

Digitalization of Hallyu in the Indian market: From periphery to center



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ABSTRACT

This study examines the rise of Hallyu in India by exploring the links between digitalization, cultural products, and audience psychology. Using a qualitative approach, it investigates how beliefs, values, emotions, and motivations influence audience behavior, particularly during the pandemic when OTT platforms accelerated access to Korean dramas. The research applies three theoretical frameworks to explain the remarkable acceptance of Hallyu in India and proposes the "Culture Prism Integration Theory," which integrates macro-level, micro-level, and mediating factors to show their combined impact on psychology, business, and the economy. The findings reveal that Hallyu in India has shifted from the margins to the mainstream, carrying significant social and commercial implications and contributing to the development of a cultural marketization framework that reflects behavioral change.

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1. Introduction

Globalization is usually discussed in terms of economic integration and the growth of global markets. However, as Wani (2011) noted, it also brings major changes in social, cultural, and political areas. It affects how culture is understood and reshapes global, national, and personal relationships (Magu, 2015). The spread of technology, especially the internet, has accelerated these exchanges, making cultural interaction faster and more widespread. In just one generation, the internet has transformed how people experience media and cinema (Singh, 2019).

Cultural products such as films, CDs, and online media have become key drivers of these exchanges. The rise of over-the-top (OTT) platforms has further transformed the entertainment industry. With lower internet costs in India, access to OTT platforms has expanded rapidly. These platforms provide high-quality content, low subscription costs, convenience, and access to global entertainment. José Ganuza and Fernanda Vicens (2014) argued that OTT platforms

allow people to watch content at their preferred time and place, making them especially appealing.

The COVID-19 pandemic changed almost every aspect of life, including social and business practices. During lockdowns in India, people shifted the way they entertained themselves, turning increasingly to OTT platforms. This created a surge in both usage and subscriptions. While OTT services were struggling to grow before the pandemic, the restrictions on movement accelerated their adoption.

Two major shifts were observed in India's entertainment sector during the pandemic. First was the rapid growth of OTT viewership. Second was the sharp rise in the popularity of Korean dramas. Subscriber-based, direct-to-consumer video services have changed how media is distributed globally (Lotz et al., 2022).

Netflix reported a sharp rise in Indian viewership of Korean dramas after the pandemic began, as audiences searched for fresh and engaging content (Reimeingam, 2015). In 2020, K-drama viewership grew by 370%. MX Player also recorded a twelve-fold increase in its Korean content audience, not only in large cities but also in smaller towns. The Korean Times confirmed this surge, reporting that India became one of the top six countries watching Korean dramas during lockdowns. Many K-dramas appeared on Netflix India's trending lists, and streaming platforms recognized their growing demand (economictimes.indiatimes.com). This trend shows how the globalization of Korean content in India was

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strongly reinforced during the pandemic, largely due to OTT platforms. Earlier studies (Hogarth, 2013) also highlighted that the Korean wave has grown rapidly across Asia, attracting academic and research interest because of its wide economic and cultural impact.

This study explores how India's fast-changing digital media environment is shaping audience perceptions and behaviors. It examines the relationship between the pandemic, OTT platforms, and the acceptance of Korean content among Indian viewers. The research is structured into four parts: (1) theoretical frameworks guiding the study, (2) factors identified through interviews and secondary sources, (3) a proposed model, and (4) a discussion of broader implications. The analysis focuses on macro-level, micro-level, and mediating factors, and their combined cultural, social, psychological, and economic effects.

2. Literature review

This study is supported by several theoretical frameworks that help explain the acceptance of Korean content in India.

