

New Korean Wave: Social Media As Agent of Mediatization Process of the Non-K-Pop Cultural Product Among Malaysian Youth

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ABSTRACT

Recent literature offers findings on the term mediatization, where mediatization and culture synergy seek to explore their links to the changes in society's everyday culture. This study strives to understand the role of social media in promoting and maintaining the power of the Korean Wave phenomenon when the world faces COVID-19 and the relevant differences in the post-pandemic future. While there has been a proliferation of research on the Korean Wave, it focuses on K-Pop music and K-Drama. Thus, this research project is designated to highlight elements other than K-Pop and K-Drama in the Korean Wave phenomenon by focusing on non-K-Pop cultural products. Also, examining the role played by social media to further extend the soft diplomacy of South Korea in Malaysia. It is worth noting that Malaysia is the only country where the Embassy of the Republic of Korea initiated a special program, namely Korean Online Supporter. By observing social media accounts and content as well as events related to South Korean products, this study will use qualitative methods, netnography and observation for data collection. It elaborates on the effect of mediatization on youth culture while facing the changing dynamic of media technology in the current era.

Keywords: *Mediatization, Korean wave, youth, social influencer, social media.*

INTRODUCTION

Social media are known to bring various changes in Malaysia and globally. In media and technology, society is in an era where information can be accessed through the Internet with any device and from various locations. According to Grover et al (2022), social media's impact extends beyond entertainment but has permeated nearly every facet of human behaviour. Previously, Wielki (2020) emphasised that today's generation does not know reality without the Internet, for whom the world made up of technology and geographical constraints do not exist, therefore, behaves differently, and completely different problems are important to them when compared to the previous generation of consumers.

Nevertheless, rapid changes in the media and technology development have significant effects on youth. There is an increasing concern about the rapid changes affecting the young generation. According to Couldry and Hepp (2017), society is currently in the mediatization world, and the development of media and communication technology brings forth changes in how society communicates. It's evident in how fan culture has undergone a remarkable transformation and development in recent decades, fueled in part by the rise of social media (Bolin et al., 2021). While the rise of social media has undoubtedly been a prominent catalyst, the evolution of fan culture can also be attributed to factors such as technological advancements, changing media consumption habits and increasing popularity of the Korean wave.

The Korean Wave is very popular among females, especially the younger generation. It is due to its widespread accessibility through social media such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter. Social media meditations such as WhatsApp, Telegram, Line and KakaoTalk are

popular among youth and have become an extension for spreading this popular culture. By looking at the relationship between media and youth, especially in understanding the role of social media in youth socio-cultural as stated by Nor Hasimah Jalaluddin and Zaharani Ahmad (2011), the Korean Wave also added a structured system that can position music as an industry to support the country's economy when used to transmit a message that can assist in social development. Hence, the Korean Wave is an excellent example of how the entertainment industry acts as a country's commodity export. By being globally known, the Korean Wave does not only involve music but also encompasses language and culture.

Social media has created an environment where ordinary users can reach a large audience and profit from the content they produce (Maares et al., 2021). It has also become a marketing trend for marketers to use influencers to advertise and sell products, as influencers have the ability to influence the attitudes and decision-making of other social media users (Zhang & Choi, 2022). Previous research conducted by Croes and Bartels (2021) has confirmed that six primary factors motivate young adults to follow their selected social media influencers. These factors include information sharing, cool and new trends, relaxing entertainment, companionship, habitual or boredom and information seeking. Therefore, it is important to examine how social media and influencers strategize for better gain.

It can be considered that despite the K-Pop celebrities' massive impact globally, there is minimal research that explores the relationship between non-K-Pop cultural products as part of the Korean Wave. For example, Bartlett (2022) stated that for decades during periods of tension, K-Pop idols and music had a favourable impact on South Korea's diplomacy, economy and the human rights movement. Furthermore, the research conducted by Jang and Song (2015) concluded that the Korean Wave offers the Korean government a significant chance to utilise recently developing cultural and public diplomacy to promote Korean cultural assets. Hence, despite previous works focusing more on the content of K-Pop and K-Drama, this research aims to extend the knowledge by adding a new element that would contribute to the knowledge of popular culture in the media convergence era. By doing so, guided by the theoretical framework of mediatization and culture, this research aims to understand the impact of social media on the acceptance of non-K-Pop-related cultural products among Malaysian' youth. Thus, this study seeks to further understand the impact of the pandemic on the Korean Wave through dimensions of mediatization. Hence, this research is guided by how changes in social media usage habits formed during the pandemic affect fans' engagement with the Korean Wave in the post-pandemic future, focusing on non-K-Pop cultural products.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Korean Wave and It's Reach

