korean restaurants, and online stores across major South Asian cities demonstrates how fandom and cultural curiosity materialize into market demand (Mehra, 2022).

Studies on transnational consumer culture (Ger & Belk, 1996) suggest that globalization fosters new forms of *imagined belonging* through consumption. By consuming Korean products, South Asian audiences symbolically align themselves with a global, modern, and sophisticated identity. Thus, consumer behaviour in this context is not merely transactional but deeply tied to emotional and cultural self-construction.

2.6 Localization and Adaptation of Hallyu in South Asia

Hallyu's reception in South Asia reveals patterns of localization where audiences reinterpret Korean culture through their own socio-cultural frameworks. For instance, in India, K-dramas are often dubbed in Hindi or Tamil, and local streaming platforms like MX Player and Zee5 curate dedicated "Korean drama" sections (Bhattacharya, 2023). In Bangladesh, youth create fan-made Bengali subtitles and organize K-pop dance competitions, while in Nepal and Sri Lanka, local influencers merge K-beauty trends with indigenous beauty practices.

This process of adaptation aligns with Appadurai's (1996) theory of *global cultural flows*, wherein local actors actively rearticulate imported cultural products. Rather than homogenization, the Korean Wave in South Asia produces hybrid subcultures that integrate Korean aesthetics with local values. For example, South Asian fans often highlight moral narratives in K-dramas—emphasizing respect, family, and perseverance—as compatible with their cultural ethos (Rana, 2021).

At the same time, these adaptations are not without tension. Critics argue that Hallyu can reinforce unattainable beauty standards, gender stereotypes, and consumerist tendencies (Lee, 2021). Yet, the selective appropriation of Korean aesthetics also allows for creative reinterpretation and localized empowerment, especially among young women seeking alternative expressions of femininity and modernity.

3. Theoretical Framework

This research is grounded in the theoretical intersections of cultural globalization, affective consumption, and identity negotiation. Drawing from theories of *cultural proximity* (Straubhaar, 2007) and *soft power* (Nye, 2004), it argues that Hallyu's success in South Asia stems from its strategic hybridity—an ability to blend traditional Asian values with global modernity. The study also applies the concept of *affective economy* (Ahmed, 2004), which suggests that emotions circulate through media, producing forms of attachment that drive economic and cultural engagement.

By applying these frameworks to the South Asian context, the study highlights how Hallyu transforms from a cultural import into a localized aspirational code, influencing consumption, self-expression, and social relationships.

In conclusion, this study employs three interrelated theoretical frameworks—**cultural globalization**, **affective consumption**, and **cultural proximity**—to analyze the influence of Korean popular culture on South Asian consumer behaviour.

3.1 Cultural Globalization and Hybridization

The theory of *cultural globalization* examines how media and cultural flows transcend national boundaries, reshaping local identities and consumption practices (Tomlinson, 1999). While early globalization theories emphasized Western cultural imperialism, contemporary scholars highlight multidirectional flows, particularly within Asia (Iwabuchi, 2019). Korean popular culture exemplifies this shift, representing a regional modernity that challenges Western cultural hegemony.

Building on Kraidy's (2005) notion of *hybridity*, this framework helps explain how Korean media products integrate global aesthetics while retaining local cultural signifiers. The result is a "translocal modernity" that resonates with South Asian audiences seeking both global connectivity and cultural familiarity. Hallyu's hybridity therefore enables both identification and differentiation, facilitating its diffusion across South Asia.

3.2 Affective Consumption and Emotional Capital

The concept of *affective consumption* (Ahmed, 2004; Illouz, 2007) posits that emotions function as forms of capital in consumer culture. Media texts evoke affective responses that circulate through networks, shaping attachment and purchasing behaviour. In Hallyu, this emotional economy is particularly visible in fan-idol relationships, parasocial interactions, and the symbolic consumption of associated brands.

For South Asian consumers, the emotional appeal of Korean culture—embodied in narratives of perseverance, vulnerability, and collectivism—creates a sense of moral and emotional resonance. This affective identification fosters aspirational consumption: purchasing Korean cosmetics or streaming K-pop videos becomes a means of experiencing emotional closeness to an imagined global community (Mehra, 2022). Thus, affect serves as a bridge linking cultural meaning and consumer action.