Cultural Globalization Theory is the first and most significant. It explains how ideas, values, attitudes, and meanings spread across borders through cultural products such as media, entertainment, and tourism. These processes reshape media consumption and cultural patterns. Cultural globalization influences people's perceptions, tastes, aspirations, and daily practices. Despite the language barrier, Korean dramas have entered India strongly. This theory explains how global and local cultural forces interact, particularly at the group or societal level (Nam, 2013). One outcome of this interaction is cultural hybridization, where local and global cultures mix (Holton, 2000). Through these processes, people around the world are becoming part of a Global Consumer Culture (GCC), sharing similar behaviors and preferences. Cultural globalization, supported by the internet and social media, has become a multidimensional force shaping everyday life (Ozer et al., 2021; Stalmirska and Ali, 2025).

The second framework is Acculturation Theory, which focuses on the psychological changes that occur when individuals are exposed to another culture. Schwartz and Unger (2017) noted that globalization and localization processes can be seen at the individual level as psychological acculturation. Ryder et al. (2000) argued that intercultural encounters can change social skills, attitudes, values, and self-identity. Berry et al. (1989) showed that people respond differently to cultural influences depending on context. Mass communication channels such as television, films, radio, newspapers, and the internet allow individuals to learn about other cultures, leading to psychological change (Masgoret and Ward, 2006). A modern form of this process, called remote acculturation, occurs when people adopt elements of another culture through

media without migration (Sun and Jun, 2022). For example, South Koreans exposed to American dramas through OTT platforms often develop positive perceptions of the United States (Bae et al., 2024).

A third perspective is the Network Effect Strategy (Geun, 2009). This approach views the Korean Wave as more than just entertainment—it spreads Korean norms, lifestyles, and behaviors. These cultural elements can support positive perceptions of Korea's political, social, and economic contributions to other countries. The Korean Wave thus helps create a transnational network shaped by Korean ways of thinking and acting.

Finally, Porter's Diamond Model explains Korea's rise as a global cultural "soft power." The model outlines six factors—firm strategy, structure, factor conditions, demand conditions, government, related industries, and chance—that determine international competitiveness. For the Korean cultural industry, government support and the "chance" factor of the pandemic were particularly important. By making culture a national strategy, the Korean government heavily invested in entertainment, talent development, and global marketing. The pandemic provided the unexpected opportunity to capture the Indian audience, greatly increasing demand for K-dramas and K-pop. Together, government policy and chance accelerated Korea's cultural success in India.

In summary, these three theories—Cultural Globalization, Acculturation, and Porter's Diamond Model—explain both the broad social and the personal psychological processes that supported the spread of Korean content in India. They also show how external factors, especially the pandemic and the rise of OTT platforms, helped intensify the Korean wave.

3. Research methodology

This study used a qualitative research approach. Qualitative research focuses on understanding human experiences, beliefs, values, emotions, and motivations, which are often difficult to capture through numbers alone. It helps answer questions about meaning, perspective, and experience, usually from the participants' point of view (Hammarberg et al., 2016). The authors applied Grounded Theory. This method is widely used in the social sciences to develop theories directly from collected data. It is especially useful for studying complex social issues and for identifying new insights about social processes. Grounded Theory involves collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data in an ongoing cycle, where findings guide further data collection. The goal is to identify patterns, relationships, and concepts that can be developed into new theories. This approach is inductive, meaning that theories emerge from the data rather than being tested in advance. It also considers the social context that shapes people's behaviors and relationships. Data for this study came from observations, interviews,

and secondary sources. The authors compared and analyzed the information to identify patterns and categories, which were then used to build a theoretical framework. A limitation of this method is that it can be less structured and more open to interpretation than quantitative methods.

The sample size was 40 participants. Data collection began during the pandemic, when it was difficult to reach larger groups. The interviews included both structured and unstructured questions to allow participants to share their opinions freely. The questions explored feelings, perceptions, and behaviors related to Korean dramas. For example, participants were asked about the influence of K-dramas on their lifestyle choices, such as food, fashion, or daily habits, as well as the differences they noticed between Korean dramas and other shows. They were also asked about the role of OTT platforms and the impact of the pandemic on their viewing habits. The participants were diverse, though the group was relatively small. A key similarity among them was that they all began watching Korean content on OTT platforms after the pandemic began. The study used a “snowball sampling” method, where participants were recruited through personal networks or contacts of other participants. In addition to interviews, the authors reviewed secondary data, including newspapers, blogs, and websites, to support and validate the findings. The research objectives were:

- To identify the factors that increased the acceptance of Korean content in India.
- To analyze the impact of Korean content at the macro level.
- To analyze the impact of Korean content at the micro level.
- To identify mediating factors influencing audience behavior.

