



From Screen to Seoul: Korean Wave, Romantic Imaginaries, and Affective Mobility among Young Japanese Women

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Abstract

The Korean Wave (Hallyu) has significantly influenced female audiences in Japan. While in the early 2000s the main audience of this cultural phenomenon consisted of middle-aged women, it has recently shifted toward a younger demographic. This study explores how Hallyu has been perceived by and has influenced young Japanese women, particularly in their decisions to study or live in Korea. Through semi-structured interviews with ten Japanese women, findings reveal that early interest in K-pop, amplified by Korean dramas and social media, fosters a positive image of Korea and a strong emotional connection. This connection not only deepens their enjoyment of Korean media but also motivates some to experience life in Korea, with some hoping to meet a Korean partner. Participants' exposure to Hallyu across its generational phases—from the early wave to more recent, digitally mediated forms—further strengthens their connection, prompting significant life choices. These findings suggest broader implications for Korea-Japan relations in the contemporary era of Hallyu.

Keywords: Hallyu, K-pop, K-drama, Korean masculinity, fan agency, transnational mobility, Japanese women

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Introduction

Korea and Japan, two neighboring countries in East Asia, share a complex and historically fraught relationship. Yet, the rise of the Korean Wave, or Hallyu—a term referring to the global popularity of South Korean popular culture—has significantly influenced the socio-cultural dynamics between the two nations (Mori 2008; Yum and Shim 2016). Driven by the transnational appeal of Korean dramas, pop music, and films, Hallyu initially captivated middle-aged Japanese women, who engaged with this cultural flow by traveling to Korea, visiting filming sites, and attending concerts and fan events featuring Korean celebrities (Hirata 2008). Over time, such forms of cultural consumption have contributed to a gradual shift in Japanese perceptions of Korea, fostering more favorable cross-cultural attitudes (Creighton 2016, 11).

Over the past decade, there has been a noticeable shift in the demographic composition of Japanese Hallyu fans, with a growing number of younger, unmarried women becoming deeply engaged in Korean popular culture. According to a 2023 public opinion survey conducted by the Cabinet Office of Japan, 52.8 percent of respondents reported feeling an affinity toward Korea, with the figure rising to 58.1 percent among women and 66.2 percent among those aged 18 to 29 (Naikaku-hu 2023). Additionally, in 2022, the number of Japanese students studying abroad in South Korea reached 2,430 in degree programs and 3,303 in non-degree programs, marking the highest level in twelve years (Gyoyukbu 2022). These figures suggest that beyond passive cultural consumption, many young women are actively reorienting their lives—relocating to Korea for education or work—often inspired by their engagement with Hallyu media and the broader affective imaginaries it evokes.

Through an analysis of interviews with ten Japanese women, this study examines how young individuals exercise their agency in navigating personal desires and goals within the context of Hallyu's cultural impact. Rather than focusing on geopolitical implications, it foregrounds the affective and personal dimensions of transnational cultural engagement, highlighting how mediated encounters with Hallyu shape aspirations,

inform life decisions, and enable everyday forms of cross-border mobility. The research addresses the following questions:

1. What drives young Japanese women's desire to move to Korea?
2. How do they exercise their agency in pursuing opportunities to study or live in Korea?

Hallyu in Global Context

While this study focuses on Japan, it is useful to begin with an overview of the global spread of Hallyu (or the Korean Wave) and related scholarship. Emerging in the late 1990s with the rising popularity of Korean dramas, Hallyu has since evolved into a global cultural phenomenon encompassing diverse forms of “K-Culture” and “K-Content” (Shim 2025). Early analyses of the Korean Wave contextualized it within the broader framework of media globalization that had been unfolding since the early 1990s (Chua and Iwabuchi 2008). In contrast to the intensifying Americanization that followed the collapse of the Eastern Bloc, the expansion of market economies, and the digital revolution, Hallyu was interpreted as evidence that the global cultural market was becoming increasingly receptive to media content from smaller nations like South Korea (Robertson 1995; Shim 2006).

Additionally, the popularity of Japanese television dramas in Southeast Asia during the late 1990s had already sparked pan-Asian cultural imaginaries (Iwabuchi 2002). Within this trajectory, Hallyu further stimulated cultural flows among Asian countries—many of which had previously experienced only limited exchange—and prompted discussions about its potential contribution to the de-Westernization of global cultural dynamics (Chua and Iwabuchi 2008; Shim 2005). In this context, the concept of cultural proximity was frequently invoked to explain Hallyu's resonance across Asia (Jung 2011; Straubhaar 1991).

