



Social media influencers as cultural intermediaries: Negotiating the Korean Wave in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how social media influencers shape and sustain the Korean Wave (Hallyu) in Malaysia, emphasizing the intersection of mediatization and contemporary youth culture. Drawing on qualitative methods including in-depth interviews with influencers and Korean Embassy representatives as well as netnography of open social media accounts, this research investigates how digital platforms facilitate fan engagement, community-building and cultural learning. Findings show that social media serves as a catalyst for fans to construct their own mediated worlds, while influencers act as vital social agents, filtering information, bridging cultures as well as fostering both emotional and practical connections with Korean popular culture. The study highlights how embassy-led programs and initiatives function as dynamic ecosystems, where existing fan accounts alongside embassy strategies and influencer mediation, illustrate how broader cultural agents perceive and shape the Korean Wave's impact in Malaysia. It also demonstrates how digital platforms enable a glocalised cultural exchange, allowing Malaysian fans to engage with Korean content while negotiating their own local identity and values. Overall, these dynamics illustrate that mediatization supports both state-led cultural diplomacy and bottom-up, participatory cultural practices, positioning the Korean Wave as a continually evolving, socially co-constructed phenomenon.

Keywords: **Mediatization, fandom, social media influencers, cultural mediation, Korean Wave**

INTRODUCTION

In today's hyper-connected world, social media influencers have become more than just trendsetters. Social media influencers have emerged as powerful figures in the everyday lives of young people. Their presence extends far beyond entertainment, shaping decisions that were once considered personal or family-driven. Today, many youths look to influencers when deciding what to eat, where to spend time with friends, or which vacation destinations to explore. More strikingly, influencers are even guiding choices about education such as which university to attend or what field to pursue, based on trends and narratives shared through social media platforms. This shift marks a profound transformation in how youth engage with popular culture. From just consumers, they have now become participants in a digital ecosystem where influence is currency and lifestyle is content.

Choubey (2025) highlighted how influencers act as aspirational figures, guiding identity formation, self-esteem and lifestyle choices. While their curated lives can spark creativity and a sense of community, they also risk setting unrealistic expectations that contribute to mental health struggles. This dual role, both inspiring and potentially harmful, is echoed in Lajnef's (2023) study, which shows how teenagers view influencers as credible and relatable figures. For many, following influencers is not just about entertainment but also about belonging, as their content becomes a way to align with peer norms and avoid social exclusion.

At the same time, influencers' reach extends beyond self-image into everyday choices, including what youths eat, how they think about values and even how they imagine their future. Amson et al. (2025) revealed how food marketing strategies channelled through influencers often reinforce gendered consumption patterns, while Mlambo et al. (2025) demonstrated that influencers can provide emotional guidance, cultural representation and even political awareness for university students in South Africa. Similarly, John et al. (2024) cautioned that while influencers can promote awareness and positive learning, they can also normalize materialism and unhealthy behaviours. Taken together, these studies paint a vivid picture of influencers as more than just entertainers; they are cultural actors embedded in youth identity, social interactions and decision-making. This growing influence suggests the need for critical reflection, especially in balancing the opportunities for empowerment with the risks of manipulation and harm.

Against this backdrop, this research narrowed its focus to the Korean Wave (Hallyu) in Malaysia, seeking to understand how social media influencers mediate the relationship between Malaysian fans and Korean popular culture, and how this dynamic shapes processes of identity and cultural negotiation. Locally, the growing impact of the Korean Wave (Hallyu) highlights how social media influencers not only drive popular trends, but also become key figures in youth identity formation and cultural negotiation, as young people navigate between globalized ideals and local values. The Korean Wave (Hallyu) has undeniably captured the hearts of the Malaysian youth, especially Generation Z, who are deeply immersed in Korean entertainment, fashion and beauty trends. Yet, while the phenomenon continues to thrive globally, we still know very little about how it is sustained locally, particularly through the influence of Malaysian social media personalities. While influencers play a pivotal role in shaping how cultural content is

shared, interpreted and consumed across digital platforms, in Malaysia, however, their impact unfolds within a unique sociocultural landscape.

