

Beyond Entertainment: Korean Popular Culture and its Associations With Cultural Engagement and Perceptions of South Korea among International Audiences

Sumaiya Aktar ^{1*}, Jannatul Ferdous Lamia², Md. Yasin³

¹Rashidazzoha Govt. Women's College, Sirajganj, Bangladesh

²Birshreshtha Munshi Abdur Rouf Public College, Dhaka, Bangladesh

³Govt. Syed Hatem Ali College, Barishal, Bangladesh

*Correspondening Author

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ABSTRACTS

The Korean Wave, or Hallyu, has emerged as a significant global cultural phenomenon, yet relatively less is known about how engagement with Korean entertainment relates to broader cultural participation and perceptions of South Korea. This study examined the associations between Korean entertainment engagement and broader Korean cultural engagement, Korean language interest, social and emotional engagement, and country image of South Korea among international audiences aged 15–34. Drawing on soft power theory and uses and gratifications theory, a cross-sectional, multi-country online survey was conducted with 298 participants from 35 countries. Composite scores were calculated for each construct, and data were analyzed using correlation, regression, mediation, and moderation analyses. The findings indicated that Korean entertainment engagement was positively associated with broader Korean cultural engagement, Korean language interest, emotional engagement, and country image of South Korea. Broader Korean cultural engagement partially mediated the association between entertainment engagement and country image, suggesting that cultural engagement represents an important pathway in this relationship. However, age group did not significantly moderate these relationships, and exploratory geographic region comparisons did not reveal statistically significant differences. These findings contribute to scholarship on cultural globalization, transnational media consumption, and soft power by empirically examining the relationship between entertainment engagement and country image rather than assuming that cultural popularity automatically translates into soft power. The results suggest that Hallyu engagement extends beyond entertainment consumption and is associated with broader cultural interests and favorable country perceptions among the international audiences represented in this study. The findings have implications for educators, policymakers, and industry professionals seeking to better understand global audiences of Korean popular culture.

Keywords: Korean Wave, cultural engagement, soft power, country image, youth, transnational cultural consumption

INTRODUCTION

The Korean Wave, or Hallyu, has emerged as one of the most significant cultural phenomena of the twenty-first century, contributing to the diversification of global cultural flows and the international visibility of non-Western cultural production. What began as a regional interest in Korean television dramas in East Asia during the late 1990s has evolved into a multifaceted global phenomenon encompassing music, film, television, fashion, beauty, food, and other forms of cultural consumption. Today, Korean popular culture reaches audiences across diverse national and cultural contexts, creating an important context for examining how entertainment engagement may relate to broader cultural participation, social engagement, and perceptions of South Korea.

The scale of Hallyu's international reach is reflected in the 2026 Overseas Hallyu Survey conducted by the Korean Foundation for International Cultural Exchange (KOFICE) and the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism. The survey covered 27,400 respondents aged 15 to 59 across 30 countries and regions. It found that 69.7 percent of respondents expressed favorability toward Korean cultural content, while Korean food, film, drama, and music remained among the most widely experienced forms of Hallyu content. K-pop was also identified as the top representative image of Korea by 17.5 percent of respondents. The survey further reported variation in Hallyu consumption and perceptions across countries, regions, age groups, and demographic categories (KOFICE, 2026). These findings demonstrate the breadth of contemporary Hallyu and provide a basis for examining whether engagement with Korean popular culture extends beyond entertainment into broader cultural and attitudinal domains.

The global diffusion of Hallyu also challenges traditional assumptions about cultural flows, which have often emphasized the movement of cultural products from powerful Western centers toward other regions. Scholars have instead conceptualized Hallyu as a form of alternative cultural globalization in which non-Western cultural products achieve international visibility and expand the range of cultural choices available to global audiences (Cicchelli & Octobre, 2021; Iwabuchi, 2002). Hallyu therefore illustrates the increasing plurality of global cultural centers and the emergence of more multidirectional patterns of cultural exchange.

The contemporary Korean Wave has been further transformed by digital technologies. The emergence of "Hallyu 2.0" or "digital Hallyu" is associated with smartphones, social media, streaming platforms, and digitally mediated cultural participation (Jin, 2016; Kim, 2023). Platforms such as YouTube, Netflix, and TikTok have facilitated the discovery, circulation, discussion, reinterpretation, and sharing of Korean cultural content across geographical boundaries (Jin, 2016; Oh et al., 2026). Consequently, audiences are increasingly not only consumers but also participants in transnational cultural circulation through online communities, fan activities, content sharing, and cultural events (Jenkins, 2006). This participatory dimension raises important questions about whether sustained engagement with Korean entertainment is associated with broader cultural and social engagement.

The present study focuses on audiences aged 15–34, an important and highly engaged demographic in contemporary Korean popular culture. The 2026 Overseas Hallyu Survey found that females in their teens, twenties, and thirties accounted for the largest shares of diverse K-content consumption and reported greater time spent consuming content (KOFICE, 2026). These audiences are also particularly likely to encounter Korean entertainment through digital platforms and participate in online communities (Jin, 2016; Oh et al., 2026). For analytical purposes, participants are divided into adolescents (15–17), emerging adults (18–24), and young adults (25–34). These are operational groupings informed by Arnett's (2000) conceptualization of emerging adulthood and patterns observed in Hallyu research. Differences in media environments and social contexts across these groups may be associated with differences in entertainment engagement, cultural participation, and perceptions of South Korea. Geographic context may likewise shape these relationships because audiences encounter Korean entertainment through different cultural and media environments.

Beyond entertainment consumption, Hallyu has implications for cultural preferences, social connections, emotional involvement, identity-related processes, and perceptions of South Korea (Bariquit et al., 2025; Cicchelli & Octobre, 2021; Lyan, 2023; Oh et al., 2026). Hallyu has also been examined in relation to soft power, particularly the ability of cultural attraction to contribute to a country's international appeal (Nye, 2004; Oh et al., 2026). However, cultural popularity should not automatically be equated with political influence or soft power. Entertainment consumption may create opportunities for cultural attraction without necessarily producing political influence (Lyan, 2023). Accordingly, the relationship between Korean entertainment engagement and perceptions of South Korea should be examined empirically at the audience level rather than inferred from the international popularity of Korean cultural products.

Despite extensive scholarship, several gaps remain. Existing research frequently focuses on individual cultural products, specific fandom communities, or particular national contexts rather than examining multiple forms of Korean entertainment within a common empirical framework. Research has also concentrated substantially on young people and university students, leaving comparatively less evidence concerning differences among adolescents, emerging adults, and young adults. Furthermore, although Hallyu is frequently discussed in relation

to cultural attraction and soft power, comparatively less attention has been given to distinguishing entertainment popularity from individual-level country image (Lyan, 2023). Consequently, less is known about whether engagement with multiple forms of Korean entertainment is associated with broader cultural engagement, Korean-language interest, social and emotional engagement, and country image within a single cross-cultural framework.

Against this background, the present study examines the associations between Korean entertainment engagement and broader Korean cultural engagement, Korean-language interest, social and emotional engagement, and country image among international audiences aged 15–34. Four research questions guide the study:

RQ1: How does Korean entertainment engagement vary across age groups (15–17, 18–24, and 25–34) and geographic regions?

RQ2: What is the association between Korean entertainment engagement and broader engagement with Korean culture, including interest in the Korean language, food, fashion and beauty, travel, and other cultural activities?

RQ3: What is the association between Korean entertainment engagement and social and emotional engagement among audiences?

RQ4: What is the association between Korean entertainment engagement and country image of South Korea, including perceptions of its global cultural influence?

The study draws on two complementary theoretical perspectives. First, Nye's (2004) concept of soft power provides a framework for examining how cultural attraction may contribute to international appeal. Rather than treating popular culture as equivalent to soft power, this study examines whether entertainment engagement is associated with individual-level country image, providing a more cautious empirical assessment of the potential soft-power implications of Hallyu. Second, uses and gratifications theory explains how audiences actively select and engage with media to fulfill needs including entertainment, social connection, identity formation, and cultural learning (Katz et al., 1973; Rubin, 2009). This perspective is particularly relevant because engagement with Korean content may involve motivations extending beyond entertainment, including cultural learning and identity exploration. In this study, Korean entertainment engagement refers to exposure to and participation in Korean popular culture, including the frequency, intensity, and active nature of consumption. Broader Korean cultural engagement refers to interest in and participation in cultural practices and products beyond entertainment, including Korean food, fashion and beauty, language, travel, and cultural activities. Country image is conceptualized as a multidimensional evaluation of South Korea incorporating cognitive and affective perceptions (Kotler & Gertner, 2002; Roth & Diamantopoulos, 2009).

The conceptual model proposes that Korean entertainment engagement is associated with broader Korean cultural engagement, which may in turn be associated with country image. Social and emotional engagement are examined as additional outcomes potentially associated with entertainment and cultural engagement, while age group and geographic region are examined as potential moderators or group-comparison variables. Using a cross-sectional, multi-country online survey design, the study contributes to Hallyu scholarship in three ways. First, it provides audience-level evidence across age groups and national contexts concerning the relationship between Korean entertainment engagement, broader cultural engagement, language interest, and country perceptions. Second, it distinguishes cultural popularity from country image, allowing for a more cautious examination of Hallyu's potential soft-power implications. Third, it integrates cultural consumption, cultural engagement, social and emotional engagement, and country image within a common empirical framework. In doing so, the study contributes to scholarship on cultural globalization, transnational cultural consumption, media engagement, and the international cultural influence of South Korea.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Introduction

The academic study of Hallyu has expanded considerably since the Korean Wave first attracted scholarly attention in the late 1990s. Early scholarship primarily examined the regional diffusion of Korean television

dramas across East Asia, whereas more recent research has focused on Hallyu's globalization, digital transformation, fandom, cultural participation, and potential implications for South Korea's international image. These strands of research provide an important foundation for examining how engagement with Korean entertainment may extend beyond media consumption into broader cultural and social domains.

Hallyu and Alternative Cultural Globalization

A central theme in Hallyu scholarship concerns its position within global cultural flows. Traditional accounts of cultural globalization have emphasized the dominance of Western, particularly American, cultural production. In contrast, scholars have conceptualized Hallyu as a form of alternative cultural globalization through which non-Western cultural products achieve international visibility and expand the range of cultural choices available to global audiences (Cicchelli & Octobre, 2021; Iwabuchi, 2002). Hallyu does not necessarily represent a replacement of Western cultural influence; rather, it illustrates the increasing plurality of cultural centers and the emergence of more multidirectional patterns of cultural exchange. This perspective provides a broader framework for understanding Korean popular culture as part of contemporary transnational cultural flows rather than simply as a successful entertainment industry.

