Iranian Youth and the Hallyu Phenomenon: A Study of Media Influence and Cultural Affinity

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Abstract

Background: *The Hallyu phenomenon—referring to the global diffusion of South Korean popular culture—has expanded rapidly in both reach and influence, particularly among adolescents. This trend holds specific relevance in Iran, where youth engagement with foreign media intersects with cultural identity formation and sociopolitical sensitivities surrounding globalized content. Accordingly, this study explores how Iranian female adolescents and young adults engage with Hallyu and develop loyalty toward South Korean entertainment.*
Methods: *This qualitative study utilized conventional content analysis following the approach of Graneheim and Lundman, suitable for exploring emerging, context-dependent social phenomena. Eleven female participants aged 13 to 22, residing in Tehran and identified as active fans of South Korean popular culture, were selected through purposive sampling. Semi-structured interviews, each lasting between 45 to 120 minutes, were conducted. Data collection continued until data saturation was achieved, meaning no new themes or insights emerged.*
Results: *Analysis yielded three main themes and seven sub-themes: (1) Initial exposure pathways to Hallyu content, (2) Attraction mechanisms through symbolic representation, aesthetic appeal, and linguistic features, and (3) Construction of group identity and deep-seated loyalty to the Hallyu phenomenon. These findings suggest that Hallyu functions not only as entertainment but as a meaningful medium through which Iranian youth negotiate identity, belonging, and cultural expression.*
Conclusions: *The study contributes to the understanding of transnational media influence by highlighting how Iranian youth adopt and adapt global cultural products. The findings offer implications for researchers, educators, and policymakers concerned with media globalization, adolescent identity, and sociocultural transformation in non-Western contexts.*

Keywords: Adolescents, Youth, Qualitative study.
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Introduction

In recent years, media and social networks have expanded rapidly in both reach and influence, particularly among adolescents and young adults. These platforms not only serve as sources of entertainment but also function as arenas for identity formation, where users actively engage in meaning-making, curate representations of self, and align with emerging cultural trends shaped by peers and celebrities[1,2]. As Lerbinger observes, media persuasion frequently targets emotional rather than rational responses, using symbolism, celebrity endorsement, and cultural iconography to generate affective engagement[3].

Adolescence represents a pivotal developmental stage during which identity construction becomes central[4]. As adolescents seek autonomy from family structures, they increasingly look to peer groups and symbolic figures—especially celebrities—for reference and affiliation. These figures, drawn from entertainment, sports, and social media, exert substantial influence on adolescents' emotional lives, values, behaviors, and even their imagined futures. Within this context, celebrity fandom emerges as a complex social process: adolescents often experience stronger parasocial connections with celebrities than with peers, aspiring to emulate their lifestyles, appearances, and worldviews[5,6].

From a psychological and sociocultural perspective, celebrities and media figures function as reflective symbols of the self—what Giddens and others describe as "narrative anchors" in identity construction[7-9]. Media engagement allows adolescents to experiment with roles, values, and affiliations. When identification with these figures is intense, it can contribute to greater self-concept clarity through processes of symbolic interaction and self-categorization[9]. However, excessive reliance on media-driven identities without critical reflection may also lead to identity diffusion or confusion[4].

Within this broader landscape, the South Korean Entertainment Industry (SKEI) has emerged as a globally influential force. Since the early 2000s, Korean pop music (K-pop), television dramas (K-dramas), and cultural aesthetics have gained international prominence—a phenomenon widely known as the Korean Wave or *Hallyu*[10,11]. Initially spreading through East and Southeast Asia, Hallyu has increasingly captured attention in regions such as the Middle East, including Iran[12]. Global icons like BTS have cultivated massive, emotionally invested fanbases that transcend national and cultural boundaries[13,14].

Recent research, such as that by Viikki, highlights why adolescents are drawn to Hallyu: the aspirational nature of its storylines, representation of progressive social themes (e.g., feminism, mental health), and the aestheticized portrayal of relationships and individual identity[15]. These media

productions function not merely as entertainment but as discursive spaces where young audiences negotiate identity, challenge norms, and form imagined communities.

This study is grounded in a constructivist epistemology and adopts an interpretivist paradigm, viewing reality as socially constructed through language, symbols, and interaction. The research draws on symbolic interactionism and identity theory to examine how Iranian adolescents and young adults make sense of and emotionally invest in South Korean popular culture. Media is understood here as a discursive environment in which adolescents actively negotiate meaning, belonging, and aspirational identity. Through this lens, Hallyu is conceptualized not just as imported entertainment, but as a symbolic resource that enables identity work in the specific sociopolitical and cultural context of contemporary Iran.

