

The Cultural Mediatization of the Korean Wave Phenomenon in Malaysia: The Role of Social Media Influencers as Social Agents

*¹Nurul Akqmie Badrul Hisham., ¹Abdul Latiff Ahmad., ²Chang Peng Kee

¹Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia

²Taylors University

*Corresponding Author

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.90400460>

Received: 15 April 2024; Accepted: 19 April 2025; Published: 22 May 2025

ABSTRACT

This study seeks to understand the role of social influencers in promoting and maintaining the power of the Korean Wave phenomenon. Aims to understand the process of mediatization in contemporary youth culture and how social media has played a role in creating the mediated world. This study also analyses the role of social influencers as social agents in the Korean Wave phenomenon in Malaysia. This study used qualitative research netnography and in-depth interviews due to the movement control orders or lockdowns in many countries due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Content on open-account social media was chosen as part of the observations. In addition, in-depth interviews among the social influencers and the person in charge from Korean Embassy Malaysia were also conducted. This study shows social media as a catalyst in connecting fans and allowing fans to create their own mediated world via online community. Social influencer plays a critical role in consolidating the process that brings fans and Korean popular culture closer with the information on the Korean Wave obtained without interruption and filters. Social influencers helped lead to negotiated creations of social reality, empowerment of fans and evolution of the Korean Wave became an essential part of the phenomenon.

Keywords: Mediatization, Korean Wave, Social Influencer, Youth, Culture

INTRODUCTION

Social media are known to have brought various changes in Malaysia. Interestingly, Berger (2016) defines social media as Internet organisations that enable people to communicate texts, images and videos to large numbers of other people at no cost. Consequently, the evolution of media and technology has placed society in an era where information can be accessed through the Internet with any device and from various locations. According to Couldry and Hepp (2017), our society is currently in the mediatization world, and the development of media and communication technology brings forth changes in how we communicate. Deuze (2012) stated that media for humans is akin to water for fish. Whether we like it or not, every aspect of our life is a part of the media. Media is no longer just a type of technology but has become a part of our world.

By using social media as a platform, this study focuses on social influencers as social agents that fully utilise their platform to disseminate information by focusing on the Korean Wave phenomenon. Coherent to the argument of the social network site, this can be seen to represent a moving target for researchers and policymakers (Livingstone & Drake, 2009). This study aims to procure a deep understanding of the relationship between media and youth focusing on the online world of the Korean Wave phenomenon.

Pertaining to the relationship between media and youth, especially in understanding the role of social media in the youth sociocultural sphere, researchers feel the significance of the Korean Wave phenomenon needed to be studied. Nor Hasimah Jalaluddin and Zaharani Ahmad (2011) explain that media and other social systems are interdependent to achieve their respective goals. For example, music has always been an element of art and culture that can be considered a facile way to approach the community, particularly the youth. This proven

standpoint has become a way for the Korean Wave to gather fans worldwide. They also added a structured system that can position music as an industry to support the country's economy when transmitting a message that can assist social development (ibid). Korean Wave is an example that uses the entertainment industry as a country commodity for export. Not only does it involve drama and music, but it also encompasses language and culture.

The Korean Wave phenomenon in Malaysia began as early as 2003, with the introduction of the drama *Winter Sonata*. It focuses at first on middle-aged women as the target audience. Only in 2008, with the influence of K-pop (Korean Pop) music introduced through the YouTube platform, the global transition expansion gets wider. It is the start of the shift in the target audience transition to youth (Jung & Shim 2014). It shows that Korean cultural product was entering a phase change from a traditional medium to a digital medium. According to Nor Hasimah Jalaluddin and Zaharani Ahmad (2011), apart from television, the internet became the primary alternative for getting information on drama, pop songs and even other information on Korean cultural products. Md Azalanshah Md Syed (2019) also explain that K-pop is very popular among Malay female, especially the younger generation. It is due to the widespread accessibility through social media such as YouTube, Facebook and Twitter. Furthermore, social media mediation such as WhatsApp, Telegram, Line and Kakao Talk are popular among youth, as it is used as mediums of consumption.

To fully understand the Korean Wave phenomenon concerning the Malay female youth, this discussion aims to have a more in-depth knowledge of this phenomenon and the relationship between social media and social media influencers. The purpose of this research is to gain a better understanding of the mediated world of Korean Wave fans in Malaysia, including the role of social influencers as social agents. This exploratory research is guided by the theoretical framework of mediatization and culture by Hepp (2009) using qualitative approaches aims to address the following research questions:

RQ1: How does social media affect the life of Korean Wave fans in Malaysia?

RQ2: How do social media influencers affect the phenomena of the Korean Wave in Malaysia?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research Background

The increase in media reports that discussed issues related to female youth and the Korean Wave phenomenon has attracted and encouraged researchers to probe this issue. For example, among the media reports from 2015 until 2021, the focus is consistently on the negative impact of the Korean Wave on Malay Muslim youth, particularly female youth. One notable K-pop event reported in local news involves a short video of a few Malay female youth wearing headscarves hugging and doing affectionate acts that happened exclusively at a fan meeting event by the K-pop group B1A4.

