# Korean Wave Fandom in Romania: From Consumers to Cultural Agents

**Valentina Marinescu[1], Ramona Marinache[2], and Teodor Dumitrache[1]**

[1]University of Bucharest, Faculty of Sociology and Social Work, Bucharest, Romania

[2]University of Bucharest, Faculty of Letters, Bucharest, Romania

# Фендом общности на Корейската вълна в Румъния: От потребители до културни агенти

**Валентина Маринеску[1], Рамона Мариначе[2] Теодор Думитраче[1]**

[1]Букурещки университет, Факултет по социология и социална работа, Румъния

[2]Букурещки университет, Факултет по литература, Румъния

## Author note

Valentina Marinescu https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9882-5902 , Ramona Marinache https://orcid.org/ 0000-0002-4072-8253 , Teodor Dumitrache https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6901-816X

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Prof. Dr. Valentina Marinescu, Department of Sociology, University of Bucharest, Romania, Email**:** valentina.marinescu@unibuc.ro

## Бележки за автора

Валентина Маринеску https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9882-5902, Рамона Мариначе https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4072-8253, Теодор Думитраче https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6901-816X

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**Abstract**

The paper explores how the Korean Wave (or Hallyu) is received, practiced, and localized among Romanian fans of South Korean culture. Moving beyond an understanding of Hallyu as imported entertainment, the study approaches K-pop, K-dramas, and similar cultural phenomena as resources through which fans build preferences, communities, identities, and instances of cultural mediation. The research uses a mixed-methods design based on an online questionnaire administered in March 2025 to 122 Romanian Hallyu fans. The findings show that Romanian fans express strong affective attachment to Korean culture while remaining cautious in assessing their own cultural knowledge. Their engagement was structured by a transmedia ecology linking K-pop, K-dramas, webtoons, social media, streaming platforms, fan communication, Korean products, and language learning. Fan practices are active but unevenly formalized. Respondents reported following artists, sharing content, voting, buying albums, talking to other fans, attending events, and learning Korean, yet official fan-club participation was limited. The results also revealed selective media consumption, critical reception of K-dramas, interest in broader East Asian cultures, and strong imagined tourism toward Korea. Korean language learning appeared as a particularly significant form of cultural investment. The article argues that Korean cultural diffusion in Romania is not a linear process of media exposure, but a complex articulation of affect, platforms, commodities, sociability, criticism, language, regional comparison, and imagined mobility. This paper contributes to Hallyu studies by foregrounding local fan agency within a specifically Eastern European cultural context.

*Keywords:* Korean wave, Hallyu, Romania, fandom, soft power, cultural agency

**Резюме**

В статията се изследва как Корейската вълна (или Халю) се приема, практикува и локализира сред румънските фенове на южнокорейската култура. Излизайки отвъд разбирането на Халю като вносно забавление, изследването разглежда K-pop, K-драмите и подобни културни феномени като ресурси, чрез които феновете изграждат предпочитания, общности, идентичности и случаи на културно посредничество. Изследването използва смесен методологичен дизайн, базиран на онлайн въпросник, проведен през март 2025 г. сред 122 румънски фенове на Халю. Резултатите показват, че румънските фенове изразяват силна афективна привързаност към корейската култура, като същевременно остават предпазливи при оценката на собствените си културни познания. Ангажираността им е структурирана от трансмедийна екология,

свързваща K-pop, K-драми, уебтунове, социални медии, стрийминг платформи, комуникация с фенове, корейски продукти и изучаване на езици. Фенските практики са активни, но неравномерно формализирани. Респондентите съобщават, че следват изпълнители, споделят съдържание, гласуват, купуват албуми, разговарят с други фенове, посещават събития и учат корейски, но официалното участие на фен клубовете е ограничено. Резултатите разкриват също селективно потребление на медии, критично приемане на K-драмите, интерес към по-широки източноазиатски култури и силен въображаем туризъм към Корея. Изучаването на корейски език се очертава като особено значима форма на културна инвестиция. В статията се твърди, че разпространението на корейската култура в Румъния не е линеен процес на медийно излагане, а сложно съчетание на афект, платформи, стоки, общителност, критика, език, регионално сравнение и въображаема мобилност. Тази статия допринася за изследванията на Халю, като поставя на преден план местната фенска дейност в рамките на специфичен източноевропейски културен контекст.

*Ключови думи*: корейска вълна, халю, Румъния, фендом, мека сила, културна дейност

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## Korean Wave Fandom in Romania: From Consumers to Cultural Agents

### Introduction

The Korean Wave, or Hallyu, mentioned throughout this study refers to the circulation and reception of Korean popular culture, especially K-pop and K-drama, among audiences outside South Korea. In the case of Romania, Hallyu is not approached only as imported entertainment, but as a set of cultural practices through which fans construct preferences, communities, identities, and forms of cultural mediation. The main concern of this paper is the shift from consumer to agent, or how Romanian fans engage with Korean cultural products and how some of these practices become social, communicative, and promotional activities.

In terms of theory, the starting point is the relationship between the concepts of soft power, global media circulation, and participatory fandom. Soft power theory makes it possible to analyze how cultural exports contribute to a more favorable perception of a foreign country and its cultural brand (Nye, 2004). At the same time, studies on fandom and participatory culture approaches help explain why audiences should not be understood as passive recipients such media products, but as users who filter, assimilate, share, interpret, translate, organize, and circulate cultural meanings (Bennett, 2014; Jenkins et al., 2013). The Romanian case is useful for noticing how these two processes intersect. On the one hand, Korean media products attract attention, on the other hand, fan practices help sustain and localize that attention.

Existing Hallyu scientific literature has emphasized that the Korean Wave should not be understood only as the export of nationally branded cultural products. For example, Shim (2006) interprets the rise of Korean popular culture through cultural hybridity, emphasizing how Korean media blend local cultural specificity with transnational and Westernized media forms. Moreover, Chua and Iwabuchi (2008) place Hallyu within wider East Asian popular-cultural flows, while Kim (2013) and Jin (2016) show that Korean media globalization is shaped by the interaction between cultural industries, state interest, digital infrastructures, and audience reception. Such perspectives are relevant for the present study because the Romanian Hallyu fandom is not treated here as a simple (and somewhat inevitable) effect of Korean cultural export, but as a locally mediated form of reception.

Recent work on what is known as “Hallyu 2.0” and other digital fandoms further clarifies the role of platforms in Korean cultural dissemination. Jin and Yoon (2014) argue that Korean popular culture circulates through a “social mediascape” driven by social media,

in which global audiences participate in the visibility, movement, and even recontextualization of Korean media. Similarly, Jung (2010) emphasizes transcultural consumption, showing that fans engage with Korean popular culture through practices of translation, imitation, reinterpretation, and affective identification. Such studies direct attention to the fan practices that occur after exposure, such as following artists, sharing content, discussing Korean media, learning Korean, buying related products, and integrating Korean cultural forms into everyday life. Thus, this type of research is useful for analyzing Romanian fans of Hallyu.

The case of Romania should also be placed within the smaller body of literature on Hallyu in Eastern and Central Europe. Marinescu and Balica (2013) assessed the impact of K-pop in Romania and showed that Korean cultural products contributed to Romanian fans' perceptions of Korea and their interest in Korean culture. Bîja (2024) also analyzed the reception of K-pop, K-dramas, and Korean films in Romania, emphasizing the different manners in which Korean popular culture is interpreted and adapted within the local cultural context. Similar studies on Central Europe show that Hallyu reception in the region is influenced by digital access, fan communities, local cultural institutions, and the uneven development of Korean cultural infrastructures. For example, Shim & Gajzágó (2023) analyzed K-culture fans in Hungary, while Hargitai, Sasné Grósz, & Sas (2023) observed the rise of Hallyu in the Hungarian digital space. These studies indicate that Hallyu in Europe cannot be understood only through the lens of measured global popularity, but also through local reception patterns, fan practice, language learning, platform use, and cultural mediation. Such an isolated perspective, especially from a region that has few ties to Eastern Asia, is relevant because it allows the Romanian case to be seen as part of a wider Eastern European pattern of mediated Korean cultural reception.