Nevertheless, many scholars predicted that Hallyu would be a short-lived phenomenon. Given South Korea's relatively small economy and its

historical status as a cultural import rather than export nation, some doubted whether the wave could sustain its momentum (S. Lee 2025). Contrary to such expectations, however, the proliferation of YouTube and other social media platforms in the 2010s significantly amplified Hallyu's global reach (Jung 2011). A notable example is singer Psy's "Gangnam Style," whose music video, uploaded to YouTube on July 15, 2012, had by December of that year become the first video in history to surpass one billion views. As of June 17, 2025, the video has accumulated 5,607,591,094 views, maintaining its status as one of the most-watched videos on the platform. Furthermore, the global rise of K-pop groups such as BTS and BLACKPINK in the late 2010s positioned them among the most influential music acts in the world. In the 2020s, Korea's cultural industries have further expanded their global footprint, with Korean artists and creators receiving major accolades—including Academy Awards, Grammys, and Tonys—thus demonstrating Hallyu's deepening imprint across multiple domains of global popular culture (Shim 2025).

Alongside this trajectory, early studies that interpreted Hallyu as the emergence of a minor cultural force within global popular culture have gradually given way to research emphasizing the agency of global fans. This shift positions Hallyu as a dynamic force in the digital era, characterized by increasingly diverse forms of audience participation (Jung 2011; Kim and Park 2024). Rather than framing fans merely as passive consumers of Korean media, recent scholarship has highlighted the ways in which Hallyu shapes everyday life and decision-making (Anderson and Shim 2015). For instance, several studies have examined how engagement with Hallyu motivates individuals to learn the Korean language (Nam 2009; Nikitina and Furuoka 2019; Wang and Kelly 2024), and how fans undertake lifestyle changes—such as studying abroad in Korea or relocating there permanently—to immerse themselves in Korean culture (Creighton 2016; M. Lee 2013).

These decisions are often driven by a mix of media-induced admiration, aspirations for personal transformation, and idealized visions of Korean life and romance. As Min Joo Lee (2020) observes, some young women from Western countries even travel to Korea in hopes of romantic relationships with Korean men, shaped by the emotionally charged depictions of love and

masculinity in K-dramas. In this context, Hallyu functions not merely as entertainment, but as a powerful cultural vector that shapes individual imaginaries, cross-border mobility, and long-term life choices.

Hallyu Boom in Japan

In Japan, media commentators commonly categorize Hallyu into four distinct phases—referred to as the first (*dai-ichi*), second (*dai-ni*), third (*dai-san*), and fourth (*dai-yon*) waves (Shim 2025). The first wave of the Hallyu boom can be traced to the broadcast of the Korean television drama *Winter Sonata* (*Gyeongju yeonga*) between 2003 and 2004, which ignited widespread enthusiasm for Korean culture, including its language, cuisine, and media content (Kim et al. 2009). This phenomenon was particularly pronounced among middle-aged Japanese women, who not only participated in fan meetings and events (Mori 2008), but also traveled to South Korea to visit filming locations featured in the drama (Hirata 2008). The appeal of *Winter Sonata* lay in its romantic narrative and idealized portrayal of love, which many viewers interpreted as fulfilling emotional needs unmet in their everyday lives (Chae 2014).

Analyzing the depiction of male protagonists in K-dramas, Takeda (2014) found that they are often portrayed as embodying “pure love,” marked by deep affection, loyalty, and emotional devotion. Some characters are also depicted as offering a Cinderella-like transformation, providing both romantic fulfillment and financial stability to the female lead. These portrayals, Takeda (2011) argues, contribute to the idealization of Korean men among Japanese viewers and, in some cases, influence women’s desires for romantic relationships or even marriage with Korean partners.

The second wave, which emerged in the late 2000s and early 2010s, was driven by the popularity of K-pop idol groups such as TVXQ, Super Junior, KARA, BIGBANG, and Girls’ Generation. This phase marked a demographic shift in the Hallyu fan base, expanding it to include younger generations (Jung and Hirata 2012). To understand the dynamics of this second wave, scholars have examined the comparative appeal of K-pop and J-pop. While

Japanese idol groups are often appreciated for their amateur charm, Korean idols are celebrated for their technical precision and highly polished performances—a result of Korea's rigorous training system (Lie 2016). Moreover, K-pop artists strategically utilize social media and diverse content production methods to enhance global accessibility and fan engagement (Jin 2020). These factors enabled the second wave of Hallyu to resonate with Japanese youth and further stimulated their interest in Korean culture, including language, history, and cuisine. As a result, perceptions of Korea among these fans shifted from previously negative or indifferent attitudes to more favorable ones. Although anti-Korean sentiment persisted among certain segments of Japanese society during this period, Hallyu fans often consciously separated political tensions from their cultural enjoyment (Ahn and Yoon 2020).

The third wave, emerging in the mid-2010s, continued to attract teenagers and young adults. Global groups such as BTS and TWICE gained widespread popularity in Japan during this period, while Korean beauty trends—particularly the *ulzzang* (*eoljjang* 얼짱) style—spread rapidly via social media. The rising popularity of Korean cosmetics and cuisine also contributed to a broader cultural fascination with Korea.

Finally, the fourth wave, which gained traction in the early 2020s during the COVID-19 pandemic, has been shaped by global digital platforms such as Netflix. This phase is characterized by the diversification of Hallyu's appeal across age and gender groups, increased localization of Korean content for Japanese audiences, and growing collaborations between Korean and Japanese entertainment industries.