Subsequently, at the end of 2017, Malaysia was once again stunned by local newspapers that reported a number of Malay female youth who participated in a ceremony to commemorate the death of a singer from Shinee, Jong-Hyun. Among the article are "Malaysian K-Pop Fans Hold Candlelight Vigil for Jonghyun at Dataran Merdeka" by News Straits Times (Aref Omar, 2017), "Excessive Wailing of Jong-Hyun Fans Chastised" by Sinar Harian (Muhammad Shamsul Abd Ghani, 2017) and "Jong-hyun's death: It is forbidden for Muslims to mourn with candles - Perak Mufti" (Wan Syamsul Amly, 2017).

These instances received attention and raised concerns from the local religious institute and were discussed in many youth magazines. Reports from the newspaper *Berita Harian* dated October 3, 2016, titled "The Risk of CWS Due to K-pop Fanaticism", associate local Korean fans with the Celebrity Worship Syndrome (Rashiqah Ilimi Abd Rahim, 2016). This report described the extreme craze-like symptoms in Malay youth due to the Korean artists, which then caused them to suffer from severe psychological problems.

Reports and discussions about the youth craze of Korean artists are not something out of the ordinary. The Korean Wave phenomenon is not a new cultural product in Malaysia. Previously, before the popularity of Korean cultural products, there have been other phases of popular sources of entertainment from abroad.

Malaysian society embraced entertainment products from Hollywood, Latin America, India, China, and even entertainment products from neighbouring countries such as Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines. They have become very well-accepted and much appreciated.

Theoretical Framework

The theory of mediatization and culture falls under the big umbrella of the mediatization theory. Mediatization can be studied by examining the mediation world as it enables the process of strengthening this theory. Krotz and Hepp (2011) describe the world of social mediation as referring to the smaller world created with the mediation of media. Small fragments of the real-life world are constructed with specific knowledge, specific social practices and the depth and comprehensiveness of a certain types of culture. For example, Hip-Hop and Black Metal can be considered popular cultures with their media mediation world.

Research conducted by Döveling et al. (2018) proved that fandom tends to rely heavily on media and mediatization processes to disseminate and expand their groups globally. It strengthens the researcher's argument for using mediatization and culture to seek a deep understanding of Malay female youth and the Korean Wave fan culture. Based on the scholars addressing these small worlds, the researcher noticed that the fans fit these descriptions. They have their own small, mediated world online where they gather not only for content and information but also as the primary way to communicate with each other.

These small worlds are reinforced daily by the media community and media culture. It elucidates how those involved with the Korean Wave seem to live in their world differently from others, although they live within the same society. Durocher's writings explained that this theory approaches cultural studies by using "tools" and conceptual material to study the transformation that exists in the social field (Durocher, 2017). It is consistent with what Krotz and Hepp (2011) have stated, as they are at a level where mediatization is strong and thus can be analysed empirically.

Krotz (2007) emphasized that the mediatization theory should be more committed to empirical analysis, including the study of specific mediatization processes among different groups in the population. The researcher wants to explain the context of this study and the context field referring to a fan culture that arises from the interest of youth in the Korean Wave, which has also created a world where the media act as their medium and shapes not only their identity but also created a community. Hepp (2009) explained that the media provides a unique identity to the community not only at the national level but also at the smaller communication level, such as diaspora, religious community, fan culture and other similar communities.

Korean Wave

The global phenomenon of accepting Korean cultural products is known as the Korean Wave. Korean Wave is often seen as a light form of entertainment that was initially liked by housewives and later enjoyed by teenagers. Just like soap operas from the United States, Latin America, Indonesia's *Sinetron*, serial dramas from Taiwan and Japan pop music and lively group dances, the public sees this as a new trend in the entertainment world.

This study looks at the Korean Wave phenomenon as a phenomenon to be studied. In previous studies, Korean cultural products were also discussed using terms such as Korean Wave or Kwave and *Hallyu*, which refer to the same meaning. According to previous research, the Korean Wave refers to the increased visibility and acceptance of Korean culture at the international level. It began in East Asia in the 1990s and continued recently to the United States, Latin America, the Middle East and Europe.

Previously, the Korean Wave discussed by researchers comprised two forms of media, television series and pop music (K-Pop). Although, Korean films and other forms of music are also categorised as parts of the phenomenon (Kim, 2015; Shim, 2017; Jang & Paik, 2012; Kim, 2011; Korean Culture and Information Service, 2011; Nor Hasimah Jalaluddin & Zaharani Ahmad, 2011; Mark Ravina, 2009).