This regional literature corpus also suggests that the distinction between consumption and agency is a core feature in studying Hallyu, because fans do not only watch K-dramas or listen to K-pop; they also help produce visibility, organize attention, circulate meanings, create interpretive communities, and sometimes act as informal cultural mediators. In this particular sense, Romanian fans definitely can be understood as participants in the localization of Hallyu, because practices help transform Korean popular culture from a foreign media product into a set of social, linguistic, material, and affective practices embedded in Romanian cultural life.

This study aims to contribute to the analysis of Hallyu by focusing on the Romanian audience as an active interpretive community, but with a specific characteristic. Rather than treating Korean popular culture as a cultural export in one direction, it explores the fan practices through which Korean culture is selected, evaluated, circulated, and integrated into everyday cultural repertoires. Thus, the findings naturally suggest that Romanian Hallyu fandom involves behaviors such as affective attachment, digital participation, transnational community building, and the development of hybrid cultural tastes.

## Method and materials

This study used a mixed-methods design, combining quantitative survey data with qualitative content analysis of open-ended responses. This type of design was chosen because the research questions required both measurable indicators of cultural consumption and interpretive evidence concerning motivations, identity, affective attachment, and fan practices, in a wider Romanian context. Consequently, the quantitative component was used to identify general patterns of Hallyu engagement among Romanian fans, while the qualitative component provided context on how respondents explained their interest in Korean culture.

Data were collected through an online questionnaire administered throughout March 2025. The administered questionnaire focused on familiarity with Korean culture, motivations for cultural consumption, media practices, fan participation, social interaction, consumer behavior, interest in other East Asian cultures, imagined tourism, and the dimensions of fandom that were related to identity.

The total sample consisted of 122 Romanian Hallyu fans who were recruited through non-probability sampling, using convenience and snowball sampling procedures. The questionnaire was distributed online, as a Google Forms link, through social media platforms, fan communities, online university networks (mainly Whatsapp groups), and informal peer-to-peer sharing. Eligibility was limited to respondents who identified as Romanian and who reported an interest in Korean popular culture, including K-pop, K-dramas, or other cultural forms related to Hallyu. Participation was voluntary, and respondents completed the questionnaire anonymously, both aspects being explained upfront. Moreover, before beginning the survey, participants were also informed about the purpose of the study and their right to discontinue participation, at any time, before submission, and that proceeding to the questionnaire would treated as informed consent.

The questionnaire included a variety of interrogative approaches, such as closed-ended, multiple-choice, multiple-response, and open-ended questions. Closed-ended items

measured characteristics such as general interest in Korean culture, perceived level of knowledge, duration of fandom, K-pop listening practices, K-drama viewing practices, use of streaming platforms, fan community participation, social media following, cultural activities, Korean product consumption, interest in other East Asian cultures, Korean language learning, and willingness to visit Korea as tourists, whereas open-ended questions invited respondents to further describe their motivations, personal thoughts and experiences, perceptions of Korea, interpretations of their own fan practices, and even criticisms of Korean cultural products.

Quantitative data were analyzed using the JASP software solution. The analysis relied primarily on descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, and cumulative frequencies. For multiple-response questions, combined answers were recoded into individual categories, and cumulative frequencies were calculated for each element. This approach made it easier to identify the most frequent platforms, practices, products, cultural interests, and modes of fan engagement across responses.

Qualitative responses were analyzed through thematic content analysis. More specifically, the coding process began with the coder rereading the open-ended answers in order to identify recurrent meanings, expressions, and interpretive patterns. Initial codes were then generated inductively from the data and grouped into broader thematic categories. Particular attention was given to recurring references to emotional attachment, self-acceptance, community, intercultural curiosity, media criticism, imagined travel, material consumption, and the transition from passive consumption to active cultural mediation. Where available and relevant, recurring words or expressions were also used to support the interpretation of dominant themes.

From a conceptual point of view, the qualitative coding followed an iterative procedure. After the initial coding phase, categories were reviewed, refined, and merged when responses expressed similar meanings using different wording. Ambiguous responses were retained as separate or unclear categories when their meaning could not be reliably assigned to a broader theme. In the end, the final thematic categories were then used to interpret the qualitative material alongside the quantitative results.

This paper asks three related research questions. First, how familiar are Romanian Hallyu fans with Korean popular culture, and how sustained is their interest? Second, what motivations and cultural values do respondents associate with K-pop and K-drama consumption? Third (the core question), how do Romanian fans move from individual consumption toward community participation and cultural agency? These questions allow the

article to connect measurable patterns of media consumption with qualitative accounts of identity, belonging, intercultural curiosity, and cultural mediation.

The demographic profile of the sample indicates that all respondents were Romanian citizens born in Romania. An overwhelming nine out of ten respondents identified as female, while a smaller proportion identified as male (6.7%) or selected another or undisclosed gender category (3.3%). Only approximately one in ten respondents reported living in a rural area. Almost all respondents were living in Romania at the time the questionnaire was administered, while only a small proportion reported living outside Romania, namely in South Korea (1.6%). Consequently, the sample was almost entirely composed of students (92.5%), with a small number of respondents reporting other occupations, including statistician, teacher, doctor, and police officer.

Of course, given the non-probability sampling strategy and the high proportion of students, the findings should not be interpreted as statistically representative of all Romanian consumers of Korean culture. Instead, the study provides an exploratory account of the practices, meanings, and forms of engagement found among a sample of Romanian Hallyu fans, many of whom appeared to be connected to educational or cultural environments in which Korean culture was already prevalent.

During the writing process, AI (ChatGPT) was used to improve the clarity of the English.

## Results

### Knowledge, appreciation, and general engagement

Over two thirds of respondents (68.9%) reported knowing Korean culture at an average level, corresponding to level two out of three (2/3). Only 21.3% rated their knowledge at the highest level, three out of three (3/3). This aspect suggests that most respondents could have been cautious about overstating their familiarity with Korean culture. Despite this, the pattern changed when respondents were asked how much they liked Korean culture, as a large majority (78.7%) reported liking Korean culture very much. Almost half of the respondents (49.2%) said they had been K-pop fans for one to five years, while slightly more than one third (34.4%) had been fans for more than 10 years.

### K-drama consumption, viewing habits, and perceived shortcomings

Almost all respondents (93.3%) stated that they also liked K-dramas; their preferences were not limited to a single K-drama genre or topic, but extended across a broad range of themes, including history, romance, science fiction, and mystery. Almost half of those who

watched K-dramas (42.4%) reported having watched between 11 and 50 titles. However, 60.7% did not feel the need to continue their engagement through webtoons or books based on the K-dramas they had watched (see Table 1).