For many young Japanese women, the consumption of Korean culture—ranging from food and beauty to fashion and K-pop—has become seamlessly integrated into their everyday lives. In this context, Shin-Ōkubo (Tokyo's Koreatown) has emerged as a distinctly feminized consumer space, where young women congregate to enjoy Korean cuisine, idol performances, K-pop merchandise, and interactions with attractive Korean men (Phillips and Baudinette 2022). Beyond domestic consumption, an increasing number of Japanese students are choosing to study abroad in South Korea, a trend largely fueled by their exposure to Korean popular culture. As Takeda

(2020) notes, K-dramas and K-pop frequently foster romanticized and idealized images of Korea, which in turn influence young women's aspirations for transnational mobility and deeper cultural immersion.

In relation to the pursuit of transnational relocation, this paper identifies two generational fan formations in Japan: middle-aged emotional spectators—largely associated with the first wave of Hallyu—who maintained a distanced admiration for Korean celebrities, and younger aspirational fans—emerging in the second wave and gaining greater prominence in the 2020s—who seek embodied engagement and even cross-border romantic relationships. While the conventional “first,” “second,” “third,” and “fourth” wave framework has been useful in mapping the chronological diffusion of Hallyu, this analysis foregrounds the evolving affective and relational orientations within Japanese fandom. While previous studies have explored Japanese women's romanticized perceptions of Korean men (Takeda 2011, 2014), social interactions in Tokyo's Koreatown (Phillips and Baudinette 2022), and similar transnational desires among Western women (M. J. Lee 2020), the specific experiences of young Japanese women who seek life-remaking opportunities in Korea remain underexplored. Given Japan's geographical proximity to and cultural familiarity with Korea, the Japanese case offers valuable insights into the gendered and affective dimensions of Hallyu engagement.

As such, this study aims to address this gap by examining how Hallyu has been perceived by, and has influenced, young Japanese audiences. Building on Takeda's (2011, 2014) findings that Hallyu has contributed to Japanese women's interest in dating Korean men, this study further explores how this influence extends to a range of desires and motivations, including some participants' romantic aspirations. Finally, it investigates how these factors collectively shape the actions and decisions of Japanese women. The concept of agency, which will be discussed in the following section, serves as the analytical framework for understanding these dynamics.

Traditional Scripts of Female Desire and Agency

In examining the choices and actions of young Japanese women in response to Hallyu, the concept of agency plays a central role. Agency refers to the ability of individuals to make choices and take actions based on their past experiences, present circumstances, and future possibilities. Emirbayer and Mische (1998) describe agency as a dynamic process that connects these temporal dimensions—habitual past, imaginative future, and practical present—allowing people to navigate complex social realities. Similarly, Giddens (1984) emphasizes agency as the reflective capacity of individuals to monitor and influence their social contexts, highlighting the continuous interplay between structure and action. These understanding stresses that agency is both shaped by social structures and capable of transforming them through meaningful action.

In this article, we use the term fan agency to describe how Japanese women actively engage with Korean popular culture—not simply as consumers, but as self-reflective individuals who reinterpret media content and reshape their identities and life trajectories through fandom. Fan agency involves fans' capacity to interpret, appropriate, and act upon media texts in ways that extend beyond passive consumption.

Therefore, rather than viewing Hallyu fandom as mere escapism, this study foregrounds how young Japanese women translate emotional attachment into meaningful actions, such as migration, career shifts, or relationship aspirations. As Jenkins (1992) famously argued, fans are not passive consumers but active participants who reinterpret media content through their own experiences—an exercise of fan agency. In the same context, Lewis (1992) and Sandvoss (2005) highlight how fandom plays a key role in identity formation and gendered media engagement. This framework allows us to understand young Japanese women's engagement with K-pop not as passive consumption but as a culturally significant practice that influences life decisions, including transnational mobility.

The research on female consumption of TV melodramas often takes an apologetic stance, seeking to validate the genre by highlighting the legitimacy of female desire and agency. For example, Ien Ang's study of

American women's viewing of the soap opera *Dallas* introduces the concept of the "melodramatic imagination," which argues for a legitimate space where women can find respite by identifying with melodramatic characters and experiencing their emotional highs and lows vicariously—navigating crises and resolutions in a fictional world without real-life consequences. This melodramatic imagination thus offers a safe realm of emotional excess within an otherwise mundane and orderly social existence (Ang 1982).

In line with this broader theoretical narrative, research on Korean TV dramas in Asia has similarly sought to legitimize female desire, pleasure, and agency by emphasizing women's active engagement with the melodramatic imagination. For example, Lin and Tong interviewed female viewers in Hong Kong, and Singapore, finding that despite social and cultural differences, women across these societies were all drawn to the fairy-tale narratives of Korean dramas. In the beautiful fictional world of these dramas, there is always a "perfect prince" waiting for a "Cinderella" (Lin and Tong 2008).