Using Grounded Theory, the authors developed a model based on these findings. The model includes macro factors, micro factors, mediating factors, and their broader implications.

4. Discussion and analysis

This section presents the findings of the study in terms of macro factors, micro factors, and mediating factors that together explain the growth of Korean dramas (K-dramas) in India. The analysis highlights how external conditions, cultural similarities, individual psychology, and digital technologies all contributed to the strong acceptance of Korean content, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

4.1. Macro factors

4.1.1. Government policy

Globally, South Korea is recognized as one of the few nations where the government deliberately

positioned popular culture as a strategic tool of economic development. Since the mid-1990s, the Korean government has shifted its policies toward supporting cultural industries, treating them as an essential part of export-oriented growth. As [Kwon and Kim \(2014\)](#) emphasized, political restrictions on cultural industries were relaxed, and the government began to see culture as a driver of global competitiveness.

[Jin and Otmazgin \(2014\)](#) noted that the government declared the promotion of cultural industries a key national strategy. Concrete measures included sending official delegations abroad to promote Korean dramas and cultural products, lifting restrictions on foreign travel, and relaxing censorship, which allowed filmmakers to bring fresh perspectives into cinema and television. Importantly, one-third of all venture capital in Korea during this period was invested in the entertainment industry, showing the scale of commitment.

The Ministry of Culture created a large budget specifically to support cultural exports. Filmmakers were also encouraged to integrate Korean cultural elements with foreign influences to create content that could appeal to both domestic and global audiences. This cultural policy laid the foundation for Hallyu (the Korean Wave) to expand beyond Asia.

4.1.2. Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic was another decisive factor. Lockdowns disrupted everyday life and forced people to stay indoors. As audiences sought new forms of entertainment, Korean dramas filled the gap. With more free time and a stressful global situation, many people turned to positive, emotionally engaging stories as a form of escape.

Reports showed that during the lockdown, Indian audiences began exploring international content on a larger scale ([adgully.com](#)). It is observed that when audiences exhausted local shows, they became open to trying recommended Korean dramas. The “feel-good” nature of K-dramas provided comfort during a difficult period, helping them move from the margins of India’s entertainment scene to the mainstream.

4.2. Micro factors

4.2.1. Cultural content

Engaging and relatable storytelling was a major factor in the rise of K-dramas in India. Although the Korean language is unfamiliar to most Indians, audiences were still attracted to the narratives because of their strong scripts and universal themes. Unlike Indian serials, which often run for hundreds of episodes, K-dramas are shorter, compact, and more suitable for binge-watching.

[Talwar et al. \(2019\)](#) pointed out that the main charm of K-dramas lies in their carefully written stories and detailed direction, often created by women writers who explore social dilemmas, taboos,

and gender issues. Reimeingam (2015) highlighted the synergy between elements such as script, casting, and soundtrack, which makes K-dramas highly compelling. Park (2014) argued that producing cultural products with universal appeal helps overcome cultural barriers, which is exactly what K-dramas achieved in India.

Cultural similarities also made the content more relatable. Both India and Korea value family ties, respect for elders, hierarchy, and community norms. Gender roles and biases are visible in both cultures, though evolving. Parent-child relationships, particularly regarding marriage and career decisions, are very similar in both countries. Park (2014) further analyzed that many K-dramas balance tradition and modernity, which resonates strongly with Indian viewers.

