



Mapping the Korean Wave Studies in the Perspective of Communication Sociology: A Bibliometric Analysis

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Diajukan: 21 Januari 2026 / Direvisi: 24 April 2026 / Disetujui: 26 Mei 2026

Abstract

The phenomenon of the Korean Wave (Hallyu) has evolved from a regional entertainment trend into a complex global force influencing digital culture and social interactions. While previous studies have predominantly focused on the economic and tourism impacts of Korean Wave, a comprehensive mapping of its sociological dimensions remains limited. This study aims to map the development trends, conceptual structures, and evolution of Korean Wave research within the perspective of the sociology of communication. Using a bibliometric analysis approach, this study analyzed 209 scientific documents published between 2015 and 2026 retrieved from the Scopus database. The data were processed using R-Package Biblioshiny to generate performance analysis and science mapping. The results indicate a significant surge in scientific production starting in 2019, driven by the global expansion of K-Pop fandoms. The network analysis reveals a distinct polarization in the research landscape: one cluster focuses on "social media activism and participatory culture," while another emphasizes the "psychological well-being of fans," particularly among adolescents and female audiences. Furthermore, the thematic evolution analysis highlights a paradigm shift from content-based studies (drama/TV) to human-centric inquiries (identity, gender, and mental health). This study concludes that the scholarship on the Korean Wave has matured into a critical sociological discourse, moving beyond mere consumption to explore how digital platforms facilitate identity negotiation and transnational community formation.

Keywords: Korean Wave, Hallyu, Sociology of Communication, Bibliometric Analysis, Social Media, Pop Culture.

Introduction

The phenomenon of the Korean Wave (*Hallyu*) has transformed from a mere entertainment trend into a global cultural force influencing the social structure of modern society. In the digital era, this phenomenon is deeply rooted in the usage of social media, which serves as a primary vehicle for cultural dissemination (Suyanto et al., 2024). Data indicates that Indonesia holds one of the largest K-Pop fan bases in the virtual world, which has significant implications for the publication of journals topic 209 on Scopus. This phenomenon confirms that the *Korean Wave* is no longer just an economic commodity but a complex sociological phenomenon.

As noted, in recent studies, social media platforms have played a pivotal role in accelerating the globalization of K-Pop, allowing it to transcend geographical boundaries and create a shared digital culture among international youth (Hisham, 2024). This massive digital consumption has not only reshaped entertainment habits but also influenced the psychological well-being of its consumers, where parasocial interactions with idols can



significantly affect fans' subjective happiness. Furthermore, this phenomenon demonstrates how digital platforms function not only as channels of content distribution but also as spaces for emotional engagement and identity construction among users

Although studies on the Korean Wave have been widely conducted, the majority of previous literature tends to focus on economic and tourism perspectives. For instance, research has extensively examined how K-Pop fandoms contribute to consumer behavior, specifically in increasing purchase intentions for Korean products (Rupińska, 2024). Similarly, other scholars have highlighted the impact of Korean Wave on the tourism sector, analyzing how the global popularity of Korean pop culture attracts international tourists to visit specific destinations in South Korea (Yoon & Labarta Garcia, 2024). While these studies provide valuable insights into the commodification of culture, they often overlook the complex sociological dynamics that occur within the digital communities themselves.

In the perspective of the sociology of communication, the Korean Wave is evolving into a more complex space for social movement and identity formation. Recent literature has begun to uncover how K-Pop fandoms are shifting from passive consumers to active political participants, utilizing their digital networks for social activism and political engagement (Park & Park, 2025). Furthermore, the discourse has expanded to include issues of cultural identity, exploring how diasporic youth negotiate their identities through K-Pop consumption (Kim & Nicolau, 2025), and the phenomenon of cultural hybridity that blends local and global elements (Suh, 2024). Additionally, contemporary studies have started to link the sustainability of the *Korean Wave* with ethical management (ESG) and social responsibility, indicating a maturity in the ecosystem of this pop culture (Azzahra & Aras, 2025)

This study aims to map the development trends of Korean Wave research within the perspective of the sociology of communication using bibliometric analysis. Unlike conventional literature reviews, this study offers novelty in the form of data visualization regarding the evolution of research topics, collaboration networks among researchers, and shifts in research focus over time. By utilizing Scopus-indexed scientific publication data from the last decade 2016-2025, this research will address how sociological trends in *Korean Wave* studies have developed and which topics have become dominant in the global academic discourse.