Historically, Chinese media was the first to use the phrase "Korean Wave" (*Hallyu*) to refer to the Korean pop

craze that swept through China in the 1990s. According to Kim (2011), it was first published in the Chinese magazine Qingnianbao in 1999 as a warning to Chinese readers to always be alert and aware of the dangers of Korean popular culture. The term Hallyu is derived from the Chinese characters "han" and "lyu", which indicates "fast cold wave," it seems like a fitting moniker for South Korea's unexpected sudden rise to prominence as a global mass culture. Kim (2015) claims that Hallyu has replaced Western popular culture as the primary representative of East Asian popular culture. Kim also elaborated that the other meaning of Hallyu is "the winter wind blowing violently over China's mainland". Likewise, the word "Hanmi" refers to the frantic crazed of K-Pop culture in China. "Hanmi" can be equated to the word "mania" in English, which resembles the term "mi" in Chinese.

Consequently, Korean Wave can be understood as all forms of Korean cultural products, including pop music, drama, film and video games, where the focus lies on celebrities that are not only popular but also has attractive charms and a reputation that can position them favourably in the industry. Other than that, a celebrity can be seen as a fan's main attraction towards Korean Wave (Lee, 2015; Parc & Moon, 2013). Shim (2017) further expands on the terms by stating that after early 2010, Hallyu has also included all genres of Korean culture which includes Soju, food, fashion, make-up and others.

Today, fans or target audiences of the Korean Wave are often associated with the internet world or as explained by Kim (2015), as Hallyu 2.0. The study by Joanne B.Y. Lim (2013) discovers that fans from this community will also arrange offline meetings through online discussions. They contributed to the increase of youth with similar interests in offline events such as flash mobs, street parties and K-Pop dance competitions.

Capili (2014) also explained that celebrities and K-pop groups have fan clubs within the social networks. It is not surprising that these groups grow and gain members in the virtual world. The internet is now the main gathering place where fans from the same fandom meet and will either join an existing group or create their own groups. However, according to the same researcher, Korean Wave fans, specifically those interested in K-pop, will also integrate their virtual activity officially with the real world. The study focuses on exploring the events that these fans attend and participate. The findings of the study categorised the Korean Wave events such as concerts, fan meetings or even fans having their local gathering or meeting.

Social Influencer

Boyd and Ellison (2008) define social network sites as web-based services that allow people to construct public or semi-public profiles within a bounded system, create lists of different users with whom they share a connection and view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.

According to Atika Hermanda et al. (2019) research, while looking at the brand image of local cosmetic products, they found that although influencers might not significantly influence consumers on their purchase intention, the social media influencers still had a significant positive effect on the brand image and consumer's self-concept of the product.

In the digital world, public relation practitioner is transforming the way to communicate with the target audience. The increasing growth of bloggers and their power as influencers in media resulted in them becoming a vital part of any social media campaign (Booth & Matic, 2011). Meanwhile, Taillon et al. (2020) showed that in digital marketing strategy, social media is considered very important, and influencers have a significant role in communicating with current and potential customers. They further elaborate that while some social media influencers may be well-known celebrities, however not all celebrities are social media influencers.

Research conducted by Casaló et al. (2018) shows that consumers were increasingly using social media to gather information to make decisions before settling on a purchase. Unique post on Instagram is a key factor for creating trustworthiness as an opinion leader in social media. While Tak-Jie Chan et al. (2021) in their research concluded that trustworthiness, expertise, physical appearance, respect and similarity towards celebrity endorsers create a positive and significant relationship with brand image, especially the trustworthiness of the celebrity.

According to Waal (2020), influencers are a type of opinion leaders. Consequently, social media influencers can be clarified as social media users with established validity in a specific industry, with substantial followers and those who have the power to influence their audience's consumption habits, particularly when endorsing certain products (Mindich, 2020). Furthermore, according to Duffy (2020), social media influencers are known as a subset of a digital content creators defined by their noteworthy online followers, peculiar persona and connection with commercial sponsors.

Justification of Mediatization and Culture Theory in The Study of Relationship and the Korean Wave

Based on past research, the researcher sees the development of media technology playing a role in changing various aspects of society, especially in the daily lives of individuals. Also, it must be stressed that today's youth is not like the previous generations. As they were born into a world where media and communication technology already existed, thus, they are used to having it as part of their lives. The youth are considered digital natives now.

Additionally, the researcher sees the importance of pursuing to understand the experiences of the youth involved with the Korean Wave to fully immerse in understanding whether or not the Korean Wave poses a threat to their identity. Although many scholars have explained Korean Wave goes beyond the boundaries of geography, culture, nationality and religion, the researcher feels that it is critical to focus on one specific subject to study. Wojtkowski (2017) argues that mediatization theory helps to find new ways to understand the dynamics of media and communication studies in today's world. Therewith, using this would provide an added perspective on studying the relationship between media and society. That is to focus on studying the changes that communication and media technology bring into society's sociology (Turner, 2016).

Turner (2016) points out that the reasoning behind mediatization and culture is about a concrete concept in which audiences are now entering a foreign realm. The researcher further explained that in this foreign realm, mass media and social relation has evolved and changed dramatically (2016). Furthermore, in addition to evolving and changing, the current state of mass media has a much faster disruption before the audiences can assimilate themselves with the changes that have occurred (ibid).