Despite the rising popularity of Hallyu in Iran and its evident emotional and behavioral influence on youth, qualitative explorations of how adolescents encounter, interpret, and commit to this cultural wave remain scarce. This study addresses this gap by investigating the lived experiences of Iranian adolescents and young adults in relation to their engagement with South Korean popular culture.

Materials and Methods

Research Design and Approach: This study employed a qualitative content analysis approach to explore how Iranian adolescent and young female fans engage with content from the South Korean Entertainment Industry (SKEI). We adopted conventional content analysis as outlined by Hsieh and Shannon, a method suitable when existing theory is limited and researcher aims to derive meaning inductively from textual data. This approach allows for the emergence of categories and themes grounded in participant narratives, rather than being constrained by pre-existing coding frameworks. This aligns with a constructivist epistemology, which emphasizes participants' meaning-making in their sociocultural context[16,17].

Participant Selection and Sampling: Participants were selected through purposive sampling, aiming to access individuals with direct, sustained engagement with Korean media. The sample consisted of 11 female participants aged 13 to 22, recruited via Instagram fan pages and Telegram channels dedicated to Korean content. The gender-specific focus was theoretically and empirically grounded. Studies in media psychology and fan studies have consistently shown that adolescent females are more likely than males to develop parasocial relationships with media figures and engage in emotionally expressive and community-based fandom practices[18,19]. Limiting the sample to females enabled deeper exploration of affective, identity-related, and symbolic aspects of fan engagement.

Inclusion criteria were: Female gender; Age between 13–22; Self-identification as a fan of Korean media (K-drama or K-pop); Willingness to participate in a interview. Sampling continued until data saturation was reached—i.e., when no new themes were emerging from additional interviews.

Data Collection: Semi-structured interviews were conducted in Persian by the first author, each lasting approximately 90 to 120 minutes. Interviews followed an open-ended format to encourage depth and reflection. Sample questions included:

- "Can you describe when and how you first became interested in Korean media?"

- "What aspects of Korean dramas or music resonate with you personally?"

- "Do you discuss Korean media with others? How does that affect your sense of identity or belonging?"

Ethical Considerations: All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim. Prior to participation, respondents received oral and written information about the study's aims, procedures, and their rights, including voluntary withdrawal and confidentiality protections. Pseudonyms were assigned during transcription. The study protocol adhered to ethical standards for research with minors and young adults and was approved by a university ethics committee.

Data Analysis: We followed the qualitative content analysis framework of Graneheim and Lundman, integrating insights from Hsieh and Shannon to maintain methodological rigor. The analytical process included[16,20]:

1. **Immersion**: Reading transcripts repeatedly for familiarization;

2. **Meaning unit identification**: Extracting segments of text related to the research question;

3. **Condensation and coding**: Condensing meaning units and assigning open codes;

4. **Categorization**: Grouping codes into subcategories and categories through constant comparison;

5. **Theme generation**: Synthesizing higher-level latent themes reflecting the participants' subjective experiences.

Themes were developed inductively, without pre-imposed theoretical categories, allowing for emergent understanding of identity, media consumption, and fandom in the Iranian context.

Trustworthiness and Rigor: We implemented several strategies to ensure the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the findings, in line with qualitative research standards[21]:

- **Member checking**: Summaries of interpretations were shared with participants to validate meaning.

- **Peer auditing**: Three qualitative researchers independently reviewed codes and emerging themes.

- **Analytic triangulation**: Thematic findings were constantly compared with raw data to ensure consistency and integrity.

- **Reflexivity**: The first author maintained a reflexive journal to monitor potential biases arising from personal proximity to the fandom community.

Results

The participants in this study were all adolescent females residing in Tehran, with an average age of 17. Through semi-structured interviews and in-depth qualitative analysis, three interconnected themes and seven sub-themes emerged, illustrating how Iranian adolescents experience, internalize, and give meaning to their engagement with the Hallyu phenomenon. While the themes are presented separately, they reflect a progressive and interconnected process: beginning with initial exposure, deepening into emotional and symbolic attachment, and culminating in a collective identity rooted in cultural loyalty and psychosocial meaning-making. Additionally, given the widespread appeal of Hallyu among Iranian youth, the researchers remained reflexively aware of their own position as both cultural insiders and observers, recognizing that personal familiarity with the context could enrich empathy but also risk interpretive bias. To mitigate this, regular peer debriefing and memo-writing were employed to foreground the voices of participants and limit overinterpretation.

Theme 1: The Process of Initial Exposure to Hallyu Content: This theme captures the beginning of the fandom journey—how participants first encountered Korean cultural products through informal social networks. Most participants described peer influence, exposure through family members, and television or online platforms as key sources of discovery. The sub-theme highlights the social and environmental scaffolding that enabled entry into the Hallyu world.