Digital Hallyu and Participatory Engagement

The transformation of Hallyu through digital technologies represents another major development in the literature. Jin (2016) distinguishes between Hallyu 1.0, characterized largely by the export of Korean television and film, and Hallyu 2.0, which emerged alongside smartphones, social media, and digitally mediated cultural participation. Digital platforms have enabled audiences to discover, circulate, discuss, reinterpret, and share Korean cultural content across geographical boundaries (Jin, 2016; Kim, 2023). Consequently, audiences increasingly function not only as consumers but also as participants in transnational cultural circulation.

This participatory dimension is particularly important in understanding fandom and identity. Recent research suggests that K-fans incorporate Korean cultural content into everyday practices and negotiate identities between global cultural influences and local social contexts (Oh et al., 2026). Such findings indicate that Hallyu engagement can involve social interaction, identity exploration, and cultural negotiation rather than entertainment consumption alone. At the same time, research on transnational fandom has highlighted differences related to nationality, cultural proximity, and perceptions of authenticity, demonstrating that global fandoms are more complex than portrayals of universally unified fan communities suggest.

Hallyu, Cultural Engagement, and Soft Power

Another important body of research examines whether Hallyu engagement extends into broader cultural participation. Studies have reported associations between exposure to Korean music and dramas and subsequent interest in Korean food, fashion, beauty, tourism, and language learning. This pattern, sometimes described as "chain consumption," suggests that engagement with Korean entertainment may stimulate interest in multiple aspects of Korean culture, extending well beyond media consumption itself. Language learning and tourism are particularly relevant because they represent forms of engagement that extend beyond entertainment consumption and may indicate deeper cultural interest.

Hallyu has also been widely discussed in relation to soft power. Nye (2004) conceptualized soft power as the ability to influence others through attraction rather than coercion. From this perspective, the international popularity of Korean entertainment may contribute to South Korea's cultural attractiveness and international appeal. However, cultural popularity should not automatically be interpreted as political influence. Lyan (2023) emphasizes the complexity of treating Hallyu as direct evidence of soft power, noting that cultural attraction may create conditions for favorable perceptions without necessarily producing measurable political outcomes. Therefore, examining the relationship between entertainment engagement and individual-level country image provides a more cautious approach to assessing the potential international influence of Hallyu.

Research Gap and Relevance to the Present Study

Despite extensive scholarship, several gaps remain. First, much existing research focuses on particular cultural products, national contexts, or specific fandom communities rather than examining multiple forms of Korean entertainment within a common empirical framework. Second, although young audiences have received considerable scholarly attention, comparatively less research directly examines differences among adolescents (15–17), emerging adults (18–24), and young adults (25–34), despite evidence that consumption patterns and media environments differ across these groups (Arnett, 2000; KOFICE, 2026). Third, Hallyu research frequently discusses cultural attraction and soft power, but fewer studies explicitly distinguish entertainment popularity from individual-level perceptions of South Korea.

The present study addresses these gaps by examining the associations among Korean entertainment engagement, broader Korean cultural engagement, social and emotional engagement, and country image among international audiences aged 15–34. By incorporating multiple dimensions of engagement and comparing three age groups across geographic contexts, the study seeks to provide a more integrated audience-level understanding of how contemporary Hallyu relates to cultural participation and perceptions of South Korea.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on two complementary theoretical perspectives to examine the associations between Korean entertainment engagement, broader cultural engagement, and country image: Joseph Nye's concept of soft power and uses and gratifications theory.

Soft Power Theory

Joseph Nye (2004) conceptualized soft power as the ability to obtain desired outcomes through attraction rather than coercion or payment. Unlike hard power, which relies on military or economic force, soft power derives from three primary resources: a country's culture, its political values, and its foreign policies. When a nation's culture is perceived as attractive, it can generate goodwill and influence among international audiences without the need for explicit persuasion. Popular culture, in particular, is effective in crossing borders and attracting global audiences, making it a potentially significant source of soft power.

However, cultural popularity should not be automatically equated with political influence. As Lyan (2023) has argued, the relationship between cultural attraction and political outcomes is more complex and ambivalent than often assumed. Entertainment consumption may create opportunities for cultural attraction without necessarily translating into measurable political influence. This distinction is important for the present study because it suggests that the relationship between Korean entertainment engagement and perceptions of South Korea should be examined empirically at the audience level rather than inferred from the international popularity of Korean cultural products. In this study, soft power theory provides a macro-level framework for understanding why Korean entertainment might be associated with favorable perceptions of South Korea. Rather than treating Hallyu itself as soft power, the study examines whether engagement with Korean entertainment is associated with individual-level country image—a more specific and measurable construct that captures cognitive and affective perceptions of South Korea.

Uses and Gratifications Theory

Uses and gratifications theory (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973) provides a complementary micro-level framework for understanding why audiences actively engage with media content. The theory proposes that audiences actively select media to satisfy specific needs. Rather than being passively influenced by media messages, individuals are seen as goal-directed consumers who choose media content based on their social and psychological needs, including entertainment, social connection, identity formation, information seeking, and cultural learning.

This theoretical lens is particularly appropriate for this study because it helps explain why sustained engagement with Korean entertainment may be associated with broader cultural participation and favorable country

perceptions. Audiences who actively seek out Korean content may do so for gratifications that extend beyond entertainment—including cultural learning, identity exploration, and social connection. When audiences find that Korean entertainment fulfills these needs, they may develop deeper engagement that extends to other aspects of Korean culture, such as food, fashion, beauty, language, and travel. This process may, in turn, be associated with more favorable perceptions of South Korea.

Integration of Perspectives

Soft power theory and uses and gratifications theory operate at different but complementary levels of analysis. Soft power theory provides a macro-level lens for understanding how cultural attraction may contribute to a country's international appeal and how entertainment consumption might relate to country image. Uses and gratifications theory provides a micro-level lens for understanding the active, need-driven processes through which audiences engage with media content and how such engagement may extend into broader cultural participation.

Together, these perspectives inform the conceptual model guiding this study: Korean entertainment engagement is expected to be associated with broader Korean cultural engagement, which in turn is expected to be associated with country image of South Korea. Social and emotional engagement are examined as additional outcomes potentially associated with entertainment and cultural engagement. Age group and geographic region are examined as potential group-comparison variables, with analyses comparing patterns across these groups. This integrated framework allows the study to move beyond describing Hallyu's popularity and instead examine the audience-level processes through which entertainment engagement may be related to cultural participation and perceptions of South Korea.

Conceptual Model

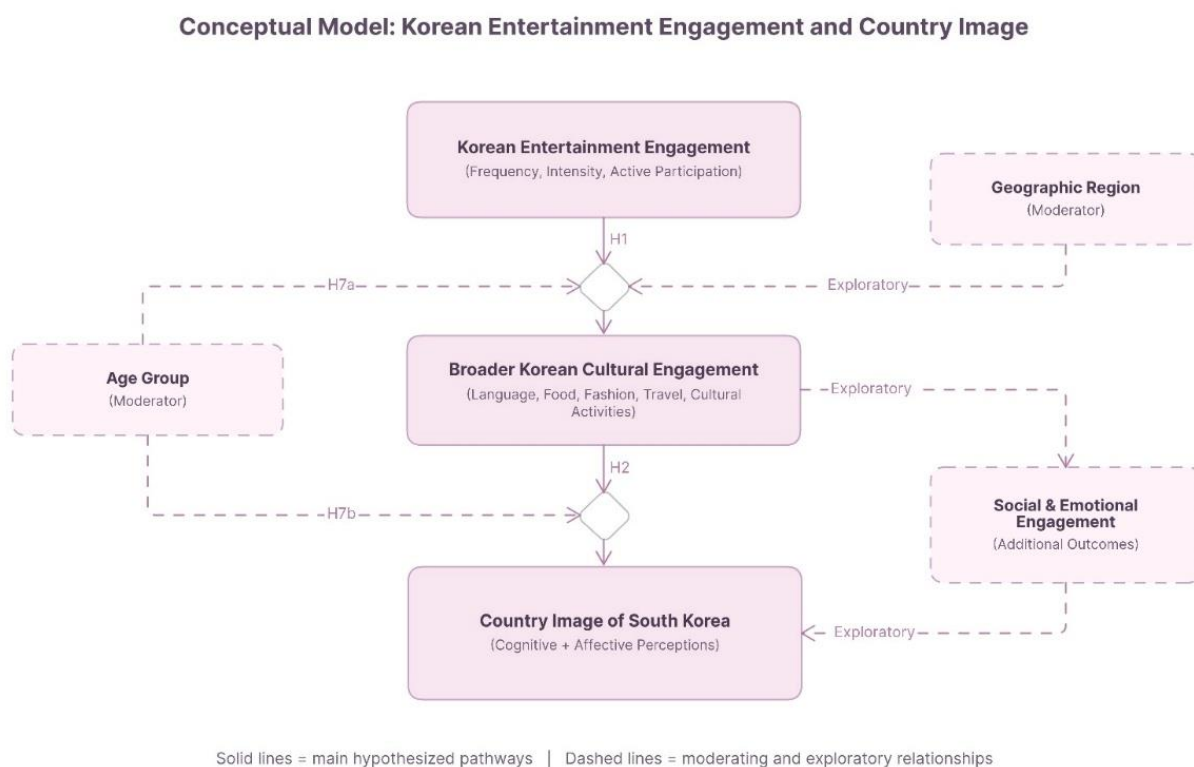


Figure 2.1. Conceptual Model of the Study

Note: The model proposes that Korean entertainment engagement is associated with broader Korean cultural engagement, which in turn is associated with country image of South Korea. Age group and geographic region are examined as group-comparison variables. Social and emotional engagement are examined as additional outcomes

Hypothesis Development

Building on the theoretical framework and literature review, this study proposes the following hypotheses concerning the associations among Korean entertainment engagement, broader Korean cultural engagement, emotional engagement, and country image of South Korea.