By using the theory of mediatization, it will show a comprehensible way of researching something that is essentially trivial (Hjarvard 2008). Hjarvard stated that this trivial culture is associated with the local society and media today, which are in a dominant position as an institution that provides cultural products, as well as the beliefs of an audience of a society. It is notably vital to see and understand aspects of society's lives and to find answers to questions where the findings are not sufficient to be supported by numbers and percentages.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative approach to netnography. Netnography is a data collection technique that focuses on online community communication and social media spaces (Costello et al. 2017; Kozinets 2010, 2002, 2015). Moreover, according to Ferreira (2015), this method is also referred to as virtual ethnography, which explores the way researchers engage deeply in cyberspace, mediated interactions and most importantly, are sensitive to key features of the internet.

Previously, Kozinets (2002) explained that purchasing and consumption decisions are discussed and debated by the online community, hence requiring thorough research to collect and interpret data in a more challenging context. In this study, the researcher found that the communication between fans is in accord with Kozinets, which mentioned the development of the internet in the late '80s and early '90s, where a form of communication referred to as "forum community" spread (2015). Kozinets added that users enjoy similar support and friendship with the community, parallel to relationships in real-life neighbourhoods and religious groups. It shows that communication between fans on social media is similar to the atmosphere of face-to-face conversation with friends.

The internet is a decisive driving force among Korean Wave fans. This research examines Korean Wave social influencers and their content on social networks like Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. In-depth interviews

were conducted to gain a deeper understanding of their role and the phenomenon of Korean Wave fans in Malaysia. For this paper, the researcher observed seven social media accounts across the social network and interviewed six influencers.

For this research, the method of using multiple sampling was chosen, as suggested by Jensen (2020). It is common for qualitative studies to sample two or more steps to determine the relevant context of certain meaningful people before being singled out. He also pointed out that keeping with the contextual orientation of the research informants must be interpreted with reference to their contact and accessibility to the researcher in the process of analysis and interpretation.

For the first round of samples, the researchers decided on theoretical sampling. In this type of sample, the focus is on the data that needs to be obtained, not on whom to interview. For this purpose, anyone who can provide this data is the best candidate (Qureshi, 2018). For this sample, we revisit the discussion of Couldry and Hepp (2013) on the concepts that they had identified as the situation's determining factors of the state of mediatization. After that, we continued with purposive sampling, where we narrowed down social media influencers to focus only on Korean Wave influencers, specifically those linked to the Embassy of the Republic of Korea in Malaysia. It is chosen due to the selected sample's required status of experience and to have the special knowledge to provide the information needed (Lopez & Whitehead, 2013).

Researchers did face some struggles in getting suitable informants. It is because the influencers felt like their identity needed to be hidden. Moreover, they were worried that they will be framed negatively due to the reactions towards K-pop fans by the public, local media and authorities based on experience. It contributed to snowball sampling and the researcher's ability to collect some data via interviews. It is proven as mentioned by Jensen (2020), that initial contact with an informant generates further contact and for the researcher to be able to contact a more informed choice of informants. The initial sample consisted of 20 social media influencers. 14 of whom did not agree to take part in the interviews. Among observed official online supporters in this research are Hangul_Saranghae, Zywxwj852, Trip Oppa Bob, Koreastuffss, Alam Anuar and others. Only those who agreed to be interviewed permitted their content to be used. The account is Hangul_Saranghae, Zywxwj852, MySwagArmyMalaysia, Dida, and Elzara, who is also the person behind Trip Oppa Bob and the official website of Korean Tourism Malaysia. Coherently, according to the findings of Guest et. al (2020), conducting around 6 to 7 interviews with a homogeneous sample is sufficient to cover the majority themes, where 6 interviews are typically needed to achieve 80% saturation point.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Mediated World of Korean Wave Fans

Social media has become an important space for fandoms or any individual that consume Korean Wave products. It can be used widely to share personal opinions or feelings on any content. Information can also be easily searched by typing any keyword related to their interest, be it an event, K-Drama, K-Pop group or celebrities. Social media has become a platform for them to share information on upcoming activities as well as to communicate with each other quickly. The relationships between fans in social media are broad, it spans the sphere of friends, borders, religion, culture and time.

The research findings support Döveling et al. (2018) argument that fandoms are highly dependent on the media and mediatization process. These elements are visible in the observation of some fan discussions. For instance, the researcher can follow and track down discussions and fandoms by simply following a keyword or hashtag. In addition, abundant information and details about Korean Wave cultural products are shared on social media, especially on Twitter and Instagram.

This situation strengthens the argument of how these fandoms form their small world via social media. This small world is enough for them to satisfy any need for information and to seek support and relief from each other. This small, mediated world becomes sufficient for fans to the extent that they might no longer need the physical world, especially in getting information and news. The presence of those who share the same interest is likely to make them feel happier and more welcoming, dismissing the need to be wary of judgement

compared to the society outside of their interest. The Korean Wave phenomenon has developed and operated entirely online, thus supporting Hepp's (2020) argument on how society is increasingly dependent on digital media.