Malaysians are known for a deeply rooted cultural identity, shaped by collectivist values and hybrid media practices that integrate both global and local influences. These sociocultural characteristics foster a distinctive digital engagement landscape for transnational cultural phenomena such as the Korean wave (Hallyu). Hallyu is not merely consumed in its original form within Malaysia, but is actively recontextualized through localized interpretations that reflect the nation's unique sociocultural dynamics. In Malaysia, Korean dramas such as *Winter Sonata* and *Crash Landing on You* gained wide popularity, supported by local adaptations like Malay subtitles and soundtrack renditions (Jalaluddin & Ahmad, 2011).

Beyond television, the influence of K-pop culture extends into fashion and lifestyle, where Malaysian fans incorporate Korean aesthetics while modifying them to align with local norms, including modesty standards and halal consumer practices (Roslan et al., 2024). This selective appropriation illustrates how global cultural products are not passively received but are instead reshaped to align with local identities, preferences and values, thereby contributing to a more nuanced understanding of transnational cultural flows. Rather than passive adoption, this process reflects a dynamic interplay between global cultural flows and national identity, illustrating how international trends are selectively adapted to align with the cultural sensibilities and lived experiences of Malaysian audiences. While much attention has been given to the popularity of such trends, the deeper mechanisms that sustain and localize them remain underexplored. Investigating these dynamics offers more than just a way to fill academic gaps but also, it provides meaningful insights into how global cultural movements evolve and embed themselves in specific national contexts, enriching our understanding of digital culture in Malaysia and beyond.

Recent studies show that Malaysian influencers face lower engagement rates compared to those in neighbouring countries like Indonesia and Thailand and that 67% of Gen Z consumers in Malaysia have not made purchases based on Key Opinion Leader (KOL) endorsements (Lim et al., 2025). This points to a possible disconnect between influencer strategies and audience trust, especially in an environment saturated with promotional content. At the same time, characteristics like expertise, attractiveness and relatability have been shown to influence purchase decisions (Sharipudin et al., 2023) and micro-influencers are gaining traction for their authenticity and niche appeal (Chen et al., 2024). Thus, emotional connections formed through parasocial relationships also play a role in how fans engage with Korean content (Liu, 2023) and Korean beauty influencers have demonstrated a strong persuasive power in shaping consumer acceptance (Wang & Lee, 2021). These insights highlight the need to better understand how Malaysian influencers contribute to the promotion and longevity of the Korean wave (Hallyu). By exploring this, we can uncover how global cultural trends are adapted and sustained through local digital voices and how Malaysian influencers might play a more strategic role in maintaining the Korean Wave's momentum.

Thus, to focus on these dynamics more closely, the study is guided by two key research questions that frame how Malaysian youth engage with social media influencers and negotiate their identities within the context of the Korean Wave as:

- 1) How do social media influencers, especially those involved in embassy-led Korean Wave programs, mediate and shape fan engagement with Korean culture in Malaysia?
- 2) How do Korean Wave fans in Malaysia experience and interpret the influence of social media in their everyday cultural practices and identity formation?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research background

Media attention on female youth and the Korean Wave in Malaysia has grown steadily, drawing both public scrutiny and academic interest. Between 2015 and 2021, mainstream reports often emphasized the challenges and controversies tied to the Malay Muslim youth, particularly young women, engaging with K-pop culture. A widely cited example was the circulation of a short video from a B1A4 fan meeting, where several Malay girls wearing headscarves were seen hugging and displaying affection toward the group members. This incident sparked heated debate in local news and online spaces about cultural propriety and religious norms.

Similar debates resurfaced at the end of 2017 when Malaysian media outlets covered youth participation in memorial gatherings following the passing of SHINee's Jong-hyun. Coverage ranged from sympathetic portrayals such as "Malaysian K-Pop Fans Hold Candlelight Vigil for Jonghyun at Dataran Merdeka" (Omar, 2017) to more critical commentaries like "Excessive Wailing of Jong-Hyun Fans Chastised" (Abd Ghani, 2017) and religious statements cautioning against candlelight vigils, including the Perak Mufti's remarks as reported by Amly (2017). Such events expose the tensions between youth expression of fandom and institutional interpretations of acceptable religious practice.