Entertainment Engagement and Cultural Engagement

The literature suggests that sustained engagement with Korean entertainment may be associated with broader interest in Korean culture beyond media consumption. Research has documented relationships between exposure to Korean music and dramas and subsequent interest in Korean food, fashion, beauty, tourism, and language learning (KOFICE, 2026; Kim, 2023). This pattern, sometimes described as "chain consumption," indicates that entertainment engagement may function as a gateway to broader cultural participation. From a uses and gratifications perspective (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973), audiences who actively seek out Korean content may do so for gratifications that extend beyond entertainment, including cultural learning and identity exploration. Therefore:

H1: Greater Korean entertainment engagement will be positively associated with broader Korean cultural engagement.

Entertainment Engagement and Korean Language Interest

Among the various forms of cultural engagement, Korean language learning represents a particularly significant form of cultural investment because it involves acquiring knowledge and skills associated with the culture from which entertainment content originates. Previous research has reported relationships between interest in Korean cultural content and motivation to learn Korean (KOFICE, 2026). Audiences who engage more deeply with Korean entertainment may be more likely to develop interest in understanding the language in which that content is produced. Therefore:

H2: Greater Korean entertainment engagement will be positively associated with interest in learning the Korean language.

Note: This hypothesis refers to interest in, motivation for, or intention to learn Korean, consistent with the questionnaire items measuring Korean language interest.

Emotional Engagement and Cultural Engagement

The participatory and emotionally engaging nature of contemporary Hallyu consumption has been well documented in fandom research. Studies suggest that K-fans incorporate Korean cultural content into everyday practices and develop emotional connections to Korean artists, actors, and cultural products (Oh et al., 2026). Such emotional involvement may intensify engagement with Korean culture more broadly, as audiences who feel emotionally connected to entertainment content may be more motivated to explore other cultural dimensions. The survey measures emotional engagement through a dedicated set of Likert-scale items assessing emotional attachment, involvement, and connection to Korean entertainment. Therefore:

H3: Greater emotional engagement with Korean entertainment will be positively associated with broader Korean cultural engagement.

Entertainment Engagement and Country Image

Soft power theory (Nye, 2004) suggests that cultural attraction can contribute to favorable perceptions of a country. When audiences engage with Korean entertainment, they may develop more positive cognitive and affective evaluations of South Korea. Research has indicated that Korean entertainment contributes to South Korea's positive image internationally (KOFICE, 2026; Oh et al., 2026). However, cultural popularity should not automatically be equated with political influence (Lyan, 2023). The present study therefore examines

whether entertainment engagement is associated with individual-level country image—a more specific and measurable construct. Therefore:

H4: Greater Korean entertainment engagement will be positively associated with more favorable country image of South Korea.

Cultural Engagement and Country Image

Beyond direct entertainment consumption, broader engagement with Korean culture may be associated with perceptions of South Korea. Audiences who develop interest in Korean food, fashion, beauty, language, travel, and cultural activities may form more comprehensive and favorable evaluations of the country. Cultural engagement represents a deeper form of involvement that may be particularly relevant to country image formation. Therefore:

H5: Greater broader Korean cultural engagement will be positively associated with more favorable country image of South Korea.

Mediation Pathway

The theoretical framework suggests that entertainment engagement may relate to country image through broader cultural engagement. Uses and gratifications theory (Katz et al., 1973) suggests that audiences who engage with Korean content for cultural learning and identity exploration may progressively expand their cultural interests, leading to more comprehensive engagement with Korean culture. This broader engagement may, in turn, be associated with more favorable country perceptions. Therefore:

H6: Broader Korean cultural engagement will mediate the association between Korean entertainment engagement and country image of South Korea.

Note: Given the cross-sectional design of this study, mediation is interpreted as statistical mediation, not as proof of causation. The analysis examines whether cultural engagement accounts for a significant portion of the association between entertainment engagement and country image.

Age Group Differences

The literature suggests that different age groups may encounter Korean entertainment through different media environments and social contexts, raising the possibility that the associations between entertainment engagement, cultural engagement, and country image may vary across age groups (KOFICE, 2026; Arnett, 2000). Adolescents, emerging adults, and young adults may differ in their motivations for engaging with Korean content and the extent to which such engagement extends to broader cultural participation and country perceptions. Therefore:

H7a: The association between Korean entertainment engagement and broader Korean cultural engagement will differ across age groups (15–17, 18–24, and 25–34).

H7b: The association between Korean entertainment engagement and country image of South Korea will differ across age groups.

Geographic Region

Geographic region is examined as an exploratory group-comparison variable. Although the study includes participants from multiple countries and regions, no directional hypothesis is proposed for geographic differences due to the absence of a strong theoretical basis for predicting specific patterns across regions.

Summary of Hypotheses

Hypothesis	Statement
H1	Greater Korean entertainment engagement will be positively associated with broader Korean cultural engagement.
H2	Greater Korean entertainment engagement will be positively associated with interest in learning the Korean language.
H3	Greater emotional engagement with Korean entertainment will be positively associated with broader Korean cultural engagement.
H4	Greater Korean entertainment engagement will be positively associated with more favorable country image of South Korea.
H5	Greater broader Korean cultural engagement will be positively associated with more favorable country image of South Korea.
H6	Broader Korean cultural engagement will mediate the association between Korean entertainment engagement and country image of South Korea.
H7a	The association between Korean entertainment engagement and broader Korean cultural engagement will differ across age groups.
H7b	The association between Korean entertainment engagement and country image of South Korea will differ across age groups.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a cross-sectional, multi-country online survey design to examine the associations between Korean entertainment engagement, broader Korean cultural engagement, emotional engagement, social engagement, and country image of South Korea among international audiences aged 15–34. A quantitative survey approach was selected to collect data from a geographically diverse sample, enabling statistical analysis of relationships among the key constructs.

Participants

Following the exclusion of two non-consenting responses, the final analytical sample consisted of 298 participants aged 15 to 34. Participants were recruited from multiple countries and geographic regions. The age distribution was as follows: adolescents aged 15–17 comprised 121 participants (40.6 percent), emerging adults aged 18–24 comprised 143 participants (48.0 percent), and young adults aged 25–34 comprised 34 participants (11.4 percent). In terms of gender, 224 participants identified as female (75.2 percent) and 74 identified as male (24.8 percent); no participants identified as non-binary or preferred not to disclose.

Participants represented 35 countries across six geographic regions. The largest proportion of participants resided in Asia ($n = 188$, 63.1 percent), followed by Europe ($n = 67$, 22.5 percent), the Middle East ($n = 17$, 5.7 percent), North America ($n = 12$, 4.0 percent), South America ($n = 8$, 2.7 percent), Oceania ($n = 4$, 1.3 percent), and Africa ($n = 2$, 0.7 percent). The most frequently represented countries were Bangladesh ($n = 72$), India ($n = 36$), China ($n = 22$), Denmark ($n = 14$), Spain ($n = 13$), and Japan ($n = 13$).

In terms of educational attainment, 138 participants reported secondary school as their highest level of education (46.3 percent), 97 reported higher secondary school (32.6 percent), 29 reported undergraduate education (9.7

percent), 24 reported graduate or master's level education (8.1 percent), 9 reported doctoral education (3.0 percent), and 1 participant reported "other" (0.3 percent). No participants reported diploma or technical education.

Sampling Procedure

Participants were recruited through a combination of convenience and snowball sampling methods. The survey was distributed via multiple channels: social media platforms ($n = 178$, 59.7 percent of recruitment source responses), university and school networks ($n = 50$, 16.8 percent), online communities ($n = 42$, 14.1 percent), personal networks including friends and family ($n = 27$, 9.1 percent), and research networks ($n = 2$, 0.7 percent). One participant did not respond to the recruitment source question. Eligibility criteria for participation included age between 15 and 34 years and self-reported familiarity with Korean entertainment. Participants who indicated no familiarity with Korean entertainment were directed to a thank-you page and did not proceed with the survey. Consent was obtained through an initial question requiring explicit agreement to participate; respondents who selected "I do not agree" were excluded from the study.

Survey Instrument

The survey instrument was developed based on existing Hallyu scholarship and theoretical frameworks. The questionnaire comprised 82 response items organized across 14 sections, with an estimated completion time of 10 to 12 minutes. The survey was administered using Google Forms and included the following sections:

Section 1 collected demographic information including age, country of residence, gender, and education level, as well as baseline familiarity with Korean culture before exposure to Korean entertainment. Section 2 assessed general exposure to Korean entertainment through questions about content types consumed, frequency and duration of consumption, and length of engagement.

Sections 3 through 5 measured entertainment engagement, emotional engagement, and broader Korean cultural engagement using 5-point Likert scales ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Section 3 contained seven items measuring active seeking, importance in media consumption, social media following, discussion, information seeking, recommendation, and online community participation. Section 4 contained seven items assessing emotional involvement, identification with characters, personal relevance, mood influence, emotional connection, and persistent engagement. Section 5 contained eight items measuring interest in Korean culture, traditions, food, history, fashion, cultural practices, and overall familiarity with Korean culture.

Section 6 assessed Korean language interest through a combination of multiple-choice questions and Likert-scale items. Participants were asked about prior interest in learning Korean, whether Korean entertainment had influenced their language interest, whether they had studied Korean, and their motivations for learning. Four Likert-scale items measured Korean entertainment's motivational role, interest in understanding original-language content, desire to improve Korean ability, and overall language attractiveness.

Section 7 measured country image of South Korea using eight Likert-scale items assessing curiosity, overall perception, favorability, interest in Korean society, travel intentions, educational and career considerations, cultural attractiveness, and interest beyond entertainment. These items collectively form a multidimensional country image scale. While travel intentions and career considerations have behavioral components, they were included as theoretically relevant aspects of country image in the context of Hallyu research, consistent with the operationalization of country image as a multidimensional construct encompassing cognitive and affective perceptions as well as behavioral intentions.

Section 8 measured perceived soft power using eight Likert-scale items examining perceptions of South Korea's positive international image, global interest, cultural introduction, cultural influence, cultural connection, international attractiveness, source of global influence, and cultural influence beyond entertainment.

Section 9 measured social engagement using six Likert-scale items assessing connection with others, friendships, cross-cultural introduction, cultural curiosity, community influence, and global connection. An additional item measured fan agency through content creation and sharing. Section 10 assessed consumer and behavioral influence through multiple-choice and checkbox questions about Korean product and experience interest, actual purchases, and spending amounts.

Section 11 contained additional measures including comparative influence of Korean entertainment, self-image influence, awareness of concerns, and continued consumption despite concerns. Section 12 contained three optional open-ended questions allowing participants to share their experiences in their own words. Section 13 measured identity and self-perception using six Likert-scale items assessing cultural identity influence, self-image, appearance comparison, goal inspiration, cultural connection, and identity importance. Section 14 contained a single question about recruitment source.