In addition, the growth of online communities has also opened their functional systems within this small world. As mentioned before, Korean Wave fans do not need support from the outside world. It created a unique ecosystem that enables them to access information from sources. They can also interact with information instantly in real time. Through the virtual realm, fans can access the official accounts of entertainment agencies, celebrities, or even their celebrities and artist accounts for press releases and news. Fans emphasized that they often learn news about their favourite artist through Twitter and Instagram. So, news such as new album announcements, concert dates, new video content or even magazine interviews and many more can reach the fans quickly and accurately. By following the management agencies' social media accounts, for example, YG Entertainment, SM Entertainment, BIGHIT Music or HYBE, JYP Entertainment and many more, they received authentic information quickly. Besides that, the functional systems have also been introduced to the unique aspect of supporter accounts, where fans are supported by other fans and become a source of information.

One example of supporter accounts is the fan's translators. It refers to the fans that have knowledge of the Korean language and act as translators and bridge the language gap barriers between other fans without such knowledge. Each fandom tends to have its fan translators. This functional system minimised the misinformation regarding their favourite celebrities and shows. Some fandoms have their fans subbing translators for television shows. The Korean Wave fans have built a world that complemented their needs. Social media is the access to this world where they even have gatekeepers that control the correct information. It creates a strong sense of trustworthiness among fans; thus, supporter accounts are slowly seen as the opinion leader among fans.

By having social media as the primary source for not only the Korean culture product but also to connect and communicate with other fans, the fans of the Korean Wave that the researcher has met often explain that this community is vast without any regard for race, colour, religion or even boundary. The shared common interest has opened the friendship door that goes beyond the physical barriers. Most informants mentioned that they have friends from abroad and often would meet when they attend concerts or fan events. They also admitted that they do not know the real name of their friends but rather the name of their social media accounts. They are known mostly based on their online identity or persona.

Furthermore, through social media, Korean Wave fans who share common interests often come together to create special projects for their favourite artists. This special project is often referred to as a fan project. They might have a long discussion and planning before an event online. They combined their online discussion with physical world activity, such as attending a concert, a fan meeting, or even conducting a fan gathering among themselves. This activity has become a symbol of unity among the fans, which shows their collective support and appreciation towards their favourite artists. The idea of media for Korean Wave fans may be different from media for those not interested in it. This support Krotz and Hepp's (2011) previous work that discusses the small world and how it created the media as a form of mediation for each other based on certain knowledge, practices and culture.

The COVID-19 pandemic has halted every event worldwide, including the Korean Wave-related events. Nevertheless, it survives the current situation by quickly adapting by leading and embracing new technologies, platforms and creativities. It is evident by their ability to transform physical concerts into online concerts while still maintaining the same format. Thus, fans will be able to take part and invest in paying for tickets and buying merchandise without physical events. This circumstance is possible and achievable with high-quality technology and internet access from both the creator and the fans. This effect is coherent with the explanation by Couldry and Hepp (2013) about the state of mediatization. The state of mediatization reflects the ideas that Couldry and Hepp (2013) set as the factors of the situation and defining mediatization, such as the growing role of media in everyday lives in many developed countries, normalization of fast internet access and massive expansion of web search capacity and the emergences of blogs, YouTube and social media as new communicative form.

While exploring the Korean Wave fan culture in Malaysia, particularly among the female Malay Muslim youth, we can evidently state that social media is not a new communicative form but is the main communicative form. Consequently, Korean Wave fans' mediated world amalgamates through the convergence of media, which then strengthen by the power of internet access for both sides. Thus, Korean popular culture was able to be supported by the fans due to the ability of the creator to embrace the change in the media landscape, transform the format and adapt to the new norm of life due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, intensify the process of mediatization among the fans and strengthen the grasp of the Korean Wave business in the world despite the situation we are facing.

Korean Wave Influencer

As most social media or social networking sites are intended for teenagers and adults, these social networking sites have been rapidly adopted by teenagers and young people around the world (Livingstone & Drake, 2009). As past scholars have pointed out, teenagers or youth are now more comfortable using the internet to access Korean cultural products as a source of entertainment. It is consistent with the development of technology and IT in Korea and Malaysia. Target audiences will gain access to South Korean cultural products through YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram (Dal Yong Jin, 2012, Kim, 2015, Min, Soo et al. 2013, Md. Azalanshah Md Syed, 2019). The researcher discovers aside from having alternative media websites such as Kmania, Malaysian K-POP Fans, Gok-pop Malaysia, K-popped, Holl K-pop, K-Variety Malaysia and many more in Malaysia, the Korean Wave scene also has its own social media influencers.

In an interview with Mr Kim Jun Pyo, charge d'affaires of the Embassy of the Republic of Korea in Malaysia, the researcher discovered a special program called Korean Online Supporter. This influencer program was an initiative from the Embassy of the Republic of Korea in Malaysia in 2006. Its sole aim is to introduce Korean culture to Malaysians. These influencers will post updates related to Korean culture, news, celebrity news, stories on dramas or films or anything related to Korea. The Embassy of the Republic of Korea also officially recruits social influencers each year. They will be known as Korean Online Supporters in Malaysia.