Regarding Japanese desires for foreign spaces, desire has traditionally been theorized in relation to the English language and the West. English—particularly American English—has long been positioned as a symbol of modernity, status, and cosmopolitan identity in Japan, shaped by post-war US influence and broader ideologies of the West. This symbolic hierarchy has often intertwined with romanticized notions of whiteness and Western lifestyles, framing them as aspirational (Kubota and McKay 2009; Kubota 2023; Rivers and Ross 2013). This has given rise to what scholars refer to as *akogare*—a yearning or aspirational desire—for English, white native speakers, and the Western lifestyle. For instance, Takahashi (2012) examined how Japanese women temporarily living in Australia were drawn to English-speaking white men, influenced by idealized images circulated in media and popular discourse. Kubota (2011) also pointed out that some Japanese women attending English conversation schools developed attachments to white native-speaking male teachers—not necessarily to advance linguistically but to enjoy the atmosphere of exoticism and fantasy. Likewise, Nonaka (2018) observed that female students studying abroad expressed interest in forming connections with white American male peers, further

illustrating how *akogare* often operates at the intersection of desire, race, and mobility.

Existing research suggests that female viewers of romantic dramas express their agency and derive legitimate enjoyment from melodramatic content, particularly by identifying with fairy-tale narratives commonly found in Korean dramas, which offer a meaningful contrast to their everyday lives. While prior studies emphasize how these narratives create a space for agency within social and cultural constraints, this study builds on those insights by examining how young Japanese women engage with Hallyu in a context marked by increased freedom and the opportunity to experience life in Korea firsthand. With expanded access to travel and social media, fan agency increasingly extends beyond fictional identification to encompass real-life decisions shaped by the Hallyu phenomenon. Moreover, romantic and aspirational desires—once predominantly oriented toward Western imaginaries—are now frequently directed toward Korea, influencing women's choices regarding language learning, lifestyle, and cross-border mobility.

Taken together, these patterns illustrate how Hallyu functions as both a mediated fantasy and a tangible horizon of possibility, reshaping the emotional and practical geographies of young women's lives. The next section outlines the research design used to explore these dynamics in greater depth.

Research Design

This study explores how Hallyu influences the emotional perceptions and social interactions of young Japanese women aged 24–35 who have actively engaged with Korean popular culture—such as K-pop, dramas, and social media content—since their adolescence. Between July 15 and July 30, 2023, ten participants were recruited through the existing social network of one of the researchers, who is Japanese and has an interest in Hallyu phenomena. Semi-structured interviews were conducted via Zoom, focusing on topics such as participants' initial exposure to Korean culture, their favorite aspects

of Hallyu, perceptions of Korean men as portrayed in the media, and the influence of Hallyu on their everyday lives. A summary of participant backgrounds is provided in Table 1 (pseudonyms are used to ensure confidentiality).

Prior to the interviews, all participants were fully briefed on the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of their participation, and the steps taken to ensure confidentiality. They were informed that they could withdraw at any time without penalty. Verbal consent was obtained, and participants were assured that their mental wellbeing would be prioritized throughout the process. All interviews were conducted in Japanese, audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim. The duration of interviews ranged from approximately 25 to 85 minutes, with an average length of about 40 minutes. Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring themes and patterns within the data.

Table 1. Summary of Interview Participants

Pseudonym	Age	Current occupation	Relationship experience with Korean partner	Experience of living in Korea	Status in Korea
Mai	35	Housewife	Yes (married)	8 months	Housewife/student
Yu	26	Nurse	Yes	9 months	Student
Aya	29	Teacher	Yes	7 months	Student
Miki	24	Service industry	Yes	11 months	Student
Mayuna	28	Office worker	N/A	6 months	Student
Yuko	28	Office worker	Yes	None	N/A
Kana	27	Office worker	Yes	None	N/A
Mayu	28	Office worker	Yes	None	N/A
Yuriko	28	Office worker	N/A	None	N/A
Aki	27	Office worker	N/A	None	N/A

Note: The interviewees are listed in the order in which the interviews were conducted.

Findings

This section presents the findings from the interviews. All quoted excerpts are English translations of the participants' original responses in Japanese. The analysis is organized into three thematic areas. First, we explore how young Japanese women became interested in Korean culture, particularly through K-pop, and how they perceive its appeal. Second, we examine their engagement with Korean dramas and the meanings they attach to them. Finally, we discuss how their fandom experiences have shaped a desire for new life experiences in Korea, including romantic aspirations involving Korean men, and the concrete actions and decisions that followed from these desires.

K-pop as Entry Point to Interest in Korea

The majority of participants described K-pop as their initial gateway to Korean culture. Although the ten informants had diverse backgrounds and varying experiences, nine reported that their first interest in Korea stemmed from exposure to K-pop.

Yuko, for instance, encountered K-pop while studying abroad in New Zealand during high school. A Korean friend introduced her to popular songs by groups such as KARA and Girls' Generation, sparking her immediate fascination with Korean music. Yuriko, an ethnic Korean who later naturalized as Japanese, was first introduced to K-pop through her mother and grandmother, who were passionate fans of TVXQ even before the group gained popularity in Japan. While she initially joined them in attending concerts and events in Korea, her own enthusiasm grew later when TVXQ became widely known among her Japanese peers.