**Table 1**

*General engagement with Korean culture among Romanian fans*

| Indicator | Result |
|---|---|
| Self-assessed knowledge of Korean culture: average level | 68.9% |
| Self-assessed knowledge of Korean culture: high level | 21.3% |
| Respondents who like Korean culture very much | 78.7% |
| K-pop fans for 1-5 years | 49.2% |
| K-pop fans for over 10 years | 34.4% |
| Respondents who also like K-dramas | 93.3% |
| Respondents who like both male and female K-pop groups | 75.9% |

A majority of respondents (83.6%) reported watching K-dramas on Netflix, including 16.3% who watched them only on Netflix. Other frequently used platforms included Rakuten Viki (62.4%), YouTube (52.4%), and Disney (26.2%), while HBO and TVN were each mentioned by 13.1% of respondents. Regarding the aspects they disliked about K-dramas, respondents most often used the adjectives “predictable” (2.42%, of all words used), “repetitive” (2.42%), and “long” (1.94%). Therefore, duration was associated with episodes, scenes, or entire series perceived by fans as excessively long. Consequently, predictability was linked mainly to scripts, followed by character actions, while repetitiveness was associated with scenes, scripts, and recurring situations. Moreover, references to clichés also appeared recurrently (1.94%) as is seen in Table2.

**Table 2**

*K-drama consumption, viewing platforms, and perceived shortcomings among Romanian fans of Korean culture*

| Indicator | Result |
|---|---|
| Respondents who watched between 11 and 50 K-dramas | 42.4% |
| Respondents who did not follow up with webtoons or books after K-dramas | 60.7% |
| Watched K-dramas on Netflix | 83.6% |
| Watched K-dramas only on Netflix | 16.3% |

| Indicator | Result |
|---|---|
| Watched K-dramas on Rakuten Viki | 62.4% |
| Watched K-dramas on YouTube | 52.4% |
| Watched K-dramas on Disney | 26.2% |
| Watched K-dramas on HBO | 13.1% |
| Watched K-dramas on TVN | 13.1% |

Romanian respondents' criticisms of K-dramas also appeared in the open-ended answers. Thus, one respondent described K-dramas as overly dramatic, repetitive, predictable, technically exaggerated, and sometimes lacking coherent emotional development or logical closure:

> "Sometimes they are far too dramatic for my taste, and in modern ones the story is often very similar. For example, scenes with rain or snow are overused, and the development of the characters' feelings is not always very clear. After watching for a while, the characters' actions become predictable. The episodes are too long, the excessive editing sometimes becomes comical, the plot twists can feel impossible, the English is spoken with a poor accent, and the gore elements are often unnecessary. I also dislike it when they end abruptly, without a logical conclusion."

Another respondent emphasized script predictability, filming choices, and the limited social and personality diversity of characters:

> "The predictability of the script is another issue. Sometimes I do not like the way it is filmed. I also dislike the fact that most of the characters come from the same social backgrounds, and the same types of personalities and behaviors are repeatedly presented. This is not the case in all of them, but it happens in quite a few."

The portrayal of minorities in K-dramas, particularly the representation of the LGBTQ+ community, also appeared as a contested theme. Some respondents interpreted this representation as excessive or as an Americanizing influence:

> "Romantic clichés and some situations that are almost impossible to encounter in real life are also common. The episodes are too long. There has started to be too much emphasis on LGBTQ themes, and the series seem to draw too much inspiration from American films, especially in terms of intimate relationships and drug-related content. Because of this, they are beginning to lose some of their charm."

Other respondents took the opposite position and criticized the insufficient visibility of LGBTQ+ characters, alongside outdated storylines, gender representation, repetitive settings, and exaggerated cuteness:

> "They can become repetitive. Sometimes the behavior of the characters or actors feels unnatural, and the settings where the scenes take place also become repetitive. I especially dislike outdated storylines, clichés, the way most women are portrayed, and the lack of LGBTQ+ representation. I also dislike it when characters act overly cute or do aegyo."

Here, *aegyo* refers to a cute style of Korean speech associated with specific phonetic features (Crosby & Dalola, 2023).

**K-pop consumption, adjacent media, and fan infrastructure in Romania**

Nine out of ten respondents said they liked K-pop. Most respondents did not express a preference for exclusively male or exclusively female groups, as 75.9% stated that they liked both. Webtoons were the main adjacent medium consumed by respondents (60.5%). Webtoons are a form of online publishing for Korean comics, or manhwa, and represent a distinctive segment of the global comics market. Their development has been supported by internet use, digital cultural consumption, and the global popularity of Korean dramas and K-pop (Jang & Song, 2017). Of course, Wattpad stories were another adjacent medium mentioned by respondents (23.7%), while 15.8% reported consuming both webtoons and Wattpad stories.

In Romania, the K-pop fan infrastructure appeared to be relatively limited despite visible fan support, as only 22.0% of respondents stated that they were officially part of a fan club (or "army"). Among them, 81.8% were registered as BTS ARMY, the fandom of the K-pop group BTS. Other official fan clubs recurrently mentioned included Shawol, the fandom of SHINee, and STAY, the fandom of Stray Kids, both at 27.2%, as well as ATINY, Blink, Carat, and MOA, each at 18.1%. When respondents were asked how they became K-pop fans, the influence of BTS was again visible, as the word "BTS" appeared among the most frequent terms in the open-ended responses (6.45%, of all words used). Other groups, including Girls' Generation, ATEEZ, Stray Kids, Hyuna, EXO, NCT, TXT, Monsta X, and 2NE1, appeared less frequently, each below 1.03%. The term "K-pop" (9.30%) appeared more often than "music" (5.93%), while other recurrent terms included "band/group" (9.56%) and "listen" (5.42%). YouTube also appeared as an important discovery channel, as reflected in the

frequency of the term (2.32%). One respondent recalls how they first heard of K-pop through the band BTS:

> "I had vaguely heard of BTS around 2018, when they broke a record and appeared on television. However, because I was not very active online at the time, I did not know much else about them. Then, around 2019, I came across one of their music videos by chance, and that sparked a real passion and curiosity. From there, I started learning about their history, listening to their albums, memorizing their names, and finding out more about the effort they put in to become who they are today."

Another K-pop fan remembers that their interest in this music genre started out as a coping mechanism during the COVID-19 pandemic:

> "I started looking for Korean music after watching Korean dramas. K-pop music is part of many of my childhood and teenage memories. This happened during the pandemic, and I became a K-pop fan mostly as a way of coping with external problems."

This respondent found out about K-pop through social media influencers:

> "In 2015, I discovered a girl on YouTube who was a vlogger and had a boyfriend who was a K-pop idol. At first, I did not really know what K-pop meant, so I searched for it online. I was initially attracted by how good the idols looked, but then I started listening to their music more and more until I became obsessed with it. K-pop combines many different music genres, and I found that very interesting."

Some respondents reported being raised on K-pop from an early age, most often through friends:

> "This type of music was introduced to me five and a half years ago by a girl. Afterwards, I started listening to it and became increasingly interested in everything related to Korea and K-pop."

A respondent also mentioned the influence of family members on developing their music taste:

> "When I was little, my cousin, who was a K-pop fan, used to play this music for me. As a result, I grew up with this genre, including artists such as BIGBANG, Girls' Generation, PSY, and BTS, and gradually became a fan myself."

The most frequent forms of support for respondents' favorite K-pop groups or artists were buying albums (58.5%) and searching for information online and on social media (58.5%). These were followed by participating in voting sessions (45.3%) and sharing artists'

videos (41.5%). Buying products associated with the artists or groups was also a relevant practice (39.6%). By contrast, commenting on artists' social media platforms appeared less frequently (22.6%). A total of 17.0% of respondents stated that they did not support the groups through any of the options mentioned or that they "did not really do it." Activities involving a higher degree of engagement, such as creating social media content to promote artists, were less frequent (7.5%). The least common forms of support were constantly sharing updates about the group (1.9%) and organizing support projects together with other fans (1.9%). Overall, fan support was expressed mainly through accessible forms of consumption and online interaction, such as searching for information, buying albums, participating in votes, and sharing content. More active forms of involvement, such as creating content or organizing collective projects, were less widespread (see Table 3).