These online supporters comprise social influencers who own YouTube channels, blog writers and even Instagram influencers who are interested in creating content to promote and introduce Korean cultural products to followers on their social sites. These social influencers are active and quick in updating and sharing news. They mostly operate for free, usually done only by fans of Korean cultural products and have a huge influence among youth that are passionately interested in Korean cultural products. They are opinion leaders and well-known among local fans. Some have fans and a good network related to Korean Wave.

Even though these influencers are unpaid, they still hold power as opinion leaders for followers. These influencers mentioned they are doing this out of passion, for their love towards Korean cultural products, thus doing the job sincerely without any force or pressure. As argued by Jansom and Pongsakornrunsilp (2021), the creation and supply of information are the core elements of opinion leaders. Therefore, their ability to provide sufficiently useful information makes the followers become their fans. Here, even though there is no profit-making, these online supporters of the Korean embassy are considered a trustworthy source of information when it comes to anything related to Korean cultural products. This outcome is proven as they have become a go-to person for fact-checking based on their content, for example, in the case of halal food or even halal restaurant, embassy events and many more.

These online supporters provide support in varieties of genres, with each of them carrying a part of the Korean Wave phenomenon. The influencers differ in age and background. These differences are reflected in their curated social media posts, which influence their interest. For example, Hangul_Saranghae would post content related to the Korean language or Hangul. The account would post content such as the correct meaning of certain words, the proper pronunciation, or daily dialogues. And while being in the same influencer program, Elzara would post content on Korean culture, food and events related to South Korea. Meanwhile, in her other account, she focuses on famous tourist spots and gives additional information regarding popular places in South Korea.

Fitting for younger Korean Wave fans, Zatul, the Instagram account holder for Zyxxwj852, is among the

youngest influencers. As someone young, her interest is more focused on K-Pop celebrities and K-Dramas. Additionally, she focuses on content from an Islamic perspective in her posts. For example, she posted videos about finding Halal Korean snacks in Malaysia by checking the ingredients written in the Korean language. Although they are all in the same program, these influencers have their niche and different followers. Followers have the option to pick and choose which influencers to follow according to their preferences in content and their likes. Contrary to the widely believed perspective in mainstream media, Korean Wave fans are not all screaming teenagers that have been infused by love towards their idols. The fans are spread across; those that enjoy and want to travel to South Korea, to the lover of food and culture, and those that only enjoy popular cultures. Or perhaps, the strictly K-Drama fans that do not listen to K-Pop at all, and vice-versa.

Aside from Zatul, there is also Venus, the owner of the MySwagArmyMalaysia account, whose content solely focuses on the famous K-Pop group BTS. Similarly, Dida is ready to post updates on Enhypen. Their posts are full of updates on photos of the group and its members, events and concerts, news updates, and wishes. They also include updates on fandom events and activities. Venus and Dida also used the account to resolve misunderstandings or issues that affected the popular group. Even though they are not a part of official online supporters, they are accepted as opinion leaders by their followers, and most of their followers do participate and engage in the fandom. They will usually "listen" and wait for updates if the group are involved in any particular issues.

Interestingly, during the pandemic, social influencers have now played a role in maintaining the public interest towards the Korean Wave cultural product. The Embassy of the Republic of Korea in Malaysia used the services of social influencers to disseminate extensive information on how South Korea dealt with the COVID-19 pandemic. The influencer also shares information about awareness campaigns in South Korea. The researcher thinks this is an effort to preserve South Korea's image to tourists. Going by the comments on the influencer's account, fans are always interested to know about the situation in South Korea, although travelling is not allowed yet at that time.

CONCLUSION

Even though previous researchers looked at social influencers or paid endorsements, this study focuses on influencers that conducted non-payment work. The result of this study is consistent with previous literature suggesting that social media is a crucial aspect of a fan's life and the mediatization process exists among Malay female youth within the Korean Wave phenomena.

The role played by influencers in the interactive world of social media attracted the youth's attention. It allows them to influence fans' interest and purchasing power and deepen the meaning of media in their everyday life. These traits strengthen the small online world of fans. The result is the creation of trustworthiness qualities in the social influencers involved, thus, resulting in them becoming paramount opinion leaders in the local scene. At the same time, as an agent, these influencers manage to increase their dependency on media in fans' daily life. As fans spend more time in the online world participating in virtual activities provided and conducted by these influencers, this reduces face-to-face communication.

During COVID-19, when all physical activities are cancelled, there is an increased use of mediation communication. This consequence proves while all physical doors are impossible and closed, social influencers' tremendous role helped bring information about the Korean Wave to fans without interruption. Furthermore, the free accessibility of social media and the content were not filtered even by the embassy. It shows social influencers help lead to the negotiation creation of social reality. The fan's empowerment and the evolution of the Korean Wave become an essential part of the phenomenon. The fan's mediatization process has empowered Korean Wave with immunity despite the world still facing the COVID-19 pandemic.