Only one participant, Miki, came to K-pop indirectly—through her admiration for a Korean athlete in the Winter Olympics, which led her to explore other aspects of Korean popular culture. The rest of the participants were introduced to K-pop artists such as TVXQ, Girls' Generation, T-ARA, KARA, BIGBANG, and BoA through family, friends, or media exposure. For most, K-pop served as the first spark that led to deeper engagement with

Korean culture.

When asked what drew them to K-pop, most participants highlighted the idols' exceptionally high-level performances, particularly in terms of dance and vocal skills. Several also compared K-pop idols with Japanese idols, often emphasizing a significant difference in professionalism and polish. Yuko, who is also a fan of Japanese idols, noted:

After watching K-pop, which is much more sophisticated than the Japanese entertainment industry, I'm sorry to say, but they are completely on different levels in terms of singing ability, movement, and quality of dance.

This comparison was echoed by others. Mayuna, for example, contrasted Japanese idols such as AKB48 with K-pop idols:

Japanese idols such as AKB48 are like [a performance at] Parents' Day at a preschool, which I think is good on its own. Like, this sense of incompleteness may be their charm...But their [K-pop idols'] quality is really high, like the details such as their well-defined movements and facial expressions.

Beyond technical performance, many informants were drawn to the visible effort and rigorous training that underpin K-pop idols' success. This perception of hard work, often lacking in portrayals of Japanese idols, seemed to generate emotional investment and admiration. Aki reflected on her experience:

Seeing K-pop idols making a lot of effort in a more severe environment than the Japanese one on TV, it made me want to support them. I mean, the background is different from Japanese idols, like the training system, and yet they have been selected, so I was fascinated by that.

Yuko also remarked on the structural difference:

The training period is really long, isn't it, for the trainees. Japanese idols are auditioned and sort of immediately, "ok, debut," but Korea is not like that. There is a custom to spend many years as a trainee before making a debut. So, their level is really high.

Similarly, Mayu explained:

Our image of idols is like Johnny's, AKB48 and Morning Musume, but the image of Korean idols is different. Like, they have depth. Of course, AKB48 and Morning Musume probably made efforts too, but I feel like K-pop idols are making much more effort on a completely different level. So, I can feel that they've worked really hard, and that makes me emotionally attached to them.

Many participants linked this behind-the-scenes effort to their impressive live performances. Some pointed out that K-pop idols "don't lip-synch at all," that "their dance moves are really sharp," and that "they keep performing in perfect order until the end," which demonstrated, in Yuriko's words, their "real abilities as entertainers."

The informants were not only impressed by the high-level performances of K-pop idols, but also by their visible effort in various aspects of their careers as entertainers. For many, this sense of hard work and dedication—often revealed through bonus content and social media—deepened their emotional engagement. Mai, who initially did not have a positive image of Korea, experienced a shift in perspective through a friend who was an avid K-pop fan. Watching a DVD of TVXQ's concert at her friend's suggestion, she was particularly struck by a bonus clip showing one of the members diligently studying Japanese. She recalled:

These people are close to me in age, but are making so much effort—even coming to Japan even though he is Korean.

Such *behind-the-scenes* glimpses—often featured in DVDs or on YouTube—allowed fans to witness the idols' personal growth and efforts to connect

with foreign audiences. Mayu also emphasized this aspect when asked what she liked about K-pop:

Of course, the songs, but also their humanity. Even though they are idols, they have various aspects as individuals, and they show it to the fans on platforms like YouTube. I find those variety of aspects of them as individuals very attractive.

These informal, candid portrayals of idols contributed to the perception that they were not only highly skilled performers but also sincere individuals working hard to achieve success across cultural and linguistic boundaries.

In summary, most participants became interested in Korean culture through K-pop during the late 2000s and early 2010s. While the technical quality of performances is a major draw to K-pop fans (Lie 2016), what sustained these interviewees interest—and emotional attachment—was the visible effort and human stories behind the polished images. This was especially meaningful in contrast to Japanese idols, who were often seen as lacking a comparable depth of training or personal narrative. As such, the structured idol training system in Korea not only produces high-level performers but also serves as a compelling narrative for fans, who come to admire the idols' resilience and commitment as part of their fandom experience.

Immersion into K-Dramas and Romantic Curiosity toward Korean Men

Triggered by their initial interest in K-pop, all participants eventually developed an interest in Korean dramas. While their initial intention was to learn more about Korean culture, their engagement soon deepened into a strong emotional involvement. As they continued watching Korean dramas, many found themselves increasingly captivated, eventually extending their curiosity to online blogs and posts about dating Korean men. This, in turn, further stimulated their romantic interest in Korean men and life in Korea. One commonly cited reason for their attachment to Korean dramas was their structural difference from Japanese dramas, particularly the number of

episodes. For example, Yu, who began watching K-dramas after learning that a favorite K-pop idol starred in one, recalled:

Korean dramas are quite long. When I first watched a series with 16 to 20 episodes, unlike Japanese dramas which usually end after 9 to 11, I was surprised by the length.