- *Participant 3*: "Well, I think I knew about Korea since I was a child, because of the TV series. But I got to know more from middle school and then high school through my friends."

- *Participant 2*: "I had heard a lot about them before in my friend's group on Telegram. But it was through my aunt that I became a real fan."

These quotes illustrate that exposure is not passive, but shaped by emotional resonance and social validation. Media content becomes meaningful when introduced by trusted peers or family, serving as a gateway to deeper identification with Korean culture.

Theme 2: Audience Attraction through Symbolism, Language, and Visual Aesthetics. This theme delves into the factors sustaining and deepening participants' emotional engagement. It comprises three sub-themes: (1) symbolic language and metaphor (e.g., the color purple as a symbol of love and trust), (2) emotional and aesthetic appeal, and (3) interactive intimacy through digital platforms.

- *Participant 1*: "BTS is often described as a purple ocean, with purple symbolizing the group itself. They even coined the phrase 'I Purple You' instead of 'I Love You.' It creates a unique emotional language that fans connect with deeply."

- *Participant 7*: "I was initially drawn in by their appearance, but what really touched me was the meaning in their lyrics and poetry. They give hope to students like me and motivate us to work hard and love ourselves."

- *Participant 2*: "They interact with us on platforms like Vverse. When they say 'I miss you so much,' it feels personal. Once, I was feeling very down, and watching BTS live really lifted me up. It was like having family around."

These quotes reveal how symbolism and emotional resonance co-create a sense of personal connection and comfort. Participants described parasocial experiences as psychologically intimate, fulfilling developmental needs for belonging, self-worth, and emotional regulation. Fandom thus becomes more than entertainment—it becomes a therapeutic and identity-forming experience.

Theme 3: Formation of Group Identity and Cultural Loyalty: As participants' engagement deepened, a shift occurred from individual attachment to collective identification. This theme captures how shared fandom practices—such as defending Korean media, using fan-specific language, or organizing online discussions—led to the formation of a distinct subcultural identity. Participants spoke of both empowerment and marginalization: pride in their cultural choices, yet frustration with social stigma.

- *Participant 2*: "I'd like my future child to grow up watching something meaningful, like Korean dramas, rather than pointless Iranian movies. It's about learning from quality content, not just entertainment."

- *Participant 2 (continued)*: "It's frustrating when people criticize us without understanding. You can't even talk freely about your interests at school or work. That kind of judgment makes it hard."

These sentiments reflect cultural resistance and emotional allegiance, wherein Korean media is not only consumed but championed as morally and aesthetically superior. Participants construct identity in opposition to mainstream norms, forming a cultural in-group that reinforces loyalty, pride, and shared resilience.

Discussion

This study aimed to explore the loyalty process of Iranian adolescents and young adults toward the SKEI by analyzing participants' lived experiences. Through qualitative content analysis of semi-structured interviews, three core themes emerged. This section critically interprets these findings in light of relevant qualitative media influence theories and literature, with a focus on identity formation and social belonging in the Iranian sociocultural context.

The first theme, "the process of becoming acquainted with products," reflects how adolescents' initial exposure to the SKEI occurred via peers, television broadcasts, and social

media. This aligns with Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model, which highlights how audiences actively interpret media content within specific cultural and social frameworks. Iranian adolescents do not passively consume Korean media but actively decode its symbolic messages through the lens of their lived realities. The fact that national television selectively aired Korean dramas, perceived as culturally proximate, illustrates how institutional filters mediate initial exposure. Meanwhile, social networks functioned as spaces of horizontal diffusion, where peer validation and algorithmic visibility reinforced content engagement[22]. These findings echo those of Viikki et al., who argue that adolescent media consumption is shaped by emotional resonance, aesthetic appeal, and peer amplification[15]. In line with this study, He and Sun conducted a qualitative netnographic study over three years to examine the psychological adaptation process of Chinese fans who renounced their idol worship following a "para-loveshock. The study offers insights into psychological resilience, coping with fandom loss, and the governance of digital fan culture, contributing meaningfully to our understanding of fandom identity and its disruptions[23].

This pattern is further explained by Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, whereby familiarity with global entertainment forms (like K-dramas or K-pop) becomes a symbolic asset in adolescent social hierarchies. For participants, consuming and referencing SKEI content enhanced their cultural literacy and social currency within peer groups[24]. The role of friends in initial exposure thus reflects both emotional bonding and the social reproduction of taste and distinction.