All Likert-scale items across Sections 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, and 13 used the same 5-point response format. The complete survey instrument is available upon request.

Measures and Scale Construction

Primary Constructs

The following constructs were measured using multi-item Likert scales. For each construct, composite scale scores were created by averaging item responses, provided that internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) reached acceptable levels ($\alpha \geq .70$). All items were coded such that higher scores indicated greater levels of the respective construct.

Korean Entertainment Engagement was measured using seven items assessing active seeking, importance in media consumption, social media following, discussion, information seeking, recommendation, and online community participation. Responses ranged from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

Emotional Engagement was measured using seven items assessing emotional involvement, identification with characters, personal relevance, mood influence, emotional connection, and persistent engagement. Responses used the same 5-point Likert format.

Broader Korean Cultural Engagement was measured using eight items assessing interest in Korean culture, traditions, food, history, fashion, cultural practices, and overall cultural familiarity. Responses used the same 5-point Likert format. Importantly, this construct measures general cultural participation and interest, distinct from the more specialized Korean Language Interest construct described below.

Korean Language Interest was measured using four Likert-scale items assessing Korean entertainment's motivational role, interest in understanding original-language content, desire to improve Korean ability, and overall language attractiveness. The same 5-point scale was used. This construct is treated as a separate specialized outcome distinct from broader cultural engagement.

Country Image of South Korea was measured using eight Likert-scale items assessing curiosity, overall perception, favorability, interest in Korean society, travel intentions, educational and career considerations, cultural attractiveness, and interest beyond entertainment. These items were treated as a multidimensional country image scale. The inclusion of travel intentions and career considerations reflects the conceptualization of country image as incorporating both perceptions and behavioral intentions, consistent with established country image literature. If internal consistency analysis reveals that these items do not form a single reliable scale, they may be analyzed as separate dimensions.

Perceived Soft Power was measured using eight Likert-scale items examining perceptions of South Korea's positive international image, global interest, cultural introduction, cultural influence, cultural connection, international attractiveness, source of global influence, and cultural influence beyond entertainment.

Social Engagement was measured using six Likert-scale items assessing connection with others, friendships, cross-cultural introduction, cultural curiosity, community influence, and global connection.

Identity and Self-Perception was measured using six Likert-scale items assessing cultural identity influence, self-image, appearance comparison, goal inspiration, cultural connection, and identity importance.

Validity of Measurement Instruments:

While the study assessed internal consistency reliability using Cronbach's alpha and McDonald's omega, the validity of the measurement instruments was established through a careful review of existing literature and theoretical frameworks. Each construct was operationalized using items adapted from previous validated studies where possible. The Country Image scale, for example, was informed by established country image literature (Kotler & Gertner, 2002; Roth & Diamantopoulos, 2009), while the entertainment engagement and cultural engagement scales drew on prior Hallyu scholarship (KOFICE, 2026; Kim, 2023). However, the present study did not conduct confirmatory factor analysis or other formal validity assessments. This limitation should be acknowledged when interpreting the findings. Future research should examine the discriminant validity of these constructs using confirmatory factor analysis, particularly given the high correlation observed between Country Image and Perceived Soft Power in this study.

Exploratory Variables

In addition to the primary constructs, several variables were measured for exploratory purposes. Social Engagement (measured as described above) was examined as an additional outcome associated with entertainment engagement and cultural engagement. Perceived Soft Power was measured to provide supplementary evidence regarding perceptions of South Korea's international cultural influence. Identity and Self-Perception was measured as an additional dimension of engagement. Consumer and Behavioral Influence was measured using multiple-choice and checkbox items assessing interest in and actual purchase of Korean products and experiences. These variables are treated as exploratory and are not included in the formal hypothesis testing framework.

Demographic and Control Variables

Age was measured categorically (15–17, 18–24, 25–34) and served as a grouping variable. Gender was measured categorically (Female, Male, Non-binary, Prefer not to say). Geographic region was derived from country of residence and categorized into six regions. Education level was measured ordinally. Categorical demographic variables were entered into regression analyses using appropriate indicator (dummy) coding.

Data Collection

Data were collected over a two-day period from 29 August 2026 to 30 August 2026. The survey was distributed through the recruitment channels described above. A total of 300 responses were received, of which 298 provided informed consent and were retained for analysis. Two respondents who selected "I do not agree" were excluded from the dataset. No incomplete responses were removed, as all required questions were answered by consenting participants. Optional open-ended questions contained blank responses, but these were not treated as incomplete responses because participants were not required to answer them.

Ethical Considerations

The survey was designed as a low-risk, anonymous online questionnaire on non-sensitive topics. Informed consent was obtained from all participants at the beginning of the survey through a consent question that described the study purpose, voluntary nature of participation, estimated completion time, and data usage. Participants were informed that they could withdraw at any time before submitting the survey; because responses were collected anonymously, withdrawal after submission was not possible. All responses were collected anonymously, and no personally identifying information such as names, email addresses, phone numbers, or home addresses was collected. Participants were informed that the data would be used for academic research purposes only and analyzed in aggregate.

The study addressed topics that were not considered sensitive (entertainment preferences and cultural interests) and did not collect identifiable personal information. Because the study did not collect identifiable information,

formal ethics committee approval was not required under the institutional guidelines applicable to this research. Researchers should consult their institutional guidelines regarding appropriate consent procedures for research involving minors in their specific context.

Data Analysis Plan

Data were analyzed in several stages corresponding to the study hypotheses.

Descriptive Statistics

First, descriptive statistics were calculated for all demographic and key study variables, including means, standard deviations, and frequency distributions.

Reliability Analysis

Second, internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha for each multi-item scale: Korean Entertainment Engagement (7 items), Emotional Engagement (7 items), Broader Korean Cultural Engagement (8 items), Korean Language Interest (4 items), Country Image of South Korea (8 items), Perceived Soft Power (8 items), Social Engagement (6 items), and Identity and Self-Perception (6 items). McDonald's omega was also computed as an additional reliability estimate.

Correlational Analysis

Third, correlational analyses (Pearson correlation) were conducted to examine bivariate relationships among the key constructs.

Regression Analyses for H1–H5

Fourth, linear regression analyses were used to test hypotheses H1 through H5. For each hypothesis, a separate regression model was specified as follows:

- **H1:** Korean Entertainment Engagement → Broader Korean Cultural Engagement
- **H2:** Korean Entertainment Engagement → Korean Language Interest
- **H3:** Emotional Engagement → Broader Korean Cultural Engagement
- **H4:** Korean Entertainment Engagement → Country Image of South Korea
- **H5:** Broader Korean Cultural Engagement → Country Image of South Korea

Five separate bivariate linear regression models were estimated to test hypotheses H1 through H5. These models examined the direct associations between each predictor and outcome without additional demographic covariates, consistent with the simple mediation framework tested in H6. Categorical demographic variables were entered using indicator (dummy) coding.

Mediation Analysis for H6

Fifth, mediation analysis was conducted to test H6, examining whether broader Korean cultural engagement mediates the association between Korean entertainment engagement and country image of South Korea. This was tested using bootstrapping procedures with 5,000 resamples and 95 percent confidence intervals.

Moderation Analyses for H7a and H7b

Sixth, moderation analyses were conducted to test H7a and H7b, examining whether age group moderates the associations between entertainment engagement and cultural engagement (H7a) and between entertainment

engagement and country image (H7b). These were tested using interaction terms in regression analyses, with age group as a categorical moderator. Due to the small sample size of the 25–34 group ($n = 34$), moderation analyses should be interpreted with appropriate caution regarding statistical power, and this limitation will be acknowledged in the discussion.

Exploratory Regional Analysis

Geographic region was examined as an exploratory group-comparison variable using analysis of variance (ANOVA). Given the unequal and small subgroup sizes, particularly for Africa ($n = 2$) and Oceania ($n = 4$), regional comparisons were interpreted exploratorily rather than as definitive inferential tests. All statistical analyses were conducted using appropriate software, with statistical significance set at $p < .05$. Due to the cross-sectional design, all associations are interpreted as statistical relationships rather than causal effects.

RESULTS

Preliminary Analysis

The final analytical sample consisted of 298 participants after excluding two non-consenting responses. For each multi-item construct, composite scores were calculated as the mean of all items. All items used a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). A review of the items confirmed that no negatively worded items requiring reverse-coding were present. No missing responses were found for the items included in the eight scales.

Internal consistency reliability was assessed using both Cronbach's alpha and McDonald's omega. As shown in Table 1, all eight scales demonstrated good internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from .823 to .902 and McDonald's omega values ranging from .883 to .921. These values exceed the minimum acceptable threshold of .70, indicating that all composite scales were reliable for hypothesis testing.

Table 1. Reliability and Descriptive Statistics for Key Constructs

Construct	k	Mean	SD	Cronbach's α	McDonald's ω
Korean Entertainment Engagement	7	4.52	0.53	.891	.915
Emotional Engagement	7	4.51	0.52	.885	.911
Broader Korean Cultural Engagement	8	4.51	0.50	.888	.911
Korean Language Interest	4	4.49	0.57	.823	.883
Country Image of South Korea	8	4.56	0.48	.886	.909
Perceived Soft Power	8	4.53	0.52	.902	.921
Social Engagement	6	4.49	0.51	.853	.891
Identity and Self-Perception	6	4.50	0.55	.884	.912

Note: k = number of items; SD = standard deviation; α = Cronbach's alpha; ω = McDonald's omega.

Descriptive Statistics

Demographic Characteristics

The sample comprised 298 participants aged 15 to 34. As shown in Table 2, the largest age group was 18–24 years ($n = 143$, 48.0%), followed by 15–17 years ($n = 121$, 40.6%) and 25–34 years ($n = 34$, 11.4%). In terms of

gender, the majority of participants identified as female ($n = 224$, 75.2%), while 74 participants identified as male (24.8%). No participants identified as non-binary or preferred not to disclose their gender.

Figure 1. Age Group Distribution of the Sample

The largest age group was 18–24 years, representing 48.0% of the sample.