**Table 3**

*K-pop fandom, adjacent media consumption, and support practices among Romanian fans of Korean culture*

| **Indicator** | **Result** |
|---|---|
| Webtoons consumed as adjacent media | 60.5% |
| Wattpad stories consumed as adjacent media | 23.7% |
| Both webtoons and Wattpad stories consumed | 15.8% |
| Respondents officially part of a fan club | 22.0% |
| Registered BTS-ARMY members among fan-club respondents | 81.8% |
| Buying albums as fan support | 58.5% |
| Searching online/social media for information | 58.5% |
| Participating in voting sessions | 45.3% |
| Sharing artists' videos | 41.5% |
| Buying artist/group-related products | 39.6% |
| Commenting on artists' social media platforms | 22.6% |
| Creating social media content to promote artists | 7.5% |

With regard to the music channels used by Romanian K-pop fans, out of 108 responses analyzed, the most frequently used platform was YouTube (94.4%), followed by Spotify (83.3%). Apple Music was mentioned less often (18.5%), while Weverse also appeared among the platforms used by respondents (11.1%). Other platforms were used less frequently, including Vlive (7.4%) and Melon (5.6%). The least mentioned platforms were

Lysn (1.9%), Tidal (1.9%), Universe (1.9%), and Mubeat (1.9%). Overall, K-pop listening practices were concentrated mainly on widely accessible global platforms, especially YouTube and Spotify, while specialized or platforms oriented specifically to this fandom were used by a smaller share of respondents. These responses also suggested that K-pop listening did not dominate respondents' daily routines, as only 20.8% listened for more than three hours per day, while 41.0% even listened to K-pop for less than 30 minutes per day.

**Digital, social, and material engagement with Korean culture**

A large majority of Romanian fans (87.3%) reported no objection to their favorite artists moving between K-pop and K-drama, or vice versa. Out of 114 responses analyzed, the most common way of discovering new K-pop artists, groups, or K-dramas was through TikTok (68.4%). YouTube (63.2%) and discussions with friends (63.2%) also played a major role, followed by Instagram (56.1%) and Twitter (40.4%). Thematic websites, such as MyDramaList, appeared less frequently (19.3%). Blogs (10.5%) were mentioned by a smaller share of respondents, while Facebook groups (8.8%) also functioned as a discovery source for the respondents. Less common sources included other websites and Reddit (both with 5.3%). The least mentioned sources were news platforms, Tumblr, and direct experience through watching films (each with 1.8%). Overall, we could see that the discovery of new K-pop artists, groups, and K-dramas was shaped mainly by social media platforms, especially TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter. Interpersonal communication also played an essential role, while specialized websites, blogs, forums, and other niche sources were accessed by a smaller proportion of respondents.

Most respondents (81.0%) stated that they followed their favorite K-pop artists, groups, and actors on social media. A smaller share (17.2%) stated that they did not follow them, while very few respondents (1.7%) said they did not currently do so but would like to. This suggested that social media functioned as a main channel through which fans kept up with Korean popular culture figures. The high percentage of respondents who followed artists and actors online could have indicated that digital platforms played a central role in sustaining fan interest and engagement. Moreover, most respondents (79.7%) had stated that they communicated or kept in touch with other fans of Korean culture. A smaller proportion (8.5%) said they did not communicate with other fans, while some respondents (11.9%) stated that they did not currently do so but would like to. Taken together, these findings pointed out that engagement with Korean culture was not only individual, but also done in a social manner. Evidently, most respondents were connected to other fans, which could suggest that

fan communities played an pivotal role in the circulation, discussion, and maintenance of interest in Korean cultural products.

It is worth noting that communication with other fans took place mainly face-to-face, through personal meetings (77.4%). Instagram (62.3%) was also a major channel of communication, while Twitter/X (22.6%) was used by a smaller portion of respondents. As a communication context, organized events (15.1%) appeared less frequently, which could hide a need for such manifestations in the community. Other channels were marginal; for example, Facebook (7.5%) was mentioned by a smaller proportion of respondents, while YouTube and blogs or vlogs (both with 3.8%) also appeared rarely. Tumblr, WhatsApp, and communication connected to university studies in Korean language and literature (all tied at 1.9%) were the least frequent. We can draw the conclusion that communication between fans appeared to be strongly anchored in direct social interaction, especially personal meetings. At the same time, Instagram functioned as the main digital platform for maintaining fan connections. This revealed that fan communication was done both on- and offline, but was not limited to social media alone.

When considering the degree of inter-fandom maintenance, the most common frequency of communication with other fans was a few times per week (35.8%). But less frequent communication was also present, with some respondents stating that they communicated much more rarely (17.0%). Several response categories had similar proportions, such as a few times per month (11.3%), a few times per day (11.3%), and once per week (11.3%). Daily communication was less common, with once per day mentioned by a smaller proportion of respondents (5.7%). Monthly (once per month) communication was the least frequent (3.8%). Communication with fellow Hallyu fans therefore tended to occur regularly, but not necessarily daily, as the dominant pattern was periodic interaction, especially several times per week, hinting at a sustained but moderate fan-to-fan engagement.

Most respondents stated that they bought products and services related to K-dramas and K-pop (57.9%). A smaller cohort did not buy such products or services (29.8%), while some respondents did not currently buy them but would have liked to (12.3%). Thus, the results indicated that consumption of Korean culture extended beyond media viewing and listening practices. For more than half of the respondents, interest in K-pop and K-dramas was also expressed through their purchasing behavior. The presence of respondents who would have liked to buy such products could extrapolate to a potential demand that may have been limited by factors not specified here.

The most frequently purchased products were printed materials, such as posters and photographs (67.4%), followed closely by CDs and DVDs (65.1%); these two categories clearly dominated the purchasing behavior reported by respondents. A smaller group stated that they did not buy such products (9.3%), while other types of products were chosen only marginally, including stickers, pens, and notebooks, plush toys, clothes, and accessories, and cosmetics (2.3% for each). Consequently, these purchases were concentrated around collectible and media-related products. Printed materials and physical music or video formats appeared to be the main forms of material engagement with K-pop and K-drama culture, while broader merchandise categories were much less common.

The most common spending range for K-pop merchandise among Romanian fans was 15-50 euros (46.5%), followed closely by less than 15 euros (41.9%). Spending between 50 and 100 euros was less frequent (9.3%), while spending between 100 and 300 euros was rare (2.3%). Spending on K-pop and K-drama products was therefore generally moderate, as most respondents remained within lower budget ranges, which pointed out that material consumption was present but usually limited in scale. Higher levels of spending were uncommon among the respondents analyzed.

Not all Korean products mentioned by respondents were directly related to K-pop or K-dramas; when asked about the most frequently purchased Korean products outside K-pop and K-drama culture, respondents most often mentioned food products, food ingredients, and food additives (87.3%). Cosmetics were also very frequently mentioned (81.8%), followed by mobile phones (58.2%). Products related to technology appeared in several forms, such as games, computer programs, and mobile apps (32.7%), electronic or household components (27.3%), and computers, laptops, or tablets (18.2%). Jewelry (12.7%) and automobiles (10.9%) were mentioned less often, while tourism services (3.6%) and novelty merchandise (1.8%) appeared only seldom. The results revealed that interest in Korean culture extended into everyday consumption, especially through food and cosmetics. Technology products also formed an important secondary category, particularly mobile phones. By contrast, more expensive or specialized categories, such as automobiles, tourism services, and niche merchandise, were much less common.

However, the analysis did not focus only on purchasing behavior, but also on product retention, namely the Korean objects owned by Romanian fans at the time of completing the questionnaire, regardless of whether these were directly related to K-pop or K-dramas. Thus, the most common Korean products owned were cosmetics, skincare products, makeup, and

face masks (70.6%). Items related to K-pop, such as albums, photos, posters, CDs, and merchandise, were also frequent (52.9%) as is seen in Table 4.