Research Method

In line with the research problem formulated, this study employs the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method combined with bibliometric analysis. SLR is a method that establishes a series of steps to organize a review methodically (Carrera-Rivera et al., 2022). This method was selected for its ability to maintain transparency and reduce bias in data selection (Williams et al., 2021). Within this framework, all primary studies are identified, assessed, and summarized systematically using explicit and replicable methodologies.

Since this study relies on metadata analysis, the SLR approach utilizes rigorous and verifiable protocols to summarize the best available research regarding the specific query (Nguyen & Singh, 2023). In its execution, this study adheres to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines (Veroniki et al., 2025).



This methodological framework ensures the transparency, consistency, and replicability of the research process, thereby strengthening the validity of the findings.

The research protocol began by defining the search query on the **Scopus** database, focusing on keywords such as “Korean Wave”, “Hallyu”, “K-Pop”, and “Social Media”. The literature search was restricted to documents published in the form of journal articles and reviews within the timeframe of **2015 to 2026**. To ensure global relevance, the selection was limited to documents written in English.

Based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria, a total of **209 documents** were successfully retrieved and exported. The metadata was extracted in **BibTeX** format and subsequently processed using the **Biblioshiny** app within the **R Language** environment. The extracted data were then visualized and analyzed to map the scientific landscape, which is presented in the Results and Discussion section. This process enables a systematic identification of research patterns, thematic structures, and collaboration networks within the field.

Results and Discussion

Annual Scientific Production and Growth Trend

To understand the development of research interest in this field, the annual distribution of scientific production was analysed. Figure 1 illustrates the growth trajectory of publications on the Korean Wave within the sociology of communication perspective from 2015 to 2026.

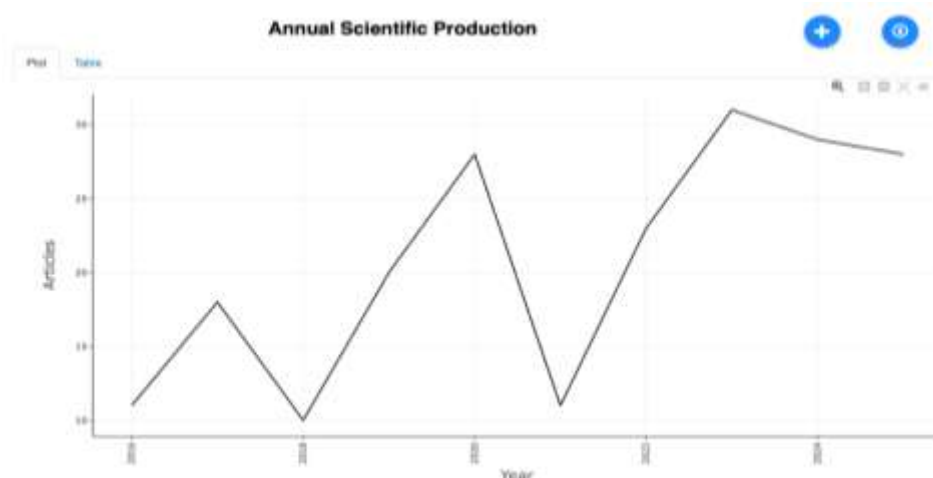


Figure 1: Most Global Cited Display in Bibliometrix
(Source: Bibliometrix Analysis)



As shown in Figure 1, the research output has demonstrated a significant upward trend over the last decade. In the initial period 2015, the number of publications was relatively low, with only 209 documents recorded. This indicates that at that time, the topic was still in its embryonic stage in academic literature.

However, a sharp increase occurred starting from 2019, reaching its peak in 2024 with a total of articles published in a single year. In the realm of virtual communities, fans do not merely consume content but actively construct social realities and shared meanings through symbolic interactions on social media platforms (Azzahra & Aras, 2025). This exponential growth can be attributed to the global proliferation of K-Pop culture and the increasing role of social media platforms in facilitating transnational fandom activities. Collective behavior in the digital space, known as herding behavior, has proven to be a significant indicator in predicting tourism demand and the consumption of Korean cultural products (Lim et al., 2023). The consistent rise in the number of articles suggests that the Korean Wave has evolved from a temporary trend into a sustained and significant area of inquiry within sociology and communication studies.