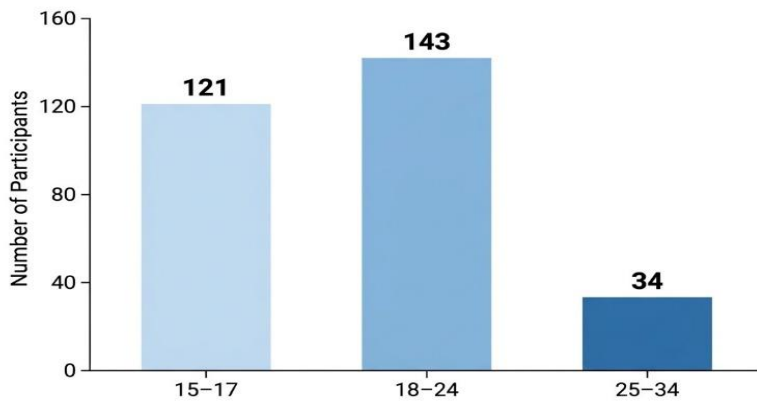


Figure 1. Age Group Distribution of the Sample

Note: The largest age group was 18–24 years, representing 48.0% of the sample.

Figure 2. Gender Distribution of the Sample

*The sample was predominantly female, with females representing 75.2% of participants.

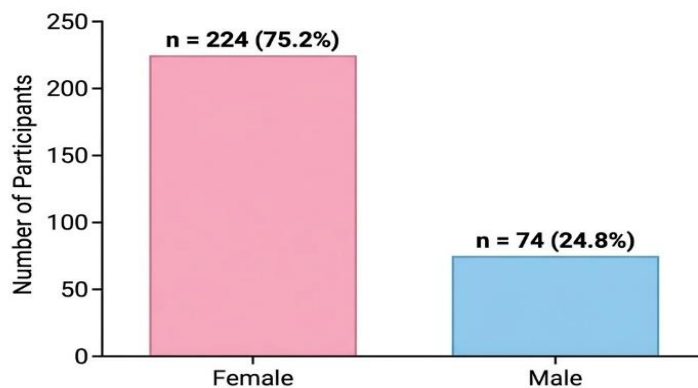


Figure 2. Gender Distribution of the Sample

Note: The sample was predominantly female, with females representing 75.2% of participants.

Table 2. Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Age Group	15–17	121	40.6%
	18–24	143	48.0%
	25–34	34	11.4%
Gender	Female	224	75.2%
	Male	74	24.8%

Education	Secondary School	138	46.3%
	Higher Secondary School	97	32.6%
	Undergraduate	29	9.7%
	Graduate	24	8.1%
	Doctoral	9	3.0%
	Other	1	0.3%

Participants represented 35 countries across six broader geographic regions: Asia, Europe, Americas, Middle East, Oceania, and Africa. As shown in Table 3, the most frequently represented countries were Bangladesh ($n = 72$, 24.2%), India ($n = 36$, 12.1%), and China ($n = 22$, 7.4%). In terms of geographic regions (Table 4), Asia contributed the largest proportion of participants ($n = 188$, 63.1%), followed by Europe ($n = 67$, 22.5%) and the Americas ($n = 20$, 6.7%).

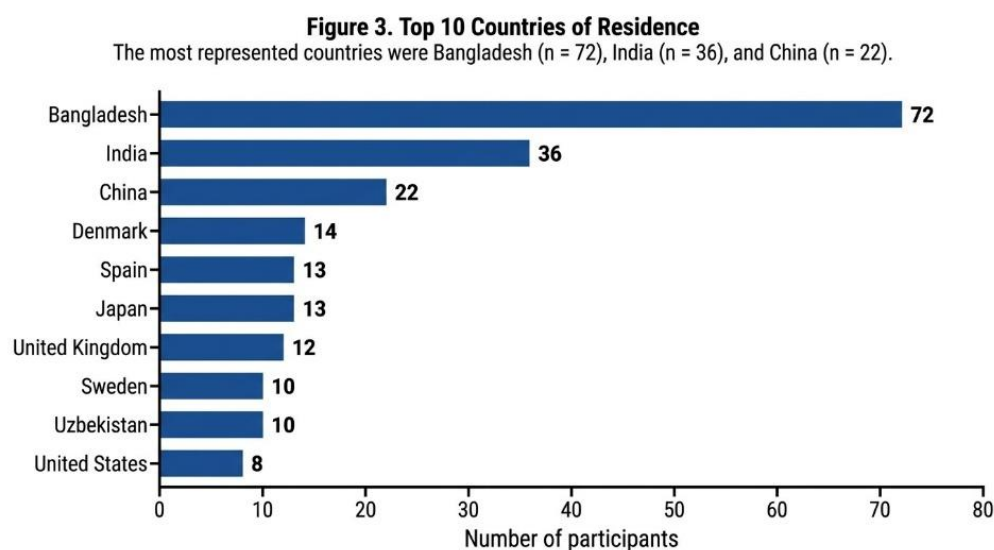


Figure 3. Top 10 Countries of Residence

Note: The most represented countries were Bangladesh ($n = 72$), India ($n = 36$), and China ($n = 22$).

Table 3. Top 10 Countries of Residence

Country	Frequency	Percentage
Bangladesh	72	24.2%
India	36	12.1%
China	22	7.4%
Denmark	14	4.7%
Spain	13	4.4%
Japan	13	4.4%

United Kingdom	12	4.0%
Sweden	10	3.4%
Uzbekistan	10	3.4%
United States	8	2.7%

Note: Percentages calculated based on $N = 298$.

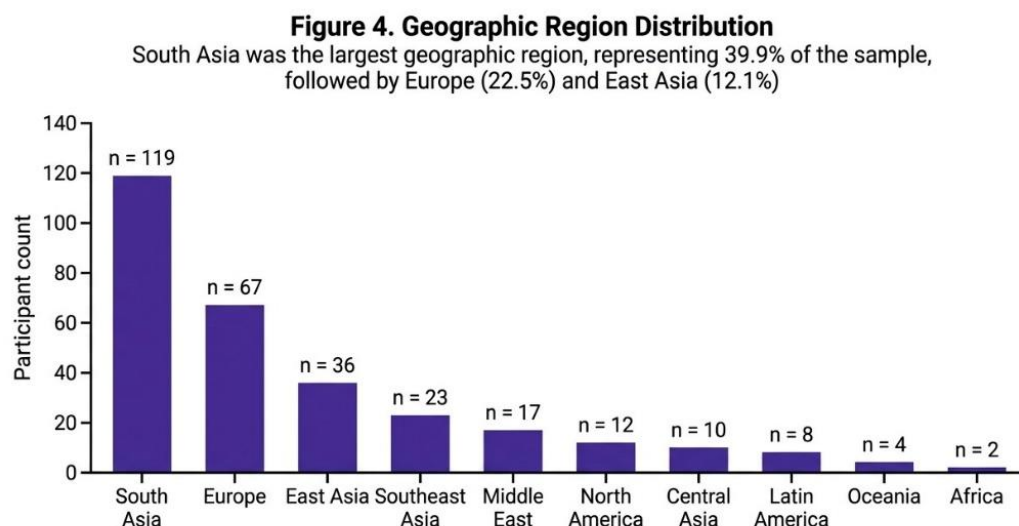


Figure 4. Geographic Region Distribution

Note: South Asia was the largest geographic region, representing 39.9% of the sample, followed by Europe (22.5%) and East Asia (12.1%).

Table 4. Geographic Region Distribution

Geographic Region	Frequency	Percentage
Asia	188	63.1%
Europe	67	22.5%
Americas	20	6.7%
Middle East	17	5.7%
Oceania	4	1.3%
Africa	2	0.7%

Note: Asia includes South Asia ($n = 119$), East Asia ($n = 36$), Southeast Asia ($n = 23$), and Central Asia ($n = 10$). Americas includes North America ($n = 12$) and Latin America ($n = 8$).

The primary recruitment source was social media, accounting for 59.4% of participants ($n = 177$), followed by university or school recruitment ($n = 50$, 16.8%) and online communities ($n = 41$, 13.8%). Personal networks (friends and family) accounted for 9.1% ($n = 27$), while research networks contributed 0.7% ($n = 2$). One participant did not respond to the recruitment source question.

Means and Standard Deviations of Key Constructs

As shown in Table 1, all constructs had mean scores above 4.49 out of 5, indicating that participants in the analytical sample reported generally high levels of engagement with Korean entertainment, positive emotional responses, favorable perceptions of South Korea, and strong cultural and language interests. The highest mean was for Country Image of South Korea ($M = 4.56$, $SD = 0.48$), while Korean Language Interest had the lowest mean ($M = 4.49$, $SD = 0.57$). These high means reflect the characteristics of the present sample, which consisted primarily of individuals already engaged with Korean entertainment.

Correlation Analysis

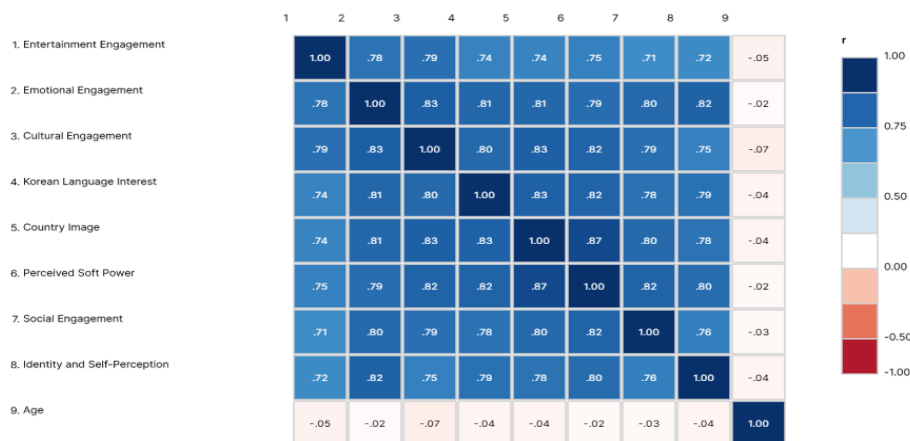
Pearson correlations were calculated to examine bivariate relationships among all key constructs. For the exploratory correlation analysis, age categories were represented by their midpoints (15–17 = 16, 18–24 = 21, 25–34 = 29.5 years), recognizing that this provides an approximate rather than individual-level measure of age.

As shown in Table 5, all eight substantive constructs were positively correlated with one another, with coefficients ranging from $r = .711$ to $.873$ (all $ps < .001$). The largest association was observed between Country Image and Perceived Soft Power ($r = .873$, $p < .001$). Correlations between age and the substantive constructs were small and nonsignificant ($r = -.016$ to $-.068$, all $ps > .05$), indicating no meaningful relationship between age and the study constructs in this sample.