The discourse extended beyond isolated incidents. For instance, *Berita Harian* ran a feature in 2016 titled "The Risk of CWS Due to K-pop Fanaticism", which linked excessive devotion to Korean idols with Celebrity Worship Syndrome, raising alarms about potential psychological effects on young Malaysians (Abd Rahim, 2016). While these accounts portrayed fandom as a form of vulnerability, they also reflected deeper societal anxieties about globalization, morality, and generational change. It is worth noting that the Korean Wave is not Malaysia's first encounter with foreign cultural products. Earlier generations embraced influences from Hollywood, Latin America, India, China and neighbouring Southeast Asian countries. What distinguishes the Korean Wave, however, is not only the scale of youth participation, but also the layered negotiations it demands between personal passion, cultural belonging and religious expectations. Especially, negotiations that are now amplified and made visible through the pervasive reach of social media.

Korean Wave and its reach

Understanding the trajectory of the Korean Wave requires revisiting the conversations and scholarship that have shaped its meaning. Commonly referred to as Hallyu, the term captures the global diffusion of Korean cultural products (Wan Mat et al., 2020). While the movement initially drew interest from housewives through family-centred dramas, it quickly expanded to teenage audiences and diversified into multiple cultural domains.

The phrase itself was first popularized in 1999 by Chinese journalists in Qingnianbao to describe the unexpected influx of Korean popular culture into China during the 1990s (Kim, 2011).

One of the earliest drivers of Hallyu's spread, as Kim (2022) observed, was the appeal of Korean dramas, which contrasted with the violent or sexualized themes often found in American programming. In Malaysia, the phenomenon gained visibility through the airing of *Winter Sonata*, which attracted a primarily middle-aged female audience in its early stages (Jalaluddin & Ahmad, 2011; Ruslan & Abdul Latif, 2016). By the late 2000s, however, the focus shifted toward K-pop, propelled by its polished aesthetics, memorable tunes, and elaborate choreography. Jang and Kim (2013) emphasised how these features, coupled with high production values, positioned K-pop as a distinctive force in global entertainment. Further, Lee and Nornes (2015) noted that this second wave of Hallyu broadened beyond television drama to include a wider range of cultural exports.

The cultural impact of this expansion was not confined to entertainment. A 2015 survey by the Korean Foundation for International Cultural Exchange (KOFICE) found that exposure to K-pop and K-dramas significantly improved perceptions of Korea's food, electronics and beauty industries (Song, 2020). Scholars such as Shim (2017) argue that Hallyu has since expanded to include diverse lifestyle elements, from cuisine and cosmetics to fashion and traditional beverages like soju, weaving popular culture into the larger tapestry of Korean cultural branding.

In Malaysia, the reception of Hallyu has been uneven, with widespread fascination concentrated among a younger demographic. Rather than focusing on sheer popularity, researchers highlight the ways fandom has evolved into a cultural and economic force. Loke and Omar (2020) documented the growth of K-pop fandom communities in Malaysia, while businesses have strategically adopted Hallyu through product endorsements and collaborations with Korean celebrities (Wan Mat et al., 2020). These observations underscore the commercial value of the Korean Wave in appealing to Malaysian consumers, particularly youth.

Today, Hallyu is inseparable from the digital sphere. As Yeung (2023) pointed out, platforms like YouTube and TikTok play a decisive role in the transnational circulation of Korean culture, enabling fans to not only consume, but also mobilize around shared interests. This dynamic is evident in Malaysia, where online interactions frequently translate into offline engagements, such as K-pop gatherings and fan-organized events. Social media thus acts as both a conduit and a catalyst, shaping how Malaysian youth connect with Korean culture and demonstrating the centrality of mediatization in sustaining fandom.