**Table 4**

*Digital discovery, fan communication, and material consumption among Romanian fans of Korean culture*

| Indicator | Result |
|---|---|
| Discover new K-pop artists, groups, or K-dramas through TikTok | 68.4% |
| Discover through YouTube | 63.2% |
| Discover through discussions with friends | 63.2% |
| Discover through Instagram | 56.1% |
| Discover through Twitter | 40.4% |
| Follow favorite K-pop artists, groups, and actors on social media | 81.0% |
| Communicate with other fans of Korean culture | 79.7% |
| Communicate with fans face-to-face in personal meetings | 77.4% |
| Communicate with fans through Instagram | 62.3% |
| Buy products/services related to K-pop and K-dramas | 57.9% |
| Most common spending range: 15-50 euros | 46.5% |
| Purchase Korean food products not directly related to K-pop/K-dramas | 87.3% |
| Purchase Korean cosmetics | 81.8% |
| Own Korean cosmetics/skincare/makeup/face masks | 70.6% |
| Own K-pop albums/photos/posters/CDs/merch | 52.9% |

Food products, snacks, ingredients, sauces, and noodles were mentioned by one third of respondents (33.3%), while electronics, phones, tablets, televisions, and appliances were also highly present (31.4%). Korean product consumption and ownership were concentrated around beauty products and K-pop material culture. Food and electronics represented secondary but still visible categories, while books, clothing, accessories, souvenirs, and automobiles were less frequent.

When asked to name their favorite Korean brands, out of 78 responses analyzed, respondents mentioned Samsung most often (43.6%), followed by COSRX (28.2%) and Beauty of Joseon (17.9%). Peripera also appeared among the more visible brands (12.8%). The results showed two dominant areas of Korean brand recognition: electronics and cosmetics. Samsung stood out as the main technology brand, while COSRX, Beauty of

Joseon, Peripera, Clio, Etude, Innisfree, Romand, Dr.Jart+, Isntree, Purito, and Some By Mi reflected the perceived quality of Korean skincare and beauty products. The relatively high share of unspecified or forgotten brands (25.6%) could be a result of some respondents using Korean products without strongly retaining brand names due to cultural difference with respect to branding.

However, brand name retention did not show disengagement, but it could be a result of a fast-paced marketing environment, since the main acquisition channel for Korean products was online purchasing (53.2%), whereas Korean specialty stores, especially K-mart or Korean Mart, appeared less frequently but remained relevant (12.8%). Some respondents obtained products directly from Korea (10.6%), either through travel or through people who had visited Korea. Since online purchasing was by far the main acquisition channel, respondents also mentioned the e-commerce platforms and stores they associated with Korean products, and the preferred sources were KJ Center (36.4%) and Kpop.ro (29.5%), followed by YesStyle (20.5%). K-mart, Kmart, and Korean Mart were also relatively visible when grouped together (15.9%), while Taste of Asia appeared as yet another recognizable source (13.6%).

It should be noted that respondents' knowledge of stores and websites was divided between specialized Korean-product retailers and broader retail platforms. Thus, K-pop and Korean beauty-oriented stores were especially visible, though mainstream retailers from the local market, such as eMAG, Notino, DM, Sephora, Carrefour, and Cărturești, also appeared in the responses. Although access to Korean products was primarily mediated by e-commerce, physical acquisition channels also existed, though in a more fragmented form. These channels included Korean specialty stores, beauty retailers, electronics stores, supermarkets, bookstores, as well as gifts from other people.

With respect to product placement, most respondents stated that they did not feel the need to buy a product when they saw it in a K-drama (66.1%), while a smaller share said that they did feel this need (20.3%), and some respondents were unsure (13.6%). This could suggest that product placement in K-dramas did not directly generate purchase intention for most respondents. However, the share of positive answers could indicate that K-dramas are still capable of influencing consumption behavior for part of the audience. Similarly, most respondents stated that they did not feel the need to buy a product when they saw it in a K-pop video (71.9%). A smaller proportion answered positively (17.5%), while some respondents were unsure (10.5%). Thus, K-pop videos appeared to have a slightly weaker direct influence

on purchase intention than K-dramas. However, in both cases, most respondents rejected an immediate purchasing impulse, suggesting that exposure to products in Korean media did not automatically translate into consumer behavior.

When it comes to diversifying their cultural channels, the majority of respondents stated that they engaged in activities related to Korean culture beyond listening to music or watching films and television dramas (73.7%). A smaller share did not currently engage in such activities but would like to (15.8%), while only a limited proportion did not engage in them at all (10.5%). Engagement with Korean culture therefore extended beyond passive media consumption, as confirmed by the high percentage of affirmative responses suggesting that many respondents participated in broader cultural practices connected to Korea, while the group that wished to do so indicated additional potential for future cultural involvement.

The most common activity among Romanian fans were cover dances (40.4%). This activity was followed by imitating idols' makeup (29.8%), playing computer games (25.5%), singing or performing songs (19.1%), and translating films or K-dramas (17.0%). Less frequent activities included studying Korean language or culture, administering social media pages or websites, writing blog posts or administering vlogs, and Korean cooking (each with 6.4%). Korean folk dance appeared less often (4.3%), but the least frequent activities included reading articles on pictorial or painting styles, Korean calligraphy, reading manhwa, promoting scholarships and student life in Korea, translating webnovels, reading Korean literature, and writing articles (each with 2.1%). Therefore, the most visible forms of engagement were performative and oriented to the fandom, especially cover dances, makeup imitation, singing, and gaming. However, activities involving language study, translation, writing, literature, or traditional cultural practices, although present, appeared much less frequently. This could imply that cultural participation was shaped mainly by pop culture practices rather than by formal study or traditional cultural activities.

Regarding the Korean-culture activities most frequently attended by respondents, out of 82 responses analyzed, participation was most often connected to academic or institutional contexts, including universities, Korean language departments, Korea Corner events, summer schools, and faculty activities (36.6%). Cultural and multicultural events, especially those linked to Cluj Days or public cultural stands, were also prominent (24.4%). K-pop parties, K-pop nights, and concerts formed a more entertainment-oriented category (14.6%). Embassy- or ambassador-related events were less frequent but still visible (12.2%). A small proportion of respondents reported no participation (4.9%). Korean-related participation therefore

appeared to be strongly institutional and educational, especially through universities and Korean language programs. However, public cultural events and K-pop-themed events also contributed to offline engagement with Korean culture.

**Korea within a broader East Asian cultural orientation**

Interest in Korean culture seemed to be connected to a broader interest in East Asian cultures. This stems from the idea that Korean cultural consumption may have formed part of a wider regional cultural orientation rather than an isolated preference, considering that Japanese culture, for example, has been the dominant soft power from that region for decades. Also, given its millennial culture and recent technology boom, it would be no wonder if Chinese pop culture will begin to attract larger followings. Thus, most respondents stated that they were also fans of another East Asian culture (85.0%), whereas a significantly smaller proportion stated that they were not (15.0%). When Korean culture was excluded from the responses, Japanese culture was the most frequently mentioned East Asian culture (82.0%). Chinese culture was also mentioned by half of the respondents (50.0%). Thai culture appeared much less frequently (6.0%), while Vietnamese culture was only briefly mentioned (2.0%). Therefore, interest in other East Asian cultures was concentrated mainly around Japanese and Chinese culture, suggesting that respondents' engagement with Korean culture often overlapped with broader interest in the most visible East Asian cultural spheres, especially Japan and China, while other regional cultures remained less prominent.