Beyond this quantitative increase, the trend also reflects a broader epistemological shift in academic interest, where scholars increasingly recognize the Korean Wave as a lens to understand contemporary digital society. The surge after 2019 may also be interpreted as a response to the intensification of global digital connectivity, particularly during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, which accelerated online cultural consumption and reshaped patterns of social interaction. Therefore, the growth of publications is not merely a reflection of popularity, but an indication of the expanding theoretical relevance of the Korean Wave in explaining the intersection between media, identity, and transnational communication.

Most Global Cited Documents

To determine the core literature that has shaped the academic discourse on the Korean Wave, this study identified the documents with the highest global citation scores. **Figure 2** presents the top documents that serve as the primary reference points in this field.

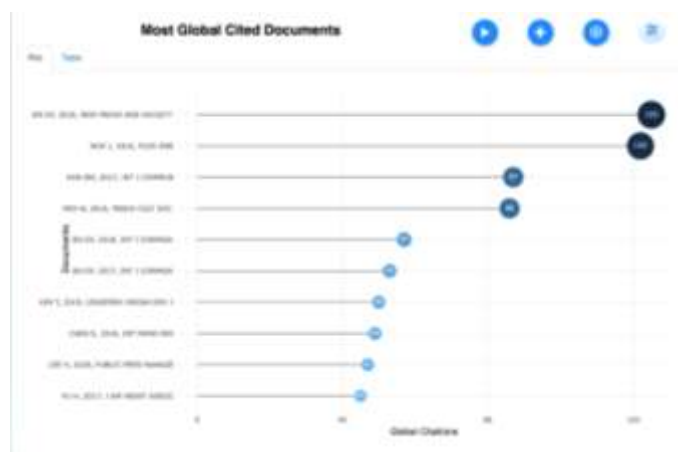


Figure 2: Most Global Cited Documents Display in Bibliometric (Source: Bibliometrix Analysis)



As illustrated in the chart, the work by Jin DY (2016), published in *New Media and Society*, stands out as the most influential article with 125 global citations. This dominance suggests that Jin's conceptualization of *Hallyu 2.0* which focuses on the intersection of the Korean Wave and social media platforms is the central paradigm in contemporary studies. The current global popularity of Hallyu is best understood through the framework of 'transnational proximity,' where similar socio-economic experiences, such as social inequality and youth culture, serve as key connectors across national borders (Jin, 2023).

Following closely is the study by Noh J (2016) published in *PLOS ONE* with 122 citations, and Han BM (2017) in the *International Journal of Communication* with 87 citations. Notably, Jin DY appears multiple times in the top list (2016, 2017, and 2018), reinforcing his status as a leading authority in this domain. The prominence of journals like *New Media and Society* and *International Journal of Communication* among the top sources further confirms that the sociological study of the Korean Wave is deeply embedded in digital media scholarship.

The prominence of journals like *New Media and Society* and *International Journal of Communication* among the top sources further confirms that the sociological study of the Korean Wave is deeply embedded in digital media scholarship. Fan identity plays a central role in educational motivation, where digital interaction with Hallyu content encourages individuals to pursue informal Korean language learning as part of their identity negotiation (Curran, 2024). This citation pattern indicates a theoretical maturity in the field: scholars are no longer merely describing the popularity of cultural products, but are rigorously analyzing the underlying communication mechanisms such as platform.

Furthermore, the concentration of highly cited works within a limited group of authors suggests the presence of intellectual gatekeepers who shape the dominant discourse in this field. This may lead to a certain level of theoretical consolidation, where specific frameworks such as transnationalism and digital participatory culture become hegemonic in explaining the Korean Wave phenomenon. At the same time, this pattern also opens opportunities for future research to introduce alternative perspectives or underexplored contexts, thereby diversifying the academic conversation beyond the currently dominant paradigms.

Conceptual Structure: Co-occurrence Network

Visualizing the connection between keywords helps to uncover the intellectual structure of the field. Figure 3 displays the keyword co-occurrence network, where the size of the nodes represents the frequency of the keywords, and the colors indicate distinct clusters of research topics.