To understand the big concept of the Korean Wave, we have to revisit earlier discussions of the term, which refers to the global phenomenon of accepting Korean cultural products. The term Korean Wave describes the phenomenon of Korean popular culture's widespread popularity globally (Mat et al., 2019). Initially, the Korean Wave was a light entertainment for housewives but later continued to be enjoyed by teenagers. From soap operas to pop music and lively group dances, the public views the Korean Wave as a trend in the entertainment world. The popular term was coined by Chinese journalists in the magazine, *Qingnianbao* in 1999 (Kim, 2011), it is used to describe the Korean pop wave that hit China in the 1990s.

One factor contributing to the rise of the Korean Wave, as highlighted by (Kim, 2022), was the export of Korean dramas that presented a distinct alternative to the frequently sexualized and violent content found in many American counterparts. While the Korean Wave embarked on its journey in Malaysia with the introduction of the *Winter Sonata* drama, at that time, targeted middle-aged women as the audience (Nor Hasimah Jalaluddin & Zaharani Ahmad 2011; Norbaiduri Ruslan & Siti Sakinah Abdul Latif 2016).

The Korean Wave has undergone continuous evolution with K-Pop music emerging as a major force in the late 2000s with several factors contributing to its global success. Jang and Kim (2013) highlighted the characteristics of K-Pop, such as its catchy melodies, synchronised choreography, emphasis on visual aesthetics, and high production quality. This unique blend sets it apart from other music genres and has garnered significant attention. Furthermore, the second generation of the Korean Wave is distinguished by the diversification of popular media content, extending beyond the initial focus on dramas (Lee & Nornes, 2015).

A 2015 survey conducted by The Korean Foundation for International Cultural Exchange (KOFICE) highlighted how the global popularity of Korean media, particularly K-Pop and K-Dramas, has positively impacted international perceptions of Korea's food, electronics, and beauty industries, enhanced the global image of Korean food, electronics and beauty products (Song, 2020). Thus, it is accepted that the Korean Wave encompasses all forms of Korean cultural products, including pop music, drama, film and video games, where the focus oftentimes lies on celebrity. It is coherent with as described by Shim (2017), the Korean Wave has also included all genres of Korean culture, including the alcoholic drink Soju, food, fashion, make-up and others.

Today, fans or target audiences of the Korean Wave are often associated with the Internet. Yeung (2023) reported that social media platforms and video-sharing sites like YouTube and TikTok have significantly contributed to the worldwide dissemination of the Korean Wave. Thus, this highlights the increase of youth using social media to mobilise other youth with the same interests and as like-minded as them to be involved in offline events such as street parties and K-Pop events. Thus, emphasises the significance of understanding the mediatization process among the fans, where social media is an essential agent of action.

Understanding Mediatization: A Gateway for Fandom and Youth Participation

Döveling et al. (2018) demonstrated that fandom heavily relies on the media and the process of mediatization to disseminate and expand their groups globally. This strengthens the argument made in the paper about using the mediatization framework to gain a deeper understanding of youth culture and how social media acts as a social agent in creating the mediated world of fandom. It also reinforces how social media strengthens the Korean Wave and the power of celebrities among Malaysian youth. Previously, Wojtkowski (2017) indicated that mediatization theory helps to find new ways to understand the dynamics of media and communication studies in today's world.