Other participants shared similar views, noting that although the early episodes could feel slow, they found themselves drawn in as the plot developed. As Mayu described:

The first few episodes weren't that interesting, but before I realized it, I just couldn't stop watching.

Many participants described K-dramas as offering a compelling mix of romance, fantasy, and suspense—elements they found either lacking or less emphasized in Japanese dramas. This combination of dramatic intensity and emotional storytelling was cited as a key factor in their continued viewing.

Some participants described Korean dramas as “classic” in their storytelling. For instance, Mai noted that while the plot's details may vary, the ending is often predictable: “It's easy to guess the conclusion—usually the poor girl and the wealthy heir end up together—so I can watch Korean dramas with a sense of ease.” Yuko highlighted the episodic structure as a distinctive feature, explaining that “each episode ends in a way that draws the audience in, and there are many episodes, unlike Japanese dramas.”

Another reason Korean dramas were easy to watch for some participants was their ability to personalize the stories. Mayu shared that although she had not experienced the exact situations depicted, many narratives felt relatable and could be imagined as stories of people she might know. This sense of emotional proximity is likely connected to cultural and visual similarities between Japan and Korea. When asked about dramas from other countries, Yuko explained that she preferred Korean dramas because “they feature Asian actors who look like me—with black hair and dark eyes—making it easier to relate visually and emotionally. In contrast,

Western dramas felt distant and overwhelming.”

Overall, the interviews suggest that participants began watching Korean dramas after their initial interest in Korean culture deepened. They became engaged for multiple reasons: the manageable length of series, familiar “classic” storylines, compelling episode endings, and a strong cultural and emotional affinity. This sense of familiarity allowed them to enjoy Korean dramas comfortably. While their primary motivation appeared to be entertainment, most participants also developed certain images and perceptions of Korean men through these dramas.

When asked about the image of Korean men that they had developed through watching Korean dramas, most participants—while noting that these impressions were not necessarily derived from dramas alone—described Korean men as kind, gentlemanly, and exhibiting “ladies first” behavior. Yuko, for example, recalled gestures such as “patting the girl’s head,” while Kana emphasized their attentiveness, noting that Korean men “look after the girl well and notice small things, like worrying if her feet hurt when wearing heels.” Mayu remarked that Korean men “celebrate anniversaries a lot,” and Yuriko added that they “consider it an important event and always remember it.”

When elaborating on what they meant by “gentlemanly” or “ladies first,” participants cited examples such as “opening the doors for the girl” (Mayu) or “treating the girl as if she is a princess” (Yuriko). Although more than half of the participants expressed such views, many were unable to provide concrete examples, suggesting that their impressions may have been shaped not only by Korean dramas but also by a broader range of media content.

Indeed, several participants noted that their perceptions of Korean men were further reinforced through YouTube videos and online articles, many of which portray Korean men as ideal boyfriend material. This exposure across multiple media platforms appeared to play a role in cultivating a romantic interest in Korean men among participants.

In sum, the participants’ emotional engagement with Korean dramas was facilitated by a sense of cultural and physical proximity, which allowed them to relate more easily to the characters and narratives. While earlier

studies have shown that middle-aged women often engage with Korean dramas to fulfill desires and fantasies absent in their everyday lives (Chae 2014; Mori 2008), the younger generation seems to perceive the lifestyles and male portrayals in these dramas as potentially attainable within their own realities.

Exercising their Agency to Start a New Life in Korea

After watching Korean dramas and engaging with Korean culture and media, all participants developed a desire—albeit to varying degrees—not merely to visit Korea, but to seek to build a new life there and pursue romantic relationships with Korean men. Some eventually relocated, making significant life changes such as quitting their jobs or taking extended leaves in order to study the Korean language and explore new possibilities. This section focuses on two participants, Yu and Aya, who resigned from their jobs to embark on this new chapter in their lives.

1) Desire to Leave the Current State of Life

Participants' narratives indicate that a central motivation for going to Korea was their desire to escape the stagnation or dissatisfaction they felt in their current lives. Although their professional backgrounds differed—one having worked as a nurse, the other as an elementary school teacher—both had spent four to five years in their jobs and found themselves frequently reflecting on their future, ultimately leading them to resign.

Yu, who worked as a nurse, said that seeing patients with serious illnesses and those given limited time to live made her realize that “anything could happen to my life at any time,” so she “wanted to take action as soon as possible if there was anything I would like to do.” This awareness motivated her to make a change.