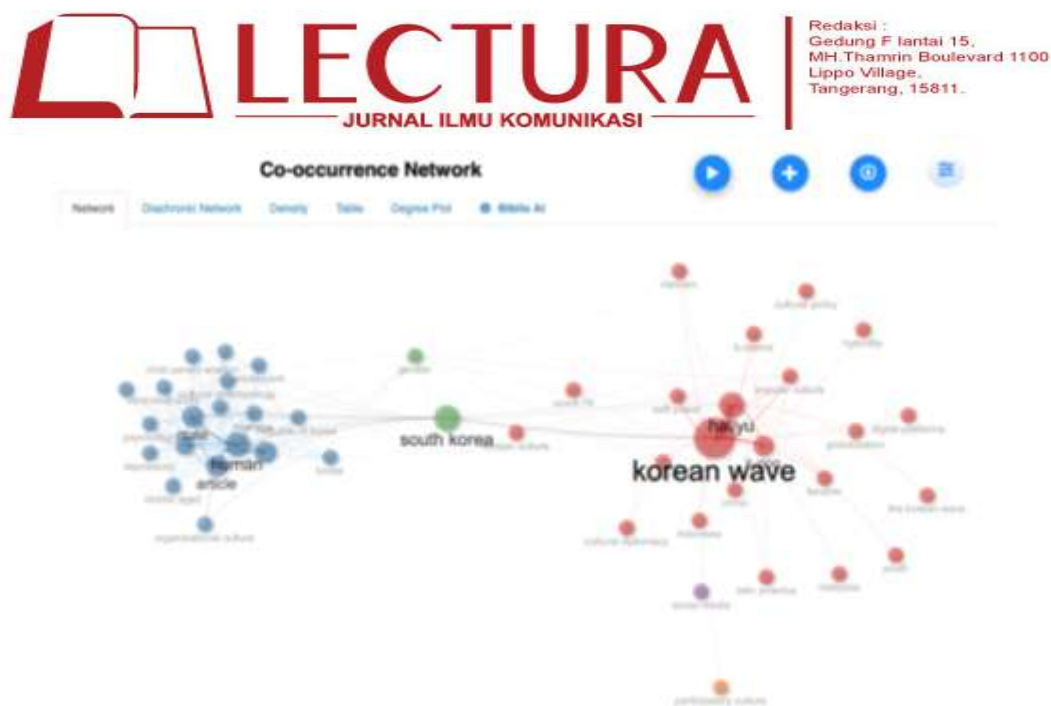


Figure 3: Co-occurrence Network Display in Bibliometrix
(Source: Bibliometrix Analysis)

The network analysis, as visualized in Figure 3, reveals a polarized structure consisting of two dominant clusters that represent the multidisciplinary nature of Korean Wave studies: The Red Cluster (Sociology of Communication & Culture): This is the largest and most central cluster, anchored by the nodes "Korean Wave", "Hallyu", and "K-Pop". Quantitative analysis of K-Pop lyrics over the last two decades reveals a significant increase in the use of English, reflecting a cultural strategy adapted to reach a global audience (Barnes-Sadler et al., 2025). Sociologically, this cluster highlights the mechanism of cultural diffusion through keywords such as "Social Media", "Digital Platforms", and "Participatory Culture". The presence of terms like "Soft Power", "Cultural Policy", and "Cultural Diplomacy" suggests that scholars heavily discuss *Hallyu* as a tool for national branding. Furthermore, the inclusion of "Fandom", "Youth", and "Hybridity" confirms that the discourse has shifted towards audience engagement and identity negotiation in the digital era. Social media functions as a crucial agent of mediatization in expanding South Korea's soft diplomacy, effectively reaching youth demographics even through non-K-Pop cultural products (Hisham, 2024).

The Blue Cluster (Psychological & Behavioral Impact): The second cluster focuses on the human subject, dominated by keywords like "Human", "Article", and "Male/Female". Interestingly, this cluster is associated with psychological terms such as "Depression", "Psychology", "Adolescent", and "Child-Parent Relation". This indicates a significant stream of research examining the psychological effects of Korean Wave consumption on teenagers, potentially addressing issues of addiction, body image, or family dynamics. Empirical studies have found that while the Korean Wave successfully transforms public perception of the country's image, specific elements like K-Pop do not always directly correlate with tourism visit intentions (Melisa et al., 2023)

The Bridging Themes: The node "Gender" appears centrally located between the two clusters, acting as a bridge. This implies that gender issues are a cross-cutting theme, relevant



both in the cultural analysis of K-Pop (Red Cluster) and in the psychological impact studies (Blue Cluster). Discourse analysis indicates that local media and cultural intermediaries actively constructed the narrative of Hallyu as a tool for national soft power, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic (Yoon, 2023).