Turner (2016) suggested that the mediatization theory provides another perspective for studying the relationship between media and society, focusing on the changes that communication and media technology bring to society's sociology. Bengtsson et al. (2021) explored the extent to which individuals perceive that media infiltrate various aspects of their daily lives. The findings reveal that perceived media reliance is influenced by three fundamental desires i.e. (re)productive desires, recognition desires and civic desires. Hall and Koloziejaska (2021) highlight the COVID-19 pandemic as an unprecedented phenomenon that

offers ample opportunities for new research in various academic disciplines. They also note that the mediatization framework combined with interviews proves to be a particularly valuable toolkit for analysing media discourses, focusing on the construction of meaning and knowledge. Importantly, this approach considers power dynamics and incorporates the perspectives of media users.

For example, research conducted by Kim et al. (2022) examines the global sports market, where the widespread impact of the pandemic has necessitated the development of new media strategies and collaborations for content creation. It reflects broader global trends, as the pandemic has accelerated the addition of digital media in various aspects of human life. Coherently, Ehrlén's work in 2022 has shown that digital media has impacted leisure sports culture and participation by contributing to differentiation in leisure sports and the formation of sports communities. On the other hand, Nichols (2022) conducted a study on the mediatization of the skateboarding subculture, tracing its evolution from the 1980s and examining the interaction between analogue and digital media. This work highlights the role of social media in reshaping the dynamics of skateboarding and how the emergence of social media has sparked discussions and negotiations among online enthusiasts, brands and amateur skaters. By examining these influences, researchers can gain more insights into broader patterns of cultural change and adaptation in the digital age.

METHODOLOGY

With the internet as an essential driving force element among Korean Wave fans, this research examines Korean Wave events and social influencers and their content on social networks such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. This study employed a qualitative approach of netnography and participant observation. At the beginning of the research, purposive sampling will be used to kick-start the research. In this study, it is essential to carefully select the events that meet specific criteria to give an in-depth experience and understanding regarding the topic of interest.

Previously, Bowler (2014) stated that netnography serves as a valuable tool for seasoned qualitative researchers and offers a good starting point for the newer ones. Heinonen and Medberg (2018) highlighted that netnography was able to provide service for researchers with access to authentic online data and as a significant method for future research. Then, Kozinets and Gretzel (2023) elaborate that netnography, as a qualitative research approach, involves systematically the researcher immersing in the digital environment to gain cultural insights using observation, digital traces and interactions. They also further explained that this method emphasises understanding meanings and symbols within their context, with a broad definition of social media allowing netnographers to explore a wide range of sites for user-generated content, thus ensuring a comprehensive understanding of digital cultures.

This research will employ the netnography process outlined by Kozinets and Gretzel (2023), which encapsulates six processes, stages and movements of conducting netnography. Phase one (1) is the initiation stage. This phase focuses the research on a topic, phenomenon or question and then slowly builds the foundation of the data collection process. Stage two (2) is the mandatory movement, a process of experiencing, observing, reflecting and recording. It will lead to the third stage (3) of investigation. This stage centred on gleaning pre-existing digital imprints and encompassing search, discovery and selective digital traces. Stage four (4) might be optional, known as interaction, which involves data elicitation if

required to answer the research question, adding to immersion. The next stage (5) would be integration, where analysis meets interpretation and lastly, incarnation. The final stage, incarnation (6), is the act of representing and communicating findings. For a better understanding, this research includes the framework set by Kozinets and Gretzel (2023) below.