Unsurprisingly, the most appreciated aspect of Japanese and/or Chinese culture was Japanese anime and manga (66.0%). However, Japanese feature films (42.0%) and Chinese TV dramas (40.0%) were also frequently mentioned, followed by J-pop (38.0%). J-drama and Chinese feature films appeared at the same level (28.0%), while Chinese pop music was mentioned less often (22.0%). More traditional or specialized cultural elements were much less frequent. Thus, history and mythology appeared only rarely (4.0%), while Douyin makeup and traditional Chinese clothing, traditions and cultural values, cuisine, fashion, J-Rock, Chinese culture and unique history, and literature (each with 2.0%) remained marginal. Interest in Japanese and Chinese culture was therefore shaped primarily by popular media and entertainment. Anime, manga, films, dramas, and pop music dominated the responses, while historical, traditional, literary, culinary, and fashion-related interests remained only secondary.

The dominant position among respondents was that interest in Japanese culture did not influence, or only minimally influenced, their feelings toward Korean culture (55.0%). A

relevant share connected Japanese cultural interest with historical or political awareness of Japan-Korea relations (22.5%). These responses briefly mentioned history, occupation, political tensions, or the importance of understanding the relationship between the two countries. Moreover, the same proportion of responses (22.5%) involved comparison between Japanese and Korean culture, especially in terms of similarities, differences, social norms, media industries, artistic freedom, or cultural values. Despite the consensus, some respondents expressed equal or balanced appreciation for both cultures (15.0%), while others stated that their interest in Japanese culture made them feel closer to Korean culture or increased their appreciation for it (10.0%). It is also worth noting that a smaller group reported limited interest in, or limited knowledge of, Japanese culture (7.5%). Uncertain or unclear answers were rare (5.0%), as were responses suggesting that Japanese culture had served as an entry point toward interest in Korean culture (5.0%). Also, explicitly negative feelings toward Japan were linked to historical or political issues, and appeared only marginally (2.5%).

Regarding Chinese culture, the most common view was that interest in it did not influence, or only minimally influenced, respondents' feelings toward Korean culture (44.4%). Several respondents stated directly that the two interests remained separate or that one did not affect the other. However, a significant share referred to historical, political, or cultural connections between China and Korea (22.2%). These responses mentioned shared history, cultural intersections, historical influence, or broader geopolitical relations. Some respondents also compared Chinese and Korean culture in terms of similarities, differences, or mutual influences (18.5%). Of course, equal or balanced appreciation of both cultures was also present (18.5%). In the latter cases, respondents described both cultures as interesting, compatible, or able to coexist within their personal interests. Some participants even suggested that knowledge of Chinese culture could support a broader understanding of Korean culture (14.8%), especially through shared historical or cultural elements.

Interest in other East Asian cultures was mainly associated with history, traditions, mythology, temples, and cultural objects (19.4%), as well as with diversity, uniqueness, originality, and cultural difference (19.4%). However, a notable proportion of answers were negative, unclear, or indicated that the respondent was not a fan of another culture in this category (16.1%). Films, TV shows, and audiovisual media were also relevant (12.9%), as were cultural elements related to Japan, such as art, architecture, fashion, language, and literature (12.9%). Anime and manga appeared less frequently (9.7%), while food, Thai culture, similarity with Korean culture, and morality or respect were mentioned by a smaller

cohort. Thus, interest in other East Asian cultures was more diffuse than interest in Japanese or Chinese culture. Respondents referred to broad cultural qualities such as uniqueness, diversity, history, and tradition rather than to one dominant media form.

The most common position was that interest in another East Asian culture did not influence, or only minimally influenced, respondents' feelings toward Korean culture (50.0%), while a substantial share of responses were unclear or non-substantive (33.3%). Some respondents connected this interest to broader curiosity about Asian cultures or to awareness that less visible Asian cultures receive limited attention (16.7%). One response noted the Korean influence on Thai culture, especially in music videos, artist-fan interaction, and links between K-pop and T-pop. Overall, the interest of the participants in other East Asian cultures generally coexisted with interest in Korean culture without substantially changing it. Where influence did appear, it tended to broaden regional curiosity rather than alter emotional attachment to Korean culture.

**Imagined tourism, national perception, and Korean language engagement**

Most respondents had not visited Korea as tourists (86.7%), while a much smaller proportion had already done so (13.3%). Interestingly, this may indicate that fascination with Korean culture was largely maintained from outside Korea. For most respondents, engagement with Korean culture appeared to take place through media, online platforms, products, communities, and cultural practices rather than through direct travel experience. At the same time, all 122 respondents (100.0%) stated that they would like to visit Korea. Three quarters of respondents expressed a wish to visit locations associated with their favorite K-dramas when traveling to Korea (75.0%), while the remaining quarter were not interested in doing so (25.0%). Most respondents also wanted to visit locations related to K-pop, such as places where music videos had been filmed (58.6%). However, a substantial minority were not interested in this type of visit (41.4%). K-dramas appeared to have a strong influence on imagined travel practices, considering that filming locations were not only media spaces, but also potential tourist destinations for many respondents.

The unanimous desire to visit Korea, combined with the fact that most respondents had never been there, could be explained by certain positive attributes that were mentally associated with the country and its people. Thus, when respondents were therefore asked to imagine South Korea as a person and describe it, they most often imagined Korea as physically beautiful, well-groomed, stylish, elegant, or strongly concerned with appearance (46.7%). Furthermore, personality traits such as respectfulness, warmth, kindness, care,

friendliness, and empathy were also frequent (42.2%). Consequently, another important group of responses presented Korea as energetic, creative, dynamic, talented, or colorful (28.9%), while traits such as hard work, ambition, strength, resilience, and competitiveness were also common (26.7%). However, some responses were more ambivalent, describing Korea as insecure, contradictory, superficial, appearance-pressured, or affected by social problems (20.0%). The image of South Korea was therefore largely positive, but not entirely idealized.

Almost all respondents (96.7%) stated that they were learning Korean, while only a very small share (3.3%) said that they were not currently learning it but would like to. Therefore, Korean language learning appeared to be a central component of respondents' engagement with Korean culture. Interest in Korean culture was not limited to media consumption, but also extended to linguistic involvement (Table 5).

**Table 5**

*Broader East Asian cultural interests, imagined tourism, and Korean language learning among Romanian fans of Korean culture*

| **Indicator** | **Result** |
|---|---|
| Also fans of another East Asian culture | 85.0% |
| Interest in Japanese culture | 82.0% |
| Interest in Chinese culture | 50.0% |
| Interest in Thai culture | 6.0% |
| Interest in Vietnamese culture | 2.0% |
| Have not visited Korea as tourists | 86.7% |
| Have visited Korea as tourists | 13.3% |
| Would like to visit Korea | 100.0% |
| Would like to visit K-drama filming locations | 75.0% |
| Would like to visit K-pop-related locations | 58.6% |
| Learning Korean | 96.7% |
| Learning Korean through university courses | 91.8% |
| Learning Korean through self-study | 55.7% |
| Beginner Korean level | 54.1% |
| Intermediate Korean level | 42.6% |
| Advanced/expert Korean level | 3.3% |

The main method used by respondents to learn Korean was university courses in Korean language and culture departments (91.8%). Self-study was also very common (55.7%), showing that many respondents combined institutional learning with individual study. Online courses were used less frequently (14.8%), while online courses with a private teacher appeared in a smaller cohort of responders (9.8%). Face-to-face courses at private associations were less common (4.9%), while reading and language partners (both with 1.6%) were the methods that had the least appeal. Therefore, Korean language learning appeared to be strongly structured by formal academic education, but was often supplemented by independent study.

Most respondents described their Korean language level as beginner (54.1%), while a substantial share reported an intermediate level (42.6%). Only a tiny proportion identified as advanced or expert (3.3%). Respondents therefore showed strong involvement in Korean language learning, although most remained at beginner or intermediate levels, with advanced proficiency being rare by self-assessment.