This mapping validates the study's premise that the *Korean Wave* is no longer just an entertainment topic but a complex sociological phenomenon. The strong link between "Hallyu" and "Social Media" in the Red Cluster reinforces the theory that digital platforms are the primary "social factory" where contemporary cultural identities are produced and consumed.

Beyond this structural mapping, the polarization between the two clusters also reflects a theoretical dualism in the field, where macro-level cultural analysis and micro-level psychological inquiry tend to develop in parallel rather than in an integrated manner. This suggests a gap in the literature that future research could address by bridging these perspectives to provide a more holistic understanding of how collective digital practices interact with individual experiences. Furthermore, the central position of "gender" indicates its strategic importance as an analytical lens, highlighting the need for more intersectional approaches that consider how identity factors shape both participation in fandom and its psychological consequences.

Thematic Map and Strategic Diagrams

To analyze the maturity and development level of the research topics, a Thematic Map was generated (Figure 4). This map plots themes based on their Centrality (x-axis), which measures the importance of the theme in the entire research field, and Density (y-axis), which measures the development of the theme's internal network.

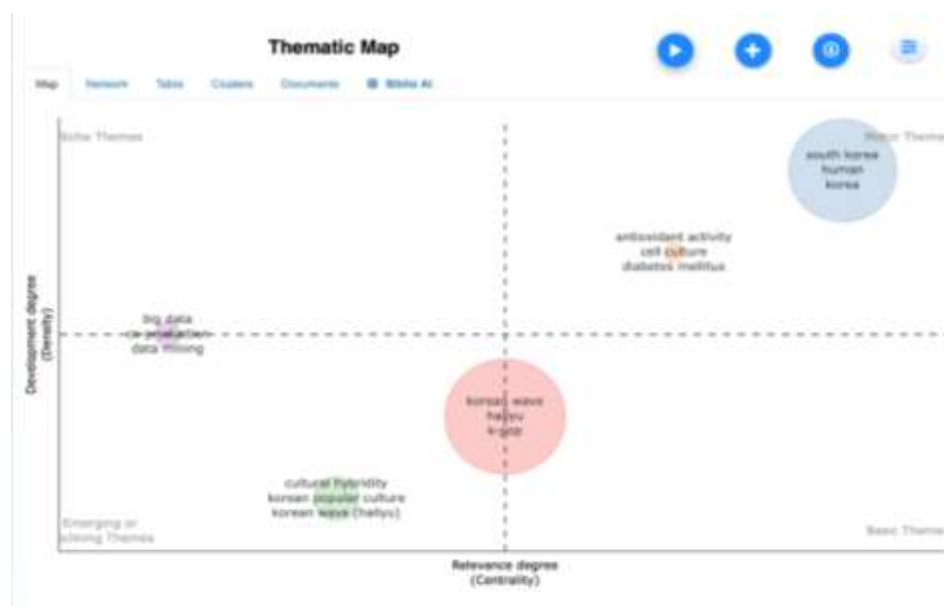


Figure 4: Thematic Map Display in Bibliometrix
(Source: Bibliometrix Analysis)



The analysis divides the topics into four distinct quadrants:

Motor Themes (Upper-Right Quadrant): The cluster containing "South Korea" and "Human" appears in this quadrant. This indicates that research focusing on the *subjects* (humans/people) within the South Korean context is both highly important (central) and well-developed. This likely correlates with the psychological studies identified earlier (e.g., impact on fans' well-being or demographic studies), suggesting this is currently a driving force in the academic discourse.

Niche Themes (Upper-Left Quadrant): Keywords such as "Big Data" and "Data Mining" are found here. These topics are highly developed internally but have lower centrality. This suggests that the use of computational methods (big data analysis) to study the Korean Wave is a specialized, technical sub-field. While sophisticated, it has not yet fully merged with the mainstream sociological debates.

Basic Themes (Lower-Right Quadrant): The cluster dominated by "Korean Wave", "Hallyu", and "K-Pop" sits in this quadrant. As expected, these are the fundamental concepts of the field. They are highly relevant (high centrality) but have lower density, implying that they serve as the broad, general foundation upon which more specific studies are built.