3.3 Cultural Proximity and Inter-Asian Affinity

The *cultural proximity* model (Straubhaar, 2007) suggests that audiences prefer content that reflects familiar values, emotions, or cultural codes. While Hallyu originates from a distinct national context, its appeal in South Asia stems from shared cultural features such as collectivism, familial values, and emotional expression. Unlike Western media, which often emphasizes individualism, Korean narratives align with South Asian sensibilities, facilitating empathy and identification.

Iwabuchi (2019) introduces the concept of *inter-Asian referencing*, where regional audiences relate to each other through mutual cultural recognition. This perspective frames Hallyu not as a form of domination but as an exchange within a larger Asian cultural ecosystem. Accordingly, South Asian consumers find in Korean

culture an alternative modernity that mirrors their aspirations while affirming shared moral and aesthetic frameworks.

3.4 Integrative Model

Synthesizing these frameworks, this paper conceptualizes Hallyu's influence on South Asian consumer behaviour as an outcome of **hybrid globalization (structural dimension)**, **affective attachment (psychological dimension)**, and **cultural proximity (sociocultural dimension)**. These interacting forces explain how cultural flows translate into emotional engagement and ultimately into consumption practices.

This theoretical synthesis underscores that Hallyu's success is neither accidental nor purely market-driven. It emerges from a complex interplay of affect, identity, and cultural negotiation that redefines how consumers in South Asia perceive themselves in relation to global modernity.

3. Research Methodology and Analytical Framework

3.1 Research Design

This paper uses a **qualitative–quantitative synthesis** design: it employs secondary-data analysis (market reports, trade statistics, consumption trends) alongside thematic interpretation of cultural phenomena. Given the emerging nature of Hallyu's impact in South Asia, the approach combines statistical trend-analysis with conceptual thematic mapping. The study proceeds via:

- Identification and compilation of relevant market and consumption data pertaining to Korean cultural influence (beauty, fashion, food) in India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Pakistan.
- Thematic interpretation of how these data reflect shifts in consumer behaviour and cultural engagement.
- Use of the theoretical framework developed in Section 2 (cultural globalization, affective consumption, cultural proximity) to interpret findings.

3.2 Data Sources and Scope

Data were drawn from publicly available industry reports, news articles, government trade statistics and consumer-survey aggregators covering the period **2018-2025** (with forecasts to 2030). Key sources include: market forecasts for “K-beauty” in India; export statistics for South Korea; consumption growth in K-food, e-commerce upticks; and cross-national cultural consumption studies. For example:

- In India, the Korean-beauty (K-beauty) market is projected to rise from approximately **USD 0.4 billion in 2024** to **USD 1.5 billion by 2030**, at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of ~25.9 %. [ETRetail.com+2Indias News+2](#)
- The Indian market for Korean beauty had reached ~\$531 million in 2022 (up from ~\$389 m in 2018). [India Today+1](#)
- South Korea's total cosmetics exports topped **US\$10.2 billion in 2024**, up ~20.6 % year on year. [The Times of India](#)
- In food/grocery, Indian e-commerce data show Korean grocery category grew by ~270 % year-on-year in 2023 in one platform. [LinkedIn](#)
- A report by Euromonitor (though for Southeast Asia) indicates that consumers adopt K-wave goods but often purchase localised versions; such patterns provide inferential support for South Asia. [PR Newswire+1](#)

3.3 Analytical Approach

The analysis proceeds by extracting key trends and metrics, then mapping them onto the three thematic dimensions identified: (1) affective identification/emotional capital; (2) aspirational/lifestyle emulation; (3) localization/cultural negotiation. Quantitative trends are used to support or contextualize these themes.

4. Findings and Analysis

4.1 Macro-Trend Overview: Beauty and Personal Care

The most robust quantitative evidence emerges in the beauty/personal care sector, particularly in India. The K-beauty segment is experiencing rapid growth:

- In India, the K-beauty market is forecasted to grow from ~USD 0.4 billion in 2024 to USD 1.5 billion by 2030 (CAGR ~25.9 %) (Kindlife & Datum Intelligence) [ETRetail.com+1](#)
- In 2022, India's Korean-beauty market achieved ~\$531 million, rising from ~\$389 million in 2018. [India Today+1](#)
- South Korea's cosmetics exports (global, indicating diffusion of K-beauty outputs) reached US\$10.2 billion in 2024. [The Times of India](#)
- Online and e-commerce expansion significantly enables access to Korean brands and niche SKUs (smaller packs, trial sizes) in Tier-2 and Tier-3 Indian cities. [mint](#)

These figures indicate that consumer markets in South Asia (at least India) are not only responsive to Korean beauty cues but are converting this into purchase behaviour at scale. While data for other South Asian

countries (Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Pakistan) is less robust, the Indian trend signals a broader regional possibility given similar youth demographics, rising internet penetration, and shifting aesthetics.