Aya, who had worked as an elementary school teacher, expressed similar feelings. She shared how exhausting it was to deal with long working hours, demanding parents, and colleagues who, in her words, “seemed like know-it-alls.” She explained, “I was so stressed and unhappy working as a

teacher, staying late, and dealing with all these people.” Adding to her distress was her mother’s declining mental health: “My mom was also a teacher, and she started showing symptoms of depression. I thought, if I stay in this job, I’ll become like her.” Eventually, she began to ask herself deeper questions about the meaning of work and life. “There is no point in working being so unhappy if it is just to make money,” Aya concluded after much contemplation.

2) A Longstanding Affection for Korea

Both Yu and Aya had been familiar with Korean dramas and K-pop since their adolescence. Their interest in Korean dramas and K-pop was sparked by friends and the media. Yu, for example, became interested in K-pop after a friend sang K-pop songs at karaoke, and she started watching *You’re Beautiful* (*Minamisineyo*, 2009) because many of her friends were watching it. Aya’s interest began when she first heard a song by BoA on TV, which led her to watching *Winter Sonata*, a drama that was very popular at the time.

Since developing this initial interest, both had watched many Korean dramas and listened to numerous K-pop songs. Yu, who grew up in a rural area of Japan, was unable to attend concerts but collected all of TVXQ’s CDs, both Japanese and Korean versions, as well as DVDs of their concerts. She relied on “HMV, the only place I could count on” to get these items.

Although they had always been fans of K-pop and Korean dramas, they mostly enjoyed watching them with Japanese subtitles and did not start studying Korean until a few years after beginning work. Aya found some free time a few years into her career and decided to learn Korean as a hobby to fill that spare time. She was drawn to a nearby language school that offered classes taught by a native Korean instructor and attended lessons once a week for a couple of years.

Similarly, Yu began attending a language school to learn Korean, attracted by the opportunity to learn “native pronunciation” from a native speaker. However, due to her irregular work shifts, she struggled to fully commit to her studies and often felt frustrated because she could only attend classes once or twice a month, less than she had hoped. Although both Aya and Yu

also tried studying on their own using textbooks, they were dissatisfied with their progress.

3) From Imagination to Reality

While studying Korean, both Yu and Aya visited Korea several times. With each visit, they increasingly felt that living in Korea would be a desirable experience. They mentioned enjoying the atmosphere of Korea and especially liked Korean food. Moreover, they appreciated how warmly local Koreans interacted with them. Yu recalled that older people she met at markets and restaurants were very friendly, while Aya, who traveled alone, met several peers she had been communicating with through online apps, and found them kind and welcoming, even showing her around.

After multiple visits, Korea started to feel more real and tangible, moving beyond what they had only seen on TV or the internet. Their desire to live there grew stronger. Yu also felt more motivated to improve her Korean language skills as she interacted more with locals during her visits. Combining this growing aspiration with their frustrations at work and dissatisfaction with their Korean studies, both decided to resign from their jobs. The timing seemed right—Aya had just completed her mandatory five years at the elementary school, and Yu was already considering a change in her work environment.

The interviewees' accounts indicated that their original plans to stay in Korea were disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Both Yu and Aya had resigned from their jobs prior to the pandemic, intending to go to Korea on working holiday visas. However, due to the suspension of these visas during the pandemic, they were forced to change their plans. Since both held professional licenses, finding temporary work was relatively straightforward—Yu started working as a home health nurse, while Aya took a position as a support teacher for immigrant children.

When they realized that working holiday visas would not be available for some time, they decided to apply for student visas instead and enrolled in Korean language institutes (*eo**hakdang*) in Korea. When asked whether they had considered canceling their plans, both affirmed their commitment

to relocating to Korea, even if it meant incurring additional expenses to attend language school. Ultimately, they began their new lives in Korea as language students, motivated by the desire to leave behind their previous circumstances and transition into a new phase of life.

4) Romantic Fantasies and the Desire for Intimacy

For some participants, their decision to move to Korea was closely tied to romantic aspirations shaped by media representations. Korean dramas frequently depict emotionally expressive, caring, and attentive male protagonists, leading some women to form idealized images of Korean men as romantic partners.

Aya acknowledged that such idealization influenced her personal decision to relocate to Korea. Her interest in Korean men began after watching K-dramas, which she felt portrayed men as “gentle and emotionally considerate.” This perception was further reinforced through her encounters with Korean men via dating apps and during brief visits to Korea. “I met several guys in Japan,” she explained, “but things didn’t go well with the Korean guys living here. So I thought maybe it would be easier if I went to Korea, where there are only Korean guys.” After relocating, she met more than ten Korean men through dating apps and eventually entered into a relationship with one of them, which has continued for over four years.

Yu, while she did not initially move to Korea for romantic reasons, also shared her experiences with dating Korean men. She noted that many of her Japanese peers in Korea, particularly those she met at language institutes and through online communities, were drawn to Korean culture because of the way romantic relationships were portrayed in K-dramas. Yu herself eventually began using dating apps and met several Korean men. According to her, these experiences helped “make Korea feel more real and close,” adding another layer of personal connection to the country.