Emerging or Declining Themes (Lower-Left Quadrant): The topic of "Cultural Hybridity" appears in this quadrant. In the context of sociology, this placement is intriguing. It may suggest that "hybridity" was an early theoretical lens that is now becoming less dominant compared to newer perspectives (declining), or it is currently being redefined in a specific context (emerging). Given its proximity to the center, it remains a relevant but less structurally dense topic compared to the "Motor Themes."

From an analytical perspective, this configuration indicates that the field is undergoing a process of theoretical consolidation, where core concepts remain stable while methodological and thematic innovations develop at the margins. The positioning of big data as a niche theme suggests that the integration between computational methods and sociological theory is still limited, pointing to an opportunity for interdisciplinary advancement. Moreover, the ambiguous status of cultural hybridity reflects a shifting theoretical landscape, where earlier globalization frameworks are being re-evaluated in light of more contemporary issues such as identity politics and digital mediation.

Thematic Evolution and Trending Topics

To understand how the scholarly focus has shifted over time, this study analyzed the lifespan of trending keywords using the Trend Topics analysis. **Figure 5** visualizes the temporal evolution of the most frequently used terms, where the horizontal axis represents the year and the position of the bubbles indicates the peak popularity of the topic.

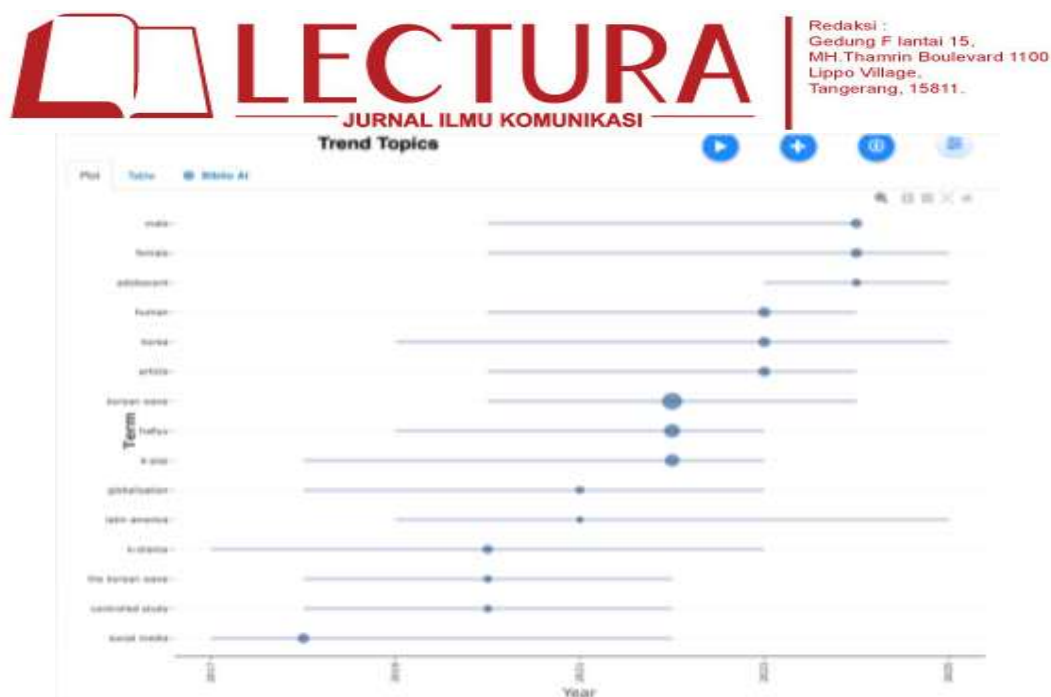


Figure 5: Trend Topics Display in Bibliometrix
(Source: Bibliometrix Analysis)

As observed in Figure 5, there is a distinct transformation in the research landscape:

Early Phase (2017–2020): Focus on Medium and Content In the earlier years, the research was heavily focused on the mechanisms of diffusion and cultural genres. The keyword "Social Media" appears as the earliest trend (peaking around 2018), followed by "K-Drama" and "Controlled Study" (around 2020). This suggests that the initial wave of academic inquiry was primarily concerned with *how* the Korean Wave spread through digital platforms and the analysis of its dramatic content.