Theoretical framework

This study is grounded in the theory of mediatization, particularly its intersection with culture. Mediatization emphasizes how media not only transmit information, but also reshape social practices and cultural experiences. Krotz and Hepp (2011) described this process as the creation of "mediated worlds," in which fragments of everyday life are reconstructed through specific forms of knowledge, practices, and cultural meanings. Subcultures such as Hip-Hop or Black Metal illustrate how media can establish distinct cultural spaces that operate within, yet apart from the broader society.

Fandom, too, is deeply intertwined with mediatization. Döveling et al. (2018) showed that fan communities depend heavily on media to expand their networks, sustain communication, and establish belonging on a global scale. In this sense, Malay female youth engaged in the Korean Wave exemplify what Krotz (2007) and Hepp (2009) described: groups whose identities and practices are mediated through digital platforms, creating small cultural “worlds” that feel separate yet remain embedded in the wider society. These spaces are not limited to content consumption, but also function as social arenas where fans interact, negotiate meaning and form community ties.

This aligns with Durocher’s (2017) view of mediatization as a set of conceptual “tools” for analysing how cultural fields are transformed by media logics. For young fans of the Korean Wave in Malaysia, mediatization not only structures identity, but also shapes everyday interaction, echoing Hepp’s (2009) argument that media provide unique forms of identification at levels ranging from diasporic and religious communities to fan cultures. In this regard, fandom illustrates how mediated communication creates new cultural identities and redefines social belonging.

Recent scholarship has further advanced mediatization as a way to analyse contemporary cultural dynamics. Wojtkowski (2017) argued that mediatization provides new pathways for understanding how media reconfigure communication and society, while Turner (2016) highlighted its potential to study shifting social structures in response to technological changes. Bengtsson et al. (2021) added that media reliance is shaped by desires for productivity, recognition, and civic engagement, reflecting how deeply media are woven into daily life. Similarly, Hall and Koloziejaska (2021) underscored the importance of mediatization during the COVID-19 pandemic, showing how it frames meaning-making, knowledge production, and power dynamics, especially when combined with user perspectives through interviews.

Beyond youth fandom, related studies further illustrate how mediatization transforms cultural practices. Kim et al. (2022) examined how the sports industry adapted to the pandemic through new media strategies and collaborations, while Ehrlén (2022) demonstrated how digital platforms have reshaped leisure sports culture and participation. Nichols (2022), tracing skateboarding’s trajectory since the 1980s, showed how social media reconfigured its subculture, sparking negotiations among fans, brands, and amateurs. Taken together, these examples highlight how mediatization extends across different cultural fields, offering a valuable framework for analysing how Malaysian youth engage with the Korean Wave.

METHODS

Research design

This research employed a qualitative design centred on in-depth interviews, complemented by netnographic observation to enrich and triangulate findings. In-depth interviews allow for detailed exploration of participants’ lived experiences and personal reflections, while netnography provides naturally occurring digital traces of fan practices in online spaces (Costello et al., 2017; Kozinets, 2002, 2010, 2015). Together, these approaches offer a fuller understanding of how Malay youth engage with the Korean Wave across both personal narratives and public digital expressions.

Sampling strategy and data analysis

Participants were recruited using a multi-stage strategy. Theoretical sampling guided the identification of data needs, followed by purposive sampling to target Malaysian influencers and cultural actors directly engaged with the Korean Wave (Lopez & Whitehead, 2013). However, the Korean Wave scene in Malaysia has at times faced public backlash, particularly around issues of youth participation and cultural sensitivity, which has contributed to the formation of tight-knit fan communities that are cautious toward external inquiries. As a result, initial outreach proved challenging; several attempts through direct messages were ignored and building trust required sustained engagement over time. To overcome these barriers, snowball sampling was employed, as existing contacts facilitated access to additional participants who might otherwise have been reluctant to take part (Jensen, 2020). In total, nine semi-structured interviews were conducted with influencers, educators and cultural mediators, complemented by the observation of seven active social media accounts.