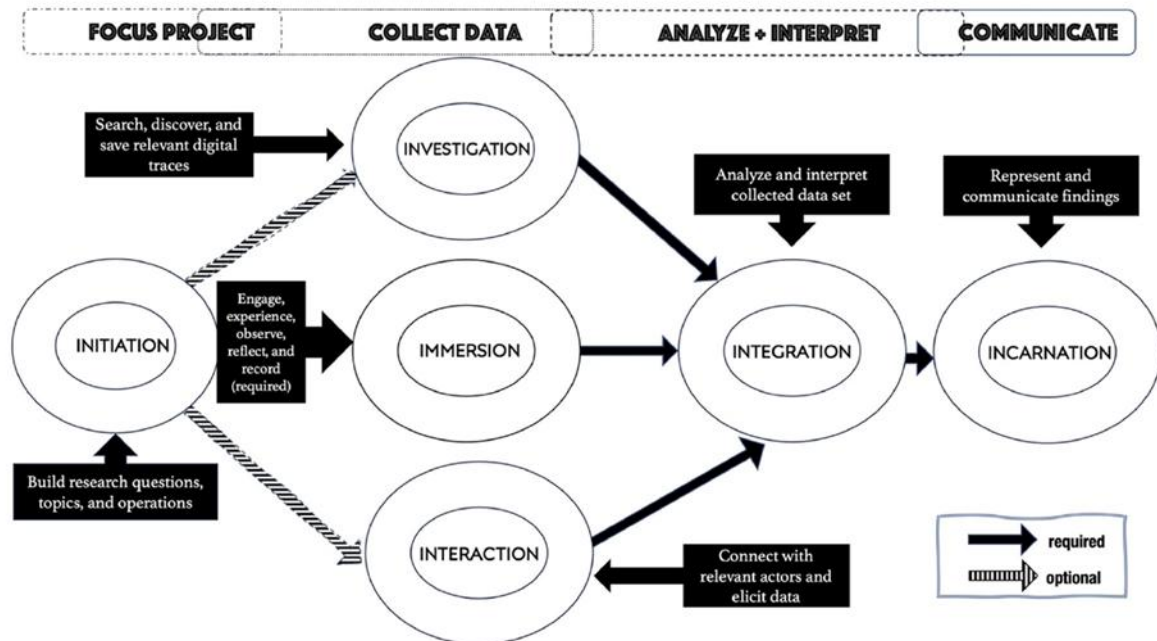


Figure 1: Netnography's procedures: Stages and movements by Kozinets and Gretzel (2023)

After months of conducting netnography to grasp the discussion and narratives among related fandoms, this research transitioned to attending all the relevant events firsthand to observe fan behaviour. To further understand fan behaviour and the connection shared with celebrities, the participant observation method was chosen. It is to delve deeper into understanding the meaning within the fandom contexts and how digital technology built the connection before meeting in person. Neuman (2014) emphasises that specific research techniques, such as participant observation, make more sense when we understand the underlying logic and assumption. Thus, adding participation observation as the second method serves to enhance comprehension and strengthen the findings of this research.

Neuman (2014) added that scholars develop participant observation as a distinct technique by expanding the anthropological technique to study a research's society, guided by three main principles which are;

- 1) Study people in their natural settings,
- 2) Study people directly by interacting with them repeatedly over time, and
- 3) Develop broad theoretical insights based on an in-depth understanding of members' perspectives of the social world.

Therefore, while the research aimed to only look at Malaysians, focusing on the Malays and given the researcher's extensive experience in studying Korean Wave fandom locally, this method is relevant and serves as a valuable tool in conducting this research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section discusses the findings of the research question regarding the impact of changes in social media habits during the pandemic on how fans engage with the Korean Wave, particularly with non-K-Pop cultural products. Based on observations conducted at three events in the Klang Valley, it is evident that both event organizers and fans have become increasingly reliant on digital media, especially social media, for information about events, celebrities, brands and even products related to the Korean Wave. This research also aims to highlight the expansion of the Korean Wave beyond just content and celebrities and to include products endorsed by South Korean celebrities. To further elaborate on these findings, this paper will discuss the findings based on the three events, while the changes are measured in terms of four elements; extension, substitution, amalgamation and accommodation of the media towards human activities.

The first event is the Mokkoji Korea event, dated 12th to 13th, November 2022. Mokkoji Korea is a global Korean Wave event hosted by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, supervised by KOFICE (Korean Foundation for International Cultural Exchange). The word "MOKKOJI" refers to the action of gathering many people through games, parties and various other events. There are numerous experience and exhibition areas, including Mini Stage (celebrity engagement), Mokkoji Kitchen (Korean Food), Mokkoji Square and Mokkoji Market. On top of that, Mokkoji Korea also incorporates numerous activities for fans to have deeper exposure to Korean culture. At the same time, celebrities such as Jeon Somi, Moonbin, Sanha, and many more were there to promote products from South Korea and draw similarities with local products, thereby successfully emphasising cultural proximity. It fostered cross-cultural understanding and appreciation.