The second theme, "attracting the audience through symbolization, language, and visual appeal," highlights how specific aesthetic and symbolic elements draw youth into the world of K-pop and K-dramas. The stylized visuals, metaphorical language, and emotionally charged performances serve as semiotic resources through which adolescents craft personal and collective meaning. From a qualitative perspective, these engagements are not superficial: they represent deep symbolic labor, where fans actively construct affiliations, values, and aspirations. Drawing on Jenkins' theory of participatory culture, this phenomenon reflects a shift from passive viewership to active meaning-making, where fans interpret and circulate content within affinity spaces. The emergence of shared codes and symbols strengthens fan community cohesion and enhances a sense of belonging[25]. In line with our study, Ezani explored how K-pop fans construct and manage their identities on Twitter, highlighting how digital spaces shape self-presentation and social belonging. The study found that K-pop fans curate their online identities through visual elements like profile pictures, headers, and biographies, while also navigating fandom hierarchies and resisting negative stereotypes. These online markers help users recognize and relate to one another within the fandom. Importantly, the study concludes that online identity construction significantly influences fans' real-life identities, illustrating the dynamic interplay between virtual and offline selves in the context of global K-pop fandom[26].

Importantly, participants' emphasis on themes such as feminism, mental health, and emotional authenticity reveals their aspirational alignment with the progressive social values depicted in SKEI content. These values, often absent or restricted in Iranian media, provide an alternative ideological framework that resonates with youth experiences of identity exploration, resistance, and emotional validation. As such, Korean media becomes a discursive space where adolescents engage with identity politics, gender roles, and emotional expression in culturally negotiated ways.

The third theme, "formation of group identity in loyalty to the SKEI," directly relates to processes of collective identity formation and social belonging. Fan communities like ARMY exemplify how adolescents co-create symbolic communities where shared meanings, rituals, and emotional investments are cultivated. This resonates with social identity theory, which posits that group membership enhances self-esteem and provides a sense of coherence and continuity[27]. Within these communities, participants enact loyalty through financial support, cultural advocacy, and defense of the group's values. Even in the face of societal skepticism, fans assert their counter-cultural identities, demonstrating agency in negotiating normative boundaries. These findings align with Cayaban et al., who emphasize the role of celebrity influence in shaping fans' consumer behavior and values[28]. Ang and Chan, in line with our study explored the motivations and impacts of celebrity worship among 15 Malaysian adolescents. Thematic analysis identified three key motivators: celebrity products, personal traits of the celebrities, and peer influence. Participants reported mainly positive effects, including emotional support, stronger self-determination, increased cultural awareness, and improved social relationships. Overall, adolescents did not perceive negative consequences from their worship, highlighting the inspirational role celebrities play in their lives[6].

In sum, the loyalty process toward the SKEI is not merely a matter of preference or entertainment consumption. Rather, it represents a layered psychosocial process whereby adolescents engage in identity work, community formation, and symbolic resistance. Theorizing this phenomenon through the lenses of cultural capital, symbolic interactionism, and discourse theory allows us to understand how global media shapes local identities in nuanced ways.

Conclusion

This study contributes to qualitative understandings of adolescent fandom by elucidating how Iranian youth negotiate cultural identity, social belonging, and resistance through engagement with the SKEI. Our findings underscore the significance of mediated cultural flows and peer networks in shaping fandom experiences and highlight the importance of symbolic and emotional dimensions in adolescent identity formation. We acknowledge that the purposive sampling of female adolescents from Tehran, combined with self-reported data, limits generalizability and introduces potential biases. Our cultural proximity as researchers informed the interpretive process, which we mitigated through reflexive memoing and expert auditing. Future research could benefit from longitudinal qualitative designs and expanded participant diversity to

deepen understanding of adolescent media engagement in Iran's evolving sociopolitical context.

This article demonstrates several strengths and a few limitations. A major strength lies in its clear methodological rigor, with well-justified use of qualitative content analysis, purposive sampling, and strategies to ensure trustworthiness, such as member checking and reflexivity. The focus on a specific demographic (Iranian adolescent females) allows for in-depth exploration of identity construction and cultural affinity, contributing meaningfully to underexplored areas in media and youth studies, particularly within non-Western contexts. The use of rich, participant-centered data elevates the authenticity and depth of insights. However, the study's limitations include its narrow sample (limited to young females in Tehran), which may restrict the transferability of findings to other regions, genders, or age groups. Additionally, although the research acknowledges researcher positionality, deeper engagement with potential interpretive biases or limitations in linguistic translation and cultural interpretation would have further enhanced transparency.

Ethical Considerations

All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent and transcribed verbatim. Prior to participation, respondents received both oral and written information outlining the study's aims, procedures, and their rights, including the right to withdraw voluntarily and assurances of confidentiality. Pseudonyms were assigned during the transcription process. The study protocol complied with ethical standards for research involving minors and young adults and was approved by the university ethics committee under the code IR.QOM.REC.1404.005.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors of this article declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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