In understanding the participants’ motivations to migrate, it is helpful to situate their narratives within the broader framework of cultural imagination and affective mobility. The decision to relocate was not solely instrumental or economic; rather, it was shaped by emotional investments

in a mediated vision of Korea constructed through Hallyu media—referring to media products associated with the Korean Wave, including dramas, online articles, and YouTube videos. As Appadurai (1996) has noted, the imaginary plays a central role in shaping individual aspirations and transnational movement, especially when popular media functions as a repository of desire and possibility. In this context, Hallyu media did not merely serve as entertainment but as affective scripts through which participants envisioned alternative lives, particularly romantic ones, within a Korean cultural framework.

This phenomenon aligns with recent research paradigms that emphasize the emotional dimensions of human mobility—forms of migration driven not only by structural factors but also by affective attachments cultivated through mediated encounters (Ernstberger and Adaawen 2023; Swanson 2024). For Aya and Yu, the emotional narratives embedded in K-dramas offered an idealized vision of intimacy and masculinity, which gradually became more tangible through their interactions with Korean men both online and offline. Their engagement with media did not remain at the level of fandom; rather, it evolved into a lived aspiration to inhabit the cultural world portrayed on screen. In this context, Hallyu functions not merely as a vehicle of collective cultural engagement but also as a catalyst for deeply personal decisions, embedding gendered and emotional imaginaries into individual migratory trajectories.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study examined the evolving dynamics of the Korean Wave (Hallyu), focusing on how its transition from a middle-aged female fandom to a youth-centered phenomenon has reshaped modes of cultural engagement, affective investment, and individual decision-making. While early audiences engaged with Hallyu largely as spectators, the younger Japanese women in this study demonstrated more sustained and personally consequential forms of involvement. Their engagement with K-pop and Korean dramas was not merely consumption, but often underpinned by feelings of empathy,

aspiration, and perceived cultural proximity.

In particular, participants contrasted the highly systematized and polished performances of K-pop idols with the more informal aesthetics of Japanese idols. This contrast fostered admiration and perceived authenticity, reinforcing their emotional investment. Korean television dramas, with their extended, emotionally charged narratives and idealized portrayals of romance and masculinity, further contributed to a favorable image of Korean culture and, specifically, Korean men as attentive, romantic, and emotionally expressive partners. These narratives were often consumed alongside online content—such as YouTube videos and blog posts—that reinforced certain gendered and affective ideals.

For younger Japanese women, this affective engagement extended into tangible action. Our participants relocated to Korea for language study, cultural immersion, or the possibility of romantic relationships. Unlike earlier research that framed middle-aged fans as seeking to compensate for emotional lack through media (Chae 2014), the younger participants in this study viewed the experiences portrayed in media as attainable. As Takeda (2011, 2014) suggests, mediated representations of Korean masculinity can inspire transnational romantic imaginaries; this study extends that insight by illustrating how such imaginaries may translate into significant life decisions such as leaving one's job or moving abroad.

This study's findings also underscore the longitudinal nature of this engagement. Many participants were first exposed to Hallyu during its initial wave in Japan through their family environments, and they either returned to or sustained their interest throughout adolescence and into adulthood. Over time, their relationship with Hallyu evolved from passive consumption to active pursuit, demonstrating how repeated emotional engagement, cultural proximity, and geographic accessibility coalesced into a life-changing decision. The porous boundary between media fantasy and lived experience gradually dissolved, culminating in relocation and the reimagining of their personal futures. In this respect, Hallyu may function not only as a transnational cultural phenomenon but also—at an individual level—as a personal framework through which life-stage decisions are contemplated and enacted.

This study also invites reconsideration of established theoretical frameworks on female media spectatorship, which often emphasize symbolic resistance or identification within the domestic sphere (Ang 1982; Lin and Tong 2008; Shim 2007). The participants in this research enacted a form of agency that went beyond symbolic engagement. Their decisions to resign from work, relocate, and reconfigure their futures reflect a more material negotiation with the media narratives they consumed. This study conceptualizes this process as “double escape”—a dual movement through which mediated desire facilitates both an exit from the regimented structures of Japanese social and work life and a movement beyond the confines of mediated fantasy into an imagined yet materially inhabited space. Nonetheless, this study has certain limitations. Its small sample size constrains the generalizability of the findings, and future research should incorporate a broader range of demographic groups, including men, older age groups, and those participating in working holiday or exchange programs. Furthermore, while this study centers on emotional and cultural motivations, it does not fully account for the broader socio-political contexts—such as Japan–Korea relations, media discourse, and historical tensions—that may have also shaped the participants’ perceptions and actions. Subsequent studies could examine how such structural factors mediate or complicate affective engagements with Hallyu.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates how Hallyu, especially through its gendered and emotional narratives, can shape not only cultural consumption but also personal life choices. It calls for a more nuanced theoretical framework that captures the gendered dynamics of media-driven desire, affective mobility, and individual agency. While Hallyu remains a site of entertainment and transnational cultural influence, its impact can also be deeply embedded in the affective and aspirational trajectories of its audiences, informing the ways in which individuals imagine and act upon their futures across national and cultural boundaries.

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