This study observed several officially recognized online supporters, including accounts such as Hantul_Saranghae, Zywxj852, Trip Oppa Bob, and Koreastuffss. Only participants who provided informed consent were included in the analysis, with their online content drawn into the study alongside interview data. Among them was Elzara, who manages both Trip Oppa Bob and the official Korean Tourism Malaysia website. To complement these perspectives, interviews were also conducted with the Embassy's cultural attaché and two additional cultural intermediaries: a well-known Malaysian fashion magazine editor and a businessman actively engaged in intercultural programs and events linking South Korea and Malaysia. Given that the South Korean Embassy's social influencer program in Malaysia involves fewer than 100 participants, with membership renewed annually through an application process, the sample size is considered appropriate and sufficient for the scope of this study.

While the number of interviews may appear modest, it aligns with established qualitative practices. For instance, Guest et al. (2020) confirmed that six interviews can reveal up to 80% of themes in homogenous groups. Similarly, Hennink and Kaiser (2022) demonstrated that code saturation often occurs within 9 to 17 interviews. In this study, saturation was achieved as recurring themes consistently emerged across the nine interviews, reinforced by observations from the seven netnographic cases. Braun and Clarke (2021) argue that saturation should be conceptualized as conceptual sufficiency, emphasizing depth and coherence, rather than sheer quantity thus, criteria that this study fulfils. Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, with iterative coding applied to both interviews and online materials to develop themes relating to cultural engagement and mediatization as well as social media influence, identity formation and personal impact.

Ethical considerations

Ethical safeguards were integral throughout the study. All interviewees provided informed consent, with a process-consent model allowing withdrawal at any stage (APA, 2024). Netnographic material was only used with explicit consent or when drawn from publicly accessible, non-sensitive content, in line with ethical guidelines stressing contextual sensitivity and user privacy (Lunnay et al., 2015; Williams et al., 2017). To further protect participants, pseudonyms and paraphrasing were used where anonymity was at risk.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Theme 1: Mediatized cultural engagement

The Embassy of the Republic of Korea in Malaysia has explicitly framed social networking service (SNS) as central to its cultural diplomacy strategy. Initially driven by budgetary constraints that limited traditional advertising, the Embassy turned to social media platforms such as Instagram and YouTube as cost-effective tools to reach interested publics. As one cultural attaché explained, their role extended beyond promoting K-pop:

First one is to try to increase the awareness, what is Korean culture, what is Korean people, what is Korean characters, how we think about the people, neighbours...
(Mr. Kim)

In practice, the Embassy positioned SNS as a space of public diplomacy and reciprocal engagement, where content circulates not only from South Korea to Malaysia, but also from Malaysians back to South Korea institutions. This aligns with Hepp's (2020) understanding of mediatization as a transformation of cultural communication through media logics, as institutions increasingly embed their diplomacy within digital infrastructures. At the same time, influencers and fans (known as Online Supporters) describe social media as a site of emotional proximity and everyday practice rather than formal diplomacy. One influencer emphasized:

That's the fact about reachable. SNS play a great role, every day...
(Bomi, 27)

This points to the sense of intimacy created through daily content updates. Here, Couldry and Hepp's (2013) notion of media practices becomes salient; routine acts of viewing, sharing, and commenting do not simply consume culture, but actively constitute the relational ties between fans and idols. For these users, mediatization is lived not through policy, but through affective rhythms that shape identity and belonging. Social media also emerges as a primary channel for cultural learning. As another online supporter explained:

Brands, some K-products, hehehe.. those kind of products only through the SNS or YouTube...
(Atul, 25)

Both influencers and embassy staff stressed how YouTube in particular functions as a gateway into language, products and cultural knowledge. This resonates with Hepp's (2020) framing of mediatization as the re-mediation of culture, where practices such as food consumption, language acquisition and lifestyle adaptation are structured through digital media. Crucially, mediatization enables not only one-way cultural transmission but also feedback loops. Influencers noted how Malaysian social media trends, such as local food challenges tend to "bounce back" into Korean consumption practices, for example, *roti tisu* and *nasi lemak*.

The cultural attaché himself acknowledged learning Bahasa Melayu and incorporating Malaysian greetings during festive periods, demonstrating how institutional

actors also adapt to local cultural practices. Such reciprocity complicates the narrative of Korea as cultural exporter and Malaysia as passive consumer, and instead implies negotiated cultural exchanges facilitated by digital media.