In Malaysia, Mokkoji is considered an event organized by the embassy and the Korea Tourism Organization (KTO). As a result, accessing the event was different from other commercial events. Instead of purchasing tickets, fans must register and participate in quizzes or games conducted by the embassy or KTO on their official social media accounts, such as Instagram and Facebook. Only the winners will receive entry tickets. Additionally, the embassy's official social media influencers, the Korean Online Supporters, are responsible for promoting the events on their social media platforms. These findings align with the researcher's previous work and findings, which involved interviewing embassy personnel on the use of social media influencers. The person in charge at that time mentioned that the social influencer's role was not only to promote but also to increase awareness of Korean culture, the people, their characteristics, and what Koreans think of others. At the same time, hiring local Malaysians as social media influencers is a way to know each other, and they can organize cultural events and introduce Malaysians to Korean culture (Nurul Akqmie Badrul Hisham, 2021).

The same person further explained that driven by budget constrain, they decided to use social media and influencers. They realised they did not have enough money to advertise on major news channels or newspapers. Instead, they sought to find a way to disseminate information, especially to those genuinely interested. Hence, they decided to utilise social media networking sites (SNS) because it is an open channel where only those interested will make an effort to access the information. People at the embassy found this to be more effective than traditional advertising. Therefore, they focused on advertising in other ways by developing content, expanding their channels beyond just their homepage and Instagram,

and finding alternative structures, processes and content that better align with the demands and dynamics of the media landscape and the Korean Wave fans.



Figure 2: Ambassador-Designate of the Republic of Korea to Malaysia, Yeo Seung-Bae Attended One of the Booth.

With regard to Mokkahi and South Korea's soft diplomacy goals, it is clear that both the embassy and the KTO have become increasingly reliant on digital media. Traditional media has been replaced and superseded by digital platforms, dynamically addressing shortcomings and meeting needs. Then, by amalgamating various media channels to create a cohesive and extensive media presence with the ultimate goal of attracting more fans, garnering attention and increasing attendance at their event.

The second event observed was Melosaga Malaysia on the 13th to 15th January 2023 at MIECC, Seri Kembangan. This event can be seen as the largest street dance and music festival with participation from the famous YG Entertainment (an agency for celebrities such as BigBang, BlackPink, 2NE1, Winner, iKon and many more) from South Korea. This event provided a platform for local talent to shine while offering space for local sellers to showcase their products. This dual-purpose event attracted a diverse audience, including local entrepreneurs and YG Entertainment fandom. The involvement of YG Entertainment lent credibility to the event, attracting more attention and participants. Attendees not only got to enjoy the talent performances but also had the opportunity to learn how to dance with famous trainers and choreographers. Those interested in K-Pop also had a chance to try their luck to audition. At the same time, attendees had the opportunity to explore and purchase local products and contribute to the growth of local businesses.

The main attraction was the audition for YG Entertainment and the dance workshop by YGX. YGX is well-known for its dancers, Yeo Jin, JiHy0 and Moodo. These dancers are well known for their work as BlackPink's backup dancers and for participating in Street Woman and Street Man Fighter shows. This show is a popular television program that focuses on the K-Dance scene in South Korea. YGX and the dancers have significant followers online, with approximately 264,000, 163,000 and 854,00 each, both locally and globally. Despite the absence of celebrities, they were the main focus of attention at the event. In a way, they

became celebrities for fans inspired by their dancing and know them online and in the mainstream media. These fans eagerly waited for the opportunity to learn choreography from them, as they are seen as successful dancers who have made it in the industry.

The online discussion on this event differed from the first event, Mokkoji. Since Melosaga was a commercial event, they started to promote it early on social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. The organizers amalgamated social media and various media channels, such as other digital media outlets, influencers, and local celebrities, thus succeeding in creating an extensive media presence for this event. It attracts more fans and ticket sales and increases attendance for their event.

The organizers also extended their invitation to less popular independent digital media channels in exchange for free promotional content, such as teasers about which celebrities would be attending. However, an unexpected announcement did happen a few weeks before the event when South Korea's celebrities, Zico and Crush, had cancelled their appearances. As a result, a few online posters were taken down and replaced with local celebrities as the main attraction, along with the dancers and audition team. Upon observing the event and cross-referencing with netnography, it was evident that the turnout was lower than expected, coupled with the numerous frustrated comments on social media about celebrity cancellations. It appeared that some attendees may not have been as interested in the local acts as opposed to the K-Pop acts. However, the renowned dancers still managed to draw in fans who actively attended and participated in the events despite the absence of prominent celebrities, especially those inspired dancers.