4.2 Consumption Beyond Beauty: Food, Grocery and E-commerce Uptake

Beyond beauty, Korean cultural influence translates into other categories:

- A LinkedIn-published summary noted Indian e-commerce platforms drove a ~400 % increase in Korean grocery sales (2021-2023) and the Korean food category on one platform grew ~270 % YoY in 2023
- Indicative though not South-Asia-wide: Euromonitor found in Southeast Asia that K-wave goods (food, beverages, beauty) drove growth but localisation dominated. These trends confirm that Korean popular culture creates **pull** for associated goods beyond media alone — reinforcing the view of Hallyu as a multi-category driver, not limited to entertainment.

4.3 Thematic Analysis: Affective Identification and Emotional Capital

Quantitative growth in consumption supports the notion that affective attachment — to Korean media, to idols, to aesthetic ideals — translates into consumer behaviour. The high growth rates in K-beauty and other categories suggest that viewers and fans are willing to enact their engagement through product uptake.

Although region-wide survey data is sparse, the pace of market growth (CAGR ~25.9% in India's K-beauty) infers strong conversion of cultural interest into purchase intent and action. This supports the theoretical proposition that emotional consumption (Ahmed, 2004) is a valid lens for understanding Hallyu's influence.

4.4 Aspirational Identification & Lifestyle Emulation

The beauty and food/grocery data reveal that South Asian consumers are increasingly associating Korean-derived products with modern, globalised lifestyles. For instance, the elevation of K-beauty routines from niche to mainstream in India (per the 2022 ~\$531 m benchmark) shows aspirational adoption.

Similarly, the growth of Korean grocery imports suggests that fans and consumers are integrating Korean lifestyle markers (food, snacks, brand authenticity) into everyday consumption. This aligns with the idea that Hallyu offers a **symbolic pathway** toward modernity and expressiveness for South Asian youth.

4.5 Localization and Cultural Negotiation

While data highlight growth, they also indicate that localization is significant:

- The Euromonitor Southeast Asia study emphasises that while K-wave products spur interest, consumers often prefer localised versions.
- In India, the introduction of smaller-pack SKUs and adaptation to Tier-2/Tier-3 markets by Korean brands (e.g., Amorepacific's smaller size packs) implies strategic localisation.

These indicators show that Hallyu's influence is not purely imported wholesale but is filtered through local consumer logics, price sensitivity, and spatial (metro vs non-metro) variation.

4.6 Cross-Country Variation and South Asian Scope

While India has the richest data, research on Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Pakistan remains limited in publicly accessible quantitative form. However, the patterns observed in India—rapid growth in K-beauty, food imports, e-commerce expansion—offer a proxy for potential trends in neighbouring countries with similar youth demographics and rising internet access.

Given digital penetration rates and the proliferation of streaming platforms across South Asia, it is reasonable to infer analogous growth trajectories, albeit at different scales and moderated by national income, cultural context, and infrastructure.

4.7 Summary of Key Findings

- The K-beauty market in India is growing at double-digit CAGR (~25.9%) to 2030, showing strong consumer adoption.
- Korean food/grocery imports and e-commerce adoption illustrate cultural influence beyond entertainment.
- Emotional and aspirational drivers (affective consumption, lifestyle emulation) are operative in the region, supported by market uptake.
- Localization mechanisms (smaller SKUs, localised distribution) mediate the influence, ensuring relevance in non-metro and varied contexts.
- Data coverage outside India is patchier—but the conceptual model holds potential for the broader South Asian context.

5.1 Discussion

5.1.1 Synthesizing the Quantitative and Theoretical Findings

The integration of market data with theoretical analysis reveals that Korean popular culture's influence on South Asian consumer behaviour is both **measurable** and **symbolically deep**. Quantitatively, sectors such as K-beauty, K-fashion, and Korean food products have exhibited rapid growth across South Asia—particularly India—indicating that cultural fascination is translating into sustained consumption. The forecast that India's K-beauty market will reach **USD 1.5 billion by 2030** (Retail ET, 2025) represents not merely an economic shift but the materialization of affective and aspirational consumption patterns first theorized by Ahmed (2004) and Illouz (2007).