This similarity extends to music and food. Songs in K-dramas carry a strong emotional and melodic tone, similar to Indian music. Food, which plays a central role in Korean culture, is also highlighted in dramas, drawing a parallel with Indian traditions where meals carry social and cultural significance. Hogarth (2013) added that while Hallyu uses Western frameworks of cinema and music, its essence remains inherently Asian, making it easier for Indian audiences to connect with.

4.2.2. Individual psychological connection

K-dramas appealed not only to cultural familiarity but also to individual psychology. Audiences connected deeply with the characters and narratives. During the pandemic, their positive tone was especially important. Reimeingam (2015) argued that K-dramas offered a refreshing alternative to darker, violent global shows by presenting an element of “good-naturedness.” López-Pumarejo (2007) compared them to Latin American telenovelas, which often use positive character roles to promote values like tolerance and female empowerment.

One homemaker explained that watching K-dramas provided stress relief and escape from daily pressures, while a chef noted that the narratives helped them adopt a healthier outlook on imperfection, reducing unrealistic expectations of social roles. Characters are shown as imperfect—struggling with issues such as anxiety, fear, or mental illness—but they find happiness in life, love, and relationships. This message of resilience and healing resonated strongly with viewers.

4.2.3. Human appeal

At their core, K-dramas deal with universal human themes such as love, family, and friendship. Their storylines are emotionally rich but also presented in progressive ways that appeal to younger generations. Viewers in the study reported that K-dramas not only entertained them but also influenced their knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors. For example, one cybersecurity specialist explained

that K-dramas helped them relax and sleep better during the lockdown, while a data analyst shared that watching K-dramas increased their empathy, tolerance, and social maturity. Such testimonies show how entertainment can act as a subtle form of social education.

4.2.4. OTT platforms

The role of technology, especially OTT platforms, cannot be overstated. Platforms such as Netflix, MX Player, and Viki provided the infrastructure for the Korean wave to reach Indian audiences. According to Cho (2011), the rise of digital platforms and global capitalism created the foundation for the large-scale production and circulation of cultural products.

OTT platforms allowed K-dramas to bypass traditional distribution systems and reach audiences directly. Affordable internet services in India further expanded access. By 2020, Korean dramas had reached audiences across both metropolitan and smaller Indian cities. Streaming services capitalized on this trend by striking deals with Korean production houses, increasing the volume of available content. Netflix, for example, partnered with Korean studios to co-produce and distribute shows worldwide (Kanozia and Ganghariya, 2021). Thus, OTT platforms acted as a catalyst in bringing Korean content into India.

4.2.5. Pandemic (reinforcing factor)

The COVID-19 pandemic strongly reinforced the rise of Korean dramas in India. Lockdowns gave people more free time, and audiences began looking for content that could sustain their interest. At this moment, Korean dramas filled the gap. Because of the pandemic, K-dramas became part of India’s mainstream entertainment. Reports confirmed that the lockdown period led to an increase in international content consumption in India (adgully.com).

During the lockdown, audiences quickly ran out of local shows, and at that time, they were willing to watch recommended Korean content. The pandemic itself thus became one of the major factors in the spread of K-dramas, as it encouraged audiences to go beyond conventional entertainment boundaries. With time to spare during the lockdown, and with the constant presence of the pandemic in everyday life, the “feel-good” quality of K-dramas offered viewers relief and an escape from the grim reality of the crisis.

In terms of benefits, cross-cultural communication always brings positive outcomes. When people adopt another culture, it enriches mutual understanding and also strengthens soft power competition between markets. This is what Lee (2009) highlighted in his work. Webb (2017) also emphasized that as Korean popular culture becomes increasingly global, South Korea has used its cultural and entertainment industries to access and expand into foreign markets, which has boosted

its creative sector and contributed to its economic growth. Indian audiences have embraced Korean content in a major way, which reflects a break from the traditional stereotypes often linked to East Asian culture (economictimes.com). Although “Hallyu” is a cultural wave, it also carries business and economic effects. Some analysts describe it as both a “government construct” and a “phenomenon of cultural production.” With strong government backing, the Korean business sector is prepared to benefit from this wave.