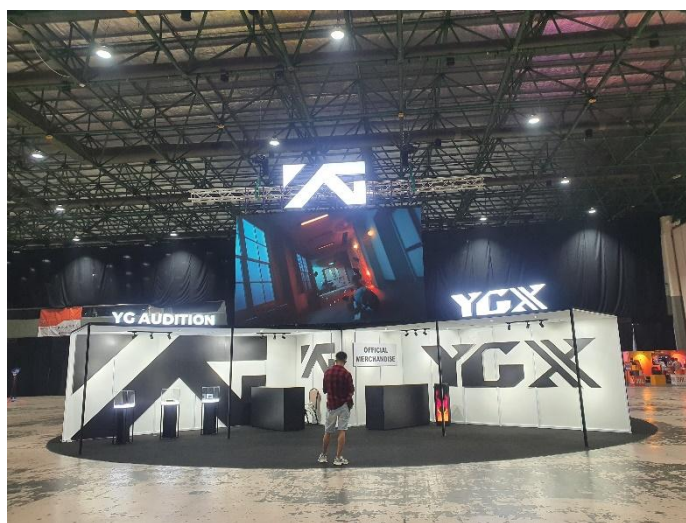


Figure 2: Official booth for YG Entertainment

The third event, Watson Kbeauty Fiesta, was held on the 17th and 18th of March 2023 at Sentul Depot. This event utilised Song JiHyo as the brand ambassador for Glutanex, the main Korean skincare brand for the event. Instead of using traditional editorials or ads, the brand substitutes it by utilising her social media accounts. Through her social media platforms, audiences are able to see the actress using skincare products at home while travelling and for work. For this event, the organizer's media reach and influence expand beyond traditional boundaries, targeting a wider audience through digital platforms. The event also showcased a stellar lineup of renowned skincare brands converging under one roof to offer attendees the unparalleled K-Beauty experience. Inviting a famous Korean female

celebrity to endorse a skincare brand significantly increased brand visibility and drew a large audience. The event attracted Song JiHyo's existing followers and also fans of South Korean skincare. Significantly, social media played a crucial role in promoting the event.

The actor, Song JiHyo, comprehensively uses her social media accounts to post about her time in Kuala Lumpur during the two days she was here. Not only did she attend the event and meet with fans, but she also influenced them to purchase the products available. She would participate in sessions with attendees, interacting with attendees by talking to them about their skincare routines and how she uses the products. She also gave the fans a rare opportunity to have close proximity interaction. While the organizer's common objective was to generate sales, the attendees were also able to create lasting memories and connections with her. Additionally, the event organizer combined Watson's official social media posts with the celebrity's posts about the event, which generated substantial engagement such as likes, shares and comments. As a result, attendees at the event and at home were exposed to various brands and their products, leading to a significant increase in brand awareness, engagement and product sales both during and after the events.



Figure 3: Song JiHyo as Glutanex ambassador For Watson KBeauty Fiesta

CONCLUSION

Previous studies have proven that social media is a crucial aspect of fans' lives and that the mediatization process existed in Malay female youth in the Korean Wave phenomena. Now, further investigation into non-K-Pop cultural product of the Korean Wave has proven that the interactive nature of social media attracted the youth's attention and has also deepened the meaning of media in their everyday life. Events leveraged by the star power to effectively promote products and brand promotion, especially when the celebrity has a strong and engaged following. It significantly emphasises social media's role in amplifying the reach and impact of an event.

Observation and online discussion effectively utilised the influence of celebrities to bridge cultural gaps and promote products with cultural significance. It demonstrated how shared values, meaning and experiences can create a sense of connection among diverse audiences. Additionally, the event showcased the power of storytelling in marketing, as the narratives shared by the celebrities resonated with attendees. Most importantly, social media

exemplifies the synergy between corporate interests and community support. It's a unique opportunity to witness how the digital age, through mediatization, bridges the gap between devoted fans, celebrities and the products and brands from South Korea.

BIODATA

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