The very strong correlations among some constructs, particularly Country Image and Perceived Soft Power ($r = .873$), suggest substantial conceptual overlap between these measures. This is addressed further in the Discussion section.

Figure 5. Correlation Matrix of Key Study Variables

All correlations among substantive variables were positive and statistically significant at $p < .001$. Correlations with Age were small and not statistically significant (all $ps > .05$).



Note. N = key study variables; coefficients are Pearson r . Matrix is symmetrical about the diagonal.

Figure 5. Correlation Matrix of Key Study Variables

Note: All correlations among substantive variables were positive and statistically significant at $p < .001$. Correlations with Age were small and not statistically significant (all $ps > .05$). Age was treated as a continuous variable using age group midpoints (15–17 = 16, 18–24 = 21, 25–34 = 29.5).

Table 5. Pearson Correlation Matrix

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Entertainment Engagement	1.00								

2. Emotional Engagement	.776***	1.00							
3. Cultural Engagement	.792***	.834***	1.00						
4. Korean Language Interest	.744***	.811***	.802***	1.00					
5. Country Image	.739***	.807***	.830***	.827***	1.00				
6. Perceived Soft Power	.747***	.794***	.824***	.823***	.873***	1.00			
7. Social Engagement	.711***	.804***	.790***	.779***	.801***	.823***	1.00		
8. Identity/Self-Perception	.718***	.821***	.750***	.791***	.784***	.796***	.756***	1.00	
9. Age (midpoint)	-.052	-.016	-.068	-.041	-.040	-.024	-.028	-.043	1.00

Note: *** $p < .001$. All correlations except those with Age were statistically significant at $p < .001$. Correlations with Age were not statistically significant (all $ps > .05$). Age was treated as a continuous variable using age group midpoints (15–17 = 16, 18–24 = 21, 25–34 = 29.5).

Hypothesis Testing

Regression Analyses for H1–H5

Five separate bivariate linear regression models were estimated to test hypotheses H1 through H5. These models examined the direct associations between each predictor and outcome without additional demographic covariates, consistent with the simple mediation framework tested in H6. As shown in Table 6, all five hypothesized associations were statistically significant and positive, with model R^2 values ranging from .551 to .712.

Figure 6. Association Between Korean Entertainment Engagement and Broader Korean Cultural Engagement (H1)

Higher entertainment engagement was associated with greater cultural engagement, $\beta = .785$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .637$.

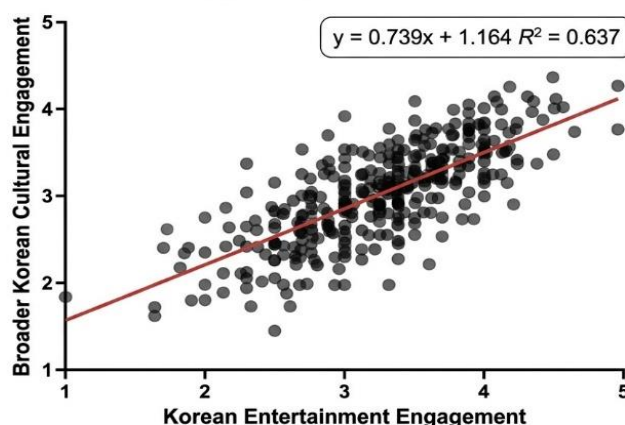


Figure 6. Association Between Korean Entertainment Engagement and Broader Korean Cultural Engagement (H1)

Note: Higher entertainment engagement was associated with greater cultural engagement, $\beta = .785$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .637$.

Table 6. Regression Results for H1–H5

Hypothesis	Predictor	Outcome	<i>B</i>	β	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI	R^2	Adj. R^2
H1	Entertainment Engagement	Cultural Engagement	0.739	.785	0.034	21.73	< .001	[0.672, 0.806]	.637	.626
H2	Entertainment Engagement	Korean Language Interest	0.780	.734	0.042	18.47	< .001	[0.697, 0.863]	.561	.547
H3	Emotional Engagement	Cultural Engagement	0.815	.841	0.032	25.87	< .001	[0.753, 0.877]	.712	.703
H4	Entertainment Engagement	Country Image	0.694	.742	0.038	18.46	< .001	[0.620, 0.768]	.551	.537
H5	Cultural Engagement	Country Image	0.833	.839	0.033	25.17	< .001	[0.768, 0.898]	.693	.684

Note: All models were bivariate regressions. Degrees of freedom for each test were $df = 296$.

H1 predicted that greater Korean Entertainment Engagement would be positively associated with Broader Korean Cultural Engagement. The regression analysis supported this hypothesis, revealing a significant positive association, $B = 0.739$, $\beta = .785$, $t(296) = 21.73$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.672, 0.806]. The model explained 63.7% of the variance in Cultural Engagement, $R^2 = .637$. H1 was supported.

H2 predicted that greater Korean Entertainment Engagement would be positively associated with interest in learning the Korean language. The analysis supported this hypothesis, revealing a significant positive association, $B = 0.780$, $\beta = .734$, $t(296) = 18.47$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.697, 0.863]. The model explained 56.1% of the variance in Korean Language Interest, $R^2 = .561$. H2 was supported.

H3 predicted that greater Emotional Engagement with Korean entertainment would be positively associated with Broader Korean Cultural Engagement. The analysis supported this hypothesis, revealing a significant positive association, $B = 0.815$, $\beta = .841$, $t(296) = 25.87$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.753, 0.877]. The model explained 71.2% of the variance in Cultural Engagement, $R^2 = .712$. H3 was supported.

H4 predicted that greater Korean Entertainment Engagement would be positively associated with more favorable Country Image of South Korea. The analysis supported this hypothesis, revealing a significant positive association, $B = 0.694$, $\beta = .742$, $t(296) = 18.46$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.620, 0.768]. The model explained 55.1% of the variance in Country Image, $R^2 = .551$. H4 was supported.

H5 predicted that greater Broader Korean Cultural Engagement would be positively associated with more favorable Country Image of South Korea. The analysis supported this hypothesis, revealing a significant positive association, $B = 0.833$, $\beta = .839$, $t(296) = 25.17$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.768, 0.898]. The model explained 69.3% of the variance in Country Image, $R^2 = .693$. H5 was supported.

Mediation Analysis for H6

Hypothesis H6 proposed that Broader Korean Cultural Engagement would mediate the association between Korean Entertainment Engagement and Country Image of South Korea. Bootstrapping procedures with 5,000 resamples were used to test the indirect effect. As shown in Table 7, the results supported partial mediation.

Figure 7. Mediation Model: Broader Korean Cultural Engagement Mediating the Association Between Korean Entertainment Engagement and Country Image (H6)

Partial mediation was supported; the indirect effect was significant, $ab = 0.488$, 95% CI [0.289, 0.606]. *** $p < .001$.

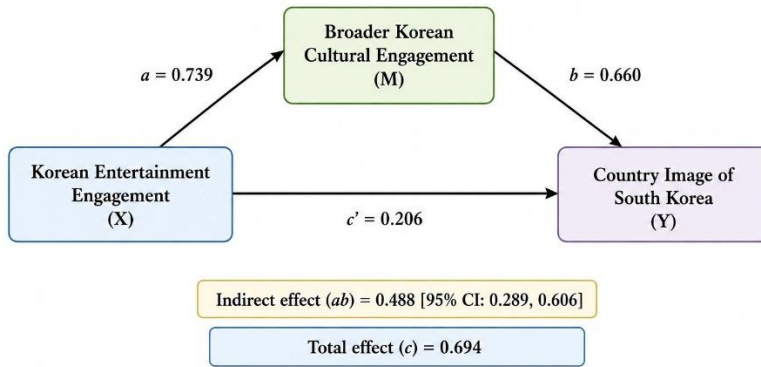


Figure 7. Mediation Model: Broader Korean Cultural Engagement Mediating the Association Between Korean Entertainment Engagement and Country Image (H6)

Note: Partial mediation was supported; the indirect effect was significant, $ab = 0.488$, 95% CI [0.289, 0.606]. *** $p < .001$.

Table 7. Bootstrapped Mediation Effects for H6

Effect	Estimate	SE	95% CI	p
a path: Entertainment Engagement → Cultural Engagement	0.739	0.034	[0.672, 0.806]	< .001
b path: Cultural Engagement → Country Image	0.660	0.052	[0.557, 0.763]	< .001
Direct effect (c')	0.206	0.049	[0.109, 0.302]	< .001
Indirect effect (ab)	0.488	-	[0.289, 0.606]	-
Total effect (c)	0.694	0.038	[0.620, 0.768]	< .001

The path from Korean Entertainment Engagement to Broader Korean Cultural Engagement was significant, $B = 0.739$, $p < .001$. The path from Broader Korean Cultural Engagement to Country Image, controlling for Entertainment Engagement, was also significant, $B = 0.660$, $p < .001$.

The bootstrapped indirect effect was positive and statistically supported, $ab = 0.488$, with a 95% bootstrap confidence interval of [0.289, 0.606]. Because the interval did not include zero, the indirect effect was statistically significant. The direct effect remained significant after including the mediator, $B = 0.206$, $p < .001$. The total effect was $B = 0.694$, $p < .001$.

The significant indirect effect, together with the remaining significant direct effect, is consistent with partial mediation. Korean Entertainment Engagement was associated with a more favorable Country Image both directly and indirectly through Broader Korean Cultural Engagement. H6 was supported.

Moderation Analyses for H7a and H7b

Hypotheses H7a and H7b proposed that Age Group would moderate the associations between Entertainment Engagement and Cultural Engagement (H7a) and between Entertainment Engagement and Country Image (H7b). As shown in Table 8, neither interaction was statistically significant. In these analyses, Age Group was treated as a categorical variable with 15–17 as the reference category.