Finally, online supporters described social media engagement as part of their daily routines, suggesting that media logics structure not only diplomacy and fandom but also temporal and social rhythms of youth life. Although not always explicitly articulated, their accounts show how mediatization operates at a micro-level: shaping habits of time, attention, and interaction, consistent with Hepp's concept of communicative figurations. For instance, one of the online supporters' posts illustrates this dynamic, alongside the Embassy's 2025 recruitment drive advertisement inviting influencers to participate.

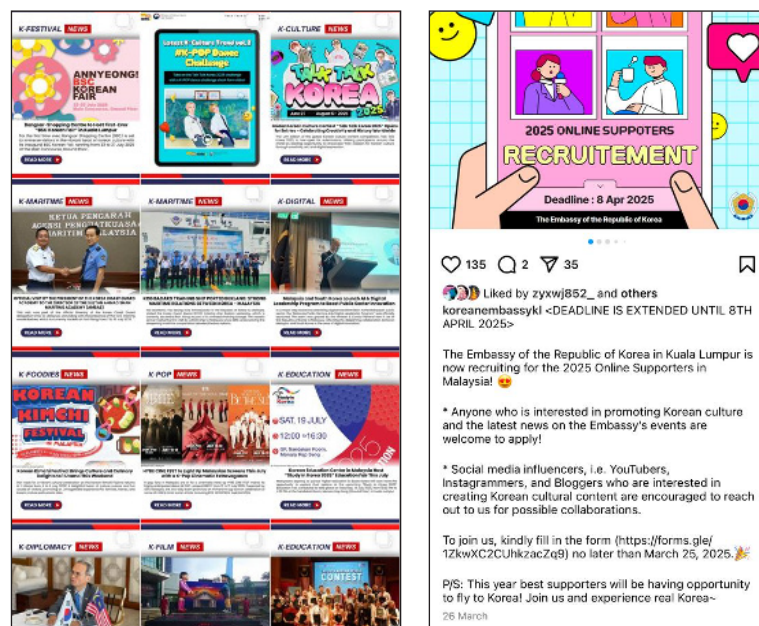


Figure 1. The Instagram account of one of the Embassy's officially recognized online supporters and the 2025 recruitment drive announcement for the Online Supporters program, published by the Embassy of the Republic of Korea in Malaysia

Taken together, these findings illustrate that mediatization in the Malaysian Korean Wave scene is not reducible to institutional strategy or fan enthusiasm alone. Rather, it is a layered process in which embassy-led public diplomacy and influencer-driven everyday practices converge and diverge. Theoretically, this demonstrates that mediatization reconfigures cultural engagement by embedding diplomacy, fandom and identity formation within shared digital ecosystems.

Theme 2: Social media influencers and embassy-led programs as cultural mediators

As previously shown, the images illustrate how online supporters go beyond promoting Korean wave content such as K-Pop or dramas. They also take on the role of sharing valuable information related to everyday life like education, economy, lifestyle and more. This reflects their active duty in not only spreading cultural content but also bridging practical knowledge, fostering global awareness and enhancing cross-cultural

understanding in meaningful ways. The Embassy of the Republic of Korea in Malaysia extends the mediatization dynamic seen in the fandom to the sphere of cultural diplomacy, strategically relying on social media as its primary tool. What began as a budget-conscious approach has evolved into a deliberate use of social media platforms and Korean Wave content to maintain visibility, foster cultural learning and strengthen cross-cultural understanding.

Through platforms like YouTube and Instagram, both embassy staff and fans access not only entertainment but also language resources, practical knowledge and everyday insights into Korean culture. The affective dimension of these practices is especially evident in how fans describe feeling emotionally proximate to Korean celebrities through daily updates and participatory cultures, blurring the line between cultural consumption and personal identity formation. As Döveling et al. (2018) noted, fandoms are deeply reliant on the mediatization process, and this dependence structures both attachment and belonging.