Subtitles were overwhelmingly the main way respondents watched or followed K-pop materials (98.1%), while voice-over was used by only a small share (7.5%). Subtitles were therefore the dominant access method for K-pop content, suggesting that respondents generally preferred to keep the original audio while relying on translated text for comprehension.

## Discussion

The findings suggest that Romanian engagement with Korean culture was marked by a notable discrepancy between affective attachment and epistemic self-positioning. Thus, respondents expressed a strong appreciation for Korean culture, yet they were more restrained when evaluating their own level of knowledge. This distinction was analytically significant because it indicated that enthusiasm did not necessarily produce self-authorizing claims of cultural expertise. Rather, many respondents appeared to occupy the position of reflexive cultural consumers, as they were emotionally invested, but also aware that their knowledge remains partial, mediated, filtered, and regionalized.

Korean popular culture circulates among respondents through a dense transmedia ecology, as K-dramas, K-pop, webtoons, Wattpad stories, social media, streaming platforms, and fan interaction do not operate as discrete cultural domains, but they form a mutually reinforcing system in which one medium can function as an entry point into another. Moreover, K-dramas may lead respondents toward Korean music, K-pop may stimulate

broader interest in Korea, and webtoons or fan fiction may extend engagement into neighboring narrative forms. The large acceptance of artists moving between music and acting further confirms that the boundaries between Korean entertainment sectors were perceived as porous. For these fans, Korean cultural consumption was not organized around a single medium, but around an interconnected field of artists, genres, platforms, narratives, and commodities.

The data also complicated any interpretation of the respondents as merely passive recipients of Korean cultural products, as their engagement included searching for information, following artists on social media, sharing videos, voting, buying albums, communicating with other fans, attending events, learning Korean, and participating in cultural activities. However, it should be noted that these practices were unevenly distributed. Low-threshold forms of participation, such as online searching, platform following, video sharing, and album purchasing, are more frequent than forms requiring sustained collective organization, such as producing fan content or coordinating support projects. This could suggest an active but only partially formalized fan culture, and the relatively small proportion of respondents officially affiliated with fan clubs reinforces this point, because Romanian K-pop fandom appears socially and digitally active, but not strongly institutionalized through official international fan structures.

Digital platforms were essential to the circulation of Korean culture in the Romanian context. TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, Netflix, Rakuten Viki, Spotify, and other platforms mediate discovery, repetition, visibility, and fan attachment. Yet the findings do not support a purely digital account of fandom, as fan communication also appears to take place face-to-face, especially through personal meetings, while Korean-related participation is frequently connected to universities, Korean language programs, Korea Corner events, multicultural activities, and public cultural stands. Thus, we can say that Romanian engagement with Korean culture therefore emerges at the intersection of platformed mediation, interpersonal sociability, and institutional cultural infrastructure.

Material consumption constitutes another important dimension of Korean cultural reception, because respondents did not engage with Korean culture only through symbolic or audiovisual forms, but they also incorporated Korean products into everyday life. Thus, cosmetics, skincare products, K-pop albums, posters, food products, electronics, and mobile phones indicated that Korean culture was materialized through objects, brands, routines, and domestic consumption. Moreover, beauty products and K-pop material culture are particularly

visible, while food and electronics function as secondary but meaningful categories. At the same time, spending patterns remain relatively moderate, and product placement in K-dramas or K-pop videos did not appear to generate automatic purchase intention. This distinction could be essential, because Korean media could produce visibility, familiarity, and desire, but exposure does not mechanically translate into consumption, especially since purchasing practices appeared to be selective rather than impulsive.

The qualitative material reveals that admiration for Korean popular culture coexists with critical reception. Respondents often said they enjoyed K-dramas, but they also criticized them for being too long, predictable, repetitive, clichéd, excessively dramatic, or narratively implausible. Some responses also identified problems related to editing, filming, character homogeneity, gender representation, and LGBTQ+ visibility. These criticisms showed that fandom was not synonymous with uncritical approval. Furthermore, respondents evaluated Korean cultural products through aesthetic, narrative, social, and ideological criteria. The divergent comments on LGBTQ+ representation were especially revealing, as some respondents interpreted LGBTQ+ themes as excessive or as an Americanizing influence, while others objected to their insufficient presence. This divergence could indicate that Romanian reception of K-dramas is shaped by broader debates over realism, representation, cultural authenticity, gender norms, and minority visibility.

The findings further point to the fact that interest in Korean culture is embedded in a broader East Asian cultural imaginary. Most respondents also expressed interest in another East Asian culture, especially Japanese and Chinese culture. However, this broader regional orientation did not seem to displace attachment to Korea. Instead, Japan and China function as comparative and interpretive reference points. Respondents used them to think through questions of cultural similarity, historical relation, political tension, media industries, social norms, artistic production, and regional difference. Korean culture is therefore not consumed in isolation, but in relation to a wider symbolic geography of East Asia, in which Japan and China remain the most salient cultural coordinates.

We noted that tourism aspirations also intensified this mediated attachment, because most respondents have never visited Korea, yet the desire to visit was almost universal among those who answered the relevant question. This could reflect that Korea is largely encountered at a distance, through screens, products, platforms, language study, and fan networks. The wish to visit K-drama filming locations and K-pop-related sites might suggest that media consumption shapes imagined mobility. For many respondents, Korea was not only a national

space but also a mediated landscape composed of scenes, idols, filming locations, music videos, narratives, and affective associations. K-drama locations in particular appear to function as prospective tourist sites, showing how fictional spaces can be transformed into imagined destinations.

Furthermore, the personification exercise provided further insight into respondents' symbolic construction of Korea. South Korea was frequently imagined as beautiful, elegant, well-groomed, stylish, respectful, warm, energetic, ambitious, creative, and hardworking. These descriptions point to a largely affirmative national image structured by refinement, discipline, aesthetic care, and affective warmth. Yet the responses were not uniformly idealizing, as some respondents also imagined Korea as insecure, contradictory, superficial, appearance-oriented, hierarchical, or marked by social pressure. This ambivalence is analytically useful because it reveals that respondents' image of Korea is not simply utopian. In fact, considering the responses, admiration can and does coexist with awareness of tension, hierarchy, pressure, and contradictions between modernity, tradition, appearance, and social expectation.

Korean language learning appears as one of the most substantial forms of cultural investment in the sample, due to the fact that almost all respondents reported learning Korean, with university courses as the dominant method. This denotes that the sample is closely connected to formal educational structures, particularly Korean language and culture programs. At the same time, the high frequency of self-study suggests that institutional learning is supplemented by autonomous effort. Most respondents identified as beginner or intermediate learners, so language engagement should not be understood primarily as achieved linguistic mastery, but it is better interpreted as an ongoing practice of cultural affiliation, through which respondents deepen their access to Korean media, communication, and symbolic belonging.

Taken together, the results show that Korean cultural diffusion in Romania cannot be reduced to the global popularity of K-pop and K-dramas, but rather produced through the articulation of affect, platforms, commodities, fan interaction, language learning, comparative regional imaginaries, and imagined travel. Respondents consume Korean culture, but they also evaluate it, translate it into everyday practices, compare it with other East Asian cultures, purchase and retain material objects, and imagine Korea as both a media space and a possible travel destination. Their engagement is therefore neither homogeneous nor uncritical, but selective, mediated, social, affective, and interpretive.