Figure 8. Moderating Effect of Age Group on Entertainment Engagement and Cultural Engagement (H7a)

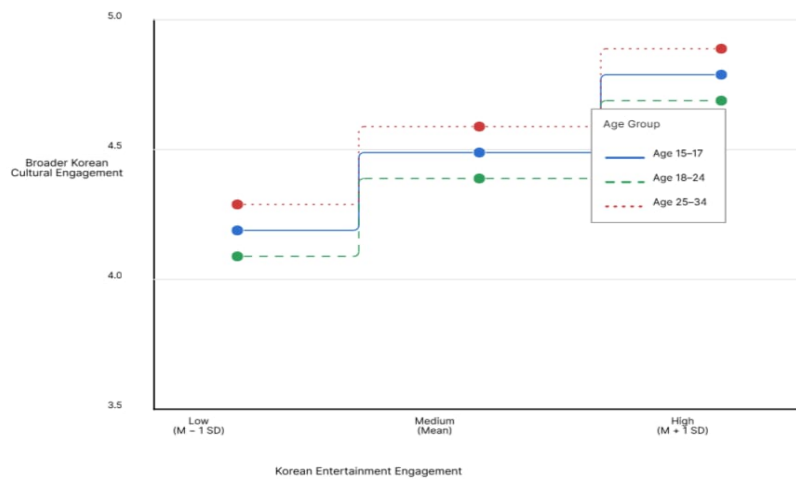


Figure 8. Moderating Effect of Age Group on Entertainment Engagement and Cultural Engagement (H7a)

Note: The interaction was not statistically significant, $p = .086$. Entertainment Engagement was positively associated with Cultural Engagement across all age groups.

Figure 9. Moderating Effect of Age Group on Entertainment Engagement and Country Image (H7b)

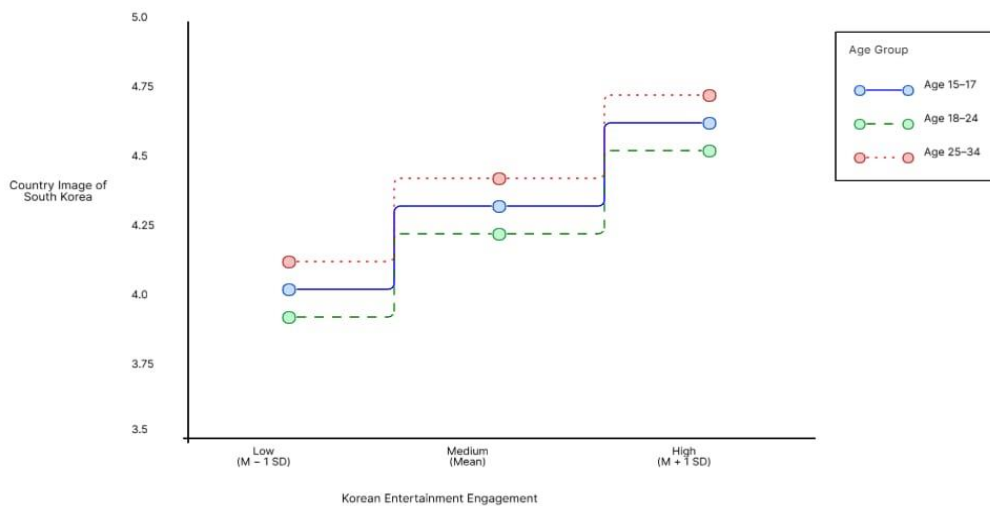


Figure 9. Moderating Effect of Age Group on Entertainment Engagement and Country Image (H7b)

Note: The interaction was not statistically significant, $p = .504$. Entertainment Engagement was positively associated with Country Image across all age groups.

Table 8. Moderation Results for H7a and H7b

Hypothesis	Outcome	Effect	<i>B</i>	β	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI
H7a	Cultural Engagement	Entertainment $\times$ Age (18-24)	-0.149	-.158	0.087	-1.72	.086	[-0.319, 0.021]
H7a	Cultural Engagement	Entertainment $\times$ Age (25-34)	0.065	.069	0.134	0.48	.630	[-0.199, 0.328]

H7a	Cultural Engagement	Simple slope: Age 15-17	0.854	.907	0.068	12.52	<.001	[0.719, 0.989]
H7a	Cultural Engagement	Simple slope: Age 18-24	0.689	.732	0.046	15.14	<.001	[0.599, 0.779]
H7a	Cultural Engagement	Simple slope: Age 25-34	0.895	.950	0.096	9.32	<.001	[0.698, 1.091]
H7b	Country Image	Entertainment $\times$ Age (18-24)	-0.064	-.069	0.096	-0.67	.504	[-0.253, 0.125]
H7b	Country Image	Entertainment $\times$ Age (25-34)	0.137	.147	0.149	0.92	.357	[-0.155, 0.429]
H7b	Country Image	Simple slope: Age 15-17	0.758	.811	0.083	9.18	<.001	[0.594, 0.922]
H7b	Country Image	Simple slope: Age 18-24	0.657	.703	0.047	14.02	<.001	[0.565, 0.750]
H7b	Country Image	Simple slope: Age 25-34	0.865	.925	0.115	7.55	<.001	[0.630, 1.099]

Note: Age Group was treated as a categorical variable with 15–17 as the reference category.

H7a: The interaction between Korean Entertainment Engagement and Age Group was not statistically significant for Broader Korean Cultural Engagement. Relative to the 15–17 group, the interaction for 18–24 was $B = -0.149$, $\beta = -.158$, $p = .086$, and for 25–34 was $B = 0.065$, $\beta = .069$, $p = .630$. Simple slopes were positive and significant in all age groups: 15–17 ($B = 0.854$, $p < .001$), 18–24 ($B = 0.689$, $p < .001$), and 25–34 ($B = 0.895$, $p < .001$). Thus, Korean Entertainment Engagement was positively associated with Cultural Engagement across all age groups, but the strength of the association did not differ significantly by Age Group. H7a was not supported.

H7b: The interaction between Korean Entertainment Engagement and Age Group was not statistically significant for Country Image. Relative to the 15–17 group, the interaction for 18–24 was $B = -0.064$, $\beta = -.069$, $p = .504$, and for 25–34 was $B = 0.137$, $\beta = .147$, $p = .357$. Simple slopes were positive and significant in all age groups: 15–17 ($B = 0.758$, $p < .001$), 18–24 ($B = 0.657$, $p < .001$), and 25–34 ($B = 0.865$, $p < .001$). Therefore, Korean Entertainment Engagement was positively associated with Country Image across all age groups, but there was no statistically reliable evidence that Age Group altered the strength of this relationship. H7b was not supported.

Exploratory Geographic Region ANOVA

Exploratory one-way ANOVAs were conducted to compare Country Image and Broader Korean Cultural Engagement across the six geographic regions. Due to the small sample sizes of certain regions (particularly Africa with $n = 2$ and Oceania with $n = 4$), these analyses should be interpreted with caution.

Regional sample sizes were: Asia ($n = 188$), Europe ($n = 67$), Americas ($n = 20$), Middle East ($n = 17$), Oceania ($n = 4$), and Africa ($n = 2$).

As shown in Table 9, there were no statistically significant differences across regions. However, these results should be interpreted cautiously due to the highly unequal group sizes, particularly for Africa ($n = 2$) and Oceania ($n = 4$). Additionally, ordinary ANOVA assumptions (homogeneity of variance, normality) should be examined before interpreting these results as definitive.

Table 9. Exploratory One-Way ANOVA by Geographic Region

Outcome	<i>F</i>	<i>df1</i>	<i>df2</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>partial η²</i>	<i>N</i>
Country Image	0.872	5	292	.500	.015	298
Cultural Engagement	1.802	5	292	.112	.030	298

Country Image: There was no statistically significant difference across Geographic Regions, $F(5, 292) = 0.872, p = .500, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .015$.

Broader Korean Cultural Engagement: There was no statistically significant difference across Geographic Regions, $F(5, 292) = 1.802, p = .112, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .030$.

Descriptive means (Table 10) suggested somewhat higher scores in the Middle East and Europe, but no statistically significant evidence of regional differences was observed.

Table 10. Descriptive Means by Geographic Region

Geographic Region	Country Image (<i>M</i>)	Country Image (<i>SD</i>)	Cultural Engagement (<i>M</i>)	Cultural Engagement (<i>SD</i>)
Africa	4.56	0.27	4.56	0.09
Americas	4.51	0.68	4.54	0.68
Asia	4.52	0.56	4.45	0.56
Europe	4.62	0.26	4.63	0.21
Middle East	4.73	0.18	4.68	0.29
Oceania	4.53	0.21	4.63	0.23

Summary of Findings

A summary of hypothesis testing results is presented in Table 11.

Table 11. Summary of Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis	Statement	Result
H1	Entertainment Engagement → Cultural Engagement	Supported
H2	Entertainment Engagement → Korean Language Interest	Supported
H3	Emotional Engagement → Cultural Engagement	Supported
H4	Entertainment Engagement → Country Image	Supported
H5	Cultural Engagement → Country Image	Supported
H6	Cultural Engagement mediates Entertainment Engagement → Country Image	Supported (Partial)
H7a	Age moderates Entertainment Engagement → Cultural Engagement	Not Supported
H7b	Age moderates Entertainment Engagement → Country Image	Not Supported

Overall, the analyses provided support for H1–H6, with H6 indicating partial mediation, whereas H7a and H7b were not supported. The findings consistently showed positive associations among Korean entertainment engagement, broader cultural engagement, Korean language interest, and country image, while exploratory regional comparisons did not reveal statistically significant differences.

DISCUSSION

This study examined the associations between Korean entertainment engagement and broader cultural engagement, Korean language interest, social and emotional engagement, and country image of South Korea among international audiences aged 15–34. Drawing on soft power theory (Nye, 2004) and uses and gratifications theory (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973), the study tested a conceptual model in which Korean entertainment engagement was expected to be associated with broader Korean cultural engagement, which in turn was expected to be associated with country image. The findings provided support for H1 through H6, with H6 indicating partial mediation, whereas H7a and H7b were not supported. Exploratory geographic region comparisons did not reveal statistically significant differences.

The results demonstrate that Korean entertainment engagement is strongly and positively associated with broader Korean cultural engagement (H1). Participants who reported greater engagement with Korean entertainment also reported greater interest in Korean food, fashion, beauty, language, travel, and cultural activities. This finding is consistent with previous research documenting the "chain consumption" pattern, whereby initial interest in Korean music or dramas extends to other aspects of Korean culture (KOFICE, 2026; Kim, 2023). The strength of this association ($\beta = .785$, $R^2 = .637$) suggests that Korean entertainment engagement may serve as an important entry point to broader cultural interests among participants in this sample. From a uses and gratifications perspective, this pattern is consistent with the possibility that engagement with Korean content may extend beyond entertainment-oriented motivations to include cultural learning and identity exploration (Katz et al., 1973; Rubin, 2009). Similarly, the positive association between Korean entertainment engagement and Korean language interest (H2) was supported. Participants who engaged more deeply with Korean entertainment reported stronger motivation to learn Korean, greater interest in understanding content in its original language, and a more favorable view of the Korean language itself. The effect size ($\beta = .734$, $R^2 = .561$) suggests that entertainment engagement is a meaningful correlate of language interest. This is theoretically significant because language learning represents a more sustained form of cultural engagement than entertainment consumption alone, suggesting that Hallyu engagement can have tangible educational implications.