Within this landscape, social media influencers recruited through the Korean Online Supporter program, established in 2006, emerge as pivotal intermediaries. They are not merely amplifying K-pop or K-drama content but actively correcting myths, contextualizing practices and publicizing opportunities for participation in embassy or Korean Tourism Organization events. As Hood (28) explained,

...Kita kena bagi nampak orang-orang kita to see... budaya yang betul orang Korea.

While Bomi (27) shared how her posts revealed overlooked opportunities:

Tapi orang kita pun macam...Korean activity macam dekat Korea ramai yang tak tahu. So, bila I post something yang ada activity dekat sana diorang baru realize and say thank you lah, I baru tahu ini ini ini. Macam KTO pun ramai tak tahu yang dia ada buat Goseng seminar .. Korean class tahu. So, bila kita post macamini baru diorang macam, 'Eh, ada ke? Free ke?' Ramai minat sebenarnya tapi diorang tak tahu. Diorang tak tahu kena register ke apa".

Such reflections illustrate how influencers operate as cultural translators, filtering and reframing Korean culture in ways that resonate with Malaysian audiences. In doing so, they also reduce the potential for cultural or religious misunderstandings, supporting Aboo Talib @ Khalid and Shamsul's (2020) argument that negotiation and mediation is the key to minimizing social tensions. In our context, local misunderstandings have stigmatized Korean Wave fandom as frivolous or morally suspect, reinforced by media portrayals and religious critiques that reproduce cultural hierarchies and misrecognition. In response, social media influencers act as mediators, reframing fandom as cultural learning and diplomacy while negotiating its legitimacy within the Malaysian context.

Social media itself sustains what Krotz and Hepp (2011) described as "small worlds" of mediated interaction, where hashtags and keywords form micro-worlds that fulfil informational needs and foster peer support. Informants described these spaces as providing a sense of community and belonging often absent offline. This complicates simplistic portrayals of fandom as trivial and instead highlights how mediated

communities generate durable cultural bonds and solidarities. Within this context, the Korean Online Supporters' unpaid labour is particularly significant. This diversity challenges mainstream portrayals of Korean Wave fans as homogeneous "screaming teenagers." Instead, the Malaysian fan community reflects a spectrum of interests, from those motivated by food and travel to others drawn to drama narratives, religiously inflected perspectives, or language study. The embassy's collaboration with such influencers exemplifies a form of participatory diplomacy, where cultural exchange is neither unilateral nor automatic but negotiated through trust, localized mediation, and grassroots passion. These findings demonstrate that the Korean Wave in Malaysia is not passively consumed; it is actively reshaped and contextualized through influencer-led mediation that bridges institutional objectives with community needs, sustaining dialogue across cultures in nuanced and meaningful ways.

Theme 3: Glocalizing lifestyle and everyday culture

Extending from embassy strategies and influencer mediation, this theme highlights how broader cultural agents perceive the Korean wave's impact in Malaysia. Informants emphasised the transformative role of social media in embedding Korean culture into everyday practices. A fashion magazine editor noted how Korean beauty and fashion dominate digital engagement, with brands like Innisfree and The Face Shop thriving without local endorsement. He stressed the importance of localization: Malaysians selectively adapt Korean trends, such as K-pop inspired makeup or hybridized music videos, rather than replicating them wholesale. This aligns with Roslan et al. (2024), who demonstrated how Malaysians embrace Hallyu while filtering it through local sensibilities to ensure cultural acceptance.

Another informant contrasted the limited presence of K-pop 15 years ago with its ubiquity today, from mall soundscapes to everyday speech;

...I feel really like Korean culture is influencing Malaysian people's lives. Compare to 15 years ago when I first came here, okay K-pop, K-wave was here, but it is not that enough, not that big at that time. But, now I feel if I go to shopping mall or like that, it give a very Korean style, people do the hairstyle in Korean way, and now they start to speak, they talk, 'kamsahamida', 'annyeonghasaeyo. (Mr. Choi, 40)

Critiques from media and religious leaders, for example, stigmatize fandom as frivolous or morally suspect, reinforcing hierarchies that privilege "legitimate" local culture. As Liu (2023) argued, parasocial intimacy is often dismissed despite its real social value. Here, influencers and cultural mediators play a critical role. By reframing Hallyu as aspirational and educational, they counter negative portrayals while guiding audiences toward socially accepted forms of engagement. Their effectiveness stems from perceived authenticity, echoing findings by Chen et al. (2024) and Delbaere et al. (2021) on micro-influencers' power to foster trust and credibility. Similarly, Lim et al. (2025) demonstrated how KOLs shape Gen Z consumption by contextualizing global trends locally as a process visible in how Malaysian influencers provide cultural translation, halal guidance and lifestyle adaptation.