These findings should nevertheless be read with methodological caution, because the sample includes many respondents connected to Korean language learning and academic environments, which may limit its representativeness for all Romanian consumers of Korean popular culture. The data are also based on self-reported practices and perceptions, meaning that they reflect respondents' own accounts of knowledge, taste, consumption, and cultural attachment. However, even with these limitations, the results provide a detailed view of how Korean culture is received and negotiated within a Romanian fan public. The main contribution of the study is to show that Korean cultural diffusion is not merely a matter of exposure to global media products. It is a complex process of cultural mediation in which media texts, platforms, objects, language, social relations, criticism, regional comparison, and imagined mobility become mutually constitutive.

## Conclusions

This study shows that Korean cultural diffusion in Romania is not reducible to the popularity of K-pop or K-dramas as isolated media products. Rather, it emerges as a layered assemblage of affective attachment, platform-mediated discovery, fan sociability, material consumption, language learning, imagined tourism, and broader East Asian cultural comparison. Respondents do not simply consume Korean culture, rather they incorporate it into everyday routines, social relations, aesthetic preferences, linguistic aspirations, and future-oriented imaginaries.

One of the most relevant conclusions concerns the distinction between appreciation and self-assessed knowledge. Respondents express strong emotional proximity to Korean culture, but they are more cautious when evaluating how much they know about it. This could suggest that Romanian fans do not necessarily equate affective investment with cultural expertise. Their engagement is therefore marked by a degree of reflexivity. On the one hand, they like Korean culture intensely, on the other hand, many also admit that their knowledge remains partial, mediated, and still developing. The results also point out that Korean culture circulates through a transmedia configuration in which K-pop, K-dramas, webtoons, social media, streaming platforms, fan narratives, and celebrity mobility reinforce one another. Moreover, respondents often move across media forms rather than remaining attached to one cultural product. For example, K-dramas can lead to K-pop, K-pop can lead to Korean language learning, and both can stimulate interest in travel, products, fashion, beauty practices, or other East Asian cultures. In this sense, Korean cultural diffusion functions through accumulation and cross-reference rather than through linear exposure.

At the level of fandom, the Romanian context appears active but only partially formalized. Respondents support artists through album purchases, online searches, voting, sharing content, and following social media accounts, but official fan-club affiliation remains limited. This could imply that Romanian Korean-culture fandom is sustained more by flexible, platform-based, interpersonal, and semi-institutional practices than by highly organized fan structures. The role of universities, Korean language departments, Korea Corner events, cultural stands, and public events further shows that Korean cultural participation in Romania is not located exclusively in online fan spaces, but also mediated by educational and cultural institutions.

Material consumption represents another major route through which Korean culture becomes embedded in everyday life. Respondents purchase and own Korean cosmetics, skincare products, K-pop albums, printed materials, food products, electronics, and mobile phones. However, due to the fact that this consumption is selective and generally moderate, product placement in K-dramas and K-pop videos does not automatically translate into purchase intention, which indicates that respondents are not simply passive targets of media-induced consumer desire. Moreover, Korean products circulate through affective familiarity, brand recognition, availability, and personal preference, but media exposure alone does not determine consumption.

The study also demonstrates that Romanian fans engage critically with Korean popular culture. Respondents identify narrative repetition, predictability, excessive length, clichés, implausible plot developments, character homogeneity, and problems of representation in K-dramas. Their views on LGBTQ+ visibility and gender representation are not homogeneous, which could mean that Korean drama reception is filtered through local expectations, ideological positions, and broader debates about authenticity, realism, and social representation. This critical dimension is important because it shows that fandom does not suspend judgment. Admiration and critique coexist.

Korean culture is also positioned within a broader East Asian cultural imaginary. Most respondents express interest in other East Asian cultures, especially Japanese and Chinese culture. However, this wider orientation does not appear to weaken attachment to Korea. Instead, Japan and China function as comparative and interpretive reference points through which respondents understand regional affinities, differences, historical relations, media industries, and cultural hierarchies. Interest in other East Asian cultures tends to broaden the respondents' cultural frame rather than displace Korean culture from its central position.

Tourism aspirations also reveal the strength of mediated attachment: although most respondents have never visited Korea, the desire to visit is immense. K-drama filming locations and K-pop-related sites become imagined destinations, showing how media spaces can be transformed into prospective tourist geographies. The personification of Korea as beautiful, refined, respectful, energetic, ambitious, but also occasionally insecure, hierarchical, or appearance-pressured confirms that respondents' image of Korea is affectively charged but not entirely idealized. Korea is imagined both as an aspirational cultural space and as a society marked by tensions.

Korean language learning is one of the most substantial forms of cultural investment identified in the study. The dominance of university courses suggests that the sample is strongly connected to academic Korean-language environments, while the frequency of self-study indicates that formal instruction is often supplemented by autonomous learning. Most respondents remain at beginner or intermediate level, but language study still functions as a form of affiliation, because it allows respondents to deepen their access to Korean media, cultural codes, and imagined proximity to Korea.

However, the study's findings must be interpreted in light of several limitations. Firstly, the sample appears to include a significant number of respondents connected to Korean language study and academic environments. This may have produced a more culturally invested, linguistically oriented, and institutionally connected sample than the wider Romanian public interested in Korean culture. Secondly, the study relies on self-reported data, which captures respondents' perceptions, memories, preferences, and declared practices rather than independently observed behavior. Thirdly, some responses were open-ended and required thematic recoding, which inevitably involves interpretive decisions. Fourthly, the study does not systematically compare Romanian fans with non-fans, casual consumers, or fans from other European countries. As a result, the specificity of the Romanian case can be described, but not fully isolated through comparison.

In consequence, several directions for future research follow from these gaps. Future studies could use larger and more heterogeneous samples in order to compare highly engaged fans with casual consumers of Korean culture. Comparative research across European countries would also clarify whether the Romanian case is distinctive or part of broader regional patterns of Korean cultural reception. Another useful direction would be longitudinal research, especially because several respondents became fans during the pandemic or through

platform-mediated exposure. Such research could examine whether Korean cultural attachment intensifies, stabilizes, or declines over time.

Further research should also examine the relationship between Korean cultural consumption and language learning in more detail. The present findings suggest that language study is a central form of engagement, but future studies could investigate whether Korean language learning emerges primarily from media consumption, academic interest, career aspirations, travel desire, or social belonging. Similarly, the connection between media consumption and tourism deserves closer attention. Future research could investigate how K-drama filming locations, K-pop spaces, Korean food, beauty products, and language learning shape concrete travel itineraries rather than only imagined mobility.

The ambivalent critical reception of K-dramas also requires further study. Issues such as gender representation, LGBTQ+ visibility, social class, character typologies, and perceptions of "authenticity" could be explored through interviews or focus groups. This would allow researchers to understand how Romanian audiences negotiate tensions between admiration for Korean media and dissatisfaction with specific narrative, aesthetic, or ideological patterns.

Finally, future research should examine the material and commercial dimensions of Korean cultural diffusion with greater precision. The present study shows that Korean products circulate through cosmetics, food, albums, electronics, and online commerce, but further research could analyze how availability, price, authenticity, branding, and local retail infrastructures affect consumption. Such research would clarify how Korean culture moves from media visibility into everyday material practice. This study contributes to the understanding of Korean cultural diffusion by showing that Romanian engagement with Korean culture is affective, mediated, selective, critical, material, social, and educational at the same time. Korean culture is not merely watched or listened to. It is learned, purchased, discussed, compared, embodied, imagined, and sometimes contested. Its diffusion in Romania therefore depends not only on the global circulation of Korean media, but also on the local ways in which fans translate that circulation into practices of affiliation, consumption, interpretation, and aspiration.

**Declaration on Generative AI and AI-assisted Technologies in the Writing Process**

The authors declare that during the preparation of this manuscript, we used ChatGPT for improving the clarity of the English. After using this tool, we reviewed and edited the content, taking full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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