REFERENCES

1. Atika Hermanda, Ujang Sumarwan & Netti Tinaprilla. (2019). The effect of social media influencer on brand image, self-concept, and purchase intention. *Journal of Consumer Sciences*, 4(2), 76-89

2. Aref Omar. (2017). Malaysian K-Pop fans hold candlelight vigil for Jonghyun at Dataran Merdeka. NST Online. Retrieved from <https://www.nst.com.my/lifestyle/groove/2017/12/317270/showbiz-malaysian-k-pop-fans-hold-candlelight-vigil-jonghyun-dataran>
3. Berger, A. A. (2011). *Media and Communication Research Methods: An Introduction to Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches* (2nd ed.). California: SAGE Publications, Inc.
4. Berger, A.A. (2016). *Media and Communication Research Methods* (4th ed.). Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, Inc.
5. Booth. M., & Matic. J.A (2011). Mapping and leveraging influencers in social media to shape corporate brand perceptions. *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, 16 (3), 184-191.
6. Boyd, D.M., Ellison, N.B. (2008). Social network sites: Definition, history, and scholarship. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 13, 210–230.
7. Casalo, L.V, Flavián, C., & Ibáñez-Sánchez, F. (2018). Influencers on Instagram: Antecedents and consequences of opinion leadership. *Journal of Business Research*, 117, 510–519.
8. Capili, P. M. L. (2014). Painting the Scenario of Filipino K-pop Fan Culture . Retrieved from https://www.ateneo.edu/sites/default/files/attached-files/Hallyu_Proceedings_Draft1b_2014-Sept-25.pdf#page=47
9. Chua, B. H. (2012). Doing pop culture studies in East Asia. In Z. Ibrahim (Ed.), *Social science and knowledge in a globalising world* (1st ed., pp. 95–108). Strategic Information and Research Development Centre.
10. Creswell, J. (2007). *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches* (2nd ed.). London: Sage Publications.
11. Deuze, M. (2012). *Media life*. Cambridge: Polity.
12. Duffy, E. (2020). Social Media Influencers. *The International Encyclopedia of Gender, Media and Communication*. 1-5. DOI: 10.1002/9781119429128.iegmc219.
13. Döveling, K., Harju, A. A. & Sommer, D. (2018). From Mediatized Emotion to Digital Affect Cultures: New Technologies and Global Flows of Emotion. *Social Media + Society* 4(1), 1-18.
14. Durocher, M. (2017). Mediatization Studies and Cultural Studies: A Possible Dialogue for Further Critical Analysis?. *Mediatization Studies*, 1, 31–43.
15. Guest, G., Namey, E., & Chen, M. (2020). A simple method to assess and report thematic saturation in Qualitative Research. *PLOS ONE*, 15(5).<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0232076>.
16. Hepp, A. 2009. Differentiation: Mediatization and Cultural Change. In Couldry, N. (Ed.), *Mediatization: Concept, Changes, Consequences*. (pp. 135–153). New York: Peter Lang.
17. Hodkinson, P. (2005). “Insider Research” in the Study of Youth Cultures. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 2, 131–149.
18. Iacono, J., Brown, A., & Holtham, C. (2009). Research methods - A case example of participant observation. *Electronic Journal of Business Research Methods*, 7(1), 39–46.
19. Jang, G., & Paik, W. K. (2012). Korean Wave as Tool for Korea’s New Cultural Diplomacy. *Advances in Applied Sociology*, 2(3), 196–202.
20. Jensen, K.B. (Ed.). (2020). *A Handbook of Media and Communication Research: Qualitative and Quantitative Methodologies* (3rd ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781138492905>
21. Joanne B.Y. Lim. (2013). Engaging Participation: Youth Culture and the Korean Wave in Malaysia. In M. J. Ainslie & Joanne B.Y. Lim (Eds.), *The Korean Wave In Southeast Asia: Consumption and Cultural Production*. (pp. 155–174). Malaysia: SIRD.
22. Jung, S., & Shim, D. (2014). Social distribution: K-pop fan practices in Indonesia and the “Gangnam Style” phenomenon. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 17(5), 485–501.
23. Kim (2015). Past, present and future of Hallyu (Korean Wave). *American International Journal of Contemporary Research*, 5(5), 154-160.
24. Kim, M. (2011). The Role of the Government in Cultural Industry: Some Observations From Korea’s Experience. *Keio Communication Review*, 33, 163-182.
25. Korean Culture and Information Service. (2011). *The Korean Wave: A New Pop Culture Phenomenon*. Republic of Korea: Korean Culture and Information Service Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism.