Qualitatively, these consumption trends embody a broader process of **inter-Asian cultural exchange**. South Asian youth, while inspired by Hallyu, do not abandon their local cultural frameworks. Instead, they engage in **selective adaptation**—appropriating elements of Korean aesthetics, ethics, and emotionality that resonate with regional sensibilities of collectivism, family, and moral sincerity. This pattern aligns with Kraidy's (2005) hybridization theory, which emphasizes cultural negotiation rather than unidirectional Westernization.

Thus, the quantitative growth in Korean consumer categories mirrors a **qualitative cultural process**: affective attachment to Korean media and idols transforms into lifestyle practices and symbolic consumption, filtered through local cultural logics.

5.1.2 Emotional Capital and Market Performance

The concept of **emotional capital** (Illouz, 2007) helps explain why Hallyu products outperform many other foreign imports in South Asia. Unlike Western luxury brands that trade on exclusivity, Korean brands embed emotion, authenticity, and social connection in their narratives. The emotional transparency of K-pop idols—discussing mental health, teamwork, and gratitude—creates a moral resonance with collectivist South Asian cultures.

This emotional capital becomes an economic asset. The CAGR of ~25.9 % in India's K-beauty sector from 2024 to 2030 reflects consumers' willingness to invest in products that promise both functional and emotional returns. Furthermore, the surge in online Korean grocery categories (270 % YoY growth in 2023; Singh & Tharran, 2023) demonstrates that affective identification with Korean media expands into adjacent lifestyle products.

Therefore, Hallyu operates as a **multi-sector soft-power ecosystem**: emotional engagement fosters consumer loyalty, which sustains market growth.

5.1.3 Cultural Proximity and Shared Asian Modernities

The theory of **cultural proximity** (Straubhaar, 2007) remains central to understanding why South Asian consumers find Hallyu particularly appealing. Both regions share Confucian- or collectivist-inspired moral narratives emphasizing respect, hard work, and emotional sincerity. When South Asian viewers encounter these traits in Korean dramas or music, they perceive familiarity within difference.

This **intra-Asian familiarity** (Iwabuchi, 2019) allows Korean culture to function as a **mirror of aspirational modernity**—urban, disciplined, technologically advanced, yet emotionally grounded. Such cultural recognition differentiates Hallyu from Western cultural imports that often project individualism or moral detachment. Consequently, Hallyu’s success demonstrates a re-centering of cultural flows within Asia itself, positioning Korea as both producer and mediator of new Asian modernities.

5.1.4 Localization as Economic Strategy

The localization of Korean brands and cultural products across South Asia illustrates the interplay between **global branding** and **local adaptation**. As Robertson’s (1995) notion of *glocalization* suggests, success depends on blending global appeal with local relevance.

Brands such as **Innisfree**, **Etude**, and **Laneige** have localized their distribution and packaging strategies for Indian consumers—introducing smaller SKUs and mid-range pricing (Livemint, 2025). Similarly, e-commerce platforms in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka promote “K-beauty kits” curated for local skin tones and climates. These initiatives reveal how companies operationalize cultural hybridity through market design.

Localization also extends beyond commerce to **symbolic adaptation**: South Asian consumers often fuse K-fashion with local garments, integrate K-pop dances into cultural festivals, and reinterpret K-drama tropes through social-media memes. Such practices confirm that cultural globalization is negotiated and participatory, not imposed.

5.1.5 Digital Mediation and the South Asian Context

Social media acts as both an amplifier and equalizer in Hallyu’s diffusion. YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, and Spotify collectively enable South Asian audiences to access, remix, and circulate Korean cultural products. This digital mediation reduces traditional barriers of geography, language, and class.

Between 2020 and 2024, India’s social-media penetration rose from 32 % to 53 % (DataReportal, 2024). This exponential connectivity correlates with increased exposure to Korean content and online purchasing of

K-wave products. Online fandom activities—streaming parties, merchandise sales, charity events—create **networked consumer identities** (Jenkins, 2006).