Ultimately, the Korean Wave in Malaysia is less about cultural imitation and more about negotiation. Mediatization embeds Hallyu into consumer habits and social routines, but glocalization ensures these practices resonate locally. Rather than cultural homogenization, the Malaysian case underscores how global flows are humanized, contested and reinterpreted within everyday life.

Theme 4: Digital communities and the resilience of fan culture

While embassy-led initiatives and online supporter accounts have successfully promoted culture and diplomacy, their impact is inseparable from the pre-existing fandoms driven by K-pop and K-drama enthusiasts. It is this fan-led foundation that ensures such efforts resonate and gain traction. It is the undeniable factor in the success of the Korean wave cultural presence in Malaysia.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the resilience of these fandoms became especially visible. With concerts and events cancelled, fans quickly migrated online, sustaining engagement through livestreamed concerts, digital fan meetings and virtual collaborations. This adaptability reflects what Couldry and Hepp (2013) described as the deepening state of mediatization, where digital media becomes inseparable from everyday life. Social media platforms such as YouTube, Twitter and Instagram became not just alternatives but the primary sites of cultural experience, enabling fans to maintain rituals of consumption and community despite physical restrictions.

Post-pandemic, these practices did not simply fade. Instead, they solidified into a new norm of fan participation where online and offline engagements now intersect. Fans continue to rely on digital platforms for information, translations and collective projects while complementing them with in-person activities such as concerts, gatherings and promotional campaigns. More importantly, through embassy-affiliated influencers and supporter accounts, fans are now also equipped with updated information about South Korea itself. Contents range from cultural trends and travel opportunities to policy changes and pandemic-related restrictions. This additional knowledge not only sustains cultural interest but also deepens their connection to South Korea as a lived reality, not just as a distant cultural product.

For Malaysian fans, this digital-first fandom is not merely about consuming Korean culture but about glocalizing it, whereby beauty trends, music aesthetics and fan practices are adapted within local cultural and religious contexts. For Malay Muslim youths, online spaces especially, serve as negotiation grounds where K-pop fandom identities coexist with Islamic values, producing hybrid cultural expressions that remain locally rooted.

Ultimately, both during and after COVID-19 pandemic, the endurance of the Korean Wave in Malaysia lies less in official diplomacy and more in the everyday practices of fans. Its ability to adapt, innovate and sustain engagement across digital and physical spaces while also integrating new, timely information about South Korea underscores how mediatization reshapes culture, ensuring that the Korean Wave continues to thrive as a shared social and cultural experience.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

This study highlights the central role of social media in mediating the Korean Wave in Malaysia, where both embassy-led initiatives and online supporters operate as

complementary cultural agents. Digital platforms facilitate not only state-led outreach but also grassroots engagement, allowing influencers and fans to translate, localize and emotionally connect with Korean culture in ways that resonate locally.

While embassy officials frame social media use strategically for cultural diplomacy, influencers foreground everyday practices, emotional engagement and community-building, demonstrating how mediatization operates across layered, intersecting levels. Together, these perspectives reveal that cultural exchange today is co-constructed, and sustained through both top-down initiatives and bottom-up fan practices.

Despite limitations in sample size and platform scope, the findings underscore the transformative potential of digital media. It enables continuous cultural participation, fosters trust at the same time, collaboration and ensures the resilience of the Korean Wave amid changing social and technological contexts. Future research could expand these insights by exploring additional platforms, broader fan networks, and longitudinal developments, further elucidating how mediatization shapes contemporary cultural phenomena.

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