26. Kozinets, R. V. (2010). Netnography: Doing ethnographic research online. *International Journal of Advertising*, 29(2), 328-330.
27. Kozinets, R. V. (2002). The field behind the screen: Using netnography for marketing research in online communities. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 39, 61–72.
28. Kozinets, R. V. (2015). Netnography. In P. H. Ang & R. Mansell (Eds.), *The international encyclopedia of digital communication and society*. John Wiley & Sons.
29. Krotz, F., & Hepp, A. (2011). A concretization of mediatization: How mediatization works and why “mediatized worlds” are a helpful concept for empirical mediatization research. *European Journal for the Philosophy of Communication*, 3(2), 137–152.
30. Livingstone, S. & Brake, D. R. (2009). On the rapid rise of social networking sites: New findings and policy implications. *Children & Society*, 24, 75–83
31. Lee, W.-J. (2015). The Effects of the Korean Wave (Hallyu) Star and Receiver Characteristics on T.V Drama Satisfaction and Intention to Revisit. *International Journal Science and Technology*, 8(11), 347–356.
32. Lopez, V. & Whitehead, D. (2013). Sampling data and data collection in qualitative research. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/25595030/Sampling data and data collection in qualitative research](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/25595030/Sampling_data_and_data_collection_in_qualitative_research)
33. Md Azalanshah Md Syed. (2019). K-pop , Aspirasi Kemodenan dan Ketidakpatuhan Strategik K-pop, 35(2), 103–122.
34. Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). *Qualitative research : a guide to design and implementation* (4th ed.). United State of America: Jossey-Bass.
35. Mindich, D. (2020). *The mediated world: A new approach to mass communication and culture*. Rowman & Littlefield.
36. Nor Hasimah Jalaluddin, & Zaharani Ahmad. (2011). Hallyu Di Malaysia: Kajian sosio-budaya. *Jurnal Komunikasi, Malaysian Journal of Communication*, 27(2), 203-219.
37. Qureshi, H. (2018). Theoretical Sampling in Qualitative Research: A Multi-Layered Nested Sampling Scheme. *International Journal of Contemporary Research and Review*. 9. 20218-20222. 10.15520/ijcrr/2018/9/08/576.
38. Parc, J., & Moon, H.-C. (2013). Korean Dramas and Films: Key Factors for Their International Competitiveness. *Asian Journal of Social Science*, 41, 126–149.
39. Rashiqah Ilmi Abd Rahim. (2016). Risiko CWS Akibat Fanatik K-pop. *Berita Harian*. Retrieved from <https://www.bharian.com.my/node/198373>
40. Ravina, & Mark. (2009). Introduction: Conceptualizing the Korean Wave. *Southeast Review of Asian Studies*. Retrieved from <https://www.highbeam.com/doc/1G1-213529550.html>
41. Ezaruddin Abd. Rahman. (2015). Rebahlah Sebagai Srikandi Bukan Kerana Ketampanan artis K-pop. *Utusan Online*. Retrieved from <http://www.utusan.com.my/rencana/rebahlah-sebagai-srikandi-bukan-kerana-ketampanan-artis-k-pop-1.47326>
42. Kosmo Online. (2015). Fanatik K-pop Makan Diri. *Kosmo Online*. Retrieved from http://ww1.kosmo.com.my/kosmo/content.asp?y=2015&dt=0118&pub=Kosmo&sec=Rencana_Utama&pg=ru_02.htm
43. Muhammad Shamsul Abd Ghani. (2017). Ratapan melampau peminat Jong-hyun ditegur. *Sinar Harian*. Retrieved from <http://www.sinarharian.com.my/mobile/hiburan/ratapan-melampau-peminat-jong-hyun-ditegur-1.774134>
44. Sinar Harian. (2015). Gadis K-pop: Jawi Buka Kertas Siasatan. *Sinar Harian*. Retrieved from <http://www.sinarharian.com.my/semasa/gadis-k-pop-jawi-buka-kertas-siasatan-1.349905>
45. Siti Fatimah Hassan. (2015a). Apa Sudah Jadi. *Harian Metro*. Retrieved from <https://www.hmetro.com.my/node/23109>
46. Siti Fatimah Hassan. (2015b). Bebas Sampai Lupa Diri. *Harian Metro*. Retrieved from <https://www.hmetro.com.my/mutakhir/2015/01/23294/bebas-sampai-lupa-diri>
47. Shim, D. (2017). Riding the Korean Wave in Southeast Asia. Retrieved from https://www.fairobserver.com/region/asia_pacific/korean-wave-k-pop-culture-southeast-asia-news-45109/
48. Turner, G. (2016). *Re-inventing the media*. London: Routledge.
49. Waal, M.V. (2020). ‘What’s in a Like?’: Hiding Likes on Instagram and its Effect on Influencer

Marketing.

50. Wan Syamsul Amly. (2017). Kematian Jong-hyun: Umat Islam haram ikut aksi berkabung dengan lilin - Mufti Perak. Astro Awani. Retrieved from <http://www.astroawani.com/berita-malaysia/kematian-jong-hyun-umat-islam-haram-ikut-aksi-berkabung-dengan-lilin-mufti-perak-163732>
51. Yoon, S. Y. (2020, June 14). [Post-Covid-19 New Normal] K-pop finds solace online, but how long can it really last? Korea JoongAng Daily. <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2020/06/14/culture/features/>