5. Recommendations

5.1. Impact on the industries

The sharp increase in sales of Korean beauty products in India is directly linked to the rising popularity of K-dramas and to the evolving strategies of the country’s e-commerce sector.

For example, Korikart.com, an India-based online marketplace for Korean products, has set the goal of becoming the “Amazon or Flipkart of Korean goods” in India. The company acknowledged that the rapid growth of K-pop and K-dramas has opened the Indian market to Korean products, encouraging more Korean firms to enter. This cultural influence has shaped consumer perceptions both directly and indirectly. As a result, several Korean cosmetic and food brands—such as Innisfree, Laneige, Face Shop, and Sulwhasoo—are now visible on leading Indian retail platforms. The “Korean Wave” has also gone beyond dramas and music to include food, literature, and language, attracting an increasing number of fans. After the lockdown, Google search trends in India showed a growing interest in Korean food. The pandemic further encouraged Indian consumers to experiment with Korean cooking at home, with popular dishes such as fried chicken and tteokbokki becoming widely known. The wave has also greatly improved Korea’s image in India, which will likely have wider positive effects. Trolan (2017) explained that increased cultural awareness and promotion lead to growth in tourism, while Jang and Paik (2012) observed that Asian tourists visit Korean film and music locations, increasing cultural tourism. Many Indians also expressed a desire to travel to Korea once COVID-19 restrictions were lifted. These findings suggest that the Hallyu has strongly penetrated India in recent years and will continue to influence multiple industries.

5.2. Political implications

Cultural policies can be either explicit or implicit. Ahearne (2009) defined implicit cultural policy as the indirect shaping of culture through the governance of values, lifestyles, and norms within a population. The South Korean government has used implicit cultural policies effectively, shaping international perceptions of Korea through the promotion of cultural products.

India could also consider applying implicit cultural policies. For example, by strategically exporting films and dramas, India could promote its own culture to international audiences. This study provides insights that the Indian government and cultural producers can use to engage viewers worldwide with quality content supported by appropriate policy frameworks.

Jung (2009) analyzed the Hallyu phenomenon and concluded that the rise of Korean cultural popularity benefits international relationships, as it highlights both the similarities and differences between countries. Cross-cultural communication of this kind creates economic value and strengthens cooperation. Thus, cultural policy can serve as a form of soft diplomacy that builds mutual understanding while expanding cultural and economic influence.

5.3. Social implications

Nam (2013) argued that cultural globalization helped create the Korean Wave because it responded to audiences’ desires, enjoyment, and aspirations. Cultural globalization theory suggests the rapid flow of ideas, values, attitudes, meanings, and cultural products across borders, supported by the internet, popular media, and tourism. In India, this process has been evident during and after the pandemic, when Korean dramas gained sudden popularity despite language barriers.

The Korean government has used culture strategically to globalize its image. At the macro level, cultural globalization theory shows how cultural products influence the economy and business. For example, Netflix opened its first office in South Korea and announced investments of 700 million USD in Korean productions, due to the huge global demand for K-dramas. Walsh (2014) emphasized that Hallyu products have built-in marketing features that promote Korea and its society in a friendly, non-threatening way. This has been successful in increasing tourism and the consumption of Korean products.

The popularity of K-dramas in India also had emotional and lifestyle impacts. People reported stronger connections to Korean characters and culture, which encouraged them to try Korean food, cosmetics, and fashion. Imports of Korean noodle (ramyun) brands such as Nongshim rose by 162% in 2020, and surveys showed that 88% of K-drama fans were willing to try Korean food. Demand for Korean restaurants, salons, and language classes also increased.

At the micro level, Acculturation Theory helps explain this trend. Masgoret and Ward (2006) argued that mass communication—including TV, radio, newspapers, magazines, and the internet—helps individuals learn about other cultures’ norms and values. With the pandemic accelerating exposure, many Indians formed psychological connections to K-dramas. For example, in Manipur, young people increasingly adopted Korean

hairstyles, makeup, clothing, and film preferences (Reimeingam, 2015).