Recent Phase (2023–2025): Focus on Human Subjects and Demographics A striking shift occurs in the most recent period. The chart shows that demographic and human-centric keywords such as "Adolescent", "Female", "Male", and "Human" have become the dominant trending topics, with timelines extending into 2025. This indicates a "humanistic turn" in the field. Scholars are no longer just studying the *media*, beyond music and drama, the platformization of digital comics (Webtoons) with vertical scrolling features has created a new, informal cultural learning space easily accessible via mobile devices (Cho et al., 2025), (the "what" and "how"), but are now deeply investigating the *people* (the "who") affected by it. This aligns with the psychological cluster identified earlier, confirming that current research is prioritizing the study of gender dynamics, youth development, and the psychological impact of Korean Wave on specific demographic groups. Although the government attempts to utilize youth culture as a nation-branding resource, policy studies reveal a disconnection between official political discourse and the organic dynamics of K-pop itself (Kita, 2025).

This evolution proves that the sociology of the Korean Wave has matured. It has moved from a general analysis of "Globalization" (trending in 2021) to a more granular analysis of how this global force impacts the lives of specific individuals, particularly adolescents and women. The global appeal of Korean Wave among women can be explained



through the concept of 'female universalism,' which offers alternative messages of empowerment compared to Western pop culture often dominated by masculinity (Oh et al., 2023).

This shift also reflects a broader transformation in communication studies, where the focus increasingly moves toward audience-centered and experience-based approaches. Rather than treating audiences as passive recipients, recent research positions them as active agents whose identities and emotional experiences are shaped through continuous interaction with digital media. Consequently, the Korean Wave serves as an empirical entry point to examine larger questions about digital subjectivity, globalization, and the reconfiguration of cultural power in the contemporary era.

Conclusion

First, this study concludes that the academic discourse on the Korean Wave within the sociology of communication has undergone a fundamental paradigm shift. Based on the bibliometric analysis of 209 Scopus-indexed documents, the field has successfully transitioned from a predominantly economic and tourism-centric perspective into a critical sociological inquiry. The data demonstrates a significant surge in scientific production, particularly after 2019, which correlates directly with the global expansion of social media platforms. This exponential growth confirms that Hallyu is no longer merely a regional entertainment trend, but a complex global phenomenon that influences social structures and cultural interactions across borders.

Second, regarding the macro-sociological dimension, the conceptual structure analysis reveals that the study of Hallyu is heavily dominated by the discourse of digital activism and participatory culture. The prominence of the "Red Cluster" in the network analysis highlights how fans have evolved from passive consumers into active agents of social movement. They utilize digital infrastructure not only to consume content but also to organize philanthropic activities, engage in political discourse, and amplify South Korea's soft power. This finding validates contemporary "new media" theories, suggesting that the sustainability of the Korean Wave relies heavily on the technological affordances that enable transnational community formation.

Third, on the micro-sociological level, this study identifies a critical research stream focusing on the psychological and individual impacts of Hallyu consumption. The "Blue Cluster" and recent keyword trends indicate a strong academic interest in how Korean Wave influences the personal lives of its audience, particularly regarding mental health, body image, and gender identity among adolescents. This polarization of topics between the public sphere of digital activism and the private sphere of psychological well-being suggests that the Korean Wave serves as a double-edged sword, acting simultaneously as a source of empowerment and a potential stressor for its global fanbase.

Fourth, the thematic evolution analysis provides evidence of a "humanistic turn" in the field. The shift in trending topics from content-based keywords (e.g., "K-Drama," "Television") in the early years to human-centric keywords (e.g., "Youth," "Female," "Identity") in recent years signifies the theoretical maturity of this discipline. Scholars are



moving beyond descriptive studies of cultural products to investigate the profound sociological consequences of these products on human subjects. This evolution asserts that the sociology of the Korean Wave has established itself as a legitimate sub-field that contributes significantly to the broader understanding of global digital culture.

Finally, this study offers several strategic suggestions for future research. Despite the richness of current literature, there remains a notable gap in the application of computational methods; specifically, the use of Big Data and Data Mining appears as a niche theme that has yet to be fully explored. Future scholars are encouraged to adopt these methodological approaches to capture the massive scale of fan interactions more granularly. Additionally, future research should critically examine the tension between state-led "nation branding" policies and organic fandom dynamics to provide a more holistic view of how cultural policies interact with grassroots digital movements.

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