The relationship between emotional engagement and broader Korean cultural engagement (H3) was also supported. Participants who reported stronger emotional connections to Korean entertainment also reported greater cultural engagement. The effect size ($\beta = .841$, $R^2 = .712$) was the largest among the regression models, indicating that emotional engagement is a particularly strong correlate of cultural engagement. This finding is consistent with fandom research suggesting that emotional connections to entertainment content can intensify broader cultural engagement (Oh et al., 2026). Emotional involvement appears to be a particularly important correlate of broader cultural engagement.

The positive associations between Korean entertainment engagement and country image (H4) and between broader Korean cultural engagement and country image (H5) were both supported. The effect sizes (H4: $\beta = .742$, $R^2 = .551$; H5: $\beta = .839$, $R^2 = .693$) suggest that cultural engagement is a stronger predictor of country image than entertainment engagement alone. From a soft power perspective, these findings indicate that Korean entertainment may contribute to favorable country perceptions by generating cultural engagement that extends beyond media consumption (Nye, 2004; Oh et al., 2026). However, it is important to note that these are associations, not causal relationships. The distinction between cultural popularity and soft power, as emphasized by (Lyan, 2023), remains important.

The mediation analysis (H6) provided support for partial mediation. The indirect effect ($ab = 0.488$, 95% CI [0.289, 0.606]) was statistically significant, and the direct effect remained significant ($c' = 0.206$, $p < .001$). The indirect effect was substantial relative to the total unstandardized association, suggesting that broader cultural engagement represents an important pathway linking entertainment engagement with country image. This

finding is consistent with the theoretical framework, which proposed that uses and gratifications processes would lead audiences to progressively expand their cultural interests, and that this broader engagement would be associated with more favorable country perceptions.

The moderation analyses for H7a and H7b did not yield statistically significant results. The associations between Korean entertainment engagement and cultural engagement (H7a) and between Korean entertainment engagement and country image (H7b) did not differ significantly across age groups. Simple slopes were positive and significant in all age groups. The failure to detect significant moderation may be attributable to several factors: the relatively narrow age range (15–34), the small sample size of the 25–34 group ($n = 34$, 11.4%), and the possibility that these associations are relatively consistent across age groups. The absence of moderation does not necessarily indicate that age is irrelevant to Hallyu engagement—rather, it suggests that the associations tested in this study do not vary significantly across these age groups.

The exploratory geographic region comparisons did not reveal statistically significant differences. However, these findings should be interpreted with considerable caution due to highly unequal group sizes, particularly for Africa ($n = 2$) and Oceania ($n = 4$). The absence of statistically significant regional differences should not be interpreted as evidence that geographic context is irrelevant to Hallyu engagement. Rather, it suggests that the present study's sample was insufficiently balanced to detect regional differences.

Several findings deserve additional attention. The high mean scores across all constructs (ranging from 4.49 to 4.56 out of 5) likely reflect selection effects inherent in convenience and snowball sampling—participants who responded to a survey about Korean entertainment were likely already engaged with Hallyu. This self-selection may have inflated the mean scores and correlations. Consequently, the findings should not be generalized to broader populations with less exposure to Korean entertainment. The high correlations among constructs, particularly the very strong association between Country Image and Perceived Soft Power ($r = .873$), raise questions about construct validity and discriminant validity. While these constructs are theoretically related, they are not identical. This high correlation may indicate conceptual overlap or common method variance, as all data were collected through a single self-report survey at one time point. While the internal consistency of the scales was good (Cronbach's $\alpha > .80$), the high intercorrelations suggest that discriminant validity—the extent to which constructs are empirically distinct—may be a concern. Future research should examine the factor structure and discriminant validity of these measures using confirmatory factor analysis and alternative measurement approaches. The findings contribute to the existing literature in several ways. First, they provide empirical evidence for the relationships among Korean entertainment engagement, cultural engagement, and country image within a single empirical framework. Second, the study distinguishes between entertainment engagement and emotional engagement and identifies emotional engagement as a particularly strong correlate of cultural engagement. Third, the study contributes to soft power scholarship by examining the relationship between entertainment engagement and country image rather than assuming that cultural popularity automatically translates into soft power.

The practical implications are also noteworthy. For educators, the strong association between entertainment engagement and Korean language interest suggests that Korean entertainment may have potential as a motivational resource in Korean language education. For policymakers, the findings suggest that supporting Korean entertainment content may contribute to South Korea's cultural attractiveness and favorable country image. However, cultural attraction does not automatically translate into political influence (Lyan, 2023). For industry professionals, the findings suggest that attention to emotional and cultural engagement may be relevant to strategies aimed at sustaining audience engagement and favorable country perceptions.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The cross-sectional design precludes causal inference. The sample was predominantly female (75.2%) and concentrated in the 15–24 age range (88.6%), limiting generalizability. The small sample size of the 25–34 age group ($n = 34$, 11.4%) limited statistical power for detecting age-related differences. Convenience and snowball sampling may have introduced selection bias, and the high mean scores may reflect self-selection effects. The geographic distribution was highly uneven, with Asia (63.1%) and Europe (22.5%) disproportionately represented, while Africa (0.7%) and Oceania (1.3%) were barely represented, limiting conclusions about regional differences. The very strong correlations among constructs raise questions

about construct validity and common-method variance. These limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings.

Future research should employ longitudinal designs to examine temporal ordering, more diverse samples to test generalizability, and validated measures to strengthen construct validity. Future research should also assess the discriminant validity of country image and perceived soft power using confirmatory factor analysis and alternative measurement approaches. Qualitative research could complement the quantitative findings by providing richer accounts of how audiences experience and interpret their engagement with Korean entertainment.

In conclusion, this study provides evidence that Korean entertainment engagement is associated with broader cultural engagement, Korean language interest, emotional engagement, and country image of South Korea among international audiences aged 15–34. The findings are consistent with the theoretical framework and contribute to scholarship on cultural globalization, transnational cultural consumption, and soft power. While the findings should be interpreted in light of the study's limitations, they suggest that Hallyu engagement extends beyond entertainment consumption and is strongly associated with broader cultural interests and favorable country perceptions among the international audiences represented in this study.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study examined the associations between Korean entertainment engagement and broader cultural engagement, Korean language interest, social and emotional engagement, and country image of South Korea among international audiences aged 15–34. Drawing on soft power theory (Nye, 2004) and uses and gratifications theory (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973), the study tested a conceptual model proposing that Korean entertainment engagement would be associated with broader Korean cultural engagement, which in turn would be associated with country image of South Korea.

The findings provided support for the primary hypothesized relationships. Korean entertainment engagement was positively associated with broader Korean cultural engagement, Korean language interest, emotional engagement, and country image of South Korea. Broader Korean cultural engagement partially mediated the association between Korean entertainment engagement and country image, suggesting that cultural engagement represents an important pathway in the association between entertainment engagement and country perceptions. However, age group did not significantly moderate these relationships, and exploratory geographic region comparisons did not reveal statistically significant differences. These findings have several theoretical implications. First, they extend soft power scholarship by empirically examining the relationship between entertainment engagement and country image rather than assuming that cultural popularity automatically translates into soft power. The findings suggest that cultural engagement serves as a meaningful pathway linking entertainment to country image, which has implications for understanding how cultural attraction may relate to soft-power resources. Second, the findings contribute to uses and gratifications theory by demonstrating that audiences who engage with Korean entertainment do so for gratifications that extend beyond entertainment, including cultural learning and identity exploration. Third, the study distinguishes between entertainment engagement and emotional engagement, demonstrating that emotional engagement is a particularly strong correlate of cultural engagement. This suggests that the emotional dimensions of media engagement deserve greater attention in future Hallyu research.

The practical implications of the findings are also noteworthy. For educators, the strong association between entertainment engagement and Korean language interest suggests that Korean entertainment may have potential as a motivational resource in Korean language education. Integrating authentic Korean media content into language curricula may enhance student engagement and motivation. For policymakers, the findings suggest that supporting the production and distribution of Korean entertainment content may contribute to South Korea's cultural attractiveness and favorable country image, potentially enhancing soft-power resources. However, it is important to note that cultural attraction does not automatically translate into political influence (Lyan, 2023). The relationship between entertainment engagement and political outcomes likely involves additional mechanisms and mediating factors. For industry professionals, the findings suggest that attention to emotional

and cultural engagement may be relevant to strategies aimed at sustaining audience engagement and favorable country perceptions.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The cross-sectional design precludes causal inference, and the predominantly female, young sample limits generalizability to male audiences and older age groups. The convenience and snowball sampling methods may have introduced selection bias, as participants who responded to the survey were likely already engaged with Korean entertainment, which may have inflated mean scores and correlations. The geographic distribution of the sample was highly uneven, limiting the ability to draw conclusions about regional differences. The very strong correlations among some constructs raise questions about construct validity and discriminant validity, and the age-related hypotheses may have been underpowered due to the small sample size of the 25–34 age group. Future research should address these limitations by employing longitudinal designs to examine the temporal ordering of relationships, more diverse samples to test generalizability, and validated measures to strengthen construct validity. Future studies could also examine the role of individual differences, such as cultural openness, cosmopolitan attitudes, and identity-related processes, in shaping Hallyu engagement and its outcomes. Qualitative research could complement the quantitative findings by providing richer accounts of how audiences experience and interpret their engagement with Korean entertainment.

In conclusion, this study provides evidence that Korean entertainment engagement is associated with broader cultural engagement, Korean language interest, emotional engagement, and country image of South Korea among international audiences aged 15–34. The findings are consistent with the theoretical framework and contribute to scholarship on cultural globalization, transnational cultural consumption, media engagement, and soft power. While the findings should be interpreted in light of the study's limitations, they suggest that Hallyu engagement extends beyond entertainment consumption and is strongly associated with broader cultural interests and favorable country perceptions among the international audiences represented in this study. As the Korean Wave continues to evolve and reach new audiences worldwide, understanding how entertainment engagement relates to cultural participation and country perceptions remains an important area for future research.

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