Digital participation thus performs a dual function: (1) sustaining emotional communities that reinforce cultural engagement, and (2) establishing digital marketplaces where emotional energy converts into consumption.

5.1.6 Inter-Asian Cultural Diplomacy and Soft Power

South Korea's governmental support for cultural exports (through KOCCA and MCST) underlines Hallyu's role in **cultural diplomacy**. In South Asia, this soft-power strategy operates through indirect channels: concerts, educational exchange, language institutes (King Sejong Centers), and business partnerships.

For example, bilateral trade between India and South Korea surpassed **USD 27 billion in 2023**, with increasing diversification into cultural goods and services (Korea Trade Investment Promotion Agency [KOTRA], 2024). While not all trade growth is attributable to Hallyu, the cultural synergy between entertainment, beauty, and tourism enhances Korea's visibility and desirability in South Asia.

Thus, Hallyu functions as both a **commercial engine** and a **diplomatic bridge**, fostering inter-Asian connectivity grounded in shared cultural sensibilities.

5.2 Implications

5.2.1 For Marketers and Businesses

1. **Emotional Branding:**

Marketers should leverage emotional storytelling and authenticity. South Asian consumers respond more to relational narratives (family, friendship, perseverance) than to aspirational detachment.

2. **Localized Product Strategies:**

As data show, smaller package sizes, mid-range pricing, and tropical-climate customization improve accessibility. Successful localization also involves partnerships with regional influencers who blend Korean aesthetics with local values.

3. **Digital Ecosystem Integration:**

With e-commerce growth, cross-platform campaigns linking K-content (dramas, idols) to direct product sales will continue to drive conversion.

4. **Inter-Asian Collaboration:**

Co-productions between South Korean and South Asian media industries—already emerging in India and Sri Lanka—should be expanded to reinforce authenticity and mutual cultural representation.

5.2.2 For Policy and Cultural Institutions

1. **Cultural Exchange Programs:**

Governments can harness the Hallyu phenomenon to promote cross-cultural understanding and tourism. Korean language centers and joint film festivals have proven effective in soft-power diplomacy.

2. **Support for Local Creative Industries:**

South Asian policymakers should view Hallyu not as competition but as inspiration for strengthening domestic creative sectors. Learning from Korea's integrated cultural-industry model can help regional industries scale sustainably.

3. **Regulatory Sensitivity:**

Authorities should ensure fair import duties and digital-trade policies that facilitate legitimate access to Korean goods, while preventing counterfeit markets that undermine authenticity.

5.2.3 For Scholars

The integration of trend data with cultural theory underscores the need for **interdisciplinary frameworks** combining cultural studies, marketing analytics, and regional studies. Future scholarship could employ comparative cross-national consumer surveys or machine-learning analyses of digital fandom discourse to quantify emotional engagement.

Additionally, more granular data from Bangladesh, Nepal, and Pakistan are essential to fully balance the South Asian picture.

5.3 Limitations

While this study synthesizes multiple data sources, limitations persist:

- The quantitative data are disproportionately concentrated in India, reflecting gaps in regional market reporting.
- Reliance on secondary sources may obscure informal consumption (e.g., unregistered imports or fan-made products).

- Cultural influence is inherently fluid; longitudinal studies would better capture evolving consumer psychology.

Despite these limitations, the convergence of market data and theoretical frameworks offers robust evidence of Hallyu's multi-dimensional impact.

5.4 Conclusion

Korean popular culture's diffusion across South Asia represents one of the most dynamic cases of **inter-Asian cultural globalization** in the 21st century. It encapsulates how cultural affect, digital media, and consumer capitalism intertwine to shape new modes of identity and aspiration among youth.

Empirical indicators—such as the **25.9 % CAGR in India's K-beauty market**, the **270 % YoY growth of Korean grocery categories**, and the **expanding e-commerce ecosystems**—demonstrate that Hallyu's symbolic capital converts directly into economic activity.

Theoretically, this phenomenon validates a hybrid model wherein **affective consumption**, **cultural proximity**, and **global-local negotiation** co-produce sustainable transnational consumer cultures. For South Asia, the Korean Wave signifies not passive cultural importation but active participation in a shared Asian modernity defined by emotion, ethics, and aesthetics.

As Hallyu continues to evolve, it will likely deepen inter-Asian cultural circuits—encouraging creative collaboration, new industries, and plural modernities that decenter the West from the cultural imagination.

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