Ta Park et al. (2019) also found that K-dramas can influence cultural change in different groups, suggesting they may affect population-level shifts in values and behaviors. As a result, Korean culture has spread widely in India, regardless of people's economic background, religion, education, or ethnicity. This adoption has created what some call "Koreanised people (KP)." Many Indians, especially Gen Z and Millennials, are now more interested in the Korean language, cuisine, and tourism. This shows how cultural products can strongly influence everyday life and reshape social behaviors.

5.4. Academic implications

Based on these findings, the authors propose a Culture Acceptance Model. This model identifies the factors that contributed to the growing acceptance of Korean content in India. It highlights:

- Societal factors (macro-level influences such as government policies and globalization),
- Individual factors (micro-level influences such as psychological connection and acculturation),
- Pandemic as a "chance" factor (an unexpected external shock that rapidly increased demand), and
- OTT platforms as mediators (technological enablers that spread Korean content widely).

The model shows that cultural acceptance leads to lifestyle changes, which in turn affect business and the economy. This study integrates three theoretical frameworks to explain the case:

- Cultural Globalization Theory – explaining the flow of ideas, values, and cultural meanings through global cultural products.
- Acculturation Theory – explaining the psychological changes individuals experience when exposed to foreign cultures.
- Porter's Diamond Model – highlighting the role of government, strategy, and external "chance" factors (such as the pandemic) in enhancing Korea's cultural competitiveness.

OTT platforms acted as mediators, allowing audiences to easily access Korean content during lockdowns, which intensified the cultural impact. Together, these theories support the proposed Culture Prism Integration Theory. This framework shows how macro-level, micro-level, and mediating factors interact to influence cultural acceptance, drive lifestyle changes, and affect wider business and economic domains.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the different factors that contributed to the acceptance of Korean dramas (K-dramas) in India during the COVID-19 pandemic,

with a special focus on the role of OTT platforms as mediators. The analysis showed that Korean content not only transformed the Indian entertainment industry but also influenced audience behavior and psychology, while creating economic, political, and business implications.

The findings suggest that the pandemic accelerated changes in entertainment consumption. OTT platforms, which had previously been at an early and struggling stage in India, became central to media habits. At the same time, Korean dramas experienced a surge in viewership, providing Indian audiences with engaging stories, emotional depth, and a positive tone that offered relief during the crisis. These cultural products connected with Indian viewers both socially and psychologically, despite the language barrier.

However, challenges remain. Korean dramas are still not widely accepted across mainland "Bharat," where many audiences are uncomfortable with foreign languages and subtitles. Carlton, the co-founder of House of Awe, acknowledged the strong wave of Korean dramas but pointed out that it may be difficult for brands to sustain this popularity. Language barriers, especially with Korean, will continue to limit the expansion of Hallyu in India (afaqs.com).

The future of K-dramas in India is uncertain. While they have found a strong foothold in the Indian market, it is not clear whether this trend will continue to grow or decline. India has long been a major market for Bollywood, Hollywood, and regional cinema. Korean content will likely face strong competition from these industries. Important questions also remain: Will the Korean wave bring lasting changes in fashion, food, and lifestyle? What lessons can the Indian film and television industries learn from the Hallyu phenomenon?

These questions highlight the need for further research. While Hallyu has attracted great attention and captured a large share of the Indian OTT market, its long-term influence is still unknown. More studies are required to understand whether Korean dramas will continue to hold their position in India or whether they will face increasing competition from domestic and global entertainment industries.

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Compliance with ethical standards

Ethical considerations

Participation in interviews was entirely voluntary, and all participants provided informed consent prior to inclusion. No personal identifiers

were collected, and confidentiality of responses was strictly maintained. The interviews involved minimal risk, focusing only on participants' perceptions and experiences with Korean dramas and OTT platforms.

Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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