

Decoding India's Fascination with Hallyu: A Tale of Online Fan Communities and Cultural Connections

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The consumption of Korean popular media has dramatically risen in India (Shergill, 2020; Wahab, 2021). A study found that by 2019, over 72% of Indians showed a preference for consuming foreign media content in languages other than their own language or English (Sharma, 2019). Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that Indians had already been consuming Korean and other East Asian popular media before the release of these official statistics, the rise of over-the-top (OTT) platforms, and the onset of the pandemic. A significant fanbase of K-drama and K-pop had already risen in Northeast India in the early 2000s, where people shared ethnic similarities with East Asia and considered themselves to be more “Asian” than “Indian” (Mohan, 2017; Ota, 2011; Reimeingam, 2014, 2015).. At the time, its fanbase was scattered across India, and the only mode by which fans could connect with each other was through the Internet. Fans used to watch K-dramas on fan-translated websites and heavily relied on online modes of consumption to satisfy their entertainment needs. Basically, the origin of the Indian fanbase of K-dramas started online, and online communities played a huge role in the promotion of Korean pop culture across India. Today, the level of popularity of everything *Hallyu* has reached an all-time high in India. Taking cognizance of all these factors, in this study, we examined how Hallyu has shaped the digital cultures of Indian youth by analyzing four specific online fan communities vis-à-vis their cultural, communication and creative practices. Indian scholars have shown an interest in investigating Hallyu and its impact in India only very recently. We used participatory culture as the conceptual model (Jenkins, 1992) and a qualitative research design was used in the study, and netnography (Kozinets, 2020) was the primary method to obtain data from the four selected online fan communities. Significant themes emerged from our data analysis. Significant themes emerged from our data, including, fan motivations, impact of Hallyu on mental well-being, representation in K-dramas, cultural hybridity in fan productions, symbolic communication and perceptions of South Korea as a country. Our research fills an important gap in the literature as it brings an important insight and a significant contribution to the field of Hallyu Studies from the Global South. By investigating the impact of Hallyu in India vis-à-vis digital cultures, communication and creative practices, our research

sheds light on the cultural exchange and globalization of Hallyu beyond its traditional reach.